

The Role of Socio-Religious Movements in Shaping Traditional Liquor Consumption in the Tribes

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Abstract

This study explores the transformation of drinking culture among tribal communities in South Gujarat, focusing on the impact of religious movements and social reforms. Traditionally, alcohol consumption held cultural significance among these communities; however, external influences have brought about notable change. The objective of the research is to understand how movements such as Christianity, the Sat Kaiwal Sect, the Sati Pati Sect, the Swadhyaya Parivar, and the Moksha Margis have contributed to this transformation. Employing historical research methods alongside field visits to the Tapi district, the study gathered data through interviews, observations, and examination of relevant literature. The findings reveal that these movements have consistently encouraged alcohol abstinence, which has led to positive changes such as improved health outcomes, reduction in alcohol-related issues, and enhanced community relationships. The study concludes that religious and social movements can significantly influence cultural practices and foster beneficial social and health outcomes in marginalized tribal communities.

Keywords: Tribal communities, Liquor consumption, Socio-religious movements, Cultural Transformation, Historical Perspective

1. Introduction

Alcohol has long been a part of human civilization, serving various roles across cultures and societies (Holt, M. (Ed.), 2006). In India, the consumption of alcoholic beverages is not simply for enjoyment but carries important value in social, cultural, and ritual significance (Mandelbaum, D. G., 1965). Among tribal communities, in particular, liquor holds a unique place as a cornerstone of cultural identity and social life (Nayak, A., 2016). It is deeply connected with communal practices, serving as a medium for social bonding, a key element in ritual ceremonies, and an important link to ancestral heritage. Traditional alcoholic beverages, often crafted from locally sourced ingredients, play an important role in preserving the cultural essence of these communities. They symbolize the close relationship between tribal people and their natural environment, reflecting their ecological knowledge and sustainable practices. Historical evidence shows that fermented beverages have been consumed in India for more

than 5,000 years, highlighting their lasting cultural and ecological significance (Loying, R. et.al., 2024; Rawat et al., 2021; Ho, L. L.et.al., 2017; and Tamang, J. P.,2016)

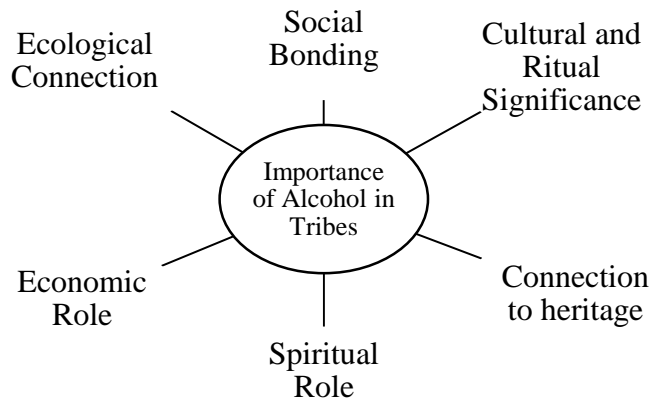


Figure 1: Importance of alcohol in the tribal community

Figure 1 shows the importance of alcohol in tribal communities, highlighting its multifaceted role. Alcohol is central to social bonding, as it is often shared during communal gatherings, celebrations, and festivals, helping to strengthen relationships and foster a sense of unity. It holds significant cultural and ritual value, being integral to various ceremonies and religious practices, where it is used as an offering or a symbol of respect. In addition, alcohol plays a key role in preserving tribal heritage, as traditional beverages are made from local ingredients, connecting tribes to their environment and ancestral customs. Spiritually, alcohol is seen as a tool for enhancing religious experiences and connecting with the divine. Economically, alcohol production can serve as a livelihood for some communities, contributing to their financial stability. Among tribal populations, alcohol is also recognized for its nutritional value, as the natural fermentation process enhances its content of vitamins, proteins, and essential amino acids, which support community health and bridge dietary gaps (Thakur, A. K., 2024; Bhattacharjee, S., 2023; Sarma & Gupta, 2022; Singh, U. et.al., 2020; Levin, J., 2007 and Bacon, M. K., 1976). Research indicates that fermented beverages contribute significantly to the tribal food supply, accounting for up to 20–40% due to their rich nutritional profile. alcohol’s role in tribal life extends beyond mere consumption, deeply connected with their culture, traditions, health, and social structure (Sahoo et al., 2024; Bhattacharya, B.,2023 and Savic, M., et.al., 2016).

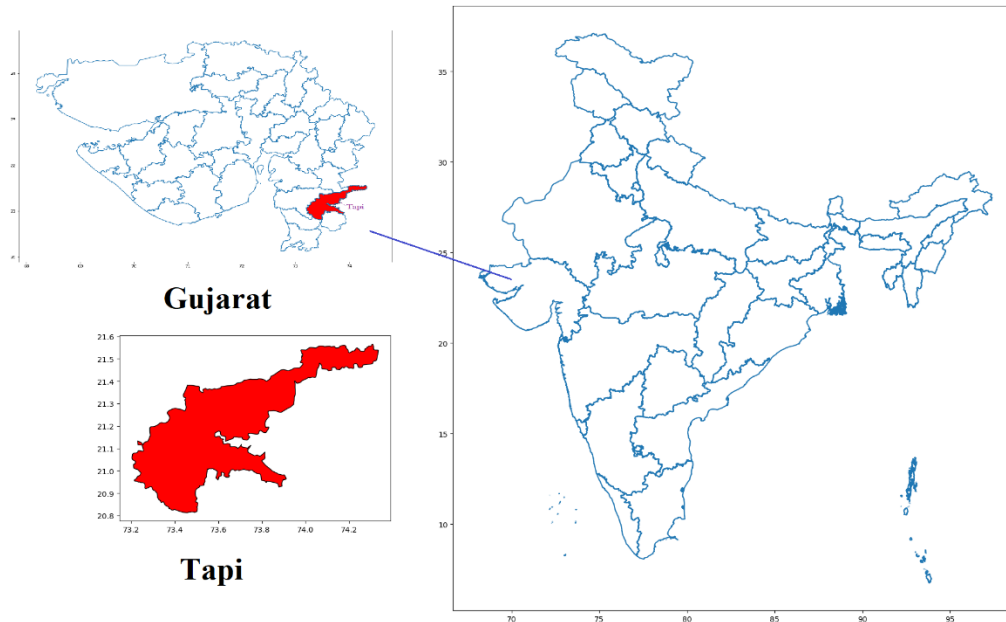


Figure 2: Geographical Location of Tapi in Gujarat

The Tapi district of Gujarat, home to a predominantly tribal population (84.8%), is rich in cultural diversity, with major tribes including the Gamit, Chaudhari, Dodiya, Vasava, Bhil, and Kokni (Tapi District Handbook, 2011 and Rawal, C., 2007). This study examines the impact of religious movements on the drinking culture of these communities, tracing their emergence, philosophies, and influence on alcohol consumption. Originating in the 19th century from neighbouring regions like Maharashtra, Navsari, and Dang, these movements have significantly shaped tribal traditions and religious practices over time. By analysing this transformation, the research offers a deeper understanding of the evolving intersection between tribal customs and religious reforms.

2. Methodology

A multi-step research approach was employed to explore how religious movements have historically influenced the drinking culture among Tapi's tribal communities (Figure 3). The process began with a thorough literature review, which laid the groundwork for understanding traditional tribal drinking practices and the role of religion. This was followed by field visits that allowed for direct interaction with tribal populations. Through in-depth interviews with tribal leaders, literature writers, and religious figures (i.e., spiritual leaders, preachers, or reformers associated with religious movements such as saints, mahants, or gurus who influenced tribal drinking practices), valuable insights were gained into the ways religious movements have reshaped drinking behaviours and cultural norms over time.

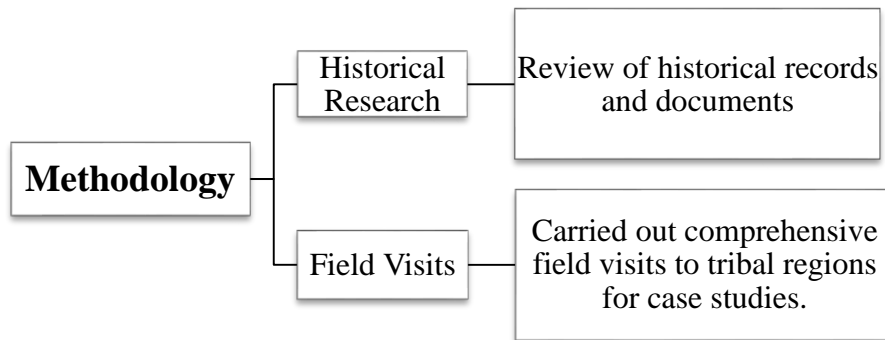


Figure 3: Flow chart of the study

Historical Research

Table 1 presents a historical overview of key sects and movements that have shaped South Gujarat's tribal communities. Highlighting their origins, philosophies, and influence, it offers insight into their role in driving moral, spiritual, and social reform.

Table 1: Sects and Movements Influencing Tribal Communities in South Gujarat (Smith, H. (2016; Patel, H., 2019; Sharma, R.,2015; Desai, M., & Patel, A., 2018; Mishra, N., 2017; Patel, V., & Joshi, P., 2016; Mehta, R., 2018 and Kumar, D., 2014)

S. No.	Sect/Movement	Description
1	Christianity	A global religion emphasizing faith in Jesus Christ and promoting ethical living and social welfare.
2	Sat Kaival Sect	A spiritual movement emphasizing simplicity, self-discipline, and devotion to the divine truth.
3	Sati Ati Sect	A spiritual sect focused on inner purity, meditation, and leading a disciplined life.
4	Swadhyaya Parivar	A spiritual organization promoting self-study, self-improvement, and community unity.
5	Moksha Margis	A spiritual path seeking liberation (moksha) through righteous living and spiritual practices.
6	Swaminarayan Sect	A Hindu sect advocating devotion, moral living, and strict adherence to its teachings.
7	Devi Movement	A religious movement centered on goddess worship and cultural traditions of tribal communities.
8	Vedchi Movement	A socio-religious reform movement aiming for the upliftment of marginalized communities.

Christianity

Table 2 highlights how religious influences, especially the spread of Christianity during British rule, reshaped tribal drinking habits, reflecting broader social and spiritual changes (Xaxa., 2008; Cook., 2006 and Robert., 2009).

Table 2: Timeline of Christian Missionary Efforts and Their Impact on Tribal Drinking Culture in South Gujarat (Hardiman., 2002; Bhatt., 2001; Patel V., 2017 and Acharya., 1981)

Year/Period Event	Development
19th Century	British colonial authorities encouraged missionaries to engage with tribal communities to align them with colonial rule.
1830	Missionary work began in Gujarat, focusing on Kutch and Kheda districts.
1840	London Missionary Society stationed missionaries in Surat.
1841	Irish Presbyterian Mission expanded to Saurashtra, Ghogha, Rajkot, and Porbandar.
1880	Missionary work started among Bhils in Kherwada (Rajasthan-Gujarat border).
1887	Efforts extended to Sabarkantha.
1889	Fagher William Mulligan expanded missionary activities to Panchmahal and Rewakantha.
1899	1899 Society of Brethren missionaries began work in Valsad, South Gujarat.
1901	Rev. Wilbur Stowe expanded missionary efforts to South Gujarat, including the Tapi district (then part of Surat).
1905	Missionary Adam W. Roche and wife Flora expanded efforts in Vyara and the eastern Surat district.
2011	Census 6.56% of Tapi district population identified as Christians; Protestantism influenced tribal attitudes towards alcohol consumption.

In the late 19th century, British colonial authorities promoted missionary engagement with tribal communities as part of their "civilizing mission," aiming to align the tribes with colonial rule. Under pressure from the colonial state, tribal kings allowed missionaries into their territories, believing they would bring education, healthcare, and moral guidance. The tribes, often perceived as holding "primitive" beliefs, were more likely to accept Christianity, which promised better living conditions through access to schools, medical care, and spiritual advancement. This combination of practical benefits and missionary influence led to a rise in conversions (Hardiman, D., 2002 and Pinto, S., 1995).

Christianity saw significant growth among India's tribal communities, with missionaries from Germany, Britain, America, and Belgium spreading Western cultural elements. The British government invited these missionaries to promote Christianity in remote regions. The first Christian converts in India came from the Malabar Coast. Throughout the 19th century, various tribal groups such as the Khasi, Jaintia,

Naga, Garo, Mizo, Munda, and Bhils began converting (Bhatt., 2001 and Downs, F. S., 1992). The mission gradually expanded, reaching Gujarat in the 1830s, with areas like Kutch, Kheda, and Saurashtra receiving missionary attention. By the late 19th century, missionaries like Rev. C.S. Thomson and Rev. Wilbur Stowe extended their efforts into South Gujarat, including areas like Surat, Valsad, Vyara, and Dang. Christianity, introduced to South Gujarat by missionaries like those from the Society of Brethren in 1899, had a significant impact on tribal communities, including in the Tapi district. The missionaries not only spread religious teachings but also improved education, healthcare, and economic conditions, bringing about substantial cultural changes. By 2011, 6.56% of Tapi's population had converted to Christianity, with Protestantism being more widespread than Catholicism (Census, 2011). Protestant Christianity, which strictly forbids alcohol, led many tribal followers to abandon traditional drinking practices. This shift has greatly influenced the drinking culture in the region, transforming attitudes towards alcohol consumption and replacing it with alternatives like tea and cold drinks.

Sat Kaiwal Sect

The Sat Kaiwal Sect had a profound impact on the drinking culture of tribal communities in South Gujarat, particularly in areas like the Tapi district. Founded in 1829 by the saint Kuberswami in Kaira district, the Sat Kaiwal sect, also known as the Kayam Panth, was one of the first Bhakti sects to spread into tribal regions. Monks, including the renowned Tapasvi Raghu Ram, played a key role in spreading its teachings across the region, especially to tribes in Vyara, Mahuva, Valod, Mandvi, and Bardoli. One of the core teachings of the Sat Kaiwal sect was the promotion of a simple, disciplined life, which included strict abstinence from alcohol, toddy, and meat. This practice was deeply transformative for the local tribal populations who embraced the sect, as it marked a significant shift from traditional practices that were often centered around communal drinking and the consumption of local alcohol like toddy. Tribes that followed the Sat Kaiwal sect moved away from these habits, which had been ingrained in their culture for generations (Lal, Bihari., 1977: Chattopadhyay, S., 2006 and Tilche, A., 2015).

The transformation, driven by the sect's emphasis on purity and discipline, led to improved health, social cohesion, and spiritual development among the tribal. However, this shift also distanced them from other tribal groups that continued to practice traditional drinking customs, creating a cultural divide. As a result, while the Sat Kaiwal sect improved the lives of its followers in many ways, it also altered their traditional social dynamics, particularly regarding alcohol consumption and communal rituals. The tribe's break from alcohol and toddy drinking, though beneficial in many respects, led to a distancing from some of the cultural practices that once bonded them with other tribal groups (Meena M., 2024).

Sati Pati Sect

The Sati Pati Sect brought about a major transformation in the drinking culture of the tribes in the Tapi district, particularly before the independence movement. Originating as a religious reform movement, it gradually evolved into a quasi-political force, shaping both the social and religious practices of the local tribal communities. The movement, initially led by Gulia Maharaj in Maharashtra, spread to Gujarat after he died in 1939, with his brother Ramdas carrying the torch and establishing a more formal structure for the sect.

One of the significant changes brought about by the Sati Pati Sect was the abandonment of alcohol, toddy, and meat by the local tribes. Gulia Maharaj had initially preached the importance of cleanliness, spirituality, and self-discipline, urging the tribes to leave behind their traditional drinking customs. Under his influence, the tribes embraced a lifestyle that excluded alcohol and toddy, focusing instead on purity and spiritual growth. When Ramdas and later Kesri Singh took over the movement, they not only continued this religious teaching but also encouraged political unity among the tribes, urging them to resist exploitation.

The impact on the drinking culture was particularly notable as alcohol and toddy had long been integral to tribal social and religious practices. As followers of the sect embraced its teachings, the practice of communal drinking, which was once central to tribal gatherings, began to fade. The sect's emphasis on abstinence from intoxicants created a cultural shift, with the tribes replacing alcohol consumption with spiritual practices and political activism. These lifestyle changes not only improved the health and well-being of the communities but also distanced them from traditional drinking habits, leading to a redefined social identity. The Sati Pati Sect thus played a critical role in reshaping the drinking culture of the tribes in South Gujarat, promoting a life free from alcohol and toddy in favor of religious discipline and social reform (Hardiman, D.et.al., 2008 and Bihari, Lal., 1977).

Swadhyaya Parivar

The Swadhyaya Parivar has had a significant influence on the drinking culture among tribal communities in the Tapi district, primarily through its teachings and community-oriented practices. As the sect gained popularity, especially among the youth, it brought about a shift in the social norms and behaviors of these communities, particularly concerning alcohol consumption (Pinto, S., 1995).

One of the central tenets of the Swadhyaya Parivar is the promotion of spiritual discipline and moral living, largely derived from the teachings of the Bhagavad Gita. As the sect spread, particularly after its introduction to the local tribes through leaders like Pandurang Shastri Athavale, it encouraged the adoption of a lifestyle focused on self-improvement, moral conduct, and community engagement. These principles often led to a rejection of traditional practices that were seen as detrimental to physical and mental well-being, including alcohol consumption (Patil, R. B., 2010 and Unterberger, B. M., et.al., 1990).

In practical terms, as Swadhyaya Parivar's activities took root in the villages, the sect's teachings provided an alternative to the traditional communal drinking habits. With its non-discriminatory nature and emphasis on education and personal growth, the Swadhyaya Parivar encouraged tribal communities to turn away from alcohol as a means of socialization or relaxation, replacing it with more spiritually focused practices. For example, the establishment of Gharmandir (home temples) and Yuva Sanskar Kendra (youth development centers) served as platforms for reinforcing the sect's ideals, which included leading a clean and disciplined life, free from the harmful effects of alcohol. As a result, the drinking culture among these tribal communities began to change. The increased participation in Swadhyaya Parivar's spiritual activities not only fostered a deeper sense of unity and respect among the tribals but

also played a key role in reducing the consumption of alcohol, leading to healthier lifestyles and a shift in social norms (Sheth, N. R., 2002).

Moksha Margis

The Moksha Margis sect had a significant impact on the drinking culture among the tribal communities in southern Gujarat, particularly through its strict prohibition of alcohol and other intoxicants. Founded in the early 20th century by Vallabh Ram Surya Ram Vyas and later led by his son Ramuji, the sect gained substantial traction in the 1950s, especially among the Dhodia, Choudhari, and Gamit communities in Surat and Valsad districts. One of the core teachings of the Moksha Margis sect was complete abstinence from intoxicants, including alcohol, toddy, tobacco, cigarettes, and betel. These practices were part of the 22 vows taken by followers upon initiation, with alcohol prohibition being one of the central tenets. As the sect's influence spread across the tribal villages, it promoted a lifestyle of purity, leading many followers to abandon their traditional drinking practices. This shift had a profound effect on the drinking culture in these communities.

As more tribal members embraced the Moksha Margis faith, alcohol consumption became increasingly stigmatized. Followers of the sect viewed those who continued drinking alcohol as impure, which fostered social divisions within villages. The separation between sect followers and non-followers extended beyond drinking to communal eating, creating further cultural and social distinctions. These divisions also affected family relationships, as some members chose to follow the sect's teachings while others continued their previous drinking habits. Despite these social challenges, families that adopted the Moksha Margis teachings saw improvements in their overall well-being. Abstaining from alcohol and other harmful substances led to better health, greater family stability, and a more disciplined lifestyle. In this way, the sect contributed to a transformation in the tribal drinking culture, with alcohol gradually being rejected in favour of a more spiritually focused and health-conscious way of life (Mishra, N., 2017).

Swami Narayan Sect

In 1801, Shri Sahajanand Swami, revered as Shri Bhagwan Swaminarayan, initiated a transformative spiritual and social reform under the Swaminarayan Sampraday, which gained widespread support in Gujarat, especially in tribal regions (Patel, Manilal, et al., 2009; Meena, M., 2024). This sect prohibits activities like alcohol consumption, gambling, and adultery, aligning with its ethical teachings. The Swaminarayan sect's influence expanded significantly across tribal villages in Vyara, Valod, and Mahuva talukas, supported mainly by educated members of the Dhodia community. With the sect's substantial resources, it is poised to grow further, particularly in the Vyara, Songadh, and Uchchal talukas (Bihari Lal., 1977). Notable developments include the Swaminarayan Sampraday temple in Ukai, which functions as a hub for education and religious activities, attracting local children and spreading its teachings through annual house-to-house visits. This growing influence of the sect is evidenced by the increasing number of temples and followers across tribal villages.

Devi Movement

The Devi Movement, which emerged in 1922-23, became the most significant anti-liquor campaign in South Gujarat. Following the Abkari Act of 1878, reports surfaced of lower-caste groups in Surat district uniting to abandon liquor. In 1895, during Lely's tenure as Collector of Surat, a total abstinence movement formed, particularly in Surat and Navsari, though it collapsed when caste leaders were caught secretly drinking. A more lasting movement emerged in 1905 in Vyara, led by Amarsinh Gamit, but it waned after the 1905 harvest failure, which led peasants to turn back to toddy for survival. The Devi Movement, led by the divine figure Salabai, who was believed to be a form of Goddess Shakti, spread across villages, teaching abstinence from liquor, toddy, meat, and the cutting of toddy trees. It also called for daily bathing and the removal of live poultry and livestock. Salabai's influence varied by community: among the Kunbi of Dang, it challenged beliefs in ghosts and witchcraft, while the Chaudhari viewed her as a symbol against exploitation by Parsis. For the Patidars and Kolis, she aligned with Gandhi's national cause. The movement, despite initially strong support, eventually faded, with conflicting reports about its origin. Some sources suggest it began in Western Khandesh and spread westward through villages in Surat, while others believe it originated with the Bhil Bhagats near the Gujarat border (David Hardiman, 1986 and Kumar, D.,2014).

Vedchhi Movement

The Vedchhi movement, starting in 1922, was a significant social reform initiative that shaped the drinking culture of South Gujarat's tribal communities. Influenced by the Indian national movement, figures like Mahatma Gandhi, Sardar Patel, and Maganlal were involved in promoting tribal welfare. The movement, rooted in Gandhian philosophy, emerged from the establishment of the Swarajya Ashram and the formation of 'Rani Paraj Sankat Phalvan' (Acharya, S., 1981). In 1928, Jugatram Dave founded the Vedchhi Ashram, which aimed to improve tribal living conditions and spread across a 50 km radius in the Surat district. Before the movement, tribal communities lived in primitive conditions, consumed liquor and toddy, and practiced widespread superstition. The movement's reforms focused on abstinence from alcohol and non-vegetarianism, hygiene, and economic empowerment. Sobriety was seen as a means to save money, invest in agriculture, and free tribes from the control of exploitative moneylenders, leading to improved housing and education (I.P. Desai, 1986). The movement saw gradual success, with Gandhian activists promoting khadi, vegetarianism, and cleanliness while living among the tribes, creating trust and social harmony. The Vedchhi movement significantly impacted the tribal community, leading to increased education, social mobility, and a more prosperous, educated segment within the tribes (I.P. Desai.,1977).

Evolution of Drinking Habits in Tribals



Figure 4: Evolution of Drinking Habits in Tribal Villages: From High Alcohol Consumption to Community Transformation

During our historical research and field visits, we observed a remarkable evolution in the drinking habits of tribal villages shown in Figure 4. Initially, the tribal villages faced widespread alcohol consumption, with numerous liquor shops and associated issues such as domestic violence and health problems. The situation began to change with the arrival of reform movements and religious sects promoting addiction-free and healthy living. Their teachings encouraged many families to adopt these principles, leading to a gradual shift in community behaviour as more individuals gave up alcohol. Over time, these collective behaviour changes significantly reduced the demand for liquor, resulting in the closure of several liquor shops. The positive outcomes were evident, with declines in health issues, reduced instances of domestic violence, and an overall improvement in the quality of life within the villages.

Case Studies Conducted During Fieldwork

The consumption of traditional liquor has long been an integral part of the cultural tradition among the tribal communities of Gujarat. It was not limited to social gatherings and religious rituals, but also constituted a crucial element of their collective identity and heritage. However, in the 19th century, various socio-religious movements began to challenge the structure of tribal life and brought significant changes to the practice of alcohol consumption. These movements advocated not only religious reforms but also portrayed the culture of intoxication within tribal society as a social evil.

This shift can be understood through Durkheim's concept of collective consciousness, wherein the shared beliefs and values of a community gradually transform, leading to the rise of a new social morality.

Vinod Gamit, a prominent leader in his village, took a significant step to address the escalating problem of alcohol consumption. Recognizing the negative impacts of excessive drinking on the health and social fabric of his community, he led efforts to close all the liquor shops in his village. This decision was made after several consultations with elders and community leaders. The closure resulted in a noticeable reduction in social conflicts and domestic violence.

This case highlights how community leadership and moral awareness, shaped by the influence of religious and social movements, played a vital role in local-level social control. It was also observed that 19th-century religious reformers, such as Christian missionaries and spiritual purification movements, emphasized personal conduct reform. Alcohol consumption was seen as impure behaviour, which led to a collective awakening against intoxication.

Laljibhai's transformation reflects a religious shift in the community. Having embraced Christianity, Laljibhai experienced a profound change in his personal life and alcohol consumption habits. Initially resistant to changing his ways, he gradually recognized the positive effects of this religious conversion, not just in his own life but within his community. His efforts to spread Christianity led to the establishment of a church in the village, which played a central role in encouraging people to abandon alcohol.

This example reminds us of Weber's concept of religious ethics and social action, where religious change influences the structure of social life. This transformation is not merely spiritual, but also becomes a foundation for social discipline and personal reform. Additionally, in some tribal communities, spiritual awareness brought forth by movements like the Swadhyaya Parivar also inspired control over liquor consumption. This movement, based on the idea that "God resides in everyone," encouraged individuals to embrace self-restraint and a disciplined lifestyle.

Mehulbhai, a member of the Swadhyaya Parivar, spoke about how the teachings of the community led to a widespread adoption of a more disciplined lifestyle, which included abandoning alcohol. The Swadhyaya Parivar emphasizes living a righteous life, which aligns with the community's efforts to reduce addictive behaviors. The positive impact of this movement is evident, as 90% of the village population no longer consumes alcohol.

This case reflects Michel Foucault's concept of self-regulation and power structure, where religion enables the individual to monitor their behaviour, reducing the need for external control. Through these case studies, it becomes evident that 19th-century socio-religious movements did not merely challenge the tribal culture of traditional liquor consumption but redefined it from a moral and spiritual perspective. These movements promoted social discipline, collective awareness, and community leadership, discouraging alcohol consumption and laying the foundation for a new social structure.

3. Conclusion

The study reveals a profound transformation in the drinking culture among tribal communities in South Gujarat, driven by religious influences, social reforms, and community-led initiatives. Historically, alcohol consumption was ingrained in the social and religious fabric of these communities. However, with the arrival of Christianity, particularly Protestantism, and the emergence of religious reform movements such as the Sat Kaiwal and Sati Pati sects, tribal attitudes toward alcohol underwent a significant shift. Local leaders, including Vinod Gamit, who implemented a ban on alcohol sales in his village, played a key role in this change. The closure of liquor shops and the promotion of healthier lifestyles by groups like the Swadhyaya Parivar further contributed to reducing alcohol consumption, alongside mitigating associated social issues like domestic violence and health problems.

From the 20th century to the present, these movements continue to influence tribal life. Christianity, particularly through large-scale conversions, has had the most lasting impact, significantly altering tribal lifestyles. The Swadhyaya Parivar and Swaminarayan sects have also gained prominence in recent times, reshaping tribal social structures and practices. Meanwhile, other movements such as the Moksha Margis and Sat Kaiwal Sect have experienced a decline in followers, and the Sati Pati sects now have only a few adherents in the Tapi district.

However, the religious and social reforms introduced by these movements have not been without their challenges. They have fostered divisions within tribal communities, with converted tribal members and those adhering to traditional beliefs increasingly segregating themselves. Tensions have arisen in various aspects of daily life, including social functions, financial transactions, and cultural practices, leading to conflicts between traditional and converted tribal groups.

In conclusion, while these movements have made notable strides in reducing alcohol consumption and fostering healthier, more cohesive tribal communities, they have also contributed to social fragmentation and conflict. The legacy of these movements continues to shape the dynamics of tribal society in the Tapi district, balancing both positive changes and challenges.

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