

Bal Gangadhar Tilak

Tilak told truth to Power

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Some leaders are born great; others become great because of the sacrifice they make for a cause or a country. Often in history, the situation in a country throws up the leaders it needs.

The circumstances prevailing in India of the 19th century saw the emergence of many leaders whose leadership was needed. Nationalism was at a nascent stage in the country, but the calibre of the leaders who grew up with it was exceptionally high.

The Indian National Congress had just arrived on the scene. It was led by outstanding and forward-looking leaders like Dadabhai Naroji who wanted the British Raj to give more power to the people in a system where Indian representative could share a slice of power to begin with to run the affairs of the country at different levels through their representatives – a kind of self rule within the ambit of the British Raj. Gradual delegation of power to the people was their approach.

The newly-formed Congress was a well-meaning organisation which did not challenge the Raj, yet wanted the people of India to have some representative institutions where they could have the right to air their views.

Essentially, the Congress was led by moderate political leaders who would meet in town halls in Bombay and Poona and elsewhere and pass sober resolutions, drawing the attention of the British Governor or the Viceroy to consider. Essentially, these leaders wanted a gradual devolution of administrative powers by the British to the people at different levels – local, provincial and possibly at a later stage at Central levels under the British Raj. These leaders were hesitant to ask for more powers.

Balgangadhar Tilak, who was fast emerging as a leader of Maharashtra because of his public speaking as well as writings in his newspaper, *The Kesri*, was of a different ilk. He had already lined up a lot of public support by building a cult for Ganapati Pooja and for celebration of Shivaji's achievements. He chose to take hard line on national issues as opposed to that of the moderates.

Poona, now Pune, where he was living had emerged as a major centre of political thought and political activity. Different streams of thought were flowing through in the debating streams of Pune. In Bombay, the debates were calm and sedate. The people of Poona were more restless although Gopal Krishan Gokhale exercised his influence to moderate passions that had begun building up against the British rule. Gopal Krishan Gokhale and B G Tilak were almost contemporaries, and were of dominant influence in these debates. Tilak, who was senior in age, was more radical in approach.

Both were vocal in their views and Poona and the city of Bombay were abuzz with what the two leaders thought and wrote and on what issues they agreed with each other and what issues they had differed. Gokhale's audience was mostly the emerging educated middle class which wanted to have

more self-rule for Indians, gradually acquiring more power from the British. They did not want to annoy the British rulers.

Tilak, on the other hand, was known for impatience with the British Raj which was at the peak of its power under Lord Curzon.

Tilak had an advantage: Through Ganapati Pooja and the cult of Shivaji he had encouraged, he had certainly become a mass leader in Maharashtra.

He had another advantage – *the Kesri* newspaper he had founded to educate the people of Maharashtra had come to wield great influence on the mind of then Marathi-speaking people. Day in and day out Tilak poured out articles and editorials to spread his message. There was bite in his pen which he liberally used to pursue a sort of radical nationalism that upset the British rulers.

He attacked the Raj for failing the people of India, holding it responsible for India's remaining backward. His editorials in the *Kesri* were at times vitriolic, at times sarcastic, but never relenting in his campaign against the British Raj.

While Tilak's radical nationalism was appealing to more and more people in Maharashtra, the British rulers were becoming more intolerant.

Tilak's writings and speeches were fanning anger against the Raj. His radical views now spreading not only in Maharashtra, but also in Bengal and Punjab. "Lal, Bal, Pal" became the byword for the national movement after Lala Lajpat Rai, Bal Gangadhar Tilak and Bipan Chandra Pal who were guiding campaigns in Punjab, Maharashtra and Bengal. The British rulers had no answer for growing appeal of these three leaders among the people. Suppression of dissent became the active policy which further led to more protests not only in these states, but in various other parts of the country.

Atmosphere across the provinces was getting daily surcharged. As often happens with men with too much power in their hand, Lord Curzon blundered. He partitioned Bengal into two, creating another province -- East Bengal --dominated by the Muslims, Basically the move was meant to weaken the nationalist appeal of the Congress Party. It led to fierce reaction in Bengal, Punjab, Maharashtra and the rest of the country.

In Maharashtra, Tilak went on speaking and writing in the *Kesri*, hitting out at the British Raj. The British rulers' reaction, as was their wont, was to suppress his voice by putting him in jail. Tilak was arrested twice under rigorous criminal laws.

In the two trials, Tilak was defended then by none else than Mohammed Ali Jinnah, then a young lawyer, who several years later was to take to altogether a different track encouraged by the Britain's divide-and-rule policy and with devastating results for the sub-continent.

Tilak was unrelenting. "Swaraj is my birth right: And I will have it" he famously told the British rulers to their face, challenging their might. He was sentenced under the Sedition Law in the second trial for six years of solitary imprisonment and sent to Mandalay Jail, in what was Burma at that time, now Myanmar.

When in prison, he daily wrote a classic book: **Geeta Rahasya**", which is still considered as most authentic interpretation of the **Geeta**. Daily he would write in his solitary cell and daily did the

jailor, a Marathi-speaking officer, specially chosen by the Governor of Bombay would smuggle out these pages and sent it to the authorities to check whether Tilak was sending through its texts any seditious ideas to the people back home.

His incarceration in the Mandalay prison did not wilt his spirit for freedom. The rigorous confinement, however, away from his people, did have an adverse impact on his health. He never fully recovered his health. With whatever strength he was left with, he carried on his task. His sacrifice for the country did not go in vain, however.

Swaraj did become the birth right of the people --but much after him --- in 1947 when the country gained Independence, although at the cost of Partition --- which he certainly would not have approved it..

His various speeches and writings make it clear that he wanted nationalism in India to overcome divisive factors like caste, language, creed, race and religion. He spoke about a sort of “Composite patriotism”.

In a speech in Bellary on May 5, 1905, he said:

“A nation is constituted of many elements, the element of ethnology, of language, of literature, of religion and of tradition. The first duty of an Indian patriot is to ask if the people of India are of one nation. The answer that comes to the lips of everyone is that India is one nation. This answer might be prompted by self-love or self-deception. Perhaps the wish is the father to the thought. Hope being the very salt of patriotism, it is not for the patriot to be disappointed. Provincial and racial ideas would not serve the purpose of a modern patriot; it should be made broader and more liberal”.

Essentially, that was Tilak’s idea of India.

About The Author

The writer is a former Editor of the Hindustan Times, the Indian Express and the Tribune and Editorial Adviser of the Times of India. He is also a former Media Adviser to Prime Minister, Ambassador and Member of the Rajya Sabha.