

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

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KEY WORDS Manusmruti. Somarasa. Suraa.

ABSTRACT Drinking of 'Somarasa' (Juice of plant 'Soma') was an uncommon sacrificial practice of ancient people, while consumption of 'Suraa' (spirituous liquor) was a sinful deed of lower social status, as evident from '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 milky 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 *Manusmurti* 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 Tribaarshikam Bhaktam Paryaaaptam
Bhrutyabrutye*

*Adhikam Baapi Bidyeta 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 Somapoorbopi 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 involvements. 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 is as follows:

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1. A seller of *Soma* is not to be entertained in 'Ssraaddha' i.e. annual ritual of departed souls. (Sl. 158/III)
2. Food given to a seller of *Soma* becomes odure. (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
Gandhamaghraaya Somapah
Praanaanpus Trirajamy Ghutam
Praasya Bissuddhyati. (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 ensures 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 Baimalamannaanaam
Paapmaa Cha Malamuchyate
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:

*Goudee Paistee Cha Maadhwee Cha
Bigneyaa Tribidhaa Suraa
Yatheibaikaa Tathaa Sarbaa Na
Paatabyaa Dwi Jottamaih. (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 *Madhukaa* 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.

SOCIALLY 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 *Rakshaasas* and *Pissachas* (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 (*Mahapaataka*). Which are 1. Killing a Brahmana, 2. Drinking *Suraa*, 3. Stealing, 4. Adultery 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 (uneatable) *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 can not 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. Gentianaceae) plant (*Sl. 148/XI*).

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 guilt by touching spirituous liquid (*Vide Sl. 149/XI*).

d. Moreover some of the penances are prescribed in *Manusmruti 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.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The authors are thankful to the authorities of the Khallikote College (Autonomous), Berhampur and the College of Pharmaceutical Sciences, Berhampur, Mohada for facilities and help.

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