



Toxic brew

Context:

- Consumption of illicit liquor has led to the death of more than 100 people in Punjab.
- There have been many instances of **large-scale loss of life due to consumption of illicit liquor** in the recent past.
- Such major incidents have been reported recently in Uttar Pradesh, Uttarakhand and Assam.



What is are issues?

- **Health impact:** The illicit liquor vendors in a bid to keep the costs low almost invariably use **toxic methanol** instead of ethanol.
- Consumption of illicit alcohol produces **long-term health impacts**. Illicit liquor, apart from causing death in a few cases, has also been reported to cause permanent damage in the form of blindness and tissue damage.
- **Apathy by government:** The typical state government response in such cases has been providing financial relief for the affected families without addressing the root cause of the problem.
- Notably, many States have **accorded low priority to revamping the excise administration and policing**, resulting in low regulation of the illicit liquor trade.
- **Issue of corruption:** There are also allegations that often **corrupt bureaucracies allow the sale of illicit liquor by illicit liquor vendors in lieu of some share in the sales proceeds**.
- Illicit liquor is sold openly by small-time vendors in some places without the fear of the state.

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- **Impact of the pandemic:** The issue has become further complicated during the COVID-19 pandemic, as people desperate for alcohol consumed hand sanitiser as a substitute, most recently in Andhra Pradesh.
- People with limited means to consume commercial alcohol often turn to the cheaper illicit liquor.

Way forward:

- **Priority area for the state:** The state must show determination to end the sale of illicit liquor. Governments should regulate the quality of legal alcoholic drinks, while **actively tracing and tracking illicit alcohol**.
- **Ensuring health infrastructure:** The **capability of the health system in every district needs to be raised**, to reduce the damage from methanol through immediate, simple detoxification therapies.
- **Public health campaign:** A sustained public health campaign to wean people away from the drinking habit and to warn them about the effects of contaminants in illicit liquor are key interventions that can help reduce the instances of fatalities caused by the consumption of illicit liquor.
- The **health communication** about harm from alcohol is particularly relevant during the pandemic, since there is evidence of reduced immunity to viruses among those who are chronic alcohol consumers.
- **Cooperation with community:** To succeed in its efforts against the sale of illicit liquor, the state can consider **cooperation with the community, particularly from women's groups**. This would allow the administration to address the issue at the grass-root level with the involvement of active stakeholders like women who often have to bear the brunt of alcohol consumption.