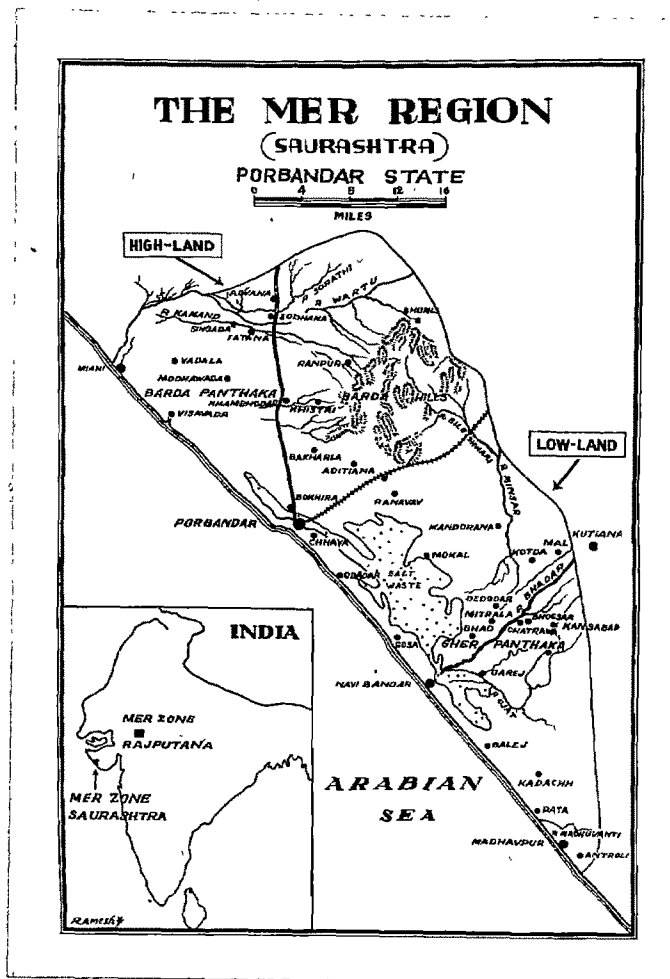


MAP - 1



## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTORY

#### I

The Mers live in what was formerly the territory of Porbandar State, in the western corner of the Sorath district of Saurashtra. The state has now been merged with Saurashtra which is the south-west part of the Indian Union.

The state of Porbandar lies between  $21^{\circ}-58'$  and  $20^{\circ}-14'$  north latitude, and  $69^{\circ}-28'$  and  $70^{\circ}-1'$  east longitude. Its maximum width is twenty four miles and length fifty eight miles along the western coast of Saurashtra. The area of the state is about 642.25 sq. miles and its total population according to the census of 1911 is 90,837; including that of the Mers.<sup>1</sup> In 1941 the Mers alone were 33,854,<sup>2</sup> but they now are supposed to number 75,000.

The Porbandar state is the sole focus of the population of the Mers. In the north it is bounded by Jamnagar state, in the south by the Arabian sea, and in the east by the state of Junagadh. This territory as a whole will be referred to, henceforth, in this work as the 'Mer region' because it is inhabited prominently by the Mers.

The Mer region can be described as a triangular plain sloping from the Barda Hills towards the sea, crossed over by the rivers Vartu, Minsar, Holar, Bilganga, Bhadar, Ozat and Madhuvanti. The swamps formed by rain-water lie towards the distant coastal areas on the either side of the city of Porbandar. The lower portions of these flood-areas, known as ghēr, are penetrated by the sea. The Modhwada ghēr lying on the west of Porbandar is about six miles long and four miles broad. It is watered by streamlets coming from Barda Hills and connected with the sea by Kindari creek. An adjoining swamp near the same creek is known as Gangajal ghēr. The swamp of Navibandar on the east of Porbandar is a vast low plain watered by the river-floods of Bhadar and Ozat. Another distant swamp of this side is that of Madhavpur. It is formed by the inundation of the river Madhuvanti.

A portion of low region south-east of Ranavav, isolated from the Barda Hills and left aside by the eastern swamp area, is a salt-waste turned into a little desert. It is known as Mokal desert.

The range of Barda Hills runs north-south, dividing the region into two halves, the western high-land known as Barda Panthaka and the eastern low-land known as Gher Panthaka respectively. Out of eleven peaks of the Barda Hills, four are principal, viz., the Malik or Abhapara, 1438 ft., the Kalo, 1148 ft., the Sath Bajadi, 1077 ft. and Ghelansar, 1048 ft. The lower area of the Abhapara peak is thickly wooded, while those of the other peaks are covered with sparse jungles.<sup>3</sup>

The reports of the geological explorations conducted on behalf of the Porbandar state, reveal that the Mer land is the formation of miliolite deposits submarine in origin and accumulated during the post-Tertiary times. The vast miliolite deposits of Aditiana heights leave their limit marks at the level of 300' above the sea.<sup>4</sup> The lime-stone known as the Porbandar stone is quarried in large quantity in the Barda Hills near Aditiana and is exported to distant places. The stone formed of shell-sand is also quarried from the coastal ridges and is used for building houses in this region.

The year is divided into three seasons, winter, summer and monsoon. Winter lasts from the middle of November to February, summer from March to the first half of June, and the monsoon from the second half of June to November. Some showers fall also in winter, sometime in the middle of January or in the beginning of March. This non-seasonal rain is known as māvathun in Saurashtra, and it sometimes

helps the growth of cotton crops.

The climate in this Mer-region is pleasant. The average rainfall brought by the south-west monsoon is 20". The thermometer reads a mean minimum of 54° in the month of January and in May the mean maximum is observed to rise upto 99°. The meteorological observatory shows 760 MB as average reading.

Various names are given to the different winds or atmospheres that blow and spread over this region during the course of a year. People call them avar, bhur, ghār and hēr.

Avar is the summer sea-breeze that blow during day time from south-west. direction. It contains moisture and is good for summer crops. Bhur is the dry land-breeze generally blowing at night from the north-east direction. Because of its dry character it is supposed to be harmful to millet and other crops. Ghār atmosphere is cloudy, damp and dull. It adversely affects <sup>the</sup> health of the people. Hēr is the name for the sable-silver rain-clouds that rise in the north-east horizon.

The vegetation in the high-land of Barda Panthaka is that of the deciduous jungle. The patches of grassy and shrubby waste land are noticed here and there. In the low-land area of Cher Panthaka the conditions are different.

Only the thorny shrubs grow there. However, people plant a variety of big and small trees in the villages.

The principal crops of Mer region are bājaro (*Holcus spicatus*, syn. *panicillaria spicata*), jawār (*Sorghum vulgare*), oil-seeds, i.e., ground-nuts, castor-oil-seeds and tal (*Archis hypogea*, *Ricinus communis* and *Sesamum indicum*), wheat (*Triticum aestivum*), rice (*Oryza sativa*), sugar-cane (*Saccharum officinarum*), gram (*Cicer arietinum*), banti (*Panicum flavidum*), araḍ (*Phaseolus radiatus*), cotton (*Panicum italicum*), chino (*Panicum sepicatum*), etc.<sup>5</sup> Some variety of vegetables and fruits are also grown for the local supply.

Crops are classified according to the methods of sowing. They are bārēt (i.e., waiting), chāsatio (i.e., furrowed) and pit (i.e., irrigated).

Bārēt crop is one that is sown before it rains. For the chāsatio (adj. of chās) crop the seeds are sown in the rain-soaked or irrigated fields furrowed for the purpose. It specially refers to the criss-cross grooves made in the field for sowing. Pit crop is raised by supplying water from the wells or the rivers.

The harvest seasons are similarly divided into

Plate I

Mer Elders:

A marked difference can be observed between the features of the two. The elder to the left comes from the village Delodar in the low-land while one to the right belongs to Vachhoda in the high-land. Vachhoda, April 1953.





Plate II

(a) A girl reaping: A Mer girl, from the village Khistri,  
reaps jawār crop in her paternal  
uncle's field. May, 1951.

(b) Youths irrigating water: A Mer and his servant (sāthi) draws  
water from the well (35 to 40 feet  
deep) with the help of the bullocks.  
Sodhana, March, 1953.

6-1



three groups, e.g., āgtar (i.e., early), pāchhtar (i.e., late) or winter, and the summer season.

In āgtar season, bājaro, tal, mag, arad, chāsatio-jawār and rice are grown. The season lasts from June to August (jyeshtha, ashadha and the first half of shrāvana). The crop is reaped in the month of October (kārtika). If the rain is heavy, it sweeps away the seeds from the fields and the crops fail.

The sowing time of pāchhtar or winter season falls from August to October (bhādrapada to ashwina). The crops of this season are generally chāsatio-wheat, gundari-jawār, gram, cotton, and sometimes, coriander, chilli, carrot, etc. Almost all the crops are reaped in the second half of January or February (dark half of Pushya or the bright half of māgha). Winter frost may spoil the cotton crop before it is ripened.

The summer crop is raised only where water is available in wells, or rivers, and where it is possible to supply such water to the fields by irrigation. The crops are chāsatio-jawār, rāl (mustard, *sinapis recemosa*), mēthi (*Trigonilla foenumgraecum*), rajako, kāng, chino and banti. The sowing time is November to January (the first half of mruga-rshi to that of pushya) and the harvest season falls in between the second half of May and the beginning of June (the month of jyeshtha).

The coastal zone of the Arabian sea gives fish like pomfret (*Stromateus cincrevs*), vichnio (*Buthus buthus*), palvo (*Mugil*, sp.), sole (*Heterostomata*), etc. Similarly, turtles (*Chelonia*), lisseymis (*Punctata granosa*) and oysters (*Ostrea cuculalata*) are abundantly found in the creeks.

The wild animals found in this area are the wolf, panther, fox, jackal, sambur, gazella, antelope, badger (*Mehs* sp.) and hare. Birds such as peacock, parrot, dove, hawk, owl and vulture are frequently seen. Out of the numerous migratory birds visiting this land in winter, heron is the principal one. These birds are found to settle temporarily on the banks of the rivers and the ponds. Domestic animals such as the cow, buffalo, horse, camel, sheep and goat are reared by the Mers and the Rabaris. Some Mers and others who are non-vegetarian, hunt hare, antelope, partridge and heron for food. They also eat fish and flesh of fowls, goats and sheep.

## II

The Mer region can be subdivided geographically into four parts. They are (1) the coastal ridge land, (2) the eastern low-land, (3) the western high-land and (4) the central hill area.

(1) The coastal ridge land is sandy and is made up

of uneven, sea-worn rocks of shell-sand formation. The ridge is broken at several places where the rivers and streamlets meet the ocean. There are very few patches of fertile soil that can favour the growth of vegetables and corn such as arad, mag, gram, wheat, chino, kāng, bājaro and jawār. These are raised by the water of the wells dug in the shell-sand rocks. The harvest seasons are early monsoon (āgtar), winter (pāchhtar) and summer. The yield of the crops is comparatively poor. The edible fish mentioned in the first section are not eaten freely as the majority of people prefer vegetarian diet.

The sea is shallow and approachable at various places where a few ports have been developed. Porbandar is, however, one of the important ports on the coast of Saurashtra peninsula. Miani, Navibandar and Madhavpur are others which harbour sail ships and steam-launches. In ancient times these ports were the teeming centres of local trade. The existence of some old mounds giving Roman pottery of early historic period reveals that there was commerce between this part of the east and the west. With all its navigable facilities, Porbandar imports various goods and timber, and exports a great quantity of sand-stone and other articles. It is a place where travellers from all parts of the world can land. It is also an important centre of salt manufacture.

The main population of Porbandar port is of the sea-faring people known by various names such as the sailors, Kharvas, the traders, Bhatia, Lohana and Khoja. Excepting a few Mers living in the city of Porbandar most of the people go to foreign countries for service, trade and business. Moreover, the Mers of Porbandar area have confined themselves to look after agriculture.

Some of the Mers living in Porbandar work in salt factories. However, the one cotton mill in the city has absorbed a good number of Mers. In fact the Mers of Porbandar rear milch cattle, grow vegetables and supply vegetables, fruits and milk to the citizens of Porbandar.

(2) The eastern low-land or Gher Panthaka, is an ever increasing deposit of alluvial soil brought by the rivers, Bhadar and Ozat. This low-land is supposed to be twelve feet lower than the surrounding area. The land is blocked up from the sea by the high ridges of shell-stone deposits stretching from Odadar to almost Madhavpur. The river Madhuvanti flows through this ridge near Pata and joins the sea. Similarly, the rivers Bhadar and Ozat meet the sea near the beach of Navibandar and Gosa. It is in fact, a very fertile land, 400 sq. miles in extent. It spreads upto Kutiana in the north, and covers the western part of Junagadh territory to the east.

The low-land seems to be an old shallow gulf, the sea waters from which have been pushed back centuries ago by the heavy floods of the rivers depositing here tons of eroded earth. This view is supplemented by the fact that the water in the wells dug up 20 ft. deep in this land tastes saltish. People, therefore, depend on the rain-waters stored up in the tanks. Those living near the banks of Bhadar use its water. With all this, the majority of the people experience an acute shortage of good water in summer.

For the major part of the monsoon season this area remains water-logged. The villages situated on the high mounds appear like tiny islands, cut off from one another. When floods of Bhadar and Ozat recede for the year, people set out for cultivation and sowing in the swamps then not under water.

The main crops of this area are jawār, cotton, rice, bājaro, and wheat. People have not much to look after the fertility of the soil. They sow and reap abundant crops in the two seasons, viz., early monsoon and winter. They pass their monsoon season in gambling and drinking kāvā and a local brew liquor that they prepare out of molasses. Now-a-days, the Government of Saurashtra has put a ban on the preparation and sale of any kind of intoxicating liquor.

The Mers who live here are dark, short and of medium built. They are extravagant, luxurious and easy-going.

The villages of this area are built on high but small mounds and the area of such a mound is sometimes increased by heaping debris on its outskirts. Most of the villages on this side have separate cattle-yards on the outskirts of the villages where fodder is stored. The houses are built of sand-stone brought inland with much difficulty and at a high transport cost. The walls are plastered with a mixture of cow-dung and clay, and roofed with local or mangalore tiles. An apartment of the house is used as cattle-byre mostly in the monsoon. There are about thirty five villages and a town, Madhavpur, in this division. Mer, Koli and Ahir who live here are agriculturists; while the Rabaris are cattle breeders.

(3) The western high-land or Barda Panthaka is about 400 sq. miles in extent. This region includes Ranavav, the well-known historical place Ghumali, Advana, Sodhana, Shingda, Liani, Visavada or Mul-Dwarka, etc. This area is a rugged uneven slope of Barda Hills and is watered by many streamlets and rivulets which flow into the sea near Kinderi creek. The water supplied by these streamlets is very scanty. Most of them dry up completely by the end of winter. People, therefore, depend on the well-water that is found 40' deep.



The river Vartu flowing to the extreme north meets the sea near the beach of Miani. It gives great advantage to the northern villages of Adwana, Sodhana, Shingda, etc. This is the only big river, worth the name, in the high-land.

The land is strewn over with low hillocks and with patches of barren and agricultural land. The land of kankar formation and of the sea-worn lime-stone is visible at various heights. The areas of agricultural produce differ in fertility. So manure is a necessity for reaping good harvest.

The early monsoon crop is raised with the help of rain water, whereas the winter and summer crops are raised by irrigating water from the wells. As people have to depend more on the system of small-scale irrigation, they have to work hard and remain engaged till next monsoon. During the times of irrigation, they are sometimes put in the worst plight when the subterranean currents dry up.

The Mers of the high-land are light skinned, tall, sturdy and well-built. They are hard-working, industrious and thrifty.

The villages of this area are not so thickly populated as those of the low-land. Most of the villages have some scope for expansion. The houses are built of lime-stone brought from the neighbouring places, Ranavav or Khistri.

The walls are plastered with dung and clay or with cement. The houses are roofed with local or mangalore tiles. Here two storeyed houses appear more in number than those in the low-land area. The houses built in the conventional fashion are provided with the inner cattle-byres which are sometimes made use of in the monsoon. But for the major part of the season, cattle are kept in the huts or houses built in the farms or in a separate cattle-enclosure. There are about thirty eight villages in this division, and a town, Ranavav.

Mers, Rabaris, Brahmins and Lohanas form the bulk of the population in this region. The Mers and most of the Baradai Brahmins subsist on agriculture. The Lohanas deal in merchandise and the Rabaris breed the cattle.

(4) The central hill-area is about 14 miles long and two miles broad. It is generally covered with sparse jungles which are the abodes of the animals such as panther, jackal and wolf, etc. Folk tales in this area speak also of the lions that lived here centuries ago.

The vegetation is variegated. Trees like rān and karmadā that bear yellow and scarlet fruits respectively, are well known. In the rifts of the valley there are sparkling brooks, fountains, pools, and pastures. The herdsmen of Rabari caste have established their clusters of huts known as nēs in these areas. In and after 1941 A.D.,

about twenty one nēs are reported to have existed here. Some of these nēs belong also to the Mers who live in <sup>the</sup> vicinity of the hills. People keep camels for transportation. They deal in butter, milk, ghee (clarified butter) and the cakes of dung used as fuel.

Except the central hilly area the whole of the Mer region has, by now, become a service area. Porbandar city is the junction of motor routes that join many neighbouring villages. There are also the long-route buses that daily run to and from the distant cities like Junagadha, Rajkot and Jamnagar. Porbandar is the terminus on the meter-gauge railway which connects the city with Jet<sup>l</sup>asar, <sup>★</sup>Veraval, Rajkot and the parts of western India.

### III

The history of Mers in India has remained still a matter of controversy.\* It is one of the historical puzzles of the epoch making immigrants of western India. The history of Mers like that of the Shakas, Kushanas, Huns, etc. is obscure. Yet we get some documentary evidences which throw valuable light on the great past of the Mers.

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\* This work deals mainly with the social structure of the Mers, therefore, it is not possible to treat the history of the Mers in adequate detail. Here I attempt to give a general sketch of Mer history as I find it in various references.

The early history of the Mers of Saurashtra is linked up with that of the Mer people living in Ajmer Merwara area in Rajputana.\* Saurashtra and Rajputana have provided shelters for peoples of different cultures and nationalities, who have moved in with every wave of migration from the north-west passes of India. The district of Peshawar has been rightly called "the transformer station of cultural currents from western and central Asia".<sup>1</sup> After settling in India, the immigrants have adopted themselves to the indigenous culture. The Mers represent one such wave of migrants, who entered India through the north-west passes and ultimately found a home in Rajputana and Saurashtra.

Many historians hold the opinion that Mers are the descendents of the central Asian people called Medes or Meds who were known in ancient times.<sup>2</sup> The author of the History of Persia refers also to the Medes, while he writes about the Aryans in Persia. He says, "It is believed that the Medes migrated into Persia from southern Russia, ..... and gradually occupied the western side of the Iranian plateau. De Morgan tells us that the Aryan invasion of Bactria took place before 25000 B.C. and that the Medes entered north-western Persia about 2000 B.C."<sup>3</sup>

This is possibly the earliest history of the group of early Aryans called Medes. In later history Medes

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\* See Map No.I.

were looked upon as inseparable from the Persian people. It has also been reported that their ancestors and those of the Hindus formed a single tribe in Central Asia. The religion of nature worship among the pastoral Medes was probably remodelled by Zoroaster, who is generally said to have lived in the seventh century B.C. The Assyrian dominion was weakened by the Medes who subjugated the surrounding states and founded the Median Empire which held its sway in that region till the beginning of the fifth century A.D.<sup>4</sup>

During this time the White Huns or Ephthalits caused a great stir in Central Asia. They attacked the Sasanids of Persian Empire and put the whole surrounding region in a "state of volcanic flux and turmoil".<sup>5</sup> The ancient kingdoms of Media and Georagea were panic-stricken at this; and consequently a historical migration of great events commenced. The "huge tidal wave of humanity"<sup>6</sup> glided towards southern and eastern parts of Central Asia. Thus the Medes of the Median empire and the Gujars of Georgea happened to enter India through north-west frontier.<sup>7</sup>

At this time western India was under the leadership of the Guptas. The Kushanas were out of the picture long before the Guptas came to rule. It seems that the kings of Gupta dynasty of north-west province drove away the migratory invaders, the Medes ( now known as Meds) and

the Gujars to the South. The southern region of the Indus valley was governed by the Jats "who flooded the country in the same way, some three centuries earlier". The Jats opposed these foreigners who overcome them. Thus the Meds settled to the east of the Indus river and the Gujars went further to the South. It is reported that of the two tribes, the Meds or Mers predominated in power and influenced wherever they went. The following account of Lient. Col. John Hoskyn throws additional light on the matter.<sup>8</sup>

"The name of the (Mihira) tribe is variously written as Maitraka (belonging to Mitra - Mitura), Mihira, Med or Mand. This varied nomenclature has led to some confusion, and historians have not always recognized the tribe under that various names by which they are mentioned, but the arguments of Pandit Bhagwanlal Indraji have placed it beyond reasonable doubt that the modern Mihiras or Mers of Marwara and Kathiawar (now Saurashtra) are indentical with the Maitrakas or Mihiras of great migration."

"Mihira in ancient language of Persia and Mitra in Sanskrit, are names of the Sun; and the names of Maitraka and Mihira by which Mers are known in the Hindu accounts of the great invasion, seem to connect this tribe in a -

particular manner with Sun-Worship".\*

Western India was governed by the Guptas from about 454 - 470 A.D. to the period of Skandagupta's reign. The next king Budhagupta was weak and consequently Gupta power began to decline. But it is not clear who ruled over Saurashtra and the neighbouring country, when Bhatarka occupied Valabhipur in eastern Saurashtra in 514 A.D. However, it is suggested that the Mers might have seized power from the weakening Guptas. This view is supported by the Valabhi copper plates which mention that the Mers were defeated and later on were pushed westward during the rule of Bhatarka.<sup>9</sup>

In the ninth century A.D., or earlier, the Jethvas, the leading chiefs of the Mers of Saurashtra, were driven out, perhaps by the Arabs from Sind.<sup>10</sup> They entered Saurashtra and settled in Morbi which already was, perhaps, a stronghold of the earlier Mers who were routed

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\* At present the Mers of Saurashtra do not worship Sun as their god, but the existence of some old temples, of later historical period, found distributed in Mer region induce us to think that their forefathers or the early occupants of this land (i.e. Chavdas) were Sun-worshippers.

It should be noted that a unique feature of Sun-worship is prevalent even today among the Hindus of Saurashtra. The Ranna Devi or Randal, the principal queen of god Sun, is propitiated symbolically by a family after the marriage of a son. Mers also worship Randal in a similar way.

by the "aitrakas of Valbhi.\* After establishing their seat in Morbi, the Jethvas spread their power in the south-western part of Saurashtra and proceeded towards the region of Barda Hills. They moved from Morbi to Nagnati (the modern Jamnagar), & occupied Bet Dwarka, the islands of Pirotan and Ajad.<sup>11</sup> They are supposed to have settled at Srinagar on the south-west coast. A prince of this royal family, Sal Kumar, founded his capital in Barda Hills, which is now known as Ghumali or Bhumbhali. The rule at Ghumali was the culmination of Jethva dynasty. It seems that they had not come into conflict with the Chavadas of Okha or Nagher.<sup>12</sup> During their stay in Ghumali the Jethvas were accompanied by the Mers whom they considered lower than themselves. The Mer chiefs have remained under the control of the Jethvas from this time. Fidelity of Mers has been inseparably linked up with the ruling Jethvas or Ranas of Porbandar.

In the tenth century the Chudasamas drove away the Jethvas from Ghumali, and instead of establishing here they went to Junagadh. It has also been said that Jam Bhamanioji captured Ghumali in 1313 and the Jethvas turned to Ranpur. After passing through further vicissitudes they went to Chhaya situated on the sea coast. Later on they moved their capital from Chhaya to Porbandar which the Jethvas acquired from the Mughal Government.<sup>13</sup>

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\* Appendix I presents another account of the origin, migration and the rule of the Jethvas of Ghumali.



## IV

Since 1313 A.D. onwards the Jadejas of Jamnagar repeatedly fought with the Jethvas living in Ranpur, and rendered them feeble day by day. But for the crusading sacrifices of various brave Mer chiefs, the power of Jethvas would have collapsed by the end of the sixteenth century. It is necessary to know the later history of the Porbandar state if we want to realise the paramount importance of the Mers as the voluntary army of the Jethvas of Porbandar. The following account makes the matter clear.

In 1573 A.D. Ramdeoji, a Jethva prince was deceitfully got rid of by Khengar, the brother of Jam Sataji of Jamnagar. Khengar snatched twelve more villages from the territory of the Jethvas and made Raval his stronghold for another conspiracy. At this time the Jethva ruler, Maharana Bhan was bed-ridden due to a severe attack of asthma. The queen Kalan-bai thought it wise to shift from Ranpur to Sodhana. Later on she migrated southward to a still safer place; but the sick king breathed his last somewhere near the beach of Bokhira. The queen was brave; she had with her her second son whom she determined to protect at all costs. When the Sumara Mers of the village Odadar knew the plight of the queen-mother (Rajmata) they invited her to live with them. These Odadara Mers (belonging to village Odadar)

offered her and the prince all honour and protection. In the meantime the 'Jams' took full advantage of the declining Jethva power and occupied the whole of the high-land. During this very critical situation the Mers promised the queen-mother that they would shed the last drop of their blood to help her regain the lost territory and to protect the Jethva prince.

The brave Mers of the high-land were called to gird up their loins and to fight the armies of Jamnagar. The haughty fighters gathered together and marched to Raval and besieged the fort where Jam Khengar and his army took refuge. The Mers and the Rabari soldiers took heavy toll of the soldiers of Jamnagar and butchered Khengar. The head of Khengar was presented to the queen Kalanbai. Later on a big army of Sisodia, Odedara, Keshwara and Rajshakha Mers and the Rabaris marched steadily and uprooted all the other strongholds of the Jams. Thus the Mers played a prominent part in liberating their region from the foreign yoke. It has been reported that about 2450 Mers sacrificed their lives in the victorious fight near the old site of Bharwada. The road-cess collector (dāni) of Jamnagar who was stationed at Bokhira, near Porbandar, was also driven away by the local Mers of Rajshakha lineage; and Chhaya was selected as a capital.

The queen-mother Kalanbai honoured the leaders

among the Mer and the Rabaris, presented to them costly gifts, and promised them hereditary possession of as many villages as they could tie festoons of victory (i.e., Vijaya torana) within a night's time. The Mer leaders who were present at this proclamation, walked to tie the festoons. The Mers could tie festoons to forty villages. While the Rabaris, who were advised to sleep over the matter, could get only three villages when the next morning they frantically walked to tie the festoons.

It is said that in the times of Maharana Sultanji, the Mer leaders of the forty villages were invited to a royal feast at Porbandar. At this time the Mers were greatly flattered and were induced to present their gifted (pasāyatān) villages on the birth of the prince. The gift to be given on the birth of a prince is known as Kunvar pachhēdo and it contrasts with the one given every year on the birth-day of the prince which is known as Kunvar nazar-ānah. Similarly, the Mers have given some villages and plots of land as gifts to Brahmins, Sadhus of some temples and to their lineage-bards or vahi-vanchā. Consequently only fourteen villages have now remained in the hands of the Mers.

Another encounter with the state of Jamnagar took place in 1729 A.D., when Maharana Sultanji was reigning.

Petty disputes, regarding the boundary lines of the neighbouring states, often took place. Once a court-herald (Bhāt) of Jamnagar wanted to see the newly built fort named Bhetalī at Vadala village. The fort which was made up of stone was unique in the sense that only three of its towers were visible when viewed from any direction.\* Mulu Meland, a Mer, who was the leader of the fort-guards, refused <sup>the</sup> permission to the bard of Jamnagar to enter it. The bard felt insulted at this and straightway went to the court of Jasa Jām and presented himself in the dress of a woman, signifying thereby his humiliated position. When the king knew that his court-herald was affronted by a mean fort-guard of Porbandar, he decided to take revenge. In the warfare that occurred, it has been said that the soldiers of Jamnagar used a strange device. They brought with them a huge wooden fort which could protect their soldiers. The soldiers living inside

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\* It is interesting to note here that the various forts built up in Mer villages do not enclose the village houses. On the contrary a fort is a part of a village site. A fort is generally built on a higher place and its entrance is kept towards the populated area. There is a storey above the entrance or the gate. It is from this highest place that the guard of the village was able to watch the surrounding area and detect the presence of the enemies. For defence purposes, the fort and the housing area of a village were, in the olden days, fenced by thorny bushes and thick shrubs. The aim of building such a fort was to save lives of the inhabitants from the surprise attacks of the gangsters, outlaws, etc. It was a place where people assembled in a group and fought the enemy hordes.

the fort were able to lift it and to make safe advances. The Mers fought bravely inspite of the war tactics played against them; and took<sup>a</sup>/heavy toll of the enemies. There are many historical events which prove that the Mers formed the volunteer army of the Jethvas.

In 1789 A.D., the same Mulu Meland of Vadala attacked Veraval port by sea. The port was under Aling Hati who was an enemy to some affinal relations of the Rana of Porbandar. Mulu fought bravely and defeated his enemies, but lost his right hand in the scuffle. The state recognized sacrifices of this brave Mer leader and honoured him by proposing to present him a iron hand as a substitute for the lost one.

In the year 1942, India launched a nation-wide agitation for freedom under the leadership of Mahatma Gandhi. The state of Porbandar joined hands with the British. The circumstances forced the state to take severe steps against the people who supported and conducted the agitation. During this critical time, the state sent messages to every Mer village and instigated the people not to co-operate with the 'Congress' workers. Many of the Mer leaders who were 'Congress' minded, could not understand what to do. However, many of them stood half-heartedly by the state. The Mer youths were recruited to form a volunteer army. Here it will be interesting to recall the past, the instance of

1873 A.D., when the state sought the help of the Mers in order to fight against the attacks of Jamnagar armies.

Thus the state of Porbandar has at various times realized the strategic importance of the Mer subject. Later on when India achieved independence and the state of Porbandar got merged with the state of Saurashtra, the Mers formed the army of Arzi Hukumat which uprooted the Muslim states and strongholds located in the Sorath district.

## V

In the olden days the main income of Porbandar was drawn from crop-share and other minor cesses levied upon the peasants. The crop-share is known as bhāg-batāi or vajē. The land was divided according to the different categories of land-holders who paid different amount of crop-share or cesses of different nature. The matter is discussed in the following account.

The land-holders called bhāyāt (i.e., brother) or pātidār (i.e., holders of plots, pāti, of land) are the agnates of the Ranas of Porbandar. They were given land for maintenance. There are eight villages and some plots of land granted to the bhāyāts. They enjoy full rights to collect crop-share from the peasants who till their land.

Categorically, they represent the class of Mer girāsdārs, i.e., the holders of the land gifted; and are also known as such. The political status and independence of the bhāyāts was higher than that of the Mer girāsdārs. The bhāyāts were independent in levying taxes and collecting crop-share from the peasants who cultivated their land. They used to charge occupancy price known as kasumbo or najarānāh for temporary lease of land. Thus their tenants known as ganotiās were tenants-at-will. Consequently, the ganotiā tenants had to suffer from victimization of the bhāyāts and had to evacuate their land totally or partially when the bhāyāts wanted them to do so. Most of the ganotiā peasants were Mers. At various times their masters forced them to offer free-labour (vēth), fire-wood, milk, vegetables, etc. Moreover, they had to pay marriage-gift (known as vadhāmanu) to a son or a daughter; and also consolation-gift (pot) after the death of a member of the master's family. Ganotiās paid  $\frac{1}{2}$  or  $\frac{1}{4}$  share of their total produce, and therefore this and other liabilities of petty but numerous taxations, contributed to their poverty.

The state of Porbandar did not benefit much from the income of these bhāyāts who paid only a salute-tax (salāmi-vēro), about Rs. 125/-, annually. Besides, the bhāyāts offered occasional gifts such as kunvar-pachhēdo, vadhāmanu, pot, etc., to the Ranas.

A majority of the Mer land-holders, other than girāsdārs and ganotiās, are known as rāvalā and they are as good as khālsā tenants of government land. Rāvalā like ganotiā peasants were tenants-at-will, but their position was sounder because they were not harrassed or evicted without reasonable cause. The plots of cultivated land were registered in the name of the occupants or of their forefathers. When it was necessary to divide land among the sons of a family, the matter was referred to the state, and the divided plots were registered under the names of the legitimate heirs. The plots were measured and recorded and the assessment was fixed according to the nature of the soil. The revenue per vighā land generally varied from twelve annas to more than a rupee.

It has already been mentioned that the Mer ancestors were given forty villages as gifts for their valour. But now they hold only sixteen villages as their own. In course of time, these Mer girāsdārs were recognized as hereditary service tenants and therefore called pasāyatā. The account of the conversion of the Mer girāsdārs into pasāyatā is very interesting. It explains how the Ranas of Porbandar gradually increased the weight of liabilities and decreased the independence of the high-land Mers.

Before 1884 A.D., the Mers of girāsdāri villages paid but a negligible amount by way of an yearly hearth-tax



(chulā-vēro), and an army-tax and an emergency-tax (lashkar kharājat and dhubak vēro) every three years. Besides this, the Mers had to offer free-labour (vēth) to the state. Subsequently these taxes were commuted and instead of them a lump-sum payment of about Rs.2/- (i.e., kori 32½)\* was levied as hearth-tax only.

In 1884-85 A.D., the Rajasthanik court set out to clear the disputes, between the state and the Mers, regarding revenue rights and other duties. At this time the Mers of pasāyatā villages raised strong objections against the hearth-tax. The Mers argued that in the olden days their fore-fathers had been autonomous, and the state had no right to levy taxes. But inspite of this they voluntarily accepted some liabilities in order to supplement the income of the state and strengthen its economic power. Now they experience that the taxes are unbearable. So they want to discard them totally. For instance, the effect of hearth-tax was becoming ruinous to the families having a small portion because it was levied per hearth. When the number of hearths in a family increased and the land decreased, it became much burdensome to each of the family divided. This problem was solved when the plots cultivated by a family were measured, and it was decided that a general levy of

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\* A kori was a silver punch-marked coin almost equivalent to four anna coin. The kori was one of the coins of currency in Saurashtra before and sometimes after the British rule.

annas 2 per vighā should be taken.\* The decision of the Rajasthanik court declared by John W. Watson, President and G.E. Hancock, Ag. President, is enumerated in sanction four of the charter of rights, i.e., hak patrak, 1884-85 A.D. The decision throws more light on the rights and duties of the Mers vis a vis the state. The state ruler is referred to as darbār in this hak patrak.

Remark and Decision:\*\*

"The Mers have been shown by ample proofs to be hereditary service tenants and that as such they enjoy their lands from generation to generation, subject to service, loyalty to the state, and payment of all rights and dues of Darbar's as detailed in this Hak Patraka. They amply prove that they have both mortgaged and permanently alienated their lands; but the alienation have been either (1) grants in Dharmada (charity), (2) sales within the clan, (3) sales at any low prices to religious classes or sales at ordinary prices to temples, (4) or sales to the Darbar. But no sales to ordinary persons have been proved. We think that in these four cases the unwritten consent of both the Darbar and the clan must be taken for granted. Restriction of such sales would certainly seem to be desirable in future.

\* "The usual local vighā is one-third of an acre, but it varies slightly; in Bhavnagar it is equal to two-fifths of an acre".1

\*\* This has been copied from the hak patrak of the village Khistri of the high-land where I spent two months in 1952. The village Khistri is one of the sixteen pasāyātā villages of the high-land.

In considering this question, we have taken into consideration the proofs shown in the similarly situated Mer villages. We declare these four model alienations proved, as well as the rights of mortgaging their lands, which has been proved by ample evidences. On the death of a Mehar without heirs, the Darbar have entirely failed to prove that such land revert to the Gadi (throne) and as they have also failed to prove any grant, we hold that such lands revert to the clan (Bhom) upon whom falls the responsibility of service collectively.... It is to be understood that where supplies have to be converged to any given spot, the man is converging them, receives rations for himself, and if he have a cart, food for his bullocks also. It is also to be understood that the Darbar cannot at any time depute a service beyond the village limits, a greater number than half the full grown men in the clan."

Besides this, many general rules as follows were made clear in the different hak patrakas of the pasāyatā villages of the Mers.

(1) It was decided that the Mers had to provide rations when the state officers, guests, surveyors, revenue collectors (mēhtā or talāti) visited a village along with their servants, police (sipāhi), etc.; and they also had to supply forage to their cattle, especially, horses. These charges were met with from the gām jahāmpā fund, i.e., the fund collected by depositing <sup>the</sup> income of a plot of land

reserved as a common property of a village. If an army was quartered for the safety of a village or for the surrounding area, the expenses were charged from the gām jahāmpā fund. The pay of the village police patel was similarly drawn from the same fund. The Mers were likewise duty-bound to pay yearly gifts called kunvar nazarānāh and the charges of store-keeper (kothari), cook (rasoyo), drummer (nagarachi), and mace-bearer (chobdār) of the Rana chiefs. When a new chief mounted the throne (gādi) Mers presented gādi nazarānāh at the coronation ceremony. All these dues were taken from the gām jahāmpā fund which lay under the joint control of the police patel and the village panchāyata. A Mer was bound to act as a guard and guide (choki-chākari) in his village, day and night, according the turn of a family. The escort and the guard services to the state officers were also demanded from the Mers. In addition to all these the state levied extra charges on the plantation of sugar-cane and on the preparation of molasses.

(2) The state passed some resolutions in order to safe-guard the discipline of the government. It was declared that if a Mer, or a group of them rebelled against the state or took part in or assisted directly robbery, theft, dacoity, etc. they were liable to punishment. The land - and other property of the guilty persons became, by law, the common property of the Mer clan (as it was described).

But if the clan as a whole should rebel, the entire property of the Mers might be confiscated by the state. In the cases of crimes committed by the individuals, the state declared punishment, or inflicted daily fine (known as mohsal) on the relatives or the family of the culprit till he came forward and surrendered.

(3) Rules regarding the attainment of the citizenship of the state and those pertaining to the crime of adultery were as follows. If a person desired to resettle in the Mer region after a long absence from the same, he had to seek permission of the state and pay about Rs. 31 (kori 125) for resuming his rights as a citizen. The state court imposed punishment under civil and criminal codes for the cases of adultery on the part of a Mer with a woman of other castes or tribes. The rules regarding adultery are in practice even to-day.

## VI

In the end I briefly survey the social, economic and political position of the Mers in the present circumstances. Until recently there was some difference in the social and economic position of the Mers of the high-land and the Mers of the low-land. In the olden days the Mers of the high-land held higher political status than those of

the low-land. They formed the volunteer army of the state of Porbandar. It should be recalled here that the Mers of the main four lineages (e.g., Keshwara, Odedara, Sisodia and Rajshakha) were known as the bhomia Mers. The term bhomia means the holders of land, and it refers to the high-land Mers, who for their military services, acquired many villages as gifts from the state of Porbandar. The high-land Mers (i.e., the bhomias) have served as ministers (divans) of the state; and they proudly claim to have provided queens to the rulers of Porbandar. For all these reasons the high-land Mers enjoy special rights and privileges befitting the original land-holders (mul-girāsdār) of the region. Though the high-land area is comparatively dry and full of waste-land, the position of the Mer peasants has remained better. It is their hardworking and industrious nature that help them in overcoming the difficulties when the rain is insufficient.

On the other side, the Mers of the low-land belong generally (with a few exceptions) to the ten lineages, other than those four lineages of the high-land Mers. As the Mers of the high-land are known as bhomia Mers, those of the low-land are ironically known as the khad Mer. The term khad means straw and so it suggests the ordinary position of the Mers of this area. They are not very famous for martial traits, and have but little reputation for friendship with the early rulers of Porbandar. Thus their social and

political status was inferior to that of the Mers of the high-land. However as the low-land is very fertile, the economic status of these Mers has always remained higher. They hold their lands on the terms of roytwari land-owners; and so they do not enjoy special privileges and concessions as the high-land Mers do. Notwithstanding these minor drawbacks, the Mers of the low-land are sought for matrimonial alliance by those of the high-land.

Since the emergence, in February 1948, of the state of Saurashtra, radical changes have been brought about in the revenue system.<sup>1</sup> The various small states and girāsdārs merged in the state of Saurashtra; and the merger helped the new government in generalizing the administrative policy regarding the land revenue system. First of all the government gave legal occupancy rights free of charge to khalsā or rāvalā cultivators. As a second step, crop-share system, wherever it existed, was abolished and instead of it a cash assessment system was introduced. The imposition of vēth and vēro, i.e., free labour and (emergency) tax were likewise discontinued. The cultivators were permanently freed from the obligations of intermediaries like bhāyāts and the holders of religious estates. These intermediaries worked between the state and the farmers; the farmers paid arbitrary and exorbitant taxes to their employers and the latter paid but a small amount to the state. But now the

local revenue officers i.e., māmlatdārs have been employed to exact revenue directly from the farmers.

Besides this, the Government of Saurashtra proclaimed an utopian slogan, "The land belongs to one who cultivates" (i.e., khēdē tēni jamin). The slogan was indeed a revolutionary step. It was codified into a law and so the land-less peasants who were cultivating the lands of their employers for the last many years were granted ownership of the same. The effect of land reform legislation in Saurashtra has become conducive to the economic upliftment of the peasant class; especially, the Mers of the high-land who were the tenants of the bhāyāt-girasdārs have received many advantages under the new law.

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