



Diversity of the Divine Plant Soma: A Search from Rigveda to Modern Science - A Conglomerated Review

Sachidananda Padhy¹ and Santosh Kumar Dash²

*Vedic Science Research Centre,
'Anandamaya', Bhaba Nagar-1, Berhampur 760 004, Odisha, India
E-mail: ¹<sachi_padhy@rediffmail.com>, ²<santoshdash64@gmail.com>*

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ABSTRACT The Vedic age plant Soma is still a Botanical enigma throughout the world. A search for this divine plant in Rigveda, Manusmriti and Ayurveda is not futile; rather it has initiated a spirit to realize the ancient Soma culture from scientific point of view. The diversity for the identification of the Soma is now concentrated on *Sarcostemma* sp; needs a detailed phytochemical analysis. A note on views and interactions of scientists and indologists are discussed in this communication.

INTRODUCTION

The quest for good health and immortality has been a continuous human endeavour since the beginning of civilization throughout the world. In India, it may be through Yoga (a technique by which the physical and mental status of an individual can be elevated to the highest level and his spirit is united with the divinity), *Tantra* (a spiritual prescription for an orderly life according to the laws of nature, exhaling everything, discarding nothing, relegating everything to its rightful place and accepting the world as it is, spread to save), or *Oushadha* (commonly referred to as Ayurveda, in which a number of medicaments are prescribed for maintenance of health, vitality, youthfulness and longevity) (Padhy 2008, 2016). In this context, the magic role played by the Soma plant, the most sacred one described in Rigveda, the juice (*Somarasa*) of which was used as medicine (but; often misinterpreted as an intoxicating drink) to alleviate the mental status of the Aaryans, has provoked the researchers to identify the particular species and make a fruitful utilisation of it in the present-day life. Soma is not only the name of a plant in Rigveda, it is attributed to the Moon god (Chan-

dra - the god of medicines; authority of *Amrita*, that is, nectar; astrologically controls the mind of a person) and also explained in multiple forms, such as Soma as light; Soma as dawn; Soma causes the sun to shine; Soma as constellations and luminous species; Soma as bird; Soma as child; Soma as the support of the sky and Soma as the king. Certainly, through all these associations, the - above-narrated Soma has attained a mythological character (Hillebrandt 1891). For more than a century, research is being carried out on the botanical identification of Soma plant and there is no end to this research; it has again made a reentry with an investigation through Vedas, Manusmriti, Ayurveda and modern science (Dash and Padhy 1997, 1998a; Padhy 2004; Padhy and Dash 2002, 2004; Padhy et al. 2001).

The Soma Plant in Rigveda

The description of Soma plant in Rigveda (RV) is given vividly in the ninth *mandala* and more hymns in other *mandalas*, including other Vedic treatises as well, are devoted to its praise. But difficulty in interpretation of the Sanskrit literature and non-specification of the plant has created a problem for the scholars for ascertaining its botanical identity. Even the localities where Soma was consumed, as mentioned in Rigveda (VIII, 7.29; VIII. 64.11) such as Aarjika, Pastyavant, Ssaryanaavant, Sushoma etc., unfortunately are not identified in the present context. This information is necessary to trace out the geographical distribution of the plant

Address for correspondence:
Sachidananda Padhy
Vedic Science Research Centre,
'Anandamaya', Bhaba Nagar-1,
Berhampur 760 004, Odisha, India
E-mail: sachi_padhy@rediffmail.com

(Kochhar 1996). However, the following morphological features of the plant, as described in Rigveda, can be used as a key for right identification of the plant, such as:

1) *Habit*

Soma plant was a creeping twisting semi-herb. The colour of the plant, as described, was brown (*Babhru*), ruddy (*Aruna*) or tawny (*Hari*) (RV. I, 137.3; IX. 11.4; IX. 92.1; Atharva Veda (AV) VI.20.3).

2) *Habitat*

- It used to grow in mountains (RV I-93.6; III. 48. 2; V.36.2; V.43.4; V.85.2) named Manjavata (RV. 1.161.8; X.34.1).
- Therefore, Soma was called *Parvataavdh*, "Mountain Grown" (RV. IX. 46.1; IX. 71.4).
- Accordingly, the mountains were known as "*Somaprastha*" (carry Soma on back) (AV.III 21.10).

3) *Stem*

The twigs or the shoots (*Vaana* RV. IV.24.9) hanging down (*Neechassaakhaa*- Pendent: RV. 111.53.14) with bright coloured branches (RV. IX.92; VII.98.1; X.144.5), resemble finger shape (*Ksip* - digitate: RV. IX.79.4) with joints in the digits (*Parvan*, *Parus*: RV. X.68.9). It was probably angular (*Prasthya*) in its circumference. The word *Triprasthyais* repeatedly used as a designation for Soma. Often, "*Prastha*" speaks of the strong one, which means the hard edge of the stalk (RV. IV. 20.4; IX.71.7; IX.75.3). The stalks with hollow space (*Vaksanaa* - Fistular: RV. VIII. 1.17) contained the acidulous milky juice (*Piyusa*: RV. III.48.2), mentioned earlier (RV. 1.168.3; VIII. 91.9; RV. IX. 107.12). This juice was extracted by pressing the shoot; the process is called *Su*; *Asavi*: (RV. IX.62.4; *Suvaano*: RV.IX. 92.1; *Suta*: RV, I.125.3. However, milking of the shoot is often mentioned as *Duh* RV. 1.137.3; RV. III. 36.6-7; RV. V. 36.1; RV. IX. 72.6, RV. X. 94.9. The *Somarasa* or *Andhas* RV IX.1.4, 16.2; 51.3; 52.1; 55.3; 67.2 and 86.44 is often praised with different adjectives.

Haug (1875) (*Gottingische Gelehrte Anzeigen*, c.f. Hillebrandt 1891) has given the description of Soma plant as follows:

The Soma plant is not a mere plant, but a creeping, somewhat twisting, semi-shrub with a series of leafless shoots, which contain an acidulous milky juice. However, Susruta Samhita indicates the presence of rudimentary leaves in Soma with a specific number; this will be discussed later. Overall, the mountainous habitat and presence of milky latex characterise Soma plant as xerophytic in nature.

Was *Somarasa* Intoxicating?

The Vedic treatise for extracting *Somarasa* involves collection of plant twigs enriched with acidulous milky juice, crushed between stones in mortar and the juice collected in a cowhide or plate. For better yielding, the twigs previously steeped in water and the extracts purified by passing through sieves.

The juice (*Somarasa*), as described was with characteristic sharp taste and intaken in pure or mixed form along with milk, curd, grain or honey (MacDonell and Keith 1912). Hardly, there was any time left between the extraction and administration which rules out any possibility of fermentation. The drink recipe so prepared, was sweet smelling and neither hallucinogenic nor intoxicating; rather acting stimulant that kept the drinker awake and alert all through. Its effective stimulus at intellectual level provoked complementary thoughts to compose maxims and hymns (Kochhar 1999). The drinking of *Somarasa* was ritual oriented, offered to Gods and entitled not for a common man. The Soma drink praised with different adjectives in different hymns of Rigveda, such as: 1) *Ssukra* RV. IV. 27.5 (gives contentment); 2) *Ssubhra* RV. IX. 62.5 (beautiful); 3) *Madhu* RV. I. 13.4 (sweet), 4) *Madya* RV. VIII. 92.1 (priority for consumption), 5) *Gorjika* RV. VII. 21.1 (free from excreta), 6) *Vivakshaswa* RV. VIII. 1.25 (to be praised aesthetically), 7) *Maneeshinah* RV. II. 19.1 (enrich cheerfulness), 8) *Sudaksha* RV. VIII.92.4 (cream of the food) etc. (Acharya 1992).

Manusmriti: A Cultural Look Back for Soma

The ancient Indian literature can be divided into two broad groups, *Ssruiti* and *Smruiti*. The Vedas and Upanishads come under the first category which are transmitted verbally by contin-

uous succession of *Guru* and *Ssishya* (student). They are protected from mutilation and are preserved since thousands of years. *Smruti* includes social laws, usages, customs, manners and moral codes. They are post Vedic by traditionally supported to be based on the Vedas. Manusmriti is regarded as the foremost and biggest compendium on human jurisprudence of ancient India and Manu as the first law giver of the world (Padhy et al. 2006).

In Manusmriti, there is no description of the plant 'Soma'. But drinking of Soma juice (that is, performance of Soma sacrifice in order to obtain the fulfillment of some wish) was not a common practice as evident from the following *Slokas*.

*Yasa Tribaarshikam Bhaktam Paryaptam
Bhrutyabrutyeh Adhikam Baapi Bidyeta Sa
Somam Paatu Marhati. (XI/7)*

Meaning: He who may possess (a supply of) food sufficient to maintain those dependent on him during three years or more than that, is worthy to drink the Soma juice (Buhler 1886).

*Atah Swalpeeyasi Drabye Yah Somah
Pibati Dwijah Sa Peeta Somapoorbopi Na
Tasyaapnoti Tatphalam. (XI/8)*

Meaning: But a twice born man, who though possessing less than that amount of property, nevertheless drinks the Soma juice does not derive any benefit from that (act), though he may have formerly drunk the Soma juice (Buhler 1886).

The uncommonness of Soma sacrifice practice is also evident from other Vedic texts (MacDonnell and Keith 1912). This indicates that drinking of Soma juice was a luxurious and costly ritual, which required lot of financial involvements. In *Slokas* XII /11,12 and 14, it is further mentioned that if a Soma sacrifice (*Soma Yagnya*) remains incomplete due to lack of any requisite, the sacrificer may take such deficient from others, even forcibly, if necessary, who are rich enough to afford but have not themselves performed the said ritual. In the present context also performance of Soma ritual (*Athiratha Soma Yaga*) in Kerala state extending to 12 days involving many *Rhitwiks*, needs an expenditure of 80 Lakhs (Personal communication by Dr. K.S. Manilal, Emeritus Professor, Malabar Botanical Gardens, Calicut on date 09.08.2002). This re-ascertains the costly affair of *Soma Yaga* (sacrifice).

The commercial value of Soma plant was well realised in ancient period (Hillebrandt 1891). Yet,

opinion on selling of the twig does not seem to be positive from Manusmriti point of view. A seller of Soma was not to be entertained in *Sraaddha*, that is annual rituals of departed souls (Manusmriti: III. 158) or food given to a seller of Soma becomes ordure (Manusmriti: III / 180) was a sort of discouragement. Moreover, a *Braahmana* or a *Kshatriya* was advised not to go for Soma selling (Manusmriti: X / 88), which probably was not an honourable profession. In another way, Soma being a public property should not be used as a commodity for sale, because such business involves the possibility of adulteration, hoarding and monopoly. Even in the present day, such synonymous restriction is implemented in the case of *Kusa* (*Desmostachya bipinnata* Stapf, Family: Poaceae) plant for selling (Manusmriti: X / 88) (Dash and Padhy 1998a; Padhy 2017).

Somarasa vis-à-vis Suraa

Manusmriti projects that the Soma drinker is of higher status compared to a drinker of *Suraa*.

*Kraahmanastu Suraapasya Gandhamagh-
raaya Somapah*

*Pnaanaanpus Triraajamy Ghrutam
Praassya Bissuddhyaii. (XI/150)*

Meaning: But when a *Braahmana* who has partaken of Soma-juice, has smelt the odour exhaled by a drinker of *Suraa*, he becomes pure by thrice suppressing his breath in water, and eating clarified butter (Buhler 1886).

The above facts ensure the discrimination between Soma and *Surra*, and are sufficient to counteract any ill opinion about *Somarasa*. In the present context it is felt essential to make an attempt, investigating the opinion of the ancient culture on drinking of spirituous liquor (*Suraa*) and its social impact.

Sloka XI/94 states:

*Suraa Baimalamannaanaam Paapmaa Cha
Malamuchyate*

*Tasmaad Braahmana Raajanyou Baissyass-
cha Na Suraam Pibet: (XI/94)*

Meaning: *Suraa* indeed, is the dirty refuse (*Mala*) of grain, sin also is called dirt (*Mala*); hence a *Braahmana*, a *Kshetriya*, and a *Vaishya* shall not drink *Suraa* (Buhler 1866).

This *Sloka* indicates that *Suraa* was known to be a bye product (*Mala*).

Sloka 95 / XI states:

Goudee Paistee Cha Maadhwee Cha Big-neyaa Tribidhaa Suraa

*Yatheibaikaa Tathaa SarbaaNa Paadtab-
yaa DwiJottamaih. (IX/95)*

Meaning: *Suraa* one must know to be of three kinds, that distilled from molasses (*Goudee*), that distilled from ground rice, and that distilled from Madhukaa flowers (*Maadhavi*); as the one (named above) even so are all (three sorts) forbidden to the chief of the twice born (Buhler 1886).

The official source of Madhukaa flowers are from *Madhuca longifolia* (Koenig) Mach./ (Sapotaceae), which is a rich source of alcohol, used by tribal's. The process of fermentation, distillation and the precursors used for preparation of *Suraa* were as scientific as prevailing now a day.

Further, in *Slokas 96, 97 and 98* of the same chapter, it is described that *Suraa* and all other intoxicating drinks and decoctions are food of *Raakshaasas* and *Pissaachas* (Dash and Padhy 1998 a). A person, taking such liquor lowers himself and commits such acts which ought not to be committed. So it is emphasized not to drink spirituous liquor.

In order to condemn the drinking of *Suraa*, it is declared as one of the five mortal sins (*Mahaapaataka* which are: 1. Killing a *Braahmana*, 2. Drinking *Suraa*, 3. Stealing, 4. Adultery with Guru's wife and 5. Associating with such afore-said offenders (*vide Sl. IX/55*). Moreover drinking *Suraa* is equalized with six other offenses like: 1. Forgetting the Veda, 2. Reviling the Vedas, 3. Giving false evidence, 4. slaying friend, 5. Eating forbidden food and 6. Eating filthy substances (uneatable) *vide Sloka XI/57*. These *Slokas* indicate that intake of spirituous liquor was strictly prohibited in the then society.

Manu has prescribed the following expiations to come over the guilt incurred by drinking spirituous liquor (*Suraa*). Penance is not only a psychological phenomenon to give mental satisfaction against the commitment of a sin; rather it restricts and prevents someone to commit any offense.

- a) If one drink unintentionally, becomes pure by being reinitiated but if drinks intentionally cannot be expiated that is, free from the guilt throughout the rest of his life. (*Sl. XI/147, 151*).

- b) Even if someone drinks water stored in a vessel used for keeping *Suraa* or other intoxicating drinks, shall drink during five day including night's milk boiled with Sankhapushpi (*Canscora decussata* Sch. and Sch. Gentianaceae) plant (*Sl. XI/148*).
- c) Manu has gone to the extent of saying that one has to perform penance by drinking water in which *Kusa* sedge has been boiled in order to come over the guilty touching spirituous liquid (*Vide Sl. IX/149*).
- d) Moreover some of the penances are prescribed in Manusmriti *vide* *Slokas 91, 92 and 93* of chapter XI, which are practically not possible as:
 1. Shall drink the liquor boiling hot,
 2. Shall drink cow's urine, water, milk, clarified butter or cow dung boiling hot until he dies and so on. But, putting such strong imposition is probably to create a fear psychosis against *Suraa* consumption.

The above facts clearly indicate that drinking of *Suraa* was a social crime and the social ethics as depicted by Manu were highly antagonistic to alcoholism. Unfortunately, in the present society, drinking wine is reflected as a status symbol of upper class people in the day to day life. Even its status is elevated and supported in the audio-visual media. The negative impact of alcoholism on the health, social life and economic-perspective of poor is an open fact. In some states of India, alcohol is already banned, prohibited and restricted while in some other part of the country it is implemented in order to earn state and national revenue. No doubt, there is now a huge cry over India from economically back-ward society, especially from women community against alcoholism. Manu's verdict against alcoholism is an indispensable endeavour since Vedic period for making the society sane, disciplined and rational.

Indian Public Opinion

In order to gather the public opinion on the *Vedic Somarasa*, 100 highly educated and conscious persons were interviewed with the following two main questions (Das and Padhy 1998a):

- (1) What is your opinion on *Vedic Soma* juice? (2) Was it an intoxicating liquid?

The majority view to question one was in favour of a plant juice. However, none could give a perfect identification of the plant and very few with diversified speculations. The consensus for the second question was that the Soma juice was an intoxicating drink and the Vedic people were making merriment out of that. Many of the subjects are of opinion regarding a comparative overview of Soma drinking with the drinking of spirituous liquor used in the present day society and expressed it as a matter of ridicule of the Vedic culture

Soma in Ayurveda

Ayurveda is a later compilation compared to Vedas and especially during the compilation of Charak Samhitaa and Susruta Samhitaa (SS), Soma plant has been presented in much diversified forms of species. Charak had included Soma amongst the divine drugs (Datta and Sastri 1970); while Susruta had mentioned it under 24 separate names arranged alphabetically as: (1) *Agnistoma*, (2) *Anssavat*, (3) *Anssumat*, (4) *Chandramaa*, (5) *Durvaasoma*, (6) *Gaayatra*, (7) *Garudaahruta*, (8) *Jaagata*, (9) *Kanakaabha*, (10) *Kaniyas*, (11) *Karavira*, (12) *Mahaasoma*, (13) *Munjavat*, (14) *Panktaa*, (15) *Prataanavat*, (16) *Raivata*, (17) *Rajataprabha*, (18) *Saakara*, (19) *Svetaaksha*, (20) *Svayamprabha*, (21) *Traistubha*, (22) *Traistubha*, (23) *Udupati*, (24) *Yathokta* (SS. IXXX 5-9). All the Somas mentioned above are identical with one another in respect of their method of use and their virtues.

This classification into 24 varieties is probably based on the differences in their habitat, name, shape and specific potency. The specific potency of some varieties is as follows (SS. IXXX. 23, 24 and 25):

<i>Anssumat</i>	: Plants emit ghee-like smell
<i>Rajataprabha</i>	: Bear rhizomes
<i>Munjavat</i>	: Bear garlic-like leaves and banana-shaped rhizome
<i>Garudaahruta</i> and <i>Svetaaksha</i>	: Yellowish appearance, look like the cast off skin of a snake, pendant from terminal part of this plant.
<i>Chandramaa</i> and <i>Kanakaabhaa</i>	: May be hydrophytes

All the other species are marked by coloured circular rings. As a general character, all the Somas are furnished with 15 leaves; they have a bulb, a creeper-like appearance, secrete milky

juice and possess various kinds of leaves. A peculiarity can be marked (SS. IXXX. 20-22) that all Somas develop 15 leaves emerging one by one daily keeping pace with the *Tithis* (lunar days) of full moon fortnight (*Sukla Paksha*) and becoming well furnished with 15 leaves on full moon day (*Poornami*). Subsequently, they lose the leaves one by one, in the same order of *Tithis* of no-moon fortnight (*Krushna Paksha*) and finally, on no-moon day (*Amaavaasyaa*) remaining only in the form of a leafless creeper (SS. IXXX. 20,21 and 22). This seems ridiculous as the vast modern plant science has not identified any such plant till now.

Because the emergence and shedding of the leaves are related to the lunar activity, the Moon god (Chandra - also known as Soma) is imagined to be the regulating factor for the plant. In this context, the diurnal emergence of leaves, coupled with the presence of juice containing bulb in Soma plant, is nowhere reflected in the Rigvedic descriptions.

Phytogeographic distribution of the Soma is mentioned as being restricted to hillocks and mountains of ancient India like Himalayas, Ar-buda, Sahya, Mahendra, Malaya, Shreeparvata, Devagiri, Devasaha, Paariyaatra and Vindhya. The varieties named *Chandramaa*, *Munjavat*, *Anssumat*, *Gaayatra*, *Traistubha*, *Panktaa*, *Jaagataand*, *Saakara* which are hydrophytic in nature are restricted to Devasunda Lake, Sindhu River and little Maanasa lake in Kashmir (SS. IXXX. 27-31).

As per the above descriptions in Susruta Samhitaa, it is difficult to pinpoint a single plant as 'Soma' and its niche as hydrophytes or xerophytes; however, it conforms to the Vedic descriptions for the presence of milky juice and its consumption for restorative treatments.

Alternative Plants for Soma - A Speculation

In Atharva Veda (V. 4.1; V. 4.7; XIX.39.5 and 9), a plant named *Kustha* is reflected which has certain relationship with Soma. *Kustha* also grows in mountains, and is considered as contemporary of Soma; it wards off fever and evil spirits; it is identified mostly as *Costus speciosus* or *C. arabicus*, may be also *Saussurea auriculata* (Hillebrandt 1891). *Parna* or *Palaasah* (*Butea monosperma*) is referred in Kausitaki Braahmana, Satapatha Braahmana (VI. 5.1.1). According to a verse in Tandyaa Braahmana (IX.

5.3) “if they do not find Soma, then they shall press *Puutiikaa* which points to *Basella cordifolia*” (c.f. Hillebrandt 1891). All these references in Vedic literature indicate that the original Soma has either suffered extinction or were scarce in availability and that there was attempt to search for alternative Soma in the Vedic age itself.

Susruta Samhita (XXX. 5) has mentioned more plants alphabetically as: 1) *Aadityaparni*, 2) *Ajaa*, 3) *Ajagaree*, 4) *Ajalomi*, 5) *Atichchatraa*, 6) *Brahma suvarchalaa*, 7) *Chatraa*, 8) *Chakraaa*, 9) *Golomi*, 10) *Gonasi*, 11) *Kanyaa*, 12) *Karenu*, 13) *Krishna-Kapoti*, 14) *Mahaa sraavani*, 15) *Mahaa vegavati*, 16) *Sraavani*, 17) *Sveta kaapoti*, and 18) *Vaaraahi*. It is necessary to mention that these 18 plants possess as much potency as Soma with identical mode of their action and therapeutic effects (Shastri 1953). The milky latex of these plants was used as the medicament for restorative treatment to remove distress and added to the youthfulness, strength, luster, longevity and powerful memory of the user. Further, the different distinguishing and identifying features of these 18 plants are narrated in *Slokas* 9 to 25 and their detailed habitat, place and season of occurrence are dealt with in *Slokas* 30 to 40, as the historical places, such as Devasunda Lake, Sindhu river, Kshudraka Maanas lake in Kashmir, specific places in river Kausik in Malaya hills as well as Nalasetu, etc. It is added that the regimen of diet and conduct, etc. is the same as that for Soma and the result is also the same (SS. XXX. 37). Even if, there is a lot of morphological and ecological variation among these 18 plants, they had the common feature of possessing a latex-containing bulb.

Consequently, a number of plants are described in Ayurvedic literature with Soma as an epithet. Survey of two legendary Ayurvedic dictionaries (Nayak 1942; Tripathy 1926) and an encyclopedia (Praharaj 1937) in which a group of such plants are listed (Table 1) with identification of the plants, as far as possible. But, all the above expectations and variability in species in Ayurvedic literature failed to focus on the specific identification of Soma, which adds to the concept as more hypothetical in the minds of the modern day Botanists. Often, the question arises whether Soma refers to a particular plant out and out, or a specific property of some plants, the fact being exposed and wide opens

for discussion before a group of elite (Padhy and Dash 2001).

Regime of Soma Drink in Ayurveda

Susruta Samhita claims that, the person who uses the Soma bears a new youthful body which is supposed to be not harmed by fire, water, poison or weapon. He enjoys the energy of a thousand elephants. He can walk unimpeded to any difficult place and bears the beauty of a *Kandarpa* and the luster of a full moon. The entire Vedas with all its branches and sections become thoroughly mastered by him. He never meets failure in life and moves everywhere with a divine spirit. He gives pleasure to the minds of all living beings (Shastri 1953).

The methodology of the use of Soma, after care and day to day progress of the user, is dealt widely in the epic (SS.IXXX) is presented systematically as follows (Padhy and Dash 2004):

1. A person desirous of using Soma (any one of the 24 species described earlier), should get a house constructed with three chambers, one inside another at a commendable site (that is, a central chamber with 2 successive outer protected chamber/corridor (Fig. 1) being provided with all kinds of routine paraphernalia and attendants. This house can be named as the Intense Care Unit of the Soma Drinker (ICUSD).

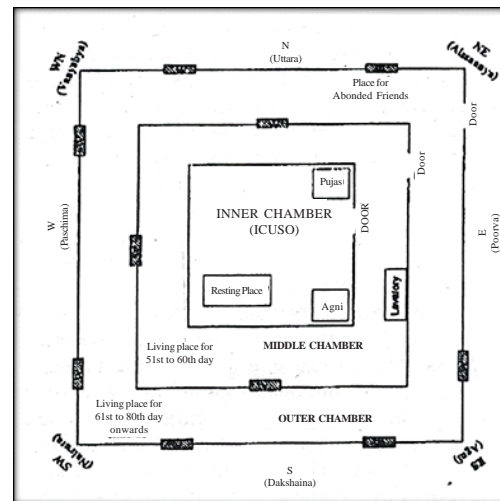


Fig. 1. The proposed hypothetical Chamber for Intensive Care of Soma drinker (ICUSD) (Padhy and Dash 2004)

Table 1: Plants named with 'Soma' as epithet (Padhy et al. 2001)

Sanskrit name	Vernacular name	Botanical name	Family
Somaraaja	1. <i>Baakuchee, Kushithanaassini</i> (Mishra 1998, Nayak 1942, Praharaj 1937) 2. <i>Somiraj</i> (Roxburgh 1820)	<i>Psoralea corylifolia</i> Linn.	Fabaceae
	3. <i>Thalkudi</i> (Praharaj 1937) 4. <i>Bana jeeraa</i> (Mishra 1998) 5. <i>Abalgujaa, Krushnaphalaa</i> (Tripathy 1926) <i>Kushmaanda Lataa</i>	<i>Serratalia anthelmintica</i> Roxb. (= <i>Vernonia anthelmintica</i> Willd.) <i>Centella asiatica</i> (Linn.) Urb. <i>Centratherum anthelminticum</i> (Linn.) O. Kuntz. <i>Vernonia anthelmintica</i> Willd. <i>Benincasa hispida</i> (Thumb.) Cogn.	Asteraceae Apiaceae Asteraceae Asteraceae Cucurbitaceae
<i>Soma Grushitkaa</i> (Praharaj 1937) <i>Soma Lataa</i> (Nayak 1942, Mishra 1998) <i>Soma raajee</i>	1. <i>Boti-or Suan-lai</i> 2. <i>Brahmi / Somavallari</i> (Praharaj 1937) <i>Soma raji</i> (Roxburgh 1820)	<i>Ichnocarpus frutescens</i> (Linn.) R. Br. <i>Bacopa monnieri</i> (Linn.) Penna <i>Paederia scandens</i> (Lour.) Merr. (= <i>P. foetida</i> Willd.) <i>Acacia catechu</i> (L.f.) Willd. <i>Myrica</i> sp	Apocynaceae Scrophulariaceae Rubiaceae Mimosaceae Myricaceae;
<i>Soma Valka</i> (Based on use of bark as medicine)	1. <i>Sweta Khaira</i> (Praharaj 1937) 2. <i>Kaaphada / Kataphala</i> (Praharaj 1937, Tripathy 1926) 3. <i>Karanja</i> (Mishra 1998, Praharaj 1937) 4. <i>Babura</i> (Praharaj 1937) 5. <i>Ithaaphala</i> (Nayak 1942) <i>Guduchi / Guluchi</i> (Nayak 1942, Mishra 1998, Tripathy 1926) <i>Soma Vruksha</i> (Mishra 1998) <i>Sweta Chandana</i> (Nayak 1942)	<i>Milleita pinnata</i> (Linn.) Pangro. <i>Acacia nilotica</i> (Linn.) Willd. ssp. <i>Indica</i> (Benth.) Brenan. <i>Sapindus trifoliatius</i> Linn. <i>Tinospora cordifolia</i> (Willd.) Mier. <i>Soyimida fabrifuga</i> A. Juss. <i>Santalum album</i> Linn.	Fabaceae Mimosaceae Sapindaceae Menispermaceae Meliaceae Santalaceae
<i>Soma Valli</i>			
<i>Soma Vruksha</i> <i>Soma Yoni</i>			

2. The particular plant should be collected according to the rites enjoyed for a sacrifice with chanting of *Mantras* and offered to the sacred fire in the inner most chamber of the ICUSD.

3. The Soma drinker should prick the bulb of the plant with a gold needle and collect a handful (*Anjali*) measure of milky exudates in a gold or silver vessel. This juice should be gulped in one sip without testing it and after that should throw away the remnants into water. Such instructions probably indicate the non palatable taste of the drink. He should then discipline himself by applying the principles of *Yama* (controlling of senses) and *Niyama* (routine life). The day to day progress of the Soma drinker is recorded as follows:

1st Day: After drinking the *Somarasa*, with concentrated mind and Holy Spirit, he should confine to the innermost chamber of the ICUSD, observe silence, should sit, stand or walk; but should never sleep being attended by friends (outside). The person after his evening meal, followed by a spiritual discourse, should lie down on a bed of *Kussa* grass (*Desmostachya bipinnata*) covered with black-buck: *Krushna-saara Mrig* (*Antelope cervicapra*) skin. He may take a little cold water if feels thirsty or can take little milk too.

2nd Day: In the next day morning he should perform the routine and auspicious rites; should sit down as before. When the Soma juice gets digested, it causes vomiting of blood and worms. In the evening, he should take boiled cooled milk and rest as usual.

3rd Day: He would get a loose motion with worms which would make him free from impurities accumulated due to errors of his previous diet and conduct; thus making his body well cleansed. He should take milk after a bath in the evening and rests as before.

4th to 6th Day: Swelling appearance of the body and the worms come out from all parts of his body are the characteristics of the day. His bed should be on strewn over with sand covered by a silken cloth and his diet is milk as before; but enhanced to twice daily.

7th Day: The person becomes completely fatigued due to excess wastage of muscles and reduced to a skeletal appearance. However, he continues to respire due to impact of Soma as claimed. Along with milk diet his body should

be sprinkled over with warm milk followed by anointing with a paste of *Sesamum indicum* – Rasi:Til, *Madhuka indica* - Mahua flower and *Santalum album* - Sandalwood.

8th Day: Activities are same as the 7th day like milk bath and application of pastes. He should leave the bed of sand by changing to a bed covered with silk cloth. Later his muscles resume strength, his skin gets desquamated and his teeth, hairs and nails began to shed off.

9th to 18th Day: His body should be massaged with a herbal oil (*Anutaila*) and a bath with decoction of Soma *Valka* (may be any one of the following plants: *Myrica* sp, *Milletia pinnata*, *Acacia nilotica* or *Sapindus trifoliatus* (Padhy et al. 2001). Thence onwards his skin becomes firm with appearance of shining and enduring new teeth towards 17th and 18th day.

19th to 29th Day: There will be a change in his diet as he should take gruel with milk and old Shali rice. During this time shining nails and glossy fine hairs will regenerate and the skin becomes lustrous.

30th to 50th Day: A hair cut (*Mundana*) is made on 30th day followed by application of paste made from Sesum seeds (*Sesamum indicum*), Sandal wood (*Santalum album*) and Usira (*Vetiveria zizanoides*) on the head and bathed with milk. Within seven days stable, glossy and curly black hairs come up. On the 40th day, he should come out of the central room to the next, remain for a moment and re-entered into the inner chamber. Afterwards, some herbal rheumatic oil for massage, paste of Barley (*Hordeum vulgare*) and decoction of *Ajakarana* (*Pterocarpus marsupium*) for rubbing and warm milk for sprinkling over the body, followed by bath in well water soaked with Usira (*Vetiveria zizanoids*) roots. He should drink varieties of pulse and other soups mixed with juice of Amlaki (*Emblia officinalis*). Also be given black Sesum seeds boiled with milk and Mahua in the curry. This will continue for the next 10 days.

51st to 60th Day: For next 10 days he should live in the middle chamber.

61st to 70th Day: These 10 days he should remain in the outermost chamber and stabilize himself getting exposed to sun and wind a little and again entered to the central chamber (for rest). During this period he should not look at himself in the mirror or water. All these days he should

control his senses, thoughts, avoid anger and remain with constructive spirit. This state will continue till he is released out of the chamber.

Final Exit: On the 4th month in a full moon day after performing the auspicious rites and worshipping the *Braahmanas* he should come out of the chamber.

Truthfully, the difficulties and risk of taking the Soma, its aftermath care and the day to day progress after administration of the juice as well, the process of metamorphosis as depicted, is beyond the expectations of any therapy and a modern man cannot have trust and patience to undergo such rigorous treatment. But, it must be admitted that the whole process described above is no less than the quarantine treatment of modern medical science.

Soma: A Botanical Enigma

In course of time, the Vedic elites and the botanists as well, have tried for more than a century to correlate the sacred plant with different plant species (Table 2). The famous Soma in indological Hindu scriptures has been attributed to as many as 20 different species like *Sarcostemma* (Asclepiadaceae) to *Amanita muscaria* (a fungus). There are many more such examples of disputed identity, which itself forms an independent area of research (Rao and Hajra 1987).

Sarcostemma as Soma

Most of the researchers argue in favour of *Sarcostemma viminalis*, *Sarcostemma intermedium* or *Sarcostemma acidium* of family Asclepiadaceae as the Vedic Soma and *S. brevistigma* Wt. and Arn. (Kirtikar and Basu 1981) and *Sarcostemma brunonianum* are closest to them due to morphological similarity. The phytopography of *S. acidium*, a bush as described by Roth (*c.f.* Hillebrandt) is: it grows several feet high, has no leaf, the stalks with numerous side branches, cylindrical with joints, smooth and particularly the younger ones full of juice, pendant that is hanging down if there is no support, with small white flowers growing in terminal umbels. The description of *Sarcostemma* supports its claim as the Soma plant (Fig. 2). In this context, the eminent taxonomist Willium Roxburgh in *Flora Indica* 1820, had identified *Somalata* as *Asclepias acida* (old name of *Sarcostemma brevis-*



Fig. 2. *Sarcostemma* Sp. (Internet Sources)

tigma). According to him, the abundant quantity of milky juice present in this plant (*Sarcostemma*) was not witnessed in any other plant by him ever before. The nature travelers often suck the tender shoots to allay their thirst. On the contrary, W. Roxburgh had referred to *Ruta graveolens* as *Somalata*/ *Brahmee*.

Ephedra as Soma

There is consensus among the researchers now about identifying Soma plant as *Ephedra*, a gymnosperm (Mahdi Hassan 1963). The plant is a leafless bush 1-6 feet high may be prostrate or erect with pine-like aroma and strong astringent taste. The tender twigs are enriched with alkaloid ephedrine (Fig. 3) 1-phenyl, 1-hydroxy, 2-methyl amino propane) (Kokate et al. 1990), which is soluble in water, odourless, colourless, decomposes when exposed to air and can be taken orally. It stimulates the nervous system,

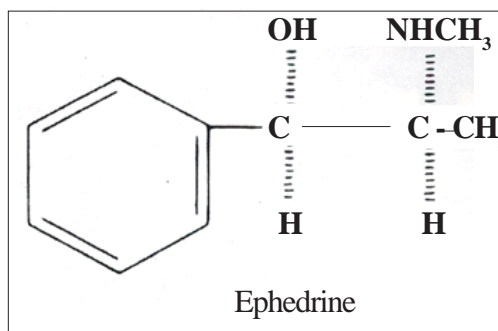


Fig. 3. Active ingredient of *Ephedra*

increases the intake of oxygen, acts as restorative and a mild anesthetic agent. It dilates the pupil and contracts the uterus. Excessive intake of ephedrine causes nervousness, insomnia, headache, vertigo, sweating, nausea and vomiting. Probably the aphrodisiac property of Soma coincides with the general feeling of euphoria that ephedrine may produce. It is used as ephedrine -hydrochloride/-sulphate in medicine (Tyler et al. 1936).

The family Ephedraceae contains a single genus *Ephedra*, which has about 45 species. They occur in the arid regions of sub-tropics and tropics. The various species of *Ephedra* are used as a source of the alkaloids ephedrine and pseudoephedrine. Amongst these, *E. sinica* and *E. equisetina* are Chinese species and *E. gerardiana*, *E. intermedia* and *E. major* are distributed in India and Pakistan (Trease and Evans 1934) and *E. nebrodensis* (Kokate et al. 1990). *E. foliata* grows in the plains of south Punjab and Rajasthan is neither sweet smelling nor enriched with juice and the rest of India is not a natural habitat of any species of *Ephedra*. Significantly, the plant is not reported in Ayurveda (Kochhar 1999). Other species, *E. distachya* (Tyler et al. 1936), *E. alata* and *E. Helvetica* (Kokate et al. 1990), are also the sources of ephedrine.

Is Soma a Mushroom?

The latest identification of Soma plant with *Amanita muscaria* (Fries) Hooker, a mushroom with a red cap, mottled with white warts, having a white stripe with a bulbous base and a conspicuous white ring has attracted the attention of ethno botanists (Fig. 4) throughout the world



Fig. 4. *Amanita muscaria* (Internet source)

(Wasson 1972). It has been argued that the mushroom used to make Soma, the divine intoxicant consumed by the Aryans and considered as the oldest hallucinogen known to man, was also used in other parts of the world like Siberia and North America (Schultes and Hoffman 1979). The active principles of *Amanita muscaria* and its neurological effects are dealt with in detail (Tyler et al. 1936). In this context the active principles in many poisonous mushrooms can be classified on the physiological basis according to the type of symptoms in human beings following ingestion, that is, (1) protoplasmic poison, (2) compounds exerting neuralgic effects, (3) gastro-Intestinal irritants, (4) disulfiram like constituents. The *Amanita* toxins found in different species of the mushroom come under protoplasmic poisons. But, the active principle originally isolated from *Amanita muscaria* comes under compounds exerting neuralgic effects, such as primarily muscarine and in small quantity of Ibotenic acid, muscimol (Fig. 5) and also associated with an oxazole derivative muscazone. The symptoms of the muscarine poisoning appear 15-30 minutes after ingestion, leading to increased salivation, perspiration and lacrimation which are often followed by abdominal pain, severe nausea and diarrhoea. The pulse gets slowed; the pupil constricted and breathing becomes asthmatic. However, the mental status of the patient remains clear. Occasionally death may occur in severe cases from cardiac arrest or respiratory failure. Atropine is a specific antidote for such poisoning (Tyler et al. 1936).

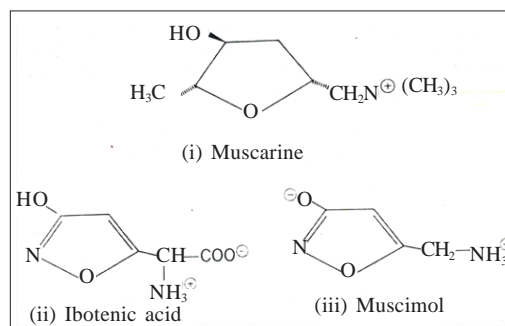


Fig. 5. Active ingredient of *Amanita muscaria*

The importance of this plant as Vedic Soma was recognised to such an extent that it has

made an entry into the emblem of the Society of Ethno botanists (SEB), Lucknow, India. Significantly, the decorative umbrella like structures over the idles of Lord Siva and Parvati creates an erroneous idea regarding the importance of a mushroom as Soma and links the plant with Hindu religion. Interestingly, the tribe's men who used *Amanita muscaria* as a narcotic had the curious custom of (self) urine drinking, since the effects of the narcotic can be experienced several times following the first ingestion of the mushroom (Wasson 1972; Wasson and Wasson 1957). In 1967, on the basis of many descriptions in the Vedas corroborating the structure of Soma plant with characteristics like fleshiness, lack of roots and a dome-shaped top, etc, as well as on the interpretation of a specific Vedic passage on urine drinking, Soma was ascribed as *Amanita muscaria* (Wasson 1972). But such corroboration of Soma plant with a mushroom is not free from objections (Dash and Padhy 1997), even though *Amanita muscaria* reserves a significant position among the psychoactive fungi (Schultes 1993).

Amanita muscaria now finds a place within an internet non-profit site (virtual museum installed by Niels Hallerberg, Gelsenkirchen) where the German translation of the paper by Padhy and Dash (2004) is available (Translated by Edzard Klapp, edzard klapp@gmx.de).

Objections Raised against *Amanita* as Soma

In Hindu system of food habits, as described in Manusmriti, intake of non-vegetarian food by human beings is discouraged (Dash and Padhy 1998b). Among the vegetables too, garlic, leek, onion, mushrooms and all other plants springing from impure substances, are declared to be unfit to be eaten by *Dwija* (twice born elite where education is considered as second birth for a man) *vide* Manusmriti: V/5 as follows:

Lassunya grunjananchaiba palaandum kabakaanicha,

Abhakshaani dwijaateena amamedha prabahaani cha.

In this context, the question arises that if mushrooms are considered as prohibited food for humans, then how can the most sacred Soma plant be attributed to *Amanita muscaria*? The

following points may be taken into consideration before going for such corroboration (Dash and Padhy 1997) projected by the authors earlier.

1. The Vedic Soma plants a creeper, somewhat twisting semi-herb with a series of leafless shoots with an acidulated milky juice. Its twigs brown (*babhru*), ruddi (*aruna*) or tawny (*hari*) in colour and branches pendulous and fleshy. This morphology contradicts *Amanita*.

2. The Vedic '*Somaraasa*' was neither intoxicating nor hallucinogenic. It stimulated thinking and kept the drinker awake and alert, contrary to juice of *Amanita muscaria* described as intoxicant and hallucinogenic.

3. If the Vedic '*Soma*' be attributed to a prohibited vegetable for human beings, there should not be the question of offering its juice to (Hindu) Gods, the most sacred ones.

4. Even though the food value of mushrooms well realised, they are never offered in any temple, and they are regarded as untouchable diet for vegetarians and widows by orthodox Hindus, in deference to Manu's dictum.

Many Other Plants as Soma

Several other researchers like Aitchinson, Watt, Rice and Mitra argued that Soma may be the Afghan grapes, sugarcane or some species of Sorghum, the juice of which was used as an ingredient in the preparation of a kind of beer (like hops in Europe) and not a beverage by itself. But the afore-said coordination is based on the possible characters of *Somarasa* rather than the plant proper. Since *Somarasa* was not a fermented product, such correlation does not hold true. Further, identification of Soma as *Cannabis sativa* (Bhang) is a view rejected by Mukherjee (*c.f.* Hillebrandt 1891).

In the Indian scenario, Soma plant is attributed to various other species, such as *Ceropegia decaisneana* or *C. elegans* in Malabar Coast; *Ichnocarpus frutescens* in Andhra Pradesh, Bihar, Odisha, Uttar Pradesh, and several other states (Tripathy 1926). *Ephedra* in Kashmir and Pakistan (Mahdi Hassan 1963) and other plants mentioned in Table 2 are according to the different interpretations of the researchers.

In addition to the plants referred (Table 2) there is much other speculation which is crowded in the internet. Some of the examples are *Psilo-*

Table 2: Plants identified as Vedic Soma at a glance (Padhy et al. 2001)

Name of the plant	Author	Remarks	References
1) <i>Amanita muscaria</i>	Schultes and Hoffman	A mushroom (<i>Kabaka</i>)	Schultes and Hoffman 1979
2) <i>Asclepias acida</i>	Burnell Roxburgh	Used as Soma in coast of Coromandal, India Description of juice content given in the text.	c.f. Hillebrandt 1891 Roxburgh 1820
3) <i>Basella cordifolia</i>	MacDonell and Keilh	Narrated as Putikaa, plant mentioned as substitute of Soma	MacDonnell and Keith 1912.
4) <i>Cannabis sativa</i> .	Author's name not cited	A view rejected by Braja Lal Mukherjee	c.f. Hillebrandt 1891
5) <i>Ceropegia decarsneana</i>	Burnell	Used as Soma in Malabar Coast, India.	c.f. Hillebrandt 1891
6) <i>Ceropegia elegans</i>	Burnell	Used as Soma in Malabar Coast, India.	c.f. Hillebrandt 1891
7) <i>Eleusine coracana</i>	Havell	Used as Soma in Malabar Coast, India.	c.f. Hillebrandt 1891
8) <i>Ephedra</i> sp.	Mahdi Hassan	A gymnosperm	Mahdi Hassan 1963
9) <i>Ichnocarpus frutescens</i>	Tripathy	Used as Soma in states of India like Andhra Pradesh, Bihar, Odisha, Uttar Pradesh, etc. Referred as Ssyamalata.	Tripathy 1926. Mishra 1998
10) <i>Peiploca aphylla</i>	Watt's Second note on Soma	Soma being used to flavour some other beverages	c.f. Hillebrandt 1891
11) <i>Ruta graveolens</i>	Roxburgh	Narrated under Sanskrit name Somalata, also Brahme; no description of Soma juice	Roxburgh 1820.
12) <i>Saccharum</i> sp.	Rice	Description given in the text	c.f. Hillebrandt 1891.
13) <i>Sarcostemma. acidum</i>	Roth	Closest to S. intermedium	c.f. Hillebrandt 1891.
14) <i>S. brevisigma</i>	Haug	Closest to S. intermedium	c.f. Hillebrandt 1891.
15) <i>S. brunonianum</i>	Haug	Reported that it grows everywhere in India	c.f. Hillebrandt 1891.
16) <i>S. intermedium</i>	Haug	Eyewitness for extracting the juice in India	c.f. Hillebrandt 1891.
17) <i>S. viminale</i>	Stevenson Windischmann A. Kuhn	Soma researcher Calls this plant <i>Asclepias acida</i> which later reported as <i>Sarcostemma brevisigma</i> by Watt.	c.f. Hillebrandt 1891.
18) <i>Sorghum</i> sp.	Rice	The oblong fruits of the Afghan grape like the shape and size of joints of human fingers, were described as the joints of the stem of succulent plant.	c.f. Hillebrandt 1891.
19) <i>Vitis vinifera</i> (Afghan Grape)	Watt		c.f. Hillebrandt 1891.
(Vine)	Aitchinson		c.f. Hillebrandt 1891.

cybe cubensis (hallucinogenic mushroom that grows in cow dung), *Peganum harmala* (hallucinogenic), *Ephedra equisetina*, *Ephedra distachya*, *Ephedra intermedia*, *E. sinica*, *Nelumbo nucifera*, *Papaver somniferum*, *Argyrea nervosa*, *Claviceps purpurea*, *Periploca aphylla* etc.

Experiences and Views

Max Muller

Max Muller drew attention to Soma description based on an Ayurvedic presentation, which is discussed by Hillebrandt (1891) in his book Vedic Mythology, which reads as follows, but he has not mentioned the exact source of it:

Soyaamalaamalaa cha nispatraa ksheerinee tvasimaamsutaa,

Sslesmalaa vaminee vallee somaakshye chhaaga bhojanam.

Meaning: The creeper called Soma is dark in colour, sour, leafless, milky and fleshy on the surface. It causes phlegm and vomiting and is eaten by goats.

This passage was not given much attention, because the period of formulation of Ayurveda was much later than the age of Veda proper. However, the eminent botanists I.G. Baker claimed that the medical text cited by Max Muller appears to refer clearly to *Sarcostemma* as Soma as so far as he had realised (*c.f.* Hillebrandt 1891).

View of Gita

In Srimad Bhagawat Gita, Sri Krishna has praised the Soma drink with the following perspectives.

‘The knowers of the three Vedas, the drinkers of the sap of the Soma plant, purified from sin, worshipping me by sacrifices, pray for the way to heaven. They attain the Indra’s paradise as the result of their virtuous deeds and enjoy the celestial pleasures of Gods in heaven. (Gita, 9/20).’

In the ‘Sadhak Sanjivani’ annotation of Gita, published by Gita Press, Gorakhpur, India, swami Ramsukhdas explained the Soma plant based on a version from epic ‘Rasendra Chudamani’ (6/6-9). He admitted that, Soma is an uncommon plant with a creeper habit and bulb; fifteen leaves

emerge and shed-down keeping pace with the lunar days as described earlier (SS. IXXX. 20-22). The medicament prepared from the *Panchanga* (five plant parts: root, stem, leaf, flower and fruit) of Soma collected on a full moon day processed with *Datura fastuosa* and mercury, when used turns the human body very strong like Iron.

Sri A. C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupad (the founder Acharya of International Society for Krishna Consciousness - ISKON) in his commentary book ‘Bhagavad - Gita as it is’ has presented a different view for drink of *Somarasas* as follows (Chapter 2.42, 43, P.117-118):

People in general are not very intelligent, and due to their ignorance they are most attached to the fruitive activities recommended in the *karma-kaanda* portions of the Vedas. They do not want anything more than sense gratificatory proposals for enjoying life in heaven, where wine and women are available and material opulence is very common. In the Vedas many sacrifices are recommended for elevation to the heavenly planets.

In the *karma-kaanda* section of the Vedas it is said, *apaama somam amrta abhuma* and *aksayyam ha vai caaturmaasya-yaajinah sukru-tam bhavati*. In other words, those who perform the four-month penances become eligible to drink the *Somarasas* beverages to become immortal and happy forever. Even on this earth some are very eager to have *Somarasas* to become strong and fit to enjoy sense gratifications. Such persons have no faith in liberation from material bondage and they are very much attached to the pompous ceremonies of Vedic sacrifices. They are generally sensual, and they do not want anything other than the heavenly pleasures of life. It is understood that there are gardens called Nandana-kanana in which there is good opportunity for association with angelic, beautiful women and having a profuse supply of *Somarasas* wine. Such bodily happiness is certainly sensual; therefore there are those who are purely attached to such material, temporary happiness, as lords of the material world.

Soma and Technology of Yoga

In yoga technology (Padhy 2016) there is a *Mudras* (posture) named ‘*Khechari Mudras*’.

In a long practice and ardent effort the tongue of the yogi finds its place at the back of Uvula. The tongue is placed above the soft palate inside the nasal cavity. This posture is otherwise called 'The Tongue Lock *Mudra*'. Touching the tip of the tongue or plucking it in the nasal cavity behind the Uvula, the divine life current draws the *Praana* (life force) from the senses into the spine and unites the consciousness with spirit.

The immortal liquor of nectar also known as *amrita* is called the 'divine *Somarasa* that exudes from the *Sahasraa Chakra* (Padhy 2016) touches the tongue of the Yogi. It elevates the practitioner to move in the blissful infinite consciousness of *Brahman*. The yogi in turn, reaches the higher states of consciousness. The practice of *Khechari Mudra* leads to a state of immortality, in which the yogi no longer fears death, disease or suffering and enters to a state of '*Samadhi*'.

'Yoga Chudamani Upanishad' has declared:

'Disease, death, sleep hunger, thirst and swoon do not trouble him who knows *Khechari Mudra*.'

The meaning of Sanskrit word '*Khe*' is space and '*Chari*' - movement. The practitioner of *Khechari* gets the power to roam at his will in space. India is enriched with *Khechari* Practitioner Yogis and there is no deficiency of top-most achievements (Box-1).

Box-1

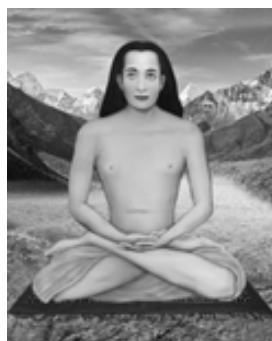


Fig. 6. Sri Mahabatar Babaji Maharaj

Sri Mahabatar Babaji, the master of Masters in Kriya Yoga traditions has a cosmic

body (*Chinmaya Sareera*) which is fabricated attracting the required atoms and molecules from the cosmos and can be dissolved as and when required as per will. Born on 30.11.203 (A.D.) (Deepaabali day, at Parangipeetai, Tamil Nadu), Babaji maintains a look like a young man of aged twenty five years (Fig. 6) after 1815 years of his physical appearance from mother's womb. This condition of the Master is one of the after effects of Yogic *Somarasa* discussed earlier. Many developed yogis have witnessed his subtle body (*Sukshama Sareera*), the latest in 2010, and their experiences and interactions are reflected in different books (Govindan 1991, 1997; M Sri 2012; Naushir 2014; Padhy 2015; Yogananda 1946)

Experiences of Swami Ram

Few excerpts from Swami Ram's autobiographical book 'Living with the Himalayan Masters' are presented below which claims the lively status of Soma drinking as experienced by the Indian Saint (Rama 1999).

... It (Soma) is a creeper which grows above 11,000 feet. There are only two or three places where it grows at that altitude.

There are several varieties of mushrooms which have similar effects (like Soma). However, the Soma creeper was definitely not from the mushroom family; but that it was from the succulent family.

The *Somarasa* mentioned in the ancient literature was used to help inferior students who were not capable of sitting in one position for a long time and who did not have the ability to concentrate their minds. This herb affects the locomotors system and makes one insensitive to external stimuli so that thoughts start running in one direction. The body becomes still and free from pain. Some of those who did not practice steady posture through systematic discipline used Soma along with ritual worship before meditation.

One morning he prepared the juice of *Astha Varga* (a mixer of 8 herbs) and mixed Soma creeper juice in it. We both drank this mixture. Its taste was a little bit bitter and sour. After a while, he

started chanting and swinging and ultimately threw off all his clothes and started dancing....

It was a chaotic experience, as he danced, began shouting that he was Shiva, the Lord of the Universe and cried, "Where is my Parvati? I want to make love to her"...

He was tried to be restrained but he became so strong that five people could not hold him down, though he was a slightly built man, he threw them off one after another.

CONCLUSION

The glory of *Somarasa* and its elevated status in Vedic culture are further elaborated by the following lines (Hillebrandt 1891):

- ◆ Soma was poured into the fire as an offering to the gods or was drunk by the priests.
- ◆ The Soma drink inspires and stimulates to compose hymns.
- ◆ Soma bestows not only long life but immortality also.
- ◆ Indra (The King of Gods) himself acquires strength through Soma.
- ◆ Soma drink removes sins from the heart and takes away the diseases from the weak, for it is the medicine of the infirm.
- ◆ Soma bestows the rain of heaven, the wealth of the earth, reputation and fame.
- ◆ Soma gives protection against human wickedness and bad omens, encourages truth and destroys untruth. It does not let the bad one to go free and condemns false dignity.
- ◆ The *Braahmanas* (elite) drinking Soma were supposed to acquire the power which could kill (others) with their glances.
- ◆ In law books, Soma is regarded as a purifier drink.

The Soma culture was not only restricted to Rigvedic people; but, was also known as *Haoma* by Avestan people. The twig, known as '*Anshu*' in Rigveda, is designated as '*Asu*' in Avesta - the sacred book of Zoroastrian (Kochhar 1999). The divine power of '*Haoma*' is very much praised in Avestans: it bestows its worshippers the best of the world, namely, the celestial world. It is the medicine and confers health and longevity, victory over attacks of the enemies; it

elevates the hearts of the poor as well as the rich.

The name 'Soma' still restored in the regions of Baluchi and Pashto as '*Hum*' and in Gilgit, Chitral and Nuristan as '*Sum*', reminds one of the ethno-botanical aspects of Aryan culture associated with this plant.

The renowned Soma plant, which occupied once upon a time a culminated status in the cult of ancient India and Iran for thousands of years, still remains at the level of reference from the common man to top ranking researchers; goes yet without established identification of its original characteristics and ecological niche, demands more and more research. Finally, in spite of comments that the Soma cult has apparently died out, and the identity of this holy plant is forgotten (Schultes 1993), it is hard to believe that Soma drinking is at its lively status as experienced and described by an Indian saint Swami Rama (1999) as described earlier.

At length, in spite of all diversification, whatsoever about the myth and science of the Soma plant and the Soma drink, we must converge to a point that in the Indian scenario it is our prime duty since time immemorial to offer *Tarpana*: (offering of sacred water) to the *Pitru* (Manis) with the chant '*Aum Soma Strupyantaam* (let Soma be contented); *Aum Somapaah Pitara Strupyantaam* - (Let all the Soma drinkers' ancestors be contented) and this chanting would continue till the Indian culture and heritage exists in this world.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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