Chapter V:

Smriti Chitre

Autobiography of Laxmibai Tilak
Laxmibai Tilak's *Smriti Chitre* is one of the earliest Marathi autobiographies. Published in four parts between 1934-1936, it gained instant popularity and brought for its author literary respectability and recognition. Before embarking on a detailed analysis of *Smriti Chitre*, it will be pertinent here to situate it in the proper historical context.

The spread of Puritanism contributed greatly to the growth of the genre of autobiography in America. The American autobiography especially has its roots in the Puritan practice of conversion narratives. This is significant because it was at the American mission in Mumbai that Tilak was baptised. He was therefore, directly influenced by the Puritan practice of conversion narratives. Says Margo Culley: “While expressing explicit self-denial, the Puritans engaged in obsessive self-absorption, believing that one’s life was a text to be read, read for evidences of God’s dealings with the soul… While ‘reading the soul’ was a constant individual discipline, it was also a communal event. Puritan churches ‘gathered’ their membership with the practice of conversion narratives… Thus the individual autobiographical act was ultimately an act of community building. The focus on as well as the ambivalence about the first person singular, the articulation of the Self within given belief structures, the positioning of the autobiographical act within a social context in the expectation that one will be judged
but also in the hope that one’s life story will be useful to others and will strengthen the community, all have their roots in the earliest practice of Autobiography in America.”

Before the publication of Smriti Chitre in 1934, very few autobiographies of note had been published in Marathi. Significantly, one of them is by Baba Padmunjee, who, like Rev. Tilak, converted from Hinduism to Christianity. He is said to have played a major role in Rev. Tilak’s journey towards Christianity. It was during the days just before his conversion, when Tilak was at the crossroads of his religious thinking and was reading as much as possible on and about Christianity that the autobiography of Baba Padmunjee was published. Tilak must have seen reflected in this autobiography the same tensions, tugs and pulls to his old loyalties and new beliefs that he himself was going through. He established with Baba Padmunjee a lively correspondence in which he admitted that he had read his (Padmunjee’s) autobiography five-six times.

This background knowledge will help us understand why it was not difficult for Laxmibai Tilak to take to this form. Laxmibai Tilak admits as much in Smriti Chitre: “If there is anyone who should be given credit for making me a confident public speaker, it is the Christian audience. During my first ever public address that day, this huge congregation maintained a strict silence for the full nine minutes.
it took me to complete my speech, and that boosted my confidence immeasurably."^2

To progress from being an assertive speaker to being an able writer and poet was but a step away and Laxmibai Tilak had the support of her husband in this. She says: "Tilak really wanted his wife to achieve something in life. He always worked towards making me a good writer, poet and speaker. Initially he felt disappointed about the first two ventures. But then gradually he became quite hopeful about my abilities."^3

Very few women had published their autobiographies in Marathi before Laxmibai Tilak. One of the most famous autobiographies was Pandita Ramabai Saraswati's My Testimony, 1907. Pandita Ramabai Saraswati was a legend in her lifetime (1858-1922) and was one of the few 19th century Indian women who were able to support themselves through their writing. After her widowhood at a young age she established a number of widows' homes in Maharashtra. She left for England in 1883 for further studies and there converted to Christianity. After her return to India she dedicated herself anew to the upliftment of women.

The other autobiography of note written in Marathi by a woman was by Ramabai Ranade, the wife of Justice Ranade.—
Amchya Ayushyateel Kahee Athavanee (Memoirs of Our Life Together), 1910. From this autobiography one comes to know how an exceptional woman, functioning within the limited scope available to her then, could still work out a mix of duty and independence. Ramabai Ranade worked with her husband in one of Pandita Ramabai’s widows’ homes. She did charitable work, including famine relief in 1913. After her husband died she became part of the more militant nationalist movement which created new images of Indian womanhood. The autobiographical mode could thus be adopted only by women who had developed a unique sense of Self. The very act of writing an autobiography was an empowering act.

Smriti Chitre is thus important not merely for its readability but because it was one of those early texts written in Marathi by a woman. It paved the way for future autobiographies written by women. It established in effect a female literary tradition in Marathi autobiography, a firm foundation upon which future women writers could build. Of course Laxmibai Tilak was not aware of this when she took upon herself the task of writing out her life.

In fact, Smriti Chitre was undertaken by Laxmibai Tilak not as her own biography but as the biography of her husband. Soon after the death of Rev. Tilak, his son thought of writing the biography
of his father. To get a complete picture of his father’s early life he asked his mother to write down whatever she remembered of their life together. Laxmibai Tilak set herself to the task with her characteristic enthusiasm. One afternoon, while she was reading out aloud to her friend Kamlabai, some sections of what she had written, she was overheard by Kamlabai’s father Tatyasaheb Kolhatkar. So enraptured was he by the reading that he insisted that it be published in the same form. His son, Bapusaheb Kolhatkar (who was the editor of the Marathi literary magazine Sanjivani) published it. And a writer was born.

Although Laxmibai Tilak’s poems had been published earlier, it was with Smriti Chitre that her credentials as a writer were established. It was on the strength of this work that a felicitation function in her honour was organised in 1935 at Nasik, which was attended by the famous luminaries of Marathi literature. This felicitation function marked a watershed in the literary life of Laxmibai Tilak. It put, in effect, a stamp of approval on Smriti Chitre and authenticated her talent. The tone of Smriti Chitre is perhaps responsible for this easy assimilation of a woman’s autobiography into the mainstream. Its tone is light-hearted and even the most serious charges against people are peppered with humour. Laxmibai Tilak uses humour in Smriti Chitre like a fine-honed weapon that cuts
in many surprising ways. She turns the humour towards herself many times too. It is because of Laxmibai Tilak’s chatty, humorous style in Smriti Chitre that literary historians speak of it more as a work of art than as a record of a life. It is because of the natural and easy use of everyday language and humour that Laxmibai Tilak can get away with giving a frank portrayal of her husband. She does not hide his faults, like his hot and quick temper, his careless attitude as a householder, or his incapacity to earn a living. If she is generous in talking about his virtues, she is equally ready to reveal his darker side. But because the narration is done with humour and in a deliberately light-hearted manner, the criticism loses the barb. The character of Rev. Tilak is unveiled before the reader, warts and all. The accompanying complaining tone of a long-suffering wife, that Laxmibai Tilak would have been fully justified in using, is entirely absent. In Laxmibai Tilak’s writing he comes through not only as a warm, generous and impulsive person but also as one who rarely stopped to consider what his spontaneity might cost others. Though it was Tilak who secretly helped a young Laxmi, terrified of the dark, to draw water from the well each night because her father-in-law insisted, it was also Tilak who pushed her roughly down the stairs when she was seven months pregnant because he was losing an indoor game they were playing together. Possibly because laughter was the
most efficient strategy she could use, but possibly also because only
the veil of humour enabled the chronicling of such experiences.
Laxmibai Tilak describes the incident as though it were a hilarious
affair, though she also comments in passing, “without doubt that day
my infirmity brought me face to face with death. I was saved by so
small a margin.” The chapter concludes, “Tilak wrote a farce about
his own temper. It was left half-finished.” This anecdotal style of
writing went a great deal in ensuring that Smriti Chitre did not
antagonise people unnecessarily. The felicitation function proved that
with determination and optimism a woman could move from the
margins into the mainstream.

Due credit thus should be given to the men around Laxmibai
Tilak. But for their encouragement, the latent talent of this unlettered
woman would never have bloomed. She had in Rev. Tilak an
enlightened husband who taught her to read and write. His conversion
to Christianity and that religion’s stress on the written word only
encouraged him in this endeavour. In this respect, he was a complete
contrast to his father. Tilak’s mother would write poetry, but
clandestinely, since writing was not considered an activity fit for
women. Whenever these scraps of poems came into the hands of
Tilak’s father, they would be burnt right away. Tilak thus grew up to
witness and loathe this male-dominated hold over learning and
education amongst the average Hindus. He inherited from his mother the poetic temperament and learnt from the Puritan sensibility the importance of education in the spread of religion.

Laxmibai benefited due to this outlook of her husband. Her talent flourished under his tutelage. \textit{Smriti Chitre} is a fitting tribute to the spirit of her husband. It is true that \textit{Smriti Chitre} was undertaken ostensibly to tell the public about the conditions under which Tilak converted. In the true spirit of the Puritan tradition \textit{Smriti Chitre} started off as a conversion narrative. Time and again in \textit{Smriti Chitre} Laxmibai Tilak addresses her readers directly. She is aware of her public. Time and again she breaks her fluid narrative to quote extensively from Tilak’s explanatory epistles to various Christian missionaries. It is true that there are long sections in \textit{Smriti Chitre} where Laxmibai Tilak launches into a sermon-like explanation of her husband’s various Church missions. It is also true that these sections are the weakest links of \textit{Smriti Chitre}. The chapter titled “Khristi Dharmakade Vatchal” (“Heading towards Christianity”) in fact almost exclusively contains extracts from Rev.Tilak’s diaries. Laxmibai Tilak has tried to convey to readers the intellectual and spiritual compulsions that led her husband towards Christianity. The extensive quotations that she gives from his letters and diaries are the justification she gives for his conversion. But although they add a
touch of authenticity to the defence she builds for her husband’s conversion, they lack the easy fluidity of her other chapters. Laxmibai Tilak has tried hard to remain loyal to the Puritan belief of a good conversion narrative. But (fortunately for the readers) this noble purpose is lost many times and does not obscure the frank pleasure that Laxmibai Tilak takes in constructing a text from a life. Just as the Puritan self-absorption stands in paradoxical relationship to their belief in self-denial, so too the act of writing to justify her conversion for a public audience stands in some tension for Laxmibai Tilak with the inner urge to write an entertaining book full of interesting reminiscences. Her other chapters, filled with her characteristic dialogues and anecdotes are more successful in conveying a full picture of this ever-optimistic woman who managed to retain her love of life in spite of the several hardships that came her way.

Since Laxmibai Tilak did not have a prodigious amount of reading behind her, the language that is used in Smriti Chitre is refreshingly different from the turgid prose preferred by the learned men of the time. Her language, replete with everyday sayings, proverbs and the fluency of day to day dialogues is reminiscent of the story-telling, anecdotal style in which women of Laxmibai Tilak’s generation were particularly adept. Her direct address to the readers time and again, “you cannot imagine dear readers the state of my
mind at that time" etc. makes the link with the oral tradition (in which women were particularly rich) stronger.

_Smruti Chitre_ can be read as one woman's search for autonomy. It can be said to belong to what Elaine Showalter calls the "feminine" phase of autobiographical women's writing in Marathi in which the "female subculture" is secret, ritualised, characterised by internalisation and self-censorship. Women, united by the physical facts of the female life-cycle (menstruation, child-birth, pregnancy) but unable to express them openly, developed a covert symbolic language to explore the range of female expression. As we shall see, Laxmibai Tilak too in _Smruti Chitre_ does not speak out openly against her male relatives. There are several factors preventing her from breaking the taboo of uncensored self-revelation - her culturally conditioned timidity about self-dramatisation, her dread of the patriarchal authority of art, her anxiety about the impropriety of female invention etc.

Of course, it is important not to approach the past as colonisers. There is a danger of bearing the superior wisdom of modern feminist thinking and applying it arbitrarily to texts whose writers were unaware of the term. It is therefore necessary to be sensitive to the contexts in which concepts and opinions have been expressed. Laxmibai Tilak, e.g., was using a male genre – the
autobiography— to write out an essentially female experience. She did not have a historical tradition to build on. She was functioning therefore within the framework given to her by the patriarchal order. Hence she does not experiment much with the form of the autobiography. She begins at the beginning with her childhood. The first chapter “Maheri” (“At my Maternal Home”) deals with her childhood. But even here, mid-way, she relates her wedding at the age of eleven. So from the middle of the first chapter itself she starts relating her married life with Tilak. From then on, her life, like most of the Hindu women of her times, is inextricably linked with the ups and downs of her husband’s life. Laxmibai Tilak relates her life experiences more or less chronologically. In the sequential narration of her life story, Laxmibai Tilak was only following the existing pattern in vogue then. It was in the fluid use of language that she displayed a unique individual style. In writing her autobiography she was breaking the traditional injunction of silence imposed upon women. By appropriating a male medium to convey a female experience Laxmibai Tilak had to be careful while using it.

Writing an autobiography is an act of assertion that was denied to women. Laxmibai Tilak realises this and tries to sublimate the boldness of an “I” — centred narrative by projecting herself as a creation of her husband. She heeds the cultural injunction against
unremitting self-assertion in women. Rhetorically, she tries to maintain a posture of “feminine” self-effacement. She gives credit for all that she achieved in life, the social service that she did, the literary accomplishment that came her way, to her husband. In this way she attributes her success in various fields to an external agency, to something outside herself: “Whatever I am, I am because of Tilak. Tilak decided his aims and I followed them blindly. Tilak composed poems and I sang them. Tilak begged and I held the begging bowl. The sparks that flew between us were because I could not bear the tremendous speed of his progress.”

After this outburst of generous praise for her husband Laxmibai Tilak uses a simile to describe her relationship with her husband that can be read in two ways. On the surface it describes the typical hierarchical relationship between husband and wife. But read another way it speaks of Laxmibai Tilak’s secret resentment at her lack of control over her own life, her dependent status that gained momentum from something outside herself: “If a ramshackle cart is tied behind the Deccan Queen and that train takes off at top speed, then the terrific bumps the cart would suffer was similar to the state I would be reduced to.”

With characteristic generosity Laxmibai Tilak gives her husband his due credit. She likens herself only to a faithful follower.
And while it is undeniable that Tilak it was who nurtured the talents of Laxmibai, it is also unquestionable that this he would not have been able to achieve had Laxmibai not possessed an inner spark, a genuine intelligence of her own. But as Sidonie Smith says in her essay: “The only script for women’s life insisted that work discover and pursue them like the conventional romantic lover.”

Smriti Chitre covers the era between 1870 and 1950.

Laxmibai Tilak describes an era where there was a strict separation between the worlds of men and women. Their concerns, their priorities, their preoccupations were completely different. In the first chapter Laxmibai Tilak describes a feminine world of women and children which would blossom everyday after the departure for work of the tyrannical and eccentric master of the house: “After Nana’s departure in the morning the most enjoyable time of the day would begin. With Nana out of the way, women from the neighbourhood would come to gossip at our place. We too would gather our own gang of children and start our play. My mother was very fond of company and having people around her. She would bathe other people’s children, lend a sympathetic ear to the grievances of new brides, give medicine to one, and talk sweetly to another. Once she even went to the house of a Maratha and prepared sweet meats for them!”
In the second chapter Laxmibai Tilak continues this theme of the tyrannical rule of the father: “The suffering that my mother had to endure in my maiden home was similar to the suffering my mother-in-law had to endure in my marital home... there were two-three reasons for my father-in-law’s displeasure towards my mother-in-law. The first and most important reason was the fact that she wrote poetry. My father-in-law would burn all her poems he could lay his hands on. The second reason was the love between my mother-in-law and her eldest son. My father-in-law could not bear this close bond between mother and child. The third reason was that my mother-in-law was fond of reading the Bible, which had been given to her by some Englishwomen. My father-in-law one day got hold of this book and burnt it.”

Creativity in a woman was thus considered a transgression of biology.

According to Sheila Rowbotham: “Poetry and songs by women survive in many differing cultures from early times with themes frequently about personal relations between men and women, preserving a memory of sensual as well as spiritual yearnings. Language, music and art are means of giving expression to one’s feelings and thoughts. Thus creativity can be seen as a kind of power.”
Creativity through the written word freed Laxmibai Tilak too from the stifling coils of ignorance, and the claustrophobia of an erratic domestic life. She describes in *Smriti Chitre* the birth of her first poem. She acknowledges that the writing of this short poem was a cathartic experience: “Waves are formed on still waters even due to a light breeze. My mind at this period was being rocked by the storms of the past, present and future. That day I wrote my first poem.”

In the last chapter of her autobiography Laxmibai Tilak likens her poetry to a “sakhi”, a beloved girlfriend. Talking of the time immediately after her widowhood she says: “After Tilak’s conversion, when we were separated for five years, the only dear friend who had stood by me now came running to my aid this time too. That dear friend was my poetry.”

Creativity, or specifically writing as a kind of power is acknowledged by Rassundri Devi, a housewife in Bengal who wrote the first autobiography in Bengali, *Amar Jiban (My Life)* in 1867. She taught herself to read by secretly scratching the letters of the alphabet into the blackened kitchen wall. She wrote about the domesticity that overwhelmed her. Yet amid outward conformity she had a most passionate sense of her individuality and of the wrongs of women. In *Amar Jiban* she questioned the custom of sending young girls away to be married, leaving their mothers so young, without
education: “Shut up like a thief, even trying to learn was considered an offence.”

In fact, so strong was the hold of men over education and so palpable the realisation of its power that when Laxmibai Tilak wrote her first poem, her immediate instinct was to hide it, lenient though her husband was about education for women. It was only when Tilak searched amongst the crumpled papers in the dustbin that he came across the hurriedly discarded poem. He read it and was extremely happy. He straightened the paper and locked away the poem safely in his cupboard. Later too he was instrumental in sending his wife’s poetry to various literary magazines and getting them published. Rev. Tilak was appreciative of his wife’s attempts at writing poetry. He wanted her to be recognised as a good poetess. So, before sending her poems for publication he gave them a final “finishing touch” to “improve” their merit. Laxmibai Tilak’s poetry was thus subject to a kind of “paternalistic control”, even if this control was benevolent. Because of Rev. Tilak’s own good standing in the literary world of Maharashtra, various doubts were expressed time and again as to the authenticity of Laxmibai Tilak’s poetry. People suspected that these poems were actually ghost-written by Rev. Tilak to give publicity to his wife. This suspicion about her own literary ability and merit would irritate Laxmibai Tilak no end. In the chapter “Shrimati”, she
talks about the first two poems she wrote after her husband’s death. Her children commented that the publication of these poems would silence once and for all those critics who used to say that Laxmibai Tilak’s poems were ghost-written by her husband. To this Laxmibai Tilak replied: “One cannot be too sure of that. People will say that Rev. Tilak wrote these poems and after his death Laxmibai Tilak is publishing them under her name.”

Laxmibai Tilak’s experience of the tyrannical rule of the father was to translate into the oppression she had to suffer as the forsaken wife of a man who had converted to Christianity. She became a persona non grata—neither married, nor widowed. She internalised the feeling of anger and grief she felt at the abandonment and it was manifested in the form of long periods of mental and physical breakdown. She did not wish to join her husband in an alien religion. At the same time the Hindu society was unable to provide her the support structure she so obviously needed. The close kinship ties that Laxmibai Tilak had been conditioned to revere were of no use here. Laxmibai Tilak does not speak out openly against the sacred kinship ties in Smriti Chitre, but the passionate outpourings that she records in Smriti Chitre as the result of her “mad” phase point to the fact that she had already started to question these ties. In Chapter 9 she records this dialogue she had with her husband’s brother: “I sprang up and told
him, ‘And how is he (Tilak) tied down now? Who am I to give him a divorce? Was it I who ran away? Or abandoned my duties? If he has no one of his own in the mission, I too have no one here. I have no money, no education, and no support for my little child. What can I possibly do? Perform menial tasks for all you relatives isn’t it? Please stop your presumptuous talk. Send Tilak a letter. Tell him to come here and first give his wife away in marriage to a responsible man and then get married to whomsoever he wants. Aren’t you aware of who you are talking to?’”

Even while exposing the hollowness of kinship ties, Laxmibai Tilak stresses the support of her female relatives but implies that they were as powerless as she was in a patriarchal set-up that gave no rights to women. Female solidarity was ineffective when women themselves were powerless. But Laxmibai Tilak makes it clear that it was the men who failed her, not the women. She was at her sister, Bhikutai’s place when she first learned of Tilak’s conversion. She suffered a major physical and mental breakdown on learning the news. She describes the ministrations of Bhikutai thus:

“The Vaidya had to be called: I could neither move nor talk.
Bhikutai’s own illness vanished. She folded her bedding and stood in close attendance to all my needs day and night. She had to do everything for me. I was like a breathing corpse. She had even to
brush my teeth for me. She fed me a liquid diet of milk, buttermilk, juice since I could not swallow solids.\textsuperscript{14}

Laxmibai Tilak's major concern at this time was her son Dattu's education. Bhikutai was sympathetic to this and had employed a tutor for him: "Bhikutai would feel, 'once this boy is educated, he will be a support to his mother. Then I need not worry about my sister.' Bhikutai used to be constantly after Dattu to study, but Nanasaheb (her husband) would say: "Leave him alone. Let him play. He is too young yet. He will start studying by and by.'\textsuperscript{15} Nanasaheb obviously did not share Bhikutai's concern for Dattu's studies.

Laxmibai Tilak also has only good words for her brothers' wives. After staying with her sister for three years, she went to live with her brothers at her maiden home in Jalalpur: "My brothers' wives would not burden me with any work. They shared my work between themselves. The elder would look after my son and the younger would take care of all my needs. She would even wash my clothes for me.\textsuperscript{16} She further adds: "I used to keep several fasts during the week. On the day I had no fast, my elder brother's wife would come and sit by me and force-feed me with nutritious food. At the same time she would lecture me, 'Dear sister, health is the most important wealth. If you lose that, who will look after you? You have
to maintain your health, if not for yourself, then for the sake of your child.'”

Laxmibai Tilak continues: “I had taken a pledge to offer a red flower each day to the goddess. I would fast on the day I could not find a red flower. To save me from yet another day of fasting, my brothers’ wives would scour the place in the quest of a red flower and bring it to me.”

She adds: “Because my husband had converted to another religion, my status in society was ambiguous. People did not know what marital status to accord me. Some people stopped inviting me for functions because of this. To save me embarrassment my brothers’ wives told me not to accept any invitation to anybody's place. During my entire stay at Jalalpur, they too did not go to any social or religious function. They could not bear to hear anyone talk ill of me. It is truly God’s gift to get sisters-in-law like these.”

Of her brothers too she does not say any unkind words. But lets slip this episode that reveals their true colours: “I had got a substantial amount of money by way of gifts during Dattu’s thread ceremony... So I told my brothers, ‘I’ll use this money to start a business or trade. If the money multiplies, I can use it for Dattu’s education.’ My brothers said, ‘You will not be able to manage that. Doing business is a difficult job. Instead, why don’t you give us the money. We will invest it such that you will be able to live off the interest.’ I was convinced by their talk and gave the money to them.
I have yet to recover from them the capital as well as the interest acquired on it."^20

After staying at her brothers’ place for some time Laxmibai Tilak moved to her husband’s brother’s home. She describes this brother of her husband’s as an eccentric and self-centred man though again she is full of praise for his wife: “We sisters-in-law never fought with each other. On the other hand if anyone came home to ask for anything Rakhmai would point towards me and say, ‘Ask her. She is the elder in the house.’ She handed over charge of the house to me and started working under my directions.”^21 She continues thus: “Sometimes people would say unkind words to me on account of my husband’s conversion. Sakharambhai (husband’s brother) would, instead of silencing them, add fuel to fire. At such moments I felt like running away somewhere.”^22

Laxmibai Tilak in fact almost “ran off” along with her son under the tacit approval of her brother-in-law who was finding their upkeep a burdensome responsibility. But Laxmibai Tilak’s plan failed due to the sudden appearance of Tilak who wanted to take his wife and child away with him to Nagar. Laxmibai Tilak describes this episode thus:

“Sakharambhai stopped talking to anyone. He stopped communication with his wife, brother, sister-in-law, Dattu and even his eleven-month-old daughter. Finally Tilak himself broke
the silence and told me, ‘I have to see to Dattu’s education. Both of you come with me to Nagar. I’ll make a separate home for you there.’ I said, ‘Why Nagar? Make a separate home for me in Pandharpur itself.’ At this Tilak became furious and told me, ‘Are you bent upon disobeying me? Enough is enough. I listened to you for the last five years. Now I can’t afford to disrupt my son’s education because of you. I give you time till 5 o’clock today. Otherwise I will take legal action.’ He said this and went out of the house. I rushed into the kitchen. I felt trapped within a circle of fire. Just then my sister-in-law came in. She hugged me close and we wept copiously in each other’s arms. ‘Tell me what I can do to help you,’ she said.

‘What can you do?’ I said, ‘Everything is in god’s hands now. You heard what Tilak said. He means to take his son with him, leaving his wife behind to wear her fingers out working for other people.’

‘Then it is better that you go along with him,’ said Rakhmai. ‘He’s not telling you to convert. And if such a situation arises, you write to me, I’ll send you money.’

‘From where will you get money?’ I said. ‘I’ll try my best,’ she said. ‘Nobody’s giving you the right advice. Everybody is bent upon misleading and maligning you. You are free to come here whenever you want to. I will share all that I have with you. Just as I have a right to this home, you have a right too. If my husband’s brother can come and go in this house as he pleases, my sister-in-law can come and go too.’

In the evening, both the brothers came home together. But there was no conversation between anyone even now. Rakhmai started packing my things. She put in numerous packets containing all kinds of foodstuff. She was crying all the time. Then we two women went to Sakharambhauiji to ask him whether I should leave. He put his hands to his ears. That was all the communication from his side. Rakhmai then bathed me. She was crying continuously.

The cart came to fetch us. Sakharambhauiji went out of the house as soon as the cart came. Rakhmai picked up her baby and started following the cart on foot. Tilak was trying to pacify her and telling her to go back home. ‘Look after my Bai. Look after Dattu,’ she kept telling him. Tilak said, ‘She is your sister-in-law but she is also my wife. If you are feeling bad for her then imagine how bad I must be feeling.’ I was crying continuously. Tilak too felt overwhelmed looking at our state. Rakhmai followed the cart as far as she could. But once the cart picked up
speed, she froze in her place and just kept looking at the cart. Soon she disappeared from sight. I started sobbing uncontrollably.”

It is thus clear that Laxmibai Tilak rejoined her husband because she simply had no other choice. To interact with a person who had deliberately walked out of his own religion was considered sacrilegious for a devout Hindu woman. Laxmibai Tilak had been a devout Hindu throughout the separation from her husband. This did not save her from the barbs and cruelties of society. But as soon as she was back under the protection of a patriarchal head, neo-convert though he may be, the subtle tortures miraculously ceased. This leads one to suspect that though class, caste and religious differences were rampant in early 20th century Maharashtra, the most crucial oppression was on gender lines. Describing the month when she returned to her husband she says: “The month passed smoothly despite minor travails. Now there was no fear of a Brahmin coming to trouble me.”

With her inherent wisdom Laxmibai Tilak realised that if she had to gain a degree of independence in this male-dominated society, the only way was to gain some education or vocational training. So strong was her urge to gain some kind of education that she set out to learn nursing a few years after conversion. The hospital at Miraj was
the place she went for training. This she did in spite of domestic commitments and financial constraints. She had her husband’s support in this venture but not the support of Dr. Hume, her husband’s employer and mentor. In the chapter titled, “The House at Rahuri”, she gives the dialogue she had with Dr. Hume over this issue: “Dr. Hume said, ‘Your real education is looking after your husband and children. I think you should not go to Miraj.’

I replied, ‘Who has seen what the future holds? One should be properly equipped to face any kind of eventuality. I have no education. Don’t you think that I too should have some means to support myself and to help my fellow brothers and sisters?’”

It is another matter that this nursing course had to be abandoned mid-way due to the machinations of Dr. Hume who regarded it as a waste of money. Besides, Laxmibai Tilak’s lack of knowledge of the English language prevented her from studying the theory of nursing. Ironically, it was a man from the West, from the “progressive” world, a man who had come to show light, knowledge and wisdom to the ignorant Easterners, who placed obstructions in the path of this progressive woman who wanted to gain an education and thereby a degree of control over her own life. As can be seen in the poems and religious songs, the bhajans and kirtans, composed by this writer couple, and in Tilak’s accounts of his conversion, they
regarded Christianity as the fruition of the promise held in Hindu philosophy itself. Not surprisingly they were, like Pandita Ramabai, to come into conflict with the more simplistic evangelical aspirations of some of their missionary mentors. Laxmibai Tilak's own exasperation, which often borders on disdain for the narrow-minded irrationality of these missionaries, is clearly evident in the autobiography.

Susie Tharu and K.Lalita regard this whole issue of women's education in the late 19th and early 20th century as riddled with contradictions. They see embedded in the women's programme of the social reformers who worked in close association with the Evangelists and the Christian missions a "hidden agenda." They say "Embedded in the explicit programmes of the Reform Movement were massive ideological reconstructions of patriarchy and gender that underwrote the consolidation of Imperial power. These reconstructions often took place at the interface of patriarchy with class and caste."\(^{26}\)

Laxmibai Tilak's Smriti Chitre and this brief but telling dialogue that she cites between her and Dr.Hume also points to the conflict between the differing perceptions of education between women and the men who sought to educate them.
Susie Tharu and K. Lalita continue thus: “Underlying much of the discussion in the 19th century was the need felt as urgently by missionaries as by the new Indian men to break into the zenana, and make women into more fitting home-makers, mothers and companions for the emerging urban middle-class men. Clearly freedom and equality meant different things for women and for men. All over the country the beginnings of women’s education was plagued by disagreements about what might constitute a suitable curriculum for women. The more conservative supporters of their cause argued that women really needed to acquire only the skills that would make them better wives and better mothers… Fortunately, the opposition was also strong.”

Laxmibai Tilak clearly regarded education as a tool of empowerment and as a means of gaining economic independence. Later she and Rev. Tilak sent their daughter to be educated in one of the best girls’ school of that time – Huzurpaga in Pune, which was also a prestigious boarding school. Laxmibai Tilak had suffered due to a lack of education. She did not want to leave her daughter ill equipped like herself. Her foresight and her belief in her daughter was proved right later in life.

The last Chapter “Shrimati” details Laxmibai Tilak’s life after the death of Rev. Tilak. A peculiar kind of detachment enters her
tone in this chapter. Gone are the good-humoured swipes she used to take on people in the earlier Chapters. Gone too is the playful tone. Laxmibai seems in a hurry now to end her autobiography. The mature, self-confident authorial self in this final section gives a sense of how much this woman changed intellectually and as a person in the year after Tilak died in 1912. Even her son Devdutta admits as much in the final Chapter entitled “Aai” (Mother): “Just as Tilak’s spiritual progress occurred at a miraculous pace during the last years of his life, mother’s intellectual progress occurred at a tremendous pace during the last years of her life.”

The reader of Smriti Chitre can sense this change in the author not only through the change in the tone of the autobiography but also through a subtle change in the use of language. Smriti Chitre, as mentioned earlier, was not written at one go but in four volumes. The writing of it was spread over a few years and each volume was published separately. While the first volume is replete with Marathi sayings and proverbs and the language is colloquial and homespun, the last volume includes several English words, indicating an expansion in the author’s vocabulary. By the time Laxmibai Tilak wrote the fourth volume, she had spent several years as a Christian neo-convert. Her world and associates had developed from the tightly knit community of Brahmin relatives and friends to include people from different strata of society. She had
matured as a woman of the world, her exposure to different ideas, languages, cultures, had widened her scope. Several English words like “shock”, “tension”, “border”, “crockery”, “cutlery” etc. creep into her language. An accompanying tone of seriousness too enters the final volume.

During this second and final separation from her husband, once again the community of women come to her rescue. Laxmibai Tilak reaffirms this belief in a common sisterhood. But while in the first instance, the solidarity of women was proved ineffective due to their powerlessness, this time the solidarity is successful because they have with them now the power of education and thereby a power over their own lives.

During the first separation, the Hindu society had failed Laxmibai Tilak and had been unable to provide her with adequate support. This time the Christian community failed her. After the death of the head of the family, all financial support stopped. Laxmibai Tilak’s son Devdutta was studying to be a lawyer and there was a danger of his education being disrupted. Because of the sudden death of Rev. Tilak he had to work part-time. Laxmibai Tilak did a short and unsuccessful stint as matron of a hostel. But then Laxmibai Tilak’s educated daughter-in-law and educated daughter got well paying jobs in Karachi. The two young women and Laxmibai Tilak set off for
Karachi with Devdutta's three children in tow. There they stayed for two-three years and sent money home so that Devdutta’s legal education could carry on unhampered. This independence of spirit and this boldness to meet head-on their straitened circumstances came because of Laxmibai Tilak’s active support to her daughter and daughter-in-law and the confidence that education provided the two young women.

Laxmibai Tilak ends her autobiography with a poetic description of their departure to Karachi from Bombay harbour: “The ship blew its whistle and started moving towards the deeper waters. We stood on the deck and watched as Mumbai receded away from us and the figures of our friends standing on the shores grew fainter. Happiness brimmed over in us as we watched them. The sea was calm. Its waters occasionally changed colours. Our minds too were busy with various thoughts. Maybe not in the eyes of the world, but in our own eyes Karachi felt like England. Three women and three children were going away to spend three years in a far-off land. There was no man with us...Freedom!”

The point at which she closes her autobiography and the way she does it validates the earlier assertion that Laxmibai Tilak was an “instinctive feminist”, unaware though she may have been of the term.
Laxmibai Tilak closes her autobiography with a poem on freedom by Rev. Tilak. Throughout her life Laxmibai Tilak struggled to gain freedom. Not freedom from responsibility but freedom from dependence, freedom from poverty, freedom from ignorance. By the time she closes her autobiography, she has gained that very freedom she craved all her life. Her autobiography is a testimony to her struggle to gain autonomy.
NOTES


2. Laxmibai Tilak, Smriti - Chitre (Mumbai : Popular Prakashan, 1958 ) 207. All quotations are taken from this edition. My translations have been given in the body of the text. The Marathi originals come in the Notes Section.

"मला समाधीत जर कोणी केलेल्या असेल तर ते खिसकत श्रोत्यांनी. त्या दिवशी माझ्या पहिल्या भाषणात नऊ मिनिट हा एका भोजांचा समाज जो इतका शांतपणे बसला होता त्यामेंच माझी भीड चेपली.""

3. Page 206. "टिबक्रणा पार हूंस की आपल्या बायवणने कोणीतरी मोठ्ठे कावे. लेखिका, कविक्रिया, वत्ती तिने बनावे व हवा दिसेणे ते नेहमी प्रवन करून. आदीं आर्धी लिखणा ल्यूपेक्षा पहिल्या दोन बाबलील अपवर्त्य सांगणे कावे लागले. पण मज लिखणा माझ्याबाबत पार आशा वावरू लागली.""
Page 332. “भी जी आहें ती केवळ दिव्यकत्वाच्या मुखे. दिव्यकाठी आपली ध्येये ठरवावी. भी होऊन शाकून ती आचरणात आणावी. त्यानी कविता रचावा, भी त्या माच आये. त्यानी भी काळ मानावी व भी त्याची शोभी धरन चालावे. आमच्या मध्ये जे खटके उडत ते जेंचा जेंचा मला त्याच्या प्रगतीचा वेग सहन होत नसे तेंचा तेंचा.”

Page 332. “देफकन कवीनच्या मागें एखादा खटारा बांधता व ती आपल्या पूर्ण वेगांत निघाली म्हणजे त्या खटा-चाची जी आपल्या होईल, ती मान्य होत असे.”


Page 2. “पण नाना एका सकली बाहेर गेले की मग मात्र आमची सगळ्यांची मजा असे. ते गेले, की शोभन पर्यंत आमच्या घरी वसायला येत. आमी ही पोरे सोरे खेळताळा गोळा करताना आई तर माणसांची फर भुकंती. तिने दुसऱ्याच्या मुलांना आंधोतो घाताच्या, सासुरावसारी च्या समजूली घाताच्या, कोणता औषधे धावी, कोणाची गोळा बोलावें, एकदा तर एका महात्माच्या घरी जाऊन तिने तेव्हे पूर्ण धार्मिक करण दिल्या होतया !”

144

Page 112. "अमरी संध पाण्यवृक्ष लहानशा वा-वाच्या झुलकीने तहाकी उठलात. माझे मन तर भूत. वर्तमान वं भविष्य हया तिन्ही किनारव्या वाढलझे उलझा आले होते. त्या दिवशी मी माझी पहिली कलिता लिहिली."

Page 331. "टिकनवाच्या धर्माताने प्रथम आमच्या दियोग झाला तेव्हा ज्या सखाले माझी सोबत केली तीच आतां पुन्हा माझ्या सहाय्यासा धावून आली."

Page 331. "मी म्हणाले, 'अरे लोक म्हणतील ल्यानी हे सारे प्रसंग लिहून आधीच कशाप्रक्ष नसून हया कविता लिहून ठेवल?' "

Page 14. "माझ्या माहेरीं माझ्या आईची जी गत होती, तींच सासरी सांबूंच्या होती. .. सांबूंच्या नावट्या असण्याच्या दोन - तीन कारण होतीं. पहिलं म्हणजे त्या कविता करीत. त्याच्या कविता मांमंजी जाऺून ठाकीत. ... मायलेक्सरालेले हे प्रेम मांमंजीचा सहन होता नसे. हे दूसरे कारण. आणि तीसरे कारण म्हणजे सांबूंच्या कडे कोणी मिशणवी मजबूत घेत. त्याच्या बायबल चं पुस्तक सांबूंच्या दिले होते. ते त्या नेहमी वाचीत. मांमंजीच्या एक दिवस ते पुस्तक ठेऊन जाकून ठाकले."
13

Page 135. "मी तटकन उडून बसले. 'आता कुठे ते बंधलेले आहेत? सूर्यन्
कशाचे देखू? मी का पडून गेले? का मिळून गेले? जसे त्यांचे कोणी नाहीं तसे माझे
कोणी नाहीं. मला पैसा नाहीं, विधा नाहीं, मृत्तला, मी काय करून सुमरीं
सगळ्यांनी बांधतो घास्याच कोणी? सुमरीं ही बिल्हाई पुरे. त्यांना पत्र पाठवा.
भाणे आधीं येवन बायकोच लाव जैडेल्लें लावून ना आणि मग स्वतःचे लम करा.
तुम्हाला कोंहीं वाटत नाहीं आपण कोणशी बोलतों ते?""

14

Page 132. "भिकूलाईचा आजार पकाला. तिने बिकाना गुंडाहाळा. मजजवळ
उभीच्या उम्मी राहून ती राजमिळवा वाहूंच लागली. तिला माझे सारंपण करतं लागें. मी
नुसती पडून होते. माझे हंसत सुहळा तिला घासाचे लागत. वर्षेवर मला दृष्ट, ताक
पाजवे लागे."

15

Page 133. "पंडपुराण आजार वसूकर्त्तां भिकूलाईने एक मास्तर ठेवला. हा
मुलगा शिकूल शाहणा झाला, की आपण मिळवली. मग आपल्याला बघणीची कांही
काठकी नाहीं असे तिला वाटे. अस्थायी कांही एकसार्खी त्याच्या मागें लागे.
नानासाहेब म्हणत, 'को त्याच्या मागे लागतें? खेळू दे त्याला. त्याच्या का वय वेळे
आहे? शिक्षा तो हजूर हजूर।'"

16

Page 150. "जलालपुराण माझ्या भावजवळ्याकडून मला काम अर्धीं पडू, विलेन नाहीं.
दोरींवाढ माझे काम उठवून घेतले. शोकवाच मुलांच सर्व पाहत असे व धाकडी माझे पाही,
मला माझं लुगळ्यात झाले तिने धुंद दिलेन नाहीं. ""
17

Page 151. “जय दिवसीय उपास नसे त्या दिवसीय माझी काही भावजय आपले
सर्व क्रममध्ये आठोपध्यावर मी पडलेली असेन तेथे एवढे दूधपोहे धेऊन यावाची व मला
आई बाध करून बजे बले खायला घालायची. एकीकरून तिचा उपदेश चालायचा. ती
हणे, ‘त्यासे, सर्व संपत्तीपेक्षा आर्थी शरीरसंपत्ती पाहिजे. ती जर तुम्ही घालून बसला
तर तुम्हाला कोण विचारील?’”

18

Page 152. “देवीता रोज ताबदे फूल वाहण्याचा भी नियम केला होता. पूल
मिळाले नाही म्हणजे त्या दिवसीय मी उपास करायची. मला उपास पहूँच नये म्हणून माझया
भावजय मला कोडून तरी ताबदे पूल आणून देत.”

19

Page 155. “मी मोठे धूळू लावण्याचे कारण म्हणजे गावात माझी सवारीत
गणना होत नसे. ते एक दिवस माझया भावजयीच्या लक्षात आले. . . . रमाविहीनाचे
नंतर हा समग्र प्रकार मला व माझया शोकाच्या भावजयीता सांगितला व मला मटले.
दर्शी, तुम्ही पण परामाण्याने नेम धरा. . . . ‘जलालपूस्क असे पर्यंत माझया भावजयाची
कधी कोणाच्या घरी जेवाला गेल्या नाहीत. त्यांना माझवाल्याने कमी हे मटले तर
अगदी खपत नसे. अशा भावजय मिळाले म्हणजे परमेश्वराची मोठी कृपाव.”

20

Page 165. “मुंजीत मला पुक्कलू पैसे मिळाले होते. मी भावांना मटले,
‘मजबूत चांद - सत्ता रुपये आहेत. मी आता शेंगांची पोली पेटे. पैंसाची पैसा वाचलो.
हया व्यापारे साठि फायदा होईल. मग दुधूच्या विवेशाची मला पैंसाची काही करीत
बसावे लागणार नाही. ‘भाऊ महणाले, ‘तुला ते जमणार नाही. तुला करपणा नाही, त्यामध्ये काम किहीं अवघड आहेत ते. त्यापेक्षा तू म्हणून पैदे व्याजी लाव. ‘त्यांचे म्हणणे मला पटलें व मी हाहू हदू त्यांनाच माझे समडे पैदे तर त्यांनी त्यांच्या लावून टाकले. ते पैदे व त्यांनी व्याज अजून मला वसूल करून घ्यावयाचे आहे. ‘

21
Page 170. आमचे जावा-जावांचे कर्थीच भांडण झाले नाही. उलट कोणी काही संगणना मागणाला आलेल्या कर्थीचे रखवाई मजकुऱ्यांचे बोट दाखविले व म्हणून, ‘त्यांनी विचारां. मी माणूसीय नाही.’ घरातील सर्व व्यवस्था माझ्या हाती सोपून रखवाई माण्यचे हातांकाळी काम करला तागली.

22
Page 171. ‘कर्थी - कर्थी लोक मला टोकून बोलत त्या वेळी मला फर वाईट वाटे. कोणाकोणाचे वागणार तर अर्थीं उर भेडून बाहेर निघून जात. त्यांच्या एका वेळीं पाहत कोणी भाऊजीही नर धालत, लागाच्याच माझ्या जीव अर्थी पिसावून गेला होता.’

23
Page 173. ‘सच्चारामभाऊजी कोणाशी बोलखारा झाले. बायको, भाऊ, भावो. दररू, इतकी नाहीं तर स्वतःची अकोट -बार महिंद्रांची मुलां फरस्वाशी त्यांमध्ये जपूं अभोला धरता. सच्चारामभाऊजी बोलखात करती. ते म्हणते, ‘दरतूनच शिक्षणाची मला सोय केली पाहिजे. तु मुख्यरॉबर नगरास चल. मी तुला निघाले बिहाड करून देतो. ‘मी म्हटलें, ‘नगरासच कशाला ? इसंदेहा निघाले बिहाड करून. मी राहते इथे.’

‘तू अला पैदे विध्वंस उच्चला आहे. सारा जन्म गेला, मी संगितलं नंतू ऐकलं असं कर्थीच मला आठवू नाही. .. तुझ्या नाही लागून मला मुलां नुक्सान
करायचं नाहीं. आज पावणयतं भी तुला बेड देतों. मी दतूळा नेणार. तुम्ही मला नेऊं दिला नाहीं तर मला दुसरे मार्ग भक्ते आहेत. ‘… असे महणून ते फिर्याला गेले. मी उद्धृत स्वर्णपाक्ष्यात गेले. तानांत चौकडून एकम रणवा पेटावा तसेच मला बादू लागले. चरूळ कडे ज्याला भडकत आहेत असेच मला झाले. इतक्यात माझी जाह आंत आली. तिने मला निंदी मारती. मग आम्ही दोघी खूप रेळलों.

‘बाई, मला सांगा भी तुमच्यासाठी काय करू. तुम्ही सांगा ते करायला भी तयार आहे.’

‘तु काय करारं? देवाला काय करायचं असेल ते तो करील. … तू सांग एकलसं आहे. त्याचा अर्थ मी मुलाचा नेतो नि तूं बऱ्या दुस्वेद्या घरी करा करील.’

‘बाई, असे करणपेक्षा तुम्ही त्याच्या बरोबर जा काय. ते काढलाय तुम्हाला हिणती हो महणत नाहीं. … मं तसा प्रसंगंच आला तर इकडे पत्र ठाक जाई, मी तुम्हाला येजे पाठवान.’

‘तु कुठन आणशींलं केले?’

‘मी हवें ते करीन. तुम्हाला कुणीचं चांगला सत्ता देत नाहीं… तुम्ही कोणत्याही स्थितीत कोणत्या ही वेळेस पत्त या. मी माझा तोडच्या घास तुम्हाला करुनदैत देऊन. जसा माझा हक्क या घरांत आहे तसाच तुमचाही आहे. त्यांचे भाऊ येतात, मग माझ्या जाँच्यें का नाहीं येऊं?’

संधिकाळी दोघे भाऊ घरी बरोबर आले. कोणी काही बोलले नाहींत. …

दुस्वेद्या विकृती रखमागं माझी तयारी करण्यास सुरवात केली. परंतु हातांनी उचलचार नाहीं इतके सामान तिने बोलले. तिथंत - मिठणसूळ मेवाक्षायंतर सर्व तुम्हांत त्यात होते. सामान बांधतंना ती रक्त होती.

आम्ही दोघींची संखारमध्येंऊळीचा विचार जांचं का म्हणून. त्यांनी कानांवर हात ठेवले. हेच त्यांचे बोलणे. रचमागं मला न्हेंं घाटले. त्या वेळेस ती एकसारखी रक्त होती …
गाढी आली. ... भाऊजी गाढी येवांच बाहेर निपूण गेले. रखमाई सोंवणे नेमली होती. तसीच मालिला कडेवर घेऊन ती अनिवणी गाढीच्या मागे निघाली. ... 'माड्याबाईला संभाळा, वन्दुला संभाळा 'असे ती एकसारख्या बजावून सांगत होती. तेच म्हणत होते, 'तुजी ती जाऊ आहे पण माढी बायण्य म्हणून आय. 'तेवढील तेवढील रखमाई आमच्या मागें चटपट पाय उचवती येत होती. पुढे गाढी जोरसंत हाकली. रखमाई गाढीकडे पाहाल उभीच होती, थोड्याच वेळात ती दिसेनाशी झाली. मला हंडक्यावर संदहक होतो, हंडकें हेजी लागले."

24
Page 183. "कांही - कांही बाबतीत तास जरी होता तरी एकदमची महिना सुखाच्या गेला. अलांकरण भाषण वेध्याच्या धार्मिक स्त्रिया नाहीं."

25
Page 229. "डों. हयूम म्हणाले, "आता बहिनी, तुमचं खरं शिक्षण महसूल आपल्या नव-याचा मुलांचा संभाळा करणं. मला वाटतं तुशी मिरजेचं जाऊ नवं."

"साहेब, तुस्ही महम्मदात ते मला पटतं. पण क्रोणता वेंढ कसा येईल हवाला नेम नसतो. मला नाही विधा तेंता मजबूत पोट भरण्याचं व जमंजवा करण्याचं काही साधन नवं व का?"

26

27
Ibid. 163.
28

Page 351. "टिढकांची आध्यात्मिक उत्तरती क्षमता व्यावहारिक कार्यांक आणि कमालाची जाली तसी आईची वैदिक उत्तरती तत्त्व ह्या स्वागत्य कार्यांक अतिशय जाली.”

29

Page 347. "बोलीचा कर्ण इंग्लंडात. ती आम्हाला पोटाच्या वाटकेकडे प्रेम निघाली. आशी दूर सरकार-या गुंडाई कंडे व तत्त्वाची काटकर उभ्या असलेल्या आमच्या भिन्नमंटसी कंडे आनंदाने पहात होती. सागर शांत होता. पाण्याचे रंग मधुर -मधुर वेदत होते. जगाच्या दूरदूरीने नसले तसी आम्हाच्या दूरदूरीने कराची म्हणजेच आम्हाला इंग्लंड वाटत होते. उत्कुंडा दूरदूर्या पर्याय प्रवेशाच केवळ तीन मुले व तीन बायकंडी जाऊन तीन वर्ष काळकाच्या होतीं ।. ।... जवळ युरव माणूस नाही... स्वतंत्रता। "

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