

ON THE CHARIOT OF THE GODDESS (मातानो रथ.) A SUPPOSED REMEDY FOR DRIVING OUT AN EPIDEMIC.*

Read on 30th June 1897. President—REV. DR. D. MACKICHAN.

In almost all nations, weapons of war were considered essential in religious gatherings. The gods and goddesses of the ancients had their instruments of war just as their warriors and heroes had. As warriors wanted weapons to strike the physical foes of their country, so gods, goddesses and angels wanted them to strike the spiritual enemies of the people they protected. So, we find, that the religious processions of many nations carried weapons with them. Even the Freemasons carried swords in their processions as symbols of authority. A Parsee youth (Nâvar), initiated into the order of priesthood, leads the procession to the fire-temple, carrying a *gurz*, a kind of club in his hand as a warrior. He indicates thereby, that, just as the angel Mithra has his own club to strike on the heads of the *Daévas*, *i. e.*, evil persons and influences (*vazrem hunivikhtem kameredhê paiti daévanâm*), he had his own club to strike it over his spiritual foes. He carries it as a symbol, to declare, that thenceforward, he will use his mental powers and spiritual faculties in the suppression of all evils. Thus, in almost all nations, instruments of war were considered to be necessary requisites for religious processions.

Now, in ancient times, chariots were considered to be a part and parcel of military requisites. So, they played a very prominent part, both in religious gatherings and in warfare. Warriors are called *Rathaéshtârs*, [*i. e.*, those who stood up in the *Ratha* (२५ Lat. *Rota*), *i. e.*, the chariot] because they fought in chariots. As warriors fought against physical

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enemies, so gods and goddesses fought against spiritual enemies. Thus, gods and goddesses had their chariots just in the same way as warriors had. In the Avesta, Ardiçura Anâhita, an Yazata presiding over waters, is represented as moving in a chariot. Mithra, the angel presiding over light, had his chariot just as Phœbus, the sun-god, had his own among the Greeks.

In India also, the *Ratha* or the chariot has been playing a very prominent part in religious or semi-religious gatherings and processions. Among the lower classes, it has lost much of the original symbolic signification. In case of epidemics like plague, cholera and small-pox, it is the village *mâtâ*, *i.e.*, the village goddess, that has a good deal to do with it. So, one of the supposed ways to drive out an epidemic from a village overtaken with it, is (भाताते रथ क्हाद्वे) *mâtâno rath kahâdvo*, *i.e.*, to take out of the village the chariot of the village goddess. The goddess is supposed to be appeased thereby and the epidemic transferred to an adjoining village.

The object of this paper is to present a few notes of three cases that fell under my observation, (a) one at Tithal near Bulsâr, (b) another at Jalâlpore near Nowsâri, and (c) another on the Ghaut Road leading to Satârâ from Mahâbleswar.

(a) The plague epidemic, that was raging for some time this year, in the town of Bulsâr, had made its appearance, in solitary cases, in the adjoining village of Tithal. This alarmed the poor villagers, and they resolved to drive away the epidemic from their village in their *mâtâ's ratha*. During the evening of the 17th of May they made all preparations for the chariot procession.

Their *raths* or chariots consisted of small pieces of wooden planks standing on wheels. They were about a foot in length and breadth. The chariot procession started in the morning of the eighteenth of May from their small village temple. All the villagers accompanied it. The *raths* were decorated with small bannerettes. Two villagers carried the two chariots in

their hands. A cock and a goat were carried by others. Others carried a cocoanut, betelnuts, cooked food, etc. The procession was led by a Bhagaṭ or a priest.

It is not every village that has a Bhagaṭ of its own. The one at Tithal, named Revlo Jirio (रेवलो जिरिओ), was specially sent for from Pândooroghad, a ruined hill fort, about four miles distant. These Bhagaṭs are village priests as well as doctors. they abstain from meat and intoxicating drinks of all kinds. They have certain religious observances to be observed. The Bhagaṭ at Tithal was paid Rs. 5 for the day's work.

The procession coming at the outskirts of the village, on the road leading to Shegvi, stopped there for some time, and the Bhagaṭ recited several incantations. The following are some of the lines of the incantations, the whole of which they refuse to recite except on proper occasions, and which it is difficult for us to follow when they are recited in a sing-song way :—

पवननो सपातो वारी लेओ

ओ दुनीआमां आपणुं काम याले.

वा भमारे आलीओ ते आपणु वारीओ

ओ अग्नी मातानुं काम अमाईं कहेवाय.

ओ दुनीआने विषे अमाईं काम याले ते वारी लेवानुं छे

अमो मारजेर करीने दुनीआने वास्ते वाणी लेशुं.

ओ दुनीआमां याले ते काम अमाईं कहेवाय, देवतानुं कहेवाय

ते दुनीआमां देवतानुं काम आपलीने कीनारे याले.

ते आपलीने कीनारेनुं काम अम वारी लछओ

ओ वीआदी ते परमेश्वरनी ने मातानी कहेवाय.

These are some of the words of the incantations, taken down from the lips of the Bhagaṭ to learn what ideas are given vent to in the incantations. I give here a rough translation of the incantations, as far as I can understand them. "Counteract the influence of this gust of wind, so that our affairs in this world

(१) वादल झु. अत्र.

(२) श्रीमारी, मर्डी.

may continue. Let us counteract the influence of this injurious wind. This work which is the work of *Agni mâtâ* (*i. e.*, the goddess presiding over fire) can be called our work. We have to counteract the influence of this work about this world. By force and violence (*i. e.*, by all possible means), we shall counteract the influence of this (injurious wind or epidemic). All that happens in this world is ours and is brought about by gods. The work of the gods in that world is performed on the edge of clouds, *i. e.*, in heavens. We shall counteract the influence of the work originated on the edge of the clouds. This disease is said to come from the great God, from the goddess."

The above incantations of these simple folks show their belief in the following facts—

- (1) That all epidemics are carried from one place to another by winds and that they are the result of injurious winds.
- (2) That their gods and goddesses have something to do with them.
- (3) These gods and goddesses work in the clouds.

These incantations were recited by the Bhagaṭ on the outskirts of the village in a chanting way, and in touching plaintive tones. He nodded his head heavily during the utterance like one who believed himself to be possessed by the spirit.

The incantations being finished, the whole procession marched from Tithal to the adjoining village of Shegvi, whose inhabitants had received, a day or two previous, a friendly intimation of the arrival of the chariot of the *mâtâ*. So, they had prepared themselves to receive the chariot of the goddess (देवीदेव) in their own hands directly from the hands of the new-comers. The villagers of Tithal returned to their village with the belief that they had driven away the epidemic from their village and passed it on to some other place.

The villagers of Shegvi in their turn were to pass on the *rath* or chariot of the goddess, with a similar procession and

similar observances to another village named Panderâ Pâiree. This village was to pass it on to another village and so on. The goddess of the chariot thus marches from village to village. At last, when the next village is very far off, and the distance too great for the villagers to go in a procession, they place the *rath* in a place surrounded by hills, so that the epidemic being shut up from all sides may die (ଅମୃତ୍ୟୁ ଶୟ) as the villagers say. If the villagers of a particular village are not on their watch, and allow the new-comers to place their chariots near their village, then they believe, that there is a likelihood of the epidemic sticking to their place.

From a sea-coast village like Tithal, the *ratha* is carried from place to place to interior villages till they get to a village from which the next village is very far off, and in that case the disease is believed to die out in solitude. But in the case of a village several miles distant from the sea, the *ratha* is carried seaward. It is taken from village to village seaward, and the last sea-coast village transfers the *rath*, and with that the disease, to the sea, where it is supposed to die. An instance of this kind came under my observation, one morning during the Christmas holidays of 1894, at Jalâlpore near Naosâri. The *ratha* was brought there from an adjoining village the evening previous and placed on the outskirts of the town. The people of Jalâlpore had to remove it to the adjoining village of Bodâli, which had to transfer it to Matvâr, which in its turn had to convey it to Karâri (Matwâr), which was quite close to the sea. The Karâri people were to convey the *rath* to the sea and there drown it.

In the matter of conveying the *rath* from village to village, there is generally a friendly arrangement, the people of the village that starts the *rath* giving a friendly notice of the coming of the *rath* to the next village in order to enable the people to be ready to pass it on to the next village. But in some places, the people of a village quietly and stealthily carry the *rath* to the outskirts of the next village and leave it there.

If the people of that next village come to know about that, they come to oppose their approach with all force, being afraid that the *rath* might bring disease to their doors. A case of that kind came under my observation at Mâhâleshwar in October 1894. On the Ghaut Road leading to Satara, I saw four small toy-chariots, lying on the side of the road, with small wooden idols standing on each of them. The idols were decorated with coloured clothes. I was told that the village of Khelgar had several cases of cholera in the preceding hot weather and to drive away that disease the people had started the *rath* of their goddess, named "Murri." They knew fully well, that the people of that village would oppose the conveyance of the *rath* to their village; so, they stealthily carried it at night and placed it midway at some distance from the village. The goat and the cock that accompany the *rath* are let loose, and nobody takes them away, the belief being, that he who takes them away is attacked with the disease.

On the day when the *rath* was conveyed from Tithal, the women of the village met at a small temple, situated near the village well, and lighting a lamp sang their favourite song, imploring their village goddess to be kind towards the village. Their principal goddess was *Jal-devi* (जल-देवी), i.e., the goddess presiding over water. This was perhaps because the temple was situated near the well of the village and because the village was close to thesea.

The song sung by the village women in honour of their 'Jal-devi' runs as follows:—

भारा सपनामां आरे सोवासन
 आरेनां हाथमां रतन कुंदावती
 आरे आली ते जलदेवी माग्मिनी सेवा करा
 देवा पैसान्नी पतरी खेधने पुंज करजेरे
 देवा सवायानो सींदुर खेधने सेवा करजेरे
 देवा सवायानो सींदुर खेधने तीलां करजेरे
 देवा ताहडां ताहडां दही खेधने छीमां करजेरे

ચારે ચાલેતો કુંકુના પગલા પરેરે
ચારે બાલે તે મોહોરેનાં માતી ગરેરે.

Translation.

I saw four married girls in my dream. All the four had cups for red-pigment¹ in their hands. All the four went to offer their services to *Jal-devii*.² Worship the gods with pieces³ of money. Serve the gods with *sindur* (a kind of pigment), worth a pice. Make marks on the idols with *sindur*, worth a pice. Make the hearts cool with cold curd. When the four girls walked, their steps made the marks of red pigment. When the four girls spoke their lips dropped pearls.

The following are two other semi-religious songs sung at the village temple of Tithal :—

તાપીને ક્રીનારે ઉભા વરલાનો છેરે
તાંચ્મરે નીપજી બે મુરતીની જોરે
ચાલેરે સાચ્મી આપણે જોવારે જાઈચ્મ
દેવાની મુરતી કેવીક હોયરે
દેવીરે દેહરાંમાંની તુરજાચ્મ માચ્મચ્મ
દેવાની મુરતી તેવીજ હોયરે.

Translation.

When the son of Varlâ was standing on the banks of the river Tapti, there appeared suddenly a pair of idols. Come on girls! We shall go to see them. Of what kind must be the idols of gods? The idols of gods must be of the same kind as those of the Tooljâ goddess in our temple.

કાઝેરો ને હરીચંદ્ર ચ્મચ્મ બાણુરે
અમારી જલદેવી માથને ચ્મટલુરે કહેજો
તીથલ ગામને ચ્મરે રમવા આવેરે
ધંધેરો આંધ્યા ચ્મજ વાતેરે
ધંધેરો તે હીરનાં ગોપનારે

¹ The marks made on foreheads, &c., with red pigment are considered auspicious.

² The goddess presiding over water.

³ The people generally take a vow to present to the gods small pieces of metals, worth one, two or more annas.

दुमतां इरके ये चार
 हंधोलिरे। आंध्या ज्मिण वातेरे.

Translation.

Karooro and Harichandra used to say, "convey this message to our Jal-devi goddess—

Come to play on the open place at Tithal.

A swinging seat is suspended for you on this road.¹

And silken tassels are suspended from there.

Two or four ribbons fly in the air on the seat.

The swinging seat is suspended on this road."

The songs of a tribe or community indicate, to a certain extent, what amount of intelligence the people of the tribe possess. The short songs of the Tithal women show the poverty of their field of thought.

¹ The gods are believed to take pleasure in these swinging chairs or seats. Hence their idols are, at times, placed on such seats.