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## WHERE HAVE ALL THE INDO-ARMENIANS GONE?

Lionel Caplan

### PREFACE

This brief essay was inspired by a query from Susan Dhavle, the editor of IJAIS, about the connection between Anglo-Indians and Armenians. During my research in Chennai (then Madras) during the 1990s I had of course met a number of Anglo-Indians who proclaimed their Armenian descent, but knew virtually nothing about their own history in India. So in response to Susan's question, and because it seemed an especially interesting one, I began to read some of the literature on the Armenian presence in India. One of the first, and certainly the foremost scholar of the community, was Mesrovb Jacob Seth, himself an Armenian who was born in 1871 in New Julfa, an important Persian commercial centre, and from where, it appears, many Armenians in India originated. Seth migrated to Calcutta in 1889 to complete his studies, and later taught at the Armenian College and Philanthropic Academy in that city where he died in 1939. Although engaged in business, he spent many of his later years in the study of old manuscripts, letters, epitaphs and memorial tablets in churches and cemeteries linked to the Armenian community in India. His major publications, *History of the Armenians in India* (1897) and *Armenians in India from the Earliest Times to the Present Day* (1937), constitute an important contribution to our knowledge of the community.

Most scholars (including Seth) writing about the Indo-Armenians have focused on their contribution to the economy of the sub-continent, especially from the 16<sup>th</sup> to the 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. In their studies the focus is understandably on successful traders – sometimes labelled the 'merchant princes of India': their extensive commercial networks, and their relations with the Europeans with whom they traded and competed. Largely unmentioned and unexplored are the less prominent members of

the community and the extent of their ties with those in the wider society of which they formed part, not least with the Anglo-Indians alongside whom they lived in several important centres of trade. As an example or 'case study', I will concentrate on Madras (Chennai). But since so little is known of these relations (or, rather, I know so little of these relations) the essay is perforce largely speculative, and will, it is hoped, generate some discussion and hopefully future research. To begin, I present some background on Armenians in India, drawing on the few publications I have read.

#### THE 'MERCHANT PRINCES OF INDIA'

Although there is some dispute about the dates of arrival and migrant figures the consensus seems to be that until the 16<sup>th</sup> century Armenian settlers in India were comparatively few. Numbers increased substantially from the early 17<sup>th</sup> century when, in 1602, the Emperor Shah Abbas deported (or 'transferred') many Armenians – one source suggests 50,000 - from the commercial town of Julfa in Armenia to 'New Julfa' on the outskirts of Isfahan in Persia. Already skilled in trans-continental commerce, many merchants soon found their way to the Indian sub-continent. Most Indo-Armenians thus traced their origins to Persia.

The Mughals are said to have invited Armenians to settle in Agra in the 16th century. Knowledge of Persian gave them an edge over other Europeans - some acted as translators at the court - and they were also allowed to move around in the areas of the Mughal empire where entry of foreigners was otherwise prohibited. In 1562, an Armenian Church was constructed in Agra, perhaps the first in India. In time, with increasing migration from New Julfa, Agra acquired a sizeable Armenian population. From the 16th century onwards, the Armenians also formed an important trading community in Surat, the most active Indian port of that period. Armenians of Surat built two churches and a cemetery there and a tombstone (dated 1579) bears Armenian inscriptions. A manuscript written in the Armenian language in 1678 (currently preserved in St. Petersburg) has an account of a permanent colony of Armenians in Surat.

While settlement in other areas took different paths, what seems clear is that by the 17<sup>th</sup> century Armenian merchants were well established in *all* important centres of

commerce in south Asia - Bombay, Calcutta, Gwalior, Lucknow, Lahore, Dhaka, Kabul and, as will be made clear below, Madras. They traded, among other things, in spices, gems, indigo, silk and muslin, and in later years diversified into some of the newer industries of jute, shellac, betel-nut, etc. They also found their way to Tibet in search of trade in gold, musk and rubies. As the 18th century wore on, Persia's political and military disarray and the demise of its silk trade drove many more traders to migrate to India (and elsewhere), where they adapted their business expertise to new settings, markets, products, and trade routes.

Economic historians have debated the precise character of the commercial structures established by the Armenians in their trading activities and compared them with the joint stock, state-backed organisations (like the East India Company) created by Europeans. The far-flung web of Armenian diaspora communities was connected by ties of kinship, religion, and language, by cooperation and mutual support, by relatively easy credit, and by contracts based on trust and good will. The general view among many of these historians is that such a reliance on ethno-religious and kin networks defined the Armenian mode of commerce as 'pre-modern'.

In time, Armenian notables played an important if not decisive role in negotiating with local rulers, including the Mughals, for territorial and trading privileges on behalf of the English when the latter first sought to establish themselves on the sub-continent. Indeed, some historians agree with Seth in his view that this Armenian mediation probably laid the foundation for the eventual domination of India by the East India Company. Ironically, with the collapse of the Mughal empire and the establishment of English hegemony Armenian traders were compelled to assume a subordinate role in the economic life of the country. Because it served their own interests, they continued to support the Company as interpreters, contractors, trading partners, ship owners, etc.

Turning to religion, Armenia was the first country to make Christianity the official religion, in 301 AD. Most Armenians in the Republic are Apostolic Orthodox and adhere to the Armenian Apostolic Church. There are many such churches in India. Armenians thus formed part of a pluralistic Christian population in India. Yet today,

while the Christian population in India numbers many millions, Armenians living in the country are estimated to number at most a few hundred individuals, half of whom live in Kolkata (Calcutta). So, where have all the Indo-Armenians gone?

### ARMENIANS IN MADRAS

The dates of first Armenian settlement in Madras are by no means agreed. One writer has them in the city as early as the eighth century, another suggests there was a major influx during the 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> centuries, while a third proposes that it was not until sometime around the beginning of the 16<sup>th</sup> century that a community started taking shape. What is certain is that Madras had an Armenian population by the 1660s. In the early days of settlement Armenian merchants, like Jewish merchants and Capuchin Fathers, had houses within Fort St George, the English factory. In 1700 a number of Armenians are said to have settled at St Thomas's Mount, by which time there were perhaps 200 in Madras. One source states that by 1711 they were 'numerous and opulent', and Armenian names appear in Company records of births and deaths.

The leadership of the community resided in a series of well to do merchants and philanthropists and most writers focus on their lives and activities. Khoja Petrus Uskan (Woscan), who left New Julfa in Persia as a young man and settled in Madras, is the most famous of these notables. He grew immensely wealthy, led the community, and is celebrated for having constructed the Marmalong Bridge across the Adyar River and a series of wide stone steps up to the chapel on top of St Thomas's Mount. He is reputed to have owned at least 42 houses in Madras, several of them in the Fort. His son became one of the members of the East India Company's Council of Madras. In time, other merchants - Agah Shameer Soolthanoomean and Agah Samuel Moorat are two names frequently mentioned in the literature - not only became wealthy but took a leading role in community and philanthropic activities. By 1795 the Armenian colony in Madras was large enough to require the building of a school for its children.

The earliest Armenian traders worshipped in the Catholic chapel of the Capuchin Fathers in Fort St George and this, it is claimed, helped to encourage the affinity of the Armenians in Madras to the Roman church (Coja Petrus Uskan was said to be

an ardent Catholic.). As was the custom in the Company's trading centres, once the community reached a core of 40 persons they were granted a plot of land and a timber structure in which to worship. This encouraged more Armenians to settle in old Madras. On the same site they later built (in 1712) a permanent church but it fell into disuse as the British apparently objected to such an impressive edifice in the Fort area. The present Armenian Church dedicated to the Holy Virgin Mary was erected on Armenian Street in 1772 on the site of the old Armenian cemetery. The church is adjacent to the (Catholic) Cathedral of St Mary of the Angels in the same street, to which is attached the Moorat chapel, last resting place of the eminent Armenian family.

The French invasion and capture of Madras in 1746 had profound implications for the Armenian settlers. Many of their properties were destroyed during the war (including a number of Coja Petrus Usca's 44 houses). Moreover, because some Armenians were suspected of having assisted the French, on recovering the city under the Treaty of Aix la Chapelle in 1748, the English prohibited all Armenians from living in 'White Town'. Thereafter, they were confined to 'Black Town'. This led to an exodus from the city on the part of some Armenian residents: a number left for several nearby settlements in south India, while a few – probably the wealthiest merchants - went abroad, as far away as Indonesia and Malaya. The least well-off, needless to say the greater part, had no choice but to remain in the city.

While the focus of most historical writing about the Armenians in India is on the merchant class for reasons already noted, the community was in fact economically diverse and internally stratified. Although virtually nothing is said about them in the literature, there are occasional references to soldiers, railwaymen, telegraph operators, journalists, civil servants and employees in British firms. Coja Petrus Usca's many houses in Madras were rented to less well-off members of the community. There is little doubt that some were quite poor, since an Orphan Fund for Armenians was established in the city in 1783. The majority, who were not part of the merchant or professional classes, had, since their arrival in Madras, lived in close contact with Christians of other faiths. Following the Anglo-French war, with their concentration in Black Town, social interaction with the majority of Anglo-Indians (then labelled 'Eurasians'), who inhabited the same neighbourhoods, worked in

some of the same occupations, and shared a similar status vis a vis the British, would have increased substantially. As already pointed out, from the beginning of Armenian settlement in Madras there was an easy relationship between them and the Catholic Church, and a number in fact adopted that faith. This too increased the extent of regular contact between the two groups. By the 19<sup>th</sup> century not only had most Indo-Armenians in Madras lost their language, but they had adopted the habits and customs of the Europeans and Anglo-Indians among whom they lived, and were increasingly marrying into these groups. Seth noted with some regret that 'several' Armenians had done so and 'forsaken' their own Church for that of their spouses. I suggest that as the century wore on such marriages would have increased and led to the absorption of the Armenian partners into Anglo-Indian society, in a development familiar to any student of Anglo-Indian history. Like many European residents in Madras - Portuguese, French, Dutch and a myriad of others – they were, through such a process, assimilated into this heterogeneous but culturally distinctive group.

## CONCLUSION

By all accounts the Armenian population in Madras (as elsewhere in India) is a shadow of its former self. One author, writing near the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, suggested that even then there were hardly 40 members in the city, and most in 'reduced circumstances'. Today, the Armenian Church functions only as a heritage site. We have seen that following the Anglo-French war in the middle of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, a number of rich merchants left the city, while the remaining population was confined to Black Town. This brought them into closer contact with Anglo-Indians of similar status. The result, I suggest, was a number of inter-marriages and the absorption of Armenians partners into this notoriously inclusive hybrid community. How often this occurred is impossible to say, but the Madras/Chennai Anglo-Indian population today includes several distinctly Armenian names along with a number of others which, though shared with other Christian groups, might possibly have Armenian connections. So when we ask 'where have all the Indo-Armenians gone?' part of the answer may lie within Anglo-India.

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**Lionel Caplan** attended McGill University in Montreal and later studied social anthropology at the University of London, where he was awarded a doctorate. He taught for many years at the School of Oriental and African Studies in London, and is now Emeritus Professor of South Asian Anthropology and Professorial Research Associate at the school. He has conducted research in Nepal and India and published several monographs based on this work. His most recent book (published in 2001) is entitled *Children of Colonialism: Anglo-Indians in the Postcolonial World* which arose from his research in Chennai during the 1990s. He has also published a number of articles on the Anglo-Indian community. He is married to the anthropologist Pat Caplan; they live in London. He can be contacted at [lc38@soas.ac.uk](mailto:lc38@soas.ac.uk)