

Alcohol in India

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Prohibition is incorporated in the Constitution of India among the directive principles of state policy. Article 47 says: "The state shall regard the raising of the level of nutrition and standard of living of its people as among its primary duties and in particular, the state shall endeavour to bring about prohibition of the use except for medicinal purposes of intoxicating drinks and of drugs which are injurious to health."

During the pre-independence period, Mahatma Gandhi himself issued several strong statements against the sale and consumption of alcohol.

The Alcohol Situation in India

Alcohol is one of the commonly consumed intoxicating substances in India. It has traditionally been drunk in tribal societies, although it has won increasing social acceptance among other groups, urban males being the prime example. It is easily available and widely used, especially at festivals such as Deepawali and Holi. At the moment the use of alcohol is infrequent among women who also tend to resist the habit among male family members.

Between 15 and 20 per cent of Indian people consume alcohol and, over the past twenty years, the number of drinkers has increased from one in 300 to one in 20. According to The Hindustan Times, it is estimated that of these 5 per cent can be classed as alcoholics or alcohol dependent. This translates into about five million people addicted to alcohol.

Of what is actually consumed, the Intake of Indian Made Foreign Liquor (IMFL) is growing at the considerable rate of 15 per cent a year. Again, The Hindustan Times says that 65 per cent of the Indian liquor market is controlled by whiskey manufacturers. The state of Kerala stands first in per capita consumption of liquor at 8.3 litres, followed by Punjab 7.9 litres.

Alcohol Situation in India among youth

Today in India, the tendency to alcohol consumption has percolated down to the youth. The media has played a leading role in encouraging the use of alcohol among young people by such means as the portrayal of drinking in congenial social settings, by associating the habit with glamour and celebrity status, and by direct and indirect advertising.

Over the years, the age at which youngsters begin to consume liquor has come down in Kerala. In 1986 the age was 19, by 1990 it had dropped to 17, and by 1994 the age was 14.

Indian liquor brands

The varieties of alcohol manufactured for consumption in India are:

- Beer
- Country Liquor
- Indian Made Foreign Liquor (IMFL)

- Wines

Indian liquor brands have registered significant growth in recent years - some of the top Indian alcohol brands showing an increase of as much as 50 per cent in sales (1993-97). United Breweries registered an increase of nearly 20 per cent in sale in the year 1998-99.

Taxes on alcohol

Alcohol is a significant contributor to government revenues in many states. In most states this accounts for over 10 per cent of total state tax revenues, whilst in the Punjab this accounts for over one third.

Policy measures in India

Alcohol policy is under the legislative power of individual states.

Prohibition, enshrined as an aspiration in the Constitution, was introduced and then withdrawn in Haryana and Andhra Pradesh in the mid-1990s), although it continues in Gujarat, with partial restrictions in other states – Delhi, for example, has dry days. There was an earlier failure of Prohibition in Tamil Nadu.

Increasing taxes as a means of reducing alcohol consumption is problematic as it has been shown to be unresponsive to price change. Tax increases will further add to economic hardship for consumers and have little or no impact on the reduction in other negative impacts. There would, however, be an increase in corruption, crime, and the production and consumption of illegal liquor.

An important aspect of policy is to delay initiation among youth. One way of doing this is to enforce age limits. The legal minimum age to purchase liquor ranges from 18 years in some state to 25 years in others. Delhi has minimum age limit of 25 years. So far, the efficiency of enforcement has not been studied. It has, however, been shown that an increase in the age of legal drinking from 18 years to 21 years achieves nearly 60 per cent of the effect of prohibition on alcohol consumption.

Legislation: alcohol advertisement

The Cable Television Network (Regulation) Amendment Bill, in force September 8, 2000, completely prohibits cigarette and alcohol advertisements. The government controlled channel, Doordarshan, does not broadcast such advertisements but satellite channels however are replete with them.

Efforts to counteract the problem

Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment has been active in this field. In 1985-86 it urged the establishment of a reduction programme. The ministry co-operates with media and youth organisations and collaborates with the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare and with NGOs involved in the problem. The Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment, in partnership with the United Nations International Drug Control Programme (UNDCP) and the International Labour Organisation (ILO), has launched three major initiatives for alcohol and drug demand reduction.

Non-Governmental efforts have been led by the Indian Health Organisation (IHO), Youth for Christ India (YFC), Health Related Information Dissemination Amongst Youth (HRIDAY), and the Student Health Action Network (SHAN).