

# Review of: "Alcohol Consumption in Ancient India and the Contemporary Challenges: A Study of Socio-Economic Implications and Anti-Liquor Protests in Tamil Nadu"

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Review of "Alcohol Consumption in Ancient India and the Contemporary

Challenges: A Study of Socio-Economic Implications and

Anti-Liquor Protests in Tamil Nadu", by John Kaviarasu, Loyola College.

It is true that alcohol, on a world-wide scale, causes more harm than so-called hard drugs (think heroin or cocaine), one reason being that more people consume alcohol than they do these other substances. And in circles engaged in the fight against alcohol, the saying goes that if it were invented today, it would be prohibited. As someone who has witnessed the effects of alcoholism (the -ism is important here) from up close, I can relate to these arguments. Yet, I find that this manuscript by John Kaviarasu misses the mark, for the reasons set out below.

Let us start from the top, the title. I expected a historical, perhaps even archaeological account of the use (the production, distribution, and patterns of consumption) in Ancient India, and not being an expert on the region, I was intrigued. Yet, apart from a few references to (and not a systematic review of) ancient texts, the manuscript focuses predominantly on the recent history and present of alcohol politics in India, more in particular in Tamil Nadu.

A second point to make is that the manuscript quickly slips into equating alcohol with alcoholism. First of all, for an evidence-based discussion of the social effects of alcohol, I think it is important to distinguish between various drinks. Some are very low in alcohol percentage and sometimes the only available beverage that is safe to drink; some are industrially produced, some are homebrews; some have an alcohol percentage of 40% or more, some are legal, some illegal, produced in safe conditions, some not. Then, apart from the materiality of production and distribution, there is the political economy of alcohols: liquor played an important role during colonization (for instance, the colonial occupation of Nigeria was financed through the sale of booze, and examples abound of how alcohol was used to conquer and subdue native populations). Also nowadays, and the manuscript succinctly points this out, one of the reasons why (local and national) governments are rather hesitant to intervene is that it represents a substantial source of revenue. On a related note, the discussion of how political parties in Tamil Nadu exploit alcohol, banning and unbanning it as they do, is fascinating and merits a more in-depth discussion.

Third, historically, the discourse on alcohol has often been only a thinly veiled moral discourse on the poor, as they slip

into unacceptable, rowdy, and uncivilized behaviour (again, historically, that was – and still, often, is – evident in Victorian London, during the famous example of the Prohibition act in the United States, and in early twentieth century Flanders). Alcohol is but one ingredient in the mix of destitution, violence, toxic masculinity, and economic deprivation. I myself would be more inclined to focus on the concept of intoxication, as people get intoxicated not just by alcohol, but by toxic (political, cultural, economic environments, too. Hence, I would suggest that the authors try to tease out this complex cocktail that does indeed have the debilitating effects (domestic violence, abuse, further impoverishment of already the most vulnerable of demographics) mentioned in the text. In order to have an effect, any measures combatting substance abuse should move away from such a moralizing discourse that primarily seems to target the poor (rather than poverty). In addition, the causality suggested by the manuscript (also towards the end) can be easily criticized or even reversed: the casualties in consequence of imbibing illicitly produced liquor can as well be used as an argument against, and not in favour of, prohibition. This notwithstanding, I think the discussion of the politicization of alcohol and drinking is one of the strongest points in the manuscript's argument, and one that I would encourage the authors to develop more in depth.

Four, on method: citing numbers does not amount to a quantitative analysis; in addition, though the absolute figures are obviously staggering, they should be projected against the total population of people who drink alcoholic beverages (and what kind of beverage, see above). One crucial question would indeed be why people keep on drinking such beverages, most often without it leading to brawling, violent behaviour, or (even) worse. Here the manuscript suggests a simple causal relation whereas substance abuse, of whatever kind, is entangled in many dimensions. When it comes to the qualitative analysis, it is mainly based on newspaper clippings and on vignettes of which the author suggests that they result from interviews they held. If so, then I would at least have expected a more elaborate section on his methodology, and a reflection on their positionality, including a discussion on possible ethical issues encountered. IMO, the methodology, as all too briefly and schematically touched upon in the current version of the manuscript, is one of the main arguments against publication.

#### Minor issues:

- The section on numbers could be better structured, as in its current version it jumps back and forth between India and the world, and to Tamil Nadu. This could be better, and more concisely structured. Again, these absolute figures say something, but certainly not everything.
- I don't think the 'cultural' intro is needed for the argument the authors try to make; also, the literature on culture and alcohol is cherry-picking, as there is an entire library on this topic, from historiography, sociology, and anthropology as they try to deal with both the sometimes disastrous consequences of substance abuse and with the reasons why (and how!) people produce and consume the various alcoholic beverages one finds on the planet.
- I think the manuscript will benefit from abstaining from sweeping generalizations (such as in the conclusion) and trying to paint a picture with more texture and depth.

As for the conclusion: it is not difficult to agree with the authors that a more balanced approach in combatting substance abuse is needed – but one would have arrived at this conclusion also without the preceding pages. Again, IMO, the strongest point the authors make is how alcohol is politicized, not just by the two political parties mentioned, but also by

various action groups pushing for change. As history has repeatedly demonstrated (and the present shows we did not learn from it), alcohol abuse may seem like an easy fix to combat the very justified concerns regarding domestic and sexual violence, or to bring down the death toll on the world's roads, but it isn't, and I would encourage the authors to further disentangle the various dimensions involved in drinking, with special attention paid to how alcohol is instrumentalized in Tamil Nadu's political arena.

Hope this helps,

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