

# ANTHROPOLOGICAL PAPERS.

## OMENS AMONG THE PARSEES.\*

*Read on 27th April 1887. President.*—DR. J. GERSON DA CUNHA.

OF the omens believed in by the Parsees, some seem to be common to other native communities of Bombay, and some are peculiarly their own. We will first speak of good omens.

### GOOD OMENS..

When a man leaves his house on an important business, or when he sets out on a journey, it is a very good omen if he meets a woman with a pot full of water either at the threshold of his house or in the street. The man sometimes throws a coin into that pot to mark his appreciation of the good omen. Sometimes, it is intentionally contrived by a female member of the family, that the man should be so met, but the thing is so managed as to present the appearance of being accidental and unintentional. On the contrary, it is a very bad omen if the man meets a woman with an empty pot. Since the introduction of Vehar water into Bombay, there is very little room for this omen, because the sight of Parsee women going to the public well and returning with water pots on their heads is very rare. But it may still be seen in many Parsee centres in Gujarât.

It is considered a very good omen on leaving home to see a sweeper with his basket on his head.

It is a good omen if a man comes across some fish while going out on an important business. Fish is the best and most excellent present that one can send to a friend or relative for good luck on festive occasions, such as birthdays, betrothals, and marriages.

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It is a good omen to meet a corpse on the road, but a bad omen to see the fire that is sometimes carried with the corpse. I should attribute the latter to the fact, that the Parsees consider it unlawful to burn a corpse.

It is a good omen if a serpent passes on one's right hand, when he goes out on an important business. It is a bad omen if it passes by his left side.

It is a very good omen if a serpent passes over one's body when asleep.

It is a good omen to meet a washerman with a bundle of clean clothes, but it is a bad omen to meet him with his bundle of dirty clothes.

It is a good omen to meet a gardener or any other person with flowers or fruits in his hands.

It is a good omen to see a pot of toddy when going out on an important business.

When two or more persons are discussing important business, the striking of a clock, or the ringing of a bell, or the firing of a gun, is considered to be a very good omen for the success of that business. It is usual in such a case, when the clock strikes, or the bell rings, or the gun fires, for somebody to call out "Hokam tē Sâhebno," *i.e.*, "It is the order of the Almighty," meaning thereby that the success of the scheme is destined by God. When two or more persons are discussing a domestic affair, or any other subject that is the cause of disagreement among them, the striking of a clock, or the ringing of a bell, or the firing of a gun is taken by the party who is then speaking or stating his case, as an additional proof of the truth of his statement. He exclaims in the midst of his speech, "Hak nâm te Sâhebnu," *i.e.*, "Truth is the name of the Almighty," meaning thereby that God, who is the source of all truth, supports his statement.

When a man sets out on a journey or voyage, it is a good omen, if, when he has just left the house, somebody calls out

to him to "turn and look back." If he turns and looks back towards the house or towards the speaker, it is a good omen, indicating that he will return safe and sound. If one does not turn and look back when called upon to do so, he is unconsciously made to do so by a dear relative on the pretence of having something important to communicate.

#### BAD OMENS.

If a cat crosses one's way when he is leaving his house for business, it is a bad omen portending failure. In such a case the man turns back a few steps, waits for a minute or two, and then proceeds to his business.

A sneeze is a bad omen. If a person sneezes when another is on the point of leaving his house for business, the latter postpones his departure for a minute or two. Sometimes he changes his shoes from one foot to another to avert the evil influence of the bad omen. Sometimes he takes off his turban and then puts it on again after a few seconds. By taking off his turban he makes one believe that he has postponed his departure. If a person sneezes twice, the omen is not thought to be so bad, because the second sneeze is supposed to counteract the evil influence of the first. In the case of a conversation on an important business, a sneeze is a bad omen, portending failure. If it is a female who sneezes, the omen is very bad and the failure certain; but if it is a male they console themselves by saying, "Oh, never mind, it is the sneezing of a male."

The breaking of a chandelier or a globe at a family rejoicing is a bad omen, portending some evil.

The breaking of glass bangles generally portends evil, but it is a very bad omen indeed if the thing happens early in the morning or at sunset, or at new moon or on good and festive occasions. Among the Parsees, the absence of glass bangles shows, that the woman is a widow. A woman's glass bangles are broken on the death of her husband generally by a widow.

Therefore the breaking of bangles is supposed to portend some evil to the husband.

The accidental falling off of a turban from a rack is considered an evil omen, portending some evil to the owner of that turban. On such an occurrence, some lady calls out "Long life to the turban," wishing thereby long life to the owner of the turban.

The whining of a dog especially at midnight, is an evil omen portending some misfortune. The peculiar noise which a dog makes by shaking his ears and stretching his limbs is a very bad omen, portending failure of business then undertaken.

The cawing of a crow portends good as well as evil. If the cawing makes a peculiar noise which they call a "bharyo-avāj," *i.e.*, "a full noise," it portends good. Such a noise is also considered to foretell the arrival of a guest or the receipt of a letter from a relative in some distant country. If a good event occurs after the peculiar cawing which portends good, they present some sweets to a crow. Another peculiar kind of cawing, especially that of the "kâgri," *i.e.*, the female crow portends some evil. A crow making such a peculiar noise is generally driven away with a remark, "Go away, bring some good news."

The sight of an owl is a very bad omen, but that of a bird called "kâkaryo koomâr" ( *કાકરીયા કુમાર* the crow-pheasant, *Centropus maximus*) is a very good omen. It is a very rare bird. If a man happens to see it, he is to meet with success in all his undertakings for a year or more. I remember that three years ago, when I was on the outskirts of Surat with a large party, somebody cried out "kâkaryo koomâr, kâkaryo koomâr." All eyes were suddenly turned in different directions to catch a glimpse of the bird. It was seen by a few when it went off in another direction. There was a general stoppage. The cart-drivers and all the passengers got out of the carriages and went in the direction of the bird, which

fortunately for them was seen a little distance off, sitting on the turf. All looked at it to their full satisfaction. They were told that that year would be a lucky one for them. An old Parsee lady was specially anxious to show the bird to her son, who was ill and was ordered out of Bombay for a change. She took the sight of this auspicious bird to be a very good omen for the speedy recovery of her son.

A shoe lying inverted is a bad omen, portending quarrel in the family. No sooner one sees a shoe so lying, he at once puts it in the proper position.

While on the subject of an omen portending quarrel, I may mention here, that the giving of a pinch of salt into the hand of another is also supposed to portend a quarrel. In order to avert that expected quarrel, after giving the salt required, you must pinch the other man on the hand. If the salt be passed to another man in a salt-cellar or a spoon it does not portend any quarrel.

The following, though it does not come strictly under the head of omens, can be mentioned here in connection with the subject :—

*Auspicious days.*—Tuesdays and Fridays are generally unauspicious days. Many persons would not begin an important work or start on a distant journey on those days. They are generally avoided for marriage, betrothal, and other happy occasions.

*Auspicious side.*—The East is the most auspicious side. When a dress is presented to a bride on marriage occasions, she is made to stand with her face to the East. When a new set of clothes is put on a child on its birthdays or on other festive days, it is made to sit or stand with its face to the East.

*Auspicious foot.*—The right foot is the auspicious foot. When the bride first enters her husband's house, she does so with the right foot. Women, who carry suits of clothes to the houses of brides or bridegrooms, do the same.

*Auspicious language.*—Women are always careful to use what they call "auspicious language." In order to do so, they

speak exactly the contrary of what they mean. For example, if you were to ask from a lady a few rupees and if she has none to spare, she would not directly tell you "I have none to spare" but she would say quite the contrary, (મારી પાસે ઘણાં ઘણાં છે.) *i.e.*, "I have too many." She thinks it inauspicious to say that she is without money. To say so in so many words would be an ill omen, portending poverty in future.

In the same way, when the members of a large family have gone out of the house, if the old lady who remains at home wishes to say that "the house looks empty," owing to the absence of the other members of the family, would not say so directly, but in quite a contrary form of expression. She would say (ઘર ભર્યું ભર્યું લાગેછે), "the house looks very full." She thinks it inauspicious to use the former expression. She is afraid, lest a mere expression of that statement be the forerunner of the death of members of the family.

Their anxiety to use auspicious language is manifested by many a Parsee mother, wife, or sister when she is speaking of the illness of her son, husband or brother. For example, a mother, who has a son named Jivanji, would not say, in case of his illness, "My son Jivanji is ill." She would transfer the illness to herself and say, "My Jivanji's mother is ill." She would think it inauspicious to speak of her son's illness in his own name, and would therefore like to transfer it to herself. Many a wife or sister generally uses a similar expression. They also generally use an expression wishing for a transference of the illness to themselves, "પગ્ગારીને મને આપી દેઓ," *i.e.*, "Cast it (illness) off and give it to me," is a common expression before the sick bed of a dear relative.

Again, another form of expression is also used in a similar case. For example, a mother who wishes to speak of her son Jivanji's illness, would say, "My son Jivanji's enemy is ill."