Armenians in Madras – A Journey through the Silk Road; ‘From Home to Home’

Abstract

The article describes the timeline of Armenian history in India and its heritage in Madras, India. The article is broken down into five sub-categories which describe the Armenian travels through the Silk Road from Persia into India and the reasons behind their travels.

The article ends with the present Armenian heritage in India.

A Journey through the Silk Road

Armenia as a nation has had a unique geo-political history. Through the ancient and medieval times to the modern era, it has been caught between the large empires of Persia, Rome, Byzantine and Ottoman. This continuous pressure from all sides has shaped Armenia’s history from ancient to modern times. The travels of Armenians through the Silk Road are closely related to the history of these empires.

It is important to note a few facts about Armenia, such as its being the first country to adopt Christianity as a state religion in 301 AD. The country’s alphabet was invented in order to translate the Bible in 406 AD.

Being geographically located on the Armenian highlands stretching to an area between the Caucasus and the Mediterranean, Armenians naturally or by will became one of the largest trading communities in the region.

Dr. Sebouh Aslanian mentions that the Armenians had built a large trading network stretching from Manila to London and Amsterdam, passing through India and the Middle East by early 1700s.

Armenians in India

The first traces of Armenians in India date back to 780 AD and the first known person of Armenian origin to have come to India was Thomas Cana around the same time. He arrived on the Eastern coast of the Indian subcontinent.

The history of India has seen many communities come and settle in its territories. The Parsi community of Persia fled persecution after the advent of Islam and found refuge in India. The Armenians suffered the same fate at the hands of Islamic invaders and were either forced to convert or face persecution. Although Armenians were able to join forces with Byzantine and even fought alongside the Persians against the Islamic invaders, they suffered heavily under the merciless sword of the advancing Muslims. The Armenian Highlands were almost depopulated by 750 AD; many were taken as slaves or fled their lands to avoid persecutions.

The route that the Armenians chose to travel was the ancient Silk Road. The Silk Road passed through many large cities which served as stopovers for traders and travellers. Armenians provided Caravan services to many traders and merchants. The two famous Armenian capitals from different times, Ani and Yerevan were located on the Silk Road and were of great value to any empire that could control them.
The first evidences of Armenian settlements in India date back to 13th century in Surat, a port city in India. These settlements show that the Armenians’ main purpose to settle in India was trade and obviously, to find peace from persecutions of the Islamic Caliphate which had taken control over Persia and the Armenian Highlands.

The Armenians began to expand their settlements all over the subcontinent from Rangoon to Bombay, Calcutta and Madras. In northern India they settled in Agra, Lucknow, Gwalior and Gurgaon.

These settlements were, however, not without logic. Dr. Sebouh Aslanian writes that the Armenians expanded their settlements because, once the native producers knew that the Armenians had arrived by ship and had to go back before the monsoon season had arrived, they would keep their goods and sell it just before the monsoon at a higher price. To outdo the natives, the Armenian merchants brought in their friends and relatives to settle in these trading cities and put up residential quarters which became Armenian neighbourhoods later on.

With these facilities, the Armenians did not have the problem of staying back during the monsoon season and the natives had to sell their products such as spices and textiles because they could not store the goods for a long time.

Thus, the Armenians expanded their hold all over India and were settled in the country long before the British ships were at bay in Indian waters. The Armenians served as middlemen between the British merchants and Indian Nawabs when their trading deals were signed.

**Armenians in Madras**

The Armenian history in Madras dates back to early 16th century if Armenian tombstones are a source of evidence of community life in Madras. Though Madras never held any large Armenian community compared to Calcutta, Rangoon and Bombay, the community was influential in both the local history and the Armenian history.

While it is known that the Armenians traded in silk, textiles, precious stones, jute and spices, their activities expanded outside their mercantile.

The historian, S. Muthiah, mentions that Armenians were an extremely religious people. This is evident in Armenian settlements in India and anywhere in the world. Armenians built churches and schools and the community was connected through the church. The Armenian Church in Madras was originally built in 1712. It was burnt down when the French sacked the city in 1746 and it was later rebuilt in 1772.

The Armenian Church in Madras on Armenian Street was the centre of Armenian community life in Madras. It was home to a notable and large collection of books and served as a library for the local Armenian community. However by early 20th century the extensive collection had reduced considerably since the community had begun dwindling.

As a merchant community it is important to know a few notable Armenians such as Coja Petrus Uscan, Agha Shameer and Harutyun Shimavonian.

Coja Petrus was born at Jufia in Persia in late 17th century and lived in India till his death in 1751. He is known for his loyalty to the British during the French occupation of Madras. While he was already a settled merchant in Madras and a member of the British East India Company, the British rewarded him with the trading monopoly of jute and spices in India after the French were defeated.
Coja Petrus Uscan spread his immense wealth in building churches and schools in Madras and helped his community in India and abroad as well. He financed the building of the steps to St. Thomas Mount Church in Madras and he also built the Marmalong Bridge over the Adyar River. The bridge was in use till 1960 when an adjacent bridge was built to reduce the heavy traffic. The St. Thomas Mount Church has paintings on its walls which bear Armenian Inscriptions. There are also a few tombstones with Armenian inscriptions near the entrance of the church at St. Thomas's Mount.

Agha Shameer, another prominent Armenian of the Madras community helped built the second church in 1772.

Rev. Harutyun Shimavonian known as the Father of Armenian Journalism published the first Armenian Journal in Madras in the year 1794. His writings consisted of Armenian Literature and articles which would encourage the Armenian youth to pursue an ambitious, truthful and faithful life. It is important to know that the first constitution for a free Armenia was drafted and written in Madras, British India. The draft constitution mentioned the Armenian republic free from the rule of the Ottoman Empire. Armenians also had one of the largest printing houses in Madras which contributed to the printing of local publications and also helped preserve large volumes of Armenian literature.

It is interesting to see a small community such as the Armenians spread their network over the vast Indian subcontinent from the Indian Ocean up to the Mediterranean.

The understanding of these vast and diverse settlements helps us realize their contributions to the history of their host countries which soon became home to them; we also understand the very complex Armenian history which is deep-rooted and vast like that of any Middle Eastern country such as Persia, Modern Iran; and Hindustan, Modern India. The diversity of ethnic communities, languages, cultures and religions makes Asia one of the most diverse continents in the world.

**From ‘Home to Home’**

Armenians did not only travel as merchants but also took permanent flights from their countries to settle in new lands where they could call it home. Throughout history they have travelled from their own lands to foreign lands where they have contributed abundantly to the local communities and societies. Most Armenian families in the present era will trace their history to some country or the other. This understanding of one’s own history with continuous travels and evidence of migration has surely influenced the mindset of generations which allows them to travel from place to place much more easily than most other communities.

Moreover, looking at Armenian settlements in India or any other country it is evident that they never had any intention of colonialism or invasion. They built their communal life near their settlements. Churches, schools and community clubs are part of every Armenian settlement.

The Armenians were able to adapt to the lifestyles and habits of the local communities and contribute to their well-being; this helped them become well accepted by their hosts and thus, they were easily assimilated into the local communities even as they maintained their Armenian identity.
In British India, Armenians were actively involved in the practice of law and administration. Some notable Armenian families were the Sookias, Stephen, Chater and Apcar families. Sir Paul Chater was another famous and wealthy Armenian who was born in India and his financial network expanded to Hong Kong during the early years of the 20th century. He was one of the largest benefactors of the Armenian community in India and also financed the building of the Howrah Bridge in Calcutta. He worked with the Sassoon family who were of Jewish origin with a family name, Sassoon, that is shared by many Armenians.

Today India and Armenia have moved away from their historical colonial past and have become modern functional states. There are 7 recorded Armenian Churches in India and a school in Kolkata which is still functional with a small number of Armenian students. Armenians have been active in the community life in Kolkata and the Armenian Rugby team is well known in the history of Rugby in Kolkata and Indian Rugby.

Today, the Armenian diaspora has a larger population than that of the population of Armenia. The Armenian diaspora in most of the countries, except Iran, was mostly created as a result of the Armenian genocide and massacres in the Ottoman Empire and the early Turkish Republic, post the First World War to the mid-1920s.

The history of the Armenians might be something of the past but it is strong enough to carry the light forward to future generations who see the world as an international community and are able to adjust, adapt and settle in with the best of their skills and ambitions.

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