

## Editorial

### Temperance and compassion

World Temperance Day today is not likely to be greeted with the same kind of enthusiasm that other more publicised days observed this week -- Universal Children's Day and Elders Day, both celebrated on October 1. Yet just more than a century ago in the late 1890s, the Temperance Movement in Sri Lanka, spearheaded by leading Buddhist figures, was gathering momentum. Its activists were also in the forefront of the country's independence movement to free Sri Lanka from the colonial yoke.

Records show that in 1895, there were 2038 taverns in Sri Lanka. Anagarika Dharmapala's "Sura Virodhi Vyaparaya" against alcoholism, succeeded in bringing down this number significantly, to 190.

That unfortunately is not a trend we see today. A front-page report in this newspaper on August 22 that the Excise Department issued more than 2,800 liquor licences last year, drew a response from Commissioner General that the total number of liquor licenses operated in 2009 was 2,820. Of this number only 40 new licences had been issued in 2009, he said, adding that according to the present government policy, new liquor licences were issued only to Tourist-Board-approved hotels. However, our reporter noted that the Commissioner General's 2009 Administrative report presented to Parliament specifically stated that the number of local and foreign liquor licences issued for the financial year 2009 was 2,820, with Colombo getting 586, Gampaha 394 and Kandy 19. The report said the number of spirit distilleries and manufacturing licences operated in the financial year 2009 as 110.

The biggest problem, however, is the proliferation of illicit liquor, kasippu - the mainstay of the common man, the expensive whiskies and wine being the preserve of a small section of drinkers in the city's clubs and hotels. A look at the situation in the city's many watteres would be an eye-opener. The majority of the men, if they do go out for work would head straight for the wayside tavern for a drink on their way home most probably squandering the better part of their day's wages. The others would browbeat their wives into parting with at least a portion of their hard-earned wage to ensure their daily ration.

The social problems caused by alcohol abuse are too well known -- domestic violence, child abuse, rape, cases which are regularly publicized and recorded, with seemingly little effect on stemming the tide. The economic count is less documented but it would be pertinent to see what proportion of income is spent on liquor -- income that could have been gainfully used for the benefit of the entire family -- on children's education, nutrition and health or housing.

The then finance minister, Dr. N.M. Perera, started the Distilleries Corporation in the 1970s to give the poor man a quality drink at an affordable price. This cash cow was privatized when it was reaping profits for the state coffers.

While we don't want to advocate a 'no booze' policy like in some West Asian countries, which kind of prohibition breeds other evils like drugs, already a huge problem in this country, particularly with regard to heroin and cannabis, there is a crying need for action. The National Dangerous Drugs Control Board states that the prevalence of drug-related arrests was 93 per population of 10,000 in 2009 and the prevalence of drug related arrests above 14 years was 125 per population of 10,000 the same year.

There is no denying the societal problems faced by the youth. The education system provides them with little avenue for

escaping the poverty trap; lack of employment opportunities drives them to kasippu or drugs at an early age, and from these twin addictions there is no respite. Then it spawns a vicious cycle as these young men marry and have their own families. An eye-opener in the National Dangerous Drugs Control Board figures is that the men to women ratio in drug arrests was 29:1.

The feel-good poya day liquor bans alone, while they may help in some ways, do not tackle the main issues at stake. The need to bring in the main stakeholders, the agencies working in combating the problems of alcohol and drug abuse and formulating concrete policy on this front is imperative.

Meanwhile, World Animal Day is celebrated tomorrow and no doubt we will see animal rights activists on the march. Reports in the media will make reference to Arahat Mahinda's words to King Devanampiyatissa: "Oh! Great King, the birds of the air and the beasts have an equal right to live and move about in any part of this land as thou." Our Features section publishes an article about St. Francis of Assisi, the patron saint of animals and his teachings. But more often than not, little is done to help the cause of the suffering animals we treat with scant concern. A case in point is the Animal Welfare Bill which was introduced to Parliament in 2009. This has lapsed with the dissolution of Parliament.

Activists have been lobbying for the reform of the laws relating to the care and protection of animals. At present, Sri Lanka's legislation is not in line with that of other countries. The Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Ordinance, No. 13 of 1907 offers little in terms of issues like humane methods of slaughter of animals and the use of animals for research. That a third party, even an animal welfare organization, is unable to take action to prevent instances of cruelty is a major lack.

The annual Munneswaram temple animal sacrifice where a few hundred goats and fowl were slaughtered was a much publicized example of how the law functions in our land. Prominent Hindu associations dissociated themselves with the practice but it went on with the Police more concerned with the breach of peace provisions of the law caused by the protesters rather than the animal abuses in direct contravention of the law of Prevention of Cruelty to Animals and the Butchers Ordinance.

Like the Arahat Mahinda's wisdom, Mahatma Gandhi's words are worth repeating: 'The greatness of a nation and its moral progress can be judged by the way its animals are treated.' If the President is intent on making this a real Dhammadipa, he must ensure that the laws are in place and upheld.

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