

# CAMA CHAMELEONS

From scholars and social reformers, merchants to Freemasons – the Cama family share a rich legacy of privilege, philanthropy and entrepreneurship. Dr Ric Berman tells the East-West story of India's KR and DP Cama



Khurshedji Rustamji, known as 'KR' Cama (1831-1909)

Following the Islamic Arab push into Persia in the 8th and 9th centuries, the Cama family found refuge in what is now Gujarat, India. The family were Zoroastrians – Parsis or Parsees, as they were called in India, meaning 'from Persia' – and successful international merchants. In 1855, two members of the family travelled to London, and forming a partnership with Dadabhai Naoroji, the first British MP of Indian descent, established Cama & Co – the first Indian-owned trading house in Britain.

The company opened offices at 3-4 Great Winchester Street in the City of London and in Liverpool, and traded a range of commodities, including cotton and opium. Cama & Co found itself the plaintiff in a leading court case in 1863, when it was obliged to sue P&O Co to recover a shortfall of 45 kegs in a large consignment of opium exported to Shanghai.

The first member of the family to become a Freemason was Khurshedji Rustamji, known as 'KR' Cama (1831-1909). Educated at Elphinstone College in Bombay, he travelled extensively in Asia, China and Europe, and was reputedly fluent in 10 languages, including English, French and German. A committed religious and social reformer, KR used his influence and financial position to promote education, including support for the Alexandra Girls' English Institution, founded in Bombay in 1863.

KR Cama had been initiated into Lodge Rising Star of Western India, No. 342 (SC) in 1854 – the first Masonic lodge to welcome Indian nationals, with members from both European and Indian communities. He was promoted through the offices, becoming Master in 1861 and winning re-election the following year. In 1863,

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he was sworn in as a magistrate and the same year was appointed Provincial Grand Steward of Western India. KR thereafter served as Provincial Grand Secretary, Provincial Junior Grand Warden, Provincial Senior Grand Warden, and finally as Pro Provincial Grand Master. He presided as such at Provincial Grand Lodge meetings in 1869, the first time that an Indian had done so. Later, Lodge KR Cama, No. 1366 (SC), consecrated in Bombay in 1930, was formed on the petition of Lodge Rising Star and named after him. The first Master, Rustom Cama, was also a member of the Cama clan.

With KR's departure back to Bombay from England in 1860, the ranking member of the family was Dorabjee Pestonjee ('DP') Cama, later Grand Treasurer of both Grand Lodge and Supreme Grand Chapter. DP had arrived in England in the late 1860s to take over the family firm. He was initiated as a Freemason into Courage and Humanity Lodge, No. 392, in Calcutta, India, in 1869.

DP went on to join Marquis of Dalhousie Lodge in central London (as did two other family members), as well as lodges in Middlesex and Surrey, where he would achieve Provincial Grand Rank. DP became Master of three English lodges, including Cama Lodge, No. 2105, a Middlesex lodge founded in 1885 and named in his honour. He was similarly active in the Royal Arch and numerous other orders – he managed to achieve Grand rank in them all.

DP Camas' obituary in *The Times* on 25 November 1910 observed that the family was renowned for its 'business enterprise and munificent liberality' and that 'no Parsi of whatever rank or class, came to London without paying him a pilgrimage, and not a few other Indians followed this custom.'

The Cama family made legion charitable donations that we know of, and which include £4,000 to University College Hospital London and £2,000 to the 1860 chartered Royal National Lifeboat Institution, whose funding has been strongly supported by Freemasons. That's equivalent to £4 million and £2 million, respectively, today. The Camas also made numerous donations of 100 guineas each to the Lord Mayor's Charity for Poor Relief.

They remain one of the most venerated members of the Indian community in England, with a tireless philanthropic legacy.