



GIPSY SNAKE - CHARMS AND REMEDIES

S.V.O. SOMANADER

The Ceylon gipsy indulges mainly in snake-charming for his livelihood. And, in his cloth-bag which contains his basket with the cobra within, and his flute, he carries, separately, a number of charms for snake-bite and other ills.

I cannot vouch for the efficacy of his antidotes, though he has no doubt in his own mind that the treatment he offers is bound to be successful.

Here are some pictures of the remedies which various gipsies, living their nomadic life in the sylvan glades of remote villages in Batticaloa South, had been giving me for a small consideration - at different times during interviews. I bought them to be put in to my curio-collection box, but the gipsy urged me to try them some time on some affected patient to be convinced of their genuineness. When I looked very sceptical, he laughed in sympathy, and assured me repeatedly that they would give effective results. In the captions to the pictures, I am giving the facts as the gipsies gave them to me.

1. **Nagthaly Ver** (root of *Martynia diandra*) is used as an antidote for the venom of snakes, including that of the small but deadly Ceylon Krait. It is applied with gingelly oil all over the wound, and the juice after

being rubbed in betel-leaf, is given internally to the victim. It is also rubbed in lime juice, and applied as a "kalikkam" around the eyes. It is the root which the snake-charming gipsy holds in front of his cobra to make it cover, when the angry reptile, with hood expanded, raises itself to strike. "Wear it, or rub it on your clothing and no snake will strike you, "Wear it, or rob it on your clothing and so snake strike you," he said. He has also another use for this root. When rubbed in castor oil and applied to the head and stomach-parts of an expectant mother, it reduces labour pains and facilitates and expedites child-birth.

2. **Nagthaly Seeds.** If a hole is bored through the seed and tied with a piece of thread (after being mounted, if desired, in silver or other metal as an ornamental amulet) around the waist as an "arakoodu", or worn round the neck or arm, it prevents the bites of snakes and the stings of scorpions. The sharp, hooked parts of the seed may be cut off, he said, to avoid injury to the wearer's skin. When worn by children, snakes will not come anywhere near them. This seed is also used for cattle bitten by snakes, the rubbing being done after mixing it with milk or water.



threaded round the waist or wrist. If a snake has been accidentally trodden upon, it will then never dare to strike. If preferred, a hole may be bored in the root, and, after being mounted with silver, it can be worn as a protective neck ornament. Rubbed with castor oil, this root is also used successfully in the treatment of rat-bite. The root is not found in Ceylon, but obtained from India where the plant grows. The presence of this root in the house will prevent snakes entering it. Another use of this root is to combat difficulties in pregnancy. After rubbing it in castor oil when it forms something like sandalwood paste - it is applied round the stomach and the top of the head of the expectant mother, to whom delivery then becomes easy and safe.

5. **Vella-Erikalai** (a species of *Calotropis*). The root of this plant is worn round the neck or waist, with the help of thread of three colours-black, white and red. "When so used, no snake will harm any one", he assured me.

5. **Kulla-Nari-Kompu** (horn of an animal-the skin and hairs in the picture hide the horn, though a small protuberance can be seen). It was explained to me that this was a horn found on the head of an animal like a fox or jackal not found in Ceylon. But "Sanyasis" (recluses or ascetics) from India take it and pass it on the gipsies. When worn round the waist in the form of a talisman, or carried as a charm in one's pocket, it brings the wearer success in litigation, and in various other undertakings and adventures, for

3. **Visha-Kallu** (Snake-Stones). These black, polished, seed-like stones are tightly applied to the puncture on the skin caused by snake-bite, or the stings of scorpions, centipedes and insects like bees and wasps. The gipsy pointed out that no less than 18 snake's teeth and venom mixed, among other ingredients, with the leaves of the "Siria-Nanga" plant, and the roots, flowers and leaves of the "Vella-Nagathaly" plant, went to make up the snake-stone. "The snake-stone sucked out the venom like a leech", he remarked, "and it dropped by itself in about two hours". He also pointed out that the mongoose ate the roots of these plants after fighting with a cobra. After use, the stone should be washed in cow's or coconut milk to draw out the venom from it, and preserved for future use for all snakes. It will be found that, when the stone had been dropped and washed in the milk after use, the milk turned yellowish - due to the venom. The stone is also rubbed in lime-juice or betel-juice, and given internally to the patient, apart from the juice being applied around the eyes as a "Kalikkam" to prevent them drooping or becoming drowsy after the snake-bite.

4. **Siriyangana-Ver** (root of a plant). This is worn



example, travel. It also ensures recovery from serious illness, victory over enemies, freedom from devils, besides helping one to pass examinations or earn promotion, or to make money in trade. The gipsy told me that the horn is "alive" - the hair around it will grow and has to be cropped (I have not found it to be so). He warned me that it should not be worn when one attends a funeral, for its efficacy is then lost. Nor should it be mixed in water when bathing. He asked me to regard this as a treasure and keep it in a separate place. In fact, I noticed that he took this horn out from the purse tucked in his waist, and not from the cloth-bag where he had his other charms and remedies.

7. **Tail of Puluganavy** (wild cat or leopard). It is the tail-tip of an animal found in India, and not in Ceylon. It is worn round the neck to avoid bad or fearful dreams, and also to prevent devils from coming near to frighten you, or interfering with people's affairs to their detriment. Children, especially, who are timid and impressionable, are protected from evil spirits when this tail is worn. Such is the power of this tail that even "sooniam" will have no effect. It is better to wear it as a pendant (after covering it with silver at either end for adornment) round the neck, with a ring and hook in the middle of it to hang round the neck.
8. **Pachchayilai-Moolee Kulisai** (a pill from a plant of this name). This pill is rubbed with raw ginger and certain other wild-plant ingredients (like 'ponnanchar, Valasanthri', "touch-me-not", 'pay-peeka', 'pay-pudalai', 'pay-choorai', root of 'atty', etc.) and the bile of the wild boar, and given internally to the snake-bitten patient. The mongoose too eats the leaves of this plant after its encounter with a venomous snake like the cobra. Rubbed with betel-juice, it is also applied round the eye for snake-bite. Further rubbed in lime-juice, the pill is used for injuries caused by the stings of scorpions and centipedes and by the irritations caused by creatures like tarantulas and by stinging of biting insects.
9. **Ingee (Ginger) pills**. These pills are made from ingredients composed of the roots, leaves and juices of certain wild plants and the "pittu" (bile) of the wild boar-all dried and mixed before use. Rubbed in ginger, these pills are given internally to a snake-victim and they are also applied (after rubbing them in betel-juice or mother's milk) round the patient's eyes as a "Kalikkam", soon after the snake-stone had done its work. Boiled in "verkompu" (dried ginger) water, they are also administered to people affected with worms, stomach-pains and other disorders.
10. **Pulee-Pal** (Leopard's Tooth) : When mounted with silver or gold to add to the adornment, and worn round the wrist or waist, this tooth averts the malign

influence of the "Evil Eye". If preferred, it can be suspended with a chain to be worn as an attractive neck-ornament.

11. **Bear's Claw**. This, too mounted in silver or gold for ornamentation, can be worn round the neck or upper arm- or any other 'suitable part of the body' - to prevent the malevolent effect of the "Evil Eye". No wicked demons will frighten children when it is used and there is no fear of "poothams" (wicked goblins) interfering with them, when they peep, for instance, into deep wells or dark caves.
12. **Vertebral bone of small python**. It is threaded and worn round the waist of children to keep away evil spirits from them. It is tied also round the waist of grown-ups to give them waist-strength, and to prevent waist-pain and crookedness of the body. The wearer is also freed from such ailments as flatulence caused by piles or other means, and it also heals pain in the limbs, sores, boils and skin-eruptions.
13. **Root of Sinna-Siriyanga plant**. It is rubbed in human milk and taken internally for snake-bite. It is also useful in injuries caused by stinging insects, centipedes, scorpions and tarantulas. It is applied to the wound after being rubbed in salt. Sometimes, it is blown in through the nose. If mixed with water and administered to an expectant mother, it eases her and hastens delivery.
14. **Fruit of Valampuri** (Indian Screw Tree-Helesteres isora). This fruit, spirally twisted, when dry, like a screw-like mass (as seen in picture) is worn round the upper arm with silver or other metal on both sides as ornament, especially by children. Apart the attractiveness it gives, it is an antidote against the "Evil Eye" and for the avoidance of devils. It also gives the wearer bright eyes and a generally radiant facial expression. It is also used for colic and twisting of the bowels. When rubbed in castor oil and served to children, it cures stomach-ache.
15. **Vayvalla-Kody**. When this twisted creeper is worn round the arm, there will be no danger of a bite by a snake lurking in the grass or inside an ant-hill. Found sometimes among elephant-droppings in the jungle, this creeper is also used around one's waist or arms to avert the power of devils. Equipped with this talisman, one can easily secure an iguana (land-monitor lizard, called in Sinhalese 'Talagoya' and in Tamil 'Udumboo') from inside an ant-hill without the danger of any snake harming him from within. "And even if the snake happened to bite", one of the gipsies gold me, "there would be no chance of the venom circulating through the body, and proving fatal. Further, when this is worn, no snakes, poisonous or otherwise, would come into the house".

Courtesy: Ceylon Today