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ART. XII.—*On the Ante-Brahmanical Worship of the Hindús in the Dekhan.* By JOHN STEVENSON, D.D.

*Read 6th January, 1838.*

IN treating of the Hindú religion, much confusion has arisen from considering all the nations settled in the plains, and ranging over the mountains of Hindustan, from the Himálaya to Cape Comorin, as originally embued with one faith, and following one religious ritual.

It is now, indeed, generally understood, that within the above-mentioned limits there is not one, but several nations, diverse in origin; and it is obvious to the observation of every one, that there are now, within the boundaries of Hindustan, different religious systems. Yet it is still a common opinion, that what is usually called Hindúism, or the Brahmanical religion, was the ancient faith of the whole country; and that it maintained undisputed sway till inroads were made upon it, first by Buddhism, and subsequently by Mohammedanism. A close inspection, however, of the rites and ceremonies practised by the Hindús throughout this country, will soon convince a studious observer, that the notion of a universal prevalence of Brahmanism, and of its being the original faith of the whole of Hindustan, are alike unfounded. I can speak from personal observation, it is true, only of the state of things that obtains in the Dekhan, among the Maratha population; and to that district, and that population, I wish it to be understood that all my remarks are limited. There Brahmanism does not yet, properly speaking, extend to all the population; and there is a different form of idolatry still subsisting in that district, which must have preceded the introduction of the Brahmanical religion.

In the first place, the Brahmans themselves have a tradition, that their primitive seats were to the north of the Himálaya<sup>1</sup> mountains; and that it was from that middle region, which has poured forth its myriads, under the names of Scythians, Goths, Turks, and

<sup>1</sup> These mountains are called by the Greeks and Latins, Imaus, and Emodus; the former is the Sanskrit (हिम) Hima, with a Latin termination; and the latter हिमवत् Himawat, a little corrupted,—both words meaning *cold*, or *snow*.

Mongols, into the southern regions of Europe and Asia, that the Brahmans descended into Hindustan. In confirmation of this tradition, we find in that vast plain, amid the mountains of Tibet, marked in D'Anville's Ancient Geography, as the primitive seat of the *Brachmanni*, that we have the Mánas-sarowar, *i. e.* the Lake of Intellect, by far the most sacred of all the Hindú places of pilgrimage, and the Brahmaputra River, winding its way to the eastward for more than fifteen degrees of longitude, till at last it bursts through its mountain barriers, and descends into the plains of Hindustan; just as the Brahmans, those other sons of Brahmá, for this is the meaning of *Brahmaputra*, descended to take possession of the more genial plains to the south of the Snowy Mountains. Tradition relates, that the descent of the Brahmans took place near the western extremity of the chain, at the chasm by which the Ganges makes its way into India, and which is called the Gomukhi; a name interpreted by modern Hindús, ignorant of the language of the Vedas, to mean the Cow's Mouth, absurdly enough rendering the word *go* by the term *cow*, instead of *water*, of which in the ancient language of the Brahmans it is equally susceptible.

If, then, it once be admitted that the Brahmans at first were but foreigners in India, we are not to suppose that the country was uninhabited till the period of their migration. Besides, the lighter shade of colour, and the bolder physiognomy of the priestly race, show them to be decidedly a different tribe from the lower castes of the population, even after every allowance has been made for their better appearance, from less exposure to the elements, and a superior mode of living. Their ancient traditions at the same time speak of all the country to the south of the Vindhya Mountains, namely, the Dekhan, *i. e.* the *Dakshin*, or south country, the Carnatic, &c., as being anciently inhabited by Rakshasas, or demons, a name no doubt applied to the unlettered and uncivilized Aborigines of India.

If, then, the Brahmans were once foreigners in Hindustan, and the country previously peopled by a different race, there is a strong presumption against the religion of that aboriginal race being Brahmanism.

It is farther to be considered, that at the present day the hill-tribes of Bhils, Ramosis, and Kolis, which inhabit the mountains in the Dekhan, have no communication, in matters purely religious, with the Brahmans; and even the Mhers who live in the villages, though outside the walls, require none of their services in making offerings to their gods, and have gurus, or spiritual guides, of their

own caste to *open their ears*, as they term it, to divine instruction, and whisper into them the sacred incantation. The Brahmans have, however, so far prevailed as to make their services essential at births, deaths, and marriages. Young children receive their names from a Brahman; the person contaminated by a dead body requires water for his purification from a Brahman, and at the marriage *he* puts the grains of rice into the hands of the parties. These are institutions, however, partly civil, and partly religious; and the Brahmanical interference in these points tends to confirm our main position, by holding up the Brahmans rather as introducing into India, civilization, with which those rites are intimately connected, than as standing as priests between the worshipper and the Deity.

Further, several of the gods worshipped by the common people are unknown to the mythology of the Brahmans, and others are but slightly connected with it by a device, the nature of which we shall by-and-by explain. The same deities are worshipped by the outcast mountaineers, Mhérs, &c., and the Hindú agricultural population, while it is looked upon as a disgrace to a Brahman ever to have recourse to the aid of such demons.

All these considerations go to prove the existence of a more ancient form of religion among the Hindús, prior to the introduction of Brahmanism, a religion, too, which the new system has yet but very partially succeeded in supplanting.

In investigations of this nature, however, it is to be borne in mind, that the Brahmanical religion, like that of ancient Greece and Rome, is exceedingly accommodating to other idolatrous systems. When the ancient Romans came to any new country, they were sure to find there a Jupiter. Not content with a Jupiter Capitolinus at Rome, and a Jupiter Olympius in Greece, they must make one of the Egyptian Hammon. According to the same principle the Brahmans find everywhere Avatárs of their principal divinities. Whenever they find among other idolaters a god they wish to reverence, they make him an avatár of that one of their own who most resembles him in attributes and worship. Innumerable local avatárs of gods have thus sprung up throughout the country; and as soon as any one of these becomes somewhat famous, a legend, or *Máhátmya*, of the god of the place is composed, and given out as belonging to one or other of the Puráns. We have an example of this in Khandaba, a modern Dekhan god. He has been made an avatár of Siva, and his *Máhátmya*, called the Mallári, is attached to the Linga Purán, no doubt, because the deified chief, Khande Rao, as he is also named, was a promoter of that worship. We

must therefore be on our guard, and not take it for granted that every thing which has now become connected with Hindúism belongs to the ancient Brahmanical system.

A close investigation of the subject will show that there is much of what is now esteemed Brahmanism, foreign to that system. Some of these things are ancient, and some modern; but neither is the one class nor the other perfectly incorporated with the ancient religion of the Brahmans. And it is this incompleteness in the amalgamation of the different and heterogeneous systems, which enables us to resolve the whole into its proper elements, and to detect the traces of that Ante-Brahmanical worship in India, which is more properly the subject of this paper, and which we shall commence by describing as the worship of Vetál.

#### I.—OF THE WORSHIP OF VETÁL.

The worship of Vetál seems, for reasons that will immediately be given, decidedly Ante-Brahmanical; and yet I have seen around one small village in the Dekhan, no less than three erections to his honour, and in a large district of the Maratha country scarcely a village is to be found, that does not publicly testify its respect for him.

Vetál is generally, in the Dekhan, said to be an avatár of Siva, and wonderful exploits performed by him are related in a book called 'the Vetál Puchísi; but this composition has not had the good fortune to gain the voice of the Brahmans, and be placed among the Máhátmyas. On the contrary, they look upon it merely as a parcel of fables, and dispute the claims of Vetál to any divine honours whatever. In Wilson's Sanskrit Dictionary no higher character is given to this important personage than that of sprite, or demon, animating dead bodies. As, then, the Brahmans universally reprobate both his character and worship, and acknowledge him in none of their sacred books, it seems rather hard to tack him to their system, and call his worship a part of Brahmanism.

That the worship of this demon is not of modern invention, but of great antiquity, is argued from the following considerations:—  
1st. Vetál, in the Dekhan, has no image in the shape of any animal whatever. It seems, then, probable that this worship was introduced previous to the custom of likening the gods to men and other animals. 2d. Vetál has no temple, but is worshipped in the open air, generally under the shade of a wide-spreading tree. This cir-

cumstance, also, connects his worship with the most ancient forms of idolatry. The Canaanites in the time of Moses had no temples, for while the Israelites were commanded to remove every vestige of their idolatry, even to cast down their idol-groves, nothing is said of temples.

The place where Vetál is worshipped is a kind of Stonehenge, or inclosure of stones, usually in somewhat of a circular shape. The following is the plan after which these circles are constructed. At some distance from the village, under a green spreading tree, of any of the common indigenous species, is placed Vetál. If, as sometimes happens in a bare country like the Dekhan, no tree at a convenient distance is to be found, Vetál is content to raise his naked head under the canopy of heaven, without the slightest artificial covering whatever. The principal figure, where the worship of Vetál is performed, is a rough unhewn stone, of a pyramidal, or triangular shape, placed on its base, and having one of its sides fronting the east, and, if under a tree, placed to the east side of the tree. The stone is of various dimensions. Those I have seen have been from about two to four feet in height. A circle is formed with similar, but smaller stones, distant about one or two feet from each other. These circles vary from about fifteen to forty feet in diameter. The number of stones also varies, but I have generally found them about twelve, or multiples of twelve, but not universally so. Many of the circles are incomplete, stones having been accidentally thrown down by the cattle, or other accidents, so that it is difficult often to determine the original number.

In one carefully constructed circle, in a secluded spot near Poonah, I found the circle consisted exactly of twelve stones, with an additional stone placed outside, as it were by way of door-keeper. There the principal figure facing the east was about three feet in height, then followed two small stones about one foot and a half in height, then a third larger stone about two feet in height, and so on till the circle was completed. In another erection, there was first an outer circle, and then an inner one about two feet in diameter, composed of very small stones. I observed particularly in all these circles of triangular stones, that each stone had been painted red with cinnabar, to about three-fourths of its height from the ground, while the remainder was painted white with a kind of pipe-clay. In those circles where the colours had not been lately freshened this appearance was not very distinct, but where they had lately been renewed it was very evident, so as at once, with the pyramidal shape of the stone, to suggest to the mind the idea of a flame of

fire. We are thus led to the conclusion, that this part of the aboriginal worship of Hindustan, consisted in the performing of certain ceremonies to fire, considered as a divinity, and represented under the emblem of a pyramidal stone, painted red below and tipped with white.

Fire, it is well known, was one of the most ancient objects worshipped, after men forsook the adoration of a Spiritual Divinity; but the emblem now described was not used either among the Brahmans or Zoroastrians, in their worship of that element; proving again the distinct and independent origin of the worship we are now considering. But it may be asked, why should there be a multiplicity of stones arranged in a circle? Would not one suffice as an emblem of fire considered as a divinity? In answer to this question, it is to be considered that the sun has always been considered as the great repository of fire, among all the fire worshippers; and therefore it is, probably, that in this other ancient form of idolatry, he has been especially kept in view. Accordingly, in the carefully constructed circle of twelve stones, which I mentioned as existing near Poonah, it would seem that the sun, in his passage through the twelve signs of the ecliptic, is intended. It is true that the modern Hindús would probably wish to identify these stones with Siva and the eleven Rudras, but Rudra is represented in the Vedas as a form of fire. So that Siva and his eleven Rudras, the twelve Adityas of the Hindús, and the twelve *Dii Majorum Gentium* of the Romans, may all be considered as referring to the same thing. The twelve Adityas of the Brahmans are by themselves referred to the different manifestations of the sun in his passage through the ecliptic, and the circular form of Vetál's inclosures, as well as the number of stones, evidently points to the same thing.

Vetál is worshipped in sickness, and vows are made to him, which are paid on recovery. The votive offering is generally a cock, the same that the Greeks were in the habit of giving to Æsculapius, when he interposed with his sanatory powers on their behalf. The blood is presented in a vessel, and the deity is supposed to smell it, and be satisfied. The carcass is taken away, and eaten by the person who has charge of the place. No priest is required to make the oblation; the person who pays the vow, or supplicates the aid of the god, is his own priest, himself makes the prayer, slays the animal, and presents the blood. In making a vow the suppliant seats himself in a respectful manner before the god, if near enough to be able to go to his shrine, otherwise he can make the vow in

any place. Seated, he addresses the god in his own vernacular language. A prayer of this kind, which I once heard, was to this effect: "O god (naming him), thou hast been to me a good god, but now my child has fallen sick. Why hast thou afflicted my boy? Restore him, O god, and I will give thee a cock."

Another occasion of worshipping Vetál is when any one is possessed by a devil, afflicted by madness, epilepsy, any severe nervous disease, or obstinate intermittent diseases, which are all ascribed to demoniacal agency. In such a case, a person expert in discerning the marks of possession is sent for. After going through a number of magical ceremonies, and saying mantras which are kept a profound secret from the uninitiated, he determines whether Vetál or what other god has caused the disease, whether the demon has been moved by the magical incantations of any one to afflict the sick or insane person, who the magician is, if magic has been used, and how the god is to be propitiated and the demon expelled. The expiation for the afflicted person is generally a cock to Vetál. If so, some of his friends takes it to the god, and after waving it round his head, and entreating favour for the afflicted person, offers it in the way before described.

Within Vetál's circles are generally to be seen three or four large stones. These the makers of vows and offerers lift, in order to divine by their means the fate of their petitions. If these divining stones feel light, they judge that their request is granted; if heavy, a contrary inference is drawn.

Vetál, I have heard, is sometimes personified, and represented with two arms in a human figure. He is then worshipped in a temple, the same as the other village gods. This worship, however, is as different from that which we have been describing, as that of Siva in his human form with three eyes, is from that of the Lingam; and is no more to be confounded with the more ancient form of worship, than are the rites practised in the two different ways of propitiating Maheswar, to be confounded with one another.

Such, then, are the principal facts I have learned relative to this primitive worship of Vetál, and such are the views I have been led to entertain of its nature and antiquity. Other ancient Dekhan divinities may at a future period claim our attention.



*NOTE on the Worship of Vetál, with reference to DR. STEVENSON'S Paper on the Ante-Brahmanical Worship of the Dekhan. By JOHN WILSON, D.D., President of the Bombay Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society.*

THE subject to which Dr. Stevenson has turned his attention is a most important one; and I hope that he will prosecute its investigation, in which many will feel a considerable interest.

With his introductory observations most Orientalists will be disposed generally to agree. He is not disinclined to allow the following statement of the result of my own inquiries into the worship of Vetál to accompany his paper, which well deserves to be transmitted to the Parent Society. It is with the view of promoting further inquiry and discussion, to which none is more friendly than himself, that I take the liberty of submitting it.

1. The worship of Vetál is not confined to the Dekhan. It is prevalent in the Konkan, Kanara, Gujarat, and Kach, and probably in other provinces.

2. The Brahmans everywhere generally discountenance this worship; and whether it be Ante-Brahmanical or not, it is certainly Anti-Brahmanical. The Brahmans, I have found, thus account for its origin. Vetál, according to the Hindú mythology, is the chief of the Pisháchas, or fiends; and is consequently an object of popular terror. The uneducated think it right to propitiate him, which they do by erecting blocks of stones, of the kind described by Dr. Stevenson, and occasionally shedding on them the blood of a fowl, a sheep, or a goat; or, in the absence of that soothing liquid, bedaubing them with red-lead, emblematical of its colour.

3. The stones which accompany Vetál are generally set forth as the representatives of a part of the army of fiends, over whom he presides. There seems to be no regulation as to their number. I have seen it vary from three to about forty, in different places.

4. The stones surrounding Vetál have generally nothing but a white colouring upon them. The Brahmans say that it is used merely to make them conspicuous at a distance. The red *shindur* is reserved for him who is the particular object of fear.

5. Vetál, as stated by Dr. Stevenson, is seldom honoured with an image and a temple. When he *has* an image, it is generally of the rudest character. In a temple on the Malabar Hill, near Bombay, he is exhibited in the form of a man, but without arms

and legs. In the village of Aráwalí, near Sáwant Wádí, there is a large temple erected to his honour, in which he is set forth as a fierce and gigantic man, perfect in all his parts.

6. If we suppose the first worship of Vetál to have preceded the use of regular images, which, to say the least, is very questionable, it seems difficult to connect it with the twelve signs of the zodiac, which are represented by regular figures.

JOHN WILSON.