

Making of a City

Opium City: Making of Early Victorian Bombay

by Amar Farooqui;
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The city of Bombay (now Mumbai) is regarded as the first city of the country. Though at present, the services sector is the main source of employment, till a few decades ago Bombay was known as an industrial city. Most people believed that the textile industry was the mainstay of the city since 1850s. In fact, the census commissioner of the 1931 Census had stated "Save for its textile manufacture, Bombay has really no claims to be an industrial city". Prior to the textile industry, cotton trade had initiated the city's growth. However, Amar Farooqui shows us that the actual growth of the city was spurred by the very profitable opium trade with China.

This slim volume contains three very perceptible essays. The first two are on the opium trade and the third discusses

Bombay's early development. In his introduction, Farooqui observes that the uniqueness of the city is largely due to the heterogeneous nature of its capitalist class, in terms of regional and religious composition. The communities comprising this class included, Parsi, Marwari, Gujarati, Bania, Bohra, Armenian and Indo-Portuguese among others. He explains that this gave a cosmopolitan character to the city that has lasted till the present.

In the first essay titled 'Bombay: A Colonial Port in Search of Business', Farooqui shows that the British crown handed over Bombay to the East India Company at a token rent of 10 pounds a year. Its main advantage was its natural harbour but this was off-set by its hinterland which created barriers for its integration with western and central India. These included the Sahyadri mountains and the Deccan plateau. Calcutta, on the other hand, was well integrated with its hinterland, which could support its growth in terms of supply of labour and agricultural products. The seven islands comprising Bombay were not suitable for agriculture and Farooqui quotes contemporary reports that state that the British had to get all their

food requirements from the Portuguese. If they were to subsist on the production of the islands they would have starved.

In 1788, Lord Cornwallis noted that the Company was spending a huge amount in maintaining its establishment in Bombay. The revenue earned through its port was very little compared to its expenditure. He had suggested that Bombay be demoted to the position of just a small factory. A few years prior to this statement, in 1784, Bombay was poised for a take-off because its trade received a boost with the rise in raw cotton exports to China. Farooqui points out that these exports were far less than the imports of tea from China. Hence cotton could certainly not be Bombay's saviour as a port town. The solution was found in the opium trade, particularly after 1820s which saw a quantum leap in trade with China. From 1827 onwards, the value of opium trade was twice as much as the value of cotton trade and the value of both was more than the imports of tea from China.

Scholarly Analysis

The first essay provides an account of the factors that led to the opium trade. It provides a very scholarly analysis of the history of western India in the 17th and 18th centuries. He discusses the decline of Surat as a major trading port and the relations between the Moghuls and the Peshwas in determining the future of the islands comprising Bombay.

The second essay deals with the opium trade and its economic and social ramifications. Farooqui states that, "Bombay as a great commercial and industrial centre was born of its becoming an accomplice in the drugging of countless Chinese with opium" (p 17). This, he notes, is the sordid underside of Bombay's colonial past. It however took some time for Bombay to emerge as the centre of the opium trade in the early 19th century. Initially this trade was conducted from the Company headquarters in Calcutta. The main supply was from Bihar. The princely states in central India also took to opium cultivation which was brought to the Portuguese colony of Daman and was exported to Macao, another Portuguese colony, and later to mainland China. By 1823, the Company had established its indirect control over the princely states in central India and it could buy opium produced in the Malwa region at cheap rates. This opium was auctioned in Bombay and exported from there.

Farooqui notes that by 1820s, a large number of Parsees, Marwaris, Gujaratis and Konkani Muslims had moved into the opium trade. There was an impression that Parsees dominated the trade but Farooqui shows that this was not true. There were others too but because Parsees formed a visible minority group in this trade they were mistaken to be the majority. One interesting episode in the book is about the involvement of Jamshetji Jeejibhoy. He was the first Indian to be knighted and a few years later became the first to receive baronetcy. He was a well known philanthropist but what was not commonly known was his deep involvement with the opium trade. Though he started from a modest background, by 1823 he became one of the principal merchants of Bombay. On the one hand, he was generous with his money and spent on the uplift of the poor and on the other hand, he had no qualms about drugging the people of China. His case is contrasted by that of another eminent Parsi, Dadabhai Naoroji, who had written: "This opium trade is a sin on

England's head, and a curse on India for her share in being the instrument".

Urban Development

The last essay deals with the urban development in early Victorian Bombay. The author tries to deal with the growth of the city against the background of the opium trade. The cities like Bombay, Madras and Calcutta were not built up from pre-colonial urban cities. In this sense they were purely the result of colonialism. On the other hand, cities like Delhi, Ahmedabad and Poona had a pre-colonial past and the colonial urban development had to take into account space that was already appropriated. However, the colonial urban development in the new cities like Bombay was distorted. The town, like the other port towns of Calcutta and Madras, started within the fort area (this area which consists of the business district in south Mumbai is still known as Fort). This area was the focus of the economic order of the city. There was a conflict

between colonial rule and indigenous capitalism and, he notes, just as the British were unable to fully control the opium trade they could neither prevent Indian merchants from gaining a foothold in the Fort area. This also prompted several Indians to reside in and around the area. The British officials then moved to Parel in central Bombay. The governor had his residence here. This was before 1850, when the textile mills started in the area. The British later moved to Malabar Hill and Colaba in south Bombay thus making these areas exclusively British. Most of the land in Malabar Hill was owned by Parsees but, interestingly, none of them resided there because the area had become exclusively European. They instead stayed at the foot of the hill.

Farooqui gives detailed descriptions of the living conditions of the workers. He notes that the congestion in the indigenous residential areas was in direct proportion to the concentration of economic activities in the Fort. Those who subsisted by selling their labour had to stay as close as possible

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to their workplace. As a result, the areas north of the Fort such as Bazar Gate, were congested and unhygienic. The sanitary conditions were appalling. He refers to reports that show that refuse from the latrines was allowed to flow to the streets. Potable water, too, was not readily available. As a result there were frequent outbreaks of epidemics, the most common being cholera. The epidemic in 1854 claimed 20,000 lives. For most of the workforce, residing in the native areas, life was miserable. He contrasts these conditions with the lifestyles of those in the European quarters and that of Indians in the affluent sections of the city.

The three essays deal with the origins of Mumbai and the rise of capitalism. The

author has done meticulous research and this is easily one of the best researched books on the economic history of the city. It will also be useful for those interested in studying contemporary Mumbai as there are many similarities with the past. One of the points that the author tries to examine is the relation of commercial capital with the growth of the informal sector. This makes it relevant to the present as Mumbai has slipped to becoming the centre of commercial capital rather than industrial capital. This book will be very useful for anyone interested in the city, but it should be of interest to other scholars also as it stands out as an excellent study in historical sociology. **EPW**

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