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# Perfect Storm — The Policy Failure Behind India's Hooch Tragedies

 THE HINDU

2 June 2026

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# Perfect Storm — The Policy Failure Behind India's Hooch Tragedies

 **The Hindu**

2 June 2026

**GS2**
**GS3**

 Source: [ujyari.com](http://ujyari.com) — Free UPSC & State PCS Current Affairs


## INTERVIEW ANGLE

*"Prohibition in several Indian states has failed to stop alcohol consumption but succeeded in making it more dangerous. Is evidence-based regulation better than morality-driven prohibition?"*

*Hooch deaths recur because of methanol diversion, unaffordable legal alcohol, and enforcement that misses the upstream chain. A structural response — supply-chain monitoring, duty rationalisation, upstream enforcement — is the only lasting fix.*

## THE ARGUMENT IN ONE LINE

**Illicit liquor deaths are a policy failure, not just a law-enforcement failure** — address the methanol supply chain and the pricing distortion that makes bootleg liquor the only affordable option.

## WHY HOOCH IS DEADLY

- **Methanol** (methyl alcohol / methanol) = industrial solvent.
- **5-10 ml** → permanent blindness; **30+ ml** → fatal.
- Indistinguishable from ethanol (drinkable alcohol) by taste or smell.
- **Cheap, widely available** as industrial chemical — easily diverted to illicit distillers.

## THE POLICY ROOTS

CAUSE	DETAIL
<b>High excise taxes</b>	Make legal alcohol unaffordable for daily-wage workers; they turn to bootleggers
<b>Methanol regulation</b>	Weak track-and-trace on industrial methanol supply chain
<b>Enforcement gap</b>	Focuses on street-level retailers; misses the methanol-diversion network
<b>Political economy</b>	Bootlegger-official networks capture enforcement selectively

## CONSTITUTIONAL CONTEXT

- **Alcohol taxation = State List** (Entry 8, Seventh Schedule) — states decide tax rates.
- States derive significant revenue from excise on alcohol.
- Some states (Gujarat, Bihar) have **prohibition** — which pushes demand underground.

## UPSC RELEVANCE

PAPER	RELEVANCE
<b>GS2</b>	Governance — state excise policy; Seventh Schedule; prohibition; enforcement
<b>GS3</b>	Economy — excise taxation; supply-chain regulation
<b>Prelims</b>	Alcohol taxation = State List; methanol vs ethanol; state monopoly models (TASMAC, Beverages Corporation Kerala)

Sources: *The Hindu*

Source: Perfect Storm — The Policy Failure Behind India's Hooch Tragedies — Ujyari.com | Free UPSC & State PCS Editorial Analysis

### ● KEY ARGUMENTS AT A GLANCE

Recurring hooch tragedies stem from methanol diversion from industrial supplies, prohibitively high taxes on legal alcohol making it unaffordable for the poor, and enforcement that targets

only retailers rather than upstream suppliers — a structural policy rethink including rationalising excise levies and strengthening supply-chain monitoring is needed to break the cycle.

✓ **SUPPORTING**

- Illicit liquor is almost always made lethal by methanol contamination — methanol (industrial solvent) is cheap and widely available; even small doses (5-10 ml) cause permanent blindness; 30+ ml can be fatal; it is odourless and tasteless, making adulteration easy to conceal.
- India's excise taxation on alcohol is among the world's highest as a proportion of retail price in some states, pricing legal spirits out of reach for daily-wage workers who then turn to bootleggers; the policy creates the very market it ostensibly controls.
- Enforcement routinely arrests street vendors while the methanol-diversion chain (industrial suppliers → distributors → bootleggers) remains largely intact due to political and economic capture.

⚠ **COUNTER**

Some states argue that liberalising alcohol access will increase alcoholism and associated social harms; Kerala and Tamil Nadu's state-monopoly systems show that managed distribution can reduce (though not eliminate) adulteration.

→ **WAY FORWARD**

Track and control industrial methanol supply chains through electronic manifests and rapid testing; rationalise state excise duties to make legal low-cost alcohol competitive with illicit alternatives; shift enforcement up the supply chain; examine state liquor monopoly models; invest in de-addiction as a public health measure.

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**MAINS ANSWER FRAMEWORK**

**QUESTION**

*"India's recurring hooch tragedies are a governance failure, not merely a law-enforcement failure." Critically examine and suggest structural policy reforms. (250 words)*

**INTRODUCTION**

India's recurring hooch tragedies — from Uttar Pradesh to Tamil Nadu to Gujarat — share the same forensic signature: methanol contamination in cheap, illicit liquor consumed by daily-wage workers who cannot afford legally taxed spirits. Each tragedy is followed by arrests, suspensions, and assurances; the next one is a matter of months away.

**BODY**

Methanol (industrial alcohol, methyl alcohol) is the proximate cause of hooch deaths. It is widely available as an industrial solvent, cheap, and difficult to distinguish from ethanol by smell or taste. A supply chain that allows methanol to be diverted from industrial use into food-grade channels is a regulatory failure. The distal cause is fiscal: state excise duties on alcohol — a significant revenue source for states under the Constitution's Seventh Schedule (alcohol taxation is a state subject) — have made legal alcohol unaffordable for the lowest income quintile.

When a day-labourer's daily wage cannot cover a regulated quarter of spirits, the bootlegger wins. Enforcement then becomes a cat-and-mouse exercise concentrated on visible street-level sales, leaving the methanol-diversion upstream network intact.

States with government-controlled liquor retail (Kerala's Beverages Corporation, Tamil Nadu's TASMALCO) have reduced adulteration risk by eliminating the incentive to cut costs with methanol — though neither has eliminated the problem entirely. The policy prescription is multi-pronged: electronic track-and-trace on methanol from production to end-use; duty rationalisation at the lower price points; upstream enforcement; and public de-addiction infrastructure.

**CONCLUSION**

Hooch tragedies are not inevitable — they are the predictable outcome of a policy that taxes legal alcohol out of reach for the poor, under-regulates industrial methanol, and enforces only at the visible end of a long supply chain. A structural response — not just a post-tragedy crackdown — is what prevents the next tragedy.


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