

# BAL GANGADHAR TILAK AND THE ARCTIC

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On a rain-soaked Sunday (August 1, 1920) morning in Bombay, with the city battling the after-effects of the influenza [pandemic](#), Bal Gangadhar Tilak, best remembered for his fight for Swaraj, breathed his last. Tilak's campaign against the British colonial rule was anchored on reclaiming Indian heritage and culture, some of which were reflected in his 1892 paper, "The Orion, or Researches into the Antiquity of the Vedas", which drew on the vast knowledge of the Hindu Vedas and Avesta, the sacred scripture of Zoroastrianism. In sum, it was a search into the antiquity of the Aryan-Vedic culture, challenging the ancientness of the Bible and establishing the primacy of the Vedic literature.

Tilak's articulation of the Vedic culture was further elaborated in his 1904 work, *The Arctic Home of the Vedas*, that brought in an Indian consciousness to human social evolution as a response to the physical environment. While updating his estimate of the Vedic antiquity, Tilak came to the conclusion that the advancement of geological science, astronomy and archaeology proved that the climate conditions at the pole during the inter-glacial period was conducive for human habitation establishing, thereby, his long-held belief that the ancestors of India's ancient Vedic civilisation lived in the Arctic region.

His emphasis on the cultural-historical geography was an important intervention and came at a time when geographical determinism emerged as a dominant school of thought, which viewed human history, culture and society as being determined by the physical environment. On the other hand, political geographers of the time like Friedrich Ratzel and Halford Mackinder, imperialist in their outlook, had emphasised location and topography as important geographic properties in influencing geopolitical thinking. Ratzel compared the state to an organism which needed space (*lebensraum*) to expand, whereas Mackinder strongly felt that geography should have objectives that serve the needs of the state.

Tilak's work and the debate over the origins and the original homeland of the Aryans in the Arctic, while complex and controversial, however, establishes familiarity of the region through genealogical connections and remains the most striking interpretation and superiority of Indo-Aryan history and culture. Sri Aurobindo, the renowned Vedic scholar, in his work, *The Secret of the Vedas*, appreciates Tilak's interpretation noting that by examining the "Vedic Dawn, the figure of the Vedic cows, and the astronomical data of the hymns", a strong probability of the Aryan race "descending from the Arctic regions in the glacial period" emerges.

Tilak's works were unlike the tales of risk, adventure and enterprise from the North Pole that captured the imagination of Western publics. The Arctic is often a backdrop of English literary works of the 19th century. Unlike the European experience, where a collective idea of the Pole came through the detailed notes and diaries of the explorers and inspired prose and verses, in India, the Vedas were the fountainhead of knowledge of the Arctic. Interpreting the text of the Vedas was an evidence-based exercise to fill the missing gaps in the origin and migration theory of the Aryans.

Tilak describes in his work the "Polar attributes" of Vedic deities such as Usha, the goddess of dawn, and the happy land of Airyana Vaêjo or the Aryan Paradise, where the sun glimmered once a year and was lost with the "invasion of snow and ice". Like dawn, night also occupies attention in the Vedas suggesting the half-yearly daylight, darkness and changing seasons in the Arctic. The Vedas in describing the Arctic used metaphorical imaging and spiritual expressions.

In contrast, the current age semantics on the Arctic like “gold rush”, “resource scramble”, “land grab”, “great game moves north”, “high stakes in the High North”, have given it an imagery of chaos emerging from intensified resource competition. However, with increasing scientific findings, the public today is far more aware of the Polar region and Polar climate change.

Tilak’s articulation, challenged it might be by the “Out-of-India” migration proponents, gives India a platform to build its engagement with the Arctic region. He reminds us through his scholarship that the Arctic has a civilisation connect and a racial memory. Mainstreaming the ancient textual connection to India’s contemporary Arctic policies, which has been dominated by the scientific narrative, will bolster India’s engagement with the region.

A few months before Tilak’s death, the Spitzbergen Treaty was signed that defined Norway’s sovereignty over the Arctic archipelago of Svalbard. India, as part of the British Empire, was party to the treaty. In remembering Tilak, one is reminded that the Arctic has spectacular roots in Indian thinking and is thus a familiar region to Indians.

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