

# Snake-crossed life

**A** FRAID to sleep, afraid to be awake, afraid to stir out—that is Kumari's lot. For death in the form of a snake has been following her wherever she goes for the last three years. Snakes have planted the kiss of death 18 times on her feet, but fortunately she has survived to tell the tale.

"I do not know why this is happening to me," Kumari said in tears when THE WEEK met her at her humble abode in Trichur district in Kerala.

Though the villagers have unkindly nicknamed her *Pampukumari* (*pampu* means snake in Malayalam), it is no joke to Bhaskaran and Thangamani, Kumari's parents. They have already spent Rs 7,000—a huge amount for wage-earners of their class—for treatment and transport to rush the sinking girl to the physician every time she was bitten.

Her father was once bitten by a snake. That was many years ago. Her mother was also bitten—twice before her marriage and once when she was expecting Kumari. She was three months pregnant then. So, in a way snakes were after Kumari even before she was born. Twenty-three-year-old Kumari is the eldest of the four children. Fortunately, the snakes have spared the other kids.

Kumari's parents have tried to keep her safe by sending her to their relatives' homes in distant places. But the snake visitations continued. On new moon day in January, when she was working the paddy fields, a snake bit her. It was a severe bite and she was on the verge of death. Her physician Sarojini, who follows the traditional system, had almost given up hope when Kumari did not regain consciousness even after four hours of intense medication.

Since no one else has seen the attacking snake—the girl herself saw it only thrice—the question whether it was all a hallucination was put to the physician. "At one stage I too thought it was per-

Saving lives. Sarojini



PHOTO: MAXWELL FERNANDEZ



Living in fear. Kumari (Inset) The snake-kissed feet

haps a psychological case. On three occasions the bite marks were not clearly visible. There were only scratches on the skin. Once I sent her home after giving her some simple medicine. They brought her back in a bad state. In our system of medicine, we call the psychological cases *sankavisham*. It means poisoning due to fear. But *sankavisham* can be fatal too."

To drive home the point, Sarojini narrated a story. Someone wanted to tease a *vishavaidya* (physician who treats cases of poisoning). He made a slight incision on his foot and approached the physician telling him that he was bitten by a snake. The physician saw through the game and told the man that it was indeed a highly poisonous snake that had bitten him. The suggestion was so powerful that the man died of shock. Believe it or not, old Ayurvedic books testify that people can die of fear of snake bite.

But in Kumari's case, at least 15 times she was in fact bitten by a snake, says Sarojini who has been treating her. According to her, it is serpent vendetta for some unknown reason that has made life miserable for the girl. Scientists, however, scoff at the traditional belief about the serpents *paka* (vengeance).

Her parents have observed some curious things about the incidents.

It was on her 21st birthday that she was bitten for the first time.

It is usually during sunset hour snakes bite her.

And recently it has been happening on new moon day.

In all these cases, the wound is filled with blood, but it seldom flows out.

After the bite, the snake coils round her feet and when she cries out, it slithers away.

At the age of 17, Kumari had killed the young one of a snake. But it was not a poisonous variety, the girl recalls.

Bhaskaran, her father, went to a family who are widely believed to have some mystic power over snakes. They sug-

Sharing the curse. Kumari's parents



gested keeping an inverted brass tumbler over a thin layer of cowdung in their home. "Snakes won't come anywhere near the house," he was told. However, on the third day after installing the repellent, the snake struck again.

On one or two occasions when she was bitten, Kumari tried to hide it from her people. Then she vomited and fainted.

Her physician Sarojini says no magic is involved in her mode of treatment. For generations her family has been in the line. And Sarojini took over from her father. According to her, he knew the secret *mantras* which could cast a spell on an offending snake and summon it to the spot for a weird revival of the dying patient. But when he had to face all sorts of troubles, he thought it might be due to the curse of the serpents he had humbled and hence burnt the book of *mantras*.

Sarojini's mode of treatment includes *nasyam* (applying herbal medicines through the nose), oil massage and blowing through the ears and the head. Of the hundreds of cases that have come to her, only eight patients have died. But in their case she had told the people concerned that she could not save them. They were taken to other physicians, in vain.

Kumari's last brush with death was quite close, says Sarojini. "There seems to be no rational explanation for what is happening to her. I feel sorry for her."

Many in the neighbourhood also felt sorry for Kumari and her parents. But their sympathy does not help much as Bhaskaran's debts pile up. A distraught Kumari told this reporter: "I have only one prayer. Next time the snake bites me, I should die on the spot. I don't want to be a burden like this on my family."

Bhaskaran is equally distressed. He said bitterly: "They call her *Pampukumari*. And with this reputation, who will come forward to marry my daughter, if at all she survives this ordeal?"

—MAXWELL FERNANDEZ



Undaunted. Chinnan

## After 24 bites

"THE sentiments are mutual. I have killed many snakes. They have bitten me 24 times. I might kill more and they might bite me again. There is no mystery in it. We are at war", Chinnan said. In true sporting spirit, Chinnan keeps count of his score—from the neighbouring compound alone, he has killed 247 snakes.

As Kumari weeps over her lot under the shadow of snakes, 78 km away from her in Ernakulam, Chinnan laughs over his encounters with snakes of all kinds. Kumari is unable to identify the types of snakes that have bitten her. But Chinnan has become an expert on reptiles and can identify them. He shows off the marks left on him by vipers and cobras.

The feud between Chinnan and snakes began at least 30 years ago. The first strike came from Chinnan—he killed some of them. The retaliation came a few years later. Since then, they struck 24 times. For the last six years, however, he has not been touched.

Chinnan has been saved from death several times by ayurvedic doctors. For long, he had a miraculous snake stone with him which he claims, saved him on other occasions. He had also a repellent tied on to his arm which is believed to keep snakes away.

Dr T.K. Pradeep of the Ayurveda hospital at Tripunithura in Ernakulam district, who holds an MD in toxicology says there is no clinching evidence so far that the same snake can repeatedly attack a person. Some of these cases might be psychological. But he cautions that it is unfair to dismiss all such cases as imaginary without examining the patients. Oft-repeated bites may make a person immune to a certain extent, he added.

