
THE COCONUT FENI DISTILLATION INDUSTRY IN GOA: A CRITICAL REVIEW

Dr. Biula V. Pereira

Associate Professor

Department of Sociology,

Fr. Agnel College of Arts and Commerce

Pilar, Goa, India.

bevigilant786@gmail.com

Abstract

Every community acquires its identity from the occupations that are created by the prevailing social structure. In Goa *feni* distillation is one occupation that supports many families. In fact, it has evolved into a social organization with its own specific characteristics. Palm and cashew *feni* distillation are a part of the traditional cottage industries of Goa. The term *feni* is used to refer to two different locally distilled alcoholic drinks. One is distilled from fermented coconut toddy and the other is derived from distilled fermented cashew apple juice. These two drinks are popularly consumed in Goa by many drinkers. The weather conditions need to be ideal for the fermentation of toddy and cashew apple juice. The present study is an attempt at understanding the process involved in toddy collection. It also aims to explain the *feni* distillation procedure as well as the various uses of *feni*.

A toddy tapper faces many difficulties in his occupation. A gender based allotment of duties exists in the occupation due to the nature of the occupation. The nature of the occupation has also introduced a certain belief system which has become a part of this occupation. Through the present study, an attempt has been made to analyse the beliefs related to the occupation of the toddy tapper. The physical and technical aspects involved in the production of palm or coconut *feni*, provide an understanding of this cottage industry. Due to the perils of the occupation, the toddy tapping industry is on a decline. The availability of IMFL (Indian Made Foreign Liquor) is another reason for the decline in the demand for this local alcoholic drink.

Keywords: *feni*, distillation, cottage industry, IMFL

I. Introduction

Goa has a warm climate. The temperature varies between 20 degrees Celsius and 32 degrees Celsius due to its proximity to the sea. The annual rainfall received by Goa is 2500 to 4000 mm. These ideal climatic conditions help the coconut plantations of Goa flourish.

Goa is identified with its local alcoholic drink *feni*. There are two types of *feni*-coconut and cashew. The production of Palm or coconut *feni* predates the production of cashew *feni* in Goa. Goan society mandatorily uses coconut *feni* to perform many rituals and customs which are incomplete without the usage of coconut *feni*. This indicates that the production of coconut *feni* pre-dates that of cashew *feni*. The cashew fruit was introduced by the Portuguese in Goa.

The Goan social hierarchy has a sub-caste called *render* (toddy tapper) whose prime occupation is based around the distillation of coconut *feni*. *Render* is a sub-caste belonging to the *Sudra* caste in Catholicism while in Hinduism coconut *feni* distillation is carried out by a sub-caste of *Sudir* called *Bhandari* or *Poi Kape*. Cashew *feni* distillers do not have any separate caste demarcated on the basis of occupation, although many cashew *feni* distillers in the Hindu community belong to the *Bhandari* caste.

Traditionally toddy tappers carry a crescent shaped blade locally called *katti*, a small earthen pot to directly collect toddy from the tree and an elongated oblong vessel to store the toddy. In the olden days the toddy tapper normally dressed in a loin cloth. This traditional attire is typical to the profession of toddy tapping. Over time, the traditional style of dressing of toddy tappers has changed and currently they wear a pair of short pants and a t-shirt while tapping toddy.

Palm and cashew *feni* constitute two important traditional cottage industries of Goa. Many families depend on *feni* distillation for their livelihood. Consequently, *feni* distillation is an important economic activity in Goa. The nature of the occupation has also introduced a certain belief system which is an integral part of the occupation. The occupation of toddy tapping has many perils and therefore it is on the decline.

II. Review of Literature

Dwijen Rangnekar (2009) conducted a case study on the social construction of a geographical indication for *Feni*. *Feni* is a liquor distilled in Goa either from fermented cashew apple juice or coconut toddy. This study aims to understand the political investment of the state and identifies a demarcation between giving a space for coming to a consensus and forming an agreement. *Feni* was registered to Goa Government's Department for Science and Technology and the Goa Cashew Feni Distillers and Bottlers Association in February 2009. The study is an attempt to analyse the historical transformation and contemporary diversity connected to a cultural product.

David Abram (1995) explained that distillation was first introduced in Goa more than 400 hundred years ago by the Catholic missionaries. Portuguese peasants stewed grape skins. Goans replaced the grape skin with locally available material like coconut sap or cashew apple juice. Over the years, the distillation process has been refined.

F. R. Allchin (1979) conducted a study on distillation in India. The art of distillation of alcohol only developed in western Europe from the 12th century A.D. However, it was known to the Greeks of Alexandria before the opening of the Christian era, and later used by the Arabs for obtaining essential oils. The present study has identified pots as parts of stills. The study indicated that the distillation of alcohol was common in northwest Pakistan between 150 B.C. and A.D due to the pots found in archaeological excavations. References to alcoholic drinks in Indian literature may trace the history of distillation in India and Pakistan back to 500 B.C.

III. Objectives

1. To understand the process involved in toddy collection.
2. To explain the *feni* distillation procedure.
3. To examine the beliefs related to the occupation of the toddy tapper.
4. To explain the different uses of coconut feni.

IV. Research Methodology

Keeping in mind the objectives of the study the village of Benaulim was selected. This village is situated in the Salcete taluka of Goa. A large number of villagers in Benaulim are involved in traditional occupations like toddy tapping. Benaulim also has a sizeable number

of distilleries and offered the needed characteristics to meet the objectives of the study due to which it was selected as the area of study.

Distillation units were visited in order to understand the distillation process. Besides this, toddy tappers were interviewed extensively for the needed information. Additionally, five Catholic and five Hindu families were selected to understand the importance and use of *feni* in their socio-cultural life.

The village and respondents were selected following the Purposive Sampling Method. The Snowball Technique was also used as it was compatible with the Purposive Sampling Method. The interview schedule was the principal instrument for collection of necessary data for the study.

Secondary data was taken from various books and research articles. Keeping in mind the purpose of the study and the qualitative characteristics of the data collected, the data was analyzed using content analysis.

V. Data Analysis and Findings

1. The Process of Toddy Tapping and Distillation of *Feni*

Palm or coconut *feni* distillation has been an age-old Goan occupation. This occupation has supported a number of families. Toddy tapping involves an arrangement of activities. This includes the need for toddy tappers climbing coconut trees thrice a day (i.e. morning, afternoon and evening). A plethora of skills and knowledge is required in order to tap a coconut tree.

Every morning the toddy tapper climbs the tree to collect toddy from the earthen pot affixed to the spadix. After emptying the toddy into an elongated vessel, which the toddy tapper carries with him as he climbs the tree, the spadix has to be sliced with the crescent blade (*katti*). Slicing the spadix is a very delicate job as it has to be cut in slices of less than half a centimeter. If thicker slices are cut from the spadix, it would be consumed quickly and will stop releasing toddy. This would reduce the income of the toddy tapper.

The second climb takes place in the afternoon. This is done only to cut into the spadix further which will ensure a good flow of toddy. If this procedure is not followed it can lead to dryness of the spadix and this reduces the flow of toddy. Management of the spadix is

tremendously important as it plays a major role in providing the required quantity of toddy. The toddy tapper has to be able to recognize if the spadix of the coconut tree is mature or ready for tapping. The maturity of the spadix is checked by checking the swelling at its base. After this is done, if the toddy tapper does not work on the spadix within five days, it will become over mature and unfit for tapping. Therefore, knowledge, skills and experience are crucial components required to carry out this traditional occupation.

After the spadix has been identified for tapping, it has to be treated with a moderate hammering for two successive days. This is done with the help of the butt of the crescent blade. An incision is then made at the tip of the spadix and this is fastened with specialized plastic strips. For the next four days, a methodical slicing and simultaneous hammering of the spadix follows. After five days, the spadix is cut three times a day to induce the flow of toddy. The earthen pot is fixed on the spadix to collect toddy. Many toddy tappers complain of blisters on their palms due to this process of hammering the spadix.

In the olden days, toddy tappers introduced grown up sons to the occupation by teaching them how to cut and fasten the spadix. The young tapper tried climbing small trees for practice before he actually started tapping big coconut trees. It was observed that generally it takes nearly six months for a learner to pick up the intricacies of toddy tapping.

The instruments used by toddy tappers have changed over the years. Formerly, instruments were made out of elements available in nature. For instance, a gourd was used as the vessel to be taken up the coconut tree to collect toddy from the small earthen pot, fixed to the spadix. This was replaced with the availability of a synthetically manufactured alternative. Similarly, earthen pots used during the distillation process got replaced with copper pots. The second, smaller earthen pot taken to the tapping site to collect toddy got replaced with a plastic pot. The fronds of the palm tree which were used originally to tie the spadix got replaced with plastic strips.

The toddy tapping occupation demands work throughout the day. After tapping the coconut trees in the morning, the rest of a toddy tapper's day is taken up with the maintaining of the tools and instruments needed for the occupation. For instance, the crescent blade has to be sharpened daily. The earthen pot fixed on the spadix also has to be washed and sun dried properly. During the winter, the tapper needs to plaster this earthen container fixed on the

spadix, with cow dung so that it does not develop cracks. The chopping of logs of wood needed for the distillation process is another time consuming requirement of the occupation.

The wives of toddy tappers assist in the occupation by washing the big earthen or copper pot used for distillation. They also replenish the pot with fermented toddy. In addition, they wash the elongated vessel used to collect toddy from the spadix. The toddy tapper's wife helps in tending to the fire during the distillation process and removes the residue from the distillation pot. The wives of toddy tappers are well equipped with the knowledge required to check and judge the strength of the coconut *feni* being distilled. In the past, they were also involved in the sale of *feni*.

The process of distillation of *feni* requires the fermentation of toddy for around four days. The warm climate of Goa hastens the fermentation process. Depending on the size of the distillation pot, fermented toddy is poured into it. After slightly heating the pot, it is sealed. Sealing is done in a careful manner so as to ensure that there are no openings or spaces from which the toddy could leak into the flames. A special type of mud available in Goa is used for this purpose. If sealing is not done properly, the distillation process can be compromised and have disastrous consequences to the attendant of the distillation pot. After sealing, the pot is heated on high intensity flames till vapours emanate. The flame is later reduced. This is a very important part of the distillation process as the knowledge of tending to the flames beneath the distillation pot, plays a crucial role in distillation. It takes about 5 hours to complete one distillation cycle. The vapours that emanate pass through a duct connected to the distillation pot into an earthen pot used for condensation. The condensed vapours now in liquid form, get collected in another earthen pot kept for *feni* collection through an opening in the condensation pot. After the heating process, the residue in the distillation pot has to be emptied immediately to reduce pressure on the distillation pot.

2. The Difficulties of Toddy Tapping

Toddy tapping is an occupation which involves timely processes that have to be followed according to procedure, despite family or medical emergencies. During emergencies, a substitute has to be arranged to carry out this process. Thus, good health and physical strength are an essential part of the occupation.

The biggest risk associated with the toddy tapping occupation is the height of the coconut trees that have to be climbed in order to tap the toddy. These coconut trees are around five to eight meters tall and are climbed by stepping on grooves cut into the trunk of the tree, without any other protective equipment. Climbing these coconut trees during the monsoon season involves a lot of risk especially when moss grows on the trees, make them slippery to climb. Moreover, during this season, the tree sways with the heavy flurries of wind. There have been innumerable cases of deaths of toddy tappers due to their falling off from coconut trees from such great heights. In some cases, toddy tappers have been crippled. Apart from this, tremendous pressure is exerted on the cartilage of the knee joint due to continuous climbing, causing orthopedic problems and eventually making it unbearable and impossible for toddy tappers to climb coconut trees. Such circumstances make families involved in this occupation face socio-economic crises.

Many dangers are also faced by toddy tappers during the distillation process. If the sealing process is not done carefully, fermented toddy can dribble out and come in contact with the flames during the heating process, which could cause an explosion. If the pot used for the distillation process develops a crack, fermented toddy can ooze out causing an explosion. The distillation process becomes more dangerous if the toddy tapper adulterates his produce by mixing it with sugar and jaggery. The melted sugar or jaggery can seep out through the huge, porous, earthen pot and come in contact with the flames beneath the pot, thereby causing an explosion.

The youth presently do not want to take up this occupation due to the large number of hurdles and intricacies involved in the toddy tapping occupation, coupled with the inflexible work routine. Apart from this, there is a stigma attached to the occupation, as toddy tappers feature on the lower spectrum of the caste hierarchy. This deters youngsters from taking up the occupation. Nowadays, children belonging to families of toddy tappers are educated and prefer salaried jobs or moving abroad for better work prospects.

After facing innumerable difficulties and health hazards during the process of the collection and distillation of toddy, the toddy tappers earn a meager income for the sale of coconut *feni*. This is because the popularity of coconut *feni* has gradually declined in Goa due to the fact that it is often considered to be a poor man's drink. This doesn't help the case of the toddy distillation industry in the state.

3. Beliefs and Rituals Associated with the Toddy Tapping Occupation

Due to the strenuous and risky nature of the toddy tapping occupation, toddy tappers have incorporated certain beliefs and rituals into this occupation. On a daily basis, once the tapping and collection has been completed, a little toddy is poured as an offering near the last coconut tree tapped. This is done with the intention to appease the guardian spirit of the place known as *zageavoilo*. This offering is made as a token of gratitude for the safety of the tapper and as a prayer for protection from any mishaps which may occur in the future.

After distillation a little distilled coconut *feni* is thrown into the flames or around the distillation unit. Though many distillers have replaced wooden furnaces with stoves, the practice of throwing *feni* into the flames still exists. In such cases *feni* is thrown on the copper pot used in distillation and around the place of distillation.

A number of Goans are known for their ubiquitous acceptance of the belief in the existence of certain spirits or entities. The most prominent of such is the belief in a supernatural entity popularly known as *Devchar*. He is accredited as a guardian spirit and is characterized as helpful and protective. In Goan spirituality the *Devchar* is not considered a deity, but a spirit that is benevolent and helpful. The *Devchar* is appeased with offerings for all favours granted and to be granted. The offerings of *soro-ronth* (Alcohol and Leavened Bread) are considered propitious and as per the taste of the supernatural entity. Originally, this offering consisted of toddy or *sur*. Hindus in particular, strongly believe in the existence of the *Devchar* and make this offering of toddy or *sur* on various religious and social occasions. The Catholic toddy tapper offers toddy or *sur* to this supernatural entity using the invocation of the phrase *Devak* (for God) but will not use the word *Devchar* (as this it is synonymous with a Hindu supernatural spirit).

4. The Usage of *Feni* and *Toddy*

Feni is used for a number of medicinal practices. In Goa, it is used as a home remedy for the treatment of various sicknesses. It is used as a disinfectant to treat cuts and bruises. When *feni* is poured on a wound or cut, it creates a stinging sensation which helps healing as well as blood coagulation. As an antifatulent, *feni* is used to treat stomach disorders. It is applied on the belly of a person in order to stop loose motions. Similarly, colds and fevers are treated

with *feni*. *Feni* is also consumed as an appetizer before meals by senior citizens, who consume it before lunch and dinner in very small quantities. It also helps as a sedative.

The consumptional use of *feni* is more prevalent among Catholics rather than Hindus. In the past, *feni* was also served at different celebrations by families. Varieties of flavoured *feni* were distilled. This was done by adding ginger, guava and orange peels to the fermented toddy during distillation.

Though *feni* is used practically as a synonym for Goa, it does not find much place in Goan society. Those who have moved up the social ladder tend to shun drinking *feni*. It is not preferred due to the availability of IMFL (Indian Made Foreign Liquor) and other foreign alcoholic drinks. Industrialization in Goa resulted in the setting up of many alcohol-manufacturing units producing IMFL. Thus, toddy based *feni*, distilled in the traditional manner is diminishing.

Vinegar prepared from coconut toddy is used in many food preparations. In Catholic cuisine, a majority of the pork and beef dishes demand the use of vinegar as a souring agent. Vinegar is said to give these dishes a distinct taste which cannot be attained by the use of other souring agents like lime or tamarind. Vinegar is also used as a preservative for meat, fish and vegetable pickles. Earlier, toddy was popularly used in the preparation of bread by the Goan bakers in the absence of yeast.

VI. Conclusion

Toddy tapping is a full time and arduous occupation. It demands a lot of energy and discipline. The continuous climbing of the coconut tree, over the years, has an adverse effect on the health and well-being of a toddy tapper. It weakens his knees and makes it difficult for him to continue the occupation after 50 years of age. Among the hazards involved, climbing the tree during the monsoon when moss grows on it, is an extremely dangerous one. There are numerous cases where a toddy tapper has fallen from the tree and has either died or was crippled. During the *feni* distillation process several fatalities can occur, which could include life threatening explosions, if there is an error in the distillation process.

Feni has several medicinal uses. It is used to treat cuts and bruises, flatulence and fevers. Earlier *feni* was flavoured and served at celebrations. Toddy is used in the preparation of

vinegar which is used to make meat preparations and pickles. There are several ritualistic uses of *feni* in the Goan society.

Currently, *feni* doesn't find a significant place in Goan society. IMFL and beer is becoming popular especially in the public drinking places. Even in Goan celebrations *feni* does not find a dominant place. Many young people who come from families of toddy tappers hesitate to take up this occupation due to the perils associated with it. Thus, the toddy tapping occupation is on a decline in Goan society.

References

- Abram, D. (1995). *Goa: The Rough Guide*. London: Rough Guides.
- Allchin, F. R. (1979). India: The Ancient Home of Distillation?. *Man*, 14(1), 55-63.
- LaSalle, P. (1992). Portuguese Goa. *Western Humanities Review*, 46(2), 204.
- Nykänen, L. (1986). Formation and occurrence of flavor compounds in wine and distilled alcoholic beverages. *American Journal of Enology and Viticulture*, 37(1), 84-96.
- Rangnekar, D. (2009). Geographical Indications and Localisation: A case study of Feni. *ESRC Report*.
- Roberts, J. (2009). *In mixed company: taverns and public life in Upper Canada*. UBC Press.
- Vallee, B. L. (1998). Alcohol in the western world. *Scientific American*, 278(6), 80-85.