

## From Royalty to Relics: The Fascinating Story of India's Dinosaur Princess by Sanchari Pal

Meet Aaliya Sultana Babi, the force behind the preservation of the rare dinosaur fossil beds at Raiyoli. Dubbed the 'Dinosaur Princess' by the locals, Aaliya, the only English-speaking guide in Balasinor, conducts fascinating tours of the fossil reserve. Friendly, cheerful and extremely down to earth, the former princess of the erstwhile state of Balasinor is an enthusiastic promoter and protector of the dinosaur legacy she fell in love with as a young girl.

It was in the winter of 1981, when Aaliya was just a child, that scientists from the Geological Survey of India (GSI) accidentally discovered fossils in the sedimentary rocks of Raiyoli village. The geologists had been conducting a mineral survey when they found some unusual stones the size of large fruits. Lab testing later determined that the finds were dinosaur eggs and bones.

Since then, researchers have uncovered fossils of about 1000 dinosaur eggs, belonging to at least 7 species of dinosaurs, making Raiyoli the third largest dinosaur hatchery in the world.

Over the next few years, while Aaliya was away at a boarding school, paleontologists collected hundreds of bones for research from Balasinor and neighbouring areas of the Narmada River Valley. However, Aaliya's first brush with the fossils took place only after she finished school and came back to Balasinor. This was in 1997, when she visited the site for the first time at the invitation of a Geological Survey of India team. Coincidentally, the dinosaur cult classic film Jurassic Park had also released sometime in the early 90s and the dinosaur craze across the world was at an all time high. Fascinated by what she saw, Aaliya (a fan of the Jurassic Park movie) soon became interested in the region's prehistory.

As a curious teenager, Aaliya had seen several scientific teams from the US, Russia and Taiwan arrive at the Raiyoli site that was just a 15-minute drive from her palatial home. And with her father, Nawab Mohamed Salabatkhani Babi, turning their large palace into a heritage hotel (the only large hotel in Raiyoli back then), it was natural that the scientists came to stay with them.

Aaliya would accompany the expert paleontologists on their research trips to the fossil reserve. Through her interactions and experiences with the scientists, she learnt all about the ancient 30-ft tall reptiles that once walked her neighbourhood.

She learnt to identify their fossilised parts lying embedded in the rocks, conducted exhaustive self-studies on the dinosaurs and even contemplated pursuing a degree. Over time, her passion for this rare historical site turned into a lifelong interest in dinosaurs.

When the significance of the Park was first made public, villagers started decamping with valuable rocks and fossils, knowing only that they were precious and that something important was going on. It became a challenging task to educate and garner the cooperation of the locals in preserving the long-neglected site.

That's when Aaliya became a fierce crusader for the Park's protection, spending long hours outdoors to personally shoo away grazing cattle, stop villagers from plucking out fossils, and even prevent random tourists from carrying away precious pieces as souvenirs.

It was largely due to her efforts that the Gujarat government belatedly woke up to preserving the site. The state government erected a new double fencing around the site and stationed guards to drive away cattle grazers. This was an important step because dinosaur bones are as brittle and fragile as human bones and treading upon them can destroy them completely.

Also, thanks to her consistent campaigning to raise awareness, the local villagers today understand the significance of the site and quickly inform the palace authorities if poachers are found trespassing. They even act as guides for the visitors coming to the hotel – they have been personally trained by Aaliya.

Throughout this period, Aaliya kept writing to paleontologists, geologists, and other scientists, asking them to mail her research papers and books with any reference to Balasinor. Thanks to her study of these materials, she was able to make several startling discoveries. Here is an interesting story from her saga of discovery and struggle to protect the most significant site for dinosaur remains in India.

In 2003, the young princess was doing the rounds of her estate one evening when she passed an old woman's hut. The old woman was renowned in the Raiyoli village for her culinary skills. Enticed by the beautiful aroma emanating from the old woman's home, Aaliya entered to find the old woman grinding spices with a strange mortar and pestle. The unusual mortar and pestle was very rough and in strange hues of brown and gray, unlike the etched and sculpted sets available locally. The mortar was a heavy piece of rock with a depression in it while the unique pestle was an oval stone, with a curved bottom and tiny pores that ground the ingredients into powder flawlessly.

Recognising that the pestle was really a dinosaur egg, Aaliya asked the old woman if she could take the utensil with her but the woman refused. Revealing that she had found them ages ago in the nearby wilderness, the woman insisted that the mortar and pestle were the secret behind her culinary expertise and she did not want to part with them. However, the equally determined princess persisted and after a few hours of negotiation it was decided that the pestle would be replaced with one from the royal kitchen and Aaliya would keep the unusual one. The pestle (egg), the size of a woman's hand, now sits in a red velvet jewellery box, ensconced in a bed of white silk.

The year 2003 was special in another significant way for the Balasinor Fossil Park. The remains of a new dinosaur species were identified and pieced together by paleontologists

Jeffrey Wilson of the University of Michigan and Paul Sereno of the University of Chicago, and a team of GSI researchers led by Suresh Srivastava and P. Yadagiri.

Given the name *Rajasaurus narmadensis*, which means regal reptile of the Narmada, the gigantic, horned, 30-foot-long carnivore lived during the Cretaceous period. This was the first reconstruction of a dinosaur skull ever assembled from remains collected in India, and the reconstruction can now be seen at the Indian Museum in Kolkata.

Today, the rural landscape is dominated by a six-metre tall, life-size replica of a roaring *Rajasaurus*, made of metal and cement and mud, with an exterior of brass paint.

A very rare example of non-dinosaurian predation on dinosaurs was also found in the form of a fossilized dinosaur-eating snake discovered by GSI paleontologist Dhananjay Mohabey. It was named *Sanajeh indicus*, meaning “the ancient gaped one from the Indus River” in Sanskrit.

When she is not working to protect the history of the beasts who roamed around in the land of her ancestors, Aaliya manages the Garden Palace Heritage Hotel where her family still resides.

Other than the warm hospitality of the Babi family and the mysteries of the nearby Fossil Park, visitors to this heritage hotel are treated to the traditional cuisine of Balasinor, cooked in the royal kitchen under the supervision of Aaliya’s mother, the queen herself, Begum Farhat Sultana.

In 2009, the gregarious and graceful princess also travelled to England to take part in a BBC reality show, *Undercover Princesses*.

Curious tourists continue to flock to see India’s very own ‘Jurassic Park’ but for Aaliya, her work has always been more about protecting the site than about attracting public attention. Even today, the princess can often be spotted at the Fossil Park sporting a safari hat as she keeps a look out for vandals and points out fossilized rocks, bones and egg rings to interested visitors.

Grateful for the unconditional support she received from her parents for her work, Aaliya plans to set up a museum and assist students of paleontology in their research. She doesn’t mind handing over the complete responsibility of the Fossil Park to the state government but only if she is assured that they will preserve it to the best of their ability.

“The village belonged to my grandfather and is now the third largest pre-historic fossil site in India protected by the Geological Survey of India (GSI). So, I will keep working to preserve the fossils for posterity,” says Aaliya, whose grand aunt was the famous Bollywood actress Parveen Babi.

A gold mine for those interested in experiencing a slice of primeval history, Balasinor’s Fossil Park is the only site in the world where tourists can actually touch dinosaur remains, hold fossils in their hands and be awed by a ‘Dinosaur Princess’ who willingly acts as their tourist guide.

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