

THE WORD KOHALA IN SUŚRUTA AND  
TERM ALCOOL-VINI OF PARACELSUS

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(Received 27 March, 1989)

Wine was distilled in Europe first about the tenth cent. A.D. It used to be called "spirit of wine". Paracelsus (1493-1541 A.D.) took the word *Al-Ko-Lu* from some translation of an Arabic treatise on alchemy and it signified collyrium which is a fine black powder applied to the eye as cosmetic. Paracelsus conceived a fine powder as the equivalent of spirit of wine so that the name for collyrium was transferred to become "Alcool Vini". Later, *Alcool* was spelled as Alcohol. In Suśruta, who can be dated 500 A.D., or a thousand years earlier than Paracelsus, there is the word *kohala* and is clearly mentioned as distillate of fermented barley-malt (or beer). *Kohala* and *Alcohol* are phonetically allied and the origin and nature of *Kohala* deserves proper investigation by a veteran Sanskritist.

In an earlier article (1972) I have shown that even before Aryans entered India, which Max Muller dated as 3000 B.C., the pre-Aryan hill-tribes fermented *Mahua*-flowers (*Bassia latifolia*) and distilled the liquor. The flowers are rich in sugars but also in a glucoside which causes diarrhoea so that the fermented liquor has to be distilled. The hill tribes in Bihar still continue to do so. When the Aryans entered India they learnt fermenting *Mahua* flowers and recovering a distilled alcoholic liquor. In *Atharvaveda* such a beverage is called *Pari-śrut*, literally meaning "excessively boiled". That would be their handy expression for a distillate. Thus distillation of alcoholic liquor in India can be dated 1500 B.C. the date that can be assigned to *Atharvaveda*. To be explicit this applies to Aryans in India while the pre-Aryan citizens were using it much earlier as do some hill tribes in Bihar even today.

In an article dated 1980 the following facts have been communicated. Read (1957) writes that in Europe "wine was probably distilled in Italy in the 9th or 10th cent. A.D. with the discovery of pure alcohol". Taylor (1959) writes, "the first mention of alcohol as drug is in the work of Salemus about 1150 A.D.". We take it that the distillate was being called "spirit of wine". Now came Paracelsus (1493-1541 A.D.) who was a physician but also an alchemist. He was fond of coining new terms and to specify "spirit of wine" he used the term "*alcool vini*". In my article of 1980, I have shown that Paracelsus conceived *collyrium* as a fine powder, fine enough to be identified with spirit. At any rate he transferred the idea of fine powder to distillate and used the word

*Alcool* for it. With the prefix “*Al*” which is Arabic he apparently got the word from the translation of some Arabic treatise on alchemy. I have shown that the Arabic term *Al-Ko-Lu* is really Chinese where it would be *Ho-Lu*, which dialectic would be pronounced *Kho-Lu*, meaning Black-Pot, or a pot containing black powder. Briefly “Alcohol” originally signified *collyrium*.

Now Mira Roy (1982) kindly gives the following information. “Regarding Kohala in *Suśruta Samhitā*, Sūtrasthāna, Chap. 45, or 46 in some editions, there is a passage which can be translated as follows: “*Kohala* or the spirituous liquor, distilled from the fermented barley-water, (malt), with the addition of the ferment *Kinva*, is agreeable to taste and it acts as an aphrodisiac. It increases all the three humours (Tridoṣa)”. This would be the “translation by A.C. Dutt Chattopadhyaya, *Asiatic Soc.* Publication”. Briefly in *Suśruta* Kohala clearly means alcohol and distilled fermented liquor. *Suśruta* may be dated 500 A.D., if not even earlier, which is nearly a thousand years before Paracelsus. It is a problem for masters of Sanskrit literature to offer proper information on *Kohala*.

#### REFERENCES

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- <sup>2</sup>Mahdihassan, S. (1980) “Chinese origin of the word Alcohol”, *Am. J. Chinese Med.*, 7 (3); 239-243.
- <sup>3</sup>Read, J. (1957) *Through Alchemy to Chemistry*.
- <sup>4</sup>Roy, Mira (1982) Private Communication. Calcutta, 16th Aug. 1982.
- <sup>5</sup>Taylor, F.S. (1953) “The idea of quintessence”, In *Science, Medicine and History*; Singer Festschrift, Vol. 1, p. 254.