



The Need for Criticality in Medical Humanities: A Critical Exploration of Hooch Tragedies through Arun Roy's *Cholai*

Aryan Thakur

Research Scholar, The English and Foreign Languages University, Hyderabad



Open Access

Manuscript ID:

BIJ-SPL5-MAR26-MD-011

Subject: English Studies

Received : 05.01.2026

Accepted : 02.03.2026

Published : 14.03.2026

DOI: 10.64938/bijsi.v10si5.26.Mar011

Copy Right:



This work is licensed under
a Creative Commons Attribution-
ShareAlike 4.0 International License.

Abstract

In recent times, there has been a surge in the illicit alcohol trade in India. The proliferating illicit alcohol business has caught attention after a series of alcohol tragedies (cases of mass alcohol poisonings in India), which have taken place since the pandemic across the country. Hundreds of people have been affected by these tragedies in the states of Bihar, Punjab, Gujarat, and, most recently, in Kallakurichi, Tamil Nadu.

These tragedies are severely understudied and are often dismissed as instances of chemical mismatch or turned into spectacles. This paper explores Arun Roy's movie Cholai. Cholai is a 2016 dark comedy that is based on the 2011 hooch deaths in rural Bengal. Hooch is the colloquial name for an alcoholic drink that is sold for commercial purposes and is often adulterated with batteries, sandalwood, and anything that gives that extra 'kick'. In the movie, when more than a hundred people die after consuming poisonous hooch, the media and society turn the entire incident into a spectacular facade. This embodies what happens with hooch tragedies outside the fictional world as well.

This paper explores this spectacular turn while arguing for a more critical view of these tragedies. It argues that the victims of these tragedies, mostly belonging to marginalised castes or classes, are victims of an institutional collapse and should be viewed as such. The responsibility should not fall upon the victims and their families, but the state and its institutions

Keywords: Alcohol tragedies, Hooch, Institutions, Spectacle, Cholai

1. Introduction

Since the lockdown, there has been a surge in the illicit alcohol trade in India. Waves of death have accompanied this surge. The Ministry of Home Affairs disclosed that in 2020, around 947 deaths were reported due to the consumption of illicit alcohol, while in 2021 another 782 deaths were reported (TRACIT 4). This comes on the back of the WHO report on Illicit Alcohol, which estimated that 46% of alcohol in India is sold illicitly. This is almost double the global average of 26% (TRACIT 7). The proliferating illicit alcohol business has caught attention after the series of alcohol tragedies (cases

of mass alcohol poisonings in India), which have taken place since the pandemic across the country. Hundreds of people have been affected by these tragedies in the states of Bihar, Punjab, Gujarat, and most recently Tamil Nadu.

It is within this historical and structural context that the Bengali film *Cholai* becomes a significant cultural text for analysis. The movie shows the suffering caused by alcohol within marginalised communities. It also shows how the economic condition of these communities is responsible for their suffering in some ways. Rather than framing alcohol tragedy as an aberration or a momentary



crisis, *Cholai* situates it within everyday structures of poverty, caste-based exclusion, and institutional neglect.

The movie is set in rural India. It shows us how hooch barons operate in rural India. It discusses the role of unemployment, healthcare irregularities and lack of education in sustaining these economies. It also shows how the local mafia manipulates the lives of marginalised populations to make their needs and lives expendable in both policy frameworks and public discourse. All these things allow *Cholai* to show something similar to the realities of the country, where law enforcement and healthcare often function inadequately or in a delayed manner.

In this paper, I aim to study *Cholai* in a way that can help understand the broader issue of alcohol tragedies in India. This sort of study can help in redefining alcohol tragedies. At present, understood to be instances of chemical mismatch, these tragedies harm the poor populations in the country. This research aims to redefine alcohol tragedies as marginalised health crises. It also aims to show that various factors, including caste oppression, structural oppression, and the influences of colonial alcohol policies, contribute to the suffering.

2. Methodology and Theoretical Framework

In the paper, the movie *Cholai*, directed by Arun Roy, is read as a text. By using the close reading method, the text has been interpreted. In terms of the field, I have used methods from the field of critical medical humanities, cultural studies and critical caste studies. These various fields of study allow the researcher to explore various elements of the text.

Using medical humanities frameworks allows one to understand how illnesses are not simply biological. The narratives and the discourses make illnesses permeate our social realities. Foucault's concept of Biopolitics allows one to understand the role of the state in controlling the bodies of its subjects. And concepts like structural violence challenge the commonly held ideas that attempt to treat tragedies indifferently and isolate them from the larger structural issues faced by oppressed communities.

3. Colonial Alcohol Policies and their post-independence continuities

The first major intervention made by the British government in Indian alcohol policy was the introduction of the Abkari Act of 1878. The Act said that the manufacture of liquor would be confined to central distilleries, the excise duty would be levied on the liquor before it leaves the distillery, no toddy would be drawn from trees except by permission of the collector and under license, and each toddy tree that was tapped will pay tax under excise (rather than land revenue, as had been the case before), and that liquor and toddy were to be sold in licensed shops, with licences to be auctioned as before (Hardiman 204). The centralization of liquor production led to discomfort among Adivasi and lower-caste communities in south Gujarat, the region where the act was originally enacted. These communities had to radically alter their consumption habits because of this act. They started brewing alcohol illicitly, drinking liquor made of Mahua flowers regularly and procuring alcohol from territories where the act was not in effect.

Soon after the Abkari Act, another major policy intervention was made by the colonials in the form of the Mahua Act of 1892. The Act initially imposed restrictions on the collection and sale of Mahua flowers by anyone apart from the state in the Thana and Kolaba districts (Hardiman 221). In 1906, it was extended to other Talukas. This impacted the peasant and other marginalized communities extensively because Mahua flowers were not just used for brewing Mahua wine, but for other purposes as well. During periods of scarcity, people consumed Mahua flowers as a part of their diets (Hardiman 222).

The colonial state had centralized liquor production and was rationing it, arbitrarily stopping shutting down liquor shops. This was done with a view of eventually imposing full prohibition. These laws, however, had the opposite effect. Rather than ending the liquor trade in the region, these laws increased the production of illicit alcohol in the region. The illicit liquor was unlike the toddy and the Mahua wine that the communities originally brewed. Because of state control, they could not utilize all the



resources necessary for producing good-quality alcohol. Instead in clandestine settings and with minimum resources, they started preparing poor-quality alcohol which was often unsafe for consumption. Some members of Adivasi and lower-caste communities chose other radical alternatives. This form of renunciation shows Brahminical cultural hegemony, not cultural reform.

The Abkari Act followed by The Mahua Act not only radically altered the way of life for many Adivasi and lower caste communities. They became associated with illicit alcohol and their interactions with alcohol gained notoriety. The colonial policies and the Brahminical hegemony painted marginalized communities as 'habitual drinkers' and 'habitual criminals' because they produced and consumed illicit alcohol. Later chapters will talk about this in more detail.

Post-independence, the legacy of the Abkari Act can be seen in the state's control over the alcohol trade in India. India's alcohol policy can broadly be understood to be working within a paternalistic framework. Colvard says that alcohol consumption in India is governed by "social and moral codes, religious rituals, and individual desires that differ widely across the population" (Colvard 13). Brahminical system of thought which maintains a hegemonic dominance in the Indian society considers alcohol to be an evil, and Savarna leaders like Mahatma Gandhi have argued in favor of total prohibition. India, however, sustains its position as the third-largest liquor market in the world (Jolad and Ravi 88). For many states, liquor is their biggest source of revenue. In Karnataka, it contributes to one-fifth of the total state revenue (Gera 1).

Stuck in the paradox between adhering to the Brahminical code of conduct and profiting from liquor revenue, Indian states have adopted a paternalistic framework closely resembling The Abkari system which includes high taxation, excise duty on liquor, and centralization of alcohol production. Within this framework, the taxes on alcohol are high which means the price of alcohol is also incredibly high. The state argues that high taxation is in place supposed to dissuade people from

purchasing alcohol. The paper argues that what this framework does is neglect the drinking cultures of marginalized caste and Adivasi groups. These groups are not effectively represented in the Indian State's alcohol policy. Furthermore, the paternalistic policy facilitates the creation of illicit alcohol markets which sell poor quality, sometimes poisonous, alcohol to marginalized individuals at low prices. The failure of state institutions, especially law enforcement, to prevent these markets from proliferating leads to tragedies such as the Bangalore Hooch tragedy.

4. Textual and Contextual Analysis of Cholai along with Discussion

In the text, the trade and consumption of illicit alcohol have been normalised, shown to be a part of everyday life. Alcohol is prepared unhygienically using additives, which can be harmful and possibly fatal. The distribution of this alcohol happens through various informal networks. This process has not been sensationalised but instead shown to be part of the normal routine of the villagers' lives. As a result, marginalized communities are pushed into unsafe informal markets where risk becomes an accepted condition of survival

The individuals affected by alcohol-related harm in Cholai are structurally vulnerable even before the tragedy strikes. In the movie, we see the villagers suffering from various structural issues, such as unemployment, poverty, and agrarian issues. This shows that alcohol is not a sign of indulgence associated with marginalised castes, but instead a coping mechanism against harsh economic conditions. This presents the issue of illicit alcohol as structural rather than isolated.

The characters in the movie indulge in the consumption of illicit alcohol, but they are not really the evil, immoral drinkers they are often portrayed as. They are humanised in the story. Before the tragedy strikes, they are often established as working members of the community. This goes against the grain as most depictions of individuals who consume alcohol are of uncontrollable habitual drunkards. A



popular example of this is from Premchand's popular short story *The Shroud*. In the story, two Dalits Ghisu and Madhava are depicted as beastly, immoral and beyond saving.

Here we use Michel Foucault's concept of Biopolitics, where he extensively discusses the state's power to 'let die'. The concept is about the state's ability to manage populations not by using direct force to kill them, but by using techniques like neglect and indifference. The structural issues which are faced by the marginalized populations make consumption of illicit alcohol a reasonable choice, as it provides them the necessary leisure for them.

5. Conclusion

Through a detailed analysis of Chulai and discussion on other aspects of alcohol governance and alcohol culture in India, one can assert that alcohol tragedies are not accidents that happen in isolation due to some chemical mismatch. The tragedies are the culmination of ongoing governmental and societal failures in giving adequate representation and respect to marginalized communities.

The paper's argument that these tragedies should be theorized as marginalized health crises does not arise from the fate of the Hooch victims in the movie alone. Recent alcohol tragedies also follow a similar pattern of victimizing marginalized individuals. Most of the victims of the Punjab alcohol tragedy of 2019 were Dalits (Brar 1). The victims of the Surat Hooch tragedy of 2016 were migrant labourers working tirelessly in the textile mills in the village of Vareli known for its textile mills and huge migrant population (Saiyed 1). There are several other such examples.

The consumption within marginalized communities is not due to an immoral inclination towards alcohol which provides alcohol consumption but is often a result of factors like their employment. The *Gotakhors* (divers), from the Mallah community consume alcohol regularly because they are often

forced by the police to retrieve dead bodies from the river early in the morning (289). Lacking any equipment, it is alcohol that helps them maintain their body temperature in shivering cold. Consumption rates are higher among migrant labourers partially because alcohol acts as a relaxing agent after an arduous day of physical labour. The Brahminical state, however, blames marginalized individuals, so it can conceal the role of structural inequalities, cultural institutions and administrative policies in the Necropolitics of Alcohol. This needs to be countered by understanding the violent instrumentalization of alcohol against marginalized communities and alcohol tragedies as marginalized health crises.

Works Cited

- Agamben, Giorgio. *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*. Translated by Daniel Heller-Roazen, Stanford University Press, 1998.
- Brar, Kamaldeep Singh. "2020 Hooch Tragedy: 18 Months on, Tragedy, Its Victims Missing from Poll Map." *The Indian Express*, 5 Mar. 2022, <https://indianexpress.com/elections/2020-hooch-tragedy-18-months-on-tragedy-its-victims-missing-from-poll-map-7732617/>. Accessed 18 June 2024.
- Colvard, Robert Eric. *A World without Drink: Temperance in Modern India, 1880–1940*. PhD dissertation, University of Iowa, 2013.
- Doron, Assa. "The Intoxicated Poor: Alcohol, Morality and Power among the Boatmen of Banaras." *School of Culture, History and Language*, The Australian National University, Canberra, Australia, 19 Mar. 2010, <https://doi.org/10.1080/19472491003593035>. Accessed 3 January 2025.
- Flood, G. *An Introduction to Hinduism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996.
- Foucault, Michel. *Society Must Be Defended: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1975-1976*. Translated by David Macey, Picador, 2003.



- Hardiman, David. *Histories for the Subordinated*. New Delhi: Permanent Black, 2006.
- Jolad, Shivakumar, and Chaitanya Ravi. "Caste, Conservative, Colonial, and State Paternalism in India's Alcohol Policies." *Indian Public Policy Review*, vol. 3, no. 5, 2022, pp. 87-106, <https://doi.org/10.55763/ippr.2022.03.05.004>.
- Jurecic, Ann. *Illness as Narrative*. Oxford University Press, 2012.
- Manor, James. *Power, Poverty, and Poison: Disaster and Response in an Indian City*. Sage Publications, 2004.