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(History)



VALIANT INDIAN WARRIORS

Philosophies, Approaches
And Victories

Edited by
Prof. (Dr.) C. B. Bhange
Devidas Vijay Bhosale

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Contribution in Social Sector by Rajashri Shahu Maharaj

Dr. Kailas Dnyanoba Sawant¹

Introduction

Chhatrapati Shahu Maharaj was the ruler of Kolhapur state from 1884 to 1922. Born in 1874 and adopted in 1884, he was invested with powers of the ruler after he attained Majority on April-12, 1894.

Chhatrapati Shahu Maharaj also known as Rajashri Shahu Maharaj was considered a true democrat and Social reformer, Shahu Maharaj was an able ruler who was associated with many progressive policies during his rule. From his coronation in 1894 till his demise in 1922, he worked for the cause of lower caste subjects in his state.

Vodokta Controversy

Like any religious person Shahu Maharaja performed daily Pooja (worship) regularly. His faith in ancestor worship, perhaps the most natural form of religious belief, was deep and strong. It was his habit of visiting the usual holy places about Kolhapur on stated days for the prescribed bath in the sacred waters of the rivers. In the Kartika (usually October) month. His Highness used to go to the Panchaganga early in the morning for the sacred bath.¹ An incident took place in October 1900. Maharaja went to Pachaganga for his morning holy bath with his brother Bapusaheb Ghatge, Mamasahab Khanvilkar, Rajaramshastri Bhagwat and Others. The practice was that while Maharaja took bath Brahmin uttered the mantras.

When on this occasion the priest himself unbathed began to chant religious hymns Rajaramshastri Bhagwat who was Padit historian and linguist, asked the Maharaja why his priest was reciting Puranic hymns instead of vedic hymns at the performance of the rites.²

When the young Maharaja asked the priest about it he promptly

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replied that it was not necessary for him either to take a bath before hand or to recive vedic hymns as the persons to be blessed were shudras. Only vedic recitals and not puranic recitals, he added indifferently, needed a bath before hand on his part.

Such an insulting reply the Chhatrapati never expected from his priest servant. All this meant that the priest regarded the Chhatrapati a Shudra. When Shahu and his brother told the priest that they were Kshatriyas of noble blood, the priest replied to his ruler and master that so long as the powerful Brahmin community did not accept his Kshatriya status, he would not consider him better than a Shudra.

The rude shock which his Highness and his companions received by this incident aroused in then an active interest in the vedokta controversy. His Highness himself waited for a few months more before putting his hand to it.

In the Month of Bhadrapad the Hindus perform certain rites for the satisfaction of the souls of their deceased ancestors. Rajopadhye the royal priest avoided going to Panhala where the Maharaja's family was staying at the time, probably thinking that Maharaja might ask him to perform vedic rites on the occasion. On this, in October 1901, Shri Shahu issued notice to him not to neglect his duties and take care that the vedokta ritual was duly observed in the palace. Shahu at the same time understanding the gravity of the situation sent his men to collect evidence regarding the practice followed by the Maratha princes elsewhere. Rajopadhye was also fortifying himself consulting with this friends and entrenching himself behind the Brahmin community, the Brahamavrinda.

Notices to Rajopadhye

In the midst of these controversies an incident took place in the palace. The Kojagar ceremony at the palace was performed by Mr. Sevekari instead of Rajopadhye whose duty it was or he refused to do so in the mean while, his highness had also made up his mind to take up the challenge on 7th October, 1901 he issued an order that the palace ceremonies should be according to the Vedokta forms and that if any one failed in obeying the order, he was to receive no emoluments. This ensued the quarrel between the Maharaja on one side and the entire Brahmin world on the other. On November 8, Rajopadhye was again asked to adopt the vedokta ritual for all ceremonies in the palace.

But Rajopadhye turned his deaf ears to all these notices and Maharaja finally served on him the following show, cause notice on 1st May, 1902.

Rajopadhye's assertion was that though Chhatrapati Shivaji was a Kshatriya Shahu Maharaja was not, as he was born into the Ghatge Family which according to him, was not a Kshatriya family.

The Maharaja, therefore, dismissed the disobedient servant, priest on May 6, 1902 and resumed his Inam lands and Villages and deprived him of his Civil and Magisterial powers.

The controversy received wide publicity Rajopadhye sent review application which then rejected.

After political Agent's decision Rajopadhye made an appeal to the Government of Bombay but Government of Bombay in its reply to memorial of Rajopadhye specifically stated "That the orders of which he complains were within the competence of His Highness, the Maharaja and that no adequate grounds have been shown for the intervention of the Government of Bombay."³

After the adverse decision of the Bombay Government Rajopadhye appealed to the Government of India.

"In reply, I am to say that the Government of India concur in the view of the Government of Bombay that His Highness, the Maharaja of Kolhapur was competent to pass the orders complained of and consider that no grounds have been shown for the intervention of the Government of India."⁴ In this way Shahu Maharaj won the decisive battle.

Through vedokta controversy the predominance enjoyed by the Brahmins in every field was challenged by Shahu. This led to a cutthroat conflict between higher and lower communities. In spite of all hue and cry Maharaja maintained patience and calmness in the controversy. He gave every opportunity to Brahmins to rectify their Mistakes against him.

Chhatrapati Shahu Maharaj Crusade Against Untouchability

When Shahu Chhatrapati took the administration in 1894, majority of state officers were Brahmins. Other backward classes remained aloof from education and consequently from state services. Thus, from the beginning Shahu realised the necessity of setting on the right track the whole social machine which for ages had strayed along lines harmful to national growth. To do this, he had to embark on a strenuous campaign against the evils of the traditional hierarchy of castes. He set about his work systematically. His first step, to this effect, was the reservation of 50 percent of posts for backward classes.

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In the year 1902, His Highness was invited to England to attend the coronation of his Majesty king Edward VII. During this sojourn in England, he issued the order from England, to the effect, that 50 percent posts of the state services should be reserved for the Backward class candidate. This was indeed a landmark in his career as a social reformer. ⁵

In the month of February 1908, he founded an education society with the object of spreading education among the untouchable class of the Kolhapur state. ⁶

A hostel for boys from depressed classes was opened in 1908 and it was named after Miss violet Clarke Hostel with the permission of sir George Clarke.

The year 1919 was landmark in the Shahu's anti-untouchability movement. He by his order closed all the separate schools meant for the low castes and threw all Public schools open for the untouchables.

Maharaja took various administrative Measures with the object of removing the bar of untouchability. The next step was the appointment of the untouchables as talathis. ⁷ The new stipend diary Village Ministers, who were hithero members of the heaven born Brahmin community.

The Medical Institutions in the state were ordered to treat the depressed class Patients on terms of perfect equality with others.

His Highness extended to them special representation in the Kolhapur Municipality, which was now reconstituted on a communal basis in 1920-21, and a young Man of the chambhar caste soon became the Chairman of the Board.

In order to do away with the practice of untouchability, at least at public places wells, river sites temples, etc, he passed an order on 6th September 1919.

He intentionally helped an untouchable named Gangaram Kamble to open a hotel in the Main road at Kolhapur, which he did, Maharaja with his court Paraphernalia often visited the hotel for taking tea. This was his attempt to convince his country men that the practice of untouchability was wrong. ⁸

In this way, His Highness sir Shahu Maharaja throughout his life, applied himself bodily and mentally to the great task of uplifting and upgrading the down-trodden and down-fallen castes by extending every kind of help to them. He set a noble example of true leadership to the future generation.

Contribution of Shahu Maharaj to the Progress of Education

Shahu Maharaja inherited love for the education of his subjects from his natural father, the late Jayasingrao Abasaheb Ghatge, the then chief of Kagal.

From 1917 the satya Shodhak Samajists were fighting for the reservation of certain seats in the Bombay legislature for the backward classes. Therefore in 1917 he began to take more interest in the educational, social and political work of the satya shodhak Samaj. Even before that, he was greatly influenced by the educational views of Mahatma Phule with regard the Primary education of the masses; which are reflected in his order of 1913. I quote, "With a view, therefore to accelerate the pace (of primary education), His Highness, the Chhatrapati Maharaj Saheb, has been pleased to order that every village in the state should have a School conducted by a person of the caste to which the majority of the village belong."⁹

In 1918 another order to make the primary education free and compulsory for all was issued for that purpose, the well-to-do people in the state were made to pay educational tax.¹⁰ This was a measure adopted by the Maharaj in order to keep pace with the educational reforms in the British territory. In 1918 the first compulsory education legislation viz; Bombay primary education Act (Patel act) was passed in Bombay presidency.

Kolhapur was the second native state. First being Baroda, to introduce free and compulsory primary education for the Masses in the state. The difference being that Baroda maintained separate schools for the untouchable while Kolhapur abolished them altogether.

Chhatrapati Shahu Maharaj held a great promise for the backward Indian society on March to freedom. Had he lived a little longer he would have worked Miracles in the social educational field of Maharashtra. Because for him, education was the instrument of regeneration of the Indian society. However the torch of knowledge lit by him has been kept by his disciples ever bright.

Other Social work by Shahu Maharaj include he legalised Intercast Marriages, stopped child Marriages, Banned Devidasi Pratha, remarriage of widow.

Conclusion

Shahu Maharaj hated untouchability and Brahmin priestcraft but believed in Hindu varna system. He believed in nothing but secular humanity pure and simple. However, stepping down from high pedestal of a ruler to the level of the common masses for their welfare

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itself. It was the most revolutionary action in case of the Maharaj. there
in lies his greatness.

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