

FROM ASIA / India**Victory will be ours**

Coastal village women in the south Indian state of Kerala battle hooch

by the Sakhi Resource Centre for Women, based in Trivandrum, India

Nellikunnu is a tiny coastal village 4 km off Kasargod, the northernmost district in Kerala, south of India. 'Welcome to the Liquor-free zone' is a sign that looks the visitor straight in the eye.

There is a calm beauty and serenity in this coastal village; a calmness that belies the fact that not so long ago, the presence of heavily intoxicated men steering their way with drunken gaits, was a common sight.

Changes have come to Nellikunnu; and these changes are the result of the relentless and determined struggles of the women of Nellikunnu. These are the women who work tirelessly, scouring the waters in their daily routine of gathering, by hand, the bounty of the sea—mackerels and sardines.

Says Sarojini, who has been involved in this anti-liquor protest for the past one-and-a-half months: '*Onam* is the season when visitors pour into our village. That is also when *Vyajan* (local term for illicit liquor) pours in. We anticipated this and planned our raids accordingly.' Sarojini is not alone in her journey for justice. There are others like Nalini, Lakshmi, Madhavi....

In 1994, the government in the province of Kerala passed an order prohibiting arrack. This led to the influx of spurious liquor from the neighbouring province of Mangalore. Simultaneously, in the outskirts of Nellikunnu, the locals started producing *Vyajavattu* (hooch) on their own. All this despite there being stringent laws against the manufacture of spurious liquor. Rules were bent according to the whims and fancies of the liquor lobby.

The tragedy and misery of all this was acute—in a short time span of two years, this village has lost 30 precious lives to the consumption of adulterated liquor. There are several others who, though alive, in many ways live the 'dead' life of an addict.

It was in June 1999 that the double tragedy of the death of Samikutty and Ravi, along with the suicide attempts of two young men, occurred. It was then that the women decided to take matters into their own hands. The women needed no deep wisdom to realize that, sooner or later, there would be only women left in their village. Unless they acted soon.

On June 23, around 300 women went to Srikurumba Bhagavathi temple to seek support from the temple authorities for their raid against illicit liquor. The temple folk, seeing their determination, promised to support them.

Campaigning began in an aggressive manner—the first raid being in the district of Kasargod. Women entered the liquor dens. Many soda bottles were smashed on the floor. During these raids, the women suffered—five of them from grave injuries.

Ingenious ways were adopted to track down the liquor dens. Disguised as men, in shirts and trousers, women managed to mislead the hooch dealers and to gain entry into the dens. Every day the women divided themselves into two groups and branched off into different directions. These explorations were always in the night—from 10 pm to 4 am. A heavy price was paid, since all the women worked during the whole day selling fish.

Physically exhausted and emotionally challenged, the women of Nellikunnu were relentless in their pursuit of justice and change, undeterred by threats from their men folk or their contemptuous comments.

There was a slight and unexpected setback when the police intervened, declaring that the women had no right to encroach and conduct raids in homes and shops. This failed to dampen the enthusiasm of the women who then shifted their attention to the beachfront. The long, sunny beach is home to this group of women protestors. The protest is straightforward and their modus operandi simple—vehicles passing their way are stopped and the liquor stocks are raided.

The women of Nellikunnu have only one regret—that their efforts started rather late. Many of their men folk would still be alive had all this began earlier.

This group of women protestors do not have any politi

cal affiliations. They are dismayed and disheartened that the local representative of the government, the MLA (Member of the Legislative Assembly) has not even come to visit them. Since they had also confiscated hooch from the home of the woman councillor, the ruling political party has also chosen to ignore them. As a protest to the apathy and indifference shown, the women decided to boycott the national elections earlier this year.

The voices of 300 women sing, "Even if we die in this struggle, it does not matter, so long as we achieve the aim of getting rid of spurious liquor. Victory will be ours". When 300 women unite and sing this refrain, it reverberates with a power and unity seldom seen in this 'totally literate and developed' state of Kerala.