

THE FIRST PRACTICAL HANDBOOK

More History of R. B. Sanyal, the first Superintendent of the Calcutta Zoological Gardens (1876 - 1908)

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R. B. Sanyal was born in 1850 at Lalgola (District Murshidabad) in Bengal, of humble parentage. His early education was from Berhampore and he came down to Calcutta for his medical studies but could not complete it. He had a natural force of character, combined with a great buoyancy of spirits.

While studying in the Medical College in Calcutta, he happened to come into contact with Dr. George King by whose grace Sanyal found employment in the Calcutta Zoological Gardens in 1876 as an ordinary worker. After a short probation, he was made an assistant for the office work. It is a notable testimony to his worth as well as to the generosity of the Committee of the Calcutta Zoological Gardens that within a short period he was made Head Assistant of the Garden.

In the beginning of his career he met two leading personalities in Zoo Management: they are Dr. John Anderson and Carl Louis Schwendler. Both of them were responsible for shaping Sanyal into a zooman of distinction. Increasing responsibility and a variety of work made him finally Superintendent of the Garden.

Apart from looking after the animals, Sanyal's main work was to write out his observation in a 'Daily Register' about the animals. After completing ten years of such writing, Sanyal began writing interesting articles for children based on his various observations in order to arouse interest in them. The idea further developed and C. T. Buckland, then President of the Committee, along with Pope and Schiller thought of publishing a book on the basis of the 'Daily Register'. This idea was revitalised by then Lt. Governor Sir Stuart Bayley. He wanted it so produced that it would be helpful to all animal lovers and Zoo personnel.

The book came out in 1892 under the title of '**A Handbook of the Management of Animals in Captivity in Lower Bengal**' published at the Bengal Secretariat Press, Calcutta. It contains notices of 10 orders, 46 families, 242 genera and 402 species of birds that had been exhibited in the Garden up to 1891. In fact, this was the first of its kind in this subject and it was reviewed by **Nature** the leading scientific magazine of Great Britain and Ireland. *Nature* reviewed thus :



R. B. SANYAL

"Considering the number of Zoological Gardens in Europe and their long establishment it is singular that it should have been left to the Superintendent of a Zoological Garden at Calcutta and to a native of India withal, to produce the first practical handbook on the management of animals in captivity. The author who, we believe ... is one of the very few natives of British India that have exhibited any taste for natural history, has been for some years Superintendent of the Zoological Gardens at Calcutta, an excellent institution mainly kept up by the Government of Bengal, but under the control of a committee of the subscribers ... It is certainly a work of a considerable merit. It is evident the author has kept a regular journal and has recorded his experiences very minutely ... on the whole we must allow that this volume is a remarkable production, considering the circumstances under which it has been prepared and that its author deserves great credit for the pains bestowed on its composition and for much valuable information contained in it".

Soon after the review of this book Sanyal became famous in his field and was made Corresponding Member of Zoological Society, London. From all corners he got recognition and this drew the attention of Bombay Corporation in 1894. He was called at Bombay to advise the Victoria Garden authorities on the management of zoos and his report was very much appreciated by the Management Committee of Bombay. Sanyal came back to Calcutta much satisfied.

This was followed by yet another incident. Members of Calcutta Zoological garden wanted that able Superintendent must get first hand knowledge of the various Zoological Gardens of Europe. With much difficulty the Government of Bengal agreed to this proposal and Sanyal could visit all leading gardens of Europe including London in 1898. He also joined the International Congress of Zoology at Cambridge in the same year during the tour. He thus visited Paris, Anwerp, Rotterdam, Amsterdam, Hamburg, Dresden, Berlin, Vivaria, Vienna and Naples and had a first hand experience of these Gardens.

He was awarded by the Governor General of India the title of Rai Bahadur on 1st January - His position in the Garden and outside was now very prestigious. He was consulted on all such matters pertaining to a zoo garden and he used to give advice freely at all times. He was made an Associate Member of the Asiatic Society of Bengal, Calcutta in April 1899.

In the meantime Sanyal wrote another book **Hours with Nature** purely meant to arouse interest in nature in school students. His articles in Bengali language were published regularly and were in great demand by his young readers. For scientific personnel he wrote articles and discussed them in the monthly meeting of the Asiatic Society almost every month. Some of them were contributions in the science of Zoology.

It may be of interest to note that after Nawab Wajid Ali Shah, King of Oudh expired, he left behind 51 mammals, 205 birds and 100 reptiles. Most of them were given shelter in the Zoological Garden under the able supervision of R. B. Sanyal and later on the Government of Bengal sanctioned Rs. 5000/- for purchasing only selected animals out of the whole lot.

With 1899 bad days started plaguing Sanyal. In August 1899, Sanyal lost his only son Hemanta Kumar Sanyal aged 25 years; who left behind his parents, a widow and one daughter. A few months later the posthumous child of Hemanta Kumar was born. A second disaster awaited Sanyal: Within a

year R. B. Sanyal lost his wife also. It was an awful scene, the whole house seemed deserted. Sanyal had to look after his widowed daughter-in-law and his grand daughter. This proved to be a great set-back to his work. His health was shattered. Although he worked till October 1908, mentally he was very weak.

By October 1905 Sanyal informed to the Committee that he must retire in January 1906. He requested a pension equal to the full pay with recommendation of his appointment. The real search for a replacement started immediately, but in comparison to R. B. Sanyal's attainment and ability no one was equal.

The Committee realized that the duties of the present Superintendent of the Garden were varied and numerous requiring a combination of natural ability with knowledge of certain subjects and practical versatility. The Superintendent must have a fair knowledge of Zoology in general and of the treatment of animals in captivity in particular. He must be a tolerably efficient pathologist, a thorough sanitarian and a good organiser, with sufficient firmness of character to command the respect and obedience of the subordinate staff. He should be an efficient gardener and be capable of supervising the routine work of office. With Sanyal's help, they finally located a person named Bijoy Krishna Basu, a veterinary assistant. This of course did not materialise within January 1906 but beyond that He was given a year-to-year extension but by 1908 October Sanyal breathed his last from a stroke of apoplexy.



The author, Dr. D. K. Mitra, along with Mr. Bannerjee, Member, Calcutta Zoo Authority and Mr. A. K. Das, Director, Calcutta Zoo.