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TRANSACTIONS
OF THE
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Held in London in September, 1874.

EDITED BY
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ON THE

HINDU DOCTRINE OF EXPIATION.

BY PROFESSOR STENZLER.

THE doctrine of expiation (*prāyaścitta*) is one of the most powerful means in the hands of the Hindu priests for exercising an influence on the people at large.

It generally forms the third principal part of the contents of their law-books. The two other parts are the *ācāra*, the customs and manners of family and social life, and the *vyavahāra*, or judicial proceeding, that is to say, civil and criminal law, the execution of which constitutes a duty of the king.

There is one circumstance which affords a peculiar interest to all historical researches on the gradual development of Hindu life in its various spheres and directions. This is the possibility they offer of tracing back almost every institution of the present time through thousands of years, until we observe its first germ in the Vedic times.

And this whole development of Hindu life has mainly proceeded from the spirit of the nation itself.

From time to time indeed a foreign seed has fallen on Indian soil; the Hindus have nursed and assimilated it to their own life, but it has not been able essentially to alter the national character of the people. The present generation still remembers the same gods whom their forefathers adored thousands of years ago. Even to-day every father impresses upon the mind of his son those rules of behaviour which we find traced out with such nicety in the ancient law-books. Even now the goods and chattels of a father are entailed

upon those members of the family who are entitled to inherit them by the *Dharmaçāstra* of the *Mānavas*.

The nations of Europe offer a remarkable contrast to this appearance. One of the most important points is the change of religion. The whole dough of Paganism has been leavened by Christianity, the power of which even the Greek spirit, whatever we may think of the charms of its productions or of the clearness and strength of its argumentations, has not been able to withstand. Moreover, a great many customs, originating in Roman Paganism, but afterwards dressed in a Christian garment, have been obtruded on the other nations of Europe by the missionaries of the Roman Catholic Church, under the pretence of their being essential elements of the Christian religion.

From this point of view it will be of some interest to observe how the doctrine of atonement or expiation, which even at the present time has so enormous an influence on Hindu life, has originated and has been gradually changed, so as to receive its present form.

I will try, as far as my literary resources allow, to give a broad outline of the history of this doctrine.

The word by which atonement or expiation is designated is *prāyaçcitta*, or in the older writings *prāyaçcitti*.

It does not occur in the songs of the Rigveda, but we find it very often employed in the prosaic writings of the Vedic period, in the *Brāhmaṇas* and in the *Sūtras*, though in a sense different from that which it has in later times.

It does not mean there an *expiation* of a *sin* committed, but merely a remedy for redressing a grievance or removing a mischief. I will quote only one of numberless instances; we find in the T. S. (2, 1, 4, 1) the following passage: *asāv ādityo na vyarocata, tasmai devāḥ prāyaçcittim aichan*: "Yonder sun did not shine, then the gods sought for a remedy," where the commentary appropriately explains it by *pratikāra*.

A very common application of the word is the following. Whenever in a sacrifice any negligence has been committed or an untoward accident has happened, the success of the sacrifice would be entirely annihilated unless a *prāyaçcitta*, a remedy, were instantly applied. So, *e.g.*, when the sacrificer has incautiously uttered an improper worldly word, the *prāyaçcitta* consists in immediately pronouncing

a verse addressed to *Vishṇu*. Other *prāyaścittas* are ordained, when the sacrificer by imprudence has chosen a priest who by some reason is not entitled to co-operation in the sacrifice, or when any vessel used in the sacrifice is broken by accident, and so in similar cases.

With the same meaning the word appears also in the *Çrauta Sūtras*, e.g. *Açv. Çr. S.* (3, 10): *vidhyaparādhe prāyaścittiḥ*, "When any precept (regarding the sacrifice) has been violated, a *prāyaścitti* must take place," that is to say, a remedy must be employed to remove the evil consequences of this violation.

In later times the word is more directly transferred to the moral sphere. In *Pāraskara's Gri. Sū.* (3, 12) we find an *avakīrṇi-prāyaścitta*, i.e. a *prāyaścitta* of him who has broken the vow of chastity. But even here it does not clearly appear whether *Pāraskara* considers the deed committed as a sin, to which the man has been tempted, "drawn away of his own lust and enticed," and which, therefore, he might have avoided by strength of will, or whether he takes it merely for a mishap, which befell him without his own culpability. Even the public confession of his sin, which *Pāraskara* ordains (*svakarma parikīrtayan*), may be taken as pointing to either side. Both notions seem to be blended with each other, and indeed we observe that by and by moral evils, by which a man is visited, are treated exactly in the same manner as corporal diseases.

Passing over to later times, we find the moral *prāyaścitta*, or the real atonement or expiation, treated of in the *Dharmasūtras*, and in their transformations the *Dharmaçāstras*.

There is a remarkable passage in *Gautama's Dharmasūtra*, which, if I am not misled by the very incorrect MS. of the Berlin Library, may be thus literally translated.

"I have declared the law of the castes and the law of the classes (*āçrama*).

"Now this person (or this soul? *ayam puruṣaḥ*) becomes defiled by a reprehensible deed.

"Such a deed is: performing a sacrifice for a person for whom one must not offer sacrifices; eating forbidden food; uttering words which ought not to be said; not doing what is ordained, or doing what is forbidden.

"For such a deed he must perform an expiation.

"Some persons reason (*mīmāṃsante*) he must not do it.

“He must not do it, they say, because the deed does not perish.

“Others say ; he must do it.”

The words, “the deed does not perish,” which are here attributed to the opponents of expiation, contain the substance of the *karmavipāka*, or the doctrine of the ripening of the deeds, according to which every deed which a man commits draws on him those consequences which it necessarily must have in the course of the natural development of the universe.

Now the doctrine of expiation rests on the conception that a man is able to annihilate the consequences of an evil deed by another deed.

The doctrine of the *karmavipāka* is indeed also held by *Gautama* ; he teaches it in the 20th chapter of his *Dharmasūtra*. If, nevertheless, he insists upon the necessity of expiation, the difference of the opinions is this.

The opponents of expiation, to whom *Gautama* alludes, hold that a deed once committed can by no means be reduced to nought ; its consequences will inevitably ensue ; therefore expiation is useless.

This opinion *Gautama* states as the *pūrvapaksha*.

In giving then his own *siddhānta* in the words, “he must do it,” he does not condescend to controvert the opposite opinion by reasoning, but, a true believer in divine revelation, he opposes to it the authority of the Vedas, e.g. a passage of the *Çatapatha-Brahmana* (13, 3, 1, 1), *tarati sarvam pāpmānam, tarati brahmahatyām, yo ’çvamedhena yajate*, i.e. “he who performs the *Açvamedha* overcomes all sin, even the murder of a *Brāhmaṇa*.”

In the *Dharmaçāstras*, with the *Mānava* at their head, we find the doctrine of expiation much more fully discussed and systematically represented.

I do not intend to enter into the single points of the doctrine, but I will only try to select some leading topics, which may afford a view of the different steps, by passing which the doctrine received its actual form.

The first point is the *classification* of the different sins which have to be atoned for by acts of expiation.

The class of *great sins* (*mahāpātaka*), which in most of the *Dh. Ç.* stands at the head, appears already in a verse quoted in the *Chāndogya-Upanishad*. There is, however, one significant difference. The

stealing of *gold in general*, which the verse mentions, is in most of the *Dh. Ç.* restricted to the *gold of a Brāhmana*.

The *Vishṇu Dh. Ç.* seems to stand alone in setting up a class of *excessive sins (atipātaka)*.

After the enumeration of the different transgressions, there follows the *karmavipāka*, the ripening of the actions, above mentioned.

Before the sinner is born again, he must remain a long time in one of the different hells, in the description of which the lawyers have given full play to their imagination. The *Taittirīya-Araṇyaka* mentions no more than four hells, whereas the *Mānava Dh. Ç.* enumerates twenty-one, and in Buddhism their number is, according to *Hardy*, raised to 136.

After having suffered an appropriate time in hell, the sinner returns into this world, and is born here in a state such as he deserved by his sins, either in the body of an animal, or in a low state of society, or affected with some bodily deficiency.

Now in order to escape these painful consequences of a sin, a man must perform expiation. Since, however, each peculiar sin can only be removed by a peculiar act of expiation, it is of the greatest importance that the sinner choose the correct expiation.

In order to be informed on this point, he must apply to a *parishad*, i.e. to an assembly or a court consisting either of *ten* persons (*daçāvārā*), who are acquainted with the Vedas, the philosophical systems and the *Dharmaçāstras*, or of *three* persons (*tryavārā*), or he may even consult only *one* person acquainted with the Vedas.

It is on this institution that not only the influential position of the priests, but also their livelihood, seems even in the present time in a great measure to rest.

I need not expatiate on their social position. It is well known, that as early as in the *Brāhmanas* they are called the *visible gods*. We find the same exaggeration in the early Christian church, e.g. in the *Constitutiones Apostolorum* (ii. 26) it is said of the bishop: οὗτος ὑμῶν ἐπίγειος θεὸς μετὰ θεόν, "this is your terrestrial god, next to God." The high degree of their infallibility has found a remarkable expression in *Parāçara's Dh. Ç.*: "Whatever the *Brāhmanas*, driving along on the chariot of the *Dharmaçāstra*, with the sword of the Veda in their hands, whatever they say,

even by way of jest (*krīḍārtham*), that is declared to be the highest law."

With regard to the *pecuniary profit* accruing to the priests from this institution, the regulations of the different law-books show a conspicuous progress to their advantage.

In the first place it is but fair and reasonable that either the members of the *parishad*, or the single priest, who advised the sinner on the expiation to be performed, should receive a fee for this advice. Waiving this point, there are some expiations which consist of a religious act *and* a gift, and in these an important change takes place in the course of time. For the killing of a *Çūdra*, *Gautama* prescribes a religious act *and* the gift of ten cows and a bull. The *Mānava Dh. Ç.* leaves the option between the religious act and the gift of the cows. Now out of this alternative, an appraisement of the different acts of expiation has arisen, which is fully represented in the modern works on expiation, and seems to be still now in use.

A passage of the *Dh. Ç.* of *Samvarta* forms the basis of the price current of the expiations. There it is said: "If a man is not able to perform the expiation called *Prājāpatya*, he must give a milch cow, and if he has no cow, he must give the price of it."

According to this calculation, a man who has to perform another expiation, which is reckoned seventeen times as heavy as the *Prājāpatya*, may give seventeen cows, or the price of them in money. This money, of course, falls again into the pockets of the priests who formed the *parishad*.

Here now I come to a point on which I have not been able to find information in the books to which I have had access.

I do not know how the formation of a *parishad* is effected, or whether there are certain regulations, by which a man, who will perform an expiation, is directed to an individual priest; in short, whether, there exists in civil communities a kind of religious or ecclesiastical division, by means of which every person belongs to a particular parish, or has, as it were, a fixed confessor.

When I met Prof. Kielhorn on his visit in Europe, three years ago in Leipzig, I conversed with him on the law of expiation, and he told me it happened very often that a pupil of Deccan College

did not appear in the class, and was excused by the statement that he had a *prāyaścitta* to perform. The Professor could not answer my question, who it was that dictated to him the *prāyaścitta*, and promised to make inquiries about it.

I have here brought forward this question in the hope that perhaps one of the many scholars present may have had or will have from actual observation an opportunity of giving us information on a point on which the law-books are silent; which, however, seems to be of some importance for a penetration into the interior relations of Hindu life.

In conclusion, I may be allowed shortly to hint at the coincidence of the Hindu Law of Expiation with the Penitential Canons of the Christian Church of the early middle ages, particularly with those composed by Irish, British, and Anglo-Saxon priests.

I refer to the critical collection of these canons published by Prof. *Wasserschleben* of *Giessen*. Some of the points, in which they nearly agree with the Indian law-books, are the following.

The *four great sins* of the *Penitential Canon of Theodore* are the same as those of the *Chānd. Up.* and the *Dharmaśāstras*.

The moral transgressions and their expiations are treated exactly like bodily diseases and their cure; even in the *Roman Catechism*, which is now in use in the Roman Church, the priests are compared to physicians, just as is done in the Indian treatises on *prāyaścitta*.

The redemption of an expiation by money is permitted on both sides. Also the substitution of other persons in the performance of an expiation is allowed in Europe as well as in India. In the Dh. Ç. of *Angiras* it is ordained, that for a child between five and eleven years of age, his *Guru* or a friend shall perform the *prāyaścitta*, and the *Brahma Purāṇa* says, that a sick person, an old man and a child shall always have the *prāyaścitta* performed by another person.

In the same manner the *Venerable Bede* allows a man, who is not able to sing a number of psalms, enjoined to him as a penance, to choose a righteous man who may do it in his stead and at his expense. In *King Edgar's Penitential Canon*, an expedient is declared, by which a rich man, who has to perform fasting for seven years, may discharge himself of his heavy penance in an easy manner. He

needs only to hire some 800 persons to fast in his stead, and they will accomplish his penance in three days.

I forbear entering into further particulars, because I am not inclined to derive this similarity from a historical connexion. But I am of opinion that an accurate comparison of them will not merely satisfy the transitory interest of curiosity, but by affording a view of the moral state both of the Indian and of the European nations, will lead us to form a just and mild judgment on our brother people on the borders of the Gangā.
