



The Armenian Church  
of  
Holy Virgin Mary  
in Madras.

1712 / 1772

*With the Compliments of*

The President  
and the Council of the  
**ARMENIAN ASSOCIATION**  
Trustees, Armenian Church of  
Holy Virgin Mary, Madras.

# Short History of the Armenian Church Madras and Some of its Benefactors

---

There are no records to show when the Armenians FIRST found their way to the Coromandel Coast, but there exists authentic evidence which goes to prove that the Armenians were trading on the Madras Coast in the early part of the 16th century.

A Chapel of the Apostle St. Thomas still existed on the Coromandel Coast in the year 1507. In 1507 two Portuguese arriving at Pulicat from Malacca, heard of the Chapel from some Armenian merchants. On arrival to the spot, they discovered a very ancient edifice, constructed like a church with nave and aisles, and having timber pillars and roof. Its length was twelve cubits. Crosses and peacocks in plaster constituted the decoration.

The Armenians flourished at Madras during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, when they had the trade with Europe and the East. The Armenians settled permanently at Madras in the year 1666. The English had settled in 1640.

The first Armenian Church at Madras was erected as far back as 1712. It was one of the few magnificent edifices in the Esplanade area of the city. The British authorities at that time would not permit so high an edifice to stand in the immediate vicinity of the Fort. Hence this edifice and another Latin Church in the same neighbourhood was objected to and demolished. The present Armenian Church, situated at No. 60, Armenian Street, was erected in 1772, and dedicated to the Holy Virgin Mary, the site being the old Armenian burying-ground. This ground was the property of the famous Agah Shameer Sultanoonian His wife Anna and seven sons were buried in the Shameer Room specially built in memory of his wife.

The Armenians are an Indo-Aryan race and Christians by religion. It was in 303 A. D. that king Tirdat the Third of Armenia issued a declaration whereby Christianity became the State religion. Thus Armenia was the first nation to officially accept Christianity.

The Armenians have their own Head of the Church and he is known as the Catholicos and Supreme Patriarch of all Armenians. The Cathedral of Holy Etchmiadzin in Yerevan, capital of Armenia is the seat of the Supreme Patriarch.

The Armenians still continue to celebrate both the Birth and Baptism of Christ on 6th January, the day of Epiphany, which is in commemoration of the Manifestation of Christ to the three wise men of the East who followed the star that led them to the crib of Jesus, the new born Prince of Peace.

The Armenian alphabet consists of 39 letters. It was during the year 404 A.D. that St. Mesroby and St. Sahag invented the Armenian alphabet and had the Holy Bible translated from the Greek version with accuracy and thoroughness. The Armenian Bible is widely acknowledged as the "Queen of Translations".

The Armenians who settled in Madras were excellent traders in textiles, precious stones silks and spices. KHOJAH PETRUS WOSKAN the most eminent Armenian merchant at Madras in the earlier half of the eighteenth century, was the son of Khojah Woskan, and grandson of the famous Khojah Pogose of Julfa, Iran. He was a true philanthropist and an earnest patriot in helping and succuring his countrymen. It is recorded that on the occasion of the visit of the Nawab of Arcot to Madras, Khojah Petrus received him with great eclat, entertained him for some days, and had all the principal streets through which he had to pass through draped in silk. The Nawab, greatly appreciating the loyalty of the Armenian merchant, requested him to name a wish, which would be granted then and there. Khojah Petrus asked for the sole monopoly of the import trade to Madras and into the interior. The request was immediately granted and thus amassed considerable riches. He died in 1751, and left in cash alone considerable sum of seven lakhs of rupees in spite of his heavy financial losses when the French under Count Lally captured Madras in 1746 who demolished all forty houses belonging

to him in the city besides other houses that he had in the Fort.

This notable merchant constructed, in 1726, a long bridge of many arches over the river Adyar. It is still standing and is known as the "Marmalong Bridge," Renamed "Maramalai Bridge" On one of the pillars bears a stone tablet (now removed and placed at the South side of the bridge) with inscription in Latin, Persian and Armenian language. In 1726 Khojah Petrus built at his own expense 160 broad stone steps from the foot to the top of St. Thomas Mount with spacious resting places at intervals Another magnanimous contribution was made when he built The St. Mathias church at Vepery in Madras and dedicated it to Our Lady of Miracles for the use of the poor Christians of the city. According to his wishes Khojah Petrus' body was interred in Vepery at St Matthias' Churchyard and his heart enclosed in a golden casket was sent to his birthplace Julfa, Iran for interment in the church erected by his great grandfather, the famous Khojah Petrus Valijanlian.

**AGAH SHAMEER SULTHANOOMIAN.** He was born at Julfa, Iran, in 1723 . He rose to eminence in Madras after settling in Madras at an early age. He flourished during the latter part of the eighteenth century. He was a famous jeweller and carried out a lucrative trade in Persian rose-water and dried fruits by selling them at immense profit to the Nawab of the Carnatic and to his luxurious household, he amassed considerable riches. He lent large sums to the Nawab of the Carnatic and the debt was not cleared off when the English took his country. When the Nawab was being oppressed by his many creditors, Agah Shameer went to pay his respects, and had the promissory note with him. The Nawab asked, "And do you, my dearest friend, entertain any fear as to my financial position, and have therefore come to demand your just claims from me?". The noble Agha Shameer replied, "Not so, my lord, I have come as usual to pay my humble respects to your Highness. My claim against you is but a little dust from your shoes". As he spoke Agha Shameer took out the Nawab's promissory note from his breast

pocket, tore it up, and threw the pieces at the Nawab's feet. This magnanimous act which appears little short of a romance, excited the enthusiastic admiration of the Nawab and his courtiers and the grateful debtor ordered the title deeds of the village of Noomblee to be brought to him. The Nawab ordered his Private Secretary to write out a **FIRMAN**, which he duly signed and sealed, to the effect that he was pleased, of his own free will, to grant the village of Noomblee, with all the lands attached thereto, to his valued and esteemed friend Agha Shameer, as a personal gift, who would be its lawful owner, and could do whatever he liked with the same. Neither his heirs, nor the British Government, were in any way to annul the provisions contained in the deed of gift which was bestowed on Agha Shameer and exempted from paying any taxes thereon. He died here at Madras, on Saturday the 13th day of June 1797, aged 74 years.

**REV. HARUTHIUN SHMAVONIAN**, It is a curious fact that the **FIRST** Armenian journal ever printed in the world was published at Madras two hundred years ago, by the Rev. Haruthiun Shmavonian an Armenian priest of Shiraz, whose name is dear to all interested in the study of classical Armenian. He started, **AZDARAR** (i. e. 'Intelligencer') on the 28th October 1794, and published it monthly for eighteen consecutive months until February 1796. Its centenary Jubilee was celebrated, in 1894 by Armenian journalists in Constantinople, Smyrna, Tiflis, Venice, Marseilles, and America; and in commemoration of the event, the religious society of the Armenian literati (Mekhitists) at Vienna, (monastic order) published an artistic phototype of the venerable father of Armenian journalism.

While at Shiraz, the Rev. Haruthiun Shmavonian had the misfortune to lose his two sons in one week. Overcome by grief, he left his fold and retired from the city. Rev. Haruthiun Shmavonian left Shiraz and came to Madras as a minister for Armenian Church in Madras. The patriotic Armenians of Madras had already shown a praiseworthy zeal

for the advancement of classical Armenian literature, and they warmly seconded his endeavours in that direction. Around 1789 he started a printing- press at Madras for printing and publishing books in the Armenian language. He acted as compositor and printer. The type used was cast by himself from materials prepared by his own hands and even the paper used was made by him by the primitive method in vogue at that time for making hand-made paper from cotton pulp, a large undertaking, even at the present day, which few would attempt single-handed.

The AZDARAR, referred to already, gave an impetus to the study of the Armenian language in India amongst the Armenian colonists. Rev Haruthiun Shmavonian, the venerable Father of Armenian journalism died on the 9th February 1824 aged 74 years, and lies buried in the Armenian Church at Madras where he had officiated as the vicar for 40 years. The Bi-centenary of his journal was celebrated at all the Armenian centres, including Calcutta, and at our special request a requiem service was held over his grave, after the celebration of Holy Mass in the Armenian Church at Madras, on the morning of Thursday, the 16th day of February 1995.

Peace to his soul, rest to his ashes' and may the journalism, which he founded, continue to flourish for the intellectual advancement of a much-persecuted ancient race, which, in the words of Byron "has partaken of the proscription and bondage of the Jews and of the Greeks, without the sullenness of the former or the servility of the latter."



---

This is an extract from the Late Mesrobyb Jacob Jacob Seth's book entitled "Armenians in India" from the earliest times to the present day, Published by the author in Calcutta 1937.



