

Drawing by Jacques Kassemacher

## Notes on Soma

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*Mystery still surrounds what was perhaps the original psychedelic plant. An eminent authority on Hinduism re-examines the legend in the light of modern discoveries.*

Western scholars are of the opinion that Soma was some kind of intoxicating liquor extracted from the leaves of a plant like Bhang (Indian hemp). In the absence of any other worthwhile information on the subject, many educated Indians have also come to believe this. It is certain that Soma was extracted from the leaves of a particular plant and it did have some intoxicating effect. But it was not used normally as an intoxicative drug. The Aryans of those days were familiar with wine and they knew how to prepare fermented intoxicants. They could easily have used some kind of wine, prepared, for instance, from barley or rice. But Soma was something of an entirely different nature and a thing used for an altogether different purpose. There were special rules regarding its transit and sale. There were religious injunctions that, even if two states were at war, there should be no obstruction to the passage of Soma from one to the other. Soma was not sold in the shops like other intoxicants, nor could it be extracted by anyone whenever he chose to do so. It was prepared only in the course of yajne or a Vedic sacrifice. Brahmanas, members of the priestly class, used to say, and they repeat these words today: "Samosmakam Brahmananam Raja": — "Soma is the king of us — Brah-

manas". One can easily see that learned priests would not utter such words shamelessly in connection with an ordinary intoxicating drug.

Soma was widely praised in Vedic literature. On the one hand, it is not only a plant by itself but a symbol for plants in general; on the other, the word is also used for that strength and sustenance to all living things which depend on plants for their life and health, directly or indirectly. Soma is also a symbol of Prana, that mysterious energy which functions in the universe at all levels, psychic as well as bodily, and is as such a manifestation of that substance which is at the same time Shiva and Shakti, consciousness and will, God and God's Power. There is this significant passage in the Veda about Soma. This is the third mantra of the 85th hymn of the 10th book of the Rg. Veda: "People press the plant with the desire of drinking Soma but the Soma which is known to Brahmanas is not tasted by the ordinary worldly man." This, in brief, is the real mystery of Soma. By drinking it, a special psychic experience is undergone which is similar to that of some of the lower stages of Samadhi, the highest stage of Yoga. Soma helped people to withdraw their minds from the outside world.

A few years ago it might not have been possible to advance such an explanation of the action of Soma. The person coming forward with it would have been laughed out of court forthwith. But recently experiments have been carried out in the West, particularly in the United States, with the juice of certain plants which have been found to possess remarkable psychedelic properties. One of the substances experimented upon is mescaline. Certain varieties of mushroom are also credited with similar properties. It is said that as soon as such a juice is taken, strange psychic experiences begin to occur. The experimenter seems to undergo a remarkable expansion of his self. It seems to him that he is transcending the bonds of space and time. The whole universe seems to reveal its reality and meaning in an instantaneous flash of intuition as it were and the point of time associated with such experience is a moment of truth, as it is called. Infinite peace seems to pervade the mind, and what is particularly remarkable, there is no addiction.

I have no doubt that Soma possesses psychedelic properties more or less of this kind. The condition produced by it was called *Baja*. This experience was not normally available to the ordinary human being. It was accessible only to the seeker after Brahman, the substratum of reality which pervades all that exists. Not only was *Baja* a psychic experience itself, it also led directly to certain *siddhis*, so-called occult powers. It is these *siddhis* which are being so laboriously investigated and studied in para-

psychological laboratories and categorized as ESP and the like. It should not be difficult for anyone acquainted with psychic phenomena and the effects of psychedelic drugs to understand how ESP is made possible by the hyperaesthetic state of mind induced by taking such drugs.

#### Soma and the Interpretation of the Vedas

I do not accept the view that the Vedic gods represent the great phenomena of nature — sky, sun, moon, thunder-cloud, dawn, anthropomorphised to some extent; I do not believe that the *Rigveda* bears witness to vagueness about the soul or that there was a cult of Soma, raising this drink to the status of a high god. I am starting from the Vedic period, the period mainly of the hymns of *Rigveda* and some of the hymns of the *Atharva Veda*, and it is my firm conviction that, in that age, the religion of the Aryans had already transcended those concepts of which alone Western scholars take cognizance.

The fact of the matter is that having outgrown the outlook of a pastoral people, the Aryan priests, who were the elite among the ruling classes were reaching out to new horizons, both spiritually and intellectually. They were putting new questions to themselves, questions about the Reality behind phenomena, about what happens after death, about the gods whom their fathers and ancestors had worshipped. Here is an example of such questions: "I ask you what is the end of the earth, I ask you where is the center of the universe, I ask you what is the cause of the Sun, I ask you what is the highest region of

speech." (I, 164,34). Or take this: "Who knows and who can tell us definitely which is the path that leads to the gods? One can see the lower regions of the gods but which is the path that leads to their higher, secret planes?" They had also discovered methods which for a time freed them from the trammels of the body and the waking consciousness and put them in rapport with the Reality, with an infinite expansion of consciousness. The levels of consciousness revealed in the course of this spiritual pilgrimage of the soul, the replies to its questions which the mind formulated in this condition of exaltation — all this experience was startling. The whole universe came to be suffused with a new light. The message had to be brought down. As the *Rigveda* itself says: "this message ensuring the ultimate good has to be conveyed to all men." But the Vedic seers were not thoughtless iconoclasts, out to disrupt society which they and their fathers had led for generations. The message was, therefore, conveyed in symbolic language mostly. In any case, ordinary language would have been inadequate for the purpose. Some statements, laying down philosophical propositions, were there as beacon lights to draw attention prominently to the new horizon. But very often, the imagery of the old sacrificial rites and the traditions of the race, the old stories of gods and men and the powers of evil, were utilized for the purpose of conveying the new lessons. In this way, the old theology, whatever it might have been, was slowly re-orientated. The old words came very often to clothe new meanings. The popular mind was brought up to

a new spiritual level while the key to the passages dealing with the more esoteric facts of experience, the mysteries, was handed down from master to disciple. Unfortunately, this key has been lost.

Anyone who goes through the Vedic texts will see that many of them seem to be puerile and convey fantastic meanings, if any. There is for instance a very famous hymn: "It has four horns, three legs, two heads and seven arms; thrice bound, this bull is roaring. Its power has entered into men." Obviously, such an animal never existed anywhere outside a maniac's dream. If it is a symbol, one should know what it symbolizes. No satisfactory answer is normally forthcoming. People have tried to find grammatical interpretations for such passages but the interpretations fall flat. One wonders how a book containing passages of this kind could have become the scripture of a race endowed with spiritual sensitivities as are apparent in the *Upanishads*. It is considerations such as these which force one to the conclusion that we have lost the key to Vedic interpretation. As Yaska, one of the great commentators, says: "No un-rishi can understand the Vedas", which means that if you want to understand such passages you have to become a *rishi* (saint). I firmly believe that anyone who tries to understand the Vedas with the help of grammar and lexicon alone will fail miserably in the attempt. The key is to be found in yogic experience and there alone. I do not believe that Soma by itself holds the key. My firm conviction is that it has psyc-

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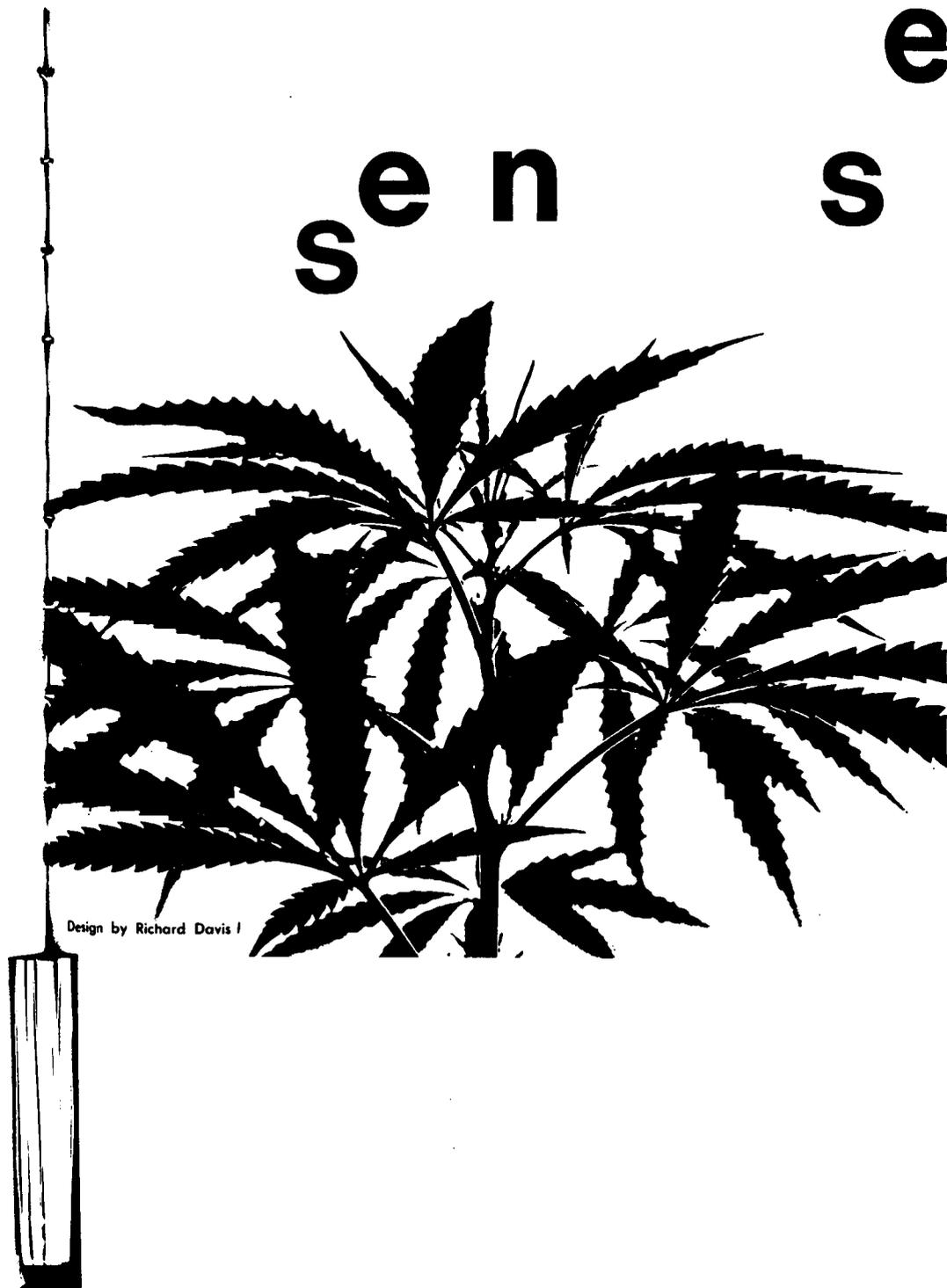
delic virtues and helped those who wanted to go in for the kind of experience that depends on the one-pointedness of the mind.

Not that it was 'must'. Everybody need not have used it. Some certainly did. It had some kind of intoxicating effect also. It was necessary, therefore, to hedge it round with all kinds of restrictions so that it should be used only by a special

class of people in the course of certain special ceremonies. Apparently, it grew somewhere in Afghanistan or Central Asia. As the Aryans penetrated further into the interior of India, it became more and more difficult to secure fresh supplies. As Vedic sacrifices became more and more rare after the rise of Buddhism, the use of Soma was finally given up till no one today can identify this particular herb.

*"He rose and walked towards the East. All the gods followed him. Faith was the wife, the Sun the bard, Knowledge the dress, the day the turban, the night the hair, the sun and moon the earrings, the stars the jewel, the past and the future the servants, the mind the chariot, PRANA and SOMA the horses, the wind the charioteer, the storm the reins. Fame and reputation were the fore-runners. He gains fame and reputation who knows this." (ATHARVA VEDA, 15th Chapter)*

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