

## Snake in Pakistani folklore

Translated from:

*Sarzameen-a-Pakistan Kay Saamp* (Snakes of Pakistan)

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### INTRODUCTION

Unlike neighboring Singhalese, Indian and southeast Asian civilizations, Muslim beliefs and thoughts do not nurture superstitions and myths. Whatever mythological figures are referred to in Pakistani literature, has been borrowed from Indian, Roman and Greek sources. On the other hand Pakistani folklore is enriched with stories and narratives based on misinterpretation of observation of natural phenomenon. Mostly such explanations are borrowed from Indian beliefs to give lores a mythical touch, but it is not incorporated in basic religious Muslim dogma, which purely believes in Oneness of Almighty God, creator of all animals, plants and natural phenomena. It is further inculcated in Islamic belief that all animals and plants are created to serve man, who is supreme in the whole creation.

A folklore takes ages to ripe, mature and spread in far and wide. Though folklores do not interfere with religious dogma, however they weaken one's belief in religion. Birth of a folklore is purely observational, amalgamated with truths. Partial facts coming from different sources are worked on by several brains to arrive at most seemingly logical story, much of which is mere fabrication.

In fact folklores depict how keenly our common man observes, thinks, interrelates and logically concludes. A lore gradually spreads from one to another, told as old wives' tale, and remains ever fresh while traveling among folks. Pakistani snake folklores can clearly be trace to different cultures of the subcontinent.

The subcontinent is predominantly agricultural. Changes in its seasons are reflected in its flora and fauna. It is rich in its herpetofauna; reptiles, especially snakes are frequent encountered animals in fields, pastures, waters and deserts. In past, snake bite accidents were frequent while medical care was meager. Common man had to rely on local *hakims* and *vaidis*, who claimed to have cure for snake bite and as a proof they told stories relating the curing abilities of their teachers, certain great *hakims*, *vaidis*, *pundants* and *mandries*, the pivot figures in folklores. They are said to have roamed about in Himalayas and deserts of Sindh and Balochistan for years until they discovered some herb or mantra. To keep attention of the audience, wondrous snake stories are told, which make rounds in several households of the village, among young and old, each subsequent narrator adding his/her part to make the story more mythical and supernatural.

In following section a selection of five most narrated folklores in folk meetings and literature is presented, to illustrate common beliefs held about snakes by the public. These lores illustrate how an observation is carried on human imagination invents interesting stories and old wives' tales. To enjoy the theme of these tales fully, it is deemed necessary to understand meanings of some of the local terms used in these tales.

*Batasha*: an oval, round crunchy sweet made from sugar. Often served on happy occasions, weddings etc.

*Guru*: teacher, religious leader.

*Hakim*: an Arabic word used for a person practicing in indigenous medicines, a wise man.

*Hukka*: is a device prepared by binding two pieces of curved hollow reeds and fixing them to a central earthen pot filled with water. A crushed lump of dried tobacco is placed on burning coal in a cape like earthen pot on one end of the whole device and from the other end the smoke is sucked in. It is used for smoking tobacco; known also hubble-bubble, hookah.

*I'd: E eed*: Yearly Muslim festival of rejoicing.

*Mantr*: the strange and mysterious incantations uttered by pundits and mantries, believed to have a magical effect on a patient.

*Mandri=Mantri*: he who professes incantations to cure snake bites. They are responsible in part for spreading snake folklores in public. Generally they are also snake charmers.

*Pundit*: A Hindu religious teacher; he is held in great reverence in Hindu religion.

*Ji*: a suffix used for reverence.

*Raja*: a small ruler.

*Sanyasi= Yogi=Jogi*: a nomadic tribe man, who roams about in desolate areas, collecting herbs and catching snakes. Claims to have cure for snake bite. Often fleeces innocent people. Spreads wrong beliefs in folklores in which charismatic healing powers of *mantras* and magical powers of snakes are presented exaggerated. They are the tools who are responsible of spreading misconceptions in general public.

*Sadhu*: simple people accompanying *sanyasies*, acting as their personal servants. They lead very austere life.

*Sayyad=Shah*: a pious person known to be from the dynasty of the Holy Prophet. They are generally believed to have some charismatic powers.

*Vaid*: a person practicing aurevadic system of medicine. He is thought to be a knowledgeable person curing different ailments.

## Folklore I

**I**t happened during the reign of Mogul Emperor Shah Jahan, that a regiment of soldiers was stationed to guard royal arsenal in Agra city, India. Every night four sentries took turn to guard the depot. One night, the sentries on duty failed to report back. The search party found them and their horses dead. Apparently their bodies showed no sign of violence and there was no wound mark to guess possible cause of their death.

A soldier named Sayyad Muzzafer Ali Shah, was known to be a simple and pious man. Everybody in the regiment respected him. He came to the commandant and told him that the dead men and their horses were bitten by a poisonous snake. He showed him the fang marks on the dead bodies. Hearing this, everybody in the camp was panic-stricken. Sayyad Sahib told the commandant that the victims could be revived if he was provided with the following items:

- \* One silver cup,
- \* One thousand earthen cups,
- \* One piece of white silken cloth,
- \* One thousand pieces of white cotton cloth,
- \* Enough fresh milk to fill all the cups,
- \* A large white paper,
- \* A piece of charcoal,
- \* A royal canopy,
- \* A gilded high place (throne).

All items were readily provided. The Sayyad got the canopy erected in a spacious place, and the throne was placed under its middle. Then he placed the silver cup in the center of the throne, filled it with milk and covered it with the silken cloth. All the earthen cups were arranged around the throne on ground and filled with milk and covered with cotton cloths.

Then Shah Sahib requested the commandant to order soldiers to fall in double row in front of the throne, leaving a passage in the middle. His request was immediately taken care of. Then, he stood close to the throne and chanted some words in some incomprehensible language and at the same time writing on the paper with the piece of charcoal. Lo! there began appearing snakes of different kinds sizes and colors, some were large, some medium-sized, small, thin, some were broad, in short almost every variety of snakes was present there. Each snake, went straight to the earthen cup nearest to it, in an orderly way and sat close to it. Whole atmosphere was filled with authoritative chanting voice of Shah Sahib, who went on writing and chanting uninterrupted, and the rustling noise of wriggling of the snakes added an aura of mystery to the atmosphere. After half an hour, everybody's attention was attracted to a huge hooded black snake which appeared at the end of the passage. A small beautiful snake was riding on its hood, it had a golden crown on its head. It was followed by several hundred snakes. As the golden crowned snake entered the pavilion, Shah Sahib came forward and welcomed him and showed him to the throne and all other snakes bent their heads in respect. Shah Sahib begged to be pardoned for giving trouble to the king of snakes. He explained to the king of snakes by pointing towards the dead bodies of four men and their horses and said he wanted the culprit snake be called and punished. At this the king snake said something to the large black hooded snake, who hurriedly left the pavilion. There prevailed pin drop silence; even the breathing sound of the audience was audible. After about half an hour or so the large black snake appeared dragging behind a smaller black snake, who at the sight of king snake began trembling all over. The king snake pointed to the dead bodies of men and horses. The small black snake went to each of them and sucked the poison from the fang marks on their bodies. And Lo! before all, to their bewilderment, the erstwhile dead men and horses stood up and looked around in amazement.

Then Sayyad Sahib went forward respectfully and uncovered the silver cup and requested the king-snake to honor him by accepting the cupful of milk. The king-snake readily dipped its mouth in the cup and drank it empty. Shah Sahib wiped its mouth with the silken cloth. Then all rest of the snakes drank from their cups.

Then Shah Sahib requested the king-snake to allow him to punish the culprit snake. The king-snake consented by bowing its head. Shah Sahib stood close to the king

snake and began chanting and tearing the paper from its middle. Suddenly the culprit snake began to cry and toss and roll restlessly on the ground. Then its body started splitting from the middle of its head. As soon Shah Sahib finished tearing the paper, the snake's body fell dead cut in two halves. Shah Sahib requested the commandant to order to present guard of honor to the king-snake, after which the whole army of snakes left. Everyone was astonished on what he saw, and desired to learn from Shah Sahib how to call the king-snake. The commandant also requested Shah Sahib to teach him. Shah Sahib avoided.

That night Sayyad Muzzafar Ali Shah slept on his cot as usual, in his tent, nobody saw him next morning, he disappeared without leaving trace. Despite the effort of the whole regiment he was nowhere to be found.

## Folklore II

This folklore is quoted in first person.

**O**ne morning in summer, I and my servant were going to visit a small village, in Tehsil Phalia, District Gujrat, Punjab, Pakistan. I was riding on a mare while the servant was walking on my side. When we were nearing Phalia, suddenly we saw one and a half foot long snake lolling on ground in our way. We changed our course without disturbing it. When my servant, by chance, looked back he saw that the snake was following us by taking short jumps. We were terrified. I told my servant to jump up on the horseback behind me so that we may leave the place as soon as possible. He refused to do so, and requested me to get away fast from the danger. I quickened my pace, the man ran for some distance along me, but soon was breathless. He decided to face the snake. He stood firmly holding his stick in his both hands. It was about thirty yards away from him. By this time the snake was about five yards from him, it suddenly took a jump high in the air when it was dropping on my servant. He swayed the stick and gave the dropping snake a mighty blow. It struck the snake at its midbody. I saw the snake breaking in two halves at mid air. I heaved a sigh of relief, we both went to look at the dead snake. Only its tail half was lying there, we were unable to find anterior half of its body.

To our utter amazement the stick melting away in a smoky cloud which disappeared in the sky. Peoples gathered around told us that the snake was very poisonous, it had been blocking the passage of passerbys for past two years.

Soon we reached our destination. My servant ran high fever and was unconscious for two days. *Hakim* Sahib told me that the fever was due to the snake's poison transmitted through the stick. If he had held the stick longer, he would have been dead since long.

## Folklore III

**I**t is stated that in a small village *Gangoora*, Near Bajnor, India, a shepherd was bitten by a poisonous snake. Despite all efforts of local *hakims* and *sanyasis* he died of the poison. The dead body of the shepherd was thrown in the River Ganges. At down

stream a *sanyasi* who was bathing on the bank of the river. He saw the floating dead body and dragged it out of water. From signs and appearance of the body he knew that it was a victim of snakebite. He slit open its skull and lighted fire, chanted some mantras. Soon the dead man rose up and asked for water.

The *sanyasi* taught the revived shepherd different mantras, how to deal with different snakes and cure snake-bite cases. Both *sanyasi* and the shepherd roamed about in villages and towns professing their trade and asking for alms. By chance, after several years, they reached the shepherd's village. When they were roaming through streets, they arrived at the door of shepherd's house, members of his household recognized him, and persuaded the *sanyasi* to allow the shepherd to join his family. But they were told, if the shepherd was separated from *sanyasi*, he would die of the poison. Both of them were kept as guests in the shepherd's house for long time. However, they left the house to roam about, occasionally returning to enjoy feasts.

#### Folklore IV

**P**undit Chooni Lal, who was famous *void* in Lahore, Pakistan, once told me a true story which was related to him by his late Guru Ji:

On a summer evening when the sky cleared after monsoon shower, it was pleasant outside, Guru Ji decided to have a walk in the nearby garden. As he came out of his house, he met a well dressed horseman, after exchanging greetings, the horseman told Guru Ji that he was new to the place. He wanted to stay for a night, so he requested Guru Ji if he could help him in this connection. Guru Ji was impressed by his dress and way of talking, he readily offered him his house for the night. As the horseman was comfortable, he introduced himself to Guru Ji that he is a *mantri* in the court of a nearby Raja.

Both *Mantri* and Guru decided to have a walk in the garden and enjoy the pleasant evening. As they were walking suddenly a snake crossed their way. The *mantri* told Guru that the snake had recently bitten some person. Guru was reluctant to believe. *Mantri*, to prove his assertion, requested him to follow him and started walking towards the direction from where the snake came. Soon they were in a small village, they heard wailing and crying of women, and found that the peoples were preparing a dead body for last rites. They were told the dead man was a farmer who was bitten by a snake, a few hours ago.

The *mantri* told the people to be quiet and stop preparing for the last rites, he promised that the dead man would be alive again. When the people had settled down, he chanted some mantras and took out four *kuries* (shell of a gastropod mollusc) from his pocket and threw them up in the air. The *kuries* disappeared in the air. After half an hour, people saw a snake coming towards the gathering. The pair of *kuries* were moving round its head as if guiding it, while the rest third pair was covering the snake from sides, not letting it slide away to sides. So lead, the snake came close to the dead body and sucked and sucked the poison from the fang marks. Soon the man rose up, to the utter amazement of the gathered peoples.

Later the *Mantri* told the mob that he was going to punish the snake for its offense. He began chanting mantras and the snake began to tremble all over restlessly

tossing twitching its body on the ground. After some time it fell down helplessly. The Mantri held took up the snake by its tail and threw it on a barren piece of land, away from the village. Both Guru and Mantri returned to their village. Guru was much impressed by Mantri's feat, and did his best to make him comfortable. Next morning Mantri took leave, despite host's insistence to stay a few days more, he left.

### **Last folklore**

"Well Sir, my name is Jamal Din and my father was Alim Din, we are from Gujranwala, Punjab, Pakistan. My father was a laborer, he worked hard to make both ends meet. He had two wives, first wife was childless and from my mother he had three sons. I am the youngest. Both of my elder brothers died in young age. As I grew up, I started working in fields with my father. Soon I got a job as a coachman in the house of a revenue officer, in Lahore.

"In 1904, famous Kangra earthquake rocked whole of India. At the time of the quake I was cutting fodder for the cattle along with three of my friends, 3 miles away from Lahore in Raj Garh area. I remember, I almost fell due to the strong jolts of the quake. On that

fateful day, I was bitten by a snake on my left ankle. I

almost tore the snake away. I well remember the brute had a pattern of blue, yellow, green, golden and white stripes on its body. I was greatly shocked by the bite and felt my heart sinking; soon I was out of my wits, and ran about in fields like a madman. My friends, seeing what had happened to me were in panic. Hurriedly they collected the fodder and off they went to Lahore, leaving me all alone in my agony. Fortunately, a small stream was flowing close by. I laid myself on its bank,

whenever I came to my senses, I washed my face with the cold water and drank plenty of it. On reaching Lahore, my friends told the revenue officer about my precarious condition, he sent his servants to take me to Lahore. I was attended by Hakim Noor Din of Mochi Gate, Lahore. After one week, I was able to walk round and soon I took charge of my duties. One day, the Hakim told me that a receptive female snake had bitten me and from hence on a snake would bite me regularly once or twice a year; this fate I could not escape till my death. Hearing this I was so horrified that I remained fainted for several hour. I felt myself the most miserable person in whole Lahore.

At the time of this unfortunate incidence, I was about twenty five years of age, and was recently married. As time passed, I almost forgot the incidence, worked normally and had a beautiful son. I felt myself a strong man, and had no worry. Suddenly one day I started feeling strange weakness and lethargy in my body, and felt a strange odor similar to that of the musk-melon flower issuing from my body. I went to consult Hakim Sahib, he reminded me that it was twelfth month since I was bitten. The changes taking place in my body were to invite and attract the male snake to bite me. In an utter panic, I went to consult several hakims, v aids and mantries; all of them told me

it was the nuptial odor of female snake, so nothing could be done. The odor became stronger day by day and on the fifteenth of the twelfth month, it was most intensified. That day I felt my body would break down. That day I could not work. I felt a

strange strong desire to be bitten by a snake! I felt I would enjoy it as sexual experience, I was in an ecstasy and rejoiced thinking that the time was nearing to get my utmost desire. At last I saw a snake coming towards me, as it neared I presented to it my leg, it bit me on big toe. I felt an extreme sense of enjoyment and could not bear it, so I lay down. The snake was lying beside me. When I came to my senses, the snake had disappeared. For next ten days I felt very weak. Meanwhile, I was told about a Pir Buksh Mandri of Piruki, Wazirabad, Gujranwala. As I met him, he advised me to crush the head and neck of the snake as it comes next time to bite. He assured me if I did this, no snake would ever dare come near me.

After six months, again I felt intensification of that typical odor in my body. One day when I was preparing fodder for the cattle, I saw a snake coming, I withdrew in a corner, as it came close, I presented my leg to it, as it bit I put a cloth round its head and crushed it under my teeth. I felt something trickling down my throat. Next morning when I woke up, to my utter horror, I felt intensification of the same odor in my body! Shortly a snake appeared and bit me. From hence on, my bad luck took another turn. I was being bitten every day by a snake! I visited Pir Buksh Mandri, and he told me he could not be of any help. I met several jogies, hakims, voids, sanyasies and mandreis. I did whatever I was advised to get rid of the snake menace. I was told to smoke peacock feather, eat the black concentrate of tobacco from inside of hukka pipe, the most bitter and foul smelling thing I ever ate; I took soup of mongoose; I wore a piece of skin of Markhoor goat (a mountain goat thought to eat only snakes) in my neck-- but with no redemption of my sufferings.

After six month of the first bite, my son was born. Since then my wife had killed about two thousand snakes, out of which 20 to 25 I ate raw and 25 to 30 after cooking, under the advice of various benefactors. One day, when I came to lunch, my wife was lying on a cot, she had been bitten by a snake hiding under faggots. From hence on our hardships took another turn, I was being bitten daily and my wife every eighth day. Every time she felt the same odor.

It was I'd day, I was sitting with my family, we were enjoying. My son was playing in my lap, occasionally I tickled him, then we laughed together. My wife was busy in cooking sweet rice. My son's legs were on my legs. At the same time a snake came to bit me in routine, during biting, its tooth touched the lad's leg. The poor child was also included in the vicious circle; I was being bitten daily, my wife every eighth day and my son every third month! The only person left, in my house, was my niece who was staying with us and helping my wife in chores. One day my wife was lying on a cot and the girl was sitting beside her. It was the time of the visit of snake; my wife saw it coming. She told the girl not to move, but the girl was terrified and jumped down from the cot, her foot fell on the snake, so she was bitten too!

An elderly person, with a long flowing beard, told my wife to eat cooked meat of snakes. I collected snakes for 15 days in an earthen pitcher. I chopped off their heads and tails, and cut them in pieces, my wife cooked the meat and we ate to our fill. I don't know why things proclaimed by different people as cures enhanced our sufferings? We ate snake meat in order to cure ourselves of the snake menace but it increased our sufferings, now every day four snake came: one for me, second for my wife, third for my son and fourth for my niece! We all were really in great trouble.

I did my best to avoid contacts with snakes: once I hung myself from the ceiling of my room, but within minutes a snake came out of the roof and bit me. Next time I decided to remain on my coach after checking it thoroughly, and lo! a snake came from under the seat of the coach. Oh, I was utterly desperate.

At last, perhaps due to my prayers or prayers of some holy man, time of my redemption from snake menace arrived. In November, 1929, a man from neighboring village came and told me that famous sanyasi Nanagal Ditta Singh was staying in shamlat (common sitting place for villagers) of his village. People from all over the area were visiting him, asking for advice and cure for their ailments. It was evening, and I almost ran to meet the sanyasi, without telling anybody in my house. Sanyasi Ji was lying on a mat, and two sadhus were sitting beside him. I saluted him by bowing my head and could not control my tears. I went on weeping, I was out of my wits. Sayasi ji asked me repeatedly what was the matter with me. I was unable to control myself and went on crying. At last sayasi gave me a pinch of powder and told me to take it with water, which was provided to me by one of the sadhus. I soon felt better. I told him about my miseries. He assured me, that I would soon get rid of the snakes. He was very sympathetic. He told me to come next morning with my family, and bring 30 seers (about 60 lbs) of goat milk. With strong assurances from the sanyasi I returned. I had no money for the milk, I borrowed 10 rupees from a friend. Next morning I bought milk, and took my family to the sanyasi ji. The sanyasi was not there; the two sadhus greeted us. They called each other by the name of Bava Sawa Das and Bava Maran Das. They took the milk from me, and ordered three bucketful's of cow-dung. They thoroughly mixed dung with water and let it settle; decanted water from the surface, thrice repeating the whole procedure. The washed dung was later mixed with the milk. One of the sadhus gave each of us a pinch of green powder placed in a batasha and told us to eat it. Then they excavated a pit large enough to contain the three of us until only tops of our heads were visible from outside. We were told to sit in the pit, and the milk mixed dung was slowly poured on our heads, as it descended on our bodies, we felt heat coming out. We felt it soothing. We sat in the pit for the whole night.

Next morning we were taken out of the pits, cotton blankets were wrapped around us and we sat for next two days close to fire. We were given bread and milk to eat by the sadhus. The day we descended in the pit was our first day when we were not bitten by snakes.

On third day Bava Sawa Das gave us a strange smelling ointment, and told us to rub it on our bodies. We readily did that, and felt stronger. Then he gave me a powder and advised all of us to take a pinch from it and churn it 101 times in sour milk and eat it with breakfast every morning. Then one of the sadhus took the hukka and went to east while the other, slung his bag on his shoulder and left to west, leaving us behind. We thought they had gone for some time. We sat there waiting for our benefactors, we wanted to offer them our services and some presents for the good deed they have done to us, but we saw no trace of them. Perhaps Almighty God had sent them only to redeem us from our agony".

**Saying this Jamal Din lifted the cloth from his arms and legs, Lo! innumerable fang marks**

were undeniable proof of the truth of his  
strange story!