



Socio-Economic and Cultural contributions of Armenian and Jews Community of Calcutta in the Colonial Era.

Chandana Banerjee

Assistant Professor

Department of History

Chandernagore College

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Abstract:

The Armenians known as the 'Merchant Princes of India' had a great share in the whole country's economic growth. The Armenians were possibly, the first among all the foreigners who came to settle in Calcutta, and most of them were from Persia in those initial days. The community began to migrate from Turkey and Iran to all the European and Asian colonies since 16th century and settled in Calcutta, Chinsurah, Chandannagar in Bengal. They took part in the city's trading activities and built magnificent churches, clubs, schools and colleges in the city. They participated and thus helped in the growth of the famous horse-racing, i.e. 'Derby' culture at racecourse of Maidan. They were the communities to introduce Rugby matches in the city, and even represented Indian football in the foreign land for the first time. However even after India's independence in 1947, traces of occasional exchanges between Armenia and India can be found in 1970s and in 1990s specially. In 1663 and recently in 2007 Calcutta even witnessed visit of two Armenian eminent personalities from Armenia like His Holiness Vazgen-I and His Holiness Karekin-II .

The Jews mostly migrated from Baghdad in Iraq in the initial days and later from various other European and Middle East countries to the 18th century Calcutta formed a part of the colonial elites throughout the colonial period. They were often identified by the natives as the Europeans as they lived in the 'White Town' near chowringhee square and began to speak English and imitate British culture later. In between 1825-1831 to escape political upheavals in Baghdad and in 1940s after Japanese invasion of Burma, migration of this community to the city increased substantially. The Jewish community in Calcutta established the famous 'Chowringhee Mansion' five synagogues including the great 'Maghan David', i.e. the largest synagogue of the East, two Jewish schools and one Jewish hospital that bear evidences of their presence in the city well. Their cake shop, i.e. the famous 'Nahoum's' helped creating a rejoicing taste bud of the city. The most influential Jewish family in Kolkata, the Ezras, not only set up a Girl's School but has a street named after them in the city also. Their legacy in the city further has been supported in the recent verdict of Calcutta High court that recognized all the members from the community, whoever own 'Meghan David'

synagogue and its property and participated sometime in the congregation, as the part of Calcutta Jews Body, whether they reside here at present or not. Thus even after the mass exodus of this community that began after the country's independence and formation of Jewish homeland in Israel, their occasional visit in search of their roots to the city continued to enrich the heterogeneous culture of the city time to time.

So this paper, going through down the memory lane of history, tries to look back on the extremely diversified and enriched socio cultural ambience of the city shaped in the colonial times which we still enjoy today and are very proud of, invoked by these two communities who have been almost forgotten and extinct in modern day Kolkata.

Calcutta the 'City of Joy' has been home to various ethnic communities from the very beginning which contributed largely in making of the vibrant and liberal cultural atmosphere of the city today. Among all the communities, the Armenians and Jewish population who have often been mistaken as the Europeans or Eurasians for their fair skin and anglicized demeanour, and who have almost ceased to exist from the city now, had a great share of contribution to the city's physical appearance, economic, social and cultural preferences since the colonial times.

The Armenians possibly were the first among all Europeans who came mostly from Persia in their initial days and settled down in 'Kolkata'. Professor C.R. Wilson in an article captioned as 'Armenian Founders of Calcutta' published in 'Englishman' (Calcutta) on 31st January, 1895, referred to the fact that the oldest Christian tomb in Calcutta was one of the Armenians, dated 1630. Sticking to this early date professor Suniti Kumar Chatterjee has opined that the Armenian traders settled in Calcutta even before the English East India Company and Job Charnock settled in the city in 1690 while according to Radharaman Mitra these Armenians came to the city only after the British establishment took its roots into the city. Most of these Armenian traders came to India in 11th century and settled near the banks of Hooghly River, specifically in Murshidabad, Chinsurah, Chandernagore and Calcutta during 1645 as per records. The Armenian traders expanded their trading operations from land to sea only after their settlement in Bengal and Calcutta. They traded from Calcutta to New Julfa, South Seas, China or Manilas and also to other parts of the Country upon equal terms, duties and freights as the British East India Company throughout the colonial period. The Armenian traders were of immense importance to the British East India Company in their initial days for their settlement in the city as well as in the Bengal province. As recorded by Seth Jacob Mesrobian in his book 'Armenians in India: From the Earliest Times to the Present Day', the eminent Armenian Khojah Israel Sarhand dealt with the Mughal emperor on behalf of the British East India Company to secure the renting of three villages of Calcutta, Sutanuti and Govindpur in 1698. He also accompanied the Surman Embassy to Delhi and successfully procured the 'Grand Farman' of 1717 from the emperor Farukh Siyar for the English that laid the foundation of British rule in India. On the onset of 17th and 18th centuries the Armenian traders in Calcutta were known as the most peaceful, polite and innocuous loyal subjects of the newly established British East India Company. As reported in the 'Indian Recreations' published in Edinburgh in 1803, the Armenians were the most respectable and perhaps the most dominant body of foreign merchants in the city whose information in the field of trade from all the different quarters is deemed to be the most accurate and detailed. In their initial days, specifically during the attack by Nawab Sirajdaulla on Calcutta, the Company got tremendous economic as well as military support from the wealthy Armenian merchants of the city like *Agah Moses Catchick and Khoja Petrus*. Some of the contemporary letters and chronicles of Armenian merchants in the city records the most controversial event of the period of the city, 'the Black Hole Tragedy', and thus provides us with one of the important insights to history. The fact that almost 150 Armenian traders, who were residing in the city at that time, were not attacked by the army of Bengal Nawab, bears testimonial that they were indeed an influential and respected trading communities of the time.

The Armenian community of Calcutta initially settled in the North Calcutta, known as 'Black Town' and moved to Central and South Calcutta later. Their settlement in the Burrabazar area has been named as 'Armanitola' after their name. Nearby there is also a street named as 'Armani Street' and a locality 'Armani Para' that still exist at the vicinity of Free School Street where they lived in major numbers. There was a steady rise in their number in the city throughout the colonial time and their migration to the city rose to

the highest after genocide in Anatolia in 1915 by the Turkish forces. By 1939, almost 1000 Armenians used to reside in the city, among whom, there were some of the most influential and opulent members of the community from all over the country. Known as the ‘Merchant Princes of India’, the members from this community residing in the then British capital were primarily engaged into trading activities; especially in the trade of Opium. Later they got engaged with all kind of occupations, like legal and medical profession, teaching, military servicemen under the British Government etc. Those who served in the military services under the British Government were often conferred with some prestigious British Titles, sometimes even crowned with Knighthood. In the 18th and 19th centuries they ran trading companies, shipping lines, coal mines and hotel business. Some of them took leading part in the construction business of the city. Some of the imposing structures, like the ‘Park Mansion’, ‘Queen Mansion’, ‘Harington Mansion’, ‘Nizam Palace’ (which is also known as ‘Galstan Park and Mansion’ named after its chief architect Mr. J.C. Galstan, the doyen of the Armenian community of Calcutta), ‘Grand Hotel’, were built and renovated by them, which added a unique flavour of the colossal architectures of the city.

The affluent and enthusiastic Armenians had many establishments of their own in the city that bear testimony of their vibrant presence in colonial period. They founded three Armenian churches in the city. The mother church of the Indian Armenians is the Church of Nazareth or Apostolic Church, named after Agah Nazar, who erected the church in 1724 at 1, Armenian street. This church is also known as the oldest church built in Calcutta after the destruction of the small chapel which was built by the community in the city in 1688 near China Bazar area. Some of the community members were buried in the church yard and the whole church has a good number of tombstones of Armenian Diaspora who came in the city as the partners and representatives of the richer Armenian traders and lived here. The main architect of this Church of Nazareth was Gavond who arrived in the city from Persia. The wonderful belfry that acts as the Clock Tower near the Church was built by Hazarmall family in 1734. Manvel Hazarmall, who popularly was known Hujurimal, an eminent merchant of the time, from the family, built the Steeple of the church in the same year. Other two churches built by the community were the Chapel of Holy Trinity, built in 1867, at Tangra region and the Church of Saint Gregory the Illuminator, built in 1906, at Lower Circular Road. Another important establishment of the community in the city was *Armani Ghat*, built in 1734 near Howrah Bridge by Manvel Hazarmall. In colonial period, Eastern Railways had their Calcutta station and ticket reservation centre here. Hazarmal also built a ‘*pacca ghat*’ near the famous Kalighat temple and donated *bighas* of lands to the temple. The first regular Armenian school in Calcutta to educate the children of the community in Armenian language, was founded by Arratoon Kaloos, in 1798. Armenian Philanthropic Academy was inaugurated in 1821 at 358, Old China Bazar Street, in the immediate vicinity of the Armenian Church of Nazareth first and was shifted to its permanent building at Free School Street, later in 1883. The Girls department, though founded since its very inception, was later abandoned in 1842. The Arratoon Kaloos School was amalgamated with the Philanthropic Academy in 1825. Being the second oldest educational institution in Calcutta, this school was transformed into Armenian College in 1888. All the boys in this school in early 20th century were educated at the expense of the Armenian Church or Batavia Armenian Association or other such associations. Later it was being run by the capital form the ‘Armenian Education Trust Funds, London’. As recorded by Seth Mesrovb, the school in its glorious days, owned a great library named *Araratian Library* with thousands of rare manuscripts, and a press. Among the teachers there were Armenians, Eurasians and Bengalis also. For the purpose of imparting free education, in Armenian and English languages to the little poor girls and boys of the community in the city, M. D. A. David, established *Davidian Day School* at 1, Ashutosh Mukherjee Road, Bhowanipore in 1924, where the entire educational faculty was Armenian lady teachers.

According to the gazette published in 1837 by Johanness Avdall, a reputed Armenian community member and a member of Asiatic Society, the Armenians in Calcutta were of two different types of populations. The Indo–Armenians or ‘Haico–Indian’, were a group of natives actually of the mixed races: the offspring of Bengali and Armenian parents, with black skin tone and ‘strange lifestyle’. This lineage was under the Armenian Church but not considered as the part of the Armenian community in its true sense. The other one among the Armenians in the city, were fair skinned, who essentially maintained European life style and were known as the ‘True Armenians’. However, in his book published in 1939, Seth Mesrovb had divided all the Armenians present in the city during the colonial time into three groups, like the ‘Calcutta

Armenians', the 'Julfa Armenians' and the 'Charmahalis' based on their times of arrival to the city, their places of origin and their cultural habits. Some of the social interactions and cultural contributions of the Armenian residents of Calcutta are unforgettable. They had christened the city's taste bud with their fusion recipe like 'Potoler Dolma'. The community members are well known for popularizing the culture of Derby or Horse racing in the city during the 19th century. Apar Aratoon Apar, the leading merchant of the colonial period and first member from the family that came from New Julfa to Bombay initially and then to Calcutta around 1830, was instrumental in giving a major thaw to the development of Royal Turf Club in Calcutta. The community members even formed a Rugby team that represented India internationally for the first time during the same period. Among all the reputed Armenians of colonial times who contributed in the social and cultural life of the city, the most celebrated one was Angelina Yeoward, popularly known as Gauhar Jaan (1873 – 1930). She became famous as 'the first recording superstar of India' and 'gramophone girl' by recording more than 600 songs in between 1902-1920 and contributed immensely in popularizing genres like *Hindi classic*, *Thumri*, *Dadra*, *Tarana* music etc.

The Jewish population arrived and settled down a bit late than the Armenians in Calcutta, almost in the early 18th century. Like the Armenians, Calcutta Jewish community were a heterogeneous community too, comprising of both the European and Eastern Jews. Most of those who settled in the city in the colonial period were Baghdadi Jews, also known as Arabic Jews, who migrated from the Middle East: viz. Aleppo, Basra, Yemen, Syria, Iraq etc. It is reported that initially those who migrated from the Aleppo region were greater in number in the city, but later, those who arrived from Baghdad outnumbered them. Their migration to the city increased during 1825–1831 to escape political upheaval in Baghdad and again in 1940s during the Holocaust and after Japanese invasion of Burma. Their number was close to almost 6000 in the city during the World War II. In their early days, they settled down in the Pollock, Ezra and Synagogue streets near *Chowringhee* in the White Town. The first generation of this Judeo–Arabic community in the city used to speak Arabic mostly at their home, and used to wear Arabic attire in public. Soon in the 19th century their identity evolved as they began to adopt English as their language and European dressing and lifestyle. Some of their Hebrew names also became anglicized. However, the common Jews unlike their richer brethren found a close relationship with the local Muslims due to the similarities in their religious and cultural customs. Some even adopted Hindi to communicate with the locals but they never acquired a good knowledge in Bengali. Despite their efforts of identifying themselves as a part of 'colonial elites', they were denied the legal privileges enjoyed by the Europeans in the country during the British period since they were reclassified as 'natives' in 1885 by the British government.

The Calcutta Jews were consisted of some extremely rich as well as poor families. Only less than forty families, who were among wealthy trading class, were engaged with the trade of Indigo, spices, cotton, Silk, Muslin, Opium and drugs via China to Rangoon. Later, some of them owned Jute Mills, Cigarette Company, Textile and Export Firms also. The famous Ezra family established their family business in real estates of the city in the 18th and 19th centuries. Middle class community members engaged themselves with shop keeping, peddling, brokerage, clerkship etc. But 50% of the Baghdadi Jews of the city in colonial time remain dependant on the community charity only. The first Jew to settle in Calcutta was Lyon Prager, who arrived in the city in 1786 from London as a diamond merchant and was appointed as Inspector and Purchaser of drugs by the Board of Trade of Fort William. After him, the *Sephardims* and then the *Baghdadi* Jewish families arrived in the city. The first Baghdadi Jew to settle in the city in 1798 was Shalom ben Aharon Ovadya Ha–Cohen who came from Aleppo as a diamond merchant. His son-in-law, Moses Dwek Cohen, organised the Jewish community members in Calcutta later. Among the reputed members of the *Ezra* family, Joseph Ezra was the first one to settle in the city from Baghdad in 1821. His son David Joseph Ezra served as the Sheriff of Calcutta in 1879. There were also some other illustrious families in the city, like, the *Sassons*, *Elias*, *Gubbays*, *Belilios*, *Musleahs* and *Judahs*.

The Jewish community of Calcutta in their heydays had established many monuments, schools, marvellous buildings, hospitals and synagogues in the city that bears testimony of their vibrant presence till now. There is a Jewish cemetery situated at 45, Narkeldanga Main Road, Calcutta- 54, where the earliest grave of a merchant from the community, who migrated from Safad, is dated from 1812. The cemetery itself shows the transformation of the Calcutta Jewish Community as the graves here followed essentially

Baghdadi style initially and later English style from the 1930s. A second cemetery at 24, U.C. Banerjee Road was opened in 1870, but was closed after 20 years. Calcutta's first Jewish school 'Jewish Girls' School' started in 1881, at Park Street with the help from Elias Moses Dwek Cohen. The Jewish hospital named as 'Ezra Hospital' was established in 1887 by Mozella Ezra, wife of Elias David Joseph Ezra, from the famous Ezra family. The Ezras also constructed *Ezra Mansion*, *Ezra Terrace* and *Chowringhee Mansion* that beautified the city with their magnificent presence. The Ezras also has a street after their name in the city that proves their highly elevated position in the city during the colonial time. The most striking among all the constructions by the community are the synagogues, among which, regular prayers can be heard only in one today. The first one known as Old Synagogue was built by Shalom David Cohen. In 1825 Ezekiel Judah built Neveh Shalom Synagogue on the Canning Street, which was rebuilt in 1911. He and David Joseph Ezra built another synagogue, Beth El Synagogue on the Pollock Street in 1856 and it was renovated and extended in 1886 again by Elias Shalom Gubbay. Magen Aboth Synagogue, built in 1897, and Sarae Rason Synagogue built in 1933 were two comparatively smaller constructions that are defunct today. The most celebrated among all these synagogues erected by the community members in their golden days in the city was the Magen David Synagogue, popularly called as '*Laal Girja*' due to its red colour. Built in 1884 by Elias David Joseph Ezra, in memory of his father David Joseph Ezra, this one is known as the largest synagogue of Asia and is still serving regular prayers in it.

This fundamentally urban community published many Judeo-Arabic Newspapers covering the news from Baghdad and the Middle East, published many printed books in Hebrew and Judeo-Arabic languages from the city and also set up numerous clubs in the 20th century. They founded the first Hebrew press in Calcutta in 1840. The first Judeo-Arabic weekly '*Mevasser*' was published from this press in 1873. They added some of their unique and delicious recipes to the cuisine of the city, like *Calcutta Hamim*, *Chicken Chitannee* and *Aloo Makallah* etc. But the most famous contribution to the city's taste bud by the community were the lip-smacking cakes baked by *Nahoum and Son's* Cake shop, which was established in 1902 by Israel Nahoum and is still running with a dedicated clientele and lover of such delicacies.

Both the Armenians and Jews were peace-loving communities and never promoted their trading ambitions with military force. Neither did they try to enforce any cultural supremacy over the population of the city and thus created a distinguished identity throughout the colonial era. However, most of them felt insecure after the Independence of the country in 1947 and migrated to Australia, Israel and other European cities in the quest of better prospect and security. But the connection between them and the city is still alive, as members of both the communities visit the city with different pursuits and bathe in the cultural osmosis of Kolkata.

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