

Indian Bhang: A Comprehensive Overview

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Abstract

This document provides a full-spectrum exploration of Indian Bhang, the traditional cannabis preparation consumed in India for centuries. It examines the history, recipes, science, cultural practices, health aspects, warnings, and legal status of bhang in India and abroad. Drawing from open-source intelligence (OSINT), contemporary cannabinoid research, and historical sources, this briefing aims to give policymakers, researchers, entrepreneurs, and cultural analysts a comprehensive understanding of bhang.

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1 Historical & Cultural Context

Bhang is deeply rooted in Indian history and spirituality. Its origins can be traced back thousands of years, with mentions in ancient Hindu scriptures. It is referenced in the Vedas, where it is described as one of the five sacred plants imbued with strong spiritual potency. The Cannabis Museum in Amsterdam provides a concise history of this ancient connection (<https://cannabismuseum-amsterdam.com/bhang-history>).

Bhang is most closely associated with Lord Shiva, one of the principal deities of Hinduism, who is often referred to as the “Lord of Bhang.” According to religious lore, Shiva used bhang to focus his meditation and channel his divine energies. This sacred association is also noted in the Atharvaveda, which describes cannabis as a plant that relieves anxiety. Leafly documents this long-standing tradition in its article on the subject (<https://www.leafly.com/news/cannabis-101/bhang-indias-traditional-cannabis-edible>).

Beyond its spiritual significance, bhang held a prominent place in traditional Indian medicine (Ayurveda). It was traditionally used to relieve a variety of ailments, including fever, dysentery, and sunstroke. It was also prescribed as a digestive aid and even as an aphrodisiac, showcasing its versatility in ancient therapeutic practices. This medicinal use is also covered by Leafly in the same article.

During the colonial period, the use of bhang in India was documented by European explorers and physicians. The Portuguese physician Garcia de Orta, who lived in Goa in the 16th century, was one of the first Europeans to provide a detailed account of bhang and other Indian medical practices. These historical records provide valuable insight into the widespread use and cultural acceptance of the substance before the advent of modern narcotics laws. This is summarized in various historical archives, including the Italian Wikipedia entry on Bhang (<https://it.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bhang>).

2 Preparation & Recipes

2.1 Common Forms

Bhang can be prepared and consumed in multiple forms, with preparations varying based on regional traditions and the context of its use, whether ceremonial, medicinal, or recreational.

- **Bhang Paste:** This is the fundamental base for most bhang preparations. It is created by grinding fresh cannabis leaves and buds with a mortar and pestle into a thick, green paste. This paste can then be mixed into other foods or drinks. Source: <https://sensiseeds.com/en/blog/bhang-the-legal-indian-cannabis-drink/>
- **Bhang Thandai:** This is arguably the most popular and celebrated form of bhang. It is a sweet, milk-based beverage infused with the cannabis paste and flavored with a mixture of almonds, pistachios, fennel seeds, cardamom, rosewater, and other spices. It is particularly associated with the festivals of Holi and Maha Shivaratri. Source: <https://sensiseeds.com/en/blog/bhang-the-legal-indian-cannabis-drink/>

- **Bhang Lassi:** A variation of the traditional Indian yogurt-based drink, lassi, infused with cannabis paste. It can be sweet or savory and offers a cooling, potent method of consumption, especially popular in cities like Varanasi. Source: <https://www.healthline.com/health/bhang>
- **Bhang Goli:** These are small, green balls made from bhang paste, often mixed with sweeteners and spices. They are typically swallowed whole with water and are used for medicinal purposes or as a convenient form of indulgence during festivals. Source: <https://www.zamnesia.com/blog-bhang-indian-cannabis-beverage-n1103>

Regional and contemporary variants include creative concoctions such as Hot-Buttered Bhang, Cardamom-Rose Bhang, and other festive drinks that showcase the versatility of the cannabis preparation. Sources for these variations can be found across cultural and culinary websites (<https://www.holifestival.org/bhang.php>, <https://www.epicurious.com/recipes/food/views/bhang-thandai-56389451>, <https://www.reddit.com/r/trees/comments/1zr0m7/how-to-make-bhang/>, and <https://www.archanaskitchen.com/bhang-thandai-recipe>).

2.2 Traditional Recipe: Bhang Thandai (serves ~8)

Ingredients

- 14–28 g cannabis leaves or buds
- 2 cups warm water
- 4 cups warm milk
- $\frac{1}{2}$ cup honey or sugar
- $\frac{1}{4}$ cup almonds
- 1 tbsp ginger root, freshly grated
- 1 tbsp fennel seeds
- $\frac{1}{2}$ tsp garam masala
- $\frac{1}{2}$ tsp black pepper
- 1 tsp cardamom powder
- 1 tsp rosewater
- Pistachios for garnish

Process

1. Boil the cannabis leaves or buds in the warm water for approximately 10 minutes to soften them and activate the cannabinoids. Strain the mixture, reserving both the plant material and the water.
2. Using a mortar and pestle or a grinder, grind the softened cannabis with 2 tablespoons of warm milk to form a fine, smooth paste.
3. In a separate bowl, mix the cannabis paste with ground almonds, all the spices (ginger, fennel, garam masala, black pepper, cardamom), rosewater, and your chosen sweetener (honey or sugar).
4. Combine this spice and cannabis mixture with the remaining warm milk and the reserved water from the initial boil. Blend thoroughly until everything is well incorporated.
5. Chill the thandai in the refrigerator for at least two hours before serving. Garnish with chopped pistachios.

3 Scientific Profile & Pharmacology

When cannabis is ingested orally in preparations like bhang, its primary psychoactive component, delta-9-tetrahydrocannabinol (Δ^9 -THC), undergoes a different metabolic process compared to when it is inhaled. After ingestion, the THC is absorbed through the digestive tract and metabolized by the liver in a process known as first-pass metabolism. During this process, a significant portion of Δ^9 -THC is converted into a more potent metabolite: 11-hydroxy-THC.

This metabolite, 11-hydroxy-THC, is more effective at crossing the blood-brain barrier and has a stronger and longer-lasting psychoactive effect than its precursor. This pharmacokinetic profile explains why the effects of edibles like bhang have a delayed onset (30 minutes to 2 hours) but a much longer duration (4 to 12 hours) and often feel more intense than smoked cannabis. This profile is detailed in research available through the National Institutes of Health database (<https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC6312155/>).

Despite its millennia of use, there is still limited modern clinical research specifically distinguishing the comprehensive effects of traditional edible cannabis preparations like bhang from standardized, modern cannabis edibles or smoked cannabis. Integrating this pharmacological understanding with Ayurvedic traditions, bhang's role is viewed holistically as a substance that balances bodily energies (doshas) and aids in digestion, fever treatment, and stress relief.

4 Legal Framework & Regulation

The legal status of cannabis in India is complex, with a notable exception made for bhang. The primary legislation governing cannabis is the Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances (NDPS) Act of 1985. This Act prohibits the production, sale, and consumption of cannabis resin (charas) and flowering tops (ganja). However, the Act's definition of "cannabis (hemp)" explicitly excludes the leaves and seeds of the plant when they are not

accompanied by the tops. This creates a unique legal loophole that effectively permits the preparation and consumption of bhang, which is made from the leaves. This is referenced in Wikipedia's entry on Bhang (<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bhang>).

While the NDPS Act provides a federal framework, the authority to regulate and license the sale of bhang is delegated to state governments. This has led to a patchwork of different laws across the country.

- **Gujarat:** The state, which otherwise has strict prohibition laws, officially legalized bhang in 2017. Source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cannabis_in_India
- **Maharashtra:** This state imposes significant restrictions on bhang.
- **Uttar Pradesh:** The sale of bhang is permitted through licensed, government-regulated shops, especially in religious centers like Varanasi and during festivals such as Holi. Source: <https://www.bonappetit.com/story/bhang-thandai>

At the global level, international drug control treaties like the 1961 Single Convention on Narcotic Drugs also focus on cannabis flowering tops and resin, omitting the leaves from strict regulation. This leaves traditional preparations like bhang in a legal gray area internationally.

5 Health Benefits & Warnings

Traditional Ayurvedic texts and folk medicine attribute numerous health benefits to bhang. It has been historically used to improve digestion, act as an appetite stimulant, reduce fever, and relieve the symptoms of rheumatism. Further documentation of these traditional uses can be found at Leafly (<https://www.leafly.com/news/cannabis-101/bhang-indias-traditional-cannabis-edible>) and Hope Trust India (<https://hopetrustindia.com/understanding-bhang-use-in-india>).

Modern research acknowledges that cannabinoids can produce subjective effects that may be perceived as beneficial, such as euphoria, relaxation, pain relief, and appetite stimulation. However, the consumption of bhang is not without risks. Potential adverse effects include anxiety, paranoia, panic attacks, impaired memory, and disorientation, particularly with high doses or in inexperienced users. Source: <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC6312155/>.

In rare instances, heavy or prolonged consumption of bhang has been linked to cases of cannabis-induced psychosis. This is a severe mental condition characterized by a temporary loss of contact with reality. A case study on this phenomenon was published in the Addiction Journal (https://journals.lww.com/addictionjournal/Abstract/1980/05000/A_case_of_bhang_induced_psychosis.8.aspx). Due to its delayed onset, there is also a risk of overconsumption, where an individual consumes more before feeling the initial effects, leading to an unpleasantly strong experience later.

6 Cultural Significance & Contemporary Use

Bhang is inextricably woven into the fabric of Indian culture, particularly during religious festivals. It is most widely and openly consumed during celebrations such as Holi (the festival of colors), Maha Shivaratri (the great night of Shiva), and Vaisakhi (a harvest

festival). During these times, its consumption is seen as both a religious sacrament and a recreational social lubricant. Sources: <https://sensiseeds.com/en/blog/bhang-the-legal-indian-cannabis-drink/>, <https://www.leafly.com/news/cannabis-101/bhang-indias-traditional-cannabis-edible>, and <https://www.bonappetit.com/story/bhang-thandai>.

Devotees of Lord Shiva consume bhang to emulate their deity and to aid in spiritual introspection. During Holi, the consumption of bhang thandai is believed to elevate the festive spirit, break down social barriers, and enrich sensory experiences. It is said that under its influence, colors appear brighter, music feels deeper, and social interactions become more joyous and uninhibited.

In contemporary India, bhang has seen a culinary revival. Chefs and food enthusiasts are experimenting with the traditional preparation, inspiring new gourmet drinks and edibles. Modern recipes like Cardamom-Rose Bhang combine traditional flavors with sophisticated culinary techniques, appealing to a new generation. Recipe source: <https://www.epicurious.com/recipes/food/views/bhang-thandai-56389451>.

7 Warnings & Ethical Considerations

The responsible production, distribution, and consumption of bhang require adherence to several key principles to mitigate risks and respect its cultural heritage.

- **Dosing and Communication:** Clear communication about dosage and potency is essential to prevent accidental overconsumption, especially for individuals new to cannabis edibles.
- **Vulnerable Populations:** Bhang should not be consumed by children, teenagers, or pregnant or breastfeeding individuals due to the potential for adverse effects on development.
- **Legal Compliance:** Consumers and producers must observe local laws, which vary significantly from state to state in India and from country to country.
- **Harm Reduction and Authenticity:** Ethical distribution requires an emphasis on harm reduction, informed consent, and respect for the cultural authenticity of the product, avoiding purely commercial exploitation.

8 Forward-Looking Recommendations

To ensure the sustainable and ethical future of bhang, several strategic initiatives are recommended:

- **Sustainable Cultivation:** Encourage sustainable hemp and cannabis cultivation in India, with controlled cannabinoid profiling to ensure product consistency and safety for consumers.
- **Ayurveda-Inspired Products:** Develop modern, Ayurveda-inspired bhang products that merge cultural tradition with contemporary nutritional science and medical standards.

- **Responsible Market Access:** Preserve the cultural authenticity of bhang while making it accessible to international markets in a responsible and regulated manner.
- **Collaborative Research:** Foster collaboration between research institutions, policymakers, and local communities to ensure that bhang is studied, regulated, and shared ethically, honoring its long history while addressing modern public health concerns.

A Appendices

A.1 Sample Recipe: Cardamom-Rose Bhang

A modern interpretation of the classic Thandai, this recipe offers specific dosing information for controlled consumption. A full recipe providing approximately 13 mg of THC per $\frac{1}{4}$ cup serving can be found at Epicurious: <https://www.epicurious.com/recipes/food/views/bhang-thandai-56389451>.

A.2 Glossary

Bhang A traditional Indian preparation made from the leaves and sometimes buds of the cannabis plant, usually ingested as a paste or a drink.

Thandai A sweet, chilled, milk-based drink popular in India, often infused with nuts and spices. When cannabis is added, it is known as Bhang Thandai.

Lassi A popular yogurt-based drink from the Indian subcontinent, which can be made sweet or savory. Bhang Lassi is a cannabis-infused version.

NDPS Act The Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances Act of 1985, the primary federal law governing drug control in India.

A.3 Legal Table (India - Summary)

- **Gujarat:** Legalized in 2017.
- **Maharashtra:** Restricted.
- **Uttar Pradesh:** Licensed government shops are permitted.
- **Other states:** Typically tolerated, especially during festivals, though legal status and enforcement can vary widely.

References (Full URLs)

Cannabis Museum: <https://cannabismuseum-amsterdam.com/bhang-history>

Leafly: <https://www.leafly.com/news/cannabis-101/bhang-indias-traditional-cannabis-edible>

Wikipedia IT: <https://it.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bhang>

Sensi Seeds: <https://sensiseeds.com/en/blog/bhang-the-legal-indian-cannabis-drink/>

Healthline: <https://www.healthline.com/health/bhang>

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Holi Festival: <https://www.holifestival.org/bhang.php>

Epicurious: <https://www.epicurious.com/recipes/food/views/bhang-thandai-56389451>

Reddit: <https://www.reddit.com/r/trees/comments/1zr0m7/how-to-make-bhang/>

Archana's Kitchen: <https://www.archanaskitchen.com/bhang-thandai-recipe>

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Wikipedia Cannabis in India: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cannabis_in_India

Bon Appétit: <https://www.bonappetit.com/story/bhang-thandai>

Hope Trust India: <https://hopetrustindia.com/understanding-bhang-use-in-india>

Addiction Journal (case study): https://journals.lww.com/addictionjournal/Abstract/1980/05000/A_case_of_bhang_induced_psychosis.8.aspx