

# Rajarshi Shahu Maharaj: The Architect of Modern Policies

Today, we live in a world where majority of the members of our society live a respectable life without discriminations based on caste, creed, religion etc. But during the period when casteism was at the peak in our nation; that's when he came in power one of the strongest revolutionaries of all times whose policies or notions could be a synonym for foresightedness and equality which inspired and later were constitutionally made and implemented nationwide.



Rajarshi Shahu Maharaj was one the most popular King with an absolute vision. Originally born as Yashwant in the Ghatge family in Kagal on 26<sup>th</sup> June 1874, later adopted by Anandibai after the death of Shivaji Maharaj IV of the Kolhapur Sansthan and renamed him as 'Shahu' on 17th March in 1884. His reign in princely state Kolhapur lasted from 1894 to 1922 during this period he addressed various issues, introduced progressive policies.

"सर्व जातीच्या पुढाऱ्यांना माझे सांगणे आहे की, आपली दृष्टी दूरवर ठेवा. जातीभेद मोडणे इष्ट आहे, जरूर आहे. जातीभेद पाळणे पाप आहे. देशोन्नतीच्या मार्गात हा अडथळा आहे. हा दूर करण्याचे प्रयत्न जोराने केले पाहिजेत, ही जाणीव पक्की ध्यानात ठेवून मग ह्या दिशेचा प्रयत्न म्हणून जाती परिषदा भरवावा. जातिबंधने दृढ करणे, जातीभेद तीव्र होणे हा परिणाम अशा परिषदांचा होऊ नये, ही खबरदारी घेतली पाहिजे." - राजर्षी शाहू महाराज

**Meaning:** "My message to the leaders of all castes is this: keep your vision far-sighted. Breaking caste discrimination is desirable and necessary. To uphold caste divisions is a sin. It is an obstacle in the path of national progress. Strong efforts must be made to remove this barrier, and this awareness should be firmly kept in mind. Only then should caste conferences be organized as an effort in this direction. Care must be taken that such conferences do not

result in strengthening caste bonds or intensifying caste discrimination.” Rajarshi Shahu Maharaj

He was an altruistic person who worked and was strongly committed to welfare his subjects. He was not just a king but a social reformer in royal robes who specially worked for excluded rural and low-caste indigent people from basic necessities, education, health, employment and various arts.

Under his rule, he introduced free and compulsory education for children from marginalized and lower-caste communities and primary education was made mandatory for all, including those from the Dalit and backward communities, at a time when the upper castes possessed educational opportunities. He offered scholarships and free lodging to intelligent students from lower castes and backward classes. This was especially revolutionary because it ensured that these students could continue their education without worrying about financial burdens.

He used unity, mutual love, trust, and persistent efforts as the weapons to abolish the concept of untouchability. He issued a royal decree in his princely State to treat all humans equal and ensured the untouchables communities had equal access to public utilities like common wells for drinking water, schools, hospitals and common buildings. His commitment to abolish untouchability was such that he was even ready to give up his throne for the service of the people.

Rajarshi Shahu Maharaj was also the first person to implement reservation of about 50% in his region on 26th July of 1902. Was this implementation really necessary? Well, if we go back and peek into the history, we'll observe the strong chains of society were suffocating the individuals who belonged various communities which were considered as the 'untouchables' at the time, the hierarchy based on jatis and varnas which existed during that period truly must've been unbearable. The higher an individual stand in the varna system, they are considered superior and given rights but if they don't fit in that system then they were deprived, their existence was considered polluting and a lot more.

Rajarshi Shahu Maharaj questioned this system which was assigned by destiny at the birth of a being who didn't have a choice for choosing before they were born into a certain class or a community. He thought that this was an issue of representation and provide equally opportunity to all people of kingdom. Therefore, he introduced the concept of reservations in education and state services, with the aim that it ensured the people from backward classes and marginalized communities had access to educational opportunities as well as employment opportunities that were historically denied to them.

He was also aware of condition of women of our society was miserable, barely any status was given to them, deprived of their rights and opportunities, they were also the victims of centuries old traditions and rituals. To change the situation of women exploitation at home as well as in the society, He made certain laws to protect women's natural right. The most important laws which were sanctioned.

- 1) free and compulsory education to all.
- 2) Marriage registration act and inter caste and inter religion marriage.
- 3) Prohibition of harassment of women act.
- 4) Divorce amongst different caste and religion - Kolhapur act.
- 5) Hindu illegitimate children and act relating to jogtin.

## 6) Devadasi prohibition act.

It was not easy to get rid of deep-rooted cultural values or reforms; the traditions which sustained discrimination but it was necessary to do so even though he was highly criticized for it. His selfless efforts sure brought a change, he created opportunities and moulded lives of those who barely survived back then, interestingly one of them was Dr. B.R. Ambedkar one of the most important personalities of our nation with similar aims as Rajarshi Shahu Maharaj.

The vision of Rajarshi Shahu Maharaj enshrined in the Constitution of India as timeless beacon of hope, equality, progress and justice. These values continue leading towards development, inclusivity, and welfare as a society.

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