Port cities and hinterlands: A comparative study of Singapore and Calcutta

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Abstract

This paper analyses the evolution of Singapore and Calcutta from colonial port cities to a post-colonial city-state and a city within a state, respectively. It will examine how the historical trajectories of these cities were determined and complicated by their maritime character and evolving relations with their respective hinterlands. Singapore had a fluid (literally and metaphorically) hinterland and its economic, social and cultural orientations were defined by the maritime trade that it conducted and the networks that were developed as a result of its commercial activities. The modern state of Singapore, which embraces the world as its 'hinterland', remains in essence a port city — subjected to global flows, multi-cultural influences and fully integrated with and dependent on regional and global commercial networks. Calcutta's position as port city, too, grew out of empire and imperial trade, but unlike Singapore, it had a clearly defined and dominant hinterland — Bengal. Its identity as a Bengali city is therefore unmistakable and it clearly shares in the strengths and weaknesses of its immediate social, economic and political hinterland, especially in its post-colonial incarnation, when it shifted from being an imperial city to a regional city. © 2007 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

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Introduction

This paper is a comparative study of two cities: Singapore and Calcutta. It seeks to understand them as port cities and examines how their evolution, character, and orientation as cities had been shaped by their functions as colonial maritime centres serving a global trade. In this

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study, I am particularly interested in the relationships between each of these cities and their respective hinterlands on the one hand, and with their sea-linked forelands on the other. Singapore and Calcutta offer an interesting comparison in this respect. In the 19th century, as two key port cities that were integrally linked by the East India Company's Empire in Asia, Singapore and Calcutta were products of imperialism, their economic space and political structures intimately intertwined by empire. They dominated overlapping trading networks in which they were critical nodes, and their urban characters bore the pronounced imprint of imperial purpose and commercial cause. As colonial port cities, their respective development followed similar trajectories – rapid economic growth, physical transformation, and the emergence of an outward-looking, plural population linked to a dense networks of maritime connections engendered by international trade. However, their respective fates diverged in the post-colonial period. The two cities encountered significant political change at the end of their colonial history – the loss of their hinterlands (or part of it). The spatial consequences of those political changes on the two cities were substantially different. In the case of Singapore, separation from Malaysia (resulting in the loss of its economic hinterland) led to its inevitable positioning as a 'global city', while the aftermath of the partition of Bengal diminished Calcutta's functionality and viability as an international port. This paper is not intended as a detailed study of the internal urban cultures of Singapore and Calcutta. Rather, it seeks to explain how Singapore and Calcutta have become what they are by tracing and positioning their respective pathways as maritime cities in the wider contexts of political and geographical change in the regional and global milieu. In tracing the evolution of Singapore and Calcutta from Asian colonial port cities to city-state and city within a state respectively, this paper will attempt to examine the impact of statehood on the development of these cities which had once been in the forefront of early globalisation. The first section of this paper briefly discusses some conceptual definitions of port cities. The second section fleshes out these concepts with a detailed look at the evolution of Singapore and Calcutta as port cities, and the third section provides a comparative overview of the trajectories of these two port cities.

What are port cities?

As "centres of exchange where different cultures and different environments meet, at the boundary between land and sea", port cities have long fascinated geographers, economists, sociologists and historians. The works of Banga (1992), Basu (1985), Broeze (1989), Driessen (2005), Fawaz and Bayly (2002), Murphey (1989), and Nas (2005) among others have highlighted distinctive features and characteristics of a port city.

We are reminded, for instance, that port cities are not merely "cities that happened to be on the shoreline"; they are economic polities whose character is essentially maritime in nature (Reeves, Broeze, & McPherson, 1989). In explaining the urban culture, personality and morphology of port cities, their economic functions as nodes of sea-based trading networks need to feature prominently. Privileged by their propitious positions at critical points in regional and global commercial connections, port cities are not normally constrained by political boundaries but are sustained by the flows of peoples, goods, cultures and ideas across the regions connected by water and the dynamics of trade. As a place, the port city can be perceived "as a hub in dense networks of maritime connections through which people, goods, ideas and meanings flowed" (Driessen, 2005: 129–130).

More than a city with a port as an appendage, the port city is a place "where goods and people as well as cultures and ideas are transferred between land and maritime space" (Kidwai,

1992: 10). Port cities do not only function as entry or exit points for the movement of goods, labour and capital; they also serve as nodal centres for the reception and transmission of culture, knowledge and information (see for instance Frost, 2002); their essential functions generating the conditions and space for cultural mixing and hybridisation. As a consequence, their identity as places "is constituted as much by their relations with other places as by anything intrinsic to their location" (Massey, 1996). As nodes and hubs of economic and social networks, port cities become natural sites for the meeting of foreign and local societies, where "races, cultures and ideas as well as goods from a variety of places jostle, mix and enrich each other and the life of the city" (Murphey, 1989: 225). To borrow a phrase from Driver and Gilbert (1999: 5), "the [port] city as a whole [thus] become less a centre than a crossroad". In political form, the port city is in many ways the cosmopolis that Reid (2004: 10–11) talks about – cities with plural communities, usually united by commerce, and "governed by leaders who themselves are cosmopolitan in culture, and able to mediate between groups".

While port cities are commercial cosmopolis made by the external trans-national networks they serve, they are also subject to the influence of the hinterland to which they are linked. The essential functions of the port city are fundamentally determined by their relative positions between hinterland on the one hand, and their sea-linked foreland – that area of the overseas world with which the port is linked through shipping, trade and passenger traffic – on the other. Traditionally, city ports are linked to hinterlands by trade, and serve as the window – or conduit – through which the trade of the land is linked to the sea. The concept of the hinterlands, however, is varied, and their typologies include the immediate hinterlands (port area itself), primary hinterland (area where port and city assume a commanding role and determine life of area), commodity hinterland (based on shipment of particular types of commodities), and the inferred hinterland (port's hegemony over a particular area, to the extent that it satisfies the demand for imports in the area it serves) (Bird, 1971). The manner and content of influence which the hinterland exerts on the port city itself depend on the economic, political and social relationships that link them together.

On the other hand, port cities are more than just passive economic funnels; they invariably exercise complex and profound influences on the hinterlands they serve. As places at the forefront of economic and cultural flows, port cities are often vehicles through which political, cultural and ideological changes are transmitted to the hinterland. In the 1970s and 1980s, scholars studying the colonial port cities preoccupied themselves with the part played by these entities in the development of colonial control in Asia (in different regions and over a long time-span) (see Basu, 1985). Arising from the concerns of these studies, a number of important ideas and examples relating to the impact of port cities on their hinterlands have been developed. Studies of colonial port cities as 'vestibules for western manipulations' have demonstrated how western trade system and demands interacted and transformed the market hierarchies, as well as the mercantile elites and communities in the hinterlands. Studies of port cities have addressed, among other things, the extent to which the composition and social structure of its population – mercantile groups and their institutions – as well as the "very milieu in which specific groups existed and operated" (morphology of the city and inter-group relations) had been determined by its underlying function as a port (Kidwai, 1992: 26). These arguments should be extended to explain how characters of port cities are influenced by their hinterlands (of whatever sorts) as well as forelands. Indeed, the manners in which cities related to their hinterlands and forelands often hint at the ways "in which global cities were formed, transformed and extended beyond their immediate geographical territoriality" (Olds & Yeung, 2004: 1). It is with this particular concept that I would like to explore in this paper, and I shall do so by examining how the character of the port cities of Singapore and Calcutta were determined and

complicated by their maritime functions as well as evolving relations with their respective hinterlands.

Singapore's maritime space

For most of its history, regional and international trade had been the mainstay of the Singapore economy. Much of the trade in the 19th century (and earlier) involved transshipment — the transfer of goods from one trading vessel to another while in transit at the port — as well as the re-packaging and re-distribution of imported manufactured goods and regional produce. This latter function, known as entrepôt trade, enabled profits to be made through processing and packaging of goods produced and gathered elsewhere before re-exportation to new destinations. The reliance on regional and entrepôt trade meant that Singapore was part of a larger trading environment, and its economic, social and cultural space was defined by the flow of its maritime activities and the networks that were developed as a result of its commercial functions.

As a transshipment centre, Singapore's economic viability depended entirely on its position as a functioning node in the trading networks in which it was situated. These networks were essentially based on trading activities and their perimeters were determined by the reach of the then available modes of sea-faring transportation. As a small island without a clearly defined and dominant hinterland, the economic networks that sustained Singapore operated on an extended sea-linked foreland covering much of the Indian Ocean and the South China seas. As a colonial port, Singapore's trade was a predominantly Asian one, covering the archipelago (overland trade with mainland Southeast Asia was insignificant), China and India (Wong, 1991: 42–43). Its commercial space was a maritime one, the extent of which was indicated by the origins of the sailing vessels that arrived regularly at the Singapore port to participate in the entrepôt trade (Bogaars, 1955: 118). The extended commercial network of Singapore was thus linked together by the full range of maritime vessels during that age; in the early 19th century, they collectively determined Singapore's commercial hinterland, foreland and the system of entrepôt trade of Singapore. Where trade was concerned, Singapore's position between two oceans clearly mattered more than its location at the southernmost tip of the Asian landmass.

As trade grew in volume, the morphology of the port city began to reflect the commercial networks which Singapore served. These networks were interwoven around physical connections, maritime routes, functional inter-dependence (trade, labour, commodity exchange and capital flows) and social linkages (community connections). The networks not only provided the resources that sustained the colony, but also supplied the manpower that eventually constituted the plural society of Singapore. As a free port and an open emporium, an unrestrictive immigration policy was adopted which would enable the easy movement of traders and workers, key elements in the development of a trading centre. By the middle of the 19th century, the port city had become a kaleidoscope of a multitude of communities — Indians, Chinese, Malays and Europeans, segregated into separate communal spaces but trading alongside one another in the market place. Communal segregation took place naturally, as communities coalesced along ethnic lines. The municipal design of Singapore came to reflect the three main concerns of the port city: enabling business, anchoring the mercantile community, and segregating the different ethnic and occupational groups that had converged on the island. Thus, while the port presented itself as an entity of cosmopolitan openness, the social reality was one of strict boundaries between different trans-national groups that had converged on the city for trade and work.

The colonial trading pattern of which Singapore became a critical node was not simply the outcome of systems made possible by empire, but a revival of a number of pre-existing networks that had connected the Persian Gulf and India to the west with China to the east for centuries. This was the 'Maritime Silk Road', in which Singapore was a part. Thus, while technological change (steam and telegraph) accelerated globalist tendencies generated by trade and imperialism, it also "revived older circuits of movement and ideas" (Harper, 2005: 2). It was during this period of growth as a colonial port city, during which much older and indigenous channels of trans-national connections, stretching from the Arab lands to the south Chinese coast, were revitalised that Singapore also became the heart of the intellectual world of Asia. This was to have an important bearing on Singapore's development as a plural (multicultural, multi-national, multi-ethnic) society. Trading patterns and interlocking networks therefore created in the port city "a polyglot migrant world constituted by streams of immigrants from China, India, the Malay Archipelago, and other far-flung places…" (Yeoh, 2003: 48).

From the late 19th century onwards, the port city was not only bustling with commerce but it stood as a centre of Malay culture and literature, of Chinese diasporic intellectual and political ferment, and of Indian debates on cultural and religious reformism. As Singapore became the centre of overlapping migrant worlds, incorporating networks of trade, labour, pilgrimage and politics, it developed as a key economic and intellectual node as well (Harper, 1997). And despite the best efforts of the colonial administration to curtail illegal activities, Singapore was an integral part of smuggling networks operating in the Straits of Melaka and East Indies. As communities drawn together by different strands of commercial networks, their social organisation and political orientation reflected a myriad of influences obtained from their continued links with their social, cultural and political points of origin. Influenced by the many cultural, social and political movements that converged on the island through communal links with their various homelands, the port city became a diasporic public sphere, where "information and ideas from outside lay in creative tension with an emerging local experience" (Harper, 2001: 7). The local in this regard was not monolithic, but a dynamic mix of diverse classes and cultural identities whose sense of place was determined as much by their relationships with regional and international economies.

Malayan hinterland — found and lost

It was not until the late 19th century that Singapore acquired a physical land-based hinterland. With the opening of the Malayan rubber estates and tin mines, Singapore became a staple port to the Malayan peninsula, and it was from the port city that the tin, rubber and petroleum extracted from the peninsula were processed and exported to the rest of the world. The links between this staple port and the hinterland came to be clearly defined and were sealed by comprehensive transport links that connected the various tin mines in western Malaya to Singapore. The rail and road networks that developed in the wake of the rise of the tin and rubber industry were to integrate the island fully with the territory to its north, thereby establishing Malaya firmly as the island colony's economic hinterland. Beyond transport links, the integration of Singapore with its northern hinterland was facilitated by the integrated nature of the staple economic structure that revolved around two essential commodities — tin and rubber (Huff, 1994: 54). This took the form of a complex system of trade and credit, incorporating European merchant houses, Asian dealers and local retailers that linked Singapore to Malaya and its external markets. By the final years of the 19th century, the processing and export of staple produce from the Malayan hinterland had become a mainstay of Singapore's port driven economy.

By the beginning of the 20th century, Singapore was to all intents and purposes an integral part of the Malay Peninsula, serving as its primary staple port and linked by deeply integrated economic hierarchies and commercial arrangements. During this period, the traditional idea of a hinterland supplying its cities was turned on its head as Singapore — the port city — played the role of supplier through its exports to the Malayan hinterland and the Netherlands East Indies. Singapore became the conduit through which food supplies from Siam, Burma and Indo-China were re-directed to the workers in the Malayan and Netherlands export industries.

Political necessities in the aftermath of the Second World War saw the severance of Singapore from its Malayan hinterland. Post-war political plans for the Malay states in the peninsula had to exclude Singapore, with its predominantly Chinese population. Despite the parting of ways in 1946, hopes were harboured that Singapore would one day return to its Malayan fold. The staple port had gotten so used to its hinterland that it had become inconceivable that Singapore could actually survive without it. What was more important, an economic arrangement had, by the end of the War, transmuted into an issue of political identity, at least as expressed by a generation of local political leaders who emerged in the 1940s and 1950s. To these people, Singapore was seen to be a natural and integral part of the Malayan peninsula and separation from it was deemed inconceivable and unnatural. This was an interesting case of historical amnesia, as less than a century ago Singapore had indeed functioned and thrived without that hinterland. In any case, even as political developments in Singapore and Malaya began to take off on separate trajectories after 1946, the ultimate aim of Singapore was an attempt to re-establish port—hinterland relationship.

Singapore did return to its Malayan fold when a merger was effected through the formation of the Federation of Malaysia in 1963, in which the northern Borneo territories of Sarawak and Sabah were also incorporated. De-colonisation, security, defence and economics were the driving forces that brought about the formation of Malaysia. However, the contrived federation, stitched together in a space of less than two years (from 1961 to 1963) did not last, and in August 1965, following two stormy years in Malaysia, Singapore had to leave the federation. This stemmed less from economic factors and more from personality differences between Singapore and Federation leaders and inimical political cultures between the port city and its hinterland.

Post-colonial conundrums

Statehood was unexpectedly thrust upon Singapore in 1965, and nation-building, alongside economic survival and security, became primary concerns of the new nation-state. When Singapore became a sovereign nation-state in August 1965, the major ingredients needed to build national identity — an indigenous rooted-ness, cultural commonness, religious, ethnic and linguistic homogeneity, common social and political cause — were all absent. Singapore's position as a port city (without a cultural hinterland) had generated a population of atomised cultural enclaves in an economy-driven milieu. Further, as Harper (2005) has argued, the politics in the island up to 1965 had reflected its historical experience as an open port city and reflected the international make-up of the cosmopolis. Internationalism and populism, more than indigenous nationalism of the sort one sees emerging in India, was the natural experience in Singapore from the 1920s to 1940s. Where there was anything resembling a nationalist movement with the onset of de-colonisation in Asia following the Second World War, it was the promotion of Malayan nationalism rather than a Singaporean nation that was in vogue in the 1950s and early 1960s. The idea of Singapore as a nation thus sat uncomfortably with its instincts as an open commercial cosmopolis that depended on international trade for its

survival. The new national preoccupations in the state-building phase therefore did not remove the deep-seated nexus between global flows and developments in the island-state as Singapore's underlying character as a port city and externally oriented city-state continued to be shaped by international demands. In its search for new economic space (following the loss of Malaysia) a further re-definition of hinterland became necessary.

Not unexpectedly, the national government addressed this need by proclaiming in 1972 that Singapore would position itself as a 'global city-state' (Rajaratnam, 1972). Lacking natural resources and faced with a former economic hinterland that had become a political rival, Singapore had no choice but to define itself as a city with global orientations. This idea suggested that Singapore would not identify with any of its proximate geographical entities as its natural hinterland. The world will now constitute its natural hinterland. By defining its hinterland thus, Singapore was in effect 'leap-frogging' the region to engage the world beyond its immediate environs. The concept of a global city-state further reinforced the idea that Singapore remains at its core an economic entity, totally dedicated to its outward-looking vocation of trade and commerce, and entrenching its position itself as hub for global international manufacturing, transport, communications and finance networks. It would be, as Raffles had envisaged in his day, an important intersection in the global networks of trade and ideas. Here, the continuities between colonial and post-colonial concerns become evident. 'Designing commerce' — the way in which foreign trade in Singapore has been shaped — has been the dominant ideology which the national government had inherited from its colonial predecessors (Lim, 1999). The port continues to shape the fortunes of the country, and an open economy driven by international enterprise is best reflected in the modern shopping malls of Singapore, where Asian, European and American retailers crowd alongside each other in the true spirit of an international emporium. Internationally, the country's fixation with free-trade agreements (FTAs) underscores the role that international trade has played, and continues to play in the evolution of Singapore.

From a traditional entrepôt port city, Singapore has metamorphosed into a global city-state whose economy is inextricably linked and nourished by new economic powers and an international system driven by commerce and enterprise. The port continues to play a salient role in the country's economic development and was expanded and modernised in the 1970s and 1980s to enhance capacity and efficiency to keep pace with global developments. The adoption of technology to deal with containerisation, among other innovations, has maintained Singapore's position as one of the busiest ports in the world. But faced with increasing competition from neighbouring countries which are seeking to position themselves as hubs for shipping routes in the region, Singapore knows it needs to enhance the connectivity that has served it so well in the past. This means that the port city must maintain links with the maximum number of global destinations that can be reached by shippers, and in the fastest possible travelling time (The Straits Times, 20 April 2004).

But Singapore's hinterland is no longer just determined by the range and efficacy of its seaborne trade; air links now influence the extent of Singapore's economic reach. That Singapore's survival depended on leveraging on its position as an economic hub was evident in the country's commitment to maintain air-connectivity, perhaps best demonstrated by the determination of the city-state to build a world class airlines and a top-rate international airport to match. The establishment of the Singapore Airlines was less a demonstration of national pride than a hardnosed decision to boost the economic vitality of Singapore. Coming in the wake of the break-up of the Malaysia–Singapore Airlines (MSA), it seemed an unlikely idea that an international airline was ever viable for a small domestic market like Singapore. As it turned out, Singapore

Airlines grew to become one of the biggest and most profitable airlines in the world. The decision to build a new international airport at Changi was crucial to this enterprise of connectivity. With its current links to 57 countries and 181 capital cities, and its ability to facilitate 82 airlines and 33 million passengers each year, the airport has become a symbol of Singapore's status as a world city, prompting Singapore's founding prime minister, Lee Kuan Yew (2000: 231), to quip that the S$1.5 billion spent on building the airport in 1981 was the best investment his government ever made.

While the port continued to symbolise Singapore's dependence on international commerce for growth and employment, the strategic positioning of Singapore as an aviation hub represented an acute awareness that the country's 'global city' aspirations meant nothing if it were not well integrated in the global transportation networks. With civil aviation rapidly becoming the critical mode of international transportation from the second half of the 20th century, air-connectivity was crucial for Singapore if it were to maintain its centrality as a hub city. Singapore is now more than a port city; it has become an airport city, a hub of international civil aviation and major gateway for all to urban centres in Asia (Sriram, Lew, & Raguraman, 2001). Trade, travel and tourism, the key drivers of Singapore's economic growth, were greatly facilitated by Singapore's development as an aviation hub and gateway. Where Singapore's economic space in the 19th century was determined by the extent of its maritime links, air-connectivity now determined the spread of Singapore's reach and influence. Former Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong referred to this when he spoke of a seven-hour economic hinterland, alluding to an economic space that would incorporate 2.8 billion people and 67 cities and countries covered by a seven-hour flight from Singapore.

The operations may be more sophisticated, the materials dealt with different, and the scope now much wider, but at the heart of its thriving economy lays a great port city (and now airport) through which goods still find their way to regional and international markets. Even as it has evolved into a modern city-state, and its port functions may be overtaken by other economic roles, the growth and development of Singapore demand that it continues to rely on its developmental instincts as a port city. An open city-state sustained by global flows creates its own tensions. The requirements of an international clientele and the interests of a local citizenry will occasionally prove inimical. More fundamentally, the construction of national identity will constantly be subjected to the shifting strains of the myriad of cultural forms and traditions that the port city had always sustained.

Calcutta: from riverine market to international port

When Raffles first set foot in Singapore in 1819, he boasted to his employers in London that his new settlement had the potential to be the next port to Calcutta. In the 19th century, as European powers jostled for political and economic control of Asia, Calcutta was the jewel of the East India Company and the model port city in Asia. Since its founding by the British in the late 18th century, Calcutta quickly grew from a small riverine market in the Hooghly River, settled by weavers and artisans, into an international port serving the vast economic empire created by the EIC and became the centre from where subsequent smaller ports acquired by the British, like Singapore and Penang, were governed. By the late 18th century, as the EIC monopolised all trade between India and the west, Calcutta began booming as an international port serving the Indian hinterland and became the most important colonial trading post in the British Empire in India. About half of India's exports, consisting of cotton, silk, sugar, jute, saltpetre, and indigo were being shipped through the Calcutta port. Its role as the primary port connecting the Indian hinterland to

international markets became more important when the volume of British trade with China and Southeast Asia increased. Most of this trade was conducted through Calcutta, and it became the ''main doorway serving the Indian trade'' (Ray, 1990: 123–124).

Once Bengal came under the full sway of colonialism, Calcutta and its immediate hinterland rapidly emerged as early centres of imperial economic activities in the subcontinent. In 1772, Calcutta became the capital of British India, and the first Governor Warren Hastings moved all important offices from Murshidabad to Calcutta. For more than a century (until 1912) Calcutta was an imperial city, with all the characteristics of a thriving port city – cosmopolitan, commercial, and cultural. The colonial city became an administrative centre, a port and a city where a European quarter (known as the 'white town') existed alongside what was termed the 'black town', where the local population resided (Chattopadhyay, 2005: 76–78). The urban boundaries between the 'white' and 'black' towns were however often fluid and not as exclusionary as the terms suggested.

The story of Calcutta's growth as a city cannot be divorced from its immediate hinterlands in northern India – the Gangetic plains to the west and the Brahmaputra valley in the northeast. Calcutta's growth drew sustenance from the growing volume of trade and labour migration that was occurring in its large north Indian hinterland that extended from Benares to Murshidabad (Bayly, 1985: 13). With the onset of the colonial economy, ''the economic and social institutions in riverine north India and Calcutta formed part of a system that linked primary producers, merchants and middlemen in India to consumers in China and Europe'' (Bayly, 1985: 14). Thus, while Calcutta's growth and rise as the pre-eminent port of India during the early 19th century was closely connected to the development of long-distance colonial trade, it is important to note that the development of Calcutta as a colonial port city was linked to intricate relationships with bulking centres and inland port cities across the northern Indian plains (Bayly, 1985: 14–15). By controlling the rivers and denying Europeans access to markets in the hinterland, the Mughals had the power to keep the Europeans at bay. However, the gradual decline of the old Mughal ports along the Hooghly and Surat in the early 18th century provided an opportunity for the English to develop an alternative system for supplying their river-port in Calcutta. Protected by the political patronage and military might of the East India Company, the Calcutta fleet grew on the back of trade in the hinterland, along the river to the markets in Bihar (Das Gupta, 2004: 205). Calcutta's rise owed as much to its ability to dominate its hinterland as to its international trade.

Industries were concentrated in the vicinity and Calcutta became a major shipping hub linking its vast hinterland which produced tea, coal and jute to the international markets connected by the imperial networks. As a seaport situated on a navigable river, Calcutta was linked by an elaborate network of rail and road connections which gave the city a command over a vast and densely populated hinterland that extended from the fertile Gangetic plains to the Brahmaputra valley. The administrative and economic pull of Calcutta soon attracted immigrants from its hinterland, making the city less and less a Bengali enclave; by 1901, just slightly more than half the inhabitants of the city came from Bengal. The rest of the population constituted migrants from north-central India and the Europeans. Between the Europeans and Indian enclaves were settlements of Armenians, Jews, Greeks and Anglo-Indians, the first three having emerged as major business communities in the city. Eastern and western cultures thrived in cosmopolitan Calcutta, which soon saw the emergence of a sizeable western-educated middle class and with it the rise of nationalist politics.

From the beginning of the 20th century, a number of momentous changes took place in India which had tremendous repercussions for the city. First, the British decided to shift the imperial

capital of their Indian Empire to New Delhi. This dealt a crippling blow to the status of Calcutta. It has been noted that the rise of Calcutta as an important centre of political militancy was linked to its economic position as the nucleus of British economic interests in India. Ray (1984: 21–23) has argued that the stake of British capital was so large in Calcutta and its hinterland that racial antagonism was also all-pervasive there. In another sense, the rise of Calcutta as an open, commercial port city, where western education, culture and ideas were introduced at an early stage gave rise to an educated middle class among the Bengali *bhadralok* who became the driving force of politics in Calcutta. Subsequently, exposure to liberal–democratic bourgeois values through western education, a flourishing press, voluntary associations and political pressure groups gave the *bhadralok* an ideological orientation of political opposition to the colonial state. Calcutta became the early centre of nationalism in India, and a range of nationalist ideas reflecting mainstream nationalism, social and political militancy and communal politics found expression in the city. From the 1860s, Calcutta became the focal point of what has been called the 'politics of association', an in-grown form of politics that was predicated on concerns of patronage, access to government jobs and power-sharing in the colonial administration. This led to the establishment of the Indian National Congress in 1882 (Das, 1990: 15).

Politics notwithstanding, Calcutta continued to thrive as a port city, its fortunes boosted by the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869. The rise of steam vessels coincided with the opening up of internal transportation in India, leading to a significant expansion of trade and commerce that ultimately converged at the major port of Calcutta (Ray, 1990: 124). Faced with a rapidly expanding hinterland (through more effective transport links) and growing economic activities from the end of the 19th century to the Great Depression, the volume of commercial traffic moving through the port of Calcutta increased tremendously, leading to a spate of dock expansions. The Kidderpore Docks were completed in 1892 and the King George's Dock started functioning in 1929 (Ray, 1990: 125).

Partition and the loss of hinterland

From 1947, Calcutta gradually diminished as an international port city. Japanese air raids on the Calcutta docks caused damage and loss of life. In 1946, the most serious communal riots took place in Calcutta, when the partition of Bengal became imminent and tensions between Muslims and Hindus reached boiling point. In 1947, the partition of Bengal constituted a major setback to Calcutta. From a major international city, Calcutta became the provincial capital of West Bengal. It not only lost a major part of its former hinterland on which its trade had depended, but also a significant portion of Calcutta's industrial hinterland was lost to the new state of Pakistan. The jute industry was a case in point. With partition, the jute mills that lay in the vicinity of Calcutta were cut off from their supply of raw jute, 90% of which came from East Bengal.

Partition had a tremendous effect on the fate of Calcutta. Indeed, as pointed out by Tan and Kudaisya (2000: 172–175), among all the capital cities affected by partition, it was Calcutta that suffered the most severe disruptions and received the largest number of refugees. The boundary created by the Radcliffe Commission left 42% of the total Hindu population of undivided Bengal (12 million Hindus) in the newly created state of Pakistan. There was initially no massive migration as had happened in Punjab, but the refugees came in a subsequent series of waves. For the first 10 years following partition (1947–1958), over 4 million refugees came to West Bengal. Between 1959 and 1971, another 1.5 million refugees from East Bengal sought refuge in India. By the early 1980s, it was estimated that at least 8 million refugees from East

Bengal and Bangladesh had settled in West Bengal, making up one-sixth of the population of the state. This influx of refugees, which by one estimate amounted to 50 years increase in population by natural growth, put considerable strain on the resources of West Bengal, aggravating social problems and causing severe over-crowding. Most of the refugees converged around the Calcutta area, and 70% of the total East Bengal refugees came to be concentrated in the city, giving rise to proliferation of squatter colonies in the city. It is estimated that there are now 2000 slums listed in the Calcutta Municipal Area, with some 3 million people. Calcutta is now one of the most densely populated cities in the world − it is reckoned that each square kilometre of space in Calcutta is occupied, on average, by 28,571.

Calcutta's status as a port city merits a special mention here. Partition deprived the Calcutta port of at least 30% of its primary hinterland. The impact of this loss was tremendous. Kidwai (1989) has shown the sharp decline in the volume of cargo handled at the Calcutta port from 95% of the cargo in the eastern Indian sector (1951−1960) to 51.4% in the decade 1961−1970. A contributory factor leading to the decline of the port was the silting of the approaches to the Calcutta port. Indeed, by early 1960s deep-drafted vessels had found it almost impossible to navigate its way into the Calcutta port, prompting the port authorities to develop a new satellite port at Haldia, some 50 miles downstream of Calcutta to overcome the difficulties encountered by the old port. The development of the new satellite port of Haldia, which would be complemented with an adjoining industrial township and connected by roads and railways to key cities in the region, dealt a major blow to Calcutta's primacy as the major port city of east India (Chaudhuri, 1964).

Partition also transformed the political landscape of Calcutta. The influx of refugees constituted a formidable power base which gradually propelled the communists to power in West Bengal. Political tension between the state and the centre complicated attempts at successful planning in Calcutta, leaving the city and state in a state of neglect, a situation that has not been helped by a economic stagnation, decaying infrastructure and continued political confusion.

Calcutta has clearly seen better times, and its decline, following independence, has been dramatic, hastened by the depressed state of its hinterland in eastern India, particularly the overall deterioration since the 1960s of the manufacturing industry in the state of West Bengal, of which Calcutta (now called Kolkata) is the capital city. New Delhi had long replaced Calcutta as the political centre of India, and Mumbai, the economic capital. West Bengal, along with Maharashtra, was India's leading industrial state in the 1960s, accounting for 14% of the country's overall industrial output. By 1980−1981, West Bengal's share had fallen to 9.8%, and a decade later had dropped to 5.6%. The declining share of Calcutta's port and airport in the country's overall foreign trade reflects this dramatic decline. Figures in 1964 show that the Calcutta port handled 92% (by tonnage) of India's export and 25% of its import; 30 years later, by 1995, this had fallen to 2.69% and 5.5%, respectively (Pal, 2006: 6). Dum Dum airport, at one time one of the busiest in Asia, is now a small airport providing mainly domestic as well as a few international connections.

Like Singapore, the Calcutta story was borne, to a very large extent, by the global force of imperialism, when the city grew as a 'centre of colonial exchange' amidst a large rural hinterland. But, unlike Singapore, local forces played a big part in Calcutta's fate. Calcutta could not escape the dominating influence of its hinterland. With the end of colonialism, the port city of Calcutta lost its lustre when its economic space was severely curtailed by partition and the disruption of the imperial trading networks that the port city once served. As a peripheral regional city, its range of functions is now determined largely by an unproductive hinterland of relatively under-developed states of West Bengal, Assam, Bihar and Orissa.

Conclusions: comparative trajectories of port cities

Port cities are not merely cities that happened to be on the shoreline; they are essentially urban spaces whose character are determined by the broader economic structures and social networks in which they operate. As places of contact where goods and people as well as cultures are transferred between land and maritime space, port cities did not only function as transit points for the movement of goods, labour and capital, but also serve as nodal centres for the reception and transmission of culture, knowledge and information. As a consequence, the character of the port city – urban culture, social and political identity, as well as economic orientation – are determined by the relative relationship between the port city, the hinterland that dominates it (or lack of it), as well as the external economic space that it serves.

In many ways, port cities are historical antecedents of today's global cities. The characters and functions of historical port cities, sustained as they were by maritime (and thus trans-national) economic processes – flows of capital, goods, labour, raw materials – and serving as key nodes of cross-border networks are similar to the position of global cities in the current globalised economy. Port cities and the way they functioned allow us to see globalisation as a historical process. As nodes of maritime connectedness, port cities are powerful manifestations of global flows and trans-national integration and can be identified as ''instances of proto-globalisation'' (Driessen, 2005: 130), and the antecedents of global cities. Port cities remind us that 'globalisation' is scarcely a new phenomenon for the markets that imperial Britain supported allowed Asian cities, for example, Singapore and Calcutta, once considered backwaters, to connect with the world. Globalisation is hardly a revolutionary and unprecedented process; early trans-national commercial systems, served and held together by maritime cities, suggest that ''economic globalisation has taken different forms in different places at different times, has ebbed and flowed over the centuries…'' (Coclanis, 2006: 17).

Yet, despite similar characteristics, port cities do not naturally evolve into global cities. Many important port cities in history have indeed fallen by the wayside, bypassed by most of their former enriching flow of exchange and hybridisation, while others, which began as ports serving land–seas exchange have developed into some of the biggest cities in the world today, their traditional port functions eclipsed by their other roles as manufacturing, financial, service and administrative centres. To understand how and where port cities become global cities, historically specific pathways to globalisation need to be scrutinised. The respective stories of Singapore and Calcutta are instructive in this respect.

Singapore and Calcutta owed their rise as port cities to the empire. Both had pre-colonial antecedents as important coastal trading entities – while Singapore was part of a chain of ports serving the 'maritime silk road' that traversed the Indian Ocean and the South China Sea, Calcutta's trade was dominated by an inland commercial hinterland, which included the large eastern Indian hinterland stretching up to the foothills of Assam in the northeast and the Gangetic North Indian plain to the west – and then shared a similar trajectory when they became major colonial port cities serving an expansive, global trading network underpinned by an imperial order. Both cities experienced significant economic growth and their respective infrastructure grew to facilitate the global trade that was passing through their ports. The trade of empire had therefore been responsible for their growth as major port cities with global reach. They became examples par excellence of colonial ports that had prospered on international trade, and were sites of historical globalisation, through which goods, people and ideas flowed. These were to fundamentally affect the characters and personalities of these cities: both became internationally-oriented, multi-cultural cities, dedicated to international commerce. The port

and port functions supported by the city were therefore to play a profound role in transforming these urban entities.

As the examples of Singapore and Calcutta indicate, colonial port cities derive their functions and energies from myriad economic forces, integrally related to a wider global system. However, these case studies also indicate the close and complex connections between economic and political forces in determining the characters and political trajectories of these cities, where the wider global economic system is often mediated through complex political–territorial shifts and transformations in the geo-political environment in which the port cities operated. Although port cities without clearly defined economic hinterlands had economic space that was not necessarily constrained by political boundaries, they, nonetheless, had to negotiate changes in the regional and global political environment to continue securing these spaces. The 'Growth Triangle Initiative' involving Singapore, Malaysia and Indonesia represented attempts by Singapore to manage economic and political relations with its immediate neighbours (Sparke, Sidaway, Bunnell, & Grundy-Warr, 2004). Cities with dominant hinterlands, on the other hand, depended on the relative relationship (political and economic) between the hinterland and foreland which they serve. If both were integrated in a productive way, the port city would thrive, as was the case with Calcutta, which prospered through its position as a port city linking a large hinterland with an extended foreland during the colonial period. However, when the economic space shrank through changes in hinterland and foreland, the port city loses its role and lustre. Calcutta was relegated to regional city status when its economic system shrunk following the end of empire and the loss of part of its hinterland through political changes in the region from 1947.

Political and cultural hinterland, too, play a fundamental role in determining the trajectory of port cities. As port cities, both Singapore and Calcutta were influenced by flow of cultures, knowledge and ideas. The surrounding maritime environment constituted an extended cultural space (or 'cultural continuum') integrated by international trade and commerce that spanned the imperial world, the extent of which was restricted only by the configuration of trade and the reach of sailing vessels. Owing to a lack of a pronounced and distinctive hinterland, Singapore became a crossroad through which labourers, traders and capitalists from the region and beyond flowed. As it lacked an indigenous core, the population growth in Singapore was generated through immigration, and this laid the basis of a multi-racial, plural population that was largely transitional and permeable (Pearson, 1998: 38). Singapore was primarily a child of commerce, and its urban development, social make-up and underlying principle of free-trade is continuously connected with and shaped by broader systems or structures. Even after independence in 1965, Singapore's pre-disposition as an open, commercial city makes it easier to function as a "de-nationalised platform for global capital" (Sassen, 2004: 168). Calcutta's status as an imperial city (and a Bengali city) gave it a character and style that was distinct from the predominantly commercial ethos that drove Singapore's development. While it benefited from its twin status as imperial capital and port city, Calcutta was a city that was firmly locked to its hinterland, its fate determined by local circumstances rather than international developments following the end of empire in India.

What happens when port cities evolve into national states or become part of city-states? How do the constraints of political boundaries and the domestic dynamics of state and nation-building come to terms with the constant need of such cities to remain open to global economic flows? When erstwhile port cities get submerged in larger and political dominant hinterlands, local developments sometimes overcome their functions as nodes of international networks and these cities lose their global orientation. Calcutta's case is instructive in this regard. In some cases, economic imperatives necessitate the continuous search for economic space that will

transcend national space. Singapore is a good example of a nation-state whose economic needs forces it to rely on its commercial impulses that had earlier informed its development as a colonial port city. As a nation-state, Singapore has leveraged on its global links and commercial instincts as well as social and economic networks developed before 1965 to good use. Desirous to remain a port (now broadly defined) city plugged into the global network, Singapore constantly searched for new hinterlands that would help sustain its port city nodal role. The new nation-state which sought to sustain its global connection, found its answer in being a node in more areas than the port, e.g. airport and teleport. The requirements of an open, outward-looking economy and an international clientele will occasionally prove inimical to the needs and concerns of a local citizenry and herein lies the tension that will plague nation-states as they negotiate with globalisation. Nowhere will this be more evident than states that remain at their core great port cities. In this respect, a wider comparative scrutiny of port city/hinterland relations – of the relationship between Hong Kong and China, for example (see Yang, 2006) – will enrich critical understanding of such negotiations.

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