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THE SWADESHI MOVEMENT ALONG THE RIVER ROUTES: THE STRUGGLE OF THE GHATAL STEAMER COMPANY

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RESEARCH ARTICLE

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Abstract
In the first half of the twentieth century, river routes served as one of the most important means of communication in the Ghatal and Tamluk subdivisions of the Midnapore district. Around these waterways emerged a remarkable Swadeshi enterprise The Ghatal Steam Navigation Company Limited. Founded in 1925 through the collective investment of local traders, the educated middle class, and ordinary people, this indigenous company aimed to break the monopoly of the British-owned Calcutta Navigation Company and to strengthen the local economy on the basis of national enterprise. Although the company initially achieved success, it began to falter in the 1930 under intense pressure from foreign competition. The 1931 Shilabati steamer disaster became a tragic turning point in this conflict. During this period, the active support and public appeals of writer Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay turned the struggle to keep the company alive into a historic effort. By examining the establishment of the Ghatal Steamer Company, its confrontations with foreign rivals, the accident, and its eventual decline, this article highlights an alternative history of the Swadeshi movement along the river routes.

Keywords: *Swadeshi Movement, River Routes, Steamer Transport, British Rule, Ghatal Steam Navigation Company, Indigenous Enterprise, Rupnarayan River*

Introduction

Bengal is a land shaped by rivers. Here, rivers are not only factors of nature; they are integral to daily life. At the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, river routes served as the primary channels for communication, trade, markets, and the circulation of culture[1]. Railways had not yet expanded beyond limited areas. In the Ghatal and Tamluk regions of the Midnapore district, the Rupnarayan, Shilabati, and Kangsabati rivers together formed an extensive waterway network[2]. Through these routes, people travelled to Kolkata, Uluberia, Budge Budge, Ghatal, and Tamluk. Steamer transport along these rivers symbolized modern technology of the time. However, control over these waterways rested in the hands of foreign companies. The British-owned Calcutta Navigation Company operated almost exclusively along these routes, leaving indigenous traders and ordinary people only as consumers, not owners. In this context, a new idea emerged among the local population and educated society—establishing their own company to operate on their own rivers. Out of this thought was born *The Ghatal Steam Navigation Company Limited*.[3]

Objectives: The main objectives of this article are:

1. To analyze the history of river-based communication in the Ghatal and Tamluk regions and to explain the rise of Swadeshi enterprise within that context.
2. To describe the establishment, management, economic structure, and social acceptance of *The Ghatal Steam Navigation Company Limited*.
3. To examine the nature of conflict and competition with the British-owned Calcutta Navigation Company.
4. To assess the role of the writer Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay in supporting this Swadeshi initiative and the impact of his involvement on public sentiment.
5. To present an alternative, less-discussed history of the Swadeshi movement within the river-based economy and transport network.
6. To understand the broader forms of local economic resistance against colonial domination.

Methodology

For the preparation of this article, various sources have been examined, including regional histories, government reports, documents related to river routes and steamer transport, company share records, court orders, and contemporary British administrative papers. Additionally, local newspapers; government gazettes; old steamer route records of the Ghatal–Tamluk region; and oral recollections from local elders and families have been consulted. Secondary sources include books on the history of the Midnapore district, academic works on the Swadeshi movement, biographies and letters of Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay, and research on regional economy and colonial communication networks. The Shilabati steamer disaster has been analyzed as a specific case study to explain the strategies of foreign competitors and the consequences of such rivalry.

Discussion

In the early twentieth century, the Ghatal river route was immensely popular[4]. The steamer stops along this route included Ghatal (slightly north of the present Bhasha Bridge), Pratappur, Bandar, Panshiuli, Gopiganj, Bakshihat, Monkour, Joshad, Shribara, Gopalnagar, Kolaghat, Panitras, Denan, Tamluk, Geonkhali, Nurpur, Falta, Raipur, Uluberia, Bauria, Budge Budge, Sankrail, and finally the Armenian Ghat of Kolkata[5]. This route served as a key channel for trade, passenger transport, and social interaction. However, after 1900 particularly with the opening of the Howrah–Kharagpur railway the dependence on river routes somewhat decreased. Still, the middle class, farmers, and small traders continued to rely on waterways, as they provided a cheaper, easier, and more direct mode of travel.[6]

Image 1: Ghatal Steam Navigation Company steamer
Source: *https://www.midnapore.in/people/sarat_chandra_chattopadhay.html*

During British rule, Swadeshi initiatives began to spread across various parts of the country. Ghatal and Tamluk also experienced a strong surge of this sentiment. In 1925, local intellectuals, traders, and ordinary residents together established The Ghatal Steam Navigation Company Limited[7]. The main aim of the company was to build a transport system under indigenous ownership and to break the monopoly of foreign enterprises. Funds for the company were raised through the public sale of shares[8]. Local markets promoted the idea that this was "our company, our river, our pride." In its initial years, the company operated successfully. Its steamers were named Shilabati, Rupnarayan, and others titles drawn from the names of local rivers.

Image 2: Calcutta Navigation Company Steamer
Source: *https://www.getbengal.com/details/steamer-service-from-calcutta-that-transformed*

The British-owned *Calcutta Navigation Company* operated steamers along the river routes during this period. Alarmed by the growing success of the Swadeshi company, the foreign enterprise began using various tactics to attract passengers—reducing fares, offering cigarettes and small gifts, and even making the fare the same for both the upper and lower decks. They also violated regulations by stopping their steamers at unauthorized points to pick up passengers. At times, when the Ghatal company's steamer was boarding passengers, they would deliberately speed past it, creating strong waves to damage the indigenous vessel.[9]

The situation escalated to such an extent that even the Sub-Divisional Officer (SDO) had to intervene. In 1930, the SDO of Ghatal warned the foreign company to halt such activities. Determined not to yield, the foreign enterprise appealed to the High Court.[10] Eventually, they resumed their operations after securing court permission—this time increasing their harassment of the Swadeshi company even further. Despite numerous challenges, the Ghatal Steam Navigation Company continued adapting in order to survive against the foreign competitor.[11]

Image 3: Sarat Chandra's house at Samtaber
Source: *https://www.midnapore.in/people/sarat_chandra_chattopadhay.html*

Toward the end of 1931, a tragic accident occurred. After the foreign company's steamer *Amba* left Kolaghat, the Ghatal company's steamer *Shilabati* attempted to proceed with its passengers. At that moment, the massive waves created by *Amba* struck the vessel, causing *Shilabati* to crash against the opposite bank at Naupala. The steamer tilted to one side, resulting in the death of two passengers. This incident triggered widespread fear among travelers, many of whom became hesitant to board *Shilabati*. In such circumstances, sustaining the Swadeshi steamer company became extremely difficult. It was at this critical juncture that the renowned writer Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay stepped forward to help save the indigenous enterprise.[12]

Role of Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay

During this difficult period, the celebrated novelist Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay stood firmly beside the indigenous company. In 1923, he built a two-storied house with a tiled roof in Samtaber village of Howrah district, located on the opposite bank of the Rupnarayan River near Kolaghat.[13] A steamer stop was situated right in front of his residence, enabling close interaction between him and the officials of the Swadeshi company. When the company fell into financial and operational crisis, Sarat Chandra extended his support and appealed to the public to purchase shares to ensure its survival. For wider publicity, he also wrote letters to newspapers.

Figure 4: Sarat Chandra used to sit and write in this house at Samtaber, facing the river,
Source: *https://www.midnapore.in/people/sarat_chandra_chattopadhay.html*

On 23 May 1931, in an appeal published in *Bongobasi*, he addressed the public: "Near my home at Panitras on the banks of the Rupnarayan, the steamers and launches of the Ghatal Steam Navigation Company pass by. Their service runs between Kolaghat and Ghatal. Hormillar's company also operates steamers on the same route. For the past six years, I have observed the unequal competition between these two companies. Hormillar's steamers are large, yet they can move in shallow water and thus operate throughout the entire year. They also have ample capital; as a result, by lowering fares, offering cigarettes to passengers, making the fares of both upper and lower decks the same, and deploying more steamers, they have made the competition extremely harsh for the indigenous company. The native company's steamers are smaller, they take on more water, and therefore cannot run year-round. Nevertheless, despite so many difficulties, the Swadeshi company still attracts a sufficient number of passengers… Through the efficiency, integrity, and selfless dedication of its directors, this company has managed to survive each year despite losses, even while battling a wealthy and powerful foreign rival." He further urged the public: "It is the solemn duty of the people to save and support this indigenous company from the grip of such unequal competition".[14]

Sarat Chandra's appeal inspired the general public. Local residents once again began purchasing shares and choosing to travel on the indigenous steamers. Although the company did not survive for many more years, his intervention remained a rare and memorable example. The struggle of the Ghatal Steamer Company was not merely an economic contest—it symbolized the spirit of self-reliance. The people of Ghatal, Tamluk, and Kolaghat realized that the difficult journey offered by the Swadeshi company carried far more dignity than the comfort provided by the foreign enterprise.[15]

This mindset reflected the practical expression of anti-colonial sentiment. A small, local company had challenged the might of a vast imperial power. They may not have won in business, but in the struggle for self-respect they emerged victorious. Because of the accident, administrative obstacles, and continuing financial losses, the Ghatal Steamer Company gradually faded away within a few years. Yet, even if the enterprise failed commercially, its social impact was profound. It showed ordinary people that indigenous ventures could survive—even challenge—British competitors. Today the company belongs to history, but the confidence it instilled in local communities strengthened the foundations of later Swadeshi movements. Sarat Chandra's call, the enthusiasm of the people, and the common spirit of resistance to British rule together created a form of "freedom struggle along the river routes."

Conclusion

In the broader history of Bengal, the name of the Ghatal Steam Navigation Company may not appear in bold letters, but it stands as a meaningful symbol. This episode brings together indigenous initiative, local courage, and the social responsibility of a literary figure to form a distinctive chapter. In this story the river is not just water; it is a current of resistance. Against British capital and technology, the unity and self-reliance of ordinary people became the driving force of this current. The *Shilabati* accident, the unfair competition from *Amba*, and administrative bias—all formed parts of this historical struggle. Yet the emergence of this Swadeshi company proved that independence is not only a political matter; it is a psychological movement embedded in economics, transportation, and everyday life.

Although countless waves, boats, and passengers have passed along the Shilabati and Rupnarayan rivers since then, the Ghatal Steam Navigation Company no longer exists. Its commercial success may be debated, but there is no doubt that—perhaps unknowingly—it played a significant role in spreading the spirit of Swadeshi in colonized India. It reminds us that "seeds of freedom are often sown in the waves of a river." Thus, this article is not merely the history of a company; it is a remarkable document of Swadeshi consciousness, of the confidence of ordinary people, and of a writer's social vision. Moreover, the efforts of the immortal storyteller Sarat Chandra will, I believe, inspire even greater respect among future generations.

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Notes:

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