



## Alcohol and Society: A Socio-cultural Study in Tea Gardens of Assam with Special Reference to Mancotta Tea Estate of Dibrugarh, Assam.

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### Abstract:

The bond between alcohol and ancient customs and traditions is a captivating thread that runs through various cultures. Within the Mancotta Tea Garden community, distillation and fermentation of alcohol hold immense importance in their daily lives and social activities. We explored traditional alcoholic drinks from different communities during our visit to the Mancotta tea estate of Dibrugarh district in Assam. The role of alcohol is undeniably significant in the cherished customs of communities like Oraon, Munda, Santhal, and Sabar. Handia, the revered rice beer, stands as a sacred elixir during solemn rituals and grand ceremonies. To fully comprehend alcohol, we must also grasp the cultural perspectives on drinking and the consequential behaviours that can arise. The traditions surrounding alcohol consumption wield a powerful influence in different communities. Therefore, a profound understanding of the cultural context becomes indispensable in navigating this intricate tapestry.

**Keywords:** Alcohol, Culture, Livelihood, Rituals and Ceremonies, Community, Customs.

### I. Introduction:

The practice of Alcohol consumption is the action of drinking alcoholic beverages such as beer, whisky, wine etc. which are produced from grains such as rice, wheat, corn etc. and fruits. Alcohol is often practised among maximum of the societies of the world. In many societies, alcohol is termed as solitary act. According to Mandelbaum (1965), drinking is more often a social affair rather than cultural artefact. The forms and meanings

associated with drinking in a society is related with their cultural interpretations. So, the social and cultural factors in various ways help in shaping and forming the meanings of alcohol consumption in different societies. In many societies, it is basically used for cultural purposes associating some values and norms of the society. The various communities of the society use alcohol for different social and cultural meanings. The people and the society help in creating the meanings of the things which are normalized and accepted in their societal sphere. In other words, it is a social construct (Berger and Luckmann, 1966). So, the different cultural factors, norms, values of society help in creating the meanings of alcohol consumption that's why it can be called as cultural construct as because the use of alcohol in societal sphere has a cultural meaning for the people. The perspectives regarding alcohol might be different for genders, different age groups. While discussing the social and cultural nature of alcohol in a society, we should not neglect the alcohol consumption as a solitary or individual act as it has certain influence and impact on our day-to-day lives. In the tea gardens of Assam, the Handia (local beer) is the inevitable part of the cultural life of the people. Verma (Dec, 2016) in his article "Drink and Work" from his book "Coolies of Capitalism" mentions that alcohol was used as a work stimulant in the tea plantations during the British era. Drinking formed a crucial part of festivals and religious occasions. After a certain period of time, consumption of rice-beer was also practiced in the workplace. Goswami (2011) in her project report, "Absenteeism among the tea garden laborers: A case study on the Mancotta Tea Garden" finds that 85.83% of the samples under study think



the consumption of alcohol necessary for their living and is found that alcohol consumption casually and in the different occasions lead to the absence of workers at the workplace. It is also found that, in the Mancotta T.E that 80% of the families prepare alcohol at their homes. Oraon (2021) in a chapter “Sanskriti ke Ansh Swarup Handia” covered in his book “Oraon Sanskritiyon Me Gyan Vigyan” mentions that Oraon community which is also an integral part of the tea gardens, offers “Handia”, (a home-brewed liquor made from rice) to their ancestors during the performance of their rituals. The amount of “Handia” which is kept for the offerings should not be drunk by the individuals outside their lineage. According to the author, there is the scientificity in the making of this beverage. It is a medicinal drink. It has its positive effects on the body. It has its cultural importance in the community. Saikia and Bori (2020) in their article “A Study on the Use of Traditional Alcoholic Drinks in Tribal Communities of Assam” mentions about the use and consumption of the traditional alcoholic drinks among the major tribal communities of the state of Assam. They study the importance of alcoholic drinks in the culture of the tribes like Bodo, Mishing, Sonowal, Deori, Rabha, Dimasa, Deoris, Karbis etc. Kalita et. al. (2021) in their study “Traditional Rice Beer of Assam, North East India: Traditionalism, Ethno-biology and its Pharmaco-medicinal Trends” discusses the various traditional methods applied by the tribal groups of Assam to make alcoholic drinks. They discuss the techniques applied by the tribes like Ahom, Bodo, Mishing, Karbi, Rabha. They scientifically study the drinks and find out the various components and variations in the drinks. “Culture and Alcohol Use in India” by Murthy (2015) depicts a picture of the trend of alcohol consumption and use in India from ancient periods to the modern time. According to the author, culture performs a great role in the alcohol consumption pattern of a caste or community. In his article “From Pleasure to Taboo: Drinking and Society in Kerala”, Menon mentions that there is a relationship between alcohol consumption and the issue of unemployment. There is a shift from the community toddy drinking to the individual drinking. All of the members belonging to the different castes unite and drink together in the toddy shop. As community drinking was extensive there, there arose a market of toddy drinks. Singh (2017) in his article “Cultural Aspects of Drinking among Kinnaura Tribe” mentions that drinking practices in tribal district of Himachal Pradesh as are result of diverse socio-cultural factors. Among the Kinnaura tribe of Himachal Pradesh use alcohol

in the socio-cultural practices to offer the deities and then it is distributed among the villagers in the form of Prasad. It is social thing and the youths are very much interested in it because of the easy access and availability of it, curiosity and cultural setting which can increase alcohol abuse among them.

Socio-cultural practices are common to all of the communities living in the world. From these literatures, it is found that there is a relation between the practice of alcohol consumption and culture of a society or a community. The literatures provide an insight that all over the world, many communities and tribes use alcoholic beverages in their cultures. As a part of the socio-cultural practices, the practice of alcohol consumption has influence on a society and the individuals. These kinds of practices can influence the entire structure of a society and can change it.

#### Research Questions:

After reviewing the studies related alcohol consumption, certain queries and questions can be arisen which are pointed as given below:

- How narratives of the people reflect the practice of alcohol consumption in a tea garden?
- How far is the practice of alcohol consumption a socio-cultural construction?

Based on the above-mentioned research questions, certain objectives are determined to be fulfilled:

1. To enquire the various social narratives of the people of a tea garden that reflect the alcohol consumption in their culture.
2. To enquire the practice of alcohol consumption as socio-cultural construction.

#### II. Material and Methods:

For the study based on its nature, the Mancotta Tea Estate of Dibrugarh, Assam is selected purposefully. There are cultural, social and community diversities in the tea garden area. The communities use alcohol in their rituals, ceremonies and it is attached with the part of their livelihood. So based on these criteria, this tea garden is selected purposefully. Based on the numerical strength of the people and families in the communities, seven of them are selected for the study. These are *Oraon, Munda, Santhal, Sabar, Sahu, Nayak, Bauri*. The respondents selected from these communities are divided on the basis of gender to see the variations in their consumption. From the pilot study, it was known that the married people mostly engage in the practice of alcohol consumption that's the married respondents are given emphasis. From each



community fifteen members are selected for the study among which ten respondents are male and five are female. So, the ratio of the respondents in accordance with gender is 2:1. It is known from the

community members that women are less involved in alcohol consumption than men, for the reason of which women are selected in less numbers.

**Table.1: Age of the Respondents of the Communities.**

Community	25-35		35-45		45-55		55-65		65-75		Total
	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	
<i>Oraon</i>	1	0	1	0	2	3	5	2	1	0	15
<i>Munda</i>	2	0	2	2	2	2	4	1	0	0	15
<i>Santhal</i>	2	0	4	1	3	1	1	2	0	1	15
<i>Sabar</i>	3	0	0	3	4	0	3	0	0	2	15
<i>Bawri</i>	1	0	3	1	5	4	1	0	0	0	15
<i>Sahu</i>	2	1	3	2	1	1	4	1	0	0	15
<i>Nayak</i>	1	0	2	1	4	3	3	1	0	0	15
Total	12	1	15	10	21	14	21	7	1	3	105
Percentage (%)	12.39		23.80		33.34		26.67		3.80		100 (Approx.)

Source: The Field.

Notes: The table is divided according to the range of ages arranged through exclusive continuous series. Those are divided based on communities and gender i.e. male and female.

The table. 1 show that the respondents belonging to the age group of 45-55 are higher in numbers. This suggests that the maximum number of the drinkers belonged to this age group. The maximum of the male drinkers belonged to the age group of 45-55 and 55-65. The maximum of the female drinkers belonged to the age group of 45-55.

For the collection of data personal interview, in-depth interview and focused group interview methods are used. Observation method is also used as a part of the study. The schedules for the interviews are structured as well as semi-structured in nature. The questions asked are closed-ended as well as open-ended. After the collection of the data, analyses are made using the method of thematic analysis.

### III. Results and Findings:

After analyzing the data collected through interviews and observations certain results and findings come out which are discussed as below:

#### Narratives of the people:

According to the Cambridge Dictionary (2024), a narrative is defined as “a story or a description of a series of events” or “a particular

way of explaining or understanding events.” Narratives encompass the sayings and oral descriptions that people use to express their perspectives on various subjects. In different cultures, there are numerous narratives surrounding alcohol. These narratives serve as tools for us to reflect on ourselves as creators of culture. We communicate our stories through various forms and styles, influenced by our individual experiences and expectations in everyday life (Isik, 2015). Many narratives about alcohol arise from daily conversations, oral traditions, and community rituals and ceremonies. It's important to note that many communities have limited or no knowledge of their own dialects, which were spoken before migration to Assam during the colonial period. Only a few communities, such as the Oraon and Munda, have managed to preserve their dialects and oral traditions.

#### Daily Conversations:

“Conversation serves as the primary foundation for direct social relations among individuals. As a real-time process, conversation involves a reciprocal and rhythmic exchange of verbal communication. It is a sharing process that fosters a common social experience” (Allen et al., 1974). In the communities studied, people engage in numerous dialogues in their shared languages, as well as in the dialects unique to their communities. An Oraon woman (58) notes that when asking for



rice beer (Handia) from fellow community members in Kurukh (the traditional dialect of the Oraon people), they say “Onn Gilas Jharra Chia,” which translates to “give me a glass of rice beer.” This phrase is commonly used in their daily interactions. Similarly, a Bauri man (55) shares that when friends gather, they often say, “Bhijai chhi ki nai? Olop khabo chol,” meaning “Have you prepared rice beer or not? Let’s go have a drink,” in Sadri language. These expressions are frequently used in everyday conversations, influencing people's attitudes toward alcohol. Through these dialogues, individuals develop social experiences that contribute to the normalization of drinking within their society. During research and observations in the tea garden, the researcher noted that it is quite common for people to ask for money to purchase drinks. The researcher has also personally experienced requests for alcohol-related funds from locals. These interactions indicate that the acceptance and normalization of alcohol are deeply ingrained in their cultures.

#### **Oral Tradition:**

Oral tradition refers to a dynamic and diverse oral-aural medium for evolving, storing, and transmitting knowledge, art, and ideas (Foley, 2019). In many traditional and tribal societies, knowledge and ideas are preserved through oral traditions, such as folk songs, dialects, and chants, which are important for social and cultural interaction. These forms of oral tradition are connected to the community's norms, values, and mores. As Foley (2019) notes, “Oral tradition represents a vital and multi-functional means of verbal communication that supports diverse activities in diverse cultures.” These traditions can shape people's attitudes toward things that are considered sacred. The communities under study maintain a positive attitude towards alcohol consumption in their rituals. This favorable perception of alcohol, specifically Handia, is reflected in their traditional songs and chants offered during rituals dedicated to deities and ancestors. There is a saying among the people of the tea garden: “Jahai Mera, Huwai Dera,” which means “Where there is Mera (a prepared fermented mixture of rice and tablet used for fermentation, from which Handia is made), you can find me there.” This traditional saying has been passed down orally from generation to generation. During discussions about Handia, one focus group (Bauri) mentioned this saying. While some proverbs are common across these communities, they remain traditional and generational. In addition, community

members offer prayers or chants (Parthana) to their ancestors and deities while presenting Handia or sacrificing animals. A focused group (Santhal) notes that they offer prayers to Marang Buru (a deity) during the Baha (Sahrul Pourab) ritual observed in Bohag (an Assamese month) and during Gohal Puja (cow worship) in October-November. They also pay respects to their ancestors during Kali Puja and Durga Puja (Hindu festivals) through sacrifices and the offering of Handia. During these rituals, worshippers seek blessings from the deities or ancestors, invoking, “I’m offering you Handia and cocks (Murgi), please keep my family or community safe and free from danger and disease.” These chants and prayers are deeply rooted in their cultures. Because deities and ancestors are regarded as sacred by the community, the people also come to view drinking as a sacred act, honoring these figures with their libations. The research is limited by the fact that many community members are not familiar with their own dialects, which affects their knowledge of traditional folk songs. Some common songs about alcohol are used during weddings. A focus group (Nayak) discussed a traditional song created by local people: “Kona Kona Haadi Aahe, Mor Jiwai Huwan Aahe. Ako baati debe goiram ghumar nisa laage,” which translates to “Handia is in which corner or place, my heart is there. Give me one bowl of that, dear, I or we feel drunk.” This line is often sung during joyful ceremonies and rituals where people drink and dance together. Though these songs are somewhat traditional, they have been created by the local populace and have lasted a few generations. The way these songs are crafted influences the actions of those who sing them, encouraging drinking Handia as a communal activity. Similar to the Santhal communities, other groups also have prayer chants associated with offering Handia to their ancestors and deities, which are specific to their traditions. The chants relate to offerings of items that acquire sacred significance in ceremonies and rituals. The narratives surrounding alcohol have a psychological impact on individuals within these societies. This influence can be either positive or negative. When these narratives are used positively, they reinforce a positive perception of alcohol consumption.

#### **Sociological Reflections Through Narratives:**

Narratives about particular concepts in society are shaped through daily conversations and oral traditions. As Abbott (2002) states, “We create narratives many times a day, every day of our lives, starting almost from the moment we begin to put words together.” Similarly, Fredric Jameson (1981)



describes narratives as “the central function or instance of the human mind.” Often, we engage in narratives unconsciously; they form the deep structure of our minds and are inherently linked with the concept of time. People observe the world, and it is only when these observations are put into narrative form that they acquire meaning. A relevant example is alcohol consumption, which is surrounded by many narratives constructed through everyday conversations and community traditions. Generally, these narratives reflect the collective nature of society. Each individual is influenced by the attributes embedded within these narratives, which are created by society and, in turn, affect every member of it. As noted by Jääskeläinen et al. (2020), “Narratives—whether in the form of written stories, oral accounts, audiobooks, fiction movies, or media feeds—powerfully shape our perception of reality.” Thus, narratives play a significant role in building societal perceptions and reflect the general understanding of the people and their social constructions regarding various topics. In the study of social perceptions surrounding alcohol consumption, narratives formed by communities provide insight into the cultural context. References to the term “Handia” within these socio-cultural narratives illustrate the cultural significance of alcohol in those communities. Cultures express their meanings primarily through two means: (1) stories, narratives, and myths (both individual and collective) and (2) non-verbal communication, such as bodily expressions within context (Hall, 1981). Culture is a system that ascribes meaning to actions by situating underlying intentional states within an interpretive framework (Bruner, 1990). As narratives are closely tied to culture, they carry meanings that individuals attach to them. In this study, people emphasize certain alcoholic beverages, such as Handia, within their narratives, reflecting their cultural context. Therefore, the culture of drinking is often intertwined with the broader culture of the communities involved in this research.

#### Through Narratives Regarding Gender:

Narrative serves as the fundamental way in which individuals understand their personal experiences and plays a crucial role in how humans create their world (Goodman, 1978). Additionally, there are narratives shaped by gender. Since both gender and narrative are social constructs, they influence and define one another (Fivush & Grysman, 2021). Alongside songs, stories, and dialogues, various cultural, social, and physical attributes contribute to the formation of perceptions

and prejudices about individuals or societies, which over time evolve into narratives. Gender, too, is subject to this process.

#### Gender Narratives and Alcohol Consumption:

In various cultural settings, alcohol consumption patterns are influenced by gender. Women's drinking behavior differs significantly from that of men within these societies. Research indicates a social perception that women consume less alcohol than men (Dawson, Goldstein, Saha & Grant, 2015). Additionally, it is noted that only married women are permitted to drink during rituals and ceremonies, while unmarried women are prohibited from consuming alcohol. This gender-based restriction reflects societal norms, with a prevailing narrative suggesting that women have more obligations and responsibilities during socio-cultural occasions compared to men. Although men also have various duties, including performing rituals, women are often more involved in tasks such as distributing items and managing related activities. As a result, they may engage less in drinking during these events. Thus, women frequently take on the role of service providers during such occasions. These societal narratives suggest that women's alcohol consumption is lower than men's due to the nature of their participation. Gender and social narratives are co-constructed systems of meaning (Fivush & Grysman, 2022). Consequently, it is reasonable to conclude that in diverse cultural environments characterized by numerous rituals and ceremonies, distinct narratives about alcohol consumption emerge.

#### Alcohol as Social Construction:

There are several factors that help to attach a positive meaning to Handia, a traditional alcoholic beverage. These factors contribute to the understanding of alcohol consumption as a socio-cultural construct. According to the Merriam-Webster Dictionary, “construction” refers to “the process, art, or manner of constructing something.” In a societal context, social construction involves the development of people's understanding of the world and the meanings they assign to actions, interactions, and phenomena in their daily lives (Leeds-Hurwitz, Wendy, 2016). Berger and Luckmann (1966) argue that society is a socially constructed reality, where social meanings shape the perceptions of people.

In the tea gardens of Assam, alcohol consumption represents a socially constructed reality or practice. Verma (1916) notes that the



patterns of alcohol consumption were once limited to tribal communities such as the Oraon, Munda, and Santhal. However, this practice has since spread to include all communities living in the tea gardens of Assam. During colonial times, the British used alcohol as a work stimulant, introducing modern liquor that was made available at grog shops near the tea gardens. As British influence expanded, various communities began to utilize alcohol (liquor) as both a work enhancer and as a reward for workers who performed well, leading to the normalization of alcohol consumption in the tea gardens.

It is observed that many communities in the tea gardens regard alcohol consumption as something sacred. This sacredness is reflected in the rituals and ceremonies where alcohol is involved, which are often associated with ancestors, deities, nature, and the community. Alcohol (Handia) serves to foster unity and cohesion among community members. People from different communities are commonly invited to one another's rituals, including marriages, death ceremonies, and birth celebrations. These events facilitate the sharing of alcohol consumption practices.

Different generations within these communities are socialized into the cultural use and consumption of alcohol. Over time, these practices are passed down, contributing to the collective understanding and meanings surrounding alcohol within the community.

#### Conclusion:

The influence of alcohol in the tea gardens has a complex impact on the communities. On one hand, it fosters integration, unity, and assimilation among the people. However, the physiological effects of alcohol consumption can be severe, leading to significant health concerns reported by community members. While many individuals use alcohol as a means to relieve stress both mental and physical or for entertainment, they often suffer from numerous hazards that develop over time.

The dual identity of individuals identifying as both members of a specific community and as workers contributes to increased alcohol consumption. Factors such as culture, the nature of work, and a legacy of colonialism heavily influence alcohol use in Assam's tea gardens. Additionally, rapid urbanization and easy access to urban facilities have increased the availability of modern alcoholic beverages in these areas.

The commercialization of alcohol within the tea gardens has transformed its role, shifting from cultural practices to a more work-related consumption pattern. As Verma (1916) noted, this change signifies a broadening of alcohol consumption behaviors, which is likely to evolve further in the future.

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