

Denizens of spiderworld

IF ONE had wondered about Gerald Durrell's penchant to call a spider or a scorpion or a beetle a beauty, here are a group of people who do exactly that.

Watching a live spider under a microscope, one can get really attached to these 8-legged creatures, says a scientist in the group. Their alert eyes and quick movements can be fun to watch. And the spiders have about 6-8 eyes too apart from that many legs.

Mind you, these web spinners are not insects, since their taxonomic classification is different. They come under the class called Aranae and come under the group called Arachneda. And the study of spiders is called Arachnology. Among the colleges in the State, only the Department of Zoology at Sacred Heart College, Thevara, has an entire division devoted to Arachnology.

P.A. Sebastian, heading the department, Thevara, feels that the research undertaken by his fellow researchers and students is sure to benefit humanity in the long run. Established in 1998, the work undertaken by the team has led to the identification of 15 new species of spiders for the first time ever and 8 species were spotted for the first time in India. The team had also worked in the Lakshadweep Islands and had identified 18 species there. The specimens of the new species will be entrusted with the Zoological Survey of India, Dr. Sebastian says.

Bio-ecological studies and the predatory potential of spider fauna in the rice ecosystem of Kuttanad in Kerala is a project taken up by the Arachnology division under the State Government's Science, Technology and Environment Committee. Last year the project got support from the Indian Council of Agricultural Research and its scope was widened.

The biological control of insect pests by using spiders as predators is being studied in four districts of Kerala. It will be used as a peg to take the project from the lab to the fields. It aims at the possibility of using spiders in bi-

ological pest management under the integrated pest management programme.

John Joseph from S.H. College, Pathummal Beevi, Department of Entomology, College of Horticulture, Vellanikkara, Thrissur, and Senior Research Fellows, Aby Varghese and Biju C.R., are the Co-Investigators in the team.

The study has so far identified 98 species from the vegetable and paddy fields of Ernakulam, Id-dukki, Thrissur and Palakkad. The abundance of the species of spider has been identified. The next phase of the study would involve studying the biology of the dominant species.

Says Dr. Sebastian, "Mass production and its application are slightly difficult but they are being given shape to." Such biological control of insect pests are being done in Thailand, Malaysia, Japan and even the USA, he added.

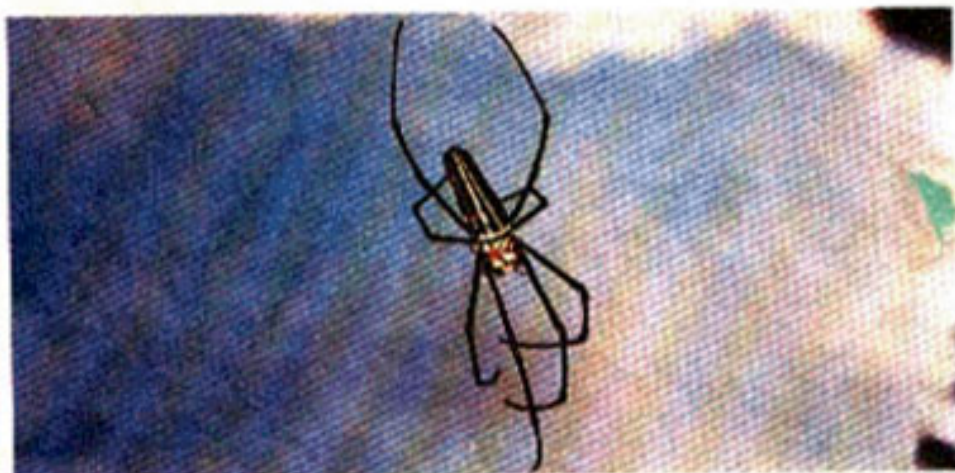
The active division is doing quite a few other research projects too. A.V. Sudhikumar, CSIR

Fellow is working on the biology and taxonomy of some predatory spiders while Samson Davis, Senior Lecturer, S.H. College, has taken up studies on Salticidae - or the jumping spiders of Kerala. Sunil Jose of St. Albert's School has taken up the study of diversity of spiders in Ernakulam district.

Another interesting area of study to be taken up by the division is the web of the spiders. It can be called bio steel, says Dr. Sebastian.

Says Dr. Joseph, there is little awareness about spiders. None of the spiders here are really poisonous, he adds. The allergies which had been seen on individuals are usually secondary and not directly caused by the spiders. In fact, if one has two giant crab spiders (*Heteropoda venatoria*) at home, there is no need for any other control measure for cockroaches, informs Dr. Joseph.

By Shyama Rajagopal



Beauties all