

# Tilak's Inclusive Cultural Nationalism: A Critical Reassessment from an Indian Perspective

Mukul Potanna Abulkod\*

MA (History), Dharmabad, Nanded, Maharashtra, India

**Abstract**— This study revisits Bal Gangadhar Tilak's writings to explore his conceptualization of inclusive cultural nationalism—a vision that integrates India's diverse religious and cultural traditions. By conducting a close reading of authenticated primary and secondary and contrasting these findings with prevailing Western-centric narratives, the research identifies significant gaps in prevalent research. The project aims to enrich the discourse on nationalism by foregrounding the cultural dimensions that have been historically underexamined. The study identifies subaltern perspective of Tilak's nationalism and show how he wasn't as conservative as its thought of him in the recent contemporary history. It studies how he gave paramount importance to political reform (Swaraj) but was also liberal in social and economic reforms which includes empowerment of all marginalised and alienated groups like women, traders, labourers, farmers and most importantly Muslim and Dalits.

**Index Terms**— Bal Gangadhar Tilak, Working class, Dalits, Cultural Nationalism, Peasants, labourers, Bhagwat Geeta, Inclusive Nationalism, Hindu Revivalism, Swaraj (Self-Rule), Swadeshi Movement, Untouchability, Indian Freedom Struggle.

## 1. Introduction

### A. Background and Rationale

Bal Gangadhar Tilak is celebrated as a nationalist leader, but his oeuvre also reveals a nuanced vision of cultural inclusivity. Tilak's writings—most notably in *Gita Rahasya* and his newspaper editorials in *Kesari* and *The Mahratta*—articulate an idea of cultural nationalism that emphasizes the integration of India's varied religious and cultural traditions. While previous scholarship has focused primarily on his political activism, the cultural aspects of his thought, as documented through authentic primary texts, have not received equivalent attention.

### B. Research Questions

- How do Tilak's ideology and speeches articulate a framework of inclusive cultural nationalism?
- What are the specific textual indicators that foreground his inclusive vision?
- In what ways do Western scholars interpretations overlook these cultural dimensions, and how can an Indian and subaltern perspective bridge these research gaps?

### C. Objectives

- *Primary Analysis*: To conduct a close reading of Tilak's key writings and speeches on inclusive cultural nationalism integrated with Swaraj.
- *Comparative Reevaluation*: To compare these insights with existing interpretations, highlighting underexplored areas in both Western and Indian researches.
- *Methodological Advancement*: To demonstrate the value of detailed analysis in understanding inclusive nationalist thought of Tilak.

## 2. Literature Review and Research Gaps

### A. Existing Research

- Extensive research has examined Tilak's role in mobilizing political dissent and shaping modern Indian nationalism.
- Major studies have primarily focused on his political contributions, with less attention given to the cultural and inclusive dimensions of his thought.

### B. Research Gaps

- *Neglected Cultural Discourse*: Many studies do not delve into how Tilak's writings promote cultural unity and synthesis, often sidelining passages that highlight his inclusive ideology.
- *Reinterpretation and Reanalysing of Tilak's inclusive liberal ideology*: There is a dearth of research providing granular, page-by-page textual analyses of Tilak's writings. For example, authenticated citations from the 1924 edition of *Gita Rahasya* reveal detailed arguments for the synthesis of spiritual traditions.
- *Reevaluating Perspectives*: Existing literature often contrasts Western interpretations with indigenous readings superficially. This study aims to systematically compare how an Indian perspective, anchored in authenticated sources, provides deeper insight.

\*Corresponding author: [abulkodmukul@gmail.com](mailto:abulkodmukul@gmail.com)

### 3. Methodology

#### A. Primary Source Analysis

*Gita Rahasya*: Analyse passages on cultural nationalism are clearly demarcated

*Kesari*: Analyse specific issues of this Marathi newspaper.

The Mahratta: Examine selected English-language editorials.

B.G Tilaks His writings and speeches (appreciated by Aurobindo Ghose).

*Field Study*: Analysis of the continuing impact of Tilak's festivals in Maharashtra like Shivaji Maharaj Jayanti and Ganesh Jayanti festival.

*Qualitative Content Analysis*: Evaluating primary and secondary texts for insights into Tilak's nationalist discourse and reinterpreting all primary and secondary sources to show inclusive concept of national identity unlike some historians who perceive him as leader of upper caste only.

### 4. Analysis and Discussion

#### A. Analysing Tilak's Inclusive Concept of Cultural Nationalism, Including Dalits, Workers, and Peasants

##### 1) Tilaks religious nationalism-utilization of religion and tradition in bringing together Indians against colonialism

Tilak's use of Hindu symbolism as a unifying force can be analysed from his announcement of Religion being an intrinsic element in formation of nationality. He defined Dharma as a word means tie and comes from within the root of dhri, which means to bear or hold. He questioned what is there to hold us all together to build nation which infuse us feeling of oneness and national consciousness. He considered religion or dharma as integral and interconnected part of humans and invoke spiritual consciousness to connect human's souls with almighty god and also with one another. He infuses brotherhood and fraternity using dharma concept of religion which focus on unity of diverse religion, race, caste etc. He interprets Hindu religion as a moral compass and also as interconnecting dhri of social tie in the nation building process.

He also sought to instil a sense of cultural superiority among Indians, similar to the British, by stating that we Indians are not inferior in any respect to any western races as he announces that Indian Aryans of Vedic age were also migrated from northern pole regions similar to Europeans. He said the Aryans superiority is revealed by their absorption of non-Aryan races after they come near equator in search of new lands only because they have significantly highly abundant level of civilisation in their original home in arctic. This interpretation of Aryans migration in during Vedic times destroyed any assumption of British race of superiority and demolish their specially designed imperialistic British propaganda of white man's burden which was psychologically demotivating Indians earlier. Tilak's use of religious history and interpretation for mass mobilization for political nationalism was unique and was very successful to unite Indians under banner of religion and cultural superiority and enlighten them with power of their own strength of Cultural dignity.

##### 2) Tilaks cultural consciousness and Muslims-Popular Mobilization Through Festivals were not divisive politics but means to build national consciousness

In 1893, Tilak initiated the Ganpati festival (which was revered equally by Brahmins and non-Brahmins) to promote nationalism and foster brotherhood through patriotic songs and speeches. His aim was to bridge the gap between the Brahmin-dominated Congress and the non-Brahmin masses. Similarly, in 1896, he launched the Shivaji festival with the same intention of unifying people across social classes. He was one of the very few leaders of that era who recognized the importance of including the lower middle classes, peasants, artisans, and workers in the national movement.

He frequently evoked history to emphasize Hindu unity, stating that in ancient history of India. India was self-contained and fulfilled country which was status of a proud nation on earth. He declares that during Vedic times we were GREAT Nation. He declared that we were united as a great nation earlier and as time passes because our unity vanishes and we were divided on various grounds our nationhood too degrades. He declared that it is duty of leaders to revive that unity of ancient history and infuse fraternity in common masses. He says that though there may be different languages, dressing styles, and various other differences there is common inner sentiment of oneness and culture that are same for every Indian. He doesn't discriminate on regional basis and said that All Hindus of India are same and Hindu from madras may differ from Hindu of Bombay but cultural consciousness is same for all.

##### 3) Bhagavad Gita and the call for mass struggle- Karm yogic tilak with secular outlook

Tilak's interpretation of the *Bhagavad Gita* invoked Karma Yoga to inspire the masses in their struggle against oppressive rule. He declared that Home Rule is our Dharma. He said Home Rule cannot be separated from us, just like we cannot separate the quality of 'heat' from fire.

While Tilak invoked Hindu unity through cultural consciousness, which some perceived as alienating other religious groups, his concept of Swaraj was fundamentally inclusive.

Criticizing the British for questioning Indians' ability to rule, he asserted: that in past when country was under rule of Hindus, Buddhists, and Muslim rulers there was peace and harmony in the country. He questioned britishers what grounds are there to believe that same descendants of earlier people who governed such large empires are now unfit to rule in present time. He invokes motivation of capability of self-rule by Indians for the Indians

He also pointed out the decline of Rome and Greece, attributing their downfall to internal divisions and jealousy. He said History tells us that the great Roman and Greek empires were vanished because of jealousy in the minds of those rulers to the common persons over whom they rule. He compared British jealousy with Greek and roman empire rulers and exploitation of masses for their mother country would one day end their mighty empire in India.

#### 4) *Advocacy for peasants and economic justice- broadening base of India's freedom struggle*

Criticizing the Congress for ignoring peasants, he stated that our country's emancipation is possible only when we end the long old practice of lethargy and attitude of indifference towards our peasants' classes. He announced peasants as soul of country. The accusation of Tilak that he was anti peasants and only upper-class leader is demolished by the fact that how harsh he criticised congress for not mobilizing peasants demands which are soul of the nation. He consciously tried hard to include peasants in churning process of nation building by constantly speaking about economic exploitation and referring of drain theory of Dadabhai Naoroji and other nationalist economists and leaders. He demanded economic justice for poverty-stricken peasants in the country. He arranged continuous process of educating, peasants through newspapers and his speeches.

Tilak's No-Tax Campaign and support for Peasant Resistance was one of earliest methods for demanding farmers rights in the new structure of national movement. In 1896-97, Tilak initiated the No-Tax Campaign in Maharashtra to support famine-stricken peasants. He encouraged them to be firm and patient and not to pay taxes when famine struck. He connected economic exploitation of farmers with necessity of self-rule so that this discrimination and status of poverty is changed forever.

One of the earliest instances of mass mobilization of peasants was under Tilak's leadership:

- In response to the devastating famine of 1896, Tilak urged peasants not to pay taxes to the British government. His demand for tax relief was seen as radical and led to his increasing popularity among farmers and rural workers.
- He organized protests and published articles in *Kesari* and *Maratha* to highlight the plight of the rural poor and expose British exploitation.
- He connected the economic struggles of peasants with the larger nationalist movement, making them active participants in the freedom struggle.

#### 5) *Tilak and Dalits-Stand against untouchability (upper caste leader vs liberal and progressive leader)*

Tilak took a progressive stance on caste discrimination. He openly declared that if God tolerate or support Untouchability then he would not consider him as God at all. Tilak further accepted that in old past there were much Brahmins autocracy that create the evil Untouchability system. He concluded by declaring that Untouchability was a disease and it must be removed at any cost. He believes that all Hindus are equal in every term and any division cannot be created on basis of caste in which Hindu is born.

The criticism of Tilak as a conservative, casteist Brahmin leader is refuted by his speech at Bharata Dharma Mahamandala where he openly said that there cannot be a Mahamandala unless it included and coordinate different sections and parts under inclusive religion where there cannot be discrimination of any kind. He said that its name can only be significant if diverse sections of Hindu religion are united and integrated under its banner. He declared that all these different

sects are only branches of the ancient Vedic religion.

Tilak never was conservative for social and religious reforms but he wanted to bring reforms not from law of foreign government. He prioritize Political freedom over social and religious freedoms. He declared that any reforms must be brought from within our own social consciousness and we Indians must ourselves make laws for that reforms rather than colonial government.

#### 6) *Working class, labourers, trade unions Early Advocacy for the Working Class and economic nationalism*

Tilak recognized the economic exploitation of Indian workers under British colonial rule. He saw the deindustrialization of India, the drain of wealth, and unfair labour practices as major tools of British imperialism. He was one of the first nationalist leaders to advocate for better wages, improved working conditions, and the rights of Indian labourers. Tilak openly was in Opposition to British Economic Policies. He frequently uses his writings in *Kesari* and *Maratha* to criticise British colonial mindset and anti-native economic decisions and processes which was detrimental for growth of Indian businesses and became mere supplier of raw materials for industrial revolution of Britain and market for their industrial finished goods. Tilak was highly critical of British policies that hurt local artisans, factory workers, and peasants. He tried best to propagate drain theory through every means and make British accountable for impoverishing the very self-sufficient country through imperialistic policies. He opposed unfair taxation, high land revenue demands, and the increasing burden on farmers.

Support for Swadeshi and Indigenous Industry could be found throughout his critics of government policies. His economic nationalism was evident in his support for the Swadeshi movement, which sought to promote indigenous industries, handloom weaving, and local production to counter British economic dominance. He encouraged boycotting foreign goods and urged Indians to strengthen their own economy through local enterprises and became self-dependent rather than any foreign countries for own needs.

Tilak played an important role in uniting workers union and ask government for their rights. His Role in the Formation of trade unions was to unify diverse workers with motto of their own welfare. Tilak was one of the driving forces behind the formation of the All-India Trade Union Congress (AITUC).

#### B. *Tilak's Legacy in Economic and Social Mobilization*

- Tilak's efforts laid the foundation for labour consciousness in Indian nationalism.
- His emphasis on economic independence through Swadeshi industries influenced later labour movements.
- His strategy of mass mobilization through festivals and political protests was later adopted by leaders like Gandhi and Subhas Chandra Bose.
- His advocacy for workers' rights and tax resistance inspired future movements demanding economic justice.

### C. Bridging Research Gaps

#### 1) Reanalysing Western Perspectives

- By contrasting authenticated page-specific readings with prevailing Western interpretations, the study will illustrate how indigenous perspectives offer a richer understanding of Tilak's cultural nationalism.

#### 2) Methodological Contribution

- The rigorous research sets a replicable standard for future research into historical nationalist texts.

### D. Expected Outcomes and Contributions

#### 1) Scholarly Contributions

- *New Interpretive Insights:* The project is expected to yield a refined interpretation of Tilak's work, emphasizing the underexamined cultural dimensions of his nationalist ideology.
- *Resource Development:* The annotated catalogue of primary sources will serve as a reference tool for scholars and students of Indian nationalist thought.

#### 2) Addressing Research Gaps

- *Enhanced Indian Contextualization:* This research will demonstrate how an Indian perspective, grounded in authenticated sources, can bridge the gaps left by predominantly Western analyses.
- *Methodological Innovation:* Detailed page-by-page

analysis provides a methodological template that future studies can follow to ensure textual fidelity and rigorous scholarship.

### 5. Conclusion

Tilak's nationalism was not confined to elites or upper-caste Hindus; rather, he actively sought the participation of Dalits, workers, and peasants. His festivals, writings, and activism aimed at fostering cultural unity and national consciousness while remaining inclusive of all communities. His economic resistance, peasant movements, and advocacy for labour rights proved that he was not just a religious nationalist but a mass leader who envisioned a self-reliant and united India.

### References

- [1] Tilak, B.G. (1905). Kesari Writings.
- [2] Tilak, B.G. (1916). Home Rule Speeches.
- [3] Dr. Ambedkar (Life and Mission) - Dhananjay Keer.
- [4] Tilak, B.G., The Arctic home in the Vedas, pp. 464
- [5] Chandra, B. (1997). India's Struggle for Independence.
- [6] Shekhar Bandyopadhyay(2nd) From Plassey to partition and after.
- [7] Tilak, B.G. (1922) Bal Gangadhar Tilak His Writings and Speeches, pp. 36, 255, 407, 107-110.
- [8] Dhananjay Keer, "Dr. Ambedkar (Life and Mission)."
- [9] Chandra, B. (1997). India's Struggle for Independence, pp. 420, 433, 1631 112.
- [10] Shekhar Bandyopadhyay (2nd), From Plassey to partition and after.