

Shahu Maharaj's Contribution To Women Empowerment**Manish Surendrarao Gomase**Research Scholar,
School of Language, Literature and
Culture Studies,
SRTM University, Nanded – 431606.**Abstract:**

Shahu Maharaj was one of the most important revolutionary reformists in Maharashtra. He was regarded as a benevolent king due to his devotion for the cause of social reformation. The Maharashtrian society is an eco-politico-cultural system based on certain ideologies, its nature is patriarchal that functions to inculcate a hierarchy of the male section in almost every sphere of life and the women are ostracised, marginalised and controlled. He sought the best solution to the issue that is education; it could/can empower the women. For this, he established girls' colleges and hostels and gave the scholarships to the girls. He also endeavoured to bring the social changes introducing the laws. He intended to bring equality between men and women. It can impart a respected position to women and let them live with dignity, honour and social status. He did not cease his attempt to the state of Kolhapur but he extended it throughout Maharashtra.

Key words: women, empowerment, education, social status.

Society is an eco-politico-cultural system based on certain ideologies. Its nature is patriarchal that functions to inculcate a hierarchy through variety of covert means – biology, politics and social system particularly family-entrench social and political inequality. The women are ostracized, marginalized and controlled in every sphere of life. It made/makes their life miserable, pathetic and wretched. It was necessary to uplift them from such situation. Shahu Maharaj, the king of Kolhapur and the leader of the *Bahujan* worked for an empowerment of women. He introduced the laws, established education institutions, gave fellowships and scholarships and made a contemporary society (especially women section) aware of evil practices.

The social condition of the period of Shahu Maharaj in Kolhapur is described in A Review of Education in Bombay State, 1855 to 1965 as: At the beginning of the nineteenth century, the social status of women in this State was far from satisfactory. Among the Hindu, women had hardly any property rights; child marriages were extremely common or rather the order of the day; polygamy was allowed and was fairly common among the higher or well-to-do classes; hardly any vocation was open to women and the social and moral code was highly discrimination against them, among the higher castes or high class families, widow marriage and divorce were forbidden, the evil of 'Pardha' had spread and its observance had almost become a distinction of higher feudal status.

It certainly reinforces light on the condition of women. For them, hearth and child were regarded as the sphere of their life. They were trapped in domesticity. Shahu Maharaj initiated to stretch his co-operative hands to empower the women. He realised that education could bring the changes in the life of women. So he put the first step towards women empowerment with his education policy. He said: There was a great loss of nation due to lack of education among the non-Brahmins and dalits. The priests became numerous in the temples and their interference should be stopped by making our schools as our temples, the knowledge of true religion must be exposed.

Free and Compulsory Primary Education to All:

Shahu Maharaj encouraged women to take education as well as made a primary education compulsory to all. He sanctioned an order on 8th Sept., 1917 to make free and compulsory primary education to all in Kolhapur state. He not only passed the Act of Compulsory and Free Education but implemented it rigidly by fining the parents for absence of their children at the rate of One Rupee per month,' 19 According to him, development of any country without education is impossible. Good leaders never emerge in a country which is drawn in illiteracy. Therefore, it is necessary to introduce a free and compulsory education in Hindustan.' This order was brought into implementation from 30th Sept., 1917.

Emphasis on Higher Education:

He promoted not only a primary education but also a higher education. He established a Training College for Women to meet the need of woman teachers. It was made compulsory for students that after completion of their education, they had to teach the girls in the schools. He sent Krushnabai Kelavkar to Grant Medical College for medical education. In 1902, he appointed her as a Assistant Medical Officer at 'Albert Edward Medical Hospital'. He again granted a scholarship to her for specialization in Gynecology to London. After successfully completing the course, she rejoined her duty in 1903. During 1910-11 he sent 15 students and 10 students in 191-12 for taking higher education at Bombay, Pune, Madras and other places. He also sent some students to the Medical College, Bombay, Medical School Puna, Training College and Deccan College, Pune. Once in a discussion with Tofkhane and Bhaskararao Jadhav, he said 'If women would get a proper education, which make them understand the difference between good and bad; if they would get it from the teachers of good moral, they would never go on the wrong ways.'

Establishment of Hostels:

Along with education institutes, it is essential to have lodging facility. So he decided to establish the hostels for the students. Victoria Maratha Boarding House for the Maratha students was started on 18th April, 1901. Later on, he started the hostel facility for Lingayat, Swarawat, Panchal, Jain, Muslim, Chamdevshilpi, Devdnya, Vaishya, Dhor-Chamar, Sutar, Nabhik, etc. castes students. Each hostel building has open place, permanent production tools and other things that made the poor students able to earn for themselves.

Scholarships and Fellowships:

He gave the fellowships and scholarships to encourage the Bahun to take an education. He declared a financial assistance to 15% students on 20th May, 1911; it was given first to the poor students and later on to the other students. He granted a scholarship to Krushnabai Kelavkar, brilliant student, for specialization in Gynecology and sent to London. He also declared the scholarships of Rs. 40 each, in the name of Shri Radhabai Akkasaheb Maharaj Scholarship and Shri Nandkunwar Maharani Bhavnagar Scholarship for first two girls in the ranking of standard IV of Marathi medium schools in Kolhapur and Bawda.

Inter-caste and Inter-religion Marriage:

Inter-caste and inter-religion Marriage and Marriage registration Act was enacted on 12th July 1919, in a period when there was tradition of child marriages. It took the decision to enact the law after getting influenced by Patel Bill proposed by Vithalbai Patel in 1918 in the central legislature. It stepped towards an annihilation of caste and integration among religions.

Widow Remarriage:

There was freedom of remarriage in backward castes however, there was a strict patriarchal hold on the upper castes section that did not allow to remarriage of widows. In addition to this, the tradition of removing hair of widows was practiced in the Brahmin, they had to live very deprived, reserved and isolated life. Shahu Maharaj broke the shackles of such strong patriarchal practices; he

passed the law related to Widow Remarriage in 1917 in his state of Kolhapur. It also registered the number of widows in the state.

The Veil Tradition:

The Veil tradition was observed in higher castes, especially aristocratic families, the Maratha knights and the *vatandars*. It was burden and restriction to women's free movement in the domestic and the out-side sphere. It was adversely affecting the women, so Shahu Maharaj introduced the law.

Divorce Act and Security of Women Rights after Divorce:

He introduced Divorce Act and Security of Women Rights after Divorce. This act was applicable to all religions except Christian and Parsi. The muslim women were given protection under this law though the talaak was practiced; they along with their children got the protection. He also brought amendments in the law related to hereditary in 1920.

Act against Harassment of Women:

The law related to prohibition of harassment of women was implemented on 2nd August 1919. According to the law, insults, abuses, verbal assaults and suspicion of women's character by men were considered the acts of cruelty. It covered almost all kind of cruelty and harassment on women. It brought the changes in the backward class community and women.

Prohibition of the Devdasi Tradition:

In the contemporary society, there was a tradition of dedicating girls in the name of God, largely practiced by backward class. It produced the traditions of Devdasi. Jagtin, Murli, Bhavin, etc. Dedicating a girl in the name of God meant that she becomes a child of god breaking all the relations with her natural parents and does not have any right to succession or inheritance, while, on the other hand, since she is left to God she has been getting certain specific rights in the concerned temples and social legal status also. This was an unfortunate group of women left by their husbands. They were sexually exploited and marginalized within the certain sphere. It was also a stigma like untouchability. Shahu Maharaj introduced the law related to it to remove the stigma.

Annihilation of Caste:

He seriously took into consideration the status of women within the caste system and the Varna system that exploit them vertically and horizontally. The Caste system based on the Varna system is ideologically constructed that errands the certain section and discards the other. The Caste system is directly linked to patriarchy that marginalizes, ostracises and constrains the women. They are marginalized twice, primarily, by the outsiders as woman and secondarily by her male kins as woman family member. So an annihilation of caste and demolition of ideological institution of patriarchy are essential factors in emancipation of women. So he attempted to annihilate the caste system.

In short, Shahu Maharaj endeavoured to unite the society which was divided into different caste, class, religion, gender, etc. Realising the status of women, he especially paid his attention towards women empowerment through introduction of education and passing the certain laws. It not only empowered but also gave protection and security to them. His contribution to women empowerment is important from historical point of view and social connotation.

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