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Maharaja Sayajirao Gaekwad III

"India is not a nation and cannot be made into a nation while it is split up into religions and castes." This was the perspective of the reformist leader Maharaja Sayajirao Gaekwad III. He was born on March 17, 1863, in a tiny town called Kavhana in the Nasik district of the Bombay Presidency. He was a direct descendant of Pilaji Rao Gaekwad, the founder of Gaekwad dynasty.



After Khanderao's death, on November 28th, 1870, left the succession to the throne in an ambiguous position. There was no legitimate successor alive, and Khanderao had not exercised his right of adoption. Therefore, his younger brother, Malharrao, succeeded him on April 19th 1871. However, a proclamation announced Maharaja Malharrao's deposition because of his notorious misconduct and misgovernment of his State. The British Government was looking for someone younger who could be shaped into a better leader of the state. Sayajirao's father, Kashirao, shared a modest family home in Kavhana leading a simple life sustained by farming. Kashirao and his sons were summoned to Baroda as possible claimants of the throne of Baroda.

Out of the three sons of Kashirao, Gopalrao, as the future Maharaja Sayajirao Gaekwad was originally named, took the Maharani's fancy and no objection was made to her choice, which was therefore ratified by the British Government.

Early on the morning of May 27th 1871 he was adopted by the Maharani Jambabai as her son, and crowned as the heir to the throne. However, being a minor Sayajirao was yet to take the throne of Baroda, thus he reigned under a Council of Regency until he came of age, on 28 December 1881.

Maharaja Sayajirao became known as a reformist because of the change he brought in his state. He went to the Social Conference of the Indian National Congress at Bombay, to deliver the inaugural address. With regard to women in India, he specified as their three handicaps: early marriages, too strict purdah, and the denial of education to them. He gave examples of our Vedic ancestors to put emphasis on how these practices were never part of our culture. In 1902, Maharaja had put into operation the law permitting Hindu widows to remarry. The Infant Marriage Prevention Act followed two years later, as did definite legislation on Primary Education, the Penal Code, and Criminal Procedure.

Maharaja Sayajirao's other social reforms included ideological and theological education, the establishment of different public welfare departments, and the promotion of beautiful arts. Maharaja Sayajirao Gaekwad was also dedicated to boosting Baroda's agricultural sector; he established the Department of Agriculture. His forward-thinking initiatives aimed to liberate farmers from money-lenders by offering State loans at a minimal interest rate and establishing Agricultural Banks to provide additional financial assistance.

In the Social Conference of the Indian National Congress at Bombay in his inaugural address regarding caste-barrier Maharaja Sayajirao said that to remove the caste-barrier should be undoubtedly the ultimate goal. If we could not do that at once, at least we should hold up boldly before everyone the ideal, that is removing caste-barriers, at which they aimed; and in the meanwhile, since something was better than nothing, we should do well to clear away the externals, the useless minute forms which encumbered our daily life. We must not stop at externals, however, but must exorcise the spirit of caste barriers.

Social reforms which he introduced concerning "untouchables" were in consonant with the change he wanted to bring. *"The people must rise superior to their circumstances and realise that more knowledge is their greatest need, their greatest want. They must be brought up to love books, not simply attractive bindings or pretty pictures, but their contents. They must be taught to regard books as part of their lives. Libraries will not then appear a luxury, but a necessity of existence."* is what he believed would help lower castes in elevating their status in society.

Maharaja Sayajirao had instituted a system of schools and hostels for them, with a well-equipped teaching and superintending staff. Many centuries in a servile position made these people reluctant to mingle with the rest of societal classes,

making them hesitant even to take prizes from Maharaja's hands. But he was determined to conquer the prejudice which separated a large section of his Hindu subjects.

Maharaja Sayajirao in the beginning broke down the tyranny of the priestly class. He cared very little about a particular religious ceremony which was performed either with the Vedic rituals or with the Puranic rituals. The crossing of ocean was regarded as a heinous crime by the orthodox Hindus in the latter half of the nineteenth century. Maharaja Sayajirao gave a shock to this Hindu tradition by sending his brother Sampatrao to England as a student. Maharaja Sayajirao started Sanskrit Mahavidyalaya in Baroda for training the priests and it was thrown open to all the Hindus, whether Brahmins or non-Brahmins. In 1915, he passed the Purohit Act which aimed at making the priests qualified for performing the rituals.

Maharaja Sayajirao also emphasised the importance of developing a national consciousness for India's growth. He pushed for peaceful relations between castes and communities, urging the underprivileged to rise above their circumstances. He denounced the caste system, claiming that it was out of date and incompatible with the future.

It had been the policy of the Maharaja Sayajirao to encourage the down-trodden classes of the Hindu society to come forward and get the benefits bestowed on them by the State for their betterment. In 1933, Sayajirao referred to his policy through which he wanted to uplift the "...diverse castes like the Dheds, Kolis (fisher-man) and Chambhars (shoe-makers). To this, he immediately added that while doing so "I take care to see that they are helped only in proportion to their need." It meant that Maharaja Sayajirao did not prefer to give aid to such backward classes for the sake of helping them, but he wanted to give them only their due share. As for the caste, he came to the conclusion that just as a "Body cannot function well unless its different organs are sound, so also our nation cannot thrive unless its constituent castes are made strong." He had a broad outlook of the nation vis-a-vis the caste.

The influence of Maharaja Sayajirao Gaekwad on Dr. B.R. Ambedkar's life and career was significant. Maharaja Sayajirao provided financial assistance and encouragement to Dr. Ambedkar to seek higher study in America, acknowledging his talent while overcoming caste biases. Dr. Ambedkar was a standout student at Columbia University, especially in the field of economics. With the Maharaja's help, Dr. Ambedkar was able to finish his education and return to India, where he had been serving in Baroda. Even though Dr. Ambedkar had to deal with further discrimination, his meeting with Maharaja Sayajirao had a significant impact on his life and made him appreciate the Maharaja's generosity and vision.

Maharaja Sayajirao Gaekwad III stood for modern civilization and disapproved of mediaeval traditions and customs which were based on erroneous conceptions of life. In this regard, he was both an idealist and a realist with a rational outlook, Maharaja Sayajirao in many ways among the class of Indian Ruling Chiefs and Princes, emerges as a thinker and reformer of considerable magnitude in the social, economic and political spheres.

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