

Abstract

Barrackpore Menagerie, a little Known and Neglected Indian Phenomenon of Fascinating and Noteworthy Impact in the world of zoos and science.

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For most of the time the British ruled India, Calcutta was the seat of Government, as well as a cultural and intellectual centre. Calcutta's seaport provided a veritable door open to south and Southeast Asia from whence a steady stream of animals flowed into the city. Undoubtedly that is one reason that three of India's first and most interesting animal facilities in Calcutta in the 19th Century. All were different but with a high-minded purpose, but none more so than the Barrackpore Menagerie, home to the little known and neglected Indian Natural History Project.

Barrackpore, a small cantonment, was located about 30km from Calcutta; it was the site of the British India Governor General's summer residence, which proved a wonderful site for the Menagerie due to its beauty and prestige. The Menagerie was not set up as a zoo but evolved into one after its original purpose had been served.

That was the Indian Natural history Project, a government funded venture and the brainchild of the brilliant and eccentric Lord Arthur Wellesley, a man of gigantic ideas and ego and scant patience or tact. He was Governor General from the apex of the 18th century, 1798 – 1805.

Wellesley's brainchild was an ambitious and sorely needed zoology project that would collect animals of the subcontinent and keep them to be categorized, described and illustrated. This scheme was the first systematic study of Indian zoology and way ahead of its time. The menagerie belonging to the project continued and opened to the public after Wellesley was transferred as subsequent governors and their families lived there and took interest in the animal collection. During those years influential Europeans, including Sir Stamford Raffles visited Barrackpore and wrote about its animals and ambience. Barrackpore influenced London Zoo as well as Calcutta Zoo and others over the years. This paper will tell that story.