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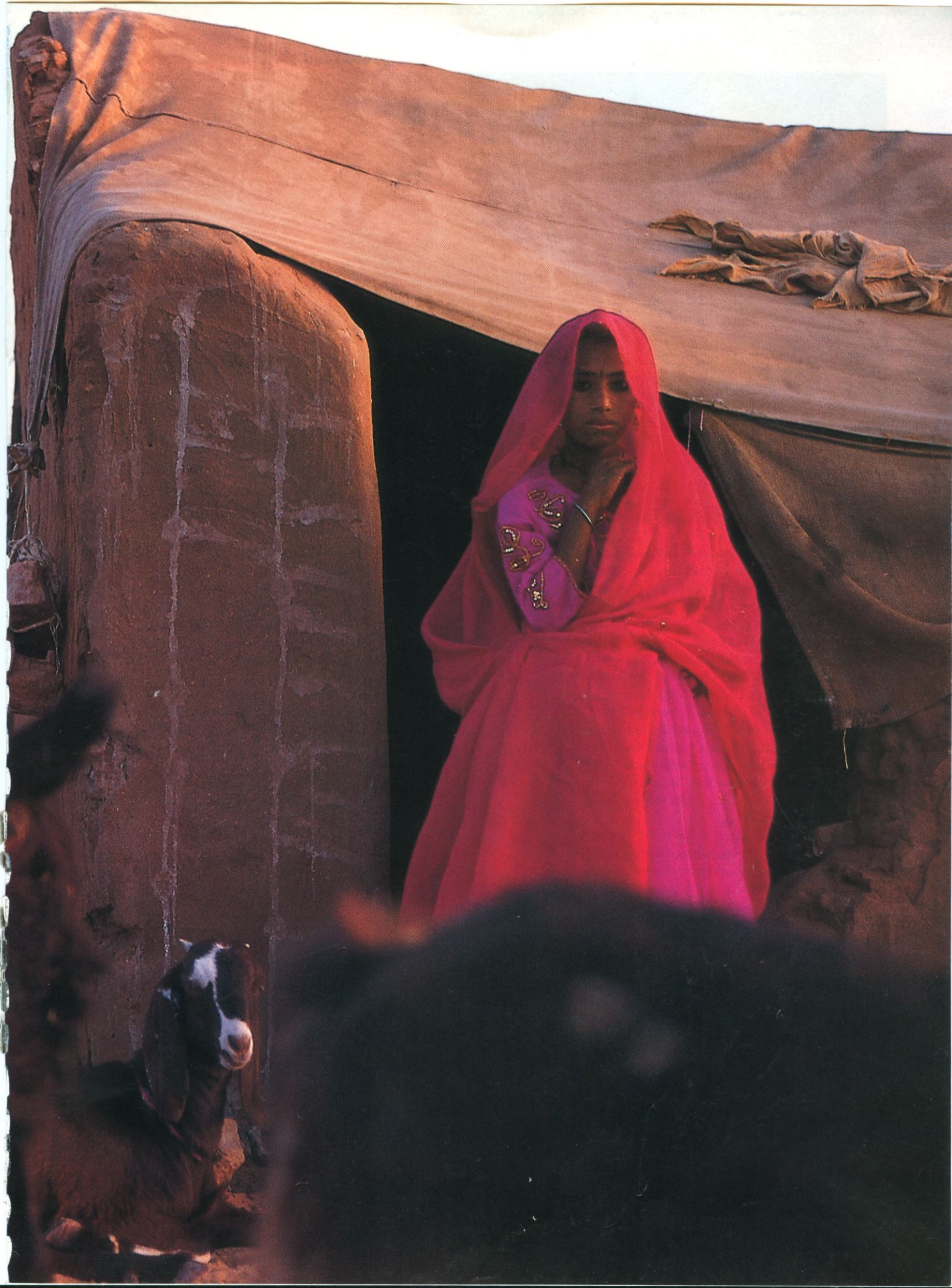
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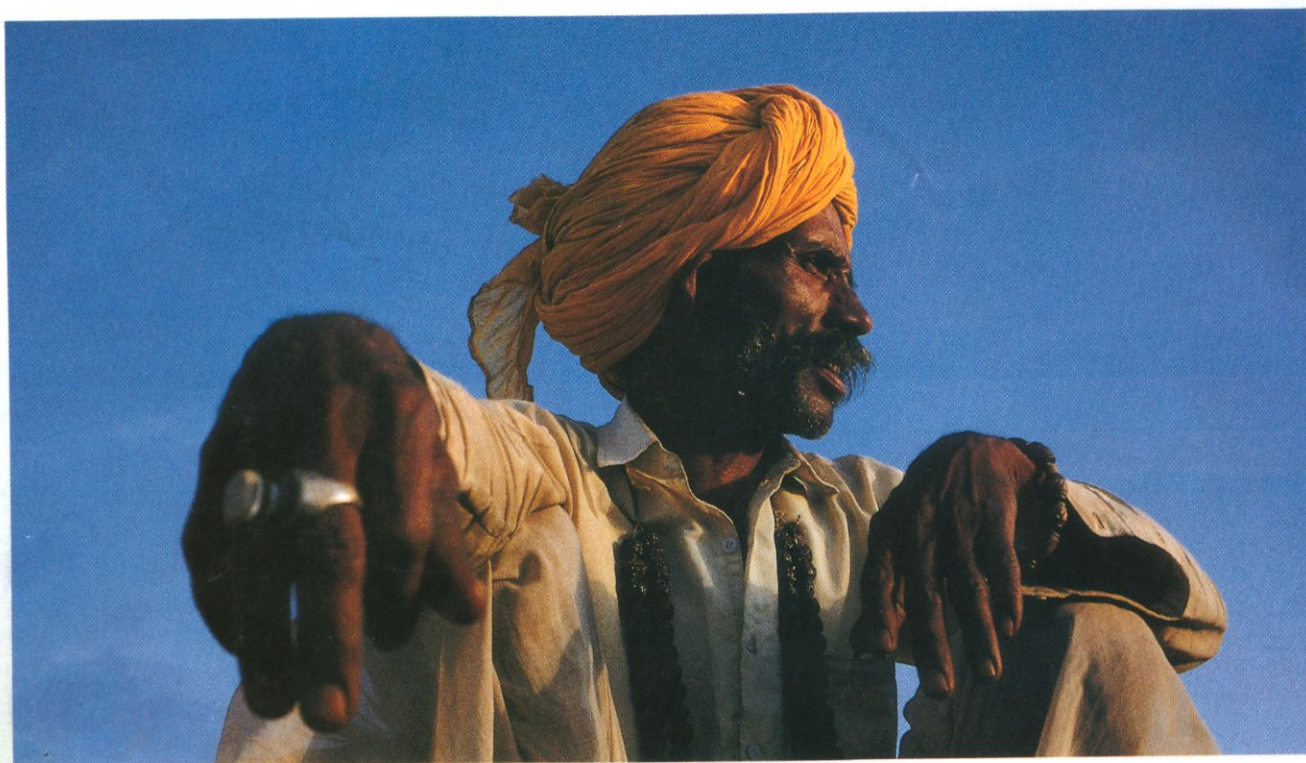
Twilight of a Tradition

THE KALBELIA SNAKE CHARMERS OF WESTERN INDIA



Story by Nihal Mathur
Photography by Liz Thompson & Simon Coate





THE COBRA HISSED IN ANGER, SENDING A CHILL DOWN OUR SPINES. WE stood transfixed in the driveway of our home, watching the deadly reptile and the Kalbelia who had been hastily summoned to catch it. By removing the flower pots lining the portico the Kalbelia had finally cornered the cobra that, with its hood raised, was now ready to strike. Repeatedly it struck but missed the dexterous hands of the Kalbelia. Then it all happened very quickly. The cobra lunged at the Kalbelia and the next moment he had caught the serpent by its head in his right hand. The enraged cobra wrapped itself tightly around the arm of the Kalbelia in a tourniquet-like grip. Catching the tail with his left hand, the Kalbelia unwound the writhing, metre and a half long serpent from his arm and deftly secured it in a cloth bag. And then, after a cup of tea and a fee of 101 Rupees he left, taking the cobra with him.

Although this happened in my home city of Jaipur, capital of India's desert state of Rajasthan, over 20 years ago, it is still vivid in my memory. More than the sense of tension, power or danger, I recall the masterly finesse with which the Kalbelia handled a highly agitated and poisonous cobra. From that day onwards I had a renewed respect and admiration for the snake charming community.

There are several snake charming communities in the Indian sub-continent; Saperas, Jogis, Naths and of course the Kalbelia people who hail from Rajasthan. Like the others, Kalbelia people are a semi-nomadic tribe who have an ancient tradition of snake charming. As old as the culture of this land that goes back 5,000 years, the Kalbelia people ascribe their origins to a Guru who gave them the duty of serving the society by catching poisonous snakes whenever they threatened human habitation. By doing this, they were granted a boon - an edict that they would not be bitten by a snake. And in the event they were, they were given a cure.

With more than ten species of venomous snakes, (that includes vipers, Kraits, three species of cobra as well as the King Cobra) tropical India has had a very definite role for the Kalbelia to play. In a predominantly rural agricultural

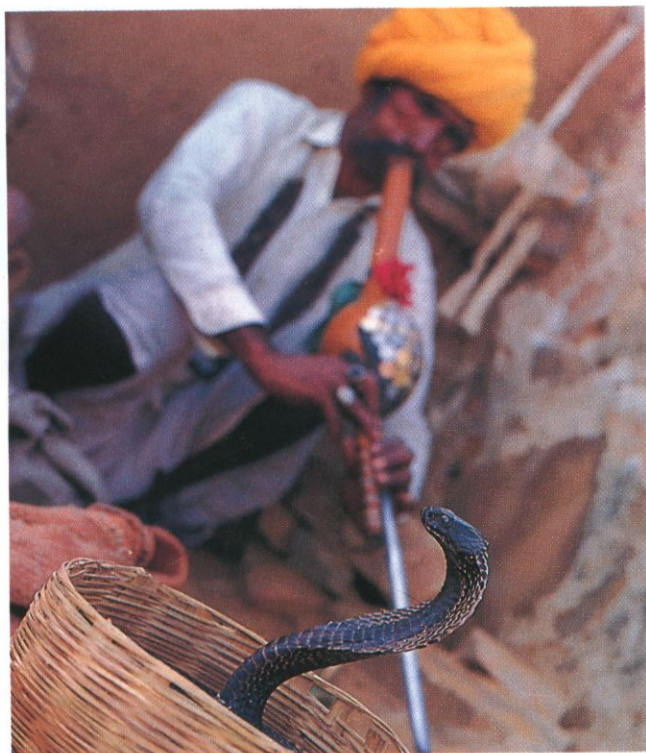
society, death lurks in the fields especially after the monsoon when the rains flush out the snakes from underground. It is interesting to note that tradition never speaks of killing the snake. Instead it recognises the fact that as the prime feeder of the rodent, the single largest destroyer of grain, it is actually a friend of the farmer.

This wisdom of the ages is enshrined in the Kalbelia tradition of taking the cobra, in a cane basket, from door to door, from village to village. Swaying to the movement of the 'been' - a wind instrument played by the Kalbelia - the cobra dances to the music, while the women of the house cautiously shower rice, vermilion powder and flower petals on the snake in the 'puja' or worshipping ritual.

By taking snake charming to the 'people', the Kalbelia is able to tell mythological stories that carry the values of Indian thought and culture. Although there are many myths with various meanings and messages, there is one of great ecological significance. This is the tale of King Parikshat who, true to a prophecy, was killed by a snake bite despite all precautions taken by his son Janmajay to save him. The frustrated prince wreaked his revenge by ordering that all snakes in his kingdom be killed. And so it was that the land in his kingdom became sterile and the waters became undrinkable. People began to die. Deeply disturbed by such turn of events, Janmajay sought explanation. He was informed by the Guru that since Mother Earth cannot bear the sins committed by man on this planet, she passes them on to the serpents who convert them into venom. The prince and the dying people realised the fatal mistake they had made in exterminating the snake. They beseeched the Gods for the snakes to return, not only to restore the balance, but today, to be worshiped and protected.

It is not without reason that the snake is deified in Indian culture where it is a powerful symbol in the nation's religion and thought and is found in the company of Indian gods and goddesses. But this serpent is not just any snake. More specifically, it is a cobra or *Naja naja naja*.

A highly adaptive animal, the cobra is widely distributed throughout the sub-continent. From the hot arid flats of



Rajasthan to the dense rain forests of south and north-east India, the cobra is also found up to 12,000 feet in the Himalayas. Prolific in agricultural fields, granaries and earth dams, the cobra also lives in rat holes and termite mounds. Extremely shy of man, it endeavours to remain out of sight but when threatened, announces its anger and gives fair warning by spreading its hood and producing a loud hiss. In this sense, the cobra is a gentleman in the world of serpents because it will not strike unprovoked. In addition, the cobra has strict behavioural patterns and hence it is easy to understand and handle. Among other special attributes of the cobra, undoubtedly the foremost is its neuro toxic poison. Capable of moving with lightening speed it can deliver a fatal blow - enough to kill a person in a matter of minutes. It is natural that the cobra has come to symbolise death and therefore time - that eventually kills everything.

It isn't surprising therefore that in Hindi language 'Kal' stands for time, death and serpent, while the word 'belia' means 'companion' - literally translating as 'Companions of Serpents'. The Kalbelia are a tribe of people whose lives, not very long ago, were intertwined with that of the snakes. But today, in the last decade of the 20th Century, they face a serious crisis of identity. Reflecting on the times that were, 70 year old Gulab Nath Kalbelia tells of a large family under a patriarch with his sons and their wives and children, some other uncles and aunts, in all about 30 to 40 people, that used to travel from place to place in search of snakes and a livelihood made from snake charming. During these nomadic wanderings they were invited by village elders to camp in their areas. Their 'deras' or camps were always unmistakable from afar by the presence of dogs that were kept for hunting.

Snake charmers with several traditional cures at their disposal were often called forward to treat a snake bite victim. Depending upon the case, he either sucked out the poison by mouth, applied 'potions' to the bitten surface or conducted the 'jhada' ceremony using 'neem' tree leaves with incantations. Besides treating snake bites, the Kalbelia also had remedies to deal with scorpion stings and inflammations

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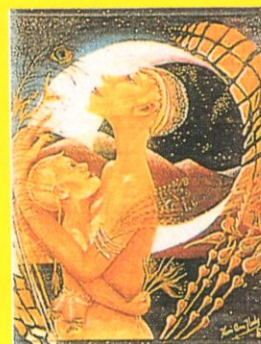
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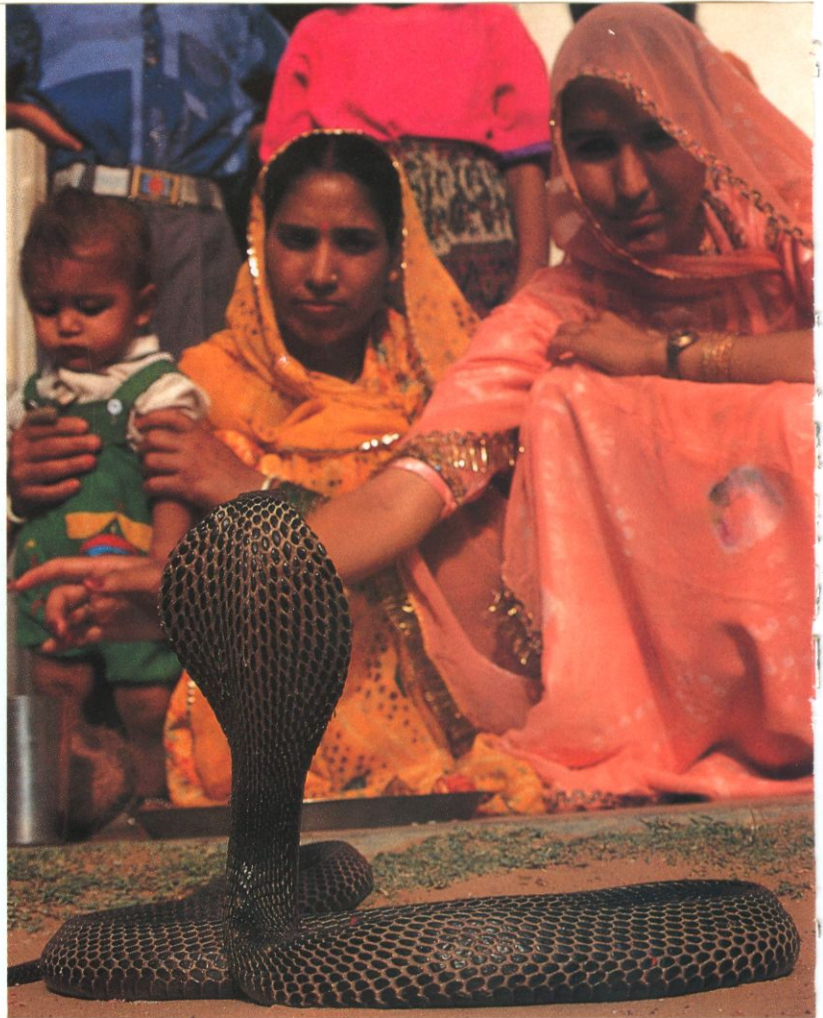
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caused by other poisonous insects. In addition to these, the Kalbelia collected wild herbs for ailments such as stomach disorders, fever, colds and coughs.

Bansi Nath Kalbelia has many medicinal items in his repertoire. Besides wild herbs, he has animal bones, porcupine quills, tortoise shells and numerous other bits and pieces, both weird and wonderful. "A jackal's gland is used in making a potion to stop menstrual bleeding," he explains. "Besides a snake vertebrae treatment for goitre and desert lizard oil therapy for impotence, in the Kalbelia system of medicine we have other special cures as well - like removing the 'evil eye' or chasing away an unwelcome spirit."

Today, with large scale mechanisation in agriculture, there seems to be little or no place for the Kalbelia in village India. A new cultural outlook is emerging with the growing reach of satellite television. In addition, widespread habitat destruction and general environmental degradation has led to the drastic decline in snake populations. In such conditions snake charmers seem to have lost the very significance of their identity.

With no stake in the land, the Kalbelia are a truly marginalised people in a rural society that looks down upon the migrant tribespeople as those on the periphery. And there is certainly no place for the Kalbelia in urban India where they are kept at bay by the 'educated' middle class. "The city people insult us by saying, 'Why do you beg. Why don't you work?'" says Bansi Nath Kalbelia. Even the traditional medicine of the Kalbelia stands discredited. It is only when people find snakes in their homes, such as when we did, that the snake charmer is called for.



With the loss of their traditional livelihood, the Kalbelia are forced to work as day labourers on construction sites. Those with some talent for crafts take to chiselling stone, work in mills or weave cane baskets. Others find jobs as rickshaw pullers and porters in hotels. There are only a few enterprising Kalbelia people like Kalu Nath and the Gulabi who have organised themselves as troupes of performing artists since, as gipsies they too have a rich heritage of dance and music. In long flowing skirts, their women do the snake dance while the men, dressed in colourful turbans, play music to affluent audiences eager for folk culture. And of course, the Kalbelia are there outside the hotels and major tourist attractions where, for a few Rupees, foreign visitors are enthralled by the recreation of the romance of India - the land of the snake charmer.

The sad news is that there are few Kalbelia people who practice the old ways. Those who do, nowadays work under the spectre of the Wildlife Protection Act of India. Promulgated in 1972, the law put the cobra in Schedule 1 (along with the tiger), making it a "highly threatened animal" and banning its capture or captive breeding. For how long the cobra needs to be protected is a debatable question, but the act effectively undermines the traditional lifestyle of the Kalbelia. In many cases wildlife protection forces terrorise cobra carrying Kalbelia people with staggering fines.

The inclusion of the cobra in Schedule 1 of the Act is seen by the Kalbelia as a denial of their fundamental right to an occupation. Contesting the act in court, the Kalbelia fought the government to have the cobra removed from Schedule 1. The court's judgement, although unsympathetic to the Kalbelia, is not readily enforced and exists merely as nuisance value.

"Where we need to catch the Kalbelia is during poaching activities," says V. D. Sharma, ex-Chief Wildlife Warden of



Rajasthan. "You know these Kalbelias are killers of wild life and wherever they have their 'dera' they remove all traces of wildlife with the help of their hunting dogs. The Kalbelias are also expert hunters of monitor lizards and other snakes which they kill and skin for a lucrative price."

With few options in life, it is not difficult for the skin trader to lure a Kalbelia into hunting reptiles and collecting their skins. It is now the sheer pressure of staying alive that has brought the Kalbelia to trade in snakes and their skins, where once they were bound by their creed to treat the snake with deference.

"Cobras are caught only to serve a term and then released," says Shankar Nath Kalbelia. It is explained that keeping a snake is not cruel and that the snake charmer is bound by his 'word of honour'. In folklore, the 'word of honour' means the mouth of the cobra is sealed in relation to its master and hence, will not bite. But if the Kalbelia does not honour his 'word', the snake gets the 'power' to bite and not any of the charmer's charms and potions will work against the poison. Also according to tradition, the 'word given cobra' is released back in the wild a day before the expiry of the term.

Is it the twilight of the tradition of the Kalbelia? Can centuries-old traditions finally die in the face of economic and social pressures? "So long as there is one cobra left in this world there will also be one Kalbelia," says Shankar Nath Kalbelia.

Nibal Mathur is a Rajasthan-based freelance photographer, journalist and film maker. He has worked as a researcher for the BBC's 'Natural History' program and Channel 7's 'Passage to India'. Liz Thompson is a Sydney-based photojournalist and author. Simon Coate is a Sydney-based photographer.



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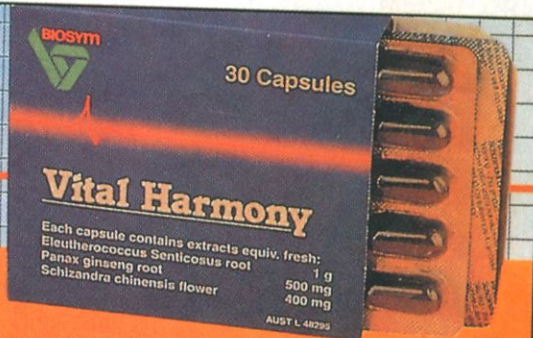
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