

The Curse of Alcohol in Punjab: A True Story[£]

BHUPINDER SINGH*

* # 738, Shivalik City, Ph-2, Landran Road, Kharar, Mohali. 140307. Email: bhupinder64@gmail.com

£ According to PTV News (In Feb. 2010), the people in Punjab consumed, in 2009-2010, 10 crore bottles of IMFL Alcohol / liquor from licenced liquor vends alone! So much for the S.A.D. run govt.!

IT WAS A DARK AMAWAS NIGHT. Nobody was on the streets of the village except - the distant sound of scooters and bikes passing by, at irregular intervals, piercing through the peace of the night. In the roadside shack a dusted bulb dangling from the ceiling, spread its dim light. A middle aged lady, Bela, alone in her muddy house, sat on the floor by the side of the *Charpoi*, on which her two kids, Mangal and Anju, had sunk into sleep while waiting for their father, Kashmira Singh.

Waiting had tired Bela beyond limit. Despite repeated yawning she was trying hard to keep herself awake, seldom trying to come closer to the door of the courtyard when she heard the barking of dogs on the street. Kashmira had never been so late.

A daily wage labourer, Kashmira Singh was working on construction sites on a casual basis. He went wherever he got the work in the neighbouring town of Kharar, Mohali or Chandigarh. Previously, they were seasonally getting employment with the crops but now the burgeoning construction work in the area, Kashmira seldom found time to be with his family. Earlier, it was hard to make both ends meet, now they needed not to bother about.

But this doddering was accompanied with the foul smell of country liquor. Kashmira was very sober and sincere then, but now he had turned to be more arrogant, quarrelsome and started drinking daily.

Jagmeet Singh, the liquor contractor of his nearby village, was mainly responsible for Kashmira and other villagers' drinking habit. Jagmeet Singh was offering *desi sharab* to the labourers against the job they were undertaking when the construction of his kothi was going on. Thereafter, Kashmira started buying *desi* or *tharra* occasionally and never left a chance of free drinking opportunity.

Bela was not feeling comfortable with all that. The situation worsened since he was working at site near Chandigarh and "enjoying" cheap availability at Chandigarh *theka*. Kashmira got late daily and returned home in a drunken stupor.

Bela, tried to dissuade Kashmira, but he never listened. Instead, both got involved in fiery arguments that ended with Bela receiving a cruel beating. Children watched in horror, biting their lips, tears rolling down their cheeks, their bodies in uncontrollable shivering. It became a routine, and she had accepted it stoically. What could she do? Who would come to their rescue? After all, it was a matter of *Mian-Biwi*. Bela was engrossed in these thoughts.

Suddenly, there was knocking on the door. She understood that Kashmira was not there, because he used to knock with a mouthful of abuses. "Who is there?", she enquired and opened the door. To her surprise, the village Sarpanch with Police party was standing in front of her. She was stunned to hear the accidental death of Kashmira Singh on the road. Words of the Sarpanch hammered her down to stone. *Sharaab* snatched away all, she heard!

She decided, such may not happen with any family in future at least in her village. That is why, in 2007, in the village Kambala, near Mohali. Women of the village agitated publicly against the opening of the *theka* in the village, and successfully, forced the closure of liquor shop. But, in the year 2008, there was news that another Mohali based liquor contractor has secured the contract for this village *theka* and when he set up a shop on April 1, the women of the village protested and literally threw out the shopkeeper along with the bottles.#

However, the contractor, that year, with “strong” backing got re-located the vend on a rented land in a tent, outside on the road leading to the village Kambala.

The cheerful vend employee is happy that the business is picking up, and they will soon have a shed to store more liquor. Drunkards are feeling delighted. There may also be a smile on the face of ruling party (“flag bearer” of Sikh ideology?) who needs revenue to run the Government.

But, is there anybody concerned to honour the will of the women of the village, or liquor-drenched youngsters, or the debt loan burdened farmers? Society has to decide whether to be with a wine or women? What future do we want to create for the new generation?

