

They are not criminals; see them as patients.

As this is written, the number of deaths in Kerala due to Covid 19 is two. In the meantime, since the lockdown came into effect, at least six lives have been lost by suicides precipitated by alcohol withdrawal.

Those six were successful in escaping from a life that was sheer torture for them. But all around us, there are a lot of alcohol-dependent people living a life that is worse than death. Not a small number; they number around six lakhs.

A clarification to avoid any misunderstanding: the six lakhs is not the number of those who consume alcohol in Kerala. That would come to something like 1.3 million. The majority of them drink alcohol because they find pleasure in it; true. But the six lakhs are those *addicted* to alcohol.

Please do not be judgmental about them. Please don't pass the verdict, "they did something wrong; let them suffer". They are in that state of addiction because of a particular set of circumstances of their body and mind. Some of us have a genetic predisposition to addiction. If we have that, if the environmental and mental factors favor it, addiction is an inevitable consequence.

When someone says with pride, "Look at me. I stopped drinking at the beginning of the holy season. I have not touched it since then. I have no problem", to them, let me point out; you have just been lucky. You have been lucky in not having that particular genetic trait coupled with the wrong psycho-environmental background. The addicted person unfortunately had a particular genetic build in him and happened to be in that unfortunate environment.

The problems facing those who have the misfortune to be addicted to alcohol are not of small magnitude. The whole society will be looking at them as criminals. Their relationships within the family and outside it are likely to be weak and physically they will go through enormous suffering if they are deprived of alcohol. They will have agonizing agitation and also physical problems like tremors, vomiting or epileptic fits.

Some of these can lead to death, especially an epileptic fits during which food matter may regurgitate from the stomach and choke the person.

When agitated, they lose control over their own minds almost completely. They can turn violent. They will attempt anything at all to obtain alcohol. Those who try to dissuade him, whether it be his wife or children or a policeman, may get attacked physically. They may try to break open a liquor shop. They, almost completely, lose their ability to distinguish between right and wrong.

Please remember that there are unseen martyrs in the vicinity of every person with addiction. Imagine what life will be for the man's wife or children. Those children will grow up with unimaginable scars.

There is a lesson that we can find if we care to look from the history of prohibition anywhere in the world. People go to any length to make illegal alcohol. Opportunists come in and sell what is literally poison.

Can this disease of addiction not be treated? An oversimplified solution that is brought in by people who look at the problem too superficially is, "if it is a disease, go ahead and treat it. Why restore the social evil of access to alcohol?"

There is an element of truth in this. Addiction can possibly be treated, It requires medicines like diazepam, will be the mainstay of such treatment, but the process requires hospitalization (practically incarceration) and great expertise. Maybe available facilities will reach less than 100 of those 600,000 today.

We have two avenues open before us. One is to pretend not to see the hell that these 600 thousand people and their families are living in. The other is the humane option – to think about what can be done about it and taking a logical and compassionate decision. The solution will have two parts in it. One, is to make alcohol available to those who are addicted to it – as a medicine. There should be a process of registration and those who need it for their existence should be given limited quantities of alcohol. And over time, we can develop treatment centers for addiction. There are a lot of them out there who want to get out of their disease. Humanity demands our

compassion as a society. Let us hope we are not tempted to run away from the problem.

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