

JOB CHARNOCK OR THE ARMENIANS: WHO FOUNDED CALCUTTA?

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The story of how Job Charnock landed at a place near Nimtala Ghat on August 24, 1690, is so much a part of recorded history that is seldom questioned. The Diary and consultation book of the Rt. Hon'ble East India Company chronicles the event quite authoritatively. But as the city prepares for its tercentenary celebrations, a challenge to that theory is worth recalling.

Charnock's credit was contested, almost by accident, 204 years after Calcutta was founded. It was in the early part of 1894 that the Government of India directed the Government of Bengal to compile a list of Bengal's old Christian tombstones and monuments of historical and archaeological interest. An Armenian scholar and businessman, Mesrovb Jacob Seth, was invited to translate into English a number of the Inscriptions in classical Armanian on the tombstones in the Armenian churchyards of Calcutta, Chinsurah and Saidabad.

It was then that an innocuous tombstone caused the controversy. Located within the precincts of the Holy, Armenian Church of Nazareth in Armenian Street, the translation of the script read: "this is the tomb of Rezabeebeh, wife of the late charitable Sookeas, who departed from this world to life eternal on the 21st day of Nakha (11th July in the year 15th new Era of Julfa=1630 A.D.)". This led Seth to claim that the Armenians were already established in Calcutta when Job Charnock arrived, for the site of the tombstone was previously the old Armenian Burial Ground.

He claimed that there was every reason to believe that the stone was "in situ", and not brought from outside. "This Armenian inscription", Mesrovb Jackob Seth concluded, "upsets the ordinarily accepted account of the history of Calcutta prior to the British settlement, for it dates as far back as 1630, about 60 years before Job Charnock, the East India Company's Agent, set foot in Calcutta and hoisted the British flag on the banks of the Hooghly on that memorable day, the 24th of August, 1690".

Seth and his favourite tomb stone might have been ignored had it not been for scholars jumping into the fray. C.R. Wilson, the noted English chronicler, contributed an article entitled "Armenian Founders of Calcutta" to the Englishman, a popular Calcutta daily, on January 31st, 1895, supporting Seth's theory that the Armenian had settled in Calcutta before the arrival of Job Charnock and the Company. The renowned Professor Suniti Kumar Chatterjee also threw his weight behind this contention.

The fact that the Armenians had settled to these parts is beyond doubt. By 1645, the Armenians had built a commercial settlement in the Dutch Colony at Chinsurah. In fact, the East India Company had signed an agreement with the Armenian, Khoja Phanoos Kalanther, two years before Charnock came to Calcutta. The terms of the agreement were: "Whenever forty or more of the Armenian nation shall become inhabitants of any garrisons, cities, or towns, belonging to the Company in the East Indies, the said Armenians shall not only enjoy the free use and exercise of their religion, but their 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. And that we also will, at our own charge, cause a convenient church to be built of timber, which afterwards, the said Armenians may after and build with stone or other solid materials to their own good liking. And the said Governor and Company will also allow fifty pounds per annum, during the space of seven years, for the maintenance of such priest or minister as they shall choose to officiate therein. Given under the Company's larger seal, June 22nd, 1688."

By 1690, the year of Job Charnock's settlement, a small chapel of timber had been erected about a hundred yards to the south of the present Church of Nazareth. Obviously, it is said, the Armenian must have arrived either before Charnock or along with him. The credit for founding Calcutta, this school of thought therefore claims, cannot only be Job Charnock's.

However, there are certain disparities in the evidence in favour of the Armenians. Mesrobian Jacob Seth came to Calcutta in 1889 and discovered the tombstone of Rezabeebeh in 1894. It is hard to believe that such an inscription had remained unnoticed by other Armenians for over 200 years. Besides, the present Armenian Church in the courtyard of which the tombstone is located was erected as late as 1724, and except for this singular piece of granite, no evidence or tombstone prior to 1690 have been found there.

The first supporter of Seth's theory, C.R. Wilson, retracted his thesis within a few months of the publication of his article. In his *Early Annals of the English in Bengal*, published in November 1895, Wilson wrote that "There is nothing to show that the stone is 'in situ'. It may well have been brought to Calcutta from elsewhere. An inscribed stone has recently been found in St. John's Churchyard which must somehow have come there from China. Even if the stone is 'in situ', it does not prove the existence of an Armenian Colony. In India, a person must be buried where he dies. If an Armenian voyager died in ship near Calcutta, it would be necessary to bury the body there."

Historical records reveal that Charnock solicited the assistance of the Armenians during the uncertain years, 1686 to 1690, between the evacuation of the English settlement at Hooghly and the construction of the new settlement at Calcutta. It is evident that Khoja Phanoos Kalanthur and other Armenians accepted the invitation of Charnock to settle in Calcutta from 1690 and the treaty of 1688 was one of the inducements offered to them by the East India Company.

Besides, even if it were accepted that a few Armenians came to Calcutta or Sutanuti before Charnock it does not imply that they founded the city. Khoja Phanoos Kalanthur's nephew, Khoja Israil Sarhad, played an important role in obtaining the "renting rights" of the three villages of Sutanuti, Kalikata and Gobindpur for the British. These were the first three villages over which the metropolis grew. An Armenian would hardly go out of his way to help the British East India Company to acquire rights over Calcutta if the city was already held by Armenians. The founding of a city is something more than simply securing a toe-hold over an alien plot of land.

Therefore, despite the enthusiastic support of Dr. Suniti Kumer Chatterjee and Radha Ramon Mitra, the historical evidence is clear. While there is no denying the assistance the early Armenian settlers gave to the East India Company in founding Calcutta and consolidating its hold over it, Job Charnock's place as the founder of the city is secure.

May Rezabeebeh's soul and Charnock's too, rest in peace.