



The two restored paintings at the altar of the church, The Last Supper and the Crucifixion, most probably the work of Charles Pote, were in a dismal state when Armen took over wardenship.



Armen Arslanian, warden of the Armenian Church of the Holy Resurrection



Armenian Church of the Holy Resurrection in Armanitola, Old Dhaka.

## In search of a community lost in time

Armen Arslanian, warden of the Armenian Church of the Holy Resurrection in Armanitola, talks to The Daily Star about the importance of preserving and researching the history of the Armenian community in Dhaka and how it was linked to a broader global community

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*"Whenever forty or more of the Armenian Nation shall become Inhabitants in any of the Garrisons, Cities or Towns belonging to the Company in the East Indies, the said Armenians shall not only have and enjoy the free use and exercise of their Religion, but there shall also be allotted to them a parcel of Ground to erect a Church thereon ..."*

- From 1688 agreement between English East India Company and Armenian merchants

When we speak of the Armenian Church of the Holy Resurrection in Armanitola in Old Dhaka, it is almost always of the once prominent role the Armenian community here—their businesses, their zamindaris, and the impact they had on the development of the city. Yet, what is often overlooked, and what is now understood much better due to recent scholarship by historian Sebouh David Aslanian, is that the Armenians in Dhaka were part of a truly global network. They had bases in Surat, Mumbai, Hyderabad, Chinsura, Calcutta and Dhaka to as far as Canton, Jakarta, Lhasa and Singapore. But this too was only part of the expansive network of settlements, connected to the central node of New Julfa in Isfahan in Safavid Iran. These merchants, trading all sorts of goods including textile, had settlements in St Petersburg, Moscow, Astrakhan, Istanbul, Venice, Livorno, Paris and Amsterdam, to name only a few.

Armen Arslanian, the current warden of the Armenian Church in Dhaka, feels this history of Armenian migration has been largely forgotten among even Armenians today. The more recent history of the Armenian Genocide in 1915 which resulted in large-scale migration of Armenians to different parts of the world overshadows the history of the Armenian merchant community. And yet, he himself inhabits a world shaped by both histories.

Armen was born and raised in Argentina. His parents emigrated there from Cilicia, now under Turkey, after the Armenian Genocide. Their initial plan was to eventually return. After five years in a refugee camp in Greece, when they saw there was no progress, they decided to go to Argentina. "They went with nothing, but Argentina was a very generous country—it still is. It gave them the opportunity to start over and be what they are today—the Armenians are a thriving community there still today," says the 58-year-old.

Today, as the warden of a church built by

Armenian merchants in 1781, Armen is trying to preserve the rich heritage and history of their presence in the Indian subcontinent—which could possibly date back as far as the 16th century—and how it was connected to the regional and the global. As he explains: "The Armenians in this side of the world, in India, Bangladesh or Burma who came here in the 16th, 17th, 18th century were not refugees. They were following the routes of business."

The 1688 agreement between the English East India Company and Armenian merchants encouraged Armenians to alter the course of their trade to and from Europe. The agreement promised special privileges to the merchants, including low customs fares. It also promised religious freedom to the Armenians, most of whom belonged to the Armenian Apostolic Church. Along with the founding of New Julfa in Isfahan in Iran in 1605 due to the deportation of Armenians from Old Julfa in Armenia by Safavid ruler Shah Abbas, this is considered today as one of the principal reasons which accelerated migration and settlement of Julfan Armenian merchants to India in the seventeenth century.

"They came as a community, they embraced the country and the cultures—they got along with the Mughals, the British and then with the local authorities afterwards. After the partition, their business was not favourable anymore. Because of that a lot of them went looking for better horizons. I am no historian, but as far as I know, a lot of them went to Australia and Canada after the '70s," says Armen.

The story of how Armen, from another part of the world, came to be in-charge of a church in Dhaka is just as intriguing.

As he narrates it: "Wherever Armenians went, they developed themselves as businessmen—that's how they came here. That is the case even today; I am a living example of that. I came to Bangladesh in 2008 as we were opening a business here. Even three weeks before my first visit, I had no idea about the existence of this church. My daughter who was going to an Armenian school in LA, when she learnt I was coming here, told me there was an Armenian church in Bangladesh." Armen initially thought his daughter was referring to a church in India. "So the first thing I asked my business partner when I came to Dhaka was if he had heard about the Armenian Church. That's how we ended up coming here and meeting Mr Martin."

Mikel Housep Martirosian (anglicised Micheal Joseph Martin), had been probably the last Armenian living in Bangladesh at the time—even in 1871, there were around 100 Armenians living in the city.

Armen says: "I was in a state of awe when I came through that door, it was really amazing. From then on, every time I came to Dhaka, I came to the church and met Mr

Martin and got to know each other very well." Out of respect, Armen always insisted that if Mr Martin needed anything, he should contact him.

Martin had a stroke in 2014. His daughters, who had already emigrated to Canada, decided that there was no way he could continue to live alone and take care of the church. And thus, at the insistence of Martin, the wardenship of the church went to Armen, since he was the only Armenian Martin knew who had frequent connections with the city. Armen still reveres Martin, now living in Canada, as his mentor: "For a long time he was the only Armenian in Dhaka and he stood his ground and kept this place for the future generations."

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The Armenian Church in Armanitola today stands in almost the exact conditions



The church today stands in almost the exact conditions as it was built in 1781.

as it was built. Before 1781, the grounds of the church were a graveyard. The church once even had a clock tower which was destroyed in an earthquake in 1897. The massive bell from the church's belfry was also stolen over time, and has now been replaced with four smaller ones.

Today, we know that churches were significant for Julfan traders as a means of fostering a sense of common identity worldwide. The church in Dhaka, along with Armenian churches in Chinsura and Saidabad

in India, used to be under the jurisdiction of the regional node, the Church of Holy Nazareth in Calcutta. These regional nodes were in turn under the jurisdiction of the Armenian church in New Julfa, and this network was one of the means of communication between the trade community scattered throughout the world.

So, Armen feels that although the church has a religious value, it also has a historical value which should be preserved. "Mr Martin did a wonderful job of preserving the church and keeping it intact. We changed the electricity lines and restored the two paintings that you now see."

And indeed, one is struck by the beauty of the paintings as soon as they enter the church. Possibly the work of English painter Charles Pote, who was also a headmaster of the Pogose School in Old Dhaka, these paintings were in tatters. "So from the Armenian Church, they sent two diplomat restorers who had studied in Italy. Gevorg Endza Babakhanyan and Rev Fr Sevak Saribekyan, came over here and did the restoration—they did an amazing job. I had initially thought one of the paintings was beyond repair."

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Armen has big plans for the church. His idea is to promote the place as a site of historical value and cultural exchange. To that end, he also wants to promote research work on the Armenian community in Bangladesh. But over the years, many church documents, which would be of immense historical value, have disappeared. Armen, after he took over, could find only some registers of births, deaths or marriages. "But when it comes to older documents or pictures, there were not many left."

He continues, "We want to conduct research through professionals about the community in the Bengal area, to find out how the Armenians here were linked to the Armenians in Kolkata and from Kolkata to Julfa."

"I have a lot of expectations about the research. We constantly receive questions about the community—what had happened to them. There is little information available and whatever exists is not compiled. So one of our projects is to conduct a research study and make a professional compilation of the history of the Armenian community in Bangladesh, from the beginning until today."

For preservation purposes, Armen also got in touch with the Armenian ambassador to Bangladesh, the Ministry of Cultural Affairs in Bangladesh and Unesco for designating the church as a Unesco world heritage site. "The process is complicated. But, this initiative has the support of the board of the church, the Armenian Church in Armenia, and Mr Asaduzzaman Noor has expressed support too. The process has to be started here from the local government, and he has said he is interested in promoting it."

Now, he is getting mail from some

Armenians about how they had visited the church, or telling him how one of their forefathers lies buried here. But Armen feels that Armenians still don't know much about their historical presence in this part of the world. He says: "The Armenian diaspora probably amounts to seven million people living outside Armenia, mostly in western countries. Among most of them there is very little knowledge about the Armenians who came to the Indian subcontinent. I remember that when we were kids, we knew that there were some Armenians in India and this and that but it was very vague information. The lack of awareness is something I am personally working on. I always send out and share articles published on Armenia. Now we are receiving emails expressing surprise, asking questions."

Armen's interest goes beyond just the church. He says, "We keep hearing of other Armenian settlements here even beyond Dhaka. I was told about the Pogose School, one of the first private schools in Dhaka which was built by the Armenian Zamindar Nicholas Pogose. I went to the school, and the state of the place is pitiful. So maybe we can bring some relief to the school—maybe some funding from Armenians. We think it is our duty to do something since it is part of our heritage."

As the warden of the church, Armen visits Bangladesh every one and a half months or so. "I wish I had more time to work here. We would love to see if somehow the City Corporation can help us with the entrance. We want the outside to be a bit more accessible. We can do a lot more. If we can make the cultural centre, I think it would be a great contribution, as long as the Bangladeshi community embraces the place."

Armen Arslanian's work on the church has not only meant better preserved premises, but the church is also drawing more visitors. But, he is also trying to make the church a more integral part of the community in Bangladesh. The church arranges to feed 300-400 local underprivileged people twice every month now, and also arranges free medical camps for locals.

"I don't want people to see this as a foreign church and they have nothing to do with it. You don't have to be a Christian to come to the church—you can come here and pray if you want. I want to eventually create a scholarship here. We have the Armanitola High School here, we have the Pogose School. We want to do something in the name of Nicholas Pogose, maybe have classes on Armenian history and encourage students there in researching our shared history."

"My goal is to preserve the history and the future of the church in hope that its legacy is one that will be remembered for generations to come," says Armen.

Interview of Armen Arslanian taken by Moyukh Mahtab and Shamsuddoza Sajen.

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