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The Story of Lodge Pioneer (1490 EC): Rediscovery of the Freemasons' Hall at Asansol

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Abstract: The early transition of Asansol from a rural native space into an urban colonial place, from a village to a small Raj-era town, did take place after 1857 and it chiefly owed to the extension of the East Indian Railway's lines to this part of the country in search of coal and other mineral resources, alongside the shortest possible route to connect Kolkata with Delhi. As the Railway had played such a crucial role in giving birth to the city we all dwell in, the Asansol Division of the Eastern Railway decided to commemorate their contribution of the olden days by organizing the First Heritage Walk at Asansol on November 2018. Apart from the Asansol Heritage Research Group as a major collaborator in this noble endeavour, the Department of English of Kazi Nazrul University, INTACH – Kolkata, the Railway Enthusiasts' Society, New Delhi, and the Lodge Pioneer (1490 EC) were also actively participated in the event. The specific objective of this walk was to make people aware of the riches of late Victorian built-heritage lying at the care of the Asansol Railway Division, of the splendor of Arts and Crafts Movement's furniture used inside all major structures, of the unheeded history of newly renovated Durand Institute, of various socio-cultural changes brought in by colonialism, and of the so called mysterious interior of the Lodge Pioneer or the Freemasons' Hall and of the Freemasonic faith which had not been made publicly accessible before the Heritage Walk.

Key words: Victorian built-heritage, First Heritage Walk at Asansol, Lodge Pioneer or the Freemasons' Hall.

In this paper we are trying to put forward a summary of our research on the Lodge Pioneer done prior to this Heritage Walk. It is divided into four interrelated sections. In the first two sections we would like to introduce the tales concerning the Lodge Pioneer and Freemasonry. And

in the next couple of sections we would discuss the relation between Freemasonry, colonialism, and railway in India besides providing some glimpse of the past and present activities of the Lodge.

The aims of this paper are twofold – academic and social; on the academic level it seeks to initiate discussions on Heritage Studies in places like Asansol which is far away from the major metropolises in India, and on the social level it tries to draw attention of the civil society into a heritage protection and preservation movement that has recently gained momentum worldwide.



Pic.1. The Lodge Pioneer (1490 EC): Freemasons' Hall, Asansol

Courtesy: Asansol Heritage Research Group



Building Tales

People call this small and beautiful piece of two-storey, lime and mortar, domesticated Gothic architecture, a haunted house – the *Bhoot Bangla*. Perhaps this has been sufficient to arouse our early curiosity towards this almost one hundred and fifty years old building. Whether it is a Freemasons' Hall, at the outset we had little idea. For a couple of years ago it was quite impossible to even imagine of the presence of such an important colonial heritage at Asansol. However, we began to behold the structure intently and from all possible corners outside, follow people who frequent the place and meet them, and also gather all sorts of narratives about it from any source available. Only much later we were allowed with our INTACH and Railway friends to see what was there inside.

The most striking of all tales that had in fact helped increase the notoriety of this building over the ages was the murder of a Police Officer of the undivided Asansol Police Station. The crime took place in the year 1957. The officer's son claims that his father was a very honest cop who wanted to get hold of a group of businessmen involved in illegal trade in this region. As the investigation was going on, he was suddenly abducted and said to be locked up inside this building, and only after a couple of days his corpse was found on the Loco Tank nearby, afloat on the surface of the water. Came politicians, detectives of top ranks, and several administrative officers to the residence of the dead man and promised a proper investigation to his widow and children. Yet nothing of this sort did actually happen (Sarkar 2018). A journalist from the local press wanted to make some probe. But none among the significant people interviewed in this connection ultimately agreed to make any substantial response (Ghosh 2018). This unresolved murder thus enabled people to weave story of the ghost of a policeman haunting around the compound of the Freemasons' Hall.

There is another tale of Black Magic being practiced inside the building during night. Obviously at the daytime people find its doors and the windows shut. Only at late evenings some men in all black are seen entering into the structure. As no story in the world could be completely fabricated, the grain of truth in this narrative of fright is that the Freemasons really attend their



monthly meetings at evenings, and they come in their uniform. The three degrees of Freemasonry have some rituals relating to conquering the fear of death. Those rituals copy certain age old esoteric practices like use of coffin, noose, dagger and sword which to those who are untutored in the craft of Freemasonry may seem like black magic (Ali Chowdhury 2018). Hence such a tale is built and believed, adding up to the mystery of this colonial building established in the year 1873 by men related to the East Indian Railway. The Freemasons of Asansol built this structure on a piece of land leased by the East Indian Railway, but it was constructed as per typical Freemasonic plan and with money collected through a private lottery. It is strategically located near the Grand Trunk Road and amidst the erstwhile European railway quarters.

Freemasons are no more members of any secret organization though they do not generally divulge any of their rituals to the non-masons. Even they do not like to allow any non-mason to enter into the Masonic Temple - their sacred space. No wonder, such restrictions might have spawned more narratives of mystery, awe, and conspiracy here in Asansol, as in everywhere in the world. But we were curious to know more about the building and our love for adventure brought us close to it as well as the respectable members of the Freemasonic community. When we found for the first time the three pillars standing erect at the top of this vermilion-red structure with thick walls, pointed arches and squared columns, did we ever thought that those pillars standing in a row, near to each other, but separate and of different orders of architecture, are symbolic of Wisdom, Strength and Beauty! They stand for those distinct characteristics which however, must all be displayed in every perfect work, and are necessary to its perfection.

The pillar symbolic of Strength is placed in the center, for strength is essential to any building or work and without strength it can be of little use. The pillar symbolic of Wisdom is placed in the first position as we look at it from left to right, because Wisdom directs strength to be obtained. In similar manner the pillar symbolic of Beauty is placed at extreme right. Beauty is less indispensable than Strength, but it must be advantageously attained or wisely sought after because it consummates the work and manifests its perfection (Kingsbury 1917).



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Story of Freemasonry

As generally believed the roots of Freemasons are to be traced back to the siege of Jerusalem in 1099 AD waged by European invaders against Arab defenders. After the Christian takeover of Jerusalem a band of crusading knights emerged who called themselves Knights Templar. In order to protect the thousands of Christian pilgrims from Europe who were arriving into the city to see the land of Christ, a French Knight named Hugues de Paynes in 1119 AD formed a group of spiritual and physical warriors from a band of fighting monks. They were ready to risk life in order to protect Christians from criminals and revengeful Muslims. The biblical temple-builder King Solomon was an important figure for the Knights Templar, as well as for the Freemasons worldwide. The Knights served as an elite task force for the pilgrims who were not fighters and were unarmed. Gradually they became wealthy from enthusiastically donated money by rich men to their cause. The Solomon's Temple was also turned into a rudimentary banking system. The pilgrims would temporarily hand over their possessions to the Knights for safekeeping as they toured through the Holy Land. These riches soon added up to a large amount of money and it is surmised that this led to the Knights' Templar eventual downfall (Lomas 2017).

For the Knights were now prevailing not as military, but also as the financial masters of the European upper class. The influence that this gave them over the rulers of European nations brought it with great antipathy. This hatred ultimately came to a head on Friday, October 13, 1307 AD. It was on that day that the Knights' French headquarters were destroyed by men from Pope Clement V and King Philip IV of France. The official reason was charges of heresy but the actual motive was a financial one. King Philip IV wanted somehow to get rid of the debt he was owing to them. Hence the Knights Templar were caught, trialed, found guilty, and all eventually burned at the stake. Their group was officially disbanded five years later in 1312 AD. Some among them could manage to escape the trap that had been laid for them and took refuge in Scotland. There the Knights Templar assumed their new identity of the Freemasons and the roots of Freemasonry began to emerge.



However they officially revealed themselves to the world on June 24, 1717 with the opening of their first grand lodge in Britain. On this Saint John's Day four previous and secret gathering spots were merged to form one grand lodge in which all four groups could meet. This first grand lodge became a "regulatory body" only in 1721 AD.

Interestingly, the ritual history of the Freemasons however begins in the Masonic Year of Light, or *Anno Lucis* (AL). According to their ritual myths, Freemasonry began with Adam, was passed down the lines of the patriarchs to the builders of the Solomon's Temple, and continued down to the present day. The Masonic calendar begins in the year 4000 BCE is said to be the year Adam was created, and is known among the Freemasons as the year 1 A.L. The Masonic Calendar is 4000 years longer than Christian Calendar of *Anno Domini* (AD). In other words, the year 2020AD or CE is in fact 4020 as per the Masonic Calendar. Great intellectuals of the West were mostly members of this Freemasonic fraternity. (Lomas 2017)

Though Dan Brown's *Angels and Demons* (2000) and *The Da Vinci Code* (2003) have presented a very mysterious and to some extent sinister picture of the Freemasons, actually it is a worldwide organization based on the principle of the Fatherhood of God and Brotherhood of all human beings. It is not at all a satanic cult as often rumored by the media. It seeks to make good men better and thereby making this world a better place to live. Their main symbol therefore is a combination of a compass and a scale which tools are used by stone masons to make a better built-space. The Freemasons do not canvass for members; a person must seek for membership of a Masonic Lodge of his own free will. No atheist can become a Mason because it is believed among the Masons that anyone who is of good moral character must approve of the existence of "G", the Great Geometer or the Almighty God. Charity is the predominant characteristics of a Freemason's heart; he is always desired to "give" to Freemasonry rather than expect to "receive" anything from it for personal benefit. A Freemason is expected to practice outside the Lodge those duties and virtues that he is taught inside.



The Colonial Context

But why do we have a branch of this organization at Asansol? In order to find an appropriate answer let us board a time machine and fly back to October 29, 1894 at Vermont in the USA where Rudyard Kipling was hosting in his cottage one of his illustrious guests who had just arrived from London. He was probably reading out to his litterateur-friend Arthur Conan Doyle, a poem composed from his Indian experience. Related primarily to his combined sense of loyalty and duty to the British Crown, this verse was an emotion recollected in tranquility perhaps, as it referred to what he had seen and felt primarily at Anarkali, Lahore presumably after April 1886. The first two stanzas of this interesting poem read:

There was Rundle, Station Master,
An' Beazeley of the Rail,
An' 'Ackman, Commissariat,
An' Donkin' o' the Jail;
An' Blake, Conductor-Sergeant,
Our Master twice was 'e,
With im that kept the Europe-shop,
Old Framjee Eduljee.

Outside - " Sergeant! Sir! Salute! Salaam!

Inside - 'Brother," an' it doesn't do no 'arm.

We met upon the Level an' we parted on the Square,

An' I was junior Deacon in my Mother-Lodge out there!

The depiction is of a small community in the British India consisting chiefly of male members who have served the colonial system as its cogs and wheels. This system is no doubt hierarchal; the job of ruling a country is distributed among people of different colours, castes, creeds, religions but most importantly among high and low ranks, posts and designations. Yet those hierarchies are to be left in the world "Outside", as the author has actually intended to convey to his learned friend, the



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celebrated creator of Holmes and Watson - the profound mystery of the world “Inside” where all such differences are magically erased. As people meet upon the Level and the Square inside a Mother Lodge, be the Station Master, the Railway man, the people working at the Commissariat or the Jail, the Conductor- Sergeant and the Shop-Keeper, or as mentioned in some other stanzas of the poem - the Accountant, the Draughtsman, and the Khansama, the Hindu, the Muslim, the Sikh, the Jew, or a Christian like Kipling himself, all are each one’s “Brother”. The Level and the Square are not actually architectural devices but symbolic representations worn by the community of Freemasons on their collars. Those symbols stand for Equality and Uprightness and Rectitude respectively; the virtues which had been expected to be found in the most faithful and efficient servants of the Raj (Keifer 2017).

Facts confirm that Kipling was initiated in the Freemasons’ Lodge at Lahore named Lodge of Hope and Perseverance No. 782, in the year 1886 AD. This Lodge was founded under the English Constitution in the year 1858. There are several references to the Freemasons of India in his various short stories, poems and memoirs. If the “Mother Lodge” described here is the one at Lahore, there is still another one at Jamalpur which he has also fondly remembered. He took these Lodges as Temples of Colonialism perhaps, where the various human instruments of the system were allowed to interact with one another on religions and other issues, smoke their cigars together, sip their cups of wine, dine on the same table at the monthly Festive Boards, and remain attached to each other socially so as to work as a team for the interests of individuals and for community under the Union Jack. The Lodge of St. George in the East at Jamalpur was run by the workers of the East Indian Railway. Here particularly Kipling came in contact with the mechanics and foremen. Though always nostalgic about his “Mother Lodge”, he acknowledged the warmth of their welcome, their “fraternal greetings”. Not so surprisingly however, Kipling was also aware of “Assensole”, its East Indian Railway town and its European population at that time living in their quarters around the Lodge Pioneer, though we are yet to find any clear mention of Kipling’s visit to Asansol or any of his meetings with the Lodge Members here. And in fact Kipling’s distinguished friend Dr Arthur Conan Doyle was also a renowned Freemason; he was initiated into Freemasonry at the Phoenix



Lodge No 257 in Southsea, Hampshire early in his career and officially resigned in 1911. (Beresiner)

Lodge Pioneer – Then and Now

Conan Doyle was an Irish by blood even though he was born in Edinburgh, Scotland and studied medicine at the Edinburgh University. Another Scotsman, Sir George Turnbull, an alumnus of the same University, was also a Freemason who in 1850 appointed the first Chief Engineer of the East Indian Railway. He was responsible for constructing between 1851 and 1862, the first 541 miles railway track from Kolkata to Varanasi. When the EIR line reached the Raniganj coalfields, Turnbull was the chief engineer, and as per the entries of his autobiography preserved at the Edinburgh University's library he visited "Raneegunj" and "Assensole" on several occasions boarding a palanquin or on horse-back, sometimes facing robbers and killing tigers, and had the plan almost ready of extending the railway lines to this part through the dense forest of *Asan* and other trees (Hollis 2019). Though the District Grand Lodge of Bengal was established at the Fort William by the East India Company's officials back in 1792 AD, it seems that Sir George Turnbull was the first noted Freemason in India to reach Asansol. The railway lines were to follow him shortly and in due course also Freemasonry. Inside the chessboard-floored Temple in the Lodge Pioneer hangs a scarlet banner made of velvet and embroidered with excellent threads of gold and silver; the logo with a beautiful design of a "Steam Engine". Though old papers and documents of the Lodge are mostly destroyed in 1977, the mahogany Roll of Honour may still confirm that a good number of the Past Masters of this Lodge were actually railway men.

The Freemasons of India proudly claim and not always unjustifiably that great nationalist figures like Swami Vivekananda, Jamshedji N Tata, Gaganendranath Tagore, Moti Lal Nehru, C. Rajgopalachary, Dr Rajendra Prasad, Dr S. Radhakrishnan, Fakhrudhin Ali Ahmed were all Freemasons, and a fair number of Presidents of the United States, and Prime Ministers and Statesmen in the UK were also Freemasons, nevertheless, they have to accept that in this country railway as the biggest colonial enterprise had immense contribution in spreading Freemasonry and constructing elegant lodges throughout. Railway helped in this object lesson in networking by



bridging geographical and cultural distances and providing a degree of cohesion (Deschamps 2017). Freemasonry in India has been different from similar fraternities in the UK and the USA, as here the degrees of difference among people are much greater. When Kipling was reading out his poem to Conan Doyle, perhaps he had to tell his friend how this challenge of difference caused by great variety in colonial India was successfully tackled at the Lodges - socially and culturally.

He sadly lamented the impoverished condition of his Mother Lodge:

“We 'adn't good regalia,
An' our Lodge was old an' bare,
But we knew the Ancient Landmarks,
An' we kep' 'em to a hair;”

But the Lodge Pioneer constructed much before the Kipling's initiation had not been a poor men's congregation. We have recovered the record of a jewel of late Harry Cribble Reed, one of the past masters of this Lodge, a logo wrought in 18 carats gold as manufactured by J. Boseck and Co., Kolkata at 1914. Presently the jewel is in the custody of the Library and Museum of Freemasonry, UK. And as already pointed out, the furniture of the Lodge Pioneer are examples of the fashion of the Arts and Crafts Movement and today any archive would feel proud of possessing them. Also found documents of handsome donations made by this Lodge to the UK for establishing a Masonic Hospital there.

We are not allowed to speak much on how the Freemasons of Asansol operate today, since we are non-masons. But it is for sure that their meetings regularly take place in the Hall and the organization is fully functional. The respectable members also dine together at the Festive Boards at the end of their meetings. The Lowest ranking officer here is the Outer Guard, who stands outside the Lodge door with a drawn sword to prevent any unauthorized entry. Next is the Inner Guard, who stands inside the closed door of the lodge holding a drawn dagger to stop anyone who might force his way past the Outer Guard. The Inner Guard is directed by the Junior Warden. Next up the



scale is the Junior Deacon who carries messages from the Senior Warden to the Junior Warden. Then there is the Senior Deacon who carries the messages of the Master to the Senior Warden. Together these Seven Officers form the basic structure of the Lodge.

At the time of meeting, the Master commands the lodge and issues instructions to the rest of the lodge via the Wardens. The Master wields a small hammer called a gavel, which he knocks to call for silence at meetings. Each of the Wardens also has a gavel, so when the master knocks for silence before speaking, each of the warden also knocks. The sound of the knocks echoes the lodge room. Only after the master and two wardens all have knocked, and the members of the lodge are silent, does the Master speak. (Hassan 2018)

The Lodge Pioneer is still under EC that is the English Constitution. This Colonial Heritage of Asansol is directed by the United Grand Lodge of the UK at London and the Regional Grand Lodge of Eastern India, Kolkata. Though the Eastern Railway, Asansol Division has declared it as a Railway Heritage and is doing its bit to conserve it, it is the responsibility of one and all at Asansol to protect it properly and preserve it for the future.

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