

BAL GANGADHAR TILAK'S RATIONALISATION OF VIOLENCE
THROUGH THE INTERPRETATION OF THE *GITA*

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A background to Bal Gangadhar Tilak (1856-1920)

Bal Gangadhar Tilak was born on 23 July 1856 in an orthodox Chitapavan Brahmin family in the small town of Ratnagiri in Maharashtra. Tilak's father lived on a small salary, which he supplemented with earning from writing textbooks. His mother passed away when he was ten years old and his father when he was sixteen. He joined the Deccan College, Poona, in 1872, took his Bachelor of Arts (B.A.) degree in 1876 with Mathematics and Sanskrit, and completed his education with a Law degree in 1879. In the years that followed, he emerged as a formidable political leader, Sanskrit scholar, writer¹ and political philosopher with radical views. Tilak was greatly influenced by Western thought on politics and metaphysics² and was to a great extent a product of English education.

Tilak was foremost among the earlier generation of national leaders who had fought for the independence of India. He was accused of instigating people to violence, criticised for his extremist activities and rated among the most controversial leaders of India's struggle for independence. K.M.Panikkar, the noted historian, says: "He [Tilak] was the recognised leader of the 'Extremists' in India who considered it their duty 'to rise up and fight' foreigners in Indian soil"³. In fact, together with Bipin Chandra Pal, Lala Lajpat Rai and Aurobindo Ghose he constituted an 'extremist' core within the Indian National Congress⁴. In spite of this, Tilak was respected and held in high esteem even by foreign intellectuals for his scholarship, but was feared for his extremism. As a wielder of a sharp pen he used his talent to promote extremism and oppose foreign rule especially through his *Kesari* (in Marathi)⁵ and *Mahratta* (in English) which were started in 1881. The columns in these newspapers unfold his

¹ Tilak's major works are: *The Orion* (1893), *The Arctic Home of the Vedas* (1903) and *The Gitarahasya* (1915).

² Tilak was particularly fond of Hegel, Kant, Spencer, Mill, Bentham, Voltaire and Rousseau. See "Tilak, Balgangadhar (1856-1920)", 118.

³ See K.M.PANIKKAR, "Hindu Revival", 14.

⁴ See D.D.PATTANAIK, *Hindu Nationalism*, vol. 2, 38.

⁵ At one time *Kesari* had a circulation of 20,000 copies, which was a large circulation for India at the time of Tilak. It also had a Hindi version published from Nagpur. See B.G.TILAK, *Selected Documents*, vol. 1, 90.

compelling, strong and radical personality and militant political views. Jawaharlal Nehru in his autobiography wrote: “the great and indomitable Tilak who would not bend though he break”⁶. Tilak came to be called ‘Lokamanya’ (‘Honoured of the People’). However, as far as social questions were concerned he was a conservative. Tilak died in Bombay on 1 August 1920.

1. Extremist tradition in India as an underestimated factor

The obscure role played by forces of militancy and extremism has often gone unnoticed in the course of the liberation of India due to the overwhelming impact of Mahatma Gandhi’s non-violence (*ahimsa*). Thus the militant tradition in India has not been fully explored and remains to a great extent underestimated. What one hears mostly is the non-violent Gandhi. But there are also personalities like Bal Gangadhar Tilak who professed a different ethics from that of Gandhi and followed a trend of extremism and violence, which earned him the appellation of the ‘father of Indian unrest’.

The re-emergence of Hindu nationalist ideology in the recent decades with its glorification of violence, militancy, extremism, communalism, religious fundamentalism and ‘ethics of end justifies the means’, has a long history. Tilak is among the prominent leaders of modern India who has significantly influenced the extremist form of Hindu nationalism. He advocated ‘violence as the higher duty’ based on his interpretation of the *Bhagavadgita* (‘Song of the Lord’), the best read text among the Hindus⁷, dismissing in the process the popularly accepted commentaries of the *Gita* by Adi Sankara (8th century A.D) and Ramanuja (1017-1133 A.D) advocating renunciation and devotionism respectively. Thus Tilak became a forerunner to many new interpretations of Hindu scriptures, especially *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* from a militant point of view.

2. Tilak’s commentary on the *Gita*

The *Gita* is an episode in India’s great epic *Mahabharata*⁸. Tilak was taught that the *Bhagavadgita* contained all the principles and philosophy of the Hindu religion.

⁶ J.NEHRU, *An Autobiography*, 388.

⁷ Franklin Edgerton observes that the *Gita* is the chief devotional book of the Hindus. It has been for millions of Indians the principal source of religious inspiration and it is to the Hindus what the New Testament is to the Christians. See F.EDGARTON, *The Bhagavad Gita*, 103.

⁸ The *Gita* constitutes Book VI, chapters 25-42 of the epic *Mahabharata*. Probably the *Gita* received its first outlines in the first and second centuries AD and acquired its present form about AD 300. Many Hindu commentators and critics have devoted themselves to the study of the *Gita*, like, Adi

Hence he thought it necessary to find an answer in this book to his queries. Thus began his study of the *Gita*⁹. His commentary on the *Gita*, which came to be called *Gitarahasya* ('the secret of the *Gita*') was a very influential one. In this work he expounded with a wealth of scholarship and unimpeachable orthodoxy the doctrine of 'energism' or action (*Karma Yoga*). He started his commentary in November 1910 and completed it in March 1911 though he could publish it only in 1915. He claims that his commentary is an independent and original one investigating the purpose of the *Gita* and showing how the Hindu religious philosophy is applied to the solution of the ethical problems involved in everyday life. Hence the *Gita* is a work of ethics, more specifically how Hindu religious philosophy is applied to solve ethical problems¹⁰.

Tilak claims that he approached the *Gita* with a mind prepossessed by no previous ideas about any philosophy, and had no theory of his own for which he sought support in the sacred book. He says: "I believe I have succeeded in it, because having no theory of mine for which I sought any support from the book so universally respected, I had no reason to twist the text to suit my theory"¹¹.

In the *Gita*, Arjuna was perplexed about what his duty was, whether he should or should not take part in a *Kurushetra* war. If he engages in war, the result would be committing heinous sins like the destruction of his own clan, though it was the duty of every *kshatriya* (warrior) to fight. Thus on the one hand the religion of the warrior was saying to him 'fight' and on the other hand, devotion to his ancestors, preceptors, love for his brethren, affection for his relatives, and other natural laws were urging him 'not to fight'. If he fought it would be a fight with his own people and he would incur the terrible sin of killing his ancestors, preceptors and relatives. If he did not fight he would be failing in his duty as a warrior¹².

Tilak argues that the *Gita* was expounded by Lord Krishna in order to induce Arjuna, who was dejected by the idea that it was sin to engage in war with one's own

Sankara, Ramanuja, Madhva, Vallabha and Nimbarka. Among the moderns mention may be made of Tilak, Aurobindo, Gandhi, C. Rajagopalachari and Vinoba Bhave. However their views differ widely. See B.WALKER, *Hindu World*, vol.1, 34. S. Radhakrishnan is another noted interpreter of the *Gita*. See S. RADHAKRISHNAN, *The Bhagavadgita* (1948), 1993.

⁹ See B.G.TILAK, *Selected Documents*, vol. 4, 61.

¹⁰ See B.G.TILAK, *Selected Documents*, vol. 2, 118.

¹¹ B.G.TILAK, *Selected Documents*, vol. 3, 59. But this claim does not seem to be entirely true. He quotes thinkers like Kant, Hegel, Green, Mill and others in his work. Tilak says that to a certain extent his line of argument runs parallel to the line of thinking followed by Green in his *Prolegomena to Ethics*. See B.G.TILAK, *Selected Documents*, vol. 2, 118. Prior to Tilak, Swami Vivekananda (1863-1902) interpreted the *Gita* insisting on action See D.D.PATTANAIK, *Hindu Nationalism*, vol. 2, 16.

¹² See B.G. TILAK, *Gitarahasya*, introductory, 34.

kith and kin, to fight. Tilak says that the conclusion he arrived after his study is that the *Gita* advocates the performance of action in this world even after the actor has achieved the highest union with the Supreme Deity by *Jnana* (Knowledge) or *Bhakti* (Devotion). This action must be done to keep the world going by the right path of evolution which the Creator has destined the world to follow¹³.

Thus, according to Tilak, what is expounded in the *Gita* is not the ‘path of renunciation’ (*jana marga*) or the ‘path of devotion’ (*bhakti marga*) but the ‘path of righteous action’ (*karmayoga*)¹⁴. By action (*karma*) Tilak means duty, and the duty for a *kshatriya* (warrior) like Arjuna, is to fight. It is his *karmayoga* (‘special device of performing actions’)¹⁵. The paths of renunciation and devotion advocate indifference to the world which in effect emasculates the devotees of the *Gita* and fill them with apathy. Thus he was convinced that the original *Gita* did not preach the philosophy of renunciation but Energism (*Karma Yoga*)¹⁶. Hence he presents *karma yoga* as superior to renunciation and devotion¹⁷. He says: “look upon your science of Proper Action (Karma-Yoga) as a most important science”¹⁸. His conviction was strengthened by the study of the epic *Mahabharata*, the *Vedanta Sutras*, the *Upanishads* and other Sanskrit and English treatises on the Vedanta¹⁹. When many outstanding commentators of the *Gita* considered the ‘path of action’ as inferior to other paths, Tilak staunchly advocated it. However, he says that there are also others who consider *karmayoga* as the most excellent path, for example, the Marathi poet Vaman Pandit²⁰.

Tilak maintained that the doctrine of *karma yoga* is not a new theory. The Law is so ancient that not even Krishna was the great teacher who first propounded it. It is

¹³ See B.G.TILAK, *Selected Documents*, vol. 4, 61.

¹⁴ *Karma-yoga* can have a variety of meanings, such as, ‘path of action’, ‘way of action’, ‘righteous action’, ‘special way of performing actions’, ‘energism’, etc. Basically it implies the ‘way of action’ which is one of the three classical ways to liberation propounded by orthodox Hinduism.

¹⁵ Tilak describes ‘yoga’ as some special skill, device, intelligent method, or graceful way of performing actions. See B.G. TILAK, *Gitarahasya*, 77. A *karma yogi* is one who performs skilfully. See *Ibid.*, 79.

¹⁶ See B.G. TILAK, *Gitarahasya*, Author’s Preface, xviii.

¹⁷ Tilak says: “This I hold is the lesson of the *Gita*. Jnanayoga there is, yes. Bhaktiyoga there is, yes. Who says not? But they are both subservient to the *Karmayoga* preached in the *Gita*”. B.G.TILAK, *Selected Documents*, vol. 4, 61.

¹⁸ B.G.TILAK, *Gitarahasya*, 103.

¹⁹ See B.G. TILAK, *Gitarahasya*, Author’s Preface, xviii.

²⁰ See B.G. TILAK, *Gitarahasya*, introductory, 27. Elsewhere he says that a certain Brooks also maintained that the *Gita* advocated *karma yoga*. See B.G.TILAK, *Selected Documents*, vol. 2, 127-128.

India's sacred heritage from time immemorial²¹. *Karma yoga* is the method which leads to the attainment of both material and spiritual glory²². Finally Tilak tells us that, though the *Gitarahasya* could be published only in 1915, the ideas contained in it he had in mind for over 20 years or more²³.

2.1 *Gita* teaches warrior morality

Tilak argues that *Gita* has been told in order to induce Arjuna to do his duty, when he was on the point of giving up. Warfare was his lot according to his duty (*svadharma*)²⁴. Hence Krishna explicitly asked Arjuna to fight in accordance with his caste duty (*dharma*)²⁵. Consequently, Arjuna did fight and in the course of it, he actually killed Bhishma, Karna, Jayadratha, and others as occasion arose²⁶. Tilak argues that, it is enshrined in the *Gita* that it is morally right to give measure for measure to immoral persons²⁷. Thus Tilak promotes a warrior-morality and a warrior-religion. In the *Gitarahasya* we read: "there [in the *Gita*] the warrior-religion has been pronounced [by Sri Krishna] to be superior to the law of fraternity"²⁸.

2.2 Rationalisation of violence

In many Hindu leaders of recent past we can observe a discernible trend of Hindu self-assertion and aggressiveness, and Tilak is one such ideologue. The dilemma which many Hindus face today is how to be aggressive and militant and shed the garb of being non-violent and passive. Should one use violence or non-violence? How to justify it rationally? How to find foundations for it in Hindu scriptures?

Basing on the *Gita*, Tilak projects violence as a duty. He cites Krishna who declares that if everyone becomes harmless, warriorship cannot be continued and when once warriorship comes to an end, subjects will have no protectors and anybody will be in a position to destroy anybody else²⁹. Krishna says: "Oh Kesava [Arjuna], that Ksatriya is truly law-abiding, who kills such persons as break laws, ethical

²¹ See B.G.TILAK, *Selected Documents*, vol. 3, 64.

²² See B.G.TILAK, *Selected Documents*, vol. 3, 65.

²³ See B.G.TILAK, *Selected Documents*, vol. 2, 118.

²⁴ See B.G.TILAK, *Gitarahasya*, 1171.

²⁵ See B.G.TILAK, *Gitarahasya*, 89.

²⁶ See B.G.TILAK, *Gitarahasya*, 36-37.

²⁷ See B.G.TILAK, *Gitarahasya*, 94.

²⁸ B.G.TILAK, *Gitarahasya*, 53.

²⁹ See B.G. TILAK, *Gitarahasya*, 44.

principles, or rules of proper conduct, or is greedy or sinful, notwithstanding that they occupy the position of preceptors”³⁰.

In the *Gita* Krishna says: “Better one’s duty (though) imperfect than another’s well performed”³¹. What is the duty is specified empirically, and it can even be expedience. The influence of Immanuel Kant who said ‘duty for duty sake’ as a categorical imperative is evident here. According to orthodox Hinduism, duties are determined by one’s caste, and one’s caste is hereditary. Since Arjuna belonged to the warrior caste (*kshatriya*) his duty was already determined by birth – i.e. to fight. In other words to engage in violence.

Tilak observes that the ethics of worldly life is very subtle³². Violence thus received a gallant endorsement from Tilak. But he followed a subjective ethics delineated to suit his militancy and extremism. According to him, when needed, one should give measure for measure by way of retaliation and protect oneself³³.

Tilak used the *Gita* to justify his violent and militant nationalist campaign and other activities connected with it. This attitude made Gandhi to say: “he [Tilak] frankly differed from me in my extreme views on non-violence”³⁴.

2.3 Violence as the higher law

As we have seen, it is the authority of *Gita* which is at the foundation of Tilak’s ethics. He argued for the justification of violence and termed it the higher law. Tilak was known as the ‘father of Indian unrest’, an extremist and a relentless fighter. He saw it appropriate to retaliate with violence, and considered it as good, necessary and morally justified. Once in the course of discussion between Gandhi and Tilak on violence and non-violence, the latter upheld the principle of tit for tat³⁵ and considered the *satyagraha* of Gandhi as a weapon of the weak³⁶. Militancy, and not mendicancy was his call to defend Indian dignity. Hence his concept of *swaraj* (‘self-rule’) endorsed the use violence in its various forms including militancy and terrorism for the pursuit for national independence.

Tilak took as his model Shivaji (1627-1680), the great Maratha leader, whose ethics was at times ambivalent, as is evident especially from his treatment of Afzal Khan, the Mughal General, whom he treacherously murdered. Ivan Strenski

³⁰ B.G.TILAK, *Gitarahasya*, 61.

³¹ *Gita* 3,35.

³² See B.G.TILAK, *Gitarahasya*, 68.

³³ See B.G. TILAK, *Gitarahasya*, 42.

³⁴ *The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, vol. 20, 371.

³⁵ See *The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, vol. 32, 195.

³⁶ See *The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, vol. 15, 32.

maintains that in Tilak's case, his ambivalence in the matter of the assassination of colonial administrator Walter Charles Rand, seems to re-play the same ambivalence that affects Shivaji. Neither act can be said to have been honourable or forthright. Both relied on treachery, deceit and deception³⁷. But they are considered justified since they come under the so-called violence as the higher duty.

2.4 Arjuna as the model in the use of violence as higher duty

Tilak says that in the *Gita*, Arjuna has been induced to fight since it has been declared as the best of all paths by the *Gita* and nowhere he has been asked to give up action³⁸. Everywhere in the *Gita*, the only advice given to Arjuna by Krishna is that he should perform action³⁹. Hence Tilak asks: "If the *Gita* was preached to desponding Arjuna to make him ready for the fight – for the action – how can it be said that the ultimate lesson of the great book is Bhakti or Ghana alone?"⁴⁰ As is evident, utilitarianism and ethics of 'end justifies the means' are at the foundation of his interpretation of the *Gita*.

The result of Tilak's interpretation of the *Gita* advocating the so-called violence as higher duty, was disastrous for the Indian society. Communal violence against Muslims increased rather than decrease with the rise of Tilak⁴¹. Many were influenced by Tilak's radical ethics based on the *Gita*. Damodar Chapekar who was executed for the crime of assassinating a British officer appealed to Tilak for a copy of the *Gita* on the eve of the execution, and the latter gave him his own copy of the sacred book, and the young man went to the gallows carrying it⁴². Roshan Lal who was sentenced to death for his involvement in the Kakori Conspiracy Case (1925) in which revolutionaries successfully derailed a train near Kakori railway station and looted the government treasure it was carrying, went to the gallows carrying a copy of the *Gita* in his hands⁴³.

K.M. Panicked says that *Gitarahasya* makes no direct allusion to politics. But the political meaning was clear enough because of the author's own background and political circumstances of the time in India⁴⁴. To Tilak it was clear that it was only through the message of the *Gita* that India could save herself⁴⁵.

³⁷ See I.STRENSKI, "Legitimacy", 11.

³⁸ See B.G.TILAK, *Gitarahasya*, 1173.

³⁹ See B.G.TILAK, *Gitarahasya*, 1172.

⁴⁰ B.G.TILAK, *Selected Documents*, vol. 3, 60.

⁴¹ See I.STRENSKI, "Legitimacy", 9.

⁴² See S.A.WALPORT, *Tilak and Gokhale*, 89.

⁴³ See B.S.PARAKH (ed.), *Contemporary India*, 38.

⁴⁴ See K.M.PANIKKAR, "Hindu Revival", 14.

3. Impact of Tilak's ethics: rise of militant Hinduism and communalism

The manner in which a religion chooses to interpret its sacred scriptures in conflict-resolution has far reaching consequences. The ethics of *Gitarahasya* took the form of militant Hinduism and political extremism. It found practical expressions in a number of initiatives which promoted communalism and politics based on religion, like, the celebration of Ganesh⁴⁶ festivals, Shivaji festivals, Anti-Cow Killing Societies, Gymnastic societies, extremist journalism and militant activities. They awakened Hindu consciousness among many Hindus, which resulted in increased anti-minority feelings and acts of violence and extremism in many parts of India.

3.1 Ganesh festivals

Tilak was perhaps the first Indian political leader who realised the strength of the masses. He evolved many programmes in order to bring people together. He argued that hero worship is at the root of nationality, social order and religion⁴⁷. Nehru remarked that Tilak was the first political leader of the new India who reached the masses and drew strength from them⁴⁸.

In 1895 Tilak inaugurated the Ganapati festivals⁴⁹. Ganesh is one of the most popular of the deities worshipped by the Hindus. The Ganapati movement was inaugurated by Tilak as a counterpoise to the Muslim festival Muhurram in which Hindus of the lower castes participated⁵⁰. Till then, Ganapati festivals had nothing of a public character. But Tilak succeeded in transforming a simple domestic rite into a public celebration⁵¹.

In 1894 Tilak with the help of the Nattu brothers was responsible for making the festival a public event lasting ten days with music and an organised procession involving boys from schools, and colleges⁵². Songs were sung in praise of Tilak and

⁴⁵ K.M.PANIKKAR, "Hindu Revival", 14.

⁴⁶ He is the elephant-headed son of Siva and Parvati. In some legends he is the son of Siva and Durga or is created by Parvati alone. See B.WALKER, *Hindu World*, vol.1, 176.

⁴⁷ See *Kesari*, 17: 22, 1 June 1897, 3 as cited in S.A.Walport, *Tilak and Gokhale*, 81.

⁴⁸ See J.NEHRU, *Glimpses of World History*, 441.

⁴⁹ See B.G.TILAK, *Selected Documents*, vol. 1, 133.

⁵⁰ See B.G.TILAK, *Selected Documents*, vol. 2, 230.

⁵¹ See B.G.TILAK, *Selected Documents*, vol. 2, 230. According to P.Kanungo, Tilak not only tried to organise Hindu nationalism around Ganapati festivals, but also used it as a vehicle for anti-British, anti-Muslim and anti-social reform propaganda. See P.KANUNGO, *RSS's Tryst with Politics*, 108.

⁵² See B.G.TILAK, *Selected Documents*, vol.3, 6.

Shivaji. Boys were engaged in fencing and other physical exercises. The Natu brothers taught them sword and single stick exercises⁵³.

Stanley A. Walport observes that through the Ganapati festivals Tilak succeeded in bringing together the hitherto ignored urban and peasant lower classes, indoctrinating them with political songs and speeches, drilling young men to march about town in militant groups and imparting to Hinduism a congregational character hitherto unknown to it⁵⁴. During the processions they shouted: “O Heroes of Hind” and “Adore your Country as God”⁵⁵.

Often the Ganapati festivals provoked the Muslim community. Tilak wrote articles in a tone which was very offence to the Muslims, calling the Hindus to abstain from acting as the bearers of the corpses of Hassan and Hussain, that the weeping stories of the Muslims in their Muharam celebrations have nothing in them that would awake patriotism⁵⁶. In 1894 and 1895 Tilak held special Ganapati meetings in his own house at Poona and at these songs were sung in which moderate Hindus and the British government were denounced, and Tilak approved these songs⁵⁷.

David Smith observes that the worship of Ganesh was reinvented in Maharashtra by the great independent leader Tilak. Today, the Ganesh festival is the largest Hindu public religious performance in Maharashtra⁵⁸. Yogendra K.Malik and V.B. Singh remind us that Tilak’s use of the Ganesh festivals was an example of the use of traditional religious symbols to mobilise the Hindus in the cause of Hindu nationalism⁵⁹. According to Walport, with the Ganesh festivals militant Hinduism’s first modern cadre was born⁶⁰.

3.2 Shivaji festivals

Tilak was instrumental in reviving the memory of Shivaji and setting in motion a great national propaganda which culminated in 1895 in the celebration at the chief centres of Brahmin activity in the Deccan of Shivaji’s reputed birthday⁶¹. According

⁵³ See B.G.TILAK, *Selected Documents*, vol.3, 6.

⁵⁴ See S.A.WALPORT, *Tilak and Gokhale*, 68.

⁵⁵ These songs have been translated and are preserved in the National Archives, New Delhi, History of the Freedom Movement Materials, R II ½ as cited in S.A.WALPORT, *Tilak and Gokhale*, 70, 319 endnote 20.

⁵⁶ See B.G.TILAK, *Selected Documents*, vol. 2, 230.

⁵⁷ See B.G.TILAK, *Selected Documents*, vol.3, 6.

⁵⁸ See D. SMITH, *Hinduism and Modernity*, 182.

⁵⁹ See Y.K.MAILK – V.B.SINGH, *Hindu Nationalists in India*, 216-217.

⁶⁰ See S.A.WALPORT, *Tilak and Gokhale*, 69.

⁶¹ See B.G.TILAK, *Selected Documents*, vol. 3, 7.

to Tilak, the Shivaji festivals serve like manure to the seeds of enthusiasm and the spirit of nationalism⁶². He saw in this festival a peculiar value for the whole country, and argued that it is the duty of everyone to see that this character of the festival is not ignored or misrepresented⁶³.

Shivaji festivals at times created tension between the Muslims and the Hindus. Some of the articles that appeared in *Kesari* prove this fact⁶⁴. But Tilak said: “The Shivaji festival is not celebrated to alienate or even to irritate the Mahomedans. [...] We are not against a festival being started in honour of Akbar or any other hero from old Indian history”⁶⁵. The Shivaji festivals were also attempts to consolidate Hindu consciousness and Hindu militancy. Kushwant Singh adds that every time the Ganesh and Shivaji festivals were celebrated there were Hindu-Muslim riots⁶⁶. Walport says that, with the revival of the Shivaji festivals the next link in the organisational chain of militant Hinduism was developed⁶⁷.

3.3 Shivaji as a role model for violence as higher duty

Shivaji, the Maratha leader, provided a kind of mythological exemplar for Tilak of his ethics of violence as higher duty, whose festivals he ardently promoted, though Mahatma Gandhi considered Shivaji as a misguided patriot. In 1896 Tilak lamented the neglect of the sites associated with the life and death of Shivaji. He said: “That the place of coronation and the tomb of that great man who gave the joy of independence to Maharashtra for two centuries should have been so utterly forgotten by the Marathas is indeed a misfortune”⁶⁸. On 24 June 1906 Tilak wrote an article in his *Mahratta* entitled “Is Shivaji not a National Hero?”⁶⁹ He called Shivaji ‘*swadeshi* hero’⁷⁰ and argued that “Shivaji is the only hero to be found in Indian history”⁷¹. Tilak also began the modern promotion of Shivaji, as the leader of Maratha independence in Maharashtra. He urged children to read a portion of a historical novel entitled *Ushahkal* dealing with the times of Shivaji⁷². According to him, what

⁶² See B.G.TILAK, *Selected Documents*, vol. 4, 39.

⁶³ See B.G.TILAK, *Selected Documents*, vol. 4, 27.

⁶⁴ See B.G.TILAK, *Selected Documents*, vol. 2, 231

⁶⁵ B.G.TILAK, *Selected Documents*, vol. 4, 27.

⁶⁶ See K.SINGH, *The End of India*, 43-44.

⁶⁷ See S.A.WALPORT, *Tilak and Gokhale*, 79

⁶⁸ As cited in A. SHARMA, *Modern Hindu Thought*, 210-211.

⁶⁹ B.G.TILAK, *Selected Documents*, vol. 4, 26-28.

⁷⁰ B.G.TILAK, *Selected Documents*, vol. 4, 26.

⁷¹ B.G.TILAK, *Selected Documents*, vol. 4, 26.

⁷² See B.G.TILAK, *Selected Documents*, vol. 1, 53.

makes Shivaji a national hero is the spirit which guided him throughout and not his deeds as such⁷³.

But history tells us that Shivaji treacherously murdered Afzal Khan⁷⁴. Ivan Strenski reminds us that Tilak's failure to bring about a method of controlled use of force must be seen at least partly as a failure of his political mythology. In a word, the myth of Shivaji sent all the wrong messages to those who might have wished for an ethic of justifiable use of force. Moreover, knowing about other ambivalent features of Tilak's political behaviour, one might conclude that Tilak chose the Shivaji myth precisely *because* it was ambivalent: it permitted him to appeal to chivalrous and heroic elements of the Maratha leader's lofty character, while at the same time permitting him to trade upon some of Shivaji's unsavoury qualities⁷⁵.

Strenski argues that Shivaji's killing of the Mughal general Afzal Khan raises many ethical questions. The 'great chivalric hero' Shivaji arrived with concealed deadly weapons to meet Afzal Khan. At his first opportunity, Shivaji murdered Afzal Khan on the very spot where they had agreed to talk peace⁷⁶. Walport describes the murder of Afzal Khan as follows:

To all outward appearances clad innocently enough, Shivaji approached the Muslim in his plain cloth shirt, but under it he wore a vest of mail, and concealed in his right sleeve was a scorpion-shaped dagger, while the finger tips of his left hand were sheathed with metal tiger claws. The embrace with which he greeted Afzal evoked the death-pang outcry from the Muslim⁷⁷.

What followed was the massacre of Afzal Khan's entire retinue. Now leaderless, the Mughal army dispersed and Shivaji won what Marathi patriots have celebrated as a great victory – a victory won by duplicity and deception. Shivaji's failure to keep his solemn word make him seem cowardly and dishonourable, little better than a sneak thief. Put on to the balance with the rest of Shivaji's deeds, it weighs heavily against permitting any honest reader to see in him an honourable man. Hence, says Strenski, Shivaji cannot be a role model for anyone who wishes to found an ethic of the principled or controlled use of violence⁷⁸.

⁷³ See B.G.TILAK, *Selected Documents*, vol. 4, 27.

⁷⁴ See B.G.TILAK, *Selected Documents*, vol. 3, 6.

⁷⁵ See I.STRENSKI, "Legitimacy", 9.

⁷⁶ See I.STRENSKI, "Legitimacy", 10.

⁷⁷ S.A.WALPORT, *Tilak and Gokhale*, 85-86. According to a report published in October 2004, the VHP, which is an extremist Hindutva organisation, has started an agitation aimed at demolishing the 17th century tomb of Afzal Khan. See V.RAMAKRISHNAN, "BJP's Failing Tactics", 5-6. See also A.KATAKAM, "A Tomb as Target", 11-13.

⁷⁸ See I.STRENSKI, "Legitimacy", 10.

It has been discovered that many years prior to the killing of Afzal Khan, Shivaji used the pretext of marriage to wrest control of a territory. After promising to marry the daughter of Chandra Rao More, the ruler of Javli, he killed More and took over Javli⁷⁹. Strenski says: “some of Tilak’s own most notorious public deeds seem to indicate that his philosophy of political action was informed by the very moral ambivalence that characterises the myth of Shivaji”⁸⁰.

3.4 Anti Cow-Killing Societies

Tilak started and used Anti-Cow-Killing Society, which in its original form was a religious movement founded on the fact that the Hindus regard the cow as a sacred animal⁸¹. Unfortunately, his Anti Cow-Killing Society was regarded as a direct movement to provoke Muslims⁸². Tilak did not take part in any anti-cow killing movement as such, but took advantage of the ill-feeling between the Hindus and Muslims for which this movement was a symptom⁸³. Tilak took a prominent part in inflaming the minds of Hindus against the Muslims. In several of his articles in *Kesari* he upheld the view that in the anti-cow-killing riots, as in all other outbreaks, the Musalmans were the aggressors. He praised the spirit in which the Hindus had stood up to their assailants when attacked and blamed those who held that when assailed by Muslims the Hindus should flee⁸⁴.

3.5 Gymnastic Societies

Tilak maintained that unless Hindus learned to employ force they must expect to be impotent witness of the gradual downfall of their ancient institutions. Therefore, he proceeded to organise Gymnastic Societies in which physical training and the use of more or less primitive weapons were taught in order to develop the martial instincts of the rising generation⁸⁵. The Natu brothers were recognised leaders of Hindu orthodoxy. They carried Tilak’s propaganda to schools and colleges proclaiming that unless they learned to employ force the Hindus must expect to be impotent witnesses of the gradual downfall of all their ancient institutions⁸⁶.

⁷⁹ See A.KATAKAM, “A Tomb as Target”, 13.

⁸⁰ I.STRENSKI, “Legitimacy”, 10.

⁸¹ See B.G.TILAK, *Selected Documents*, vol. 3, 5.

⁸² See B.G.TILAK, *Selected Documents*, vol.2, 225.

⁸³ See B.G.TILAK, *Selected Documents*, vol.2, 227.

⁸⁴ See B.G.TILAK, *Selected Documents*, vol.2, 227-228.

⁸⁵ See B.G.TILAK, *Selected Documents*, vol.2, 232.

⁸⁶ See B.G.TILAK, *Selected Documents*, vol. 2, 232.

His Gymnastic Societies sometimes resorted themselves into juvenile bands of dacoits to swell the coffers of *swaraj*. Young Hindus were taught to use arms and induced to believe it to be their duty to employ them against the enemy⁸⁷. The teaching which he gave or caused to be given to the members of the said societies was of such an evil and demoralising nature that with his approbation the members of some such societies formed themselves into bands of robbers who committed murder and robbery with the object of obtaining money to pursue Tilak's political campaign⁸⁸.

3.6 Extremist journalism

Tilak started two newspapers *Kesari* and *Mahratta*. He wrote incriminating articles to encourage terrorism. In several of his writings he spoke of the cheapness of bombs and the economy with which they could be manufactured⁸⁹. He described the bomb as a charm and an amulet and a legitimate weapon of political reform⁹⁰. He even considered terrorism as an expression of patriotism. He said: "There is an excess of patriotism at the root of the bombs in Bengal"⁹¹. He went so far as to say that the Bengalee murders were 'beneficent murders' so that, in his opinion, there might be a beneficent murderer⁹².

Tilak used his newspapers to incite the Hindus to assert their rights. He vilified the Muslims and the British⁹³.

From June through August of 1902, *Kesari* ran a highly provocative series of nine editorials entitled 'Guerrilla Warfare'⁹⁴. Sometimes *Kesari* contained articles on methods of the Russian Revolutionaries and the cult of the bomb in Bengal⁹⁵. He openly advocated Russian methods of retaliation. Writing in *Kesari* on 16 July 1907 he exhorted Indians to follow the Russian methods of political agitation⁹⁶. Tilak also wrote some articles proposing to the government to make gymnastics a compulsory subject in schools⁹⁷.

⁸⁷ See B.G.TILAK, *Selected Documents*, vol.2, 232.

⁸⁸ See B.G.TILAK, *Selected Documents*, vol.2, 232.

⁸⁹ See B.G.TILAK, *Selected Documents*, vol. 1, 74.

⁹⁰ See B.G.TILAK, *Selected Documents*, vol. 3, 15.

⁹¹ B.G.TILAK, *Selected Documents*, vol.1, 105.

⁹² See B.G.TILAK, *Selected Documents*, vol. 1, 74.

⁹³ See B.G.TILAK, *Selected Documents*, vol. 2, 229.

⁹⁴ See S.A.WALPORT, *Tilak and Gokhale*, 150.

⁹⁵ See B.G.TILAK, *Selected Documents*, vol.2, 244.

⁹⁶ See B.G.TILAK, *Selected Documents*, vol. 1, 49-50..

⁹⁷ See B.G.TILAK, *Selected Documents*, vol. 2, 235.

In the *Kesari* of 28 May 1907 he exhorted Indian leaders to emulate the example of Russian democrats in their methods of political agitation⁹⁸. He also spoke of how the Russians managed to evade press censorship⁹⁹. On 27 July 1907 Tilak wrote in *Kesari*: “We find in Mr. Savarkar’s book a true echo of the thoughts of Mazzini, his secret and the open attempts to bring about the unification of Italy”¹⁰⁰; “We find in Mazzini’s writings a clear enumeration of the noble principles of democratic politics”¹⁰¹.

When Tilak began *Kesari* and *Mahratta* he had stated that the aim of the two newspapers would be to give a fearless account of the existing condition in the country, to give reviews of Indian books and to give correct estimates of political affairs in Britain¹⁰². But as is evident, his columns went beyond this scope and promoted extremism and militancy. They became vehicles for his radical political views and ethics of violence.

3.7 Militant activities

Tilak was the founder of the militant revolutionary school in the national movement¹⁰³. He seems to have had connections with the secret societies at Nasik, Bengal and elsewhere¹⁰⁴. He felt himself strong to capture the Congress organisation in 1907, though it was not successful¹⁰⁵. The fight between the Moderates and the Extremists carried on in the political arena led to a split in the Indian National Congress. The extremist founded a party of their own. But Tilak said that the extremist of today will be the moderates of tomorrow just as the moderates of today were extremists yesterday¹⁰⁶. In 1907 at Surat, Tilak and his revolutionary group were expelled from the Congress for their radicalisation of Indian politics, which included also Aurobindo Ghose¹⁰⁷. The rift was only healed in 1914 when Tilak finalised a pact with the Muslim League for a joint front against the British¹⁰⁸.

⁹⁸ See B.G.TILAK, *Selected Documents*, vol.1, 42.

⁹⁹ See B.G.TILAK, *Selected Documents*, vol.1, 45.

¹⁰⁰ B.G.TILAK, *Selected Documents*, vol.1, 50-51.

¹⁰¹ B.G.TILAK, *Selected Documents*, vol.1, 51.

¹⁰² See D.KEER, *Lokamanya Tilak*, 29.

¹⁰³ See MENON, P.K.K, *The History of Freedom Movement*, vol. 2, 29.

¹⁰⁴ See B.G.TILAK, *Selected Documents*, vol. 1, 133; *Ibid.*, vol. 2, 237.

¹⁰⁵ See B.G.TILAK, *Selected Documents*, vol. 1, 136.

¹⁰⁶ See B.G.TILAK, *Selected Documents*, vol. 4, 29-30.

¹⁰⁷ See B.G.TILAK, *Selected Documents*, vol. 1, 139.

¹⁰⁸ See A. SHARMA, *Modern Hindu Thought*, 195.

It has been argued that in the murder of Walter Charles Rand¹⁰⁹ and Charles Egerton Ayerst¹¹⁰ at Nasik, the assassins were only giving effect to Tilak's teachings¹¹¹. He played a leading role in inflaming the minds of the Hindus against the Muslims. During the cow-killing agitation of 1893, which caused disturbances throughout the country and much loss of life and property, He thus showed himself as an open advocate of violence and the cult of physical force¹¹². Sometimes he advocated insurrection and argued that the Boer system of warfare which had been successful against the British, was that which had been adopted by Shivaji against the Muslims¹¹³. In 1908 Tilak was tried for sedition because of an attempt on the life of Kingsford, a British judge at Muzaffarpur. Though the intention was to murder Kingsford, the assassins missed the target and two ladies were killed. Tilak in his writings supported the bomb throwers¹¹⁴. This bomb outrage offered the government a golden chance to arrest Tilak. Tilak was sentenced for six years in prison.

Tilak was convicted for inciting disaffection against the British in his writings in Marathi. But he claimed that the English renderings were defective. The trial ended in his incarceration and he was sent to Mandalay (Myanmar) and it was there that he composed his influential commentary on the *Gita* – the *Gitarahasya*.

3.8 Anti-Muslim attitude

Tilak played a prominent part in inflaming the minds of the Hindus against the Muslims. Between 1880 and 1890 throughout India there was an evident antipathy between Hindus and Muslims. There were numerous riots and encounters between the members of the two faiths in many parts of the county¹¹⁵. He promoted Ganapati festivals, in the first place, to prevent people from taking part in the Muslim festival Muharram¹¹⁶. He was accused of inciting the Hindus to assert their rights to play

¹⁰⁹ Rand was the chairman of the Plague Committee, appointed by Governor Sandhurst. He was based at Poona and was known as a stern disciplinarian. Prior to this appointment he had served as magistrate of Satara District and had passed a sentence convicting eleven Brahmins to jail. Because of this he was also regarded with hostility by orthodox Hindus. See S.A.WALPORT, *Tilak and Gokhale*, 83.

¹¹⁰ Ayerst was a Lieutenant who was accompanying W.C.Rand when they were attacked and killed by the Chapekar brothers Balkrishna and Damodar. See S.A.WALPORT, *Tilak and Gokhale*, 89.

¹¹¹ See B.G.TILAK, *Selected Documents*, vol. 2, 240. For a detailed account of the murder see S.A.WALPORT, *Tilak and Gokhale*, 88-91.

¹¹² See B.G.TILAK, *Selected Documents*, vol. 1, 133..

¹¹³ See B.G.TILAK, *Selected Documents*, vol. 1, 135.

¹¹⁴ See B.G.TILAK, *Selected Documents*, vol. 1, 76.

¹¹⁵ See B.G.TILAK, *Selected Documents*, vol. 2, 226.

¹¹⁶ See B.G.TILAK, *Selected Documents*, vol.2, 230.

music in passing before mosques¹¹⁷. He even called the Muslims a savage race. He said: “even a savage race like the Mohammedans did not disarm the Hindus while exercising their imperial sway over India”¹¹⁸.

In High Court of Justice, Kings Bench Division accused Tilak of several crimes. For example, in 1893 during the Hindu-Muslim riots in Bombay Tilak took advantage of the situation to stir up the feeling of the Hindus against the Muslims. He was accused of using the Anti-Cow Killing Societies as a means to provoke the Muslims¹¹⁹. According to the report of the Bombay government on 16 July 1918, on the occasion of Shivaji’s coronation festival, Tilak presided at a lecture on conscription. In his speech he called the army a mercenary which consisted of Muslims and foreigners¹²⁰. It has been observed that basically, Tilak’s anti-Muslim attitude manifested itself in four things: the question of playing music before the mosques, the Ganapati celebrations, the Shivaji movement and the Anti-Cow Killing Societies.

3.9 Anti- Christian attitude

Tilak saw Christianity as an enemy of Hinduism. He said: “Now I turn to the forces that are arrayed against us. There are mainly two forces of (1) science and (2) Christianity. If our religion is threatened with any hostile criticism, it comes from these two”¹²¹. Once he took tea in a Christian missionary school and accepted to do penance for it¹²².

Tilak was vehemently opposed to the so-called conversion activities of the Christians. When Pandita Ramabai, a great Sanskrit scholar who became a widow, converted to Christianity and then set up *Sharada Sadan* for educating destitute high-caste widows, Tilak alleged that it was being covertly used to promote conversion to Christianity¹²³.

Tilak never really favoured social reforms¹²⁴. On 30 July 1907 he wrote in *Kesari* against Christian involvement in social reform and human rights issues. He said:

¹¹⁷ See B.G.TILAK, *Selected Documents*, vol. 2, 228.

¹¹⁸ B.G.TILAK, *Selected Documents*, vol. 1, 106.

¹¹⁹ See B.G.TILAK, *Selected Documents*, vol. 3, 5.

¹²⁰ See B.G.TILAK, *Selected Documents*, vol. 3, 102.

¹²¹ As cited in A. SHARMA, *Modern Hindu Thought*, 207.

¹²² See “Tilak, Balgangadhar (1856-1920)”, 118.

¹²³ See A. SHARMA, *Modern Hindu Thought*, 193.

¹²⁴ To some extent, Tilak was against untouchability. He said: “if God were to tolerate untouchability I would not recognise Him as God at all. [...] I do not deny that it was the Brahmin rule that introduced the practice of untouchability. This is a cancer in the body of Hindu society and we

Though the correspondence with regard to the abolition of the customs of dedicating minor girls to the gods at Jejuri and Savantwadi is carried on under the leadership of Dr. Bhandarkar, it is the Missionaries who are as a matter of fact at the bottom of the whole affair. It was they who first brought to the notice of Government that such girls led an immoral life after attaining puberty and that the existing statutory resolutions were quite inadequate to remedy the [sic] evil. [...] It is not at all possible for the people to believe that the above suggestion of the Missionaries originated from disinterested motives. [...] Our hypocritical Missionaries do not seem to know that immorality is not a criminal offence in England and that the value of the chastity of women can be estimated there in damages. The missionaries needlessly interfered in the matter¹²⁵.

Again, referring to Christianity Tilak said: "Our enemies are fast disappearing before the teachings of modern science, take courage and work hard for the final triumph"¹²⁶. He envisaged a time when, instead of Christians preaching Christianity in India, Hindus will see their preachers proclaiming *Sanatana Dharma* (Eternal Religion) all over the world¹²⁷.

3.10 Critical attitude towards Buddhism and Jainism

Tilak did not view benevolently the Buddhists and the Jains of India. He praised Adi Sankara of Kaladi who aggressively fought these two religions. Tilak says: "Buddhism flourished and attacks were made on Hindu religion by Buddhists and Jains. After 600 years of chaos rose one great leader, Shankaracharya and he brought together all the common philosophical elements for our religion and proved and preached them in such a way that Buddhism was swept away from the land"¹²⁸.

must eradicate it at all costs". *Bal Gangadhar Tilak: His Writings and Speeches*, Madras 1922³ as cited in A. SHARMA, *Modern Hindu Thought*, 201. But it is also true that on 24 March 1918 an All India Depressed Classes Conference was held under the presidentship of Sayajiro Gaikwad, the Maharaja of Baroda. Although Tilak spoke of the removal of untouchability, he refused to sign a manifesto declaring that the signatories would not observe untouchability in their day-to-day life. See "Tilak, Balgangadhar (1856-1920)", 118. Again, Tilak differed on the question of widow remarriage. See *The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, vol. 20, 371.

¹²⁵ B.G. TILAK, *Selected Documents*, vol.1, 51-52.

¹²⁶ A. SHARMA, *Modern Hindu Thought*, 207

¹²⁷ See A. SHARMA, *Modern Hindu Thought*, 208.

¹²⁸ As cited in A. SHARMA, *Modern Hindu Thought*, 206.

4. Promotion of Hindu nationalism

Koenraad Elst observes that Tilak was the first to connect Hindu symbolism with the freedom struggle and he interpreted the *Gita* in terms of political activism¹²⁹. It was during the British rule that Hindu nationalism took birth. ‘The father of Indian unrest’ was in many respects one of the figures who nurtured it. Tilak was a Hindu nationalist to the core who made – as Walport says – no distinction between religion and politics¹³⁰. He was anti-Muslim and anti-Gandhi. According to Tilak, religion is an element of nationality¹³¹. He buttressed the claims of Hindu chauvinism through his scholarship. He said: “The common factor in Indian Society is the feeling of *Hindutva* (Hinduness)”¹³². The Hindu religion provides to the Indian society a moral as well as social tie. During the Vedic times India was a self-contained country and a great nation united by a common culture. That unity disappeared and it brought upon the nation great degradation. But it is the duty of the leaders of India to revive that union¹³³.

Tilak stood for the establishment of a Hindu *rashtra* in India. It is argued that Tilak had a part in the so-called ‘Nepal plot’¹³⁴. The idea presumably was to convince the King of Nepal to invade India, sparking in turn an uprising within the country in his support, since if the independent King of the only independent Hindu Kingdom conquered India there would be one sovereign Hindu nation¹³⁵.

Emulation of a great past is axiomatic to any cultural renaissance. Tilak argued that truths that are being discovered by the West were known to the *rishis* of India. Modern science is gradually justifying and vindicating the ancient wisdom of

¹²⁹ See K.ELST, *Decolonising the Hindu Mind*, 111.

¹³⁰ See S.A.WALPORT, *Tilak and Gokhale*, 68.

¹³¹ See A. SHARMA, *Modern Hindu Thought*, 205.

¹³² As cited in A. SHARMA, *Modern Hindu Thought*, 211..

¹³³ See B.G.TILAK, *Selected Documents*, vol.4, 28.

¹³⁴ The ‘Nepal plot’ was a plan by some Hindus in India to convince the King of Nepal to invade India so that there would be one sovereign Hindu nation. In 1901 Tilak attended the Calcutta Congress with his business associate Vasudev (alias Vasukaka) Ganesh Joshi (1856-1944), and after the Congress they met and talked with a Maharashtrian school mistress named Mataji, then living in Calcutta. Mataji suggested that Tilak and Joshi visit Nepal, where she had lived for many years. She offered to introduce them to the King of Nepal. Starting the journey to Patna in early 1902, their intention was to enter Nepal with the Saivite pilgrims allowed free transit across the border in February to visit the temple of Siva during the festival. However, because of a plague the Nepalese border was closed and Tilak and Joshi were obliged to return to Poona. Later in April of the same year, Tilak deputed Vasukaka and K.P.Khadilkar to Nepal where they were to set up a tile factory, as a respectable front for arms and munitions plant designed to supply the invading Nepalese army. But the incredible plot was never realised. See S.A.WALPORT, *Tilak and Gokhale*, 148-149.

¹³⁵ See S.A.WALPORT, *Tilak and Gokhale*, 148.

India¹³⁶. He says: “Are not these common allegiances to the Vedas, the Gita and the Ramayana our common heritage? If we lay stress on it forgetting all the minor differences that exist between different sects, then by the grace of providence we shall [...] be able to consolidate all the different sects into a mighty *Hindu nation*. This ought to be the ambition of every Hindu”¹³⁷.

The *Gitarahasya* is essentially a work of nationalist literature than of philosophy. Through it he made a stirring call to his countrymen to action in order to claim their birth right which is *swaraj* (self rule). He argued that in that process it is legitimate to indulge in violence, in imitation of Arjuna and Shivaji. It is the motive rather than the action in-itself that matters. In other words, end justifies the means.

5. Claim of the superiority of Hinduism

Tilak advocated the superiority of Hinduism over all other religions. During an address in Benaras in 1906 he said: “There is no other religion on the face of the earth except the Hindu religion wherein we find such a hopeful promise, a promise that God comes to us as many times as necessary. After Mahomed, no Prophet is promised, and Jesus Christ came once for ever. No religion holds such promise full of hope [...] A time will come when our religious thoughts and our rights will be vindicated”¹³⁸

According to Tilak, all the different sects of Hinduism are many branches of the Vedic religion. He claims that the term *sanatana dharma* (‘eternal religion’) shows that Hinduism is very old – as old as history of the human race itself. Vedic religion was the religion of the Aryans from a very early time. Hindu religion as a whole is made up of different parts co-related to each other as many sons and daughters of one great religion¹³⁹.

Tilak claims that all religions, except Hinduism, are partial truths. He says: “they [non-Hindu religions] are partial truth while our Hindu religion is based on the whole, the Sanatana truth”.¹⁴⁰ He adds: “Hindu religion is very comprehensive – as comprehensive as its literature itself; we have a wonderful literature. Wisdom, as is concentrated in the Gita and epitomised in about 700 verses, that wisdom, I am

¹³⁶ See A. SHARMA, *Modern Hindu Thought*, 207.

¹³⁷ B.G.TILAK, *Selected Documents*, vol. 4, 28. (Emphasis added)

¹³⁸ B.G.TILAK, *Selected Documents*, vol. 4, 29.

¹³⁹ See A. SHARMA, *Modern Hindu Thought*, 205.

¹⁴⁰ As cited in A. SHARMA, *Modern Hindu Thought*, 207

confident, cannot be defeated or overcome by any philosophy be it Western or any other”¹⁴¹.

In many of his speeches Tilak asked for greater co-ordination of all the sections of Hinduism under the banner of *Bharata Dharma Mahamandala* (‘All India Religious Association’). He also emphasised the value of numbers. He said: “Numerical strength also is a great strength. Can the religion which counts its followers by crores die? Never, unless the crores of our fellow-followers are suddenly swept away our religion will not die. All that is required for our glorious triumph and success is that we should unite all the different sects on a common platform and let the stream of Hindu religion flow through one channel”¹⁴².

6. Claims that Hinduism is the most tolerant religion

Tilak proudly maintained that Hinduism is the most tolerant religion in the world. According to him it tolerates all religions. He asks: “If there be any religion in the world which advocates toleration of other religious beliefs and instruct [sic] one to stick to one’s own religion, it is the religion of the Hindus alone”¹⁴³. He adds: “Shri Krishna does not say that the followers of other religions would be doomed to eternal hell. I challenge anybody to point out to me a similar text from the scriptures of other religions. It cannot be found in any other religion”¹⁴⁴.

7. Indoctrination of the young through education

Tilak was convinced that the salvation of his motherland lay in education of the people, which for him had to be English education¹⁴⁵. He was convinced that the mind arrives at a correct or incorrect decision according as it has been educated¹⁴⁶. In a speech delivered 1908 he spoke of the need for national education and religious education. He said: “We are not given such education as may inspire patriotic sentiments among us”¹⁴⁷; “We must have education on national lines, and for this there must be schools fully under the control of national leaders”¹⁴⁸; “Of the many

¹⁴¹ As cited in A. SHARMA, *Modern Hindu Thought*, 207.

¹⁴² As cited in A. SHARMA, *Modern Hindu Thought*, 207.

¹⁴³ B.G.TILAK, *Selected Documents*, vol. 4, 50.

¹⁴⁴ As cited in A. SHARMA, *Modern Hindu Thought*, 206-207.

¹⁴⁵ See D.V. TAHMANKAR, *Lokamanya Tilak: Father of Indian Unrest and Maker of Modern India*, London, 1956, as cited in A. Sharma, *Modern Hindu Thought*, 193.

¹⁴⁶ See B.G.TILAK, *Gitarahasya*, 177.

¹⁴⁷ B.G.TILAK, *Selected Documents*, vol. 4, 49..

¹⁴⁸ B.G.TILAK, *Selected Documents*, vol. 1, 34.

things that we will do there, *religious education will first and foremost engage our attention*. Secular education only is not enough to build up character”¹⁴⁹.

According to Tilak the want of religious education is one of the causes that have brought the Christian missionary influence all over the country¹⁵⁰. For the promotion of national and religious education, he first thought of establishing private schools on the model of the missionary institutions. Then he succeeded in founding the New English School without any help from the government, thereby establishing a model of education of the Indians for the Indians and by the Indians¹⁵¹.

Tilak envisaged a Hindu university for Hindus. He said: “The idea of a Hindu University where our old religion will be taught along with modern science is a very good one and should have the support of all”¹⁵².

The success of Tilak’s New English School paved way for its conversion into a public body called the Deccan Education Society under whose auspices the Ferguson College was founded (1885) for training educational missionaries for all of Maharashtra. Later, due to a conflict related to the management Tilak resigned.

8. A critical evaluation of Tilak’s philosophy

Tilak created a revolution in the world of ethics with his *Gitarahasya*. It had far reaching consequences in the field of religion, politics, relationship with religious minorities and national struggle for independence. Below we take a critical look at his ethical views and its impact on the Hindutva ideology which is in vogue. K.M.Panikkar observes that it is Tilak’s *Gitarahasya* which marked the change in Indian political scenario. He showed for the first time that the message of the *Gita* was not renunciation as others had thought before, but it was essentially a scripture preaching a doctrine of social activism where action for human good without personal attachment is preached as the first imperative¹⁵³.

¹⁴⁹ B.G.TILAK, *Selected Documents*, vol. 4, 50 (Emphasis in the original).

¹⁵⁰ See B.G.TILAK, *Selected Documents*, vol.4, 48.

¹⁵¹ See D.V. TAHMANKAR, *Lokamanya Tilak: Father of Indian Unrest and Maker of Modern India*, London, 1956 as cited in A. Sharma, *Modern Hindu Thought*, 193.

¹⁵² As cited in A. SHARMA, *Modern Hindu Thought*, 208.

¹⁵³ See K.M.PANIKKAR, “Hindu Revival”, 4.

8.1 Subjective interpretation of the *Gita*

Richard Charles Zaehner says that in interpreting the *Gita*, as in interpreting any sacred text, the danger is that the interpreter will quote all that is grist to his mill while failing to draw attention to what embarrasses him in other parts of the text¹⁵⁴.

Tilak introduced a new trend in the reading of scriptures with his *Gitarahasya*, namely, that of giving a subjective interpretation to the Hindu scriptures in order to give foundation for his concept of violence as higher duty. It is said that ‘what one ought to do’ is the problem of morality. The *Gita* says that what ought to be done is one’s caste duty. If we follow Tilak’s *Gitarahasya* the caste duty consists in action which may involve also violence, and it is fully justified. This is of course abuse of caste power.

The traditional Hindu texts like the *Gita* took on unprecedented importance with Tilak’s *Gitarahasya*. The *Gita* became for the Hindu reformers a kind of counter Bible. Consequently many translations of the *Gita* were sponsored throughout the subcontinent in various languages. Until the advent of Tilak, the interpretations given to the *Gita* never really advocated violence. Many of the great Hindu reformers felt compelled to compose their own ‘reading’ or commentary of it. Thus not only do we hear from the more spiritual reformers such as, Swami Vivekananda (1863-1902), Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan (1888-1975) or Vinoba Bhave (1895-1994) but also men of action like Gandhi. But their concept of *karma yoga* differed from Tilak’s.

The great commentators of the *Gita* preferred non-violence than violence. Some saw in the *Gita* action for social reform, others action for political independence, and some others saw in it a call to take up arms. For the most part, the overwhelming majority of commentators read the *Gita* non-violently, as a spiritual or moral allegory and the desire to avoid violence was ever present. Many made allegorical readings of the battle between the Pandavas and the Kauravas. Gandhi saw the *Mahabharata* itself as a ‘great anti-war epic’ and Krishna’s conversation with Arjuna as imaginary. This interpretation became the dominant reading of the *Gita* during the twentieth century. But with Tilak it was different.

In his own time Gandhi had rejected the views of Tilak. He said: “I do not find myself in agreement with everything he [Tilak] says”¹⁵⁵; “What we need to consider

¹⁵⁴ See R.C.ZAEHNER, *The Bhagavad Gita*, 4.

¹⁵⁵ *The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, vol. 88, 173. But Gandhi had the magnanimity to say: “He [Tilak] lived for swaraj and he died muttering the swaraj mantra”. *Ibid.*, vol. 19, 510; “Though Mr.Tilak and other great Indians like him differ from us, we should continue to hold them in the highest esteem [...] Since they are great patriots, we must consider no honour too great for them”. *Ibid.*, vol. 8, 419.

is whether Indians should accept the views of Mr.Tilak and his party. We submit, after great deliberation, that Mr.Tilak's views should be rejected"¹⁵⁶.

K.M.Panikkar tells us that the British government was not unaware of the dynamite that the *Gita* contained, for long before Tilak's *Gitarahasya* had been published, he had been preaching its message. The authorities even considered seriously the question of proscribing the *Gita*; but a holy book which the Hindu masses use as daily prayer and which has been translated into every Indian language could not be proscribed as a seditious volume¹⁵⁷.

8.2 Divine sanction to violence

Tilak's interpretation of the *Gita* was an attempt to find justification for violence and militancy in the Hindu scriptures. An action may involve violence. But when that action is seen as a duty, violence becomes unavoidable and necessary. Tilak goes a step further and gives it a divine sanction. He presents Krishna as the new law-giver. This makes his ethics even more dangerous and diabolic. Thus violence becomes a religious activity, an obligation (*dharma*) for all Hindus and salvation is to be achieved through it. This makes us raise two pertinent questions: can a subjective interpretation of sacred scripture to rationalise violence be justified? Can such an interpretation be declared as divinely sanctioned? As we have seen above, according to Tilak, both are possible.

Tilak's ethics has been a great attraction for many Hindutva ideologues and organisations of modern and contemporary India. Hindu sacred scriptures like the *Bhagavadgita*, *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* and even some *Puranas* are liberally interpreted in order to justify militancy, violence and extremism against both real and imaginary enemies in many parts of India. Ashis Nandy is correct to some extent when he says that South Asian gods and goddesses, like their Hellenistic counterparts, can sometimes be found on the wrong side of morality and law¹⁵⁸.

Many modern and contemporary Hindutva ideologues were inspired by Tilak's interpretation of the *Gita*. For example, M.S.Golwalkar, who was the leader of the RSS from 1940 to 1973 said: "Our Philosophy teaches us to fight with all our strength, [...] Sri Krishna commands Arjuna to fight, [...] and in a spirit of doing one's duty unwaveringly"¹⁵⁹.

¹⁵⁶ *The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, vol. 8, 418.

¹⁵⁷ See K.M.PANIKKAR, "Hindu Revival", 15.

¹⁵⁸ See A. NANDY, *Bonfire of Creeds*, 142.

¹⁵⁹ M.S.GOLWALKAR, *Bunch of Thoughts*, 342.

Aurobindo said: “It is an error to think that the heights of religion are above the struggles of this world. The recurrent cry of Sri Krishna to Arjuna insists on the struggle: ‘Fight and overthrow thy opponents’”¹⁶⁰.

Pravin Togadia, a prominent leader of the VHP says: “during the Mahabharata, did God ask Arjuna not to fight, did God talk to Arjun about *Ahimsa*? What had Krishna Bhagawan said? Fight. [...] He told Arjuna to kill Karna. This is what Kshatriya [sic] blood is made up of. Karna was killed. Did anyone tell Krishna that he had followed a path of *adhharma*?”¹⁶¹.

There is nothing as dangerous as giving divine sanction to violence. It easily convinces the naive and the ignorant to indulge in violence as there is merit attached to it. It makes the criminals to commit violence with religious fervour.

Many instances of communal violence in India are violence justified by religion. In 1992 those who died during the *kar seva* in order to demolish the Babri mosque are considered as martyrs. On 6 December 1992 at Ayodhya in the midst of the hysterical cries of the *karsevaks*, *Jai siya Ram* the Babri mosque was razed to the ground. The attack on a century-old Christian Girl’s school at Rajkot on 20 June 1998 was carried out amidst shouting slogans of *Jai Shri Ram*. The same slogan was heard when the Australian missionary Graham Staines and his two sons were burned alive in Orissa in 1999¹⁶². When the Muslims women were being gang raped at Godhra in Gujarat in early 2002 the rapists shouted *har har Mahadev*¹⁶³.

Religious sanction to violence helps militants and extremists to plan to the finest details the execution of their misdeeds. Thus acts of violence become a sort of sacred ritual, the criminals assume the role of high priests and what is promised to the accomplices in the crime is merit.

8.3 Justification of Hindu militancy

Tilak represented a militant version of Hinduism¹⁶⁴. He argues that Hinduism is a warrior-religion with a warrior-morality. Lord Krishna did not send Arjuna to the woods as a mendicant or make a *sanyasin* out of him, filling his mind with apathy¹⁶⁵.

¹⁶⁰ AUROBINDO, *India’s Rebirth*, 51.

¹⁶¹ “Against the Law”, 10. (From the video recording of Pravin Togadia’s entire speech in Hindi, translated into English by Teesta Setalvad).

¹⁶² See S.SARKAR, “Hindutva and the Question of Conversions”, 74-75. See also P.SAHGAL – K.WALLA, “Losing Control?”, 18.

¹⁶³ See P.BIDWAI, “For Justice in Gujarat”, 122.

¹⁶⁴ See Y.K.MAILK – V.B.SINGH, *Hindu Nationalists in India*, 218.

¹⁶⁵ See B.G. TILAK, *Gitarahasya*, introductory, 35.

He did not place in his hands cymbals or drum or harp but bow and arrows¹⁶⁶. His advice to Arjuna was to fight: “therefore, O Arjuna, fight”¹⁶⁷; “therefore, determine to fight and rise”¹⁶⁸; “therefore, think of me [Krishna] and fight”¹⁶⁹; “the doer and the causer of everything is I myself [Krishna], and you [Arjuna] are only the tool; and therefore, fight and conquer your enemies”¹⁷⁰. Tilak reminds us that Arjuna did really fight, and in the course of the fight he actually killed Bhishma, Karna, Jayadratha, and others as occasion arose¹⁷¹. In other words, according to Tilak, in modern terms, a true patriot is one who holds the *Gita* on the one hand and pistol on the other.

Gandhi once remarked that Tilak seems to have said that in our language we have no word corresponding to conscience. Therefore, he rejected the idea of conscience¹⁷². Gandhi was of the opinion that Tilak missed the inner meaning of the *Gita* when he used it to justify violence. He says: “But I have often felt that he [Tilak] has not understood the age-old spirit of India, has not understood her soul”¹⁷³, which according to Gandhi, is non-violence (*ahimsa*).

During the trial of Tilak the judge said the following about him in the sentence he delivered: “It seems to me that it must be a diseased mind, a most perverted mind, that could say that the articles which you have written are legitimate weapons in political agitation. They are seething with sedition; they breathe violence; they speak of murder with approval, and the cowardly and atrocious act of committing murder with bombs not only seems to meet with your approval, but you hail that advent of the bomb in India as if something had come to India for good”¹⁷⁴.

Violence is energy and talents wasted. The Judge added: “you [Tilak] are a man of undoubted talents and great power and influence. Those talents and influence if used for the good of your country would have been instrumental in brining about a great deal of happiness for those very people whose cause you expouse”¹⁷⁵.

Thus, as K.M.Panikkar observes, the terrorists and other political groups which worked for revolution believed frankly in violence and elevated it to a creed¹⁷⁶, and with the beginning of the twentieth century a new type of nationalism which believed

¹⁶⁶ See B.G. TILAK, *Gitarahasya*, introductory, 36.

¹⁶⁷ *Gita*, 2, 18 as in B.G. TILAK, *Gitarahasya*, introductory, 36.

¹⁶⁸ *Gita*, 3, 37 as in B.G. TILAK, *Gitarahasya*, introductory, 35.

¹⁶⁹ *Gita*, 8, 7 as in B.G. TILAK, *Gitarahasya*, introductory, 36.

¹⁷⁰ *Gita*, 11, 33 as in B.G. TILAK, *Gitarahasya*, introductory, 36.

¹⁷¹ See B.G. TILAK, *Gitarahasya*, introductory, 37.

¹⁷² See *The collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, vol. 37, 267.

¹⁷³ *The collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, vol. 37, 261.

¹⁷⁴ B.G. TILAK, *Selected Documents*, vol. 1, 83.

¹⁷⁵ B.G. TILAK, *Selected Documents*, vol. 1, 83.

¹⁷⁶ See K.M. PANIKKAR, “Impact of Europe”, 21.

in revolutionary methods emerged. The leaders of this new movement were Tilak in Western India and Aurobindo Ghose in Bengal¹⁷⁷.

8.4 Ethical relativism and intrinsic goodness of violence

The *Gitarahasya* advocates ethical relativism. Tilak believed in the principle of 'end justifies the means' which implies only that one's *motives* should be untainted by selfish interest and passion¹⁷⁸. The method does not matter. In other words, it is the motivation rather than the action in-itself which is important in determining culpability. He says: "The Reason (*buddhi*) is of greater importance than the Action' [...] If one considers only the external Action, it is often misleading"¹⁷⁹. Thus an action may be sinful. But from the fact that the external action is bad, one cannot draw the conclusion that the reason must also be bad.

Similarly with regard to truth. Under certain circumstances one has a higher obligation to lie. Tilak says: "telling a lie has been found, after mature deliberation, to be much better than speaking the truth"¹⁸⁰; "There is no sin in speaking the untruth on the following five occasions, namely, if in jock [sic] or while speaking with women or at the time of marriage, or if your life is in danger, or for protecting your own property"¹⁸¹. It is stated in the Vedas that even gods themselves broke the pledges made by them¹⁸². There is then, in the strict sense, nothing called truth, justice, honesty, fairplay, charity, and the like. What exists is ethics of expediency. Everything is, therefore, relative. D.D.Pattanaik a pro-Hindutva writer admits: "Tilak was ready to condone occasional acts of terrorist violence on grounds of expediency"¹⁸³. But the paradox is that, according to Tilak, even though one indulges in terrorist violence it may not be considered as sin so that one can still attain final liberation (*moksa*). He says: "the Gita has propounded the device of performing Action in such a way that one ultimately attains Release without committing sin"¹⁸⁴.

Concerning the ethical problem involved in the killing Afzal Khan by Shivaji through treachery, Tilak said that great men are above the common principles of morality. Krishna preached in the *Gita* that we have the right even to kill our own

¹⁷⁷ See K.M.PANIKKAR, "A Primer of India", 27.

¹⁷⁸ See B.G.TILAK, *Selected Documents*, vol. 3, 65

¹⁷⁹ B.G. TILAK, *Gitarahasya*, 120.

¹⁸⁰ B.G. TILAK, *Gitarahasya*, 47.

¹⁸¹ B.G. TILAK, *Gitarahasya*, 51.

¹⁸² See B.G. TILAK, *Gitarahasya*, 53.

¹⁸³ D.D.PATTANAIAK, *Hindu Nationalism*, vol. 2, 37.

¹⁸⁴ B.G.TILAK, *Gitarahasya*, Author's preface, xx.

guru and our kinsmen¹⁸⁵. Tilak openly approved the use of bomb as a legitimate weapon in political agitation¹⁸⁶. He wrote articles in defence and justification of political assassinations¹⁸⁷. He was accused of the offence of forgery by fraudulently altering documents¹⁸⁸. He came to be considered as the chief conspirator against the British government.

Here, it may be argued that the ethics of Tilak has a counterpart in Chanakya (Kautilya, 4th century B.C) who wrote a treatise on statecraft entitled *Arthashastra* which contained a code of conduct for rulers that justified force, cunning and ruthlessness and endorsed real politic and dismissed considerations of morality in public life, which ranged from spying to assassination¹⁸⁹.

Gandhi could never agree with Tilak on an ethics of this kind. K.M.Panikkar says: "To Gandhiji it was not sufficient that the ideal should be *Lok Samgraha* or the welfare of all. It was even more important that the means should be ethically right [...] it must be uncontaminated not merely by selfishness but by anything which injures others"¹⁹⁰. Gandhi says: "After many a frank chat with the Lokamanya I had come to see that on some vital matter we could never agree [...] I only know that we fundamentally differed"¹⁹¹; "I cannot claim the honour of being the follower of the late Lokamanya [...] I am conscious that my method is not Mr.Tilak's method"¹⁹². According to Gandhi both the end as well as the means to achieve it should be good and only then an action can be said to be good. He further stated that even if one's 'inner voice' tells one to do an evil act one should not do it: "If a voice told a thief, 'kill that girl, cut off her limbs and take away her jewellery', I would not say it was the still small voice within. It would be sheer wickedness"¹⁹³.

Ivan Strenski says that the ethic of action in the *Gita* is employed to guide the use of public violence in political matters. The *Gita*, and the *Mahabharata*, of which it forms a portion, are about war. The straightforward literal injunction of the *Gita* is to fight, and to fight to death. Thus Krishna urges the reluctant Arjuna to rally his

¹⁸⁵ See *Kesari* 17, 24, 15 June 1897, 3, as cited in S.A.Walport, *Tilak and Gokhale*, 86-87.

¹⁸⁶ See B.G.TILAK, *Selected Documents*, vol. 1, 138.

¹⁸⁷ See B.G.TILAK, *Selected Documents*, vol. 3, 12-13, 15.

¹⁸⁸ See B.G.TILAK, *Selected Documents*, vol. 3, 11.

¹⁸⁹ See T.J.S.GEORGE, *The Enquire Dictionary*, 28.302. See also S.R.GOYAL, *The Kautilya Arthashastra*, 166-174.

¹⁹⁰ K.M.PANIKKAR, "Hindu Revival", 16.

¹⁹¹ *The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, vol. 22, 461-462.

¹⁹² *The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, vol. 20, 369.

¹⁹³ *The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, vol. 88, 173.

courage and fight. This will surprise those familiar only with the more ‘spiritual’ interpretations of the *Gita*¹⁹⁴.

Tilak’s ethics propounded in the *Gitarahasya* is subjective, relative, dubious, ambivalent and machiavellian. He harbours on the idea that violence is a simple thing, a mere performance of caste duty. But violence in any form is self-defeating and it always involves irrationality, however lofty the motives may be. Violence simply works on the principle that ‘end justifies the means’. This was the ethics of the Nazis¹⁹⁵.

Often violence is motivated and pre-meditated and carefully planned. It is irrational in the domain of motivation as well as in the results it produces. The best example for this is the Godhra pogrom of February-March 2002 in the State of Gujarat. Kushwant Singh says that during the Godhra massacre armed mobs were out in different parts of Gujarat with detailed lists of Muslim homes and establishments. Several hundred Muslims were hacked to death or burnt alive, women raped, homes and shops looted and burnt. Not only did the police remain inert, when the army arrived on the scene it was not deployed. Officers who tried to do their duty and foil the plans of the mobs were transferred out¹⁹⁶. Arundhati Roy says about the Gujarat massacre: “The leaders of the mob had computer-generated cadastral lists marking out Muslim homes, shops, business and even partnerships. They had mobile phones to co-ordinate the action. They had trucks loaded with thousands of gas cylinders, hoarded weeks in advance, which they used to blow up Muslim commercial establishments. They had not just police protection and police connivance, but also covering fire”¹⁹⁷. If Tilak were to be alive today, he would have, in all likelihood, endorsed the communal pogrom of Gujarat which was meticulously planned and executed.

8.5 Influence on the Hindutva movement

In Tilak, Hindu religion invaded the domain of politics. He was an icon of religio-centric politics in his time. But he was eclipsed by Gandhi in the leadership of the Congress Party. This political displacement of Tilak corresponded with what *seemed* the virtually final eclipse of his reading of the *Gita* as well¹⁹⁸. But it was not so. On 30 January 1948 Nathuram Godse (1912-1949) fired three shots at point blank range

¹⁹⁴ See I.STRENSKI, “Legitimacy”, 2.

¹⁹⁵ For example, Joseph Goebbels, Adolf Hitler’s right hand man, said: “*jedes Mittel recht ist, diese Ketten der Sklaverei zu zerbrechen*”(‘any means is right to break the shackles of slavery [of the German nation]. *Goebbels Reden 1932-1939*, Band 1, 1.

¹⁹⁶ See K.SINGH, *The End of India*, 28-29.

¹⁹⁷ A.ROY, “Gujart, Fascism and Democracy”, 32.

¹⁹⁸ See I.STRENSKI, “Legitimacy”, 7.

at Gandhi. The assassin after firing the shots raised his hand with the gun and called for the police. He voluntarily surrendered to the authorities¹⁹⁹. The Hindu Mahasabha celebrated the event by distributing sweets²⁰⁰. Godse later said that he had done his duty like Arjuna in the Mahabharata whom Krishna advised to kill his own relatives because they were evil²⁰¹. He had also read Tilak's writings²⁰².

Godse exhibited a surprisingly serene composure after the murder and showed his legal skill and self-confidence in the way in which he argued his case in English, a language he supposedly did not know well. Ashis Nandy says that it was as if the assassination gave meaning and drive to a life which otherwise was becoming increasingly prosaic²⁰³. Godse was extremely religious. He read into the *Gita* with his martial background. For him Krishna was speaking to Arjuna about *real battles* and not allegorical battles fought in the inner self. Tilak's ethics of intrinsic goodness of violence had once again come back to life. It was once again seen as a sacred duty of the patriots of the Hindu *rashtra*.

Gandhi was denounced by Hindutva ideologues for preaching and practising the doctrine of *ahimsa* (non-violence) in the most 'perverted form'. He was killed by a Hindu for having undermined and betrayed Hindu India²⁰⁴. Gopal Godse, brother of Nathuram Godse says: 'Our motive was not to achieve control of the government; ... we were simply trying to rid the nation of someone who had done and was doing great harm to it. He had consistently insulted the Hindu nation and had weakened it by his doctrine of *ahimsa*'²⁰⁵. Patrick Nair reports that at Nagpur the RSS have built a shrine in honour of Godse. While visiting Nagpur in the 1980s he wandered into the RSS complex and found a shrine dedicated to Nathuram Godse. It had a plaque with the message that one day when the Hindu nationalists come to power a far more fitting memorial would be erected²⁰⁶.

Prior to 30 January 1948, there had been five known unsuccessful attempts to kill Gandhi, all of them except one in Maharashtra – the land of Tilak. The first was in Poona in June 1934 when Gandhi was engaged in an anti-untouchability campaign there. The second, in July 1944, at Panchgani where Nathuram Godse, dressed in a Nehru shirt, pyjama and jacket, rushed towards Gandhi brandishing a dagger in his

¹⁹⁹ See N.GODSE, *Why I Assassinated Mahatma Gandhi*, 5.

²⁰⁰ See "At Last they Got Him", 31.

²⁰¹ See GODSE, *Gandhihatya ani Mee*, 46, 221 as cited in A. Nandy, *Bonfire of Creeds*, 87.

²⁰² See T.GHOSH, *The Gandhi Murder Trial*, 25.

²⁰³ See A. NANDY, *Bonfire of Creeds*, 73.

²⁰⁴ See V.S.NAIPAUL, *India: A Wounded Civilisation*, 156.

²⁰⁵ Interview with Gopal Godse in Pune on 13 May 1969 as cited in W. K. ANDERSEN – S. D. DAMLE, *The Brotherhood in Saffron*, 50-51

²⁰⁶ See P.Nair, "RSS' Godse Shrine", 47.

hand and shouting anti-Gandhi slogans. But he was overpowered by the people around Gandhi. The third, in September 1944, at Sevagram which also involved Godse along with some others. The fourth, in June 1946, near Poona when some unknown persons tried to derail the train in which Gandhi was travelling. The fifth, on 20 January 1948 in New Delhi which involved a bomb attack²⁰⁷.

The unprecedented growth of the RSS and its affiliates and the upsurge of militancy among the Hindus should be seen as one of the effects of the re-reading of Tilak's interpretation of the *Gita*. Following Tilak's example many Hindutva ideologues and organisations are now giving new interpretations not only to the *Gita* but also to other sacred books of the Hindus like, the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* and even *Puranas* in order to rationalise violence as a means to promote Hindu cultural nationalism. Referring to *Mahabharata* – of which the *Gita* forms a part – Rajmohan Gandhi says that the epic is a story of unending revenge and violence²⁰⁸.

In his own time Tilak became the guru of V.D.Savarkar (1883-1966), especially in his extreme ideology of nationalism. It was Tilak who recommended the case of Savarkar for a scholarship to go to London for studies. In London Savarkar was busy with production of bombs, eventually sending a manual on this subject back to Tilak, publication of revolutionary pamphlets, books, etc.²⁰⁹. The founder of the RSS, Keshav Baliram Hedgewar (1889-1940) also came under the influence of Tilak²¹⁰. Another prominent RSS leader who was influenced by Tilak was Balkrishna Shivaram Moonje (1872-1948) the founder of the Bhonsle Military School in Nasik²¹¹. Madhav Kashinath Damley founder of *Lokhandi Morcha* or *Iron Front*, a Fascist movement, was also a follower of Tilak²¹². Tilak's thoughts have influenced the Hindu Mahasabha²¹³, the Jan Sangh²¹⁴ and the RSS²¹⁵. The RSS subscribe to Tilak's understanding of *karma-yoga* and the *swayamsevaks* are advised to read the *Gita* regularly²¹⁶. Krishna Kumar writing about the revival of Hindu nationalism in

²⁰⁷ "At last they Got Him", 29-31. See also NANDY, *Bonfire of Creeds*, 70.

²⁰⁸ See R.GANDHI, *Revenge and Reconciliation*, 1,6.

²⁰⁹ See S.A.WALPORT, *Tilak and Gokhale*, 169.

²¹⁰ See BAXTER, *The Jana Sangh*, 3 2. See also H.V. SESHADRI (ed.), *Dr.Hedgewar The Epoch-Maker*, 35.

²¹¹ See B.G.TILAK, *Selected Documents*, vol. 2, 207; 216-217; 219-222.

²¹² See K.ELST, *The Saffron Swastika*, vol. 1, 497-498.

²¹³ In 1951 N.B.Khare said in his presidential address of the Hindu Mahasabha: "Hindu Sabha stands for the Tilakite policy or the Gita policy". N.B.KHARE, *Presidential Address* (1951), 23.

²¹⁴ See P.C.SWAIN, *Bharatiya Janata Party*, 61. See also D.D.PATTANAIK, *Hindu Nationalism*, vol.2, 60.

²¹⁵ P.Kanungo says: "The RSS has certainly borrowed from Tilak the technique of militant mobilisation to assert and consolidate Hindu identity". P.KANUNGO, *RSS's Tryst with Politics*, 108.

²¹⁶ See P.KANUNGO, *RSS's Tryst with Politics*, 109.

India says: “the RSS was a blossom of the vigorous seed of revivalist nationalism that Tilak had sown”²¹⁷. Almost all those convicted in the trial of Gandhi murder case had a connection, past or present with either the Hindu Mahasabha or the RSS and they were believers in violence.

Many Hindutva ideologues make strenuous effort to popularise the view that the Hindu gods and goddesses are ‘weapon wielding deities’. In 1966 N.N.Banerjee, president of the Hindu Mahasabha, on the occasion of the golden jubilee of the organisation told the Hindus that all their deities, such as, Siva, Vishnu, Durga, Kali, Kartikeya, Shri Ramachandra, Shri Krishna are warriors and they carry weapons. Hence Hindus need to realise their significance and should become their dynamic worshippers²¹⁸. Aurobindo reminds us that in the *Mahabharata*, Krishna says that God created battle and armour, the sword, the bow and the dagger²¹⁹.

Describing Goddess Kali, V.S.Naipaul says: “Kali, ‘the black one’, the coal-black aboriginal goddess, surviving in Hinduism as the emblem of female destructiveness, garlanded with human skulls, tongue forever out for fresh blood, eternally sacrificed to but insatiable”²²⁰. Ashis Nandy states that Kali is the new symbol of a treacherous cosmic mother, eager to betray and prone to aggression, fierce, violent, associated with robbers, thieves, thugs, prostitutes, and in some of her incarnations she was associated with certain dangerous diseases²²¹. B.Walker says that Kali holds in two of her hands a sword and a dagger and in the other two are severed heads dripping with blood. Her long tongue hangs out of her mouth and blood trickles down her chin and neck as she gorges herself at her cannibal feasts. In one hideous image a headless Kali holds her own severed head, while the mouth greedily drinks the blood spurting from her neck²²².

Rama of *Ramayana* is depicted as wielding a bow and arrow. In fact, the symbol of the Shiv Sena is Ram’s bow and arrow. He is also projected as the national hero of the Hindu nation²²³. Hanuman is the monkey-god who served Rama with steadfast

²¹⁷ See K.KUMAR, “Hindu Revivalism”, 545.

²¹⁸ See N.N.BANERJEE, *The Golden Jubilee* (1966), 6.

²¹⁹ See AUROBINDO, *India’s Rebirth*, 46.

²²⁰ V.S.NAIPAUL, *India A Wounded Civilisation*, 92.

²²¹ See A. NANDY, *Bonfire of Creeds*, 42, 142.

²²² See B.WALKER, *Hindu World*, vol. 1, 509.

²²³ A.G.Noorani, in his review article of the book by Manjari Katju entitled *Vishva Hindu Parishad and Indian Politics*, reminds us that the traditional depiction of Ram in lithographs has been accompanied by a mood of tranquillity and serenity, and he rarely assumes an angry disposition. However, Ram was made a weapon by the VHP all of a sudden in 1984 after the *Ekatmata Yagna* years of 1983. It is a political symbol which helps the VHP politically. See A.G.NOORANI, “The BJP

devotion. But he is also a symbol of irrational destruction. He went to Lanka in search of Sita. Before he left he destroyed everything in sight, razing houses and uprooting trees as though they were grass until he was captured by Indrajit, son of Ravana. In a bid to humiliate Hanuman and send him back to Ram, an oil-soaked cloth was tied to his tail and set alight. But Hanuman, charged through the city and the surrounding countryside causing untold havoc and burning all the crops with his fiery tail²²⁴. Today Hanuman is the model for the Bajrang Dal activists – the Indian version of the Nazi Stormtroopers (SA, *Sturmabteilung* ‘storming department’). Durga Vahini cadets emulate the Goddess Durga, the demon-killing protective mother²²⁵, who is actually supposed to be the goddess Kali. Many Hindutva ideologues now speak of militant Hinduism as the ‘Third Eye’ of the Hindu²²⁶.

M.M.Ahluwalia maintains that the Hindu revolutionaries were influenced by the European revolutionaries on the one hand and the militancy of Hindu gods and goddesses and historical heroes on the other²²⁷.

Many Bengali secret societies were inspired by Tilak’s interpretation of the *Gita*. The members of the *Anushilan Samiti* (‘disciplinary organisation’) took an oath of allegiance to the organisation before an image of Goddess Kali with the *Bhagavadgita* in one hand and a revolver in the other²²⁸. Aurobindo envisaged *karma yoga* as a means of legitimising violence as a form of sacrifice²²⁹. He believed in an aggressive Hinduism²³⁰. According to him open attack, unsparing criticism, the severest satire, the most wounding irony, are all methods perfectly justifiable and indispensable in politics²³¹. In 1951 N.C.Chatterjee as president of the Hindu Mahasabha said: “The greatest task of the Mahasabha is to create Hindu character on the basis of the Geetha (sic)”. In 1960, V.G.Deshpande in his presidential address of the 45th Annual Session of the All India Hindu Mahasabha spoke of the need to

and the VHP”, *Frontline*, 28 March 2003, 77. (77-78). For similar ideas see also D. SMITH, *Hinduism and Modernity*, 41,190-191.

²²⁴ See B.WALKER, *Hindu World*, vol. 1, 425. The same Hanuman foolishly carried the whole mountain, unable to locate the magical drug Vishalyakarani that he was told to find on the hills for the treatment of Lakshman’s war wounds. See A. NANDY, *Bonfire of Creeds*, 138.

²²⁵ See A. NANDY, *Bonfire of Creeds*, 42.

²²⁶ See G.M.JAGTIANI, *Militant Hinduism (“Third Eye” of the Hindu)*, (1993). Notice the reference to ‘third eye’.

²²⁷ See AHLUWALIA, M.M, *Freedom Struggle in India*, 324, as cited in D.D.Pattanaik, *Hindu Nationalism*, vol.2, 74.

²²⁸ See U.MUKHERJEE, *Two Great Revolutionaries: R.B.Bose and J.N.Mukherjee*, Calcutta, 1966, 17 as cited in C. Jaffrelot, *The Hindu nationalist Movement*, 35.

²²⁹ See C. JAFFRELOT, *The Hindu Nationalist Movement*, 41 footnote 124.

²³⁰ See AUROBINDO, *India’s Rebirth*, 131.

²³¹ See AUROBINDO, *India’s Rebirth*, 20.

resort to guerrilla and mountain warfare²³². The *karma yoga* expounded in the *Gita* is practised by the RSS *pracharaks* ('preachers') which is described as a matter of inner sacrifice. They maintain that action, even when violent, can constitute a means of renunciation when it is undertaken without regard to personal advantage and in the service of Hindu nation (*rashtra*) and Hindu *dharma*²³³.

Many Nazis of Germany took inspiration from the *Gita*. For example, Heinrich Himmler (1900-1945), the chief of Hitler's security service (SS, *Schutzstaffel* = *security guard*) constantly carried with him this sacred book, cited from it, compared Hitler to Lord Krishna and wanted his SS troop to be like the Kshatriya caste of India which saw war as part of their spirituality²³⁴. Savitri Devi (1905-1982) a staunch Nazi (popularly known as 'Hitler's Priestess') was the first woman writer who regarded Adolf Hitler as a divine incarnation equal of Ram and Krishna in the *Gita*²³⁵. She justified the elimination of millions of Jews in Nazi Germany by quoting from the *Gita*. Devi also considered the *Schutzstaffel* of Hitler as the incarnation of the Indo-Aryan Kshatriya caste²³⁶. According to Victor and Victoria Trimondi, the *Gita* spiritualises cruelty (*skralisierung der Grausamkeit*). All imaginable forms of cruelty were practised in the fratricidal war described in the *Gita*. In addition, Hitler envisaged cruelty as a virtue of the new generation of Nazi youth²³⁷.

Writing in the 1960s K.M.Panikkar said that the *Gita* has become the scripture of the new age, the main foundation on which its ethic, its social doctrines and even its political action depends²³⁸. The Rama myth is a help to rationalise the aggressiveness and violence of the Shiv Sena, VHP, BJP, RSS, Bajrang Dal and the Sangh Parivar as a whole. Rama is the new icon of the anti-Muslim movement in India as was Shivaji in Tilak's time. *Mahabharata* is seen as a scripture of war. The televising of *Ramayana* (1987-1989 in 91 weekly episodes) and *Mahabharata* (1988-1990 in 94 episodes) helped the Hindu masses to imbibe the spirit of violence from their favourite sacred books, gods and goddesses²³⁹. Today, the sacred books of Hinduism – which are meant to guide the everyday religious code of the Hindus – are often used

²³² See V.G.DESHPANDE, *Hindu Socialism Explained*, 15.

²³³ See C. JAFFRELOT, *The Hindu Nationalist Movement*, 40-41.

²³⁴ See TRIMONDI, V.– TRIMONDI, V., *Hitler, Buddha, Krishna*, 26-27, 31, 83.

²³⁵ See N.G.CLARKE, *Hitler's Priestess*, 1-6; TRIMONDI, V.– TRIMONDI, V., *Hitler, Buddha, Krishna*, 342-360.

²³⁶ See TRIMONDI, V.– TRIMONDI, V., *Hitler, Buddha, Krishna*, 88.

²³⁷ See TRIMONDI, V.– TRIMONDI, V., *Hitler, Buddha, Krishna*, 89.

²³⁸ See K.M.PANIKKAR, "Hindu Revival", 14.

²³⁹ According to a popular view, the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana* revolve around a struggle between good and evil forces. In the former the 'good' Pandavas vanquish the 'bad' Kauravas in the Kurushetra war, and in the latter the evil Rakshasas led by Ravana are defeated by Rama.

to extol violence for a so-called 'greater cause'. The saffronised NCERT school textbook of Social Sciences for Class IX extols revolutionaries like Tilak, Aurobindo, V.D.Savarkar, G.D. Savarkar, Swami Saradhananda, Sister Nivedita, and militant organisations like *Anushilan Samiti* (Bengal), *Yugantar Party* (Bengal, led by Barindra Ghose brother of Aurobindo Ghose), *Abhinav Bharat* (in Maharashtra, led by Savarkar brothers), Baroda Secret Society (Maharashtra), etc.²⁴⁰.

In 1991 the BJP campaigned vigorously for the extension of a Sunday morning television serial depicting the life of the famous Indian political philosopher, Chanakya or Kautilya (the word 'Kautilya' means 'crookedness and treachery')²⁴¹, the reputed author of *Arthashastra*, a hand book of totalitarian, ruthless and cynical stagecraft characterised by depravity in standards of morality²⁴². The serial portrayed Chanakya's struggle to assist Chandra Gupta Maurya (320-297 B.C) in ancient India in a way to suggest its similarities to the struggle waged by the BJP then to seize political power in New Delhi²⁴³. But those who are familiar with the functioning of the BJP knows that much of its ethics is 'chanakyan' where 'end justifies the means'. Its 'India Shining', 'Feel Good', 'Super Power India' slogans were founded on chanakyan cut-throat ethics of lies, crookedness and ruthlessness with the desire to win 300 seats in the Indian parliament during the general elections of 2004 – a dubious heritage from Tilak's ethics of expediency.

Conclusion

The *Gita* is perhaps the highest expression of the ethical religion of the Hindus. But Tilak interpreted it in the interest of his political expediency and twisted its message to justify violence, extremism and militancy. Today, some Hindutva ideologues consider him as the person who freed the Indian National Congress from the so-called scourge of moderation²⁴⁴. Tilak selectively cited from the *Gita* in order to justify his ethical stand and he believed in the intrinsic goodness of violence. This might be the reason why he said that politics is a game of worldly people and not of *sadhus*²⁴⁵.

²⁴⁰ See B.S.PARAKH (ed), *Contemporary India*, 29-30.

²⁴¹ See B.WALKER, *Hindu World*, vol. 1, 540.

²⁴² See B.WALKER, *Hindu World*, vol. 1, 542.

²⁴³ See K.KUMAR, "Hindu Revivalism", 555. P.Kanungo observes that the teleserial 'Chanakya' (1991-1992), though its theme appeared to be different from the epic serials 'Ramayana' and 'Mahabharata', in reality it was a mere continuation. See P.KANUNGO, *RSS's Tryst with Politics*, 207.

²⁴⁴ See D.D.PATTANAIK, *Hindu Nationalism*, vol.2, 39.

²⁴⁵ See B.G.TILAK, *Selected Documents*, vol. 4, 17.

Tilak's experiment of combining religion and politics became a model for the Hindutva ideologues of contemporary India. Communal violence in India today is frequently and almost ubiquitously justified by using Hindu scriptures, especially the *Gita*, *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*. Many interpret them literally, and indulge in the most eccentric forms violence against their enemies without qualms of conscience. Arvind Sharma remarks that it was more than a mere curiosity that both Mahatma Gandhi and his assassin Nathuram Godse swore by the *Bhagavadgita* – one by its figurative interpretation and the other by its literal²⁴⁶. S.C.Sen Gupta observes that the *Gita* is patently a call to arms, an exposition of the doctrine of violence when it becomes a duty²⁴⁷. B.R.Ambedkar, criticising Hinduism and its the tendency towards violence, observes that the *Gita* is about the justification of war; Krishna offers a philosophical defence of war and killing in war²⁴⁸.

During the *rath yatra* of L.K.Advani in 1990, in many places the most common offering was traditional weaponry: arrows, dices, maces, swords, trident and *kripans*. At Jetpur in Gujarat 101 kshatriya youths offered him a bowl containing their blood²⁴⁹. No wonder why V.S.Naipaul says: "I think religion is the greatest curse of mankind. It has killed more people, destroyed more property, than any other thing"²⁵⁰.

Tilak's ethics is not for any right thinking person to emulate. All violence is destructive. Jesus Christ has said: 'One who takes the sword will perish by the sword'; 'blessed are the meek they shall inherit the earth'. There is nothing called 'good violence' as such. Can we speak of a 'good murderer' or a 'good terrorist' or a 'good rapist'? Violence is the product of diseased minds. Violence can go out of control especially if it is mob violence since with the mob one cannot any more speak of rationality and right proportion. Tilak's ethics of violence which he justifies by interpreting the *Gita* provides us another reason to question the claim that Hinduism is a tolerant religion and that it upholds *ahimsa* (non-violence). Finally, his interpretation of the *Gita* is subjective, distorted, far-fetched, deviant, perverse and dangerous. The ethics of intrinsic goodness of violence will create anarchy, intolerance and destruction, as it has been confirmed by the recent past in India.

²⁴⁶ See A. SHARMA, "Gandhi or Godse?", 24.

²⁴⁷ See S.C.S.GUPTA, *Swami Vivekananda and Indian Nationalism*, 53.

²⁴⁸ See V.RODRIGUES (ed.), *The Essential Writings of B.R.Ambedkar*, 193.

²⁴⁹ See P.KANUNGO, RSS's *Tryst with Politics*, 203. Advani reportedly did not approve of this gesture and advised them to donate blood in the nearby hospital. See *Ibid.*, 220 note 103.

²⁵⁰ V.S.NAIPAUL, *India A Million Mutinies Now*, 418.