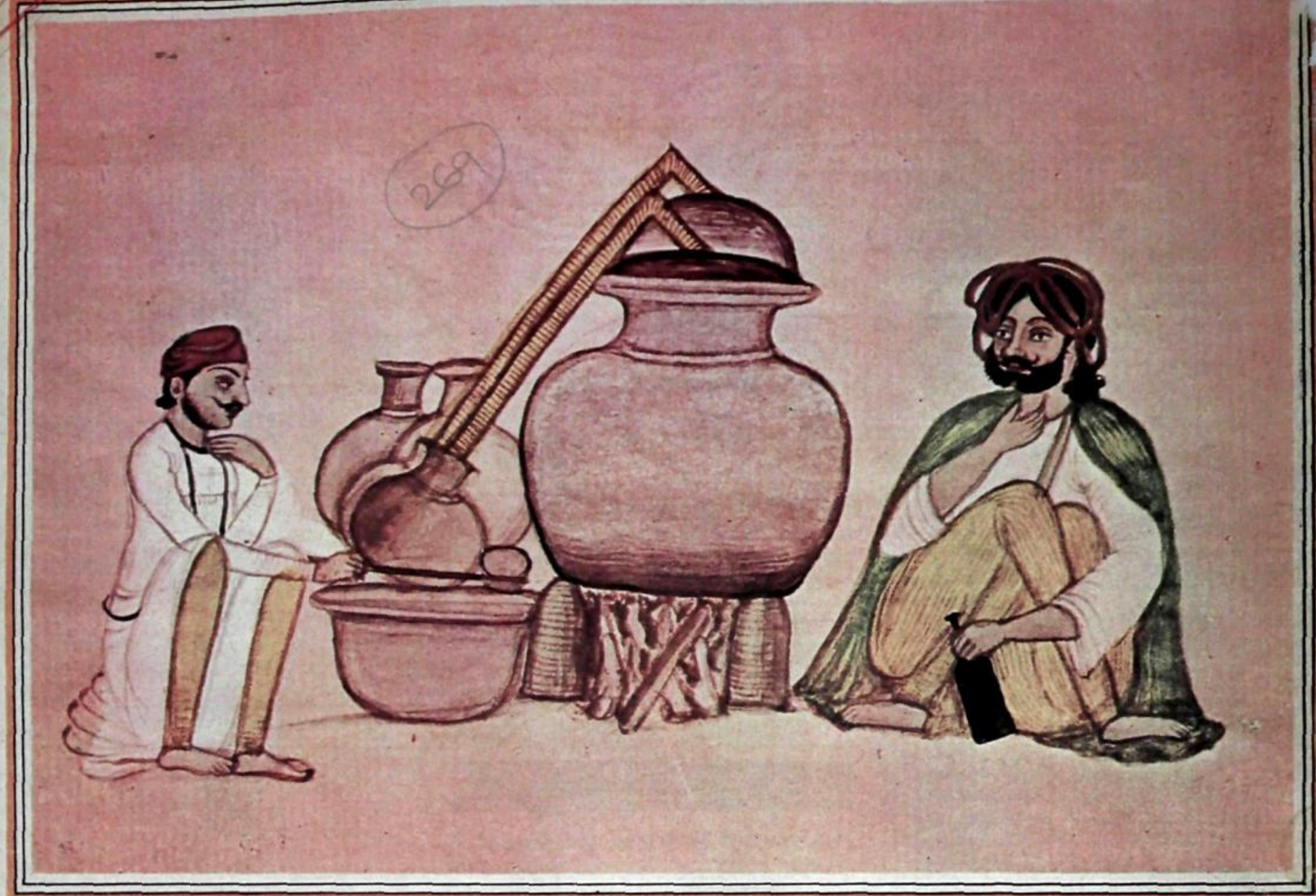




MAKING A LOCAL BREW (From an old painting—courtesy, Patiala Museum)

To Drink Or Not To Drink ?

by MINOO MASANI

Prohibition will cost us at least Rs 1,000 crores. (Loss of revenue: Rs 520 crores, cost of enforcement: another 480 crores). Even so there is little chance of it succeeding.

We have 30 major distilleries producing liquor worth Rs 10 crores every year. A million people engaged in production and vending of liquor will lose their livelihood. Can we fritter away our resources on this costly fad?

PROHIBITION is a non-issue. India is not a country of massive drunkenness. The problem of drink in India pales into insignificance when compared with those of poverty, overpopulation, illiteracy, castes and social backwardness. Prohibition has achieved current importance only because of the adventitious fact that our present Prime Minister happens to be addicted to it.

As it happens, I am not a habitual drinker nor am I greatly excited by liquor of any kind. I never drink alone and I often do not drink for days or weeks on end. I drink in

company, but in great moderation. In fact, I often parody Gandhiji's profound remark, taken from a Christian hymn, "One step enough for me", by telling my host or hostess that my slogan is: "One drink enough for me".

When my host or hostess goes on passing around drinks beyond a reasonable time in the evening, thus pandering to the hardened toppers, I start making a nuisance of myself and organise a lobby which calls out: "We want dinner." I do not believe it is good hospitality to keep twenty temperate people

waiting for dinner because two or three hardened toppers have not yet had their six pegs.

When I see a drunk being either aggressive or abusive or a man driving a car under the influence of drink, I find myself in happy agreement with Morarji Desai's idea that drinking should be banned altogether. But only for that moment. That is because I realise that only one of a thousand people who drink get drunk and become a nuisance to themselves and to those around.

Also, anyone who knows the world cannot but concede a point or two to the conviviality that drinking together brings.

In the British House of Commons, Winston Churchill and Aneurin Bevan, than whom no two leading politicians disliked each other more, were often seen having a happy drink together at the bar in the House of Commons immediately after one of them had attacked the other vigorously on the floor of the House. If this happy detente does not happen in our own Lok Sabha, I have often felt it was for the lack of a place

protagonists on opposite sides of a debate could share a beer in good fellowship.

In his recent book, *A Prime Minister on Prime Ministers*, Sir Harold Wilson refers affectionately to his drinking partner after the tumult of debate, Harold Macmillan: "That," he said, "is the great glory of our Parliament. You can disagree passionately with someone, but afterwards you don't want to destroy him, but have a drink with him."

A Disease

There are many social evils; excessive drinking of alcohol and smoking are among them. Excessive smoking is dangerous for the health of the persons who indulge in it. Excessive indulgence in liquor impinges in addition on other people, like members of the family, those who happen to be on the road when a drunken man is at the wheel and people who may be assaulted or attacked by a man under the influence of liquor. The amount of money spent on drink by workers on pay-day, at the cost of the family, can be quite substantial.

There can be no doubt therefore that excessive drinking or drunkenness is an evil and alcoholism is like a disease. All educative and civic measures to make people aware of this evil and to help them not to succumb to it therefore need to be taken. Hence the need for temperance organisations and propaganda.

Who Is An Alcoholic?

Alcoholics are those excessive drinkers whose dependence on alcohol has attained such a degree that they show a noticeable mental disturbance or an interference with their mental and bodily health, their interpersonal relations and their smooth social and economic functioning; or who show the prodromal signs of such developments.

They therefore require treatment.

(World Health Organisation)

There can also be no objection to a reasonable measure of regulation which is quite widely adopted in the civilised world in order to deal with this evil. Thus a man is protected from temptation by what are called "early hours of closing", so that the time the pubs or liquor shops remain open is restricted; by closing pubs and liquor shops on pay-day and a day or two after pay-day; by "severe punishment", as in Sweden, for driving a car after having taken drinks, with compulsory imprisonment and no option of a fine. A variety of measures of this nature cannot be objected to because every right and liberty has its limitations.

It was in this spirit that Mr Ennals, Secretary of State for Social Services in Britain, invited the public on November 7, 1977, to suggest what action Government should take to combat increasing drunkenness in Britain. Among the questions which he put for eliciting public opinion, according to *The Times* of November 8, were the following:

Should a bigger tax on alcohol be imposed or was that unfair to sensible drinkers? Should tax policies to ensure that the price of drink remained constant in relation to income, as advocated last week by his advisory committee, be used or not?

Should the law on drinking and driving be made severer, perhaps by random breath tests, increased penalties and/or a lower limit of alcohol in the blood than the present 80 milligrams a 100 millilitres, which now incurred conviction?

Should the age at which alcohol was legally available be changed or should there be more rigorous enforcement of the law? And what was the best way to halt the apparent increase in heavy drinking among young people?

Should a more restrictive code on advertising be introduced, presenting a less one-sided picture about drinking, especially to young people?

Finally, what sort of publicity about the dangers of drinking was most effective? Should bottles be labelled, as are packets of cigarettes, with a health warning?

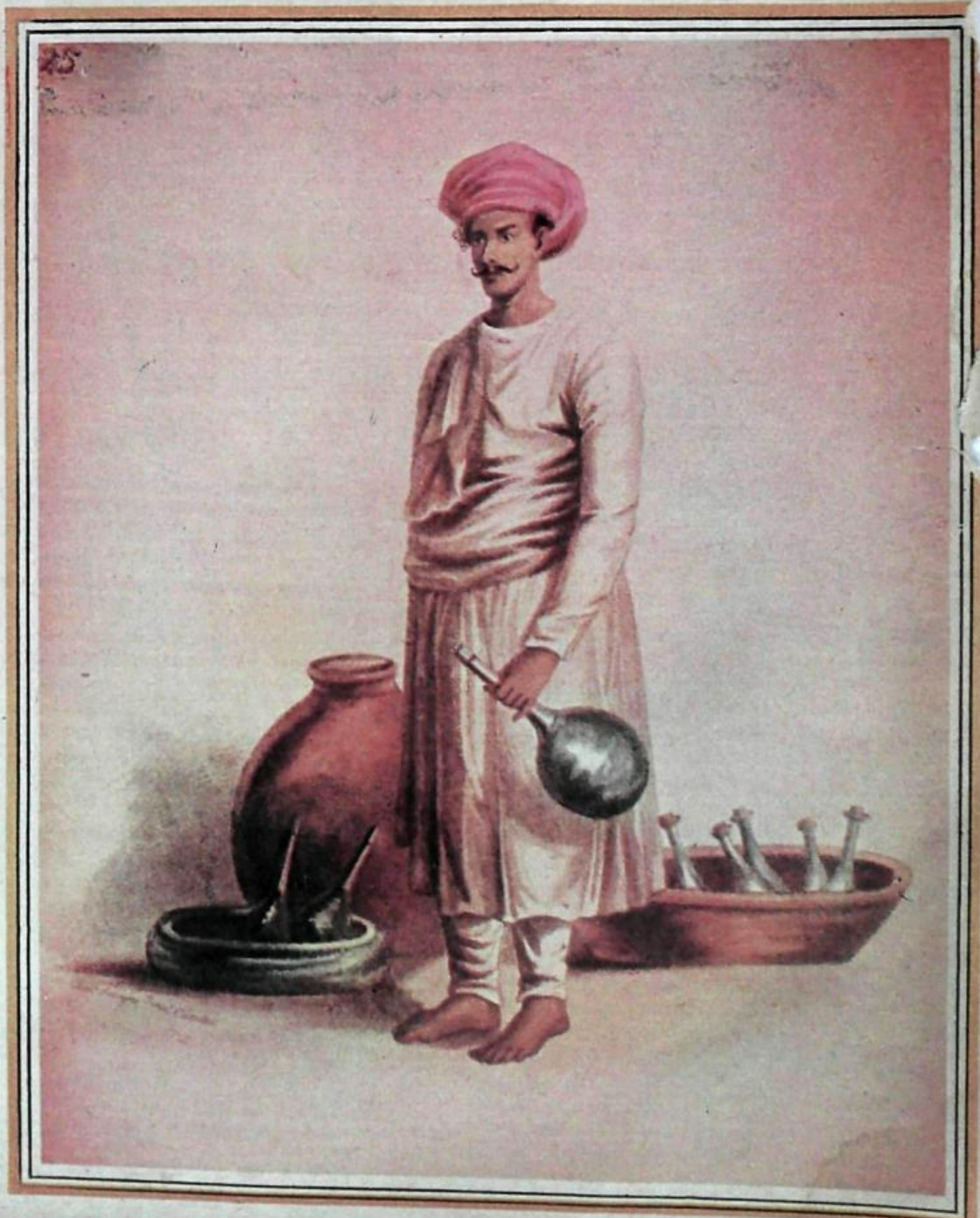
These are appropriate questions to raise. Beyond these limits, however, it would not be legitimate to proceed. Total prohibition of drink is illiberal and undemocratic. The

rights of a person to eat, drink, move around, marry and express himself are all Fundamental Human Rights. Interference with any of these rights leads in time to interference with others. There can be no tolerance of such a thin end of the authoritarian wedge.

Total prohibition does not, in fact, fit into a free society because it is an infringement of individual liberty and the freedom of choice of the citizen.

It is most unlikely that if the Indian people were asked to select one particular liquid whose use as a beverage should be prohibited by law, it is liquor that they would select. Would Mr Morarji Desai, in such a situation, submit to this "democratic" decision and alter his own habits? He would be perfectly right not to do so because no numerical majority has the right to dictate to a man or woman what he or she may eat or drink.

Gandhiji always supported the right of a single citizen to resist a law which, in his or her opinion, was wrong or immoral. Jayaprakash Narayan referred to this in his *Prison Diary* on September 7, 1975, when he was provoked by a remark made by the the-



THE MAN IN CHARGE OF THE CELLAR. He was known as abdar and described as a "cooler of water and wines by the means of saltpetre." (An illustration from *The Costumes of Hindostan* by Balt Solwyns)

Attorney-General about the supremacy of Parliament elected by the people:

No wonder Gandhiji called parliamentary democracy a dictatorship of the majority... What does the supremacy of Parliament mean? It means something sordid, something revolting to a democrat! A Parliament virtually means the Cabinet... the Cabinet means the leader, the Prime Minister... So let no one be beguiled by the concept of the supremacy of Parliament. The concept just does not fit into the picture. Here there must be clearly laid down checks and balances. No organ of the State should be supreme.

Principle apart, there is a practical case against Prohibition based on experience and a pragmatic approach. It goes against human nature. Nowhere in the whole world has Prohibition succeeded. Wherever it has been tried, as in the United States, it has been an unmitigated failure.

Not only does Prohibition not stop people from drinking but it makes many more determined to do so. A liberty or pleasure denied is always the more desirable and attractive. A by-product of this situation is that the bootlegging industry, along with whole armies of smugglers and illicit distillers, comes into existence—creating a new vested interest. The consumption of noxious drinks results in the death of a large number of people, as has happened in one or two recent incidents. The police and public servants get corrupted. Hypocrisy would be bred among judges and Government officials in an effort to protect their jobs. What is even worse, contempt for the law would spread among the people in general. Each one of these evils is as potent as the evil of drink itself. As it happens, drunkenness in India is not a major or mass phenomenon as in many other countries and draconian measures like Prohibition are like the use of a sledgehammer to kill a fly.

Coercion, No!

Who can deny that population control is among India's primary needs and priorities? Yet is it not generally agreed that coercion, even in this very desirable cause, must be entirely ruled out? Was that not the will of the people as evidenced in March 1977? Coercion or force, used even for a desirable purpose like vasectomy, is abhorrent to the Indian people and alien to our traditions.

In India, wherever Prohibition has been tried till now, it has not only been a complete failure, by not serving the purpose for which it was intended, but it has also resulted in State Governments losing substantial revenue which would otherwise have been available to them. This in turn makes the State Governments more dependent on the Centre and adds to the burdens of the Finance Ministry and the Union Government. It has been estimated that Prohibition would result in an actual loss of Rs 520 crores of revenue every year, in addition to an expenditure of Rs 480 crores on introducing and maintaining it in the country. This burden of Rs 1,000 crores on the already highly taxed Indian taxpayer cannot be justified.

It is for these reasons, no doubt, that Mr Jayaprakash Narayan, India's leading Gandhian and devotee of Sarvodaya, recent-

ly described Prohibition as a fad and drinking in moderation as not harmful.

It was also probably for similar reasons that the Prime Minister, Mr Morarji Desai, himself announced earlier this year that, while he was for Prohibition, he would not resort to any coercive measures for its enforcement.

Let not those who find drunkenness abhorrent play at being God and decide what others should or should not do. On the other hand, let those who find drinking acceptable and even pleasurable recognise their duty and obligation to encourage and work for Temperance.

It is therefore that I say: Temperance, Yes! Coercion, No!



CHEERS AND BEERS. Bombaywallahs welcome relaxation of the dry law (December 1968).

DRINK TO YOUR HEALTH

A moderate use of alcohol does not cause heart attacks. In fact, a few drinks a day may actually help protect the heart's blood-vessels, according to the New England Journal of Medicine (USA).

The conclusion was borne out after six years of research among seven thousand Japanese in Hawaii, sponsored by Honolulu Heart Study. A leading authority on causes of heart diseases, Dr William Kannel, added that several studies in the US and Europe had found similar evidence. Dr Kannel noted that "not everything one enjoys in life predisposes to cardiovascular disease. There is nothing to suggest for the present that we must give up either coffee or alcohol in moderation to avoid a heart attack." He cautioned that heavy drinking can severely harm the heart and other organs. "Alcohol isn't a completely innocuous beverage by any means," he added.

Liver damage is the third largest killer in the US, France and Australia, three countries widely differing in drinking habits.

It is the quantity imbibed as well as the duration of drinking that determines the amount of damage.

Dr R. V. Rajam, former Dean of the Madras Medical College, said

that alcohol was less harmful than psychotropic drugs. He mentioned the discovery of Dr Hans Cribbs, the Nobel Prize-winning British scientist, that the "human intestine is a distillery where dietary sugars and carbohydrates are fermented into ethanol (chemical name for ethyl alcohol in beverage and spirits) to the equivalent of one quart of 3.2 per cent beer each day. A specific liver enzyme breaks it down to non-toxic products. Hence ethanol is a natural metabolic product in man to which the body is attuned. It is conceivable that people who consume more sugar and sugary foods, as in the northern belt where even buttermilk and curds are sugared, distil more ethanol in their intestines.

"Addiction to drink is a disease only in the sense that excessive gourmandising, excessive sexing, excessive smoking or gambling are also 'diseases'. According to sociobiologists, such people are genetically prone to excesses.

"The contention that alcohol has no therapeutic value is only a personal opinion of the obsessed teetotaler. It is true to say that no one is quite so obsessed by alcohol as a fanatical teetotaler," Dr Rajam added.