



# History of Science in South Asia

*A journal for the history of all forms of scientific thought and action, ancient and modern, in all regions of South Asia*

## Book Review: James McHugh, *An Unholy Brew*

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## HISTORY OF SCIENCE IN SOUTH ASIA

A journal for the history of all forms of scientific thought and action, ancient and modern, in all regions of South Asia, published online at <http://hssa-journal.org>

ISSN 2369-775X

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# Book Review:

## James McHugh, *An Unholy Brew*

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James McHugh, *An Unholy Brew: Alcohol in Indian History and Religions* (New York, Oxford University Press, 2021), pp. xii, 403. £25.99. ISBNs: 9780199375943, 9780199375936. DOI: [10.1093/oso/9780199375936.001.0001](https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780199375936.001.0001).

ALTHOUGH MANY DOUBT that there was “much alcohol in ancient India”, as James McHugh states in his introduction (p. 1), alcohol is an enormous topic in South Asian history that has been little researched to date. The existing literature dealing with this topic is outdated or superficial, and global studies on the history of alcohol skip the region or only touch on it. Therefore, a comprehensive survey of drinks, drinking and ideas about drinking in premodern South Asia is not only an attractive topic for a more general readership but also a big desideratum for many scholars working on South Asia, Cultural Anthropology, Social and Religious Studies and other disciplines. But while the blurb promises “[t]he first comprehensive book on alcohol in premodern India”, McHugh admits in his introduction (p. 2) that “[i]t is impossible to be comprehensive when dealing with such a wide-ranging topic.” In fact, a comprehensive history of alcohol in India or South Asia in all its aspects would fill several volumes. The author acknowledges this situation and is eager to be honest with his readers throughout the book. Instead of losing himself in an ocean of alcoholic drinks, he satisfies his readership with well-chosen sips and offers selected, in most cases representative, tastes from all relevant literary genres in Sanskrit literature.

In addition to the problem of the vast mass of material, there is the reverse issue of all the texts lost to us. Again, McHugh is fully aware of this and repeatedly reminds his readers to keep in mind that the extant sources are not comprehensive in depicting cultural life in premodern South Asia. Moreover, we cannot rely on those sources to actually depict what happened at the time of (or before) their composition. They might be representations of an elitist perception, advertise the ideals of a religious group, or contain poetical exaggerations and so forth. Finally, there is the problem of our own presuppositions. McHugh



rightly warns against imposing contemporary terms like wine, beer or liquor on Sanskrit words denoting specific alcoholic drinks. On top of that, the concept of alcohol, as we understand it today, was not known in premodern India – a fact that is difficult to keep in mind while reading a book on alcohol in premodern India. Attendant to these issues, the author adopts a careful and cautious style of writing in order not to mislead the reader. Inevitably, this cautiousness results in many uncertainties and unproven hypotheses. Of course, if one wants to write a comprehensive book on the topic that does not end up as a multi-volume undertaking, this is probably the only reasonable and feasible way to deal with the task.

The book is structured into two Rounds (or parts) consisting of altogether nine Cups (i.e., chapters). The menu is rounded off with an Aperitif and a Digestif, introducing and concluding the book. It also contains an extensive bibliography with many further resources, and a helpful index. While the decision to use endnotes may be pleasant for most casual readers, in combination with the inconsistent chapter titling, it makes scholarly use of the book inconvenient. In the table of contents, all chapters have bipartite titles, like “Cup 6: Drink in Ritual, Myths, and Epic”. The header line within the chapters provides only the second part of these titles, while the sections in the notes at the end of the book are titled only with the corresponding first part. In order to look up an endnote, readers must be aware of the first component of each title, which is not indicated in the header. This means that they constantly have to resort to the table of contents unless they have internalized the structure of the book.

The structure of the book is inspired by a tantric myth describing nine cups offered by the goddess Surā (Liquor) to the gods (see pp. 16 and 261–269). In the first Round (Cups 1–5), McHugh focuses on the material culture of the various drinks and drinking practices, while the second Round (Cups 6–9) is dedicated to theories and reflections upon drinking, addressing mythical, ritualistic and legal aspects. According to the author, this order is mainly due to the decision to structure the book based on the complexity of the topics. First come the simpler matters, introducing the readers to various drinks and their backgrounds and preparing them for the more complex and theoretical parts of the monograph. In general, this makes for an easy read, always ensuring that the reader knows the basics before reading on. On the other hand, this approach repeatedly results in the division of subject areas across several chapters, which in turn creates the need to scroll forward or backwards and re-read certain passages. However, this reading mode is hampered by the fact that the author often provides only vague cross-references. In many cases, he merely tells his readers that “we’ll examine [something] later” or introduces a new topic with “as we saw earlier”. If someone is only interested in a specific chapter or does not know the whole book by heart, this lack of precise referencing can become quite annoying and

time-consuming. After all, even the reviewer poured himself a nice glass of wine before opening the volume for the very first time, and also the author admits that “it’s possible that the readers [... are] not always sober” (p. 143).

The chapters themselves are well-structured and dedicated to well-proportioned topical units. If a section risks becoming too verbose for some readers, the author gives out warnings and suggests skipping a few pages, as, for example, in Cup 6, where certain parts are only included for the sake of completeness, dedicated to the most committed readers (pp. 163–164). Cup 1, relying on Vedic and various later sources, focuses on the usually grain-based *surā*, the prototypical drink of premodern South Asia, deciphers its various meanings and explains related matters like the importance of the ferment *kinva*, or the depiction of the drink in medical sources. The second big group of alcoholic drinks, those based on various kinds of sugar, are dealt with in Cup 2. Then, in Cup 3, the author returns to *surā* and discusses aspects of brewing, selling and consuming the beverage, focusing on texts providing details on communal, public drinking, festivals and connected moral implications. In contrast, Cup 4 is dedicated to the more private, elite form of drinking as depicted in the belle lettres and the *Kāmasūtra*. Cup 5 addresses the medical literature, focusing on the question of how to drink in a healthy way. If the readers heeding the advice provided in that Cup are not too intoxicated yet, they can now proceed to the second Round and read, in Cup 6, on myths relating to alcoholic drinks and their ritualistic use, establishing a basis to fully understand the rest of the book. Cup 7 deals with legal and ethical aspects of alcohol, focusing on relevant Vedic and Hindu literature, but also taking into account Buddhist and Jain sources. Then, Cup 8 contains a concise account of the vast topic of alcohol in tantric rituals, also including mythological details from the tantric tradition and an excursus on the relevance of cannabis and opium in this context. Lastly, Cup 9 provides a glimpse into later developments of the drinks, ideas, narratives and rituals that have been described in the book. According to the author (p. 18), however, this is actually a topic for another book to be written by someone else.

The author was forced to carefully select and sort his materials, primarily making use of anecdotes to tell his story instead of relying on tedious summaries. For example, McHugh bases his chapter on “Drink, Health, and Disease in Āyurvedic Texts” on several passages from Vāgbhaṭa’s *Aṣṭāṅgahṛdayasaṃgraha* (c. sixth century CE) and on one chapter from the earlier *Carakasamhitā*. Although the quotations from these two (closely related) works provide interesting insights into how early āyurvedic physicians evaluated alcoholic drinks, treated maladies resulting from them and even employed alcohol as medicine, they do not represent the full depth and width of the āyurvedic tradition. The question of whether there are diverging approaches to the topics discussed remains unad-

dressed, and later developments in the rich medieval and colonial medical literature are not covered. As a result, the chapter provides only a cursory introduction to the vast topic of Āyurveda and alcohol that is based on a few examples from two related texts but it does not provide a general survey of the topic. Keeping this issue in mind, the chapter is still an enjoyable and informative read, preparing the reader to dive deeper into this vast aspect of alcohol use in South Asia. In this way, the book is, in many respects, a perfect starting point for more in-depth studies on the topic. Some such studies have already been published by the author himself along with the book in the form of stand-alone papers on specific alcoholic drinks like *sīdhu*, *maireya*, or *surā*. Other topics surveyed in the monograph still await deeper investigation. Such limitations are inevitable if the task consists of representing an inexhaustible topic on less than four hundred pages and in an enjoyable manner. And other chapters, probably those nearer to the author's personal interests, are more comprehensive and provide good overviews of the chosen themes.

Despite these, which are mostly either due to editorial choices or the vastness of the topic, *An Unholy Brew* will definitely be the standard resource on the history of alcohol in South Asia, at least until someone undertakes a more comprehensive account. The book provides valuable overview for everyone interested in the production and consumption of (and also abstinence from) liquors, as well as an exploration of the interrelations of alcohol with such diverse topics as mythology and ritual, law and politics, health and medicine,otics and literature. Cheers!

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Please write to ([wujastyk@ualberta.ca](mailto:wujastyk@ualberta.ca)) to file bugs/problem reports, feature requests and to get involved.

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