

WHAT IS SOMA ?

In the course of collecting historical data from the economic products mentioned in the Vedas, I have come up against the problem which has exercised the minds of Sanskritists from the time of Max Müller down to the present day—what was the plant from which the old Aryans in India prepared their famous drink, the Amrita of the gods, Soma ? The prolonged discussions on the subject are summarized by Professor Julius Eggeling in the introduction to his translation of the Shathapatha-Brāhmana.<sup>1</sup> The facts regarding the plant given in the Vedas are to be found in Professor Macdonell's *Vedic Mythology*. The most important for the purpose of identification are these : —

1. That it resembled cows' udders.
2. That it had a likeness to the fingers of a man's hand.
3. That it was "tawny" in colour.
4. That it grew on the mountains.

Another very important clue is that in the Shathapatha-Brāhmana several plants akin to Soma, which might be substituted for it, are given ; among these are two well-known Indian grasses—*dāb* or *dāros* and *kuska* grass. Another of these substitutes was called *Śkyenakṛita*, "that which is carried off by eagles," or falcous.

Armed with these facts I went recently to the Royal Botanic Gardens at Kew to consult my friend, Sir David Prain. He had no theories of his own on the subject, and so kept an open mind to the suggestions I made to him. We first discussed the possibility of the young shoots of the *decidua* having been used, but this hypothesis did not fit in well with all the known facts. But when I mentioned that *dāb* and *kuska* grasses were used as substitutes Sir David at once said, "Then very likely Soma was a kind of grass, probably *Elymus corvina*," or *rōgi*, the common millet still used in the Eastern Himalayas for making the intoxicating drink called *narwa*. We then went to the Herbarium, where the

<sup>1</sup> *Sacred Books of the East*, vol. xxvi.

Curator showed us specimens of the plant and of others collected by the Afghan Boundary Commission in its search for the real Soma.

There can be no doubt that the rāgi plant answers perfectly to the description given in the Vedas. The spikes of the unripe ear (usually five in number), growing upwards, may very aptly be compared to the outstretched fingers. It is also quite easy to understand that the fat ripened ears, heavy with grain, when cut and held downwards suggested cows' udders to the old Aryan peasant farmers. They are also "tawny" in colour. I have now again gone carefully through all the data collected by Professor Macdonell and others, and find no single detail which conflicts with the theory now presented, that the original Soma plant is no rare or obscure thing, but the common, familiar rāgi.

I will try now to describe the whole operation of preparing the famous drink of immortality as it pictures itself to my mind, and leave it to Sanskrit scholars to criticize. First the carts came in from the forest plantations with their loads of ripened rāgi. Possibly the ears were soaked in water, or sprinkled, before being brought to the sacrificial ground. Then a skin was spread on the bottom of the sacrificial cart, and while one Brahman rubbed the ripe fat ears between the hands [or milked the udders of the Soma cow], another sat and ground the falling grain with a stone roller—the familiar curry stone of modern times. The next step was to pour water [perhaps hot water, for the Soma rite was closely connected with the fire rite] over the Soma mash and pass the liquid through a strainer of sheep's wool. While the Brahmans were at work they sang a song, which reminds one of a good old Aryan sailors' chantey, with a refrain, "Flow Indu, flow for Indra" (*Rig Veda*, ix, 113). Indu, meaning a drop, was suggested by the small round grains of the millet, which were likened to drops of rain sent by Indra, or to drops of milk from the Soma cow. Both of these similes, very characteristic of the bacolic mind, seems to have misled Sanskritists into

supposing that Soma was a succulent plant exuding a milky juice. The liquid as it passed through the strainer was collected in jars placed under the cart, and when mixed with milk it was ready to be used as a libation for the gods.

Whether fermentation took place before or after it was so used is a point which is not very clear. A more important question is why Soma was described in the Vedas as coming from the mountains. Rāgi is now cultivated along the Himalayas up to a height of 8,000 feet. It may be assumed that the plant was brought to India by the early Aryan immigrants at a time when it constituted the principal food and drink of the Brahmans. In the later Vedic times they had already descended from the mountains to the Ganges Valley, where rice and not rāgi was the staple food of the population. The Brahmans found rice a more palatable and more easily digested food. They adopted it then as a substitute for rāgi, and perhaps under the influence of Buddhism gradually gave up intoxicating liquors, or "went dry". So that when Soma was required by them for sacrificial purposes, either substitutes were found for it, or it had to be obtained from the original home of the Aryans in the mountains. Gradually the old name of it was forgotten. Rāgi itself, however, remained the principal food of the Śūdras, as it is in the present day, and thus the cultivation of it gradually spread over all the plains. The legends connecting Soma with eagles or other mountain birds is easily explained—the birds used the dry stalks of rāgi as a lining for their nests!

The only other point requiring explanation is that Soma is sometimes believed to have had a nauseating effect and an unpleasant smell. This is the case with *marras* when it is kept too long, but when freshly made it is an exhilarating drink which easily intoxicates the uninitiated.

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