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"YOU CAN go to any liquor shop across the city and you will not find brands upwards of Rs 1,500 to Rs 1,600. This has been the case since the (excise) policy was rolled back. People used to ask us if some premium brand or the other was available. Now, they have stopped doing that and go straight to Gurgaon," said the manager at a liquor store near New Friends Colony.

He flagged non-availability of brands ranging from Johnnie Walker's Black and Red Label, Bombay Sapphire and Samsara gin, Grey Goose vodka, Glenlivet, Jack Daniel's and Monkey Shoulder whiskey, in addition to Jagermeister.

The manager's complaint symbolised the state of many liquor stores in Delhi — low stock of premium as well as popular brands for several months and unhappy customers — ever since the Delhi government scrapped its new liquor policy and reverted to the old one.

It was in early 2021 that then excise minister Manish Sisodia announced a draft policy to "revolutionise" Delhi's liquor trade. This marked the exit of the government from the retail business, new norms for shops — which included an end to shops where a customer stands on the street and buys liquor from a small window — and opening of premium vends, which were allowed to have tasting rooms.

A year later, however, the government scrapped the new policy after L-G VK Saxena recommended a probe by the Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) into allegations of kickbacks received by government officials and irregularities in the way the policy was implemented.

Since September, when the government reverted to its policy that only allowed government vends to operate, vendors have complained that customers are going to neighbouring states, especially to Gurgaon, where well-lit liquor shops with fully-stocked shelves that are open till the early hours of the morning have slowly become the norm.

Amid two probes by the CBI and the Enforcement Directorate (ED) into the excise case, several people have been arrested. The first high-profile arrest was of AAP's communication-in-charge Vijay Nair by the CBI on September 28. Sisodia was arrested by the agency in connection with the case in February this year. The ED has arrested General Manager of Pernod Ricard India Benoy Babu among others — a move that has resulted in several brands of the French company being unavailable in Delhi.

Few options

Is Delhi getting its drink of choice? The question elicits a firm 'no' from Dinesh Kumar, a salesman at a liquor shop on Arya Samaj Road in Central



HARDLOOK

LOW SPIRITS

Nearly a year after Delhi government's contentious excise policy was scrapped, business is yet to fully recover, with customers and restaurateurs complaining of limited availability of popular brands, and of losing customers to neighbouring Gurgaon. *The Indian Express* visits 20 liquor vends across the capital to understand what's missing, and why

Delhi's Karol Bagh. "The supply of imported liquor is low, this has been the case ever since private stores shut. We are getting Black Label, but it is in low supply. In beer, Kingfisher has also been in low supply recently. *Majboori mein*, some people buy other brands, but many customers have just been going to Gurgaon or Noida," Kumar said.

Out of 10 shops across parts of North, West and Central Delhi that *The Indian Express* visited, only one had stock of the Grey Goose vodka, while most had stocked up on Indian gin.

The overall situation was worse in East, South and Central Delhi where retailers admitted they had either been forced to resort to clearing old stock of premium scotch brands such as Johnnie Walker Black and Red Label or requesting customers to choose mid-range brands such as Black Dog and Teacher's single malt when it came to whiskey. Artic and Kiev were the vodka brands up for sale.

While mostly Terai gin was mainly available, if at all, beer too was in questionable supply — especially popular brands such as Kingfisher and Tuborg — leaving retailers with no choice except asking customers to choose from Bira and Bhutan-made Druk.

"Old stock is being cleared to ride over the supply issue with Johnny Walker brands; Tuborg's licence has just been renewed so it has started coming. Other beers like Budweiser and Hoegaarden too are now slowly being made available but Kingfisher's supply is intermittent due to some issue at the source," said Murari Lal, employed at a liquor vend in Mayur Vihar.

Connaught Place, on the other hand, seemed to be struggling in most respects. "Red Label, Black Label *kuch bhi nahin hai kya?*" Dineshwar Singh, a private bank employee, asked an attendant at a liquor store in CP.

"*Jo hai saamne laga hai, inke upar wale brand agle week aayenge*," Singh was told by Monu, who was manning the counter. "We only have Druk in beer, Black Dog is the most premium whiskey available and Vodka mein Artic aur Kiev hai, *kaun sa doon?*" he added.

At Rajendra Place, where four shops are clustered together in a single complex, staff said other brands have taken the place of those that are not available. "In place of Absolut, which is also associated with Pernod Ricard, some buy Smoke, an Indian vodka. Stickers who insist on a certain brand tend to go to



Liquor shops in Connaught Place (top) and Central Delhi.
Praveen Khanna / *The Indian Express*

Gurgaon and get a month's supply. On the other hand, regular drinkers may choose alternatives," said a staffer at one of the shops in the building.

A 25-year-old who asks for Absolut at Rajendra Place, however, walks away without an alternative. "We don't drink often, but this is what we came for. This was available when we bought it over six months ago," he said.

The blowback

But it is not just the more premium brands that are missing. Staffers at liquor vends across

segment marketed by Seagram's had significantly impacted sales.

Staff at the Old Rajender Nagar Market in Central Delhi concurred. "Every third person would come for Royal Stag, Blenders Pride or 100 Pipers... Even Black Label has been in short supply. We got a few boxes in January, but none after that," he said, listing all the brands associated with Pernod Ricard that are not available, including Jacob's Creek wines.

A retailer in South Delhi's New Friends Colony explained, "Since last September, when the new policy was rolled back and the old one reinstated, we have been relying on mid-range replacements. Given the summer season, we are hopeful that supply of beer will get better so we are able to at least break even. Though it is a different matter that we will have to sell, say, 20 cans of beer to equal the price of a single bottle of Chivas," he added.

While some might remain loyal to the brands that are no longer available in Delhi, others may have switched loyalties, staff at some liquor shops said. In North Delhi's Ashok Vihar, a vendor said, "Sales haven't been bad. While some may be buying from Gurgaon for reasons including a lower rate, others have

realised that some, like Royal Stag, have not been available in Delhi for a while now and are switching to others."

Despite the issues, the Excise Department, earlier this month, said it collected the highest ever revenue in the past financial year — Rs 5,548.48 crore. An average of 17 lakh bottles of alcohol were sold a day, generating a revenue of Rs 19.71 crore. The total revenue collected, after including excise revenue and VAT was Rs 6,821 crore.

Officials in the Excise Department claimed there were no issues related to supply of premium brands. "Supply is done on a daily basis and whatever is being supplied is being consumed quickly. More brands will be registered in the coming days," said an official.

One official also pointed out that since Delhi is not a state that manufactures alcohol, beer supply in summer is restricted in the city in favour of states where it is manufactured. For some brands, the department has allowed old stock, bought under the now-scrapped policy, to be used but industry insiders said manufacturers and brand owners are now more careful about the markets and vends where their brands will be made available.

STATUS REPORT

585

liquor shops in Delhi
(as of March 6)

THESE ARE RUN BY FOUR GOVERNMENT CORPORATIONS:

- Delhi Tourism and Transportation Development Corporation (DTTDC)
- Delhi Consumer's Cooperative Wholesale Store (DCCWS)
- Delhi State Industrial and Infrastructure Development Corporation (DSIIDC)
- Delhi State Civil Supplies Corporation (DSCSC)



₹5,548.48 crore

Highest-ever revenue collected in the past financial year

₹6,821 crore

Total revenue collected, after including excise revenue and VAT

17 LAKH bottles of alcohol were sold a day on average, generating revenue of Rs 19.71 crore

1,000 BRANDS (approx) registered in the city

930 HOTELS, restaurants & clubs have licence to serve

The shadow cast by the excise policy case has had an effect on the way the policy is being viewed from within.

"The situation in Delhi is such that the decision making is uncertain on excise matters," said Vinod Giri, Director General, Confederation of Indian Alcoholic Beverage Companies. (CIABC).

Talking about the supply of premium alcohol and beer, Giri said, "For premium Indian liquor brands, the licence fee is much higher than for imported brands. Local companies find it too high to service the market. As for the old stock stuck due to policy changes in the past, we hear that permissions have been granted to some brands, but there needs to be general clarity. Manufacturers are wary due to that."