INTRODUCTION

The present studies were carried out during 2005-2012 in the rural village ponds for the observations of fresh water turtles in Northern Haryana. In this vary context, eleven Districts of Northern Haryana viz. (i) Panchkula (ii) Ambala (iii) Yamunanagar (iv) Kurukshetra (v) Kaithal (vi) Karnal and (vii) Panipat (viii) Jind (ix) Fatehabad (X) Hisar and (Xi) Sirsa were selected for investigations. The state of Haryana is located in the North-Western part of India. Its geographical position, lies between 27\(^\circ\) 37’ to 30\(^\circ\) 35’ latitude and 74\(^\circ\) 28’ to 77\(^\circ\) 36’ longitude. Haryana was carved out of the Indian state of Punjab on 1\(^{st}\) November 1966. The river Yamuna flows on the Eastern boundary of the state. The Shivalik mountain range flanks the state on its north; the state of Himachal Pradesh is also on its northern side. On the north western side, it is flanked by the state of Punjab. At the Southern side, the state is flanked by the Aravalli Hills and the desert of Rajasthan. On the Eastern side, Uttar Pradesh is the neighboring state. It is pertinent to mention that National capital i.e. New Delhi is surrounded by Haryana state by three sides. It is pertinent to mention that in all nine species of tortoises were obtained from northern Haryana Viz. (i) Narrow Headed Soft Shell Turtles (Chitra indica), Indian eyed Turtle (Morenia pelersia), Indian Peacock soft Shell Turtle (Asperitetes liithi), Indian Black Turtle (Melanochelys trijuga), Indian Mud or Flap Shell Turtle Lissemys punctata, Spotted Black Terrapin Geoclemys hamiltonii Indian Tent Terrapin Pangshura tentoria, Keeled Box Turtle Pyxidea mouhotii and Asian Brown Turtle (Manouria eviys). Indian Flapshell turtle was recovered from most of the villages in all the districts in Haryana.

It is pertinent to mention that in natural circumstances, no tortoises are available in northern Haryana as per the present studies carried out between 2005-2012. Only these young boys of Balmiki Smaj had the knowledge about the availability of one or two species of ponds nearby.
their respective villages. These boys were first cultivated with great difficulty so as to engage them in verbal discussion. These young unemployed and totally illiterate boys of Balmiki Smaj were subsequently allured by way of offering them money in cash only up to Rs. 250/- to Rs. 500/-. As such present studies points towards the fact that the last few tortoises left out in only few ponds in Haryana fetch as low as Rs. 250/- to Rs. 500/-. If that is the situation, this last remnant of tortoises will be no more available in the next 2-3 years only. As such Govt. should take steps to protect and conserve these tortoises by educating the youth of Balmiki smaj so as to collect tortoises from village ponds for their subsequent conservation in Govt. maintained Tortoise Park in some suitable Sanctuary having a healthy natural water sheet. This way it would be directly addressing the problem of conserving the last remains of tortoises rather than allowing the grim situation to slip further deep resulting in total extinction of tortoises in Haryana.

On in-depth interrogation of Balmiki youths, two facts came to the lights which have certainly dealt a severe blow to the last live tortoises in village ponds in northern Haryana.

Firstly, these youth revealed that poaching of tortoises is sometimes done so as to provide LIVE-TORTOISES to patients suffering from chronic incurable diseases like Asthma, Tuberculosis. Herein it is also relevant to point out that RMP (Registered Medical practitioners) were, in camera, advising patients to try tortoises as means to get rid off the age-old incurable diseases.

Secondly, the Balmiki Smaj youths were kind enough to reveal that such tortoises which could not be sold were finally roasted live over fire and consumed as food. As such, the present studies revealed that tortoises are being traded at a very low level in Haryana and this practice will add more stress to the few left out tortoises to survive even for few more years.
In the present studies, a total of nine species of turtles have been observed in various rural ponds of selected districts in Haryana. All these turtles could be photographed after paying money to 10+2 students in village schools. The authors were required to return the turtles soon after the photographs.

The Narrow Headed Soft Shell turtles (*Chitra indica*) were virtually shown by all the students. However, the other turtles mentioned over here (Indian eyed Turtle (*Morenia pelersia*), Indian Peacock soft Shell Turtle (*Asperitetes liithi*), Indian Black Turtle (*Melanochelys trijuga*) and Asian Brown Turtle (*Manouria eviys*) were seen only once or twice. Despite seven years of persistent efforts, authors could not spot even one vibrant normal population of turtles anywhere in Haryana.

Surveys of the people revealed, there were turtles available 25-30-40 years back in all the village ponds. Survey of the people also confirmed that stray turtles are available even today but to be sold for various prices. Surveys of the fish farmers also confirm to the stray presence of turtles in village ponds which have been now converted into “FISH-FARMING” ponds. All rural ponds in Haryana today are “FISH-FARMING” ponds. In the first place, Fish farming in rural ponds has destroyed millennia-old Tortoise’s populations in fish ponds. In the second place, the “egg-laying grounds” nearby the fish ponds is 100% encroached. Thirdly, as per our own survey the left over one-or-two tortoises in few ponds are “HUNTED” as and when periodic harvesting of “fish produce” is done with the help of “NETS”.

Virtually all the ponds in Haryana, 40-50 years ago had good populations of Tortoises. Today their decimation has attained a level of 99% in rural ponds, rivers, streams, lakes and dams linked with total habitat transformation telling upon sustenance of adult’s tortoises and severe
interference in “REPRODUCTION EFFORTS” of surviving populations. If immediate and last minute rehabilitation measures not taken then these “LIVING-RELICS” will become a thing of the past. The present studies do confirm that turtles in Haryana are today “LIVE-RELICS” on their way to total extinction in the next 4-5 years. No live populations are available in Haryana, whosesoever and anywhere.

It is suggested that a high level “TURTLE REHABITATION PROGRAMME” be launched on very serious line of extinction so that these “LIVE RELICS” get a chance to proliferate, once again. Tortoises are today on their extinction in next 4-5 years only. The Govt. of Haryana should necessarily constitute Tortoises conservation authority. The TORTOISE CONSERVATION AUTHORITY constituted thus, so first conduct a detail survey followed by in-situ conservation in few selected ponds. It will be rather encouraging if a TORTOISES SANCTUARY is designed in a traditional village pond, where, to the great fortune of tortoises, a vibrant population discovered by chance. Today tortoises in Haryana are live-relics on their total extinction sooner than later.

The present findings are revelations connected with ignorance and greed for money in context of poaching of tortoises in Haryana by totally illiterate people belonging to lower and economically deprived section of society. These people live in a very poor state of affairs both economically as well as from the hygiene point of view. Most of them are Schedule Caste and with no means, whatsoever of livelihood. They are traditionally and from generations-“BROKE”. They have a Penchant to discover and catch for surety, the one percent left over tortoises in ponds between far off locations. These people in the first place eat away the turtles by roasting then live in households “CHULAHS” and relish the same as a wonderful dish. These people sell LIVE-TORTOISES; one or two that they may succeed in catching, to such patients who are suffering
from chronic diseases. Even the “JOHOLA-CHAAP: Doctors advise these chronic patients to eat roasted turtles to cure the incurable prolonged diseases. One or two Tortoises are also available for taking Photographs at the price of Rs. 500 or so for one specimen of tortoise. In this way, tortoises like Indian Peacock Soft Shell Turtle (*Aspideretes hurum*), Indian Black Turtle (*Melanochelys trijuga*), Asian Brown Turtle (*Manouria eviys*), Indian eyed Turtle (*Mosenia petersia*) and Narrow-headed soft-shelled Turtle (*Chitra indica*) were collected from Kurukshetra, Kaithal, Karnal, Jind and Hisar Districts by concentrating attention on 10+2 Science students in Village schools. The other contacts involving SARPANCH, PANCH, and VILLAGE ELDERS yielded no results. Haryana Govt. must conceive a precise “CONSERVATION AND REHABILITATION PROJECT” for saving the miniscule number of tortoises left over in few ponds also. It will be a practical step to institute a TORTOISE-PARK by establishing a “TORTOISE TASK FORCE”. It will be beneficial to draw lessons from Mamallapuram Crocodile Park near Chennai. In the first place, the pin-pointed section of society herein must be inspired to stop poaching upon tortoises for roasting and eating or alternately selling to chronic patients. Tortoises in Haryana and perhaps every else in India are in a bad shape. These illustrations are proof of the various channels in rural society which siphon off tortoises to the live “CHULAHS” for roasting to enjoy the dish later on.

All tortoises, once in the hands of these poor ruralists, never get a chance to enter the ponds again. These tortoises are sacrificed without exception. These tortoises are, in the first place, eaten as roasted. Once in a while, are sold to the chronic patients of tuberculosis who use them as medicine under the veil of ignorance and misconception but through the advice of quacks. Preliminary surveys revealed that alarming decimation in Tortoises populations directly linked with habitat transformation in the shape of frequent multipurpose usage of village ponds,
encroachment of eggs laying “fringe land” in the vicinity of ponds, conversion of village community ponds into Fish Farming Ponds and funny belief of curing diseases like Tuberculosis, likelihood of infusing longevity to human life, as aphrodisiac to terminate impotency and many other awesome tell-tale stories in vogue in rural society due to ignorance, illiteracy, helplessness and “QUACKS” operating as “DOCTORS” in the Indian hinterland.

The WILDLIFE (PROTECTION) ACT, 1972 seems helpless, although it does cover the interests on conserving and protecting the tortoises.

The present studies reveal that rural ruralites can be inspired to stay away from the practice of unlawfully exploiting the last living relics of tortoises in Haryana. Awareness programmed to be initiated sooner than later. A “TORTOISE PARK” be instituted in Haryana. Tortoise task force should, preferably be constituted urgently.

The present work on tortoises of Haryana between 2005-2012 clearly indicates that tortoises stand totally eliminated in Haryana.

Remaining last few tortoises, which could be counted on fingers are facing further extreme threats from un-employed stray youth of lower section of society who either sell them or eat away by roasting live in fire.

RMP doctors are also reported to prescribe the usage of tortoises to chronic patients to treat dreaded diseases like Asthma and tuberculosis but always in Camera. It is suggested that Govt. of Haryana is prompted to take few steps to salvage the already dipped condition of tortoises.

First good measures will be to create a tortoise park in the wild followed by capturing the few tortoises in village ponds and subsequently releasing these in the proposed Tortoise park.
Rehabilitation of the proposed tortoise park may help in inducing the tortoise to undertake breeding exercise in a stress free environment.