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A Different Tragedy Strikes Kerala During COVID-19 Lockdown Due to Non-Availability of Alcohol



Policemen keep vigil on a road in Kerala's Kasargod during the lockdown. (News18)

Thiruvananthapuram: Within days of Prime Minister Narendra Modi's announcement of the 21-day nationwide lockdown on Tuesday to check the spread of the coronavirus pandemic, Kerala has seen nine deaths not due to the infection but because of the non-availability of alcohol. These include seven cases of suicide, one cardiac arrest, and one who died after consuming aftershave lotion.

The southern state with over 200 COVID-19 cases had reported only a single death caused by the virus till Sunday. But the closure of all liquor outlets, including bars, hotels and toddy shops, has brought a different sort of tragedy.

Police said the first deaths for want of alcohol happened on Friday with Sanoj from Thrissur and Murali from Kochi taking the extreme step. This was followed by the suicides of Vijil from Kannur, Biju and Suresh from Kollam and Vasu of Kochi (all on Saturday) and Krishnan Kutty from Thiruvananthapuram (reported on Sunday).

A 46-year-old man who jumped from a building for the same reason on Sunday is undergoing treatment at a government hospital in Kottayam.

Nowshad from Kayamkulam lost his life on Saturday after he consumed shaving lotion when liquor was unavailable, while Muraleedharan Achary from Kollam died on Sunday of cardiac arrest when he couldn't find a bottle of alcohol.

"According to the Kerala Mental Health Survey, 2018, there are about 50,000 men suffering from alcohol-related problems. Moreover, nearly 10,000 to 15,000 of them may develop serious problems like alcohol withdrawal fits, hallucinations and depression. The number of deaths in a couple of days endorses the projections available from the survey," said Dr CJ John, a senior psychiatrist.

While Kerala has reported only one death till now due to the coronavirus even as it has one of the highest number of positive cases, nine people have died for want of alcohol.

Chandrakanth Viswanath

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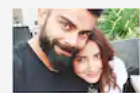
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Chief Minister Pinarayi Vijayan on Saturday said those who could not do without liquor daily would soon have the opportunity to avail themselves of a fixed quota of legal alcohol from the Excise Department, with a medical testimonial from a qualified doctor. "The ban on the sale of liquor during the lockdown is creating a host of social problems in the state," he said.

However, the Indian Medical Association (IMA) and Kerala Government Medical Officers' Association have rejected the government's suggestion in this regard. The IMA has criticised the Left government's plan to supply liquor to alcohol addicts based on doctor's prescription, saying it was not "scientific".

IMA state president Dr Abraham Varghese said those showing withdrawal symptoms should be provided scientific treatment, which can be given at homes, or by giving medicines after admitting them to hospitals.

"The move to supply liquor to such people cannot be accepted on scientific grounds. Doctors have no legal liability to give prescription to get them liquor," he said, adding a 'liquor prescription' may even result in the cancellation of the licence of the medical practitioner.

It is better to give scientific treatment to such persons and any other approach would make things more complicated, Varghese said, adding the IMA has conveyed its concern to Vijayan.

According to Dr John, a doctor can only indicate in a certificate that a person is suffering from alcohol dependency and is at a high risk of alcohol withdrawal symptom and has been suggested a proper treatment of this condition.

He also has been motivated to use this period to get out of alcoholism. "It is the government to decide what to do with this prescription," said Dr John.

The Kerala Mental Health Survey says, "We have a more accurate data after looking at the number of people who may require inpatient treatment. The 'National Survey on Extent and Patterns of Substance Use in India' gave a current prevalence of alcohol dependence for Kerala for the year when the survey was conducted (2018) at 0.6%. The projected population for Kerala for 2020 is 3.47 crore. So, the actual number of alcohol-dependent individuals will come to around 2,08,200."

"About 5%-20% patients undergo a complicated course of alcohol withdrawal (Eyer F, Schuler T et al 2011). So the actual number of complicated withdrawal is expected to be between 10,000 and 42,000," it adds.

State Excise Minister TP Ramakrishnan has urged tipplers suffering from withdrawal symptoms to approach de-addiction centres in their respective districts.

Despite repeated pleas from the opposition Congress-led UDF and BJP, the Vijayan government decided to keep open all outlets of the state-run beverages corporation till Wednesday, a day after Modi announced the 21-day lockdown. Vijayan had then said the sudden closure of all shops would lead to social problems.

The other major reason why the government was reluctant in taking the decision was the loss of revenue. The total annual turnover of liquor sales in Kerala during 2018-19 reached an all-time high of Rs 14,508 crore and the government's revenue during the period was Rs 2,521 crore.

There are a total of 301 retail liquor outlets across Kerala's 14 districts of which 265 are under Kerala State Beverages Corporation and the rest under Consumerfed along with 598 bar hotels and 357 beer parlours.

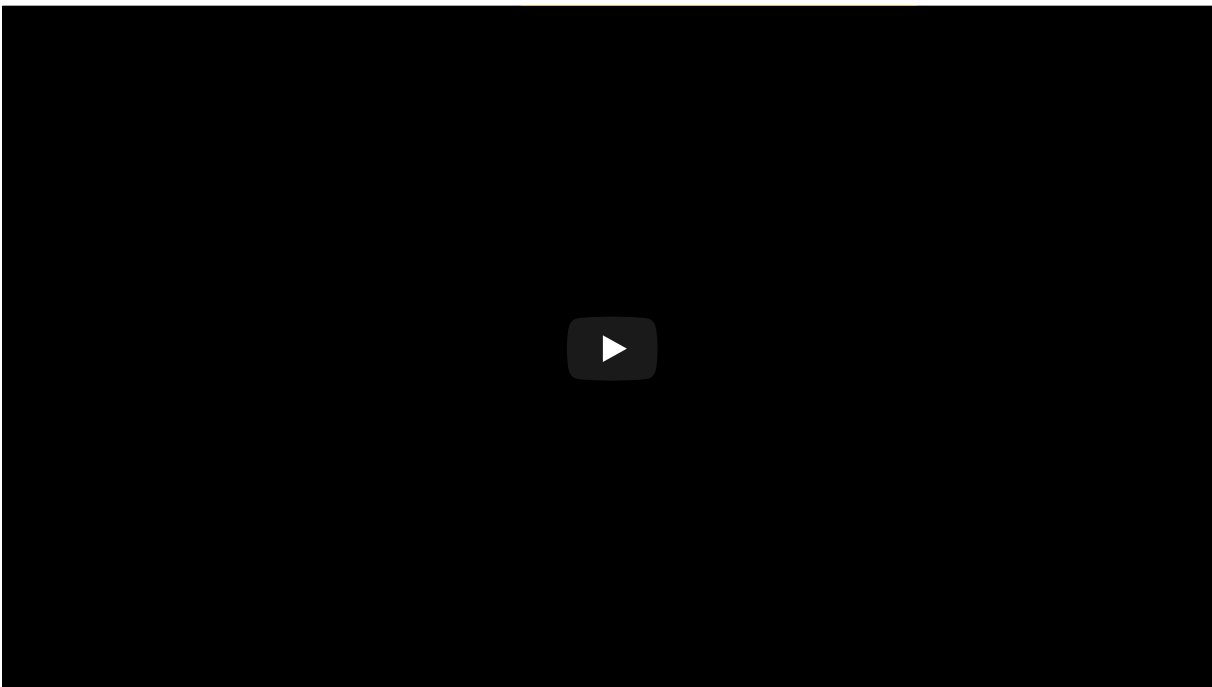
(With inputs from PTI)

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