

A Study of Lakshmibai Tilak's Smruti Chitre: Tussle Aligning Social Prejudice

Dr. R. Nagarajan*

Associate Professor of English
Department of Science & Humanities
GRT Institute of Engineering & Technology
Tiruttani - 631209

Lakshmibai Tilak's autobiography under the title *Smruti Chitre* which presents the account of her husband and her life together turned out to be a great masterpiece in Marathi Literature, published in four parts between 1934-1937. Each part shows the transition of little girl into a married woman and a perfect life partner to her husband. This transition was not easy for Lakshmibai, rather it was very painful for her to tear herself from the roots of her family and adjust to the life of being a wife of a convert and gradually embracing her husband's religion. The analysis of her autobiography *I Follow After*, 1950 (English translation by E. Josephine Inkster) is a focus on her critique on the orthodox religious and family systems, her struggle with her ancestral beliefs and that of the society on religious conversions, after the conversion of her husband Tilak to Christianity. It explores Lakshmibai's fight against the institutionalised Church practices of caste discrimination and the power relations within and outside the society after her own conversion. Her transformation can be seen also from a lowly high-caste Hindu wife, to a pillar of hope for the poor and depressed around her.

Brahmans have been among the dominant groups of the society all over traditional India but particularly in Maharashtra they held a position of unrivalled prestige under the Peshwas. Brahman power in general and Chitpawan (to the Brahman group Lakshmibai belonged) power in particular has been summed up as follows, of the significant concentrations of power in society, namely the institutions of religion, the administration, and the ownership of land, the Chitpavans virtually controlled all three. (*Rewriting History*, 5)

Coming from such lineage, Lakshmibai's family considered themselves staunch blue-blooded Brahmans. However, they had a lenient view on the social customs of their times. Lakshmibai's fight was against the institutions of religion, caste system, family, colonial system and the Church. Both Tilak and Lakshmibai fought against the power structures within these institutions, to bring about the change in the social structure of the Maharashtrian society. When Lakshmibai was eleven years of age, she was married to her friend's elder brother who was famous in Nasik as a poet and an eloquent speaker. 'The marriage of a girl of a high caste family involved an expenditure of about six hundred rupees at the very least' in the nineteenth century and luckily for her, Tilak married for no dowry and the expenses of the marriage were met by her uncle Govindarao who had adopted her. Tilak with his education came in contact with many learned people from different religions, and was caught in this wave of social reform. From the late eighteenth century, the missionaries had begun to attack a range of 'degenerate' Hindu practices, majority of which were directed expressly against. The aim of the missionaries was to contrast Hinduism to Christianity.

However, before Tilak's conversion to Christianity, Lakshmibai as a woman with no mother-in-law, in Tilak's house, had to deal with patriarchy and caste prejudices in the guise of her complicated father-in-law. Tilak's father considers it Lakshmibai's fault that his eldest daughter died immediately after their marriage. It is said that goddess possessed Tilak's father every Friday and the entire household was present to witness it. Hindus in general and the Maharashtra upper class in particular distinguished the Vedas and other mythical books as the canonical scriptures. They believed in the immortality of the soul and in 'karma' and 'rebirth' as directed in *Vedas* and the *Puurans*, that a man is rewarded or punished according to his deeds in his next birth. He undergoes existences of different descriptions in order to reap the fruits of his deeds in the previous birth.

Explaining this concept of 'moksha', Pandita Ramabai says that it is "just as a river ceases to be different from the ocean when it flows into the sea" (*Rewriting History*, 132). According to this doctrine, a man is liable to be born eight million and four hundred times before he can become a Brahman (first caste), and except one be a Brahman he is not fit to be reabsorbed into the spirit, even though he obtains the true knowledge of God. If any man transgressed the law of religion, he'd again be subjected to being born eight million and four hundred times. Even a small transgression of the social or religious rules may render him to the degradation of perpetual births and deaths. This was the belief of the Hindu creed of the nineteenth century India.

Tilak finding comfort in Christianity, he had to do all the readings and discussions in secret. This made Lakshmibai suspicious of his doings. Once she came to know what was happening, she was incited by the neighbours to burn the *Bible* on his desk but she restrained in doing so. Tilak being a high caste Hindu, chose to become a Christian, betraying his 'religion' and thereby his 'nation' in the eyes of the nineteenth century Hindu Brahman society. As the wife of Tilak, during the time of conversion, Lakshmibai went through a lot of agony. For her, dealing with this new development in her life was a traumatic experience. Living in such a century where there was no independence for high-caste women, her's was a pitiable condition but later she also got converted. Tilak and Lakshmibai were well known for their service for the poor and the marginalised people until the end of their life. Her process of conversion to Christianity was a rejection of the ingrained ancestral upper-caste prejudices against the lower- caste people, and liberation of the upper-caste woman from the shackles of caste and patriarchal domination.

Lakshmibai fought against any injustices she saw in the Church. Once, a man was excommunicated from the Church for unseemly behaviour. However, he mended his ways and wanted to be taken back into the Church but his fellow Church-members, instigated by the officer of the missionary refuse to take him in until he gave a public apology. So, Lakshmibai talked to the missionary lady to forgive him but she did not relent. So, she went to the Church and read a chapter from the *Bible* where Jesus Christ says: 'he that is without sin among you let him first cast a stone at her'. Lakshmibai made a distinction between Christ and his Church. The Christ was who was compassionate to the needy, the poor, the destitute, the fatherless, the widow, and the Church officers who shunned all these qualities of Christ to the background, and lived in pride and selfishness, rejecting to help the poor and the needy. This bold stance against the Church won her disapproval and rejection from the Church. She took the bold step of accepting Christian faith even though she came from the highest bracket of the Maharashtra Hindu social order.

Lakshmibai Tilak went from being a lowly wife to a pillar of hope to the oppressed in the Maharashtra society. The independence and integrity of her character is clear when it is realised that she carried throughout her life a simultaneous battle against the Hindu and the Christian religious hierarchies as well as Hindu and Christian patriarchal social norms. Her memoirs vividly describe her struggle not only cross caste and family barriers to join her husband but also to realise her own potential in the new, unfamiliar world opening up in front of her and spotlights the changes *Smruti Chitre* or *I Follow After* has brought about in Marathi literary conventions, cultural perceptions and philosophical underpinnings of autobiography as a genre.

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