

SHAHU CHHATRAPATI (1894-1922) AND THE UNTOUCHABLES :

AN IMPORTANT ASPECT OF NON-BRAHMIN MOVEMENT IN KOLHAPUR STATE

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The modern period has, among others, two main characteristics. One is that social change is inevitable in the complex modern period in which various economic and technological forces are operating. The second characteristic is that the governments everywhere and everyday are gaining strength. Social change, however, needs to be controlled so as to direct it towards social regeneration and the only force which is strong enough for such a control is the governmental agency. A strong modern government, with sympathy and imagination, tact and firmness can plan the social change on the universally accepted great trio of the French Revolution of 1789.

The forces of social change were let loose in modern India by the contact with the Western civilization through the British and Shahu Chhatrapati of Kolhapur, I submit, was the first ruler of modern India to set an example of how governmental power can be used to canalize social change. He mounted on the surf of social change that was gathering momentum in the early years of the twentieth century and led it towards the goal of a just social order, which as yet remains to be achieved.

2. THE FIRST PHASE : 1894 to 1916 :

The reforms of Shahu Chhatrapati, in social matters, can be divided for the convenience of study into two phases. One is from 1894, when he ascended the gadi of Kolhapur to 1916, the year when the first world war was passing through a critical stage. The second phase is post-1916 period. In the first phase he gave emphasis on the spread of education and employed the untouchables to public offices. In the second phase he used governmental power for the upliftment of the untouchables.

In his address to the Sarvajanic Sabha in September 1894 he pointed out that without the equal progress of all (the society) the progress of a part (of society) was impossible.¹ And to achieve this progress, he felt, education was absolutely essential. In his address to the Rajaramian Club in September, 1902 he said, "unless and until the importance of education is understood and its vast spread achieved, the caste differences could not be removed. My constant endeavour is to realize this aim of casteless society."²

To spread the education in all the ^{stratas} ~~state~~ of society not only the schools and colleges were needed, but also boardings where the students from different villages could live and take food. In 1896 there existed in Kolhapur a hostel with non-sectional name. The school, however, catered only to Brahmin students.³ Shahu Chhatrapati waited for four long years to see

a change in the attitude of the management of the hostel but there was no change. The experience elsewhere was also the same. Professor Annasaheb Karve had started Anath Balikashram at Hingane (near Pune). V. R. Shinde, a Maratha and later on the founder of the Depressed Class Mission, went to Prof. Karve with a request for admitting his sister Janakka in the said Balikashram in 1895-1896. But Prof. Karve flatly refused to admit her because she was a non-Brahmin.⁴

Under these circumstances, Shahu Chhatrapati had no other alternative but to start hostels on caste basis in Kolhapur.

He started Miss Clarke hostel for promoting the education of the untouchables which in turn would equip them for better posts and better life. He also made them coachmen, mahuts (elephant^t drivers) and Kuttewans (dog-carriers) during the marriage ceremony of his daughter. They were also made to wear swords of honour and to appear in the state functions like the soldiers and sardars of the warrior class.⁵

3. THE SECOND PHASE : POST 1916 PERIOD :

"His method", his biographer says, "uptill now was to educate them, employ them in public service and look upon the Brahmins - the traditionally recognised propounder of religion-to change their angle of vision and yield to these classes (the untouchables) their social right."⁶

Shahu Chhatrapati, after 1916, sincerely felt that mere education would not cut the Gordian Knot. He began to use his power as a ruler of a native state to uplift the position of the untouchables. The changed political atmosphere and the difficulties of the British due to first world war were helpful for him in his attempts at reform.

His reforms in this respect can be divided as follows :

1. Removing the traditional economic disabilities of the untouchables.
2. Removing the social disabilities of the untouchables.
3. Opening new fields of occupation to the untouchables.
4. Removing restrictions on inter-caste marriages.
5. Discontinuing the use of the word asprushya i.e., untouchable.

As he believed more in action than in speech,⁷ he issued orders for the upliftment of the untouchables and then explained them in the conferences of the untouchables.

1) REMOVING THE TRADITIONAL ECONOMIC DISABILITIES OF THE UNTOUCHABLES :-

The untouchables like the Mahars and the Mangs were the traditional balutedars in the villages, they had to serve

the village throughout the year for which baluta was given to them. They also held watan lands in the village for their traditional duties and had to submit to the veth (i.e. forced labour), enforced on them by Patil and Kulkarni of the village. Some of the untouchables, along with the other so-called criminal castes, had to pay visit to the Police Patil; it was called as hazeri.

If the baluta system was becoming outdated, the practice of hazeri and veth made it difficult for the untouchables to live an honest life. The watan land was usually a small strip of land, which was both materially and psychologically rather difficult for the untouchable to leave. Shahu Chhatrapati issued orders to remove these traditional economic disabilities.

In May 1916, Shahu Chhatrapati ordered that the Mahars need not pay local fund. An order in 1918 says, "The services of a Mahar are very useful to the people and the administration of a village. The emoluments from their services are, therefore, transferred from watan to inam land. The land possessed by the Mahars was to be mentioned in the gavhakdar list instead of the baluta list."⁸ still another order made the watan lands of the Mahar rayatwara.⁹ Shahu Chhatrapati indicated that making inam lands rayatwara was a way of removing their gulangiri i.e. their servitude.

The Mahars who, thus, became the individual owners of their pieces of land could not be forced for veth. In a strongly worded order Shahu prohibited any person to demand forced labour (vet varala). If any ^awatnadar demanded forced labour, his watan land would be taken away and in case of a government servant demanding veth, he would be dismissed from the services,¹⁰ without pension.

The British ^{had} and labelled Mahar, Mang, Ramoshi and Berad as the criminal castes making it compulsory for its male-members to give hazeri (roll-call) at the nearest police-station. Shahu Chhatrapati abolished this practice by an order which says that the practice of hazeri makes honest living impossible.¹⁰

2) REMOVING THE SOCIAL DISABILITIES OF THE UNTOUCHABLES :

The untouchables suffered from social segregation whereby their touch, may even their shadow, was considered defiling a touchable. Shahu ordered that segregation should not be observed in the public institutes. In September 1919, the separate schools for the untouchables were closed. In public schools they were to be admitted along with the children of the touchables. The order says, "whereas no segregation is to be observed in the public schools, the students of all castes and religions should be made to sit together in the classroom."¹² In August 1919 by a notification all officers in the State — Revenue, Judicial and General -- Departments were ^hordered to observe equality, "If any officer", the order continued, "has

any objection to treat the untouchables according to the above order he will have to give resignation within six weeks from the receipt of this order and resign his post. He will be entitled to no pension. His Highness expects every subject of his should be treated like a human being and not like a beast."¹³ Shahu had observed that the untouchables were not allowed to enter within the compound of the educational institutes. Shahu, therefore, warned them: "The state quarters of the educational bodies are not given to them as their private property and so they have no right whatever to treat the so-called untouchable human beings so defiantly, but they are expected to give them every consideration. Institutions like education bodies are meant for poor people, and even the poorest untouchable human being has right to be treated on a footing of equality." The order further raises a poignant question: "They pay the taxes, why then should they be ill treated." Shahu expected that "private and state educational bodies should treat untouchables with greater respect and kindness than the touchables because touchables can make their way in education anyhow while untouchables are hopelessly helpless." Shahu did not stop with this appeal and request but gave threat that the grant given to the private bodies would be taken back and the property donated to them by the state would be taxed, if the untouchables were not given equal treatment. If this order were not acceptable to any member of the state educational staff he was asked to send his resignation.¹⁴ Similar order was sent to the charitable hospitals. In all these orders Shahu has given a precedent and has pointed out that the missionaries, Arya Samajists, Railway authorities do not make any difference between touchables

and untouchables. In October 1919 another order was published which was intended to remove segregation in public buildings, states houses and even on rivers and public wells. In all these orders reference has been given to the American Missionaries at Miraj and especially to Dr. Whale and Dr. Wanless which indicates that Shahu was influenced by the action and the attitude of the missionaries towards the untouchables and adopted their policy in his state.¹⁵

3) OPENING NEW FIELDS OF OCCUPATION TO THE UNTOUCHABLES :

Shahu Chhatrapati had started giving education to the untouchables but he did not stop there. If the education did not give employment or means of livelihood, there was every possibility that the untouchables who had started taking education after centuries of illiteracy would discard it as futile. Shahu, therefore, gave orders that the untouchables with proper qualifications would be appointed in the revenue department as bhag karkun, avval karkun and talathi.¹⁶ He was ready to appoint them on the posts of departmental heads in the state service.¹⁷ He, further, laid down that every peta and every mahal should have respectively five and three untouchable talathis.¹⁸ Many of the educated untouchables were given sanads, permitting them to be advocates in the courts of law. In his speech at the all India Third Untouchables Conference in Delhi, in February 1922, he said to them: "You should not stick to your traditional professions. You must take education and thereby acquire higher

posts in army and govern^ement services. You should also enter the independent professions like those of pleader, doctor and merchant. In my small kingdom, your caste-brothers are practisⁱng these professions. The Chairman of the Kolhapur Municipal Committee, I submit, is an untouchable.¹⁹

4) REMOVING RESTRICTIONS ON INTERCASTE MARRIAGES :

It stands to the credit of Shahu Chhatrapati that he saw the question of untouchability in the broad perspective of the caste system of India. In 1919 he made all the marriages, irrespective of the caste of the bride and bridegroom, ~~as~~ legal. This order overrode the prevalent practice among the Hindus and the Jains. After issuing this order he spoke about it next year in the All India Untouchable Conference held at Nagpur in May 1920, when he said that the speed of progress of this country would ultimately depend on the speed with which the caste-differences were destroyed. He further pointed out that caste-differences would be removed not only by inter-dining but also by inter-marriages. To promote such marriages, he pointed out, it was necessary to remove the legal difficulties. Though he had removed the difficulties in his kingdom, he advocated the need of supporting the Patel bill in the Legislative Council which was intended to remove legal barriers in the intercaste marriages in British India.

5) DISCONTINUING THE USE OF THE WORD 'ASPRUSHYA',

i.e., UNTOUCHABLE :

The scheduled castes were denigrated as the asprushyas by the other castes. Shahu Chhatrapati did not like the use of this word. In the above-mentioned Nagpur conference he said, "The leaders of the untouchable (asprushya) castes from all over India have gathered here today. It is highly derogatory to use the word asprushya to any person.... You are not asprushya. You are more intelligent, more brave, more thoughtful and more self sacrificing than many of the persons who call you asprushya. You are a part and parcel of the Indian nation. I do not regard you as asprushya. We are brothers and sisters with equal rights."

In November 1921, he ordered that the word asprushya should not be used; they should be called suryavanshi.²⁰ Thus even before the asprushya were referred to as harijan by Gandhiji they were referred to as Suryavanshi, the clan of Ram, by Shahu Chhatrapati in Kolhapur.

4) CONCLUSION :

Shahu Chhatrapati regarded practically all non-Brahmin castes as the backward castes which he, in April 1920, compared with a child which had begun to walk. The untouchables however according to Shahu had not reached even the stage of crawling. In his speech he further compared the untouchables with a weak child and pointed out that by giving special attention the physician tries to make it strong and healthy. The same policy he had adopted in his kingdom and expected that the other governments in India should do likewise.

Though social change is an inherent part of modern life, social reform is bound to be a slow process as reforms really aim at the change in attitudes ^{of} in the human beings. Governmental policy and action might initiate social reform but without the change in the minds of the people which are dominated by custom, tradition and the social environment it does not take root. Shahu Chhatrapati was aware of the change that had occurred in Kolhapur but he regarded this reform as only a beginning. He himself has evaluated his policy in this respect in his farewell address to Sir Stuart Fraser, his teacher. He says, "There is no doubt that Kolhapur has vastly changed since you saw it last. It is for you to judge in what direction the change has been. During all this time it has been my earnest wish and constant endeavour to do everything in my power to educate the masses, to inspire them with a higher standard of life, to root out superstition and with it the causes that have led to the singularly artificial state of our society, the inequalities between man and man that we see on all sides. The task is not easy, nor the work light. The inertia of ages has to be overcome and the old order of things has to be changed. What part I have played in bringing this about at least partially, it is not for me to say." He further acknowledged the help that he received from his brother Bapusaheb, the social and religious reformer^s, and especially the American Christian missionaries in the Kolhapur state. In conclusion he said to Sir Fraser, "You have heard and seen enough to give you a fairly accurate idea of what is and what has ~~you~~ to be done. Before the latter the former is but a drop in the ocean."²¹

Sir Fraser who knew Shahu as a boy and a man paid a tribute to him in 1922 in the following words :-

"Not long afterwards Sir Shahu Chhatrapati Maharaj passed away suddenly in his prime and thousands of his countrymen must have felt that with him they lost the light which had begun to illumine a world of new possibilities. His loss to India is indeed hard to overestimate, for as a social reformer he occupied a niche by himself among the Ruling Princes of India and the gap caused by his death is to be measured not only by what he achieved but by the magnitude of the work which still remains to be done. But he kindled a torch in the Maratha country, which others must, and I believe will, hand on. Its light can never now be extinguished and his name will not forgotten among the people he loved and served."²²

N_O_T_E_S

1. B. B. Jadhav, Rajarshi Shri Shahu Maharajanchi Bhashane (Kolhapur, 1971), p. 183.
2. Ibid., p. 186.
3. A. B. Latthe, Memoris of His Highness Shri Shahu Chhatrapati Maharaja of Kolhapur I. p. 134 (Bombay; 1924).
4. V. R. Shinde, Mazya Athavani va Anubhav (Poona; 1958), pp. 104 & 105.
5. A. B. Latthe, op.cit., II, p. 488.
6. A. B. Latthe, op. cit., II, p. 489.
7. B. B. Jadhav, op.cit., pp. 9 and 13.
8. Karveer Sarkarche Gazette (Hereafter referred to as K.S.G.), I, p. 128, dated 13 May 1916.
9. K.S.G., I, p. 138, order dated 25 August 1921.
10. K.S.G., I, p. 127, order dated 27 July 1921.
11. K.S.G., I, p. 120, order dated 17 August 1918.
12. A. B. Latthe, op.cit., II, p. 500.
13. Kolhapur Archives, Huzur Order No. 79, dated 20 August 1919.
14. Kolhapur Archives, Huzur Order No. 80, dated 20 August 1919.
15. Ibid., No. 81 dated 22 August 1919.
16. K.S.G., I, p. 120, dated 17 August 1918, order dated 10 August 1918.
17. Ibid., p. 123, dated 24 August 1918.

18. Ibid., p. 133 dated 30 August 1919,
peta and mahal were administrative divisions and the
talathi holds the village revenue record and, by the
nature of his work, comes in contact with the high
and the low in the village.
19. B. B. Jadhav, op.cit., p. 131.
20. K.S.G., I, p. 194, order dated 25 November 1921.
21. A. B. Latthe, op.cit.,
22. A. B. Latthe, op.cit.,