



Eclipse: An Ancient Indian Perspective

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Recordings of eclipses are available in texts, temple inscriptions, copper plates and legends of the land.

Through the times, we see continuity in the understanding and recording of eclipses.

Why were our ancients interested in eclipses? Why did they learn to predict eclipses?

Dos and Donts surrounding eclipse

We see there are many elaborate dos and donts surrounding eclipses which have been a tradition of this civilization. Some interesting ones that have continued to this day are

- eating food atleast 4 to 6 hours before an eclipse and not carrying forward food cooked prior to an eclipse
- the use of Dharba grass to protect food items and other perishables
- protection of pregnant women from the rays of sun during solar eclipses
- not seeing solar eclipse with the naked eye

Advice for Pregnant Women

Scientists have shown today how during a Solar Eclipse, the amount of Ultra Violet rays and other cosmic rays reaching the earth are higher. These rays are harmful to the foetus. Hence pregnant women were advised to cover themselves and stay indoors during an eclipse to protect the foetus from these rays. Even today pregnant women are advised to stay away from radiation exposure of all kinds for example X Rays.



Contamination of Food

The increased exposure to such rays also contaminates food. Carrying forward of food cooked before an eclipse is therefore not advisable. Further more, there is the need to ensure that all food in one's stomach is digested before the start of an eclipse.

Using Dharba grass

The antidote for preventing the food from contamination by radiation has been the practice of covering food with Dharba grass. This points to our ancients having used the Dharba grass as a shield to absorb the unwanted radiations in the atmosphere, especially those arising during eclipses.

Dharba grass absorbs X Rays

Nascent, independent research on Dharba grass has revealed its ability to absorb X Rays. These early finds make Dharba grass a very promising field of study.

We see a good grasp of astronomy, physics, biology and mathematics all rolled into the practice of predicting eclipses and the traditions followed during an eclipse. This holds good for a host of other astronomical observations and traditions followed too.

Donations During Eclipses

De Dhaan Chute Grahan - is a slogan one got to hear on the streets about 4 to 5 decades, during the time of eclipses.

It means Give Alms To Release The Eclipsed.

It was a common practice in India to give donations during eclipses and other cosmological events such as:

1. *Ayana*, Solstices – *Dakshinayana*, Summer Solstice and *Uttarayana*, Winter Solstice
2. *Vishnuvrata* Equinoxes – *Mesha Vishu*, Vernal Equinox and *Tula Vishu*, Autumnal Equinox



3. *Grahana*, Eclipses – *Surya Grahana*, Solar eclipse and *Chandra Grahana*, Lunar eclipse
4. *Amavasya*, New Moon
5. *Yugadi*, New Year

Many explain that such *Dhana* were given in the superstitious belief that the donor will gain relief from the evil forces that were capable of even devouring the Sun and the Moon.

On the contrary, we find from traditional literature that the people were well aware of the scientific nature of these cosmological events. They could predict their occurrences due to their understanding of the motions of the earth, moon and various planets as well as their proficiency in Mathematics, which is needed to model these motions and calculate dates for their occurrences in advance.

Dhana for noble causes was given on these significant days as these days were considered as markers of time and hence would be easily remembered over time.

Every king, landlord, *zamindar*, royalty made it a point to give *Dhana* every year from their accumulated wealth. Various kings like Krishnadevaraya, Harshavardhana and others, repeatedly gave *Dhana* every year and during such events as eclipses.

Many temple inscriptions speak about such *Dhana*, endowments made to the temple and thereby to the people at large, on the occasion of eclipses.

Eclipses continue to happen and many just ignore them. Inscriptions continue to remain as evidences of the ones gone by but are hardly known to many.

The request for alms on eclipses are no longer heard on the streets. Neither are there donors, nor are there receivers on this day.

But misconceptions about the Indian perception of eclipses continue to loom large in everyone's minds.



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