

# Journal of the Oriental Institute

VOLUME XIV  
1964 - 1965

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**BARODA**



Printed at the Maharaja Sayajirao University of Baroda Press (Sadhana Press),  
Near Palace Gate, Palace Road, Baroda and published on behalf of the M. S. University of  
Baroda by Prof. B. J. Sandesara, Director, Oriental Institute, Baroda, January 1966

## THREE STAGES IN THE ADVENT OF SOMA\*

By

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Much has been said about the Vedic Soma. Well known is the controversy on the point whether Soma was identified with the moon even at the Vedic times. Hillebrandt went far as to say that all the soma-hymns of the Maṇḍala IX, and a few from other maṇḍalas are addressed to the moon-god<sup>1</sup>. The myth of the bringing of Soma from the heavens by a divine falcon, has also been interpreted variously, the notable interpretation being of Bloomfield who sees in it the bringing of rain from the clouds (= the iron-fort) along with the flash of lightning<sup>2</sup>. Not accepting this hypothesis, Oldenberg points out that there is no positive proof to see any physical phenomena in the 'bird' that brings soma<sup>3</sup>. It has also been shown that this myth of 'a bird bringing divine drink' obtains in other mythologies also<sup>4</sup>. On examining the material available to him Macdonell concludes that the idea of the 'sweet drink' was a creation of the Indo-European period and that, in India, it gave rise to the idea of Soma, as in Greece to 'mead' in the Indo-Iranian period. Oldenberg seems to be quite right in pointing out that the physical (or natural, we may say) phenomenon is not warranted. Taking into consideration the existence of the myth in other mythologies the 'natural' method of interpretation would not be well applicable here. The 'iron-fortress' which the bird 'Śyena' is said to take away soma need not again be the cloud. There seems to be a constant quest for the immortal liquor or the 'water of life' in the mind of the ancient man recorded by various mythologies<sup>5</sup>.

Opinions regarding the identification of the Moon and Soma (the juice) originated from such passages where soma is said to be married to the Sun's

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\* Read at the International Congress of Orientalist, New Delhi-1964. Jan.

<sup>1</sup> Hillebrandt—'Vedische Mythologie'—P. 309

<sup>2</sup> Bloomfield—J.A.O.S. Vol. XVI-P-1-24.

<sup>3</sup> Oldenberg—'Die Religion des R̥gveda'—P. 177, 180. The oldest account of the bird bringing Soma see Rg. V. IV-26 and 27.

<sup>4</sup> Macdonell—Vedic Mythology (Hindi. Tr.) P. 216. Oldenberg—Op. cit., P. 176.

<sup>5</sup> We shall note a few examples further on; see for example The Zu bird from the Babylonian Mythology; Wang Shu from the Chinese Mythology-mentioned further on.

daughter,<sup>6</sup> where Soma is said to be in the midst of stars,<sup>7</sup> and the saying "none eats of the Soma that is known to the preceptor (Purohita)," and which is said to be different from the one that is pressed.<sup>8</sup> Here, Soma that is different from the one that is pressed, is believed to be the moon-god by some scholars,<sup>9</sup> while according to a recent opinion it indicates 'Corporeal' Soma viz. the inner physical power which could be utilised for meditation (Samādhi).<sup>10</sup> It is possible that Soma, when drunk, caused a state of hallucination leading the drinker to fanciful imagination which itself might have been referred to as another Soma.<sup>11</sup>

Apart from the point of the identity of the two fold Soma, we shall confine ourselves to see if there is a definite scheme in the R̥gveda about the conception of the advent of the Soma, comparing it with a similar conception in other mythologies.

Soma is described as 'maujavata' i.e. growing on mountain (R̥g.V-X-34-1 'Somasyeva maujavatasya'). The same is the implication of the expression where he is said to be residing in the mountain.<sup>12</sup> Macdonell says that the word 'giri' or 'parvata' here refers to the terrestrial mountain. Soma, as we know, is also the 'juice' of the Soma-plant. Looking to the etymology of the word 'Soma', it seems to be clear that the name of the plant (Soma) is suggested from the 'juice'; and that the word 'Soma' was applied to the juice primarily and to the plant only secondarily.<sup>13</sup> It should be noted that the word generally used for this juice of the Soma-plant is 'induḥ' or 'drapsa' which hints at the original conception of the first oozed out 'drop'.<sup>14</sup> This 'indu' i.e. the 'drop' is said to be the god.<sup>15</sup> This would mean that the Soma juice

<sup>6</sup> R̥g. X-85

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid*—85-2

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid*—3

<sup>9</sup> Cf. Macdonell *op.cit.*, P. 214, also Sāyaṇa on R̥g. X-85-3

<sup>10</sup> Cf. T. R. Kulkarni in 'Proceedings of the Indian Science Congress—1961, Pt. IV, pp. 119 to 124.

<sup>11</sup> It may also be noted that Soma is said to reside in every part of the body cf. R̥g. V-VIII-48-9; but this probably refers to the effect of Soma when actually drunk and not Soma as an inner fluid of the body.

<sup>12</sup> R̥g. IX-46-1—*Kṣarantaḥ parvatāvṛdhāḥ*: also—95-4 'amśum duhanti ukṣaṇam giriṣṭhām'. For the origin of the Soma plant see Roth ZDMG 38; 134-9 MaxMuller's Biographies of words' London-1888 P. 222-42.

<sup>13</sup> from √Su to press—'Soma' would mean 'the pressed one' or the (plant) to be pressed.

<sup>14</sup> R̥g. IX-89-2—apsu drapsa vāvṛdhe; also for 'drapsa' see—IX-85-10, 78-4, IX-51-3—tava tya indo andhaso devā madhor vyaśnute also—77-4.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid*—IX-51-3; X-115-3—cf. Svyāyudhā pavate deva induḥ.

at the sacrifice embodies the first drop ('*drapsa*') that is divine, which is mystically *pressed* from the plant which is hence called *Soma*. This *drop*, that is divine, is invoked at the sacrifice with the same honour as other gods. It is this drop that is called '*andhas*' (nourishing food) and is said to descend from heaven, upon the earth,<sup>16</sup>—naturally in the sacrificial *Soma*-plant on the mountain top.

We now turn to another point in the *Saga of Soma*. Very often *Soma* is said to be '*milked*' connecting it with a cow-symbol. Thus, the shoots of this miraculous plant are said to '*milch*' like the udder of a cow.<sup>17</sup> The fountain ('*utsa*') of *Soma* is said to be in the midst of cows.<sup>18</sup> *Soma* is identified with the cow when it is said to be bound by ten straps ('*Valgā*'). It is said to be a '*milking branch*' that is being chewed by the pressing stones.<sup>19</sup> It would, thus, indicate that the divine drop is full of milk and is said to be mystically gathered in a branch *i.e.* the *Soma* plant. To complete the identification of the *Soma* and the cow, as it were, we have a ritual in the Brahmanic sacrifice according to which, in the rite of purchase of *Soma*, a cow is to be given as the price of *Soma*, and the colour of the cow is said to be white or ruddy, *because* *Soma* is also of the same colour.<sup>20</sup> It will be interesting to note that the stones that are used to press the shoots of the *Soma*-plant are laid on the hide of the cow.<sup>21</sup> This indicates that the *Soma* juice is thought to be the essence from the cow. Connecting this idea with the one where the divine drop or the fountain is said to be in the midst of the (heavenly) cows, we get the conception that the divine drop that lies in the midst of the heavenly cows, is to be mystically gathered in the terrestrial cow.

We have already noted that, while talking about *Soma*, the Vedic sages have imagined a well or a *fountain* ('*utsa*') of *Soma* in the midst of the cows. This well (of honey) is also said to be in the highest step of *viṣṇu* (Rg. I-154-5) where there are multi-horned cows.

Which are these cows? Commenting on the passage where the word

<sup>16</sup> Rg. IX-61-10 *uccā te jātam andhaso diviṣad bhumi-ādade* for '*andhasa*' meaning nutritious food see Rg. VIII-32-28; X-94-8.

<sup>17</sup> Cf. *Ibid*—VIII-9-19 *gāvo na durh ūdhabhiḥ*; VII-98-1.

<sup>18</sup> —V-45-8; VI-44-24.

<sup>19</sup> —X-94-3'—Vṛkṣasya śākhām aruṇasya bapsataḥ. This idea can be compared with the Chinese mythical idea, wherein two goats are said to be eating the divine branch. (cf. *Myths of China and Japan* by Donald Maikenzie).

<sup>20</sup> Taitt. Sam—VI-1-6-1; Śatapatha Br. III. 3-1-34; for the Colour of *Soma*—VII-98-1.

<sup>21</sup> Rg. IX-79-4.

'bhūriśṛṅgāḥ' (multi-horned) occurs (Ṛg. I-154-5) Yāska takes it to mean 'the rays of the sun'.<sup>22</sup> Peterson, following Sāyaṇa, takes it to mean the stars with myriad rays.<sup>23</sup> The fountain (utsa) is said to be in the highest place,<sup>24</sup> which clearly means the sky, though Sāyaṇa takes it as the sacrificial place. Even if we accept Sāyaṇa's interpretation, it could be so done only secondarily, taking the sacrifice to mean the ritualistic representation of the heavenly phenomena on the earth. The gods are said to be born of the cows (go-jātaḥ).<sup>25</sup> Aditi is called the cow<sup>26</sup> and she is identified with the 'Sky' and is said to give milk to the gods.<sup>27</sup> Elsewhere Soma is compared with the milk of *Aditi*,<sup>28</sup> thus helping their identification. In sacrificial ritual the consecrated cow is said to be Aditi<sup>29</sup>—the very 'sky-goddess' symbolically represented on the earth at the sacrifice. Now, the 'divine fountain', in the midst of the cows, whence 'Indu' or the 'drapsa' (the divine drop) oozes, can be nothing but the mystic 'well' in the midst of the stars, or in the very lap of the sky-cow Aditi.<sup>30</sup> Soma that is gathered from the 'shoots' at the sacrifice represents the 'drop' that comes from the *divine fountain* that lies closely associated with the *cow-of-the-sky*. The descent from heaven of the divine 'drop' is the first stage in the advent of Soma. This 'drop' is *fertilizing, generative and energizing*. It is the very life-essence—which has the potentiality to give heavenly life of immortality to those who might taste it. It is represented in the sacrifice by Soma which was a drink of restricted gain, and was offered very sparingly. Even some of the divinities (like the Aśvinau) had to qualify for its gain zealously.

This reminds one of similar beliefs in the fertilizing 'drop' from heaven or from the stars elsewhere. An emperor of China is said to have constructed a huge and high tower on the top of which he would keep a pot to get the morning dew directly from the stars for gaining a length of life.<sup>31</sup> In ancient Egypt

<sup>22</sup> Nirukta-II-7.

<sup>23</sup> 'Hymns from Ṛgveda' Bombay Sanskrit Series XXXVI-1924.

<sup>24</sup> V-45-8, Utsa āsām parame sadhasthe.

<sup>25</sup> Vedic Mythology (Hindi Tr.) P. 286.

<sup>26</sup> Vājasaneyi Sam. XIII-43-49.

<sup>27</sup> Ṛg. X-63-3.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid* IX-96-15.

<sup>29</sup> Macdonell Op. cit.—P. 206, for Aditi being the cow. See VIII-101-15.

<sup>30</sup> It is this 'sky-cow' (studded with stars) that is symbolically killed for offering at the sacrifice. Clearly, the sacrifice of the cow was for mystically imbibing the essence of the sky-cow and ensure good crops and cattle. This sky-cow is, doubtless, Aditi. For cows sacrificed see Ṛg. V-85-13.

<sup>31</sup> 'Myths of China & Japan'—Donald Mackenzie,

obtains a belief in the fertilizing ray that oozed from the moon. Osiris, who is said to be the son of the sky-mother (in the form of the cow), is said to have been conceived from the fertilizing ray of light that fell from the moon.<sup>32</sup> According to the Japanese mythology the drinker of the dew of immortality was a *moon-girl* who drank from the bowl of the moon.<sup>33</sup> The 'drop' (drapsa) that is said to descend from heaven, comes very very close to the fertilizing ray of the moon or the first dew from the stars, both connected with the heaven (or the sky). If the cows with multiple horns are to be taken as 'rays' or the stars as we have noted from the authorities, the 'drapsa' would easily mean the *first divine drop* from the heavenly rays or from a fountain amidst the stars. This fountain amidst the stars gives out the drop-'indu'. 'Indu' seems properly to mean the 'drop' from the moon, which in later periods gets to be called both 'Soma' and 'indu'. It seems probable, hence, that, (though it may be said that the R̥gveda does not have a clear identification between the moon and the Soma-juice) in the R̥gveda period itself the conception of a divine drop from the moon was strongly cultivated. *This 'drop' from the moon is invoked as the god* and is lauded like other gods in the sacrifice. It is the very essence of the moon-god, who is on a different par from the other gods; for he is 'killed' [pressed. The word used in the context is 'Ghanti] and eaten for nourishment by other gods and is undying in the real sense of the word. It only changes the form which vanishes to give sustenance to the gods and is reborn (juice-form) in sacrifice as in the heaven (moon-form) very much like osiris who gets killed and is brought back to life in the famous osirian ritualistic drama.<sup>34</sup>

The next point is the absorption of the 'drop' in the plant (called Soma) as it reaches the earth. The plant, as we have noted, is identified with the udder of the cow. Thus the plant oozes from the fountain among the cows and gets absorbed *in another* cow (in the form of the plant.) This is the second stage in the advent. The 'drop' reaches the mountain a high place on the earth and, as it were, *gets changed into the plant*<sup>35</sup>. This could be clear from the R̥gv., where Soma is addressed as follows:—

<sup>32</sup> Ibid—P. 150. The name of the cow-sky-goddess is Hathor. She is said to have star-specked belly which reminds us of the Vedic sacrificial cow described as having prominent spots (*cf.* Sthūlapr̥ṣatim ānadvāhim ālabheta' For Hathor having a star-speked belly Cf. 'Myth and symbol of Ancient Egypt' —Rundle Clark (London-1926.)

<sup>33</sup> Donald Mackenzie *op. cit.*, p. 152.

<sup>34</sup> For which see Rundle Clark 'Myth and Symbol in ancient Egypt' and Donlad. Mackenzie-Op.cit.

<sup>35</sup> It could be seen how the usually understood meaning of 'giri' as the 'cloud' is unnecessary; and could be only a secondary one.

“ O Soma of divine abode, that art generated high in heaven ! of thy juice *the earth doth procure* ’. ( Note 16 above ).

Further we have.

“ ( What ) excellent ( juice ) of thine was procured in the naval of heaven, that same sprouted up *on the summit of the earth* ( doubtless the mountain ), being sprinkled thereupon. The pressing stones eat of thee on the hide of the cow. Thee did the wise ones *milk* with their ( palm )—in the water ”.<sup>36</sup>

The latter clearly brings out the principle underlying the descent of Soma, as we have already noted.

The close association of the ‘ Utsa ’ ( the well ) and the plant that imbibes the ‘ drop ’ from it on the earth is to be noted outside India also. The Chinese ‘ *dragon-well* ’ is usually situated inside a deep mountain-cave. It flows from a cave called ‘ golden well-spring ’.<sup>37</sup> In the Chinese mythical tale of the ‘ Blue Boy ’ we have the Blue Boy residing in a well in a high mountain. He darts to heaven from the well and disappears in the clouds that rain heavily to the utter amazement of a certain Wang Shu who was wandering to obtain the herb of immortality. When the rain subsides, the Blue Boy returns to the well and disappears. Now, on the bank of the mountain well, Wang Shu finds a peculiar herb sprouting out. He takes it away ; for it is the herb of immortality.<sup>38</sup> The herb is generated from the drop of the divine cloud, which itself is formed from the divine well high in the mountain. Similarly, in the legend of ‘ Gilgamesh ’ we have the ‘ plant of life ’, and the well of ‘ *immortality* ’ associated with the adventures of the hero.<sup>39</sup> The ‘ well ’ of immortality that sends the ‘ drop ’ and sustains the herb of immortality can be seen, in the sacrificial ritual of the Aryans in ancient India, to be represented by the ‘ Vasativarī ’—waters, where the pressed out shoots of Soma are placed for getting ‘ re-swelled ’, the indication of which is to be found as early as the R̥gv.<sup>40</sup> Here is a clear indication of the belief in the ‘ living waters ’ that are apt to give immortality, and which

<sup>36</sup> R̥gv. IX-79-4-divi te nābhā paramo ya ādade p̥rthivy āste ruruḥḥ sānavi k̥ṣipah/

adrayastavā bapsati goradhī twaci-apsu hastair duduhur manīṣaḥ  
[ Translation-by the author ]

<sup>37</sup> Donald Mackenzie op. cit., p. 55.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid*, p. 80 ; there is also another herb called the ‘ Red-cloud-herb ’—  
P-79.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid*, p. 109 ; also see ‘ Myths of Babylonia and Assyria by the same author.

<sup>40</sup> Cf. R̥g. IX.89.2 ( and Sāyaṇa’s note thereon ) apsu drapso vāvṛdha  
‘ —apsu vasativarīṣu ’.

represent the heavenly 'utsa'. Now here is an interesting phenomenon. The 'drop' is restored in the pressed out shoots of the Soma-plant by the '*Vasatī-vārī*' waters, and at the same time, by this ritual, the 'drop' of Soma is said to swell the waters. Soma is elsewhere said to be the lord of the waters—both the oceans and streams<sup>41</sup> both the cosmic waters and the terrestrial ones. The cosmic waters give place to the actual rain drops and Soma is said to impell rain (Rg. X.30.9) and causes the waters to expand in the form of rain and the streams on the earth. The heavenly 'drop' that is said to be in the celestial 'utsa' (well) in the midst of the cows is represented in the sacrifice by the Soma-juice as going to the tub (Kalaśa) of Soma which also is called 'Utsa'.<sup>42</sup> Thus from the divine 'well' to the high peak on the earth and thence to the 'utsa'—(Kalaśa) in the sacrifice is the advent of the 'drop'. The whole purpose of the Soma-sacrifice is thus to bring the divine 'drop'—the 'indu' which is the essence of the moon or the starry region and is invoked as a divinity—to the sacrifice. When it is symbolically brought forth after the pressing of the Soma-plant which is gathered from the mountain, the constant flow of life, food and water is ensured water in rivers, food in the plants and the cows, and continued life in the sacrificer and those who partake of the juice.<sup>43</sup> Hence this divine drop—now Soma-juice—is ritualistically mixed with water, milk (whence 'gavā-śīra') and barley (Yavāśīra) representing prosperity in plants, milk, water, and grain. Milk represents the cows and Soma-juice (the divine-drop) mixing with milk gives fertility to the cows. Hence this 'drop'—now sacrificial Soma—described as a youth in the midst of cows.<sup>44</sup> Without the ritual of sacrifice this was not supposed to be accomplished. The 'drop' that is so potential in swelling the earthly flood,<sup>45</sup> and gives immortality, figures prominently, in the Brahmanic tale of the '*Ṣomāharāṇa*' (the bringing of Soma), where the Ṛgvedic bird Śyena-Suparṇa gives place to the metres and the 'mantras' obviously to establish the importance of the sacrificial ritual and the efficacy of the 'mantras'.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.86.33 'rājā sindhūnām pavate patir divaḥ cf. also Ibid.15.5; 89.2, 85.10.

<sup>42</sup> X.30.9 'madacyutam auśaṇam nabhojampari tri-tantum Vicarantam Utsam.'

<sup>43</sup> The famous tale of the advent of the Ganges is only a phase of this motif. The river *drops* from the star-path (called ākāśa-gaṅgā) on the mountain Kailāsa and thence flows upon the earth. Mark the name 'tripathagā' (going along three paths) given to her.

<sup>44</sup> Rg. V.45.9; IX.9.5.

<sup>45</sup> Compare with this the idea of a tear from Atum swelling the Nile. Rundale Clark—*op. cit.* P. 84; also a drop from the star sirius (sky-cow and the mother of the sun god) flooding the Nile—Donald Mackenzie—'Myths of China and Japan, p. 64.

thus connecting the myth to the magical symbolism in action. It is here that the myth gets transacted into ritual.<sup>46</sup>

It would be, thus clear that the 'bringing of Soma' by the Śyena-Suparṇa is only a phase of the general saga of the 'Advent of the divine drop'. Once the conception of the divine drop oozing out from the sky is rooted in imagination, it is natural to have a myth of some powerful personality to get it from such a forbidden place. This personality will naturally be super-human and more probably a great bird that could fly aloft-right upto the high region on the earth or right into the domain of the sky. As we have seen, the 'rain' is only a phase of the 'divine-drop'. In the same way the bird that brings it could only be a mythic bird, and it is not necessary—or rather it is wrong—to suppose that the bird is the lightning or any other natural phenomena, as Bloomfield has done. The zeal for longevity and immortality in man is great and the myth is the product of that zeal. Hence the expression of this zeal in a number of folk-tales widely spread in the world. The bringer of this 'drink of immortality' sometimes is a man-like the Babylonian Gilgamesh or the Chinese Wang Shu—or the bird Zu who stole the tablets of the immortal,<sup>47</sup> or the Śyena-Suparṇa of the ancient Indian Aryans. It is this conception of a celestial 'drop' or 'divine drink' that could be found in the wide-spread belief in the *island of the Blessed*, or the 'floating island' where nobody dies—the very 'Swarga' that is known to the Ancient Indians, with its secret of immortality. The secret of the most invigorating 'drop' could naturally be as well guarded as the drink itself. Hence it could be said to be in the very interior of forts which the hero, whosoever he might be, has to destroy. This fort need not be the 'cloud' as the adherents of the Nature-theory would have us believe. The conception of the 'divine-drop' and that of the 'bringer' of it are closely connected. Hence it is usual to find in the tales of the 'cultural hero', the fetching of a plant of life or the water of immortality as one of the exploits, that necessarily gets associated with the killing of the guards and destroying of the 'prison' that holds the 'divine food or drink'.<sup>48</sup>

<sup>46</sup> A similar conception can be seen in the present day Hindu festival of 'Kojāgiri'—which is held on the first full moon day of the Autumn. In the night a big cauldron of milk is boiled with cardamom, saffron and other ingredients, in the open, *so as to get the reflection of the moon into the vessel*. The idea is to get the nectar from the moon in the milk. This seems exactly similar to the idea of the 'fertilizing ray' or the '*indu-drapsa*' from the moon, mixing with the milk, and reminds one of the actual mixing of the Soma-juice (the terrestrial form of the 'drapsa') with milk, in the Vedic sacrifice.

<sup>47</sup> Donald Mackenzie—'Myths of Babylonia and Assyria'.

<sup>48</sup> A number of such tales could be cited as example *e.g.* the 'Gulabākāvali'—Ceylonese folk-tale. 'The water of life'—(Grimm) etc. etc.