

Cobra

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Cover

Olive forest snake (*Rhabdops olivaceus*)

Nocturnal. Rare, non-venomous snake. Maximum length: 2' 7". Found in hill forests of Western Ghats. Endemic to India. Eats slugs and soft-bodied worms.

Photo : **S.R.Chandra Mouli.**

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“For one species to fight for the survival of another, even in times of stress, is something new in evolution. In this, more than all our technology, lies our claim to being human”.

— George B. Schaller.

**STUDIES ON THE SIZE COMPOSITION
AND MORPHOMETRY OF COMMON KRAIT
BUNGARUS CAERULEUS (SCHNEIDER, 1801)
AT THE IRULA SNAKE CATCHERS' INDUSTRIAL
CO-OPERATIVE SOCIETY, VADANEMMELI,
KANCHIPURAM DISTRICT, TAMIL NADU**

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The present study was undertaken in the context of the importance of morphometry in the study of snakes.

Study Area

The study was done at the Irula Snake Catchers' Industrial Co-Operative Society (ISCICS), Vadanemmeli, Kanchipuram district. The Society was started for the self-employment of the Irula tribals living in Chennai and nearby districts. The main objective of this Society is to improve the economic condition of the Irulas.

The study was carried out during the months of April and May 2006 for a duration of 30 days. The snakes had been captured from various parts of Kanchipuram District, Tamil Nadu.

Methodology

Two field trips were made as part of this project primarily to capture kraits. Kali, an active snake collector from the Society accompanied us on both the trips.

The procedures usually followed by the Society in respect of all snakes captured are as follows: The snakes on arrival at the Society are weighed and their lengths measured. Sex is determined by external appearance in a rough and ready manner. Males have a swelling at the base of the tail. Though probing the cloaca is the sure method for determining sex, it is not generally done here in view of the numbers involved and since sex has little value in the context of venom extraction. These observations are then recorded in a register maintained for the purpose. The snakes are kept in earthen pots stored in a pit-shaped enclosure measuring 19 x 12.5 x 2 m. The earthen pots are partly filled with sand, and glucose water is provided in a small cup placed inside the pot. The mouth of the pots is covered with porous cotton cloth. Every morning, the snakes are taken out and the pots are cleaned and glucose water changed. The pit is provided with two fans to control the temperature. If the snake is found sick, it is immediately returned to the wild. Skilled Irulas are appointed to carry out these duties. The snakes are fed twice a week with baby shrews and frogs.

Venom is extracted four times from each snake. The venom is lyophilized and then processed before being supplied to research laboratories for manufacture of anti-venom.

When the snakes are brought in, they are marked according to their serial numbers. This is done by snipping the caudal scales. After the venom is extracted, the abdominal scale is snipped. After four extractions are done, the snake is returned to the wild.

These are the procedures followed in the Society in all cases. The kraits subjected to our study were also covered by the same procedures. In addition, snout-vent length and tail length were also noted in each case. For sexing, the probe was also used in doubtful cases. For the purpose of this study, the coloration, the snout vent length and tail length were also noted.

The kraits (*Bungarus caeruleus* (Schneider, 1801) under study were predominantly of three distinct colours, viz grayish black, brownish black and black. Differences were also noted in the presence of striations, with some showing distinct bands while others lacked them.

Results

Size composition

200 kraits were taken up for the study. The length ranged from 80-175 cm with a mean of 91 cm. 109 (54.5%) had a length of 80 –100 cm followed by 79 (39.5) having a length of 101-125 cm and 12 individuals (6%) ranged from 126- 150 cm. Females dominated the lower length group 80-100 cm (85.5%) and males were always higher in the length group ranging from 101 –125 cm (64%) and 126 –150 cm, (10.6%). Only one female was recorded in this group (Table. 1).

Table: 1 Total Length

Total Length (Cm)	Total		Males		Females	
	N= 200	%	N= 103	%	N=97	%
80-100	109	54.5	26	25.2	83	85.5
101-125	79	39.5	66	64.0	13	13.4
126-150	12	6.0	11	10.6	1	1.3
151-175	-	-	-	-	-	-

The snout-vent length of the 200 kraits varied from 68-150 cm. Males were dominant in the size range of 101-125 cm (33.9%) and 126-150 cm (2.9%) and 96 females (98.9%) were found in the lower length range of 68-100 cm (Table. 2).

Table: 2 Snout Vent Length

Snout vent Length (Cm)	Total		Males		Females	
	N= 200	%	N= 103	%	N=97	%
80-100	109	54.5	6	25.2	83	85.5
68-100	161	80.5	65	63.1	96	98.9
101-125	36	18	35	33.9	1	1.0
126-150	3	1.5	3	2.9	-	-

Among the 200 individuals studied, the tail length ranged from 8-22 cm. The higher length group 14-22 cm was dominated by males whereas in the medium length group 11-13 cm as well as the lower length 8-10 cm, females were higher having 65.9% and 29.8% respectively (Table.3).

Table 3. Tail Length

Tail Length (Cm)	Total		Males		Females	
	N= 200	%	N= 103	%	N=97	%
8-10	42	21	13	12.6	29	29.8
11-13	116	58	52	50.4	64	65.9
14-16	35	17.5	31	30.09	4	4
17-19	5	2.5	5	4.85	-	-
20-22	2	1	2	1.94	-	-

The weight recorded ranged from 100–500 gms. The highest no of kraits was found between the lower weight group 100–150 gms and there were mostly females. In the higher weight group, males were dominant over the females. In the weight range 201-500 gms, only males were recorded (Table. 4).

Table: 4 Weight

Weight (g)	Total		Males		Females	
	N= 200	%	N= 103	%	N=97	%
100-150	95	47.5	15	14.5	80	82.4
151-200	61	30.5	44	42.7	17	17.5
201-250	22	11	22	21.3	-	-
251-300	11	5.5	11	10.6	-	-
301-350	6	3	6	5.8	-	-
351-400	5	2.5	5	4.8	-	-
401-450	3	1.5	3	2.9	-	-
451-500	1	0.5	1	0.9	-	-

Colouration

The 200 kraits varied in colour : greyish black, brownish black and pure black. 36 individuals had distinct bands. Black was the predominant colour followed by brownish black. 47 snakes sloughed their skin during the observation period.

Table: 5 Colour Pattern

Colouration	Total		Males		Females	
	N= 200	%	N= 103	%	N=97	%
Greyish black	34	18.37	19	18.4	15	15.4
Brownish black	52	28.10	30	29.1	22	22.6
Black	99	53.51	46	44.6	53	54.6

Discussion

In India, little work has been done on the size composition and morphometry of snakes.

During the present study, it was seen that the morphometry values for the males in regard to total length, snout-vent length, tail length and weight were always higher than those for the females.

Whitaker and Captain (2004) have observed that one way of determining the sex of snakes is by knowing which sex grows longer and that a large water snake, striped keelback, or python is invariably a female while a large cobra, rat snake or krait is probably a male. Our study confirms that the males are larger than the females in krait.

Reference

Whitaker, R. and A.Captain.2004. *Snakes of India – The Field Guide.* Draco Books, Chennai 481 pp.

Females		Males		Total		Colouration
N=97	%	N=103	%	N=200	%	
12.4	12.7	10	9.7	18.37	9.2	Greyish black
52.6	54.1	50	48.5	52.10	26.05	Brownish black
34.8	35.8	48	46.5	53.21	26.6	Black

HERPETOFAUNAL SURVEY AT AGUMBE, KARNATAKA

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Introduction

After coming to know about the Agumbe Rainforest Research Station (ARRS) at Agumbe, Shimoga dist, Karnataka, set up by the renowned herpetologist Romulus Whitaker, we undertook a field trip to this area for herpetofaunal survey from 5th to 12th June 2006.

Work area

Our work area – Agumbe – is in the Tirthahalli taluk of Shimoga district in Karnataka state. The geographical region nestles in the wet evergreen forests of the Western Ghats. Agumbe (650 m ASL) has the highest rainfall in south India (10,000mm per year).

Methodology

We used visual encounter survey to spot the animals in their natural habitat. At times, collection was necessary for species identification. As soon as the species was confirmed, the animal was released. We made repeated visits to rain forests, ghat roads, disturbed forests and private plantations, day and night. Sightings of road-kills were also included so as to assess the reptile mortality due to human intrusions.

Details of species recorded

During our visit, we accompanied P. Gowri Shankar, the Conservation Officer of the research station to attend a snake-rescue call from Sitanadi, Udipi district and a 11 feet king cobra was rescued by him from a cowshed and released in the nearby Someshwara forest area.

We also had a rare opportunity of locating a nest of king cobra in Sauli village of Tirthahalli taluk. The nest was in disturbed, mixed deciduous forest. It was 600 ft away from the Thunga river. The nest was surrounded by undergrowth 3 to 5 meters high and trees about 10-12 meters high. It was under a thick tree canopy.

We recorded 33 species belonging to 25 genera and 16 families, out of which 18 species are endemic.

Class : Amphibia

Order : Gymnophiona

Family : Ichthyophidae

- 1 . Beddome's caecilian (*Ichthyophis beddomii*) Peters *

Order : Salientia

Family : Bufonidae

- 1 . Common toad (*Bufo melanostictus*) (Schneider)

Family : Microhylidae

- 1 . Marbled balloon frog (*Uperodon systoma*) (Schneider)

Family : Rhacophoridae

- 1 . Marten's bush frog (*Philautus leucorhinus* (Lichtenstein and Marlens) *)
- 2 . Yellow tree frog (*Polypedates pseudocruciger*) *

Family : Ranidae

- 1 . Indian bull frog (*Hoplabatrachus tigerinus* (Daudin))
- 2 . Beddome's frog (*Indirana beddomii* (Gunther) *)
- 3 . Leith's frog (*Indirana leithii* (Boulenger) *)
- 4 . Cricket frog (*Limnonectes limnocharis* (Gravenhorst))
- 5 . Bronze frog (*Rana temporalis* (Gunther) *)
- 6 . Fungoid frog (*Rana malabarica* (Tschudi) *)
- 7 . Bicoloured frog (*Rana curtipes* (Jerdon)*)

Class : Reptilia

Order : Chelonia

Family : Chelonidae

- 1 . Indian pond turtle (*Melanochelys trijuga* (Schweigger))

Order : Squamata

Family : Gekkonidae

- 1 . Kandy day gecko (*Cnemaspis kandiana* (Kelaart))
- 2 . House gecko (*Hemidactylus flaviviridis* Ruppell)

Family : Scincidae

- 1 . Indian keeled skink (*Mabuya carinata* (Schneider))
- 2 . Beddome's forest skink (*Mabuya beddomii* (Jerdon) *)
- 3 . Bronze grass skink (*Mabuya macularia* (Blyth))
- 4 . Beddome's cat skink (*Ristella beddomii* (Boulenger) *)

Family : Agamidae

- 1 . Roux's forest lizard (*Calotes rouxi* (Dumeril & Bibron) *)

Order : Serpentes

Family : Uropeltidae

1. Pied belly shieldtail (*Melanophidium punctatum* (Beddome) *)

Family : Colubridae

1. Montane trinket snake (*Coelognathus helena monticollaris* (Schulz)*)
2. Indian rat snake (*Ptyas mucosa* (Linnaeus))
3. Painted bronzeback tree snake (*Dendrelaphis pictus* (Gmelin))
4. Green vine snake (*Ahaetulla nasuta* (Lacepede))

Family : Natricidae

1. Checkered keelback (*Xenochrophis piscator* (Schneider))
2. Beddome's keelback (*Amphiesma beddomii* (Gunther) *)
3. Hill keelback (*Amphiesma monticola* (Jerdon) *)

Family : Dipsadidae

1. Olive forest snake (*Rhabdops olivaceus* (Beddome) *)

Family : Homalopsidae

1. Ceylon cat snake (*Boiga ceylonensis* (Gunther))

Family : Elapidae

1. Striped coral snake (*Calliophis nigrescens* (Gunther) *)
2. King Cobra (*Ophiophagus hannah* (Cantor))

Family : Viperidae

1. Hump nosed pit viper (*Hypnale hypnale* (Merrem) *)

* Endemic.

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank Mr.P.Gowri Shankar and all the staff of the ARRS for the various facilities given to us. We are in debt to Mr. Romulus Whitaker, the founder of ARRS without whom all these would not have been possible.

**A NOTE ON THE OCCURRENCE OF COPPER-HEADED
TRINKET SNAKE *COELOGNATHUS RADIATUS* (BOIE, 1827)
IN WESTERN ASSAM**

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At present, there are 277 species of snakes known from India. Among these, 101 species belonging to Typhlopidae, Boidae, Colubridae, Elapidae and Viperidae are known from Northeastern region. However there is no proper documentation of the diversity of serpent fauna and their natural history of the western- most part of Assam. This note reports a new record of copper-headed trinket snake *Coelognathus radiatus* (Boie, 1827) (Family:Colubridae Oppel, 1811) in the western-most part of Assam. Previously copper-headed trinket snake *Coelognathus radiatus* was reported to be distributed from Uttaranchal to Arunachal Pradesh along the Himalayas and in parts of Madhya Pradesh, Chattisgarh, Orissa, West Bengal, Sikkim (Whitaker, R. and Captain, A.2004). There is no published record of the species in the north eastern part of India other than Sikkim and Arunachal Pradesh. But on the basis of frequency of observation of the species during our field surveys it seems to be common in the western-most part of Assam. This species is generally observed in

the forested areas, paddy fields and near human habitations. The copper-headed trinket snake *Coelognathus radiatus* is sometimes rescued from human habitations both in urban and rural areas. This species seems to be more adapted to be near human habitations than the sub species common trinket snake *Coelognathus helena helena* Daudin, 1803.

It is essential to conduct a long-term monitoring and systematic study of this species.

Acknowledgements

I thank Mr.S.N.Sen, Mr.B.C.Roy of Nature's Foster for providing all necessary facilities and Dr.A.K.Gupta of Assam(Central) University, Dr.H.J.Singha of Birjhora Mahavidyalaya for their continuous encouragement.

Reference

Whitaker, R. and Captain, A. 2004. *Snakes of India - The field guide*, Draco Books, Chengalpattu-603 001.

EXTENDED DISTRIBUTION OF THE SPECTACLED COBRA *NAJA NAJA* (LINNAEUS, 1758) (FAMILY: ELAPIDAE) IN WESTERN ASSAM, INDIA

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This note is on a new record of the spectacled cobra *Naja naja* (Linnaeus, 1758) (Family: Elapidae) in the western-most part of Assam. Previously, spectacled cobra *Naja naja* had been reported only from the mainland of India excluding the northeastern portion (Whitaker, R. and Captain, A.2004). There is no published record of the species in the northeastern part of India. But on the basis of frequency of observation of the species during various field surveys it seems to be common in the western-most part of Assam. This species has been observed in the forested areas, paddy fields, tea gardens and near human habitations. The snake is sometimes rescued from human habitations both in urban as well as rural areas.

Acknowledgements

We thank Dr.S.Sengupta for his encouragement and Mr.S.N.Sen of Nature's Foster for providing all necessary facilities.

Reference

Whitaker,R. and Captain, A. 2004. *Snakes of India - The field guide*, Draco Books, Chengalpattu - 603 001.

ON THE OCCURRENCE OF *JAPALURA VARIEGATA* GRAY (REPTILIA: SAURIA: AGAMIDAE) IN MIZORAM, NORTH EAST INDIA

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Zoological survey of India,
Risa Colony, Shillong.

Key words:

VR/ERS/ZSI- Vertebrata/Reptilia/Eastern Regional Station/Zoological Survey of India.

Japalura is a genus of mountain agamid lizards inhabiting Himalayan and Trans-Himalayan regions (Smith, 1935). Altogether 30 species of this genus are known to occur (Schleich and Kastle, 2002), Smith (ibid.) reported 12 species, including *J. andersoniana* and *J. planidorsata* from North East India. *Japalura tricarinata* Gray is known to occur in the Eastern Himalayas, Sikkim and West Bengal (Smith, 1935; Ahmed and Dasgupta, 1992). A single specimen of this not too common species was collected from District Park, Zebawk, Lunglei district, Mizoram (22° 50' 52.8" N ; 92° 49' 8" E, Alt. 1128 m), on 22nd September, 2005 by R. Mathew and party. This collection spot is some 15 kilometers ahead of Lunglei, and is the backyard of forested area. A stream passes through this and this specimen was collected from bushes by the side of this stream. As the name of the locality indicates, the area is being developed into the District Sports Complex and construction of a bridge and other modern structures is being done.

Diagnostic characters

Head with a distinct neck; dorsum of head with unequal scales; a dark band across and anterior to the orbit; tympanum concealed; 10 upper and 11 lower labials; an angular series of five enlarged scales on either side of the head immediately above the neck continued to the body as dorsa-lateral ridges which are disrupted half way through; three enlarged scales below, towards the gular region; enlarged scales forming ridges on head, body and limbs; a white band from lower side of eye to corner of mouth passing through 10th upper labial; limbs long, hind limb reaches to the eye; Dorsum dark brown, ventrally paler, speckled with black; SVL 32 mm, tail 47 mm. The specimen is registered VR/ERS/ZSI /264.

Acknowledgements

The author is grateful to Dr.J.R.B.Alfred, Director, Zoological Survey of India, Kolkata and to Dr.Sen, Officer-in-Charge, Eastern Regional Station, Zoological Survey of India, Shillong for permission to study the material and for laboratory facilities.

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**BREEDING RECORD OF FOURLINED TREEFROG
POLYPEDATES LEUCOMYSTAX (GRAVENHORST, 1829) AT
RAJPUR, SOUTH 24 PARGANAS DISTRICT, WEST BENGAL**

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3rd June 2006: The day was quite hot throughout. The observation site was at “Farmland”, Shyamkhola More, South Jaggadal, Rajpur, South 24 Parganas district, West Bengal. With the onset of evening, calls of the four-lined tree frog, *Polypedates leucomystax* (Gravenhorst) started from different thickets around small puddles. An ideal breeding water body was a small cemented birdbath with a small Jamun tree beside it from which a twig hung over the water surface. Observation was continued at intervals of about one hour.

At 19:30 hrs, we saw a pair of *P.leucomystax* partially submerged in the birdbath water in mating posture with the smaller male clasping the larger female in amplexus. Two more males were sitting at the edge of the cemented birdbath. All were silent.

At 20:45 hrs, The pair was observed holding on to a small twig of an adjacent short Jamun tree, which was hanging directly over the birdbath 5’6" ft above the surface of the water. The position of the pair was such that they were directly above the water. The female kept her abdomen slightly inflated.

At 22:00 hrs, The pair remained in the same posture with the female's abdomen much inflated.

At 23:00 hrs, Foam-nest making had commenced.

12:00 midnight, A light cream coloured foam-nest was finished. Size of the nest was 6.3 cm X 6.1 cm X 7.0 cm. The female was observed sitting on the same tree about 2 ft away from the nest. The male frog was sitting on a wild arum herb about 5 ft away from the birdbath.

The 4th day of June 2006 was the first day of monsoon in the year. There was torrential rain for 2 hours from 13:00 hrs. to 15:00 hrs. When the rain was over it was seen that some part of the nest was in degraded condition and was hanging from the twig and the remaining part had fallen into the water of the birdbath beneath.

Lest it be presumed that the frogs' mating was the forecast of the coming monsoon it may be clarified that two foam-nests of the same species had been observed on 29.04.2006 in the identical location, over the same birdbath, on the same tree, on the same twig and at the same height. Among them one was deep cream in colour and its measurement 5.8 cm X 5.8 cm X 6.5 cm and the other light cream in colour and its measurement was 6.3 cm X 6.0 cm X 8.0 cm. These also dropped into the birdbath.

Reference

Deuti, K & A.Banerjee (2005): First record of *Polypedates leucomystax* (Anura: Rhacophoridae) from southern West Bengal. *J.Bombay nat. Hist.Soc.*, 102(1): 123.

RANDOM HARVEST

Why they gape.

Crocodylians basking with their mouth wide open is a familiar sight in the wild and in zoos. This is generally explained as a thermo-regulatory behaviour to promote evaporative cooling through exposed oral mucosa. But a different explanation is necessary when this happens in low ambient temperatures.

Writing in *Copeia* 1993, No.2, Christopher P.Kofron referred to a paper by Loveridge J.P.(1984) in *Symp. Zoo. Soc. London* 52: 443-467 in which this behaviour had been interpreted in a social context. Proceeding from this and based on 54 observations of gaping by basking Nile crocodiles (*Crocodylus niloticus*) in the pools of a river in a national park in Zimbabwe, during winter, Kofron found that 45 were threat displays (19 crocs gaped when another croc. drew near; seven when he approached them; six when hippos drew near; six when splashing occurred; five when touched by another croc; one when touched by a hippo and one when birds drew near); on seven occasions, crocs gaped immediately after emerging to bask and twice with no apparent reason.

Gaping as a threat display during capture operations is well-known.

* * *

ELISA for Snakebite – Testing facilities near Chennai.

A report in the *New Indian Express* of July 20, 2006 says that the S.R.M. Medical College Hospital in Kattankulathur, near Chennai, is planning to have an exclusive trauma and emergency care centre where, along with other activities, snakebite cases will be treated. Ian D.Simpson, member, WHO Snakebite Treatment Group, is reported to have said that the Group would develop ELISA testing facilities at the centre at a cost of Rs.20 lakhs for prompt identification of the kind of venom in a snake bite victim and the extent of envenomation. This would help the doctor in the treatment with antivenin.

ELISA stands for ‘Enzyme-Linked Immunoabsorbent Assay’ which test is utilized to detect substances that have antigenic properties. These substances include antibodies.

The S.R.M Medical College and Hospital has launched a website for snakebite management which will serve as a guide for symptoms of snakebite and advice on treatment for the benefit of doctors and the public. The address is www.srmsbru.org

* * *

Colour-changing snake.

Biologists working in the forests of Borneo have discovered two specimens of a new species of snake, which can change its colour like a chameleon. The half-a-meter long poisonous snake was found in the wet lands and swamp forests of Betung National Park in the Indonesian part of the Island. The snake has been named Kapuas mud snake with the scientific name *Enhydryis gyii*.

Sources: *The Hindu* and *The New Indian Express* June 28, 2006

* * *

Bloodsquirting as a defence strategy in reptiles.

Many reptiles use foul-smelling cloacal discharges and external glandular secretions in encounters with predators to put them off. In a few rare cases, the putative defensive substance is, or includes, blood.

During the death-feigning display by the West Indian wood snakes, blood is released into their eyes. Also capillaries inside the mouth get ruptured leading to blood trickling from their apparently lifeless jaws. These enhance the pretence.

Horned lizards (*phrynosoma* spp.) found in the sandy tracts of the United States and Central America have the unique ability to squirt blood from the eyes. This is not a regular behaviour though; it occurs erratically in some individuals. The exact mechanism of this has been much debated. These lizards are also called 'horned toads' because of their toad-like faces.

* * *

Length of prey no problem.

There are instances of a snake swallowing another snake longer than itself. In Ditmars's *Snakes of the World* (1931), there is an X-ray picture of just such a case. The prey is seen to have been accommodated within the predator by many bends and loops.

* * *

Our Raahu and their Reahou.

According to Indian mythology, eclipses of the moon and the sun are caused by their being swallowed by a demon *Raahu*, often depicted as a serpent. He had a score to settle with the moon and the sun dating back to the episode of the churning of the ocean of milk to extract nectar (*amrt*).

In Cambodia, *Reahou* is believed to be an evil cosmic serpent and a brother of the sun and the moon who swallows his siblings causing the eclipses. On such occasions, the people make a racket beating on pots and pans, shouting and striking gongs in order to warn the heavenly body of the impending disaster and scare away

the monster. Access to technology seems to have helped more impressive demonstrations. Sherman Minton and Madge Minton say in *Giant Reptiles* (1973) that “on Jan.30, 1972, soldiers guarding the Cambodian Capital, Phnom Penh, lit the sky for a full hour with a fusillade of shells and tracer bullets. They killed two of their comrades and wounded eightyfive others, all in an effort to drive away a malevolent serpent who was swallowing the moon. Commander-in-Chief Lon Nol called the incident “a serious blot on the honour of the Khmer Republic”.

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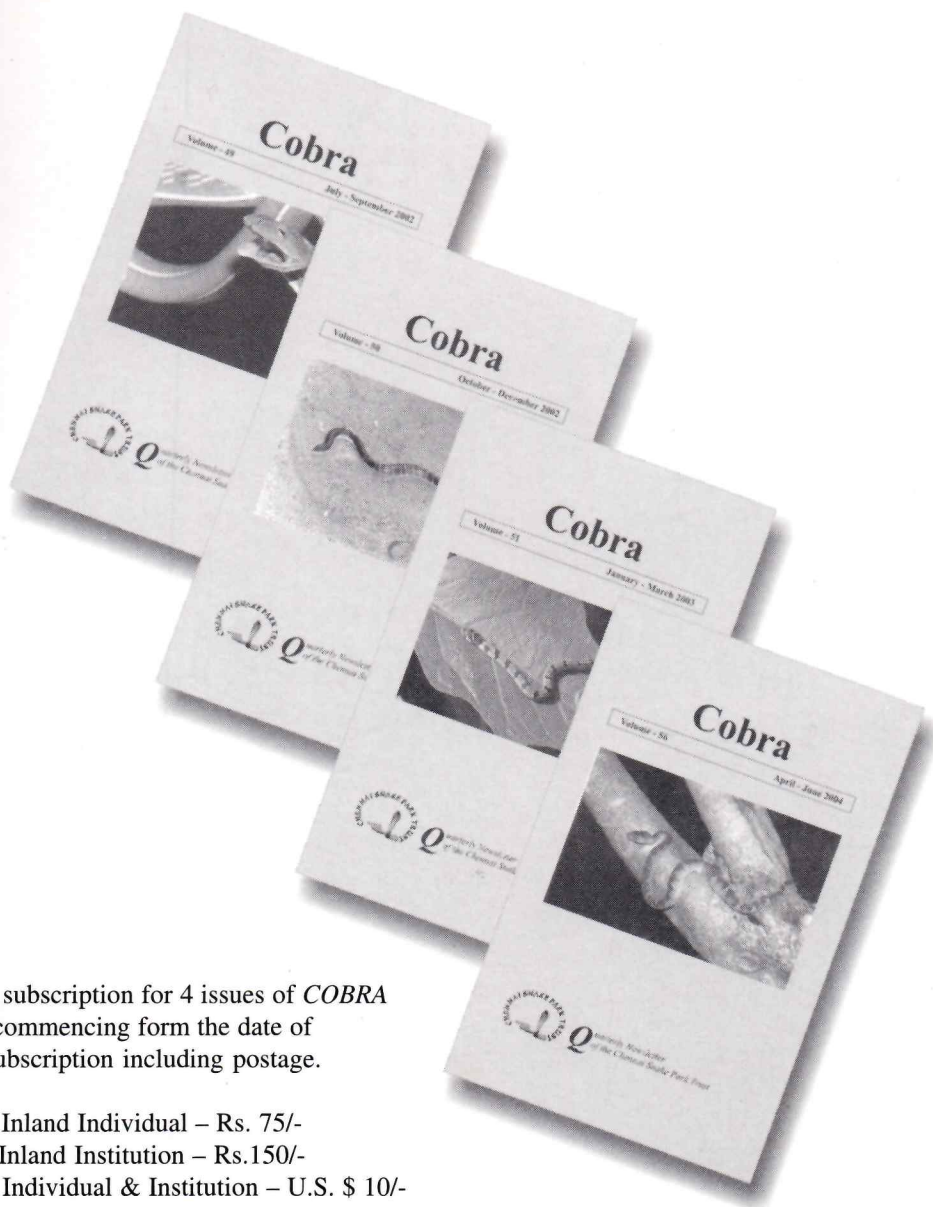
Our ‘eight steps’ and their ‘seven steps’.

There is a belief in parts of South India and in Sri Lanka about the existence of a highly venomous snake whose bite will kill the victim by the time he moves eight steps ahead. In Kerala, it is called *ettati moorkhan*, the ‘eight-steps cobra’. K.G.Adiyodi in his 1965 book in Malayalam on the venomous snakes of Kerala identifies *ettati moorkhan* as *Calliophis nigrescens* – the striped coral snake which is a rare 4 ft. long venomous snake of the Western Ghats. He also says that the snake known as *ettati veeran* is different – it is the common krait (*Bungarus caeruleus*). The Tamil name is spelt as both *ettati viriyan* and *ettati veeran*. *Viriyan* means viper; *veeran* means ‘powerful’ or ‘brave’ or it is, more probably, a corruption of *viriyan*. In F.Wall’s *Snakes of Ceylon* (1921) *yettati viriyan* is given as the Tamil name for the common krait. Gharpurey (*The Snakes of India and Pakistan*, 1954) says that the common krait is called *yettati viriyan* “in Madras”. The *Tamil Lexicon* (University of Madras, 1982) describes *ettati virian* as a viper.

So, is it a cobra or a krait or a viper or a coral snake? Whatever its identity, the belief about its lethal power is the same: it is ‘finis’ just eight steps away. This is, of course, no more than an old wives’ tale even though all these species are venomous.

There is a curiously similar tale from Africa. Mark O’Shea says (*Venomous snakes of the World*, 2005) that, in Somalia, the African subspecies of the Arabian burrowing asp (*Atractaspis microlepidota*) is called ‘seven steps’, the belief being that the victim of its bite will be dead by the time he moves seven steps ahead. The venom of the snake can kill, but not that fast.

- B.Vijayaraghavan.



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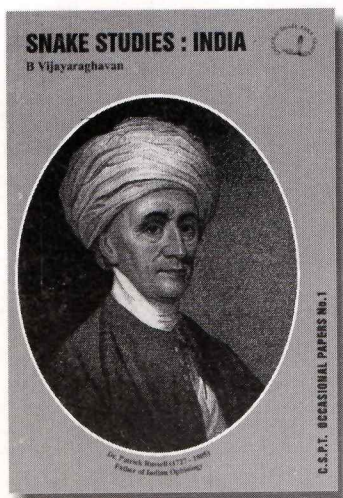
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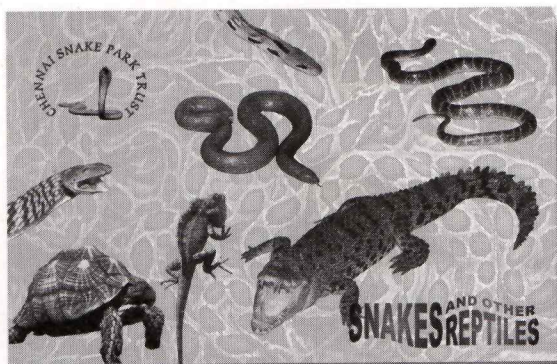


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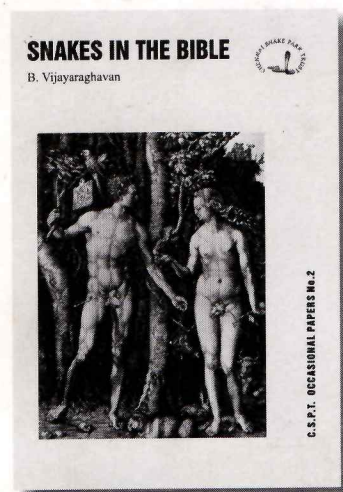
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