

FOLK-LORE OF NORTHERN INDIA



YAMA, GOD OF DEATH,
BORNE BY HIS MESSENGERS.

Frontispiece, Vol. II.

THE
POPULAR RELIGION
AND
FOLK-LORE
OF
NORTHERN INDIA

BY
W. CROOKE, B.A.
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CHAPTER I.

THE EVIL EYE AND THE SCARING OF GHOSTS.

Nescio quis teneros oculus mihi fascinat agnos.
Virgil, *Eclogues*, iii. 103.

ASMA 'BINT 'UMAI relates that she said, "O Prophet! the family of Ja' afar are affected by the baneful influence of the Evil Eye. May I use spells for them or not?" The Prophet said, "Yes; for if there were anything in the world which would overcome fate, it would be the Evil Eye."—Miskât, xxi.-i. Part II.

The belief in the baneful influence of the Evil Eye prevails widely.¹ According to Pliny,² it was one of the special superstitions of the people of India, and at the present day it forms an important part of the popular belief. But the investigation of its principles is far from easy. It is very closely connected with a number of kindred ideas on the subject of diabolical influence, and few natives care to speak about it except in a furtive way. In fact, it is far too serious

¹ For some of the literature of the Evil Eye see Tylor, "Early History," 134; Henderson, "Folk-lore of the Northern Counties," 187 sq.; Westropp, "Primitive Symbolism," 58 sqq.; Gregor, "Folk-lore of North-East Scotland," 8.

² "Natural History," vii. 2.

a matter to be discussed lightly. Walking about villages, you will constantly see special marks on houses, and symbols and devices of various kinds, which are certainly intended to counteract it; but hardly any one cares directly to explain the real motive, and if you ask the meaning of them, you will almost invariably be told that they are purely decorative, or that they have been made with some object which obviously conceals the real basis of the practice.

One, and perhaps the most common theory of the Evil Eye is that "when a child is born, an invisible spirit is born with it; and unless the mother keeps one breast tied up for forty days, while she feeds the child with the other (in which case the spirit dies of hunger), the child grows up with the endowment of the Evil Eye, and whenever any person so endowed looks at anything constantly, something will happen to it."¹ So, in Ireland we are told that "the gift comes by Nature and is born with one, though it may not be called into exercise unless circumstances arise to excite the power; then it comes to act like a spirit of bitter and malicious envy that radiates a poisonous atmosphere, which chills and blights everything within its reach."²

In Bombay the "blast of the Evil Eye is supposed to be a form of spirit possession. In Western India all witches and wizards are said to be, as a rule, evil-eyed. Of the rest, those persons only who are born under certain circumstances are believed to be evil-eyed. The circumstances are as follows:—Among the Hindus it is believed that when a woman is pregnant, she begins to conceive peculiar longings from the day of conception, or from the fifth month. They consist in eating various fruits and sweetmeats, in walking under deep shades, or in gardens where brooks gurggle, or in putting on rich clothes or ornaments, and in many other like things. If in the case of any woman these desires are not gratified, the child whom she gives birth to becomes weak and voracious, and is said to have an Evil Eye. If

¹ Ibbetson, "Panjâb Ethnography," 117.

² Lady Wilde, "Legends," 24.

such a person sees a man or woman eat anything which he feels a longing for, the eater either vomits what he or she has eaten, or falls sick. By some it is believed that if a person come from without at the time of dinner, and enters the house without washing his feet, the man who is eating becomes sick or vomits the food he has eaten, or does not feel longing for food for some time, until the blast of the Evil Eye is warded off." Mr. Campbell explains this on the principle that "as he comes from places where three or four roads meet, and which are spirit haunts, an evil spirit accompanies him without entering his body, from the place of its residence by which he has passed. If he washes his feet, the spirit goes back; but if he enters the house with spirit-laden feet, the spirit enters the house with him, and affects any one of the persons eating."¹

The real fact seems to be that in most cases the Evil Eye is the result of covetousness.² Thus, a man blind of an eye, no matter how well-disposed he may be, is almost certain to envy a person blessed with a peculiarly good pair of eyes. But if the blind man's attention be distracted by something conspicuous in the appearance of the other, such as lamp-black on his eyelids, a mole, or a scar, the feeling of dissatisfaction, which is fatal to the complete effect of the envious glance, is certain to arise. This theory that the glance may be neutralized or avoided by some blot or imperfection is the basis of many of the popular remedies or prophylactics invented with the object of averting its influence.

Hence comes the device of making an intentional blot in anything one values, so that the glance of the Evil Eye may be deprived of its complete satisfaction. Thus, most people put lampblack on the eyes of their children as a protection against fascination, because black is a colour hateful to evil spirits; it has the additional advantage of protecting the eye from the fierce heat of the Indian summer. Women when delivery approaches often mark themselves with black

¹ Campbell, "Notes," 207.

² On this see valuable notes by W. Cockburn in "Panjâb Notes and Queries," i. 14.