

A tale of two cities

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Singapore's ties with India were deep in the early days too. Colonial Singapore was founded in 1819 as a trading outpost of the British East India Company (EIC). As part of the Straits Settlements, Singapore was governed by Bengal until 1851 and then the Governor-General of India until 1867.

Later, in 1943, Indian political leader Subhas Chandra Bose set up a free India movement in Singapore.

Professor Tan Tai Yong, Yale-NUS College president and professor of humanities (history) and deputy chairman at the Institute of South Asian Studies, pointed out these facts during a lecture at the Victoria Memorial in Kolkata recently.

The lecture, titled *A Tale Of Two Cities: Singapore And Calcutta Past And Present*, was held to commemorate Singapore's bicentenary and discuss the historic relationship between the two cities.

As port cities, Kolkata and Singapore were closely linked as they constituted important nodes in the imperial trade network. Prof Tan told *tabla*! "Their characters, personalities and morphology were to a large extent determined by their functions as port cities."

Singapore's trade was developed around the maritime space in which it operated – Java, Sumatra, Gulf of Siam, Indo-China and the Malay peninsula. It was part of a chain of ports serving the maritime Silk Road that spanned the Indian Ocean and the South China Sea.

"Ships would dock in Singapore, unpack the big cargoes into smaller vessels and the smaller vessels would move around the region to re-distribute the goods," Prof Tan explained. "Singapore was more a middle-man and trans-shipment centre."

Calcutta was a riverine port, located in a strategic waterway. It was away from the coast but the British found it useful as trade started to develop with the world and the interior of northern India.

As the EIC monopolised trade between India and the West, Calcutta started thriving as an international port and became the most important colonial trading post in the British Empire in India.

India's exports, consisting of cotton, silk, sugar, jute and indigo, were shipped through the Calcutta port. "Its port functioned well because it was able to integrate its northern Indian hinterland very effectively with the trade in the world outside. This was the critical role that Calcutta played," said Prof Tan.

When Sir Stamford Raffles landed in Singapore in 1819, he sent a note to his bosses in London that Singapore had the potential to become another Calcutta. But the thought crumbled in the 20th century as India's political landscape changed and led to repercussions for the city.

Said Prof Tan: "Japanese air raids destroyed much of Calcutta's port facilities. From a major international port city, Calcutta became the provincial capital of West Bengal when the British shifted the capital of the Indian Empire to Delhi in 1921.

"While the port still functioned, it faced competition from other ports. In 1947, the partition of Bengal was also a major setback for Calcutta. It went through turmoil, becoming the capital city of a state, not an independent city."

Its range of functions was then determined by an unproductive hinterland of underdeveloped states – West Bengal, Assam, Bihar and Orissa. This led the authorities to develop a new satellite port at Haldia.

Comparatively, Singapore too saw success in the late 19th century as it became an important port connected to the Malayan peninsula.

Said Prof Tan: "As the British opened up Malaya through the discovery of tin and rubber, they needed a port through which the commodities extracted could be processed and exported to the world. Singapore became the most natural point and it became connected with the Malaya peninsula by rail, road and other physical infrastructure."

But the changing political scene in the aftermath of World War II saw the severance of Singapore from its Malayan hinterland. Though Singapore returned to



An old image of the Singapore River and town as viewed from Fort Canning.



An old image of the port city of Calcutta. PHOTOS: BRITISH LIBRARY

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– Professor Tan Tai Yong on smart nation initiatives which the two cities could work on together



cause "it is able to control its own destiny as a sovereign state since coming out of Malaya".

Kolkata continues to be subjected to the controls of the state and federal governments. "It's not as nimble as Singapore," he said.

According to Prof Tan, Singapore has been more adept to trade changes, free trade agreements and is plugged into trading networks. However, he felt there is scope for both cities to come together as they were part of the EIC and shared a similar colonial past.

One area is smart nation initiatives. Last year, West Bengal launched its IT and electronics policy, focusing on artificial intelligence, big data analytics and content computing.

"Singapore has aspirations and ambition to be a smart city and we see evidence of West Bengal embracing that ambition," said Prof Tan. "Singapore has a limited talent pool but India has the natural talent to carry out these plans."

Another area for collaboration is urban planning. "Kolkata's streets are crowded while Singapore has some expertise in urban planning," he said.

Changi Airports International has invested in Durgapur Aerotropolis, India's first privately-managed airport city, in West Bengal. Singapore's sovereign wealth fund GIC has also invested in Kolkata's riverside development and township. "Investments can bring the two cities closer and generate more people-to-people connection," Prof Tan said.

He also feels that there should be more cultural exchanges between Kolkata's Victoria Memorial and National Museum of Singapore or Asian Civilisations Museum. "Both cities have ambitions. The question is how we realise those ambitions. You could either do it alone or do it in collaboration," said Prof Tan.

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