

A Memorable Occasion

Three unexpected Baptisms. Lakshmi makes a speech. Tilak rescues a baby.

Part 2, Chapter 16, pp. 200-204.

A couple of months after returning from Mahabaleshwar on Dr. Ballantine's invitation, we went for a few days to Rahuri. We were given a little house, and Dr. Ballantine provided us with our food. Everyday in our home, both morning and evening, there was Bible reading, prayers and hymn-singing. The hymns sung were composed by Tilak. The neighbours always gathered for prayers, and the group would repeat those Bible verses they liked. This custom was continued during our stay at Rahuri. Dattu and I were Hindus, nevertheless we were present at Tilak's prayers. I began to like them. It was a new experience for me to commune with God in my heart. Hearing the Bible read again and again I grew familiar with it.

It was a Saturday and a group had gathered for the usual prayers. All the Christians present repeated a verse of the Scripture. It was Dattu's turn. He said, 'God is Love.' Then came my turn and I repeated the verse, 'Oh God, have mercy upon me, a sinner.'

'God will never have mercy upon you,' said Tilak.

'Why not?'

'If being bound to me by promise, you desert me, what can I think of you? Even so if you live apart from Christ to whom you are devoted, how can be God pleased with such deception? How can he have mercy on you?'

Prayers being over I rose and went out.

I told no one at home where I was going, but made straight for Dr Ballantine's Bungalow, and knocked on his door. He was very astonished to see me. 'Well Lakshmibai, have you come alone?'

'Saheb, baptize me tomorrow.'

'Now, Lakshmibai you have no knowledge of the Bible yet. You have to study the Christian religion for at least five or six months.'

I have a good knowledge of the Christian religion now. I want to be baptized tomorrow.'

'But Lakshmibai why all this hurry?'

'Never mind, if you do not intend to baptize me say so plainly.'

'But they will put questions to you, and you will have to answer at the time.'

'I know nothing about that, tell me if you are going to baptize me or not, or I shall go.'

'You had better go for the present. I cannot give an answer now.'

'Saheb, tomorrow is Sunday. My baptism, Dattu's and Houshi's must be performed tomorrow. Even though I pass in no Scripture examination, my faith is in Christ. Why should I lie?'

Dr Ballantine and I prayed there and then, and our Baptism was arranged for the morrow. He told me a story which I do not remember perfectly, but the gist of it is as follows:

'There was a man. An unexpected guest came to his house at night. The host had nothing to give him to eat so he went to a neighbour and brought back something.'

I failed to unravel the story at the time and later forgot it altogether, but today as I write I begin to appreciate the reference. The Baptisms were arranged for the next day, and in that happy knowledge I went home. Dr Ballantine sent a man with a lantern along with me. On my arrival Tilak asked me where I had been. He was filled with joy when he heard the whole story from my lips.

Before my baptism I was examined. A pastor from somewhere else was visiting Rahuri. He was a most kindly man and old enough to be my father. He sat beside me prompting me with the answers to the questions on the Bible, and I repeated his answers to the examiners. I refused to accept baptism at the hands of a foreign missionary, and expressed my desire to be baptized by the Pastor of the Congregation, the Rev. Waniramji Bapuji Ohol. The request being granted I, Dattu and Houshi were baptized in the church at Rahuri. That day I was also received into full membership and was given permission to partake of Holy Communion.

On Monday we returned to Nagar. Everyone there was very pleased to hear of our Baptism, but many of them thought the ceremony should have been held in Nagar instead of Rahuri, and so they were disappointed.

One other memorable event of that year was my speech. During the festival of lights at Divali a great gathering was always held at Nagar, called the 'Unity Meeting.' To this meeting came Christian people from the districts of Nagar, Satara, Sholapur and elsewhere, till it took on the appearance of some place of Hindu pilgrimage. From Nagar alone came one and a half thousand men and women; four or five hundred more from outside brought the figure up to two thousand. The old Church in Nagar was always packed to overflowing. On this particular day people filled even the doors and windows. It was considered a momentous event that Tilak's wife was going to speak.

Tilak had a great desire that his wife should become a celebrity. An author, a poet or an orator she must be, and he strove consistently towards this end. In the beginning he was in despair about the first two heads, though he later began to see a few signs of sprouting genius. Be that as it may, this was the first time I had aspired to be an orator. That woman was to face a furnace, who had never even lit a lamp. Let alone the making of a speech, I had never so much as heard one. I had had experience of one display of oratory at Rajnandgaon, but my part in that was the cooking and serving.

Tilak wrote out my address for me, and made me learn it off by heart. Oh, how many times was it rehearsed? The two of us would go out to some lonely spot and I, standing before him, would recite my piece in a loud voice. The preparations made in this way were prodigious.

Each speaker had been allotted ten minutes. There were three or four addresses before mine. When my name was announced I too went up with great pride and stood in the pulpit. Before me an enormous crowd was spread out. Tilak and Dr

Hume were sitting at the very front seat. My attire was as it had always been, that is nose-ornament, ear-rings and red kunku mark on my forehead. My sari drawn back between my legs and draped up to form a divided skirt in the Hindu fashion called *kasota*, completed my brave array. The dress for Christian women had been already established, so I proved a novel sight for their eyes. Added to that I was a new convert.

It is true that I went and stood up in the pulpit in great style, but for nine minutes out of the allotted ten, not one word escaped my lips. Like a block of wood I stood, and like a picture sat the congregation. Many a one put up a prayer for me, 'Oh God, let but four words come out of her mouth.' Someone brought a glass of water, someone else a few cloves. To what use could I put them in my pitiful state. Some said to themselves, 'She has notes in her hand. May she have the wit to read them.' In my other hand was a handkerchief. I could not even raise it to my face. I was unaccustomed to the use of a handkerchief, and had no memory to read my notes. There were many addresses to come after mine.

Dr Hume rose to thank me. Immediately speech burst from me, and I began to talk so forcibly and so steadily that hearing me everyone was amazed. The speech was ended; but my mind insisted that something had been left out. There was a blot on the paper at a certain place, and I felt as if that part had been neglected. In the end, beyond my learnt lesson I spoke. The situation was saved. 'What I had to say I have said,' 'If there is anything to be added our dear Mr Tilak will do it now.' I came and sat down in my seat, and Tilak appeared in my place in the pulpit. He said, 'She has left nothing for me to say.'

When we got home I was very cross with him. 'Without being thrown into the water one cannot learn to swim', he said.

Henceforth,' I said, 'if you think I must speak anywhere I shall learn nothing by heart. I shall say what I want. My mind is confused by other people's writing.'

From then until now I have many a time spoken in public but never again committed to memory anything written out. If anyone ever created confidence in me it was that Christian congregation, a huge gathering who, by sitting so quietly for nine minutes during my first address, overcame all my terror. The disciplined behaviour of the listeners in the meetings of this community is of the highest order, sympathetic and quiet.

On becoming Christian, or rather on being caught in the current of Christianity I took a Mahar girl into my house as if she were my own. Later when we were in Nagar, Tilak adopted a Mahar boy called Bhikaji.

One day when Tilak was visiting a little village, a boy of a year or a year and half was lying dying of hunger under a tree. Tilak searched the whole village for his relatives, but no one came to claim him. When he asked the headman of the village to provide for him, he too was unmoved by the appeal. In the end Tilak stayed two days there for the child's sake, searching the neighbouring villages. When nothing could be traced, he brought him home with him, and we made much of him. Tilak used to say he would make a learned scholar of this orphan boy, and he made him repeat Sanskrit everyday. From this he was nicknamed *Shastri-Bawa*- Doctor of Scripture.