



BREAKING THE SPELL OF AGES

Known as the Grand Old Man of India, Dadabhai Naoroji was a prominent Indian nationalist and one of the founders of the Indian National Congress.

Dr Ric Berman tells the extraordinary story of how this professor, politician and Freemason became the first Indian to be elected to British Parliament

The son of a Parsi priest, Dadabhai Naoroji was born in 1825 into poverty in Khadak, in what was then Bombay, in British-occupied India. He won a place at Elphinstone Institution, now Elphinstone College in the University of Mumbai, and excelled to the extent that he was appointed to the faculty and, in 1855, became the first Indian to be appointed to a professorship.

Dadabhai was also active as a social reformer. He founded the *Rast Goftar* newspaper in 1851 and the following year co-founded the Bombay Association, channelling public grievances to the British and giving Indians a better understanding of their legal and moral rights. He also set up literacy classes for Indian girls in Marathi and Gujarati, and created Dnyan Prasarak Mandali – the Society for Promotion of Knowledge – to provide education for adult men.

Dadabhai viewed the British as honourable and British misrule in India as a product of ignorance of the Indian way of life. He believed the British should be made aware of India's views directly and gained the potential to achieve this in June 1855, when he was offered the

position of partner in Cama & Co, a cotton-trading firm that the Bombay-based Cama family intended to establish in London. It would be Britain's first Indian-owned business.

In London, Dadabhai juggled his position as a partner in Cama & Co with a professorship at University College, where he was Professor of Gujarati for a decade from 1856.

Dadabhai resigned from Cama & Co in 1859 to set up his own trading company, Naoroji & Co, but remained on good terms with the Cama family, many of whom would later join the Marquis of Dalhousie Lodge which he co-founded. At least five members of the family became members between 1870 and 1874, including DP Cama, Master in 1874 and later Grand Treasurer.

Alongside his business interests, Dadabhai became a prolific political writer and speaker on Indian affairs. He founded two powerful lobby groups, the East Indian Association and the London Indian Society, the effect of which was to make him India's de facto if unofficial ambassador.

Dadabhai had been initiated into freemasonry in the Rising Star of Western India Lodge, No. 342 (Scottish Constitution), the first lodge in India set up specifically to include Indian brethren. And following his arrival in London he was instrumental in founding the Marquis of Dalhousie Lodge, No. 1159.

Among the lodge's first joining members was Earl de Grey and Ripon, then DGM, and in 1870 GM. He was Under Secretary of State for India (1861-63), Secretary of State for War (1863-66), and Secretary of State for India in 1866 under Earl Russell.

Dadabhai's political associates included other Conservative and Liberal MPs, and in 1886 he agreed to contest the London seat of Holborn as a Gladstonian Liberal. He lost, but in the 1892

general election succeeded and was elected MP for Finsbury Central. His Conservative opponent demanded a recount and at the second count Dadabhai's majority was doubled – to six, making him the first non-white member of the Commons.

Although he lost his seat at the 1895 general election by some 800 votes, Dadabhai had established his political credentials. He was granted an appointment to Lord Welby's Royal Commission into Military and Civil Expenditure in India and Indian Taxation, where he advanced the view that the principal cause of Indian poverty was excessive taxation by the British, a position he detailed in *Poverty and Un-British Rule in India* (1901). And he continued to speak out on Indian affairs.

Dadabhai was the founder Secretary of the Marquis of Dalhousie Lodge and in 1871 became its fourth Master. He proposed numerous Parsi law students and barristers for membership, and they in turn introduced friends and colleagues, building a strong connection with the sub-continent.

Dadabhai's devotion to India led to his return on numerous occasions and, in 1885, he was present at the first meeting of

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the Indian National Congress. He would go on to be elected to its presidency on three occasions: 1886, 1893 and 1906.

Dadabhai used his final presidential address at the Indian National Congress to demand Indian independence, cementing his place as a mentor to other nationalists, including Gopal Krishna Gokhale, Mahatma Gandhi, and Mohammad Ali Jinnah, the founder of Pakistan, whom he had met when the latter was studying at Lincoln's Inn. By now known as the 'Grand Old Man of India', Dadabhai left Britain for the last time in 1907. He retired to Bombay where he died in 1917 aged 92.

Dadabhai's thoughts regarding his Mother Lodge were recorded at a meeting of Yarborough Lodge, No. 811, in Brighton in 1868. They open a window onto his outlook just a year after the consecration of the Marquis of Dalhousie Lodge:

'Lodge Rising Star is the first Lodge founded for admitting the natives of India to the privileges of freemasonry. At the time of its institution in 1843, there were supposed to be many difficulties in the way, difficulties of race, difficulties of social custom, of political equality, differences of enlightenment and perhaps many others. But there were stout hearts who, headed by James Burnes, maintained and desired to prove that masonry belonged to no creed or colour, to no climate or race. It was the Universal Patrimony of mankind. It was 'the one touch of nature that makes the whole world kin', and the Lodge Rising Star thus came into existence. The foundation of that Lodge has broken the spell of ages.'

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