

# Review of the Oldest Museum of India: The Indian Museum of Kolkata

Sikta Singh<sup>1\*</sup>, Ankita Shrivastava<sup>2</sup>

## Abstract

*A museum is more than a collection of art, sculptures or treasures. Rather it is a repository of the history of extinct species and their cultures. "Real museums are places where Time is transformed into Space." (Orhan Pamuk, The Museum of Innocence, 2008) Museums organise the world according to how we view it changing, such as from colonialism to modernism. The Indian Museum in Kolkata is the world's biggest and oldest multidisciplinary museum, covering the Asia-Pacific region as well as the Indian subcontinent. This museum was established as early as 1814 as the seat of colonial power, and was planned throughout time as a mother-institution that would host a representative Indian collection. As a result, the museum has grown to just be the world's largest centre of its sort, reflecting national heritage and pride, and is listed in the Constitution of the Republic of India as one of the country's national infrastructural institutions.*

**Keywords:** From colonialism, producing apparatus, mother-institution, pioneering National

## INTRODUCTION

"A museum is a place where one should lose one's head."— Renzo Piano.

Museums are sites where artefacts are displayed and stored. Museums have a variety of purposes, ranging from the preservation and documentation of their collections, to the benefit of researchers and experts to the general public. This paper intends to apprise about The Indian Museum of Kolkata and about its history [1].

The Indian Museum was founded by Sir William Jones in 1784 at the Asiatic Society of Bengal. The demand for a museum originated in 1796 from members of the Asiatic Society who wanted a space where the gathered man-made and natural things could be safely stored, cared for and displayed. The Society was awarded a suitable location by the Indian Government in 1808, and it appeared that the purpose had been attained at Chowringhee-Park Street area. The present-day Indian Museum was founded in 1867 in the picturesque Chowringhee area in front of the lower Court. One of the main objectives of writing this article is to ensure that people are able to know about our country's museum history and it may be shared with the world and the coming generations to come [2].

**\*Author for Correspondence**  
Sikta Singh

<sup>1</sup>B. Arch Student, School of Architecture, LNCTU, Bhopal, Madhya Pradesh, India

<sup>2</sup>Professor, School of Architecture, LNCT University, Bhopal, Madhya Pradesh, India

Received Date: January 21, 2022

Accepted Date: February 28, 2022

Published Date: March 20, 2022

**Citation:** Sikta Singh, Ankita Shrivastava. Review of the Oldest Museum of India: The Indian Museum of Kolkata. International Journal of Architectural Heritage. 2022; 5(2): 1–6p.

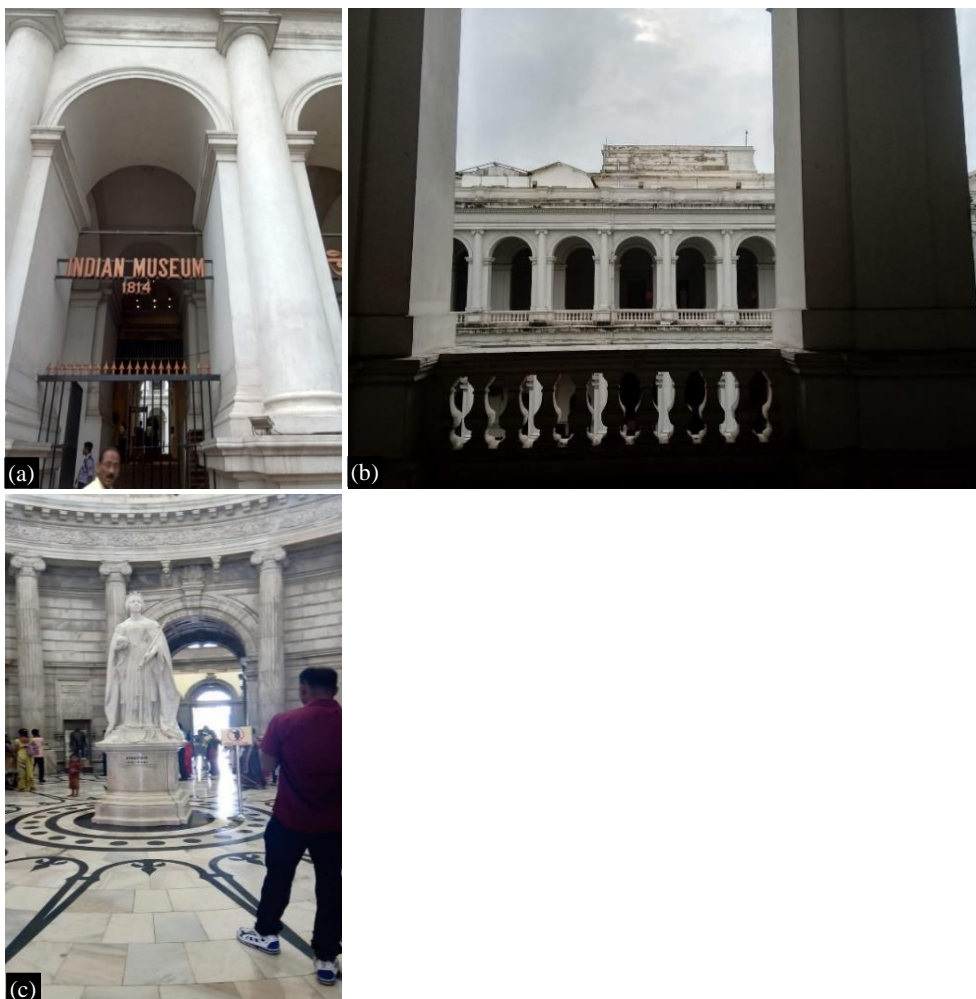
## LITERATURE REVIEW

History is made alive and the truth is revealed in the world through museums. After the establishment of the new building in chowringhee road, the venue of the building changed from the Asiatic society with the two new galleries on April 1, 1878. The Archaeology Gallery and the Birds Gallery. Following the completion of the new building on the plot on the Chowringhee Road, the Society Museum was moved

from the Asiatic Society to the present building and opened to the public in two galleries on April 1, 1878. The Archaeology Gallery and the Birds Gallery. The Zoological section has been announced. It was more than just an archaeological museum. All that was unique and illustrative of India's curiosities, relics, and natural specimens could be made a part of the museum [3].

### ARCHITECTURAL APPRAISAL

The Indian Museum dates back to 1814 and is housed in a three-story white Neoclassical-style structure with a simple design. Colonnaded pavilions and enormous halls may be seen on each storey. The total area is divided into thirty-five galleries, whose sizes vary depending on what they feature and with a large central courtyard. The Indian Museum of Kolkata is the subject of this research, which includes a brief description. The study employs descriptive live study analysis. The studies have been primarily done by collecting different types of data collection, personal visits of the museum and through virtual tours. The used data sources are referred from books, magazines, websites etc. The Indian Museum in Calcutta was built around the Asiatic Society's collection (Figure 1). The fact that the first curator of the Asiatic Society Museum was botanist Dr. Nathaniel Vallich, whose personal collection of botanical specimens contributed significantly to the first museum in India, explains the style of study used to seek for diverse artefacts. Members of the Asiatic society accepted to establish the museum with four sections namely archaeological, ethnological, and industrial, while the other is geological and zoological. Donations were invited and statues were requested for museums to include "stone or bronze inscriptions, ancient monuments, Hindus or Mahomedans, statues of Hindu gods, ancient coins, ancient manuscripts, instruments that were used in the eastern India's war, different type of musical



**Figure 1.** (a) to (c) Different views of the museum.

instruments, metallic and earthen containers used in religious ceremonies, influence of indigenous artwork and mass production, specimens of birds, ayurvedic medicines and fruits, skeletons or bones of animals, locally available minerals or Vegetable preparations that are only available in eastern pharmacies, ores of metals, natural metal alloys, and other things which are operational to history and science. Under the leadership of its ardent creator, Dr. Vallich, and other private collectors, the Museum thrived and grew quickly [4, 5].

### **DIFFERENT SECTIONS OF THE MUSEUM**

As already explained, earlier when the Museum, was established at the time, it consisted of only the four main sections, of the zoological, geological and archaeological collections. In this museum, 6 sections and 35 galleries of art is displayed presently that is both cultural and scientific which are - Art, archaeology, anthropology, geology, zoology, and economics which have a detailed description as follows [6].

#### **Anthropological Section**

Sir William Jones initially encouraged the study of anthropology, starting with only a few topics in his opening remarks to the Asiatic Society of Bengal, and it seemed like that many of the sample specimens that had been collected in the museum collection now had a been arranged when Dr. Vallich's proposal for the establishment of a proper museum would now fall under this section. Anthropology was thus reintroduced, as an important collection of human skulls, primarily created by the late Dr. John Anderson, was kept under the direct supervision of the Superintendent, while a set of well-known models of faces, hands, and feet were repaired by the Schlagintweits in India and Central Asia and moved to the Industrial, or Economic Section, as it was known at the time [7].

#### **Geological Section**

The Geological Section of the museum consisted of four galleries. The first one-the Siwalik gallery, second one -the Meteorite gallery, third one-the Mineral gallery, and the fourth one-Fossil Gallery. These consisted of the collection from the former geological museum and the collections from the Geological survey of India, integrated with the original collections of the Bengal Asiatic society. Metallic ores, metal alloys in their natural state, and minerals of all descriptions are specially attached to the list attached to the solution, and the collection increases rapidly. Dr. Wallich was appointed Curator of the Geological and Zoological Section, a post that he held for several years [8].

#### **Archaeological Section**

When the first block of museum's building was completed, officials from the Bengal Asiatic Society gave their entire collection of antiquities to the Trustees of the Museum with the exception of etched coins and copper plates. The collection as it was in 1876, despite of its importance, the collection was not ideal. The remains of the Bharhut stupa were not included, and there were just a few Indo-Greek statues from Gandhara and a few medieval statues from Bihar. The most important collection in this section were Sculptures of Mathura and Sarnath, Stone inscriptions, collection of Brahmanical and Buddhist images from Java etc [9].

#### **The Art Section**

In December 1874, when The Viceroy (Lord Northbrook) when inaugurated a temporary fine art show in the Museum building, he had expressed his expectation that in Calcutta a new permanent art gallery would be constructed. The Lieutenant Governor of Bengal, then, took steps to achieve this by renting certain buildings and receiving donations in the form of works of art. (Figure 2.) The new gallery which was established was now in connection with School of Art. It was inaugurated by King [10].

Northbrook on the 6th April, 1876. On April 1st, 1911, the Art section of the Indian museum was formed by the combination of the Artware Court of Indian museum and the Government Art Gallery.



**Figure 2.** Donations in the form of art works.

### **Industrial Section**

Samples of commercial and industrial interest from all across India were exhibited in this segment. The collection in this section is almost 40 years old when there was a provincial museum already in the city (Figure 3). In Calcutta in 1872, the Bengal Museum was established and the conditions for its development were very favourable. Mr Justice Phear initiated the construction of a comprehensive package of Bengal commercial and industrial products, making them accessible to the public. Different type of oils, drugs, grains, distinct fabric materials of silk and other things like seeds, timbers, fibres were also included in the collection.



**Figure 3.** View from front gallery of museum.

### **Zoological Collections**

In the beginning, the Asiatic Society did not promote the study of zoology much because the head of the institute Sir William Jones was against of killing or using any kind of violence against the animals of this country for this purpose. The preconception of founder affected a lot the early history of the society and in his tenure and afterwards till 50 years nothing noticeable had been done in this field. Under the competent leadership of Mr. Brian Hodgson, serious zoological investigation was started. His researches on the fauna of Nepal then became the classic of natural history. The field tour investigation, was described in a very attractive manner by Dr. Ball in his book “Jungle Life in India” (Figure 4). The scientific officer’s major goals in the field were to collect material for an underwater species survey for fresh and brackish-water fauna collected from the various segments of the Indian Empire.





**Figure 4.** (a) and (b) Collection of underwater species in zoological section.

### **GROWTH OF THE COLLECTION/MUSEUM**

In 1878 the galleries of archaeological and zoological collections in Indian museum were opened to the public. In the quest for knowing India better, the material remains of India's past and specimens of its flora, fauna and geology were all invested with value. Although all of them were sources of information in India, the type of information that could be extracted from them varied. It was widely believed that India did not have written histories, so archaeological material has the value of rebuilding India in the past. In the galleries of this museum distinct things are kept preserved which are related to Indian and world history, human and natural sciences. It focuses on the emergence and self-definition of a specific discipline—archaeology—in and around the museum. The narrative, therefore, has two distinct origins: the first one which dates back to the origins of India's first museum, which was placed in the Bengal Asian community's buildings, and the other one, to the first British government-sponsored one programs for examining and writing 'ancient' Indian texts.

### **CONCLUSION**

During the British colonial rule the Indian museum of Calcutta was also known as the Imperial Museum. When British empire was established in this province, Sir William Jones founded the Asiatic society of Bengal in India in 1784. He was the foremost scholar and had devoted his life to serve the country. He had given his strong opinion that investigation's limitations are because of geographical limitations of Asia. He suggested that within these constraints the investigations would be extended to anything done by man or produced by nature. In the beginning Sir William Jones did not include the establishment of the museum as the part of society's activity. Although at that time and till so many years the society did not have any permanent building but the members of society were curious and began to accumulate. In 1976, they started working to elevate a suitable building should be made for their collection and preservation. Again, it is undoubtedly our responsibility to do our best for public culture by presenting appealing exhibition series that are well-planned, full, and clearly labelled, and thereby stimulating and broadening the minds of individuals who are not involved in scholarly research.

### **REFERENCES**

1. Singh, K. (2015). Professor S.R. Das memorial prized paper: the archaeological survey and museums in colonial India. *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress*, 76, 778–785. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/44156646>
2. Amit Kumar Gupta. The 'Public' Indian Museum, Calcutta, 1858–1878. *Indian Historical Review*. 2020 ; 47(1): 99–114.
3. Indian Museum. The Indian Museum, 1814-1914 [electronic resource]. Calcutta: Pub. by the trustees of the Indian museum and printed at the Baptist mission press; 1914.

- 
4. History Of the Museum. Indian Museum Kolkata. [Online] Available from <https://indianmuseumkolkata.org/informations/MQ%3D%3D/history-of-indian-museum>
  5. Indian Museum in Kolkata: India's oldest and largest museum
  6. Indian culture. MOC Organization: Indian Museum. [Online] Available from <https://indianculture.gov.in/MoCorganization/indian-museum>
  7. Orhan Pamuk. The Museum of Innocence. Turkey: Iletisim Publishing; 2008
  8. Brainy Quote. A museum is a place where one should lose one's head. - Renzo Piano. [Online] Available from [https://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/renzo\\_piano\\_404359](https://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/renzo_piano_404359)
  9. The Oldest Museum in The World | Indian Museum
  10. Elliott, M. J. 2003. Behind the scenes at the magic house: An ethnography of the Indian Museum, Calcutta. Ph. D. Dissertation, Anthropology, Cambridge University.