

THE GENESIS OF THE MALAYALAM ERA

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THE Malayalam Era is known as the Parasurama Abda or Kolla Varsa. According to the popular view in Travancore and Cochin, it was started in 825 A.D. in pursuance of the decision of a body of learned men of Kerala who, it is said, had met at Quilon early in that year. Such a view, however, does not seem to be based on any reliable tradition, whatever. History has not recorded any occurrence sufficiently remarkable to justify 825 A. D. being made the starting point of an era for the whole of Kerala, extending from Gokarnam to Kanyakumari. Further, on the basis of this view, we cannot find any satisfactory explanation as to why, in Malabar, the year is reckoned from Kanya whereas in Travancore and Cochin it starts with Simha, or one month earlier. Nor can we find any astronomical reason for beginning the year with either of these months at so recent a date as 825 A. D. For neither Simha nor Kanya was distinguished by the entry into it of the summer solstice marking the commencement of the Varsa Rtu within thousands of years of that date.

Parasurama Era

Malabar has quite a different tradition in regard to the origin of this era. According to the famous traveller, Dr. Francis Buchanan, the people there reckoned by the era of Parasurama, in cycles of a thousand years each, the month of Kanya in 1800 A. D. marking the beginning of the 976th year of the cycle then current. This means that 825 A. D. marked, not the beginning of the era itself, but of the very last of its completed thousand year cycles. In other words, the era itself began in the year 176 of some millennium, B. C.

Before I set about defining this particular millennium I will just mention one or two basic facts regarding the calendar followed by our remote ancestors. They generally reckoned their year from the winter solstice which always marks the true beginning of the Uttara-ayana. Occasionally, however, their year started at the summer solstice which marks the commencement of the Dakshina-ayana, as well as of the Varsa-rtu. When so commenced, the year was termed Sama as marking the middle point of the ordinary Ved. year. It is interesting to note that the English word 'Summer' has the same origin as the term 'Sama'. This year is also termed 'Abud' give water, or 'Varsa', both in view of the fact that it starts with the rains or the Varsa.

Summer Solstice; Year's Starting Point

Another important circumstance to be borne in mind is the fact that the two ayanas constantly shift backwards their points of commencement in relation to the Naksatras. In fact, each of them completes a whole round of the sidereal Zodiac in about 26,000 years, taking approximately 2200 years for traversing each of the twelve signs. For example, if, in a certain year, the Dakshina-ayana started at the end of Kanya, at the end of the next 2,200 years, this starting point will have shifted to the end of the previous sign, viz., Simha. The year was reckoned from the day following the Amavasya at or immediately before the Ayanasam-kramana. And, because our era is known as Parasurama Abda or Kolla-Varsa we may take it that, originally, its years were Samas or started at the summer solstice.

Bearing these simple facts in mind, let us now proceed with our inquiry regarding the genesis of this era. We naturally expect to find the necessary clue to its origin in the fact that it takes its name from Parasurama. If, therefore, we succeed in defining the epoch which marked the end of the career of this great warrior-sage, we shall have fixed up the era itself.

Legend of Bhrgu

There can be little doubt regarding the historicity of the illustrious family of the Bhrgus, and of Parasurama the greatest among them. But in our ancient literature, their portraits are so thickly overlaid with the legends of the heavens that they are now no more than the records of astronomical events observed in some far-off antiquity. Here is a brief account of the origin of the Bhrgus as given in our Vedic and epic literatures.

Varuna held a great sacrifice at which were present all the Gods and Goddesses. At the sight of these Goddesses, Brahma dropped his seed to the ground. The moistened particles of earth were at once gathered and thrown into the sacrificial fire. And from the flames came forth Bhrgu endowed with the splendour of the sun. Him Varuna adopted as his own first born.

अर्षिषि भृगुः संबभूव तं हि सूर्यवर्चसं भृगुं
वरुणः पूर्वमपत्यं जग्माह ।

Now according to Vedic mythology, Varuna is the ruler of the divine night which is only another name for Daksina-ayana. रात्रिः स्यादक्षिणायनं. Varuna is also the God of the rains, which commence with the दक्षिणायन. That Bhrgu, endowed with solar splendour, was born at the beginning of Varuna's यज्ञ is only the mythological way of saying that the Bhrgus represent the sun at the summer solstice. Parasurama,

therefore, was none other than the flaming orb at his starting on his southward course. His patronymic जामदग्न्य 'child of the all-consuming fire' is, in the circumstance, one eminently appropriate. It is, therefore, quite in the nature of things, that the era associated with his name should start with a दक्षिण अयन at the commencement of the rains. The terms Abda and Varsa applied to the years of this era perfectly accord with this conclusion.

The following legend in the Ramayana provides all the necessary data for the exact determination at the year which marked the commencement of this era. Sita was wedded to Rama Dasarathi on Uttara Phalguni or उत्तरं नक्षत्रं. The next morning, before हस्तनक्षत्रं had ended, Rama, Sita and others started for Ayodhya. They had not proceeded far when they noticed with terror that the sun had become invisible and the whole landscape had been plunged in total darkness. In the midst of this terrifying gloom, they saw standing before them Rama the son of Jamadagni holding out the जामदग्न्य bow, challenging Sri Rama to draw the same. The latter quietly snatched it, and, drawing it with ease, fitted an arrow to it. At this Parasurama got thoroughly unnerved, and humbly sought Rama's permission to retire into the solitude of Mahendragiri. Presently the darkness cleared and the landscape was again bathed in the sun's glory. Then turning to Varuna, Sri Rama entrusted to him the bow with the arrow he had fitted to it.

Symbolic Significance

Varuna, as I have already stated, is the ruler of the period of the Daksina-ayana. The bow that Rama entrusted to him is the insignia of his royalty, and symbolises the half of the ecliptic covered

by the southward course of the sun. It is exactly in this sense that the तैत्तिरीय आरण्यक speaks of it in the Mantra,

दिव्यस्यैका धनुरार्ती

वृथिव्यामपराश्रिता ।

Likewise, Sita also who figures prominently in the legend stands for the transition from the Uttara to the Dakṣiṇa ayana. The word comes from the same root as does सीमा 'boundary', and literally means 'she who stands at the boundary'. The Rgveda Mantra सा नः पयस्वी-दुहामुत्तरामुत्तरां समां । refers to Sita, and means, 'May Sita well stored with water, yield the same to us as milk, समा after समा, summer after summer'.

The whole legend is unmistakably astronomical in character. Divested of its mythological garb, it implies that, in a certain year, there occurred a total eclipse of the sun in the close vicinity of the bright ecliptic star Citra (Spica), and visible in Northern India during the forenoon. The occasion was also distinguished by the occurrence of the summer solstice at the end of the eclipse or within ten days after it. For, in those far-off days, our ancestors could define the solstices only within a margin of ten or twelve days, the दशह

the द्वादशह mentioned in the Veda. It is in allusion to this fact that the great Vedic scholar Max Muller has observed, 'Whether this time lasted ten or twelve nights should have been difficult for more experienced astronomers than the Vedic Rsis to determine'. It is to this uncertainty in regard to the exact day of the summer solstice in the year of Parasurama's discomfiture that we owe the institution of the Dasara or ten-night festivals from the first day of the Asvina month, namely, from the new moon in Kanya ending the month of Prosthapadi. This particular total eclipse of the sun, occurring as it did in the close proximity of the summer solstice near the brightest of

the ecliptic stars is a combination of celestial phenomena which may not recur in a million years. The occasion was, therefore, one eminently worthy of being immortalised as the starting point of an era associated with the name of the departing glory personified in Parasurama Jamadgnya.

Date of the Eclipse

On a careful calculation, I find that this eclipse occurred in 6176 B. C., when the sun and the moon were in the first quarter of Citra Nakṣatra, the actual solstice itself occurring on the third day of the month of Asvina. Therefore, this year marks the commencement of the era. And it will be observed that this conclusion perfectly accords with the ancient tradition in Malabar as recorded by Dr. Buchanan in 1800 A. D. In explaining the implications of this tradition, earlier in this talk, I pointed out that the era must have begun in the year 176 of some millennium B. C. 6176 B. C. is exactly that year in the seventh millennium B. C.

Originally, the year started with the month of Asvina. When, subsequently, the solar months came into vogue, it came to be started with Kanya as we have it now in Malabar. About 3900 B. C. the solstitial colure entered Simha, and passed out of it to Kataka in the neighbourhood of 1700 B. C. It must have been some time during this interval that the year came to be reckoned from Simha. By 500 A. D., the colure had shifted to Mithuna. Therefore 825 A. D. could have had nothing to do with the practice of reckoning the year from Simha.

From my investigations I find that the Saptarsi era, the Dasara festivals in Asvina, the Rama-Sita festivals for the Peruvian Indians, the Sama-upa-karma ceremony on Prosthapadi Hasta had, all of them, their origin in the same celestial event as I have described. Though they have all long lost their astronomical significance, still they are of great historical value as preserving for us the memory of an astronomical event hallowed by more than 8,000 years of unbroken observance.—Talk broadcast from the T. B. S. on Malabar New Year Day (17-8-45)