

FIGHTING OVER THE SPIRIT OF A POLICY

Relevant for: Indian Polity | Topic: Functions & Responsibilities of the States, the Governor, the Chief Minister and State COM

People buy alcohol from a liquor shop during the pandemic. File | Photo Credit: MUSTAFAH KK

Recently, the LDF government [allowed the sale of legal alcohol in “specially designated areas” in IT parks](#) in response to the industry’s grievance that techies lack socialising venues with alcohol where they can unwind after work in Kerala. It stated that such amenities were imperative to attract foreign investment. The government also sanctioned the production of local beer and the manufacturing of wine and ‘low proof’ liquor from local produce except grains. It said a less restrictive liquor policy would provide a lifeline to the State’s tourism industry, which has suffered the impact of the pandemic. It has also opened more liquor shops with a walk-in facility to prevent crowding in front of retail outlets.

The Congress-led UDF has portrayed the new policy as an attempt to liberalise the production and sale of hard liquor. It has alleged that powerful business interests have capitalised on the LDF government’s outsize dependence on liquor taxes. It feels that the liquor lobby is aspiring to make profits by getting breadwinners addicted to liquor. It has also alleged that the liquor lobby had promised to channel a part of its profits to the CPI(M) to buy political cover.

The per capita consumption of alcohol in Kerala is among the highest in the country. Alcohol has always been a politically and socially sensitive subject. The church-backed temperance movement has a long and tumultuous history in the State. In the 1980s, the Latin Catholic Church had launched a social movement to ensure that fisher hamlets were illicit liquor-free. Other conservative Muslim outfits, including the Jamaat-e-Islami, back total prohibition.

The previous Congress government had pursued a hard-line liquor policy. In 2016, it tried to introduce total prohibition in a phased manner by shutting liquor outlets and cancelling two-star and three-star bar licenses in the run-up to the Assembly elections. The UDF lost. In 2017, the LDF government upended the UDF’s liquor policy and proceeded to liberalise it incrementally over the years.

However, the All India Trade Union Congress (AITUC), which is affiliated to the CPI, a ruling coalition partner, has opposed the LDF’s latest policy. It feels that the government has opened the door for the increased sale and consumption of potent spirits. The AITUC also fears that a profusion of breweries, wineries and distilleries would deal the traditional toddy sector a death blow.

The AITUC’s opposition to the policy could galvanise the opposition and religious groups into social action against the government. Various Christian denominations and the Jamaat-e-Islami’s political arm, the Welfare Party of India, have opposed the current policy. The protests against the policy could also dovetail with the anti-SilverLine protests that have gathered steam. However, CPI(M) State Secretary Kodyeri Balakrishnan has said that the CPI “as a party” has not opposed the policy.

It is unlikely that the government will repeal the new policy. Chief Minister Pinarayi Vijayan has repeatedly stated that a vibrant nightlife is vital to woo IT majors. Nissan, he said, had pointed to the need for robust partying and socialising avenues that remain open well into the night for it to establish its global digital hub in Thiruvananthapuram.

Prohibition has failed globally. Slashing the supply of legal liquor without reducing social demand is no panacea for addiction as people could turn to illicit sources. It robs the government of revenue and people of the freedom of choice. The government and the opposition should engage in a constructive legislative debate on the new policy. Unrest over the new policy is not something that Kerala can afford now.

anand.g@thehindu.co.in

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