



RELATIONS BETWEEN RAJARSHI SHAHU MAHARAJ AND DR. AMBEDKAR

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ABSTRACT:

The relation between Rajarshi Shahu Maharaj of Kolhapur and Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar is one of the important chapters in the history of social reform movements in Maharashtra. Rajarshi, himself was a great social reformer of that time. Being a great visionary, he understood the great scholarship and dedication of Dr. Ambedkar towards the mission of upliftment of downtrodden. Hence, he supported Dr. Ambedkar till his unfortunate death. Not only, that, the successors of Rajarshi also supported the cause of Dr. Ambedkar. Dr. Ambedkar also maintained great respect for Rajarshi Shahu Maharaj and his contribution to contemporary reform movement.

Key Words: *Rajarshi Shahu Maharaj-Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar-Untouchability-Mangaon Conference*

The first meeting between Rajarshi Shahu Maharaj & Dr. Ambedkar was undoubtedly unique one in the history not only of Maharashtra, but of the whole of India. But unfortunately, the association did not live long. The untimely demise of Shahu Maharaj ended this association, which was the most tragic event for Maharashtra & ultimately for the whole India.

Dr. Ambedkar had gone to America (1913) for higher education due to the valuable support of scholarship offered by the generous king of Baroda, Maharaji Sayajirao Gaikwad. He completed his M.A. & Ph.D. & later went to the London University for M.Sc. & Bar-at-Law. However, the Baroda Government did not agree to extend the tenure for scholarship. Therefore, helplessly, Dr. Ambedkar had to return India (1917). Immediately, according to the terms laid down in the scholarship, he had to join for the service at the princely state of Baroda. Due to

his caste, he faced several obstacles in getting a place to stay in. Even in the office, he was insulted by the so called high-caste employees, though lower in position. Sayajirao Maharaj, the ruling sovereign of Baroda himself found helpless in helping Dr. Ambedkar to save from insults & injustices. Consequently, out of desperation, Dr. Ambedkar had to resign from the service & return to Mumbai.

By this time (1918) Shahu Maharaj must have heard about Dr. Ambedkar. He became greatly delighted to know that a young person belonging to *Mahar*community had an opportunity to go to foreign countries & return to India having accomplished such higher degrees. Naturally, he felt great curiosity to see this young person. Khairmode, the biographer of Dr. Ambedkar, says that Mr. Dattoba Pawar, an educated social worker from Kolhapur who; himself belonged to untouchable community, was acquainted to Dr. Ambedkar. He, who for the first time informed Shahu Maharaj about Dr. Ambedkar. Dhananjay Keer, a noted biographer of Dr. Ambedkar has also agreed on this point & asserts that Mr. Dattoba Powar was responsible for the first meeting between these great personalities. Khairmode has stated the year of meeting as 1920.

On the other hand, Bhai Madhavrao Bagal disagrees with the above & says that it was not Dattoba Powar, but Mr. Dattoba Dalvi, who made the meeting possible. Bagal has written this in his autobiographical book - '*Aathawani*' (the memoir) in which he claims that Dalvi himself had told him about this meeting. Dalvi was one of the best artists in Kolhapur. Shahu Maharaj had sent Mr. Dalvi to Dr. Ambedkar, who expressed Maharaja's desire to see him. Later, accordingly, the meeting took place, however, not in 1920 as Khairmode states. It is informed that before 1920 Dr. Ambedkar started a fortnightly which was financially helped in the beginning by Maharaja by donating Rs. 2500/-. It means clearly that both Maharaj & Dr. Ambedkar definitely have met prior to the beginning of the fortnightly & had discussion regarding movements for the betterment of untouchables, which required some kind of newspaper for awakening them. Mr. Khairmode himself has admitted that due to the inspiration from Dr. Ambedkar, a delegate of activists from untouchable community had met Maharaj in 1919 at Mumbai for the cause of

issuing a newspaper complementary to the movements for untouchables. It is possible that Shahu Maharaj & Dr. Ambedkar's meeting had taken place before the delegation's meeting at Mumbai. Dr. Pantavane, a noted researcher of Ambedkar movements & Prof. Dhammpal Ratnakar also agreed upon the year 1919 as the authentic year of this meeting.

THE 'MUKNAYAK' & CONFERENCE AT MANGAON:

Dr. Ambedkar gave a meaningful name to his fortnightly i.e. the '*Muknayak*', the one which professed to lead and give expression to repressed thoughts & opinions of those communities which had been 'speechless' rather maintained speechless & exiled for the centuries. Though the names of associated activists of Dr. Ambedkar appeared as editors of '*Muknayak*', it was Dr. Ambedkar who provided the motives for & in the beginning, used to write the editorials of '*Muknayak*'. One historical truth is necessary to be stated here. The advertisement of '*Muknayak*' was rejected in its beginning by '*Kesari*'. It was quite antithetical because LokmanyaTilak had expressed his progressive thoughts in regard to the eradication of untouchability at the first conference on 'Eradication of Untouchability' held at Mumbai in 1918. Yet, '*Kesari*' had not published even a single line of that speech. On this background, it was not a great surprise that '*Kesari*' rejected the advertisement of '*Muknayak*'. On the other hand, ChhatrapatiShahu cooperated with '*Muknayak*' right from its inception. There are many documents showing how Shahu Maharaj extended his hand in cooperation to Dr. Ambedkar from time to time.

Dr. Ambedkar could establish close relations with Shahu Maharaj in 1920 only when he came to Kolhapur. The conference at Mangaon (a village in the princely state of Kolhapur) was mainly motivated by Chhatrapati Shahu Maharaj who participated in it enthusiastically.

He expressed his belief on Dr. Ambedkar's leadership of untouchables who was capable & quite suitable as a leader of untouchables. While expressing his satisfaction, he said to the gathered public, "You have found your leader; therefore, I congratulate you all with my whole heart. I am sure Dr. Ambedkar will never feel at ease without emancipating you. Not only this but I am sure, that a time will come & he will be held as a leader of whole India. My heart tells

me so." It was Shahu Maharaj's visionary outlook & prediction which came true & the history of modern India is the strong proof of it.

At this Mangaon conference, while honoring Dr. Ambedkar's scholarship and his intellect, Rajarshi Shahu Maharaj said, "Is there any objection to call him (Dr. Ambedkar) a 'Pundit'? Why should there be? He is a real gain of a pundit. The Arya Samajists, Buddhists & Christian would have gladly accepted him in their religions. But, he did not enter into their religious for that you must thank him & I, too, thank him." In this conference a very important resolution was proposed that "Rajarshi Shahu Chhatrapati had emancipated the community of untouchables from their slavery & tried to establish social equality in his state. Such a noble work nobody had done in India, therefore, he deserved many hearty congratulations. For this reason, let all sociality exiled untouchables & mass community celebrate his birthday as a festival". This resolution was passed in the conference.

Chhatrapati Shahu Maharaj, at this occasion, publically invited Dr. Ambedkar for meals & arranged a communal feast at the camp of Sontali. Maharaj treated Dr. Ambedkar in his visit to Kolhapur with a great honor & in the end, at farewell; he honored him with '*Jari-Pataka*' (a special turban from Kolhapur) as a token of his affection. While accepting this honor, Dr. Ambedkar moved with emotions & replied, "I will try my best to honor this turban through all my life." It is known that Dr. Ambedkar kept his words by way of dedicating himself to the cause of emancipation of untouchability till his end. In fact, the public life of Dr. Ambedkar began with his Mangaon conference which he admitted later in his public speech in 1940.

GROWING CO-OPERATION & RELATIONS:

After the Mangaon conference, only within a month & quarter, Dr. Ambedkar & Rajarshi Shahu Maharaj met again at Nagpur on occasion of 'All India Ex-Communicated Society's Conference' (30 May 1920). This meeting strengthened the friendly ties between them further more. In that meeting a burning problem of ensuing political reforms & accordingly, the representation of untouchables on legislative council was discussed. In reality, that was Dr. Ambedkar who himself organized this conference with the view to clarify to the

government regarding the role of untouchables. In this regard Dr. Ambedkar bitterly criticized the so called role of Maharshi Vitthal Ramaji Shinde regarding above mentioned problem. He succeeded in making people registering their remonstrations against him. As the result of it, the Nagpur conference made it clear that the leadership & the reins of movements for untouchables were transferring to a rising, able leadership of Dr. Ambedkar. Rajarshi Shahu Maharaj had this very expectation from Dr. Ambedkar.

During the later period, both continued their ties with regular correspondence. Dr. Ambedkar had written a letter to Rajarshi Shahu Maharaj about establishment of a committee working for emancipation of untouchables, for which some funds should be raised & Rajarshi Shahu Maharaj should adorn this committee by pontificating in it. In reply to this letter Rajarshi Shahu Maharaj wrote (7th June 1920) "I may happily allow you to include my name in it. The institution so formed for this noble cause, I assure you that I will readily take responsibility in it either as a vice president or even as an assistant secretary. I think you should form an 'All India Depressed Classes Education Fund Institute' on which some responsible, reputed & active persons be appointed as employees & on behalf of this institute some people be sent on deputations at various places for the work of raising funds, which will be the most convenient way. I strongly desire to hold the position of an Assistant secretary, the work of which I will perform quite gladly". The leadership of any movement run for the Dalits should be led by a leader like Dr. Ambedkar & his role in such movements will always be due of a co-operator which was an honest desire of Rajarshi Shahu Maharaj which clearly reflected in this letter.

It was already referred above that at the conference of Mangaon, 26th June i.e. the birthday of Rajarshi Shahu Maharaj was resolved to be celebrated by all untouchables as a festival. The same resolution was once again passed at Nagpur Conference. In accordance with this occasion, Dr. Ambedkar had decided to publish a special issue of '*Muknayak*'. A letter written by him to Rajarshi Shahu Maharaj in this regard on 13th June 1920 runs as, "I am coming to Kolhapur for getting detail information about His Highness's income & other matters for the special issue of '*Muknayak*'. Unfortunately information regarding

whether Dr. Ambedkar came to Kolhapur or he published the special issue on the said topic, is not available anywhere.

During this time, Dr. Ambedkar was engaged as a professor in Sydenham College to earn for his livelihood. Yet, his attention was focused on his incomplete education. For its completion, Dr. Ambedkar had to go to London in July 1920. Rajarshi Shahu Maharaj extended financial help to him for his higher education. At the same time, he himself visited Dr. Ambedkar's residence in a Cement Chal at Parel. Not only this, but he offered brotherly affection toward Ramabai, the wife of Dr. Ambedkar, as his younger sister & promised Dr. Ambedkar that he would take her to Kolhapur i.e. her '*Maker*' (mother's home) until Dr. Ambedkar's return. From this kind expression we can imagine what a great affection & generosity Rajarshi Shahu Maharaj extended towards Dr. Ambedkar! On this, Dr. Ambedkar thanked Rajarshi Shahu Maharaj from his bottom of heart & politely said, "I am making almost all kinds of arrangement for my family in Mumbai. I would not like to give any troubles to you." This meeting of these two great personalities turned out unfortunately, the last one (May 1920).

At the time of his departure from Mumbai, Rajarshi Shahu Maharaj gave a letter to Dr. Ambedkar which was to be delivered to his friend in England, Sir Alfred Peas. In this letter Rajarshi Shahu Maharaj had requested Peas to cooperate with Dr. Ambedkar in his work of awakening public opinion in England for making it favorable on the side of Non Brahmins in India.

As per Rajarshi Shahu Maharaj's expectations, Dr. Ambedkar met the leaders in England and awakened them regarding the movement by Non-Brahmin communities. He began publishing articles in the newspapers over there. He even paid visit to Lord Montague, the then secretary of states. In his letter to Rajarshi Shahu Maharaj (3rd Feb. 1921), he wrote, "Mantague's behavior shaped by the recommendations by liberal leaders. However, now onwards, I am sure, he will not speak against the movement by Non-Brahmins and will not look at it with contempt & scorn. In reality, no one here cares to know about the Non-Brahmin movement. It is a matter of regret. When the reformation Act was under preparation, there was no able Indian who has

convinced them about the importance of this movement. Therefore, the people in opposition of this movement easily could convince that the movement was against the Brahmins. The democratic aspects of the movement were kept hidden & its nature was distorted. Such distorted picture has still been retained by the common British public. As now the Act of political Reforms has been confirmed, no one cares to understand how fiercely the discrimination in India has been observed. I think, we must begin preparing for the future times from right now. Therefore, whenever I get an opportunity to meet an English person I try my best to explain him how complex & inter-dependent the social & political problems in India are. The incident has already taken place & hence, the results cannot be seen immediately, yet, whether they were failure or what that can be determined by the time itself."

Dr. Ambedkar ran a public awakening movement in England for the just rights of Non-Brahmins at the same time he was taking care of his studies. Here in India, Rajarshi Shahu Maharaj & Dalit Communities were anxiously waiting for his arrival to motherland. Rajarshi Shahu Maharaj was very particular about how to help to increase Dr. Ambedkar's reputation & prestige among people even in his absence. In February 1922, an 'All India Conference of Untouchable Communities' was held at Delhi. Rajarshi Shahu Maharaj was the Chief Guest of this conference. In his speech, Rajarshi Shahu Maharaj remembered Dr. Ambedkar without fail & he said of him in honor:" In fact, the honor of being the Chief Gust of this conference should have gone to the most enthusiastic & well-educated Mr. Ambedkar. He is more learned & proud young man than me. He has worked hard for your welfare without rest, but today, he couldn't attend this conference, because, at present he is in England for completion of his studies."

From England, Dr. Ambedkar continued his communication with Rajarshi Shahu Maharaj with the same affection & affinity. In his letter to Maharaj (4th September 1921), he wrote that as the value of pound in England had decreased, he faced financial difficulties, so Maharaj should sent him 200 pounds for expenditure. With this request, in the same letter at the end he wrote: "I hope you are in the pink of your health. We require your presence very badly because you are the pillar of a progressing social, democratic great movement in India."

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The great movement began by Mahatma Phule & continued up to Rajarshi Shahu Maharaj was a mass movement for emancipation & development of untouchables in order to establish social democracy. Rajarshi Shahu Maharaj was a real strong supporter of this movement. The reference to which Dr. Ambedkar made was appropriate in all respects.

And Dr. Ambedkar, while yet in England received the heartbreaking news of the demise of such a great supporter of social democratic movement. He was greatly shocked & moved by this news. He wrote a letter of condolence to Rajaram Maharaj, the elder son of Rajarshi Shahu Chhatrapati, he says "This critical incident has been extremely painful & sorrowful for me for two reasons. His death deserted me from my personal great friend & the untouchable community lost its greatest will-wisher. I myself greatly grieve the death of Maharaj & participate your & widowed Maharani's unfathomable sorrow & express my condolence with my whole heart."

Dr. Ambedkar, even after the death of Rajarshi Shahu Maharaj, always remembered as respectfully & fondly. He always referred him with utmost respect. When in 1940 he had come to Kolhapur for the Dalit Praja Parishad (Dalit Public Conference), he said in his speech, "One thing is clear about Kolhapur & that I myself & my untouchable community are very proud of it. It was in Kolhapur itself that Shahu Maharaj raised & founded the democratic system."

CONCLUSION:

The relations between Rajarshi Shahu Maharaj & Dr. Ambedkar were not only on the level of social movement, but also on the personal level, that too very intimate. The instances of this affection & intimacy as described by biographer Khairmode that Maharaj considered Ramabai as his young sister & that Rajaram Maharaj & Akkasaheb, son & daughter of Rajarshi Shahu Maharaj used to call Dr. Ambedkar as '*Mama*' (maternal uncle) are such evidences.

The other aspect of this relationship is that both had extreme respect for each other. Though Rajarshi Shahu Maharaj was a king of a Kolhapur state & elder than Dr. Ambedkar, he treated him as his equal. Rajarshi Shahu Maharaj had emerged as deliverer of mass community. Yet, he never exhibited his

kingship and his greatness while dealing with Dr. Ambedkar, either in his behavior, speaking, in correspondence, speech etc. on the other hand he treated Dr. Ambedkar as more learned friend of him. This politeness of Rajarshi Shahu Maharaj was paid in the same coin by Dr. Ambedkar also. Many instances show that Dr. Ambedkar revered Rajarshi Shahu Maharaj immensely.

There is a letter written by Rajarshi Shahu Maharaj to Dr. Ambedkar in which Maharaj addresses him as "*Lokmanya Ambedkar*". The letter dates c.1920. Isn't this address not enough to show how he gave respect Dr. Ambedkar? Isn't it visionary about Dr. Ambedkar's bright destiny? The address like '*Lokmanya*,' in those days was used only for Tilak. Maharaj used it for Dr. Ambedkar & in a way predicted that one day Dr. Ambedkar also will be a '*Lokmanya*' (admitted & accepted by public) leader of Dalit community all over India. This indicates the generosity of Maharaj on one hand, & on the other, it indicates his vision. It is perfectly right then, that Rajarshi Shahu Maharaj has been attributed with the title - 'Rajarshi'-a king & the sage.' The history made Maharaja's vision perfectly true. Dr. Ambedkar, in his later life received immense popularity like Lokmanya Tilak on national level. As Dr. Ambedkar was honored by Rajarshi Shahu Maharaj & the public alike, he received encouragement in ample degree. With financial help offered by Rajarshi Shahu Maharaj, Dr. Ambedkar could stay in England & complete his education of Bar-at-Law. After completion, he faced a dire financial difficulty. He needed Rs. 2000, for which he wrote on urgent letter to Rajarshi. Unfortunately, before receiving this letter, Rajarshi passed away. Secretary of the Court, Sir R. V. Sabanis handed this letter to Chhatrapati Rajaram Maharaj, who without a moment delay ordered to send Rs. 2000/- to Dr. Ambedkar. Chhatrapati Rajaram Maharaj too, observed the promises made by Rajarshi Shahu Maharaj. Dr Ambedkar, on his return to India, came to Kolhapur & meet Chhatrapati Rajaram Maharaj. He expressed his feelings of absolute gratitude toward both Chhatrapatis. He said on this occasion, "Whenever the princely state of Kolhapur need my service, I would certainly be here & serve you & people in whatever way & capacity & might." And, Dr. Ambedkar then paid the great & humble tribute to the memories of dear Rajarshi Chhatrapati Shahu Maharaj.

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