



SHAKUNT PANDEY

An account of the growth of the Indian Museum based on the Calcutta Review 1866, The Indian Museum (1814-1914), Bicentenary Souvenir of the Asiatic Society 1784-1984, and Indian Museum Bulletin January 1966, Vol. 1.



Indian Museum during the British Period
(picture credit Walter Firminger, 1906)

ONE of the largest multi-disciplinary Museums in Asia – The Indian Museum situated at Chowringhee area of Kolkata – completed its bicentenary on 2nd February 2014. A few of its galleries were renovated and a new look museum was thrown open to the public by the Prime Minister on this day.

It is interesting to note that the Indian Museum in its long chequered history of 200 years has been out of bounds to the public only on a few occasions. It was closed for a short period on account of the Indo-China war of 1962 and recently when it was closed for a brief period for the renovation.

On 2nd February 1814, Dr. Nathaniel Wallich, who later occupied the post of the

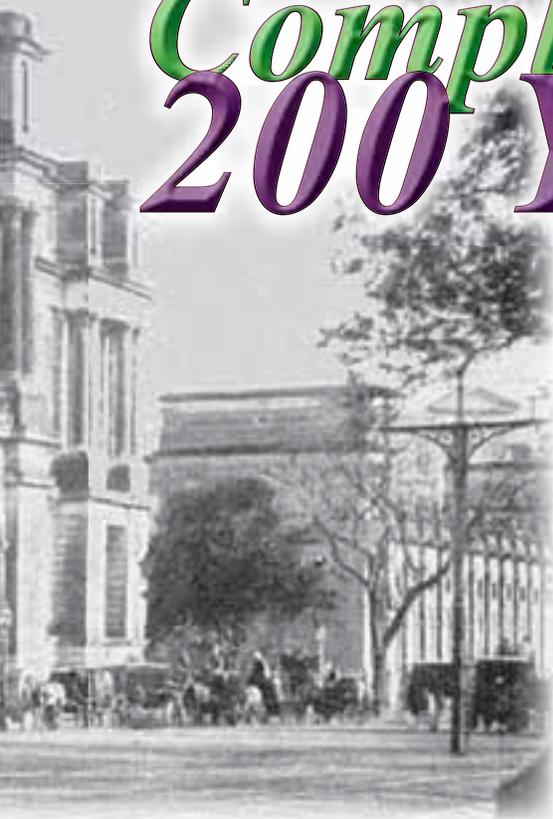
Superintendent of The Botanic Gardens (now known as AJC Bose Indian Botanic Gardens), wrote to the Asiatic Society of Bengal with a proposal to form a museum. He proposed to provide duplicates from his own collections to form a nucleus of the museum and offered his services as an honorary curator. Both these proposals were gladly accepted by the council and thus the ball was set rolling for the foundation of the Museum of the Asiatic Society of Bengal which subsequently developed into the Indian Museum, as it now exists.

The founder of the Asiatic Society Sir William Jones had never envisaged the creation of a museum to be a part of the society's activities. Since the Asiatic Society itself did not have a proper accommodation of its own, curios sent by

its members from time to time began to accumulate and their proper preservation became a headache for the society. In 1808 when the Asiatic Society got its own permanent accommodation at Park Street on land granted by the Government the need for a museum began to gain ground and Wallich's proposal to form a museum was readily accepted. It was decided to form a museum with two sections. One section comprising of archaeological, ethnological and technical galleries and the other section having Geology and Zoology galleries. Dr. Wallich who could be aptly called the father of the Indian Museum was appointed the museum's first Curator.

The scope of the museum was defined in the widest possible terms, as an institution for the reception of all

The Indian Museum Completes 200 Years

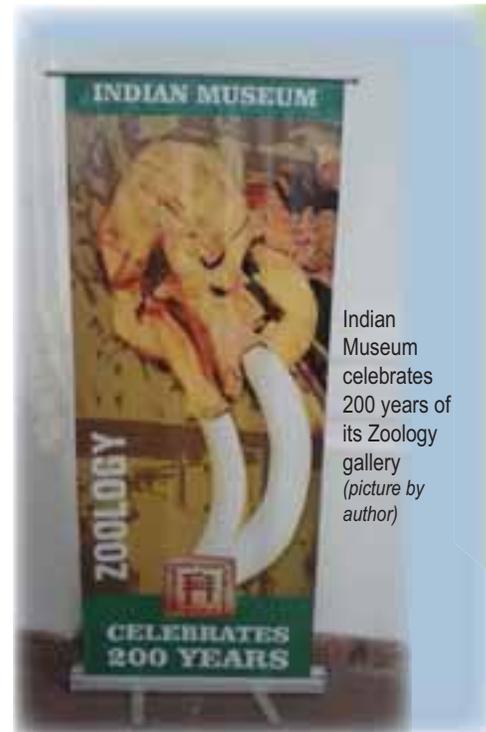


articles that might be sent to illustrate oriental manners and history, or to elucidate the peculiarities of art or nature in the east. Contributions were invited and specimens were solicited so that the museum might include "inscriptions on stones or brass, ancient monuments, Hindu or Mahomedan, figures of Hindu deities, ancient coins, ancient manuscripts, instruments of war peculiar to the east, instruments of music, vessels used in religious ceremonies, implements of native art and manufacture, animals peculiar to India, dried or preserved skeletons or bones of animals, birds stuffed or preserved, dried plants and fruits, mineral or vegetable preparation peculiar to eastern pharmacy, ores of metals, native alloys of metals, minerals of every description."

The hall on the ground floor of the society's house was suitably fitted for the purpose of displaying the museum articles. On 1 June 1814, Dr. Wallich reported the satisfactory commencement of the museum. On 5th April 1815 William Loyd Gibbons then Librarian and assistant secretary of the Asiatic Society was appointed joint superintendent with Wallich. European contributors particularly Col. Stuart, Major R. Tylor, General Colin Mackenzie, Brian Hodgson, Capt. Dillon, Robert Home and residents like Ramkamal Sen, Begum Samroo, Siva Chandra Doss, Radhakanta Dev, Kalikisen Bahadur, Mathuranath and Rajendra Mallick donated to the Society interesting and curious objects collected from the nooks and corners of India.

The year 1836 was a dark year for the Asiatic Society's museum brought about by the failure of its bankers Palmers and Co. The Society was plunged into a major financial problem and finding no other solution in sight it approached the Government. On 15 June 1837 the Society requested the Government for a grant of Rs 200 per month to at least meet the salary of the curator. The Government sanctioned an interim grant of Rs 200 and later in 1839 a sum of Rs 300 a month for the museum.

Since 1837, the Asiatic Society had harboured a dream of having a national museum in Calcutta. In 1856 the Asiatic Society submitted a memorial to the government for establishing an Imperial Museum in Calcutta. To the proposed museum the society expressed their willingness to transfer all their "extensive



Indian Museum celebrates 200 years of its Zoology gallery (picture by author)

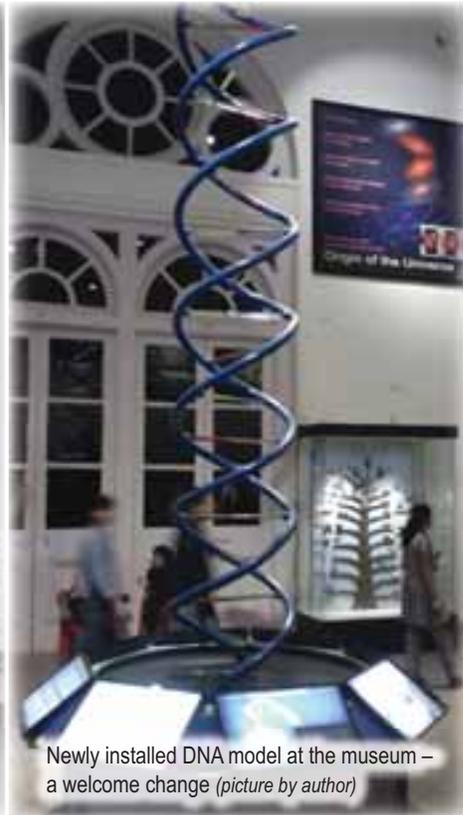
and priceless collections" but excluding books and manuscripts of its Library and coins in its collection. The Society's persistent efforts bore fruit when in 1862 the Government of India announced its decision to build a public museum in Calcutta, which was to be named "The Indian Museum".

During the course of the construction of the new Indian Museum building it was realised that the Asiatic Society could not be accommodated in the same building and upon the recommendation of Sir Ashley Eden and Dr. Thomas Oldham the Government paid to the Asiatic Society a sum of one and a half lakh rupees as compensation for giving up its claim of accommodation in the Indian Museum building.

The Asiatic Society of Bengal's museum was kept open from 8 am to 4 pm and always attracted a large number of visitors Europeans as well as Indians. The museum attracted residents and foreigners alike and even renowned holy man Ram Krishna Paramhans, who is also well known as the teacher of Swami Vivekananda, visited the museum. In 1860 the average number of visitors was 185 persons per day. According to the Calcutta Review 1866, "The total number of visitors to the Asiatic Society's museum during the first six months of the present year amounted to 73,198, giving a daily average of 406, amongst whom nearly all the nations of southern Asia are represented. In the Visitors book we find mention of the following tribes and races among the sightseers: Bhooteas, Nepalese, Siamese, Burmese, Malays, Chinese,



The Indian Museum
(picture by author)



Newly installed DNA model at the museum – a welcome change (picture by author)

Polynesians, Andamanese, Afghans, Kashmiries, Punjabees, and other tribes of the North-West, and crowds of the Hindoos and Mahomedans of Bengal.”

The construction of the Indian Museum building was finally completed in 1875 but the museum could be opened only three years later on 1 April 1878 with two galleries – Zoology gallery containing collections of birds and Archaeology gallery. A few months later in December 1878 the Mammal gallery was added.

The Statesman of 7 December 1888 carries an interesting note on the Indian Museum. According to it, “If the number of visitors to an institution is at all a criterion of its popularity, we would say that the Indian Museum is the most patronised of all in Calcutta. In days gone by, when the masses were comparatively

unenlightened, there was a superstitious belief current that those who entered the jadooghar (the house of witchcraft) never again saw the light of day. Very few natives, therefore, ventured within its wall. But now, although it bears the same appellation, the fear attached to it has vanished, and crowds of men, women, and children may be seen going in and out during the time the building is open to visitors.”

At present the Indian Museum has Geology, Botany, Zoology, Anthropology and Art sections.

Strengthening the Indian Museum

The journey of the Asiatic Society’s Museum to the present Indian Museum saw a number of brilliant curators and

superintendents without whom the institution could not have achieved such fame and glory. Interestingly all the acclaimed curators and superintendents beginning from Blyth to Annandale were Zoologists.

The turning point for the Asiatic Society’s museum came with the arrival of Zoologist Edward Blyth from England who is recognised as one of the founders of Indian Zoology. Blyth took up his duties as curator in September 1841. Blyth was a great zoologist but unfortunately he was not a geologist and faced problems in arranging the geological collections. His problem was solved by the appointment of Mr. Piddington as head of the geology gallery the following year.

For over twenty years Blyth was in charge of the Asiatic Society’s Zoological

Bronze bust of the First Superintendent of the Indian Museum Dr. John Anderson (picture by author)



Dr. Nathaniel Wallich, Father of Indian Museum (picture courtesy Wikipedia)



Edward Blyth, father of Indian Zoology (picture courtesy Wikipedia)



James Wood Mason (picture credit Wikipedia)





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collections and the work that he did in this period may be said to have laid the foundations of zoological study in India. At one point of time Blyth was accused of paying little attention to insects and molluscs in comparison to birds and mammals. According to Indian Museum 1814-1914, "from the point of view of the Indian Museum the extraordinary energy, which must have been combined with a considerable amount of tact that he displayed in persuading correspondents and friends to send specimens to Calcutta is particularly noteworthy....the chief loss that has fallen his collections he made is that of all the rays he described. Many of the specimens of this group of fishes that he examined perished long ago, but there is reason to think that some remained intact as late as 1906...."

The resolution of the Asiatic Society's meeting held in November 1864 heaped praises on Blyth. "In the period of twenty two years during which Mr. Blyth was curator of the society's museum, he has formed a large and valuable series of specimens richly illustrative of the ornithology of India and the Burmese Peninsula, and has added largely to the mammalian and other vertebrate collections of the museum; while by his numerous descriptive papers and catalogues of the museum specimens, he has made the materials amassed by him subservient to Zoological science at large, and specially valuable to those engaged in the study of the vertebrate fauna of India and its adjoining countries."

A few of Blyth's collected specimens still exist today which attests to the excellent preparation of the materials. For example, a Mounted Male Langur (*Presbytis entellus*) collected by him in 1842 as well as a skeleton of an African Cheetah collected in 1857 are still in very good condition.

The first superintendent of the Indian Museum was Dr. John Anderson

Dr. Wallich who could be aptly called the father of the Indian Museum was appointed the museum's first Curator.

Inside the Indian Museum (picture by author)



in 1865. One of his first work was the bringing together of an ethnological series. Among other additions made by him was that of a fine series of human skulls representing various Indian races. Another achievement was the collection of carapaces and stuffed specimens of Indian Chelonia.

During his tenure as superintendent, Dr. Anderson went to Tenasserim and the Mergui Archipelago in 1881-82 for collecting specimens. He wrote two catalogues – **Mammals Part 1** published in 1881 and Catalogue and Handbook of the *Archaeological Collection* which appeared in 1883.

Another Zoologist James Wood Mason was the first assistant curator and later first deputy superintendent of the Indian Museum. In 1872 and 1873 he explored the marine fauna of Andaman and Nicobar and in 1888 he went as a Naturalist on board the Indian marine survey steamer "Investigator" which added to the collections of the Indian Museum.

Zoologist Alfred Alcock succeeded James Mason as Superintendent of the Indian Museum in May 1893. Alcock set in order the marine collections of the Museum and exhibited to the public selection of animals identified or described by him or others. The dissection

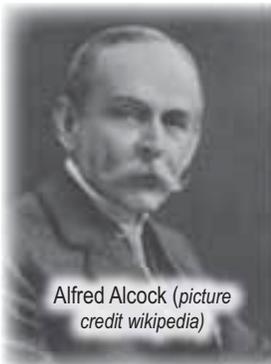
samples of reptiles and other terrestrial vertebrates were a boon for the students of comparative anatomy. In his work *Fish of the Indian Museum* in 1899 Alcock writes about a new fish gallery which was opened during his superintendence, "The limitations imposed by climate have led me to seek to add interest to the Gallery in other directions; as for instance, by exhibiting dissections, maps of geographical distributions, and models of characteristic deep sea fishes."

Thomas Nelson Annandale joined the Indian Museum as Deputy Superintendent in 1904 and succeeded Alcock as the Superintendent of the Indian Museum. His work on sponges, chelonia, amphibians and reptiles speaks volumes about his zoological attainments. His major works were published in the various volumes of the *Records of the Indian Museum*. *Journal Nature* Volume 113 reported his death as "a severe loss to science and Indian Zoology in particular".

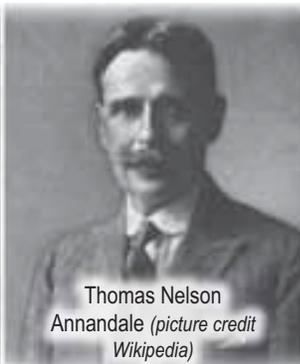
As a cradle of learning, the Indian Museum has been associated with the establishment or growth of a large number of institutions such as the Geological Survey of India, Archaeological Survey of India and Marine Survey of India. The British Museum was founded in the mid 18th century and is considered as a child of enlightenment. The Indian Museum, too, was part of this enlightenment founded as early as 1814.

Now, keeping with the changing times the Indian Museum is undergoing a welcome change in its quest to become an internationally rated institution.

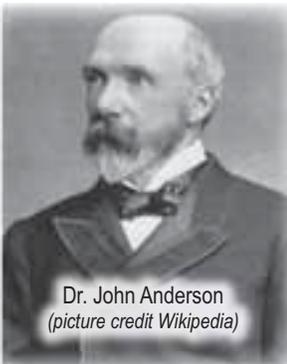
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Alfred Alcock (picture credit wikipedia)



Thomas Nelson Annandale (picture credit Wikipedia)



Dr. John Anderson (picture credit Wikipedia)