



LOKMANYA BAL GANGADHAR TILAK



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Bal Gangadhar Tilak was a great nationalist, social reformer and a mass leader who influenced generations of people with his ideas and ideals. He played a pioneering role in arousing mass political consciousness during the freedom movement. He was one of the strongest advocates of 'Self Rule' (Swaraj). His famous slogan "*Swaraj is my birthright, and I shall have it!*" inspired millions during India's Freedom Movement. Acknowledged as 'Lokmanya' by the nation, Tilak was also a great scholar and a visionary leader.

Bal Gangadhar Tilak was born on 23 July 1856 at Ratnagiri in Maharashtra. His father Gangadhar Ramchandra Tilak, better known as Gangadhar Shastri, was a Sanskrit scholar. Tilak inherited from his father a strong determination and indomitable will, a healthy mind, a capacity for industry and achievement, and a way of methodical work.

Bal Gangadhar Tilak was a brilliant student and received most of his education at Pune. He was known for his razor-sharp intellect, passion for reading, fierce self-respect, and intense abhorrence of injustice. After his matriculation, he joined the Deccan College, Pune. He secured a first class in his B.A. examination with Mathematics as the main subject; and in 1879, he obtained his Law Degree. He was well read in Hindu scriptures and was also greatly influenced by Western thoughts on politics and metaphysics. He was particularly fond of Voltaire, Rousseau, Hegel, Kant, Spencer, Mill and Bentham.

After completing his education, Tilak spurned the lucrative offers of Government service and decided to devote himself to the larger cause of national awakening. He firmly believed that modern education had to be taken to the masses by the Indians themselves if they were to grow in stature to overcome the pathetic

acceptance of the concept of the ruler and the ruled which the British wanted to perpetuate. He was instrumental, along with his three friends G.G. Agarkar, M.A. Chiplunkar and Mahadev B. Namjoshi, in starting the New English School at Pune in 1880 and later in founding the Deccan Education Society and the Fergusson College, both at Pune, in the years 1884 and 1885, respectively.

In Maharashtra, Tilak, Agarkar and Chiplunkar were the rising stars of the new generation, whose aspirations for a new order in India far surpassed those of the earlier generations. While working in the field of education, they took upon themselves the task of educating the people to a new height by launching two journals in 1881—*Mahratta*, an English weekly and *Kesari*, a Marathi weekly. Both the weeklies evoked an enthusiastic response from the people.

The last decade of the nineteenth century witnessed great turmoil in different parts of the country and the people had to pass through untold sufferings. Tilak, who started his social activities in 1880, championed the cause of the people and won the hearts of many with his selfless services. His stature as a social worker grew while facing difficult situations. When famines and epidemics took a very heavy toll by the end of the nineteenth century and the measures adopted by the Government to contain these disasters proved to be inadequate and defective, Tilak, through his writings and speeches, led the radicals in rousing public indignation against the callous indifference of the British administration to the sufferings of the people.

The period between 1900 and 1908 is characterized by the birth of revolutionary nationalism in India. Lokmanya Tilak, along with Bipin Chandra Pal and Lala Lajpat Rai, all blessed with great political foresight, emerged as the shining stars in our national firmament. The trio—Lal, Bal, Pal—championed Indian nationalism by strengthening the bonds of unity among the people. Lokmanya Tilak, with his strong sense of realism, came forth with a four-point programme of *Swadeshi*, boycott, national education and *Swarajya*, thus involving the people in different activities and enabling them to contribute to the freedom struggle.

In 1907, Tilak wrote two articles in the '*Kesari*', "The Country's Misfortune" and "These Remedies Are Not Lasting" wherein he demanded that the Government should try to understand the changing circumstances in the country. These articles which were a scathing criticism of the governmental policies of oppression, invited the wrath of the British Government. Consequently, he was arrested in 1908 on the charge of sedition and sentenced to a six-year imprisonment in the Mandalay Jail in Burma. While in prison at Mandalay, he composed the '*Gita Rahasya*', a monumental philosophical treatise containing the message of the Bhagwad Gita and his own interpretation of life.

After his release from the Mandalay Jail in 1914, Tilak became closely associated with the Home Rule Movement. When Annie Besant founded her own independent Home Rule League, Tilak made an alliance with her. The movement that Tilak led jointly with Annie Besant was a part of his mass-based politics. With Annie Besant, he made a whirlwind tour of the nation to propagate 'Home Rule'. Tilak wrote several editorials under the title '*Hindu Swarajya Sangh*' in 1915 through which he dwelt on the concept of 'Home Rule' and put forth a plan of action for achieving it. In 1918, Tilak visited England as President of the Indian Home Rule League and intensified the Home Rule Movement thereby addressing public meetings and contacting eminent leaders of the British Labour Party. He succeeded in getting the confidence of the British Labour Party. He came back to India in 1919 and re-immersed himself in the freedom struggle.

Lokmanya Tilak was radical in his political outlook, and with his fearlessness and burning love for the country, he challenged both the westernized social reformers as well as the spirit of orthodoxy. Being a political realist, Tilak was aware that spiritualization of politics could well bring his dream of *Swaraj* nearer. A devout Hindu, he equally believed in the fundamentals of secularism and tried to divorce the public life of society from religious precepts. He believed in Hindu-Muslim unity and was keenly aware that the yoke of foreign domination could not be thrown away unless the country stood united.

Tilak's contribution towards the freedom struggle, in rousing political consciousness among the masses and thereby drawing them into the freedom struggle, was legendary. He had a rare insight into the working of the society and he was one leader who fully recognised the strength of the masses in the fight against foreign domination. He evolved programmes such as *Shivaji Jayanti* and *Ganesh Pooja* with the sole motive of bringing people together to ensure their awakening and involvement in the freedom struggle. His demand for '*Sampoorna Swarajya*' as his birthright was radically different from what the moderate leaders had then been seeking. His speeches and writings had a new, vigorous and assertive quality which electrified the nation.

Lokmanya Tilak's entire life was a '*Karma Yajna*'. He worked tirelessly and selflessly to rouse the nation out of its slumber and apathy. With his indomitable will power and tenacity of purpose, exceptional organizational ability and, above all, an implicit faith in himself and his ideals, he always strived to do the best for the people and the nation.

The emergence of Lokmanya Tilak on the political horizon of the country was thus truly a watershed in the life of the country. In a tumultuous period of Indian history, he brought to the political arena a new kind of leadership which was intellectual, had a clear vision and an intense patriotism but at the same time had its roots and strength in the vast illiterate and poor masses. The transformation of the freedom struggle from a political perspective of the sophisticated, westernised and educated few to a mass movement drawing strength from the millions of the poor and the downtrodden was possible because of the new orientation given to the liberation struggle by Lokmanya Tilak. The '*Tilak Era*', thus, constituted a significant landmark in our movement for independence.

Tilak's ceaseless social and political activities had put a heavy strain on his health. In July 1920, being unwell, he was under treatment in Mumbai. His condition deteriorated and finally he breathed his last in the early hours of 1 August 1920.

Across the nation, leaders and the masses expressed their profound sorrow at the passing away of Lokmanya Bal Gangadhar Tilak. Mahatma Gandhi wrote in the *Young India* on 4 August 1920:

No man of our times had the hold on the masses that Mr. Tilak had. The devotion that he commanded from thousands of his countrymen was extraordinary. He was, unquestionably, the idol of his people. His word was law among thousands. A giant among men has fallen. The voice of the lion is hushed. What was the reason for his hold upon his countrymen? I think the answer is simple. His patriotism was a passion with him. He knew no religion but love of his country.

The Special Session of the Congress held at Calcutta* from 4 to 9 September 1920 passed the following resolution:

The Congress places on record its sense of deep and profound sorrow at the death of Lokmanya Bal Gangadhar Tilak. The stainless purity of his life, his services and sufferings in the cause of his country, his deep devotion to the welfare of the people, his arduous endeavours in the fight for national autonomy—these will enshrine his memory in grateful recollections of our people and will be a source of strength and inspiration to countless generations of our countrymen. At this crisis in the history of the nation, the Congress will sorely miss his wise, helpful and courageous leadership, the lofty inspiration of his radiant patriotism and healing benediction of his counsel in difficulty.

*Now known as Kolkata.