



The National Museum of Natural History

JAYANTA STHANAPATI

When History Was Guttled

The National Museum of Natural History building in New Delhi recently suffered great damage due to a fire that gutted most parts of the museum. Considering the importance of environmental education and awareness today, one hopes that the National Museum of Natural History is soon restored to its former glory.

ACCORDING to the International Council of Museums (ICOM), an institution that collects, displays and researches materials, collected or extracted from the natural world, is termed as a Natural History Museum.

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.

The museum movement began in India in 1814 with the opening of the Oriental Museum of the Asiatic Society of Bengal (later named as the Indian Museum) in Calcutta, 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. Since then 56 more full-fledged natural history museums or comprehensive natural history galleries as a part of general museums or university departments, have been established in India.

The National Museum of Natural History (NMNH) in New Delhi was possibly the first museum in India to promote environmental awareness among the masses, extensively, through its exhibits and activities. This observation is also true for its four Regional Museums of Natural History located in Mysore, Bhopal, Bhubaneswar and Sawai Madhopur.

In a tragic incident several floors of the NMNH were gutted in a fire recently. Hoping that the national museum would be soon be restored to its former self, let's take a look at the timeline that helped establish this museum and some of its rare exhibits.



Smt Indira Gandhi, the then Prime Minister of India in NMNH, accompanied by Dr. S.M. Nair, the then Director NMNH

“I am sure you will agree that our Natural History Museum should be nothing less than first rate. Its conceptual themes, collections and the manner of their presentation should be sophisticated and imaginative...”

The Beginning

It was Mrs Indira Gandhi, Prime Minister of India, who in 1972 initiated the NMNH project. Her desire was to have a first grade natural history museum in the country. In her letter dated 26 April 1973, addressed to Shri C. Subramaniam, Union Minister of Industrial Development and Science & Technology, she wrote,

“I had approved the setting up of a Natural History Museum in New Delhi to commemorate the silver jubilee of our Independence. However, it was not my intention that the museum should come into being and open its doors to the public within the jubilee year itself...”

I am sure you will agree that our Natural History Museum should be nothing less than first rate. Its conceptual themes, collections and the manner of their presentation should be sophisticated and imaginative. This will not be possible unless there is a detailed project report, prepared by a competent inter-disciplinary team consisting of a Botanist, a Zoologist, a Geologist, and an Anthropologist, assisted by a competent Museologist from the very outset. If necessary, this team could also be sent abroad to study one or two famous Natural History Museums....

I should like to have the names of the people whom you propose to appoint to prepare a detailed project report. Such a project should also involve people who have ideas on communication and display.”

The second gallery on “Nature’s Network – Ecology” was added on the second floor of the museum building in 1983.

Setting up of NMNH

One thing led to the other and in 1974 Dr. S.M. Nair was appointed as head of the NMNH project. He was 37 then. Dr Nair had earned M.Sc. and Ph.D. degrees in Museology from the University of Baroda. He also had experience of teaching various subjects in museology at academic institutions like the University of Baroda, Birla Institute of Science and Technology at Pilani and National Museum Institute in New Delhi.

The museum was set up at the building of the Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce & Industry (FICCI) on Barakhamba Road. The building originally was planned to house an Industrial and Technological Museum, but was later given on rent to set up the natural history museum. Furthermore, the area is very close to Connaught Place in Central New Delhi and hence could be accessible from any part of the city. With everything in order, the work came to a completion after four years in 1978. The budget amounted to Rupees 70 lakhs.

Being a natural history museum, it was quite apt to inaugurate it on the World Environment Day on June 5th in the same year in 1978. Understandably, Dr S.M. Nair became the first Director of the National Museum of Natural History.

Galleries of NMNH

The NMNH was opened on 5th June 1978 with its gallery on “An Introduction to Natural History”, located on the first floor of the building. With the help of 67 interesting exhibits the gallery portrays the origin and evolution of life on earth and also gives us a glimpse of the variety of Indian flora and fauna. The major sections of the gallery are on universe and solar system, origin of life, life through the ages, fossils and evolution, mammals, birds, reptiles, fishes, invertebrates, plant kingdom, endangered animals, and manmade crises. The exhibits provide useful information to the visitors and also often serve as curriculum resource for school children.

The second gallery on “Nature’s Network – Ecology” was added on the second floor of the museum building in 1983. The gallery with 36 exhibits gives an overview of various ecological systems of the world. Sections of the gallery deal with topics like man’s place in the ecosystem, variety and diversity of life, the biomes, bio-geo chemical cycles, man and nature, energy, man’s impact on nature, four pillars of conservation, eco-theatre, etc.

The third gallery on “Conservation” was set up in 1987 on the third floor of the museum. The gallery deals with



A fossilized Ammonite



Fossilized bone of an Indian sauropod called Barapasaurus tagorei

One of the most interesting exhibits of NMNH is a 160-million-year old fossil dinosaur bone. It represents the left femur bone of an Indian sauropod dinosaur called 'Barapasaurus tagorei'.

all the aspects of conservation and its necessity through 31 exhibits. Some of the important exhibits include the ruthless hand, two faces of a forest, loss of forest cover and soil erosion, diminishing wildlife, the shrinking tropical forests, pollution of the oceans, pollution of river Ganga, endangered plants and animals of India, depleting natural resources and increasing demands, energy conservation, you and the environment, and so on.

The fourth gallery on "Cell – the Basic Unit of Life" – was created in the museum in 1989. The gallery displayed 20 exhibits on important topics like the cell and its environment, evolution of life through cellular diversity, DNA the basic genetic material of life, genetic diversity as a basis of biological diversity, development of a cell into human embryo and fetus, reproduction in plants, various tissue systems of a human body, the immune system in a human body, etc.

Between 2002 and 2012, the National Museum of Natural History was actively involved in a newly introduced movement of the International Council of Museum (ICOM) on 'Intangible Heritage'. The museum organized as many as seven national and international conferences on Intangible Natural Heritage during the period.

Thus, after a gap of about 23 years, NMNH opened its fifth gallery on "Intangible Natural Heritage" in 2012. It was set up on the fourth floor of the museum and has 31 exhibits on display, some of which are on – introduction to intangible natural heritage, oral traditions and expressions, Ayurveda, rituals and festivals, agricultural calendar, knowledge and practices about nature, from plants to products, threats to intangible natural heritage, etc.

One of the most interesting exhibits of NMNH is a 160-million-year old

fossil dinosaur bone. It represents the left femur bone of an Indian sauropod dinosaur called 'Barapasaurus tagorei', from the lower Jurassic Kota formation of India, unearthed during 1960-61. While Barapasaurus means a big-legged lizard, tagorei stands for Tagore, to honour the first Indian Nobel laureate Rabindranath Tagore, whose birth centenary was celebrated throughout the country in 1961. The specimen came to NMNH on loan from the Indian Statistical Institute, Kolkata where a mounted skeleton of the entire dinosaur is on display.

Then there is a stuffed White Indian Tiger also on display in the museum. The first white tiger was captured in the forests of Rewa in 1951. White tigers are similar to yellow tigers in habits and habitat.

A large stuffed Indian one-horned rhinoceros is displayed on the ground floor. The Indian rhinoceros is one of the largest of the living rhinoceros. This rhinoceros specimen was collected from the Delhi zoo after its natural death.

A fossilized Ammonite that is 100 million years old is also on display. It was found in Anapadi in Tiruchirapalli. None of its contemporaries live today. Its nearest relative surviving now are called Nautilus.

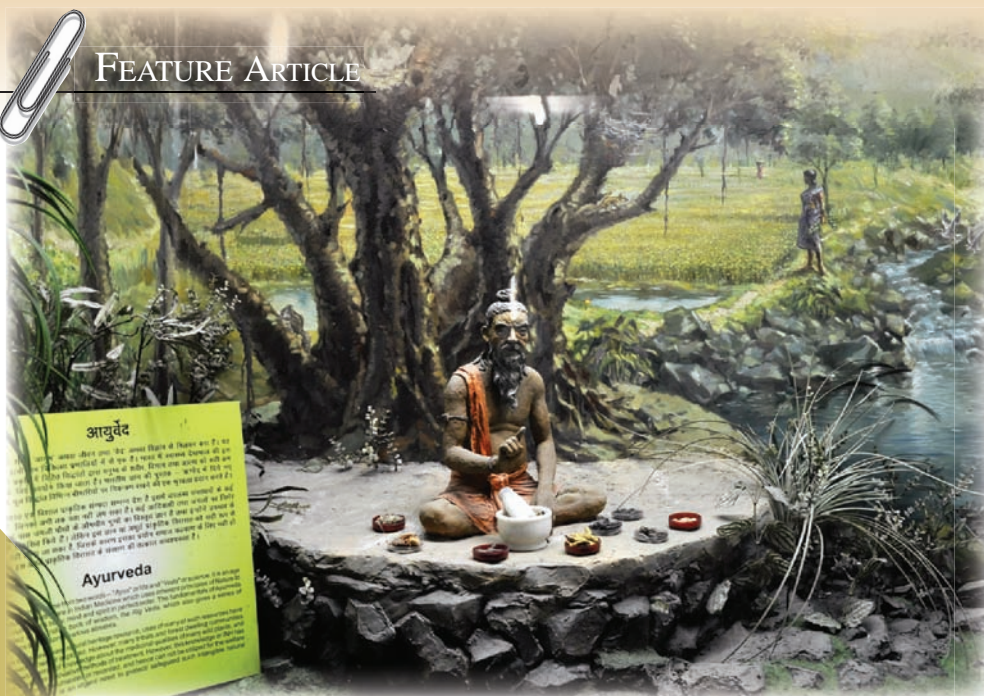
There is an exhibit that symbolically draws the attention of museum visitors towards the necessity of conservation of our nature. Titled as 'Cutting our own base' the label reads "With all the damage he inflicts on nature, MAN today is precariously perched on the very branch of the tree, the base of which he is axing without forethought for future".

A large stuffed Indian one-horned rhinoceros is displayed on the ground floor.

The Indian rhinoceros is one of the largest of the living rhinoceros. This rhinoceros specimen was collected from the Delhi zoo after its natural death.



The Indian one-horned rhinoceros



An exhibit on Ayurveda

...NMNH opened its fifth gallery on “Intangible Natural Heritage” in 2012. It was set up on the fourth floor of the museum and has 31 exhibits on display, some of which are on – introduction to intangible natural heritage, oral traditions and expressions, Ayurveda, rituals and festivals, agricultural calendar, knowledge and practices about nature, from plants to products, threats to intangible natural heritage, etc....

Educational Activities

The Discovery Room and Activity Room of the museum are used for holding educational activities, like examining specimens, clay model making, painting and so on for children throughout the year. Specially designed summer vacation programmes are also organised for children.

The NMNH further organises a large number of educational programmes, classified as interpretation, extension, in-reach, and out-reach programmes. While interpretation programmes are provided in the Museum Galleries, extension programmes are meant for

those schools that have been to the Museum earlier. Out-reach programmes are organized for those who cannot visit the Museum. In-reach programmes are special programmes organized inside the Museum for those who generally do not visit the Museum.

The NMNH organizes specially structured educational and guided tour programmes for differently able children. School teachers being one of the primary target audience, NMNH organizes workshops for such teachers regularly. They are exposed to the resource material available at the Museum which may help in classroom teaching. The Museum further screens films on wildlife, ecology,

conservation and the environment in the Museum Auditorium regularly.

The mission of NMNH is to promote environmental awareness among the masses. The mission today acquires all the more importance due to all round environmental degradation, depletion and scarcity of resources such as water, mounting problems of waste disposal, and increasing pressures on habitats of wild animals.

With environmental education and awareness occupying top-most priority, one hopes that the National Museum of Natural History, which suffered extensive damage due to the recent fire episode, is once again restored to its original glory.

Acknowledgement: The author is indebted to Dr. S.M. Nair, Founder Director of NMNH for sharing reminiscences in an interview in July 2013. He is thankful to Mrs Nazz Rizvi, Scientist (E) of NMNH for providing valuable information, documents and photographs.



...there is a stuffed White Indian Tiger also on display in the museum. The first white tiger was captured in the forests of Rewa in 1951.

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. Address: 4, K. K. Majumdar Road, Santoshpur, Kolkata-700075. Email: dr.jayanta.sthanapati@gmail.com