

THE PRINTING ENTERPRISE OF ARMENIANS IN INDIA

For a long time, the Armenian books published in India were little known or studied, largely because of their normal print-runs of only 100-200 copies and their very limited circulation outside of India. The only extensive research in that field was conducted by H. Irazek (Hagob Ter Hagobian), who in the 1930's had the unique opportunity to work at the Library of All Savior's Monastery in New Julfa, which had the largest collection of Armenian publications from India. His *History of Armenian Printing in India*, was published in Antelias, in 1986.

The Armenian printing enterprise in India that started in Madras and continued in Calcutta, lasted for a century and produced almost 200 books and booklets and 13 periodicals through 12 different printing presses. Today, within the time limits set for this conference, I will only try to present the highlights of Armenian printing in India.

Since the late 17th century, close cooperation developed between the British East India Company and Armenian merchants of New Julfa origin, who enjoyed special privileges in trade and civil matters in Madras, Calcutta and Bombay, all of which were under British control. But by the late 1760's, the British had changed their policy by restricting the trade operations of Armenians. These developments coincided with the arrival of Joseph Emin in Madras, after 19 years of travel and "adventures" for the liberation of Armenia. In Madras he tried but failed to secure financial support from the Armenian merchants for his liberation plans. But certainly he made an impact on a small circle of merchants, chief among them being Shahamir Shahamirian.

In 1772 Shahamirian established the first Armenian printing press in Madras in the name of his older son Hagop, who would be assisted by his Armenian tutor Movses Baghramian, a former collaborator of Joseph Emin. The first publications of Shahamirian press in 1772 were an

Aybbenaran and a geography of Armenia, followed by *Nor Tetrak vor Kochi Hordorak* (New Pamphlet, which is called Exhortation), an important work that laid the foundations of Armenian political thinking and literature. According to its title page, the author was Movses Baghramian and the printing date was 1772. But at the end of the book, addressing his readers, Hagop Shahamirian claims to be the author and the publisher, with the collaboration of Baghramian. He also indicates that the publication was completed in 1773.

Hordorak is an appeal to the Armenian people, especially the youth, to open their eyes and see the miserable conditions in which they live as human beings and as a nation, under the Persian and Turkish yoke, and to be ready for the long struggle of liberation. For that purpose the author is urging the youth to get enlightened through education, to work hard, unite and be ready to sacrifice their lives, because he says “it is better to die once as a hero, than to live in misery.” After a long presentation of the heroic past of Armenians and the beauty of Armenia to create a sense of national pride, the author adds that Armenians lost their independence due to laziness and ignorance. Therefore, they should regain their independence through wisdom and bravery.

The crowning publication of Shahamirian press was *Girk Anvaneal Vorogayt Parats* (Book Called Snare of Glory), of which only 110 copies were printed. According to its title page the book was written by Hagop Shahamirian and printed in 1773. While Hagop, who died in 1774, could have largely written the book and started its printing in 1773, as late as October 1787, only its manuscript copies were sent by Shahamir Shahamirian to King Heraclius II of Eastern Georgia and Catholicos Ghougas Karnetsi of Etchmiadzin, for their review and approval. Therefore, the original text written by Hagop could have been revised and expanded before its circulation in a final printed form after 1787.

Vorogayt Parats includes an introduction and *Nshavag* (Guideline), which is a blueprint constitution for a republican democracy or a constitutional monarchy. The introduction emphasizes the importance of law and order in human society and the benefits of the proposed constitution. The guideline includes 468 articles of law, drafts of 50 official form letters and three sample balance sheets of the incomes and the expenditures of the state. The supreme authority in the state belongs to the people. The highest governing body is *Hayots Tun*, the National Assembly, formed by two elected representatives from each district of Armenia for a term of three years. The Assembly is equally divided between legislative and executive bodies. The President (*Nakharar*) is elected by the National Assembly. However, that position may also be hereditary, if a descendent of an old Armenian royal dynasty claims his hereditary rights. This exception was obviously made for King Heraclius II, who was a member of the Bagrationi Dynasty.

After the death of Hagop Shahamirian, his brother, Yeghiazar, assumed the management of the printing press and followed the path of his late brother in promoting patriotism and liberation ideology. Between 1775 and 1783 he produced four publications, including:

– *Patmutiwn Mnatsordats Hayots yev Vrats* (Chronicles of Armenia and Georgia) by 10th century Mesrob Yerets, a collection of heroic episodes from Armenian history, *Gahnamak*, a protocol of old Armenian princely houses, the life of Catholicos Nerses the Great and his “vision” for the liberation of Armenians by Western Princes, and a Chronicle of Georgia.

– *Tetrak vor kochi Nshavak* (Pamphlet called Guideline), the bylaws of the Armenian community of Madras by Shahamir Shahamirian, according to which the highest authority in the community was the General Assembly, which elected a three-member Executive Committee, excluding the clergy, to manage the “Orphans’ Fund” raised from membership dues, donations,

wills and investment incomes, for charitable and social purposes. The bylaws had to guide the community until the day when all Armenians would return to a liberated Armenia. But until then, if the Armenians were forced to leave Madras, they would go and settle in the North Caucasus under Russian rule and wait for the liberation of Armenia. For that interim settlement, Shahamirian had even drafted an agreement between the Russian government and Armenians.

In 1787, Shahamirian suffered the loss of his second son, Yeghiazar, and yet, for the rest of his life he actively pursued his dream for the liberation of Armenia. His death in 1797 marked the end of the Armenian liberation movement in India.

The second Armenian printing press of Madras was established in 1789 at St. Asdvadzadzin Church by Rev. Harutiwn Shmavonian from Shiraz, who is best known as the publisher of *Azdarar* (Mirror), the first Armenian Journal in 1794. For his 48-page monthly, Shmavonian had followed the example of an English magazine, which had just started publishing in Madras. His goal was to print original Armenian works and articles translated from foreign magazines, news from Armenia and Persia, the index of market prices, the schedule of trade ships, and the monthly calendar marking the Armenian feast days and the official British holidays.

As a clergyman, Shmavonian was moderately conservative, but his journal was a forum for all kinds of opinions and ideologies. In a genuine sense of true journalism, the pages of his journal were open for people of different persuasions. Individual writers who preferred to remain anonymous, were given the option of dropping their materials in a special box, placed under the bell tower of the church. Besides religious, political, social and literary articles, two very valuable works: the *History of Persia* by Khachatur Jughayetsi and the *History of Haydar Ali Khan* by Hakob Simeonian–Ayoubian were published in *Azdarar*.

In a small community of only 80 Armenian families, *Azdarar* had both supporters and opponents. With only 40 subscribers at its peak, the journal could not survive for very long. After publishing only 18 issues, the publication of the journal was terminated in February 1796.

In addition to *Azdarar*, during his 20-year publishing career (1789-1809), Shmavonian printed 20 volumes, including the *Dagharan* of Simeon Yerevantsi, the *Grammar* of Paghsar Tbir, the *Introduction to Categories* by Porphyry, the *Book of Definitions* by David Anhaght, a book of engineering by Hagop Harutiwnian–Taghian, *Voghb Hayasdaneayts*, a booklet of patriotic poems by Rev. Tadeos Soginian, and other titles of religious, ethical and educational character. Under heavy debt, caused by his daughter and grandchildren, Shmavonian lost his home and printing press after 1809 and spent the rest of his life in extreme poverty.

In 1809 Sargis Aghavelian opened the third printing press in Madras and during the following three years published five volumes, including two volumes of an Armenian textbook, Nerses Shnorhali’s *Voghb Yetesio*, and most importantly a *Commentary on the Sacrament of Holy Communion* by the famous theologian Hovhannes Vardapet Mrkus of New Julfa.

The last Armenian printing press in Madras belonged to Hagop and Hovsep Shamrian brothers, who in 1812 translated from English Voltaire’s *Julius Caesar*, the first play ever printed in Armenian, and Jean-Pierre Claris de Florian’s *Numa Pompilius*, a novel translated from French by “*Vomn Banaser*,” who remains unknown.

The establishment of the first Armenian printing press in Calcutta was somehow the result of sheer coincidence. In 1790, Armenian fonts and other printing equipment, discovered at the shop of a British trader in the market, were purchased and donated to St. Nazareth Church by Movses Khachig Arakel, to establish a printing shop, under the management of Rev. Hovsep Stepanosian. During the following eight years, five publications were produced, including the

first editions of the History of Catholicos Abraham Kretatsi for his time with Nadir Shah and the religious-theological debate of Hovhannes Vardapet Mrkuz with Shah Sulaiman.

In 1811, thirteen years after the closure of St. Nazareth press, with 30 supporters in the community, Avet Jntlumian established the second Armenian printing press in Calcutta for the “enlightenment, splendor and merriment” of his nation. In nine years he produced 21 publications, including the *Hajakhapatum Jark*, the histories of Zenob Glak and Yeghishe, the *prayer book* and the *Commentary on the Song of Songs of Solomon* by Narekatsi and *Hravirak* (Inviter) by Mnatsakan Vardanian Smbatian, an enlightenment activist and the pioneer advocate for the establishment of the Armenian Philanthropic Academy and printing press in Calcutta.

Hravirak is an appeal for education and enlightenment with a clear road map, according to which, all the candidates for priesthood should first study grammar and literature under a learned teacher. An elderly priest-teacher should be assigned to each church to teach the children. A School Fund should be established in all major cities with a sizeable number of Armenians in India, Georgia, Russia and under the Ottomans. The larger part of church incomes from tithes, donations and wills should be allocated to the School Fund. A central school with a printing press should be established in each city, where four languages, including Armenian, Greek or Latin, English, French or Russian, and Persian or Arabic, along with arts and sciences should be taught. Thus, within 20-30 years Armenians will recover their glittering past and within 100 years will be able to compete with the civilized European nations.

In 1821, Poghos Hordananian established an Armenian printing press in Calcutta under the management of *Imastakhndrian* (wisdom seeking) and *Ojanaspiwriian* (aid spreading) Societies, which were formed by a handful of youths from Calcutta and Bombay, including Mkrkich Aghanour, Hovhannes Avdalian and Martiros Davtian–Mkrtchian. In the same year *Hayeli*

Kalkatian and *Shtemaran*, two weekly papers, and five books were published by the two societies, including the first printed Armenian play, *Khtradima Djroghutian* (the physiognomist of Treachery) by Martiros Davtian, which was published with an introduction in 1821.

Khtradima Djroghutian is written both in classical Armenian and the dialect of New Julfa. In the introduction the author states that he is motivated by the example of the British, being convinced that the theater is a “second church” and a “primary school” and his play reflects the social picture of his time, with both male and female, positive and negative characters. In 1832 *Leyli*, another play inspired by the Armenian social life in Calcutta was produced by Mardiros Ghougassian, albeit in lithograph form.

Mardasirakan Jemaran (the philanthropic Academy) of Calcutta was established in 1821. Soon after, it acquired as a donation the Jntlumian Press and until 1873, in addition to annual calendars, 43 large and small publications were produced there. The most productive years of the *Mardasirakan* press were 1824-30, when under the supervision of Hovhannes Avdalian, 26 works were published, including an *Aybbenaran* by Harutiwn Aghanouriants *Khrakhjan Patmutian Hayots*, which was the abridged version of Michael Chamchian’s *History of Armenia*, and his *Grammar of Armenian language*, a *Commentary on the Divine Liturgy* by Hovhannes Arjishetsi and nine volumes by Avdalian, mostly translations from European literature, including Samuel Johnson’s *Rasselas* and Chateaubriand’s *Atala*.

Avdalian, a native of Shiraz, was graduated from the school of Haroutiwn Galoutsian in Calcutta. He was the principal of *Mardasirakan Jemaran* from 1825 to the end of his life in 1871, and a lifelong member of the Asiatic Society of Bengal. He was well-versed in seven languages and a prolific writer, translator and editor. His monumental work was an English translation of Michael Chamchian’s abridged version of *History of Armenia*, printed in two

volumes at the Bishop's College Press of Calcutta in 1827. Two-thirds of the 250 subscribers listed at the end of the second volume of this publication were non-Armenians.

In the mid-nineteenth century, the dominant figure in the Armenian literary, educational and printing scene of Calcutta was Mesrop Taghiatians, a native of Yerevan, who was raised at Holy Etchmiadzin to become a priest. In 1823 he arrived in Calcutta and started his career as a substitute teacher at *Mardasirakan Jemaran*.

In 1826 Taghiatians was admitted to Bishop's College, where he mastered a few languages and during his studies he translated eight volumes from Latin, Greek, English and Persian. He also translated the *History* of Yeghishe into English and produced seven Armenian publications at the Bishop's College Press, including his *Ditsabanutiwn* (Mythology) and his translations from Latin of *On the Truth of the Christian Religion* by Hugo Gratius, and from English *Palestine* by Bishop Reginald Heber of Calcutta. Having received the news of liberation of Yerevan from Persian rule by the Russians, in November 1828 he also printed a three-page open letter to his compatriots in Yerevan, which is a genuine expression of his great patriotism and enlightened mind.

In 1831 Taghiatians returned to Armenia "to live and die" for his homeland. But due to his uncompromising character, he could not establish good relations with Holy Etchmiadzin and with both conservative and liberal circles. Consequently, he left Armenia again and for five years wandered in New Julfa, Tabriz and Constantinople, before returning to Calcutta in late 1839 and resuming his publishing work at Bishop's College. In two years he published six volumes, including his *Aybbenaran*, *Armenian-English Composition* book and *History of Ancient India*. In a letter dated 1840, he claimed that since 1827, Holy Etchmiadzin with a five hundred member religious order and financial resources did not print as many books as he did alone.

In printing, the most productive years of Taghiatians started in 1845, when he joined the “Araratian Association” of Manoug Zohrapian, an Armenian merchant, and four other young members and helped establish a new printing press, a library and *Azgaser* (Patriot), a weekly journal. In 1847 he also established his own St. Sandukht School for boys and girls.

From 1845-48, Taghiatians published 140 weekly issues of *Azgaser*, which had only 66 subscribers. He also published 25 books, eleven of which were his own works, including *Vep Vardgisi Tearn Tuhats*, *Sos yev Sondipi*, *Vep Varsenkan*, *Tutak Taghiatians*, *Jar Dastiarakutian Oriordats* and *Janaparhordutiwn i Hays*. With the passing of Manoug Zohrapian in 1847, the Araratian Association was dissolved and Taghiatians was forced to suspend the operation of his press in June 1848. Three months later, having secured financial support, he resumed the publication of his journal under the name *Azgaser Araratian*, and until 1852, in addition to his journal, he managed to publish only eight books, half of which were translations from English by the students of his school, while more than a dozen of his own works remained unpublished.

In the first half of the 19th century, Taghiatians, along with Khatchatur Abovian and Stepanos Nazarian, played an important role in the Armenian national enlightenment movement. Through *Azgaser* and most of his other literary works, he struggled against ignorance and prejudice and advocated patriotism, national unity and enlightenment through good education, literature, science and hard work.

Under heavy financial burdens, in 1852 Taghiatians closed both his school and printing press and spent the last six years of his life disappointed, hopeless and isolated in Chinsura, 23 miles to the north of Calcutta. In 1858, with only ten boxes of his printed books he left for Armenia, reaching Shiraz in poor health, where he died on May 28, 1858, at age 55 and was buried at the local Armenian Church.

From the beginning, India was not an ideal place for developing an Armenian print culture. At their demographic peak, the Armenians of Madras and Calcutta combined were less than three hundred families. There were almost no qualified writers, editors or trained printers. The literary language was a degraded classical Armenian and the colloquial was a dialect of New Julfa. And yet against all these odds, there was a great deal of dedication in both communities. Almost all of the Armenian publishers in India were born in Iran or Eastern Armenia and had experienced the Persian oppressive rule before reaching India and getting a taste of European civilization and enlightenment. For them, printing was not a business for profit; it was a national and cultural mission for the survival of Armenians living in a foreign world. Except for the Shahamirians, all of them depended on financial support or in-kind donations of paper, ink or voluntary labor from the community for the survival of their printing presses.

But by the end of the third quarter of the 19th century, the Armenians of India were more integrated with British society. A young generation of lawyers, doctors, engineers and other professionals had largely replaced the old merchant class, the Divine Liturgy and other books used at the church were published in English translations, sermons and announcements at the Armenian churches were being delivered in English, and in the words of Melik-Beglar, editor of ARA, a journal of literature and of Armenian politics and history, which was published in Calcutta from 1892-5, Armenian had been a dead language to them for a generation. That also would mark the death of Armenian print culture in India.

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