

1891-1949

Birbal Sahni



PROF. Birbal Sahni, the greatest palaeobotanist India has ever produced, pioneered research in palaeobotany in India. He founded the Institute of Palaeobotany at Lucknow, now named after him, which is the only one of its kind in the world. So intense was his love for paleobotany that he contributed his entire life's savings for setting up the institute.

Birbal Sahni was born on 14 November 1891 at Bhera, now in Pakistan, into a family which was unusually enlightened and which held education in high esteem. His father, Lala Ruchi Ram Sahni, was himself a scholar and a Professor of Chemistry. It was Lala Ruchi Ram Sahni who unwittingly helped young Birbal embark on his palaeobotanical profession that would take him to fame. He encouraged the boy to collect plants, rocks and

fossils, and during his vacations took him on excursions to the Himalayas and other places.

Birbal had his early education at Lahore, first at Mission and Central Model Schools and then at the Government College. After graduating from Cambridge in 1914 he worked under Prof. A.C. Seward. Sahni began his research work at Cambridge with conventional investigations of morphology and anatomy of living plants, but before long he took up study of fossil plants. For his research on fossil plants he was awarded the D.Sc. degree of London University in 1919. The University of Cambridge recognised his work by the award of ScD. in 1929, said to be the first awarded to an Indian scientist. Seven years later he was elected Fellow of the Royal Society.

Sahni's first introduction to the rich stores of fossil plants in India was in 1917 when he joined Prof. Seward in the production of a 'Revision of Indian Gondwana Plants'. In 1919, Sahni returned to India. He held for one year the chair of Botany at the University

of Benares and for another year was Professor of Botany in the University of Punjab.

The turning point in Birbal Sahni's life came in 1921 when he took charge of the newly opened Botany Department of Lucknow University as its first Professor. Very soon he had established that apart from being a keen researcher, he was also a teacher par excellence. His reputation as a teacher and his fame as an investigator attracted students from all over India to his department. But Birbal Sahni had long realised that a student of botany cannot do justice to paleobotanical studies without adequate background of geology. It was this belief that led Sahni to make untiring efforts to set up a Department of Geology at Lucknow University in 1943. He became its first head of department and taught dynamic geology and palaeobotany.

During the last ten years of his life Sahni relentlessly pursued an idea—that of establishing an institute devoted to palaeobotany. Birbal Sahni and his wife provided most of the funds, contributions from various donors were added from time to time, and grants were received from the Government of India and from the Provincial Government of Lucknow. On 3 April 1949 Pandit Nehru laid the foundation stone of the Institute of Palaeobotany. The foundation stone was itself quite unique. Designed by Sahni himself it was a mosaic of plant fossils collected from various continents of the world.

Ironically, Sahni did not live to see his dream come true. Five days after the foundation-laying ceremony, Sahni had a severe heart attack and died on 10 April 1949.

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Institute of
Palaeobotany.*