

## Au Bangladesh à Dhaka



The Armenian Church of the Holy Resurrection (1781) on Church Road in Old Dhaka highlights a rich tapestry of the Armenian footprint on the commerce, politics, and education of East Bengal. More importantly, the church is an architectural testament to the story of how the Armenian diasporas spread out from their historic

homeland, located between the Black Sea and the Caspian Sea, to far-flung regions, and thrived as a versatile cosmopolitan community.

Armenia occupies a crucial geographic location at the intersection of various civilisations and trading routes, such as the Silk Road from China to Rome. A vital link between East and West, the country was under the domination of various competing political powers, including the Persians, the Greeks, the Romans, the Arabs, the Persians again, the Ottomans, and the Russians. Their long political subjugation, on the one hand, made it difficult for them to maintain their Christian faith (the Armenians were the first people to embrace Christianity as a state religion in 301 CE), language, culture, and national identity. On the other hand, challenging circumstances exhorted Armenians to be resilient in the face of political repression, to develop entrepreneurial acumen and mediating skills, and to be a “trade diaspora”, who learned through experience how to negotiate commercial opportunities whenever and wherever they presented themselves.

Considered one of the most successful trading groups in the Eurasian trade circuit, the Armenians’ accomplishment was generally attributed to a number of key factors: their ability to identify regions where competition was relatively sparse, their deep understanding of markets and products, interdependency among the Armenian diasporas, their capacity to thrive on low profit margins,

their diplomatic skills, and ability to successfully compete with other merchants. Wherever the Armenians went to trade, they typically learned the local language—unlike other Asian or European merchants—benefitting from their capacity to communicate with primary producers. It was no surprise that the Europeans in Bengal wanted the Armenians as business partners, and employed them as vakils to mediate at the local court or office on their behalf.

The Armenians also played a significant role in the history of world architecture. In the early medieval period, when the Byzantine world abandoned classical stonework in favour of brick masonry (the 6th-century Hagia Sophia is basically a brick construction), only the Armenians retained the knowledge of concrete work and continued the Hellenistic attitude to buildings as a compact, object-like impression in space. Their contribution had a crucial influence on subsequent development of church architecture in Europe.

There is no consensus on exactly when the Armenians arrived in Dhaka. Some historians, however, suggest they were in Bengal in the early 17th century, most likely arriving with the southbound migration of Armenian diasporas from Persia. During the Safavid-Ottoman wars of 1603-1605, the Safavid monarch Shah Abbas (r. 1587-1629) deported up to 300,000 Armenians from the Armenian mercantile town of Old Julfa to what became known as New Julfa in the suburb of Isfahan. Because the official language of the Mughal court was Persian, the Persian-speaking Armenians could easily adapt to the life in the Mughal Empire. Being skilful at textile business, the Armenians naturally gravitated to Dhaka, one of the trading hubs for fine textile, contributing significantly to the city's commercial life. According to one estimate, their share of textile export from Dhaka in 1747 is reported to be as large as 23 percent of that year's total export, way ahead of the English, the Dutch or the French in Dhaka. In addition to textile and raw silk, the Armenians also engaged in the trade of saltpetre (used as gunpowder), salt, and betel nut. They pioneered jute-trading in the second half of the nineteenth century and popularised tea-drinking in Bengal. When they began to lose the textile business to the British private traders in the late 18th century, the Armenians reoriented their focus to landholding, eventually becoming prominent and wealthy zamindars. Examples of Armenian zamindars in Dhaka include Agha Aratoon Michael, Agha Sarkies, and Nicholas Marcar Pogose.

Another major Armenian contribution to Dhaka was the transport "revolution", introducing ticca-garry or the horse-carriage, the main mode of transportation in

the city until the first decade of the 20th century. They also introduced western-style department stores for European and British goods, including wines, spirits, cigars, bacon, reading lamps, shoes, toys, table cutlery, shaving soap, saucepans, frying pans, travelling bags, umbrellas, etc.

The Armenian community contributed significantly to Dhaka's civic life and urban administrative bureaucracy. Nicholas Pogose founded the first private school of the city, Pogose School, in 1848. It still functions as a prestigious school in Old Dhaka. In response to Nicholas Pogose's resolution that the Dhaka Municipality Committee had no corporate entity, and that steps should be taken to remedy the problem, the British colonial administration enacted the District Municipality Act of 1864. The Dhaka Municipality became a statutory body with its legal jurisdiction.

Compared to those in Calcutta and Madras, Dhaka's Armenian community was small but wealthy, exerting a great deal of influence on local and regional businesses. It was a well-knit community, living in Armanitola, an Old Dhaka neighbourhood or mahalla that was named after their colony where they once lived (although not all Armenians lived there). They maintained a close working relationship with the British colonial administration and other European merchants in the city, as well as with their kinsmen in Kolkata. According to an 1870 survey, there were 107 Armenians in Dhaka, of whom 39 were men, 23 women, and 45 children. Among this group, there was a priest, five zamindars, three merchants, one barrister, five shopkeepers, and four government employees.

Many of Dhaka's wealthy Armenians lived in European-style bungalows in Old Dhaka, one of the most famous being the Ruplal House (now in derelict conditions) built by the Armenian zamindar Aratoon. The religious life of the community revolved around the Armenian Church of the Holy Resurrection, built in 1781 on the ruins of an earlier chapel and cemetery. It is worthwhile to note that the Armenians built their first churches in Madras (now Chennai) in 1547, in Agra in 1562, and in Calcutta in 1724. The Portuguese built the first church in Dhaka in 1679 and reconstructed it in 1769, a decade or so before the Armenians built their church in Old Dhaka.

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