

CHAPTER FOUR

REFORMS OF RAJA SIR T. MADHAVA RAO (1875-81)

We witness an interesting pattern in the career path of Raja Sir T. Madhava Rao.¹ The birth of Raja Sir T. Madhava Rao occurred in Tanjore in a Maratha Brahmin family in 1828 and he was the son of one and the nephew of another Diwan of Travancore. He received his education at the High School of the University of Madras and mainly became the most outstanding student of mathematics and science and was awarded the Proficient's Degree in 1846.² He later became a professor at the University. He was born in a family of statesmen.³ He was decorated with the Knight Commander of the Order of the Star of India (K.C.S.I) in 1865.⁴ An eminent statesman of modern India, Raja Sir T. Madhava Rao was renowned for his immense ability and intense patriotic fervor, not only in India, but in the whole of the British Empire.⁵ He got his first assignment as Diwan of Travancore, whose ruler was charged with misgovernment by the British Government of the Madras Presidency. The Travancore ruler was warned by the Madras Government to cleanse his administration or else the British would annex his State. Raja Sir T. Madhava Rao initiated reforms in the State on such a scale that he transformed it into the 'Model State of Travancore'. He repeated the same feat as Diwan of Indore and in 1875 he was appointed as Diwan of Baroda by the British when the State was in a mess following the deposition of its tyrant ruler Malharrao Gaekwad. He was offered the post of Diwan in recognition of his talents and he was asked by the British Government to run the administration of the Baroda State during the minority of its new ruler Sayajirao Gaekwad III.⁶ He gave an invitation to some of his eminent friends to join the services of the Baroda State since he would have been unable put his ideas about cleansing the administration of the evils of the erstwhile regime into practice all alone. He had to start the work of overhauling the administration from zero because when he was

¹ Urmila Rau Lal (2015), *Diwan Sir Thanjavur Madhava Row: Statesman, Administrator Extraordinaire*, p. 122.

² Charles Edward Buckland (1906), *Dictionary of Indian Biography*, pp. 350-351.

³ Chavda, *Sayaji Rao Gaekwad III*, p. 31.

⁴ Buckland, *Dictionary of Indian Biography*, p. 351.

⁵ Sir Roper Lethbridge (1893), *The Golden Book of India: A Genealogical and Biographical Dictionary of the Ruling Princes, Chiefs, Nobles, and Other Personages, Titled or Decorated, of the Indian Empire*, p. 293.

⁶ Lal, *Diwan Sir Thanjavur Madhava Row*, pp. 112-113.

appointed as the Diwan the coffers of the State were virtually empty and the state machinery was full of awkward complications and in a debt trap. The State creditors protested clamorously for repayment of the loans they had advanced to the erstwhile regime. Neither the State jewels nor any other item had an inventory. The revenue collectors repeatedly troubled and annoyed the people who were in a state of misery. According to the observations of Sir Richard Meade even the capital city of Baroda was in a pathetic condition. Good drinking water was a scarce commodity. Owing to open gutters there was an annual epidemic of cholera. Raja Sir T. Madhava Rao was an eyewitness to dingily built houses in the city, devoid of sunshine and with men and cattle living side by side.⁷

Reconstruction of the State machinery was also going to be an arduous task. The territories of the Baroda State were scattered having common boundaries either with British India or with other native States of entire Gujarat inclusive of Kathiawar and this situation presented its own complications. The dearth of roads or railways and of other good communicational means inhibited connectivity of the State machinery and made the task of oversight an uphill one if not an impossible one. Moreover, the Waghers of Okhamandal, the Mewassi Bhils of Sankheda-Bahadurpur, and the thakurs of Amreli *mahal* and other criminal tribes behaved recalcitrantly and created anarchy in the State.⁸

Dadabhai Naoroji must be given credit for already taking a few correct steps during the course of his administration. There was a discontinuation of the practice of *nazaranas* and forced labor as well as an abolition of corporal punishment during his tenure. The petitions of victims of forcible confiscation of properties were heard by him in person. But the biggest impediment in the work of reforming the Baroda State that Dadabhai Naoroji was carrying out was the Resident. His incessant intervention and the habit of supporting different parties at different times were a hindrance to the progress of reforms. Under Dadabhai Naoroji there was a beginning of the reorganization of different departments where he introduced new systems and improvement in working methods.⁹ “The pernicious system of selling justice to the highest bidder, which had been the greatest scandal of Baroda, was stopped, but not without a tussle with the ruling chief”.¹⁰ Dadabhai Naoroji also began the preparation of the civil and criminal procedure codes and started overhauling the revenue system. However, this experiment of good governance was stopped abruptly when Dadabhai Naoroji was forced to

⁷ Chavda, *Sayaji Rao Gaekwad III*, p. 32.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid., pp. 32-33.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 33.

resign in the most disastrous state of affairs. In fact, Dadabhai Naoroji was neither allotted adequate time nor did he receive the “willing cooperation and warm sympathy”¹¹ of the Resident or Malharrao Gaekwad which is extremely essential for reforming the administration of a State. Raja Sir T. Madhava Rao was successful in securing not only the willing cooperation and warm sympathy of the British Government but was additionally allotted adequate powers. And thus the Baroda State embarked on the path of progress and reforms, the aim of which, to use the phrase of the Diwan himself, was ‘to promote the happiness of all classes alike’.¹²

“Over and above the normal routine work of a native State administration”, writes V.K. Chavda, “such other problems as relations with the tributaries surrounding native States, official visits, ceremonial functions, patient hearing of individual complaints and the herculean task of putting the State finances on a sound footing claimed the immediate attention of the Baroda administration”.¹³ With this purpose in mind, there was a creation of the Huzur Cutchery and the distribution of different departments to his Councilors by the Diwan over whose debates and discussions he decided to preside over. There was also an initiation of a comprehensive ten-point program by him which “covered the main pillars of good government, law and order, a purified system of justice, the development of public works, education, medical help, finance and the machinery of government”.¹⁴ Raja Sir T. Madhava Rao was deeply influenced by Western knowledge and was spontaneously driven by progressive, liberal ideas which he wanted to appropriate in order to mold the medieval ideas regarding the State and kingship into the modern form. He had six and a half years available for using his powers in the best possible manner to achieve the eventual goal.¹⁵

The first major area of the State in which Diwan Raja Sir T. Madhava Rao intervened, initiated reforms and revamped it altogether was its land revenue administration. When Raja Sir T. Madhava Rao became the Diwan of Baroda the task of the collection of land revenue was given to certain nobles called *sardars* for a fixed number of years. These *sardars* in turn gave the task of collection to certain revenue farmers known as *sahukars*. These *sahukars* who had armed forces at their disposal began to plunder and oppress the rich as well as the poor peasantry and enriched themselves at their expense with impunity. The Government

¹¹ Chavda, *Sayaji Rao Gaekwad III*, p. 33.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid., pp. 33-34.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 34.

¹⁵ Ibid.

received payment from the *sardars* and therefore considered it unjust to resume their right of collecting revenue. Raja Sir T. Madhava Rao therefore enacted special acts of State in order to compel the *sardars* into selling their rights. The *sardars* who were Marathas refused submission to the new regime and their shrewd lawyers gave quotations of law and precedent, and threatened to appeal to the Secretary of State for redressal. Undeterred by these threats Raja Sir T. Madhava Rao entreated, intimidated and deported troublesome people and thus got success in the restoration of order.¹⁶

Another difficulty was lying in the same direction. There was no precise definition of the position of the *sardars* in the State. Their position was somewhat like the feudal lords of Europe because they were given absolute control over land on condition that they would furnish the State with troops or money whenever the need arose. The ejection of the *sardars* from their lands was against the law of the State but as long as they held absolute rights over land the possibility of an efficient administration sounded bleak. Raja Sir T. Madhava Rao solved this problem tactfully. The *sardars* were in debt to the State since they had evaded demands of money in the past. Raja Sir T. Madhava Rao dug up the old records, “and the Sirdars were called upon to make payments at short notice, of all their dues with interest for seventeen or eighteen years. Their rights were attached in default of payment”.¹⁷ Raja Sir T. Madhava Rao ordered the deportation of all those *sardars* who showed intransigence and unruliness on being cornered to Banaras and other places. Others were persuaded into selling their rights for a huge payment. The Diwan succeeded in this way in restoring order to a large extent but could not affect a complete solution to the problem of *sardars*.¹⁸

The standing army required the Diwan’s urgent attention. The army of the Baroda State was a disorderly regiment of Arabs and Abyssinians called “soldiers by courtesy”.¹⁹ They were provided with arms by the State and whenever they were sent on an expedition they caused widespread devastation of large territories. Determined to do away with this needless burden Raja Sir T. Madhava Rao successfully disbanded the regiment and provided them civil employment. This decisive step brought greater unity in the armed forces “and to a certain extent removed the mercenary character of the troops”.²⁰

¹⁶ Lal, *Diwan Sir Thanjavur Madhava Rao*, p. 120.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 120-121.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 121.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ *Ibid.*

Raja Sir T. Madhava Rao built courts of law, schools and libraries, and a host of other beneficial institutions; secured the services of eminent men from Bombay and Madras to help in the administration; abolished useless taxes, burnt down narrow insanitary alleys and instead built clean rows of houses at Government cost. He also laid the foundations for costly and graceful structures to adorn the city and erected parks and museums at great cost for the amusement and instruction of the people.²¹

The Kamati Bagh was built by Raja Sir T. Madhava Rao in order to ease the problem of hot weather by planting shady trees. The Gaekwad Baroda State Railway (GBSR) was started by him but the railway line construction could not be extended because owing to budgetary constraints the British did not give his proposal acceptance. The British knew very well that if transportation facilities in the Baroda State increased it would disable their Government's control over trade and commerce. The administration of Raja Sir T. Madhava Rao was beneficial for the public because some taxes were relaxed by him and others abolished altogether thus ending the domination of state officials. No complaints were received by the British against Raja Sir T. Madhava Rao because he did good work and made both the British Government as well as the Baroda State happy.²²

The administration of Raja Sir T. Madhava Rao brought a breadth of fresh air for the public and he left an indelible mark on local governance by bringing discipline to work. "He established decorum in interstate relations", writes Urmila Rau Lal, "celebrating royal anniversaries, festivals, exchanging gifts in the Durbar".²³ He used all means possible in order to implement ideas for the improvement of economic conditions of the State. In order to make the administration efficient he opened the Huzur Court. There was a commitment in him for the efficient coordination of matters pertaining to law, education, governance, health, finance, court procedures etc. The capability of Jamnabai was appreciated by him and he decided to include her into the State machinery by assigning her with the internal matters of the State. She gave her acknowledgment of the need to appropriately distribute the income and comprehending and stressing at the same time the need to obey the rules, in spite of an end to monarchy.²⁴

²¹ Lal, *Diwan Sir Thanjavur Madhava Rao*, p. 121.

²² Ibid., p. 123.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid., pp. 123-124.

Nonetheless, the people of Baroda remember Raja Sir T. Madhava Rao in particular for abolishing several unpopular taxes imposed by erstwhile regimes. The list of taxes he abolished include those on professions such as carpentry and masonry or commodities such as milk, vegetables, fuels like wood and grass, sugarcane and many others. Although this step led to a reduction in the burden of taxation on the people who were already facing harassment, it was reduced by 25 per cent only and it was accepted as a fact that even after this reduction the rate of taxation in the Baroda State was still higher than in the British districts encircling it. Raja Sir T. Madhava Rao started building up a large State reserve at a slow and steady pace. Thus, when the rule of the Diwan ended on 28 December, 1881 and Sayajirao Gaekwad III assumed full ruling powers the position of the State was financially extremely sound.²⁵

In order that there was not any repetition of history in Baroda, there was a preparation of a draft constitution by the Diwan for the State. It was based on the model of the Mysore State when the British Government restored it to the Wodeyar Prince following the fall of Tipu Sultan in 1799. The principle of constitutional monarchy was the hallmark of it. He sent the draft to Lord Ripon for his consent. Among certain sections of the apparatus of the State there was an assertion that this constitution would lead to the reduction of the Baroda State to a mere zamindari. However, the biographer of Raja Sir T. Madhava Rao considers such criticism unjustified and incited by a want of correct comprehension “of the principles of good government, where the ruler and the ruled worked with utmost amity and mutual consideration”.²⁶ Although the draft constitution was rejected in the end, it is indeed remarkable that even in 1880-81 the Diwan was driven by sublime ideals. The family of the Maharaja, however, believed that Raja Sir T. Madhava Rao wanted to continue his dominance and control even after 1881 and thus gave rise to discontentment between Sayajirao Gaekwad III and his Diwan. Owing to his farsightedness the Diwan gave recognition to Gujarati as the State language because it was the language spoken by the majority of its subjects. There was the establishment of the State Library too in 1877-78; there was an expansion of this movement under Sayajirao Gaekwad III.²⁷

²⁵ Chavda, *Sayaji Rao Gaekwad III*, pp. 35-36.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 36.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

A notification was issued by the government in response to the monopoly over producing salt from sea water. It said, “Royal families should not produce their own salt”.²⁸ Till that time the ruler of Baroda controlled production of salt in Gujarat. Now with this rule being abolished, the Government exerted pressure on the State to allow central officials to carry on investigation in the state provinces in order to search for offenders who were provided with shelter by the Gaekwad. The transfer of salt from Okhamandal to the islands of Kathiawar was facilitated by Raja Sir T. Madhava Rao. But “learned” critics have leveled a baseless charge against Raja Sir T. Madhava Rao of sacrificing the interest of the State. “One can never incur deep losses”, writes Urmila Rau Lal, “in a field where it was earning maximum profit”.²⁹ After coming to power Sayajirao Gaekwad III made ardent attempts to resolve the issue but in vain.³⁰

The Baroda State had to stop the cultivation of opium within its territories on the order of the British Government and thus lose a lucrative source of revenue. “The advice of the government”, writes Urmila Rau Lal, “were invariably orders. Even if the advice went against the interest of the state, neither the Diwan nor the King had the power to veto the move”.³¹ The British Government “advised” the Baroda State not to manufacture arms and ammunition within its territories even though the State had the potential to produce gunpowder. It was forced by the Government of India to buy arms and ammunition for its armed forces exclusively from the British. This order was opposed by Maharaja Sayajirao Gaekwad III later on with considerable success but the vindictive British refused to permit the sale of arms to the Baroda State in this situation and thus his marginal success was nullified. The Baroda State was continuously bullied by the British Government but Raja Sir T. Madhava Rao dexterously dealt with conscientious issues and drove home the advantage.³²

Raja Sir T. Madhava Rao was also forced by the British to give his consent to another of their demand when the Minority Administration was nearly going to end in 1881. He was asked to make an annual payment of Rs. 3.75 lakhs so that effective policing of the tributary districts could be carried out. Although this was the responsibility of the Baroda Contingent, the British deemed it incompetent to accomplish its task and therefore argued that the British Government forces would undertake the work. Regarding this question, however, the Diwan

²⁸ Lal, *Diwan Sir Thanjavur Madhava Rao*, p. 122.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid., pp. 122-123.

³² Ibid., p. 123.

took a cautious approach and consulted both Jamnabai and Sayajirao Gaekwad III whose investiture with full ruling powers was to take place soon before giving his consent to the proposal of the British.³³

V.K. Chavda writes that against the British Government's aggressive demands there neither existed a possibility nor was it expedient to take a tough stand. Taking a firm stand would only make the relations of the State with the British more bitter and ultimately the paramount power was bound to overrule the State. In such a state of affairs on issues like currency, railways, posts and telegraph, admiralty jurisdiction, jurisdiction over foreigners and other such matters, on which there was silence in the mutual treaties, the State took a weak stand and finally in order to avoid conflict surrendered to the British demands. Even then the Diwan took a firm stand when he had doubts regarding the wisdom of the paramount power on any matter like that of salt, opium or the Contingent Force. It is indeed lamentable that a man of the caliber of Raja Sir T. Madhava Rao was not courageous enough to resist such unfair infringement on treaty rights, even resist very fiercely or request the British Government for the postponement of these matters until the Maharaja was invested with full ruling powers which was to happen imminently. And if even after effortfully trying to convince the British to postpone the matter they remained adamant he ought to have been courageous enough to tender his resignation. Since the British had appointed him to the post of Diwan he was already seen as a British tool. So whenever he yielded to the pressure of the paramount power it sent confirmatory signals in the minds of those who regarded him a British agent who was ready to sacrifice the State interests in order to maintain his position. In spite of all these accusations it must be admitted that someone else in his position too would have been unable to oppose this pressure of the British Government.³⁴

Notwithstanding his shortcomings, one cannot avoid the conclusion that history ought to see Raja Sir T. Madhava Rao as one of the founding fathers of modern Baroda. It was he who in reality built the foundational structure of good governance on which Sayajirao Gaekwad III constructed the superstructure of a welfare state and realized his dream to the fullest.³⁵ The death of Raja Sir T. Madhava Rao occurred on 4 April, 1891.³⁶

³³ Chavda, *Sayaji Rao Gaekwad III*, pp. 38-39.

³⁴ Ibid., p. 39.

³⁵ Ibid., pp. 39-40.

³⁶ Buckland, *Dictionary of Indian Biography*, p. 351.