A CONCISE FIELD GUIDE TO Indian Insects and Arachnids



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FOREWORD

It is not hard to catalogue a whole range of reasons why we should be interested in insects and spiders, indeed in all forms of life on this 'Little Known Planet', as Howard Ensign Evans called it in a book by that title. Some entomologists study insects for their agricultural importance, especially for their pollination services. Others study them because of the diseases, such as malaria, that insects spread. Some researchers use insects as model systems to conduct experiments in genetics, physiology and pharmacology experiments which would be difficult to perform on higher animals and perhaps impossible on humans. Others study insects, like ants for instance, to learn from them about efficient division of labour and communication. I, for example, study social wasps to understand how societies biologically remote from ourselves deal with the very same problems of everyday social life.

What we can learn from insects is limited only by our imagination and not by their ability to teach us. However, to exploit the full potential of wisdom that insects can offer us, we need to change the way we approach insects. If a new family moves in next door, we try to find out something about them, entirely out of curiosity and not because we already know that they can provide us something we need or because we already know that they are dangerous. That is the kind of neutral, curious attitude we need in dealing with our insect neighbours. The fact is that we know about the service or disservice of only a few thousand insects species. We know nothing whatsoever of the remaining—at least a million recorded species and perhaps up to 10 million or more unnamed species.

But how can we inculcate in our fellow human beings such a curiosity toward insects? Most people are either smitten by a love for or bitten by a fear of insects—and both conditions are based almost entirely on experiences in childhood. Any child that is encouraged to explore nature with a field guide to insects is most likely to develop a life-long fascination for these remarkable

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co-inhabitants of our planet. In India, we have plenty of curious, intelligent children, but we have no field guides to our insects.

Armed with remarkable photographs of insects and arachnids by T. N. A. Perumal and others, Dr Meenakshi Venkataraman may have just begun to fill this lacuna. She has produced a Field Guide to Indian Insects and Arachnids that is sure to convert nine out of ten children who get hold of this book from a hobby of crushing grasshoppers and tying dragonflies with a thread, to a hobby of collecting beetles, watching butterflies and rearing caterpillars. Believe me, this is a service far more valuable to the future of our children than all the coaching classes that are the order of the day.

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