



A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE ARMENIAN COMMUNITY IN MADRAS WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO THE ARMENIAN CHURCH

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Abstract

India has distinctive trade relation not only with the European countries but also with the Asians. The Armenians were the most established merchants in India by the 17th century. The British took the help of the Armenians for negotiations at the Mughal Imperial court as they were well versed in many languages. This paper aims at bringing out the contributions of the Armenian community in Madras

Key words: Armenians, merchant, church, Mylapore, trade.

Introduction

Armenia is located at the headquarters of the two rivers the Tigris and Euphrates and it is in constant interaction with the Mesopotamian civilization to the South. The strategic location of Armenia for overland trade between East and the West from the Ancient to the close of the early Modern times, International trade had assumed a central place in the Economic life of the Armenian people.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Armenians constitute a large country in Asia. It is situated partly in Turkey and partly in Persia. The Armenians were considered as innocent and harmless people, not given to litigiousness. They were thrifty, sober, frugal and well versed in all the places of trade and commodities in India.¹ The Armenians were restricted to their commercial transaction to the East India Company. They styled themselves as free traders, without king, company or superiors and held themselves in no way responsible for the actions of others of their nations.

The Armenians were the most established merchants in the trade of this region by the 17th century.² In 1697 the Court of Directors of the English East India Company remarked, “For most certainly they (Armenians) are the most ancient merchants in the world”.³ By 16th and the 17th centuries they were able to spread out throughout Asia and Europe. The list of places are given in the Journal of Lucas Vanantesi, (a contemporary trade manual) it gives a ideas about their trade operations.⁴

India plays a distinctive role in establishing direct ties and developing trade and economic, cultural and political interactions between both of them since ancient times and this ties intensified during the late Medieval and Modern times. The Intercourse between India and the Armenians at the initial phase of history was more indirect in nature. The orally preserved literature and archaeological evidence disclose continues relation between the people of the Indus region and those of the western Asia. Artefacts found on scattered sites connect the early cities of western India with those of Mesopotamia in Southwestern Asia from about 3000 BC and through the latter

with the Armenia plateau.⁵ The Armenians utilized English shipping to freight their goods to various trading centers. The English in return depended on the Armenians, for they were better acquainted with the land and its practices for purchase of commodities. They took the help of the Armenians for the negotiations at the Mughal Imperial Court, for local Mughal administration and for gaining concessions at both the levels.⁶ After the advent of the English in India they were assisted by the Armenians as courtiers, qasids and interpreters.⁷ The English were unacquainted with the languages and cultural environment, hence the Armenians who had a good command of languages and their thorough understanding of the local stage, were the natural resort of the English. The Armenians on the other hand had flair of languages.⁸

The First relative concentration of the Armenian population in India was small in number. But soon the embryonic community related to the first of the sixteenth century soon arose in the South India and then expanded towards west and north. When the Portuguese arrived in the western coast of India in the year 1498 and then they settled in the southern region of the country, they found many Armenians already live there.

THE ARMENIANS COMMUNITY IN MADRAS

The small town Mylapur (later renamed as San Thome) on the outskirts of Madras had Armenian inhabitants in the first quarter of the sixteenth century. According to the Portuguese Sources, it was the Armenians who first resided in Pulikat (or Pulicat in the Kingdom of Vijayanagar, Coromandal) who first led them to the tomb of the Apostle Saint Thomas in Meilapur (Mylapur) where a small church has been built.⁹ According to Om Prakesh, the trading Community of Pulicat consist of members of the Muslim Communities of the coastal South Eastern India, known as Marakkayars on Coromandel Telugu speaking Chettis of the Baliya and Komatti communities as well as Armenians.¹⁰

Later in the Seventh century when Francois Martin, the founder of the French Colony of Pondicherry retired in San Thome to write his famous memoris, he noted the following about Armenian relations with the town: "It is held that the commencement of the building of San Thome was the work of many Armenians who were frequenting there an account both of trade and also of their pious devotion to the Saint whose name the town bears. When the Portuguese secured themselves in India, the member of those nations settled in all parts of the country, and a number of them in San Thome, where they united with the Armenians who were already residing there."¹¹

In the city of Madras the Portuguese had their trading station since 1504, before the English took possession of it. It came under their control in 1602, we can see that the Armenians were well established there in the first half of the 16th century. On the Mount of St. Thomas in Madras, an Armenian Inscription is preserved on the date of construction of the Christian Church in the same area. The year of 1547 is mentioned on the wall gate inscription, despite the fact that there is no Armenian Church in that area and the Armenians were using some common Christian Church.¹² The first Armenian publication was printed at Madras in 1772. The first Armenian

journal in the world was also printed at this place in 1794.¹³ The Armenian Church was another medium through which information was dispersed. They were also responsible for funding the printing presses, the religious Ecclesiastes who travelled to and fro from New Julfa have also to be taken into account.¹⁴

The Armenian merchants settled in Madras.¹⁵ From a valuable Armenian Manuscript, written at Masulipattnam by Sarkies Johannes in 1790, we find that the Armenians settled permanently at Madras in the year 1666. The site of Madras was obtained by the English East India Company by a Grant from the Qutb Shahi Sultan dated 1st March 1639. Many Armenian merchants assumed the role of the intermediaries between the English and the Qutub Shahi court. They were very comfortable in multiple cultures. The town of Mylapore (San Thome in Chennai) was captured by Sultan Abul Allah Qutb Shah of Golconda from Portuguese in May 1662. The Sultan appointed an *Armenian Markus Erezad as its governor*. In the *Public Record office Museum in London in case K, no.113* a document is kept, which is a letter of Mylapore governor Erezad to the English king Charles II, dated February 4th. It is written in Portuguese. The Portuguese was the official language of usage in Mylapore not only till the end of Portuguese rule but was also circulated a couple of more decades. The letter was signed by the author in Armenian (Markus Erezad).¹⁶

THE CHURCH

In the letter dated 29th February 1692 from the governor of the English East India Company in London to the Council in Fort St. George, Madras following interesting fact was mentioned: “We have discoursed Sir John Goldsborough about enlarging our Christian town to a quadrangle so it may be done without the detriment to the company with a handsome stone bridges over the river in which designed new moiety of the city. One quarter of that moiety may be set apart for Armenian Christians to build their new church at their charges with stone and other durable materials and convenient dwelling houses for their merchants.... And the quarter so set apart for their use, you may call Julfa, that being the town from whence Shah Abbas the great brought them in a suburb of his new made metropolitan city of Isfahan and called the quarter he allotted there to the Armenian Julfa by the name of the city from whence he brought them, and they are increased there to be richest people and most expert merchants that we know in the Universe”.¹⁷

With the countenance and support of the late Honourable East India Court of Directors under a contract, dated 22nd January 1668, in the fourth year of the reign of James the Second by which Armenians were given equal privilege with the British subjects. They were permitted to cross and recross the Indian sea in the vessals of the company as free men, to trade as merchants, to purchase and hold land property unmolested by the company’s officers and to enjoy all civil offices and Preferment’s like other subjects of the company.¹⁸ In any of the towns or cities of the Company which contains forty or more Armenians, they were provided with temporary wooden place of worship, which might at any time be converted into more substantial ones, so as to worship God after their own fashion, and be unmolested in the free use and enjoyment of their religion. They were allowed an annual Grant of 50 pounds to enable them to provide themselves with a priest to officiate in their place of worship.¹⁹

The Armenian Church called St. Mary, Black Town, Madras, was built by the Armenian Community at their own expense, and is located at No.1, in the head of the street called after the Armenians, Armenian street, in which the bulk of the Armenians resided. The Church was erected in 1712 AD. The main building forms a long corridor, open at the sides, with a plain altar place at the east end. The belfry is distinct from the main building, within the enclosure of the building, having a room for the residence of the priest, school rooms etc.²⁰ They very rarely they received assistance from the Government. In 1833 they received a donation of Rupees 5000/- from the late lottery Funds, for Repairs etc. which enabled to build a substantial Verandah, 118 feet in length and 10 feet wide on the eastern side.²¹ In 1839 a further donation of Rupees 2000/- was given to them from the Woolley Estate for the Repair of the Church, while to community itself have made additional and alterations to the church and its environment. Their spiritual chief was a Bishop, their priest were permitted to marry and in their ceremonial observances there is a great resemblance to the Roman Catholic Church – like the use of incense, candles, veneration of pictures, representation of sacred subjects, holy water, sign of the cross with the exception of image-worship. In doctrine point of view the authority of the Pope is denied. One hundred and fifty days are consumed in fasts during the year. Meat, fish, eggs, butter, cheese and milk are excluded on fast days and they are extremely rigid in absorbing them.²²

The Armenians established an Orphan Fund in 1783 and opened a School for the young of their community in 1795. They have also a cemetery of their own which was built and made over them in 1862 by the Government.²³ The affair of the Armenian Church was managed by the priest, assisted by a deacon and three church wardens. The latter are elected from the leaders of their community. The Orphan Funds are looked by the Governors and the School by the Directors. The Office of the priest is limited to two years, then the Priest has to return to his native place and his place is taken by another send out for this purpose. The salary of the Priest is two hundred rupees per month that of a deacon is sixty rupees. The Deacon resides permanently in Madras.

In Person the Armenians have a short, stout make of body, with full and large faces, well- chiseled bold features, and prominent long nose. In their own country they dressed after Arab and Turkish fashion. Their women covered their mouths wherever they went, even in their house and when out of doors wrap themselves up in white cloaks or chuddhers and the married women lived in great seclusion which is imposed upon them with greater severity than among the Persians. She lives in silence and conceals her face even from her husband's father or mother.²⁴ They are brought up in ignorance and it is thought not prudent to educate them. In Southern India both male and female take European dress and habits and educate their children. Both Boys and girls receive their best education. They also send them to England for higher studies.

The Armenian marriage ceremony is much after their own fashion by a priest. The bride and bridegroom are made to kneel and are covered over with a shawl. The Priest places his prayer book on their heads and out of it he chants or repeats the prayers. When this is over the young people are made to drink the wine out of the

same cup, when the cover is removed they kiss each other with this the ceremony is complete.²⁵

Conclusion

The Armenian Community of Madras once outnumbered among its members some of the wealthiest and most thrifty of our Indian merchants, some of their names are Asphar, Moorat, Sam, Lizar, Johanes and Macartoon.²⁶ The Armenians in southern India generally lived to their old age, they were not addicted.

Some of the Armenians suffered from unusual diseases of the Country like rheumatism, syphilis, asthma etc.²⁷ They led a quiet and peaceful life. It was an uncommon thing to hear the Armenians in trouble, may be because of their scanty population. The Armenians in Southern India within a few course of time dwindled in small numbers.²⁸

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