

PROHIBITION IS A PHANTOM which rises every election. Most recent being Rajasthan, which toyed with the idea, but thankfully discarded it after studying its impact in Bihar and Gujarat. Andhra Pradesh is another state which promised prohibition and is now struggling with implementation.

Yet another example is Maharashtra, which has archaic laws of permits to drink (bars are called 'permit rooms') despite the fact that it has never been enforced. It now intends to enforce permit for small private parties at home. Similarly, there are inexecutable limits on stocking of alcohol for personal consumption. Such ad-hocism prevents a consistent public policy aimed at creating a culture of responsible drinking.

Is prohibiting liquor the solution to problems like alcoholism? There is no doubt that the malaise runs deep in our society, but is ban an answer?

It's not alcohol but excessive and irresponsible intake of alcohol that is a matter of concern and should be addressed. BH Khardekar, Kolhapur MP in the first Lok Sabha, had said in the Constituent Assembly in 1948, "...you do not know the essential difference between a drinker and a drunkard", an argument that led to decision against imposing prohibition.

Prohibition has not succeeded anywhere in the world. Also, to a large extent, the move to ban consumption and sale of liquor has been more of a populist inter-

No to prohibition

Evidence from Indian experiments show that liquor ban does not lead to desired changes

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vention on part of the government.

There is a lot to learn from the US experience with respect to prohibition during the first half of the 20th century. It almost established that prohibition leads to an increase in organised crime. It also drives up corruption amongst law enforcement agencies and gives rise to illicit liquor trade. One of the biggest losers is the government, which has to let go of legitimate revenues and above all, consumers, who are forced to use suspect quality and spurious products.

Closer home, Gujarat (that has been under prohibition for most of its existence) has a thriving illegal liquor industry. For reference, neighbouring Daman has a per capita consumption of 56 litres per annum against the national average of just 4.3 litres per annum. It is estimated that the state loses revenue to the tune of ₹8,000 crore annually. Off-late Gujarat has diluted prohibition to contain negative fall out on tourism and MICE (meetings, incentives,

conferences and exhibitions) sector.

Haryana, Tamil Nadu and Kerala too have experimented with prohibition at different times, but abolished it due to its ineffectiveness. Prohibition did not solve the problem of alcohol consumption—it only drove it underground. In recent times Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland and Manipur have also overturned years old prohibition policy due to its failure.

A careful analysis will show that prohibition also does not win elections. Demand for prohibition comes from a highly vocal and visible, but small group of voters. During last assembly elections in Tamil Nadu, all parties except winner AIADMK had prohibition prominently mentioned in their manifesto. In Kerala, LDF promised to overturn prohibition imposed by erstwhile UDF and it won. In Chhattisgarh, Congress discarded prohibition promise after winning and has continued to win by-polls. In AP, YSRCP did win elections, but pre-



election surveys had already predicted its victory; prohibition was merely incidental.

Tax revenues from alcohol is a major part of any government's revenues. These enable the government to finance several public welfare schemes. Absence of these revenues severely impacts state's ability to run public welfare programmes.

Bihar introduced complete prohibition in April 2016. While it certainly has led to reduction in alcohol consumption, the

related social, economic, and administrative costs have been far too much to justify gains. Prohibition crippled the judicial administration. So far over 2.14 lakh cases have been registered under the Act; 2.55 lakh people have been booked and 1.67 lakh arrests have been made. Nearly 40,000 bail applications are pending in High Court, which has expressed its anguish at the turn of events and questioned how it can deal with this enormous pendency. Ironically, liquor sales

in districts in Uttar Pradesh and West Bengal bordering Bihar have seen a sharp rise.

Now picture this. Today, Indian Made Foreign Liquors (IMFL) industry contributes over ₹1 lakh crore in taxes every year. It supports livelihood of 35 lakh farming families and provides direct and indirect employment to lakhs of workers employed in the industry. It also supports hundreds of ancillary industries in glass, tin, plastic and paper with a turnover of ₹6,000-7,000 crore.

The belief that banning alcohol would check issues related with alcoholism is a very simplistic notion, whereas in reality the situation is much more complex. Between issues such as morality, prohibition or freedom of choice, also are factors like economy, jobs, etc, which cannot be ignored. What is required is an informed and a constructive dialogue on the causes and effects.

Policy makers should focus on framing laws which encourage responsible behavior and compliance. Drinking age should be made uniform across the country and no person below that should be permitted to buy alcohol. Tough laws should be made against drunken behaviour in public, domestic violence under influence, and drinking and driving. Besides, governments should set aside part of revenue earned from alcohol for social education, de-addiction, and community support.

Point is we know that sugar is bad for health. Should we just ban it or instead get people to consume it less by way of creating awareness.