

## **Chapter IV**

### **The Controversy of Vedokta**

'The Vedokta' in Shahu life is very significant event, which created turmoil not only in his life but also in the socio-religious atmosphere of entire Maharashtra. Shahu's victory in the Vedokta gave impetus to the movement of social and religious equality in Maharashtra. The study of this episode is important for comprehending Shahu's life as well as the relations between him and the British. It is because of the firm support of the British to Shahu in this case for five long years; that he could overcome the adversity. It is the British-British relation that largely contributed to the socio-religious transformation in the Kolhapur State.

#### **The Beginning of The Vedokta**

The Vedokta issue began in October 1899, when one day Shahu went to the river Panchaganga at dawn for his holy bath. He was accompanied by his brother Bapusaheb Maharaj, Mamasahab Khanwilkar and an the intellectual reformist Rajaram Shastri Bhagwat. A priest Narayan Shastri was also present there to recite some Mantras. He started chanting them as Shahu started his bath. Meanwhile, it was found by Rajaram Shastri that Narayan Shastri was chanting the Puranokta Mantras instead of 'Vedokta' and that he was doing that without taking bath himself. Rajaram Shastri brought these things to the notice of Shahu. When Shahu asked explanation for this, Narayan Shastri very arrogantly answered back, 'The Shudras are entitled to 'Puranokt' Mantras only'. Shahu, however, showed great composure and told Narayan Shastri that he hails from the Kshatriya family . But Narayan Shastri shamelessly declared that unless and until the almighty Brahmins proclaimed him as Kshatriya, he would continue to be a Shudra. Narayan Shastri's explanation fell upon Shahu as a bolt from the blue. Shivaji the Great, founder of the Maratha Empire, was declared in 1674 as the 'Kshatriyakulavatansa' i.e. the crest of the Kshatriyas and Shahu was his descendant. Narayan Shastri had refused to accept this historical truth.

The right of Vedokta (the right to conduct all the 16 Sanskaras and other religious rituals with Vedic Mantras) had conventionally been granted to three Varnas excluding the Shudras. However, with the passage of time, the Brahmins overpowered the other two Varnas, namely Kshatriya and Vaishya and degraded them as the Shaudras only. Naturally, the right to Vedokta came to be restricted to the Brahmins only. For that purpose the myths such as 'Parashuram had destroyed all the Kshatriyas for 21 times from the earth' or 'All the Kshatriya families vanished with the Nandas in Ancient India' were constructed by the Brahmins. Such myths naturally led to the belief that the Brahmins were the highest and most superior Varna of all. This Brahminical theory was first challenged by Shivaji the Great in 1674, later by Pratapsingh Maharaja of Satara in 1835 and by Maharaja Sayajirao

Gaikwad of Badoda in 1896. All these three great men successfully struggled for their Vedokta right and they won it. Now, it was Shahu's turn.

The Vedokta issue had much been debated on all these three occasions, however, it could never turn into a social struggle. These three Kshatriya rulers achieved their own right of Vedokta, however, none of them tried to acquire it for the common Marathas. But it was Shahu who fought the Brahmins for the Vedokta right not for himself only but for the entire Maratha Community at large.

On the occasion of the Vedokta outburst, Shahu was 25. Though the arrogance of a Brahmin priest deeply offended him at heart, he did not lose composure. He decided to fight back with patience. But the same patience was not seen in the Brahmins. Some of the Brahmin leaders like Prof. Vishnu Govind Vijapurkar tried utmost to prove how Shahu had never been a Kshatriya and, therefore, could never be entitled to the right of Vedokta. Such attitude naturally created discontent amongst all the Marathas, which ultimately culminated into the conflict of Vedokta. This Vedokta conflict was intensified by one more issue i.e. Tai Maharaj case.

#### **The Vedokta Issue Aggravated**

In August 1901, Tilak visited Kolhapur in connection with the 'Tai Maharaj issue'. During his visit Tilak discussed the Vedokta with the Brahmins in Kolhapur. Tilak had opposed the right of Vedokta even to the Maharaja of Baroda. It was no wonder that he supported the views of the Brahmins in Kolhapur; further intensifying the controversy. The British Government, had a close eye on every happening of this issue. On July 12, 1902, The Governor of Bombay, Northcote, writes to the Secretary of State for India, "The matter was apparently passing off quietly when Mr. Tilak, who had gone to Kolhapur in connection with an adoption case in the family of the late Baba Maharaj which was then before the District Judge of Poona and in connection with which there are now charges of perjury and forgery against him, finding the question of adoption settled in the opposition to his wishes in the matter, intervened and stiffened the agitators against His Highness the Maharaja and gained advocates for them in Poona, thus making the question a more general and a sort of trial obtained between Brahmins and Marathas."<sup>1</sup> Thus, the issue of Vedokta at Kolhapur was aggravated by Prof. Vijapurkar in first place and Tilak in the second. Vijapurkar started criticizing Shahu severely through his journal 'Granthamala' which was actually aided and funded by Shahu himself. He also started organizing the Brahmin community against Shahu. So Shahu stopped the aid to the 'Granthamala' from June 1901.<sup>2</sup>

There were many more episodes responsible to keep the fire of Vedokta burning. Firstly, a sincere and dedicated priest Narayan Bhatt Sevekari was excommunicated by the Brahmins in Kolhapur, because he performed the rituals of Marathas such as 'Shravani' and renewal ceremony with Vedic Mantras.

Later, Shahu's adoptive mother Anandibai Ranisaheb's funeral rites were denied to be performed in Vedic manner by the Brahmins. The same night, some part of Shahu's Old Palace was set on fire by some conspiring Brahmins. But the most shocking case took place when the chief priest of the Darbar (Royal Priest), Appasaheb Rajopadhye evaded to perform the religious rituals in the Palace with Vedic Mantras. When this came to the notice, the Darbar issued Mulki order in the name of Rajopadhye on October he was warned not to neglect his duties as the Royal Priest. Since Rajopadhye was supported by the Brahmins in Kolhapur, he did not succumb to the warning of the Darbar. In the second order, he was asked whether he was willing to perform all the ceremonies of the Royal Family in Vedic form.<sup>3</sup>

Meanwhile, the Brahmins in Kolhapur, appealed to Shahu to prohibit Narayan Shastri to perform any holy rites at the Ambabai Temple. Shahu did not pay any heed to this appeal and asked Narayan Shastri to continue his worship as usual. So the infuriated Brahmins lodged a written complaint against Shahu to Col. Seally, the Political Agent, saying 'Shahu had been interfering in their religious rights'. On this Col. Seally replied that he could not interfere in the religious matter and that Shahu was the ultimate authority in this matter. The entire Brahmin class got infuriated by this stance of the Political Agent. Tilak wrote two editorials in the 'Kesari' venting the boiling anger of the Kolhapur Brahmins. Tilak openly opposed Shahu and supported the Brahmins.

He writes, "If an Indian Prince is misusing his powers, he will have to be accountable to the British Paramount Power. It is the duty of the Paramount Power to take the cognizance of the conflicts in the Native States and to see to it that they are not aggravated. -----If people had to seek help of the Paramount Power to resolve their conflict, it is a clear proof of the inability and incompetence of the Princes to rule with a reformed administrative system".<sup>4</sup> In the end Tilak had appealed to the Government to check the behavior of the rulers of the Native States.

Once again on November, 8, 1901 Shahu asked Rajopadhye to perform the religious rites in the Vedic manner. This was Shahu's third warning to him. But Rajopadhye remained unwavering. At the same time, the Acting Secretary of Governor of Bombay, C.H.Hill praised Shahu's stand against the Brahmins and their superiority complex. He also instructed that all the newspapers and individuals opposing Shahu be dealt with stern measures.<sup>5</sup>

Hill's stand undoubtedly revealed that the British Government would support Shahu in this matter. After the retirement of Col. Sealy as Political Agent on November, 30, 1901, Col. Williams Butler Ferris joined as Political Agent of Kolhapur.<sup>6</sup> He had earlier worked on different posts in the office of the Political Agent at Kolhapur. Shahu was familiar with his good nature and style of administration. It was a positive sign for Shahu, that Ferris took charge as the new Political Agent.

It was necessary for Shahu to have the support and trust of the British Government in the Vedokta case. Hence, he kept on informing his position about Vedokta and its various happenings to the British officers and his friends from time to time. In his letter on April, 16, 1902 to Mr. Edgerlery, the Secretary of State for India, Shahu writes about the co-operation extended by Col. Sealy and Sir Charles Allivant to him in the Vedokta case. He also had expressed his deep satisfaction towards the British Government for always standing by his side.<sup>7</sup> Similarly he had also thanked Sir Charles Allivant for his strong support.<sup>8</sup>

### **Rajopadhye Watan Confiscated**

Rajopadhye never budged at all, despite several orders by the Kolhapur Darbar. At last on May, 1, 1902 the Darbar issued a show cause notice to Rajopadhye. This notice asks why he should not be removed from the hereditary office of the Rajopadhye as he had refused to perform the religious rites in the Royal Palace in Vedokta manner in spite of oral and written orders issued to him to that effect.<sup>9</sup>

As there was no change in Rajopadhye's attitude despite this last notice, Shahu issued an order on May, 6, 1902 to confiscate the Vatan and Inams of Rajopadhye and to dismiss him from the post of Rajopadhye.

This order highlighted the following three points :

- 1) Rajopadhye was removed from his office of family priest.
- 2) Inams and landed property given to his family as Rajopadhye were confiscated.
- 3) Revenue, civil and criminal powers exercised by him in his estate were withdrawn.<sup>10</sup>

Almost six month period passed since the first notice was issued to Rajopadhye was issued. Shahu utilized these six months to collect different evidences regarding the Kshatriya's right to Vedokta from several places such as Tanjore, Satara, Udaipur, Nagpur and Baroda. During this period, he also appointed two learned Brahmins to trace the history of Vedokta in Kolhapur. It was then found that all the rituals in the Royal family had been performed in Vedic manner. However, this tradition was discontinued in Babasaheb Maharaja's time. His priest Raghunath Shastri Parvate took advantages of his ignorant and superstitious nature. He was told that it was because of the Vedokta rituals in the palace that all his issues had met untimely death. Thus the Raja was bullied into accepting the Puranokta rituals. This had been in practice for the last 30 years during the period of minority. Shahu had to face the same.<sup>11</sup>

In his letter to Mr. Edgerley on May, 12, 1902, Shahu had tried to convince him of his Kshatriya origin by referring to the historical evidences he had discovered.<sup>12</sup> This clearly shows that Shahu did not fight for the Vedokta because of his obstinate nature. He sincerely tried to reach to the roots of the issue.

Rajopadhye did not pay any heed to the notices of Shahu for six months but as soon as his Vatans and Imams were confiscated he very promptly sent his reply, to the Kolhapur Darbar, incorporating as many as arguments he could make. He had remained firm on his stand.<sup>13</sup>

Shahu also confiscated the imams of Rs. 50,000/- of the Shankaracharya Math and those of all the Brahmins who refused to perform the rituals in Vedic manner. Meanwhile, Shahu published his proclamation of 50 percent reservation in the government and Khasgi services of the State for the backward classes in 1902. The Brahmin Class in the entire Maharashtra got infuriated due to these actions of Shahu and they all stood united against him in the Vedokta struggle.

Though Rajopadhye had made certain arguments against the notice of the Darbar, he had by then realized that his position and his powers would never be entrusted to him again. So he then changed his stand and requested Shahu on June, 28, 1902 to withdraw the order of Darbar against him and to return powers and Inams.<sup>14</sup> However, the Darbar issued an order on September, 10, 1902, rejecting his request.<sup>15</sup>

#### **The British Support to Shahu**

The British Government was happy with Shahu's strong action against the Brahmins. The Government had also promised Shahu to support him fully against all these intrigues. Because it was the Brahmin class which was always in the forefront in spreading discontent against the British amongst the masses.<sup>16</sup> During Shahu's visit to England, Fraser also expressed his satisfaction over his strong action against the Brahmins and assured him that the British Government would take care of his interests in his absence from his State.<sup>17</sup>

One of the reasons why the British Government had always supported Shahu was that he had constantly kept the British officers informed about the Vedokta matter and had taken them in confidence. For example, after returning from England, Shahu informed Lee Warner on October, 12, 1902, about the intentions of the Brahmins to create a great stir in Kolhapur and also about the the report regarding the suspected cause of recent fire in the Old Palace.<sup>18</sup>

He also informed Mr. McNeil in his letter on October, 17, 1902 about the fire in the Old Palace and also about the proposed plan of the Brahmins to raise the issue in the British Parliament and if necessary to take the matters even to the Liberal Party when it would come to power.<sup>19</sup>

This shows the stubbornness of the Kolhapur Brahmins to take the issue of Vedokta to the British Parliament and to wait for the Liberal Party to come to power. Shahu was not worried of these machinations of the Brahmins, because he was aware that they had made many such appeals against the rulers of Gwalior, Baroda and Dewas which were later rejected by the British Government.<sup>20</sup> He used to give prior information to the British officers of all these Brahminic moves. Shahu

had written many such letters to Mr. Edgerely and Sir Hill informing them about the of the Vedokta Controversy. In one of his letters to Mr. Edgerely Shahu had informed him that an agent of Tilak had come to see Rajopadhye and some local pleaders and Prof. Vijapurkar had been helping Rajopadhye against the Kolhapur Darbar.<sup>21</sup>

### **Rajopadhe's Petitions Rejected**

By now Rajopadhye realizing his inability to move Shahu regarding his request, approached the British Paramount Power. He appealed almost everybody from the Political Agent to the Governor General. He made his first appeal to the Political Agent Col. Ferris on Jan. 9, 1903. He requested Ferris to advise Shahu to return the land and Inams as well as his civil, criminal and revenue powers back to him.<sup>22</sup>

Col. Ferris declared his decision on February, 19, 1903 after giving a careful thought to Rajopadhye's request petition. He said that despite Shahu's several written orders to Rajopadhye, he had not performed his duty. Therefore, it was not unfair to deprive him of his rights and land. Finally Col. Ferris says, "After a careful consideration of the petitions of the applicant and all the circumstances of the case, I can find nothing that would warrant my interference with the legitimate authority and power of the Maharaja and I therefore, reject the application."<sup>23</sup>

After Col. Ferris's decision against Rajopadhye, he made a petition to the Governor of Bombay. On May, 23, 1903, in which he had repeated the same arguments and requests that had been made to the Political Agent. The prayers of the petitions were ----

- 1) That he should be restored to the office of Rajopadhye and its perquisites be continued as before,
- 2) That all his property now resumed be restored,
- 3) That his Revenue, Civil and Criminal powers be restored to him,
- 4) That the attachment of the records, and the watch kept in his dwelling house as a permanent indignity and nuisance should be ordered to be removed at once and all his books, papers and other records being his private property should be restored to him at once.
- 5) That he should be restored to his hereditary rank of a Sardar of the State.<sup>24</sup>

On the background of Rajopadhye's petition to the Governor. Shahu informed Fraser about the Vedokta movement that the discontent of the Brahmins had been aggravated and that they were bitterly criticizing Shahu's administration and his caste. Even the decline of Tilak's reputation was blamed on the Kolhapur Darbar. However, Shahu, while expressing his faith in the support of the Government, says, "I conscientiously believe that I am fighting for a true cause, in which I have assurance of support not only from Bombay but from Calcutta and even from England."<sup>25</sup> This letter sheds light on the then prevailing position of the dispute.

On October, 16, 1903 Col. Ferris conveyed the decision of the Governor on the petition made by Rajopadhye. According to the decision the Government refused to interfere in the matter of Rajopadhye and asserted that the orders of the Darbar issued to Rajopadhye were within the competence of the Maharaja of Kolhapur and that there are no adequate grounds for the Government of Bombay to intervene into the matter.<sup>26</sup>

Col. Ferris conveyed the Governor's decision to Shahu immediately after this, in which he says, "the decision of the Bombay Government will not be interfered with even if Rajopadhye appeals to the Government of India or the Secretary of State and that in your jurisdiction, also there was not tyranny or palpable injustice such as calls for the interference of the Paramount Power". Col. Ferris further feels that in the view of this decision the controversy of Vedokta would soon cease to exist.<sup>27</sup>

Sir C.H.Hill congratulated Shahu from London for the decision of the Governor of Bombay. He says, "You have nothing to fear if you steadily pursue your course of right and Government are always anxious to support you".<sup>28</sup>

Shahu received full support of the British officers such as Ferris, C.H.Hill, Edgerley and Fraser in the Vedokta Controversy. Shahu expressed his special thanks to Col. Ferris for his co-operation as the Political Agent. While conveying his feelings to him Shahu writes, "If he had received such support from the beginning of his career the opposition would not have been so strong and audacious and the Brahmins would not have been so overbearing." He further informs that the Brahmin community is being treated more courteously in Kolhapur State than in Baroda, Dewas and other States.<sup>29</sup>

Rajopadhye appealed to Lord Curzon, the Viceroy and Governor General of India on January. 5, 1905, He requested the Viceroy to reconsider the decision given by the Governor of Bombay and to return his Imams and Vatanas that Shahu had confiscated.<sup>30</sup> Later, he also sent a supplementary petition against the decision of the Governor of Bombay to the Viceroy on April 10, 1905.<sup>31</sup>

On the appeal by Rajopadhye the Government of India issued a notice that contained the final decision on his claims. It is very significant to note that the Government on India retained the same verdict of the Governor of Bombay in this case and declared that, "the Government of India concur in the view of the Government of Bombay that His Highness the Maharaja of Kolhapur was competent to pass the orders complained of and consider that no grounds have been shown for the intervention of the Government of India".<sup>32</sup>

This final decision of the Government of India was conveyed to Rajopadhye by the Political Agent on June 13, 1905 and it brought to an end the much chewed controversy of Vedokta, with its result in favour of Shahu and his Darbar.

### **Shahu Victorious in the End**

Rajopadhye case was the last hope of the entire Brahmin Community in Maharashtra but since the decision of the Government of India was declared in favour of Shahu, final hope of the Brahmins died out. The Brahmin camp was seized with depression. They had no other place left for redressing their so called grievance and so, they decided to surrender and make peace. The first surrender was made by the Shankaracharya of Karveer, Brahmanalker Swami, their spiritual leader. He declared that, "the family of Chhatrapatis of Kolhapur belongs to the Kshatriya Varna and that there is no objection to the performance of Vedokta rites in their family". (July, 10, 1905)<sup>33</sup>

Shahu then took pity on him and returned the wealth of the Shankaracharya's Math.<sup>34</sup> Shankaracharya was followed by the entire Brahmin community in Kolhapur in surrendering themselves. In Dec, 1905 they held a special public meeting in which they pronounced "H.H.Chhatrapati Shahu Maharaj of Kolhapur is a Kshatriya and that all religious rites in this royal family should be performed according to the Vedokta ritual as per their ancient family tradition".<sup>35</sup>

In this way, Shahu was successful in the social conflict that continued for six long years. It was a significant event not only in Shahu's life but in the social history of India. Its credit goes to Shahu's patience, pursuit of the truth as well as to the extraordinary support and cooperation extended to him by the British Government. If such support had not been extended by the British Government, it would not have been easy for Shahu to win the Victory. The British Government was equally happy to share the joy of Shahu, as they had humbled their perpetual enemy, at least for the time-being.

## References and Footnotes

1. SCRR, p. 90
2. Ibid, p. 89
3. RSCP, Vol. III, Letter No. 67, 68, pp. 161-162
4. Kesari, 20, 22 October, 1901
5. RSC, p. 100
6. Ibid, p. 100
7. RSCP, Vol. III, Introduction, p. 27
8. Ibid, p. 28
9. Ibid, Letter No. 69, p. 163
10. Ibid, Letter No. 70, p. 164
11. Ibid, Letter No. 70, pp. 164-165
12. Ibid, Letter No. 6, p. 29
13. Ibid, Letter No. 72, pp. 171-178
14. Ibid, Letter No. 71, p. 168
15. Ibid, Letter No. 73, p. 179
16. Ibid, Letter No. 7, p. 30
17. Ibid, Letter No. 10, p. 34
18. Ibid, Letter No. 22, p. 61
19. Ibid, Letter No. 23, p. 62
20. Ibid, Letter No. 28, p. 78
21. Ibid, Letter No. 33, p. 83
22. Ibid, Letter No. 112, pp. 250-263
23. Ibid, Letter No. 114, pp. 271-277
24. Ibid, Letter No. 65, p. 158
25. Ibid, Letter No. 47, pp. 101-102
26. Ibid, Letter No. 50, p. 105
27. Ibid, Letter No. 51, p. 106
28. Ibid, Letter No. 52, p. 108
29. Ibid, Letter No. 55, p. 113
30. Ibid, Letter No. 64, 126, pp. 126, 293
31. Ibid, Letter No. 134, p. 311
32. Ibid, Letter No. 139, pp. 341, 342
33. Ibid, Letter No. 146, pp. 380-383
34. RSSG, p. 45
35. RSCP, Vol. III, Letter No. 147, pp. 384-385

