

THE EVOLUTION OF SOMA IN VEDIC MYTHOLOGY AND RITUAL

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ABSTRACT

The proposed research Paper entitled 'A Study of the Evolution of Soma in Vedic Mythology and Ritual' is divided into five chapters. The first chapter provides an introduction to the present work with a discussion on the Vedic Gods, association of Soma with other Gods, Vedic rituals and the ninth *maṇḍala* of the *R̥gveda*. The second chapter deals with characteristics of the God Soma and his medicinal power. The third chapter deals with the rituals of *Somayāga* and interrelation of *Somayāga* with other *yāgas*. The fourth chapter deals with a study on the synchronization of rituals and myths of the God Soma and the fifth chapter resumes to its major findings and provides for the concluding observations of the proposed research work.

Summary Study of the Evolution of Soma in Vedic Mythology and Ritual

The God Soma is one of the prominent deities of the Veda. The poetry of the *R̥gveda* is mainly connected with the Soma ritual. As the ritual plays a very important role in *R̥gveda* it is only natural that Soma, the plant, the juice of which is so much used in the ritual is deified as one of the most important of Vedic God Soma. Soma, the Vedic God or Somaritual is the making of synchronization of myth and ritual.

Vedic Gods are thirty three in number, this total being several times expressed as thrice eleven. Eleven of the Gods are addressed as being in heaven, eleven on earth and eleven in the waters. The Gods obtained immortality by drinking Soma, which is called the principle of immortality in the Vedas. The benevolence of the gods resembles that of human being while the Soma is pressed, the offering is cast in the fire and priests attend to the intricate details of the ritual. The beverage of the Gods is Soma. The abode of the Gods is variously described as heaven, the third heaven or the highest step of *Viṣṇu*, where they live a joyous life exhilarated by Soma. Soma is an all powerful God. He is further like *Viṣṇu*, Indra and *Varuṇa*, the supporter of heaven and earth, of all Gods and human being.

Indra, who credits one fourth of the extent of the *R̥gveda*, is associated with Soma both in the mythology and rituals of the Vedas. Indra's excessive love for the Soma drink is beyond controversy. He is the best consumer of Soma. Before his confrontation with *Vṛtra*, he drank rivers of it to gain the strength needed to overcome the fearsome *Vṛtra*. It is Soma who gives strength to Indra and enables him to conquer his enemy *Vṛtra*. Invigorated by Soma, Indra fights his enemies, kills them and devastates their cities. When Indra is entangled in long battles, his wife also offers the Soma drink to him in the house. Invigorated by Soma, Indra exhibits his martial feats; in the battlefield he enjoys Soma the best. Indra drank Soma just after his birth. He is the best Soma drinker and he is the lord of Soma. Indra is the only deity to enjoy all the three oblations and the midday oblation was solely for him. Soma has an intimately close connection with Agni because of the equality that is drawn between its inebriating qualities and the subtlety of flames respectively. Both Soma and Agni were major rituals described in the *R̥gveda*; therefore, they were both distinctly connected in their roles regarding communication with the other Vedic deities. Agni is the fire of ritual and this mediator between men and the Gods and Soma is the hallucinogenic drink of the ritual. *Varuṇa* is the most prominent of the celestial Deities. He is very closely associated with Soma, in Soma's incarnation as the drink of the Gods. *Varuṇa* sits on the strewn grass at the ritual and like other Gods he and Mitra drink Soma. Gandharva is moreover, in the *R̥gveda* often associated with Soma. He guards the place of Soma and protects the races of the Gods. Observing all the forms of Soma, he stands on the vault of heaven. Together with Parjanya and the daughter of the Sun, the Gandharvas cherish Soma. Through Gandharvas mouth the Gods drink their draught. Soma is further said to have dwelt among the Gandharvas or to have been stolen by the Gandharva *Viśvavasu*, but to have been bought from the Gandharvas, as they were fond of females, at the price of the Goddess *Vāc*. Maruts are also associated with Soma. In rituals, the Maruts

are offered with the usual Soma libation. The Maruts are the regular enjoyers of the midday Soma libation along with Indra and with other Gods as well.

God *Viṣṇu* is associated with Soma. During the *Ātithya iṣṭi* of the Soma ritual which is dedicated to him before the *Upaśad* during the *Udavasānīya* of the same. *Viṣṇu* is introduced into Soma ritual through Indra. The little attention paid to the God is all the more striking since during the Soma ritual *Viṣṇu* is not at all mentioned in the verses, but he is drawn into association in this ritual, as in others with various implements, particularly with the *havirdhāna* cart. *Bṛhaspati* or *Bramhanaspati* is also associated with God Soma. He, like Indra is called the Soma drinker. The twin divine physicians, the *Aśvins* hold an important position in the Vedic Gods. The *Ṛgveda* singers generally offer Soma libation to the *Aśvins*. For about fifty times they have been offered Soma in fifty one hymns dedicate to them. There exists a special relationship between Soma and *Sūrya*. The verses of *Ṛgveda* tell us of the meeting of Soma and the Goddess, the daughter of *Sūrya*. It is known that Soma is also *Vācaspati*. Soma and Rudra are invoked together in one and the same hymn of the *Ṛgveda*. They are dual divination, co-operative powers. The *Āpah* or waters are associated with God Soma. The waters of the sea are encompassed between heaven and earth. They flow in the wake of the Soma juice which is collected in vats as waters of the sea. The streams of *Saraswatī* and *Sindhu* have also the same course and may be identified with the Soma juice. The stream of *Saraswatī* is said to be pure, flowing from the mountains; she fills the terrestrial regions and wide atmospheric space and occupies three abodes. She invoked to descend from the sky to the ritual.

Soma is associated with Parjanya. The three reservoirs that pour their treasures around Parjanya are the three vats through which the Soma juice flows when purified. Soma is also associated with Yama. Soma is pressed for Yama, ghee is offered to him and he is besought to come to the ritual and place himself on the seat. Yama is invoked to lead his worshippers to the Gods and to prolong life. Along with *Varuṇa*, the *Aśvins*, Yama and *Pūṣan*, King Soma is also prayed to far deliverance from death and to save the worshipper from the south, the quarter of Yama. Terrestrial Soma is compared to the milk of Aditi and milk only can be meant by the daughter of Aditi who yields to Soma as he flows to the Vat. There may be similar allusion when priests with their ten fingers are said to purify Soma on the lap of Aditi. Soma in the Ninth *Maṇḍala* of *Ṛgveda* is in intimate relation to *Vivasvat*. Soma dwells with *Vivasvat* and is cleansed by the daughters of *Vivasvat*. The streams of Soma flow through the sieve having obtained (the blessing) of *Vivasvat* and producing the blessing of dawn.

The rituals are the first origin and basic dharma according to *Ṛgveda*. The sacrificial fire is central to all Vedic rituals. Ritual is the bearer of holiness, sin saver and well wisher for all. Ritual is performed to attain some desired fruit. Soma played an extremely important role in Vedic rituals. Soma ritual is one of the most important one which gradually assumed a cardinal and all important position in Vedic religion.

The Ninth *Maṇḍala* of the *Ṛgveda* is known as Soma *Maṇḍala*. It consists entirely of hymns addressed to Soma *Pavamāna* (purified Soma). The Ninth *Maṇḍala* is most pronouncedly a ritualistic *maṇḍala*. The principle governing the original arrangement of hymns in the family *maṇḍalas* seems to have been determined by three considerations— deity, metre and the number of verses contained in the hymns concerned. The Ninth *Maṇḍala* is distinguished from the rest by all its hymns being addressed to one and the same Deity Soma and by its groups being based not on identity of authorship, but of metre. The Ninth *Maṇḍala* of the *Ṛgveda* mentions many desirable qualities of Soma.

In the *Ṛgveda* the Ninth *Maṇḍala* comprises incantations sung over the tangible Soma while it is pressed by the stones, flows through the wooden strainer into the wooden vats in which it is ultimately offered on a litter of grass to the Gods as a beverage sometimes in fire or sipped and drunk by the holy priests. Soma in creeper form is crushed for procuring its juice for its useful role in the ritual. The portion of the Soma plant which compressed is designated as *amśu* i.e. shoot or stalk. The shoots swelling give milk like cows with their udders.

The entire Ninth *Maṇḍala* is devoted to the knowledge of Soma. The hymns say that Soma has the power to overpower everything and is considered a sage. He heals the sick and helps the blind and the lame. The Soma also has the capacity to drive away all sorts of evil from the earth and sky and also drives away the enemy. It is believed that it is Soma who prevents the greedy from getting what they want. Through the *Ṛgveda* hymns on Soma the worshippers have asked Soma to be merciful to them and not to wound them or to terrify them. The worshippers have also asked Soma not to enrage them. The prayer also says that Soma should help mankind to keep away from all evils and to free their minds from all kind of hatred and failures. In the hymns the process which is similar to the milking of rain out of the cold and the down pouring of the torrents upon the earth and to the pouring of seed into a womb to produce children and to the winning of race. Soma is further identified with more abstract and general forms such as navel of order, the pillar of the sky and the posture or lap of Aditi which is considered the highest heaven. The hymns say that honey of Soma is a great feast and is for the man who follows the right path. According to the hymns Soma bring in supreme ecstasy and Indra drinks it for its sweetness. In one part of the hymn it has been mentioned that the composer of the

hymn had invoked Indra to have Soma and in the process he had also tasted the ecstatic drink. It was under the hallucinating effect of the drink that he had asked the God for granting immortality to him. Finally it can be said that the hymns celebrate the effects of Soma, particularly the feeling of being set free and released into boundless open space and the belief that the drinker is immortal.

Soma has various characteristic features. Soma is the God of inspiration, the intoxicant who stirs the minds, lures the Gods and brings them to the place of worship. He caused the Sun to rise, impelled it, obtained and bestowed it and caused the dawns to shine.

Soma is said to have born as the lord of plants. He receives the epithet *Vanaspati*, 'lord of the wood' and is said to have generated all plants. He with the plants is invoked to remove sin and confers bliss. The branches of the Soma plant were used for the extraction of the juice, but not the fruits. The part of the Soma plant which is pressed is called *amśu*, shoot or stalk. Soma is the name of a mysterious plant from which a drink is pressed that is said to have a certain effect on the mind. Soma juice is glorified as a drink of longevity.

Based on the mixture of water with the juice, the connection of soma with the water is expressed in the most varied ways. Streams flow for him. The waters flow his ordinance. He flows at the head of streams. He is lord and king of streams, lord of spouses. The waters are his sisters. As leader of waters, Soma rules over rain. He produces waters and causes heaven and earth to rain. He streams rain from heaven. The Soma drops themselves are several times compared with rain. Soma regarded as a divine drink which bestows immortal life. Hence it is mythologically called *amṛta*, the draught of immortality. Soma is immortal and the Gods drank him for immortality. He places his worshippers in the everlasting and imperishable world where there is eternal light and glory and makes him immortal. The Soma drink was considered the most effective of all medicinal preparations. The Soma drink was an elixir that worked both psycho actively upon the brain and nervous system to induce an altered state of consciousness as well as medicinally upon the human body to cure it of various diseases. When imbibed Soma stimulates the voice, which he impels as the rower his boat. He is also said to raise his voice from heaven.

Soma is the soul of ritual, a priest among the Gods and apportions to them their share of ritual. Soma is a great fighter. He is a victor, unconquered in fight, born for battle. He is the most heroic of heroes. Soma is a fighter against darkness. He can also afford protection from foes. He drives away goblins and like some other Deities but more frequently, receives the epithet of goblin slayer. Soma is the only God who is called a slayer of the wicked. Being a warrior, Soma is said to have weapons. He is described as armed with a thousand pointed shafts and his bow is swift. The conception of Soma comes to be extended to that of a being of universal dominion, who is lord of the quarters, who performs the great cosmic actions of generating the two worlds, of creating or establishing heaven and earth, of supporting heaven and of placing light in the Sun.

As the Moon, Soma became equated with the God Candra, who originally was the Moon Deity. The Moon was considered the cup which held the drink Soma for the Gods, and one reason that the Moon waxed and waned, it was because the Gods were drinking down all the Soma; as it waxed, the God was recreating himself, only to be consumed again once the cup was again full. As the Vedic age ended and the Brahmans asserted themselves, the power of the Gods no longer came from Soma but instead from rituals made by humans; Soma came more and more to be just a God of the Moon. In later times, the waxing and waning of the Moon was due to a curse put on Soma. Soma had twenty seven wives (who correspond to the twenty seven stations of the Moon). They were all the daughters of the *Dakṣa*. *Dakṣa* felt that Soma was paying too much attention to one of his daughters, thereby neglecting the rest. He cursed Soma to die a withering death. But Soma's wives intervened, and so the death became only periodic, during half of the month slowly dies away, but is reborn and comes around again to full vigour.

Soma is the name of one of the most sacred plants of the ancient world. Soma, the plant with high medicinal properties is used in rejuvenation, *vajikaranam* and vitality. By the power of Soma both Gods and humans are able to produce the most unusual paranormal feats. The Soma drink was considered the most effective of all medicinal preparations. The Soma drink was an elixir that worked both psycho actively upon the brain and nervous system to induce an altered state of consciousness as well as medicinally upon the human body to cure it of various diseases.

The Soma drink was considered the most effective of all medicinal preparations. The Soma drink was an elixir that worked both psycho actively upon the brain and nervous system to induce an altered state of consciousness as well as medicinally upon the human body to cure it of various diseases. Both weakness and disease disappear in the physical body immediately after one drinks Soma, a unique and divine medicine. Among its benefits, Soma is said to heal eye diseases and give clearer sight. It heals the crippled by uniting and knitting their joints back together. It initials regeneration and replaces dislocated limbs. It is medicine for a sick man. Hence the God Soma heals whatever is sick, making the blind to see and the lame to walk. Soma is said to heal eye diseases and give clearer sight. It heals the crippled by uniting and knitting their joints back together. Soma is the guardian of men's bodies and occupies their every limb, bestowing length of life in this world. Soma refers something that produces happiness, peace, bliss, relaxation, enthusiasm, satisfaction and global vision. Soma is not only pure itself but also purifies everything else.

Soma played an extremely important role in Vedic rituals. *Somayāga* is divided on the basis of duration of time in three categories, namely the *Ekāha*, the *Ahinā* and the *Satra*. The *yāga* which is performed in one day in three *savannas* is called *Ekāha*. The *yāga* which take more than one day but not more than twelve days is *Ahinā* and the *yāga* lasting from more than twelve days to thousand years is called *Satra*. There are seven types of *Somayāga* viz *Agniṣṭoma*, *Atyāgniṣṭoma*, *Ukthya*, *Ṣoḍasi*, *Atirātra*, *Vājapeya* and *Aptoryama*. The *Agniṣṭoma* which is the first of the seven *Somayāgas* is the *prakṛti* or model. Every year in the Spring this ritual is to be performed by twice born caste with his wife. The *Somayāga* can be performed only by the *dvijas* or twice born, viz *Brāhmaṇas*, *Kṣatriyas* and *Vaisyas*. The juice of the creeper Soma is the main oblation in this ritual. The construction of the *yajñasālā* requires precise measurement which is to prepare in such a place away from cremation grounds, temples or temple grounds.

The priests after having been selected by the *yajamāna* decide a suitable and proper place for ritual (*devayajana*) in the morning. The three sacred-fires, namely the *Āhavaniya*, the *Gārhapatyā* and the *Dakṣiṇā* are established respectively with proper *vidhi*, in their holes (*kundas*) prepared already for them. In these fires, the other rituals like *Agnihotra* or *Darśapūrṇamāsa* etc are not performed. The *Prācinavamsaśālā* having four door and ventilation for air and light constructed over the established fires and the adjacent are according to the requirement. In the afternoon the *Dīkṣaniyeṣṭi* begins. The *yajamāna* gets his nail cut and shaved his hair and beard. He takes bath with the water kept in a special pot-already placed in the north to the *yajñasālā*. After taking bath he steps towards the north-east and wears a new but washed dress.

The wife of the *yajamāna* goes through these rites too (except cutting of the hair) guided by the *Pratiprasthata*-priest.

In this *iṣṭi*, *ekadasakapala-purodasa* for Agni and *Viṣṇu* and the *caru* for *Āditya* are prepared. The *Adhvaryu* anoints butter (*navanita*) from head down to the feet, on the body of the *yajamāna*, who stands to the east of the *yajñasālā*. After purifying the *yajamāna* with the pavitries, the *Adhvaryu* makes him enter the *śālā* along the back of the *Āhavaniya* and to the front of the *Gārhapatyā* and performs *Audgrabhanahoma*.

The *Adhvaryu* spreads two pieces of *kṛṣṇamṛga-carma* in the north of the *Āhavaniya* in such a manner that the upper parts (neck etc) of the *carma* should face the east. The *yajamāna* and his wife sit on these *carmas*. The priests cook the prescribed food for them on the *Gārhapatyā* and *Dakṣiṇā* – fires as per rules. The food for *yajamāna* is served in an iron pot and for his wife in a copper pot. After this rite the *yajamāna* observes specific rules in his behaviour.

Next day begins the *Prāyaniya-iṣṭi* (the opening sacrifice) in which the special-offering of *caru*, cooked in milk is offered to *Aditi* and the *ajya* to *Pathya svasti*, Agni, Soma and *Savitā*. The *sviṣṭakṛt*-oblation is offered to Agni- *sviṣṭakṛt*. The mantras of the *Anuvākya* are recited in place of *yajya* mantras and vice-versa in this *iṣṭi*.

After the '*Prāyaniyeṣṭi*' comes the *Somakrayani*-rite, in which the Soma, the king of herbs is taken in exchange of cow, gold, he goat and bull etc. The purchased Soma is brought to the *yajñasālā* in a *sakata* following the prescribed procedure; this Soma is placed to the south of the *Āhavaniya*. *Ātithyeṣṭi* Ritual is performed to welcome the Soma. The *navakapala-purodāsa* is offered to *Viṣṇu* in this *iṣṭi*. The *ajya* is placed in the pot called *tanunaptra-patra*, named after the deity *Tanunaptra*. All the priests and the *yajamāna* touch the *ajya* for the sake of mutual co-operation. After that the *yajamāna* takes the *Avantara-dīkṣa* and does not sleep that night.

At the end of the *Ātithyeṣṭi*, the *upasada iṣṭi* is performed two times daily for three days. The offerings of *ajya* are made to Agni, Soma and *Viṣṇu*, after taking the *ajya* eight times, with *chamas* in *juhu* and four times in *upabhṛta*. The *Brahmā* unites the Soma herbs and all the priests praise the Soma by reciting the mantras and touch the Soma at the same time.

The *Ādhvaryu* goes to the south of the *Āhavaniya* after taking the *Juhu* and *Upabhṛta* filled with *ajya* and offers its oblations to Agni, in the east, from the central point of *Āhavaniya*, to Soma in the centre and to *Viṣṇu* in the west from the central point of *Āhavaniya*.

The follow the *Pravargya* and the *Upasada* rite respectively or vice versa. Both are done twice a day in the morning and in the afternoon, at least for three days. The *pravargya* rite is performed either by laying out the *Pravargya*-apparatus in the form of a human body or by throwing them in water. In the *Upasada iṣṭi* the offering of *ajya*, taken from *juhu* are made to Agni and Soma, and from *upabhṛta* to *Viṣṇu*. *Mahāvedi* is constructed on the second-day of the *Upasads* and *Pravargyas*.

The *Agnipranayana* rite (Bringing fire from the *Āhavaniya* to the *Mahāvedi*) takes place on the fourth day, after performing the *Upāsadas* and the *Pravargyas* in the centre of the *Mahāvedi* becomes *Āhavaniya* for all rites in the Soma rituals and the original *Āhavaniya* becomes *Gārhapatyā*. When the fire is led to the *Mahāvedi*, two *Havirdhāna-maṇḍapas* are constructed, one in its north and the other in the south. Then four *Uparavas* (pits) are dug in the southern *Havirdhāna-mandapa*. The *Kuśa*-grass is strewn around these pits and *adhisavana* and *falaka* are placed on it. A

particular spot named *Khara* is made to the east of the *uparavas*. A shed called *sadas* and six *dhisnya* fire-holes are also constructed. Other preliminary rites of the *Agniṣṭoma* ritual are also performed before the main ritual.

The fifth day is called the *Sutyadivasa* because the Soma is pressed-out on this day and offered to the Deities. The priests get up in the second half of the night of the *Upavasada*-day i.e. the fourth day prepare the materials and perform the preliminary rites for pressing out the Soma, thrice, on the fifth day. Meanwhile the oblations are prepared for offering to Indra, *Viṣṇu*, *Pūṣan*, *Sarasvatī*, *Mitra* and *Varuṇa* in the principal ritual. The *Adhvaryu* first of all gives thirty three *yajñatanu*-offerings of *ajya* in the *Agnidhriya*-fire. Then the various patras and othersacrificial materials are placed on their respective place. The *Hotā*-priest recites the *prātaranuvāka* and then the *Adhvaryu* assisted by the *Pratiprasthata*, *Neṣṭa* and *Unnetā* performs the *Mahabhisava* (the great pressing of the Soma). The *Adhvaryu* sprinkles special nigrabhya-waters on the Soma herbs and presses them three times, with the help of *adhisavana*-falakas and collects the Soma in the *Upamsu-patra*. The same method is adopted to collect the Soma in the *Antaryama-patra*, *Aindravayava-patra*, *MaitraVaruṇa-patra*, *Aśvina-patra* and *Dronakalasa*. The offering of Soma is given in the *Āhavanīya*-fire, after chanting the respective *ṣṭomas* and *storas* for various Deities in the *Pratah-savana*.

Then begin the *Madhyandin-ssavana*. It is the climax of the ritual, first of all is performed the *Mahābhisavana* rite, in which the *Adhvaryu* fills the *sukra-patra*, *Manthin-patra*, *Agrayana patra*, *Ukthya-patra* and *Marutvatiya-patra* with Soma. Then the priest and the *yajamāna* come out of the *Havirdhāna-maṇḍapa* and recite the *Pavamāna-stotra* in the *Sadasa*. After the *gharma*-offerings, the *Paśupurodāsa* is offered to Agni and Soma. After that the *Adhvaryu* offers the *pradhanahoma*-oblations followed by one offering of *Ida* in the end. The offering of Soma from the various parts are made to the *dvidevatas*, namely the *Indravāyu*, *Mitrāvaruṇa* and *Aśvinau*. The priest and the *yajamāna* eat the *yajñaśeṣa* in the end.

In the evening the *Sayam-savana* or the *Trītiya-savana* begins. In the *savana* the method of *abhisavana* is the same as in the *prātaḥ* and *Madhyandin-savanas*, but the Deities, the offerings the *stotras* and the *ṣṭomas* are different. The *Adhvaryu* first of all fill the *Āditya-patra* then the *Agrayana*, *Samitra*, *Vaisvadeva Patnivrata*, *Hariyojana*, *Atigrahya*, *Ṣoḍasi*, *Daghigraha*, *Adabhya* and *Amśugraha-patras* with Soma, by pressing the Soma herbs and offers their oblations respectively to the respective deities after reciting the *ṣṭomas* related to them. Then the *yajamāna* and the priests come out of the *Havirdhāna maṇḍapa* and recite the *Pavamāna-stotra*. Then the *Paśupurodāsa* is offered to eleven Deities, namely Agni, *Sarasvatī*, Soma, *Pūṣan*, *Brhaspati*, *Viśvedeva*, Indra, Maruta, Aindragna, *Savitā* and *Varuṇa*. (It is the *Vikṛti* of the *Agnisomiya-Paśuyāga*). Then the *yajamāna* and the priests eat the *yajñaśeṣa* (the remains). The *Sayam-savana* ends with the *Patnī-samyāja* offerings.

After the *trītiya* (*Sayam*) *savana* the rite of *Avabhṛtha*, 'final bath' is performed. The priests, the sacrificer and his wife go to the river, taking with them almost all the *upakaranas* and the *patras* used in the *savannas*, smeared with Soma or *ghṛta* and put them in the river, after taking the final bath. After that they return to the *yajñaśālā* and perform the concluding rite the *Udayaniyeṣṭi*, following the method adopted in the *Prāyaniyeṣṭi*. The principal Deity in this *iṣṭi* is Agni. One offering of *astakapala-purodāsa* and one of *pancakapala-purodāsa* are offered to Agni. Only the *anuyāja*-offerings are made in it not the *prayāja*-offerings. The *anuvakya* mantras are recited in place of *yajñamantras* in it. The *Dakṣiṇā* to the priests is given separately according to the *vidhi*. Thus the *Agniṣṭoma* goes to an end with the *Udayaniyeṣṭi* rite.

Somayāga is an important ritual of the Vedic period. Soma ritual has obvious affinities with the ceremonies which all over the world have been used to realize the feeling of ecstasy which makes man attain the divine bliss and realization. To sum up, Soma ritual occupies an important place among the literature of the Vedas.

The Vedic texts are interconnected with numerous rituals, their references and ceremonies. The simplest and most popular form of Soma ritual is *Agniṣṭoma*. The *Agniṣṭoma* is obligatory like *Upanayana* for all the *Dvijaties* i.e. the *Brāhmaṇa*, the *Kṣatriya* and the *Vaisya*. This Soma ritual has close relation with other rituals. *Dīkṣaniyeṣṭi* is related to *Agniṣṭoma* or *Somayāga*. There are twelve *stotras* sung in this type of ritual. The last *stotra* is *Agniṣṭoma*. On the first day of the *Agniṣṭoma* sacrifice, the sacrificer invites these priests and engages them for the performances promising sacrificial fees or *dakṣiṇā*. This is called *Rtvika-varanam*. This is followed by the Initiation ceremony named *Dīkṣaniyeṣṭi*. In the *Dīkṣaniyeṣṭi* the *yajamāna* and *yajamānapatnī* are initiated. Both of them observe certain ceremonies like new born babies. That is why the initiation in the *yāga* is regarded as the second birth. After initiation the *yajamāna* and his wife perform all the sacrificial rites of the *Agniṣṭoma*. In the *Agniṣṭoma*, the oblation of Soma is followed by the oblation ceremony styled *Avabhṛtha iṣṭi*. In general the *Dīkṣaniyeṣṭi* is the right which is performed by the sacrificer and his wife before the *Somayāga*.

The *Rājasūya* is a religious ceremony which includes amongst other rites the performance of a number of *Somayāgas* of different kinds. It includes seven distinct *Somayāgas*, viz, *Pavitra*, an *Agniṣṭoma* as the starting *yāga* and followed by the *Abhisevaniya*, an *Ukthyayāga*, being the consecration or anointing ceremony. Then follows the *Daspeya*, an *Agniṣṭoma*, so called because ten priests take part in drinking the Soma juice contained in each of the ten cups. The Consecration ceremony consists of five days, viz, one *Dīkṣā* (initiation ceremony), three *upasads* and one Soma day, the particular form of *Somayāga* being the *Ukthya*.

Darśapurnamāseṣṭi is related with *Somayāga*. The *yāga* that is performed on New Moon day is called *Darśeṣṭi* and on Full Moon day *Pournamāseṣṭi* is performed. On *Darśeṣṭi* the *yāga* is performed for Agni and *Agnisoma* Deities. If the *yajamāna* has performed *Somayāga* then for one year he has to perform *Darśeṣṭi* for Indra and Mahendra Deities. This *yāga* is performed before or after *Somayāga* also. *Somayāga* is generally performed after the *Darśapurnamāsa*, the *Caturmāsya* and the *Paśubandhayāga*, but one can perform it even before these *yāgas* but necessary after *Agnyadhyayāga*. This *Paśuyāga* is a part of the *Somayāga* and is performed on the day of the Soma pressing and offering the seven *haviryajñas* the *Paśuyāga* is also separately mentioned as a kind of *haviryajñas* and is named as *Paśubandha*.

Rituals are actions that synchronize the world with myth. In Vedic thought, myth and ritual have both been regarded as very close to each other. The *Brāhmaṇas* have demonstrated the possibility of multifold interpretation of the Vedic myth. The Vedic ritual also has similarly been interpreted at various levels. The components of the *yajnika* pattern are seen as corresponding to the various organs and faculties of a human being and the coordination of mind, intellect and speech is desired for the performance of the ritual.

The myth, as it is presented the *Śat Br*, starts with the session (*satra*) for a *Somayajña* held at *Kurukṣetra* on a night of full moon, by a select group of Deities including Indra, Agni, *Viṣṇu*, Soma, Makha, *Viśvadeva*, *Aśvins*. All these Deities are connected, in one way or another with *pravargya*. After the usual preparations, the *Devas* desire a deeper knowledge of the ritual they are about to perform. So, they enter into a contest among themselves to see who will succeed in being the first to attain the end of the ritual. The palm of victory will be luminous glory to be then shared by the rest of the group. The winner is *Viṣṇu*, a Deity relatively new to the Pantheon, who beings to acquire prominence precisely because of this victory for which he became the ritual. But *Viṣṇu* is puffed up by his triumph which sets him on his way to becoming the Supreme God and forgetting the agreement to share his glory with the rest of the group, he takes up his bow and three arrows for self-defense and withdraws to a place apart, waiting and at the same time resting, erect and with his head reclined on the end of the bow. The other deities, defeated, sit around him, keeping a respectful distance from him, not daring to reclaim their share of the glory. Then, some ants (*varmi*), of the *upadika* species, offer to help them to recover the lost ritual in return for the gift of finding food and water even in the desert. The Deities agree. So the ants secretly approach *Viṣṇu* and start gnawing away at the bowstring. Finally it snaps, and the end of the bow on which *Viṣṇu* is confidently resting his head, is suddenly cut loose and severs his head clean off. With a 'ghrn' sound, the head falls and becomes the Sun, while the rest of the sacrificial body of the Deity lies stretched out pointing towards the East. Hence the names *gharma* and *pravargya Viṣṇu*, still resplendent even though decapitated is admired by the deities and finally recognized to be the great hero.

Again the Deities enter into a contest to take possession of the beheaded yet glorious sacrificial body of *Viṣṇu*. The winner this time is Indra who reaches him first and stretching himself out of him, limb on limb, takes on himself the glory of *Viṣṇu*. The Deities, then, now in possession of the ritual through Indra, their leader, proceed to it toil round it and enjoy the headless body as it is. Indeed, it seems that they take their delight precisely because it is headless. They divide it into three distinct parts: the morning-pressing, the midday pressing and the afternoon pressing which they then share among themselves in accordance with their needs. To the *Vasus* and Agni is offered, with the *Gāyatrī*, the morning one; to the Rudras and Indra, with the *Trstubh*, the midday one; to the *Ādityas* and *Viśvadeva*, with the *Jagatī*, the evening one.

While the Gods go on, thus satisfied with their headless ritual, there appears on the scene a *ṛṣi* of the *Atharvan* family, *Dadhyan Atharvan*, who having spied on the Gods from a far, now knows about the mystery of the sacrificial decapitation. He knows too how to put the head back on the Soma ritual and offers to demonstrate it to the Gods. These however, there and then turn him down. What is more, far from permitting him restore the head to the ritual, Indra forbids the *ṛṣi* from divulging the secret for otherwise he would cut off his head. Indra is overheard by the *Aśvins* who, we recall, were absent from the *Somayajña* and understanding the *Dadhyan Atharvan* knew a great liturgical secret went to him and insistently begged him to disclose to them the secret of how to make the sacrificial body whole again. The *ṛṣi* hesitates for he fears, the anger of Indra, now the Lord of the Gods. But the ingenious *Aśvins* devise a stratagem by means of which they replace the *ṛṣi's* head with that of a horse so that when Indra, enraged at the transgression of his command, makes good his threat and cuts off the talking head, they, the heavenly doctors, can easily return him his original head. When Indra sees that the secret is now out, he accepts in his own name and in that of the other Gods, even though reluctantly, the re-incorporation of the 'head' in the Soma ritual by means of the *pravargya* rite.

Even though the myth does not directly concern us, it is significant enough to have it narrated in such detail. It seems to refer to the time when *pravargya*, a simple morning offering to the *Aśvins* was incorporated into the whole complex of the Soma ritual offered to other Gods. It also reflects the resistance to it on the part of the traditionalists who maintained that it was possible to continue performing the Soma ritual as they had always done, without any addition of any sort. They had always regarded the rite of the three Soma-pressing perfectly complete in itself without needing any 'head' to be joined to it. Moreover, the inclusion in a rite already so potent by itself, of still another rite

which is a potent as *pravargya*, could give rite as in fact happened to an excess of sacred power causing problems within the performance of the rite. The myth's purpose is not only to teach deeper saving knowledge. Its principal purpose is to justify a liturgical reform and especially to explain how it is that a sacrificial session. At the same time, the myth points out the danger in which spiritual exaltation, unless adequately controlled, can put him who experiences it.

Conclusion

Soma is all powerful God. He represents a multifaceted state in the whole extent of the Vedic literature. Soma is the name of the plant from which Soma juice is extract and offered to the Gods. Being the most important of herbs Soma is said to have born as the lord of plants. He receives the epithet *Vanaspati*, lord of wood. So much of the mythology of Soma is clear enough; the actual plant lies immediately behind the God and explains his characteristics.

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