

Propelled by patriotism

This book tells the story of the Tamil freedom fighter V.O. Chidambaram Pillai, who helmed a shipping company that hoped to stand up to a British hegemon at sea but was instead sunk by the machinations of the Raj. **MANU S. PILLAI**

Some years ago, the Collector of Madurai was reported to have donated Rs.5,000 to a family. It was not poverty alone that brought them to his notice but the fact that they are the descendants of a heroic freedom fighter: a man





described by A.R. Venkatachalapathy as “the first popular leader produced by the Indian Nationalist Movement in south India”.

The reference is to V.O. Chidambaram Pillai (1872-1936), also known as VOC, who, just over a century earlier, had helmed one of the most ambitious business ventures in Indian history: a shipping company that hoped to stand up to a British hegemon at sea. The steamers acquired for this alone were worth lakhs of rupees, and they were received in Tuticorin with much fanfare. But the tide turned, and in what is one of the freedom struggle’s more tragic episodes, both the company and VOC were left broken. In *Swadeshi Steam*, Venkatachalapathy tells this story.

As such, it is rare to find a history of failure. But here we have just this commodity, exa-

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A special postage stamp released to commemorate VOC’s

birth centenary on September 5, 1972.

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mining a milestone in India’s anticolonial movement. It is a granular, painstakingly built volume—a project the author pursued for decades. The effort is patent through the text as is the feeling that a less determined scholar might have given up. The archives, after all, are fragmentary and spread out. Often, sources are contradictory—there is, for instance, no clear figure as to what the two big steamers owned by VOC’s Swadeshi Steam Navigation Company (SSNCo) were worth; the numbers vary. It is to Venkatachalapathy’s credit that he did not waver in his commitment. And as a result, for the first time, we have in a single place an exhaustive account of what it took for VOC and his associates to raise their economic challenge to the Raj.

The bulk of this nearly 500-page book is concerned with some six years starting in 1906. It was at this time that VOC, his patriotism fired up by Bal Gangadhar Tilak and his more aggressive brand of nationalism, banded with others to launch the SSNCo. From the start, he perceived this as not a business enterprise but a cause for “the welfare of our motherland”. This was “the abode and shrine of our divinely pure Mother India”, and any profits would serve as “national moral gain”, not a means to fatten the purses of shareholders. Coming soon after the launch of the wider Swadeshi Movement, the company’s very name boldly flaunted its loyalties. It broke the monopoly on coastal trade of the British India Steam Navigation Company—seen as “almost a branch of the [colonial] Indian government”—by waging this war not only against a powerful commercial entity but also the imperial state.

VOC’S DETERMINATION AND energy were essential to the SSNCo’s early momentum: he travelled to find backers, obtained most of the company’s funds, and gave patriotic speeches to inspire public subscription. His British opponents reciprocated in kind: they poached employees, cut rates to render the SSNCo unviable, and exploited government links to harass and intimidate anyone who would support this brown challenge to white profit. In the end, it was the latter that prevailed, for the game was rigged.

VOC’s politics, meanwhile, left him susceptible to the charge of sedition—like many others in this period, including Tilak—and after

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public agitation led to violence in 1908, he was imprisoned for years. The SSNCo soon floundered. Faced with a tilted field and predatory competition, even the most valiant efforts by his partners could not prevent the company from folding.

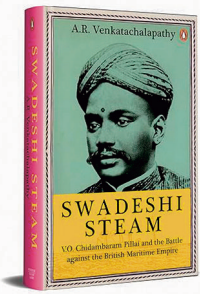
While *Swadeshi Steam* narrates these happenings in breathless, sometimes overwhelming detail, questions emerge on the tensions implicit in a marriage of commerce with nationalism, between sober pragmatism so necessary to business and the heady spirit of the political pulpit. With the SSNCo, all at once it was a political statement (standing up to colonial power) and a commercial enterprise (which had to operate on terms set by the same hostile power). How could these be reconciled?

Economic viability was contingent on toning down assertions of nationalism and focussing on building the business; indeed some directors tried to rein in VOC for these reasons. But from the latter's perspective, the *raison d'être* of the SSNCo was political. If the company abandoned its pointed nationalism, what was to separate it from any other Indian-run shipping business, of the likes that had long existed in Bombay and Bengal?

Venkatachalapathy is in sympathy with VOC here. For example, an article in *The Modern Review* (May 1909) that charged the icon with recklessness is deemed patronising. It argued that "calm discretion" would have benefited the SSNCo; that a "commercial vessel [that] came in contact with the dangerous political rock" would "be wrecked" (a not surprising claim, given how even today power can make life difficult for businesses). But similar points were made by VOC's colleagues from the start too, and they did so, arguably, to protect the entity in an unfriendly environment.

Swadeshi Steam

V.O. Chidambaram Pillai and the Battle against the British Maritime Empire



By A.R. Venkatachalapathy
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So also, we read how the SSNCo was "propelled by patriotism and not steam". But it appears that while VOC was propelled by patriotism, many company directors did not believe this to be sustainable fuel. Where he remained a patriot first and a businessman second, these opposing colleagues advocated an inversion of the formula.

WHILE ONE UNDERSTANDS Venkatachalapathy's affection for VOC, as a reader I could not help but try and view the question from the perspective of these dissenting directors. Would they not also have had the best interests of the company in mind? While some did harbour a personal dislike for VOC—his popularity seems to have bruised many egos—these were also intelligent men. Criticism from his fellows, then, that a little tact on VOC's part might have saved their cause seems not unfair. In merging the political stage with the boardroom, the company was left in a precarious position. But then again, this might be a moot point: as Venkatachalapathy shows, the British side was not prepared to brook any challenge to its monopoly in the region, so even a more cautiously managed SSNCo would likely have been crushed simply for eating into its entrenched rival's profits.

On the whole, *Swadeshi Steam* is a highly instructive, vastly detailed work of scholarship. I sensed a gap in one respect alone. Throughout the book we see VOC as a public figure and as an able organiser of people and resources. But we do not get a sense of VOC as a human being. The first 30 years of his life are covered in just two pages, and there is little by way of early influences and what went into the making of his character. Older (and admittedly dated) biographies speak of conflict with his father, a stint where he tried to become a hermit, and so on. Elaborating on these aspects of its protagonist's life would have added emotional texture to the text, which it lacks in its present shape. And understanding this facet of VOC is important. How else can we account for the fact that this staunch opponent of the Raj, diminished by prison and political marginalisation, in later life ended up naming one of his sons after a British judge? ■

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