

COVID-19, liquor and lockdown

Armaan Arora

National Law University, Odisha

Introduction:

The COVID-19 has caused unforeseen challenges for people all across the world. At the time of writing this article, the total number of confirmed cases of COVID-19 were over 36,64,098. As many as 213 countries and territories have registered COVID-19 cases. To slow down its spread, many countries, along with India, have declared restrictive measures such as a lockdown or stay at home orders.

In India, unlike other nations, strict and timely measures were taken, the same was also lauded by the World Health Organisation. These timely measures met its purpose and helped in slowing down the spread of COVID-19 to a great extent. However, as every coin has two sides and every action has its equal and opposite reaction. Soon the negative impacts of nationwide lockdown began to unfold.

Economically it not only affected the lives of citizens at the micro-level, but it also had a significant impact on the economy of India. The first lockdown which lasted for 21 days, resulted in a GDP loss of almost 7-8 lakh crores.¹ Lockdown 2.0 was extended till 3rd May, in a view to curb this problem on 24th April Ministry of Home Affairs released certain guidelines on lockdown to allow the opening of certain shops with required safety measures like 50% strength of workers.² These guidelines did not apply and prohibited the opening of shopping malls and liquor stores.

Soon after these guidelines were issued, the government got mounting pressure from states to revisit the guidelines prohibiting the sale of alcohol during the nationwide lockdown. While Punjab officially wrote it to the centre, other states also informally raised the issue to seek permission to sell liquor. An important question arises here that why all these states raised this

¹ *World's biggest lockdown may have cost Rs 7-8 lakh crore to Indian Economy*, THE ECONOMIC TIMES (Apr. 13, 2020) <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/economy/finance/worlds-biggest-lockdown-may-have-cost-rs-7-8-lakh-crore-to-indian-economy/articleshow/75123004.cms>.

² *Lockdown guidelines: What is allowed and what is not allowed after April 20?*, THE HINDU (Apr. 15, 2020) <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/lockdown-guidelines-what-is-allowed-and-what-is-not-allowed-after-april-20/article31344466.ece>.

demand in unison to start the sale of liquor?

Reasons for allowing the sale:

Before answering that question, first, it is essential to understand liquor through the lens of our Constitution. Article 47 of the Constitution of India states, “*the State shall endeavour to bring about prohibition of consumption except for medical purposes of intoxicating drinks and of drugs which are injurious to health.*”³ Secondly, in our Constitution the eight entry of 7th Schedule’s second list states “*intoxicating liquors, that is to say, the production, manufacture, possession, transport, purchase and sale of intoxicating liquors,*”⁴ making liquor a state subject.

Now, understanding this situation step by step. Let us first understand how much does alcohol contributes to the economy of states. The data may differ from state to state, but roughly one-fifth of most State government budgets are funded by alcohol, and surprisingly, this share is going up by every year. The reasons are simple as well; a 2018 World Health Organisation report stated that the per capita alcohol consumption in India was 2.4 litres in 2005 it then increased to 4.3 litres in 2010 and further increased to 5.7 litres in 2016.⁵ This clearly shows that state governments are becoming more and more dependent on revenue generated by alcohol to pay their bills.

The reopening of shops:

The intention behind taking this decision was to give a boost to the economy of states, which depends on liquor as a significant revenue source. The state governments were free to decide where they want to open the liquor stores until they follow the proposed guidelines. For example, The Delhi government has listed nearly 150 shops out of a total 800 shops to sell liquor.⁶

Ministry of Home Affairs in its order dated 1st May 2020 allowed the sale of liquor along with following guidelines - “Ensure minimum six feet distance from each other, also ensure that not more than five persons are present at one time at the shop.”⁷

³ INDIA CONST. art. 47.

⁴ INDIA CONST. sch. 7, list II.

⁵ WORLD HEALTH ORGANISATION, ALCOHOL CONSUMPTION: LEVELS AND PATTERNS (2018).

⁶ Shishir Sinha, *With locks down, State revenues may get a ‘high’ from liquor sales*, THE HINDU BUSINESS LINE (May 4, 2020), <https://www.thehindubusinessline.com/economy/with-locks-down-state-revenues-may-get-a-high-from-liquor-sales/article31504314.ece>.

⁷ *Stand-alone liquor stores with L6, L8 licenses allowed to open*, HINDUSTAN TIMES, (May 4, 2020),

As the liquor shops reopened after more than 40 days, the liquor sales all over the country recorded astronomical hikes. Liquor worth more than crores was sold in just one day. However, amidst this economic profit, the social distancing norms proposed by the MHA were flouted regularly. As hundreds of drinkers gathered in front of the liquor shops, the guideline of ensuring that ‘not more than five persons are present at one time at the shop’ was also violated in many places.

To curb these state governments took impromptu measures like Delhi Government imposed a ‘special corona fee’ wherein the liquor will be sold at 70% increased rate, Andhra Pradesh also increased the price of liquor by 25%.⁸

The disadvantages of sudden flow of alcohol in the market

The World Health Organisation in a press release dated 14th April 2020, stated that people should minimise their alcohol consumption, as alcohol consumption can exacerbate health vulnerability, risk-taking behaviours, mental health issues and violence. This leads us to another negative social impact caused due to reopening of liquor shops, i.e. ‘Violence’.

Several reports emerged from different states, in the past few days, of scuffles outside liquor shops, of people fighting with each other after consuming alcohol. This behaviour has both biological and social backing to it. Biologically alcohol reduces self-control and ability to process incoming information; thus, it makes the drinker either a perpetrator or a victim of violence, which in either way increases violence.⁹ Socially it is a belief that alcohol causes aggressive behaviour, and this can lead a drinker to use alcohol as a way of excusing violent acts.¹⁰

The National Family Health Survey data shows a direct link between alcohol use and violence by men. The survey report says that ‘the experience of spousal physical or sexual violence varies greatly with the level of husband’s alcohol consumption. Seventy-one percent of women whose husbands often get drunk have experienced spousal physical or sexual violence, as compared with twenty-two percent of women whose husband do not drink alcohol.’¹¹

<https://www.hindustantimes.com/delhi-news/stand-alone-liquor-stores-with-16-18-licences-allowed-to-open/story-oTmhK2mBcsG3xfSx675z5K.html>.

⁸ Dipak Mondal, *Tax on Alcohol: More states to follow Delhi’s 70% special corona fee on liquor*, BUSINESS TODAY (May 5, 2020), <https://www.businesstoday.in/current/economy-politics/tax-on-alcohol-more-states-to-follow-delhis-70-special-corona-fee-on-liquor/story/402937.html>.

⁹ WORLD HEALTH ORGANISATION, INTERPERSONAL VIOLENCE AND ALCOHOL, at 2 (2006).

¹⁰ *Id.*

¹¹ MINISTRY OF HEALTH AND FAMILY WELFARE, NATIONAL FAMILY HEALTH SURVEY, at 570 (2016).

There is already a rise in the domestic violence cases. The total complaints from women rose from 116 in the first week of March (2-8), to 257 in the final week (March 23-April 1) in which the first lockdown of 21 days took place¹², and reopening the sale of liquor shops will further give it a push.

Conclusion

Opening liquor shops may serve the purpose of gathering revenue. However, the state governments which urged the Central governments to allow the sale of liquor must understand that as the economy at the macro level is going through a tough time, economy at the micro level is also under distress. The reasons are visible around us, people are losing their jobs, their income sources are coming to a halt, and their limited savings are also reducing. Amidst this economic distress, alcohol is not the best choice that is provided by the government to the people. The disadvantages have outnumbered the advantages by a huge margin and if this sale of alcohol doesn't stop, with the available instances of violence and flouting of norms, the government might end up spending more on treatment of people than what it'll learn from the sale of booze.