

A Study on the Philosophy of 'Karma' with a Reference of B.G. Tilak and Swami Vivekananda

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Abstract – Lokamanya Tilak (1856–1920) represents the full tide of ideological activity in the Indian Nationalist movement. Long overshadowed by his younger contemporary, Gandhi, his life and thought are only now, a third of a century after his death, receiving due recognition.

Prior to his entrance upon the political stage, Indian leadership afforded the spectacle of a rather polite debating society which accepted British ideals and values as almost axiomatic. Protests against government policies consisted of thoughtfully worded petitions calculated to appeal to the sense of reason and fair play of officials. Tilak saw little profit in such method, but his rivals in the Nationalist leadership, particularly G. K. Gokhale, were wedded to the traditions of British parliamentary procedure.

Keywords: Karma, Philosophy, Yoga

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INTRODUCTION

Bal Gangadhar Tilak was a Hindu Indian independence activist, journalist, lawyer and social reformer. Tilak was often referred to as "The Father of Indian Unrest," originally a derogatory term allotted to him by the British authorities, it is now considered a favorable title. Tilak was also given the honorary title of "Lokmanya," meaning "accepted by the people." Tilak greatly valued education and believed that by educating the people of India Indian independence could be achieved.

Born on July 23, 1856 in Ratnagiri, India as a Chitpawan Brahmin, Bal Gangadhar Tilak was among the first generation of Indians to receive a college education (Sharma 192). He graduated with a Bachelor of Arts in 1876, and received a Bachelor of Law in 1880 from Deccan College (Sharma 192). Tilak was greatly influenced by his grandfather who had borne witness to some of the atrocities and achievements that occurred during the Indian Mutiny (Sharma 193). This would come to influence his political ideologies later in life.

Bal Gangadhar Tilak was instrumental in advancing the education of the people of India. Tilak said "The salvation of our motherland lay in education and only education of the people" (Sharma 193). His first educational endeavor was in 1880 as a co-founder of Poona's New English School (Brown 1961:76). Later in 1884, Tilak, along with several of his colleagues, founded the Deccan Education Society (Brown 1961:76). The following year the Deccan Education Society established Fergusson College in Poona.

Tilak's educational activism reflected his belief that educating the masses was the only way to achieve Indian independence.

Bal Gangadhar Tilak established two newspapers, the Mahratta, published in English, and the Kesari, published in Marathi (Brown 1961:77). Both newspapers were intended to promote education among the Hindus of Western India. The newspapers were also meant to promote mass agitation among Indians, a conscious effort to mobilize Indians against British rule (Brown 1961:77). Both newspapers were widely successful and managed to gain the attention of the British authorities. This attention, coupled with Tilak's ambition of mobilizing the people of India to fight for independence, would cause Tilak legal difficulties in the future.

One of Bal Gangadhar Tilak's first political experiences occurred as a result of the Age of Consent Bill of 1890, which proposed raising the minimum age of cohabitation for Hindu marriages from 10 to 12 years of age (Sharma 194). Tilak did not disagree with the content of the bill, but disagreed with the British government's ability to establish and enforce the bill. He felt that legal decisions should be made by Indians upon the attainment of Indian self-government, rather than by a foreign government (Brown 1961:77). Tilak often stated "Indian social problems must be solved by Indians" (Sharma 195).

During a three year period from 1905-1908 the British government decided to divide the province

of Bengal into two separate provinces, which they claimed was for the purpose of “administrative convenience” (Sharma 195). Tilak and two of his colleagues, Lala Lajpat Rai and Binpin Chandra Pal, created the Lal-Bal-Pal political regime to protest what they believed was actually an attempt to “divide and rule” by the British government (Sharma 195). The Lal-Bal-Pal regime is often considered the first instance of Indian nationalism and spurred the Swadeshi (indigenous goods) Movement (Muralidharan 12). [For more information on the economic and social impact of the Swadeshi Movement see Biswas (1995)]. Their program of “swaraj, swadeshi and national education” provided the impetus required to mobilize the people of India (Nambodiripad 4).

Tilak played a fundamental role in the Swadeshi Movement. The aim of the Swadeshi Movement was to gain swaraj or “self-rule” for India through the establishment of economic self-sufficiency. Tilak often stated “swaraj is my birthright; and I will have it” (Nambodiripad 3). Tilak used the movement as an opportunity to extend his political influence to both the working class and the citizens of Bombay (Pati 61).

Bal Gangadhar Tilak became a member of the Indian National Congress in 1890. In 1907 diverging opinions within the Indian National Congress had reached an apex, which resulted in the “Surat Split,” dividing members of Congress into two camps; the “moderates” and the “extremists” (Guha 115). Tilak came to represent the extremists, and his lifelong acquaintance, Gopal Krishna Gokhale, represented the moderates. [Guha (2010) provides an account of Gopal Krishna Gokhale’s life and political career]. As leader of the extremists, Tilak’s mandate included “self-government, national education, and the use of boycott” and passive resistance (Brown 1961:78). Tilak never did become president of the Indian National Congress.

Bal Gangadhar Tilak was imprisoned twice in his lifetime. The first imprisonment in 1897 was for sedition and lasted eighteen months (Guha 117). Sedition in this instance was defined as “spreading disaffection against the British Indian government” (Karve 208). In 1908 Tilak was charged with sedition for the second time (Guha 117). His actions were seen as “intensifying racial animosity between Indians and the British” (Guha 117). He served his six year sentence in Burma. The news of Tilak’s imprisonment caused outrage in Bombay where textile workers in seventy mills went on strike and ultimately shut down production (Guha 117). This provides evidence of the widespread support and popularity that Tilak had gained among the Indian working class. He was tried for sedition a third time in 1916, however he was successfully acquitted of the charges (Guha 118).

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The Hindu religion was very important to Bal Gangadhar Tilak, both as his practiced religion as well as for political purposes. He believed that Hinduism, and its various sects, ought to be united in order to form one ‘mighty Hindu nation’ (Harvery 321). Tilak believed that this unity could be achieved by simply adhering to the principles outlined in traditional Hindu texts such as the Bhagavad Gita and the Ramayana (Harvey 321). [Chaitanya (1987) provides modern insight into the contents of the Bhagavad Gita. For insight into the Ramayana see Hindery (1976)]. He outlined his philosophy in his book titled Gita Rahasya, meaning “The Secret of the Gita,” which he wrote during his six year imprisonment in Burma (Sharma 196). The principle that Tilak emphasized the most in his book was found in the Bhagavad Gita. It was the need for activism, or action, which he felt should be applied to religion and politics. This call for action is often referred to as Karma Yoga, a principle in Brahmanic theory insisting upon the warrior’s responsibility to fight (Brown 1958:197). He also advocated the superiority of the Hindu religion over the religions of the West in Gita Rahasya (Sharma 197). Ultimately Bal Gangadhar Tilak sought the use of principles found within the Bhagavad Gita to revitalize Hinduism, replace Western philosophy, and legitimize political action (Harvey 322).

In addition to the Gita Rahasya Tilak wrote two books on Vedic Studies. This included The Orion in 1893, and The Arctic Home Of The Vedas in 1903. In both books he attempted to use science to reveal the history of Hinduism in an attempt to reconstruct Hindu history (Sharma 197). His aim was to separate Hindu tradition from the work of Western academics. The “Aryan theory of race” characterized by Tilak in these books would become of crucial importance to Hindu revitalization (Muralidharan 16).

Tilak sought to strengthen the Hindu tradition and Indian consciousness through the revival of two Hindu festivals, one dedicated to the deity Ganapati, and the other to Sivaji (Brown 1961:78). Tilak managed to transform the Ganapati celebration from a private in-the-home affair into a mass celebration. He began the Sivaji festival to celebrate the achievements and memory of the medieval warrior chief by the same name (Guha 116). He ultimately used these festivals as a mode of political mobilization for the Indian Independence Movement.

Tilak joined together the Hindu religion and Indian politics in order to emphasize his policy of Hindu nationalism. He believed that religion played a very important role in nationality. Tilak’s historical

interpretations led him to believe that Indian unity existed only during times when Hinduism's predominance was secure, and chaos and disorder were prevalent when the Hindu religion reached a low point (Muralidharan 12). Tilak has often been credited with exercising a policy of exclusionary nationalism, emphasizing the distinctness of the Hindu religion rather than cultural tolerance. A great example of this religious intolerance was Tilak's revival of the Hindu Ganapati festival, which often occurred during the same time as the Islamic Muharram observance. As such, the festival became an occasion for fighting between Muslims and Hindus (Muralidharan 13). Hinduism, being a class-based religion, excluded the lower classes of the religion in many instances. Therefore, in addition to alienating much of the Muslim Indian population, Hindu nationalism also alienated much of the lower caste Hindu population. Ultimately, Tilak's policy of Hindu nationalism was unitary and intolerant of diversity, making him a controversial historical figure.

After his release from prison in 1914 Tilak was run down both physically and spiritually. He was willing to accept Dominion status within the British Empire as opposed to complete independence (Guha 117). He also called upon India to support England in World War One and began to praise some of the beneficial aspects of the British government (Pati 53). He remained active in politics and went back to being a Congressman in 1915 (Pati 52). However, the polarization that had resulted in the Moderates and Extremists was no longer relevant upon his return. In 1916 he went on to form the All India Home Rule League, which further voiced Indian demand for self-government.

DISCUSSION

Bal Gangadhar Tilak died on August 1, 1920 at the age of 64. Tilak left an enduring legacy. After his death he became recognized as the first "father of the movement for the liberation of India," a cause that would later be adopted by Mahatma Gandhi (Karve 208). [See Spear (1969) for a historical account of the independence activism of Mahatma Gandhi]. The Swadeshi Movement that Tilak helped initiate ultimately achieved its goal when Indian independence was achieved in 1947. Through his political activism, Hindu nationalism, and various modes of religious and political mobility Tilak was able to lay the groundwork for the future of the Indian Independence Movement.

In 1880 Narendra joined Keshab Chandra Sen's *Nava Vidhan*, which was established by Sen after meeting Ramakrishna and reconvertng from Christianity to Hinduism. Narendra became a member of a Freemasonry lodge "at some point before 1884" and of the Sadharan Brahmo Samaj in his twenties, a breakaway faction of the Brahmo Samaj led by Keshab Chandra Sen and Debendranath Tagore.

From 1881 to 1884 he was also active in Sen's Band of Hope, which tried to discourage youths from smoking and drinking.

It was in this cultic milieu that Narendra became acquainted with Western esotericism. His initial beliefs were shaped by Brahmo concepts, which included belief in a formless God and the deprecation of idolatry and a "streamlined, rationalized, monotheistic theology strongly coloured by a selective and modernistic reading of the *Upanisads* and of the Vedanta."

Rammohan Roy, the founder of the Brahmo Samaj who was strongly influenced by unitarianism, strived toward an universalistic interpretation of Hinduism. His ideas were "altered [...] considerably" by Debendranath Tagore, who had a romantic approach to the development of these new doctrines, and questioned central Hindu beliefs like reincarnation and karma, and rejected the authority of the *Vedas*.

The same search for direct intuition and understanding can be seen with Vivekananda. Not satisfied with his knowledge of philosophy, Narendra came to "the question which marked the real beginning of his intellectual quest for God." He asked several prominent Calcutta residents if they had come "face to face with God", but none of their answers satisfied him.

At this time, Narendra met Debendranath Tagore (the leader of Brahmo Samaj) and asked if he had seen God. Instead of answering his question, Tagore said "My boy, you have the *Yogi's* eyes."

According to Banhatti, it was Ramakrishna who really answered Narendra's question, by saying "Yes, I see Him as I see you, only in an infinitely intenser sense." Nevertheless, Vivekananda was more influenced by the Brahmo Samaj's and its new ideas, than by Ramakrishna. It was Sen's influence who brought Vivekananda fully into contact with western esotericism, and it was also via Sen that he met Ramakrishna.

Vivekananda propagated that the essence of Hinduism was best expressed in Adi Shankara's Advaita Vedanta philosophy. Nevertheless, following Ramakrishna and in contrast to Advaita Vedanta, Vivekananda believed that the Absolute is both immanent and transcendent.

According to Anil Sooklal, Vivekananda's neo-Advaita "reconciles Dvaita or dualism and Advaita or non-dualism". Vivekananda summarised the Vedanta as follows, giving it a modern and Universalistic interpretation: Each soul is potentially divine. The goal is to manifest this Divinity within by controlling nature, external and internal. Do this either by work, or worship, or mental discipline, or philosophy—by one, or more, or all of these—and

be free. This is the whole of religion. Doctrines, or dogmas, or rituals, or books, or temples, or forms, are but secondary details.

CONCLUSION

Nationalism was a prominent theme in Vivekananda's thought. He believed that a country's future depends on its people, and his teachings focused on human development. He wanted "to set in motion a machinery which will bring noblest ideas to the doorstep of even the poorest and the meanest".

Vivekananda linked morality with control of the mind, seeing truth, purity and unselfishness as traits which strengthened it. He advised his followers to be holy, unselfish and to have *shraddhā* (faith). Vivekananda supported *brahmacharya*, believing it the source of his physical and mental stamina and eloquence. He emphasised that success was an outcome of focused thought and action; in his lectures on Raja Yoga he said, "Take up one idea. Make that one idea your life – think of it, dream of it, live on that idea. Let the brain, muscles, nerves, every part of your body, be full of that idea, and just leave every other idea alone. This is the way to success, that is the way great spiritual giants are produced"

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