

Back When . . . & Then ?

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SPHoZaNHIA -- pronounced spo-zah- knee - ah (* and captive animal collections in any form)

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Special Feature celebrating the 125th Anniversary of the Calcutta Zoological Gardens

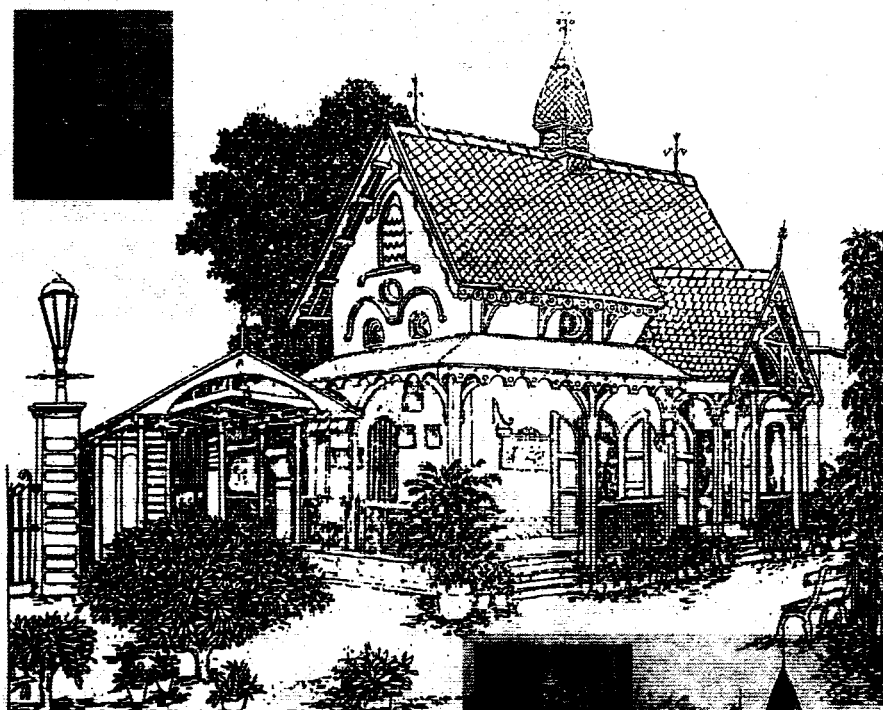


As Calcutta zoo celebrates its 125th anniversary this year, most of this issue of BACK WHEN ... & THEN is devoted to the famous Alipore Zoological Garden, Calcutta. There are original articles, reprints from the past and plenty of praise for the people who shaped its history.

Back When ...

Calcutta Zoo was the 7th zoo to be founded in India ... 7th instead of 1st ... despite the fact that it was wanted by a number of influential citizens of Calcutta. There were people as early as 1841 who felt that Calcutta should have a proper zoo. In 1866, the establishment of a good zoo in Calcutta was still merely a subject of discussion but in 1873 the zoo was very seriously discussed by a Subcommittee formed for the purpose. After more than three decades of discussion, debate and defeat a Zoological Garden for Calcutta was established by the Government of Bengal in conjunction with the public.

A more detailed history of the very early origins of the Calcutta Zoo has been written by Dr. Dilip Mitra, biographer of R. B. Sanyal, first Superintendent of Calcutta Zoo. In preparing to write a full biography of Sanyal Dr. Mitra found that the man could never be separated from the zoo. The biography of Sanyal depended on this history of the zoo. Dr. Mitra has published a history of Calcutta Zoo in Calcutta's native language, Bengali, and is currently preparing an English translation. In the meantime, his article about the very early history of the zoo has been included in this issue.



... and Then

Calcutta Zoo today is preparing for their anniversary with many works in the zoo. There are a number of new activities and facilities. One of them is a charming and attractive gift shop with an abundance of animal themed items for sale. It is the first such gift shop in any zoo in the country. Located right in the front court of the zoo, the gift shop is convenient both to visitors entering and leaving the zoo.

The zoo has constructed a fine new elephant yard where the animal can play or nap in a large grassy plot all day or cool and bathe themselves in a pool. They can be seen throwing water on their backs in the evenings. There is also a large new white tiger enclosure under construction built according to a modern, naturalistic design.



Administrative office of Calcutta ... then and now. Inset photos are the Superintendent R. B. Sanyal then and Director A. K. Das now.

New directional signboards have been erected as well. Many of the visitors to Calcutta Zoo are illiterate visitors, as well as visitors from other states who do not know Bengali, English or Hindi. The directional signboards, perched on tall poles, do not have words -- they have nicely painted pictures of the animals at the end of the pathways they

The Menagerie of the Monastery in Theybo, Myanmar

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When I was researching the information about the rhinoceroses in captivity, I was rather thrilled and at the same time puzzled about a reference to this animal collection in Theybo. It is found in the pages of Gustave Loisel's *Histoire des Ménageries*, that epic history of zoological gardens published in 1912. This book in three volumes is truly a compendium of the history of zoos, not confined to Europe or to one particular period. Unfortunately, a translation has never appeared. Loisel found the reference to Theybo in a book by the French traveller A. Thomas-Anquetil (1874) who visited this place in the Burmese interior in 1859. Loisel's account is here summarized:

In Burma we find the largest menagerie ever formed by monks. This curious collection of animals is found in the park surrounding the monastery of Theybo, situated not far from Mandalay on the left bank of the River Mhyet-Nghy, a tributary of the Irrawaddy. The park occupies an elevated plateau. Water diverted from the river feeds a winding canal which fills the different lakes in the park. A part of the park is used to grow vegetables used in the monk's food, another to grow flowers, but one section is reserved for the menagerie.

Visitors first notice the large aviaries constructed from teak or bamboo, and enlivened with ornaments of rural scenes. Those aviaries are airy and spacious, they have water and shadowy parts. In 1859 they contained representatives of all types of indigenous small birds as well as several species of imported sparrows. Further on, vast enclosures and clear water ponds are occupied by herons, cranes, black swans, wild ducks, flamingoes, cormorants, ostriches, cassowaries, etc. The birds of prey are kept in smaller cages in which falcons, hawks, sparrow-hawks, eagles and others live in small groups. The aviary with the parrots also contains

pheasants, calaos, pigeons, peacocks, and even bats. A marshy enclosure planted with aquatic shrubs, swarming with insects and reptiles, is the home of the "ducks with the fans" from China, together with a pair called the "cock and chicken of the primitive ages". These birds are so rare that they receive special attention, but they breed and the young ones are sometimes donated to other Buddhist monasteries.

The mammal section contains some sixty enclosures of different types. They show elephant, rhinoceros, horse, cow, buffel, bear, different kinds of deer, tiger, panther, cheetah, lynx, hyaena, jackal, sheep, goat, pig, babiroussa, wild pig, antelope, muskdeer, dog, cat, monkey, otter, badger, squirrel, porcupine, hedgehog, civet, mongoose, armadillo, rat, mole, and many others, as most of the animals of the Indian subcontinent are represented.

The collection was made complete by ponds with fresh-water fishes, a field with a couple of monitor lizards, and a large lake in which a dozen gavials receive food from the hands of their guardians at the sound of the bagpipe and cymbals.

Considering the size of the collection, one would have expected that there would be many other descriptions of this rather special park. Maybe this note will reveal some of those, any information will be welcome.

References

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Rhinoceros fights in Laos

Kees Rookmaaker, Ph.D.

For a long time, rhinoceroses have been used for fights meant to entertain both royalty and the masses in India. The best documented instances have been the battles organized by the Maharajah of Baroda (Vadodara, Gujarat) in 1864 and 1875 (Rookmaaker et. al. 1998). It was pointed out to me by Mr. Henri Charpentier of Paris that there is evidence of similar induced combat in Laos. He referred me to a paragraph in a book about hunting animals in this Indochinese country published in 1939 by Guy Cheminaud. This passage reads as follows in translation:

In former days the people of Laos made two male rhinoceroses fight each other. This was done for general excitement. These peaceful animals usually refused to fight. But human nature would not let them. People used to bath one of the animals in bluish indigo, and the other one in red blood. It appears that the colour difference decided the issue and the animals would start their fight. The battle would usually end when one of the animals was able to kill his adversary by striking his horn in the other's throat (Cheminaud 1939, p. 84).

One would like to believe that the story is apocryphal, because there is so little evidence to go by. But to paint the animals in blue and red seems to be a novelty not found in other sources. If true, I for one would love to see a drawing of the event, like those produced in India. It may also be noted that the rhinoceros was rather often encountered in Laos in earlier days (Rookmaaker, 1980). Although most sources are too general to indicate which species was involved, the most likely one is the Javan species (*Rhinoceros sondaicus*), now confined to populations in Java, Indonesia and in Vietnam. Or could we still hope for another re-discovery of the animals in Laos?

References

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