

MAHARS HAVE BEEN MARTIAL PEOPLE

The *Mahars* have been a martial people. The army of the East India Company which successfully fought against the army of the Peshwa was recruited from the *Mahars*. The last battle between the Peshwa and the British was fought at Koregaon in the Poona district. There is a column at Koregaon raised by the British to commemorate the battle. On the column are inscribed the names of the soldiers who fell in the battle on the side of the British. Nine out of ten names are of *Mahars*. The recruitment of the *Mahars* continued upto 1892 and in all the wars, the *Mahars* have proved their martial qualities. All of a sudden the recruitment of *Mahars* was stopped in 1892. Ever since the *Mahars* have nursed a grievance against the British Government for what they regarded as very ungrateful conduct. There is much justification for this grievance for there can be no doubt that without the help of the Untouchables the British would never have been able to conquer India.

The *Mahars* carried on a great agitation against their banishment from the Army. But it bore no fruit. It was during the war of 1914 that the British Government under necessity lifted the ban and raised one *Mahar* battalion. It was raised at the fag end of the war and the battalion had no opportunity to go on war service and show its mettle. It was posted in Waziristan in the North-West Frontier Province, and it is on record while almost every battalion stationed in the N.W.F. lost some rifles and ammunition to the Pathans, who are in the habit of raiding ammunition and rifle depots to arm themselves, the Pathans did not succeed in stealing a single title or a single cartridge from the *Mahar* battalion. It was expected that the British Government, having re-enfranchised the *Mahars* for Military purposes, would continue the *Mahar* battalion and add to it more *Mahar* battalions. But instead the British Government on the excuse of economy, disbanded the *Mahar* battalion. This caused great bitterness in the minds of the *Mahars*. When the present war came, the *Mahars* hoped that their turn would come. But the steps taken by the British Government in the early stages of the war only added insult to injury. The *Mahars* were only wanted

for labour corps and not for the combatant ranks. The labour corps is safer than the combatant ranks, but the *Mahars* wanted to join the combatant ranks.

One of the banalities of the British Government in India is this distinction between martial and non-martial classes. Nothing has been more disastrous. It is a pity that so great a catastrophe as the war was necessary to force the British Government to give up this senseless distinction. It is stated that Government have directed to raise a *Mahar* battalion. The credit must go to H. E. the Governor of Bombay. On my making it a grievance he took up the matter with the Central Government and brought it to a successful issue. I appeal to the *Mahars* to take advantage of this opportunity; both for their sake as well as the sake of the country and also appeal to the British Government to keep faith with the *Mahars* and not to disband them from the army after the war is over.

Bombay :

(Dr.) B. R. Ambedkar”¹

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¹: The Times of India, dated 18th June 1941.