



A Tale of Two Cities:  
**Singapore** and **Kolkata**  
Past and Present  
Tan Tai Yong





## Introduction

The year 2019 marks the 200<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the arrival of Sir Stamford Raffles to Singapore – a milestone in Singapore’s long and diverse history. However, in understanding the Singapore story, it is important to go beyond this crucial chapter to trace the entire history of the island dating back 700 years to 1299.

The bicentennial year provides a valuable opportunity for Singapore and Singaporeans to revisit this rich and varied history and to trace important developments as well as key players at each crucial juncture. In line with this, the Institute of South Asian Studies (ISAS) at the National University of Singapore organised a public lecture at the Victoria Memorial Hall in Kolkata, India, on 26 February 2019.

Co-organised with the Victoria Memorial Hall in Kolkata, Professor Tan Tai Yong, Deputy Chairman, ISAS; and President, Yale-NUS College, delivered the lecture on ‘A Tale of Two Cities: Singapore and Kolkata, Past and Present’. The lecture was organised in support of Singapore’s Bicentennial commemoration. This paper is a revised excerpt of Professor Tan’s lecture.

### Cover Photographs

*Singapore’s Skyline - Courtesy of Pixabay*

*Victoria Memorial, Kolkata - Courtesy of Wikimedia Commons*



# **A TALE OF TWO CITIES:**

## **Singapore and Kolkata, Past and Present**

### **Summary**

As former colonial port cities, Kolkata and Singapore share similar histories. They were intimately linked as part of the British Empire and constituted important nodes in the imperial trade network. As part of the Straits Settlements, Singapore was under the charge of Bengal till 1851 and subsequently the Governor-General of India till 1867. Their trajectories diverged following the end of colonial rule in their respective regions and one eventually became a city (and nation) state while the other remained a city in a state.

### **Introduction**

Two hundred years ago, in 1819, Stamford Raffles, then an employee of the East India Company (EIC), landed in and secured Singapore as a trading post for the EIC. Subsequently, the foundation of Singapore as a port city allowed it to thrive into a global city state. This year, the commemoration of the bicentennial in the founding of Singapore is a recognition that Singapore has always embraced and accepted the period of colonialism, unlike in many other parts of the world.

These, however, has sparked unintended social debates and ambivalence about the emphasis of colonialism in post-developed Singapore. Some have criticised the celebration of colonialism as opposed to celebrating Singapore's independence as a sovereign city-state, while others have interpreted the celebration as a tacit acknowledgement that trajectories before 1900 in Singapore were completely left out.

Nonetheless, it remains a fact that there have been research findings pointing to Singapore as a regional trading post long before the arrival of the Dutch and the British, and later between Singapore and Kolkata. Engaged in regional networks, traders come to Singapore from as far as Yemen in the Middle East and China. Nearer to the present day in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Singapore was even ruled directly from Calcutta (now renamed Kolkata) as part of the Bengal Presidency. The linkages between Singapore and India became clearer when Subhas Chandra Bose organised the Indian National Army in Singapore with the aim of liberating India from the British.

### **Port Cities: Singapore and Kolkata**

Such linkages are possible because of the interactions and trajectories between port cities, in the case of India's Kolkata and Singapore.

First, port cities cannot be understood as mere geographical entities situated on the shoreline. Conversely, port cities have specific functions that they perform and in character which often links to their hinterlands – the way they serve and are impacted by their hinterlands are clearly manifested in the trajectories of both Singapore and Kolkata as port cities. In addition, while port cities have a cosmopolitan culture in nature, it is the openness in attitude that would allow the movement of people and ideas between them which shapes that very culture.



## Singapore

Singapore did not have a natural land-based hinterland in the 18<sup>th</sup> century as it is an island at the southern tip of the Malay Peninsula. There was little trade between Singapore and the Malay Peninsula then. However, vessels spanning from Eastern Java, Gulf of Siam, to the Celebes have been passing by Singapore – the sea space, therefore, constituted as Singapore's hinterland rather than an overland one. It was not until the 19<sup>th</sup> century that, as the flow of maritime activities increased exponentially, the British opened up Singapore for export of tin and rubber from the Malay Peninsula to Britain and the rest of the world, thereby integrating the Malay hinterlands with Singapore via railway and road.



**Singapore Port in 1890**

*Source: Royal Netherlands Institute of Southeast Asian and Caribbean Studies and Leiden University Library/Wikimedia Commons*

Singapore also served as a transshipment hub – although it did not produce commodities nor that its market size constituted for any significant imports, ships with larger amount of goods would stop by, unload and unpack goods for smaller vessels to move around the region to dispatch them. Alongside, Singapore also saw the development of complex systems of credit to facilitate international trade.

However, Singapore's development as a port city also encompasses the flow of people and ideas. As a free emporium without strict immigration policy, it served as a regional hub for the Haj Pilgrimage for Muslims. Waves of Chinese immigrants also came as physical labourers (coolies) as demand for Singapore's infrastructure development increased, despite the British having many of their convicts to build infrastructures in the early days.

## Kolkata

Kolkata, as a port city, on the other hand, poses both similarities and contrasts to Singapore. Unlike Singapore being a natural strategic water way, Kolkata was a small riverine market in the Hooghly River, 200 miles away from the sea. However, the British found the site useful to be developed as the capital of British India and a point that could connect and transfer trade within the land-locked Northern India with the outside world. Subsequently, a network of rail and road connections linked Kolkata to its hinterlands – Kolkata's port development was a direct result of government intervention.





**The Customs Wharf of Calcutta**

*Source: Victoria Memorial Hall collection*

Kolkata also mainly traded its local produce with the outside world, whereas Singapore functioned as a transshipment hub additionally. However, similar to Singapore, Kolkata was also home to a cosmopolitan culture where it saw an emergence of settlements by Armenians, Jews, Greeks and Anglo-Indians. The city, therefore, became a commercial hub, as its capital status coincided with the rise of steam vessels and the opening of the Suez Canal. When Raffles founded Singapore, he had even conveyed to London that Singapore has the potential to become like Kolkata.

## **20<sup>th</sup> Century Transformations: Singapore and Kolkata**

Significant developments from the 20<sup>th</sup> century onwards, however, reshaped and projected a different trajectory across the two cities.

### **Singapore - The City-state**

After World War II, the Japanese surrendered and British Malaya was re-organised into the Malayan Union, combining the Federated Malay States, Unfederated Malay States, Penang and Malacca, under one administration in 1946. While the Malayan Union Plan attempted to create a united Malayan state, the British excluded Singapore from the Malayan Union as its entrepot economy was deemed economically and politically too distinct from the rest. Its population composite was also different from the rest – as a result of its liberal immigration provisions that allowed the Chinese and the Indians to settle permanently in Singapore. It, thus, became a separate crown colony. Singapore now has a Chinese majority population.

However, shortly after, the British re-organised the Malayan Union into the Federation of Malaya in 1948. In response, Singapore's political leadership then aimed to re-establish the port city and the Federation in the north. Eventually, there was a merger in 1959. The transformation of Singapore's hinterland was, therefore, minimal then. Singapore did not lose its northern hinterland despite undergoing a series of political transformations.





### **Singapore's Skyline**

*Source: Wikimedia Commons*

Even as the merger proved to be short-lived and lasted for approximately only two years, policymakers of the newly independent city-state would begin searching for a larger hinterland beyond the Malay Peninsula. As Singapore's former Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong has conceptualised, Singapore, today, has a "7-hour hinterland", representing a radius of a seven-hour flight from Singapore where the city-state continues to trade, invest and interact, without necessarily being connected to any of them by land – mainly spanning across China, India, Australia, Japan and the entire Southeast Asia. The strategic positioning of Singapore as a global city entails its philosophy of being open and liberal, while continuing its ambition of finding newer hinterlands.

### **Kolkata - The City within a State**

Kolkata, on the other hand, has experienced a significant transformation of its hinterlands and to a larger extent, the loss of its international port city status due to a number of factors.

During World War II, Kolkata suffered severe physical damage due to a series of Japanese air raids. Then, just before the partition of Bengal which took place in 1947, Kolkata witnessed a number of communal riots among Hindus and Muslims. After the partition, Kolkata lost a large part of its industrial hinterland, amounting to nearly 30 per cent, to a newly formed East Pakistan. From the 1947 partition to the 1971 creation of Bangladesh, there were waves of refugee influx into India, the numbers touching at least 13 million by the early 1980s.

However, there were already political elements that caused the decline of Kolkata as a port city. In 1911, Kolkata lost its capital city status when Delhi replaced it as the political and administrative centre of India. Then, in the post-partition period, Kolkata became only a city within the state of West Bengal, subject to the political forces and dynamics of both the Union and State government. Since the 1960s, both West Bengal and Maharashtra competed as India's leading industrial state but, by the 1980s, West Bengal had been left behind.



### **Howrah Bridge, Kolkata**

*Source: Pexels*



## **Reviving the Potential of Kolkata's Hinterland**

Today, Kolkata's hinterland, however, continues to provide ample opportunities for further economic integration with other distant Indian states. Defined by the Kolkata Port Trust, Kolkata's hinterland comprises the entire Eastern India, including Bihar, Jharkhand, Uttar Pradesh, Uttarakhand, Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Punjab, Haryana and Rajasthan, and Northeastern states like Assam. Neighbouring countries – Bhutan and Nepal – are also considered part of Kolkata's hinterland as both utilise the Kolkata and Haldia ports respectively to facilitate transit trade into their landlocked borders.

The government of India already has plans to upgrade Kolkata's access to its existing hinterlands. This is through the 2014 approved Amritsar-Delhi-Kolkata Industrial Corridor and the Eastern Dedicated Freight Corridor. By improving connectivity across the six Indian states – Punjab, Haryana, Uttar Pradesh, Uttarakhand, Bihar and Jharkhand – this improves 40 per cent of India's population's access to inter-state goods. As Kolkata is largely a service economy, its improved linkages with the other states mentioned could help to boost its manufacturing sector, mostly through finished goods. Since Kolkata serves as the final gateway for many Indian goods, its assembly line can be boosted through larger supplies from the hinterland states.

On the other hand, Northeast India's connectivity, in relation to Kolkata, is also undergoing significant change. Particularly, the Kaladan Multi-Modal Transit Transport Project is planned to link Kolkata to the Northeastern Indian state of Mizoram through Rakhine, Myanmar. This is not only seen as an upgrade in terms of Kolkata's connectivity to Northeast India, but is also part of India's 'Act East' policy cooperation. Another ongoing plan, the Kolkata-Kunming (K2K) Economic Corridor, also attempts to link Kolkata with its old hinterland in Bengal (Bangladesh). As part of the Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar Corridor, the K2K can enhance Kolkata's role in fostering India's Neighbourhood First Policy.

In addition, Kolkata already possesses good prospects for trade. In 2017-2018, the Kolkata Port Trust registered the third highest growth (13.61 per cent) among major Indian ports. For Singapore, Kolkata also remains an important trading partner within India and vice versa. Conversely, Singapore ranked second in Kolkata Sea Port's top 10 exports destinations and fourth in Kolkata Airport's top 10 exports destinations, based on 2009-2013 aggregate data. Major export items include jewellery items, petroleum and aircraft components.

## **Recoupling Ties between the Two Cities: Singapore and Kolkata?**

While the development trajectories of Singapore and Kolkata have diverged so significantly in present time, the question of whether both cities can have a way of returning to history, in connecting and developing each other, remains ever relevant and at heart.

First, as seen in the post-colonial era, both cities have not stopped their quest for expanding their hinterlands. Both the service sectors of West Bengal and Singapore also form more than half of their gross domestic product – which provides an equal platform for companies in both cities to invest in each other.

Collaborations are also not new. Singapore has invested in West Bengal on several occasions. One prominent instance was in 2009 when Changi Airport International invested in the Durgapur Aerotropolis, its first investment in an airport development project in India; the Aerotropolis is also India's first privately-managed airport city. In 2015, Singapore's sovereign



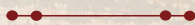
fund, GIC Pte Ltd, signed a US\$32.5 million (S\$44.1 million) agreement for Kolkata Riverside Development, a 262-acre township with international schools and a hospital. In the same year, in 2015, Surbana Jurong Private Limited, a Singaporean government-owned consultancy company focusing on infrastructure and urban development, participated in the Kolkata-Raghunathpur Growth Axis project and later, in Kolkata's East-West Metro Line project.

Beyond trade and hinterlands, Kolkata has also shown promise in building its digital capacities. The West Bengal government's Information Technology (IT) and Electronics Policy, launched in 2018, focuses on artificial intelligence, quantum-computing and big data analytics. The Silicon Valley IT Hub in New Town, Kolkata, is an initiative aimed at enhancing West Bengal as an epicentre of cutting-edge research and development in IT. With Singapore's Smart Nation development and Kolkata's technological developments, West Bengal can engage more intensively with Singapore in areas such as Fintech and Smart Cities, which other states like Maharashtra and Andhra Pradesh have already done so with Singapore.

## Conclusion

As former colonial port cities, Singapore and Kolkata share similar histories under colonial rule. Post-independence, their trajectories diverged following the end of colonial rule in their respective regions and one eventually became a city (and nation) state while the other remained a city in a state.

Despite having their hinterlands transformed significantly, both cities, preceding their own respective nations, continue to seek to play different roles from their traditional port functions. Like London and New York, both Singapore and Kolkata have been transforming into service hubs although at a different pace. Following this path dependency, there remains great positivity that both cities can serve as each other's hinterland in further developing their cities.



## About the Author

Professor Tan Tai Yong, a historian, is the President Yale-NUS College. He was the Director of the Institute of South Asian Studies, National University of Singapore, from 2008 to 2015.

Professor Tan specialises in South and Southeast Asian history. He has published extensively on the Sikh Diaspora, social and political history of colonial Punjab, de-colonisation and the partition of South Asia, and Singapore history.

Professor Tan has authored and co-authored several books, including *Seven Hundred Years, A History of Singapore*; *Creating Greater Malaysia: Decolonisation and the Politics of Merger*; *The Garrison State* and *The Aftermath of Partition in South Asia*.