

Case Report

Homicide by direct snake bite: a case of contract killing

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Abstract

It has been estimated that five million snake bite cases occur worldwide every year, causing about 100,000 deaths. Snake bite is exclusively accidental in nature. Suicide by snake bite is very rare and homicidal snake bite is not reported. In the present case, a contract killer was hired, who used a poisonous snake to kill an elderly couple by way of direct snake bite. We believe this to be the first case reported where a snake was directly used for the murder of two victims through a contract killer.

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Introduction

Snake bite is an important and serious problem in many parts of the world, especially in South Asian countries. It has been estimated that five million snake bite cases occur worldwide every year, causing about 100,000 deaths. On average, nearly 200,000 people fall prey to snake bite per year in India and 35,000–50,000 of them die every year.¹ In India, there are 216 species of snake, of which only four are venomous, namely cobra, krait, Russel's viper and saw-scaled viper.² Snake bite cases are exclusively accidental in nature³ and homicides by snake bite are not reported.

With the increase in population, day-to-day frustration, stressful life, competition and modern needs, homicide is on the rise, with stabbing, mechanical asphyxia, blunt trauma and shooting as the most common methods of killing worldwide. A contract killer may sometimes be employed to murder the target individual. Contract killing is a form of murder, in which one party hires another party to kill a target individual or group of people. It involves an illegal agreement between two parties in which one party agrees to kill the target in exchange for consideration, money ('blood money') or otherwise. The hiring party may be a single person, a group of people, a company or any other kind of organization. The hired party may also be one person, such as a hitman, or a group of people or organization.⁴ The party hires the contract killer mainly because they do not want to disclose their identity, and sometimes they have no courage to kill the target party. In India, both parties are equally responsible for the murder of the target individual and are punishable under section 302 of the Indian Penal Code. The contract killer commonly prefers shooting as the method of murder followed by stabbing and blunt trauma injury. In Australia, contract killings account for only 2% of total murders, with shooting as the

most common method used by a contract killer.⁵ Against this background, a case is presented in which a contract killer used a poisonous snake to murder an elderly couple by way of direct snake bite. Thus, the snake can be used as a weapon of offence for homicide.

Case report

The bodies of an elderly couple, the man aged 84 years and the woman aged 78 years, were brought to the mortuary for medico-legal autopsy with history of snake bite. As per the investigation officer, the woman was the second wife of the man deceased, and they were living separately from their children. On the fateful day, both the victims were kidnapped along with their driver. The couple was forcefully asked to sit in the car and their driver was told to sit in another four-wheeler. The kidnapper took them to a distant confined area. On the way, the snake charmer, who was sitting by the side of the kidnapper in the front seat of the car, took out a poisonous snake from a box and made it bite the couple. The couple collapsed immediately. After that, the kidnapper threatened the couple's driver and told him to take the couple to the hospital saying that a snake had bitten them. The driver took the couple to the private hospital where they were declared dead. The couple died within one hour of the snake bite. An in-depth probe revealed that the eldest son of the elderly couple had plotted their murder over a property dispute, had hired the contract killer and had also arranged the snake charmer to have his parents killed. Thus, it was actually a case of contract killing, but the perpetrator was trying to make the death look like an accident. The accused son, snake charmer and contract killer with his three accomplices were punished under section 302

(punishment for murder), 364 (punishment for kidnapping or abducting a person in order to murder), 120-B (punishment for criminal conspiracy), 34 (acts done by several persons in furtherance of common intention) and 506 (punishment for criminal intimidation) of the Indian Penal Code. During interrogation, the snake charmer confessed that he had used a common cobra to kill the elderly couple and then set it free in the forest. The common cobra belongs to the family Colubridae and injects a neurotoxin venom with its bite. Common cobra is one of the most common poisonous snakes found in rural areas of India (Figure 1).

Autopsy findings

Case 1

The deceased man was of average build. Signs of cyanosis were present in the fingertips. Signs of rigor mortis were present in the whole body and postmortem lividity was present on the back of the body. Two fang marks of snake bite were present on the dorsal aspect in the middle third of the right forearm, 5 mm apart with bluish-reddish discoloration and swelling present in the surrounding area (Figure 2). On a cut section, reddish fluid oozed out with oedema and haemorrhage present in the soft tissue underneath the area surrounding the bite mark. A reddish coloured abrasion of size 3 × 1 cm was present just below the occipital protuberance. On internal examination, visceral organs were congested. The lungs and the brain were congested and oedematous. The kidneys were congested with corticomedullary haemorrhages present on the cut section. No evidence of any other surface or visceral injuries was present. Tissues of the kidneys, lungs and brain were preserved for histopathological examination. On histopathological examination, the



Figure 1 Common cobra snake



Figure 2 Snake bite over the right forearm in the man

kidneys showed congestion, haemorrhage and focal glomerulosclerosis. Sections from the lungs and cerebrum showed oedema and marked congestion.

Case 2

The deceased woman was of average build with the tongue tip clenched between the teeth. Signs of cyanosis were present in the fingertips. Signs of rigor mortis were present in the whole body and postmortem lividity was present on the back of the body. Small reddish abrasions were present over the left eyebrow and the left lateral malleolus. Two fang marks of snake bite were present on the dorsal aspect of the right hand between the thumb and the index finger, 3 mm apart with bluish-reddish discoloration and swelling present in the surrounding area over the entire hand (Figure 3). The cut section showed a reddish fluid oozing out with oedema and haemorrhage present in the soft tissue underneath. On internal examination, visceral organs were congested. The lungs and the brain were congested and oedematous. The kidneys were congested with corticomedullary haemorrhages present. Dark-red fluid blood was present in the heart. No evidence of any other surface or visceral injuries was present. Sections of the kidneys, lungs and brain were preserved for histopathological examination. On histopathological examination, the kidneys showed congestion and haemorrhage. Sections from the lungs and cerebrum showed oedema and marked congestion.

Toxicological analysis

No venom was extracted from the blood and skin from the site of the snake bite on toxicological analysis in both cases. This is mainly due to inadequate facilities in our laboratories.

Cause of death

In spite of negative toxicological analysis, the opinion about the cause of death is 'death due to snake bite' in both the



Figure 3 Snake bite over the dorsum of the right hand in the woman

cases after considering the circumstantial evidence and police investigation report.

Discussion

Snake bite is an important and serious problem in many parts of the world, especially in South Asian countries. In India, the highest incidence of snake bite was found in the age group 21–50 years.² The majority of the snake bites were encountered in the lower limbs.⁶ In the present case, there were two victims in the same incidence of snake bite, in which the snake charmer was appointed to kill the couple. Moreover, the snake bite was seen in the upper limbs and in an old age group. Both the victims collapsed immediately and died within an hour of the snake bite. This is probably due to the fright associated with snake bite along with old age and kidnapping. The shock is attributed to kinins or complement activation. The victims of cobra bite often present with a pre-paralytic syndrome followed by generalized paralysis including respiratory muscle paralysis due to the action of neurotoxins that act either pre- or postsynaptically to inhibit peripheral nerve impulse.⁷

Snake bite is almost exclusively accidental, occurring mostly in agricultural fields, gardens and in village roads and houses.^{3,8} Snake charmers are occasionally the victims of accidental snake bite.⁸ Suicide by snake bite is very rare. Queen Cleopatra is believed to have committed suicide by getting herself bitten by a venomous snake (an asp) on her left breast.^{3,9} Occasionally, suicidal cases are recorded in snake charmers.⁸ In another case, a person tried to commit suicide by applying dried snake venom to a small wound on his body.¹⁰

As far as homicide with snake bite is concerned, it was a usual practice in ancient India as well as in other countries

to execute capital punishment by throwing the victim into a pit full of snakes or to ask the victim to put his hand inside a small basket harbouring a deadly snake.⁹ Another instance of homicidal snake bite is of the 'Vish Kanyas' or 'poison damsels' who were much used to kill a state enemy in ancient India especially in the period of the Mauryan and Gupta Empires. These Vish Kanyas were repeatedly bitten by snakes since their childhood, so that their blood and saliva were loaded with almost fatal quantities of this poison. The Vish Kanyas themselves were not affected by these fatal doses as they gradually developed immunity to these poisons. When such a Vish Kanya was sent to cohabit with an enemy King, she would kiss him, and at the same time, bite his tongue, so that the poison could be transferred from her saliva directly into his system.⁹

Jonathan Tze¹¹ also quotes a curious practice undertaken by the Scythians of using snake venom to kill human beings. The Scythians killed a certain kind of snake (probably small adders) and left their bodies in a vessel to decompose. They then filled the vessel with human blood, which they sealed and buried in dung until the blood began to putrefy. This cocktail of poisons (a blend of snake venom and tetanus/gangrene-rich bacterial mass) was then applied to a sharp object (i.e. an arrow), which was then used to kill enemies. In another case, a man threw cobra venom on the open wound of his enemy trying to kill him.¹⁰ But this was the way in which a snake could be 'indirectly' used for homicide. So apart from legally executed sentences using snake bite, no case of 'direct' homicidal snake bite has been reported in the literature so far. In the present case, the poisonous snake was directly used to kill the couple, so as to make the death look like an accident by the contract killer. We believe this to be the first case reported, where the snake was directly used for the murder of an elderly couple through a contract killer.

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