

Assam Liquor Tragedy of 2019: A perspective

Dr. Aniruddha Kumar Baro*, Dr. Pranti Dutta**

*(Assistant Professor, Department of Political Science, University of Science and Technology, Meghalaya, India)

** (Assistant Professor, Department of Economics, University of Science and Technology, Meghalaya, India)

Abstract:

The incident of hooch tragedy in Assam exposed state's inability to control excise activities and to educate people of the outcome from consuming illicit liquor. The commercialization of the liquor trade widened the scope for unethical production of alcohol which cost more than 150 lives in the district of Golaghat and Jorhat districts of Assam.

Keywords: Alcohol, Assam, tragedy, tradition, business, death.

I. INTRODUCTION

More than 150 people died in Golaghat and Jorhat district in the Assam's worst hooch tragedy. The commercialization of the illicit liquor for profit motives of peddlers claimed lives of many innocent and poor people especially in the different tea estates of the two districts. Following the incident, two assistant inspector of Excise have been suspended and high-level inquiry team has started investigation. This is not the first time in Assam to face such tragedy. Similar kind of incident took place in Golaghat in the June last year, where seven people died after consuming spurious liquor.¹ The state government announced monetary compensation to the victims of the tragedy.

This article studies the historical use of alcohol in Assam and its commercialization in present era and unethical production which cost life of many people. First, it studies the historical understanding and use of traditional alcohol by tribal and non-tribal communities of Assam. Second, arguing about the historical use, it brings out the debate on the use and commercialization of alcohol. The issue of alcohol has opened a gate for the politician to create a new issue for the upcoming Lok Sabha election. After discussing different issues and debated on the final note, the article stressed the need of proper

policies to stop further tragedy and politicization of such issues.

II. HISTORICAL USE OF ALCOHOL IN ASSAM

The Northeastern region of India is well known for the production of household liquors with the help of indigenous knowledge system. The region comprised of more than 130 major tribes which mostly include the Mongoloid, the Chinese and the Aryan origin (Ghosh, 1992). Traditional alcohol consumption among the different tribes of the Northeast India is an important societal activity which is carried out mostly in religious ceremonies and social gatherings. As tribal society is mostly agrarian in nature, they use to consume alcohol to reduce tiredness or to boost strength after heavy work in the paddy field. The method of production of local wine among the tribes differs because they follow their own indigenous knowledge which produces different tests. However, most of the tribes use rice as primary sources to produce indigenous alcohol. The rice beer produced by *Ahom* is known as *Xajpani*, *Bodo* tribe produces *Zu*, the *Adivasi* community of Assam produces *Haria*, the *Mishing* tribe produces *Apong* (Tanti, Gurung, Sarma, & Buragohain, 2010).

The *Karbis* are distinct and major hill tribes of Assam who are of Mongoloid origin and speak their dialect 'Karbi'. Their alcoholic beverage is known as *Hor* which is an integral part of their socio-cultural life. *Hor* is used during traditional marriage and worship (Teron, 2006). Other tribal communities of Assam such as Bodo, Mishing, Tiwa, other Kachari tribes also use the traditional alcohol in every ritual. Alcohol remained a symbol of togetherness among the tribal communities. Traditionally, the guests visiting a household of tribal community was offered alcohol as a mark of gratitude. The alcohol is also used along with food as well.

For the production of traditional wine rice is the main raw material in South East Asia because of abundant supply of rice in the region. Such type of alcohol is produced not only in Assam or Northeast India, but it witnessed in China, Malaysia, Tibet, Japan and other countries as well (Ahuja & Ahuja, 2014). Tribal population of India produces rice alcohol for consumption as home level and to serve the guests visiting their home. For example, the Nagas of Northeast India knows no drinks excepts rice beer which is taken uniformly by young, old, men, women and children as well. The alcohols produced by the tribal communities were not commercialized as it was intended to drink only at home and during rituals (Tanti, Gurung, Sarma, & Buragohain, 2010).

In the post colonial structure, alcohol is used as commercial material for economic purposes. The poor section of the society took up local alcohol selling as a profession to earn their livelihood especially in the tea garden plantation areas and in tribal areas (Chatterjee, 2003). Consumption of alcohol is also structured by the social orientation of people, such as the upper caste of Hindu society avoided consumption of alcohol as they thought it as impure or sin to have it (Sharma, 1996). However, coming of modernization and commercialization of alcohol shows a different picture in the present day India in general and Assam in particular which is discussed as follows.

III. CHANGING TREND OF ALCOHOL USE

Traditional method of using alcohol in rituals and festivals are overpowered by intoxication of people towards alcohol which is very much relevant in rural areas. Because of demands of alcohols the tribal people produces more alcohol to be sold to their customers which became a source of income to the family. Alcohol produced for consumption at home is quite different from the produced alcohol for selling to regular customers. As they have to produce a huge amount of alcohol for the customers, the quality of the alcohol is not taken into consideration.

Along with the quantity and quality of production of alcohol for sale at home, the material used in the process of production is to be understood because it causes health hazard. Producers use poisonous leaves, Urea and other chemicals to make it stronger in terms of effectiveness of alcohol which in reality toxicated the process of alcohol production. It is interesting to witness that the locally produced alcohol is not used only in village areas; it is used in Guwahati city as well in open market in the areas of Beltola which shows a failure of the excise and police departments.ⁱⁱ Along with local alcohol, the city is spread with new process of substance abuse (drugs) hampering the harmony of the region. The emergence and spread of drugs in Assam is increasing criminal activities in all corners of the state.

IV. DEBATE ON ASSAM HOOCH TRAGEDY

The recent incident of death of more than 150 people in the two districts of Assam has created debates on the government policies and steps they have taken after the incident. Different leading newspapers of Northeast India claimed that during the week of the tragedy the numbers of the death was increasing in Golaghat District Kushal Konwar Civil Hospital and the Jorhat Medical College and Hospital (JMCH) which were full of people who faced the tragedy of the alcohol death. It is not only the male members but among the deaths a prominent number of women were also affected

which shows that in terms of alcohol consumption, equal share is taken by both male and female.

During the visit of Chief Minister Sarbananda Sonowal to JMCH, he announced rupees two lakh to the family of who died and rupees fifty thousand who are undergoing treatment as compensation. Along with that the government also promised to destruct the illegal market of alcohol. Police and excise department made a drive against the production of alcohol and six go-downs of *lali gur* (molasses) have been sealed which are used for production of *chulai* (illicit liquor).ⁱⁱⁱ For such an incident the excise staff was already informed about the probable tragedy after the incident in Saharanpur and Kushinagar districts of Uttar Pradesh killing over 100 people because of hooch tragedy of February 9, 2019.^{iv} Following the incident of death the opposition legislators disrupted the proceedings of the Assembly sitting of February 25 and claimed that the government is not giving any importance in solving the problems of the alcohol tragedy.^v However, the government also agreed to take up reform policies in the excise sector to control production and selling of the illicit alcohol in the market.^{vi} On the other hand one of the civil society activists Akhil Gogoi urged to make Assam as dry state like few of the states of Northeast and Central India.^{vii} However, the concept of dry state is quite questionable because states with restrictions on alcohol had used alcohol in huge amount. For understanding of such issues we can take examples of Manipur, Nagaland from Northeast India where restriction is still intact but with less regulated. Somehow, if the idea of dry state is implemented to regulate it in proper manner in Assam it will be problematic due to diverse populations and among which many tribal communities practice brewing alcohol is their tradition. Different organs of civil society and students' organization blamed government for its inaction against illicit liquor trade in Assam. Students' organizations such as All Assam Tea Tribe Students' Association (AATTSA), All Adivasi Students' Association of Assam (AASAA) and Mod Mukta Asom (MMA) bring the protest to the street and demanded blanket liquor ban in Assam.^{viii}

However, if economic perspective is taken into consideration the locally produced alcohol also acts as economy to the many poor sections of the society who produced local alcohol for economic consumption. In the interior villages, alcohol remained a source of income for many families and running on the income produced from selling locally produced alcohol. It has its economic value for the consumers as well, because the cost of locally produced alcohol is very nominal which could be afforded by the poor people. Because of the minimal price of alcohol most of the death of village areas is the result of overconsumption of alcohol which acts as a slow poison.

The announcement of compensation has revealed another truth in the two concerned districts. People who died were supposed to get 2 lakh and who were hospitalized to get an amount of fifty thousand. However, it has been reported that who died a natural death after the incidents in the districts are also claiming for the compensation urging it is death out of illicit liquor. Rather than compensation by the government proper steps should be taken to regulate such kind of issues to stop further tragedy.

Liquor tragedy of Assam depicts the plights of tea workers of the region, the condition of their living, poverty, poor healthcare and no importance on education. The Adivasis (also called as tea tribes, however it is a debated term) consumes alcohol to drain out their tiredness after their day long work in the tea gardens. However, commercialization of the low priced alcohol by unscrupulous peddlers had taken lives of more than 150 people. The Adivasis had to consume low priced alcohol as they cannot afford quality liquor. It also brings out to debate of wages of the tea tribes which are very minimal to serve a quality life. Issues related to grievances and conditions of Adivasis are never ending. Numerous NGOs are working for the betterment of the community; however, the result could not be achieved without proper consciousness of the people of the community.

The Lok Sabha election finds a new topic to criticize and counter criticize policies of government and opposition respectively. Politics will be played on the issue of who did what during

their regime and who should come to power to stop the tragedy. But, in reality it will not matter whoever comes to power the state of tragedy will continue. In a democracy like India the people hold power only in voting, and no power could be exercised after the election. After 70 years of Indian independence the condition of the Adivasis are still same as they are the easy target for any politics in the state. To overcome such issues consciousness should come among Adivasis through proper education which will end different tragedy in the later future.

V. CONCLUSION

The recent incident of the liquor tragedy is a new lesson to Assam to have a concrete policy for restricting illicit alcohol. Traditionally, the use of alcohol in Assam was related to traditions and cultures. However, new trend of alcohol use is more of commercial than tradition. The death of innocent people in the recent incident is the outcome of use of commercialized alcohol produced for economic benefit of peddlers. In many parts of Assam, production of alcohol in many household provides livelihood to the poor section. However, the issue of alcohol death is taking a different turn with politics of blame game and a fresh issue for the upcoming election. Rather than concentrating on politicization of issues, the government and civil society should try to stop illicit alcohol and educate people to reduce their bad habits accepting improvised living standard. Alcohol should also get less importance during election. Mobilization of people, especially the Adivasis through distribution of alcohol to garner vote should be stopped. We cannot blame the uneducated and illiterate people for such deed, but have to blame educated section of people for not helping to eradicate such issues. To overcome such issues, proper policy should be maintained which should be effectively regulated and in terms of recent incident excise duties should be imparted flawlessly then only development of Assam will be inevitable.

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ⁱ The Assam Tribune, February 23, 2019, 'Golaghat hooch tragedy toll rises to 17'.

ⁱⁱ The Sentinel, February 24, 2019, 'Failure of Excise & Police departments'.

ⁱⁱⁱ The Assam Tribune, February 24, 2019, 'Over 100 die in State's worst hooch tragedy'.

^{iv} The Assam Tribune, February 25, 2019, 'Excise staff ignored alert after UP tragedy' by Rituraj Borthakur

^v The Assam Tribune, February 26, 2019, 'House proceedings disrupted over hooch tragedy'.

^{vi} The Assam Tribune, February 26, 2019, 'Govt to undertake reforms in excise sector: All-party team to visit Jorhat, Golaghat'.

^{vii} He stated during different TV interviews on the discussion of death due to alcohol in two districts of Assam.

^{viii} The Times of India, February 26, 2019, 'Assam hooch toll touches 154, protests erupt across state'.