



BOOKS

Power, Poverty and Poison

Disaster and Response in an Indian City

James Manor

Sage Publications 1993; Price Rs. 220 (HB)

Review : Renuka Vishwanathan

JAMES Manor intends his *Power, Poverty and Poison* to be a study of how an urban system copes with disaster. The disaster under examination is the liquor poisoning in which a record number of more than 3000 deaths occurred from adulterated hooch in the unlikely middle class locale of Bangalore between the 6th and the 12th of July 1981. The analysis is of immense value for all those concerned with recent popular movements spearheaded mainly by women against the liquor trade since Manor presents the events leading up to the disaster accurately and in depth and also evaluates the responses of many groups — the medical profession, the state through its bureaucrats, the police and the politicians, the press, the judiciary, NGOs and the survivors — with great perception. However, his focus is not on women per se and the picture that emerges is one of women merely as victims or as their dependents as our experience with recent agitations would suggest. Manor's study reveals a more complex reality; it is a salutary reminder that women are not necessarily on the side of the angels for we discover that the second-in-command of Amir Sultan (indicted as the boss of the hooch network) was a woman and women were widely employed to receive and transport

liquor as they were less likely to be intercepted and searched.

The general demand of the women-led movements has been the closure of liquor sales outlets. In Andhra Pradesh they have, in fact, succeeded in their efforts. But reducing supplies without a fall in demand can be dangerous. Prohibition of this type even when accompanied by wholesale social ostracism has failed everywhere; maximum number of liquor tragedies have occurred in Gujarat which has consciously been under prohibition. Banning the sale of alcohol drives demand underground where it is satisfied by adulterated brews, retailed by an organised mafia which gradually extends its tentacles into several other areas of activity. When arrack prices shoot up beyond the reach of the poor, they turn to illicit liquor. This is what happened in 1981 for various reasons. The Bangalore disaster offers clear proof of this phenomenon.

In Bangalore, illicit liquor is consumed by the poorest of the city's population — its unskilled labour living in the cantonment slums. Hooch is more costly to produce than arrack and only as potent. But it was then three times cheaper at the sale point because arrack had a tax element of 66%. Excise rentals on auctioned

production and sale of arrack constitute a significant source of state revenues. State excises contributed one-fifth of state tax receipts in 1981 and continue to be its second main fiscal source.

Liquor barons had funded the earlier Congress (I) government of Devraj Urs and had enabled it to fill the coffers of the high command as well as buy up disgruntled partymen. But when Gundu Rao was picked for leadership by the high command, he felt no need for such support and resolved to break their economic and political clout.

He brought in a dedicated and honest officer to enforce strict compliance with tax and regulatory legislation. He also encouraged outsiders to participate in excise bids to break the collusive cartelised system. Bids soared and prices had to necessarily follow. Leakages of untaxed rectified spirit from distilleries and industrial alcohol producing units were relentlessly plugged. This also affected illicit liquor manufacturers who depended on the same sources. Another regular channel for hooch production — denatured spirit (non potable alcohol) — ostensibly meant for the manufacture of French polish also dried up when many spurious units

were shut down and licences withdrawn. With the demand of hooch on the rise due to the skyrocketing prices of tax-paid arrack, purveyors of illicit liquor became more reckless and negligent. They substituted poisonous methanol for ethanol or potable alcohol and distributed it through their retail network. The result was disaster.

In a situation like the one above, Manor's solution is to make state-produced cheap arrack as widely available as possible in protected packings. His recommendations have since been implemented but only to a certain extent and they have led to fresh difficulties. The Karnataka government has, in fact, nationalised arrack production in two public undertakings — Mysore Sales International and Mysore Sugars. But rectified spirits from private distilleries, even when allotted to these public sector undertakings, escape into the open market where prices are higher and could easily feed an illicit liquor manufacturing network.

Arrack is now sold in sachets but distribution continues to be auctioned in the interests of the excise revenue. Manor's suggestion that a lower tax on arrack may be compensated by higher imposts on beer and IMFL is unlikely to find acceptance as the latter are consumed by richer and more influential people. Besides, the greater availability of cheap labour has contributed to greater alcoholism and dissipation among the poor which is precisely what the women of Andhra Pradesh are complaining about. Karnataka's supply of arrack is crossing the border to dry areas of neighbouring Andhra Pradesh raising prices all around and creating an explosive situation not very different from the 1981 scenario. Naturally, it is not easy to be optimistic about a quick

and easy solution. To avoid a repetition of 1981 we can rely only on the native sense of the poor arrack consumer who, it is hoped, will not endanger his life by purchasing liquor that is not sold in sachets!

Manor's investigation of the "worst liquor poisoning to occur in India" becomes "an enquiry into the condition — social, economic and political — of urban India today". He adds that "if Mahatma Gandhi were on-hand he might say that it also tells us something about India's moral condition". This wider enquiry is the result of Manor's study of the responses of the different sections and institutions to the liquor deaths. The systemic issues — poor medical infrastructure and non involvement of private hospitals and doctors in reacting to the disaster due to fear of medico-legal involvement, inadequate journalistic follow up after the event, judicial delays and procedural hitches which scare away victims and their well-wishers, indifferent and collusive police investigation and prosecution — are described in detail by Manor.

In Bangalore in 1981 some tragic mistakes also pushed up the death toll. Due to the inexcusable delay of the forensic science laboratory in releasing the results of its chemical analysis the doctors remained ignorant that methanol was the adulterant and could not neutralise its effects by the administration of ethanol or potable alcohol (as was done in several later tragedies). The centralisation of the police force discouraged field officers from fanning out into the affected areas and bringing in more victims on the night of 5th/6th June without specific orders from senior officials. The cumulative effect of the institutional failure to cope with the crisis is seen in the fact that not a single case has ended in

conviction and those who had adulterated the liquor are alive and thriving and are back at their old game. Very little of the compensation amount given by the government reached the hands of the victims as it was distributed in a totally unprecedented manner through the police. Rehabilitation measures have also met with little success.

Manor's suggestions to improve the reactive capacity of institutions relate to the extension of civic services including health to slum areas, the encouragement of private doctors and NGOs to work there, the tightening of laws and penalties for illicit distillation and sale of liquor and making excise related offenses non bailable. He proposes a liquor poisoning code on the lines of the famine code to cut across procedural hassles and facilitate emergency action. These suggestions are certainly worth implementing but one wonders if there ever will be sufficient political will to take a hard stance against influential lobbies.

Manor's study has been published 12 years after the event. Meanwhile there have been several similar occurrences in other states though none has had quite as fatal an effect. The Bangalore tragedy has been enquired into by an official commission whose report was published in 1983 after the Hedge government replaced the Congress (I) administration of Gundu Rao. Manor makes passing references to the report, noting inter alia that the terms of reference of the commission were tailored to fix the blame on the official machinery, that the commission was unfairly harsh to the excise department, etc. Unfortunately, however, these views are just stated and there is no summary of the commission's findings either in Manor's text nor in an appendix. Manor's assessment of the

commission's conclusions are absolutely accurate. Nonetheless, a reader unfamiliar with what had happened would have benefited with greater information, especially since the initial reaction of a government faced with such an event even today is to appoint an enquiry commission.

Manor cannot be faulted on most of his conclusions. There is, however, some theatricality especially in the opening chapter where he tries to set the scene in a journalistic manner by describing Bangalore "the most westernised urban centre in India" as the city where Winston Churchill was posted as subaltern and calls attention to the fact that even in Washington, Toronto, Sydney, Glasgow, three English language newspapers are not being published *as* in Bangalore. These lines are evidently meant to put Bangalore in perspective for the Western reader as is the comparison between disaster management and public response in developed and developing countries in the first few pages of chapter XI. There is truth in Manor's comment that "middle class people in Bangalore tend to view the problems of the city's slum dwellers in the same way that people in the West regard the difficulties of the poor in the Third World" with "social distance", "remoteness" and "a sense of impotence" And Manor does not disparage or condemn out of hand institutional inadequacies. From that point of view the tragedy could not have a better chronicler. Manor's judgements are doled out evenly and with compassion. Witness, for example, his verdict on the excise department — the principal villain in the eyes of the enquiry commission — as having worked out "not wisely but too well", his wholehearted praise for the overburdened government doctors who toiled tirelessly to save lives and for the journalists who made special



arrangements to cover the crisis. He is aware of systemic failures and draws attention to them but he does not spare individual indifferences either. There is a pointed analysis of the failings of the police, prosecution, political and judicial systems but he does not gloss over the incident of the senior police officer whose orders were essential to prevent large scale deaths but whose sleep could not be disturbed on the night of 5th/ 6th July or the indifferent forensic science personnel who refused to conduct lab analysis quickly for procedural reasons.

Manor's familiarity with the milieu dates from his continuing association with Karnataka politics since the seventies when he wrote his dissertation on the subject. He is alive to every nuance of caste and class alignment in the state and the capital city of Bangalore. His political antennae pick up data effortlessly. The masterly manner in which he sums up the entire Devraj Urs Indira Gandhi relationship in a couple of pages is a case in point.

Nor does he hesitate to tell all. He investigates the complaint frequently made in the press about the involvement of a senior

Congress (I) politician, now an important minister in the central government, in shielding the hooch baron. Although there is not enough material to decide the issue, Manor goes into all available information.

His greatest strength is in his wide range of sources. Apart from documentary evidence and references to relevant disaster management and development studies on a global level, Manor has collected a vast body of oral testimony. He has spoken to victims, politicians, journalists, doctors, officials, policemen and they have often revealed unexpected facts and feelings. There is even the evidence from a senior official who was present when a leading Congress (I) politician lobbied successfully to get Amir Sultan released on bail. People have willingly confessed their feelings of inadequacy and culpability. And Manor, while respecting his sources, has meticulously footnoted each such confidence, only keeping the names of individuals secret where required. His data is drawn even from politicians like ex-chief ministers Devraj Urs and Gundu Rao. What emerges is an eminently credible picture of confused, but well meaning persons, who are cynical about institutional failure and are overcome by a sense of impotence. And despite his practical suggestions for reform, Manor does not totally succeed in dispelling the feeling of helplessness in readers who are familiar with Indian politics and bureaucracy.

