

Working Class and Politics of Drinking in Bengal (1856-1900)

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Abstract:

In colonial Bengal, being the victims of economic exploitation, the working class's idea of drinking pleasure faced the moral question of the Indian reformists, Europeans and Christian missionaries. These three groups presented three perceptions on the drinking pleasure of the working class; however, all these narratives indicated that excessive drinking led this particular class into the paths of immorality and financial distress. The paper, while revisiting all these narratives, especially colonial excise policies, finds out patterns of drinking practice of the working class and the reasons for changing the perception of the society on working-class drinking and redefining drinking pleasure of the working class in the nineteenth century Bengal.

Keywords: *Working Class, Drinking, Colonialism, Nineteenth-century, Bengal, Plantation, Excise policy.*

The emergence of Kolkata as an important business centre and the establishment of jute mills, coal mines, and expansion of tea plantations in different parts of Bengal during the first half of the nineteenth century drove many people to the urban centres and other newly established workplaces for better livelihood and opportunities. These migrated people formed a new group, called the working class, and gradually their identity became prominent with the formation of workers' organizations and their agitations. Meanwhile, the Colonial Government passed the Factory Acts of 1881 and 1891¹ along with other labour related acts² for the betterment of the working class and to safeguard the colonial interest. However, all these labour acts remained silent on many of the social issues related to the working class, especially, on the moral and financial degradation of the workers due to drinking as posed by the social reformers and philanthropic Europeans. The intemperance among the workers, as the social reformers and temperance activists

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identified, was continuously increasing from 1860 due to colonial excise policies. The study, while looking through colonial excise policies, first discusses reasons and patterns of the drinking of the working class, the perceptions of colonial government and Indians on working-class drinking and then highlights the reason of scrutinizing drinking practice of the working class by the different section of the colonial society and if these scrutinization helped the working-class in the search of pleasure. The paper, to trace the drinking pattern and politics of drinking of the working-class, chooses four labour sectors, i.e., the migrated labourers in the Kolkata, the labourers in the tea gardens, the railway workers and the mill workers.

Working-class and pleasure of drinking

Migrated labourers in Kolkata started drinking due to the lack of any other entertainment in the world of ‘sanitise culture’ of the city. While migrating to the new urban centres like Kolkata, the migrants brought their traditional culture and entertainments, like *jatra*³, *panchali*⁴, and *kabigan*⁵ with them. These popular cultures, initially, provided the working class with a source of entertainment and an opportunity to mingle with the same class people. Eventually, after 1840, these traditional art forms got marginalised with the emergence of the ‘sanitised culture’, controlled by the newly educated middle class. This marginalization of popular art form had forced the poor labourers to search for new entertainment.⁶ Availability of cheap liquor and consumption of alcohol among the upper-class had encouraged the labourers to emulate them. Mostly, these working-class people gathered in groups at toddy shops for drinking and entertainment. Kaliprasannay Sinha in *Hutom Pyanchar Naksha*⁷ has described the ambience of a toddy shop, overcrowded with working-class people on a busy market day, situated at Chitpore Road. He describes⁸,

The sweepers, now done with the removing garbage, came to the watering hotel and started drinking rum in large swigs. They began an argument with the undertakers on the relative superiority of their professions. The wine-sellers, who acted as the mediator, now tried to please the undertaker by ruling that his vocation was superior to that of the sweeper and now conceded that the sweeper’s profession was the greatest. Drummers, funeral

makers, hog-keepers and palanquin-bearers took sides in this great-war on the lines of the battle of Kurukshetra. The sudden arrival of a group of dancers, exponents of *jhumur* or *gadai*, had the effect of pouring cold water on the heated debate. The liquor shop bubbled with life.

This description of the toddy shop highlighted how toddy became a source of entertainment for the working class, how sometimes people of lower-class committed crimes under the influence of drunkenness, but at the same time, he admitted that drinking culture and drinking places allowed the working class to maintain the spontaneity of life.

The establishment of mills, expansion of tea gardens, and construction of railway tracks in the different parts of Bengal led to the gathering of workers in these areas. A large number of coolies from Bihar and Bengal migrated to tea gardens of Darjeeling and Assam with the expansion of tea cultivation from 1851. These coolies followed the custom of drinking *pachwai* during the festivals after shifting to the plantation area. The colonial government and the planters turned that custom into a habit by providing liquor to the coolies as a stimulator and reward for overtime.⁹ Besides, these coolies were also provided rum to maintain their health in the cold and wet weather.¹⁰ At the initial phase of the plantation, coolies' pleasure of drinking was dependent on the wish of the tea-garden planters and colonial government. Later, coolies regularly became drunkard on the weekend and absentee on Monday without concerned about the wish of the authority. Expansion of the out-still system and availability of the liquor at the vicinity of the tea gardens turned coolies into drunkards.

After the formation of the separate Assam province in 1880 and the growing impact of capitalism on the plantation and colonial administration, as Nitin Varma argues, changed the perception on the drinking practice of the coolies. The tea planters, under the influence of the new plantation economy and capitalism, posed the question on the drinking practice of the coolies.¹¹ The influence of capitalism and desire of ruling the world tea market by competing China changed the perception of Assam tea planters on working-class leisure. The tea planters identified the drinking pleasure of the coolies as a violation of the 'time-work-discipline' method of the tea gardens.¹² These tea planters

took the help of the medical science and idea of temperance to oppose the drinking pleasure of the coolies and colonial aim of increasing more liquor revenue.¹³ These changes in Assam also impacted the tea garden managers of Darjeeling, and the tea planters of Darjeeling argued that the coolies became addicted to liquor for two reasons. First, the aboriginals of Darjeeling, *Paharis*, consumed country liquor to survive in the cold and wet weather, and the close association of the tea-gardens' coolies with these hill tribes contaminated drinking practice among coolies too. Second, the opening of the government *out-still* liquor-shops near to the tea gardens also attracted the coolies towards drinking.¹⁴ Under the *out-still* distillery system, the production of liquor, the price and strength of alcohol were determined by the Contractor. The Government had hardly control over the production of this kind of distillery. Absence of any government supervision had led these distillery and liquor shop owners to increase the strength of the liquor and turned the coolies into addicted and habitual drunkards. The managers of the tea garden were continuously informing the government about the growing intemperance in the area. One of the manager of a tea-garden in Darjeeling had written to the government that the local government officers had pressured them (tea-garden managers) to open a liquor shop in the estates. Under this circumstance, the coolies of tea gardens in Darjeeling would get more opportunity to drink.

Thomas Evan, a Baptist missionary of the Santhal Parghana, highlighted the drinking practice of railway workers of Jamalpore railway workshop. He said that most of the people of the town were artisans and workmen, who earned high and regular wages. This population regularly spent a proportion of their wage on the liquor. Therefore, the number of convictions for the drunkenness in the area was increased. Further, Evan pointed out that drunkenness also spread among servants for household work and turned them absentee.¹⁵

Establishment of jute mills opened up a large number of job opportunities at Kolkata and its vicinity; thus, a huge number of labourers migrated in these areas. Such a mill was opened in Gurrifa.¹⁶ The inhabitants of Gurrifa and its adjoining villages, while giving the petition to the Lieutenant Governor of Bengal, mentioned the annoying

behaviour of the mill workers. They argued that these millworkers spent almost their entire salary on liquor and wrote;¹⁷

[T]he drunken mob behave most abominably in the public thoroughfares, singing indecent songs and taking all manner of liberty with the travellers who come across them, and breaches of the peace have frequently been the result.

This perception of the inhabitants of Gurrifa indicates, first, the fear of outsiders and second, identifying the expression of joy and pleasure of the working class as un-cultural while following the ‘sanitised cultural’ norms of city-space.

Parimal Ghosh shows that the establishment of the jute mills led to the formation of slums for the coolies. The poor living conditions of these slums and lack of any other entertainments drove these coolies in the path of drinking and consumption of other narcotics.¹⁸ The *Rangpur Dik Prakash* of the 7th July 1864 published an article on the pattern of growing intemperance among the low-working class and its effect. The article argued that most of the low-class labourers with small payment spent most of their salary on liquor due to its high price. Therefore, the family members of the labourer became the sufferers. However, the article also suggested that the only way to solve this was to decrease the price of liquor and the number of drunkards as well.¹⁹ Along with the moral issue, the economic effects of drunkenness also became the important focal point of this newspaper article.

These descriptions of the labourers’ drinking practice indicate that there were two narratives on the drinking practice and patterns of a different groups of labourers. The first narrative, produced by the colonial government, tea planters, Christian missionaries and common people, argues that the working-class were habitual drinkers. Besides, the working-class found alcohol consumption as the easiest mode of entertainment in the new workplaces and increased wages along with *out-still* liquor shops enabled them to spend money on liquor. However, the second narrative on the drinking of the working-class, produced by incorporating the views of labourers, highlighted an alternative notion of working-class drinking. According to the workers of collieries, alcohol consumption made them energetic, increased their work efficiency

and enabled them to earn more. Further, they believed that liquor would improve their immune system and protect them from diseases like fever, cholera and other diseases which affected the teetotallers.²⁰ The coolies also argued that the workers usually drank on holidays which did not affect their work, but the manager of the collieries wanted to use the working capacity of the coolies without any interruption. Thus, the managers or contractors of the collieries were against any leisure enjoyed by the workers. One of the excise reports of 1906 highlighted this situation. The report says,²¹

The consumption of any particular kind of alcoholic drink does not interfere seriously with the consumer's power to resume work next day. Coolies have the opinion that liquor enables them to work better. As a matter of fact, in the colliery tracts, the coolies are exempted from work on Sunday and Monday. The coolies are generally paid on Sunday, which is spent in heavy drinking; and as a holiday. It is likely that the colliery managers are inclined to minimise the evil in order to prevent any sort of interference which might affect the content of their labours.

Besides, the drinking practice and liquor-shops provided the culturally marginalised working-class a chance of assimilation in the unfamiliar landscape of city life. Changes can be observed in the first kind of narratives on the working-class and drinking with the socio-economic changes in society. The government, however, identified workers as drunkards and denied the second narrative on working-class drinking with the establishment of the linkage between the *out-still system* and the working-class drinking practice. Except for Kaliprasanya Sinha, every report on the working-class drinking identifies the workers as drinkers. However, this government initiative of identifying workers as drunkards and protecting the government's excise policy was soon challenged by different groups of people.

Changing perception on working-class drinking

The drinking practice of the working class was closely scrutinised by the missionaries, Indian nationalists and Europeans from economic, cultural, moral and nationalist perspectives. These perspectives revealed different dimensions of the drinking practice and two stands could broadly be brought out from this scrutiny, i.e., first, the views of the

Indians, missionaries and Europeans and second, the views of the colonial government on the working-class drinking.

The first criticism on alcohol consumption of the working class came from the tea garden managers. H. Bald, a manager of a Darjeeling tea garden, wrote that the drunkenness led these coolies towards gambling. These coolies carried on these two vices, drinking and gambling, all night long; therefore, they became incapable of work in the daytime. Further, Bald mentioned that coolies went to the market to buy supplies of food for the week on Sundays (the market day), and while returning from the market, these coolies got drunk and spent the bulk of their salary on drinks. The effect of drinking remained on the next day. As a result, the employer found a significant number of absentees in the tea gardens and faced a significant loss.²² Besides, these drunken coolies violated law and order under the influence of alcohol, creating a disturbance within the tea-garden premises. Many of the coolies died due to excess drinking. While reporting all these incidents related to labourers' drinking, the tea-garden managers wrote to the government that intemperance in the tea-garden areas increased due to government excise policy and opening of numerous *Out-stills* at the vicinity of tea-gardens. Thus, the managers demanded the reduction in the number of *Out-stills*²³ and the liquor shops in the vicinity of the tea-gardens.²⁴

The missionaries, working in the Darjeeling districts also became vocal about the drunkenness of the tea gardens coolies, wrote letters to the government and appealed to the tea-garden managers to look into the issue. Some of the tea-garden managers collaborated with the local missionaries and founded the Darjeeling Temperance Associations in 1885.²⁵ Later this society was affiliated to the Anglo-Indian Temperance Association. The president of the Darjeeling Temperance Association, Mr D. Sutherland, and its secretary, Rev. A. Turbull were among the first temperance activist who joined hand with the tea garden planters, organised a successful agitation against the *Out-still System* and working for controlling the drunkenness among the coolies.²⁶ The tea-garden managers also sought the government's intervention in controlling liquor sale while asking changes in the

excise policy, especially in the license system and requesting the government to stop the liquor traffic from Nepal.²⁷

Along with the missionaries, social organizations like the Brahmo Samaj were also preaching the temperance while highlighting the condition of the working class. Among the Brahmo Samaj activists, Keshab Chandra Sen took the first initiative to spread the message of temperance along with the agenda of social and moral reform. He formed the Indian Reform Association on 11th November 1870. This Society organised meetings to discuss the idea of temperance, and the number of labourers attended them. In 1871, such a meeting was organised in Baranagar²⁸. Next year the organization started to publish a temperance magazine.²⁹

The nationalist leaders also addressed the issue of growing intemperance among the working class at the end of the nineteenth century and identified British excise policy along with the exploitative nature of the British colonialism for the moral and economic degradation of the workers. In the presidential address of the fifth National Social Conference, held in Kolkata on 29th December 1901, Raja Binoya Krishna Bahadur argued that the consumption of intoxicating drugs, especially the consumption of liquor, was increasing among the workers. He also mentioned that the workers' families suffered financially due to the changes in the liquor consumption patterns and spending of a large proportion of wage on the liquor. Further, the speaker promoted the idea of temperance and the notion of social purity among the working class. This proposal was supported by nationalists, like Bipin Chandra Pal and Mr Jadunath Mazumdar.³⁰ Common people, along with the reformers and political leaders, also started to write petitions to the government against the growing intemperance, the spread of the *Out-still System*, availability of the substandard liquor at a low price and the opening of new liquor shops. For instance, petitioners of Gurrifa³¹ and its adjoining villages assumed that the new construction work in the area would bring more employment and prosperity to the younger generation, and encourage these young people to become drunkards.³² Thus, they sought government intervention in the matter.

Despite these criticisms, the colonial excise policy remained the same, and the government did not try to control the growing intemperance among the working class for

the economic benefit of the empire. In reply to the nationalist and missionary criticisms, first, the government denied the fact that spreading of the *Out-still System* was the reason for growing intemperance among the workers. Second, the government argued that the improvement in the economic condition also encouraged the workers to spend money on liquor, but there was a decrease in the number of convicts for drunkenness.³³ Additionally, the report of the Lieutenant Governor of Bengal, published in the year 1884, also supported the fact that the consumption of liquor among the people increased not only for the establishment of the *Out-still System* but also due to the operation of social, moral and religious changes, increase the purchasing power and cheapening of liquor.³⁴ The Collector of Nadia, while reporting to the government about the growing drunkenness among the people, had remarked that the increase in the wage encouraged 'lower order' people to consume more liquor.

The government's contempt for the nationalist, missionary and planters' criticisms of the colonial excise policy reflected through the opening of new *Out-stills* in the Tea-Districts and other parts of Bengal. Besides, the introduction of the auction of liquor licence policy to the highest bidder had increased the number of liquor shops as well as the flow of liquor after 1883 in the tea-districts, especially in the vicinity of the tea gardens. This resulted in the growing intemperance among the coolies.³⁵ Besides, the government policy of opening up new out-stills at new workplaces in Bengal aimed to turn workers into disciplined drinkers while stopping them from having illicit liquor or homemade *pachwai* and ensured the flow of the excise revenue to the government treasury. These policies of the colonial government to promote drunkenness among the workers changed under the pressure of the House of Commons, the report of the Hemp and Drug Commission and the nationalist leaders during the last decade of the nineteenth century.

The change in the colonial stand resulted in the identification of the working class as drunkard and drinking of the working class as the source of crime with the help of the 1901 census report. Bengal's Board of Revenue reported that the drinking population increased both in Kolkata and Chota Nagpur during 1903-04 due to the increased number of mills and opening of the collieries respectively.³⁶ While identifying

the workers as drunkards, the colonial government once again denied responsibility for promoting intemperance among the workers and bypassing all the criticism of Indians and missionaries. Soon under the pressure of the Government of India, the Government of Bengal was forced to accept the missionaries' proposition of Local Opinion system in 1908 and changed the liquor policy in 1909. The introduction of the local opinion system forced the government to seek the permission from the residents of the area before the opening of any liquor shop, but this policy also hardly brought any changes in the life of the workers.

Conclusion

The paper is arguing that the pleasure of alcohol consumption of the working class turned into cultural, moral and political conflict grounds for different groups of people, but this conflict failed to bring any change in the life of the working class during the second half of the nineteenth century. Drinking, initially, became popular among the labourers due to the marginalization of the popular folk culture by the 'sanitise culture', working-class' displacement from the aboriginal places and isolation during the migration in the urban centres and other workplaces. The marginalization of the folk and popular culture could not offer any other entertainment to these workers. Besides, some groups of labourers claimed that consumption of liquor made them energetic, increasing their immune system. Besides, violation of colonial instruction on drinking by the working class of Indian could also be considered as subaltern resistance against the colonial interference in the everyday life of Indians. However, this violation of the order or discipline regarding drinking, i.e., what to drink, when to drink and how much to drink by the workers led the colonial authority, planters to intervene.

The colonial government used labourers' drinking pleasure to generate revenue. In this process, first, the colonial government identified drinking as a regular activity of the workers; and second, opened new liquor shops at the vicinity of the working places while claiming to make the working class as 'disciplined drinkers'. Ultimately the colonial excise policy had turned the working class into 'habitual drunkards'. This change in the drinking practice of the workers encouraged the missionaries, Indian social reformers, temperance activists and nationalist leaders to identify the economic

exploitation of the colonialism and moral degradation of the workers. They argued that due to the colonial excise policy, the workers became drunkards, faced moral degradation and financial problems. However, these criticisms failed to change colonial excise policy or to turn the workers into teetotallers.

In the process of scrutinizing drinking practice of the working-class from the economic and moral ground, the society failed to trace the reason for choosing drinking as at most pleasure by the working-class. The absence of an alternative mode of entertainment, an increase in wage and easy availability of cheap liquor due to the colonial excise policy made the workers addicted to liquor consumption. The colonial government identified the workers as habitual drunkards in the census report of 1901 to bypass all allegations imposed on the colonial excise policy by the missionaries and Indians. This colonial step to identify the working class as a drunkard had hardly left any scope to improve their living condition during the colonial era and failed to address the actual reason of working-class drunkenness, i.e., marginalization of popular culture. Neither the colonial government paid attention to it, nor the temperance activists, or the missionaries or the Indian politicians addressed this cultural lacuna during the late nineteenth century.

Notes and References

- ¹ Both of these Factory Acts addressed the working hours of the children and women in the factories and looked into the living condition of the workers.
- ² Several plantation acts, like the Plantation Labour and the Inland Emigration Act of 1882, the Assam Labour and Emigration Act of 1901, the Madras Planters' Labour Act of 1903 were passed to protect the interest of the planters and secure the profit of Indian colonial government.
- ³ An art form acted before a large group of people.
- ⁴ Story of the divine bodies has been written in the poetic form.
- ⁵ A performing art, where two poets verbally contest before their patrons and large gathering of audiences.
- ⁶ Banerjee, Sumanta, *The Parlour and The Streets*, Calcutta, Seagull, 1998, p.64.
- ⁷ This is one of the old and authentic books on the culture of nineteenth-century Kolkata.
- ⁸ Sinha, Kaliprasannay, *Sketches by Hootum the Owl* (Hutom Payachar Naksha) translated by Chitralekha Basu, Kolkata, Samya, 2012, p. 253.
- ⁹ Varma, Nitin, "For the Drink of the Nation", Macrcel van der Linden & Prabhu p. Mahapatra (eds.), *Labour Matters* India, Tulika Books, 2009, pp. 296-299

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- 10 *Ibid.*, p.307
- 11 *Ibid.*, p.300
- 12 *Ibid.*
- 13 *Ibid.*, p. 311.
- 14 Collection of papers, Relating to the Excise Administration of India, Reprinted, March 1890, Letter no. 15, pp. 287-290, NAI
- 15 Sinha, *Ibid.*
- 16 This place is near Naihati, a suburb town near Kolkata.
- 17 December 1883, *A Proceeding*, Financial Department/Head: Excise (F/Ex), Coll no. 12, File no. 39, West Bengal State Archives, (WBSA).
- 18 Ghosh, Parimal, *Colonialism, class and a History of the Calcutta Jute Milllhands 1880-1930*, Orient Longman Limited, Hyderabad, 2000, p.136-39.
- 19 Native News Paper Report (NNPR), Bengal, 27th July 1864, No. 3123.
- 20 December 1884, *A Proceeding*, F/ Ex, File no.2, collection no. 1, Appendix B, WBSA
- 21 March 1906, *A Proceeding*, Financial Department/Head: Separate Revenue (F/SR), nos. 24, File no. E1-c2. 2, Letter No. 365E, Dated, Darjeeling, 5th January 1906, WBSA.
- 22 Collection of papers, Relating to the Excise administration of India, Reprinted, March 1890, Letter no. 15, pp. 287-290, National Archives of India (NAI).
- 23 Under this distillery system, the production of liquor, the price and strength of liquor were determined by the contractor. The government had hardly control over the production of this kind of distillery.
- 24 Collection of papers, Relating to the Excise administration of India, Reprinted, March 1890, Letter no. 11, p. 274, NAI.
- 25 This was one of the earliest affiliated societies of the Anglo-Indian Temperance Association.
- 26 *Abkari*, No. 11, October 1892, London.
- 27 Collection of papers, Relating to the Excise administration of India, Reprinted, March 1890., Letter no. 11, p. 274, NAI.
- 28 A Sub-urban city, situated near to Kolkata.
- 29 Mukhopadhy, Arun Kumar, *Keshub Chunder Sen*, Delhi, Publication Division, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Government of India, 1992, p. 21.
- 30 *Abkari*, No 48. April 1902, p. 51.
- 31 This place is near Naihati, a suburb town near Kolkata.
- 32 Collection of papers, Relating to the Excise Administration of India, Reprinted, March 1890, Letter no. 15, pp. 287-290, NAI.
- 33 December 1883, *A Proceeding*, F/ Ex, Collection no. 12, File no. 41, WBSA.
- 34 December 1884, *A Proceeding*, F/ Ex, File no.2, collection no. 1, WBSA.
- 35 February, 1889, *A Proceeding*, F/ Ex, File no. E 102, Serial No. 1-4, Appendix B, WBSA.
- 36 Board of Revenue, Lower province of Bengal. Report on the Administration of the Excise Department in the Lower Province of Bengal for the year 1903-04, Printed by the Superintendent, Government Press, 1905.