

THE MAHARS : WHO WERE THEY AND HOW THEY BECAME THE UNTOUCHABLES ?

In this paper, I propose to raise these questions, and attempt to give an answer to them which in my judgment are most appropriate answers. These questions are : (1) Who are the Mahars ? (2) Why do they live outside the village ? and (3) Why have they been classed as Untouchables ?

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I

Who are the Mahars ?

Mr. Wilson derived the word 'Maharashtra' from the word 'Mahar' and suggested that Maharashtra meant the country belonging to the Mahars. This derivation of the term Mahars is sought to be supported on the analogy of 'Gujarashtra' the country of the Gujars and 'Saurashtra' the country of the Sauraj. An objection is taken to this derivation of the term Mahar on two different grounds, the one objection rests upon the view that the term Maharashtra does not mean the country of the Mahars but that it means the great country. The second objection that is raised to this derivation is based upon the view that the Mahars who are at present so fallen in their social status that it could not be supposed that they at any time in the course of history have had so exalted a position as to be the ruler of the country. It is my view that this derivation put forth by Mr. Wilson is unsupportable for two very different reasons. The first reason which leads me to reject the derivation suggested by Wilson may be formulated in the following terms : It is obvious that if Maharashtra meant the country of Mahars, it is obvious that the Mahars as a community distinct from the rest of the population must have been in existence from very ancient times and must have been known in history, by that name. Now is there any evidence to show that the Mahars are as a community known to history by the name Mahars ? Confining ourselves to the Bombay Presidency the three principal communities which comprise the Untouchable classes are: (1) The Mahars, (2) The Chambhars, and

(3) The Mangs. Of these the Mahars form by far the largest group. It is extraordinary to find that while Mangs and Chambhars are known in history as existing communities, there is no-where any mention of the Mahars as a community. Reaching back to Manu he mentions certain classes which in his time were recognised as Untouchable Communities. Among them the Chambhars are specifically mentioned as an Untouchable Community. The Mangs are not mentioned by Manu. That is probably because Mangs were not to be found in the territory which was known to the author of the *Manusmriti*. But there is ample evidence in the Buddhist literature that the Mangs who therein referred to as Matangas existed as a separate community bearing a name which became well known to all. But neither in the *Manusmriti* nor in the Buddhist literature is there any mention of the Mahars as a community. Not only is there mention of the Mahars in this ancient lore but even the later *Smritis* of quite modern times make no reference to the Mahars as a community. Indeed upto the advent of the Muslims, one does not meet with the word Mahar. One finds it mentioned only once in the *Dnyaneshwari* which is 1100 A.D. Before him the name Mahar is simply non-existent. What are we to suppose? Was there no such community as the Mahars in the ancient times before *Dnyaneshwari*? Or, are we to suppose that there existed a community but then it was known by some other name? Whichever the case is the non-existence of the name Mahars militates strongly against the view of Mr. Wilson. If the term Mahar was not known, much less could it become the basis of a name given to the country.

The second reason which leads me to reject the view of Mr. Wilson is based upon the considerations arising out of the totems which one finds existent in the Mahar community. Mr. Wilson's hypothesis if taken to be correct must necessarily lead to the conclusion that the Mahars are an aboriginal race inhabiting the country before the entry of *Aryans* in the country now known as Maharashtra. I feel certain that such a conclusion is untenable for reasons which I am sorry to say, have not been fully appreciated by those who allege that the Mahars belong to the aboriginal classes of this Province. As a first step in the chain of reasoning, I am depending upon in support of my view, I would like to point out one notable fact and it is this—there are no Marathas where there are no

Mahars and wherever there are Mahars there are Marathas also. This link is not a mere matter of accident, that the link is integral, is supported by another piece of evidence which is also usually overlooked by students of ethnology. Now it is well known that the Marathas have a clan organisation. They have what they call their '*Kuls*': and they have also what is called a totem. The importance of the '*Kul*' and the totem will be obvious to every student of ethnology. A common '*Kul*' and a common totem are indicative of kinship. Bearing this in mind a comparison of the '*Kul*' among the Mahars and the Marathas yields a very significant result.

(The Table mentioned below is not found in the M. S.—Editors)

A glance at the table would show that there is no '*Kul*' among the Mahars which does not exist among the Marathas and there is no '*Kul*' among the Marathas which is not to be found among the Mahars. If anthropology can be relied upon in support of the proposition that the common '*Kul*' is indicative of kinship then the Mahars and the Marathas form a kindred community and the Mahars could not be rejected as an aboriginal community unless one is also prepared to go to the length of saying that the Marathas also are an aboriginal community.

Whether the Marathas are an *Aryan* or a *Non-Aryan* community is a question on which there is no unanimity. Risley held the view that the Marathas were not *Aryans*: and he rested his conclusions mostly on anthropometric measurements. Others have challenged this view and concluded that the Marathas are *Aryans* and have sought to meet the anthropometric objections of Risley by the argument that there were two waves of the *Aryan* invaders and the Marathas belonged to the Second. That is the reason why their anthropometric measurements do not tally with those taken as standard by Risley. The second hypothesis seems to derive some support from the fact that in ancient times Maharashtra was called '*Ariake*' on the ground that the *Aryans* formed the predominant population and also because in the Karnatak the Maratha is still called '*Arer Mated*' (The *Aryan* Man).

Be that as it may, there is no question that the Mahars are not an aboriginal people. In addition to what has been stated in support

of this proposition there are other land-marks and survivals which can be relied upon in support of this view. The first thing to which attention must be drawn is the fact that a great number of the '*Kul*' which indicate the status of a Rajput are also to be found among the Mahars. In the quarrels that have taken place between the Brahmins on the one hand and the Marathas on the other on the issue whether the latter were *Kshatriyas* or not, the test sought to be applied was whether the '*Kul*' of the claimant was one of the 96 '*Kuls*' which were admittedly belonged to the Rajputs in whose status as *Kshatriyas* was beyond question. Now if this test was applied to the Mahars, there could be no question that the Mahars would have to be pronounced as belonging originally to the Rajput that is to say to the *Kshatriya* class. It is suggested that the Mahars have been appropriating the '*Kuls*' of the Rajputs since very recently with the idea of improving their social standing. That evidently is a mistake. There is a long tradition among the Mahars that they belong to what is called the '*Somavansh*' which is one of the two branches of the *Kshatriyas*, that the Mahars have had these '*gotras*' from long past and have not appropriated to them in recent times is clear from the fact that as long ago as the Court of Enquiry held by the Brahmins into the status of the last Maratha King of Satara, namely Pratapsing whom the Brahmins refused to recognise as a *Kshatriya*. One party of the Brahmins who favoured the side of Pratapsing contended that as the Bhonsale *Kul* was one of the 96 *Kuls* of the Rajputs, and as the Rajputs were recognised as *Kshatriyas*, Pratapsing must be propounded as a *Kshatriya*. The other side in reply to this contention propounded a conundrum. It contended that if that argument was sound, all the Mahars would have to be pronounced as *Kshatriya* because they too had '*Kuls*' like those of the Rajputs. Apart from the validity of the view as a test, the fact remains that the *Kuls* which the Mahars have appropriated is no new phenomenon. This is one consideration in support of the view that the Mahars are not aboriginals.

The second consideration in support of this view is the word of salutation which is peculiar to the Mahars. The word of salutation used by the Mahars is *Johar*. This word is undoubtedly a corrupt form of the Sanskrit word '*Yoddhar*'. It is well-known that

in ancient Vedic times the Brahmins and the *Kshatriyas* had adopted separate words of salutation. The Brahmins said 'Namaskar': the *Kshatriyas* said 'Yoddhar'. It is difficult to conceive that the Mahars should have been allowed to use the term 'Yoddhar' as a word of salute if they were a body of low class ; or if they were aboriginals particularly because the word of salute among the Chamars and the Mangs is quite a different word having not the remotest connection with the status of the *Kshatriya*. The Mangs used the word 'Furman' which seems to be a corruption of the word 'Farman' meaning 'command'. The Chamars used the word 'Duffarao' a word of which I am unable to give the derivative : but the fact remains that only the Mahar Community uses as its word of salutation the word 'Johar' which as I have stated above was a word which was in exclusive use by the *Kshatriyas* as a word of salutation. There is no doubt that the Marathas too at one time used the term 'Johar' as a word of salutation. It was in vogue during apart of Shivaji's rule; and even Shivaji in the one and the only letter admitted to have been signed by him in his own hand and addressed to Maloji Ghorpade has used the word 'Johar' as the word of salutation. It is well-known that the Marathas since after Shivaji began to use 'Ram Ram' in place of 'Johar' as a word of salutation. It is curious that the Mahars did not follow suit. Why the Mahars continued to use the word 'Johar' even when the Marathas had given it out and why were they allowed by the State to continue 'Johar' when the State enforced 'Ram Ram' on all others, are questions which require some elucidation. But the fact remains that 'Johar' is indicative of the status of a *Kshatriya*.

There is one other matter to which attention must be drawn because it militates against the view which I am supporting namely that the Mahars are not aboriginals and that they really belonged to the Maratha community and at one time were reckoned as *Kshatriyas*. The fact is the custom prevalent among the Mahars of burying the dead body when as a matter of theory and practice the Marathas and the *Kshatriyas* have the custom of burning the dead. The existence of this custom of burying the dead must be admitted but to admit the existence of the custom is not to admit the

form of the conclusion that is sought to be derived from it. In the first place, there are indications that this custom of burying the dead is not original. But the original custom among the Mahars was to burn the dead seems to be supported by the fact that even though the Mahars bury the dead they still carry with them to the cemetery cinders and burning coal in an earthen pot along with the corpse.

There must have been some purpose for such an act and there could be no conceivable purpose except to use the fire for burning the dead. Why the custom of burning the dead gave place among the Mahars to the custom of burying the dead, it is difficult to give a precise reason. But it seems that the burying of the dead was a custom which was enforced upon the Mahars at some later date when the Mahars had become fallen in the status and classed as Untouchables. Considerable support can be found for this view from what the *Padma-Puran* contains. It is stated in the *Padma-Puran* that certain communities were prevented from burning their dead because burning the dead was a privilege of the three regenerate classes. If this is correct then the custom of burying the dead could not outweigh the overwhelming evidence which goes to show that the Mahars are not aboriginals and they might as well have been in times past part of the Marathas by race *and Kshatriyas* by status.

II

Why do they live outside the Village ?

It is notorious that the Mahars live outside the village. This is a fact which it is difficult to sense at any rate for foreigners for the reason that the village is generally built on an open site without any indication of its boundaries. But two things demonstrate incontrovertibly that the Mahars are reckoned as being outside the village. Every villager makes a distinction between the village as such and the *Maharwada* meaning thereby that the *Mahar-Wada*, that is to say the settlement of the Mahars is not within what is meant by the village. A more ocular demonstration is afforded wherever village has its wall. Wherever a village has had a well known in vernacular as '*Gavkus*' it will be noticed that the settlement of the Mahars is always outside the wall. Now this fact read in the light of what has been said in this paper in connection

with the first question gives considerable significance to the second question. If the Mahars are not an aboriginals race why are they treated as the reject of the society, and made to live outside the village community. The most natural answer which strikes one as being a true answer is what one finds in the injunctions contained in the code of Manu. Speaking of the *Chandal*, Manu lays down that he should be compelled to live outside the boundary of a village. Generalising from what Manu has said about the *Chandal* it might be guessed that what was said by him of the *Chandals* was imposed upon all similar classes by the Hindu Rulers in all its rigour. On a deeper consideration I find that this cannot be the answer to the question raised. What Manu has stated is not so much the original command of the law-giver. What Manu has done in my judgment is to recognise what had happened as a result of the forces operating during the historical period and made the real his ideal because it suited the purpose he had in mind. The answer to the question must be looked for in quite a different direction. The direction in which a true answer can be found lies in my view in the field of study which relates to the period when a pastoral Community became a settled community. It must be a matter of common knowledge to all students of the growth of civilization that the form of the wealth of the community was the chief determining factor in determining the habits. The pastoral people never settled anywhere but lived a nomadic life migrating from place to place because their wealth consisted in sheep and cattle and the sheep and cattle moved from place to place those owned it also moved whenever their wealth carried them. A community which had learned the art of cultivating the land and valuing its produce gave up their nomadic life and settled at one place undoubtedly because their wealth consisted of immoveable property namely land. Now this process whereby nomadic life gave place to a settled life has been a long drawn out process : A process in which some roamed about and some were settling down. It must also be well known to students of early history of human civilization that all social life in those early days was organised into tribes and these tribes were often at war with one another. Now in the light of these considerations one must reach back to the beginning when communities or tribes began to cease to be nomadic and became settled and imagine what must be the

needs which they must have felt as the most supreme needs of the earth. Here was a tribe which had settled down and formed a settlement now spoken of as village. It is possessed of gray com. It is possessed of sheep and cattle. On the other hand, it is surrounded by tribes which are nomadic and which are casting covetous eyes on the grain and the cows and the sheep which it owns. Obviously the first and the foremost question to such a settled tribe would be to protect itself against the raids and invasions of the nomadic tribes. How could they protect themselves? How could they provide this protection? Obviously they themselves cannot engage in constant warfare whether defensive or offensive for the protection either of their corn or of their cattle. For their energy is all absorbed in the pursuit of agriculture, an occupation to which they are new and for which they have to depend upon their own manual labour. The only way they could protect themselves is to look to their tribal chief. But how could the tribal chief protect his tribe which is settled and engaged in tilling the soil assiduously that it can find neither time nor men from its own who would take up arms on its behalf. The tribal chief must, therefore, look to some other source for raising a force to act under his command in defence of his tribe against the invasions of the nomads. From what quarters can the tribal chief secure recruits for his defence force. Obviously from one source. Here not very far there are tribal wars going on. One tribe waging a war against another tribe. In this warfare a tribe is routed and the men belonging to one tribe are broken up by defeat and parties of them small disheartened and fearful of their own safety are moving about in search of a safe place. How excellent would it be both for the chief of the settled tribe and the broken men of a defeated tribe if destiny would bring them together. The chief of the settled tribe would get the force he needs to protect his tribe without disturbing the occupation of the tribe. The men of the broken tribe would get an assured subsistence in return for service to the village community and also get the chieftain's protection. But having got the men from the broken tribe next question for the tribal chief to consider is where to settle these men. They could not be allowed to settle in the midst of the settled community because they belonged to a different tribe, and were not kindred. Only kindred could live within the settlement of the tribe.

Obviously the only way by which the chieftain could settle the broken men of another tribe whom he needs as a force to be employed in defence of the settled community was to settle them beyond the limits of the settlements made by his tribes. This is the process which alone can explain in my judgment why the Mahars live outside the limits of the village. The Mahars are broken men of tribes which in primitive times were warring with one another. They were taken hold of by the chief of the settled community namely the Patil of the village and were allowed to settle on the confines of his village. They did for him the duty of watch and ward, and were given in return certain sites. There is nothing strange in the Mahars living outside the village limits. There is nothing in that fact which can signify that they belonged to a lower status and that on that account they were made to live outside the village limits, that they were brought to the village by the village headman for the defence of his community and that they were made to live outside their village limits not because they were of a low status but because they belonged to another tribe is a conclusion which can be supported by reference to what has happened in Wales or Ireland. A study of the Brehon Laws of Ireland which gives the tribal organisation of the Irish discloses that the Irish too had their village community which was a settled community and on the borders of the settlement of the community there lived a body of people who were known as Boairs. The Boairs were remnants of a broken tribe which were brought by the village chieftain for service under him and in the interest of the protection of the community. Exactly the same state of affairs existed in the Wales villages known as Gwelleys. Every Gwelley had a body of strangers settled on his confines. They were called Alltud. They too were parts of a broken tribe brought by the chieftain of the Gwelley for the protection of the Gwelley. This is in my judgement the only satisfactory answer to the question. The question, however, remains as to why the Mahars continued to live as a separate community when in Ireland and in Wales the Alltuds and the Boairs in course of time ceased to remain distinct communities, and became absorbed in the general mass of the village population. The answer to this question is not difficult. It is that, it was the development of the system of caste and Untouchability which has prevented this fusion. But this of course raises by anticipation the third and the last question which is raised for discussion in this paper.

III

Why are the Mahars classed as Untouchable ?

The origin of Untouchability is to be sought in the struggles of Brahminism against Buddhism. This is a strange answer to the question but there is no doubt that it is the true answer. In order to make matters clear it is necessary to explain the principles for which Buddhism stood. It is unnecessary to go into all the details. It would be sufficient to state that one of the things which Buddha opposed most strenuously was *Yadnya* which was the chief and principal form of religion of the *Aryans*. The *Yadnya* involved the sacrifice of the cow.

The cow was the most important animal in the *Aryan* economy. The whole system of agriculture depended upon the cow. The cow gave milk which formed the chief sustenance of the people and the cow gave birth to bullocks which served as animals necessary for the cultivation of the land. Although the Buddha's objections to the *Yadnya* were based on philosophical grounds the common mass of the people whose intellect could not travel beyond the realities of life gathered round the banner of Buddhism because they could see that it was intended to save the cow from the incessant slaughter to which that animal was subjected by the Brahmins for sacrificial purposes. The cow, therefore, became at first an object of special consideration and lastly of veneration. The Brahmins whose supremacy was seriously jeopardised by the people refusing to consent to the sacrifice of the cow had to devise some means whereby they could win back the heart of the masses who had gone over to Buddhism. How did the Brahmins do this ? The reverence of the cow created by the Buddhist religion had gone so deep down into the minds of the people that it was impossible for the Brahmins to do anything else to do except to give up their *Yadnya* and begin instead to reverence and worship the cow as the Buddhists did. But that was not enough. The Brahmins in their struggles against Buddhism were not actuated by any pious motive of religious consideration. They were actuated by a purely political motive namely to regain the power and prestige they possessed over the masses and which had been transferred to the Buddhist *Bhikkhus*. They knew that if they were to gain any ascendancy over the Buddhist, they must go a step further

than the Buddhists had gone, and they did go a step further, and proclaimed that not only they shall kill the cow but they shall not kill any animals or destroy any living creature. The origin of the vegetarianism prevalent among the Brahmins is to be found in the strategical move which the Brahmins of the past took as a means of out-bidding the Buddhists.

Along with this, one other thing must be borne in mind. Before the Buddhist times and upto the period of Asoka beef was a food common to all classes, the *Brahmins*, the *Kshatriyas*, the *Vaishyas* and the *Shudras*. There is nothing repugnant in that. The cow was just an animal as the sheep or the goat or the deer was. Consequently, although the population was divided into four classes, the four classes did not differ in the matter of their food, and particularly all ate beef. The only difference probably was that some ate meat of animals that were slaughtered. This was possible for those who could afford to buy. The rest who were poor were used to eat the flesh of dead animals either because the well-to-do did not care to use it as food. It is quite conceivable also that the village chieftain gave the carcasses of dead cows and dead animals to the men belonging to the broken tribes who had settled on the confines of the village by way of remuneration for the services which they rendered to the settled community. Without doing any violence to truth, one could say that, before the Asoka period so, far as the eating of the cow's flesh was concerned, there was no difference whatsoever. All ate cow's meat. The only difference that existed was this namely that the village people ate slaughtered meat while those living outside the village ate the flesh of the dead cow. This difference must be noted, it had no religious or social significance. It was just the difference of the rich and the poor connotation. After the Buddhist times and especially in the period of Asoka an important change takes place. Cow-killing was either given up voluntarily or was stopped by the State. The result was a sharp difference arose. The villages ceased to eat beef because they lived on slaughtered meat and as the slaughter being stopped they ceased to eat beef. The broken tribe-men who lived on the border continued to eat the flesh of the dead cow. It was unnecessary to prohibit them because it did not involve the *Himsa* of the cow. Now, this division namely those who did not eat beef at all and

those who did was not a mere economic difference. It was a difference which gave rise to religious considerations. The killing of the cow had become a notion which from the point of view of religion has become repugnant. And a class which dealt with the dead cow also became a repugnant class. Untouchability has its origin in this notion of repugnance. And that notion of repugnance is based upon the reverence or irreverence to the cow. The Brahmins who out of consideration of their own self-interest agreed to reverence the cow and worship it. It went so far as to treat any class which had anything to do with the cow in a manner incompatible with reverence to the cow, Untouchable are not worthy of association.

That, this is the origin of Untouchability and that this is the reason why Mahars have come to be regarded as Untouchables can be seen if any one who cares to probe into the subject and to find out what are the special pursuits of these communities in India who have misfortune of being treated as Untouchable communities. An enquiry into the subject would show that all-over India the Untouchables perform certain duties which are common to them. These duties relate to the carrying of the dead cow, skinning the carcass, eating the flesh, selling the bones etc. There is no exception to this proposition. It applies in all cases and to all provinces. Why there should be such close association between the dead cow and Untouchability? Why do the two go together? My answer is they go together because one is the cause of the other. Untouchability has arisen out of the repugnance of the Hindu community, which as a result of Buddhism developed a reverence of the cow, towards those who have not ceased to eat the cow. The Mahars had not ceased to eat the dead cow and consequently became the object and victims of this repugnance.

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The three questions propounded in this paper have now been answered. There, however, remains one more question and it is this : Why were the Mahars called Mahars ?

Many have attempted to give a definition but of all the definitions the one given by Doctor Bhandarkar seems to be the correct one. According to Dr. Bhandarkar, the word Mahar is a

corruption of the word *Mrut* Ahar-those who live on dead meat. It accords with what has been stated above in discussing the question of the origin of Untouchability. But in this connection there arise two other subsidiary questions. One is why was this particular feature of the Mahars, life taken as a basis for so designating them. The answer to this has already been given but it may be summarised here because it goes to strengthen the correctness of the derivation of the term Mahar. As I have already said the eating of the cow's flesh was at one time so universal that nobody ever cared to note the fact. Even when some ate slaughtered meat and some ate dead meat the difference had only economic significance but no religious or social significance. But when all had given up eating cow's meat those who continued to eat presented a difference which was noticeable to the naked eye and significant to the religious mind. It is, therefore, natural that the difference so obvious and so significant should have been made by the rest of the population a basis of designating that class. But this derivation of the term Mahar creates a difficulty which must be grappled with. If this is the correct definition of the term and if these are the reasons why it came into vogue, it must have come into operation when the difference became sharp and significant. What was the name by which the Mahars were known in history before they began to be called as Mahars ? That the name Mahar is a new name admits of no doubt because it does not occur anywhere either in literature or history before the time of Dnyaneshwar. This, however, makes the other question more important namely what was the name by which they were called before the name, Mahar became their common name. Now, it is well-known that the Mahars are also called *Parwari*. This name has never gone out of name, and has continued to exist side by side with their name Mahar, although the name Mahar became more prominent. But in times past the name *Parwari* was more prominently used than the name Mahar. For instance, during the time of East India Company, Mahars were very largely employed in the Company's army as soldiers and officers. In their caste columns they were all designated as *Parwaris*. There is, therefore, no question that the Mahars had this their other name. And I venture to say that this was the name by which the Mahars were called before the name Mahar came into being.

That this name *Parwari* is a very ancient name is proved by the fact that it occurs in Ptolemy's. He uses the word '*Pauravardi*' which probably is a misspelling or mispronunciation of the word *Parwari**. What does the word *Parwari* mean? It is, of course, a difficult question to answer. For all that one knows it means dependence which is the root meaning of the word '*Pariwar*' of which '*Parwari*' appears to be corruption. The broken tribes even undoubtedly dependent for their means of livelihood upon the village community and the village community might very appropriately designated by the descriptive name '*Parwari*' those broken tribe men who were strangers to the community but were dependent upon it. It might be mentioned here that the term '*Parwari*' which was in vogue was not confined to what is known as the Mahar community. It was used in a general sense. As there is documentary evidence to show that at any rate it included also the community which is now known as the Mang community. The term '*Parwari*', therefore, seems to have been applied to all men who came and settled as strangers to the village community. Not only the term '*Parwari*' is a composite term but the term Mahar is also a composite term and does not connote a common origin. The Mahar community appears to be composite community and includes within it a strata which is high in origin and a strata which is low in origin. This is indicated by the different '*Kuls*' of the Mahars. Those whose '*Kuls*' fall within the 96 belong to the higher strata, those whose '*Kuls*' do not fall within them fall in the lower strata. But a common name Mahar which has been in existence for the last so many hundred years has produced in them a consciousness of kind which has destroyed any notions of high or low. But it is just as well for students of ethnology that what is now known as Mahar community is in its origin a conglomeration of broken parts of different tribes who had nothing in common except that they were the '*Parwaris*', that is, the dependents of the village community.

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*The word '*Parwari*' has been used in a Government letter of state of Baroda also. For the same see Appendix No. VII on Page No. 472 in Part 1 of this Volume.—Editors.