



## Women's Power: The Anti-Arrack Movement in Andhra Pradesh

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This is not a story. This is the achievement of women who have studied in an evening school. Our village is Dubagunta. We are wage earners. We produce gold from earth. But what is the use? All our hard-earned money is spent on toddy and arrack. When our menfolk do not have money they sell away our rice, butter, ghee or anything that fetches them arrack [...]. They take away whatever they can lay their hands on.... Apart from drinking they abuse us, pick up fights with us, slap our children. They make our day-to-day existence miserable [...]. Then we read the story of Sitamma's death. It started us thinking. Who is responsible for her death? We then told the sarpanch (head of the village council) to close the arrack shop. But we could not succeed.

So next day, hundreds of us marched out of the village and stopped a cart of toddy. We told the owner to throw away the liquor. We said all of us would contribute one rupee to compensate his loss. He was terrified. From that day no toddy has entered our village. Then, when a jeep carrying arrack arrived in the village we surrounded it and warned the owner that we would lodge a complaint with the magistrate. This sent a shiver down his spine. He closed his shop. Now we gained in confidence. We realized that this victory was possible only through education. This year no one dared participate in the arrack auction.

This is a quote from a literacy primer, Adavallu Ekamaite ("if women unite") and, as the first sentence indicates, not a fictional story. It is a part of the modern history of the Indian state of Andhra Pradesh, where in the early nineties of the twentieth century something extraordinary happened. Out of an 'extremely subaltern situation', one could say, a movement was born which finally changed some fundamental (power)



structures of the state.

The events and circumstances are, in a way, well documented and well-known, at least in Andhra Pradesh. The most extensive documentation of all local events can be found in *Eenadu*, a Telugu newspaper which published daily reports from the villages and about the people involved in the anti-arrack movement. Apart from that, two smaller books (Bandila and Sailaja 1997; Sarveswara Rao and Parthasarathy eds. 1997) and a small range of articles sum up and interpret the story of the movement. They are partly very illuminative and bring things to the point, but none of them is, in a strict sense, a scientific article. This is one of the reasons why I thought it might be worth taking the matter up once more and collating and summarizing this part of modern Indian history from my own, certainly less affected, perspective. Secondly, the events might be interesting from a theoretical point of view and I will try to discuss this towards the end of the article.

As this (true) story deals with alcohol and prohibition, let me start with a short overview of the official handling of the matter in India after independence. Particularly in the years immediately after India became independent, the gross political opinion was against the selling and of course the consumption of alcohol, be it arrack, Indian Made Foreign Liquor (IMFL) or toddy. In the Madras state, for example, excise receipts had increased from 3,8 crore in 1938/39 to 16,8 crore in 1945/46 (against 8 crore from land revenue). Notwithstanding this enormous growth of revenue which was paradigmatic for the entire subcontinent, states introduced prohibition as soon as popular ministries assumed office in 1946. In the Madras state, this policy was revised and, by 1949/49, extended to all districts. At a national level, it was considered an important task to extend prohibition as a national policy, for it was understood as a decisive welfare measure.

The story of postcolonial prohibition, or, to put it in another way, the history of failed idealistic ideas and approaches in connection with an attempted ban of alcohol in India after independence, is quickly told. Of course one cannot talk about specific processes and structures in Andhra without referring to the all-Indian situation, which necessarily framed the regional or local events in Telugu land. This is especially so, because in Article 47 of the Indian Constitution prohibition is explicitly mentioned: "[...] the State shall endeavour to bring about prohibition of the consumption except for medicinal purpose of intoxicating drinks and of drugs which are injurious to health". This meant, not only for



Andhra, that concrete political action was taken to prevent people from drinking or taking drugs in general. In 1954, the so-called Prohibition Enquiry Committee was appointed and a report it submitted one year later constituted an optimistic approach towards the implementation of prohibition as a national policy (Report of the Prohibition Enquiry Committee 1955). It recommended a number of measures, such as a target date for the completion of the nationwide prohibition (1st April, 1958), an immediate end to drinking in hotels, bars, restaurants etc., the establishment of prohibition committees in each district and at the local level as well as a statement by the government, clearly supporting the politics of prohibition as a national policy.

Consequently, the Lok Sabha discussed the policy of prohibition and passed a resolution on 31st March, 1956, stating that prohibition should become an integral part of the Second Five-Year Plan (1956-1961) and that a Planning Commission should take care of setting up a programme to induce prohibition quickly and effectively. Many of the recommendations of the Planning Commission became part of the Second Five-Year Plan, which thus also assessed financial considerations as being of secondary importance (in this regard), because a consistent execution of these ideas would have meant forgoing a huge sum of tax money.

Yet according to Reddy and Patnaik, no significant progress was made until the end of the fifties, except the appointment of a central prohibition committee, which basically only reviewed the progress of the prohibition policy. So again, the Third Five-Year Plan (1961-1966) reiterated prohibition as a social welfare movement, demanding the development of public support for prohibition, the establishment of voluntary organisations and financial assistance for these and other educational and promotional activities (Reddy and Patnaik 1993: 1060).

In order to collect reliable data for the implementation of prohibition, the Planning Commission set up a study team under the chairmanship of Justice Tek Chand in 1963. This team submitted a comprehensive report one year later, known as the Tek Chand Report, which covered many aspects of liquor manufacturing, trade, consumption etc. It is a work of 1265 pages in two volumes and presents a huge mass of statistical material and offers a number of recommendations, foremost of which is a four-phased programme with the aim of instituting total prohibition by 1970. However, in contrast to the official rhetoric in the Five-Year Plans and measures like the Tek Chand report, politicians had completely different ideas concerning the handling of alcohol, or their



attitude changed in the course of the sixties. The 'practical' result was the step by step abolition of prohibition (Andhra relaxed it in 1969), until in the early seventies the only state left with prohibition in force was Gujarat (Reddy and Patnaik 1993: 1061).

For that reason one could call the fact that in the Fourth Five-Year Plan (1969-1974) prohibition is not even mentioned – a pragmatic development. If there had been political and social consensus beyond a limited number of dedicated circles, to enforce prohibition the situation changed completely after the mid-1960s. I am not going to discuss the details of this development here, for this article focuses on a later regional story. But it is important to note that the liquor trade, which had been stigmatized until the 1960s and associated with "criminal and anti-social elements", changed its character to become a politically respected business at that time. As politicians became more and more dependent on the money gained from liquor trade, many of them began to join the game while on the other side many liquor traders became politicians (Reddy and Patnaik 1993: 1062). This extremely powerful alliance of politics and money, formed in the 1970s and sustained until the time our story starts, creates the highly interesting background for the protest of powerless, subaltern people in the early 1990s.

After more than 20 years of strong support from politics, the situation in Andhra Pradesh concerning alcohol dependency in the early 1990s was disastrous. The consumption of all kinds of alcohol had increased steeply and Andhra occupied the first place in India for arrack consumption. The number of arrack shops had almost tripled since the 1970s, only declining slightly due to a very effective innovation of the liquor industry. 1986 was the year of the birth of Varuni Vahini, a term coined by the then Telugu Desam Party leader N.T. Rama Rao. It denotes small polythene sachets used to pack arrack, which were delivered by peddlers on foot and by bicycle to the doorsteps of the consumers. This new system, clearly inspired by high demand and the idea to reach villages without arrack shops, made it even more convenient for anybody 'in need' to purchase alcohol (Reddy and Patnaik 1993: 1063).

A few other factors made the situation even worse. Firstly, prices of staple foods had increased significantly in the 1980s (of course arrack was becoming ever more expensive as well), whereas the wages had not. Thus, the overall amount of available money was reduced and a higher percentage of this amount had to be used for alcohol. Men spent about 75 percent of their income on drinking (Pande 2000: 133). Sec-



ondly, the situation has a gender dimension as well. Most of the addicts were men and the women not only had to struggle for the survival of the household and care for the children, but also, in some cases, to suffer from abuse and beating. The power behind the whole system, wielded through a combination of economic and political hegemony, by (often criminal) liquor contractors and politicians, completed an often desperate situation. Needless to say, most of the people affected were agricultural workers from scheduled castes, for drinking is a social taboo for many upper castes. In some villages in Andhra, the addiction rate was up to 90 percent among the male population and although it sounds bizarre, that in many places the wages were even directly 'paid' in arrack (Reddy and Patnaik 1993: 1064; Pande 2000: 134).

In the beginning of the 1990s, liquor contractors belonged to the most powerful people of Andhra Pradesh. Government revenue from excise on arrack and IMFL had risen to 8.12 billion rupees in 1991/92 – from 390 million rupees in 1970/71 (Pande 2000: 132; Balagopal 1992: 2457). As mentioned above, many liquor contractors had become politicians and vice versa. They stood behind (and for) a very powerful system of consequent interaction or a combination of normally irresistible forces. Political and economic power are usually the defining and insurmountable hegemonic devices. They create the state and only equally powerful opponents should be able to resist or successfully fight them.

So one could not expect a movement to become a threat to this alliance, which was started, as stated, by a number of low caste women in a remote village in Andhra Pradesh. Under normal circumstances, something so subaltern could not be of any relevance, let alone be able to overcome these forces. But this is exactly what happened – the ultimately powerless challenged those in power with the idea of taking away one of their most important sources of income, which for many was a sine qua non to finance political careers. Completely disillusioned and frustrated by the situation, these women wanted to totally ban alcohol from their villages. Applied not only to a few villages but to larger areas or to the whole of Andhra, this would mean the breakdown of the Varuni Vahini system and, in consequence, the end of the alcohol business, the loss of many jobs and a huge sum of revenue.

The history of the events which started the movement is, like that of many beginnings of greater developments, a little blurred. There is consensus that in Dubagunta, a small village some 80 km from Nellore town, the women decided to stop the vending of arrack and thus be-



came the prototype for that which followed. But there are at least two versions about exactly how and why the decision was taken; one maintains that it happened because two men had died after a drinking bout (Balagopal 1992: 2459), another talks about a preparatory meeting in the context of a literacy campaign, where two drunken men insulted some officials who visited the village. In reaction the women present forced the men to leave and decided to attend the literacy classes. One of the primers used in these classes contained a story where the wife of an alcoholic committed suicide after she failed to reform her husband. The women were very moved by the story and vowed to fight alcoholism; as a consequence they closed down the arrack shop in their village (Pande 2000: 133f.; Shatrugna 1992: 2584).

Whichever version is true, the successful struggle of the women in Dubagunta soon found its way into reading material, whether primers or newspapers, and initiated discussions and action at other places. The next major occurrence took place at Saipet, where a drunken man stabbed his father. The women stopped the trade of alcohol in their village and staged a demonstration against arrack in Kavali, the second largest town in Nellore district. This too found its way into the news and soon became the topic of the day in many villages in the district (Balagopal 1992: 2460).

When in August 1992 the annual excise auction for arrack was about to take place at Nellore, the movement had already gained enough power to organize a huge demonstration at the collector's office. As a result, the auction was postponed. On the next proposed date there was another demonstration, and again on the following designated date. Altogether the auction was postponed six times and in the end never took place. Meanwhile, opposition parties and voluntary organizations had joined the protest and soon women started to demonstrate at other district headquarters to prevent auctions. Although they were not as successful, the idea that their action might be effective against the sale of arrack had now inspired women all over the state (Balagopal 1992: 2460).

Soon committees were formed in many places and campaigns were initiated in areas where no activities had started so far. The plan of action was now to stop the sale of alcohol by preventing the stocking of the shops or deterring the customers from purchasing liquor. Where the vendors would not 'cooperate', i.e. where they did not promise to stop the sale of alcohol, forms of 'punishment' or other 'drastic action'. Picketing liquor shops, throwing out liquor packets stored in the shops



or setting the alcohol on fire were among the more harmless punishments, while shaving the moustaches or the heads of intractable men, or even parading them through the village on donkeys, were among the less harmless measures. Dalit and CPI (ML) organisations encouraged such more violent forms of protest but in many cases the women simply vented their anger about drunken husbands and domestic violence (Balagopal 1992: 2460). Another means of preventing the sale of arrack was to physically block the supply route to the shops in villages or, more radically, to raze the liquor shops in the villages to the ground (John et al. 1993: 87f.). In addition, men often had to swear oaths in temples to stop drinking. The violation of such an oath meant a heavy fine to the temple or even the banishment of the families from the village (Reddy and Patnaik 1993: 1065).

Of course the people who were running the liquor trade did not silently endure all this resistance, which was, from their perspective, primarily an attempt to ruin their lucrative business. And as indicated above, many were not only in the arrack business, but also in politics; the Congress (I) as well as the Telugu Desam parties were almost completely constituted of arrack contractors and some BJP and CPI leaders had an interest in the business as well (Balagopal 1992: 2460). So at an official level, there was initially a very limited amount of enthusiasm and the reaction was more cynical, often in the form of patronizing advice ("you'd better reform your husband"). On the ground things were a little different, because after some hesitation, the local police and goondas hired by the contractors started to attack agitating women. They were beaten up, insulted, sexually harassed and a couple of incidents are documented where goondas even tried to disrobe the women. A number of women went to jail, some only because they discussed prohibition in public (Balagopal 1992: 2460f.; Abbai Reddy 1993: 190). One of the most violent attacks on agitators in this context took place in the Mahboobnagar district in October 1992, where a gathering of about 500 women were assaulted by policemen. They were beaten with lathis, injuring about 80 women who could not walk or work on the fields for several weeks afterwards (Balagopal 1992: 2461).

The only effective defence against such attacks was to gather in greater numbers and stand together; if needed, the women used broomsticks, chilli powder and fire. From Gundlur, a village in the Chittoor district, we know of an especially impressive example of a successful battle against the conniving tactics of a liquor contractor: When the women



decided to end the sale of arrack in their village, they turned back the jeep that delivered arrack packets. They were not deterred even when the vendor, under pressure, called the police to tell them to retreat and let him do his work. When the vendor took up the sale of arrack again, the women raided his shop and threw 20 litres of liquor on the ground. The next day, the infuriated contractor sent five jeeps with goondas to the village. The men, armed with sticks, country-made bombs and guns, started to raid the whole village. As the men of the village had gone to a fair, the women had no help from anybody. They were pulled out of their houses by their hair, insulted and beaten. When the women realised what was happening – and why – after a moment of surprise, they decided that if they did not act now, they would continue to be victimized in future. So they gathered and turned towards the goondas to fight back. Seeing themselves confronted with a large number of furious and unflinching women, the goondas started to flee, some in two of the jeeps, some running across the fields. Not able to shake off their pursuers, the goondas threw a bomb and fired their guns, but nobody was injured. When the women returned to their village, they destroyed the remaining jeeps.

As these events show – and of course they represent only a few examples from a larger historical process, a struggle which went on for months and even years – it was a rocky road the women had decided to take. Even more so because the government, deeply involved in the trade of alcohol, was not very interested in changing things quickly or at all. On the contrary, initially they pursued the 'usual' strategy of delaying decisions as much and as often as possible, with the idea that sufficient delay would take the movement out of the public arena and back into the living rooms of the affected families. It was only when that did not work that a number of committees were formed and female activists, opposition leaders and intellectuals were invited to discuss matters. At that time, even prohibition-friendly politicians had to face two major problems: Firstly, if arrack was legally banned in Andhra, it was clear that the state would be flooded with spurious arrack, causing more (health) problems than before. And secondly, such a ban would create a huge gap in the state budget which had to be filled by some other kind of revenue (Balagopal 1992: 2461).

But women activists appeared in village after village and town after town. After the movement had spread from Nellore to Chittoor and other districts, Hyderabad became the meeting point for many groups,





until finally the campaign was centred in the capital of Andhra Pradesh. Meanwhile, many politicians had joined the movement, mostly from the opposition to the ruling Congress Party. The most 'multifaceted' person in the whole story was certainly N.T. Rama Rao, leader of the Telugu Desam Party and chief minister of Andhra Pradesh, from 1983-89. As the chief designer of the Varuni Vahini system, he now became the most prominent supporter of the anti-arrack movement, making prohibition his political cause. After innumerable meetings and protests by women in Hyderabad, arrack was officially banned in October 1993. In 1994, N.T. Rama Rao returned to power with an overwhelming majority (Balagopal 1992: 2460f.; Pande 2000: 142).

As expected and feared by many people, the ban on arrack made little difference to the existing situation. In 1994, there was a drastic increase in the consumption of toddy, which was also adulterated with chemicals to increase its effects (not surprisingly lethal in some cases), and the sale of IMFL also increased. That is why a Joint Action Forum of women was built by women from all political camps, to demand total prohibition from the government. Again, when no measures were taken by the chief minister, there were meetings, rallies, marches and picketing. In October 1994, N.T. Rama Rao proclaimed that he would declare total prohibition if he was elected to power again. Although all political parties had prohibition on their agenda at that time, in December 1994 the Telugu Desam Party gained a landslide victory. In January 1995 total prohibition took effect (Pande 2000: 143).

In sum, this is the story of the anti-arrack movement in Andhra Pradesh in the 1990s. Parts of it, especially the way it has started, have meanwhile become legend. But, as Balagopal correctly puts it, the creation of legends is also always a political process and a critical review of events takes away any 'innocence' it might have had in other contexts and forms of representation (Balagopal 1992: 2459).

Still the most fascinating features of the legend – and thus of the movement – are that it supposedly started more or less spontaneously and that the by definition completely powerless – uneducated, low-caste women – were its initiators and main agitators. For that reason it makes sense to take a closer look at the context in which the movement's beginning was embedded. There are, to start with, two framing factors which should be taken into account here: One is the role of the CPI (ML), and the other is the role of the literacy movement.

Nearly every article dealing with the movement mentions the im-



portance of the literacy movement as a significant force for raising the consciousness of women in Andhra Pradesh. The narrative above even locates the initial spark which inspired the first closing of an arrack shop within the context of the literacy campaign. Whether or not this is true, it is certainly correct that the collector of the district who ran the programme in Nellore was a person receptive to the problems of the poor. And the reading material for the literary classes contained short stories or anecdotes touching on a range of topics from the daily life of the poor people, among them arrack. After the first measures against the sale of arrack turned out to be effective, again stories which 'documented' the success of the campaign found their way into primers and other reading material. Certainly the closing of the arrack shop in Dubagunta was one such success. Thus, it is evident that the literacy campaign played an important role in the anti-arrack movement (Balagopal 1992: 2460).

In 1990 CPI (ML) groups fiercely began to fight the sale of arrack in villages in Andhra, by trying to stop the arrack auctions. They had realized the damage being done by arrack long before, but initially struggled only for a reduction of the price, as labourers had been spending a large part or even their entire income on arrack. But although the groups were successful, the situation deteriorated because the labourers simply went on drinking and, as a consequence, could get more alcohol for their money than before. This led to a lot of criticism, but nevertheless it was these activities which highlighted the devastating effect arrack had on the lives of the poor from the beginning of the eighties. The efforts to stop the auctions was then vigorously supported by many poor women and men. But as the militant faction of the CPI (ML), the PW group, took up the fight and started killing arrack contractors and destroying arrack shops, the whole movement was discredited. Moreover, the government's hatred of militant communists was so great that it drove them to convert police stations into arrack shops and to identify villages where people had stopped drinking, beating up its inhabitants. However, a number of intellectuals expressed appreciation and support for the actions taken by the naxalites (Balagopal 1992: 2459).

In contrast, the anti-arrack movement of the 1990s did not have any form for organised political leadership. Rather it was initiated by local women and took the form of improvised on-the-spot-action, depending on the requirements of the situation at hand. Most of the work was done with the initiative which came from local women. There was no detailed planning, but a lot of improvisation or on-the-spot action, depending



on what the situation required. Educated, high-caste women also entered the discourse later – political parties did so only in the very last stage (Pande 2000: 140f.). The literacy campaign and the activities of the communist party had paved the way or, in other words, readied the discourse for the movement, but in spite of all ‘exemplary’ or ‘preparatory action’, the decisive steps like the first resistance, the protests, the fights, had been taken by the ultimately subaltern: The poor, low-caste, uneducated women. Who started raising their voice? Did the subaltern ‘learn to speak’ at this point?

Yet there was another force which played a very important role in this story, especially when talking about voices and power: the press. Today’s leading daily Telugu newspaper *Eenadu*, founded in 1974, had introduced the so-called ‘district dailies’ in 1989, with the idea of reaching a more ‘remote’ readership, by printing local news for smaller towns. The owner and editor of *Eenadu* at that time was not only anti-Congress and vigorously fighting for hegemony on the newspaper market, he also took up the cause of the activists and dedicated two pages of *Eenadu* every day to the reporting of incidents from the towns and villages. Besides eliminating some of his competitors, he created public awareness of the anti-arrack movement. The impact of the recognition of this movement in the public arena can hardly be overestimated (Balagopal 1992: 2461; Pande 2000: 142).

Still, despite the role the literacy movement, the preparatory groundwork by the CPI (ML) and the public support by newspapers (and by a number of NGOs and other organisations) played in supporting the women’s cause, it is the latter’s courage and tenacity that will – rightly – persist in the cultural memory of the Andhra people. On the other hand, the question remains how this success was at all possible. To reiterate, it was a struggle of economically and politically almost completely powerless women against the centre of power in Andhra Pradesh – the rich, ruling, arrack-trading politicians of the government. One could possibly answer the question by meticulously mapping the microhistory of the process and convincingly showing how the chain of events made the powerless powerful and vice versa. Perhaps a short theoretical discussion could help to explain the ‘weakness of the powerful’ in this context.

The approach I will use draws on Foucault, Laclau and Mouffe and the discussion starts at the nexus of power and authority. Traditionally, power is responsible for the repression of wills and desires and, when organised, consists of a network of censorship, prohibitions and



taboos. This organised form of power constitutes the law (Foucault 1998 [1976]: 81-85). In contrast to this negative and juridical notion of power, Foucault emphasises its productive aspects and refers to its productivity, strategic resourcefulness and its positivity (Foucault 1998 [1976]: 86). Power decisively constitutes and transforms identities and for that reason is also closely related to knowledge: Through power, truth is produced and the main exercise of power is through the production of knowledge (Foucault 1986 [1976]: 93).

According to Torfing, Foucault's analysis of power can be summarised in a small number of statements. Firstly, power is everywhere, because it comes from everywhere; secondly, power is not something which can be possessed; thirdly, power comes from below, from a multitude of local forces, which causes effects of cleavage running through the social body as a whole; fourthly, power strategies cannot be mastered by an individual subject, power is non-subjective; fifthly, resistance always works within and against power, but does not come from a position of exteriority (Torfing 1999: 163; Foucault 1998 [1976]: 93-96). It is apparent from this list of propositions that Foucault did not like to see power as a potentiality or capacity, or as a relation of domination – as 'power over' or 'power to'. In his eyes, power is primarily "the way in which certain actions modify other actions by means of shaping the identities of the acting subjectivities" (Torfing 1999: 164).

Authority, on the other hand, is defined as "an exercise of power that is accepted by those who are subjected to it, at least to the extent that they 'voluntarily choose' not to put up any resistance against what is implied by the exercise of power". Authority does not make people agree with the content or outcome of an exercise of power, but means that it is also accepted if people do not like it (Torfing 1999: 165). According to this understanding, power is not necessarily authoritative, but can also be directed against, or be wielded independently of authority.

Torfing distinguishes three main sources of authority. There is *de jure* authority, if "somebody submits to a certain exercise of power because it appears to be in accordance with the rules prevalent in society", i.e. the law. One can speak of *de facto* authority, when "people submit to a certain exercise of power because they consider the judgements or claims of those exercising power as rightful authorities". And in the case that "the exercise of power is accepted not because it is considered to be lawful and not because it is advanced by a rightful agency, but rather because people anticipate that in the normal course of events obedience



will be forthcoming”, i.e. if, for example, people think that resistance is too dangerous, he calls this “pragmatic” authority (Torfing 1999: 166f.).

One can apply this small set of theoretical assumptions to the historical events of the anti-arrack movement. First of all, if one tries to interpret these through a ‘classical’ understanding of the power-authority relation, it will not be very productive. Hobbes, for example, understood authority as legitimate power, which involves the right to exercise it. Certainly, we have here the elected politicians who were in a position to act or ‘make things happen’ in the name of the state. But to enforce the law did not have much to do with the trade of arrack here, on the contrary: The hiring of goondas in order to ‘punish’ women in villages was an illegal act not authorized by any law, possible only through the influence or the power contractors had as ‘local rulers’. Also, in the context of the movement, the imprisonment of innocent people by the police can be characterised as the exercise of illegal power.

According to these examples power is directed against (state) authority, and the authority represented by the contractors/politicians is neither *de jure* nor *de facto* authority, because the actions were illegal and not considered rightful. Also what Torfing calls ‘pragmatic’ authority only partly applies to our case, that is only as long as the women did not dare to resist and thus accepted authority. But the fact that the movement started at all and that the women generally did not show much concern about the legality of their actions or the dangers involved, simply means that in the context of the arrack trade, the state and the contractors, even the men in the villages, no longer represented authority. In other words, the authority the women’s power was directed against had been reduced to something abstract and inapplicable, which had to be erased from their daily lives. This is underlined by the raiding of liquor shops and by the throwing of sachets on the ground, which were illegal actions as such. The women’s decision to act included a devaluation of authority, wherever ‘necessary’, to achieve their ends.

Both structure and agency are constructed in and through power struggles and thus internal to political power (Torfing 1999: 162). This means that all fights which took place in the course of events were not fed from a source of power that was of a different quality from (or external to) the existing power relations against which they were directed. If the women were able to eliminate certain power structures (the system of arrack trade, the influence of the contractors, in the end, the trade of alcohol at all), they had (an equal kind of) power themselves. Power



is everywhere and cannot be possessed, so it is no 'substance' the contractors or politicians could hold (exclusively) in their hands. It is, from a theoretical point of view, as 'available' for the suppressed as for the suppressor. Power becomes visible through the identities of the acting subjectivities and is thus continuously renegotiated.

Identity is constituted by power in an act of exclusion, identity as such is power (Laclau 1990: 31). The continued expression of what is excluded is the condition of the possibility of social identity (Torfing 1999: 161). Identities are defined by both what they are and what they are not. Thus, this "constitutive outside" is "present within the inside as its always real possibility". For that reason identity is constructed and contingent; and all social relations are power relations (Torfing 1999: 161; Mouffe 1996: 247).

If one follows this line of thought, something changed in the identities of the poor, low-caste women when they started their struggle against arrack. Their identities gained a number of attributes which they had not had before: they had been less involved in the decision whether their husbands drank or not; they had not been able to communicate a common interest across a certain distance; they had not been capable of expressing themselves; they had been less able to organise themselves. During the movement, a number of features were added to their identity which, in a relatively short period of time, made them powerful opponents of the ruling elite.

These new features of their identity were taken from structures, agencies and events inside the power relations of their society – they did not come from afar. The women assimilated imagined archetypes of resistance from texts or narrations through their ability to read; they had heard of or even witnessed the strategies of the CPI (ML) in their fight against arrack; newspapers documented their actions and presented them as "women fighting against the evils of arrack". In this way, decisively adding to the many local and spontaneous actions, the women 'were communicated' and their identity as a resistance group 'was shaped' by the press.

An unfixed identity, its contingency, open for any potentiality, was the prerequisite for this processual development. By changing their self-perception and through the construction of their identity by the press, the women gained power far beyond their usual circle of influence. They became not only a political factor, but also a symbol of the weak fighting the strong, of good winning against evil. Again, the women did not



possess this power like some kind of personal belonging – one cannot have power over one's power. Power is not a weapon, ready to strike, in the hands of the strong. It is a weapon others, the weak(er), identify with those hands. As soon as the women were discursively identified as resisting protagonists, their powerful career began.

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