

Introduction to Freemasonry and a quick overview of its history.

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Introduction

Freemasonry is one of the world's oldest secular fraternal societies. It is a world-wide organisation based on the principle of the Fatherhood of God and the Brotherhood of man. It is a society of men concerned with moral and spiritual values. Its members are taught its precepts by series of ritual which follow ancient forms and use stone masons' customs and tools and allegorical guides. It seeks to make good men better and there by make the world a better place in which to live. Information in this write-up is intended to explain Freemasonry as it has been practised under the United Grand Lodge of England, which administered Lodges of Freemasons in England and Wales and in many places overseas including India and a quick overview of its history.

The origin of Freemasonry

The origins of Freemasonry are the subject of great debate. No one knows just how old it is because the actual origins have been lost in time. One belief is generally accepted by Masonic historians that there is a connection with the operative stonemasons who built the great medieval cathedrals and castles - but whether that connection was direct or indirect is still the subject of speculation. According to that belief the origin of Freemasonry is the ancient guilds or associations of operative stonemasons in Europe who were the builders of the great cathedrals in the middle ages. Possibly, they were influenced by the Knights Templar, a group of Christian warrior monks formed in 1118 to help protect pilgrims making trips to the Holy Land.

As time passed other men of good moral character and high standing were accepted as members of these stone masons guilds or Lodges. This still applies today and Freemasons continue to reserve the right to elect to membership only men with proven high moral standards.

Freemasonry To-day

Organised Freemasonry became established when four of the "old" Lodges met in London on St. John the Baptist's Day, June 24, 1717, and formed the first Grand Lodge of England, thereafter known as the Premier Grand Lodge of the world. In 1723 the first rulebook - the Constitutions of Masonry - was published. By 1730 the Grand Lodge had over 100 lodges in England and Wales under its control and had begun to spread Freemasonry abroad. For historical reasons separate Grand Lodges were formed in Ireland (1725) and Scotland (1736). Between them they took Freemasonry around the globe.

With effect from 1727-28, when travel was by horseback and sailing ship, Masonry spread with amazing speed in Europe, the West Indies, North America and India where lodges were set up.

In the later 18th and the 19th centuries British Freemasonry was taken to the Middle and Far East, Australia, Africa and South America, mirroring the development of the British Empire. When those areas eventually achieved nation status many of the lodges formed independent local Grand Lodges, but other lodges decided to remain with their parent Grand Lodge - resulting in the United Grand Lodge of England still having some 750 lodges overseas, principally in Commonwealth countries. Freemasonry has been in existence in the present form for nearly 280 years in the world and for over 266 years in India. There are more than 150 Grand Lodges throughout the world today with a membership in excess of 6,000,000. In U.S. alone there are more than 13,200 Lodges.

It is of interest to note that within 12 years of the constitution of the Grand Lodge of England, constituted for the purpose of exercising supervision over the lodges in London, and its neighbouring areas, a petition was sent by a few Brethren in India to constitute a Provincial Grand Lodge in Calcutta. The Lodge at Fort William -- that is, Calcutta -- appears in the Engraved List of 1730 A.D., to meet at Fort William in Calcutta. LODGE "STAR IN THE EAST", No. 67 E. C., was the FIRST LODGE constituted in CALCUTTA and is still in existence, having completed 256 years. The Provincial Grand Lodge of Madras was formed in 1752 and The Provincial Grand Lodge of Bombay was created in 1758.

On the advent of freemasonry to Indian soil its membership was restricted to the British residents of India until 1775, when for the first time an Indian, NAWAB UMADAT-UL-UMARA, the eldest son of the Nawab of the Carnatic was initiated into Freemasonry at Trichinopoly. But Hindus were not considered for admission because it was believed that they did not believe in one Supreme Being, rather worship many deities. The doors to Hindu Masonry were flung wide-open by the unstoppable determination of one Mr. P.C. Dutt of Calcutta to become a member of the craft after much opposition from the Provincial Grand Master (Hugh Sanderman) and black balling by members, In the 1830's the Duke of Sussex proclaimed that the Hindu gods were the personification of a single Supreme Being and that the religion of the Single Mason was his own concern. This allowed the native Indians to join the Craft. Thus Mr. Dutt became Bro. Dutt in Anchor and Hope, No. 234, only in 1872, nine years after he was proposed for initiation.

Indian Order of Freemasons

After independence it was in 1956 that the first real consideration was given to the establishment of a sovereign Grand Lodge of India and indeed, following a joint Conference in Dublin of The Grand Lodges of England, Ireland and Scotland in October of that year, it was agreed that the views of the Brethren in India should be sought. Ultimately the Grand Lodge of India was officially consecrated as a Sovereign Grand Lodge with full Masonic jurisdiction over the territories of the Republic of India on Friday, the 24th of November 1961 A.D. in the Ashoka Hotel, New Delhi, India. The Indian Order of Freemasons has, as its head, its Grand Master, who is elected for a term of three years. The First Grand Master was M.W. Bro. Major General Dr. Sir Syed Raza Ali Khan, G.C.I.E., D.Litt., LL.D, the Nawab of Rampur. M.W. Bro. Arun Chintopanth O.S.M. is the 12th Grand Master of the Grand Lodge of India. On 28th October, 2006 M.W. Justice Devinder Gupta O.S.M., Former Chief Justice of Andhra Pradesh will be installed as the 13th Grand Master of the Grand Lodge of India.

On the founding of the GRAND LODGE OF INDIA four Regional Grand Lodges. viz, the Regional Grand Lodge of Northern India, Eastern India, Southern India and Western India were established. There are now about 350 Lodges and about equal number of other Masonic bodies located in different parts of the country with a total membership of about 18,000

Freemasons under the Grand Lodge of India. There are number of Lodges and other Masonic bodies functioning in India under their respective parent Grand Lodges.

There are number of prominent Indians who have been Freemasons. To name a few ; Swami Vivekananda, Shri C. Rajagopalachari, Shri Moti Lal Nehru, President Dr. Rajendra Prasad, President Dr. S. Radhakrishnan, President Shri Fakhrudin Ali Ahmed, as also several serving and retired judges of Supreme Court and High Courts, serving and retired Defence Personnel and Civilian Officers besides many Industrialists, Business men, Business Executives and other Professionals.

A Freemason's Lodge

The primary unit organisation of Freemasonry is a Lodge. The word "lodge" means both a group of Masons meeting in some place and the room or building in which they meet. It's a Middle English word. When the great cathedrals of the Middle Ages were being built, the masons had special, temporary buildings built against the side of the cathedral in which they met, received their pay, planned the work on the cathedral and socialized after work. This building was called a lodge. The term has simply remained down through the ages. Masonic buildings are also sometimes called "temples" because much of the symbolism Masonry uses to teach its lessons comes from the building of King Solomon's Temple in the Holy Land. While there is some variation in detail from state to state and country to country, lodge rooms today are set up in similar style.

Master of a Lodge is selected annually by the members. Progression through the various Offices of a Lodge enables members to develop self-confidence and improve speaking skills and promotes qualities of leadership.

Lodge meetings include Social functions which include wives and families are also held and in many instances these activities raise funds for charitable causes.

Freemasons enjoy personal recognition and friendship when they visit Lodges in any part of the Country and when travelling interstate and overseas. A wide circle of friends and acquaintances is easily established.

There are two types of meeting agenda. The first is like the business meeting of any other organisation. It takes just a bit longer to call the meeting to order, because a longer opening ceremony or ritual is used than most of the civic clubs do. But, it reminds the members of the Lodge of some of the most important lessons in Masonry. After the lodge is "opened", there is reading of the minutes of last meeting, vote to pay bills, take care of old and new business, and plan projects etc., The other type of meeting is one in which new members are received in solemn ritual ceremonies and stimulating lectures which relate to the ancient traditions and principles on which Freemasonry is founded and conclude with enjoyable fellowship over supper/dinner.

Freemasonry and its principles

Freemasonry is fundamentally based on Brotherly Love, Relief and Truth which are ethical principles acceptable to all good men. It supports the "Golden Rule" - To do unto others as you would wish them to do unto you. It teaches each member to act and live in such a way that he will always strive to become a better man, not better than someone else, but better tomorrow than he is today.

The stonemasons' tools and principles of architecture are used in a symbolic way by

Freemasons to teach the basic moral truths and impress on members the virtues of Faith, Hope, Charity, Prudence, Fortitude, Temperance and Justice. Masonic ceremonials form the basis for teaching the Masonic philosophy which leads to a better understanding of the purpose of life and the need for care and concern for others.

Masonic teachings promote personal growth of character, and encourage Freemasons to lead an active life in the community. Masons practice charity and benevolence and strive to promote human welfare. All over the world Masons care for their indigent Brethren, widows and orphans; maintain homes; support their mother countries; contribute scholarships and practice character building.

Masons are dedicated to freedom and are champions of liberty. This is as much a cardinal characteristic today as it was when American colonial Masons were in the forefront of our fight for freedom and independence. Even then, however, Masonic Lodges remained Sanctuaries where war passions were conciliated with brotherhood. The background thus displayed makes clear that neither tyrant nor dictator can exist in a country where Freemasonry prevails.

People helping people

Freemasonry teaches concern for others, care for the less fortunate and help for those in trouble, sorrow, need, sickness or any other adversity. Masonic teachings inculcates in its members obedience to God & observance of the Laws of the country. It is committed to extend the hand of fellowship & provide Relief to those in distress.

Freemasonry reinforces kindness in the home, honesty in business, courtesy in society and fairness in all things. It flourishes in every free country and is a way of life for men of all nations.

Freemasonry and the family

Freemasonry instructs its members to hold the family in the highest regard. Lodges involve families and friends of members in a number of their activities and the welfare of widows and families of deceased members is of particular concern.

Freemasonry is also not a social club. It however provides the means of socialising among its members, which consists of a cross section of society drawn from all walks of life who meet on an equal · footing. It also involves the families of members on such social occasions.

Freemasonry and politics

Freemasonry is not a political organisation. It has no political agenda. Discussion of any topic of a political nature is not permitted in Lodges. Freemasons are urged to perform their civic duties according to the laws of the country in which they work or live. It reminds them of the filial affection one should always have for the Land of their birth, to remain loyal to the laws of the land which, for the time being, may be the place of their residence, or afford them protection. The use of membership of the Craft for material benefit is discouraged. Freemasonry naturally tends to attract those with a concern for people and a sense of social responsibility and purpose.

Freemasonry is not a secret society.

There is nothing secret or secretive about Freemasonry. It is not a secret society, but lodge meetings, like meetings of many other social and professional associations, are private occasions open only to members. Freemasonry does not conceal the time and place of its meeting, nor does a member hide the fact of his membership. Like many other Societies it regards some of its internal affairs as private matters of concern only for its members. There is no secret about its aims & principles. Copies of its Constitutions and Rules and aims of Freemasonry can be obtained by interested members of the public from its offices. The meeting places and halls used by Freemasons are readily identifiable. Freemasons are encouraged to speak openly about their membership, while remembering that they undertake not to use it for their own or anyone else's advancement.

The rituals and ceremonies used by Freemasons to pass on the principles of Freemasonry to new members were first revealed publicly in 1723. They include the traditional forms of recognition used by Freemasons essentially to prove their identity and qualifications when entering a Masonic meeting. These include handshakes which have been much written about and can scarcely be regarded as truly secret today; for medieval Freemasons, they were the equivalent of a 'pin number' restricting access only to qualified members. Many thousands of books have been written on the subject of Freemasonry and are readily available to the general public. Freemasonry offers spokesmen and briefings for the media and provides talks to interested groups on request. Freemasons are proud of their heritage and happy to share it.

Freemasonry and religion

Some people confuse Masonry with a religion, but it is not. Although every meeting is opened and closed with prayer, Freemasonry is not a religion, nor is it a substitute for religion. An essential qualification for a person who wants to become a Mason is that he must have a belief in God. No atheist can ever become a Mason. A Mason is taught, as one of the first lessons of Masonry that one should pray for divine counsel and guidance before starting an important undertaking. But that does not make Masonry a "religion." Men of many different faiths are members of the Craft and while each one is encouraged to continue to follow his own religion, discussions of a religious nature are not at all encouraged in a Lodge. However, it emphasises secularism by teaching respect for and tolerance towards all religions. In every Lodge meeting Volume of Sacred Law is kept open on the altar or table. In the Lodges under the jurisdiction of the Grand Lodge of India Volumes of Sacred Laws of five major religions in India viz. Bhagwat Gita, Holy Quran, The Bible, The Holy Granth Sahib and The Zend Avestha are opened an altar or table if a lodge is meeting,

Sometimes people confuse Masonry with a religion because we call Masonic buildings as "temples." But we use the word in the same sense that the Court is called a "Temple of Justice". Masons believe in the importance of religion. Masonry encourages every Mason to be active in the religion and church of his own choice. Masonry teaches that without religion a man is alone and lost, and that without religion, he can never reach his full potential. But Freemasonry does not tell a person which religion he should practice or how he should practice it. That is between the individual and God. That is the function of his house of worship, not his fraternity.

Masonic Charity

Freemasonry encourages its members to be community minded. From its earliest days,

Freemasonry has been involved in charitable activities, and since its inception it has provided support for many widows and orphans of Freemasons as well as for others within the community.

All monies raised for charity are drawn from amongst Freemasons, their families and friends, while grants and donations are made to Masonic and non-Masonic charities alike. Widows and others in distressed circumstances are assisted by the provision of financial grants. In India too the Masonic Fraternity is involved in several charitable projects, all over the country. The General Williams Masonic Polyclinic at Janpath, New Delhi, Masonic Public School in Vasant Kunj, New Delhi, Amrit Masonic Charitable Society, Noida, Masonic Medical care centre for children in Coimbatore, as also the adoption of an entire village located in backward area in Bheemlipatnam in Visakhapatnam Distt and another village in Srikakulam District, for all round development in Health, Sanitation, Education & Housing. & Construction of Sheds for cyclone victims in Andhra Pradesh, awarding many Scholarships and Bursaries to deserving students, helping institutions for the handicapped and the aged, holding of periodical Blood donation camps, Eye camps and other Health Camps etc., are examples of some of the socially relevant activities of Masonic organisations all over the country.

What does Masonry teach?

Masonry teaches some important principles. There's nothing very surprising in the list. Masonry teaches that:

Since God is the Creator, all men and women are the children of God. Because of that, all men and women are brothers and sisters, entitled to dignity, respect for their opinions, and consideration of their feelings.

Each person must take responsibility for his/her own life and actions. Neither wealth, nor poverty, education, nor ignorance, health, nor sickness excuses any person from doing the best he or she can do or being the best person possible under the circumstances. No one has the right to tell another person what he or she must think or believe. Each man and woman has an absolute right to intellectual, spiritual, economic, and political freedom. This is a right given by God, not by man. All tyranny, in every form, is illegitimate. Each person must learn and practice self-control. Each person must make sure his spiritual nature triumphs over his animal nature. Another way to say the same thing is that even when we are tempted to anger, we must not be violent. Even when we are tempted to selfishness, we must be charitable. Even when we want to "write someone off," we must remember that he or she is a human and entitled to our respect. Even when we want to give up, we must go on. Even when we are hated, we must return love, or, at a minimum, we must not hate back. It isn't easy!

Faith must be in the centre of our lives. We find that faith in our houses of worship, not in Freemasonry, but Masonry constantly teaches that a person's faith, whatever it may be, is central to a good life.

Each person has a responsibly to be a good citizen, obeying the law. That doesn't mean we can't try to change things, but change must take place in legal ways.

It is important to work to make this world better for all who live in it. Masonry teaches the importance of doing good, not because it assures a person's entrance into heaven -- that's a question for a religion, not a fraternity -- but because we have a duty to all other men and women to make their lives as fulfilling as they can be.

Honor and integrity are essential to life. Life without honour and integrity is without meaning.

Qualification for membership

To be eligible to become a Freemason the absolute qualifications are that a man must be over the age of 21 years; be of good character; be law abiding and profess belief in a Supreme Being. No atheist can become a Mason. Anyone who is of good moral character and believes in the existence of Almighty God and a belief in the Supreme Being, no matter by what name He is called, or what faith the person professes, is eligible.

The process of becoming a Mason is not complicated. It involves three evenings to undergo three degrees, or three stages of membership called Entered Apprentice, Fellowcraft, and Master Mason. These are learning experiences. There is some homework that goes with each degree that is worked out with another member of the Lodge. The degrees of Masonry teach progressive lessons in morals, ethics, and philosophy the importance of honour and integrity, of being a person on whom others can rely, of being both trusting and trustworthy, of realizing that you have a spiritual nature as well as a physical or animal nature, of the importance of self-control, of knowing how to love and be loved, of knowing how to keep confidential what others tell you so that they can "open up" without fear. To understand these lessons and use them in our daily life requires that we invest some individual time and thought. But that's what makes being a Mason so special. But, after a man becomes a Mason, the time he gives to the fraternity is entirely up to him. There is no requirement that a man participate in the meetings and projects of his Lodge. Each man determines for himself the time he wants to give to the fraternity.

Membership

There is a rule in Masonry that a person must seek admission himself. Some men are surprised that no one has ever asked them to become a Mason. They may even feel that the Masons in their town don't think they are "good enough" to join. But it doesn't work that way. For hundreds of years, Masons have been forbidden to ask others to join the fraternity. We can talk to friends about Masonry. We can tell them about what Masonry does. We can tell them why we enjoy it. But we can't ask, much less pressure, anyone to join. There's a good reason for that. It isn't that we're trying to be exclusive. But becoming a Mason is a very serious thing. Joining Masonry is making a permanent life commitment to live in certain ways. Most of them listed above -- to live with honour and integrity, to be willing to share with and care about others, to trust each other, and to place ultimate trust in God. No one should be "talked into" making such a decision. Men enter of their own volition after a discussion with a Mason about joining. He should come to Masonry "of his own free will and accord", to learn to improve himself and to enjoy the company of other good people, not because someone keeps pestering him to join or because he thinks it will help him "get ahead" in business. . A person has to be ready to grow, has to suspect that there is something more to life, and wants to know what that is, before he is really ready to become a Mason.

How to join the fraternity

So, when a man decides he wants to be a Mason, he asks a Mason for a petition or application. He fills it out and gives it to the Mason, and that Mason takes it to the local lodge. The Master of the lodge will appoint a committee to visit with the man and his family, find out a little about him and why he wants to be a Mason, tell him and his family about Masonry, and answer their questions. The committee reports to the lodge, and the lodge votes

on the petition. If the vote is affirmative -- and it usually is -- the lodge will contact the man to set the date for the Entered Apprentice Degree. There is some study and a bit of memory work required with which a Lodge Brothers will always help.. After the Third Degree the man will be a full-fledged Master Mason and will have joined the oldest global brotherhood in the world!

For more information a person can call the Grand Lodge/Regional Grand Lodge office and get information.

What can Free-masonry offer?

On the basis of the foregoing information, it is relatively easy to see what Freemasonry can give to someone, on an individual basis as well as towards humanity in general. In short, it is essentially an educational guide for showing how to live one's life and an apprenticeship for learning what liberty is, whilst taking into account the dimensions of one's personality on emotional planes, passing through "Fraternity"; on intellectual grounds through the exercise of "Tolerance"; and on the spiritual plane through "Traditions", and by reference to the Superior Being. It would allow anyone who prefers taking the difficult way to attain his own improvement to find essential material inside the fraternal alliance where he may share efforts and questions. Freemasonry, therefore, provides a place where constructive discussion is possible through the mutual respect of others' opinions and in the listening of them. What unites Freemasons is faith in one's perfectibility and one's radiating influence on others. Through Mason's works, and through an active and a responsibly guided self conduct, Freemasonry endeavours to shine out towards the exterior world with more Justice, more Tolerance, more Charity and Love.

Source: Internet