



Sayajirao Gaekwad's Perspective on Educational Empowerment for Marginalised Groups

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Abstract- This paper sociologically analyses the educational reforms introduced by Maharaja Sayajirao Gaekwad III of Baroda as an early experiment in state-led social justice within colonial India. Situated in a context of rigid caste hierarchy, patriarchy, and restricted mobility, Gaekwad's introduction of free and compulsory primary education represented a structural intervention aimed at redistributing cultural capital and dismantling inherited privilege. Education was reconceptualised not as a marker of caste status but as a public right essential for citizenship and social integration. Vocational and technical expansion further linked education to economic mobility. Such initiatives illustrate a multidimensional model that combines literacy, skill development, and social inclusion. From a sociological perspective, Gaekwad's reforms demonstrate how institutional commitment, administrative enforcement, and targeted welfare can transform education into an instrument of social restructuring, anticipating later constitutional principles of equality, affirmative action, and universal access in India.

Keywords: Inclusive Education; Social Justice; Caste and Gender Inequality; Affirmative Action; Social Mobility.

I. Introduction

Caste and gender barriers have long hindered social and educational mobility in India. In the late nineteenth century, Sayajirao Gaekwad III, the ruler of Baroda, emerged as a progressive reformer. He championed universal education, advocating access for all, regardless of caste, class, or gender, to challenge entrenched social hierarchies and build a just society. Gaekwad's policies for Dalits and women continue to inspire affirmative action and inclusive educational practices. The socio-political environment of 19th-century India was one of rigid stratification, where age-old customs determined opportunities and personal development. Marginalised groups like Dalits and women were systematically excluded from formal education, and education was closed to them due to discrimination and a lack of institutional support. Education became a means of empowerment that attempted to bridge the social divide. In this regard, Sayajirao Gaekwad's leadership was revolutionary.(Dholakia, 2023). He not only questioned existing norms but also championed a new approach to social justice in education, breaking away from tradition and transforming the lives of the underprivileged.

Sayajirao Gaekwad believed that no society can progress if a large segment of its population is excluded from self-improvement. Social justice requires active policy intervention.(Thirupal, 2025). During his time, free and compulsory primary education was introduced in Baroda, a revolutionary idea at a time when most educational institutions served the interests of the wealthy. This mandate applied to all children, regardless of their social status, completely undermining the dominance of upper castes and men over knowledge and providing equal opportunities to lower castes. He also established public libraries, girls' schools, and scholarships for people with low



incomes, including Dalits. Gaekwad's vision didn't just open the doors of schools; Rather, it sought to lay the foundation for a better society where access to education would be considered a right, not a privilege.(McQuarrie et al., 2013).

The transformative impact of Gaekwad's policies was immediately clear. Dalits faced social stigma, legal barriers, and violence, yet they persisted; these reforms offered hope. Many Dalit students received scholarships and encouragement, enabling them to pursue professional education for the first time. Sayajirao supported Dr B.R. Ambedkar's educational journey, which became a symbol of Dalit rights. For women whose formal education was outside the mainstream, Gaekwad promoted social awareness that allowed cultural and practical learning for girls. Separate education for girls was introduced in Baroda, challenging traditional views about women's abilities and changing their roles over generations.

Gaekwad emphasised social reform not only in educational policy but also in bureaucracy, curriculum, and community engagement. He created a culture of respect, dignity, and shared responsibility among teachers, administrators, and local families.(Oza, n.d.). Breaking conventions, he enabled citizens to succeed in new fields such as teaching, the civil service, medicine, and commerce, giving voice to those previously denied social standing. He believed that education was not just a path to upward mobility but also to active citizenship and leadership. His reforms later laid the foundation for affirmative action, the reservation system, and the national constitutional guarantee of the right to education. The philosophy behind Gaekwad's efforts was distinctly modern. He believed that educational institutions should become incubators of equality, creativity, and critical thinking, rather than merely systems of rote learning rooted in outdated hierarchies. His influence extended far beyond Baroda, encouraging debate and imitation among other princely states and colonial administrators. As India grapples with new forms of inequality, Gaekwad's vision remains an essential reference point for policymakers, activists, and educators.(swargiary, 2025). Affirmative action and inclusive educational approaches, strengthened by government initiatives enshrined in the Indian Constitution, reflect his reformist spirit. Increasing female enrolment, the growing representation of Dalits and other marginalised communities in educational institutions, and a growing commitment to universal education are all part of this historical legacy.

Sayajirao Gaekwad III's contribution: their belief in universal access to education, regardless of caste, class, or gender, is the foundation of India's unfinished project of social justice. As today's society seeks new solutions to old problems, his example demonstrates leadership, imagination, and a strong commitment to equality. His legacy compels us to recognise that the true measure of progress lies in the potential of every child, regardless of background, and in ensuring that everyone, regardless of race, class, or gender, can benefit from the transformative opportunities that education offers. By honouring his ideals, we move closer to a society where learning empowers everyone, not just a few, and advances communities and entire nations.



II. Historical Context

Sayajirao Gaekwad III's vision of education was shaped by a progressive mindset that saw learning as a path to liberation for marginalised communities. In an era of systemic discrimination, his reforms not only opened avenues for Dalits and women but also challenged the ingrained mindsets that had long suppressed their rights. By institutionalising free and compulsory education for all sections of society, Gaekwad demonstrated a unique commitment to justice, equality, and social progress. His efforts went beyond policy statements: he invested in public infrastructure and built libraries. He created an environment where girls and boys from lower castes could find their place in the classroom and society.

Central to Gaekwad's vision was that education should be a force that could reshape culture, attitudes, and opportunity structures. He believed that schools should foster critical thinking, social integration, and confidence among those who had previously been denied respect and rights. The impact of his reforms is visible in the person of Dr B.R. Ambedkar, whose educational journey was made possible by Gaikwad's support. His policies laid the foundation for future affirmative action, the reservation system, and the constitutional commitment to equality in Indian education.

Today, as India strives to expand access to education through the NEP 2020, Gaikwad's legacy is crucial. Efforts underway to develop an inclusive curriculum, ensure representation, and provide institutional support for marginalised groups are largely grounded in the reforms he initiated. His vision demonstrates the potential of education not only to impart knowledge but also to empower entire communities, fostering social justice and an equal society for generations to come.

Universal education thought: Sayajirao Gaekwad's decision to introduce free and compulsory primary education for all was a major departure from tradition in India. He firmly believed that education should be a universal right, which inspired him to take significant steps to ensure the inclusion of children previously excluded from school due to social or economic status.(Klasen, 2001). By making school attendance compulsory for children from backward castes and tribal communities, Gaekwad helped break the old system of privilege, making knowledge accessible to all and significantly reducing the gap between wealthy and underprivileged groups.

Special provision for Dalits - Sayajirao Gaekwad was a visionary leader who fully understood the transformative power of education in achieving social equality. By providing scholarships, reserved seats, and institutional support to Dalit students, he actively addressed the educational discrimination faced by this marginalised community.(Pradhan, 2024). He was a vocal opponent of untouchability and worked to eliminate caste-based discrimination in his area. Gaekwad's support wasn't limited to policy; he practically sponsored the education of social reformers like Dr B.R. Ambedkar, who received a scholarship from Gaekwad to study abroad and emerge as a prominent leader advocating for the rights and freedom of Dalits. This support not only strengthened Ambedkar's education but also marked a major shift from traditional social hierarchy, paving the way for widespread empowerment and social reform of Dalits in India. Through these efforts, Sayajirao Gaekwad laid a crucial foundation for



inclusive education, inspiring later efforts to bring social justice and equality to the education system.

III. Advancement for Women

Sayajirao Gaekwad's efforts led to the establishment of separate schools for girls, making education easier and culturally appropriate for women. He actively campaigned to change societal attitudes against women's education, emphasizing that women's empowerment depended on their education, economic independence, and active participation in civic and public life.(Levinson, 2010). His efforts not only improved girls' education but also helped change societal norms regarding women's roles, promoting gender equality and empowerment.

Zenana classes were run for women who, due to domestic responsibilities or social norms, could not attend regular schools. In 1906–07, a total of four Zenana classes were run, enrolling 133 women. Of these, 83 appeared for the examination, and 67 passed. These classes taught reading, writing, household accounting, sewing, and embroidery.(Greenberg, 2010). This initiative aimed to increase women's functional literacy and household economic efficiency. From a sociological perspective, Zenana education made a significant contribution to women's empowerment, even within traditional patriarchal boundaries.

IV. Social Justice and Policy Impact

Sayajirao Gaekwad's approach to inclusive education was deeply rooted in principles of social justice, aiming to dismantle systemic barriers that marginalised many Indian communities. His progressive policies actively restored agency to individuals traditionally excluded from power by empowering them to participate in decision-making and leadership roles within their schools and communities. This empowerment was not limited to Baroda; the ripple effects of Gaekwad's reforms influenced educational policies across India. His pioneering work laid the groundwork for national initiatives, such as affirmative action and reservation policies, that aimed to address historical injustices and create more equitable opportunities.(Kamble, 2024). By encouraging representation and access, Gaekwad's vision helped democratize education and fostered a more inclusive society, setting precedents for social reformers and policymakers dedicated to building a just India.(Mukherjee, 2015).

The Baroda Administration Report (1906–07) shows that under Maharaja Sayajirao Gaekwad, education was implemented as a structured social reform program, supported by a strong administrative system and measurable expansion. Within a year, the number of local schools increased from 665 institutions with 64,447 students to 1,241 institutions with 99,768 students. Schools for lower classes increased from 18 (1,928 students) to 247 schools with 9,269 students, and 793 out of 1,287 examinees passed. Untouchable students received a monthly scholarship of Rs. 115, and school supplies were provided free of charge. Urdu education expanded significantly, with attendance for boys rising to 9,052 (10.7% of the male Muslim population) and girls' schools increasing from 11 (844 girls) to 27 (2,314 girls). These figures indicate deliberate state intervention to reduce caste and minority exclusion.



Technical and vocational education also expanded significantly. Enrolment at Kala Bhavan increased from 479 to 561, including 186 students from the Bombay Presidency, while 295 applicants competed for only 44 engineering seats. Industrial schools enrolled 126 students, and manual training classes increased from 313 to 868 students. Evening schools for artisans enrolled 47 working-class students; carpentry classes saw 41 and 35 passing out of 78 and 92 applicants, respectively. Model farms cultivated 60 and 20 bighas of land with a net profit of 587 rupees. The museum, which functioned as a public educational institution, attracted visitors and boasted a library of 3,300 books valued at 16,600 rupees. Overall, these data reveal a multi-layered educational strategy combining literacy, vocational training, cultural education, and social integration.

V. Challenges and Critiques

Despite the innovative initiatives launched under Sayajirao Gaekwad's leadership, significant challenges related to exclusion and discrimination persist in India. Numerous studies have revealed the difficulties marginalised groups, particularly Dalits, tribals, and women, face in accessing and pursuing higher education. Issues such as systemic discrimination, socio-economic inequalities, and cultural biases create structural barriers that prevent their full empowerment. Affirmative action policies, while helpful, often face implementation challenges, leading to gaps between intended and actual outcomes. These realities highlight the urgent need for continuous monitoring, policy refinement, and adaptive frameworks to effectively address evolving societal challenges and ensure marginalised communities have equal opportunities for education and social development.

VI. Contemporary Relevance

Syajirao Gaekwad's legacy remains relevant today, having profoundly influenced educational reforms across India aimed at equality and inclusion. His visionary approach emphasised the need for holistic development, including educational advancement, increased community representation, the building of cultural capital, and the promotion of work opportunities for marginalised groups. These are crucial to addressing the various forms of social exclusion. Today's policies and programs must adhere to his fundamental principles, deliberately targeting the long-standing disadvantages faced by these communities and creating a supportive environment where learners from diverse backgrounds can thrive, succeed in their studies, and contribute to social and economic progress. Gaekwad's ideals serve as a guiding framework for upholding social justice through education.

VII. Conclusion

The educational reforms introduced under Maharaja Sayajirao Gaekwad III represent one of the most significant early experiments in state-led social transformation in modern Indian history. At a time when caste hierarchies, gender discrimination, and economic inequality systematically excluded large sections of society from formal education, Gaekwad institutionalised a radically inclusive framework grounded in free and compulsory primary schooling. The expansion of vernacular schools from 665



institutions with 64,447 students to 1,241 institutions with 99,768 students within a year illustrates not merely administrative growth but a deliberate democratisation of knowledge. The increase in schools for lower classes from 18 (1,928 students) to 247 (9,269 students), the provision of scholarships amounting to Rs. 115 per month for marginalised pupils, and the substantial rise in Urdu and girls' education demonstrate a conscious effort to dismantle caste and gender barriers through policy intervention.

Equally important was the multidimensional nature of Gaekwad's strategy. Technical and vocational expansion, such as the growth of Kala Bhavan enrolment from 479 to 561 students, the rise of manual training from 313 to 868 learners, and the establishment of evening schools for artisans, linked education directly with economic empowerment and occupational mobility. Boarding schools for forest tribes, model farms generating net profit, Zenana classes enrolling 133 women, and scholarships supporting Dalit students collectively indicate that education was designed as a tool for social integration, cultural transformation, and self-reliance. Institutions such as museums, music schools, Sanskrit and Urdu schools, and agricultural training centres further reveal a holistic vision that combines intellectual, vocational, moral, and cultural development. From a sociological perspective, Gaekwad's reforms redefined education as both a right and a mechanism of structured social change. His approach anticipated later constitutional commitments to equality, affirmative action, and universal access to education. Although contemporary India continues to grapple with persistent inequalities and implementation challenges, the foundational principles he advanced state responsibility, inclusive policy design, targeted support for marginalised groups, and integration of education with dignity and citizenship remain deeply relevant.

Ultimately, Sayajirao Gaekwad's legacy underscores that meaningful social justice requires more than rhetoric; it demands institutional commitment, financial investment, and sustained policy innovation. His model demonstrates that when education is treated as a public good rather than a privilege, it becomes a transformative force capable of reshaping society across generations.

VIII. References

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