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Political ideas of B.G. Tilak: colonialism, self and Hindu nationalism

Oak, A.

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Conclusion: Legacy of Lokmanya Tilak

Tilak's political ideas, as I have tried to present in my dissertation, represented a peculiar strand in Indian nationalist thought of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. It developed in the form of strong reaction to British colonialism, contained strong traits of regional pride during its formative years but eventually aimed at national emancipation by propounding Self-government. Therefore, Tilak's political outlook shows remarkable malleability at crucial junctures of his political career. Tilak regularly invoked Hindu vocabulary and envisioned India's nationalist Self in terms of a religious phenomenon. But this Hindu Self-image was traced to an unbroken lineage rooted in antiquarian past while the Sanātana dharma acted as its chief, albeit negotiable, foundation. Therefore, Tilak expected Hindus to follow the principle of benevolent majoritarianism towards the minority communities. Looking Tilak's political vision in its totality one stifling puzzle remains particularly troublesome- How can nationalist aspirations, anchored in Hindu upper-caste majoritarianism, make space for the birth of an egalitarian social order? – The puzzle rarely appears in Tilak's writings, inviting intense controversy and, in all fairness, tarnishing his political legacy. Neither Tilak nor his peers could resolve the contradiction to any degree of satisfaction- a spectral failure which continues to asphyxiate postcolonial India.

Crucial events in India's social and intellectual history including gender-reform (chapter 3), Bengal's Partition and subsequent Swadeshi movement (chapter 6) and politics of early Congress shaped the narrative of 20th century India. Tilak's role in shaping India's intellectual and political history has either been misunderstood or largely panegyricised. Of greater concern is the scholarly neglect of his contribution to Indological studies (chapter 5) and modern Vedānta philosophy (chapter 7). In the process, as I have argued, Tilak-scholarship tends to be overly simplistic and/or vociferously antagonistic, leaving no scope for critical engagement and scrutiny. As I have argued in this dissertation Tilak's political ideas transformed, slowly but surely, evidenced from his role during the communal riots and Hindu public festivals of 1890s (chapter 4) to his inclusive approach to religious minorities during his final years (chapter 8). What remained unperturbed was his strong conviction in India's claim to Svarājya and political rights for all Indians within the British Empire. Tilak was, against all odds, a firm

believer in institutionalist and proceduralist forms of democracy and hence his solidarity with the Indian National Congress could not be undone.

His sudden, and rather unexpected, death in 1920 was a rude shock to most Congress leaders, nationalist thinkers and majority of Indians. At the same time his political personality was immensely multi-faceted allowing different political ideologues to pronounce their creed invoking his memory.

Scholars, historians and the general public have been debating over the legacy of Tilak for well over a century. Theodore Shay (1956: 159-63) argues that Tilak laid the foundation of India's freedom struggle and paved the way for its Independence. He is celebrated as one of the earliest philosophers of the concept of 'Swaraj' which involved "[...] not inert acceptance of alien domination, not administrative reforms, not evolving colonial government, not an imitation of nineteenth-century utilitarian European nationalism, but Swaraj in the classical Indian value system as India's birthright" (Shay 1956: 162). For Shay, much of political philosophy and strategy of Gandhi was borrowed from Tilak. For Stanley Wolpert, Tilak is best remembered for his "[...] militancy, resurgent Hinduism, regional and communal sensitivity, caste consciousness [and] social conservatism [...]" (Wolpert 1989: 305).

After Tilak's demise the political leadership of Maharashtra fell in the hands of N. C. Kelkar who revolted against the Non-cooperation movement. He wanted the INC to follow the principles of 'responsive cooperation' and refrain from boycotting provincial and central legislative elections. He was supported by Dadasaheb Khaparde and B. S. Moonje. The other lieutenants of Tilak such as K. P. Khadilkar and Gangadhar Deshpande moved towards Gandhi and joined his Non-cooperation movement. In subsequent years, the INC moved far away from the political strategy laid out by the Extremist 'Old Guard' and within a decade it demanded *Poorna Swaraj* (Sovereign status) for India.

Undoubtedly, Tilak left behind a chequered legacy, evidenced not in the least, by the routine invocation of his political contribution amongst certain sections of Marathi-Indian population and detractions from other quarters. It was difficult to fill the vacuum left behind by Tilak's sudden demise, a fact brilliantly captured by Richard Cashman-

"Bereft of the political leadership and inspiration of Tilak, the older Tilakites [Kelkar, S. M. Paranjape, Khaparde] adhered steadfastly to the established political formulas. Stripped of

their accustomed authority with the national and regional Congress and, eventually, within their own city [Bombay], they clung to the trappings of remaining power, the legacy of the *Lokamanya*. But their loyalty was to a legend, to a static vision of the past which distorted the tradition of the *Lokamanya*. Tilak himself was a flexible politician who refused to be bound by previous strategies and revised his tactics according to changing political realities. The older Tilakites lacked the ability or authority to reinterpret effectively the tradition of Tilak” (Cashman 1975: 213, italics in the original).

In the post-Tilak period Indian nationalist movement grew along two antagonist forces- Gandhian non-violence and Hindu nationalism- each of which claimed direct lineage to Tilak’s legacy¹²⁷. Their selective appropriation of Tilak’s ideas, discussed briefly below, point towards the complexity of Tilak’s political and philosophical heritage as well as act as a partial representation of the evolution of the Indian nationalist struggle.

Tilak and Gandhi: Passing the Baton

In an editorial commemorating Tilak’s second death anniversary (‘*Khudda Tīlakāñceca udgāra!*’, *Lokmanya*, 23rd July, 1922) (Khadilkar 1949: 146-152) Khadilkar recounted a private conversation where Tilak agreed to lend his support to Gandhi’s Non-Cooperation movement. However, he also feared that the British government, just out of a global conflict, would not be too pleased to face non-cooperation from Indians. A call for mass non-cooperation, Tilak feared, might provoke the government to imprison Congress leaders and brutally crush the movement. Therefore, if the Calcutta Congress (1920) were to accept the resolution for Non-Cooperation, Tilak had planned to return to England, forge better ties with the Labour Party and actively participate in its upcoming election campaign.

While Tilak found Gandhi’s work in South Africa praiseworthy (Tilak 1976c 765-771) there were serious ideological differences between them. Gandhi had characterised Tilak’s political creed as ‘everything being fair in politics’ (‘The Reforms Resolution in the Congress’ *Young India*, 14th January, 1920) (Gandhi 1965: 483-84) to which Tilak had responded –

“[P]olitics is a game of worldly people and not of ‘Sadhus’ and instead of the maxim ‘*Akkodhen jine kkodham*’ as preached by Buddha I prefer to rely on the maxim of Shri Krishna ‘*ye yathaa*

maam prapadyante taam tathaiv bhajaamyaham' [...] Both methods are equally honest and righteous but the one is more suited to this world than the other" (Tilak 1976e: 955-56).

Gandhi saw no conflict between the two texts quoted by Tilak since both uttered eternal Truth. But, for Gandhi, the Gītā preached gentleness, kindness, compassion and the principle of Truth. Thus, he described the political approach of Tilak as 'śaṭham prati śāṭhyam' (Tit for Tat) while Gandhi worked on the principle of 'śaṭham prati satyam' (Fight cruelty with truth) (Gandhi 1965: 490-91).

N. C. Kelkar, on the other hand, found the political values of Tilak and Gandhi to be polar opposite. Speaking on the occasion of Tilak's 16th death anniversary (Kelkar 1938: 385-398) Kelkar accused Gandhi of creating a mystifying aura around himself and working towards a single agenda, namely, "[...] to destroy the legacy of Tilak" (Kelkar 1938: 387, my translation)¹²⁸.

Tilak and Hindutva: A Case of Romanticised Misrepresentation?

In the same speech Kelkar also deliberated upon Tilak's plausible response to 'new ideas' emerging in the world during the second quarter of the 20th century, namely, Communism and Fascism. Kelkar argued that dictatorship ("jhoṭiṅgaśāhī") had also existed in India, if by it one means, concentration of power in the hands of an authoritarian ruler. Such a regime, he argued, concentrates power exclusively for social welfare. Considering Tilak's nature, belief-system and political outlook, Kelkar argued that Tilak would have favoured the Fascist rule in Germany and Italy and would have supported its transference to India (Kelkar 1938a: 395-96). Kelkar had developed close association with Vinayak Damodar Savarkar¹²⁹, the founding ideologue of Hindu nationalism whereas former associate of Tilak, Dr. Moonje, assumed the mentorship of Keshav Baliram Hedgewar (founder of the Hindu nationalist organisation-Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh) (Andersen and Damle 1987).

The Democratic Swaraj Party, a local off-shoot of Swaraj Party established by anti-Gandhian Congressmen in 1922, transformed into a Hindu-nationalist party under the leadership of Kelkar. Kelkar's opposition to Gandhi's programs paved the way for Savarkar's entry into the Democratic Swaraj Party in 1937. Speaking on the occasion (coinciding with Tilak's 17th death

anniversary), Savarkar declared Tilak as one of the founders of the Hindutva ideology (Savarkar 1965: 364-70) and added-

“The interests of Hindus, which number in the majority, should be considered pivotal while determining the future of India. One of Tilak’s principal goal had been to safeguard the Hindutva of Hindus. Just as Germans make up Germany and French make up France similarly the majority Hindu community make up Hindusthan [sic.]. If somebody had suggested to Tilak that we are ready to grant India independence but she would have to give up her Hindu - status Tilak would have thrown the proposition out. Hindutva, for him, was indispensable to the idea of India” (Savarkar 1965: 370, my translation).

Tilak’s patriotic fervour, as I have tried to explore in my dissertation, resisted religious identification and numerical majoritarianism. His notion of Hindu community, borrowed from the 19th century Orientalist-racial discourse, attained political status due to a sense of disenfranchisement ushered in by colonial subjugation. Energising dormant Indians (although which primarily included Hindus) was premised upon building mass politics for Svarājya. Tilak separated religious ethos from public politics. The former was open to reinterpretation and transformations depending upon changing historical circumstances. The vitriolic attack on Muslims and Christians, foundational to Savarkar’s political ideology, was largely absent in Tilak’s writings and political philosophy.

Tilak and Social Democracy: An Unfinished Project

His activities in England suggest that Tilak was keen on developing strong relations with other European and trans-Atlantic countries and agitating for self-government for India. Some kind of ‘international consortium of colonised nations’ was envisioned by him. He had convinced the Congress for sending permanent deputations to England, the US and other countries to undertake propaganda activities. The Amritsar Congress had selected Tilak as its chief convenor for international deputations of the INC (INC Report 1922). Tilak had built strong relations with the British Labour Party, the British Socialists and the Radicals. He was also growing distrustful of the British bourgeoisie. In a speech on 7th December, 1919, he is reported to have said- “Capitalists are crushing down the British labour. We should join hands

with the British Labour Party. The Indian and British labourers are feeling the pinch resulting from the tyranny of the Capital” (Tilak 1997: xi).

Shapurji Saklatvala left the Independent Labour Party and joined the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB) in 1920 and became a member of its Colonial Committee. The CPGB had received directions from the Communist Party of Soviet Union to forge collaborations with communist, labour and anti-colonial movements in South Asia (Gopal 2019). Consequently, Saklatvala wrote to Tilak in May 1920 and requested him to form an ‘International Communist Labour Party of India’ (Kelkar 2012c: 479). Saklatvala never received a response from Tilak. But as one historian admits, “Had he [Tilak] lived longer perhaps he would have acted on this suggestion” (Naik 1999: 1025)¹³⁰. The Bombay textile mill-workers had been radicalised by the HRL and the incipient labour movement. They remained virtually inactive during the Non-cooperation movement but continued to observe a one-day *hartal* on the death anniversary of Tilak. The Communist movement, especially under the leadership of Shripad Amrut Dange—a self-proclaimed ‘Tilak-disciple’, supported the Tilakite-Bombay faction (Chandavarkar 1994: 416).

It seems highly unlikely that Tilak would have whole-heartedly supported Marxism and a Bolshevik-style revolution in India for at least two reasons— firstly, he sought support of the British Labour Party for India’s demand of self-government. The economic critique of imperialism, articulated by Indian nationalists such as Dadabhai Naoroji, R. C. Dutt and M. G. Ranade found an echo in the anti-imperialist ideology of the Labour Party of the 20th century. Labour Party leaders did not find Bolshevik revolution too appealing for their English taste, and continued to propagate social democracy and workers’ welfare, ideals cherished by Tilak as well. Secondly, Marxism-Leninism was essentially a materialist philosophy. Tilak’s political philosophy, which was deeply entrenched into Hindu metaphysics, found western materialism quite alien to Indian sensibilities and its emancipatory-plausibility too limited (as is evidenced from his critique in *Gītā Rahasya*). To cite one example— speaking to the workers in Bombay on 29th November, 1919 he argued that Indian saints had propagated Liberation through work. Therefore, each person should work, not for material self-interest, but for larger Liberation (collective and ontic) (Tilak 1976d: 667-68). But this not to suggest that Tilak was opposed to trade-union activities. He was selected to preside over the first national

convention of the All-India Trade Union Congress (scheduled for October, 1920). But Tilak's death in August 1920 forbade him the opportunity.
