TIME TO ‘DE-CRIMINALISE’ THE CONSUMPTION OF ALCOHOL

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Liquor does not always spell chaos, as is the popular perception. Images from Goa, after liquor shops were allowed to open in lockdown 3.0, show buyers lazily shopping and taking off. No long lines, no police lathi-charge.

That was not the picture in Delhi, Mumbai or Tamil Nadu. When liquor sales resumed in Mumbai on May 4, there was a stampede outside shops. There was no physical distancing. Just jostling to get to the booze. Mumbai sold 16 lakh litres of liquor worth 862 crore in one day. By evening, the Municipal Corporation had reversed the permission for liquor shops to do business. The Delhi administration, unlike Mumbai, decided to ride out the chaos, and in fact, used it as an opportunity to impose a 70 per cent ‘corona virus’ tax on MRP. Karnataka, which did a record-breaking sales of 197 crore on Day 2, is following the Delhi example and will impose a 10-15 per cent ‘corona charge’ on tipplers.

No Corona Link

These sales figures clearly indicate that consumption of alcohol is a popular habit across classes. One is risking social chaos if the natural propensities of people are bottled up. Without getting into ethical issues, what pray is the connection of fighting corona virus with banning the sale of liquor?

Liquor has no relation to the spread of the pandemic, as Punjab Chief Minister Captain Amarinder Singh passionately points out. The virus thrives in and is spread by the mucus of infected persons. On the other hand, liquor may not be an ‘essential’ commodity like rice and dal; but for many, it is equivalent to say, the use of soaps and cosmetics that we have got used to.

Supporters of the temperance movement point out that the buying and consumption of liquor creates crowding and thus the conditions for the social spread of the infection. This would never be the case if liquor is sold like medicine at pharmacies — fixed timings, social distancing; and consumption at home. Home delivery via an Amazon or the neighbourhood delivery boy is also an option. Come to think of it, the corona ban on liquor is a heartless policy. We are bot-

ting up people at home; and adding insult to injury by denying them the one thing that makes the evenings pass away easier.

Bad Business Sense

There is the business side of it too. Laments Captain Amarinder Singh: “When our share of state GST has not been paid by the Centre, what right has the Union government to deny us this source of revenue.”

State excise, the duty imposed on liquor sales, is a large portion of the states’ revenues. Maharashtra, for instance, raked in ₹24,000 crore for the last financial year. By that count, the state has already lost ₹3,000 crore over the last 45 days of lockdown. Tamil Nadu similarly collected ₹5,000 crore in taxes on liquor last fiscal, and has lost nearly ₹5,500 crore over the lockdown so far. It is no wonder that states are pushing for the opening up of liquor sales.

The RBI estimates that excise duty on alcohol accounts for around 10-15 per cent of the states’ Own-Tax revenue; and as a revenue head, it is either the second or the third highest contributor to states’ incomes after Goods and Services Tax.

This brings us to the last leg of the proposition. Consumption of liquor in reasonable proportions is recognised in most developed societies as normal social activity. Historically, it has been around since the advent of Man. However, from time to time, conservative civil society has tried to stigmatise drinking, declaring it an ‘evil’ practice that destroys families.

In recent times, prohibitionists in the US launched a huge ‘Dry Crusade’ and succeeded in getting Congress to ban liquor in 1920 via an amendment to the US Constitution. What arose in the years of prohibition was illegal distillation, criminal gangs and a huge loss of revenue, ultimately leading to a repeal of Prohibition in 1933. The failure of Prohibition everywhere hasn’t prevented us from giving it a shot ourselves — in Gujarat, in Nagaland and now Bihar.

The results are well known. Prohibition remains in name alone. While the well-heeled have the privilege of ordering home deliveries of the brands they desire, the poorer classes ingest illegally brewed bootleg liquor. That, over the years, has killed and maimed thousands. Prohibition is dead but its ghost lingers on. Socially, the stigma around liquor is crudely propagated, while state governments continue to make a show of deviating some controls on consumption and distribution.

The time has come to ‘de-criminalise’ liquor as the state of Goa has done successfully. Considering that 50 per cent or more of the price of every bottle finds its way to the coffers of state governments, it is preposterous that tipplers are treated with such scant respect.