



Alcoholic Beverages in Ancient India: Production, Consumption, Trade and Regulation

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ABSTRACT

Alcoholic beverages were integral to the economic, social and cultural life of ancient India. This article argues that alcohol was not merely a recreational substance but a significant product, produced using specialised methods, organised production, and systems of social and administrative regulation. Using a historical, philological, and comparative approach, the study examines the Arthashastra, Manusmriti, Kamasutra, Caraka-samhita, Susruta-samhita, and Buddhist and Jain texts. Particular attention is given to terms such as sura, madya, asava, arista, maireya, and madhu, their meanings in different textual contexts, and the ingredients and methods used in preparing various beverages, including grains, rice, sugarcane products, fruits, flowers, honey, spices, and fermenting agents such as surabija. The Arthashastra provides especially valuable evidence of the organisation of liquor production, storage, distribution, sale, taxation, and regulation under the Suradhyaksha (Superintendent of Liquor), demonstrating the economic and administrative significance of alcohol. Other sources reveal its uses in household and cultural practices, while also reflecting differing moral and religious attitudes towards drinking. Taken together, the study demonstrates that alcohol occupied a complex and multidimensional position in ancient India. It was also a product of technological knowledge, a traded commodity, a source of state revenue, and a subject of moral and administrative regulation. It therefore provides valuable insight into how production, the economy, social practice, and state authority were interconnected in ancient Indian society.

Keywords: Arthashastra, Suradhyaksha, Liquor production, Fermentation, Trade and taxation, social practices, Moral regulations, Sura, Madya, Asava

Introduction

Alcoholic drinks were known in ancient India and are mentioned across a range of Sanskrit, Buddhist, Jain, and other literary sources. These references indicate that drinking was part of various aspects of social and cultural life, although attitudes towards it were not uniform. Some legal and religious texts impose restrictions on drinking, while other literary sources present it as part of everyday social practices. The terminology for alcoholic beverages is also varied. Terms such as sura, madya, asava, arista, maireya, and madhu appear in different contexts, but their meanings cannot always be taken as direct equivalents of modern categories such as beer, wine, or spirits. Their interpretation therefore requires attention to the historical context in which they were used (McHugh, 2021).

Among the available sources, Kautilya's Arthashastra offers valuable evidence of the organisation of liquor production, storage, distribution, sale, taxation, and regulation under the Suradhyaksha (Superintendent of Liquor), underscoring the economic and administrative significance of alcohol. When read alongside the Manusmriti, Kamasutra, and Buddhist and Jain sources, these references provide a broader picture of how alcoholic beverages were understood and regulated in ancient Indian society. Rather than treating the terms and practices through modern categories, the study reads them within their own textual and historical contexts.

Methodology

This study employs historical, descriptive, and textual analysis to examine alcoholic beverages in ancient India. The historical method situates the production and use of alcohol within the wider social, economic, religious, and administrative context of the period. The descriptive method presents the different types of alcoholic beverages, their ingredients, preparation, fermentation, production, storage, trade, taxation, and regulation. Textual analysis underpins the study, with Kautilya's Arthashastra as the principal source and the Manusmriti, Kamasutra, and selected Buddhist and Jain texts as supporting sources. Particular attention is given to terms such as sura, madya, asava, arista, maireya, and madhu, examining their meanings in the contexts in which they occur. Relevant historical scholarship is also consulted to clarify the interpretation of the textual evidence, especially where scholars differ in their understanding of liquor production and distillation. The study therefore remains grounded in the available primary sources while clearly distinguishing what the texts state from later scholarly interpretations.

Research Objectives

The study aims to examine the terminology, ingredients and fermentation techniques associated with alcoholic beverages in ancient India. It also seeks to explore the state's role in regulating liquor production, distribution, taxation, and trade, and to assess the economic significance of these activities. In addition, the study examines the social and religious attitudes towards alcohol and its place in different aspects of ancient Indian society.

Terminology, Ingredients and Fermentation Techniques

Ancient Indian texts use several terms for alcoholic beverages, including sura, madya, asava, arista, maireya, and madhu. Their meanings vary across texts and contexts, and they do not always correspond directly to modern categories such as beer, wine, or spirits. The Arthashastra is particularly valuable because it discusses different preparations, ingredients and forms of regulation. The Manusmriti and Kamasutra further show the use of this varied terminology in normative and social contexts.

Sura

Sura is commonly associated with grain-based alcoholic liquor. The Arthashastra discusses its preparation and regulation and refers to different varieties and ingredients. The Manusmriti describes sura as a grain product and mentions three varieties gaudi, paisti, and madhvi. While the Manusmriti focuses on restrictions surrounding its consumption, the Arthashastra presents it as a

regulated commodity.

Madya

Madya is generally used in a broader sense for alcoholic or intoxicating drink rather than for one specific preparation. It appears in different textual settings, including discussions of drinking in the Manusmriti. Its wider usage distinguishes it from more specific beverage names such as sura and maireya.

Asava and Arista

Asava and arista occur in the Arthashastra among several named alcoholic preparations. Asava is associated with ingredients such as fruits and flowers, while the available evidence for arista is less detailed in this context. Their inclusion in the liquor section indicates that the text recognised several distinct preparations rather than a single type of alcoholic drink.

Maireya

Maireya is described as a preparation made with molasses or jaggery, along with other ingredients, including spices, fruits, and flowers in some cases. Its composition illustrates the variety of ingredients used in preparing alcoholic beverages. The Kamasutra also mentions maireya alongside sura, asava, and grape wine, showing its presence in social and domestic contexts.

Madhu

In the Arthashastra, madhu is associated with grape wine and appears primarily in relation to its varieties and circulation. The text refers to Kapisayana and Harahuraka, names that appear to have regional associations, although the precise identification of the latter remains uncertain. This evidence points to the movement and availability of grape-based alcoholic drinks beyond locally prepared liquor.

Administration and Regulation of Liquor

The Arthashastra presents liquor production and distribution as an organised activity under state supervision. Production was carried out in supervised establishments, while the sale of liquor was restricted to designated places. The Superintendent of Liquor (Suradhyaksha) played a key role in overseeing these activities and maintaining records of production, sales, and revenue. The regulation of storage and distribution further linked the liquor trade to broader systems of agriculture, commerce, taxation, and administration. This suggests that liquor was not treated merely as a household or local product but as an economic activity requiring organised management and official oversight.

Administrative control also extended beyond production and commercial transactions to the conduct of drinking establishments. The Arthashastra refers to licensing, record-keeping, surveillance, and penalties as means of ensuring compliance with state regulations. The text refers to a ten-per cent duty and penalties that could reach 600 panas.

The authorities were therefore concerned not only with controlling the economic value of liquor and securing revenue but also with monitoring the places where it was consumed and maintaining public order. Through these measures, the state sought to regulate the entire process from production and storage to distribution, sale, and consumption, making liquor an important part of the broader administrative and fiscal system described in the Arthashastra.

Economic Significance

The economic importance of liquor is particularly evident in the revenue streams and financial controls associated with its production and trade. The state collected licence fees from those temporarily permitted to manufacture liquor during festivals, fairs, and pilgrimages, while traders dealing in liquor other than the king's supply were required to pay a five per cent toll. The Superintendent also had to examine daily sales, differences between royal and public measures,

and excess proceeds to determine compensation due to the king when private trade affected royal liquor revenue (Kautilya, 1915). At the same time, the text imposed fines for violations and required shopkeepers to compensate customers for lost property and pay an additional fine. These provisions show that the state viewed liquor simultaneously as a source of revenue, a regulated commercial activity, and an area requiring administrative and legal supervision. Rather than prohibiting liquor altogether, the Arthashastra sought to regulate its production, distribution, taxation, and consumption to protect public order and the state's financial interests.

Social and Religious perspectives on Alcohol

Alcohol occupied a prominent place in household and social life in ancient India, although attitudes towards it varied across texts and social contexts. The Kamasutra associates drinks such as sura, maireya, asava and grape wine with household life, social gatherings and entertainment. A wife was expected to manage the household supply of certain drinks, and knowledge of preparing sura and asava formed part of cultivated domestic skills (Vatsyayana, 2003). Drinking was also linked to festivals, gatherings and conversations with courtesans. Women could participate in drinking on particular occasions, while courtesans served and consumed various alcoholic beverages. Literary evidence further suggests that drinking was not confined to one social group. In Kalidasa's Sakuntala, for example, a fisherman uses his reward to purchase alcohol and invites the guards to drink with him. Asvaghosa's Buddhacarita and other literary sources also indicate the presence of drinking in everyday social life (Prakash, 1961).

Religious and moral texts, however, often view alcohol more critically. The Manusmriti strongly condemns drinking and treats it as a serious moral fault, particularly among Brahmins and the twice-born classes. It specifically prohibits the consumption of sura and identifies varieties such as gaudi, paisti and madhvi (Olivelle, 2005). At the same time, Manu acknowledges that alcohol and other pleasures are part of ordinary human behaviour, while presenting abstinence as spiritually preferable. Buddhist literature also reflects this tension between social practice and religious discipline. The Jatakamala, for instance, describes people consuming sura, asava, sidhu, maireya and madhu, while the Bodhisattva criticises alcohol and encourages sobriety (Aryasura, 2000). The available material also cites Buddhist and Jain literature as sources for reconstructing drinking practices, but it does not provide sufficient specific evidence here to make a separate, detailed claim about Jain attitudes (Prakash, 1961).

Discussion

The analysis brings together the findings on terminology, ingredients, fermentation, and the practical knowledge involved in liquor production. The various preparations mentioned in the Arthashastra show that people had a practical understanding of raw materials, fermentation, and beverage preparation. The evidence also shows that liquor was more than a household product. Its production, sale, distribution, and taxation were organised under state supervision, with the Suradhyaksha playing an important administrative role. Thus, liquor was part of an organised economic system and a source of state revenue.

The social evidence presents a more nuanced picture of alcohol in ancient India. The Kamasutra and other literary sources link drinking to household life, entertainment, festivals, conversation, and social gatherings, whereas the Manusmriti and Buddhist literature express moral concerns about drinking and emphasise restraint. These differences show that social practices and religious or legal rules can coexist. Overall, the study demonstrates that alcoholic beverages were connected with practical knowledge, economic activity, state regulation, and social life, while their consumption was also shaped by moral and religious values.

Conclusion

The study reveals that alcohol occupied a complex position in ancient Indian society, shaped by practical and social considerations. Its production reflects accumulated knowledge of ingredients and fermentation, while its regulation shows the close relationship between economic activity and

state authority. At the social level, drinking was part of everyday and cultural life, yet it was also subject to moral and religious expectations. The evidence therefore suggests that attitudes towards alcohol were not uniform; they varied with social context, purpose, and normative values. The study ultimately highlights how the history of alcoholic beverages can illuminate the broader interactions among knowledge, economy, social practice, and authority in ancient India.

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