

**Tilak-Agarkar Debate: Ideologies of Social Reforms in 19th Century
Maharashtra Its Relevance and Irrelevance**

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Abstract- The social reforms that started in India in the 19th century, threw up many interesting debates. The Indian intelligentsia reacted differently to the rapidly changing time under colonial subjection. The debate between Tilak (1856-1920) and Agarkar (1856-1895) gives us a fairly good understanding of the social and intellectual churning that went on in western Maharashtra, especially among the elites of society. This article explores the finer points of the debate in the context of colonial political atmosphere that also produced the anti-colonial nationalist movement in the late 19th century. But how relevant was this debate for the vast majority of women in India?

Key words: Kesari, Maratha, Tradition vs Modernity, Sudharak, Rukhmabai, Age of Consent Bill, Swarajya,

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Tilak and Agarkar were close associates in their younger days. Born into the brahmanical class, they both studied together in Pune. In those days, western education was a means to acquire a job in the British colonial bureaucracy, albeit at a lower level. But Tilak and Agarkar vowed not to work for the British government in India in any capacity. Instead, they decided to dedicate their lives to nation building. One way to do this was through education and raising public awareness through press. Hence, along with another elite Brahman, Vishnushastri

Chiplunkar, they started a 'New English High School' and two newspapers *Kesari* in Marathi and *Maratha* in English in 1881. Agarkar became the editor of *Kesari* and Tilak that of *Maratha*. Though working together, Tilak and Agarkar had different bent of mind. (Karandikar: 1957:123) Tilak's father was a teacher of Sanskrit, and he himself had considerable mastery over it. Along with formidable Sanskrit, he acquired considerable mastery over the Hindu scriptures. This inculcated in him, some degree of pride in Hindu Brahmanical tradition. He felt strongly about the political domination of India by an alien power and was among the pioneer to publicly express strong views against it. He objected to any British interference in reforming Hindu society. He took a position that Indian society should be reformed by Indians themselves, and not by an alien power. He maintained, that though politically defeated, the Hindus have superior tradition, and this gave them an independent identity under British imperial domination. Tilak personified this identity and associated it with the bigger concept of Swarajya. His painstaking efforts in organizing people through popular Ganesh Puja and Shivaji Jayanti are well known. (Ramgopal 1965: 82-93) This is an example of what Partha Chatterjee has called, the 'inner domain of sovereignty' whereby, anti-colonial nationalism creates an independent space within the colonial society to organize and launch its struggle against imperial domination. (Chatterjee 2010: Ch. 1).

Agarkar on the other hand, was influenced by western intellectual tradition. His sarcastic criticism of Hinduism reflects Gibbon's comments on Christianity in his, 'The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire.' (Ganachari 2016: 99). Agarkar was also impressed by the democratic tradition of the west and had no hesitation in taking help from the British administration in introducing reforms in India. Fired by the patriotism, they both managed to

work together in spite of the attitudinal differences and also faced imprisonment together in British jails.

Appearance of crack

The differences between them started surfacing at the functioning of the New English High School, which they were running with great enthusiasm. Agarkar requested a salary raise in the meeting but Tilak opposed it. (Keer 2015:49) Tilak was relatively affluent, and Agarkar was mostly dependent on the salary. Tilak accused Agarkar of deviating from the noble mission. Agarkar reacted by calling Tilak 'obstinate' in claiming a moral high ground. (Ganachari 2016: 53) Tilak did not like Agarkar's sarcasm of Hinduism in *Kesari*. Agarkar on the other hand was uneasy with Tilak's aggressive criticism of British government and some prominent people like Ranade. (Bedekar 2002: 10) These differences finally led to Agarkar resigning from the *Kesari* and starting his newspaper *Sudharak* in 1887. Now it was an open war of words between the two with *Sudharak* on the one hand and *Kesari* and *Maratha* on the other. (Vidwans 1966: 240-247)

Tradition Vs Modernity

Tilak believed that the masses in India have lost their self-confidence under the oppressive British colonial rule. The need of the hour therefore is to unite and work towards taking political power from the alien hands. At a time when the anti-colonial political mobilization was underway, social reforms will shift the focus from the main goal of national liberation. Accordingly, divided opinions about social reforms would only suit British machination to further divide the Hindu society. Tilak argued further, that the Indian masses are attached to their age-old traditions. Its violent criticism will lead to *Tejobhanga*, i.e. loss of spirit.

'*Sudharak*' of Agarkar became the mouthpiece of those, who were in favor of prioritizing social reforms. They took a general stand that before asking for democratic form of government

in the public sphere, there should be democracy within the house. If we treat our women as slaves and have oppressive caste hierarchy, we have no right to ask for equality. (Ganachari 2016: 141). This aspect was exposed in great detail by Tarabai Sindhe in her trenchant critique of Hindu patriarchy. (Guha 2010: 129-139). Tilak on the other hand, rejected the assumption of Indian women being treated as slaves. (Joshi 2009: 3) As stated earlier, he accepted the need for social reforms, but maintained that it should come from within and not superimposed by the alien government. Tilak also claimed that the British are deliberately pointing out the shortcomings of Hindu society to justify their imperial domination. He accused the *Sudharak* that, by aggressively criticizing Hindu tradition, they were playing into the hands of the British. Some of the supporters of *Sudharak* like Ranade, were in fact in the British service. Pointing this out, Tilak claimed that such people will not state anything that will antagonize their colonial masters. He was of the opinion that if the British are allowed to interfere in social matters, very soon they will also start interfering in other things, such as ritual observances and practices. Hence, this encouragement of social reformers by the British is a deliberate plan to divert the attention of Indian people from core political issues raised by the national movement. *Sudharak's* unwillingness to understand this, caused Tilak a great deal of anguish.

Tilak and A gark ar both focused primarily on urban society. Vast majority of the non-Hindu and rural women remained outside the purview of the Tilak-A gark ar debate. This also applies to their views on social reforms in general. Hence, their approach remained restricted and marginal, and could not really go deeper into the Indian social system.

Tilak repeatedly stated that, he is not against social reforms per se. But it should not be a top priority of the Indian struggle. When *Sudharak* took up a stand against the tonsuring of Brahmin widows, Tilak reacted by stating that stopping the practice is not going to have any

substantial effect on Indian society. (Joshi 2009: 12) Agarkar on the other hand was deeply concerned about women's issues. As a child, he had seen the suffering of his two widowed aunts. Apart from that, his thoughts were also influenced by J.S. Mill's 'Subjection of Women,' which states that the standard of a given society is indicated by the position of women. (Ganachari 2016: 185).

Tilak was more focused on the use of political power to undertake social reforms. He maintained that, so long as political power was in the hands of alien rulers, no serious reforms can be undertaken. Therefore, priority should be given to acquiring political power, and social reforms would come gradually. He gave an example of Parshuram Bahu Patwardhan, the Brahmin ruler of small principalities, who tried to arrange the marriage of his widowed daughter and sought scriptural support for it. However, he was dissuaded by the orthodox Brahmins. And Parshuram Bhau was unable to get his widowed daughter married. ((Joshi 2009: 7) Here, the weakness of Tilak's approach was exposed.

Agarkar on the other had tried to rationalize that social reforms can be best achieved under British rule, as the white colonial masters were immune from public opinion. If the rulers are indigenous, they will only initiate those reforms which will support their power structure. (Ganachari 2016: 176)

A case of Rukhmabai in 1886 proved the difference of opinion between them. Rukhmabai was married at a very young age. But after attaining maturity, she refused to accept the marriage as it was done without her consent. The case went to court. Tilak supported the right of husband over her, and Agarkar and Ranade stood beside Rukhmabai. The high court finally ruled in favor of the husband. (Keer 2015:45)

In order to prove their point, sometimes both the parties lost decorum. Pointing out the weakness of twenty-five crore Indians, who are ruled by one lac Europeans, Agarkar called the natives as '*Shudra Jantu*,' i.e. an insignificant insects. (Pradhan 2013: 215) No wonder Tilak, being proud of the Indian heritage, reacted sharply.

Age of Consent Bill, 1891

Marriages of young girls were common practice in those days. The young girls were very often at high risk of early pregnancy and sometimes even death. There was demand from certain sections of progressive Indians to enact a law to prevent this. In 1889 a ten-year girl named Phulmoni Dasi died due to a brutal rape by her thirty-five years old husband Hari Mohan Maitee in Bengal Province. (Pande 2013) As he was married to her, rape charges could not be proved. But he was found guilty of causing death due to negligence. This episode was a catalyst that led to the enactment of the law called 'Age of Consent Act of 1891' by the Governor-General and his council. It made sexual intercourse with a girl less than twelve years of age, a criminal offence.

Sudharakas welcomed this initiative. But Tilak, characteristic of his dislike for the British intervention in socio-religious matters, opposed the legislation. It is surprising that he was not moved by the death of an eleven-year old girl. Was he insensitive towards the unspeakable sufferings of the young girls who were married to grown up men? Did he personify the orthodox Brahmanical patriarchal attitude of treating women as less than human beings? Are women expected to suffer, and if necessary, die without whimper to uphold the tradition that is determined by patriarchy? Tilak was present in the Calcutta session of Indian National Congress in 1890. (Keer 2015:45) Had he not heard about the Phulmoni's case which happened just a

year back in Bengal? Was the matter discussed among the congress delegates? Was the congress leadership so insensitive to women's plight? All these questions remained unanswered.

Marriage for a Hindu, is considered a sacred act. Hence, it was easier for Tilak to mobilize public support against the legislation. It is stated that many women were also opposed to the 'Age of Consent Act'. Gayatri Spivak in her essay, 'Can the Subaltern Speak?' narrates that the women became so psychologically imprisoned by the patriarchal narrative/indoctrination that, they also adopt the language that suits patriarchy. (1988: 271-313) The hegemony makes women the victim of 'Stockholm Syndrome', where the prisoners of the system start loving their own tormenters as they see no escape from the shackle. This can also be described as a situation of 'hegemony with consent,' from Gramsci's perspective. (Adamson 2014: Ch. 6)

Though Tilak opposed the legislation, he educated his daughter and arranged her marriages at the age of fifteen. (Kelkar 2001:201) Thus by action, he showed that he is not opposed to social reforms as such. He only emphasized that it has to come gradually, and also, from within the society.

Who is the People's Leader?

If we look at the relative support that these two different groups received, we have evidence to suggest that Tilak understood the pulse of the masses better than Sudharaks. His support base suggests that the people in general were more receptive to prioritizing national liberation/Swaraj over social reforms. His strong criticism of *Sudharaks* made them so unpopular in Pune that people took out funeral procession of the effigy of *Sudharak*, from in front Agarkar's residence and burnt it. (Ganachari 2016: 156)

Tilak deliberately stated what appealed to the people. He confessed to his daughter that he approved of the reforms *Sudharaks* wanted to initiate, but couldn't say it in public, for the fear

of losing popular support. (Keer 2015:72) Was he a clever politician? Should a true leader not state what he sincerely believed to be good for the society, even if it meant erosion of popularity? Or should he understand the pulse of the masses and state only those things that appeal to people? Or try to maintain a balance between two extremities? Tilak believed that if he plunged into reforming the society, he would not be able to arouse the masses against colonial domination, which was his main mission. As he boldly stated, “Swarjya is my birthright and I shall have it.”

Turning things around, Agarkar accused Tilak of addiction to popularity even though agreeing with social reforms in his private thoughts. (Bedekar 2002: 58) Agarkar-Tilak debate sometimes degenerated into personal attacks. For example, when Tilak had tea and biscuits in a Christian mission, it was highlighted by Agarkar in the newspaper with the intention to project Tilak as a hypocrite who claims to be a leader of the traditional Hindus and have no hesitation in accepting the food from the missionaries. Later he also accused Tilak of eating rice from the hands of a Muslim. Enraged Tilak was preparing to file a case against this defamation, but with the intervention of Ranade, the matter was settled. (Kelkar 2001: 214-215) Nevertheless, when Pandita Ramabai launched a lifelong struggle against Hindu caste system and brahmanical patriarchy and eventually converted to Christianity to emancipate herself, every one of the nationalist and social reformers turned against her. She was completely marginalized and even erased from the collective consciousness. (Aisha Khan 2018, Chakravarti 1989)

Obstinacy of Tilak is obviously well known. Once he decided on a position, he did not budge from it. He displayed remarkable capacity for work. Nevertheless, he lacked the modesty to consider anyone else as his equal. (Kheer 2015: 49) Often time, his stubbornness proved to be resolute. On the issue of having tea and biscuits with the missionaries, he faced social ostracism

bravely and refused to submit to extreme orthodoxy. Ranade a well-known *Sudharak*, also had tea in the Christian mission, but submitted to the dictates of religious orthodoxy by undertaking *Pryascitta* (penance) ordered by Shankaracharya. (Kelkar 2001: 74)

So, the difference in social attitude and political outlook was stark. A popular Marathi proverb, “*moden pan vaknar nah*” (I will break but will not bend), probably suits Tilak, because in his zeal for ‘*Swaraj*’, he could not overcome the prejudices and practices of the caste system.

However, it seems that these obstinate, uncompromising traces of his personality added some masculine, rustic charm and appealed to people, who were looking for a ‘strong’ leader who has the courage to stand against the might of the British empire.

While criticizing Tilak, the ‘*Sudharaks*’ also did not follow in their personal life what they preached in public. Ranade’s submitting to Shankaracharya is already mentioned above. He was one of the leading luminaries of the movement for widow’s remarriage. But on the death of his first wife, he married a child bride instead of a widow. Telang, though opposed the child marriage, got his own daughter married at the age of eight. (Bedekar 2002: 11) Agarkar did not object to these discrepancies in thought and practice. Tilak did not miss any opportunity to point out this double standard of *Sudharaks* and called them ‘Sign boards’ who show way to others, but they themselves do not traverse on it. Ideological differences blended with ego and turned the situation between these two stalwarts into long drawn conflicts.

Visible contradictions in the practice and preaching of both Tilak and Agarkar made them both relevant and irrelevant during their times and beyond.

It seems that Agarkar came around to the opinion of Tilak in the later stages of his life. In an article written three years before his death, Agarkar also accepted that political reforms

should be given priority over the social. (Bedekar 2002: 13) But his dislike for Tilak did not subside. In his last days, Agarkar was bed ridden. Tilak visited him. According to C.G. Devdhar, a close associate of Agarkar, the latter was not very comfortable with Tilak's visit and wished him to go away. But according to a version provided by Agarkar's wife Yashodabai, Agarkar was relieved that the bitterness between him and Tilak is resolved before he finally shut his eyes. (Bedekar 2002: 14)

Agarkar appears to be a rather lonely figure, who lived a life of poverty. As he departed from Tilak, the latter's popularity graph soared. Ranade became a judge and went to Bombay. Gokhale also became well known. It was only Agarkar, who appears to be lonely and led a life of deprivation. It is said that after his death, a small amount of money was found in his home tied in a paper, on which it was mentioned that this money is kept for his funeral. (Bedekar 2002: 12) Agarkar's life appears to be like a lonely mountain, who had burned his own trees and deprived himself of shed. Agarkar's wife who says that her husband had never thought about himself, but about others. But sadly, his work was not valued in his lifetime. (Bedekar 2002: 16)

Vishram Bedekar's drama '*Tilak ani Agarkar*' is a very well researched piece of creative writing. The concluding scene of this drama portrays Agarkar's death, where Tilak is present. We hear a cry of a newly born girl in the background and Tilak says, "The girls born in the Maharashtra do not have to cry so much now, because Agarkar was born here." (Bedekar 2002: 98)

Conclusion

Looked at from one angle, the Tilak-Agarkar debate depicts the coming of age of Indian nationalism and also the confidence to tackle social issues independently, and mobilize the masses against British colonial rule. But from a critical angle, this debate was not really relevant

for the vast majority of rural and working women of the Hindu community. It also did not do anything for the Tribals. It completely ignored and alienated non-Hindus, i.e., Muslims, Christians, tribal communities and others. They formed a substantial proportion of the population in the country. So, the debate scratched only the very thin surface of Indian society and did not go deep enough to usher in any radical change or social reform. Most importantly, the issue of violence against women was not even addressed. The debate took place within the elite upper caste Hindu social framework. It never challenged the oppressive social system that was presided over by an equally oppressive British colonial rule. The British colonialist, nationalists, and social reformers would try to address women's issues without actually involving the women themselves in their own emancipation. (Chakravarti 1989) While Tilak and Agarkar debated endlessly on what should come first, national liberation or social reform, Gandhi tried to show later that both can be undertaken simultaneously.

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