



I Follow After

Lakshimibai Tilak's autobiography, *Smriti Chitra*, written in Marathi, was published in four parts between 1934 and 1937. The English translation of the first three parts, was first published in 1950.

Born into a strict Brahmin family, Lakshimibai was married off when she was eleven years old. When her husband, a whimsical poet, converts to Christianity, she is treated like a widow. She lives apart from him for five years and then joins him and converts to Christianity herself.

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The excerpt given below is a window into Lakshimibai's struggle to educate herself to be a nurse.

My Education

That year, at Mahabaleshwar, a man behind our house died of fever. There was a by-law in Mahabaleshwar that no outbreaks of any disease were to be permitted. After the occurrence of this one suspicious case, Tilak said, 'Peter, you take the two girls and Anand and go back. Who knows what this man has died of? The law is very strict here. We do not want any unnecessary trouble later. Take the children to Poona and you yourself go on to Nagar.' In this way, the four of them left and we four remained.

However, it was not in Tilak's nature so long as he lived to have his house without visitors. Sant Kaka had had plague. Having recovered he came for a change of air. Now all the shopping was put into his hands. Whenever Sant Kaka came to us, he was always appointed 'Master of the Market.'

A letter came from Peter saying he and his company had all arrived safely. In this letter, he also suggested we should arrange his engagement to Houshi, and asked us to get him work. Tilak procured work for him in Sangli. The rains broke early. The first time I was in Mahabaleshwar, I left behind as a present for the landlord a large quantity of firewood I had acquired very cheaply and stored. Being determined that such a mistake should not occur again, this time I was buying in more wood only when the first bundle was finished. But on account of the rains, there was soon no wood in the market. All the neighbours had heaps of it, but they said, 'Though you offer ten rupees, we would not sell you a stick. This is our supply for the rains.' Tilka always called me, 'Penny Wise and Pound Foolish.' He reminded me of it again. After that we immediately began to pack up. There was still time before Tilak had to return to his work, so instead of going straight to Nagar, we turned our batteries on Sangli and Miraj. We stayed two days in Sangli to see how Peter was getting on and then left for Miraj.

Here, Bhaskarrao Gowande and his wife Ramabai were studying. As Tilak knew them well, we stayed with them. The sight of the hospital and the encouragement of this kind pair, revived my enthusiasm for nursing, but my house, Tilak and my box-room kept me in a state of indecision. Tara, too, was young and had just recovered from an illness and Dattu did not at all look strong. Tilak decided for the plan. 'Do not worry,' he said, 'I shall look after everything.' I shall send you ten rupees regularly.'

Tilak met Dr Wanless, and with the aid of his advice, everything was finally arranged. Dr Wanless gave me a room. We had no money for a return journey, so a ring was sold and Dattu, Tara and Tilak went on to Nagar.

My training as a nurse began again. There were no classes. One had to do any work that one was told. This was 'practical training'; Peter came once a week from Sangli to do my shopping. Jaibai's son was studying medicine in Miraj. He began to give me English lessons, because one had to know at least a little to be able to read labels on the bottles. There were many students there from Nagar, and I had help from them too.

Four months passed by. I became homesick for the children and one day I rose up and went to Nagar to see them. Dr and Mrs Gowande having finished their courses had gone to work at Kedgaon under Pandita Ramabai. It was probably about four o'clock in the afternoon when I reached home. Tara was playing; Dattu had gone to school; Tilak was out. Neither he nor anyone else knew I was coming. I arrived quite unexpectedly. Tara ran and clung to me when she saw me.

Mother has come,
Mother has come,
My mother has come.
Games are finished, stories done,
My mother has come.

Still humming these lines, she hugged me. I, too, was overjoyed to see her, and clasped her to my breast. Tilak and Dattu were not at home, and I had come for one day only. When they came in, they too were delighted. A little while later, Dr Hume called and invited us all to his house for a meal. After dinner, we sat and talked.

'Now Bai,' Dr Hume said, 'your true vocation consists in looking after your husband and your children. I do not think that you should go back to Miraj.'

'Saheb, I agree to what you say. What great pleasure have I in leaving them and staying in Miraj? But there is no telling what may happen, nor when, so people should prepare themselves to face all contingencies.'

'Now brother, what is your opinion?'

'My opinion is the same as hers'.

'Saheb, I have no education. Do I not want some means of earning a living, and serving others?'

'Very well brother. Think well over it. You are always short of money. The children do not look well.'

After talking at great length, we came home. I was going in the evening by the 7 o'clock train. Dr Hume was there sitting waiting at the station before us. As the train left, he pressed a ten-rupee note into my hand. 'Study well and afterwards take good care of your husband and children; here is not a flower, but a flower petal from me.'

'But Saheb, I have money. I do not want this. If I need anything, I shall ask.'

'But Bai, this is only a brother's gift of blouse and bangles.'

Though the children were not looking well, both Tilak and I had fully determined that my studies should be completed. Tilak had come to the station to see me off. I began to feel like crying.

'Do not worry at all,' said Tilak, 'if you are the children's mother, I am their loving father. I shall take good care of them.' The train started. I was off to Miraj.

For two days after I arrived there everything went perfectly smoothly.

On the third day, Dr Wanless said to me, 'Bai, we need your room. Vacate it and go back to Nagar. You are not able to lift heavy patients.'

'But doctor, I want to learn'

'No you are not able for the work.'

'Why not? Am I not human?'

'I have no time to argue with you. Clear your things from the room today.'

I was in a state of complete bewilderment. I did not know what to do. Dragging my things out of the room, I piled them in the middle of the compound, and sat down on them.

Mr. Prasadrao Waghchawre of Nagar was my neighbour. He came home and seeing this sight asked, 'What is this? Why have you brought all your things outside? Are there bugs in the house?'

'No the doctor told me to empty the room.'

'Why? You yourself are paying for your course. What right has the doctor to put you out?'

'I can see no reason. I broke one thermometer, but replaced it at once. He is convinced I am not fit for the work, that I cannot lift heavy patients.' I was crying steadily. 'What fault is it of mine that I cannot lift patients?' I said. Prasadrao pressed me to take something to eat. I replied, 'I will not eat. I must know the truth of what I have done wrong. I am going to sit here.'

When Prasadrao went to Dr Wanless he told him over and over again that I would never be able to do the work. Prasadrao said, 'She says she will not move until she really knows what is wrong.' Then only, did Dr Wanless take out from his drawer Dr Hume's letter, and show it to Prasadrao. 'See this, Dr Hume says, "Send Lakshmibai back at once; her husband and children are being neglected here." It is no fault of hers. Look, Dr Hume has written above, "Do not show this letter to Lakshmibai. Do not let Lakshmibai know you have had a letter from me." Now what can I do?

Prasadrao came and told me everything that had been said. The ten rupees that Dr Hume had given me now clashed in my ears. So this gentleman had provided me beforehand my return fare! I was grieved to death. How could I have the face to return to Nagar? What would people say? Yet the alternative was the bottom of a well. The wives of the Nagar students comforted me, helped me to pack and put me into the train. All the way to Nagr, I felt like getting out at each station and running away somewhere. Dr Hume might throw all Miraj Hospital into confusion, but was not my mind my own? To the end, however, these thoughts were not translated into action. Tilak, having just drunk his tea had come outside and sat down when my tonga drew up at the door.

'Hallo! How have you turned up?'

'I cannot learn nursing, that is why.'

Thereupon, I told him the whole story.

I now understand why students commit suicide when they fail in their examinations. I know what examinations and learning are worth.

Dr Hume knew that I had arrived but he did not come to see me.

(Taken from Chapter 23, page 236 to page 240)