

Omens and Superstitions of Southern India



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Cover image: Egyptian vultures fed by temple priests at Thirukalukundram, India. Photograph by Edgar Thurston. 1906.

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Malayan exorcist with fowl in his mouth.
(See p. [246](#).) Frontispiece.

Preface

This book deals mainly with some aspects of what may be termed the psychical life of the inhabitants of the Madras Presidency, and the Native States of Travancore and Cochin. In my "Ethnographic Notes in Southern India" (1906), I stated that the confused chapter devoted to omens, animal superstitions, evil eye, charms, sorcery, etc., was a mere outline sketch of a group of subjects, which, if worked up, would furnish material for a volume. This chapter has now been remodelled, and supplemented by notes collected since its publication, and information which lies buried in the seven bulky volumes of my encyclopædic "Castes and Tribes of Southern India" (1909). The area dealt with (roughly, 182,000 square miles, with a population of 47,800,000) is so vast that I have had perforce to supplement the personal knowledge acquired in the course of wandering expeditions in various parts of Southern India, and in other ways, by recourse to the considerable mass of information, which is hidden away in official reports, gazetteers, journals of societies, books, *etc.*

To the many friends and correspondents, European and Indian, who have helped me in the accumulation of facts, and those whose writings I have made liberal use of, I would once more express collectively, and with all sincerity, my great sense of indebtedness. My thanks are due to Mr L. K. Anantha Krishna Iyer for supplying me with the illustrations of Malabar yantrams.

Omens and Superstitions of Southern India

I

Omens

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In seeking for omens, Natives consult the so-called science of omens or science of the five birds, and are guided by them. Selected omens are always included in native calendars or panchāngams.

To the quivering and throbbing of various parts of the body as omens, repeated reference is made in the Hindu classics. Thus, in Kalidāsa's Sakuntala, King Dushyanta says: "This hermitage is tranquil, and yet my arm throbs. Whence can there be any result from this in such a place? But yet the gates of destiny are everywhere." Again, Sakuntala says: "Alas! why does my right eye throb?" to which Gautami replies: "Child, the evil be averted. May the tutelary deities of your husband's family confer happy prospects!" In the Raghuvamsa, the statement occurs that "the son of Paulastya, being greatly incensed, drove an arrow deep into his right arm, which was throbbing, and which, therefore, prognosticated his union with Sīta." A quivering sensation in the right arm is supposed to indicate marriage with a beautiful woman; in the right eye some good luck.

During a marriage among the Telugu Tottiyans, who have settled in the Tamil country, a red ram without blemish is sacrificed. It is first sprinkled with water, and, if it shivers, this is considered a good omen. It is recorded,[1](#) in

connection with the legends of the Badagas of the Nīlgiris, that “in the heart of the Banagudi shola (grove), not far from the Doddūru group of cromlechs, is an odd little shrine to Karairāya, within which are a tiny cromlech, some sacred water-worn stones, and sundry little pottery images representing a tiger, a mounted man, and some dogs. These keep in memory, it is said, a Badaga who was slain in combat with a tiger; and annually a festival is held, at which new images are placed there, and vows are paid. A Kurumba (jungle tribe) makes fire by friction, and burns incense, throws sanctified water over the numerous goats brought to be sacrificed, to see if they will shiver in the manner always held necessary in sacrificed victims, and then slays, one after the other, those which have shown themselves duly qualified.”

In many villages, during the festival to the village deity, water is poured over a sheep’s back, and it is accepted as a good sign if it shivers. “When the people are economical, they keep on pouring water till it does shiver, to avoid the expense of providing a second victim for sacrifice. But, where they are more scrupulous, if it does not shiver, it is taken as a sign that the goddess will not accept it, and it is taken away.”²

Before the thieving Koravas set out on a predatory expedition, a goat is decorated, and taken to a shrine. It is then placed before the idol, which is asked whether the expedition will be successful. If the body of the animal quivers, it is regarded as an answer in the affirmative; if it does not, the expedition is abandoned.

If, in addition to quivering, the animal urinates, no better sign could be looked for. Thieves though they are, the Koravas make it a point of honour to pay for the goat used in the ceremony. It is said that, in seeking omens from the quivering of an animal, a very liberal interpretation is put on the slightest movement. It is recorded by Bishop Whitehead³ that, when an animal has been sacrificed to the

goddess Nukalamma at Coconada, its head is put before the shrine, and water poured on it. If the mouth opens, it is accepted as a sign that the sacrifice is accepted.

At the death ceremonies of the Idaiyans of Coimbatore, a cock is tied to a sacrificial post, to which rice is offered. One end of a thread is tied to the post, and the other end to a new cloth. The thread is watched till it shakes, and then broken. The cock is then killed.

Of omens, both good and bad, in Malabar, the following comprehensive list is given by Mr Logan⁴:—

“Good.—Crows, pigeons, etc., and beasts as deer, etc., moving from left to right, and dogs and jackals moving inversely, and other beasts found similarly and singly; wild crow, ruddy goose, mungoose, goat, and peacock seen singly or in couples either at the right or left. A rainbow seen on the right and left, or behind, prognosticates good, but the reverse if seen in front. Buttermilk, raw rice, puttalpira (*Trichosanthes anguina*, snake-gourd), priyangu flower, honey, ghī (clarified butter); red cotton juice, antimony sulphurate, metal mug, bell ringing, lamp, lotus, karuka grass, raw fish, flesh, flour, ripe fruits, sweetmeats, gems, sandalwood, elephants, pots filled with water, a virgin, a couple of Brāhmans, Rājas, respectable men, white flower, white yak tail,⁵ white cloth, and white horse. Chank shell (*Turbinella rapa*), flagstaff, turban, triumphal arch, fruitful soil, burning fire, elegant eatables or drinkables, carts with men in, cows with their young, mares, bulls or cows with ropes tied to their necks, palanquin, swans, peacock and crane warbling sweetly. Bracelets, looking-glass, mustard, bezoar, any substance of white colour, the bellowing of oxen, auspicious words, harmonious human voice, such sounds made by birds or beasts, the uplifting of umbrellas, hailing exclamations, sound of harp, flute, timbrel, tabor, and other instruments of music, sounds of hymns of consecration and Vēdic recitations, gentle breeze all round at the time of a journey.

“Bad.—Men deprived of their limbs, lame or blind, a corpse or wearer of a cloth put on a corpse, coir (cocoanut fibre), broken vessels, hearing of words expressive of breaking, burning, destroying, etc.; the alarming cry of alas! alas! loud screams, cursing, trembling, sneezing, the sight of a man in sorrow, one with a stick, a barber, a widow, pepper, and other pungent substances. A snake, cat, iguana (*Varanus*), blood-sucker (lizard), or monkey passing across the road, vociferous beasts such as jackals, dogs, and kites, loud crying from the east, buffalo, donkey, or temple bull, black grains, salt, liquor, hide, grass, dirt, faggots, iron, flowers used for funeral ceremonies, a eunuch, ruffian, outcaste, vomit, excrement, stench, any horrible figure, bamboo, cotton, lead, cot, stool or other vehicle carried with legs upward, dishes, cups, etc., with mouth downwards, vessels filled with live coals, which are broken and not burning, broomstick, ashes, winnow, hatchet.”

In the category of good omens among the Nāyars of Travancore, are placed the elephant, a pot full of water, sweetmeats, fruit, fish, and flesh, images of gods, kings, a cow with its calf, married women, tied bullocks, gold lamps, ghī, and milk. In the list of bad omens come a donkey, broom, buffalo, untied bullock, barber, widow, patient, cat, washerman. The worst of all omens is to allow a cat to cross one's path. An odd number of Nāyars, and an even number of Brāhmans, are good omens, the reverse being particularly bad. On the Vinayakachaturthi day in the month of Avani, no man is allowed to look at the rising moon, on penalty of incurring unmerited obloquy.

By the Pulayas of Travancore, it is considered lucky to see another Pulaya, a Native Christian, an Izhuva with a vessel in the hand, a cow behind, or a boat containing sacks of rice. On the other hand, it is regarded as a very bad omen to be crossed by a cat, to see a fight between animals, a person with a bundle of clothes, or to meet people carrying steel instruments.

It is a good omen for the day if, when he gets up in the morning, a man sees any of the following:—his wife's face, the lines on the palm of his right hand, his face in a mirror, the face of a rich man, the tail of a black cow, the face of a black monkey, or his rice fields. There is a legend that Sīta used to rise early, and present herself, bathed and well dressed, before her lord Rāma, so that he might gaze on her face, and be lucky during the day. This custom is carried out by all good housewives in Hindu families. A fair skinned Paraiyan, or a dark skinned Brāhman, should not, in accordance with a proverb, be seen the first thing in the morning.

Hindus are very particular about catching sight of some auspicious object on the morning of New Year's Day, as the effects of omens seen on that occasion are believed to last throughout the year. Of the Vishu festival, held in celebration of the New Year in Malabar, the following account is given by Mr Gopal Panikkar.[6](#)

“Being the commencement of a new year, native superstition surrounds it with a peculiarly solemn importance. It is believed that a man's whole prosperity in life depends upon the nature, auspicious or otherwise, of the first things that he happens to fix his eyes upon on this particular morning. According to Nair, and even general Hindu mythology, there are certain objects which possess an inherent inauspicious character. For instance, ashes, firewood, oil, and a lot of similar objects, are inauspicious ones, which will render him who chances to notice them first fare badly in life for the whole year, and their obnoxious effects will be removed only on his seeing holy things, such as reigning princes, oxen, cows, gold, and such like, on the morning of the next new year. The effects of the sight of these various materials are said to apply even to the attainment of objects by a man starting on a special errand, who happens for the first time to look at them after starting. However, with this view, almost every family religiously

takes care to prepare the most sightworthy objects on the new year morning. Therefore, on the previous night, they prepare what is known as a kani. A small circular bell-metal vessel is taken, and some holy objects are arranged inside it. A grandha or old book made of palmyra leaves, a gold ornament, a new-washed cloth, some 'unprofitably gay' flowers of the konna tree (*Cassia Fistula*), a measure of rice, a so-called looking-glass made of bell-metal, and a few other things, are all tastefully arranged in the vessel, and placed in a prominent room inside the house. On either side of this vessel, two brass or bell-metal lamps, filled with cocoanut oil clear as diamond sparks, are kept burning, and a small plank of wood, or some other seat, is placed in front of it. At about five o'clock in the morning of the day, some one who has got up first wakes the inmates, both male and female, of the house, and takes them blindfolded, so that they may not gaze at anything else, to the seat near the kani. The members are seated, one after another, in the seat, and are then, and not till then, asked to open their eyes, and carefully look at the kani. Then each is made to look at some venerable member of the house, or sometimes a stranger even. This over, the little playful urchins of the house fire small crackers which they have bought for the occasion. The kani is then taken round the place from house to house, for the benefit of the poor families, which cannot afford to prepare such a costly adornment."

I gather further, in connection with the Vishu festival, that it is the duty of every devout Hindu to see the village deity the first of all things in the morning. For this purpose, many sleep within the temple precincts, and those who sleep in their own houses are escorted thither by those who have been the first to make their obeisance. Many go to see the image with their eyes shut, and sometimes bound with a cloth.[7](#)

If a person places the head towards the east when sleeping, he will obtain wealth and health; if towards the

south, a lengthening of life; if towards the west, fame; if towards the north, sickness. The last position, therefore, should be avoided.⁸ In the Telugu country, when a child is roused from sleep by a thunderclap, the mother, pressing it to her breast, murmurs, “Arjuna Sahādēva.” The invocation implies the idea that thunder is caused by the Mahābhārata heroes, Arjuna and Sahādēva.⁹ To dream of a temple car in motion, foretells the death of a near relative. Night, but not day dreams, are considered as omens for good or evil. Among those which are auspicious, may be mentioned riding on a cow, bull, or elephant, entering a temple or palace, a golden horse, climbing a mountain or tree, drinking liquor, eating flesh, curds and rice, wearing white cloths, or jewelry set with precious stones, being dressed in white cloths, and embracing a woman, whose body is smeared with sandal paste. A person will be cured of sickness if he dreams of Braāhmans, kings, flowers, jewels, women, or a looking-glass. Wealth is ensured by a dream that one is bitten in the shade by a snake, or stung by a scorpion. One who dreams that he has been bitten by a snake is considered to be proof against snake-bite; and if he dreams of a cobra, his wife or some near relative is believed to have conceived. Hindu wives believe that to tell their husband’s name, or pronounce it even in a dream, would bring him to an untimely end. If a person has an auspicious dream, he should get up and not go to sleep again. But, if the dream is of evil omen, he should pray that he may be spared from its ill effects, and may go to sleep again.

The arrival of a guest is foreshadowed by the hissing noise of the oven, the slipping of a winnow during winnowing, or of a measure when measuring rice. If one dines with a friend or relation on Monday, Wednesday, Friday, or Saturday, it is well; if on a Tuesday, ill-feeling will ensue; if on a Thursday, endless enmity; if on a Sunday, hatred. While eating, one should face east, west, south, or north, according as one wishes for long life, fame, to

become vainglorious, or for justice or truth. Evil is foreshadowed if a light goes out during meals, or while some auspicious thing, such, for example, as a marriage, is being discussed. A feast given to the jungle Paliyans by some missionaries was marred at the outset by the unfortunate circumstance that betel and tobacco were placed by the side of the food, these articles being of evil omen as they are placed in the grave with the dead. Chewing a single areca nut, along with betel leaf secures vigour, two nuts are inauspicious, three are excellent, and more bring indifferent luck. The basal portion of the betel leaf must be rejected, as it produces disease; the apical part, as it induces sin; and the midrib and veins, as they destroy the intellect. A leaf on which chunam (lime) has been kept, should be avoided, as it may shorten life.

Before the Koyis shift their quarters, they consult the omens, to see whether the change will be auspicious or not. Sometimes the hatching of a clutch of eggs provides the answer, or four grains of four kinds of seed, representing the prosperity of men, cattle, sheep, and land, are put on a heap of ashes under a man's bed. Any movement among them during the night is a bad omen.[10](#)

When a Kondh starts on a shooting expedition, if he first meets an adult female, married or unmarried, he will return home, and ask a child to tell the females to keep out of the way. He will then make a fresh start, and, if he meets a female, will wave his hand to her as a sign that she must keep clear of him. The Kondh believes that, if he sees a female, he will not come across animals in the jungle to shoot. If a woman is in her menses, her husband, brothers, and sons living under the same roof, will not go out shooting for the same reason.

It is noted by Mr F. Fawcett[11](#) that it is considered unlucky by the Koravas, when starting on a dacoity or housebreaking, "to see widows, pots of milk, dogs urinating, a man leading a bull, or a bull bellowing. On the other hand,

it is downright lucky when a bull bellows at the scene of the criminal operation. To see a man goading a bull is a good omen when starting, and a bad one at the scene. The eighteenth day of the Tamil month, Avani, is the luckiest day of all for committing crimes. A successful criminal exploit on this day ensures good luck throughout the year. Sundays, which are auspicious for weddings, are inauspicious for crimes. Mondays, Wednesdays, and Saturdays are unlucky until noon for starting out from home. So, too, is the day after new moon." Fridays are unsuitable for breaking into the houses of Brāhmans or Kōmatis, as they may be engaged in worshipping Ankalamma, to whom the day is sacred.

Some Bōyas in the Bellary district enjoy inām (rent free) lands, in return for propitiating the village goddesses by a rite called bhūta bali, which is intended to secure the prosperity of the village. The Bōya priest gets himself shaved at about midnight, sacrifices a sheep or buffalo, mixes its blood with rice, and distributes the rice thus prepared in small balls throughout the village. When he starts on this business, all the villagers bolt their doors, as it is not considered auspicious to see him then.

When a student starts for the examination hall, he will, if he sees a widow or a Brāhman, retrace his steps, and start again after the lapse of a few minutes. Meeting two Brāhmans would indicate good luck, and he would proceed on his way full of hope.

If, when a person is leaving his house, the head or feet strike accidentally against the threshold, he should not go out, as it forebodes some impending mischief. Sometimes, when a person returns home from a distance, especially at night, he is kept standing at the door, and, after he has washed his hands and feet, an elderly female or servant of the house brings a shallow plate full of water mixed with lime juice and chunam (lime), with some chillies and pieces of charcoal floating on it. The plate is carried three times

round the person, and the contents are then thrown into the street without being seen by the man. He then enters the house. If a person knocks at the door of a house in the night once, twice, or thrice, it will not be opened. If the knock is repeated a fourth time, the door will be opened without fear, for the evil spirit is said to knock only thrice.

A tickling sensation in the sole of the right foot foretells that the person has to go on a journey. The omens are favourable if any of the following are met with by one who is starting on a journey, or special errand:—

- Married woman.
- Virgin.
- Prostitute.
- Two Brāhmans.
- Playing of music.
- One carrying musical instruments.
- Money.
- Fruit or flowers.
- A light, or clear blazing fire.
- Umbrella.
- Cooked food.
- Milk or curds.
- Cow.
- Deer.
- Corpse.
- Two fishes.
- Recital of Vēdas.
- Sound of drum or horn.
- Spirituous liquor.
- Bullock.
- Mutton.
- Precious stones.
- One bearing a silver armlet.
- Sandalwood.
- Rice.
- Elephant.
- Horse.
- Pot full of water.
- Married woman carrying a water-pot from a tank.
- Pot of toddy.
- Black monkey.
- Dog.
- Royal eagle.
- Parrot.
- Honey.
- Hearing kind words.
- A Gāzula Baliya with his pile of bangles on his back.

If, on similar occasions, a person comes across any of the following, the omens are unfavourable:—

- Widow.
- Lightning.
- Fuel.
- Smoky fire.
- Hare.
- Crow flying from right to left.
- Snake.
- New pot.
- Blind man.
- Lame man.
- Sick man.
- Salt.
- Tiger.
- Pot of oil.
- Leather.
- Dog barking on a housetop.
- Bundle of sticks.
- Buttermilk.
- Empty vessel.
- A quarrel.
- Man with dishevelled hair.
- Oilman.
- Leper.
- Mendicant.

Sometimes people leave their house, and sleep elsewhere on the night preceding an inauspicious day, on which a journey is to be made. Unlucky days for starting on a journey are vāra-sūlai, or days on which Siva's trident (sūla) is kept on the ground. The direction in which it lies, varies according to the day of the week. For example, Sunday before noon is a bad time to start towards the west, as the trident is turned that way. It is said to be unlucky to go westward on Friday or Sunday, eastward on Monday or Saturday, north on Tuesday or Wednesday, south on Thursday. A journey begun on Tuesday is liable to result in loss by thieves or fire at home. Loss, too, is likely to follow a journey begun on Saturday, and sickness a start on Sunday. Wednesday and Friday are both propitious days, and a journey begun on either with a view to business will be lucrative. The worst days for travelling are Tuesday, Saturday, and Sunday.¹² On more than one occasion, a subordinate in my office overstayed his leave on the ground

that his guru (spiritual preceptor) told him that the day on which he should have returned was an unlucky one for a journey.

If a traveller sees a hare on his way, he may be sure that he will not succeed in the object of his journey. If, however, the hare touches him, and he does not at once turn back and go home, he is certain to meet with a great misfortune. There is an authority for this superstition in the Rāmāyana. After Rāma had recovered Sīta and returned to Ayodha, he was informed that, whilst a washerman and his wife were quarrelling, the former had exclaimed that he was not such a fool as the king had been to take back his wife after she had been carried away by a stranger. Rāma thought this over, and resolved to send his wife into the forest. His brother, Lutchmana, was to drive her there, and then to leave her alone. On their way they met a hare, and Sīta, who was ignorant of the purpose of the journey, begged Lutchmana to return, as the omen was a bad one.¹³

If a dog scratches its body, a traveller will fall ill; if it lies down and wags its tail, some disaster will follow. To one proceeding on a journey, a dog crossing the path from right to left is auspicious. But, if it gets on his person or his feet, shaking its ears, the journey will be unlucky.

A person should postpone an errand on which he is starting, if he sees a cobra or rat-snake. In a recent judicial case, a witness gave evidence to the effect that he was starting on a journey, and when he had proceeded a short way, a snake crossed the road. This being an evil omen, he went back and put off his journey till the following day. On his way he passed through a village in which some men had been arrested for murder, and found that one of two men, whom he had promised to accompany and had gone on without him, had been murdered.

Sneezing once is a good sign; twice, a bad sign. When a child sneezes, those near it usually say “dirgāyus” (long life), or “sathāyus” (a hundred years). The rishi or sage

Markandēya, who was remarkable for his austerities and great age, is also known as Dirgāyus. Adults who sneeze pronounce the name of some god, the common expression being “Srimadrangam.” When a Badaga baby is born, it is a good omen if the father sneezes before the umbilical cord has been cut, and an evil one if he sneezes after its severance. In the Teluga country it is believed that a child who sneezes on a winnowing fan, or on the door-frame, will meet with misfortune unless balls of boiled rice are thrown over it; and a man who sneezes during his meal, especially at night, will also be unlucky unless water is sprinkled over his face, and he is made to pronounce his own name, and that of his birthplace and his patron deity.[14](#)

Gaping is an indication that evil spirits have effected an entrance into the body. Hence many Brāhmans, when they gape, snap their fingers as a preventive.[15](#) When a great man yawns, his sleep is promoted by all the company with him snapping their fingers with great vehemence, and making a singular noise. It was noted by Alberuni[16](#) that Hindus “spit out and blow their noses without any respect for the elder ones present, and crack their lice before them. They consider the *crepitus ventris* as a good omen, sneezing as a bad omen.” In Travancore, a courtier must cover the mouth with the right hand, lest his breath should pollute the king or other superior. Also, at the temples, a low-caste man must wear a bandage over his nose and mouth, so that his breath may not pollute the idols.[17](#) A Kudumi woman in Travancore, at the menstrual period, should stand at a distance of seven feet, closing her mouth and nostrils with the palm of her hand, as her breath would have a contaminating effect. Her shadow, too, should not fall on any one.

A Kumbāra potter, when engaged in the manufacture of the pot or household deity for the Kurubas, should cover his mouth with a bandage, so that his breath may not defile it. The Koragas of South Canara are said to be regarded with

such intense loathing that, up to quite recent times, one section of them called Ande or pot Kurubas, continually wore a pot suspended from their necks, into which they were compelled to spit, being so utterly unclean as to be prohibited from even spitting on the highway.¹⁸ In a note on the Paraiyans (Pariahs), Sonnerat, writing in the eighteenth century,¹⁹ says that, when drinking, they put the cup to their lips, and their fingers to their mouths, in such a way that they are defiled with the spittle. A Brāhman may take snuff, but he should not smoke a cheroot or cigar. When once the cheroot has touched his lips, it is defiled by the saliva, and, therefore, cannot be returned to his mouth.²⁰

At the festivals of the village deities in the Telugu country, an unmarried Mādiga (Telugu Pariah) woman, called Mātangi²¹ (the name of a favourite goddess) spits upon the people assembled, and touches them with her stick. Her touch and saliva are believed to purge all uncleanness of body and soul, and are said to be invited by men who would ordinarily scorn to approach her. At a festival called Kathiru in honour of a village goddess in the Cochin State, the Pulayans (agrestic slaves) go in procession to the temple, and scatter packets of palm-leaves containing handfuls of paddy (unhusked rice) rolled up in straw among the crowds of spectators along the route. "The spectators, both young and old, scramble to obtain as many of the packets as possible, and carry them home. They are then hung in front of the houses, for it is believed that their presence will help to promote the prosperity of the family, until the festival comes round again next year. The greater the number of trophies obtained for a family by its members, the greater, it is believed, will be the prosperity of the family."²²

In a note on the Kulwādis or Chalavādis of the Hassan district in Mysore, Captain J. S. F. Mackenzie writes²³ as follows:—

"Every village has its Holigiri—as the quarters inhabited by the Holiars (formerly agrestic serfs) is called—outside the

village boundary hedge. This, I thought, was because they are considered an impure race, whose touch carries defilement with it. Such is the reason generally given by the Brāhman, who refuses to receive anything directly from the hands of a Holiar, and yet the Brāhmans consider great luck will wait upon them if they can manage to pass through the Holigiri without being molested. To this the Holiars have a strong objection, and, should a Brāhman attempt to enter their quarters, they turn out in a body and slipper him, in former times it is said to death. Members of the other castes may come as far as the door, but they must not enter the house, for that would bring the Holiar bad luck. If, by chance, a person happens to get in, the owner takes care to tear the intruder's cloth, tie up some salt in one corner of it, and turn him out. This is supposed to neutralise all the good luck which might have accrued to the trespasser, and avert any evil which might have befallen the owner of the house."

The Telugu Tottiyans, who have settled in the Tamil country, are said by Mr F. R. Hemingway not to recognise the superiority of Brāhmans. They are supposed to possess unholy powers, especially the Nalla (black) Gollas, and are much dreaded by their neighbours. They do not allow any stranger to enter their villages with shoes on, or on horseback, or holding up an umbrella, lest their god should be offended. It is believed that, if any one breaks this rule, he will be visited with illness or some other punishment.

I am informed by Mr S. P. Rice that, when smallpox breaks out in a Hindu house, it is a popular belief that to allow strangers or unclean persons to go into the house, to observe festivals, and even to permit persons who have combed their hair, bathed in oil, or had a shave, to see the patient, would arouse the anger of the goddess, and bring certain death to the sick person. Strangers, and young married women are not admitted to, and may not approach the house, as they may have had sexual intercourse on the previous day.

It is believed that the sight or breath of Muhammadans, just after they have said their prayers at a mosque, will do good to children suffering from various disorders. For this purpose, women carry or take their children, and post themselves at the entrance to a mosque at the time when worshippers leave it. Most of them are Hindus, but sometimes poor Eurasians may be seen there. I once received a pathetic appeal from a Eurasian woman in Malabar, imploring me to lay my hands on the head of her sick child, so that its life might be spared.

In teaching the Grāndha alphabet to children, they are made to repeat the letter “ca” twice quickly without pausing, as the word “ca” means “die.” In Malabar, the instruction of a Tiyan child in the alphabet is said by Mr F. Fawcett to begin on the last day of the Dasara festival in the fifth year of its life. A teacher, who has been selected with care, or a lucky person, holds the child’s right hand, and makes it trace the letters of the Malayālam alphabet in rice spread on a plate. The forefinger, which is the one used in offering water to the souls of the dead, and in other parts of the death ceremonies, must not be used for tracing the letters, but is placed above the middle finger, merely to steady it. For the same reason, a doctor, when making a pill, will not use the forefinger. To mention the number seven in Telugu is unlucky, because the word (yēdu) is the same as that for weeping. Even a treasury officer, who is an enlightened university graduate, in counting money, will say six and one. The number seven is, for the same reason, considered unlucky by the Koravas, and a housebreaking expedition should not consist of seven men. Should this, however, be unavoidable, a fiction is indulged in of making the housebreaking implement the eighth member of the gang.²⁴ In Tamil the word ten is considered inauspicious, because, on the tenth day after the death of her husband, a widow removes the emblems of married life. Probably for this reason, the offspring of Kallan polyandrous marriages

style themselves the children of eight and two, not ten fathers. Lābha is a Sanskrit word meaning profit or gain, and has its equivalent in all the vernacular languages. Hindus, when counting, commence with this word instead of the word signifying one. In like manner, Muhammadans use the word Bismillah or Burketh, apparently as an invocation like the medicinal Rx (Oh! Jupiter, aid us). When the number a hundred has been counted, they again begin with the substitute for one, and this serves as a one for the person who is keeping the tally. Oriya merchants say labho (gain) instead of eko (one), when counting out the seers of rice for the elephants' rations. The people of the Oriya Zemindaris often use, not the year of the Hindu cycle or Muhammadan era, but the year of the reigning Rāja of Puri. The first year of the reign is called, not one, but labho. The counting then proceeds in the ordinary course, but, with the exception of the number ten, all numbers ending with seven or nothing are omitted. This is called the onko. Thus, if a Rāja has reigned two and a half years, he would be said to be in the twenty-fifth onko, seven, seventeen and twenty being omitted.[25](#) For chewing betel, two other ingredients are necessary, viz., areca nuts and chunam (lime). For some reason, Tamil Vaishnavas object to mentioning the last by name, and call it moonavadu, or the third.

At a Brāhman funeral, the sons and nephews of the deceased go round the corpse, and untie their kudumi (hair knot), leaving part thereof loose, tie up the rest into a small bunch, and slap their thighs. Consequently, when children at play have their kudumi partially tied, and slap their thighs, they are invariably scolded owing to the association with funerals. Among all Hindu classes it is considered as an insult to the god to bathe or wash the feet on returning home from worship at a temple, and, by so doing, the punyam (good) would be lost. Moreover, washing the feet at the entrance to a home is connected with funerals, inasmuch as, on the return from the burning-ground, a

mourner may not enter the house until he has washed his feet. The Badagas of the Nīlgiris hold an agricultural festival called devvē, which should on no account be pronounced duvvē, which means burning-ground.

A bazaar shop-keeper who deals in colours will not sell white paint after the lamps have been lighted. In like manner, a cloth-dealer refuses to sell black cloth, and the dealer in hardware to sell nails, needles, etc., lest poverty should ensue. Digging operations with a spade should be stopped before the lamps are lighted. A betel-vine cultivator objects to entering his garden or plucking a leaf after the lighting of the lamps; but, if some leaves are urgently required, he will, before plucking them, pour water from a pot at the foot of the tree on which the vine is growing.

Arrack (liquor) vendors consider it unlucky to set their measures upside down. Some time ago, the Excise Commissioner informs me, the Madras Excise Department had some aluminium measures made for measuring arrack in liquor shops. It was found that the arrack corroded the aluminium, and the measures soon leaked. The shop-keepers were told to turn their measures upside down, in order that they might drain. This they refused to do, as it would bring bad luck to their shops. New measures with round bottoms, which would not stand up, were evolved. But the shop-keepers began to use rings of indiarubber from soda-water bottles, to make them stand. An endeavour was then made to induce them to keep their measures inverted by hanging them on pegs, so that they would drain without being turned upside down. The case illustrates how important a knowledge of the superstitions of the people is in the administration of their affairs. Even so trifling an innovation as the introduction of a new arrangement for maintaining tension in the warp during the process of weaving gave rise a few years ago to a strike among the hand-loom weavers at the Madras School of Arts.

When a Paidi (agriculturists and weavers in Ganjam) is seriously ill, a male or female sorcerer (bejjo or bejjano) is consulted. A square divided into sixteen compartments is drawn on the floor with rice flour. In each compartment are placed a leaf-cup of *Butea frondosa*, a quarter-anna piece, and some food. Seven small bows and arrows are set up in front thereof in two lines. On one side of the square, a big cup filled with food is placed. A fowl is sacrificed, and its blood poured thrice round this cup. Then, placing water in a vessel near the cup, the sorcerer or sorceress throws into it a grain of rice, giving out at the same time the name of some god or goddess. If the rice sinks, it is believed that the illness is caused by the anger of the deity, whose name has been mentioned. If the rice floats, the names of various deities are called out, until a grain sinks. When selecting a site for a new dwelling hut, the Māliah Savaras place on the proposed site as many grains of rice in pairs as there are married members in the family, and cover them over with a cocoanut shell. They are examined on the following day, and, if they are all there, the site is considered auspicious. Among the Kāpu Savaras, the grains of rice are folded up in leaflets of the bael tree (*Ægle Marmelos*), and placed in a split bamboo.

It is recorded by Gloyer²⁶ that “when a Dōmb (Vizagapatam hill tribe) house has to be built, the first thing is to select a favourable spot, to which few evil spirits (dūmas) resort. At this spot they put, in several places, three grains of rice arranged in such a way that the two lower grains support the upper one. To protect the grains, they pile up stones round them, and the whole is lightly covered with earth. When, after some time, they find on inspection that the upper grain has fallen off, the spot is regarded as unlucky, and must not be used. If the position of the grains remains unchanged, the omen is regarded as auspicious. They drive in the first post, which must have a certain length, say of five, seven, or nine ells, the ell being

measured from the tip of the middle finger to the elbow. The post is covered on the top with rice straw, leaves, and shrubs, so that birds may not foul it, which would be an evil omen."

In Madras, a story is current with reference to the statue of Sir Thomas Munro, that he seized upon all the rice depôts, and starved the people by selling rice in egg-shells, at one shell for a rupee. To punish him, the Government erected the statue in an open place without a canopy, so that the birds of the air might insult him by polluting his face. In the Bellary district, the names Munrol and Munrolappa are common, and are given in hope that the boy may attain the same celebrity as the former Governor of Madras. (I once came across a Telugu cultivator, who rejoiced in the name of Curzon). One of Sir Thomas Munro's good qualities was that, like Rāma and Rob Roy, his arms reached to his knees, or, in other words, he possessed the quality of an Ajanubahu, which is the heritage of kings, or those who have blue blood in them.

In a case of dispute between two Koravas,²⁷ "the decision is sometimes arrived at by means of an ordeal. An equal quantity of rice is placed in two pots of equal weight, having the same quantity of water, and there is an equal quantity of firewood. The judges satisfy themselves most carefully as to quantity, weights, and so on. The water is boiled, and the man whose rice boils first is declared to be the winner of the dispute. The loser has to recoup the winner all his expenses. It sometimes happens that both pots boil at the same time; then a coin is to be picked out of a pot containing boiling oil."

At one of the religious ceremonies of the Koravas, offerings of boiled rice (pongal) are made to the deity, Polēramma, by fasting women. The manner in which the boiling food bubbles over from the cooking-pot is eagerly watched, and accepted as an omen for good or evil. A festival called Pongal is observed by Hindus on the first day

of the Tamil month Tai, and derives its name from the fact that rice boiled in milk is offered to propitiate the Sun God.

Before the ceremony of walking through fire²⁸ (burning embers) at Nidugala on the Nīlgiris, the omens are taken by boiling two pots of milk, side by side, on two hearths. If the milk overflows uniformly on all sides, the crops will be abundant for all the villages. But, if it flows over on one side only, there will be plentiful crops for villages on that side only. For boiling the milk, a light obtained by friction must be used. After the milk-boiling ceremonial, the pūjāri (priest), tying bells on his legs, approaches the fire-pit, carrying milk freshly drawn from a cow, which has calved for the first time, and flowers of *Rhododendron*, *Leucas*, or jasmine. After doing pūja (worship), he throws the flowers on the embers, and they should remain unscorched for a few seconds. He then pours some of the milk over the embers, and no hissing sound should be produced. The omens being propitious, he walks over the glowing embers, followed by a Udaya²⁹ and the crowd of celebrants, who, before going through the ordeal, count the hairs on their feet. If any are singed, it is a sign of approaching ill-fortune, or even death.

It is recorded by the Rev. J. Cain³⁰ that, when the Koyis of the Godāvari district determine to appease the goddess of smallpox or cholera, they erect a pandal (booth) outside their village under a nīm tree (*Melia Azadirachta*). They make the image of a woman with earth from a white-ant hill, tie a cloth or two round it, hang a few peacock's feathers round its neck, and place it under the pandal on a three-legged stool made from the wood of the silk-cotton tree (*Cochlospermum Gossypium*). They then bring forward a chicken, and try to persuade it to eat some of the grains which they have thrown before the image, requesting the goddess to inform them whether she will leave their village or not. If the chicken picks up some of the grains, they regard it as a most favourable omen; but, if not, their hearts are filled with dread of the continued anger of the goddess.

At the Bhūdēvi Panduga, or festival of the earth goddess, according to Mr F. R. Hemingway, the Koyis set up a stone beneath a *Terminalia tomentosa* tree, which is thus dedicated to the goddess Kodalamma. Each worshipper brings a cock to the priest, who holds it over grains of rice, which have been sprinkled before the goddess. If the bird pecks at the rice, good luck is ensured for the coming year, whilst, if perchance the bird pecks three times, the offerer of that particular bird can scarcely contain himself for joy. If the bird declines to touch the grains, ill-luck is sure to visit the owner's house during the ensuing year.

Concerning a boundary oath in the Mulkangiri tāluk of Vizagapatam, Mr C. A. Henderson writes to me as follows:—

“The pūjāri (priest) levelled a piece of ground about a foot square, and smeared it with cow-dung. The boundary was marked with rice-flour and turmeric, and a small heap of rice and cow-dung was left in the middle. A sword was laid across the heap. The pūjāri touched the rice-flour line with the tips of his fingers, and then pressed his knuckles on the same place, thus leaving an exit on the south side. He then held a chicken over the central heap, and muttered some mantrams. The chicken pecked at the rice, and an egg was placed on the heap. The chicken then pecked at the rice again. The ceremony then waited for another party, who performed a similar ceremony. There was some amusement because their chickens would not eat. The chickens were decapitated, and their heads placed in the square. The eggs were then broken. It was raining, and there was a resulting puddle of cow-dung, chicken’s blood, egg, and rice, of which the representatives of each party took a portion, and eat it, or pretended to do so, stating to whom the land belonged. There is said to be a belief that, if a man swears falsely, he will die.”

Though not bearing on the subject of omens, some further boundary ceremonies may be placed under reference. At Sāttamangalam, in the South Arcot district, the festival of the goddess Māriamma is said to be crowned by the sacrifice at midnight of a goat, the entrails of which are hung round the neck of the Toti (scavenger), who then goes, stark naked, save for this one adornment, round all the village boundaries.[31](#)

It is recorded by Bishop Whitehead[32](#) that, in some parts of the Tamil country, *e.g.*, in the Trichinopoly district, at the ceremony for the propitiation of the village boundary goddess, a priest carries a pot containing boiled rice and the blood of a lamb which has been sacrificed to the boundary stone, round which he runs three times. The third time he throws the pot over his shoulder on to another smaller stone, which stands at the foot of the boundary stone. The

pot is dashed to pieces, and the rice and blood scatter over the two stones and all round them. The priest then goes away without looking back, followed by the crowd of villagers in dead silence. In the Cuddapah district, when there is a boundary dispute in a village, an image of the goddess Gangamma is placed in the street, and left there for two days. The head of a buffalo and several sheep are offered to her, and the blood is allowed to run into the gutter. The goddess is then worshipped, and she is implored to point out the correct boundary.³³ In Mysore, if there is a dispute as to the village boundaries, the Holeya³⁴ Kuluvādi is believed to be the only person competent to take the oath as to how the boundary ought to run. The old custom for settling such disputes is thus described by Captain J. S. F. Mackenzie:³⁵

“The Kuluvādi, carrying on his head a ball made of the village earth, in the centre of which is placed some earth, passes along the boundary. If he has kept the proper line, everything goes well, but, should he, by accident even, go beyond his own proper boundary, then the ball of earth, of its own accord, goes to pieces. The Kuluvādi is said to die within fifteen days, and his house becomes a ruin. Such is the popular belief.”

Some years ago Mr H. D. Taylor was called on to settle a boundary dispute between two villages in Jeypore under the following circumstances. As the result of a panchāyat (council meeting), the men of one village had agreed to accept the boundary claimed by the other party if the head of their village walked round the boundary and eat earth at intervals, provided that no harm came to him within six months. The man accordingly perambulated the boundary eating earth, and a conditional order of possession was given. Shortly afterwards the man's cattle died, one of his children died of smallpox, and finally he himself died within three months. The other party then claimed the land on the ground that the earth-goddess had proved him to have

perjured himself. It was urged in defence that the man had been made to eat earth at such frequent intervals that he contracted dysentery, and died from the effects of earth-eating.[36](#)

When the time for the annual festival of the tribal goddess of the Kuruvikkārans (Marāthi-speaking beggars) draws nigh, the headman or an elder piles up *Vigna Catiang* seeds in five small heaps. He then decides in his mind whether there is an odd or even number of seeds in the majority of heaps. If, when the seeds are counted, the result agrees with his forecast, it is taken as a sign of the approval of the goddess, and arrangements for the festival are made. Otherwise it is abandoned for the year.

At the annual festival of Chaudēsvari, the tribal goddess of Dēvānga weavers, the priest tries to balance a long sword on its point on the edge of the mouth of a pot. A lime fruit is placed in the region of the navel of the idol, who should throw it down spontaneously. A bundle of betel leaves is cut across with a knife, and the cut ends should unite. If the omens are favourable, a lamp made of rice-flour is lighted, and pongal (boiled rice) offered to it.

It is recorded by Canter Visscher[37](#) that, in the building of a house in Malabar, the carpenters open three or four cocoanuts, spilling the juice as little as possible, and put some tips of betel leaves into them. From the way these float on the liquid they foretell whether the house will be lucky or unlucky, whether it will stand for a long or short period, and whether another will ever be erected on its site.

Korava women, if their husbands are absent on a criminal expedition long enough to arouse apprehension of danger, pull a long piece out of a broom, and tie to one end of it several small pieces dipped in oil. If the stick floats in water, all is well; but, should it sink, two of the women start at once to find the men.[38](#)

In the village of Chakibunda in the Cuddapah district, there is a pool of water at the foot of a hill. Those who are