

NOTE ON THE KOLIS OF BASSEIN.*

Read on—25th July 1906.

President—MR. S. M. EDUARDES, I.C.S.

I had the pleasure of going to Bassein on the 21st of April last to see the whale that had been carried to the shore of the sea there.

When there, I interrogated some of the fishermen on the subject of the whale and on some of their customs and manners. Taking advantage of this opportunity, when our learned President has read his paper to-day on the Kolis of Bombay, I beg to submit my few notes of the conversation I had with the Kolis there.

First of all, I would give some particulars about the whale itself. I read some days ago in the Report of the Proceedings of the last meeting of the Bombay Natural History Society, that the Society had taken some measurements of the whale. I do not know on which date they took the measurement. I submit my figures for comparison. I must say, that I did not take the measurement myself. It was very difficult to go near the whale itself, both on account of the horrible putrifying smell that it gave out, and on account of the muddy condition of the soil on which it lay. The oil flowing from its body had made the soil very muddy. However, I was at the distance of about six or seven feet from the whale. A fisherman, whom I paid for the work, took the measurements.

I will put down here the measurements of the whale taken at the time. I had no tape with me to take the measurements. So, I took a stick from a fisherman there and took therewith the measurements. I put down the measurements in my note book in numbers of the stick. I produce herewith the stick

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On measuring it, I find that it is 40 inches in length. So, reducing my measurements from the stick, to our English measure, I give my measurements as follow :—

The length of the whale was 73 feet 1 inch.

The height of the whale was 4 feet 4 inches.

The length of its tongue was 15 feet.

The length of one of its two wing-like sides was 9 feet 7 inches.

The village near Bassein where the whale was found, and from the villagers of which I collected some information about the fishermen there, is known as रान्गाव Rângão in the precincts of कपलार Kaplâr. It is about half an hours' drive by *tonga* from the town of Bassein itself.

The whale was at first found on the sand of the shore. It lay there for about a week. Then, it was on the 17th of April that a large number of fishermen gathered together and pulled it up, at the time of the rising tide, further down towards the village, by means of ropes. I saw it at the latter place.

The attention of our Bombay people was drawn to this matter by a short reference to it in the *Times of India* of the 20th of April 1906, and I went with my family there by the first morning train on the 21st of April. I took an interest in the sight, because I remembered having heard in my childhood from my mother of a large whale having been washed in on the eastern foreshore of Upper Colaba where I lived. I was told that hundreds of people from the city went there to see it. I have given above my measurements, but I give below the measurements given by a correspondent of the *Times of India* in its issue of 19th July 1906, for the sake of comparison and for preserving the notes of that correspondent in our Journal for some future reference:

“As measured by a tape this monster is 63 feet long from head to tail, and 30 feet wide. The lower jaw is 18 feet long, and 10 feet wide, and has a space large enough to accommodate

six persons seated as in a bunder boat. Each fin is about 6 feet long and 4 feet wide. This sea monster is apparently one of the Greenland species as the lower jaw is larger and longer than the upper. The spot where the creature is lying is about 4 miles from the station and a tonga can take one to within 500 yards of the whale. It is one of the largest of the species known to exist and the preservation of the skeleton, which is yet intact, may be of interest to the Natural History Society or to those concerned in the "New Museum." Early steps would, however, be necessary as the flesh about the jaw has already been torn away and dogs have been picking and tearing off the flesh at other parts of the body. It is well worth one's while to view the carcass, even in its present half decomposed state, as the sight of a whale covered with its flesh and stretched at full length on land is one that may not again occur in a lifetime. Personally, I can say that I have seen a "whale," a thing which many cannot, and will probably never get a chance of seeing. The preservation of the skeleton, *i. e.*, of the spinal column, the jaw and the head would furnish a very good idea of the magnitude of this great sea monster."

The fishermen called the whale, that was carried to the shore and is referred to here, and such other large whales which, they said, they occasionally saw on the sea there, देवमास "Dev-mas," *i. e.*, the God-fish. When asked, why they called it Dev-mas, they said it was for two reasons. The first was, that it was the largest kind of fish. The second reason was that when they came across such whales in the midst of the sea, being afraid lest they may do them harm, they addressed them as follows:—

“देव आया अमाला रस्ता दे.”

i. e., "God, Father! Give us the way."

On seeing the whale on shore, they gave it the offering of कुल तांदुल, *i. e.*, flower and rice.

Now I come to the subject of the Kolis themselves. The name of my principal informant, who was surrounded by a number of other fishermen, was Konla, the son of Arjoon, the son of Rama. He did not know the names of his forefathers higher up. His age was 40.

These fishermen were Hindus, and belonged to the caste called मण्जेली Mangelâ. These Mangelâ fishermen have their caste-men in Bombay, Mahim, Agasi, Kelva-Mahim, Tarapur and Dehnu. Dehnu is their farthest limit.

Their living was upon fishing and tilling the ground.

There are about 300 people of this caste at Bassein.

They married among themselves. They had no *भोजन* *वेदना* with other castes of fishermen, *i.e.*, they did not eat with them. They drink liquor. They ate fowls and mutton, but not beef. They had polygamy among them, but not poliandry. They had widow re-marriages among them.

When asked, when their forefathers came to Bassein, they said it was before the time of the Portuguese, from the very time of Brahmâ *ब्रह्मा*.

Among their gods, one was a sea-god, known as Gomâvir. The seat of that god was a rock in the sea. They laid the offering of *पुष्प*, *i.e.*, flowers and leaves, on it.

Nâliaripunam (*i.e.*, the Cocomat Holiday), Holi, and Shivarâtri were their principal holidays. They believed in Shri Nârâyen, who lived in the *Kailas*, *i.e.*, Paradise.

They had no intermarriages among near relatives. They had infant marriages, but the minimum age for it was generally ten. On the occasion of the marriage, they sent for a Brahmin from Bassein. His fee varied from Re. 1 to Rs. 5. They sent for him also on the occasion of a death. The fee then was generally smaller, but at times it was Rs. 4.

On the eleventh day after death, they had *पितृ-उत्सव*, *i.e.*, they gave offerings of sweetmeat balls.

It was after great persuasion that I could prevail upon them to sing me one of their songs. The following is the

song, wherein the fish is the principal subject. It is addressed to a Thânkarni, *i.e.*, a woman of Thana :—

हेला लाल आवठा, थानकरणी!
 हे तुज नीतल पाणी शुभलाया.
 ना मोरीला पनगाया गाता, थानकरणी.
 आगाया गाडी मदी असला, थानकरणी.
 मुंअध्या मारकीट मदी गेली थानकरणी.
 मांथा वर सरगाया पाती, थानकरणी.
 सांग तुज सरगाया कीमत, थानकरणी.
 गेलु आया सवा इपीया, थानकरणी.

Translation.

O Thânkarni ! Hela (*i.e.*, here is) your red flag. ¹

Here is your clear water of Boomlâ (*i.e.*, Bombay ducks
a kind of fish)

The leg of the cot is not broken, O Thânkarni!

The Thânkarni sat in the railway train,

And the Thânkarni went to the Bombay market.

The Thânkarni had a basket of pomfrets on the head.

O Thânkarni! Tell me the price of your pomfrets.

(She replies) The Thânkarni will charge a rupee and a quarter.

I said above, that Gomâvir was their sea-god. Here is a couplet of their song, which refers to this sea-god as saving the vessel from the storm :—

समुद्राना डोले ताइ अले, वारांनी दुपते,
 गोमारायी कृपा आली तरी ताइ लागते.

The boat moves on by the movements of the sea. But it sinks by the force of the wind; it sinks by the force of the wind.

By the favour of Gomâvir (the sea-god) the boat safely reaches the shore.

I produce here for the inspection of members the oil that collected from the body of the whale during my visit.

¹ Reference to red flags generally placed on the boats,