

## The Hook-Swinging Ceremony as I Saw It.

BY THE REV. JOSHUA KNOWLES.

The able representative of the London Missionary Society in Pareychaley, Travancore, South India, sends his personal impressions of one of the most extraordinary pagan festivals in the world. The devotees have iron hooks fastened into their flesh, and they are then swung high into the air at the end of a long pole.



SINCE I first went out to India in 1880 as a missionary of the London Missionary Society, I think nothing has impressed me more than the belief which many of the more ignorant classes in India firmly hold, that their

sufferings and sicknesses come upon them because their deities are displeased with them. The cause of the god's displeasure is generally attributed to failure on the part of the worshippers to perform the religious ceremonies due to the idols. And so, in order to propitiate these cruel deities, the relatives of the sick will visit the idol temple, and by offerings try to appease their wrath. Or the sick persons themselves will make vows that on their recovery they will do honour to the gods.

In the case of children, the parents or relatives will make appropriate vows on their behalf. Sanguinary offerings—either of the blood of goats or fowls, or of the sacrificer's own blood—are believed to be specially pleasing to these deities.

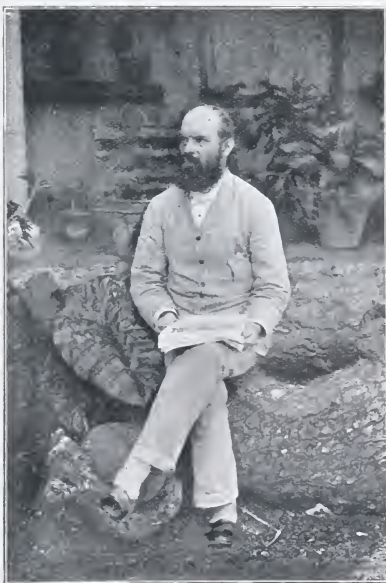
At certain festivals held in honour of the goddess Bhadra Kāli, in the Native State of Travancore, South India, the most strange and striking form which these sanguinary sacrifices take is known as Hook-swinging. The devotees have iron hooks inserted into the fleshy part of their backs, and are then swung up in the air

before the goddess. I think of all the superstitious and cruel ceremonies it has been my lot during my missionary career in India to see or to hear of, this one of Hook-swinging is (with the exception of the sacrifices under the car of Juggernaut, now prohibited by the British

Government) the most extraordinary. In one respect, viz., that infants and children are included in the ceremony, Hook-swinging is worse than the "fire-walking" sometimes practised in parts of India.\* The following is an account of a visit paid by me to the festival about eighteen months ago.

"Next week there will be the annual Hook-swinging Festival at Kollangodu. There will be many thousands of people there. We hear that some twenty men are to be swung. Will our missionary be pleased to come with us?" asked Laban, the Evangelist, of me at our fortnightly agents' meeting.

It was the end of March, and the hot season was beginning. I did not half relish the exposure to the sun I knew the visit must involve, but I had heard so much of Hook-swinging that I was desirous of seeing the festival; and also I wished to encourage the mission agents



THE REV. JOSHUA KNOWLES HAS DONE MUCH TO WEAN THE DEVOTEES FROM THIS BARBAROUS PRACTICE.  
*From a Photo.*

\* In the WIDE WORLD for May, 1893, appeared a remarkable article on the mysterious "fire-walking" practised in Fiji. Each phase of the ceremony was illustrated by a photograph.

by my presence. So I told Laban I would endeavour to be at the temple where the swinging took place early on the day of the festival. Accordingly, on the morning appointed, I took a supply of Bible portions, handbills, and pictures for sale and distribution, then got into my jinrickshaw, and set out for the temple in which were the idols in whose honour the festival took place.

The road was thronged with people of almost all castes, including a great number of women and children. The travellers were mostly on foot, with here and there a well-to-do Sudra, or Chetty family, in country carts, drawn by bullocks. The temple is near the sea-shore, and for the last two miles the road was over heavy sand along a narrow lane, so I got out, and leaving my men to bring the jinrickshaw, with my camera, on to the place, I joined the multitudes going there. At two or three places I found large crowds gathering in the court-yard of some native houses before the household gods. On inquiring I learnt that devotees were there being prepared for the Hook-swinging ceremony. The preparation, so far

as I could gather, consisted in making offerings of goats, fowls, coconuts, and flowers to the idols in the court-yard. Then, having bathed, they rubbed themselves over with oil, till their skins shone with it. There was also, it seemed, a good deal of drinking of toddy. I spoke to several of the devotees, and tried to find out what led them to offer themselves to be swung, but they were in such an excited state that I could not make out clearly their reasons. I gathered from them, however, that they did it to propitiate the goddess—though some by-

standers informed me that they were paid for being swung by the relatives of the children or sick people on whose account vows had been made. Sacrifice by deputy, in fact.

Pushing forward with the crowd, I came to the Kollangodu temple where the Hook-swinging ceremony is yearly performed. Thousands of people were gathered together, many having come from a great distance. The place had the appearance of a vast fair. There were shops and booths for the sale of rough country-woven

cloths; calicoes from Manchester; prints; native dyed goods; brass and copper household vessels; earthenware pots; and all the miscellaneous things sold in an Indian bazaar. There were also, of course, the ubiquitous arrack shops and booths for the sale of this intoxicating liquor; and here and there a knot of men gathered round some gambling-place.

Near the temple was a building with small verandas facing the temple; and on these verandas were gathered companies of Sudra women and girls, gaily dressed for the occasion, and wearing quantities of gold and silver jewellery. Here, also, I found the

tahsildar, police-officers, peons, and others, on whom devolved the charge of keeping order during the great festival.

I took a photograph of one of the Sudras here; I believe he was the village schoolmaster. I tried to include in it one of the women, but failed to obtain permission. As usual, the boys crowded round us, so some of them come in. These Sudras are generally well-to-do farmers. In North India Sudras are considered low caste, but in Travancore they rank quite high. The marks on the man's forehead and chest denote



IN THE OLD DAYS THE DEVOTEES WERE SWUNG LIKE THIS—WITH ALL THEIR WEIGHT ON THE HOOKS. [From a] [Photo.]



"I TOOK A PHOTO, OF ONE OF THE SUDRAS HERE,  
From a Photo, by the Rev. Joshua Knowles.

his religious sect; they are put on by the finger with sacred ashes. The tuft of hair on the crown of the head marks him as a Hindu, and it is by this that, according to the popular belief, the wearer is to be raised to Heaven.

In front of the temple was a booth containing the image of the goddess, called Bhadra Kālī—a cruel deity, who is supposed to delight in blood. This hideous image was decked out with jewels and garlands. Alongside of it were some other images,

such as the elephant-headed Ganesha. The priests were in attendance to receive the offerings of the people. These came forward one by one. They prostrated themselves on the ground before the idol, made salaams to the priests in attendance, put their offerings into a collecting box, not unlike a missionary box, and then gave way to others. The offerings during the day amounted, I was told, to a very considerable sum. Now and then the crowd grew greater, as the devotees who were to be swung, and the children who were to have a sad share in the ceremonies, came forward, accompanied by musicians beating tom-toms and playing Indian flutes. The devotees seemed to me half-mad as, leaping and dancing, they dashed to the front. But whether it was religious frenzy, or drink, or opium, or bhang, or all of these things combined, I cannot say.

At a little distance was the car. I took a photo. of this as a devotee was being made fast. The bottom part of this car was very much like the lorry used when transporting large logs of timber by means of elephants. There were four solid wooden wheels of thick timber, with a framework, like a railway wagon on a small scale. To this were attached two thick cable ropes. Joined to the sides of the car were two upright posts, about 15ft. high,



HERE THE SEE-SAW POLE IS LOWERED. BENEATH THE CANOPY ON THE LEFT THE DEVOTEE IS BEING MADE FAST.  
From a Photo, by the Rev. Joshua Knowles.



ALL BEING READY, THE FANATICAL VICTIM IS RAISED HIGH INTO THE AIR BY PEOPLE PULLING ON THE ROPES. THE ENTIRE STRUCTURE IS THEN DRAGGED ROUND THE TEMPLE.  
*From a Photo. by the Rev. Joshua Knowles.*

man to it, and then pulling down the other end by the ropes, the man could be raised into the air a height of some 40ft. or more. The whole car, with the man in the air, could then be dragged by the thick cable ropes around the temple. Some native carpenters were on the car, to direct the people in raising and lowering the man, and to be ready in case of any accident—a thing likely enough to happen.

The next photo., though not taken at the same festival as the others, gives us a closer view of the car of the cruel goddess

strengthened with stays and cross-pieces. On the top was a piece of thick timber, with a hole in it and the bottom rounded, which fitted into a cross-piece, and allowed the long beam on which the men were swung to move up or down. This beam was some 35ft. or 40ft. long, and about 9in. in diameter. It was placed through the hole in the piece of timber on the top of the upright frame, and balanced in the middle, like a huge seesaw. At one end of the pole was a covered canopy, and at the other long ropes were fastened, which trailed on the ground.

The whole arrangement of the car was such that, by lowering one end of the long beam to the ground and fastening a

unobstructed by a crowd. The men are Chogans of Travancore. The boy on the extreme left is



HERE WE HAVE A CLOSE VIEW OF ANOTHER HOOK-SWINGING CAR. THE DEVOTEE IS DECORATED WITH PEACOCKS' FEATHERS.  
*From a* [Photo.]

without the *kudumi*, or "Disraeli curl," which Hindu boys and men wear on their forehead. This boy and the bald-headed man to the right of the frame work are Christians. The strangely-clad swinger is being kept in position by the man below, while his photo. is being taken before he begins to swing. Over the frame above his head a mat is stretched, partly to do him honour, and partly to protect him from the sun. His head and neck are richly ornamented, and below he is bedecked with peacocks' feathers. Not so evident as these things, but much more useful, is a cloth-band which will bear at least some if not all the weight of his suffering body. The hook is passed through his back, and after being photographed he will swing to and fro in front of one of the temples.

The pain these devotees go through for the honour and glory of their god is intense. They generally take drugs and intoxicants beforehand, but, in any case, the passing of a large hook through the sinews of the back must be accompanied with excruciating agony.

I wandered about among the crowd for some time giving away handbills and conversing with the people, but they were so excited that I fear, from a missionary point of view, I made but little impression on them. Yes, they said, Christianity was good, but—what did I think of the festival? One and all were full of high expectation.

Presently I heard loud reports as of fire-arms; and going in the direction I found they proceeded from small mortars filled with gunpowder. Anyone could pay for mortars being let off, and with the report his sins flew away! So the people said. Soon followed the beating of tom-toms, the screeching of native flutes, the shouts of the crowds. The canopied end of the long beam was now lowered. The devotee lay prone on the ground below the end of the beam, and was fastened to the beam by means of ropes passing under his arms and around his chest. To some of the ropes iron hooks were fastened. The priests took hold of the fleshy part of the man's back, squeezed up the flesh, and fastened the iron hooks into it. Some four hooks at least were put through the flesh. A rudely fashioned

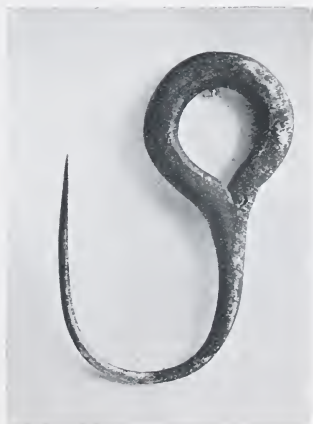
native sword and shield were then given to the man. Then, whilst the people shouted, the rope fastened to the other end of the long beam was pulled down, and the man swung upward into the air, waving the sword and shield and making convulsive movements with his legs as if dancing in the air. With shouts and cries, loud beating of tom-toms, and screaming flutes, the people took hold of the long cable ropes, and strained and tugged till the car moved forward. The place, as I have said, was very sandy; the wheels sank into the sand, so that the work was heavy. Slowly, but surely, however, the people dragged the car round the temple, a distance not quite as far as round St.

Paul's Cathedral. Some of the men were suspended while the car was dragged round three or four times. I should think that from the time the hooks were put in till they were taken out half an hour passed.

Finally the devotee was lowered to the ground, the ropes unfastened, and the hooks taken out of the flesh. I managed to secure one of the hooks—in fact, I assisted in taking it out of the man's back, and a photograph of it specially taken for this article is here reproduced. There was, of course, some bleeding; and I saw the wounds made by the hooks. This man and the others must have suffered not a little pain; but the barbarity and cruelty were to my mind a much more

offensive thing than the actual pain inflicted. Perhaps, however, that may be because I have been familiarized with surgical operations.

But barbarous as had been the above-mentioned proceedings, a greater barbarity was to follow. The next devotee was fastened in the same way to the beam, but instead of giving him a sword and shield, the priests gave him an infant in his arms, and devotee and infant were swung up into the air, and the car dragged round the temple as before. Mounting a banyan tree, I tried to secure a snap-shot as the car moved up to the stopping-place, but I failed to secure a very clear image of the devotee and hapless infant. I did not think it right to ask for a moment's delay in the horrible proceeding, so the image was a little blurred.



THIS IS THE IDENTICAL HOOK WHICH MR. KNOWLES TOOK OUT OF THE DEVOTEE'S BACK.  
From a Photo. by George Newnes, Ltd.

The terror of the little infant and the feelings of the poor mother waiting below may best be left to the imagination. The only bright ray I saw in the whole of this barbarous business was the almost tender way in which one of the men assisting gave the child into the devotee's arms. During the day about a score of devotees—some with swords and shields, and some with children—were swung in the way I have described.

On this occasion, at least, the devotees were not actually swung by the hooks alone, but by ropes and hooks. I was, however, shown some big, awful looking iron hooks—thicker than the

I believe, the ceremony had not been performed for years). The fleshy part of the man's back was first beaten to cause it to swell. Then two large hooks were fastened into the flesh, and the poor, deluded victim swung away into space, as we see him in these remarkable snapshots. The distension of the flesh caused by the hooks can be seen in the accompanying photo. The whole ceremony, however, was so brutal that I really do not care to enter into further details. The missionaries of the American Madura Mission petitioned vainly against the ceremony, but of one thing I am sure—that the best and most influential and largest portion of



HOOK-SWINGING AT MADURA. POLE DECORATED WITH COLOURED CLOTH AND FLOWERS.  
From a] MAN SWUNG BY HOOKS ONLY. [Photo.

largest butchers' variety—which I was told were formerly used in the Hook-swinging, until the Government interfered in the matter.

At Madura, in the Madras Presidency, however, some three years ago, the Hook-swinging ceremony as already described took place, and on that occasion the devotee was swung by the hooks alone, as shown in the accompanying photographs. The pole was longer than that used at Kollangodu, and it was, as seen in the photo., decorated with coloured cloth something like a barber's pole, and garlanded with flowers. Instead of being fixed on a car, a large platform was used instead. Thousands of people gathered to watch the proceedings (especially as,

the Indian people would be glad if the British Government stopped any repetition of this ceremony.

But to return to the Kollangodu festival in Travancore. Some children were brought forward whose parents had made vows about them. The little ones were then made to prostrate themselves before the image of the goddess Kālī. Then the fleshy parts of their sides were pinched up, some wires put through, just as a surgeon would sew up a large open wound. This done, the wires were placed in the hands of relatives, and in this way the suffering children were led round and round the temple, as though in leading strings. Any

cries they made were drowned by the noise of the music and the shouts of the people.

In the afternoon—but long before all the proceedings were over—I came away, with feelings of pity for the suffering children, and with a more earnest longing than ever that the people

all these tortures were entirely self-inflicted, and no one but the devotee himself need take any part in them. In Hook-swinging and side-piercing, however, there are the temple authorities, the priests, the relatives, and the people holding the ropes— all taking a distinct part,



From a]

GENERAL VIEW OF THE HOOK-SWINGING FESTIVAL AT MADURA.

[Photo.

should be taught a better way of giving themselves and their children to God's service. The day had been a very hot, sultry one, and the heavy thunderstorm which had been threatening all the afternoon burst upon us when we had gone about five miles. This, however, I learnt afterwards from my agents, did not stop the festival.

I have during my missionary life in India seen various kinds of self-inflicted torture by religious devotees and fakirs. I have seen men with iron skewers thrust through their cheeks. I have seen men walking on sandals with nails driven through. I have seen men sitting on little carts made of a board with hundreds of sharp nails driven through point upwards; and I have seen men lying naked on beds of thorns—but

and all (I hope my Hindu friends will excuse the word, but none other will express the meaning) being brutalized by the ceremony and taught to combine in a cruel rite. Then there are the infants and children, unwilling sufferers in the ceremonies; and for this reason, and on behalf of the children, I do hope every possible influence will be brought to bear to bring this barbarous and dangerous practice to an end.

Kollangodu is in Travancore. This is a Native State, having self-government and a British Resident; but the Travancore Rajahs have always been loyal to the British throne, and I believe His Highness the Maharajah would join the Madras Government in making this ceremony a thing of the past.