

## Some Observations on Masonry in India Today

By W. Bro. Arthur Goodall

Just before I left for my holidays in Chennai (Madras) last year, the June copy of United Masters Transactions arrived and I noticed an article on 'Glimpses of Masonic History in India' (up to 1961.) I thought just what I needed to take with me to read on the long flight to Madras. This paper presented by R.W. Bro. V.Rajendran, PDyGM. OSM was given at Madras Masters Lodge held at Madurai on 18<sup>th</sup> September, 1999 and gives a very interesting insight into the history of Freemasonry in India and I feel that I should reflect on some aspects of what I have observed on my yearly visits to Chennai (Madras) since 1992.

The official records of Freemasonry in India date back to 1728 in Calcutta, and today accounts for 343 lodges across the country, with a membership of 18,000 members from all walks of life. This is only the record from the Grand Lodge of India since its conception in 1961. As in New Zealand, not much was known about the activities of the masons outside Freemasonry, as the lodges used to maintain total secrecy, but of late, Freemasonry has been coming out in the open to attract new members into the fold by clearing doubts about the movement. "Earlier we were discreet, but now we understand the importance of having a close relationship with local community," the Bangalore-based Chartered Accountant, Arun Chintapanth, Grand Master, said in a newspaper interview for the *Hindu*, one of the largest newspapers in India. He continues "has been concentrating more on increasing the strength of the lodges by encouraging people to enrol in the movement. Though the society has been involved in various kinds of social activities, we have planned to concentrate more on education-oriented activities by starting new schools to teach moral and spiritual values."

The Grand Master represented the Grand Lodge of India at the World Conference of Masonic Grand Lodges in Chile in 2004 and one of their resolutions was to declare that, all the masons throughout the world would celebrate every 24th June, the summer solstice in the Northern hemisphere, as 'Universal Brotherhood Day'. All freemasons would visibly demonstrate their ideals of Universal Brotherhood — through acts of charity, extending relief and living up to the high principles of truth. Accordingly, on his return to India the Grand Master requested the daughter lodges to commemorate this noble ideal in an appropriate manner. He also ensured that all masons were sent specially designed UBD miniature lapel flags to be worn on that day. Some of the activities held on that day were:-

Lodges in Bangalore gathered with spouses and non-masons to hear the Grand Master address the assembly and explain the concepts of Freemasonry and its cherished values.

Under the banner of *Freemasons Family Circle (FFC)*, the brethren of the lodges of Chennai City and their families celebrated with a painting competition for children, an Antakshri for ladies, and a number of lodges engaged in charity work and large donation were given to different welfare groups.

In Mumbai brethren from all Constitutions, along with ladies and guests, gathered together in the presence the Deputy District Grand Master of the District Grand Lodge of Bombay and North India, the Provincial Grand Master of the Irish Constitution in India and District Grand Master of Scotland for dinner and a cake cutting ceremony.

In Lucknow the brethren assembled in their temple for an informal meeting with masons, non-masons, the press and ladies for a talk on Freemasonry. This sparked enough interest among the invitees for them to seek pamphlets about Freemasonry. The evening proceedings concluded with dinner and the major papers like the Times of India and Hindustan Times carried articles about the event and about Freemasonry in the following days.

It seems that the day was a great success but I must note that most of the events included ladies, non-masons, the press and activities for the children.

Benevolence has always been a main tenet of freemasons throughout the world and Indian masons are no different from any other. They donated Rs30 lakhs (A\$ 900,000) for victims of the Gujarat earthquake and have already collected over Rs50 lakhs (A\$ 1.5M) towards the relief fund for tsunami victims and it has planned to collect Rs 30 lakhs (A\$0.9M) more before launching rehabilitation programmes. The Grand

Master, when he was Regional Grand Master of the Southern District in 1999, introduced the novel Dhanya Dhaan scheme, in which each member would put aside each day a fist full of cereals for the poor. The cereal would be collected each month and donated to the homes run for the poor. Now each of the 343 lodges in the country participate actively in the Dhanya Dhaan programme. In Bangalore there has been overwhelming response towards the scheme and the programme is now benefiting a large number of poor school students.

Last year, while I was visiting Chennai, I heard of charity in action, as Friday, 16th July, 2004 will always be etched in my mind, and I am sure in the minds of the Kumbakonam citizens, as a Black Day, the day when 100 odd school children lost their lives in the towering inferno that was their school. Just as news spread of this tragedy, the brethren of Lodge Mahamaham No. 341 swung into spontaneous action by extending all kinds of urgently required relief. I have heard that the relief is still going on and I was surprised at how quickly the freemasons of the district swung into action.

Bro. S. Srikanth reminds us "Charity, the cornerstone of Freemasonry, is said to be the brightest star in the masonic crown, adding strength, beauty and grace to its fabric. Brotherly love and relief are interwoven into "Charity", which is predominant in our work."

"Charity is best understood as a personal and social endeavour to ameliorate the sufferings of another or the conditions that prevail in society. Thus a freemason, while sustaining himself from the society of which he is a part, gives back to that society much more than he has taken, just as a tree gives shade in summer, fruits to eat, twigs and leaves for fuel and manure and finally its entire body for making articles of utility, a freemason gives and gives and gives."

Masonic charity is not just giving money away; it is not writing cheques; it is not posing for photographs with people in wheelchairs; it is not a report in the local newspaper about what he did. It is being there in body and mind and soul. It is realizing that we too came into this world in a state of helpless indigence. We are, all of us, mutually dependant and naturally equal. We share the need to seek the solace for our own distress by offering relief and consolation to our fellow creatures. A true appreciation of the principles of Freemasonry would thus teach us that giving does not elevate the giver nor does receiving demean the beneficiary. A freemason gives because giving is his nature. True masonic charity is humble, silent and speaks in actions rather than in words.

Membership is a problem all over the world and the Grand Lodge of India is no exception and this is always at the forefront of their minds. With 343 lodges they were able to initiate just over 200 new masons in the year 2004. New lodges formed since the new millennium (2001) has been sixteen to the end of 2004, starting with The Millennium Lodge No. 327 in Cheimai, which is run on the lines something like our 500 series lodges here in New Zealand.

Interaction between lodges seems to be very important. They have produced a rather nice poster:

Look beyond.

Enlarge Your Lodge

Initiate action now. Choose a sister lodge from the list overleaf.

Fill up the enclosed form and mail it to the Grand Secretary, Grand Lodge of India

The Grand Lodge of India looks forward to your immediate response. Nature, no doubt has implanted in your breast, an attachment to your mother lodge.

Yet, to make masonic life more fruitful and brotherhood more meaningful and interesting, look beyond your lodge.

The M. W. Grand Master proposes that every lodge ties up with another, preferably in another city or region.

To interact, to exchange notes, to visit each other, to conduct joint meetings and workings, to build fellowship and brotherhood beyond your own lodge.

To some extent I feel that this is already taking place, as you read in some of the lodge notice papers of tennis, cricket and other sporting events taking place on a lodge by lodge basis as well as regional events. Interaction also takes place in charity work as some lodges join together in these activities. One such venture was that Lodge Asoka conducted a Medical Camp for the families inhabiting Chinnandikuppam, a fishing hamlet. More than 160 kids were screened by a team of five doctors. The thankful villagers, once the doctors had finished, organized a boat ride for the brethren into the sea. Imagine a ride on a fishing boat into the deep

blue sea in India. It was all too much for some of the land based masons who thought it wonderful to touch land again.

July is not the month to visit lodges in India. First the heat, which is so hard for some of us to bear, and secondly in Chennai, they have 'Ritual Working Competition' and you will see the same degree worked in each lodge over and over again. However, last year they were working the second degree and I must have seen it five or six times and was impressed each time. The lodge is judged by a panel of judges, usually consisting of the Regional Grand Master and three other senior masons who sit next to the secretary. They are present from the opening of the lodge to the closing and even to the reception of District Grand Lodge. Even though I was a visitor I was reprimanded a couple of times for not sitting correctly as I think I might have crossed my legs or folded my arms etc. at the wrong time. Anyway all in the lodge are judged by their posture and dress as well as their delivery of ritual and movements. I was similarly impressed by the number of master masons who gave the charges, even the tracing boards, and who filled all the positions in the lodge. The Treasurer, Chaplain and Secretary were also filled by master masons. I was told that once the Regional Ritual Working Competitions were finished the winner went on to National Competitions. The best team would receive a trophy, while individual prizes would be awarded for outstanding performances. The objectives of the competition are to promote higher standards of ritual working in general, and to encourage lodges to develop a competitive spirit in ritual working, with camaraderie to all.

They also have an award for the 'Best Lodge Summons' and lodges are asked to send one month's notice paper to the committee and it is judged on:

- Aesthetic appeal
- Statutory information contained
- Additional information contained

Masonic education is very important in the life of an Indian mason. An essay competition on some aspect of masonic education is held yearly, and in the year 2003 it was won by W. Bro. C.S. Madhavan, entitled 'Masonry — Its Relevance in Today's Context'.

Each month the Grand Lodge of India sends out to each lodge a subject on masonic education to be read at its lodge meeting. In January, 2005 the article was titled 'A Charge at the Closing of a Lodge'. This article finished with 'Finally, brethren, be ye all of one mind, live in peace, and may the God of Love and Peace delight to dwell with, and bless you. May this charge be our New Year Resolution.'

The success of the Ritual Working Competition for some lodges is due to the mentor system. A new young brother is never left alone in lodge or forgotten between lodge meetings. Over the first few years in his masonic history he always has a brother who will instruct him, both in the lodge and outside, so when he is asked to give a charge he is ready, and time is not wasted at lodge rehearsals instructing the younger brethren on that night. They all seem to know their work well in advance and are ready to give charges that we most of the time leave for senior brethren.

The structure of the Grand Lodge of India is that it is divided into four Regional Grand Lodges.

- The Regional Grand Lodge of Eastern India at Calcutta
- The Regional Grand Lodge of Northern India at New Delhi
- The Regional Grand Lodge of Southern India at Chennai (Madras)
- The Regional Grand Lodge of West India at Mumbai (Bombay)

Each has its own District Grand Master and District Officers but, unlike New Zealand, the Grand Master and the District Grand Masters are responsible for not only the Craft lodges but are also the Grand Master or District Grand Master of the Mark Lodges, Holy Royal Arch and Royal Ark Mariner. These other degrees have also different Grand Officers than that of the Craft lodges and each seems to have its own Regional Board of General Purposes.

The Grand Lodge of India recognizes these other three degrees in Freemasonry and the Grand Master is the Grand Master of them all. No other degrees are worked under the Grand Lodge of India. However, under the Grand Lodge of Scotland the Cryptic Degrees and the Conclave (Order of David and Jonathan) are still worked. As far as I can work out the Knights Templar, Rose Croix and the higher degrees are no longer worked but I have seen regalia for these degrees in storage in the Temple in Chennai.

The official journal of the Grand Lodge of India is The Square and Compasses and is published twice a year. The main object of this journal, as far as I can see, is so that the brethren can make a daily advancement in

masonic knowledge and it deals with papers relating to all the degrees that Grand Lodge recognizes. An interesting page in the July 2004 edition under Long Term Service Jewels, July to October 2004 states:

50 years 4 presented

40 years 17 presented

25 years 54 presented

25 year Chapter jewels 18 and about the same number for Mark and R.A.M.

A smaller journal in the form of a printed newsletter is GLINDIA. The editor is W. Bro. Bharat V. Epur, from Chennai, whom I have met and hope will visit New Zealand at the end of this year. The newsletter has letters to the editor, news round ups, which includes Craft lodges and chapters, know your lodges, new initiates and snippets of interest to masons. A modern journal that they should feel very proud of. One letter to the editor I noted is from Lodge Islam No. 27 'that since January 2001 they had initiated eighteen masons to April 2004'.

I would like now to talk about my impressions of the scene in Chennai. First of all the main Masonic Hall in Commander-in-Chiefs Road, which is now called Ethiraj Salai, was dedicated on Friday, 27<sup>th</sup> February, 1925, about the same time as St. Benedict's Street building was built. This large classical structure which can be seen from the other side of the Coovam river, stands out from all other buildings around it. The accommodation consists principally of two lodge rooms on the first floor and two dining rooms on the ground floor and a smaller lodge room with a number of offices and utility rooms. The design of the building, which is finished internally and externally with fine polished Madras plaster, is based on Greek motifs modified as necessary to suit modern conditions of planning and Indian conditions of climate. The building relies very largely for its external effect on the Ionic colonnade forming its northern elevation. Internally, an architectural feature has been made of a winding staircase which is semicircular in plan, and forms the entrance to the more purely masonic portion of the building and this is emphasized by framing it between two columns of the Doric Order. All that is needed today is the ear of corn and we have the second degree tracing board. With the exception of certain special doors and window furniture which were obtained from London, it is interesting to note that the whole of the work was supplied and erected by Madras firms.

This building was falling into disrepair in the 1990s and I have been told that they were thinking of demolition but with the vision of the now Grand Master an appeal was launched and the building has now been restored to its former glory. With modern up to date facilities it is now a privilege to attend masonic meetings. One reason for this is that very few mosquitoes are now biting you throughout the meetings. Sometimes you did not know which degree you should be saluting as your hands were fighting off the mosquitoes. Now with the aid of air conditioning, improved lighting and modern refectory rooms of five star comfort, it is somewhere that every mason in Chennai should be very proud of. The only casualty in any modernization is that some of the characteristics of the past have had to be removed and in this cause a magnificent pipe organ, that any cathedral in New Zealand would have been proud of, has been removed and painted tracing boards the size of a door have also been removed from the walls, as they were failing to bits.

The first lodge that I attended in 1992 was Lodge Shanti No. 146 and was looked after by a new brother, now W. Bro. D.V.N. Kumar, who is still a very active freemason today. I was also able to attend a meeting of Lodge Shanti when he was the Master in 1997. At my visit last year, the lodge had sixty-six members and, as with most of the lodges in Chennai, the growth is increasing with young members. Another Craft lodge that I regularly attend was mentioned in the article of W. Bro. V. Rajendran in 1999 and that is Lodge Carnatic. Consecrated in 1883 solely for the purpose of providing an "opportunity for the natives" to take office in the lodge from day one, for in the days of the British, an Indian could not be installed into the eastern chair. At the consecration of this lodge the natives and the colonial rulers had refreshments in separate rooms. This does not happen today. I had the honour to be present when the now R.W. Bro. M. Prabhat Kumar P.Dy.R.G.M was given his long service jewel in the presence of his father, a long serving mason, and his son. Most of their family are members of this lodge and they have remained personal friends for some years.

I have often wondered, with at least five Volumes of the Sacred Law being opened at each lodge meeting, how the brethren understood the story as related in our Bible. It has been made known to me that in each of the religions there is some similarity of these stories and the morals contained therein are the same in all religions and each degree has different moral and spiritual values to be enhanced.

**But what of the other constitution in India?** The Irish fraternity in India originally consisted of twenty-seven lodges. Not many survived. With the ravages of time and eventual opting of a few lodges to join the

newly constituted Grand Lodge of India, the total number of lodges under the Provincial Grand Lodge of Ireland in India stabilized to ten, equally distributed between Eastern and Western India. With the lodges in Eastern India having difficult times, it was decided to relocate them to other masonic centres. Accordingly, they have now been relocated at New Delhi, Chennai, Kanpur, Pune and Calicut. It was a prudent move as they have now prospered and flourished with the active and dynamic support from local brethren.

**United Grand Lodge of England.** Although they have an office in the main building in Chennai I have had little contact with them. The Chennai District has eighteen lodges, Bombay and Northern India twenty-nine lodges, Bengal nineteen lodges and Bangladesh three lodges.

On a visit to the Nilgiri Hills, the hill stations about 350 km from Chennai, I stayed at a small town called Wellington, once a regimental town, and there, to my surprise, was a masonic lodge still in action, Lodge of Anchor of Hope No. 1093, founded in 1886.

**Grand Lodge of Scotland:** The District Grand Lodge is in Mumbai (Bombay) with fourteen lodges, Chennai one and another fourteen in other areas of India. This is the second oldest district outside Scotland and was approved on 30th November, 1836.

From the journal The Indian Mason, Lodge Zoroaster in Mumbai founded in 1892 consisted of 800 Parsees and they still practise today a 'Jashan' ceremony in the lodge room. This is not a masonic ritual but a Parsi Zoroastrian ritual normally done as a thanksgiving for the year that was, as also asking for continuance of His bounty.

The old French and Portuguese areas in India are no longer served by their Constitutions but now come under the Grand Lodge of India.

One question that is often asked is 'was Gandhi a Freemason?' To the superficial observer, the answer to the question is NO. Unlike Pandit Motilal Nehru and Rajaji Gandhi, both of whom were freemasons, Gandhi was not a member of the Order, but he was in every sense of the term a true mason. One could only wish that freemasons all over the world, would lead such a pious, pure life as he led every moment of his existence.

To conclude this brief sketch, I would like to stress that the first of the three great tenets of Freemasonry — Brotherly Love — is the same in all religions. In the Hindu faith we are taught of Karma-yoga. Karma is action, yoga is wisdom and Masonry teaches us that the two are needed to bring about Brotherly Love. Freemasonry attempts to cement the brotherhood of Man and bind humanity in one great band of peace and unity. It is that bond of brotherhood that will bring about harmony and social unity, which I believe is the ultimate destiny of mankind. The temple that the Craft is building is the unification and the harmonisation of the entire human family. Freemasonry affirms this conviction.

'God hath made mankind one vast brotherhood, Himself their Master, and the world His Lodge'.

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We are indebted to United Masters Lodge No. 167 of Auckland, New Zealand for the above paper published in their July 2005 Proceedings.

With the greater mobility of people in the world and especially Australians visiting India on a tourist visa, interactions between Freemasons should be encouraged.

More recently, after the disastrous Indian Ocean Tsunami of Boxing Day 2005, one Lodge in Southern Queensland was able to help out the Lodge 254 Vivekananda, meeting at Kanyakumari situated on the extreme southern tip of India, in its relief efforts for the distressed fisher people of the town.

It was good to know that all donations raised here would reach their people directly instead of being filtered through the official agencies channels.

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