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Soor: A traditional alcoholic beverage in Tons Valley, Garhwal Himalaya

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The aboriginal communities in the hilly and mountainous Tons Valley have traditionally had recourse to *Soor* ─ a traditional alcoholic beverage to cope with adverse climatic conditions and also on ceremonial occasions as well as festivals. This paper describes the indigenous method of preparing *Soor*. It also explores the role of *Soor* in the life and culture of aboriginal people.

Keywords: *Soor*, *Keem*, Garhwal Himalaya.

The hill communities of India use a number of plants for decantation/ distillation of alcoholic beverages. The constituent plant as such varies from place to place. Alcoholic beverages of different communities have received attention of several Ethnobotanists and Anthropologists[1-7]. Several aboriginal communities mainly Jaunsaris and Parvatis inhabit Tons Valley. The alcoholic beverage locally known as *Soor* prepared by indigenous method is a part of life and culture of these communities. They consume it during rough weather to cope with adverse climatic conditions prevailing in the area and also on ceremonial occasions as well as during festivals.

The present study was undertaken during 1996-1999, while conducting the extensive floristic and ethnobotanical surveys in Tons Valley, with an aim to assess economic potential of the plant resources of the area. All the voucher specimens of the plants used have been housed in the Herbarium of National Botanical Research Institute, Lucknow (LWG). The traditional method of preparation of *Soor* as followed by local people has been described here.

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Study area and the people

Tons Valley (30º 35′-30º 18′ N latitude and 77º 49′-78º 37′ E longitude) is one of the floristically rich Himalayan valleys located in Garhwal Himalaya of Uttaranchal. The valley is bounded on the north and northwest by Shimla district of Himachal Pradesh, on the southwest by Chakrata Forest Division of Dehra Dun district, on the east by Uttarkashi district covering an area of 4500sq km (Fig. 1). The entire valley is situated in the temperate zone. Owing to topographic and climatic diversity, there is a unique assemblage of tropical, temperate and alpine elements in the flora. Broadly, Cedar, Pine, Oak and mixed type of forests could be seen which along with terraced farms provide a spectacular landscape[8].

Methods of preparation of *Soor*

The preparation of *Soor* consists of two steps:

(i) Preparation of *Keem,* the starter having yeast-like properties.
(ii) Distillation of liquor.

(i) Preparation of *Keem*

The starter of *Soor* is locally known as *Keem*, which is in the form of a cake. In the process of the preparation of *Keem*, the villagers collect different species of plants during rainy season. About 8 kg of

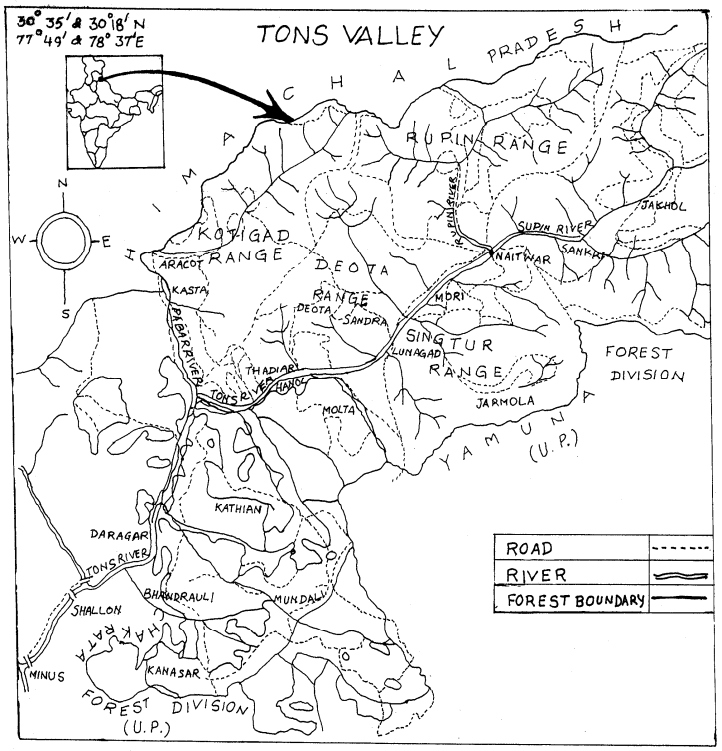

Fig. 1—Location map of the study area

chopped fresh twigs of *Cannabis sativa*, 5 kg leaves of *Sapindus mukorossi* and 10-15 kg in total of different plant species (as listed in Table 1) are dried in the shade and powdered. The powder prepared from the plants is mixed with about 50 kg of Barley flour. To the desired quantity of above dry mixture is added a sufficient quantity of *Jayaras* (an infusion prepared by keeping finely chopped leaves and tender parts of *Melia azedarach, Zanthoxylum armatum, Leucas lanata*, and *Dicliptera roxburghiana*), in a big container for whole night and doughed in to a round cake of about 1-2 kg weight. By repeating this process many cakes are prepared for their use round the year. The cakes so formed are further processed by placing them on plant bed (locally called *Sathar*) made up of tender shoots of *Cannabis sativa* and *Pinus roxburghii* alternately between the cakes in a closed room. The whole set up is allowed to remain undisturbed for 24 days. On the 25th day the room is opened and the cake is put upside down and allowed to remain there for another 12 days. The cakes are then taken out and allowed to dry in the sun or open air. When the cakes dry up they are ready for use as the starter for fermentation of liquor, *Soor*.

The plants used for preparing *Keem* are locally known as *Jadiya* and the people involved in this job are known as *Jadayi*. About 10-15 *Jadayi* are involved in the process of cake preparation at a time. The plants used for this purpose vary slightly from place to place. During the course of this study the authors came across people who disclosed that their forefathers used several more plants for this process; however, no body could identify or name all of them. According to the local people several such plants are not available or are very rare in occurrence. It is also observed that these people were very reluctant to reveal their secrets, until unless, somebody has developed good rapport with them.

(ii) Distillation of *Soor*

The raw materials for the distillation of *Soor* consist of either fruits rich in fermentable sugar such as apples, pears, peach, apricot, etc. or cereals mainly rice, barley or finger millet. About 10 kg of fruit pulp or cooked rice, barley plus roasted cakes made from flour of finger millet, is kept in a big earthen vessel to which about 2 kg of jaggery and 1/4th of powdered *Keem* cake is added. The mouth of earthen vessel is kept closed. Whole vessel is covered with woolen clothes to keep it warm. Now the Mixture is left for fermentation. The fermentation is assumed to be complete when it smells with bubbling or hissing sound due to generation of CO_2 gas ceases. It usually takes 7–10 days depending on the weather. After completion of fermentation, the mash is now transferred to a pitcher of the metallic still (Plate 1) to half of its capacity for distillation. The wooden lid of the pitcher having a condensing pipe also contains a metallic pot for keeping cold water. The still is now put on fire. After few hours the distillate known as *Soor* is collected in a pot through a string. The distillate collected in the first hour of distillation is classified on the basis of alcohol concentration as 'Super', after two hours

Table 1 ─ Important plants used for preparation of *Keem*

Botanical Name	Family	Vernacular Name	Part used
Achyranthes aspera L.	Amaranthaceae	Litchkuri	R
Adhatoda zeylanica Medik.	Acanthaceae	Baisheyi	R
Aerva sanguinolenta (L.) Bl.	Amaranthaceae	Safed-phulia	R
Alysicarpus vaginalis (L.) DC.	Fabaceae	Phatkaniya	L
Arachne cordifolia (Decne.) Hurusawa	Euphorbiaceae	Bhartoi	L
Artemisia roxburghiana Wall. ex Bess.	Asteraceae	Chamara	R
Berberis lycium Royle	Berberidaceae	Chatroi, Kashmal	R
Boerhaavia diffusa L.	Nyctaginaceae	Patharchatta	Wp
Cajanus scarabeoides (L.) de Pitit-Thou.	Fabaceae	Batti	Wp
Callicarpa macrophylla Vahl	Verbenaceae	Dahiya	Wp
Cannabis sativa L.	Cannabaceae	Bhang	L
Carissa opaca Stapf ex Haines	Apocynaceae	Karonda	R
Cassia tora L.	Caesalpiniaceae	Panvar	Wp
Cinnamomum tamala (Buch.-Ham.) Nees ex Eberm.	Lauraceae	Guradra	L
Cissampelos pariera var. *hirsuta* (Buch.-Ham. ex DC.) Forman	Menispermaceae	Parh	R
Cocculus hirsutus (L.) Diels	Menispermaceae	Jaljamni	Wp
Colebrookia oppositifolia Sm.	Lamiaceae	Bhirmoli	R
Cymbopogon martini (Roxb.) Wats.	Poaceae	Parhu	R
Datura stramonium L.	Solanaceae	Dhatura	L
Dicliptera roxburghiana Nees	Acanthaceae	Kathmul	Wp
Dioscorea bulbifera L.	Dioscoreaceae	Genthi	Bl

(*Contd*)

Table 1 ─ Important plants used for preparation of *Keem—Contd*

Botanical Name	Family	Vernacular Name	Part used
Euphorbia royleana Boiss.	Euphorbiaceae	Surat	R
Ficus benghalensis L.	Moraceae	Barh	B
Ficus semicordata Buch.-Ham. ex Sm.	Moraceae	Khonu	F
Geranium nepalensis Sur.	Geraniaceae	Laljarhi	R
Ichnocarpus frutescens (L.) R. Br.	Apocynaceae	Kalidudhi	Wp
Indigofera linifolia (L.f.) Retz.	Fabaceae	Torki	Wp
Leucas lanata Benth.	Lamiaceae	Bish-kopra	Wp
Melia azedarach L.	Meliaceae	-	L
Parthenocissus semicordata (Wall.) Planch.	Vitaceae	Dakh	Wp
Physalis minima L.	Solanaceae	Latkaniya	Wp
Pinus roxburghii Sargent	Pinaceae	Chir	R
Punica granatum L.	Punicaceae	Dadim	R
Rhus parviflora Roxb.	Anacardiaceae	Ninau	R
Roylea cinerea (D.Don) Baill.	Lamiaceae	Titpat	W
Rubus niveus Thunb.	Rosaceae	Kalahisar	R
Sapindus mukorossi Gaertn.	Sapindaceae	Atthu	L
Skimmia anquetila Taylor & Airy Shaw	Rutaceae	Kedarpat	L
Syzygium cumini L.	Myrtaceae	Jamun	Bl
Vitex negundo L.	Verbenaceae	Shayneyi	L
Woodfordia fruticosa (L.) Kurz.	Lythraceae	Dhai	L
Zanthoxylum armatum DC.	Rutaceae	Timur	R

Abbreviations ─ L=Leaves, R=Roots, B=Bark, Wp=Whole plant, Bl=Bulbils, F=Fig

Plate 1—Traditional distillation unit for *Soor*

'good' and after three hours as 'moderate'. It contains 35-40% alcohols. The residue left after distillation is considered highly nourishing and is fed to cattle, particularly to oxen.

Discussion

Soor has a special importance in all occasions, such as birth, marriage contracts, initiations, feasts, hospitality and some magico-ritual ceremonies of the people of Tons Valley. These people believe that drinking *Soor* gives strength to the body, acts as a blood purifier, removes intestinal worms and provides relief in urinary troubles. In fact all the alcoholic beverages are much richer in calories than proteins and carbohydrates, but are devoid of all the nutrients[2]. However, rest of beliefs might be mythical only. According to some elderly people of the area, in earlier days almost all families had their own distillation units like other house hold appliances. Now due to time taking process of distillation of liquor, availability of much cheaper industrial liquors in the local market and effect of growing modernization, this practice is restricted to some remote villages only. Further, *Soor* is not as economical as other local resource based trades. Local people of the valley still have a liking for *Soor* and they enjoy it on some special occasions and lean months, if not regularly. However, this knowledge is getting eroded fast in younger generations due to changing life style and culture in view of mass awareness of modern world. If the same trend continues this age old traditional practice would vanish in the days to come.

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