Stories from the margins: Indian business communities in the growth of colonial Singapore

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Abstract

Colonial Singapore witnessed the movement and settling of Chinese, Malay, Indian, Arab, European and other mercantile groups as a free port and emporium of the British Empire. This social landscape was defined by boundaries between the different ethnic communities, often drawn up by the British, in contrast to the cosmopolitan exchanges of the market. This article focuses on the Indian business communities which had played a significant role in maritime trade networks since pre-colonial times and continued to be a part of Singapore’s developing society and economy in the British period. A minority in the colonial era port city and largely confined within intra-ethnic economic and social circuits, Indians participated in the complex colonial structure of trade and credit alongside British, European and Asian traders and merchant houses, as brokers, agents, and retailers. British hegemony over the Indian subcontinent was both an advantage and a disadvantage for these Indian trading communities. This article brings to light the history of Indian networks in the colonial transnational flows of capital and entrepreneurship, and their patterns of integration into and role in the development of Singapore, a role marginalised in the scholarship and the national narratives alike by a focus on the large-scale Indian labour migrations.
1 Singapore's development as an entrepôt complemented and facilitated regional trade alongside the establishment of Hong Kong (after the Opium War) as a clearing house for China as well as extending commercial relations with the ports of Netherlands East Indies and French-dominated Saigon. The efficiency of the Singapore market is reiterated along with the participation of Chinese and Indian merchants in the Report of the Commission appointed by His Excellency the Governor of the Straits Settlements to enquire into and report on the trade of the Colony, 1933–34, vol. 1, pt-II, chap. 6 (Singapore: Government Printer, 1934), pp. 41–2.

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7 Though much less prevalent, such terms still survive in everyday notions of ‘Indians’ in Singapore, particularly among the older generation.


17 Nawab was the honorific title usually given to semi-autonomous Muslim rulers by the Mughal emperors, a practice continued by the British. It was accompanied by land grants, cash allowances and important social and economic status.

18 Sen, Empire of free trade, p. 123.


27 Ibid., p. 111.


32 The Chulias, Muslim trading communities from the Coromandel Coast, had resisted and posed a serious threat to Dutch monopolistic claims in the southern Bay of Bengal, which was sorted out between the Dutch and the English by the Anglo–Dutch Treaty of 1784, thus pushing the Chulias to reorganise themselves. See Bhaswati Bhattacharya, ‘The Dutch East India Company and the trade of the Chulias in the Bay of Bengal in the late eighteenth century’, in Mariners, merchants and oceans: Studies in maritime history, ed. Khuzipallil Skaria Mathew (New Delhi: Manohar, 1995), pp. 347–61.


34 Turnbull, A history of modern Singapore, p. 46.

35 There were twenty British, six Jewish, five Arab, five Chinese, two Armenian, and two German merchant houses, and one Portuguese, one American and one Parsi merchant house each. Ibid., pp. 56, 58.

36 Ibid., p. 70.

37 Ibid.


Colonial Grain Traders in Singapore: The Story of Raja Bhai Jumabhoy

Raja Bhai Jumabhoy was one of the prominent grain traders in Singapore during the colonial period. He was associated with the A.M.S. Angullia of Surat, which preceded him in this trade. He was the biggest sago flour exporter to Bombay. Other exports included gum benjamin, rattan, gambier, tin ingots, canned pineapples, etc., while imports included dates from Muscat, Bahrain and Basra, onions from Port Said (1923–30), timber from Jeddah (1934–41) and gunny bags from Calcutta. Raja Bhai Jumabhoy stated that the export-import firm of A.M.S. Angullia of Surat had preceded them in this trade. R. Jumabhoy, Multiracial Singapore: On to the nineties, rev. ed. (Singapore: Chopmen, 1990), pp. 39–40.

Kantilal Jamnadas Shah, Oral History Recordings, Accession No. 000094, Reel No. 2, NAS.

Minutes of the meetings of the Sindhi Merchants Association held in 30 May 1946, and 17 October 1946, unpublished records of the Sindhi Merchants Association (in Sindhi). The author is grateful to Mr. Chhatru Vaswani, an elderly Sindhi businessman and a member of the Sindhi Association, for the translations.

For details, refer to Jaswant Singh Bajaj, Oral History Recordings, Accession No. 000167, Reel No. 3, NAS.


The Chinese name ‘Tek Kia Kha’ shortened as Tek Kah, meaning ‘foot of small bamboos’, possibly used in building the cattle pens, ‘kandang kerbau’. Siddique and Puru


‘The building plans and also business establishments were peppered with Chinese, European, and Eurasian names, such as Law Boon Seng, Wee Eng Guan, Hong Chye Hoe, Koh Choon Seng, G. Rappa, H. Desker, E. Cashim, M. Engter, R. Angler, B. d’Aranjo, and H.P. Cork. North/South, Hindu/Muslim Indian names such as Adamsha, Daud bin Mohamed, Hadjee Hassan Dawood, Paltradind, Rama Durgy, Madarsah, sieboo Gunny, Shena Meydin, Subdu Mistree, Meyappa Chitty, K. Marican, Magouse, Ena Januluddin, Shaikh Mattar, and N.C.Y. Beravan Chitty, reflect the diversity of Indian heritage.’ Ibid., p. 35.


Girishchandra Kothari, Oral History Recordings, Accession no. A000549, Reel no. 14, NAS.


Ibid., p. 90.

Jumabhoy, *Multiracial Singapore*.

Girish Chandra Kothari, Oral History Recordings, Accession no. A000549, Reel nos. 7 and 8, NAS.

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Amrith, ‘Mobile city and the Coromandel Coast’, p. 248.

Jumabhoy, *Multiracial Singapore*.


**71** For further details, see Bhattacharya, *Beyond the myth*. 