

CHAPTER III

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SATYA SHODHAK JALASAS AND THE ACTIVITIES :

Satya Shodhaks used Jalasas as their medium of preaching. Satya Shodhak Jalasas were different from Tamshas. The teachings of Bhagawat Dharm were carried through Kirthan. In like manner the teaching of Satya Shodhak doctrines was carried through the medium of Jalasa (Musical concert) which were composed specially for this purpose. The main object behind this public concert was not to entertain but to awaken the masses. The main topics of these concerts were the deplorable condition of the peasants, their exploitation by money lenders and Brahmin priests. Social inequality, the evils of caste system and so on. They composed songs to enlighten the masses to the importance of Education. Through this medium the masses were advised to educate their children and improve their Social Condition. Its motto was " There is no true life without knowledge. Knowledge is obtained through education." They also explained how the Bhataji (Brahmin priest) took undue advantage of peasants ignorance and deceived them. The Satya Shodhak concerts were performed by the persons like Bhimrao Mahamuni, Bhaurao Patil, Tatyaba Patil, Kasegaonkar, Shankarrao Patil, Yelurkar, Ramchandra Ghadge Kalekar, Abasaheb Sabale, Shivatarkar¹ etc.

1 Bhai Bagal : Op.Cit. P. 69-73.

Samajists also used poetry, religious style Kirtans and singing performances (Kirtan) to spread their message. But even this was felt to be insufficient. Some times it was found that ignorant masses did not understand Kirtans and lectures. Tamashas and Jalasas which were the popular folk drama of Maharashtra were often used for conveying the Social message of the Samaj.

On 27.1.1927 Shahu Maharaj granted a free place at Budhawar Peth Satya Shodhak Bhajani Mandir for practising hymns. In this connection Maharaja passed an order to the private Secretary that, " With a object to practice hymns an open space 22.5 X 17 Sandhyamath Gali, New Bhudhawar Peth, Kolhapur should be granted free of charge to Dattoba Harugale, Ganapati Salunkhe, Ganapati Bhonsale, Dnyanoba Sarnaik, Dnyanoba Suryawanshi, Bhau Patil (Karmaveer) Yeshawant Sanglikar, Jotaba Salokhe Dattoba Patekar etc. All of them disciples of Haider Jangli. Mujawar Kalagiwale was well know for his speedy composition of poems. These persons constituted a Bhajani Mandal of Satya Shodhak. To erect building on that granted space, stones and other building material were provided free of charge.² Though at the beginning Shahu Maharaja had extended full support to the activities of Satya Shodhak movement, in the later period he had some disagreements with Satya Shodhaks. The following

2 Dr.Khane B.D,Shri Shahu : A Study of Socio Political Reforms) unpublished Ph.D. Thesis)

letter dated 22.10.1920 written by Shahu to Khaserao Jadhav corroborates this " In my every speech I have been expressing that I am against Satya Shodhak Samaj. After attending the wrestling matches of Ganapu at Badwai, we were returning. We had the company of Baburao Yadav and other Satya Shodhakites in the same car. In the course of travel I went through a lot of discussion with them but I found it to my dismay that my disagreement with them still continues. As we had the differences of opinion with muslims, we have the same differences with Satya Shodhak Samajists. As we have witnessed various acts and plays conducted by muslims and Eruopeans, and also as we have heard the preaching by Christians, I have also seen the Satya Shodhak Jalsas. But I am not at all of their opinion. I agree with some of their principles as I do with Muslims and Christians. That does not mean I am a Satya Shodhak.³

But inspite of all this the Satya Shodhak Samaj, Bombay at the same time was considering to confer an address of honour on Shahu Maharaja for his valuable service and contribution to Satya Shodhak movements. A letter dated 16.10.1920 from Raghunath Devaji Bankar, General Secretary, Satya Shodhak Samaj Bombay addressed to Maharaja corroborates to this. It says :--

" The Satya Shodhak Samaj is working vigorously in Bombay. It is found that Samaj concerts (Jalasa) are

3 Dr. Khane B.D., Op.Cit.

producing good effect on the minds of the people. We are trying to arrange the Tenth conference of Satya Shodhak Samaj in Bombay under your Chairmanship. We are desirous of conferring an address of honour on you on that occasion. I will be seeing you very soon to request you to accept the offer of Chairmanship and I hope, you will not decline it.⁴

Shri P.B.Salunkhe appropriately narrates the relations of Shahu with Satya Shodhak in following words :-

" After the demise of Mahatma Phule, the Social work of Satya Shodhak Samaj was paralysed due to the absence of eminent Leadership. Shahu Maharaja came to the rescue of the Samaj and revived it. He by extending every help including monetary aid spread and propogated. Kolhapur became a powerful centre of Satya Shodhak Samaj and its activities owing to the free educational facilities including Boarding houses and various others a large number of students from outside flocked at this Centre. After completing their education, they returned to their native places and carried on the banner of social movement of Jotiba and Shahu throughout Maharashtra.⁵

This is how Shahu encouraged the activities of Satya Shodhak's in Kolhapur though he never became an active member of the Samaj.

4 Dr. Khane B.D. : Op.Cit.

5 Rajashri Shahu Felicitation Volume (Shahu Birth Centenary Volume Government of Maharashtra) 1976 Ed. by Hon.P.B.Salunkhe , P.430.

Satya Shodhak Tamashas :

Satya Shodhak used Tamashas as their medium of preaching. Satya Shodhak Samajist had already used poetry religious style Kirtans and singing performances to spread their message and over come the communications barrier felt by upper-class non-Brahmins. But even this was felt to be insufficient. Our illiterate masses understand tamashas better than do in understanding Kirtans, they do not like lectures.⁶ Tamashas were the popular bawdy folk drama of Maharashtra, whose traditional form contained an opening invocation to the God Ganapati a great deal of byplay in dialogue centering around a Krishna theme, clowning with a man dressed as a woman and a final main play or vag. Traditionally they were primarily peasant based with troupes wandering on tours throughout the villages, occasionally however, more aristocratic sponsorship was given. Under colonial rule they began to take on a ' modern commercialized form. Theatres were built and tamasha contractors appeared small entrepreneurs who, sometimes became big entrepreneurs, paying a daily wage to the artists who appeared in their productions.⁷ Among the heroes of this professional tamasha stage was pathe Bapurao, a Brahmin artist and actor who in the period between 1910 and 1935 brought women into the troupes and helped to bring the troupes into theatres. Though

6 Mahant Dnyangiribuva, Presidential speech, yearly Report of the 7th Satya Shodhak Conference 1917.

7 Bhai Bagal : HIRAK MAHOTSAV GRANTH , P.P.69 - 1931.

drawing on village tradition and troupes from rural areas, this was an urban, commercialized form with the favourite theme of the play often, being that of a naire villager visiting the big city.

But at a level completely removed from this commercialized tamasha theatre there was a development in the same period of the village folk drama tradition for the purposes of radical social propoganda. This occurred twice, with the Satya Shodhak Tamashas of the 1920 and later with communist tamashas in the 1940. Nor is it surprising that this would happen, for the tamashas were not only capable of reaching a wide rural audience but with their openness to popular participation and their uninhabited language they have been said to be a far more modern artistic form than the upper-class western oriented Marathi stage theatre.⁸ They were in fact, ideally suited for a guerrilla theatre movement.

The Satya Shodhak tamashas seem to have originated spontaneously, although they eventually got the sponsorship of rich non-Brahman families such as the Jedhes and Shahu Maharaj of Kolhapur. While Bhimrao Mahamuni's Jalsa played an important inspirational role the pioneer of the first real Satya Shodhak tamasha was of a Maratha peasant, Ramchandra Ghadge of Kale, a large agricultural village in Satara. Ghadge was described as a very poor man with some education upto the fourth Standard. This description of men with minimal or

8 According to Tevio Abrams, a canadian playwright who has recently studied the tamasha.

moderate amounts of land and the beginnings of education, seems to fit most of the tamasha organizers. Ghadge began his troupe around 1915 and by 1925 there were twenty - nine identifiable tamashas in Western Maharashtra. Most of their organizers seem to have been Marathas, though a Nahavi, a Sonar and a Brahman were also associated⁹. However, the troupe members often included men of lower castes, including many untouchables, among the wellknown Buddhist leaders of today who took part in a Satya Shodhak tamasha as a child is Dr.P.T. Borale, now Principal of Siddhartha Law College, Bombay.

Satya Shodhak tamashas followed the traditional form but with a new content. Thus, the traditional tamasha opened with an invocation to Ganapati, with an implication of support for this traditional Brahman deity, however, Satya Shodhak leaders, according to one, counteracted this by explaining that the actual meaning was from gun or people and pati or ' leader ' and that it thus represented an invocation of the people as the source of rule. The Second part a dialogue involving Krishna's encounter with milkmaids, was transformed into an encounter of the hero. " Satyajit " with village Brahman women with traditional dilliance being replaced by insulting and challenging language often leading to a dialogue on Brahman tyranny.¹⁰ The traditional drama section seems most often to have featured a play concerning the efforts of Brahmans and sometimes monelenders to cheat innocent but generous peasants, while songs invoking

10 Hrak Mahotsay Granth, Chapter 9. Many such dialogues are given in Tatoba Yadav Satyaca Shodh(Sangle,1950).

opposition to caste and religious superstition and the oppression of the peasants were added.

It is often said that peasants have no history, at least in the written form, but two surviving publications of tamasha verses and plays give an important insight into the ideas spreading among the Maharashtrian peasantry at this time. These indicate the degree to which the tamashas, largely a spontaneous outgrowth, could vary in their emphasis, but they also show important common themes.

Thus for example the tamasha of Jotirao Phalke of Satara Road (Padli Village) whose songs were written by the poet Tukaram Bhosle and inspired by Keshavrao Vichare. Seems to have represented a particularly pure form of Satya shodhak ideology. They mocked almost all the sacred religious books and traditional stories of the origins of gods and castes and attacked vigorously popular religious tradition such as the Pandharpur cult and the fast growing Satyanarayan Puja. Thus poems claimed that the peasant pilgrim to Pandharpur lost his health in the diseases of the rainy season and his money to the cunning Brahman priests of the cult. Whose ancestors had been responsible for the murder of Pandharpur's favourite saint Tukaram.¹¹ This represented a general Satya Shodhak reaction to the Varkari cult, there was no question about the popularity of Tukaram and other Saints but they emphasized the oppression that the Saints had faced from the Brahmans of their day, compared it to that the Satya

11 Tukaram Bhosale, Kahi Kirane (Satara : Vijayi Press n.d.) P.P.13-26.

Shodhak's faced and argued that the Brahman priests of Pandharpur had no right to represent the cult.

One of the major Vags or plays of the Phalke Bjosle tamasha said to represent a real story of a Vidarbha village illustrated the degree to which the Satya Shodhak message represented not simply the claims of the wealthy peasant or village headman, but a genuine treat to social revolution in the villages. It tells the story of a heroic Koshti or weaver whose generasity and social service won him such popularity in the village that the jealous Kulkarni began to plot against him. Winning over the village Patil to his side the Kulkarni brought a Court suit against the Koshti for building a section of his house on government land.

The latter tamasha that of Tatoba Yadav of Kasegaon another Southern Satara village represented a more conservative approach in that it praised the Hindu religion while trying to separate it from Brahmanism and included a long history of religion.¹² While trying to separate it from " Brahmanism " and included a long history of Marathas who as Kshatriyas were said to have played the role of protectors of religion. At the same time, however it included poems asserting basic human equality and attacking the Varna system as a latter-day creation, arguing that Brahmans were hypocritical in talking about the maintenance of caste since even their own caste-mates in the cities were practising

12 Gail Omvedt : Cultural Revolt in a colonial Society, The non-Brahman movement in western India, 1973, P.213.

inter-caste marriage. Similarly many songs emphasized the value of education and expressed in unique form the fascination that modern technology had for these peasant villagers.

Let us go to school, young and old and get acquainted with education.

It is the experience of so many people, that education brings happiness in the world and removes calamities. Railroads, bicycles, cars, airplanes like birds, steamboat merchant and passenger ships go on the sea; There are factories, presses, telegraphs for communication so you can hear so quickly seated in your house; Kerosene lamps and electric lights fill the sky with light, phonographs speak like a man, watches tell the time ; Heat and water can come to the fourth floor in pipes - This is all the work of knowledge. It is man's greatness, but if he misses the opportunity it is a time of destruction. The opportunity has come : rise, farmers ? It is not real knowledge.

just to eat bhakris and left over ground corn;

it is no knowledge just to do this ;

Tatoba says, remember this in your mind.¹³

Generally speaking the tamashas praised modern science and education mocked the sacred books and religious traditions in their songs, dialogues and plays : in the iconoclastic Satyashodhak fashion they cited sacred Hindu texts to show

their contradictions. Troupe organizers searched the religious texts and writings of Phule for themselves and learned them one another, for instance in meetings at conference in Kolhapur under the sponsorship of the Maharaja. It seems to have been the tamashas for example, that helped to spread throughout Maharashtra such stories as that of Shambuk, the untouchable boy killed by Rama in the latter's effort to protect Hindu orthodoxy. And in general tamashas played a prominent role in forming and spreading a popular Maharashtraian culture of religious and caste revolt which would give impetus to the movements of caste Hindus and untouchables alike.