



Image 1: The Armenian Church Dhaka mid 1930s during the wardenship of Rev. Ter Bagrat David (seen standing in the archway).



Image 4: Some of the Armenian community gathering at Mr. Michael's home around the 1930s/40s.



Image 5: The Armenian Community Dhaka celebrating Armenian Christmas, 6 January 1952

# EARLY ARMENIAN SETTLERS IN DHAKA

LIZ CHATER

It is often repeated that the 'founding fathers' of the Armenian church in Dacca were Messrs Sarkies, Kevorke, Pogose and Petrus respectively. Numerous reports tell us the land was donated by 'Armenian nobleman Agha Catchick Minas' (also known as Agha Catchik Emnias). Let's explore some of these individuals and take a peek into a small period of their lives.

For the early Armenian settler in Dacca, life was constantly challenging, one-sided and often unfairly stacked against them. Saddled with troubles with-in and with-out of this small community, these 'big-named' individuals who strove to make a living weren't just trying to outwit their competitors but also some of their

to the East India Company. Through no fault of their own, their losses were immense because of Barwell's double dealing and greed for more revenue, something he tried unsuccessfully to prove in Court. A protracted enquiry ensued in Calcutta at the Supreme Court, and all the evidence went in the favour of the Armenian partners whilst Barwell was found to be trading in an unorthodox and underhand manner. His unauthorised demand of Rs125,000 to be paid directly to him, circumnavigating the official East India Company contract, was Barwell's downfall. Although their names and reputations were honoured and kept intact, their finances took a huge blow, something they never recovered from. Khoja Michael Sarkies (Coja

and his brother Howan were from the extensive trading Minas family of New Julfa. Their father, Khojah Emnias Minas, had suffered a most horrendous death having been burned alive at the stake by Nadir Shah in January 1747 in Isfahan's central square. The brothers were both traders and landowners in Dacca. Their respective first wives, Catchick's Sophie and Howan's Khathaie had died within two years of each other at Dacca in 1764 and 1766 respectively. Both men went on to marry a second time. As a wealthy landowner Agha Catchick possessed a number of villages in Dacca from which he received rental income. However, by 1791 he was part of the Armenian merchants and traders living in Saidabad where he remarried to Mariam Gregory. In May of that year, in what can only be described as the equivalent of our modern-day social media, a furious Agha Catchick placed a classified ads notice in the local newspaper, describing in detail an unprecedented personal account of how he had been humiliated and cuckolded by Mariam. One can only imagine the kind of sensation this outburst caused amongst the readers in Bengal. Clearly, he felt strongly enough about the situation that he thought himself impervious to those quietly gossiping about him. His tone and style was strong and resolute and he sought to be as disparaging of her as he could. I CATCHIK EMNIAZ, an Armenian, now an inhabitant of Saydabad, but late of Dacca in the Province of Bengal, a Merchant: and sorry to be obliged to give the following notice to the Public, but my own security demands it: Whereas MARRIAM CANOOM my present wife, who was the Daughter of GREGORY of the family of AGAS AVETICK, did on the 23d day of December 1787, elope from me her Husband, without any cause or pro-vocation whatever, under a presence that she was going to take a walk to Berhampore, taking with her Jewells and other things belonging to my Estate to a very considerable amount, and in her way to Berhampore she exchanged her Bearers to prevent discovery, for Ticka Bearers, and at Calcapore she took up and cohabited with the Dutch Company's Doctor called Doctor VERNAM, and went to Patna, of which I was quite ignorant of, and for some time concealed herself in the house of a native shroff there, until they could obtain protection at the Danish Factory there under the Danish Flag, which in a few days they accomplished, and here it is, I must say some thing of her general behaviour to me and in my house after our marriage, which behaviour was so undutiful and untoward, that I cannot pass over it in silence. She kept company with people of bad character expressly against my repeated order to the contrary; admitted them to my house, bribed my servants to form excuses whenever she went out by which I found myself ridiculed and laughed at daily, yet I never used her ill for all this, but often talked and conversed with her on the impropriety of it, which she regarded not, but continued her bad behaviour with great untowardness by giving away and wasting my property, Monies, Jewells, and other articles she made away with, without my knowledge. I should not have said so much on the subject of her behaviour, was it not for what follows: that since her first cohabitation with Doctor VERNAM, this Doctor happened to die at Patna, and she not finding it easily to dupe every man, was rendered incapable of getting any assistance from any body in the scheme she

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having went away, she therefore after eight or nine months came under the protection of the Danish Colour to Serampore, and from thence to Calcutta; from whence she wrote me a Letter of penitence desiring my pardon, and wishing to be reinstated in my house again, to which I have not complied, and I have written in answer to it that I would not admit a woman of that character, and an enemy to my life and property into my family. This therefore is to give notice to all to whom it may concern, that I will not be responsible for any act whatsoever of her the said MARRIAM CANOOM, nor will I pay any Debt or Debts which she may contract either in my name or any name whatsoever, on any pretence, the 18 May, 1791.

Agha Catchik's brother and business partner Howan Emnias also owned property in Dacca. A third business partner was Astwasatoor Papook of Calcutta. Astwasatoor died in 1787 and following his death the partnership between them was wound up with Both Catchik and Howan as executors. However, Catchik passed away in 1798 leaving Howan to wind up both estates. When Howan passed away in 1804 the outstanding estates of his partners were far from finalised and his son Muckertich was left with the unenviable task of unravelling a very complicated set of inter-connected accounts, claims and counter-claims.

Properties belonging to Howan Emnias at Sydadab were advertised for sale in 1805 [image 2] and in 1807 [image 3]; his property in Dacca was also put up for sale. This advertisement [image 3] contains important locational information, and offers insight into how close the community were located in relation to the Armenian Church in Dacca. "One lower and three upper roomed houses situated behind the Armenian Church in Dacca, built of the best pukka materials with a well laid out garden the whole standing on five Biggahs of ground." The importance of this incredible statement tells us that the area around the church was not heavily built upon but in fact contained large open spaces; something that won't be recognisable in today's Dhaka.

As part of the Dhaka Armenian Heritage Project, we were fortunate to have gained access to a photograph [image 4]. It is of some of the Armenian community gathering at Mr. Michael's home around the 1930s/40s and shows the Armenian Church located in the background. This is excellent corroborative evidence of how the community continued to live close to the church 130 years after Howan Emnias with open green spaces and single storey residential properties surrounding it.

Our early Armenian pioneer settlers literally built the foundations on which today stands the beautiful Armenian Church. Those early pioneer settlers also unwittingly gave an insight into their lives by the very disputes they chose to argue about in the public forum of the local judicial Courts. Today there are scores of descendants around the world whose ancestor was Khoja Michael Sarkies, many of them are unaware of their turbulent ancestors' past and the wonderful Armenian heritage they are part of.

Liz Chater is a Armenian family history researcher and Armenian Heritage Project coordinator for the Armenian Church Dhaka.

Read the full story on this link: <https://chater-genealogy.blogspot.com/2019/12/early-armenians-in-dacca.html>

**LANDED PROPERTY,**  
 AT,  
**SYDABAD.**  
 To be sold by Public Auction.  
 By Messrs. Lawtie & Goulds,  
 At their Spacious Room,  
 On SATURDAY next, the 28th December,  
 BY ORDER OF THE ADMINISTRATOR,  
 THE  
**HOUSES**  
 AND  
**GROUNDS,**  
 SITUATE AT  
**SYDABAD,**  
 BELONGING  
 TO THE  
**ESTATE**  
 OF  
**Mr. HOWAN EMNIAS,**  
 DECEASED,  
 Further particulars will appear in  
**CATALOGUES.**

Image 2: 26 December 1805 Calcutta Gazette

more notoriously tricky British chiefs. Alongside that, some were in constant battle with their own community and families as well.

A perfect example of this was in 1773 when Khoja Michael Ter Stephanos, more commonly known as Khoja Michael Sarkies, entered into a partnership with Coja Kevorke jointly running salt farms in Savagapore and Selimabad under contract to the East India Company. They reported directly to Richard Barwell, the Chief of Dacca. Barwell was ruthlessly ambitious and, according to correspondence written in January 1769 to his sister Mary in England, he was: "willing to spend five thousand pounds [by today's standard of living that is a value equivalent to in excess of £600,000] for the chiefship of Dacca and Patna.....to supervise the collection of the revenues." Barwell got his wish in 1772 and quickly became a law unto himself. He decided to take away the contract Sarkies and Kevorke had already been given to supply salt

**Sales by Auction.**  
 To be sold by Public Auction,  
 By Tulloh and Company,  
 At their Auction-Room,  
 On THURSDAY next, the 16th April 1807.  
 Precisely at Twelve o'Clock,  
 (WITHOUT RESERVE.)  
 By Order of the  
**EXECUTOR TO THE ESTATE**  
 OF THE LATE  
**Mr. HOWAN EMNEAZ;**  
 IN ONE LOT.  
 One Lower and three Upper-Roomed HOUSES situated behind the Armenian Church in Dacca, built of the best Pukka materials, and now occupied by Mr. MENAS ARRATOON, at the rent of One Hundred Rupees per month; together with a Garden well laid out; the whole standing on five Begahs of Ground, more or less.  
**LOT II.**  
 A large, pukka built Upper-Roomed HOUSE and PREMISES, situated at Sydadab, at nearly an equal distance from Berhampore and Moorshedabad, lately occupied by the deceased, and standing on about five Begahs of Ground.  
**CONDITIONS OF SALE.**  
 The purchaser to be at the expense of Conveyance  
 AND  
 The Amount of the Purchase Money to be paid in Ten Days.  
 Further particulars may be known on application at the Auction Room, where the Title Deeds may be inspected.

Image 3: 9 April 1807 Calcutta Gazette

Michael), as a Zamindar, continued to live and trade in Dacca extending partnerships in his salt business to Johannes Ter Daniels and Stephanus Arratoon of Calcutta. In 1765 he also conducted trade with Joseph Saffor Shahrman but found himself to be a creditor of Shahrman when he died in 1766; Khoja Michael was owed around 600 Rupees.

Meanwhile, the other partner, Khoja Kevorke, went to Calcutta and settled there with his wife and family. Familiar Armenian Calcutta names such as Manuk, Avietick, Owen, Zorab, Emin, Stephen Gaspar, Vardon, Arathoon, Jordan, Bagram, Vertannes, Michael, Cavorke and George, all descend from him whose full name was Khoja Kevorke Ter Simon, and there are a number of living descendants scattered around the world today. Khoja Kevorke died in Chinsurah in 1790, the same year as his business partner Khoja Michael died in Dacca.

Some of the other early Armenian settlers in Dacca arrived at a time when

One of those who survived the famine and who was sufficiently well placed to help Muslims and Christians alike was salt and property merchant Khoja Michael Sarkies. He had been born in Julfa around 1732 and as we have already seen, during his time in Dacca he was one of the most prominent and successful of his Zemindar contemporaries. It was to Michael Sarkies that other migrating Julfan Armenians turned when they wished to settle in Dacca.

Khoja Michael Sarkies died in 1790 without leaving a will. As a successful businessman and having accumulated considerable wealth, he didn't think to write his last will and testament, perhaps believing 'his word was his bond.' His valuable estate, which contained Zemindaree lands at Dukhun, Shahbazpore and several houses and other property in Dacca, became fiercely fought over by relatives.

To put the size of this community into perspective with the rest of Dacca, in 1840 there were approximately 40 Armenian families in the city, yet here we are nearly 180 years later talking about this incredibly small minority community and how much they achieved, although not always smoothly. Their in-fighting and quick-fire quills to start court cases has given us much to muse about in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

We are fortunate to have incredibly gifted Armenian historians, who have studied the trading patterns and routes from Persia to India and Bangladesh during the 18th century and beyond. For those who wish to read about this relationship between Asia and Persia, I would recommend Dr. Sebouh Aslanian's "From the Indian Ocean to the Mediterranean The Global Trade Networks of Armenian Merchants from New Julfa".

The Dacca Armenian Church land contributor, Agha Catchick Minas