

A Sip of 'O' Amid Celebrations: A Sociological Study on The Influence of Alcoholic Beverages Among Apatani Adolescents

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Abstract: *Alcoholic beverages among tribal populations are an integral part of the culture. Arunachal Pradesh known for its rich culture and food habits traditionally prepares rice beer holding socio-cultural significance for generations. This is also true for the Apatani tribe of Ziro Valley, where preparation and consumption of rice beer, locally known as 'O' is used during various ritualistic performance, social gatherings and festivals such as Murung, Myoko, and Dree etc. Today along with locally brewed alcohol, the valley is witnessing a transition towards popularization of factory-made alcohol as many wine shops and bars are being established day by day. This has utmost implications for the younger generations, especially adolescents group. Commercialization of alcohols has further introduced new dynamics leading to availability and accessibility of alcohols among adolescents. Thus, this paper deals with the evolving dynamics of alcohol consumption, its prevalence and impact on adolescents focusing on traditional festivals and modern influences. The study employs mixed-method approach with quantitative and qualitative methods, using survey as well as in-depth interviews with key informants and descriptive approach to analyse the narratives of the respondents. The findings indicate adolescents often initiate alcohol consumption at a young age due to factors such as imitating parents, siblings, as well as a coping mechanism towards loneliness and peer pressure. Though consuming alcohol among adolescents may seem like a phase that shall eventually pass, it has detrimental repercussions highlighted in the study.*

Keywords: alcoholic beverages, adolescents, celebrations, Ziro Valley, Arunachal Pradesh

INTRODUCTION:

In tribal society, celebration especially during traditional festivals reflects the cultures and traditions of a tribal life. It is a way for the community to connect with nature, and deities and bring prosperity in terms of health, wealth and peace within the community. People come together and are reminded of their ancestors, and through socialization pass the traditional knowledge from one generation to another and celebrate life in general. These celebrations also include large quantities of traditionally brewed alcoholic beverages, of which small quantity is offered to appease the deities, though it can differ among different communities along with other food items such as rice and meats. Among majority of the cultural groups around the world, alcohol is an element used in some form or the other (Bacon, 1976). This is true for the tribal groups in particular whose knowledge and usage of alcohol is an age-old tradition. It has been present since the beginning of human civilization to the fact that it is considered a societal and cultural 'artefact' (Mandelbaum, 1965, p. 281).

In the midst of serene mountainous of Arunachal Pradesh, resides the Apatani tribe, in the valley of Ziro situated in Lower Subansiri District between 26°55' and 28°21' North and 92°40' and 94°21' East. Among whom locally brewed alcohol or 'O' is often used embraced with enormous cultural connotation. It has been part of their socio-cultural landscape and often seen as a part of socialization process.

Decades back O was offered as a symbolic gesture to welcome the guests at home during any hour of the day, similar to modern days' tea or coffee. Other than that it is used in various rituals performed by shamans to do away with bad omens, to correct the degrading health of clan members, to bring prosperity in the clan or among certain families etc. without which any ritualistic performance is deemed incomplete.

In major festivals of Apatanis like Dree (agricultural festival), Myoko (socio-religious festival), Murung (socio-religious festival), religious performances like SubuTatii, Nyipo Aping (childbirth ceremony), Mida, Ellie Bani (events of the marriage system) and funerals etc. The use of O is inevitable.

Though major festivals like Murung, Myoko and Dree are celebrated in the month of January, March and July respectively, the preparation process starts way ahead of the actual event, some as early as two to three months prior to each of these festivals. Preparation of alcoholic beverages is among these activities where O should be kept handy by the host members at all times to serve the community members. And therefore, approximately half of the year is spent in serving locally brewed alcohol in the name of celebration. The issue is concerning because regular consumption of

alcohol can lead adolescents towards the circle of alcoholism.

This is concerning for the young individuals as they also take part in such celebrations and excessive consumption of alcohol goes unnoticed. Especially during Myoko, young people like adolescents find a way to consume alcohol as individuals are allowed to go to houses of the host village and are served with alcohol, meats, and rice regardless of their age and gender. Further, Dree today can be seen more of a festival meant for commercialization of commodities including local crafts, attires, jewels, food and both locally brewed as well as factory made alcoholic beverages. Adolescents with their peer group though underage easily walk into the stalls and buy alcohols as most vendors also look for profits during this festival. Therefore, this study seeks to explore how acceptance of alcohol as a part of socio-cultural and religious tradition has influenced adolescents into an early engagement with alcohol. The attitudes and behaviours towards alcohol among Apatani adolescents (aged 13-19 years) of Ziro Valley and its broader implications are also studied. The study aims to explore how traditional celebration can act as a passage for individuals to develop the habits of alcoholism. Further, approaches to mitigate and reduce the harmful consequences of alcohol use among tribal groups of Apatani adolescents are discussed by the authors.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Today more and more young people are falling into the addiction of alcohol. According to the study by Nadkarni (2022), alcohol consumption is believed to start as early as the onset of adolescence. World Health Organization (2024) report states globally, 7% of the total population, aged 15 years and above are reported with alcohol use disorder, an estimation of 400 million people.

India with the largest adolescent (aged 10-19 years) population with over 253 million people, consuming alcohol starts as early as 13 years of age (Guruaj et al., 2016). The WHO (2024) also suggested alcohol use has more negative effects on young people than on older adults as these groups are biologically and psychologically more vulnerable and therefore needs special attention. The reason why alcoholism is concerning is because adolescents who start drinking at the age below 12 years are more likely to experience Alcohol Use Disorder (AUD), more likely to be chain smokers, and indulge in other forms of substance abuse, and risky sexual behaviours leading to unsafe pregnancy. Stress, anxiety, depression, aggression, constant conflicts at home, accidents and injuries are strongly linked to alcohol consumption (Wen et al., 2012; Zhou et al., 2013). Other problem with alcoholism is the life threatening risks, for instance, suicide, which is found to be the leading cause of death among Indian adolescents (WHO, 2024). This illustrates how alcohol consumption is a serious health concern affecting all ages of life, especially adolescents.

Moreover, research on some of the Northeastern states of India shows the number of alcohol abuse is high as homemade alcoholic drinks along with commercially available drinks are easily accessible. Especially the number of young people indulging in alcoholism is growing to an extent which requires serious consideration. Medhi et al. (2006) in their study on young individuals of Dibrugarh district of Assam found that adolescents in the age group of 15-19 often consumed alcohol. In Arunachal Pradesh, the age for early initiation of alcohol use among young people was below the age of 10 years (Chaturvedi, 1997). More studies

suggested that Naga adolescents mostly consume alcohol out of all illicit substances (Nuken & Singh, 2013) which further extends to the youth of Manipur and other states of North-east India (Indira, 2014). This shows that alcohol is one of the most commonly consumed drinks among the adolescents of Northeast India.

METHODOLOGY

Data collection for the present study was done via field study by using a mixed-method approach including a Quantitative Survey to assess alcohol consumption patterns and associated behaviours as well as Qualitative Interviews to gather insights into adolescents' perception of the use of alcohol and its implications. Data were also collected from secondary sources such as books, articles, journals, government documents available online etc. A total of 181 adolescents in the age group of 13-19 were selected for this study from Ziro.

RESULTS

Adolescent Attitude and Perception towards Alcohol:

Adolescents from the age group of 13-19 years were randomly selected in this study. A total of 181 adolescent respondents from the Apatani community were selected, of which the highest age group were older adolescents of 16 and 17 years, 25 per cent each, that is 46 out of 181, followed by 15 years (22 per cent) and 14 years (13 per cent). 7 per cent (were 13 years, 6 per cent were 18 years and the least number were 19 years (2 per cent). Of these 181 respondents, males were in the majority comprising 47 per cent and females were 53 per cent of the total population.

The adolescents respondents were asked about the type of family they live in, majority of the respondents which is 47 per cent reported to live in a nuclear family, followed by 32 per cent of the total respondents live in a joint family. Rest 21 per cent of the respondents live in a single type family, that is, either with their mother, father or their relative which is 10 per cent, 8 per cent and 3 per cent respectively.

To understand the attitudes and perceptions of adolescents towards alcohol use, they were asked whether they felt drinking alcohol is 'okay' for people their age. The majority of the respondents which is 35 per cent and 15 per cent stated they strongly disagreed and 0 disagreed with the question respectively. However, 31 per cent agreed that it is okay for people of their age to drink once in a while as it does not cause any harm to anyone. And 5 per cent strongly agreed with the question, making a total of 37 per cent of respondents who agreed it is okay to consume alcohol irrespective of whether they consume alcohol or not. And the rest 14 per cent responded they were not sure if consuming alcohol is okay or not for their age group. This highlights the respondents who agreed that alcohol consumption is 'okay' are nearly equal to the respondents who did not agree.

Pattern of Alcohol Consumption among Adolescents within specific Age Groups:

Adolescents were asked whether they consume or have tried alcohol in their lifetime, to which 45% agreed to the question, of which 28 per cent are male and 17 per cent are female. A significant 42 per cent of adolescents answered they consume alcohol during festivals like Myoko and Dree and other social gatherings and 3 per cent of them reported they consume alcohol on an everyday basis. The study also indicates that out of these adolescent respondents who agreed to consume alcohol, the majority of them were in the period

of middle to older adolescence, meaning they fall under the age bracket.

Further, a significant number, 14 per cent was 17 years old of which 2 per cent agreed to drink alcohol every day, followed by 10 per cent were 15 years of which 1 per cent drank daily as reported by the respondents, 9 per cent were 16 year old, 5 per cent were 18 year old, 3 per cent were 14 year old of which 1 per cent stated to drink daily, 2 per cent were 19 years and 2 per cent was of 13 years. This shows that middle-aged and older adolescents were more into consumption of alcohol. Thus, the data though indicates majority of the adolescents do not engage in alcohol consumption, however, 45 per cent of them do consume alcoholic beverages which for an age group of 13-19 years is still concerning.

Alcohol consumption by Family Members and its influence

A child is introduced to alcohol starting from its birth when parents dip their finger in O and make their young ones taste it regardless of their gender; this process is known as alyo-yatü/algün ulu la. This is done because alcohol is believed to prevent the formation of blisters in the mouth of the baby. As they grow up parents often allow adolescents to take sips of alcohol from their drinking glass, however, this also depends on the family dynamics.

As consumption of alcohol has been persistent traditionally among the Apatanis, question was asked if any of their family members drink alcohol. A majority of the total respondents, which is 51 per cent agreed that their family members consume alcohol and the rest 48 per cent responded none of their family members was engaged in alcohol consumption. This indicates most of the adolescents were familiar with and observed alcohol consumption in their close social setting of primary group.

Adolescents were asked what made them try alcohol, to which majority 61 per cent of the adolescents responded their parents made them taste alcohol for the first time. Additionally, a significant 35 per cent of the respondents replied they consume alcohol because they saw their parents do it. Whereas 27 per cent stated they were copying their friends who would drink in festivals as well as during social gatherings and 20 per cent of the respondents reported their friends forced them to try alcohol. A small 5 per cent of the respondents reported they were imitating their siblings who engage in alcohol consumption.

Regarding other reasons to consume alcohol, respondents reported their friends forced them to try alcohol, they were copying their friends, imitating their siblings who engage in alcohol consumption. Additionally, parents not being able to make time for their for their children can also lead them to engage in such activities. Adolescents also replied they tried alcohol as they felt lonely because their parents were too busy and did not give them proper attention.

Furthermore, the increasing number of wine shops, bars, clubs and restaurants that sell alcohol in the valley is concerning. The commercialization of alcohol is at the rise which is also evident during the Dree festival where O is filled in factory-made bottles as well as in traditionally made bamboo mugs and openly displayed in the stalls. Individuals are open to buying them with no age restriction in particular which is seen as an opportunity by adolescents to buy alcoholic beverages. Though this behaviour is expected during festive

time, it can perpetuate the cycle of drinking which can lead to early initiation of alcoholism and increase its frequency over time.

DISCUSSION

In many tribal cultures, alcohol is not merely a recreational substance but is often interwoven in its socio-cultural, religious and community bonding. Therefore, the use of alcohol has always been an integral part of tribal culture since time immemorial. The present study found most adolescent respondents were oriented with alcohol by their parents. Parents introduce their children to alcohol during celebrations or even regular family gatherings, reinforcing the idea that drinking as a socially acceptable behaviour. Rose et al. (2015) in their study also stated that adolescents in tribal settings often initiate alcohol use under the influence of peers and family. Furthermore, as adolescents observe their peers and siblings consuming alcohol, they are likely to imitate these behaviours to fit in or gain acceptance within their social circles as stated by the Bandura's Social Learning Theory (1977). The present study also found adolescents were copying their parents, peers, siblings and some were even forced to consume alcohol by their peers.

Further, festivals where locally brewed alcohol is used in abundance can have unforeseen consequences. As Robert Merton states in his book, 'Social Theory and Social Structure' social situations can have two functions, (a) manifest functions, which are functions that are socially intended and recognized and (b) latent functions, which is unintended and unrecognized "social and psychological consequences" (p.122). The manifest function of festivals like Murung, Myoko, and Dree is to appraise the spirits and deities for community welfare and superior harvest etc., however, on the other hand, one of the many latent functions is that along with elder members of the community, young people also take part in these festivals like adolescents making them engage in alcohol consumption.

It is during these festivals that even parents if not completely but are partially okay with their adolescent consuming O in small quantity. More so, month-long celebration including the preparation process for these festivals gives space for adolescents to indulge in alcoholism which can further the potential of risky behaviours associated with alcohol. In addition, consistent exposure to events where adults drink all the time can inculcate the same behaviours among adolescents, as mentioned by psychologist Albert Bandura (1977) social behaviours are learned through the act of observation and imitation of others' behaviour.

Alcohol consumption as a means of socializing or coping with loneliness was also found, which is potentially due to limited recreational opportunities leading them to idleness, and more susceptible to peer pressure. Additionally the study also found lack of parental supervision, lack of parent-adolescent communication, and parents not able to make time for their young ones can also leave adolescents vulnerable to engaging in risky behaviours like alcoholism.

Further, when social norms accept the production and consumption of alcohol, access to alcohol becomes easier, individuals more susceptible to alcohol use disorder (AUD). In such cases keeping them away from alcohol once they are an addict becomes difficult no matter what interventions are considered by the stakeholders. This not only jeopardises the present health of the adolescent but the future of the young people and this will require more than formal

treatment to eradicate such nuance. Thus, in tribal societies, where alcohol holds cultural significance, the dynamics influencing adolescent drinking behaviours is prominent. Although today among Apatanis the parents are more aware than they were traditionally regarding alcoholism and its consequences.

CONCLUSION

Traditionally brewed alcoholic beverages are part and partial of the social landscape of the tribal society, particularly among Apatanis, it remains an integral unit of their tribal culture. Though commercially available alcohols are easily accessible these days, various measures are taken by the Apatani clan members so that their culture remains intact. Some instances are restricting the use of commercial alcohols such as wine, beer, vodka, rum, whiskey etc. in festivals like Murung, and Myoko but only locally brewed alcohol. Additionally, increasing number of wine shops in the valley makes commercial alcohols available and easily accessible.

Without a doubt, adolescents are more vulnerable to harmful consequences associated with alcohol than people of older age groups, especially once they step into the cycle of alcoholism. In a society where alcohol use holds immense cultural significance, its negative consequences can be often overlooked, impacting individuals as well as the entire society at all times of life. However, we cannot do away with the fact that for a tribal society like the Apatanis where traditional alcohol, especially locally brewed alcohol is an integral part of their socio-cultural and religious landscape. Therefore, the study concludes by emphasizing festive seasons and their prolonged celebrations give a passage for adolescents to indulge in alcoholism, though festivals and alcoholism may not be directly associated.

Thus, it is important that socio-cultural norms regarding alcohol misuse is strengthened. Further awareness regarding excessive alcohol consumption should be widespread among the community members which will require collaborative efforts from various stakeholders such as community members, the youths of Apatanis, Non-Government Organisations (NGOs), Self-Help Groups (SHGs) as well as medical experts. Adolescents as well as family members should be educated early on the negative consequences of alcoholism and its associated risky behaviours that have the potential to ruin the well-being of young people and their future opportunities.

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