

Busting Indian Myths around Alcohol

Sunday 21 June 2020, by [BANERJEE Sumanta](#) (Date first published: 31 May 2020).

The other day, I came across a rather interesting news item. A BJP woman leader of Hyderabad Ms. Prasanna, while driving back home was blocked by a crowd queuing in front of a liquor shop. She got down from her car, and was shocked to discover among the crowd the migrant workers whom she had served food for 43 days by spending Rs. 80,000. Expressing her sense of distress at the sight, she said: "...I was heartbroken and could not control my anger. How did they got money to purchase booze ?" (Deccan Chronicle, May 9, 2020).

Ms. Prasanna's sentiments are shared not only by philanthropists like her, but also by large segments of our society, ranging from committed prohibitionists and religious leaders to women's rights activists, medical experts and politicians of various hues, who have taken umbrage at the recent opening of liquor shops in certain areas. Some among them have raised objections from purely mundane quotidian fears, while others on the ground of what they consider perennial moral values. All of them look alarmingly at what they envisage as an apocalyptic future of a society about to be deluged by alcohol. Those who are more concerned about the mundane material problems claim that consumption of alcohol results in increasing number of deaths due to cirrhosis of liver, traffic accidents by drunken drivers, and bashing up of wives by drunken husbands among many other similar ills in our daily existence. Those who raise ethical questions argue that alcohol consumption leads to moral turpitude that violates the traditionally set norms of social behaviour, and they usually rest their arguments on orthodox religious diktats, Gandhi's insistence on prohibition, and the belief that alcohol is an alien beverage introduced in India by the British rulers.

Both the assumptions - whether made by the pragmatist materialists or the champions of ethical behaviour - are found to be fallacious, as evident from the hard facts and statistical data collected from the ground roots. These reports prove that their anxieties are misplaced and appear to be based on insidious misinformation that exaggerates the ill-effects of drinking, and are reinforced by socio-religious prejudices that equate drinking with sin.

Reports from the ground

Let us first get down to the basic data which should address some of the concerns raised by the materialists. Out of a population of 135.26 crore in India, only 16 crore consume alcohol (Re: India Today, February 18, 2019). The number of deaths due to alcohol consumption is 2.6 lakhs every year (WHO report, September 23, 2018). According to WHO statistics, the average number of total annual deaths in India stands at 9 million plus. Researches conducted by Indian medical teams have found out that the majority of these fatalities are caused by heart diseases, peri-natal conditions, chronic respiratory ailments, diarrhoea, cancer, cardiac or cerebral strokes and tuberculosis. Alcohol related factors occupy the bottom of the list. (Re: Indian Council of Medical Research findings carried by Lancet Global Health, 2019). As is well established from our own familiar and familial experiences, a large number of patients suffering from cirrhosis of liver (an ailment usually blamed on alcohol consumption) had never touched alcohol. Thus, by all accounts, alcohol-related deaths constitute only a miniscule of total fatalities in India. Most of these deaths are caused by

prevailing socio-economic factors like lack of basic nutrition and housing amenities, and the state's failure to provide adequate and easily accessible health care facilities to prevent the outbreak of diseases and cure the patients.

Surely, this is not to dismiss the risks of unbridled and hazardous drinking habits among sections of our people. But let us locate such habits in the larger perspective of the death rate in India, and not exaggerate them beyond proportions. While advising the tipplers to give up drinking and be sober, the materialists and the proponents of ethical norms themselves need to become sober when they make assessments, instead of being drunk with misinformation and social prejudices.

Drunk driving - by truck drivers and private car drivers

One such example of how misinformation distorts their attitudes is the much touted claim that drunk driving is the main cause of traffic accidents and alcohol-related fatalities. We should look at the available data again. According to a report by the Road Transport Ministry in 2018, a little over 1.51 lakh people died in road accidents. Speeding was the biggest reason, accounting for 64.4%, followed by driving on the wrong side of the road. Drunk driving caused only one-third of all traffic accidents. (Re: Times of India, March 19, 2020). The next question that arises from this is - how many of these alcohol-driven accidents were caused by public transport like highway trucks (run by drivers employed by their owners) on the one hand, and private motor cars driven by their owners on the other? A recent survey of truck drivers reveals that of the main causes for crashes on national and state highways, 41.77% were over-speeding (out of the compulsion by the drivers to deliver goods on time, as demanded by their employers), 38.7% because of fatigue and sleepiness (brought about by over working), and 30.3% due to consumption of alcohol and drugs like bhang, charas, etc. (Re: Status of Truck Drivers in India, February, 2020. National Study conducted for Save LIFE Foundation by Marketing and Development Research Association).

Next to truck drivers are the private car motorists, who have been hauled up for drunk driving. An average of 9 lakh people get arrested for DWI - the official acronym for **driving while drinking**. (Re: Times of India, March 19, 2020). Unlike the truck drivers who work under pressures from their employers, the private car owners are on their own and drive at their pleasure. In India, they constitute a minority - only 22 out of a thousand citizens. But the rate of accidents caused by their drunken driving is disproportionately higher considering their miniscule number. Every now and then we read reports of brats of rich politicians or VIPs, film stars or socialites on their way back home from cocktail parties at midnight, running over sleeping pavement dwellers, or knocking down pedestrians and scooter drivers. The lockdown - touted by its cheer leaders as an effective deterrent against drinking - has made no difference to these privileged sections of our society. To take some recent instances of their breaching the law during the lockdown - on April 30 in Kolkata, three businessmen were found drunk while driving an Audi car with CC (Consular Corps) number plate. They were returning from a party (Hindustan Times, May 1, 2020). Soon after, in the first week of May, news came from Hyderabad reporting three accidents caused by drunk driving by private car owners. Is there then any class bias sneaking behind the publicity that is given to drunk driving among the under privileged class of truck drivers, while underplaying the same habit prevalent among the upper and middle class privileged car- owners? A similar bias against the labouring poor is evident in the social propaganda (accepted by large sections of the public) that alcohol consumption leads to domestic violence in their homes. Such a propaganda conveniently ignores the fact that domestic violence is common in

Indian educated middle and upper class homes also - even without alcoholic stimulus. There are numerous instances of husbands and female members of their households harassing, and even killing brides because of inadequate dowry. {{Beyond the urban alco-polis - the rural Adivasis and Dalits}} We have been discussing till now the issue of alcohol consumption in Indian metropolitan cities - among manual labourers, factory workers and upper class citizens. But there is a wide segment of alcohol consumers who live beyond this urban environment. Most of them are farmers, agricultural labourers and artisans. Among them there are Dalits and Adivasis, the former comprising about 16.6 % and the latter 8.6% of our population. In the rural environs where they live and work, they brew their own variety of alcohol, varying from region to region - arrack' made from palm juice, hadiya' from rice, mohua' from flowers, feni' from cashew nuts. They are different - both in taste and after effects - from the IMFL (Indian Manufactured Foreign Liquor) branded bottles of whisky, rum, brandy, gin and other hard drinks that serve the urban consumers. In the present drive against drinking in the name of fighting CONVID-19, these indigenous drinks are also being tarred by the same brush of prohibition and branded as poisonous and sinful. As it is, the Adivasis are being deprived of their natural resources by industrial predators, who under the benevolent patronage of the Indian state, are seizing their forests and lands to set up mining enterprises and factories. Now, one of their popular sources of community entertainment is also being choked by the administrators and the fanatic cheerleaders of prohibition. This is nothing new. A similar campaign was launched several decades ago by Gandhians in the tribal areas in pre-Independence India. Verrier Elwin, the English anthropologist who started his career as an ardent devotee of Gandhi's and went to tribal villages in central India to live there, found to his dismay that Gandhi's message of prohibition had no takers among the tribals. He discovered that the alcohol brewed by the tribals in their homes, was an "essential item of their diet." He felt that the introduction of prohibition would "rob them of a much-needed tonic and deprive their festivals and marriages of their former gaiety and even their funerals of some sort of comfort." This experience led him to part ways with Gandhi, as he was to explain later in his autobiography: "Gandhi's emphatic views on Prohibition (which I considered damaging to the tribes)...further separated me from him." (The Tribal World of Verrier Elwin. An Autobiography. 1964). Prohibition in any case has never worked - whether in the US or Europe in the past, or in India's Mumbai under the regime of Morarji Desai, or Bihar today ruled by Nitish Kumar. Instead of curbing drinking, it has led to the proliferation of illicit distilleries and more deaths from the consumption of poisonous liquor. {{The ill-informed basis of moralistic objection to alcohol consumption}} A large part of the campaign against alcohol consumption in modern India has been triggered by moral objections based on religious diktats, and reinforced by Gandhian politics which identified drinking with Western culture (that led to the picketing of wine shops during the Swadeshi movement). But neither the religious objection to alcohol consumption propagated by orthodox preachers in Hindu society, nor the Gandhian campaign for prohibition, can derive any justification from the ancient religious epics like Ramayana and Mahabharata, which the Hindus hold as sacred. Both the epics describe alcohol consumption as a part of the social daily life of the citizens of Ayodhya and the Pandavas and Kauravas. To refer to the life-style of Rama - the mytho-political hero of the modern

Hindutva brigade - we find this delightful description of his manners in the Valmiki- composed Ramayana: "...he (Rama) took Sita by the hand, made her sit and drink the wine distilled in the province of Mira. And in no time, the servants brought for him well-cooked meat and various fruits. Being inebriated, the beautiful Apsaras, well-skilled in the art of singing and dancing, began to dance before Rama." (Uttarakhand 7, Sarga 42, Verses 18-23). The Mahabharata, in one of its chapters, comes out with an equally delightful account given by the divine messenger Sanjaya who describes the frolics of Krishna, Arjuna, Draupadi and Satyabhama "exhilarating themselves with Bassia wine.." (Udyog Parva 5, section 59, verses 2-5). Bassia is traced to what in modern scientific investigation is termed as *Madhuca longifolia* - a tropical tree found in central and north Indian plains and forests, which produces *mohua* flowers' from which indigenous liquor is made. The arguments of the puritan teetotaler - whether from the pragmatic camp or the moralist shelter - thus do not carry any weight in view of the hard facts that are available from both the data of today and the religio-historical records of the past. Should we not then think of adjusting our socio-political system to the popular custom of drinking - without of course allowing it to drift into a self-destructive direction? Instead of branding every drinker as a criminal-cum-sinner, should we not make a distinction between hazardous drinking (a level of alcohol consumption which can prove injurious for the user, and the impact of whose behaviour can be harmful for society) on the one hand, and responsible drinking on the other, that helps the drinker to relax in privacy, and unwind in company by sharing pleasantries, as also stimulates creative minds to produce art and literature ? {{Promotion of Responsible Drinking'

The term 'responsible drinking' may sound paradoxical - a contradiction in terms - since drinking had always been mistakenly associated with irresponsibility in the minds of large sections of the public, thanks to the widely-publicized misbehaviour of the minority of black sheep among the consumers of alcohol. Yet, there is a case for 'responsible drinking' - which curiously enough is being advocated, of all agencies, by the alcohol manufacturing industry!

In order to promote its image of corporate social responsibility, it has funded an NGO called the International Alliance for Responsible Drinking (IARD), which is committed to addressing public health issues emanating from 'harmful drinking'. As opposed to 'harmful drinking', the IARD promotes 'responsible drinking' which it defines as "...the enjoyment of alcohol drinks by adults who choose to drink in a manner that does not harm others..." I think this is a fairly objective global definition of 'responsible drinking' which can be extended to cover the personal and collective habits of drinking that are prevalent in Indian society. In tune with this spirit of the IARD definition, the International Spirits and Wines Association of India (a representative body of multinational alcoholic beverage companies) in a petition addressed to the Tamil Nadu government on January 23, 2020, urged it to set up more licensed drinking places to promote 'responsible drinking', and curb the menace of alcohol smuggling and sale of spurious and illegal alcohol. I am aware of the tricky ground that I am treading upon. It is a ground enmeshed in a demand and supply economy - the public demand for alcohol and its supply by the industry. The latter, out of its own self-interest wants the legalization of drinking, even if it is restricted, instead of the reign of prohibition under which it would otherwise lose its monopoly over manufacturing of liquor, and

give way to its rivals in the spurious liquor industry. In such a situation - where the self-interest driven corporate sector promotes the concept of responsible drinking,' which allows healthy drinking on the one hand, while the self-denial driven puritan teetotalers on the other hand impose the diktat of abstinence that drives alcohol consumption into the criminal underground of poisonous liquor - which is the option that the Indian citizen should choose?

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