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‘It’s About Changing Our Lives’ -Himachali Women Organise

This second and concluding part of the article on women in Solan district, Himachal Pradesh, describes how the antiliquor campaign mobilised women from many villages to undertake new forms of action. The first part of the article appeared in Manushi No. 39.

ONE of the women’s growing concerns has been the increase in the number of liquor vends in their villages over the last 20 years with a consequent increase in alcoholism which has negative effects on the life of women and children. One of the women reminisced : “When I was young, just married, there were only three liquor stores in the area and they were miles away from each other, but now you find liquor shops in nearly every village.”

Individual women’s groups had taken up the issue at a local level. In Bharotiwalla, for example, they approached the chief minister for closure of a nearby vend. In Narayani and Jakharota, women fought against the brewing of illicit liquor, but were

defeated by the combined force of village and political leaders.

In 1985, the Society For Upliftment Through Rural Action (SUTRA) received a grant from the ministry for human resource development under the title of “Raising public awareness against alcoholism.” They ran a series of village level camps at which women were able to discuss the problems that liquor creates in their lives and to learn more about the government’s role in licensing and sanctioning the sale of liquor at the state level.

In December 1985 a group of Mahila Mandal leaders and village midwives came together for their regular three monthly meeting and discussed the state of health in their villages. One midwife said: “What is

the point of our discussing health problems when the biggest problem we face at present in many villages is that of alcohol ? Our lives are being ruined by our men drinking.”

After much discussion, the women agreed, that a meeting should be held at SUTRA in February to which they would invite women from all the Mahila Mandals and where they would discuss what steps they could take.

Government Gains Women Lose

SUTRA conducted investigations and found that, in 1985, a figure in the region of Rs 68 crores must have been raised by the state government from the sale of licences alone. Depending on whether a vend is in