Balagangadhar Tilak and His Philosophy of Nationalism

Dr. G. Gnaneshwari
Department Of History, Government Arts College,
DR.B.R.AMBEDKAR Road, Bangalore-560001, Karnataka, India.

Abstract: The extremist ideology created a leadership trio of Lala Lajpat Rai, Bal Ganghadhar Tilak and Bipin Chandr Pal, who altered the nationalist vocabulary by incorporating swadeshi, boycott and national education. Of the trio, Bal Gangadhar, Tilak, rooted in Maharashtra, was perhaps the most articulate militant leader of this phase of freedom struggle. In his public life of forty years, Tilak devoted his energies to diverse type of activities. As an educator he was one of the most important members responsible for the establishment of the Poona New English School, The Decan Education Society and the Fergusson College. Long before his active involvement in the Indian National Congress, Tilak articulated his nationalist ideas in both Kesari (in Marathi) and Mahratta(in English). In 1893 he transformed the traditional religious Ganapthi festival into a compaign for nationalist ideas through patriotic songs and speeches. Similarly , in 1896, he introduced the Shivaji festival to inspire the youth by drawing upon the patriotism to Shivaji in opposition to the Mughal ruler Auranzeb. His Home Rule League, established in April 1916, prepared the country for swaraj. He had a good knowledge of Indian Nationalism and the British labour party during his visit to England. He had a good knowledge of Indian History and Indian Economics. He had inherited from his father a strong sense of personal dignity and self-respect. He had a passion for independence, both for himself and for his country. Tilak was born in 1856 in Maharashtra in an educated family. His father was an educator and he carefully taught the boy in Sanskrit and mathematics. From his childhood, he inherited a vision of a new India arising firmly based on the spirit and traditions of her civilisation and her glorious past. Soon after the completion of his university education, Tilak embarked upon his mission in life. As he was deeply interested education and public service from his young age, he resolved to dedicate his life to the cause of reorientation of India education and drastic social and political reforms.

SOCIO-POLITICAL IDEAS OF TILAK

Although the seeds of patriotism in modern Maharashtra were sown by Chiploonkar, Tilak was the real founder of a vigorous and valiant nationalism there. Through the Kesari he spread for nearly forty years the gospel of natural rights, political liberty and justice. He taught the people of Maharashtra the value of organised self help by deciding to serve the plague victims in Poona during the 1897, Tilak become a leader of the people who auto matically were drawn to him for humanism. Apart from his role in serving the victims, he wrote several pieces in Kesari condemning the arrangement and the steps, the government undertook in combating this deadly disease. The cult of Ganapati and Shivaji gave to the Maratha people a renewed sense of patriotism, vitalism, and the capacity of political self assertiveness. He revived the concept of swarajya which was used to designate the polity of Shivaji. The people of Maharashtra thoroughly understood the meaning and message of Tilak. Majority of the Indians regarded Tilak as an invincible hero and as the antagonist of the British power in India.

ROLE OF TILAK IN NATIONAL MOVEMENT

Tilak’s role in the Indian National Congress was that of an agitator.. He wanted that the Congress should have its roots in the life of the people. From 1905 to 1907 and from 1917 to 1920 he played a decisive role in the congress. He taught the gospel of self reliance and self-help at a time when some of the other leaders were mainly looking to British sympathy and support. He introduced extremist national sentiments in the Congress. The Congress so for was mainly middle class organisation. Tilak attempted to bring it to the Congress the lower middle-classes and the ordinary masses.

TILAK THE STATESMAN

As one of the greatest makers of the Indian Nation, Tilak has won undying fame. He was not merely an agitator but was a statesman whose life work is the creation of the foundations of a strong nation. Tilak was a great politician and an all pervasive and
exalted patriotism was the dominant theme of his life. The mission of his life was to rouse patriotic self-consciousness among Indians. But he was not merely the prophet of an aggressive nationalism. He was also a leader who made great efforts to execute his ideas into concrete action. Hence, Tilak did not remain a mere political intellectual but was a practical statesman of a high order. Tilak is a unique figure in several respects and for generations his memories will inspire the people of India and freedom lover all over the world. In political life, Tilak was the Bhisma of Indian nationalism. He was an intellectual giant, a statesman and a moral hero.

TILAK AND ADVAI'THA PHILOSOPHY

Tilak was a believer in the Advaita philosophy. He had a very comprehensive conception of Hinduism in his mind. He said in a speech of January 3, 1906 thus; ‘The term Sanatan Dharma shows that our religion is very old, as old as the history of human race itself. Vedic religion was the religion of the Aryans from a very early time. Hindu religion as a whole is made up of different parts correlated to each other as so many sons and daughters of one great religion. If this idea is kept in view and if we try to unite the various sections it will be consolidated in a mighty force. Religion is an element in nationality. The word Dharma means a tie and comes from the root dhri, to bear or hold ‘what is there to hold together’. To connect the soul with god, and man with man, dharma means our duties towards God and duties towards man. Hindu religion as such provides for a moral as well as social tie. ….’ Tilak has given a broad definition of Hindu. According to him, a Hindu is one who accepts the authoritativeness of Vedas. A Hindu moulds his conduct according to the injunctions of the Vedas the smritis and the puranas.

TILAK’S POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY

Tilak’s political philosophy has its roots both in the Indian tradition as well as in some of the currents of contemporary western and legal thought. His main problem in life was the political emancipation of India and there is an element of great realism in his political ideas and outlook. He, however, was not a realist in the Hobbesian and Machiavellian sense of the term. He was well-versed in ancient Sanskrit philosophy and his political thought represents a fusion of some of the dominant conceptions of Indian thought and the nationalistic and democratic ideas of the modern world.

The metaphysical assumptions of Tilak influenced his political ideas. According to him, the metaphysics of non-dualism of the Vedanta implied the political conception of natural right. Advaita taught him the supremacy of the concept of freedom. Freedom is the very life of the individual soul which Vedanta declares to be not separate from God but identical with him. Freedom, according to Tilak, was a divine attribute. Freedom may be equated with the autonomous power of creativism. Without freedom no moral and spiritual life is possible. Foreign imperialism kills the soul of a nation and hence Tilak fought against the British empire.

TILAK’S CONCEPT OF NATIONALISM

Tilak’s nationalism was also influenced by the western theories of national independence and self-determination. In the famous trial speech of 1908, he quotes with approval of John Stuart Mill’s definition of nationality. In 1919 and 1920 he accepted the Wilsonian concept of self-determination and pleaded for its application to India. Hence, Tilak’s philosophy of nationalism was a synthesis of the vedantic ideal of the spirit as supreme freedom and the western conceptions of Mazzini, Edmund Burke, J.S. Mill and Woodrow Wilson. Because of his spiritual approach, Tilak regarded that swarajya was not only a right but dharma.

AS A PROPHET OF MILITANT NATIONALISM

Tilak was nationalist par excellence of Vedanta philosophy and orthodox Hindu rituals and practices. Tilak was accused of being sectarian in multi-religious India. That he upheld the most reactionary form of Hindu orthodoxy was evident in his opposition to the 1890 Age of Consent Bill that sought to raise the age of consummation of marriage of girls from 10 to 12 years. While the moderate spokesman Ranade hailed the bill for its progressive social role, Tilak found in this legislation an unwarranted intervention in Hindu social life. Similarly, his involvement in the cow protection society alienated the Muslims to a large extent from the extremist campaign. Tilak’s argument in favour of law protection drew upon the sacredness of cow in Hindu belief, completely disregarding the importance of beef in Muslim diet.

Tilak’s nationalism had to some extent, a revivalist orientation. He wanted to bring to the front the message of the Vedas and the Gita for providing spiritual energy and moral enthusiasm to the nation. A recovery of the healthy and vital traditions of the old culture of India was essential. He said: A true nationalist desires to build on old foundations. Reform on utter disrespect for the old does not appeal to him as constructive work.…… We do not want to anglicize our institutions and so
denationalise them in the name of social and political reforms’ He pointed out that the Shivaji and the Ganapati festivals had been encouraged by in because they served to link contemporary events and movements with historical traditions.

Nationalism is essentially a psychological and spiritual conception. It is the modern version of the old deep sentiments of tribal patriotism which we find since prehistoric and ancient times. It is true that nationalism flourished best when there are objective entities which create sentiments of unity. A common language, belief in common descent from an actual or a mythical race habitation on the same territory and profession of a common religion are very important objective factors which generate the feelings of nationalism. There must be the presence of a psychological unity fostered by the heritage of historical tradition. In spite of racial and linguistic diversities, this psychological bond of nationalism has been important in India. The overflowing continuity of the stream of India culture since olden times has contributed to produce this fundamental psychological unity in India. Besides the subjective experience of this psychological unity, another feature of nationalism also has been upper most in India namely spiritual nationalism. In India the spiritual side of nationalism has been stressed by Bankim Chandra, Vivekananda, Aurobindo Gosh and Tilak.

TILAK AS A LEADER

As a leader, Tilak wanted to create a solid nationalistic following in Maharashtra and for the purpose he wanted to symbolise the permanent religious and historic traditions of the people. The Ganapati and the Shivaji festivals were the symbols of the rising symbolism in Maharashtra and later on, to some extent, in other parts of India also. The Ganapathi unsaved was an old institution and is traditional in Maharashtra. By inaugurating the Ganapathi festival, Tilak tried to bring nationalism to the masses. He regarded Shivaji as a vibhuti, in the language of Gita. A vibhuti is a man gifted with creative powers of divine nature. According to Tilak, national festivals provided opportunities of confraternity amongst the educated and uneducated multitude. Tilak believes that nationalism is not visible and concrete entity but is a kind of sentiment, an idea, and in generating this idea the historical memories of the great figures of a country play a significant role.

Tilak had a systematic philosophy of nationalism. He felt that the roots of Indian nationalism must he not with mere intellectual appeals to the theories of the western liberal writers but in the sentiments and emotions of the Indian masses and hence he felt that the memories of Shivaji would serve to re-invigorate nationalistic emotions of the common people Shivaji was the symbol of the resentment and resistance of the people against oppression and injustice. Thus Tilak wanted to substantiate the nationalist movement in India by a strong cultural and religious revival of Hinduism.

SWARAJ AND SWADESHI MOVEMENTS

Two important features in Tilak’s political philosophy separated him from the moderate thinkers. First, unlike the moderates who argued for gradual introduction of democratic institutional in India, Tilak insisted on immediate swaraj or self-rule. His concept of swaraj was not complete in dependence but a government constituted by the Indian themselves that rules according to the wishes of the people or their representatives. Similar to the British executive that decides on policies, impose and remove taxes and determine the allocation of public expenditure, Indians should have the right to run their own government, to make laws, to appoint the administrators as well as to spend the tax revenue. The second dimension relates to the notion of the right of the people to resist an authority that loses legitimacy.

As early as 1895, Tilak had begun to preach the necessity for swaraj. He came to realise that swaraj or self-rule must precede meaningful social reform, that the only enduring basis for national unity and national self-respect must be national self rule. He had reminded the people that Shivaji had recreated swaraj as the necessary foundation of social and political freedom. His insistence on swaraj was completely consistent with his personal, social and political philosophy.

PROGRAMMES OF TILAK

Tilak presented the nation with a threefold programme or techniques for effective practical and political action. The three principles were boycott, swadeshi and national education. Boycott initially involved the refusal of the people to purchase British manufactured goods. It was started as a measure designed to bring economic pressure on the British business interests, both in India and abroad. Boycott gradually moved from the economic into the political sphere. At the Calcutta Congress of 1906, Tilak supported the swadeshi resolution and spelled out the economic foundations of Indian nationalism. The swadeshi movement quickly became a movement of national regeneration: swadeshi was a practical application of love of country.
TILAK AND SWARAJ

Swaraj became the reason and justification for the entire programme and movement led by Tilak and other nationalists. He held that the attainment of swaraj would be great victory for Indian nationalism. He gave to Indian the mantra: ‘swaraj is the birth right of Indians. He defined swaraj as people’s rule instead of that of bureaucracy. For pushing his ideal of swaraj forward he started Home Rule League in 1916 with the co-operation of Annie Besant. Tilak contemplated federal type of political structure under swaraj. He referred to the example of the American Congress and said that the government of India should keep it hands similar powers to exercise them through an impartial council for the correct implementation of his programme. Tilak urged the method of non-violent passive resistance’. Thus Tilak’s method of action was democratic and constitutional. He had constructed practical objective. The swadeshi boycotted movement was an attempt at vindicating the rights of the people to self government and hence it used several techniques of political agitation as mass processions, big public meetings, strikes, picketing etc, which have been followed by later Indian leaders in their political movements.

Assessment

Tilak was one of the dominant political figures who gave to the people of India the first lessons in the consciousness of the right of swaraj. He enlightened the population of India into a political recognition of the general will of the nation. He has given us a theory of nationalism. His theory of nationalism was synthesis of the teachings of both eastern and western thinkers. Tilak was not merely a nationalist leader with tremendous political acumen. He himself represented a new wave of nationalist movement that created an automatic space for it by providing the most powerful and persuasive critique of moderate philosophy and articulating his nationalist ideology in language that was meaningful to those it was addressed.