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THE VEDIC SOMA

*Dr. Sanjiban Sengupta, WBES
Associate Professor in Sanskrit,
Govt. Training College, Hooghly*

❖ **Abstract:**

Soma is a symbol for the aspiring Ananda, the touch of Bliss, from which, in the Vedic symbolism, the existence of Humanity, this thinking being, is drawn. Soma being a plant is seen as a sacred offering to the Vedic gods. This external sacred ritual is basically the symbolism of the inner sacrifice, a deeper life of Mysticism. Soma offers strength to ritualists alongwith the gods since Indra slew Vritra by the power of Soma. Soma appears to be a plant by which a drink is prepared through pressing and it is called to have a certain positive effect on the mind of the drinkers. The Soma has been recognized as one of the effective elements of all medicinal preparations in the Vedic era. The juice of the creeper Soma is the main oblation in this ritual. Sri Aurobindo gives us to know that it helps man to enlighten and purify his mind and heart out of narrowness and obscurity turning from impurity to purity, darkness to enlightenment, from dark obscurity to immortal Ananda. So by dint of Yogic practices of self-perfection all the elements of human viz., physical, vital, emotional and mental beings have to be purified to reveal the Divine Estacy, Bliss and Ananda. The ecstasy increasing through it in man exalts him to his highest possibilities and goads him capable of supreme experience. Thus, Soma seems to be one of the important aspects of Vedic ritualism, spiritual discourses alongwith one of the important subjects in medicinal world also.

❖ **Key words:**

Soma, Mysticism, Ephedra, worshipper, Somalata, Rejuvenate, Heal, Immortality, Health, Stamina, Strength, Divine, Medicine, Ritualism, Ritualists, Psycho-activity, Ecstasy, Longevity, Paranormal, Affects, Transcendental Bliss.

❖ **Introduction:**

"We have drunk the Soma, we have become the immortals
We have attained the Light, we have discovered the Gods."

Thus stands the exultant chant of the Rshi in the Rig Veda¹. Soma is a symbol for the aspiring Ananda, the touch of Bliss, from which, in the Vedic symbolism, the existence of Humanity, this thinking being, is drawn. Taittiriya Upanishada speaks for this Ananda as ethereal atmosphere of bliss and Ananda. Aitereya Upanishada sounds this Soma as the lunar deity. It

¹ Rigveda VIII.43.3

has to be distilled and purified and intensified until it takes its luminous forms, full of energy and swiftness. It is considered as the chief substance of the gods for the enjoyment and strength. The ecstasy increasing through it in man exalts him to his highest possibilities and goads him capable of supreme experience.

The ninth Mandala of Rigveda is being designated solely to Soma. Besides Indra and Agni, Soma appears to be the most popular ritual in both the Rigveda and in the Samaveda; whereas the Yajurveda speaks for Soma sacrifice as the highest sacrificial order. We find soma cult in the Samhita and Brahmana portion of the Vedas through legends and as discussion in Aranyakas and Upanishadas.

In Vedic rituals, Soma being a plant is seen as a sacred offering to the Vedic gods. The external sacred ritual is basically the symbolism of the inner sacrifice, a deeper life of Mysticism. Here Soma is referred being existed among all the plants² and there are so many types – water, especially of the Himalayans³ and the fire; it is believed that there is an element of Soma at every form of Agni (Fire). This cult of soma is absent in other worlds of existence except under a different nomenclature, 'Haoma' of Iran. Many researchers have pointed out that the ephedra plant seems to be the Soma plant of Vedic culture. Ephedra basically has grown up in land of Afghanistan and Iran and the Persians believe that it is the main Soma plant. The Ephedra plant even today is being seen at different parts of India being named as Somalata. But some of the researchers have believed that ephedra may not be the Soma plant as per the Vedic literature is concerned. The Atharva Veda⁴ refers five great plants of Soma of that era viz, *Marijuana* (barley) and *Darbha* (kusha), *Reed* (darbha) easily pressed for a juice like sugarcane and Marijuana, suggesting that mind-altering plant in connection with the plant of Soma. In Atharva Veda⁵ we have also seen Soma's connection with a spicy nervine kushta and with fig tree Ashvattha growing in the Himalaya hills.

In the Vedic literature Soma's juice has been extracted through the stone alongwith through cooking by the help of grains viz., *Yava* (barley), *Go-dugdha* (milk) and *Dadhi* (curds). It has been occasionally mixed with *Ghrita* (clarified butter) and *Madhu* (honey). Sushrut, the great Ayurvedic doctor has mentioned twenty four Soma plants, available in the Himalayan ranges out of which eighteen plants, popularly known as nervine herbs are of the subject of present scientific research.

In yoga discipline, Soma appears to be an Amrita like viscous and during deep meditation it is being secreted from the pineal gland which drips down for mingling with the heart for the alignment of the heart and mind in proper suithing state. Soma through yogic practices influences the human chakra and flows down throughout the body. This inner meaning of Soma is the real subject of the Vedic hymns. Thus, Soma seems to be one of the important aspects of Vedic ritualism, spiritual discourses alongwith the important subject in medicinal world.

❖ **Objectives of the Study :**

- 1) To have outlines of the roles of the Soma sacrifice in Vedic literature
- 2) To know a brief characteristic feature of Vedic Soma

² Rigveda X.97.7

³ Rigveda VII.49.4

⁴ Atharvaveda XI.6.15

⁵ Atharvaveda XIX.39.5, 6

- 3) To focus on the process of pressing Soma juice for the oblation in the Soma sacrifice.
- 4) To judge the medicinal elements of Soma plant used in the Soma sacrifice
- 5) To get a clear idea of the Soma Yaga as a ritual in Vedic literature
- 6) To discuss with the symbolism of Soma sacrifice of the Vedic literature

❖ **Characteristics of Soma sacrifice in Vedic literature:**

Soma offers strength to ritualists alongwith the gods since Indra slew Vritra by the power of Soma, we know. Through his power Agni retains his sway, Sun shines and dawns⁶, gives lights in the sky⁷, his worshippers receive light for themselves⁸. Being the lord of plants⁹ and lord of the wood¹⁰ Soma is being invoked for eradicating sin from the world of bliss¹¹. Rigveda refers Soma's dwelling in the mountain hills (*Giristha*) and developing there (*parvatavridh*)¹² alongwith his nature of intoxication being 'child of heaven'¹³.

The branches of the Soma plant are being pressed, popularly known as 'Amshu'¹⁴. Soma plant is not popular for its fruits but for extraction of the juice¹⁵ causing certain effect on the mind for having longevity. The colour of the plant varies viz, as brown (Babhru), ruddy (Aruna) and tawny (Hari) and is being purified with hands¹⁶, by ten fingers¹⁷, by the ten maidens¹⁸. Finally, Soma appears to be the prince of the wine of Ananda and delight.

In the Rig Veda we find incantations pouring while Soma is pressed through the stones, pouring with the strainer, maid of wood and is being drunk by the worshippers. Again, Soma is being described as a creeper, procured for its juice in the interest of the successful completion of Soma ritual. Here, Soma is classified into three types, for admixture (*Tryasir*)¹⁹ viz, with cow-milk (*Gavasir*), sour-milk (*Dadhyasir*) and barley (*Yavasir*) and is being pressed three times in a day.

In Satapatha Brahmana Soma is being treated as a divine drink which leads to immortality²⁰. He gives immortality to men alongwith the gods²¹. Soma plays the role of a stimulant for the development of the voice²² and thus has been referred as the lord of Speech²³. It is said that Soma helps the poet to compose a good poetry. Therefore, Soma is

⁶ Rigveda IX.28.5; Rigveda IX.37.4

⁷ Rigveda IX.85.9

⁸ Rigveda IX.35.1

⁹ Rigveda IX.114.2

¹⁰ Rigveda IX.12.7

¹¹ Atharvaveda II.10.2

¹² Rigveda IX.46.1

¹³ Rigveda IX.38.5

¹⁴ Rigveda IX.67.28

¹⁵ Rigveda X.85.3

¹⁶ Rigveda IX.86.34

¹⁷ Rigveda IX.8.4; Rigveda IX.15.8

¹⁸ Rigveda IX.1.7

¹⁹ Rigveda V.27.5

²⁰ Rigveda IX.106.8

²¹ Rigveda VIII.48.3

²² Rigveda VI.47.3

²³ Rigveda IX.26.4

regarded as a Kavi²⁴. He gives pleasure as a husband has been honoured by his wife²⁵ and leads ahead as a youth to the young maids²⁶.

❖ **Process of pressing Soma juice for the oblation in the Soma sacrifice:**

The soma has been mixed with water, with milk and with other elements. At first, the branches of the plants have been pressed through stones by ritualists and then it is strained with an element, made of sheep's wool for purification and trickle into a jar and finally is mixed with corns or with curds or with milk or with honey leading to fermentation and then has been offered for the gods and at length in the name of the gods the worshippers drink life to the lees.

Soma appears to be a plant through which a drink is prepared through pressing which is called to have a certain positive effect on the mind of the drinkers. This Soma juice is magnified being a drink for longevity. Thus, he is the lord of streams²⁷. It is said that Soma rules over rain water. He helps waters to cause to come down to earth from the heaven as a rain²⁸. Soma is again named as a drink which helps man to reach his divine life. Therefore, it is said to be the Amrta, which leads men to reach in the way of divinity. By drinking this Soma juice, the sages have become thus immortal²⁹.

❖ **Medicinal elements of Soma plant used in the Soma sacrifice:**

The Soma has been recognized as one of the effective of all medicinal preparations in the Vedic era. It is an elixir which is not only effective on psycho activity in human but also it works upon the proper functioning of the brain and nervous system of the human being. It also helps for stability of the consciousness of the being and works medicinally within the body and cure various diseases, if there be any.

Soma, the sacred plants of the ancient, possesses high medicinal values and helps rejuvenating the vitality in man. Thus, it acts as effective means for the treatment medically. Nervousness, weakness, anxiety and other diseases have been ameliorated after taking Soma juice, viz, Soma cures eye diseases and offers clearer vision; so to say, gives vision to the blind³⁰ and secondly, it heals the joints of the crippled³¹ and thirdly, leads to walk by those who are unable to walk properly³² and fourthly, it also arrests painful situations under control, and finally, annihilates disorderliness of a sick.

The therapeutic values in the essence of the Soma plants work upon the physical frame along with psycho-motor domain of the human. It symbolizes an altered consciousness that not only heals the physical frame but also rejuvenates the psycho-conscious elements of the human frame. Therefore, Soma sacrifice with the help of the sacred plants with its juice appears to be not only for the purpose of healing and rejuvenating on medicinal ground but also for achieving wisdom of immortality through the journey of ecstasy and transcendental bliss³³.

²⁴ Rigveda IX.96.18

²⁵ Rigveda IX.82.4

²⁶ Rigveda IX.86.16

²⁷ Rigveda IX.15.5

²⁸ Rigveda IX.49.1

²⁹ Rigveda IX.94.4

³⁰ Rigveda X.25.11

³¹ Rigveda VIII.48.9

³² Rigveda X.25.11

³³ Rigveda X.119.8

This juice of holy herb offers longevity of life and it protects from diseases. It works like drug in heart diseases as well as in psycho related disorders. One regains or enhances one's youth, strength, stamina, health and virility³⁴ after taking Soma drinks, a unique and divine medicine through which the weakness of man as well as disease of psychological disorder may slink away³⁵.

❖ Soma Yaga as a ritual in Vedic literature:

Soma sacrifice has played a formidable role in field of ritualism in the Vedic era. This sacrifice has three categories which have been done on the basis of duration of time, viz. Ekaha, Ahina and Satra. The sacrifice which is being performed in a day is designated as Ekaha, the sacrifice which continues more than a day but does not continue beyond twelve days is Ahina and finally the sacrifice which continues above twelve days but does not continue beyond thousand years is called Satra. There are seven types of Soma sacrifice viz Agnistoma, Atyagnistoma, Ukhthya, Sodasi, Atiratra, Vajapeya and Aptoryama. The Agnistoma, the first of the seven Somayagas, is the model in nature. Every year in the spring time this ritual is being performed. The juice of the creeper Soma is the main oblation in this ritual.

❖ Symbolism of Soma sacrifice of the Vedic literature:

Soma is the master of the wine of delight leading to immortality. The Soma-juice, offered in the external sacrificial oblation is nothing but the symbol of intoxicating juice of delight. The process in which the stalk³⁶ of the Soma plant, named Amshu, is being pressed with the help of pressing-stone, named as *Adri and Gravan* has been symbolized as thunderbolt, coming before the advent of the of rain drops in the land of ours. Thus, Soma has been purified through pressing for the seat of Heaven³⁷ by a strainer (*Pavitra*) and through this process of purification the pure streams enter into the wine bowl (*Chamu*), wherein the sacrificial oblation has been taken place, and finally has been kept in the jars of wine (*Kalasa*) for drinking. Here, the physical frame of man has been identified as the Soma jar and the purifier strainer is the mind or the mental being which has to be purified and enlightened through the strainer of wisdom (*chetas*) for the proper manifestation of the Transcendental Truth leading to immortality³⁸.

Here Soma has been regarded as Brahanaspate³⁹, the Soul-god who is giving the blessings for the divine Ananda (delight) leading to immortality. Here the mind has been regarded as the strainer and the purifying media is Soma through which the heart of human body has to be enlightened and purified⁴⁰. The transformation of the consciousness has to be enlightened into estacy and delight through divine Ananda and immortal Bliss.

Soma is the god of Ananda. Sri Aurobindo gives us to know that it helps man to enlighten and purify his mind and heart out of narrowness and obscurity turning from impurity to purity, darkness to enlightenment, from dark obscurity to immortal Ananda. As the Soma-wine drops from the strainer and then pervades into the jar, it goes into the concentrated consciousness and then encompasses the whole being leading infinite Ananda and joy. But Sri Aurobindo

³⁴ Rigveda IX.66.21

³⁵ Rigveda VIII.48.11; Rigveda VIII.72.17; Rigveda VIII.79.2; Rigveda X.25.11; Rigveda X.97.18

³⁶ Rigveda IX.67.28

³⁷ पवित्रं ते विततं ब्रह्मणस्पते

³⁸ प्रभुर् गात्राणि पर्यु एषि विश्वतः

³⁹ ब्रह्मणस्पते

⁴⁰ पवित्रं

has cautioned us that the over-flooding elixir wine in pursuance of the divine life may result violent ecstasy, devastating the surface personality and serious sufferings and treat in human life. The symbolism embided in the concept of kalash (jar) is unparallel, since kalash (earthen jar), remains partially raw even after passing through the flames of the fire does not work properly as a contenor of soma wine and finally ruins the costly liquid surely. Strong and over-dosed wine of elixir of estacy causes of difficulties and sufferings in life causing crisis physically and mentally. Self-perfection of all the elements of human endavour viz., physical, vital, emotional and mental will surely enable him for his desired purification and for revealing the Divine Estacy, Bliss and Ananda. Sri Aurobindo further reminds us of the fundamental teachings of Indian life that this physical frame is the Prathishta (pedestal) and one has to work hard to achieve true Truth and sublime Ananda widening wisdom through aspiration, rejection and surrender stenthening the power of physical (bodily), mental (chitta), vital (prana), psychic (Chaitta) and spiritual (adhyatmic) in the way of perfection and Siddhi.

❖ Conclusion

In the Vedic literature Soma appears to be a multi-dimentional powerful god. It is the plant from which extraction of the juice of Soma is being made for the offering of the gods. Again, it is a significant herb, popularly known as Vanaspati, the god of wood. It is a common belief in the Vedic culture that this sacred Soma is being symbolized, as if, it is very much present in all the plants⁴¹ and secondly, in the form of a water, flows down through the Himalayan rivers⁴² and thirdly, in the form of fire-Agni being the aspiration of the sacred ritual, mediates between men and the gods and finally, in the form of Soma juice, the divine drink of the ritual, upholds men and the gods towards the journey of perfection, the highest goal of one's sacred life.

The sacred external ritual symbolises of the inner Yajna of the human. The highest earthen place from where Soma plant is collected, appears to be the holy place of the sublime from which the flows of Supreme Ananda and divine Bliss are being trickle down and the alter of the ritual with all its performances is the blossom of the heart within wherein the sublime Annada lies with all its unknown and unseen happenings in the Mystic deeper life of the human.

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⁴¹ Rigveda X.97.7

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