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Wald, Erica. 2018. Governing the Bottle: Alcohol, Race and Class in Nineteenth-Century India. *The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, 46(3), pp. 397-417. ISSN 0308-6534 [Article]

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*Governing the Bottle: Alcohol, Race and Class in Nineteenth Century India*

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In India in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, as today, the issue of alcohol and its consumption carried with it a complex and often contradictory set of moral, political and financial issues. The picture of drinking in India was never a clear one and was marred by a number of assumptions. The way in which alcohol and drinking was framed by commentators meant that a number of competing, and often contradictory, visions of drinking were present. Understandings of the 'appropriate' place of alcohol in society and what constituted 'respectable' consumption varied wildly. These were dependent on a range of overlapping divisions of race, class, caste and gender. Medical observers, government officials, commanding officers, Brahmin intermediaries, vernacular newspaper editors and revenue collectors (among others) all contributed to debates which offered suggestions on what should be drunk, by whom, in what quantity and at what time (or place).

Varying cultural geographies even meant that the most basic of definitions – what constituted liquor – was at times contested. East India Company officials often found the sheer volume of varieties of drink and intoxicants – all of which bore both varying levels of strength and supposed cultural significance – overwhelming. In India, the Company stepped into a complex pre-existing excise framework, established not only by the Mughals and Marathas, but by smaller regional kingdoms. As it assumed greater and greater administrative and political power across India, its officials were tasked with deciphering

existing policy and creating new ones. In civil spaces, control of alcohol was largely the responsibility of the revenue department, which managed excise duties in the form of the *abkari*, or tax on intoxicating spirits and drugs. Here, as in colonial sites across Africa, the excise duties collected on alcohol, as an indirect form of taxation and control, formed one way in which the state could avoid the far less-popular forms of direct taxation on land, property or head. The Company quickly recognised the importance of such valuable revenue streams, and the complications therein.

Medical and military understandings of the relationship between certain bodies and certain drinks complicated this further. Alcohol was at once 'dangerously native' and 'completely foreign'. This article suggests the ways in which, through discussions on alcohol and its taxation, drinks themselves were racialised and assigned particular characteristics. While colonial military officials worried that the arrack and toddy so favoured by European soldiers and sailors was inherently more dangerous than 'sound' (read: European) beer, later newspaper editors across the vernacular press just as fervently lamented the spreading poison of 'European' intoxicants (here, the stronger distilled spirits), which, they argued, now threatened to alter the previously abstemious behaviour of India's 'respectable' classes.<sup>1</sup>

The drinking that attracted the most pitched commentary was the alcohol consumed by those deemed to be the 'lower classes' – from European soldiers to Indian labourers. The lower classes, the prevailing argument went, were constitutionally predisposed to drink. However, this was complicated by an accompanying belief which posited that alcohol provided a much needed stimulant required for life in India. The most commonly discussed drink for much of early colonial rule was toddy. Manufactured locally, toddy was cheap and often sold in situ, under the trees from which it had been tapped or along

roadsides. This made it not only the preferred drink for many Indian drinking populations, but also for European soldiers and sailors who viewed it as an inexpensive substitute for the ale, small beer, malt liquor or gin that they had left behind in Britain. Critically though, for an expanding colonial state, not only did this alcohol spark associations with debauched disorder, but most of it easily evaded its revenue machinery.

Early colonial administrators not only sought to draw a profit from the regulation of alcohol, but attempted to exercise some measure of moderation over Indian drinking populations and (in many ways more critically) over its own European soldiery who were seen as prone to violent disruption when drunk. In a period of empire-building, the Company's officials were acutely concerned with securing control over a rapidly growing cluster of territories and the disorder associated with particular drinks was a potential threat to this. Military regulations accordingly sought to regulate—to provide the 'sound' liquor that the European soldier constitutionally 'required' and, in so doing, shield him from the uncontrolled, 'dangerous' country spirits that could be found in neighbouring bazaars and villages. This article focuses particularly on the anxieties around 'disorder' that shaped colonial policies on alcohol, in military and civil spaces alike. It demonstrates that these two centres of control remained in constant dialogue with each other. Each absorbed and reflected the needs of the other, from the early Bengal Regulations that prohibited the establishment of stills within 2 kos of the cantonments of Barrackpore, Berhampore and Dinapore (where large contingents of European troops were stationed) to the military's adoption of civil licensing policies for producers and vendors.<sup>2</sup>

This article considers the controls imposed on and around alcohol as a particularly significant focus of colonial governance. It suggests the ways in which the colonial state's relationship with alcohol shifted—from an earlier focus on excise and

revenue generation to a hybrid form which saw the *abkari*<sup>3</sup> controls as part and parcel of the process of empire-building and a means of shaping Indian society (including its European residents) while still drawing a significant revenue for the state. In comparing these military and civil attempts to manage alcohol, we are able to better understand some of the ways in which ideas about drink and 'respectability' in India transformed over the long nineteenth century and how these ideas were part of a broader imperial narrative. These contested notions suggest some of the ways in which the colonial state was involved in a broader moral reconfiguration of Indian society.<sup>4</sup> The colonial state's controls on alcohol speak to Foucault's notion of governmentality and increasing social manipulation, as the Company raj, from its inception, stepped beyond the existing framework for alcohol taxation towards a fixed emphasis on the morality of its taxation policies.<sup>5</sup> In moving Indian drinkers out of the fields and into licensed shops, not only did drinking habits shift, but drinkers became more visible. This article suggests the ways in which the revenue demands and military controls of the colonial state precipitated a changed approach to alcohol that set the stage for later nationalist demands for its prohibition.

The actions of the colonial state reflected a particular opinion not simply on country spirits, but on the 'appropriate' place of drink in society and the character of those who drank (and those who did not) in India. This notion was heavily informed by ideas of class, race and caste. As David Hardiman has argued, nineteenth-century middle-class temperance advocates, in making the case that drink was inherently 'foreign' in Indian culture, 'confused their own elite values with Indian culture as a whole'.<sup>6</sup> Indeed, Hardiman's own focus, peasant drinkers in South Gujarat, suggests the significant and longstanding role alcohol played in numerous Indian cultures. Moreover, the *abkari*, as Nancy Gardner Cassels and others have pointed out, was a hugely important revenue stream, not just for the East

India Company and Crown, but for the Mughals and Marathas before them.<sup>7</sup> Lynn Pan has argued that the duties on drink were one of the key supports upon which European colonial empires in Africa were built and maintained.<sup>8</sup> While the building blocks of colonial rule differed in India, after land revenue, the *abkari* revenue represented the second largest source of income for the Company. Indeed, as Marc Gilbert has shown, the revenue from liquor and opium was so great that it eventually led the colonial (and later post-colonial) state to form a dangerous dependency upon it.<sup>9</sup>

The history of drink in India often focuses on late colonial rule, when the Indian National Congress and temperance campaigners railed against 'foreign' drink in India.<sup>10</sup> The phenomenon of nationalist division of liquors into 'foreign' and 'native' was certainly not unique to India. In Southern Africa, colonial officials drew a sharp distinction between the locally produced grain beers and 'foreign' distilled spirits. A number of African rulers actively resisted the introduction of 'foreign' distilled spirits (as opposed to the locally produced grain beers or fermented drinks traditionally consumed) in their territories, with the protests of leaders merging with those of temperance advocates in the late nineteenth century.<sup>11</sup> This article shifts our focus earlier, to analyse the tentative changes that the East India Company state enacted in the eighteenth century through the early military and civil experiments with *abkari* within the territories which fell under its direct rule, to the more forceful, confident pronouncements of the later Crown raj, leading to the 1878 Abkari Act, which threatened to reach beyond borders.

## **Alcohol and Administration or the Administration of Alcohol**

While the East India Company was initially established for the purposes of trade, with the expansion of its military and political power over the course of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, it took on increasing administrative responsibilities. The collection of alcohol excise by the Company state was interwoven with its earliest direct political, military and administrative duties. As the Company assumed political and administrative control over growing sections of the subcontinent, it engaged with the question of alcohol in the areas which fell under its direct control in two main ways: first in the military context through regulations and restrictions on the sale of alcohol in and around cantonments (being largely concerned with the relationship between alcohol and its European troops); and, second, through the civil laws imposing taxes and excise duties via the *abkari* system which it inherited (though heavily modified).<sup>12</sup> Revenue and military authorities worked in tandem—and the flow of regulations on alcohol in both spheres frequently occurred in parallel.

The 1764 Treaty of Allahabad and subsequent award of the *Diwani* and *Nizamat*<sup>13</sup> gave the East India Company the right to collect revenue and perform administrative and legal duties on behalf of the Mughal emperor in the fertile areas of Bengal, Bihar and Orissa. Experiments with land revenue followed. By 1790, Governor General Lord Cornwallis extended this to order a reform to the ways in which excise, namely the *abkari*, or tax on spirituous liquors and intoxicating drugs, was collected. In taking over the salt, sayer [Customs duties] and *abkari* administration, the colonial government absorbed an incredibly valuable revenue stream. Together with the controls on salt and opium, the *abkari* taxed not only consumption, but also production, of liquor and spirits. Regulation XXXIII of 1790, passed in April of that year, stipulated that within the Company's provinces any person wishing to make or sell spirituous liquors required a license to do so. Further, the Company edged out all other competitors

from potential revenue gains when it stated that 'no tax shall be levied on the making or vending of spirituous liquors except on the part of government'.<sup>14</sup>

The Company's civilian<sup>15</sup> representative on the ground was the district officer, or collector. Each collector held multiple roles. He was responsible for revenue collection and administration in his assigned district as well as serving as the local magistrate and supervising the lower courts and police in his district. Historians have noted the ways in which early Orientalists, many of whom held the position of collector, engaged across Bombay, Bengal and Madras sought to better understand the country, in order to better rule it. In this, they turned to information gathered from Indian intermediaries, translators and teachers on complex and varied matters such as land revenue, religion and the rule of law.<sup>16</sup> Indian informants were pressed on local customary or religious land rights (the *Inam* settlements), on excise arrangements and land revenue. Just as revenue settlements varied across the subcontinent, so too did the state's involvement with the *abkari*. The pre-existing systems of taxes, rights and management that the East India Company state absorbed as further areas fell under its political control varied widely. Some, though certainly not all, of the differences corresponded to the rough lines which both cut across and divided the three presidencies.<sup>17</sup> As collectors gathered information about Indian law and society they also attempted to parse the information they could gather on the *abkari*. Administrators sought to unpick and solidify the complex pre-existing frameworks for taxing alcohol, frequently expressing their frustration at the all-too-fluid arrangements in place.<sup>18</sup>

In this information-gathering (and revenue-collecting) exercise, Indian informants and 'assistants' played a critical role in



determining sources of revenue. This was especially true where the *abkari* was concerned. The Board of Revenue noted, in approving the 'commissions' (or rewards) granted to these individuals, the 'great degree' in which the revenue collected from salt, sayer and *abkari* depended on the 'activity and intelligence' of those officials.<sup>19</sup> In some instances, this meant translating (and interpreting) existing practices for the collector. However, in other cases, this was more explicitly an 'intelligence' exercise. Informants reported on producers and vendors, denoting those who fell foul of local regulations. On top of the requirement to understand existing policies, collectors were also required to determine the range of possible intoxicants that required taxation. This spectrum of drinks ranged from the fresh, sweet, barely fermented (and only slightly alcoholic) toddy, to drinks prepared with ground cannabis, all the way through to much stronger, distilled liquors. This complexity generated countless further discussions on what was drunk across Company territory and whether it could, or should, be taxed. The most popularly consumed drinks were those broadly termed 'country spirits'. These included arrack, toddy, *daru* and *putchwye*. Arrack, originally produced from the fermented sap of a date palm, came to mean any strong, often distilled, spirit and was one of the key ingredients in the most quintessential of colonial drinks, punch.<sup>20</sup> Toddy (or *tari*), produced from the fermented sap of palm trees, was widely drawn and consumed across India. *Desi daru*, another fermented drink, was produced from the flowers of the *mahua* tree. *Putchwye* or *doasta* were the terms used by excise officials to describe most varieties of rice wine (fermented and often mixed with other intoxicating drugs). These drinks were usually less potent than the stronger, distilled European-style spirits, easier to produce and cheaper to purchase from a local liquor seller.

Despite the activity of Indian intermediaries, the finer details of pre-existing local arrangements were often lost in translation as

collectors confused and conflated previously separate rights or (without precedent) targeted one drink for taxation while excluding another. One debate in the Arcot district highlights the complexity of existing *abkari* arrangements and the potential pitfalls for collectors. Here, the collector erroneously distinguished only between two types of taxes: land revenue and that derived from arrack and toddy. In effect, this resulted in a flattening of all other taxes and levies in between.<sup>21</sup> The control of these 'lower-end' intoxicants was a particular source of both anxiety and reliable revenue for the colonial state. Lord Cornwallis's Bengal government lost little time after absorbing the responsibility for the Abkari Mahal,<sup>22</sup> and suggested the direction the state would take in the years to follow, when it pronounced in 1790 that:

The immoderate use of spirituous liquors and intoxicating drugs having become prevalent amongst many of the lower orders of the people, from the very inconsiderable price at which they were manufactured and sold ... the Governor General in Council, with a view to prevent the perpetration of crimes, and at the same time to augment the public revenue, passed certain rules on the 16th of April 1790 and subsequent dates. Those rules are now re-enacted with modifications.<sup>23</sup>

Even at this early date, it is clear that civil regulations on alcohol carefully considered the needs of the military. The East India Company state was, at every point, a military-fiscal operation.<sup>24</sup> The three presidency armies of Bombay, Madras and Bengal were central to the Company state. Decisions on the day-to-day operations of the military were made (in each of the presidencies) by a group of high-ranking officers: the Military Board. The correspondence of these boards stretched across, and beyond, India: to individual members, commanding officers, the governor, governor-general and later the India

Office in London. Their decisions had far-reaching consequences and were not simply confined to military spaces. This can be seen clearly where decisions on alcohol were involved.

Within the military super-structure, the cantonment, or military station was one of the core building blocks of rule. These areas, and the space around them (frequently up to 10 miles), were governed by military law. This meant that the military regularly applied the articles of war to large swathes of the Indian population. That is, these laws were applied not simply to those under its direct employ, the sepoys and camp followers present in the cantonments (itself a significant number), but also included any Indian living near a station or those Indian traders who sold goods or provided services within the bazaar. Troop movement further expanded this radius of control (albeit on a more temporary basis) as it shifted to cover the areas adjacent to the line of march. In the case of alcohol regulations, this meant that the strict controls enacted to order the cantonment, and the harsh punishments meted out for violations, were applied to a broader section of the population than simply the (relatively) small numbers of European soldiers that the regulations were designed to protect.

In July 1790, following Cornwallis's pronouncement regarding the *abkari* and civil space, a military regulation followed. It required the collector to note any *kulal*, or liquor shop, situated close to the cantonments.<sup>25</sup> The sale of liquor had, by an earlier 1782 regulation, been banned within 10 miles of Calcutta, a move most likely aimed at preventing over-indulgence among soldiers stationed at Fort William and nearby Barrackpore.<sup>26</sup> This (as evidenced by the numerous regulations that followed) did not transform Calcutta into a 'dry' town, but rather was intended to limit the sale of alcohol to certain populations. This anxiety about the potential for disruption and disorder among the European soldiery ran through most

of the military regulations on alcohol.

To be clear, the liquor shops targeted by military regulations catered largely (though on an unofficial level, not exclusively) to European soldiers and sailors. The East India Company was not concerned with the drinking habits of sepoys, or Indian, troops. When, on the rare occasion, military or medical boards raised the issue of 'liver complaints'<sup>27</sup> among the sepoys, this was usually done to contrast the sepoys' supposed abstemious behaviour with that of the European soldier. Certainly, by virtue of the revenue generated by the Abkari Mahal, the Company state recognised India's drinking populations. However, among military officers, the assumption remained that sepoys, if they did drink, were better able to regulate their behaviour than their European peers.

Military officers held the European soldiery in low esteem. The sharp, class-based assumptions held by the majority of officers painted European soldiers as immature and brutish, uneducated and (almost) irredeemable. In the early nineteenth century, the majority of troops to both armies were young—between 15 and 19 years old—and earned a daily wage of about one shilling.<sup>28</sup> However, there were some noticeable differences in the demographic composition of the Crown versus Company troops. Service in the Company's army attracted a higher number of skilled labourers and artisans and there is some evidence to suggest higher levels of literacy among its troops.<sup>29</sup> However, given the low wages, and, for many, the unappealing prospect of service in India, army enlistment remained largely limited to the lower and working classes. Reforms in the late nineteenth century, most notably Cardwell's suggestions in the 1870s, eventually sought to widen the appeal of army service to men deemed (by upper-class administrators and army officers) to be more 'respectable', but for the majority of

the nineteenth century, these class-based prejudices held firm.<sup>30</sup>

In the early years of the nineteenth century, a number of debates carried out across military and civil departments led to a series of regulatory controls on alcohol which moved beyond the 'simple' generation of revenue. What emerged was a tension between two official schools of thought. On the one hand, some officials argued that alcohol production should be carefully monitored, regulated and reduced in order to protect valuable labouring (read: working-class) groups such as the European soldier, Indian domestic servants or mill hands.<sup>31</sup> On the other, an equally vocal group recognised the value of the substantial revenue stream which alcohol provided for the colonial government, identifying this as crucial to its growth and profitability. The regulations that followed clearly reflected this tension.

Regulations in 1800 spelled out what would become a central tenet in later civil legislation: to raise the cost to the consumer with the aim of checking excess (or 'immoderate') consumption without pushing producers and consumers toward illicit liquor and spirits or acting as a 'virtual prohibition'.<sup>32</sup>

Suggesting too the sharp awareness of the significant potential proceeds to be drawn from the production and sale of toddy, these regulations extended the provisions which had governed other spirits and intoxicants to the drink in its fermented state.<sup>33</sup> Adopting the air of benevolent paternalism so common to colonial pronouncements, the government repeated its policy with regard to the purpose of the *abkari* on numerous occasions throughout the nineteenth century: to restrict consumption and, in so doing, to improve society. Government commentary on the *abkari* consistently echoed this tone throughout the century. An 1881 note from Bombay's

Abkari Commissioner stated:

the object which Government has in view is to restrain and, if possible, to correct and diminish the total actual consumption of spirituous liquors, being fully persuaded that any amount of revenue that may be lost by the efficiency of the system for this, will be repaid a hundredfold in the preservation and advancement of moral feeling and industrious habits amongst the people.<sup>34</sup>

In the first two decades of the nineteenth century, the East India Company's Military Boards launched a number of (ultimately unsuccessful) attempts to regulate and restrict the sale of spirits within and without stations where European troops were stationed.<sup>35</sup> These regulations reflected a less benevolent tone than the civil legislation as military discussions took direct aim at Indian merchants, village dwellers and camp followers. Military officials blamed these groups for creating disorder in the station by facilitating the soldiers' easy access to bazaar hooch. The standard stipulations within military regulations ordered that alcohol be provided to troops through official channels—the commissariat department—and that there were to be no shops selling European spirits within three miles of the nearest cantonment (as the earlier Bengal regulations had established). This, it was hoped, would prevent soldiers 'wandering' outside the cantonment in search of spirits or, conversely, from alcohol being smuggled into the cantonment. Commentators argued that the men could easily obtain alcohol illegally in any number of ways: through unscrupulous bazaar merchants selling it directly; from doubly dubious 'prostitutes' who, it was alleged, plied the men with drink at their houses or brothels; and via a smuggling network composed of both camp followers and unsavoury wives who brought illicit drinks into the barracks.

In an effort to control illegal production and smuggling, Bengal Regulation X of 1813 ordered that official distilleries be established at each of the towns where collectors were stationed in order to give them greater, and more direct, oversight of this branch of the revenue.<sup>36</sup> While the Revenue Board was primarily concerned with the financial losses caused by smuggling and the illicit production of liquor, within military cantonments this issue took on far more menacing undertones. Commanding officers argued that it was illicit alcohol, drunk by the troops, which was to blame for so many courts martial. So serious was this threat thought to be that the Military Board granted commanding officers a free hand in their efforts to check this problem.

Correspondence about the continuing problematic state of European troops in Meerut in 1819 highlights the military's power to control, or in this case eradicate, neighbouring villages seen to pose a threat to its dictates on alcohol. Major General George Ashe, commanding the 2nd Division, lamented that Meerut, being an 'open' cantonment, saw a high volume of alcohol passing into the station. This designation implied that the cantonment did not employ guards for the express purpose of monitoring the flow of people and goods into and out of the cantonment. Ashe laid the blame for the troops' disorderly conduct squarely on the small village of Bokerpore, situated 200 yards from the lines of HM 8th Light Dragoons. The village, he asserted, supplied the men with great quantities of toddy and spirits and harboured the 'profligate of both sexes'.<sup>37</sup> The soldiers either wandered to the village itself, or had liquor conveyed to their barracks by any number of dubious (to Ashe's mind) facilitators. Ashe noted that orders had been issued for the removal of the village. However, he expressed some impatience that these orders had (at the time of his writing) not yet been carried into effect.<sup>38</sup>

Similar demands for additional 'moral' control in and around cantonments escalated in the 1820s and 1830s. Moreover, commanding officers sought even greater (and more absolute) personal control over and beyond cantonments. Correspondence in 1826 between the commissary general, Mr Morison, and the chief secretary, Mr Hill, noted that commanding officers and bazaar police sought the power to inflict swift corporal punishment on camp followers and retainers for petty offences or breaches of 'good order' in the hope that this would curtail the 'disorderly habits' prevalent among the camp followers.<sup>39</sup> These offences, unsurprisingly, often related to alcohol smuggling, sales or consumption.

An 1832 Madras regulation further illustrates the severity with which those who violated its terms could expect to be dealt with.<sup>40</sup> It expressly marked for punishment any Indian who attempted to sell liquors or drugs within the limits of the cantonment to any European, unless specifically licensed to do so by the government. The punishment for anyone convicted under this clause was imprisonment with hard labour for up to one month, as well as the possibility of up to 50 lashes for aggravated offences. Perhaps more crucially for the government's coffers, it reminded those would-be liquor sellers that the exclusive control of the sale of liquor and drugs within and around the cantonment was deemed to rest with the commissary general. Any individual who wished to possess anything more than a bottle of liquor or a seer of drugs<sup>41</sup> was required to apply to the officer in charge of the station, who held the exclusive power to grant licenses for the sale of liquor and drugs to vendors in and around the cantonment.

Such licenses further reinforced the penal and spatial controls imposed on cantonments. Contracts required vendors to adhere to a long list of regulations that sought to further 'sanitise' military space. The text of the contracts adopted from



earlier *abkari* licenses reflects the nature of military and public space that the state sought to create. By signing the contract, shopkeepers in effect, agreed to act as police in their shops. Any 'disorderly conduct' or gaming within the shop was forbidden, and vendors were required not only to prevent such activities but to pass on any information that they might have about 'thieves or riotous persons' directly to both the *chowdry* and the officer in charge of the bazaar.<sup>42</sup> This suggests that surveillance networks were firmly established in the bazaar—by this section, the shopkeepers, already themselves subjected to surveillance, became informants.

### **'Sound' versus 'Dangerous': Alcohol and Race**

Drink bound groups together and excluded others, whether it was the illicit arrack drunk by 'low-class' European soldiers or the untaxed *mahua* which was played a role in Santhal preparations for the hunt. What a person drank was a believed to be as strong an indicator of class and race as any other. More expensive, imported alcohol (the claret, port and champagne preferred by the wealthier Anglo-Indians) was regulated through import duties, thus escaping the closer scrutiny that the state fixed on locally produced spirits. In effect, this meant that alcohol consumption was understood in two distinct ways. Among the higher classes, alcohol was deemed perfectly healthy, and even beneficial, as the well-to-do supposedly drank 'healthier' spirits moderately. High-ranking civilians and military officers argued that a certain amount of alcohol—of the 'right' sort—was beneficial, if not essential, for Europeans facing India's 'challenging' climate. Proponents of this argument stressed that respectable (read: upper-class) Europeans maintained good health with a certain amount of Madeira, champagne and claret. Expensive, imported wines were celebrated and advertisements for port

and fine wines (freshly arrived from Europe) regular featured in newspapers and magazines. However, deserving of much more intense surveillance was the immoderate, 'indiscriminate' drinking of the lower classes. Indeed, military and civil debates were at their most pointed when discussing the drinks most widely consumed: country spirits and 'European-style' distilled liquors. These were supposedly dangerous and required careful monitoring, control and taxation.

Perhaps perversely, while military regulations sought to carefully regulate the troops' access to liquor, in no way did they seek to stop the men from drinking. Indeed, far from discouraging drinking in the army, the actions of the military department signalled the support, or at least tacit encouragement, of alcohol in military life. This is revealed most clearly in three key army institutions, namely: the above-mentioned commissariat department, responsible for the purchase of alcohol for the troops as well as the later sale of liquor contracts within army spaces; the implementation of a liquor ration for the troops; and the regimental canteen. Together, these institutions played a significant role in reinforcing and cementing the central place of drinking in military working class sociability and permissible leisure.

Certain kinds of alcohol were ascribed positive characteristics in particular circumstances for discrete bodies. Europeans in India generally held that strong liquors were essential to counter the enervating effects of the Indian climate on European bodies.<sup>43</sup> However, while rum might be a necessary tonic for Europeans, it could be dangerous for Indians. In a similar manner, other colonial officials argued the benefits of 'native' drinks for 'native' bodies, contending that fresh toddy was an important dietary supplement for some impoverished Indian peasants but certainly not appropriate for Europeans. This idea can be read across the rations

granted to European soldiers, which included a daily alcohol allowance. Sepoys had no such ration (and, for that matter, found themselves largely responsible for gathering their own provisions). In order to stimulate the constitution, part of the European soldier's allowance of two drams daily was administered at breakfast, and a remaining dram offered in the evening. The liquor provided was not, the well-heeled civilian would stress, claret. Instead, distilled European spirits or, later in the century, a 'healthy' pint of beer was the preferred choice for the soldier.

The idea that alcohol was a beneficial stimulant for European bodies in India remained an enduring tenet of medical and military 'common sense' throughout the nineteenth century. An 1862 report specified that the men received one pint of malt liquor at 4pm (with their dinner), plus one dram of 76-proof rum.<sup>44</sup> The report's author, Arthur Longhurst, suggested that it would be better to dilute or 'moderate' the men's drink with water, so as not to destroy their stomachs.<sup>45</sup> Longhurst, like a number of commentators before him, recommended that the timings of alcohol issuance be altered—reverting to part of the ration being given out in the morning, either before or directly after the morning parade, noting that this should aid the men's languid stomachs and sharpen their taste for breakfast.<sup>46</sup> While the distribution and timings of alcohol issuance in the cantonments had changed by the 1860s, alcohol remained a firm staple in the men's daily routine.<sup>47</sup>

The third way in which the military reinforced the place of drinking among the troops was through the institution of the regimental canteen. Officially sanctioned canteens were introduced from the 1820s. The initial orders sanctioned the construction of a designated building for drinking in the cantonment where the men would be entitled to take their liquor ration. While the liquor in the canteen was more

expensive than that (illegally) available in the neighbouring bazaars, commanding officers hoped that the comfortable space, good lighting and various 'entertainments' available in the canteen would draw the men there instead.

The author of 'The European Soldier in India' in 1858 noted that a new canteen had recently opened in Calcutta on the plain between the fort and the town.<sup>48</sup> This meant, he happily noted, that the men would not be 'forced' to go into the bazaars to seek refreshment. To prevent the dangers that so often accompanied intemperance, this canteen provided 'sound, drinkable liquor' as well as a host of other amusements in order to draw the men in for the evening.<sup>49</sup> In this way we see that medical concerns and ideas about 'appropriate' ways to consume alcohol further reinforced racial segregation as men were encouraged to mix only with 'their own' in the safety of the military canteen. In many respects, the canteens enjoyed success. They were popular with the men and were established, with official sanction, at the majority of stations where European troops were based. However, despite the optimistic notes of some authors to the contrary, the canteen system did not prevent men from also seeking alcohol outside the cantonment.

In stark contrast to the military's consistent support for carefully controlled and administered 'European' liquors within the 'safe' confines of the canteen, the threat of uncontrolled, immoderate drinking by Europeans and Indian drinkers was used to justify the moralising paternalism exhibited whenever 'country spirits' were discussed. As the favoured tippie of varying sets of drinkers, this broad category remained the target of most legislation. Concerns about overindulgence and uncontrollable indiscipline among both the European soldiery and Indian lower classes grew as observers stressed that these groups were drinking beyond the 'healthy' limit. European troops were unruly, it was argued,

due to their love of the unregulated liquor that flowed so freely around them.

In an effort to dissuade soldiers from turning to arrack as a cheaper alternative to the alcohol available in the barracks, the revenue department moved to equalise the taxes on country spirits. Over time, these changed taxes on toddy and *mahua*, ostensibly intended to regulate the drinking of the European soldiery in India, inadvertently resulted in a shift in Indian drinking patterns. Drinking populations soon turned to the stronger, European liquors. It was not so much that European liquors were introduced to India, but that, through the tax regime, drinks like toddy and daru, once locally produced and consumed, became more expensive for peasant consumers to access. Mirroring tariffs across the empire, the doors of preferential access (of a slightly different sort) were wedged open for European-style spirits in India. As the new tax situation made these drinks (certainly stronger than freshly brewed toddy or *mahua*) more attractive to Indian drinkers, Indian anti-drink observers, in a precursor to the early nationalist and later Gandhian temperance campaigns, angrily pointed to the impact of European spirits on Indian society.

In the language of these warnings, we can read clear, racialised labelling of particular drinks. Country spirits were interchangeably labelled 'native', 'unwholesome', 'illicit' and 'dangerous'. When associated with European drinking, these drinks were not only said to contain a toxic tonic of additives, but perhaps, most critically, evaded the revenue machinery of the state. However, fresh toddy and daru were hailed by some sympathetic observers as providing critical nutrients for poor Indian labourers, and, beyond this, medicinal qualities (such as functioning as a stimulant and digestion aid).<sup>50</sup> Labourers, such as the 'coolies' employed to bear heavy loads, often drank toddy (with the support of their employers) for the

energy required for such hard labour (done, it should be remembered, for scant food or payment). Toddy and *mahua*, in the mouths (and bellies) of Indian labourers, were deemed 'natural' and beneficial supplements, particularly essential in times of scarcity and famine. However, both could inflict untold injury when consumed by European soldiers. Similarly, the strong distilled 'European'-style spirits were viewed as a venomous poison when drunk by Indians, one which threatened to reach beyond the grasp of the poor peasant and trickle through the blood of the 'respectable' Indian classes.

Officials further argued about the 'traditional' place of drinking within Indian society, insisting that social drinking was conducted differently in India. Commentators insisted that for many Indian drinkers, toddy was not touched for most of the year, but retained an important role in certain festivals or celebrations, such as *Holi* or marriage ceremonies. Moreover, unlike the stereotypical image of the violent, brutish, drunken (European) lout, high rates of drinking among Indian populations did not appear to lead to a corresponding increase in violence.<sup>51</sup>

Nevertheless, despite the on-going arguments about the more restrained cultures of drinking, the presentation of the European lower classes as chronically addicted to drink and indiscipline was one applied increasingly to the Indian labouring classes and the poor. This was especially true of mill labourers, whose daily existence came, in many respects, to echo the social confines of the military barracks. Later temperance campaigners used this negative comparison, drawing explicit links between these groups, and suggested the role the government's *abkari* policies played in this glum equalisation. There was certainly very little evidence to suggest that *abkari* policies had any moderating effect on the amount of alcohol consumed. Excise collections for Bengal from 1851 to 1864 continued to reflect healthy [sic] sales of

spirits and drugs across the presidency with nothing to indicate that ever-rising taxes acted as a check on consumption. The 24 Parganas district near Calcutta, one of the earliest territories to be handed over to the East India Company for revenue collection, consistently boasted one of the highest rates of *abkari* collection in the Presidency, with an annual return of Rs 863,978 (or about £431,989) in 1852–53 on spirits and drugs (excluding opium).<sup>52</sup>

### **‘Deformed, Demoralised and Demented’:<sup>53</sup> Critiquing the Abkari**

By the 1870s, Indian nationalists, newspapers and temperance campaigners were all actively contributing to debates on the implications of the government’s alcohol policies. Most pointed to the financial gains made by the colonial government as a result of the *abkari*, with others more explicitly critical: comparing the avarice of English liquor merchants in India to their cotton-selling peers, arguing that both products were forced, artificially on the Indian market.<sup>54</sup> However, perhaps predictably for the newspapers whose readership was the ‘respectable’ *bhadralok*,<sup>55</sup> the greatest threat was the idea that this love of drink had made advances among the ‘respectable folk’ and higher castes, both in the cities and *mofussil*.<sup>56</sup> The editor of the Dhaka-based *Hindu Hitoshini* suggested that one solution to this problem could be a rule that no ‘native, if he is addicted to drinking’ be eligible to hold any government appointment.<sup>57</sup> Reviewing the recent report of the Bengal sanitary commissioner, the editor of the *Amrita Bazar Patrika* bemoaned the fact that ‘formerly there were scarcely two in a hundred who knew what spirituous liquor was ... [however] the term Bengali is now a synonym for a creature afflicted with inflammation of the liver, enlargement of the spleen, acidity in the stomach, and

headache'.<sup>58</sup>

Protests of another sort erupted in 1878 when the Bombay government enacted a new, far-reaching Abkari Act. The new regulations set a fixed tax on date, brab and coconut trees of between Rs 3 to 14 per tree depending on the location and type of tree. By virtue of the fact that the Act set the minimum number of trees to be tapped at 50, it, like earlier military regulations, prioritised the rights of large, wealthy producers over the traditional toddy-tappers of Bombay, the Bhandaris. The Act set a monopoly grant on the buying and drawing of toddy for the liquor contractor. For producers and consumers, the Act was seen as an insurmountable challenge to their very livelihoods. As a result of the Act, overnight the Bhandaris found themselves priced out of the market. Similarly, those who had previously tapped a smaller number of trees solely for their family's personal consumption were now prohibited from doing so. Both small producers and consumers protested almost immediately, arguing that the law was not only immoral but was a betrayal of previous negotiated settlements between producers, the *abkari* department and government. In the history of protest and agitation in colonial India, the Bhandari strikes, organised in response to the 1878 Act, often appear only as a footnote. However, these were widespread and involved both strikes and a refusal to take up government licenses. Adivasi<sup>59</sup> also joined the protest and argued that the consumption of fresh toddy was an integral part of their existence, providing not only a potential food source in times of famine, but containing a number of important nutrients. In effect, these protests signalled that a significant section of the Bombay population refused to acknowledge the authority of the colonial state.<sup>60</sup> Eventually, the state modified the Act, though this did not meet all of the protestors' demands.

Further protests followed, though, as Eric Colvard has



highlighted, these possessed a different tenor from the 1878 Bhandari protest.<sup>61</sup> If the colonial state was more self-assured in the righteousness of its social interventions where alcohol was concerned, contemporary observers suggested the reverse. By 1886 the British Colonial Temperance Congress warned that the 'habits of intemperance' had spread across India due to the licensing system and the *abkari* department. The system, it argued, had promoted an expansion of liquor shops in places where 'until recently, such things were unknown, in defiance of native opinion and unhappily spreading misery and ruin amongst many families of the industrial class'.<sup>62</sup> To many critical Indian observers, this suggested that the state was encouraging the introduction and spread of 'European-style' spirits. Later temperance advocates and upper caste nationalists alike would conflate this with the introduction of a drinking culture (where, they assured others, there was none previously) in India.

An 1888 House of Commons debate on excise revenue in India heard representations from the Liberal Unionist MP and temperance advocate, W.S. Caine. Caine warned that the 'habits of intemperance' were on the rise across India and Burma. He lamented that the pressure of the fiscal demands on the government of India had prompted it to turn to the *abkari* as a means of boosting its revenue, with dangerous results for the people of India.<sup>63</sup> Caine argued that the 'outstills are frequented by large numbers of people, young and old, who are found often in a high state of intoxication, singing ribald songs and creating all kinds of disorders. In fact, the condition of things you would expect to find ... in the lowest slums of London'.<sup>64</sup>

There was a tangle of paradoxes in public or 'civil' spaces where alcohol was concerned. Following this metaphor, the common thread that ran through this knot was the colonial state's

growing belief that alcohol required moderation and careful governance to secure the appropriate behaviour of its subjects. In cantonments, military officials emphasised the threat to good order that ungoverned, unrestricted access to country spirits would provoke. Whenever the *abkari* system was introduced, revenue and government officials emphasised the morality of the act and insisted that this was brought forward to ensure that the population consumed less dangerous drinks. By increasing the price of liquor (by virtue of these heavy taxes), the state claimed that the natural result would be a climate of morality, moderation and restraint. However, in both the cantonments and civil spaces, the military regulations and the *abkari* achieved no such promise. Government receipts from excise and the 'Canteen Fund' steadily increased over the nineteenth century and the *abkari* department continued to expand its remit—encompassing an ever-growing range of alcohol and drugs for taxation. This reflected a growing confidence by the colonial state in its ability to restructure both laws and society in India. Moreover, in imposing taxes on drinks like toddy, the colonial state unintentionally encouraged a shift in drinking behaviour. The connection between the decisions of the colonial state and Indians' increased consumption of European-style spirits has, over time, been erased. However, the framework established by the colonial state for dealing with the production and consumption of alcohol made a deep and indelible impression on Indian society, and its drinking populations, which continues to resonate through the twenty-first century.

## Notes

1. Indicating, perhaps, the eighteenth-century understanding of the 'foreign' place of liquor within India was the entry for the 1795 almanac, which, in spelling out liquid measurements, noted that in Madras town, 'milk, ghee and oil were sold by the Measure [padi]', whereas 'wine and spirits' were sold by English measure. See Madras Board of Revenue, Memorandum on the Weights and Measures.
2. One kos is roughly equivalent to 2.25 miles (3.6 km). AD 1793, Regulation XXXIV, Regulations Passed by the Governor General in Council of Bengal, with an Index and Glossary, Vol I (London: JL Cox, 1828), British Library, India Office Records, Asian and African Studies (AAS) V/8/16.
3. The term '*abkari*' is derived from the Persian for strong water, or spirituous liquors. In India, the word came to mean the taxes, or excise system, imposed on alcohol production and consumption.
4. There is an extensive historiographical debate that engages with the question of how the colonial state reinforced religious and caste identifications through its actions. See, for example Washbrook, 'South India 1770-1840'; Dirks, *Castes of Mind*; Appadurai, 'Number in the Colonial Imagination'.
5. For a discussion of governmentality, see Burchell, Gordon, and Miller, eds, *The Foucault Effect*.
6. Hardiman, 'From Custom to Crime', 167.
7. Cassels, *Social Legislation*, y.
8. Pan, *Alcohol in Colonial Africa*, 16.
9. Gilbert, 'Empire and Excise', 117.
10. See, notably Colvard, *A World Without Drink*; Fischer-Tine

- and Tschurennev, eds, *A History of Alcohol*
11. Crush and Ambler, *Liquor and Labor*, 14. The European colonial powers grew increasingly anxious about Africans' consumption of dangerous 'foreign' spirits. This anxiety led to the 1919 Treaty of Saint Germain-en-Laye, which banned the production of spirits and barred the introduction of imported spirits into large parts of Africa.
  12. Related to these two streams was a third means of dealing with alcohol in the areas under 'indirect' rule: civil and military negotiations with the princely states on the flow of alcohol into and out of their territory. The complexity of the issue of alcohol in the princely states merits its own article and will not be attempted here.
  13. The *Nizamat* referred to the civil administration of the area.
  14. Regulation Number XXXIII by the Board of Revenue, 19 April 1790, Regulations in the Revenue and Judicial Departments Enacted by the Governor General in Council for the Government of the Territories under the Presidency of Bengal, 1780 to 1792, 1834, AAS V/8/15.
  15. High-ranking East India Company civil servants were known as civilians. These sought-after, covenanted posts were awarded through nomination (by a Company director) until 1855 when the Company, under pressure, shifted to introduce competitive examinations for these appointments.
  16. See, for example, Ludden, 'Transformations of Colonial Knowledge'; Bayly, *Empire and Information*; Washbrook, 'Law, State and Agrarian Society'; Rocher, 'British Orientalism'.
  17. The three presidencies of Bengal, Bombay and Madras were the administrative divisions of the Company state. Bombay and Madras were administered by governors and Bengal by a governor-general (the viceroy after 1858) who not only administered Bengal, but who held precedence over the other two. While officially, the decisions of the governor-general in Calcutta took

- precedence over his peers in Bombay and Madras, in practice, divisions and inconsistencies remained throughout the nineteenth century. For a further discussion on the many fractures within the colonial state, see Wald, *Vice in the Barracks*.
18. Remarking on the variation of Indian land measures, W. H. Bayley, a member of the Board of Revenue in Madras exasperatedly noted, 'it is well known that the areas are not even what they profess to be, the rod or rope being seldom or ever the number of cubits it is said to be'. See Madras Board of Revenue, Memorandum on the Weights and Measures, 4, emphasis in original.
  19. Extract from the Proceedings of the Board of Revenue, 2 March 1812, Revenue Letters from Madras, vol 4, 1812-14, AAS L/E/3/234. The report fixed the commission appointed to officials at 1 per cent of collections and capped this amount at 1,500 pagodas a year. The star pagoda (coined at Madras) was worth 3½ rupees. See Madras Board of Revenue, Memorandum on the Weights and Measures, 25.
  20. From *pāunch*, the Hindi and Marathi word for five, suggesting its five ingredients: arrack, sugar, lime juice, spice and water.
  21. Extract from the Proceedings of the Board of Revenue, 2 March 1812, AAS L/E/3/234.
  22. Abkari Mahal simply denotes the *abkari* office.
  23. AD 1793, Regulation XXXIV, A Regulation for Re-enacting, with Moderations, the Rules passed on the 16th April 1790, and subsequent dates, for levying a tax upon intoxicating liquors and drugs. AAS V/8/16.
  24. On the nature of the military fiscal state, see Peers, *Between Mars and Mammon*; Bayly, 'The British Military-Fiscal State'; Wald, *Vice in the Barracks*.
  25. Number XL, Regulation for Cantonments, Passed on 28 July 1790, Regulations in the Revenue and Judicial Departments Enacted by the Governor General in Council for the Government of the Territories under the Presidency of

- Bengal, 1780 to 1792, 1834, AAS V/8/15..
26. See references to earlier 1782 legislation in AD 1793, Regulation XXXIV, A Regulation for Re-enacting, with Moderations, the Rules passed on the 16th April 1790, and subsequent dates, for levying a tax upon intoxicating liquors and drugs, AAS V/8/16.
  27. Hospital admissions for liver complaints were often attributed to the over-consumption of alcohol.
  28. Hawes, *Poor Relations*.
  29. For a fuller explanation of the differences between the Crown and Company troops, see Stanley, *White Mutiny*. For details on reading, and literacy, among Company troops, see Murphy, *The British Soldier*, 29–61.
  30. Between 1868 and 1874, the Army enacted a series of reforms which had been proposed by the Secretary of State for War, Edward Cardwell. These reforms aimed to make the army more efficient and to attract better recruits. Amongst other things, the reforms abolished flogging and shortened the length of service.
  31. Here too one can draw an interesting comparison with later policy in East Africa. As Justin Willis has argued, policies at the turn of the twentieth century were very much concerned with securing a stable labour supply. See Willis, *Potent Brews*, 120–22.
  32. *Ibid.*
  33. The point at which toddy became alcoholic was debated regularly, with many authors stressing the health benefits of fresh and lightly fermented toddy.
  34. AD 1800, Regulation VI, A Regulation for Defining the Tax to be Levied on the Sale of Intoxicating Drugs and Toddy, Regulations Passed by the Governor-General in Council in Bengal, Vol. II ,1828, AAS V/8/17.
  35. Letter to John Nugent, Acting Secretary to Government, Revenue Department, from  
W. R. Pratt, Acting Commissioner of Customs, Opium and Abkari, Bombay. 25 March 1881, Report on the

Administration of the Abkari Department of the Bombay Presidency (Exclusive of Sind) for the Revenue Year 1879–80, 1881. AAS V/24/1098.

36. Wald, Vice in the Barracks, 128–36.
37. AD 1813, Regulation X, A Regulation for reducing to one Regulation, with Alterations and Amendments, the Regulations at present in force respecting the Manufacture and Sale of spirituous liquors, intoxicating drugs, taury and putchwye Regulations Passed by the Governor-General in Council in Bengal, Vol. II, 1828. AAS V/8/17.
38. Letter to Lieutenant Colonel James Nicol, Adjutant General of the Army, from Major General George Ashe, Commanding 2nd Division, 28 May 1819, Bengal Military Collections, Proceedings Adopted with the View of Checking the Sale of Spirituous Liquors to the European Troops, 1819, AAS F/4/643/17790.
39. Ibid.
40. Regulation VII of 1832; A Regulation for ... the better order and discipline of Military Bazars, the more effective administration of justice, and of the police, at the stations where such Bazars are established, and at certain other military stations, and in military forces in the field; the extension of the powers of Courts Martial; and the more effectual prevention of the undue use of spirituous and fermented liquors, and intoxicating drugs, by the European Troops under this Presidency, Board's Collections, 1833–34, AASF/4/ 1425/56238.
41. This weight conversion varied, but was roughly equivalent to 2½ lbs.
42. Letter to Mr Chief Secretary Hill from W Morison, Commissary General, 4 October 1826; Enactment of Regulation 7 of 1832 for the Better Discipline of Military Bazars and Relative to the Establishments to be Entertained in lieu of Troops at the Several Military Stations for the Execution of Civil Process, Board of Commissioners Collections 1833–34, AAS F/4/1425/56238.

43. For a broader discussion of climatic determinism and race, see Harrison, *Climates & Constitutions*.
44. *Ibid.*
45. Longhurst, *Diet of the European Soldier*, 25.
46. *Ibid.*, 34.
47. The British army retained the liquor ration through the First World War, after which it was phased out. The Royal Navy abolished rations for its ranks, the 'Rum Tot', only in 1970.
48. 'The European Soldier in India', *Calcutta Review* 59 (1858), 136.
49. Longhurst, *The Diet of the European Soldier*, 35.
50. Wald, 'At Ease Soldier'.
51. Hardiman, 'From Custom to Crime', 176.
52. *Sulabha Samachar*, 19 Oct. 1875, *Indian Newspaper Reports, Bengal, 1875*, AAS L/R/5/1.
53. Protesting the *abkari* department and the ostensible rise in the use of spirituous liquors among Indian populations, the editor of the *Sulabha Samachar* asked: 'Of what use will be an increased revenue, and the consequent increase in the power of Government to benefit the country, if the people continue to be deformed, demoralized and demented by the use of intoxicating liquors and drugs?' See Caine, *India and the Excise Revenue*, 3.
54. Report on the Financial Results of the Abkarry Administration of the Lower Provinces, 1852-1868, 1857. AAS V/24/1128.
55. The 'gentle-folk' - this term referred to the English-educated 'respectable' classes of Bengal.
56. *Bharat Sangskarak*, 22 Jan. 1875, *Indian Newspaper Reports, Bengal, 1875*, AAS L/R/5/
  1. The mofussil were the regions outside the main cities of India.
57. *Grambasi*, 30 Dec. 1874, *Indian Newspaper Reports, Bengal, 1875*, AAS L/R/5/1; *Behar Bandhu*, 2 Feb. 1875, *Indian Newspaper Reports, Bengal, 1875*, AAS L/R/5/1.



58. Hindu Hitoshini, 18 Sept. 1875, Indian Newspaper Reports, Bengal, 1875, AAS L/R/5/1.
59. Tribal peoples
60. This was not the first time that the Bhandaris petitioned the state to demand their rights, but it did represent the largest strike on their part. For earlier protests, including what one resident described as a Bhandari 'mob', see Letter from Lawrence Shah, Resident at Bancoot, to the Revenue Department, 17 August 1808, Bombay Revenue Proceedings, Nov. 1808, AASP/366/64.
61. Amrita Bazar Patrika, 4 Feb. 1875, Indian Newspaper Reports, Bengal, 1875, AAS L/R/ 5/1.
62. Colvard, 'A World Without Drink'.
63. Hardiman, 'From Custom to Crime', 173.
64. Caine, India and the Excise Revenue, 3.

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