

INDIAN NATIONAL MUSEUM: A MILESTONE IN THE CULTURAL AND SCIENTIFIC HERITAGE OF INDIA

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The Indian Museum was established in the globally famous Asiatic Society of Bengal in the city of Kolkata, Bengal Presidency, British India in the year 1814. It is currently located in Chowringhee area of Kolkata on the Jawaharlal Nehru Road. It has been one of the oldest, largest, most diverse and multipurpose national museum in the Indian subcontinent and in the Asia-Oceania region. The Asiatic Society, the first multipurpose scientific, socio-cultural research institute of its kind in Asia, Africa and Latin America was established by the leading scholar Dr William Kings in 1784. The objective of the institute was to explore in depth the rich socio-cultural heritage of Asia in the most comprehensive manner. Dr Nathaniel Wallich, a leading Dutch botanist of the colonial age was the founder curator of this prestigious museum. The idea of establishing the museum was conceived in 1796 and started taking shape since 1808 when the Asiatic Society found its premises at Park Street, Kolkata granted by the then colonial government. The Indian museum is presently an autonomous organization under the Ministry of Culture, Government of India and is administered under the supervision of a director and an advisory committee. The museum has among its priceless collections the famous pillar of the Maurya emperor Ashoka. The four-lion symbol on the pillar later became the official emblem of India post independence when the nation emerged as a modern republic. Among other famous collections of the museum include the 4,000-year-old Egyptian mummy and the urn containing the ashes of Lord Buddha. The museum displays a rich collection of different coins, seals, sculptors, statues, arts and artifacts, glass and pottery, lacquer-work, textiles, carpets and musical instruments representing different periods of history from the Indian subcontinent and from different parts south and south east Asia. The science section displays the enormous biodiversity of the Indian subcontinent, rich geological, paleontological, zoological and botanical specimens. The numerous antiques of the Mohenjodaro and Harappan civilizations (now mostly located in modern day Pakistan) proudly portrays the dawn of civilization in the Indian subcontinent.



Currently, the cultural division of the museum consists of three sections-Archeology, Arts and the Anthropology sections; while the scientific division consists of three additional sections, namely the Zoology, Botany and Geology sections. The geological section is one of the largest from the continent of Asia and among the premier collections in the world. It is also one of the best and richest collections of natural and geological resources from the Indian subcontinent in the whole world. The Archeology section is represented by nine galleries: Pre & Proto History, Main Entrance, Bharhut, Gandhara, Long Archaeology, Bronze, Coin, Minor Art & Egyptian. The Art exhibits are displayed in four spectacular galleries: Mughal & Bengal painting, Decorative art & textile and the famous South East Asian Gallery.

The Anthropology section has four separate displays, namely, Palaeo-Anthropology, Cultural Anthropology, Mask and the Musical instrument gallery. The rare collection of the Geological section is portrayed in four separate galleries: Siwalik & Invertebrate fossil galleries, Rock & Mineral gallery and Earth & Meteorite gallery and is maintained by the Curatorial Division of the Geological Survey of India. The Zoological section has its

extensive exhibits distributed in six distinct galleries (Insect, Fish, Amphibia-Reptile, Bird, Mammal & Ecology). The anthropology and zoology sections house several beautiful life-size human models and taxidermy animal displays of different ethnic communities and animals from the Indian subcontinent respectively. The Botanical sections has the exhibits displayed in 8 bays under different sections such as Indian timbers, food products, medicinal produces, vegetable fibers, oil & oilseeds, dyes & tans, and gums & resins. This section is a unique window to the widely diverse, both wild and cultivated species of plants from the Indian subcontinent from socio-economic, religious, cultural and commercial perspectives.

The Indian museum displays the illustrious history, socio-cultural tradition and heritage of India across different periods in an elegant manner. It also portrays the rich ethnic, biological and geological diversity of the Indian



subcontinent through its spectacular collections and displays. The museum recently went through renovations, face lift and modernization to improve the look of the building as well as the several displays and galleries. However, compared to other internationally famous and historical museums across Asia, Europe and North America or Australia, the Indian museum has been unfortunately far behind. The drive for procuring new collections and specimens has been extremely poor and is largely dependent on the related government organizations and departments only and on sporadic personal donations. In the post colonial India, the museum has failed to capture the wide diversity of art and sculptor from the subcontinent and to enrich its collection and treasures. Several factors have contributed to this process of decay over time including lack of initiatives, poor management, lack of adequate and liberal funding and lack of capable and highly motivated staff and curators.

There is dearth of highly trained and skilled workers, interns and technicians for the maintenance of displays and galleries. Although some face lifting has been done recently; however, the displays stands far away from the displays of other international and globally reputed museums. There is strong need for collaborations in terms of training, external funding, specimen and socio-cultural exchanges with other museums from developed nations to train the staff for better maintenance and improving the quality of the displays and galleries. Museums are no doubt an expensive financial project; however, they display the rich socio-cultural history, heritage and national treasures of a nation. As a result the funding for the museum needs to increase several folds and a better and professional management is long overdue. The museum is the reflection of the glorious past of the Indian subcontinent and its rich national and natural treasures. Hence care must be taken for increasing the global profile of the institute and increase the collection base of the historic and scientific items and displays. Enhanced funding from government and non-government and philanthropic sources will be important for its long term sustenance. Attempts should be made to procure international heritage funds and corporate sponsorships for financial sustainability of the museum. The museum should also think in designing workshops, courses and curricula for training technicians and interns in different areas of museology in collaboration with different academic institutes for additional sources of income over the sale of tickets to visitors. Regular lectures, presentations and discussion by eminent personalities and experts from different related scientific and cultural fields will also help the institute in attracting enthusiastic visitors and public as well as serious researchers in the activities and offerings of the museum.

Photo credit: Ms M. Dasupta (Kolkata, India)