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**K. V. SARMA**  
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**VISHVESHVARANAND VISHVA BANDHU INSTITUTE  
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PANJAB UNIVERSITY  
HOSHIARPUR**



## ON THE SIGNIFICANCE OF SOMA

By

BISWANATH MUKHOPADHYAY

*Lecturer, Department of Sanskrit, Burdwan University*

### I. Introductory

The conception of Soma in the *Rgveda* is very peculiar. It appears in two forms—mortal and divine. The mortal soma was a plant whose juice was extracted and offered to the god. In its divine form, Soma was praised by the seer with all the qualities and attributes common to other *Rgvedic* gods.

Vedic scholars, both Indian and European, have attempted to identify the soma plant,<sup>1</sup> but up till now no definite conclusion has been arrived at with regard to its exact nature. The same is the problem in respect of the identification of the divine Soma. Indeed the paucity of exact references in the *Rgveda* is a hindrance to the clear identification of the plant or the god Soma. Consequently attempts have been made to understand Soma from the spiritual (*ādhyātmika*) standpoint alone.<sup>2</sup> This, however, could not put an end to the controversy regarding Soma.

Indeed, the apparently controversial opinions are nothing but the reflections of different developments of the Soma-idea through the ages. So, to understand Soma clearly, one has to know primarily the exact implication of the term *soma* which has not been confined to a single meaning but has produced different meanings by way of semantic changes through the ages.

With this problem posited above, in mind, the present paper proposes to study in brief the gradual semantic development of the term *soma*. Thus, it may be said that the term *soma* first meant the inebriating juice of plants, secondly, the plants bearing soma, thirdly, the elixir of life and delight and lastly the god. We propose now to take them up, one by one.

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1. Macdonell and Keith, *Vedic Index*, vol. II, p. 475 fn. ; G. Majumdar, 'Vedic plants', *B.C. Law Volume*, pt I, p. 645.

2. *On the Veda*, Sri Aurobindo, Pondicherry, 1964, p. 260.

## II. Soma : The inebriating juice of plants

It is true that none knows the name of the man who was the first drinker of soma, nor is it possible to know it today because history preserves no record of him. But one thing is certain, the practice of taking intoxication even for spiritual elevation has been a necessity for man from very early times. This also was true in the discovery of soma. But it may be assumed, that, at the very outset, only the taste of the juice and not the mere sight of the plant produced in the mind of the discoverer a sense of elation and exhilaration for the time being. So, primarily, the juice was recognised and called *soma*. The term *soma* is derived from the root  $\sqrt{su}$ , 'to press', which means 'the juice, the pressed one'. The other names of soma like *andhas* and *indu* also mean the juice, though the former has been used as the plant name also.<sup>3</sup> The word *pavamāna*, used as an epithet to soma also fits the sense of the juice. Soma has been called also *sumnah*,<sup>4</sup> which means 'pleasure'. The detailed description of soma in the ninth book of the *R̥gveda* supports the view that the juice with the peculiar qualities captured the mind of the seer completely and became the chief source of attraction much more than the plants.

## III. Soma : The plant bearing soma

It is surprising that none of the seers of the *R̥gveda* has devoted a hymn exclusively for the description of the soma plant which yielded the best oblation for the sacrifice. From the hymns addressed to soma in the *R̥gveda* it is difficult to find out the exact nature of the physical form of the plant. Plants in general have been a matter of praise to the seers (*RV*, 10.97). But why did not the seer describe the soma plant? It should not be convincing that the seers who were so eloquent about the soma-juice had no knowledge about its yielder. It may be assumed that the soma plant was *not a single plant* and that there was a group of plants from which the juice could be collected or extracted, or, in other words, plants bearing the particular juice were known as soma plants. Thus, any concrete description of the plant was rather impossible.

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3. "For the juice pressed from the soma plant, the *R̥gveda* offers various names, such as *andhas* applied also to the whole plant ..." A.B. Keith, *Religion and philosophy of the Veda and the Upaniṣad*, Harvard Or. Ser, 31, 32 Cambridge, Mass., 1925, part II, p.167; Monier Williams, *cf., Sans.-Eng. Dictionary*, p. 44.

4. *Cf., yācante sunnah pavamānam akṣitam, RV, 9.78.3.*

In the *Ṛgveda* the soma plant has been called as *oṣadhi* (*RV*, 10.85.2), *bīrudhah* (*RV*, 1.91.22), *udbhid* (*RV*, 8.79.3), *rasin* (*RV*, 9.97.14), *parṇin* (*RV*, 9.82.21) etc. which are the names of plant in general. Once soma has been called 'the creator of all plants'.<sup>5</sup> We also find the names of different regions as the birthplace of soma. The hill Muñjavat was known as the place producing the best soma.<sup>6</sup> The god Indra was known as very much fond of the soma of *Śaryanāvanti* lake.<sup>7</sup> All these appear to indicate different types of soma originating at different places. There is a clear and convincing proof of this in the ninth maṇḍala of the *Ṛgveda* where different types of somas are mentioned :

*ye somasaḥ parāvati ye arvāvati sunvire*  
*ye vāda śaryanāvati*  
*ye ārjikeṣu kṛtvasu, ye madhye pastyanām*  
*ye vā janeṣu pāñcaṣu*  
 (RV, 9.65.22-23)

“May these soma juices which are effused at a distance or nigh or on this *Śaryanāvanti* (lake)—or amongst the *Rijikas*, or the *Kṛtvas*, or in the neighbourhood of the rivers, *Sarasvatī* etc. or in five castes.” (Tr., H.H. Wilson).

So far as the references in the *Brāhmaṇas* are concerned, it appears that not only the original plants but even the substitutes also were not restricted to a single plant.<sup>8</sup> In the medical literature of Sanskrit more or less twentyfour types of soma plant have been mentioned.<sup>9</sup> All these prove that the conception of the soma plant was not restricted to a single one.

5. *tvam imā oṣadhīḥ soma viśvās tvam āpo ajanayas tvam gāḥ*, *RV*, 1.91.22. Cf., also, *somāt parjanya oṣadhayaḥ pṛthivyām*, *Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad*, 2.1.5.

6. *somasyeva maujavatasya bhakṣyo*, *RV*, 10.34.1.

7. *RV*, 9.113.1. See also,  
*puṣṇāmi cauṣadhīḥ sarvā somo bhūtvā rasātmakāḥ |*  
*Bhagavad-Gītā*, 15.13

8. See *Śatapatha-Brāhmaṇa*, 4. 5. 102-6 ; *Tāndya-Brāhmaṇa*, 9.5.3.

9. *Suśrutasaṁhitā*, *Cikitsasthana*, 29. 5-8.

#### IV. Soma : The elixir of life and delight

So far as the third meaning of the term is concerned, we can say that the meaning of *soma* was not restricted to the juice or the plants only, but was extended to mean also the elixir of life and delight. Thus soma became the giver of pleasure,<sup>10</sup> strength and life. It was called the divine ambrosia.<sup>11</sup> A seer proclaimed once : "We have drunk soma, and become immortal."<sup>12</sup> The soma drink gave pleasure to the gods also and, so, is called *devamādanah* (*RV*, 9.44.1). Indra performed his heroic deeds by drinking soma.<sup>13</sup> It is even said that all the gods are powerful through the power of soma : *somenādīyā balinah*, *RV*, 10.85.2. In the sacrifice we find that soma juice was mixed with other elements like milk, barley, curd, mead, ghee, water etc. Thus the oblation soma became a mixture of the elements giving life and delight. The abode of soma was also known as the abode of delight.<sup>14</sup> Thus it may be said that neither the plant nor the juice was adorable to the seers, but the effect of the drink, the taste of immortal bliss was longed for and so by soma they meant the elixir of life and delight.

#### V. Soma : The god

The supernatural quality inherent in Soma made the seer to meditate upon the presiding deity behind it, and they finally recognised the existence of the god of the same name in it. They invoked the god to flow for ever, giving life and delight to all. Thus Soma became one of the principal deities in the Vedic pantheon. This god shares all the attributes of other Vedic gods and is mostly associated with Indra. The conception of the deity Soma as the moon is not distinct in the *R̥gveda* but in the *Brāhmaṇas* it has been identified with the moon clearly.<sup>15</sup>

Thus all these meanings taken together give a clear picture of the idea of Soma of the *R̥gveda*, which should be borne in mind while identifying Soma.

10. *somena ānandam janayan*, *RV*, 9.113.6.

11. *divah piṣam uttamam*, *RV*, 9.51.2.

12. *apāma somam ar̥tā abhūmah āganma jyotir abidama devān*, *RV*, 8.48.3.

13. *somasya tvā made indra acakara*, *RV*, 2.15.

14. See, *RV*, 9.113.7-11.

15. *etaḍ vai devasomam yac candramāh*, *Aitareya Brāhmaṇa*, 7.10.