

Alcohol Consumption and Cultural Practices among Tribal Communities in Gujarat

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Abstract

Alcohol consumption among tribal communities in India has long been embedded in cultural, ritualistic, and social practices. This study examines the drinking culture of tribal communities in Tapi district, Gujarat, focusing on traditional practices, transformations over time, and the associated health, economic, and gender impacts. A mixed-methods approach was employed, combining literature review with qualitative interviews of community members, elders, women, youth, and local leaders.

Findings reveal that traditional alcoholic beverages such as Mahua liquor and palm toddy were historically consumed during festivals, rituals, and agricultural celebrations, reflecting cultural identity and community cohesion. Socio-religious reform movements, commercialization of liquor, urban migration, and increased accessibility of commercial alcohol have transformed these practices, leading to more frequent and individualized consumption. The study highlights significant consequences, including alcohol-related health issues, financial strain on households, and gendered burdens disproportionately affecting women. Community narratives also demonstrate resilience, with local initiatives, awareness programs, and collective social norms mitigating harmful practices while preserving cultural heritage. The findings underscore the need for culturally sensitive policies and interventions that balance public health objectives with respect for indigenous traditions.

This research contributes to a nuanced understanding of the interplay between tradition, modernization, and social change in tribal drinking practices and offers insights for policymakers, health practitioners, and social scientists working with marginalized communities.

Keywords: Tribal communities, Alcohol consumption, Mahua liquor, Social change, Health impact, Gender, Tapi district, India

1. Introduction

Alcohol consumption has long been an integral part of the socio-cultural life of many tribal communities in India. Among the tribes of South Gujarat, particularly in Tapi district, traditional forms of locally

brewed liquor such as Mahua-based beverages and palm toddy have historically played an important role in ritual practices, social gatherings, agricultural celebrations, and community bonding. Drinking practices are not merely individual habits but are deeply embedded in cultural traditions, belief systems, and collective identity. In many tribal societies, alcohol is associated with hospitality, religious offerings, and lifecycle ceremonies such as marriages, festivals, harvest rituals, and death rites.

Tapi district, predominantly inhabited by tribal communities such as the Gamit, Chaudhari, Vasava, Dhodiya, and Konkni tribes, presents a unique socio-cultural context in which traditional drinking practices have evolved over time. Historically, alcohol consumption was regulated by customary norms and collective responsibility, often restricted to ceremonial occasions and communal events. However, in recent decades, significant transformations have occurred due to processes such as modernization, migration, increasing market penetration, government regulations, and the influence of socio-religious reform movements. These changes have altered both the meaning and the patterns of alcohol consumption, shifting from ritualistic use toward more frequent or commercialized consumption in some cases.

At the same time, the transformation of drinking culture has generated multiple social, economic, and health implications within tribal communities. While traditional brewing practices were once closely connected to subsistence economies and ecological resources like the Mahua tree, the availability of commercial liquor has introduced new challenges. Increased alcohol consumption has been associated with health issues, financial strain on households, and gender-based social concerns, particularly affecting women and children. Conversely, various socio-religious reform movements that emerged in the region have sought to regulate or discourage alcohol consumption, promoting values such as discipline, education, and social reform. These movements have contributed to behavioural changes among certain groups, creating diverse patterns of acceptance, resistance, and adaptation within tribal society.

Despite the cultural and social significance of alcohol in tribal life, there remains a need for in-depth qualitative understanding of how tribal communities themselves perceive and negotiate changing drinking practices. Much of the existing literature focuses either on public health consequences or policy perspectives, often overlooking indigenous knowledge systems, community narratives, and lived experiences. Therefore, this study aims to explore the drinking culture of tribal communities in Tapi district through field-based research and interviews with community members, religious leaders, and local stakeholders. By examining traditional practices, contemporary transformations, and community perspectives, the study seeks to provide a sociological understanding of continuity and change in tribal drinking culture.

Through qualitative analysis of interviews and field observations, this research highlights the cultural meanings attached to alcohol, the influence of socio-religious reform movements, and the emerging health and socio-economic dimensions associated with alcohol use. The study contributes to broader discussions on tribal culture, social change, and indigenous health practices, offering insights that may inform culturally sensitive policy interventions and community-based awareness programmes. Ultimately, understanding the complexities of drinking culture in tribal societies requires moving beyond simplistic narratives of addiction or prohibition and recognizing the dynamic interplay between tradition, reform, and modern influences shaping tribal life in contemporary Gujarat.

2. Review of Literature

2.1. Alcohol Consumption in Tribal Societies: Cultural and Traditional Context

Alcohol consumption has historically been embedded within the socio-cultural practices of many tribal communities in India. Several studies highlight that drinking is not merely a habit but is associated with rituals, festivals, social bonding, and community identity. Research among tribal populations in Arunachal Pradesh found that alcohol use is closely linked with religion, ethnicity, and cultural beliefs, indicating that traditional values continue to shape drinking behaviour across tribal societies.

Similarly, studies conducted among tribal populations in South India reveal that alcohol consumption is socially accepted and considered part of community life, particularly during ceremonies and gatherings. Traditional brewing practices and the communal nature of drinking reinforce collective identity and social cohesion.

Research among indigenous tribal women in Odisha further emphasizes that alcohol is woven into daily rituals and customs, reflecting deeply rooted cultural norms and social expectations within tribal communities.

These studies collectively demonstrate that alcohol plays a multidimensional role in tribal societies, extending beyond recreation into symbolic and cultural domains.

2.2. Socio-Cultural Determinants of Tribal Drinking Practices

The literature consistently identifies socio-cultural factors as major determinants influencing alcohol consumption among tribal populations. Qualitative studies among tribal communities in Wayanad, Kerala, found that alcohol use is often initiated at a young age through parental exposure, peer influence, and traditional practices.

Alcohol is also used during lifecycle events such as marriages, funerals, and festivals, reinforcing its importance within cultural rituals and social obligations.

In addition to traditional influences, research among tribal communities in Tamil Nadu highlights that local brewing practices and social pressures contribute significantly to alcohol consumption patterns.

Furthermore, community-based qualitative studies have shown that tribal populations perceive alcohol consumption as part of normal social behaviour, though recent socio-economic changes have contributed to shifts in patterns and increased concerns regarding excessive use.

These findings suggest that understanding tribal drinking culture requires a contextual analysis of community norms, rituals, and intergenerational socialization processes.

2.3. Economic, Occupational, and Structural Factors

Beyond cultural aspects, structural and economic factors also play a significant role in shaping drinking practices among tribal communities. Studies in Wayanad district indicate that alcohol consumption is

influenced by occupational structures, labour practices, and historical exploitation by landlords, where alcohol was sometimes used as a form of payment or incentive.

Unemployment, seasonal work patterns, and economic marginalization further contribute to alcohol misuse, as individuals may use alcohol as a coping mechanism or a form of social recreation during periods of inactivity.

Research on marginalized tribal groups also indicates that alcohol consumption is disproportionately higher among socio-economically disadvantaged communities, reflecting structural inequalities and historical marginalization.

Such findings highlight the need to examine drinking culture not only from a cultural perspective but also through the lens of political economy and structural inequality.

2.4. Health, Social, and Community Implications of Alcohol Use

A large body of literature documents the health and social consequences associated with alcohol consumption in tribal populations. Studies indicate that hazardous alcohol use is highly prevalent among tribal men, with some research reporting substantial levels of dependency and associated health risks.

Alcohol misuse has been linked to family conflicts, financial instability, domestic violence, and negative impacts on women and children within tribal communities.

Research also highlights rising alcohol use trends due to increased availability of commercial liquor, contributing to changing patterns of consumption and new social challenges.

Additionally, alcohol consumption among tribal populations has broader public health implications, as high prevalence rates have been observed among several tribal groups across India.

These findings underscore the complex relationship between traditional drinking practices and emerging health concerns within changing socio-economic contexts.

2.5. Community Perspectives, Resilience, and Changing Drinking Patterns

Recent studies emphasize the importance of community perspectives in understanding tribal drinking culture. Qualitative research shows that while alcohol consumption remains culturally embedded, many tribal communities recognize the need for moderation and are developing resilience mechanisms through social support, faith-based initiatives, and awareness programmes.

Community-based studies also reveal changing attitudes toward alcohol, particularly among younger generations, who may experience increased exposure to commercial alcohol markets and urban influences.

These evolving dynamics suggest that tribal drinking culture is not static but is shaped by processes of modernization, migration, policy interventions, and socio-religious reform movements.

2.6. Research Gaps and Relevance to the Present Study

Although several studies examine alcohol use among tribal populations in India, there is limited research focusing specifically on the cultural meanings, historical transformations, and local narratives of drinking practices in tribal communities of Gujarat, particularly in Tapi district. Much of the existing literature

emphasizes public health outcomes rather than indigenous perspectives or socio-religious influences on drinking culture.

Therefore, the present study contributes to filling this gap by exploring traditional practices, socio-religious reforms, and contemporary changes in drinking behaviour through qualitative interviews and field observations among tribal communities in Tapi district.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Design and Approach

The present study adopts a qualitative research design to explore the drinking culture of tribal communities in Tapi district, Gujarat. Since the research focuses on cultural meanings, social practices, and community perspectives related to alcohol consumption, a qualitative and interpretative approach was considered most appropriate. The study seeks to understand traditional practices, changing drinking patterns, and the socio-cultural, economic, and health dimensions associated with alcohol use from the viewpoint of tribal community members themselves. A descriptive and exploratory research framework was employed to capture both historical context and contemporary transformations in drinking behaviour.

3.2. Study Area

The research was conducted in selected tribal villages of Tapi district, located in South Gujarat, India. The district is predominantly inhabited by tribal communities such as the Gamit, Chaudhari, Vasava, Dhodiya, and Konkni tribes. The region has a strong tradition of locally brewed alcoholic beverages prepared from forest and agricultural resources, including Mahua flowers and palm sap. The selected villages represent diverse socio-cultural and economic conditions, allowing a comprehensive understanding of drinking practices and their variations across communities.

3.3. Sampling Technique and Sample Selection

A purposive sampling method was used to select respondents who had knowledge and experience related to traditional drinking practices and cultural life. The sample included:

Elderly community members with knowledge of traditional practices

Adult men and women involved in social and ritual activities

Religious leaders and reform movement followers

Local health workers and community leaders

Participants were selected to ensure diversity in terms of age, gender, tribe, and social roles. This approach enabled the collection of varied perspectives on traditional drinking culture and its transformation over time.

3.4. Data Collection Methods

Primary data were collected through in-depth interviews, informal conversations, and field observations conducted during village visits. Semi-structured interview guides were prepared to explore themes such

as traditional liquor preparation, ritual use of alcohol, community norms, socio-religious influences, and health impacts.

In-depth Interviews: Interviews were conducted with community members to gather personal experiences, perceptions, and narratives related to alcohol consumption and cultural practices.

Key Informant Interviews: Discussions were held with tribal leaders, religious reformers, and elders to understand historical changes and social control mechanisms.

Participant Observation: Observations were made during community gatherings and everyday village interactions to understand the social context of drinking practices.

Secondary Data: Published literature, government reports, and previous research studies on tribal communities and alcohol use were reviewed to provide contextual and theoretical background.

3.5. Data Analysis

The collected qualitative data were analyzed using a thematic analysis approach. Interview transcripts and field notes were systematically coded to identify recurring themes and patterns. Major themes included:

Traditional and ritual uses of alcohol

Cultural meanings and social norms

Influence of socio-religious reform movements

Health and economic consequences

Gender perspectives and changing attitudes

The analysis involved comparing narratives across different age groups and tribes to understand both continuity and transformation in drinking culture.

3.6. Ethical Considerations

Ethical guidelines were strictly followed throughout the research process. Participants were informed about the purpose of the study, and their voluntary consent was obtained before conducting interviews. Confidentiality and anonymity of respondents were maintained by avoiding the disclosure of personal identifiers. The research respected local cultural norms and ensured that participants were not exposed to any social or psychological harm during the study.

3.7. Limitations of the Study

The study primarily relies on qualitative data collected from selected villages, which may limit the generalizability of findings to all tribal communities in Gujarat. In addition, responses were based on personal experiences and perceptions, which may be influenced by individual biases or social desirability. However, triangulation through multiple interviews and field observations helped enhance the credibility and depth of the findings.

4. Traditional Drinking Practices

Traditional drinking practices among tribal communities in India are deeply embedded in cultural life, rituals, and livelihood systems. Alcohol consumption in many indigenous societies is not merely a recreational activity but an integral component of social customs, religious ceremonies, agricultural cycles, and community bonding. Various ethnographic and sociological studies highlight that tribal alcohol practices evolved historically within ecological, economic, and spiritual contexts (Mahapatra, 2019; Sarkar & Das, 2020).

One of the most common traditional beverages in many tribal regions of Central and Western India is **Mahua liquor**, prepared from the fermented flowers of the Mahua tree (*Madhuca longifolia*). The Mahua tree holds significant socio-economic and cultural value, serving as a source of livelihood, ritual offerings, and traditional medicine. Mahua-based beverages are typically prepared using indigenous fermentation methods passed down through generations, reflecting community knowledge systems and collective labor practices (Verma et al., 2018; Patel, 2021). Ethnographic accounts indicate that Mahua liquor is frequently used during festivals, marriage ceremonies, harvest celebrations, and community gatherings.

Similarly, **palm toddy** and other naturally fermented beverages are widely consumed in many tribal and rural areas. Toddy is traditionally prepared by collecting sap from palm trees through tapping and allowing it to ferment naturally for one to two days. The process relies on indigenous knowledge of fermentation and local materials such as earthen pots and bamboo pipes. The beverage often serves both subsistence and livelihood functions among tribal communities.

Traditional alcohol consumption also has strong **ritualistic and symbolic meanings**. Anthropological research shows that alcoholic beverages are offered to ancestors, village deities, and spirits during religious ceremonies and healing rituals. Alcohol is often perceived as sacred rather than purely intoxicating, symbolizing hospitality, solidarity, and respect for guests. In many tribal societies, collective drinking practices reinforce kinship ties and social cohesion within the community (Basu, 2017; Ekka & Toppo, 2022).

Gender roles and age-based norms traditionally regulated alcohol consumption. For instance, older community members and male household heads historically controlled production and distribution, while women were often involved in preparation and brewing processes. Drinking patterns were socially monitored, and excessive consumption was discouraged through community norms and moral expectations (Rathod & Mehta, 2019).

However, traditional drinking practices have undergone transformations due to socio-religious reform movements, modernization, market forces, and state regulations. Several studies indicate that external influences, including missionary activities and reform movements, contributed to shifts from ritual-based drinking toward abstinence movements or regulated consumption patterns in certain tribal communities (Sharma, 2020; Chaudhary, 2023).

Overall, traditional drinking practices among tribal populations reflect a complex interplay of culture, economy, spirituality, and social organization. Understanding these practices requires a contextual

approach that recognizes indigenous knowledge systems, ritual meanings, and ongoing socio-cultural transformations.

5. Transformation of Drinking Culture among Tribal Communities

The drinking culture among tribal communities in India has undergone significant transformation over time due to socio-religious movements, modernization, state policies, economic changes, and external cultural influences. Traditionally, alcohol consumption was closely linked with rituals, festivals, agricultural cycles, and social bonding. However, contemporary changes have altered both the patterns and meanings of alcohol use in many tribal regions, including South Gujarat and Tapi district.

1. Influence of Socio-Religious Reform Movements

One of the most significant factors in transforming tribal drinking culture has been the influence of socio-religious reform movements. Reformist groups and spiritual leaders often promoted abstinence or moderation, framing excessive alcohol consumption as a social problem affecting health, family life, and economic stability. Studies on tribal communities in Gujarat and central India show that religious movements encouraged behavioural change through collective pledges, moral teachings, and community regulations (Hardiman, 1987; Shah, 2010; Xaxa, 2008).

These movements contributed to a shift from alcohol being perceived purely as a sacred or communal substance to being viewed in some contexts as a harmful habit requiring social control. In several tribal villages, reform campaigns led to reduced traditional brewing practices and encouraged alternative forms of social organization.

2. Impact of Modernization and Market Forces

Modernization has significantly transformed traditional drinking patterns. The introduction of commercially manufactured liquor has altered consumption habits, replacing locally brewed beverages such as mahua liquor and palm toddy with stronger and more accessible industrial alcohol (Basu, 2015; Mohan & Sengupta, 2021).

Market expansion and increased connectivity to urban centres have facilitated the availability of new alcohol products, contributing to changes in taste preferences and frequency of drinking. Scholars argue that commercialization has shifted alcohol consumption from ritualistic occasions toward more individualized and recreational patterns, especially among younger generations (Sarin et al., 2017).

3. Government Policies and Legal Regulation

State intervention has also played an important role in reshaping drinking culture. Licensing systems, prohibition campaigns, and public health initiatives have influenced the production and consumption of alcohol in tribal areas (Benegal, 2005). Policies aimed at revenue generation sometimes increase the

availability of commercial liquor outlets, indirectly transforming traditional consumption patterns (Nayak, 2016).

Simultaneously, awareness campaigns and de-addiction programmes have promoted changes in community attitudes toward alcohol, encouraging reduced consumption and healthier lifestyles.

4. Socio-Economic Changes and Migration

Economic transformation and migration have further contributed to changes in drinking practices. Wage labour, urban employment, and exposure to non-tribal lifestyles have influenced the adoption of new drinking habits. Studies show that younger tribal men working in cities often adopt modern drinking cultures that differ from traditional community norms (Xaxa, 2008; Mohanty, 2012).

Increased cash income has also shifted alcohol consumption from collective sharing to individual purchase, leading to changes in social dynamics and patterns of use.

5. Changing Gender Roles and Social Perceptions

Another major transformation concerns gender dynamics. Traditionally, alcohol consumption in many tribal communities was a communal activity with participation from both men and women during rituals and celebrations. However, modernization and changing social norms have sometimes led to the stigmatization of women's drinking while normalizing male consumption in commercial contexts (Basu, 2015; Mohan & Sengupta, 2021).

Public health discourse and educational campaigns have also influenced perceptions, leading to greater awareness of alcohol-related health risks and social problems.

6. Health Awareness and Community Response

Growing awareness about alcohol-related diseases and social issues has contributed to behavioural change in many tribal regions. Health workers, NGOs, and local leaders have played a role in promoting responsible drinking or abstinence. Community-based initiatives often combine traditional leadership structures with modern health education strategies (Benegal, 2005).

As a result, many communities are negotiating a balance between preserving cultural practices associated with traditional beverages and addressing the negative consequences of excessive alcohol use.

6. Health, Economic, and Gender Impacts of Alcohol Consumption among Tribal Communities

Alcohol consumption in tribal communities has traditionally been embedded within cultural practices and ritual life. However, changing patterns of alcohol use, commercialization, and increased frequency of consumption have contributed to a range of health, economic, and gender-related challenges. Several

sociological and public health studies highlight that the consequences of alcohol consumption extend beyond individual behaviour and influence family structures, household economies, and community well-being (Benegal, 2005; Mohan & Sengupta, 2021).

6.1 Health Impacts of Alcohol Consumption

Research indicates that tribal populations in India face significant health risks associated with hazardous alcohol use. Studies have reported high prevalence rates of alcohol-related diseases such as liver disorders, gastrointestinal problems, malnutrition, injuries, and mental health conditions among tribal men (Benegal, 2005; Rathod et al., 2015). Limited access to healthcare services and low awareness about the long-term health effects of alcohol further aggravate these problems.

Alcohol consumption has also been linked with increased vulnerability to infectious diseases and poor nutritional outcomes. Tribal populations often experience co-existing socio-economic challenges such as poverty, food insecurity, and occupational hazards, which intensify the health consequences of alcohol use (Mohan & Sengupta, 2021).

Moreover, research on indigenous communities shows that alcohol misuse is associated with psychological distress, depression, and reduced productivity. Health workers in tribal regions frequently report delayed healthcare seeking behaviour due to normalization of alcohol-related illness and financial constraints (Sarin et al., 2017).

In addition, increased availability of commercial liquor has led to a shift from occasional ritual consumption toward more frequent drinking, thereby increasing the risk of addiction and chronic health problems.

6.2 Economic Impacts on Household Livelihoods

Alcohol consumption has important economic implications for tribal households. Several studies highlight that excessive spending on alcohol reduces household savings and contributes to financial instability, particularly among economically vulnerable families (Nayak, 2016; Mohanty, 2012).

Traditional liquor production was historically integrated with subsistence economies and communal sharing practices. However, commercialization has transformed alcohol into a regular household expenditure. In low-income tribal households, a significant proportion of daily wages may be spent on alcohol, affecting expenditure on food, education, healthcare, and agricultural investments (Mohan & Sengupta, 2021).

Economic strain also manifests in increased debt, sale of livestock or agricultural produce to sustain drinking habits, and reduced labour productivity. Studies from rural and tribal India have shown that alcohol dependence can disrupt family labour systems and negatively impact agricultural productivity and seasonal income generation (Rathod et al., 2015).

At the same time, traditional brewing activities—especially those related to Mahua flower collection—have historically served as supplementary livelihood sources for some families. Therefore, the economic dimension of alcohol is complex, combining both livelihood benefits and financial burdens depending on patterns of consumption.

6.3 Gender Impacts and Social Consequences

Gender plays a central role in shaping both the experience and consequences of alcohol consumption in tribal communities. Although traditional drinking practices in some tribal societies allowed participation of both men and women during rituals and celebrations, modern patterns of alcohol misuse have disproportionately affected women and children (Basu, 2015; Ekka & Toppo, 2022).

Women frequently bear the indirect burden of alcohol consumption through increased domestic responsibilities, financial stress, and emotional strain. Studies have documented a strong association between alcohol misuse and domestic conflict, intimate partner violence, and household instability (Sarin et al., 2017). In many cases, women become primary caregivers for alcohol-related illnesses while also managing household finances under conditions of economic uncertainty.

Furthermore, social stigma and changing moral norms have influenced gendered perceptions of alcohol use. While male drinking is often normalized or tolerated, women's alcohol consumption may be discouraged or socially criticized in modern contexts, reflecting shifting gender expectations under external social influences (Basu, 2015).

Educational and socio-religious reform movements have encouraged women's participation in community campaigns against excessive drinking. Women's self-help groups and grassroots initiatives in tribal regions have played an important role in advocating for alcohol regulation, family welfare, and community health awareness.

6.4 Interconnected Nature of Health, Economic, and Gender Impacts

The health, economic, and gender dimensions of alcohol consumption are deeply interconnected. Poor health outcomes reduce labour capacity and household income, while financial stress may contribute to increased alcohol use as a coping mechanism. Simultaneously, gender inequalities intensify the social consequences, placing additional burdens on women and reinforcing cycles of poverty and social vulnerability (Benegal, 2005; Nayak, 2016).

Understanding these interconnected impacts is essential for developing culturally sensitive interventions that address both the structural causes and community-level dynamics of alcohol consumption in tribal areas.

7. Voices from the Field: Community Narratives and Lived Experiences

This section presents qualitative insights reflecting community perceptions and lived experiences related to drinking culture among tribal communities of Tapi district. The narratives are organized thematically to capture the voices of elders, youth, women, and community leaders. These accounts highlight cultural meanings, social transformations, and everyday realities associated with alcohol consumption.

7.1 Alcohol as Tradition and Cultural Identity

Many respondents described traditional alcohol, especially Mahua liquor and palm toddy, as deeply connected to tribal identity and ritual life. Elder participants emphasized that earlier drinking practices were structured around festivals, agricultural cycles, and religious ceremonies rather than daily consumption.

One elder male respondent from the Gamit community shared:

“Earlier, Mahua was not just for drinking. We offered it to our ancestors first. Only after rituals would people drink together during festivals or weddings.” (Male Elder, Age 68, Tapi District)

A female elder explained the communal nature of traditional brewing:

“Women and men together collected Mahua flowers. Preparing liquor was a shared activity, and drinking happened only during special occasions.” (Female Elder, Age 60)

Younger participants also acknowledged the cultural value of traditional alcohol but noted changes over time:

“Our grandparents used to drink only during Holi or harvest festivals. Now many people drink without any occasion.” (Youth Respondent, Age 24)

7.2 Perceived Changes in Drinking Practices

Respondents widely discussed the transformation of drinking culture in recent decades. Many participants observed that commercial liquor has replaced traditional beverages in everyday social interactions.

A middle-aged farmer noted:

“Earlier we made our own drink from Mahua. Now shop liquor is easily available, and people drink more frequently.” (Male Farmer, Age 45)

Young migrant workers highlighted the influence of urban exposure:

“When we go to the city for work, we see different lifestyles. Some young men start drinking modern alcohol and bring those habits back to the village.” (Youth Labourer, Age 27)

Community leaders expressed concern about increasing individual drinking practices:

“Before, elders watched over young people during community events. Today drinking happens privately, and social control has become weaker.” (Village Leader, Age 52)

7.3 Influence of Socio-Religious Reform Movements

Many respondents mentioned socio-religious reform movements that promoted abstinence or moderation. Religious leaders described awareness programmes encouraging discipline and social reform.

One religious follower explained:

“Our spiritual leaders teach that alcohol destroys family harmony. Many people in our village have taken vows to stop drinking.” (Religious Follower, Age 40)

A local elder described positive social changes:

“After reform meetings started, some families stopped making liquor. Children began going to school more regularly.” (Community Elder, Age 65)

However, some elders expressed concern about losing cultural traditions:

“Traditional drinking during rituals is part of our heritage. Total prohibition sometimes creates conflict between generations.” (Traditional Leader, Age 58)

7.4 Health Experiences and Community Awareness

Health-related narratives revealed growing awareness of alcohol-related diseases and their effects on families. Caregivers described the financial and emotional burden of illness.

A woman caregiver shared:

“My husband’s health suffered because of regular drinking. Medical treatment was expensive, and we had to sell part of our livestock.” (Female Respondent, Age 38)

A local health worker observed:

“In recent years we have seen more liver problems and injuries related to alcohol. Awareness is improving, but social habits are difficult to change.” (Health Worker, Age 34)

Another respondent reflected on personal change:

“After falling sick, I reduced drinking. Now I encourage others to be careful.” (Male Respondent, Age 42)

7.5 Women's Perspectives and Gendered Experiences

Women's narratives highlighted the gendered consequences of alcohol consumption. Many women described increased household burdens and emotional stress.

One female respondent explained:

“When men spend money on alcohol, women have to manage the house with less money for food and children's education.” (Female Respondent, Age 35)

A member of a women's self-help group noted:

“Our group talks to families about alcohol problems. We try to stop violence and encourage savings.” (SHG Member, Age 41)

Older women reflected on traditional gender roles:

“Earlier, women participated in ritual drinking, but it was controlled. Today excessive drinking has created more family conflicts.” (Female Elder, Age 62)

7.6 Community Responses and Local Strategies

Despite challenges, respondents described collective efforts to regulate drinking practices. Village councils and community groups have introduced informal rules and awareness programmes.

A village head explained:

“We decided that public drinking during village meetings is not allowed. Community pressure helps reduce problems.” (Village Head, Age 55)

Another respondent highlighted youth engagement:

“Young volunteers organize awareness programmes during festivals to promote responsible behaviour.” (Youth Volunteer, Age 23)

Many participants emphasized balancing tradition with health awareness:

“We want to keep our cultural practices but avoid excessive drinking that harms families.” (Community Member, Age 47)

The field narratives demonstrate that drinking culture among tribal communities is dynamic and shaped by cultural traditions, modernization, religious influences, and socio-economic change. While traditional alcohol remains a symbol of identity and ritual life, contemporary patterns have introduced new health and social challenges. The voices of community members reflect ongoing efforts to preserve cultural heritage while adapting to emerging realities through collective awareness and local interventions.

8. Conclusion

This study explored the traditional drinking culture, its transformation, and the associated health, economic, and gender impacts among tribal communities of Tapi district, Gujarat. The findings reveal that alcohol consumption within tribal society has historically been embedded in cultural traditions, ritual practices, and community identity. Traditional beverages such as Mahua liquor and palm toddy were closely linked to agricultural cycles, festivals, religious ceremonies, and collective social life. Earlier drinking practices were regulated by strong community norms and elder supervision, reflecting a culturally controlled pattern of consumption.

However, the research demonstrates that drinking culture has undergone significant transformation due to socio-religious reform movements, modernization, market expansion, migration, and increased accessibility of commercial liquor. While traditional alcohol consumption once held ritualistic and symbolic meaning, contemporary patterns increasingly reflect individual and recreational drinking. Respondents highlighted that commercialization and urban influence have weakened traditional social control mechanisms, leading to more frequent consumption and emerging social concerns.

The study also highlights the complex health implications associated with changing drinking patterns. Alcohol-related illnesses, mental health concerns, injuries, and reduced work capacity were commonly reported by respondents and health workers. Limited access to healthcare and low awareness in earlier generations contributed to delayed treatment-seeking behaviour, although recent community awareness programmes have started influencing attitudes toward responsible drinking.

Economic consequences emerged as another significant dimension. Increased spending on commercial alcohol has placed financial strain on many households, affecting food security, educational investment, and agricultural productivity. While traditional brewing once contributed to livelihood systems and community cooperation, contemporary consumption patterns often result in economic instability and indebtedness, particularly among economically vulnerable families.

Gender impacts were strongly reflected in women's narratives. Women frequently experience indirect burdens of alcohol consumption, including increased household responsibilities, financial stress, and emotional challenges. Many respondents described domestic conflicts and social instability associated with excessive drinking. At the same time, women's self-help groups and community organizations have played an important role in promoting awareness, supporting families, and advocating for social change.

Despite these challenges, the study also reveals strong community resilience and adaptive strategies. Tribal communities are not passive recipients of change but actively negotiate the balance between preserving cultural heritage and addressing emerging social and health problems. Local initiatives such as religious reform movements, village-level awareness programmes, informal social regulations, and youth engagement reflect collective efforts to redefine drinking practices in contemporary contexts.

Overall, the findings emphasize that tribal drinking culture cannot be understood solely as a public health issue or social problem; rather, it represents a complex cultural phenomenon shaped by historical traditions, socio-economic change, and community agency. Any policy or intervention aimed at reducing alcohol-related harm must therefore be culturally sensitive, community-driven, and grounded in local knowledge systems.

The study contributes to existing literature by providing an in-depth sociological understanding of drinking culture within the specific context of Tapi district, highlighting the voices and lived experiences of tribal communities. Future research may expand comparative analysis across different tribal regions, examine generational shifts in attitudes, and explore culturally appropriate health and policy interventions that respect indigenous traditions while promoting social well-being.

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