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*ON PROHIBITION

Dr. B. R. Ambedkar: Sir, I realise that the feelings of this House on the matter of prohibition run very high ; not that I do not share those feelings, but for other reasons I do not wish to be harsh to the Honourable the Minister for Excise. I realise that he is a new man for the office. I realise also that it is a very wrong place for a man to be in. I congratulate him on the courage he has shown in accepting the place which another honourable member of this House thought it better to leave.

I rise to speak on this subject simply because I feel that what has fallen from the Honourable the Minister for Excise during the last two or three days has left the impression on me that he will fall into the bad old ways, which are the established ways of this department. In course of the interpellation that we had the other day, to my mind, he made somewhat an extraordinary statement. He stated that he opened a shop somewhere near the borders of the Nizam's Dominions because the Nizam had opened a shop in our territory. Sir, I do not think that is an argument which a Minister who has accepted the policy of prohibition ought to advance in this House. That argument amounts to something like this ; that because a dacoit has committed dacoity and carried away some booty which the Honourable the Minister for Excise could have done himself that he himself is entitled to commit the dacoity. Sir, a wrong committed by one does not justify another to commit a similar wrong. The best policy for my honourable friend the Minister for Excise to adopt was to remonstrate with His Exalted Highness the Nizam for having opened shops near our territories. Instead of doing that he has placed the interest of revenue over and above the interests of the people of this Presidency.

It seems to me that my honourable friend the Minister for Excise looks only to revenue exclusive of every other consideration. In the course of the debate on the budget he also made a statement which I think ought to be taken seriously into consideration. In reply to certain criticisms which I offered he said that in judging of the policy of the Excise Department we ought to take into consideration the amount of consumption of liquor in the presidency and not the amount of money that is raised by the Excise

*B.L.C. Debates, Vol. XIX, pp. 838-40, dated 10th March 1927.

Department. He gave us certain figures to show that the people of Bombay were not drinking as much as the people of the other provinces in India. I have not had the time to look into those figures, but I think we may accept the figures as they were given by the Honourable the Minister for Excise. But I think, Sir, that my honourable friend will admit that while people are drinking less of licit liquor, the manufacture of illicit liquor in this presidency has been on the increase. So, if we take into consideration the fact that although drinking of licit liquor is decreasing, drinking of illicit liquor is on the increase, the result that we get is that the consumption is not less. Of course we have not got the actual figures of illicit manufacture, but I believe the fact is admitted, I think the Honourable the Minister for Excise will be first to urge it, that illicit liquor is increasing. So, on the whole we are not gainers, because the only result is that people are drinking less of licit liquor and more of illicit liquor. The question that then arises is, why is the manufacture of illicit liquor increasing in this presidency ? So far as I am aware, there has been no official reply to this question. But I venture to give a reply for it for what it is worth. I think, Sir, the increase in the manufacture of illicit liquor in this presidency is entirely due to the high tariff on country liquor. Now, it is an admitted principle of political economy, not only a principle which is embodied in text-books, but I believe it is also a principle which is acted upon and known to every housewife that when the price of a certain commodity rises, then, there is always a tendency on the part of the people to substitute another commodity in its place which is equally serviceable and which costs less. We all know, for instance, that when sugar rises in price people will substitute gul in place of sugar and if coffee was to rise in price people will consume more of tea. Applying the same principle to this case, I submit, Sir, that the increase of illicit drink in this presidency is entirely due to the high tariff on country liquor. My honourable friend the Minister for Excise will therefore pay a little more attention to this aspect of the question. If he is really a believer in prohibition he must regulate his tariff. If he does not regulate the tariff, I submit that although he may succeed in controlling the consumption of licit liquor, he will give a direct incentive to the increase in illicit liquor.

The other point that I wish to speak of is as regards the policy of prohibition. I was glad to hear from my honourable friend the Leader of of the House in reply to certain arguments urged by my honourable friend Mr. Murzban, that prohibition is now the accepted policy of Government, and that Government under no circumstances would go back on the policy resolved upon by the Legislative Council. But, Sir, I was a little disappointed when, as I believe, he sidetracked us a little from the real issue before us. He told us that the issue before the House was, what method we should adopt in bringing about prohibition, whether we should adopt the method of rationing or whether we should adopt the method of local option. Sir, in my view the two methods, making allowance for minor details, are more

or less equally efficient. Whether you adopt the policy of rationing or whether you adopt the policy of local option, makes no difference in the situation whatsoever, because the effect of either is to control the supply of liquor that will be put on the market. Whether you do it by not supplying more to the shop-keepers or whether you do it by not opening shops at all, the result is the same. But, Sir, the question is how far we can go on in advancing the policy of prohibition and that question, I think, my honourable friend the Leader of the House has not taken into account. I feel, Sir, that the problem of prohibition, whether you will be able to carry it out to a successful issue or not, entirely depends upon the financial solution of the question, upon how we will manage to make good the losses we are bound to incur as a result of our new excise policy. I think we on this side of the House would have liked to hear a good deal from the Honourable the Leader of the House as to the kind and method of taxation that he has in contemplation. Sir, I think although there might be differences of opinion in this House, we at least on this side feel that we are not opposed to the additional taxation, provided of course the Government will use the taxes for nation-building proposes. We are certainly opposed to additional taxation if Government are going to use the taxes merely to maintain the Government, merely to govern. But if they are going to make life happy, and not merely try to make life possible, then, I think we on this side are certainly willing to support any tax. The honourable member the Leader of the House tried to repudiate the charge of insincerity that was made against Government. Sir, I think no Government ought to make any promise as regards carrying out a policy of prohibition unless it has made up its mind as to how it will make good the loss of revenue. Unless therefore my honourable friend has got the courage—that is far more important than mere conviction—unless he has the courage to tax the people who have not been taxed so far, people who have better capacity to bear the burden, I think it is no use his trying to incur the odium of making a promise and not carrying it out. The best thing for the Honourable the Leader of the House would have been to bring forward a proposal for taxation and to test the sincerity of this House as regards the policy which it has been asking him to pursue. I think the House understands as well as anybody that this policy is going to cost money, and it was the duty and interest of my honourable friend the Leader of the House to have obtained from the House an assurance that it was willing to meet the cost of the policy it was so strenuously enforcing upon him. With these remarks I beg to resume my seat.

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