

Penang and Bombay: Indian Ocean port cities in the nineteenth century

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Gyan Prakash's recent book, *Mumbai Fables*¹ presents a picture of Bombay as a 'spectacle of modernity, as an ideal of modern life' projected trans-nationally through Bollywood. He recounts not only the glory of the contemporary as reflected along the length of Marine Drive and Bombay's coastline, but also the political corruption and murder which was its dark underside in the era of Mrs Gandhi and after. Prakash, who grew up in Bihar, records that he was entranced from afar by the image of the city's shining modernity. This is not a new theme for the city's inhabitants. Nineteenth-century Bombay's leading social historian, the late Rajnarayan Chandavarkar, records how even the city's sewers installed in the mid-19th century were a cause for triumphal proclamations of modernity and its citizens happily compared it to the most advanced cities in the world.²

Despite its smaller scale, Penang received similar plaudits. Robert Montgomery Martin remarked in 1844: '[t]he town is one of the neatest in India; the streets wide, straight and at right-angles. The buildings are respectable...The roads are among the finest in India.'³ This was an age when classical, or in Bombay's case, neo-Gothic hyper-modernity was valued not simply for aesthetic reasons, but also because it offered a sense of protection against disease and crime. Georgetown was raised as a model modern commercial cityscape, vying with its larger rivals Bombay and Singapore in architectural modernity. Later in the 1890s and after, as Indian labour was funneled into the city and out into the rubber estates and tin mines of the Malayan interior, Penang seemed once again the door of modernity through which capital would transform Southeast Asia and the British Empire. With Georgetown now a world heritage site, even the 1920s and '30s, Penang was still regarded as a modern cosmopolitan city of education and culture, as Su Lin Lewis and Rachel Leow have shown.

Recently, however, anthropologists and social theorists have critiqued the notion of 'modernity' arguing that it caricatures change and denies agency to social actors,

especially non-Western ones. For his part, Bruno Latour famously argued that ‘We were never modern.’ The idea of ‘colonial modernity’ applied to Asian port cities like Penang and Bombay has come in for particular criticism. Luc Nagtegaal criticized this concept, writing that most Asian port cities ports, notably Batavia, were much closer in social and economic structure to pre-modern Asian cities than to European ones and that an insistence on the ‘colonial’ element foreshortened their growth, Noordin Hussain has, I think, defused this argument by stating that in terms of governance, politics and global linkages cities such as Penang, Malacca (and I would add Bombay) were in fact profoundly influenced by colonial modernity, even while their social composition showed distinct continuities with pre-colonial port cities.⁴

Why compare Penang and Bombay in particular? Penang, of course was not a town of comparable size or commercial importance to Bombay, Calcutta or even, after about 1830, Singapore. Penang’s (the Prince of Wales Island) population in 1830 was about 40,000, much of it quite rural;⁵ Bombay’s was 235,000. But Penang was a critical second-tier Indian Ocean port, commanding the Straits of Malacca. This was especially so before Singapore’s own commerce took off in the 1830s. Initially, Penang was as much of an Indian as a Chinese town before the rapid increase of its Chinese population after 1870. Bengalis and Chulias (South Indians) numbered about 8,000, a similar population to the Chinese. Clearly, Penang’s closest Indian connections were with Bengal and Madras. But there were 51 Parsi merchants and artisans in the city in 1830.⁶ Indeed, the celebrated Parsi form of opera was quickly established in Penang. Penang was the easternmost port of call for ships of the Bombay Marine patrolling the cotton and opium trade in the late-eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, Penang also traded in the re-export of commodities that were critical for Bombay’s own nineteenth-century trade: Indian cloth, opium and Malabar pepper. So by comparing two settlements at different levels of the hierarchy of trading centres and population, we can make some broader observations on Indian Ocean society and commerce over the eighteenth to early twentieth centuries.

Historically, too, Bombay and Penang were ‘modern’ mavericks on the margins of the East India Company’s ‘monopoly and despotism,’ as reform era opponents of the

Company termed it. For Francis Light and his immediate successors, Penang was indeed a magnet for free-traders and later, after 1826, an actual free port outside the ambit of the antiquated monopoly of the Company. Equally, Bombay took many initiatives in trade and political relations for which it had no sanction from Calcutta. The story of Bombay's expansion into Gujarat and the Malabar Coast after 1780 fits well with the initiatives of Light and his successors in Penang. Equally, the benign orientalism and interest in Malay and Chinese culture, displayed by figures such as J. R. Logan in Penang, bears comparison to the Indophile work of the celebrated Bombay Literary Society. Many of the scholar-officials and inquisitive merchants in both centres were, like Logan, Scots who drew on the intellectual traditions of the Edinburgh Enlightenment. By comparison, conflict between the Bengali intelligentsia and the much larger local expatriate community in Calcutta had already stirred a virulent racism in the capital and a tendency to disparage Indian culture well before the Black Acts controversy of the 1850s.

In my view, then, historians can successfully resolve the worries of anthropologists about the vagueness and weak relativism of the notion of 'multiple modernities.' The intertwining and mutual adjustment over time of communities and institutions confronting new situations can reasonably be understood as pluralized modernity. Such an analysis neither detracts from human agency or from the violence of colonial power. I will now try to elucidate and compare some features of this intertwining of these forces of modernity in the two cities.

Bombay's intertwined modernities.

One important contributing factor to the modernities of what became Bombay and its hinterland was the emergence of a Portuguese Christian polity on the west coast of India after about 1510.⁷ This saw the implanting of new religious and social forms on the Hindu and Muslim littoral of western India and the Straits. It led on to intellectual conflicts between the Padroado and the Jesuits, the latter promoting the view that Goan Christian Indians could be spiritually the equal of Europeans. But this was not simply a theological dispute between Europeans. It was entangled with the assertion by *Luso*

Descendentes, Portuguese creoles, and Portuguese Indians of their right to office in church and state in the Indian colonies. The issue of rights to office also implied rights to political representation.⁸ These conflicts were in turn confounded with issues of caste status.

Even in the early days of British rule, there already existed in Bombay a limited system of representation on urban bodies. This had been established much earlier by the Portuguese, who had blended the medieval European form of the corporation (*conselho*) with the indigenous concept of the *panchayat*. Equally, the Portuguese commitment to conversion, compared with the English East India Company's hostility to it, promoted a large expansion of education along the length of the west coast, with schools teaching technical subjects as well as language religion and culture in Diu, Daman, Bassein, Mahim and Bombay itself. Later, British and American Protestant missionaries moved into the area, while Parsi initiatives underpinned the work of the Bombay Native Education Society. In this way, doctrinal competition through education created a particularly large concentration of secular and avowedly modern skills in the region.⁹

The second critical form of ideological and social change on the western Indian coast arose more directly from Asian early modernity itself. This was represented, above all, by the Parsi diaspora across western India, especially to Surat and later Bombay. As heterodox exiles and later commercial co-actors with the Portuguese and British in the burgeoning Indian Ocean and later China trades, the Parsis developed unique, though locally varied, social and religious institutions which marked them out as a 'chosen people.' They adapted their form of local assemblies and created their own modernised form of the Indian *panchayat*. Above all, they promoted a local commercial knowledge economy through bulletins of intelligence which later became newspapers. Actually, Parsis were relative late-comers to the world of Indian Ocean commerce. Many of the most influential Parsis of the nineteenth-century, notably Dadbhai Naoroji himself, came from relatively poor rural families, often priestly ones rather than from an old mercantile aristocracy. Nevertheless, Parsi aspiration and their early compacts with the Portuguese

and the British, when both these powers remained endangered bit-players on the west coast, propelled them rapidly to prominence.

By the early eighteenth century, quite apart from their subtle networks of relations of power and money across the Indian Ocean and Middle East, Parsis had fostered a robust sense of self-representation to their lately come-British rulers, which meshed with vigorous debates within their panchayats and religious trusts. For instance, Nowroji Manek voyaged to London to protest to the East India Company Directors about the 'arbitrary' acts of Sir Nicholas Waite, Governor of Bombay against his family as early as the 1720s.¹⁰ What one might call a culture of cosmopolitan commercial sociability arose very early, with Parsis, and later Gujarati banias, meeting the British and Portuguese on relatively equal terms in maritime insurance societies which operated across the whole area between East Africa and along the China coast.¹¹ The Parsis' emphasis on community knowledge and their separateness, yet location within a cosmopolitan space, created commercial opportunities just as much as commercial opportunities reinforced this sense of identity. There are distinct parallels here with the various communities of Baba Peranakan in the Straits as I will suggest later,

Related to the case of the Parsis were the various overlapping Shi'ite sects of Bombay and the coast: Ismailis, Bohras, Khojas and Memons. Again, these were in origin wide-ranging commercial communities which had maintained strong links with Iran, the Persian Gulf and even East Africa well before the onset of colonial domination. For instance, the word Bohra seems to have been a corruption of the Gujarati *vewahar* or 'trading.' They had long been part of what Gagan Sood terms the 'Islamicate ecumene', a network of seaborne entrepreneurship and knowledge that arose *pari passu* with the great Islamic empires of the fifteenth to eighteenth centuries.¹² Here again, an emphasis on community knowledge and ingenuity provided the basis for their particular modernism. A fairly direct parallel to the Bombay Muslim communities was represented in Penang by the Jawi Pekans, the predominantly south Indian Muslim communities which had become assimilated into the Malay Muslim social world, but likewise retained their links to the wider ecumene.

It is often thought that the high rationalistic form of orthodox Sunni Islam provided Muslims with the entrée into modern religious movements in India, especially in north India. Yet the west coast Sh'ites, particularly the Ismailis, conserved a mystical tradition which emphasised the unity of God and promoted a kind of religious and ethnic cosmopolitanism, whereby all races and religious forms should ideally add their different characters to a common humanity. A key medieval Ismaili text, known in nineteenth century Bombay, described the ideal human thus: 'Persian by breeding, Arabian by faith...Iraqi in culture, Hebrew in law, Christian in manner, Syrian in devotion, Greek in science, Indian in discernment, Sufi in intimations'.¹³

This type of doctrine made it possible for later liberal reformers among Bombay's Muslims to promote cosmopolitanism, reform and nationalism at the same time. The early Congress leader, Badruddin's Tyabjee's father, Tyab Ali, traveled to Liverpool as early as 1853. He became the first Indian solicitor and also spent time in France. A liberal in political beliefs, Tyab Ali was a social reformer arguing for women's education and seeking to purge his community of 'social evils'.¹⁴ Yet he also emphasised the Bohras' Islamic character, sought to promulgate Arabic, Persian and Urdu rather than Gujarati. For his part, Badruddin Tyabjee adopted a more comprehensive liberal position, arguing that many Muslim practices, such as *purdah* and *niqab*, or even Muslim male dress, were simply 'customs' and not an essential part of the Faith.

It was this inclusiveness that made it possible for many western Indian Shias to relate to the Indian National Congress as an organ of a wider Indian nationalism after 1885. In the meantime, an entangled competitiveness, dependence on information and multi-lingualism brought together the leaders of all these various groups in a series of educational initiatives which created an early and well-developed 'knowledge economy.' Juggurnath Shankarsett, a leading Konkani Brahmin magnate of the 1820s and '30s worked with Parsis and others in the creation of bodies which would promote 'the arts and sciences of Europe, yet retaining all that we consider sacred in the religious peculiarities of our various tribes.'¹⁵

Two other elements combined over time to create Bombay's plural aspirations to modernity. First, British influence had, of course gradually but powerfully impacted on the city from 1700. But a particularly important turning point was the period immediately after the Maratha wars of 1817-18. Mountstuart Elphinstone, the Governor, and a body of mainly Scottish military and civil officers implanted new educational and civic institutions in the city, while simultaneously were imposing British rule on the interior of western India. The Bombay Literary Society soon spawned a Bombay Native Literary Society. Elphinstone College, as it became, was a forcing house for modern forms of education, particularly statistics and political economy. Secondly, large numbers of Maratha and Konkani Brahmins from the interior, bringing with them family traditions of government service, converged on the city. Far from being by-products of the 'decline of the Mughals', the Maratha states themselves had pioneered modern, streamlined and information-rich Asian state forms.

Intertwined modernities in Penang.

At this point we can return to Penang to note similarities to, and differences from Bombay's character during the nineteenth century. Penang, of course, was a much more recent creation than Bombay. The British, or more exactly Francis Light, played a formative and not simply secondary role in its creation. But, as Tan Liok Ee and others have pointed out, the British re-located in Penang aspects of commercial and social dynamism that already existed in the Straits area. Razzak Lubis, in particular, has written of the legacy of Sumatran trade and knowledge networks in Penang; these bore some similarity to those of the Bombay Shi'tes I mentioned. For his part, Francis Light had something in common with the maverick Company officials trading privately, that Pamela Nightingale highlighted in her study of Bombay's intervention in the Gujarat cotton and opium trades over the same period. Light's attempted deals with the Siamese monarchy in the 1770s and his successful bargain with the Sultan of Kedah in 1786 are reminiscent of the agreements made by Bombay entrepreneurs with the Maratha states of the Konkan and Gujarat. In both cases, the creation of a maritime zone of trade released

local commercial agents from the pressure of both indigenous inland states and the Company itself.

Though I will point to some significant differences in community governance and inter-group relations in these two contexts of 'local cosmopolitanism', there are also some interesting analogies. Like Bombay, Goa and the western Indian coast, the Straits of Malacca felt early Portuguese influence, as the worldwide spice trade became a source of contention. Pulao Pinaom, of course, was nowhere as important as Malacca and remained little more than a provisioning point for Portuguese and Dutch shipping until the arrival of the British. Yet Penang rapidly acquired a small but important Portuguese population that continued to speak Portuguese Malay- Christang- into the nineteenth century and later. Portuguese and mixed-race Christians fled to the island from persecution in Siam and Burma. A series of Catholic educational institutions developed alongside a creole merchant community and these played a part in Christian conversion and cultural contact in Indochina and other parts of the region.

One of the most revealing parallels in terms of ethnic groups, however, relates to the role of the Parsis in Bombay and the Chinese Peranakan, or Babas, in Penang and other ports on the Malacca Straits. As recent scholarship, particularly the work of Tan Chee-Beng, has suggested, it is important not to homogenise these communities characterised by what Jean Bernardi calls 'extraordinary diversity.'¹⁶ But some broad analogies still remain. Parsis themselves reached Penang very rapidly after the settlement itself was established. The community consisted of some large merchants dealing in raw cotton and opium, but also numbers of craftsmen, particularly carpenters, who were regarded as being among the most skilled workmen in India.¹⁷ Yet they remained small in number in Penang and it was the Babas who most closely replicated the Parsis role in Bombay. Though the Parsis were formally a separate religious group while the Peranakan Babas had South Chinese ritual patterns in common with later migrants, there were some striking similarities.¹⁸

Like the Parsis, the Chinese Peranakans were an assortment of old diasporic community that had embedded themselves in local society. Migrating from Fukien Province of South China, some had settled in Kedah as early as 1400. This migration continued until the early eighteenth century. The Parsis had preserved their Iranian religious traditions in Bombay, but had little contact with Persia itself. Similarly, the Baba saw Malaya as their homeland and had much less contact with China than the great Chinese *towkays* who reached Penang and established businesses there during the nineteenth century.¹⁹

By assimilating indigenous Malay characteristics, the Babas were able to fill the role of intermediaries both with the incoming British and also with other communities, most significantly those new Chinese immigrants of the later nineteenth century. The Parsis spoke Gujarati. Like the Parsis, those ‘remarkably effective political brokers’ the Baba Peranakan, retained Chinese domestic rites and marriage patterns, but generally spoke Malay. By the mid-nineteenth century, many had learned English language at the Penang Free School and had adopted aspects of the European life-style. Along with the Parsis, the Baba Peranakans were perhaps the most westernized and anglicized of all Asian commercial and political communities during the mid-colonial period. Their fate also resembled that of the Parsis, but in a rather different way. Intermarriage gradually shrank the Baba Peranakan community. The offspring of mixed marriages tended to be absorbed back into the larger Chinese community, especially after the Confucian revival of the twentieth century. In parallel, rigid endogamy also diminished the small Parsi population of western India, while those few who married Europeans, Eurasians or Indians were also lost to it.²⁰

If we are looking for further functional and social equivalents to the major communities of Bombay in Penang, then the role of Gujarati and Konkani Hindu traders in the former was replicated by Madras Chettiyars and later Chinese emigrants, Fukienese and Hokkienese, in the Malayan case. In fact, the commercial organization of the Gujarati merchant panchayats bears a distant comparison with the Chinese voluntary associations, based on kinship, with dialect and business interests superimposed on

them.²¹ Caste-based marriage arrangements differed in detail from the Chinese kin-based arrangements, of course. But the impact of immigration and urbanization created what has been called the ‘kinship artificiality’ of the *pang* system, in the one case and rapid sub-caste fission and fusion in the other. Both social forms helped to maintain business and artisan monopolies, but at the same time made it possible to absorb important newcomers or wealthy ‘commercial outliers.’

Finally, what were the main features of the ideologies of the Muslim communities of the Straits which were represented in Penang? The forms of Hadrami Islam, which were drawn from the thought of Abu Hamid al-Ghazali and elaborated by Abdalla al-Haddad (1634-1720), were well suited to an inclusive diasporic mercantile community. Faith in the Prophet was exalted. But the niceties of legal differences between communities were downplayed. Jawi Peranakans, influenced by the traditions of the Nagore dargah of south India with its offshoot in Penang, were similarly doctrinally open. The Malayali Muslim communities of the city displayed none of the spiritually insurgent tendencies of the south Indian Mappilahs. Above all, Sufi spirituality was accepted and allowed to flourish, without apparently feeling the increasing pressure to conformity exerted by *ulama* on the Sufi institutions of north India, for instance. In doctrinal terms, of course, the Hadrami and Jawi Pekkan versions of Islam were far distant from the theology and spiritual genealogy of Bombay’s Shi’ites or Ismailis. Yet both sets of communities exhibited a common toleration of difference and emphasis on the spiritual, as opposed to the legal. This set them apart both from the Wahhabism of the Persian Gulf and the north Indian purists who emerged around the seminary at Deoband.

The inclusiveness of Malay language and culture and the recruitment of Jawi Peranakans by the Hadrami Sufi *tariqas* created an assimilative Muslim society. Light’s own appointment of *hakims* to keep a register of Muslim inhabitants and the emergence of a parish organization in Penang also acted to create commonalities amongst Muslims, just as Bombay’s educational institutions consolidated rather than fractured Muslims in Bombay.

Community interactions and conflict

This leads on to the issue of how these communities of merchants and workers related together and intertwined to create these two modern Asian commercial centres. In one sense, it takes us back well before the work of Eng Seng Ho's notion of 'local cosmopolitanism' to J. S. Furnivall's thinking on 'plural societies' in the 1930s or to Christine Dobbin on Bombay's caste politics in the 1960s. Indeed, Nordin Hussin specifically calls Penang a 'pluralistic society'. One criticism of Furnivall's original formulation of the plural society, or Fredrik Bath's re-formulation of it as 'economic interdependence and ecological specialization,' is that it gave insufficient weight to the role of colonial power itself. Yet paradoxically, it was often the limitations of colonial power as much as its intervention that encouraged such social plurality. A more telling criticism is that society was less fragmented than Furnivall's model suggested. There was much social fusion, cooperation and intermarriage between different groups, even between Muslims and Chinese secret societies. Mahani Musa has examined the Malay secret societies which paralleled their Chinese equivalents and whose personnel overlapped at the margins.

It certainly seems to be the case in Penang that it was the very weakness and limited aims of British government in the settlement that allowed the development of an extremely light and non-interventionist form of rule and the consequent power of discrete community leaders. Penang was financially broke for most of its early years because of the very light local taxes it raised in comparison with most cities across the Indian subcontinent. It could barely afford police and conservancy. It was not until 1809 that a semblance of local colonial jurisdiction came into being with the Recorder's Court. An enormous amount of local power was therefore accorded to the *kapitans*, local community leaders who compromised disputes and organized basic forms of local control through a variety of kinship relations, trade associations and secret societies. The Kling Kapitan formally represented the Indian communities many *panchayats* and religious trusts, while the Kapitan China corralled the new Chinese migrants.

Amongst Muslims, local self-rule also flourished. W. E. Maxwell noted in the 1880s that the *kadis* were chosen by the people and not by government and ‘practically irresponsible.’²²

Even when the British government tried to impose a higher degree of governance with the Charter of Justice of 1826 and new municipal powers the 1870s, most authorities agree that these local community leaders continued to exercise a great deal of local power with the quiet connivance of the authorities.²³ Even after secret societies were banned in 1890, they continued a subterranean existence both in Penang and in the adjoining Malay states. Society functioned because these magnates made informal deals amongst themselves, particularly about the use of local resources and the control of various sectors of trade and commerce. The societies themselves acted as channels of social mobility for poorer artisans and labourers.

In the case of the Chinese communities this off-laying of governmental functions was particularly deep. Dialect and community associations overlaid trade associations and these in turn overlaid the secret societies that continued to exercise a monopoly of power and, on occasions, violence. The British would only intervene when local conflict became so serious that commerce itself was endangered this occurred notoriously when in 1866-7 a massive conflict between different Chinese secret societies brought the settlement to a halt and caused the British in the city to man barricades. The authorities in Singapore were ultimately forced to send in troops. These conflicts were apparently in part about control of trades, tax farms and labour. For instance, Cantonese and immigrants from Macao tried to break the hold of the Fukeinese by smuggling goods. But these confrontations also reflected the ethnic and political conflicts between Hakka incomers and Punti locals in the Canton area during and after the Taiping Rebellion. It is interesting that conflicts between communities and religious groups-what is called communal violence in the Indian literature- were relatively infrequent and usually quickly compromised by the Kapitans. Indeed, by the 1880s as the flow of Chinese labour increased, the British were beginning to encourage a new stream of Indian

‘assisted migrants’, precisely because of their concern about ‘faction’ amongst the Chinese.²⁴

By contrast, though the local authorities and the different social groups in Bombay had a great deal more independence of the Government of India than those in Calcutta or north India, colonial political authority in the city was much more powerful and interventionist than in Penang. A competent local executive operated through a Municipal Council that grouped together representatives of the *panchayats* of the communities who were elected on a limited franchise that dated back to the Portuguese period. There was also a wide range of inter-community civil society organizations, promoting education, municipal improvement and civic responsibility in the city by 1830. This meant that a degree of economic co-operation was supported by social co-operation even where castes and religious groups did not intermarry or even inter-dine. Some scholars of India have indicted British census activity for the modern re-invention of caste. But Bombay’s form of pluralism had reflected free-standing immigrant statuses even during the Portuguese period. If anything, the development of civil society and liberal nationalism in the nineteenth century actually tended to reduce caste and religious conflicts. Law was also an important unifying force here. Bombay’s elites resorted early to British courts, and consolidated their control of urban and suburban land through them. Penang, by contrast, was subject to a kind of relatively unregulated land-grab after 1786 by Europeans and Asians, a development more common in the Caribbean and Australasia.

There were, of course, divisions within the communities, between for instance the Parsi elite and the working class. There were also occasional communal riots and disturbances, particularly in the economically troubled 1860s and ‘70s between communities. Parsis and Hindus came into conflict with the Muslim poor at Mohurrum, for instance. There was a parallel to this in Penang in 1855, when riots broke out between Indian and Chinese labourers at Mohurrum, centred particularly on Indian convicts and ex-convicts.²⁵ Yet, generally speaking, as this example shows, class politics and conflict was a more common feature of the life of Bombay in the nineteenth century than in Penang, where factional conflict within communities was more in evidence. As

Rajnarayan Chandavarkar's work shows, the Bombay mill-workers and other subaltern groups mobilized quite early, sparking unease amongst the middle classes. This sort of industrial or class conflict was not generally seen in Penang until the 1920s, when tin and rubber workers began to form associations.

What these comparisons and contrasts show is that there was a complex interaction between colonial power and inter-community relations in these different settings, which makes the concepts of 'colonial port city', 'colonial modernity' and 'local cosmopolitanism' more complex. The case of Penang may even rehabilitate Furnivall's idea of a plural society, while Bombay can be seen as an incipient class society where caste was a 'congealed form of class', as the Indian socialist, Rammanohar Lohia, once put it.

Colonial expansion and the port cities in the late nineteenth century.

I now want to suggest that some of the major changes in British imperial policy in Asia were strongly reflected, though in different ways in both Bombay and Penang. The British 'military fiscal state' pushed forward fast in mainland India between 1780 and 1820. But in both Bombay and Penang an early version of what Robinson and Gallagher called 'free trade imperialism' was more in evidence. As Simon Layton is demonstrating, unsanctioned arrangements with local powers for trade concessions in both locales were reinforced by the discourse unleashed in a campaign against armed Asian entrepreneurial activity characterized as 'piracy.'

Paradoxically, that classic, later period of Robinson's and Gallagher's mid-century 'free trade imperialism,' from 1820 to about 1870, was more obviously a time when both settlements were affected by British military expansion in Afghanistan and the Punjab, on the one hand, and in Burma, on the other. These campaigns unsettled the trading communities of both cities. In Bombay there appeared the first signs of strenuous proto-nationalist denunciations of military imperialism. Yet, at a local level, both centres also saw a jump in investment in plantations and mines. In Penang, the export of tin increased

by four times between 1844-8 and 1869-73 and it was European demand that was dominant by the latter period.²⁶

Moving to the later part of the century, the histories of Bombay and Penang also complicate our conventional understandings of the relationship between capital and empire. During the age of the ‘new imperialism’ after 1870, Bombay and its merchant communities were closely implicated with British expansion in East Africa. The city became a jumping-off point for commercial and political penetration of the hinterland of Dar es-Salaam and Mombassa and a staging post for Indian labour working on its railway systems. For its part, Penang was already well connected through its European, Malay and Chinese business groups with the Malay states, especially Perak and later, Kedah. When the Colonial Office began to assume more direct control of these states after 1870, Penang-based community leaders acted typically as intermediaries and informants in the establishment of the new political dispensation of indirect rule. These changes culminated in the foundation of the Federated Malay States.

The two port cities, then, were vital cogs in the emergence of the new imperialism in both East Africa and Southeast Asia, then. Yet once again, some of our accepted views about that ‘new imperialism’ are challenged by an examination of regional conditions. Following the debate between Robinson and Gallagher, Schloch, and Cain and Hopkins, we might expect to see some combination of a ‘local crisis’ and the role of finance capital, or indeed ‘gentlemanly capitalism,’ in the two regions. But it is difficult to postulate that the Malay states in the period 1870-1909 were suffering any kind of ‘local crisis’, let alone any insurgent proto-nationalism, comparable with what historians believe was happening in contemporary Egypt or Southern Africa. Local crisis and resistance was created by British intervention, rather than the opposite.

Instead, there seems more purchase in the older argument that the British forward movement was precipitated by fear of the influence of European rivals, the Germans and French in Bombay’s East African terrain after 1882 and the French in Indo-China in Penang’s hinterland. Even in the case of the final conquest of Burma in the 1880s, which

also indirectly impacted on Penang's trade, it appears to have been fear of French diplomatic meddling, rather than any crisis in the rump of the Burmese kingdom, which precipitated intervention.

To address the Cain and Hopkins argument directly, the capital that flowed through Penang into the Malay states during the period 1870-1930 was not an indirectly operating finance capital, but directly invested mercantile and industrial capital working, along with incoming Chinese labour, to exploit tin and later rubber production. This was hands-on plantation and mining capital, neither indirect nor particularly 'gentlemanly,' but essential to service a rapidly industrializing Europe with raw materials.

Politics inward and outward

Finally, what of the emerging nationalist politics of the two settlements? The rhetoric and public pronouncements of elite Bombay subjects had already become deeply critical of British rule during the military expansionism of the late 1830s and early 1840s. A decade on, figures such as Nowrojee Furdoonjee and Dadabhai Naoroji were articulating sophisticated versions of what I call 'statistical liberalism', arguing that the prevailing form of colonialism and the increasing racism of the expatriate community were smothering indigenous aspiration and capabilities. But through to at least 1905, these critiques remained moderate, pacific and, as more radical politicians put it, 'mendicant. This was not surprising in a society where political and community leaders were working, and often prospering, within the context of colonial capitalist modernity. On a smaller scale, Penang reflected a similar political moderation.

There were, of course, some 'alarms and excursions.' The events surrounding the 1857 Rebellion caused panic among British residents in Penang who feared an uprising by the Madras Regiment that was stationed in the settlement. Unease had increased because a major Sikh leader, who had fought the British during the recent conquest of the Punjab, was imprisoned in the city. There had also been demonstrations and strikes against local police and municipal acts that were seen as assaults on community independence and the

management of Chinese festivals.²⁷ One of these had resulted in an affray in which a soldier's rifle was seized.²⁸ Despite pressure from European expatriates and the British authorities, the local community leaders were able to fight off these measures by fomenting a small-scale insurgency.

Yet both Bombay and Penang were in a very different situation in 1857 from the cities of northern India. The Indian soldiers of the Bombay and Madras armies stationed in the two coastal cities were more heterogeneous and less historically privileged than those of the Bengal army, whose mutiny against the loss of high status initially sparked the revolt. The Bombay and Madras armies had also been re-organized after a series of minor mutinies earlier in the century, unlike the Bengal Army. Again, the princes of the Bombay hinterland had been defeated and displaced well before 1857, while the sultan of Kedah and other adjacent Malay rulers had little ideological or material interest in revolt. They had benefitted a good deal from the expansion of trade in the Straits of Malacca and the British government and missionary organizations had not spread a sense of religious conflict, as was the case in north India. So the Mutiny-rebellion was decidedly a revolt of the hinterland and though it spread ripples across British Asia, including the Straits, it had little direct effect on the coastal cities. This was in marked contrast, to the situation in 1914 and after, when Indian soldiers revolted in Malaya and Tilak's and Gandhi's mass movements resonated in the streets of Bombay.

Nevertheless, radical politics was not entirely absent from the two port cities at the end of the 'long nineteenth century.' Some of the defining issues of the political stance of the nationalist elites of the twentieth century can already be seen in embryo in the associations which had emerged there even before 1900. The significance of both Indian and also Malay liberalism has been underestimated by historians. One of the most significant features of Bombay was the emergence of a vibrant public sphere by the end of the nineteenth century. This was characterised by an emphasis on education, particularly female education, a multiplicity of associations and a liberal version of political economy arguing for protection for India's nascent industries. This 'moderate' position had been challenged by cultural nationalists from the Maratha hinterland,

notably Bal Gangadhar Tilak, who developed an audience among mill workers in the city. But liberal moderation remained strong until the 1930s, when the Indian business community of Bombay began to support Gandhi's anti-colonial strategy, in part at least to deflect the emergent Communist movement.

On a smaller scale, Penang replicated this political sensibility. The British business community, of course, had long criticised the Calcutta authorities through its mouthpieces, the *Pinang Gazette* and the *Straits Times*, but generally for restrictions placed on free trade rather than the opposite. Emerging Indian elite opinion in Penang adopted the moderate stance then prevailing in both Bombay and Madras. The local leadership had particularly close connections with Madras because of the dominant position of Tamils in the local Indian population. The Penang Indian Association was founded in 1892 by clerks in government offices and a few commercial men. It urged moral and social improvement and better treatment of Indian labour. It set up branches in Taiping and other nearby centres. But the association faltered and became inactive, mainly because its leadership was so heterogenous and mobile, compared with the regional politicians of Bombay, let alone Calcutta with its strong Bengali 'culturalist' ethic.

Later, Indian spokesmen, such as P. K. Nambyar and Rev Raja Naidu, became more vigorous critics of the local and Indian authorities.²⁹ But again, their main objections were to the British governments' profiting from opium and alcohol sales. The idea of a greater Indian East Asia also threw up its versions of moral rearmament, such as Swami Satyanand's Shuddha Samajam,³⁰ which paralleled movements such as the Arya Samaj and Sanatan Dharm Sabhas in Bombay and its hinterland. Through to the Great Depression, in fact, Indian elite opinion in Penang remained cautious, seeking dialogue rather than conflict with the local authorities, not least because Indian politicians did not wish to cede points to the powerful Chinese leadership. At best, their statements echoed the political and moral position of Bombay moderates, such as G.K. Gokhale, or even Mohandas Gandhi in his earlier, Transvaal incarnation.

As far as the political stance of Chinese and Muslim bodies was concerned, they also adopted liberal versions of nationalism and modernism. But, in contrast to Bombay, their gaze was generally turned outwards, to the South China, the Malay States, Aceh, the Dutch East Indies, respectively. Internally, the pressures of colonial government remained relatively light and even liberal demands for constitutional change remained muted, the criticism of British rule by figures such as Lim Boon Keng were known and discussed in Penang. The Baba Peranakan newspaper *Straits Chinese Herald* founded in 1894 and its Malay equivalent were mainly devoted to educational and linguistic reform and identity building.³¹

Penang was, however, more robust in its external political commentary on China. If Bombay's politics, both moderate and extremist, could be seen as clearly 'nationalist' as early as 1860, Penang's is best described as 'diasporic nationalist.' Sun Yatsen and other Chinese nationalists used the city as a key base for anti-Qing propaganda and organization in the first decade of the twentieth century. There was an old, pre-colonial hostility to the Qing among migrant groups loyal to the Ming.³² Yet most of the leading Baba notables stayed aloof from nationalist agitation, preferring to remain 'the King's Chinese.' They were supported by a group of mainly Hakka notables who continued to represent the Qing government in the settlement. One set of events did, however, provide a parallel to the struggle between 'moderates' and the 'extremists' led by Tilak in western India and Bombay. In the 1900s, as revolutionary movements spread across Europe and Asia, Sun Yatsen was attempting to enlist the Nanyang Chinese against the Qing. Young Chinese, particularly those educated in resurgent Japan, were eager recruits into radicalism as were under-employed and disenchanting Brahmin intellectuals in Bombay and Poona.

Penang became a centre of interest because the radicals hoped to raise money from the wealthy tin miners and plantation owners and remit it by British banks through Hong Kong to fund revolutionary activities in Canton.³³ Political societies were established. A radical newspaper, the *Minpo Magazine* appeared. This propagated themes much like Bombay's radical *Kesari* and *Mahratta* journals. Local businessmen and moderates

reacted to the revolutionaries ‘as if they were snakes and scorpions’, much as the Bombay magnates and liberals reacted to their home-grown extremists. There is also a distant analogy between the Bombay radicals’ festivals for King Shivaji or the god Ganpati and Sun’s use of Chinese opera to raise funds and enthusiasm. Wang Jingwei, who was married to a Penang woman, tried to assassinate a Manchu prince in 1910. Western Indian radicals had actually assassinated British officials in Bombay Presidency and in London during the previous year.

Tilak’s activities in Bombay and Sun’s in Penang were abruptly curtailed, however, when both were expelled by the British authorities. Tilak was imprisoned in Rangoon for preaching sedition. Similarly, the moment Sun began to attack the British government, rather than the Qing, and argue that it was considering removing the Chinese population from Penang, the government expelled him. Chinese support waned even as the 1911 revolution broke out.³⁴ The fall of the Qing regime led to large-scale celebrations in Penang, but this was only after the event. Sun’s failure to raise a revolutionary wave paralleled the Indian ‘extremists’ failure to radicalize Bombay at this period. It required the trauma and economic dislocation of the First World War and the Great Depression to shift these ‘polite and commercial societies’ on their axes.

Muslim politics and reformism in Penang was similarly moderate in tone and comparable with Muslim organization in Bombay and its hinterland. Muslim community life in Penang was dominated by great Acehnese and Malay Muslim merchants. They worked more or less harmoniously with locally resident Indian Muslim Kling traders, who were mostly Tamil-Arabic magnates. Though Arab influence through Aceh was felt in the city, the predominant attitude seems to have been reformist rather than radicalizing. There was little evidence of Wahhabi doctrines or other forms of fundamentalism, though there was widespread support for the Aceh revolt against Dutch rule in Sumatra. In 1918, Sheikh Al-Hadi moved from Singapore to Penang and made it a centre for the propagation of reformist literature,³⁵ but the target of this was more the conservative establishment of the Malay states than the local and broadly tolerant Sufi tradition. Both Abdullah Ahmad Adawi and Hafiz Ghulam Sarwar, prominent Straits

Muslim intellectuals, were educationists and reformists, rather than Islamic purists and revivalists. To this extent, Penang can once again be compared with the atmosphere of Badruddin Tyabjee's Bombay, rather than north India with Deoband and the Tablighi Jamaat.

Conclusions.

During the 1970s and early '80s a number of historians of Asia began to analyse the 'port cities' and commercial connections of the Indian Ocean as a whole. Later, Indian historians moved their attention to agrarian political economy and subaltern studies. In the meantime, historians of Southeast Asia continued to focus on trade and port cities. Yet their attention moved to sub-regions, producing, for example, James Warren's classic study of the Sulu Sea and, more recently, the important literature on the Straits Settlements, to which many people in this room have contributed. In this lecture, I have suggested that the broader comparison still has much value, though I have concentrated on two centres of great importance: Bombay and Penang.

Both were 'colonial port cities' and examples of 'colonial modernity.' But this status was achieved through the physical and cultural juxtaposition of different communities which had adjusted rapidly to the new conditions created by the expansion of Islamate Asia and, only latterly, European trade and technology. They were in fact bearers of complex forms of Eurasian modernity. I have attempted to specify more precisely the elements of their 'local cosmopolitanisms.' Both settlements supported a maritime Muslim inclusiveness created by trading affinity, doctrinal inclusiveness and Sufism. There was, again, the sense special status and multiple cultural capacities created by the distant origin, yet local assimilation of Peranakan Baba and Parsi communities. Equally, we have noted the adaptability and flexible family structure of the later Chinese migrants in Penang and the influx of comparable Gujarati and Maratha merchant families in Bombay, underpinned by a wealth of easily exploitable hinterland labour in both cases.

There were, of course, substantial differences between the two centres. Colonial power was more evident in Bombay. Penang's jostling 'pluralism' during the nineteenth century was created as much by colonial neglect as by regulation and intervention. Bombay lurched towards nationalist politics much earlier than Penang, as inland Maratha politics impinged on its moderate leadership of traders and liberal statisticians. Penang's politics, however, remained moderate until after the First World War when the labour conflict, Pan-Islamism and communism spreading in the wider Malayan world registered their impact. Yet, even before the War, younger leaderships in Penang, as in Bombay, had begun to move towards a more radical anti-state and anti-colonial stance. The difference was that in Penang this radicalism was turned outward to China and Dutch Indonesia. Indeed, a comparative and connected history of power, commerce and modernity in the wider Indian Ocean area still has much to offer historians, both empirically and theoretically.

¹ Gyan Prakash, *Mumbai Fables* (Princeton, 2010)

² I have examined Bombay's nineteenth century in more detail in 'Bombay's intertwined modernities' in Michael Dodson and Brian Hatcher (eds.) *Transcolonial modernities in South Asia* (forthcoming, 2011). This article recapitulates some of the material on that city's Parsis, Muslims and Hindu commercial people to provide a comparison with Penang.

³ Cited in Andrew Barber, *Penang under the East India Company 1786-1858* (KL, 2009), p.135. This work is the only one of its kind, but it is difficult to assess because of the lack of footnotes.

⁴ Nordin Hussin, *Trade and society in the Straits of Melaka. Dutch Melaka and English Penang 1780-1830* (Singapore, 2007), pp. xviii, xvix and 336,

⁵ T.J. Newbold, *A political and statistical account of British Settlements in the straits of Malacca* (London, 1839), pp. 54-5.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 55.

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- ⁷ M. N. Pearson, *The Portuguese in India*. New Cambridge History of India. 1, 1 (Cambridge, 1987).
- ⁸ Pratima Kamat, *Farfar Far: Crossfire. Local resistance to colonial hegemony in Goa 1510-1912* (Panaji, Goa, 1999).
- ⁹ Vijaya Gupchup, *Bombay social change 1813-77* (Bombay, 1993), pp 23-32.
- ¹⁰ Pилоo Nanavutty, *The Parsis* (Delhi, 1977), p. 51.
- ¹¹ Adrian Leonard of the University of Cambridge is working on this issue.
- ¹² Gagan Sood, 'The Islamicate ecumene' Past and Present, forthcoming.
- ¹³ Geert Jan van Gelder, review of Lenn E. Goodman and Richard McGregor, eds and trans. *Epistles of the brethren of purity* (Oxford, 2010), *Times Literary Supplement*, 27 November 2010.
- ¹⁴ Husain B. Tyabji, *Badruddin Tyabji. A biography* (Thacker and Co., Bombay, 1952), pp. 5-9
- ¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 69.
- ¹⁶ Jean Bernardi, *Rites of belonging Memory, modernity and identity in a Malaysian Chinese community* (Stanford, 2004), p. 23.; cf. Tan Chee Beng, *The Baba of Melaka. Culture and identity of a Chinese Peranakan community in Malaysia* (Selangor, 1987).
- ¹⁷ *ibid.*, 115.x
- ¹⁸ Tan Chee Beng, 'Baba and Nyonya: a study of the ethnic identity of the Chinese Peranakan in Malacca.' PhD thesis, Cornell University, 1979, p 203.
- ¹⁹ See e.g., Wu Xiao An, 'A prominent Chinese towkay from the periphery. The Choong family' in Y.Guan, L. Leng et al., *Penang and its region. The story of an Asian entrepot* (Singapore, 2009), pp.190-213.
- ²⁰ Tanya Luhrmann, *The good Parsi. Postcolonial experiences of an Indian colonial elite* (Harvard, UP, 1996).
- ²¹ Taku Suyama, *Pang societies and the economy of Chinese immigrants in Southeast Asia*', in Tregonnin (ed.) *Papers on Malayan history*, pp. pp. 193-213.
- ²² Cited in J.M.Gullick, *Malay society in the late nineteenth century. The beginnings of change* (Singapore, 1987), p. 286.

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- ²³ Chinese politics in Malaysia. A history of the Malaysian Chinese Association (Singapore, 1988), pp. 1-13.
- ²⁴ Kernial Singh Sandhu, *Indians in Malaya. Immigration and settlement 1786-1957* (Cambridge, 1963), p. 58.
- ²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 139.
- ²⁶ Wong Lin Ken, 'The Malayan tin industry', in K.G.Tregonning (ed.), *Papers on Malayan History* (Singapore, 1962), p. 31.
- ²⁷ C. M. Turnbull, 'Communal disturbances in the Straits Settlements in 1857', *JMBRAS*, 31, 11958, pp. 96-146. see also, Debernardi, *Rites of belonging*, pp. 54-8.
- ²⁸ Barber, *Penang*, pp. 150-51,
- ²⁹ Khoo Kay Kim, 'Tanjong, Hilir Perak, Larut and Kinta. The Penang-Perak nexus in history' in Yeoh Seng Guan, Loh Wei Leng, Khoo Salma Nasution and Neil Khor (eds.), *Penang and region. The story of an Asian entrepot* (K,L., 2009), p.67,
- ³⁰ Sandhu, *Indians in Malaya*, p.12.
- ³¹ Tan Chee Beng, 'Baba and Nyonya', p. 118.
- ³² Debernardi, *Rtes of belonging*, p. 26.
- ³³ Khoo Salma Nasution, *Sun Yate Sen in Penang* (Penang, 2008), pp. 35-41.
- ³⁴ C. M. Turnbull, 'Penang's changing role in the Straits settlements', *ibid.* p. 46.
- ³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 6.