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Beyond Reformism: *Chhatrapati* Shahu and Hinduism Reimagined

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In this article, I investigate the intellectual contributions of *Chhatrapati* Shahu, who was the ruler of the princely state of Kolhapur from 1894 to 1922. Shahu was not just a prominent source of patronage for the non-Brahmin movement, but he was also an influential public speaker who shaped an alternative conception of Hinduism. Shahu attempted to reimagine Hinduism through the prism of the Arya Samaj and as this article explores, Shahu's creatively resolved the balance between this alternative idea of Hinduism while simultaneously retaining a staunch critique of caste practices. Instead of identifying him as a 'Sanskritizing Kshatriya' agent, I seek to study Shahu's gradual transformation of views on caste by calling him a 'radical reformist'. Furthermore, I argue that Shahu's public presence from 1890s to 1920 had a major impact on how the generation after Jotirao Phule imagined and responded to the discourses surrounding religion, identity and caste. Despite Shahu's status as the Maharaja of Kolhapur, his speeches delivered all across Maharashta and beyond, were instrumental in channelling the movement's trajectory during the early 20th century. Lastly, I suggest that even if Shahu's methods seemingly imitated Brahmins, more so with the adoption of the Kshatriya seat of authority as a counter to the Brahmin one, his conception of this parallel authority emphasised the significance of equality and individual autonomy.

Chhatrapati Shahu, Hinduism, Arya Samaj, Caste, Kshatrajagadguru

Introduction

> In his death, I have lost a personal friend and the Depressed Classes have lost a great benefactor and the greatest champion of their cause.
>
> Ambedkar on Chhatrapati Shahu.[1]

> I am against Satyashodhak Samaj, and this is what I clarify in all my speeches.
>
> Shahu's letter to his friend Khaserao Jadhav.[2]

Chhatrapati Shahu, or as his admirers lovingly call him Rajarshi Shahu Maharaj, was the ruler of the princely state of Kolhapur from 1894 to 1922. For close to 30 years as the ruler of one of the largest princely states in colonial India, Shahu's primary focus was on the upliftment of the lower castes. From opening schools and hostels for lower caste communities to making historic political amendments like reserving 50% seats in the Kolhapur administration for non-Brahmins, Shahu's popular legacy has been crystallized over the years as a saviour of the backward classes and as a pioneering reformist. Shahu's popular legacy in terms of why he enjoyed veneration and respect from the lower castes is well documented. At the same time, it is also important to note

[1] B.R. Ambedkar, 10.05.1922 (Sangve 1978 [vol 9.]: 132).
[2] Shahu Chhatrapati (Phadke 2018: 186).

that Shahu goaded the masses to embrace the Arya Samaj and its call of 'Going back to the Vedas', holding strongly that the Arya Samaj's idea of Vedic Hinduism sans untouchability constituted 'real' Hinduism. In this article, I attempt to explore Shahu's role in reimagining Hinduism amidst his gradual evolution of views on caste and some existing scholarship on the subject already provides useful insights into the approach I wish to take. For example, Omvedt's chapter (1976 [2011, 2019]: 137-146) on Shahu provides a critical appraisal of him infusing a conservative role of religion in the state and broadly labels Shahu's reign from 1900 to 1920 as 'Kshatriya oriented aristocratic anti-Brahminism'. By describing Shahu's position as a merely Sanskritising Kshatriya ideology, Omvedt hints at the compromised position between his conservative ideology and the radical Satyashodhak ideology. Without fundamentally disagreeing with her critical insight on Shahu, I depart from Omvedt's propositions on two counts. Omvedt's limitations are that she fails to sufficiently explain and contextualize three critical terms, namely *Kshatriya*, *conservative* and *radical*. There is not enough deliberation on whether Shahu was a conservative merely in terms of his practices as a princely ruler or even in his philosophical thoughts as a public speaker. Omvedt fails to take into consideration the complexities of how Shahu's thoughts evolved over the span of two decades. Shahu certainly was not an anti-caste champion, in a similar mould as Jotirao Phue. However, to reduce Shahu to a Kshatriya ruler who was solely concerned with upholding Maratha pride and valour, is a disservice to the complex evolution of his anti-caste thoughts. Toward the end of his life, Shahu's evolving conception of non-Brahmin politics had sought to include non-aristocratic Marathas and as Jaywant (2023: 407) comments:

> The maharaj, who until then had closely guarded the category of Maratha for aristocratic Kshatriya families, now reached out to include those considered to be of 'common Kunbi origins' as well as Maratha sub-castes accused of varying degrees of 'illicit' mixing such as Kadu, Akkarmashi, and Kharchi Marathas. He also mingled with Maratha families who were believed to have 'impure origins', treated them as kin, and encouraged marriages between aristocratic and *varna sankara* Maratha clans.

Instead of seeing Shahu as a ruler with static ideas over two decades, I seek to argue how his staunchly anti-Brahmin stand in the initial phase of his time as a princely ruler was responsible for his rising awareness about the perniciousness of the caste system, evident especially towards the last few years of his life before his death in 1922. I argue that Shahu's anti-caste thought evolved *through* his anti-Brahmin-ness. The more recent scholarship on this by Rahul Sarwate (2020) provides a cogent analysis of this period by exploring the contradictory narrative enduring in Marathi intellectual culture for more than a century. He argues this position by investigating various forms of progressivism through textures of Modern Hindu-ness, articulated through discursive texts, nationalist schools and bodily practices. Even though Sarwate's formulations are meant to broadly explicate the emerging consciousness of non-Brahmin modern Hindu-ness, they are useful for our purpose to situate a princely ruler like Shahu in that intellectual context. For Sarwate, the non-Brahmin critique of caste was not a philosophical critique, constituting a cosmetic attempt at engaging with textual and material questions of tradition (ibid: 1-3). Sarwate also argues about how emerging anti-Brahminism was distinct from Phule-ite discourse (ibid: 15). Specifically on Shahu,

Sarwate describes how Shahu wanted to overthrow the British rule but without wishing to abandon Hinduism (ibid: 23). Instead of seeing his anti-Brahminism as a rupture from the Phule-ite discourse, I suggest that Shahu's constant engagement with the Satyashodhak Samaj must be understood both, in terms of how he supported the movement by providing material support to their activities, and also in terms of how he was influenced by the Samaj and their core socio-cultural principles. Even if Shahu himself clarified his stand about not being a member of the Satyashodhak Samaj, the evolving nature of his thoughts deserves an eclectic approach in order to further contextualize the influence that Satyashodhak Samaj exerted over him. As Madhavrao Bagal (1934: 7) pointed out in one of his essays titled *Satyashodhak Chhatrapati Shahu Maharaj*:

> …the term Satyashodhak could be perceived as Shahu being a member of the Samaj but that is not the case. I am, in a broader sense, using the term as a *visheshan* (adjective) (emphasis mine).

Similarly, Shahu's proximity with the Satyashodhak Samaj also impacted and influenced prominent Satyashodhak writers from Kolhpur, like Haribhau Chavan in the 1920s, who formed the Satyashodhak Samaj in Kolhapur in 1911 and became its general secretary (Gundekar 2010: 561). More importantly, Chavan along with a fellow Satyashodhak leader called Ramchandra Babaji Jadhav, formed another organization called the 'Shahu Satyashodhak Samaj' (ibid: 562) in 1923, in honour of Shahu after his death. With the help of such examples, I argue that Shahu, without he being an active member of the Satyashodhak Samaj, nevertheless became a crucial figure who posthumously shaped and influenced the intellectual trajectories of the Samaj, spearheaded by leaders like Chavan. While I agree that Shahu did not abandon Hinduism, I nevertheless also argue that Shahu was proposing an alternative form of Hinduism which can be described as an *Arya Samajist Hinduism.* This form, then, influenced other non-Brahmin writers and leaders who did not necessarily, overtly take recourse to the Arya Samaj. This complex dabbling into defending and espousing the virtues of the Vedas, an unfiltered embrace of the Arya Samaj, and a relentless pursuit of saving Hinduism from Brahminical didactic intrusions has remained a curious blind spot in evaluating Shahu's intellectual legacy. The most comprehensive biography on Shahu was written by Annasaheb Latthe, two years after Shahu passed away in 1922. This biography, along with Dhananjay Keer's biography, remain the only two exhaustive accounts of Shahu's life in English which chronologically document Shahu's life events from his coronation ceremony in 1894 to his death in 1922 (see Latthe [1924] and Keer [1976]). While Omvedt's chapter (1976 [2011, 2019]) on Shahu focuses more on his socio-economic reforms, Ian Copland's paper (1973) establishes Shahu's connections with colonial bureaucracy. Bharat Patankar's recent chapter (2021) on the other hand provides a synoptic overview of Shahu's image as a material benefactor of the downtrodden along with briefly hinting at his streaks of conservatism. Marathi writings on Shahu have largely followed a similar trajectory by documenting Shahu's major life events and contextualizing these within his social milieu (Phadke 2018). Others have edited Shahu's speeches, letters and correspondences with British officers (Pawar 2010). The debate and discussion on Shahu's intellectual legacy, however, remains limited as most debates seem to revolve around intellectually limited enquiries that interrogate whether Shahu was an Arya Samajist (supported by Phadke

[2018] and Garge (1968 [2017]) or whether he had Satyashodhaki proclivities (as insisted upon by Jadhav [1992], Chavan [2022] and Pawar [2010]). Shahu's complex and seemingly contradictory social and religious positionality has seldom received critical assessment.

In this article, I seek to dwell on Shahu's rationale underlying his path that enabled him to become an alternative Hindu reformist. I will argue, that instead of labelling him a 'conservative', it would be more intellectually stimulating an endeavour to consider him a 'radical reformist' instead. Taking cue from Gramsci's views on religion and the need to glean positives from the incoherence and fluidity that religion has to offer (cf. Forlenza 2021), I argue that Shahu's religious articulation needs to be seen through his own philosophical moorings within Brahmin bureaucracy, the caste system, and the Arya Samaj. I believe that Gramsci's formulation is especially useful in this context, as it helps us explore Shahu's 'tricky phase' characterized by religious ambiguity, where he attempted to rescue Hinduism from Brahmin priesthood, and in the process, realized the perniciousness of the caste system. I would describe these nascent attempts at radical reform, Shahu's 'dharmic experimentation'. Exploring Shahu's emerging religious beliefs, I believe, is necessary for primarily two reasons: Shahu in his context was the most prominent face fighting for the rights of the lower castes after Jotirao Phule. This allowed him to occupy a space of reverence and respect among the depressed masses in general and among the Satyashodhaks in particular. Secondly, by contextualizing his image as that of a benefactor of the movement, it is crucial to analyse his role in shaping the Satyashodhak consciousness regarding Hinduism in this period. For our concern, this is especially crucial as I argue that Shahu's engagements with reformulating Hinduism in the early 20th century had a major impact on the non-Brahmin public sphere. Shahu's *darbar* (princely court) orders, his correspondence with British officials concerning Brahmins and non-Brahmins, and his public speeches strongly shaped the non-Brahmin print sphere and its involvement with the question of Hinduism. I begin this article by thematically categorizing it in terms of providing a brief background to the beginnings of when Shahu embraced the Vedas, followed by Shahu's public speeches and correspondences with the Kolhapur State's British officers that engage with his views on what he pejoratively termed *Brahmin bureaucracy*. This is followed by a discussion of Shahu's paradoxical-sounding commitment to the eradication of the caste system on one hand, and on the espousal of the merits of the Hindu *varna* system on the other. Shahu's reimagining of Hinduism through a distinctly Arya Samajist lens is significant in order to understand the impact it had on some of the prominent Satyashodhak newspapers. Towards the end of this article, I will attempt to demonstrate the extent of Shahu's posthumous influence in newspapers like the *Vijayi Maratha* that continued to publish articles and speeches of the *Kshatrajagadguru* (Kshatriya Pontiff Maxim), a Kshatriya world priest appointed by Shahu to resist the Brahmin dominance in religious affairs.

Vedokta Controversy: Reciting Vedas as an Ethical Right

The immediate backdrop of the *Vedokta* episode is in 1899, when Shahu went for his daily ritual bath to the *Panchganga* river. He was accompanied at this time by his brother, Bapusaheb Ghatge, his brother-in-law Khanvilkar, and by Rajaramshastri

Bhagwat, a learned Brahmin reformer and intellectual. It was Bhagwat who pointed out to Shahu that while bathing, Narayan Shastri, who was Kolhapur's appointed priest, was reciting Puranic hymns instead of Vedic hymns. After seeking instant clarification, Shastri stood his ground by stating that Vedic hymns were meant only for Brahmins and not for Shudras. It is interesting to note here that the practice of reciting Vedic hymns was discontinued only a few decades before Shahu was anointed the princely ruler of Kolhapur. In 1860, during the reign of Chhatrapati Babasaheb Maharaj, his family priest Pandit Raghunath Shastri Parvate convinced the Chhatrapati of the futility of Vedic chanting. He did this by squarely blaming unfortunate incidents like Chhatrapati's childlessness on his insistence of holding on to his right of use Vedic hymns (Sangve 1978 [vol 3.]: 3). However, Shahu was determined to reverse this situation and bring it back to where it was before 1860, not least because this was deemed to be the only way of reinstating the honour and respect of Chhatrapati Shivaji's legacy, but also because, for Shahu, Shivaji was not a Shudra but a Kshatriya who was a direct descendant of the Sisode family of Udaipur, and regarded as the highest family of Kshatriyas in India by all Hindus (ibid: 3). While the *Vedokta* controversy was used by some Brahmins to mock Shahu's *Vedokta* demand as a 'fad' or a 'passing whim', an 'absurd dispute' and a 'hobby' (ibid: 27), this reaction was devoid of historical facts. Rosalind O'Hanlon for instance has argued, that the Bhosale and other elite Maratha families had always been granted Vedic rites on the strength of their Rajput origins, right since the time of Shivaji's reign. O'Hanlon further notes how Chitpavan Brahmins feared that castes of all kinds would seize the opportunity to press claims to higher status, hitherto denied to them under Peshwa rule. During Pratapsinh's reign in Satara, Balajipant Natu, Chintamanrao Patwardhan and Nilkanthshastri Thatte had campaigned to limit the authority of Vedic ritual to Brahmins. They argued for this by stating that because Shivaji, Sambhaji and Shahu were not true Kshatriyas, they had never received proper Vedic rites. In 1835, Pratapsinh demanded a public debate on his *varna* status to settle the dispute, and the dispute was ruled in favour of the Bhosale families at Satara, Tanjore, Nagpur and Kolhapur. At the same time, Pratapsinh's demands were made to primarily privilege the Bhosale family and not the Gaekwad and Shinde families, who he identified as *kunbi*—an agrarian caste considered to be of lesser status (see O'Hanlon [2014: 25-49]) for more details on the upward social mobility of the *kunbi*s and the crystallization of the Maratha-*kunbi* complex in late 19th century.

If this was the historical trajectory of the demand for Vedic rights after Shivaji, Shahu's renewed push for Vedic rituals can only be seen as an immediate continuation of what Sayajirao Gaekwad, the ruler of the princely state of Baroda, had already demanded as late as 1891. Gaekwad's visit to the Jodhpur state made him realize that Rajput kings had access to Vedic religious rites (Sarwate 2020: 18) and this was the beginning of the *Vedokta* controversy, which not only ignited a fresh schism between Brahmins and the rest, but also sowed the seeds for *varna*-based tussles for power. Shastri, who felt robbed of his prestige and status, apart from feeling humiliated by being forced to heed to the demands of whom he identified as a Shudra king, pleaded his innocence to colonial officers. However, Shahu's close-knit connections with colonial officers across hierarchies meant that Shastri was forced to be at the receiving end of their rejection. These events could be contextualized within the mutual camaraderie and respect that Shahu shared with British political agents in Kolhapur. The example of this

quote is revealing, taken from a letter from S.M. Fraser, resident of Kolhapur and also tutor and guardian to Shahu, written around the same time in which Fraser congratulated Shahu (ibid: 21):

> I notice that Cambridge university is going to confer on you the degree of LL. D a great honour. No Brahmin in the State will be able then to touch you in the way of Academical honours! I am glad that you took strong action with them before you left and, though I know nothing about the details of the case, you may rest assured that the government will look after your interests in your absence.

Fraser continues, advising Shahu about needing to remain wary, and not make his victory sound like a vindictive ploy that would project Shahu as being against the entire Brahmin class, especially as Shahu was the ruler of both Brahmins and Marathas. This kind of a considerate support for Shahu was not an aberration, evidenced in the words of Lt. Col. W.B. Ferris, the political agent after Fraser in Kolhapur. Ferris informed Shahu of the conditions in Kolhapur whilst the latter was on a tour of England as (ibid: 22):

> All goes well here…. I see a newspaper has been started in Kolhapur, the *Brahmodaya*, I have written to the Acting Dewan to enquire if it was with your sanction and whether the provisions of Act XXV of 1867 have been observed for it appears to me that the paper has been started not as a bonafide venture but in order to champion the Brahmin cause in the Vedokta controversy and will last long as the trouble does.

This protective colonial shield helped Shahu navigate the Brahminical disdain, which was becoming part of the public discourse through Brahmin newspapers, literature, and loose talk that bordered on rumour and gossip. A newspaper called *Samarth*, started by Professor Vishnu Vijapurkar of Rajaram College, registered its staunch disapproval of granting Shahu *Vedokta* rights and instead demanded that a decision about this be taken by a tribunal that consisted of Brahmins. Many other Brahmin run newspapers like *Kesari*, *Modavritta*, *Kal*, *Gurakhi*, *Jagadhitechhu* from Poona, *Prekshak* from Satara, *Subodh Sindhu* from Khandwa, *Belgaum Samachar* from Belgaum, and *Brahmodaya* from Kolhapur (ibid: 19) lent their collective support to this demand that objected to granting Shahu Kshatriya status. The ensuing public discourse against Shahu became further emotively intensified, when it blamed Shahu for inviting the wrath of learned Brahmin priests. Going against Brahmins was projected as tantamount to going against God. From not allowing Shahu to visit the local *Ambabai* temple in Kolhapur, to the death of his adoptive mother, and the sudden outbreak of fire in his old palace—everything was being ascribed to as a direct result of the ‘anger of God’ (ibid: 17).

However, despite this backdrop of Brahmin opposition, colonial officers refused to budge from their position. From the resident of Kolhapur to the governor of the Bombay presidency. to Lord Curzon—all rejected Shastri’s appeal of revoking Shahu’s confiscation of his *Inam* gifts of land grants. The colonial authorities instead supported Shahu by highlighting the history of his leniency, and his approachability toward

Brahmins, and in fact accused Shastri of hatching a vindictive plot against Shahu. Finally, Brahmins along with the seat of the Shankaracharya had to accede to Shahu's demands wherein 'Kshatriya' Shahu was recognized as a rightful claimant to the right of Vedic hymns. However, these claims were agreed upon only for Shahu and not for all Kshatriyas, and certainly not for other non-Brahmin communities. It has been suggested that Shahu's assertion to recite Vedic hymns was more of a diplomatic ploy to maintain smooth societal relations rather than an act of religious deference (Pawar 2010: 57). However, Shahu's speeches after the *Vedkota* controversy, complicates our understanding of Shahu ideas about caste rights, caste equality, and religion. In one of his public speeches at Navsari in Gujarat in 1918, Shahu argued (Pawar 2008: 35): "After propounding that everyone has a right to Vedas, (I) was convinced of all humans being equal." Interestingly, having the right to avail of the knowledge of the Vedas was as much an assertion to equality, as it was a matter of reforming religion itself. In other words, the right to make use of Vedic hymns was a question of an innate and 'natural rights', and not just a matter of claiming superiority as a religious being. Furthermore, it can be argued that the term 'Shudra' was deemed inappropriate, specifically because of the negative class connotations attached to it, denoting mental slavery. Annasaheb Latthe, the first official biographer of Shahu,[3] translated the term Shudra as 'menial' and Ati-Shudra as 'super-menial' (Latthe 1924 [vol. 2]: 323). Latthe conjured up a class analogy, linking the plight of Shudras to Western slaves (ibid [vol. 2]: 374):

> The priest may look upon his Yajman—the employer and master—as a Shudra, a term which non-Brahmins hated as much as an Englishman would hate being called a slave and being accorded religious rites which were reserved only to a slave and which no freeman would ever think of adopting.

From a rights and equality-based framework, Shahu's *Vedokta* turn can also be analysed as an endeavour to convert the Vedas from being an exclusive Brahminical preserve to being considered an accessible, quotidian set of texts. The idea of making the Vedas accessible to all coheres here with his proposition of positioning all *varna*s on an equal footing. He urged (Pawar 2008: 43), "…I believe that when each individual becomes capable of internalizing the capabilities of *all* varnas, then the country will progress"[4] (italics mine). In order for this to happen, Shahu encouraged the masses to particularly imbibe the Satyashodhak Samaj's call for brotherhood, which he described as the 'cosmopolitan ethic' (Ibid: 58).[5]

Connecting *Vedokta* to the *Aryavrata*: Shahu's Liberation Philosophy

Shahu's admiration for the Vedas can be contextualized within the growing animosity between Brahmins and non-Brahmins. Shahu believed that this conflict between the two rival Hindu groups to have reached an extreme. Remarking on how this situation

[3] Latthe was a close confidant of Shahu's. He worked with the Kolhapur administration from 1904 to 1914 as an educational inspector, and was also a professor in Kolhapur's Rajaram college.

[4] Shahu Chhatrapati's speech: *Ha Vidyecha Samay Aahe*, at the Akhil Bhartiya Kurmi Samajik Parishad Kanpur, 11.04.1919.

[5] Shahu Chhatrapati's speech: *Jati bhed modun apan sarva ek houyat*, at the inauguration of Shri Udajirao Maratha Vasatigruha Nasik, 15.04.1920.

was not ideal for the progress of the country, he explained how original Vedic Dharma had in fact declined only because of Brahminical Dharma, and this was the reason behind why non-Brahmins should not realize the benefits of real Dharma from Brahmins. For Shahu, this theory of decline was sufficient reason to conclude upon Kshatriya Marathas deciding to tread on an independent route of progress. This explanation included all the elements that later shaped Shahu's religious proclivities—deep longing for a pristine Vedic past, disdain for Brahmin bureaucracy, and Brahminical Hinduism. Based on this, he called for Kshatriya Marathas in particular to break free from the religious bondage of Brahmins, and reformulating Hinduism through their own Kshatriya lens. Simply put, Shahu regarded the Vedas as holier and higher than the Puranas. The Vedas were seen by him as those ancient scriptures whose authorship was *apaurusheya* (beyond human), whereas the Puranas were projected as sacred works, after being authored by the cunningness of later-day Brahmins. For Shahu, and in terms of their temporal position, the Vedas enjoyed a more mythical, transcendental aura that the worldly Puranas severely lacked. Shahu seems to have derived his reformist zeal from the Arya Samaj's core principles that emphasized the removal of untouchability and condemned Brahmin priests acting as middlemen between the almighty and masses. By staying within the fold of Hinduism, Shahu proposed a complete evisceration of allegedly degenerate Hindu practices and customs, and through this evisceration, reimagined a pristine Hinduism of yore. This stand directly echoed the core principles of the Arya Samaj stated in the *Arya Patrika* published in 1885 (Jones 2006: 113). While the Arya Samaj saw themselves in the middle space between orthodoxy and extreme radicalism, this path of reform, by going to the roots of Hinduism, was identified as a prudent sustainable mechanism that was more productive than uprooting the institution altogether. The implied claim made here by the Arya Samaj was that Hinduism was not found to be pernicious in its original state and Jones, in his in-depth study of the early days of the Arya Samaj in Punjab, explicates this position by pitting the Arya Samaj against the Brahmo Samaj (ibid: 94-95).

> Aryas refused to follow the Brahmo Samaj and move beyond the limits of Hinduism. They wished instead to find a place compatible with Dayanand's severest criticism yet still within the Hindu world. This they did through a slow, piecemeal process of experimentation. They moved forward in an uneven rhythm of boldness and timidity, of accommodation and innovation.

Shahu's embracing of the Arya Samaj must be seen in a specific context that allowed him to conceptualize the overlap between a pristine Vedic past, and the egalitarianism of the present proposed by the Arya Samaj, without jettisoning Hinduism altogether. In fact, amidst Shahu's efforts to reform Hinduism by propagating widow remarriage, female education, and offering financial assistance for writing endeavours that codified Hindu laws for the present, his fundamental drive surrounded identifying 'Arya Samajists' as 'Hindus'. This idea of reform accompanied by the piecemeal pace of reform carried out by the Arya Samaj allowed Shahu to gradually nudge the non-Brahmins into reoccupying a discursive space that allowed them to rearticulate and own Hinduism. Staying within the fringes of pre-existing Hinduism allowed the Arya Samaj to criticize its beliefs and practices as degenerate, without severing its ties entirely with Hinduism, as was the similar perceived case of Brahmo Samaj that was

seen as a 'distorted form of Christianity' (ibid: 114). Arya Samajists on the other hand remained critical adversaries of 'degenerate' Hindu practices, having an insider perspective to it. Being radically antagonistic here, in contrast, would be counter-intuitive, deemed tantamount to expressing enmity with Hinduism, and thereby siding with an alien force in the country—like in the case of the Brahmo Samaj.

At the same time, the conversion drive of Christian missionaries in Gujarat from the 1890s onward was not necessarily perceived to be a direct threat in Kolhapur either (Hardiman 2007). Unlike Gujarat where the Arya Samaj became prominent for its orphanages that housed untouchables in order to restrict their conversion to Christianity, the Arya Samaj came to the fore in Kolhapur, largely as a result of Shahu's personal quest for achieving a robust religious egalitarianism. Being the ruler of a princely state, Shahu was invited to many events organized both by the British administration and other socio-cultural associations spread across the country and Shahu's increasing presence in the public domain had begun to critically impact the shaping of a non-Brahmin consciousness, not just in Western India, but also in North and South India. His usage of all kinds of terms such as 'untouchables classes', 'backward classes', 'non-Brahmins', 'exploited castes', or simply 'masses' in his speeches delivered all over India, especially toward the latter part of his life, are testament to the fact that he spoke to and for *everyone* who had been oppressed. His concerted experiments with Hinduism, along with his gradually evolving views on the caste system, allowed him to expand the spatial horizons of his alternative articulation of Hinduism. He felt that his experimental Hinduism could only become expansive if it were to be linked with the 'national', whereas limiting it to a 'regional' issue would only make it parochial. This almost sounded as though Shahu was proposing a separate reformed 'sect' within Hinduism, which was certainly not the case. Addressing a labour rally in Parel (Mumbai) in 1918, Shahu confessed (Sangve 1978 [vol 8.]: 44-45):

> When in 1902, I was going to England by a steamer for the Coronation ceremony, I met on the steamer the great Kshatriya warrior Maharajah Pratap Singh and he explained to me in detail the views of the Arya Samaj. After some years, when I met Pandit Atmaram, I was attracted to Arya Samaj and recently I have become a follower of Arya Samaj … Just as it is important by organizing labour to remove the exploitation of capitalists, it is still more necessary to do away with the domination of the few over the others in the field of religion. This work is done by Arya Samaj and that is why I very much appreciate the Arya Samaj.

Shahu's public admission is indicative of how, even though the Arya Samaj was formed in 1918 in Kolhapur, Shahu was guided by its principles right from the period marked by the *Vedokta* controversy. This also forces us to rethink popularly-made connections between *Vedokta* and its purportedly direct, and only worthwhile linkage—the identity-centric assertion of *Kshatriya*-hood. Instead, the category of the 'Arya Samajist' was a more capacious term that not just included identity assertion, but also reformulated a compendium of Hindu beliefs, customs, and practices that germinated in the early 1900s. This argument can be extended by discussing how Shahu's insistence on moving away from being identified as Shudra and claiming Kshatriya lineage that connoted equality in terms of dignity and status vis-à-vis Brahmins cannot be entirely

identified with the fantasy of caste purity. Becoming an Arya Samajist made it possible for non-Brahmins to not only dissociate themselves from the dehumanizing context attached with the category 'Shudra', but also to stake their ownership and membership within a caste-free religion. It is interesting to note, that during his advocacy of the Arya Samaj, Shahu found the Satyashodhak Samaj to be severely lacking in a robust religious foundation. However, this did not mean that the Satyashodhak Samaj itself had no relations with the Arya Samaj. In fact, the earliest reference of the interactions between the two comes from as early as 1875, when Krishnarao Bhalekar, one of the founding members of the Satyashodhak Samaj and a close colleague of Jotirao Phule, defended Dayanand Saraswati, when the latter's procession was opposed by Sanatani Brahmins in Pune (Rairkar [no date]: 7). Bhalekar also managed to organize a speech, delivered by Saraswati, at a *Dharmashaala* (religious hostel) near a Rokdoba temple in Bhamburde, Pune (ibid). Nonetheless, Shahu made a strong distinction between the two and saw the Satyashodhak Samaj as being more of a 'social' movement. Curiously enough, Shahu did not engage with Jotirao Phule's reformulation of religious tenets in *Sarvajanik Satya Dharma Pustak* (The Public Book of True Faith), and in any case, Phule's attempt at radically revamping Dharma must have seemed inchoate and still in its nascent stage by Shahu.

It could be concurred here therefore that Shahu preferred religious grounding in Vedic antiquity, instead of mythical reformulations, that centred around the figure of King Bali for Phule. This lacuna in Shahu's deliberate shift away from the Satyashodhak Samaj on the issue of religious tenets, seems to be his general lack of engagement with religious incoherence among many members of Satyashodhak Samaj itself. Even during Phule's times, Satyashodhak members continued their experiments with Hinduism at both an individual and at collective levels. They did not convert to an alien religion as a group, and neither did they dissociate themselves completely from popular beliefs and customs encompassed within Hinduism. Perhaps for Shahu, identifying with the Arya Samaj provided a clearer path to resuscitate an ideal past. Even though Satyashodhak Samaj spoke in a similar language of ethics, equality, and truth, its reformism under Phule, and the uncertainty over the role of certain religious precepts convinced Shahu to opt for Arya Samaj. It must however be reiterated that Shahu's involvement with the Satyashodhak Samaj, both in terms of engaging with Satyashodhak principles and providing monetary support to the Samaj began from the 1890s itself. A brief timeline of Shahu's relationship with the Samaj will suffice to demonstrate this argument: Shahu appointed Bhaskarrao Jadhav and Khanderrao Bagal as first-class magistrate and Munisff respectively, in 1898. Both Jadhav and Bagal, along with Annasaheb Latthe who worked in the Kolhapur state administration between 1904 to 1914 were prominent members of the Satyashodhak Samaj. It can be said that Shahu's donations helped establish the Satyashodhak Samaj in Kolhapur in 1911 and in 1913, a Satyashodhak school was also opened in Kolhapur under the leadership of Vitthal Done (of the *dhangar* caste) and monetarily supported by Shahu. Shahu also provided generous grants to Satyashodhak writers like Mukundrao Patil and in 1912 even financed Patil's *Kulkarni Lilamrut* that critiqued hereditary *vatan* officers, demanding that they be replaced by a Talathi system[6]. Shahu also enacted

[6] *Talathi*, meaning a village accountant who was appointed based on merit, replaced the hereditary-based position of the village *Kulkarni*.

an ordinance in support of instituting the Talathi system in 1918 after reading Patil's work (cf. Sangve [vol 8.] 1978).

Brahmin Bureaucracy and the Caste System: Shahu's Twin Enemies

In 1921, the Resident of Kolhapur advised Shahu to refrain from giving any public speeches as they were resulting in Shahu being unfairly vilified along with his family members. Shahu demurred by saying (Sangve 1978 [vol. 9]: 23-24):

> Public speeches are badly wanted as they alone teach the ignorant masses about the real benefits from British government and also reminded the British government about his fight against Brahmin bureaucracy for the last 20 years. Another reason why I make public speeches is to show the public that I am not the sort of man the extremists paint me.

This quote helps us further delineate Shahu's decision to become an Arya Samajist. Firstly, Shahu's fight against what he called Brahmin bureaucracy was in tune with his belief in the theory of an absence of any caste hierarchy in the Vedic past. By that logic, and with examples of the roles played by the Kshatriyas, not just on the war front but also in the authorship of religious scriptures, Shahu was able to take an unequivocally anti-Brahmin stand that was nevertheless staunchly Hindu. However, even if that meant that a peculiar kind of identity assertion was inevitable for him, it did not necessarily move Shahu away from critiquing the caste system. There is no gainsaying the fact that Shahu was operating in a space that was informed by the grammar of caste. However, his identity assertion was not bereft of a gradual, albeit frontal critique of the caste system. In fact, his speeches and letters show how it was *during* his one-upmanship over Brahmins for 20 years, that Shahu realized the deleterious nature of the caste system in its entirety. For Shahu, the 'system' which he was fighting was Brahmin bureaucracy. To use S.M. Fraser's explanation: "(Shahu) opposed Brahmins as a *system*" (italics mine) (Latthe 1924 [vol.1]: 12). This point is crucial, as being anti-Brahmin for Shahu could not be without being against the caste system. Shahu's position can be analysed through a speech he gave at his Kolhapur *durbar* in 1905 (Sangve 1978 [vol. 3]: 29):

> It is a matter patent to every student of Hindu society, that all Brahmins have an innate desire to suppress all other classes, and thus to assert their supremacy over them. The lower the social status of an individual the greater is their influence. They would have greater influence over a Shudra than over a Kshatriya, who by following the same ritual with them would ascend much higher on the social ladder and be very nearly on a footing of equality with them.

Shahu's views on Brahmins became crystallized during the *Vedokta* controversy. Even toward the end of his life, Shahu was aware of the unending nature of the challenge he had undertaken to topple Brahmin bureaucracy. In a speech he made at the *Akhil Bhartiya Bahishkrut Samaj Parishad* in Nagpur in 1920 (30.05.1920), Shahu claimed that even if an oligarchy were to establish bureaucratic control over him, he would bequeath the rule of his kingdom to his son and dedicate himself to the service of the masses (Pawar 2008: 86). As discussed previously, the *Vedokta* controversy also

made colonial officers aware of Shahu's stand against the growing influence of Brahmins within colonial administration. Shahu's correspondences to the resident of Kolhapur and to the Governor of Bombay underlined his intention of making them aware of Brahmin self-conceit. He articulated his position clearly in a letter to Col. F.W. Wodehouse, the Resident of Kolhapur in 1918, by saying (Sangve 1978 [vol. 8]: 42):

> I want to break it (religious monopoly of Brahmins) by introducing Satyashodhak Samaj and Arya Samaj. The former has got no solid foundation while the Arya Samaj has got the foundation of the Vedas. I am thinking of teaching Vedas to other castes meaning to say, that is their religion which the Brahmins do not like at all, I tried my best by obliging the Brahmins and giving them all the good treatment, but I find that they are all incorrigible and if I were to leave the things as they are, their influence will never be loose. Government is helping Arya Samaj because they do not dabble in politics. They are a religious and social body and are helpful to government in counteracting the Brahmin extremists.

From the beginning of the *Vedokta* controversy till his death in 1922, Shahu impressed the rationale for his policies against Brahmins upon British officers. Shahu's equally passionate speeches on the perniciousness of the caste system complicates the imagery of his popular persona—one that was a conservative leader who spoke *only* on behalf of the Kshatriyas and someone, who as a result, cast a blind eye to caste discrimination. Laying the foundation stone at the Maratha Boarding school in Nasik in 1920, Shahu confessed (Shahu Chhatrapati and Bhosale 1975: 43):

> At one time, I confess, I was a conservative and as an upholder of orthodoxy believed in the perpetuation of the caste system. The idea that thereby I was obstructing the progress of others never occurred to me.

Shahu specifically expounded on how dissolving caste hierarchies was necessary, since upholding them would be tantamount to sin. By calling out the false binary of caste-enmity (purportedly considered a vice) while simultaneously upholding the caste system for its functional merit, Shahu condemned caste enmity calling it unsophisticated and reiterated that caste enmity was the effect of caste hierarchy. Interestingly, he encouraged non-Brahmins to critically reflect on the purpose behind holding caste meetings. For him, they were only means to an end. As he himself pithily stated: "The end of our caste meetings is to end the caste (system)" (ibid: 43). Shahu also consciously repeated this sentiment of restraining caste pride in other public speeches. For example, in his address at both the *Arya Kshatriya Sabha* in Kolhapur (15.08.1920) along with his speech at the Shri Rajaram industrial school, his principal message emphasized on 'caste pride must be kept under control' (Pawar 2008: 98-101). For Shahu, a limited extent of caste pride was inevitable, and he often drew its parallels with casting these as the sentiments of the many children of the same man, and through this mechanism, established a familial logic for legitimizing his mandate of limiting caste pride. However, in the same address, he also provoked the public to think beyond their own children. Whilst invoking restrained caste pride, his call was aimed at making a transition to a world that was beyond one's own caste community. His capacious outlook can also be gleaned from his views on other religions and their

treatment of the lower castes. By reiterating the perniciousness of the caste system, Shahu claimed that Christians, Mohammedans, Buddhists and others treated their own backward classes kindly and sympathetically. Even if different creeds, Shahu declared that "they have endeared themselves to us" (Latthe 1924 [vol.1]: 156). To give one example, Shahu responded to their caste-based generosity by providing monetary support to Mohammedans, and by opening a Mohammedan hostel in 1906. He further organized Mohameddan educational conferences and had translated the Quran into Marathi (Patankar 2021: 78).

At this point, I would like to take a step back and argue that Shahu seems to have made a broad distinction between Kshatriyas and non-Brahmins, addressing them as two groups grappling with two separate questions. This is where Shahu's Kshatriya orientation becomes starker, as he envisioned Marathas as more worthy of enjoying certain social and political privileges when compared to Shudras. Shahu's commentary on Vedic rituals and practices could be seen as a caste right that he demanded only for the Kshatriyas. On the other hand, non-Brahmins seem to feature prominently in Shahu's public discourse, primarily when it came to issues pertaining to socio-economic schemes and education policies. There was an implicit hierarchical assumption here of the Kshatriyas enjoying superior social, economic, and educational status. For all his emphasis on primary education, Shahu hinted to the importance of education, as the source of power underlying upward social mobility. In Shahu's words (cf. S.S. Bhosale, [Gundekar 2010: 559]):

> In a country sunk deep in illiteracy, it can never produce excellent diplomats and warriors. And for that reason, Hindustan desperately needs compulsory and free education.

Simply put, according to this assumption, uneducated non-Brahmins could never lay claim to Shahu's own caste-rights to Vedic rituals and practices. Shahu's twisted argument implies that in order to become legitimate recipients of Vedic knowledge, communities would have to first prove themselves worthy of that reception by realizing the significance of attaining respectable educational status. For Shahu, the quest for humanity among Shudras was therefore primarily tethered to the question of education. Their passage toward respectability and a position of social status however also meant that Marathas did not receive any critical scrutiny for the social prestige that they had historically enjoyed. The importance of education to bring the masses to a certain degree of public awareness can be understood by Shahu's views on who deserved to champion the cause of 'Swaraj'. The following quote from Shahu's public address, delivered while laying the foundation stone of the Maratha Boarding school in 1920 is self-evident (Shahu Chhatrapati and Bhosale 1975: 49-51):

> You will no doubt understand that my efforts after education are motivated solely because I am most anxious to give self-Government as early as possible to my subjects. If all my subjects had reached the literacy test of the vernacular third, I would have very cheerfully handed over to them the responsibilities of Government and retired on pension sufficient to maintain myself.

Shahu continues with this thought of a caste-conscious Swaraj by further stating (ibid):

> I am desirous of entrusting my people with full and complete power as soon as they are advanced to understand its exercise. Till they grow up to this stage I feel great anxiety in handing over any political power for it may be monopolized by the few to the disadvantage of the many.

Shahu's ultimate conception of Swaraj must be understood through his drive toward establishing *aryavarta* (the Aryan domain), and of how he perceived the terms Kshatriya and Shudras vis-à-vis his critique of the caste system through the lens of his desire to establish an Aryan domain. Even if Shahu failed to provide a critique of Maratha supremacy, and in fact valorised its pride and status vis-à-vis Brahmins, his equally astute views on the caste system, and how that affected Shudras, provides us with crucial insights into his evolving views on both caste and identity. In order to foster an ethic of education among the masses, Shahu endeavoured to instil pride within them by preserving memory and heritage, facilitating this enlightenment further by commissioning grants for research and publishing. There are umpteen examples of how active Shahu was in sanctioning history projects. For example, Shahu issued a 2000-rupee grant for Arjun Keluskar's biography of Shivaji in 1906. He additionally sent copies of M.G. Dongare's two volumes on the Bhosale family lineage (*Siddhant Vijaya*) that traced the history of *Vedokata* rites for Kshatriyas in the 19th century, to big schools and libraries. Shahu befriended figures like Prabodhankar Thackeray by hiring him to work on the history of the *Chaturvarna* system and in 1920, Thackeray subsequently received a grant of 2000 rupees to publish a series of books titled *Vajraprahar Granthamala*. Thackeray in fact assured Shahu that he would leave no stone unturned to bring their mutual enemies to book. Shahu hired British legal experts like F.C.O. Beaman in 1922 to codify Hindu laws that would be in conformity with the progressive spirit of equality, that would treat all castes of the Hindu community equally. This was also a time when Shahu was himself working on publishing books on the British administration to compare it with the Peshwa regime (cf. Sangve 1978 [vol. 9]: 91–120). Even with his complicated stand on giving preference to Marathas and making provisions for Shudras to improve their social and educational positions, Shahu's image seldom remained fixed as that of a sole votary of the Marathas. His social efforts confronted caste discrimination, made operational through the Satyashodhak Samaj and permeating beyond. Along with being in contact with leaders like P. Tyagraja Chetti and Dr. T. M. Nair of the non-Brahmin movements in Madras, Shahu's presence contributed to the rise of various other organizations pertaining to different communities like Gujarati Untouchables, Depressed Classes, Mohammedan Samaj, Lingayat Samaj in Mysore, and the Madras Dravidian Association (Kavlekar 1979: 72).

Documenting *Kshatrajagadguru* in Vernacular Print

As previously observed, Shahu was influenced by the principles of the Arya Samaj from 1902 onward. This was also the time when the *Vedokta* controversy was at its peak. In the meanwhile, Shahu simultaneously engaged with another idea that would, in the future, polarize opinions, not just between Brahmins and non-Brahmins but also among non-Brahmin castes. This new idea was related to Shahu's conceptualization

of a *Kshatrajagadguru*, a Kshatriya Pontiff, a position that was in direct response to the Brahmin office of the Shankaracharya. In order to break free from the thraldom of Brahmin high priesthood, Shahu's nomination of a Kshatriya counter Guru was considered a viable resolution that would lead to the liberation of non-Brahmins. The idea of the *Kshatrajagadguru* germinated in 1904 and Pawar quotes Shahu saying (2013: 9): "Other castes like Daivadnya Sonar, Shenvi, Lingayat, Jains established their own Dharma gurus. Why should Marathas not do the same?" Latthe's biography on Shahu recounts how Shahu also made sustained enquiries into the notion and possibility of creating separate priesthoods at the Satyashodhak Samaj, the Brahmo Samaj, the Theosophical Society, the Arya Samaj etc. (Latthe 1924 [vol.1]: 7). Interestingly, Latthe explains this turn in Shahu's thoughts as the 'spirit of Akbar', not only because Shahu himself drew parallels between himself and Akbar's secular approach of laying down guidelines for the incumbent sovereign Kshatriya leader, but also because he lauded Akbar's emancipatory measures that included recruiting the Mahar and Mang castes in his army.

It was as late as 1920 that Shahu decided to establish the separate seat of the *Kshatrajagadguru*, located in a small village called Patgaon in Kolhapur. Patgaon was special and chosen primarily because it was the place where a certain Mouni Maharaj had his *samadhi* (commemorative spot). Mouni Maharaj was known to be Chhatrapati Shivaji's Guru, whose blessings Shivaji sought in difficult times (ibid: 10). Shahu decided to look out for a young, promising Maratha man who would be a worthy recipient of the seat and identified a certain Sadashivrao Benadikar Patil from Benadi village in Kolhapur for the job. Patil was primarily identified, based on his intellect and hunger for knowledge while studying in Poona's Fergusson college. In November 1920, Patil was anointed as the inaugural *Kshatrajagadguru* at the hermitage or *muth* of Mouni Maharaj in Patgaon. In a letter Shahu wrote to the newly appointed Jagadguru, he advised him to become one among the masses. Paradoxically, the *Kshatrajagadguru* was also meant to embody the Kshatriya response to the hegemony of Brahmin middleman (priest) who mediated between the almighty and the masses. At the same time, Shahu believed that this situation of Brahmin priesthood could be rectified through the presence of a Kshatriya Guru who would act as a facilitator, instead of mediating between the two. After his appointment, the *Kshatrajagadguru* addressed multiple public events in Kolhapur, ranging from educational programs to Dharmic gatherings, and a majority of his speeches and articles were published in the *Vijayi Maratha*, a prominent non-Brahmin newspaper of the time based in Poona. Shripatrao Shinde, the editor of *Vijayi Maratha* was an influential voice from the non-Brahmin movement who supported the idea of a Kshatriya Guru, even while other members like Mukundrao Patil and Prabodhankar Thackeray categorically opposed the idea, saying that the seat of a *Kshatrajagadguru* was modelled on the seat of Shankaracharya and that it would merely imitate Brahmin high priesthood. Despite this discussion ensuing among non-Brahmins, Shahu was unfazed by it and went ahead with the appointment.

The founding of this new seat added a new dimension to the non-Brahmin movement. The publication of *Kshatrajagadguru's* speeches and articles by leading non-Brahmin newspapers implied a concrete validation of the seat's presence by at least one section of the Satyashodhak Samaj. Secondly, through the *Kshatrajagadguru*'s speeches and

articles demonstrate the overlaps and divergences inherent to the *Kshatrajagadguru's* thoughts on the self, questions of individual autonomy, the role of philosophy, the importance basic education in everyday life, and the contingent role of history in everyday life that included the core principles of the non-Brahmin movement itself. Shahu's letter to the *Kshatrajagadguru* made one specific suggestion that advised the latter to learn philosophy. The *Kshatrajagadguru* internalized this suggestion as a guiding principle, and also put that advice into practice in a very literal way. For example, while addressing what could have probably been an unlettered group of people at a *Brahmanetar Parishad* in Satara in 1923, the *Kshatrajagadguru* was seen quoting Aristotle to describe the basis of society and its functions (Pawar 2013: 52):

> Aristotle said once that society comes into existence from the formation of family and family comes into existence from marriage and thereby in any given society, the institution of marriage is considered as extremely pure.

More than seeking validation from the Western world on his views on female education and *stree atmavikaas* (progress of the female self), the quotation above followed a trajectory that was similar to other non-Brahmin writers of this period that used similar quotations as signposts of a wider philosophical argument. While most of the *Kshatrajagadguru*'s public speeches were replete with sermons on how to use the intellect to lead an informed life, similar to the genres followed by traditional *kirtankar* (religious performer), the *Kshatrajagadguru* wove his public addresses around metaphysical questions like: What was the purpose of life? How was one to achieve one's life goals? What were the different ways in which to increase the avenues of knowledge generation? How was one to place one's life at the service of those in need, among other similar questions. Although the frame of the *Kshatrajagadguru*'s speeches were metaphysical in orientation, there was also a strong emphasis in them on the importance of using one's intellect. The masses were warned against jeopardizing individual autonomy, by taking scriptural prescriptions at face value. This evidences how the *Kshatrajagadguru* was not merely meant to be a conduit of Shahu's thoughts. His endeavour included encouraging non-Brahmins not to think of his seat as a *Jagadguru* (world leader) as sacrosanct but consider him as a personage for whom *jag aahe jyacha guru*—the world was his teacher (Pawar 2013: 12). By reversing the intellectual gaze on the real world, the epitome of learning was no longer encompassed by the seat of the *Kshatrajagadguru*. This democratization was a significant marker that differentiated Kshatriyas from Brahmins, with the latter being notorious for concealing religious knowledge from non-Brahmins. For the *Kshatrajagadguru*, knowledge was meant to be mined from the world; a resource that was accessible to all, in contrast to the notion of religious knowledge being a repository of a few. As the *Kshatrajagadguru* exclaimed: *vaad vivaad karnyaat nehmi faydaach aahe* or, how it is was always beneficial to discuss and express dissent (ibid: 16). Along with access to doctrinal knowledge, the right to discuss and dissent created newer avenues of knowledge production was considered significant. The *Kshatrajagadguru's* insistence on relying on one's intellect over didactic teachings can also be seen as his refutation of the Arya Samaj's belief about the divinely ordained nature of the Vedas. For him, the Vedas were not written by the almighty at all (*vedas ishwar pranit nahi*)

(ibid: 81),[7] and debating with a few Arya Samaj members on the day of *Makar Sankraman*, the *Kshatrajagadguru* reminded them: *sarva kaame satya-asatyacha nirnay karun karne* (decisions must be taken based on the validity of truth and non-truth). Elaborating on critical intervention he further stated: "To say the world should agree with the idea of Vedas being written by God, as was the case with Dayanand, is like assaulting an individual's right to think" (ibid: 81). The term he used while reiterating how not all knowledge resided in the Vedas was *buddhi pramanya* (proof of intellect). This intellect in his opinion, in turn, was informed by the *Kshatriya* ideal of collective *karmayog* (constant work in the face of everyday challenges), as opposed to the Brahminical ideal of *sanyasmarga* (renunciation). The *Kshatrajagadguru* specially invoked this binary to deploy a counterintuitive spin that suggested how it was a Kshatriya-induced logic that undergirded the Bhagavat Gita's message of *karmayog*. He emphasized the validity of this mandate further by citing Tilak, who has also publicly agreed to the superiority of *karmayog* to *sanyasmarga*, and thereby indirectly validated the purity of non-Brahmins (ibid: 26).

While the *Kshatrajagadguru* persisted in reflecting on the virtues of dissent and encouraged non-Brahmins to make provocative interjections in the theory of divine authorship, this resulted in producing intriguing and contradictory claims about Vedic knowledge, *Kshatriya* penmanship, and the reconciliation of Brahminical Hinduism with the ideals of Maratha-Kshatriya way of life. Like other influential non-Brahmins of this period, the *Kshatrajagadguru* focused on reclaiming the mantle of an authentic interlocutor of Vedic Hinduism, and while doing so, he attempted to outdo Brahmins as the primary agents of Hinduism, substituting them with the idea of Kshatriyas as the original purveyors of the Vedas. "Vedas have been authored by Kshatriyas", he begins by saying and contextualizes his claim: "the reason why *Brahmanatva* (Brahmin-ness) comes into existence, is that Gayatri mantra has been authored by the Kshatriya Vishwamitra, wherein Kshatriya king Agnihotri helped Yadnyavalkya the Brahmin sage" (ibid: 15). The *Kshatrajagadguru*'s urge to instil reform was thus intertwined with the reimagining of Brahminical Hinduism through a Kshatriya lens. Addressing a *Brahmanetar Parishad* in Satara in 1923, the *Kshatrajagadguru* categorized Hindu *Dharmashastra* texts into three categories: the *Upanishad*s as a repository of philosophical knowledge, the *Smriti*s focused on societal laws, and the *Purana*s that described the 'history of Kings' (ibid: 51). For societal laws, he moreover suggested that rules no longer appropriate for the present day, be altered. However, at the same conference, he also proposed that Krishna was the original Kshatriya man, reminding his listeners about how according to Krishna's teachings in the Bhagavata Gita, *Parameshwara* or Supreme Lord resided in all human beings. Further elaborating on how *Sanatana Dharma* considered no-one to be superior by birth, he reiterated that there was no caste discrimination in Vedic times. The *Kshatrajagadguru* in fact, squarely laid the blame for caste discrimination on *Brahmani Vachane* or Brahminical mandates, that according to him, were interpolations—deviously inserted into scriptures at a later date. The *Kshatrajagadguru's* reformist zeal along with his prioritizing of individual intellect became positioned and emplaced as significant in the reimagining of *Sanatana Dharma* itself. Complimenting his paradoxical image of being a 'sovereign public intellectual', was the *Kshatrajagadguru*'s quest to further reconcile

[7] Kshatrajagadguru's speech *Kshatra Jagadguru yancha khulasa*, Satara. Vijayi Maratha, 09.03.1925.

Sanatana Dharma with the language of egalitarianism. This followed and almost replicated Shahu's ideological contradictions on caste and his religious conservatism.

Concluding Thoughts on Shahu's Intellectual Legacy: Conservative, Radical or Liberal?

In a speech that Shahu delivered at the *Kurmi Kshatriya Mahasabha* in Kanpur in 1919, he emphasized on the functional nature of the *varna* system. Shahu's position was similar to the growing non-Brahmin discourse in this period, of a pristine Vedic past that was being distorted by Brahminical illusionary infusions of a hereditary *varna* system over the years. There was a contradiction in Shahu's co-opting of the *varna* system that simultaneously retained his desire to fight against caste hierarchy. At the same event, Shahu was bestowed with the honorific title 'Rajasrshi', meaning regal sage. However, Shahu's socio-cultural positioning was not that of a sage at all, born with a blueprint on the ways in which to lead an ideal ethical life. As seen above in one of his speeches, Shahu admitted to being a 'conservative' in his early life. He moreover used the word 'conservative' in the English language even when the rest of his speech was in Marathi. However, it is also difficult to label Shahu a conservative in the early stages, which would entail describing him as a progressive in the latter stages of his life. Shahu also never labelled himself a 'progressive', especially when he described his transition from a self-avowed 'conservative' position. Shahu was not a political thinker either, who would articulate his position on conservatism as a strand of political thought. In that sense, he could be better identified as one among the many who did not reflect on his conservative journey in a sustained enquiry. As Sudipta Kaviraj argues (2018: 8-10): "Indian political thought of past two centuries hardly has any serious conservative tradition", and unlike Gandhi and other national figures, Shahu was clearly not a political thinker who offered nuanced reflections on the global political ideologies of conservatism through his speeches. Shahu's appeal for a liberatory politics couched in the Vedic idiom is therefore a conundrum, not just ideologically but also as part of his political grammar. While Kaviraj is concerned with the idea of liberal declaratory statements and its ambiguous relationship with the actual expression of their belief, my concern in this article is more complicated. Shahu started his public journey from a conservative position, expressed *during* his emancipatory work for the depressed masses. He embraced the Arya Samaj's call of 'Going back to the Vedas', which he used to argue about how this past was bereft of caste hierarchy and discrimination. Unlike Gandhi, who was against untouchability but attempted a seemingly contradictory reconciliation with *Sanatani* 'caste' order, Shahu's idea was to revive an egalitarian past which for him had no traces of caste hierarchy altogether.

Shahu's improbable reconciliation can perhaps be theorized in terms of Gramsci's views on religion where he specifically dwells on seeing religion of the people (and not of intellectuals) as an active mode of experiencing social and historical reality. Rosario Forlenza, in his paper on Antonio Gramsci on religion (2021: 49), captures this liberatory potential of religious incoherence when he argues:

> The lived and unstructured religion of the masses is fragmentary and incoherent, but it is intrinsically political, and in specific conditions, can challenge dominant hegemonies and create an oppositional and

> confrontational culture. Religion, in other words, possesses a counter-hegemonic, revolutionary and transformative potential as an incentive to action and mobilization.

Forlenza further outlines that even when religion was identified as an integral aspect of social life by Gramsci, the discursive relation between religion and society has remained a field of constant conflict and tension. In fact, antagonistic interpretations constitute a key element to discussions about whether the religion of the masses, especially and more so when the repository of religious knowledge has been thrown open to the masses after centuries of caste oppression, are a valid historical source of society. Instead of disenchanting the masses by coaxing them to move away from the socio-cultural grammar of religion that they are already aware of, Gramsci's idea was to highlight the inchoate religious sensibilities of the masses and connect it to a memory and imagination of an egalitarian past. A study of Gramsci certainly throws up questions for this article and its intellectual history of Shahu: Did Shahu indeed believe that the caste system (especially the hierarchy and discrimination associated with it) was a later-day invention, like some Satyashodhak leaders believed untouchability to have thrived on the religious mandates of Adi Shankaracharya in the 7th century? Was Shahu attempting a reformulation of Hinduism by prioritizing the Vedas and using the perspective to move the Puranas and Smritis to the discursive fringes of Hindu belief and practices? Perhaps Shahu's self-realization about his own conservative stand in the initial periods of his life can be seen as one of the key elements of what Gramsci termed 'common sense'. In his Prison Notebooks (Smith and Hoare 1971: 421) for instance, Gramsci argues how: "the starting point must always be that common sense which is the spontaneous philosophy of the multitude, and which has to be made ideologically coherent", continuing to further say how: "Common sense is both 'crudely neophobe and conservative, and represents the raw beginnings of a genuinely counter-hegemonic narrative" (ibid: 423)."

Shahu's Dharmic puzzle constitutes a critical inflection point, not just because of his influence as the ruler of a princely state, but for us to specifically chart out the various intellectual trajectories through which Hinduism was sought to be reformulated for and by the non-Brahmin public. As Shahu's reflective analyses of the Vedas remained a continuous discourse from the early 1900s onward till his death in 1922, his intellectual trajectory needs to be contextually evaluated from the position he had as a princely ruler from a non-Brahmin social backdrop within which the subsequent period of the non-Brahmin movement and its print culture flourished. Shahu was considered the most influential non-Brahmin figure in the public domain of his times after Jotirao Phule, his views and opinions carrying a wider societal significance. His monetary contributions to Satyashodhak newspapers reached beyond his princely state of Kolhapur, and this is one of the tangible reasons for which his musings on caste and Dharma need to be critically examined as a signpost that reflects upon the impact it had on similar Satyashodhak enquiries on Hinduism in the early 20th century.

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