



PHOTO: ANISUR RAHMAN

# The last of the Armenians

Once a flourishing community in Bengal, Armenians have dwindled in number to such an extent that only one man now represents the entire community in Dhaka. He is known by his Anglicised name of Michael Joseph Martin.

When Martin, now in his late seventies, dies, it will throw into doubt the future of the Armenian Apostolic Church of Holy Resurrection, one of Dhaka's most beautiful churches.

Martin, whose Armenian name is Mikel Houssep Martirosian, shoulders the responsibility of preserving the building against the ravages of the weather and pollution.

The cemetery in the church is akin to a huge history book, chronicling the history of the Armenian people in the region.

Founded in 1781, the Armenian Church is a historically significant architectural monument situated in Armanitola in old Dhaka. The church bears testimony to the existence of a significant Armenian community in the region in the 17th and 18th centuries.

Following the domination of their home-

land by the Persian powers of the time, Armenians were sent by their new rulers to the Bengal region for political and economic reasons. They came to Dhaka for business and traded in jute and leather. The area where they lived came to be known as Armanitola.

The now famous church was built on Armenian Street in Armanitola, then a thriving business district. The site was an Armenian graveyard before the church was built, and the tombstones that have survived serve as a chronicle of Armenian life in the area. Agaminus Catachik, an Armenian, gave away the land to build the church.

In the fifty years following the church's construction, a clock tower was built on its western side. It is said that the clock could be heard four miles away, and people synchronised their watches with the sound of the tower's bell. The clock stopped in 1880, and an earthquake destroyed the tower in 1897.

The church plan is rectangular. Features include an arched gate and an arched door. There are four doors and 27 windows. The main floor is divided into three parts: a pulpit

enclosed by railings, a middle section with two folding doors, and an area separated by a wooden fence for seating women and children. There is a spiral staircase leading into the church.

Today, the church is usually closed. It has been the subject of BBC and AFP documentaries, and has received recognition from the Bangladesh government as an archaeological site.

Martin, the custodian of the church, came to Dhaka in 1942 during World War II, following in the footsteps of his father who had settled in the region decades earlier.

In his advanced age, he now worries about who will look after the church.

"This is a blessed place and God won't leave it unprotected and uncared for," he told an AFP interview.

He added, hopefully: "When I die, maybe one of my three daughters will fly in from Canada to keep our presence here alive."

Sources: The BBC, AFP, The Independent and works of Muntassir Mamoon and Sushil Chaudhury.

## Relics left unprotected

TAMANNA KHAN

Though listed for preservation by Rajdhani Unnayan Kartripakkha, the 232-year-old Armenian church in Old Dhaka is yet to be recognised as a protected heritage site by the Department of Archaeology.

"As part of our efforts to declare the church a protected heritage site, we sent four letters to the deputy commissioner's office asking for land schedule [details on land] of the church," said Rakhi Roy, deputy director (antiquity) of the Department of Archaeology.

"But we are yet to receive any reply," she said, adding that the department sent the DC office two letters in 2000, one in 2010 and another on June 6, 2011.

But the land division of the DC office said it could not trace any of the letters sent by the Department of Archaeology.

About the letters, DC Shaikh Yusuf Harun said, "Hundreds of letters arrive every day in this office. If they [officials of the Department of Archaeology] are so keen on obtaining the land schedule of the church, they should have contacted us over the phone after sending the letters."

While the whereabouts of the letters remain a mystery, time continues to take its toll on the stone inscriptions on the Armenian graves that lie in the premises of the age-old church in Armanitola.

Archaeologist Dr Sufi Mostafiz said, "The stone inscriptions at the church premises carry historical value, as they tell stories of Dhaka's lost Armenian community."

But the Department of Archaeology said it didn't have any list of the stone inscriptions at the church.

Even the Committee for Documentation on Architectural Sites in Dhaka couldn't obtain a complete list of stone inscriptions there.

Committee Chairman Prof AAMS Arefin Siddique, also vice chancellor of Dhaka University, said, "We contacted the church's custodian Michael Joseph Martin. He declined to give us information, saying since it is a private property he was not liable to disclose any information about it."

Martin could not be reached for comment as he is now abroad for medical treatment.

The church was included in the 2009 Rajuk gazette, in which 93 buildings and four areas were listed for preservation, said Taimur Islam, Chief Executive of Urban Study Group that campaigns for conservation of architectural and urban heritage of Old Dhaka.

He said the Department of Archaeology could enter into an agreement with the church authorities under Section 12 of the Antiquity Law that allows protection of historically significant buildings and sites without acquisition of land by the department.



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## A silent chronicler

This tombstone marking the death of merchant Avetis in 1714 is the oldest gravestone of an Armenian in Dhaka. With inscription in both Armenian and Portuguese, the memorial stone lies at the Holy Rosary Church, a Roman Catholic church, in the capital's Tejgaon area.



PHOTO: COURTESY

## The trading diaspora



The East India Company's observation in 1699 about the Armenians that "most certainly they are the most ancient merchants of the world" was perhaps no exaggeration.

From the beginning to the end of the pre-modern era, Armenian merchants ventured out of their homeland to different parts of Asia and Europe. They settled in important cities and ports far away from home.

And thus they created an efficient long-distance trade network with a strong link with their main centre at New Julfa, a large settlement established by Armenian refugees in Isfahan, Iran.

This "trading diaspora" of the Armenians was a unique feature of the business world of the 17th and 18th centuries.

Armenian traders took the overland route to travel to India through Afghanistan and Tibet in the 12th century. They became the first merchants to carry back from India spices, muslin and precious stones to Europe and the Middle East.

Aware of the Armenian merchants' integrity and shrewd nose for business, Mughal Emperor Akbar invited them to settle in Agra, the imperial capital. In 1562, he married an Armenian, referred to as Mariam Zamani Begum in Abul Fazal's Ain-I-Akbari.

Some records show Armenian traders came

to Dhaka around 1613, soon after it became the capital of Mughal Bengal. In the beginning, textile trade was their main prop of the city.

The Armenians were the first, not the Europeans or other Asians to foresee the bright prospects of jute in Dhaka. They are reputed to be the pioneers of jute trade here in the second half of the 19th century.

Some Armenians in Dhaka shifted to landholding in the late 18th century in the wake of the decline in textile trade following the British conquest of Bengal in 1757.

The Armenian community contributed a lot to the civic life of Dhaka. It was Nicholas Pogose, an Armenian Zaminder, who founded the first private school, Dhaka Pogose School, in 1848. The school is still running.

Armenian merchant Shircore, the founder of GM Shircore & Sons, pioneered transport "revolution" by introducing hackney carriage. The business house was probably responsible for popularising tea in Dhaka.

The Armenians were also pioneers in introducing European and British goods in Dhaka and in setting up western-style departmental stores. CJ Manook, GM Shircore, JA Minas, and Anania were some of the prominent Armenians to open big stores in the city.

Sources: armeniancollege.in, indiaprofile.com and works of Sushil Chaudhury

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