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Herpetology of an Antique Land: The History of Herpetological Explorations and Knowledge in India and South Asia

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Abstract. The history of herpetological explorations in the Indian subcontinent is traced from Vedic times to present. The profound knowledge that the ancients of India had ca. 3,300 years before present, including the identification and classification of snakes, was remarkable, and probably stems from their deep interest in the natural world, besides the obvious utilitarian value of such knowledge. Medieval European knowledge of the regional herpetofauna consisted mostly of exaggerated accounts culled from bestiaries and colourful accounts by visitors writing primarily for the entertainment of a European audience. With the Mughal period came the age of natural history record keeping. Many of the rulers were keen natural historians and kept memoirs that often recorded specific information on amphibians and reptiles.

European merchants, and subsequently, the British colonial system, brought the best of western science to India. Although primarily motivated by profit to be made from botanical explorations (e.g., spices and tea) they also supported early herpetological explorations of the country. As a result, specimens from India, Nepal and Sri Lanka were made available for examination and description by museum curators in Europe. The enormous collections that were made also resulted, in the 1800s, in the foundation of local museums, some of which are the earliest existing systematic institutions in the world, including those in Calcutta and Bombay. Prominent naturalists of the time who were associated, as staff, society members and collectors of such museums include Edward BLYTH, Edward KELAART, John ANDERSON, William THEOBALD and Ferdinand STOLICZKA.

The final chapter in the history of south Asian herpetology began after the withdrawal of the colonial powers, at the end of World War II. Among the few local scientists who produced exceptional work was Paulus DERANIYAGALA of Sri Lanka. DERANIYAGALA explored his island nation and described a large number of new taxa in local journals in several volumes published by the Colombo Museum. At the beginning of the 21st Century, herpetological explorations, through a combination of lack of resources and political will, as well as new restrictive laws, face the threat of coming to a halt. The rapid disappearance of natural habitats and the inevitable extinction of species place an urgency on the resumption of inventories and the protection of the living resources of the region.

Key words. Sri Lanka, Asiatic Society of Bengal.

1. INTRODUCTION

Southern Asia, comprising the Indian Subcontinent countries of Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka, has a distinctive and rich herpetofauna, as well as a long history of documented studies, commencing from the Vedic period, that date back perhaps as far as 10,000 years before Christ. The following essay traces the development of the science in the region, especially India, and also, her adjacent countries, to the present, enumerating the more important works, and authors and collectors, till 1970. A listing of geographic names as in former times, along with the modern-day equivalent is in the Appendix.

2. THE VEDIC PERIOD

The ancestors of the people living in the region now called India did not have their own name for their land ("India" is derived from the Sindu, later, Indus River), nor their religion ("Hindu", also from the same source),

both having been given by invading armies from the west. The richness of her civilisation and of the land itself nurtured many regional scholars, not the least of these being the unknown authors of the great works, the Vedas, written, according to various sources, between 1,300–1,000 B.C. (BLOOMFIELD 1908), to around 10,000 B.C. (SIDHARTH 1999). The Vedas not only offer guidelines for code of conduct, hymns and incantations to various deities, but also discuss many more practical topics, such as health care, the treatment of illnesses and injury through medicine and surgery, and protocol for sacrifices. Thus, while Europe and, indeed, much of the rest of the world languished in the dark ages, Vedic scholars founded the world's first university (at Takshila, in 2,700 BP, with an attendance of over 10,500 students from all over the world), started a school of surgery (in 2,600 BP, that dealt with complicated cases such as caesarians, cataracts, artificial limbs, brain and plastic surgeries), worked on algebra, trigonometry, calculus and astronomy (including the helio-