The deadly price of the world's biggest prohibition experiment

In the Indian state of Bihar, a black market for booze runs rampant, making millions — and killing people in the process.

By Meghna Bali and producer Ellie Grounds in Bihar, India

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Deep inside the Rajauli forest in India, the air is thick with the sweet and sour punch of yeast.

About a dozen policemen march in single file through the tangled undergrowth, dry leaves crunching under their boots in the blazing sun.

Suddenly, two massive drums loom into view, 1,000 litres each, bubbling with an illicit brew.

A mix of mahua flowers, raw cane sugar and a chemical accelerant, in days it would have been distilled into moonshine worth tens of thousands of dollars on the black market in Bihar, a state in India's east.

Over several hours, police unearth more so-called "country liquor" buried in pits and covertly stashed in giant plastic bags.

Rivers of pungent liquid are poured out on the ground, pooling in the dirt.

Soon the entire distillation rig is set on fire so it can't be used again, but it's only a matter of time until the next one pops up.

Bihar, one of India's largest states, has been under total prohibition for nearly a decade. About 130 million people — five times the population of Australia — have been legally forbidden from drinking alcohol since the law was introduced in 2016.

Bihar's liquor ban is on a scale unmatched anywhere in the world but, just like 1920s America, illegal bootleggers ensure that the liquor still flows. An underground smuggling racket worth tens of millions of dollars also operates throughout the state, requiring a massive police effort and harsh penalties to enforce the ban.

With an election looming later this year, voters will soon decide whether to call time on a massive social experiment critics say has had a raft of unintended consequences.

A few kilometres from the raid in the Rajauli Forest, police officers man a major checkpoint on Bihar's border with Jharkhand, one of three neighbouring states. This stretch of road is notorious for smuggling.

With dusk approaching, a blue Suzuki rolls to a halt, carrying four men home from a wedding over the border. Officers pop open the boot and quickly find four 180-millilitre bottles of Royal Challenge whisky hidden under the spare tyre. It's not moonshine but "Indian-made foreign liquor", as it's called in Bihar — domestically produced spirits manufactured legally in other parts of the country and smuggled into the state.

The father of the bride turns nervously to the police officer. "Will you lodge me in prison?" he asks. In Bihar, it's a fair question. Those caught with even small volumes of liquor can face harsh penalties ranging from a few days in jail to a few months. In the past, the laws were even more severe, with offenders sometimes jailed for years over what might seem minor infringements.

Within minutes, the group is detained and taken into a cramped room at the checkpoint where their fingerprints are taken.

Stopping booze from getting into Bihar requires constant vigilance from law enforcement agencies when alcohol is freely available in neighbouring states.

Checkpoints like this one are monitored 24 hours a day from a Prohibition Control and Command Centre in Bihar's state capital, Patna. In a sterile, high-security facility, officers watch hundreds of live camera feeds from 82 checkpoints across the state, tracking every vehicle that enters. Phones buzz from a tip-off hotline that receives more than 300 calls a day.

It's not just casual smugglers bringing a litre or two of alcohol across the border they're looking for. Bihar's thick jungles and sprawling farmland make ideal hiding places for deeply entrenched criminal networks to produce commercial quantities of bootleg liquor out of sight. To find them, a police drone team scours the terrain from above, ready to dispatch officers to raid the sites.

"The mafia in that area produces country liquor and supplies it," says station house officer Sanjeet Kumar, who led the raid in the Rajauli Forest. "Our mission is to destroy their operations."

So far, nearly 15 million litres of country liquor and 20 million litres of Indian-made foreign liquor have been seized in Bihar. But illegal production has proved almost impossible to stamp out.

An epidemic of domestic violence

Prohibition was the brainchild of Bihar's chief minister Nitish Kumar, the leader of the Janata Dal (United) party, who built his political success promising social transformation. Before he banned alcohol, Mr Kumar took the opposite approach, expanding liquor licences and encouraging alcohol sales to boost state revenues. It filled government coffers but fuelled another crisis — alcohol abuse surged and, with it, domestic violence.

Prior to prohibition, Bihar had one of the highest rates of domestic violence in India, with nearly 40 per cent of women reporting abuse. Prompted by a government program called Jeevika, women began mobilising to protest against domestic violence, arguing alcohol was the root cause. Many started to call for a total ban on alcohol.

"I was only 14 or 15 when I got married," says Baby Kumari, a domestic abuse survivor and prohibition campaigner. "My husband would waste every rupee he earned on alcohol and if I didn't give him money then we would fight and [he would] beat me up and snatch it."

In the lead-up to the 2015 state election, she and thousands of other women wielding sticks and brooms raided breweries, smashing bottles and shutting down operations. "We used to join hands and form a human chain, blocking roads as a form of protest," she says.

As the state election approached, Nitish Kumar met with the protesters and soon adopted an outright alcohol ban as his policy. Record female voter turnout propelled him to victory, and prohibition into law.

Men once drank everywhere in Bihar, Ms Kumari says, and it was "impossible for a normal person to walk on the streets without facing humiliation and abuse". "But after the ban, we no longer see that on the roads. People live happily."

A 2024 Lancet study suggested the ban had prevented 2.1 million cases of intimate partner violence.

Ms Kumari's husband Pawan is now sober. Together they have been able to build a home, start a small farming business and secure a future for their daughter. "Her dream is to be an engineer," Ms Kumari says. "She won't have to face the pain I have."

Triggering unintended consequences

Prohibition continues to enjoy overwhelming public support in Bihar, especially among women, but there have been unintended consequences too. Official records list about 300 poisoning deaths from illicit liquor since 2016, but some say the true toll is likely many times higher.

In December 2022, at least 70 people died after drinking a toxic batch of liquor in Bihar's Saran district. That mass poisoning was not an isolated event.

Outside a small hospital in Masrakh, a man stumbles out of a rickshaw, gripping his stomach and drawing ragged breaths. His white T-shirt is damp with sweat and his eyes are glassy and unfocused.

Inside, the doctors move fast, lifting him onto a bed and hooking him up to an IV. "Are you able to see?" one asks him. "How many fingers are these?" The man, whose name is Ajay, can only answer with a blind stare.

A man goes blind from drinking bootleg liquor in India. *(Foreign Correspondent)*

He was brought here after consuming country liquor laced with methanol, a toxic additive used by bootleggers as a cheap means of upping the potency. It's a deadly shortcut that kills dozens in Bihar each year. Just a single shot can be lethal.

The doctor eventually referred Ajay to an ICU in a larger hospital. This small health centre isn't equipped to help him avoid the worst possible outcome.

Alongside the health crisis, other problems have sprung up too. Criminal smuggling networks have flourished under the laws, with some exploiting weak spots in the state's ability to police its border to rake in vast sums of cash.

Bihar shares an 800km frontier with Nepal, where alcohol is legal, and Indian citizens can enter without a visa. The smuggling rings employ thousands of foot soldiers to ferry booze across the border.

One young smuggler, who agreed to speak to Foreign Correspondent on the condition of anonymity to protect himself, shows us how easy it is to do. It takes no more than 2 minutes to walk through open fields across the border to a Nepalese bottle shop.

There are no checkpoints or border guards to contend with on the way there or back. "I bring in 30 to 35 bottles every night," he says, "and I sell to 50 to 60 customers."

It's a simple operation, and lucrative. The scarcity of liquor has pumped up the price. Each bottle can sell for $20 in Bihar, twice what it costs the smuggler to buy in Nepal. In a good month he can pocket almost $2,000, a staggering income considering the average farmer here earns just $140.

The lure of fast cash has fed police corruption. At least 230 police officers have been dismissed for colluding with smugglers since prohibition began, according to former prohibition minister Sunil Kumar.

There are police on both sides of the Nepalese border, the smuggler says, but a bribe is normally enough to make them look the other way. "We always carry extra cash. Every time we go, we have to pay."

Can the law survive?

The courts, at least, are not turning a blind eye. Last October, Patna High Court Justice Purnendu Singh issued a scathing judgement criticising the law's failures and the rampant corruption it had fuelled. "The draconian provision[s] have become handy for the police, who are in tandem with the smugglers," Justice Singh wrote. "For them it means big money."

The judge noted the number of cases involving illegal liquor kingpins paled in comparison to those involving "the poor who consume liquor". Since the law came into effect, there have been over a million arrests, but most are first-time drinkers from poor backgrounds, who are now clogging Bihar's courts and jails.

For generations, some of the state's most marginalised have brewed country liquor to survive, but now they are criminals.

"I feel scared," says one woman, who asked to remain anonymous, while brewing liquor from mahua leaves in her home in a remote village.

She is from the Musahar community, one of the most ostracised groups in India's caste system.

Her hands are stained from the crude distillation process she carries out in her home, which produces just a litre of product every eight days, for a profit of $2.

She has seen others arrested in police raids but feels she has no choice but to continue. "I do not have food in my belly," she says. "What else can I do? Beg?"

Under mounting legal pressure, the government has watered down the prohibition law three times, but it's now facing growing calls to suspend it altogether amid claims it's fuelling a secondary public health crisis.

Days after Ajay was admitted to hospital, blind with alcohol poisoning, he was sent home to his wife, Lalita Devi. "He was fine till the morning," Ms Devi says. "Then suddenly I don't know what happened."

She had just finished dressing him when she noticed something was wrong. "My child came running and said, 'Mother, look what happened to father. He is staring with his eyes wide open.'"

Ajay had suddenly died. He was one of at least 40 other victims who died within days of each other after drinking from the same toxic batch.

Months later, Ms Devi, now a widow, has never received an official report on the cause of death. Opponents of prohibition say the state is reluctant to acknowledge the true number of alcohol poisoning deaths because it would mean admitting the law has failed.

Ms Devi believes a properly enforced ban could have saved her husband, but she no longer believes it's possible. "They say it has been banned but the people selling it won't stop," she says. "Alcohol will never be stopped in Bihar."

Several Indian states, including Haryana and Manipur, have scrapped similar alcohol bans over enforcement failures. Even Gujarat, the birthplace of Mahatma Gandhi, who championed India's temperance movement, has introduced drinking permits for non-residents after a longstanding, blanket prohibition.

But in Bihar, as the state heads to the polls this year, Nitish Kumar and his government remain defiant, insisting prohibition isn't going anywhere if re-elected. This time he has a fight on his hands. He'll be opposed by Prashant Kishor, a political strategist who is credited with helping Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi's rise to power and has promised to scrap prohibition within an hour if he's elected.

Backers of prohibition like Baby Kumari say that would be a disaster for Bihar. She remembers life before the ban, when women like her had no power, safety or hope.

Nearly a decade later, Ms Kumari still patrols her village, threatening abusive men with broomsticks and rolling pins. She's not waiting for the police to protect her.

"I tell my sisters as soon as the husbands come home drunk, whack them," she says with a laugh. But she isn't joking. "At first, they feel humiliated, wondering why all these women are standing up to them, but then the wives step in and help them understand," she says.

"In the end, they listen and realise the purpose behind it. Because of prohibition, many sisters now have happy lives."

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