

‘Yu’ Distillation: A Traditional Cottage Industry of Scheduled Caste Lois of Manipur

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The distillation of ‘Yu’- a kind of rice alcoholic beverage prepared in Manipur- is an aged old tradition practiced by the *Loi*¹ women since the early period till today by Scheduled Caste *Loi* villages as well as some tribal villages of Manipur. The entire procedure of the preparation of ‘Yu’ is mostly done by the womenfolk. ‘Yu’ which had an indispensable part in Manipuri society during the native rule in Manipur, is still continuing playing an influencing part in the contemporary Manipuri society, even though, Manipur was declared as ‘A Dry State’ since April 19, 1991 under the Manipur Prohibition Liquor Act 1991. The present paper is a humble attempt to highlight the process of ‘Yu’ distillation as it is traditionally practiced by the Scheduled Caste *Loi* villages. The paper will also describe its mode of trading system as well as its utility as a medicinal property.

Key Words: *Atingba, Chamang Rice, Hamei, Loi villages, Yangli and Yu*

Introduction:

The distillation of ‘Yu’- a rice alcoholic beverage prepared in Manipur, and its consumption by the people was, as per records indicated, seems to be done by most of the people living in the valley as well as the surrounding hills of Manipur, before Hinduism became the state religion. T.C. Hodson in his book ‘the Meiteis’ says, (97) “...the records distinctly shows that up to the formal introduction of Hinduism in the reign of Pamheiba the people buried their dead, ate meat, drank ardent spirit, and behave just like the hill people of the present day.” After the adoption of Hinduism as the state religion, animal flesh was forbidden and all spirituous liquor or intoxicants were accursed. Some eminent scholars also mentioned (Ashokumar 32; Chinglen 97; Dun 27; Ibobi 170; Khelchandra 35) that during his reign (i.e. King Pamheiba, later known as King Garibniwaz), he forbade domestication of hen, duck and pig etc. distilling and drinking of wine, and eating

meat by the Meiteis. Thus who defied such orders were strictly penalised, and sent them to *Loi* villages as outcaste section of the Hindunised Meitei society. The order of the King became the law of the land. People had to obey such order against their will and conscience since there was no authority to pay heed to their emotional and passionate appeals and protests. Later on, the distillation of ‘Yu’ and its consumption, after it was despised by the Hindunised Meiteis, and it was done only by the *Loi* villages and Hill people of Manipur. When there arose any necessity of ‘Yu’ for the King, the supply was done by the distillers of *Loi* villages of the valley. For example, during the native rule, wine manufacturing villages like Sekmai provides pots of paddy and pitches of wine especially for Kuki soldiers of the king. Thus, Dun quoted (27) that the *Loi* people alone during the native rule, distilled country spirit.

When the commercial production of ‘Yu’ was started in Manipur cannot be told

exactly, but it might probably started after non-Scheduled Caste *Loi* people i.e. the Hindunised Meiteis began co-dinning and accepting matrimonial alliance with the scheduled caste *Loi* villages, which was possible due to gradual social change in the Hindunised Manipuri society in the late 1950's. Thus, the distillation of 'Yu' which was a traditional household occupation/industry practiced by the *Loi* villages for social, religious and medicinal purposes, slowly increased its production to meet the demand by the non-Scheduled Caste *Loi* communities especially the Meiteis for the occasional and daily consumption. In this way, the distillation of 'Yu' becomes a flourishing agro-based cottage industry, as its most important ingredient is rice.

Objective of the study:

The present study is an attempt to highlight the processes of 'Yu' distillation i.e. country liquor as it is traditionally distilled by Scheduled Caste *Loi* villages of Manipur. It will also discuss the mode of its trading in present Manipur as well as its preservation and utilities as a medicinal property.

Methodology of the study:

The present study is mainly based on both primary data. Primary data is collected through the personal interviews with some women distillers of Scheduled Caste *Loi* villages. In collecting information, Prior Informed Consents (PIC) has been taken from the knowledge providers. Secondary data is collected from various publications and website.

Results and Discussion:

A. Distillation of 'Yu':

The preparation/distillation of 'Yu' is in three processes, namely (i) Preparation of *Hamei* (ii) preparation of *Atingba*, and (iii) distillation of 'Yu'.

i. Preparation of Hamei :

The different types of *Hamei*- a kind of rice cake specially prepared for 'Yu' distillation, which is prepared using similar ingredients and methods except with slight differences in shape, size and covering during the process of fermentation at Andro, Sekmai, Phayeng, Jiribam, Bishenpur and Tengnoupal, etc. White rice of about 3 kg was pre-soaked for about half an hour and dried for 15 minutes to remove excess water. The white rice is prepared traditionally by pounding in a wooden mortar known as '*Shumban*' with a wooden mallet (*Shuk*) and the powder mass thus obtained is called '*Yam*'. Finely chopped or powdered about 250-300 gm dried bark of '*Yangli*'- a kind of yeast, is mixed with required amount of water and filtered. The filtrate obtained appears brownish in colour. A homogenous mixture paste is prepared by '*Yam*' and '*Yangli*' filtrate. From this paste mass, a cake like structure in the form of elliptical or rounded flattened mass is prepared known as '*Hamei*'. Pressing a small portion of paste mass in between the palms does the preparation of '*Hamei*' cake in the form of flattened mass. These flat cakes are generally 2-7 cm in diameter and 0.6- 1.5 cm. (Field work; Jayaram, K.a, et al. 115-125 ; Tamang, J.P., et al. 119-125)



Hamei



Yangli



Mixing of cooked rice with Hamei



Fermentation of Cooked Rice with Hamei

Source: Field Work

ii. Preparation of Atingba:

An earthen pot of 15-20 L capacity is required for this preparation. Now-a-days, aluminium pots are substituted in place of mud pots. Properly washed 5-6 kg of 'Chamang' rice (husked rice- it is floured rice which contains its outer membrane) is taken and cooked in the pot. The cooked rice is spread over a 'Phoura'- a kind of round bamboo mat and kept in dim light for suitable cooling. Now-a-days, instead of 'Phoura', plastic trampoline are generally used. The cooked rice is then mixed up with 'Hamei' @5 cakes/10kg. (Field work; Jayaram, K.b, et al. 115-121)

After thoroughly mixing the two components, it is kept for fermentation. In the village like Sekmai, and Phayeng, the cooked rice is properly washed with water and mixing of 'Hamei' is done. The mixture is then filled inside the pot, which is previously cleaned and dried over fire. The mouth of the pot is covered with clean

cloth and kept in sunlight for 3-4 days in a bamboo basket internally wrapped with the leaves of 'Khangla'- a kind of small tree having large leaves/ teak. This is followed by 2-3 days submerged fermentation in earthen/aluminium pot and form fermented beverage- which has a sweet and bitter taste. The sweet and bitter ones are filtered, and the filtrate obtained is called 'Atingba Yu.'

iii. Distillation of 'Yu':

The distillate collected from 'Atingba' is called 'Yu'. Traditionally both 'Atingba' and 'Yu' are produced under different stages of their preparation, 'Atingba' is obtained first as fermented product, and then 'Yu' is distilled from 'Atingba'. At present, most of the distilling Scheduled Caste *Loi* villages, do not generally filtrate 'Atingba', instead of it, they directly distilled 'Yu'.

The distillation of 'Yu' i.e. wine manufacturing is the most important

traditional industry and an important source of income for most of the Scheduled Caste *Loi* villages. Most of the houses of Scheduled Caste *Loi* villages are engaged in manufacturing of wine. The distillation of wine is generally done by the females and it is the most important occupation of the women folk of the most of the Scheduled Caste *Loi* villages. There is no formal training for wine making. It can be learned from watching wine making procedures. Wine is a distilled product and its ingredients consist of rice, *Yangli* - a kind of yeast and *Hamei* - the mixed rice cake. Wine manufacturing i.e. distillation of 'Yu' is a complicated process. For the preparation of wine, a special kind of rice known as *Chamang* is required. Such type of *Chamang* rice is floured at the rice mills.

For 'Yu' i.e. wine manufacturing, at first *Chamang* rice is cooked, then *Hamei* is mixed with it and the mixture is put in some earthen pots or *Korphus* (large aluminum vessel) for 2 or 3 days. Then pure water is poured into such pots and thus allowed them to ferment for 5-7 days. After it is cleared that the mixtures are totally fermented, then *Yangli* is added to the mixtures for the final preparation of wine. The final mixture is poured into a large aluminum vessel which is specially used for the distillation of wine. Then the aluminum vessel is heated at a fire place

which is also specially made for wine preparation. An aluminum tub is also placed upside down on the mouth of the aluminum vessel. The bottom of the tub is cut round so that on it an aluminum vessel containing cold water is placed. A side of the tub is also cut round to insert a small plastic pipe from which condensed wine vapour is to be extracted. Here it should be noted that it is made to be free from any leakage between the two mouths of the lower aluminum and the tub. The other end of the plastic pipe is generally inserted in a large plastic bottle. When it is heated the lower aluminum vessel continuously, water of the aluminum vessel becomes hot. Then the hot water is replaced by cold water. The replacement of hot water by cold water enables vapour of the final mixture to condense through the pipe and then finally to the plastic bottle. Here, it is also ensured that there is no leakage between the mouth of the plastic bottle and the plastic pipe except cold water. The replacement of hot water by cold water enables vapour of the final mixture to condense through the pipe and then finally to the plastic bottle. Here, it is also ensured that there is no leakage between the mouth of the plastic bottle and the plastic pipe except the pipe which is inserted in the bottle. The condensed wine vapour is slowly stored in the plastic bottle. 'Yu' i.e. county liquor is, thus finally prepared. (Field work; Maibam 172-173)



Traditional process of 'Yu' distillation

Source: Field Work

B. Trading of 'Yu':

There is an important business run by Scheduled Caste *Loi* womenfolk and those engaged in selling of 'Yu' which is closely related to distribution. The 'Yu' or local wine trading is also a complicated business. There is no open sale of it in most of the Scheduled Caste *Loi* village as well as in nearby villages. This is mainly due to restriction imposed by various state actor and non state actors. And the state government enforcement and a declaration of 'Dry State' status under the Manipur Prohibition Liquor Act 1991 in 1991,² the distribution and selling of 'Yu' has become a risky business. Now, it is illegal to distil wine commercially. Under the law, now, it is not allowed to distil the wine more than social-religious requirement of the Scheduled Caste *Loi* villages by the Government of Manipur and non state actors. In the heydays of its business, the agents or distributors from the Scheduled Caste *Loi* villages as well as from the other villages including from Imphal town, came to the distilling houses for collecting the product. This business is the most profitable and easiest means of earning in most of the Scheduled Caste *Loi* villages.

C. Mode of Transport for selling/marketing of 'Yu':

The means of transport in selling and marketing of 'Yu' from the distilling village to the other places in the early period i.e. up to late 1989 was generally small and limited and done through carried by passenger buses, two wheelers and to some extent by 'Yu' carrier horses. This is because of the fact that (a) In those days, 'Yu' vendors in other villages except the distilling Scheduled Caste *Loi* villages were hardly available, (b) the availability of the IMFL (Indian made foreign liquor) is easily available and there were lots of wine shop in the valley area and demand was very less, and (c) there was less consumption of 'Yu' in the daily basis. But the scenario is very change suddenly, the mode of transport of 'Yu' is done through various means bigger and larger vehicle are used to increase the speedy movement and carrying larger quantity. The racketeers distributed the 'Yu' to the vendors usually small hotels and eatery which are situated at the various parts of the valley including formerly distilling Kabui villages- a tribal community of Manipur of which a section of the

community settled in many villages in the valley of Manipur. The modus operandi in such distribution of 'Yu' is generally done smoothly after paying monthly fees to Excise Department, Police Stations. The nominal monthly fee of a vehicle is Rs 500, This illegal nexus provides avenue for free movement of 'Yu' from distilling villages to market without any interruption and if they want to increase the volume of traffic they can increase whenever there is any such demand.

D. Distribution and Market Area:

The distribution of 'Yu' by the Scheduled Caste *Loi* villages has had their own sphere of influence. But these areas of influence are sometimes overlapped with one another. Sekmai has its own area of influence covering larger area of Imphal valley and Dimapur, whereas Andro has mostly concentrated in the south eastern part of the State including Thoubal District. Again, Phayeng has concentrated its market in the western part of the valley and Bishnupur District. Among the distilling Scheduled Caste *Loi* villages, 'Yu' from Sekmai village is the most famous one, and most of the international tourists who come to Manipur and taste 'Sekmai Yu', and they say that it can be branded for marketing internationally. Now, the Government of Manipur is planning to distil 'Yu' scientifically and make it an export quality one to enhance State's economy.

E. The Need for Preserving the Distillation of 'Yu':

There is the need of preserving the distillation of 'Yu' despite the fact that of its prohibition by the Government of Manipur as well as by non- state actors namely, insurgents, civil organisations,

women's vigilant groups like women's torch bearers (locally known as *Meira Paibis*), Nisha Bands etc. The main reasons for its preservation are briefly discussed as follows:

- 1) **Income Generation:** Earlier the distillation of 'Yu' was mainly done during the agricultural off season. However, now-a- days due to much demand of 'Yu' outside the distilling Scheduled Caste *Loi* villages, the distillation of 'Yu' is a regular occupation on the daily basis as the income is very constant and regular in most of Schedule Caste *Loi* villages especially in villages of Sekmai, Khurkhul, Koutruk, Tairenpokpi and Andro. The profit income can support day to day household needs. Whilst in some case it can be considered as surplus income, which can be use during the rainy days.
- 2) **Employment:** The employment in this cottage industry is perennial and practice at home, neither need of large investment, nor non- availability and scarcity of raw material (rice) and large market area which has a never ending demand of 'Yu', in spite of being illegal, provide part-time jobs to the Scheduled Caste *Loi* villagers.
- 3) **Medicinal uses of 'Yu':** The most significant contribution of 'Yu' is its applicability as a medicine. It has been used for treatment of various medicinal alignments since the early period. The medicinal property of 'Yu' is found from *Machin*—which is the most finely distilled 'Yu'. It is traditionally and at present used mixing with plant and other medicinal ingredient to treat the poor health condition of women due to

irregular menstrual flow, infertility, obesity, loss of appetite, low nourishment of food, etc. It is also use as massaging oil during child birth and body aching.

Conclusion:

The distillation of 'Yu' is a complicated process. It was originally done for socio-religious requirement of the Manipuri society especially for the *Loi* people of Manipur. However, now-a-days, due to increasing consumption of it by most of the young generation due to social changes in Manipur, the demand of 'Yu' is tremendously increased. In order to meet the increasing demands, the production capacity of distilling Scheduled Caste *Loi* villages is also greatly expanding. This is because of the fact that the business of 'Yu' is slowly expanding as a cottage industry, and it is profitable and can sustain the rural economy at some extent. It has potential to become an international brand like 'Vodka'—a Russian rice alcoholic beverage and 'Saki' Korean rice wine—if it is distilled with scientific methods. It can also sell internationally, as Manipur, now, is the centre of India's Look East Policy- now rechristened as Act East Policy, Trans Asian Highway, Kunming Initiative Myanmar Policy, etc. So, the business of 'Yu' distillation needs to be nurtured and patronised by State Government's long term policy to improve State's economy without affecting social

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fabrics and law and order problems in the State. At the same time, it has medicinal properties to treat some diseases relating to women, body-ache, as an appetiser etc. So, the distillation of *Yu* needs to be preserved with scientific methods.

Notes:

1. *Lois* is socially deprived classes of people whose social position is considered as lower in the Hindunised Manipuri society. Even after Manipur became a part of the Union of India on October 15, 1949, and despite of the introduction of democratic form of government which provided social equality, prohibit any form of discrimination, rule of law, etc., the *Lois* of Manipur were treated as low section by the Hindunised Manipuris. So, they were included as one of the Scheduled Caste communities of Manipur under the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (Modification) Order, 1956.
2. Manipur became a dry state after the Manipur Prohibition Liquor Act 1991 was enacted on 19.04.1991. This means that selling and buying of all kinds of liquor restricted to the military personnel residing in Manipur. There is no open sale of it to the public of Manipur and it is also a crime to sale it in open market. So, now, it is illegal to distil and selling 'Yu' commercially in Manipur.

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