

Bal Gangadhar Tilak and the Quest for Hindu-Muslim Unity: Rethinking Cultural Nationalism in Colonial India

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History

Abstract:

This research explores Bal Gangadhar Tilak's concept of cultural nationalism and its engagement with the Muslim community. Often perceived as a Hindu revivalist, Tilak's political strategies, particularly his role in the Lucknow Pact (1916), demonstrate a nuanced approach to Hindu-Muslim unity. The study examines primary sources, including his speeches, newspaper articles, and contemporary accounts, along with secondary analyses to critically evaluate his inclusive nationalist approach. The findings offer a comprehensive understanding of Tilak's contributions and the limitations of his vision in the broader context of Indian nationalism.

Keywords: Cultural Nationalism, TILAK, JINNAH, Hindu-Muslim Unity, Inclusive Nationalism, Swaraj, Lucknow Pact (1916), Political Strategies, Communal Relations, Kesari and Mahratta, Anti-Colonial Struggle, Religious Pluralism, Nationalist Ideology, Partition of Bengal, Alienness, Chauvinism, Forgive and forget).

Introduction:

Bal Gangadhar Tilak (1856–1920) was a towering figure in the Indian independence movement, often credited with popularizing the slogan “Swaraj is my birthright.” While he is widely recognized for his assertive nationalism and advocacy of Hindu traditions, his role in fostering Hindu-Muslim unity remains an underexplored dimension of his political thought. This study aims to examine Tilak's inclusive cultural nationalism, analysing his engagement with the Muslim community, his political strategies, and the extent to which his vision of nationalism accommodated religious diversity.

The research investigates how Tilak's nationalism, rooted in cultural and religious identity, sought to integrate Muslims into the broader anti-colonial struggle. It explores the inherent tensions between his religious mobilization strategies and his efforts toward communal unity, shedding light on the complex interplay of culture, politics, and nationalism in colonial India.

Literature Review:

Several scholars have examined Tilak's nationalist ideology and his role in the independence movement. However, studies focusing on his engagement with Muslims are relatively scarce. This section reviews key works:

1. **Primary Sources (Kesari, Mahratta, Lucknow Pact proceedings, Home rule speeches)** – Offer firsthand accounts of Tilak's speeches and political strategies.

2. Secondary Sources like Bipin Chandra Indias Struggle for independence and Shekhar Bandyopadhyay from Plassey to partition and after.

This review highlights a gap in scholarship regarding Tilak's role in inclusive nationalism, which this study seeks to address.

Methodology:

This research adopts a historical-analytical methodology, utilizing:

1. Primary Sources:

- Tilak's writings and speeches.
- Articles from Kesari and Mahratta.
 - Proceedings of the Lucknow Pact (1916).
- Correspondence and statements by contemporary Muslim leaders.

2. Secondary Sources:

- Books and academic papers on Tilak's political philosophy.
- Biographical studies and historical analyses of the nationalist movement.
- Scholarly interpretations of Hindu-Muslim relations during the independence movement.

3. Comparative Approach: ○ Assessing the impact of his strategies on later communal politics in India.

Analysis and Discussion:

Tilak's Swaraj

Tilak was a great nationalist who was also utilitarian in using cultural and religious consciousness to achieve his ultimate goal of Swaraj. By Swaraj, he meant home rule similar to other British colonies, where all bureaucracy and political, social, and economic decisions are made by the natives of the land in the interest of their motherland, rather than by foreign rulers who governed for the benefit of their imperial homeland.

Cultural Nationalism and Religious Sensitivities: "Muslim Perceptions of Tilak's Festivals: Controversy and Cooperation"

Tilak used religion to develop cultural pride and to dispel the myth of British invincibility and racial superiority over Indians. Initially, Muslim integration into the national consciousness and freedom movement was affected by Hindu cultural symbolism. However, over time, they too were incorporated into the nationalist concept, rising above mere religious identities.

“In 1893 he began Ganpati festival (respected equally by brahmins and non-brahmins) to propagate nationalism and brotherhood through patriotic songs and speeches to bridge gap between brahmin dominated congress and the non-brahman masses. In 1896 he started Shivaji festival with same intention of unification of masses .” “Tilak and other Chit Pavan brahmans of Poona decided to organise it as an annual public festival and to imbue politics in it, as a means to bridge the gap between brahman-dominated congress and the non-Brahman masses”. Tilak believed in mobilizing the masses using Hindu cultural frameworks, which initially led to conflicts with some sections of the Muslim community. His emphasis on Hindu historical figures like Shivaji sometimes created tensions, as Muslim rulers were often depicted as adversaries. His invocation of Hindu religious symbols and assertions of cultural superiority through references to the **Vedas** and **Aryan theories** were often misinterpreted as an anti-Muslim stance intended to belittle minorities—an interpretation that was entirely incorrect. His call for action and the justification

of political struggle through **Shivaji Festival, Ganesh Festival, and Karma Yoga (from the Gita Rahasya)** were tools for building national consciousness. His strategy of instilling cultural pride was sometimes wrongly perceived as opposition to Muslims.

Tilak and Secular Nationalism: Diverging Paths to Indian Unity

Tilak clarified that he bore no animosity towards Muslims or any other Indian on the basis of religion, race, caste, or class. He stated that worshiping of Shivaji Maharaj is sometimes misrepresented by some sections of society as being fight against Muslims. He said Shivaji Maharaj was born in Maharashtra in past but in future any great national leader could be born anywhere in India and may be even born as Muslim. This anticipation of being ruled by any great future leader might it be Muslim ruled out all critics of him kneeling to Muslim. He was clear in mind that all Hindu Muslims and other religion might have diverse religious beliefs but they all are part of bigger national culture which is being demerited by colonial rule in all spheres of political social and economic life of Indians. He dated

“It’s a sheer misrepresentation to suppose that the worship of Shivaji includes an invocation to fight either with the Mahomedans or with the Government. Shivaji was born in Maharashtra. But a future leader may be born anywhere in India, and who knows, may even be a Mahomedan.”

(The Maratha, 24 June 1906)

Response to the Partition of Bengal (1905)- Mass Mobilisation.

Tilak staunchly opposed the partition of Bengal and wanted to take Congress’s anti-partition movement beyond Bengal, spreading it across India through **Swadeshi** and **boycotts of foreign goods**. His response to the partition was strong and multifaceted, involving political activism, mass mobilization, and a push for Hindu-Muslim unity. The partition, implemented by the British under Lord Curzon, was widely seen as an attempt to divide Hindus and Muslims and weaken the growing nationalist movement.

- Tilak’s opposition to the partition marked his final break with the moderate Congress leaders.
- He advocated passive resistance, non-cooperation, and mass agitation, which later influenced Gandhi’s strategies.
- His imprisonment in 1908 for sedition was partly due to his aggressive stance against the British post-partition.

Tilak wanted to take Anti partition movement of Bengal outside to whole of nation and build national consciousness in every Indian against this communal divisive partition of Bengal by government, which Moderates in congress objected and cause party split in later times.

Building National Consciousness: Forgive and Forget, Fight Against Colonial Divide

Tilak invoked harmony and unity among all religions in India, urging people to forgive and forget past conflicts and unite in **national consciousness** to break free from British imperial rule. He said that Hinduism should be taught to the Hindus and Islamism to the Muslims be taught in these schools. And he said that it will also be taught there to forgive and forget the differences of other religions. He means that all past diverse religious should be amalgamated into religion of Indianness. very few observe how he evokes need of religious education in pure form to resolve any differences between Hindus and Muslims. He opposes scratching of old wounds and appeal all to forgive and forget any past differences. He synthesis and initiated religious education of Hindus and Muslims to sow the seeds of nationalism in

hearts of millions of Hindus and Muslims, his focus was on unity of all religions and means and ends to achieve its end objective of oneness of national identity.

Alienness Defined by Interest, Not Religion, Race, or Caste.

Tilak categorically distinguished between Indians and foreigners, defining "alienness" by **national interest** rather than **religion or race**. He said that By alien, he does not mean alien in religion as some interpreted by his invoking of Hindu festivals and symbols to mobilise Hindus against Muslims. He said that who does what is beneficial to the people of this country, be he a Muslim or an Englishman or Hindu, is not alien. He defined Alienness' has to do everything with interest in mind. He rejects notion of alienness on basis of race, caste, religion . he said Alienness is certainly not concerned with white or black skin, and absolutely not at all is concerned with religion or region. Alienness is just concerned about what your choices, actions, and processes have with the common masses' benefits or losses. He openly stated that in past Muslims might came in India as invaders but they eventually settle here itself and became Indian in long process because their interest was same as common peoples of country, but in case of English rule which is colonial country has all interest attached to betterment of third mother country India and not Indians. He maid adverse attacks on imperialtus policies if government to fulfil demands of industrial revolution of own country by exploiting natives' interests at peril of their own.

Inclusive Nationalist And Not Upper-Caste Chauvinist.

Tilak firmly believed that British economic policies harmed both **Hindus and Muslims alike**, as both communities suffered under British economic exploitation. Some critics accused him of advocating Brahmin supremacy and resisting power-sharing with Muslims, but this claim is refuted by his own words when he said that he absolutely doesn't care if rights of home rule or self-government swaraj are granted to Muslims or Rajput's or lowest classes of the Hindu population. Hw care for swarj and don't bother if government decide yo put on throne anyone but Indian might it be only Muslims. He was inclusive in nature and wanted to throw imperialist rule out of nation without discrimination towards any religion race caste or region provided they rule keeping Indians interest at mind

Opposition to Separate Electorates: Preventing National Division

Tilak was acutely aware of the **British "divide and rule" policy** and sought to counter their attempts to divide the nation. He strongly opposed separate electorates based on religion or caste, as he believed this would divide Indians and harm national interests. He understood that the introduction of **separate electorates** could hinder cultural integration in India. He stated that our country India must stand united and well-organized. He stated that Communal jealousies and caste rivalries are the weakest points in the armour of our Nation. He asked all to became strengthen in our position by sinking all differences amongst ourselves. He wanted to make a united and firm demand against British. Tilak was absolutely against any further division in Indian society be on name of religion or caste. He was very aware of devil imperialist actions to sow seeds of communalism and divide and rule India as long as could. He openly opposed separate electorates designed by government and said that If every caste and community would ask for separate electorate and separate representation then the administration would be a chaos and we will fall apart sooner or later. He declared Religion has no place in modern polity. He sees religion as means to achieve secular polity and nit as religious polity as end of freedom struggle according to him representative of people must be judged by his merits and not by his caste or creed. He warned Communal

representation would take up old jealousies and would sap the very foundations of unity in India, which all were trying hard to prosper in heart of every Indian.

Hindu-Muslim Unity: The Lucknow Pact pacifying and assimilating Muslims

Tilak was a liberal in his personal life and played a significant role, he played major role along with **M.A. Jinnah**, in bringing about the **Lucknow Pact** (1916), which presented a unified Hindu-Muslim front against British rule. He and Jinnah were joint authors of the **Congress-League Pact**, aimed at strengthening Hindu-Muslim unity in the freedom movement. Interestingly, Tilak was also defended by **Jinnah in court** around this time. His alliance with Jinnah set a **precedent for Gandhi's later efforts** in uniting Hindus and Muslims. He also admired many Nationalist Muslim leaders and understand the gravity of communal jealousies government has been trying to sow through separate electorates. But in Lucknow pact he accepted separate electorates to remove all fear of Muslim minorities and culminate them equally in national movement for freedom. He back down from early opposition to separate electorates of Muslims given in Morley Minto reforms to pacify Muslims and remove fear of Hindu dominated home rule, which was very successful also for time being.

Political Swaraj Over Religious Reforms – first and foremost solution of all reforms

As a staunch supporter of Swaraj, Tilak believed that **all social, economic, and religious reforms must be decided by Indians alone**, rather than imposed by colonial rulers. He viewed **British interference in cultural matters as a threat to national integrity**.

Although he opposed **government intervention in marriage customs**, he advocated **education rather than legislation** as the most legitimate method for **eradicating social evils**. He was too liberal and progressive in personal life and wanted all reforms but nit at the cost of being raked by aliens who make laws for us by coming into our country. While he was **not an obscurantist** in his personal beliefs, he prioritized **political Swaraj over social and religious reforms**, believing that self-rule must come first. Tilak don't want to at mercy foreign government to remove social and religious; Ife of Indians. He preferred national and religious dignity over any other reforms which can be dealt personally after home rule flourish in India, he dedicated his whole life for sowing national consciousness in lower and middle classes of society which he considers as soul of the nation. Tilaks home rule movement was the foundation on which later Gandhiji and other national leaders fought hard and achieve freedom from colonial rule,

Conclusion

Tilak's legacy has often been misrepresented—either as a **Hindu nationalist who alienated Muslims** or as a **communal leader**. This study clarifies that Tilak was fundamentally a **pragmatic nationalist** who employed **cultural symbols as political tools**, not as religious exclusivism. His **inclusive nationalism** was evident in his rejection of **separate electorates, his partnerships with Muslim leaders, and his insistence that Swaraj must be for all Indians, regardless of caste or religion**.

His belief that **alienness was defined by interest, not identity**, and his assertion that **religion should not be a basis for political division**, demonstrate a nuanced, secular vision embedded within his cultural nationalism.

This research identifies **gaps in historical interpretations** of Tilak's ideology and calls for further exploration of his **lesser-known efforts at Hindu-Muslim unity**, as well as his influence on later nationalist leaders, including Gandhiji.

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