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How Masonry Built Integration in India

The 'religion' was good at building bonds within professional communities - the military, the business community, civil servants - which helped build the institutions the Raj needed to develop. **Vikram Doctor reports**

There is a key moment in *The Man Who Would Be King*, John Huston's hugely entertaining 1975 epic, which is based on a story by Rudyard Kipling. Two disreputable British soldiers have made their way to Kafiristan, a valley beyond the Khyber Pass almost totally cut-off from the rest of the world.

The soldiers, played by Sean Connery and Michael Caine, try to take advantage of the ignorance of the inhabitants to loot the place, but the local priests are hostile. One rip open Connery's shirt to stab him but stops at the sight of a medal with the compass and eye symbol of the Freemasons. They associate that ancient symbol with Sikander, or Alexander the Great, who they revere, and immediately accept Connery as his successor and their king.

Freemasons in India are currently celebrating a couple of anniversaries. The United Grand Lodge of England was set up in 1717 and this helped the formation of the first Masonic Lodge in India just 11 years later, in 1729, in Fort William, which is now Kolkata. In the highly formalised world of the Masons relationships between Lodges are described in familial terms, so the 300th anniversary of the 'Mother Lodge' is a matter of some importance.

The Masons of South India have been particularly active. They organised a music concert featuring the works of Mozart, who was famously a Mason and used Masonic themes in his opera *The Magic Flute*. They also commissioned a history of their activities and buildings in South India entitled *Brotherhood and Benevolence*. Researched and written by urban historians V Sriram and Karthik A Bhatti it commemorates the many notable men who were Masons in South India and showcases Chennai's Freemason's Hall and the other buildings associated with the Freemasons in South India.

Buildings matter to the Masons, who are said to originate with secret associations of master builders of the European medieval ages. They revere a pan-religious deity they call the Great Architect of the Universe and put much significance in a figure named Hiram Abiff, who was said to be the builder of King Solomon's Temple, murdered for refusing to divulge the secrets of masons. And this is where the use of architectural implements like compasses in Masonic imagery comes from.

Not surprisingly, Masons in Mumbai are also celebrating the 120th anniversary of their own Temple, a building that, despite its central location near CST station, has always remained rather invisible in an appropriately Masonic manner. But now the Masons have opened up its ornate interiors to a few journalists and tour parties and, like the South Indian masons, are talking about their allegedly mysterious practices.

As documented in Sriram and Bhatti's book though, and the annals of the *Times of India*, the mysteries of the Masons seem more imagined than actual. The details of Masonic practice have long been known and the sheer number of stories about their secret handshakes, ceremonial attire and initiation rites raises the question of how secret these actually are. The idea of their secrecy seems to matter rather more than the reality.

This is certainly true of the numerous opponents of Freemasonry. The idea of a secret and powerful elite, with special rituals and maybe even religion, has always been perfect for conspiracy theorists. Masons are alleged to be behind various global conspiracies and portrayed as sinister manipulators in many books and films. Organisations from the Roman Catholic Church to Hamas have condemned them. The USA's first significant third political party was the Anti-Masonic Party.

Masons themselves protest that they are merely a philanthropic and fraternal organisation, devoted to good works and getting to know each other. But they participate enthusiastically in the rituals, dressing up and in jargon and are always referring so coyly to their not quite secrecy that it is hard not to wonder if it helps recruit new members. Their rather odd organisation, like Rotarians crossed with Theosophists, seems much more



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attractive when it comes with a hint of behind-the-scenes domination.

Yet historically the Masons may have played a truly useful role in India and Kipling suggests how. He became a Mason as a young man in Lahore in 1886, though he seems to have been an active member only for a few years. But the Masons feature several times in his work. Apart from *The Man Who Would Be King* they play a role in Kim, where one of the few facts known about Kim's deceased soldier father is that he was a Mason. As per the practice, the young orphan was taken care of by the Masons, of which his mentor, Colonel Creighton, is one.

It might seem odd that in the rigid hierarchies of the Raj a regular soldier and Colonel could both be equal members in a Lodge but this was what the Masons provided. They seem to have emerged at a time when differences of class, community and creed were increasing in Europe, and were an attempt to bridge the gaps. Since there were powerful interests behind the differences, like the Protestant and Catholic Churches, these attempts were necessarily rather secretive at first.

Freemasonry has always come under suspicion of being either irreligious or partial to one religion. Its response has been to assert the importance of God—one is required to affirm faith of some kind when joining—but to leave the actual Deity vague. Masons did not have to cut ties with their existing religion when they joined and they used this to argue against their opponents: if they could include all religions and communities, how could they be a threat to any?

The historian Vahid Fozdar argues in his essay 'That Grand Primal and Fundamental Religion: the Transformation of Freemasonry into a British Imperial Cult' that Masonry used these principles for a par-

ticular purpose—strengthening the British Empire in India. He points out that in the early 19th century Christian missionaries were becoming increasingly active in India.

The East India Company had earlier emphasised commerce, not Christianity, in its takeover of India, but converting Indians became a useful way to sell the growth of their Empire to British politicians wary of how their country's growth as a colonial empire would transform it. But all this religious activity came to a crashing halt with the Rising of 1857 that was partly blamed on the activities of the missionaries. Indians were promised that their religions would be left alone.

But if religion was no longer going to bring British and Indians closer, something else was needed. Fozdar argues that this is where Masonry came in: "For Raj officials... Masonic 'religion' inculcated civic consciousness and responsibility, which are key features of a 'civil religion.' Masonry was good at building bonds within professional communities—the military, the business community, civil servants—which helped build the institutions that the

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Raj needed to develop.

There were a few problems. Masonry was exclusively male, which didn't matter in a patriarchal system like the Raj, but it was also European, which gave it an instinctive racial bias. The rhetoric of Masonry spoke about universal brotherhood, but individual Masons felt that crossing racial barriers was going too far. This led to an extensive campaign that pitted Masonic ideology against its individuals.

Masons in India were occasionally willing to let in Muslim aristocrats—Umdat ul-Umrah, eldest son of the Nawab of the Carnatic was made a member in 1775. Parsis were also allowed after a spirited campaign by Maneckji Cursetji, the first Indian sheriff of Bombay. But Masons refused Hindus, arguing that Masonry believed in a single Deity, which Muslims and Parsis did, but not Hindus. They also asked how Hindus could accept universal brotherhood while supporting caste barriers. (As a practical point, orthodox Hindus would not eat at the dinners that were an important part of Masonic life).

But a few factors helped the reformers. Despite the structure of a 'Mother Lodge' which 'daughter' Lodges obeyed, in fact there were multiple lineages to choose from. Scottish and Irish Masons had a parallel structure to the English lodge system, and were often happy to sanction their own, more liberal Lodges. This made a big difference in Bombay, where the Scottish or Irish influence was strong. (But Cursetji sidestepped all three British Masonic systems by going to Paris and getting accepted by a French Lodge. He then returned to India demanding acceptance as an accredited Mason).

The British royal family also helped. Its male members had embraced Masonry, often becoming its leaders—a fusion with the establishment that fed conspiracy theorists, but also added to the elite appeal—and when issues about inclusivity finally reached them, they usually supported the principle. When the Prince of Wales, later King Edward VII, toured India in 1876-77, he was already Grand Master of the English lodge and he happily emphasised the inclusive, and imperial, nature of Freemasonry.

Most important of all, Hinduism itself, or a certain view of it, started changing. Hindu reformists started emphasising the essential unity of Hindu religious thought under its plurality of deities. The Vedas were put forward as foundational scriptures, like the Bible—a useful point, since Masonic practice required a Holy Book of some kind.

Movements to overcome caste divisions came up, with admittedly little reach in the sort of elites who aspired to join the Masons, but it was useful to suggest that caste was not essential to Hinduism. Masons, meanwhile, were also discovering—sometimes almost inventing—the apparently ancient roots of Masonry, some of which they argued could be traced back to ancient religions like Hinduism.

By the end of the 19th century Masonry in India was becoming integrated. In large cities Lodges tended to divide between communities, but in smaller places there was real mixing. Kipling paid tribute in his poem 'The Mother Lodge' which had a Mason remembering his old Lodge and its variety of members. This included British members, but also Indians: 'We'd Bola Nath, Accountant/ An' Saul the Aden Jew/ An' Din Mohammed, draughtsman/ Of the Survey Office too/ There was Babu Chuckerbutty/ An' Amir Singh the Sikh/ An' Castro from the Fittin'-sheds/ The Roman Catholic' (Kipling notes that the Lodge never ate together, which avoided Hindu caste issues).

Kipling is remembered for his lines 'East is East and West is West/ And Never the Twain Shall Meet' but what's less remembered is that the end of that verse contradicts the opening statement: "But there is neither East nor West, Border, nor Breed, nor Birth/ When two strong men stand face to face, though they come from the ends of the earth!" Masonry offered a way, however imperfect and limited, to achieve this during the Raj. Perhaps Indian Masons should think of organising screenings of *The Man Who Would Be King* as part of their celebrations this year.