

INTOXICATION AS SIN AND PLEASURE IN CLASSICAL SANSKRIT LITERATURE

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Abstract:

This paper examines the complex and often contradictory representations of intoxication in classical Sanskrit literature, where drinking is situated simultaneously within the moral discourse of sin and the experiential domain of pleasure. Rather than treating intoxication merely as a pathological or ethical deviation, the study approaches it as a culturally embedded practice shaped by social hierarchy, ritual norms, leisure practices, and textual genres. Drawing upon a wide range of sources, Dharmaśāstras, Vedic and post-Vedic texts, the Kāma-sūtra, Ayurvedic literature, epics such as the Rāmāyaṇa and Mahābhārata, and classical kāvya, the paper highlights the plurality of attitudes towards alcohol and other intoxicants in ancient India. The analysis demonstrates that normative texts, especially the Dharmaśāstras, largely frame intoxication as a moral transgression, closely linked to varṇa order, gender discipline, and social control. At the same time, literary, medical, and erotic texts present a more nuanced picture in which intoxication appears as a source of pleasure, sociability, aesthetic refinement, ritual efficacy, and even therapeutic benefit when consumed in moderation. The paper argues that this tension reflects a deeper discrepancy between prescriptive ideals and lived practices, suggesting the coexistence of multiple drinking cultures within the same society. **By engaging with concepts such as plural culture,**

leisure, and the distinction between ritual, recreational, and excessive consumption, the study challenges any monolithic understanding of ancient Indian attitudes towards alcohol. Ultimately, the paper situates intoxication as a lens through which broader questions of morality, pleasure, social order, and cultural negotiation in classical Sanskrit literature can be critically understood.

Keywords:

Intoxication; Sanskrit Literature; Sin and Pleasure; Cultural History

Intoxication is state of alteration of mind or consciousness through psychoactive substances (natural as well as synthetic).^{xxiii} Even before advent of agriculture, almost all human cultures had discovered and used substances that altered the state of human consciousness. Intoxicants, which are psychoactive substances, are and have always been a part of every human culture. Because the effects of these substances have caused moral panic in many modern cultures, it has gained enormous popularity in some academic fields, particularly psychology and clinical studies. Nonetheless these disciplines have treated intoxication as a case of individual pathology ignoring the various historical and cultural forces that shape intake of intoxicants by human. The modern state has always used clinical studies in its favor to control and regulate people's life. Very few historical studies of pre-modern societies have been done in this field. There is a significant dearth of scholarship on the history of drunkenness in ancient India. It is only recently that some of the most thorough research on alcohol usage in ancient India has been brought to the forefront of historical studies. Whether it's D. N. Jha's newly edited volume *Drink of Immortality: Essays on Distillation and Alcohol Use in Ancient India*(2020)^{xxiii} or James McHugh's *An Unholy Brew: Alcohol in Indian History and Religions* (2021).^{xxiii} Prior to these books, there was no monograph devoted entirely to the history of intoxication in ancient India. However, we do have specific discussions on these subjects in which Soma takes centre stage, dating all the way back to the nineteenth century.

According to Max Mueller, there was no common root for wine or liquor in the Aryan languages, as a result, he concluded that the Aryans, "if not entirely unaware of the use of alcohol, surely used it sparingly" in their ancestral homelands. According to Mueller, however, drinking (liquors) became the Aryan race's greatest sin, second only to gambling.^{xxiii} But should the discourse around intoxication be limited only in context of sin in ancient India. Sin and pleasure are very well connected. Pleasure is always in suspicion of becoming a sin. Both coexist simultaneously in same cultural framework. Peter Burke argument about the existence of sub-cultures or plural culture in a society is very important in this regard. He argues that cultures are interdependent on each other and exist in the same society. This argument can be extended to culture of drinking as there is no homogeneous culture but plural culture of drinking at any point of time.^{xxiii} Another important issue to be considered is the question of discrepancies between discourse and practice i.e., discrepancy between the idealized version of life envisioned in normative texts and life as lived in practice.

Intoxication is depicted in a variety of ways in *Dharmaśāstra*. One way to look at it is as the process of social identity formation around intoxicating substances. *Surā*, an alcoholic beverage prepared from fermented grains or sugarcane, is one of the beverages described in the *Dharmaśāstras*. *Surā*'s origins as an intoxicating alcoholic beverage may be traced all the way back to the *Ṛgveda*, where it is contrasted with *Soma*, a drink enjoyed primarily by Brahmins. According to the *Ṛgveda*, *Surā* was consumed by the other three *Varna*, namely *Kṣatriyas*, *vaisyas*, and *Śūdra*. In later vedic literature, Brahmins are permitted to take *surā* only once, following the *Sautrāmaṇi* ceremony. *Surā* appears to have been a generic name for all types of alcoholic beverages in the later Vedic period. Even in *Kauṭilya's Arthaśātra*, the superintendent of all sorts of liquor is referred to as *surādhayksha*. However, the *surā*'s use in *Dharmaśāstric* literature has shifted dramatically. To begin, it was not used as a generic term for all alcoholic beverages, and to further confine its use to *Śūdra*.

Surā was not permitted to the upper three *varnas* called as *dvija* (twice born). The manufacture, sale, or consumption of *surā* by *dvija* or twice born men was classified as *Mahapātaka* (great sin).^{xxiii} Intoxication was strongly denounced in the case of women. Manu presents a variety of grounds for replacing a wife: 'A wife who consumes alcohol, is dishonest, or is rebellious, unwell, violent, or frivolous with money may be replaced at any moment.'^{xxiii} However, emphasis was placed on the fact that the conduct was committed purposefully or not. If the act of drinking was deliberate or habitual, punitive measures such as drinking hot cow urine till death or drinking hot liquor until death are advised.^{xxiii} However, if the deed was inadvertent, it could be expiated via appropriate *Prāyaścitta* (penance).^{xxiii} Similarly, these writings place a premium on whether an act was committed in secret or in public. Secret acts of crime were prescribed secret penances to atone for the transgression that were not excessively severe. And openly committed crimes were punished with public penance, which were extremely severe and were prescribed by an assembly of knowledgeable Brahmins (*parsad*).^{xxiii} This demonstrates the Brahmin community's fear of publicly breaching a law. Even *Śūdras* who abstained from drinking were dignified. A phrase that appears in later *Smṛtis* is *saccsudra*, which Kane translates as well-behaved *Śūdra* who served *dvijas* and had abstained from meat consumption, drinking, and selling liquor.^{xxiii}

One of the verses from the *Mānava Dharmaśāstra* demonstrates how Manu admits the propriety of liquor consumption while demonstrating that moral superiority is demonstrated by abstaining from it. The stanza reads as follows: "There is no wrong in eating meat, drinking liquor, or having sex; these are all natural behaviors of creatures." However, abstaining from such action reaps enormous rewards."^{xxiii} This verse is strange because a scripture that states that people have inborn proclivities, or (*svabhava*), according to the *varna* into which they are born is alluding to a natural tendency or *prakriti* that is shared by all beings. This

demonstrates unequivocally that their literature served as a model for religious law, not as the law itself.

Jurgen Habermas argues that leisure behaviours can help us understand the conflicting pressures of instrumental control and individual will.^{xxiii} The question of will or conscience in context of leisure remains a valid issue even in ancient times. One cannot consider every act of consumption as a pleasurable experience. The use of intoxicants in a ritual is very different from recreation, which is again very different from excessive consumption or alcoholism. The *nāgaraka* in the *Kāma-sūtra* seems to be ideal for this analysis of pleasurable experience.

Yashodhara's Jayamangala a commentary on *Vātsyāyana Kāma-sūtra* states that The two types of sexual activity are primary and secondary. Female bodies form its foundation with wine, ornaments and other decorative items as its auxiliary limbs.^{xxiii} The god of erotic love *kāma-deva* is called *madana* (intoxicator) in the *Purāṇic* literature.^{xxiii} The *Kāma-sūtra* deals with duties daily routine of a (*nāgaraka*) man about town; some are his daily duties, and some his occasional duties. *nāgaraka*, is defined as one who lives in a city who has finished his education, and follows a profession, or has some independent means of livelihood. Among his daily duties, wine finds no place, but we find among his occasional duties, he indulged sometime with his friends in drinking. The drinking party, met in each other's houses or gardens. They drank various kinds of alcoholic liquor viz., *Madhvi*, *Maireya Surā*, *Āsava*; etc. These wines, were mixed with various kinds of salts, fruits, vegetables and condiments of bitter, hot, sour tastes, offering these to one another.^{xxiii} In the gardens, in addition to drinking, they indulged in various kinds of games, such as cock or ram fight or gambling, or game of chance. Often they drank wine freely. They enjoyed life fully, of course in their own way, is evident from the 11 different kinds of games mentioned here. *Vātsyāyana* a deals exhaustively about this too. In book IV we find a chapter on the duties of a wife. We see the daily routine of a faithful wife,

feelings of euphoria, vigour, contentment, corpulence, health, and power of sexual desire. It goes on to say that Wine improves taste and appetite, is cordial, helps with voice and complexion, is saturating, bulk-promoting, strength-promoting, and relieves fear, sadness, and exertion. It also says that Wine is hypnotic for the sleepless, elevates the voice of the dumb, awakens those who oversleep, and eliminates constipation in those who suffer from it.^{xxiii} Stimulating beverage promotes happiness and increases virility (*pauruṣam*) alcohol plays a significant role: sensual pleasure and erotica. One Sanskrit text on drinking and erotica begins: ‘The nectar-like fluid extracted from grapes. It is known as *kadambara*, and it stimulates the penis. It is also incredibly beneficial to the arts [found] in erotica works, it is appropriate for stimulating Mara [that is to say, *kāma*, the god of love], and eminently bestows talent.’^{xxiii}

In *Rāmāyana* too we find evidence of alcoholic consumption as a source of pleasure . We see the great hermits and sage, Vasiṣṭha honouring Viśvāmitra, with many kinds of foods and alcoholic drinks. Sabala, the wish-fulfilling cow, produced as much as anyone desired.. "She produced sugar cane and sweets, as well as dried grain and wines "outstanding liquors, expensive beverages, and a wide variety of meals."^{xxiii} Rāma momentarily withdraws from public life at the court in order to pursue more personal interests. In the backdrop of *Uttarakāṇḍa* , the image is particularly remarkable. Rāma is now enjoying the pleasures of wedded life. With its intricate design description of the *aśoka* grove, wine, and dancing women.^{xxiii} We locate a lengthy description of the *Rākṣasa*' drinking garden and select a few passages—"Here golden jars, there crystal and ruby goblets full of wine, females are laying dishevelled by wine."^{xxiii} In one section when drinking is condemned in the book which echoes *Dharmaśāstra* position , Lakṣmaṇa admonishes Sugrīva, the monkey king, as follows: "Those who are inebriated should not partake in it. In search of religion (or duty greater than wealth) or love for all of these are destroyed by alcohol" ^{xxiii} Almost all the chief characters in the *Mahābhārata* were addicted to strong drinks. Ladies of high families too

consumed intoxicating beverages. It mentions about a pleasure ground where both Subhadrā and Draupadī lose their senses and gave their expensive ornaments to other women. This place was filled up with beautiful music, drums and flute.^{xxiii}

Drinking intoxicants, an activity connected with sensual pleasure and leisure sociability is also mentioned in literary and artistic literature. For example, in the *Buddhacharita*, an early lyrical work by *Aśvaghōṣa* recounting the Buddha's life, there is a scene in which the Buddha visits a pleasure garden. His father thinks that the sensual dalliances of the women in that location would distract him from his newfound awareness of old age, disease, and death. The women in the pleasure garden are inebriated, flirtatious, and perplexed.^{xxiii} Kālidāsa too described the drinking of wine by women in his poems, suggesting that intoxication lends them a special charm for instance in his play *Mālavikāgnimitram* Queen Irāvātī comes to see the King having drunk wine, which was believed to give her added beauty.^{xxiii} In the *Raghuvansam* to the soldiers are relieved from the fatigue of victory through the use of wine.^{xxiii} In the same text the youth of King Sudarṣana is described as "Thereafter, he entered youth, the age of luxury and pleasure, a wine enjoyable with women, a flower on the tree of passion which does bud and bloom with love, and the whole body pervades."^{xxiii}

All Greek historians mention Dionysus, their wine God, visiting India at some point in the past. He subdued the people, constructed towns, and established rules for them. He introduced wine to the Indians, as he had done to the Greeks, and taught them how to sow the soil. He provided the seeds. He began by yoking the oxen to the plough. According to Magasthenes, "Men of great learning among the Indians inform us that in the farthest reaches of the country, Dionysus visited India during the remote time period".^{xxiii} This has been supported by the studies of Martha L Carter on *Dionysiac* aspects of *Kuṣāna* art.^{xxiii} This can be particularly seen in north-western part of the subcontinent. Harry Falk has shown its impact on Buddhist monasteries of that region and has also argued that the consumption of young

wine was associated with the adoration of *Pāñcika* and *Hārītī*, which is present as statues inside the monastery, which were displayed as well as drinking or holding a grape. Almost all panellists from the wine-making or wine-drinking industries. There is also one moment in which a man approaches a woman in a sensual mood the age-old and non-Buddhist wine-making celebration was so appealing that Buddhists took over the organisation monasteries. Buddhist communities further east, like Sanghol and Mathura, also embraced it.^{xxiii}

There are numerous examples of alcoholism in the Sanskrit literature. One of the most famous one is from *Mahābhārata*. The legendary tribe of *Yadavas* was so hooked to alcohol that their chief had to declare that anyone producing wine within the city shall face the death penalty. However, the precaution did not save them, and the entire tribe was decimated by a family feud sparked by drinking. This resulted in the deaths of approximately 500,000 *Yadavas*.^{xxiii} Similarly, in the *Mattavilasa* of Someśvara we see the Kāpālika was out of his senses due to intoxication.^{xxiii} It seems that the issue of alcoholism was taken seriously both by dharma literature as well as *ayurvedic* literature from a physiological point of view. While the dharma texts characterized it as a kind of sin, the *ayurvedic* treaties dealt with it from a practical scientific approach.

The 24th chapter from *Chikitsāsthāna* of *Caraka Saṃhitā* consist a detailed discussion on alcoholism and its cure. The term used for alcoholism is *madatyaya*.^{xxiii} It talks about both merits and demerits of drinking which depends upon time and quantity of drinking.

Wine made of many ingredients possessed of many properties and actions and characterised by intoxication has both merits and demerits. It is like nectar for that who drinks according to prescribed method, in proper quantity, in proper time, with wholesome food, according to strength and with exhilaration.

On the contrary, it acts like poison for that who indulges in

drinking unwholesome wine whatever is presented observing rough regimens and physical exertion constantly.^{xxiii}

These Classical Sanskrit texts demonstrate a variety of intoxicating tendencies. While some texts, such as the *Dharmasāstras*, emphasise complete abstinence, others, such as the *Rāmāyana* and *Mahābhārata*, are ambivalent about intoxication. On the other hand, some texts, such as *Arhtśāstra* the and the *Caraka-Saṃhitā*, can be considered semi-permissive (allowable with certain conditions) when it comes to the consumption of alcoholic beverages.

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