

# 19A Gurusaday Road

Once the home of Tagores and Birlas  
A museum of the sciences since 1959





## Kath Badam Trees and the Tom Tom Bhoot

Mihirendranath Tagore, son of Surendranath Tagore, visited the Birla Museum recently and reminisced on his childhood at 19 Store Road:

“I left 19 Store Road with my parents when I was only five. I remember a large gate at the entrance and two large lawns flanking the gateway. There were many kath badam trees and a big pond where now stands a girls’ school. As children, we believed that the pond was haunted. The story went that an English couple, mistaking the moss on the pond for grass, drove into it in their carriage and were drowned. Whenever one of the children in the family was naughty, he was told ‘There comes mem bhoot, tom tom bhoot’.

There was another pond at the rear of the building where the family used to take a bath after celebrating Holi and on other occasions. The building was three-storied. In front, there was one overhanging verandah with a spiral staircase connecting it. Inside, the stairs were wooden. My parents used to occupy a suite on the first floor and my grandparents were on the second floor.”

## From 18 Ballygunge Store Road to 19A Gurusaday Road

Till 1942 Gurusaday Road was known as Ballygunge Store Road, after the general store owned by J. F. Madan at Tivoli Court. At the time Mirza Abdul Karim was the owner, the premises at which the Birla Museum now stands was 18 Ballygunge Store Road. When the Tagores took over, the address was changed to 19 Store Road. And it was only in 1942, more than twenty years after G. D. Birla had bought the property from Surendranath Tagore, that the road was renamed Gurusaday Road after Gurusaday Dutt who revived the folk culture of Bengal. In 1958 the Corporation incorporated an ‘A’ in the address and the property from then onwards was listed in the records as 19A Gurusaday Road.

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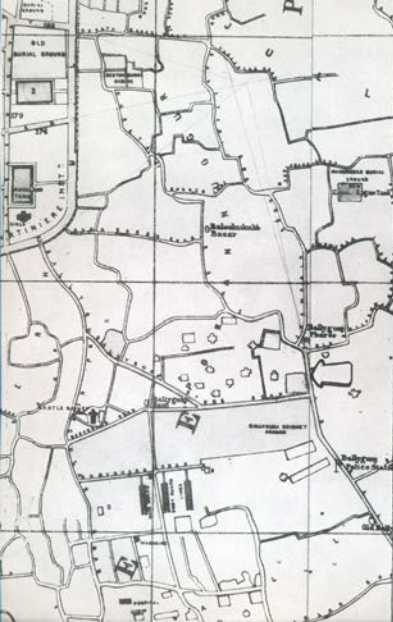
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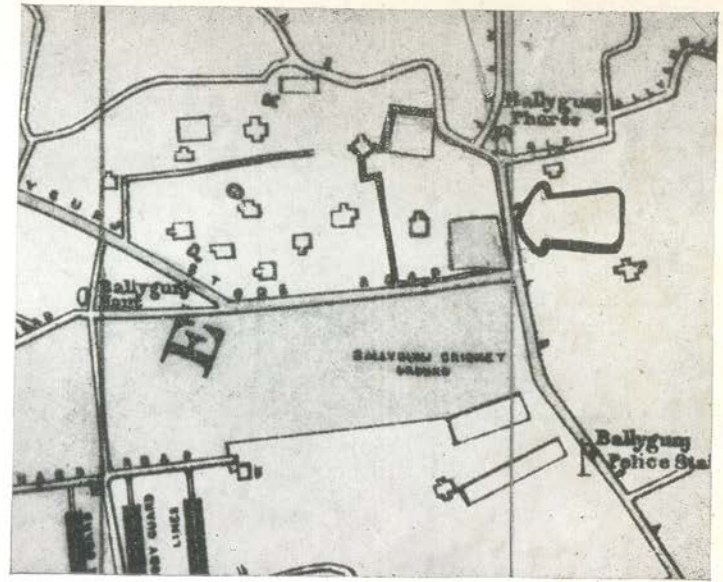


## Ballygunge Store Road and the Property of the Tagores in a mid-nineteenth century map of Calcutta.

A list of owners of 18 Store Road, now 19A Gurusaday Road, as found in the Corporation's assessment book.

1877-78	Mr. A W Chapman
1880-99	Mirza Abdul Karim
1899-1919	Surendranath Tagore
1919-45	G D Birla
1946-56	The Madho Properties Ltd.
Since 1956	Government of India

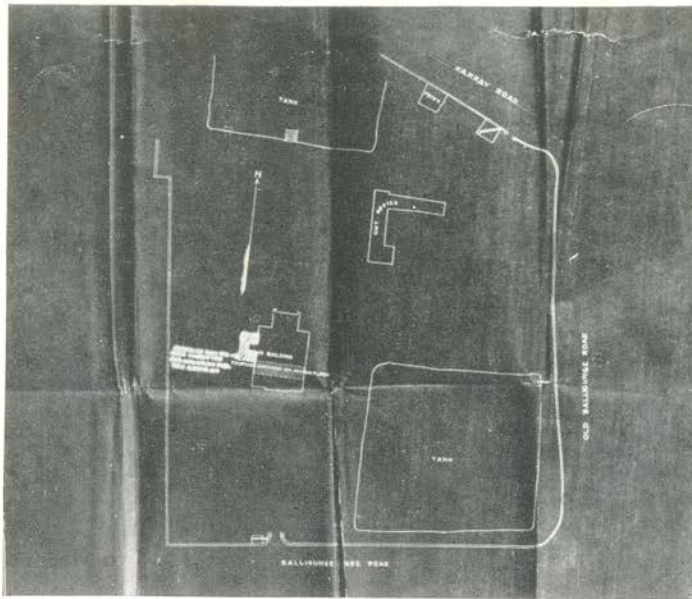




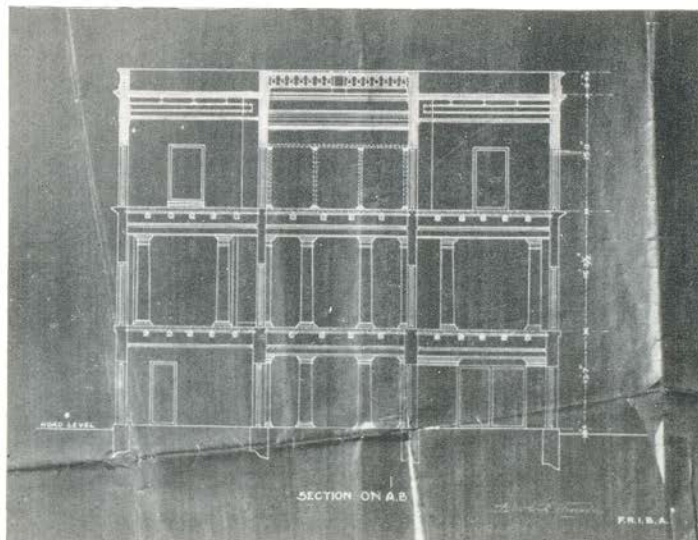
Twenty-five years ago Dr. B. C. Roy made one of his many investments in the future of India. He mooted the idea of a science museum to keep the nation abreast with the giant strides it was poised to make in science and technology. Inspired by the Deutsches Museum in Munich and the Science Museum in London, Dr. Roy foresaw a role for such temples to science and technology in a developing country. Pioneer industrialist G. D. Birla matched that vision with the magnanimous gift of Birla Park, his rambling Calcutta residence. And on May 2, 1959, the Birla Industrial and Technological Museum, the first of its kind in the country, came into being.

The Museum occupied all of the forty rooms and seven sprawling halls of Birla Park and a good five bighas of surrounding space. Alterations were hurriedly made to equip the mansion for its new role and an additional five bighas were set aside for future expansion. As the harbinger of the popular science movement in the country, the museum was soon to become a major landmark in Calcutta, but for those who remembered and those who cared to find out 19A Gurusaday Road also had a rich and indelible past.

G. D. Birla had bought the property—eighteen bighas, seventeen kattas and three chattaks—for four lakh rupees from Surendranath Tagore in 1919. The Tagores had purchased it from a certain Mirza Abdul Karim and eight part owners in 1898. Before that there seems to have been a line of faceless sahibs and memsahibs with the earliest owner listed in the Corporation's records of 1878-79 as A. W. Chapman. There is a general absence of documents and much of what is known about the property is from accounts provided by the Birlas and the Tagores. There is, however, the rare piece of authentic evidence such as the Corporation plan of 1907-1908 in which the building is shown as partly two-storied and partly three-storied with a tank to the north and another on the eastern side. Meera Devi, the fourth of Rabindranath Tagore's five children, spent a large part of her childhood at this house. In her 'Smritikatha' or reminiscences she speaks of one of the tanks of always being full of blooming lotuses and used occasionally by the family for boat rides, while the other tank was believed to be haunted by a European couple who had accidentally drowned in it.



The plan of the property owned by the Tagores at 19 Store Road.  
Below: The building they bought with the property from  
Mirza Abdul Karim in 1899.



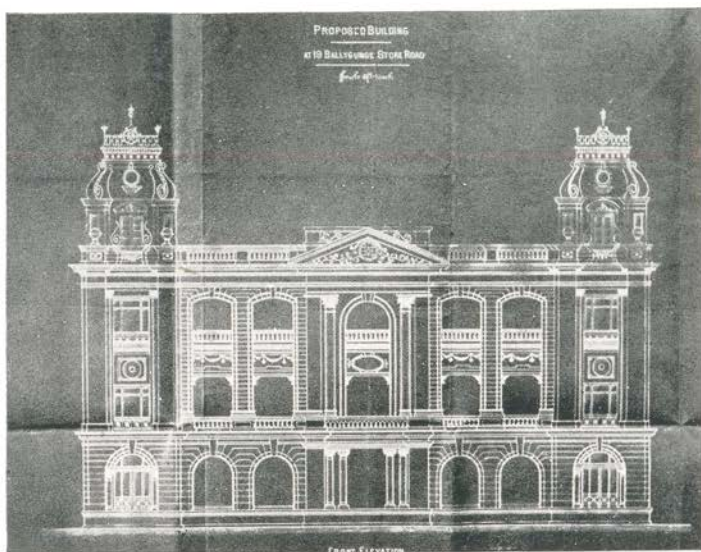
After the Birlas took over the property in 1919 there came major changes. The house used by the Tagores was pulled down and architects N. Guin and Co. were called into design the structure we see today. The museum building is a colonial adaptation of a mixture of various styles of European architecture. The symmetrical romanesque arches and the rustication of the renaissance style are broken by the baroque balconies of the facade. The tank with the membhoot was filled with mud from the Dhakuria Lakes at the instance of the Ballygunge Cricket Club which had lost innumerable balls there. Finally, Ballygunge Store Road came to be renamed and there was a change of address to 19A Gurusaday Road.

But there continued under the Birlas a tradition which began when the Tagores were the owners. Surendranath's liberal outlook attracted luminaries from different walks of life. Sister Nivedita introduced him to Kakuzo Okakura, the founder of the academy of the neo-Japanese school of the east, and he became a frequent visitor. Yokoyama, Tikan, Hishida and Katusta, all famous Japanese artists of the time, were also members of his circle.

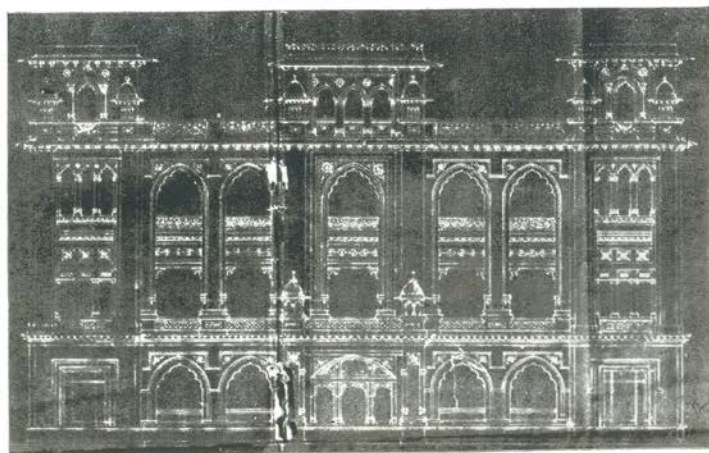
As the financier of extremists during the freedom movement, Surendranath became the treasurer of a committee set up to unify revolutionary forces in Bengal under the leadership of Pramathanath Mitra, a barrister. Other members of the committee, which operated from his house, were C. R. Das and Aurobindo Ghosh. Satyendranath Tagore, Surendranath's father, drew leading Congressmen like Surendranath Banerji, Rashbehari Ghosh and Anandamohan Sen. Surendranath's mother, Jnanadanandini Devi, a lady much ahead of her times in the views she held on the emancipation of women, was always the hostess at these gatherings of foreigners and Indians.

With the Birlas as the new owners, 19A Gurusaday Road continued to be a very special address. G. D. Birla's close association with the nationalist leaders brought to Birla Park Mahatma Gandhi, Motilal Nehru, Lala Lajpat Rai, Pandit Madan Mohan Malaviya. Informal meetings of the Congress were held and there was hardly anyone involved in the political and social developments of those heady times who had not been invited to the Birla residence. Chiang Kai-shek and his entourage stayed as guests and it was here that Chiang and Gandhiji met.





The plan revised at the request of the Birlas to a European facade in 1922-23.



The original plan for the Birla residence proposed by architects N. Guin & Co. in 1921-22.



The building as it was finally constructed.



Chiang Kai-shek and Gandhiji at 19, Gurusaday Road.

The transformation from a luxurious residence of historical importance to a public museum was swift. Committee meetings chaired by Dr. B. C. Roy, and attended by Sir J. C. Ghosh and G. D. Birla decided the new role that the building was to play. A canteen was created and durwans' quarters expanded to serve as a ticket counter. A lift was installed and two of the groundfloor rooms served as a workshop. More changes followed, exhibits rolled in and what was once the home of the Tagores and the Birlas became India's first museum of the sciences.



# Kabir Inaugurates Birla Technological Museum

## SCIENCE BROUGHT NEARER TO COMMON MAN

By A Staff Reporter

"I declare the Museum open." Hardly had these words been uttered by Union Minister Prof. Humayun Kabir, when the doors of the Birla Industrial and Technological Museum, Calcutta, opened wide to receive the State Chief Minister, Dr. B. C. Roy, and other guests on Saturday evening. This was done through an electronic device.

Prof. Kabir speaking at the opening function, hoped that the exhibits would help students develop a scientific outlook and a democratic spirit, which were essential for the working of the Constitution of India.

Both Prof. Kabir and Dr. Roy who presided, praised Birlas for their munificence, which made it possible for the Council of Scientific and Industrial Research to start the museum.

Prof. Humayun Kabir

Mr. B. M. Birla, addressing the gathering, said that in the Western countries children grew up in an atmosphere where various mechanical gadgets and industrial museums located in important cities, fostered their yearning for acquiring scientific knowledge. But in India children did not get such facilities. Some of those who had lived in the museum building for more than 30 years felt the necessity of starting an institution through which scientific knowledge could be imparted to children. That was why they had agreed to make a gift of the Birla Park to the Government of India. He hoped that the museum would help people understand the various problems facing them everyday and tackle them on scientific basis.

Dr. B. C. Roy said that Birlas earned money and they also knew how to utilise the money for the benefit of the people. The donation of the historic Park to the Government was an instance on the point, Dr. Roy said.

The Chief Minister hoped that other industrialists would emulate the noble examples of Birlas. Many years ago, Dr. Roy said he had seen a remarkable industrial museum in Munich in Germany which was built up through sustained efforts of a gentleman for a number of years. The museum had impressed him so much

that he suggested to Birlas about starting such an institution in Calcutta and they had agreed.

Science and technology should be brought nearer to the common man, Prof. Kabir said.

In ancient times though India made great discoveries in the realms of science and technology, knowledge was confined to a few only who invested it with some sort of mystery and secrecy, he said. As a result, Indians of next generations could not get any heritage from their predecessors and many great scientific discoveries made by Indians were lost to mankind.

The Union Minister said that iron was probably first discovered in India and he was

emphatic that steel was first manufactured in this country. But as there was no sharing of knowledge and co-operative development of science India in the next few generations lagged much behind the Western countries so far as science and technology were concerned.

Earlier, Prof. M. S. Thacker, Director-General of Scientific and Industrial Research, in welcoming the guests, said

that the progress of the museum would be rapid henceforth. He hoped that the museum would take its final shape in a short time. He was confident that industrialists would help the museum with models and charts of various industrial machinery and products.







Mr. A. Bose, Planning Officer



Prof. Humayun Kabir inaugurating the museum.

## Day Not Far Off When Man May Turn Into A Machine

### Live Models Answer Human Call: Opening Of Birla Museum Today

By A Staff Reporter

The Birla Industrial and Technological Museum is to be formally opened today (Saturday). The museum will remain open daily from 4 to 8 p.m. except on Monday.

A pre-view of the Museum and models kept in different halls and rooms of the palatial building at Gurusaday Dutt Road, Ballygunge of the Birlas was arranged yesterday when Mr. P. Sundaram, Secretary of Scientific Research Department of the Union Government was present.

There are, in each room of the museum, models—not dead models as are come across in an historical or archeological museum—live models when answer to man's wishes or magnify his vision a

thousand time or help man in locating sites of underground oil or ores. There are in all more than 20 such models, overwhelming majority of which was built here in India by the Indian technicians.

Newspapermen while moving from room to room of the museum could realise the amount of sustained efforts that Sri Amalendu Bose, Planning Office-in-charge of the museum and his colleagues, had made to give a shape to this unique museum, the first of its kind in India. Two long years were devoted to plan it now on its further development will be an easier job.

There is, in one room a radar-  
(Continued on page 5, col. 3)



Prof. M. S. Thacker



Dr. B. C. Roy



Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru receiving the title deeds for Birla Park from G. D. Birla (right) on 29th January 1956, M. S. Thacker, the then Director General of CSIR, is on the left.





No. 264-PMH/56.

New Delhi,  
6th February, 1956.

My dear Ghanshyamdasji,

On the 29th January, you gave me a letter in which you told me about your gift of your family house, Birla Park, in Calcutta for the purpose of making it an Industrial Museum. At that time you handed to me also the title deeds of this house, which I passed on to Dr. Thacker.

I must congratulate you and thank you for this generous gift. I am happy also at the use that you have suggested for this house. I think an Industrial Museum will serve a very useful purpose. As Dr. B.C. Roy is the Chairman of the Industrial Museum Committee, I have no doubt that this museum will grow and become one of the special institutions of Calcutta.

As you point out in your letter, your house has been connected in the past with many important events and thus has certain emotional significance. I remember going there so many times to see Gandhiji and to attend meetings of committees.

I would like to perform the opening ceremony of this museum; but you will appreciate that I cannot give a firm assurance at this stage. I do not know where I might be then and what I might be doing.

Thanking you again and with all good wishes,

Yours sincerely,

Shri G.D. Birla,  
Birla House,  
New Delhi.