



SUTRA

**Carrying the major burden of fieldwork**

far beyond the financial reach of many who buy it. This particularly affects families from the interior villages — their menfolk may have to walk 10 or 15 kilometres to get labouring work, and then, being far from home, they will spend it all on alcohol in the evenings, thus wasting their day's wages.

Groups of men club together to buy a bottle, and with about one third of the male population sharing a bottle two or three times a week regularly, over Rs 1,000 per family

annually is easily swallowed up. This is a low estimate when you look at drinking patterns. For example, during the vegetable selling season, the men who drink regularly will be drunk almost every night, and even those men who rarely drink for the rest of the year will do so during this time.

The actual economics can be worked out if we take the example of one village, Patta Mahlog, which has a population, including the surrounding area, of about 1,300 families. The licence here sold for Rs

100,000 in 1985, which means that the licensee has to make at least Rs 400,000 before he shows a profit. This is equivalent to about 13,000 bottles or roughly 10 bottles per family.

If only a third of the men drink on a regular basis, this means that at least 30 bottles per year are purchased in drinking families, equivalent to about Rs 900. If we accept that this expenditure is necessary simply for the licensee to break even, and it is well known that they actually make very good profits from the stores, it gives some indication of what a large drain on family income alcohol now constitutes.

In certain areas, it is not only the men who drink. Particularly amongst the poor population, the women too drink. In Purla, a village occupied by basket maker families, there are days when the women will leave their baskets and sit and get drunk together. At weddings too people get drunk and this can put people in debt to the tune of anything from Rs 1,000 to Rs 5,000.

The Himachal Pradesh excise regulations are framed in such a way that they allow no provision for the closure of a liquor shop once it is licensed for the year, and although there is a paragraph which states that public opinion should be assessed before a licence is granted, there is nothing that makes it incumbent upon the licensing authorities either to assess opinion or to follow its dictates.

There are legal limits to the siting of vends close to temples or schools, but these are often flouted, and once a vend is sited it is almost impossible to get it moved. The state government makes large amounts of money from liquor and is yearly increasing the number of licences granted.

In 1983, the issue of siting of liquor vends was taken up in Simla high court as a public interest litigation