

The Museums of India*

THE report of the Museums Association on the museums and art galleries of India completes a series of reports, which not only comprises a full directory of the museums of the British Empire, but also contains critical commentaries on every phase of their activities. In the course of six or seven years, nearly two thousand museums in all parts of the Empire have been visited. The funds for this survey were provided by the generosity of the Carnegie Corporation of New York, excepting the grant for the British survey of 1926-27, for the expenses of which the Carnegie United Kingdom Trust was responsible.

The survey of the museums of India began in October 1935. It was carried out by Mr. S. F. Markham, M.P., Empire secretary of the Museums Association, and Mr. H. Hargreaves, formerly director-general of archaeology in India. Personal visits were made to the greater number of the museums of India, and for purposes of comparison Ceylon, Malaya and the Dutch East Indies were visited. The funds, as already mentioned, were provided by the Carnegie Corporation of New York, to fill the gap in the Empire survey, but on the distinct understanding that assistance could not be provided for the Indian museums, such as had been made available for the museums of the Empire.

In a brief historical survey the report points out that the institution of museums in India began so long ago as 1796, when the Asiatic Society of Bengal decided that the many curiosities it had accumulated should be suitably housed in Calcutta. Donations were invited; but the plan proved premature, and it was not until 1814 that the Society was able to establish a proper museum. The scope of the museum was defined as "the illustration of Oriental manners and history and to elucidate the peculiarities of art and nature in the East". After persistent pressure, official financial assistance was received from the Court of Directors of the Honourable East India Company in 1839, a grant being made for the salary of a curator, and the Government of India was authorized to make grants for special purposes. Four years previously the Government itself, being anxious to develop the country's mineral resources, had decided to found a Museum of Economic Geology in Calcutta. This was opened in 1840. The Central Museum of Madras was opened in 1851 as the result of a decision of the East India Company, "impressed with the advantage of storing up in some one place the knowledge and the material which had been acquired by the investigators working in different parts of the Peninsula, and with the object of fostering scientific enquiries and pursuits". This was due to the activity of the Madras Literary Society, a branch of the Royal Asiatic Society, but the proposal was mooted so long before as 1819. By 1857 there were twelve museums in India. Further growth was checked by the Mutiny of 1857, and thereafter was slow until the jubilee of Queen Victoria in 1887. This was responsible for the foundation of a number

of museums; and a further stimulus was provided, especially in the foundation of archaeological museums, during the viceroyalty of Lord Curzon of Kedleston, 1899-1907, whose personal interest and munificent benefactions did much to encourage study of Indian art and culture. The most recent development, commendable though not without its drawbacks, is the institution of museums on the sites of archaeological excavation, in which the local finds are housed, while in some instances excavated buildings are preserved so far as possible intact.

It is, however, significant that notwithstanding activity since 1914, and especially in the last decade, a number of museums formerly in existence have closed, the most recent being Quetta, which has not been reopened since the earthquake of 1935. The Phayre Museum in Rangoon has been closed for thirty-three years, though the collections are reported to be still in existence.

There are now a hundred and five museums in India. These have a quadruple origin: first, the scientific museums at the great centres of government established by the Governments and their European servants; secondly, the museums established by the Indian States, which have followed this example; thirdly, the local museums established by the Archaeological Survey; and fourthly, the museums created by the teaching institutions and learned societies for their own requirements. The great majority of the museums are under Government, municipal or provincial control. It is noted, however, that there are fifteen towns with populations of more than 100,000 which have no public museums. Nowhere, except in China, it is pointed out, are there so many large towns without a public museum. Burma, with a population of more than fourteen millions, has no Provincial Government museum which is now open. Yet 35,000 visitors annually pass through the small Palace Museum at Mandalay.

Neither in British India nor in the Indian States, the report points out, have museums been distributed in a rational manner—some of the smaller towns, such as Dehra Dun, have museums of which any great city could be proud, while populous centres, such as Ahmedabad or Amritsar, have no museum at all. There is not a single province or Indian State that does not compare poorly with the leading countries of Europe, the British Commonwealth or the United States. In fact, with the exception of the most backward countries of the world, there is not an area where museums count for so little, are so meagrely supported, or are so few and far between.

Finance repeats the same story in another idiom. The financial provision for the museums is absurdly inadequate. The total amount spent on the one hundred and five museums is no more than £58,000 per annum, and out of this the largest five museums have an income larger than the remaining hundred put together. The total amount, in fact, is less than is spent on a single great museum in the capital cities of Europe or America.

It is not difficult to diagnose the causes that lie at the root of most of the defects in the provision of museums in India. A general apathy and neglect,

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combined with and in part the cause of an inadequate provision of funds, is responsible for failures in maintenance, an insufficiently high standard in staffing, both as to numbers and qualification, and a lack of energy in administration, which has failed to keep abreast of museum development in other countries, while allowing exhibits to deteriorate and perish through neglect of proper care and attention. Unless immediate steps are taken, the report says, proof of India's cultural greatness in past time, of her technical and artistic skill in perishable materials, will vanish for ever from India itself and will only be found in the vast repositories of Europe and elsewhere.

Notwithstanding the illiteracy of the population, generally estimated at ninety per cent, the inadequacy of the museum cannot be excused on the ground of the lack of interest of its public. It is stated that during a recent festival in Madras, no less than 130,000 individuals passed through the Museum in one day, while the Mysore Government Museum, Bangalore, has 260,000 visitors annually.

As is indicated by the directory of Indian museums, which forms Part 2 of the report, the character of the Indian collections on the whole is sufficiently varied. The predominant place is taken by exhibits illustrating the archaeology, history and art of India whether in specialized institutions or as part of a larger institution. The variety and extent of the fauna of India are well shown in the famous collections of the Indian Museum, in the Prince of Wales Museum, Bombay, and the museums at Madras, Nagpur and Darjeeling. The Geological Survey has four galleries in the Indian Museum, which are fully representative of the geology of India. One deficiency

to which attention is directed is the inadequacy of the ethnological collections illustrating the culture of the varied peoples of India, although the collections demonstrating the culture of the aboriginal tribes at Lucknow, Calcutta, Nagpur, Madras and Trivandrum are noted. The importance of agriculture and forestry in India is responsible for the efficiency of the Forest Research Institute at Dehra Dun, with its world-famed collections devoted to botany, silviculture, entomology, timber and other forest products, while systematic botany is covered by the Herbarium of the Royal Botanic Gardens, Sibpur, where there are more than 2,000,000 specimens. There are also agricultural museums at Coimbatore and Lyallpur. The Indianization of the staffs is now virtually complete.

Of the recommendations appended to the report, the most important is that the Government should appoint immediately an Inspector General of Museums with European experience, and an assistant to be trained overseas. Further, that the constitution of the Indian Museum should be reorganized to permit the appointment of a director with full powers and freed from other duties. In view of the criticisms of the standard of staffing and of the lack of general appreciation in museum administration of advance in technique and development of museums as centres of cultural organization, special emphasis should be laid on the recommendation that the Standing Committee on Museums and Museum Conferences should be revived, and funds provided to meet the cost of Committee, travelling allowances and printing; while the provinces and municipalities are advised to provide more funds for maintenance and also adequate and competent staffs.

The Service of Unified Knowledge

MR. H. G. WELLS'S recent discourse* on the disastrous inco-ordination and waste of modern knowledge and thought concluded with a warning that "without a World Encyclopædia to hold men's minds together in something like a common interpretation of reality, there is no hope whatever of anything but an accidental and transitory alleviation to any of our world's troubles".

To Mr. Wells's appeal to the learned world to set its house in order comes an answer from Prof. A. B. Dobrowolski, director of the Meteorological Service of Poland, president of the Warsaw Geophysical Society and professor of pedagogic sciences in the Free University of Warsaw. Prof. Dobrowolski, while recognizing the potential value of Mr. Wells's project, suggests that it does not go deep enough. If men's minds are to be held together in something like a common interpretation of reality, it is essential that they should have sufficient general culture for an insight into and appraisal of the rich and complicated life of the civilized world of to-day.

This means that there must be a revival of the ideal of a liberal education and efficacious means for realizing it at a level higher than that of the secondary

school. A boy or girl leaves school with a certain capacity for self-education. This capacity ought to be cherished and utilized as a means towards higher general education; but encouragement and support are needed. Society ignores the need. The universities are concerned to form, not cultivated men and women, but specialists. Such general culture as is acquired after school-days are over is derived from no systematic cultivation of the arts of observing and thinking, with study to understand and appraise the observations and thoughts of others; but from a purely haphazard succession of experiences, chance readings, conversations, attendances at exhibitions, public meetings, concerts. So, in the vast majority of cases, the intellectual worker's conception of the civilized world, his philosophy of life, if such it may be called, which will determine his reactions to circumstances throughout his life, is the haphazard product of a series of accidents, a thing of shreds and patches.

Prof. Dobrowolski suggests that the remedy lies in creating, in every university, a new 'faculty of general knowledge', the function of which would be to arouse, especially among the young, a lively sense of the value of higher general culture and to stimulate and guide efforts to attain to it through self-education. The mere existence of such an institution would be,

* Delivered at the Royal Institution on November 20 and published as a Supplement to NATURE of November 23, 1936, under the title "The Idea of a World Encyclopædia".