“Yes we can!”

According to an article in The Times of India of 13th April, Tamil Nadu has the highest alcohol consumption in the country. Although the per capita consumption is higher in one or two other states (including Pondicherry), almost half the population in Tamil Nadu consumes alcohol. While the numbers who are addicted is unknown, reports suggest the problem is very serious.

“Alcoholism is really a major problem in the local villages and it is getting worse,” says Senthil, who runs a recovery program (AA) in Auroville. “Alcohol is the main reason for every problem in the village - and everywhere.” Senthil tells Prabha, who works with the Thamarai Healing Centre in the same village. Those problems include depression, accidents, health, family problems, early mortality and frustrated educational opportunities for children.

But it was always like this? If not, what changed? Kalai, a member of the local Youth Club also working at Thamarai, says the club was not organized well, but the influence of his other friends is stronger.

“The atmosphere was very bad,” says Kalai, *”Tamil Nadu has the highest alcohol consumption in the country, but the influence of his other friends is stronger.”*

After that, he begins drinking more and more. He has a good friend who tries to get him to stop, but the influence of his other friends is stronger.

His parents are desperate. Eventually an uncle suggests that they get the young man married, in the hope that his wife will stop him drinking. But this also fails. Every day he is drunk and beats his wife and children, who cannot concentrate on their studies. Eventually, he falls seriously ill and is admitted to hospital. There he has a vision. A good spirit appears to him, shows him what his present life is like and explains how an ideal man should behave.

The young man is transformed. He joins a de-addiction programme, where he meets other addicts and gets guidance on how to avoid alcohol in the future. Then he takes up sports and yoga, gets a good job and begins to look after his family well.

The Thamarai youth decided they would present the drama to the whole of Tamil Nadu. There was a touching moment, a huge problem but we must do our best,” says Savitri, “the girls who did the Hatha Yoga demonstration in Edayanchavady? Savitri reports that 40% of the state’s revenue according to the government, the other girls thought if they did it in our own village, people would tease them, so they would only do it in another village. But then Nammal told them, if you do this, the young people will get the confidence to do it; you will create a path for them. And they realised they wanted to bring something and joined me to perform and make a big change. We asked Kamar, Murugabahu’s wife to come. At first, she refused but we explained to her that we have to bring a change. Finally, she accepted to play the major role since her brother has also been affected by alcoholism.

Through this drama we highlighted not only alcohol but also emphasised the need for equality for women. I think I am just a soul, not a man of my own, and have been given a body for this soul. So I can also do what boys do.

How did the audience react?

“The play was a big step for girls to go on stage,” Badri says. “But will you change this? It’s not easy to be a girl in this society, so why can’t we make this step?”

I asked these girls if they would go on stage,” says Poozhi, Bhavana’s sister. “At first, the other girls thought if they did it in our own village, people would tease them, so they would only do it in another village. But then Nammal told them, if you do this, the young people will get the confidence to do it; you will create a path for them. And they realised they wanted to bring something and joined me to perform and make a big change. We asked Kamar, Murugabahu’s wife to come. At first, she refused but we explained to her that we have to bring a change. Finally, she accepted to play the major role since her brother has also been affected by alcoholism.

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The young people are under no illusion about the scale of the task before them. “It is a huge problem but we must do our best,” says Savitri, “it’s not easy to stop them, it will be a long process but at least we have made a beginning. Never before has there been an organised attempt to stop drinking in this village. And we are confident that we can make a difference. That is why we call ourselves ‘nammal mudiyam’ - the ‘we can’ project.”

Another use for an alcohol bottle

When the domestic violence scene was being shown on stage, we arranged to stop the play and discuss it with the women present and addressed the audience directly.

“Why are they facing this problem? Why are they facing this problem?” Savitri asks.

“We have to give equal rights to women and respect them to get a better society. We can make a change; women can take a step. We can!”

“It’s really changed something,” confirms Bhavana. “Before the alcohol-awareness day, we asked more girls to participate in future programmes, but nobody came forward. But after seeing the drama, many of them asked us to call them when we do the next programme because they would like to take part.”

“Many people participated in making this programme a success,” says Poozhi. “They included people from the Kamari team, Jayabhuvan from Reach for the Stars and people from our village. We would like to thank Sholing De Zaizer for the funding, the many Auroville groups who helped us, the health speakers from AA and the Pondicherry Government hospital, and most of all, Sri and the Fara team for all their dedication and support.”

The alcohol-awareness day in the village included the famous quote from Goethe "Whatever you can do or dream you can do; begin it. Begin it now. Its uses have begun to fade. Begin it. Now. Begin."

The youth of Edayanchavady have obviously taken it to heart.