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INDIAN ARMENIANS FROM THE PAST TO THE PRESENT*

(GEÇMİŞTEN GÜNÜMÜZE HİNDİSTAN ERMENİLERİ)

Fatma Jale Gül ÇORUK**

Abstract: *In this study, the process of Indo-Armenian relations from the first date that can be followed until today will be discussed in various aspects. When and how the relations began in the historical process, the reasons for and the details of the process that led the Armenians to India, as well as the formation stages of the Armenian settlement centers in India will be discussed. In addition, the cities with the densest Armenian settlements and the social, political, religious, and commercial activities of the Armenians there will be discussed in detail. Information on the commercial and military foundations of today's relations will be presented. In the light of all this information, an attempt will be made to present a holistic perspective on Indo-Armenian relations.*

Keywords: *India, Armenia, Indo-Armenian Relations*

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Öz: *Bu çalışmada Hint-Ermeni ilişkilerin takip edilebildiği ilk tarihten bugüne kadarki süreci çeşitli yönleriyle ele alınacaktır. Tarihi süreç içerisinde ilişkilerin ne zaman ve nasıl başladığı, Ermenileri Hindistan'a yönelten sürecin sebepleri ve sürece dair ayrıntıların yanı sıra Hindistan'daki Ermeni yerleşim merkezlerinin oluşum aşamalarına değinilecektir. Ayrıca en yoğun Ermeni yerleşimlerinin gerçekleştiği şehirlerin hangileri olduğu ve Ermenilerin buralardaki sosyal, siyasi, dinî ve ticari faaliyetlerinin neler olduğuna detaylarıyla değinilecektir. Günümüz ilişkilerinin ticari ve askerî temellerine dair ilişkin bilgiler sunulacak; bütün bu bilgiler ışığında Hint-Ermeni ilişkilerine bütüncül bir bakış açısı ortaya konulmaya çalışılacaktır.*

Anahtar Kelimeler: *Hindistan, Ermeni, Hint-Ermeni İlişkileri*

Introduction

Studies on Turkish-Armenian relations in Turkey are generally based on the Armenian Diaspora and the Caucasian geography. However, with the military agreements and arms purchases signed as a result of the increasing interactions between Armenia and India in recent years, the expanding relations between these two countries needs to be taken into account as well. All the strategic moves that have been made and/or are likely to be made will inevitably have repercussions for both Turkey and the South Caucasus countries of Azerbaijan and Georgia.

Although there are various arguments on the beginning of the relations between Armenians and India, these relations can be traced back to the 8th century in the light of the available data. The fact that the Armenians have been able to maintain their active presence in India for such a long time is a testament to their ability to live in different geographies without losing touch with their roots. Indeed, “very few people have gone through an experience similar to that of the Armenians; numerous colonies dispersed over a very wide geography that have nevertheless continued their existence. On the one hand, they have been well integrated into their [host countries’] social, economic, cultural, and even political structures, and on the other hand, they have preserved the basic distinctive features of their origins for centuries.”¹

In our study, before touching on today’s relations, we will make inferences on the commercial, political, and social aspects of the Armenian presence in India by touching upon how Armenian-Indian relations began in the historical process, the stages of settlement of Armenians in India, the cities where Armenians densely settled and their activities in these places. In this manner, an attempt will be made to present a holistic perspective on Armenian-Indian relations from the past to the present.

The Roots of the Armenian Presence in India

According to historical accounts, India was one of the countries with which Armenians had contact with long before they migrated and settled there. “It is believed that the first Armenians came with their Assyrian allies, as part of Queen Semiramis’ expedition to India, some centuries before Christ. Some Armenians were sure to have come with Alexander [the Great].”² Various sources indicate that there is information about Armenian-Indian relations in

1 Boğos Levon Zekıyan, *Ermeniler ve Modernite* (İstanbul: Aras Yayıncılık, 2002), p. 31.

2 Jawhar Sircar, “Armenians: Merchant-Princes of the Past”, *The Sunday Telegraph*, May 2, 1983: 2.

the “works of Xenophon, Zenob Glak, Movses Khorenatsi and Procopius”³, meaning that the interaction of Armenians with India must date back to ancient times. The general opinion about the beginning of relations with India points to the 8th century. “As foreign traders, Armenians were known to large segments of the Indian population. They entered India by land via Iran and Afghanistan. In addition, Armenians played an important role in the commercial, political, social, and cultural life of India in three different periods of its history: ancient, middle, and modern.”⁴

The majority of the Armenians who traveled to India originated from New Julfa, and accordingly, there is a close ethnographic, ideological, economic, and cultural connection between the Armenian settlements in India and the Armenian settlements of New Julfa. Therefore, to fully understand the development of the Armenian presence in this geography, it is necessary to know the historical process experienced by the Armenians under Safavid rule. In short, it would be difficult to understand the formation of the many Armenian-dominated trade cities in India without knowing Persian Shah Abbas’ New Julfa move.

Although Armenians “did not have an independent state after 1375, they managed to gain an enviable place in the commercial world of the Middle Ages thanks to their talents.”⁵ The geographical location of the Armenian settlements at the crossroads of trade also played an important role in this success. In particular, the city of Julfa under Safavid rule stood out as an important trade center of its period. This city served as a trade center both for various parts of the world and within the country. “The people of Julfa had 20-30 years of experience as suppliers of Iranian silk and had international connections and communication networks with distant markets such as Aleppo, Venice, and possibly Mughal India.”⁶ They had established these connections “through the Iranian cities of Shiraz, Bushehr and Bandar Abbas.”⁷

Having previously been in contact with India as traders, Armenians gradually began to settle there for various reasons. The first of these reasons emerged during the reign of the Safavid ruler Shah Abbas (1571-1629). At that time

3 Արթուր Զաքարյան, “Հնդկաստանի հայ համայնքը.(պատմամշակութային անդրադարձ)”, *ԿԱՆԹԵՂ*, 1 (2010): 181.

4 Փանջանան Սահա, “Հայերը Հնդկաստանում”, *Պատմա-բանասիրական Հանդես*, 2, 1966: 187.

5 Ruquia K Hussain, “Armenian, Iranian and Turkish Merchants in India 1550-1800” (unpublished doctoral thesis, Aligarh Muslim University, 2005), 79.

6 Sebouh David Aslanian, *From the Indian Ocean to the Mediterranean, The Global Trade Networks of Armenian Merchants from New Julfa* (New York: University of California Press, 2011), 2.

7 Bahador Mehraki and Abdolrasool Azimiyan, “Economic Endeavors of Julfa Armenian”, *TOJDAC*, 8 (2018): 2.

there had been a long period of war between the Safavids and the Ottomans, interspersed with periods of peace. Shah Abbas regained control of Julfa in 1603, but realizing that he could not protect the region any longer, he decided to solve the problem by having Julfa evacuated and burned to the ground, and published an edict proclaiming this in 1605. As a result of this edict, the Armenian population there was transferred to Isfahan. Panossian notes that; “Half the displaced people died on the way, but special attention was paid to the Julfa merchants who were resettled in a town called New Julfa near Isfahan. [...] As for Old Julfa, it was completely destroyed by the Persian forces along with the other conquered lands.”⁸

Shah Abbas gave control of his country’s silk trade to the Armenians he had forcibly settled in New Julfa. The Armenian merchants in New Julfa sold not only silk but traded all kinds of goods such as rose water, rugs, Indian/Far Eastern textiles, teas, spices, jewelry; and mirrors, glass, watches, woolen clothes, gold and silver coins from Europe. On the other hand;

“The Armenians had their own private shops in the west of Naqsh-e Jahan Square in Isfahan, and in these shops they sold English and Dutch broadcloths, red Venetian textiles, and various Frankish fabrics. These were the goods that were coming to Iran from Europe in exchange for silk. The Shah wanted to benefit from Armenians’ relations with Europe, especially in foreign trade. Armenians were thus able to dominate all of Iran’s foreign trade as far as Venice and Livorno. In fact, apart from Venice and Livorno, Iranian Armenians had special representatives in Amsterdam and Paris.”⁹

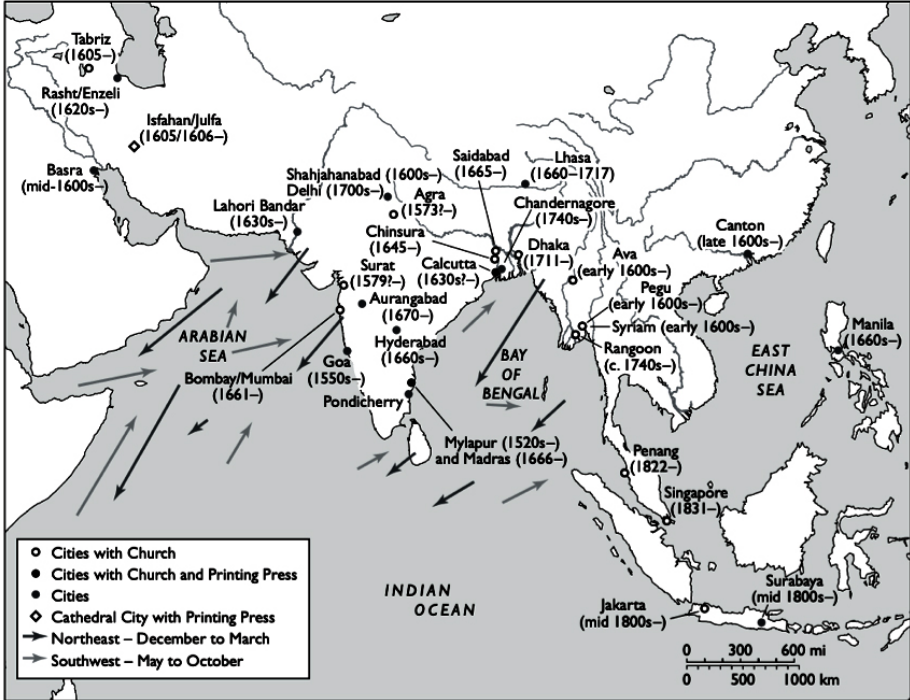
Over time, based on the commercial power of the Armenians, New Julfa became the center of a trade network spanning from Manila in the East to Amsterdam in the West. The settlement of Armenians in India increased even more after their exile, and the Armenian movement to India as a distant point of migration intensified. In short, the wave of migration that started from Julfa also shaped the formation of Armenian presence in India.

Emphasis had been placed on the Armenians in commercial affairs during the reign of Shah Abbas. However, this situation gradually decreased after the death of the Shah, and the shahs who came to power afterwards adopted a completely opposite stance to Shah Abbas by “making direct agreements with European merchants and levying heavy taxes on the Armenians in order to

8 Razmik Panossian, *The Armenians from Kings and Priests to Merchants and Commissars* (London: Hurst & Company Publishers, 2006), 78.

9 Cihat Aydoğmuşoğlu, “Şah Abbas Devrinde (1587-1629) İran’da Ticari Hayat”, *A.Ü. Türkiyat Araştırmaları Enstitüsü Dergisi [TAED]*, 48 (2012): 369.

reduce their wealth and economic importance.¹⁰ In response, “Armenian merchants developed their own trade networks covering countries such as Russia, India, Italy, and the Netherlands.”¹¹



Map 1. The trade network of Culfa Armenians and their places of settlement along the coasts of the Indian Ocean during the early modern period¹²

The second reason that accelerated the settlement of Armenians in India was the trade policy of Mughal Shah Akbar (1542-1605). In fact, “the permanent settlement of Armenian merchants was made possible by the encouragement of Mughal Emperor Akbar.”¹³ Shah Akbar invited Armenian merchants to settle in his country to contribute to the country’s economy. He granted them the freedom of travel, allowed them to trade freely, and possess vehicles to transport their goods. It is known that the first Armenian to come upon

10 Panossian, *The Armenians*, 79.

11 Mehraki ve Azimiyan, “Economic Endeavors”, 2.

12 Aslanian, *From the Indian Ocean*, 57.

13 George A. Bournoutian, *A Concise History of the Armenian People* (California: Mazda Publishers, 2006), 219.

invitation in this process was a merchant named Hakob, originally from Aleppo, and settled in Agra in 1560.¹⁴ However, Abrahamyan claims that the country already had a developed internal and external trade system at that time, and therefore the real purpose Shah Akbar's move was different; "Shah Akbar had realized that the Portuguese who had entered India were very serious and dangerous rivals for the country, especially in the coastal and border regions. Unable to force the Portuguese out of certain regions, the Mughals sought to create against them an opposing group of foreign traders made up of Gujaratis, Arabs, Persians, etc. Shah Akbar also wanted to use rich Armenian merchants for this purpose."¹⁵

Both reasons presented here do not seem to be independent of each other, so regardless of which reason was more pertinent, the formation of permanent Armenian communities in India dates back to the 16th century, that is, to the time of Shah Akbar. Although there had been an increase in the Armenian population especially in the coastal regions, the community continued its development by taking shape in the 17th and 18th centuries. It should also be considered that the trade agreement with the British East India Company in 1688 had an accelerating effect on Armenian population growth. The Armenians established a stable community life in India. They remained close to the Mughals and often served as intermediaries and interpreters between local rulers and European representatives. With this, "the trade centered in India replaced New Julfa as the leading center of world trade in the second half of the 18th century."¹⁶

"In the period after the Mughal rule, Armenians grew deep roots in the political life of India. There is ample data to show that they participated in the political affairs of the country. They helped the British East India Company from time to time. [...] The existence of Armenian settlements in different parts of India can be understood from street names and various graves and churches."¹⁷ There are also various accounts about one of Shah Akbar's wives being Armenian, and that Akbar met an Armenian merchant named Hakob of Julfa and his family while traveling in disguise, and that he saw and grew fond of the merchant's son and adopted him, giving him the name of Dhu al-Qarnayn.¹⁸

Although the Armenians were not a large community, they had an important place and influence in the country thanks to their wealth and unique qualities.

14 For detailed information, please see: Panossian, *The Armenians*, 80.

15 Ռ. Ա. Աբրահամյան, "Հայերեն Ագրայում", *Բանբեր Երևանի Համալսարանի*, 2 (77), (1992): 151.

16 Panossian, *The Armenians*, 79.

17 Սահա, "Հայերը Հնդկաստանում", 187.

18 For detailed information, please see: Ռ. Ա. Աբրահամյան, "Հնդկաստանի գաղթօջախները", *Հայ ժողովրդի պատմություն*, Հատոր IV, (1972): 338.

“Many Armenians provided invaluable service to the Indian government and the Indian people, playing an important role both in India’s ruling elite and in the export of Indian goods to the West prior to British colonization. The Armenians, who were connected to the Indian people with common interests, also actively participated in their struggles.”¹⁹

Armenians fought with the Indians against the Portuguese in Malabar in 1662; they participated in the war on the side of the Indians against the British in Bengal in 1760-64; and “Armenian merchants helped by providing financial resources, Armenian gunsmiths helped by making weapons, and Armenian soldiers joined the Indian army and fought against the imperialists.”²⁰ In addition; “Armenian officers Markar Kalantar, Harutyun Markar, Krikor Ayzvazyan, Bedros Astvatzatur, Ghazar Hakob, Sukias Avedik and others attracted attention with their courage in the battlefield.”²¹

Armenians lived in the Indian cities of Agra, Delhi, Bengal, Bombay, Surat, Calcutta, Chinsura(h), Madras etc. Instead of gathering as one whole community in these cities, they were scattered and lived mainly as merchants, craftspeople (jewelers, tailors, embroiderers, blacksmiths, gunsmiths) and civil servants. There were also government officials, military administrators, translators, and intellectuals among them.

Since almost all the Armenians who had migrated to India had their roots in New Julfa, there was an ethnic and religious-based organization and structure among the Armenians of India. They all spoke the same dialect and lived according to the same traditions and customs. Their religious unity was also based on their origins, and it can be said that this sense of unity was the basis of their ability to organize and build their places of worship in a short time and not have any problems while living together. On the other hand, the fact that they had migrated to India “did not mean that they had severed their connections with New Julfa, because they continued to be spiritually and ideologically nourished by New Julfa.”²²

Armenian merchants, who successfully engaged in trade with a wide variety of countries, occupied an important place for India. According to Chaudhury, a record of the East India Company dating back to 1689 refers to the Armenian merchants in India as follows; “These people [the Armenians] are frugal, friendly, and cautious people who have traveled all over India and know almost

19 Ջաբարյան, “Հնդկաստանի հայ համայնքը. (պատմամշակութային անդրադարձ)”, 182.

20 Արամ Սարգսյան, “Հնդկաստան”, *Հայ Միջուրք հանրագիտարան*, (Երևան: Հայկական հանրագիտարան հրատարակչություն, 2003), 358.

21 Սարգսյան, “Հնդկաստան”, 358.

22 Հ. Ղ. Միրզայան, “Հնդկահայ լուսավորականության ակունքները”, *Էջմիածին* 54 (12): 57.

every village and all manner of goods under Mughal rule with excellent skill and judgment.”²³

Dutch, British and French, etc., or in other words, European merchants heading for India received help from Armenian merchants, and made maximum use of Armenians’ power and communication opportunities in the region. Armenians also assumed the role of intermediaries in the increasing relations with the United Kingdom. “The British first encountered the resident and prosperous Armenians in Surat in the 17th century, and they were able to approach the Mughal Palace by developing friendships with them.”²⁴ The Armenians “remained close to the Mughals and often served as intermediaries and interpreters between local Muslim rulers and European representatives.”²⁵ The agreement signed with the East India Company in 1688 provided Armenian merchants with the opportunity to trade freely, acquire property, and open representative offices in all regions under British rule. With these privileges they had gained, Armenian merchants were able to become increasingly powerful; “They expanded in population, wealth, and influence throughout the 17th century.”²⁶

Over time, having gained a more dominant position in Madras and Calcutta, the Armenians began to build trade centers, churches, and schools in a short time after settling in different cities of India; and established printing houses and started publishing newspapers and books.

The first city where Armenians settled permanently in India was **Agra**. As we mentioned above, an Armenian merchant from Aleppo named Hagop settled in Agra in 1560 upon invitation. The Mughal Shah Akbar provided ample opportunities to the Armenians by allocating a settlement area there. It is known that Armenians “operated a caravanserai in Agra and had a neighborhood with their own cemetery.”²⁷ The Armenian settlement in Agra developed further after the exile by the Persian Shah Abbas and the establishment of New Julfa. The first Armenian church in India was built in this city in 1562. Agra lost its importance with the collapse of the Mughal Empire, and the Armenian population there went on to settle in other cities of India.

Although the Armenians had spread to almost all the important cities of India, **Bengal**, where they had started to settle before the British, was an important

23 Sushil Chaudhury, *Trade, Politics and Society/The Indian Milieu in the Early Modern Era* (London: Routledge, 2017), 36.

24 Panossian, *The Armenians*, 81.

25 Սարգսյան, “Հնդկաստան”, 358.

26 Bournoutian, *A Concise History of the Armenian People*, 220.

27 Bournoutian, *A Concise History of the Armenian People*, 220.

place in the life of Armenians and it is thought that they were present in that region since the early 17th century. Bengali Armenians settled in the Armenian Quarter in **Dhaka**, which is today a part of Bangladesh. Almost all the Indian hemp (jute) trade was controlled by the Bengal Armenians. Armenians influential not just in trade but also in the military field were present in this city. The Holy Resurrection Church (*Դարձայի Սուրբ Յարութիւն Եկեղեցի*) in Dhaka was built in 1781. “There were 90 Armenians living in 25 households in Dhaka in 1876; and 41 Armenians in 10 households in 1917.”²⁸ Today, however, no Armenians reside in Dhaka.

Another Armenian settlement was **Chinsura**, which stood out with its silk trade. Chinsura Armenians held important positions in the Bengal Palace. The first record of Armenians here dates to 1645. The St. Hovhannes Mkrtich (St. John the Baptist) Church (*Սուրբ Յովհաննէս Սկրտիչ Եկեղեցի*) was built in Chinsura between the years 1695-1697. Although there are no Armenians living in Chinsura today, “Armenians in India continue to gather here every year on 13-14 January to attend the Holy Mass.”²⁹

The Armenians settled in the city of **Bombay** in the 18th and 19th centuries. “The British invited the Armenians of Surat to turn the city into a trade center and provided them land and loans to build houses.”³⁰ The Bombay Armenians, most of whom were merchants and craftspeople, lived in their own neighborhoods, and in addition to making jewelry, they were also engaged in the diamond and spice trade. Hodja Minas, one of the famous Armenian merchants, was from Bombay. M. Jacob Seth states that many Armenians lived in Bombay in the 18th century and that it was known that 105 Armenians had lived there in 1813. He adds that he even encountered Armenians when he visited the city in January 1889 and that there were approximately 30 Armenians living in Bombay at the time he wrote his work.³¹ The St. Peter’s Church (*Սուրբ Պետրոս առաքյալ եկեղեցի*) in the city was built in 1796. The said church “opened its doors to the Indian Orthodox Church [Malankara Orthodox Syrian Church] for services in 2019, after a pause of 223 years.”³² The Diaspora Aid Society (*Օճանասփյուն ժողովրդ*) was established in Bombay in 1815. In addition, the periodicals titled *Tsakhstan* (*Ծաղկաստան*) and *Bombay Armenian Newspaper* (*Բումբայու հայոց լրաթուղթ*) began to

28 Սարգսյան, “Հնդկաստան”, 353.

29 “The Armenian Church of St. John the Baptist”, *Wordpress*, accessed November 26, 2023, <https://anilvohraphotography.wordpress.com/2016/09/20/st-john-the-baptist-armenian-church-of-chinsurah/>

30 Սարգսյան, “Հնդկաստան”, 359.

31 M. Jacob Seth, *Armenians in India from the Earliest Times to the Present Day* (Calcutta, 1937), 299.

32 “Mumbai: 223-yr-old church for Armenians has opened doors to Indian Orthodox Church”, *Indian Express*, accessed April 6, 2023, <https://indianexpress.com/article/cities/mumbai/mumbai-223-yr-old-church-for-armenians-has-opened-doors-to-indian-orthodox-church-5705668/>

be published in 1822 and 1844 respectively. Very few Armenians reside in the city today.

Madras was an important center where Armenians flourished from the 16th century onwards. The Armenian community here consisted mainly of wealthy merchants who traded with Europe and the Far East. Madras, where the Portuguese had established a trade center in 1504, was occupied by the British in 1602. Some important intellectuals such as Hovsep Emin, who is of historical importance for Armenians, were raised in Madras. Another importance of Madras for Armenians is related to the printing houses there. A printing house was established by Shahamir Shahamiryan in 1771. The first Armenian periodical, *Azdarar* (*Ազդարար*), began to be published here in 1794. In addition, books and brochures that are of particular interest to the Armenians were printed here as well. The Church of the Holy Virgin Mary (*Սուրբ Աստվածածին Եկեղեցի*) located in the city was built in 1772. It is rumored that the first church in Madras was built in 1712, but that it fell into ruin over time.

Calcutta (Kolkata), a port city, was one of the most important settlements of Armenians in India and maintains its importance for the Armenians today. The Armenian community in the city was established in the 17th century. “The oldest tombstone in the Church of Holy Nazareth dates back to 1630. This evidence suggests that Armenians had settled near Calcutta at least 50 years before the British East India Company established its first commercial enterprise.”³³ Although most of the Armenians there were merchants, there also held positions as craftspeople, architects, doctors, lawyers, etc. “Most Calcutta Armenians had migrated from Shiraz or New Julfa.”³⁴ Calcutta has always been a center of attraction for people of different nationalities at different times. Due to the strategic nature of its geographical location and the associated commercial potential, it has attracted people from both inside and outside the country. “International migrants such as the Dutch, French, Jews, Chinese, and Armenians have given the city its cosmopolitan character.”³⁵

Merchants from New Julfa expanded their maritime trade networks after settling in Calcutta. Ports gained importance with increasing maritime trade and Calcutta as a port city correspondingly witnessed a population increase. In this context, Bhattacharya categorizes Calcutta Armenians into three groups; “resident Calcutta Armenians who arrived in the 18-19th centuries, Julfa Armenians who came from New Julfa in the 19-20th centuries, and the ambitious and hard-working migrants who came from Chaharmahal”.³⁶ By the

33 Sebouh David Aslanian, “Julfa v. Armenians in India”, *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, XV/3, pp. 240.

34 Susmita Bhattacharya, “The Armenians of Calcutta”, *Calcutta Mosaic* (India: Anthem Press, 2009), 72.

35 Bhattacharya, “The Armenians of Calcutta”, 71.

36 Bhattacharya, “The Armenians of Calcutta”, 75-76.

beginning of the 18th century, Armenians had their own ships and even their own ports in Calcutta. Both the development and decline of the Armenian merchants were closely related to the policies conducted by the British. At first, the British utilized the Armenians in every sense, which was a process that benefited the Armenians. However, strengthening their position over time, the British began to eliminate the Armenians in the commercial sense. Lacking an organized structure, the Armenian merchants eventually lost their influence in Indian trade. “Many of the Armenians who lost power in traditional trade started to establish land and real estate businesses. [...] They built private residences, hotels, offices, hostels, and guesthouses.”³⁷

Compared to other cities, there are more Armenian schools, publications, and places of worship in Calcutta. The most well-known place of worship is the Armenian Church of Holy Nazareth (*Սուրբ Նազարեթ հայոց եկեղեցի*), which was built in 1724 by an Armenian who had migrated from Isfahan. The second most famous one is the Church of St. Grigor Lusavorich (St. Grigor the Illuminator) (*Սուրբ Գրիգոր Լուսավորիչ եկեղեցի*), built in 1906. The third one is the Holy Trinity Armenian Church (*Սուրբ Երրորդություն հայոց եկեղեցի*), which was built in 1867 and restored in 2007. St. Sandukht Co-ed School (*Սուրբ Սանդուխտ երկսեռ դպրոց*) and Calcutta Armenian Charity Seminary (*Գալկաթայի Հայոց մարդասիրական ճեմարան*) were established in 1817 and 1821 respectively, and both schools continue their activities today. St. Sandukht Girls’ School (*Սուրբ Սանդիստյան աղջկանց դպրոցը*) and Calcutta Davityan Girls’ Armenian School (*Գալկաթայի Դավիթյան օրինորդաց հայկական դպրոցը*) were established in 1847-55 and 1922 respectively, but the latter school was merged with the Seminary in 1949.

A printing house was established in Calcutta in 1797. Both original and translated books, as well as many periodicals were published here. These publications included *Hayeli Kalkatyan* (*Հայելի Գալկաթյան*) in the year 1820, *Azgaser* (*Ազգասեր*) between 1845-48, *East India Newspaper* (*Արևելյան հնդկաց լրագիր*) between 1862-65, *Azgaser Araratyan* (*Ազգասեր Արարատյան*) between 1848-52, *Yeghbayraser* (*Եղբայրասեր*) between 1862-63, and *Nor Azdarar* (*Նոր ազդարար*) between 1950-56.

Demographic Information

“It is difficult to give a specific figure for the Armenian population in India [in general] and Calcutta [in specific]. As a matter of fact, the layout of the Armenian colonies in India witnessed great changes in the 19th century and the

37 Bhattacharya, “The Armenians of Calcutta”, 78.

only Armenian community that survived was the one in Calcutta.”³⁸ As highlighted by this quote, data on the Armenian population in India varies and it is therefore not possible to give a clear figure on their population.

Armenians have never been a crowded community in these lands. According to the information given by Sircar,³⁹ there were 636 Armenians in Calcutta according to the census conducted in 1837, 892 according to the census of 1850, and 498 according to the census of 1951. As for Bengal, the number of Armenians there was 800 in the year 1872. While different figures are given in various sources, it is generally estimated that between 8000 and 20,000 Armenians were living in India at the end of the 19th century.

According to Abrahamyan, there were no Armenians left in cities such as Agra, Lahore and Surat in 1840, but that there was a sizable population in some cities such as Saidabad. According to data in the 1860s, Armenian centers in many cities had disappeared and that there was not even a trace of Armenians left in these places such as Saidabad and Dhaka. At the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century, the number of Armenians in Madras did not exceed 25-30 families. The rich Armenian settlement in Bombay had begun to decline from the beginning of the 19th century. Only 107 Armenians were living in Bombay according to the 1813 census, and according to the 20th century census, that number had dropped to 25. Surat, which was a very important Armenian center in the 18th century, was virtually abandoned at the beginning of the 19th century. By the 1850s, almost all Armenian activities had stopped in the city.⁴⁰ During this decline, Armenians who had lost their influence in other cities of India migrated either to Calcutta or to other countries. “In those years, gold mines were being opened in Australia and many Armenians sought salvation by going there, but the first ones to go there quickly lost everything they had and returned [to India] in disappointment.”⁴¹

On the other hand, the social structure of the existing Armenian population also exhibited a different character in comparison to the previous years. At the end of this process of decline in which many rich merchants went bankrupt in the face of European capital and lost their influence at the state level, the affluent and influential population was replaced by an Armenian population working as clerks, tradespeople, lawyers, doctors, and architects. As previously stated, it is estimated that there were between 8000 and 20,000 Armenians residing in India at the end of the 19th century.⁴² It is known that “2000

38 Bhattacharya, “The Armenians of Calcutta”, 74.

39 Sircar, “Armenians: Merchant-Princes of the Past”, 7.

40 Ա. Գ. Աբրահամյան, “Հնդկահայ գաղթավայրը նոր և նորագույն ժամանակներում”, *Համառոտ ուրվագիծ հայ գաղթավայրերի պատմության*, (Երևան, 1967), 256-258.

41 Աբրահամյան, “Հնդկահայ գաղթավայրը”, 260.

42 For detailed information, please see: Bhattacharya, “The Armenians of Calcutta”, 77.

Armenians were living there [in India] at the beginning of the 20th century, 1500 in the year 1960, 450 in 1980, 300 in 1990, and 200 in 2003.”⁴³ “The turmoil during World War I and World War II and the partition of India further reduced the number of Armenians. In the second half of the twentieth century, there were no Armenians left in Delhi, Agra, Chinsura, Dhaka, and Surat.”⁴⁴

The population of Armenians in India today is around 150-200 people, and most of them are adults. Among today’s Armenians in India, “there are many mixed marriages and very few of them know their native language. Unlike in the past, today’s Indian Armenians do not have any notables or celebrities.”⁴⁵ In interviews conducted by *BBC* in 2019, it was emphasized that there has been an increase in the Armenian population in recent years, and that Indo-Armenian marriages are also contributing to this. It has been reported that 25 families of Armenian origin currently live in Calcutta.⁴⁶

Political Relations

It is evident that Armenians have been living in harmony with the government of their host country. It is known that they participated in India’s liberation struggle and played important roles during that process. Armenians have proven that they are on the side of both the Indian government and the Indian army based on their financial support, the diligence they have shown in matters requiring craftsmanship, and their achievements in the military field. In turn, they were rewarded for the sacrifices they made by being granted privileges or positions. For example, “In 1662, Malabar Armenians fought alongside the Indians against the Portuguese. After the victory, Indian officials appointed Marcos, an Armenian, as governor of Malabar.”⁴⁷ It is known that about 150 Armenians took part in the Battle of Plassey in 1757, and that the commander of the Indian army that fought against the British in Bengal between 1760-64 was an Armenian by the name of Girgor Khan/Grigor Harutyunyan. “Grigor Harutyunyan, a minor cloth merchant, rose to the leadership position of the Bengal Army under the command of Mir Qasim. He is known as Gorgin Khan in Indian sources.”⁴⁸ Despite being a cloth merchant, Gorgin Khan demonstrated extraordinary military intelligence as a commander under Mir Qasim.⁴⁹ Again, the Armenians “actively participated in almost all the anti-

43 Սարգսյան, “Հնդկաստան”, 353.

44 Bourmoutian, *A Concise History of the Armenian People*, 355.

45 Ջաքարյան, “Հնդկաստանի հայ համայնքը. (պատմամշակութային անդրադարձ)”, 185.

46 “The Armenian Population in India Is Growing Again, After Centuries”, *TheWire.in*, accessed November 26, 2023, <https://thewire.in/culture/the-armenian-population-in-india-is-growing-again-after-centuries>

47 Սարգսյան, “Հնդկաստան”, 358.

48 Սահա, “Հայերը Հնդկաստանում”, 188.

49 For detailed information, please see: Marshman, John C., *Outline of the History of Bengal* (Calcutta, 1857), 177.

British uprisings that occurred in the first half of the 19th century, and Hakob Petrosyan and Hovhannes Mkrtich, who commanded the armed detachments, are fondly remembered in Indian chronicles.”⁵⁰

As for Indo-Armenian relations in the modern times; during the Soviet period, Indian President Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan visited the Armenian Soviet Socialist Republic in September 1964, while Prime Minister Indira Gandhi did the same in June 1976. India recognized Armenia on 26 December 1991, 3 months after Armenia declared independence following the dissolution of the USSR. At the same time, its ambassador to Moscow was accredited to Armenia. Diplomatic relations between the two countries became official with a protocol signed on 31 August 1992. India’s embassy in Yerevan was opened on 1 March 1999, while Armenia opened an Honorary Consulate in India in April 1994 and established its embassy in New Delhi in October 1999.

Three presidential visits from Armenia were made to India in 1995, 2003, and 2017, and four prime ministerial visits were made in 2000, 2006, 2022, and 2023. As for India, it made two official visits at the level of Deputy Speaker of the Parliament in 2005 and 2017, and one visit at the level of the Minister of Foreign Affairs in 2021.⁵¹ Armenian Minister of Foreign Affairs Ararat Mirzoyan visited India on 24-27 April 2022, and in September and December 2022, Mirzoyan met with his Indian counterpart S. Jaishankar in New York. Frequent interactions have continued at the level of various ministries in 2023. India-Armenia-Iran trilateral consultations were held in Yerevan in April 2023, and the India-Armenia Policy Planning Dialogue meeting was held in Yerevan in July 2023.

Economic and Cultural Relations

The basis of relations between India and Armenia have been economic from the beginning. Today, in addition to political interests, relations between the two sides are developing with a strong economic aspect. There is a commercial network between the two countries in a wide range of areas from food to precious stones, from textiles to industrial products. According to the table prepared by the Indian Ministry of Commerce and Industry, the trade rates and import and export information between the two countries in recent years are as follows:⁵²

50 Ջարսրյան, “Հնդկաստանի հայ համայնքը. (պատմամշակութային անդրադարձ)”, 182.

51 “Bilateral Relations”, *Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Armenia*, accessed November 16, 2023, <https://www.mfa.am/en/bilateral-relations/in>

52 “Department of Commerce”, *Ministry of Commerce and Industry of India*, accessed November 26, 2023, <https://tradestat.commerce.gov.in/eidb/iecent.asp>

Department of Commerce
Export Import Data Bank
Country - wise

Dated: 26/11/2023
Values in US \$ Millions

Country / Region: ARMENIA						
S.No.	Year	2018-2019	2019-2020	2020-2021	2021-2022	2022-2023
1.	EXPORT	25.94	40.49	69.83	27.47	61.37
2.	%Growth		56.08	72.48	-60.66	123.37
3.	India's Total Export	330,078.09	313,361.04	291,808.48	422,004.40	451,070.00
4.	%Growth		-5.06	-6.88	44.62	6.89
5.	%Share	0.01	0.01	0.02	0.01	0.01
6.	IMPORT	0.91	1.56	96.46	134.85	72.89
7.	%Growth		71.56	6,097.50	39.80	-45.94
8.	India's Total Import	514,078.42	474,709.28	394,435.88	613,052.05	715,968.90
9.	%Growth		-7.66	-16.91	55.43	16.79
10.	%Share	0.00	0.00	0.02	0.02	0.01
11.	TOTAL TRADE	26.85	42.05	166.29	162.32	134.26
12.	%Growth		56.61	295.51	-2.39	-17.29
13.	India's Total Trade	844,156.51	788,070.32	686,244.36	1,035,056.45	1,167,038.89
14.	%Growth		-6.64	-12.92	50.83	12.75
15.	%Share	0.00	0.01	0.02	0.02	0.01
16.	TRADE BALANCE	25.03	38.93	-26.62	-107.38	-11.53
17.	India's Trade Balance	-184,000.33	-161,348.24	-102,627.40	-191,047.65	-264,898.90

As the table indicates, there has been an increase in bilateral trade since 2020-21. However, as of now, there is no significant Indian investment in Armenia. An exception to this has been the various agreements that were signed with a delegation led by a pharmaceutical company in November 2019, and with a business delegation led by the Indian Economic Trade Organization in November 2019.

At the same time, mutual interactions continue in the cultural field. In 2009, the Center for Indian Language and Literature was established in Yerevan with the support of India. In 2010, a Memorandum of Understanding on cultural, educational, and scientific cooperation was signed between India and Armenia. Attention is also being paid to the anniversaries of common elements in the relations between the two countries. In 1994, a special postage stamp was issued in Armenia on the occasion of the 200th anniversary of the publication of *Azdarar*. In 2014, Armenia and India celebrated the anniversary of the naming of the Armenian Street in Madras and the 300th anniversary of the friendship between the two peoples. These celebrations were also attended by a delegation from Armenia. The Indian Culture Festival was held in Armenia in 2018. And in 2022, Armenia and India celebrated the 30th anniversary of the establishment of their diplomatic relations.

The India-Armenia Friendship Association has made significant efforts to promote Indian culture through numerous events. Translations of classical works in both languages are being made; and events such as photography and

painting exhibitions, Indian film weeks, chess tournaments etc. are being organized.

As part of Mahatma Gandhi's birthday celebrations on 23 May 2019, the Armenian Postal Department issued a special postage stamp in honor of Gandhi.⁵³ A Mahatma Gandhi statue was officially unveiled in Yerevan on 16 August 2021. The Mahatma Gandhi Center at Yerevan State University has been operating since 2021. Additionally, some Indian students have chosen to pursue their education at Yerevan State University and some private universities.

In recent years, there has been an increase in the tourist flow between the two countries. The number of Indian tourists visiting Armenia were showing a strong upward trend that was, unfortunately for Armenia, disrupted by the Second Karabakh War of 2020: 11,589 in 2017, 28,659 in 2018, approximately 50,000 in 2019, only 2920 in 2020, and, increasing again, 17,980 in 2021.⁵⁴

Relations between the two countries are being widely covered in the media of both Armenia and India. News pieces continue to be published about the importance and consistent development of the relations between the two countries. From time to time, both countries make mutual support statements and the publics of both countries show their support for the other country through social media concerning conflicts that Armenia and India experience with third countries. For example, Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan has made statements indicating that Armenia supported India in the Kashmir issue between India and Pakistan in 2019. In addition, Pashinyan states at every opportunity that Armenia attaches special importance to the development of relations with India. India's support for Armenia became more evident in the Karabakh War in 2020, and arms sales agreements between two countries gained momentum during and after this war.

Military Relations

Although the basis of bilateral relations between Armenia and India has been trade and economic cooperation, the two sides have begun to sign partnerships in the field of defense industry in recent years, especially after 2020. In 2020, an agreement was signed on the sale of the Swathi Weapon Locating Radar (WLR) system developed by India.⁵⁵ The first batch of this system was

53 The visuals of the stamp and the poster can be found in the Appendix section.

54 "Bilateral Relations", Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Armenia.

55 Alperen Mastı, "Ermenistan, Hindistan'dan 4 adet Swathi Silah Yer Belirleme Radarı satın alıyor", *DefenceTurk.net*, accessed November 20, 2023, <https://www.defenceturk.net/ermenistan-hindistan-dan-4-adet-swathi-silah-yer-belirleme-radari-satin-aliyor>

delivered on 22 January 2021, and in October 2022, a new agreement was signed for the export of missiles, rockets, and ammunition.

Following the recent violent conflicts with Azerbaijan, news and statements have begun to be made that Armenia is willing to expand its defense cooperation with India. In November 2022, a company called Kalyani Strategic Systems signed a 155 million US Dollars' worth contract to supply artillery weapons to Armenia.

In March 2023, Armenia's senior commander Edward Asryan visited India and held various meetings there.⁵⁶ As a result of these visits, it was announced that Armenia would purchase anti-drone military equipment worth 41 million Dollars from India. In July 2023, the Pinaka Multi-Barreled Rocket Launcher system was delivered to Armenia via Iran.

Conclusion

It can be understood from all this that Armenians had been interacting with India for centuries prior to their migration and settlement in the country in the 16-17th centuries. Since the beginning, Indo-Armenian relations have been economically based. Today, it is seen that it has a structure that is focused on import-export and develops within the framework of a win-win principle.

Armenians, who had affluent lives under Safavid rule, largely lost their political support with the death of Persian Shah Abbas. In the following period, factors such as heavy taxation and persecution led them to India. Here too, they lived in prosperity for a long time with the opportunities offered to them, but then began to weaken as a community as they could not resist the pressure of foreign capital. Armenians not only gained various privileges from the state level and the trust that developed in line with this, at the same time, they managed to gain the affection and trust of the local people. Mixed marriages between Armenians and Indians both in the past and today are also an indication of this.

Armenians had an important place not only in the commercial life of India but also in its social order. While some Armenians served in managerial positions, others served in important roles as military commanders. They managed to maintain their positions in every sense until the consequences of the manipulative British policies began to manifest themselves. The Armenian population began to shrink after they were sidelined from trade affairs. Today, between 150-200 Armenians live in the lands that once hosted an important

56 Shashank Mattoo, "Armenia keen to expand defence links with India as conflict festers", *LiveMint.com*, accessed November 20, 2023, <https://www.livemint.com/news/india/armenia-keen-to-expand-defence-links-with-india-as-conflict-festers-11698254453791.html>

Armenian population. A large portion of this population consists of adults in mixed Indo-Armenian marriages, and very few of them speak their native language. Contrary to their influence in the past, it is not possible to talk about an influential Armenian community in India today.

Armenians have tried to protect their social existence in India by building at least one church in almost every place they settled. The existence of churches was important for both protecting and maintaining their identities in the settled places and for interaction and support within the community. There are still Armenian churches, cemeteries, and monuments in various cities across India. Places of worship continue to be actively used today and people continue to gather in these places for religious services and other occasions.

On the other hand, in the context of political and military relations that have developed after 1992, an increasing interaction between India and Armenia can be observed in recent years. Although they are not adjacent countries, both countries protect each other's interests and express their support for each other at every opportunity. There is a sustained progress in the cultural, economic, and military cooperation between the two sides.

The Armenia-India relationship is built on a solid foundation of common cultural and historical ties. Over the years, with the influence of political processes, efforts have been made to develop cooperation between the two countries in areas such as trade, education, defense, and culture. In the international arena, both countries have demonstrated support for the other in every way. Considering the developments that have occurred and will occur in both the Caucasus and Indian foreign policy, it can be predicted that these bilateral relations will continue to increase and become more relevant.

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APPENDIX



A poster celebrating the 300th anniversary of Indian-Armenian relations



Special postal stamp on celebrating the 200th anniversary of the publication of *Azdarar*



Special postal stamp of Mahatma Gandhi



A photograph from the opening ceremony for the Mahatma Gandhi statue in Yerevan⁵⁷

57 “Mahatma Gandhi statue officially inaugurated in Yerevan”, *ArmenPress*, accessed November 20, 2023, <https://armenpress.am/eng/news/1060869.html>