Drinking habits in ancient India

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ABSTRACT

Consumption of one or other form of intoxicating substances has been present throughout the history of the world. This article traces such use in the Indian subcontinent, both in North and South India. References to the use of intoxicants are to be found in the Vedas, the Great Epics, and the ancient Tamil literature.

Key words: Aryans, Ephedra, fly agaric, Kural, liquor, Sangam, soma, Tamil, Vedas

INTRODUCTION

Mahatma Gandhi, after his return to India in 1913, started his political career for freedom from the foreign yoke. He initially paid much attention to the amelioration of the poor, especially in the villages, stressing the importance of Panchayat Raj and the abolition of drink evil, and the production of khadi and the use of charka. Many of the social problems were discussed in his Young India (published from 1913 to 1932). Many of the articles relating to “the drink and drug evil in India” were written by the assistant editor Mr. Badrul Hassan, which were later published as a book by Ganesh and Co., Madras in 1922.[1] In the words of the Mahatma, the information given in this book will definitely help the reformer who is bent upon ridding India of the double evil of drink and drug. In the introduction to the book, Mr. Hassan has quoted Prof. Debove and Dr. Faisans.[2]

The habit of drinking leads to neglect of family, forgetfulness of all social duty, distaste for work, theft and crime. It leads at the very least to the hospital for alcoholism causes a great variety of diseases, many of them most deadly.

Alcoholism is one of the most frightful scourges – whether it is regarded from the point of view of the health of the individual, of the existence of the family, or of the future of the country.”

RIG VEDA

Of all the multifaceted problems in India, the drink evil is the oldest one and indeed steeped in antiquity. The discovery and art of manufacturing some kind of intoxicating liquor are a corollary of settled habits and wandering savages have generally been found ignorant of it.[3] This proves the fact that we had a settled and advanced civilization. Such habits were prevalent in the earlier Egyptian, Babylonian, and Greco-Roman civilizations. It may be stated that, except for gambling, the greatest vice of the Aryan race in India was drinking.[4] Rig Veda is the most ancient and extant literature available to us on this subject. According to historians, both Western and Indian, these hymns in the praise of the various Aryan gods such as Indra, Varuna, and Agni were collated by various sages such as Angiras, Brihaspati, Bharadvaja,
Thoughtful the necessity of repressing this growing habit in spirituous liquors, perhaps to excess, but the evil.

At the beginning of our history, the Aryans indulged in soma, the liquor, which was afterward incorporated with the worship of soma – the moon god. Elaborate rules for the preparation of this intoxicating liquor are still to be found, which show the hold that the liquor had on the elite – if not the common people.

Preparation of soma
The soma used in India is thought to be the Asclepia acida or Sarcostemma viminale, a plant of the family of milk-weeds. It is the juice of this plant which, duly pressed out, mixed with other ingredients and fermented, yields the intoxicating sacrificial beverage. The process is alluded to in the Rig Veda innumerable times with most precise directions.

“The plant, collected by moonlight on the mountains, plucked up by the roots, is carried on a car drawn by two goats to the place of sacrifice; where a spot covered with grass and twigs is prepared, crushed between stones by the priests and is then thrown, stalks as well as juice, sprinkled with water, in a sieve of loose woolen weaving; whence, after the whole had been further pressed by hand, the juice trickles into a vessel or kettle which is placed beneath. The fluid is then mixed with sweet milk and sour milk or curds, with wheaten and other flour and brought into a state of fermentation; it is then offered thrice a day and partaken of by the Brahmins … it was unquestionably the greatest and holiest offering of the ancient Indian worship … the Gods drink of the offered beverage; they long for it; the seller by having recourse of law, turned his attention to rooting out the evil.

He laid down strict rules for the prevention of drinking. He held that drinking was the most pernicious of the king’s vices. He counseled the king instantly to banish the sellers of soma, and he advised the drinker on the forehead with the sign of the tavern (i.e., wine-cup).

For a twice-born, drinking was a mortal sin. If he did not perform the prescribed penances, he was “excluded from all fellowship at meals, all sacrifices, instruction, matrimonial alliances, and all religious duties.” He was forthwith to be cast off by his “paternal and maternal relations, and receive neither compassion nor salvation.” Nor were the penances less rigorous as only death could put an end to them.

He denounced, too, such women who so far forgot themselves as to drink. It was an offense in itself to share her couch; she “might any time be superseded;” no libations were to be performed at her death; and in her next birth, she would descend into the body of a jackal or some equally low animal or would be born in hell.

The other Vedas
The Rig Veda Samhita has a hymn which shows that “soma, the offering-beverage. The process is alluded to in the Rig Veda innumerable times with most precise directions.

In this connection, it is useful to mention the views of Lader, who quotes the opinion of Wasson, who concluded that the best candidate for soma was the fly agaric fungus Amanita muscaria. However, Mahdi Hassan says that soma must have been the Ephedra plant.

The other Vedas
At the beginning of our history, the Aryans indulged in spirituous liquors, perhaps to excess, but the evil consequences and baneful results demonstrated to the thoughtful the necessity of repressing this growing habit and brought about a revulsion of feeling, so that the later Vedas prohibited the use of spirits for the gratification of the senses, saying “wine is unfit to be drunk, unfit to be given, unfit to be accepted.” A step in the right direction was thus taken, and this is the first example in the history where the right of drinking alcoholic liquor was disputed and denied.

The age of manu
In the later, Vedic period a compromise was affected by sanctioning the use of liquors at ceremonial and sacrificial functions only, while condemning its common usage. In the age of Manu (the period around 500 BC), the thoughtful sage knowing full well that for an evil to be resisted, it must be abolished and not confined, turned his attention to it.

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Nor did Manu content himself by appealing to the fears of the people; he laid down proper rules and observances for practice in this world. For instance, food given by intoxicated persons could not be eaten by a Snataka (Brahman, who has completed his studentship) money due for spirituous liquors could not be realized by the seller by having recourse of law; and even a seller of soma was to be avoided at sacrifices offered to the gods, and food given to a seller of soma became ordure.

It would seem, therefore, that while previous moralists had allowed the use of liquor for religious purposes, Manu was opposed even to this indulgence and was determined to put it down. He, therefore, put restrictions in the way of selling soma by regarding a seller as a low person, and in the way of drinking by laying it down that “he who may possess food sufficient to maintain those dependent on him during 3 years or more than, that is, worthy to drink soma juice,” but a twice-born who had less “did not derive any benefit from drinking the soma juice though he may have formerly drunk it.”

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THE GREAT EPICS

Both in Mahabharata and Ramayana one finds frequent references to drinking, which show that the habit was not uncommon, and the inquisitive one may find that “Baladev and Krishna and Arjuna indulged in drink in the company of their wives, daughters, and sisters,”[27] that the sage Bharadvaja offered in his hospitality wine to Bharata and his soldiers,[28] and that Sita while crossing the Yamuna offered that Goddess “a 1000 jars of arrack and cooked flesh-meat.” However, there are no references to any woman drinking, and the probability is that by that time drinking was never indulged in by women of rank at least and only on rare occasions by women in general.

TAMIL LAND

It is interesting to study how the ancient Tamils used the intoxicants. Much of this information can be gleaned from the ancient Tamil literature of the Sangam age. They are various anthologies (புத்து தைலம், நறவு எமக்கீ) belonging to the 2nd century AD. These drinks are called kal (கால்) and given various names pizhi (பிழி), theral (தைலார்), ariyal (அறியல்), naravu (நராவு), and mattu (மாடு) depending upon how they are produced, by squeezing, filtering, etc. The varieties are those obtained from the coconut tree, palmyra palm, and date palm; some varieties were obtained from the fruits like jackfruit; some from honey; and others were “manufactured” from rice and other cereals. It is not possible to decide how intoxicating they were some must have been very potent indeed; in the words of the poets, it was like the scorpion sting and snake bite.

According to researchers like Prahlada,[29] the drink was part of the cuisine and freely used by both sexes and all classes of people. Many a time the drinks were offered during social intercourse. The habit, needless to say, was prevalent in the courts of the royalties and various chieftains and was freely indulged in by the royalty and the various visitors and guests.

Various incidents from the literature could be quoted, and the following are some of them: The famous epitaph of Avvaiyar on the death of her benefactor Adhiyaman Neduman Anji. The mutual respect is evident here. It may be mentioned that the friendship between the famous chieftain and the great poetess is a legendary one, and most of us are aware of the historic presentation of the gooseberry fruit which confers longevity and health.

In another instance, Avvaiyar suggests that the king first gives the drink to the valiant fighter and then drink the remainder:

இன்றிய குருவையால், குடையால்.
(இலக்கி, 290)

In another reference, a courageous and bold warrior refers to the drink in the form of kalangal (காலங்கல், probably a cocktail, superior in quality) offered to him by the king, who himself takes the inferior, less potent, and plain theral (தைலார்):

நாளையில் கயல்கை காலங்கல் அரியல் தைலார், நராவு தைலார்.
(இலக்கி, 298)

In the following incident, the “dutiful” daughter offers cooked virah fish (அரியல்) to her father who is intoxicated with the drink theral (தைலார்):

வாய் உறுக்கும் புறம் உன்பை தைலார் தைலார்நது தபாருள்தைலார்.
(இலக்கி, 216)

Another notable reference is to the import of wine from Greece to the Tamil kingdom and is referred by the famous Nakkeerar in the poem:

போர் தைலார் கால் கோவில்லாம் தைலார்.
(இலக்கி, 56)

It is but natural that so much importance is given to the wine from Greece, the birthplace of Bacchus (Dionysus), the god of wine, the son of Jupiter and Semele. He represents not only the intoxicating power of wine, but also its social and benefical influences likewise so that he is viewed as the promoter of civilization, and a lawgiver and lover of peace.[30] It must be noted here that preparation of wine by fermenting grapes was not known in India at that time, hence there must have been excitement over the new flavor of drink from the West.

It is not quite clear when the evil aspects were recognized and frowned upon by the educated and the social reformers. The most prominent protagonist of abstinence and powerfully expressed is Thiruvalluvar in his Thirukkural (திருக்குறள்) in the chapter on Kalunnaamai (காலுணநாமம்).

உண்டு போர் கத்து எமக்கீத்தானபடுத்து கோட்டை கோதல் கோட்டை — With the gift of goods who self-oblivion buys,

ஹீரமையுந்த வானை — Is ignorant of all that man should prize.

To pay and drink and lose the sense is nothing but rank ignorance. (925)
Is he who strives to sober
— What in thy mind lies hid
shall soon be known abroad.

Let (the drunkard) give up saying “I have never drunk;” (for) the moment (he drinks) he will simply betray his former attempt to conceal. (928)

Reasoning with a drunkard is like going under water with a torch in search of a drowned man. (929)

Does he not think, “such is my folly in my revelries?”

When (a drunkard) who is sober sees one who is not, it looks as if he remembered not the evil effects of his (own) drink. (930)

The views on abstinence and vegetarianism have been prompted by the teachings of Mahavira and Buddha. The repercussions are to be found also in the Manusmriti. At present, the political scene of India is, unfortunately, void of social reformers such as Gandhiji and Rajaji. The politicians are interested in running the government out of the excise duty collected from the sale of alcoholic drinks. Social reformers, religious leaders, and medical professionals should carry the banner.

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