
ALCOHOLISM IN KERALA AND THE ORGANISED VIOLATION OF HUMAN RIGHTS OF WOMEN

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Abstract

Keralam, over the last few decades, has become the State with the highest per capita consumption of alcohol. If it is ever possible to quantify the illegally manufactured and sold liquor, the per capita consumption level is bound to take a further leap upwards. Alcohol has become a highly visible aspect of life throughout the State, and there is no sort of let-up in this. Alcohol-related mental and physical problems, suicides included, have become well-known aspects of Malayalee society. Strictly speaking, growing alcohol intake and the resultant individual, family and social problems cut across the different classes, but the poorer sections bear the brunt of the tragedy. This is mainly because of the severe economic drain and frequent imbibing of cheap, low quality fire water type of poisonous drinks, leading to fast and steady degeneration of all sorts of health conditions. The rich man obviously need spend only a small percentage of his income on drinks, but it is only too common in urban and rural Keralam to witness workers throwing away even more than 70 % of their daily income on poisonous brew.

Keywords: Alcoholism, Keralam, sociologists, psychologists, criminologists, anthropologists, economists, educators

Alcoholism in Kerala

Alcoholism is becoming a serious problem in India in general and Kerala in particular. It is developing as a major public health problem as well as a social menace. A thorough understanding of this problem is necessary to check this social malady effectively. More over the prevention of alcoholism needs the serious studies and suggestions of remedial measures by persons on diverse as sociologists, cultural anthropologists, economists, educators, criminologists, jurists, psychologists and after all historians.¹ Alarmed by the wide prevalence of drug abuse in the state of Kerala, the Medias have now started wide coverage to this problem. The state of Kerala,

characterized as "God's own Country" in the tourist point of view has been now a days going towards the path of attaining the name "the Alcohol's Own Country". B.B.C has telecasted a programme about the ever increasing use of alcoholism in Kerala at 5.30pm on 12th March 2010. The programme was titled "Kerala's Love Affaire with Alcohol". It pointed out that Kerala is now in the number one position in the sale of alcohol in the country and it is the one state which is getting maximum revenue from the sale of alcohol. Approximately 80,000 persons are daily visiting the Beverages Corporation stalls. It also pointed out that the world will be frightened if the real position of the illegal manufacturing and sale of alcohols will be revealed. Frontline published an article about the specific illness of Kerala. The article pointed out that even though Kerala is better than most other states in India, and is comparable to several western countries in its health, literacy, life expectancy etc. The state is experiencing the problems of suicide, crime and atrocities against women due to the ever growing tendency of alcoholism. The week published a serious article on this issue in a special edition recently under the caption "Gulpable Homicide".² The article contained extensive statistical data on the growing trend of alcoholism in Kerala. It pointed out that liquor consumption rate keep soaring in Kerala, where even school kids have started hitting the bottle. Recently apprehensions were raised by some earnest men about the seriousness of the issue. For example President Pratibha Patil expressed surprise that alcoholism was rampant in Kerala. She has expressed surprise that, despite the state's impressive social indicators, alcoholism was rampant in Kerala and women were the worst sufferers." Mrs Patil said while inaugurating the National Conference of All India Federation of Women Lawyers (AIFWL) in Kochi. A family court judge said that one out of three cases filed in family courts in the recent past was due to alcohol problem. He said Article 47 of the Constitution stated that it was the duty of the state at least to reduce the consumption of liquor, gradually leading to prohibition.³ But Kerala was becoming richer and the citizens were becoming poorer because of alcohol sale and consumption. The judge said the state was providing compensation to those killed in liquor tragedies. Then why it should discriminate the living victims of alcoholism, he asked.

There is a Chinese proverb, which says "First man takes a drink, then the drink takes a drink, then drink takes the man". What the proverb suggests is that once a man starts drinking, no force can have control on him. Hence the best policy is never to start drinking. Modernisation and its impact in the social and economic life of the people created a favourable condition for the growth of alcoholism in Kerala. Modernisation led to the decline of joint family system and the caring and responsibility associated with the system vanished. Moral values and traditional support systems that regulated and sustained individuals in previous generations are gradually being weakened. The family structure has over the past few decades shifted away from traditional joint family

systems toward increasingly nuclear groups. Social drinking is a thing of the past now. Men began to consider alcohol as a medium for friendship building and status symbol. Ernakulam, the Venice of the East is the thirstiest city in Kerala. Here we can see a direct relation between consumerism and the influence of modernism in alcoholism. With increasing exposure, liquor consumption is bound to increase. Women started drinking, especially in urban areas. This has its direct relation with the influence of modernization. The direct impact of modernization can be traced in Kerala from 1920 onwards which found expression in the social and political movements of the state. A wider scale alcoholic use also started from this period and naturally the state for the first time began to witness the origin of temperance movement. The Ezhava community of Kerala was mainly associated with liquor manufacturing and the opposition against it came from the same community. Guru Sree Narayana was dead against this practice. T.K Madhavan, the leader of Vaikom Satyagraha was the main figure behind the temperance movement.

Limited avenues of pleasure compelled the men folk including the youths turned their attention towards alcoholism. Kerala is an Indian state with highest literacy rate and fastly moving to the position of a consumer state. But at the same time traditional taboos are still prevailing in the society which prevents individuals from acquiring various kinds of pleasures including sexual pleasure. On the other hand when the alcoholic beverages became cheaply available and society treated alcoholism as a simple individual affair; the men folk started the practice of opening bottles in thousand numbers. The Medias and advertisements intensified the problem. People today celebrate every festival. They need no excuse of celebrations to drink. Liquor, brandy, whisky, rum or beer, whatever be the brand, these are the main ingredients of peoples celebrations. Festivals may be different, but drinks are common. In developed countries most of the alcoholic drinkers belong to beer drinking group. But in developing countries like that of ours most of them belong to arrack consumers and toddy drinkers.

Alcoholism in Kerala is creating a social crisis and if it remains uncontrolled the future of the state will be disastrous. Alchahole appears as a factor, the chief maker of the bad social conditions which mar our civilization. Kerala has in the fore front of other areas of our country in the per capita consumption of liquor. There is ample evidence to show that the alcoholic problem is more disastrous for the socially and economically backward sections of our society who were struggling to manage their basic needs. It drastically reduces the amount needed for food, clothing, shelter, health and education. Alcaholism has created many abandoned people. Children are the most severely affected, since they can do little to protect themselves from the direct or indirect consequences of parental drinking. Some 20–50% of people who commit suicide or attempted suicide were intoxicated at the time or known to be heavy

drinkers. It's said that Keralites spend more money on liquor than on rice. Successive Governments have failed in eradicating poverty, building infrastructure, ensuring drinking water to all, but it is certainly generous in providing alcohol to all. About 20 percent of the hospital admission in Kerala is for treating alcohol related diseases. Over 40 percent of road accidents in the state are due to drunken driving. At least 50 percent of the suicides in the state are directly or indirectly linked to liquor. About 30 percent of women who attempt suicide in the state are wives of alcoholics. About 61 percent homes in Kerala witness domestic violence due to alcoholism. About 80 percent of divorce in Kerala is related to alcohol abuse. 272 per lakh persons in Kerala suffer from psychological disorders and most of them related to alcoholism. So Swamy Vivekananda's saying that Kerala is a lunatic asylum is going to be nearer to reality. About 70 per cent of the crimes in the state are indirectly related to alcoholism.

Liquor sales rise around August and September during the annual 'Onam' harvest festival. It is also a time for so-called 'hooch tragedies' when spurious or adulterated brews claim many lives. Last year's festival was no different. Twenty-six people died after drinking toxic liquor in Malappuram district. Over the last three decades, as many as 250 people have died from these 'hooch tragedies,' leaving behind families deprived of breadwinners. Such tragedies have not diminished the demand for liquor. According to studies made by the Kerala State Beverages Corporation (KSBC), liquor sales almost doubled from Rs 2320 crore in the period 2004- 05, to Rs 5538.90 crore in 2009-2010. A study conducted by the Indian Institute of Management revealed that KSBC is the only public sector undertaking in Kerala that consistently generates profits. Kerala has become very materialistic. Increasingly, alien values replaced traditional ones and nuclear families took the place of a once-predominant joint family system. It is today a very individualistic society, caught in a state of imperfect modernization. Imperfect education and easy gulf money had led to the creation of a society which has great expectations but not enough resources and other means to bring them to reality. Kerala society is caught in a cultural lag. In Kerala, which tops in per capita consumption of hard liquor in the country, 75 percent of the toddy (a drink extracted from coconut and Palmyra trees) the 40-lakh-odd tipplers down everyday is manufactured artificially using psychotropic drugs, ammonium sulphate, methyl alcohol and several other poisonous chemicals. "Toddy is supposed to come from coconut or Palmyra trees. But not even 25 percent of the toddy consumed in Kerala is tapped from the trees. It is manufactured in the liquor mafias' devil's smithies by experts at the art of making slow poisons. What Keralites drink is not toddy but poison. You cannot avoid death when you drink poison," Alcohol, for the Malayalees, is no more a relaxation agent, appetizer, depression-suppressor or socialising factor. In front of the beverages stalls we could find an entire crowd anxiously indulging in a forced occult ritual to fly into oblivion, to escape the clutches of reality of which they have never

bothered to think. The marginalized sections of the people like the labourers, low caste groups and the women folk of these groups were facing the severe consequences of this menace. The politician-police-abkari nexus may lead to the growth of wide level supply of bad quality liquor and thereby causing liquor tragedies. In most all the liquor tragedies the poor people were the victims. The awareness programmes, temperance movement and works of de-addiction centres were inadequate to control the menace. To minimize alcoholic problems three measures adopted will be (1) risk reduction (2) demand reduction and (3) supply reduction. But Kerala was poor in these areas. The government policy of considering alcohol only as a means to fill its coffers is not helpful. The money that the government is spending in matters of public health, policing, legal expenditure etc. can be substantially reduced if it discourages alcoholism.

Alcoholism and Family

Living with an alcoholic is a family affair. Because it subjects all members of a household to constant stress and fears of various kinds, it has often been referred to as a "family illness." ⁴ To one degree or another, all members of the family are affected. However, not all alcoholic families, nor all members of the same family, are affected in a similar manner. To assume that all family members are equally and identically affected is to assume that the family possesses a "collective mind." The "collective mind" assumes that the entire family shares the same feelings about the alcoholic and alcoholism. Closely related to the degree of alcoholism is the type of alcoholic that lives with the family. One type of alcoholic is the belligerent type who is verbally abusive and is consistently looking for an argument. The recipient of these attacks is exposed to high degrees of verbal and emotional abuse. ⁵ Another type of alcoholic may be jovial after drinking. This person likes to laugh a lot and is preoccupied with entertaining. Being around this alcoholic, although not physically or verbally harmful, may be emotionally stressful, due to inappropriate joking, or the inability to express himself or herself seriously. In an alcoholic family the wife may feel herself totally devastated because she feels that they are living in a crisis situation. The reactive phase is characterized by the behaviour of non-alcoholic family members reacting to the alcoholic's behaviour. During this time, most family members become extremely cautious in their behaviour, in order to avoid further complicating the existing problems of alcoholism. However, by being reactive, they are constantly adapting their behaviour in order to minimize or survive an unhealthy situation. Much of that adaptation will not only have detrimental effects on those who are adjusting, but also indirectly allow and supports the continuing alcoholism. Drinking can impair performance as a parent, as a spouse or partner, and as a contributor to household functioning. There are also other aspects of drinking which may impair functioning as a family member. In many societies, drinking may be carried out primarily outside the

family and the home. In this circumstance, time spent while drinking often competes with the time needed to carry on family life. Drinking also costs money and can impact upon resources particularly of a poor family, leaving other family members destitute. Also, it is worth noting that specific intoxicated events can also have lasting consequences, through home accidents and family violence. The effects of men's drinking on other members of the family is often particularly on women in their roles as mothers or wives of drinkers. The risks include violence, HIV infection, and an increased burden in their role of economic providers. Besides money spent on alcohol, a heavy drinker also suffers other adverse economic effects. These include lowered wages (because of missed work and decreased efficiency on the job), lost employment opportunities, increased medical expenses for illness and accidents, legal cost of drink-related offences, and decreased eligibility of loans. Individuals who through abuse of alcohol have become addicted are more than likely to undergo a personality change. This change of personality will definitely affect anyone who is close to them.

Alcoholism is known as a family disease. Alcoholics may have young, teenage, or grown-up children; they have wives or husbands; they have brothers or sisters; they have parents or other relatives. An alcoholic can totally disrupt family life and cause harmful effects that can last a lifetime. Each member of the family may be affected by alcohol differently. Parental alcoholism may affect the foetus even before a child is born. Parental alcoholism also has severe effects on normal children of alcoholics. Many of these children have common symptoms such as low self-esteem, loneliness, guilt, feelings of helplessness, fears of abandonment, and chronic depression (Berger, 1993). Children of alcoholics (COAs) may feel responsible for the problems of the alcoholic and may think they created the problem. COAs often experience high levels of tension and stress. Young children of alcoholics may have frequent nightmares, bed wetting, and crying. They also may not have friends and may be afraid to go to school. Older children of alcoholics may show such depressive symptoms as obsessive perfectionism, hoarding, staying by themselves, or being excessively self-conscious. Thus addiction is a family problem and is a major source of stress for family members. Family disruption related to alcoholism is a serious, complex and pervasive social problem. Alcoholism is linked to violence, disrupted family roles, impaired family communication and partly to physical and psychological illness.

Denial of the Human Rights of Women

Alcohol drinkers can be divided into a number of different groups namely occasional social drinker, social drinker, situational drinker, problem drinker and compulsive drinker. ⁶ In Kerala as in the case of other areas of India, the women of downtrodden classes were the victims of alcoholic addiction. Their men folk happened to be the problem drinkers or compulsive drinkers. Though alcoholics may feel alone in their struggles, the wives of alcoholics are affected by their husbands' drinking, as well.

Alcoholism puts strains on marriage. Since long-term alcohol abuse can have dangerous physical and emotional effects, the wives may worry about their husband's physical and emotional health. This worry can be worse if their husbands don't see a problem with drinking. Alcoholism can put financial strains on a marriage. The heavy drinking families devote between 15 to 30 percent of their total expenses to drinking. The survey and study that we conducted in selected areas revealed different experiences shared by wives. There were instances of the complaint of woman who stated that her husband reaches late at home and sleep in front of television which became a daily routine. Another wife said that she regularly receives call from the police for informing that her husband was in jail due to crimes committed by him after drinking. Yet some others complained that their husbands became quarrelsome. Most of them could not sleep because of a problem drinker. Most of their thoughts revolve around their partner who happened to be a problem drinker. They were fearful, anxious, and frustrated most of the time. Many of them withdrew from the outside activities and friendships because of embarrassment and shame over the drinking problem of their husbands. ⁷ The spouse often tries to hide and deny the existing problem of the alcoholic; takes on the responsibilities of the other person, carrying the load of two and perpetrating the spouse dependence; takes a job to get away from the problem and maintain financial security; and in the long run avoids sexual contacts. For some families, the only viable alternative left to them will be family separation. For others, the separation will only compound existing problems, and still others will only exchange one set of problems for a new set of problems. In short, for some life will get better, for others it will be about the same, and for still others it will get worse. The addicts on the other hand denies the alcohol problem, blames others, forgets and tells stories to defend and protest against humiliation, attack and criticism from others in the family; spends money for day-to-day needs on alcohol; becomes unpredictable and impulsive in behaviour; resorts to verbal and physical abuse in place of honest, open talk; loses the trust of family, relatives, and friends; shows deterioration of physical health; experiences a diminishing sexual drive; subjected to the feelings of despair and hopelessness; and, thinks about suicide and possibly makes an attempt.

The effects of alcoholism are as damaging to wives as they are to the alcoholic themselves. Some of the issues they face include the following:

1. Financial worries: The alcoholic spends a large proportion of his income on drink. They are also putting their jobs at risk by drinking. Maybe they turn up late for work, take long breaks, come to work smelling of alcohol, ignore their duties etc. Partners and wives of alcoholics live in constant fear of not having enough money to meet the basic needs of themselves and/or their family.
2. Emotional stress: Living with an alcoholic is an emotional roller-coaster. This puts great strain on the partner or wife of a drink dependent man. The alcoholic can undergo huge mood swings, generally dependent on the alcohol level in his blood

stream. The family, and in particular the wife, bears the brunt of this. Emotional stress is one of the greatest effects of alcoholism on family life.

3. Depression: Depression is more common among partners and wives of alcoholics. This is hardly surprising. Self-blame, anger, stress, shame, hopelessness are all understandable emotional reactions felt by someone when involved with an alcoholic. These emotions can lead to clinical depression.
4. Co-dependency: Co-dependency in relationships is very common in an alcoholic partnership. What this means, in short, is that the wife or partner of an alcoholic becomes a kind of 'little helper' for the alcohol addict. They do everything for the alcoholic while ignoring their own emotional and physical needs. It is very common for a wife to unconsciously enable an alcoholic.
5. Abuse: Abuse can take many forms. We are all used to the image of the 'wife beater'. Yet this is only one type of abuse. Wives of alcoholics can be subjected to all types of alcoholic abuse. Verbal, emotional, financial abuses are all faced by wives of alcoholics on a daily basis.

Alcohol addiction is a clear example of Love Buster because it causes so much suffering in marriage. Besides being physically and emotionally harmful to alcoholics themselves, addiction is also harmful to those whose lives touch them. Addiction makes people insensitive to the feelings of those who care most for them, and they will stop at nothing to feed their addiction. Alcoholics commonly engage in their most painful habits while under the influence. Acts of infidelity are common. The fact that he is drunk at the time is no consolation to a grief-stricken spouse. Women's experiences of both physical violence and psychological abuse from men with whom they have relationships have recently been found predictive of negative consequences, including health problems, mental health problems and substance abuse. A large percentage of women experience partner violence on an annual basis. The impact of drinking on family life can include substantial mental health problems for other family members, such as anxiety, fear and depression. Alcohol consumption is linked to many harmful consequences for the individual drinker, the drinker's immediate environment and society as a whole. Such social consequences as traffic accidents, workplace-related problems, family and domestic problems, and interpersonal violence have been receiving more public or research attention in recent years, indicating a growing interest in a broader concept of alcohol-related consequences. A likely consequence of problem drinking is that the drinker's behaviour becomes unpredictable, and naturally this makes it very difficult for the family as a whole and the spouse in particular to plan anything in advance or to stick to familiar routines. It will be unpredictable whether he will be in a fit state to collect the child from school, to what time will he come home, and in what state. Clearly, this sort of constant uncertainty can be highly disruptive. A good chunk of spousal violence against Kerala women was related to husbands drinking. 'State crime statistics had revealed a nearly 50 percent increase in wife-beating complaints during the period 1998 to 2008. Social drinking is, of course, accepted, and liquor is essential at weddings, funerals and other social occasions. But

the number of chronic drinkers in Kerala is rising and now includes teenagers and young women.

Alcohol tends to lower a person's inhibitions. In other words, he may act before he thinks. Similarly, after drinking alcohol, a man who tends to express his anger in sexually controlling ways might rape or sexually assault a woman before stopping to think about his behaviour. Although alcohol abuse and violence often occur together, one does not cause the other. ⁸ Alcohol or drug use can increase the risk of violence and can affect how often violence occurs and how severe it is. For example, a man with a quick temper or low frustration level may be more likely to act out his anger physically or verbally after he has had alcohol. Domestic violence is not only on the increase, but is also assuming subtler forms every day. Earlier victims of domestic violence did not lodge complaints, as they feared that such complaints might create a hostile home environment. Very often, women used to endure the violence towards them in silence for fear of repercussions. Physically abused women live under constant fear, threats and humiliation. She is a potential candidate for personality disorder and psychosomatic problems. Indian women feel the entire responsibility of preserving the family as her duty; hence she makes all adjustments unilaterally in her husband's home. In spite of the extreme physical and psychological violence meted out on many women, they do not seek divorce, as they feel their trauma and that of their children is too great a price to be paid instead. Thus to a great extent she accepts domestic violence as part of her family life. ⁹ The National Family Health Survey (NFHS-2) findings released at the end of the year 2000 points out this fact. Although no direct link has been established, the survey reveals the extent to which women lack autonomy, even as more than 50 percent justify, or accept violence within the home. Through international covenants, human rights, constitutional and legal provisions to protect women already existed, most women were not aware of these. Even if they were aware, they lacked the resources in terms of money, skill, time, confidence, contacts and coverage to invoke these provisions. Thanks to legal literacy campaigns, social activists, social work institutions, government initiatives towards gender sensitization programme for all level of administration and the law enforcing machinery strengthening of existing legislation regarding violence against women, etc have made women more confident to register complaints against the atrocities meted out towards them by the family members.

Men drink more than women and problems of male drinking are more acute in most cases. Excessive drinking can increase household poverty and damage the inter-generational transfer of human and social capital by creating unhealthy living conditions, reducing the provision of health care and education and increasing neglect. Women who experience any type of sexual abuse in childhood abuse are roughly three times more likely than non-abused women to report drug or alcohol dependence. ¹⁰ Many studies have revealed that the perpetrators use of alcohol, particularly heavy drinking, was likely to result in more serious injury to their partners than if they had been sober. ¹¹ The hardship and persecution the women faced found

expression in the voice of a woman named Radhamani, wife of Kunhikkuttan who appeared in a media recently. She said, "I am ready to work for him and my kids till my back breaks. But what I get in return is torture, grief and the sight of my kids in perpetual anxiety and fear. He will come home late, may or may not eat and begins beating me up for no reason. Earlier, he used to show some signs of remorse in the morning, but now he is beyond that. Somebody should do something to save women like me," Radhamani said with tears rolling down her sunken cheeks. Violence against women is surely a reliable index of criminalisation of society. There is a remarkable growth in the incidence of violence against women. Keralam has become notorious for blue films and what has come to be known as sex rackets. Statistics for the last few years indicate that incidents of violence against women has increased by more than double within the last four years. Domestic violence, organised sexual violence on a broader scale and economic deprivation hit the women more than anyone else. Here again, women belonging to the Adivasi communities, depressed castes and classes suffer the most. Alcohol plays a major catalyzing role in all this. The anti-arrack movement in Andhra Pradesh during the early 1990s was a women's movement, and the reasons are not far to seek. The participation of women in certain pockets of Keralam in the anti-liquor movement is also quite visible. But it is to be noted that none of these movements are unqualified successes and often even the partial victories won tend to get reversed, like in Andhra Pradesh and Orissa.

To whom should we blame?

There are many factors for the increased use of alcohol in Kerala. Among the various reasons, the politician- abkari- police nexus is the prime factor for the ever growing alcoholism in Kerala. Every day there are 5-6 news items in the mass media. Liquor poisonings and deaths, confiscation of spirit and spurious liquor, open "helplessness" expressed by the excise officials, charges against the ruling parties accusing them to be in league with the liquor mafia, accidents to trucks smuggling spirit etc. are routine news items. It is not only the health and economic security of the consumers that is at stake but also the overall health of the society. The areas under the jurisdiction of the liquor mafia are invariably criminal areas. It is not simply the criminalisation that goes along with the underworld nature of the trade but the enormous power of money, easy money, which engenders criminality. Money buys power which is essentially political in nature. The judiciary can be purchased, the police can be purchased and politicians can be purchased. Excise is the most lucrative department because of the phenomenal degree of corruption built into it over a period of time. Coalitions change in Keralam at frequent intervals and all the coalitions and the political parties in them are in cahoots with the liquor lobby because of the lucre involved. The contractors knew fully well that parties may come and go but their interests remain the same. Leading political parties knew it equally well that antagonizing the liquor lobby is unthinkable because they are the people with enormous amounts of liquid cash which is so much in demand, especially during elections. Using their economic clout the abkaris have built up an extensive network

among the police, excise, judiciary and other key segments. What is needed is an economic and political package which will severely curtail and ultimately eliminate the powers of the liquor mafia. Immense political pressure is a necessary precondition for such a transformation. Serious governmental level investigations into the pros and cons of the liquor sector starting with the long-term and short-term economic and social costs of drinking as well as the sociological and social psychological reasons behind why such a large number of people drink heavily on a continuous basis should be done without delay. There is no dearth of manpower within Kerala to conduct such socially relevant investigations. The handicap of the prohibitionists in this regard is their fixation on moral reasons only. This attitude has to give place to down-to-earth realities and scientific investigations. But unfortunately no such serious effort has so far been taken place in the God's own country. The result is the violation of the human rights of non- drinkers, especially the poor mothers of this God's own country.

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