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A FEW SUPERSTITIONS COMMON TO EUROPE AND INDIA.*

Read on 30th April, 1890. President—MR. JIVANJI JAMSHEDJI MODI, B.A.

There is no nation in the world, that has not, at one time or another, entertained a belief in superstitions of one kind or another. All ages and all nations present a few instances of men, of whom a writer of the 17th century says :—

> "For worthless matters some are wondrous sad,
> Whom if I call not vaine I must term mad.
> If that their noses bleed some certain drops,
> And then againe upon the suddaine stops;
> Or if the blleeding fowl we call a Jay,
> A Squirrel or a Hare, but cross their way,
> Or if the salt fall towards them at table,
> Or any such like superstitious bable,
> Their mirth is spoiled because they hold it true.
> That some mischance must thereupon ensue.

This paper has for its object, the consideration of few superstitions common to Europe, and India. During my recent tour in Europe, and especially during my comparatively long stay in Paris, I came to observe, that there were many superstitions, which were common to the East and to the West, and which had for their origin a common cause.

The first class of common superstitions, I wish to speak about, are those that have some relation with involuntary motions or tremors of some part or other of the body, such as sneezing, an involuntary tremor in the ear, nose, cheeks, and feet, and in particular spots on the body.

Sneezing is one of the acts of man to which superstitious notions have been attached from very old times. There seems to be a very general custom both in Europe and India to bless people when they sneeze. It is a custom spoken of by ancient authors, and is so old, that even an ancient writer, like Aristotle, seems to be ignorant of its origin. It is said, that in the time

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of Gregory the Great, an epidemic prevailed in Italy, which carried off thousands. A similar epidemic is reported to have prevailed in the whole of Europe in the middle of the 14th Century. The complaint began with an attack of sneezing, just as it was the case with influenza this year. Thousands were killed by that dire disease. An attack of sneezing was a sure precursor of the complaint. In times of these epidemics, when a man began to sneeze, his friends and relations close by, knowing that the man was attacked by the disease, immediately wished him health, and said some words to that effect. This seems to be the orign of the custom of blessing a man when sneezing. On such occasions it is not unusual to hear "Gud hjlep" (*i.e.*, may God help you) in Sweden, "Gesundheit" (*i.e.*, health) in Germany, and "A vous souhaits (*i.e.*, good wishes to you) in France. In a hotel at Vienna, where I stayed, on my sneezing, the porter bowed before me, and said some words. On enquiry I learnt that he did so out of courtesy and wished me good health. They say, that at one time, Englishmen also said something to wish good health to the man sneezing, but it is now considered rude to notice a sneeze, simply because it reminds one of the past times of the plague. The Turks are reported to say on such occasions "Maschalla" (*i.e.*, may God be with you), and the Greeks "Kalli Ejia" (*i.e.*, good health). Coming to the further East, it is common among the Arabs to say يرحمك الله Yarahamakallâh (*i.e.*, God be merciful with you). It is usual to hear a Parsee lady say on such an occasion જીવશો or જીશે (*i.e.*, may you live long). Sometimes the good wishes are expressed in rhythmical lines as these. For example, if it is a child, Jamshedji by name, that is sneezing, the mother would say "મારો જમશેદજી જીવશો, દરજી વાગા સીવશે" (*i.e.*, My Jamshedji will live long, and the tailor will prepare suits of clothes for him).

Thus, we see that the origin of the custom of blessing a man on sneezing was the anxiety on the part of the nearest relations and friends to wish health to the man affected with plague.

The custom then extended to ordinary sneezing. But the blessing did not remain restricted to the wishing of good health alone, but was extended to other good wishes, such as that expressed by a Parsee mother in the above lines. Once, I heard my hostess, at Paris, a good old lady, thus accost her son on sneezing, "Dix mille livres de rentes" (*i.e.*, may your annual income be 10,000 livres). Again, superstitious notions of good or bad omen are associated with sneezing in different nations. Dryden alludes to it when he says—

> "To these Cupid sneezed aloud,
> And every lucky omen sent before,
> To meet the landing on the Spartan shore."

Milton alludes to the same belief when he says in his Paradise Lost—

> "I heard the rack
> As earth and sky would mingle ; but
> These flaws, though mortals fear them,
> As dangerous to the pillar'd frame of Heaven
> Are to the main as wholesome as a sneeze
> To man's universe, and soon are gone."

In India also a sneeze generally portends good or evil. A sneeze, just when a man is on the point of leaving the house for an important business, is a bad omen. To avert the evil consequence the man generally waits for a minute or two, and then starts again for his business. Among some classes of Hindus, a sneeze by one of the opposite sex is generally understood to portend some good. For example, if it is a male who is thinking of some important affair, the sneeze of a female portends success, but that of a male, failure. If it is a female who is occupied by such a thought, the sneeze of a male portends success, and that of a female, failure.

Next to sneezing, there are other particluar involuntary motions in the different parts of the body, which presage, both in India and in Europe, different consequences. In Europe, the itching of the nose generally predicts the arrival of a stranger. In France, I learnt that the tingling of the ear or a peculiar sensation in it, indicated that the person so affected was re-

membered or talked about by another person. If that was the case with the right ear, they talked well of him: if with the left, ill. In Austria, such an involuntary motion in the ear, predicted the arrival of a letter from a friend. The burning in the cheeks also indicated different tokens. In India, this indication is shown by an involuntary biting of one's tongue between his teeth. If the biting was on the left part of the mouth, he was remembered by a friend for some good; if in the right part, for some evil. Again, an involuntary movement of the eyelids predicted good or bad consequences. If the movement was with the left eye, it predicted something good; if with the right, it portended a quarrel with somebody, or a mishap. To avoid such calamity, the person so affected rubbed his shoe over that eye seven times. The relation of the number 7 with this involuntary sensation in the eye reminds me of another superstition. It is generally believed that if a man gets a small pustule (આંજણી) over the edge of his eyelid, he is to expect seven of that kind one after another. To avert that attack, the person so affected must go at the dead of night to the house of a man who has married more than one wife, and knock at his door when he is asleep. The itching on the soles of the feet also indicates different consequences. Again, particular spots on the body of a child, called લાંછન, predict whether the child will turn out fortunate or unfortunate.

2. The second class of superstitions common to both countries is the custom of taking omens from the flight of birds. This custom is as old as the time of Herodotus, who said that the ancient Persians took their omens from birds. The words, which different languages possess for "good omen," show, how far this custom was, and is prevalent in many nations, ancient and modern. The root of our English word "auspices" (avis a bird) refers to the ancient Roman custom of taking the auspicium or inspection of birds before undertaking an important business. The Gujarati word for auspices, *viz.*, સગન, (sagan), which is the same as the Sanscrit word शकुन (shakun)

also means a bird. طیر (Taêr), the Arabic word for omen, also means a bird. So, مرغوا (murgwa), the Persian word for omen, also comes from مرغ (murg), which means a bird. Thus the word "auspices" in English, પગન in Gujarati, शकुन in Sanscrit, طیر or طیرت in Arabic, and مرغوا in Persian, all tend to show, that at one time, the Romans, the ancient Hindus, the Arabs, and the Persians took their omens from the movements of birds. In France, the sudden entrance of a stray bird into one's house, or even the striking of a bird against a closed glass window or door with a view to enter into the house, is considered a very good omen, portendnig a good event. In Vienna, the proprietor of the hotel at which I stayed, would not let the birds, which made their nests on the different parts of his building, be driven away, though they were a great nuisance to him and to his customers, because he took their presence in his house to be full of omens, and was afraid of a bad event if those auspicious birds were driven away. I was told at Strassbourg, that some of the houses near the Monument Kleber were regularly visited every year, at the end of February or in the beginning of March, by a species of birds, called the stork, that built their nests there, and that the house-owners considered their presence to be full of good omen, and did not drive them away though they committed a great nuisance. In some parts of England, the screeching of the owl and the croaking of the raven predict a calamity. It is unlucky to see a single magpie but lucky to see two, which denote a merry occasion; three, signify a safe and sound journey; four, promise some good news; and five, predict a good company. In India, birds play a prominent part in telling omens. I have already spoken of some of these in my paper on "Omens among the Parsees."[1]

Just as the custom of blessing a man when he sneezes had a common origin, so there seems to be a common origin for the custom of portending evil or good results from the sight of birds. The origin is the migratory nature of many

[1] Vide above pp. 4-5.

species of birds. The flight of birds portends the change of seasons, just as it is illustrated in the proverb, "One swallow does not make a summer." In cold countries, the return of a particular kind of bird in the end of February or beginning of March is a forerunner of the setting in of spring, which after a dreary winter is welcomed with all kinds of rejoicings and feasts. In such countries, the sight of those birds is considered very auspicious. In Strassbourg, I was told that the return of the storks was hailed with delight as a messenger of the approach of the pleasant days of spring. Thus a certain class of birds, whose arrival indicated a change of seasons, began to be considered birds of good omen.

Again, the features of birds and their voice, whether good or bad, determined in many cases their fitness for serving as good or bad omens. For example, the ugly owl is everywhere considered a bird full of bad omen. I remember the peace of mind of even an English headmaster of a High School being disturbed at the sight of an owl on the roof of his school. He did not rest till he made it leave his premises by means of stones. A sweet singing nightingale is always welcome as a bird of good omen.

I have already spoken of the omen taken from the crow in my paper on "Omens among the Parsees." I will here quote the following few lines which I heard a Hindu woman speak to a crow:—

કાવ, કાવ,
સોનાચી પાવ,
દહી ભાતાચી ઉંડી,
રેશમચી લેંગોટી,
લોનચ્યા તોંદી.

i. e., "Oh crow! oh crow! (I will give thee), golden rings on the feet, a ball prepared of curd and rice, a piece of silken cloth to cover thy loins, and pickles in thy mouth." A peculiar noise made by a crow is supposed to indicate the arrival of a dear relation or at least of a letter from him. When they hear

a crow make that peculiar noise, they promise him all the above good things (*viz.*, ornaments, a suit of clothes, and an excellent meal), if his prediction turn out true. In case it does turn out to be true, they fulfil their promise minus the costly part of it—that is to say, they give him some sweets to eat, but neither the promised ornaments nor the suit of clothes. It is believed, that when the promised meal is spread before the crows on the roof of the house or on an open place, all the crows gather round it, but do not fall upon it until the particular crow to whom the promise was made comes to the spot and begins to partake of the repast.

3. The third class of superstitions common to the two countries is that which is connected with the movement of certain animals. In some parts of England, a sow crossing the way of a person, when he is going out on an important business, indicates disappointment, but not so, if the sow is accompanied by her litter of pigs. In Sweden, a cat crossing one's way indicates a bad omen. To avert it they say on such an occasion, "Toi! toi! trollen till markes," *i. e.*, "Pooh, pooh, may the evil spirit see it." In France, a black cat especially is very unlucky. In India, also, a cat crossing one's way when he starts for an important affair portends failure. To avert the evil, the man waits for a minute or two, or turns back a step or two, or takes off his shoes and, after a short time, puts them on again. All this is to indicate, that he had given up the work on meeting with a bad omen, and had started it again. In Europe, as in India, the howling of a dog is believed to presage death of a near friend or relative.

4. In both countries, salt has several superstitions attached to it. In Europe, if salt, when being removed from the cellar, falls on the table, it is an evil omen portending quarrel in the family. In India, they do not like to pass salt from hand to hand, as it is believed to portend some quarrel. They generally hand it over in a plate. If they do pass it from hand to hand, the giver, after giving the salt, pinches the

hand of the receiver to avert the quarrel or to end it in a pinch. The Greeks have a similar superstition about the soup. They do not pass it from hand to hand.

In India, salt is considered very auspicious on a joyous occasion. I have begun many a birthday of my boyhood with eating a few grains of salt, the first thing in the morning. To eat a few grains of salt on your birthday before partaking of any other food portends a good omen, indicating, that during the whole of the ensuing year you will always be sure of getting your નીમક રોટી (*nimak roti, i.e.*, salt and bread) or livelihood. It is with this idea of good omen that many a Parsee lady always puts in a little salt in the tiffin basket of her relatives who go out on a long journey.

I was told that it is with a similar idea that in Northern Europe many families, when they leave their summer residences for their homes, take care to place behind them a piece of bread and salt. It is considered a good omen to do so, as indicating that they will all return safe and sound to take their meals again at the house next season.

5. The next class of superstitions, common to the two countries, consists of those superstitions which aim at averting the influence of an evil eye.

In India, if a sick person were to go before a healthy one and to talk of his illness, the latter would mutter some words like this, ત્યાંનું ત્યાંજ, *i.e.*, "let it be there and there," meaning thereby that the illness complained of may not go to him. In Italy, the opposite party gently and imperceptibly taps from below, the table at which he may be sitting at the time, in order to keep off the complaint from him. In Italy, as in India, some people carry amulets to ward off evil. On occasions like the above, if the person is not at the table, and so not in a position to tap the table, he imperceptibly points his amulet to the person complaining about his illness to indicate, "May his illness remain to him and not come to me." In case the man bears no amulet he points with his two fingers thus ⋁ to the

speaker, thus wishing the illness to be repelled from himself.

In Greece, when they express their liking or affection for a child that is plump, well-formed, and healthy, after doing so, they spit on the ground to avert the influence, if any, of their evil eye drawn to the child by its beauty. In India, a mother makes a black mark on the face of her child after dressing it to divert the danger of an evil eye to the black spot. Sometimes, a mother, on hearing a man speak of the healthiness or plumpness of the child, says to the speaker, તમારા પગ તરફ જુઓ, *i. e.*, look to your feet. This is to avert the evil eye of the speaker from the child to his own feet. At Constantinople, I saw the house of a Greek bearing an old flag on a pole; some houses bear an old shoe. This is to avert the evil eye of passers by. In India, it is not unusual to see old shoes placed on a pole in fields with a good crop. This is done with the same object. If a fruit tree bears good and excellent fruit, it is not considered good to point to that fruit with one's forefinger. If that be done, the tree will catch the evil eye of the person, and the fruit will get rotten, or the tree will lose its fruit-bearing capacity. One must point to the fruit not with his forefinger, but with the middle part of his thumb.

It is with a view to avert the influence of an evil and malicious eye from the happiness and pleasure of the newly-married couple that old shoes are supposed to be thrown upon them in England. In some parts of England, it is lucky to throw an old shoe after a person going out on an importat errand. In Turkey, when a sailor happens to leave a ship for good, some one from the rest of the crew throws after him an old shoe, or any other old worn-out thing with a view, that if he had an evil eye, he might bear it with him, or passs it over upon the shoe and not let it remain with them.

In Russia, iron is considered to possess the property of averting an evil eye. When they suppose the evil eye of a person to be coming towards them, they immediately hold their keys in

their hands. If they have no keys with them, they look for anything made of iron, and go and sit upon it or touch it to avert the danger.

In India, an iron nail is supposed to have this effect. Persons afraid of such an evil eye put in a corner of their house a particular nail for this effect. An old horse-shoe is sometimes met with on the very threshold of Indian houses. It is to frighten away an evil eye or a ghost. Many Indian mothers put very small iron knives round the necks of their pet children to avert an evil eye. It is not unusual to see below the cot of ladies in accouchément a knife and a lemon. The metallic knife is believed to withstand the influence of an evil eye upon the blessed condition of the mother and the new-born child. To be the blessed mother of a child is considered so much a blessing and a meritorious deed in the East, and to remain barren is considered so great a curse that from the very time of conception every possible care is taken, as well for her health as for her being out of the way of drawing an evil eye on her blessed condition. In her state of pregnancy, if an eclipse were to happen, the husband is not allowed during the period of the eclipse to hold a knife in his hand or to mend his pen. If he were to do so, either intentionally or unknowingly, the child that would be born would also bear a natural cut or mark on some part of the body. With the same idea of averting an evil eye by means of iron, it is not unusual to find a small knife or a nail or a scissors attached to the cradle of a child.

6. Among other miscellaneous superstitions common to the two countries we find the following :—In Europe, Friday is considered an inauspicious day for undertaking or beginning a new work. It is because Christ was crucified on that inauspicious day. In India also, Friday is generally inauspicious. It is because Venus (શુક્ર), from which the day શુક્રવાર (Friday) takes its name, is an inauspicious star. A man under the influence of that star is generally unlucky. In Europe, many take the number 13 as an inauspicious number

at the table, because Christ was arrested after the last supper at which there were 12 apostles with him, and they formed the number 13. In India, an odd number is auspicious and an even number inauspicious. Brides or bridegrooms are generally presented with an odd number of rupees, as 3, 5, 7, 9, 11, but rarely with 4, 6, 8, &c. The reason seems to be that the dead bodies are always carried by an even number of corpse-bearers. It is especially forbidden among the Parsees that the corpse be carried by an odd number of corpse-bearers.

In Europe, to hunters, the coming of an old woman from the opposite direction is a bad omen, indicating want of good game. In India, it is a widow that indicates a bad omen while starting for any important business.

In Europe, the breaking of a mirror portends a great mishap to the person to whom it belonged. In India, the sudden breaking not only of a mirror, but a chandelier or any other such glass work, especially on a merry occasion like marriage or birthday, is very unlucky.

In Europe, a loaf lying inverted portends an accident to a friend at sea. In India, it is a shoe lying inverted that portends quarrel.