

## **WHY WOMEN'S ALCOHOL CONSUMPTION ISN'T JUST A CLINICAL ISSUE**

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Post independence India has seen many changes in the way it has reconstructed its identity. One of the issues that remains contentious is alcohol and drug consumption. Gendered narratives on the subject tied with nationalism have ensured that the issue has stepped out of the clinical realm. Culture influences the way in which we understand disorders, alcohol consumption and addiction are understood through non-clinical means. Clinical diagnosis is not neutral it is influenced by the culture it is immersed in. Women who drink in India have to contend with non-clinical and clinical images of themselves. They often find themselves at the hands of vigilantes who claim to save Indian culture from dangerous westernisation. Women in India who transgress boundaries of 'culture' are frequently at risk of being sexualised even by their recreational use of psychoactive substances. These narratives are present everywhere, especially in cinema. The discourse that runs on screen through films is similar to incidents of violence against women in everyday life. Nationalism runs through these narratives, as does gendered violence.

### **Introduction**

A 17-year-old woman comes out of a pub in Guwhati, Assam and is grabbed by a mob of men who molest her in the street for 45 minutes. A journalist who is present at the time captures this entire incident. Within hours this video is on youtube. National outrage is followed by international outrage. The Guardian carries a headline 'Why is India so bad for women?' (Pidd, 2012). Meanwhile in India some of the perpetrators are caught, they justify their actions by claiming that the woman wore provocative clothes and was drinking. As the victim was underage the question of her consuming alcohol cast aspersions on her character. Indian femininity was cited as being under threat.

This incident is not an isolated one, India has seen regular attacks on women, westernised or otherwise. This paper attempts to examine how the consumption of alcohol, recreational or addictive, is not merely a clinical phenomena which can be explained by symptoms. Around the world it is recognised that women's addiction is stigmatised, clinical studies and facilities often not catering to women. However women's alcohol consumption is tied to many factors. In India nationalistic forces claiming the loss of femininity and loss of culture take up the issue. Indian men face no such criticism, rather their masculinity is often regarded as increasing with alcohol consumption.

### **Addiction in India**

Diagnostic criteria while seeming beyond reproach are not so, they are easily misinterpreted and even overused at times, as some of the criteria

are vague (Wetzel, 1991). It is not always possible to distinguish between what constitutes normal and abnormal (Rosenhan, 1973). Given the forceful idea in India that women do not drink or use any psychoactive substance, it would not be hard to diagnose as abnormal any woman who uses such substances recreationally. However there is another problem at hand here, a cultural blindness exists in India when it comes to acknowledging and diagnosing women as addicts/alcoholics. A report by the UN notes that:

*It is difficult, however, to get a full picture of women's substance use, since international, national and local studies on the prevalence of substance use and associated problems do not often address gender issues. As noted by Murthy, women with substance use problems may not show up in official statistics in some countries, such as India, because of their small numbers and subordinate position in the drug culture. (United Nations, 2004:14)*

While addiction to psychoactive substances is understood to be biologically possible, in India their use is often attributed to westernisation and globalisation. In an extensive study conducted by Stigler et al. (2010), tobacco use among adolescents was attributed to 'westernisation'. This study also attributed food (burgers and pizzas), clothing (jeans and t-shirts) and spaces of socialising (shopping malls and coffee shop chains) to 'westernisation'. Indian culture or 'traditional' culture was considered protective against tobacco consumption. Acculturation was associated with greater tobacco consumption in women. This study makes arbitrary inferences about both culture and tradition. It positions Indian traditional culture as superior and impervious to corruption. However this discourse is not new or limited to alcohol and drug consumption.

Both Srinivas (1956) and Kakar (2000) note how psychoactive substances have been consumed by different communities through time but their pattern of consumption has not been a constant one. Bhugra and Winston (1994) go further and trace the use of alcohol medicinally in the Caraka Samhita, an Ayurvedic text (dated at 600 BC or pre-600 BC):

*In modern Hinduism there is a strong taboo on the drinking of alcoholic beverages; drinking is often seen in those who are Westernized or of low caste. This moral objection to alcohol is very ancient but it became widespread only slowly. The Aryans were a turbulent people and had few of the taboos of later India. Ancient society was not an acquisitive one. The perspective of most early Indian literature is that of the affluent. Worldly wealth was looked on as morally desirable for the ordinary man and indeed essential to a full civilized life. Accounts of drinking therefore reflect the experience of the rich. (Bhugra and Winston, 1994:348)*

The notion of being a dry drug free culture is further challenged with evidence of the opium and wine trade in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries (Bhargava, 2012; Prakash, 1987). Capitalism had led to the wide distribution of these commodities now thought of as a western problem. References to these drugs and their effects are noted in literature of their times. Foreign and local observers of these practices

mention the effects these substances have on their consumers (Chatterjee, 2005). Bhargava (2012) in her detailed history tells us that while this consumption of wine was legitimised by the Mughal rulers of the time, it had a gendered aspect to it in the way women were allowed to sell the commodity but not partake of it. This gender division was not without contradiction - 'public women' we are told, consumed opium not for pleasure but to express grief and die.

*Brahmans of the Vedic period drank soma, an alcoholic drink, ate beef, and offered blood sacrifices. Both were given up in post-Vedic times. It has been suggested that this was the result of Jain and Buddhist influence. (Srinivas, 1956:481)*

Changes in economic factors and governmental restriction have contributed to changes in the way alcohol and drugs are perceived and consumed. The earliest use of an alcoholic beverage is traced back to 'Som Ras', mentioned in the Vedas, along with the consumption of meat and animal sacrifice (Srinivas, 1956). However over time the consumption of alcohol and tobacco changed, as did the meanings ascribed to them. Added to this list is also what Vatuk and Vatuk (1967) describe as a culturally defined form of addiction - 'chatorpan'. They talk about excessive consumption of sweets and salty-spicy snacks, and anti-social behavior resulting from the consumption of this food. The discourse employed takes a benign view of culture and categorisation. Every society has culturally acceptable 'addictions' and intoxicants, India is no different in this regard. There is a relaxed and even an indulgent attitude about the consumption of indigenous drugs. For example in villages of Northern India there is the tradition of Lathmaar Holi (SCFI, no date) where bhang (cannabis) flows freely and women armed with sticks beat men who are not allowed to retaliate. While this might sound like an anomaly in patriarchal India, it is an example of how culture contains contradictions. Chatterjee (2005) notes how the perceptions of different kinds of alcoholic drinks in India have not only gained and lost public support, but also how these were used as indications of cultural superiority. Similarly, certain drugs are associated with class and social status, for example cocaine due to its high price is associated with the upper classes in India (De-AddictionStaff, 2011). This relates to the point put forth by Cronin (2002:318) about the discursive category occupied by 'the drug' shifting. This analysis shows how alcohol was widely consumed but the attributes given to it were constantly shifting and formed contradictory narratives. Tied to a growing colonial presence these narratives began to theorise how race, ethnicity, gender and reproduction began to be understood.

Alcohol consumption in modern India is affected by a combination of social and historical factors (Benegal, 2005). Abstinence was not only a religious issue but also one of moving up the caste ladder (Sanskritisation) and one tied to Gandhi's notion of temperance. As the freedom struggle grew so did the need for an 'Indian' identity, temperance was one of those issues that symbolised purity. This influence can still be seen in national holidays such as Republic Day (26th January), Independence Day (15th August) and Gandhi Jayanti (2nd October) which are dry days in India. Gujarat, Gandhi's home state is also a 'dry state' and the sale of alcohol is banned. This is not the only state to have

an alcohol restriction - Manipur, Mizoram, Kerala and Nagaland as well as the union territory of Lakshadweep have all banned the sale of alcohol.

Benegal (2005) goes on to note that alcohol use despite its prevalence is still stigmatised.

*There is an imbalance in research findings (due to a lack of funding) and public fear mongering which is used as a catalyst for public outcry: The popular media favour lurid descriptions of alcohol related violence and heroic accounts of sporadic, short-lived anti-alcohol agitations by women's groups. These, paradoxically, serve to marginalize the issue further and detract from a balanced public discourse. ...English language media extolling the health benefits of alcohol have invaded that space. (Benegal, 2005:1053)*

As discussed earlier, attributions of danger and perceived threats of a moral breakdown are not new or unique to one nation alone. However, social attribution has a large role to play in the perception of what constitutes a 'drug'. The symbolic nature of this 'outsider' or 'threat to society' discourse should not be undervalued. It is a powerful societal force and one that has the power to mobilise individuals (Hazare, no date). Temperance in former colonial nations began as a nationalist movement which has had counterparts in the west. The object of resistance varied, however it was presented in similar terms. Rogers (1989) traces the growth of this movement to privileged natives who were excluded from the political process of their nation. Constructions of an independent India called for the birth of a new identity, one that borrowed ideas of nationalism from the west but constructed it with its own nuances (Nandy, 1996). One of these rallying points was alcohol consumption. Tied to ritual purity, this movement played on the idea of the moral and spiritual superiority of Indians over the west (Britain in particular). This aspect of India's national identity has come up in several instances and has been mentioned throughout this thesis. Colvard (2013) argues that this nationalist project (one that eventually led to independence) was tied to the bodies of all those who drink and not just women. However this temperance movement was not approved by all sections of Indian society, some of whom depended on selling alcohol for a living. Yet this oppression of the elite classes who advocated for temperance over the non-elite is glossed over in history and is still a reality in independent India. This process of nationalism is built upon accepting and rejecting the west at the same time, it is contradictory in what it chooses and rejects.

Dissident opinion on this issue is termed as the other, a discourse that is often under represented. Post independence India has seen several changes in the way it has utilised the process of Sanskritisation and Westernisation to create a discourse that is often fraught with gender stereotypes.

### **Stereotypes and consequences**

A persistent stereotype in India has been that of the westernised woman whose morality is lost to vices such as alcohol and drug consumption. Women in Indian films have played this stereotype for several decades.

The westernised woman often the vamp, is depicted in western dress, cigarette in one hand alcohol in another. She has little or no morals and stands out in contrast to the heroine who is expected to be chaste and passive. These women are often killed by the end of the film. If this violence were only contained within the screen it would not be continually challenged. However it spills out of the screen and is internalised by the audience (predominantly male) who react to these images by hooting, clapping and even whistling songs to harass women.

Post independence cinema saw the rise of socialist driven cinema, films of this era reflected secularism, women's emancipation and freedom from superstition. (Ahmed, 2015). Over the decades cinema in India gradually moved towards commercialisation, cinema reflected this change by producing stories that were commercially viable. Characters on screen became formulaic, heroes and heroines stood in stark contrast to villains and vamps. Heroines were applauded for their passivity and their suffering valorised (Dwyer, 2006). This distinction led to the creation of vamps who drank, smoked, wore western clothes and worked with the villain.

*Prior to 1990s Hindi cinema, only the character of the vamp, who did not have any honour to lose, could be seen in night clubs in revealing Western dress signifying sexual intimacy with unrelated men. The vamp existed in part to reinforce the virtues of the leading lady. (Mohammad, 2007: 1024)*

In real life the women who played these roles were often associated with their characters. Actress Helen who played the vamp found it impossible to walk on the streets as her roles in films made her a target (Kabir, 2001). Helen played westernised women who danced in bars drank and had an affair with the villain.

On screen portrayals of women drinking had one common theme—death of the woman who transgressed this unwritten boundary. Popular films from the 1960's to the present have all presented this idea. *Sahib Biwi aur Ghulam* (1962) is regarded as a landmark in Indian cinema. The film is set against the background of a Zamindar class that is ruining itself through sheer decadence. The tormented younger daughter in law who turns to alcohol in desperation ends up being murdered. It was also chosen as India's official entry to the Academy Awards, but the nomination was reportedly rejected by the Academy on the basis that a plot involving a woman who drinks was not acceptable in the Indian culture (Roy, 2013).

Bollywood films since then have almost always predictably depicted the death of women who drink or take drugs as part of the plot. *Hare Rama Hare Krishan* (1971) and more recently *Fashion* (2008) depict a similar idea. Women in both these films take drugs, drink and smoke, they are westernised and both end up dying. It is impossible for them to find sobriety or for the plot to depict another reality. Other films have gone on to depict women in such situations as vulnerable to physical and sexual attacks. *Purab aur Paschim* (1971), *ChaalBaaz* (1988) and *The Dirty Picture* (2012) are a few of the films that play on the idea that women who drink are to blame for violence directed at them. The theme of retribution runs strongly in these films but it is not confined to the screen, the Guwhati attack is an example of how violence on screen is

replicated in everyday life. This case is not isolated but it has been replicated across the country.

'Ram Sena on pub attack: We're custodians of Indian culture' read the newspaper headlines (TNN, 2009). Headlines such as these would not stop for days or weeks. On 24th January 2009 a group of forty men belonging to right wing Hindu group Sri Ram Sene (or Sri Ram Sena) entered a pub in Mangalore (a town in southern India) and attacked a group of young women (The Hindu, 2009). Claiming that the men and women were violating traditional Indian values, they beat them up. Videos of this shocking event went viral; one video on Youtube has over one million views as of 2015.

January 2009 brought two important changes in India. It brought to the forefront the presence of Indian right wing groups infiltrating south India (considered a peaceful non right region). It also was the start of a new kind of activism powered by people challenging the right of women to enjoy the fruits of globalisation. The specific incident in question was the brutal Mangalore pub attack, which was recorded on camera and played over and over again on television news channels. Pramod Muthalik<sup>51</sup> (leader of the Ram Sene group) commented on the attack carried out by his group, condemning the violence but condoning the ideology behind the attack as 'saving our mothers and daughters' (World Watch Monitor, 2009). When questioned about their actions a spokesperson of the Sri Ram Sene, Pravin Valke, said the following-

*'These girls come from all over India, drink, smoke, and walk around in the night spoiling the traditional girls of Mangalore. A girl from Punjab was drugged, raped, and killed last month. There was no hue and cry then. Why should girls go to pubs? Are they going to serve their future husbands alcohol? Should they not be learning to make chapattis? Bars and pubs should be for men only. We wanted to ensure that all women in Mangalore are home by 7 pm, - You think the boys didn't know what they were getting into. They did it in broad daylight before TV cameras. Don't you think every girl will now think twice before entering a pub? The strategy was a success.'* (Johnson, 2009).

Attacks on women by right wing Hindu groups are often carried out in order to protect women from the perils of Western values (pub going, drinking, smoking, dancing, wearing western clothes) which are thought of as a corrupting force which makes an individual lose out on their 'Indian' values and identity. Over the last twenty years India has seen an emerging right wing force which is predominantly Hindu. Hancock (1995) documents some of these changes in ideologies and how they have reached parts of India which were once thought of as politically neutral. The focus of this new nationalism is almost always on women and how this process affects them and the impact it will have on the larger society (McClintock, 1995). Women are often thought of as preservers and reproducers of their culture and therefore their behaviour comes under greater scrutiny (Yuval-Davis, 1997). Drinking/drug use is one such activity that challenges the role of the feminine and therefore Indian identity; while a psychoactive substance isn't masculine or feminine or grounded in national identity, certain substances are classified socially as male or female. Male and female areas are clearly demarcated. Women

violating these unwritten norms are subject to violence. The use of illegal substances is a legal transgression, however vigilantes use this as an opportunity to send out an ideological message.

Behaviour that is considered sexually deviant (drinking, wearing western clothing, going out to pubs etc) is treated as a crime against the well being of the community. Mountian (2004) points out how fears of losing out on an unborn generation combined with a notion of nationhood play on the way westernised women are positioned as a threat to the well being of the (Indian) state. However as these are not crimes against the nation, groups who perceive this as a crime deal with them by inflicting violence upon the victim.

In such an environment of hostility cinematic portrayals have not provided contradictory narratives but have expressed the status quo.

Discourse in Bollywood films around the subject of women's shamed bodies calls for their humiliation and eventual death. This same discourse plays on women's bodies in a less melodramatic manner in real life incidents. Headlines in national and international media have brought to attention some of these crimes against women. The victim's identity or transgression is used against her to perpetrate these acts of violence. These acts of violence are supposedly carried out to correct women and to preserve 'Indian culture'. Culture and nationality are invoked to normalise the brutality of these acts by men/right wing groups, which seem to be on the rise. While Indian law defines these incidents as crime, vigilante justice assumes it is on the side of the state and helping to build a cleaner society. In some of these cases, the state has had an implicit role in the mistreatment of women. What makes this discourse particularly disturbing is the use of terms such as 'culture' and 'tradition' to make a distinction between crimes against western and non-western women. The state has often had an implicit role in colluding with the perpetrators of these crimes. Invoking an exotic cultural specificity has ensured such crimes are thought to be a feature of Indian culture which creates a divide between women in the global south and north.

Discourse regarding women's alcohol and drug consumption is not unique to India but can be observed in places such as the UK. A campaign to promote responsible drinking led the NHS ("Know Your Limits") to issue a poster which bore the words 'One in three reported rapes happens when the victim has been drinking'. Widely criticised because of the victim blaming overtones of its message, implying that rapes happen when the victim has been drinking, it is the drinking habit of the victim that is the cause of the rape, it is not the fault of the rapist (Evans, 2014). The poster surfaced again during 2014 giving rise to a protest and petition run by the National Union of Students. Promises were made by government to cease the use of the poster, but no apology was given. (Sherriff, 2014).

Despite cultures claiming protection of women the issue of alcohol consumption remains male territory. Women's rights are almost always extended to idealised women in thought alone. Some women are deemed to be deserving of violence, their portrayal on screen and in acts of violence off screen reinforcing that view.

Addiction is not only a disorder contained within clinical boundaries, but disperses into the everyday consumption of those substances. The opposite is true for gender which is expected to be contained within the narrow confines of the home, family, religion, region

and nation. The imaginary lids on these boxes are often thrown open or shut down.

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