

PAVAMĀNA SOMA

By

BISWANATH MUKHERJEE (Burdwan)

The conception of *Soma* in the Ṛgveda is very peculiar. It appears in the Ṛgveda principally in two forms : mortal and divine. As a mortal one it is an intoxicating plant, the juice of which was extracted by a regular process and was offered in the fire as an oblation to the gods. In its divine form the *Soma* shares all the qualities and attributes of the Ṛgvedic gods.

But still the question 'what is *Soma*'? is a puzzling one to the Vedic scholars even to this day, and it is difficult to realise, from among the varied and contrary references in the Ṛgveda, what is the exact nature of *Soma*. Much has been said and discussed about it but a definite conclusion has not yet been arrived at. This (short paper) is an humble attempt to find out some clues with regard to the true nature of *Soma*.

The reference to a plant called '*Soma*' in the Ṛgveda cannot indeed be denied but the concept of *Soma* is not confined to and complete in the plant alone i.e. its *ādhibhautika* form. Moreover the plant has not yet been identified.¹ It is also true that *Soma* means both the plant and the juice of it in the Ṛgveda.²

We find the same difficulty with regard to the divine *Soma*³ i.e. its *ādhidivika* form. It is sometimes a particular god in the Vedic pantheon and sometimes it appears as the Power of the god (rather a divine drink) or the spirit of the universe.⁴ The abode of the divine *Soma* as stated in the Ṛgveda (1.113.7-11) indicates some other region than the three established regions of the gods.⁵ The identification of the *Śyena*, the *Soma*-bearing bird, has also not yet been established beyond doubt so far.⁶

The mystic interpretation of *Soma*, or the interpretation of *Soma* as a mere ideal principle alone and not a material object, though justified, is also not complete. Thus the *ādhyātmika* form is also not quite clear.

However, we find that *Soma* signifies the plant, the juice of the plant or the oblation, the god and the spirit of the god or the divine drink. It is important

1 The exact identity of the plant from which their sacred liquor was prepared is still somewhat doubtful.—Śatapatha-Bra-Eggeling-Pt. II, P. XXIV.

2 RV. 9. 79.1; 9.114.2; RV. 9. 1.6; Rv. 9. 8.1.

3 The divine personality of *Soma*, it is true, is even for Vedic imagery, of an extremely vague and shadowy character.—Śatapatha Bra-Eggeling. Part II, P. XII.

4 RV. 9. 3.1. RV. 9. 51.2. RV. 10. 85.2.

5 Nir.—7.5.2.

6 Śatapatha Bra.—Eggeling., p. 19;

to note that whatever may be the exact significance, everywhere the *Soma* has been praised as the best and the greatest in all its forms. As a plant the *Soma* is the lord of the plants.⁷ As an oblation it is the best one.⁸ As a god it is the supreme god⁹ and also it is the highest power in all aspects.¹⁰ So it can be said that the idea of *Soma* cannot be confined only to a plant or to a god alone. Then naturally the question comes: 'What was the conception that the seers had in their mind about the nature of the *Soma* ?'

To find an answer to this question we must first discuss at the outset the position of the *Soma* in the Ṛgveda.

There are 120 hymns for *Soma* in the Ṛgveda, where *Soma* has been praised separately. The reference to *Soma* exists almost everywhere in the Ṛgveda. However, the entire ninth Maṇḍala of the Ṛgveda consists of 114 hymns dedicated exclusively to the *Soma* and it is therefore especially called the *Pavamāna* Maṇḍala, as the deity is here *Pavamāna Soma*. The other six hymns significantly are dedicated to the god *Soma* and not to the *Pavamāna Soma*. It should be noted in this connection that *Pavamāna Soma* occurs only in the Ninth Maṇḍala of the Ṛgveda and not any where else.

It may be profitable to concentrate on the special epithet which is mostly used in connection with the *Soma*, viz. '*pavamāna*' and this may give a clue to the understanding of the exact nature of the *Soma*. Now we are to discuss what the term *pavamāna* signifies.

The term '*pavamāna*' is derived from the root $\sqrt{pū}$ (*ñ*), to purify with the affix *śānan* with it.¹¹ The commentator Sāyaṇa interprets the term as purifying, (*pūyamāna*) and flowing (*kṣaran*). It is true that the purification of the *Soma* juice is a process. It is called *Pavamāna* when in the sacrifice it is poured into the jar called *Pūtabhṛt* from the jar called *Ādhavanīya*. It is significant that the terms bearing the sense of 'flowing' or 'purifying' are used several times in connection with the *Soma*¹². However, the term *Pavamāna* signifies both flowing and purifying. It seems that while it flows it purifies or to purify *Soma* it should be made to flow (cf. *sūta* = extracted)¹³. *Pavamāna* is also the name of a prayer, recited in connection with *Soma*'s purification. e.g. *Bahiṣpavamāna*, *Mādhyandina Pavamāna*, and *Ārbhava Pavamāna*. *Soma* is called the impeller or (inspirer) of prayer.¹⁴ *Pavamāna* is a name for *Agni* and *Vāyu* (i.e. the light

7 RV. 9.114.2.

8 "Devebhya uttamam haviḥ"—RV. 9. 67. 28.

9 RV. 9. 86. 11-33.

10 "Brahmā devāṇām, padaviḥ kavīnām ṛṣirviprāṇām"—etc. RV. 9. 96. 6.

11 "Pūnyajoh Śānan"—Pāṇini, 3. 2. 128.

12 pavate, kṣhara, abhyarṣa, dhāvati, dīyati, upayāti etc.

13 *Pavamāna* = 'to pass so as to be purified', M. Williams.

14 RV. 9. 62. 30. (Music is also a source of bliss obviously).

and the wind) the two principles of the earth and the atmosphere respectively¹⁵ which are well-known for their purificatory qualities.

Thus Pavamāna signifies primarily that which flows i.e. light, wind and water, most probably the rain water. Generally the water, resides in the heavens, air in the atmosphere and fire on the earth. These three elements in the three plains of the universe maintain with their moving nature (*pavamānatva*), the existence and the purity of the universe. This principle is the source of eternity, rather the continuity of this universe and its abiding freshness.

The seers had this idea of Pavamāna, in their mind when it was used as an epithet in connection with Soma, who is the giver of immortality. Thus Pavamāna Soma is the real Soma which is the life-force of this universe, and which moves eternally purifying and illuminating everything that has life and thereby bestowing the bliss of longevity. This becomes all the more clear when we look into Soma's close relation with Fire and Air.¹⁶

The performanc of the Soma-sacrifice, it seems, was also related to this sense of eternity. The *Ekāha* sacrifice of Soma, starts with *Prāyaṇīya Iṣṭi*, and ends with *Udavasānīya Iṣṭi*, the performance of both of which is of equal type, which as it were indicates that there is no end of this sacrifice, or it begins again where it ends, i.e. it is a continuous process.¹⁷ One of the varieties of this sacrifice the Agniṣṭoma, also resembles the year, as it contains twelve *stotras* and twelve *śastras* in its institutions.¹⁸

We also find that Indra, the atmospheric god, is mostly busy and active to dispel the demons of drought and darkness. He being assisted by the *Maruts*,¹⁹ (Wind) takes the bolt (lightning) in his hand and kills them, creating the path for the free flow of light and water. He displays this chivalry by drinking Soma.²⁰

Thus we find that Soma was originally looked upon as life-force of this universe and this idea was extended to something exhilarating²¹ and ultimately it came to signify some sort of a plant which contains this life-force and hence is also an elixir of life and delight.

15 Śatapatha Brā—2.5.1.5.

(a) Aitareya Brā—1.7.

Śatapatha Brā—2.2.1.6. cf. Vaidika Kosha—Suryakanta (for "pavamāna")
cf. pavate—Nir—3.9.4 (gatikarmā).

(b) RV. 9.66. 19-21,

RV. 10. 85. 5, cf. Āprisūkta—RV. 9.5.

16 Aitareya Brā—3.14.

17 Ibid.—3.14.

18 cf. Marutvān Indra.

19 RV.—2.15. cf. RV. 10.119.

20 In the Brahmanical literature Soma is obviously identified with the Moon, the object of immortal delight.