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Fermenting Identity: Traditional brew, forest knowledge, and cultural heritage in Dahanu Taluka

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Abstract:
The research project aims at studying the traditional brewing practices in the Warli and closely related tribal communities within Dahanu Taluka, Maharashtra as they refer to the production of palm toddy (Taadi), fruit wines and Mahua (Madhuca longifolia) liquor. Structured through the frame of Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) discourse, this research locates these brews within a biocultural system, imbued in socio-ritual life, ecological knowledge and tribal identity. With an interdisciplinary perspective, the paper records the ethnobotanical and technological knowledge that informs these practices as well as the dual menace of the repressive state policy and ecological deterioration. It says that these traditional drinks are a credible and complicated cultural act and not just a process of alcohol production. The review considers strategies for protection: the legal case advocating for cultural exemptions, as well as community-led ethno-ecological projects, and supports policies that protect tribal self-determination and preservation of their forest-based culture.

Keywords: Intangible Cultural Heritage, Dahanu Taluka, Tribal Communities, Mahua, Toddy, Fruit Wine, Traditional Fermentation, Ethnobotany, Cultural Preservation.

Introduction:
Dahanu Taluka as a coastline and forested area in the Palghar region, located in Maharashtra, is an unusual biocultural landscape. Characterized as an ecologically fragile environment, the surrounding vegetation forms a strong habitat that has mutually influenced the cultural practices of its principal tribal populations like (Warli people) (Bhide, 2015). Among them, the indigenous tradition of cultivating fermented beverages from forest and agro-forest substances – namely palm toddy, seasonal fruit wines, and Mahua wine – is a key and a frequently ignored aspect of intangible cultural heritage. These practices constitute an advanced knowledge base that incorporates aspects of seasonal cycles, plant knowledge, religious observance, and social structure (Jain, 2017). Traditional foodways are also recognized as integral for the preservation of cultural identity and eco-wisdom worldwide (UNESCO, 2003). Tribal fermentation practices in India sit on a contested landscape and are often misrepresented and otherwise prohibited by the legal system despite being rooted in deep cultural traditions. The brews of Dahanu — Taadi tapped from palms, wines from wild berries and liquor from fermented Mahua flowers — are vital to community life but are facing existential threats from prohibitionist laws, degradation of forest resources and cultural assimilation. The traditional fermentation knowledge on which Dahanu is constructed is thus treated as a complex cultural asset that is relevant to their tribal identity and ecological relationship by this paper. Preserving it is about cultural rights and biodiversity conservation. The research will first explain the sociocultural and ritual meanings associated with the brews. It will then describe the ethnobotanical and technical process, but, critically, address the legal and environmental pressures that are blocking them. Finally, it will focus

on how community-based practices of their preservation should be promoted, advocating for a departure in policy, and a reexamination of the debate over what makes these forms of culture heritage as opposed to vice.

Traditional drinks are inherent to ethnic groups of Dahanu-tribal peoples:

In their manufacture and consumption they are regulated by season, ritual, and social behaviour, which sets them apart from mainstream alcoholic. The Mahua liquor, which is found in the flowers of Madhuca longifolia , is considered to be the most basic of the traditional alcoholic beverages. The annual gathering of Mahua flowers is done as a group activity with songs, customs. The prepared brew should not be consumed as a mere drink like beer but as a special offering (naivedya), for festival like Bohada and Holi, or requirement for all life stage activities from a births and death (Kumbhar, 2016). Palm toddy (Taadi), collected from Borassus flabellifer and Caryota urens palm, is a daily supplementary drink and a ritual drink. It is tapped based on traditional laws of thumb and methods that have been handed down from generation to generation among the children of Toddy Tapper groups for generations (Mohan, 2016). Seasonal fruit wines obtained in regions with seasonal supplies: jamun (Syzygium cumini) or karonda (Carissa carandas) are an example of an adaptive use of their seasonal riches, frequently prepared to be consumed at certain local gatherings or used for medicinal purposes. Women are often the main holders and producers of knowledge, especially for Mahua and fruit wines, where they also control fermentation to turn forest harvest into cultural product. Dissemination of these brews strengthen the social ties, helps to settle disputes in assemblies of the village, and provides support of hospitality. Their use, then, is ritually bounded and socially controlled and constitutes a significant performative idiom of tribal identity and continuity (Sontakke, 2014).

Ethnobotanical Knowledge and Technical Processes :

The making of such beverages reflects an intimate knowledge of botany, ecology, and microbiology and involves a regional understanding of nature and culture. Each brew means a unique cluster of knowledge.

Mahua Liquor: The process starts with the environmentally friendly collection of Mahua flowers, which are sun-dried for preservation. Fermentation begins with a traditional starter cake commonly known as Ran u or Bakhar, made up as a herbal, root, and spice composition which is kept secret between brewing families. Key ingredients include bark of Anogeissus latifolia, roots of Asparagus racemosus and leaves of Murraya koenigii, chosen for their fermentative, flavouring and apparent medicinal properties (Sharma & Sharma 2018). The slow fermentation and distillation (if such is done) is a task of accuracy and exact ecological literacy.

Palm Toddy (Taadi): This is the practice of skilled, sustainable tapping of palm sap. Tappers make deep incision about palm inflorescence, in which time they store sap in earthen pots. This knowledge encompasses choosing the best tree, time of day of the day to tap (time of year), and means to naturally slow down the fermentation so the drink is easily consumed as a sweet, mildly alcoholic beverage. The practice is a well-rounded study of plant physiology with the sustainable harvesting ethic (Gadgil & Guha, 2013). A sustainable harvest ethic.

Fruit Wines: These are the opportunistic innovation of fruits. They are collected, crushed and fermented wild fruits, sometimes along with some jaggery or portions of the Ran u starter. The concept of this kind of practice exploits the season of gluts and turns an area's perishable forest food into storable, socially useful goods, and is, by implication, adaptive resource utilization. This triad of practices constitutes a comprehensive ethnobotanical system. These brews are perceived by the community not just as narcotics, but also as nutrients, digestives and medicine against common diseases, which is an issue that is increasingly supported by ethnopharmacological research (Tamang et al., 2020).

Dual Challenges: Prohibitionist Policies and the environment:

The survival of this heritage is imperiled by two forces at once. The biggest challenge is legal and political. Maharashtra's prohibitionist approach, both historically and in contemporary policy, cannot differentiate the two realms — traditional, culturally embodied fermentation versus commercial spirits production. Even though the Panchayats (Extension to Scheduled Areas) Act (PESA), 1996, and the

Forest Rights Act (FRA), 2006 grant tribes autonomy in relation to minor forest produce (MFP), and Mahua flowers and palm sap are included in this category, State excise laws criminalize the conversion of those into fermented beverages (Barve, 2017). Such criminalization also forces the practice underground, stigmatizes knowledge holders and prevents intergenerational transmission — while ironically allowing for adulteration with dangerous industrial alcohol. At the same time, ecological degradation dilutes the resource pool. Deforestation, land use change, and climate variability jeopardize the availability of Mahua trees, tapping palms, and wild fruit-bearing plants (Deshpande, 2021). Dahanu's ecological fragility adds to these pressures. As biodiversity is lost, so is the material base for this knowledge system. Changing climate patterns also disturb flowering and fruiting cycles and interfere with the seasonal rhythms which provide structure to these cultural practices.

Pathways for Safeguarding: Community-Led Strategies :

For Protection Effective Preservation and Protection There are not enough local-led, legally creative and ecologically synergistic paths available. There can be no such thing as good governance; to protect, practice must be facilitated by enabling a conducive legal and cultural landscape.

Legal advocacy for cultural exemption:

The most direct route, is policy reform. Based on PESA and FRA, tribal councils (Gram Sabhas) and civil society partners can promote direct legal exemptions for the brewing of traditional Mahua, toddy, and fruit wines for use at home, in ceremonies, and for the local community. This would require segregating such folk arts from the commercial craft of liquor, a difficult, but essential legal division (Singh, 2015).

Ethno-Ecological Conservation and Value Addition:

Knowledge preservation is inextricably integrated into the conservation of the resource. Community-led campaigns can encourage the sustainability of Mahua trees, palm groves, and indigenous flora that produce fruit. Further, investigating the legal production and marketing of non-alcoholic derivatives (e.g., Mahua flower sweets, palm jaggery) or the search for Geographical Indication (GI) tags for these forest produce can generate economic impetus for conservation and also promote the value of the connected knowledge (Das, 2019).

Community-based Heritage Recording and Education:

In order to counter intergenerational erosion, such digital archives need to be created by the community. They can record, in native lingo, the production methods, songs, rituals and ecological knowledge tied onto those brews. Incorporating that understanding into informally educating the community will teach young people about the cultural importance of all of this, regardless of whether they engage in production later in life.

Strategic Alliance Building:

Forces such as the tribal peoples, ethnobotanists, cultural anthropologists and environmental attorneys that are strong forces that can form a strong advocacy front. Alliances of this kind can create strong evidence of cultural and ecological significance for such practices, in turn providing supporting evidence for legal campaigns and applications for heritage rights.

Conclusion:

The conventional fermentation customs of Dahanu Taluka —focused on Mahua, toddy, and fruit wines—are about so much more than just ways to get alcohol together. They are, as this paper has suggested, integral representations of a biocultural heritage: complex systems of knowledge that weave the forest, the seasonal calendar, ritual life and social identity into one whole. Their present situation, besieged by prohibition and ecological collapse, speaks for a larger crisis in regard to the recognition of tribal lifeways and rights. Protecting that heritage calls for a radical re-definition. Such practices cannot be interpreted as vice but rather within the frameworks of cultural rights, ecological sustainability, and intellectual heritage. The next steps—legal arguments for cultural exemption, ethno-ecological conservation, community-led documentation–are linked to each other, and all of them must proceed with the FPIC of tribal communities. At its core, the saving of knowledge on fermentation in Dahanu is about honouring the right of these people to maintain and preserve their

unique identity in connection with their environment and to define themselves in their own culturally dictated way. But the future of these forest brews cannot be separated from the future of tribal cultural vitality and ecological stewardship in the region.

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