

The rhetoric of bliss: linguistic approaches to ambivalence in Hindu spiritual language

A retórica do êxtase: uma abordagem linguística da ambivalência na linguagem espiritual hindu

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Abstract: This paper explores the ambivalent attitudes toward religious ecstasy in contemporary India and throughout history, focusing on how language structures and shapes the discourse surrounding intoxicants and religious ecstasy. Through a linguistic analysis centered on semantic and lexical meaning, the paper examines the language used in key texts, including the *Rig-Veda*, and others. It employs cross-cultural and intertextual analysis to describe ecstasy and its associated taboos, focusing on rhetoric, metaphors, and structures. The study investigates the consumption and offerings of intoxicants, such as *Soma*, *Sura*, and others, as both taboo and revered forms of drug-induced spirituality and religious objects. It examines the deities for whom intoxicants are beloved religious objects and offerings, and explores Hindu traditions—particularly *Tantric* sub-sects of *Shaivism* and *Shaktism*, as well as *Ayurvedic* practices—where herbs, minerals, and alcohol or drug-induced ecstasy are seen as means to cleanse and heal the soul. Additionally, it addresses accounts that portray alcohol and drug-induced ecstasy as taboo, particularly in gender and caste-related contexts where intoxicant consumption leads to joyful, foolish, and generally debauched experiences of sensorial new worlds. The paper reveals how the language used in these texts reflects and constructs the ambivalence surrounding these practices. It shows how linguistic choices both shape and are shaped by cultural and religious attitudes toward intoxicants.

Keywords: Linguistic analysis; Ambivalence; *Rig-Veda*; *Shaivism*; *Shaktism*.

Resumo: Neste artigo, exploramos as atitudes ambivalentes em relação ao êxtase religioso na Índia contemporânea e ao longo da história, com foco em como a linguagem estrutura e molda o discurso que envolve substâncias intoxicantes e êxtase religioso. Por meio de uma análise linguística centrada no significado

semântico e lexical, examinamos a linguagem usada em textos importantes, dentre eles o *Rig-Veda*. Empregamos análises interculturais e intertextuais para descrever o êxtase e os tabusele associados, com foco na retórica, nas metáforas e nas estruturas. O estudo investiga o consumo e as ofertas de intoxicantes, como *Soma*, *Sura* e outros, como formas tabus e reverenciadas de espiritualidade induzida por drogas e objetos religiosos. Avaliamos as divindades para as quais os intoxicantes são objetos e oferendas religiosas adorados e exploramos as tradições hindus – particularmente as subseções tântricas do xivaísmo e do shaktismo, bem como as práticas ayurvédicas – em que ervas, minerais e o êxtase induzido por álcool ou drogas são vistos como meios de purificar e curar a alma. Além disso, abordamos relatos que retratam o êxtase induzido por álcool e drogas como tabu, especialmente em contextos relacionados a gênero e casta, em que o consumo de intoxicantes leva a experiências alegres, tolas e, de modo geral, desregradas de novos mundos sensoriais. O artigo revela como a linguagem usada nesses textos reflete e constrói a ambivalência que envolve essas práticas, mostrando como as escolhas linguísticas moldam e são moldadas por atitudes culturais e religiosas em relação aos intoxicantes.

Palavras-chave: análise linguística; ambivalência; *Rig-Veda*; xivaísmo; shaktismo.

1 INTRODUÇÃO

A meme titled “God told the man”, posted by John Wassenberg (2022) in the Facebook group “Ashtavakra Gita”, shows Pope Francis sitting with Ayatollah, with the text reading: “God told the man in white to drink wine but never to get married, and then He turned around and told the man in black to never drink wine but to get four wives”. While it may seem a bit frivolous to start an academic discourse with a meme, Hindu religious discourse is often/sometimes entangled with the two “Ws,” i.e., women and wine. Do these two “Ws” have something in common? Not really, but in Hinduism, women and wine (here used for *Sura* and *Soma*) do combine in a fascinating way and are part of numerous religious discourses. For instance, in Valmiki’s *Ayodhya Kanda* of the *Ramayana*, there is a reference to Lord Rama, a Hindu god, lamenting his abducted wife Sita, which states: “Rama is not eating meat, nor drinking wine. He takes only the one meal (sanctioned for an ascetic) available in the forest” (IIT Kanpur, 2022).

From a linguistic perspective, an intertextual examination of these references reveals how asceticism and restraint are portrayed through specific lexical choices and syntactic structures. The contrasting injunctions related to wine and marital status in the meme and the ascetic practices in

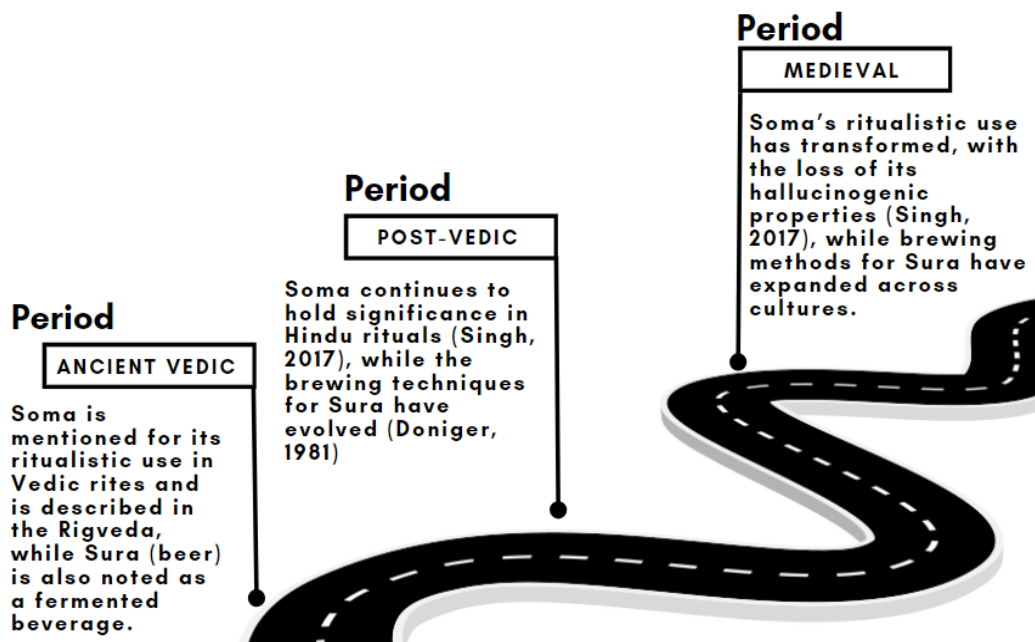
the *Ramayana* illustrate how language encodes religious values and societal norms. The favorite drink of royalty was *maireya*, which, for instance, was offered to Sita by Rama in the *Ramayana*, notes Achaya (2002, p. 26). Since *kshatriyas* (warrior class) were not allowed grain-based liquors, *maireya* was likely made from sugar or fruit, most likely distilled, and spiced or flavored. It was often sweetened with expensive honey, or with more affordable *guda* (jaggery) or even cheaper molasses. Numerous liquors are mentioned in literary sources. The *Ramayana* references four, Kautilya lists twelve, and Charaka enumerates no less than eighty-four (Achaya, 2002, p. 26).

This paper focuses on the analysis of the language and lexicons used in these texts, uncovering underlying attitudes toward these elements and offering insights into broader cultural and religious perspectives on pleasure, austerity, and gender roles. For example, the *Rig-veda*, which consists of 10 *Maṇḍalas* (books), contains a total of 10,552 hymns, of which 1,028 verses are dedicated to *Soma*—similar to the *Incan ayahuasca* states (Singh, 2017, p. 17). The IX *Maṇḍala* (Book) is particularly rich in *Soma*-related descriptions, with a total of 114 hymns focusing on *Soma* (Shah, 2015, p. 28; Achaya, 2002, p. 225). And in *Bhagavad Gita* (9.20), it is stated that those who study the Vedas and drink the *Soma* juice, seeking to attain the heavenly planets, worship Me (*i.e.* almighty) indirectly. After being purified of sinful reactions, they are reborn in the pious, heavenly realm of Indra, where they experience divine pleasures (Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada, 1986, p. 608-609).

The first half of the paper, *i.e.* sections 3 & 4, examines linguistic approaches to the ambivalence of ecstasy in religion, with a focus on semantic and lexical analysis. It explores how language represents the ingestion of intoxicants and forms of drug-induced spirituality, particularly emphasizing religious objects explicitly associated with the second “W” (*Soma*, *Sura* and *ecstasy*). The paper addresses two main themes: the etymological study of intoxicants used in Hindu traditions and the linguistic examination of substances such as *Soma*, *Sura*, alcohol, and other intoxicants linked to drug-induced ecstasy. The second half of the paper, *i.e.* section 5, and its sub-headings, provides further insights into the ambivalent views on ecstasy and intoxicants within Hindu traditions, particularly

regarding their effects on the psyche of followers in Kulaarnava Tantra. These arguments will be supported by textual evidence from key works, including the Rig-Veda, Ramayana, Mahabharata, Bhagavad Gita, and others.

Figure 1 — Timeline of Intoxicant Use



Source: The author.

Ecstasy, intoxication, and bliss are not just abstract concepts; they are embodied experiences that are expressed through language. The exploration of non-linguistic elements, such as the use of intoxicants and ecstatic states is necessary for a comprehensive understanding of how language functions in linguistic contexts. By analyzing these experiences from a linguistic perspective, the paper demonstrates the dynamic interplay between language, cultural practices, and spiritual states. Sections 5 and 5.1 to 5.4, which are non-linguistic, provide valuable insight into the practices and ideologies that shape the language, making them essential to the paper's overarching argument about the rhetoric of bliss. These sections do not focus on linguistic analysis.

2 METHODOLOGY

The methodology of this study employs an interdisciplinary, mixed-methods approach, integrating linguistic analysis with cultural, historical,

and comparative perspectives. It combines qualitative methods from both the humanities and social sciences to provide a comprehensive understanding of the relationship between language, intoxicants, and ecstatic states in Hindu spiritual traditions. The approach primarily focuses on linguistic analysis while incorporating interdisciplinary insights from cultural, religious, and philosophical studies to deepen the exploration of the subject matter.

Special attention is given to terms like *Soma* (the ritual intoxicant in the *Rig-Veda*), *Sura*, condemned in the *Rig-Veda* (Achaya, 2002, p. 25) as its excessive consumption seems to be considered bad, ecstasy, and other words that signify transcendental states, exploring how these terms evolve and their connotations in different historical, philosophical, and ritual contexts. To support the linguistic analysis, the study integrates non-linguistic perspectives from anthropology, religious studies, and cultural history, examining how intoxicants and ecstatic experiences are embedded within Hindu practices, rituals, and beliefs.

This interdisciplinary approach helps interpret the language used to describe altered states of consciousness, such as the ingestion of *Soma* in Vedic rituals or *Sura* in *Tantra*, through the lens of cultural and spiritual practices. One key focus of the methodology is the exploration of how language shapes and reflects the embodied experiences of bliss, intoxication, and ecstasy, using metaphors, symbols, and discursive strategies to convey experiences that are often beyond ordinary human comprehension.

Table 1 – Cultural and Ritualistic Context

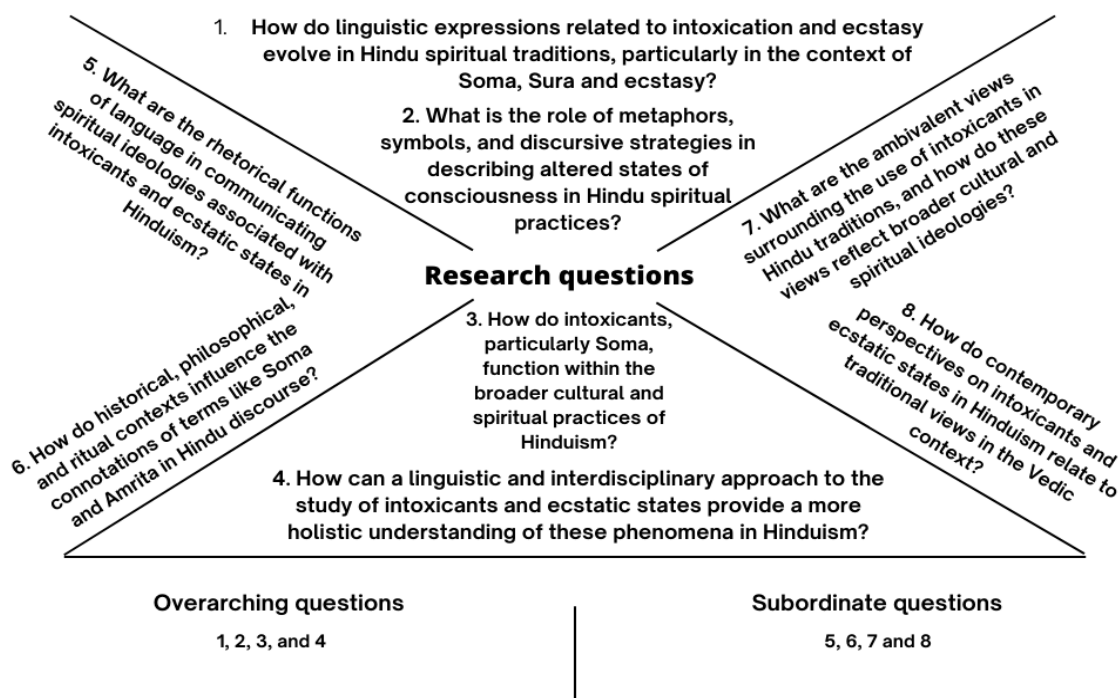
Intoxicants	Ritualistic Use	Cultural Impact
<i>Soma</i>	Integral to Vedic rituals, described in hymns as leafless (Singh <i>et al.</i> , 2010, p. 171; Singh, 2017, p. 17).	Associated with divine attributes and longevity (Singh, 2017, p. 19).
<i>Sura</i>	Used during specific rituals, otherwise restricted (Dwivedi, 2021).	Considered both a stimulant and a potential source of negative effects.

Source: The author.

The study examines how these linguistic expressions function rhetorically, communicating transcendental experiences while also

reflecting the spiritual ideologies governing such practices. By integrating linguistic analysis with a broader understanding of cultural and spiritual practices, this approach demonstrates the dynamic interplay between language and experience, ensuring that non-linguistic elements like intoxicants and ecstatic states are understood in the context that shapes the language itself, thus providing a comprehensive understanding of the rhetoric of bliss.

Figure 2 – Research Questions



Source: The author.

The remainder of the paper is structured as follows: Section 3, “Ecstasy and Intoxicants: Etymology, Linguistic Connection, and Morphology,” offers a linguistic exploration of the origins of the terms “ecstasy” and “Soma-intoxicant,” examining their cross-linguistic connections and references. Section 4, “Linguistic Perspectives on *Soma* as an Intoxicant in Vedic Literature,” provides a detailed analysis of references to *Soma* in both Vedic and post-Vedic literature. Section 5, “Additional Notes,” is further divided into four sub-sections. Sub-section 5.1, “Views on Intoxicants in Hindu Traditions,” discusses the ambivalent views

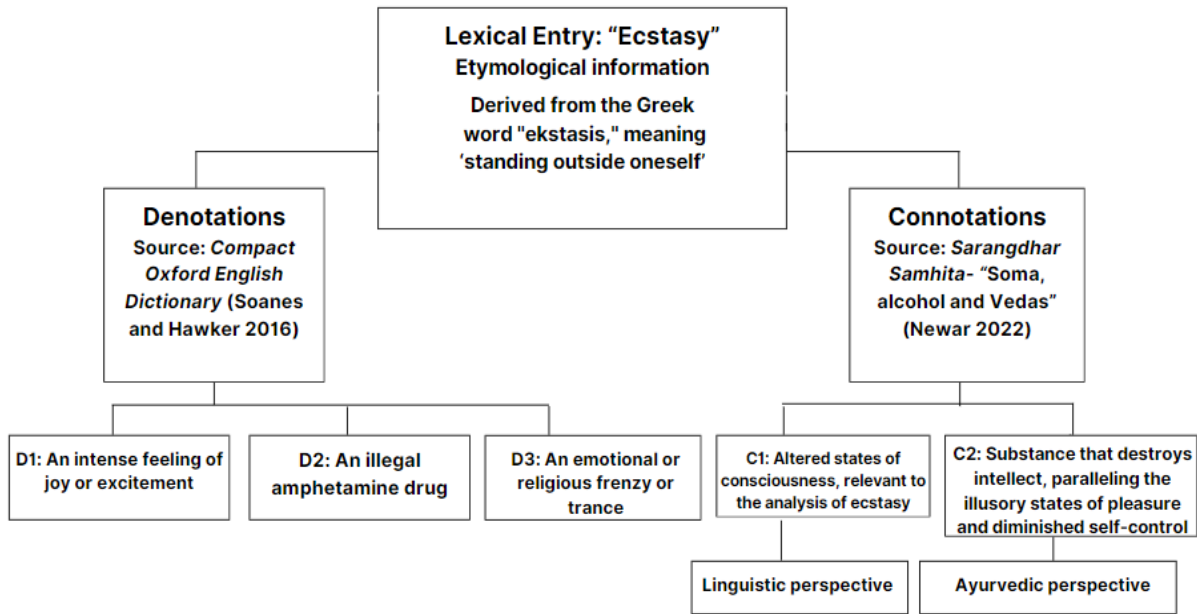
surrounding ecstasy and intoxicants within Hindu traditions. Sub-section 5.2 provides an overview of contemporary perspectives on intoxicants in Hinduism. Sub-section 5.3, “Dialogues on Intoxicants,” explores sage Brihaspati’s responses to questions raised by Indra, the king of the *devas*, regarding the consumption of intoxicants, and includes an anecdotal reference to the tale of Sukra. Sub-section 5.4, “Intoxication and Trance in Kulaarnava Tantra,” examines *Shakta* tantric practices performed in Bengal, India. The final section, Section 6, “Conclusion,” summarizes the paper’s findings and outlines potential areas for future research. However, the author suggests that such papers may not necessarily require a traditional conclusion, advocating instead for considering them as liminal in nature.

3 ECSTASY AND INTOXICANTS: ETYMOLOGY, LINGUISTIC CONNECTION, AND PHONOLOGY

To start, what does the term “ecstasy” signify? Etymologically, “ecstasy” derives from the Greek word “ekstasis”, which means “standing outside oneself.” The *Compact Oxford English Dictionary* (Soanes; Hawker, 2016) provides three definitions: first, an intense feeling of joy or excitement; second, an illegal amphetamine drug; and third, an emotional or religious frenzy or trance. Although these definitions address different aspects, they each contribute to the broader understanding of “ecstasy” in the context of this discussion. From a linguistic perspective, these definitions of “ecstasy” reflect a spectrum of connotations related to altered states of consciousness, which are relevant to the subsequent analysis.

The effects of drinking *Soma* are typically described using forms and derivatives of the verb *mad*, which is unrelated to the English word “mad.” This verb encompasses a range of meanings, including delight, intoxication, and inspiration. It also signifies the heavenly bliss experienced by gods and ancestors (Staal, 2001, p. 752). In the context of *Soma*, it is most accurately translated and understood as rapture or ecstasy. In *Ayurveda*, the *Sarangdhar Samhita* defines an intoxicant as “a substance that destroys intellect” (Srikanta Murthy, 1995, p. 36), paralleling the dictionary’s description of substances like alcohol that create illusory states of pleasure and diminished self-control.

Figure 3 – Ecstasy: Etymology, Denotations & Connotations



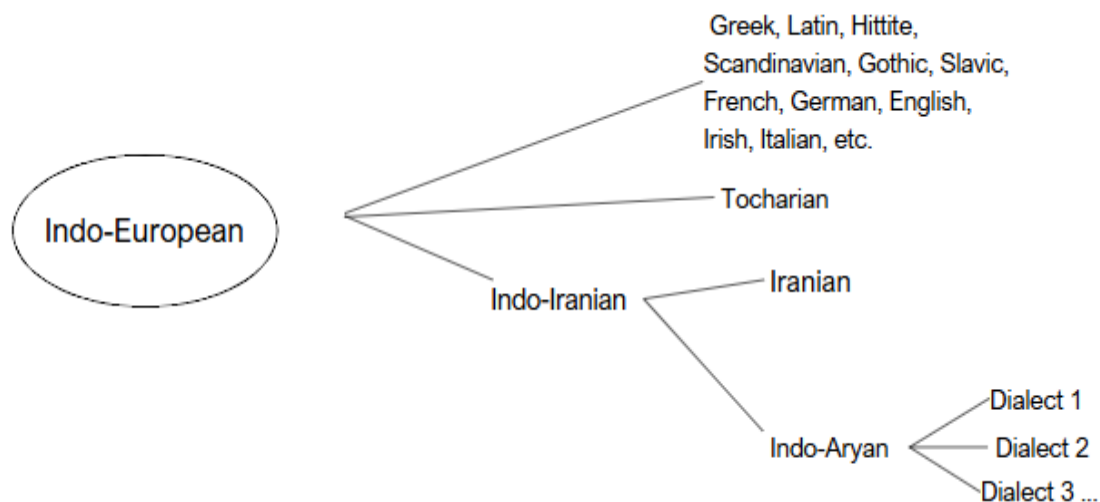
Source: The author.

The term “intoxicant” is historically linked to *Soma* and *Prahamana* drinks mentioned in the *Rig-Veda* (Singh, 2017, p. 17). Another reference is to *Masara* (Achaya, 2002, p. 26), a pre-Aryan beverage made from rice, grass, and barley, used by northern Indian hill tribes (Singh, 2017, p. 14). Linguistically, there is a noteworthy connection between the Sanskrit word “Soma” and the modern Hungarian term for beer, “Sor.” Historical linguists suggest this similarity may indicate historical contact between Finno-Ugrians and Indo-Iranians, revealing a process of linguistic borrowing from the Indo-Iranian word “Surd” (Wikipedia, 2024). Cognates of “Soma” appear in other Indo-Iranian languages, such as Avestan “Haoma,” which similarly refers to a sacred drink in Zoroastrian rituals. In contrast, the Hungarian word “Sor,” meaning “beer,” is thought to be a linguistic borrowing, potentially influenced by Indo-Iranian languages through contact between Finno-Ugric and Indo-Iranian people (Wikipedia, 2024).

The diagram in Figure 4 is drawn with the language/dialects of the *Rig-Veda* in mind. Some Indo-European languages of Europe have been grouped together. The position of Tocharian, the easternmost member, is confirmed in later sources, specifically in Buddhist manuscripts from the

end of the first millennium A.D., discovered in Xinjiang, northwest China (Staal, 2001).

Figure 4 – Indo-Aryan Dialects of the Vedas



Source: The author.

Staal (2001, p. 745) argues that the evidence supporting this claim is primarily linguistic. The language of the *Rig-veda* represents the earliest form of Indo-Aryan, a major branch of Indo-Iranian, which itself is a subfamily within the broader Indo-European language family. Ragozin suggests that the *Soma* cult dates back to the Indo-Iranian period, prior to the split of the two great sister races. He points out that *Soma*, known as *Haoma* in this context, plays a similar role in the worship and sacrifices of the Iranian followers of the Avesta (Ragozin, 1899, p. 168).

Furthermore, Staal (2001, p. 750) argues that Vedic *Soma* is not a name but is derived from the root *su*, meaning “press” or “extract.” Its Iranian counterpart is *haoma*, and the reconstructed Indo-Iranian form is **sauma* (the asterisk indicates that this form has been reconstructed by linguists). The term primarily refers to the juice, and possibly also to the plant from which it is extracted. The Indo-Iranian cult surrounding *Soma* may be connected to the Indo-European usage or cult of *Madhu*, an Indo-European word found in the *Rig-Veda*, which is related to the English word “mead.”

Linguists hypothesize that the phonetic similarities between “Soma” and “Sor” may result from historical interactions between these groups,

particularly in the Eurasian steppe during the late Bronze or early Iron Age. This contact likely resulted in the transformation of "Soma" into "Sor," with the original sacred significance evolving into a more commonplace association with fermented beverages. *Sura*, a term frequently mentioned in the *Rig-Veda*, refers to a distilled alcoholic drink made from barley or wild rice flour. Its consumption by the despised local population was strongly condemned (Achaya, 2002, p. 246).

Phonological changes, such as the shift from "m" to "r" and the simplification of vowel sounds (Wikipedia, 2024), could explain the transformation of the word. To express the phonological changes more formally, we can write the rules as follows:

3.1 Consonant shift

Rule 1 – /m/ → [r] / ____ (environment condition, e.g., in certain syllabic positions)

This rule indicates that the phoneme /m/ changes to [r] in a specific phonological environment.

3.2 Vowel simplification

Rule 2 – /V/ → [V'] / ____ (unstressed position, or other environmental condition)

This rule indicates that a vowel /V/ undergoes simplification to a more neutral or less distinct vowel [V'], which can happen in unstressed syllables or other particular conditions within a word.

These processes of phonological change, followed by semantic shift, reflect how language evolves within cultural contexts and provide insight into the spread of fermented drinks across ancient societies. Additionally, the spread and evolution of intoxicant terminology reflect broader patterns of cultural exchange and adaptation. Evidence of similar fermented beverages can be traced across various ancient cultures, indicating a shared human interest in fermentation and its effects (Singh, 2017, p. 15).

Comparative studies also show that such beverages played significant roles in rituals and social practices, emphasizing their importance beyond mere sustenance. Furthermore, recent archaeological finds, such as ancient pottery with residue analysis, support the historical use and significance of these drinks in ritualistic and communal settings, underscoring their integral role in early societies (Singh, 2017, p. 20).

Table 2 – Metaphorical and Linguistic Connections

Term	Meaning/Connection	Cultural Reference
Soma	Symbol of divine nectar, relaxation, and longevity.	<i>Rig-Veda</i> , Moon (Ragozin, 1899, p. 177), Hindu calendar (Achaya, 2002, p. 236; Singh <i>et al.</i> , 2010, p. 163).
Sura	Associated with intoxication, both positive and negative.	<i>Sura</i> was probably made in the Indus Valley from barley and rice flour. In Vedic writings, it is spoken of in derogatory terms as a drink of the mlecchas or natives (Achaya, 2002, p. 213).
Modern Hungarian “Sor”	Possible linguistic borrowing from Indo-Iranian “surd” (Wikipedia, 2024).	Historical contact hypothesis (Ragozin, 1899, p. 177).

Source: The author.

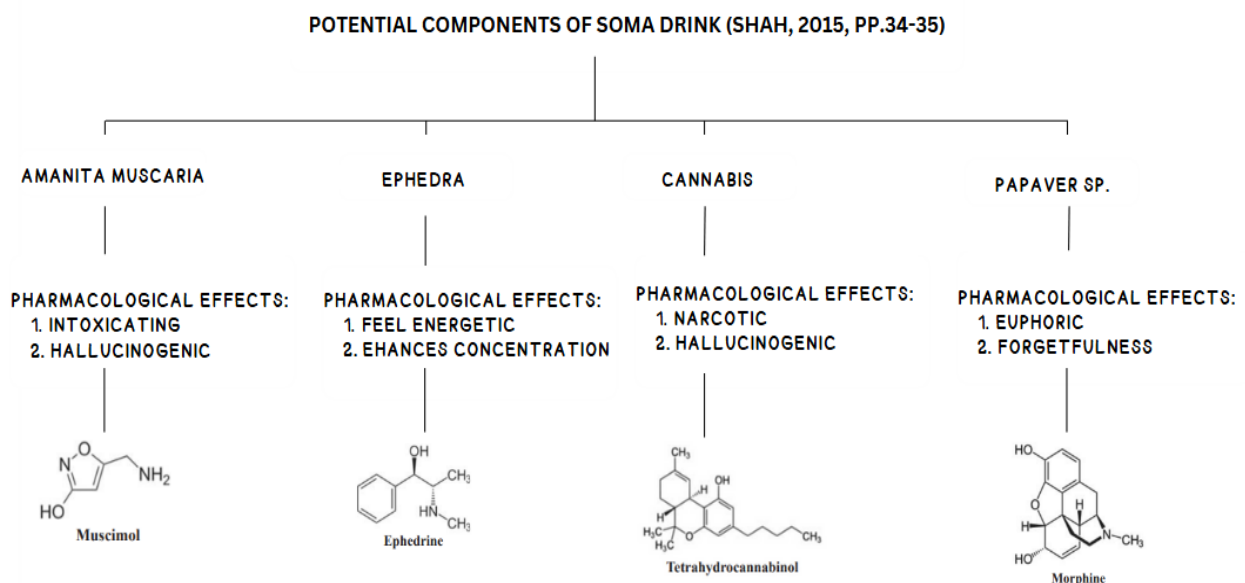
The comparison of these terms across different languages highlights the diffusion and adaptation of intoxicants through cultural and linguistic exchange, underscoring how linguistic evolution influences our understanding of substances like *Soma* and their role in various traditions. Both beer and *Soma* are ancient products of human civilization, but they differ significantly in their effects on the psyche. Historians argue that the Rigvedic beverages were not distilled (Forbes, 1970, p. 3), and there is debate over whether ingredients for fermentation, such as barley or grapes, were available to the Rigvedic people.

Somarasa, potentially a fermented version of *Soma*, is mentioned, but it is noted that *Soma* lost its hallucinogenic properties during fermentation and developed a sharp, acrid taste. To mitigate this bitterness, curd, honey, and grain or gruel were added (Singh, 2017, p. 19). While

Somarasa is an alcoholic drink, *Soma* is described as “aducchund” (9.61.17), meaning ‘without evil effect,’ suggesting it did not produce harmful effects on its consumers. Singh *et al.* (2010, p. 166) argues that Rigvedic people knew fermentation of drinks is evident from the hymns praising *somarasa*. In contrast, the psychological effects of *Sura*, or beer, are described as inducing anger, folly, and exhilaration (Ingalls, 1971, p. 188). The *Rig-Veda* does mention that *Sura* was distilled (Achaya, 2002, p. 25).

Linguistically, the descriptions of *Soma* in the *Rig-Veda* reveal a rich tapestry of metaphors (Doniger, 1981) that underscore its symbolic significance. Terms such as “rtdsya nabhih” (“the navel of truth,” p. 110), “divdh skambhdh” (“the pillar of the sky,” p. 109), and “nirnij” (“the bright robe,” p. 178) reflect the poetic and ritualistic importance of *Soma* in Vedic literature. *Rig-Veda’s* ninth *mandala* (book), which contains 114 hymns devoted to *Soma’s* purification, illustrates the complexity of its symbolic and ritual significance (Singh *et al.*, 2010, p. 166). From a linguistic perspective, the identification of *Soma* with various plants—such as *Ephedra*, *Rhubarb*, *Sarcostemma*, *Hops*, *Cannabis indica*, *Ruta graveolens*, *Sarcostemma brevistigma*, *Amanita muscaria* (fly agaric) (Shah, 2015, p. 27) and *Asclepia acida* or *Sarcostemina vimmale* (Ragozin, 1899, p. 171)—shows the complexity of interpreting ancient texts and the challenges in linking historical names with botanical substances.

Figure 5 – Conjectures on the Potential Components of *Soma*



Source: The author.

The diversity in names for similar drinks, including *Subhra*, *Gorjika*, *Vivakasa*, *Madhu* (mead), and *Sukra* (Sivapriyananda, 1990; Singh, 2017, p. 22), further illustrates how linguistic variations reflect regional and cultural adaptations of intoxicants. This analysis helps to trace the historical and cultural diffusion of these substances, revealing how different traditions and languages have contributed to the evolving understanding of intoxicants like *Soma*.

Table 3 – Comparison of Intoxicants

Aspect	Soma	Sura (Beer)
Historical Reference	<i>Rig-Veda</i> , ancient Vedic texts (Singh <i>et al.</i> , 2010, p. 165).	Mentioned in the <i>Rig-Veda</i> , historical texts (Achaya, 2002, p. 25).
Ingredients	Juice of a mountain plant mixed with water, milk, barley curds, and honey (Ingalls, 1971).	Typically brewed from grains like barley (Singh, 2017, p. 14).
Alcohol Content	Non-alcoholic, ritualistic stimulant (Singh <i>et al.</i> , 2010, p. 166).	Alcoholic, can induce anger and folly (Ingalls, 1971).
Effects	Produces visions, associated with longevity and immunity (Tricumji; Ram, 1987, p. 530).	Induces exhilaration and can cause negative effects (Ingalls, 1971).
Cultural Significance	Highly recommended in traditional texts, associated with divine qualities (Dwivedi, 2021).	Permitted in specific rituals, otherwise restricted (Dwivedi, 2021).
Botanical Identification	Various candidates including <i>Ephedra</i> , <i>Cannabis sativa</i> (Shah, 2015, p. 27-28).	Generally considered to be fermented barley (Achaya, 2002, p. 25).
Metaphorical References	“Rtdsya nabhih”, “divdh skambhdh”, “nirnij” (Doniger, 1981).	Mentioned in texts as a stimulant drink and distilled liquor (Achaya, 2002, p. 228).
Historical Contact	Linguistic link to Hungarian “Sor”.	Links to ancient distillation processes (Achaya, 2002, p. 228).

Source: The author.

Soma was a mountain plant, and its juice was mixed with water and milk, barley curds and honey, used for *Madda* “intoxication”, and the

consumption would produce visions (Ingalls, 1971). Some textual descriptions tell that *Soma* had “long stalks, tawny in colour and fifteen leaves” (Ingalls, 1971); however, this description is not in line with *Rig-Veda* in which the plant is described leafless. Some textual descriptions point out that it was possibly *Soma-latha*, a creeper, still found in the Himalayas with a bulb. But it couldn't have been a possible candidate as it is toxic to humans. There are other contenders for what could have been the *Soma* plant, including American milkweed and *Cannabis sativa* (Singh, 2017, p. 5).

The Rigvedic *Soma* is a non-alcoholic intoxicating drink which is a ritualistic stimulant drink, and it is highly recommended in the traditional Hindu texts, whereas *Sura* is an alcoholic drink, and only allowed during *Srauta* ritual, a rite performed after *Rajasuya Yajna*, and otherwise prohibited in *Rig-Veda* VII.86.6; *Shatpath Brahmana* XII.7.2, 12. 21 (Dwivedi, 2021). *Ayurveda*, a medical treatise, also prescribes the use of alcohol for cathartic and medicinal purposes, particularly herbal wines, e.g., *asavas* and *arishtas* are considered beneficial for weak digestion (Dwivedi, 2021).

In his *Samhita*, a medical treatise, Sushruta recorded 24 varieties of *Soma* (Singh, 2017, p. 171). He claimed that anyone who drinks *Soma* would not age and would be immune to poison, fire, or attacks from weapons. Such a person can master all the four *Vedas* and will be successful in his life (Singh, 2017, p. 19). Initially, it causes the patient's hair, teeth, and nails to fall out, followed by the transformation of the entire body into skin and bones. This is then followed by a complete reconstruction, resulting in a new, indestructible body after four months, which lasts for ten thousand years (Wujastyk, 1998). Furthermore, *Soma* could imbue the drinker with the strength of one thousand elephants (Singh, 2017, p. 19). The *Samhita* also includes a description of alcohol, detailing the time, place, and rituals associated with its consumption. The drinker must take into account factors such as diet, age, constitution, season, time of day, state of mind, and the *doshas*. These *doshas*, which shape a person's conscience, encompass physical, mental, and emotional characteristics derived from the elements of nature: air, earth, water, and fire (Achaya, 2002, p. 259).

There are many connotative meanings associated with *Soma*, such as something that produces relaxation, enthusiasm, peace, and happiness. Since the moonlight provides calmness, the Moon is also referred to as *Soma*

(Acaya, 2002, p. 236; Singh *et al.*, 2010, p. 163; Ragozin, 1899, p. 177). The second day of the week is also called *Somavaar* “Mo(o)nday” in the Hindu calendar. A friendly and cultured person is called *Saumya* (e.g. the author’s cousin sister is also named Saumya). The Rigvedic *Soma* acts as a relaxant, and certain medicines that promote longevity are also referred to as *Soma* (Newar, 2022).

4 LINGUISTIC PERSPECTIVES ON SOMA AS AN INTOXICANT IN VEDIC LITERATURE

In many places within the *Vedas*, *Soma* is referred to both as a deity and a substance. Linguistically, the dual use of *Soma* as both a divine figure and a substance highlights the concept of syncretism, where a single term encompasses multiple meanings. The *Rig-Veda* (1.91.22) often associates *Soma* with positive qualities such as blissfulness, vision, trance, peacefulness, and satisfaction. For example, it states: “O *Soma*, You alone create the medicines that heal us. You alone create the water that quenches our thirst. You alone create all moving objects, sense organs, and living beings and give us this life. You have provided expanse to this universe, and you alone enlighten the world to eradicate darkness” (Doniger, 1981; Wilson, 1926). This passage uses anaphora—the repetition of “You alone create” to emphasize *Soma*’s multifaceted role. The invocation in imperative address, “O *Soma*” personifies *Soma* as both a god and an intoxicant, reflecting the polysemy of the term. This linguistic device underscores the blend of divine and earthly attributes ascribed to *Soma*, illustrating its dual nature in Vedic texts.

This dual role of *Soma* raises questions about its medicinal nature. Is the effect of *Soma* primarily psychological rather than physical? The semantic field of *Soma*’s qualities suggests that its effects could be perceived as transcendent, facilitating a deepened state of devotion and trance. This could indicate that the worshiper, through immersion in *Soma*-induced ecstasy, achieves a higher level of spiritual communication, thereby refining their internal state while rejecting external chaos.

Conversely, the *Rig-Veda* (8.4.10) explicitly connects *Soma* with urination, a detail that invites linguistic analysis of the “metaphorical” use of bodily functions to describe spiritual processes. In two hymns, the verb “urinate” is used to describe Indra’s consumption of *Soma*: “Like a thirsty

stag, come here to drink. Drink *Soma*, as much as you want. Pissing it out day by day, O generous one, you have assumed your most mighty force” (Ingalls, 1971, p. 189). Indra’s strength is depicted through the trembling of his golden mustache, while his insatiable thirst for soma leads the poet to praise the immense capacity of his belly (Wallis, 2010, p. 9). This metonymic reference to urination emphasizes the transformation of *Soma* within the body, aligning with the ritualistic and symbolic significance attributed to bodily functions in Vedic literature.

Wasson’s (1971, p. 167-187) hypothesis that links this to Siberian practices of consuming the urine of those who have ingested *fly agaric* mushrooms suggests a cross-linguistic analogy between Vedic and Siberian shamanic practices. However, this interpretation remains contentious and is considered an “idiosyncratic” approach by some scholars (Ingalls, 1971, p. 188).

Table 4 – Comparative Analysis – Vedic vs. Siberian Practices

Aspect	Vedic Practices	Siberian Shamanic Practices
Consumption Method	Drinking <i>Soma</i> , symbolic urination.	Consumption of fly agaric mushrooms, urine of others.
Metonymic Reference	Urination as a metaphor for transformation.	Urine consumption as part of ritualistic practice.
Scholarly Interpretation	Emphasizes transformation and ritual significance.	Wasson’s (1971, p. 167-187) hypothesis suggests cross-cultural analogy.
Controversy	Considered “idiosyncratic” by some scholars (Ingalls, 1971, p. 188).	Debate over direct correlation between practices (Ingalls, 1971, 188-91).

Source: The author.

The preparation of *Soma* is described in detail in the *Rig-Veda*, and various theories exist about its composition. From a linguistic perspective, the lexical semantics of the terms used for the ingredients (e.g., *Amanita muscaria*, *Ephedra*) reflects the rich, albeit uncertain, botanical knowledge of the time. *Soma* preparation is described as: The plant, gathered by moonlight from the mountains and uprooted, is transported on a cart pulled by two goats to the sacrificial site. There, a preparation area covered with

grass and twigs is set up. The plant is then crushed between stones by priests. In the *Rig-Veda* (10.101.1-12), a sexual metaphor is employed to describe the pressing of *Soma* in the mortar and pestle. This *triple entendre* encompasses: the tree in the forest symbolizing the *Soma* plant in the wooden bowl, and the penis in the womb. The latter comparison is extended in the final quarter of the verse, which reinforces the imagery found in verses 3, 5, 6, and the concluding verse (Doniger, 1981, p. 58-62). The crushed plant and its juice are placed in a woolen sieve (Doniger, 1981, p. 54), where water is added. After additional pressing by hand, the juice flows into a vessel below. This liquid is mixed with sweet milk, sour milk or curds, and various flours, then fermented. It is offered three times a day and consumed by the Brahmins, the highest of the four castes, with the others being the *Kshatriya* (warriors), *Vaishya* (traders), and *Shudra* (menials) (Achaya, 2002, p. 30).

This preparation is regarded as the most sacred offering in ancient Indian rituals. The gods eagerly drink this divine beverage, which causes joyous intoxication. The drink is believed to be purifying and a source of health and immortality (Jamison, 2015, p. 4; Ragozin, 1899, p. 180), leading to heaven and overcoming enemies. Its fiery, exhilarating, and inspiring qualities (Brough, 1971, p. 358) are highlighted, and those who consume it experience a heightened state of exaltation and vitality beyond ordinary human levels (Ragozin, 1899, p. 174-175). The descriptive language in this passage vividly captures the complex process of *Soma* preparation and its ritual significance. The use of sensory language (“collected by moonlight,” “crushed between stones,” “mixed with sweet milk”) evokes the multi-sensory experience of *Soma*, reflecting its importance in Vedic rituals. This detailed description serves to highlight the sacred nature of *Soma* and its role in facilitating divine experiences, underlining its transformative effects on both body and spirit.

Further, the *Rig-Veda* (2.34.13) states: “The Rudras have grown in the seat of Truth. In the form of horses, pisses it out, they have assumed their bright and brilliant color” (Jamison, 2015, p. 53; Wilson, 1926) This passage suggests that *Soma* is not only cherished by the gods but also serves as a vital source of their strength and vitality. Linguistically, the imagery of *Soma* taking on the form of horses and its brilliant color reflects its perceived potency and divine association, highlighting how *Soma* is symbolically

linked to the gods' attributes. In a similar vein, another Rigvedic reference (9.108.3) reads: "O *Soma*, You purify everything. You are the best source of enlightenment. You lead us towards immortality. Should we say more!" Here, *Soma* is praised as both a purifying force and a source of enlightenment. The emphasis on *Soma's* ability to purify and lead towards immortality underscores its revered status and multifaceted nature, illustrating how *Soma* is seen as essential for both spiritual and physical transformation (Jamison, 2015, p. 51; Wilson, 1926).

The *Atharvaveda* (14.1.3) provides a contrasting perspective on *Soma*: "Ordinary people consider that as *Soma* which is used as medicine. But the enlightened ones seek the *Soma* of intellect which materialistic minds cannot even comprehend!" (Sharma, 2013). This passage delineates two distinct meanings of *Soma*: as a medicinal substance and as a divine, intellectual element. Linguistically, the contrast between the materialistic and spiritual understandings of *Soma* highlights the broad range of connotations associated with the term, reflecting both its physical and metaphysical dimensions. The Vedic commentators largely agree on one point: that *Soma* was a creeper (*valli* or *lata*). However, these terms do not appear in the *Rig-Veda* (10.16), where *Soma* is instead referred to as an herb (*osadhi*) or plant (*virudh*) (Doniger, 1981, p. 44).

In the *Pavamana Parva* of the *Sama-veda Purvarchika*, *Soma* is described as a mind-expanding and potency-enhancing substance (Ragozin, 1899, p. 178). Several verses illustrate this: "The distiller of intellect, the brilliant moon-plant" (7.6, p. 75); "Soma is flowing down pure; he is the creator of intellect, the creator of heaven, the creator of earth, the creator of fire, the creator of the Sun, the creator of Indra" (5.19, p. 110); "O *Soma*, of thy expressed juice; and let all the other gods drink of it, to obtain intelligence and strength" (11.8, p. 148); "Confer on us for our preservation an intellect for obtaining cows, horse's, food, and heroes" (15.11, p. 172); "O *Soma*, thou art poured out for Indra, the slayer of *Vritra*, for his drinking; for he is the giver of gifts, and the god who, like a heron, sits in the assembly of men" (18.8) (Stevenson, 1906, p. 180). These verses collectively portray *Soma* as a source of both physical and mental enrichment. The repeated use of terms like "intellect," "drinking," "creator," and "intellect" emphasizes the

transformative and enriching qualities attributed to *Soma*, illustrating its integral role in spiritual and intellectual development.

The praise of *Soma* extends to equating it with the supreme being, with various epithets reflecting its esteemed attributes. Terms such as “Vicharshani” (“one who sees everything actively”), “Bhuvanasya Gopaa” (“protector of the world”), “Vajasatam” (“provides strength”), “Daksham Mayobhuvam” (“adeptness that provides happiness”), “Kavi” (“sees everything”), “Vipra” (“extremely intelligent”), “Daksha” (“adept”), “Dakshasadhana” (“source of happiness”), “Swarvidah” (“knows self”), “Vichakshanah” (“expert”), “Angirastamah” (“best of the scholars”), “Gatuvittamah” (“one who knows the path clearly”), “Kratuvit” (“knows his duties perfectly”), and “Kratuvittamo Madah” (“an intoxication that inspires us to perform duties perfectly”) illustrate the multifaceted nature of *Soma* (Stevenson, 1906, p. 176-180; Brough, 1971, p. 331-362). The variety of descriptors used highlights *Soma*’s profound impact on both spiritual and practical aspects of life, emphasizing its role in wisdom, protection, and personal strength.

Table 5 – Stylistic Features of *Soma* Epithets

it continues

Epithets	Sanskrit Term	Translation	Linguistic Feature	Significance
Omniscience	<i>Vicharshani</i>	“One who sees everything actively”	Metaphor, Epithets	Indicates all-seeing, active presence.
Protector	<i>Bhuvanasya Gopaa</i>	“Protector of the world”	Metaphor, Function	Reflects a protective role over the world.
Strength Provider	<i>Vajasatam</i>	“Provides strength”	Descriptive, Function	Highlights <i>Soma</i> ’s role in granting strength.
Happiness Provider	<i>Daksham Mayobhuvam</i>	“Adeptness that provides happiness”	Descriptive, Metaphor	Represents <i>Soma</i> as a source of happiness.
Omniscience	<i>Kavi</i>	“Sees everything”	Metaphor, Epithets	Emphasizes wisdom and knowledge.
Intelligence	<i>Vipra</i>	“Extremely intelligent”	Descriptive, Epithets	Indicates high intelligence.

Table 5 – Stylistic Features of *Soma* Epithets

conclusion

Epithets	Sanskrit Term	Translation	Linguistic Feature	Significance
Adept	<i>Daksha</i>	“Adept”	Descriptive, Epithets	Highlights expertise and skill.
Happiness Source	<i>Daksha Sadhana</i>	“Source of happiness”	Descriptive, Function	Depicts <i>Soma</i> as a source of joy.
Self-Knowledge	<i>Swarvidah</i>	“Knows self”	Descriptive, Epithets	Reflects deep self-awareness.
Expert	<i>Vichakshanah</i>	“Expert”	Descriptive, Epithets	Represents mastery and proficiency.
Scholarship	<i>Angirastamah</i>	“Best of the scholars”	Descriptive, Epithets	Indicates superior scholarly status.
Path-Knowledge	<i>Gatuvittamah</i>	“One who knows the path clearly”	Descriptive, Epithets	Emphasizes clarity and guidance in understanding the path.
Duty-Knowledge	<i>Kratuvit</i>	“Knows his duties perfectly”	Descriptive, Function	Highlights perfect understanding of duties.
Duty-Inspiration	<i>Kratuvittamo Madah</i>	“An intoxication that inspires us to perform duties perfectly”	Descriptive, Metaphor	Shows <i>Soma</i> as a source of inspiration for fulfilling duties (Brough, 1971, p. 358).

Source: The author.

Some Rigvedic hymns suggest that *Soma* was widely available and accessible to the people, with a leather pouch commonly used to store it (Wilson, 1926). The hymns frequently praise *Soma* as a divine substance, specifically linked to the moon god. According to the *Sushruta Samhita* (Singh et al., 2010, p. 172), anyone who consumes *Soma* is said to bear the luster of a full moon. This association is underscored by the use of adjectives such as “swadu” (“sweet”) and “swadishtha” (“tasty”) to describe *Soma*. These terms not only highlight its pleasant qualities but also distinguish it from

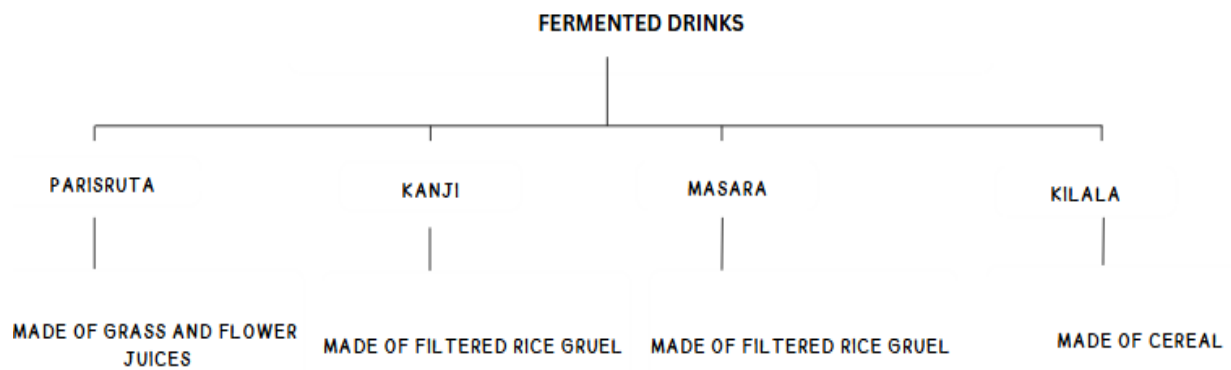
alcoholic substances like *Sura*. The distinction between *Soma* and alcohol is reinforced through these descriptive adjectives, suggesting that *Soma* should be viewed more akin to modern energy drinks or soft beverages such as cola, tea, and coffee (Dwivedi, 2021).

The preparation of *Soma* involved a complex and demanding ritual, reflecting the intricate cultural and linguistic contexts surrounding its use. The process required meticulous care and adherence to specific instructions, including detailed aftercare to mitigate the effects of consumption. The Vedic texts describe a rigorous regimen for the drinker, including the construction of a house with three chambers, residing in each room while expelling impurities, and adhering to a strict diet and drinking schedule. This quarantine-like period lasted four months, after which the individual was deemed stable enough to reintegrate into society. This detailed prescription reflects not only the ritualistic significance of *Soma* but also its perceived impact on the drinker's spiritual and physical state.

From a linguistic perspective, the extensive instructions and descriptions of *Soma's* effects illustrate its role in connecting drinkers with the divine. *Soma* juice was believed to bestow supernatural powers (Singh, 2017, p. 19), enabling the drinker to exert extraordinary influence, such as causing a person or animal to fall dead merely by staring at them. The phrase from Spiderman's Uncle Ben, "with great power comes great responsibility," (Top Movie Clips, 2017; Singh, 2017, p. 19) aptly captures the ethos surrounding *Soma* consumption. The yogic elite and Brahmins, who used *Soma* to establish divine connections, were expected to wield their newfound powers responsibly.

In the later Vedic period, three notable fermented drinks made from flowers and special grasses became popular: "parisruta", "masara", and "kilala" (Pande, 2017). Etymologically, the term "parisruta" is derived from Sanskrit, meaning "to ooze" or "to tickle" (Singh, 2017, p. 25), reflecting the drink's nature and preparation process. This semantic nuance highlights how the language used to describe these beverages provides insight into their cultural and ritual significance.

Figure 6 – Fermented Drinks during later Vedic Period



Source: The author.

The *Sukla Yajur Veda* states that *Sura* was made from rice meal, wheat, sugarcane, grapes, and various types of fruits, and it was a popular drink of the working class and the warriors (Griffith, 1957, p. 10). *Sura* was a favored drink of Indra, the king of the devas, who won many battles after consuming it. Ragozin (1899, p. 198) notes that “Indra’s soma-drinking abilities, which inspire the poets with the most extravagant absurdities”. Over time, flavored variations emerged, such as *prasanna* and *medaka*, along with brews like *mahua* and *madya*. Kautilya referred to *asavas*, *arishtas* (distillates), and beverages like *kapasayani* and *harahuraka* (wines), while Sushruta praised the beneficial properties of *Soma*, a hallucinogenic drink (Singh, 2017, p. 252).

5 ADDITIONAL NOTES

In this section, we will examine the ambivalent views on ecstasy and intoxicants within Hindu tradition. “Dialogues on Intoxicants” features sage Brihaspati’s responses to Indra’s questions about intoxicants, along with an anecdote involving Sukra. “Intoxication and Trance in Kulaarnava Tantra” explores *Shakta* tantric practices in Bengal, India, highlighting the role of intoxicants in these rituals. Through the analysis of these texts, we gain deeper insights into how intoxicants are conceptualized in Hinduism and their connection to spiritual and cultural narratives.

5.1 Views on intoxicants in Hindu traditions

The perspectives on intoxicants within Hindu traditions reveals a complex and nuanced landscape, with varied attitudes across different sects

and scriptures. Linguistically, the terminology and metaphors used to describe intoxicants reflect these diverse views. For example, the *Chaarvaaka* perspective denotes materialist philosophers who advocate for the pleasure principle, often using metaphors of fermentation and intoxication to elucidate their materialist worldview. The *Chaarvaakas* argue that just as intoxicants derive their power from the fermentation of grains, consciousness itself is a byproduct of material processes. The metaphor of fermentation highlights their belief in the material basis of consciousness, emphasizing the sensory and empirical nature of experience.

In contrast, other Hindu sects present ambivalent or restrictive views on intoxicants. *Tantric Shaivism* and *Shaktism*, as well as certain branches of Hinduism such as *Asgama* or Balinese Hinduism, often endorse the use of intoxicants in ritual contexts. Here, the lexical choice of terms like “Tadi” (an intoxicant derived from the “Tada” or Palmyra plant) and “Bhaang” (Cannabis) reflects their ritualistic and symbolic use of these substances (Singh, 2017, p. 328). These sects use intoxicants to achieve altered states of consciousness necessary for certain spiritual practices, suggesting a more integrative view of intoxication within their religious frameworks.

Conversely, sects such as contemporary *Vaishnavism*, *Arya Samaj*, *Nath*, and *Shrautism* strictly forbid the use of intoxicants. This prohibition is linguistically reinforced through terms that convey purity and asceticism, emphasizing the negative connotations of intoxication. For instance, Vaishnavism’s stance against intoxicants can be linked to its emphasis on “sattvic” (pure) living, contrasting sharply with the more permissive views of other sects (Wisdomlib, 2024).

The ambivalence within *Vaishnavism* itself is notable. The depiction of Balarama, Krishna’s elder brother, who is fond of “Tadi” and is associated with Lord Shiva and “Bhaag”, illustrates a more nuanced view. The term “Varuni”, the goddess of wine and Balarama’s consort, further complicates this picture. Here, the language reflects a duality: while Balarama’s affinity for intoxicants might seem contradictory to the general Vaishnavite prohibition, it indicates a more complex interplay between ritual, symbolism, and divine associations (Singh, 2017, p. 328). This duality highlights how different aspects of religious narratives can influence and reflect varying attitudes towards intoxicants. The linguistic exploration of

terms and metaphors associated with intoxicants across Hindu traditions reveals a spectrum of attitudes, from permissive to prohibitive. These varied linguistic choices not only reflect theological and philosophical positions but also underscore the complex role that intoxicants play in religious and cultural contexts.

Table 6 – Contemporary Hindu Sects on Consuming Intoxicants

Sects	Recommend	Forbid	During Ritual
<i>Chaarvaaka</i>	✓	X	✓
<i>Shaivism</i>	X	✓	✓
<i>Shaktism</i>	X	✓	✓
<i>Asgama Hindu</i>	X	✓	✓
Balinese Hinduism	X	✓	✓
<i>Vaishnavism</i>	X	✓	X
<i>Arya Samaj</i>	X	✓	X
<i>Nath</i>	X	✓	X
<i>Shrautism</i>	X	✓	X

Source: The author.

5.2 Contemporary views on intoxicants in Hindu traditions

In contemporary times, alcohol has become a central offering to *Kaal Bhairav*, a deity worshiped in Ujjain, India. This represents a notable shift from traditional views on intoxicants. The fierce forms of *Shiva* and *Shakti*, *Bhairava* and *Bhairavi*, are associated with various aspects of divine power and ritual practice. However, the prevailing notion in mainstream Hinduism holds that attaining *moksha* (liberation) necessitates abstaining from intoxicants and meat. This is echoed in Bhagavad Gita, Chapter 14, Verse 16 (Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada, 1986, p. 876-877), where followers are advised to avoid substances such as wine, gambling, and meat, which are considered corrupting influences that reflect a demonic mindset (Dwivedi, 2021).

The *Bhagavad Gita* (Chapter 6, verses 20-23) distinguishes between three types of living, or *gunas*: *Tamasika*, *Sattvika*, and *Rajasika*. The Brahmandā Purāna (I.I.I., 1) pays homage to the self-born deity, who manifests in three forms: Sattva, Rajas, and Tamas (Tagare, 2000, p 1). The

Tamasika lifestyle is associated with indulgence in unclean, decayed, and tasteless food, including alcohol (Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada, 1986, p. 423-425). This classification underscores how different states of consciousness are linked to specific types of food and drink. The *Sattvika* and *Rajasika* lifestyles, on the other hand, are considered more conducive to spiritual and ethical living. This nuanced classification provides insights into why certain individuals are more inclined toward alcohol, while others remain abstinent.

Similarly, in the *Atharvaveda* (6.70.1), alcohol is criticized as a path to destruction and failure, reinforcing the belief that only corrupt and weak minds are drawn to it (Sharma, 2013). The caste-based prescriptions regarding alcohol consumption found in the *Vishnu Smriti* further illustrate the socio-religious dimensions of intoxicants: “The ten intoxicating drinks are unclean for a *Brahmana*, but a *Kshatriya*, *Vaishya*, and *Sudra* commit no wrong in drinking them” (Jolly, 1880, XXII.84, p. 96). This linguistic differentiation reflects historical and cultural attitudes toward alcohol consumption across different societal roles.

In Valmiki’s *Sundarakanda* of the *Ramayana*, Hanuman informs Sita that Rama has become a teetotaler and a vegetarian. However, in the *Uttarakanda*, Rama is depicted feeding Sita with wine, meat, and fruits (IIT Kanpur, 2022). This juxtaposition highlights a complex and evolving view of intoxicants within Hindu narratives. The *Mahabharata* also contains references to intoxicants. In the *Adi* and *Mausala* episodes, Krishna and Arjuna host a party where young women indulge in alcohol and revelry, leading to deviant behavior and loss of inhibitions (Ramesh, 2022). This depiction of intoxication, including the women’s loud singing and erratic behavior, adds another layer to the cultural perception of alcohol.

Kautilya’s (2000) *Arthashastra*, a seminal political treatise, mentions various types of alcoholic beverages, including *Asavas* and *Arishtas*, with specific terms like *kapasayani* (“white wine”), *harahuraka* (“red wine”), and *varuni* (“strong liquor”). The term *harahura* is used today in Kafiristan for black raisins, linking historical terms with contemporary usage. Kautilya’s text reveals that public drinking was regulated and taxed, suggesting a controlled approach to alcohol consumption. Although *Soma* was mentioned for religious ceremonies, it was excluded from daily use, possibly

due to the scarcity of the hallucinogenic plant and its uncertain fate (Kautilya, 2000).

The mythological tale of *Varuni*, the goddess of wine, illustrates the divine and symbolic significance of intoxicants. Born from the churning of the ocean, *Varuni* represents a celestial form of wine enjoyed by the gods. This myth reinforces the distinction between *Sura* (divine intoxicants) and *Asura* (demons), reflecting the complex interplay between divine indulgence and moral teachings. The narrative of Indra's repeated defeats and eventual victory through yogic practices underscores a broader message: indulgence leads to defeat, while disciplined practice and spiritual connection lead to triumph.

5.3 Dialogues on intoxicants

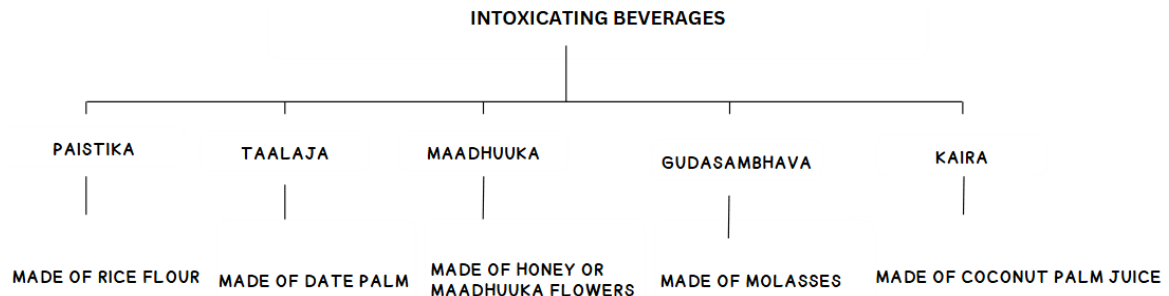
In the *Brahmanda Purana*, a significant dialogue unfolds between Indra, the king of the *devatas* (deities), and his guru, Sage *Brihaspati*, concerning intoxicants (Tagare, 2000, p. 1048-1049). Indra inquires about the nature and implications of *Aasava*, a term denoting "liquor." His questions encompass its intrinsic qualities, advantages, and drawbacks, as well as the types of cooked food that are prohibited in its context. Brihaspati responds by categorizing intoxicants into various types, including *Paistika*, *Taalaja*, *Kaira*, *Maadhuuka*, and *Gudasambhava* (Tagare, 2000, p. 1048-1049). Each category reflects a different preparation method and ingredient profile.

Linguistically, the term *Aasava* comes from the Sanskrit root *as* (to live), signifying a life-enhancing or stimulating substance. The different types of intoxicants mentioned—*Paistika* (derived from *paisti*, meaning "fermented"), *Taalaja* (from *taala*, referring to the palm tree), *Kaira* (possibly related to *kaira*, a term for a type of fermented drink), *Maadhuuka* (linked to *madhu*, meaning "honey" or "sweet"), and *Gudasambhava* (associated with *guda*, meaning "jaggery" or "sugar")—highlight a rich linguistic tapestry that conveys various methods of fermentation and ingredient sources (Tagare, 2000, p. 1048-1049).

This dialogue not only delineates the varieties of intoxicants but also reflects on their preparation and consumption practices. The specific terms used provide insight into the cultural and ritualistic dimensions of these

substances, illustrating how different types of intoxicants were understood and utilized in ancient Indian society.

Figure 7 – Intoxicating Beverages and their Ingredients Described by Sage Brihaspati



Source: The author.

Further, the dialogues in the *Brahmanda Purana* (7.61-79) outline specific prescriptions and prohibitions concerning intoxicants, particularly in relation to caste and gender (Tagare, 2000, p. 1048-1049). The general directive is to abstain from intoxicants to avoid succumbing to bodily pleasures; those who do partake are deemed the lowest of humankind, with atonement options including immolation or being cast from a precipice. However, exceptions are made during the worship of *Shakti* goddesses, where liquor made from honey is permissible. A person who consumes liquor outside of these ritualistic contexts is condemned to suffer in *Raurava* hell.

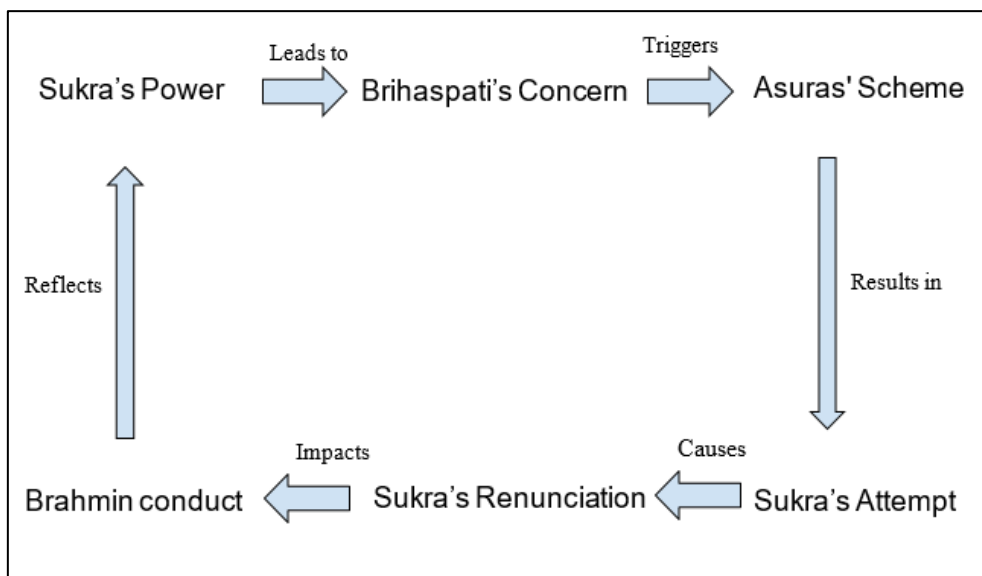
Sage Brihaspati's instructions detail the proportions of liquor consumption for the four castes—*Brahmana*, *Kshatriya*, *Vaishya*, and *Sudra*—with *Brahmanas* being permitted the most. Specifically, the ratios are set at 10 parts for *Brahmanas*, 8 or 6 parts for *Kshatriyas*, and 4 parts for *Vaishyas*, with *Sudras* receiving a proportionate allowance (Tagare, 2000, p. 1048-1049). Women are to consume only half of these amounts, and if drinking in the company of their husbands, only one-quarter. Women who indulge in alcohol out of desire are labeled as *Unmaadinii* (literally “mad woman”), and those who are menstruating, virgins, or widows are advised against drinking altogether.

The sage also prescribes ritualistic penance: *Brahmanas* are to repeat the *Gaayatri Mantra* or *Jaatavedasa Mantra* 10,000 times underwater or

perform the *Kṛcchracaandraayaṇa* (a form of expiation). *Kshatriyas* are required to recite half as many times, and women a quarter. For *Brahmanas*, any consumption of alcohol due to delusion, addiction, or social pressure necessitates double the expiation. The stringent regulations for *Brahmanas* are linked to an anecdote about *Sukra*, the guru of the *asuras* (demons), which illuminates the broader cultural and linguistic context (Tagare, 2000, p. 1048-1049).

According to the tale, Sukra possessed the mantra to revive the dead, a power he frequently used to restore asuras after battles with the *devatas* (gods). Concerned, Brihaspati, the guru of the *devatas*, sent his son Kaca to learn this mantra. The asuras, discovering this, killed Kaca and mixed his remains into Sukra’s wine. When Sukra attempted to revive Kaca, he experienced immense pain as Kaca’s spirit broke free from his body. This event led Sukra to renounce alcohol, declaring that any Brahmin who consumes liquor out of delusion will be deemed devoid of dharma and despised in both this world and the next (Tagare, 2000, p. 1100-1101).

Figure 8 – Causal Loop in the Tale of Sukra, Kaca, and the Mantra



Source: The author.

Linguistically, the term *Sukra* (meaning “bright” or “pure”) is also associated with a Vedic drink, suggesting a connection between the mythological narrative and the cultural significance of intoxicants. This tale reinforces the idea that the consumption of intoxicants, particularly for

Brahmanas, is intertwined with broader themes of moral integrity and spiritual discipline.

5.4 Intoxication and trance in *Kulaarnava Tantra*

In Hinduism, the Bengali *Shaktas* are a sect dedicated to venerating the ten major incarnations of the mother goddess. Among these, *Kali* and *Tara*—goddesses embodying death, rebirth, wisdom, and inspiration—are notably associated with possession trance (McDaniel, 1988, p. 87). The “KulaarNava Tantra”, a seminal text within the *Kula* tradition of *Shaktism* and *Tantric Shaivism*, provides an intricate depiction of these rituals. Etymologically, “KulaarNava” combines “kula” (meaning “clan” or “family”) and “arnaya” (meaning “ocean”), rendering it as “Ocean of the Kula.” This textual name reflects a deep-seated metaphorical and symbolic connection to the vast and enveloping nature of the ritual practices. The “KulaarNava Tantra” serves as both an instructional manual and a divine justification, outlining ritual procedures and offering a philosophical rationale for these practices (Rai, 1999, p. i-xiv).

Shakta tantric circles, or “chakras”, are groups known for their esoteric rites, including some infamous for their orgiastic ceremonies marked by indulgent drunkenness and uninhibited sexuality (McDaniel, 1988, p. 87). The term “mahaa-ullaasa”, translating to “ecstatic joy,” denotes the profound identity transformation that occurs when worshippers consume intoxicants, allowing their bodies to embody the deities, underscoring how ritual language and substances intermingle to dissolve traditional social and ethical constraints.

During initiation, rituals progress through stages, beginning with penetration and advancing to “ullaasa” (‘the state of bliss’), a term that conveys both sensory and spiritual ecstasy. The ritual involves chanting “maatrika” (alphabet) mantras over wine and “muula” (seed) mantras over flesh, integrating these elements into the participants’ consumption (McDaniel, 1988, p. 91). The linguistic nuance here is significant: the lack of clear differentiation between alcohol and other intoxicants in the rituals illustrates their shared role as facilitators of spiritual experiences (Pattanaik, 2022).

The “KulaarNava Tantra” articulates that intoxicants become vehicles for the goddesses to inhabit and manifest through the worshippers. This concept is rooted in the understanding of divine embodiment and possession, where consumption of these substances transforms individuals into conduits for the divine. The text posits that through the blending of “dhyaana” (meditation) and intoxicants, worshippers experience various ecstatic states, including fainting, as a form of divine interaction (McDaniel, 1988, p. 91). This portrayal reflects the complex interplay between ritual actions and their perceived divine outcomes. In the possession state, all actions performed are deemed divine, transcending conventional ethical and social norms.

The *tantra* text elaborates: “In this state, discussion reveals the fruit of the mantra; sleepiness is seen as *Samadhi* (spiritual absorption), bad actions are worship, union with *Shakti* is liberation, one treats food as an offering to *Bhairav*, and conversation, *O Isani*, is considered the chanting of hymns” (Dasa, 1383 BS: VIII, 59-60). This exemplifies how ritual language frames mundane actions as sacred, illustrating the transformative power of ritual context. The text argues that the consumption of wine and flesh is not merely for bodily pleasure but is integral to spiritual practice. If such acts alone could lead to liberation, all consumers of wine and meat would attain spiritual perfection. The distinction between those who drink for pleasure and those who drink for spiritual ecstasy is underscored: “The contact of bodily parts is *Nyasa* (ritually placing a god in the body), taking food is the pouring of oblations upon the sacrificial fire, observation is meditation, and sleeping is like an embrace” (Dasa, 1383 BS: VIII, 61). Here, the language of ritual transforms ordinary acts into sacred practices, highlighting how ritualistic terms and metaphors frame and elevate the experience.

The “KulaarNava Tantra” further explores the effects of intoxicants on participants’ psyche, describing how intoxicated individuals may experience confusion and a loss of self-awareness. This is illustrated in descriptions of worshippers who, under the influence of intoxication, engage in behaviors that blur the lines between spiritual and carnal acts: “The women are confused and ask their husbands questions such as: ‘Who are you, who am I, who are these other people, why are we here, is this a garden, or our home, or an inner courtyard?’” And further, “O Sambhavi! The yogis take food from

each other's plates and dance about with their drinking pots on their heads." Also, "the men fill their mouths with liquor and have the women drink from their mouths. They also put spicy food in their mouths and pass it to their partners." And "The women, overcome by emotion, clap and sing songs with unclear words, and stagger while dancing." Furthermore, "Yogis who are intoxicated fall upon the women, and intoxicated yoginis fall upon the men. O Kula Naayika! They are driven to perform such actions to fulfill their mutual desires." Finally, "When this state of *ullaasa* is not accompanied by perverse thoughts, the bull among yogis reaches the state of identity with the deity" (Dasa, 1383 BS: VIII, 69-75).

This text explains how intoxication facilitates a form of spiritual liberation and transformation. The described behaviors and their ritualistic meanings reflect the complex interplay of language, perception, and spiritual practice. The text's focus on the use of wine within the ritual framework is particularly intriguing. Wine, alongside meat, fish, grain, and copulation, is part of the five Ms used in goddess worship (Dasa, 1383). This categorization highlights the ritual's focus on transcending ordinary experience to access deeper spiritual realms. The "KulaarNava Tantra" details the preparation and use of these substances, emphasizing their role in achieving spiritual purification and union with the divine. Wine, in this context, is not just a substance but a symbolic agent that temporarily suspends everyday sensibilities to unlock higher levels of consciousness (Rai, 1999, i-xiv).

McDaniel's (1988, p. 87-99) exploration of possession states provides further insight into the ritual's impact on participants. The use of ritual language to describe intoxication as a divine experience emphasizes the linguistic shift that occurs within the context of these rituals: it is not the substance itself that is transformative, but the way it is framed within a sacred narrative. Thus, the linguistic significance of these practices is twofold: it shapes the meaning of actions and substances, transforming them from mundane to sacred, and it offers insight into how language is used to structure and frame spiritual experiences in a way that transcends conventional social and ethical boundaries. The rituals and their associated linguistic expressions create a space where the divine and the human meet,

where possession and intoxication are not only tolerated but are integral to the spiritual journey.

5.4.1 Linguistic gender of mantras in Kulaarnava Tantra

The mantras associated with *Devatās* (deities) are considered masculine, while those related to *Vidyās* are feminine. Mantras that end with "Hum" or "Phat" are masculine, and in these mantras, the *prāṇa* (life force) moves through the right nostril. On the other hand, mantras ending with "Svähā" are attributed to female deities, with the *prāṇa* flowing through the left nostril (*Idā*). Mantras that end with "Namah" are considered neuter, and in these, the *prāṇa* circulates through both nostrils (Rai, 1999, XVI, 40-41, p. 264).

This phenomenon is linguistically significant as it reflects a broader cultural understanding of divine possession. The linguistic significance of the rituals and practices described in the *Shakta* and *Tantric* traditions, particularly in the context of possession states and the consumption of intoxicants, lies in the way language functions to elevate ordinary actions into sacred practices, framing them as transformative spiritual experiences.

For instance, *Saumya* "tender" mantras are primarily used in pacificatory rituals, as their syllables are imbued with *Amṛta-tattva* (the essence of nectar or immortality (Ragozin, 1899, p. 180), symbolizing purity and spiritual energy, and they conclude with the sacred syllable *Svähā* (a sacred offering or affirmation). In contrast, *Agneya* mantras (mantras associated with *Agni*, the fire god) are employed in more intense or destructive rituals, where their energy serves to invoke power or transformation.

For rituals focused on prosperity, *Phat* mantras are used, with the syllable "Phat" carrying force and transformative power. When the aim is attraction or captivating others, *Vaṣat* mantras (mantras used for invoking or summoning) are invoked, calling forth the power to influence and draw things toward the practitioner. In rituals intended to bring about the death of an enemy, *Hum Phat* mantras are utilized, combining the syllables "Hum" and "Phat" to invoke destruction. *Namah* mantras (mantras ending with "Namah," meaning "I bow to" or "salutation") are used in rituals for immobilization or reverence, as they symbolize humility and submission.

Finally, *Svāhā* mantras are again employed in pacificatory rituals, marking the completion of the offering or invoking a peaceful conclusion (Rai, 1999, XVI, 42-43, p. 265).

6 CONCLUSION

This paper offers a detailed analysis of the ambivalent attitudes toward religious ecstasy involving intoxicants in contemporary India and throughout history, supported by linguistic analysis and textual evidences. It explores how language structures and shapes the discourse surrounding intoxicant use and its religious significance, ranging from taboo and prohibition to veneration and incorporation into spiritual practice. While not exhaustive, the study centers on a linguistic perspective focused on semantic and lexical meaning, examining key Hindu texts, including the *Rig-Veda*, *Ramayana*, *Mahabharata*, and *Bhagavad Gita*, alongside seminal studies that provide foundational support.

The scope of this paper encompasses the intoxicant's role as a cherished religious object, its use in offerings to Hindu deities—particularly within the *Tantric* traditions of *Shaivism* and *Shaktism*—its implications in *Ayurveda*, and the intersections of gender and caste with intoxicant consumption. Additionally, the paper employs cross-cultural or intertextual analysis to further explore the broader context of intoxicant use in religious and cultural practices. Despite its comprehensive approach, the study acknowledges that it cannot cover all aspects related to intoxicants. There remains considerable scope for future research to further investigate and expand upon these themes, providing deeper insights into this complex and multifaceted topic.

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