

SNAKE CHARMER

An element in the mystique of India since the first European traders reached her shores, the roots of snake charming can be traced to ancient snake-worshipping cults. Gogol Vir, the patron saint of all snakes, was the high priest of a serpent worshipping cult whose deities were known as Nagas. One day a viper which lay hidden above a door in Gogol Vir's house bit him on the back of the head, a mortal wound. As he lay dying, Gogol Vir instructed his son to cook and eat his flesh so that his magic powers might be passed on, but no sooner had the son prepared this meal than seven hungry thieves stole it. Feasting on it, they became the masters of magic and gained power over snakes. An Indian Legend of the Origin of Snake Charmers A twelve-year-old boy stands at the entrance of a circus tent, his voice adding to the din at a mela, fair, in Rajasthan: "See the Master! Yogi Raj Bengali, Master of poisonous snakes! See Aasha, the Naga Woman! Mistress of venomous creatures!" Not many in the thick crowd can hear him but it makes little difference: above his head the tent is festooned with lavishly painted signs depicting the beautiful Aasha with her reptilian fauna, and in India, even the picture of serpents is enough to draw a crowd. Inside the tent nearly one hundred Rajasthanis have already taken their seats, their chairs set in a semi-circle around a darkened wire-mesh cage. A loudspeaker crackles to life and an expectant hush falls over the audience. "I am Master Bengali" the unseen voice announces; "Watch as my protege Aasha mesmerizes the king cobra with her Naga magic! Watch deadly scorpions climb upon her face! Watch her enchant the two-headed constrictor of Rajasthan! Bet you! Bet you! Bet you never saw a sight like this!" While Bengali speaks a spotlight illuminates the cage, revealing Aasha, a zaftig vision in red satin with long black hair and dark, gypsy eyes. She stares out over her audience imperiously. Around her the floor of the cage is cluttered with wooden boxes and reed snake baskets. Bengali barks an order and Aasha moves behind a small table and opens the box which sits upon it; boas emerge, dozens of them, covering the table and slithering to the floor. Aasha picks them up by the handful and drapes them about her head and shoulders, her eyes widening at the sight of them. They flick their tongues and she imitates them, then feigns tossing them through the mesh and into the crowd: there is an instant and palpable shudder from the audience and Aasha grins at their frightened reaction. Bengali begins a steady patter broken by the occasional "Bet you! Bet you! Bet you!" and Aasha begins to throw open her boxes. More boas, then huge lizards are set free; scorpions by the handful begin to climb upon her dress and face, their tails intact and poised to strike. "Nothing may strike her!" Bengali barks; "She is protected by the power of Gods!" From one basket Aasha pulls a snake whose head and tail are identical, spins it around like a ship and snaps it into a figure-eight knot. "Which is the head? Which is the tail?" Bengali asks, then answers himself: "They both are! The only one of its kind in the world!" From a canvas bag Aasha pulls a tangled mass of electric-lime colored tree snakes, places them on her head like a Medusa's wig and struts about the cage. Her black eyes bulge, her grin is demonic. She flicks her tongue, puts a snake head in her mouth and hisses at the audience. Bengali dares anyone to climb into the cage with her: no one moves. They can't. The audience is motionless, their mouths agape, their eyes filled equally with terror and fascination. Bengali barks a new order and Aasha's expression suddenly becomes deathly serious: she collects the scorpions which crawl about her clothes and tosses them onto the mesh walls of the cage; the constrictors she pushes contemptuously to the floor. She places a latched box on the cleared table and raps the lid several times before cautiously opening it. Two spectacled cobras emerge above the box walls, their hoods flared, Aasha stares at the serpents, forms a fist and begins to move it slowly in front of them. One of the cobras follows the motion instantly but the other is agitated and snaps forward to strike; Aasha pulls her hand out of range, then concentrating on the restless cobra she begins the rhythmic fist motions again. This time both cobras follow the gently swaying motion, apparently mesmerized. Aasha breathes deeply, leans forward and lifts them from their box. Gently, she wraps them around her neck and strokes their cowls, calming them. She looks for a moment like the incarnation of some ancient Indian Deity, surveying her domain, her mystical Naga guardians standing erect on either shoulder. The tableau is so still it might be cut from stone. In the next moment she's deftly uncoiled them, replaced them carefully in the box and replaced the box on the floor. She pushes the constrictors underfoot out of her way, clearing a path to the largest of her baskets and slides it to the front of the cage. As with the cobra box she raps the basket several times before cautiously opening the lid. As she does the magnificent head and hood of a huge black king cobra, the largest venomous snake in the world, appears. Aasha and the cobra appear to lock stares for a moment, then Aasha grabs the serpent's neck and waves it in slow circles, undulating her body in an identical rhythm, almost pulsing with the snake, maintaining her grip until the cobra is willing to stand on its own. She continues her undulations using two fists to coax the beast to stand higher and higher; it follows her lead and presses itself nearly five feet from the floor of the cage, a magic rope, stately, elegant, a potentate among serpents. "Bet you never saw a sight like that!" Bengali shouts into the microphone as the snake begins to collapse under its own weight and is replaced in the basket. "Bet you! Bet you! Bet you!" ----- "Among the many strange tales which the great Macedonian conquerors brought home from the Land of the Five Rivers, those relating to serpents of gigantic size were not the least wonderful," Jean Philippe Vogel, professor of Sanskrit and Indian Archaeology, tells us in the introduction to his notable book Indian Serpent-Lore. He relates that the king of Abhisara, a hill tract south-west of Kashmir, was said to keep two serpents, "One of which was supposedly 80 cubits and the other 140 cubits in length," and that one biographer of the time relates that Alexander, "Assaulting some cities in India...found a snake which the Indians, regarding as sacred, kept in a cave and worshipped with much devotion. The Indians...implored Alexander to let no one molest the animal." The snake was said to be 70 cubits—105 feet—long, with eyes as large as Macedonian shields. No doubt, as Vogel goes on to say, the authors of those remarks exaggerated the size but not the importance of serpents in ancient India; in fact, they attest to the existence of genuine snake worship. Sherman and Madge Minton, noted herpetologists, remark in their co-authored book Venomous Reptiles: "Snake worship—ophiolatry—has been traced to prehistoric Dravidian times, before the Aryan invasion of the sub-continent in about 1600 B.C." Other authors set the dates even earlier, some tracing ophiolatry back to the phallic

cults which existed in India as early as 5000 B.C. But while the connection between snakes and the phallus is obvious and nearly universal to all early religions, it may only serve to diminish the actual importance of serpents on the sub-continent; in a land alternately swept by ravaging monsoons and severe droughts, the snakes were seen as being responsible for both extremes of nature. When monsoons came the snakes sought higher ground to escape the flooding which ensued, higher ground which was already occupied by the people of that land. And with the increased contact during those seasons, there was a wildly increased mortality rate among those inhabitants. So while the appearance of the serpents was a harbinger of a period of flooding to be followed by a renewal of the fertility of the land, they also brought with them death. Conversely, prolonged dry periods meant infrequent contact with snakes and came to be seen as times when the snakes disassociated themselves from humans. Given these physical conditions of monsoon and drought then, it was not unusual that snakes came to be associated by these ancient peoples with the forces of Nature, an association which gave rise to their belief in serpent deities, known as Nagas, to whom sacrifices were offered and temples of worship built. Among the legends of the Nagas (still believed by remnant snake-worshipping cults in some areas of Southern and Western India), were stories of Nagas haunting lakes and ponds and sources of rivers, and, while they were beneficial givers of rain, if roused to anger they sent down hail storms to ravage the crops. They were also thought to guard volcanoes and manifest themselves as lightning; they could blow their breath across the land and cause droughts or send plagues of malaria—known in India still as “snake-wind disease”—Hinduism—which like the ancient cults nearly always depicts the Nagas as the cobra—absorbed and expanded many of the serpent-worshippers’ Naga legends. Shiva, the first and oldest of the Indian trinity, is sometimes called Mahadev, king of the serpents, and is described as having a girdle of cobras and wearing cobra earrings. Vishnu rests on the coils of the Naga Shesha, the thousand-headed cobra whom Brahma appointed Lord over all poisonous and fanged creatures. In one Hindu legend, Shesha longs to abnegate evil and begs Brahma for a task which would provide him with enlightenment, and Brahma gave Shesha the world to guard, which Shesha did by wrapping his body around the earth to protect it from evil influences. In another Shesha is even given a primary role in the Hindu creation story when, during one of the periodic dissolutions of the universe Shesha’s avatar Vasuki is used as a rope and looped around a sacred mountain, then pulled back and forth by gods and demons, churning a new universe from the cosmic sea. Even Buddhist legend includes stories of the great Nagas; once, it’s said, while Buddha meditated in the desert, the Naga Muchilinda spread his great hood to protect the master from the sun. When Buddha awoke he lay his hand upon Muchilinda’s hood in gratitude, leaving behind the familiar spectacle mark common to a great many cobras. And on another occasion, when Buddha first arrived at the Ganges river, a welcoming committee of Nagas formed a bridge with their hoods for him to cross. But there were so many Nagas that they formed four bridges. Buddha, not wanting to slight any of them, courteously became four Buddhas who crossed the bridges simultaneously. Every cobra is said to possess a part of the Naga spirit and so many of the Naga legends persist throughout India today, not only as traditional Hindu lore but in common belief and superstition. When houses are built, regardless of whether the building is grand or a simple mud-hut, a metal stake is driven into the ground to prevent the Naga living there from turning and upsetting the dwelling. The Nagas, it’s also said, could assume human form, an act both male and female Nagas often performed when particularly taken with princesses or princes; many descendants of the royal families of India still trace their family histories back to one Naga or another. Too, Nagas are thought to have jewels or pearls in their hoods, which, according to Spence Hardy in his *Eastern Monochism*, “are thought to be formed in the throat of the Naga. They emit a light more brilliant than the purest diamond, and when the serpent wishes to discover anything in the dark it disgorges the substance, swallowing it again when the work is done.” A person who obtains one of these jewels is said to have power over Nagas and is assured good fortune and protection against venomous snake bite. For a human to obtain one of these jewels from the great Nagas like Shesha—whose thousand jewels upon his thousand heads light the serpent nether world—is unthinkable, but obtaining the jewel from a common cobra by stealing it while the stone, or mun, is disgorged is permissible, though should the cobra be killed during the theft great misfortune will befall the thief. In fact, the killing of any cobra, even by accident, is thought to bring such bad luck that the death is frequently followed by prayer and offerings to appease the Naga spirit. Those capable of assuring that the offering is acceptable are known in some parts of India as chelas, in others as jobis, sapiras or samp wallahs. They are the snake charmers. ----- Traditionally, snake charmers claim to be descendants of the ancient snake priests, whose living is earned performing public displays while they travel from village to village in the rural areas of Indian. Once a charmer’s credentials are validated—his work with dangerous serpents in his public performances is proof of his connection with the Naga spirit—he may be called on to execute any number of tasks the villagers need done. Unwanted snakes are removed from homes, prayers and offerings made to appease the Nagas for real or imagined slights, snake-bite remedies are provided and often charms for luck, or stones said to be muns themselves are offered for sale. The snake charmer’s equipment includes his bheen—the snake flute—snake baskets and the snakes themselves. Cobras are the overwhelming favorite of charmers, both for their religious significance and their visual effect. “Cobras are large enough to be impressive, unquestionably dangerous and unmistakable because of their spectacular rearing stance with spread hood,” say the Mintons. “The bheen,” they continue, “consists of two wooden flutes fitted with bamboo reeds and cemented with beeswax into the bottle section of a gourd. Melodies are in minor keys and the tone is resonant and piercing, with the strong beat common to most Indian ragas.” The bheen is the samp wallah’s trademark, often personalized with bits of mirror or stone or coins, and despite the fact that snakes can’t hear the melodies it plays, its use is important. The knocking on the basket prior to opening the lid puts the cobra on the alert and the appearance of the flute, seen by the snake as a potential enemy, causes the serpent to rear into its defensive stance. Once standing, the cobra’s entire forebody sways in imitation of the motion of the bheen, giving the appearance of dancing. Should the charmer sense a waning of his audience’s interest, he need only move the bheen quickly and the cobra will strike at it, hissing loudly as it does. Rarely will a snake charmer use a “hot” cobra, one whose fangs and poison glands are intact. The snake is simply too

dangerous. To “cool” the snake, its fangs are most frequently broken off near the root, leaving the cobra fully venomous but limiting its ability to strike. Some charmers cut out the entire venom system—which involves removing not only the venom glands but reservoirs, ducts and fangs on both sides of the mouth—but the damage sustained by the cobra in such an extensive operation by generally inexperienced hands frequently results in death from blood loss or resultant infection. Some charmers find it expedient to leave the entire mouth intact and simply sew it shut. Some samp wallahs resort to fantastic chicanery to make their performances profitable, particularly in cities, where competition is high and the showing of a single snake dancing for a few minutes is hardly considered cause to part with rupees. John’s Sand Boa, a harmless creature often billed as the two-headed snake because of the striking resemblance between the markings on its blunt tail and those on its head, is frequently mutilated to make the resemblance more perfect; sometimes horns are sewn onto snake heads and they are then exhibited as demon-snakes. Some charmers even specialize in exhibiting cobra-mongoose fights. The natural enemies are placed in a closed cage, and, if the audience looks prosperous enough to repay the charmer for the loss of his snake, a fight to the death ensues, a fight which the cobra, a relatively slow snake, would have no chance of surviving even if it were “hot”. Of all the samp wallahs and sapiras in India, the most well known is M.M. Bengali, a small good looking man with an intense presence and bright black eyes. Bengali is a showman of the highest order and an expert at the handling of venomous snakes, the product of five generations of practice. “My grandfather’s grandfather knew snake remedies in his village in Rajasthan. He was no priest, he just liked snakes and scorpions. His son was the same. My grandfather was the first to begin making exhibitions with snakes, just a few, and my father did the same. When I was a boy I would watch my father catching cobras from the water, and after a while I took the cobras myself. I grew up wanting to be the most famous snake charmer in India.” His eyes sparkle as he speaks; he’s appeared by request at nearly every major festival in India in the past fifteen years, and been photographed with dozens of India’s leading dignitaries. “My daughter Aasha always played with my snakes and since female sapiras are very unusual—I only know of three others in India—I decided to build a program around her. We’ve been working together since 1980. At some festivals I perform and she speaks; at others she’s the performer. The crowds love her work, but when someone asks us to work with “hot” cobras I always perform myself.” The cobras he uses in his program are “cooled” by snapping off the fangs, which leaves the venom production gland intact but reduces the snake’s capability to strike. “Not all cobras are deadly,” he laughs. “I think many people die from just the fright of having been bitten by a cobra. If you handle them gently they’ll never strike you. Of course, I keep antivenin just in case.” When asked whether he defanged the green tree vipers he and Aasha used in the show, Bengali opened the mouth of one and pointed out the fangs in the rear of the mouth. “Rear-fanged. They’ve really got to get a grip to pierce your skin. And the venom isn’t so strong. You feel a little sick, that’s all.” “The scorpions, now they’re a problem. They’re very nervous. The big black ones I use can’t kill you but they make you too sick to do anything for a day. The hardest thing is to stay calm after you’ve been stung so as not to get the others going.” On request, Bengali pulled three fresh, “hot” cobras from a box his brother, Sai Baba, the snake catcher in the family, had just shipped him. The difference between the fresh snakes and those used in typical performances was striking: their scales were bright, their hoods iridescent. They moved quickly and struck frequently at Bengali’s closed fists. Bengali stayed well out of range of them, keeping his concentration absolutely focused on their motions. Within a few minutes his clothes were damp and his face streaked with sweat. “Fresh ones are wild things,” he said. He decided to “cool” the most animated of the three, and produced a work kit and a stone. The snake’s head was pinned to the stage floor between two prongs affixed to the end of a stick. Bengali grabbed the cobra in one hand, his fingers beneath the jaw and behind the top of the head, and placed it on the work stone. With a pen knife he dug out the fangs. The snake twisted wildly in his grasp and he had to hold it down with one of his feet. Next, he cut one side of the mouth from the fang back to the venom gland; then, with a kind of fork he gouged the entire apparatus free, scraping the duct several times to ensure that no part of it remained. The procedure was repeated on the other side of the mouth, leaving the snake’s mouth bleeding badly. Gauze dampened with a little alcohol was put into the mouth to control the flow. The production over, Bengali scrubbed his hands for several minutes as a precaution to prevent any trace of venom from lingering on his skin. Asked about the training of snakes, he just smiled. “You don’t train snakes. Some, like the cobra, which is docile anyway, do get used to a certain touch, but really, snakes do whatever they want.” Despite the obvious charlatanism resorted to by many of the charmers, or the open admissions of M.M. Bengali, the samp walah continues to enjoy a place of esteem in Indian culture. A good part of that probably stems from the fact that deaths due to snake bite in that country are estimated to be in the 10,000 per annum range. But part of it must be assumed to be connected with a reaffirmation of ancient beliefs deep in the psyche of a people. “You don’t have to go very far to find people in India who still think that handling poisonous snakes requires something in the way of a magical or supernatural power,” Sherman Minton says. “It’s a very old attitude toward snakes,” his wife Madge agrees. “They’ve had it for many thousands of years and they’re not likely to lose it.” Bengali laughs. Bet you! Bet you! Bet you! Copyright © 2007 The World & I Online. 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