

Alcohol, Caste, and Control: Sociological Perspectives on the Illicit Liquor Crisis in India

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To Cite this Article

Raghavendra R.H. & Anil Kumar R. (2025). Alcohol, Caste, and Control: Sociological Perspectives on the Illicit Liquor Crisis in India. *Studies in Indian Sociology*, 2: 1-2, pp. 73-81.

Abstract: Illicit alcohol consumption poses a significant public health crisis in India, disproportionately affecting marginalized communities. This paper examines the pervasive issue of illicit alcohol, focusing on its production, distribution, consumption patterns, and devastating consequences. The analysis reveals a complex interplay of factors contributing to the problem, including poverty, social exclusion, weak regulatory oversight, and cultural practices. Despite substantial government revenue from legal alcohol sales, illicit liquor remains prevalent, particularly among Scheduled Castes and Tribes. The paper highlights the urgent need for comprehensive policy interventions, such as increased awareness, improved access to affordable legal alcohol, effective enforcement, and rational tax policies to address this critical public health challenge.

Keywords: Illicit alcohol, India, Methanol poisoning, Public health, Marginalized communities, Social inequality, Regulatory challenges.

Introduction

Illicit alcohol is a critical global public health issue because it is produced without regulatory and market oversight with increased risk of safety, quality and adulteration issues. Poisonous homemade alcohol is a problem in India, particularly among the poor. Illicit alcohol is largely categorized as unrecorded alcohol, it is not accounted in official statistics on alcohol taxation or sales in the country where it is consumed. This is because it is usually produced, distributed and sold outside the formal regulated channels under government control. In India according to WHO estimation unrecorded alcohol can accounts for up to 46% of total consumption. Illicit alcohol sales are popular in India due to its lower prices, making it accessible to the underprivileged. Prohibiting the sale

and consumption of liquor in several parts of the country also further boosts its sale on the black market. (TRACIT, 2023)

According to WHO's Global status report on Alcohol 2004: illicit liquor is mostly produced clandestinely in small production units with raw materials similar to that used for country liquor. With no legal quality control checks on them, alcohol concentration of illicit liquor varies (varies up to 56%). Adulteration is quite frequent, industrial methylated spirit being a common adulterant, which occasionally causes incidents like mass poisoning with consumers losing their lives or suffering irreversible damage to the eyes. Cheaper than licensed country liquor, illicit liquor is popular among the poorer section of the population. In many parts of India illicit production of liquor and its marketing is a cottage industry with each village having one or two units operating illegally. (WHO 2004, 2012).

In contrast, the illegal stuff, known as "hooch", derived from cane sugar, is sold for a fraction of the price, about 25 or 30 rupees for a plastic pouch or glass. It's sold discreetly by word of mouth. And without a culture of social drinking, people are looking for something that can offer them a cheap kick. But distilling it safely requires a precise control of the temperature, because if that rises above a certain level then methyl alcohol or methanol can form. Sometimes, certain herbs or chemicals might be added to increase the strength or improve the flavor, and these can react badly with other chemicals. Methanol is highly toxic to humans and ingestion of just 10 ml can result in blindness and 30 ml or more is usually fatal. "It's usually a mistake because no-one who does this business wants people killed, because they end up with no business. There's sometimes an error of judgment or sometimes it's deliberately spiked by a rival. When swallowed in high concentrations, ammonium nitrate may cause headache, dizziness, abdominal pain, vomiting, heart irregularities, convulsions, collapse, and death (BBC, 2011).

Number of people killed due to consumption of illicit liquor

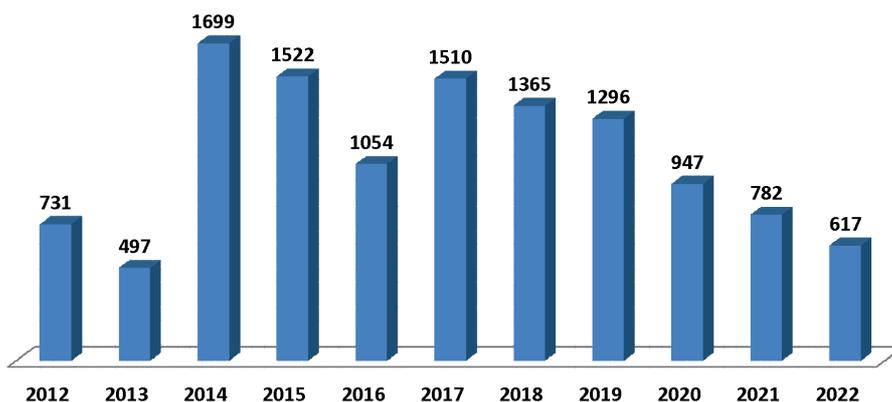


Figure 1: Number of people killed due to consumption of illicit liquor

Source: Compiled from ADSI- NCRB, Ministry of Home affairs, Govt of India.

Figure 1, shows the number of people killed due to consumption of illicit liquor from 2012 to 2022. The data shows a general trend of decline in the number of deaths, with a few spikes in certain years. Data on deaths resulting from illicit liquor consumption reveals that over the last decade more than 12,000 lives have been lost. The number of deaths has fluctuated over the years, with a peak of 1699 deaths in 2014 and a low of 497 deaths in 2013. In terms of illicit liquor consumption, the data for 2022 marks the second lowest figure in the past decade with only 617 reported deaths.

Timeline of recent major illicit alcohol tragedies in India- Production of illicit liquor has a substantial footprint in India and deaths from these illegally brewed concoctions are common. Hundreds of people die every year in India from cheap alcohol made in backstreet distilleries but following poisoning are worst in recent years.

- On 20 June 2024, an incident of poisoning due to the consumption of illicit liquor occurred in Kallakurichi district in the southern Indian state of Tamil Nadu. It resulted in vomiting, stomach aches and diarrhoea due to the presence of methanol in the liquor. At least 66 people died from consumption of tainted liquor and more than 200 people were admitted to hospitals. Most of those who died were economically and socially backward Dalits from Kallakurichi, and nearby villages. (Sivapriyan, E. 2024, July 14).
- May 2023 Around 22 people died due to methanol poisoning after consuming country made alcohol in Villupuram and Chengalpattu districts in Tamil Nadu. (KUMAR, S. V. 2023, May 23).
- May 2023 A suspected hooch tragedy in the Yamunanagar and Ambala district Haryana left atleast 20 people dead due to consumed poisonous country made liquor. (Siwach, S. 2023, November 19).
- July 2022 At least 42 people died in Gujarat after consuming undiluted methyl alcohol. 156 people died in 2019. (LANGA, M. 2022, July 28).
- In August 2020, at least 120 people died in Punjab from drinking toxic local alcohol, with 92 of the deaths in just one district. (Kumar, M. M. 2024, June 22).
- In February 2020 at least 100 people were killed after consuming methanol laced moonshine, two weeks later 168 people died after drinking bootleg alcohol in Golaghat and Jorhat in Uttarakhand. (BBC. 2019, February 24)

This tragedy is not isolated; multiple states have reported fatalities linked to consumption of spurious liquor. It is people from marginalized social, economic backgrounds and they were breadwinners of their families who often suffer the consequences of consuming illicit liquor. Most of the victims were daily wage laborers, with an income of about Rs300 to 400 per day. The men work just to drink, and women run the family. Many drink to forget the body aches after a day of heavy physical work

and most were addicted to illicit liquor as they could not afford to buy from government run retail outlets. For them illicit liquor cheaper and would give kick.

Table 1: States with the highest alcohol-poisoning deaths

| State | 2016 | 2017 | 2018 | 2019 | 2020 | 2021 | 2022 |
|----------------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|
| Punjab | 72 | 170 | 159 | 191 | 133 | 127 | 90 |
| Uttar Pradesh | 68 | 54 | 78 | 41 | 50 | 137 | 50 |
| Madhya Pradesh | 184 | 216 | 410 | 190 | 214 | 108 | 0 |
| Jharkhand | 41 | 76 | 56 | 115 | 139 | 60 | 55 |
| Karnataka | 68 | 256 | 218 | 268 | 99 | 104 | 98 |
| Chhattisgarh | 142 | 104 | 77 | 115 | 67 | 30 | 60 |

Source: Compiled from ASDI-NCRB, Ministry of Home Affairs, Govt of India.

Table 1 shows the state wise data reveals that five states – Punjab, Uttara Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Jharkhand, Karnataka and Chhattisgarh have collectively accounted for half of the total deaths due to illicit alcohol consumption since 2016. Madhya Pradesh leads with 1322 deaths, followed by Karnataka with 1111, Punjab with 942, Chhattisgarh with 595, Jharkhand with 542 deaths and Uttara Pradhesh with 478.

State governments view the sale of liquor as a revenue generating avenue and ignore the harm it causes to society. In 2022-23 Tamil Nadu earned Rs45,855 cr in revenue from state run liquor shops.(Hindu, T. 2024, june 22). In Andhra Pradesh revenue from liquor sales increased to 1,24,312 cr between 2019 and 2024. (PTI. 2021, Nov 25). Karnataka earned a 28,181 cr by January end, Maharashtra collected Rs23,250 cr in 2023-24 (D’Souza,P.(2024, Feb 16), Punjab has collected revenue or Rs8841.4 cr and West Bengal earned a 16272 cr in 2022-23 from the liquor sales.(Hindu, T. 2024,june 22) The Uttar Pradesh government earned around Rs 47,600 crore in revenue from liquor sale in financial year 2023-24 as compared to Rs 41,250 crore in the previous fiscal, (Agarwal,N.2024, April 2) Madhya Pradesh government earned Rs 13,914 crore, marking a 12.63% increase from the previous year’s revenue of Rs 12,353 crore for the financial year 2023-24. (Kumar,S.2024, April 9).

Social stratification of Drinking alcohol in India

From the ancient Vedic times to the present, the pattern of social stratification of drinking seems to have been preserved, with Brahmins being forbidden from drinking alcohol, while Kshatriyas were permitted to drink different wines and beer made from wheat or barley (Sharma et al. 2010). The lower castes and tribal groups have their own customs of drinking, which varies across regions

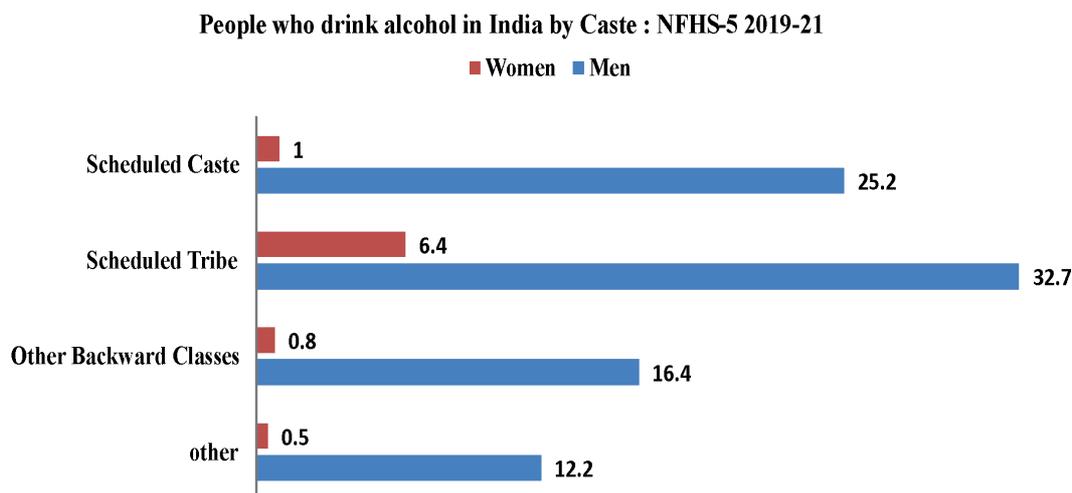


Figure 2: Percentage of people who drink Alcohol in India by CASTE

Source: NFHS-5, 2019-21, Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, Govt of India.

Figure-2, shows the People who drink alcohol in India by Caste: NFHS-5 2019-21. Alcohol consumption patterns in India vary widely across caste religion and gender. According to National Family Health Survey (NFHS)-5 (2019-21) data 32.7% scheduled tribe and 25.2% of scheduled caste men drink, while only 16 and 12.2.4% of other/ higher caste men drink. Across all castes, women's alcohol consumption is notably lower. The highest rate is among Scheduled Tribes (6.4%), followed by Scheduled Castes (1%). According to National Family Health Survey (NFHS)-4 (2015-16) data, 41% Scheduled Tribe and 31% of Scheduled Caste men drink, while only 21% of other/higher caste men drink (NFHS. 2016).

The production and consumption of illegal hooch have long plagued rural India, but its impact is particularly severe among impoverished Dalit populations. The marginalized SC/STs communities face numerous socio-economic challenges. Among these, the menace of illegal hooch — illicitly produced alcohol — has emerged as a deadly threat.

Marginalized groups face numerous socio-economic challenges. Among these, the menace of illegal hooch — illicitly produced alcohol — has emerged as a deadly threat. When people who are addicted to alcohol do not have enough money to buy liquor from retail outlets they go for cheap liquor available locally. However the overregulation of alcohol sales also has the potential to drive illicit alcohol sales. High taxation on legal alcohol making it less affordable and pushing people towards cheaper, unregulated alternatives.

Several factors contribute to the prevalence of illegal hooch in Dalit communities

- (a) **Economic Vulnerability:** The marginalized population in many parts of India, often lives in poverty. Legal alcohol is expensive, driving many to seek cheaper alternatives, regardless of the associated risks.
- (b) **Social Marginalization:** Socially disadvantaged groups frequently face social exclusion and discrimination, which limits their access to education and employment opportunities. This marginalization exacerbates their vulnerability to harmful substances, including illegal liquor.
- (c) **Lack of Regulatory Oversight:** Despite numerous regulations, enforcement remains weak in many rural areas. Corruption and lack of adequate policing allow illicit liquor trade to flourish.
- (d) **Cultural Factors:** In some communities, alcohol consumption is culturally ingrained, and the lack of affordable and safe options leads people to resort to illegal hooch
- (e) **Demand-Supply relation:** It is a result of a simple demand vs. supply problem and the cost adds to the complication.
- (f) **Liquor ban:** Several instances of hooch tragedies can mostly be traced back to incidents that occur in states where liquor is banned.
- (g) **Cheap alternative:** people tend to look for a cheap alternative out of desperation.

There are also easy targets for bootleggers trying to make quick money by selling cheap, low quality liquor that they sell in a bid to make good profits.

TRACIT (Transnational Alliance to Combat Illicit Trade) recommends that state governments in India consider a portfolio of policy and regulatory controls that can help control illicit alcohol:

- Raise awareness of illicit alcohol among consumers and the related threats to health and safety and the economic and social impact, especially the weakest sections of society.
- **Improve accessibility of legal products** at affordable prices and increase the density of legal outlets to stem demand for illicit products.
- **Avoid prohibition laws** as the benefits outweigh the negative consequences and are counterproductive to health, employment, and economic objectives.
- **Enforce laws and impose sanctions** and penalties at levels sufficient to deter criminal activity. Moreover, imposing administrative, criminal and civil penalties for illicit trade in alcohol including counterfeits should be made a priority.

- **Crack down on smuggling of foreign spirits and beer.** An import of foreign spirits and beer in India are heavily taxed. Customs duties can be as high as 150 per cent and combined with other federal/ state taxes can push the rate even higher depending on the state. This creates strong incentives for illicit operators to smuggle alcohol from neighboring countries or to produce counterfeit versions.
- **Rationalize tax policies and subsidies** to ensure that they do not incentivize illicit trade, smuggling, adulteration and theft. Tax policies need to account for various demand related factors, particularly the price and income factors that determine overall affordability of products.
- **Improve ethanol regulation and enforcement** to ensure that ethanol intended for industrial, pharmaceutical or other commercial purposes is not used in the production of alcoholic beverages.
- **Improve inter-agency cooperation** as responsibility for alcohol policy, regulations and their enforcement are shared by a number of ministries. This encompasses various entities including customs, tax agencies, health and regulatory organizations, as well as bodies addressing counterfeiting and illicit trade.

Conclusion

The pervasive issue of illicit alcohol in India is a complex interplay of socio-economic factors, weak governance, and a disregard for human life. The disproportionate impact on marginalized communities, particularly Dalits, underscores the urgent need for comprehensive and targeted interventions. While state governments view liquor as a lucrative revenue source, the human cost is immeasurable. The recurring tragedies highlight the failure of prohibition policies and the urgent need for a more nuanced approach. Addressing this crisis requires a multi-pronged strategy. It is imperative to strengthen law enforcement and impose stringent penalties on illicit liquor producers and distributors. Simultaneously, increasing the availability of legally produced and affordable alcohol can reduce the demand for illicit alternatives. Furthermore, investing in social welfare programs and economic development in marginalized communities can address the root causes of vulnerability to such harmful substances. Ultimately, the eradication of illicit alcohol is a complex challenge that demands a holistic approach involving government, civil society, and communities working in unison. Only then can India hope to break the cycle of tragedy and protect the lives of its most vulnerable citizens.

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