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## **The rise of radical nationalism in early 20<sup>th</sup> century India: Bal Gangadhar Tilak influence and the challenge to moderate Indian National Congress (INC) Approaches**

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### **Abstract**

In the beginning of the twentieth century, there was a change in the methods of the Indian national movement. One of the prominent leaders who made these changes was Bal Gangadhar Tilak, an extremist nationalist who believed in using more direct action for "Swaraj" or self-rule for Indians. "Swaraj is my birthright" became a war-cry for many and marked a shift in the Indian National Congress from moderate to radical nationalism. This study investigates the scope to which Tilak leadership and demand for self-rule helped in the mobilization of the masses. Through this it also assesses Tilak role in the emergence of radical nationalism and its criticism of the more moderate Gokhale-Naoroji strategy. This paper studies the radical nationalist movement and how it transformed the trajectory of the Indian National Congress through the study of Tilak role.

**Keywords:** Bal Gangadhar Tilak, Swaraj, (INC), Tilak role, Radical Nationalism

### **Introductions**

Bal Gangadhar Tilak was a strong Indian nationalist leader in India. He was an influential figure in the Indian movement for independence. Tilak, who was born on July 23, 1856, at Ratnagiri in Maharashtra, was one of the most prominent leaders of INC. He was one of the Lal-Bal-Pal trio with Lala Lajpat Rai and Bipin Chandra Pal who adopted a radical approach towards independence from British rule. Initially trained as a lawyer, Tilak has a cultural influence on the Mahratta and selected other formulations from others. He soon became involved in the political and social life of India. A reformer to start with, he soon began advocating for immediate self-rule, opposing the moderate approach of Gokhale and Naoroji after 1905.

In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, the INC was divided between the moderates and the radicals that shaped India's struggle for independence. Moderates believed in constitutional reforms but radicals like Tilak demanded more extra-constitutional action for the affirmation of rights of India. Tilak emergence was a reaction to the failure of moderate ways. The Congress split into two bands. The Congress adopted Tilak brand of nationalism as a cult. This brand of nationalism became central to the freedom movement.

### **Background of early 20<sup>th</sup> century nationalism**

In eighteen eighty-five, the Indian National Congress was founded with increased rights for Indians within the British Empire as their goal. At first the party followed a moderate course and negotiated with the British for self-rule. Leaders like Dadabhai Naoroji and Gopal Krishna Gokhale were in favour of dialogue and cooperation eventually leading to self-rule in India. Naoroji's assumption of Drain Theory wherein he stated receiving the drain of wealth from India was to Britain.

However, moderate methods became less effective in the twentieth century onwards. India faced economic woes and famines, and political repression in India. The British Ignored Indian demands for self-rule to a large extent. As these conditions developed, the youth became increasingly frustrated and felt that more radical measures needed to be taken to overthrow the British.

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**Bal Gangadhar Tilak: The father of Indian nationalism.**

The entry of Bal Gangadhar Tilak in Indian politics marked the advent of more of an aggressive style of nationalism as opposed to the moderate one. Tilak thought of Swaraj not as a political necessity but as a necessity for the spiritual life of India.

**Swaraj is my heritage right**

One of Bal Gangadhar Tilak's most famous and influential slogans "Swaraj is my birthright, and I shall have it" was the linchpin of his radical nationalism and formed part of the larger Indian independence movement. This phrase showed an important idea of Tilak's belief which was Swaraj or self-rule is not a gift of Britishers but the birthright of every Indian.

The Tilak slogan was an extreme criticism of the other nationalists, especially Gopal Krishna Gokhale and Dadabhai Naoroji. They were in favour of gradual and moderate reforms. They believed that self-rule would follow gradually through cooperation with the British. The moderates were agitating for gradual changes in governance and aimed at working within the existing colonial framework. They believed that reforms would be granted slow and steady over time. The British were generous, they said, and India would get freedom sooner or later with patience and diplomacy.

Tilak opposed this slow, conciliatory approach and insisted that waiting for concessions from the British was no good. He thought that the British, having established and continued their rule in India by employing force and exploiting the Indians, would never give away power voluntarily or grant a full self-rule. Tilak's Swaraj is not only a demand for political right but also a moral right regarding the Indian people right for self-government.

The slogan of his resounded with the growing anger of Indian masses. By the early 20th century, many Indians, more particularly the youth and the working class, started to lose faith in reforms and the British Government's indifference to India's problems. People were tired of waiting for changes that seemed only to maintain British control and would not give India what drew them away from the Mughals. The slogan came to embody the masses' wish for a radical change in their political and social status.

The rejection of gradualism by Tilak and his emphasis on immediate self-rule were ideological in addition to political. He thought Swaraj would bring freedom and liberation (in cultural sphere) along with political independence. He claimed the British colonial system had killed India's cultural spirit as a result of which his cultural and social and economic became a wreck. According to Tilak, the battle for Swaraj was not merely a struggle for political self-governance of India, but it was also a struggle for preserving India's ancient culture and a battle for restoring India's self-respect. The slogan hence represented political independence along with cultural revival and was therefore an important symbol of cultural nationalism.

Tilak made it abundantly clear by framing Swaraj as a birthright that Indians should not plead for self-rule. The British had no right to grant it to them; it was their fundamental right. A very revolutionary thought. The masses will be the center of the movement and not a select high caste or class. Further, he said that every Indian, high or low, may participate in the freedom movement. The Tilak slogan gave people the feeling that they were powerful

enough to rule themselves. It also shows how a nation under colonial oppression can get empowered.

Through his demand for Swaraj, Tilak changed the course of the Indian independence movement. Gandhi's assertion of Swaraj as a birthright challenged not only the British colonial system but also the moderate leaders within the INC, who believed India should seek reform through cooperation with the British. Tilak advocated direct action, and this would later inspire many more leaders like Mahatma Gandhi who would espouse these ideas that would be further worked through protest and non-violence to create a national movement.

To sum up, Tilak slogan "Swaraj is my birthright, and I shall have it!" became more than a political slogan; it became the symbol of radical nationalism in India.

The manifesto's approach reflected the increasing frustrations of the people. Moreover, the manifesto highlighted the importance of getting rid of British rule.

**Culture and religion on a large scale**

Recognizing the power of culture and religion in the movement, Tilak modified the movements in his own way. He played an important role in popularizing the public celebration of Hindu festival Ganesh Chaturthi and Shivaji Jayanti. The celebrations not only instilled pride in India's cultural heritage but also provided an opportunity to promote the message of Swaraj. Simultaneously mobilizing diverse groups of people, Tilak's use of religion and culture transcended the caste and class lines to build a radical nationalist movement that extended beyond the moderates' intellectual milieu.

**Taking decisive action and challenge.**

A major element of the radical nationalism of Tilak was his call for direct action. While the moderates believed that talking was the way to achieve self-rule, Tilak was sure that not talking but confronting the British was the only way to achieve India's rightful freedom. During the Swadeshi Movement and, later, the Boycott Movement, Tilak led huge protests against a British decision to partition Bengal in 1905. His call for a boycott of British goods and, in particular, the promotion of local Indian industries became a significant part of the resistance against British rule.

**The boycott and swadeshi movements**

Leadership of Bal Gangadhar Tilak in the Swadeshi and Boycott Movements was a turning point in the nationalist struggle. The Swadeshi and Boycott Movements were intended to challenge British rule directly. These campaigns not only sought political self-rule but were also meant to achieve economic independence which was viewed as a stepping stone towards getting rid of British rule. Both these movements aimed at weakening the British control in India by making them economically weak through self-reliance (Swadeshi).

**The Swadeshi movement emerged after the partition of Bengal**

The Swadeshi Movement began in 1905 as a result of the British decision for the partition of Bengal which was an attempt to divide and rule the Hindus and Muslims. The British felt that the partition, under Lord Curzon, would lessen the increasing nationalist fervour of Bengal by separating the stirring Bengali Hindus from the Muslim-

majority areas. However, this step was viewed as a direct assault on the unity and integrity of India and led to many protests across the nation particularly in Bengal.

Tilak was a leader of the swadeshi movement along with other leaders like Bipin Chandra Pal, Lala Lajpat Rai, Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi who advocated the boycott of British goods to promote Indian-made products. The call of Tilak for a self-reliant India not only meant a rejection of British imperialism but also gave a message that India should be able to stand on its own economically. The movement aimed to promote the use of Indian products by the Indians to reduce reliance on British goods which would help to challenge the British economic interests.

The cultural aspect was also a part of the Swadeshi Movement. The British tried to enforce Western culture on the Indian population and diminish their national identity. Therefore, this cultural effort was, therefore, a way of asserting India's cultural identity. Tilak stressed the importance of Indian identity and self-respect through the use of swadeshi goods. It became a symbol of national pride. It also brought many sections of Indian Society together-urban middle class, rural population, who could actively boycott foreign goods.

### **The boycott movement that challenged British control economically in direct manner**

The Boycott Movement closely resembled the Swadeshi Movement and sought to cripple the British government by denying it economic sanction through the exclusion of British goods. In order to lessen the economic strength of the British government and deny it the funds to continue operating in India, a boycott was advocated. The movement urged the boycott of British clothes and also salt, sugar and other manufactured products which flooded the Indian market and in turn, encouraged the Indians to use and promote local products.

The Boycott Movement had a political message that criticized the unequal relationship of exploitation in the colonial system and it hoped to achieve a rejection of that power through a wide range of boycotts. The British were heavily involved in the textile industry in India. They imported large quantities of British-made material into the Indian markets. In this way, they drained India of its resources. The Swadeshi and Boycott Movements specifically aimed at this economic exploitation by encouraging Indians to support local industries and boycott foreign goods that were undermining the local economy.

The Tilak leadership in the Boycott Movement played a significant role noteworthy. The movement helped in arousing public opinion against the British in India. The moderates within the INC were initially reluctant to adopt such measures. However, Tilak understood the potential of economic boycotts to challenge the British imperial framework. According to him, economic independence is essential for India's freedom, and this became an important part of his radical nationalist ideology.

### **Economic Independence-A Nationalist Strategy**

Tilak was a strong advocate of the idea of economic independence in full freedom. He saw the Swadeshi and Boycott Movements as not limited to political acts of defiance but also as a way to create an economy that could ultimately challenge the British. The movement was

important for Indian industries like handloom weaving and handicraft which were hurt by the import of cheap British goods. Tilak wanted to establish an economy independent of the British by encouraging indigenous industries and products which would allow us to have an actual self-rule.

The Swadeshi and Boycott Movements also showed how powerful mass mobilization can be to challenge imperialism. These movements were mass campaigns of the ordinary Indians, whether peasants, artisans or students, unlike the moderate approach, which emerged by the elite-intellectual circles' support. Tilak made it possible to create a Pan-Indian movement that would cut across social, cultural, and regional boundaries by uniting different classes and regions.

### **Influence and legacy of the movements.**

The Swadeshi, and the Boycott Movements are an expression of the radical nationalism of Tilak. And they changed the direction of the struggle for freedom. By placing economic issues at the centre of the movements, self-reliance and indigenous production were given prominence in the nationalist discourse, thus challenging British rule at an economic level. Several of the later anti-colonial movements were inspired by these movements. For instance, Mahatma Gandhi accepted the values of non-violence and self-reliance which became essential to the Indian anti-colonial struggle.

The Swadeshi Movement had a lasting impact on India's political culture. It emphasized the importance of national unity and resistance to foreign domination. It sparked a wave of national consciousness. It contributed to the growing popularity of the Indian National Congress among the masses. Even though the British suppressed the Swadeshi Movement through the use of arms, anti-British activities continued under its influence in the following years.

Overall, Bal Gangadhar Tilak was a prominent nationalist leader in the Indian freedom struggle. His leadership in the Swadeshi and Boycott Movements marked a transition from moderate constitutional methods to radical direct action. These movements were instrumental in India's nationalism, which emphasized economic self-sufficiency and cultural pride as essential elements of the struggle for Swaraj. Tilak's mobilization of boycotts and support for Swadeshi goods as a means of challenging British economic interests took the form of a new resistance. The effectiveness of these movements in mobilizing the people was extensive. These movements were instrumental in establishing India's claim for economic freedom. These movements were critical for the success of the Indian national movement.

### **The Division in the Indian National Congress**

The increase in radical nationalism by Tilak led to a split in the INC during the Surat session of 1907. The two main factions that formed within the party were moderates who were led by Gokhale and Naoroji and the extremists who were led by Tilak. The moderates advocated co-operation with the British but under the leadership of Tilak the extremists demanded immediate self-rule through direct action. The ideological split led to the emergence of a new phase in the nationalist movement with, on the one hand, the radicals demanding more forceful methods and the moderates demanding constitutional reforms.



### The challenge related to moderation

Bal Gangadhar Tilak became a key figure in the early twentieth century when he began advocating radical nationalism. He thus began challenging the moderate section of the Indian National Congress (INC). Gopal Krishna Gokhale and Dadabhai Naoroji were leaders who strongly believed that the most effective means for India to achieve self-rule would be through gradual constitutional reforms and working with the British. Their strategy revolved around engaging in dialogue and negotiation with the British government, seeking gradual reforms in India's governance. According to the moderate faction, British colonial rule has to be seen not as a curse but as a boon which can from time be amended. To many people, however, this strategy seemed to be ineffective as the British continued to exploit the economy, exacerbate social inequality and repress freedom.

As the Indian people, especially the youth, grew increasingly frustrated by the sluggish pace of reforms, Tilak advocated for direct action as the British government showed no real signs of granting any autonomy. Tilak said the moderates' appeal for constitutional reforms and cooperation with the British had failed and only mass mobilization and direct action could win self-rule (Swaraj) for India. Tilak's slogan "Swaraj is my birthright, and I shall have it" expresses the idea that self-rule is the entitlement of the Indian people and is not a concession that could be negotiated from the British. He rejected the notion that the British would grant India autonomy by advancing step by step. He did not believe in negotiating with British officials but in challenging British rule along with mass movements and cultural mobilization.

Tilak's challenge to a moderate approach was not only political but also cultural. Moderates favoured reforms of western type of government, Tilak propagated a form of nationalism based on the Indian cultural and religious heritage. He wanted to bring the Indian masses together in his cultural heritage and arranged public celebrations of the Ganesh Chaturthi (1893) and Shivaji Jayanti (1894) festivals which had political and cultural meanings. These festivals became an important platform of spreading nationalism and mobilizing people against colonialism. The cultural berangement of Tilak helped him to break the barriers of intellectual and elite-dominated politicking of the moderates. Through his capacity to mobilize the religious and cultural identities of the Indian people, he succeeded in building a mass-based nationalist movement which was more broad-based and inclusive than that of the moderate.

The rise of Tilak within the INC led to a marked ideological schism, which manifested itself in the 1907 split at the Surat session of the Congress. The split formally separated the moderates, who were in favour of gradual reforms and working with the British, from the other side. The radicals who wanted immediate self-rule through more forceful means and were led by Tilak. The divide highlighted a divergence that was emerging within the Indian nationalist movement, which would be significant in the years ahead. The moderates believed in winning over the colonial rulers by using arguments. Gokhale and Naoroji are important moderates. Gokhale believed in working within the colonial control to achieve a goal. Nonetheless, they were continuously frustrated by the British government to make meaningful changes. In Naoroji's view, India cannot raise its demand without justification. He argued that Indians could

govern themselves and carry out self-rule. Indeed, this is at the essence of his drain theory. As a consequence of their failure to achieve the desired outcome, the moderates started losing their credibility among the Indian masses.

Within the INC, the influence of Tilak and an increasing ideological divide culminated in the split of 1907, leading to the moderation and extremism factions. Gokhale and Naoroji continually emphasized participatory demands made peacefully to the British and argued for constitutional reforms and self-rule through the door of moderation. On the other hand, there were Tilak and his followers, Bipin Chandra Pal and Lala Lajpat Rai, who formed a radical faction that wanted immediate self-rule and direct action against the British. This partition represented a profound change in India's freedom struggle. Though the moderates wanted cooperation, the extremists were of the opinion that direct confrontation and mass mobilization would yield Swaraj. Instead of gradual reforms, a split with the British Empire reveals growing frustrations on the part of both the Indian National Congress and the Mahatma.

Tilak's form of radical nationalism had major implications for the nationalist movement. The moderate and the effectiveness to challenge the INC this shift aggression modes of the most forms resistance-focus. Due to the change in attitude, it also influenced future leaders like Mahatma Gandhi who also tried mass mobilization but by following non-violence. Tilak's calls for self-reliance through the Swadeshi Movement and Boycott Movement became important strategies in the Indian independence movement. Tilak's call for boycott of British goods and promotion of local industries highlighted the significance of economic independence as a stepping stone to political freedom.

Tilak was called the "Father of Indian Unrest" because although he started using constitutional methods later in his life and after his release from prison in 1914, he was not a moderate politician. His challenge to the moderate approach of INC was the starting point of the rise of radical nationalism in India. It brought a major shift in the course of struggle against British rule. Subsequent generations of Indian nationalists continued to be inspired by this to demand immediate self-rule and to oppose British imperialism.

### Summary

Bal Gangadhar Tilak and radical nationalism were powerful instruments in the hands of the nationalists for India's struggle for freedom. Tilak's campaigns for Swaraj, and direct action; his use of culture and religion to mobilize the masses helped provoke the advent of radical nationalism in the Indian National Congress (INC). The British colonial system was challenged in a new phase through his opposition to moderate leaders Gokhale and Naoroji. The Tilak legacy, for the architect of radical nationalism, is inspiration of people who believe in direct action and self-rule against repressive regimes.

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