OBITUARY

Dr Saroj Ghose
(1 September 1935 — 17 May 2025)

A Legacy in Science

Honouring Dr Saroj Ghose, Father of India's Museum Movement

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IT was 17 May 2025 when the world of science communication lost a towering figure — Dr Saroj Ghose, who passed away just a day before International Museum Day (18 May). This is a tragic coincidence that highlights his lifelong dedication to the museum movement. Referred to as the "Father of the Science Museum Movement in India," Dr Ghose transformed the landscape of science education and public engagement in a nation working to re-establish itself post-independence. His innovative vision, relentless passion, and ability to translate complex scientific concepts into accessible, engaging experiences revolutionised how India approached informal science education. Dr Ghose was diagnosed with liver cancer and moved to a peace home in early May 2025. His final wish reflected his lifelong commitment towards science as he donated his body to Washington University, US, for medical research, instructing his family to forgo traditional rituals in favour of a legacy rooted in advancing human knowledge.

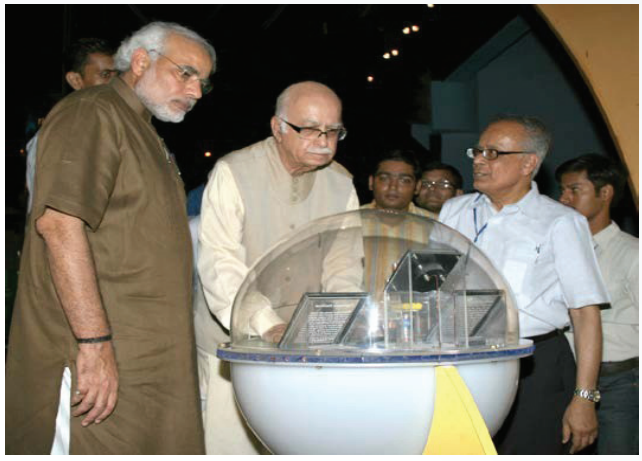
The extraordinary contributions of Dr Ghose, from his foundational work at the Birla Industrial and Technological Museum (BITM) to his leadership of the National Council of Science Museums (NCSM), grew into the world's largest network of science centres. His global impact, including his presidency of the International Council of Museums (ICOM), and his creative ideas like mobile science exhibitions and open-air science parks, cemented his global legacy. Spanning his early life, career milestones, and enduring impact, this biography honours a visionary whose work continues to motivate generations.

He was born on 1 September 1935, in Narkeldanga, Kolkata, and Dr Ghose was the only child of his parents. From an early age, he had shown intellectual curiosity and academic brilliance. His school education at Narkeldanga High School was completed with an exemplary matriculation, opening the doors for his admission to Presidency College, Kolkata, where he pursued science with distinction. Dr Ghose continued his academic journey at Jadavpur University and

Inauguration of the Museum at Rastrapati Bhavan under Dr Saroj Ghose

graduated as an Electronics Control Engineer. That was the time when engineering graduates were in high demand, with lucrative opportunities in the public as well as private sectors. But Dr Ghose opted for an unconventional path. Driven by a desire to democratise science and foster scientific temperament among the masses, he joined the nascent field of science museums — a decision that would shape his legacy and India's scientific landscape.

Ghose's academic pursuits extended beyond India. In the mid-1960s, he earned a Master's degree in Control Engineering from Harvard University, USA, and engaged in research at the Smithsonian Institution. His time at the Smithsonian, under the mentorship of Dr Bernard Finn, Curator of Electricity Collections, deepened his interest in the history of science and technology. This experience inspired his doctoral research at Jadavpur University, where he earned a PhD for his thesis, "The Introduction and Development of the Electric Telegraph in India." His academic rigour and exposure to global museum practices equipped him to spearhead the science museum movement in India with unparalleled expertise.



Inauguration of Science City at Ahmedabad

Inauguration of Science City at Gujarat

India's independence in 1947 brought with it the monumental challenge of rebuilding an economy plundered by 200 years of British colonial rule. Visionaries like Prime Minister Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru and West Bengal Chief Minister Dr Bidhan Chandra Roy recognised that fostering a scientific and industrial revolution was critical to the nation's progress. However, traditional education systems were insufficient to create widespread scientific awareness in a populous, economically challenged country. Dr Roy, inspired by a visit to the Deutsches Museum in Munich, envisioned a similar institution in India to engage the public with science and technology. His vision found support from Nehru and industrialist GD Birla, who donated his sprawling bungalow and adjacent land at 19A Gurusaday Road, Kolkata, to the Council of Scientific and Industrial Research (CSIR) in 1956.

This historic building, constructed in 1922 by N Guinn & Company, became the site of the Birla Industrial and Technological Museum (BITM), Asia's first science museum for public engagement. Under the leadership of CSIR Director General Prof. MS Thacker and Dr Amalendu Bose, the museum's development began. In 1958, a young Saroj Ghose joined the CSIR team as a Technical Officer. There, he was tasked with transforming textbook science into interactive, three-dimensional exhibits. His innovative approach and dedication were instrumental in realising Dr Roy's dream, and on 2 May 1959, BITM opened its doors, marking a milestone in India's science communication history.

Dr Ghose's tenure at BITM was marked by groundbreaking initiatives that extended the museum's reach beyond its physical walls. In 1965, at the age of 29, he assumed leadership of BITM and introduced the Mobile Science Exhibition (MSE), a revolutionary concept with the motto, "If you cannot come to the museum, the museum will come to you." Launched on 17 November 1965, at Ramakrishna Mission School in Narendrapur, Kolkata, the MSE brought interactive science exhibits to remote and underserved regions, including rural areas like Purulia, one of India's most underdeveloped districts. This initiative, approved by CSIR and lauded by UNESCO, democratised science education, fostering curiosity and awareness among communities with limited access to formal education.

The success of the MSE laid the groundwork for another of Ghose's pioneering ideas: the open-air science park. In 1979, as Director of the newly formed National Council of Science Museums (NCSM), Ghose conceptualised an open-air science park for the Nehru Science Centre in Mumbai. Inaugurated on 22 December 1979, it was likely the world's first science park, blending interactive exhibits with natural surroundings to create an immersive learning environment. This innovative concept, recognised by UNESCO as a model for informal science education, inspired science centres globally, including in the United States. Ghose replicated this model in Purulia, where, with support from local authorities, he established India's first District-Level Science Centre, inaugurated on 15 December 1982. These science parks became signature features of NCSM's science centres, enhancing their appeal and accessibility.

The success of BITM and the Visvesvaraya Industrial and Technological Museum in Bengaluru (opened in 1962) highlighted the potential of science museums to transform public engagement with science. However, bureaucratic challenges delayed the establishment of additional museums, prompting the Government of India to form a task force to evaluate their role. The task force recommended detaching science museums from CSIR and establishing an autonomous body under the Department of Education. Thus, the National Council of Science Museums (NCSM) was formed in 1978, with Dr Amalendu Bose as its first Director. In 1979, following Bose's retirement, Dr Ghose assumed the role of Director, later elevated to Director General in 1986, a position he held until his retirement in 1997.

Under Ghose's leadership, NCSM grew into the world's largest network of science centres, overseeing 27 directly managed centres and supporting 56 others across India. His tenure saw the establishment of 18 science centres, including national-level institutions like the National Science Centre in Delhi, regional centres, and district-level centres like Purulia. Ghose's ability to secure funding and collaboration from state governments and local communities was critical to this expansion. His strategic vision ensured that NCSM's centres catered to diverse audiences, from urban elites to rural schoolchildren, making science accessible to all.

Dr Ghose's influence extended far beyond India's borders. In 1985, he organised the Festival of India (FOI) exhibition in science centres across the United States,

Dr Saroj Ghose with Dr APJ Kalam, Dr Manmohan Singh and Somnath Chattopadhyay

showcasing ancient Indian achievements in science and technology. The exhibition's success sparked global interest in India's scientific heritage and strengthened cultural ties. This led to further FOI exhibitions in the USSR (1987–1988), France, Bulgaria, and China, supported by figures like Sam Pitroda. Ghose's international stature grew, culminating in his election as President of the International Council of Museums (ICOM) in 1992, a position he held for two terms until 1998 — the only Asian to achieve this distinction twice. During his presidency, he elevated ICOM's publications to international standards, producing them from India through NCSM's enhanced publication division.

Ghose's interactions with global science centres, including the Cité des Sciences et de l'Industrie in Paris, inspired his most ambitious project: the Science City in Kolkata. Conceived in 1992 and inaugurated in two phases in 1996 and 1997, Science City combined cutting-edge exhibits, a convention centre, and interactive spaces on a 49.6-acre site. Despite challenges in securing land and funding, Ghose's perseverance, coupled with strategic initiatives like the popular animatronic dinosaur exhibition inspired by Steven Spielberg's *Jurassic Park*, ensured the project's success. Science City remains a landmark of Kolkata, blending education, entertainment, and economic impact.

Staff members of DSC Purulia pay a poignant tribute to honour the memory of Dr Saroj Ghose

After retiring from NCSM in 1997, Dr Ghose remained a dynamic force in science communication. He contributed to projects like the Kolkata Panorama for the Kolkata Museum Society, the Parliament Museum, the Rashtrapati Bhavan Museum, and the Gujarat Science City in Ahmedabad. His belief that "work is worship" drove his relentless pursuit of innovation, even in his later years. Ghose's contributions were recognised with numerous accolades, including the Padma Shri (1989), Padma Bhushan (2007), Hari Om Trust Award (1988), Primo Rovis International Prize (1996), ASTC Fellowship (1997), Indira Gandhi Prize (1998), and the NCSTC National Award (2001).

Dr Ghose's legacy is not merely institutional but deeply personal. His ability to connect with rural communities, inspire young minds, and bridge science with culture transformed how India engages with knowledge. His final act of donating his body to Washington University for medical research reflects his lifelong commitment to advancing human understanding, unencumbered by tradition or dogma.

Dr Saroj Ghose's life was a testament to the power of vision, innovation, and dedication. From a young engineer at BITM to a global icon in science communication, he built a movement that made science accessible, engaging, and transformative for millions. His mobile exhibitions, science parks, and leadership of NCSM redefined informal education in India, while his international contributions elevated India's scientific heritage on the global stage. As we reflect on his passing on International Museum Day 2025, we celebrate a legacy that continues to inspire curiosity, foster discovery, and shape the future of science communication worldwide.

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Photographs collected from the National Council of Science Museums and DSC Purulia.