

Lokmanya Tilak And Maharaja Sayajirao Gaekwad of Baroda

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In the Indian mythology, it was said that on the occasion of the SamudraManthan, a tussle between the forces of right and the wrong, the light and darkness, the just and the unjust, there were two teams. Powerful entities picked sides and threw their entire weight behind those holding either end of Vasuki, wrapped around the mountain Mandar, that acted as the churning rod. A massive stir was set in motion.

Churning, whether it is political, social, ideological or spiritual, can throw up successful outcomes with teamwork and passion. Victory belongs to every single individual on the team that gave their best to the process. Some are at the forefront and others work best by being the quiet strength, working behind the scenes and encouraging those who take the lead. Take, for instance, the role of a heavyweight like Maharaja Sayajirao Gaekwad of Baroda in the Indian independence movement and in the incredible life of Lokmanya Tilak.

Tilak and Maharaja Sayajirao were close associates, both working towards the same goal. But the association was deliberately under-emphasised to avoid unnecessary attention from the British. Writes author-publisher Baba Bhand, secretary of the Maharaja Sayajirao Gaekwad Sanshodhanaani Prashikshan Sanstha, “The Maharaja was perhaps the only ruler of a princely state in the India of the time who put himself out, supporting activities of radical nationalists while most others acted subservient to the British and grovelled in front of British officials.” Sayajirao watched, minutely, Tilak’s journey of indomitable courage and, being a hardcore nationalist himself who was forced to appear neutral due to his position as a ruler of Baroda, he spent no time connecting with the first national leader of India. He was supportive of the Congress, of which Tilak was a very significant part, encouraging officers from his State to participate in Congress sessions.

Tilak and the Maharaja first met in 1890 after which they kept in touch. According to Sadashiv Vinayak Bapat’s book, *Lokmanya Tilak Yancha Aathvanyaani Akhyaika (Vol III)*, “During their meeting in 1894, when Tilak was a member of the Legislative Council, Sayajirao, who was aware of the blazing brilliance of Tilak’s intellect, advised Tilak to work on, author or translate, some important books in Sanskrit and English. He suggested that Tilak write on the *Arya Neeti Mimansa*. Tilak said that he had already started work on it and research was under way. He would, in the near future, start writing it. ‘You are the best person to write on it,’ the Maharaja had remarked.”

On May 30, 1895, Tilak had organised a meet at Pune's HirabaugMaidaan to discuss the issue of the restoration of Chhatrapati Shivaji memorial. Notes N R Phatak in his book, '*Lokmanya*', Sayajirao had immediately contributed Rs 1,000 to the project.

The association grew after Tilak decided to fight the legal case of Bapat, an assistant commissioner in the State of Baroda and the right-hand man of Mr Eliot, the Maharaja's mentor and the biggest influence on his life. According to Bhand, Bapat was wrongly accused of misdemeanors and fraud by the British Resident Col. Bidulph. It was a face-off between the British government as represented by the Resident and the Maharaja who believed that Bapat was being framed. Tilak visited Baroda and did the work of preparing the case. He sifted through all the evidence, directed the cross examination of all witnesses, and gave Bapat's defence that came to 200 foolscap pages. Later, a commission was appointed to further examine the issue and finally Bapat was acquitted. The British government, obviously, did not like it. There were also reports of late-night meetings between the Maharaja, Tilak and Aurobindo on issues that were related to India's freedom. Tilak, who had followed Aurobindo's sharp writings in Baroda newspapers closely, was impressed by him. Aurobindo was in touch with the revolutionaries in Maharashtra. In 1897, the government charged Tilak with sedition. As a response, in a symbolic act of defiance, Sayajirao appointed Barrister Keshavrao Deshpande, who had represented Tilak and was also described as an 'extremist' in the secret reports of the British, to an important position in the Baroda administration. This was an act that needed immense courage and also affection for Tilak. Those were difficult times and these were fierce minds that were joined by a common thread of intent.

The Maharaja's association with Tilak, Aurobindo and the others, as also his support to the revolutionary activities had earned him the sobriquet of 'the patron of sedition' by the British government that kept filing secret reports on him. In fact, in 1909, says a statement from the Baroda State Records on the Maharaja's visit to Pune, "In 1909 His Highness visited the Sarvajanik Sabha in Poona. This Sabha the Government of Bombay have declined to recognise. The Vice-President, Anna Sahib Patwardhan, and the Secretary, N. C. Kelkar, are notorious extremists and political agitators, the latter having been committed for contempt of court in the Tilak case. His Highness's speech to the Sabha was characterised by the Government of Bombay as 'a thinly veiled disparagement of British rule'. Even if it be urged that so far as the Gaekwar is concerned there is no evidence of active disloyalty, his words and action evince a sympathy with the extremists (like Tilak)."

In the Maharaja's Baroda, a Muslim wrestler, Jumma Dada, who ran an *akhada* or a Vyayam Mandir was deeply impressed by Tilak. Since Jumma Dada's gymnasium was popular among the youth, he decided to spread the message of patriotism. Influenced by Tilak, he then came up with the idea of organising Ganesh festival at the *akhada*. Tilak learnt about Jumma Dada and his activities and decided to meet him, encouraging him to foster patriotism and spread the message of brotherhood and communal harmony. In 1901, a Shri Ganesh idol, made of clay, was installed in the *akhada*. The Sarvajanik Ganesh Utsav in Baroda played the same role in Baroda that Tilak witnessed in Maharashtra.

Tilak had, in his article 'The Need of National Festivals', referred to the part played by them in ancient Greece and Rome. He wrote, "Such festivals were revived by Saint Ramdas in the days of Shivaji. It is the duty of the educated people to take an active part in these celebrations instead of lecturing on Bhakti or uttering the name of God behind closed doors." According to A K Bhagwat and G P Pradhan's biography of Tilak, at a speech in Amravati during the Shiv Jayanti celebrations, Tilak cited the examples of the jubilees celebrated by the British. He said, "Jubilee celebrations conjure up the picture of the growth of the empire. Celebrations of heroes are object lessons by which the ideas of national uplift are installed in the minds of the people. We have a number of religious festivals but we must also have political celebrations. They will enable us to understand politics and also the state which we are in."

It is interesting that the first case of sedition against Tilak was filed after his speech at the Shiv Jayanti celebrations in Pune where he had referred to Afzal Khan's killings – which the British suspected had a direct bearing on the then contemporary political situation and allegedly incited violence. The report was published in the *Kesari* on June 15, 1897. It was the first time that the British openly identified Tilak as a dangerous troublemaker.

Both Tilak and the Maharaja of Baroda continued with their overt and covert efforts towards independence. Sayajirao was known to have provided funds to Tilak's aide Khadilkar to start a weapon-manufacturing factory in Nepal under the guise of a tile-making firm. But the pinnacle of their coordination came with their plan just ahead of World War I. According to an article in *The Times of India* that quotes author Dr Damodar Nene, a biographer of Sayajirao Gaekwad, "A major war for independence was planned in 1914 led by Tilak. It was planned in Amritsar and the plan was to catch the British administrators by surprise. Only 2,000 British men were present in India at that time and Tilak wanted to cash in on that opportunity." Nene, whose father was the personal secretary of the Maharaja of Baroda, believed that the Maharaja Gaekwad toured Europe frequently and, contrary to what many thought was for leisure activities, the tours were in reality to study the administration and institutions closely so they could be of reference once the country got her independence. As per the plans, Sayajirao Gaekwad was to be the President of the independent India and Tilak, the Prime Minister. The plan was foiled courtesy some Indian traitors who revealed it to the British. The World War I went on till 1918 and, unfortunately, Tilak did not live too long after that. The Maharaja, on his part, did not give up and in 1936 Berlin Olympics met Hitler where, in a secret pact, he assured Germany the support of the Indian princes if it, in turn, helped India gain its freedom. Unfortunately, neither of these doyens of Indian freedom movement could witness the country's independence.

There have been reports and some bitterness on how both Tilak and the Maharaja differed in their outlook towards social reforms. We are not in a position to go into the merits of it, considering the severity of opposition and limitations that both, a passionate social reformer like Maharaja Sayajirao and a plucky nationalist like Tilak, had to work in. Both suffered hostility from their own people, who initially ridiculed, questioned, and resisted their ideas, from an ever-present and increasingly-spiteful

British administration, and the constant threat of dire consequences. Hence any judgement that we pass on it today would be unfair. What we could focus on, instead, are the characteristics that were common in these two men with Himalayan abilities.

Maharaja Sayajirao Gaekwad was one of the brightest flames of reform that India had ever witnessed. A towering figure that changed the social narrative of the time and supported to shape the political one, he lived a life dedicated to his country. He was a scholar, benefactor, nationalist, social reformer, cultural patron, literary figure, promoter of science, and much more, with a solid backing and admiration of the masses, the middle class, as also the elite. He strived for the society to shake off its inferiority complex, to retrieve its former glory with the help of education and awareness, and to go with the flow of the modern world without abandoning its values and faith.

Tilak was no different. A great scholar, journalist, educator and patriot he was the one who converted the Indian National Congress into a mass organisation. He commanded support from the elite because of his incredible scholarship; from the middle class by his championship of economic independence, national education, and resurrection of hope and confidence, concepts like the freedom of the press, evolving democratic process and increasing rights; and of the masses because of his ideas like the revival of healthy and vital traditions, his oratory, and celebrations like the Sarvajanic Ganesh festival and Shiv Jayanti. Pages of *Kesari* bear witness to Tilak's genuine concern for the workers, labourers, peasants, the vast toiling section of the society, the masses, that he galvanised with a new spirit so they could be organized into a national movement.

Yes, Gandhi, later, did manage to combine both political and social reforms. But we must remember that both Tilak and the Maharaja were outliers in their own spheres of activity – nonconformists and mavericks –much before Gandhi came on the scene. What Tilak left for both Gandhi and the Indian National Congress, was a philosophy of dauntlessness and fortitude, and a clearly demarcated goal of independence. What the Maharaja of Baroda left behind was an awe-inspiring legacy of social change that was way ahead of its times and easily overtook the advancements that were possible even for the British empire in India.

Here is a quote from Tilak that applies perfectly to the lives of both Tilak and Sayajirao: “The most practical teaching of the Gita, and one for which it is of abiding interest and value to the men of the world with whom life is a series of struggles, is not to give way to any morbid sentimentality when duty demands sternness and the boldness to face terrible things.”

Socio-political churning is a process that is lengthy, painful, brutal, fraught with frustrations and failures and hits and misses but, ultimately, it does bring the incredible gift of change and evolution for a society. Every person who participated in it deserves our gratitude and ovation.

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