

Snakebites

a neglected healthcare problem in India

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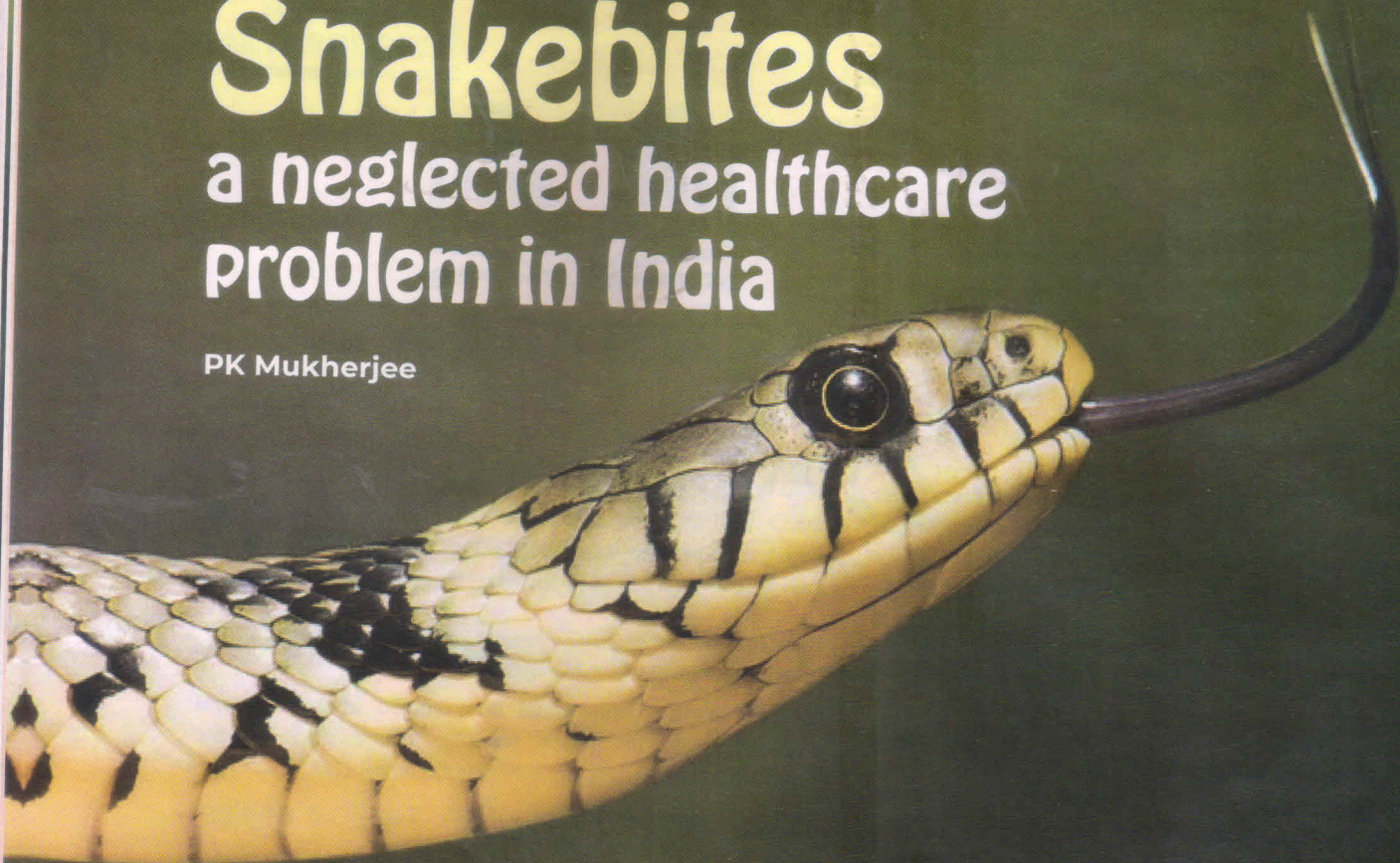


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THE mention of snakes is enough to send a chill down our spines. The childhood stories about snakes, often made us very scared. Indeed, snakes often evoke fear and disgust with their slithery appearance and flickering forked tongues. However, snakes are typically misunderstood, mistreated and often maligned, feared or killed, primarily out of our ignorance. There are more than 3,000 species of snakes in the world. They inhabit all continents except Antarctica and some small land masses, such as Iceland, Ireland, Greenland and New Zealand. Snakes are found in a wide range of habitats, such as forests, deserts, swamps and grasslands, and can move over land, climb trees and swim in the water with ease. Of all known species of snakes worldwide, only about 600 are venomous, and a small proportion of them, about 200, can kill or significantly wound a human.

The sense of awe and fear that snakes instil in us is not without a basis. The burden of deaths and disability caused by snakebites is a cause of great concern. South Asia has the highest incidences of snakebites in the world. Bangladesh, India, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka constitute nearly 70 per cent of global snakebite mortality within the region. However, our country tops the list as more than half of all snakebites worldwide occur in India alone. That way, India could well be said to be the world's snakebite capital. For example, on average, 5.4 million snakebite cases occur annually worldwide, and the estimated number of snakebite cases

in India is 2.8 million. While the estimated annual figures worldwide, according to the World Health Organisation (WHO), are between 81,000 and 1,38,000 (with an average of 1,00,000), annual deaths from snakebite mortality in India are around 46,000. While every year, about 4,00,000 people are disabled worldwide due to amputations, etc., resulting from snakebites, the corresponding annual figure for India is 1,40,000.

Snakebite cases in India

Around 300 snake species in India are found, of which about 62 are venomous. However, only four accounts for around 90 per cent of all snakebite fatalities. These species are saw-scaled viper (*Echis carinatus*), common krait (*Bungarus caeruleus*), Russell's viper (*Daboia russelii*), and the spectacled or binocellate cobra (*Naja naja*), collectively referred to as "big four."



Echis carinatus