

The Political Ideas of Bal Gangadhar Tilak: An Analytical Study

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ABSTRACT

This article seeks to delineate the various aspects of political ideas of Lokmanya Tilak. It highlights the seminal significance of Tilak as a mass leader during the course of the Indian National Movement. It delineates the views of Tilak on nationalism, swaraj, social reforms etc. Further, it shows the outstanding influence of Tilak's socio-political ideas on the trajectory of the Indian National Movement.

Keywords: Nationalism, Swaraj, Hinduism, Vedanta, Education, Social Reforms

INTRODUCTION

Bal Gangadhar Tilak was undoubtedly one of the most important leaders of the Indian National movement. He enriched the ideational landscape of our anti-colonial struggle by advocating revolutionary steps to overthrow the British rule (Desai, 1966). He faced a challenging early life. He encountered numerous struggles and difficulties during his formative years. Nevertheless, he managed to establish himself as a prominent educator and political leader. The impact of Lokmanya Bal Gangadhar Tilak in India prior to 1920 was extensive and noteworthy. The freedom movement he spearheaded successfully united the populace; this marked his greatest achievement in solidifying his status as a national leader. He played a significant role in the quest for independence. Lokmanya Bal Gangadhar Tilak was the first widely recognized leader of the Independence Movement.

Ideas on Nationalism:

The concept of nationalism espoused by Tilak was inextricably inter-connected with religion (Brown, 1992). It was distinct from the prevailing western definitions of nationalism which missed religious overtones. Tilak was

a devout Hindu with a strong faith in Advaita philosophy. He upheld the belief in a powerful and all-pervading Supreme Being as described in the sacred Rigveda. He also had unwavering trust in the truthfulness of the Upanishads and the Bhagavad Gita. Additionally, Tilak believed in the notion of a personal God (ishta-devata). But he suggested religious symbols for the general populace who might have a less evolved spiritual awareness. He held a strong conviction in the theory of reincarnation, particularly regarding the idea that Lord Krishna is a manifestation of divinity.

His nationalism, which was deeply rooted in religion, did not obscure his understanding of the economic aspects of nationalist discourse. He fully endorsed Dadabhai Naoroji's Drain theory and, more significantly, he was a prominent advocate of the Swadeshi and Boycott Movements. His religious inclination led him to intertwine nationalism with what he perceived as the Vedantic principle of human unity.

He believed that nationalism was a derivative of Vedantic wisdom and that the two concepts were not in conflict. His characterization of nationalism as an essential component of dharma was an effort to engage the common populace in the national struggle, as they were

more accustomed to terms like dharma and religious symbols.

Furthermore, he contended that nationalism was not a concrete idea but rather connected to the sentiments of the people, which were deeply rooted in the heroic narratives of India's history. The initiation of the Shivaji Jayanti festival was precisely for this reason; for Tilak, Shivaji epitomized a wise ruler who was genuinely concerned for the welfare of all citizens, and due to his extraordinary accomplishments, he could even be regarded as a manifestation of the Divine Being.

The nature of Tilak's upbringing and his proficiency in Sanskrit fostered a deep admiration for ancient Indian culture and the principles espoused by Hinduism. As a political activist, he actively sought to reinstate the ancient civilizational standards that had once elevated India to greatness. The logical consequence of this stance was a rejection of Western values, Western education, and a denunciation of leaders who promoted the imitation of Western culture and ideals. This explains the fact that Tilak was a vocal critic of the Moderates within the Indian National Congress.

Tilak's legal training provided him with the chance to explore ancient Indian legal texts, manuscripts, and their commentaries. Consequently, his expertise in Sanskrit, his deeply religious mindset, and his thorough examination of ancient legal and philosophical works solidified his status as a devoted admirer of India's historical achievements.

Role in the Indian National Movement:

Tilak also investigated the economic exploitation of India by foreign rulers. During the challenging famine of 1896, he rendered significant service by enlightening the populace about their rights. His dedicated efforts were instrumental in transforming Swadeshi into a nationwide movement. Furthermore, he strongly promoted the boycott of foreign goods, which was essential for the Swadeshi Movement to avoid being merely a one-sided political protest.

To raise political awareness among the people, Tilak established two weekly publications, 'Kesari' in Marathi and 'Mahratta' in English. He was joined by few other nationalist leaders in making the programme of these publications successful. Through these publications, he made valiant attempts to instill a sense of nationalism in the hearts and minds of his fellow countrymen.

Tilak first participated in the Indian National

Congress session in 1889, where he caused a stir by openly criticizing both the British misrule and the soft approach of moderates within the Congress in opposing such misrule (Tamhankar, 1956). This approach was entirely novel and unfamiliar to the Westernized and elite leaders of the Congress.

Tilak was unapologetic about using religion for political purposes especially in the context of bolstering nationalism in India. He introduced methods of political mobilization through the organization of the Ganesh Festival and Shivaji Jayanti. These events became integral to political mobilization in and around Maharashtra during India's anti-colonial struggle as Tilak sought to instill a sense of nationalism in the hearts and minds of Indians. It is often noted that Tilak's affinity for ancient Hindu traditions played a crucial role in the initiation of these two events.

Tilak faced significant repercussions due to his bold political writings and actions. It led to his imprisonments several times. Moreover, he was also expelled from the Congress due to his radical views. Many of his close associates, who had supported him during his journalistic and educational endeavors, abandoned him when he needed their support the most. In the final phase of his political activism, Tilak focused on promoting the Home Rule League, a movement aimed at achieving Swaraj. Towards the end of his life, he traveled to England (1918-19) and made earnest efforts to establish friendly relations between the ruling Labour Party and India's nationalist leaders.

Tracing the Roots of Tilak's Ideas:

Tilak is also recognized for his scholarly contributions, which primarily appeared in the columns of Kesari. Among his notable works published in his Marathi weekly are his essays on Spencer, the Mahabharata, and a research article aimed at determining the date of Shivaji's birth, all of which are exceptional pieces of writing (Tamhankar, 1956).

He skillfully utilized his expertise in Sanskrit and his keen understanding of Mathematics to create a remarkable body of work. He also endorsed the ritualistic elements of Hinduism, believing that religious ceremonies evolved over time and should be practiced as long as they were not intentionally modified. He took pride in being a follower of Sanatana Dharma (eternal faith). He regarded the Vedas, Gita, and the epics of Ramayana and Mahabharata as the shared heritage of all Hindus.

Tilak recognized the sectarian divisions among Hindus but hoped that by setting aside these differences, all Hindus could unite to form a strong Hindu Rashtra.

Tilak maintained that the core teachings of Hinduism emphasized the significance of action (Bakshi, 2006). In this regard, he viewed it as a highly practical religion that advocated for the appropriate course of action to address the challenges of a particular historical period. In this context, he referenced the Bhagavad Gita as evidence, where God vowed to reincarnate as often as necessary. In contrast to the liberal-secular political ideologies favored by many Congress leaders in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Tilak contended that religion and politics could not be disentangled. His concept of nationalism diverged from that of the Liberal nationalists within the Congress in another aspect (Aggrawal, 2017). The Liberal leaders primarily focused on addressing economic grievances.

Tilak discovered a formidable symbol in Shivaji to motivate the populace to engage in the national fight against foreign oppressors (Tamhankar, 1956). Inspired by the Bhagavad Gita, Tilak held the belief that Shivaji was a vibhuti, meaning an incarnation of a divine being or an individual endowed with extraordinary powers by divinity. He elevated Shivaji to such a lofty position that he took on the characteristics of a superhuman entity, as Tilak asserted that for such a person, the norms of conventional morality were inapplicable. In Tilak's view, commemorating Shivaji Jayanti would invigorate the nationalist spirit among the people of India.

Quest for Hindu-Muslim Unity Against the Britishers:

The recurrent Hindu-Muslim communal riots that erupted during Shivaji Jayanti celebrations in the Bombay province provided an opportunity for Tilak's adversaries to depict him as an anti-Muslim figure.

In response, Tilak clarified his position regarding the selection of Shivaji for the annual celebrations. He emphasized that his concept of spiritual nationalism was not anti-Muslim. Furthermore, his intention in promoting Shivaji Jayanti celebrations was not an anti-Muslim initiative. He chose Shivaji because the esteemed Maratha warrior embodied the spirit of bravery in confronting oppression and injustice. He also clarified that the strategies employed by Shivaji Maharaj to combat injustice were essential for his era. Tilak made it clear that he was not advocating for the application of similar tactics

against foreign rule; rather, he aimed to revive the fundamental spirit that inspired Shivaji Maharaj to stand up against tyranny (Singh and Choudhary, 2012).

Tilak argued that during the period of British rule, there was no justification for conflict with the Muslims. He envisioned a united front of Hindus and Muslims to oppose the foreign rulers. Although Tilak utilized Hindu symbols and expressions for political purposes, he was neither a communal nor an anti-Muslim figure. He consistently promoted the idea of granting equal social, cultural, and religious rights to both Hindus and Muslims. In his personal interactions, he maintained close relationships with several Muslim leaders, who held him in high regard. Hasrat Mohani, a completely selfless and dedicated leader, along with Shaukat Ali, the brother of Muhammad Ali and a prominent figure in the Khilafat Movement, considered Tilak to be their political mentor. In terms of rights within a fair political framework, Tilak advocated for the protection of all rights for everyone, regardless of caste, creed, or race. He valued national unity but emphasized that this ideal could not be realized through appeasement of minority groups. He sought to build a joint front of Hindus and Muslims against the Britishers.

Tilak also expressed his disapproval of cow slaughter in a nation predominantly composed of Hindus. In this regard, he did not wish to provoke controversy with Muslims. His criticism was aimed at the British authorities, who intentionally issued licenses for butcher shops in areas primarily inhabited by Hindus. Tilak believed this was a deliberate attempt to incite hostility between Hindus and Muslims. Tilak's reasonable recommendations on prevention of cow slaughter should be adhered to in contemporary multi-religious society of India.

Linkage between Education and Nationalism:

Tilak expressed dissatisfaction with the curriculum prescribed in government-funded schools. In 1908, he strongly asserted that India required a National Education syllabus that would not only include the lives and accomplishments of national heroes like Shivaji but also impart the religious and cultural values of ancient India to students. He criticized secular education, believing it to be insufficient for character development.

The idea of providing educational facilities to every individual undoubtedly stemmed from the British colonial rule in India. Following the notable Minutes of Lord

Macaulay in 1835, the East India Company authorities implemented a policy to offer modern education through the English language. The Bengalis were the first to embrace the new opportunities that became accessible to Indians. Subsequently, British-endorsed education gained popularity in the Bombay Province.

The initial leaders of the Indian National Congress were also among the first graduates of the Universities of Calcutta and Mumbai. However, most of them held a deep admiration for the British and their intellectual legacy. Nearly all of them possessed a strong belief in British Liberalism and were genuinely convinced that the Britishers would eventually facilitate the establishment of a responsible, democratic government in India.

However, Tilak was not convinced of the generosity of Britishers in granting political freedom to India. After completing his Master's degree and legal education, Tilak dedicated himself to instilling a sense of nationalism in education (Kumar and Sharma, 2011). Concurrently, he resolved to align social service initiatives and political reforms with the realities on the ground in India. His first significant action in the realm of education was the founding of the New English School in Poona in January 1880. The promotion of national education was one of the three most significant political endeavors of Tilak, alongside the Swadeshi movement and the boycott of foreign goods. He was convinced that the educational approach advocated by Lord Macaulay for India was not only detrimental to the development of genuine nationalism but also harmful to the nation's future. He firmly believed that the British educational system would not only render many Indian youths indifferent to the religious and cultural heritage of our nation but would also make them irrelevant to the future (Sharma, 2008).

Ideas about Social Reforms:

The Social Reform Movements that began in the early 19th century primarily aimed to eliminate social ills and evils from Hindu society. A notable aspect was the involvement of British authorities, who at that time represented a commercial company, in facilitating reforms within Hindu socio-religious traditions (Tiwari, 2005). Consequently, the abhorrent practice of sati was banned in 1829, and the remarriage of Hindu widows was legalized in the same year.

However, a negative consequence of this entire endeavour was that the Company authorities gradually began to associate social reform initiatives with political

expediency (ibid). This linkage was met with resistance from both Hindus and Muslims in the subcontinent. As a result, the Queen's Proclamation, which followed the suppression of the Indian uprising in 1857, marked the end of the Company's rule in India, leading to direct governance by the British government. In this Proclamation, Queen Victoria assured that British administrators in India would adhere to a policy of non-interference in the religious and cultural practices of Indians. Nevertheless, this policy was not well-received by Indian social reformers. The educated Indian class, which had the advantage of Western education and was actively engaged in social reform movements, vocally opposed the new non-interference policy regarding religious matters as outlined in the Proclamation. They insisted that government authorities should persist in promoting and executing reforms within Indian society.

Conclusion:

Tilak was undeniably one of the most significant freedom fighters who provided a clear direction to India's struggle for independence at critical junctures of history. He was the initial prominent leader of the Indian National Congress who advocated for engaging with the British on an equal basis. He urged the so-called Moderate and Liberal leaders to overcome their feelings of inferiority.

He criticized the Moderate faction of the Congress for appearing to be embarrassed by India's ancient socio-religious heritage. He introduced a bold concept of nationalism that was deeply rooted in spirituality and ancient Hindu traditions. Not only was his nationalism connected to the Hindu religion, but many of his political ideas were also grounded in dharma.

Tilak envisioned that the future Indian state would be firmly established on the sanatana dharma (the eternal faith) as articulated in the Vedas. His argument was that while the notion of Vedic dharma was associated with the Hindu faith, it was advantageous and pertinent to all of humanity. He worked to popularize the teachings of the Vedas and the Bhagavad Gita with the intention of revitalizing individuals with spiritual and moral energies that could be harnessed for the national struggle. Despite the risk of being labelled a revivalist, he proceeded to rejuvenate the positive and constructive traditions and practices of ancient Indian culture and beliefs.

He emphasised pride in the philosophical and religious foundations of ancient India. It motivated nationalist leaders to impart a genuinely nationalist

perspective to our freedom struggle. The most remarkable contribution of Tilak was democratization of the Indian National Congress by turning it into a re-energized, inclusive and broad-based movement.

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