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16. Relevancy of Shahu Maharaj's Educational thoughts in Today's Scenario

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Abstract

The first Maharaja of the princely state of Kolhapur, Rajarshi Shahu Maharaj was born 26 June 1874 and died on May 6, 1922. He was considered a true democrat and social reformer. Greatly influenced by the contributions of social reformer Jyotiba Phule, Shahu Maharaj was an ideal leader and able ruler who was associated with many progressive and path-breaking social activities during his rule. From his coronation in 1894 till his demise in 1922, he worked for the cause of underprivileged and marginalized section of society in the state. He realized the importance of education for the upliftment of marginalized section of society. Free and compulsory primary education to all regardless of caste and creed was one of his most significant priorities. He worked tirelessly towards his revolutionary vision and progress in India. His feministic perspective is evident through his work.

Keywords: Chhatrapati Shahu, education, women, feminism, gender justice, laws.

Introduction

Shahu Maharaj was an invaluable gem in the history of Maharashtra. He occupied throne of Kolhapur for 28 years from 1894 to 1922. Shahu was a staunch follower of Mahatma Phule and devoted his whole life for the up-liftment of his subjects including untouchables. During this period he initiated various social reforms in his empire. His emphasis was on education and his aim was to make education available to masses. He introduced number of educational programs to promote education among the common people. He established hostels separately for different ethnicities and religions. He also established Miss Clarke boarding school for the socially quarantined segments of the community. He introduced several scholarships for the poor but meritorious students from backward castes so that they could continue their education. Shahu Ji tried his level best to make education and jobs available to all those living in his State.

Shahu Maharaj was a great visionary king of the state. He realized the importance of education for the upliftment of poor, marginalized and underprivileged section of the society. As education plays vital role in progress of nation, he wanted to bring them in the main stream of the progress. So he initiated free and compulsory primary education to all. He also established Vedic schools to learn the scriptures and propagate Sanskrit education among all. He also started special schools for the village heads to make them better administrators. He wanted to have social and gender equality among all strata of the society. There is a close relationship between education and economic empowerment (Ahmed et al 2010). Chha. Shahu Maharaj exercised this relationship through idea of free and compulsory education. He issued a declaration that it is the responsibility of every parent to send their children to school. If they fail to do so, they were fined one rupee for one month. Maharaj had constituted a committee to implement this system. To meet the challenges of free and compulsory education, he laid educational taxes on doctors, pleaders, officers, money lenders and Inamdars whose income was more than one hundred rupees. He believed that education is not only for socially and economically powerful people but it must be inclusive in nature. To increase the enrollment boys and girls in schools, Maharaj started scholarships and free-ships for the students belonging to lower caste and economically poor students. He issued an order to all colleges and schools to make their admissions sure. To promote education, Shahu Maharaj helped Satyashodhak Samaj. He also sanctioned grants to schools. In 1893, he came out to establish Satyashodhak schools for the students from non-Brahmin community in Kolhapur. He believed that to achieve nation's progress, along with traditional education, industrial and technical education is also important. As India is an agriculture country, Maharaj said that "Now-a-days agriculture is becoming methodical and to get success in agriculture we must read books on that subject." It reflects his visionary attitude in life. People working in different sectors like agriculture, trade, industry etc. have different needs and difficulties. Shahu Maharaj realized that education can only solve the problems of people. He also promoted military education, arts education etc. He appealed the workers to take education because he realized the fact that it is easy to unite educated people and society.

One of his revolutionary steps is women education. Shahu Maharaj was aware of the fact that women comprise half of the population of the state, so their involvement in social, political, economical fields is necessary. He expected gender equality in his state. He focused his attention on women's education. He made priority of his social activities to provide education

especially women belonging to lower class and caste. To promote women's education, Maharaj announced Radhabai Akkasaheb Maharaj scholarships and Shri Nandkuvar Maharani, Bhavanagar scholarships for girl students in the state. To solve girls' problems, he appointed lady servants. He also made provision of English language education for girls. Near about 8369 girls had taken English education through this system. For this he had appointed six lady teachers for training to Female Training College. One lady teacher was awarded scholarship on the condition that she should serve in this state. Shahu Maharaj wholeheartedly supported women's education. As per 'charity begins at home' he took many efforts to educate his eleven year old widowed daughter-in-law Indumati after his son's death in a tragic accident. He made her financially secure by arranging a regular monthly income. He financially supported Dr. Krishnabai Kelavkar to pursue higher medical education abroad and on her return, created a post for her in the government hospital. He really recognized the importance of women empowerment through education in the nation's progress.

Shahu Maharaj, besides encouraging women education, was aware of the exploitation of women in family and society. He understood the disastrous effects of social evils. He wanted to change this situation in the society, and to exercise gender justice in his Kolhapur state, he laid emphasis on women education and passed some legislating laws to check crimes against women. He introduced some laws for women protection. He also passed orders and notifications in the interest of women. In his empire, he supported women's education and educated women. His feministic approach is reflected through his firm stand on purdah system, child marriage and widow remarriage.

Being influenced by the work of Mahatma Phule for the cause of women, Shahu Maharaj followed Phule's footsteps towards the equal social status for women. By legislating laws he protected women's human right. In 1919, he passed Marriage Registration Act that gave legal approval to inter-caste, inter-religious and widow marriage. Because of this law women got courage to subvert the social unbearable restrictions imposed on them. Women came out of their domain of child and hearth. They became free to enter into a relationship of their own choice.

Shahu Maharaj raised in those days existing legal age of girl's marriage from 10 years to 14 years. He issued an order that the girls above 18 years were adults in their own right and did not require the consent of their parents for marriage. It was a revolutionary decision allowing girls to choose their life-path.

The Prevention of Cruelty to Women Act was another milestone towards betterment of women's life. According to Shahu Maharaj cruelty is defined as physical and mental torture. He also included insults, verbal and physical abuse, physical assaults and suspicion on woman's character by men as acts of cruelty. He covered all women including wife, widow, daughter-in-law, even step-mother. He had recognized much earlier a famous declaration about women's oppression by radical feminist Kate Millet: "Every woman is a victim of rape." He used the word oppression related to women decades before the second wave of feminism in 1960s.

Shahu Maharaj also brought "The Kolhapur Divorce Act" which states "it is better to make specific provision in the law itself to allow the husband and wife to divorce and thus build this relationship on a sound footing." According to him option of divorce is necessary in order to enjoy a good marriage. Because of this act women got a chance to give up painful marriage life.

In those days it was a tradition to dedicate girls in the name of God in which girl child has to break all relation with the relatives and does not have any right in inheritance. Women dedicated through this tradition were known as 'Jogin', 'Bhavin', 'Devdasi' etc. Through this Devdasi Prohibition Act Chh Shahu Maharaj tried to uproot this immoral tradition. He was totally against such kind of exploitation of women. Provision of the Act of Inheritance was useful to retain their legal right in family.

Thus Chh Shahu Maharaj took up the women's question where the Phules had left it. He expected women's public contribution in the state. His feministic approach is clearly visible.

Chha. Shahu Maharaj was not satisfied only with the provision of primary education but he also promoted higher education. Maharaj sent many students to Bombay, Pune, Madras etc. for taking professional education.

From the bottom of heart, Shahu Maharaj opposed caste discrimination and took many initiatives to abolish untouchability. He introduced reservation for the untouchables in government jobs. He issued a royaldecree in his princely state to treat all human equal and to give equal access to the untouchables to public utilities like common wells, schools, hospitals and common buildings. He was committed to abolish untouchability in the state. Even he was ready to give up his throne for the service of dalit or lower class people. He helped Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar for his education and his newspaper, 'The Muknayak'. Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar appropriately described him as the "Pillar of Social Democracy."

Above all he opined that education is basic right of people and is necessary for social and economical equality in the state. Education enables to face the basic challenges in life.

Conclusion

Shahu Maharaj was a true visionary social reformer. His policy of education was a mixture of many factors. His genuine efforts for maintaining social, economical and gender equality in society are remarkable in the history of nation. He was of the view that only because of education, Bahujan Samaj could get rid of social evils like poverty and superstition. His great deal of contribution educational, social and even agriculture reforms shows his visionary approach. His realization of need of water harvesting in those days makes us to know its importance in today's scenario. His vision and strategies are still as fresh as the blooming flower in the midst of nature. Today the whole nation remembers his contribution, sacrifice and courage to work for the set goals.

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