

MASONRY IN INDIA

India is an ancient and exotic country with great gifts and contrasts ranging from abject poverty to unbelievable wealth. The following is a condensation of the work of Dr. Guy L. Beck, 32° who teaches Comparative Religion and Asian Religions at Tulane University and Naresh Sharma, 33° who was born in India and served in the Indian Army. No attempt in this oration to is made to discuss Hinduism in any depth,

India gained independence from England in 1947. Its current population is over 1.2 billion. The Indian constitution lists twenty-two Major languages spoken in thirty eight states and six Union territories. Hindi and English are spoken throughout the country. With the religions of Buddhism, Jainism and Sikhism it is a secular country with religious freedom and separation of Church and State. While about 80% is Hindu, it is also home of the second largest population of Muslims in the world. St. Thomas the Apostle planted the seeds of Christianity and the second oldest synagogue outside of Israel is in Cochin.

Thus tolerance, diversity and understanding existed in an India permeated with Hindu values and ideals. When Freemasonry arrived in India about ten years after the formation of the Grand Lodge of England in 1717, the fraternity of universal brotherhood found fertile ground for the application of its own principles of tolerance and respect for all cultures and ethnic diversity.

In 1728 a few English Brethren in India petitioned the Grand

Lodge of England to form a Provincial Grand Lodge in Calcutta. Most members were from Military Lodges and the East India Company. There were also Lodges of Irish and Scottish origin. Freemasonry had occupied a prominent place in the British Raj and was not to be handed over quickly to native Indians. But by the end of the 19th century members of the Indian elite, Muslim Nawabs, Hindu Maharajas, professionals and administrators were joining in large numbers.

The question then arises: when and how were natives of India admitted to Freemasonry? More specifically how were Hindus whose religious beliefs at first did not seem to fit Masonic traditions. To the uninformed, Hindus appear as venerating a variety of human-like and animal-like statues through an array of ritualistic practices of the philosophy of Vedanta where all visible or tangible expressions of Deity are linked together in a higher intangible principle of Deity termed Brahman. Albert Pike called Hinduism "pantheistic monotheism."

It is not surprising that Muslims and Parsees were admitted much earlier than Hindus because of their visible submission to one Supreme Being, but also they were more easily absorbed into the economic and political world of the English speaking empire. Also the occurrence of different casts willing to sit and socialize on the level was unheard of in Indian society at that time.

In 1863 Bro P. C. Dutt, an Indian, petitioned a Lodge but was rejected. In response, Bro Dutt set out to demonstrate that the basic teachings of Freemasonry must in no way exclude men of

other races and religions. Dutt's initiation marked a new beginning in the history of Freemasonry in India. When Rudyard Kipling was raised in Lahore in 1885 he wrote of the diversity of the Lodge.

It was Swami Vivekananda's teachings regarding tolerance and a belief in a Supreme Being that first drew our attention to the commonalities between Hindu Vedanta and Freemasonry. Both seek a practical realization and application of the teachings of universal brotherhood and tolerance under the rule of a Supreme Being. Hindu scholars circumvented the polytheistic stigma of the Hindu religion by restating the Vedic principle that all gods could be viewed as aspects of the One true God Brahma or Brahman. And that all religions are true.

Swami Vivekananda showed how closely the Vedantic Hinduism resembles Masonic teachings of the ascent in Masonic degrees. To the Hindu, man is not traveling from error to truth, but from lower to higher truth.

In rare genius Swami Vivekananda was able to weave a fabric of universal religious tolerance for humanity that was simultaneously Masonic and Vedantic and might be labeled 'Masonic Vedanta.' He strongly argued that all religions contain a divine element. In this way he was guided by Masonic principles and benevolence.

Vivekananda likely felt comfortable in Lodge when he saw how morality, toleration, virtue, self-improvement, brotherly love, relief and truth were inculcated in Masonic teachings, as these are similar to the teachings of the Vedas.

Albert Pike was a near contemporary of Vivekananda. He read almost all available publications on Indiology and studied Sanskrit at the age of sixty to better to understand the linguistic subtitles of the Vedas.

Pike believed the religions of the world contained the Primitive Truth--the oneness of God, the trinity and the spiritual survival of man after death--which he believed originated with the Aryans. Because of his convictions about the Aryan roots of world religions he included the names of Aryan deities and concepts of unity within the ritual of the 32nd degree, or Master of the Royal Secret.

The degree Master of the Royal Secret selects, classifies and unifies into a single coherent doctrine all of the duties and lessons of the proceeding degrees.

Both Pike and Vivekananda nurtured similar Masonic and Vedantic tendencies toward envisioning a universal brotherhood based on ancient Aryan principles of tolerance and brotherhood. Pike came to the same conclusion as Vivekananda that Freemasonry was essentially a religious philosophy that drew from the wisdom of the Aryans. Pike wove the Ancient Indian teachings into the Scottish Rite lectures and sought a practical solution to a world viewed as descending into intolerance and fanaticism.

In 1961 Lodges that were chartered by the Grand Lodges of England, Ireland and Scotland opted to form the Grand Lodge of India. There are 356 Lodges with a membership of 18,000. Currently there also Lodges that are still operating under the Grand Lodges of England, Scotland and Ireland.

The term of the Grand Master is three years. All Lodges display the five Volumes of Sacred Law: Bhagavad-Gita (Hindu), Bible (Christian and Jew), Zend Avesta (Parsee), Quran' (Muslim) and Guru Grant (Sikhs). The square and compasses are displayed on the VSL of the Master's faith and that book is placed in the center of the five VSL.

Indian Lodges don't hold open meetings though the Grand Lodge has started inviting the public to Divine Service meetings, where Brethren of each faith recite passages from the five VSL underscoring the Brotherhood of Man and the Fatherhood of God. Knowledgeable Masons make talks on the working tools and recite the Charges to candidates to inform the audience of the moral lessons within the Masonic Lodge

The only officers elected are the Master, Treasurer and Tyler. The Master elect appoints the rest of the officers, including the wardens and Secretary. The Master cant dismiss any officer. Installation of Officers is conducted on the Entered Apprentice Degree. After the initial instillation, Masons who are not Past Masters are requested to leave the room and a Board of Installed Masters elect and invest him with the grip, signs and words of a Master. He is then installed in the Oriental Chair. The Board of Instated Masters is closed and the Brethren are invited back into the Lodge.

Summons detailing the business to be conducted are mailed for every meeting. Meetings are formal and members are expected to follow the dress code. Lodges meet once a month

and go dark during the oppressive summer months. The Secretary sits in the North. Knocks are different in each degree. Dues are around \$56

The Director of Ceremonies, a Past Master, is responsible for the ritual and may overrule the Master on all procedural matters. After closing , the Brethren depart from the Lodge according to their Masonic office and degree. Business is conducted in English. Lodges don't appoint an Investigating committee. A minimum of two-thirds of the members must approve of the candidate. A quorum for the conferral of the degrees is seven and there can be no more than two candidates. There is no circumambulation by the Senior Deacon. The Master delivers most of the lectures. Participants in the Degree read their parts from a ritual book. Lodges rarely hold practice sessions. The Supreme Council of the Ancient and Accepted Scottish Rite was installed in 2006.

The discovery in the 1780s that Sanskrit, Greek, Latin and Persian are related languages served to propel India and Hinduism into the Masonic arena. This made Hindus, representing ancient Aryan peoples, the inheritors of a vast fount of ancient wisdom that filtered into the universal fold of esoteric Masonry. Enlightened thinkers helped accelerate interest in the Hindu religion such that it became fashionable to think about and discuss the real possibilities of a universal religion based upon academic and spiritual foundations. The thrust of Hindu Vedanta as propagated by the Indian Mason Swami Vivekananda and the pioneering work of Albert Pike in establishing Hindu and ancient Aryan themes

within the American Scottish Rite degrees formed impressive substantiation of spiritual thought that still needs to be tested as a formula for world peace.

SOURCES:

1. Sharma, N., Beck, G. L., *THE INTERSECTION OF HINDU AND MASONIC TEACHINGS., HEREDOM*, The Scottish Rite Research Society. Washington, D. C., vol. p 241
2. Harland-Jacobs, J., *BUILDING OF EMPIRE: FREEMASONRY AND BRITISH IMPERIALISM 1717-1927*, Chapel Hill, N.C., University of North Carolina Press, 2007