**CHANDIGARH UNIVERSITY**

**DEPARTMENT OF CAREER DEVELOPMENT**

**REGIONAL ISSUE**

**Chief Minister in a Hurry**

**Highlights:**

Bihar Chief Minister Nitish Kumar will clearly leave no stone unturned in giving his prohibition policy a legislative punch.

Within days of the Patna High Court striking a blow to the “total prohibition” regime in the State, the government notified the Bihar Prohibition and Excise Act, 2016, and approached the Supreme Court to challenge the High Court order. The haste throws some light on Mr. Kumar’s political strategy, which is aimed at distinguishing himself in a crowded landscape.

Prohibition was his main campaign outreach to women voters in the 2015 Assembly elections. Having won the votes of women in earlier elections on schemes such as bicycles for schoolgirls, prohibition gave his Janata Dal (United) an added moral aura — he was fighting a no-holds-barred election against his former ally, the BJP, and he was fighting in alliance with Lalu Prasad’s Rashtriya Janata Dal. In the event, he was returned to the Chief Minister’s post, but with the RJD getting a greater number of MLAs than the JD(U).

Mr. Kumar’s natural claim to the big post draws from his personal credibility, seen to be more potent than his party’s. This connect with a wide cross-section of the public, as a politician empathetic to aspirations for a dignified, socially and educationally empowered life, had him in the fray for a larger national role during his BJP-allied days, and so too in his current anti-BJP politics.

The prohibition plank, with its Gandhian overtones and empathetic message to women, gives Mr. Kumar a chance to arrogate to himself the mantle of a moral campaigner nationally. In the immediate term, it allows him to set himself apart from the RJD’s rougher politics, and change the subject soon after his government found itself emitting the wrong message on law and order, particularly when Mohammad Shahabuddin was briefly out on bail.

By attempting to overcome the High Court order, Mr. Kumar may have underlined his assertiveness, but he has, in the process, missed the opportunity the court gave him to reconsider the harsh punishments outlined in the previous law, with all the questions they pose for civil liberties, as well as the very architecture of the legislation.

The prohibition regime forces the deployment of the police to seal the State’s border, and away from more mindful policing within, which was the change Mr. Kumar’s long chief minister ship promised. The punishment worked into the current law gives the police greater opportunity for rent-seeking. This may alienate the very constituencies that keep him in the running for a role larger than his party’s electoral footprint.