





# SIR PAUL CHATER: THE BAREFOOT INDIAN ARMENIAN ORPHAN

If you were an ex-pat Brit from Hong Kong you would definitely be familiar with the name Paul Chater since quite a number of places in Hong Kong are named after him: the Chater Garden, Chater Road and Catchick Street. Even now in the year 2010, his mark is all over the island. He died in 1926 having lived what we would today call a “rags to riches” story. During his life, he was a “closet Armenian” – he lived, worked and died for the British establishment. His rise to the highest echelons of society in the finest colony under British rule of the time must have been beyond his wildest dreams. After all, he was simply a barefoot orphan boy on the streets of Calcutta in the 1850s.

text LIZ CHATER



**P**aul Chater lost his father in a tragic accident in 1853 on the Hoogley River when he drowned while trying to save the life of another person. Two years after the loss of his father, Paul Chater's mother, Mariam, died leaving behind 13 children. Paul was only eight and, in addition, he had two younger and more vulnerable siblings: Sophie was six and Joseph had just had his fourth birthday. Throughout Paul's life, Sophie and Joseph were particularly special family members.

Stability came into Paul's life through the stabilizing effects of education. Despite being born in 1846 to Armenian parents in Calcutta and being baptized in its Armenian Church, Paul was not sent to the Armenian College. In 1855, he was admitted to La Martiniere School for Boys, where he excelled academically and recreationally. He was both a prefect and captain of the cricket team. During the course of his final examinations at La Martiniere, he passed the special examination of the India Survey Department. However, he never entered the Survey Department in Calcutta and instead turned away from what was a clear and certain career path that would have kept him in Calcutta. The teenager had been persuaded by his sister Hosannah, who was based in Calcutta, to go and live in Hong Kong with their eldest sister Anna, who had married into a respected Armenian family of Madras – the Jordans.

Paul landed in Hong Kong on the evening of April 1, 1864, just as the sun was setting in the harbor. What a beautiful sunset it was! He cast his eyes on that rocky, and in some places inhospitable, island, unaware of the illustrious future ahead of him. The early years in Hong Kong were frugal, exciting, and occasionally lonely. But opportunities came his way and he seized them all. Other members of his family from the Armenian community of Calcutta were already established in Hong Kong. Paul's eldest brother, Marcar, was in partnership with Anna's husband, Jordan Paul Jordan, and they were doing very well as brokers. Their daughter Mary had married Gregory John Malcolm Manuk (originally an Armenian from Calcutta) in 1863. Gregory too was now in Hong Kong establishing himself as a successful merchant and agent. Paul needed commercial experience and so, rather than take the easy way of going into business with his brother and brother-in-law, he got himself a job in a bank. Within a year of arriving in Hong Kong, he was head-hunted by Victor Kresser, the manager, and John Griggor, the accountant of the Hong Kong and Shanghai Banking Corporation. Nevertheless, he turned them down. One can only guess how different his life would have been had he accepted their offer. Instead, he observed and learned enough within two years of his arrival to branch out on his own as a broker. ▶



"Bizen-Ware"  
by James Orange.

## Sir Paul Chater became an extremely successful and influential figure – considered by most to have “the Midas touch” in the colony.

### Info

#### The Six Pioneers from Calcutta

G.M. Gregory, Tigran Matthews Gregory, Stephen M. Joseph, Nazareth Malcolm Manuk, Mackertich Cyril Owen, and “Goblin” all took up their positions obtained for them by Paul Chater in the Post Office of Hong Kong. Five of them are listed in official papers of the colony. They were all earning \$40 per month with a four dollar sorting allowance. None of them stayed long in the post office, all of them ultimately earning a good living. Tigran Matthews Gregory in particular. Tigran started his own company, T.M. Gregory & Co, of which he was sole proprietor. He was also a well-connected and established diamond merchant in Hong Kong during his lifetime. So, without that first leg up from Paul Chater, Tigran Matthews Gregory would not have been in a position to donate to the Armenian Church in Calcutta as generously as he did upon his death. Tigran died in Hong Kong in 1962 and is buried in the same cemetery as Sir Paul Chater. Thus, the Armenian Church in Calcutta acquired more generous donations.

Nazareth Malcolm Manuk joined the post office briefly but quickly obtained a position with the Chartered Bank of India. After about 18 months he joined the Dairy Farm, a company that Paul Chater had helped get off the ground. Within a year of joining, Malcolm was promoted to Secretary of the Company in 1905, a position which showed that he was held in the highest esteem for his business abilities. Malcolm dedicated 27 years of his life to the Dairy Farm Company and its rapid progress was in no small measure because of his responsibilities. During WWI he served in the Hong Kong Volunteer Corps in what was known as the Right Section Machine Gun Company. He was well-liked and thoroughly efficient. He was also an extremely good marksman having won many shooting trophies.

Malcolm took an interest in theosophy and was the Presidential Agent of China of the Theosophical Society in Hong Kong.

The six men had a long and tight friendship lasting their lifetimes; particularly close were Malcolm Manuk and Tigran Matthews, who later became Paul's brother-in-laws since Mrs. Gregory was Mr. Manuk's sister Ripsey. According to the newspaper *The Chinaman*, Malcolm Manuk died in Hong Kong on April 7, 1932.

After three years at the Post Office, Stephen M. Joseph felt confident enough in himself and his abilities to test his luck in Shanghai, but perhaps it was youthful exuberance, or slight immaturity that held him back since he wasn't as successful there as he would have liked. However, undaunted and unbowed, he left for Japan with one of the original six friends (name unknown), and he secured a job with an American firm. S.M. Joseph lived in Japan for 23 years and became extremely successful. However, his brother, Abraham Joseph had a Shellac business in Jhalda and asked Stephen to join him. And so he left Japan for India with approximately a lakh (100 thousand) of Rupees in his pocket. Just prior to his leaving, he learned of his brother's death by drowning, which happened in 1927. Shortly after this the big trade depression set in and in 1930 all his savings were lost. Stephen Joseph was now in serious financial difficulties and facing great hardship. However, he received a letter from one of the original six friends with whom he had traveled to Hong Kong from Calcutta, and had heard of his hardships, offering him a job with a firm in Bangkok. He immediately took the offer and left for home to start his life all over at the age of 60. Other Armenians from India who settled and worked there during the lifetime of Paul Chater include Owen Elias Owen, Enos Seth, Harold Arathoon Seth, John Hennesey Seth, Seth Arathoon Seth and Aratoon Vertannes Apcar (Hong Kong Government Gazettes), to name but a few.





## Sir Paul and Lady Chater went on to become close friends and confidants of the British Royal Family, regularly visting Buckingham Palace.

He tentatively carved out a career and social life for himself, both of which were often dovetailed; after all, Hong Kong was a small island. He continued to play cricket from the moment he left La Martinere, and by 1869 was a member of the Hong Kong Cricket Club's first eleven. Paul's first taste of royalty came when His Royal Highness, Alfred, the Duke of Edinburgh visited the island. A cricket match was organized between service men from the island as well as the Duke's ship against the Hong Kong Cricket Club. Paul, being an exemplary player, was called into action. The match lasted two days and all thoughts of business were put aside. Years later, Sir Paul and Lady Chater went on to become close friends and confidants of the British Royal Family. They regularly visited Buckingham Palace and other royal residences and spent vacations with the Duke and Duchess of Connaught in the South of France. Freemasonry played just as big of a role in his life as his commercial ventures did as he was initiated in the Perseverance Lodge that same year. By the 1870s Paul was buying plots, building properties and renting them out. He was joined by his younger brother Joseph from Calcutta in unique and formidable joint enterprises. By that time Joseph too was well-established and the brothers were sought after company at the tables of the island's social elite. In the 1870s, Paul saw the potential in horse racing and set up





#### ☐ About the Author

Liz Chater is an Armenian family history researcher focusing on the Armenians that lived, worked and died in India during the years 1600-1947. She has been researching for nearly 10 years, after her first discovery of an Armenian ancestor. In 2005, she made her first trip to Calcutta at the invitation of the Armenian Church. Ms. Chater started photographing graves, transcribing them and uploading them to her website. She then asked for permission to photograph the early church registers, transcribe them and make them available for other people. The church agreed and by the end of the trip Liz had taken over 3,000 photographs.

During the first two years Ms. Chater collected the names of all the Chaters that the British Library held and started piecing together various branches of her family. However, there was very little basic information available for the novice; the question of how and where to find birth, marriage and death records of her ancestors was illusive. The India List at [www.rootsweb.com](http://www.rootsweb.com) gave her that first breakthrough. Soon another researcher, Nadia Wright, who specializes in Armenians in Singapore and Malaysia, pointed out that all these names were in fact Armenian. "It was then that I became hooked," says Liz Chater. Her family history database of Armenians who passed through India now contains nearly 10,000 names and she still has many other sources to investigate. Liz has recently put together a slideshow of all the Armenian churches in India and has been contacted by several hundreds of people living around the world. Her aim for 2010 is to continue to transcribe the India Church registers and to help as many other people as she can when they discover a hidden Armenian in their family tree through her website [www.chater-genealogy.com](http://www.chater-genealogy.com).





## When Sir Paul Chater died, the months that followed saw the Hong Kong market falter and the business stability in all areas severely halt.

a stable with his business partner Hormusjee Mody, a Parsee from Bombay. By 1899, Paul Chater had become an extremely successful and influential figure: he was considered to have "the Midas touch" in the colony. The settlement was expanding at a fast rate, and there were many jobs for the hungry and enthusiastic young men. Paul, knowing he could make a difference in people's lives, helped some of them. Upon one of his visits to India around 1899, he made an offer to six students at the Armenian College in Calcutta. He suggested they give up their studies earlier than planned and take advantage of his offer to follow him to Hong Kong and fill jobs he had obtained and held for them at the Post Office. Thus, the six young Armenians, G.M. Gregory (not to be confused with Reverend G. Gregory), Tigran Matthews Gregory, Stephen M. Joseph, Nazareth Malcolm Manuk, Mackertich Cyril Owen, and another student whose name is not known to us, but who was nicknamed "Goblin," embarked on a ship with Paul Chater to sail towards a new land of opportunity.

They arrived in Hong Kong in late 1899. Coincidentally, the ship, "Lightning," was the same ship that Chater had sailed on in 1864 when he left Calcutta for Hong Kong. So, an Indian Armenian pioneer in 1864 led more Indian Armenian pioneers along the same path in 1899. The ship belonged to the Armenian company Apcar & Company and so the promise of a new life and prospective fortune was instigated and carried out

by Chater and Apcar, who were influential in their own right in the Far East, having paved the way for further Armenian settlers from Calcutta. The friendship of the six Armenian College students was solely due to Sir Paul Chater spotting their potential, bringing them together, and giving them the chance of a lifetime to make something of themselves. Meanwhile, Paul Chater, who had accepted the honor of Knighthood in London in 1902, was forging ahead with the ground-breaking scheme of the Praya Reclamation Company. For this, he placed members of his family in key roles. A nephew, Percy Manuk, known as PC, was the legal brains assisting Sir Paul. As the years passed, PC became the best advocate in Patna. Paul's favorite nephew, John Bagram, known as Theo, conducted business on Paul's behalf, becoming his trusted confidant.

### THE PRAYA RECLAMATION COMPANY.

When Sir Paul Chater died at age 79, the months that followed saw the Hong Kong markets falter – business stability in all areas was lost; financial markets wobbled. The man that had brought structure, stability, employment and social prospects to the island was no longer around to give advice or direction; it was as though Hong Kong had lost its heart. He generously left his house, Marble Hall, along with his priceless china and art collection – The Chater Collection – to the government of Hong Kong, probably in the hopes that they would make the house a museum. They did not. After a few very generous bequests to some nephews, Sir Paul Chater, who had been a "closet Armenian" the majority of his life, felt compelled to donate his remaining estate to the Armenian Holy Church of Nazareth, Calcutta where his life had begun. Though it is difficult to do justice to the life of Sir Paul Chater in such a short editorial piece, there is no question that Hong Kong revolved around the genius of this man. And whilst he achieved all that he did for Hong Kong, he did it with honesty, integrity, humbleness and always with a generosity that saw no boundaries.