

(1) Epitaph of William Harney (1830-1901) in the Armenian Churchyard, Dhaka. (2) Epitaph of Mrs Heripsima Harney (1843-1898) wife of William Harney in the Armenian Churchyard, Dhaka. (3) Charles Wilfred Harney (1920-1975) with his children Macquair and Rita Rose, Dhaka, 1968. (4) A century-old mahogany wardrobe with two doors and foliage decoration by the renowned C. Lazarus & Co., cabinet makers of Calcutta, bought by the Harneys from Joseph Lazarus in Dhaka (Collection: Macquair Harney).

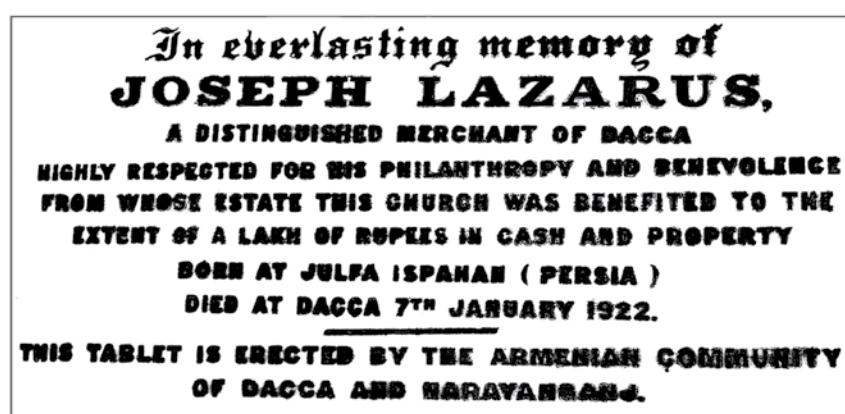
# The Bangladeshi-Armenian Harneys of Dhaka

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A brief on the Armenians of Dhaka: Regardless of the absence of any definitive chronicle on the advent of the Armenians in Bengal, particularly to Dhaka, historians today unanimously agree that the Armenians started to arrive in Bengal, from the late 17th century onwards. It was the lure of trade and commerce which attracted them to come here during the Mughal, Nawabi and the colonial periods – Company and the British Raj. Towards the end of Mughal Emperor Aurangzeb's reign, Job Charnock of the East India Company, the founder of Calcutta, is said to have enlisted the services of the hardy and industrious Armenians,

1781. The site on which the Church stands today, was once part of an old cemetery. This property was owned by an Armenian called Agha Catachik Minassian (Minas), who donated the land for building of the church. The mortal remains of his wife Sophie, who died in Dhaka in 1764, lie interred inside the church.

The Armenians were classified as Europeans in India during the British rule. The census of 1866 listed 107 Armenians in the town of Dhaka. According to the census, there was one clergyman, five zamindars, thirty merchants, five shopkeepers and four government servants at that time in



Epitaph of Joseph Lazarus at the Armenian Church, Dhaka. He was a relation of the proprietors of C. Lazarus & Co., cabinet makers of Calcutta

notable philanthropists. In recognition of their commendable services, the Mughals, the Nawabs of Bengal and the British conferred on them the variously spelled appellations of Khajeh, Khojah or Khaja derived from the Persian honorific title of Khawaja or Khwaja, meaning lord or master. This was often corrupted or anglicised to Coja. They also carried another honorific prefix to their names, that of Agha (also Aga), signifying their Iranian antecedents.

Some of the noteworthy surnames of Armenian families of Dhaka in the 18th, 19th and early 20th centuries were the: Minassians/Minas's, Aminus's/Emnias's, Merkers, Servorgs, Georges, Petrus's/Petros's, Pogoses, Kevorkes, Aratoons, Manooks/Manuks, Davids, Catchatoors, Stephens, Highcazonys, Mackertichs, Bagdassors, Nahapiets, Painotys/Paneatis, Harneys, Lazarus's, Lucas's, Agacys, Michaels, Sarkies's/Cerkes's, Joakims and Thomas's. They once wielded great influence in Dhaka society, especially in the 19th and early 20th centuries as notable zamindars, merchants, financiers, philanthropists, institution builders (Pogose school and Dhaka Bank) and as community leaders of the civil society in local politics (municipal bodies), art and culture (horse racing, club). In Dhaka, many of them lived in the Armenian quarters in Armanitola or elsewhere in Old Dhaka, in beautiful garden houses in Ramna, Fulbaria, Motijheel and in palatial mansions along the banks of the river Buriganga in Dhaka, as can be seen from the alluringly picturesque booklet, "Panorama of Dacca", 1840.

The Harneys are a notable Armenian family of 19th to mid-20th century Dhaka. My friend Macquair Harney, a successful hotelier in Dhaka, is a fourth generation direct descendant from his great-grandfather. This compelling story thus begins with the great-grandfather of Macquair, named William Harney (1830-1901), who was born in Belfast, Ireland, and came to Dhaka probably in the late 1840s. What actually impelled the young man to come to India (Bengal) is not clear, except to assume that he had travelled all the way to try his luck.

However, not long after his arrival in Dhaka, he volunteered and fought on behalf of the East India Company in the short-lived, abortive rebellion of the native sepoy of the Company at the historic Lalbagh fort in Dhaka

in November 1857, following the failed Indian Rebellion of May 1857, in upper India starting in Meerut and ending with the fall of Mughal Delhi in September 1857. There is also a dearth of information on his life and times spent in Dhaka, besides that he married a lady named Heripsima (1843-1893) and raised a family. The older generation of the Harneys have all passed away. Sadly, they have not left behind any family chronicle. However, William along with his son Thomas William are credited for introducing the hackney-carriage – a four-wheel, horse-drawn covered carriage driven by a coachman (garwan) – to the streets of Dhaka, as an efficient mode of public transport. William died in Dhaka in 1901, and lies buried in the Armenian Churchyard along with his wife and eldest son. He and his wife had two sons: William Harney Jr (1863-1891) and Thomas William Harney (1872-1952), who was Macquair's grandfather.

Thomas William Harney seemed to have done well in life, and became wealthy enough to eventually acquire a sizeable zamindari estate in Dhaka and Bhola. He was liked by Nawab Sir Salimullah of Dhaka, for his social refinement. He charmed the Nawab with his fluency in Farsi and Urdu. Thomas built two large houses in old Dhaka. The first one still stands today in a dilapidated condition at Harney Street, Armanitola. The second house, also an old one, can be visited at 64, Sarat Chandra Chakravarti road, in Mahutholly. This house was once known locally as the "Saab Kuthi" (Saheb Bari). The celebrated Bangla poet Shamsur Rahman was once a close neighbour and friend of the Harneys here. The young poet respectfully addressed William as "Bobby Saheb". Both these houses were disposed of by the Harneys long ago. Thomas had also built a garden-house in Padma Pukur, some 122 miles south-west of Dhaka. He established The Dacca Cotton Mills in Postagola, Old Dhaka, nearby the river Buriganga. The land of the factory was leased from a Hindu family. Thomas married a lady named Teresa and had five sons, Harold, Gerald, Edward, Peter Lawrence and Charles Wilfred, and three daughters, Mary, Margaret and Carol.

Thomas William Harney and his family left the Orthodox Armenian Church and became Roman Catholics. Therefore, on their death he and

his wife were buried at the Narinda Christian cemetery in Wari, instead of the Armenian Churchyard. He was the first Harney to break with the Armenian family tradition. However, he never severed his connection with the Armenian Church completely, but continued with his patronage and support, by occasionally visiting the church, and making handsome donations.

The youngest son of Thomas William and Teresa was called Charles Wilfred (1920-1975). Charles married Irene. They had two sons, Macquair and James, and a daughter, Rita Rose. The abolition of the zamindari in 1950 in East Bengal (Bangladesh), saw a steady decline in the fortunes of the Harneys. The zamindari estate in Bhola was lost and so was the property at Padma Pukur. After the Indo-Pak war of 1965, the Harneys' cotton mill at Postagola, which was originally leased from a Hindu family, was acquired by the then Pakistan government as enemy property, since the Hindu owner of the land suddenly decided to leave for India permanently. On their deaths, Charles and Irene were buried at the Narinda cemetery in Wari.

The eldest son of Charles Wilfred and Irene, Macquair Harney (b.1961), is married to Teresa Kumkum. They have two sons, Joseph Wilfred and Charles Isidore Arnob, and two daughters, Rebecca Juliet and Jennifer Antora. As mentioned earlier, Macquair is a businessman about town. Before he became a hotelier, he worked for a while with Mother Teresa's organisation, Missionaries of Charity, in Islampur, Dhaka. For his devotional social work, he was awarded a certificate by the legendary Mother Teresa of Calcutta.

Macquair is of an amiable deportment. He is soft-spoken and an engaging conversationalist, once you get to know him. He is trying his best to keep the Harney family legacy and the Armenian heritage alive. Over the years, almost all the Harneys have emigrated overseas, having left Dhaka and Chittagong for good. They now live in Kolkata, Australia, USA and Canada.

Macquair, too, is of the Roman Catholic persuasion, initiated first by his grandfather. Consequently, he does not regularly attend the Armenian Church. Nonetheless, he has a strong emotional connection to the church in Armanitola, where his Armenian ancestors lie buried. Moreover, he is the sole representative of the once thriving and vibrant Armenian community of Dhaka. As someone with the notable surname of Harney, he is the last link to the past amongst all those memorable surnames of the remarkable Armenian families listed above, who had once enriched the history and heritage of Dhaka manifold, the remnants and memories of which continue to intrigue us!

I am grateful to Macquair Harney, for generously sharing the images and the basic family information. His help and cooperation were invaluable.

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A rare photograph of a jute factory, Nahapiet & Co's, at Postagola in old Dhaka, owned by the wealthy Nahapiet Armenian family of Dhaka, circa 1907.

then newly arrived migrants to Bengal. Their pontifical seat was in Julfa, Isfahan, in Persia (Iran). Although Christian by faith, their fluency in the Persian language, and familiarity with the Persian culture (Shiite Muslim) greatly facilitated their assimilation in Bengal, since the court and official language, that is, the lingua franca of the society, was Farsi or Persian up until 1835. However, even after the introduction of English as the official language, the larger society and local communities in the urban areas and even in the hinterland, carried on with their daily interactions as usual in Persian, Hindustani, Urdu or Bengali, to the advantage of the multilingual Armenians in Dhaka, and elsewhere in Eastern Bengal.

The provenance of the early presence of Armenians in Dhaka is borne by the fact that there are two known existing old graves of Armenians dated between 1714 and 1795, within the premises of the historic Roman Catholic Church of the Holy Rosary at Tejgaon, built in 1677. The earliest Armenians in Dhaka settled in Tejgaon. There was once a small ruined wooden Armenian chapel in Armanitola over which the Armenian Apostolic Church of the Holy Resurrection, was built later in

Dhaka, who were Armenians. The Armenians were a favoured community of the British, since they were not only Christians, but an intrepidly enterprising people, imbued with a pioneering spirit, and guided by a strong work ethic. They also became readily anglicised. Thus, they blended well with other Europeans and were often members of the exclusive British social clubs in Dhaka, Narayanganj and in a few district towns of Eastern Bengal, prior to the partition of British India in 1947.

The Armenians initially traded in rawhides, salt, spices, precious stones, saltpetre, calico and indigo. Later they prospered in the 19th century as the foremost pioneers of the lucrative jute industry in Dhaka and Narayanganj, setting up mechanised factories dealing in jute and cotton textiles, thereby, becoming manufacturers and retailers, initiated steam navigation businesses, dealt in wholesale trading in essential commodities, were the first to establish and operate super-shops which sold luxury European goods, and set up small shops including thrift stores, confectionaries and boarding houses (hotels). By the early 19th century quite a few had speculated wisely and invested capital in land, becoming wealthy zamindars (landholders), and