

Studying spiders



ARACHNOLOGY, OR the study of spiders, is not common in India. This makes the Division of Arachnology under the Department of Zoology in Sacred Heart College, at Thevara in Kochi, rather unique. In fact, it is the only one of its kind in Kerala.

Not only are there scientists studying spiders, but also collectors of spiders who display them as pets. Not many would have thought that the study of spiders would lead to so many discoveries in Kerala.

The division has identified more than 400 species of spiders in Kerala, including 40 new species, says P.A. Sebastian, head of the Division of Arachnology. Scientists believe that as many as 1,70,000 species of spiders could exist. Till now 38,274 species of spiders in 3,530 genera and 110 families have been described. Those who want to know more about spiders could visit the website www.southindianspiders.com. It contains a treasure trove of information on spiders. According to Dr. Sebastian, the website launched by the Division is the only one of its kind in the country.

According to Dr. Sebastian, spiders can control pest population and reduce crop damage. Spiders feed almost exclusively on insects, but little attention has been paid

to their possible use in controlling insect and pest populations.

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and biological control, which has become important in view of the pollution caused by chemical insecticides and pesticides.

Spiders have not received enough attention because little was known of their ecology and interaction with other insect populations. For instance, did you know that spiders are not classified as insects but as arthropods (joint-footed animals) under the class Arachnida.

The research work

conducted by the scientists in the Arachnology Division has led to the sanctioning of four externally-funded research projects. While one each is funded by the Indian Council of Agricultural Research and the University Grants Commission, two projects are being aided by the Kerala State Council for Science, Technology and Environment, Thiruvananthapuram.

The findings of these projects will be presented at the 16th International Congress of Arachnology to be held at Gent University, Belgium, in August 2004. Another UGC project was awarded recently to Dr. Sebastian and his team to study mygalomorph spiders, which are large primitive spiders living in burrows or on trees. The species faces the threat of extinction because of soil erosion and deforestation. Tarantulas, tiger spiders and bird spiders are some of the species that fetch a good price in the international market.

For those who find the basic biological sciences interesting, spiders could be an interesting topic of study. This area of study provides one the thrill of unearthing new insights on one of the least understood species in the animal kingdom. Study of spiders is taken up after post-graduation in Zoology. ■

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