Exhibition on Fossils and Minerals: Popularising Science – Rajani Panchang, Agarkhar Research Institute, Pune - 411004 (*Email: rajanipanchang@gmail.com*)

In an effort to popularise science amongst the common man, especially students, the Maharashtra Association for the Cultivation of Sciences (MACS-ARI), Pune held an exhibition of fossils, minerals and gemstones on 21st and 22nd March, 2012. The exhibition was inaugurated by Prof. V.G. Phansalkar. He appreciated the institute's attempt to bridge the gap between science and society.

During this event, the Geology and Palaeontology Group of the Agharkar Research Institute exhibited an array of mega-fossils collected over the past 50-years. Evidences of life as old as 2500 Ma (stromatolites) to as recent as 60,000 yr (Elephant molar tooth) were on display. These included type specimens of a crustacean brood chamber (260-250 Ma Loc. Rajasthan), Echinoids (85-65 Ma Loc. Madhya Pradesh and Tamil Nadu), Ammonites (Cretaceous, Tamil Nadu), a dwelling burrow namely *Skolithos* (1100 Ma Vindhyans), fish skeletons (65-60 Ma. Loc. Kathiawar, Gujarat) and branched palm (65 Ma Loc. Silthar, Madhya Pradesh). The crustacean brood chamber displayed is only one out of the three such specimens recovered in the world.

Dinosaur related fossils included their vertebrae, eggs, isolated teeth, a jaw with teeth intact, coprolites, and pictures of their egg nests and isolated foot prints. This section was the star-attraction at the show. Body fossils collected from the Jurassic of Rajasthan and Kachchh, Cretaceous of Madhya Pradesh and Tamil Nadu and Tertiary of Kachchh and Kathiawar included several explicit specimens of Ammonites (coiled and uncoiled), Nautiloids, Belemenites, Echinoids (regular and irregular), Gastropods, Bivalves, Brachiopods, Corals and Crabs. Five types of ichnofossils displaying past locomotory, feeding, resting, grazing and dwelling behaviour of organisms complemented with explanation by Research Fellow Ms. Shweta Gurav were another highlight of the exhibition. It was probably the first time the public was exposed to such specimens of ichnofossils. Another major section was that of plant fossils where several fossil logs and leaf impressions of different plant species were exhibited. A rare specimen of several intact fossil areca fruits embedded in chert attracted a lot of attention.

(Clockwise) 1. School students and teachers closely inspect cavity mineral crystals in a giant specimen; 2. Entire fish skeleton preserved in fine grained-sandstone ; 3. A research scholar describes her fossil exhibits to the audience; 4. A specimen of the rare blue zeolite mineral, Cavenzite.

Dr. Kantimati Kulkarni, In-charge of the Geology and Palaeontology Group at ARI had also invited Mr. M.F. Makki, a collector and exporter of minerals and related artefacts to display his personal collection. Makki exhibited gigantic, beautiful and rare specimens of cavity minerals, zeolites, ore minerals, gemstones, rock artefacts and geodes collected from different parts of India. He also exhibited a meteorite collected in Russia, which elevated the level of the exhibition, with people wanting to lift and feel this extra-terrestrial body. He also exhibited some polished specimens of giant belemnites and ammonites and some mammoth hair. Whilst most of the specimens Makki displayed were from abroad, many of the zeolites were collected from the Deccan Traps in and around Maharashtra.

The two-day exhibition saw over-whelming response with over 15,000 people thronging to see the exhibits. The event received widespread post-event coverage also. Over ten schools brought their students to attend the exhibition. People's participation made this fossil and mineral show a memorable event and proved that interest in science is not dying out.... science just needs to be propagated in ways that people can relate to.... science that can capture minds young!