

FROM HERITAGE SPIRIT TO GLOBAL PALATES: NAVIGATING THE DYNAMICS OF FENI INDUSTRY IN GOA

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Abstract

This research paper delves into the intricate landscape of the Feni industry in Goa, India, exploring its historical roots, contemporary challenges, and potential avenues for sustainable growth, with a specific focus on its integration into the tourism narrative. Recognized with a Geographical Indication (GI) status and titled as 'Heritage Spirit,' Feni symbolizes centuries of heritage and craftsmanship, embodying a unique blend of Eastern and Western influences. Employing a qualitative methodology, the study conducted site visits and in-depth interviews across various stages of Feni production, uncovering challenges in cultivation, processing, and marketing, both for cashew and coconut Feni. Findings highlight the industry's dynamic evolution, from the resistance to standardization to the untapped potential in maturation practices and waste disposal. The study emphasizes the need for standardized practices, branding strategies, and policy initiatives for sustainable development. Furthermore, it explores the decline in coconut Feni production and proposes strategies for promoting Goa as an Alcohol Tourism destination, intertwining cultural experiences with Feni consumption.

Keywords: *Feni Industry, Goa, Geographical Indication, Alcohol Tourism, Heritage Spirit*

Introduction

The attraction of tourism lies not only in picturesque landscapes and historical landmarks but also in the distinct flavors that encapsulate the essence of a destination (Stone et al., 2018). Goa, nestled along the Arabian Sea, beckons travelers with its sun-kissed beaches, vibrant culture, and a hidden gem in its local spirits – Feni. As we navigate the crossroads of tradition and modernity, this paper embarks on an exploration of the journey to popularize Feni, a traditional Goan alcoholic beverage, within the dynamic realm of touristic experiences.

Feni, a testament to Goa's rich cultural tapestry, emerges as more than just a drink; it encapsulates centuries of heritage, craftsmanship, and a unique blending of Eastern and Western influences (D'souza, 2021). Recognized with a Geographical Indication (GI) status and bestowed the title of 'Heritage Spirit,' Feni stands at the intersection of tradition and innovation, presenting an opportunity to enhance its prominence within the vibrant tourism landscape of Goa.

In the evolving narrative of global travel, tourists seek not only scenic vistas but also immersive encounters with local culture, and what better way to encapsulate Goa's spirit than through its indigenous beverage – Feni. This paper aims to unravel the potential avenues and challenges in the quest to popularize Feni as a quintessential part of the Goan experience for tourists.

As we delve into this exploration, we navigate through the historical roots of Feni, examining its evolution from a traditional elixir in social and religious ceremonies to a nuanced expression of Goan identity. The economic landscape of the Feni industry, once confined to cottage production, has expanded to face the dual challenge of preserving tradition while adapting to the changing preferences of a globalized market (Furtado & Velho-Pereira, 2020). The Geographical Indication bestowed upon Feni in 2009 acts as both a protective shield and a catalyst for its recognition on the world stage. The subsequent acknowledgment of Feni as a 'Heritage Spirit' in 2016 opens avenues for its integration into the tourism narrative, enticing visitors with a sip of Goan history and craftsmanship. However, this journey is not without its obstacles – the modern palate's inclination toward Indian Made Foreign Liquor (IMFL), the shifting perceptions of Feni among the younger generation, and the overshadowing allure of global alcoholic beverages.

Feni, as a local indigenous alcoholic beverage in Goa, shares commonalities with traditional drinks found in various parts of the world. Drawing parallels with other regional spirits, such as Mezcal in Mexico, Sake in Japan, or Arrack in Southeast Asia, Feni represents a cultural and historical connection to its roots. These beverages often embody the essence of local ingredients and traditional production methods, contributing to the unique identity of the regions they originate from. In this dynamic landscape, the paper sheds light on initiatives like 'The Cashew Trail' and 'The Spirit of Goa Festival,' which strategically position Feni as a cultural and artisanal treasure for tourists. The potential lies not only in marketing Feni as a beverage but in crafting an authentic and memorable experience for visitors, fostering a connection between the drink and the vibrant tapestry of Goan life.

As we embark on this exploration, we navigate through the nuances of Feni's journey, weaving together history, culture, and the contemporary demands of the tourism industry. The intoxicating aroma of Feni is not merely confined to glasses but echoes as a symphony of Goan heritage, waiting to be discovered by those seeking a taste of authenticity in the heart of a touristic paradise.

This study aims to comprehensively explore the Feni industry in Goa, encompassing various facets such as cultivation practices, production processes, challenges, and financial considerations. By focusing on distinct stages of Feni production, including cultivation, plucking, juice extraction, fermentation, distillation, and post-production processes for both cashew and coconut Feni, we seek to gain a nuanced understanding of the industry. Our objective is to analyze the qualitative data gathered from these methods to identify recurring themes, challenges, and potential areas for improvement. Key areas of investigation include bottling and labeling practices, exploration of maturation practices, waste disposal and its environmental impact, challenges in coconut Feni production, and discussions on the cannibalization effect from alternative products. Additionally, we aim to propose solutions to financial complexities, address policy and government initiatives in safeguarding Feni's geographical indication status, and highlight collaborative efforts that have propelled Feni's popularity internationally. The study also seeks to outline strategies for promoting Goa as an Alcohol Tourism destination, considering diversified experiences, themed museums, culinary integration, strategic partnerships, and leveraging digital platforms for effective promotion.

Literature Review

Feni, a traditional spirit from Goa, has a rich history deeply intertwined with Portuguese colonization and the introduction of cashew along the Malabar Coast in the 16th century (Smith, 2007; D'Cunha, 2013). Initially, coconut Feni predates Portuguese influence, while cashew Feni is believed to have emerged during colonization (Xavier, 1993). The Portuguese, aiming at soil conservation, brought cashew to Goa, and records indicate its cultivation in Porvorim dating back to the 1770s (Lobo, 1971; Rangnekar, 2009). The liquor industry, rooted in cottage practices, played a significant role in Goa's pre-liberation economy, with toddy tappers contributing to treasury through a "rend" (tax) system (Fernandes, 2015). Feni varieties included coconut and cashew, with the latter considered superior and exported since 1789 (Pinto, 1994).

Alcohol consumption in Goa, documented by Rangnekar (2011), showcased sura and toddy as common drinks. The Portuguese later introduced Western wines, whisky, and brandy post the 1878 Anglo-Portuguese treaty, influencing Goan culture (Rodrigues, 2007). Feni became a pivotal element in social and religious functions, reflecting Portuguese practices (Rangnekar, 2011). Even as Feni played a part in these traditions, imported wines gained prominence among the wealthy (Pereira, 1995). The Portuguese cultural influence extended to Goan cuisine, substituting wine with locally available Feni and vinegar (Rodrigues, 2000). Apart from its role in celebrations, Feni found use in traditional remedies for various ailments and cultural practices. However, with the disintegration of joint families and advancements in science, its medicinal usage declined. Changes in societal structures and lifestyles, driven by factors like liberalization and tourism, transformed alcohol consumption patterns in Goa (Pereira, 2007; 2015). The younger generation embraced modern recreational activities, leading to a shift from traditional drinking spaces to pubs, discotheques, and gaming clubs. Society's attitude towards alcohol consumption became more lenient, with alcohol being viewed as a means of relaxation (Pereira, 2015).

The advent of Indian Made Foreign Liquor (IMFL) and the shift towards mechanized large-scale production affected traditional Feni production. IMFL gained popularity due to factors like affordability and availability, impacting the preferences of the modern Goan society (Greenfield et al., 2010). Despite Feni's decline in popularity among the younger generation, efforts were made to promote it as a tourism product. Initiatives like 'The Cashew Trail' and 'The Spirit of Goa Festival' aimed to highlight Feni's unique characteristics, including its Geographical Indication (GI) status attained in 2009 (Rangnekar, 2009). The GI status

protects Feni's identity, ensuring that only products originating from Goa can be labeled as Feni.

In recent times, Feni producers have made efforts to rejuvenate its appeal. Events like the 'Spirit of Goa Festival' showcase Feni in various products, cuisine, and handicrafts, fostering a connection with tradition. Feni's export market has also grown, with tourists becoming patrons and bottlers capitalizing on the souvenir appeal (Rangnekar, 2009). Despite challenges, Feni's heritage status, GI protection, and its role in cultural practices position it uniquely in the global alcohol market. However, sustaining and enhancing this unique spirit's legacy requires collaborative efforts from stakeholders, including the Tourism and Excise departments, to market Feni as a tourism product effectively.

Methodology

In a qualitative exploration of the Feni industry in Goa, The methodology employed for the comprehensive study of the Feni industry in Goa involved a multifaceted approach aimed at gaining insights into various aspects, including cultivation practices, production processes, challenges, and financial considerations. We conducted extensive site visits to different units involved in Feni production, ranging from small family-run enterprises to larger, commercialized setups. These visits facilitated a firsthand understanding of the industry from the cultivation of cashew to the marketing of Feni. In-depth interviews were conducted with industry experts, stakeholders, and producers to gather qualitative data on their experiences, observations, and concerns. The study focused on distinct stages of Feni production, namely cultivation, plucking, juice extraction, fermentation, distillation, and post-production processes. Attention was given to both cashew and coconut Feni, recognizing the unique characteristics and challenges associated with each. The qualitative data gathered from these methods were then analyzed to identify recurring themes, challenges, and potential areas for improvement in the Feni industry.

Findings

The study commenced by spotlighting the significance of cashew nuts over cashew apples, influencing harvesting practices and raising questions about the potential impact on agricultural norms. The collection of fully ripe fruits proved to be a formidable challenge, contributing to substantial wastage, particularly in inaccessible, hilly terrains where cashew trees thrive. Mechanization emerged as a trend in juice extraction, attributed to labor

shortages and cost considerations, signaling a shift from traditional stomping methods. However, the study underscored that while modernization can enhance efficiency, the industry must balance this with preserving traditional flavors to maintain consumer acceptance.

The fermentation practices within the Feni industry underscored a clear inclination towards natural processes, as opposed to artificial interventions such as the addition of sugar. This preference was rooted in concerns about the potential compromise of taste and the extended duration required for natural fermentation. Moving to the distillation phase, a critical component in Feni production, a harmonious integration of traditional methods and contemporary elements was observed. While some producers adhered to conventional copper 'bhan,' others embraced modernity with the incorporation of copper coils and the utilization of alternative fuel sources, including steam, gas, or electricity.

An intriguing aspect that surfaced during the study was the resistance to standardization in the distillation process. Producers staunchly defended the uniqueness of their methods, considering it a core competency and resisting attempts to homogenize proportions and mixtures. This resistance raised questions about the potential challenges and benefits of standardization in the industry.

Bottling and labeling practices within the Feni market were found to lack uniformity, with various materials used for bottling, including glass and, surprisingly, plastic. The absence of standardization in this realm raised concerns about consumer information and the need for industry-wide regulations to provide transparency and prevent misleading claims on labels. This finding underscores the importance of establishing guidelines to protect consumers and foster fair competition among Feni producers.

Maturation, a facet often overshadowed by concerns about evaporation losses, emerged as an untapped area with significant potential. While many producers opted to forego maturation to avoid losses, those who engaged in this practice found it to be lucrative, particularly among larger manufacturers. The choice of maturation vessels varied widely, ranging from glass garrafaos to oak barrels. This diversity highlighted the need for further exploration into the impact of maturation vessels on the final product, including aspects like color and flavor.

The study extended its focus to waste disposal, revealing underutilization of by-products from juice extraction, posing both environmental and economic challenges. Seasonality and associated issues, such as annual licensing requirements and fragmented plantations, were identified as inhibitors to the industry's growth.

Shifting gears to coconut Feni, the study uncovered a decline in pure coconut Feni production, primarily attributed to challenges in toddy tapping. Safety hazards, health issues, and a lack of social security for toddy tappers emerged as critical concerns, impacting the industry's ability to attract and retain skilled labor. Social stigma surrounding toddy tapping further compounded challenges, deterring the younger generation from entering the profession.

Discussion and Conclusion

The qualitative exploration of the Feni industry in Goa offers a comprehensive understanding of the intricate challenges and potential solutions across various stages of production, from cultivation to market dynamics. The study detects a cannibalization effect from alternative products, emphasizing the need for standardized containers, labeling practices, and branding strategies to ensure clarity and legitimacy in the market that has been highlighted in the Goa Feni Policy 2021. One of the primary challenges highlighted is the terrain of cashew plantations, which often poses difficulties in harvesting fully ripe cashew fruits due to inaccessible and hilly landscapes. Similarly, coconut Feni production faces safety concerns during toddy tapping, with issues such as accidents and health hazards for laborers. These challenges necessitate systematic approaches, including the development of safety protocols, infrastructure improvements, and the adoption of innovative practices like netting to prevent spoilage of fallen cashew fruits and the cultivation of shorter coconut tree varieties to reduce labor intensity and improve efficiency during plucking and extraction.

Moreover, the study identifies opportunities for mechanization in juice extraction and fermentation processes, which not only enhance efficiency but also allow for better utilization of waste products generated during production. However, this shift towards mechanization raises concerns about maintaining traditional flavors and processes, highlighting the delicate balance between modernization and preservation of cultural heritage within the industry.

In the distillation phase, the harmonious integration of traditional and modern methods is observed, with producers employing a variety of techniques ranging from traditional copper 'bhan' to modern copper coils and alternative fuel sources like steam, gas, or electricity. Nonetheless, challenges such as wood scarcity and the seasonal nature of Feni production persist, calling for innovative solutions and sustainable practices to ensure continuity and quality in production.

Market dynamics also pose significant challenges, with the emergence of alternative products threatening to cannibalize the Feni market. To address this, standardized packaging, labeling practices, and branding strategies are proposed to provide clarity, legitimacy, and differentiation in the market. Additionally, financial complexities, including labor costs and seasonality, necessitate interventions such as mechanization subsidies and the exploration of cost-effective packaging alternatives to improve profitability and sustainability for producers. By addressing these challenges comprehensively and implementing thoughtful solutions, the Feni industry in Goa can navigate towards sustainable growth, ensuring the preservation of cultural heritage, economic viability, and competitiveness in the market.

The traditional Goan cashew liquor, is the result of concerted efforts by both the Goa government and local stakeholders. The government has taken proactive measures such as organizing an annual Feni festival, featuring competitions and workshops on Feni making. Additionally, the safeguarding of Feni's geographical indication (GI) status ensures that only authentic Goan Feni carries the label. Feni tourism is actively encouraged through dedicated circuits, tasting tours, Feni museums and collaboration with hospitality establishments. Local stakeholders, including dedicated producers, enthusiasts, and the hospitality sector, contribute significantly. Feni producers focus on enhancing product quality and exploring new flavors. Enthusiasts organize events and educational workshops, while restaurants and bars increasingly incorporate Feni into their menus, expanding its reach.

These collaborative initiatives have propelled Feni's popularity, leading to exports beyond Goa and international recognition. The shared commitment of the government and stakeholders reflects the belief in Feni's intrinsic value to Goan culture and its potential for global success.

To further promote Goa as an Alcohol Tourism destination, drawing inspiration from indigenous alcoholic beverages worldwide and recognizing their role in enhancing the destinationscape, several strategies can be considered. First and foremost, the diversification of alcohol-related tourism experiences can be explored. This could include curated tours that not only showcase the production of Feni but also delve into the rich cultural and historical aspects of its making, providing tourists with a holistic understanding of the drink's significance in Goan heritage. Creating themed Feni museums and immersive visitor centers can add an educational and interactive dimension to the tourism experience. These spaces can offer insights into the traditional methods of Feni production, its evolution over time, and its

impact on the local community. Moreover, collaborating with local artisans to craft unique, alcohol-related souvenirs can contribute to the overall tourism appeal.

Culinary tourism can be intertwined with alcohol tourism by promoting the pairing of Feni with authentic Goan cuisine. Specialized Feni tasting events and festivals, featuring local chefs and mixologists, can attract connoisseurs and enthusiasts alike. This approach aligns with the global trend of experiential tourism, offering visitors a chance to engage with the destination through their taste buds. Strategic partnerships with the hospitality sector can further elevate Goa's status as an Alcohol Tourism destination. Establishing Feni bars, where visitors can savor diverse Feni varieties and cocktails, would provide a unique and memorable experience. Additionally, collaborating with travel agencies to incorporate alcohol-themed itineraries, including visits to Feni distilleries and cultural events, can attract a broader audience. Furthermore, leveraging digital platforms and social media to promote Goa's alcohol tourism can enhance visibility and reach a global audience. Engaging storytelling, virtual tours, and online workshops can create anticipation and interest, encouraging potential visitors to include Goa in their travel plans. By embracing these multifaceted approaches, Goa can position itself not only as a destination for Feni enthusiasts but also as a hub for alcohol tourism, celebrating the diverse and culturally rich world of indigenous alcoholic beverages.

Suggestions

This study presents a few limitations that warrant consideration in the interpretation of its findings. The study's sample size, although diverse, may not encapsulate the full spectrum of the industry, potentially overlooking nuances in smaller or larger-scale operations. The subjectivity inherent in in-depth interviews introduces the possibility of individual biases, influencing the outcomes of the study. Furthermore, the dynamic nature of the Feni industry especially with the implementation of Goa Feni Policy 2021 poses a challenge, as findings may become outdated over time, emphasizing the need for ongoing research to capture and understand industry changes post implementation.

Despite the aforementioned limitations, this study opens avenues for future research that can enrich our understanding of the Feni industry and guide its sustainable development. Longitudinal studies tracking changes in Feni production practices over time would contribute valuable insights into industry evolution and adaptation to emerging trends. Exploring tourists' perspectives on Feni as a Tourism product could offer insights into market

dynamics and aid in shaping industry strategies. Investigating the impact of policies, such as the Goa Feni Policy 2021, on industry dynamics and proposing potential improvements or adaptations for policy frameworks would be crucial. Comparative studies with other countries renowned for traditional alcoholic beverages can offer insights into global trends, fostering cross-cultural learning and collaboration. Addressing these research opportunities will undoubtedly contribute to the knowledge base surrounding Feni production and support the industry's sustainable evolution.

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