Ethnobiological Studies from 'Manusmruti' : V. The Concept of 'Somarasa' and Dictum Against 'Suraa'

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ABSTRACT Drinking of 'Somarasa' (Juice of plant 'Soma') was an uncommon sacrificial practice of ancient people, while consumption of 'Suraa' (spirituos liquor) was a sinful deed of lower social status, as evident form 'Manusmruti'.

INTRODUCTION

The 'Soma' plant is considered as the most sacred plant in Rig veda, whose juice (Somarasa) was offered to the Gods and used as well for drinking purpose. It was a sweet smelling plant and its juice was neither hallucinogenic nor intoxicating but used to stimulate the drinker and keep him awakened and alert (Macdonell and Keith, 1967). There is lot of research for the botanical identification of the 'Soma', but the efforts have remained as yet an enigma (Hillebrandt, 1980; Rao and Hajra, 1987). It is attributed to cane juice, grape wine or beer made from hops and as many as 24 different plant species of disputed identity are referred to this. However the consensus is in favour of the Ephedra plant which is regarded as the vedic 'Soma' (Mahdi Hassans, 1963). But the Indian species Ephedra foliata is without milkey juice and sweet flavour.

As Manusmruti is given highest regard in vedic literature (Das, 1978) and in searching the efficacy of its contents with the modern scientific perception (Padhy et al., 1996 a,b), Dash and Padhy 1996, a; 1997) an attempt has been made in this piece of work to find out the opinion of this epic on 'Somarasa' which has a misinterpreted lore as an intoxicating agent.

CONCEPT OF SOMARASA

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

Sloka 7/XI, states:
Yasa Tribaasrikam Bhaktam Paryaaptam
Bhrutyavrutye
Adhikam Baapi Bidjeta Sa Somam Paatu
Marhati. (7/XI)

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).

And Sloka 8/XI:
Atah Swalpeeyasi Drabye Yah Somah
Pibati Dwijah
Sa Peeta Somapoorbopri Na Tasyaapnoti
Tatphalam. (8/XI)

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 (Macdonell and Keith, 1967). This indicates that drinking of Soma juice was a luxurious and costly ritual, which required lot of financial involvement. In Slokas 11,12 and 14/ XI, it is further mentioned that if a Soma sacrifice(Soma Yagnya) remains incomplete due to lack of any requisite, the sacrificer may take such deficiencies from others, who are rich enough to afford but have not themselves performed the said ritual.

FORBIDDEN STATUS OF SOMA SALE

However opinion on selling of Soma plant does not seem to be positive which as is follows:
1. A seller of Soma is not to be entertained in ‘Sraaddha’ i.e. annual ritual of departed souls. (Sl. 158/III)

2. Food given to a seller of Soma becomes odorous. (It is a sort of discouragement). (Sl. 180/III)

3. A Braahmin or a Kshetriya living by a Vaishya mode of sustenance and in order to increase his wealth, may sell the commodities sold by Vaishya, making certain exceptions. Amongst these exceptions, the Soma plant is included. (Sl. 83, 85, 86 and 88/X)

   The above facts give a clue that selling of Soma plant was not a honourable profession and the reason there of it, being a public property, should not be used as a commodity of selling, because any business involves the possibility of adulteration, hoarding and monopoly. Even in the present society such synonymous restriction is also implemented to Kusa (Desmostachya bipinnata Stapf./Poaceae) plant for selling. This fact from Manusmruti (Sl. 88/X) has already become a lore in the present day society because of the continuity in use of ‘Kusa’ in Hindu rituals. Any one is expected to procure the Kusa sedge for his own ritual need of the year on a specific day i.e. ‘Kusa Purnima’. Indirectly this also reflects on the conservation of the species.

**PRESENT PUBLIC OPINION ON SOMARASA**

In order to gather the public opinion on the vedic Somarasa, 100 highly educated and conscious persons were interviewed (Rao and Hajra, 1987) with the following two questions.

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.

**HIGHER STATUS OF THE SOMA DRINKER**

However this controversy is clear from the following Sloka which indicates that the Soma drinker was of higher status compared to a drinker of ‘Suraa’.

Sloka 150 / XI, says:

*Braahmanastu Suraapasya 
Gandhamagraaya Somapah 
Praanaapanus Triraajamyaghrutam 
Praasya Bisuddhyati. (150/XI)

*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 Suraa, and is 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.

**BIOLOGICALLY ACCEPTED FACTS ABOUT SURAA**

Sloka 94 / XI states:

*Suraa Baiimalamannahaaam 
Paaampa Cha Malamuchya 
Tasmaad Braahmana Raajanyou 
Baissyasscha Na Suraam Pibet : (94/XI)

*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, 1886).

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

Sloka 95 / XI states:

*Gouvee Paistee Cha Maadhwee Cha 
Bigneyya Tribhidhaa Suraa 
Yatheibikaa Tathaa Sarbaa Na 
Paatabyaa Dwi Jottamihaaih. (95/XI)

*Meaning*: Suraa one must know to be of three kinds, that distilled from molasses (Gaudi), 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 Madhukar flowers are from Madhuca longifolia (Koenig) Mach./ (Sapotaceae), which is a rich source of alcohol, used by the tribals. The process of fermentation, distillation and the precursors used for preparation of Suraa were as scientific as prevailing now a days.

**SOCIALY DENOUNCED FACTS ABOUT SURAA**

Further, in Slokas 96, 97 and 98 of same chapter, it is described that Suraa and all other intoxicating drinks and decoctions are food of Raakshaasas and Pissaachas (Dash and Padhy, 1996). 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 (Mahaaapaata). Which are 1. Killing a Braa-hmana, 2. Drinking Suraa, 3. Stealing, 4. Adultry with Guru’s wife and 5. Associating with such aforesaid offenders (Vide Sl. 55/XI). Moreover drinking Suraa is equalised 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 (unetable) vide Sloka 57/XI. These Slokas indicate that intake of spirituous liquor was strictly prohibited in the then society.

**PENANCES(PRAAYASCHITTA) FOR DRINKING ‘SURAA’**

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 some one to commit any offense.

a. If one drinks unintentionally, becomes pure by being reinitiated but if drinks intentionally cannot be expiated i.e. free from the guilt through out the rest of his life. (Sl. 147 and 151/XI).

b. Even if some one drinks water stored in a vessel used for keeping Suraa or other intoxicating drinks, shall drink during five day including nights milk boiled with Sankhapushpi (Canscora decussata Sch. and Sch. Genti-anaceae) plant (Sl. 148/XI).

c. Manu has gone to the extent of saying that one hast perform penance by drink-ing water in which Kusa sedge has been boiled in order to come over the guilt by touching spirituous liquid (Vide Sl. 149/XI).

d. Moreover some of the penances are prescribed in Manusmrti 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 (i.e., d) are 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 audiovisual 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 backward 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.

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