



Cultural Nationalism in Bal Gangadhar Tilak's *Kesari*

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Abstract

This paper examines the literary, hermeneutic, and philosophical dimensions of cultural nationalism in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century India, using Bal Gangadhar Tilak's foundational Marathi newspaper *Kesari* (founded 1881) as a primary study. Moving beyond conventional political histories that categorize Tilak solely as a nationalist leader, this study offers a critical textual analysis of how *Kesari* constructed an indigenous, counter-hegemonic public sphere against British colonial rule. By reclaiming ancient Vedic textuality, revitalizing local communities through the public celebration of Ganeshotsav and Shivaji Jayanti, and articulating an activist philosophy of action (*Karmayoga*) derived from the *Bhagavad Gita*, Tilak transformed vernacular journalism into a vital site of epistemic and political resistance.

Crucially, this study also interrogates the internal contradictions embedded within *Kesari's* editorial project. It explores how the newspaper's reliance on Brahminical frameworks and Maratha historical narratives inadvertently introduced regional and communal fault lines into the anti-colonial movement. Through this evaluation, the paper demonstrates how *Kesari* operated as an intellectual space, utilizing the tools of Western jurisprudence and print capitalism alongside classical Sanskrit tropes to dismantle the moral legitimacy of the British Raj. Thus, the paper highlights *Kesari's* enduring legacy as a watershed text that pioneered mass political mobilization in India while fundamentally shaping the anxieties and fractures of South Asian nationalism.

Keywords: Cultural Nationalism, *Kesari*, Vernacular Journalism, *Karmayoga*, Epistemic Resistance

Introduction

Indian nationalism involves both political and cultural dimensions. Cultural nationalism in India emerges as a reactive to the British administrative exploitation and moreover, it was fundamentally an aesthetic, linguistic, and hermeneutic war waged against the foundational ideas of Western colonialism. To sustain the civilizing mission, British administrative and educational apparatuses in nineteenth-century India systematically sought to delegitimize indigenous intellectual traditions, law, and literature. They replaced them with an Anglo-centric system that relegated Indian antiquity to a state of primitive mysticism or stagnant decay, viewing the subcontinent as an ahistorical space requiring external enlightenment.

For Indian intellectuals confronting this profound sense of alienation, the path to political liberation (*Swaraj*) could not be separated from the resurrection and critical reinterpretation of their cultural heritage. This imperative gave rise to cultural nationalism, a movement asserting that a nation's right to sovereignty is organic, rooted in its historical continuity, linguistic specificity, and shared metaphysical traditions. Unlike political nationalism, which often contented itself with demanding constitutional concessions within the framework of the British Empire, cultural nationalism operated on a deeper psychological plane. It sought to dismantle colonial mental submission by instilling a profound sense of self-respect (*Abhiman*) based on the intellectual achievements of ancient Indian civilization.

In the vernacular print culture of India, no publication embodied this hermeneutic resistance more fiercely than *Kesari* (meaning The Lion), a Marathi newspaper founded in Pune in 1881 by Bal Gangadhar Tilak, Vishnushastri Chiplunkar, and Gopal Ganesh Agarkar. Under Tilak's editorship, *Kesari* ceased to be a mere vehicle for news; it evolved into an ideological laboratory where complex Sanskrit

theological formulations, Maratha historical narratives, and radical anti-colonial polemics were synthesized into an accessible, urgent vernacular idiom. By deploying a sophisticated vocabulary drawn from ancient literature, *Kesari* bypassed colonial restrictions, challenged the utilitarian justifications of British rule.

This paper provides a detailed literary and historical examination of *Kesari* as a text of cultural resistance. It explores how Tilak utilized vernacular journalism to undermine British historiography, reconstruct Indian antiquity, and mobilize the masses. Through an analysis of *Kesari's* editorials, its rehabilitation of historical and mythical figures, and its philosophical re-reading of the *Bhagavad Gita*, this study demonstrates how cultural nationalism functioned not as a nostalgic retreat into a mythic past, but as a dynamic, literary methodology designed to dismantle the intellectual authority of the British Empire.

Discussions

To understand the literary and political mechanics of *Kesari*, we must analyze how it divided the social world into two distinct domains: the material and the spiritual. The material domain is the external sphere of the economy, statecraft, science, and technology, where the West had demonstrated immediate superiority and where the colonized had to learn and adapt to Western methods. The spiritual domain, by contrast, is the internal sphere bearing the essential marks of cultural identity, family, language, and literature. In this inner realm, the colonial state was barred from entering. The nation was already sovereign within this inner domain long before it achieved political independence. Tilak's editorial project in *Kesari* can be understood as a systematic consolidation of this inner, spiritual domain. By asserting the absolute sovereignty of Indian culture, language, and ethical systems, *Kesari* built an unassailable psychic fortress from which it could launch devastating critiques of the material colonial state.

Tilak, a brilliant scholar, trained in both Western law and classical Sanskrit literature, refused to accept the cultural hierarchy imposed by British education. Instead, he turned the tools of Western legal reasoning, philology, and print capitalism against the British administration. *Kesari* became a literary space where Western political concepts like 'liberty,' 'representation,' and 'citizenship' were translated into and enriched by classical Indian concepts such as *Dharma* (righteous duty), *Swaraj* (self-rule), and *Swadeshi* (of one's own country). This translation process did not dilute the original concepts; rather, it radically altered them. *Kesari* created a vernacular public sphere where rational critical debate was fueled by the shared, affective power of historical memory and rich cultural heritage.

The development of this public sphere was contingent upon the unique properties of the Marathi language as refashioned by the nationalists. Before *Kesari*, Marathi prose was frequently divided between two extremes: the highly Sanskritized, pedantic style of scholars (*shastris*) that remained inaccessible to ordinary people, and the simplified, often patronizing style used by colonial textbook writers. *Kesari* rejected both. It forged a language that was grammatically pure and elevated, yet idiomatically direct and vibrant. This prose style forced the reader to engage with politics as a matter of cultural honor, elevating the act of reading a weekly journal into an exercise of civic and spiritual responsibility.

Historical Context

The late nineteenth century in India, specifically the Bombay Presidency, was marked by socio-economic distress and political unrest. The administrative machinery of the British Raj, driven by the extractive policies of land revenue and the rigid economic theories of laissez-faire capitalism, had devastated the agrarian economy of Maharashtra. The region suffered from catastrophic famines in 1876-1877 and 1896-1897, which were compounded by the

outbreak of the plague in Pune in 1897. The British response to these crises, characterized by bureaucratic indifference and brutal plague control measures carried out by the military under Special Plague Officer Walter Charles Rand, created intense resentment among the population (qtd. in Cashman 92).

Intellectually, Pune was divided between two major factions of the elite intelligentsia: the Reformers, led by figures like Justice Mahadev Govind Ranade and Gopal Ganesh Agarkar, and the Nationalists, led by Tilak and Vishnushastri Chiplunkar. The Reformers argued that political self-rule was impossible without a thorough, internal modernization of Indian society, advocating for the eradication of caste inequities, child marriage, and the subordination of women through the help of colonial legislation. Tilak and the cultural nationalists fiercely opposed this approach. They argued that appealing to the alien colonial state to reform Indian society was a humiliating capitulation that validated the British claim to moral and cultural superiority (qtd. in Wolpert 45).

Tilak asserted that social reform must come from within the community through organic education and moral evolution, rather than being imposed by a foreign, despoiling power. He believed that by prioritizing social fractures over political liberation, the Reformers were inadvertently weakening the collective will be needed to resist imperialism. It was within this highly charged atmosphere that *Kesari* was established.

Vishnushastri Chiplunkar's journal *Nibandhmala* (1874-1881) had begun the work of revitalizing the Marathi language by cultivating a vigorous, proud, and uncompromising prose style that celebrated indigenous literature and history (qtd. in Inamdar 63). Tilak took this linguistic revivalism and adapted it for mass journalism. The prospectus of *Kesari* made its democratic and confrontational mission explicitly clear: the newspaper promised to treat

the public with the utmost respect, addressing real-world problems without fear or favor, and comparing British administration to the historical misrule of tyrannical rulers (qtd. in Kelkar 88). By choosing Marathi as the medium for *Kesari* (while publishing in journal, *The Mahratta*, in English for colonial administrators and Indian elites), Tilak democratized political discourse. He brought complex debates about economic drain, constitutional rights, and historical identity directly to the shop floors, village squares, and temples of the Marathi-speaking world.

Biography of Lokmanya Bal Gangadhar Tilak

To comprehend the editorial vision of *Kesari*, it is essential to trace the intellectual trajectory of its driving force, Bal Gangadhar Tilak (1856-1920), later revered by millions as *Lokmanya*, "The Leader Accepted by the People." Born into a Chitpavan Brahmin family in the coastal town of Ratnagiri, Maharashtra, Tilak grew up in an environment saturated with traditional Sanskrit learning, alongside memories of the recently dissolved Maratha Empire. His father, Gangadhar Ramchandra Tilak, was a noted school teacher and Sanskrit scholar who instilled in his son a deep reverence for classical texts and mathematical precision (qtd. in Parvate 12).

Tilak received his higher education at Deccan College in Pune, graduating with a Bachelor of Arts in Mathematics and Sanskrit in 1876, followed by a Bachelor of Laws (LLB) in 1879. At Deccan College, Tilak immersed himself in Western philosophy, reading John Stuart Mill, Herbert Spencer, and Edward Gibbon alongside classical Hindu texts. This dual education produced a scholar uniquely equipped to engage in anti-colonial polemics; he possessed the rigorous analytical capacity of Western jurisprudence combined with an authoritative command of Sanskrit scriptures. Convinced that the colonial education system was designed to produce submissive clerks rather than independent thinkers, Tilak, along

with Agarkar and Chiplunkar, co-founded the New English School in 1880 and the Deccan Education Society in 1884, establishing Fergusson College in 1885. These institutions sought to provide high-quality, affordable education that cultivated a spirit of national self-reliance and civic duty.

By the late 1880s, however, Tilak realized that institutional education alone was too slow a vehicle for the urgent task of political mobilization. He severed his ties with the Deccan Education Society to dedicate himself entirely to the political activism and the editorship of *Kesari* and *The Mahratta* (67). Tilak's life was defined by an unyielding defiance of British authority, resulting in multiple imprisonments for sedition. His first major trial occurred in 1897, following the assassination of Plague Officer Rand by the Chapekar brothers, an act the British attributed to the inflammatory rhetoric published in *Kesari*. Tilak was sentenced to eighteen months of rigorous imprisonment. It was during this trial that his national reputation was cemented; he refused to apologize to the court, transforming the dock into a stage for asserting freedom of speech.

His second and most famous trial occurred in 1908, when he was charged with sedition for editorials in *Kesari* defending the use of political violence by young revolutionaries as an inevitable reaction to British tyranny. Sentenced to six years of deportation, Tilak was imprisoned in the remote fortress of Mandalay, Burma. In the isolation of Mandalay, he produced his monumental philosophical work, *Gita Rahasya* (211). Upon his release in 1914, Tilak launched the All-India Home Rule League, revitalizing the national movement and bridging the gap between conservative tradition and radical mass politics. Until his death in 1920, Tilak remained the defining voice of *Swaraj*, famously declaring in the pages of *Kesari*, 'Swaraj is my birthright, and I shall have it.'

Textual Analysis of *Kesari*: Language, Style, and Rhetorical Strategies

The literary significance of *Kesari* lies in its revolutionary transformation of the Marathi journalistic prose style. Before Tilak, public discourse in Marathi tended to be either overly Sanskritized and esoteric and subservient to colonial norms. Tilak, drawing inspiration from Chiplunkar, forged an editorial style characterized by absolute directness, logical clarity, and an uncompromising, combative rhythm. He avoided ornate, language in favor of a lean, muscular prose designed to convince, provoke, and stir to action.

A defining feature of *Kesari*'s rhetorical strategy was its use of classical Sanskrit concepts and maxims (*nyayas*) to dissect contemporary British administrative policies. When criticizing the British Indian government's economic exploitation, *Kesari* did not rely solely on an economic terminology; it evoked ancient concepts of statecraft found in Kautilya's *Arthashastra* and the *Shanti Parva* of the *Mahabharata*. For instance, Tilak frequently reminded his readers that according to ancient Indian law, a king is merely a *shadbhagabharta*, one who is entitled to a sixth portion of the produce *only* in exchange for providing absolute protection and welfare to his subjects (1991:104). By applying this ancient standard to the British Raj, which exported Indian grain during devastating famines, *Kesari* effectively stripped the colonial state of its moral legitimacy, rendering it an illegitimate, predatory entity (*Dasyu*).

Furthermore, *Kesari*'s headlines were masterpieces of political irony and rhetorical defiance. When the British administration passed the Age of Consent Bill in 1891, which sought to regulate Hindu child marriage through colonial courts, Tilak's editorials featured scathing titles such as "Is the Government Our Sovereign or Our Master?" (142). Here, Tilak utilized a sharp linguistic distinction between *Raja* (a legitimate ruler

bound by *Dharma*) and *Swami* (a slave-master). By framing the legislative intervention as the behavior of a slave-master trampling upon the internal, spiritual autonomy of Indian society, Tilak mobilized an intensely emotional defense of cultural sovereignty.

The power of *Kesari*'s style lay in its ability to operate on multiple levels simultaneously. For the educated intelligentsia, Tilak's editorials offered sophisticated legal arguments, precise statistical breakdowns of colonial budgets, and philological debates over historical texts. For the less literate public, who listened to the newspaper being read aloud in community spaces, *Kesari* communicated through vivid metaphors drawn from popular epics. The British bureaucracy was regularly compared to the king Ravana, while the suffering Indian populace was cast as the righteous but exiled Pandavas. This metaphorical framework provided the masses with a familiar, morally coherent language to understand their contemporary political subjugation, transforming the reading of a newspaper into a shared, ritualistic act of defiance.

Reinterpreting the Vedas and the *Gita*

Tilak's cultural nationalism was anchored by a lifetime of rigorous philological and astronomical research into ancient Indian texts. Unlike Western writers who viewed the Vedas through a social-evolutionary lens as primitive pastoral songs, Tilak approached them as repository texts of an advanced, highly sophisticated ancient civilization. In his major scholarly works, *The Orion: Researches into the Antiquity of the Vedas* (1893) and *The Arctic Home in the Vedas* (1903), Tilak utilized astronomical data embedded in the Vedic hymns to argue that the Vedas dates back to at least 4500 BCE, challenging the much later dates proposed by European scholars like Max Müller (1893:22).

While these scholarly works were published in English to challenge Eurocentric academia directly, *Kesari* served as the vital

conduit translating these theories for the vernacular public. Day after day, *Kesari* published articles asserting that Indian civilization was not in its infancy when Europe was civilized, but possessed profound mathematical, philosophical, and scientific knowledge when Europe was still populated by nomadic tribes. This reconstruction of antiquity was crucial for reversing the deep-seated inferiority complex induced by colonial education. By anchoring Indian identity in a glorious past, *Kesari* provided a historical basis for the claim that a people with such an intellectual lineage were fully capable of self-governance.

However, the achievement of Tilak's hermeneutic project was his reinterpretation of the *Bhagavad Gita*, serialized and discussed extensively in *Kesari* before and after its formal compilation as *Gita Rahasya (The Secret of the Gita)*. For centuries, the commentary on the *Gita* had been that of Adi Shankara, who interpreted the text through the lens of *Advaita Vedanta*, emphasizing *Sannyasa* (the renunciation of the material world) and *Jnana* (contemplative knowledge) as the sole path to liberation. Tilak recognized that this traditional, quietist interpretation could foster political passivity among a colonized population.

Through the pages of *Kesari*, Tilak launched a profound exegetical counter-offensive. He argued that the true message of the *Gita* was not renunciation (*Nivritti*), but selfless, energetic action in the material world (*Pravritti*). He asserted that Krishna delivered the *Gita* to Arjuna not in a peaceful forest hermitage, but on the battlefield of Kurukshetra, precisely when Arjuna was paralyzed by moral doubt and political despair. Tilak defined this as *Karmayoga*, the yoga of action performed without attachment to the fruits thereof (1935:118).

This reinterpretation transformed the *Gita* from an esoteric theological text into an active manual for anti-colonial mobilization.

Kesari argued that working for *Swaraj* was not a secular political ambition, but a selfless spiritual duty (*Dharma*). To fight against an unjust, tyrannical empire was equated with Arjuna's duty to fight against the unrighteous Kauravas. By framing political resistance as a metaphysical imperative, Tilak removed the fear of death and suffering from the minds of his readers. If the soul is immortal and action in defense of righteousness is the highest spiritual path, then imprisonment, exile, and sacrifice for the nation became badges of spiritual honor. Through this shift, *Kesari* successfully weaponized the innermost core of Hindu metaphysics for the cause of national liberation.

The Cultivation of festivals: Ganeshotsav and Shivaji Jayanti

Tilak understood that newspaper editorials, no matter how powerful, could reach only those who could read or who lived in urban centers where text traveled freely. To expand the anti-colonial movement, he recognized the need to move beyond print into the realm of public performance, symbolic politics, and visual culture. He engaged in the revival and reinvention of public rituals, creating outward expressions of solidarity that served contemporary political needs.

In 1893, Tilak transformed the traditional, private domestic worship of the deity Ganesh into a grand, multi-day public festival known as Sarvajanic Ganeshotsav. Prior to this, Ganesh worship was an individual or family affair celebrated within the home. Tilak saw in this beloved deity a universal symbol capable of transcending caste divisions and uniting a fragmented society. *Kesari* became the official base for planning, promoting, and theorizing this festival. Editorials outlined how each neighborhood should establish its own public Ganesh idol, turning the festival into a vibrant site for community organizing, political education, and cultural expression (78).

The Ganeshotsav effectively subverted British anti-assembly laws. The colonial state,

bound by its policy of religious non-interference, could not easily ban large gatherings centered on divine worship. Under the guise of religious devotion, Tilak created a democratic public space where political speeches were delivered, nationalistic songs (*melas*) were sung, and anti-colonial literature was distributed. *Kesari* published schedules of these festivals, reviewed the political plays performed at them, and praised the young singers who used the festival to criticize the British administration.

Following the success of Ganeshotsav, Tilak and *Kesari* launched the Shivaji Jayanti festival in 1895, celebrating the birth anniversary of Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj, the seventeenth-century founder of the Maratha Empire. If Ganesh provided a religious anchor, Shivaji offered a historical symbol of political resistance. The British historical textbooks often depicted Shivaji as a leader or a primitive freebooter. *Kesari* led a sustained literary campaign to dismantle this colonial narrative, reconstructing Shivaji as a visionary, righteous king (*Chhatrapati*) who fought against foreign tyranny to establish Swarajya (self-rule).

The editorial pages of *Kesari* dealing with Shivaji Jayanti are among the most passionate examples of anti-colonial literature. Tilak did not merely narrate historical facts; he invoked Shivaji as a living spirit haunting the conscience of Maharashtra. In a famous editorial published in *Kesari* in 1897, Tilak wrote a poem titled "Shivaji's Utterances," imagining the great king waking from his slumber to gaze upon the contemporary degradation of his land, "How have you allowed this land to fall into decay? Foreigners are draining the wealth of our country, our people are dying of hunger, and our women are insulted. Wake up, my descendants, and reclaim your lost heritage." (112)

This literary device of personifying the historical hero and having him witness contemporary colonial suffering created a

profound sense of urgency among the Indians. The celebration of Shivaji Jayanti became an annual ritual of political dedication. By celebrating a historical figure who successfully overthrew an empire, *Kesari* reminded its readers that empires are not immortal, and that resistance to foreign rule was deeply based on the historical spirit of the region.

The Trials

The radicalism of *Kesari* made it a frequent target of the colonial state's legal apparatus. The newspaper's history is punctuated by major sedition trials under Section 124A of the Indian Penal Code, a law specifically enacted by the British to suppress vernacular writings that attempted to excite disaffection against the government. These trials were not merely legal battles; they were high-stakes literary and political performances where Tilak used the courtroom to articulate the core principles of cultural nationalism.

The first major trial occurred in 1897. Following the devastating famine and the heavy-handed plague measures in Pune, *Kesari* published a series of articles reporting on popular anger, including the poem 'Shivaji's Utterances' and a detailed report on a seminar where scholars debated whether Shivaji's killing of the Mughal general Afzal Khan could be justified as a righteous act of self-defense rather than murder. When the Chapekar brothers subsequently assassinated Plague Officer Rand, the British authorities claimed a direct causal link between Tilak's editorial rhetoric and the political violence (101).

During the trial, the British prosecution focused on philological debates over the Marathi words used in *Kesari*. They argued that terms like *Swaraj*, *Abhiman*, and Tilak's critiques of British officials were designed to incite hatred and violence. Tilak, defending himself alongside expert lawyers, turned the trial into a linguistic seminar. He argued that the British prosecutors, relying on poor translations by colonial scribes, completely misunderstood the

nuance of classical Marathi prose. He asserted that criticizing the illegal actions of individual bureaucrats did not equal sedition against the sovereign state, and that discussing historical events like Shivaji's encounter with Afzal Khan was a legitimate exercise in historical interpretation (qtd. in Saddique 54).

Though Tilak was convicted and sentenced to eighteen months of rigorous imprisonment, the trial backfired on the colonial state. *Kesari's* circulation surged and Tilak emerged as a national hero. His refusal to sign an apology or compromise his editorial integrity transformed him into a living symbol of the very *Karmayoga* he had championed in his writings.

An even more significant trial took place in 1908. In May of that year, Tilak published two celebrated editorials in *Kesari* titled "The Country's Misfortune" and "These Remedies Are Not Lasting," responding to a bomb attack carried out by young revolutionaries Khudiram Bose and Prafulla Chaki in Muzaffarpur. In these articles, Tilak condemned the use of bombs and the loss of innocent life. However, he warned the British government that young revolutionaries were an inevitable, tragic symptom of an oppressive system that denied people their basic constitutional rights. He noted that while a ruler can confiscate guns and swords, he cannot confiscate the "bomb," which is a psychological state born out of absolute despair (1991:184).

The British state viewed this analysis as a justification for rebellion and charged Tilak with sedition again. The 1908 trial lasted for eight days in the Bombay High Court. Tilak conducted his own defense, speaking for a total of twenty-one hours over several days. His address was an exhaustive tour de force of political philosophy, legal history, and literary analysis. He argued that freedom of the press was a natural right, and that an editor's duty was to warn the government of impending dangers rather than flatter it. He famously concluded his defense by addressing the jury,

"All that I am ready to face... There are higher powers that rule the destiny of things, and it may be the will of Providence that the cause which I represent may prosper more by my suffering than by my remaining free." (224)

These words, inscribed on a marble plaque outside the central courtroom of the Bombay High Court, illustrate how the spirit of nationalism elevated political dissent to a sacred, providential duty. Sentenced to six years of solitary confinement in Mandalay, Tilak's physical absence only amplified the authority of *Kesari*. The newspaper continued to publish under the stewardship of his close associate N.C. Kelkar, maintaining its status as an unyielding text of resistance.

Conclusion

Bal Gangadhar Tilak's *Kesari* represents a watershed moment in the history of anti-colonial literature. It demonstrated that a vernacular newspaper could become far more than a chronicler of events; it could serve as a primary engine for cultural preservation and intellectual resistance. Through a sophisticated synthesis of classical textuality, historical myth-making, and sharp journalistic polemics, *Kesari* successfully wrestled the domain of Indian history and identity away from British colonial administrators and scholars. Tilak's editorial project proved that the reclamation of antiquity and the preservation of heritage were not inherently nostalgic. Instead, when deployed with intellectual rigor and rhetorical skill, they could function as, revolutionary strategies to challenge global empires. By translating the *Bhagavad Gita* into a manual for selfless political action and reconstructing historical figures into living symbols of resistance, *Kesari* provided the Indians with the psychological and moral spirit needed to demand absolute self-rule (*Swaraj*). Therefore, the legacy of *Kesari* lies in its foundational contribution to the creation of an independent, democratic, and fearless vernacular press. It pioneered a prose style and a political vocabulary that influenced

generations of Indian writers, journalists, and freedom fighters across linguistic boundaries. Its role in awakening a collective consciousness and asserting the absolute dignity of indigenous culture remains an undeniable chapter in the narrative of India's liberation.

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