

Gopal Krishna Gokhale: A Study on His Liberal Views and Relevance in Present Times



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Abstract

Gopal Krishna Gokhale was India's one of the greatest moderate leader, political guru of Mahatma Gandhi, whose philosophy of political mendicancy played a major role in generating understanding between British rulers and Indian public. He strongly advocated that all the differences must be solved through discussions and he opposed boycott, agitation and any form of violence. He was doyen of Indian liberalism, and India's moderate leaders learnt a lot from him. He firmly believed that any movement that involves risk of losing lives of people is bound to fail. If India has to gain independence then it must choose path of moderate agitation. His ideas appealed not only the masses but also the British Government and he played a major role in putting forth cause of Indian people. His ideas are relevant even today and everyday world is realizing that violence and unrest cannot solve any problem.

Keywords: Moderates, Politics, Swaraj, Congress, British Government, Liberalism

Introduction

Gokhale "the first moderate" as called by Khilafat leader Mohammad Ali, political guru of Mahatma Gandhi and devoted disciple of justice Ranade was a scholar, parliamentarian educationist, constitutionalist whose liberal views on politics guided Indians during their struggle from British Rule and served as a negotiator between Indian and British. Although his "Political Mendicancy" could not serve its purpose he imparted quality and coherence to the liberal ideology.

Gokhale was born at Kothluk in Chiplun Taluka of Ratnagiri District on 9th May 1866. He completed his university education at the Rajaram College in Kolhapur, the Deccan College, Pune and the Elphinstone College Mumbai. An average student he was blessed with sharp memory and could quote books line by line. This helped in sharpening his intellect and later helped in writing impactful speeches. His public career began in 1866 when he joined the Deccan education society and came in contact with the people like Gopal Ganesh Agarhar, Mahadeo Govind Ranade his guru from whom he learned the tenets of politics.

Objective of the Study

The objective of this paper is to discuss the role Gokhale had played during freedom movement of India. Because very often this genius educationist, reformer is dismissed as a leader whose experiment of political mendicancy failed to yield desired results. Referred as Prince of Liberalism which surly he was, his role is limited to failed moderator between British and Indian people. But very few realize what he advocated then, that any problem could be solved through bilateral discussions only not through agitation, world is emphasizing the same now. This papers aims to bring about this genius futuristic vision of Gokhale.

Gokhale's rise as a political leader was meteoric. In 1888 he was elected secretary of Bombay provincial conference. In 1889 he joined congress when its fifth session was held at Bombay and continued to take part in its proceedings till his death, except for a short interval between 1897 to 1904. Gokhale regarded congress as one of the cherished means in the fight for India's political rights.¹ He presided over the Banaras session in 1905 at the time when country was facing a great political crisis due to Lord Curzon's 'Official Secrets Act', 'Indian Universities Act' and the 'Partition of Bengal', Within congress a schism appeared in the form of extremist party. Gokhale was aware of these challenges, 'the sky had been overcast and for some time a storm has been raging; and it is with rocks

ahead and angry waves beating around that I am called upon to take charge of the vessel of congress,' he said in his presidential address. He succeeded in postponing the immediate split in the congress, "by trending the tight rope between the old congress orthodoxy and the new radicalism."² Gokhale's presidential election was delivered to pacify both the groups within congress and it was apparent. The Times of India wrote that Gokhale did not seem the same person who was known to be sober and dispassionate critic of the acts and policies of the government.³ The leaders in Congress had full faith in his capabilities and they believed he would steer Congress away from this situation. D.E. Wacha wrote to him, "I rejoice to think that we have now in you a really capable and competent person of the fullest integrity and spotless character to steer the destinies of the Congress in future."⁴

In the same years 1905 Gokhale founded Servants of India Society with the sole object of training a band of selfless and dedicated workers to serve the country with a missionary zeal.⁵ This society gave Indian politics leaders like V.S. Srinivas Sastri, G.K. Dedhar, Thakkar Bapa, N.M. Joshi and H.N. Kunzrce.

Gokhale's idea of liberalism was similar to that of British liberalism. He dreamt of India prospering under the leadership and guidance of British. He had firm faith in British liberalism and was sure that they would work for the betterment of the Indian people. He worked very hard to familiarize the English with the hopes and aspirations of the Indians. He was sure that India would blossom under British imperialism. As for Indian aspiration, he advocated participation of Indians in the bureaucracy as it would contribute to the progress of Indian people and that would in turn reduce the discontentment which Indian had towards government. So Indianisation of services was must for success of British Govt.

Gokhale was opposed to the idea of agitation. He believed that Indians and British must work together for betterment of Indian society. He advocated constitutional politics. He was opposed to the idea of boycott. He defined constitutional agitation as agitation by methods which were adopted to bring about the desired changes through the action of legal and constituted authorities. It excluded force, rebellion aiding or abetting a foreign invasion and resort to crime. Making petition, appealing to sense of justice, resolutions passed by elected legislatures and even non-payment of taxes were termed as constitutional. A person who adopts the constitutional methods should be able to harness the strength of the public opinion and be always prepared to face public disappointments. He was once asked whether he could quote the example of any country which had won freedom through the medium of constitutional agitation. His reply was that even if the history of the world did not furnish such example, they should supply it for the first time.

He was opposed to boycott. "Your know I have never approved to this boycott propaganda, which to my mind is bound to do us great harm in our present political and economic condition."⁶ He was

instrumental in persuading congress to drop the idea of boycott in 1909. "If you don't mind my mentioning it myself, it was in response to a strong personal appeal from me that they finally yielded."⁷ He believed that weapons like this should be reserved only for extreme occasions, under an over powering sense of necessity. On an extreme occasion of course, a boycotting demonstration is peacefully legitimate....."⁸ He believed that the constitutional struggle itself must be great teacher imparting to the people the lessons of human freedom.

Gokhale fully approved of the Swadeshi Movement. To him Swadeshi meant an exalted, deep and all-embracing love for India. In his presidential address at the Benaras session in 1905 he said "The true Swadeshi movement is both a patriotic and economic movement. The idea of Swadeshi or "one's own country" is one of the noblest conceptions that have ever stirred the heart of humanity" Gokhale was a forward looking man who wanted to develop India into modern progressive nation.

Gokhale visited England seven times for furtherance of the Indian political cause from 1897 to 1914. He made a favorable impact on British statesman through his intellect, knowledge and winning personality. Lord Morley was so impressed that he took his advice in formulating Morley-Minto Reforms of 1909. Gokhale was ably assisted by William Wedderburn in molding course of activities of the Congress in England through the medium of British committee of Indian National Congress, established in July 1889.⁹ Though the initial work and initiatives belonged to the congress in India, but it was the duty of the British committee, "to give support to the measures thus initiated and when necessary, to press and appeal to parliament and British public opinion."¹⁰ From 1912 onwards he was primarily responsible for organizing the activities of the British committee as Wedduburn, Dadabhai Naroji and Hume could no longer assist.

He attached great importance to the work of 'India' and tried to make it a popular journal by keeping it in close touch with the programmes and activities of the Congress. The object 'India' was to present the case of India to the English public who has some sense or responsibility towards India. This journal was started by the British committee of the Indian National Congress in 1890. He had to undertake hectic tours to collect the finances for 'India'. He did not hesitate to declare that the main defect of the British rule was that an attempt was being made to dwarf Indians by excluding them from seats of powers. The stunting of natural abilities of Indians was according to him an 'enormous evil'.¹¹

Gokhale advocated constitutional politics to solve any problem. He preferred debates and discussions rather than controversies He took the task of educating masses on political situations and urged them to put their opinion through constitutional method so that authorities could work upon them. He does not advocated protests, rebellion, force, for he thought this method would not deliver anything. People must inform authorities about their aspiration through letters, petition etc. if they do not pay

attention to them only in extreme cases mass movements were permissible. Such was the liberalism of Gokhale, who wanted to bring both side to discuss and work together to solve any situation. Though his intentions were good they did not yield desired results as both the sides, British rulers and Indian public could not stick to such formula and extreme steps were taken by both sides. Gokhale on the other hand believed that "the constitutional struggle itself must be the great teacher imparting to the people the lessons of human freedom."¹²

Gokhale had immense faith in British Nationalism. He believed in British sense of justice and expressed it in his budget speech of 1902. He advocated though government is in hand of foreigners it is working for upliftment of Indians. Many times in several speeches he reiterated his vision of India prospering under the able and just leadership of the British.

Conclusion

Though his ideas did not go down well with masses he won support of many prominent leaders of the time who had firm faith in British benevolence and foremost among them was Mahatma Gandhi who called him his "political Guru". But today this true advocate of liberalism who is truly worthy of being remembered as a teacher, educationist, social reformer, economist is only remembered as a moderate leader whose policy of political mendicancy had hardly any effect on the British and hardly his efforts get any recognition for struggle for independence as his effort did not bore intermediate fruits. But he was a true servant of India who in all his capacity worked to bring peace and harmony among the British rulers and Indian subjects. He was true advocate of bilateral discussions which after so many years world has learnt, is the only solution for impending issues, no matter could be solved with opposition, protest unless both two sides are willing to discuss it at the table. How visionary was the man

called Gokhale who taught this at the dawn of 20th century while the world learnt it after two world wars. To best tribute to Gokhale was given by poetess Sarojini Naidu. "Heroic heart! Lost hope of all our days! Need'st that the homage of our love or praise Lo! Let the mournful millions sand the pyre. Kindle their souls with consecrated fire, Caught from the brave torch fallen from thy hand."

To succor and serve our stricken land, and in a daily worship taught by three, up build the Temple of her unity."

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