

*An Instance of Royal Swayamvara as Described  
in the Shâh-Nâmeh of Firdousi.*

(Read 24th January 1918).

The word Swayamvara (स्वयम् वर) in Sanskrit literally means 'self-choice' from svayam (स्वयम् one's self (from sva = Av. hva = Lat. Se, suūs) and var वर (Av. var = Lat. velle) to choose. Then, it means the self-choice of a husband or choice-marriage. Choice-marriage, though not common among modern Hindus, is not rare. But, in ancient India, it seems to have been somewhat rare in royal families. The word Swayamvara specially came to be applied to choice-marriages by princesses among the ancient royal families of India. An article, entitled "Ancient Royal Hindu Marriage Customs," by Pandit Vishwanath in the Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland,<sup>1</sup> which has suggested to me the subject of this short paper, says on this subject: "The mode of winning a wife<sup>2</sup> at that time among Kshatriyas was that called a swayamvara or self-choice. Kings and princes used to be invited by the bride's father to his capital, and they displayed their skill at games and their prowess in arms and performed great feats of strength. The bride witnessed them all and chose him who pleased her most."

I give here, in brief, the two cases of Swayamvara given in the paper, as there are here and there a few points which will bear some comparison in the case I propose giving from the Shâh-nâmeh. The story of the first case of Swayamvara, mentioned in the article, is that of Gangâ, the great goddess of rivers who was ordered to be born on earth to punish Mahâbhisha, who, when in heaven, did not respect her modesty, by bending his head when others did so, on finding that her body was accidentally exposed by a gust of wind blowing away her clothes. When born on earth, Gangâ sought marriage with the pious King Pratipa. Pratipa refused, but promised to see that his son who was to be born may marry her. A son was born to him and named

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1 Vol. XLVII, January to June 1917, pp. 31-36.

2 Rather, winning a husband.

Shântanu (son of the peaceful). Pratipa relinquished his throne, and gave it to his son Shântanu, and asked him to marry a celestial maiden (Ganga) to whom he had promised such a marriage. The marriage came of itself without Sâhntanu knowing that the lovely maiden, whom he saw on the bank of the Ganges and afterwards married, was herself Gangâ whom his father had asked him to marry. The principal condition of marriage provided that Shântanu was to let the girl do whatever she liked and not speak a word of protest. Eight sons were born, one after another, but all, except the last one, were killed by the mother. When the eighth was born, the father, in spite of his promise not to protest against any of his wife's doings, remonstrated, and the child was saved. Thereupon, the wife explained, that all the eight children were the eight *vasus*, thieves in heaven, who had stolen the *nandini* cow of a *rishi*, and that they were therefore, for divine punishment, made to be born on earth. When punished, they apologized, and so, were permitted to return to heaven, but the eighth, Dyân by name, being the greatest offender, was not pardoned and was destined to remain on earth. All that was destined to happen did happen. However, Gangâ brought up and trained the saved child as a good son, most dutiful and affectionate to his father. One day, the father Shântanu while going about on the banks of Yamunâ (Jamnâ) saw a lovely daughter of a fisherman and fell in love with her. The father agreed to give him his daughter Satyavati in marriage, provided, the king undertook, that the son that may be born be appointed heir. Shântanu could not agree to let his dutiful son Dyân to be superceded. Under the circumstances, the marriage could not take place. Dyân, finding that his father had become morose and dejected, inquired from his Minister, what the cause was. On learning it, he secretly went to the fisherman and asked him to give his daughter in marriage to his father, promising on his part, that he would let the male progeny of his father's second marriage succeed to the throne. The fisherman said, that he accepted the prince's word, but what if the son or sons that may be born to the prince would not accept the arrangement? The dutiful son, in order to remove even that remote chance of a future objection, undertook never to marry and remained celibate. The gods in heaven blessed this dutiful son, who thence came to be known as Bhishma, *i.e.*, the terrible, because of the terrible vow he took for the sake of his father. The marriage took place. Two sons—Chitrangad and Vichitravirya—were the fruits of the marriage. When Shântanu died, Chitrangad came to the throne. Being a minor at the time, his elder step-brother Bhishma acted as his protector. Chit-



rangad being killed in battle Vichitravirya came to the throne. "The mode of winning a wife at that time amongst Kshatriyas was that called a swayamvara or self-choice.' Kings and princes used to be invited by the bride's father to his capital and they displayed their skill at games and their prowess in arms and performed great feats of strength. The bride witnessed them all, and chose him who pleased her most." Vichitravirya was too young to take part in such a competition, but his mother being eager to see him married, Bhishma took upon himself the task of finding him a queen. At a *swayamvara*, he carried off by force three daughters of the King of Kashi, challenging all the assembled princes to wrest the girls from him if they could. The oldest of the three princess having told Bhishma that she had taken a vow to marry another prince, she was let go and the other two were married to Vichitravirya, who unfortunately died some time after. He left no issue and this caused the further grief of seeing the royal house heirless. To avoid this calamity, their mother Satyavati requested Bhishma to marry the widows of his step-brother, but he declined as he had, under arrangement with Satyavati's fisherman-father, taken a vow of celibacy. However, to avoid the disappointment of seeing the royal line extinct, Bhishma advised Satyavati to perform *niyoga*, which was a practice<sup>1</sup> resorted to in emergency. The practice was, that when a person died heirless, somebody else, for whom the family had a regard or affection, was asked to beget children to the widow. The children thus born were not the children of the new or second husband but of the deceased first husband. When so advised, Satyavati remembered Krishna Dvapâyana Vyâsa, her son by her former husband Parasha who was a great sage. When they parted, this son had promised his mother to go to her help whenever she wanted help. She had only to think of him and he would appear. So, during this emergency Satyavati thought of her son Vyâsa and he appeared. The mother asked him to beget children to the widows of her deceased son Vichitravirya. He

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1 The form of marriage, referred to in this Indian story as Chakravand, reminds us of an old Iranian form of marriage known as Chakrazan. The Indian form of marriage, known as Chakravand, is one, in which, when a person dies heirless, somebody else for whom the family had regard or affection was asked to beget children to the widow of the deceased. When children were born of such an union, they were taken to be the children of the deceased husband. Of the five kinds of wife in ancient Persia, some of which are referred to in the Pahlavi books, and which are explained in some detail in the Persian Rivâjets, one is known as the Chakrazan: The wife is a widow who marries again. If she has no children by her first husband, she marries a second husband, stipulating that half her children by the second husband should be taken as belonging to the first husband in the other world. She herself continues to belong to the first husband. *Vide* S. B. E. Vol. V., p. 142, n. 10.



consented. But as he was very ugly and was therefore called Krishna, *i.e.*, black, the widows did not like that he should beget children; but, on the request of their royal mother-in-law and for the sake of saving the royal line from extinction, they consented. They were excused the whole year's purificatory penances, as their toleration of Vyâsa's ugliness was in itself a penance.<sup>1</sup> The elder widow, in order to avoid the sight of the ugly man with whom she had to associate against her will, shut her eyes for the time being. Vyâsa predicted for her son a blind son, who on being born was named Dhritarâshtra. The younger widow, on looking at the ugly associate, turned pale. The son born to her was born pale and he was named Pandu, the pale. The queen wished for a third son, perhaps because one was blind and the other was pale. But the elder widowed daughter-in-law, in order to avoid being with the ugly man, sent one of her maids to Vyâsa. This maid reverently submitted and so a good saintly son was born to her and was named Vidura.

Bhishma looked after the education of these brothers who turned out learned as well as sportsmenlike. Dhritarâshtra, being blind, the second son Pandu came to the throne. He married two wives, Kunti and Madari, but, once, having shot a stag when it was coupling with its mate, received a curse that if he lived with his wives, he would soon die. So, he went into retirement in a jungle followed by his wives even there. When there for some time, he began to wish that he may have children. His wife Kunti said, that she knew a mantra, by the recital of which she could summon gods Dharma (god of justice), Vâyu (god of wind), and Indra, the king of all gods to come and live with her. The result was the birth of three sons, Yudhishtira, Bhima and Arjun. The second wife Mâdri also, by virtue of the mantra taught to her by Kunti, summoned the twins Aswins and the result was the birth of two sons, Nakula and Sahadewa. Kunti had already a son Karna, born from the sun before her marriage with Pandu. It was this son, who, as described in Mahâbhârata, fought against the sons of Pandu. Pandu died as the result of the abovementioned curse, having one day embraced his Mâdri. His wife also thereupon committed suttee.

The account of the second case of Swayamvara runs as follows:—"King Drupada had heard much of Arjuna's skill as an archer and wanted to give him his daughter Draupadi in marriage. But he wished that she should be won in a swayamvara. He made a great bow which he thought none but Arjuna could bend, and placed on a lofty pole a revolving fish whose eye was

<sup>1</sup> *Journal Royal Anthropological Institute*, Vol. XLVII, January to June 1917.



to be the mark. He who could hit was to marry his daughter. A great crowd of kings assembled for the contest, but all failed to bend the bow. Then Karna stepped forward and strung it and took aim with an arrow. Just as the Pandava brothers, who had so far not come forward and were disguised as Brahmans, were giving way to despair, Draupadi spoke in clear accents :—" I will not take a low-born man for my husband." At this, Karna put down the bow and went away, but Arjuna came forward looking like a Brahman, lifted the bow, drew it, and hit the mark. Flowers rained from heaven, and Draupadi put a garland of sweet flowers round Arjuna's neck as a sign of her choice. The crowd of kings protested that a Brahman must not carry off a Kshatriya girl and fought for her possession, but the Pandvas defeated them all and carried the bride home.

Now I come to the story of the Shâh-nâmeh : The King Gushtâsp of the Shâh-nâmeh is the King Vishtâsp of the Avesta. He was the son of Lohrâsp, the Aurvât-âspa of the Avesta. He was the father of Aspandyâr, the Spento-dâta of the Avesta. In one point, we find a parallel between the story of these three kings and that of the Mogul Emperors Jehangir, Shâh Jahân and Aurangzebe. Shâh Jahân was an undutiful son of Jehangir. In turn, he was ill-treated by his son Aurangzebe. Gushtâsp also was an undutiful son, who wanted the throne of Persia in the life-time of his father. In turn, his son Aspandyâr wanted his throne in his life-time. When Kaikhusro, who, in the matter of his retirement from the world, is compared to Yudhisthira,<sup>1</sup> abdicated the throne of Persia and retired childless into a wilderness, he, setting aside, as heirs to the throne, other descendants of his grandfather Kai Kâus, appointed, as his heir, Lohrâsp who was descended from a brother of Kâus. Lohrâsp was unknown to the courtiers, but Kaikhusro thought highly of him as a good successor. Lohrâsp, on coming to the throne, repaid Kaikhusro's kindness towards him, by showing special favours to the other heirs who were displaced. Thereupon, his son Gushtâsp felt offended. He did not like that his royal father should love his distant nephews more than himself. Fearing, lest he may displace him and appoint somebody else from the family of Kâus as his heir, he began to quarrel with his father and asked for the throne in his life-time. His wishes not being complied with, he left the royal court to come to India, but he was pursued by his uncle Zarir, persuaded and taken back. He again left the court,

<sup>1</sup> *Vide Journal B. B. R. A. Soc. Vol. XVII. Abstract of Proceedings, pp. II-IV. Journal Asiatique (1887) Huitième série, Tome X, pp. 38-75.*

and, under an assumed name of Farrokhzâd, went to the country of Roum. There, when he sat one day homeless and friendless bemoaning his fallen fortune, the headman of the village, being struck with his manly and noble appearance, befriended him and took him to his own place as his guest.

Now, the royal custom with the Kaisar, the ruler of that land, for the marriage of his daughters was as follows :—

The King called in his palace an assembly (الاجتماع) of young men of position and wisdom, and the princess chose from among them a young man for her husband. The then Kaisar had three beautiful daughters, the eldest of whom was named Kaitâyun. He called an assembly of young men from whom Kaitâyun can choose her husband. The night before the day of the assembly she dreamt as follows : “ Her country was illuminated by the sun. There assembled a gathering of young men, so large, that even the Pleiades would make way before it. In that assembly there was a foreigner, who, though poor and distressed, was very wise. He was as straight and tall as a cypress and as beautiful as the moon. His demeanour and manner of sitting were such as befitted a king sitting on his throne. She (Kaitâyun) presented a nosegay of myrtle-coloured fragrant flowers to him and received one from him.”

The next morning, the princess went with her 60 court-ladies to the assembly of the young men, convened by her father, to choose a husband for herself. She held a nosegay of roses in her hand. She moved about among the young men, but found none whom she could like for marriage. She returned to her palace, dejected and disappointed for not having found a husband to her liking.

When the Kaisar learnt that his daughter found no young man to her liking from among the young men of the first rank in wealth and nobility, he called another assembly, to which he invited young men of the second grade or the middle class. The notice convening this second assembly was given in the city and in the adjoining country. Thereupon, the host of Gushtâsp pressed him to go to that assembly with him. Gushtâsp accompanied him and sat in a corner, a little dejected. The princess went in the assembly with her court-ladies and moved about among the people, till, at length, she came near Gushtâsp. She saw him and said “ The secret of that dream is solved.” She then placed her crown on the head of Gushtâsp and chose him as her husband. The prime minister of the Kaisar, learning this, hastened towards his royal master and said : “ Kaitâyun has chosen from among the assembly a young man who is as erect



as a cypress, and as handsome as a rose and has a commanding stature ; whoever sees him admires him. One may say, that the glory of God shines in his face. But we do not know who he is."

The Kaisar, finding that the young man was an unknown foreigner, did not like the choice. His minister tried his best to persuade him, that he could not now act against the usual royal custom of selection, but to no purpose. The king then handed over Kaitâyun to the young man without any dowry or gift and asked both to leave his court. Gushtâsp, seeing what had happened, tried on his part to dissuade the princess, saying he was a poor man. Kaitâyun thereupon said : " Do not be distressed with what our fate has destined. When I am contented with thee, why do you ask me to choose, as husband, one with the prospects of a crown or throne ? " The couple then left the royal palace and Gushtâsp's host kindly made proper lodging arrangements for the couple at his house. Though the king had given nothing as dowry or gift, the princess had very rich jewellery on her body when she left her royal father's palace. With that, she tried to set up her new house and to live with her husband pretty comfortably. Gushtâsp often went a-hunting and presented the game he killed to his friends.

After this event, the Kaisar did away with the above custom, and for the marriage of his two other daughters he himself tried to find out proper husbands. One Mirân, a member of a high family, asked for the hand of the Kaisar's second daughter. The king said to the suitor, that he would accept his offer if he achieved a great deed. He asked him to prove his bravery and fitness by killing a ferocious wolf in the adjoining village of Fâskun. Mirân had not the required courage and strength to do so. So, through the intercession of a mutual friend, he got the wolf killed by the brave foreigner, Gushtâsp. He then went before the king, and, claiming the credit of killing the ferocious wolf, asked the king's daughter in marriage. The king acting according to his promise, brought about the marriage.

One Ahran also married the third daughter of the Kaisar, similarly seeking the help of brave Gushtâsp for killing a ferocious snake which caused terror in the adjoining country.

The Kaisar occasionally held athletic sports in an open place which were open to all sportsmen of his country. At the desire of Kaitâyun, Gushtâsp attended one of these, and by displaying his courage, strength and intelligence, drew the admiration of all. He also drew the admiration of the king himself, who was

then soon reconciled with his son-in-law. Gushtâsp had still continued to be known under the name of Farrokhzâd, but an embassy from Persia from the court of Lohrâsp, who was challenged to war by the Kaisar at the instigation of Farrokhzâd (Gushtâsp), divulged the whole secret. The Kaisar became glad when he knew all the facts, and was proud of his matrimonial alliance with the royal family of Persia.

There seem to be several points of similarity as well as difference in the Swayamvara cases referred to in the Indian and Persian stories. In the story of Gushtâsp, we observe a new trait, *viz.*, that of the dream of Kaitâyun. Again, the first assemblies, or Anjumans are without athletic sports. It is later on, that there is the assembly where athletic sports take place and where Gushtâsp by his extraordinary sportsmanlike feats wins the favour of his royal father-in-law. Again, just as Bhishma by his bravery won two daughters of the King of Kashi for the two princes, so did Gushtâsp win the two daughters of the Kaisar for two princes. The garlanding of the chosen husband by the princess is common to the Indian and Persian cases. In both the stories, the question of the position of the family of the bridegroom is attended to. In the Indian case, it is the bride herself who is solicitous about it.