

Vol 2 Issue 12 June 2015

ISSN No: 2321-5488

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*International Multidisciplinary  
Research Journal*

# Research Directions

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ISSN No.2321-5488

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SOCIO-POLITICAL CONTRIBUTIONS OF SHAHU MAHARAJA



Mallikarjun Sharanappa



**ABSTRACT:**

Shahu Maharaja was ruler of Kolhapur during British period. He was great administrator, who realized the significance of equality in society. As such, he was wandered throughout his State to know about the problems of common people. He found that caste based discrimination made non-brahmins poor and negligent and even he found that untouchability was great menace, through which Dalits are suffering in society. As such, he took many of reforms to promote education of girls and non-brahmins, employment of non-brahmins, eradication of untouchability, reservation to non-brahmins in employment, etc to bring social equality in society.

**KEYWORDS**

*Socio-Political Contributions, equality in society, women's education.*

### INTRODUCTION :

Shahu Chhatrapati (1876-1922) was the Maharaja or the king of the Indian princely state of Kolhapur. Also known by the name of Rajarshi Shahu, he was known to be a great social reformer of his time. King Shahu was an invaluable gem in the history of Kolhapur. King Shahu was related to all progressive activities which contribute to the good of society in various spheres such as business, administration, Dalit emancipation, women's education and so on. The peak years of his contribution for welfare to society were from 1894 to 1922. His main contribution was to education for which he took the initiative from revolutionary reformer Mahatma Jyotirao Phule. He gave importance to primary education since this is the base to an individual's progress. Kolhapur is the mother of hostels and schools and he was responsible for this great concept. Working for its success was of pride to him and was his primary goal right unto his death. Food and other amenities were provided to students to create an environment to grow. He also gave attention to all other spheres from singing to wrestling to women's education. He was a great man with a great foresight, a person to be admired and looked upon as an example of great success and hard work.

### SOCIO-POLITICAL CONTRIBUTIONS:

Shahu was a ruler with a difference. He did not live like other Indian rulers of those days. Instead of indulging in luxury in his palace, he preferred to stay in a camp outside the city in the midst of the oppressed and the suppressed. He had toured his State and the whole of India and knew at first hand the miserable life that the majority of his subjects, especially the backward classes were living. His soul overflowed with pity for them. He made it a mission of his life to remove the root cause of this social stigma. The Vedokta incident had vividly brought to his notice how Brahmin priests in the name of religion, socially exploiting the ignorant Backward classes in the society. Shahu decided to revolt against this social hierarchy in the Hindu religion.

The Vedokta conflict was an important incident not only in the life of the Maharaja, but in the social life of the whole of Maharashtra. What began as a private and incidental affair turned out to be a milestone in the social history of Maharashtra and an eye-opener to the Maharaja. The incident, as it were, made clear to the Mahatma the mission of his life. Similarly Shahu, it seems, found the mission of his life after the Vedokta incident.

Shahu Maharaja started his policy of recruiting the non-Brahmins in the State Services. This enraged the Brahmins in the State. Prof. Vijapure, the spokesman of the Brahmin community, started a vilifying campaign in his newspaper, 'Samartha', against Shahu Maharaja and the newly appointed R.V. Sabnis. The Poona Brahmins headed by Bal Gangadhar Tilak supported the campaign but Shahu did not care a fig for the Brahmin attack. He firmly stuck to his policy. R. V. Sabnis was promoted as the Dewan of the State. At this juncture, the unfortunate Vedokta incident occurred in 1899. Lord Curzon, the Viceroy and the Governor General of India, to whom the matter was referred, gave his final judgement in 1905, that the stand taken by Shahu in the Vedokta issue was correct and dismissed the appeal. It was a trial of strength between Shahu and his non-Brahmin opponents, both in Kolhapur and Poona. Shahu emerged victorious but it took much of his time and energy. It only widened the distance between the Brahmins and non-Brahmins in Maharashtra<sup>1</sup>. One wishes today that it had not taken place at all.

Shahu though a social reformer was a strict observer of religious rites. He regularly took bath in

the holy Panchganga. One morning in 1899, in the month of Kartik, Shahu went to the Panchganga Ghat to take bath. On this occasion his learned friend from Poona, Rajaram Shastri Bhagwat, happened to be with him along with others. A Brahmin priest was appointed by the Maharaja for the purpose of uttering mantras at the time of bathing. On this occasion Rajaram Shastri, who was well versed in the Shastras, noticed that the priest was uttering Puranokta Mantras and not Vedokta Mantras. As per tradition Puranokta Mantras are meant for low caste Shudras and Vedokta Mantras are meant for high caste Brahmins and Kshatriyas. Bhagwat Shastri brought this to the notice of the Maharaja. The Maharaja asked the priest for explanation. And surprisingly, the priest replied that as the Maharaja was not a Kshatriya, he was not entitled to the Vedokta Mantras. Shahu tried to tell him that he was a descendant of Chhatrapati Shivaji and as such, was a Kshatriya. The priest arrogantly replied that he was not prepared to accept him as such unless the Brahmin community accepted him as a Kshatriya<sup>2</sup>.

Due to Vedokta incident, Shahu emerged victorious but it took much of his time and energy. It only widened the distance between the Brahmins and non-Brahmins in Maharashtra. One wishes today that it had not taken place at all.

Tilak sided with the Kolhapur Brahmins in the Vedokta controversy and criticized Shahu's stand in his periodical "Kesari", and tried to pressurize Shahu. But Shahu did not yield to his pressure. Even after repeated warnings to Mr. Rajopadhyay, the chief Royal priest, to perform all religious functions in the Royal household according to the Vedokta rites, he was adamant. On 6th May 1902, Shahu finally removed him from service and confiscated the Inam (Prize) of Rs. 30000 given to him for his services as a Royal Priest.

After Lord Curzon, the Viceroy, gave his decision in favour of Shahu in 1905, Rajopadhyay and the Brahmin camp realized that there was no use fighting, against Shahu and they began to make compromise with Shahu. Shahu was finally declared in a special session of the Brahmins of Kolhapur, on 25 December 1905, as a Kshatriya and they agreed to perform religious functions at the Royal House hold according to the Vedokta rites. Thus Shahu emerged victorious in this fight. But it took six valuable years of his life and gave him many trying times. However, the victory enthused the masses and the common people all over Maharashtra. It was a victory against the suzerainty of the priestly caste over the common masses. It released them from the clutches of the priests. Shahu fought for the rights of the common people and not for personal gains. The fight was a symbolic fight for equality of rights against the supremacy based on birth. All are born equal.

When he was attending Coronation ceremony of King Edward VII, he declared from England in his State Gazette on 26th July, 1902, that 50 percent of the vacancies that may occur in the State services shall be filled by recruits from among the Backward classes. According to the notification the Backward classes meant all classes other than the Brahmins, Prabhus, Shenvis, Parsis and other forward classes. This was not an ordinary declaration. It was the precursor of a new era that was to shake later not only Kolhapur but the whole of India<sup>3</sup>.

Brahmins raised a hue and cry against this declaration, but Shahu was firm in his intention to continue the movement of social equality begun by Mahatma Phule, whom he regarded as his ideal. Shahu found inspiration for his social and religious reforms in some of the organisations of those days. Of these, two organizations, Satyashodhak Samaj and Arya Samaj, seem to have inspired Shahu in his social reforms.

The Satyashodhak Samaj was founded by Mahatma Phule on 24th September, 1873, at Pune with the express purpose of extricating the poor, ignorant masses from the clutches of functions like

marriages, house warming etc. were performed without the help of Brahmin priests. On 11th January 1911 "Shri Shahu Satyashodhak Samaj" was established in Kolhapur. Bhaskar Rao Jadhav was nominated as President, Annasaheb Latthe was nominated as Vice-President, Mahadev Rao Dongre was Chief Officer and Haribhau Chavan was nominated as Secretary to the Samaj<sup>4</sup>. The strength of the members of the Samaj was 150 in Kolhapur in 1913. With Shahu's encouragement, the Satyashodhak movement gathered strength. But the Samaj had no building of its own in the city. Shahu granted free of cost a plot of land in the Gangawesh area for construction of a building. Besides, a sort of school was necessary for training non-Brahmin priests to perform religious functions as per the Satyashodhak system. The School was established in July 1913. Shahu donated Rs. 40 per month for this Satyashodhak School run under the guidance of Bhaskarrao Jadhav. Shahu paid the salaries of the teachers of the school. Bhaskarrao Jadhav prepared a textbook for the trainees in the school. The school became popular not only in, but outside the State, and non-Brahmin youths not only from neighboring districts but even from far off places like Baroda in Gujarat, joined the school. Shahu gave official recognition to the school. And non-Brahmin priests got legal sanction<sup>5</sup>.

This movement of getting all religious functions performed without caste priests spread like wild fire all over Maharashtra. A-report published in 1915, on the occasion of the 5th conference of the Satyashodhak Samaj, mentions that during those five years nearly fifty thousand functions were performed according to the Satyashodhak system. The moving spirit behind this great movement was, without doubt, Shahu Maharaja. It functioned under his liberal patronage. In August 1920 he donated Rs. 1500 to the Samaj. He also issued orders that all religious functions and daily worships of the gods in the Royal House were to be performed by Maratha priests. By another order the Brahmin priests in the Patgaon Sansthan and Jotiba Temple were replaced by Maratha priests.

Shahu had started a great movement of social transformation. It aimed at a sort of over-hauling of the entire system, social, political, religious etc. His was a multi-pronged approach. It is true that Shahu says more than once in his public speeches that he is not a member of the Satyashodhak Samaj. In 1921 in a letter published in the periodical "Jagruti" of Baroda, Shahu asserts that he never was a SatyaSamaj follower. He believes in the Vedas and will stick to the Vedas.

In spite of these assertions and declarations, the fact remains that it was Shahu who had given a new lease of life to the Satyashodhak movement after Phule's death. Between 1919 to 1921, the Brahmin public and Press were writing letters against Shahu to the British Govt. about his activities in and out of the State, allegedly disturbing peace in the society. They went to the extent of saying that, nobody's wife, life and wealth was safe in Shahu's State and that he should be forced to abdicate. Shahu was more than a match for his Brahmin enemies. He tactfully started making public denial of his association with the Satyashodhak Samaj and expressing his faith in the Vedic principles of the Arya Samaj which was in the good books of the British Government.

1920 was a very eventful year in Shahu's life. During this year Shahu took a number of bold decisions to put an end to the Brahmin supremacy. The creation of a separate religious seat (peetha), known as "Kshatra Jagatguru peeth", for the Marathas was one such bold step. In fact Kshatra Jagatguru peeth has its origin in the Vedokta incident. It is the culmination of Shahu's conflict with the then Brahmin priesthood.

The first Shankaracharya had established four peethas, religious seats, in the four quarters of India, East, West, North and South. Kolhapur state came under the jurisdiction of the Dwaraka peeth in the West. The King of Kolhapur also had created a separate peeth known as Karveer Peeth. The

Shankaracharya of Karveer peeth was supposed to take orders from the king of Kolhapur. But it rarely happened. At the time of the Vedokta incident, one Brahmanalkar was chosen by the Karveer Shankaracharya to succeed him, without consulting Chhatrapati Shahu. Shahu confiscated the property of the Karveer Math and appointed one Dr. Kurthakoti, who was highly educated and professed progressive views on social matters, as the Shankaracharya of the Peeth; but soon Shahu realized that he had made a mistake<sup>6</sup>. Dr. Kurthakoti was a pretender and Dr. Kurthakoti resigned later.

Now Shahu fully realized that such Shankaracharyas would never give justice to the masses. Shahu decided, once for all, that the only way to save the common masses from the exploitation by the Brahmin priests, was to do away with the service of the Brahmin priests altogether, and train non-Brahmin priests to perform their own religious functions. Shahu established in July 1920, Shivaji Vaidik School in Kolhapur, for the express purpose of creating Maratha priests. Shahu was not content only with acquiring Vaidik rights on par with the Brahmins. He wanted to overthrow once for all the religious yoke of the Brahmins and sever all connections with them<sup>7</sup>. It seems, he had discussed with some of his associates this question of creating a separate peeth with a Kshatriya as its head. Shahu further lays down rules for the functioning of this religious authority and rules for the conduct and duties of the person appointed.

A highly educated graduate of Sanskrit and Philosophy, Sadashiv Laxman Patil was appointed to the post and was designated as Kshatra Jagatguru, on 11th November, 1920. A special Darbar was arranged in honour of the Kshatra Jagatguru. Shahu welcomed the Kshatra Jagatguru, bowed and saluted him. The Kshatrajagatguru was different in many ways from the Shankaracharya. Shahu's order allowed him to marry and lead married life like an ordinary citizen<sup>8</sup>. The order also prohibited the Guru to use human beings like animals, to carry him in a palanquin on their shoulders. The Guru was not to get his feet washed and worshiped by the devotees, as the Shankaracharya did. He was not to receive any gifts or donations from the people. In a letter written to the Kshatra Jagatguru in 1921, Shahu expresses his expectations from the Guru. He was not to be an agent of God as other religious heads were. He was to serve the people and through them the nation. He was to guide the people in religious matters and see that the common illiterate masses are not exploited and looted while performing religious functions.

Kshatra Jagatguru was only a sort of administrator for religious matters. It was necessary because Shahu could not have completely done away with religion. Religion is a need of man; hence a religious head becomes inevitable. It was only a first step that was necessitated by the exigencies of the times, towards total emancipation of the oppressed classes from the religious bureaucracy of the Brahmins.

By 1920-21 the non-Brahmin movement in Maharashtra was in full swing. So also was the attack of Tilak's Kesari and other Brahmin papers on Shahu, the brain behind the movement. The attack was personal, poisonous and had reached meanest level, unbecoming the learned Poonaites. A special issue of Kesari was brought out mounting a full-fledged attack on Shahu, describing him as 'traitor to the freedom movement'. The issue published reports sent confidentially by Shahu to British authorities about secret activities of a terrorist group in the State. Of all the Southern states, the group had chosen Kolhapur for its activities, with the hidden evil intention of creating disturbances in the State, so that Shahu Maharaja's image would be damaged in the eyes of the public and the British authorities, which would provide an excuse for demanding Shahu's resignation, for being unfit to rule<sup>9</sup>.

The Brahmin papers raised a hue and cry against Shahu's act, describing it as opposition to the

Freedom Struggle. Nothing could be far from the truth. Shahu, in fact, was a supporter of the Freedom Struggle. But his was a dependent Princely State. He could not openly support the Freedom Struggle. He respected the Revolutionary Freedom Fighters. Shahu has repeatedly said in his public speeches that he wanted India to be free and believed that the British would have to leave India one day and that day, was not far away. But.... and this 'but' explains Shahu's concept of Independence. "Who would replace the British when we get Independence?" "Which sections of the complex Hindu society would hold majority of the posts?" Naturally, the educated few, "Where do the common people stand vis-a-vis the educated few from the upper strata of the society, who at present dominate administration?", "The reins of power would only change hands, from the white to the dark skinned" 10.

These were some of the questions that haunted the mind of Shahu, like that of Mahatma Phule, Dr. Ambedkar and a few others. Political reforms without social and economic reforms would not change the condition of the deprived and the depressed classes of the society. Real Freedom should bring social rights along with political rights; nay, social rights should precede political rights. The nation is politically free today, but even after sixty years of political independence, a large number of people are slaving under many a social, communal, and economic shackle.

Shahu Maharaja not only emphasized equality irrespective religions and castes, but also he also supported gender equality, that is equality between men and women. Mahatma Phule founded schools for girls and Shahu Maharaja encouraged such schools and also supported women's education. Shahu realized that without adequate education, exploitation against women should not be controlled and women can't get equal status without adequate education.

Apart from women's education, Shahu Maharaja also recognized legal sanction for widows' remarriage. But in few castes in Hindu religion, it was not become possible to recognize widows' remarriage and Shahu introduced legal registration of such widows' remarriage. In this way, it became legal evidence for women to claim their marital rights in the society<sup>11</sup>.

Similarly, to achieve equality among all castes in the society, on 12th July 1919, "Marital Relations Act of Kolhapur Department" was published in Karaveer (Kolhapur) Gazettee. It allows the men and women of different religions and castes should marry each other subject to the conditions that the age of boys should be minimum 18 years and age of girls should be minimum 14 years at the time of their marriage. Similarly, it was also mentioned that no approval from parents should be taken by girls who attained 18 years for marriage<sup>12</sup>. In this way, Shahu Maharaja attempted to prohibit child marriage that was prevailed during those days.

To protect women against violence and crimes, on 2nd August 1919 Karaveer (Kolhapur) Gazettee published a 'Law to prohibit the violence against women and Divorce Rules'. Hindu society is male dominated and it enabled lower punishment for violence against women in the family and as such it is misused to commit crime against women. Hence, above stated law acts as protection for women. The law contains 11 clauses and it also imposes penalty of Rs. 200 and six months imprisonment to those who commit violence against women<sup>13</sup>.

Similarly, Hindu Succession Amendment Act was published on 17th January 1920 in Karaveer Gazettee, which enabled share in property of father to his son, born from divorced wife. Earlier, there were different legislations for the people of different castes on the succession of property, but the present legislation announced equal provisions for the people of all castes<sup>14</sup>.

Shahu Maharaja prohibited Devadasi practice indirectly by prohibiting legal status to Devadasis in the society. While introducing the legislation against Devadasis, Shahu Maharaja stated that "at very



early age these unlucky girls fallen prey to social stigma of Devadasi practice. The Devadasi practice is stigma for Hindu law. Of course, Hindu law assures a few rights to Devadasis, the extent of exploitation due to this practice is more. Hence, it is not a social culture to increase such stigma in the society<sup>15</sup>.

### CONCLUSION:

To sum up, Shahu Maharaja struggled to provide equal status to all citizens irrespective of castes, religions or gender. His views and actions to achieve women equality and freedom are worth to appreciate. He emphasized education and employment for non-brahmins, who were backward, illiterate and negligent during that period. To achieve this aim, he encouraged opening of schools for girls and non-brahmins and provided reservations to non-brahmins in employment. He condemned untouchability as offense and he took number of measures to curb caste and gender based discrimination. In this way, Shahu Maharaja was a great socio-political reformer.

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