THE SEVEN THEORIES IDENTIFYING THE SOME PLANT

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ABSTRACT: The author attempts in this paper to identify the soma Plant by interpreting various texts and ascribes to seven theories in support of the study.

Man in ancient times had a short life-span. In fact even when there had been Hipocrates and galen as authorities of medical science the expectancy of life in Roman times was only 40 years. As reaction to premature deaths Man entertained belief in agencies that could prolong life. Practically all over the ancient world there had been belief in drugs of longevity. One of the oldest literary records would be Rigveda. It mentions the plant soma, better inscribed as sauma, according to Prof. Boyce (1975), as the Sanskrit equivalent of Hauma in Avesta. The juice of this plant was also called sauma and was admitted to be a drink of longevity in fact of immortality. However Rigveda defines immortality as life of 100 years or of three generations, which thus does not assert a myth. Since soma is the oldest documented source of such belief it has become the ideal of its kind and generally recognized as such. Naturally the more important was the juice, the actual drink, but the plant was its container and this was discovered before the juice came to be appreciated. On account of such importance scholars have attempted to identify the plant extolled in Rigveda. Prof. Kashikar (1980) a renowned Vedic authority writes, as 1980, “the identification of the plant has engaged the attention of scholars for the past 150 years (yet) the problem cannot be said to have been settled unanimously.” That such should be the case becomes a side problem which then has to be discussed first.

Some connotes both, the plant and the juice. What is important is the juice so that it has been considered first. But the juice is the content while what exists in nature is the plant. Thus what was actually discovered first was the plant so that chronologically considered it should have been studied before the juice. What has been done was to compare the soma juice with another drink like wine, while nowhere has a writer compared the soma plant with any other, not even with the grope vine, assuming that soma juice is intoxicant and alcoholic. Thus the comparison of soma as plant with any other is conspicuous by its absence in the literature.

Let us now consider what is known of Haoma among the Zoroastrains. A juice is
given as few drops to a child newly born. This custom exists even to-day and the plant used is ephedra. Thus ephedra as Haoma has an uninterrupted history of the use of ephedra as Haoma” – Modi (1922; 303). Now this use of soma juice, as the earliest, in an Aryan’s life is also traceable to Rigveda. RV. 3.32.9 says “Indira soon as born thou drunkest up the soma (juice) .” I (1983) have published a regular article to show its importance even as recognized by Rigveda. As far as I know this reference in rigveda of the child being given a few drops of soma drink has never been considered before. Now rigveda being an ancient composition and mainly of poets, who were otherwise nomads, naturally is not explicit in all its information. This has tempted scholars to differ radically from one another. Reviewing critically how they tried to identify what some has been I have been left with the impression that, great men make great mistakes. There is no doubt that max Muller (1891) was great as an Indologist and yet he considers the soma juice to be an intoxicant, which means alcoholic. Then following him Dhabar (1955;27) compares it to wine and writes, ‘the drink of grapes delivers the mortals from grief and gives sleep, nor is there any other medicine for troubles”. Now Rigveda is explicit that soma was used as freshly extracted juice, yet it was alcoholic, so that the plant must have contained alcohol. Thus the implication that a plant can contain alcohol is quite contrary to science and a statement as above can only come from an authority which was great enough to ignore such an impossibility.

A second theory emanating from Miss Mulholland (1976) states that, soma was a plant rich in an essential oil which was the real active principle. Here again there is no essential oil which was is an energizer cum euphoriant to be soma. Moreover she does not hint at comparing the soma plant with any other, so that the plant and its content both remain enigmatic.

A third theory has been propounded by no less an authority than prof. windfuhr (1985), a renowned scholar of Avesta and ancient Iranian culture. He identifies the soma plant as the famous Chinese herb, ginseng. The root of this plant resembles man with his two legs as the most prominent feature. Now he does not cite Rigveda to show that the juice was extracted from the roots. In fact reference to roots is conspicuous by its absence in Rigveda. The best short description of the plant in Rigveda is the verse, 9.5.10 “O Pavement anoint Vanaspati (medicinal plant) the ever-green, the golden hued, refulgent with a thousand boughs”. The plant is leafless and its stalks (boughs) alone are crushed and juice extracted from them. The stalks are compared with arrows, due to their thin and erect appearance. No root is erect when thin.

A fourth theory comes from wasson (1968) who identifies soma as the mushroom Amana muscahia known to be hallucinogenic, while soma was an anti-fatigue drink and an energizer. Considering again RV. 9.5.10. the mushroom is neither evergreen nor refulgent with thousand boughs. Wasson again must be looked upon as a “great man” to afford to ignore clear references to numerous stalks which alone mainly constituted the soma plant:
The fifth theory has been propounded by Havell who was principal of college of arts at Calcutta and the author of a classical work on Indian Art. This is mentioned by Mukherjee (1921). Havell identifies soma as the ragiplant, eleusine coracana, which produces an edible cereal. He possibly considers R. V. 8.9.19. this states that “Yellow stalks give forth the juice”. This would be rigvedic statement of the fact that stalks of soma soaked in water and thereby swollen should be like the udder of a cow which gives forth milk. Then according to him plant itself has likeness to the fingers of a man. This reminds me of charaka describing as having stalks with joints like those of a human finger. Braja Lal Mukerjee (1921), who refers to Havell’s theory, points out that the very few indications to which Havell refers by no means suffice to identify Ragi as Soma.

The sixth theory comes from B.L. Mukerjee (1921) above. According to him soma was bhang, cannabis sativa. He cites 24 facts in favour of his theory, the twenty second being “the preparation of soma is similar to that of Bhang, cannabis sativa. He cites 24 facts in favour of his theory, the twenty second being “the preparation of soma I similar to the of Bhang” we have to remember that rigveda never speaks of soma possessing leaves or roots, it speaks solely of stalks and thereby of leafless stalks. Cannabis sativa, the Bhang plant, has large leaves which would not require being crushed between large stones to extract its juice. I do not propose criticizing him further. But this much may be said that the name soma is really Sau-Ma, ad its original is Chinese as Hau-Ma, which means fire-red-Hemp. The plant which was first discovered in china had yellow stalks which resembled the fibres of hemp in shape and in colour. It may be boted that the hemp fibres are yellowish or orange coloured and there was no word for orange hence it was compared to the colour of fire. Thus soma or better sau-Ma would suggest a herb like hemp-fibres. It has therefore been mistaken for the hemp plant itself, which is also the Bhang plant.

The seventh theory maintains that Ephedra = soma. Prof. Kashikar kindly informs that it was Aitchinson who first identified soma botanically as ephedra in 1984. The latest authority to accept such identification has been Prof. Boyce (1975) the famous author of the Hisoty of Zoroastrianism. Finally the reader is referred to a monograph on soma by myself (Mahdihassan) dated 1987.

Summary

The seven theories identifying the soma plant would be.

1. A plant with alcohol in its fresh juice implicitly stated by Max Muller.
2. A plant with essential oil as its active principle as suggested by Miss Mulholland.
3. The Chinese herb Ginseng as Soma being conceived by Prof. Windfuhr.
4. The mushroom amanita muscaria, the hallucinogen, as soma, according to wasson.
5. Ragi plant, Eleusine coracana, is soma according to Havell.
6. The hemp plant, which is the Bhang plant, cannabis sativa, is the soma
plant, as maintained by Braja Lal Mukerjee (1921).

7. Ephedra is soma first identified botanically by Aitchinon (1887).

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