Toddy to Tequila

Toddy to Tequila

The Story of Alcohol in India

Sandhya Mulchandani

juggernaut

JUGGERNAUT BOOKS
C-I-128, First Floor, Sangam Vihar, Near Holi Chowk,
New Delhi 110080, India

First published by Juggernaut Books 2026

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

P-ISBN: 9789353456771
E-ISBN: 9789353453565

Typeset in Adobe Caslon Pro by R. Ajith Kumar, Noida

Printed at Thomson Press India Ltd

Wine doesn't ask questions, wine understands –
Oftentimes better than people …

Contents

Introduction

At the outset, this is not a book about the processes involved in making alcohol, nor is it about what to or where to drink or what ensues after the drinking. It's not a book about mixing cocktails either. This is a book about the genesis of what you're drinking, the stories of where it came from and, though Indians have always been drinking, how drinking culture has evolved, with new layers added with every passing generation. Alcohol is more than a mere social habit in India; it forms a cultural continuum.

This is a book that traces the journey of alcohol through the centuries – how it has been celebrated and reviled, taxed and outlawed, hidden in earthen pots and flaunted in stone-studded gold and silver goblets … Every bottle tells a story, varied and subjective. In India, the narrative is as old as the Vedas and as new as the shiny bottles lining the flashy liquor shops in

Gurugram. It has permeated through every segment of society, from being consumed by the gods in Vaikunth and Kailash and offered in Vedic sacrifices, to being found in royal courts and battlefields, brewed in tribal huts and raucously debated in Parliament. It has variously been a sacred libation, a status symbol, an alluring temptation, an addiction as well as a very lucrative economic and political tool.

The book follows the evolution of alcohol through broad historical periods, beginning with the Vedic era and post-Vedic developments such as the introduction of taxes and licensing, and the emergence of Buddhism and Jainism, with the very first anti-alcohol doctrines. The writings of the renowned medical practitioners Charaka and Sushruta also introduced new lines of thought, including arguments for moderate alcohol use. The counterculture in the south during the same period, free from northern Brahmanical diktats, was of a more egalitarian society happily brewing alcohol from palm trees with no censure or restrictions.

Islamic influence changed the social fabric of India completely, its resplendent courts and kings exhibiting a complex interplay of widespread use of liquor and drugs set amidst the clear Quranic opposition to alcohol consumption. The fragmentation of the Mughal

Empire saw the rise of western seafaring nations, again deeply influencing Indian lives.

So, the narrative about alcohol reflects these shifts in power, trade, faith and class. It reveals hierarchies of purity and pollution, caste and gender restrictions and the tug of war between pleasure and prohibition.

Myths, contradictions and duplicity abound about the genesis of alcohol, inebriated gods and the first men who discovered and brewed it, and continue to influence more contemporary and sanctimonious beliefs, like the idea that Indians never drank in the past and that it was a habit brought in by foreigners. Unlike in East Asia or Europe, where alcohol developed in a fairly linear tradition, in India, it's a patchwork of ritual, medicine, community, tradition and colonialism.

But ultimately, it's about people – the people who first made, drank, enjoyed and abused it; the people who became wealthy from it, who fought and even murdered for it. It's about the gods who first created it, the sages who elevated it to the status of divinity, the kings who imposed taxes on it to generate revenue, the soldiers who drank it for Dutch courage before battle, the men who drank it in company, the women who distilled it. The abstainers and naysayers, Muslim emperors and British corporals, saints and sinners – everyone has

played a role in the drama that is alcohol, which has gotten intrinsically woven into the history, religious life and mythologies of India.

From being a land that celebrated its Soma to, many centuries later, once again rising as a producer of some of the world's best spirits, India has come full circle. It's been a saga of turbulence, excesses, resistance and reinvention – nonetheless, its very own narrative.

This, then, is the story of India and a story of alcohol that's flowed closely alongside India's history, reflecting its culture and ambiguities, its excesses, exuberance and travails.

1

Euphoric Beginnings: Soma and Sura

The first thought to have arisen in the Primeval Being was one of desire. Thus, desire in Indian mythology is considered to be an innate element that makes up human beings – be it for material goods, spirituality, relationships, food or drink.

Seen as a fundamental human necessity, all aspects of desire were enthusiastically embraced, alcohol amongst them. Described as something that brought about exuberance, tolerance, happiness and valour, besides altering the mind and intellect, Soma, the first brew, was considered to be sentient – a living entity; therefore, blessed by the gods. So, much like these gods, Sura and Soma too developed their own mythologies and occupy an exalted position in the Vedic texts.

The Vedic period is loosely dated between 1500 and 800 BCE, years that saw the advent of the Aryans, Sanskrit, the Vedas and an organized religion that was the precursor to Hinduism as we know it today. However, it also brought with it caste divisions, social hierarchies as well as wealth disparities that were codified in books like the Puranic epics, the Grha Sutras, the Manusmriti and the Arthashastra.

India is a glorious country, colourful and ebullient, stoic in the face of insurmountable difficulties, but a place where life is celebrated as an *utsav*, a carnival. There are no disinterested bystanders in India; rather, every man, woman and child is an enthusiastic and willing participant in this exuberance that we call life.

And it has always been so. From the very beginning of civilization, when men hunted and huddled together, pondering life under august moons and starlit skies, the quest was to find meaning, both metaphysical and physical, which was interpreted as seeking happiness, pleasure and peace. The first settlements in the subcontinent embodied just this.

Excavations of the Indus Valley townships showcase not just a politically and architecturally advanced civilization, but also a socially adept one with high culture. It is amply clear that 5,000 years ago, people

took pleasure just as seriously as they did work. While the script and the numerous clay tablets of Harappa have yet to be deciphered, there can be no ambiguity about what the large fermentation vats found at the sites were used for, making the Indian subcontinent probably one of the first few regions in the world where alcohol was brewed. Much like in Pompeii but almost 1,500 years earlier, there is evidence of large distillation pits and even seating arrangements for regular clients in taverns and brothels.

And it continued to flourish, until the entire civilization mysteriously collapsed.

When the peripatetic, pastoral Aryan settlers came from Central Asia, they brought with them cattle, horses and, amongst other things, their rudimentary language and an interesting array of gods. With borrowed elements from Central Asia, Bactria and Margiana, these eclectic gods soon got assimilated into the existing beliefs and practices that prevailed in the Indus Valley. There was nothing subtle or subdued about these gods; they were primeval beings – temperamental, energetic and dynamic representations

of natural elements like rain and thunder, fire, earth, and water. To appease these uncontrollable forces of nature, the Aryans composed a large body of verse in Sanskrit that sang their praise and placated their egos with sacrifices to ensure their continued grace. These collective verses, called the Vedas, form the largest extant body of scriptural works in the world.

These verses, besides containing hymns to a number of gods like Varuna, the god of rain, and Agni, the god of fire, also propitiate Usas, the goddess of dawn; they also sing paeans of praise to Soma, a plant that is variously taken to be a hallucinogen, an opiate and manna from heaven. Probably used by them to dispel fatigue and restore energy and well-being, Soma's uses and effects were well known to the early settlers.

Though the people of the Indus Valley – and the Chinese even before them – had perfected the art of brewing liquor, the first mention of a powerful sap appears in the Rg Veda (c. 1700 BCE), which extols the virtues of Soma. The Zoroastrians of Persia had a similar plant sap that they called haoma, but Soma attained cult status in South Asia. This was no ordinary plant secretion; its effect on the human mind was so expansive that it immediately inspired souls to take flight, made their imaginations soar and made them sexually potent and invincible – almost godlike.

It made a hard life look so very good and worthwhile.

There are ongoing debates that claim Soma was more opioid than liquor. Ancient texts describe the plant variously as a sap, a fermented drink or a spirit, but settle the debate by calling it the 'drink of the gods'. Stupefied by the near magical effects of Soma, sages with an interest in the nature of god or the ultimate reality saw it as a direct gift from the heavens that helped their minds breach boundaries and experience the vastness as well as the oneness of the universe. These expansive experiences helped turn Soma into something sacred, to be cherished and imbibed as a sacrament. It, thus, attained an elevated status – consecrated, its consumption initially restricted to the 'seekers': saints, seers and holy men.

Described as having yellow drooping boughs with knotty joints, Soma exuded an abundance of milky sap, which was tapped by moonlight along the Himalayan mountaintops and mixed with other ingredients to produce the intoxicating beverage. Although initially the drink was mainly associated with spiritual activities, it soon became just that – a drink on which much time,

effort and research was conducted to produce the best liquor. The celestial sage Narada says in the Narada Purana (III.90.11), 'This Vidya is as exhilarating as the intoxicating liquor. It is the means of overcoming distress. I shall now tell you the precise preparation of it.'[1]

So, especially in the course of yagnas, it was prepared with great ceremony, pressed between stones amidst chants of Vedic shlokas and incantations, mixed with milk, strained and offered as prasad and oblation.

Ancient sages deified what, to them, were incomprehensible mysteries, like conception, or how a few drops of plant sap could have such a dramatic effect on human beings. And so mythic tales were born. Soma has several narratives about its genesis that appear in the Rg Veda, the Puranas and the Brahmanas, amongst others. According to one version of the story, the Soma plant was supposed to have been in the possession of the Gandharvas (residents of the present-day Afghanistan–Pakistan border), zealously guarded by an archer named Krishanu, probably their king. A falcon called Suparna was sent to steal the plant. He is said to have flown high up to the third heavens where, as per the Rg Veda (VIII.82.9), it was kept guarded within an iron fort. When Krishanu saw the falcon

carry away Soma, he shot the bird, who lost its wings and dropped the Soma to the earth.

> The straight-flying hawk, conveying the Soma plant from afar; the bird attended by the gods, brought, resolute of purpose, the adorable, exhilarating Soma, having taken it from the lofty heaven. (Rg Veda [4.26.6])[2]

In another version, the king of the gods, Lord Indra, went out in the guise of a ram and stole Soma. More risqué tales appear later in texts like the Taittiriya Samhita and the Aitreya Brahmana, in which the devas want to steal it from the Gandharvas but can't come up with a viable plan. Knowing the Gandharvas' fondness for women, they decide to barter a woman for it, but again can't find a woman who would consent to the plan. Finally, Vac (the goddess of speech and knowledge), assuming the form of a beautiful woman, is traded for Soma Rasa. The tale reiterates the high esteem in which Soma was held.

> Speech said, 'The Gandharvas love women; with me as a woman do ye barter it.' 'No,' replied the gods, 'how could we be without you?' She replied, 'Still

> do ye buy; when ye will have need of me, then shall I return to you.' 'Be it so' (they replied). With her as a great naked one they bought Soma… (Aitreya Brahmana [1.5.27])[3]

Soma became such an integral part of the Vedic ritual that the sages wrote several hymns in its praise and created a separate chapter or mandala in its honour; there are more than 114 hymns dedicated exclusively to it in the Rg Veda. It became a special god to whom the Brahmin priests prayed for grace, largess and plenitude.

> Well-skilled in speech we magnify thee, Soma, with our sacred songs:
> Come thou to us, most gracious One. (Rg Veda [1.91.11])

> Enricher, healer of disease, wealth-finder, prospering our store, Be, Soma, a good Friend to us. (Rg Veda [1.90.12])

> Invincible in fight, saver in battles, guard of our camp, winner of light and water, Born amid hymns, well-housed, exceeding famous, victor, in thee will we rejoice, O Soma. (Rg Veda [1.90.21])[4]

The king of the gods was Indra. The ruler of the heavens, lightning, thunder, storms, rains and rivers, and one of the first gods to be mentioned in the Rg Veda, Indra has the largest number of verses, some 250 of them, dedicated to him. He is the god of war, wielder of Vajra the thunderbolt, and is usually described rather unfavourably as being rowdy, rancorous, adulterous and potbellied from excessive drinking. His wife, Indrani, taunts him for being an alcoholic, inept and overweight. She chides him to do his duties as the king of gods and even threatens to run off with a more suitable and handsome god if he doesn't shape up. Indrani's threats notwithstanding, Indra continues his drinking and womanizing.

> Narayana said [to Narada]:– In ancient days, Indra the Lord of the three worlds, intoxicated with wine and becoming lustful and shameless, began to enjoy Rambha in a lonely grove. (Devi Bhagavata Purana [9.40.13–25])[5]

Given to many a misadventure usually triggered by Soma, Indra is not known for his restraint or moderation and is only saved by the helpful twins called the Ashvins, gods associated with medicine and health,

who are always at hand to administer an antidote for his hangovers and restore him to his senses.

The Rg Veda eulogizes Indra as the Deva Samrat (the king of the gods), the dragon slayer, a fearless warrior and an enthusiastic imbiber of Soma.

> His belly, drinking deepest draughts of Soma, like an ocean swells. (Rg Veda [1.7.7])
>
> Come Indra and delight thee with the juice at all the Soma feasts. (Rg Veda [1.9.1])
>
> Indra and Soma burn, destroy the demon foe, send downwards, O ye Bulls, those who add gloom to gloom. (Rg Veda [7.104.1])[6]

The best-known tale in the Rg Veda about Indra is how excessive Soma made him so insolent and arrogant that he even became disrespectful to his guru Brihaspati, who, on being thus insulted, withdrew support from the devas who were then at war with the asuras. Soon realizing that they had no guru, the devas sought the help of Lord Brahma, who recommended Vishwarupa. Always sceptical of Vishwarupa's allegiance, Indra one day heard him praying for the welfare of the asuras, flew into a rage and killed him.

When Vishwarupa's father Tvashta learnt of his son's death, he created Trisiras (the three-headed one) to dethrone Indra. The three heads were called Somapitha, Surapitha and Annada, consumers of Soma, Sura and food, respectively. Fierce battles ensured, but eventually Indra managed to kill him too. Tvasta then conducted a yagna from which rose Vritra, one of the most powerful demons ever created. The ensuing battle between Vritra and Indra was long and hard, and finally, with a special weapon fashioned out of the bones of a sage called Dadhichi, Indra managed to kill the demon-dragon, but only after drinking three tankards of Soma. The imagery of Indra fighting the dragon after consuming Soma is very eloquently described in the Vedas:

> Impetuous as a bull, [Indra] chose Soma and in three sacred beakers drank the juices, Maghavan then grasped the thunder for his weapon and smote to death the firstborn of the dragons. (Rg Veda [1.32.3])[7]

Not that Indra was going to rest quietly on his laurels – he bragged loud and long not only about

killing the dragon but also about his capacity to drink Soma and the powers it gives him:

Like wild winds
The draughts have raised me up.
Have I been drinking Soma? (Rg Veda [X.119.2])

The draughts have borne me up
As swift steeds a chariot.
Have I been drinking Soma? (Rg Veda [X.119.3])

The heavens above
Do not equal one half of me.
Have I been drinking Soma? (Rg Veda [X.119.7])

I will pick up the earth
And put it here or put it there
Have I been drinking Soma? (Rg Veda [X.119.9])[8]

Indra was not the only god addicted to Soma. There are several other deities as well as sages; pride of place amongst them goes to Agni, the god of fire. The discovery of fire is what set humans apart from animals – the magical quality of fire, its heat, warmth and light were considered to be a divine gift from God.

The Rg Veda venerates the effulgent Agni in over 200 hymns. Seen as a protector of men and their homes, Agni presides over all sacraments, witness to all that is sacred. As the Soma yagnas were central to Vedic worship, Agni became the primary recipient of the main oblation offered, which was Soma.

> Agni, taste this prepared oblation; accept it, Mighty One, and let it please you. Vouchsafe us good protection and kind favour: Grant to the sacrificer health and riches. (Rg Veda [1.93.7])

> Agni and Soma, cherish well our horses, and let our cows be fat who yield oblations. Grant power to us and to our wealthy patrons, and cause our holy rites to be successful. (Rg Veda [1.93.12])[9]

The love of Soma was not restricted to gods – after all, the people who partook most of the Soma during yagnas were the priests and sages. Dattatreya, the son of the great sage Atri and a great yogi himself, was considered to be one such serious imbiber of alcohol. In the Markandeya and Padma Puranas, when the gods facing defeat by the asuras in battle sought the assistance of Brihaspati, they were directed to

Dattatreya, who declines to help, saying, 'I am drinking strong drink, I have remnants of food in my mouth, nor have I subdued my senses. How is it, O gods, ye seek for victory over your enemies even from me?' (Markandeya Purana [18.23.32]).[10]

The Vedic vision of heaven as explained in the Atharva Veda is stated to be a land of *ananda* (bliss) that contains rivers of flowing wine. A later-day text describes heaven as being a place where:

> Those people of earthly world who had attained mastery over Lalita's Mantra attain the chamber of sapphire on giving up their bodies and stay there. They enjoy divine objects in the company of their womenfolk. They drink sweet wine and dance with great devotion. (Brahmanda Purana [4b.33.43–4])[11]

Thus, drinking essentially became a sacred duty. There was a ritual performed at the beginning of a famous yagna called the Vajapeya. This was the highest form of Soma Yagna involving the pressing of Soma and performed in autumn. The term 'Vajapeya' is a compound word, where *vaja* means the strengthening liquor and *peya* means that which is to be drunk. This was performed for 17 days; the yagna observed 17

*strotra*s and 17 *shastra*s. 'Five cups of Soma were offered to Indra as well as an additional 17 cups of Soma and 17 cups of Sura' to a whole host of other deities.[12]

Although used as a synonym for an intoxicant or drug, 'Soma' has multiple meanings. There are several references in the Vedas that clearly establish Soma as a gift from Ishvara; the ensuing intoxication meant giving up of one's individuality and a complete surrender to divine powers. Thus, it was used by the sages as something that made them 'see', something that expanded their minds so they could personally experience the oneness of the universe and eventually achieve a state of enlightenment.

> O Soma, being purified, bring us from all sides, for thou canst-riches and food with hero sons. (Rg Veda [5.61.6])

> Soma, pour blessings on our kine, pour forth the food that streams with milk. Increase the sea that merits laud. (Rg Veda [5.61.15])

> Chasing our foemen, driving off the godless, Soma floweth on, Going to Indra's special place. (Rg Veda [5.61.25])

> O Pavamana, hither bring great riches and destroy our foes. O Indu grant heroic fame. (Rg Veda [5.61.26])[13]

Of course, teetotalism, abstinence and moderation were entirely unknown to both the Vedic gods and sages.

According to legend, it was the overindulgence of Soma by the gods and sages that led to the creation of Sura as an antidote by the celestial physicians the Ashvins. A more likely explanation is that probably due to enthusiastic overuse, and despite its supernatural qualities, the supply of Soma began to dry up. The best Soma plants were grown in the shadows of the Hindu Kush mountains called Mujavat in present-day Afghanistan, which is said to supply 90 per cent of the world's opium. This region has always straddled trade routes between China, Central Asia, Greece and mainland Europe, and in all likelihood, Soma became a much-traded commodity. As the new settlements along the Indo-Gangetic plains were not conducive to cultivate the plant, Soma had to be purchased from these travelling traders, who then as now charged a hefty premium. Soon rendered unaffordable and scarce, it was replaced by a less potent alternative.

At any rate, the euphoria that Soma had generated soon lost its shine, due to either its high prices or adulteration or non-availability, and the sap soon metamorphosed into Soma the moon god, still libidinous and capable of inducing moon madness but without the ecstatic elation. But having experienced the elevated states induced by Soma, human beings were not going to give it up so easily.

The quest was now on for a substitute.

There is much debate on whether Sura was a beer, a distillate or an accidental drink fermented from leftover fruit. There is speculation on whether the early settlers grew enough rice and barley to actually make fermented drinks from grain. But what is evident is that whether by watching monkeys eating very ripe fruits off the trees and getting high or watching animals eating the fallen fruit off the ground and reaching a happy state there, the serious search on for a viable Soma replacement led to experimentation with fruits, grains and herbs, and Sura came into being.

Produced through fermentation and distillation, tried-and-tested processes that were already known

from the time of the Harappans, Sura also finds mention in the Rg Veda as well as the Shukla Yajur Veda, which records it as being made from a variety of local produce, showing that the Aryans had by now turned into settled agriculturists.

Even though Sura was a distillate and man-made, like much else in Hindu mythology, the Vedas and Puranas also accorded Sura a divine birth, thereby giving it religious sanction. In a delicious twist of irony, the Indian god of wine is a woman called Varuni. Also known to be the wife of the Vedic god Varuna, Varuni is the goddess of liquor and intoxication. There are, as usual, conflicting narratives about Varuni's genesis. She is supposed to be one of several valuable items that emerged during the Samudra Manthan when the oceans were churned, along with Lakshmi, the goddess of wealth; Kamadhenu, the wishing cow; precious gems as well as Amrit, the nectar of immortality.

In an alternate narrative, in the Brahmanda Purana, Lalita Mahatmya (9.66–69):