

THE DRINK CURSE

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The drink habit is alien to the people of Ceylon. Our literature does not sing its praises. If ever there is a reference to the use of intoxicating drinks in such works as sandesas, it is condemned as an evil. For instance, Paravi Sandesaya, written in the fourteenth century, describes a drunken brawl among the Berbers of Beruwala. Every student of our history knows how King Wimaladharmasuriya turned his back on the drunken De Weert, the Dutch Ambassador, bidding the attendant nobles to "Bind this Dog".

Knox tells us that "Drunkenness they (the Sinhalese) do greatly abhor, neither are there many that do give themselves to it." According to Knox, by the time of Rajasinghe the Sinhalese villager had learnt the use of arrack (from Arabic Araq) as a drink, and the Portuguese who were settled in the country distilled the liquor and kept taverns (see Knox's Ceylon page 176). Under the later Kings, according to D'Oyly, the manufacture of arrack was punishable as an offence. It is significant that the terms used in the manufacture of arrack are of Portuguese origin.

It is also significant that the areas where once the Portuguese held power are also the areas where today the manufacture of pot-arrack is largely carried on. The foreigners who came to Ceylon (Portuguese, Dutch and British) wanted intoxicating drinks. And adjoining the trading posts or factories, which they first established, were the canteens or the taverns for the sale of these drinks. The trader, avaricious for easy money, had no conscience. He adopted all manner of ruses to create a growing appetite and market. The foreigner had no conscience either. He always maintained a "taut alliance" with the liquor trade for the sake of easy revenue even at risk of empowering the King and demoralising an entire nation.

Major Skinner, in his Fifty years in Ceylon writes "(Taverns) are established in every district, almost in every village of any size, throughout the interior, often to the great annoyance of the inhabitants and in opposition to the headman. To give the people a taste for the use of spirits, it is often, at first, necessary to distribute it gratuitously. I have known districts, of the population of which, some years ago not one in a hundred could be induced to taste spirits, where drunkenness now prevails to such an extent that villagers have been braved to pawn their crops upon the ground to tavern-keepers for arrack. Government by the tempting item of its revenue derivable from arrack farms, has been induced tacitly to allow, if it has not, through its agents, positively encouraged, the use of spirits throughout the land".

It is the encouragement the British Government gave to the popularising of the use of intoxicating drinks which conclusively proved to the people of Ceylon how foreign the British Government was and how incapable it was to rule a sober people like Buddhist Sinhalese. The result was complete frustration. The public resentment led to a social upheaval that first of all

took the shape of the Matale Rebellion of 1848. Forbes, in his Military executions in Ceylon, sets forth as one of its causes "the establishment of one hundred and thirty-three Government taverns for the sale of ardent spirits, to about two hundred thousand persons, whose religion forbids them to taste the accursed draught thus pressed to their lips by a Christian Government."

Then followed a long period of widespread massacre, utter devastation and untold misery and deep humiliation. The Sinhalese villager, undaunted, came under the inspiration of the Sangha, stuck fast to the faith of his forefathers, to the ethos of the nation that condemned the use of intoxicating drinks, whereas his westernised countrymen fell to aping the manners and habits of the European.

Whisky drinking became a passport to high society. The British official set the fashion of drinking everywhere. Liquor lavishly displayed on tables became the chief feature of society weddings and official banquets. The denationalised Sinhalese did just what the British official did. And the British Government was determined to increase its revenue by the easiest method possible, bringing liquor within reach of all the inhabitants of the country. During the first two decades of the present century, a great effort was made under the aegis of the then Colonial Secretary, Sir Hugh Clifford, to establish taverns in every village. To counteract this, the great temperance movement was started by the leaders of the people.

The Temperance Leaders focused public attention on the misery which the drink habit has brought on the workmen who labour hard from early morning till late night. Without intending it they spend a large part of their income at the tavern and drunk and disorderly they crawl home to meet their weeping wives and starving children. The Temperance leaders also focused public attention on the alarming increase of crime due to intemperance. And they appealed to Government to halt the unrestricted opening of taverns. Government on its part made virtue of necessity and called itself the Greatest Temperance Organisation in the Island and looked upon temperance workers as dangerous people.

It is a pity that the Government of free Ceylon follows almost the same policy as the British Government. Honorable Mr. E.A.Nugawela, Minister of Health is reported to have said recently that prohibition is a blow at one's personal liberty. If this report is correct, it is doubtful whether he knows what **liberty** means. The liberty that one has is not the freedom of the wild ass. Mr. Nugawela, is no man free to do what he wants than the meanest Rickshaw Wallah. As Minister of Health he has to exercise greater self-restraint than a Rickshaw Wallah. I wonder whether he subscribes to the view of Lord Ronaldshay, the eminent English thinker, that the fashion of drinking, set in the most influential quarters, spreads and spreads like the plague.

A great banquet given by a Governor-General or by the Mayor of a great city, in which Champagnes, wines, brandies and whiskies are conspicuous, and are reported by the papers as a notable feature of the festivities, has an influence for perpetuating and extending the drink curse which cannot

be overcome by a thousand temperance leaders.

Plato, in his Republic, holds to the opinion that the aim of the state is not to convert it into a "City of pigs" but to achieve the highest spiritual good of its citizens. Likewise Gladstone considered it "the duty of Government to make it easy for the people to do well and difficult to do ill."

Therefore as intoxicating drinks are known to be the cause for a large percentage of crimes and accidents, their prohibition is an essential function of Government.

Those who oppose prohibition argue that it will result in a big loss of revenue to Government. But it is said that for every rupee Government collects on liquor, it will have to spend Rs. 14/- on prevention of crimes and of accidents, the cause for which could be due to drink.

It is also argued that prohibition will bring about an increase in the manufacture of pot-arrack. This harmful activity has now reached its peak in spite of the extensive facilities available for all kinds of intoxicating drinks. The prevalence of the manufacture and use of pot-arrack is the inevitable consequence of the large-scale propaganda for liquor regularly carried on through the press and the radio.

Once this propaganda for intoxicating drinks is stopped and its place taken by propagation for prohibition, we shall soon see a decline in the manufacture and use of pot-arrack. If our high society makes up its mind to practise total abstinence in keeping with our national traditions, then prohibition rather than the use of liquor will be the fashion and the general public will undergo a change of heart, to which they are looking forward as a vital part of the Buddhist Renaissance now taking place.

It is interesting to recall that the agitation against the opening of liquor shops was the first step taken in this country in its march for political independence. Likewise, Mahatma Gandhi made it known that the British Empire trafficked intoxicating liquor to India for the purpose of maintaining a top heavy administration.

Further, picketing liquor shops was an important item in every Satyagraha movement organised by Gandhi for the liberation of India. And when India became free, naturally prohibition was introduced in quite a number of States. That it has been a huge success is admitted by everybody, except those interested in the liquor trade. So much so that when a deputation approached Mr. Rajagopalachari, the then Chief Minister of Madras, asking for the restoration of liquor sales his retort was that it was tantamount to the recall of the British Government in India.

It is therefore in the fitness of things that prohibition be implemented as soon as possible. It is certainly too much to expect liquor interests and foreign interests in this country to agree to such a move. We must completely ignore them in this momentous issue and act in the interest of the nation.