

SIGNIFICANCE OF SOMA: THE NECTAR OF THE GODS

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Abstract :

Soma in ancient India a Plant, of which juice was fundamental offering of the Vedic sacrifices. There was great mysticism and spiritual power surrounding the plant. Soma plant is of great significance; it is defined as a composite of lunar energy. The plant is prominently called the nectar of gods. In scientific terminology, the Soma plant is known as Ephedra Gerardiana. This plant provides numerous boons to people. Soma is a mysterious plant and a hub of numerous medicinal benefits also.

Soma plant acquires an elaborative link with the Indian mythological history and culture. Soma drink was prepared by pressing the stalks of the some plant between stones and the juice was filtered through sheep's wool and then mixed with water milk, curds, ghi, barley and honey.

The great scriptures state that great gods including mighty Indra and Agni Deva, used to drink it and they were courageous and immortal because of it. Our great Purāṇas, including Ṛgveda and Gītā mention Soma plant's pious usage for medical and spiritual practices. This plant is considered the elixir of immortality.

'Soma' a ritual drink, was considered as the most precious and indispensable entity in the 120 hymns of the Ṛgveda. For example, the 9th maṇḍala of the Ṛgveda is also known as the soma maṇḍala consists of hymns addressed to 'soma pavamāna' (purified soma). 'Soma' was composed from a plant, most likely hallucinogenic and magical, which caused an overwhelming and empowering feeling of intoxication. This drink was also known as 'amṛta' or the wine of immortality. Being considered as the most precious liquid in the universe, soma, was used in all Vedic sacrifices to all gods, specially to Indra, the warrior god, and Agni, the divine representation of fire. Gods consumed the soma in copious quantities to sustain their immortality.

'Soma' played an important role in Vedic rituals. Some of the most famous were the consecration of the king (rājasūya) 'the drink of power' ritual (vājapeya) and various fire rituals (agniṣṭoma).

Due to the supernatural powers bestowed upon those who drank this drink, soma gradually Sturned to be portrayed as a god. In the Ṛgveda, the Vedic god Soma was considered to be the king of plants and the bestower of immortality. Soma's divine dominion was held over plant life.

In the later Vedas, God soma was identified with the moon god, chandra, a god of the flowing waters, a god of inspiration and ecstasy. Soma, as a god, is believed to be the personification of soma juice. Thus few myths have been found in various Vedic texts regarding the origin of Soma as god.

Besides, being recognized as an essential entity of Vedic sacrifices and deity soma was also regarded as the king of medicinal herbs and was titled as 'supervisor of herbs' by several texts like the Atharvaveda.

Thus, we notice that the 'soma' was a celebrated plant. It played a vital and an influential role in Vedic tradition and was perceived as a giver of not only immortality but also healthy and long life, happiness, courage, strength and above all considered as the bestower of wisdom, understanding and creativity.

Key Words : Ritual drink, soma pavamāna, hallucinogenic, intoxication, amṛta, the drink of power ritual, the king of plant, medicinal herbs, supervisor of herbs, celebrated plant, bestower of immortality, bestower of wisdom, understanding and creativity, giver of healthy and long life, happiness and strength, wine of immortality, moon god, chandra, god of inspiration and ecstasy.

'Soma' a ritual drink, was considered as the most precious and indispensable entity in the 120 hymns of the Ṛgveda. For example, the 9th maṇḍala of the Ṛgveda is also known as the soma maṇḍala consists of hymns addressed to 'soma pavamāna' (purified soma).

'Soma' was composed from a plant, most likely hallucinogenic and magical, which caused an overwhelming and empowering feeling of intoxication. This drink was also known as 'amṛta' or the wine of immortality. According to Vedic narrative, the soma plant grew on a mountain, protected by hundred concentric fortress walls and guarded by an archer. Manu, the first sacrificer, sent a falcon to steal the Soma and brought it back to him, so that he could offer it to Indra. The story evolved in the later Vedic and Epic tradition, according to which the eagle Garuda stole the 'Soma' from heaven and from Indra, although he eventually returned it to Indra.

'Soma' played an important role in Vedic rituals. Some of the most famous were the consecration of the king (rājasūya), 'the drink of power ritual (vājapeya) and various fire rituals (agniṣṭoma). Middle and late Vedic literature describe the classical Vedic rituals in detail. Among these rituals, the Soma rite was the most prestigious and complex. In this ritual, stalks of the Soma plant were first soaked in water and then crushed. The liquid was extracted from the plant by pressing or crushing its stalk for offering to gods and for drinking. After extraction, the juice was purified by the presiding priest by filtering it through sheep's wool and then collected it in tubs. After that the collected liquid was mixed with milk, water, curds, ghee, barely and honey. The liquid was offered into the fire for the gods and drunk by the priest and by the sacrificer of the rite. During the principal day of a Soma sacrifice, there were three rounds of Soma preparation and offering, one each in the morning, midday and evening.

Being considered as the most precious liquid in the universe Soma, was used in all Vedic sacrifices to all gods, specially to Indra, the warrior god and Agni, the divine representation of

fire. Gods consumed the Soma in copious quantities to sustain their immortality. The core Ṛgveda is primarily a liturgical collection for Soma rites. The principal collection of hymns dedicated to Soma in the Ṛgveda is book 9, which contains 120 hymns. These hymns were chanted as the Soma was pressed and poured through the filter into vessels.

In early Vedic period, in the Soma rites – participation of both gods and men was essential. But goddesses and women were both excluded from the drinking of the liquid. God, Indra, was the dominant divinity in the Soma rites. According to Ṛgveda (RV. – 5.29.7), Indra drank three lakes of Soma in order to strike down Vṛtra, the paragon and paradigm of all obstacles.

In some rites, men both participated as offerers and drinkers of Soma. Receiving the Soma juice, lord Indra, was able to overcome all obstacles and gained cattle and other forms of wealth. Thus, by performing the Soma rite Indra became an true Aryan. In the Ṛgveda ‘Soma’ is considered as the ‘amṛta’. Those who drink the liquid become ‘deathless’, which means the prevention of premature death and later in ṚgVedic hymns of ‘Soma Pavamāna’, deathlessness refers to immortality.

Here, the ṚgVedic hymn (RV. – 8.48.3) has been cited. In this hymn, we notice that drinking Soma produces immortality.

The ṚgVedic hymn (RV. – 8.48.3) says: ‘apāma somamamṛtā abhūmāganma jyotiravidāma devān | / kiṃ nūnamasmān kṛṇavadarātiḥ kimu dhūrtiramṛta martyasya ||’

Ralph T. H. Griffith translates as: we have drunk soma and become immortal; we have attained the light, the Gods discovered. Now what may foeman’s malice do to harm us? What, O Immortal, mortal man’s deception?

Swami Dayananda Saraswati translates as: soma (good fruit containing no intoxicating juice) apāma (we drink you) amṛtā abhūmā (you are elixir of life) jyotira āganma (achieve physical strength or light of god). avidāma devān (achieve control over senses); kiṃ nūnamasmān kṛṇavadarātiḥ (in this situation what our internal enemy can do to me) kimu dhūrtiramṛta martyasya (god, what even violent people can do to me)

Above all the references to immortality and light are characteristics of an entheogenic experience.

Due to the supernatural powers bestowed upon those who drank this drink, soma, gradually turned to be portrayed as a god. In the Ṛgveda, the Vedic god soma was considered to be the king of plants and the bestower of immortality. Soma’s divine dominion was held over plant life.

Different types of myths have been found in various Vedic texts regarding the origin of Soma as a god. The Pavamāna hymns described ‘Soma’ as a warrior god who was victorious in battle. The Pavamāna hymns also described soma’s descent through the filter as an assault or a raid. Soma overcame all obstacles and thereby won freedom of movement.

In the later Vedas, god Soma was identified with the moon god, Chandra, a god of the flowing waters, a god of inspiration and ecstasy.

In the Ṛgveda, 'Soma' was compared to the sun or even kindles it. According to various description, found in the Ṛgveda Soma illuminated the sun, begot the sun in the water, made the sun shine.

Sometimes, 'Soma' was described as 'Vācaspati', lord of speech. It was he who made ordinary mortals Ṛṣis, wise sages. In Hindu tradition, somewhere 'Soma' was also regarded as the deity who supervised Hindu religious sacrifices.

Besides, being recognized as an essential entity of Vedic sacrifices and deity 'Soma' was also regarded as the king of medicinal herbs and titled as 'Supervisor of herbs' by several texts like the Atharvaveda.

Thus, we notice that the 'Soma' was a celebrated plant. The consumption of Soma juice not only healed illness but also brought great riches and enhanced the energy. 'Soma' played a vital and influential role in Vedic tradition and was perceived as a giver of not only immortality but also healthy and long life, happiness, courage, strength and above all was considered as the bestower of wisdom, understanding and creativity. As a presiding deity of Vedic sacrifices, 'Soma' was praised as the Supreme God (in the 9th maṇḍala of Ṛgveda) who led the consumers of Soma juice to the immortal blissful worlds.

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