2 Pre-Industrial Singapore: General Structural Developments up until 1959

INTRODUCTION

The incorporation of Singapore into the British colonial empire arose out of a very specific historical struggle between imperial powers for access to and control over Oriental trade. This had very definite implications for the structure of the economy which developed. In view of the considerable strategic advantages Singapore offered in the contest for commercial superiority, from the outset the British intended specific economic functions to be performed there. Though there were some modifications over time in the nature of Singapore’s trading role, these were invariably linked to the logic and dynamism of British colonialism and capital. The various other economic activities of any significance which developed in Singapore also derived in one way or another from the trade which passed through its port. This trade-based economy soon became intricately related with the commerce of the region in such a way that opportunities for capital accumulation perpetuated the basic economic structure imposed by British colonialism. As a result there was a long delay in manufacturing development in Singapore.

ECONOMIC FOUNDATIONS AND COLONISATION

The earliest history of Singapore is not altogether clear. According to Turnbull, the first indisputable evidence of a settlement on the island dates from the 14th century.¹ This settlement, known as Temasek, probably represented the most significant inhabitation of Singapore prior to Raffles. Even so, Turnbull contends that this settlement was at the most only a small outpost of the Malay empire of Srivijaya, with its people dependent on the sea for their livelihood. Certainly reports from travellers passing the island around that time
emphasised the dangers of piracy. In any case, the settlement suffered a brief and violent history, culminating in its near-obliteration in 1398 after being attacked by Thais. Subsequently, Singapore became a Thai vassal state in the early 15th century and, in turn, passed into the control of a Malacca sultanate. When the Portuguese gained Malacca in 1511, Singapore was briefly employed as an outpost for the Malay sultan’s new capital of Johor Lama. Johor Lama was itself destroyed in 1587 by the Portuguese and, according to Turnbull, by about 1613 Singapore’s significance as a settlement was minimal.  

The next major settlement at Singapore did not come until 1811 when about a hundred Malays from Johore were led by their Temenggong (chief) to the mouth of the Singapore River. The Temenggong established an overlord structure whereby ‘tribes’ of the surrounding Riau-Lingga archipelago were afforded protection in return for duties to Malay overlords. A division of labour developed under which some tribes acted as private armadas and others as boatpeople and suppliers of fish to the Temenggong. Other inhabitants of the island at that time included the Orang Seletar and the Biduanda Orang Kellang who were indigenous to the island. These people were essentially boat dwellers who relied on fish and jungle produce for their existence. They were not engaged in agriculture. The only agriculture carried out was by a small group of Chinese who had planted gambier and pepper. Thus, when Sir Stamford Raffles founded Singapore in 1819, the island comprised a small group of about a thousand inhabitants whose notoriety derived more from piracy than agriculture or extensive trading activities. Following Raffles, however, drastic change was to come.

The British interest in Singapore stemmed from a number of considerations. The primary concern was that the Dutch presence in Malacca represented a potential threat to the security of passage through the Straits of Malacca and Sunda, and thus the East India Company’s trade with China. The Company was heavily dependent on this trade for its profits. Britain thus needed, according to the Governor-General of India, Lord Hastings, ‘the establishment of a station beyond Malacca, such as may command the southern entrance of those straits’. Raffles, who was at the time an officer of the East India Company, had been commissioned to find just such a station. On 29 January 1819 Singapore, being strategically placed astride the sea routes from Europe and India to China and Japan, was occupied for this purpose.

Owing to the priority the British Government placed on securing