

"The Armenian Church of Dhaka (Bangladesh) and the task of Heritage preservation"

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The Armenian Church in Dhaka stands as the most prominent testament to the historical presence of Armenians in Bangladesh. This talk will provide an overview of the history of the historically significant Armenian community in Bangladesh and the efforts being taken today to preserve the church and the raise awareness of the legacy of the Armenians of Bangladesh. The first Armenian merchant colonies in Bengal were founded in the seventeenth century. Armenians founded a small settlement in Dhaka in the early eighteenth century. Making their fortune mainly in the salt trade, several Armenians became owners of large estates in the surrounding area. A number of merchants entered into contracts with the East India Company, with varying degrees of success. By the late nineteenth century, Armenians had become involved in the jute industry. Prominent Armenian jute merchants had their own companies, namely Messrs Sarkies & Sons, Messrs David & Co., Thaddeus & Nahapiet, Lazarus & Co. Gradually, the jute business was absorbed and monopolized by the more powerful and better organized British firms who established themselves in Bengal.

Before the Armenian community had its own church or cemetery, a number of Armenians were buried in the cemetery of the Church of the Holy Rosary Tejgaon, itself built in 1677. The Armenian community continued to use the church until 1794, 13 years after their own was built. The early Armenian settlers built a small chapel in their community graveyard. By the end of the eighteenth century, the Armenian colony in Dacca had grown considerably and the chapel was found inadequate for the needs of the community. With the contributions made by prominent Armenian merchants, the chapel was replaced with a church, completed in 1781. The extensive grounds on which this church was built were donated by a well-known Armenian merchant, Agah Catchick Minas. Today, the church and the artworks within it are undergoing active restoration with the help of Armenian art restorers. The church acts as a site for cross-cultural collaboration and charitable activities, as well as a reminder of the disappeared Armenian community that played an important role in the development of Bangladesh in the last 200 years.

Bio: *Armen Arslanian is a businessman of Armenian descent who was born and raised in Argentina. He first visited Dhaka in 2010 and met Mr. Michael Martin, the renowned warden of the Armenian church in Dhaka. After this trip, Armen became a frequent visitor and supporter of the church. In 2014, when Mr. Martin retired to Canada for health reasons, Armen took over as warden of the church. Since assuming the role of warden, Armen has made it a priority to spread global awareness of the church and the legacy of the vanished Armenian community of Bangladesh. Through the Michael Martin Food Assistance Program, the church gives back to the local community based around the church.*