

## **Tamil Muslims in the Penang Port, 1900-1940**

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### INTRODUCTION

During its days as free port, Penang's economy was strongly anchored in the service sector of the port cluster. This paper looks at the Tamil Muslims in the Penang port and focuses on the Tamil Muslim elite, family businesses as well as social organisations which achieved prominence in the early 20th century. The elites ran family businesses tied to the Indian Ocean trade and exerted their influence through leadership of organisations such as Muslim Merchants Society and the Muslim Mahajana Sabha. By following a few personalities and their involvement in the two societies, it is possible to get a better understanding of strategies used by the Tamil Muslim elite to enhance social and business networks, champion common trade interests and sustain ethno-religious group identity.

Being the first port of call in Southeast Asia, and the last stop back to India, Penang was an important node and nexus for the Tamil Muslim communities in the region. From 1786, after Penang was made a British trading outpost for its India-China trade, Penang attracted many sojourners and settlers from India, China and the archipelago. In early records, Tamil Muslims are subsumed under the term 'Chulia', which may have included a minority of other South Indians such as Tamil Hindus and Malabaris. The Malays referred to the same as 'Keling', hence the title 'Kapitan Keling' was given to the headman of the South Indian community who founded the main mosque for this port.

The Kapitan Keling Mosque became the main mosque for South Indian Muslims within the port cluster, but a number of other cultural-religious organisations or Landsmannschaft from the early 19th century, such as the Nagore Dargah (1801) and the Tanjore association, provided centres of affiliation for people of the same origin. Through chain migration, there was a tendency for various groups of sojourners to hail from the same village, and to be related to each other.

Sir George Leith, Lieutenant-Governor of the Prince of Wales Island from 1800 to 1803, wrote, 'The Chooliahs are dispersed all over the Malay Peninsula, and are entrusted by the different Rajahs with the chief management of their affairs; they are a quiet useful People.' He described three main groups. The first group were 'fixed inhabitants and possess Property to a very great amount', domiciled merchants who were well connected to each other and to the British

administration. The second and largest group were merchants and ship crew who imported salt, tobacco and textiles from the Coromandel coast; they traded seasonally, 'reside on the Island only for a few months; when having disposed of their Goods and purchased a fresh cargo, they return to the Coast.' The third group were 'coolies and boatmen', working-class sojourners who returned to India after a few years and were succeeded by others. From this, it is clear that the Chulias and Tamil Muslims population in Penang were not a homogenous group, but differentiated in terms of trades, status as residents, and economic class.

The earlier waves of seafaring sojourners and permanent settlers from the Coromandel coast to the Straits of Malacca consisted of Maraikkayar seafarers. They are also called Maricar, Marican or in Malaysia, 'Merican'. They originated from the 'Maraikkayar ports', in which Muslim seafaring lineages and communities had formed after centuries of exposure to Arab trade. This migration started from ancient times, and continued to the early 20th century, with a 'golden age' from around 1700 to the mid-19th century.

The Maraikkayars were mostly engaged in entrepôt trade with other Maraikkayar communities across the region. They consolidated their wealth, influence and leadership in the local communities by founding mosques and other religious endowments. In Southeast Asia, Maraikkayars from the old sea trade were among the leading Indian Muslims traders in Penang, Kuala Lumpur, Medan, Jakarta, Surabaya, Bangkok, Rangoon and Moulmein in Southeast Asia, Saigon, Laos and Cambodia in Indochina, and Johannesburg, Natal, Uganda in Africa. The majority of Malaysian Maraikkayars originated from the English ports of Nagore and Nagapattinam, whereas most of those in Indonesia, especially those now in Medan, originated from French Porto Novo and possibly Karikal.

In the Straits of Malacca, Maraikkayars used to dominate but today they are just one among a number of Tamil Muslim groups. In the late 19th century, the Maraikkayars were gradually edged out of the Indian Ocean trade by European steamship operations. The important triangular trade between the Coromandel coast, Penang and Aceh was broken by the Dutch war on Aceh in 1873. After this period, Penang ceased to be a major Maraikkayar trading destination. Those who remained in Penang began to concentrate on opportunities opened up by the expansion of agriculture in the hinterland. However, they could hardly penetrate the tin-mining economy in the Malay States which was largely controlled by Chinese capitalists through the truck system.

Maraikkayars follow the Shafi'i mazhab and it was common for their locally-born offspring to assimilate into the local Muslim population. Maraikkayar male sojourners maintained wives and families in India, but when they could afford to do so, some also took 'local' wives - their children raised on this side of the Indian Ocean tended to be absorbed into the Jawi Peranakan hybrid community and subsequently into the Penang Malay community.

The Nagore group of merchants, which consisted of Maraikkayars and other lineages, were another very early group of seafaring merchants. Historically, Nagore is well known for close cooperation between Hindu and Muslim communities. The Nagore merchants had a close relationship to the British, both in India and in Penang, and as result the East India Company granted land for the Nagore dargah in 1801. Nagore dargahs were also found in Aceh, Singapore and quite a few Malay States.

Meanwhile, from the mid-19th century onwards, other groups of Tamil Muslims started to come by the same ships that transported South Indian Hindu labourers. The earlier sojourners mainly came from South Arcot and Tanjore (Thanjavur) but they were later joined and even outnumbered by sojourners from Ramnathapuram (Ramnad). These sojourners used the colonial infrastructure which had been built up throughout the Madras Presidency, travelling by road and railway to the port of Nagapattinam to cross the Indian Ocean to the port of Penang. From Penang, they spread into the Malayan hinterland. As thousands of Hindu labourers headed for the sugar cane plantations of Prai and then the rubber plantations of the Malay States, so the Tamil Muslims like the chettiars also found new opportunities. They developed a well-reticulated distribution network for supplying Indian goods and services across Malaya.

As Maraikkayar traders withdrew from the Penang port, other Tamil Muslims stepped up to take their place. In the early 20th century, the port elite consisted of Maraikkayars, Rawthers and other groups. The Rawther (Rowther) are known as urban traders in Tamil Nadu. In Penang, a few Rawther families controlled the lighter trade whereas many other Rawthers managed small businesses. The Rawthers were less likely to assimilate with the Malays because of their Hanafi'i mazhab.

In the study of Tamil Muslim traders, one frequently comes across mention of those who have 'gone back to India' - they may have done so temporarily to visit wife and family or retired permanently expecting to die there. The circular motion of Indian traders and migrant workers dates from the days of ancient Kedah, and

continued into modern times. Rather than being diaspora in the strict sense of the word, the settlers and sojourners continued to travel back and forth across the Indian Ocean, maintaining dual families and identities, and complex transnational lineages. This sojourning pattern also affected the structure of the family company or leadership of social organisations.

## MERCANTILE ASSOCIATIONS

Compulsory registration of friendly societies was a measure introduced by the government to control and suppress 'secret societies' which were engaged in illegal activities. It pushed local groups to formalise their societies along more egalitarian lines. However, most of the early societies were still steeped in a culture of traditional patronage. The first societies founded by Tamil Muslims in Penang catered to the Jawi Peranakan community. This was a loose term which included all local-born, locally-educated or acculturated Penang Muslims of pure or mixed Arab and/or Indian Muslim parentage.

Practically the first Muslim society to be registered was the Pranakan Club, around 1892; it was headed by K. Patchee, then around 31 years old, and heir of a successful shiphandling company. The Penang correspondent of the newspaper *Jawi Peranakan* wrote in 1894 that in the last few years, several 'gathering places' (tempat persekutuan) had been opened - the Jawi Peranakan Club, the Mohammedan Cricket Club, the S.M. Jamsyid Club and the Muslim Recreation Club at Pitt Street. The Young Muslim Union, founded on 1 January 1911, was in fact an 'Association of Young English educated Mohamedans'. Back then, the Jawi Peranakan community of Penang was prosperous and culturally eclectic. These clubs catered to their social and recreational needs.

Muslim occupational guilds were organised along religious or quasi-religious lines and were slow to register themselves as societies. As most Tamil Muslim business were vertically organised as family businesses, the first business associations were almost like an alliance or collective of family business. As the original Penang Chamber of Commerce overwhelmingly represented European (including Eurasian) interests, a Muslim Chamber of Commerce was formed in the 1880s. This probably consisted of Tamil Muslims, Arabs, Jawi Peranakan and Acehnese seeking representation to protect their interests after the disastrous consequences of the Aceh war upon Muslim trade. The Penang Chinese Chamber of Commerce, founded in 1903 by Chinese who had worked with European companies, proved more powerful and enduring.

The first Muslim merchant associations in Penang were the Muslim Merchants Society and Muslim Mahajana Sabha. The Muslim Merchants Society consisted largely of merchants and commission agents with long-term property and plantation interests in the Straits Settlements and Malaya. These included textile merchants, shopkeepers and money-changers. The Muslim Mahajana Sabha on the other hand, appeared to consist mainly of shipchangers and shipping agents with direct involvement in the Indian trade. Both had a strong Tamil Muslim identity, although they may also have had Jawi Peranakan members.

The Muslim Merchants' Society was founded around 1912. It was a sort of club 'where on ordinary days a good deal of commercial business is done among Mahomedan merchants of standing, to whom the society is confined'. They had their own clubhouse at 1 Transfer Road where feasts were held. Initially its membership consisted 'entirely' of merchants who hail from the old port of Nagore and the modern port of Nagapattinam in Tanjore. In 1916, they entertained Penang Muslim society in commemoration of the anniversary of the patron saint of Nagore.' After the biography of the saint had been recited, the large gathering sat down to a sumptuous dinner' which most probably included an offering of the famous Nagore briyani.

For the society's anniversary in 1916, the president K.P. Mohamed Madersah entertained 2,000 people at the clubhouse, welcoming the H.G. Sarwar as well as European officers with 'tiffin served in English and native styles'. K.P. Mohamed Madarsah's brother K.P. Mohamed Kassim took over as president in 1921. K.P. Mohamed Kassim had his office 200 Beach Street; he also had plantation interests, once owning 180 acres of rubber estate in Perlis. During the Muslim Merchant Society's silver jubilee in 1937, he endowed the K.P. Madar Library in memory of his late brother, and had it opened by the Penang Resident Councillor.

In 1929, K.P. Mohamed Kassim entertained important visitors from India to an 'At Home' at the Penang Muslim Merchants' Society. The guests were the honorable T. Pragasam, barrister-at-law and member of the Indian Legislative Assembly and editor of Swarajya, Madras, the honorable Abdul Hamid Khan, member of the Madras Legislative Council, and N. Rajagopalan, barrister-at-law Madras on a tour of Malaya. They were welcomed with a speech by Dr. K. Mohamed Ariff, a medical doctor. Although Dr. Mohamed Ariff, who was considered a Jawi Peranakan, had in the meantime started the Penang Malay Association in 1927, he was closely associated with the Muslim Merchants Society for many years.

When Seena Aminsahib first took over as president of the Muslim Merchants Society in 1916, he gave a dinner, on behalf of the society, to the Singapore Mohamedan Football Association which was in Penang for an inter-settlement match. A.P. Sultan Mydin assisted the President in receiving the guests at the club.'

Unlike the Muslim Mahajana Sabha, where it seems, long absences were tolerated, it seemed to be the practice for the Muslim Merchants' Society for an office-bearer to vacate his seat when going back to India. For example, in 1921, at a special general meeting of the Penang Muslim Merchants' Society held at Penang on Sunday, under the presidency of K. P. Mohamed Kassim, A. P. Sultan Mydin the textile merchant was appointed honorary secretary, because S. Oothman Saiboo, who served as secretary of the society for many years, resigned owing to his approaching departure for India. Mohamedali Maricar was appointed assistant honorary secretary. A.P. Sultan Mydin later became president of the society in 1927.

The Muslim Mahajana Sabha was established around 1914, holding its second annual meeting at Sabha Hall, 29 Penang Road. The founding president was K. Patchee Haji Mohamed Noor, the shipchandler previously described. The long-serving Honorary Secretary was M.A. Marican, a partner in the Penang Labour Syndicate. The treasurer was E.M. Naina.

The very name Mahajana Sabha suggests that it was modeled after the associations in India rather than those in Malaya. The Madras Mahajana Sabha, for example, formed by the city's westernized and wealthy elite, was considered the 'premier nationalist organisation' in Madras at the turn of the century.

It is possible that the Muslim Mahajana Sabha was formed to challenge the Muslim Merchants Society, as the relationship between the two was initially bitter. In 1914, Sultan Mydin bin Pitchay, better known as A.P. Sultan Mydin, secretary of the Muslim Merchants Society was charged with importing bhang from Deli to Penang. Though eventually acquitted of the charge, he accused Saiboo Merican and other members of the rival Muslim Mahajana Club of planting the evidence.

Later, as each organization found its own niche, the relationship improved and it was possible to find businessmen, such as the money changer M. Kader Bawa from Ramnad, who was on the committee of both organisations. By that time, the

Muslim Mahajana Sabha had opened its doors to merchants from outside of Tanjore.

The Muslim Mahajana Sabha had close relations with the Penang Pranakan Club, as both societies shared the same President, K. Patchee. In 1917, the Penang Pranakan Club celebrated its silver jubilee at its premises on Hutton Lane. Among its 500 guests were 'many prominent Mohamedans from out-stations.' A 50-member deputation from the Muslim Mahajana Sabha, headed by a band, arrived and presented a congratulatory address, printed on silk in English, Malay and Tamil, and enclosed in a silver casket, to K. Patchee Haji Mohamed Noor, and other club members. The addresses in English and Tamil were read out by the Muslim Mahajana Sabha Secretary, M.A. Marican.

Later that year, K. Patchee died, a day after attending social gatherings at the houses of Syed Omar Alsagoff and M. Kassim Merican and a week after he had 'entertained lavishly' at his daughter's wedding. He had been at the helm of the Muslim Mahajana Sabha for three years and of the Pranakan Club for 25 years. In those days, presidentship of a society was for life.

The Muslim Mahajana Sabha had its share of scandals. In 1928, Shaik Mohamed Malimiar, treasurer of the Muslim Mahajana Sabha, was sentenced to two months imprisonment for criminal breach of trust with respect to almost \$3,951 of the club's funds. He was manager of the Straits Cattle Trading Company, the Penang branch of a Singapore Tamil Muslim firm. The following year, the Sabha was also investigated by police for having run a lottery in Singapore, as the tickets issued read 'For Members only. Muslim Mahajana Sabha, Penang. Unlimited non-selling sweep in aid of Building Fund.' As people tended to confuse the two societies, the Honorary Secretary of the Penang Muslim Merchants' Society promptly issued a denial that his society was involved in the Singapore lottery case.

Although hardly reported in the news, it is likely that the two societies organised welfare activities and recreational activities for its members. When Anatolia was hit by earthquake in December 1940, the Penang Muslim Merchants' Society collected funds from Indian, Arab, Malay and Bengali (North Indian) communities for transmission to the British Minister at Ankara for the relief of the victims.

As previously seen, the Muslim Merchants Society was closely affiliated with the Mohamedan Football Association, while in 1930, the Muslim Mahajana Sabha

had the position of 'sports secretary' - this was A. M. Yousoof Iyzuddin, also known as A.M.Y. Izzudin who became a youth leader. During the Second World War, he was appointed 'Malay leader under the Japanese regime'; however, he was cleared of collaboration after the war.

## RELIGIOUS IDENTITY

The Muslim community constantly turned to Tamil Muslim merchants for sponsorship of religious causes. Seena Aminsahib, Oothman Saiboo, Shakkarai Rawther and Seeni Rawther were members of the Mohamedan Advisory Board. They gave generously to mosques and Muslim schools and also sat on the board of the Al-Mashoor School. Although they acted as patrons to the larger Muslim and Malay community, they upheld their own Tamil Muslim religious identity.

When P.K. Shakkarai Rawthar was president of the Muslim Mahajana Sabha in 1930, he called a special general meeting to discuss a certain offending trade mark on sarongs. 'After discussion from the religious point of view it was unanimously agreed that the words were in every respect against the religion and immediate steps be taken to deal with the matter.' A sub-committee was formed P.K. Shakkarai Rawthar, V.S. Madar Sahib, A.S. Md. Hussain, M. A. Pitchay Ganny and S.M. Hossain was elected for the purpose.

The test came about when Muslim Mahajana Sabha had to defend their religious culture in court. In 1934, Shakkarai Rawther was slandered by the Malay paper *Bumiputera* and accused of sponsoring an un-Islamic cultural practice. In response, the plaintiffs K.L.M. Mohamed Abdul Kader, P.K. Shakkirai Rowther and the committee of the Muslim Mahajana Sabha, Penang, took out a libel suit against the M. Mohamed Ibrahim and Mohamed Amin and the Commercial Press.

The first plaintiff K.L.M. Mohamed Abdul Kader was a religious visitor from India who had been put up at the Muslim Mahajana Sabha's club house as a personal guest of the President, Shakkiri Rawther. He wrote spiritual verses in the form of kaseda (qasida), the 'text of a prayer hung up in the Muslim houses', and gave out a few copies without asking for money. 'Mohamed Amin, editor and publisher of the Malay newspaper Bumiputra gave evidence to the effect that the Kasedas contained sentiments contrary to Mohamedan religion, and the sentiments expressed in the Kasedas were quite different to those expressed in the Koran.'

The tradition of writing and learning *qasida*, usually in the form of a panegyric in praise of the Prophet, was regarded as mainstream Islamic practice in India, but evidently not in Malaya. The plaintiffs contended that ‘differences of opinion about religious doctrines did not provide any excuse for the vilification of the first plaintiff, or of others who gave him hospitality while he was in Penang.’ The two parties settled out of court to the satisfaction of Shakkarai Rawther, as the Commercial Press agreed to publish a tendered apology and pay up the \$1,000 damages and \$2,000 agreed costs.

P.K. Shakkarai Rawther became good friends with Hafiz Ghulam Sarwar, who returned to Penang after retiring from his post as Civil District judge in Singapore. Both served on the Mohamedan Advisory Board and on the Almashoor School Board in the 1930s. In 1935, the two families were joined when Rawther’s eldest daughter S.R. Salma was married to Shaik Muhammad Siddique Faruque, the only son of H.G. Sarwar. ‘P.K. Shakkarai Rawther, J.P. entertained a number of his friends of all nationalities to dinner at his residence in Irving Road, Penang.’ At the time, a union between a South Indian family and a North Indian family must have been unusual, but for lack of Northern Indian compatriots in those days, Hafiz Ghulam Sarwar had formed close alliances with Penang Tamil Muslims of the Hanafi mazhab.

As the Prophet Mohamed's Birthday (Maulud Nabi) was an important holiday for Muslims in India, The Muslim Merchant’s Societies was the first organisation to lobby for the recognition of Maulud Nabi in the Straits Settlements. They passed a resolution in 1932 calling for it to be declared a public holiday in the Straits Settlements, as it was already so observed in the Federated Malay States the previous year. The All-Malaya Muslim Missionary Society kept the pressure up over the years until the holiday was granted after the war.

## POLITICAL AWARENESS

The seeds of political consciousness were sown with the advent of the Malay and Tamil press at the turn of the 20th century, which related international news of interest to the local Muslim community. Tamil Muslim readers had access to education and news in at least three different languages - Tamil, Malay, English. Among the journalists trained in the Middle East, India and in the Dutch East Indies, were those who championed a Pan-Islamic outlook. These journalists promoted the idea of the unity of the Muslim ummah, symbolized by the Ottoman Caliphate.

In the Malaya and the Straits Settlements, the strongest show of pan-Islamic protest during the First World War was the Singapore Mutiny, in which Sikh and Muslim sepoys rose against the British in February 1915. As a precaution, the British authorities in Singapore decided to set up a Mohammedan Advisory Board in June 1915 as an 'emergency measure'. Its main function was to assist the colonial administration in establishing closer rapport with the local Muslims, particularly the Indian Muslims.

In early October 1915, the formation of an Advisory Board 'on matters connected with Muhammadan religion and custom for the Settlement of Penang' was announced. The committee initially consisted of eleven members, one European chairman, five Arabs and five non-Arabs.

The Governor had appointed H.C. Sells (chairman), H. Zachariah, Syed Hashim, K. Pachi, A. Yusof Gani, A.O. Merican, Syed Hasan Al-Shatri, Syed Mashhur, H. Daud, H. Othman, visiting teacher, Province Wellesley, and Syed Salleh Alsagoff bin Syed Hashim Alsagoff (secretary). The non-Arabs included the stevedoring boss K. Pachi bin Kappa Tamby, chairman of the Muslim Mahajana Sabha and Pranakan Club, Yusuf Gani bin Allapitchay, president of the Moslem Society and A.O. Merican, grandson of the Kapitan Keling Mosque founder. Both the Boards in Singapore and Penang were chaired by British officers from the Malayan Civil Service. In April 1916, Hafiz Ghulam Sarwar who in the meantime had been transferred from Singapore to Penang was appointed to the Board in Penang; he would be the only northern Indian Muslim for a long time. By 1917, there were three new Tamil Muslims on the board, including M.H.M. Noordin, Muslim Merchants Society, and Shin Tambi Aminsah better known as Seena Aminsahib, President, Muslim Merchants Society. The committee was now 15 strong, made up of six Arabs, six Indian Muslims or Jawi Pekan, and possibly two Malays or Sumatrans. It was a delicate balance between Arabs and Indians, but this was not proportionate to the numerical strength of the respective communities, as the Arab minority was much smaller.

The Mohamedan Advisory Board helped to stabilise the Tamil Muslim elite. Although initially the representatives were picked from various Muslim associations, there was no system compelling nominations from the associations themselves. Furthermore, membership of the Advisory Board and the mosque committees was highly prestigious, as they assumed patronage of the Muslim community through events such as mass feeding of the poor organized at the Kapitan Keling Mosque during imperial celebrations or religious holidays, where funding was enabled by the endowments board.

## TAXES

The historian Kenneth McPherson, referring to India, wrote that 'The bulk of the Tamil Muslims had proved impervious to the growth of Pan-Islamism in India prior to the War as they had no emotional attachment to the temporal power of Islam. However, economic and political grievances during the war finally stirred many of them into overt political activity.' Like their counterparts in Madras, the Tamil Muslim businessmen in the Straits Settlements were drawn to political advocacy only when adversely affected by wartime taxation and trade restrictions.

Until World War One, India followed a policy of free trade. When British India was plunged into a fiscal crisis due to the war, it tried to raise government revenues by imposing duties. In February 1916, the Muslim Mahajana Sabha organized a lavish dinner for their European business associates to lobby against the 'enhanced deposits' introduced on certain commodities shipped from India. The main speech by D.G. McConechy, manager of the Madura Coy, Ltd., was translated into Tamil; McConechy had been an agent of the British India Steam Navigation Company's line of steamers at Nagapattinam for 25 years. Jules Martin, the French partner in G.H. Slot and Company delivered an 'excellent' speech in Malay.

Present were prominent Muslim Mahajana Sabha members who built their businesses upon servicing the British shipping giant: S. Vanjore Madar Sahib from Nagore, stevedore of British India Steam Navigation Company, and his brother Sinda Madar; P.K. Sakkarai Rowther, the landing and shipping Contractor for British India Steam Navigation Co., Ltd. a venture which he operated with A.K. Seeni Rowther; K.E.A. Mohideen Kandau, Maricar & Co., general merchants and commission agents at 43 Penang Street.

At the end of 1916, the honourable Khan Babadoor Ahmad Tamby Maricar arrived from India. He represented the Labour Enquiry Commission appointed by the Indian Government to look into the conditions of Indian labour in Ceylon, the Straits and the F.M.S. The Commissioner was met on board by Muslim notables such as M.M. Noordin, U. Gunny (Pilot), Wanchee Ariffin, A.O. Marican, Haji Zachariah, M.K. Kader Bawa, S.A.M.M. Hussain, Ahamed Meah, S.V. Madar Sahib, K. Patchee, A. Singaram Pillay, V. Krishnasamy Vandayar, V. Nadesam Pillay, Karmagam Pillay and others. As chairman of the reception committee, and secretary of the Muslim Mahajana Sabha, M.A. Marican entertained them to a dinner at the Sabha. M.A. Marican was a partner of the Penang Labour Syndicate which supplied labour to the Penang Harbour Board. At this stage the workers'

groups were not sufficiently organised to make their own representation, and the Commissioner having attended carefully scheduled meetings with labourers was apparently satisfied with the reports of major Indian employers.

Local Muslim merchants mobilized in response to the proposed introduction of the war tax. A meeting in 1916 was presided over by M. M. Noordin, a leader of the Jawi Peranakan community. The gathering unanimously resolved that the Muslim community was ready and desirous to contribute to the cost of the war, but opposed the imposition of income tax. Instead, the gathering proposed that a special war contribution should be raised by increasing property assessment and stamp duties, but only for a period of five to ten years. Mohamed Hussain Merican Noordin and Sinnatamby Aminsah, better known as Seena Aminsahib had been appointed war tax assessors.

The magnanimous Mahomed Mashurdin (Nasroodin) Merican Noordin or M.M. Noordin (died 1924) was the youngest son from Penang's wealthiest merchant family. His company, which was managed by Hassanally Abdul Cader from Surat, had a branch in Singapore and exported local produce to London, Marseilles and several ports of India and China. His company suffered major losses major during World War One and was foreclosed in 1917. The mantle of leadership of the Noordin family passed to M.H.M. Noordin, grandson of Mahomed Noordin, who became a municipal commissioner in 1923. He served on the Mohamedan Advisory Board from 1917 till his death in 1931.

In 1920, there was widespread concern among Muslims all over the world over the abolition of the Ottoman Empire under the Treaty of Sèvres. The All-India Khilafat Committee, led by the brothers Maulana Shaukat Ali and his brother Maulana Muhammad Ali, joined forces with Mahatma Gandhi's non-violent, 'non-cooperation' movement. The Khilafat-Congress alliance encouraged Muslims and Hindus to work together and fanned anti-colonial sentiments. Its influence spread through the print media and the constant traffic between the Tamil communities in India and overseas, but here government intelligence in the Straits Settlements detected little more than the surreptitious distribution of anti-British propaganda. Malaysian historian Khoo Kay Kim assessed that 'There was little overt demonstration of hostility toward the British but there was a great deal of open display of veneration and admiration for Gandhi.' However it is likely that the anti-Khilafat awareness emboldened the local Muslim community to make demands upon the colonial government.

In 1922, the Muslim Merchants Society organised a large attendance of merchants and traders at its premises at 1 Transfer Road, to call for the abolition of income tax. Among those present were about 50 Muslim notables and a few leading Chetties representing the entire Chetty community. M.M. Noordin was again elected to chair the meeting, while H.H. Abdul Cader was elected secretary. M. Mohamed Ali Marican addressed the assembly, saying that 'The revenue of this Colony, without the Income Tax, according to the official figures, is quite ample for all reasonable requirements. ... Such being the case, there seems to be no good reason why the Government should continue the Income Tax, which everyone knows is unnecessary and is a great handicap to our trade.' The war tax had been continued after the war as income tax with the object of increasing the revenue of the colony, and this was explained in Tamil by A.P. Sultan Mydin. The resolution was moved by S.M. Haniff to support the action of the Straits Settlements (Singapore) Association in demanding the abolition of income tax and this was passed. This motion was supported by the Ceylonese and Indian groups present; the latter which included a number of Chettiars.

The following month, the rival society Muslim Mahajana Sabha, organized a petition by 300 prominent members of the Penang Muslim community, to demand 'an Imam able to translate Arabic weekly teachings and sermons into Tamil for the benefit of local Chulia Muslims, most of whom do not understand Malay.' This petition was forwarded to H.G. Sarwar, as president of the Mohamedan Advisory Board, to make a recommendation to the Mohamedan and Hindu Endowments Board, to engage this imam, who would have been stationed at the Kapitan Keling Mosque. The Advisory Board enabled Muslim representation but it was the Endowments Board that controlled the waqf funds.

Tamil Muslims began to think of themselves as a regional minority group rather than as members of a village or status-group. After the collapse of the Khilafat movement, Tamil politics took a distinct path with the growth of the Self-Respect Movement founded by 'Periyar' E.V. Ramasamy Naicker in 1925. His influential weekly Tamil journal *Kudi Arasu* was read on both sides of the Indian Ocean. His ideas enabled Tamils, both Hindu and Muslim, to articulate their aspirations around their own Tamil identity, thereby laying the foundation for a deeply-rooted Tamil nationalism and Dravidian politics. The Tamil press also encouraged Muslims and Hindus to work together towards social reforms and for the larger cause of Tamil nationalism.

Promoting the Self-Respect Movement, the journalist P. Daud Shah, editor of *Tharul Islam*, gave an address at the Penang Indian Association in 1925. E.V.

Ramasamay himself spoke in Penang in 1930, attended by South Indian leaders such as Dr. N.K. Menon, A. Mohamed Rawther, Messrs. P. K. Seeni Rawther, V.M. Mohd. Yusoff, Sinda Madar Sahib (then chairman of Muslim Mahajana Sabha), N. Raghavan, Dr. Letchmanasamy and Dr. Kuppusamy.

The plight of Tamil labour in Malaya came to dominate public discourse on the Indians in Malaya. From the 1920s, a few prominent figures among the Straits Settlements elite started to champion the underclasses, voicing out problems of poor living conditions and exploitation of Hindu plantation workers, which made up the majority of labouring population, large-scale repatriation of coolies and retrenchment of clerical workers during times of recession and structural unemployment.

Among those who championed labour issues was the Cambridge-educated Malayalee advocate and solicitor P.K. Nambyar of Penang. He was the first Indian Member to be appointed to the Straits Legislative Council in early 1923. He proceeded to form an Indian Association dedicated to social welfare among Indian labour and was instrumental in the passage of the Straits Settlements Labour Ordinance of that year.

The Indian Association was founded in 1924 as a company limited by guarantee, seated in Penang. Its objects were to establish a social clubhouse, a loan club, educational scholarships, schools, shelters and the like for the poverty relief and to deal in Indian provisions. Rao Saheb, D. Arulnandum Pillai, agent of the Government India of Penang and S. Othman Sahib (of the Muslim Merchants Society) were among the founder members. S. Amin Sahib (also Muslim Merchants Society) and Kader Mohideen Marican served as office bearers. After Maulana Muhammad Ali's death in London in 1931, a public meeting was held at the Penang Indian Association to pay tribute to him. The speaker Kader Mohideen Marican said that Muhammad Ali was not a communalist but had done much to promote unity between Hindus and Muslims.

When P.K. Nambyar passed away suddenly in 1928, the Penang Indian seat on the Straits Legislative Council was given to H.H. Abdool Cader who headed the rival United Indian Association. T.M.S.D. Marikar served as vice-president of H.H. Abdool Cader's United Indian Association while S.M. Hussain (of the Muslim Mahajana Sabha) also joined the committee. Through the Indian Association and the United Indian Association, Tamil Muslims played an important supporting role and worked with other Indians for socio-political causes.

The first All-Malaya Indian Conference was convened in 1927, to discuss the welfare of Indian labourers. Apart from concern over the treatment of Indian workers, there were also aspirations to further the progress of Indian business as a whole vis-à-vis other communities in Malaya. The Muslim Mahajana Sabha as one of the organizations representing Penang was urged to take steps to form an Indian Chambers of Commerce in its own state.

An attempt at starting an Indian Chambers of Commerce was made in 1930, but failed to take off. The following year, the Muslim Merchants' Society lobbied the Indian Government against the ruling on the surcharge of five annas per rupee in cable rates ruling between India, England and British Malaya, which they felt was unwarranted by the suspension of the gold standard in Great Britain. Finally in 1932, a large gathering of Indian businessmen established the Penang Indian Chamber of Commerce, the first in Malaya. The majority of the members were representatives of prominent northern Indian businesses, some of them branches of Singapore concerns. K.J. Sukkrani and S.M. Haniff (of the Muslim Merchants Society) were elected chairman and vice-chairman respectively, while E.E.S. Mohamed Ismail and A. Mohamed Rawther were among the local Tamil Muslim committee members. By comparison, the Indian Chamber of Commerce in Singapore was formed only three years later in 1935, and some Penang Indian merchants with Singapore connections also joined as members.

## INDIAN POLITICS

The political sympathies among Indian Muslims in the Straits Settlements reflected those in India. The All-India Muslim League had been founded in Dhaka in 1906. A Madras branch was formed two years later. The All-India Muslim League only began to field official candidates in South Indian elections on in 1936. Separatist politics had little appeal to the majority of Tamil-speakers, who felt left out of the mainstream of national politics, which was dominated by Urdu-speakers. By contrast, the small community of Northern Indian Muslims in the Straits Settlements strongly identified with the All-India Muslim League in India.

Intellectual leadership for the politicization of the local Indian Muslim community was provided by the Surat-born Hussein Hasanally Abdoolcader better known as H.H. Abdool Cader (1890-1974), the son of the M.M. Noordin's manager. He was a Cambridge-educated barrister who became Indian member of the Strait Straits Settlements Legislative Council from 1928. H.H. Abdul Cader chaired a gathering of the 'Indian Muslim Merchants Society' in Penang in 1938 to condemn a

proposed amendment to the Indian Income Tax Bill. The society appears to be a combined society of North and South Indian Muslim merchants, but little is known about it. Hamid Sultan, honorary secretary of the Muslim Merchants' Society, speaking in Tamil, pointed out the hardships that would befall Indian Muslim merchants here if the proposed amendments were adopted. M. S. Ahamed Mohdeen, also speaking in Tamil, proposed a resolution to send a cable to Muhammad Ali Jinnah, President of the All-India Muslim League in India, asking him to oppose the amendment in Central Assembly.

In Singapore, the South India Muslim League was formed around 1936. It looked after a madrasah for Indian Muslim children. Although it asserted it had 'no connection whatsoever with Muslims in India', it took a political stand on safeguarding Muslim rights in India, in response to an appeal by Jinnah three years later. The Penang Muslim Merchants' Society also supported this stand. This shows the increasing politicization of the Indian Muslims during the late 1930s, partly as a result of the two-nation theory forwarded by the Jinnah at a later stage of the Indian Independence Movement.

After the Viceroy of India declared war with Germany in September 1939, the Congress party resigned from provincial and central offices in India as a protest against not having been consulted over the decision to enter the war. As All-India Muslim League President, Muhammad Ali Jinnah asked Muslims in India to celebrate December 22, 1939 as a 'Day of Deliverance' for Indian Muslims. H.H. Abdool Cader used his influence to persuade the Muslim Merchants Society to celebrate the Day of Deliverance as requested by Jinnah. This move was supported by Indian Muslims in Kuala Lumpur but not in Singapore. With the growing excitement over politics in India, the Penang Indian Muslim League registered itself under the Societies Ordinance in June 1941 but was not fully activated until after the Japanese Occupation.

## CONCLUSION

In the early 20th century, Tamil Muslim merchants in Penang started to go beyond provincial identification, to work with other merchants with common ethnic and religious affiliations. This resulted in two organisations the Muslim Merchants Society and the Muslim Mahajana Sabha, of which a few tentative conclusions can be drawn. They depended very much on the personal influence of paternalistic personalities and served as vehicles for the Tamil Muslim elite to demonstrate their social patronage. They were set up more for social and business

networking but rose to champion common mercantile interests when faced with local or international crises.

Tamil Muslims in the Penang port cluster were influenced by two trends. Ethnic construction in Malaya encouraged the younger generation of Muslims of Indian origin to identify with Malays. Families which had cut off ties with India, or that had intermarried with Malays or were involved in government occupations, tended to assimilate. However, Tamil Muslims who were involved in the trade with India, including those servicing British commercial agents, continued to maintain family connections across the Indian Ocean, held on to their Tamil Muslim identity and resisted assimilation with Malays even after a few generations.

From the 1920s onwards, the Muslim Mahajana Sabha had a strong Tamil Muslim ethno-religious orientation that also valued cooperation with Hindu counterparts following the ethos of the Self-Respect Movement and Dravidian movement. On the other hand, the Muslim Merchants Society was steered by H.H. Abdool Cader to identify more with the All-India Muslim League positions in the late 1930s.

Engagement in the two organisations could not adequately prepare the Tamil Muslim elite for what was to shortly follow - the Japanese Occupation, mass mobilization by the Indian National Army, followed by the problematic return of British rule, intensifying labour confrontations and civil strife in Malaya, the movement against the Malayan Union, and the Indian Partition as well as its aftermath. But despite these disruptions, a thread of continuity can be seen in postwar years.

After the war, the Muslim Merchants Society was superseded by the current Penang Indian Chamber of Commerce. The latter was registered in 1946, attracting all-rounded representation from among both North and South Indians, Hindu and Muslim businessmen. Within a few months the Chamber amalgamated the revived Penang Indian Merchants Association. By comparison, the Malay Chamber of Commerce only commenced around 1959.

As for the former members of the Muslim Mahajana Society, they must have been besieged by problems that plagued the port services. As the Penang port and its related businesses declined, the old families diversified into new businesses such as finance, construction, travel, food and other services.

The Tamil Muslim-Jawi Peranakan elite as a whole were confronted with cataclysmic events in India on the one hand, and the new realities of Malayan politics on the other. Both Malay and Tamil ethnic nationalisms threatened to pull the Tamil Muslim-Jawi Peranakan community in different directions.

After the Indian Partition, the Muslim League was reconvened in Madras as the Indian Union Muslim League under the leadership of M. Mohammad Ismail Saheb. He visited Penang in 1953 and stimulated the revival of the present Muslim League of Penang, Restructured and re-registered in 1954, the Penang Muslim League served to unite a large number of South Indian organisations in Penang. It emerged as a political party competing successfully in local elections when they were first introduced in Malaya.

In conclusion, the Muslim Merchants Society and Muslim Mahajana Sabha were transitional, rather than truly modern organisations. But they helped to evolve a Tamil Muslim elite which could respond vigorously to postwar politics. This elite participated in the Indian Chamber of Commerce, a modern business organisation which transcended provincial affiliations. At the same time, it had the strength and vision to form the Penang Muslim League which largely united South Indian Muslim groups into a more cohesive front. The old families who had been involved in the Muslim Merchants Society and the Muslim Mahajana Sabha continued to play an important role in postwar period. The younger generation scions of the old elite, being intensely familiar with social mobilization and political engagement, confidently rose to become leaders in both Muslim League and UMNO. They became a force to reckon with, in city politics as well as in Penang's modern civic movements.