



S.H. Prater Curator Par Excellence

If there is one stalwart who left an indelible mark as Curator of BNHS that would be Stanley Henry Prater. Assuming the role in 1919, when the Natural History section of the Prince of Wales Museum of Western India was under the management of the Society, Prater mingled art with science to put together a natural history section in the museum.

Prater was born in the Nilgiris in 1890. The very first spark of interest in natural history glimmered in him during his school days in Khandala. With support from the Jesuit fathers of the German mission, and inspiring works by Revd Fathers Dreckmann (Herpetology), Assmuth (Entomology), and Blatter (Botany), Prater grew to be one of the most eminent naturalists in the Subcontinent. He often reminisced about them, and spoke of all three with immense reverence and affection.

Prater joined the BNHS in 1907. He initially worked under senior naturalist E. Comber, and later as assistant to N.B. Kinnear, who was then the first stipendiary Curator of BNHS. After a four-year probationary period,

and following Kinnear's resignation, Prater was appointed Curator in 1919, a position he held till his retirement in 1948 with marked distinction and pride. During the time when Prater took over as Curator, plans were afoot to establish a natural history section in the Prince of Wales Museum of Western India. Many such museums had already shaped up in the first world countries such as UK and the US. There were lessons to be learnt from their experiences, and Prater was sent to acquire the necessary skills. He was first deputed to the United Kingdom, the major motive for sending him there being to learn the art of modern taxidermy under the honorary taxidermist L.C. Harwood.

Returning to India, Prater made elaborate notes on his visit to "certain museums in Great Britain", especially drawing on those experiences to envision a future for the Prince of Wales Museum of Western India [*JBNHS* Vol. 29(2)]. Prater was sent again in 1927, this time to the foremost museums in the United Kingdom and America, to pick up the techniques of modern natural



Paintings by Paul Barruel, from THE BOOK OF INDIAN ANIMALS by S.H. Prater

history museum exhibitionism, that is, the preparation of habitat groups or dioramas, which had started in Germany but had reached perfection in the United States (particularly at the American Museum of Natural History, New York). Everywhere Prater travelled, he assimilated the experiences of other museums.

His writings on museums are passionate accounts, reflecting an urgency for change. He noted firstly how the museums were recasting themselves to be “of service to the public”. In a three-part series called ‘Modern Museum Methods’, which he later published in *JBNHS* [Vol. 32(3),

Vol. 32(4), Vol. 33(1)], he described at length what a museum should envision to be. Some of his observations on world museums went thus: “By giving the public something which it can understand and appreciate and something which it wants, the museums succeed in rousing its interest and ultimately its support. And in this the American Museums have been completely successful” [Vol. 32(3)]; “At the Natural History Museum, Berlin, radical changes are being made in the character and nature of exhibits. There, too, the museum is making a bid for popular interest and support...” [Vol. 32 (3)].

The artistically designed galleries of the Natural History section of the Prince of Wales Museum of Western India and the group exhibits (which were acclaimed the finest in the East) were the outcome of Prater’s remarkable skill and aptitude. Between 1923 and 1937, the new Natural History section was conceived, designed, erected, and finally opened to the public. It is a standing monument to Prater’s genius.

Prater was the Executive Editor of the *JBNHS* for 27 years of his service. During his tenure as Editor, the *Journal* gained high standards and

earned international recognition as the foremost natural history journal in the whole of Asia. Prater also contributed his own writing to the *Journal*, and the topics he wrote about ranged from mammals, reptiles, and birds to aquatic animals like the dugong [Vol. 33(4)] and the game fishes of Bombay, the Deccan, and the neighbouring districts of the Bombay Presidency [Vol. 36(1)]. Some of Prater's more important contributions in *JBNHS* were: 'Note on a Stranded Great Indian Fin Whale (*Balaenoptera indica*) at Ratnagiri', 'Progress of the Mammal Survey', 'An Old Time Buffalo Hunt', 'Black Tigers', and 'The Wild Animals of the Indian Empire'. Besides these, he wrote a section on fauna in Perceval Landon's *NEPAL*, which was published in 1928. He was a frequent and popular contributor of natural history articles to various other journals and magazines.

Along with being a voracious reader and prolific writer, Prater's hobbies included painting and plaster modelling, all of which he invested in during his retirement. Prater wrote in a readable and often humorous style, and was a good illustrator with pen-and-ink or brush. *THE BOOK OF INDIAN ANIMALS* bears some of these illustrations.

Prater has to his credit the honour of being the first to collect Wroughton's Free-tailed Bat *Otomops wroughtoni* in 1912 during the Society's Mammal Survey (1911–1923). He made a note of it in *JBNHS* Vol. 22(4): "These bats were found at Talewadi in the Belgaum District, some 20 miles north of Castle Rock. They occupied a large cave which is locally known as the Bara Pede (12 caves) ... the year I was fortunate enough to obtain a specimen alive ... From what I observed this species seemed to prefer a fruit diet and invariably spat out any flies I offered him ... but showed no reluctance in swallowing pieces of banana. His involvement in the survey as field collector, and his experience of handling specimens that arrived from the field or from the British Museum after identification inspired him to write *THE BOOK OF INDIAN ANIMALS* (1948), which was a huge success and invaluable for the detailed information on the habits and behaviour of the species described. Sadly, an accident during the Mammal Survey incapacitated him for further field work and he was forced to be confined to intramural work.

Prater wrote at length in the *Journal* about 'The Wild Animals of the Indian Empire' [Vol. 36(5)]. This was in fact his address to the

Jubilee Meeting of the Society held in Bombay on August 10, 1933. The address set the tone for an outcry for the protection of wildlife in India. It is a revelation to note that even as early as the 1930s, the state of wildlife in India was at risk, for as a consequence of "changing conditions in the country, the gradual conquest of forests and waste lands, above all, the building of new roads and the radical improvement in methods and rapidity of transport have left few areas in the Peninsula of India which are free from intrusion by Man." Prater, in the address, urges the enforcement of Government laws that would ensure the protection of wildlife.

During his long service as Curator at BNHS, Prater acquired an all-round familiarity with the Society's natural history collections. Even though his own expertise related to specific animal taxa such as mammals, birds, and snakes, he welcomed the inclusion of specimens of all other groups to enrich the BNHS collection. He could not only precisely name the specimens brought in, but also give their distribution and characteristic traits. Prater was a remarkable man who stood for truth, and whose hard work and professional ambitions not only enriched Indian natural history but also BNHS particularly. ■

"If our wild life is to find protection at all, it must find it somewhere in our forests. It is often claimed that the proximity of forests to agriculture makes them a constant source of harassment to the cultivator. If this argument is pushed to its logical conclusion, the only remedy would be to remove such protection as is now given to wild animals in our forests, for it would not be possible to remove this menace entirely until all the large wild animals in them are killed or die of wounds, or are exterminated over large areas because of their inability to breed. Surely our goal is not the total extermination of our wild life, which is what must inevitably happen unless some form of protection is given to it within its natural domain. While it is essential that the cultivator should have reasonable latitude to defend his property, it is equally essential that there should be certain areas or reserves where the shooting of animals is regulated and where the laws for their protection are rigidly enforced." ... S.H. Prater – *THE BOOK OF INDIAN ANIMALS*