

Princely States in Social Reforms: Contributions of Maharaja Sayajirao Gaekwad III

Amit Dholakia*

The history of modern India is dominated by the narratives of British colonial rule and the nationalist movements that resisted and eventually succeeded in overthrowing the colonial regime. However, princely states are a significant yet often overlooked aspect of India's past. These semi-autonomous kingdoms, numbering approximately six hundred, spanned the breadth and length of the Indian subcontinent, comprising two-fifths of its landmass and one-third of its population at the time of India's independence.¹ Despite being nominally independent, they acknowledged the supremacy of the British Crown in several matters and were treated as feudatory states. The princely states were diverse in cultural, social, and economic contexts. They had different historical origins, administrative systems, and levels of modernization.

The princely states played a crucial role in the governance of the Indian subcontinent, not only during the pre-colonial era but also at the height of British colonial rule. The rulers of the princely states continued to play an important role in India's political and public life even after India's independence. In terms of governance, some of these states performed better than the provinces of British India.² The role of the princely states in modern India is crucial to understanding the complexities of Indian society and how people lived under British rule.³ The contribution of India's princely states should be added to rather than subtracted from the development of modernity and cultural renaissance in India.

Modernization of Indian society and social reforms in the 19th and early 20th centuries in India were initiated and accelerated by various reformists and India's monarchies. Many kings initiated and supported significant social

changes inside their kingdoms. The princely states of Baroda under Maharaja Sayajirao Gaekwad III, Mysore under the Wadiyar dynasty, Travancore under Maharaja Swathi Thirunal and his successors, or Cooch Behar under Maharaja Nripendra Narayan and his successors played a significant role in promoting education and the upliftment of the status of women in society through various policy measures and social mobilization. Their efforts laid the groundwork for future advancements in women's rights and education in India.

The Baroda State

During the final years of Mughal Emperor Aurangzeb's reign, the Marathas initiated incursions into Gujarat's territories. In 1721, Pilajirao Gaekwad, a Maratha Sardar who had previously established the fortifications of Songadh and Rajpipla, captured the city of Baroda from the Mughal Empire. This action was undertaken on behalf of Peshwa Bajirao I. To achieve this conquest, Gaekwad strategically enlisted the support of local Adivasi communities, such as the Bhils and Kolis. In recognition of his significant contribution to the expansion of the Maratha Empire, the Peshwa bestowed upon Gaekwad the city of Baroda as a jagir, a land grant. This event marked the genesis of the Gaekwad dynasty's consolidation of power and the establishment of the princely state of Baroda, which later became one of the premier princely states, located mainly in the central part of Gujarat which also covered small provinces in North Gujarat, South Gujarat, and Saurashtra, which were geographically disconnected from the central Baroda province.⁴

Baroda was a princely state ruled by the Maratha Gaekwad dynasty from its establishment in 1721 until its merger with the Dominion of India in 1949. Geographically, it spanned 3,239 square km and had

* Professor and Head, Department of Political Science, The Maharaja Sayajirao University of Baroda. Can be reached at acrosstoamit@gmail.com

a population of 2,032,798 people as of the 1911 census. Though the Gaekwad dynasty governed it, the colonial rulers regulated Baroda under a treaty arrangement through a British Resident under the direct authority of the Governor-General of India. Baroda became one of the most progressive states in India, with significant reforms in education, health, and social welfare under the reign of Maharaja Sayajirao Gaekwad III.

Maharaja Sayajirao Gaekwad III

Maharaja Sayajirao Gaekwad (11th March 1863 - 6th February 1939) was the most illustrious and longest-serving ruler of the Gaekwad dynasty, holding his reign for nearly sixty-four years from 1875 till his death in 1939.⁵ Born as Gopalrao Gaekwad, he was the second son of Kashirao Gaekwad and Ummabai in a village called Kavhana in Maharashtra. He was adopted at the age of twelve by Maharani Jamnabai – who had no male child – following the death of her husband Maharaja Khanderao Gaekwad and the deposition of her brother-in-law Malharrao Gaekwad by the British on account of bad character and incompetence. Born and raised as a commoner, Sayajirao lacked formal education or specific knowledge of royal life and responsibilities before adoption. However, gifted with exceptional intellectual abilities, he completed a thorough training in various aspects of statecraft and governance imparted by accomplished British and Indian teachers a few years after his adoption.

Sayajirao married Laxmibai (renamed as Maharani Chimnabai I) in 1880. Upon her death in 1885, he married Gajrabai (renamed Maharani Chimnabai II), who stayed as his lifelong partner. Sayajirao faced various challenges throughout his life, including personal tragedies like the death of several of his children and chronic health issues. Despite these obstacles, he governed the Baroda state with remarkable zeal and success. His personal life exemplified a harmonious blend of simplicity and sophistication, often eschewing the extravagant displays of wealth typical of many contemporary royals.

Significant socio-economic reforms, measures of progressive governance, and educational advancement mark Sayajirao's reign. One of his notable achievements was the introduction of compulsory primary education and the establishment of scholarships to facilitate the higher education of youth from marginalized sections. He banned child marriage and made special arrangements for the education and skill development of girls and adult women. In public health and sanitation matters, Sayajirao's governance was marked by the setting up of modern hospitals and dispensaries. His regime introduced preventive measures against epidemics.

His initiatives included clean drinking water projects, drastically improving his state's public health standards.

Sayajirao initiated economic reforms, including industrial and agricultural development, setting up exhibitions, and establishing educational institutions. He initiated agrarian reforms, recognizing the importance of irrigation and introducing modern agriculture techniques. His policies led to a significant boost in agricultural productivity and improvements in farmers' livelihoods. He offered wastelands for cultivation at lower rates. He also encouraged new methods of cultivation and set up model experimental farms. He also promoted cottage industries and crafts, ensuring a balanced industrial growth in Baroda. He encouraged industrialization in both public and private sectors, with textiles being the leading industry. The state-owned industries included cotton mills, sugar factories, and glass factories, while private industries encompassed chemical, iron, salt, cement, and match manufacturing. His policies encouraged the establishment of cooperative societies and modern banking systems, the most famous being the Bank of Baroda, which is among India's largest nationalized banks today.

Sayajirao undertook numerous initiatives to enhance public works, including developing roads, dams, water reservoirs, irrigation facilities, and a railway network within his state. Maharaja also expanded the railway network, establishing the Gaekwad's Baroda State Railways in 1921 and founding a Railway Staff College and a Railway Colony in Vadodara. One of his notable endeavors was the construction of the Ajwa reservoir, initiated in 1885 and completed in 1890, which supplies water to a large part of the city of Vadodara even today. Through his reformist measures in governance and social reforms, Sayajirao left an indelible mark on the life and society of Baroda. The sections below highlight his ideas and contributions to education, the welfare of the depressed classes, women's empowerment, amelioration of retrograde social practices, and other related areas.

Ameliorating Caste-Based Discrimination and Inequality

Sayajirao was especially concerned with reducing the barriers that India's caste system posed to individuals and society's social, economic, and moral advancement. In his inaugural lecture at the Eighteenth Social Conference on December 30, 1904, he identified two major impediments to social growth in India: the complications created by the caste system and concerns concerning women's standing.⁶ He was convinced that the caste system not only inhibited social development but also national unity and individual economic potential.

Sayajirao's progressive policies and strong stance against caste discrimination were influenced by his childhood experiences, such as saving a Mahar boy from drowning in a village pond, as well as the anti-Brahmin movement of Jyotirao Phule and Chhatrapati Shahuji Maharaj of Kolhapur, which his father supported. He believed that untouchability was repugnant to the idea of common humanity and that there should be no difference between man and man in the eyes of the government. Maharaja's ideal of social justice and equality was highlighted by his meetings with famous personalities like anti-caste campaigners, the founder of the Depressed Classes Mission Society, Vitthal Ramji Shinde, and the Arya Samaj leader. He was particularly impressed by Swami Dayanand Saraswati's views and activities and the Arya Samaj he created. Arya Samaj played a noteworthy role in uplifting the depressed classes in Baroda. Swami Dayanand Saraswati visited Baroda in November/December 1875 as a state guest invited by the Maharaja to provide guidance and share the message of renaissance with the people of Baroda. In his lectures, Dayanand Saraswati emphasized social reforms such as promoting education among the public, uplifting the Dalits, and banning child marriage. He strongly opposed the caste system prevalent in Hindu society, citing that it was not mentioned in the Vedic era literature but is a later-day distortion.⁷

During the early phases of the Gaekwad government's education strategy for backward classes, Arya Samaj workers collaborated with the Maharaja. Under the inspiration of Swami Nityananda, Pandit Atmaran Amritsari was appointed as the administrator of Antyaj Boys' Hostel and inspector of the school by Sayajirao in 1908. Pandit Atmaram, a dedicated worker of Arya Samaj, had full sympathy and empathy towards the lower classes of society. His consistent and honest efforts enabled boys and girls from underprivileged neighborhoods to overcome their complexes and develop self-confidence.

To weaken the negative impact of the caste system on social cohesion and the progress of individuals, Sayajirao implemented a series of progressive measures. He legalized inter-caste marriages in 1908, allowing Hindus of different castes to marry each other without losing the Hindu faith. In the early 20th century context, this was a revolutionary measure that was not taken positively by the conservative elements of society. Baroda was the first state to introduce this reform in the country, which led Chhatrapati Shahuji Maharaj of Kolhapur to follow suit and Vitthalbhai Patel, elder brother of Sardar Patel, to propose an all-India bill to legalize inter-caste marriages. Sayajirao ensured that caste norms that contradicted public policy and hampered society's material advancement would not be upheld in the state's

civil courts. Moreover, Sayajirao endorsed the Religious Freedom Act of 1902, safeguarding individuals' rights to convert without forfeiting their property or entitlements. This Act also stipulated that excommunication from a caste would not lead to the loss of these privileges.

By challenging deeply ingrained social norms and introducing progressive reforms, Sayajirao laid the groundwork for a more inclusive and fair system of governance in the state of Baroda. This was demonstrated in the measures he took for the uplift of the backward and socially marginalized sections of society despite facing opposition from the conservative elements from the higher castes. He encouraged the admission of students from artisan and 'untouchable' castes to the Kala Bhavan Technical College he had set up in 1890. He also provided free and compulsory education to all children, including the children of the Dalit communities, in the Amreli taluka of Saurashtra starting in 1893, and later extended this policy to the entire Baroda state in 1906. This policy led to a high level of literacy among the people living in the Dalit communities in his state. By 1910-11, there were 288 schools for Dalit children in the Baroda state, with over 15000 students enrolled. He also employed students from these schools as teachers and in the municipal and survey departments of the Baroda State. He established boarding schools in Baroda, Amreli, Patan, and Navsari for the children from the backward communities, where boarders were also required to visit the neighboring villages to spread modern ideas among the rural folks.

Sayajirao ensured representation for Dalits in the legislative assembly, 'Dhara Sabha', founded in 1907. All these changes prompted neighboring princely princes and the British colonial authority to protect the Dalits' educational and welfare interests. Sayajirao took a notable step in providing spiritual and financial support to famed social reformer Jyotirao Phule. Jyotiba had personally narrated his book titled *Cultivator's Whipcord (Shetkaryacha Asud)* to the Maharaja and expressed his pleasure thus: "I am extremely indebted to Shri Sarkar Gaikwad Senakhaskhel Samsher Bahadur Sayajirao Maharaj for taking time from all of his valuable political administrative work to hear the reading of this book [Cultivator's Whipcord] with great pleasure and loving emotions; and for giving me the benefit of his munificence and a show of honor."⁸ This gesture underscored his commitment to empowering reformers striving to eradicate caste disparities. His efforts to break down caste prejudices and promote social harmony were evident in his actions, such as organizing banquets where people of all castes dined together and opening temple gates to Dalits.⁹

The Maharaja's efforts to provide education and employment opportunities to the backward classes laid

the foundation for a more inclusive and equitable society in the Baroda State. However, these efforts faced obstacles that limited the full realization of his goals. The elitist journal *Buddhiprakash* and the newspaper *Prajabandhu* expressed disapproval of his actions in favor of the education and advancement of the Dalits. Due to the prevailing caste prejudices, he could not set up schools where higher and lower-caste children studied together. As a practical concession, he allowed for separate schools for Dalit children, resulting in insufficient integration of these children into mainstream society.

Support to Dr. B. R. Ambedkar

Sayajirao played a pivotal role in shaping the life and professional career of Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, the principal architect of India's Constitution and a lifelong fighter for the emancipation of Dalits and the advancement of social justice in India. Sayajirao's financial and moral support was instrumental in facilitating Ambedkar's pursuit of higher education, both in India and the United States, ultimately catalyzing his emergence as a distinguished economist, jurist and a leader for the social justice. Sayajirao originally promised Ambedkar Rs. 25 per month to attend Elphinstone College in Mumbai. After completing his college education, Ambedkar joined Baroda State as a junior staff member in the accounting department, earning a monthly salary of Rs 75. However, Ambedkar's tenure in Baroda was brief, as he was compelled to return to Bombay due to his father's ill health and the caste prejudices suffered by him. The Maharaja then met Ambedkar at Malabar Hill Palace in Mumbai in 1913 to understand his future and service commitment to the Baroda state. After this meeting, Sayajirao was convinced about the extraordinary talent of the young Ambedkar. On 4th June 1913, Ambedkar agreed to dedicate himself to studying specific subjects discussed with Sayajirao and later serve the Baroda State for ten years after completing his education in the United States. In return for this agreement, he received a scholarship of Rs. 20,434 from the Baroda State. Grateful to the Maharaja for this invaluable support, Ambedkar dedicated his PhD thesis submitted to Columbia University, New York, to Sayajirao with the following words: "Dedicated to His Highness Shri Sayajirao Gaikwad Maharaja of Baroda as a Token of my Gratitude for his Help in the Matter of my Education."

When Ambedkar returned to Baroda in 1917, Sayajirao appointed him as his Military Secretary, intending to promote him later to the position of Finance Minister. However, despite earning numerous academic degrees, Ambedkar faced caste-based discrimination once more in Baroda. This experience left him deeply disheartened,

and he returned to Mumbai soon after joining the state services.

Despite these difficulties, Maharaja Sayajirao continued supporting Ambedkar in their senior years. Ambedkar's overseas education, financed by Sayajirao, exposed him to egalitarian principles and equipped him with the tools necessary for social reform. His experiences in Baroda, both positive and negative, significantly influenced his ideologies and concepts, and his relationship with Sayajirao remained steadfast throughout his life. In 1931, Ambedkar participated in the Round Table Conference in London, where his speeches advocating for the rights of the Depressed Classes were heard by Sayajirao, who subsequently invited him to a special dinner.

Measures for Women's Welfare

Sayajirao was quite passionate about the cause of women's social progress and measures for their empowerment. He recognized the significance of education and legal measures for achieving this objective. He argued that by failing to educate women, the country was losing half of its potential power. He also highlighted the importance of having educated mothers, as it benefits not only the children but also the entire race by promoting development and reducing mental divisions inside the home.

Sayajirao implemented a law in 1902 allowing widows to remarry. Not only did he legalize widow remarriage against stiff social opposition, but he also personally encouraged and supported young boys of his state wanting to marry a widow.¹⁰ Sayajirao believed that the root cause of many social evils in India was the custom of child marriages. As early marriages had detrimental effects on the lives of women, he advocated for the abolition of the practice of child marriage to ensure the happiness and progress of families. The Prohibition of Child Marriage Act of 1904, enacted by the Baroda State, addressed this issue by setting a minimum marriageable age of 12 for girls and 16 for boys. A clause was added to the Act, making it punishable for parents who compelled their daughters to marry before the age of 8. In 1929, the marriageable age was further raised to 14 for girls and 18 for boys. These legislative measures collectively contributed to a significant change in societal attitudes towards women, ultimately paving the way for greater gender equality and social justice in India. The Act contributed to increased awareness about the negative impacts of child marriage on the health, education, and well-being of girls. This awareness was crucial in shifting societal attitudes towards child marriage and encouraging parents to prioritize their daughters' education and development over early marriage.

Sayajirao recognized the pivotal role education plays in empowering women. His initiatives in promoting education for girls were groundbreaking and far-reaching. The introduction of compulsory primary education for girls in 1893 benefited girls more than boys, as more girls were out of school than boys. His remarkable endeavor to educate his wife, Maharani Chimnabai II, demonstrates his devotion to women's education. He always regretted that he could not educate his first wife, Maharani Chimnabai I, who passed away early in their marital life. Subsequently, upon his marriage to Chimnabai II, he realized his aspiration of educating his wife. Initially, the Maharani exhibited little interest in learning new subjects. However, following her first overseas trip in 1887, her attitude towards education changed. Her educational pursuits encompassed languages such as Marathi, English, Sanskrit, and French. Furthermore, she expanded her intellectual horizons by studying diverse subjects.¹¹

One of Sayajirao's earliest initiatives for women's education was the establishment of schools exclusively for girls in 1881. This move was a significant step towards recognizing the importance of education for women. The Maharaja also established a training college for women teachers, which was built in 1882 and later known as the Zenana School, or Stree Adhyapan Mandir. This training institution sought to teach women skills like needlework, sketching, and cooking so that they might use them in their everyday lives.

Sayajirao's efforts to uplift women went beyond education alone. He also recognized the importance of their participation in social and political spheres. To provide women, particularly those restricted from public appearances, with an environment of liberty, he decreed in 1892-93 that the public park be reserved exclusively for women every Friday. This initiative ensured that the park was freely accessible to women as a recreational space, free from the presence of men. This was a significant step towards creating inclusive public spaces. In 1908, the Chimnabai Maternity Relief Committee was established in Baroda. This organization aimed to provide charitable assistance to impoverished pregnant women, with a particular focus on those who were incarcerated. Both mothers and their infants received financial aid, protective clothing, and other comforts during confinement.¹²

By 1911, the formation of the Sanitary Association marked another significant development in Baroda. This association hired a matron and health visitors who guided sanitation and hygiene through house-to-house visits and public lectures. Their efforts were focused on raising awareness among women about the importance of sanitation.¹³ The Shri Chimnabai Stree-Samaj, founded in 1913 and supported by Chimnabai II, was an

institution entirely managed by women with the primary goal of women's empowerment. This association aimed to help middle-class women engage with the evolving social landscape and participate actively in societal improvement. It offered classes in language, nursing, first aid, and sewing, among other subjects.¹⁴ Additionally, a branch of the All-India Women's Association was established in Baroda. This organization formed subcommittees that visited jails, asylums, hospitals, schools, and infirmaries to further women's welfare. They also engaged in social reform activities, such as campaigning against child marriage and advocating for raising the age of consent.

Contributions in the Field of Education

Sayajirao was a trailblazer in the realm of educational reforms. His reign was characterized by a significant emphasis on primary education, which he made free and compulsory across his state. Baroda was most likely the first state to implement essential basic education in 1892. This was a significant achievement, considering the British only passed a similar act in the nearby Central Provinces in 1920, nearly three decades later. Parents had to pay a fine of two annas for each day their child was absent from school until grade six. This fine was later increased to one rupee, leading to a consistent rise in the number of children attending school and receiving education. By 1910, the state boasted as many as 2938 primary schools, catering to the educational needs of girls, disabled children, and those from the Dalit communities. In addition to these reforms, Sayajirao also opened the first Adivasi School in India, specifically for the Bhil community residing in the southern regions of Gujarat. This initiative was a testament to his commitment to inclusivity and the social upliftment of the communities left behind in educational achievement.

The establishment of the Maharaja Sayajirao University of Baroda was a notable milestone in the history of Indian higher education. The idea of founding a university in Baroda captured the attention of Sayajirao and his educational advisors long before the concept of regional universities took root in the country.¹⁵ The Maharaja founded the Baroda College in 1881 for education in science and liberal arts on the lines of the best Western universities. This institution soon became a premier learning center in Western India, drawing students like Vinoba Bhave and K. M. Munshi. Sayajirao persuaded Sri Aurobindo to accept the position of Vice Principal and Professor of English and French at Baroda College. Sri Aurobindo stayed in Baroda and served the Baroda College for nearly thirteen years. The Maharaja also founded a college to teach Indian classical music and

India's classical dances under the tutelage of renowned musicians and artists. Kala Bhavan, an Institute for learning crafts and technology, was also established. Dadasaheb Phalke, the pioneer of filmmaking in India, studied photography and filmmaking at Kala Bhavan in Baroda.

The seed of the university's development grew from these institutions' success. The Government of Baroda consistently subjected its educational system to periodic exploratory inquiries by internationally renowned education experts, leading to the appointment of the first Commission in 1909. The state's educational policy underwent another review in 1916. As part of this inquiry, Shri S. V. Mukerjea, a member of the Commission, prepared minutes of recommendations advocating for establishing a University at Baroda. In 1919, the issue was brought to the forefront with the appointment of another Committee which prepared an elaborate report in favor of a civic University at Baroda. Subsequently, Prof. P. Sheshadri of the Benares Hindu University was requested to devise a scheme for a University at Baroda. During this period, Maharani Chimnabai II offered a generous donation to establish a Women's University at Baroda. However, the Maharaja and his advisors wanted a broader university in Baroda. Though Sayajirao did not live long enough to see the fruition of his dream of establishing a university in Baroda, the founding of The Maharaja Sayajirao University of Baroda in 1949 by Maharaja Pratapsinhrao Gaekwad was a result of a series of strategic decisions and visionary leadership of Sayajirao. Today, the university stands as a testament to the foresight and commitment of its founders to the cause of higher education.

A Pioneer in the Public Library Movement

Sayajirao played a pivotal role in developing the public library movement in India. His vision for the library movement was deeply rooted in his understanding of the role of education in personal and societal development. He believed that the public library was the people's university where individuals could continue their lifelong education.¹⁶ Sayajirao's vision for public libraries took shape during his visit to America, where he was inspired by the modern library systems he observed. He invited Mr. William Alanson Borden, a renowned American librarian, to cooperate to establish a comprehensive Baroda State library system. Borden, a colleague of Melvil Dewey and a student of C.A. Cutter brought an excellent background in public libraries to the project. He was free to plan and organize the public library network in Baroda, a role he fulfilled until 1913. Under Borden's guidance, the Maharaja established a separate Department of

the Library and appointed Motibhai Amin as Assistant Curator. The project aimed to spread knowledge and public education, with approximately 8,000 books being packed in boxes and sent to different libraries for readers in 18 villages. The central library at Sanketwada, established by the Maharaja, housed an impressive collection of 1.25 lakh books. This library was visited by five Viceroys of India, a testament to its significance and the Maharaja's commitment to education. Sayajirao's contributions to the public library movement did not stop there. He gave Pandit Madan Mohan Malviya a generous donation of Rs. 1 lakh to create a library at Banaras Hindu University named after Sayajirao.

Conclusion

Maharaja Sayajirao Gaekwad III contributions to the Baroda state and society are considered extraordinary. Despite the challenging circumstances of his times, he demonstrated an unwavering commitment to modernizing his state. His visionary foresight led to transformative initiatives for mobilizing social capital through education and social reforms focussed on women and deprived sections of society. These efforts serve as a testament to his leadership and enduring dedication to the welfare of his people, inspiring contemporary societal advancements. In navigating the complex social and ideological landscape of his times, Sayajirao addressed the difficult issue of untouchability and improved conditions for the oppressed sections within his state. He developed a broad social reform program while balancing Western cultural influences and Hindu religious precepts to avoid causing societal divisions. While influenced by European and American norms, Sayajirao remained deeply rooted in Indian traditions and practices, preserving our heritage while embracing modern advancements. Sayajirao's reign significantly impacted not only the princely state of Baroda but also modern India. His legacy, characterized by dedication to welfare, education, and modernization, secures him a venerated position in the history of modern India.

Notes

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