

A Brief History of Alcoholism in Bengal: A Socio-Economic Study of the Impact of the “Out-Still System” amongst the Poorer Section of the Bengali Society, 1875 -1909

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Abstract: *Destitution had a long history of interconnection with intoxication in Bengal. The largest province of the British Empire saw an unforeseen increase in the consumption of alcohol after the British government took control over the raj. The government applied several economic methods to gain maximum profits. During that time, Bengal Presidency was going through a very critical situation in terms of financial conditions. But the British government for their purpose of the rule required a strong military force. To meet the excessive demand of military forces the administration focused on excise revenue. In such a situation, the colonial authority introduced the ‘out-still system’ in Bengal to maximize their profit from excise revenue. This particular system made the liquor price cheaper and made it affordable to the lower sections of people like daily wagers. Therefore, this article deals with the major shift of the British excise policy from the central distillery system to the out-still system, and its ill effects upon several sections of people in Bengal. It also explores the health issues that are associated with this major transition in British excise policy. The article, at the same time, unexplored the reactions from Bengali society that took place against these changes in British excise policy.*

Keywords: Alcohol, Excise Policy, Poverty, Health, Intoxication

Intoxication is not a new thing in the historical developments of the Indian past. As a province of India, Bengal had a long history of consumption of intoxicating substances like *ganja*, *arrack*, *taadi*, etc. Since the advent of alcohol or liquor, humans had been fond of it. Consumption of intoxicating liquor on various occasions and festivals had been the norm of society. On the other hand, several instances of imposing *abkari* taxes over intoxicating drinks by rulers from ancient times to the Mughal period are well recorded in historical writing. In the colonial era, the British East India Company also took several excise policies but with a motive to gain maximum profits. After 1857, the British government directly took control of the Indian territories and replaced

the mercantile monopoly with *Laissez-faire* policies by decontrolling the market. This led to several changes in the existing socio-economic structure of Indian society as well as Bengal. Several revisions regarding alcoholism and excise policies were evident in this historical process. Therefore, this article is an effort to understand how these new changes brought in by the British government influenced the socio-economic life of the Bengali poor and made them even poorer.

Many historians and scholars dealt with various aspects of alcoholism, intoxicating substances, and British excise policies in Bengal. After the 1950s, many historians portrayed social and cultural life in colonial India. According to David Washbrook, the East India Company in India had been building perhaps the world's first 'narco-military' empire. According to him, Power and profit remained as closely linked as ever they had been in the mercantilist age of the eighteenth century.¹ Marc Jason Gilbert observed that 'liquor and opium use, licit and illicit, have always had a place in the Indian economy.'² D.T. Courtwright argues the taxation of psychoactive substances was a fiscal cornerstone of the modern state and the chief financial prop of the colonial regimes.³ David Owen's pioneering work on the imperial drug trade mentions that the British might not have introduced the drug to India. It was nonetheless their 'talent for the organisation' that made it a world problem.⁴

Varsha Sirgaonkar considered raising alcoholism as an urban affair. She locates the problem within the superimposition of European culture on Indian society.⁵ Binay Ghosh argues that urban-rural interaction led to the changes in alcohol consumption patterns of the rural people, and could be observed in the vicinities of urban areas.⁶

In his works, Harald Fischer focused on race and class division to understand drinking habits in British India. He opined that vagrancy, drunkenness, prostitution, and the criminality of the poor Europeans were considered degraded acts by the Indian natives. These perceptions of the Indians threatened the idea of racial superiority of the British Empire.⁷ Erica Wald argues that the laws enacted by the government against alcoholism were often race and class-specific. As stated by E. Wald, Indian anti-liquor campaigners, on the other hand, strongly condemned, and boycott distilled spirits like whiskey or rum because those are all by-products of an alien culture.⁸ Swati Chattopadhyay's article focuses on the cultural assimilation of two distinct races through native and alien (European) practices of intoxication.⁹

Nihar Ranjan Ray discusses the existing drinking behaviour of the lower-class people in Bengal that are closely associated with traditional rituals and practices.¹⁰ Golam Murshid focused on Bengal's cultural tradition of the last thousand years and its evolution under Muslim and colonial rule. As he suggested, drinking and smoking became fashionable among the Bengalis under British influence.¹¹ Many historical writings have given utmost priority to the liquor boycott and prohibition strategies that derived from the Indian freedom movement. Ranajit Guha argues that the acts of boycotting liquor,

imported spirits, and toddy were prominent strategies within the Swadeshi campaign of 1905, which sought further economic self-sufficiency and national identity.¹² A. K Biswas's work denotes the paradoxical characteristics of the Swadeshi Boycott movement. He argues that the import of foreign liquor did not decrease; instead, it shifted from British to German-made.¹³ Lucy Carroll's argues that the Indian temperance movement was a product of colonialism, developed through Western missionaries.¹⁴

This article, therefore, tried to establish the connections between some elementary notions like the changing policies on alcoholism, motives of the British government, increase in alcohol consumption, and growing poverty. It also closely observed the root causes of socio-cultural and economic anxiety within the people of Bengal as well as their reactions against alcoholism that resulted after the introduction of the out-still system.

Alcoholism in Bengal: From Central Distillery System to the Out-Still System

After 1857, the British government simultaneously worked with both the Central Distillery System (CDS) and Out-Still System (OSS) for imposing levies on country liquors. Now, we need to enquire about the characteristics of both systems to understand the problem of growing alcoholism more efficiently. The sudder distillery functioned under the supervision of an excise officer who resides within the distillery area, surrounded by a wall. The entire process of distillation of the licensed distillers is supervised here by the officer in charge. He acted under the rules of the excise department and imposed four rupees of duty and distillery fees on the spirit as per government rule. In the central distillery system, produced alcohol does not sell from the distillery premises. The spirit was supplied to the retail licensed shops run by the distillers themselves or retail vendors (*pattahdar*) from where one could purchase liquor. The liquor shop, therefore, was required to pay monthly fees of rupees eight to run the retail shop. The duty and license fees are credited to the excise revenue and the distillery fees used to maintain the distillation unit. The *pattahdar* sold their liquor at a profit of rupees 1.8 in addition to the duty. At the same time, the government restricted liquor shops so that they could not sell more than 50 gallons a month¹⁵. This whole process of alcohol production and supply made the liquor costlier. After several years of experimentation with both systems, the government finally adopted the out-still system for most of the area of Bengal in 1876 where the central distillery system only continued in the densely populated areas like Calcutta or Howrah.¹⁶ The out-still system was based on auctions. Roy Brahma Dutt, the Second Inspector of the Patna Division who had experiences of both the CDS and OSS mentioned the phases of transformation. According to the Commission appointed by the Government of Bengal, in the out-still system, the government held the monopoly in liquor trafficking and was solely responsible to decide the amount of liquor and methods by which the liquor was sold in various districts. The government granted permission for opening working stills and

liquor shops through a legalized auction system. The highest bidder was able to receive the license for the liquor business by promising to pay the highest still-head duty to the government. Also, in the out-still system, it was decided that the maximum selling amount of liquor should be limited to six quarts bottles to a single person which was limited to 1 bottle per head at the time of the central distillery system. To explore the system more vividly Mr. Samuel Smith, Minister, House of Commons cited a letter from a retired civilian. According to Smith "Tenders were called for as to who would engage to sell the largest quantity of spirits within the period of his farm, the contractor binding himself to pay the still-head duty to the State, whether he was able to dispose of the whole quantity which he engaged to sell or not. The tenders were forwarded to the Commissioner of Excise who accepted the tender of the farmer who promised to sell the most liquor and to pay the still-head duty on it to the state."¹⁷ Babu Gurucharan Sen who visited out-still at Dariapur of Patna Division in 1883 mentioned several qualities of country liquor prepared in out-stills like 1) *Khassia* - 6 gallons of distilled liquor in 10 gallons of hot water 2) *Dobara* - 5 gallons of distilled liquor and 8 gallons of hot water 3) *2-annas* - 10 gallons of distilled liquor and 3 gallons of water 4) *4-annas* - 4.5 gallons distilled liquor and 3/4ths gallons of hot water 5) *8-annas* - Distilled liquor out of molasses without any admixture of water.¹⁸

Due to the introduction of the out-still system, a sudden influx can be observed in liquor sales and consumption. In Farridpore it was seen how the production of spirit was increased by the establishment of the out-still system in the following table¹⁹

Table-1

Years	Gallons
1877-78 (last year of central distillery system)	5,667
1881-1882	12,349
1882-1883	15,329
1883-1884	16,935

Source: Excise of Country Spirit in Bengal, 1883-84, p. 262

There were several reasons behind this enormous increase. First, in the case of the central distillery system, the price of alcohol was much higher than the alcohol produced in the out-still system. The poorer section of Bengal like the day labourers, agriculturalists, and people from tribal areas failed to access the country spirit manufactured in the central distillery and shifted to traditional forms of intoxication like ganja, taddi, or pachwai. In Bengal, homemade spirits made out of natural resources like fruit or rice were very popular amongst the poorer section of society. But their taste and quality were not even comparable to the country spirits. Therefore, when country spirits were started to be sold at lower prices, people shifted to country spirits produced by the out-still system. The expansion of out-stills in the Bengal province led to the rapid consumption of alcohol. Most of the people who quit alcohol due to its high prices during the time of the central distillery system;

now again started to consume the country spirit that they received from the out-still system. Baboo Umesh Chandra Batabyal, the Deputy Collector, Tumlook stated that during the time of the sudder (central) distillery system, the country spirit become expensive and people from poorer sections like the day labourers, palki bearers, methars, and others shifted to taddi and ganja from alcohol. After the out-still system, they returned to alcohol as they were able to get it at a cheaper price. Artisans, shopkeepers, and other intermediate classes also started drinking alcohol due to the cheaper price of country spirit during the time of the out-still system.²⁰ Secondly, out-stills in various parts of Bengal provided the opportunity to drink at the site of the still which was not possible in the earlier time of sudder distilleries. Thirdly, the excise department brought changes in provisions for the labourers who worked in various mills like rice and cotton mills who worked late at night. Though the normal closing time of out-stills was 8 p.m., several stills were open for them until 9 p.m. so that they could purchase alcohol from out-stills. Fourthly, out-stills were more in numbers than central distilleries and mostly situated in front of the streets, which were easily accessible to the passer-by. According to C.T. Metcalfe, the Additional Commissioner of Patna, "Among the labouring and artisan classes drinking has increased to a deplorable extent. I have not noticed any cases among school-boys, but my experience is that domestic servants, day-labourers, and women drink to an extent I never noticed before under the distillery system."²¹ The revenue also increased in the out-still system.

From the above study, we can identify the motives of the British government. The government wanted to ensure a collection of maximum excise revenue through the out-still system. They also wanted to discourage illegal activities of the officials who were associated with central distilleries as several allegations of corruption were registered against them. At the same time, the government attempted to eliminate all the possibilities such as liquor trafficking and sell of illicit liquor.

Economic Degradation of Bengal and The Question of British Excise Revenue

Poverty and destitution had a long history of interconnection with intoxication in Bengal. The largest province of the British Empire saw an unforeseen increase in the consumption of alcohol after the British government took control over the raj. On the other hand, Bengal Presidency was going through a very critical situation in terms of financial condition during the second half of the nineteenth century. The condition became more critical after the adoption of *Laissez-Faire* policies by the government to gain maximum profits by decontrolling the market. The economic condition of Bengal further deteriorated a lot and resulted in poverty, hunger, unemployment, and a lack of proper wages. Several parts of the Bengal province witnessed famine-like destitution. The lack of social security caused despair and depression amongst the poorer section of people. Increasingly,

these insecurities drove them towards alcohol consumption. On top of this, the introduction of the out-still system by the government, therefore, triggered the inclination towards drinking. The out-still system made the price of alcohol cheaper and easily available to the local poor which triggered the increasing rate of alcohol consumption. These developments towards alcoholism led to poverty and the complicated social lives of Bengalis. There was a well-known Chinese proverb, that says:

"At first the man takes the drink, then the drink takes the man, and finally, the drink takes the man." According to F.M. Halliday, the Commissioner of Patna Division, "the extension of the out-still system has not affected the drinking habits of the well-to-do, or educated classes, but that the drinking habits of the labouring classes have increased in consequence of the cheapness of the out-still liquor."²² According to W. S. Caine, "The system has induced habits of intemperance where they never existed before because it encourages the consumption of spirits where spirits were never drunk before."²³ These intoxicating drinks are mostly consumed by the poorer section of society and generated 75 – 80 percent of excise revenue.²⁴ The inaccessibility of the local people to the country spirit during the earlier system of central distillery resulted in a decreasing trend in the excise revenue collection. To meet the crisis in excise revenue and to meet the huge military expenses of British imperialism, the government adopted the out-still system to increase their excise revenue. The government devised the out-still system in such a manner so that the country spirit could be accessible to all the sections with a cheaper price who desired to quench their thirst with alcohol. Nitin Varma in his article "For the Drink of the Nation",²⁵ rightly argued that the government wanted to replace all kinds of selling of illicit liquor (home-brewed intoxicating drinks like *taddi*, or *pachwai*) with licit country spirit so that the government could earn more revenue.²⁵ By providing data of Bengal, Madras, and Punjab, W. S. Caine showed the rapid increase of country spirit due to the out-still system. According to him, the average revenue from intoxicating liquor in Bengal increased from 620,000 to 900,000 pounds within seven years.²⁶ Due to the enormous sale of alcohol, the revenue profit of the government increased significantly. As F.M. Halliday suggested in his report, because of the out-still system it was possible to displace illicit liquor, and the government was able to earn profits through the licit sale.²⁷ Financial statements of the British Raj strongly indicated that most of the revenue comes from the excise revenue imposed over *Pachwai*, Toddy, and country spirit. According to the report of the Excise Administration of India, the collected amount of out-still revenue in Bengal was 31, 91, 334 rupees during December 1888.²⁸ Also in the Patna division, the growing revenue rate increased up to fifty percent after the out-still system. In Patna Division, during the time of CDS in 1877-78, the amount of revenue collection was 7, 39, 346 rupees. The revenue collections increased during the time of the out-still system in this division. The chart is given below:

Table-2

Year	Revenue collection in Patna District (Rs.)	Revenue Collection in Patna Division (Rs.)
1879-80	3,60,451	9,61,448
1880-81	4,78,912	13,98,435
1881-82	4,67,584	16,33,167
1882-83	4,45,668	16,75,363

[p.26, Evidence of Witness, Excise Commission]

Therefore, Harendra Coomar Mukherjee rightly stated, "It does not tax a man according to his means but on his vices".²⁹

The system severely damaged the expenditure pattern of the poorer section and many of them spend a large portion of their wage on consuming alcohol at cheaper rates. Many *bhadralok* of Bengali society wrote letters to the authority against such an increase in drinking alcohol. They suggested several things to control such an increase. However, the colonial or the state government hardly bothered about such issues. For example, Ministers like Sir J. Ghorst in the debate of the House of Commons over the issue of increasing alcoholism in India in 1888 completely denied the adverse effects of the out-still system in Bengal. According to him, out-still system failed to fully flourish in Bengal and Assam but still existed just because of transportation problems and to discourage the illegal smuggling or self-distillation process.³⁰ As he showed, in 1885-87 the Central distillery system was extended to ten districts and the number of central distilleries increased from 479 to 672. At the same time, out-stills were reduced from 3,943 to 3,614. During this time, the capacity of out-still was reduced from 111,538 gallons to 74788 gallons. He also opined that drunkenness increased mainly in the *taddi* season. Sir J. Ghorst also mentioned that not the country spirit but the *pachwai* is the main cause behind drunkenness amongst Santhals and other aboriginal peoples of Bengal.³¹

The Out-Still System and The Socio-Cultural Changes in Bengal

Drinking or intoxication was been considered a social evil for a long-time. During the nineteenth century, Bengal experienced many social changes due to the establishment of railways, developments of commerce, and expansion of educational and job opportunities. The tradition of drinking alcohol was not a new thing to the culture of Bengal but it was mainly confined to occasional drinking. But the culture of alcoholism was brought in rural Bengal by the labourers who went to urban areas for searching jobs and became alcohol addicts after their association with urban culture. According to Binoy Ghosh, the people from rural areas migrated toward towns searching for jobs. Through these workers, the culture of urbanity spread out to the villages. This interaction between the urban and rural cultures changed the characteristics of the village society.³² These changes in Bengali society build a perfect

platform for the out-still system to perform its vices. Several social changes took place after the introduction of the out-still system in rural Bengal. In 1883-84, the Government of Bengal appointed a commission to enquire into the excise of the country spirit in Bengal. Several collectors and deputy collectors of different districts of Bengal province submitted their reports before the commission about various impacts. According to Bankim Chandra Chatterjee, the Deputy Magistrate and Deputy Collector of Howrah draw a clear demarcation between the pattern of the drinking habits of rural agricultural labour and coolies or workers of the town area. According to him, while the agricultural day labourer consumed *taadi* in moderate amounts there, on the other hand, the town coolie drunk randomly in an increasing manner due to depression and despair.³³ He also suggested that the caste identity was deeply connected with drinking habits and higher caste agriculturalists preferred to abstain from these habits.³⁴ Samuel Smith also talked about the adverse effects of the liquor shops on the coolies who increasingly became addicted due to the out-still system³⁵.

It is true that when the distillery system was in vogue, liquor used to be consumed to a certain extent in marriages or other festivals, but in post-out-still Bengal; many domestic servants have become so addicted to spirits that they do not in those festivities come forward and engage themselves in any work attentively if they were not supplied with liquor: and the men performing such ceremonies are compelled to include for liquor a sum of money in the list as he would do for an item of necessary expenditure. The use of liquor has in reality increased so much in the country that even at a cremation ceremony those who went to burn the dead body would not do the work unless supplied with liquor.³⁶ *Abkari* officials acknowledged the fact that it was the people of lower classes who, by exhausting their little wealth and putting their families into financial crisis; would drink profusely. Many of the Mussulman tenants who treated the liquor as '*haram*' (things that are forbidden in Islamic laws) also started to have country spirits. According to Baboo Bhubaneshwar Dhar of Dhaka, the Brahmins who cautiously maintain distance from alcohol in earlier times and used to take baths if they somehow touched liquors; started to consume it during the time of out-stills.³⁷ Alcoholism was increasingly popularized amongst women after the out-still system was permanently introduced in rural Bengal, especially among tribal women. Nagendranath Sarkar, the Deputy Collector of Manbhoom stated that because of the lower prices of the country liquor, an increasing number of tribal men and women shifted from their traditional way of consuming substances like *Ganja* and shifted to the country spirit supplied through the out-still system.³⁸ As mentioned in the 1883-84 Commission's report on the excise policy of country liquor, "Drinking has gradually been defiling the morals, habits, and customs of the people."³⁹ "The prevalence of drinking has led to great immorality and vices among the lower classes. Gambling by cards and *dosh panchisi* had prevailed, and sentiments of chastity and purity of morals have been much lessened."⁴⁰ The increasing rate of alcoholism led to

the increasing rate of crimes in Bengali society. Crimes such as suicide, adultery, rape, theft, and fights over trifle things increased day by day.

The changes in British excise policies heavily affected the socio-cultural life of Bengal. People who preferred to maintain distance irrespective of their class, caste, or gender origin from alcohol for various socio-cultural and religious obligations now became addicted to alcohol. C.T. Metcalfe, Additional Commissioner, Patna also argued that people irrespective of their class, caste, religion, and gender identity induced into alcohol during the time of the out-still system which includes higher caste Brahmins, Muslims, and women who earlier preferred to abstain from alcohol.⁴¹ This alcoholism as I have shown severely affected the social relationships of Bengali people. These changes due to excessive alcohol consumption also affected the work culture of Bengal which seriously threatened the progress of industrialization of the province as well.

Health, Hygiene, and Excise policies

The out-still system, as a brainchild of British excise policies, not only affected the socio-economic and moral condition of the province but also immensely affected the health of the local inhabitants, especially of the poorer section. There were several criticisms of the out-still system. The liquor produced through such a system was very bad for health and somewhat poisonous. Ingredients that were used were also of cheap quality. There were shreds of evidence that suggested adulteration of the country spirit. Mixing of several substances into the country spirit throughout the distillation process to make the spirit stronger to increase its ability to drunkenness were frequent in practice. Samuel Smith, Minister of the House of Commons also focuses on the quality deterioration due to the out-still system. To prove that he quoted the experience of an out-still owner. "First of all, we extract the pure spirit. These we cannot sell under a rupee a bottle, and we keep them for the few who can afford to pay it. Then we go on forcing all we can out of the refuse of the Mowah by extra boiling. This is inferior staff and very bitter, but we add plenty of water to make it sweet and to sell it cheap, and it is strong enough to make the people drunk."⁴² According to C. T. Metcalfe in out-stills many used substances like *kakmari* (*Aninirta coculus*), *kuchila* (*Strychnos nuxvomica*), *Dukra*, *dhatūra* (*Fastuosa*) to meet the customers' preferences.⁴³ The editor of Amrita Bazar Patrika condemned the report of the Sanitary Commissioner of Bengal and wrote that there were very few who knew about spirit liquor but now due to the British abkari policies the Bengalis now frequently suffered from liver inflammation, spleen problem, headache, and stomach acidity.⁴⁴ According to W. S. Caine, Minister of the House of Commons, Christian Missionaries also considered the out-still system as the greatest difficulty in their way of actions against alcoholism.⁴⁵ Several missionaries also shared their observations regarding the adversities of the out-still system. Revd. A. Campbell, a missionary from the Free Church of Scotland who worked in Manbhoom showed his concern about the enormous

increase of country spirit amongst the day labourers and agriculturalists. He also mentioned that the liquor supplied through the out-stills was more injurious to health because of the addition of barks of several trees like *phyllanthus emblica*, *terminalia belerica*, *Shorea robusta*, etc in the fermentation process of *mohuwa*.⁴⁶ Mr. Uffman, a missionary from Purulia also talked about health hazards and uses of several substances like *dhatura*, tobacco, etc. in the liquor-making process.

The health issue of the day labourers, agriculturalists, coolies of tea plantations, and rural poor made a huge impact on the progress of Bengal. Poorer sections of the province fail to deliver their best efforts to earn their daily bread and to run their family. Some of them became lunatics by consuming poisonous or excessive alcohol. Some even starved to death by exhausting their little possessions or losing their capability to work.

Social Anxiety within the Bengali Society and Imperial Reactions of the British

These social degradations and adversities due to the implication of the out-still system and rapid increase of alcohol consumption created a notion of descent among various sections of society. A section of Bengali elites, missionaries, tea planters, and members of temperance movements constantly put pressure on the British government to make changes in their excise policies regarding the out-still system. Several industrial sectors like tea plantations and jute mills faced serious problems because of the deterioration of the work culture in Bengal after the introduction of the out-stills and growing alcoholism. As Nitin Varma suggested 'industry and drink do not mix'⁴⁷. He cited the District Commissioner's report where the commissioner mentioned a complaint lodged by the garden manager of Cachar district. The complaint mentioned several behavioural changes of the coolies of the tea plantation like unruliness, sickness, aggressive behaviours, madness, suicidal tendencies, etc. which hampered the production system.⁴⁸ Missionaries also experienced strong challenges to accomplish their mission against intemperance in Bengal. Mr. Samuel Smith (Flintshire) pointed out that the expansion of temperance movements was heavily challenged because of the rapid increase in the sale of intoxicating drinks in Bengal during the time of the out-still system.⁴⁹ Some rural and urban elites, people from educational institutions, and religious leaders of Bengal also showed their deep concern about the expansion of the out-still system. Some of them even provide suggestions to the government to reduce the ill effects of the out-still system. The objection was raised against the out-still system because since its introduction even the lowest classes started to drink. Several letters with suggestions to minimize the ill effects of alcoholism from various districts and sub-divisions started to come to the excise department. These letters constantly pointed towards the increasing rate of drinking. One such suggestion was made by Baboo Chandi Charan Shome, second teacher, Munshigunge middle-class English school. He suggested several ways to

control or decrease the increasing spirit consumption. 1) I would revert to the sudder distillery system 2) The duty on liquor should be raised to bring on a higher price. 3) The rule at present in fore; that a person should not be able to purchase more than six bottles of liquor, be so altered as to bring the number of bottles saleable from six to one bottle. 4) The number of shops should be reduced, and they should be located at greater distances from each other. I should suggest that no two shops should be within 12miles of each other. 5) no liquor should be sold to boys and women. 6) Drinking on the premises should not be allowed.⁵⁰

Many administrative officers, respected citizens, zamindars, and even school teachers wrote letters to the colonial state government about the out-still-related crisis.⁵¹ According to the statement of Baboo Kailash Chandra Sen, B.L., Zamindar, and Vakeel, Judge's Court, Dacca, drinking has not increased among school-goers but it increased among the following classes.⁵²

Table-3

Classes	Percentage of Increase
Domestic servants	75
Agriculturalists (<i>Chandals, Mochis,&c.</i>)	50
Day-labourers	75

Source: Excise of Country Spirit in Bengal, 1883-84, p.256

Many of them suggested the state government should limit the rate of consumption of country spirit. They also raised objections against a heavy concentration of liquor shops or against the shopkeepers who kept extra liquor than they permitted. Discontents are also raised against the location of liquor shops like in the area of educational institutes or religious places.

In a petition presented by Durgacharan Chatterjee and 492 others, inhabitants of Vikrampore, sub-division Moonshigunge, they brought to the notice that, "The introduction of the out-still system has wrought evils in this country in diverse ways. During the *sudder* distillery system, there were only four country spirit shops within the jurisdiction of this sub-division (Moonshigunge), whereas there at present are 19 such shops."⁵³

It was also suggested that the sudder distillery system should be brought back because of its efficient manner of increasing the price of the spirit. To discourage the lower classes from drinking alcohol, the price of the alcohol required to be increased so that they could never afford to drink such an expensive spirit. But in reality, the price of the spirit is well within their reach. However, these letters and suggestions hardly consist of the woes and sorrows of women.

The taxes being so low on the country's spirit allowed the price to be cheaper. Taxes levied on the country spirit produced by the out-still system were as low as Rs. 0.01 per head of population. A quart bottle of country spirits under the sudder system was 12 *anna* to 1rupee. But under out-still, it was down to 6 to 12 *annas*. These structural changes in taxation not only

increased the production of country spirit via the out-still system but at the same time, generate great anxiety amongst the social reformers, missionaries, and other activists. One such example of a reaction against the increasing amount of drinking was set by the Vikrampore '*Shammilani Shabha*' in 1880. They protested against the out-still system which increased drinking.⁵⁴ Several renowned people came forward and protest against this evilness of alcoholism and showed their discontent against government measures and intentions to tackle the grave situation in Bengal. Indian association directly blamed the excise policies of the British administration for the cheap price and availability of country spirits.

The problem of growing alcoholism was first addressed by the Christian missionaries during the time of colonial period. In 1841, the Calcutta Temperance Society was established by Alexander Duff. The Bengal Temperance Society was also established in 1861 by the Bengalis under the influence of Christian missionaries. The organization successfully established sixty-four branches in Bengal. Sketch writings became popular to depict the debauchery of society, from the mid-nineteenth century onwards. '*Alaler Gharer Dulal*', '*Hutom Pyanchar Naksha*' efficiently portrayed true reflections of the society. The movement against intemperance was led by Rajnarain Basu, Bholanath Chakrabarty, Pyari Charan Sarkar, James Long etc. Influenced by the work of Mary Carpenter; Sashipada Banerjee provided special attention to a large section of the working class who became alcoholic and ignorant of their family needs. Karl Marx in the Essay "The Reflection of Money" (1881) argues "The worker can squander his wages on liquor for himself instead of buying meat and bread for his children, a thing he cannot do when he is paid in kind. Marx blamed the growth of capitalism to explain this growing alcoholism."⁵⁵

From 1880, the temperance movement spread out across the world. Bengal had not remained untouched by its waves of it. By imitating the temperance societies of Britain, many voluntary organisations were established in Bengal. One such organisation was Band of Hope, or *Ashar Dal*, established by Keshub Chandra Sen. Gyan Chandra Basak, a member of the Calcutta Band of Hope, wrote '*Surapan Ba Bishpan*'; A Handbook of Temperance in 1888 to aware the people of the growing intemperance.

The Government of Bengal, therefore, is compelled to take some necessary steps to investigate the problems regarding the out-still system. The Government of Bengal appointed a commission to investigate the adversities of the out-still system in Bengal consisting of two Bengalis and two European who spent most of their life in Bengal. The Commission visited 27 districts and examined witnesses of 320 persons that included several administrative officers of various divisions of Bengal like Patna, Burdwan, Manbhoom, Birbhoom, etc. The members of the commission personally visited 216 out-stills and 9 Central Distilleries and submitted their report to the Government of Bengal.⁵⁶ This report was published in 1883-84 which further led to a debate

that took place in 1888 in the House of Commons over the report that was prepared under the government of Bengal. Some of the ministers argued for out-still and some raised their voices against the system to stop increasing alcoholism. A section of British officials demanded the inclusion of temperance education in schools to create awareness against alcoholism and the 'Asiatic mode of drinking'.⁵⁷ G. B. Fell, Deputy Secretary of the Government of India asked the respective provincial governments to enquire about temperance teaching.⁵⁸ These developments not only raised awareness amongst the people of Bengal but also encourage the temperance movements in Bengal as well as in India. The newly formed Congress also came forward to protest against intemperance and demanded reform on British excise policies in the session of the fourth Indian National Congress on December 1888.⁵⁹ The Government also appointed W. S. Westmacott to enquire into the issues in the two districts of Howrah and Hooghly. He, unfortunately, concluded that the agricultural and labour classes are not sober by nature. The term *matal* (drunkard) has been used without justice to include everyone who drinks spirits or *tadee*. The House of Commons in their report on the out-still question argues that the jute mills and other industries have given better facilities to the employer and provided higher wages to the landless section of Bengal who turned into mill labourers. These higher wages enable them to spend more on liquor as well as on other luxuries, and the growth of intemperance among these people was the subject of remark long before the establishment of out-stills in the tract under-report in April 1887.⁶⁰ According to Erica Wald, from 1870 onwards many Indian nationalists, newspapers, and participants of temperance movements strongly criticized the abkari policies of the British administration for their attitude to maximize profits. Newspapers like *Hindu Hitoishi* of Dhaka suggested that to discourage alcoholism in Bengal, no alcoholic native should be given any opportunity in government services.⁶¹

Under the continuous pressure of Indian nationalist leaders, missionaries and tea planters against intemperance, the British government finally agreed to the demand for a 'local option'⁶² in 1909. Bengal Government also enacted the 'Bengal Excise Law' in 1909 made changes to its licensing system and revised the hour of selling. By this act, the government had a provision to prohibit liquor selling on the ground of health, morality and public order.⁶³

From the above study, we can get a picture of how alcoholism spread in Bengal after the introduction of the out-still system by displacing the older system of sudder distillery. The growing intoxication not only caused economic destitution of the poorer section of society but caused social and moral crises also. The questions of health issues, hunger, and poverty were severely compromised in exchange for this growing alcoholism in Bengal. The idea of 'exchange entitlement' was seriously challenged because the poor alcoholics had nothing left to exchange. It raised questions about Victorian morality, humanity, and the theory of racial superiority. People from different sections of India as well as Bengal started to raise questions about the legitimization of British rule and began to realize the importance of freedom

from all such evils of British imperialism. The growing notion of discontent and anger therefore perfectly build a stage from where the political forces received their inspiration to fight against intemperance as well as all the adversities endorsed by the British Government.

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 51. "...I believe that there has been an increase of drinking and drunkenness in this sub-division during the last ten year and this increase is owing to the introduction of the out-still system. Drinking is rare among schoolboys, but a few are known here and there to have attracted the habit....." for details see also, Ibid., p. 253
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