

BHANG

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1. Core Definition

Bhang is a traditional, aromatic preparation derived from the mature leaves and female buds of the **cannabis plant**, specifically *Cannabis sativa* or *Cannabis indica*. Unlike modern forms of cannabis consumption such as smoking hashish or refined oil extracts, bhang is consumed orally, typically as a viscous paste, a confection, or most commonly, a liquid decoction known as **Bhang Thandai**. Historically and culturally restricted almost entirely to the Indian subcontinent, its significance extends far beyond recreational use, deeply embedding it within indigenous spiritual practices, particularly within Hinduism and Ayurvedic medicine.

The preparation methods utilized for bhang dictate a fundamentally different pharmacological profile compared to inhaled cannabis. Since cannabinoids like **tetrahydrocannabinol** (THC) are lipid-soluble, traditional bhang preparation involves grinding the plant material and integrating it thoroughly into fatty mediums such as milk, ghee (clarified butter), or rich, oil-based confections. This necessary process allows the psychoactive compounds to be effectively absorbed through the digestive tract. The resulting effect is characterized by a significantly delayed onset, often taking one to three hours, but a notably prolonged duration, sometimes lasting six to twelve hours, contributing to its ceremonial and meditative utility.

Crucially, bhang typically refers to preparations made from the leaves (pattis) and flowering tops, which historically contain lower concentrations of THC compared to pure resin (charas) or potent modern strains. This often results in a milder, more manageable intoxication, which is why the source content identifies it as a **mild preparation**. Its mildness, combined with its traditional use blended with various spices and flavorings--such as rose water, cardamom, and saffron--distinguishes it as a culturally specific psychoactive food item rather than merely an unadulterated drug. The term itself is often used metonymically to refer both to the raw plant material used and the final, consumable product.

2. Etymology and Historical Development

The term **Bhang** has deep linguistic roots in Sanskrit, underscoring its antiquity within the Indian subcontinent. References to cannabis and its preparations appear in some of the oldest religious and medical texts. Within the Atharvaveda (c. 1500-1000 BCE), one of the four foundational texts of Hinduism, cannabis is listed as one of the five sacred plants, indicating its spiritual and medicinal recognition from the earliest recorded periods of Indian civilization. It was revered not only for its intoxicating effects but also for its capacity to alleviate anxiety and facilitate profound meditation,

leading early scholars to categorize it as a sacred entity.

Throughout the Ayurvedic tradition, bhang was systematically cataloged and incorporated into pharmacological formularies. Classical medical texts detail precise methods for its purification and combination with other herbs to treat a wide range of conditions, signifying that its use was managed and codified within an established intellectual framework. Its historical use was so pervasive and integrated into the social fabric that it transcended class and regional boundaries, maintaining a consistent presence in rural and urban life, particularly as an aid for laborers seeking respite from physical exertion and heat, and as a common component of communal religious gatherings.

The most detailed historical account of cannabis use in India, including bhang, comes from the influential Indian Hemp Drugs Commission Report of 1894, commissioned by the British colonial government. This exhaustive study confirmed that bhang was widely consumed, especially among Hindus, and concluded that moderate consumption posed minimal social or health risks. The commission's findings are pivotal, as they established a documented historical precedent showing that traditional consumption patterns, especially involving the less potent bhang preparation, were remarkably stable and did not lead to widespread social disruption or criminality, contrasting sharply with colonial anxieties regarding drug use.

3. Key Characteristics and Preparation

The key characteristics of bhang are primarily defined by its unique sensory profile and its fundamental distinction from smoked cannabis. When properly prepared, bhang possesses an intensely aromatic quality, which results from the combination of the plant's terpenes and the spices used to mask the earthy, sometimes bitter flavor of the cannabis material. The use of traditional ingredients such as rose petals, saffron, and various nuts transforms the preparation into a complex, sweet, and highly palatable beverage or confection, making it suitable for communal sharing during festivals.

The most iconic form of consumption is the **Bhang Thandai**, a cool, creamy beverage. Preparation involves meticulous grinding: the cannabis leaves and buds are first ground into a fine, smooth paste, often utilizing a mortar and pestle. This paste is then slowly emulsified into full-fat milk or yogurt, which acts as the crucial carrier for the non-polar cannabinoids. This mixture is subsequently strained and blended with traditional Thandai ingredients, including cooling agents like cucumber seeds, black pepper (which some studies suggest may influence THC effects), fennel, and copious amounts of sugar. The ritual of preparation is often as important as the consumption itself, emphasizing care, patience, and tradition.

Beyond the liquid Thandai, bhang is also consumed in solid forms, known locally as **Bhang Goli** or **Bhang Halva**. Golis are small, spherical confections made by mixing the cannabis paste with

ghee, sugar, and various binding agents, creating a discrete, potent edible similar to a Western-style cannabis truffle. Halva involves cooking the paste into a dense, sweet dessert. These solid forms are particularly favored by ascetics or those engaging in lengthy periods of meditation or travel, as they offer an easily portable and long-lasting method of ingestion. The precise control over dosage in these solid forms is often difficult, necessitating reliance on the skill and experience of the traditional preparer.

4. Cultural and Religious Significance

Bhang holds unparalleled cultural significance, primarily centered around the veneration of **Lord Shiva**, one of the principal deities of the Hindu pantheon. Shiva is often mythologically associated with the consumption of cannabis, which is believed to aid him in deep meditation and transcendence. According to religious belief, bhang helps devotees focus their minds, detach from material distractions, and experience a state closer to Shiva's divine consciousness. This association elevates bhang from a mere intoxicant to a sacrament (prasad), making its ritual consumption an act of devotion and spiritual purification.

The consumption of bhang reaches its zenith during two major Hindu festivals. During **Maha Shivaratri**, the "Great Night of Shiva," devotees often consume bhang as a means of honoring the deity and achieving the meditative calm associated with him. More universally, bhang is central to the celebrations of **Holi**, the Festival of Colors. During Holi, the consumption of Bhang Thandai is widely accepted and even encouraged. It serves as a social lubricant, reducing inhibitions and facilitating the communal joyous atmosphere of the festival, where social structures are temporarily inverted or dissolved through play and shared intoxication.

Furthermore, bhang plays a vital role in the ascetic practices of various sects of **Sadhus** (holy men) across India. Certain groups, particularly Shaivite ascetics like the Aghori, rely on cannabis consumption, including bhang, as an integral tool for spiritual discipline. They utilize it to cope with extreme physical conditions, maintain intense concentration during prolonged meditation, and deliberately cultivate a sense of detachment (vairagya) from worldly existence. For these practitioners, bhang is not a substance of pleasure but a key aid in achieving difficult yogic states and philosophical realization.

5. Traditional Medicinal Uses

As documented in historical Ayurvedic and Unani medical texts, bhang was utilized extensively as a versatile therapeutic agent. Its properties were recognized primarily as an analgesic, an anodyne (pain reliever), and an antispasmodic. The source content notes its use as an **appetizer** and a **sleep aid**, two of its most common traditional applications. As an appetizer (deepana), it was prescribed to stimulate the digestive fire (agni), making it useful for treating anorexia or general

lack of vitality. Its calming, hypnotic effects made it a primary remedy for treating various forms of insomnia and restlessness.

Beyond these common uses, traditional practitioners prescribed bhang for complex conditions, often combining it with specific herbal mixtures. It was historically used to treat gastrointestinal disturbances, including diarrhea and dysentery, due to its documented effect in slowing gut motility. Furthermore, its antispasmodic qualities made it effective in managing muscle spasms and cramps, and it was occasionally used to mitigate symptoms of asthma. The traditional medical system viewed cannabis as having both hot (ushna) and dry (ruksha) qualities, necessitating careful prescription and dosage control to avoid imbalances within the body's doshas.

The efficacy of bhang in traditional medicine is largely attributable to the complex synergy of cannabinoids, terpenes, and flavonoids present in the raw material, which interact with the human endocannabinoid system. While modern pharmacological research is now validating many of these historical uses--such as its potential for pain relief and appetite stimulation--traditional preparation methods, which involve water-based heating and infusion into fats, differ significantly from modern pharmaceutical extraction techniques. This difference means that the traditional bhang consumed today may possess a holistic range of effects not entirely replicated by isolated cannabinoid drugs.

6. Modern Legal Status and Impact

The modern legal status of bhang in India presents a unique dichotomy within global drug policy. While the comprehensive Narcotics Drugs and Psychotropic Substances Act (NDPS) of 1985 strictly prohibits the cultivation, possession, and sale of cannabis resin (charas) and flowering/fruited tops (ganja), the Act contains a crucial exemption regarding **bhang**. The law defines "cannabis" in a manner that generally excludes the leaves, which form the primary base of traditional bhang preparations. Consequently, the sale and consumption of bhang are regulated by individual state governments, often through licensed, authorized shops (Bhang Shops).

This legal loophole, which protects a culturally and religiously sanctioned practice, reflects the government's recognition of bhang's deep historical integration into Indian society. In states like Uttar Pradesh and Rajasthan, bhang is sold openly and legally in designated retail establishments, particularly during festivals. However, this legal tolerance often clashes with international drug treaties, such as the UN Single Convention on Narcotic Drugs, which generally seeks to restrict all forms of cannabis. India maintains its distinction, largely based on the cultural necessity and historical evidence presented by the 1894 Commission.

The modern impact of bhang is increasingly influenced by tourism and commercialization. While licensed shops maintain traditional preparations, the rise of recreational interest, especially among foreign visitors, introduces challenges regarding quality control and dosage. The traditional preparer understood the variability of potency, but modern commercial pressures can lead to

inconsistent products. This tension exists between maintaining the integrity of a religious sacrament and managing a quasi-legal psychoactive commodity in an increasingly regulated global environment.

7. Debates and Pharmacological Criticisms

Despite its cultural acceptance, bhang remains the subject of ongoing debates, particularly concerning public health and pharmacological risk. A primary criticism revolves around the difficulty of dosage control in edible preparations. Because the effects of orally ingested cannabis are delayed, novice users or those unfamiliar with the preparation may consume excessive amounts while waiting for the initial effects, leading to severe intoxication, panic attacks, or prolonged psychological discomfort (often referred to as 'greening out').

Pharmacological research also highlights risks associated with chronic, heavy use. While the 1894 report minimized concerns about addiction, modern understanding acknowledges the potential for psychological dependence and chronic health issues associated with habitual cannabis consumption, regardless of the method of ingestion. Concerns also focus on the potential for adulteration or contamination in unregulated street bhang, posing risks that authorized, licensed preparations attempt to mitigate through oversight.

Furthermore, there is an academic and cultural debate surrounding the commodification of bhang. Critics argue that the widespread commercial sale and recreational use--especially outside the specific ritual contexts of Holi or Shivaratri--dilute its sacred nature and diminish its spiritual significance, reducing an ancient sacrament to a casual intoxicant. Preserving the context of consumption is viewed by many traditionalists as essential to respecting the heritage of the substance and preventing its misuse. The challenge for regulatory bodies remains balancing cultural preservation, public health safety, and compliance with increasingly stringent global narcotics standards.

Further Reading

[Bhang \(Wikipedia\)](#)

[Indian Hemp Drugs Commission Report, 1894-1895](#)

[Traditional Uses of Cannabis in Ayurveda and Unani Medicine](#)

[Cannabis in India: Historical and Legal Context](#)