

THE VENERATION PAID TO THE
PLANE-TREE IN PERSIA,*
ALLUDED TO BY LONGFELLOW IN THE
FOLLOWING LINES:—

“Bright with the sheen of the dew, each glittering tree of the forest
Flashed like the plane-tree the Persian adorned with mantles
and jewels.”

Read on 25th November 1903.

President.—MR. JAMES MACDONALD.

THIS paper† is intended to present a few notes to explain the allusion in the above lines¹, which refer to a very old custom among the Persians, *viz.*, the custom of decorating the plane-tree.

Before entering into the subject proper of our paper, we must note, that as Ousley says, “particular trees have been honoured in all ages, and . . . in all countries”² with veneration. Ousley gives various instances from the Bible, classical writers, Arab writers and the works of travellers in Persia in support of his statements.⁵

On the subject of the reverence paid to trees, Pliny says :—

“In old time, trees were the very temples of the gods : and according to that ancient manner, the plain and simple peasants of the country, savouring still of antiquity, do at this day consecrate to one god or other, the goodliest and fairest Trees that they can meet withall First and foremost, the ancient ceremony of dedicating this and that kind of Tree to several gods, as proper and peculiar unto them, was

* Vol., VI. No. 8.

† The subject of the paper was studied at the desire, of a Parsee friend, who wanted an explanation of the allusion in Longfellow's poem.

¹ Longfellow's Poetical Works. *Evangeline*, Part the First, II, ll. 22—23.

² Ousley's Travels in Persia, Vol. I. P. 360, Appendix No. IX.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 360 *et seq.*

always observed, and continueth yet to this day
 Moreover, it is received and believed generally, that the
 Sylvanes and Faunes, yea, and certain goddesses, are appro-
 priate and assigned to woods and forests ; yea, there is attri-
 buted unto those places a certain divine power and godhead,
 there to inhabit.”¹

In “The Sacred Tree” by Mrs. J. H. Philpot, an excellent
 book on the subject, the author says:—

“It is undeniable that the worship of the spirit-inhabited
 tree has usually, if not always, been linked with, and in many
 cases overshadowed by other cults.”²

She further says:—

“There is little doubt that most if not all races, at some
 period of their development, have regarded the tree as the
 home, haunt, or embodiment of a spiritual essence, capable of
 more or less independent life and activity, and able to detach
 itself from its material habitat and to appear in human or in
 animal form. This belief has left innumerable traces in
 ancient art and literature, has largely shaped the usages and
 legends of the peasantry, and impressed its influence on the
 ritual of almost all the primitive religions of mankind. There
 is, indeed, scarcely a country in the world where the tree has
 not at one time or another been approached with reverence or
 with fear, as being closely connected with some spiritual
 potency.”³

Now, why are these trees held in veneration ? There seem
 to be two reasons for this belief.

1. Firstly, such trees are very old trees, some, of hundreds
 of years standing, and they are believed, as Chardin says, to
 have been the seats of “holy men of former times,” who “had
 prayed and meditated under their shade.”⁴ They are believed

¹ Pliny's Natural History, translated by Holland, Book XII, Ch. 1, p. 357.

² “The Sacred Tree,” by Mrs. J. H. Philpot, Preface, p. VII.

³ “The Sacred Tree,” p. 1.

⁴ Ousley's Travels, Vol. I, pp. 372.

to have "been miraculously preserved by God so many years, because they had afforded shade and shelter to his faithful servants."¹ Then, as such miraculous trees, they are believed to possess the power of curing various diseases. Some of these trees may have been associated with the events of some of their great men.

2. Again, it seems, that some coincidence or accident attaches to a tree, a sacred importance. A particular person may pray and take a vow under a certain tree for some particular object of his desire. That desire may be fulfilled and he thenceforward holds that tree dear and sacred. Others carry on that idea and the tree becomes a sacred tree with many others. Ousley gives an anecdote which he had heard and which confirms this view. The story runs thus :—

"A merchant, lately married to a beautiful girl, but who had not yet given him reason to expect the blessing of an heir, was travelling with her; and finding a pleasant spot, halted there awhile; the sun's excessive heat induced him to seek shelter; he perceived, at a little distance from the road, some ancient walls among which grew a shady and handsome tree. To this he retired with his young wife, leaving the mules or horses in a servant's care. The tree, from its situation, had, until that time, escaped the notice of most passengers, and did not exhibit on its branches even one votive offering; but the merchant, whose fondest wish was to obtain a son, fastened on it a shred torn from his clothes, and the united vows of himself and his fair companion, were crowned with success before the expiration of a year. This circumstance being known, (although some would, perhaps, think the event possible without any preternatural agency) was ascribed to the tree's efficacious influence; and within another year the branches were covered with several hundred rags, by as many votaries; not all, however, acting from the same motive."²

¹ *Ibid* p. 373.

² Ousley's *Travels*, Vol. I, pp. 4-85.

Thus, we see, that, vows taken under a tree, if successful, mark the tree with sanctity. The success of the vows makes the tree, at first, dear to the party, and then, what is very dear is held sacred. Hence the sanctity.

It is not rare to find, even here in Bombay, that a happy coincidence in a particular spot or house makes the spot or house dear and well nigh sacred. पनातु धर, पनातो धेडा, पनातु इरबंद, an auspicious house, an auspicious horse, an auspicious child, are phrases, which, one comes across often. If a man gets rich after removing to a new house, or after purchasing a new horse, the house or the horse is held dear and well nigh sacred by him. In the same way, a particular child, out of many, after whose birth the father prospers or succeeds in life, is held as the dearest child, whose birth was believed to bring good fortune in the family.

Coming to the subject proper of our paper, we find that the custom of venerating the plane-tree has come down to us from very old times. After his general views on the subject of the veneration in which trees are held generally, Pliny says of the plane-tree:—

“ But who would not marvel rather at this, that our people here should go into far countries, and fetch a Tree from thence, even out of another world, only for the shade that it gives? . . . And what tree should that be but the very Plane? brought first over the Ionian sea into the island Diomedea, for to beautify the tomb of *Diomedes*. From thence translated into Sicily, and so bestowed at length upon Italy, and there planted, as a most singular, rare and special tree. But now is it carried as far as Terwin and Tournay in France, where it is counted an appearance to the very soil that payeth tribute; insomuch, as people that will but walk and refresh themselves under the shadow of it, must pay a custom therefore unto the people of Rome. . . . I find in writers that there were other besides in Italy, and, namely, about Adria, as also in Spain. And all this happened about the time tha

Rome was sacked by the Gauls. But afterwards they came to be so highly esteemed, that for to make them grow the better, men would be at the cost to water them with wine."¹

Pliny gives several instances of large plane-trees in Italy, in the hollow trunks of which, kings and emperors had made, banqueting places. We thus learn from Pliny, that it is from very old times, that the plane-tree has been highly esteemed and held very dear and well nigh sacred in Italy and the western countries. Not only that, but we learn that the plane-tree was taken to Europe from the East, through Ionia, which came into frequent contact with the Easterns, especially the Persians.

Coming to the particular country of Persia, to which a reference is made in the lines of Longfellow, quoted at the commencement of this paper, we find that, the plane-tree is known in Persia as *Chindr*. Mon. L. Langlés, the editor of an edition of the travels of the French traveller Chardin (1643 to 1713),² says on the authority of Pietro della Valle, an Italian traveller of Persia (1622), that the Persians name the plane-trees *Tchendr*. He says that some of these trees at Tehran are so large that the circumference of their trunk cannot be enclosed by the hands of two or three persons together. The number of these trees in Tehran was so large that he called the city of Tehran the "City of Plane-trees" just as he had called Constantinople the "City of Cypresses."³

Ousley,⁴ in his Travels in Persia (Vol. I, Appendix No. 9), gives several instances of the plane-tree being held in veneration by the modern Persians, who are Mahommedans by religion. Two of the instances are referred to by Chardin. Chardin says that he saw "a large and ancient Plane, all bristling with nails and points and hung with rags, as votive

¹ Pliny's Natural History, translated by Holland, Book XII., Ch. I., pp. 357-58.

² Voyage en Perse. Nouvelle édition per L. Langlés. Vol. I., Preface, pp. XI-XVI.

³ *Ibid.*, Vol. VIII., p. 167.

⁴ Travels in Persia, Vol. 1, pp. 372-373.

offerings from *Dervishes*, who, like monks of the Latin Church, were professed mendicants, and came under this tree to perform their devotions."¹

Chardin, according to Ousley, refers to another plane-tree, one thousand years old. He says of this tree that it was venerated as a *Darakht-i-fâzel*, *i.e.*, an excellent tree.

Professor Darmesteter, in his "*Haurvatât et Ameretât*," dwells at some length on the subject of this *Darakht-i-fâzel*, and says that this modern epithet is, as it were, a translation of *Urvara vangheus*. He thinks that the modern Mahomedans have, as it were, inherited their notions of holding trees in veneration from the ancient Persians, the Zoroastrians, who were the original occupiers of the soil.

Chardin refers to a third plane-tree also. He says that all these trees are known among the Mahomedans as درخت فاضل *Darakht-i-fâzel*, *i.e.*, excellent trees.

According to Ousley, Father Angelo, a missionary, who lived for many years in Persia, says:—

"Certain *Chenâr-trees* may be seen in *Irân* which the people superstitiously respect, as representatives or supplying the place of *Imâms* and *Pirs* or holy heads of the church, and pious elders."²

Now it is not the plane-trees alone, that are held in veneration by the Mahomedans in Persia. Ousley and others give instances of other various trees that are held in veneration. It is not the plane-tree alone that is known as *Darakht-i-fâzel*, *i.e.*, the excellent tree or the tree of cure. Other various trees are also known by that name. Again, it is not all plane-trees that are known as *Darakht-i-fâzel*. There are only some special plane-trees and some special trees of other species that are known by that name.

Coming to the books of the ancient Persians, we find, that the plane-tree was known among the ancient Irânians as *Chinâr*

¹ *Ibid.*

Ousley's *Travels*, Vol. I, p. 374, n. 62.

چنار or Sinâr. سنار In the Pahlavi Bundelesh it is called Chinâr ¹ There, it is said to be of the same species of tree, as *sarv*, i.e., cypress, *saphid-dâr*, i.e., the white poplar and the *shamshidâr*, i.e., the box-tree. It is a tree of the genus *platanus* and is said to be derived from a Greek root *platus* broad, because its leaves are broad and its form generally spread outwards. I do not find any other reference to the Chinâr in other Parsee books.

In Herodotus, we find references to this tree in connection with the kings of the ancient Persian Achaemenian dynasty. These references to the plane-tree in Herodotus, show that it was held in some estimation by the Achaemenian kings.

Firstly, we read in the description of the march of Xerxes (Bk. VII. Ch. 31): "Xerxes, who chose this way, found here a plane-tree so beautiful that he presented it with golden ornaments and put it under the care of one of his Immortals."

We find in another place a statement that one Pythius, a very rich man, presented to Darius, the father of Xerxes, a golden plane-tree (Bk. VII., Ch. 27).

Rawlinson refers to the authority of Antiochus the Arcadian, who says that "it was so small that it would scarcely shade a grasshopper." It was kept long in the citadel of Susa, and "was finally carried off from" there "by Antigonus (B. C. 316), when he fought against Eumenes."²

It appears that the plane-tree was held in estimation by several nations besides the Persians. According to Mrs. Philpot "in Armenia, the fire-priests were wont to interpret the will of the God from the movements observed in the branches of the holy plane-tree at Armavira."³

¹ Chap. XXVII. 6 S. B. E. Vol. V., West, p. 101. *Vide* my Bundelesh, p. 123. Justi's text p. 64, I. 9.

² Rawlinson's Herodotus, Vol. IV. (1860) p. 30.

³ The Sacred Tree, p. 99.

Again, according to Mrs. Philpot, "The heroic decendant of Pelops ¹ regarded the plane-tree as especially sacred to them and bound with their fortunes." ²

Now, can we account in any way, why the plane-tree was held in veneration by the Achemenians like Xerxes and Darius? We cannot account for it in a particular way. But we know, that according to the Bundeshesh, there were several flowers and plants sacred to several *Yazatas* or angels. So, the plane-tree also, though not sacred to one of the *Yazatas*, may be sacred from some particular associations. We know from the Bundeshesh, that it was believed to be of the same species as *sarv* or cypress. Now we know that the cypress had been held sacred for its supposed connection with the name of Zoroaster. The *sarv* of Kashmar is well known to us as a tree brought by Zoroaster and planted by king Gushtâsp. So, perhaps, being of the same species, the plane-tree also was held in some veneration.

¹ The hero of Greek mythology who gave his name to Peloponessus.

² "The Sacred Tree" p. 86.