



“Lokmanya Bal Gangadhar Tilak's Ideology of Nationalism and Swaraj”

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Abstract

Swaraj is my birth right and I shall have it” were the fiery motivating words of Bal Gangadhar Tilak, which aroused a sleeping nation to action, making Indians aware of their political plight under an imperialist rule.¹ That way, Tilak may arguably be credited to be first of the Indian nationalists who lit the indomitable light of radical nationalism in the hearts of common people of India. He had multifaceted personality and devoted his energies to diverse types of activities. As an great champion of the Poona temperance and educationist, he played significant role in establishing Poona New English School in 1880, apart from the Decean Education Society and the Fergussoan College.

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During the days of Swadeshi Movement, he was the main leader, mover and also patron of the Samartha Vidyalaya. As a fighter against economic injustice, he played an important role in making the people conscious of their rights during the famine of 1896.² He was opposed to any kind of economic discriminatioesn and moved an important resolutions pertaining to economic affairs from the nationalist platforms such as the resolution on permanent settlement, decentralization of finances, etc. Swadeshi movement and its cult is closely associated with Tilak. As a political leader, Tilak played very significant role in activities having profound impact on the life of common men. He infused the spirit of political assertiveness and patriotism among the people of the country through his aggressive nationalist policies.

He was keen to see that the public should not remain unaware about numerous happening in the region and in the subcontinent as a whole. He had the desire to give vent to his feeling in the press with the sense of complete responsibility and freedom. Therefore, he started two news papers Keshri and Maratha in 1881.³ To inject the spirit of nationalism and awareness among the people, he started the Ganapati Puja and Shivaji Mahotsva in 1896. These festivals were instrumental in bringing people together culturally irrespective of their caste and creed. He believed that independence is the foremost necessity for the well being of a nation and its people. In India perhaps he was the first leader to understand the importance of mass support and subsequently became the first mass leader of India. He realized that the constitutional agitation in itself have been futile against the Colonial rule but without



venturing with the revolutionaries. He created and marshaled the extremist wing of the Indian National Congress which he joined in 1889 His movement was based on the principles of Swadeshi, Boycott and Education.

Believing that the imparting education is the best policy to serve the nation and its people, he and his friend Gopal Ganesh Agarkar who became the, Principal of the Ferguson College, decided to devote their lives to the cause of education. To impart affordable and healthy education to younger generation,⁴ they established the New English School at Pune, in and Deccan Society in 1885. They started their carrier as school teachers.

However, Tilak felt that only educating young generation was not enough and that the elderly people also needed to be exposed to the socio-political and economic realities of Indian society and started two weeklies Maratha and Keshri in English and Marathi respectively. According to Tilak enriching the Indian society and its cultural values is only possible with the development of education. Tilak had great respect and love for Indian civilization. He analyzed the situation of the country and concluded that the freedom of the Nation cannot be achieved without the active support of the masses. In order to enthuse the masses to participate in the on going freedom struggle actively it was essential to revive their pride in the glorious past of the country and make them awake of the misdeeds of the foreign rule. Ganpati and Shivaji Mahotsava became highly successful in this regard and became a mile stone in the history of our freedom movement.

Tilak was the first political Leader to break through the routine of its somewhat academic methods, to bridge the gulf between the present and the past and to restore continuity to the political life of the nation. He developed a language and a spirit and used methods which indianized the movement and brought into the masses. Tilak had not faith in the constitutional method adopted by Gokhle and others to achieve their goal.⁵ He pointed out that the constitutional method might be very appropriate in a country like Britain where there is a constitution and a responsible government for the public. But it is totally inapplicable to a country like India where the penal code is the constitution and the people have no democratic means to change the government. He asserted that Indian could not base their agitation on law because the law could be changed by the irresponsible and autocratic government at any point of time and in any manner it like.

About the ineffectiveness of the Constitutional method he wrote in Kesari, "We will get nothing by appealing to or shouting hoarse in the ears of the British bureaucracy in India. It is like breaking our heads against a stone wall. He was off the opinion that the British government is unresponsive to the demands of the Congress leaders, because it was convinced that they could 'only bark and had no teeth to bite.' Thus he adopted a method of agitation which must heart the Britist government.⁶



His political thought represents a synthesis of some of the dominant conceptions of Indian thought and the nationalistic and democratic ideas of the modern west. He was a Vedantist which taught him the supremacy of the concept of freedom : According to him freedom was the soul of the Home rule movement. The divine instinct of freedom revealed that freedom is the “freedom was the soul of the home rule movement.”⁷

Nationalism

Lokmanya Tilak as a political philosopher has given us a theory of Nationalism. His theory of nationalism is a synthesis of both the teachings of eastern and western thinkers. Tilak's nationalism had a revivalist orientation. He wanted to bring to the forefront the message of the Vedas and the Gita for providing spiritual energy and moral enthusiasm to the nation. According to him, “a recovery of the healthy and vital traditions of the old culture of India was essential a true nationalist desires to build on old foundation.”⁸ Reforms based on utter disrespect for the old does not appeal to him as constructive work.” He said that we do not want to anglicize our institutions and so denationalize them in the name of social and political reforms.⁹ M.N.Ray pointed out that Shivaji and Ganpati festivals had been encouraged by Tilak to link contemporary events and movements with historical traditions.¹⁰

Because of his spiritual approach, Tilak regarded that Swarajya not only a right but a dharam.¹¹ He also gave a moral and spiritual meaning of Swarajya. Politically meant Home Rule. Morally it meant the attainment of the perfection of self control, which is essential for performing "one's duty" (Swadharma). It also had a spiritual significance because it meant the realization of spiritual inner freedom and contemplative delight. Tilak wanted both political and spiritual freedom. Tilak's nationalism was also influenced by the western theories of national independence and self determination. His philosophy of nationalism was a synthesis of the Vedantic idea of the spirit as self contained freedom and western conception of the Mazzini and Burke, Mill and later on of Wilson. This synthesis he expressed in terms of swarajya, a Vedantic term, which was used in Maharashtra to indicate the Maratha policy of Shivaji. According to Tilak nationalism is not a visible and concrete entity but is a kind of sentiment and idea and in generating this idea the historical memories of the great figures of a country play a significant part.

Nationalism is essentially a psychological and spiritual conception. Tilak had a systematic philosophy of nationalism. He rightly felt that the roots of Indian nationalism must lie not in the mere intellectual appeals to the theories of the western liberal writers but in the sentiments and emotions of the Indian masses. He felt that the memories of Shivaji would serve to reinvigorate nationalistic emotions of the common people. Shivaji became the symbol of the resentment and resistance of the people against oppression and injustice. Tilak tried several times to repeal the changes of anti Muslimism against this festival. He pointed out carefully that he wanted revival of his foundations and spirits. During Bengal partition day Tilak said that both



Hindus and Muslims should assert their rights against the bureaucracy that was trying to crush all.

Tilak wanted to substantiate the nationalistic movement in India by a strong cultural and religious revival of Hinduism but he also accepted the economic arguments for nationalism.¹² Dadabhai Nauroji made famous the 'Drain theory' in Indian economies. Both Tilak and Gokhale accepted the foreign imperialism resulted in the enormous 'drain' of India's resources. In-1897 Tilak wrote three articles in the Kesari at the time of Diamond Jubilee Celebration of Queen Victoria on 22nd June. He stated that India's arts and industries had declined under the British rule. He wrote that various economic enterprises and investment in India, of the foreign capitalists only created evidence given by Dadabhai, before the Welby commission.¹³ He also emphasized the economic dimension of the swadeshi movement, which indicates his awareness of the economic roots of Indian nationalism. The swadeshi movement in India assumed a spiritual and a political character. It becomes a movement for the liberation of spiritual energies of the nation for the sake of the political emancipation of the land. In a speech in January 1907 at Allahabad, Tilak pleaded for a protective tariff of our own by the boycott of foreign goods. The salvation of the country could be attained not by waiting on the bureaucracy and sending petitions to them containing appeals to logic and reason but only by the concerted efforts of the people themselves. He therefore exhorted the nation to work for the concrete realization of the resolutions on Swadeshi, Boycott and national education which had been passed at the congress session of 1906 at Calcutta.¹⁴

Tilak held that attainment of Swarajya would be great victory for Indian Nationalism. Hence he gave the Mantra "Swarajya is the birth right of Indians." Although in his speeches and writings Lokmanya always said that swarajya did not imply the negation and severance of ultimate British sovereignty, still people knew that in his heart of hearts he always wanted -complete independence. He once wrote that swarajya is "the foundation and not the height of our future prosperity."¹⁵ He always pointed out that the path of the attainment of swarajya was full of suffering and misery. During the Home Rule days Tilak always was careful to say that he was not opposed to the king-emperor but he wanted to change the Anglo Indian bureaucracy. Bipin Chandra Pal has described, "Tilak was a believer in Imperial Federation which would be composed of Great Britain, Ireland and Egypt, India and the dominions each absolutely autonomous internally: but combined for the purposes of protection and progress."¹⁶

Concept of Swarajya

The word swarajya is an old Vedic term and in Tilak's value system swaraj was a moral necessity.¹⁷ For Tilak, swaraj not only the birth right of every Indian but a dharma, a duty. It was "a life centered in self and dependent upon self." It meant self control and inner spiritual freedom. But such spiritual freedom was possible only if



there was political freedom. Similarly Bipin Chandra Pal said that term swaraj was used in the Vedanta to indicate the Highest Spiritual State.¹⁸ In course of time Tilak studied the different issues agitating the minds of the people. He saw clearly the inherent contradiction between the economic interests of Britain and India. He realized that the administrative weaknesses, the political injustice and the political exploitation from which India suffered could be remedied not by an appeal to the good sense of the British people but only by making the Indian administration responsive to Indian Public opinion. He therefore placed before his countrymen the objective of Swaraj.¹⁹ Defining swaraj as the right of the people to conduct the administration of the country, according to what they consider to be their good.

Swaraj might mean government by rulers belonging to same country Religion or caste as the ruled, through desirable in itself. This was the least important aspect of Swaraj. If the government is really responsible to the governed foreign king or a few foreign administrators would mean no harm except a small outflow of income from the country. What is more essential is that the government should be a good government, a government based on peace order and rule of law. The word swaraj essentially mean a constitutional government." A government which rules according to the wishes of the people of their representatives.²⁰ Tilak's connotation of swaraj needs to be analysed a little more carefully. The interpretation and analysis made so far is either too narrow or superficial. This may be due to the fact that scholars have paid more attention to Tilak's role as a nationalist leader than as" a philosopher of swaraj. Tilak himself has described these things in his writings and speeches. What is swaraj? Many have a misconception about this. Some do not understand this: Some understand it. Misrepresent it. Some do not want it.²¹ Thus, it has become very necessary to review and assess afresh the contribution of Tilak. But it is difficult to expect any coherent political philosophy from Tilak, because_ primarily he was a political activist and was mainly concerned with the mission of mobilizing people for Swaraj. This becories even more difficult as one has to rely mainly on Tilak's occasional writings in Kesari and many speeches he delivered in the long span of his political life.

Conclusion:

Tilak was one of those leaders who asserted themselves ever since the beginning of the freedom struggle to argue for India's right to swaraj or national self determination. Such ideals as these can be achieved by fostering strong feeling of patriotism and self respect among the people by moulding public opinion and by bringing pressure to bear on the British authorities for granting political rights. He concentrated his efforts throughout his life for the attainment of this single aim. But the Britishers envy was pride of the Indians. The way Tilak nurtured the values and feelings for nationalism in the poor folks of the country went a long way in reinforcing the struggle for independence whose fruits were actually obtained in 1947, after the death of Tilak. Yet, when the country became independent, in the galaxy of Indian leaders whose mammoth



efforts lay at the root of independence of the country, the name of Tilak and the other people of his ilk will remain inked in indelible colour.

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