Rethinking Alcohol Control in India

Mains Syllabus : GS II - Issues relating to development and management of Social Sector/Services relating to Health, Education, Human Resources.

Why in the News?

Recently Maharashtra has increased excise duty on Indian Made Foreign Liquor (IMFL) by 50% - 60% last week.

What are the determinants of alcohol consumption?

- **Biological Factors**- Some individuals are genetically predisposed to addiction.
- Alcohol activates the brain's reward system - similar to nicotine or cocaine, praise, and money - making it habit-forming.
- **Psychological Drive** - People drink to relieve stress, anxiety, or experience euphoria and become habituated.
- **Social Environments** - Urban lifestyles, peer pressure, and glamourised portrayals in media have normalised alcohol use.
- **Commercial determinants -** The industry has broadened its product portfolio with offerings such as fruit-flavoured spirits, pre-mixed cocktails, and other ready-to-drink options, making alcohol more appealing to new and younger users.
- **Promotional Tactics** - Despite legal advertising restrictions, promotional tactics persist through surrogate advertising.
- It involves brand sponsorships, and strategic product placements in Bollywood films and OTT content, where the depiction of alcohol has doubled over the past two decades.
- **Social Media Influence** - Alcohol-related contents (ARC) have amplified in social media.
- **Easy Accessibility** - The placement of liquor stores in residential and high-traffic areas, ensures easy access and everyday visibility.
- **Branding and Marketing** - Packaging shapes consumer perception - sleek bottles, international labels, and premium branding enhance the aspirational value of alcohol.
- **Affordability** - Indian Made Indian Liquor (IMIL) remains cheap and accessible to lower-income groups, especially in rural areas, while growing disposable incomes in cities have made alcohol increasingly affordable for the urban middle class.
- **Policy Influence** - The alcohol industry wields significant influence over regulation, often resisting stricter laws by emphasising its contribution to State revenues through excise taxes.

Status Of Alcohol Consumption In India

• **Consumption Status** - 23% of Indian men and 1% of women consume alcohol (NFHS-5).
• **Heavy Episodic Drinking** - India also records one of the highest rates of heavy episodic drinking, with lakhs needing clinical and social support.
• **Increase in Per Capita Consumption** – It has increased by ~240% in the last two decades.

What are the impacts of alcohol consumption problem?

- **Personal Health Issue** - Alcohol consumption significantly raises the risk of injuries, mental illness, and non-communicable diseases, including cancer.
- **Personal Social Violence** - Beyond health, alcohol use is associated with aggression, intimate partner violence, crime, suicides, and risky behaviour.
- **Family Issues** - It drives households into financial distress, often reinforcing generational poverty.
- **Productivity Losses** - In 2021, alcohol-use contributed to approximately 2.6 million DALYs (Disability-Adjusted Life Years) in India, reflecting the combined toll of premature deaths and years lived with illness or disability.
- **Economic Cost** - The estimated societal cost of alcohol-related health is Rs. 6.24 trillion.

What is the alcohol-policy landscape in India?

- **State Jurisdiction** - Alcohol regulation in India falls under State jurisdiction, granting each State authority over legislation, excise taxes, supply chain, licensing and manufacturing, sale and consumption restrictions, prohibition, and pricing.
- **Regulatory Variations Across States** - Bihar, Gujarat, Mizoram, and Nagaland enforce prohibition, while Andhra Pradesh, Haryana, Kerala, Manipur, and Tamil Nadu had previously imposed similar bans.
- **Toddy Regulations** - Kerala's new Akbari Policy markets toddy as a "natural, traditional beverage," while Andhra Pradesh is introducing a policy offering alcohol for ₹99 to ensure "quality, quantity, and affordability."
- **Online Delivery** - Meanwhile, some States are exploring online alcohol delivery through platforms like Swiggy, Zomato, and Blinkit, contradicting efforts to restrict alcohol access.
- **Difference in Drinking Age** - The legal drinking age differs across States, ranging from 18 to 25 years.
- **Pricing Regulations** - Alcohol pricing regulation exists in 19 of 33 States/UTs, with nine States setting only maximum prices while others setting both maximum and minimum prices.
- **Taxation** - The GST Act excludes liquor from sales tax, leaving alcohol taxes to States, often vaguely defined in excise policies.

What are the national policies around alcohol regulation?

- **National Policies** - India lacks a unified national policy on alcohol regulation but

some policies addressing single aspects such as drunk driving or prevention of alcohol use exists.

- **Exclusion from Narcotic Drugs Policy** - Alcohol was excluded from the National Policy on Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances (NDPS) 2012 despite being a common psychoactive substance followed by cannabis and opioids.
- **Nasha Mukta Bharat Abhiyan** - Alcohol regulation was included in the National Action Plan for Drug Demand Reduction (NAPDDR) 2021-22 under Nasha Mukta Bharat Abhiyan.
- **Scattered Regulations** - The Ministry of Social Justice leads demand reduction, while supply and harm reduction are handled by the Ministries of Home Affairs, Finance, and Health.
- **National Mental Health Policy (NMHP) 2014** – It recognised the role of alcohol in mental illness and suicide prevention and suggested the need for a specific action plan.
- **National Health Policy (NHP) 2017** – It has mentioned curbing alcohol use through higher taxation.
- **National Suicide Prevention Strategy (NSPS) 2022** – It has identified alcohol as a major risk factor for suicides, advocating for a national alcohol control policy and measures to limit alcohol accessibility.
- **Non-communicable Diseases Control** -National Action Plan and Monitoring Framework for Prevention and Control of Noncommunicable Diseases (NMAP) 2017-2022 also echoed the call for a national alcohol policy.

What needs to be done to address the issue?

- **Affordability** - Alcohol pricing needs to deter excessive use without pushing the poor toward dangerous alternatives like illicit liquor.
- Higher excise taxes, paired with strong enforcement against illicit trade, can reduce harmful consumption.
- **Allocation** - Ear-marking these funds for public health, combined with transparent governance, can improve trust and accountability - and prevent corporate lobbying from redirecting them.
- **Accessibility** - Alcohol access can be curbed beyond geographic distance and Urban policy must reduce availability in everyday spaces to signal a shift toward alcohol-free environments.
- **Advertisement** - Regulating social media influence including algorithmic amplification - is key to reducing social appeal.
- **Attractiveness** - Plain packaging, visible warning labels, and controls on point-of-sale promotion are needed to disrupt the cycle of normalisation.
- **Awareness** - Public understanding of alcohol's health harms - especially its link to cancer, mental illness, and generational poverty needs to be increased.
- **Artificial Intelligence** - AItools can be used to detect and suppress alcohol-related content on digital platforms and flag misinformation.

References

[The Hindu | Rethinking Alcohol Control in India]



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