

*Negotiating with Law: Phases of Armenian Interaction with the  
Early Colonial Law Courts in India.*

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Scholars have looked for the reason behind the success of the New Julfan Armenians as long-distance traders. While some have highlighted the element of generic trust among the members of the network; a few others have looked more closely at the mercantile codes, institutions and legal system that functioned as an effective self-regulatory organ for the community. While this pointed towards a more concrete explanation, it also provoked new questions vis-à-vis the community's engagement with the emerging colonial regime in the Indian subcontinent and its legal system in the eighteenth century. The Armenians in Madras made profuse use of institutions like the Mayor's Court. Did this dilute the self-sustaining legal culture and identity of the New Julfan Armenians that catalyzed the disintegration of the network?

The paper suggests that the nature of Armenian interaction with the English law courts was not entirely unitary or seamless. The dialogue between the diaspora and the colonial regime underwent a constant evolution during the course of eighteenth to early nineteenth century. Initially the interaction was considerably untroubled due to minimal intrusion of the colonial ethos in the legal sphere. The Armenians could consider the Mayor's Court almost as an extension of the legal culture that they were familiar with during the first half of the eighteenth century. However, the escalated position of the colonial regime prompted greater scrutiny and intervention in the Mayor's Court in the second half of the eighteenth century. This created instances of tension within the community that in turn led to the construction of a language of both resistance and adjustment. Therefore, the interaction with the Mayor's Court did not entirely diffuse the self-representation of the community in the legal sphere. On the contrary, the deliberations in the courts of law provided an opportunity to the Armenians to produce a narrative of collective self-representation, even when it did not actually determine the outcome of the judicial proceedings. The third phase of Anglo-Armenian legal dialogue could be roughly placed in the first half of the nineteenth century. It was starkly different from the previous two phases in terms of the Armenians accepting the colonial legal culture and identity. Did the degree of the power of the colonial regime regulate the legal identity of the Armenians in the subcontinent during this period of time, or was the language of law a tool of negotiation for the network? Did this legal discourse provide a scope to produce the sense of a collective and connected narrative even when the customary institutional framework of the network had actually dwindled?

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