

ARMENIANS: MERCHANT-PRINCES OF THE PAST

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December, 1921. The Calcutta race course. Backers and bookmakers were screaming themselves hoarse as the thundering phalanx of horses drew closer to the post. The steward discreetly observed the Prince of Wales mopping his regal brow, as frenzied punters broke into hysterics. 'Galway Gate' streaked past the winning post — nose, neck, hood, head and all length.

A little later, the beaming owner led his mount in and made a slight bow before the grandstand. With confident steps, he strode up to the smiling prince, while the crowd cheered lustily. Shaking hands with the King-Emperor's son, he received the coveted Prince of Wales Cup from the Royal Heir himself and held it high for the adulating race goers to see. Turning around, he casually informed His Royal Highness that he was making over the entire stake money to him — for charity!

Galway Gate's master was the most colourful racing personality in Calcutta during the closing years of the nineteenth and the first half of this century: Johannes Carapiet Galstaun, O.B.E. This flamboyant Armenian multimillionaire's career as a racer, racehorse owner, rider, real estate tycoon, builder, exporter and philanthropist had made him a living legend in Calcutta. At one time, he owned as many as a hundred racehorses. He is credited with having built about three hundred and fifty houses and having developed and beautified large areas of central and south Calcutta. Harrington Mansions, Galstaun Mansions (renamed Queen's Mansions), Galstaun Park (the Nizam's Palace) were all his. Rawdon Street, Pretoria Street and Lansdowne Road were just a few of the streets that he developed. Though he was to lose almost all his wealth before his death in 1948, his risky speculations, and his magnanimity, continued unabated.

J. C. Galstaun was one of the many Armenians who made Calcutta their home. Arathoon Stephen, another Armenian, owned the attractive Stephen Court in Park Street and Stephen House in Dalhousie Square, besides the Grand Hotel in Calcutta and the Mount Everest Hotel in Darjeeling. T.M. Thaddeus (the proprietor of the Park Mansions), B.M.V. Gasper and S. A.

Basil are just a few among the Armenians, who made their fortunes in ‘real estate’.

But, ‘real estate’ occupies only a small mention among the Armenian enterprises and activities in India, spread over centuries and millennia. It is believed that the first Armenians came with their Assyrian allies, as part of Queen Semiramis’ expedition to India, some centuries before Christ. Some Armenians were sure to have come with Alexander. It was largely through Armenian caravans that the European came to learn of the wares of Hindoostan — spices, muslins, and precious stones. When Babur entered Delhi, Armenian merchants were already settled in the chief commercial centres of India.

For the merchant-princes from Hayastan, trade was not only a matter of profit and pride, but also a creature of historical necessity. The history of Armenia is a saga of periodic foreign invasions, devastations and wanton bloodshed. Persians and Turks ravaged Armenia with almost predictable regularity. The Tartar-Mongols, including the dreaded Tamurlane, also let loose the dogs of war over Armenia. The Russians, the Arabs and Kurds were not always the kindest of neighbours.

Time and again the Armenians revolted against foreign domination, only to be taught the brutish lessons of history, with fire and sword — the last, unforgettable one being in the years 1915-16. While the Turks massacred, maimed or deported two-thirds of the Armenian nation, the western world went on making sympathetic noises, without unsheathing its sword.

In fact, except for brief periods of history under dynasties like the ‘Arteshians’, the Armenian hardly ever saw peace. It was in these brief intervals that Armenian culture and religion flourished. When Gregory the Illuminator converted the Armenian King, Tirdates III, to Christianity in 301 AD, Armenia becomes the first Christian nation in the world. (Constantine’s dictum, declaring Christianity as the official religion of the Roman Empire, would come 23 years later.)

Their religion was to become one of the chief irritants that brought their hostile neighbours into Armenia with blood in their eyes. The Armenian

participation in the Crusades could hardly endear them to the Saracens. With life so uncertain at home, it was no wonder that the Armenian peddler sought his fortunes elsewhere.

Agra and Indians appeared considerably more congenial, especially as the Mughal-e-Azam had not only married an Armenian Christian, Mariam Zamani Begam, but had also been awarding high honours to talented Armenians. The Chief justice of the Empire, Abdul Hai, and Akbar's Portuguese interpreter, Domingo Pires, were both Armenians who had conveniently coloured their real names. It is said that Akbar's adopted son, Prince Mizja Zul Qurnain (who was later on to become the Governor of Sambhar, Mogor, Babraich, Lahore and Bengal), was also an Armenian. Sarmad, the Sufi poet and mystic of Delhi, to whom Aurangzeb's elder brother, Dara Shikho, had turned for spiritual solace, was yet another Armenian.

It was the Armenian's fluency in Persian, the chief language of Hindustan's government and commerce, that stood him in good stead. Almost a third of the total number of root-words of the Armenian language is of Persian origin, and the forcible deportation of a sizable chunk of the Armenian nation to Persia by Shah Abbas in 1605 contributed its bit towards this linguistic proficiency.

In its early days, the East India Company realised without much effort, that the Armenian merchants settled in Surat, Bombay, Chinsurah and Chandernagore were its best bets for securing a proper foothold in the highly competitive markets of the subcontinent. The Company started cultivating these traders most assiduously and succeeded not only in weaning them away from the Dutch and the French, but also in inducing them to use English ships only.

The wily English traders had no compunctions in mixing religion and trade, as long as their interests in India were served better. Realising the Armenian's soft corner for his religion, an 'Agreement' was signed between Hon'ble Company and the Armenians (represented by the merchant-prince, Khoja Phanoos Kalanthar) on the 22nd of June, 1688, whereby the Armenians were to be allowed the same rights and privileges as the English in India, as also complete religious freedom. "Whenever 40 or more of the Armenian nation shall become inhabitants of any garrison cities or towns, belonging to

the Company in the East India, the said Armenians,” declared the Agreement, “shall not only enjoy the free use and exercise of their religion, but there shall also be allotted to them a parcel of ground to erect a Church thereon for worship and service of God in their own way”. Furthermore, the Company promised to build wooden churches for the Armenians, to start with, as also to pay 50 pounds for the first seven years for the maintenance of each church and its clergy.

In return (and this is where the catch lay) the Armenian merchants were to carry their Indian trade exclusively in English ships. As history would prove later, the nation of shopkeepers scored a decisive economic victory over the more religiously-inclined Christian merchants from Hayastan, for the established Armenian businesses were henceforth to play second fiddle to English traders.

The Armenians seem to have taken their mission to build churches quite seriously. Starting from the first edifice of Christian worship in north India, the Martyrose Chapel of Agra (built in the beginning of the 17th century) to the first church in Calcutta, the Armenian Church of Nazareth, constructed in 1724, the Armenians have been prolific and enthusiastic church-builders. The Armenian Church of St. John the Baptist of Chinsurah (completed in 1697), the Armenian Church of the Virgin Mary of Saidabad (near Cossimbazar) built in 1758, the Armenian Church of the Holy Virgin Mary erected in Madras in 1772 and the Armenian Church of St. Peter built in 1796 in Bombay, are a few examples of Armenian piety and religious fervour.

The Armenians kept their part of the bargain, in so far as assisting the English in India was concerned, with equal seriousness.

The process began with Khoja Israel Sarhed, Kalanthar’s nephew, aiding the English in obtaining the ‘renting rights’ of the three villages of Sutanatee, Kalikata and Govindapur, the nucleus of the city of Calcutta, in 1698-99. It was the same Armenian who played a decisive role in the Surman Embassy’s signal success in acquiring the coveted Firman granting the Company rights over 38 villages surrounding its original three in Calcutta, from the Mughul Emperor, Farruksiyar in 1717.

In the troubled days of high-stakes diplomacy and the politics of treachery in Bengal, shrewd Armenians like Agha Hazurmull, Agha Petrus Nicholas, Agha Petrus Arathoon (whom Clive affectionately called his ‘Armenian Petrus’) and Abraham Jacobs made their fame and fortune with the blessings of the English. On the Indian side too, it was another Armenian (in fact, the younger brother of Petrus Arathoon), Khojah Gregory, better known as Gorgin Khan of Monghyr, who rose rapidly as Mir Kasim’s trusted minister and Commander-in- Chief.

Armenians who served elsewhere in India also left behind tales of success. Jacob Petrus of Gwalior commanded the Scindia’s Army for decades. The famous Zamzamah gun of Lahore, referred to in Kipling’s ‘Kim’, was cast by an Armenian expert for Ahmed Shah Durrani. The Peshawar Records of the 1870s also mention other Armenian achievements. Sultana Mariam Begum Sheba, the Queen of Oudh (in the first quarter of the 19th century) was very much an Armenian.

Though the British befriended and used the Armenians, they took special care to check Armenian monopolies and arrest any appreciable ascendancy in their mercantilism. Despite the jealous, watchful eyes of John Company, individual Armenians (and families) made it to dizzy heights of wealth and fame. The Apcars, Chaters, Agabegs, Cretes, Phillips and many other Armenians were pioneers in mining coal from the Ranigunj-Jharia fields. From the forests of Jhalda in Purulia, G.G. Carapiet, A.M. Arathoon and N.C. Gregory minted their millions — all from shellac.

Hotels seem to have held a special fascination for the Armenians. Apart from Arathoon Stephen’s Grand Hotel in Calcutta and Mount Everest Hotel in Darjeeling, dozens of hotels boasted of Armenian enterprise. In Calcutta, hotels like Astor, Carlton, Kenilworth, Astoria, Lytton and Russell were all started by them. The engineering and automobile industries had quite a few Armenian pioneers, like the Marcars, Malcolms, Adams and Gaspers.

Unlike the Jews, who were primarily (and also, secondarily) businessmen, the Armenians produced a fair crop of professionals too. They entered the Railways, made their marks in law and medicine, tried their hands at history and journalism and were also first-rate executives in mercantile firms.

All this goes to show that the Armenian passion for education yielded good dividends. The Armenians claim that the first English school for all communities was founded by an Armenian in the latter half of the 18th century. Marger Johannes started teaching English as early as the 1760s while Arathoon Kaloos set up the first private Armenian school in Calcutta in 1798. The Armenian Philanthropic Academy (better known as the Armenian School of Free School Street, Calcutta) was started in 1821 in Old China Bazar Street. Despite many difficulties in the 162 years of its existence, it continued to maintain high standards, mainly due to the efforts of stalwarts like N.A. Basil and V. Poladian. The Armenians also founded schools in Madras, Dacca (Pogose School) and elsewhere.

The Davidian Girls' School was founded in March 1922 by Aviet David, to educate poor Armenian girls. It was started at 15 Royd Street, and after moving out to Russa Road, Nainital (during the war) and Queen's Mansions, it has returned to its original premises.

Religion, along with education, continued throughout history to lead a kindly light to the harassed Christians of Armenia. The Holy Armenian Church of Nazareth (not St. Nazareth, as it is mistakenly called) is located in a claustrophobic lane, Armenian Street, off Brabourne Road in Calcutta. Built in 1724 by Agha Nazar, its site was (and remains, considerably) a graveyard. If one goes by the date of the earliest grave, (Rezabeebeh, wife of the late 'Charitable Sookias', died July 11, 1630), one can easily presume that there were at least some Armenians near Sutanatee, if not an established Armenian colony, 60 years before Charnock dropped his decisive anchor in these parts.

The high walls of the Church muffle the din and bustle of one of the chief bazaars of the Orient. Hundreds of tombstones, literally speaking, pave the courtyard in granite black and marble white. The imposing steeple was added in 1734 by the wealthy Hazur Mull. The interior of the Church presents a picture of absolute tranquility and peace, in sharp contrast to the unholy and positively loud transactions of commerce a few feet away. The stained glass windows with obviously Biblical themes, the commanding altar, the shiny brass lectern, the overhanging oil lamps, and (above all) the superb scenes of the 'Holy Trinity', 'The Lord's Supper', and the 'Enshrouding of the Lord' lift the mind from things mundane.

The Armenians in Calcutta have another chapel, St. Gregory's in Park Circus, and their cemetery and Holy Trinity chapel is in Tangra.

Proud as they are of the fact that Armenia was the first Christian state, the Armenians celebrate Christmas with a difference — on 6th of January, insisting that their date is more correct than 25th of December. The Orthodox Churches of Greece, Russia and Ethiopia agree with the Armenians and claim that Christmas in December was an easy way out for later Christians to reconcile their new faith with existing pagan customs, as in any case, a pre-Christian celebration came around the last week of December. (What Santa Claus feels about his 'double duty' is anybody's guess.)

Easter (in April), the Transfiguration of the Lord (in June), the Festival of Virgin Mary (in mid August) and the Festival of Holy Cross (in mid September) remain the other principal holy days for Armenians. St. John's Festival on 14th of January is an occasion for most Calcutta Armenian to get together at the Chinsurah Church. Martyrs' day is celebrated on 24th of April to remind the Armenians of the Genocide during the Great War, while the Battle of Vardannatz of 451 A.D. is remembered with considerable national pride.

Armenians had never been a populous community — their strength was reported at 636 only in the Calcutta Police Census of 1837. 13 years later, the census taken by the Chief Magistrate of Calcutta counted 892 Armenians. H. Beverly placed the Armenian count at about 800 in the first complete Census of Bengal in 1872. The 1951 Census enumerated the Armenian population in Calcutta at 498 souls. At present, there are hardly three hundred Armenians left in Calcutta, and almost half of them non-Indian nationals, who are studying or residing in the city.

Like the Jews, Parsis and the Anglo-Indians, the Armenians have started leaving this city, and the country that had once offered them refuge. With 'Indianisation' standardising social behaviour slowly but inevitably, the Armenian may have finally decided to reconcile the plaguing contradiction between his 'Eastern heart' and 'Western mind' in favour of the latter.

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