THE BELIEF ABOUT THE DUBBÂ OR THE DROWNING SPIRIT IN INDIA. ITS PARALLEL IN ANCIENT IRÂN.*

(Read on 15th June 1927.)

I.

In the "Man in India" of September and December of 1923 (pp. 196-201), there is an interesting article, entitled "Water Spirits in North Behar" by Mr. Sarat Chandra Mitra, the prolific contributor on subjects of Cultural Anthropology in the Journals of our and other societies. The article describes a belief, that various tanks are believed to be inhabited by a Dubbâ or Drowning Spirit, which is also spoken of in some places as Pân dubbâ (पान इच्चा) or "the Drowning spirit (Dubbâ) which lives in water (Pân)." The belief is that "The Dubbâ does not kill men for the purpose of feeding upon their corpses, but does so with the sole and express object that the ghosts or spirits of his victims may become his companions and keep company with him" (p. 197). It is also believed, that the "Drowning Spirit" haunts the neighbourhood of some wells and "accosts lone passers-by in the stilly hours of the midnight and to ask from them for khaini (powdered tobacco leaf mixed with quicklime) to eat saying with a nasal twang: - खोन हे खोन हे (khaini dê, khaini dê) or 'Please give me some powdered tobacco to eat.' Should the passer-by be foolish enough to pay heed to this ghostly request and to go near him for giving "him the asked-for tobacco, it is believed and said that the ghost will surely seize and kill him " (pp. 197-98).

What we find at the bottom of the belief is, that it is an evil spirit that inhabits the tanks and other collections of water that kills a man falling into them, and not the water itself.

^{*} Journal Anthropological Society of Bombay, Vol. XIII, No 7, pp. 750-53.

H.

Now, we find a somewhat parallel belief of that kind in ancient Iran, as referred to in the Vendidad of the Parsees. There, in the 5th Chapter (Sect. 8), we read the following question and answer:

Translation:—O Holy Creator of the Corporeal world! Doth Water kill man? Ahura Mazda replied: Water doth not kill man. (The Demon) Astô-vîdhôtu ties him. (Want of) Air¹ carries him away bound. (Then) Water takes him up (to the surface); water takes him down (to the bottom); water casts² him out (ashore). Then birds eat him (i.e., his corpse). Through Fate, it (i.e., the corpse or a part of the corpse) passes up from here, passes below from here.

Similar are the question and answer with respect to Fire, wherein it is said that, when a man is (accidentally) burnt, it is not the Fire that causes death, but the Demon Astô-vîdhôtu.

¹ Vaya, vayu, Sans. वाय Pahl. vâi, Guj. vâ, air.

² Raêchayêiti from rich, Sans. ج Pahl. rikhtan اربطتر P. rikhtan ريطتري Lat. licere, licitare linquere, to leak, to pour out.

What is meant is this: Water and Fire are the beneficent objects of God, and, so, they are worthy of being respected and reverenced. When a man, falling into Water or Fire, is killed, it is not these good objects of God that kill him. It is the Demon Astô-vîdhôtu, the Demon of Death¹ that kills him. The man does not get fresh air (vayu²) in water and so is suffocated.

The parallel then at the bottom of the two beliefs, the Indian and the Iranian, lies in this, that the water itself is innocent, because it is a good, beneficent agent of God. It is the demon of Death, lurking in it, that kills the man.

The Pahlavi rendering of this passage runs thus:

तम नित्त-त्रभातम) नित्र (भि) तम् नित्त-त्रित्तम नित्त नित्तम नित

¹ For this word, vide my Dictionary of Avestaic Proper names. He is the Demon, who, as his name signifies, dismembers the parts of a man's body and brings about death.

² There is, as it were, a hidden pun upon the word vaya S. agg which means air as well as bird (Av. vi, vaya Sans. agg, Lat. avis). Want of fresh air (vaya) in the water suffocates the man whose corpse is then eaten by birds (vaya).

Translation:—O Creator! "Does Water kill man?" Ohrmazd replied to him that "Water does not kill man. Astovidât binds² him. The (bad)³ atmosphere carries him away bound. The water carries⁴ him up (i.e., brings him up to the surface); water carries him down (i.e., takes him down to the bottom); water pushes⁵ him forward⁶ (i.e., carries him back into a hole)³; and then in the end birds eat him. When from there, in the end, Fate reaches him (i.e., comes to him). It [Fate] over takes him in the end (i.e., he is on the higher route when he proceeds further in this corporeal world by [means of his] Fate and in the spiritual world by soul."

III.

As to the Drowning Spirit, alluring the passers-by, by asking tobacco from them, some folk-stories, heard on this side of our country, say, that some of the ghosts of the dead are fond of flesh. If a passer-by has cooked-mutton with him he is harassed by the lurking ghosts. The harassment consists in causing him to miss his way, his returning to one and the same spot, his being called by some invisible being by a clapping of hands, &c. In such a case, the advice, commonly believed in, is, that the person so harassed

¹ Dastur Hoshang Jamasp's Vendidad pp. 150-51. Vide also Spiegel's Vendidad p. 50 ll. 7 et. seq. Dastur Darab's Vend. p. 71. Dastur Jamaspji's Pahlavi Gujarati Vendidad, p. 31.

² Pahl. asruntan to bind. Arab. نسير taking capture (Steingass).

³ Two kinds of air or atmosphere or winds are spoken of. Vâe-i-veh, i.e., the good or beneficent air and Vâe-i salitar, i.e., the bad or maleficent air.

⁴ Vajidan P. گزیدی to choose.

⁵ Lit. mingles up. Gomekhtan, P. to mix, mingle.

⁶ Patireh, padireh Av. paiti.

⁷ i.e., hollow or crevice of a rock.

should throw away the flesh. The ghost, thus getting what it wanted, ceases to harass him further. Again, another advice, in the case of thus being harassed by a ghost at the dead of night on a road, is, to make water at once. The ghost is believed to dislike the smell of the urine and so leaves the pursuit of the man. Urine of cattle is, for this purpose, believed to have the efficacy of driving away evil spirits. It seems that at first, it was believed to have some efficacy to cure or prevent some physical diseases. Thence, the efficacy was believed to have extended to cases of mental diseases or evils.¹

¹ Vide Prof. Eugene Wilhelm's paper on Urine. Vide my "Religious Ceremonies and Customs of the Parsees." See the word Gaomez in the Index.