



Snake Bite

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Abstract

The article gives a brief account of the author's experience of a snake bite. In an attempt to save the endangered lion cubs he was bitten by a poisonous snake (Indian cobra) when he was Director of the Zoo. The story goes with the narration of tidbits of many people's effort to save the author's life with the associated post-bite stress which lasted for about four months. The experience reveals the author's benevolent approach to save the living creature at the cost of his own life. In all respect, it was an experience to be reckoned with for the conservation and protection of wildlife.

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It was 3rd July 1986 when Rajiv Gandhi, the erstwhile Prime Minister of India, was leaving for Mauritius at around 3.00 pm. He decided to gift a pair of peacocks and spotted deer to his counterpart. Therefore, head animal keeper, zoo ranger and veterinarians all went to Delhi International Airport with the animals for dispatch.

It was a sultry morning around 10.00 am when I was on inspection duty an animal keeper of the Indian Lion's Enclosure was rushing to me to inform that a very large cobra had entered into the lion's cage, where three four-month old cubs were in great danger. Immediately I rushed to the cub's cage. Inside the cage I saw the cubs poised to attack a fiercely hissing cobra. It was a large almost six foot long, black glistening cobra, with its hood wide spread, all concentrated for delivering its deadly strike. A cobra possesses enough poison to make a couple of kills if need be.

The cobra seemed to have just entered into the cool comfort of the caged enclosure, when it was immediately challenged by the possessive occupants, who eagerly looked out for anything with which they could play, just as little kittens of domestic cats would do with a ball of wool, or any moving object. Therefore, the cobra was a handy playing thing for them. Their mother was lying down watching the prank of her little ones without worrying about any danger. The cubs emboldened by our presence moved forward to attack the cobra, not realizing their incapability and lack of knowledge about the deadly foe. They were concerned only about playing the prank. It was a deadly dangerous sensitive

situation. It was a sure death for these highly threatened Indian lion species, and extremely bad news for the reputation of the zoo in the eyes of the public. Therefore, death of the cubs needed to be averted, and an immediate action was required to be taken as the situation warranted.

The cobra was very close to the bars of the cage. It could not be killed using a stick as the cross bars were close to one another, and the cage was further protected with large wire mesh to prevent vandalism by human intruders. If there were only bars, the stick could have been used, as it would have had enough leverage for a strike, to immobilize the snake as a preventive action to save the cubs. How to save the cubs by any other alternative means was the greatest concern for me. As a quick thought, with a view to save the cubs, I realized that the cobra needed to be yanked off the cage. I, therefore, instantly inserted my hand between the bars and the mesh, and grabbed the snake at a lightning speed, to pull it away from the cubs. I did manage to pull it out fairly fast, and dropped it on the ground outside, and was delighted at having saved the cubs. But it was not to be so. The snake was enraged. It immediately jumped up to two feet height, and menacingly tried to strike me. I stepped back, and was immediately handed over a stick to strike it almost simultaneously, while it swerved angrily.

When I tried to hold the stick firmly, I felt a strange numbness in the palm of my right hand with a very severe burning sensation, as experienced from a scorpion sting. My sixth sense told me that I had been bitten by the deadly cobra.

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However, with the numbness and pain I struck the cobra with as much force as I could apply. And it became immobilized. I looked at upper side of the palm with a feeling of excruciating pain. I saw the fang marks from where blood plus serum were oozing out. It confirmed that I was bitten.

Leaving the immobilized snake to be attended by the keepers, I rushed to the All India Institute of Medical Sciences (AIIMS) hospital's emergency ward with minimum waste of time along with a clerk who happened to be waiting nearby. On the way to the hospital, drawing on my knowledge of treating snake bites learnt in our first aid class at Forest Academy, I tied one tourniquet on my arm above the elbow, and another above the wrist for delaying the spread of the poison in the body.

We reached the hospital around 10.25 am and reported to the doctor in duty at the reception. He took sometime to decide as to whether I was the patient or my accompanying clerk who was very badly shaken up, sweating and shivering, fearing the worst to happen to me. I, on the contrary, believed that I was in safe hands then, as taken adequate preliminary measures, and once the anti-venom would be given intravenous, it would be alright, and I would be discharged within an hour. However, it did not happen so, for the indifferent doctors made the short story very long. They wanted to know whether it was a cobra or a non-poisonous rat snake, and demanded that the snake ought to have been brought with me for them to take a decision. Perhaps they were unaware that the fang marks should have adequate indication of a poisonous snake. I became stern, which was not supposed to be in that situation, but the situation made me to react so. I informed them about my designation as Director of the Zoo having enough knowledge about snakes. They then took it more seriously, and allotted me a bed in the ward.

I was instructed not to fall asleep at any cost. To keep me awake expecting that I may do so due to the effect of venom, they kept a very charming talkative nurse to refrain me from falling asleep. The pretty nurse and her sweet talk was enough to keep me awake. But it was not a reason good enough to neutralize the effect of the venom in my system. However, at around 11.00 am I felt that sleep was gradually taking control over me. I felt, there is need to make haste in expediting the treatment by the doctors, since everything seemed cool and calm about them. I spoke to Kishore Rao, Deputy Director (Wildlife) in the Ministry and informed him about the situation there. He was my student at Indira Gandhi National Forest Academy (IGNFA), Dehradun, India, became very much concerned, and immediately rushed to T N Seshan who was Secretary in the Ministry. Mr Seshan immediately informed the Prime Minister, who also held the Environment and Forest portfolio. The Prime Minister who was to leave for Mauritius told Mr Seshan to ensure my best treatment, if needed to call an expert from elsewhere.

Meanwhile my son arrived at the hospital, and seeing the callous situation there rushed to Ms Subramanyam, wife of Joint Secretary Health, a close family friend, and informed her. She promptly told her husband in the Ministry of Health about the negligence being meted out in such a life struggling situation.

At around 11.15 am, by the time Mr Seshan and Mr Subramanyam got into action, I approached the doctors on duty at the reception at AIIMS to enquire about the measures being taken by them. I was informed that they did not have the required anti-venom for treating me. So, my clerk and my driver went to procure the same from outside. Fortunately, better sense prevailed on me and I did not lose my temper. Instead, I asked them for the alternatives. The doctors without any hesitation informed that anti-venom would be available at Safdarjung Hospital, New Delhi. So, I should have gone there first, instead of coming to AIIMS—a referral hospital. I asked them to send me there if failed to do so at the initial stage itself. They informed that they had neither such procedure nor any facility to transfer me there, except that they could discharge me at my request, and thereafter I would be at liberty to go wherever I wish.

By 11.30 am I was feeling very sleepy. I was forcefully trying to keep my drooping eyes open. The pretty nurse was getting worried seeing me sleepy beyond her ability to refrain me. I was feeling a little breathless, though the pain in my hand had subsided considerably. I took the decision of a voluntary discharge. It was readily given.

I asked the doctors to get me shifted to Safdarjung by an ambulance. They stated that it was not possible. So, I walked towards the gate of AIIMS, and requested an auto-rickshaw driver to take me quickly to Safdarjung Hospital, since I was new to Delhi and did not know its location. He pointed out the hospital opposite to the wide road. It was easier to walk across faster than by auto-rickshaw because of the heavy traffic, traffic signals, and the long distance of going around because of the road divider. I told the auto-rickshaw driver that my eyes were blurring, legs were wobbling, and feet were dragging because of the snake bite. He was a God sent human, not heartless like the doctors at AIIMS. He assisted me to cross the road with another person's help up to the gate of Safdarjung Hospital. From there with a little help I reached to the door of the emergency ward in an almost collapsing state, with the discharge certificate of AIIMS at about 11.45 am.

At Safdarjung the reception doctor immediately put me on the bed with intravenous glucose drip together with anti-venom. Just after having done these initial actions, he got a call from Ms Subramanyam, and assured her of the best attention. It was followed by a message from Prime Minister Office for giving me the best care and attention. It was the time I was just slipping out of my consciousness when my wife Rohini arrived along with Sudir Pande (my batchmate at Forest Academy). She noticed that I was turning blue-black despite my dark complexion, and informed the doctor. I was immediately put on oxygen while I started mumbling to give confidence to my wife whom I could recognize faintly. In a few minutes, around 12 noon I became unconscious, and was shifted to Intensive Care Unit (ICU) with the intravenous glucose and anti-venom continued when the doctors declared that I had gone into a state of coma.

In the ICU while my wife sat outside weeping, Mr Seshan arrived at 12.30 pm and took charge of the situation, empowered



with the order from the Prime Minister to ensure my best treatment. He found that the best of treatment was being done, not knowing what all had already happened. He realized that my fate hinged on the Almighty. He advised my wife to pray, while he himself got into a meditative silence with the prayer. Ms Shankar Guruswamy (wife of Secretary Sarkaria Commission) visited the hospital along with Ms Subramanyam at evening. She very thoughtfully gave my wife Indian Rupees 100 (US\$ 2.256 at present rate) in the form of small change for use in any emergency like making a telephone call, giving a tip to attendants, etc.

While my wife was waiting outside the ICU, a dead body, not me, was brought out at around 4.00 pm. My wife asked out of curiosity, and was informed only that he had died of a snake bite. At 6 pm another body was brought out of the ICU who had died of a cobra bite. It gave her the jittery creeps worrying about my turn likewise, since it was a miracle for a cobra bite victim to survive. At about 7.00 pm she was advised to call near and dear ones as my pulse rate and breathing were collapsing. Hearing this, both my wife and Mr Seshan intensified their prayers. At that time a nurse consoled her informing that no patient had so far died in bed no. 3, and if at all I should die, then the luck of the bed must have gone. It was a great solace to my wife who was still unsure and depressed. But this news brought rays of hope. Besides, it was a fact that Seshan, whose name coincidentally linked with *Seshnag*—the King of Snakes—prayed for my life. My wife felt assured that some miracle is bound to happen, and I would recover.

At 8.30 pm there was some unexpected spurt, a slight movement noticed, and I started to mumble. I once again slipped back into the sweet deep undisturbable slumber of unconsciousness. I laid this way till around 11.30 pm when I showed some more positive movements, and uttered something more clear though not understandable with a more positive sign of consciousness. The doctor in attendance became confident that I would now improve further. He said that it was an unexpected and mysterious event in the history of the hospital for a patient to recover from a snake bite coma after almost 12 hours. What could it all be was a startling question.

Was it due to intense sincere prayers by my wife and Mr Seshan or the better attention paid consequent to the high level interest with greater sincerity, or was it the miracle of the bed no. 3 as stated by the good nurse? Whatever may be the reason I got back to myself almost fully by 12.30 am in the night. This fact was informed to Forest Minister of State Ibrahim Ali Ansari by Mr Seshan, who then visited me at the hospital at around 1.00 am to say “You have saved the lion cubs risking your life. So, Allah the most benevolent has shown His compassion on you saving your life for your good deed to His creation”.

Soon after the Minister went away, I once again slipped into a deep but conscious sleep shown by my reflexes. I got up at 7.00 am next morning when Shankar Guruswamy, Secretary Sarkaria Commission, a very kindly soul, had brought for my wife some nice hot coffee.

Thereafter for next two days appeared several blisters all over my body which on rupturing was emitting a very putrid smelling fluid. It was quite disgusting to me. Doctors explained the cause as the physiological process of getting rid of undesirable matter from the system. In this case, the poison had a putrefying effect on the flesh wherever it had an access, and began acting. It is a process of digestion by snakes which cannot chew their food. So, they need to digest it from within. I had to be detained in the hospital for constant dressing of the blisters as they erupted to prevent any secondary infections. Thereafter it was no looking back, I showed a rapid improvement in my health. When I was feeling fine I requested for discharge unable to bear with the stress of being in the hospital. I was permitted to be discharged with a great difficulty, but the doctors kept visiting me, and kept me under close observation thrice a day till the 10th day, and thereafter twice a day till the 20th day. Blisters ceased from the 5th day, but many other problems began surfacing gradually. Digestion problem continued for almost two months, and so I was put on enzyme supplements to digest milk and carbohydrates, and had to keep to easily digestible soups and liquids in small doses till I got back to normal digestion. There was urinary problem because of the effect on the kidneys inspite of consuming large quantity of liquid diets. Lung functioning was hampered almost for three months. As a result I used to yawn every 5-10 minutes, and fall asleep when talking continuously for too long. There were frequent bouts of amnesia lasting from 5-10 minutes when there was difficulty in recognizing persons and remembering who they were. It continued for almost four months and reduced at a gradually decreasing frequency. The state of forgetfulness continued for fairly long. Things started to become normal after about four months.

Therefore, treatment of snake bite proved to be not just an instant cure, but a long drawn out recovery process., Impairment can occur anywhere the poison has an access in great concentration. In this regard I remembered G R Swamy, Forest Range Officer, Bairluty who died on the 18th day after a snake bite in 1965 due to complication leading to failure of kidneys as a consequence to coagulation of poison therein.

Later I came to know that almost all the staff of the zoo came to see me at the hospital, and many prayed for my recovery. Many vowed to offer the Almighty in their own silent ways. Shankar Guruswamy made me to attend a special *pooja* performed by him at my convenience to fulfill his vow at Malaiswamy Temple at R K Puram, New Delhi. Gayatri Ramchandran donated money to a temple in Tamilnadu state praying for my recovery. Ms Seshan prayed for my recovery till Mr Seshan gave her the good news. Some zoo staff desired that I should visit Nizamuddin Darga with them for a thanks giving, while some other desired I must visit the Matka Darga outside the zoo premises for offering in fulfillment of their wishes.

However, on the whole it had been a very close shave and could have been very damaging. Now recollecting everything turned out alright. Thanks to Rajiv Gandhi's personal intervention, and Mr Seshan's persistence I became normal.