

Tilak, maker of modern India: fearless dissenter and journalist

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Initially I thought, why me, a modest career journalist and teacher, when there are so many specialists and scholars, women and men of great erudition who have studied Bal Gangadhar Tilak's life and times, his monumental work as a philosopher, writer, sanskritist, freedom fighter and newspaperman extraordinaire.

But then, after thinking things over, I came to the conclusion that although my political and social beliefs might set me apart from Tilak, and of course there is the time factor of over a century that separates us to consider as well, there are many issues, both intellectual and emotional that bring me close to him and to his memory. One has to remember that Tilak was a man of his times and we should not make the mistake of judging him from the perspective of the norms and mores that mark our day and age.

I have unbounded admiration for his contribution to the freedom movement in this country. For his ability to encourage and foster debate; for his bravery in defying and challenging foreign rule; for his astounding courage and readiness to pay the price and suffer for his ideals. Tilak was no sychophant and he was a true scholar for whom intellectual pursuits were as important as his political work in favour of swadeshi and freedom.

I realise that despite the fact that I come from a differing intellectual and social school of thought, I have remained deeply influenced by Tilak and his actions, his utter fearlessness and his determination.

I am also a pure product of his vision for an India, ruled not by a distant conquering, imperial power, but by her own people. I come from Pune, this

wildly fascinating, schizophrenic city, where centuries-old traditions deeply rooted in religious practice live cheek by jowl with modernist thinking often influenced by Western philosophical and political thought. It is a city peopled by moderates and radicals of every stripe but where intellectual activity has continued to exist untrammelled over several centuries. I would describe Pune as the most self-consciously intellectual city in India, in a certain way not unlike Paris, the city where I normally live, where the word “intellectual” is uttered with awe and reverence, not disdain and contempt. This is a city where students are cherished and valued as the nation builders of tomorrow where dissent is welcomed and encouraged.

I personally feel a great deal of gratitude towards Tilak and his contemporaries. I went to Fergusson college, where I learnt to think independently. Teachers like the late Professor Bachal, A.Y.Joshi, Professor Salkar and others instilled in us a love of politics, cultures, languages and distant lands, encouraged us to voice our opinions. I belonged to a trio of students who made up the debating team of Fergusson College. One of them became India’s Ambassador to Paris, High Commissioner to the UK and the country’s Foreign Secretary. The second became our ambassador to Saudi Arabia and the UAE and a Middle East Expert. The third, yours truly, became a journalist and foreign correspondent, publisher, broadcaster, novelist and teacher. One of them was a Christian, the other a Muslim and the third a lapsed Hindu.

Had it not been for Tilak and his companions, Fergusson College and the Deccan Education Society might never have existed. The three of us and many others who went on to achieve personal and public success might not have received the broad-based, progressive education we did. Tilak and his contemporaries worked extremely hard and endured great penury to set up these institutions and make them a success.

I am not a Tilak scholar. But I have read several books about him, including Dhananjay’s Keer’s biography first published in 1952, the papers and documents relating to the Trial of Tilak first published in 1908 and re-issued in 1980 by the Government of India, GafoorNoorani’s Jinnah and Tilak Comrades in The Freedom Struggle, published in 2010, Gayatri Pagdi’s Lokmanya Tilak, the First National Leader published in 2011, Lokmanya Tilak, a biography by A.K.Bhagwat and G.P Pradhan published in 2008 and Foundations of Tilak’s Nationalism by Parimala V.Rao. I shall be quoting a few excerpts from these books and I am grateful to the authors for giving me several of insights into Tilak the Educationist, Man of Letters, Journalist and Freedom Fighter par excellence, as well as a few tools to delve into his personality. In this talk I shall focus on four aspects of Tilak’s life . Firstly his role as an educationist, scholar and thinker, the builder of schools and universities and the

committed teacher.

Secondly, I shall talk about the development of his idea of Swaraj and self-rule. Much has been written about the fight between the moderates and the radicals that led to the split in the Indian National Congress at the 1907 Surat session, about the triumvirate of Lal Bal and Pal – that is to say Bipin Chandra Pal, Lala Lajpat Rai, Bal Gangadhar Tilak who were seen as the disruptors who wanted political freedom before social reform. I shall not go into those details here, limiting myself to examining his decision to push for Swadeshi and his idea of Nationalism.

The third question I shall deal with is Tilak's Idea of India as a country that was home to all. He was the one who coined the words that have become common currency in our day – “unity in diversity”. Here I shall also look into his friendship with Mohammad Ali Jinnah. Suffice to say that there were great contradictions within Tilak himself and one cannot square off his religious beliefs and observances with his globally tolerant and all-encompassing view of India as the rightful home of its diverse populations be it in terms of belief systems, ethnicities or linguistic groupings.

And finally, I shall talk about Tilak the fearless newspaperman who preferred to spend long years in prison rather than seek early release on conditions laid out by the British government.

Tilak can justifiably be described as the first Indian political leader of national, not just local stature. He lived before Mahatma Gandhi emerged on the national stage and died an untimely death a mere five years after Gandhi's return to India from South Africa. Loved by millions, venerated by many, he talked the language of the people. They loved him because they saw him act and suffer for his beliefs and actions. He was above all a man of action which stemmed from a deep religious conviction about right and wrong, duty and dharma.

In his book *Geeta Rahasya*, which he completed in six months while in prison in Mandalay exiled on sedition charges, he lays the emphasis on selfless, committed action. And I quote: “The conclusion I have come to is that the Geeta advocates the performance of action in this world even after the actor has achieved the highest union with the supreme Deity by Jnana (Knowledge) or Bhakti (devotion). This action must be done to keep the world going by the right path of evolution which the Creator has destined the world to follow. In order that the action may not bind the actor it must be done with the aim of helping his purpose without any attachment to the coming result. This I hold is the lesson of the Gita. Jnana Yoga there is, yes. Bhakti Yoga there is, Yes. Who says not? But they are subservient to the Karma Yoga preached in the Gita.... I differ from almost all commentators when I say that the Gita enjoins action

even after perfection in Jnana and Bhakti is attained and the Deity is reached through these media....If man seeks unity with the Deity he must necessarily seek unity with the interests of the world also and work for it. Will the individual say "I shall do no action and I shall not help the world?" It does not stand to reason...."

Tilak's activism began very early in his life when, with his fellow student and friend, the great Gopal Ganesh Agarkar, he felt the need to start a school that would help the poor and needy. Cheap, effective education, accessible to all, was their motto. With Vishnushastri Chiplunkar, M.B Namjoshi and V.S.Apte they started the New English School in 1880. The school was novel in that it was co-educational until 1936 when the Ahilyadevi School for Girls was started but this year, 138 years after its foundation, the institution has once again begun admitting girls.

The school's financial prospects being extremely weak, Namjoshi suggested the institution take over his newspaper, the Deccan Star. They also decided to start another publication, Mahratta. And around the same time, they launched its Marathi version called Kesari. The two papers would be used to propagate their ideas while generating income for the school. The school did extremely well and in 1884, the group launched the Deccan Education Society which a year later, established my alma mater, Fergusson College. Ultimately Tilak would become the sole proprietor of both Kesari and Mahratta with Kesari becoming the largest circulation daily anywhere in India. Opposed to the idea of limiting his actions to teaching, Tilak left the Deccan Education Society and plunged into public work espousing many causes but he never gave up his own intellectual research or study and taught Mathematics for eleven years. He was a noted Sanskritist, an ace legal mind although he never practiced law and a mathematician of repute and he conducted classes in both those disciplines. The classes helped him prop up the woeful finances of the two dailies.

His academic brilliance, eloquence, mastery over the finer points of contract law and unparalleled rhetoric pushed him into the public eye and he became a prominent member of the Congress party.

The most significant and lasting role Tilak performed in the Congress and through his editorials, national speech tours in big and small towns and villages across India, was in propounding the philosophy of Swadeshi or Indian Nationalism. As an organisation man Tilak built up the edifice of the Indian National Congress across the country. And although he was one of the most steadfast and staunch supporters of the Congress, he was not wholeheartedly accepted by the policymakers of the party until the Lucknow session in 1916, just four years before his death. It is to Tilak that we attribute the famous quote

“Swaraj is my birthright, and I shall have it!” when he founded the Home Rule League in 1916 at Belgaum. It was here that he met Mahatma Gandhi for the first time.

But I am getting ahead of myself. It was the partition of Bengal by Lord Curzon the Viceroy of India on 16 October 1905 that the flame of Swadeshi was lit. There had been calls for the boycott of British goods before but they had failed to win popular support. Although Maharashtra and Bengal were on the extreme western and Eastern edges of the subcontinent, both states were crucibles of intellectual debate and lively public discourse. Aurobindo Ghosh later known as Sri Aurobindo and Tilak developed an extremely strong bond. The test of a political leader lies in his ability to work on public sentiment at opportune moments and Tilak passed that test admirably. He saw in the unrest in Bengal the signs of fresh political conflict. He had long been a critic of Curzon and he wrote a powerful article in the Kesari. Entitled The Crisis, it said: It is evident that the government is not prepared to pay the least heed to public opinion expressed in mammoth meetings attended by lakhs of people. And if we do not find ways to oppose the present move and the tendencies of the government, people will lose faith in such movements. The government will not yield so long as we do not resort to stringent methods. We are at present passing through a crisis and the whole of India is looking to the actions of the leaders of Bengal. They must set an ideal before the people. They must tour the whole of Bengal and make the boycott of British goods successful. We now need action and not words, and action of a determined nature... Boycott is the correct weapon... But its strength lies in action and not in declaration. Tilak's articles during this period, when he was sketching out his ideas of Swadeshi and Nationalism have a rare force and lucidity. They are clear, crisp, simple and to the point. The Swadeshi movement calling for the boycott of British products found in him a remarkable champion.

The relationship between Jinnah and Tilak has been a long neglected area of study and we have to thank A.G.Noorani for giving us a remarkable peep into the close friendship and understanding between the two men. Their friendship was all the more remarkable given the fact that twenty years separated them, Tilak being the older of the two. They also came from hugely different cultural and political backgrounds. Together they made Bombay one of the great centres of the freedom struggle.

Following the split in the Congress at its Surat session, it was Jinnah who acted as a bridge builder, attempting to reconcile the two sides. And later, in 1915 and 16, Tilak and Jinnah worked together to bring the Extremists back into the Congress fold.

Chief Justice M.C Chagla wrote in his memoirs: “It is surprising that

there should have been so much in common between Jinnah and Tilak. I understand that the regard Jinnah had for Tilak was reciprocated by Tilak. Nothing conveys the depth of Jinnah's friendship with Tilak better than the eulogy Jinnah delivered to condole Tilak's passing on 1st August 1920.

Mr Tilak was a shrewd politician. After the split at Surat, where I came to know him first, Mr Tilak's party in the Indian National Congress had a very small voice and remained in a minority, and so far as Mr Tilak was concerned, his conviction by Mr Justice Davar in a case against him for sedition, under section 124-A of the Indian penal code removed him from the political arena for six years. The sentence passed against him for six years was a savage sentence... After his return from Mandalay I came in closer contact with him and Mr Tilak who was known in his earlier days to be to be communalistic and stood for Maharashtra, developed and showed broader and greater national outlook as he gained experience ... Mr Tilak rendered yeoman services to the Hindu Muslim unity which ultimately resulted in the Lucknow pact in 1916. Subsequently he was one of the pioneers of the Home League Rule movement and established the Indian Home Rule League. In his pursuit to make the movement popular, he delivered a series of lectures all over Maharashtra and again he was convicted by the Magistrate in Poona ...” Such words of praise have many a time been obscured or ignored because of similar hyper nationalistic narratives in both India and Pakistan. Across the border Jinnah is viewed as the absolute super hero while in this country he is seen as the arch villain responsible for the carving up of the country and the senseless bloodletting that followed. When Tilak knew him Jinnah was still in favour of a unified, secular India. He said: The Hindus and the Mohomedans should stand united and use every constitutional and legitimate means to affect the transfer of power from bureaucracy to democracy as soon as possible. But for a real new India to arise petty and small things should be given up. She is now India irredenta and to be redeemed; all Indians must offer up sacrifice not of their good things but of those evil things they cling to blindly – their hates and divisions, their pride in what they should be thoroughly ashamed of, their quarrels and misunderstandings.

On his return from exile and imprisonment in Mandalay, Tilak echoed similar thoughts as recorded by Sadashiv Vaman Bapat: Tilak wanted the national movement in India to keep entirely free from all contamination with any theological or foreign political questions. He foresaw, as if by prophetic vision, the frightful consequences from accepting the Khilafat dispute and he warned us all against it. To those Hindu nationalists who said they had agreed to agitate for the Kilafat movement only to secure the active support and cooperation of the Muslims in our national fight for freedom, Tilak had only one

reply: If Hindus think they will succeed in deceiving the Muslims, they will soon be disillusioned and will find they did not deceive the Muslims but themselves. Let us therefore seek cooperation on the broad national question of Swaraj. In that by all means give them special privileges to bring them into the Congress fold but never seek to introduce Theology into our politics. To quote Noorani, “No Indian leader of his times or later has had as many brushes with the law as Tilak did. In 1897 and in 1907 Tilak was tried for sedition. He was convicted in both trials. In 1897 he was sentenced to 18 months rigorous imprisonment.

He was accused of Sedition and tried under sections 124 A (Whoever, by words, either spoken or written, or by signs, or by visible representation, or otherwise, brings or attempts to bring into hatred or contempt, or excites or attempts to excite disaffection towards, the Government established by law in India, shall be punished with imprisonment for life, to which fine may be added) ...and 153 A (Promoting enmity between different groups on grounds of religion, race, place of birth, residence, language, etc., and doing acts prejudicial to maintenance of harmony)

In the second trial in 1908, Jinnah appeared in Tilak’s defence. The Jury returned a split verdict. Eight Europeans who knew not a word of Marathi returned a verdict of guilty based on translations while two Parsi judges who also could not understand Marathi held him not guilty. Given the split verdict the judge should have ordered a retrial. Instead he sentenced Tilak to six years transportation – that is to say imprisonment in a penal colony in Mandalay, Burma – three for each of the two cases, the sentences to run consecutively, not concurrently. Tilak spoke in his own defence over five days for a total of 21 hours and ten minutes.

The charges were flimsy. On April 20, 1908 a bomb intended for a British official killed two British women travelling in the same carriage. In articles in the Kesari and Maharatta Tilak argued that such acts were the result of the incessant repression of public opinion. “It is not possible to cause British rule to disappear by such murderous deeds. But rulers who exercise unrestricted power must also remember that there is also a limit to the patience of humanity. Where governments neglect their duties towards their subjects, the occurrence of calamities such as Muzzafarpore is inevitable”. ... the real and lasting means of stopping the bombs consists in making a beginning to grant the important rights of Swarajya to the people. The government produced a list of 23 seditious charges against him. They accused him of supporting terrorists and bomb throwers, of intentionally spreading disaffection against the government.

In his defence Tilak brought up several issues, notably that of press

freedom before the judge and jury, vainly pointed to the fact that they were relying on inaccurate translations and wrongly imputing intentions. They all fell on deaf ears. The government was alarmed by his popularity and determined to nail him, physically remove him from the scene of action. "The jury may not approve of my views but the question is of good or bad intention, he said."

As he was told the verdict Tilak was asked if he wished to say something. This is what he said: All I wish to say is that in spite of the verdict of the Jury, I maintain that I am innocent. There are higher powers that rule the destiny of things and it may be the will of Providence that the cause which I represent may prosper more by my suffering than by my remaining free."

News spread like wildfire and thousands of people thronged the streets in protest. The force the government employed to quell the mobs was impressive: The Bombay Garrison made up of three companies, the Royal Garrison Artillery, half a battalion of British Infantry, one regiment of Native Infantry supplemented by a volunteer force of 1274 drawn from Foot, Mounted and Artillery and the police force made up of 85 Europeans carrying revolvers and 2038 native constables armed with sabres and a further 70 native constables armed with breech loading rifles firing buckshot..... The firing resulted in fifteen deaths with 38 wounded.

Tilak was shipped away to Mandalay. While he was in prison his wife died. He agonised over her death. In 1909 Tilak was asked if he would agree to a conditional release. His response was typically uncompromising.

"One year is almost over. I now have only five years before I can live with you as a free citizen. I cannot let go of all the social and political work that I have done so far for the sake of a few years. I will soon complete 53 years of age. Considering the average life span and my health, I have another ten years of life. If I complete my term, I will be able to live the way I wish to, but if I accept the terms that you are suggesting, my life will not be very different from death. My work is not only related to politics. I can also devote myself entirely to literature, but taking into consideration the beliefs and values by which I have lived so far, I cannot accept living under restrictions like these. If, for the sake of my personal gain I step out of public life, it will not be ethical on my part with serious consequences. I have never lived for myself or for my own family. I have lived to work for society. I would rather spend my life in prison than come out as useless. And who knows? A lot of events might take place within the next five years which may lead to my release. If that does not happen, I am ready for the final journey; You can keep trying for my release as much as possible, You can stop trying if it is not feasible. I refuse to be released on the impossible terms suggested by the government.

The government showed no leniency, no compassion. Tilak served out his entire sentence. But the years in solitary confinement took their toll. Six years later, Tilak was dead.

The sedition laws under which Tilak was tried and convicted to long prison sentences date back to 1860. India has still kept these repressive laws used against our most illustrious freedom fighters on the books.

We are at a crucial moment in our history. Communal ill will, which Nehru regarded as the biggest threat to the unity of India is being fomented again. There is deep insecurity in the land born out of unemployment, bleak futures, a sliding economy and a leadership that appears to have lost itself in its own hubris and poisonous rhetoric.

For those who still hesitate to speak up or demonstrate, make their dissatisfaction known. Even the first baby steps into politics require a certain amount of courage because we are living under a vindictive, vengeful and authoritative regime. But we will triumph, as Tilak did.
