



Documenting the occurrence of the Indian Black Turtle in northern Chhattisgarh: evidence from the Hasdeo River landscape

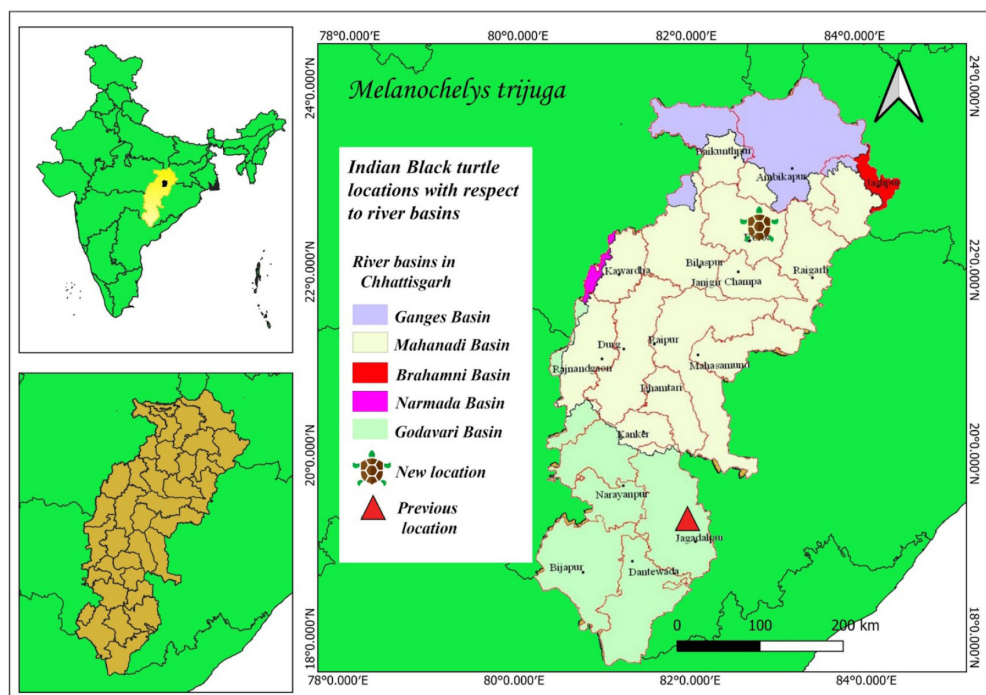


Indian Black Turtle *Melanochelys trijuga*, documented for the first time within the Hasdeo River landscape, of the Mahanadi River basin. © Vikas Banarjee.

The Geoemydidae family includes the Indian Black Turtle, also known as the Indian Pond Terrapin *Melanochelys trijuga* (Schweigger, 1812), which inhabits freshwater environments throughout southern Asia. This medium-sized turtle is primarily found in still water regions of northern India, northeastern India, and the peninsular region. Its yellow plastron distinguishes it from other semi-aquatic pond turtles (Suraj et al. 2021).



These turtles have been recorded in the foothills of the Himalayan range, often residing in riparian vegetation and grasslands along the Ganga and Brahmaputra rivers (Basumatary & Sharma 2013). *M. trijuga* is particularly notable for its distinctive head pattern, featuring a broad black diamond-shaped marking on the crown, bright yellow or white temporal regions, and olivaceous other head regions, with the shell being uniformly black (Smith



Distribution map showing the previous occurrence of the Indian Black Turtle *Melanochelys trijuga* (Schweigger, 1812), in the Godavari Basin and the newly documented record from the Hasdeo River landscape of northern Chhattisgarh (Mahanadi Basin).

1931; Das 1995). The carapace is elongated, more elevated in adults, and more depressed in juveniles, with a tricarinate structure and feebly serrated posterior marginals. The nuchal scute is small and distinctly triangular. A unique feature of the carapace is the octagonal second neural, commonly seen in turtles with megacephaly (Pritchard 1988; Das & Bhupathy 2009).

This turtle commonly inhabits rocky riverine habitats, where it utilizes crevices for refuge and displays streamside basking behavior during January (Ahmed & Das 2010). It exhibits an omnivorous feeding strategy, consuming aquatic plants, vertebrates, and carrion, thereby functioning as both a predator and scavenger within freshwater ecosystems (Ahmed & Das 2010). This species is classified as Schedule I of the Wild Life (Protection) Act, 1972, listed as 'Least Concern' on the IUCN Red List, and included in Appendix II of CITES.

M. trijuga has been documented for the first time with photographic evidence from northern Chhattisgarh. This turtle was previously recorded from the Godavari River basin in Kanger Valley National Park of Chhattisgarh (Panikar et al. 2023). This turtle has been observed in the forested region adjacent to Bimalta Village, situated within the Lemru Range of the Korba Forest Division. This area is located near the boundary between Sarguja and Korba districts. The Lemru area is proximate to the Baro mountain range and is characterized by a rich botanical assemblage, including Sal *Shorea robusta*, Tendu *Diospyros melanoxylon*, Char *Buchanania lanzan*, Saja *Terminalia elliptica*, Jamun *Syzygium cumini*, Kurru *Diospyros exsculpta*, Karra *Cleistanthus collinus*, and Bija *Pterocarpus marsupium*.

The region comprises a heterogeneous matrix of moist peninsular sal forest (3C/C2e), moist mixed deciduous forest (3C/C3), and



dry peninsular sal forest (5B/C1) vegetation types (Champion & Seth 1968). These forest formations are known for their dense Sal-dominated stands, mixed deciduous patches, and associated understory vegetation, creating favorable conditions for a variety of faunal species. Additionally, the turtle was sighted near Chhinkona Village in the Pasarkhet Range of the Korba Forest Division, where moist peninsular Sal forests predominate. The area similarly exhibits high ecological diversity and supports a broad spectrum of wildlife. There are also several types of snakes, such as the King Cobra, Indian Spectacled Cobra, Common Krait, Banded Krait, Indian Rat Snake, and Indian Rock Python. Additionally, the Indian Flapshell Turtle is also found in this area (Ahmed et al. 2021).

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