

XXII.

ON SOME EXTRAORDINARY FACTS,
CUSTOMS, AND PRACTICES
OF THE HINDUS.

BY THE PRESIDENT.

IN the preliminary discourse addressed to the Society by our late President, *Man and Nature* were proposed as the comprehensive objects of our Researches; and although I by no means think that advantage should be taken of this extensive proposition to record every trivial peculiarity of practice, habit, or thinking, which characterizes the natives of *India*, many singularities will be found amongst them which are equally calculated to gratify curiosity, and to attract the notice of the philosopher and politician.

OF all studies, that of the human mind is of the greatest importance; and whether we trace it in its perfection or debasement, we learn to avoid error, or obtain models for improvement and examples for imitation. In pursuing customs and habits to the principles from which they are derived, we ascertain by the sure rule of experience the effects of natural or moral causes upon the human mind.

THE characters of the natives of *India*, notwithstanding all that has been published in *Europe*, are by no means well understood there; and a careful and

accurate investigation of them, with a due discrimination of habits and usages, as local or general, would afford a subject for a curious, useful, and entertaining dissertation.

It is not my intention to undertake it. I neither profess to have ability, nor have I leisure for the task; and the preceding remarks are offered to the Society for the purpose only of introducing the recital of some extraordinary facts, customs, and practices of this country, which have occurred to my observation in the course of public duty. If the narrative has too much of the language of office, it may be deemed a sufficient compensation that it is extracted from official documents, and judicial records, and hence has a claim to authenticity.

THE inviolability of a *Brábmén* is a fixed principle of the *Hindus*; and to deprive him of life, either by direct violence, or by causing his death in any mode, is a crime which admits of no expiation. To this principle may be traced the practice called *Dberna*, which was formerly familiar at *Benares*, and may be translated CAPTION OR ARREST. It is used by the *Brábméns* in that city, to gain a point which cannot be accomplished by any other means; and the process is as follows:

THE *Brábmén* who adopts this expedient for the purpose mentioned, proceeds to the door or house of the person against whom it is directed, or wherever he may most conveniently intercept him: he there sets down in *Dberna*, with poison, or a poignard, or some other instrument of suicide in his hand, and threatening

threatening to use it if his adversary should attempt to molest or pass him, he thus completely arrests him. In this situation the *Bráhmén* fasts; and by the rigor of the etiquette, which is rarely infringed, the unfortunate object of his arrest ought also to fast; and thus they both remain until the institutor of the *Dherna* obtains satisfaction. In this, as he seldom makes the attempt without resolution to persevere, he rarely fails; for if the party thus arrested were to suffer the *Bráhmén* sitting in *Dherna* to perish by hunger, the sin would for ever lie upon his head. This practice has been less frequent of late years, since the institution of the Court of Justice at *Benares* in 1783; but the interference of that Court, and even that of the Resident there, has occasionally proved insufficient to check it; as it has been deemed in general most prudent to avoid for this purpose the use of coercion, from an apprehension that the first appearance of it might drive the sitter in *Dherna* to suicide. The discredit of the act would not only fall upon the officers of Justice, but upon the Government itself.

THE practice of sitting in *Dherna* is not confined to male *Bráhméns* only. The following instance, which happened at *Benares* in the year 1789, will at once prove and exemplify it:—

BEENOO BHAI the widow of a man of the *Brábmínical* tribe, had a litigation with her brother-in-law BALKISHEN, which was tried by arbitration; and the trial and sentence were revised by the court of Justice at *Benares*, and again in Appeal.

THE suit of *Beenoo* involved a claim of property and
a con-

a consideration of cast, which her antagonist declared she had forfeited. The decision was favourable to her, but not to the extent of her wishes; and she resolved therefore to procure by the expedient of the *Dberna*, as above explained, what neither the award of arbitration nor the judicial decision had granted.

IN conformity to this resolution, BEENOO sat down in *Dberna* on BALKISHEN; and he, after a perseverance of several days, apprehensive of her death, repaired with her to a *Hindu* temple in *Benares*; where they both continued to fast some time longer. Thirteen days had elapsed from the commencement of BALKISHEN'S arrest, when he yielded the contest, by entering into a conditional agreement with BEENOO, that if she could establish the validity of her cast, and in proof thereof prevail on some creditable members of her own tribe to partake with her of an entertainment of her providing, he would not only defray the expence of it, but would also discharge her debts. The conditions were accepted by BEENOO, who fulfilled her part of the obligation; and her antagonist, without hesitation, defrayed the charges of the entertainment: but the non-performance of his engagement to discharge her debts, induced BEENOO BHAI to institute a suit against him; and the practice of the *Dberna*, with the proofs of it, were thus brought forward to official notice.

IT is not unworthy of remark, that some of the *Pandits*, on being consulted, admitted the validity of an obligation extorted by *Dberna*, provided the object were to obtain a just cause, or right wickedly withheld

withheld by the other party, but not otherwise. Others again rejected the validity of an engagement so extorted, unless it should be subsequently confirmed by the writer, either in whole or in part, after the removal of the coercion upon him.

OF the practice which I have related, no instance exactly similar has occurred to my knowledge in *Bengal* or *Behar*, although *Bráhmens*, even in *Calcutta*, have been known to obtain charity or subsistence from *Hindus*, by posting themselves before the doors of their houses, under a declaration to remain there until their solicitations were granted. The moderation of the demand generally induces a compliance with it; which would be withheld if the requisition were excessive. But I have been credibly informed that instances of this custom occasionally occur in some parts of the *Vizier's* dominions, and that *Bráhmens* have been successfully employed there to recover claims, by calling upon the debtor to pay them, with a notification that they would fast until the discharge of the debt. The debtor, if he possesses property or credit, never fails to satisfy the demand against him.

ANOTHER practice, of a very singular and cruel nature, is called Erecting a *Koor*. This term is explained to mean a circular pile of wood which is prepared ready for conflagration. Upon this, sometimes a cow, and sometimes an old woman, is placed by the constructors of the pile; and the whole is consumed together. The object of this practice is to intimidate the officers of Government, or others, from importunate demands, as the effect of the sacrifice is supposed to

to involve in great sin the person whose conduct forces the constructor of the *Koor* to this expedient.

AN instance of this practice occurred in a district of the province of *Benares* in the year 1788. Three *Bráhmens* had erected a *Koor*, upon which an old woman had suffered herself to be placed; the object of temporary intimidation was fully attained by it, and the timely interposition of authority prevented the completion of the sacrifice. It cannot be uninteresting to know the cause which urged the three *Bráhmens* to this desperate and cruel resource. Their own explanation is summarily this: That they held lands in partnership with others, but that the public assessment was unequally imposed upon them; as their partners paid less, whilst they were charged with more than their due proportion; they therefore refused to discharge any part of the revenues whatever, and erected a *Koor* to intimidate the government's officers from making any demands upon them. Their sole object, as they explicitly declared, was to obtain an equal distribution of the public assessment between themselves and their partners.

A WOMAN, nearly blind from age, had in this instance been placed upon the *Koor*: she was summoned to appear before the English superintendent of the province, but absolutely refused to attend him; declaring that she would throw herself into the first well rather than submit. The summons was not enforced.

THIS is the only instance of setting up a *Koor* which had occurred for many years, previous to 1788, although the practice is said to have been frequent formerly.

merly. No information has reached me of the repetition of this practice in *Benares*, or of the existence of it in any other part of the Company's possessions; nor is it pretended that it was ever general throughout *Benares*, but is expressly asserted to have been limited to a very small portion of that extensive province.

THIS last mentioned fact is very opposite to that humanity and mildness of disposition by which the author of the historical disquisition, regarding ancient and modern *India*, affirms the inhabitants of this country to have been distinguished in every age. As a general position, liable to particular exceptions, I am not authorized to dispute it: but it must at the same time be admitted, that individuals in *India* are often irritated by petty provocations to the commission of acts which no provocation can justify; and, without reference to the conduct of professed depredators, examples may be produced of enormities scarcely credible: the result of vindictive pride, and uncontrolled violence of temper.

IN support of these assertions, I shall quote three remarkable instances, attested by unquestionable evidence. In 1791 SOODISHTER MIER, a *Bráhmén*, the farmer of land paying revenue and tenant of tax free land in the province of *Benares*, was summoned to appear before a native officer, the deputy collector of the district where he resided. He positively refused to obey the summons, which was repeated without effect; and after some time several people were deputed to enforce the process, by compelling his attendance. On their approaching

approaching his house he cut off the head of his deceased son's widow, and threw it out. His first intention was to destroy his own wife; but it was proved in evidence that, upon his indication of it, his son's widow requested him to decapitate her; which he instantly did.

IN this case, the process against SOODISHTER was regular, his disobedience contemptuous; his situation in life entitled him to no particular exemption, he had nothing to apprehend from obeying the requisition, and he was certain of redress if injury or injustice were practised upon him.

ANOTHER *Brábmén*, named BALOO PAUNDEH, in 1793, was convicted of the murder of his daughter. His own account of the transaction will best explain it, and his motives; I give it in abstract. That about twelve years before the period of the murder, he, BALOO, and another man, were joint tenants and cultivators of a spot of ground, when his partner BALOO relinquished his share. In 1793 this partner again brought forward a claim to a share in the ground: the claim was referred to arbitration, and a decision was pronounced in favour of BALOO. He consequently repaired to the land, and was ploughing it, when he was interrupted by his opponent. The words of BALOO are as follows: "I became angry, and enraged at his forbidding me, and bringing my own little daughter APMUNYA, who was only a year and a half old, to the said field, I killed her with my sword." This transaction also happened in the province of *Benares*.

THE last instance is an act of matricide, perpetrated by BEECHUK and ADHER, two *Bráhmens*, and zemindars, or proprietors of landed estates, the extent of which did not exceed eight acres. The village in which they resided was the property of many other zemindars. A dispute, which originated in a competition for the general superintendence of the revenues of the village, had long subsisted between the two brothers and a person named GOWRY; and the officer of government, who had conferred this charge upon the latter, was intimidated into a revocation of it by the threats of the mother of BEECHUK and ADHER to swallow poison, as well as to the transfer of the management to the two *Bráhmens*. By the same means of intimidation he was deterred from investigating the complaints of GOWRY, which had been referred to his enquiry by his superior authority.

BUT the immediate cause which instigated the *Bráhmens* to murder their mother, was an act of violence, said to have been committed by the emissaries of GOWRY, with or without his authority, and employed by him for a different purpose, in entering their house, during their absence at night, and carrying off forty rupees, the property of BEECHUK and ADHER, from the apartments of their women.

BEECHUK first returned to his house, where his mother, his wife, and his sister-in-law, related what had happened. He immediately conducted his mother to an adjacent rivulet, where, being joined in the

grey of the morning by his brother ADHER, they called out aloud to the people of the village, that although they would overlook the assault as an act which could not be remedied, the forty rupees must be returned. To this exclamation no answer was received; nor is there any certainty that it was even heard by any person; and BEECHUK without further hesitation drew his scymetar, and at one stroke severed his mother's head from her body, with the professed view, as entertained and avowed both by parent and son, that the mother's spirit, excited by the beating of a large drum during forty days, might for ever haunt, torment, and pursue to death GOWRY and the others concerned with him. The last words which the mother pronounced were, that she would blast the said GOWRY and those connected with him.

THE violence asserted to have been committed by the emissaries of GOWRY, in forcibly entering the female apartments of BEECHUK and ADHER, might be deemed an indignity of high provocation; but they appear to have considered this outrage as of less importance than the loss of their money, which might and would have been recovered with due satisfaction, by application to the Court of Justice in *Benares*. The act which they perpetrated had no other sanction than what was derived from the local prejudices of the place where they resided: it was a crime against their religion: and the two brothers themselves quoted an instance of a *Brábmén*, who six or seven years before had lost his cast and all intercourse with the other *Brábméns*, for an act of the same nature. But in truth

truth BEECHUK and ADHER, although *Bráhmens*, had no knowledge or education suitable to the high distinction of their cast, of which they preserved the pride only; being as grossly ignorant and prejudiced as the meanest peasants in any part of the world. They seemed surprized when they heard the doom of forfeiture of cast pronounced against them by a learned *Pandit*, and openly avowed that, so far from conceiving they had committed a barbarous crime, both they and their mother considered their act as a vindication of their honour, not liable to any religious penalty.

THE Society will observe, with some surprize, that the perpetrators of the several acts which I have related, were *Bráhmens*. These facts took place within three districts only of the province of *Benares*, named *Kuntel*, *Buddhoee*, and *Kereat Sekur*. I mention these particulars that I may not lead any person into a common error of deducing general conclusions from partial circumstances. In *Bengal* and *Behar*, where the passions of jealousy, pride, and revenge, sometimes produce very fatal consequences, I recollect no instance where the efforts of their violence have been transferred from the objects which excited it to others that were innocent, as in the preceding cases.

THAT the practice of Infanticide should ever be so general as to become a custom with any sect or race of people, requires the most unexceptionable evidence to gain belief: and I am sorry to say that the general practice, as far as regards female infants,

is fully substantiated with respect to a particular tribe on the frontiers of *Juanpore*: a district of the province of *Benares*, adjoining to the country of *Oude*. A race of *Hindus* called *Rajekoomars* reside here; and it was discovered in 1789 only, that the custom of putting to death their female offspring, by causing the mothers to starve them, had long subsisted, and did actually then very generally prevail amongst them. The resident at *Benares*, in a circuit which he made through the country where the *Rajekoomars* dwell, had an opportunity of authenticating the existence of the custom from their own confessions: he conversed with several: all unequivocally admitted it, but all did not fully acknowledge its atrocity; and the only reason which they assigned for the inhuman practice, was the great expence of procuring suitable matches for their daughters, if they allowed them to grow up. It is some satisfaction to add, that the custom, though general, was not universal, as natural affection, or some other motive, had induced the fathers of some *Rajekoomar* families to bring up one, or more, of their female issue; but the instances where more than one daughter had been spared, were very rare. One village only furnished a complete exception to the general custom; and the *Rajekoomar* informant, who noticed it, supposed that the inhabitants had sworn, or solemnly pledged themselves to each other, to bring up their females. In proof of his assertion in favour of the village in question, he added, that several old maids of the *Rajekoomar* tribe then actually existed there, and that their celibacy proceeded

proceeded from the difficulty of procuring husbands for them, in consequence of the great expences attending the marriages of this class of people.

It will naturally occur to the Society to ask, by what mode a race of men could be continued under the existence of the horrid custom which I have described. To this my documents enable me to reply, partly from the exceptions to the general custom, which were occasionally admitted by the more wealthy *Rajekoomars*; more particularly those who happened to have no male issue; but chiefly by intermarriages with other *Rajepoot* families, to which the *Rajecoomars* were compelled by necessity.

A PROHIBITION enforced by the denunciation of the severest temporal penalties, would have little efficacy in abolishing a custom which existed in opposition to the feelings of humanity and natural affection; and the sanction of that religion which the *Rajekoomars* professed was appealed to, in aid of the ordinances of civil authority. Upon this principle an engagement, binding themselves to desist in future from the barbarous practice of causing the death of their female children, was prepared, and circulated amongst the *Rajekoomars* for their signature; and as it was also discovered that the same custom prevailed, though in a less degree, amongst a smaller tribe of people also, within the province of *Benares*, called *Rajebunses*, measures were adopted at the same time, to make them sensible of its iniquity, and to procure from them a subscription similar to that exacted from the *Rajekoomars*.

The following is a copy of the engagement which the latter subscribed :—

“ WHEREAS it hath become known to the Government of the Honourable East India Company, that we of the tribe of *Rajekoomars* do not suffer our female children to live ; and whereas this is a great crime, as mentioned in the *Brehma Bywant Pooran*, where it is said that killing even a *Fetus* is as criminal as killing a *Bráhmén* ; and that for killing a female, or woman, the punishment is to suffer in the *nerk*, or hell, called *Kat Shootul*, for as many years as there are hairs on their female’s body, and that afterwards that person shall be born again, and successively become a leper, and be afflicted with the *Fukbima* ; and whereas the British Government in *India*, whose subjects we are, have an utter detestation of such murderous practices, and we do ourselves acknowledge, that although customary among us, they are highly sinful, we do therefore hereby agree not to commit any longer such detestable acts ; and any among us (which God forbid) who shall be hereafter guilty thereof, or shall not bring up and get our daughters married, to the best of our abilities, among those of our cast, shall be expelled from our tribe, and shall neither eat nor keep society with us, besides suffering hereafter the punishments denounced in the above *Pooran* and *Shaster*. We have therefore entered into this agreement.

“ Dated the 17th December, 1789.”

A RECORD of the various superstitious ceremonies which prevail throughout Hindustan, would form a large and curious volume; but as all the preceding instances which I have related, are taken from transactions in *Banares*, I cannot refrain from mentioning the superstitious notions of the people of that province regarding the sugar-cane: which proves an ignorance that may be admitted in palliation of grosser errors. The narrative is a mere extract from an official record, with an omission of some words, and some trifling verbal alterations.

As it is usual with the ryots, or husbandmen, to reserve a certain portion of the canes of the preceding year to serve as plants for their new cultivation, it very frequently happens that inconsiderable portions of the old cane remain unappropriated. Whenever this happens, the proprietor repairs to the spot on the 25th of *Feyte*, or about the 11th of *June*, and having sacrificed to *NAGBELE*, or the tutelary deity of the cane, he immediately sets fire to the whole, and is exceedingly careful to have this operation executed in as complete and efficacious a manner as possible.

THIS act is performed from an apprehension, that if the old canes were allowed to remain in the ground beyond the 25th of *Feyte*, they would in all probability produce flowers and seeds; and the appearance of these flowers they consider as one of the greatest misfortunes that can befall them.

THEY unanimously assert, that if the proprietor of a plantation ever happens to view even a single cane therein in flower after the 25th of *Feyte*, the greatest calamities

calamities will befall himself, his parents, his children, and his property; in short, that death will sweep away most of the members, or indeed the whole of his family, within a short period after this unfortunate spectacle. If the proprietor's servant happens to see the flower, and immediately pulls it from the stalk, buries it in the earth, and never reveals the circumstance to his master; in this case they believe that it will not be productive of any evil consequence. But should the matter reach the proprietor's knowledge, the calamities before stated must, according to the prevailing ideas, infallibly happen.

IN support of this belief, many of the most aged zemindars and ryots in the province of *Benares*, recited several instances of the above nature, which they affirmed to have actually happened during their own time; and moreover, that they had been personal witnesses to the evils and misfortunes which befel the unhappy victims of the description alluded to.

WHEN we reflect how generally credit was given to the power of witchcraft, long after the revival of letters in *Europe*, and that names of great repute for learning and abilities are found amongst its defenders, we shall not be surprized that charms and amulets are worn in this country by men of superior rank and education; that astrologers are consulted to name the fortunate hour for commencing a journey or expedition; and that the fascinating influence of an evil eye upon the human constitution, as well as the power of witchcraft, is admitted by the vulgar in general. Fortunately, however, the practice is not supposed

posed to bear any proportion to the belief of the power; although two recent instances occur to my recollection, of individuals having been sacrificed to this popular delusion; or at least the imputation of witchcraft was made the pretence for depriving them of life.

BUT the judicial records contain a case of great enormity, in which five women were put to death for the supposed practice of sorcery. I shall submit the circumstances of this transaction, with some detail, before the Society, premising that it happened in a district of *Ramgur*, the least civilized part of the Company's possessions, amongst a wild and unlettered tribe, denominated *Soontaar*, who have reduced the detection and trial of persons suspected of witchcraft to a system.

THREE men of the cast of *Soontaar*, were in the year 1792 indicted for the murder of five women; the prisoners without hesitation confessed the crime with which they were charged, and pleaded in their defence that with their tribes it was the immemorial custom and practice to try persons notorious for witchcraft. That for this purpose an assembly was convened of those of the same tribe, from far and near, and if after due investigation the charge was proved, the sorcerers were put to death, and no complaint was ever preferred on this account to the ruling power. That the women who were killed had undergone the prescribed form of trial, were duly convicted of causing the death of the son of one of the prisoners by witch-

craft, and had been put to death by the prisoners, in conformity to the sentence of the assembly.

THE prosecutors, who, agreeably to the forms of the *Mabommedan* law, were the relations of the deceased women, declared they had no charge to prefer against the prisoners, being satisfied that their relations had really practised sorcery.

THE custom pleaded by the prisoners was fully substantiated by the testimony of a great number of witnesses, who recited specific facts in support of it, without any denial or disagreement; and from the collective evidence exhibited in the course of the enquiry, the following curious and extraordinary circumstances appeared:—

THAT the successive demise of three or four young people in a village, led to a suspicion of sorcery as the cause of it; and the inhabitants taking alarm were upon the watch to detect the witches. They were generally discovered dancing naked at midnight by the light of a lamp, with a broom tied round their waists, either near the house of a sick person, or on the outside of the village.

To ascertain with a greater degree of certainty the persons guilty of practising witchcraft, the three following modes are adopted:

First. Branches of the *Saul* tree, marked with the names of all the females in the village, whether married or unmarried, who have attained the age of twelve years, are planted in the water in the morning, for the space of four hours and a half; and the withering of any of these branches is proof of witchcraft against the person whose name is annexed to it.

Secondly.

Secondly. Small portions of rice enveloped in cloths, marked as above, are placed in a nest of white ants; the consumption of the rice in any of the bags, establishes sorcery against the woman whose name it bears.

Thirdly. Lamps are lighted at night; water is placed in cups made of leaves, and mustard-seed and oil is poured, drop by drop, into the water, whilst the name of each woman in the village is pronounced; the appearance of the shadow of any woman on the water, during this ceremony, proves her a witch.

SUCH are the general rules for ascertaining those who practise witchcraft. In the instance which I have quoted, the witnesses swore, and probably believed, that all the proofs against the unfortunate women had been duly verified: they assert in evidence, that the branches marked with the names of the five women accused were withered; that the rice in the bags having their specific names, was devoured by the white ants, whilst that in the other bags remained untouched; that their shadows appeared on the water, on the oil being poured upon it whilst their names were pronounced; and farther, that they were seen dancing at midnight in the situation above described.

IT is difficult to conceive that this coincidence of proof could have been made plausible to the grossest ignorance, if experience did not shew that prepossession will supercede the evidence of the senses.

THE following custom would be too trivial for notice, if it were not strongly descriptive of the simplicity

plicity and ignorance which mark the character of the generality of the inhabitants of *Ramgur*.

FROM habitual neglect in ascertaining the quantities of land held in lease, and in defining with accuracy their respective tenures, frequent disputes arise between the inhabitants of different villages regarding their boundaries: to determine them, a reference is usually made to one or more of the oldest inhabitants of the adjacent villages; and if these should not agree in their decision, other men are selected from the inhabitants of the villages claiming the disputed ground; and the trial proceeds as follows: Holes are dug in the contested spot, and into these holes each of the chosen men puts a leg, and the earth is then thrown in upon it; and in this situation they remain until one either expresses a wish to be released, or complains of being bitten or stung by some insect. This decides the contest, and the property of the ground is adjudged to belong to that village the inhabitant of which goes through the trial with the most fortitude, and escapes unhurt by insects.

IF the preceding detail has no relation to science, it is at least descriptive of manners; and in availing myself of the opportunities afforded by official occupations (which is all indeed that these occupations admit) to contribute my portion to the researches of the Society, my example will, I hope, be imitated by those who with the same, or greater opportunities, possess more knowledge, ability, and leisure.

NOTE.

HAVING lately received some further documents on the subject of the *Dburna*, which I did not possess when the preceding paper was read to the Society, I have extracted from them what appears to me requisite to elucidate this extraordinary practice. From these documents it appears that several cases of *Dburna* had been brought before the Provincial Court of Justice at *Benares*, and as a penalty had been annexed to the performance of this mode of importunity, it became necessary to define with precision the rules constituting *Dburna*, according to the *Shaster* and *Usage*.

FOR this purpose a question was proposed to several *Pandits*, inhabitants of the province and city of *Benares*; and the answer subscribed by twenty-three *Pandits* is as follows :

“ ANY one who sits *Dburna* on another’s door, or in his house for the realization of a debt, or for other purpose, in which the party sitting takes with him some weapon or poison, and sits down; nor does he eat himself, nor allow the party against whom he is sitting, or his family, to eat; nor does he allow any person ingress into that person’s house nor egress from it, and addressing himself in terms of the strongest oaths to the people of the house, he says, “ If any of those of your house shall eat victuals, or go into your house, or go out of it, I shall either wound myself with this weapon, or swallow this poison;” and it does sometimes happen that both these events take place, and that he who sits in *Dburna* is not to remove
from