

## MADHU-DRINKING

AN INTERESTING EPISODE AND PROBLEM FROM THE  
RAMAYANA

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The Rāmāyaṇa, like other authentic epics, contains much to interest and even intrigue the careful reader. The authentic epic which is largely descriptive and narrative in character, concerns itself with life as it was led long ago and, despite poetic touches and interpolations, has a foundation in fact. As such, it touches upon, and sometimes brilliantly illuminates, various facets of life in pre-historic times. Even after making due allowances for exaggeration indulged in by the poet, the reader finds much to think over and it is not of literary interest alone. The scientist too would find much to claim serious attention from him. The Madhuvana (Madhu-forest or Madhu-wood reserve) incident in the Ramayana is an intriguing problem particularly for the apiculturist. The present writer is no expert, but he hopes that his attempt to outline the problem will serve as a spring-board for speculation by experts.

In Cantos 61 and 62 of the Sundarakāṇḍa of the RAMAYANA the poet Vālmīki states that Vānaras (literally, monkeys or men resembling monkeys) belonging to the search party led by Prince Aṅgada, forced an entry into the forest-reserve known as Madhuvana. There they ate and drank Madhu as a result of which they got intoxicated. The poet graphically describes the actions of the inebriated Vānaras.

The problem that the incident poses arises over the exact meaning of the term *madhu*, as used by the poet. What, precisely, was the substance which caused the intoxication? *Madhu* is a term used to signify: (1) the nectar of flowers, (2) honey, (3) spirituous liquor. Discarding the first of these meanings as it does not suit the context, we have to choose one of the other two, namely, honey and spirituous liquor.

It is very tempting to take *madhu* to mean an alcoholic drink, perhaps prepared from honey, and dismiss the matter. The intoxication caused by the substance would strongly support such a supposition. However, an alcoholic drink prepared from honey is more usually referred to as *madhvi* and not as *madhu*, the word *madhvi* being, grammatically, a derivative of *madhu*. The poet himself later refers to a few alcoholic drinks among which we find *madhvika* but neither *madhvi* nor *madhu*. *Madhvika* is defined as a liquor distilled from the blossoms of the *madhuka* tree. Moreover, the poet always uses the plural number of the word Madhu whereas he could have used the singular with facility. This would indicate that the plural form had, at least for the

poet, a special connotation. The problem is further complicated by the poet's assertion that the *Vānaras ate the roots*.

If, however, *madhu* is taken to mean honey, the elation if the marauding *Vānaras* would be very difficult to understand and account for. Honey in small quantities is prescribed by practitioners of Ayurvedic medicine and is not known to cause any intoxication, while its effects on the system when it is taken in massive doses are not widely known, because no one takes such large quantities as the *Vānaras* are said to have done. As against this, the *Tilaka* commentary on the *RAMAYANA* interprets *madhu* as honey. As the poet says, the *Vānaras ate the roots*, and this may be accepted as correct if, as is said, parts of the beehive are eaten by aborigines, be true. "Roots" would, then, refer to the edible parts of the hive. As for the poet's consistent use of the plural number of *madhu* in this connection, it may be pointed out that used this way, the word means a beehive and not an alcoholic drink as is clear from internal evidence. So we have much evidence in support of the conjecture that the *Vānaras* swallowed honey and not an alcoholic drink, but then we have to account for the intoxication. Whichever meaning the reader accepts, he has to explain away discrepancies. A very intriguing problem indeed. This is where the scientist should come in and look for hints. A few of these may be indicated here.

The poet's beautiful descriptions of the seasons, of nature and of topography may provide the scientist with material on which to work though, of course, he would find himself face to face with other problems too. He might, for instance, have to fix the exact connotation of "*Vānara*". He might have to determine the location of *Madhuvana*, determine the season of the year, identify the flora etc. Some information, however, is available in the text on these points.

The details in the *Kiṣkindhākāṇḍa* would indicate that *Madhuvana* was located in a region west of the Ganges, east of *Saurashtra*, south of the *Mleccha* and *Pulinda* principalities and north of the *Vindhya* ranges. This is only a broad statement, but reference to the original text might be of help to the curious.

From the text it seems that the time at which the episode took place was towards the close of the rains and in, or about, *Mārgaśīrṣa* of the Hindu calendar. There are many references which would help the scholar to determine the time with fairly great accuracy. The poet's reference to a number of plants would prove interesting to the botanist and enable him to form an idea as to the type of honey which the bees were able to gather and store up.

In cantos 28 and 30 of *Kiṣkindhākāṇḍa*, there are many references to bees, and they may be discussed in some detail here. It may be remarked that the poet makes a clear distinction between the big, steel-blue bumble-bee so common in India, and the honey-bee. In referring to the bumble-bee, he uses words which, in English mean six-legged, while he refers to the honey-bee as "honey-maker". The big bees show a distinct partiality for the ripe, luscious, dark-blue *jambu* fruit, the ripe mango fruit

and for *ḥadamba* blossoms. A very significant point is that the poet speaks of the bees as being intoxicated by their deep draughts of the nectar of flowers. This point will be referred to a little later. In the charming description of the rains, the poet refers to trees in flower as being full of bees, the distinction between the six-legged ones and the honey-makers being maintained.

All these details, read with Dr. G. B. DEODIKAR's remarks in his paper: SOME ASPECTS OF BEE BOTANY suggest conjectures which, if found valid, would establish that *madhu* does mean honey and, more important still, honey of a special kind. Dr. DEODIKAR asserts that toxic ingredients may be present in "Nectars and pollen grains of poisonous plants" and that bees foraging on their flowers may get killed. He also says that certain poisonous plants may not affect bees at all, but consumption of the honey collected from such plants may have deleterious effects on human beings and may cause even death. Could it have been possible, one wonders, that the people of the poet's day knew of honey collected from certain plants, which would intoxicate but cause no further harm? The specific mention of a forest reserve for the purpose of cultivating such honey seems to be nearer fact than fiction in that case.

The behaviour of the Vānaras affected by the drink is, again, of pathological interest, even though to the student of literature it provides mere comic relief. The poet tells us that the Vānaras "ate fragrant fruits and roots"; he does not mention the names of the fruits and roots though in view of his capacity for detail, he could easily have done so. He is taken to refer to certain edible portions of bee-hives. Forcing their way into the reserved area, the Vānaras held bee-hives large as *drona* (a measure of capacity, or a wooden vessel or a bucket) in their arms (not hands) and, gathering in large groups, happily drank the honey. Some of them ate, while others flung away, portions of the hives. They hit one another with the leftovers, an action suggestive of not only inebriation but also satiation. When intoxicated, the Vānaras danced, sang, laughed, bowed, repeated what they had learnt by heart, moved from place to place, jumped, babbled, sought each other's company, quarrelled, jumped from tree to tree, chattered, flung down stones, sang, jeered at the singers, wept, struck and pushed one another, lay down on beds of leaves, sat down and made a noise. Of great interest, again, is another point that the poet mentions. The riotous crowd had dealt roughly with the keepers. Their head, therefore, went to the king and made a report. The king sent him back with a message to the noisy fellows. In the meantime, the latter had become sober and when the head-keeper returned, he found them, as the poet says, passing urine containing elements from the *madhu*.

Here is, thus, a very interesting problem for specialists. What did the Vānaras drink? If it was spiritous liquor, textual evidence which goes contrary to the assumption will have to be reconciled. If it was honey, it would appear that it was a very special variety of honey.

If the assumption that it was honey that the Vānaras drank, is proved correct, it would mean that apiculture was in an advanced state in the poet's day. Special centres seem to have been established for the purpose and specialists employed there. The effects of honey on the system had been pretty closely studied. It would seem that honey-drinking was rather the exception than the rule. It is also possible that different types of honey collected from different plants could be collected by the experts of those days. Perhaps, apiculture was one of the arts of ancient India but it was lost in the course of time.

For the guidance of those who might be interested further, a list of the references is supplied in the appendix.