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Regulating Spirits: The Punch House and Colonial Liquor Policy in Tellicherry

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During the colonial period, the European mercantilist companies established their trade centres in different parts of the Indian subcontinent. Their presence brought many social, political, and economic changes to these regions. One notable aspect of European life that influenced local practices was the use of liquor. For Europeans, liquor was an important part of daily dining and social life. It was commonly used during gatherings, celebrations, and official meetings, and it also held a place in their cultural traditions. In addition to social uses, liquor had practical value. In earlier times, it was often considered safer to drink than water, which could be unsafe or contaminated. Liquor was also used to preserve food and prepare certain medicines. Because of these reasons, the demand for liquor grew in European settlements, and this demand influenced trade networks, local production, and colonial policies related to alcohol in India. They imported foreign liquor into these settlements and exported indigenous drinks like punch and arrack to foreign markets. As part of their settlements in India, the Europeans started the liquor trade, established punch houses and created related laws and regulations. This study examines the punch house in Tellicherry and the liquor policies formed by the English East India Company's factory there.

A "punch house" was a historical English term in colonial India for a small inn or tavern, often in port towns where punch was served, along with lodging, food, and entertainment, mainly for sailors. Such places catered especially to seamen and travelers, combining a basic hotel with a drinking house focused on serving bowls

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of punch. Punch was the old English word for a fruit drink. The word comes from the popularity of "punch," a mixed drink of spirits, water, sugar, citrus, and spices that reached England and its colonies via the East India Company in the 17th century.

The original drink in the Indian Subcontinent was named 'paantsch'. The word punch may be a loanword from Persian पाँच (*pāñj*), meaning 'five', as the drink was frequently made with five ingredients: alcohol, sugar, juice from a lime or a lemon, water, and spices.[1] Some believed the word originates from the English puncheon, which was a volumetric description for certain, sized barrels used to transport alcohol on ships.[2] The drink was introduced from the Indian Subcontinent to England by employs of the East India Companies in the 17th century. From there it was introduced into other European countries.[3] The punch house means an inn or tavern. The term punch refers to a wide assortment of drinks, both non-alcoholic and alcoholic, generally containing fruits or fruits juice.[4]

The factory records of English East India Company provide detailed references to the various types of liquor imported into their settlement in India during the seventeenth and eighteenth century. The Company's Tellicherry factory correspondence and account books indicate that a steady supply of liquor from various places including London, Bombay, Batavia, Goa and different centers of Malabar was considered essential for maintaining the lifestyle and social routines of the English establishment. In addition to this, three types of arrack were brought to Tellicherry, the Malabar arrack, Goan arrack and the Batavian arrack. Malabar arrack was brought from various centers along the Malabar Coast and transported to Tellicherry by coastal routes. A portion of this arrack was directly dispatched to Bombay and to other Company factories.[5] The Portuguese settlement of Goa maintained active and time honoured trade links with the English settlements of Bombay and Tellicherry.[6]

The Tellicherry factory purchased the Batavian arrack from the Dutch factory at Cochin. The factory also bought Batavian arrack from Ezekiel Raby, a Jewish merchant settled at Cochin. He was a reliable dealer of Batavian arrack, and the

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English Company records show that the Tellicherry factory repeatedly purchased this imported liquor from him. Batavian arrack was considered as superior to Goan arrack, prompting the Bombay Council to instruct the Tellicherry factory to procure it. A letter dated 8 April 1738 by John Horne, the President of Bombay Council to Stephen Law, the Chief of Tellicherry, states that "the arrack made at Goa not being so good, though dearer than usual, and Batavian arrack being difficult to be procured here. We would have you annually secure 40 or 50 leaguers of the best and cheapest you can get, and send it up as conveyances may offer."[7] Following this advice, the Tellicherry officials contacted Ezekiel Raby to arrange the purchase. In December 1739, the Tellicherry factory bought 9 leaguers of Batavian arrack from Ezekiel Raby for a payment of Rs. 900.[8] Again, in January 1740, the Company purchased 16 leaguers of Batavian arrack from Ezekiel Raby at the rate of Rs. 96 per leaguer.[9] On several occasions, he played a crucial role in helping the Company procure Batavian arrack.

The word 'punch' first appeared in English records in 1632, when most punches were still made like wassail, using wine or brandy as the base. But around 1655, Jamaican-produced rum came into use, and the "modern" punch emerged. By 1671, documents make references to punch houses. In Indian subcontinent, Arrack-based punches were historically popular in India and Sri Lanka, where it was distilled from toddy, the wine made from sap of various palm trees. The important sales items in the punch house were toddy and country arrack. Punch is usually served at parties in large, wide bowls, known as punch bowls. In India, during the colonial time punch houses were situated in the Presidency towns and other major colonial towns, a boarding-house or house of entertainment for seamen.

The most of the European Companys controlled settelements had punch houses. The English Companys Bombay records of early years of eighteenth century gives evidences of existence of a punch house and arrack farms in Bombay city. In 1707, Sir Nicholas Waite, General of Bombay, stated that arrack farms had been placed in the hands of Agents, who were managing them, because when put up for sale, no person offered to take them. The same method had been adopted with the tobacco farms.[10] According to the Company records on 31 August 1720, the license

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to run the punch house for eleven months was auctioned. Mr. Richard Bristow became the highest bidder at Rs. 1520, which included the excise on Goa arrack sold at retail.[11] In the same period a Dutch Punch house was existed at Bandar Abbas, Persia.[12] Even in Calcutta the taverns are commonly called Punch Houses.[13]

The Company had one punch house in Tellicherry bazaar, which was situated near the Tellicherry fort. It was noted by traveller Alexander Hamilton, who visited Tellicherry in 1720. He wrote that, "...a Punch-House that stands on the Sea-Shore a short Pistol Shot from the garrison."[14] He again continues as "the English have punch houses, where the European soldiers make oblations to Bacchus, and if they want devotion, which their accounts can certify at pay-day, they are forced to commute with their officer, or undergo some wholesome discipline or chastisement."[15]

The most reliable sources on the history of the Tellicherry factory are its own factory records. Interestingly, none of these early documents contains any reference to a punch house. However, in the later Company records, there are clear references to an 'arrack farm'. This establishment appears to have played an important role in the functioning of the Tellicherry bazaar and operated under the close supervision of the factory authorities. It is sure that the arrack farm was the later form or renamed version of the earlier punch house.[16]

A manual was prepared for regulating the working of arrack farm, which can be considered as the precursor of the liquor policy of modern Governments. The entry into the arrack farm was restricted to the Company military officials, garrison and other Indian and European servants. The working time of arrack farm was up to 10 at night. The factory records noted that different varieties of liquor were imported to Tellicherry from other markets, meant to be used at the arrack farm. Along with the European liquor like European wine, port wine, Madeira wine, red cape, white cape, brandy, strong beer, and small beer, the arrack of Batavia, Goa, Beypore, Calicut and Tellicherry were important items of sale in the arrack farm. In addition to these items, toddy known as punch in European records was also sold in the arrack farm. These items, except punch which was sold in bowl, were sold in

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bottles. The port wine was the most expensive and country arrack was the cheapest priced items.[17]

According to the factory records, the arrack farm remained under the direct control of the Tellicherry factory until 1735. After this period, the factory adopted a new system, inviting proposals and selecting the highest bidder to manage the farm for one-year terms. In 1735, the Company understood that the large scale importing of liquor by the Company officials created many problems in Tellicherry, especially, as the generality of the Company people were exceedingly addicted to the vice of drunkenness. Therefore, the Chief proposed the Company officers and their subordinates to be exempted from making any gain in the sale of liquors. They decided to invite proposals through public notice and issued a license to the highest bidder. It was also decided that no person should be admitted to sell country arrack or any other liquor items in Tellicherry without having a previous license from the Company.[18] Through these measures, the Company sought to regulate liquor distribution more strictly and curb the widespread problem of drunkenness among its personnel in Tellicherry. Henceforth, the factory gave arrack farm to private individuals on the basis of agreement for one year. At the end of the annual contract, the Company announced it by the beating of drums together with a published notice for inviting a new proposal from bidders.

In September 1737, the factory had collected only small revenue from the arrack farm, as no one was willing to take it on lease. Consequently, the factory proposed that an excise duty of Rs. 5 should be imposed on every hogshead of arrack.[19] This marked the first instance of an excise duty being imposed on liquor in Malabar. It represented a significant shift in the Company's revenue strategy, introducing a formal system of taxation on arrack production and sale, and laying the foundation for more structured fiscal control over the liquor trade in the region. In September 1746, following their request, the thiyya's ('tivees' and 'tiveys' in factory records), who were the bearers of the Company arms were permitted to sell country arrack, not the Calicut arrack or any other spirituous liquor.[20] Therefore, except for the Thiyyas[21], no other individuals were permitted to sell liquor in Tellicherry.

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In 1745 and again in 1746, the arrack farm was offered for public auction. On both occasions, John Frazer emerged as the highest bidder. Having secured the contract, he assumed control of the farm for a one-year term, gaining the exclusive right to manage the production and sale of arrack during that period.[22] In 1747, it was taken over by William Gill and he took it for Rs. 1200.[23] In 1748, when the Company invited fresh proposals from bidders for the arrack farm, a public notice was accordingly issued. The proclamation was announced by beat of drum and affixed at the Limit Gates, accompanied by the terms and conditions that prospective renters were required to accept.[24] The meeting was held to set up the arrack farm, but one member noted that the rules requiring the renter to give credit to military personnel would raise the rent. Everyone agreed, and the article was changed.

When the arrack farm was subsequently put up for bidding, only a nominal amount was offered, which the Council attributed to the presence of military officers, possibly discouraging other bidders. It was therefore resolved that sealed proposals be invited, to be submitted on Monday, 8 August. The Secretary was instructed to issue a public notice to this effect and to record the revised conditions of the arrack farm thereafter.[25] The following are the Articles of Agreement to be entered into by whoever becomes the renter of the arrack farm.

1. That the Renter shall have the sole privilege of selling by Retail Spirituous Liquors. Punch, European wine, and all liquors of what sort or kind soever for the Space of one Year within the Honorable Company's Limits and the jurisdiction thereof, except the persons mentioned in the 5th Article of the agreement.
2. The following fixed prices were set for the liquors that the renter was permitted to sell. A bowl of punch was to be sold for 2 fanams, while a sneaker of punch was priced at 1 fanam. A bottle of Batavia arrack was to cost 2 fanams, and a bottle of Goa arrack 1 fanam. Calicut arrack was likewise fixed at 1 fanam per bottle, whereas country arrack was to be sold at 8 reas. A bottle of port wine was priced at 1 rupee and 2 fanams and a bottle of red Cape wine at 1 rupee.

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White Cape wine was to be sold at 4 fanams per bottle. Brandy was set at 1 rupee per bottle, strong beer at 3 fanams, and small beer at 2 fanams.

3. The renter was permitted to extend credit to the military and militia only up to the specific limits, and no deductions would be allowed for any amount exceeding these limits. The approved monthly credit amounts were as follows: a sergeant could be trusted up to 2 rupees, a corporal or rounder up to 1 rupee, 2 fanams, and 8 cash; an European sentinel up to 1 rupee; and a Topass or any member of the militia up to 2 fanams.
4. The renter is not allowed to take clothes or any other items as pawn, and cannot let anyone from the garrison stay in the shop or house after 10 p.m.
5. The thiyas who serve under the Honorable Company are allowed to sell the arrack produced in this place and nearby areas, but they cannot sell Calicut arrack or any other type of liquor.
6. Anyone caught selling liquor against these rules, at any time from the start of this lease until it ends, will be fined as the Chief decides. Half of the fine will go to the renter, and the other half to the Company.
7. The renter shall pay the rent of the farm amounting to Rs. 1550 into the Company's treasury in two installments.
8. No person shall be allowed to gamble with cards or dice in the renter's house. If this rule is broken, the renter will lose the license or face any other penalty the Chief considers appropriate.[26]

In August 1748, William Grill submitted his proposals to Chief Robert Rawdon in response to the public notice for the lease of the Punch House. He requested that all stoppages be handled by the paymaster and that a portion of the fines collected from illicit liquor sellers be given to the renter as compensation for identifying offenders. He also asked that sepoys be provided occasionally to help detect clandestine liquor sales. On these conditions, together with those stated in the public proposal, he offered 1,400 rupees for the arrack farm for the upcoming season beginning on the first of the following month.[27] On 7 August 1748, another person James Hog informed Chief Robert Rawdon that he had no objections to the terms outlined in the public notice of 30 July. He stated that he was willing to offer

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1,350 rupees per year for the arrack farm.[28] Captain Thomas Mostyn submitted an offer promising to pay 101 rupees more than any other bidder for a one-year term. When later asked to specify his bid for the arrack farm, he declared that he was willing to pay 1,550 rupees.[29]

The secretary of factory presented to the Board several proposals concerning the rent of the arrack farm. After the proposals were read, Captain Thomas Mostyn emerged as the highest bidder, offering a sum of 1,500 rupees. It was therefore resolved that he be appointed as the new renter for 1748-49.[30] In 1749, the Company got only one proposal by Robert Adams. He offered to give Rs. 1500 per annum. The Company accepted his offer and signed a bond with him.[31]

Conclusion

As part of the establishment of English factory at Tellicherry there emerged a colonial market, connected with the indigenous communities. The European mercantilist companies began setting up various amenities in their trading centers. They started different verities of shops, hospitals, money exchanging system, liquor shops etc. Among these the punch houses and arrack farms were important part of these markets. The records of the English Company provide detailed references to the various types of liquor imported into their settlement during the eighteenth century. The importation of these were not intended for general commercial circulation but were procured primarily for consumption by the Company's European officials and their domestic servants. The Company's correspondence and account books indicate that a steady supply of liquor from different places including London, Bombay, Batavia, Goa and different centers of Malabar was considered essential for maintaining the lifestyle and social routines of the English establishment.

In the arrack farms the company formed a liquor policy, shows how alcohol became an important part of the economic and administrative strategies of European powers in colonial India. A manual was prepared for regulating the working of arrack farm, which can be considered as the precursor of the liquor policy of modern Governments. Through the establishment of punch houses, the

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English Company created controlled spaces for consumption, trade, and social interaction, especially among sailors and factory employees. Examining these policies reveals how the liquor trade linked local producers, coastal merchants, and global markets through commodities like arrack and punch. Ultimately, the evolution of punch and liquor regulations in Tellicherry highlights the wider influence of colonial economic priorities on local society, trade networks, and everyday life along the Malabar Coast.

End notes

1 *"Words in English: Loanwords"*. www.ruf.rice.edu.,: Punch at the Online Etymology Dictionary

2 The History of Punch". *diffordsguide.com*. Retrieved 27 January 2019.

3 Edwards, Graham and Sue. *The Language of Drink*, Alan Sutton Publishing, 1988

4 Surprising history of punch". *History.com*. Retrieved 27 January 2019.

5 On 8th December 1743, the Tellicherry factors directed the ship Montague, which had been dispatched to Cochin, to collect arrack from Beypore and Calicut on its return journey and deliver it to Bombay. Tellicherry Consultation (hereafter TC), Diary, 8 December 1743.

6 As per the records of 13 March 1735, the factory bought 55 hogsheads of Goa arrack at the rate of Rs. 16 per hogsheads. TC, Diary, 13 March 1735.

7 Letters to Tellicherry, John Horne, Bombay to Stephen Law, Tellicherry, 8 April 1738. In 1800 General Wellesley wrote to J. Uhthooff, the English Envoy at Goa, "I don't imagine that the Goa arrack is of so good quality as that made at Batavia or Colombo, and as it is more liable to adulteration and no more may be purchased for the use of the army." See for details; The Secretaries, Ed., *The Journal of the Bombay Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society*, Vol.XIII, Bombay, 1878, p.114.

8 TC, Consultation, 10 December 1739.

9 TC, Consultation, 8 January 1740; TC.

10 Edgar Thurston, *History of Coinage of the Territories of the East India Company in the Indian Penisula and Catalogues on the Indian Coins in the Madras Museum*, Madras, 1890, p.23.

11 *Gazeteer of the Bombay Presidency, Material towards Statistical accounts of the town and Island of Bombay*, Vol.III, Bombay, 1894, p.344.

12 Peter Good, *The East India Company in Persia, Trade and Cultural Exchange in Eighteenth Century*, Chennai, 2022, p.39.

13 Hugh Murray, *Historical Descriptive Account of British India*, Vol. III, Edinburg, 1844, p.343.

14 Alexander Hamilton, *A New Account of East Indies*, London, 1727, p.299.

15 *Ibid.*, p.300.

16 The term 'Punch House' appears again in 1748, when the Company invited proposals for its farming and received offers from three bidders. In response, James Hog wrote to the factory chief, stating: "Having perused your publication for the sale of the Punch House, I now beg leave to offer the following proposals." TC, Letter, James Hog, Tellicherry to Robert Rawdon, Tellicherry, 7 August 1748.

17 TC, Consultation, 30 July 1748.

18 TC, Consultation, 8 October 1735.

19 TC, Diary, 20 September 1737.

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[20] TC, Diary, 8 September 1746. In 1747, the English Company hired local toddy-drawers in Calicut and paid them wages to distil palm spirit. See for details; TC, Consultation, 1746-47.

[21] The Thiyyas of Malabar are a prominent traditional community of north Kerala, historically linked to toddy tapping, coconut cultivation, and various skilled trades. In Tellicherry, they also formed an important part of the factory's soldier force.

[22] TC, Diary, 8 September 1746.

[23] TC, Consultation, 6 October 1747.

[24] TC, Consultation, 8 July 1748.

[25] TC, Consultation, 30 July 1748.

[26] TC, Consultation, 30 July 1748.

[27] TC, Letter, William Gill, Tellicherry to Robert Rawdon, Tellicherry, 8 August 1748.

[28] TC, Letter, James Hog, Tellicherry to Robert Rawdon, Tellicherry, 7 August 1748.

[29] TC, Letter, Thomas Mostyn, Tellicherry to Robert Rawdon, Tellicherry, 8 August 1748,

[30] TC, 8 August 1748.

[31] TC, Diary, 26 July 1749.

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