

Fr. CHARLES LEIGH, THE 'SNAKE FATHER'

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Fr. Charles Leigh (1881-1969), a Britisher, came to India during the colonial rule and first worked as a professor of English at the St. Joseph's College, Trichinopoly. He was the principal of that College during 1921-1923 and again from 1924 to 1927. Later, he moved on to the Loyola College in Madras. He was fondly called "the Snake Father" because he was much more than an English professor for he was interested in the natural history of snakes. He collected several snakes, even the large Indian rock pythons, and venomous ones like cobras, kraits and vipers, reared them in captivity inside the campus, made extensive observations on them, preserved them as museum specimens for future studies and even went on to publish scholarly articles in scientific journals. So much so, his contributions to Indian snake studies were taken note of by even the legendary Malcom A. Smith, whilst writing his much-acclaimed work *-The Fauna of British India. Vol. III - Serpentes* (see Smith, 1943: 548).

Fr. Leigh died while in India and was interred in the Jesuits' graveyard in Loyola College Campus adjacent to Loyola chapel.

He made his collections largely in and around Madras (12°N 79°E < 20 m asl) (now Chennai) and Kodaikanal (10°N 77°E ca. 2000-2500 m asl), a hill-station in the Pulney hills of the Western Ghats in the then Madras Presidency.

His collections are of considerable interest, notwithstanding that scientific studies on snakes began in Madras dating way back to Dr. Patrick Russell in 1796 during his research on the Coramandel Coast and that in Kodaikanal by Lt. Col. R.H. Beddome between 1863 and 1886, by Col. Frank Wall in 1923 and later by Dr. M.V. Rajendran (see Smith, 1931; Das, 2004; Vijayaraghavan, 2005; Ganesh, 2011). Fr. Leigh's specimens, preserved, identified and labeled, were divided between the Zoology Museum of the Loyola College (Raman, pers. comm.), a college in Chennai founded in 1925 and the Anglade Institute of Natural History (Matthew, 1994) a natural history museum in Shenbaganur, Kodaikanal, founded in 1895.

In his account on the Anglade Institute's natural history museum collection, Matthew (1994) writes thus "*the existing collection [of snakes in the Anglade Inst. Nat. Hist.] is a gift from Fr. Leigh made in the plains (...)there are a few interesting items: (...)the two spinal columns, one of a python (4.5 m) and a shorter one of a rat snake (...) The poisonous king cobra is represented by a 3.6 m long mounted skin (...)poisonous snakes of the Upper Palnis are the Russell's viper and the green viper; lower down are the krait, the cobra and the saw- scaled viper.*"

In a letter to *The Hindu* 9 Apr. 2009, N. Sreedharan quotes Fr. Leigh as saying that he wrote a series of articles for the *Madras Mail* "enough to make a book if reprinted". This newspaper closed down long ago and, unfortunately, the articles could not be accessed. If someone could lay his hands on them, that would be a worthwhile effort.

Fr. Leigh's collections are a good representation of the snake fauna of the concerned areas. The number of sea snakes stored at the Loyola College and the myriad hill-dwelling forms like the shieldtails and pitvipers mostly present in the Shenbaganur Museum stand testimony to this. A complete checklist of the snake species reported as collected / donated by Fr. Leigh is given below:

(Note. - # indicates presence only in Loyola College Museum; * indicates presence only in the Anglade Institute of Natural History Shenbaganur; unmarked entries are present in both the museums)

SERPENTES Linnaeus, 1758

TYPHLOPIDAE Merrem, 1820

1. Common worm snake *Ramphotyphlops braminus* (Daudin, 1803)

UROPELTIDAE Müller, 1832

2. Madurai sheidltail *Platyplectrurus madurensis* Beddome, 1877*
3. Wall's shieldtail *Brachyophidium rhodogaster* Wall, 1921*
4. Perrotet's shieldtail *Plectrurus perroteti* Duméril, Birbon & Duméril, 1854
5. Woodmason's shieldtail *Uropeltis woodmasoni* (Theobald, 1876)
6. Palni shieldtail *Uropeltis pulneyensis* (Beddome, 1863)*
7. Red-bellied shieldtail *Rhinophis sanguineus* Beddome, 1863*

PYTHONIDAE Fitzinger, 1826

8. Indian rock python (*Python molurus*)

BOIDAE Gray, 1825

9. Common sand boa *Gongylophis conicus* (Schneider, 1801)
10. Red sand boa *Eryx johnii* (Russell, 1801)

ACROCHORDIDAE Bonoparte, 1831

11. File snake *Acrochordus granulatus* (Schneider, 1799)

COLUBRIDAE Oppel, 1811

12. Indian trinket snake *Coelognathus helena helena* (Daudin, 1803)
13. Indian rat snake *Ptyas mucosa* (Linnaeus, 1758)
14. Bronzeback tree snake *Dendrelaphis tristis* (Daudin, 1803)
15. Ornate flying snake *Chrysopelea ornata* (Shaw, 1802)*
16. Banded kukri snake *Oligodon amensis* (Shaw, 1802)
17. Russell's kukri snake *Oligodon taeniolatus* (Jerdon, 1853)#
18. Black-spotted kukri snake *Oligodon venustus* (Jerdon, 1853)
19. Common wolf snake *Lycodon aulicus* (Linnaeus, 1758)
20. Barred wolf snake *Lycodon striatus* (Shaw, 1802)#
21. Travancore wolf snake *Lycodon travancoricus* (Beddome, 1870)*
22. Common bridal snake *Dryocalamus nympha* (Daudin, 1801)#
23. Striped keelback *Amphiesma stolatum* (Linnaeus, 1758)
24. Green keelback *Macropisthodon plumbicolor* (Cantor, 1839)*
25. Checkered keelback *Xenochrophis piscator* (Schneider, 1799)
26. Olive keelback *Atretium schistosum* (Daudin, 1803)
27. Perrotet's wood snake *Xylophis perroteti* (Duméril, Birbon & Duméril, 1854)*
28. Günther's vine snake *Ahaetulla dispar* (Günther, 1864)*
29. Common vine snake *Ahaetulla nasuta* (Bonnaterre, 1790)
30. Brown vine snake *Ahaetulla pulverulenta* (Duméril, Birbon & Duméril, 1854)*

31. Common cat snake *Boiga trigonata* (Bechstein in Daudin, 1802)
32. Ceylon cat snake *Boiga ceylonensis* (Günther, 1858)*
33. Dog-faced water snake *Cerberus rynchops* (Schneider, 1799)

ELAPIDAE Boie, 1827

34. Common krait *Bungarus caeruleus* (Schneider, 1801)
35. Banded krait *Bungarus fasciatus* (Schneider, 1801)*
36. Slender coral snake *Calliophis melanurus* (Shaw, 1802)#
37. Striped coral snake *Calliophis nigrescens* Günther, 1862*
38. Bibron's coral snake *Calliophis bibroni* (Jan, 1858)*
39. Spectacled Cobra *Naja naja* (Linnaeus, 1758)
40. King cobra *Ophiophagus hannah* (Cantor, 1839)*

HYDROPHIIDAE Boie, 1827

41. Hook-nosed sea snake *Enhydrina schistosa* (Daudin, 1803)#
42. Jerdon's sea snake *Kerilia jerdoni* Gray, 1849#
43. Malacca sea snake *Hydrophis caeruleus* (Shaw, 1802)#
44. Annulated sea snake *Hydrophis cyanocinctus* (Daudin, 1803)#
45. Yellow sea snake *Hydrophis spiralis* (Shaw, 1802)#
46. Banded sea snake *Hydrophis fasciatus* (Schneider, 1799)#
47. Small-headed sea snake *Hydrophis gracilis* (Shaw, 1802)#
48. Cochin banded sea snake *Hydrophis ornatus* (Gray, 1842)#
49. Short sea snake *Lapemis curtus* (Shaw, 1802)#
50. Black and yellow sea snake *Pelamis platura* (Linnaeus, 1766)#

VIPERIDAE Gray, 1825

51. Russell's viper *Daboia russelii* (Shaw & Nodder, 1799)
52. Saw-scaled viper *Echis carinatus* (Schneider, 1801)
53. Large-scaled pitviper *Trimeresurus macrolepis* Beddome, 1862*
54. Bamboo pitviper *Trimeresurus gramineus* (Shaw, 1802)*
55. Malabar pitviper *Trimeresurus malabaricus* (Jerdon, 1854)*
56. Horse-shoe pitviper *Trimeresurus strigatus* Gray, 1845*

Besides merely collecting snakes, either for rearing in captivity or for preserving in natural history museums, Fr. Leigh subjected them to close studies. He published several scholarly articles in scientific journals which testify to his professional knowledge of the subject notwithstanding that he had no academic background in zoology. His articles still continue to be consulted and cited. He is most remembered for his works on the breeding and captive husbandry of the endangered Indian rock python.

List of publications on Indian snakes by Fr. C. Leigh:

1. 1926. Notes on snakes. *J. Bombay Nat. Hist. Soc.* 31: 227-228.
2. 1928. Notes on the Indian python. *J. Bombay Nat. Hist. Soc.* 38: 208-210.
3. 1936a. Age and growth of pythons. *Field.* 1936, June: 404.
4. 1936b. Breeding of pythons. *Field.* 1936, Dec: 1556.
5. 1948. Notes on the Fauna of British India- Reptilia and Amphibia, by Malcolm A. Smith. Volume III Serpentes. *J. Bombay Nat. Hist. Soc.* 47(2) : 399-400.
6. 1949. Egg-laying by the Indian python in captivity. *J. Bombay Nat. Hist. Soc.* 48(3): 597.
7. 1951. Egg-laying by a python in captivity. *J. Bombay Nat. Hist. Soc.* 50(1): 183.

His contributions in this field be it the increasingly dwindling art of collecting, classifying and cataloguing specimens in museums (Das, 2003) or making natural history observations on captive snakes, have all contributed in some measure to our present understanding of the subject. Furthermore, it must be remembered that all these happened during a period when there was a lull in Indian snake studies (Das, 2004 & Vijayaraghavan, 2005), i.e., between the colonial days and the 21st century. Fr. Leigh was among the few, forgotten naturalists of excellence and it is hoped that he and his contributions to herpetology will be remembered.

Acknowledgements

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Prof. Anantanarayanan Raman of the Charles Sturt Univ. Orange, Australia first drew our attention to the need for studying the work of Fr. Leigh notwithstanding that the material available was sparse. He also introduced us to many professors at the Loyola College, namely, Rev. Fr. Casimir Raj who gave biographical details about Fr. Leigh; Dr. A. T. Flemming, Head, Dept. of Zoology, who kindly permitted the examination of specimens in the collection and to photograph the portrait of Fr. Leigh; Mr. Christi Raj, lab assistant who gave important information about the tombstone of Fr. Leigh. I am grateful to my uncle, Mr. N. Ramesh, for sharing with me his videos, photos and experience after his recent visit to the Anglade Institute of Natural History.

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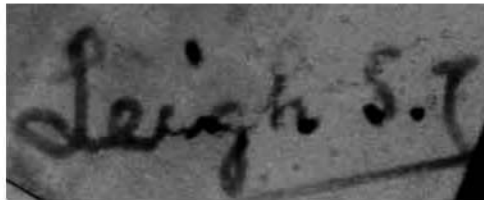
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Fr. Leigh with four pythons



His tombstone



His signature