

***I follow After: An Autobiography.* London: Oxford University Press, 1950, English Trans. from the original, *Smruti Chitren*. Lakshmibai Tilak, First serialized in the Marathi weekly *Sanjivani* 1934-1937.**

Very few women in 19th-century India were literate and fewer still able to write about their own lives. It was usually men who wrote autobiographies in which they make passing mention of significant women. Lakshmibai Tilak was one of few women from her period to draw a colourful picture of her life. Lakshmi's sensitivity and sense of humour as she narrates details of her life and describes her somewhat eccentric husband, her interactions with a range of people from all caste and religious backgrounds—Indian, European and American—makes this a unique autobiography. Here is a summary of her autobiography [NB—although her husband's first name is Narayan, she refers to him by his caste name 'Tilak' throughout the autobiography].

As was common in the 19th century, Lakshmibai was arranged to be married to Narayan as a child, after a horoscope predicted they would be a good match. She was married at aged 11 to the then 18-year-old Narayan, who, after a difficult childhood, was gaining a reputation in the region as an upcoming poet. Despite this early marriage, Narayan and Lakshmibai rejected some of the traditional marriage customs of the time and region. From Lakshmibai's account, it seems Narayan and she develop a strong but unusual relationship. Narayan is headstrong and short-tempered but also extremely kind to both her and others. Lakshmi, on the other hand, although desiring to fulfill the roles of a daughter-in-law, wife and mother dutifully, has a mind of her own and is not afraid to stand up for herself. Their unpredictable relationship, filled with laughter, games, arguments, competition yet deep devotion to each other, is a source of amusement to their peers who witness their various disagreements. It makes for an entertaining read even now.

In the first ten years of their marriage, Narayan earns a good salary either as a teacher of English and Marathi (his native language), employed at schools set up by the British government or ones he starts himself, or by his writing. Narayan is now recognized as a poet, essayist and orator, writing on all kinds of topics, from an argument he might have had with his wife to devotional songs in praise of the Hindu god Rama, which are sung at religious

festivals. He also earns a good income from his publications. Yet, the family is almost never comfortably provided for as he is equally good at giving money away or distributing *all* their possessions to the poor! This often reduces them to poverty but both are too proud to ask for help of their wealthy relatives. They have four children but only one son survives to adulthood.

In the early 1890s, Lakshmibai notes two crucial years that bring dramatic changes to their lives and relationship. On moving to Rajnandgaon, a small town, Narayan began learning Urdu (he was already competent in Marathi, Sanskrit and English), as well as reading the Bible and corresponding with Baba Padmanji, a young Hindu man who was at the time infamous for his conversion to Christianity. Narayan had already had a deep interest in religious debate, exploring other religions such as Islam and Buddhism, and questioning many of the traditions and customs that his Brahmin family followed. For instance, he refused to feed the Brahmins at one of the anniversaries of his mother's death, as was the custom. At Lakshmibai's insistence, he said he would hold the anniversary only if she agreed to serve dinner to those he invited: "The blind, the lame, any caste, any religion". When Lakshmi admonished him of making a mockery of his mother, he answered: "My mother loved mercy. She was not straight-laced about religious observances....I intend to seat those blind and lame in the place of the Brahmans. There will be no Brahmans invited" (p. 103). He was also concerned about the oppression of the poor and one of his diary entries from this period says: "Within five or six years I shall give up my home, and set myself free for my country's service" (p. 102). At this stage, he was not particularly attracted by Christianity, until he was offered a copy of the Bible upon a chance encounter on a train. Soon after, Lakshmi discovers that Narayan has begun meeting with other Christians in the area in secrecy. By November 1894 he resolves to become a Christian and publicly declares this in a Marathi journal, *Dnyanodaya*.

News of Narayan's baptism by (at his insistence) an Indian minister in Bombay in 1895 reached Lakshmibai and her family who were shocked and confused. They were determined to protect Lakshmibai, and tried for some time to prevent a meeting between the two in the belief that this was for the best. Lakshmi spends more of her time at a Hindu temple, fasting and praying in increasing despair for the gods to return Narayan to her. Meanwhile Narayan writes her letters almost daily, some pleading for her to join him and others demanding a divorce. She

is determined to do neither for over five years. Finally, she decides to join him in order to ensure that her son gets a proper education, but Narayan and she maintain different households, which means that she cooks her food separately and lives in an adjoining house to his. At this point her family stops supporting her.

Subsequently, in one of the towns where Narayan has a teaching appointment, she is forced to drink water drawn out of a well by a Muslim as there was nobody else for her own caste to help. Although she is uncomfortable at the idea, she is persuaded by Narayan that drinking a little of this water in an emergency would not really contaminate her. However, she has an immediate physical reaction, vomits the water she drinks and falls ill. Distraught, she tells us how she prays at this point: “Oh God! What have I done today? Today what are my ancestors saying about me in heaven? What can I do to make amends for such a sin?” (p. 191). But very soon, she has an intense ‘conversion’ experience, and feels a brilliant light all around her when she is convinced that distinctions of caste and religion are man-made and therefore false. New thoughts flood into her mind:

“Did God create different castes or man? If God, then would He not have made also differences in mankind? Birth and death, flesh and bones, intelligence, the power to judge good and evil,...do not all men have in common?...What is the difference between Brahman and Shudra? A Shudra has no bull’s horns protruding from his skull. A Brahman is not born with the mark of his God-given greatness stamped on his forehead...Enough, my caste distinctions were gone. From that day on, I would hold all equal. The very roots of my caste pride had vanished. I would eat from anyone’s hand, drink too from anyone’s cup” (p. 192).

Her decision to accept food and water from anybody—regardless of their caste or religion—surprises everyone else around her, as she has not converted to Christianity, but continues to live as a Brahmin Hindu in all other ways. Although Narayan had been praying for her to change, he too is taken aback at her sudden change of heart. She also adopts a low-caste orphan girl at this point, intending to bring her up with her son. Now that she has decided to eat with anybody, she moves in fully with Narayan, and while she continues to worship her gods as usual, also attends the Christian prayers and Bible readings that Narayan organises daily. She asks to be baptised soon afterwards, but from the way she narrates this episode it

is not because of a sudden 'conversion' experience to Christianity, but more because Narayan provokes her with his teasing!

Soon after this there is an outbreak of plague and famine and they decide to take in another 25 children when a boarding school run by missionaries decides to shut down and send the boys away. However, when one of their daughters falls ill, they are forced to move into an isolation 'camp' (for plague patients) in very miserable conditions. Although their daughter miraculously survives the illness and they have a choice to leave, they decide to stay on and serve the other families who have been abandoned both by the state and the missionaries, undertaking cleaning tasks that would usually be assigned to the very lowest. After the epidemic, Lakshmi enrolls to study nursing and learns to read and write English (Narayan had already been teaching her Marathi intermittently), but gives this up due to pressure from a missionary that she should focus on her family. As the years progress, Narayan and Lakshmi continue to write and address congregations, travelling to other parts of India, constantly taking in the poor when they can. Towards the end of his life, Narayan decides to adopt the life and appearance of an ascetic, one of the Hindu recommendations for this stage in life. He leads daily Christian worship services, accompanied by bells, cymbals and dancing – these practices are in the tradition of Hindu devotional singing. Both Christian missionaries and Hindu Indians are uneasy with such a mixing of religious styles, but he always has a ready answer, and the combination of personal integrity, service to others and powerful personality ensures that he has a huge and popular following. Narayan dies in 1919 but Lakshmi survives him by several years and continues writing and speaking.