

EXAMINING THE UNINTENDED CONSEQUENCES OF BIHAR'S ALCOHOL BAN

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Abstract: This paper examines the unintended consequences of Bihar's alcohol prohibition policy, implemented in 2016. The policy, aimed at curbing alcohol consumption and reducing domestic violence, has instead led to a flourishing bootlegging network, the empowerment of liquor mafias in nexus with the administration, and widespread corruption. Despite some positive outcomes, institutional challenges and failures in policy implementation have resulted in worsened economic strain, a large number of incarcerations, deaths from the consumption of spurious alcohol, and increased involvement of youth in the illegal alcohol trade. This often creates a vicious cycle of substance abuse, crime, and poverty. This paper offers insights into the limitations of blanket prohibition and advocates for community-based interventions and policies more grounded in local realities.

Keywords: Alcohol Ban; Illegal Alcohol Trade; Prohibition Laws; Implementation Challenges; Economic Mobility.

INTRODUCTION

The issue of alcohol lies at the intersection of personal, political, and public policy—an interplay particularly evident in the implementation and consequences of Bihar's Prohibition and Excise Act of 2016. The shift in Bihar's alcohol policy in 2007 triggered a sharp rise in alcohol consumption, subsequently leading to an increase in violence against women. In response, the state implemented a sweeping prohibition policy in 2016, driven by political and economic motivations. However, this policy triggered a range of unintended and far-reaching consequences. It spurred the growth of a black market, strengthened a powerful liquor mafia, and led to frequent hooch tragedies. Economically, the state lost thousands of crores in tax revenue, adversely impacting social welfare spending. Institutionally, enforcement challenges fostered widespread corruption, implicating actors from the police to the judiciary. By 2023, over 749,000 individuals, predominantly from marginalised communities, had been incarcerated under the stringent penalties of the law (Roy, 2023). This paper explores the unintended consequences of alcohol prohibition, examining how they unfolded and their impact, by drawing on personal lived experiences.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Following the implementation of the Bihar Excise Rules in 2007, the state witnessed a significant rise in alcohol consumption, which in turn contributed to an increase in incidents of alcoholism, domestic violence, and crime against women. Chief Minister Nitish Kumar introduced the policy as a measure to compensate for the revenue loss incurred following the bifurcation of Bihar and the creation of Jharkhand. The widespread availability of alcohol, even in the most remote areas of the state, led to the rise of a powerful liquor mafia. Liquor mafias were allegedly connected to the ruling establishment and received support from bureaucrats and police officials (Ahmed, 2022). This policy shift led to a significant rise in the allotment of liquor licenses, with the number of alcohol outlets increasing across the state. It resulted in a surge in alcohol consumption, which led to a significant rise in domestic violence and crimes against women (MN, 2020).

These incidents sparked widespread grassroots movements led by women across various parts of Bihar demanding a ban on liquor (Sajjad, 2020). In response to these protests and anger among many women voters, Nitish Kumar introduced the Bihar Prohibition and Excise Act of 2016 to completely ban alcohol across the state, fulfilling his poll promise to women voters, who constitute a key vote base for him across caste backgrounds (Singh, 2016; Zumbish, 2019).

The alcohol ban was introduced to reduce domestic violence and alcohol-related crimes and to improve living standards and public health (Mishra, 2025), as the highest incidence of domestic violence in the country is reported in Bihar, with nearly 59% of married women believed to have experienced some form of abuse (Chaudhary, 2013; Chachra, 2017; “Bihar,” 2008, as cited in Bajwa et al., n.d.). As intended, the prohibition has had several positive outcomes, including a reduction in daily alcohol consumption, improved health among men, prevention of intimate partner violence, and a significant decline in emotional, sexual, and physical violence against women (Chakrabarti et al., 2024). It has also been linked to a decrease in road accidents and fatalities (Dash, 2017), as well as a reallocation of household income from alcohol to essential commodities (Sinha & Ambastha, 2023).

However, the ban has also exacerbated the precariousness of already vulnerable situations. Bajwa et al. argue that women whose husbands consume alcohol are at heightened risk when reporting domestic violence, as such disclosures may lead to retaliatory violence if their husbands become aware (Berg et al., 2010, as cited in Bajwa et al., n.d.). These risks are further intensified by the added fear of arrest under alcohol prohibition laws; securing bail in such cases is often extremely difficult. Even when bail is granted, many of the accused are unable to afford the amount, as they typically come from economically marginalised backgrounds. The economic burden of arrests under alcohol prohibition laws is severe, as in many cases, the accused and their families are forced to exhaust their savings, take high-interest loans from moneylenders, or sell personal belongings to cover legal and related expenses (Ray, 2018).

RESEARCH OBJECTIVE

The prohibition policy has brought about wide-ranging implications for the state treasury, political decision-making, and the everyday lives of citizens, resulting in mass incarceration, legal entanglements, and preventable deaths. This research aims to contribute to the broader discourse on policy implementation by illustrating how a seemingly progressive legal intervention can, in practice, become an albatross around the neck when it lacks transparent enforcement, inclusive

planning, and administrative foresight. In doing so, it also seeks to offer critical insights into how future legislation—, particularly those with profound social and economic consequences—, must be designed with a deeper understanding of local contexts, fiscal realities, and human rights considerations.

METHODOLOGY

The study employs qualitative methodology within a mixed-methods framework, incorporating both primary and secondary sources of data to ensure a comprehensive and in-depth analysis. Primary data were collected through semi-structured interviews with individuals who had direct or indirect experience with the issue, allowing for the capture of rich, context-specific insights. Secondary data were gathered from a wide range of online news articles to provide additional perspective and context. A manual content analysis of these articles was conducted by systematically searching and reviewing them using targeted keywords aligned with the research questions, such as “involvement in the illegal alcohol trade” and “impact of alcohol prohibition in Bihar.” This analytical approach allowed for the identification of key themes and recurring narratives. The secondary data not only supplemented and corroborated the findings from the interviews but also contributed to building a broader and more representative dataset, which would have been challenging to construct through primary methods alone, particularly given the expansive, statewide scope of the study.

The illicit alcohol trade, though widely recognised and acknowledged within local communities, remains a highly sensitive and stigmatised topic due to its illegality and the stringent enforcement measures associated with prohibition. The legal risks involved contribute to an atmosphere of fear and caution, discouraging individuals from openly discussing their knowledge or involvement. This reluctance is especially evident in formal or research settings, where conversations are often perceived as potentially incriminating. Potential respondents frequently express concerns regarding their personal safety and the risk of legal repercussions, including the fear that their identities, affiliations, or locations might be inadvertently disclosed, even after repeated assurances of confidentiality and

anonymity. These apprehensions not only hindered efforts to reach out to potential respondents and complicated the data collection process, but also posed significant ethical challenges, as they limited by limiting the depth, openness, and authenticity of participant responses.

To facilitate participant engagement under such challenging conditions, purposive sampling was employed to contact participants who had relevant knowledge or experience concerning the various aspects of the illegal alcohol trade and its broader implications. This method ensured the inclusion of participants whose insights were directly aligned with the study's objectives. To navigate the constraints, initial contact was established with individuals either personally known to the researcher or reached through mutual acquaintances. This strategy was instrumental in building rapport and fostering trust, which ultimately encouraged participants to engage in conversations related to the research topic. Snowball sampling was employed alongside purposive sampling to expand the respondent pool by relying on referrals from initial participants, who introduced others within their networks with similar experiences or perspectives. The combination of purposive and snowball sampling proved particularly effective in accessing otherwise hard-to-reach individuals and contributed to the collection of a diverse and contextually rich dataset.

The sample was heterogeneous, comprising a total of thirteen participants based in the capital, Patna and nearby villages who contributed diverse and nuanced perspectives shaped by their distinct experiences, roles, and positionalities. Among them were two police officers and three lawyers, who offered valuable insights into the legal and institutional dimensions of the issue, including the enforcement of prohibition laws and the judicial implications of related offences. The remaining eight respondents—comprising neighbours, family members, and close acquaintances of individuals involved in the illegal alcohol trade—offered valuable contextual knowledge of the trade's day-to-day operations, local networks, and its socio-economic impact at the community level. This varied composition of participants enriched the study by allowing for a multidimensional understanding of the issue. Comments and interventions by non-participant respondents

during the field visit also highlighted key issues and contributed enriching details.

FINDINGS

IMPACT ON WOMEN AND FAMILY

Women respondents argued that, in many ways, the alcohol prohibition has worsened the situation. They noted that things were relatively better for the first six months after the prohibition was enforced. As one respondent explained, “pehle 6 machine asal mein sharab bandi thi, par phir sab paisa khane laga aur ab pehle se bhi bura halat hai” [The alcohol was actually banned for the first six months, but then everyone started taking bribes, and now things have gone worse].

The most significant issue cited was the increased economic strain. One respondent lamented, “kuch fayda nahi hua hai, sab aur barbad ho gaya hai” [There has been no improvement; things have further deteriorated.], emphasising that people are now paying double the price for alcohol. As one person described, “pehle jo 50 ka ek glass daru aata tha, ab uska 100 de rahe hain” [What used to cost Rs 50 for one glass of alcohol is now being sold for Rs 100.]. Another respondent pointed out that domestic violence incidents, which often occur under the influence of alcohol, persist. However, they added that there is now a greater fear of reporting domestic violence cases post-prohibition. Women are less likely to report such cases due to the fear of arrest associated with alcohol consumption.

The economic strain is particularly severe for families of those arrested under the prohibition law. In many cases, men are the sole earning members, and their arrest results in the complete loss of household income, often leaving families unable to meet basic necessities. Women are frequently compelled to seek employment or take on additional work, placing further strain on the family. Already, limited resources are redirected toward covering legal expenses, and in many instances, families are forced to take out loans not only to manage these costs but also to cover day-to-day living expenses.

SPURIOUS LIQUOR, BOOTLEG ECONOMY AND CORRUPTION

The large-scale production of spurious liquor, driven by powerful liquor mafia and smaller producers, has become a significant menace. The illegal alcohol trade is an immensely profitable venture, attracting individuals from all castes and economic backgrounds. Over time, it has transformed into a pure business enterprise. This shift has fuelled the rise of country liquor production by newly involved players, often resulting in the production of spurious alcohol. Chemicals such as urea and oxytocin injections are commonly added during production to enhance the intoxicating effects. It is this adulterated liquor that is frequently responsible for hooch-related tragedies.

LIQUOR MAFIA-ADMINISTRATION NEXUS

Widespread corruption is widely regarded as the biggest factor behind the failure of the alcohol ban and the continued easy availability of liquor. Corruption extends from the lowest-ranked officials to the highest echelons of the administration. As one respondent remarked, “niche se le kar upar tak sab manage hota hai” [everything from the lower to the higher level is managed]. Another respondent noted that, in some ways, access to alcohol has become even easier under prohibition, as it is now home-delivered. The nexus between the liquor mafia, the administration, and political parties is particularly notorious, with each reinforcing the other and forming a powerful alliance (Joshi, 2019).

UNEMPLOYMENT AND CHANGING ROUTES TO ECONOMIC MOBILITY

Involvement in the illicit alcohol trade is not just a lucrative business but is also seen as a means of employment, with those involved working systematically, much like in any other business. Given the limited employment opportunities in Bihar, many view it as a legitimate alternative, not only for those directly engaged but for the wider community as well. One respondent stated, "There is nothing wrong if done strictly as a job, and in some ways, alcohol prohibition is beneficial as it provides employment opportunities for the youth in

Bihar; otherwise, what else is there to do?" He further emphasised that this is not just his personal view, but one that echoes the general sentiment.

The reliance on an overburdened bureaucratic system entrenched in patriarchal norms and limited community participation has led to unintended consequences, as noted by an activist. He stated that these conditions created “aapda mein avsar” [an opportunity emerging from a crisis] which, in turn, contributed to the expansion of the illicit liquor (Mishra, 2024).

Bihar's persistent unemployment crisis (Sharma, 2024) has driven many young people into the illegal alcohol trade. The illegal alcohol trade has provided significant economic benefits to many individuals, often resulting in notable cases of upward economic mobility. One respondent shared that he knows people who previously did not even have a pucca house and have since acquired multi-story buildings, bikes, and cars. Similar testimonies from other respondents highlight how involvement in the illegal alcohol trade has led to substantial financial gains and economic mobility. Furthermore, there is evidence of mobility not only within the trade itself but also across other sectors, indicating broader opportunities for those engaged in this illicit economy. Yadav (2025) recounts the story of a student who initially came to Patna to prepare for competitive exams and worked as a delivery agent on a daily wage. Over time, he transitioned into a “liquor entrepreneur,” and the profits from this venture were 50 times greater than his daily earnings from delivery work. Within six months, he had amassed enough capital to expand into a full-fledged business. Today, he employs six young men, aged 15 to 21, and “plans to turn his black money into a white-collar business by 2027.”

Individuals involved in bootlegging networks come from diverse caste and class backgrounds. However, the majority are from marginalised socio-economic groups, primarily middle and lower castes, and low-income working-class families, especially those engaged in the bootlegging of country liquor. The network is heavily gendered and male-dominated, though some young women are also reported to be involved.

MINORS IN ILLEGAL ALCOHOL TRADE

The study reveals that a significant number of those involved in the trade are minors, with some as young as 13 or 14. It is common to find minors aged 15 and young adults in their twenties working in various roles driven by different motivations. Many of the young individuals involved are students, including school-going children who work part-time as carriers or delivery boys to earn extra cash and make 'quick money.' One respondent explained that these children work either occasionally or regularly to supplement their allowances. A lack of employment opportunities, the allure of a better lifestyle marked by 'nice clothing,' 'expensive phones and bikes,' along with a growing aversion to labour-intensive, traditional forms of work, are significantly contributing to shifting aspirations among youth and fuelling the desire to earn quick, easy money.

While minors are primarily involved in delivery roles, there have also been cases of 15-year-olds producing liquor (Yadav, 2025). Many of these young adults initially entered the trade as minors. The severity of punishments for adults has inadvertently shifted the risk onto children, leading to increased participation of minors in the illegal alcohol trade. This trend poses serious challenges, contributing to a rise in drug use, petty crimes, and increased exposure to organised crime. It has also fostered a mindset that favours quick, informal means of earning money over engagement with the formal labour market, often leading to involvement in scams and other illegal activities.

RISE IN DRUG USE AND PETTY CRIME

The money made from engaging in bootlegging activities is also closely intertwined with the surge in drug use, which has significantly risen since the alcohol ban (Chaudhary et al., 2017). With alcohol becoming more expensive, harder to procure, and easily identifiable, many individuals have turned to drugs, often referred to as 'sasta nasha' [cheap drugs], which are relatively inexpensive and can be consumed in private. Many boys work in bootlegging networks to finance their addiction and also engage in non-violent crimes such as petty theft and extortion to fund their drug use. Boys as young as 12 are using consuming marijuana, synthetic drugs, and substances like heroin, brown

sugar, smack, and adhesives called "Suleshan". During fieldwork in a lower-caste, low-income working-class neighbourhood, a teenage boy responded with haunting indifference when asked whether he was concerned about the effects of drug use on his body, saying, "jeene ka kya fayda hai? kya karenge jee ke?" [What is the point of living? Why live at all?] His words reflected a deep sense of hopelessness and a lack of vision for the future. His mother, with visible anguish, lamented, 'jaan ki koi kimat nahi hai' [The youth today have "no value for their lives"], highlighting a growing detachment among adolescents and young adults. She expressed concern that many no longer want to engage in hard, manual labour and are thus indifferent to the consequences of drug use. Drawing a comparison, she remarked that at least older men consumed alcohol after a day of hard work and with their own earnings, whereas today's youth especially boys in their teens and early twenties often remain unemployed and singularly focused on securing the means to access drugs. She pointed to her nephew, severely ill and with little hope of survival, adding that his father had sold their house to pay for his treatment. "Now he will lose both his home and his son," she said, capturing the devastating ripple effects on families and communities.

DISCUSSION

Bihar's alcohol ban has produced a mixed legacy and far-reaching impact. It presents a case of policy failure illustrating how a well-intentioned measure can trigger a cascade of adverse consequences, often in direct contradiction to its intended outcomes. The findings indicate that there is a broad consensus among the participants that the unintended consequences of the ban outweigh its benefits. This sentiment is particularly prevalent among working-class women—, originally seen as the primary beneficiaries of the policy—, who now face increased economic strain and continued experiences of domestic violence.

The findings reflect a larger systemic failure, where the state's short-sighted policy framework—, implemented without sufficient consideration of ground realities has failed its citizens, particularly the youth. With limited employment opportunities, especially among marginalised youth, bootlegging has become a means of livelihood. For them, it offers not only a viable source of income but also a

pathway to economic mobility. Notably, the nature of aspirations and routes to upward mobility are shifting, with fewer young people relying on traditional occupational mobility. Becker (1968) posits that when labour market opportunities decline, engaging in criminal activities becomes a relatively more appealing option. The lack of job opportunities has made illegal activities appear both attractive and rational. At the same time, the rise in drug use and substance abuse has created a cycle of addiction, crime, and poverty.

The solution to the problems stemming from the illegal alcohol trade and continued alcohol consumption cannot rely solely on the strict implementation of prohibition laws, though enforcement remains essential in addressing alcoholism and related crimes. Importantly, the grassroots movements have shaped the resistance to alcohol misuse in Bihar has also been shaped by grassroots movements—most notably, consumption and its ramifications, particularly the women-led, locally self-organised anti-liquor protests that spread across the state. Women actively raided illegal breweries, armed with brooms and sticks, destroyed alcohol bottles (Jha, 2012), and compelled the closure of liquor shops (Jha, 2022). Alcohol consumption is not merely a personal matter; it is a moral and social issue that deeply affects families and communities. Addressing it requires a return to the grassroots—fostering awareness, empowerment, and sustained social change within the very communities where the demand for change first emerged.

CONCLUSION

Nearly a decade after the implementation of prohibition laws in Bihar, the illicit alcohol trade continues to thrive, accompanied by a range of unintended outcomes—, many of which run counter to the law's original objectives. Despite the persistence and complexity of these consequences, there remains a notable lack of in-depth qualitative research exploring how policy failures have translated into lived, individual-level experiences. This study sought to address that gap by examining how prohibition has shaped everyday life and personal experiences in the post-prohibition context.

Findings reveal that the ban has affected everyday life, particularly for women and children. Pre-existing problems have persisted, while new challenges—such as increased financial strain,

heightened fear of legal consequences, and rising cases of incarceration—have emerged. At the same time, the ban has also created opportunities for income generation, albeit through involvement in the illegal alcohol trade.

The policy has had a significant impact on youth, particularly adolescent boys and young men in their early twenties. Lacking viable economic opportunities, many are drawn into illegal activities and develop patterns of substance use. The increasing involvement of minors in bootlegging networks is an alarming trend that warrants immediate attention and further investigation.

Through this critical examination, the research brings attention to emerging issues that have surfaced in the aftermath of the ban, which demand urgent attention, policy intervention, and targeted solutions. Rather than a blanket prohibition, a harm-reduction model that includes awareness, regulation, and economic development may offer a more sustainable resolution.

This research contributes to the broader scholarly discourse on policy implementation and governance while also highlighting the need for a more nuanced approach to public policy—one that takes into account local socio-economic realities and promotes community-based interventions. Insights from the study could help inform future policymaking, guide practical interventions, and support the development of more context-sensitive legislative frameworks.

However, since the research draws primarily on qualitative data from a relatively small number of participants, it may not be adequately representative and lacks diversity, particularly in capturing experiences from other regions and remote areas of the state.

The study offers a broader understanding and highlights several critical issues that warrant further specialised investigation. It is primarily focused on individuals. However, the research draws primarily on qualitative data from a relatively small number of participants, mostly from lower socio-economic backgrounds residing in and around the capital city. As a result, it may lack adequate representation and diversity, particularly in capturing experiences from other regions and remote areas of the state. Future research should include perspectives from other regions and more varied socio-economic contexts to develop a more comprehensive understanding of the policy's impact.

The adverse outcomes of Bihar's alcohol prohibition illustrate how well-intentioned policies, when divorced from social realities and institutional preparedness, can deepen the very problems they aim to resolve. It

underscores a lesson that policies with far-reaching social and economic implications must be shaped through inclusive planning and contextual sensitivity, with solutions grounded not only in enforcement but also in empathy and evidence.

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