

Two Hundred Years of Natural History Museums in India



Dr Jayanta Sthanapati

E-mail: dr.jayanta.sthanapati@gmail.com

Introduction

The first two natural history museums of the world were established in Europe during 18th century. The Italian 'Imperial and Royal Museum of Physics and Natural History', founded in 1775, in the city of Florence, was the first public museum to display natural history specimens comprehensively. The next such museum was the 'National Museum of Natural History', established in Paris in 1793.



*Indian Museum, Calcutta
in late 19th century*

In India the first museum was established in Calcutta (now Kolkata) in 1814. Named as Oriental Museum of the Asiatic Society of Bengal, this museum had various natural history objects on display from the very beginning. The museum was later named Indian Museum.

The term 'Natural History' is used for scientific study of all objects of the

natural world, covering major subject areas such as zoology, botany, geology and their allied fields like palaeontology and physical anthropology. Collections of natural history provide us information of biodiversity on Earth.

According to the International Council of Museums (ICOM), Natural History Museums are institutions that collect, display and research materials, collected or extracted from the natural world. The multifaceted purpose of such a museum is to: (i) build or store natural history collections, (ii) conduct research and interpret the results, (iii) support the purpose of science and biological conservation, (iv) enhance public understanding and appreciation of the natural world, and (v) collaborate with the public in deriving their own meaning from the natural heritage they encounter in the museum and in nature.

Natural History Museums by the numbers in India

During last two hundred years (1814-2013) sixty natural history museums or natural history galleries have been set up in various parts of India. Distribution of the institutions in seventeen states is as follows: Uttar Pradesh (14), Maharashtra (6), Tamil Nadu (6), Gujarat (4), Karnataka (3), Kerala (3), Uttarakhand (3), West Bengal (3), Assam (2), Bihar (2), Madhya Pradesh (2), Odisha

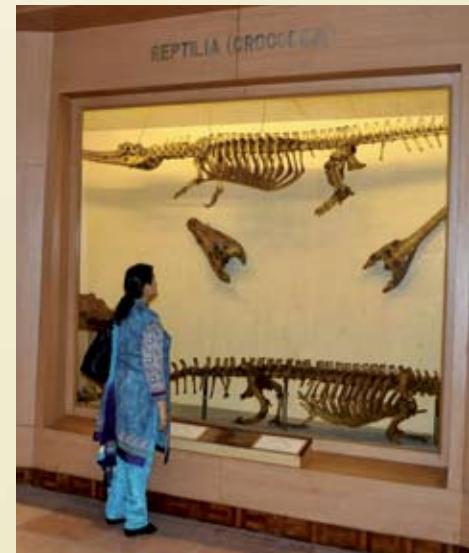
(2), Punjab (2), Rajasthan (2), Telangana (2), Chhattisgarh (1), Manipur (1). Only two Union Territories of Chandigarh and New Delhi, are having natural history museums, one in each place.

In India 20 natural history galleries were set up as part of general museums, that also have galleries on art, archaeology, anthropology, numismatics, crafts, paintings and so on. The departments of zoology, botany, geology, etc. of many universities and colleges also have natural history museums and they are 23 in number. There are 17 fully dedicated natural history museums, but their size and collection vary widely.

General Museums with Natural History Galleries

The Oriental Museum of Asiatic Society of Bengal (later named Indian Museum) was established in Calcutta in 1814, with two major sections – one of archaeological and ethnological materials and the other of zoological and geological specimens. With the establishment of this museum, collection and display of natural history specimens began in India.

The next significant natural history display was in Government Museum and National Art Gallery, Madras (now Chennai), which was opened in 1851. The



Skeleton of crocodile in Indian Museum

Table 1. Growth of Natural History Museums or Galleries in India

Eight quarters of 25 years each	1814-1838	1839-1863	1864-1888	1889-1913	1914-1938	1939-1963	1964-1988	1989-2013	Total
General Museums with Natural History Galleries	1	4	3	1	3	5	2	1	20
Natural History Museums in Universities and Colleges	-	-	2	5	5	8	3	-	23
Dedicated Natural History Museums	-	-	2	2	-	1	6	6	17
Total	1	4	7	8	8	14	11	7	60



Specimens of lions in Baroda Museum and Picture Gallery, Vadodara

Museum of Natural History, Economic Geology, Industry and Art was established in Mumbai in 1855. Two general museums, set up in 1863, namely, State Museum, Lucknow and Central Museum, Nagpur also had added natural history galleries. Government Museum, Bangalore (now Bengaluru) established in 1865 too has important natural history sections. Three more museums—Mahant Ghasidas Memorial Museum, Raipur (1875), Watson Museum, Rajkot (1888), and Baroda Museum and Picture Gallery, Vadodara (1894), had set up galleries on natural history in the 19th century. The next eleven natural history galleries, set up as part of general museums in the country, were at Patna Museum (1917), Prince of Wales Museum of Western India, Mumbai (1921), Municipal Museum, Gwalior (1922), Museum of Antiquities, Jamnagar (1946), Prabhas Patan Museum (1951), Government Museum, Faizabad (1954), Bundelkhand Chhatrasal Museum, Banda (1955), Chandradhari Museum, Darbhanga (1957), Salipur Museum (1975), Government Museum, Vellore (1985) and B M Birla Science Centre, Hyderabad (2000).

Natural History Museums in Universities and Colleges

Since late 19th century many Indian universities and colleges realised the importance of natural history collections in innovative undergraduate science education. As a result, departmental natural history museums were set up. Maharaj's College in Ernakulam had first such facility, a Zoology Museum in 1874. The museum is still in operation. Only four more were there in that century, Natural History Museum at St. Joseph's College, Tiruchirapalli (1881), Museum of the School of Plant Morphology

at Meerut College (1892), Botany Museum of Christ Church College, Kanpur (1896) and Central College Museum, Bengaluru (1898). However, eighteen more departmental museums, spread all over the country, were established during the 20th century. These are known as, Museum of the Forest Research Institute, Dehradun (1906), Zoological Museum (1906) and Agahrkar Museum (1923), both in Allahabad University, Botany and Zoology Museum, I T college, Lucknow (1921), Zoology Museum, Annamalai University, Annamalai Nagar (1929), Museum of Plant Fossils, Lucknow (1929), Botany and Zoology Museum, Madras Christian College (1937), Geological Sciences Museum, Guwahati University (1950), Geological Museum, Lucknow University (1951), Botany Museum, T D College, Jaunpur (1956), Museum of the Botanical Survey of India, Dehradun (1956), Zoological Museum, D A V College, Muzaffarnagar (1958), Geology and Geophysics Museum, University of Roorkee (1960), Botany Museum, Punjab University, Chandigarh (1960), Zoology Museum, Punjab University, Chandigarh (1960), University Museum of Science and Culture, Aligarh Muslim University (1964), Shri Jainarain College, Lucknow (1973), and Geology Museum, Indian Statistical Institute, Kolkata (1977).



Timber Gallery in Forest Research Institute, Dehradun

Dedicated Natural History Museums

There are seventeen dedicated natural history museum in India. The first such museum was established by the Bombay Natural History Society in Bombay (now Mumbai) in 1883. Only after two years a natural history museum was opened in 1885 at Thrissur under the Kerala State Museum and Zoological Garden. The Gass Forest

Museum, a natural history museum, was established in 1902 in Coimbatore. Next was the Bengal Natural History Museum set up in Darjeeling, West Bengal in 1903. However, no more dedicated natural history museum was established before India's independence. In 1961 a unique Museum of Arthropods was set up in Pune. A very large natural history museum was opened in Thiruvananthapuram in 1964. Two natural history museums attached to the nearest zoological gardens were established in Ahmedabad (1974) and Hyderabad (1979). So far, only two natural history museums have been established in the northeast—they are Assam Forest Museum, Guwahati (1983) and Biological Museum, Imphal (1989). Five natural history museums with thematic galleries and extensive educational activities were established in New Delhi (1978), Mysore (1995), Bhopal (1997), Bhubaneswar (2004), and Sawai Madhopur (2014). A government natural history museum was established in Chandigarh in 2001 and another such private museum was opened at Thar in Rajasthan (2007).

Highlights of some Natural History Museums

I. Early Natural History Museums in Mumbai

The first museum in the western part of India was opened in Mumbai in 1855. It was named the Central Museum of Natural History, Economic Geology, Industry and Arts. It was set up at the Town Barracks in Colaba area of the city and the Secretary of Bombay Geographical Society, Dr George Buist was appointed as the Secretary and Curator of the Museum. At that time, the museum was just a treasure house of decorative and industrial arts. But in 1857, when India declared its first rebellion for independence, British troops were stationed at the Town Barracks. This led to the shifting of the Central Museum to a different place. Right after the 1857 war died out, British Crown took over the governance of India. A group of intellectuals of Bombay, both of British and Indian origin decided to establish the Central Museum at a new and prominent location in the city and dedicate the museum to Queen Victoria. Sir Henry Frere, Governor of Bombay laid the foundation stone of this Museum on November 19, 1862. Funds were collected

from the public as well as the Government and the museum came to existence in 1872. Since it was built in the honour of the British Queen, it was named Victoria and Albert Museum and was opened to the public on 2nd May 1872

In 1883, eight residents of Bombay decided to form a Society for the study of natural history. They named it Bombay Natural History Society (BNHS) and held regular meetings in the Victoria and Albert Museum. Soon, the Society filled up with many members and collections began to be made. Thus they needed a new place, and ample space to exhibit these collections. Secretary of the society, Mr. H. M. Phipson came to the rescue and in 1886 the entire body was shifted to 6, Apollo Street which is currently known as Shaheed Bhagat Singh Road. When collections at 6, Apollo Street



Town Barracks in Colaba area of Bombay

began to grow, the need to have a proper museum was felt. After several years, the exhibits were shifted in 1921, to set up a permanent gallery on natural history in the Prince of Wales Museum, in Bombay.

II. Natural History Museum, Thiruvananthapuram

Back in 1885, the Napier Museum in Thiruvananthapuram had a substantial collection of natural history specimens. It initially had started with the personal collection of General William Cullen, a British Army Officer with the Madras Artillery Regiment. As years went by, the stock got richer and it was decided to expand the building. The foundation stone for the new Natural History Museum was laid on 22nd January, 1958 by the then Governor of Kerala, Dr. B. Ramakrishna Rao. It took about six years and the construction of the modern two storied building that we see today was completed in 1964.



Specimens of Indian rhinoceros in Natural History Museum, Thiruvananthapuram

There are some 2500 specimens and exhibits in the museum, displayed in galleries on Skeleton, Birds, Mammals, Vertebrates, Invertebrates, Ethnology and Palaeontology. The museum also has a huge collection of specimens to facilitate research in ornithology. Two Indian rhinoceros specimens are on display at the Entrance Hall of the museum. 'Maniyan', the male and 'Rita', the female had arrived in Thiruvananthapuram in 1956 and 2003, respectively, from Assam State Zoo cum Botanical Garden.

III. National and Regional Natural History Museums

India in 1978 had celebrated the World Environment Day on the 5th June befittingly by opening the National Museum of Natural History (NMNH) in New Delhi. The museum owes its beginning to Smt Indira Gandhi, Prime Minister, who in 1972 on the occasion of the 25th Anniversary of India's Independence, decided to establish a museum of natural history, primarily to depict the rich biodiversity of the country, and to promote environmental awareness among the masses through exhibits and activities. The NMNH is functioning under the aegis of Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change, Govt. of India. Unfortunately, a massive fire had gutted out a major part of the NMNH in the early hours of 26th April, 2016.

In 1974, Dr S.M. Nair, an MSc and PhD, both in Museology from M.S. University of Baroda, was appointed as the Head of the project by Union Ministry of Environment and Forests. He was solely responsible for conceptualization of the museum. Dr Nair was assisted by his able colleagues like, Dr D.P. Singh, Shri S.K. Saraswat, Dr B. Venugopal. The museum opened its doors to the public in FICCI building on Barakhamba Road with

a gallery on 'An Introduction to Natural History'. The initial expenditure amounted to rupees 70 lakh. During next 34 years NMNH added four more thematic galleries, namely, 'Nature's Network – Ecology', 'Conservation', 'Cell – the Basic Unit of Life' and 'Intangible Natural Heritage'.

The NMNH New Delhi has established four natural history museums in four zones of the country between 1995 and 2014. These are Regional Museum of Natural History in Mysore (1995), RMNH Bhopal (1997), RMNH Bhubaneswar (2004) and Rajiv Gandhi Regional Museum of Natural History in Sawai Madhopur (2014).

These four regional natural history museums collectively have permanent galleries on varied topics like, Biodiversity, Ecology, Life through Ages, Marine Creatures, Nature's Network, etc. These museums also conduct specially designed programs for school students and their teachers.



Skeleton of Baleen Whale in RMNH Bhubaneswar

It is evident from the forgoing paragraphs that there is large accumulation of natural history objects in our country and perhaps only a fraction of it is on display in museums for public viewing and study of respective academic institutions. It is necessary to digitize such collections and make that available to researchers from any part of the country, because such treasure would enable scholars to explore the relationships among environmental conditions and biodiversity.

Dr Jayanta Sthanapati, former Deputy Director General of National Council of Science Museums, is currently engaged in writing the 'History of Science Museums and Planetariums in India', a research project sponsored by the Indian National Science Academy. He holds PhD (Physics) and PhD (History) degrees.