

Hindustan ki jadu ghar
or
Freemasonry in India.

Masonic experiences in India between 1923 and 1947 by Bro. Eric Parker, St. Andrews Lodge No. 49, BCR

First, I should like to tell you how I became a Freemason. In 1920, I was serving with an Indian Regiment on the North-West Frontier of India and was friendly with the 2nd in command. We often talked about the religions, customs and history of India and the Orient generally - as far as we knew about them. In a sense this was part of our job of understanding our sepoy and being able to maintain good relations with them.

I knew he was a keen Freemason and one day I asked him "Do you advise me to be a Freemason?" His answer was "No" and nothing more was said. I was too stunned to ask him any more. Years after I found the explanation. It was the current point of view with respect to the question in the Initiation Ceremony - "unbiased by the improper solicitation ... uninfluenced by mercenary or other unworthy motives... etc." If he had said "Yes" to my question it would have amounted to a masonic misdemeanor.. If I had asked him to help me to become a Freemason or said I wanted to become one it would have been different and he would have put my name forward.

Later, in 1923, I was made a Freemason in Calcutta under unique circumstances. I was then commanding some Indian troops in Tibet and made the journeys too and from Calcutta in the following manner: I had to travel over 200 miles on horseback to railhead, thence some 14 hours by train to Calcutta. The journey took six days. My party consisted of an armed orderly, a bearer (body servant) and a cook. The luggage, including our food, was carried on 6 mules. As far as railhead there were only 2 or 3 small villages and one small town with a Tibetan fort. We were, on an average, 14,000 - 15,000 feet high. Every 15-20 miles there was a small Government rest house and a change of mules. The train journey involved two changes because there were three different gauges. There is no time for more on this.

I took my obligations on 4 volumes of the Sacred Law, i.e. the Bible, the Koran, the Granth Sahib and the Bhagavad Gita because there were Christians, Moslems, Sikhs and Hindus among the brethren of the Lodge.

Perhaps it will interest you if I try to give some idea of the various religions observed by brethren in India.

1. Moslems worship the God of Abraham, the same God as the Jews and Christians - the God of the Old Testament. It is simple, austere and explicit. There is no organized priesthood, nor sacraments but each mosque has its maulvi or leader, often hereditary- I suppose something like the Levites. There are congregational prayers on Friday and prayers are said individually five times a day. Then there is the great fast of 40 days called Ramadan, universally observed and quite an ordeal. Moslems recognize four great prophets, i.e. Abraham, Moses, Christ and Mohammed; and because Mohammed is the latest, he is the greatest and the most up to date.

The Koran contains many legends and traditions found in the Old Testament. There are no images in the mosques only the name of God on the wall.

2. Hinduism at least 6,000 years old. The root of this religion is a belief in Brahm - Brahm the Infinite, the unknown God - He who is behind all gods and from whom all gods and man emanate His

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three great attributes are expressed as:-Brahama the Creator the seed birth

Vishnu the preserver the earth life

Shiva the Destroyer the plant death

That is the eternal cycle of nature. Below this is a pantheon of lesser attributes and manifestations; and a host of legendary and historical characters mixed up in a galaxy of writings and practices. One of their sayings is "the Trinity of God", the master and the word are one' that all who are initiated into the Word become the Sons of God.

3. Sikhism is a monotheistic creed founded by Nanak Guru in the late 15th century. There is a priesthood but no fancy ceremonies; and although the founders were Hindus there is no caste system as there is with Hindus. Their great and holy book - Guru Granth Sahib - is read aloud continuously by relays of gurus, i.e. teachers or priests - in the Temple. There is a congregational form of service with readings, prayers and singing of hymns. Sikhism, as I understand it, is a reformed version of Hinduism strongly flavoured by Moslem influence. Sikhs are forbidden to smoke or to drink strong liquor

4. Zoroastrianism is a reformed and purified form of the old nature religion of Persia it is the religion of the Parsis who fled from Persia apparently in the 8th century and settled in Bombay. It is several thousand of years old. It deals with the continual struggle between good and evil. Parsis believe in the good spirit; Ahura Mazda and expect him ultimately to overcome the evil spirits headed by Ahriman, the Evil One. Parsis venerate but do not worship fire and the sun as manifestations of the Holy One.

5. Buddhism is a philosophy rather than a religion. It consists of:-The 8-fold path which may be described as:

Right belief	Right means of livelihood
Right aims	Right endeavour
Right Speech	Right mindfulness
Right actions	Right meditation

There is a moral code of 10 points and- there are ten cardinal virtues. If these and similar teachings are followed and observed faithfully, a Buddhist could be nearly a perfect man, but there is no god or good spirits so far as I know. There is, of course, the matter of re-incarnation through several stages until Nirvana is reached. I have often wondered how Buddhists can be accepted into masonry since they have no G.A.O.T.U. to believe in.

In the course of my army career I moved from one station to another, consequently I did much visiting, and was affiliated to several lodges. One such affiliation was to Lodge Hope and Perseverance No. 782 EC meeting in Lahore. This was the lodge in which Rudyard Kipling was initiated in April 1886. This lodge does not have any speeches with their toasts. After each toast there is a quotation from Kipling's works. I will quote four:-

The King Emperor and the Craft

"Robed, crowned and throned he weaves his spell.."

The M.W. the Grand Master

"With him are the keys of the secret things."

The R.W. the District Grand Master and D.G. Lodge

"Keep ye the law, be swift in all obedience."

The Worshipful Master and his officers

"And they shall work for an age at a sitting and never be tired at all."

It was very simple but very impressive; and it did away with all speechmaking which can be repetitive and boring in many cases.

There was a lodge in Nagpur G.P. that I visited many times. It was furnished more

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beautiful than any other I have seen. Lodge Corinth No. 1122 E.C. - there are only three seats in the East, i.e. W.M., I.P.M. and on the W.M.'s right the D.G.M. All other past masters sat among the ordinary brethren. The Chaplin was. where our Secretary sits; while the Secretary and Treasurer sat in the middle of the North

side. The Wardens and Deacons sat as we do. The brethren sat in the North and South only. All the seating was in teakwood and in the form of stalls as one finds in the Cathedrals in England. No chairs anywhere. The floor was of marble and the mosaic pavement was so big that there was only convenient space for one candidate and Deacons to perambulate around. This incidentally, is the common practice in most lodges and the V.S.L. is situated just below the W.M.'s pedestal. It was all quite plain but beautiful in its simplicity, and it automatically created a feeling of awe and reverence which I have never seen elsewhere. Most of the brethren were Parsis and in those days wore a distinctive form of clothing with a peculiar kind of hat in the form of a cow's hoof in black shiny material.

Freemasonry in India is very old. Many British regiments had a lodge which traveled with them wherever they went. They were responsible to a considerable degree for the spread of Freemasonry in India and in other parts of the world, particularly the British Empire. One example occurred in 1768 when the 29th Foot arrived in Boston in the U.S.A. as it is now. The masters and wardens of:-

The local lodge St. Andrews No. 82
Duke of York lodge No. 106 held in the 64th Foot
Lodge No 58 held in 14th Foot
Lodge 322 held in the 29th Foot

All present signed a petition to the Grand Lodge of Scotland for a warrant to authorize the formation of a Grand Lodge of Massachusetts which was granted and thus brought into being the Mother Grand Lodge of America. Incidentally, Lodge 322 of the 29th Foot also introduced into both Canada and U.S.A. as it is now called the Knight Templar degree which it worked as part of its regular work.

Many of these old regimental lodges were of the Irish Constitution; and they fostered the Royal Arch and the K.T. degrees before their respective Grand bodies were formed. I know of several lodges which worked other degrees. With such a strong start as these Irish lodges gave to freemasonry in India, it is curious that there are not more Irish lodges about than there are. Inquiry into this is outside the scope of this evening's talk.

Another good example of these old lodges is the Lodge of Perfect Unanimity No. 150 E.C., meeting in Madras, South India. It started life as an Athol or Ancient Lodge, the date of its warrant being 5th of January, 1768. There was also at that time a Regular or Modern Lodge of Perfect Unanimity No. 152 and it is still working. This union took place some 30 years before the two rival Grand Lodges in London amalgamated into the present Grand Lodge of England For a time the old Athol Lodge had the power of a Provincial Grand Lodge and the banner of the

present Lodge combines the coat of arms of the two rival grand lodges.

In 1839 the members of this lodge formed a Rose Croix Chapter although there was at that time no Supreme Grand Council of 33rd degree. The present Coromandel Chapter of Rose Croix is known to this day as "attached to the Lodge of Perfect Unanimity," a unique feature.

Then again in 1856 the Grand Lodge of England decided "that the Mark degree may be given as a separate degree in this lodge to anyone who has taken the degree of fellowcraft." It appears that it was not necessary to have taken the 3rd degree. before going through this Mark degree

Some of the old lodges passed out of existence during the Indian Mutiny in 1857 and their records have been lost. It is known, in at least one case that a lodge in Cawnpore worked the Super Excellent Degree, Ark and Mark Degree Mark Master and Knight of the Red Cross of Babylon - all this in 1845 From information elsewhere it is known that W. Bro. R.A.B. Johnston, Sergeant Major of the

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9th Lancers held all these degrees in this lodge. He left a strange cypher message on the wall of the room in which he and many others were murdered. This message has never been satisfactorily de-ciphered but is understood to be connected with the disposal of lodge records or equipment by him - he was the last known W.M. of the lodge in question.

The oldest lodge in India to-day is Star in the East No. 67 E.C. meeting in Calcutta.. It was warranted in 1740 and it celebrated its bi-centenary in 1940 and is still flourishing to-day. Another lodge in Calcutta to which I was affiliated for a time had its permanent quarters in Fort William rent free located in a bastion of Plassey Gate. I have a copy of a letter from the Quarter Master General in India dated 7th April 1871 confirming this. This was St. John's Lodge No. 486 . It celebrated its centenary in 1940. Every St John's lodge in the world was written to and nearly everyone answered. The banquet was held on the ramparts in the open air - an old fashioned banquet not the light refreshments that go under that name to-day. There were about 100 present - it was a wonderful star light night - the band of the Border Regiment played down below and altogether a night long to be remembered. We had three secretaries that year, two in succession whisked off to war. I was the 3rd secretary and after one year as junior warden I too was posted away. There is one other lodge in Bengal I must mention - Lodge Ubique No. 2476 E.C., raised in 1893 - which met in Barrackpore, a military station about 24 miles north of Calcutta. This lodge held an emergency meeting in November 1940 in order to raise seven brethren of the fellowcraft in one ceremony. This was because the Lodge composed mostly Artillerymen whose battery had been mobilized and they were under orders to move to what was shortly to become a war zone. The English Constitution does not allow more than two candidates to go through any degree at a time without a special dispensation from the District Grand Master. A special dispensation was granted in this case But with a proviso that all seven should go through in one ceremony and there had to be seven masters and fourteen wardens taking part. It was the most unique ceremony of the third degree that I have ever seen. The seven candidates, seven master and fourteen wardens took up a lot of space on the limited floor, added to which the lodge room was small and packed with brethren from other lodges too. It was in the middle of the N.E. monsoon. Rain was falling at the rate of two or three inches per hour and it was like a steam bath in lodge added to which many clothes were wet coming in from our cars. Truly a memorable evening and a wonderful send off to war. This lodge is now under the G.L. of India.

Later I was affiliated to Lodge Orion in the West No. 415 E.C., which met in Poona. It had had a chequered career. It had been warranted from a grand lodge in the east of India which later petered out. Correspondence was very slow and uncertain and there was further confusion between India and England with the result that this lodge lost several years of continuity, but it has now achieved well deserved recognition of 100 years. It has a unique toast at the dinner table. No matter what is happening or who is speaking, sharp at 9:00 p.m. the master raps his gavel, and says "ABSENT BRETHREN.". The toast is drunk in silence. Brethren of this lodge all over the world, as many of them are, - always know that they are being remembered at 9:00 p.m.

There are many Indians of many walks of life in the fraternity and a number of them have attained High Grand rank. The English language is the only one used. Among the high ranking Indian freemasons there have been some colourful characters. Only professing Christians go beyond Lodge, R .A. Chapter and Mark. One was the old Maharajah of Patiala who was P.G.W. of England in 1922. He had some twenty or thirty wives and over one-hundred concubines gathered from many different countries throughout the world. If I remember rightly there were more than one-hundred and twenty children, some legitimate and some illegitimate. He was a great influence for good not only in freemasonry but as an outstanding ruler of his people. The son who succeeded him was another fine prince who has reached high rank too but is more modern in every way. Then there was the Maharajah of Karpurtala - another Sikh prince who was also a P.G.W. of England. He too had a colourful court in the old style with several wives and many children. There were others including a number of Moslem rulers. I used to wonder 4. how they came to be accepted and how they were on such good terms with some of our dignitaries as for instance Bishops of the Church of England. Later I realized that they were only living and acting in accordance with an accepted code of behaviour and morals common to the princely race of India, Hindus, Sikhs and Moslems. Moslems are allowed four wives by the Koran.

The Grand Lodge of India was formed in 1961 and the first Grand Master was H.H. The Nawab of Rampur - a Moslem prince who had previously become a Grand Lodge Officer of England. An Englishman, Lt. General Sir H. Williams was the Deputy.

The great majority of lodges E.C., S.C., and I.C. all surrendered their charters and were re-warranted under G.L. of India. There are a few of the older English lodges still working under their respective Grand Lodges in U.K. in India and a few have transferred to England and found new homes there.

On November 30th, 1971, there was a masonic divine service in Delhi at which there were readings from seven different V.S.L. and prayers by seven prominent brethren of the seven religions.

Much more could have been said but time does not permit.

May I close with the great Tibetan prayer -
"Om Mani Padme Hun"