

Sarvajanik Ganesh Utsav initiated by Lokmanya B.G. Tilak and its role in freedom movement

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The revival of the old Ganesh Festival in 1894 was a masterstroke on the part of Tilak since the British policy at that time was not to ere with any religious activity. He realized that there was no religious function where people of all caste and legions could come together. Even the Pandharpur procession (Processions of the saints like Dnyaneshwar and Tukaram) had its limitation time and rigor. Therefore the Ganesh festival was ideal since it could be celebrated in the locality where one lived without any difficulty. The God Ganesh was the son of Lord Shiva who has all the qualities of young leadership or The General of an Army and a very popular deity amongst the people of Maharashtra. Being the son of Shiva,

the destroyer, he evoked a warlike spirit, he represented wisdom and his abilities as remover of obstacles was ideally suited as a symbol of protest (Ref. Mr. Richard Cashman – An American Researcher). The community festival brought together the people on a common platform, enabled organization of speeches, lectures, melas, group singing and competitions. Since Tilak was well aware of the fears of the Muslim population, he took great pains to explain the intention of the Ganesh festival through Kesari and encouraged Muslims to participate in it just as Hindus in Pune participated in the Muharram processions.

The British, of course, realized that the public festival would bring

together the people brushing aside their differences, in social standing and castes and they made every attempt at depicting the festival as intended to propagate Brahmin superiority and an anti-Muslim activity. The police and other official reports of the time show how they failed in their endeavour. Muslim musicians happily played in the Ganesh festival processions and there were no instances of any serious conflicts. The British authorities also tried to instigate differences by having some Muslims complain about the music being played around the mosques but this too came to naught through the efforts of intelligent leaders on both sides. In 1892-93 there were Hindu-Muslim riots. But after initiating sarvajanik Ganesh utsav, there was no incidents recorded in Pune about Hindu-Muslim riots. Lokmanya Tilak planned very minute details of Ganesh Festival.

1. Tilak planned to organize Ganesh festival for 10 days.

2. Establishing Ganesh idol with procession and reinstalling (visarjan) Ganesh Idol with joint procession along with dance and music became main attraction of the Ganesh festival where in the beginning thousands and after few years lakhs of people came together.

3. During festival Tilak

planned various entertaining and educating functions during 9 days like speeches, kirtan, melas, singing, etc. Tilak used to prepare list of orators or kirtankars or musicians and performers and to prepare subjects and poems list and use to allot it to all the ganesh mandals in Pune and Maharashtra.

4. The Britishers and social reformist tried to create obstacles in Ganesh festival. But Tilak took great efforts to resolve it before any mishap.

5. In those days untouchables were not permitted to enter the temples. But Sarvajanik Ganesh Utsav was planned in such a way that Festival Ganesh Idol used to be put in different place or on the road. So that people from all casts could visit and worship it.

6. Tilak, through sarvajanik ganesh utsav created a platform for open education. He used various media like speeches, kirtan, melas, drama, sculpture, poems to educate masses. Ganesh utsav became a mass education tool.

7. Mass popularity and mass gathering and participation of people in sarvajanik Ganesh Utsav made it a medium of publicity. And along with Swaraj and Nationalism, various issues like swadeshi, national education, paisa fund (co-operation), against alcohol, sports, etc. were dis-

cussed on this platform.

After achievement of independence, Ganesh Utsav remained as publicity platform for various social issues as well as commercial products.

8. The Ganesh festival and the Shivjayanti festival were the grand success. People understood the true state of affairs of the country under the British rule through lectures.

Their patriotic spirit began to wax and realization began to sink in that they must do something. The people also began to see Tilak as a great leader whose thinking and action plans were realistic and goal oriented. His stature grew considerably, first across all Maharashtra and indeed throughout India as the people came together and worshipped, sang, met, discussed and were changed. Yet another advantage of Ganesh Utsav was that in nineteenth century people in spite of social religion and economical class came together resulting in social accord.

Such community festivals created a consciousness among the people from all walks of life, religion and caste and the British authorities were quite alarmed by this development. They recognized that Tilak's stature among the leaders of India was growing rapidly, that he was fast becoming a national figure and a thorn in the side of British rule that was required

to be removed.

In 1908, when Lokamanya Tilak was sentenced for treason and the British Government then took steps to break the movement started by Lokamanya Tilak and issued a summons in 1909 stating, "Lokamanya Tilak, Lala Lajpatrai, Bipinchandra Pal and others were considered to be the enemies of the nation. Displaying their photos, taking out processions by their name and distribution of any article was banned on public roads as well as in Ganesh Festival" **Ref. 29th Sept. 1909, Pg. 5 Kesari**

The British journalist Wellington Chirol addressed Lokamanya Tilak as "the father of Indian unrest" and this resulted in changing the view of British Government towards Ganesh Festival started by Lokamanya Tilak. Partition of Bengal was not only an administrative decision but it also has political motive behind it, i.e. Divide and Rule, that instigate agitation in Bengal. Lokamanya Tilak took advantage of this unrest. His four fold programme i.e. Swarajya, Swadeshi, Boycott and National Education, was passed in Calcutta Congress in 1906. Swadeshi and Boycott were simply accepted by all the Indians dropping down foreign sales by 80%. At the same time, several bomb explosions took place in Bengal. Lord Curzon tried to sup-

press the movement but people restricted the same.

This could happen because of mobilization of masses. Ganesh Utsav played an important role in uniting the common man and developing self respect and lust for Swarajya.

The then Police Commissioner of Mumbai, S.M. Edward said, “Celebration of Ganesh Utsav is a conspiracy which has been created against the British Government like at first it was seen as a religious movement of Hindus against Muslims. Through this Lokmanya Tilak created a feeling of national awakening among the people. Putting forth a feeling of patience and comprehensiveness of Hindu religion, he tried to reduce the division in the society and created a feeling of national unity. He made this concept acceptable to the society by taking help from Hindu religious institutions like Arya Samaj, Ramkrishna Math, etc.

Utsav when Tilak was imprisoned (1908 – 1914)

Lokmanya Tilak was sentence for the first treason in 1897. At that time, Ganesh Utsav was in its toddler stage with a very limited spread. Police need not had to repress the people as nature of Ganesh Utsav was restricted. Partition of Bengal in 1906 gave

true impetus to Ganesh Utsav. This was the period when people highly talked about Swaraj, Swadeshi and Boycott. It was a period when a fierce opinion developed against the British Government among the people. In 1908 Lokmanya Tilak was again sentenced for the second treason and was affirmed with six years of black water punishment. But this did not change the nature of Ganesh Utsav. In 1909 British Government, suppressed this movement by imposing certain legislations. During Tilak’s imprisonment, though people were not openly agitating, they started resisting the police throughout Maharashtra. People consciously broke the ban and willingly suffered the punishment given by the British Government.

After the break in Congress Party in Surat in 1907, the number Congress representatives went down. Congress became non influential body. Lokmanya Tilak’s tower leadership inspired Swaraj movement. The British Bureaucrats decided to remove Tilak from national scene and sent him to Mandale jail for six years.

British Government Obstructions 1909 :

The British Government started picking up the names of the people who participated in Bhajans, Dramas, Melas. In 1909, British Government

put a ban on Melas and devotional songs or poems sung in such melas. As Swaraj and Swadeshi were strictly banned, the songs and poems had to pass through censorship of the British Government. In 1910 thirty ganesh melas sent their scripts for approval. In the same year the British Government started recording the name, caste, age of the people who participated in various melas. In 1912, the British Government also prohibited melas to take a part in Ganesh immersion procession. The melas were the major attraction of immersion procession. They used to wear varied drapery. Like Mahars, Brahmins in some melas used to dance with lanterns or to ride on a horse. A large number of people used to gather to see the melas. By imposing a ban on melas, the British Government tried to weaken the Ganesh Festival movement. People were banned to proclaim the slogans like “Lokmanya Tilak ki Jay” “Shivaji Manahaj ki Jay”. Undue fear was created in the minds of the young generation. Playing of a traditional instrument like Lazim and using Mashals was also on a hit as British Government banned use of sticks during the festival period. Three people from Pune, who broke the ban and proclaimed “Lokmanya Tilak ki Jay” were punished with a fine of Rs. 400/-

. Exhibiting photos of Lokmanya Tilak during Ganesh Utsav was prohibited. All these incidents affected Sarvajanik Ganesh Utsav and resulted in calming down the emerging movement of Ganesh Utsav. While going through the book “60 years of Ganesh Utsav” no writing is seen for the period between 1908 and 1914. The celebration of Ganesh Utsav at Nene Ghat of Pune was reduced considerably. In 1914, Tilak called upon Mahadev Date and encouraged him to restart celebrating this utsav, once again. Chintamanrao Vaidya from Pune’s Mandai Ganesh Mandal said, “we all are unfortunate that Lokmanya Tilak is not with us at this moment (he is in jail). We must stay as calm and as high like Himalaya if we want to fight the situation. Lokmanya Tilak holds a very high position in our minds. The respectable and elder persons like Lokmanya Tilak always work hard and suffer hardships so as to simplify the work of people like us.

Mahad 1909 :

In Mahad this utsav was celebrated at only four places. On the second day of the Utsav the British Govt. issued an announcement that no slogans should be given and no photos of Lal, Bal and Pal should be displayed.

In 1908, British Govt. made a declaration about this Utsav. Photo of Lokmanya Tilak was confiscated which lead to a conflict between the Police and the People. Many people were first arrested and then released. 100 policemen controlled Ganesh Utsav procession, the next year. Imprisonment of the National Hero – Lokmanya Tilak, who dared to raise a voice against the British Govt., do adversely affected the excitement of the people to celebrate the Utsav during the period 1908 to 1914. The new concepts of Paisa Fund and Swadeshi had started sowing its roots. An American Researcher Richard Cashmen expressed his opinion as why Lokmanya Tilak must have chosen Lord Ganesha. Ganapati is a God of many virtues. Ganesha is a God of Wisdom. He is worshipped at the beginning of any auspicious occasion. He is a beloved and favourite of all in all the religions in India. Lord Ganapati is a manifestation of three fundamental philosophies of Hindu Dharma, namely, Devotion, Atheism and Action. God Ganesha is the son of Lord Shiva. He has many virtues. He possesses all the qualities of a Commander. He also has all the leadership qualities. He is believed to be a Trouble-shooter and extends help and support in the challenging situations.

Ganesh Utsav cannot be imagined without Lokmanya Tilak.

Though the conscious of people was awake, due to troublesome British Govt., the movement was slowed down. This reflected in the gathering of Sanmitra Samaj Mela.

Kuni Bal Tilak mahi dava,

kuni tari dava ge bai |

Bal nahi na, thata (थाट) tyavin suna ||

Karma dasha hi mazyamagil na kale
kevha sarate |

Zurate nishidini kinva yatach

ek divas mi marate ||

When Lokmanya Tilak was released from Jail in 1914, the Britishers felt that the movement started by Tilak is already over. They thought that after returning from Mandale, Tilak will check the possibility to restart the movement and then disappointed Tilak will either go to Himalayas or to Germany for research in Sanskrit. But the best efforts put by Tilak resulted in changing the atmosphere once again and ignited fire of swarajya in the minds of the people that further gave birth to Homerule movement. Ganesh Utsav developed national unity among people that got visible during Lucknow Congress on 19th December 1916. Later, the British Government taken aback and withdrew all the restrictions put on the celebrations of Ganesh Utsav in 1914. People

demonstrated a uniform demand for Swarajya in Lucknow.

One should see Ganesh Utsav as the utsav of people, the utsav of nationality and national integration. It's not mere a fun or a gathering of people, but in true sense it is the National Festival. The one who can differentiate between a public festival and a national festival would understand the further directions of Ganesh Utsav.

To conclude :

Ganesh festival was the masterstroke by Lokmanya Tilak to unite the masses, to educate them and to convince them for action.

In short Ganesh festival has achieved

1.Ganesh festival brought all the people together in spite of religion, cast or creed.

2.To create nationalism

3.To make aware of swaraj (freedom)

4.To make aware of their rights.

5.Created power people

6.To make aware importance of indigenous goods, industry, i.e. swadeshi.

7.To create self respect.

8.To fight against injustice.

9.To make aware of their social duty without selfish motives.

10.Ganesh Utsav become a

platform to educate masses.

11.Platform for publicity.

12.Ganesh Utsav created employment for artists, musicians, singers, etc.

13.Ganesh utsav created market and developed turnover and trade.

14.Ganesh utsav helped to increase sales of indigenous goods.

15.Ganesh utsav created ground level leaders and helped to learn organizations skills.

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