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On a Few Ancient Indian Amulets and Charms.

By SARAT CHANDRA MITRA.

I. THE AMULETS AND CHARMS USED FOR THE PROTECTION OF THE CHILDREN.

Kādambarī (कादम्बरौ) is the title of a famous prose composition by the ancient Indian author, Bāna, who flourished in the first part of the 7th Century A.D. during the reign of King Sri Harsha at Kanouj. This Sri Harsa was Bāna's patron.

This prose work gives us a vivid picture of the life, religion, manners, and customs of the Hindus of the 7th Century A.D. From a study of this famous work, we find that the Hindus of these far-off times resorted to many expedients for protecting their children from the influences of ghosts and other malignant spirits. These expedients consisted in the use of various amulets and charms which were tied on and applied to the child's neck, elbow, and wrist. I shall deal in this paper with a few of these ancient Indian amulets and charms and discuss the magical significance thereof.

In the aforementioned Sanskrit romance entitled *Kādambarī*, there is an episode which runs to the following effect :—

In ancient times, there lived in Ujjainī a mighty king named Tārāpīḍa and his queen whose name was Vilāsavati. His minister was a Brāhmana named Sukanāsa. Both the king and his minister were childless. In his childless state, King Tārāpīḍa used to conjure up before his mind's eye the vision of the birth of a son to him and of this son's bearing upon his body a few amulets and charms for protecting him from ghosts and other evil-doers, clambering upon his back.

The Sanskrit text, in which the aforementioned vision is described, is given below :—

कदा सर्वौषधिपद्मरजटिलकेशो निहितरक्षाष्टतविन्दुनि तालुनि
विन्यस्तगौरसर्षपोन्मिश्रभूतिलेशो गोरोचनाचित्रकण्ठसूत्रग्रथिरुत्तान-
शयो दशनशून्यस्मिताननः पुत्रको जनयिष्यति मे हृदयाह्लादम् ?

English Translation.

O ! When again will my little boy give rise to the delight in my heart—the child lying on his back, his toothless face beaming with a smile, his hair turned yellowish by the powdered dust of certain medicinal herbs, his palate moistened with the

drops of charmed ghi (or clarified butter) for protection, whereon were placed particles of ashes mixed with the grains of white mustard, and the thread, beautifully dyed with the yellow pigment of a cow, (tied) round his neck?

Remarks.

From a study of the foregoing passage, we find that, in ancient India during the beginning of the 7th Century A.D., the underdescribed amulets and charms were tied round and applied to necks, palates, and hairs of little children for protecting them from the influences of ghosts and other malevolent-doers :—

(1) A string dyed yellow with *gorochanā* or the yellow pigment of a cow was tied round the neck of the child, the string forming a circle round his neck.

(2) Drops of charmed *ghi* (or clarified butter) and honey, mixed with ashes and grains of white mustard, were applied like an unguent upon the child's palate.

(One commentator says that this unguent was applied on the child's palate for augmenting his life on the occasion of the *jātakarma* (जातकर्म) ceremony. This ceremony was performed, most likely, on the 30th day from the date of the child's birth for purifying the newly-made mother from the ceremonial uncleanliness which had been inflicted upon her by the birth of the child. It very likely corresponds to the *shashṭi-pūjā* (षष्ठीपूजा) ceremony of the Hindu womenfolk of Bengal.)

(3) The child's hair was dusted with the powder made by pounding certain medicinal herbs and substances.

Now, I shall take up for discussion the amulet No. 1 *supra*. Its principal features are :—

- (a) A string tied round the child's neck.
- (b) The circular shape of the string-necklet.
- (c) The *gorochanā* used for dyeing the string-necklet yellow.
- (d) The yellow colour of the string-necklet.

As regards point (a) set forth *supra*, I may state here that many races of people, both civilized and uncivilized, believe in the efficacy of the coloured and uncoloured string or ligature as a talisman or amulet for warding off the attacks of diseases. These bands of string or ligatures are tied either on the wrist, above the elbow-joint, or round the neck. The practice of tying these amulets is current among the Chinese, the Burmans, the British peasantry of Norfolk in Great Britain, among the people living in the localities round about London. The practice also exists among the Afghans, and the Bengalis living in Bengal and

in Northern India.¹ Closely analogous to the aforementioned practice is that followed by the Hindus of ancient India, of tying yellow-coloured strings round the necks of little children for warding off the attacks of ghosts and other malevolent spirits.

Then coming to point (b) set forth *supra*, I may state that it is believed throughout Northern India that the circle or the circular shape possesses great magical potency in keeping off malignant spirits. (See the various examples cited at pages 210ff. of Dr. W. Crooke's *An Introduction to the Popular Religion and Folklore of Northern India*. Allahabad Edition of 1894.)

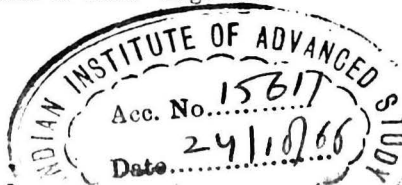
Then, coming to point (c), I may state that the *gorochanā* is a yellow pigment found in the navel of a cow. While others say that it is prepared from the cow's urine. In any case, it is a *मङ्गलद्रव्य* or an object which brings good luck, because it is produced by the sacred cow. It is, therefore, endowed with considerable magical potency for driving off ghosts and other evil spirits.

Then, as regards point (d) mentioned above, I may state that the yellow colour is a scarer of ghosts and other malignant spirits, who do not venture to come near objects which are dyed or tinted with that colour. It is for this reason that the yellow-coloured turmeric is used in the domestic ritual. Mixed with oil which is also efficacious, the bride and the bridegroom are carefully rubbed before marriage with the condiment which is known as *abtan*. Five roots of turmeric are sent to complete the betrothal. This explains the use of yellow clothes by various classes of ascetics and *sannyāsīs* and of *chandana*, or sandalwood paste in making caste-marks and for various ceremonial purposes. So the dead body is covered with turmeric before cremation,—a custom which is certainly not of Aryan origin, because it is current among the Thārus, one of the most primitive tribes living in the sub-Himalayan forests. Yellow and red, again, are the colours of marriage-garments.²

The foregoing uses of the yellow-coloured turmeric for warding off ghosts and other evil spirits, which have been mentioned by Dr. W. Crooke, are prevalent in the United Provinces of Agra and Oudh and also in Bihar. But, in Bengal also, there is the turmeric-ceremony (गात्रहरिद्रा) on which occasion both the bridegroom and the bride are anointed with the yellow-coloured paste of pounded turmeric mixed with mustard oil. Both these ingredients have the magical efficacy

¹ For a fuller discussion of this subject, *vide* my article entitled: 'North Indian Incantations for Charming Ligatures for Snake-bite', published in *The Journal of the Anthropological Society of Bombay*, Vol. X, pp. 593-614.

² *Vide* Crooke's *An Introduction to the Popular Religion and Folklore of Northern India*. Edition of 1894. Page 201.



of protecting the bridegroom and the bride from the malignant influences of ghosts and other beings of that ilk. This ceremony takes place before the actual wedding rites are performed.

Then again, for the foregoing reasons turmeric and saffron are extensively used in the marriage-ceremonies of the Hindus of Western India.¹

Then again, in their marriage-ceremonies, the Parsis of the Bombay Presidency use the *mangala-sutram* or 'the auspicious thread or cord', which is dyed yellow with saffron and to which is attached a small gold ornament. This thread is tied on to the bride's neck by the bridegroom.²

Then I shall take up for discussion the charmed unguent No. (2) which has been mentioned above. The principal ingredients used in the preparation of this unguent are (a) drops of charmed clarified butter (*ghi*) and honey, (b) ashes, and (c) grains of white mustard.

As for the ingredients (a) mentioned *supra*, I may state that the *ghi* is a product of the sacred cow, and, therefore, possesses sacrosanct properties. Both the *ghi* and the honey are used in various Hindu rites and ceremonies. Small earthenware saucers containing *ghi* and honey are placed upon the *barandālā* (वरणडाला) which is a winnowing-fan on which are placed various kinds of sacred objects. This winnowing-fan or basket is placed before the deities on the occasion of their worship. It is also waved before the bridegroom on the occasion of marriage-ceremonies. As both the *ghi* and the honey are sacred objects, they have the magical potency of scaring away ghosts and other malignant spirits.

As regards the ingredient (b), I may say that the ashes used in the preparation of this unguent are, most likely, the ashes of fuel burnt upon the sacrificial fire. It is, for this reason, that these ashes collected from sacrificial fire, are very efficacious for warding off the influences of ghosts and other evil spirits.

Then, as regards the ingredient (c), namely, grains of white mustard, it may be stated that mustard-seeds were used in ancient India for exorcising away ghosts and other malignant spirits. Their use for this purpose is mentioned in the *Atharva Veda*. One Sanskrit text goes on to say that white mustard-seeds are रक्षोघ्न (*Rakshoghna*) or 'slayer of demons and giants', and भूतनाशन (*Bhūtanāsana*) or 'scarer of ghosts'.

¹ For a fuller exposition of this subject *vide* the article on 'The Use of Saffron and Turmeric in Hindu Marriage Ceremonies', by Lt.-Col. K. R. Kirtikar in *The Journal of the Anthropological Society of Bombay*, Vol. IX, pp. 439-454.

² *Vide* the article on 'Some Parsi Marriage Ceremonies. How far they are borrowed from the Hindus', by Dr. J. J. Modi in *The Journal of the Anthropological Society of Bombay*, Vol. VIII, pp. 425-430.

The appositeness of the epithet *rakshoghna* is strikingly illustrated in the Birhor legend about Rāvaṇa's abduction of Sītā. In this traditional story, it is narrated that, before Rāma and Lakshmaṇa went out ahunting, the latter gave to his sister-in-law Sītā a handful of charmed mustard-seeds, saying: 'O sister, if any stranger would come before your *kumba*, throw a grain of mustard at him, whereupon he will fall down dead and remain so for an hour and then come to life again. Thereupon, you should throw another mustard-seed at him, whereupon he would die again, and thereafter revive'. When Rāvaṇa, the demon-king of Lankā, appeared before Sītā, the latter acted up to Lakshmaṇa's instructions and went on throwing mustard-seeds at him *one by one*, and he died and revived as many times as the mustard-seeds were thrown at him separately. After reviving for the last time, Rāvaṇa, addressing Sītā, said: 'O lady, why are you taking the trouble of throwing the mustard-seeds at me *one by one*? Throw them all at me *simultaneously*'. Hearing these words, Sītā threw all the mustard-seeds at Rāvaṇa simultaneously. No sooner was this done than the demon-king burst into flames and was reduced to ashes.¹

Then again, the people of the Punjab and Northern India believe that ghost, demons, and other evil spirits have a lively dread of the mustard-seed. For this reason, it is excessively used in the exorcism-ceremonies throughout India. In the Punjab, it is believed that ghosts and spooks cannot pass over ground which has been sown with mustard. For this reason, mustard-seeds are scattered about the halting-places, when a corpse is taken for the purpose of burial to the graveyard so that the ghost of the deceased person may not retrace its steps homewards. Then again, for the same reason, the *Silari* or the professional hail-avorter of the district of Mymensingh in Eastern Bengal throws mustard-seeds in the south-western corners of houses in order to make them proof against lightning-strokes, because the malignant god of storms, who hurls the lightning-stroke against men, beasts, trees, and houses, is very much afraid of mustard-seeds, and will not, on any account, approach localities which have been sown with these seeds.

Lastly, I shall take up for discussion, the charm-medicine No. (3), which consisted in powdering the hair of the child's head with a powder made by powdering certain medicinal herbs and ingredients so as to impart a yellowish tinge to his hair.

I have already shown above that the yellow colour is a scarer of ghosts and other beings of that ilk.

¹ Vide my article entitled: 'Note on the Birhor-Legend about Rāvaṇa's Abduction of Sītā'. Published in *The Journal of the Bihar and Orissa Research Society*, Vol. XIV, pp. 548-555.

The medicinal herbs and ingredients, by pounding which the powder sprinkled on the child's head was prepared, not only possessed medicinal properties, but, very likely, were believed to possess magical potency for keeping off the influences of malignant spirits from the child.

The medicinal herbs and ingredients (सर्वौषधि) are enumerated in the undermentioned Sanskrit text:—

१ । कुष्ठमांसौ हरिद्राभिर्वचाश्लेयचन्दनैः ।

२ । सुराकर्पूरचन्दनैः मुस्तसर्वौषधिः स्मृतः ॥

English Translation.

Sarboushadhi is a powdered or pasted compound of (1) *musta*, (2) *kushtha-māngsī*, (3) turmeric, (4) *vachā*, (5) *Silājatu*, (6) sandal, (7) alcohol, and (8) camphor. (This paste is applied on the pate of a young child.)

It will not be, I hope, out of place to give here a succinct account of the medicinal properties of the principal ingredients enumerated in the Sanskrit text quoted above.

(1) *Kushthamāngsī* is, very likely, identical with *Jatāmāngsī* which is botanically known as *Nardostachys jatamansi*. Its Bengali name is *Jatāmāngsī*; while its Hindi synonym is *Balchhar*. This plant grows upon the higher altitudes of the Himalayas. The medicinal commodity consists of short pieces of an underground stem covered with a hairy fibre. It possesses, to a considerable extent, the same medicinal properties as Valerian, and is used as an antispasmodic and a nervine tonic. It is considered to be useful in hysteria and epilepsy. It is also employed in jaundice, affections of the throat, and as an antidote for poisons. It is also used to scent and clean the hair. About 15 cwts. of this drug are annually exported from the Kumaon Hills.

After making a good deal of research the great orientalist Sir William Jones has arrived at the conclusion that *Jatāmāngsī* is identical with the *Nard* or *spikenard* mentioned in the English Bible. In ancient Rome, an ointment was made of this drug. It was considered to be so precious that, in ancient Rome during the days of Jesus Christ, a single pound of this medicine would cost as much as or more than £8-6s.-8d.

(2) *Vachā* is the Sanskrit name of a plant which is botanically known as *Acorus calamus*. Its Bengali and Hindi names are *bach*. Its English equivalent is Sweet Flag. It is a semi-aquatic perennial plant which is a native of Europe and North America. But it is cultivated in damp and marshy places of India and Burma. The whole plant is aromatic. But its rhizomes only are used in medicine. It contains an aromatic bitter principle, and is considered efficacious in epilepsy, cold,

fever, cough, rheumatism, colic, dyspepsia, and various other diseases. An essential oil is obtained from its leaves. This oil was used by English perfumers in the manufacture of hair-powders.

(3) *Silājatu* or *Saileya* is the Sanskrit name of an oily substance which is secreted from the bare rocks in certain parts of India. Its Hindi name is *Silājat*. It is secreted from the rocks when they become heated during the hot weather months at noon-time. It is produced in great quantities in the Vindhyan Hills. It contains iron in a high degree. It is considered to be a very valuable tonic by the practitioners of the indigenous healing-art.

(4) *Musta* is the Sanskrit name of a bulbous grassy plant of which the botanical name is *Cyperus rotundus*. Its Bengali name is *mutā* or *mutō*; while its Hindi synonym is *muthā*. It is found in moist places. Its tubers are used medicinally as diaphoretic and astringent. Dr. Bidie states that these tubers are used as food by the people in famine-stricken areas.

II. THE AMULETS AND CHARMS USED BY THE WOMEN THEMSELVES.

In ancient India, the women themselves wore and used amulets and charms for the attainment of their hearts' desires. These consisted of, possibly, the wearing of thread-circlets, charmed with the recitation of incantations upon them and sometimes tied with herbs of magical efficacy; and, secondly, the carrying of caskets containing birch-bark inscribed with charm-formulæ written with the yellow-coloured *gorochanā* upon them. From a study of *Kādambarī*, we further learn that Queen Bilāsavatī wore upon her body thread-circlets which had been charmed by the pronouncement upon them of powerful incantations and, further, having tied on to them herbs possessing magical potency. She further carried caskets (most probably of some kind of metal) containing birch-bark on which incantations had been written with *gorochanā* or the yellow pigment of the cow. These amulets and charms she used while she was very much anxious to become the mother of a son.

[गोरोचनालिखितभूर्जपत्रगर्भान् मन्त्रकरण्डकानुवाह; रक्षाप्रति-
सरोपेतान्योषधिसूत्राणि वबन्ध ।]

The *mantra-karandakas* were, very probably, small metal cases, made either of gold or silver, having enclosed therein small pieces of birch-bark, having written thereupon suitable charm-formulæ with the yellow coloured pigment of the cow. These amulets were very likely worn upon the upper left arm. Similar metal amulets are extensively worn by the Hindus, both male and female, throughout India even at the present day.

The yellow colour of the *gorochanā*, and the fact of its being the product of the sacred cow, served to scare away malignant spirits from the wearer of the amulet.

Queen Bilāsavatī wore these amulets in order that the evil spirits might not frustrate her desire of becoming *enceinte*.

The circular shape of the thread-circlet and the herbs of magical potency also serve to exorcise away these malignant beings.



