

GREAT FIGHT

“The new year i.e. 1st January 1927, opened with a meeting at the Koregaon War Memorial held by the Depressed Classes. This year prominent leaders of the Depressed Classes attended the ceremony.

Dr. B. R. Ambedkar addressed the meeting at the Memorial and told the audience that hundreds of fighters from their community had fought on the side of the Britishers who ungratefully later dubbed them a non-military community. Since the caste Hindus treated them as Untouchables and a despicable lot, they had no means of livelihood, and in the last resort they joined the British forces. In the end, he asked his people to agitate against this policy and compel Government to remove the ban on their military career.”¹

Importance Of The Koregaon War Memorial

However, the entry of Untouchables in the British army in the past (especially Bombay Army) gave Untouchables an opportunity to prove their bravery in so many battlegrounds within and outside the country, that the British Officers showered praise on them.

“Gen. Malcolm praised the Bombay Officers and Sepoys for their fidelity. Writing to the Secretary of the Board of Directors in 1816, Gen. Malcolm confirmed that the Bombay Army was composed of all classes and all religions like Hindus, Muslims, Jews, and Christians. Among the Hindus of Maharashtra, the Parwaris (Mahars) were more numerous than the Rajputs and some other higher castes. These Parwaris hailed from the south coast of Bombay. Much praise was showered on the Mahar Sepoys of the Bombay Army who endured the rigours of difficult marches when rations were low and disease was high among men and animals. Whether they were charging ahead or were besieged or

¹ Keer, P. 69.

taken prisoner-of-war, whether they were storming fortresses or making tactical withdrawals, they always stood steadfast by their officers and comrades, never letting down the honour of their Regiments. The crowning glory of the Mahars was achieved on the New Year Day of 1818 on the hot and parched battlefield of Koregaon beside the bank of the rivers Bhima. A small force of 500 men of the 2nd Battalion 1st Regiment Bombay Native Infantry together with 250 men of the Poona Irregular Horse and two six-pounder guns with 24 European gunners of the Madras Artillery, under the command of Capt. F. F. Staunton, fought without rest or respite, food or water, continuously for twelve hours against a large force of 20,000 horses and 8,000 Infantry of Peshwa Baji Rao II who was threatening the British garrisons at Kirkee and Poona.

Capt. Staunton's detachment had been rushed from Sirur on the evening of December 31 to held the Poona garrison. Marching throughout the night, covering a distance of about 27 miles, the detachment had arrived at Koregaon on the morning of 1st January 1818 to witness a frightening array of the famous Maratha Horse. Capt. Staunton had hardly prepared his defences when three detachments of the Peshwa's Infantry, each about 600 strong, had advanced simultaneously from three directions. They were supported by two guns and the advance was covered by a continuous barrage of rockets. In spite of the gallant efforts of the Poona Irregular Horse, the entire British force at Koregaon was encircled by the Maratha Cavalry and Infantry and all accesses to the river were cut off. The assaulting parties came in force and pushed their way into the heart of the village seizing some strong and commanding positions from which it was impossible to dislodge them. There was severe hand-to-hand fighting for each house, hut, and street, and the British were suffering heavy losses. But they would not give up and the Indian Sepoys, many Mahars, held on doggedly, fighting tenaciously and with magnificent courage. Capt. Staunton asked his men to fight to the last man and the last bullet. The Mahars showed tremendous intrepidity and continued to battle with the utmost

bravery against hopeless odds. As the sun set the British found themselves in a desperate situation. The Maratha Army, led by their able general Gokhle, was dominating the British on all sides. Fortunately, the nightfall brought some relief to the British and the attacks of the Maratha forces relaxed in vigour. Then, just one of the unaccountable chances of war changed the course of events. It was difficult to say why the Peshwa's forces ceased firing by 9 o' clock at night and withdrew from Koregaon when victory was within their reach. Twelve men of the Madras Artillery and fifty men of 2/1st Regiment Bombay Native Infantry as also three British Officers were killed in action. One hundred and thirteen men and two British Officers were wounded. Of the men of the 2/1st Regiment Bombay Native Infantry who fell in action, 22 were Mahars or Parwaris (identified by their names ending with "nak"), *16 were Marathas, 8 were Rajputs, two were Muslims, and one or two were probably Indian Jews.

This action of "heroic valour and enduring fortitude" displaying "disciplined intrepidity" and "devoted courage and admirable constancy"¹ won imperishable renown for the Mahar soldier. It has been recorded that "it is hard to say who has the greater glory, the Indian soldiers themselves, or the British Officers, who had been able to ensure and command such faith and such staunch and amazing loyalty"² (Many of the Indian soldiers were Mahars.)

*Names of martyred Mahar : 1 Somnak Kamalnak Naik, 2 Ramnak Yemnak Naik, 3 Godnak Kothanak, 4 Ramnak Yeshak, 5 Bhognak Harnak, 6 Ambanak Kananak, 7 Gannak Balnak, 8 Balnak Kondnak, 9 Rupnak Lakhnak, 10 Wapnak Ramnak, 11 Vitnak Dhamnak, 12 Ragnak Gannak, 13 Wapnak Harnak, 14 Rainak Wannak, 15 Gajnak Dharmanak, 16 Deonak Aannak, 17 Gopalnak Balnak, 18 Harnak Hirnak, 19 Jetnak Dhainak, 20 Gannak Lakhnak

Names of Injured Mahar : 21 Jananak Hirnak, 22 Bhiknak Ratannak, 23 Ratannak Dhannak. (Ref. Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkaranche Bahishkrit Bhartatil Agralekh, (Marathi) Editor Ratnakar Ganvir, P. 247.)

¹. Brigadier-General Lionell Smith's report to the Resident at Poona, the General Orders of the C-in-C of the Army of the Deccan and the Governor-General of India, and the Despatch of the Court of Directors of the East India Company.

². Maj. J. T. Gorman, *Historical Record of the Second Battalion Fourth Bombay Grenadiers, 1796-1933*.

Soon, the immense importance of the Koregaon action was realized. It was decided to raise an obelisk, 65 feet high, standing on a stone platform about 32 square feet, on the spot onto which the first shot was fired at Koregaon.¹ The foundation-stone of this monument was laid on 26th March 1821. The Column was erected to commemorate the valour of the force. To perpetuate the memory of the brave troops “to whose heroic firmness and devotion it owes the glory of that day” it was decided to inscribe the names of the killed and the wounded on the monument. A special medal was issued in 1851 inscribed “To the Army of India” and two clasps of the medal commemorated “Kirkee” and “Koregaon.”²

The Mahars continued to participate in the operations of the Bombay Army and give proof of their redoubtable courage and undeflecting devotion to duty. They fought gallant battles and won renown for their valour at Kathiawar (1826), Multan and Gujarat (1849), and Kandahar (1880). The Bombay Army took part in the First and the Second Afghan Wars, the Battle of Meeanee (1843), and in the Persian War of 1856-57.³ Soldiers of the Bombay Army went to China (1860), Aden (1865), and Abyssinia (1867), Gen. Sir Charles Napier of Magdala who never forgot the significant contribution that the 25th Bombay Native Infantry made, under his command, to the conquest of Sind was, for ever, praising the Bombay soldier: “I love the Bombay Army most. I never think of its Sepoys without admiration.” The Mahars in the Bombay Army were moving from place to place leaving imprints of their heroism on various battlefields,

¹. Lt.-Col. H. E. Kenyon, “The Battle of Koregaon”, *United Services Institute Journal*, 1931.

². This was the first Indian medal issued by the British for the Armies in India of the East India Company.

³. It was during the Persian War that the first Victoria Cross of the Indian Army was won by Capt. J. A. Wood of the 20th Bombay Native Infantry (120th Rajputana Rifles). Subedar-Major Mohammad Shareef and Sepoy Bheer Bhut, both of the 20th Bombay Native Infantry, were also recommended for the award but it was not given to them as Indian soldiers were not entitled, till October 1911, to receive the Victoria Cross.

far and near. During the Second Afghan War (1878-1895) a Mahar soldier again won high renown for his outstanding bravery which recalled the intrepidity, tenacity, and dauntlessness of the Mahars at Koregaon. Sep. Sonnak Tannak gave proof of gallantry of the highest order, as is recorded on a tablet on the Waudby Road in Bombay. The inscription reads : “ This road is named after Major Sidney James Waudby who with Private Elahi Bux and Private Sonnak Tannak, all of the 19th Bombay Infantry, fell on the 16th April 1880, in defence of the Dabrai post in Afghanistan which, when warned that an attack in force was imminent, they refused to abandon and most gallantly held for three hours against three hundred of the enemy, many of whom were slain. Eventually, when all their ammunition was expended they dashed into the midst of their foes and died fighting. In honour of their heroism this tablet is placed by the Regiment. ” ¹

While describing the social status of Mahar community under the rule of the Peshwas prior to 1818, Dr. B. R. Ambedkar said, “ under the rule of the Peshwas in the Maratha country the Untouchable was not allowed to use the public streets if a Hindu was coming along lest he should pollute the Hindu by his shadow. The Untouchable was required to have a black thread either on his wrist or in his neck as a sign or a mark to prevent the Hindu from getting themselves polluted by his touch through mistake. In Poona, the capital of the Peshwa, the Untouchable was required to carry, strung from his waist, a broom to sweep away from behind the dust he treaded on lest a Hindu walking on the same should be polluted. In Poona, the Untouchable was required to carry an earthen pot, hung in his neck wherever he went, for holding his spit lest his spit falling on earth should pollute a Hindu who might un-knowingly happen to tread on it.”²

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¹: Forefront For Ever-The History of the Mahar Regiment, by V. Longer, Pp. 12-15.

²: Writings and Speeches Vol. 1, P. 39.