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## **Chhatrapati Shahu Maharaj: The Progressive King**

Chhatrapati Shahu Maharaj, also known as Rajarshi Shahu Maharaj, was considered a true democrat and social reformer. Chhatrapati Shahu Maharaj was an exceptional gem in the history of Maharashtra. Even though he was not born in this 'so-called' untouchable class, he still spent all of his life trying to rid our society from ill practices such as Untouchability. Chhatrapati Shahu Maharaj was an ideal leader and able ruler associated with many progressive and ground-breaking activities during his rule. From his time becoming king in 1894 till his death in 1922, he worked tirelessly for the lower caste subjects in his state.



Chhatrapati Shahu Maharaj was born in the Ghatge family in Kagal village of the Kolhapur district as a Yeshwantrao Ghatge to Jaisingrao and Radhabai on June 26, 1874. Jaisingrao Ghatge was the village chief, while his wife Radhabai hailed from the royal family of Mudhol. Anandibai, the widow of the late Shivaji IV, later adopted him. He became the king of

Kolhapur on April 2, 1894. He completed his education at the Rajkumar College in Rajkot and took lessons on administrative affairs from Sir Stuart Fraser, a representative of the Indian Civil Services. During his accession, Yeshwantrao was renamed Chhatrapati Shahu Maharaj. He was married to Lakshmibai, the daughter of a Maratha nobleman from Baroda in 1891.

From 1894 to 1922, Chhatrapati Shahu ruled Kolhapur for 28 years, and during this period, he did uncountable social reforms in his empire. His goal was to make education available to the masses. He introduced several educational programs to promote education in his region. The condition of the society at that time was such that no one was ready to live and study together due to untouchability. To resolve this problem, he built separate hostels for different ethnicities like 'Panchals,' 'Devadnya,' 'Nabhik,' 'Shimpi,' and 'Dhor-Chambhar' communities. He started several scholarship programs for poor but deserving students from backward castes. He also started compulsory free primary education for all in his state. Chhatrapati Shahu Maharaj devised the earliest affirmative programs by promising proper employment to the students. Chhatrapati Shahu Maharaj pushed great efforts to abolish caste segregation and untouchability. His Royal Decree was to his people to treat every member of the society equally and give the untouchables equal access to public places like wells and ponds and establishments like schools and hospitals. He legalized inter-caste marriages and made a lot of efforts for the betterment of the 'Dalits.'

Chhatrapati Shahu Maharaj also worked towards the betterment of the women in his empire. He established schools to educate women and spoke vocally about women's education. He introduced a law banning the Devadasi system. He legalized widow remarriages in 1917 and made efforts toward stopping child marriages.

He introduced several projects that made people self-sufficient in their chosen professions. Chhatrapati Shahu Maharaj Spinning and Weaving Mill, the establishment of co-operative societies for farmers introduced by him to free his people from intermediaries in trading. He made credits available to farmers looking to buy equipment to improve agricultural practices. He even started the King Edward Agricultural Institute to teach farmers how to increase crop yield and related technologies. He started the Radhanagari Dam project on February 18, 1907, which was completed in 1935. This dam stood as a testament to Chhatrapati Shahu's vision toward the welfare of his subjects and made Kolhapur self-sufficient in water.

Chhatrapati Shahu Maharaj was introduced to Dr. Ambedkar in year 1917. He was greatly impressed by the great intellect of young Bhimrao and his revolutionary ideas regarding untouchability. The two met several times during 1917-1921 and discussed possible ways to eradicate the negatives of caste segregation. He even donated Rs.2,500 to Dr. Ambedkar when he started his newspaper 'Mooknayak' on January 31, 1921, and contributed more lately for the exact cause. Their association lasted till Chhatrapati Shahu Maharaj's death in 1922.

Chhatrapati Shahu Maharaj was the first ruler who started the reservation for backward classes in his empire. When he was asked about his reason for starting the reservation, he said “If you have some Horses who are fit and some Horses who are weak, then don’t you give them separate kinds of diets? Only when all Horses are fit, then the race would be equal. Until then we will have to feed them based on their requirements.”

Chhatrapati Shahu Maharaj did a lot of things to end the caste system that was present at his time. He would go to the stall of a tea maker who was considered as an untouchable, and would drink tea made by him. He gave various government grants to the tribals communities and gave them some land, so that they could build a permanent home for themselves. He also built many Hostels so that people of various castes would not have any problem while studying in his empire. These Hostels were proof of Chhatrapati Shahu Maharaja’s future thinking, because at that time no other empire was doing such reforms. Chhatrapati Shahu Maharaj started his journey because of his own personal experiences, but he put them aside and looked at this problem from a social angle and just like how a skilled surgeon conducts his operations to remove some impurities form patients’ body, Chhatrapati Shahu Maharaj also did the same for the ill practices in our society.

His life teaches us that the questions of the so-called untouchable society, are the questions of Hindu society as whole and to remove them, mainly this so-called touchable Society should do something about them. This ideology of Chhatrapati Shahu Maharaj is like a beacon for the people, which helps us walk on the path of true equality.

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