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Transcript

Lauren

Have you ever found yourself asking why alcohol plays such a big role across so many cultures? Striking a balance between moderation and excess isn't just a modern struggle. It goes back to ancient Egypt, Mesopotamia, and the Roman Empire. I'm Lauren, and I'm a postdoctoral fellow in Egyptology at the University of Oxford. I'm fascinated by how today's issues mirror the past, from ancient health warnings to peer pressure at Greek symposium. We're exploring it all. Join me as we get drunk on history and uncover the timeless truth behind our drinking habits. Hello everyone and welcome to another episode of Drunk on History. We are going to ancient India with James McHugh. He's a professor of South Asian religions at the University of Southern California and is mainly working on sources written in Sanskrit. And he wrote the first comprehensive monograph on the history of alcohol in pre-modern India titled *An Unholy Brew: Alcohol in Indian History and Religion*. James, welcome to the podcast.

James

Thank you. Thank you for inviting me and I'm excited for this.

Lauren

So Indian history is of course a very wide topic and you are mainly working on pre-modern India, which includes both ancient and medieval times. Could you be a little bit more specific about the time span that you are working on? Which centuries are we talking about, as well as what are the geographical boundaries of pre-modern India.

James

I should start. The way to start with this is basically it's mainly because they work in these Sanskrit texts, which people are still producing. But I even work with things from like the 18th century. So it's kind of that world that I'm dealing with. So which can go from like the earliest Vedas, which about sort of 1300 BCE up to like not that long ago. And there is kind of intellectual continuities. The bulk of my stuff, I'd say, is from a few centuries BC till about 1200. I'm not going to get into periodization terminology for that part of the world, which is different for Europe. So let's... You know, early medieval, in fact, if we're gonna call it anything. And then medieval gets complicated. Basically, I

look at anywhere where people were sort of working with these texts, in South Korean and Pali and so on. Often I would technically maybe go South Asia, but then, and this is, I feel like people get offended or something, but weirdly in America, a lot of people, quite educated people, confuse South Asia and Southeast Asia. So if I say I do South Asia, they'll think it's gonna be about like, I don't know, Cambodia or somewhere. So I actually have to say it's a India. So, but people work, you know, the Sanskrit texts from, you know, even parts of inner Asia, definitely parts of Pakistan, Bangladesh, modern day India, Sri Lanka, Nepal and places like that. So the big, and also, um, Southeast Asia, which I don't really deal with in fact. So, so big, big time period, a big area covered. Yeah.

Lauren

Yeah. And most of the sources that you're working with, they're, they're written in Sanskrit. So what is Sanskrit actually, because the kinds of texts that we observed in this more sacred literary language, as far as I know, is quite difficult to work with, especially when you want to reconstruct the daily life of people. So how can you use these Sanskrit texts in that sense?

James

Yeah, that's a good point. Maybe I won't give a sort of mini history of like Sanskrit in this podcast, more that, yeah, these are typically texts that were written and used by elite, an educated elite part of society. Sometimes they're religious texts, say they're associated with sort of Buddhist monastic laws or something like that. or sort of theory of Hindu, classical Hindu law or something. So yeah, in terms of going from that to, you know, what was it like at a pub type place is difficult because they might mention places like that, but in some religious texts, it might be a very negative way that they're talking about it. And not only that, there's this conventionalized description of bad people drinking and it will just get used and used and used again for like centuries and just sort of repeated and it doesn't necessarily sort of map onto everyday reality. And then things like recipes are actually notoriously difficult to work with as well. So, so yeah, so to go from the text to what was really going on, whether it was drinking, brewing, or what people even really thought about it being good or bad, like your typical person is kind of difficult to say the least.

Lauren

Yeah, absolutely. And you already mentioned the Vedas, which are these like the oldest texts that you basically can work with. So how old are they exactly and why are they so important?

James

Yeah, so, well, it's complicated with the Vedas. So there's different sort of parts of the Vedas. The oldest part of the Veda, which is a load of hymns, got, and it's huge, is the Rig Veda and there's also the Atharva Veda and they're sort of both older and they don't really talk tons about alcohol in fact, but they do talk about this other stuff called Soma. But there is a bit on alcohol in there. And then there's later types of Vedas that get more into this sort of big complicated ritual system. with, you know, mantras that you sort of, they're like a liturgy and instructions and sort of things like mythological explanations of why you do certain things and certain points of the ritual and stuff. And there is a bit about alcohol in there, in a sense there is one ritual where you brew and offer alcohol, which is a bit of an exceptional, strange ritual, in fact. So that gives us some very early recipes. But yet again, you know, this is far from this ancient liturgical text from what is even in those days seen as a bit of a sort of exceptional ritual. So does that tell you what everyday brewing was really like? I don't know.

Lauren

Yeah, it seems to be very difficult to reconstruct a more daily life Indian society. And it seems all fascinating, but it's also very challenging for non-specialists like me to really understand and grasp the Indian society. maybe give a little bit of a more very generic background for our listeners on the different religions that you have, like Buddhism, Hinduism, Jainism, and also the social classes, like you have the priests, you have the warriors, as far as I know, and how these different classes are maybe linked with the different religions.

James

Yeah, I mean, one thing to bear in mind with this is what was society, like everywhere, no doubt changed a lot over the centuries and from century to century. And actually, if you look closely at it, you can really see things are really changing a lot. But for a lot of the period I'm looking at, you know, these elite texts are being written by Buddhist communities, but Buddhists aren't one thing, there's different types of Buddhists, and then Jain communities and also different types of what we'd now call sort of Hindu communities. Within that, yeah, there are many different types of actors. So you have kind of what you might call religious specialists. In the Hindu community, you would have some ascetics who were sort of maybe celibate things, but you also have Brahmins who traditionally were sort of tasked with like learning the Vedas, teaching the Vedas, kind of maintaining that whole thing going on. But like say with Buddhists, you'd have nuns and monks and the same with Jains. So you have this kind of division of religious labor almost. You have specialists and then other people who would have moral duties, of course, and texts talk about that. But in terms of what they do religiously, it might be different, or their main duty might be to support or to feed the specialists. And so then within that, within the Hindu system, there's this classical theory of these four, what you call varnas, that will be like Brahmins, Kshatriyas,

Vaishyas, and Shudras. It's very much a theory. It's very much an idealized theory. So yet again, how that mapped onto what you might think of as sort of castes in different communities nowadays, how it actually looked say 1700 years ago is also a bit elusive, but it's very much a theory and it does inform the ideal vision of Hindu law about alcohol. As to how many people in a given region were involved with that is hard to know.

Lauren

Yeah. So yeah, really have like these different classes within the Hindu tradition. And some of them are also specifically connected with like abstaining from certain kinds of alcohol. And in general, Indian alcohol is also not very straightforward. As with other ancient civilizations, there was no real word or term or generic concept of alcohol. And in addition, we also can't really use like our own classifications, like Western classifications of wine, a distilled liquor on all of the Sanskrit terminology and there seem to be a lot more forms of alcohol than we have. So can you give us a little bit of an overview of the various types of these grain and sugar based alcohols that they were producing and especially thinking of Sura and maybe also Soma?

James

Yeah, so this, in a way, this is key to understanding, especially sort of very classical Hindu alcohol theory. It might be different in practice, because you've got different types of people and you've got different types of drink. And then you get this kind of complicated interplay between that, which is why the Hindu sort of texts from about, I don't know, 1400 years ago, very complicated. So there wasn't a concept that like, oh, say, you know, beer, wine, cider contain the same substance as alcohol. Didn't think of it like that. As you said, the way they understood it was certain things that are completely innocuous like rice or, you know, sugarcane juice start out, they don't get you drunk. But then you transform them and they do. Things that behaved like that were sort of grouped together. Within that, there was also a division that like things are made of starch, like rice or millets, they need this extra stage of turning the starch to sugar. which is done through enzymes and there's various methods around the world of doing that, which I'm sure cropping up on this podcast quite a lot. But the way they understood that process 2000 years ago in India is that you added this stuff to it, which you sort of got separately. And we talk about it now in terms of enzymes and microbes, but they just thought of it as this fermenting agent stuff. And you added that to your rice. And actually what it was doing technically, it was turning the starch to sugar and then the sugar to alcohol. But they just thought you put it with like, say, grains and you get an alcoholic drink. And then things like, say, sugarcane juice, you wouldn't need that stuff. And you get this in some Buddhist regulations, in some versions where, you know, there's the ones that have this kinva stuff that you add to the starches, and then there's the other ones that you don't. But then within that, within the starchy drinks, there's

loads, and it changed, you know, different centuries, you get different ones, you know, like there's this tool called surah is the kind of key concept. Surah can be a very big umbrella term for sort of alcoholic drinks in general, but it can also sometimes refer a bit more to the starchy ones. And there's, you know, there's black surah, red surah, clear surah, pale surah. And then within the sugary drinks, quite early on they had sugarcane and not just sugarcane juice, but all sorts of processed forms of sugarcane-y products. And you could make alcohol from all of those. You have fruit juices, you have palm, sap, toddy. And so within the region you had like a ton, and honey, of course. So there were like a ton of different options for making these drinks and they all had different names and often they have just the sugarcane juice ones alone as like different types of it and stuff like that. very complicated, but because they weren't seen as all containing alcohol, you know, medicinally and legally and ritually, they were often organized in different ways.

Lauren

Yeah, I also think it's really fascinating that like with the Sanskrit term for like fermentation, it's not really how we see the concept of fermentation. It seems that there are really, okay, you put different ingredients together, you mix them, and this is the process of fermentation. But that's of course not how we see the concept of fermentation nowadays. And I think that's really, really fascinating. I don't know if you could maybe say a little bit more about that.

James

Yeah, that was this interesting thing when I was working on this, is the word to ferment is sort of connected to sort of, to put together. And things aren't always clear words, you know, like to understand. You're kind of used to these things being a bit like that. And then I, I was reading one more ancient ritual text and it, you know, they have the water, they have the grains and they have this agentive ferment thing and they're, they're brewing and they kind of go at the time of putting together, recite this, these words, then I was like, oh, well that's, that's how I I was like, oh, of course you could also understand that as a time of fermentation or brewing. And then this is the common later word for fermentation and brewing. So the understanding was it's only when you place these things together that the potency to intoxicate arises. So it's not a new substance appearing. It's like the right combination changes the quality of the substance to a new quality, which is the potential to intoxicate. or to make you drunk or, you know, change your mind and body. Yeah.

Lauren

Very interesting. And to stick a little bit with the terminology you're already mentioning, intoxication for them, I think they, I believe they called it mada. So how did they understand intoxication? Because as far as I understood, there are three different

stages of intoxication and they also viewed being intoxicated with alcohol at the same level as being intoxicated with heroism or wealth, hunting, even learning. And I wanted to ask you, why is this? Why do they place this at the same level? Because it's a completely different concept of intoxication than we understand, I think.

James

Yeah, a lot of the things we're talking about, the drinks, the communities, the mental states, they're sort of untranslatable. But there's this concept, there's a few words, in fact, that you might use for drunk person, but perhaps the most important one is the fact that they have madder. Let's call it intoxication. Some people get really annoyed because the intoxication has this kind of toxic word in and they're like, oh, that's an anachronism and things like that. But like, you know, gotta get going with translating somewhere. And so, yeah, so madha, and the thing is madha is like a very broad concept. So this other substance that wasn't alcoholic that's used in these very ancient Vedic rituals, soma, causes madha too. And that kind of madha is like, you know, Indra gets that madha and it makes him all sort of feisty and fired up to go and defeat enemy and things like that. Elephants, when they're kind of mating and all sort of excited, they have madder. Gamblers is mentioned, get madder. So it's a general thing of sort of a sort of out of control frenzy where, you know, you're not quite thinking straight because you're filled with this excitement and confusion also sometimes. And so there's sort of good versions and bad versions. And so alcohol is one of the many types of matter, but you know, lust can cause it as well. So it's grouped with that. But there are actually a couple of other words that are more sort of specific to alcoholic intoxication. But yeah. So that's kind of how I grew. But, you know, but there's good badder and bad madder and, you know, it has advantages and disadvantages.

Lauren

There's alcohol everywhere, of course. What I was wondering about who was actually making the alcohol, especially the sura that you already mentioned, because I believe there were these sura shops where they were not only producing the alcohol, but also selling it. But I assume that in addition to these kinds of shops, there must also have been some domestic production. And what I also found very fascinating when I read your book was these kind of off licenses that people needed to have in order to be allowed to take the Sura home.

James

I mean, the thing is, I actually should have mentioned it before, as well as the sort of things like the locally brewed things, like these grain ones and sugar cane ones, some wine was imported. There was some imported wine. So that would've been a whole different thing. That would've been this stuff that came from modern day parts of Pakistan, Afghanistan maybe, and was this precious stuff that kind of came in a jar. It

was quite expensive. But yeah, we do have some references. There's this text about this section of it about 2000 years old. It's called the Artishashtra. It's about sort of running the kingdom. That has quite a lot of details on sort of running the tavern. And that does mention these off licenses, sort of for taking stuff off license. That chapter is all about regulation and taxation and things like that. And so the brewing houses, the sort of drink houses, the brew and sell, probably just probably just one product. They were licensed and it was a bit of a state monopoly, in fact, on that. But there were also these temporary home brewing licenses mentioned in that text, which is fascinating. The thing is, it's just one text, as is often the case. So it's hard to go, was this how it was all over the place for many times in places? But yeah, there's an inscription that gets into the regulation of this stuff as well. It does seem there was government involvement with permission to brew and how much you brewed and whether you brewed at home or brewed out. So it seems there were drinking establishments that brewed their own and you could go there and they had a sign of some sort. We don't know exactly what it was, maybe a jar on a stick or something like that. And that was actually, as far as I can tell, the only retail sign that there was in the modern sense of a retail sign in ancient India. It might have been some of the times and places just advertising, We've got Surah at the moment, it's here. Rather than just a constant sign, it might have been a temporary announcement type sign. But then it was definitely domestic brewing as well. We've got a few references to that. Women seem to have been involved in the domestic brewing. And it's seen as a kind of skill, it's seen as a difficult skill. There's a Buddhist story about a woman who's trying to brew for her, I think it's for her own wedding, and she's really bad at it. And then this nun shows up doing their alms collecting rounds and says, oh, I'll help you with that and helps her out. But it just seemed like, that tells you one, people did it at home sometimes, and it was really cheaper to do that. And then it was difficult, but women were sometimes expected to be able to do it. Because I think she's seen as a bit failing. She's screwed up brewing. And then this other woman who's a nun comes and helps. So it seems it was skilled work. If you think about it, you've probably come across this in the rest of the podcast. You're turning sacks of grains into this other thing, which you can sell quite a lot more probably. So yeah.

Lauren

Yeah, I think it's like in every civilization that you have like the home brewing versus the more state monopoly tavern situation, you kind of see it a little bit everywhere. And of course you've been so far mainly discussing the information that you can gather from the Sanskrit texts. But do we also have any archeological sources, maybe settlements in which a sura shop has been discovered or any sura making equipment or cups that have been, been found.

James

Your question raises a huge problem with what I've done or not done as it were. It's not just, I mean, I've been doing mainly Sanskrit texts and there's probably tons of important stuff in ancient Tamil, which is a fabulous, interesting language that I don't study. For later periods in other languages too. And then to say there's a huge Jain story literature in Prakrit, which I can do at a pinch, but you know, it's not my thing. So there's a ton more research to be done and I really wouldn't want to ever say, oh, I've covered everything. There's some art historical evidence of images of people drinking. Mostly it's this very formal, romantic, the kind of drinking you get in the Kama Sutra where it's a couple drinking as a kind of like warmup for sort of lovemaking type thing. You'll get images of that. Obviously, with an image, you don't actually know what's in the cup because it's just a picture. But just because of various factors, you can assume maybe that's what's going on there. There seems to be maybe one visual image, if we understand the scholarship right, from the Ajanta Caves where there's a painting that might be-- it's a complicated story, but it might be of a Seurat shop that's dishing it out on the street. Archaeology, to be honest, it could be out there. I'm not an archaeologist. And one difficult thing though is like, I know that especially with beer, I was at a thing in Alsace on beer in fact, and there was a kind of chemist archaeologist from Paris and he was just pointing out the difficulty of all this residue analysis and it's pretty contested and controversial according to him, which I didn't know. So, so if the residue analysis type stuff's difficult, what are you going to be looking looking for when you're looking for sort of a syrah brewing place is like bowls, jars, you know, it's going to be hard to identify. So we might have some stuff already, but I don't know about that to be honest. Yeah, that's again, another opportunity for somebody to look into that.

Lauren

So hopefully there will be some people looking at a more archaeological side of things to sort of complement with the research you have been doing. Then I have a very tiny but specific question. They also had a large range of drinking snacks. Please tell me more.

James

Yeah, so the drinking wasn't the European concept of like food and wine and drink with the meal. That's not how it worked. It was sort of drinking for drinking's sake. The flavors were appreciated, people like that, the smells, the colors of it, but you were drinking for fun to kind of get drunk. And almost always with salty snacks, salty, spicy, intense snacks. And these get mentioned again and again. And actually you still see this quite a lot in India today. It's sort of one thing about this whole world which survives. So, you know, things like sort of fresh ginger with salt would be a simple one or chickpeas. That's a common drinking snack today. But we've got like quite old recipes for these or just kind of references to sort of like people having snacks with him. There's a Buddhist story about a guy who runs a kind of brewhouse pub type place and he's got this really

stupid assistant. who's like this like young boy who's just sort of works for him. The boys notice that all the drinkers have a little bit of salt with the drink, which sometimes people still do as well. They just drink a little bit salt. And so he gets left in charge for an afternoon and he goes, oh, everyone seems to prefer salt with a beer. So he just puts loads of salt in the drink and everyone's really disgusted and won't drink it and it ruins the batch and costs the guy money and stuff like that. Yeah. So just like this idea, but it's almost like that story takes it for granted that it's always salt. That's what you do. And it's still kind of like that, to be honest, in India.

Lauren

I mean, I kind of agree with the fact of having a salty snack with your drink. They were clearly also very much aware of the concept of the intoxication and the effects that this could have on people. And one of the texts that you translated in your book mentions drinking confuses the mind, causes evil deeds, and plunges the drinker into misfortune in both this world and future rebirths. So drinking also seemed to have been regarded as potentially dangerous, especially as far as I understood for kings and rulers, because it can of course have serious political and social consequences. But what I found very fascinating when we look a little bit more into the concept of moderation is that rather than focusing on a certain type of alcohol that they were allowed to drink or a certain quantity, they were very also concerned concerned with what people were eating in combination with what they were drinking and also in which company they were consuming alcohol. So could you tell us a little bit more about these kinds of regulations and why they have such a wide focus and how this then also affects these future rebirths?

James

Yeah, so the regulation is a vast topic, to be honest. I mean, maybe you've already picked up, there's lots of different types of drinks and there's lots of different types of people. And we've also got different religions, huge period of history. But some sort of big strands in that, there's this concept of drinking as a vice. Texts that talk about that tend to be addressed to kings, at least theoretically. And that's the idea that there's various vices, like hunting's one and gambling's one, but if you kind of get too sucked into that, it can make you make bad decisions. So there's that idea that you get the more generic versions of that that are aimed at everyone of like, you're best off not drinking. It makes you do stupid stuff. You know what I mean? Within Hinduism, you get these sort of Nirvana community specific things of Brahmins can't have any drink and then say Kshatriyas might be like king's warriors, they're forbidden sun drinks, but they're allowed others, which connects to this whole, there's no concept of alcohol, all the drinks are treated differently. So there you have a kind of A very complicated system, which I really can't get into here of sort of different people, different drinks. Yet again, how did that really play out? We don't know. Buddhists and Jains tend to be just

like, don't drink. It makes you do bad stuff. In many ways, it's a bit of a generalization, but the problem with drink is it makes you do bad stuff. So it confuses your perception about what's right and wrong, and it releases your inhibitions. So it's not necessarily the case that for all of these groups, drinking is innately bad. Sometimes it is. It's like this sort of impure thing you shan't put in your body. But sometimes it's more what it makes you do. There's a Buddhist reference to sort of like enlightened beings having drink and it doesn't make them do anything bad because they're like, can't do anything bad if you know what I mean. Uh, but typically it makes you mix up what you should do and what you shouldn't do, what is, what you're perceiving and what isn't. And then you get really fired up and excited and say lustful or angry and just do really stupid stuff. And it's those sins, those bad deeds, which typically would be seen as bad karmic actions that would lead to future, well, bad stuff in this life, bad stuff in this life often. and bad stuff down the line as well. But there is, like I said, sometimes there is a sort of Hindu idea that certain Brahmins just shouldn't put it in their body, even if they don't do anything bad on it. It's just like forbidden to consume that. So it's a complicated picture.

Lauren

And these regulations, they also, they were not really codified in like law codes as far as I understood. It seems to be more coming from religious and literary texts.

James

For a given community, this would be the sort of ideal norms, if you know what I mean. They're not necessarily like our modern laws. They're more sort of theoretical texts, not in every case, but sort of theoretical texts for sort of reflecting on norms and examples of complicated situations. You get a lot of commentarial literature sort of working through those kinds of complicated situations. Yeah, so they weren't kind of like our modern laws for the most part, I'd say.

Lauren

Yeah, and I also think it's really fascinating and also very confusing that it's not sort of really religion specific, like Hinduism, Buddhism, like who is allowed to drink, but also not only like social class specific, but it seems to be really a mix of all of it, which makes it also very difficult to understand who was actually allowed to drink alcohol and who was more specifically allowed to drink what, I think this is the first civilization in the podcast that we come across that has so many different rules regarding this, who is allowed to drink what, which I think is super interesting.

James

I mean, the thing is you've got, we've got the fact that what we're dealing with is these elite techs and there's probably like what everyone else did, which we'll never have access to probably. But then like I said, yeah, there's different versions of why it's bad

for the Jain community and for the Buddhist community. And then there's sort of the complexity in the Hindu community and all the different drinks and other substances kind of start cropping up as well. So it's not just like say here and like cocaine is illegal for everyone. It's not like that. It's very complex and fragmented. But there are some general patterns like you've said about sort of it makes you do stupid stuff, best off not doing it, that kind of stuff.

Lauren

Yeah. To maybe end this episode, I have just one final question. So what is your favorite type of alcoholic drink from ancient India that we do not have in the West and why?

James

Ah, most of them don't get made anymore. Some of these ones called asavas get made now in a Ayurvedic medicinal context. But they're not necessarily made to be palatable. Things like toddy get made. People make some of these rice beers still. And they're all good. A good arsenal can be good in fact, even though it's medical. The one I'm fascinated by, and I've been meaning to try and reconstruct for some time, just need to get a bit of time. This is called Mairea, which was really big early. It seems like it was the kind of fancy drink, like early, like maybe a few centuries BCE. And that is made of sugars fermented with kind of peppery spices. So you maybe start out with, say, honey and some herbs, but things like black pepper and other things that are peppery. And you brew that. like a sort of mead. And then you'd add a second dose. It's almost like champagne where you sort of add more, but not to make it fizzy, but you're kind of like re-fermenting. You might add another sugar, say some type of brown sugar type things like this product jaggery, some dark brown sugar type stuff basically, and re-ferment it, which would add more flavor, more complexity and make it stronger. And it seems to have been like a big thing, this really ancient period, several centuries BC. And I don't know, I just like the idea of trying this sort of sort of double fermented, say strong dark brown sugar mead, but maybe fermented until it's pretty dry with like peppery things. I keep meaning to have a go at making it probably badly, but at least try. It'd be interesting to try that.

Lauren

Well, let me know when you try that out. And I think this is also a very good way to end this episode. I believe we learned a lot from the pre-modern Indian society when it comes to alcohol use. It's not only important what you drink and how much, but also in which company and compared with salty snacks, if possible. So thank you very much, James, for joining me in Getting Drunk on Indian History.

James

Thank you for having me.

Lauren

We hope you enjoyed this episode of Drunk on History. If you're thirsty for more tales from the ancient world, don't miss our next episode. It's full of even more drinking stories from past civilizations. Drunk on History is made in cooperation with the new media center of the University of Basel.