

# NOMADS OF INDIA ARE SAID TO BE IMMUNE TO POISON; WOMEN INDIFFERENT TO SNAKE BITES

There are many places in Calcutta where one can obtain a plentiful supply of snake venom, and it is perhaps significant that Italy is one of the largest buyers of snake venom from India. A large consignment of snake venom accidentally was discovered being dispatched to Italy the other day and on making careful inquiries a correspondent of an English paper in Calcutta was informed about the strange source from which this supply comes. At the mouth of the Ganges, the sacred river of India, there is a large tract of marshy land called the Sunderbunds. More than half of this tract still is unexplored. In the Sunderbunds there exists today a tribe of snake catchers, purely nomadic, living on boats, who ply their trade between the marshes where the most venomous of Indian snakes, the cobra and the krait, live, and the by-lanes of Calcutta where are situated the shops of the venom vendors. Eighty to 85 per cent of the total tribal strength consists of women, who feel themselves as much at home among the death-dealing reptiles as among human beings.

It is remarkable that the members of this tribe seem to possess immunity from the poison of any type of

snake, whether it be the dread hooded cobra or the spotted black snake. The English correspondent of the Statesmen, says:

"After watching a few tricks performed by the women with their cobras, cobras that had their poison glands intact and which struck at and bit the women on the face to their supreme indifference and to my absolute horror, I parted with the tribe. Before I left, though, I learned that the tribe was quite immune from the poison of any snake whatever. Certainly, from what I witnessed I did not doubt it for a moment." The women and men of the tribe have to resort to a trick, however, in order to catch the snakes. Most of the day the snakes live underground in little holes which they have usurped from the white ant or rodents—"like a cobra in a readily prepared hole," according to a common saying among Indians about persons who are too prone to allow others to work while they snatch away the prize.

However, the reptiles have one weakness which is fatal to their existence. They are music mad especially the monotonous music of the reed pipe or the gourd. The note of the pipe is the one thing on earth they are un-

able to resist. When it is being played they must leave the safe harbor of their holes and go as near to the player as they can, and then sway to the rhythm of the music. If it is possible for a player to go on for hours on end, he will find in the cobra an absolutely perfect listener. To an ordinary mortal, not belonging to this tribe, there is the danger of being quickly despatched to the other world if he fails in his notes or his rhythm. But this is not a consideration at all for these snake catchers writes a correspondent of the New York Herald-Tribune.

They get to an island, surround a likely shrub, and one of them begins to play on the reed. In about ten minutes the krait, or hooded cobra, is seen gliding into the open toward the piper. It stops near him and, raising its hood, begins to sway with the music. The piper waits till he feels that the music has got hold of the serpent, and then he plays the pipe faster and faster, and runs it up as high a scale as he can in a great burst of music and—breaks off on the top note. The snake stands motionless as if paralyzed, and then the piper calmly walks up to it, and catching hold of it under the head, pushes it down in his basket, coil upon coil. If there is more than one snake, then the other members of the party calmly appropriate them. There is a large market in Calcutta for these snakes, especially those of the poisonous variety. Besides the Zoological Gardens at Calcutta, there are innumerable princes and chieftains who

boast of zoos and always are willing to buy a few reptiles.

The immunity of these snake catchers is said to have been derived from their being descendants of a snake-man called Astika, famous in Hindu mythology. Astika was supposed to have been born of a sage and a snake maiden, and when once the King of Hastinapur was, as a matter of vengeance for the death of his father, pursuing a deadly war against snakes, Astika got the King to save the Lord of the Snakes. The Snake Lord gave a blessing to Astika and said that his descendants would never be harmed by a snake bite so long as they did not kill nor attempt to kill any snake. Then, of course, that immunity will cease. Therefore, however brave the snake catchers of the Sunderbunds may be, none of them will dare ever to kill a snake. So long as the remains in their hands they must care for it as they would for their own child. When it is sold what happens to it will be, so to say, its own funeral!

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