

## Living According to the Gospels

**Text:** *I Follow After: An Autobiography by Lakshmibai Tilak* (Translated by E. Josephine Inkster), London: Oxford University Press, 1950.

### The story of Lakshimbai and Narayan Waman Tilak

Throughout history many people have chosen to embrace Christianity and to attempt to live life according to how they understood the gospels, the main teachings and example of Jesus Christ as recorded by his followers. The following case study looks at the example of two people, Lakshmibai Tilak and her husband Narayan Waman Tilak, who did just that. Although brought up in Hindu families in India in the mid 1800s, they both chose to be baptised as Christian, although at different times. As we read sections of the autobiography, we will consider what motivated them to make that decision and how their lives were changed by attempting to live their lives according to the gospels. This story is based on the autobiography of Lakshmibai Tilak. As an account written by a woman in mid 19<sup>th</sup> century India, this document provides us with a unique insight into the thoughts and issues that affected people involved in the encounter between different religions in India during this time. In particular it shows the social impact that Christianity had, at a time when it was strongly associated with British colonial power. As the experiences of Lakshmibai and Narayan show, conversion need not necessarily be a complete break away from the past resulting in the complete rejection of one faith to adopt another.

### Christianity in India

The Christian population of India today, according to the 2011 census, is nearly 28 million people. This may sound like a substantial population, but in fact it makes up just 2.3% of the population of the Republic of India, which has a

population now in excess of 1.2 billion

(<http://www.census2011.co.in/religion.php>). Although there has been a Christian presence in certain parts of India since the First Century AD, the religion became much more prominent and the Christian population grew substantially during the colonial era, when much of India was governed by British authorities. During this period, Christian missionary societies from Britain were very active in India, setting up schools, clinics and other forms of social provision. They also tried to convert Indians from other religions, and they were often very critical of aspects of Indian society, especially caste. The Christian community in India, despite being small in number has a distinctive social and cultural significance.

### Caste System

India has one of the world's oldest social divisions, placing people in different classes or hierarchical categories, known as *varna*. *Varṇa* is mentioned in the Rig Veda, one of the oldest known sacred texts (composed roughly between 1500 and 1200 BCE). It organises society into four recognisable roles – Brahmins (teachers and priests), Kshatriyas (Warriors and statesmen), Vaishyas (traders and businessmen) and Shudras (labourers, artisans, skilled workers and servants). This formal theory is now related to an elaborate concept of social distinction apparent in Indian society, known as *jati* (or social 'type'), There are thousands of *jati* groups in India. Many Indians look to the *varna* theory to help them organise *jatis* in relation to one another, so that one *jati* will be seen as Kshatriya, one as Vaishya and so on. It is this dynamic set of relations that we today understand as the hierarchical 'caste system.'

Lakshimibai and Narayan were born, into high caste families known as Brahmin. Brahmins are traditionally perceived as intellectuals and specialists in

ancient rituals associated with the Vedas. When Lakshmibai and Narayan were alive, the lives of most Brahmins were governed by strict religious rules. In order to carry out religious rituals, Brahmins are traditionally required to be 'pure', meaning that they can only eat food prepared by someone of the same or similar caste, and their food should be strictly vegetarian. It also means that they cannot come in contact with people of other castes or else they would lose their 'purity'. You can read more about this way of living in the first chapter of Lakshmibai's autobiography (Supplementary Reading 1), which describes family life when she was a child. As you will see, Lakshmibai's father was particularly 'holy', as she calls it; that is, he engaged in careful and long ritual activities, and he was very concerned with issues of purity and the threat of 'pollution', a kind of ritual uncleanness resulting from contact with others, especially in relation to food. All food entering the house had to be purified to the extent that salt would have to be washed. You will also see that the rest of the family was less concerned with strict purity regulations, and frequently looked for ways to get round father's rules, although they knew that father would be furious if he found out that the children had lied about cleansing the food. This shows us that although ritual regulation is important when we consider the issue of caste, people have different approaches to it, even in the context of a traditional high caste family in a 19<sup>th</sup>-century village.

### Questions:

1. In what ways did having restrictions impact on the lives of brahmins?
2. Give an example of the strict religious upbringing of Lakshmibai?
3. In what ways would this have impacted her when her husband converted to Christianity?

## Lakshimabi marries Narayan Waman Tilak

As was common in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Lakshimibai 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. Narayan who, after a difficult childhood, was gaining a reputation in the region as an upcoming poet rejected some of the traditional marriage customs. Nevertheless, Narayan's family were also traditional Brahmins living in an Indian village and her family expected her to follow rules of purity strictly. Soon after their marriage, Narayan's sister unfortunately died. Her father-in-law immediately declared that Lakshimibai had brought the family bad luck. This annoys Narayan immensely and he stands up for his young bride. After a few months, Narayan who finds work in the city of Bombay, is able to take Lakshmi to live with him and neither of them are dependent on Narayan's father any more.

From Lakshimibai's account, Narayan and she develop a strong but unconventional relationship. Narayan is headstrong and short-tempered but also extremely kind both to 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 turbulent relationship, filled with laughter, games, arguments, competition yet deep devotion to each other, is a source of amusement not only to their friends and peers who witness their various quarrels. It also makes for an entertaining read even now.

In the first ten years of their marriage, Narayan earns a good income 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 a quarrel he might have had with his wife to devotional songs in praise of the Hindu god Rama, which are sung at religious festivals. He 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.

### **Conversion to Christianity: Narayan Waman Tilak**

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 already knew Marathi, Sanskrit and English). Narayan had always had a deep interest in religious debate, and was now exploring other religions such as Islam and Buddhism and was drawing up foundations for a new religion. He also questioned 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 say: "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 but one day he was offered a copy of the Bible upon a chance encounter with a passenger on a train. He did not think that he would find any meaning in the book but his life was transformed by the New Testament teachings of the Sermon on the Mount. Narayan said,

*“it became impossible to leave the jewel-like sentences, so filled with love, mercy and truth. The most difficult questions of Hindu philosophy found their answer in these three chapters of St Matthew. I was most astonished to see problems like that of re-birth fully resolved and being filled with a desire for more knowledge of Christ I read on to the end.”*

### Sermon on the Mount

The Sermon on the Mount is a collection of the sayings and teachings of Jesus, emphasizing his moral teachings as laid out in the Gospel of Matthew (Ch. 5, 6 and 7). These teachings instruct a person on how they should live their life, indicating that they should be meek, merciful, and pure in heart, and a peacemaker. Jesus explains that a person is blessed by God for cultivating these traits.

There were some ways in which these teachings contrasted with Narayan’s religious upbringing. In particular, people were to be judged not in terms of which caste they belonged to, or how correctly they followed religious rituals, but rather on how closely they were following the teachings of Jesus in the Gospels. Jesus told his followers to, *“Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven”* (Matthew 5:16). It was not enough to observe rituals before the Divine source. Jesus explained that, *“Not everyone who says to Me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father in heaven”* (7: 21).

Jesus' followers were to be an example to others and a reflection of God's righteousness. In other ways, however, these ideas would have connected with his experience of Hindu practices. The emphasis on purity would have been familiar. The idea of judgement through action was also something that echoed the Hindu idea of acting correctly in society, according to what was recognised as one's *dharma*, or duty.

### Moral Life

In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus clearly outlines the importance of living a moral life and warns people of the difficulty of doing so whilst pursuing wealth. To a certain extent, this contrasted to high caste Hindu ideas about the importance of working to acquire wealth (*artha*) during a particular period of one's life, when it is one's duty (*dharma*) to act as a responsible, prudent and generous householder (*grihastha*). Jesus explains that it is impossible to worship money and serve God and god at the same time. "*You cannot serve God and mammon (riches)*" (5:24). The first priority he explained was to serve God and develop righteousness. "*Seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added to you*" (6:33). Although once he was married to Lakshmibai, Narayan had effectively entered the *grihastha* stage of his life, he was clearly not motivated by the pursuit of wealth. He was a poet, and in Lakshmibai's autobiography we can see that he rejected financial inducements related to religion. If you read Supplementary Reading (SR) 2 (pp 114-5), you will see that he rejects money offered by some people to induce him to convert, and by others to prevent him from converting! As he had not at that stage converted, Narayan states that 'I shall not be a Christian. And if I did become one, it would not be for money'. Ironically, it appears that this moral stance fits very well with Jesus' teachings,

and can help us to see why Narayan did eventually convert. His conversion was a kind of rejection of social pressures in favour of a commitment to God – this it seems was more important to the non-conformist poet than whether he was seen as a Christian or a Hindu! At the conclusion of his teachings of the Sermon on the Mount Jesus warns people not to follow the crowd and not to choose the easy way to live (Matthew 7:13-14) or to follow false prophets (Matthew 7:13-14). People are told that they must obey God's instructions as set out in the Bible, otherwise God will say, *"I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness!"* (7:23).

### Questions

- Q.1 What happened to Narayan on a train which was to cause to him to ultimately embrace Christianity?
- Q.2 Explain the teachings of the, 'Sermon on the Mount' and how they indicated the type of behaviour and attitude Jesus expected from his followers. What drew Narayan towards these teachings?
- Q.3 Explain how Bible teachings such as the 'Sermon on the Mount' might help Christians to make difficult moral decisions.
- Q.4 How might these teachings have differed from the strict religious upbringing of both Narayan and his wife?
- Q.5 What does Jesus mean when he states that, *"Not everyone who says to Me, 'Lord, Lord,' shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father in heaven"*? (Matthew 7: 21)

### **Conversion to Christianity: Lakshmibai Tilak**

Lakshmibai's autobiography shows us that she was also someone who knew her own mind and would not be pressured into actions she did not believe were right. When her husband converted, she did not follow him

automatically, despite considerable pressure from her family, onlookers as well as Narayan. 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. Lakshmi spends increasing time at the village Hindu temple, fasting and praying in growing despair to the gods to return Narayan to her. Finally, she decides to join him in town to ensure that her son gets a proper education. At this point her family stops supporting her even though Narayan and she maintain separate households—that is, she lived in an adjoining house to Narayan’s and cooked her food separately.

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 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 has drunk 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, when she is convinced that distinctions of caste and religion are man-made and therefore false. New thoughts flood into her mind as she experiences an intense brilliant light all around her:

*“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.

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. Her changed attitude to caste purity influences other decisions. For instance, she tells us that during this period she decides to adopt a girl aged 12 from a lower caste and raise her as her own. Though not a Christian at the time she took Narayan's bible and in a silent prayer asked if helping the girl was the right thing to do. She opened the Bible and found the following passage, '*And he shall be like a tree planted by the rivers of water that bringeth forth his fruit in his season; his leaf shall not wither.*' (Psalm 1-3). She said, 'I was convinced that God had told me what to do. I made no inquiries about the caste of the child because my caste distinctions and rules of purity had gone.' (chapter 15, part 2) It is important to recognise that Lakshmibai was at this stage able to follow the bible as a guide to living despite not having been baptised. It helped her to make sense of her life, and especially all the social pressures that followed her husband's baptism. For many people it is important to have God in your life to make them complete. Passages of the bible such as the Sermon of the Mount help people to open themselves to God and live a moral life.

Soon after she asks to be baptised, but from her description it is not because of a sudden 'conversion' experience to Christianity but more because Narayan provokes her with his teasing which you can read about in SR 3. You can see here that she makes her own decision and insists on certain aspects of her baptism, such as ensuring that she was not baptised by a 'foreign missionary'. It is also clear that she continues to dress as she always has done, despite it being conventional for Christian converts to abandon dressing 'in the Hindu fashion' (p 203). SR1 shows us that when she was a child, Lakshmibai rebelled against her father's strict caste rules. When she grew up she continued to defy authority and convention (including that of her husband at times), and found support for her actions in the bible.

Many Christians believe that in attempting to live a moral life, it is not enough just to address our personal actions; we also have a responsibility to address social injustices including structures that affect the poor and marginalised in our society. In Narayan's time it might have been those affected by caste. Naryan and Lakshmibai both defied caste norms in order to do what they thought was right. For instance, soon after her baptism there is an outbreak of plague and famine and 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 had a choice to leave, they decide to stay on and serve the other families of various castes and religions who had been abandoned both by the state and the missionaries, undertaking caring and cleaning tasks that would usually be assigned to the very lowest castes. There are other examples in history of people who have chosen to challenge social structures due to their beliefs, including Martin Luther King, Mahatma Gandhi and Malcolm X.

Lakshmi and Narayan were interpreting the idea of 'living according to the Gospel' to the situations they encountered in 19<sup>th</sup> Century India, applying the teachings of the Gospel in very practical ways. They were always sacrificing their own food or home to help those around them who were in greater need than themselves. In this way, they were following many of the teachings of Jesus as described in the Gospels.

### Baptism

Many Christians believe that a person's capacity to live a moral life begins with baptism or conversion to Christianity. Lakshmibai's story shows us that this is not always the case. She was able to access the Bible and respond to its teachings, relating them to her own experience, even before she consented to be baptised. The importance for her at this point was the teaching, and its capacity to help her to make sense of the world around her and her own actions within it.

Nevertheless, baptism is of central importance to Christians. A person is expected to commit themselves to belonging to the community that recognised Jesus as the source of salvation. People are believed to be born into a world of sin and only God can free people from that sin. The water of baptism symbolises the washing away of sins. The idea of the purifying power of water in baptism might remind you of the purification rituals of Lakshmibai's father, which are detailed in SR1. Because of such everyday practice, the ritual of baptism would have had a familiar feel for Brahmins like Narayan, who clearly saw the ritual as an important marker of his commitment as a Christian. In SR3, when Lakshmi asks, 'Oh God, have mercy upon me, a sinner.' Narayan responds that God would not have mercy upon her while she was not a Christian. Narayan said. 'if you live apart from Christ to whom you are devoted

how can God be pleased with such deception?’ How can he have mercy on you.’ For Narayan, this is a key marker of a person’s Christian identity (much as ritual purification is a marker of Brahmin identity), and Lakshmi too appears to acknowledge this by accepting baptism shortly afterwards.

### Kingdom of God

Christians have a strong belief in the, ‘Kingdom of God’. To establish the kingdom on earth means that Christians must accept God’s purpose as set out in the Sermon on the Mount and other Bible teachings. Those who follow Jesus’ example and work to put the teachings of the love of God and their neighbour into practice in this world may then be able to enter the ultimate ‘Kingdom of God’ in heaven.

Narayan and Lakshmibai are an excellent example of people who were inspired by gospel teachings. Narayan was devoted to serving God through Christ and continued to teach Christianity within the mission school and to compose writings including devotional prayers. He clearly saw Christianity not only as a way of life but as the clear way to peace of mind and salvation. As he explained prior to his conversion to Christianity in February 1894, ‘My mind is being drawn towards the religion of Christ. Here appears a faith capable of giving the mind of man, peace, devotion, righteousness, salvation.’ Both Narayan and Lakshmibai risked being rejected by their families for making the decision to convert to Christianity. By looking at the evidence of Lakshmibai’s autobiography, we can see that their decision was shaped by their experiences of and approach to life, by the social and political environment of the time, and also by the teachings and moral positions they read about in the Bible. Their transition to Christianity was supported by a belief that what they were doing would allow them to enter the ‘Kingdom of God’. For Narayan and Lakshmibai

being part of the 'kingdom of God' also meant devoting themselves to serve their fellow Indians and country.

### Questions

- Q.1 What was so unusual about Lakshmibai's decision to adopt a child from a lower caste as her own?
- Q.2 Explain the importance of baptism to Christians? Why was Narayan insistent that his wife become baptised?
- Q.3 What challenges would Narayan and his wife face in becoming baptised as a Christian? What would be the possible implications of their choice?
- Q.4 For Christians it is important to lead a better individual moral life but also to challenge social injustices. Can you give an example of how Narayan and or his wife challenged social injustices at that time?

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### **Extension tasks**

- Q.1 Do some research from the life of Martin Luther King, Mahatma Gandhi or Malcolm X. How did they challenge the social injustices of their time? Was it through violent or non-violent actions?
- Q.2 'All Christians should obey the moral teachings of the Bible'. Evaluate why this viewpoint would be difficult for Christians.
- Q.3 What part of Jesus teachings on the, 'Sermon on the Mount' demonstrate love?
- Q.4 What actions might we take to put some of these teachings into practice today?

(8 marks)

## Exam practice

Q1. Explain why the teachings in the gospels are important for Christians.  
(4 marks)

Q2. Describe what Christians mean by the Kingdom of God.  
(4 marks)

Q3. Explain why building the Kingdom of God is important for Christians today.  
(6 marks)

Q4. "Being Baptised is the most important way of showing you are a Christian".

Would Christians agree? Give reasons for your answer.  
(8 marks)