

A FEW ANCIENT BELIEFS

ABOUT THE ECLIPSE

AND A FEW SUPERSTITIONS BASED ON THOSE BELIEFS.*

Read on 25th April 1894.

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THE last eclipse of the Sun, on the sixth of this month, has suggested to me, the subject of my paper this evening. Sitting on the verandah of my house the previous evening, I heard a few mill-hands talk various things about the phenomenon and about the customs to be observed on the occasion. I thought that an inquiry into the belief of the ancient Persians about the cause of the eclipse, a comparison of that belief with the beliefs of other ancient nations, and an enumeration of the superstitions based on those beliefs, would form a fitting subject for a paper before this Society. Hence this paper.

I.

The ancient Aryans, and the different nations that descended from them, held a belief, that the eclipse was the result of a fight between a hostile power and the Sun or Moon as the eclipse happened to be solar or lunar. Though, according to Sir Monier Williams, Arya-bhata, who lived in the fifth century after Christ, knew the true theory about the cause of the eclipse, the Māhabhārata points to a similar belief among the ancient Hindus. Dowson thus describes the belief.¹

“Rāhu is a Daitya who is supposed to seize the sun and moon and swallow them, thus obscuring their rays and causing eclipses. He was son of Viprachitti and Sinhikā, and is called by his metronymic Sainhikeya. He had four arms, and his lower part ended in a tail. He was a great mischief-maker, and when the gods had produced the Amrita

* Vol. III, No. 6, pp. 346-60.

¹ Dowson's Classical Dictionary of Hindu Mythology. The word Rāhu.

by churning the ocean, he assumed a disguise, and insinuating himself amongst them, drank some of it. The sun and moon detected him and informed Vishnu, who cut off his head and two of his arms, but, as he had secured immortality, his body was placed in the stellar sphere, the upper parts, represented by a dragon's head, being the ascending node, and the lower parts, represented by a dragon's tail, being Ketu the descending node. Râhu wreaks his vengeance on the sun and moon by occasionally swallowing them." The same story is referred to in the Vishnu Purâna. Thus, it is the fight between the Daitya Râhu and the sun or moon that causes the solar or the lunar eclipse. According to Pictet,¹ it is this story, that has given the Sanscrit word *râhu-graha*, its secondary meaning of eclipse. The same authority gives different myths of the same kind prevalent in other nations. The Mongols have taken this belief from the Indians with this difference, that among them Aracho has taken the place of Râhu. The Scandinavians say that there are two wolves Sköll and Hati which always run after the sun and the moon. Hati, which is also known by the name of Mânagarmr (the dog of the moon), will, in the end, devour the moon. It is this tradition that has given rise to the Burgundian phrase "May God save the moon from the wolves," which is used ironically for a distant danger.²

The ancient Greeks, at one time, believed, that Diana or the moon once fell in love with Endymion, the beautiful shepherd when he once slept unclothed, on Mount Latmos, and that the lunar eclipses were due to her absence from the Heavens to pay her frequent nocturnal visits to her lover on the earth.

The Romans believed that the sorcerers and magicians, especially those of Thessaly, had the power to bring the moon down to the earth from the heaven to aid them in their enchantments and that the eclipse was due to this attempt on the part of the magicians. The Chinese belief about the eclipse is

¹ Les Origines Indo-Européennes, Livre Quatrième Chap. III, Sec. I, 369 (Les Éclipses), Deuxième édition ; Tome III, p. 329.

² *Ibid.*

thus described by Lewis Le Comte:¹ "All nations have ever been astonished at eclipses, because they could not discover the cause of them; there is nothing so extravagant as the several reasons some have given for it; but one would wonder that the Chinese, who as to astronomy may justly claim seniority over all the world besides, have reasoned as absurdly on that point as the rest. They have fancied that in heaven there is a prodigious great dragon, who is a professed enemy to the sun and moon, and ready at all times to eat them up. For this reason, as soon as they perceive an eclipse, they all make a terrible rattling with drums and brass kettles, till the monster frightened at the noise lets go his prey While the astronomers are on the tower to make their observations, the chief Mandarines belonging to the Lipou fall on their knees in a hall or court of the palace, looking attentively that way and frequently bowing towards the sun to express the pity they take of him, or rather to the dragon, to beg him not to molest the world, by depriving it of so necessary a planet." The same author, later on, thus describes what he saw during an eclipse.

"The Chinese, . . . were terribly alarm'd, imagining that the earth was going suddenly to envelope in thick darkness. They made an hideous noise all abroad, to oblige the dragon to be gone. It is to this animal that they attribute all the disappearances of the stars, which come to pass, say they, because the celestial dragon, being hunger-bit, holds at that time the sun or moon fast between his teeth, with a design to devour them."²

Coming to the belief among the ancient Persians, we find no reference to the eclipse in the oldest writings of the Avesta. Among the Pahlavi books, we find the Dinkard saying, that the moon shines with the light of the sun.³ It is the Dâdis-

¹ A complete History of the Empire of China, by Lewis Le Comte, Jesuit, (second edition 1739) pp. 70-71.

² *Ibid* p. 483.

³ Dastur Peshotan, Bk. I, chap. LI, 6. Vol. I., p. 48.

Translation.

“Two opaque (avin) dark faces (or bodies) move and revolve far below the sun and the moon. When in the usual revolution of the sky, they pass below the sun or below the moon, it (*i. e.*, one of the two opaque bodies) becomes a covering and stands as a curtain (𐬀𐬎𐬎𐬎) over the sun. Thus it is that the sun or the moon is not seen. Of both these opaque bodies, one is called the head and the other the tail. Their motion is explained in the calculation of astronomers. However, in standing in the way of, and in covering those luminaries, they do not thereby (actually) raise a covering over those luminaries. From (the fact of) the luminaries being in a place pure and free from opposition, and from (the fact of) the (two) concealers (of light) being far below them, there result no diminution of light in those luminaries, except this, that their light is concealed from the world, and that their all-adorning energy of supplying light to the earth during that time is incomplete.”

It appears from this passage that the ancient Persians believed that the eclipse was caused by two opaque dark bodies interfering between us and the luminaries, that those dark bodies moved much below the luminaries, and that their cutting off, of the light of the luminaries was temporary. We do not find in the Dâdistân-i-Dini, any clear reference to the two opaque dark bodies as being distinctly hostile to the sun and the moon, but the following passage in the Shikand Gumanik Vijâr shows, as Dr. West says, that these bodies were hostile to the luminaries :

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¹ The text published by Dastur Hoshang and Dr. West, p. 199; ch. IV., 46.

“And those two fiends that are greatly powerful, who are opponents of the planetary sun and moon, move below the splendour of (those) two luminaries.”¹

The idea of there being some heavenly bodies opposed to other heavenly bodies is not entirely foreign to Persian belief. According to the Zâdsparam,² some heavenly bodies are said to belong to the good creation, and others, for example, the planets, to the evil creation.

There is one thing to be noticed in the Mahâbhârata version of the cause of the eclipse and the Dâdistân-i-Dini version. One of the two interfering dark bodies is spoken of in the Dâdistân-i-Dini as the head (sar), and the other as the tail (dûmb). So, in the Mahâbhârata, Râhu's body being cut into two pieces by Vishnu, his upper parts were represented by a dragon's head and his lower parts by a dragon's tail.

Not only do these references in old books point to a belief in a fight between a hostile power and the luminary as the cause of the eclipse, but as Pictet points out, the very words for eclipses in different nations point to that belief. For example, the Persians speak of the eclipse as گرفت ماهتاب or گرفت آفتاب *i.e.*, “the capture of the moon or the capture of the sun.”³ The Pahlavi word **𐬵𐬀𐬎𐬎𐬀** vakhduntan, used in the above passage of the Dadistan-i-Dini, is also a synonym of Persian ‘giraftan’ and means “to catch hold of, to seize.” The Sanscrit ग्रहण, which has come to mean an eclipse in Gujarati has also the same primary meaning. According to Pictet,⁴ ‘camman,’ the old Irish word for eclipse, signifies ‘combat.’ Again, a few proverbs of different nations also point to the belief, that a fight with a hostile power was the cause of the eclipse of the luminary. For example, the tradi-

¹ S. B. E. XXIV (Shikand-Gamanik Vijar, chap. IV, 46) p. 132. Dr. West's Pahlavi Texts Part III.

² S. B. E. V, p. 164, West's Pahlavi Texts I., Zâdsparam, chap. IV. 3.

³ *Vide* the word گرفت in Dr. Steingass's Persian-English Dictionary.

⁴ Les Origines Indo-Européennes, 2nd ed. Vol. III p. 330; Bk. IV, chap. III, Sec. I, 369.

tion of a fight between two wolves and the sun or the moon, being the cause of the eclipse, has given rise to a proverb among the Burgundians, which is used ironically for a distant danger, but, which literally means, "May God save the moon from the wolves." The Tamils also hold the belief of the fight, and so, we find in one of their quartrains, illustrating "generosity to fallen foes." In reference to this belief, an old quartrain says: —

"Worthy men, when they behold where foes are foiled, themselves too feel sore-abashed, and do not hasten on to crush them. Behold, the strong invulnerable dragon draws not near the moon (to swallow it) when it is in its tender crescent days!"ⁱ Again, take our common Gujarati proverb ગ્રહણ લાગ્યું. When two persons begin a quarrel, we generally say ગ્રહણ લાગ્યું, i.e., the eclipse has commenced.

II

We will now speak of some of the eclipses immortalized in history, as having produced, by a superstitious belief in them, marvellous changes in the destiny of great men and great armies.

Eclipses were generally regarded by almost all the ancient nations as precursors of some events of great importance. Herodotus supplies us with some instances. When the famous bridge over the Hellespont was completed by the Persian king Xerxes, the occurrence of an eclipse of the sun struck the monarch with alarm. "At the moment of departure," says Herodotus, "the sun suddenly quitted his seat in the heavens, and disappeared, though there were no clouds in sight, but the sky was clear and serene. Day was thus turned into night; whereupon Xerxes, who saw and remarked the prodigy, was seized with alarm, and sending at once for the Magians, inquired of them the meaning of the portent. They replied—God is foreshowing to the Greeks the destruction

¹ The Náladiyâr or Four Hundred quartrains in Tamil, by G. Pope. p. 155.

of their cities; for the sun foretells for them, and the moon for us.' So Xerxes, thus instructed, proceeded on his way with great gladness of heart."¹

According to the same authority, it was a solar eclipse that had frightened the Spartan general Cleombrotus into recalling his army from the task of building the wall at the Isthmus.² Again it was an eclipse, known subsequently as the "Eclipse of Thales," being predicted by him, that had frightened the two fighting nations, the Lydians and the Medians, into entering into some terms of peace.³

Malcolm, who believed that Cyaxares, the Median king spoken of by Herodotus, was the same as Kaikâus of Firdousi, points to a passage in the Shâh-nameh⁴, as referring to this, above eclipse predicted by Thales of Miletus. In the expedition of Kâus to Mazenderan, according to Firdousi, Kâus and his army were "struck with a sudden blindness, which had been foretold by a magician." Malcolm says, that the predicting magician is no other than Thales of Miletus and that the blindness was nothing but the darkness caused by the eclipse.⁵ I think it is a far-fetched comparison of events-suggested to Malcolm by his zeal to find striking resemblances between the events of the reigns of the two monarchs. If Firdousi's account of the phenomenon refers to anything, it is to a sudden volcanic eruption.⁶

From Tacitus, we learn that Drusus, the son of Tiberius, made use of the occurrence of a lunar eclipse, which occurred during the time of a revolt by three Roman legions under his command, to frighten his soldiers and thus to suppress the

¹ Rawlinson's Herodotus, Vol. IV., p. 39, Bk. VII., Ch. 37-38.

² Ibid Vol. IV., p. 390, Bk. IX., 10.

³ Ibid Vol. I., pp. 212-13, Bk. I., 74.

⁴ Firdousi, *Liber Regum*, by J. A. Vuller, Vol. I., p. 328.

⁵ *History of Persia*, by Sir John Malcolm, Vol. I., p. 515.

⁶ Or perhaps, it was a great dust storm. The eruption or the storm was supposed to have been brought on by a magician, but Firdousi says nothing of its being foretold (*vide* Warner Brothers' Translation of the Shâh-nameh Vol. II., p. 40).

revolt. Tacitus thus describes the event: "The night that followed seemed big with some fatal disaster, when an unexpected phenomenon put an end to the commotion. In a clear and serene sky the moon was suddenly eclipsed. This appearance, in its natural cause not understood by the soldiers, was deemed a prognostic denouncing the fate of the army. The planet, in its languishing state, represented the condition of the legions: if it recovered its former lustre, the efforts of the men would be crowned with success. . . . The crowd in the meantime, stood at gaze: every gleam of light inspired the men with joy; and the sudden gloom depressed their hearts with grief. The clouds condensed, and the moon was supposed to be lost in utter darkness. A melancholy horror seized the multitude; and melancholy is sure to engender superstition. A religious panic spread through the army. The appearance in the heavens foretold eternal labour to the legions; and all lamented that by their crimes they had called down upon themselves the indignation of the gods. Drusus took advantage of the moment." ¹ Tacitus then describes at some length how Drusus by promises and by the terror caused by the eclipse, subdued the spirit of the insurgent soldiers.

Plutarch, in his *Lives*², refers to several eclipses, which had agitated the minds of great men and great nations in antiquity. An eclipse of the sun at the time of the death of Romulus had greatly agitated the minds of the Romans. An eclipse at the time when Pericles was embarking for an expedition against the Peloponnesians had frightened the pilot and his men. "The whole fleet was in readiness, and Pericles on board his own galley, when there happened an eclipse of the sun. This sudden darkness was looked upon as an unfavourable omen and threw them into the greatest consternation. Pericles,

¹ The *Annals of Tacitus*, Bk. I., ch. 28. The *Works of Tacitus* by A. Murphy (1813), Vol. I., p. 52.

² *Plutarch's Lives*, translated by J. and W. Langhorne, Vol. I., p. 88.

observing that the pilot was much astonished and perplexed, took his cloak and having covered his eyes with it, asked him, "If he found anything terrible in that, or considered it as a sad presage?" Upon his answering in the negative, he said, "Where is the difference between this and the other, except that something bigger than my cloke causes the eclipse?"¹

In the last Macedonian War, the Roman Consul Æmilius Paullus, predicting the occurrence of an eclipse, by his superior knowledge of Astronomy, prepared his soldiers for the event and cheered them up while the phenomenon spread terror and alarm in the Macedonian army. According to Livy, it was Sulpicius-Gallus, a general of the Consul, who predicted the eclipse. The event is thus described: "An eclipse of the moon, it was known to Sulpicius, would occur that night, and he thought it prudent to prepare the soldiers for it. When the eventful moment arrived, the soldiers went out indeed, to assist the moon in her labours, with the usual clamour of their kettles and pans, nor omitted to offer her the light of their torches; but the scene was one of amusement, rather than fear. In the Macedonian camp on the other hand, superstition produced the usual effect of horror and alarm; and on the following day the result of the battle corresponded to the feelings of the night." According to Plutarch, the Consul, Æmilius Paullus, sacrificed eleven heifers to the moon and several oxen to Hercules on that occasion.²

When Dion was preparing an expedition against Dionysius of Syracuse, an eclipse of the moon alarmed his soldiers. Miltas, the diviner, "assured them that it portended the sudden obscurity of something that was at present glorious; that this glorious object could be no other than Dionysius, whose lustre would be extinguished on their arrival in Sicily."³

¹ Ibid., p. 299.

² Ibid., Vol. I., p. 450.

³ Ibid., Vol. III., p. 392.

In the expedition of the Athenians led by Nicias against the Syracusans, a lunar eclipse retarded the retreat of the Athenians.¹ "Everything accordingly was prepared for embarkation, but in the night there happened an eclipse of the moon, at which Nicias and all the rest were struck with a great panic, either through ignorance or superstition They looked upon it, therefore, as a strange and preternatural phenomenon, a sign by which the gods announced some great calamity Supposing the eclipse a prodigy, it could not, as Philochorus observes, be inauspicious to those who wanted to fly, but on the contrary, very favourable; for whatever is transacted with fear, seeks the shadow of darkness; light is the worst enemy. Besides, on other occasions, as Anticlides remarks in his commentaries, there were only three days that people refrained from business after an eclipse of either sun or moon; whereas Nicias wanted to stay another entire revolution of the moon, as if he could not see her as bright as ever the moment she passed the shadow caused by the interposition of the earth."

III.

Now we come to the question of the different customs and usages observed by different people at the time of the eclipse, (A) either with a view to help the luminary in his supposed difficulty, (B) or to threaten and frighten his supposed opponent, so as to force him to slacken his strong grasp of the luminary.

(A) To help the luminary in his difficulty, some resort to self-sacrifices, offerings, or prayers. For example, the Mexicans fasted during the eclipses just as our Hindoo friends do. But it is difficult to determine exactly what it was that led people to fast during the eclipse. (a) Perhaps it was a pious desire to participate in the grief of the luminary that was supposed to have been attacked by an opponent. (b) Some are

¹ Ibid., Vol. II., p. 242.

frightened into fasting, lest the extraordinary event may bring some mischief during the process of eating. (c) Again, it is possible, the origin of the custom may be due to the desire of undergoing a little privation in order to avert a greater mishap. It is a little sacrifice to propitiate the powers to avert a greater danger. The latter view is illustrated by a custom of the Mexican women, who, they say, maltreated themselves on such occasions, while their young girls got themselves bled in their arms.

This belief of the Mexican women, brings us to some of the observances observed by Indian women on such occasions. Women who are *enciente* are advised to lie down during the eclipse, so as to avoid coming under the shadow of the eclipse, lest the evil influence of Rāhu might overtake them and their children in embryo. They, as well as their husbands, must avoid cutting or breaking anything during the time of the eclipse. If they do not do so, their future children are affected some way or other. Children with cuts on ears or with defective parts of some members of the body, are sometimes pointed out to us as the result of carelessness, or obstinacy on the part of the parents in not properly observing this rule of abstaining from cutting or breaking anything during the time of the eclipse. The ancients believed in the influence of the moon on women. The moon had all feminine characteristics, and was therefore a female goddess while the sun possessed the male characteristics. The sun and moon as such, represented the creating and conceiving powers of nature. That being the case, it is not surprising to find women, specially those in the state of conception, ready to show in various ways their sympathy in the grief of the luminary when attacked by a supposed opponent. Among the customs observed by the ancient Romans, we find a peculiar mode of helping the luminary to get out of his supposed difficulty. It was the custom of lighting torches and candle-sticks and of pointing them to the sky to recall

the light of the eclipsed luminary. Plutarch refers to this custom in his life of Æmilius Paullus.¹

(B) Again the custom of raising cries and of creating noise and bustle, with a view, either to help the luminaries in their hour of trouble, or to frighten their adversaries, seems to be very old. It was prevalent among the Romans of the first century after Christ. As pointed out by Pictet, Juvenal, in his well-known satire on women, refers to this custom, when he says ²:—

“Such a power of words falls from her, you would say so many pans, so many bells were being struck at the same time. Let no one henceforth fatigue trumpets or brasses; single-handed she will be able to succour the moon in labour.” As Lewis observes, this was due to the old Roman belief referred to above, that magicians and witches were endeavouring to bring the moon down from heaven to aid them in their enchantments and that she could be relieved from her sufferings by loud noises, the beating of brass, and the sounding of trumpets, produced to drown the voices of the enchanters. They say, that the home of this custom of creating a noise with trumpets at the time of the eclipse, was ancient Egypt, where Isis, the moon, was honoured with the play of drums and trumpets. It is usual, even now, to see, that in some of the Native States the appearance of the new moon is announced with a flourish of trumpets and a play of drums. Tacitus also refers to this custom among the Romans. Describing the lunar eclipse which occurred during the time of the revolt of the three Roman legions in the time of Emperor Tiberius, he says: “In a clear and serene sky the moon was suddenly eclipsed. To assist the moon in her labours, the air resounded with the clangor of brazen

¹ Plutarch's Lives translated by Langhorne, Vol. I., p. 450.

² Juvenalis, Satiræ, by Lewis, pp. 75-6. Satire, VI., ll. 440-43.

instruments, with the sound of trumpets and other warlike music."¹

The custom was prevalent even in the middle ages. It is said that "the people of Turin used to greet eclipses with loud cries for which St. Maximus of Turin, who lived in the fifth century after Christ, had to rebuke them. Two centuries later, St. Eloi is said to have preached against this superstition." According to Birgman, the Mongols also made loud cries, to save the luminaries from their enemies. The custom is still prevalent to a certain extent. Mr. Child² says of the Siamese, that at the time of the eclipse, they fire guns, shoot crackers, beat drums, tomtoms and other instruments and thereby frighten the monster Rāhu from his work of swallowing the sun or moon. The Siamese resort to this custom also on the occasion of their new year's day, to expel evil spirits from the precincts of the city and thus to bring about prosperity and happiness. Pictet says that this custom is still prevalent among the Greenlanders and also among several tribes of Africa.

In India, this custom is said to be more or less prevalent in several parts; but on this side of the country, the principal means believed to be efficacious, and therefore adopted to relieve the luminary, is to present offerings and to give alms in charity. Hence it is not uncommon to see Hindu women throw *बीज बीज* (*i.e.*, seed and grain) high in the air towards the luminary supposed to be in affliction, with the words *छोड़ ग्रहण, छोड़ ग्रहण* (*i.e.* leave your grasp). The words very often heard in the Bombay streets announcing the commencement of the eclipse, *viz.*, *दीप्ति दान छुड़े ग्रहण*, tend to the same belief. It is generally the lower classes such as the Māngs and the Dhers that go about in Bombay streets, uttering the

¹ The Annals of Tacitus, Bk. I., chap. 28. The Works of Tacitus, translated by Murphy, Vol. I. p. 52.

² The Pearl of Asia, or Five Years in Siam, by J. T. Child, chap. IX., pp. 113-16.

above words, and asking for alms. The presence of these lower classes is accounted for by the following story, which is, on its face, a corrupted version of the original Mâhâ-bharata story given above. I give the story as narrated to me by a Hindu mill-hand on the evening preceding the last solar eclipse.

Rama on his return from Lankâ, after the victorious fight with Râvan, gave a feast to his victorious army. Mâhadev and Pârvati were serving the meals. Mâhadev drew the attention of Pârvati to the presence of a low class Mâng in the assembly, and asked her to be careful, and to serve him the meals, from a distance. This drew the attention of Râm, who slew the Mâng boy for daring to go there to mar the sacredness of the feast. The mother of the boy took up the head, placed it in a basket and tried to resuscitate it with fresh water. With the basket containing the head of her lost son, she went to the gods and goddesses to ask for her meals. In turn, she went to the sun and the moon and asked meals from them, threatening to touch them in case of refusal and thus to desecrate their holy character. It is the shadow of her basket that causes the eclipse, and so, it is to remove this Mâng woman, this importunate creditor, from the sun and the moon, that people are asked to give offerings to the luminaries, and alms in charity to Mângs and Dhers on this earth. This story explains, why it is, that Mângs go about for alms, and why the words *ଦିଏ ଧନ ଓଡ଼ି ଗ୍ରହଣ* are uttered in our streets.

It was usual among the Parsees, until a few years ago, to say prayers on such occasions, and to recite specially the Mâh-bokhtâr Nyâish, in praise of the moon during lunar eclipses. Mr. Gaspard Drouville¹ said of the Zoroastrians in Persia in the early part of this century that they prayed to the luminary on such occasions: "Ils adressent leurs prières au soleil, et les jours d'éclipse sont pour eux les jours de désolation et de

¹ Voyage en Perse, fait en 1812 et 1813, par Gaspard Drouville (1825), Chap. XXXIX, Tome II., p. 193.

deuil; ils se prosternent alors la face contre terre et ne se relèvent qu'au retour des rayons de cet astre." ¹

¹ The Mexicans also have been described as being much troubled and distressed at an eclipse of the Sun or Moon. Some of the wild tribes regard the Sun and Moon as husband and wife. They believe that an eclipse of the Sun is caused by domestic quarrels, and to soothe the ruffled spirit of the Sun on such occasions the ruddiest human victims that could be found used to be a rificed to him. For sacrifices to the Moon under similar circumstances albinos were chosen..... (Symbolism of the East and West by Mrs. Murray Aynsley, p. 16).
