

## Inhibition of *Bungarus caeruleus* snake venom toxicity by *Citrus reticulata* methanolic extract and *in-silico* analysis of possible binding modes

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Received 11 May 2021; revised 04 January 2023; accepted 04 January 2024

Snakebite envenomation has been one of the major causes of morbidity and mortality around the world. Though intravenous administration of commercial anti-venom systemically neutralizes the toxicity, adverse effects are commonly seen in the post-treatment period. Plant metabolites and their derivatives have been shown to exhibit a wide range of anti-ophidian properties. In this study, we have investigated the *Bungaruscaeruleus* venom neutralization potential of *Citrus aurantium* and *Citrus reticulata* Blanco peels in terms of phospholipase and hemolytic inhibition. Methanolic extract of *C. reticulata* exhibited the highest inhibition (93%) of PLA<sub>2</sub> activity. However, the extracts of both these *Citrus* species significantly inhibited the hemolytic activity of the venom (54–82%). Molecular docking indicated the binding of the citrus metabolites to catalytic site residues (TRP19, GLY30, TYR31, GLY32, and HIS48) of PLA<sub>2</sub>. *In vivo* studies using Swiss Albino mice confirmed the neutralising capacity of the citrus peel extract, as reflected by the increase in survival time. Therefore, the study reveals that these metabolites in the methanolic extract of the citrus peel can be used as supplements for the management of snake bites.

**Keywords:** Snakebite, *Citrus aurantium*, *Citrus reticulata*, Venom, Neutralization, *Bungarus caeruleus*

**IPC Code:** Int Cl.<sup>24</sup>: A61K 36/752, A61K 38/17

Management of snakebites is one of the several challenges faced in medical history. The mortality rate due to snakebites is more than 100,000 per year<sup>1</sup>, and the death due to snakebites in India is about 15,000. Of the 216 species of snakes, 52 are reported to be highly poisonous. The four major snakes responsible for accidental fatality are *Naja naja*, *Bungarus caeruleus*, *Vipera russelli*, and *E. chischarinatus*<sup>2</sup>. Krait is a member of the *Elapidae* family and is of secretive habitat and docile nature. Though these snakes are less aggressive, the accidental bite is highly neurotoxic and lethal. Kraits are predominantly present in South Asian countries and are represented by various local names. The venom of the *Elapidae* (cobra and krait) family is known for its neurotoxicity, directly affecting the function of the central nervous system and the heart<sup>3</sup>. *Bungarus caeruleus* is one of the 13 species listed in the *elapidae* family and has five subspecies. The type of toxic proteins and their composition is not the same in all the snakes. However, these proteins constitute up to 90-95% of the dry weight of the venom. The

major proteins in the venom of *B. caeruleus* contain neurotoxins, membrane toxins, phospholipase A<sub>2</sub> (PLA<sub>2</sub>), and proteases<sup>4</sup>. In general, krait envenomation leads to abdominal pain or cramps that cause progressive paralysis and requires artificial respiratory support. Bungarotoxins affect nerve endings of the brain's synaptic cleft and lead to muscle paralysis<sup>5</sup>. Phospholipases hydrolyze glycerophospholipids and immobilize the prey, breakdown cells, and other tissues before they completely digest the prey<sup>6</sup>. Snake venom PLA<sub>2</sub> exhibits similarity to the PLA<sub>2</sub> present in the mammalian system. Along with the other venom proteins they end up in life-threatening pathophysiological manifestations.

Anti-venom/animal-derived serum contains heterologous immunoglobins, and administration of this polyvalent anti-venom is the only approved and practiced treatment for snakebite envenomation. There are about seven known anti-venom-producing laboratories in India, and the production mainly targets against big four snake species<sup>7</sup>. At the same time, it is necessary to find a supplementary therapeutic procedure to mitigate or delay the adverse effects caused by snakebite. One such possible

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solution is to use traditional medicinal plant extracts or their decoction, which are readily accessible even in unprivileged areas<sup>8</sup>. In addition, such procedures may alleviate post-treatment adverse effects, such as serum sickness and anaphylaxis<sup>9</sup>.

Plants are a potential source for snakebite treatments, especially in remote regions, when there is a limitation of anti-venom availability and considering the economic value of the drug. The use of medicinal plants against poisonous species of elapids *Naja naja* and *Bungarus caeruleus* bites were reported<sup>10</sup>. The knowledge of the use of medicinal plant extracts is passed orally through generations. Recently, the scientific community has taken the responsibility of providing in-depth experimental shreds of evidence for their use. *Acanthaceae*, *Amaranthaceae*, *Caesalpiniaceae*, *Euphorbiaceae*, *Lamiaceae*, *Rutaceae*, and *Verbenaceae* are reported to be the most significant families used for snakebite treatment in India<sup>11,12</sup>.

In addition to herbal plants, some common plants have also been shown to possess pharmacological value. Several investigations are being carried out on the inhibitory potential of common plants. Functional ingredients of plants are being screened and studied for their neutralizing capacity at the molecular level. Of the several plants, citrus species are also known for their pharmaceutical and therapeutic applications<sup>13</sup>. Citrus belongs to the family *Rutaceae*. Among these, phytochemicals present in citrus peels exhibit anti-inflammatory, anti-oxidant, and anti-cancer activities<sup>14</sup>. Traditionally citrus species such as *Citrus limon*, *Citrus aurantiifolia*, and *Citrus aurantium* L., are reported for their venom-neutralization potential<sup>14,15</sup>. However, a detailed investigation has not yet been carried out in this direction. Hence, the current study is focused on exploring the krait venom PLA<sub>2</sub> inhibitory potential by *Citrus aurantium* and *Citrus reticulata* Blanco peels.

## Materials and Methods

### Venom and chemicals

Lyophilized *Bungarus caeruleus* venom was purchased from Irula Snake Catcher's Industrial Co-operative Society Ltd., Chennai, India. Biochemical kits were purchased from Arkray Healthcare Pvt. Ltd, Mumbai, India. All other chemicals and solvents were high-grade analytical chemicals and were purchased from SD Fine chemicals / Hi-Media, Mumbai, India.

### Sample collection and extraction

Citrus fruits (*Citrus aurantium* L. and *Citrus reticulata* Blanco) were purchased from Katpadi

Taluk, Vellore District. The samples were identified and authenticated by a Botanist (Dr. R. Siva) at Vellore Institute of Technology, Vellore, India, and the voucher specimens (2017/PEL/51191 and 2017/PEL/61191) are maintained. Fruit peels were washed, shade dried for 5-7 days, and powdered using mortar and pestle. 500 g of powder was used for polarity gradient solvent extraction [PGSE], using petroleum ether, chloroform, ethyl acetate, methanol, and, finally, water. The extracts were dried using a rotatory evaporator. The yield was calculated based on the obtained dried crude extract. The individual stock solution was prepared by dissolving (100 mg) the extract in 10 mM phosphate-buffered saline (pH 7.4), sonicated for 30 s 42 kHz, 135 W, and centrifuged at 25°C (10 min at 10,000 g). The stock was stored at -4°C for further use.

### Phospholipase inhibition assay

A slightly modified protocol was used to determine the PLA<sub>2</sub> activity of the venom<sup>16</sup>. Accordingly, 2% (v/v) egg yolk suspension was prepared by dissolving 2 mL of yolk in PBS (phosphate buffer saline). To the 200 µL of yolk suspension, different concentrations of venom (10-70 µg/mL) were incubated for 30 min at 37°C. Hydrolysis of lecithin was inferred from the optical density value at 900 nm (SHIMADZU 1280 UV-spectrophotometer). PLA<sub>2</sub> inhibition was inferred from the observed difference in the absorbance value for the sample treated with different extract concentrations (20, 25, 30, 35, and 40 mg).

### Protease inhibition assay

The caseinolytic activity of the venom was determined using the method described by Lemos *et al.*<sup>16</sup>. To 0.2% (w/v) azo-casein (Tris HCl, pH 8.5), different concentrations of venom (10-70 µg/mL) was added and incubated for 1 h at 37°C. The reaction was terminated by the addition of 10% TCA (trichloroacetic acid). Further, the mixture was centrifuged at 10,000 g for 10 min. The supernatant was taken, 500 mM of sodium carbonate was added, and 0.5 N of Follin's reagent was added. The change in absorbance of the supernatant was measured at 366 nm (SHIMADZU 1280 UV-spectrophotometer).

### Hemolysis inhibition activity

The hemolytic activity of the krait venom was assayed using the microtiter plate method<sup>16</sup>. RBC (Red Blood Cell) suspension was washed with 0.9% saline. Different concentrations of venom

(10-70  $\mu\text{g/mL}$ ) were then added. The final reaction was terminated by the addition of ice-cold saline, followed by centrifugation at 5,000 g, and the absorbance was measured at 540 nm (SHIMADZU 1280 UV-spectrophotometer).

#### Pro-coagulation activity

The pro-coagulation activity of the krait venom was assayed with plasma cells using the method<sup>17</sup>. Briefly, to 100  $\mu\text{L}$  of plasma (separated from human citrated blood), 1  $\mu\text{L}$  of venom (10-70  $\mu\text{g/mL}$ ) was added and incubated for 10 min at 37°C. 10 mM  $\text{CaCl}_2$  (20  $\mu\text{L}$ ) was subsequently added, and the coagulation was monitored at 405 nm, and the time was noted. Plasma, along with only PBS, was maintained as control.

#### Inhibition studies

For determining the inhibition of  $\text{PLA}_2$ , protease, hemolysis, and pro-coagulation activity, 70  $\mu\text{g}$  of venom was incubated with different concentrations (10-40  $\text{mg/mL}$ ) of the peel extract. Subsequently, the required substrates were added, and the reactions were monitored as described before.

#### Molecular docking

Sequence similarity between  $\text{PLA}_2$  of *Bungarus caeruleus* (PDB code: 1G0Z) and *Naja naja* (PDB code: 1A3D) was analyzed using ClustalOmega (<https://www.ebi.ac.uk/Tools/msa/clustalo/>). AutoDock was used to infer the interaction between  $\text{PLA}_2$  of krait venom with the plant metabolites. The protein coordinates were downloaded, whereas the ligand molecule (by GC-MS identified) was generated using ChemSketch. A grid size of 27,000  $\text{\AA}$  used for the docking study was made to cover the protein's active sites as  $x=49.68$ ,  $y=10.82$ ,  $z=13.00$ . The spacing was maintained at 0.375  $\text{\AA}$ . The number of GA runs was set to 100. The ADME values of each ligand were analyzed using the online server SwissADME<sup>18</sup>. PyMOL and Ligplot<sup>+</sup> were used to visualize the interactions between the metabolite and protein<sup>19</sup>. The results were evaluated based on the predicted binding energy, root mean square deviation from the starting geometry and other non-bonded interactions. To avoid any kind of ambiguities, the statistics derived from the best five structures (represented as  $\text{mean} \pm \text{sd}$ ) are presented.

#### Ethical statement

The animal study was carried out through the standard protocol as per the national and international

guidelines. The study was approved by Institutional Animal Ethical Committee, followed by the Committee for Supervision of Experiments on Animals (CPCSEA), New Delhi (meeting reference number VIT/IAEC/14/NOV5/31, dated 05-11-2017). Animals 8 weeks old (male  $n=4$ ) with weights 22-25 g were used for the experiment.

#### In vivo neutralization studies

The lethal dosage of *Bungarus caeruleus* venom was determined according to the protocol described by Meier *et al.*<sup>20</sup>. In brief, animals were separated into six groups ( $n=4$ ), and varying concentrations of venom (0.2-1.0  $\text{mg/kg}$ ) in saline (0.2 mL) were injected (negative control). The behaviour of the mice was monitored for 48 h, and the  $\text{LD}_{50}$  was calculated. The inhibition study was performed only on selected extract(s), and the selection was based on the *in-vitro* and *in-silico* studies. Different concentrations of extracts were incubated with twice the amount of the  $\text{LD}_{50}$  of venom for 1 hr at 37°C. The mixture was then administered intraperitoneally, the behavioural changes were monitored for 48 h, and  $\text{ED}_{50}$  was calculated. Higher concentrations of only MPE extract and only saline-injected groups were kept as the positive control.

#### Biochemical and histopathological studies

The blood serum was separated for control and test animals. Liver function was performed using Span Diagnostic Kit and as per the company specifications. For, the alkaline phosphatase level test (ALP), 50  $\mu\text{L}$  of the sample was mixed with 500  $\mu\text{L}$  of reagent, followed by measurement of change in absorbance at 405 nm. Aspartate aminotransferase test (AST) was performed by incubation of 50  $\mu\text{L}$  of sample in 500  $\mu\text{L}$  of reagent and the absorbance was measured at 340 nm after 1 min and the change in the absorbance was used for the calculation. A similar setup was maintained for the alanine aminotransferase test (ALT) by replacing AST with the ALT reagent. All results were recorded using an ELISA plate reader (Biorad xMark) and were noted as absorbance per minute (IU/I) with the extinction coefficient of 2742 and 1746 for ALP and ALT/AST, respectively. Further, the organs (heart, kidney, and liver) were used to examine the histopathological effects. The samples were processed by dehydrating with acetone (70-100%), and 100% xylene was used to remove the dehydrating solvent. Further, the samples were fixed in wax and embedded with paraffin. Thin sections

were made (4-6  $\mu\text{m}$ ) using Spencer ‘800’ microtome. The sections were then allowed to dry and subsequently stained using hematoxylin and eosin and visualized under a high-power Cilika microscope for imaging.

**Data processing and statistical analysis**

All experiments were performed in triplicates. Values were expressed as mean $\pm$ s.d. One-way ANOVA was performed using GraphPad Prism 6 software to derive the statistical significance of the data ( $p < 0.05$ ).

**Results**

**PLA<sub>2</sub> inhibition**

The crude extracts were of different colours (brown/orange/yellow in the case of *Citrus reticulata* Blanco and green/brown in the case of *Citrus aurantium* L.) and the yield obtained was reported earlier<sup>26</sup>. Previous studies indicate that *Bungarus caeruleus* venom showed 40  $\mu\text{g}/\text{mL}$  of venom causes 100% PLA<sub>2</sub> enzyme activity on yolk suspension. Hence, 40  $\mu\text{g}/\text{mL}$  venom was used for the inhibitory assay. Methanolic extract of *C. reticulata* exhibited high inhibitory activity (93%) against venom PLA<sub>2</sub>

(Fig. 1 a, b). Besides, chloroform, methanolic, and ethyl acetate extracts of *C. aurantium* inhibited 23 – 28% of PLA<sub>2</sub> activity. The order of PLA<sub>2</sub> inhibition observed with *C. aurantium* extract was chloroform (28%)  $\approx$  methanol (25%)  $\approx$  ethyl acetate (23 %) > water (12%) > petroleum ether (1.2%) and in the case of *C. reticulata* the order of observed inhibition was methanol (93%) > water (77%) > chloroform (69%) > ethyl acetate (41%) > petroleum ether (22%). The results thus indicate that the extracts of *C. reticulata* exhibited higher PLA<sub>2</sub> inhibition potential than *C. aurantium* extracts.

**Hemolytic inhibition**

Maximum rupture of RBCs was found to be by 40  $\mu\text{g}/\text{mL}$  of snake venom, and therefore the optical density observed with this mixture was considered to correspond to 100% hemolytic activity. Methanol and aqueous extracts exhibited 70% and 57% activity, whereas petroleum ether, chloroform, and ethyl acetate extracts of *C. aurantium* exhibited less than 5% hemolytic activity. Similarly, 82% and 74% inhibition were seen with methanolic and aqueous extracts of *C. reticulata* (Fig. 2 a,b). The extracts of *C. reticulata* exhibited higher hemolytic inhibition potential

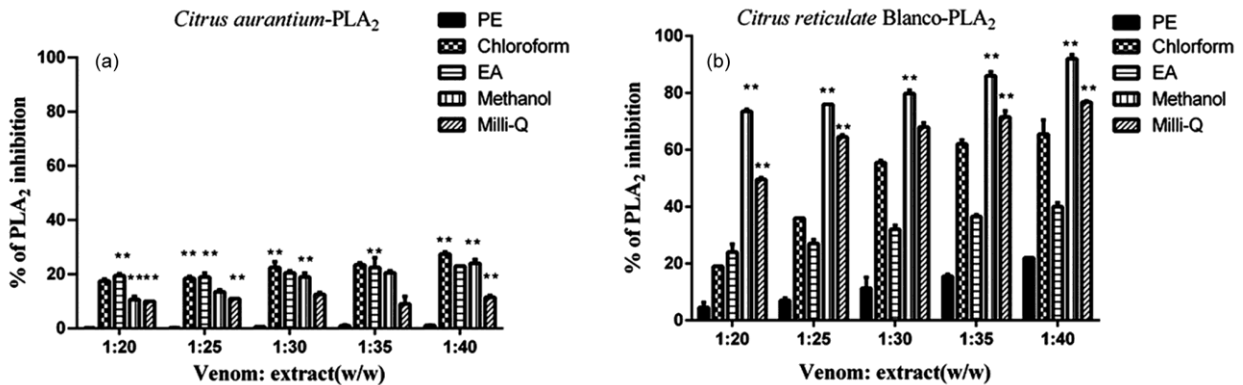


Fig. 1 — Inhibition of snake venom PLA<sub>2</sub> by various extracts of (a) *C. aurantium* and (b) *C. reticulata* (PE- Petroleum ether, EA- Ethyl acetate)

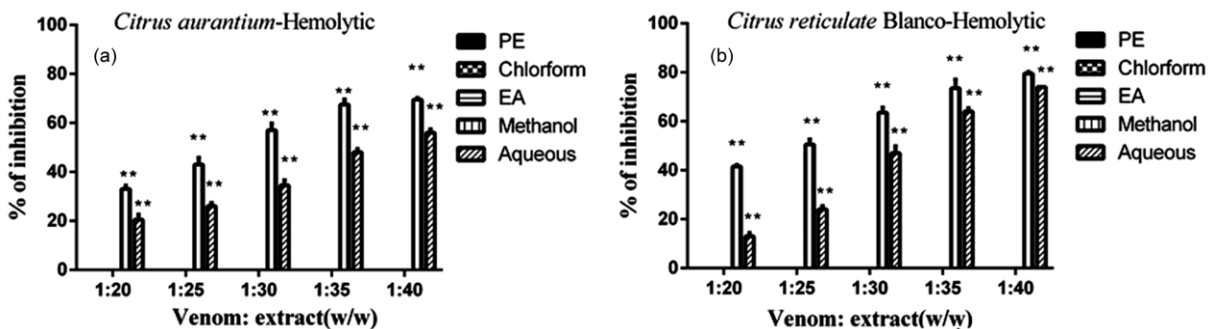


Fig. 2 — Inhibition of snake venom hemolytic activity by various extracts of (a) *C. aurantium* and (b) *C. reticulata* (PE- Petroleum ether, EA- Ethyl acetate). Methanol and aqueous extracts exhibited higher inhibition.

**Molecular docking**

Computation of the number of binding cavities using CASTp for krait PLA<sub>2</sub> indicated that the protein has 20 possible sites (with different physicochemical properties) to which the metabolites can bind. The amino acid residues present in the putative ligand-binding site are LEU2, PHE5, LYS6, ILE9, TRP19, TYR22, ILE23, TYR28, CYS29, GLY30, TYR31, GLY32, CYS45, HIS48, ASP49, TYR52, ASN62, LEU64, ILE65, PHE101. The 24 compounds in the methanolic extract of *C. reticulata*, identified earlier using GC-MS, were used to study the plausible molecular interactions<sup>21</sup>. Among these 24 compounds, interactions observed between the top five ligands and PLA<sub>2</sub> are depicted in Figure 3, and the non-bonded interactions and binding affinity are given in Table 1.

**Venom neutralization by *C. reticulata* extracts**

The LD<sub>50</sub> of *Bungarus caeruleus* venom for albino mice was found to be 0.4 mg/kg of animal weight, based on the dose-response study (Fig. 4). Mice showed sequential changes in behaviour, like isolation and heavy breathing, when treated only with venom. Survival time was monitored by injecting mice with venom (2 x LD<sub>50</sub>) pre-incubated with extracts (Supplementary Table S1 and S2). Mice injected only with venom survived for 7.5±1.5 h. In contrast, mice injected with pre-incubated methanolic peel extract (MPE) survived for more than 24 h, indicating the extract's neutralization potential even under *in vivo* conditions. Mice treated only with peel extract did not show any changes in survival time.

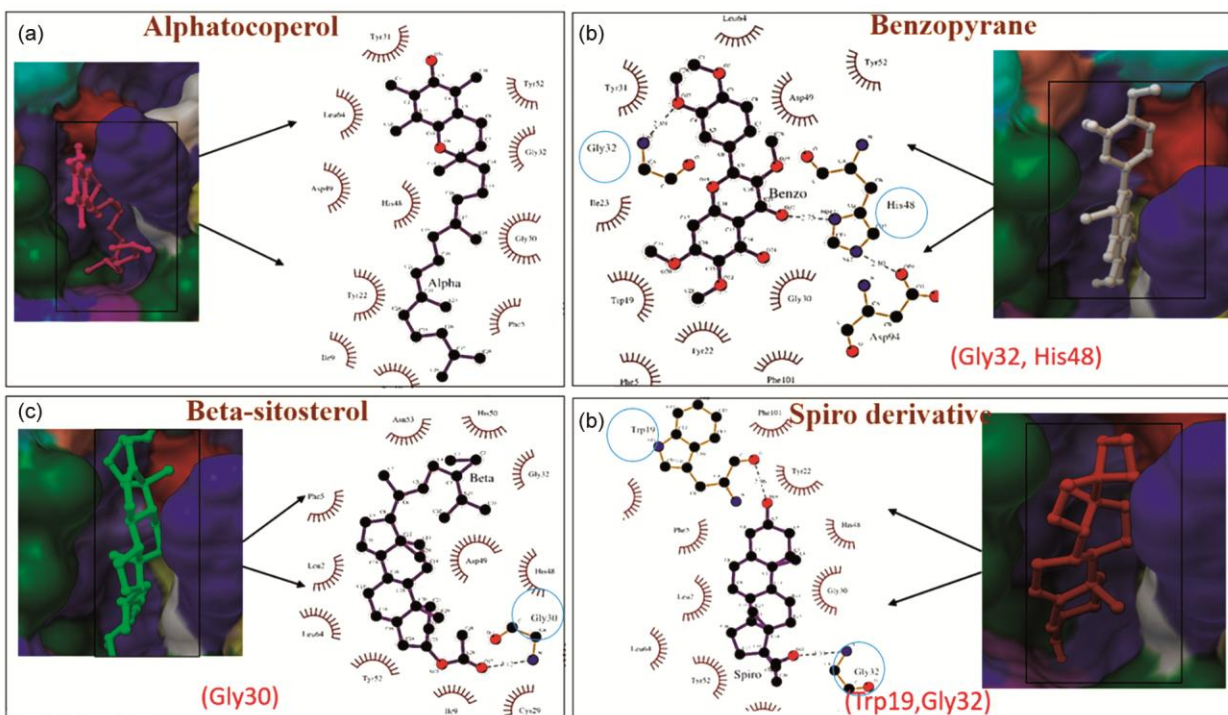


Fig. 3 — Representative structures of the protein-ligand complex depicting the intermolecular interactions between PLA<sub>2</sub> and (a) alphatocopherol, (b) benzopyran (c) beta-sitosterol (d) spiro derivative. LigPlot was used to represent the interactions.

Table 1 — Molecular docking analysis for selected compounds against snake venom PLA<sub>2</sub>. The binding energy given is derived from the five best structures (mean ± sd) of each complex.

S. No	Compound	Binding affinity (kcal/mol)	Donor: acceptor(H-bond)	ADME Value (Log P)
1	Spiro[androst-5-ene-17,1'-cyclobutan]-2'-one, 3-hydroxy-[3.β.,17.β (Spiro)	-9.41±0.10	SpiroH56:PLA <sub>2</sub> Trp190 PLA <sub>2</sub> Gly32O:SpiroO22	4.12
2	Alpha-tocopherol (Alpha)	-8.15±1.01	AlphaH81: PLA <sub>2</sub> Tyr31OH	8.57
3	Beta-sitosterol acetate (Beta)	-8.69±1.43	PLA <sub>2</sub> Gly30HN:BetaO27	7.63
4	Squalene (Squa)	-7.17±1.35	No H bond	9.38
5	4h-1-Benzopyran-4-one, 2-(3,4-Dimethoxyphenyl)-5,6,7-Trimethoxy (Benzo)	-6.84±0.29	PLA <sub>2</sub> Gly32HN:BenzoO27 PLA <sub>2</sub> His48:BenzoO12 BenzoN:PLA <sub>2</sub> Asp94	3.10



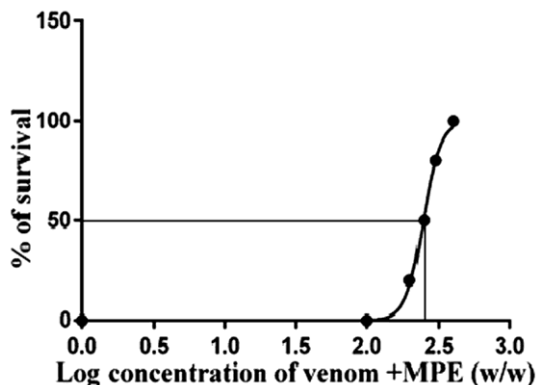


Fig. 4 — Neutralisation of Krait venom toxicity by the methanolic extract *C. reticulata*. ED<sub>50</sub> of the extract was determined to be log concentration= 2.3979 (250 mg/kg).

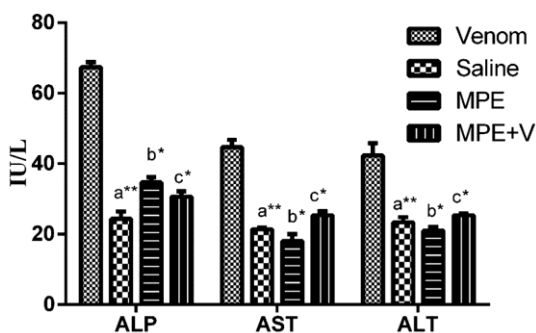


Fig. 5 — Histochemical analysis for liver function (ALP-Alkaline Phosphatase, AST-Aspartate aminotransferase, ALT- Alanine aminotransferase). The levels of all three enzymes were normal in animals treated with venom pre-incubated with the methanolic extract. Values were expressed as mean±SD, n=3 in each group (\*p<.05, \*\*p<.01), a\*\*=comparison of venom with saline, b\*=comparison of venom with MPE, c\*=comparison of venom with MPE+V.

#### Biochemical analysis

The biochemical parameters were used to assess liver function. AST, ALT, and ALP levels were higher in animals treated with snake venom than the animals injected with only saline (Fig. 5). Increased enzyme activity in venom treated group might be due to the damage that occurred in the liver tissue/cell. Mice treated with venom pre-incubated with MPE samples showed complete neutralization of snake venom-induced toxicity. Further, the toxicity was not evident in the case of mice treated only with MPE.

#### Histopathological changes

Histopathological analysis of the organs harvested from mice treated with snake venom indicates several abnormalities. The heart section showed haemorrhage, congestion, and avascular tubular necrosis. In the kidney section, mononuclear and inflammatory cell

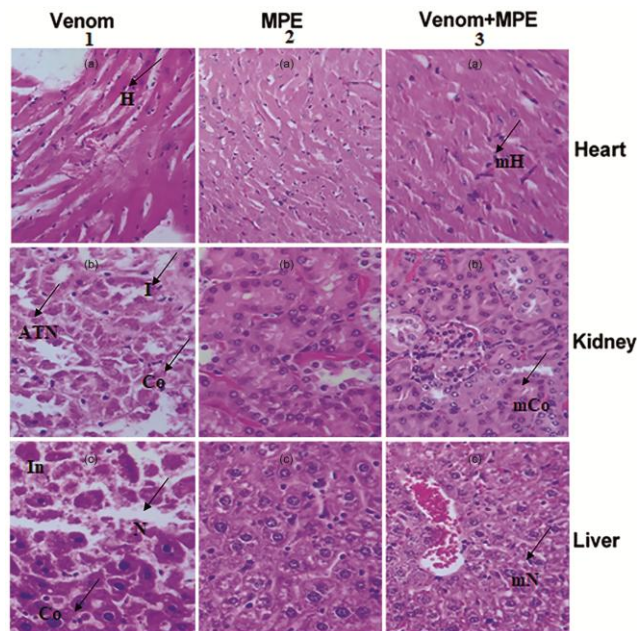


Fig. 6 — Histopathological observations of the heart (a), liver (b), and kidney (c); 1(a-c) organs of mice injected with only venom, showing pathological changes (H- Hemorrhage, Co-congestion, I-infiltration), 2(a-c) organs of mice injected with only MPE of *C. reticulata*, showing no major abnormalities, 3(a-c) organs of mice injected with a pre-incubated sample of venom and MPE (1:300 w/w), (mCo- mild congestion, mI- mild infiltration, In- Inflammation) showing strong neutralization in the venom toxicity.

infiltration, and the liver section showed inflammation in a hepatic vein (Fig. 6 (a-c)). However, there was a significant reduction in venom toxicity in the case of animals injected with venom pre-incubated with MPE, which showed haemorrhage in the case of heart tissue, mild necrosis in the liver, and mild congestion in kidney tissue (Fig. 6 (a-c)). *C. reticulata* methanolic peel extract injected animal tissue (control) did not show any abnormality (Fig. 6.2 (a-c)).

#### Discussion

*Bungarus caeruleus* envenomation cannot be detected easily as the visual local effects are not very predominant. In many instances, krait envenomation is misinterpreted as dry bite<sup>22</sup> since the local effect produced is minimum and, therefore, barely observable. This probably is the reason why traditional healers administer herbal decoction orally, as first aid treatment, and do not apply them topically. Indian medicinal plants are being recognized, practiced, and recommended as a remedy for snakebites<sup>11</sup>.

Administration of anti-venom restores haemostasis and cardio dysfunctions, whereas prevention of tissue damage and other neuro-related effects remains

controversial<sup>23</sup>. Administration of anti-venom, in case of krait bite, fails to reverse paralysis. The prophylactic effects are still contradictory<sup>24</sup>. Hence, there is a requirement to delay the spreading factor of venom enzymes from the site of the bite to enter the circulation. Plant metabolites can be used as additives if they can delay/inhibit the toxic effect of the snake venom proteins. In addition, such a strategy will also reduce the amount of anti-venom used for treatment and therefore lower the post-treatment regional toxic impact of the anti-venom.

About 68.0% of *B. caeruleus* venom contains PLA<sub>2</sub> and bungarotoxins<sup>25</sup>. Relatively higher amount of PLA<sub>2</sub> (only) present in *B. caeruleus* (Sri Lanka) venom. These toxic proteins have been isolated, purified, and characterized earlier<sup>26,27</sup>.

Phospholipase A<sub>2</sub> and proteases are key enzymes in Elapidae venom and are responsible for mortality among the human population<sup>16</sup>. Plant extracts of *Mimosa pudica* (0.14 mg and 0.16 mg) were shown to possess significant anti-venom effects against *Naja naja*, and *Bungarus caeruleus* venom, and the mechanism(s) of their action was suggested<sup>10</sup>. However, there is no primary evidence available on the venom neutralization studies of non-edible parts of plants<sup>14</sup>. Research on the effect of *Citrus limon* (L.) Burm. f. against snake venom showed 100% inhibition, which is a positive way forward in this direction<sup>28</sup>.

Secondary metabolites present in peel extracts of *C. aurantium* and *C. reticulata* Blanco were qualitatively analysed. They showed the presence of molecules with a wide range of polarity<sup>21,29</sup>. The identified secondary metabolites are effective against stress tolerance in the plant system<sup>30</sup>. It has been proven that plant metabolites can interfere with the activities of various enzymes, either by inhibiting or by stimulating or altering their activity. Studies report that polyphenolic compounds are capable of eliciting anti-inflammatory effects<sup>31</sup>.

The present study indicates that *C. reticulata* is more effective than *C. aurantium* against snake venom PLA<sub>2</sub>. PLA<sub>2</sub> is the most crucial enzyme in the pharmaceutical sector as it plays a critical role in pro/anti effects on toxicity (myo-, neuro- and cyto-) levels<sup>32</sup>. *Bungarus caeruleus* venom has a cocktail of PLA<sub>2</sub>, 3FTxs, LAAOs, SMVPs, CRISPS, and AchEs, of which the percentage of PLA<sub>2</sub> is higher than the other venom components<sup>33</sup>. Hence, inhibition or suppression of PLA<sub>2</sub> activity caused by snake venom is the primary objective of anti-venom developers.

Research revealed many effective secondary metabolites against snake venom enzymes<sup>16,27</sup>.

The snake venom does not possess any observable proteolytic activity on the substrate (azo-casein) used in the study, thus indicating no major effect of venom metalloprotease. According to Rusmili *et al.*<sup>4</sup> serine protease is not substantial in *Bungarus* species as it is mainly detected at the transcript level. Similarly, krait venom does not affect the pro-coagulant activity *in vitro*. However, Utkin *et al.*<sup>34</sup> have reported that serine proteases of krait venom interfere with the coagulation process and have anti-coagulant properties. Literature indicates that krait venom contains 5% of Kunitz-type serine protease inhibitor (KSPI) that interferes with blood coagulation and fibrinolysis<sup>35</sup>.

Extracts of *C. aurantium* and *C. reticulata* are very effective in inhibiting the hemolytic activity of the venom. Methanolic extract of *C. reticulata* shows comparatively significant inhibition of hemolytic (82%) activity compared to other extracts. Previously, anti-hemolytic activity was reported by extracts of *C. hystrix* (92.69%) and *C. maxima* (93.60%) during the stress conditions by preventing RBC rupture<sup>36</sup>. A study carried out on *Citrus reticulata* revealed the possibility of oxidative stress inhibition<sup>37</sup>. The mechanism of venom enzyme neutralization can be directly related to the competitive binding of metabolites present in the extract at the substrate binding site of the enzyme<sup>38</sup>.

PLA<sub>2</sub> of krait venom has 118 amino acid residues compared to 119 residues in the cobra PLA<sub>2</sub>. The binding sites of cobra venom PLA<sub>2</sub> comprises of 15 amino acid residues (PHE5, ILE9, TRP18, PHE21, ALA22, TYR27, CYS28, GLY29, ARG30, CYS44, HIS47, ASP48, TRY51, TYR63, and PHE63). Sequence alignment indicates 70 conserved amino acids (Supplementary Fig. S1). Both these proteins belong to D-type PLA<sub>2</sub> (containing aspartic acid at the 49<sup>th</sup> position) which catalyses the hydrolysis of sn-2 bonds in phospholipids. Despite the differences in the amino acid sequence, both these molecules contain identical catalytic site residues. These amino acid residues along with others that are involved in the formation of homo-oligomers dictate the activity state of these toxins. Krait PLA<sub>2</sub> trimer has been shown to have aligned ordered active sites on the enzyme, whereas the cobra PLA<sub>2</sub> trimeric form renders the enzyme inactive though the stability is moderately enhanced<sup>39</sup>. Therefore, the conformation of these proteins is crucial in their activity.

Interactions were seen in all the targeted ligands, and the major residues (TRP19, GLY30, TYR31, GLY32, and HIS48) are involved in hydrogen bond formation with the ligand. Other additional interactions, such as hydrophobic alkyl, and pi-alkyl with the residues LEU2, TRP19, CYS29, LEU64, HIS47, and PHE101, are also identified between PLA<sub>2</sub> and target metabolites. These non-covalent interactions contribute substantially to the binding free energy, in addition to the conventional H-bonded interactions. Moreover, the complementarity in the binding site between the protein and the ligand, and the involvement of residues in the cavities, especially the hydrophobic amino acid residues contribute significantly to the enthalpy of binding<sup>40</sup>. Compared with the interaction with cobra venom, PLA<sub>2</sub> reported earlier<sup>21</sup>, the three amino acid residues (CYS29, GLY30, and HIS48) seem to play a crucial role in substrate binding with the target ligands. Further, ligand-induced oligomerization of PLA<sub>2</sub> has been reported<sup>27,41</sup> and it is believed to lower toxicity of the snake venom PLA<sub>2</sub>.

Liver dysfunction and pathology are life-threatening conditions. Biochemical assay of the liver revealed an increased ALT level, AST and ALP cause a high rate of liver damage<sup>42</sup>. Histopathological studies showed major destruction in the structural integrity of the organs. Pathological impressions revealed heavy infiltration and congestion in the kidney. The main route of elapid venom elimination from the living system is through excretion; hence, kidney dysfunction could be possible<sup>43</sup>. Inflammation, along with tissue necrosis of liver cells, is also reflected in liver function tests as inferred by elevation in the level of marker enzymes. Haemorrhage is also observed in heart muscles. Mice treated with pre-incubated venom and MPE show a significant reduction in toxicity in the animal system, possibly due to the binding of venom enzymes with the extract's peel metabolites. The animals injected only with MPE, and saline does not show any toxic activity.

Further in-depth studies are required to explore the lead molecule against snake venom enzymes isolated and studied for their potential inhibitory activity. Combinatorial approaches, with commercial anti-venom, can also be further investigated in detail to reduce the dosage of anti-venom used for the therapy. Hence, metabolites from the natural source can act as complementary drugs for their unique properties or can use as a first-aid procedure, wherein delayed medical procedures with anti-venom are expected<sup>44</sup>.

## Conclusion

For the first time, Citrus species were examined for their inhibition of krait venom toxicity. The current study reveals that Citrus reticulata Blanco's methanolic extract inhibits PLA<sub>2</sub> (93%) and haemolytic (82%) activities. In vivo, animal studies reveal 100% neutralization potential with 400 mg/kg. Thus, secondary metabolites present in the methanolic extract indicate possible binding with PLA<sub>2</sub>, making way for the development of molecules to neutralize venom enzymes. Hence, further synthesis and formulation of phytoconstituents against the target enzyme can reduce the effect of toxicity. As the World Health Organisation has given a clear road map to mitigate snake envenomation, these metabolites can serve as supplements to the existing anti-venom therapy.

## Supplementary Data

Supplementary data associated with this article is available in the electronic form at [https://nopr.niscpr.res.in/jinfo/ijtk/IJTK\\_23\(01\)\(2024\)67-76\\_SupplData.pdf](https://nopr.niscpr.res.in/jinfo/ijtk/IJTK_23(01)(2024)67-76_SupplData.pdf)

## Acknowledgement

The authors like to thank Vellore Institute of Technology, Vellore for providing the necessary support for carrying out this research work.

## Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest.

## Author's Contributions

GJ and SR conceptualised and formatted the study design. SR performed, analysed, interpreted, and wrote the first draft. GJ supervised, revised, and reviewed the manuscript. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

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