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scholars, including the medical profession, have neither properly studied or resisted the rise in the alcohol consumption. However, the following figures give some idea of the trend. The British government in India used to earn 250 million rupees a year from the excise tax on alcohol in India. Today the provincial governments in India together collect 40 000 million rupees as excise tax on alcoholic beverages each year.

Gadchiroli is an undeveloped district in the state of Maharashtra. Half of the population of 650 000 in the district are aborigines, mostly of the Madia Gond tribe. SEARCH (Society for Education, Action & Research in Community Health), a voluntary organisation working in the district, initially tried hospital based treatment of the alcoholics, but soon realised the futility of the medical approach in the face of a problem of such enormous size. Encouraged by the strong feelings among the women and young people in the villages about the problem of alcoholism among males, a participatory programme was started in 1988, which yielded two major results.

A quick but crude survey revealed that there were 20 000 alcohol addicts in the district about 1000 of whom died each year. The cost of annual consumption of alcohol was 200 million rupees, an amount that exceeded the annual development and welfare budget for the district. Alcohol had become a serious threat to development and public health.

Alarmed by this picture, a community ban on the consumption of alcoholic drinks was applied in 200 villages. As the campaign snowballed, the leaders of the district joined forces and, supported by 331 local organisations, demanded a stoppage of all trade in liquor in the district. After four years of public protest and lobbying, the state government finally yielded. On July 29, the chief minister announced the decision to stop all sale of alcoholic drinks in the Gadchiroli district. A small beginning in the form of a participatory health programme has ultimately resulted in a policy decision.

This is not a lone example. Similar public action has been taken in north eastern provinces and in the state of Tamilnadu leading to reintroduction of restrictions on the sale of alcohol. A large-scale public campaign has forced closure of almost all liquor shops in the Cuttuck city.

Is the tide turning against alcohol in India?

Abhay and Rani Bang

### ✓ India: Action against sale of alcohol

Social boycott of the sale and consumption of alcoholic beverages was a part of the Indian struggle for independence led by Mahatma Gandhi. However, in the post-independence period, the ruling political parties distributed licences to manufacture and sell liquor to their local leaders for whom the trade became a main source of income and election campaign funding. With such political patronage, and with the tendency to equate drinking with modernity, the consumption of alcohol in India has increased greatly in the last 45 years, even though the the climate, culture and social ethos were not conducive to drinking. Unfortunately