

# The Idea of Activism, Revolution and Freedom in the Political Thought of Bal Gangadhar Tilak

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## Abstract

Bal Gangadhar Tilak's political philosophy constitutes a crucial element of Indian nationalist thought. Tilak established a new category of political engagement which brought about an activist approach to Indian independence efforts. The article investigates Tilak's political philosophy through its three main elements of activism and revolution and freedom to show their impact on the Indian nationalist movement during colonial times. Tilak rejected passive political methods and emphasized active participation of the masses in the struggle against British rule. His declaration that "Swaraj is my birthright and I shall have it" demonstrated his belief that freedom extended beyond political independence to become a fundamental right which belonged to all people. The study shows that Tilak's revolutionary spirit started the resistance against colonial powers while it preserved connections to traditional cultural and ethical customs. Tilak used the Bhagavad Gita text to interpret activism as a duty (karma) which allowed him to fight political battles for justice and national dignity according to his religious beliefs. His ideas combined political realism with moral idealism while he called for both strategic resistance and national awakening. The article demonstrates that Tilak's political philosophy included activism and revolutionary awareness and freedom as its main components through his writings and speeches and political work. It was not simply Tilak's philosophy that inspired the early days of militant nationalism but also his monumental mastering in statecraft and political history posing a role in shaping the later ideation in the struggle of India's independence.

**Keywords:** Political Philosophy, Revolutionary, Political Activism, Self -Rule, Indian Nationalism, Anti-Colonial Struggle.

## Introduction

A new political framework built by Bal Gangadhar Tilak becomes essential for the development of Indian nationalist ideologies. The Indian national movement began in the late 1800s and continued through the early 1900s when its initial leaders preferred moderate and constitutional approaches but Tilak developed as a vigorous supporter of active nationalistic movements. His political theories required people to participate in their government through active work and demonstrate their commitment to achieving independence through revolutionary action. Tilak used his writings and speeches together with his political work to develop Indian nationalism from an exclusive movement into a widespread public resistance against British colonial authority.<sup>1</sup> Tilak established his political beliefs through his conviction that every nation possesses an inherent freedom which stands as a basic

human right. The Indian freedom movement adopted his declaration that "Swaraj is my birthright and I shall have it" as one of its most impactful slogans. For Tilak Swaraj functioned as a political demand which served as an essential moral and national requirement that the Indian people needed for their development and dignity.<sup>2</sup> The early moderate leaders of the Indian National Congress who worked on petitions and constitutional reforms as their main activities differed from Tilak who believed that political mobilization and active resistance served as essential methods to fight against colonial control. Activism served as the main element which defined Tilak's political philosophy. He believed that national freedom could only be achieved through mass participation which became the primary method of the struggle. Through his newspapers Kesari and Maratha, Tilak spread political awareness and encouraged people to participate in nationalist activities. He used cultural symbols and public festivals to create national unity and pride among people through his two main festivals which were Ganapati and Shivaji.<sup>3</sup> The initiatives transformed political awareness into a unified struggle which fought for independence.

The revolutionary component of Tilak's belief system contributed to the development of aggressive Indian nationalism. Tilak supported the principle of fighting back against tyrannical and oppressive systems but he did not advocate for violent revolutionary methods. He developed a political approach which would empower Indians through building their bravery and self-worth and national identity. The public recognized Tilak as the foremost leader of Indian nationalist extremism which supported self-sufficiency and boycott activities and political resistance.<sup>4</sup> Tilak built his political philosophy upon two main intellectual foundations which included his understanding of the Bhagavad Gita. In his famous book Gita Rahasya, Tilak claimed that the Gita presents karma-yoga as its main teaching which requires people to complete their responsibilities through their work. Tilak believed that people should fulfill their responsibilities because it helps their communities instead of choosing to live in seclusion from their responsibilities. The interpretation established a moral basis which allowed people to participate in political activities and national movements because it connected spiritual beliefs with the actual work needed to achieve freedom.<sup>5</sup> The three concepts which Tilak used to develop his political philosophy included activism combined with revolutionary consciousness and the pursuit of freedom. He developed his political thought through the combination of moral idealism and political realism which became a foundational element of his work for the Indian nationalist movement. The research study investigates how Tilak's philosophical beliefs developed his nationalist political movement through his writing and his activities during his independence struggle.

### Objective

- The purpose of the research is to investigate the concept of activism in the political thought of B.G. Tilak.
- The study investigates Tilak's perspective on revolution as a method of conducting political opposition.
- The study investigates Tilak's political philosophy through an examination of his concept of freedom which he called Swaraj.
- The study aims to analyze how his nationalist beliefs connect activism with revolution and freedom.

### Research Methodology

The research uses qualitative and analytical methods to study Bal Gangadhar Tilak's political philosophy

The research uses descriptive and historical methods to analyze his ideas of activism, revolution, and freedom in the context of the Indian national movement. The study mainly relies on secondary sources such as books, articles, and Tilak's works including Srimad Bhagavad Gita Rahasya.

### **Activism in Tilak's Political Thought**

Tilak established his political theory through his dedication to active political work. The nationalist movement's moderate leaders faced his strong criticism because they depended on constitutional methods and gradual reforms to conduct their political activities. Tilak believed that people should participate in political activities because their nation was experiencing a national awakening which would help them achieve political rights. To educate the public about political issues, Tilak used the newspapers Kesari and Mahratta as his platforms. The newspapers helped people learn about colonizer resource exploitation which drove them to participate in political activities. Through his writing, Tilak motivated people to develop national pride and political awareness (Mehrotra, 2001). Tilak created new methods which enabled him to organize large crowds for public protests. He made public celebrations of the Ganapati festival and Shivaji festival into popular events. The historical and religious ceremonies turned into political platforms which enabled people to discuss their nationalist views. The festivals created an atmosphere of shared responsibility among participants which united them in their quest for independence from colonial rule (Sarkar, 1983). Tilak dedicated his activism to change nationalism from an exclusive movement into a popular national movement. His work brought political awareness to common citizens who had no previous engagement with civic matters.

The British Empire controlled India through its political system while trying to force Indian people to adopt European customs and educational practices and Western ethical standards, which created a mental condition of dependency. Tilak considered colonialism to be the worst colonial impact on India because it made Indian people believe in their own inferiority. To achieve this goal, he called for the entire population to experience both moral and intellectual renewal (Chandra, 1989). He accused contemporary moderate leaders of his era for their belief in constitutional methods which he considered useless because he believed that foreign rulers would never provide freedom to those who refused to fight for their own rights. His demand for Swaraj served as both a statement of his self-respect and a claim to his right of self-determination. Tilak considered political freedom as a divine right which belongs to all people because it exists as a natural human right that no empire can give or take away. He understood that Indian communities had developed a state of internalized political control which resulted in their people becoming politically inactive. People needed to establish their ethical standards before starting their political actions.<sup>6</sup> Tilak's political philosophy establishes a unified framework that combines his colonial critique with his moral regeneration efforts and his cultural revival work. He regarded colonialism as a force that oppressed people from outside while it caused native people to lose their moral values. The solution required self-realization which created a connection between individual freedom and collective freedom through the concept of Swaraj. The Hindu philosophy established all essential elements for national renewal which provided both ethical guidance and emotional expressions needed for national revitalization according to Guha 2010.<sup>7</sup> Through his synthesis, Tilak established political independence as a requirement that required people to practice ethical behavior and maintain their cultural heritage. The three elements of colonialism, self-identity and Hindu nationalism functioned as interconnected paths toward liberation which included fighting against oppression and discovering

personal identity and reclaiming cultural heritage. His freedom concept encompassed all aspects of life because it combined political freedom with moral training and cultural unity.

### **Revolutionary Spirit in Tilak's Political Philosophy**

Tilak's political ideologies contained a revolutionary aspect which he developed through his political beliefs. People should resist unjust authority according to his belief although he rejected violent revolution as a solution. His ideas inspired nationalist activists who wanted to see political changes but found moderate reform methods unsatisfactory. Tilak became one of the prominent leaders of the extremist wing of the Indian National Congress. The group used self-reliance and national education together with boycott movements as their primary methods to fight against colonial rule. The Swadeshi movement which started after the Bengal partition in 1905 showed the revolutionary spirit which characterized this new phase of Indian nationalism. Tilak's revolutionary nationalism taught Indians to develop their national pride through courageous self-confidence. He believed that political freedom required people to achieve psychological liberation from colonial domination.

Tilak's promotion of these ideas transformed the nationalist movement from a limited political campaign into a mass struggle for independence. Tilak established his connection to Hindu nationalism because he believed that cultural identity served as the foundation which enabled political parties to unite. He used Ganesh Utsav and Shivaji Jayanti festivals to create social unity among different caste groups and regional groups of people who used private religious ceremonies to show their national allegiance.<sup>8</sup> The events functioned as venues for political speeches and patriotic songs which spread nationalist beliefs. The political transformation of nationalism underwent a fundamental shift because it developed into a cultural movement. The movement gained its essential strength through the vernacular press which collected public viewpoints while it exposed British acts of injustice. The three publications Kesari, Bande Mataram and Hindu Patriot served as outlets for disseminating their respective ideological systems. The song Vande Mataram which derives from Bankim Chandra Chatterjee's novel Anandamath became a national song of resistance that enabled people to unite across different languages and regions. The Indian renaissance of literature, art, and philosophy established stronger moral aspects which supported the growth of nationalism. Rabindranath Tagore and Aurobindo Ghosh developed a new definition of nationalism based on their understanding of spiritual progress toward shared national identity. Indian intellectuals adopted national traditions while they studied global movements such as the Irish Home Rule struggle and the Italian Risorgimento and the Japanese victory over Russia in 1905 which established the right of nations to self-determination. Tilak used Shivaji as a representation of Hindu courage and he used Lord Ganesh to defend his right to establish Hindu traditions. Tilak viewed religion as a system of ethical principles which guided his political activities. He maintained that nationalistic movements only achieved their proper moral foundation through shared cultural beliefs which people of different backgrounds could reach as shared understanding. The public discussion about his combination of religious beliefs and political affairs continues.<sup>9</sup> States that Tilak created a unified movement through his method but that it produced a non-Hindu exclusionary effect which stopped its growth. His 1916 Lucknow Pact with the Muslim League and his other political partnerships showed that he wanted to create unity among people who opposed colonial domination.

### **Concept of Swaraj**

Tilak's political philosophy centers on his definition of Swaraj which he developed as a central concept.

He redefined self-rule by defining it as the ability to govern oneself through moral self-control which enables people to act according to their obligations. In Gita Rahasya Tilak (1984) presented his argument that the Bhagavad Gita serves as a call to righteous action rather than a scripture of renunciation. He established karma-yoga as a spiritual duty which he developed into a method for people to participate in political activities. Tilak understood the self as a part of a moral community which exists together with all other members. He applied Vedantic philosophy to politics by asserting that every nation possesses its own Atman which needs to reach enlightenment for its citizens to achieve freedom. The political philosophy of Bal Gangadhar Tilak included Swaraj which he defined as self-rule because he believed it represented the fundamental right to freedom. Tilak defined Swaraj as the authority for Indians to self-rule their country without any foreign control. He asserted that all nations possess natural rights which permit them to pursue political independence. Through his statement "Swaraj is my birthright and I shall have it" he expressed his belief that Indians possess an authentic and justified right to freedom. Tilak considered Swaraj to represent both political freedom and a spiritual and ethical framework. Tilak believed that people should fulfill their duties through active work which benefits society because he followed Bhagavad Gita teachings. He presented his analysis of the Gita through the Gita in Srimad Bhagavad Gita Rahasya (1915) which explains the Karma-Yoga principle that motivates people to engage in social and political activities. He viewed the battle for Swaraj as both a political struggle and an ethical obligation that every person should fulfill. Tilak maintained that people who achieve Swaraj will establish their national dignity and bring their country to a state of unified strength. He organized public events and nationalist activities through newspaper articles in Kesari and Mahratta to promote political awareness among the general public. People needed to take part in political activities which determined their future to experience true freedom according to Tilak. Tilak viewed Swaraj as freedom which combined political independence with moral obligations and civic duty to create both an essential political need and a superior moral standard. The political freedom of Swaraj existed as an essential element of spiritual freedom. The absence of moral regeneration would result in political independence which leads to new types of oppression. Tilak's concept of Swaraj contained both theoretical and practical aspects. He established moral discipline as the essential element of civic duty because he believed citizens needed ethical standards to operate self-governed societies. His understanding of freedom differed from Western liberalism because Tilak saw freedom as a communal obligation while Western thinkers defined freedom through personal rights. His combination of Vedantic spirituality with political ethics created an Indian form of modernity which used personal growth to fight against colonial rule.

### **Anti-Colonial Struggle**

Bal Gangadhar Tilak's anti-colonial movement brought about a major transformation in the Indian independence struggle because it enabled common people to join the fight against colonial rule. Tilak rejected the moderate approach of the early leadership within the Indian National Congress which relied on petitions and constitutional reforms that required British permission. He stated that Swaraj existed as an inherent right belonging to all Indian people whom he called his birthright. His ideology combined political realism with cultural nationalism to establish self-reliance and national pride as essential elements for fighting against colonial rule. Through his leadership during the Bengal Partition protests Tilak showed his dedication to economic nationalism by supporting Swadeshi and boycott movements which urged Indians to stop buying foreign products while they should support local businesses.

Tilak demonstrated his innovative abilities by using cultural and religious symbols as tools to organize mass movements between Ganesh Utsav and Shivaji celebrations which he used to create political awareness through his depiction of Shivaji as a resistance figure. His work as a journalist for newspapers such as Kesari and Mahratta helped to establish anti-colonial arguments through his fearless attacks on British policies which he used to raise nationalist sentiments among the public. The colonial authorities imprisoned Tilak because they mistakenly believed that he supported revolutionary movements although his main belief system included organized but forceful resistance. The Home Rule Movement became his next political involvement which brought new energy to nationalist politics while creating a base for future mass movements which Mahatma Gandhi would later lead. Through his anti-colonial fight Tilak established himself as a key person in the development of India's independence movement because he demonstrated his ability to connect ideological understanding with political work and cultural activities.

### **Tilak's Concept of Freedom**

Tilak's goal of political freedom served as his primary objective in political activities. His understanding of freedom extended beyond the basic definition which considers only political independence. Tilak defined freedom as a complete state which encompasses all three forms of political freedom and moral freedom and cultural freedom. Swaraj which people refer to as self-government represented the political definition of freedom. Tilak regarded foreign domination as an essential injustice because it stripped people of their right to self-rule. The demand for Swaraj developed into both a political requirement and a moral duty according to Nanda 1977. Tilak showed that freedom consists of two main aspects which include cultural elements and moral elements. He believed that colonial rule had destroyed Indian society and its traditional cultural practices. The Indian people intended to use Swaraj as a means to restore their native cultural heritage and their true national identity. Tilak used his reading of the Bhagavad Gita to develop his concept of freedom. Tilak used karma-yoga philosophy to demonstrate that people must fulfill their responsibilities to benefit society. National freedom struggle participation became a moral obligation which every citizen needed to fulfill.

### **Conclusion**

The evolutionary path of Indian nationalism reached its pivotal point through the political philosophy of Bal Gangadhar Tilak. His approach to activism and revolutionary movements and his belief that freedom should be treated as a moral obligation created a fresh force that propelled the nationalist movement forward. Tilak rejected passive political methods and encouraged Indians to actively participate in the struggle for self-rule. Tilak created an ethical foundation for political activism through his interpretation of Bhagavad-Gita teachings which he viewed as an action-based philosophy. The Indian freedom movement transformed into a mass movement because his ideas linked spiritual principles with operational political methods. Scholars studying Tilak's political philosophy should continue their research because it helps them understand both the ideological basis of Indian nationalism and the historical path which led to India's independence.

### **Suggestions**

- Scholars must conduct deeper research on the three concepts of Swaraj activism and freedom which Bal Gangadhar Tilak presented to determine their current value in democratic systems.

- Researchers need to study Tilak's political philosophy because it connects to Indian nationalist movements and the freedom struggle.
- Tilak uses The Bhagavad Gita as his foundation to show people how to use his ethical and moral principles of Swaraj in their current political and social requirements.
- The researchers can use comparative studies between Tilak's theories and the theories of other nationalist leaders to understand his contributions to Indian political theory.

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