

Tradition, Oppression and Resilience is in Every Pour of this Indian Spirit

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ALAMY

Little connects the Adivasis, the hundreds of Indigenous tribal communities in the forested depths of India, other than systemic oppression, loss of land sovereignty and a spirit called mahua.

The drink is made from the tropical evergreen tree *Madhuca longifolia*, also called mahua, or *Kalpa vriksha*, which translates to “the tree of life.”

The term “Adivasi” means original inhabitants in Sanskrit. And Adivasi tribes, many which are hunter-gatherers whose roots date to 1500 B.C. and earlier, have made mahua for centuries. Their traditions are replete with stories, songs and sacred verses

about the mahua tree and its many blessings. Many consider themselves custodians of the trees and gatherers of its flowers, fruit, branches and leaves, which are used as food, currency and medicine.

During the 1858-1947 British Raj in India, the colonists denounced mahua as a dangerous intoxicant. Those who consumed it were depicted as barbarians.

Prohibitions and policies, like the Mhowra Act of 1892, were enacted to curtail its distillation and consumption. This led to covert brewing and a decline in quality. Stories of liquor poisoning continue to form part of the narrative in present-day India.

Now, mahua production is resurgent in India. But questions remain, however, about who it benefits to take mahua global, and whether a heritage liquor can lift generational oppression and provide sovereignty.



A FLOWER USED FOR MAKING MAHUA / PHOTO COURTESY OF DESMONDJI

Making mahua

Made from the *Madhuca longifolia*'s flowers, the mahua *sharaab*, or alcohol, is known for its floral notes and for being sweet, with smoky undertones. Once these bulbous, pale yellow and sap-drenched flowers are collected by hand, they're sifted through, steeped and then fermented. The fermented juices undergo distillation in pots and pans over fired embers.

To test potency and purity, mahua may be splashed onto open fire as its final test. If the open fire results in a blazing inferno, the spirit is considered to be at its optimal distillation level. Traditional mahua ranges from 10-25% alcohol by volume (abv). But most distilleries dilute mahua and sell it between 5-7.5% abv.

The effects of colonialism on mahua

Despite the spirit's medicinal and cultural role in daily Adivasi life, in the late 1800s, colonial laws placed restrictions on the mahua spirit and the mahua flowers. Mahua was classified as an intoxicant as well as a danger to public health and morality. And its consumers were painted as uncivilized, peasant outlaws.

A slew of embargoes followed suit in the 20th century. There were heavy taxes on Indigenous spirits, and the License Raj led a smear campaign that targeted the Adivasis way of life, which included mahua.

The prohibitions acted as a vehicle and scheme to line the pockets of the British Crown, as onerous provincial taxes placed on communities for consuming country alcohol.

In her article in *Economic and Political Weekly*, "On Drunken and 'Drunkenness History of Liquor in Colonial India," Indra Munshi Saldanha, a professor of sociology at Mumbai University wrote, "The extent of impingement of the colonial state upon what may be called private, collective domain is well illustrated by the policy of the British government on indigenous liquor making and drinking. ...Liquor became an instrument of exploitation of the poor."

By such restrictions, the British colonists intended to push their own agenda of foreign-made alcohol to capture the Indian liquor market.

"Alcohol was one vital commodity that was imported cheaply from Germany and Britain and competed with local industries," writes Nandini Bhattacharya from the School of Humanities, University of Dundee, Dundee, UK in The Problem of Alcohol in Colonial India (c. 1907 - 1942). "The increase in consumption was the consequence both of the government policy of using excise as a major source of revenue in all the presidencies, and of the change in taste and habits of consumption."

"These last categories of spirits [diluted/treated in India] were in competition with 'country' liquor," said Bhattacharya. "'Country' liquor itself was a generic term for distilled spirits, most commonly from the mahua flower, particularly where it was abundant in western and central India."

Today, as much as 90% of mahua flowers in India are used to make liquor, according to a report for the Chhattisgarh State of Rural Development.

Despite this, the mahua economy didn't improve when India gained independence in 1947. The Indian ruling class didn't grant Indigenous peoples like the Adivasis land sovereignty or rights to carry out their traditional lifestyle.

The Indian states that produced mahua either banned the product or limited the amount of mahua flowers and liquor that individuals can possess.

Subsequent Indian governments continue to tax, incriminate and penalize Indigenous peoples for mahua consumption made from their own forests. These regulations also restrict the times when the Adivasis can store, sell and produce certain amounts of mahua. The Adivasis are forced to sell the majority of their harvest to traders at abysmal prices, who can then store the flowers for months on end.

Each year, when they are allowed to procure a larger quantity of mahua flowers, the Adivasis buy back the flowers from these traders at inflated prices.

The geographical belt of Indigenous mahua-production in central India runs through the heartland of Maoist insurgency regions.

“For the last 50 years, Maoist guerrillas have been fighting against the Indian state to establish a communist society,” writes Alpa Shah, author of *Nightmarch: Among India's Revolutionary Guerrillas*, for the BBC. “The conflict has so far claimed at least 40,000 lives.”

A WOMAN MAKING MAHUA / PHOTO COURTESY OF DESMONDJI

Mahua today

“Things have only gotten worse for the [Adivasis] since the independence of India from British colonialism,” says Conrad Braganza, the marketing executive of Agave India. In 2018, it launched the first craft distilled mahua spirit and liqueur in India under the brand DesmondJi. “All the present policy is a bit of a hangover from the previously established puritanical and mercenary laws.”

The distillery partners with Adivasi communities in Odisha to source its mahua flowers.

Desmond Nazareth, the distillery’s founder, has lobbied for years to change the archaic policies around liquor production, distribution and sale. He faces challenges from state governments to market and sell his mahua-based beverages.

Nazareth is licensed to sell Agave India’s craft mahua in the states of Goa and Karnataka. He believes he will be able to distribute the spirit in Britain far earlier than the rest of India.

Braganza says that mahua has a beautifully subtle flavor profile, but it shouldn’t be overly acidic or sweetened. He says it pairs well with shrubs, tonic water and dessert cocktails.

In a deluge of new Indian craft gins and sizable whisky market, Nazareth champions the mahua as Indian heritage alcohol. He hopes to establish a legacy like that of Cognac in France or Scotch in Scotland.

Is mahua being exploited?

Debjeet Sarangi of Living Farms, a non-profit centered around the cultural upliftment of Kondh Adivasi community in Rayagada, Odisha, cautions against the romanticism of the narrative surrounding Adivasi mahua and their practices.

In March 2020, the Ministry of Tribal Affairs under the Central Government of India intended to launch Mahua Nutribeverage, a mahua-based alcoholic beverage with six fruit-based flavors. But the actual benefits of the government funding mahua production for the Adivasis remains to be seen. And so, Sarangi questions who actually benefits from this launch.

“Whenever we say benefit, we have only one currency in mind,” says Sarangi. “A relatively non-monetized, symbiotic relationship [between the forest and the Indigenous peoples] is getting monetized and commercialized, which is a deep concern.”

According to Sarangi, true welfare for these communities can only come through food sovereignty, agency and a voice.

Sarangi wonders if mahua’s resurgence is a sign of decolonization, or if it simply perpetuates white capitalism.

“Indigenous communities have taught us how to live responsibly without being extractive,” he says. “Can we please talk to them, learn from them what they want?”



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