CHAPTER III

These beliefs probably had their inception in the remote period of early development when the first ancestors of the tableland subcontinent approached this vast, rugged terrain from the east or north. Not to begin to think of the observed phenomena, events, and the historical evidence to their ancestral relationship. One of the earliest influences tending to these relationships have been many misconceptions which have prominently
HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The prevalence of superstitions in ancient and medieval world

Superstitious beliefs have been in all lands and among all races from time immemorial to the present. It is thus not solely confined to the Dark Ages or to the poor or ignorant, but is an integral part of humanity, intimately tied up with our character and environment.¹

These beliefs probably had their inception in that remote period of man's development when he first ventured into the twilight zone that separated his dark, savage realm from the land of civilization, and to begin to think of the observed phenomena, events, and the material universe in their causal relationships. Out of the erroneous influences relating to these relationships have come many misconceptions which have profoundly

influenced man's state of being — some for good and some for evil.

These unsound notions of causal relationships have coloured much of our literatures, permeated many religious creeds and practices, altered the science of medicine, retarded the progressive evolution of the social order, formed the basis for the development of governments, laid the foundation for moral codes, given rise to systems of economics, and finally, have led man to the portals of science. The superstitious beliefs have been potent in shaping the affairs and destinies of people all over the world, and have also invaded the various fields of thought which affect the philosophies and activities of men, great and small, in many lands and all time. A few of the evidences of these widespread influences are presented here under several heads.

1. Literature

Literature is replete with examples of how human conduct has been determined and shaped by superstitious beliefs; throughout literature we find that leaders frequently depended on priests or oracles for foretelling of events. This belief is found expressed in Shakespeare's "Julius Caesar".

"Caesar: God bid the priests do present sacrifice, 
And bring me their opinions of Success".

Many classical writings represent Nature as in 
accord with human events; for example, if a murder is to take 
place, direful portents in nature foretell evil. This belief 
is expressed in Shakespeare's "Macbeth".¹

"Thou seest the heavens, as troubl'd with men's act, 
Threatens his bloody stage; by the clock 'tis day, 
And yet dark night strangles the trawling lamp".

"To the quivering and throbbing of various parts of 
the body as omens, repeated reference is made in the Hindu 
classics. Thus in Kalidasa'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 Gantari replies: 
"Child, the evil be averted. May the tutelary deities of 
your husband's family confer happy prospects". In the 
Raghuvaansa, 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 Sita". A quivering sensation in the right arm is 
supposed to indicate marriage with a beautiful woman; in the 
right eye some good luck".²

¹ Ibid., Macbeth, Act II, Scene iv.
² Edgar Thurston, Omens and Superstitions of Southern India. 
Nature has been thought of as being kind and according protection to those deserving protection. Keats has the faery storm sent to aid the lovers as they flee the castle of Madeline's father.

"Like love's alarum patterning the sharp sleet, Against the window panes; St.Agnes' moon hath Set ..........................

Hark! 'tis an elfin storm, from faery land, Of haggard seeming, but a boon indeed".

From the remote past there has been a wide spread belief that the spirit or ghosts of the great leaders can return to their countries in times of need.

Tennyson says:

"He passes to be king among the dead And after healing of his grievous wound He comes again".

Again, according to ancient and widespread belief, the spirit of an unburied corpse can never find rest. We find in the writings of Dryden the following lines.

"Those are Grecian ghosts, 
that in battle were slain
And unburied remain
Inglorious on the plain".

A belief in luck, good and bad, is one of the most common superstitions, and we have Longfellow\(^1\) saying:

"Happy art thou, as if everyday thou, 
Hadst picked up a horseshoe".

These and several other examples drawn from literary works convince us how the beauty, tragedy and sentiment in literature rest on superstitious beliefs. These writings of very olden times present a vivid picture of the practices, beliefs and customs of those days and also point out how much the people were under the sway of these unfounded beliefs.

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2. Religion

It seems that superstitious beliefs antedate religion or that religions have grown out of the ancient mystical notions about man's relationship to some sort of supreme beings. Magic is doubtless older than religion and probably no religion today has been entirely purged of all its forms and influence. Some of the examples of this idea are as follows:

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In speaking of this evolution from magic to religion Frazer\(^1\) says: "Meanwhile the magicians, who may be repressed, but not extirpated by the predominance of religion, still addict themselves to their old occult arts in preference to the newer ritual of sacrifice and prayer". In a description of some heathen rites for the dead and some modern church practices Frazer\(^2\) concludes: "A comparison of these European customs with the similar heathen rites can leave no room for doubt that the nominally Christian feast of 'All Souls' is nothing but an old pagan festival of the dead which the church, unable or unwilling to suppress, resolved from motives of policy to connive at". The feast of "All Saints and All Souls" grew out of an old festival of the dead. They were adopted by the church in an effort to put the colour of Christianity on such ceremonies. Frazer\(^3\) continues, "On this theory that feasts of All Saints and All Souls mark two successive efforts of the Catholic church to eradicate an old heathen festival of the dead. Both efforts failed". Many of the present day ideas of the sacredness attached to priests and other religious workers throughout the world probably may be vestiges of the once reputed powers of the ancient orders of Sorcery and magic. Frazer\(^4\) gives

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reference to it in his work. Even now we experience the influence and effect of these old superstitious beliefs upon our most common religious observance. Hindu mythology is a reservoir of such examples.

3. Science

In man's efforts to control the forces of nature for his own benefit by use of magic or sorcery the wisest gradually began to see that in many instances such means were not efficacious. In their efforts to gain such powers they, by accident, in some instances and by insight in others, slowly passed from the realm of mystery into that of science. In discussing this gradual change from magic to science, Frazer\(^1\) says: "... in time the more sagacious of their member perceived the fallacy of magic and hit upon a more effectual mode of manipulating the forces of nature for the good of man; in short, they abandoned sorcery for science".

The science of agriculture has been influenced by a belief that the phases of the moon had an influence on the growth of plants, and to some extent animals. Pliny,\(^2\) in describing the influence of the moon, says: "That it may be considered the planet of breath ...... because it saturates

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1. Ibid., Vol.I, pp.420-421.
the earth and its approach fills bodies, while by its departure it empties them ..... Even the blood of men grows and diminishes with the light of the moon, and leaves and herbage also feel the same influence, since the lunar energy penetrates all things".

From the supposed influence of the moon upon sub-lunar things men have, in ancient and comparatively recent times, formulated rules governing agricultural activities, husbandry, and other practices such as cutting the hair, nails, corns and the pruning of plants. These beliefs in the power of moon to affect growing things have spread throughout the world, until they are found in some form among many nations.

The physician of a generation ago frequently advised those bitten by an animal with hydrophobia to go to a "mad stone", told mothers to hang a bag of asafoetida about their children's necks to prevent contagious diseases, that the rattles from rattle snakes would make teething easier if hung about the child's neck, and advised expectant mothers against exciting experiences, or the viewing of unsightly and hideous things, lest their babies might be "birth-marked". The science of chemistry made but little progress until the "philosopher's stone" was no longer the principal object of the chemist's quest. Certain phases of physics evolved
rapidly when nature ceased to "abhor a vacuum"; and genetics, after the rejection of the idea of universal spiritual preg- 
nation, gave to the world a new outlook upon life.

4. Morality

Many of our moral codes and practices have become basic in philosophy as the result of rigid enforcement, by 
those thought to have supernatural powers, by punishing those 
who broke the rules and laws thought best for the common good. 
At one time, it was thought that the owner of property, by 
pronouncing a certain taboo, could destroy those who stole his 
possessions, or in some instances, the stolen articles itself 
possessed magical energy which greatly endangered the purloiner. 
This superstitious idea led to the preservation of property.

Sex-morality had its inception in the superstitious beliefs that such practices as adultery, fornication, and 
incest were very displeasing to the gods and, as a punishment 
for such practices, the rains ceased, the crops were destroyed 
and famine was abroad in the land. In short they believed all 
the people would be made to suffer for the sins of the few. 
Dominated by this superstitious idea they were quick and 
extremely severe with their condemnation of such offenders.¹

The respect for human life and the aversion which men have for the murderer is deeply rooted in superstitions. The superstition which had stayed in the hand of the would-be-killer of his fellow-men is the fear of ghosts, especially the ghosts of the murdered. This fear was widespread among savages and is extant among many people today. Not only was the murderer tormented and hounded by the ghost of the one he had slain, but his whole country was subject to dire calamities unless the murdered were avenged. This belief caused the enactment of severe laws providing for the punishment, in many instances in an atrocious manner, of the slayer. The blood thirsty have had two deterrents - the fear of ghosts and the fear of the lash of the law.¹

Finally, we have Frazer² (Vol. II, p. 31) saying: "More and more as time goes on, morality shifts its ground from the sands of superstition to the rock of reason, from the imaginary to the real, from the supernatural to the natural. In the present case the state has not ceased to protect the lives of its peaceful citizens because the faith in ghosts is shaken. It has found a better reason than old wives' fables for guarding with the flaming sword of justice - the approach to the Tree of Life".

5. Government

While the Athenians were getting ready for the battle of Marathon, a runner, Philippides, rushed to Sparta for aid, but as it lacked only a few days till the full moon, the Spartans, on account of an old superstition, dared not begin a military expedition in the interim, waited for the full moon and reached Athens after all was over. ¹

Superstitions had their influence on the early codes of justice. If a man was accused of crime he did not try to prove himself innocent, as is the custom today, but appealed to God to show what was right by reversing or counteracting in some mysterious way the resultsordinarily expected from the workings of natural law. Such an accused one would try to show his innocence by being bound and cast into water. If he sank, he was innocent. It was believed that the pure element would not receive a criminal. On other occasions he was forced to run through fire, or to carry hot irons certain distances. If he escaped serious burns he was innocent, otherwise he was guilty. ²

The control of the monarch over his subjects has grown out of superstitious notions that the ruler had contacts

with supernatural beings from whom he received authority which made his will supreme.

Frazer says: "Among many people the task of government has been facilitated by a superstition that the governors belong to a superior order of being and possess certain supernatural or magical powers to which the governed can make no claim and can offer no resistance".¹ Again, it is believed that the "Divine right of kings" had a superstitious origin. From the earliest time priests, chiefs, and kings were thought to be divinely chosen and to be imbued with supernatural powers. The Emperor Hirohito of Japan, even today, is supposed to be direct lineal descendant of the gods. These powers were thought to enable these rulers to cause the lands to yield abundant crops, to put fish in streams, to cause the trees to be loaded with fruit, and to heal certain diseases.² In England the belief that a king or queen could heal scrofula by his or her touch survived into the eighteenth century. Boswell,³ tells in that Dr. Johnson was 'touched' in his childhood by Queen Anne for scrofula.

Frazer concludes on this point by saying, "... many peoples have regarded their rulers, whether chiefs or kings,

with superstitious awe as beings of a higher order and endowed with mightier powers than common folk. Imbued with such a profound veneration for their governors and with such an exaggerated conception of their own, they cannot but have yielded them a prompter and more implicit obedience than if they had known them to be just like themselves.....that among certain races and at certain times superstition has strengthened the respect for government, especially monarchical governments, and has thereby contributed to the establishment and maintenance of civil order".¹

¹ Ibid., Vol.II, pp.15-16.
The Prevalence of Superstition in Modern Society

A noticeable aspect of modern society is that no matter what scientific advances are achieved, the 'old wives' tales still persist. Superstition is still taking a heavy toll in certain parts of Africa, India and in many developed as well as undeveloped and underdeveloped countries. The unscrupulous witch doctor and local medicine man playing for profits on simple peasant's fears still hold sway over the modern medicine man and his scientific skills. Technological and scientific advances have enabled man to fly to the Moon; defy the force of gravity in air-craft; and travel faster than the speed of sound. With control over such powerful devices, coupled with the ability to eradicate the once calamitous epidemics, it is rather surprising that anyone needs to harbour old superstition in his mind.

In wild type of superstitious practices also, the position of India is no better. The news reports in the Indian dailies clearly show us how and to what extent the Indians, particularly the people in the rural areas are under the sway of certain ridiculous superstitious beliefs. The 'Sunday Standard' dated 5-9-1971, in its editorial gives an alarming picture on this line. "It is said that even in modern times human sacrifices should be taking place in India."
One of the most gruesome to come to light was from the village of Nohar in Rajasthan where two young children, Narish aged six and Sunita aged five, were killed to propitiate Goddess Kali.\(^1\) Massanattulachan, a childless woman, had been told by a sooth-sayer that she must propitiate Goddess Kali with a human sacrifice if she wanted a child. The poor children were lured into her home and killed. Later their bodies were found in the village well .... Last April a nine year old girl was sacrificed to Goddess Lakshmi in Ramannagutum near Warrangal in Andhra Pradesh. A rich farmer and his 21 year old daughter were subsequently arrested. The human sacrifice was resorted to so that Lakshmi, the Goddess of wealth, would stay permanently in their house. On March 24 the accused had kidnapped the girl who lived near their house. After performing a puja they cut her neck, collected her blood and offered it to the Goddess.\(^2\) In February last at Madra village in Udaipur District of Rajasthan yet another human sacrifice by the culprits to propitiate a goddess before the construction work was started at the village.\(^2\) A three and a half year old boy was allegedly murdered by his relatives as human sacrifice at Dina Nagar in Gurdaspur District on Sunday the 2nd April 1972 according to another report in the 'Indian Express' dated 4th April 1972.\(^3\)


\(^3\) Indian Express, Vol.XL, No.182, dated April 4, 1972.
The report said the ritual murder was committed in the presence of a large number of persons. Police said that the murderer had claimed that the boy would be brought back to life with the help of the Goddess after the sacrifice.

In Jullundur a sixteen year old girl lost her life on April 10, 1972, when a Sadhu allegedly attempted to "kick out the ghosts in her body" with heavy iron forceps.¹

Even politicians are not free from the influence of superstitions. Marxist leader E.M.S. Namboodiripad on 13th July 1970 invoked a bit of superstition to 'buttress his point that the Malayalam month of 'Karkadakam' (July 17th to August 16th) would be 'inauspicious' period for election campaign.²

In Trichur District in Kerala a Nair aged 55, said to be a black magician was taken into custody for allegedly castigating on Valli (31) with beating and applying pepper powder in her eyes for relieving her from the attack of a ghost. The woman is reported to have died in the hospital.³

The blessings of "Chandra Bhagwan" the moon-god, were invoked in Bombay on April 15, 1970, for the safe return to the earth of the moon voyagers of the unlucky Appollo 13 mission.⁴ Superstitious observers of the Appollo moon shot

drama were said to have, no doubt, confirmed all their fears about the number 13, it was noted in Houston in U.S.A. ¹

In Dehra Dun a middle aged woman suffering from leprosy was burnt alive at Budha Kadar Village in Tehri-Garhwal District. According to a superstitious belief prevalent among the residents of the area a village could rid itself of leprosy by burning alive a patient suffering from this disease.²

Community devil dancing, now though rare, once was a regular feature of village life in many parts of South India. The outbreak of epidemic was the main indication that devils in strength are active and have to be dealt with in a large way. It has been an ancient belief in most parts of India that small-pox was caused by the angered goddess Kali who sent her ill looking minions to avenge some wrong the people had done her. Among the folk of Kerala, in particular, nothing was so dreadful as small-pox. The distortion of the face of the afflicted, the fearsome protuberances all over the body, the intense pain and bleeding struck terror in those who happened to see the patient. Once a person was struck down by the dire malady, he or she was abandoned and all relatives left the house hiring professionals to look after the patient.

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Women and children are believed to be particularly vulnerable to attack by evil spirits.¹

In India it is an age-old custom not to commence any venture during Rahukalam. Many Indians even now think twice before doing anything important during these "black-hours". One could see his car haltingly coming out and many a time abruptly stopping near the gate waiting for good omen. The failure of business or the fall of a government is at times traced to its ominous beginning.²

Every nation has its quota of superstition, but it is doubtful whether any other has such a vast and varied collection as India has, or gives them so much importance. In India, superstitions have practically been given official recognition. Auspicious times are picked for the swearing in of a new Ministry, or for the opening of a Government project, and the traditionally auspicious signs and symbols are prominently displayed.³

In India the astrologers have an important voice in the land. Readings are usually taken before marriages are


contracted, and the advice of the stars often sought for other important decisions. When the astrologers prophesied the end of the world by February 1962 there was general consternation, with vast sections of the population either preparing for the doom or attempting to ward it off with round-the-clock prayer-sessions. The Indians also have a remarkable faith in the miracles of which various holy men are supposed to be capable. One of these in 1966 promised to walk on the surface of water, and a crowd of spectators paid near £3,000 to watch the feat. The outcome could be seen in a photograph showing the venerably bearded Hatayogi, Lexman Saudra standing chest-deep in a tank of water, looking disconsolate.¹

Regarding inauspicious time, there was full three minutes' pause marked by 'pin drop' silence on Sunday in the Navarangha Hall where the members of Ceylon's new house of representatives had gathered to constitute themselves into a Constituent Assembly, Mrs.Bandaranaike was closely looking at her wrist watch. Three minutes hence she walked to the mike and called on the Constitutional Affairs Minister to read out the text of her earlier notice to the members to attend the meeting. It was later learnt that she was waiting for the auspicious time 11.13 set by the astrologers to begin the day's historic proceedings.²

To cite an example as to what extent the people of Egypt are superstitious, a report in the Malayala Manorama daily dated 14-8-1972, quoted from the Egyptian daily 'Akbar El Chom', will be of tremendous significance in this connection. In Egypt it is believed that an unmarried girl should not look into a mirror after dusk or sunset lest she should remain a spinster throughout her life. More than 274 varieties of superstitions are said to be in current use in Egypt. More than 95% of the villagers in Egypt still believe in the superstition relating to 'the virgin and the mirror'. More than 62% of the urban population are also said to be superstitious in Egypt. A majority of the University degree holders in Egypt are said to participate in 'magic dances' to avoid the influence of evil spirits.¹

Egypt's former War Minister and other disgraced politicians now in prison sought guidance from the spirits for running the affairs of the nation, it was reported in the Indian Express. The General is said to have called on the spirit of a dead Sheik to find out the best time for attacking Israel.²

Superstition is still taking a heavy toll in many parts of Africa. The unscrupulous witch doctor and local

medicine man were playing for profits on simple peasants' fears still hold sway over the modern medicine man and his scientific skills. A terrible illustration of this occurred in Central Tanzania's Singida region recently. At least 70 children have died following primitive circumcision and dental operation to ward off a rumoured, a nonexistent disease known as 'lawalawa'. It was also said that unless people were circumcised and teeth extracted to prevent a disease named "mylon teeth" children would die. In fact there are no such diseases. Some 350 local medical practitioners were arrested and a number of them were sentenced to heavy fines or prison terms.1

"Satan has replaced God in the new temples of the West, as Covens of witchcraft and black magic are attracting more 'worshippers' than the churches. It is revealed that 3,000 witches and 500,000 participants carry on the trade of black magic in Britain alone." 2

England, it seems, still has room for witches and exorcism. In Germany, says Richard Cavendish, Editor of the new periodical Mar, Myth and Magic, which thrives on British curiosity about the occult superstition has infiltrated political ideology. It is certain that in modern England

witchcraft is a real mixture of superstition, hysteria and illusion, stimulated by that alienation from the rational reality of technological modernity.¹

In this 'enlightened' age with ignorance and superstition supposedly banished, we find nations still celebrating the old Halloween holiday, with its goblins, the fear of black cats, and children masked as demons and witches. In schools, the children march in weird processions during the day, anticipating a hectic night of fun and foolishness. Halloween is the strangest holiday of the entire year in the U.S.A. But the testimony of history stamps Halloween as a heathen festival built on pagan foundation.²

There are many far away places steeped in all kinds of superstitions. When the Queen visited West Germany in 1966, the station master at Duisburg arranged to change the number of the platform from which the Queen's train was due to depart from 13 to 12 A.³

In this age of computer and the moon rocket, astrology and fortune-telling are enjoying a boom. It is estimated that

there are probably 2,000 professional fortune-tellers in
Britain today, getting a comfortable four figure income.
Regular customers are supposed to number over a million.
Methods vary from card to tea-cup reading via crystal gazing
to astrology. Prominent astrologers and clairvoyants receive
notice in the press, and appear on television.¹

Many newspapers and magazines carry astrological
columns. In Britain there are several magazines catering
for a taste in prophecy and the occult. One of these has a
circulation of 50,000 copies per month, others keep this
secret. Paper back publishers have also raised their sights
to the stars, and one of them was reported to have issued a
collection of astrological books with a first printing of
750,000 copies.²

A minor part of commercial superstition is the sale
of charms, lucky mascots or talismans. There are also
specialists who produce tailor-made talismans for specific
purpose relating to love, health or wealth. These are manu-
factured by people who are skilled in the occult arts.

In England, one person in six believes in ghosts,
and nearly one quarter are uncertain whether or not they exist;

¹. Ibid., p.21.
². Time Magazine, December 28, 1962 and the Observer Colour
one person in fourteen thinks he or she has actually seen or heard a ghost. In England almost one person in three has been to a fortune teller, and some have been repeatedly — no wonder the profession is flourishing. In England at least one person in ten feels that they have lucky days or numbers, or possess lucky mascots. The percentage is much higher in Germany. The word astrology is not widely understood either in England or Germany, but practically everybody knows what a horoscope is. Everywhere about two thirds read their horoscope at least occasionally.¹

Enough has been cited to show that, apart from considerable variations to be expected from differing samples and methods, there is clearly a substantial minority of the general population who hold decidedly superstitious beliefs. Moreover such beliefs are by no means confined to the poor or ignorant. Thus under the seemingly rational surface of modern society there is unexpectedly wide spread yearning for the mysterious and the occult we are supposed to have outgrown. Although there is a modest amount of evidence about the prevalence of superstitious beliefs in Western Industrial societies, hardly any systematic work has been done on superstitious behaviour, probably owing to the practical difficulties involved. If one takes into account the fact that people

are apt to be somewhat shamefaced about superstition, and liable to deny holding any such beliefs when faced with a strange interviewer, the evidence becomes even more impressive. Superstition is still very much with us, and it is even possible that some forms of it may be in the increase. Hence it is well worthwhile trying to understand the nature of this complex phenomenon, which is a general human one not confined to distant people.

Superstitions which belong to cultural tradition are infinite in their variety and importance, and many have deeply influenced world history, including the development and retardation of scientific knowledge. It is significant to note that today with the imminence of interplanetary travels, the shadow of another world war and the phenomenal growth of knowledge, we too, are almost as perplexed and frightened as our sixteenth century kinsmen are drifting towards a new manifestation of superstition which many have already begun.

Nevertheless, the study of superstitions is of vital significance to the social historian and psychiatrist alike, for they reflect thought patterns of very ancient times, beliefs once tenaciously held which are now either forgotten, changed completely, or but remnant shadows in the mind. "Carefully assessed, superstitions throw light on the history of our ethnic groups and help us to understand the thought process of our ancestors in relation to our own".  

The Superstitious Practices of Kerala

Regarding the superstitious practices prevalent in Kerala, the earliest available sources are from the works of M.J. Walhouse\(^1\) (1876), Logan\(^2\) (1887), Rev. S. Mateer\(^3\) (1883), N. Sankunni Waríar\(^4\) (1892), M.N. Venkataswami\(^5\) (1905), S.P. Rice\(^6\) (1901), Edgar Thurston\(^7\) (1912) and (1909).\(^8\)

Recently Kottarathil Sankunny also has made an attempt to collect and compile the various religious and social practices and customs of the people of Kerala in his works entitled as 'Aithihyamala'. Many of the curious customs and practices mentioned in his work appear to be irrational and unfounded.\(^9\)

Among the works carried out in South India that of Edgar Thurston (1912) is worthy of mentioning. Superstitions, he collected, include omens, animal superstitions, the

1. M.J. Walhouse, 'Ind.Ant.' 1876.
8. Edgar Thurston, Castes and Tribes of Southern India, 1909.
evil-eye, snake-worship, vows, votives and other offerings, charms, human sacrifice, magic and magicians, divination and fortune telling, agricultural ceremonies and the like. In seeking for omens, Natives consult the so-called 'science of omens' and are guided by them. Selected omens are always included in the native calendars or 'panchangams'. Of omens, both good and bad, in Malabar, the following comprehensive list is given by Mr. Logan. 1

"Good:— crows, pigeons, etc., and beasts as deer, etc., moving from left to right, and dog and jackals moving inversely, and other beasts found similarly and singly, wild crow, ruddy goose, mongoose, goat and pea cock 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. Butter milk, raw-rice, puttalpura, priyangu flower, honey, ghee; red-cotton juice, antimony sulphurate, metal mug, bell-ringing, lamp, lotus karuka grass, raw fish, flesh, flour, ripe fruits, sweet meats, gems, sandal wood, elephants, pots filled with water, a virgin, a couple of Brahmins, Rajas, respectable men, white flower, white yak tail, (used as a fly-flapper), white cloth, and white horn, 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, bensoar, any substance of
white colour, the bellowing of oxen, suspicious words,
harmonious human voice, such sounds made by birds or beats,
the uplifting of umbrellas, hailing exclamations, sound of
harp, flute, timbrel, tabor, and other instruments of music,
sounds of hymns of consecration and vedic recitations, gentle
breeze all round at the time of a journey". The list of bad
omens is the following: "Men deprived of their limbs, lame
or blind, a corpse or weaver of a cloth put on a corpse, coir,
broken vessels, hearing of vows expressing of breaking,
burning, destroying, etc., the alarming cry 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, ignana (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 emmaxh, 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, broom-stick, ashes,
winnow, hatchet". In the category of good omens among the
Nayars 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, ghee, and milk. In the list of bad omens come a donkey, broom, buffalo, united 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 Nayars, and an even number of Brahmins, 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. Hindus are very particular about catching sight of some suspicious 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. Gopala Panikkar.\(^1\) "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 subjects, are inauspicious ones,

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which will render him who chances to notice them first fare badly in life for the whole year, and their abnoxious effect 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 year. The effects of the sights 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 taking care to prepare the most sight-worthy 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 grandham 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 the 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, someone who has got up first wakes the inmates both male and female, of the house, and takes them blindfold, 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.

If a person places the head towards the east when sleeping, he will obtain wealth and health; if towards the south, a big thing of life; if towards the west, fame; if towards the north, sickness. The last position, therefore, should be avoided. 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 Brahmins playing of music, one carrying musical instruments, money, fruit or flowers, a light or clear blazing fire, umbrella, cooked food, milk or curd, cow, deer, corpse, two fishes, recital of vedas, 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 water pot from a tank, pot of toddy, black monkey, dog, royal eagle, parrot, honey, hearing kind words, a gazula balija with his pile of bangles on his back.

If, on similar occasion, a person comes across any of the following, the omens are unfavourable:—widow, lightning,
pot of oil, leather, fuel, smoking fire, dog barking on house top, hare, crow flying from right to left, snake, new pot, blind, lame, sick man, salt, tiger, bundle of sticks, butter-milk, empty vessel and quarrel, man with dishevelled hair, oilman, leper, mendicant.¹

Gaping is one indication that evil spirits have effected an entrance into the body. Hence many Brahmins, when they gape, snap their fingers as a preventive.²

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.³

Eclipses are regarded as precursors of evil, which must, if possible, be averted. Concerning the origin thereof, according to tradition in Malabar, Mr. Gopala Panikkar⁴ writes as follows: "Tradition says that where an eclipse takes place

² M.J. Walhouse, 'Ind. Ant.', 1876, v.21.
Rahu, the huge serpent is devouring the sun or moon, as the case may be. An eclipse being thus the decrease of one of those heavenly bodies, people must, of necessity, observe pollution for the period during which the eclipse lasts. When the monster spits out the body, the eclipse is over. Food and drink taken during an eclipse possess poisonous properties, and people therefore abstain from eating and drinking until the eclipse is over. They bath at the end of the eclipse, so as to get rid of pollution. Any one shutting himself up from exposure may be exempted from this obligation to take a bath.

**Evil-eye**

Many superstitious beliefs in Kerala centre around evil-eye. The objection which a high caste Brahmin has to being seen by a low caste man when he is eating his food is based on a belief allied to that of the evil-eye. In villages, even now strangers are not allowed to be present, when the cows are milked. Sudden failure of milk or blood-stained milk, are attributed to the evil-eye, to remove the influence of which the owner of the affected cow resorts to the magician. In Malabar, a mantram, which is said to be effective against the potency of the evil-eye, is practised widely.¹ In Malabar fear

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of the evil-eye is very general. At the corner of the upper storey of almost every new building near a road or path is suspended some object, often a doll-like hideous creature, on which the eye of the passers-by may rest. 1 "A crop", Mr. Logan 2 writes, "is being raised in a garden visible from the road. The vegetables will never reach maturity, unless a bogey of some sort is set up in their midst. A cow will stop giving milk, unless a couch (Turbinella rapa) shell is tied conspicuously about her horns. When a house or shop is being built, there surely is to be found exposed in some conspicuous position an image, some times of extreme indecency, a pot covered with cabalistic signs, a prickly branch of cactus, or what not, to catch the evil-eye of passers-by, and divert their attention from the important work in hand. Again when cholera, or other epidemic disease breaks out Muhammedans have the imprint of the hand dipped in sandal paste on the door. The sudden illness of children is often attributed to the evil-eye. Loss of appetite in children is attributed by mothers to the visit of a supposed evil person to the house. If that person appears again, the mother will take a little sand or dust from under the visitor's foot, whirl it round the head of the child, and throw it on the earth. If the suspected person is not likely to turn up again, a handful of cotton seed, chillies,

2. W. Logan, Malabar, 1887, i: 175.
and dust from the middle of the street, is whirled round the child's head, and thrown on the hearth. If the chillies produce a strong smell, the evil-eye has been averted. If they do not do so, the suspect is roundly abused by the mother, and never again admitted to the house.¹

Charms in Kerala

Mantrams or consecrated formulae, are supposed to be very powerful, and by their aid even gods can be brought under control. They are believed to be efficacious in curing disease, in protecting children against devils, and women against miscarriage, in promoting the development of the breasts, in bringing offspring to the barren women, in warding off misfortune consequent on marriage with a girl who has an unlucky mark, in keeping the wild pigs away from the fields, and warding off cattle disease.

The charms worn by the people of Kerala, have been recorded by Mr. Fawcett.²

² Fawcett, Madras Museum Bull., 1900, iii: No.1, 41.
Govinda Nambiar writes: There are certain specialists among mantravadis (dealers in magical spells), who are known as Odiyans. "Conviction is deep-rooted that they have the power of destroying whomever they please, and that, by means of powerful bewitching matter called pillalthilum (oil extracted from the body of an infant), they are enabled to transform themselves into any shape or form, or even to vanish into air, as their fancy may suggest. When an Odiyan is hired to cause the death of a man, he waits at the gate of his intended victim's house at night, usually in the form of a bullock. If, however, the person is inside the house, the Odiyan assumes the shape of cat, enters the house and induces him to come out. He is subsequently knocked down and strangled. The Odiyan is also credited with the power, by means of certain medicines, of inducing sleeping persons to open the doors, and come out of their houses as Somnambulists do. Pregnant women are sometimes induced to come out of their house in this way, and they are murdered, and the foetus extracted from them. Murder of both sexes by Odiyans was a crime of frequent occurrence before the British occupation of the country".¹

¹ B. Govinda Nambiar, Ibid., Indian Review, 1900.
It has been stated that sorcerers usually unite together to form a society, which may attain great influence among backward races. In Southern India, there are certain castes which are summed up in the Madras Census Report, 1901, as exorcists and devil-dancers, whose most important avocation is the practice of magic.¹

Concerning sorcery on the west coast, the Census Commissioner, 1901, writes as follows: "The forms of sorcery familiar to the people of Malabar are of three kinds: (1) Kaivisham or poisoning food by incantations; (2) the employment of Kuttichattan, a mysteriously working mischievous imp; (3) setting up spirits to haunt men and their houses, and cause illness of all kinds. The most mischievous imp in Malabar demonology is an annoying quip-loving little spirit as black as night, and about the size of a well-nourished twelve-year-old boy. Some people say that they have seen him vis-à-vis, having forelock. There are Nambutiris in Malabar to whom there are so many missiles, which they may throw at anybody they choose. They are, like Shakespeare's Ariel, little active bodies, and most willing slaves of the master under whom they happen to be placed. Their victims suffer from unbearable agony. Their clothes take fire, their food

¹. A.C. Haddon, "Magic and Fetishism", (Religions, ancient and modern), 1906, 51.
turns to ordure; their beverages become urine; stones fall in showers on all sides of them; but curiously not on them; and their bed becomes a bed of thorns. With all this annoying mischief, Kuttichathan or boy satan does no serious harm. He oppresses and harasses but never injures. A celebrated Brahman of Changanasserie is said to own more than a hundred of these chathans. Household articles and jewellery of value may be left in the premises of homes guarded by chathan, and no thief dares to lay his hand on them. The invisible sentry keeps diligent watch over his master's property, and has unchecked powers of movement in any medium. As remuneration for all these services, the chathan demands nothing but food, that in a large measure. If starved, the chathans would not hesitate to remind the master of their power, but, if ordinarily cared for, they would be his most willing drudges. As a safeguard against the infinite power secured for the master by Kuttichathan, it is laid down that malign acts committed through his instrumentality recoil on the prompter, who dies either childless or after frightful physical and mental agony. Another method of oppressing humanity, believed to be in the power of sorcerers, is to make men and women possessed with spirits. Here, too, women are more subject to their evil influence than men. Delayed puberty, permanent sterility, and still-births, are not uncommon ills of a devil-possessed woman. Sometimes the spirit sought to be exercised refuse to
have the victim, unless the sorcerer promises them a habitation in his own compound, and arranges for daily offering being given. This is agreed to as a matter of unavoidable necessity, and money and lands are conferred upon the mantravadi Nambutiri to enable him to fulfil his promise.¹

Even now, hysteria, epilepsy, and other diseases, are, in Malabar, ascribed to possession by devils, who can also cause cattle disease, accidents, and misfortunes of any kind. Throwing stones on houses and setting fire to the thatch, are supposed to be their ordinary recreations.²

Again with regard to the prevalence of astrology in Kerala Mr. Govinda Nambiar³ writes: "when a village doctor attending a sick person finds that the malady is unknown to him, or will not yield to his remedies, he calls in the astrologer, and subsequently the exorcist, to expel the demon or demons which have possessed the sickman. If the devils will not yield to ordinary remedies administered by his disciples, the mantravadi himself comes, and a devil dance is appointed to be held on a certain day ...... Amidst the beating of drums and blowing of pipes, the magician bite live cocks, and suck with ferocity the hot blood". One may wonder if he hears the news that even now this type of crude customs

1. Edgar Thurston, Omens and Superstitions, pp. 287-289.
2. B. Govinda Nambiar, Indian Review, May, 1900.
3. Ibid., May, 1900.
are practised here and there and in strict secrecy. Sometimes
a sorcerer makes an evil spirit take a vow that it will not
trouble anyone in the future, and in return, offers it the
blood of fowls, a goat, etc. He then orders the spirit to
climb a tree, and drives three large iron nails into the trunk
thereof. An iron is disliked by evil spirits, the result is
to confine the spirit in the tree, for it cannot descend
beyond the nails. These practices are also reported to be
prevalent among certain castes even now.

There are a lot of mischievous and barbarous
beliefs, customs and practices which will consume volumes, if
attempted to, but still it is a fact that there are a lot of
people supposed to be elite, cultured and rational, who are
willingly or unwillingly observe these wild customs when
necessitated by circumstances beyond control.

Divination and Fortune Telling

It has been said that "men not only attempt to act
directly upon nature, but they usually exhibit a keen desire
to be guided as to the best course to take when in doubt,
difficulty, or dangers, and to be forewarned of the future.
The practice of divination is by no means confined to profes-
sional magicians, or even to soothsayers, but any one may
employ the accessory means".1

1. A.C. Haddon, "Magic and Fetishism". (Religion ancient and
Of professional diviners in Southern India, perhaps the best example is afforded by the Kaniyans of Kerala, where caste name is a Malayalam corruption of the Sanskrit Ganika, meaning astrologer. Kings and great persons used to send to call them, and ask them what they desire to know. They are great diviners and pay great attention to times and places of good and bad luck. The merchants even now take care to do their business at the time which these astrologers advise them, and do the same in their journeys and marriages.

Mr. Logan\(^1\) says that it would be difficult to describe a single important occasion in everyday life when the Kaniyan is not at hand, foretelling lucky days and hours, casting horoscopes, explaining the causes of calamities, prescribing remedies for untoward events, and physicians for sick persons. He is even consulted to find lucky days and moments for setting out on journeys, commencing an enterprise, giving a loan, executing a deed etc. For such important occasions as births, marriages, etc., they are indispensable. His most lucrative business lies in casting horoscopes, recording the events of man's life from birth to death, pointing out dangerous periods of life, and prescribing rules and ceremonies to be observed by individuals for the purpose of propitiating the gods and planets, and so averting the calamities of dangerous times.

He also shows favourable junctures for the commencement of undertakings. Even now some people believe and put their trust in a class of people called Velichchapad, who are regarded as oracles in Kerala.

The nomad Koravas or Yerukalas or Kakkathikal even now earn a livelihood partly by telling fortunes. These women proceed with baskets and winnowing tray to a village, proclaiming their ostensible profession of tattooing and soothsaying, which they do for gain or money. When unfortunate village women, who always lose their children or often fall ill, consult these women moving about. These women, who are sufficiently trained to speak in suitable language, are clever enough to give out some yarns in equivocal terms, so that the anxious women, hope for better futurity, understand them in the light uppermost in their own minds. They will be duly rewarded.

Some Agricultural and Rain Making Ceremonies

There are, even now, certain rituals and ceremonies practised by people in Kerala. Among the agricultural ceremonies, 'Vishu' the first of the Malayalam month Medam is celebrated throughout Kerala.
Mr. C. Karunakara Menon speaks something on Vishu as the feast of the verbal equinox, celebrated on the first of the Malabar month Medom, between the 10th and 14th of April. To the Tamilians it is the New Year's day, but to the people of Kerala, it marks the commencement of the new agricultural year. The first thing seen on the morning of Vishu day is considered as an omen of the whole year. Every Malayali takes care, therefore, to look at an auspicious object. Arrangements are accordingly made to have a 'kani', which means a sight or spectacle. After the first sight, the elders make presents of money to the junior members of the family and to the servants. After the distribution of money, the most important function on Vishu morning is the laying of the spade-furrow, as a sign that cultivation operations have commenced.

The Vishu phalam finds a place in the native Malayalam calendar or Panchangam even in this seventies, and people usually take a note of it as and when they get the calendar on every Malayalam new year day. This also shows the irrational approach of the people towards life situations even in this space age.

Rain-making ceremonies are also not alien to the taste of the people of Kerala, though not widely practised.

The following quaint superstitions relating to the origin of rain are recorded by Mr. Gopala Panikkar.¹ "In the regions above the earth, there are supposed to exist large monsters called Kalameghathanmar, to whom is assigned the responsibility of supplying the earth with water. These monsters are under the direction and control of 'Indra', and are possessed of enormous physical strength. They have two huge horns projecting upwards from the sides of the crown of the head, large flashing eyes, and other remarkable features. All the summer they are engaged in drawing up water from the earth through their mouths, which they spit out to produce rain in the rainy season. A still ruder imagination ascribes rain to the periodical discharge of urine by these monsters. Hence, in some quarters, there exists a peculiar aversion to the use of rain water for human consumption".

Animal Superstitions

The Keralites also have some superstitious notions about animals or related to the animal kingdom.

The five products of the cow, known as panchagavyam — milk, curd, butter, urine and faeces — are taken by certain people to remove pollution from confinement, a voyage across the seas, and other causes.¹

It is stated by Mr. Gopala Panikkar² that, "people believe in the existence inside the earth of a precious stone called manikkakallu. These stones are supposed to have been made out of the gold, which has existed in many parts of the earth from time immemorial. Certain serpents of divine nature have been blowing for ages on these treasures of gold, some of which dwindle into a small stone of resplendent beauty and brightness called manikkam. The moment their work is finished, the serpents are transformed into winged serpents, and fly up into the air with the stones in their mouths".

Still another version is that³ people in Kerala believe that snakes guard treasure.

In Kerala, it is believed that snakes wed mortal girls and fall in love with women. The snake is said, never to use its fangs against its chosen woman. So strong is the belief that women in Kerala would think twice before attempting to go by themselves into bush.¹

There is, in Kerala, a class of people called mantravadis, (dealers in magical spells), who are believed to possess a hereditary power of removing the effects of snake poison by repeating mantrams, and performing certain rites. If a house is visited by snakes, they can expel them by reciting such mantrams.²

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