

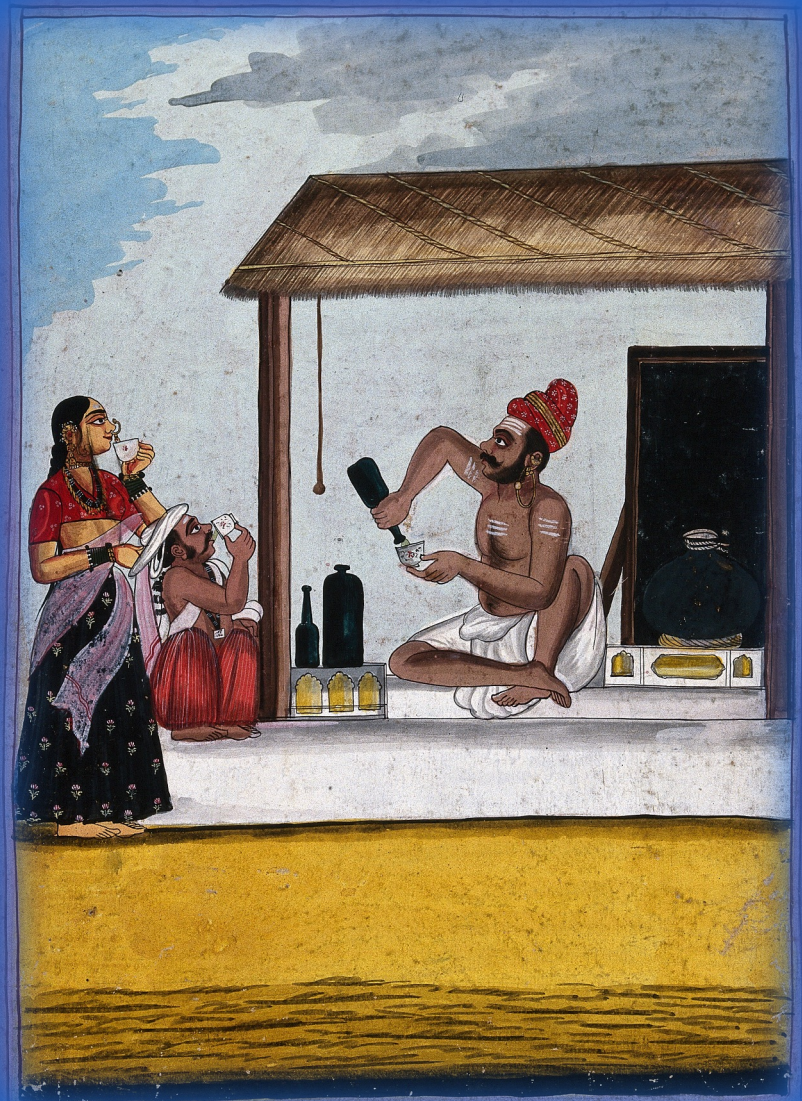
WED 29  
APRIL

4 pm  
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## Surā's Many Cups: A Survey of Humans using Plants to make Mind-Altering Substances in Pre-modern South Asia

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Studies of religion and history in South Asia sometimes characterize the region as historically dominated by mind altering substances other than alcohol, such as soma, datura, or cannabis. This paper challenges and even overturns this view of drug history in ancient and early medieval South Asia. After a brief consideration of soma, the paper argues for most of the ancient period the only mind-altering substance anyone consumed was alcohol, with betel appearing roughly about 300 CE. And cannabis is only prominent (at least, in our sources) from about 1000 CE. Datura has been suggested as a powerful entheogen taken in this middle period, a "bridge drug" between ancient soma and medieval cannabis. Yet on closer examination, our sources from this period typically present datura as a plant used to stupefy people for nefarious means. Following a presentation on these and some other substances, the paper presents some recipes for alcoholic drinks, considering how fermentation was understood. Throughout, the paper also reflects on the considerable methodological difficulties involved in relying largely on surviving ancient texts to study plants and processed products, such as beers.



An Indian man selling alcohol to a couple. Gouache drawing. Source: Wellcome Collection.

