

# The American Question: Ambedkar, Columbia University, and the “Spirit of Rebellion”

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## Abstract

The education of Bhimrao Ambedkar is a vital part of his complex story. His experience at institutions like Columbia University with its progressive cast of academics helped him see how scholarship and activism can matter in the battle against caste oppression. His thought—and life—would have been radically different had he exclusively attended British institutions of higher education. But how did he end up in America, the imperfect land of freedom and democracy? Why did he choose Columbia University when so many other Indian students chose educational institutions in the British Empire? This study examines the question of Ambedkar’s education and proposes some answers to these questions by starting with his relationship to an important early sponsor, the Gaekwad of Baroda. By tracing the engagement of Sayajirao Gaekwad III with the West, we can see the connections this ruler felt between Columbia University, America, and freedom. By placing the Gaekwad’s story next to Ambedkar’s—and alongside Ambedkar’s nuanced lifelong engagement with one of his most prominent professors, John Dewey—we can reveal new connections between the American experience and what Ambedkar called “a spirit of rebelliousness.” Both Ambedkar and the Gaekwad wanted an education that enshrined the right sort of rebellious freedom from oppressive external authority. This intelligent mediation of education resides in the unstable middle ground between a conservative complacency with a tradition’s customs and a radical upturning of all that is through revolution. Ambedkar, like his pragmatist teacher John Dewey, wanted a sense of education that was reflective and reconstructive.

## Keywords

Sayajirao Gaekwad, Ambedkar, education, Columbia University, pragmatism, John Dewey

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## Introduction

Ambedkar’s education is one of the common themes in numerous stories that others tell about his life. His education underwrites or foreshadows so much of what he thought and did in terms of his pursuit of social justice and democracy. A central part of his education was the time he spent in America at Columbia University during 1913–1916. He was sent to the U.S. with the help of a scholarship from the ruler of the princely state, Baroda. This relationship between Ambedkar and the Gaekwad of Baroda, Sayajirao III, is an often-mentioned part of the story of Ambedkar’s educational exploits in the West. As virtually every biographical account about Ambedkar notes, it was due to the Gaekwad’s support that Ambedkar was able to attend Columbia University in 1913, and then later, pursue further education in London. But one question has rarely been asked: How exactly did Ambedkar end up in New York at Columbia University? The detailed recent biographies uncover many details about Ambedkar’s education in the West, but they still leave this question unanswered.<sup>1</sup> What might we add to Ambedkar’s story—and the constructive lessons we draw from it—if we try our best to provide an answer to the “American question” of vital parts of his educational journey?

The magnitude of the American question strikes one when the vast number of Indians that were channeled toward English educational opportunities in London, Oxford, or Cambridge come to mind. Ambedkar represents the first untouchable sent from India to American higher education, and one of the most prominent of the limited cases of Indians sent to the U.S. for education in the pre-Independence period. As Brant Moscovitch notes, there was a reason for this choice: “most families encouraged their children to study in Britain in the hope of advancing their career prospects and possibly enabling them to eventually join the Indian Civil Service.”<sup>2</sup> The question becomes more intriguing when one considers how stunningly different the Indian political scene, the movement for “untouchable” rights, and the eventual Indian constitution would have been had Ambedkar, a central figure in all of these areas and activities, not ended up in the seminar rooms of Columbia University but instead had studied only under British intellectuals.

Whatever the accuracy of counterfactual speculations may be, Ambedkar went to Columbia largely through the guidance and support of the Gaekwad. There is not much indication that young Ambedkar had a preference for Columbia specifically; Ambedkar’s father—helped by his time in the British service—might have preferred his son to pursue more standard routes to higher education through the channels of Empire. Archival evidence that I have detailed elsewhere does seem to indicate that Ambedkar’s father desired a British education for young Bhimrao, but Bhimrao himself did not like that option given Britain’s domination over India.<sup>3</sup> Might the

<sup>1</sup>Aakash Singh Rathore (2023). *Becoming Babasaheb: The life and times of Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar (Volume 1): Birth to Mahad (1891-1929)*. Harper Collins; Ashok Gopal (2023). *A part apart*. Navayana.

<sup>2</sup>Brant Moscovitch (2012). Harold Laski’s Indian students and the power of education, 1920–1950. *Contemporary South Asia*, 20: 1,36.

<sup>3</sup>See Scott R. Stroud (2023). *The evolution of pragmatism in India: Ambedkar, Dewey, and the rhetoric of reconstruction*. University of Chicago Press.

tipping of the scales toward America have occurred at the hand of the Gaekwad? It is useful to explore the reasons why the Gaekwad might have prepared the way for Ambedkar in America. Understanding the ruler's history with both the British and with America (and Columbia) can give us new details to add to our stories of young Ambedkar's education, as well as his later pursuits of social and education reform in India. What will become apparent is that both the Gaekwad and Ambedkar valued a sort of rebelliousness in educative endeavors. They saw the value in a spirit that enshrined intelligent resistance to sources of power and domination. One can see this spirit across Ambedkar's works, but the concluding section of this article will illustrate how this orientation in Sayajirao was also present in Ambedkar up to his final years. America mattered for Ambedkar, and examining the conditions for it to so matter is a valuable, and understudied, part of his story.

## **Becoming the Gaekwad of Baroda**

Who was the enlightened ruler who connected Ambedkar and Columbia University? The boy who would become the Gaekwad or ruler of Baroda, a princely state in Gujarat, and key benefactor to the young Ambedkar, was born in the extended family of the Gaekwads in Kavhana on March 11, 1863. He was elevated to the position of ruling Baroda at the age of thirteen through a fascinating story of intrigue and struggle between the British and the former ruler of Baroda, a prince by the name of Malharrao, an unseemly ruler who even descended to the level of supposedly trying to poison the British resident of Baroda to be rid of his interference.<sup>4</sup> Through a series of events that do not concern us here, the young boy was adopted into the royal family and pronounced the future Gaekwad of Baroda. The young Gaekwad was given a private and expansive education at the hands of a member of the Indian Civil Service and Director of Education in the State of Berar, F. A. H. Eliot. Eliot closely supervised an intense educational plan for the young ruler which included language training in English, Marathi, Gujarati, and Urdu, as well as the subjects of mathematics, history, and geography.<sup>5</sup> The young Gaekwad eventually rose to the levels that this education demanded of him, and became close to Eliot; he would later on demand of the British that Eliot serve him as an advisor during his rule of Baroda, a demand that was granted for a time. He would never forgive the British, however, when Eliot was recalled from Baroda's service in response to perceived defiance by the Gaekwad to British interests.

Sayajirao Gaekwad was a relatively progressive ruler for his time, insisting on founding many schools for his subjects. His forward-looking policies also included attempts to fight caste discrimination in Baroda through inter-caste dinners, employment schemes for disadvantaged castes, and scholarship programs for lower-caste individuals. Of course, it was the later initiative that so benefitted the young Ambedkar. But added on to these social reform predilections was an interesting relationship with the West. Eliot had introduced the young Sayajirao to the culture

<sup>4</sup>Fatesinghrao Gaekwad (1989). *Sayajirao of Baroda: The prince and the man*. Popular Prakashan, 45–50.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid., 55.

and ways of the West, both good and bad, and the Gaekwad began a habit of making extended trips to Europe and America in the 1880s that would continue for decades. Sayajirao was even present for the historic World's Parliament of Religions in Chicago in 1893. He sometimes claimed that the trips that dragged him through Switzerland, London, and eventually America were done for his health—he loathed the hot summers of Baroda and could not accept the respite that traditional Indian mountain retreats provided Indian princes. Or perhaps it was the escape from the pressures of being a prince, the position of power that the young boy had not been born into and that seemed to have descended upon him in a rather random fashion. Whatever the motivation, Sayajirao experienced much of Europe and the West, and took these influences back to his dealings in Baroda. The British were torn about this habit of travel to the West. On the one hand, they did not like the Indian princes being so far away from an effective position of control over their Indian states—and the British officials there who might thereby influence them. On the other hand, the British had long criticized or looked down upon Indian princes precisely because they were perceived as crude and “unworldly.”<sup>6</sup> Sayajirao's habit of staying away from his realm and among European and American communities pulled at both of these concerns.

## **Torn between Empire and America**

There are two trips to America, however, that are particularly relevant to the issue of Ambedkar's education. Sayajirao, his second wife (Chimnabai), and his entourage arrived in the U.S. on May 13, 1906 with the intention of studying American industry; he also indicated an interest in visiting American universities and mentioned in the press that he had letters from a range of dignitaries offering to assist with his tour—including the president of Columbia University, Nicholas Butler.<sup>7</sup> Sayajirao's brother, Sampatroo, also accompanied the ruler and often spoke to the agents of the press; he admitted in one story he, unlike the Gaekwad, was Oxford trained, but quickly continued on to say that, “It is the educational system of this country that his Highness is most anxious to study...his Highness wishes to have all of his subjects educated.”<sup>8</sup>

Wealthy businessman and president of the Chamber of Commerce in New York, Morris K. Jesup, arranged a variety of stops for Sayajirao at various educational institutions—out of which one of the handful of schools that the Gaekwad visited was Columbia University.<sup>9</sup> Jesup was also the president and benefactor of the American Museum of Natural History in New York, an institution directed for ten years by the naturalist, Hermon C. Bumpus (1862–1943).<sup>10</sup> Jesup brought Bumpus in to lead the programming and activities of the museum in 1901, and they became close

<sup>6</sup>Ibid., 123.

<sup>7</sup>A Real Maharaja Here in A Shiny High Hat. *New York Times*. May 14, 1906, 9.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid.

<sup>9</sup>The Maharaja's Names Puzzle Hotel Staff. *New York Times*. May 15, 1906, 6.

<sup>10</sup>For more on Bumpus's life and education, see: Hermon Carey Bumpus (1944). May 5, 1862–June 21, 1943. *Science*, vol. 99, no. 2559, Jan. 14, 28–30; Hermon C. Bumpus, Jr. (1947). *Hermon Carey Bumpus: Yankee naturalist*. Minnesota Archive Editions.

colleagues.<sup>11</sup> Bumpus continued in this role until 1911 when he resigned and became a business manager for the University of Wisconsin. While in New York, the Gaekwad was interested in seeing all manner of educational institutions, so he asked Jesup to arrange a visit to the American Museum of Natural History. It was here that Sayajirao met Bumpus, and they quickly became good friends.<sup>12</sup> Their relationship would blossom so much that the Gaekwad would eventually appoint him “as Baroda’s agent in America.”<sup>13</sup> The Gaekwad would write to Bumpus in 1908 about the Gaekwad’s son, Jaisingrao, who was initiating a course of study in America at Harvard University.<sup>14</sup> Bumpus would become the personal guardian of Jaisingrao, or “Jay” as the Bumpus family would come to know him, a task that surely created some stress on Bumpus given the young prince’s irresponsibility with money and inexperience with life on his own.<sup>15</sup> Over the years, Bumpus would also serve as a periodic, but important, advisor to the Gaekwad, channeling a steady flow of American academics toward the service needs of Baroda. Following Bumpus’s advice, Charles Cuthbert Hall was hired to be Baroda’s Educational Advisor; he also sent young Americans like Ralph C. Whitnack, a graduate of Brown University, to Baroda, where he eventually created the first banking institution in that princely state.<sup>16</sup> Bumpus also recommended William Alanson Borden (1853–1931) from Yale as the person to lead the Gaekwad’s new public library initiative in 1910.<sup>17</sup> Under Borden’s leadership in Baroda for three years, the Gaekwad’s ideas of enhancing public education for all of his people were greatly augmented—45 larger libraries were established, along with the creation of around 650 smaller village libraries.<sup>18</sup> Even after his time in Baroda was finished, Borden continued to seek out meetings with the Gaekwad when the ruler visited Europe in 1913.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>11</sup>Interestingly enough, it was conflicts at the museum between Jesup and Bumpus and the anthropologist, Franz Boas, that would drive the latter away from the museum; Boas would shift his affiliation to Columbia University in 1906, where he would interact more fully with John Dewey and other stars soon to be in the orbit of young Ambedkar. For more details on this incident, see Rosemary Lévy Zumwalt (2019). *Franz Boas: The emergence of the anthropologist*. University of Nebraska Press. For more on Ambedkar and Boas, see Jesús Francisco Cháirez-Garza (2018). B.R. Ambedkar, Franz Boas and the rejection of racial theories of Untouchability. *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies*, 41(2), 281–296. For a general account of anthropology’s rise during Ambedkar’s education and life, see Kamala Visweswaran (2010). *Un/common cultures: Racism and the rearticulation of cultural differences*. Duke University Press.

<sup>12</sup>Hermon C. Bumpus, Jr., *Hermon Carey Bumpus*. 73.

<sup>13</sup>Fatesinghrao Gaekwad. *Sayajirao of Baroda*. 204.

<sup>14</sup>Portions of this letter are printed in Stanley Rice (1931). *Sayaji Rao III: Maharaja of Baroda*, vol. 1. Oxford University Press, 136.

<sup>15</sup>Hermon C. Bumpus, Jr., *Hermon Carey Bumpus*. 75–76.

<sup>16</sup>Hermon C. Bumpus, Jr., *Hermon Carey Bumpus*. 73–74.

<sup>17</sup>*Cornell Alumni News*, vol. 12, No. 40, August 1910, 475. For more on Borden’s activities in Baroda, see Murai Lal Nagar (1992). *William Alanson Borden (1853-1931): An apostle of international librarianship*. International Library Center.

<sup>18</sup>Stanley Rice, *Sayaji Rao III: Maharaja of Baroda*, vol. 2, 73.

<sup>19</sup>We know this detail from the reports of British intelligence agents tracking the Gaikwad’s movements and meetings while in Europe. Fatesinghrao Gaekwad. *Sayajirao of Baroda*. 255.

In 1906, however, one of Bumpus's earliest influences on Sayajirao was to help convince him about the educational potentials of America; after meeting Bumpus and touring American universities in New York, Sayajirao was convinced to send his son to an American university, as well as at least "two young men from Baroda to America to 'study sociology and the science of Municipal Government.'"<sup>20</sup> Bumpus would remain in the Ambedkar-New York story even after the naturalist resigned his position at the museum and left for Wisconsin in 1911—Bumpus's name appears thrice in the detailed "Memorandum of Agreement" between Baroda and Ambedkar on June 4, 1913, that sets out the terms of the Gaekwad's support of Ambedkar's education in America. Bumpus was to receive reimbursement requests from Ambedkar related to his education, as well as be a channel for Ambedkar to report his progress in his studies. The 1913 agreement, signed just before Ambedkar left for America, indicates that "Mr. Ambedkar Bhimrao R. undertakes to proceed to America to be trained up in finance and sociology in the Columbia University, New York, and to obtain the Master's degree in economics, finance and sociology staying there for a period of two years or more as may be hereafter considered necessary. During this period he shall stay under the general supervision of Dr. H.C. Bumpus."<sup>21</sup>

The 1906 trip was important in other ways, as well. Sayajirao made a point to tell the American press, one often interested in only the exotic and impractical elements of Indian culture, that he was "glad to say that the caste barriers are breaking down slowly."<sup>22</sup> In a side trip to Washington D.C., the Maharaja of Baroda had an invited audience with President Roosevelt, and he also observed the rituals of Senate debates in the Capitol.<sup>23</sup> By all indications, he was getting exposed to a range of aspects of America, from Wall Street to Morningside Heights to Washington D.C., and he seemed to be increasingly fond of what America had to offer. Before leaving America's shores, the press reported his promises to return again soon and to send Indian students back to America for higher education.<sup>24</sup>

Sayajirao's interest in the U.S. education system was still in the foreground during his next trip to America in 1910. He arrived in Vancouver on June 5 and then worked his way to New York City once again, arriving in that buzzing metropolis on June 15, 1910.<sup>25</sup> He only stayed a week in New York, but his infatuation with the city was quickly reported in the press—next to a rather odd debate about whether he found American women attractive, a controversy spurred on by reported comments during his previous trip to the U.S. Trying to raise the coverage of Baroda and its rulers to a higher level in the American press, he praised the greatness of the U.S., and was quoted as saying that "I believe it has the greatest future of any country." The press coverage

<sup>20</sup>Fatesinghrao Gaekwad. *Sayajirao of Baroda*. 204.

<sup>21</sup>This document hails from the records of the state of Baroda. The "true copy" referenced here of "The Memorandum of Agreement between Bhimrao Ambedkar and Baroda State" can be found in the Khairmode Papers at the University of Mumbai Archives.

<sup>22</sup>*Ibid.*, 6.

<sup>23</sup>Maharajah Sees President. *New York Times*, May 24, 1906, 2.

<sup>24</sup>Gaekwar Is Coming Back. *New York Times*, May 25, 1906, 11.

<sup>25</sup>Indian Prince Coming. *New York Times*, April 23, 1910, 1.

of his short stay in New York also gives us some insight into why he continued to visit this city so often; his love of New York seeped through the reports that “he said he liked the noise of New York because noise always meant progress.”<sup>26</sup> This visit also fell in the middle of Jaisingrao’s matriculation at Harvard University. Jaisingrao, the son of the Gaekwad, joined Harvard and pursued his studies in philosophy and religion in 1908, after preparatory education at the Horace Mann School in New York City alongside Bumpus’s son Carey.<sup>27</sup>

Jaisingrao ultimately earned his Harvard degree in February 1912, but not after making the formal and informal news circuits through his extravagant spending habits and expensive poker addiction.<sup>28</sup> Even though Bumpus was named as Ambedkar’s guardian in the 1913 agreement, he was far from New York (taking over his new post in Wisconsin) by then and he was likely relieved to be free of the sort of tribulations that his previous guardianship role and Jaisingrao’s troubles put him through.<sup>29</sup> It is no wonder that Ambedkar did not have any close contact with Bumpus, whatever Sayajirao’s understanding of the agreement might have been. In 1916, Bumpus, busy with his new post as President of Tufts University, did write a letter on Ambedkar’s behalf to his advisor, Edwin Seligman, imploring him to help the Indian student in his application for a travelling fellowship from Columbia University that would support his education in London the following term. Bumpus’s letter evidences little connection with Ambedkar—even the promising line of “Mr. Ambedkar has impressed me as being a very earnest student” strikes one as not revealing much personal familiarity between them through its passive phrasing. The letter does, however, show the American’s continuing respect of the Gaekwad and his projects, including sponsored students such as Ambedkar.<sup>30</sup>

It is clear that educational connections like Bumpus and the aura of progress exuded by New York were all tied together in the mental impression that Sayajirao had of America. But combining with this recurring theme in the middle of the Gaekwad’s decades of rule was another tenor that so often lay just below the surface of his official dealings—his dislike of being under the thumb of the British. The Gaekwad seemed intrigued by the West and what it could offer India and its masses, but he consistently recoiled at the idea that India needed the British to be ruled well. His reign can be read as an attempt to constantly show the British—and their local “Resident” watching over Baroda’s governmental happenings—that Indian princes could rule in an enlightened fashion. The Gaekwad had to request permission from the British in 1904 to travel to Europe, a sort of monitoring that constantly infuriated the Baroda ruler. As he was preparing to leave American soil during his 1906 trip, and freshly inspired by his interactions with Americans like Bumpus and with institutions like Columbia University, the Gaekwad penned a letter to the annoyingly inquisitive British Resident

<sup>26</sup>The Gaekwar Has Gone. *New York Times*, July 14, 1910, 6.

<sup>27</sup>Hermon C. Bumpus, Jr., *Hermon Carey Bumpus*. 75–76.

<sup>28</sup>Gaekwar’s Son Gets Degree. *New York Times*, February 9, 1912, 5.

<sup>29</sup>Hermon C. Bumpus, Jr., *Hermon Carey Bumpus*. 76–78.

<sup>30</sup>Letter by H.C. Bumpus to E.R.A. Seligman, March 24, 1916, Seligman Papers, Columbia University.

that "I enjoyed my visit to Free America."<sup>31</sup> It is no wonder that the British did not like the increasing American connections with Baroda and its educational endeavors through figures like Borden, given the Gaekwad's disposition toward his colonial rulers.<sup>32</sup>

The relationship of the Gaekwad and the British was tumultuous, but hostilities rarely broke out into the realm of overt conflict. Instead, a multitude of smaller acts of rebellion and resistance initiated by the Gaekwad continued to incense various agents of the British Empire. For instance, the Gaekwad had a habit of hiring bright, but anti-British, Indians to positions of influence and power within his court. Aravinda Ghose (later known as Sri Aurobindo) was one such appointment. Yet the British could not get rid of the Gaekwad that easily, given his status in the hierarchy of the Empire; he was one of the few native rulers in India accorded the high honor of a 21-gun salute, a status that also protected his political autonomy from much interference at the hands of the British Resident in Baroda.<sup>33</sup> This animosity came to a head, however, at the Coronation Durbar held in Delhi to honor the new British king, George V. The British used this elaborate public ritual to cement the loyalty of Indian subjects and its princely states to the crown, but Sayajirao raised a furor through his actions at this high-profile event. On December 12, 1911, in front of over 50,000 spectators, the Gaekwad strode up to the dais on which the newly installed king-emperor sat. The Gaekwad wore a Western-style suit, carried a walking cane, and bowed once to the king before turning his back and leaving. His conduct reached the status of a royal affront, since the British expected the "native princes" to dress the part with jewels and robes, not Western business attire, and to bow three times without turning their back on the king. Sayajirao followed none of these British-dictated protocols.<sup>34</sup> Despite his claims that his intentions were not to snub the king, the fact remains that many perceived his behavior as a purposeful move in the constant struggle he led to maintain autonomy in the face of British colonial power.

## **Why America for Ambedkar?**

Any answer to our questions of why Ambedkar ended up at Columbia must include reference to these two prominent themes in Sayajirao Gaekwad's rule: his animosity toward the British, and his admiration for American educational institutions. The first reveals a spirit of rebelliousness in Sayajirao, one that we can also detect in Ambedkar throughout his own development. The latter theme, his admiration for American education, was only enhanced by the experiences that connections like Jesup and Bumpus orchestrated.<sup>35</sup> The Gaekwad's son was sent to Harvard, American

<sup>31</sup>Fatesingh Rao Gaekwad. *Sayajirao of Baroda*. 204.

<sup>32</sup>*Ibid.*, 204.

<sup>33</sup>Lucy Moore (2004). *Maharanis*. Viking, 6–7.

<sup>34</sup>*Ibid.*, 8.

<sup>35</sup>Both themes are related to the idea of enhanced freedom—or a spirit of freedom—felt by the Gaekwad, and then Ambedkar, in America. But the question is: what *enables* this spirit of freedom? Part of the answer is the sort of critical and probing education at leading institutions like Columbia University. And what *use* is this spirit of freedom attuned to? A response to that

administrators like Borden were imported to run library schemes back in Baroda, and various American educational practices were adopted in Baroda's own schools.<sup>36</sup> There is even evidence that Ambedkar's teacher at Columbia, Edwin R.A. Seligman, had ongoing contacts with figures in Baroda between 1909–1912, mostly orbiting around accusations by the British of subversive activity by the Indian professor, Samuel L. Joshi, undertaken when he was a student of Seligman's at Columbia University. In a June 26, 1909 letter, Joshi writes to Seligman indicating that the Gaekwad cancelled Joshi's appointment at the College of Baroda because of the British charges of seditious behavior; he also indicates that the Gaekwad was interested in reinstating his position once the British suspicions were removed.<sup>37</sup> Seligman wrote a general letter of support for his former student Joshi, perhaps seen by the Gaekwad, on July 5, 1909, trying to absolve Joshi of seditious intentions.<sup>38</sup> It would come as no surprise if the Gaekwad, given his urges to stand up to the British, his needs for educational and financial reform, the smell of progress and life that he loved around New York City, and his various encounters with the educational achievements of Columbia University and its faculty, would incline young Ambedkar to choose Columbia University over British educational institutions.

This rare, and unplanned, confluence of factors somehow led the young Ambedkar to Columbia in 1913. In many ways, it was an epochal decision that changed the course of much of Indian politics given Ambedkar's later successes and failures. More work is ongoing about Ambedkar, including Vijay Surwade's much-needed project on Ambedkar in Baroda. Among many new facts and details about Ambedkar's connection to Baroda, Surwade has unearthed documents that show that Ambedkar was originally going to be sent to the West for education in *pedagogy*, or the study of effective teaching.<sup>39</sup> What caused the shift from pedagogy to "economics, finance, and sociology" in the June 1913 order is unclear. All of these disciplines could translate into the practical projects of the Gaekwad's in Baroda. But America meant *progress* for the Gaekwad, and a practical university education was surely to be had in America and would certainly be useful for his state's future. Ambedkar was to be a vital part to the Gaekwad's sidestepping of the British in this initial planning of education that would benefit Baroda.

The focus on practical matters—and even the early focus on pedagogy as a subject matter—is intriguing. Did Ambedkar evince an interest in this topic? In a summary of original biographical work, the collected works of Ambedkar includes a reconstructed dialogue (drawn from Khairmode's biography) where he supposedly told the Maharaja

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question would entail the sort of rebelliousness or revolution that will be worked out in the remainder of this article. Rebelliousness requires an empowered freedom, but freedom does not always entail rebelliousness.

<sup>36</sup>Stanley Rice (1931). *Sayaji Rao III: Maharaja of Baroda*, Vol. 2. Oxford University Press, 120–123.

<sup>37</sup>Letter by S.L. Joshi to E.R.A. Seligman, June 26, 1909, Seligman Papers, Columbia University.

<sup>38</sup>Letter by E.R.A. Seligman, July 5, 1909, Seligman Papers, Columbia University.

<sup>39</sup>Vijay Surwade's forthcoming book, *Dr. Ambedkar in Baroda*, is sure to be the most detailed factual survey of Ambedkar's connections to the Maharaja and the princely state of Baroda yet produced.

on his second meeting in Bombay that he wanted to study "Sociology, Economics and especially Public Finance." The Gaekwad asked why Ambedkar wanted to study these topics; Ambedkar replied, "The study of these subjects would give me clues for improving the depressed condition of my society and I shall undertake the work of social reforms on those lines." The Gaekwad eventually pressed Ambedkar that Baroda too must be served by this education, to which Ambedkar indicated that he could both serve his community and the state of Baroda. The Gaekwad then tellingly indicated what *his* plan was—"I have been thinking on the same lines. I am thinking [of] sending you to America[,] will you go?" Ambedkar then responded that he would.<sup>40</sup> America answered many needs and desires of the Gaekwad, and it would soon fill Ambedkar with several desires—and the means to satisfy them—in turn.

Ambedkar was sent to Columbia University in America to learn important topics for the social improvement of Baroda. Of course, the intention was that he would use this education to improve Baroda (a task he couldn't sufficiently execute upon his return because of caste-based challenges in the workplace and in finding housing). He would, however, successfully put his expansive education to work in his efforts to organize and agitate on behalf of the Dalits across India. The Gaekwad looked at America as a symbol of rebelliousness against the British and a source of progress for his people. Ambedkar would imbibe these values in the specifics of his education at the hands of the progressive academics employed by Columbia in the 1910s.

## **Ambedkar in America**

Some of the most moving parts of the experience at Columbia for Ambedkar came through his contacts with John Dewey, a prominent American philosopher and leader of the tradition of American pragmatism. Ambedkar had many influences, of course, but Dewey is one of the most documented influences that we can find, and his influence built upon the ideas of education and pedagogy central to this question about Ambedkar, Sayajirao, and the role of education in social reform.<sup>41</sup> Like so many parts of Ambedkar's incredible story, we are fortunate that incidents of fate lined up such that the seeds of Dewey's pragmatism had a chance to grow. The agreement from June 4, 1913 between the Gaekwad and Ambedkar explicitly committed the latter to focusing exclusively on economics, finance, and sociology—Ambedkar was commanded in the memorandum to "not devote any time to the study of other subject or subjects to the detriment of his study of those mentioned in the agreement without the consent of His Highness' Government."<sup>42</sup> Fortunately for the prospects for pragmatism, democracy, and social justice in India, and perhaps through the absence

<sup>40</sup>Bhimrao R. Ambedkar. (1979). I am a Man of Character. *Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar: Writings and speeches*, vol. 17, part 1. Government of Maharashtra, 211–212.

<sup>41</sup>For more on Ambedkar's other influences at Columbia, see Scott R. Stroud (forthcoming). Ambedkar at Columbia University, in *The Cambridge companion to Ambedkar*, ed. Anupama Rao and Shailaja Paik. Cambridge University Press.

<sup>42</sup>"The Memorandum of Agreement between Bhimrao Ambedkar and Baroda State," June 4, 1913, Khairmode Papers, University of Mumbai Archives.

of any sort of guardian figures in New York such as Bumpus, Ambedkar found enough room in his focused course of study for Dewey's courses in philosophy. He would end up taking three courses from Dewey—Philosophy 231 “Psychological Ethics” and the year-long series of two courses, Philosophy 131-132 “Moral and Political Philosophy.” This latter course was shared with the soon-to-be voice of Dewey's pragmatism in China, Hu Shih.<sup>43</sup> There is no evidence that Ambedkar took any pedagogy course from Dewey while he was at Columbia. In all likelihood, what he learned about Dewey's views on education came from his acquisition of Dewey's book, *Democracy and Education*, while he was studying in London in January 1917.<sup>44</sup> There is the chance that Ambedkar had heard of Dewey's philosophy before he departed for Columbia in 1913, since he owned a 1910 reissue of the pragmatist's 1908 book, *Ethics*, but the available textual evidence makes this hypothesis unlikely; Ambedkar most likely stumbled onto Dewey's fame—and into Dewey's classrooms—once he was exploring in the intellectual environments of Morningside Heights.<sup>45</sup>

We know that Ambedkar valued Dewey's writings on education, as we can see from the constellations of annotations that emerge from his two heavily marked copies of *Democracy and Education*.<sup>46</sup> When he read these books is unclear, but it is definite that he saw major themes of Dewey's within their pages.<sup>47</sup> The ideas of habits, custom, and reconstruction were noticed, and would become central to Ambedkar's later critique of caste in his own writings. What we see emerging from many of these marked passages in Dewey will help us explore the impact—and orientation—of Ambedkar's education. Part of the account that's emerging in this article is that there was a spirit of reflection, criticism, and even rebelliousness that marked Sayajirao's interest in institutions like Columbia, and that these themes were shared by Ambedkar, and to some extent, Dewey himself.

We can start to tie all these threads together by looking at Ambedkar's own annotations in *Democracy and Education*. Like Dewey, Ambedkar valued the idea that education was a reconstructive endeavor, and that its reconstructive power was not merely material—meaning issuing in an observably changed social setting. It also meant an inner change of attitude and habit in the pupils it encumbers.

<sup>43</sup>See Scott R. Stroud (2023). *The evolution of pragmatism in India*.

<sup>44</sup>We know when Ambedkar acquired this 1916 book because the copy preserved in the archives at Siddharth College, Mumbai, from his personal collection is signed and dated 1917.

<sup>45</sup>Ambedkar's heavily annotated copy of this book is signed by K.A. Keluskar, an important guide and advocate for young Ambedkar. It is more likely that Ambedkar gained this book around 1930 or after Keluskar's death in 1934. For more on this book and its mysteries, see Scott R. Stroud. (2018). Ambedkar's pragmatism drew heavily on the 1908 'Ethics'. *Forward Press*. <https://www.forwardpress.in/2018/01/ambedkars-pragmatism-drew-heavily-on-the-1908-ethics/>.

<sup>46</sup>Ambedkar owned four copies in total of this work. The earliest are 1916 and 1925 editions, and each is heavily marked in his distinctive annotation styles. The annotations noted in this article are taken from his markings in the 1925 edition.

<sup>47</sup>To take Ambedkar seriously as a reader means taking what he read—and what he marked while doing so—seriously. For more on this methodology, see Scott R. Stroud (2017). What did Bhimrao Ambedkar learn from John Dewey's *Democracy and Education*?. *The Pluralist*, vol. 12(2), 78–103.

This approach to education as reconstructive is built upon a view of experience that many pragmatists share. It is that experience itself educates or shapes us. This engagement with natural and social environments not only changes what we do and gain, but also how we think about our projects and the obstacles facing them. In other words, experience shapes our attitudes as it resists and enables them. Ambedkar saw this theme in Dewey’s book and marked it in his distinctive red pencil: the “social environment forms the mental and emotional disposition of behavior in individuals by engaging them in activities that arouse and strengthen certain impulses, that have certain purposes and entail certain consequences.”<sup>48</sup> While this is a broad view of education—experience itself can educate—formal institutions like schools can give us more control over the results of these process. Thus, such organized efforts become an important way to alter and optimize the attitudes and habits of their pupils, a position noted by Ambedkar when he read Dewey: “it is the business of the school environment to eliminate, so far as possible, the unworthy features of the existing environment from influence upon mental habitudes.”<sup>49</sup>

There can be many uses of education on this approach. Dewey, and Ambedkar, would not be content with education as indoctrination or brainwashing. Those sorts of non-reflective outcomes come close to not really being educative in the first place. What is sought from education by Dewey, and marked in Dewey’s text by Ambedkar the reader, is the idea that education ought to emancipate through attitudinal change: “it is the office of the school environment to balance the various elements in the social environment, and to see to it that each individual gets an opportunity to escape from the limitations of the social group in which he was born, and to come into living contact with a broader environment.”<sup>50</sup>

We must understand Dewey on this point to see what Ambedkar perceived as promising in pragmatist views of education. Social strictures and limitations—such as customs of caste—would not primarily be observable physical externalities. Students can be conditioned just like non-human animals to act and react in specified ways. What Dewey sought was marked by Ambedkar as he read through *Democracy and Education*: “The difference between an adjustment to a physical stimulus and a mental act is that the latter involves response to a thing in its meaning; the former does not.”<sup>51</sup> Ambedkar saw what Dewey was after—a reorientation about how an individual thought about a world and its meanings. Meaning, after all, lay in how we anticipate and react to something given our past courses of experience. It was a meeting of the by-gone past and the yet-to-come future.

<sup>48</sup>John Dewey (1985). *Democracy and education*, vol. 9 of *The Middle Works of John Dewey*, ed. Jo Ann Boydston. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 20. How do we know Ambedkar’s annotations and their style? For an explanation and exploration of Ambedkar as a reader, see Scott R. Stroud (2023). How do we know what Ambedkar read? *Round Table India*. <https://www.roundtableindia.co.in/how-do-we-know-what-ambedkar-read/>.

<sup>49</sup>Ibid., 24.

<sup>50</sup>Ibid., 24–25.

<sup>51</sup>John Dewey. *Democracy and education*. 34.

This was precisely the sense of meaning that Ambedkar was concerned with in his 1936 text, *Annihilation of Caste*, when he claimed that “Caste is a notion, it is a state of the mind,” and that caste concepts and labels led individuals to judge and react to others in a habitualized (and normative) fashion.<sup>52</sup> Caste was a learned attitude that assumed and instantiated certain meanings for what others were worth. It was, in other words, inherently limiting in its attribution of meaning to those who bore the weight of its labels. What Ambedkar sought was similar to what Dewey opined about in his work on education. It was a formation of community, but a formation that did not rest upon pacific and uncritical dispositions. Ambedkar marks such a commitment in Dewey’s idea that commonality in meaning (and value) attribution through common habits was the instantiation of community: “To have the same ideas about things which others have, to be like-minded with them, and thus to be really members of a social group, is therefore to attach the same meanings to things and to acts which others attach. Otherwise, there is no common understanding, and no community life.”<sup>53</sup> This sort of common understanding appears in Dewey, and in Ambedkar’s *Annihilation of Caste*, in the engagement with social endosmosis.<sup>54</sup> The important aspect of this commitment for this inquiry comes in the *attitudinal* aspects to education—and in Ambedkar’s own person during his educational experiences in the West funded partially by the Gaekwad.

## Ambedkar and the “Spirit of Rebellion” in Education

Ambedkar made several passing remarks on education. He even made some longer pronouncements on education in his expansive body of work. Future work must systematically explore Ambedkar as a theorist of education and its social values. But here, let us look at a few of his arguments made later in his life since they hold the interesting combination we have been building to—education, pragmatism, and a sort of critical reflectiveness as attitude. A few months before his death, Bhimrao Ambedkar addressed the world—now divided into communist and non-communist blocs—through the “Voice of America” radio broadcast on May 20, 1956. His speech was on a theme that had surfaced often throughout his life and writings: that of the nature and benefits of democracy. Ambedkar, one of the chief architects of the Indian constitution, approached the question of whether there is democracy in India. Instead of providing a straightforward answer—and the affirmative one that newly independent Indians might expect—he indicated that it depended on how clear one was with their concepts. Pragmatically, what we answer depends for him on what we mean by “democracy.” “No positive answer can be given,” Ambedkar intones, “unless the confusion caused by equating democracy with Republic and by equating

<sup>52</sup>Bhimrao R. Ambedkar (2003). *Annihilation of Caste*. In *Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar: Writings and speeches*, vol. 1, ed. Vasant Moon. Government of Maharashtra, 68.

<sup>53</sup>John Dewey. *Democracy and education*. 35.

<sup>54</sup>Arun P. Mukherjee (2009). B.R. Ambedkar, John Dewey, and the meaning of democracy. *New Literary History*, 40(2), 345–370.

democracy with Parliamentary Government is removed.”<sup>55</sup> Ambedkar is concerned with the natural, but harmful, assumption that external laws and institutions render some community a democracy.

Ambedkar then explains in this American radio broadcast what a democracy is in his use of the term: “A democracy is more than a form of government. It is primarily a mode of associated living. The roots of Democracy are to be searched in social relationship, in the terms of associated life between the people who form a society.”<sup>56</sup> These are both Ambedkar’s words—he would also use them in *Annihilation of Caste* in 1936—and not Ambedkar’s words.<sup>57</sup> Dewey penned them in his own *Democracy and Education*, and Ambedkar marked this passage in both of his early editions of this book. This engagement and appropriation of selected parts of Dewey’s texts are part of a general *reconstructive* approach taken by Ambedkar, one enabled and authorized by Dewey’s own form of reconstructive pragmatism.<sup>58</sup>

In *Annihilation of Caste*, Ambedkar shows the pragmatist pedigree of this reconstructive use of past resources—including Dewey’s own texts. In praising his “Prof. John Dewey, who was my teacher and to whom I owe so much,” Ambedkar explicitly quotes *Democracy and Education*: “Every society gets encumbered with what is trivial, with dead wood from the past, and with what is positively perverse... As a society becomes more enlightened, it realizes that it is responsible not to conserve and transmit the whole of its existing achievements, but only such as make for a better future society.”<sup>59</sup> Ambedkar’s target in this planned speech was the religious tradition of Hinduism (with its sacred texts) that he saw as grounding existing caste hierarchies and their related caste attitudes. Such a tradition had long textual roots into the past. But the past wasn’t a touchstone of certainty, however, or something to be mindlessly recreated and replicated in the course of formal or informal education. It was a resource that can be drawn upon and remixed in our ongoing experiments for forming better communities and courses of experience. If one notes the ellipses in Ambedkar’s own use of Dewey’s book, one can see his point—even though Dewey was explicitly talking about formal schooling and its appropriation of parts of a past tradition, Ambedkar alters the quotation in his own act of dealing with the texts of his past. Dewey’s *Democracy and Education* was one of those past resources that Ambedkar the writer could selectively draw upon, both in enunciating the concept of reconstruction and in divining the nature of social democracy.

In this 1956 speech about democracy, Ambedkar continues his life-long chastisement of caste system as a “Graded Inequality,” in which “Castes are not equal in their status. They are standing one above another. They are jealous of one another. It is hatred and descending scale of contempt. This feature of the Caste System has most

<sup>55</sup>Bhimrao R. Ambedkar (2003). *Prospects of Democracy in India*. *Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar: Writings and speeches*, vol. 17 part 3. Government of Maharashtra, 519.

<sup>56</sup>*Ibid.*, 519.

<sup>57</sup>Bhimrao R. Ambedkar. *Annihilation of Caste*. 57.

<sup>58</sup>Scott R. Stroud. *The evolution of pragmatism in India*.

<sup>59</sup>Bhimrao R. Ambedkar. *Annihilation of Caste*. 79, ellipses in original.

pernicious consequences. It destroys willing and helpful co-operation.”<sup>60</sup> But shortly after broaching this theme, he explains how the caste system harms such cooperation:

It means that when there is no equitable opportunity to receive the stimulus from and to return the response from different caste, the result is that the influences which educate some into masters, educate others into slaves. The experience of each party loses its meaning when the free interchange of varying modes of life experience is arrested. It results into a separation of society, into a privileged and a subject class. Such a separation prevents social endosmosis.<sup>61</sup>

If one is sensitive to Ambedkar’s engagement with Dewey—and the sense of reconstruction and agency he draws from the pragmatist—one can again see that Dewey is being reconstructed in this passage. Parts of this passage appeared in Dewey’s *Democracy and Education* over forty years earlier, and not in the context of the critique of caste.<sup>62</sup> Dewey’s target was mindless forms of outdated pedagogy that aimed to produce factory workers for the never-sated form of capitalism he saw growing in America at the turn of the twentieth century. In making his own argument, Ambedkar reworks resources from John Dewey, his beloved teacher at Columbia University, to explain the problems of the thousands-year old caste system of the Indian subcontinent.<sup>63</sup>

The intrigue of Ambedkar as an Indian pragmatist figure, and as a partisan of an expanded sense of education, goes even deeper in this 1956 address, one of the last he was to give in his final year of life. He was clearly influenced enough by Dewey’s *Democracy and Education*, a book that he acquired first in 1917, to weave its passages into his appeals, yet he insists on qualifying what many would take to be the linchpin of Dewey’s whole philosophy: education.<sup>64</sup> The end of his address features Ambedkar departing from what might be expected of a Deweyan pragmatist. He does not tell his audience that education, especially formal education, is the solution to India’s caste problems. This was the tactic that Dewey often employed in his lectures in China between 1919–1921, when he discussed topics such as student government and school activities as vital for developing a rich sense of democracy.<sup>65</sup> Ambedkar, in this 1956

<sup>60</sup>Bhimrao R. Ambedkar. *Prospects of Democracy in India*. 520–521.

<sup>61</sup>*Ibid.*, 521.

<sup>62</sup>John Dewey. *Democracy and education*. 90.

<sup>63</sup>For more on Dewey’s relationship with India—and with Ambedkar—see Scott R. Stroud (2024). *John Dewey and India: Expanding the John Dewey-Bhimrao Ambedkar*. *The Pluralist*, vol. 19, no. 1, in press.

<sup>64</sup>Through my own investigations into the surviving parts of his personal library spread across various libraries at Siddharth College, Milind College, the Symbiosis Institute, at Rajgraha, and in private collections, I have discovered that Ambedkar owned at least four editions of Dewey’s *Democracy and Education*—at least two of which (a 1916 and 1925 edition) are heavily annotated in his distinctive style of red and blue pencil markings. The 1916 edition is inscribed by Ambedkar as purchased in January 1917 in London, after his time with Dewey at Columbia University.

<sup>65</sup>See John Dewey, 1919–21. *Additional Lectures in China, 1919–1921*. Trans. Robert W. Clopton and Tsuin-chen Ou. Unpublished manuscript, University of Hawaii, Manoa; John

address, falls short of wholesale enthusiasm for education and asks “Can education destroy caste?” His answer is an enigmatic “‘Yes’ as well as ‘No.’” His reasoning is interesting, at least when we take it as a way to possibly develop a complex notion of Ambedkar as pragmatist and to see him as continuing patterns in the Gaekwad’s story from early in his life. If education merely gives dominant castes a reason to retain and reinforce the caste system, Ambedkar sees it as having no meliorative or reconstructive value. In that case education is, as Ambedkar puts it, “not helpful as [a] means to dissolve caste.” Taken in another sense, however, it could be meliorative: “But education may be [a] solvent if it is applied to the lower strata of the Indian Society. It would raise their *spirit of rebellion*. In their present state of ignorance they are the supporters of the Caste System. Once their eyes are opened they will be ready to fight the Caste System.”<sup>66</sup> Ambedkar both praises education and warns of its lack of efficacy if it simply reproduces a past system of discrimination.

The best education on this complex reading would be one that reconstructs Indian society—and the attitudes of specific pupils—through the “spirit of rebellion” he intimates in his radio address. What he wants in his international listeners, as well as in his followers back in India, is a trained orientation that would be courageous enough to demand a complete rejection of the religiously grounded system of discrimination set in the concept of caste. But his appeals are different from Dewey’s insofar as Ambedkar seems committed to pursuing education often through less-formal means such as speech or oratory, as well as social organizations such as educational societies and hostels. These differences are part of what it means for pragmatism to evolve in Indian contexts, of course. It is true that Ambedkar founded a variety of educational institutions later in his life (such as Siddharth College in 1946), but he focused much of his energy on political and social advocacy and organizational efforts that involved direct communication and engagement with supporters and opponents.<sup>67</sup> He clearly held the commitment to experience being educative, and to the idea that educative endeavors can extend beyond the institutions of formal schooling. This purpose was also evident in his planned volume *Riddles in Hinduism*, a work whose intended Hindu audience was telegraphed in its planned subtitle—“an exposition to enlighten the masses”—as well as its prefatory chapter.<sup>68</sup>

What animates much of this lifelong course of argumentation, advocacy, and activism can be seen as the same sort of spirit that Sayajirao Gaekwad displayed in subtly and overtly resisting the British. He saw the promise for American education to help Ambedkar further amplify such a sense of rebellion. In Ambedkar’s experience in

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Dewey (1973). *John Dewey: Lectures in China, 1919–1920*. Trans. Robert W. Clopton and Tsuin-Chen Ou. University of Hawaii Press.

<sup>66</sup>Bhimrao R. Ambedkar. *Prospects of Democracy in India*. 522, emphasis added.

<sup>67</sup>Eleanor Zelliot (2013). *Ambedkar’s world: The making of Babasaheb and the Dalit movement*. Navayana, 162.

<sup>68</sup>Bhimrao Ambedkar. (2003). *Riddles in Hinduism*. In *Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar: Writings and Speeches*, vol. 4, ed. Vasant Moon. Bombay: Government of Maharashtra, 1. For the rhetorical context of his planned volume and its arguments, see Scott R. Stroud (2022). Excessively harsh critique and democratic rhetoric: The enigma of Bhimrao Ambedkar’s *Riddles in Hinduism*. *Journal for the History of Rhetoric*, 25(1), 2–30.

the many classes he took in the West, he not only gained *from* his education—he gained an appreciation *for* education. In taking Dewey seriously as one important influence on Ambedkar, we can see the connection between education as *reconstructive* and education as *rebelliousness*. Ambedkar was not excited about revolution or rebellion for its own sake. Changes, major or minor, must be made in regard to the situation of a present ever-connected to a past and a future. Our resources and our needs and aspirations all meet in the present, and destroying or upending traditions just out of a sense of mechanical rebellion were not what Ambedkar was after.

Such a pursuit of massive changes out of dissatisfaction with the present, and with no concern about its social costs to community, also concerned Dewey. It destroyed too much of value, and too many of those who held such ends. This was precisely Ambedkar's criticism of the Marxists of his day, those in India and those implementing versions of Marx's thought in the Soviet Union and in China. These varieties of communism sought equality, but utilized forceful means that took away the capacities for fraternity or fellow feeling. Marx's thought lacked love and caring for others, including those labeled as opponents, in its pursuit of justice, a point that Ambedkar would make in his final years in various speeches and in his reconstruction of the Buddha's *dhamma*. Ambedkar consistently wanted to annihilate caste, and perhaps some religious texts or ways of interpreting religious texts, but he never wanted to annihilate or abandon the quest for supportive and unified community. He was forever committed to democracy as a way of life. Education was a means for creating such a shared association that democracy demanded; it was also a way to constantly support or preserve that community among its denizens' many differences. Ambedkar's preferred notion of education was just this means of reconstruction, perhaps radical, that lay between total revolution (with all its human costs to community building among opponents) and a complacency with traditions like the customs of caste. This builds upon Ambedkar's commitment to *reconstruction* in his broadly political endeavors, which mandated a path of radical reform that treaded an unsteady path between a pursuit of conservative preservation and the total newness that often motivates revolutionaries. He wanted revolutionary change, but his serious engagement with Dewey and other progressive thinkers at Columbia (as well as elsewhere) impressed on him the fact that the path to reconstruction featured an *intelligent* rebelliousness, one that did not forsake the ends of community in a shallow fixing of some social problematic. Education could be that desired means of intelligent rebellion. In taking Ambedkar's education seriously—and in considering his views on education seriously—we can start to flesh out both the historical story of Ambedkar's development *and* the conceptual story as to what he wanted out of his critique of caste.