

Women and Alcohol in India: A Study of Women's Access to Drinking in Delhi

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Abstract

The paper focuses on young women's drinking in Delhi. Building on existing work on emerging urban drinking culture among young women in India, this paper aims to further deepen the analysis by focusing on two aspects: a) women's drinking on licensed premises; and b) buying alcoholic drinks from shops. Using an ethnographic approach to study alcohol consumption among women, the paper argues that women's drinking in the city is shaped by entrepreneurial strategies in building a nighttime drinking culture, even as women go out and have a good time while negotiating the negative attitudes towards women's drinking. Women's experiences of buying alcohol are shaped by men's control over public spaces and the wider social norms around who is expected to drink. It is also found that women tactfully negotiate such gendered inconveniences to have their way.

Keywords: Delhi, drinking culture, women, India

Introduction:

Abstinence is the norm for women in India. Cultural attitudes discourage women from drinking. As such, women are assumed to be 'obvious abstainers' (Benegal, 2005; Shiraz, 2019). Not only are women at the receiving end of many gendered discriminatory practices of alcohol use, but they are also directly affected by men's drinking habits in terms of family impoverishment. In the media, women are hailed as champions of temperance movements (Benegal et al., 2005). Such proscriptions on women have resulted in culturally and morally shaming those found drinking or buying alcohol (Alavi, 2017). The Kantar-NFX study on 'Responsible Drinking and Consumer Behaviour' covering 3000 women across seven Indian states noted that women who drink feared being judged in public and expressed issues of safety and insecure environments of public drinking (The Financial Express, 2019). As such, women's drinking is much lower than that of men (Mahal, 2000; Mohan et al., 2002). In Delhi, 40 percent of men and only 20 percent of women reported consuming alcohol (Shiraz, 2019). However, the picture is changing.

There is a rise in the consumption of alcohol among women in urban India (Sassi, 2015), especially among younger age groups (Gururaj et al., 2011). A study conducted by the Community against Drunken Driving (CADD) in 2019 among 5000 women in Delhi aged between 18 and 70 years reported that 43.7 and 41.7 percent of women in the age groups of 18-

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30 and 31-45, respectively, consumed alcohol regularly (The Economic Times, 2019). It further noted that binge drinking was common among these groups. The recent rise in women's consumption points to a changing trend. The CADD study highlights, 'More Women are Drinking, and Women are Drinking More'. Women are consuming alcohol for various reasons ranging from habit or desire, occupational requirements, and norms, emotional reasons, or being enticed to drink more through 'feel-good cocktails.' Alcohol is seen as a means to cope with modern-day stress. Furthermore, social activities today are increasingly centred around drinking (Talwar, 2019). At the heart of this change is a new urban economy of drinking that increasingly focuses on women and the younger population (Shree et al., 2016). However, social norms and sexist attitudes remain strong, placing women in a precarious situation (Murdeshwar et al., 2019).

This paper focuses on the 'culture of intoxication' among women in Delhi. It builds on and extends the work of Murdeshwar et al. (2019) on young middle-class urban women's drinking culture. We argue that a spatial understanding helps to unpack the complexities of women's access to and consumption of alcohol and participation in the urban culture of drinking. Studies on alcohol in India have largely focused on the death and disease discourse (Ray et al. 1989; Benegal, 2005; Das et al., 2006; Girish et al., 2010; Roy et al., 2010). However, in the research on women and the emerging 'culture of intoxication' in urban India, Murdeshwar et al. (2019) provide a gendered analysis of urban drinking culture among young Indian women. They note the rise of drinking practices of young urban women in Mumbai and locate such a rise within the context of a neoliberal regime of consumerism and deregulation of alcohol licensing, advertising strategies targeting female consumers, and the rise of social media. They argue that the new neoliberal, gender-neutral, service sector-based employment opportunities that empower women with increased disposable incomes and consumption opportunities, exposure to ideas of freedom, and the accomplishment of cultural capital lie at the heart of young women redefining urban drinking culture in India. However, they further note that women still need to negotiate the gendered, classed, and nationalist ideals/discourses of the macro-culture of drinking, which devalues women's participation in the 'culture of intoxication'. The contradictory discourses of neoliberal empowerment and cultural devaluation shape women's experience of urban drinking culture. Using an ethnographic approach, they aimed to understand young middle-class women's drinking practices and norms, the factors that facilitated these practices, and how these practices impacted the shaping of their subjectivities. The study found that 'participants identified their drinking practices as part of an emerging, consumer-oriented drinking culture' (p. 4). 'The norms evident in these practices were drinking for fun without being highly intoxicated, managing that drinking about wider social norms (e.g., when bars shut, parental concerns), and being seen in public (both on and offline) to be having fun in cool, upmarket places' (p. 4). The participants described alcohol and drinking as a facilitator of fun, associated with freedom and being part of a consumer-oriented cool elite. More so, they felt valued through a sense of individualism, freedom, and consumerist-global elite orientation. Furthermore, participants visualized drinking in these spaces with gender equality and safety even as they reported experiencing gender inequalities around sexuality and sexist attitudes. The authors conclude that the contradictory valuing through global discourses and devaluing through gendered and national (read: traditional) discourses left women in a precarious position (p. 6).

The insights provided by Murdeshwar et al. (2019) are useful and widely reflect women's drinking culture in Delhi. Taking these insights as points of departure, this paper aims to further deepen the understanding of women's drinking in urban metropolitan India by focusing on two

aspects, namely, drinking in the city and purchasing alcohol. We believe a geographical reading of these two aspects would provide critical insights into both the neoliberal landscapes of drinking and young women's access to alcohol. Moreover, Delhi differs from Mumbai in its socio-spatial making, historical and spatial antecedents (political, cultural, social, and economic), its alcohol licensing policies, and especially the way women experience the city space. It is widely known that Delhi is unfriendly to women (Viswanath & Mehrotra, 2007; Dhillon & Bakaya, 2014). In such a situation, what is the place of young women in the drinking culture of the city, and how they access and experience alcohol may be critical here. Furthermore, studies have shown that the consumption of alcohol is related to the freedom and empowerment of women (MacNeela & Bredin, 2011; Bailey et al., 2015). Using an ethnographic approach, our study attempts to critically read the nature of such claims by spatially analyzing drinking spaces and access to alcohol. Here we follow the same conceptualization of drinking culture as given by Murdeshwar et al. (2019), 'a micro-level drinking culture, defined multi-dimensionally about its norms of who can drink, and the practices, settings, meanings, values, problems, and pleasures of drinking. These are contextualized within a dynamic network of factors including policy, marketing, gender, age, class, and the macro-level (national) drinking culture' (p. 1). In what follows, we first discuss the study area and methodology of this research and then move on to reporting the findings and discussion on drinking premises and purchasing drinks from alcohol shop counters.

Research Methods:

The study was undertaken in three locations, namely Hudson Lane-Kingsway camp in North Delhi to study the nature of alcohol shops, and Connaught Place and Hauz Khas Village in Central and South Delhi to study licensed drinking premises. We chose an ethnographic approach to understand the dynamics of alcohol consumption. 'Interviews, long-term participant observation, field notes, and document analysis are regarded as classic features of ethnography' (Wall, 2015). The study used participant observation and conversations as the key methods. We focused on observing sites first and then approached female customers and staff for their insights. The setting of the bars and shops was more suitable for short conversations than formal in-depth interviews. The women we had a chance to interact with on these sites ranged between the ages of 18 and 40. The fieldwork was undertaken from June to September 2019.

The first site, Hudson Lane-Kingsway Camp, is dotted with many alcohol shops along the main road. The area is densely populated with young adults, mainly students of the University of Delhi, various coaching institutes, and other young working populations. The busyness of this area is heightened by the location of the GTB Nagar Metro rail station, enabling students, residents, and workers—men, women, and others of different age groups—to ferry in and out as they go on with their routine lives. With only a few steps away from the gates of G.T.B Nagar Metro rail station, the alcohol shops unobtrusively attract many customers—mainly men. While the business is slow during the day, these shops pull in a large number of customers in the evening, putting up an emphatic landscape with a complete ecology of drinking—the *Chakna* (snack) stalls/ carts, plastic glass and ice-cube vendors, etc.—making the shop fronts busier than the surrounding shops. The alcohol shops shut down at 10 pm as per the instructions of the regulatory authorities. There is a fixed number of days (known as 'Dry Days') during the year when these shops remain closed. The study on shops was mainly carried out to observe the everyday humdrum of business and how women accessed the shops, the behaviour of the staff, the peak and low business hours, and the activity around the shop that determined the character

of the space. The authors also visited alcohol shops in other locations of the city (given that areas in Delhi are classed in specific ways) to assess the difference in layouts, nature, size, staff, and clientele of the shops. Most visits to these shops were made during the afternoon—off-peak hours—to get a chance to interact with the staff while observations extended late in the evening until their closure.

Connaught Place, the second location, is a popular upmarket shopping, drinking, and dining district in central Delhi. It is the business and financial hub of Delhi and is famous for its Georgian-style buildings housing retail outlets of global brands, fine dining restaurants, and bars. This place emerged as the dining and drinking hub around the year 2014, with entrepreneurs investing in and transforming it into an upmarket food and beverage hub. The courtyards or outer spaces are popular hangouts in the evening, occupied mainly by young people. During the weekend, the bars and clubs grow livelier and more vibrant. The authors first mapped all the bars to assess their popularity and later visited and scrutinized a couple of bars before scaling down to four bars (for conducting the study), depending on the female clientele, the design and space layout, and the pricing of drinks. All the drinking premises chosen for the study were in the vicinity of Connaught Circus (mainly the inner and middle circles).

Hauz Khas Village, the third location for our study, is an urban village. Erstwhile known for art galleries and fashion boutiques, it has emerged as the most happening place for young people with its vibrant club scene (Bernroider, 2015). Located in South Delhi in the vicinity of the city's educational institutions, including the city's major universities and the Indian Institute of Technology, this place pulls in young crowds from across the city as far as the North Campus of the University of Delhi, located twenty kilometers away. The bars and lounges are known to host a variety of events, themed evenings, promotions, and upmarket music along with inexpensive drinks and good food. The bars here are known to host women-themed Ladies' Night (complimentary drinks and no cover charges for women) on specific days of the week, making them all the more attractive for young women to frequent this place. Both authors visited the place together, mapped the layout of the commercial area of the village, and surveyed the clubs/bars during the evenings.

In both sites for drinking premises, conversations were held with staff, including those who relayed information to customers on the streets, the front-desk staff, the waiting staff, and managers, to understand the management. The layouts were surveyed, and conversations were held with women customers about their motivations to visit a particular bar/club, the context of the visits, the frequency of drinking out, the company they chose for an evening, and the issues they faced or expected to face in such outlets or for the act of drinking itself. They were also asked to reflect on the alcohol-buying experience in shops. The observations ranged from one to four hours per visit. All data were documented from time to time in a field diary.

While it is generally difficult to make conversations with women given that both researchers identify as men and were strangers to these women, it was much easier to initiate a conversation in the bar/drinking premises than in a coffee shop or open space in the city. Furthermore, both of us being young, university-educated men participating in the urban nightlife made it easier to strike up conversations. Once introduced to the motives of the study, many women agreed to share their insights. Women who came in groups (same and opposite sex) were more willing to talk than those who came in as (opposite-sex) couples. Standard ethical practices were followed in all stages of research. The interview transcripts and field notes were analysed thematically, with particular attention to gendered experiences, including stigma,

safety, access to drinking spaces, social norms, and women's strategies for negotiating male-dominated spaces. In what follows, we provide the analysis and discussion of findings.

All Dressed Up and 'The Place to Go': Women in Drinking Spaces:

The licensed drinking premises were fun places to visit. We found similarities with the findings of Murdeshwar et al. (2019), where women in Delhi also valued their sense of themselves through the new drinking spaces. However, income and age determined the choice of location. Furthermore, the visit to these places was occasional and accompanied. The following excerpts provide us with insights.

"It is a nice feeling being in a lively place. Good music, food, drinks, company, and the crowd. I usually come here to have a fun time with my [female] friends twice a month or if we are celebrating an occasion like a birthday party. It gives us an occasion to dress up and have a good time. We usually visit this place [Hauz Khas Village]. It is near where we all live, and we can choose which place to visit. Sometimes we bar-hop. [...] No, I also come here with a mixed group of friends sometimes."

(Jayita, 21, female, Hauz Khas Village)

"I have not been to the Ladies Night at HKV [Hauz Khas Village] but have heard about it from others. I used to visit on weekends, but it is years since I have visited HKV. We usually go to places in CP [Connaught Place], Khan Market or GK [Greater Kailash] or meet up at a friend's place."

(Laveena, 34, female, Connaught Place)

"I have come here [bar in Connaught Place] with my office colleagues. We are celebrating my colleague's birthday. It is hardly possible to come here on a regular basis. The company does matter, and coming in a group means something. I do come here with my friends as well, but it is once in a while."

(Parul, 28, female, Connaught Place)

Jayita, Laveena, and Parul's narratives show that there was a difference in the choice of locations among the two cohorts of women. Jayita (21) is a student, and Laveena (34) and Parul (28) are working professionals. Hauz Khas Village bars attracted women who were younger and mostly students, while bars in Connaught Place were mostly frequented by comparatively older women. Hauz Khas Village bars were cheaper compared to those in Connaught Place. Limited budgets, low prices (as compared to other parts of the city), and complimentary drinks, themed evenings, promotions, youthful music, and the presence of a similar cohort of young women and men made bars in Hauz Khas Village attractive places for younger women to visit. On the other hand, bars in Connaught Place were comparatively more expensive, exuded a different ambience, and attracted mixed customers like office groups, individuals of all ages, and sometimes even families. It is not that younger student groups were completely absent here, but their presence was comparatively lower. Women in their late 20s and 30s reported visiting different upmarket locations in the city, while Hauz Khas Village bars were something they used to visit in the past and did not prominently figure in the present choice of locations. As their income and age increased, Laveena informed, their tastes too changed. It is further observed that drinking on these premises was occasional—a part of the celebration or a planned night out,

rather than an everyday visit. This was explained by the fact that drinking in these bars was expensive and needed reason or planning to visit. Furthermore, women visited these places in groups or with company— friends, colleagues, dates, and male partners. Murdeshwar et al. (2019) explain it as a tactic to ward off potential sexual advances from other men and as part of managing vulnerability (p. 5). Women in our study informed us that it was part of the fun to have a known company. More so, women found these spaces enabling and free of judgment, which made drinking an enjoyable experience.

Ladies' Night and Stag Entries: Managerial Strategies for Women Drinkers:

For premise management, image and popularity held the key to good business. With women emerging as a new customer base, the image has become even more important for the new drinking establishments. Traditionally, drinking premises have been masculine spaces that have largely marginalized women and not-so-masculine men discursively (Driessen, 1983; Mars, 1987; Latham, 2003). The new spaces for drinking attract women customers by providing comfortable spaces free of danger, nuisance, and violence, along with various free add-ons and women-specific evenings. However, this needs critical reading. The following excerpts from the field notes and conversations with management and female customers provide a picture.

“Two free Vodka shots for you, sir, if you have female friends in your group, two extra shots for them!!”

(Staff enticing customers at the entrance, Hauz Khas Village)

“Women are our prized customers. Our club is women-friendly. We have complimentary drinks and Ladies' night for them. Our staff knows where the difficulties arise and intervenes if anybody is creating trouble for our female customers. We aim to make our customers feel welcome and safe. [...] no, it does not mean that men are not absent on Ladies' Night here. There is a cover charge for men to enter the place. [Heterosexual] couples have to pay a charge as well.”

(Bar Manager, Hauz Khas Village)

“Male-only groups are barred on Thursdays, Fridays, Saturdays, and Sundays. Men have to be accompanied by women to enter. Men misbehave with women after getting drunk, mostly when men come in [men-only] groups. They misbehave with women customers and staff after getting drunk. Men tend to behave well if they are with women. That is why we prevent Stag entry on weekends. One man can go in with one woman.”

(Female bar staff, Connaught Place)

“If a woman is drinking, she is easy and available. There is no consent thing. They will follow you till you get an Auto [local transport]. There would be cars, Boleros, and Scorpions following your auto; it isn't safe. If you are going to a party, I have to see what sort of people are coming. People misbehave with you. You don't know how people will behave. We cannot anticipate anybody's reaction.”

(Purvi, 24, female, Hauz Khas Village)

The researchers found the street leading to the drinking premises in Hauz Khas Village crowded with male staff of various bars and clubs persuading customers to enter their respective

establishments. Freebies and complimentary drinks were used to attract more (female) customers. The concept of Ladies' Night is popular in Hauz Khas Village, usually held on one of the weekdays to attract women drinkers. Women are provided complimentary drinks. Men are charged for entrance, thus restricting men's entry into the premises and limiting potential danger. With customers in an inebriated state, loud music, and a dancing crowd, the place has a high potential for fights and harassment to take place (Khurana & Mahajan, 2019). The bouncers at the entrance and female bouncers and staff inside the premises ensure that no untoward incidents take place, mainly against women. Similar arrangements can be seen in Connaught Place, where some premises have complimentary drinks for women mid-week and many others bar 'stag' entries on weekends. Single men or men-only groups (known as 'stag entries') are not allowed to enter the drinking premises. When accompanied by women, it is assumed that men are more responsible and thoughtful in holding their drinks and behaviour. The door staff turn away any single man or men-only groups. However, in some bars, it was observed that the door staff scrutinized single men or men in groups of two and provided them with entry if they found them 'decent enough'.

The image of the premises is an important part of the new spaces of drinking, and the managers play the key role as regulators of the night economy (Chatterton & Hollands, 2003). While these may seem like strategies to make women comfortable, it can be argued that welcoming women drinkers is more a business strategy than anything to do with their empowerment and independence. From many respondents in this study, it came to light that the free complimentary drinks hardly gave a high and were a sheer marketing strategy to attract female customers to the premises. Diluted free drinks meant the women would eventually spend money on more drinks. The theme of Ladies' Night was distinctly staged on a weekday, meant to keep the revenues flowing when the business was at its lowest. Men were not barred but charged for an entrance. It was assumed that more females meant more men would follow in. Women were also assumed to circulate information through social media and word-of-mouth about the music and coolness of a particular place more systematically. While these bars were made to be safe enough, the responsibility of the premises ended where their doors ended. The village buildings and layout, with their long, confusing pathways and parties ending in the middle of the night, made women more vulnerable. The distance from the premises entrance to the taxi bay and parking area was not accounted for by the village bars, where women were the most vulnerable to drunken men's unwanted attention in a poorly lit street. Like Purvi's narrative above, many women are being followed or approached by men in the pathway to the parking area. Violence and sexual assaults on women by drunken men have been reported in the media (Ara, 2017). In contrast, Connaught Place premises attracted mixed crowds all through the week, mainly professionals who could afford what the place had to offer. As such, the bar on Stag entries helped to maintain the decorum of the place during weekend evenings, while business strategies included happy hours for both men and women before 8 pm. Even before the drinking premises started emerging, Hauz Khas Village was already a popular place where young people—mainly students—hung out in the historic monuments, art galleries, and the adjoining Deer Park. Capitalizing on young people's presence, these bars invested in making money by providing cheap liquor, freebies, and good music, coupled with enjoying lower rents in the village. When seen as a business strategy, these bars make women sheer instruments of money-making for the urban nightlife economy rather than making space for women in the (egalitarian) city.

Purchasing Alcohol: Crowded Shops and the Unfriendly Gaze:

Expensive drinking places in the city meant alcohol had to be brought home, mainly for women who stayed by themselves or hosted or drank in an all-women house party. Buying alcohol seemed to be a greater problem for women than drinking on a licensed premise, as it needed one to access unregulated public spaces of local markets that were predominantly occupied by men. Concerns of safety, reputation, appropriateness, judgments, prejudices, and hesitation were reported by the women we spoke to, which made alcohol purchasing uncomfortable. However, women had learned their way of negotiating these discomforts. Furthermore, there are new women-friendly alcohol vending stores opening in some parts of Delhi. This section discusses women's alcohol-buying experiences.

"Most of the customers are adult men. Women are rarely seen in this store at this time. A woman is seen with a male companion. He enters the shop while she waits outside. There is a great struggle to get access to the counter of the shop. Men are shouting on top of each other's voices to get the attention of the counter staff, who have limited capacity to respond at any given moment. There are four male staff at the counter, but the crowd is too large to handle. One has to know what brand one needs before one reaches the front of the counter. Having an alternative too helps in case the preferred label is not available."

(Field notes, 26th June 2019, 7.20 pm. Hudson Lane)

"Buying alcohol from [the] shop in markets is usually a male-dominated subculture in the society. For safety or concern about appropriateness and comfort, I usually do not visit alone to buy drinks in alcohol shops; societal judgments and prejudices play a big role in the hesitation of drinking and buying alcohol."

(Rashmi, 22, female, Mukherjee Nagar)

"The opening of women-only alcohol shops in a different part of Delhi conveys that the ordinary alcohol shop is more than just an alcohol shop. These shops are women-unfriendly. Alcohol shops are largely male-dominated spaces."

(Pratishtha, 26, female, Malviya Nagar)

"As the shops are very crowded in the evening with many male consumers, I usually go to buy alcohol in the afternoon to avoid the rush in front of the counter. No one will be pushing from behind while choosing my preferred drink."

(Ritwika, 27, female, Munirka)

"The first time I went out to bring alcohol from the shop with a female friend, we found the shop bustling with men. And we didn't want to risk ourselves in that crowd. So, we asked one of the men to get us a bottle. He may have taken his cut, but bought the bottle for us."

(Purvi, 24, female, Vijaynagar)

The above narratives throw light on the culture of purchasing alcohol at shops in Delhi. Most women in our study narrated how buying alcohol involved visiting the alcohol shop (locally known as *Thekas*) in the vicinity of their residential areas. The cultural devaluation of women drinking was strongly felt while buying alcohol. One could be judged as a 'loose woman' or stared at as 'somebody available'. Buying alcohol is largely considered a man's job. Shops are mainly dominated by men, both as sellers and buyers. The sellers are rough-speaking men who

usually have to deal with chaotic male customers during peak hours. Buyers are from diverse class backgrounds with different sensibilities towards women, making it more complicated for women to buy alcohol. Furthermore, during evenings, these alcohol shops not only experience men crowding the counters, but also many men with no suitable place to drink are found consuming alcohol in the vicinity, making women more vulnerable to being groped or pushed around in the shop or assaulted, being called names, or stalked around the shop. On the way out from Gate No. 4 of the GTB Nagar Metro Station to the alcohol shop, one could observe the number of men consuming drinks in front of shut shop doors along the footpath. Such unfriendly behaviour of the staff and the evening crowds made alcohol buying an uncomfortable activity.

However, women negotiated their way to purchase alcohol. They visited the shop during the afternoon hours when the shops were relatively empty, and one could have a chance to choose the preferred brands and purchase peacefully. Some women asked a known male member to accompany them or purchase on their behalf. In other instances, women asked a male passerby on the street for help. Purvi narrates her experience above about how she made her first purchase from the shop by asking a stranger to purchase for her. Still, other women purchased alcohol in larger quantities and stocked it at their homes so that they did not have to frequent the shop. These tactics of purchasing alcohol in an environment that is spatially dominated by men or devaluing women helped women access alcohol. Foregrounded in this is Delhi's public space, which is largely unfriendly to women (Dhillon & Bakaya, 2014). More recently, women-friendly alcohol shops have opened in some parts of Delhi. These are new players in the market that acknowledge women as independent consumers of alcohol. Though these are very few in number given the large size of Delhi, they nevertheless help women access alcohol easily—shops with counters only for women where women can make the purchase; shops in malls where women can freely move around, explore, and purchase; shops with female staff who guide women to explore the displays and help them with the purchase. These shops are new entrepreneurial initiatives to make alcohol buying a safe and enjoyable experience for women. Though they do have class exclusion, just like in the case of drinking premises, these shops are progressive initiatives that make it easy for women.

Conclusion:

The paper aimed to analyze young urban women's drinking in Delhi by taking two aspects, namely women's drinking spaces in the city and access to alcohol shops. The issue of women's drinking in the city is shaped by entrepreneurial investments in building a nighttime drinking culture, even as women go out and have a good time. These spaces were classed in particular ways, were expensive, and were visited occasionally. The urban nighttime economy creates enabling spaces for women to drink. However, they capitalized on women's presence to build their image and popularity and keep the business going during the week. It is found that women's safety is more a business strategy than making a place for women in an egalitarian city. Women's experiences of buying alcohol are shaped by men's control over public spaces and the wider social norms around who is expected to drink or buy alcohol. It is found that women tactfully negotiate such gendered inconveniences to have their way.

Through a spatial analysis of women's participation in urban drinking culture, it is found that the city has diverse locations supporting particular types of female clientele, which are age- and income-specific. Women (as much as men and others) go through various stages in their life course, which determine their choice, accessibility, and affordability of various drinking spaces

in the city. The categories of ‘young’ and ‘middle class’ are wide in their definition and may include diverse subcategories. Further research on alcohol is needed in India to see how shifts in economic and life-course positionalities—student, working, married/cohabiting—determine the choice, access, affordability, and experience of alcohol.

The cultural devaluation of women drinking was strongly felt while buying alcohol in the local market rather than drinking on a licensed premise in the city centre. Such a finding juxtaposes the friendly neoliberal drinking premise in the city with its women-unfriendly residential/suburban/local markets, where the alcohol shops are accessed. The recent private entrepreneurial moves to make space for women may provide a guide to opening more accessible spaces for women in terms of more shops and friendlier staff. It has to be noted that alcohol licensing policies that govern the nature of alcohol shops are gender-blind. We suggest that sensitivity towards problems of gendered accessibility to alcohol may help in a gender-sensitive licensing policy.

Alcohol studies in India have largely focused on the death and disease discourse. Our paper moves away from this dominant strand of literature and makes a contribution in analyzing alcohol as the site of pleasure, consumption, and celebration, critically looking at the other-than-pathological understandings. In this direction, our paper provides a spatial analysis to understand the dynamics of alcohol consumption. Following the CADD report’s highlight that ‘More women are drinking and women are drinking more,’ the questions that arise on women’s drinking spaces and contexts are manifold. These need further inquiries into the spaces and contexts beyond the alcohol shops and city centres. These may include drinking at home, family gatherings, and weddings; drinking with friends or colleagues; and drinking alone. These would involve questions around issues of identity, subjectivities, social positioning, power, safety, changing gender norms, resistance, and acceptance. The questions are vast. This study is a small addition in this direction.

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