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# The Sultan as a servant of Brahmans? : tracing the peregrinations of an early modern legend

# The Sultan as a Servant of Brahmans? Tracing the Peregrinations of an Early Modern Legend [1]

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The Bahmani sultanate (1347-1527) was created as an outcome of a re-bellion against the Delhi's sultan instigated by the governors of the southern and western parts of the Tughluq dominions in India. The new sultanate became a powerful state for nearly two hundred years. The Bahmani sultanate, followed by its successor states (the most important of which were the sultanates of Bijapur, Ahmadnagar, and Golconda), enabled independence of the Deccan from the Northern Indian political formations for almost three hundred and fifty years. The Bahmani era saw several able rulers; high economic, military, and territorial growth; a high influx of immigrants from the Persianate world; as well as internal and ethnically tinged struggles among its nobles that eventually led to its decline.[2] As this article shows, the memory of the Bahmanis narratively transpires through many myths and fables. Some may also have been inspired by historical affairs like the death of the successful Bahmani minister Mahmud Gavan, which contributed to the decline of the kingdom, the sacralisation of sultan Ahmad Shah Wali, or the adoption of a reportedly Brahman ancestor of the post-Bahmani Nizam Shahs, Timma Bhat alias Hasan Bahri, by yet another Bahmani sultan.[3]

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2  For more on the Bahmanis, see in Haroon K. Sherwani, *The Bahmanis of the Deccan: An Objective Study*, Hyderabad: Saood Manzil 1953; and Richard M. Eaton, *A Social History of the Deccan: Eight Indian Lives*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2005.

3  Briefly but lucidly on Bahri, see Pushkar Sohoni, *The Architecture of a Deccan Sultanate: Courtly Practice and Royal Authority in Late Medieval India*, London: Ibn Tauris 2018, XXI, 236. On Gavan, see H. K. Sherwani, *The Bahmanis…*, 291-335. On Shah Ahmad Wali see Sara Mondini, "Architectural heritage and modern rituals: The

The first half of the 20th century witnessed a debate among historians[4] about the origin of sultan Alauddin Hasan Bahman Shah (d. 1358), the founder of the Bahmani sultanate. The cause of the debate was a legend recorded by Muhammad Qasim Ferishta (d. circa 1623), later reframed, and reproduced by other Indo-Persian historians[5] and mentioned in works on Bahmani history. Ferishta's story presented Alauddin Hasan as a servant of a Brahman-turned-minister called Gangu. After becoming the king, Alauddin, out of gratitude, is said to have adopted the Brahman's name, calling himself Hasan Gangu Bahmani, referring also to his patron's Brahman status (Bahmani, according to Ferishta, was the Deccani pronunciation of the word Brahmani). This narrative thus rendered the sultan's early life enigmatic and thought-provoking.

The uncertainty regarding Alauddin's origins coupled with the memory of Bahmani kings' power was creatively utilized not only in Indo-Persian but also in Marathi hagiographical and legendary writing. All of these have been instrumental in propagating what I call the Deccani Sultan and Brahman legend. Though Ferishta's rendering of it informed the debate of modern historians, it is more a concoction of different narrative strands than a single legend with a definite source. These narrative strands display different memories of Bahmani power symbolized through the persona of the king, but not necessarily Alauddin. The king's identity was constructed according to the contemporary political, social and/or religious goals of the legend's transmitters. While some authors, both Indo-Persian and Marathi, employed the Sultan and Brahman legend in an attempt to narrate the past, the Marathi hagiographers employed the legend within religious discourse. Historically, Alauddin's own self-representation, which reflected the new monarch's goal of securing an ancient pedigree, was that of Bahman Shah (not Bahmani), a descendant of the legendary Iranian king Bahman, son of Isfandiyar.[6] The phonetic similarity of the words Bahman

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Ahmad Shah Bahmani Mausoleum between old political concerns and new religious perceptions", in: Knut A. Jacobsen – Mikael Aktor – Kristina Myrvold (eds.), *Objects of worship in South Asian religions: Forms, practices and meanings*, London – New York (NY): Routledge 2015, 129-142.

4  E.g. Haroon K. Sherwani, Ganesh H. Khare, Rajaram V. Oturkar, Vishwanath K. Rajwade, Moulvi A. Wali, Saiyid Abdul Qadir Husaini, Major J. S. King, Sir Thomas W. Haig and recently an Iranian historian Mehrdard Shokoohy and a Marathi literary historian Bhimashankar Deshpande.

5  Particularly Rafiuddin Shirazi and Khafi Khan. I have not been able to access Khafi Khan's account because its translation is not available in English. However, Sir Wolseley Haig reported that Khafi Khan was merely repeating Ferishta's story. See Wolseley Haig, "Some Notes on the Bahmani Dynasty", *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal* 78, 1904, 1.

6  Saiyid Abdul Qadir Husaini, *Bahman Shāh. The Founder of the Bahmani Kingdom*, Calcutta: Firma K. L. Mukhopadhyay 1960.

and Brahman, however, also brought to the debate a 20th century political discourse that favored the dichotomy which divided India's past into Hindu and Muslim parts. Hence the idea of the sultan serving Brahman and adopting Brahman/Bahman as his royal name seemed not only a mystery to modern historians, but also undermined modern claims of religious-cum-identarian continuities that had captured the imagination of late colonial discourse in India.

In recent decades there has been an ongoing scholarly interest in the social history of Indian early modern textual production. Whether seen from the perspective of the interactions of texts with sociocultural realities that shaped the texts' content, form and circulation, or in the context of the competitive world of different social actors with their ideals and social opportunities, literati, such as the transmitters of the Sultan and Brahman legend, can be seen as a diverse yet skilfully competent group.[7] In a way, their history as agents of the written does not represent only the early modern and increasingly deeper involvement of state administration in rural regions, but also a space shared by the socially high-ranked producers and sharers of diverse ideas, from explaining skills in state administration to reflecting on the past, up to promulgating ethical behavior and religious ideals. All these areas of intellectual agency were also more often interconnected than not. Studying the Marathi writing manuals (*mestak*), Sumit Guha has discussed the connections between the social status of the different scribal groups at the Deccani sultanates and their ideological concerns, and Prachi Deshpande has shown the overlap between writers serving in the administrative apparatus of the sultanates and more religiously oriented writers, such as the Marathi holy man, *sant* Ramdas.[8]

It is in the social environment of these literati where the sharers of the Sultan and Brahman legend can be located and from where they drew materials informing their legends. In the early modern period this was an environment in which skills, knowledge and social capital mattered more

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7  Sheldon Pollock (ed.), *Literary Cultures in History: Reconstructions from South Asia*, Berkeley (CA): University of California Press 2003; Rosalind O'Hanlon – Christopher Minkowski, "What makes people who they are? Pandit networks and the problem of livelihoods in early modern Western India", *The Indian Economic and Social History Review* 45/3, 2008, 381-416; Muzaffar Alam – Sanjay Subrahmanyam, "The Making of a Munshi", *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 24/2, 2004, 61-72.

8  Sumit Guha, "Serving the barbarian to preserve the dharma: The ideology and training of a clerical elite in Peninsular India c. 1300 -1800", *The Indian Economic and Social History Review* 47/4, 2010, 497-525; Prachi Deshpande, "The writerly self: Literacy, discipline and codes of conduct in early modern western India", *The Indian Economic and Social History Review* 53/4, 2016, 449-471.

than religious identity, though it was not completely overlooked.[9] It was also an environment infused with social demands that enabled the struggle for improving and/or preserving one's social position as argued by Guha.[10] Recognizing the social embeddedness of writers, this article aims to discuss the socio-textual peregrinations of the Sultan and Brahman legend as found in Indo-Persian histories, Marathi *bakhars*[11] and hagiographies (*caritra*), and connect these three textual layers to the modern debate among 20th century historians. It aims to extend the context of the legend from the early modern world of the writer's social sensibilities to the more complex ideals of kingship and authority, in the promulgation of which the literati participated. Although they shared the craft of writers, they also displayed different motivations in promulgating the legend. These motivations were often informed not solely by the social position of the author, but also by the knowledge and ideals of kingship and socio-religious order that the authors espoused. These two aspects were often intertwined, given the king's role as a defender and keeper of the divinely declared order of social and religious matters. At the end, I will turn to the example of the latest 20th century rendition of the legend. Here, the Indo-Persian *bakhar* and *caritra* narratives merge into a creative promotion of a Maharashtrian religious group (*sampradāy*) with overtones of modern religious nationalism. The article, thus, both contrasts and connects early modern sensibilities and the modern search of the historical past, which bears repercussions for the past divided into its modernly imagined Hindu and Muslim parts.

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9  A good illustration of this point is the translation project of the Mughals. See Audrey Truschke, *Culture of Encounters: Sanskrit at the Mughal Court*, New Delhi: Allen Lane 2016; and Shankar Nair, *Translating Wisdom: Hindu-Muslim Intellectual Interactions in Early Modern South Asia*, Oakland (CA): University of California Press 2020.

10  S. Guha, "Serving the barbarian…".

11  As explained by Prachi Deshpande and Sumit Guha, the Marathi genre of *bakhar* (most probably from *khabar* – information and *akhbar* – newsletters), whose authors were preoccupied with narrating the past, developed as a combination of traditional storytelling with the exertion of bureaucratic power through inquest into local pasts and cases of legal disputes. Prachi Deshpande, *Creative Pasts: Historical Memory and Identity in Western India, 1700-1960*, New York (NY): Columbia University Press 2007, 19-39; and Sumit Guha, "Speaking Historically: The Changing Voices of Historical Narration in Western India, 1400-1900", *The American Historical Review* 109/4, 2004, 1084-1103. See also Raghunath V. Hervadkar, *A Forgotten Literature. Foundations of Marathi Chronicles*, Bombay: Popular Prakashan 1994.

### Hasan Gangu in Indo-Persian histories

It is not the goal of this article to resolve or discuss the ambiguities regarding Bahman Shah's origins. Some observations, however, may prove useful. Narrating the success of various political formations of medieval India, the Indo-Persian histories written in the royal milieu of various monarchs between the 14th and 17th centuries often mention sultan Alauddin Bahman Shah under the name Hasan Gangu.[12] To be clear, none of the pre-17th century Muslim historians who mention the king as Hasan Gangu relate the story of him being a servant of a Brahman. Only later historians do so. However, the association of the monarch's unusual name with the Sultan and Brahman legend has triggered modern debate on the sultan's origins more than the fact that there is hardly any connection between this story and the early accounts of the sultan's life.

In the *Futuhu's-Salatin*[13] (Victories of the Sultans), a rare work from Alauddin's era by the sultan's panegyrist Malik Abdul Isami (who died sometime after 1350), the future king is called Hasan (without the epithet Gangu) and Zafar Khan. The latter title, according to Isami, was an honorary title of sultan conferred on him by his predecessor, the rebel-king Nasiruddin Ismail. Intriguingly, Hasan, as a character in Isami's narrative – as a "scion of the house of Bahman" – appears in the narrative only towards the end of Isami's voluminous work.[14] Clearly, the panegyrist, apart from linking Hasan to Bahman, obscured the details of the origins of the sultan. Although Sherwani painstakingly tried to relate Hasan to the other rebels against Muhammad Tughluq's despotic rule – Ali Shah and his brothers – there is hardly anything in the *Futuh* that would suggest a fra-

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12  Ishtiyaq Ahmad Zilli (trans.), *Tarikh-i Firoz Shahi*, New Delhi: Primus Books 2015. *Tarikh-i Firoz Shahi* by Shams-i Siraj 'Afif; *Tarikh-i Mubarak Shahi* by Yahya bin Ahmad Sirhindi, *Tabaqat-i Akbari* by Nizamuddin Ahmad, *Muntakhab-ut-Tawarikh* by Al-Badaon, *Gulshan-i Ibrahimi* by Muhammad Qasim Ferishta, and *Tazkirat-ul Muluk* by Rafiuddin Shirazi. Except for the first and last, the English translations of all these works can be found at www.archive.org. Gangu's story translated from Shirazi's *Tazkirat-ul Muluk* appears in J. S. King, "History of the Bahmani Dynasty (Founded on Burhān-i Ma'āsir)", *Indian Antiquary, A Journal of Oriental Research* 28, 1898, 153-155, see also footnote 18. A variety of spellings appears in these translations: Gangu, Kanku, Kangu, Congo. Further, Amin Ahmad Razi in his 'Hapht Iqlim' refers to Hasan as Hasan Kakuya. For the latter, see Haroon K. Sherwani, "Gangu Bahmani", *Journal of Indian History* 10/1, 1941, 95-99: 96.

13  Abdul Malik Isami, *Futuhu's Salatin or Shah Namah-i Hind*, Agha Mahdi Husain (ed. and trans.), Agra, Vol. III, New York (NY): Asia Publishing House 1977.

14  *Ibid.*, 772 ff. The greatness of the sultan is evoked also at the beginning of the work, but it has no relevance for the narrative of his rise to power, which comes only at the end. For the title Zafar Khan, see *ibid.*, 780.

ternal relationship.[15] Nor it is found elsewhere in the works of contemporary authors, like Barani. After all, why would a poet, whose work was patronized by the sultan Alauddin, omit the ruler's fraternal relationships? Doubts about Hasan's relationship with Ali Shah and his brothers are shared also by Husaini, who is otherwise critical of the Sultan and Brahman story.[16] Although other works that narrate the foundation of the Bahmani sultanate were written, all of them are now lost and only referred to by later historians. Isami's Futuh, then, is itself a good source for the beginning of the legends about the first Bahmani sultan, even if we forget that he posits himself as a litterateur, a follower of Sufis, and a panegyrist of the Muslim conquest of India, rather than a historian.[17]

The more the Indo-Persian historians wrote outside the Deccan, the more they were prone to project the sultan as the rebel Hasan Gangu (Kanku etc.) with varying degrees of intensity. Those writing from the Deccani courts, in contrast, see him as the founder of a state independent of Delhi and a person of great qualities. Among these qualities prevails the ideal of a powerful, religious, but just king who cares for the well-being of all his subjects despite their ethnic or religious differences, as promoted in the influential Nasirean ethic and embodied also by the king's alleged Iranian ancestor.[18] The locational difference between the Indo-Persian historians may also be behind the fact that it is in the works of the two Deccani historians, Ferishta and Shirazi, where the story of Allauddin

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15  H. K. Sherwani, "Gangu Bahmani…", 97-99. Sherwani's main argument is that the Ali Shah and his brothers were Zafar Khanis, i.e. nephews of Zafar Khan Alai, a noble of Afghan descent serving under sultan Ghiyasuddin Tughluq, and through Zafar Khan connected to the Afghani dynasty of Kakuyids. Although this might be quite possible, it is by no means certain. Sherwani's arguments based on a comparative reading of other historians may hold, yet the unclarity remains (especially when we are asked to read Isami from the 14th century along with Ferishta from the 17th, on whom he relies rather selectively). It seems that it was the story of subordination of the sultan to Brahman Gangu that led Sherwani to his painstaking efforts.

16  S. A. Q. Husaini, *Bahman Shāh*…, 23-24.

17  Abdul Malik Isami, *Futuhu's Salatin or Shah Namah-i Hind*, Agha Mahdi Husain (ed. and trans.), Agra, Vol. I, New York (NY): Asia Publishing House 1967, 12-22, 35-44.

18  John Briggs, *History of the Rise of the Mahomedan Power in India Till the year A.D. 1612. Translated from the original Persian of Mahomed Kasim Ferishta*, Vol. 2, Calcutta: Editions Indian 1966 [1829], 183; James S. King, "History of the Bahmani Dynasty (Founded on Burhān-i Ma'āsir)", *Indian Antiquary, A Journal of Oriental Research* 28, 1898, 148-149, 152-153. Most of the King's text is a translation of the Tabataba's *Burhan-i Ma'asir* and includes also Shirazi's account. For more on the popularity of Nasirean ethics in the Sultanates and Mughal periods, and the inspiration taken from the Iranian ideas of governance, see Muzaffar Alam, *The Languages of Political Islam: India 1200-1800*, Chicago (IL): The University of Chicago Press 2004, 47-80.

serving a Brahman is narrated for the first time. Although reading the Indo-Persian histories does not offer a clear clue as to the origins of Alauddin Bahman Shah, it is possible to observe the ideational currents that informed the narrative of his royal qualities.

The different arguments postulated by modern historians testify to an intense search for a way of resolving the enigma contained in the two Deccani accounts. Whether it is agreement or disagreement with the phonetic similarity of the words Bahman and Brahman, references to the absence of the word Gangu in Bahmani inscriptions and coins calling the sultan Bahman Shah, suggestions of the sultan's Afghani/Irani roots, the use of Gangu as a nickname connoting his infantile slow-wittedness, or even possible Sasanid patterns in early Bahmani architecture, none of these could satisfactorily answer the question posed by the Marathi historians Rajwade, Khare and Oturkar as to why Indo-Persian historians, and particularly Ferishta, praised for his seriousness and familiarity with Deccan affairs, resorted to the enigmatic legend.[19] By far the most extensive text discussing the origins of Alauddin Bahmani is found in a book by S. A. Q. Husaini.[20] He has carefully gone through plentiful evidence found in the Indo-Persian writings and concludes by dismissing the Sultan and Brahman story as unreliable due to Ferishta's Shi'a leanings. Be that as it may, the lack of decisive evidence will probably keep the sultan's origins, as in many other similar cases, in a mist of doubt. Interestingly for our context, Husaini explains the epithet Gangu as referring to Gangi village in the vicinity of Miraj, an old town in southern Maharashtra, the area of which was most probably Hasan's domain (*iqta'*), where Isami also locates his mother.[21]

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19  W. Haig, "Some Notes…", 2-3; Mehrdad Shokoohy, "Hasan Gangu", *Encyclopaedia Iranica* 12/1, 2003, 32-33; Vishwanath K. Rajwade, "Hasan Gango Bāhmaṇī", in: M. B. Shaha (ed.), *Rājvāḍe Samagra Sāhitya*, Vol. 11, Dhuḷe: Rājvāḍe Saṁśodhan Maṇḍaḷ 1998, 128-129; Rajaram V. Oturkar – Ganesh H. Khare, "The Origin of 'Gangu Bahmani'. Is Ferishta's Legend Absurd?", *Proceedings of Indian History Congress, Allahabad, Second Session* 1938, 304-308; H. K. Sherwani, "Gangu Bahmani…"; Gavin R. G. Hambly, "Ferešta,Tārīk-e", *Encyclopaedia Iranica* 9/5, 1999, 533-534.

20  S. A. Q. Husaini, *Bahman Shāh*…

21  *Ibid*., 43 on Ferishta, 64-67 on Gangi. Hukkeri and Balgaon, near Miraj, are also said to be under Hasan's administration. Cf. A. M. Isami, *Futuhu's Salatin*…, Vol. III, 812. Currently, it seems that the Gangi village is unknown to the people from Miraj. Its other name given by Shirazi, Murtazabad, is well-known even today. Personal communication with the Maharashtrian historian from Miraj Muphid Mujawar, *Messenger*, 1-19 February 2024. Hasan's alleged mother is revered as Hazrat Maa Saheba in the dargah at Kudchi, around 35 km southeast of Miraj.

### The Indo-Persian legends of Hasan Gangu

Ferishta, who came to India in his youth and spent his entire life there, was well-acquainted with Deccan affairs while serving under both the Nizam Shahs and the Adil Shahs,[22] as evidenced also by his remark that "the management of the revenue has been committed generally to brahmins by all the Princes of the Deccan".[23] Let me at this point quote the most important parts of Ferishta's account (ca. 1606) as translated from the Persian by Lieutenant-Colonel John Briggs and published in 1829:[24]

> Authors differ regarding the birth and the early life of Alla-ood-Deen Hussun Bahmuny. It would be tedious and useless to relate all that has been said on this subject, so that I shall merely state that which is most generally believed in the Deccan.
>
> Hussun, a native of Delhy, was the servant of Gungoo, a Brahminical astrologer, enjoying high favor with the Prince Mahomed Toghluq, and who, in consideration of good conduct of Hussun, gave him a pair of oxen, and permitted him to till a small piece of land for his own use. While at work one day, the plough attached itself to some substance, which on examination Hussun found to be a chain fastened to a copper vessel, containing a number of antique gold coins. On making the discovery, he carried the treasure to his master, who commending him for his honesty, acquainted the Prince Mahomed Toghluq with the circumstance, who communicated it to his father, the King. The monarch ordered Hussun to the presence, and conferred on him the command of hundred horse.
>
> It is further related, that the Brahmin […] made him promise if he ever should attain regal power, that he would assume the name of Gungoo, and employ him as his minister of finance; a request with which Hussun readily complied. It is said, also that his future destiny was foretold by the celebrated Sheikh Nizam-ood-Deen Ouliya […] Not unmindful of his promise to his former master, the King entrusted his treasury to the bramin Gungoo, who quitted the service of Mohamed Togluq Padshah, and repaired to the Deccan; and the affix of Gungoo Bahmuny was super-added to the King's title in all public documents, and remained engraved on the royal seal of that dynasty till its extinction […] I believe his origin was too obscure to admit of being traced. The appellation of Bahmuny he certainly took out of compliment to his master, Gungoo, the bramin, a word often pronounced bahmun. The King himself was by birth an Afghan.[25]

Of the three historians, all of whom came to India and worked in the courts of the Deccani sultans, Ali bin Tabataba is the earliest and perhaps the least important for our enquiry. In his *Burhan-i Ma'asir* (completed in 1595/1596), he does not mention the Sultan and Brahman legend. However, even he is unsure of the sultan's origins, saying that he did not disclose to

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22  John Briggs, "Essay on the Life and Writings of Ferishta", *Transactions of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland* 2/1, 1829, 341-361.

23  J. Briggs, *History…*, 180.

24  I keep the transliterations of the names in the forms given by Briggs.

25  J. Briggs, *History…*, 175-176, 180.

anyone "his illustrious descent from Kaiyumars" (i.e. Iranian kings).[26] Tabataba narrates yet another legend, which Ferishta also refers to a few years later. Here, the sultan is said to be a follower of the famous Chishti Sheikh Nizamuddin Auliya from Delhi (d. 1325). On one occasion, both Muhammad Tughluq and Hasan were his guests. After Tughluq left, the Sheikh allegedly said that "today one king has gone out and another king is at the door: let him come in", thus predicting Hasan's rise to royal power.[27] This story gives a different spin on the narrative of Alauddin, linking him to Sufis, who were historically well-known rivals of the sultans in their claims to authority.[28]

Rafiuddin Shirazi, an Irani merchant and contemporary of Ferishta, in his work *Tazkirat al-Muluk*[29] (completed in 1611/1612) reframes the legend in a significant manner and introduces narrative elements that are also found in the *bakhars*. Shirazi does not place the sultan directly in the service of 'Gangu-Pandit'. The latter recognizes the royal qualities of the young boy when, while sleeping, a cobra protects him from disturbing flies and acts as his servant. Therefore, Gangu demands from the boy 'a post of honour' as well as the adoption of the name 'Bahman'[30] upon Hasan's accession to the royal throne, to which Hasan complies. More persuasively than Tabataba, however, Shirazi makes Hasan the disciple of a Sufi Sheikh – Sirajuddin Junaydi –, whose residence he places in Gangi village near Miraj. In a series of events that include Hasan sheltering the Sheikh from the sun (an event performed by a cobra on Hasan in *bakhars*), as well as Hasan and his mother tilling the land and finding treasure, the future sultan instigated by the Sheikh builds a mosque, fights and conquers the local Hindu rulers, makes Gulbarga his capital, and founds the Bahmani dynasty.[31]

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26  J. S. King, "History…", 141.

27  *Ibid.*

28  On the mutual patronization of Chishti, Junaydi Sufis and Bahmanis see Carl W. Ernst, *Eternal Garden: Mysticism, History and Politics in South Asian Sufi Center*, New York (NY): State University of New York Press 1992, 98-99, 201-207. The respect for Chishtis is also clear from A. M. Isami, *Futuhu's Salatin…*, Vol. I, 13.

29  The legend translated by King appears in J. S. King, "History…", 153-155. For more on Shirazi and his work, see in Carl Ernst, "Ebrāhīm Šīrāzī", *Encyclopedia Iranica* 8/1, 1997, 76.

30  This might seem puzzling, but I presume it is a play on the phonetic similarities of the words Brahman/Bahman referred to by Ferishta.

31  J. S. King, "History…", 153-155. Gulbarga was the first capital of Bahmanis, where the tombs of both Alauddin Bahman Shah and Sheikh Sirajuddin Junaydi are found today.

## Between legitimation and memory:
## Hasan Gangu in Marathi bakhars

Some of the Marathi *bakhars*, texts that started to be composed on the cusp of early modernity, creatively employed the narrative themes also found in Indo-Persian histories. They linked them to the agenda of their upper caste writers, as well as to the city of Bidar, second capital of the Bahmanis. Since these were usually the works of writers whose livelihoods depended on the scribal skills in a given administrative post within the various layers of the state governance, *bakhar* writing was not devoid of the context of the bureaucratic power of the state, and many of the texts were products of government inquest – enquiries from government representatives into various kinds of affairs; economic, judicial, administrative and historical.[32] This was also the reason why *bakhars* addressed the past, and their narratives were conditioned by both external enquiry and the internal purposes of writers. Framed on the interstices between a chosen, authority-inflected grasp of the past and memory, these texts can also be read as instances of 'past-presencing'.[33]

A push to reveal what one knows, stimulated as it was by inquest, also offered an opportunity to project one's own ideals into the past – often ones through which a traumatic past could be remedied when the opportunity arose, such as a change of government. The conquest of the Deccan by the Delhi Sultanate in the 14th century ousted from power and social position a whole range of state functionaries of previous Deccani kingdoms. In the Deccan, as argued by Richard Eaton, Phillip Wagoner and Sumit Guha, and in contrast to Northern India, most of the literate administrators of the state, particularly those dealing with tax administration and land matters, were Brahmans.[34] Although the Bahmani sultanate gradually provided them with the opportunity to re-enter royal service, conditions were different, and the trauma of the conquest hardly forgotten. In Guha's words, the Brahmans "suffered widespread loss of lands, endow-

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32  S. Guha, "Speaking Historically…".
33  Cf. Sharon Macdonald, *Memorylands: Heritage and identity in Europe today*, Abingdon: Routledge 2013, 12, 15-17.
34  R. M. Eaton, *A Social History…*, 91, 144-145; S. Guha, "Serving the barbarian…", 506-513. In another Deccani setting, Eaton and Wagoner note the role of the Niyogi Brahmans in sultanate administration. Interestingly, they refer also to a Telugu warrior Sitadu/Shitab Khan, whose worth was recognized by a Niyogi Brahman when the cobra sheltered young Sitadu from the sun. Richard M. Eaton – Phillip B. Wagoner, *Power, Memory, Architecture: Contested Sites on India's Deccan Plateau*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press 2014, 166-167, 208-209.

ments, and temple employment that accompanied the conquest. So perhaps it was more than inertia that brought them into sultanate employ".[35]

Their social position differed widely – from the literate village official with a limited administrative role and moderate economic capital, whose role has been documented in the pre-Bahmani Yadava kingdom, up to the consecrator of the royals known already from the ancient as well as Yadava periods.[36] These different roles continued into the Sultanate period where, however, the social position of Brahman was subordinated to new rulers with a state ideology that did not recognize the inevitability of a Brahman's role in state affairs, but recognized the worth of his administrative skills and knowledge of local affairs. Such a position caused competition between the literate and administratively able personnel of the Muslim-led state and brought about self-critique and lamentations over the degradation of the social role of Brahmans. It is true that the more common role of the Brahman literati was to keep village accounts and produce different kinds of records pertaining to localities or regions, including those that presented matters of the past. Nevertheless, in the post-Bahmani Deccan Sultanates, Brahmans also reached high positions.[37]

Therefore, even if the impulse for Ferishta and Shirazi to employ the Sultan and Brahman legend may have been doubts about the sultan's origins, the authors of *bakhars* had different reasons. Regarding the legend, Sumit Guha sees *bakhars* as being on the verge of memory and myth, and suggests that it should be read as a legitimating myth of the politically subordinate, economically deprived, and yet socially elite Marathi Brahman scribes.[38] Hence, in terms of narrativized social imagination, nostalgia, and the ideal of the restoration of an idealised monarch who

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35  S. Guha, "Serving the barbarian…", 507.

36  *Ibid.*; Hiroshi Fukazawa, "A Study of the local administration of 'Ādil Shāhī Sultanate (A.D. 1489 – 1686)", *The Hitotsubashi Journal of Economics* 3/2, 1963, 37-67: 45; Jan C. Heesterman, "The Conundrum of the King's Authority", in: John F. Richards (ed.), *Kingship and Authority in South Asia*, Madison (WI): University of Wisconsin 1978, 1-27. The Yadava period brought new ideological leanings crystalizing in the 'Brahmana legalist' as discussed by Jason Schwartz, *Ending the Śaiva Age: The Rise of the Brāhmaṇa Legalist and the Universalization of Hindu Dharma* [dissertation thesis], Santa Barbara (CA): University of California 2023.

37  For instance, Shyam mentions several high-ranked Hindus in the service of Nizam Shahs. Radhey Shyam, *The Kingdom of Ahmadnagar*, Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass 1966, 37 (Deoras Pandit), 70 (Kunwar Sen Brahman), 72-73 (Narsu Pandit, Sambaji Chitnavis and Kunwar Sen). In addition, Pandit Dalapati, author of the *dharmaśastra* called Narasinha Prasād, was most probably a vizier of the Ahmad Nizam Shah. Pandurang V. Kane, *History of Dharmaśāstra: Ancient and Medieval Religious and Civil Law*, sec. ed., Vol. I, Part II, Poona: Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute 1975, 861-862, 867-868.

38  S. Guha, "Serving the barbarian…", 515.

submits to Brahmanic knowledge and skills, the *bakhars'* legend serves also as an apologetic effort that seeks to legitimise the worth a skilled Brahmanic writer employed at the sultanate court and preserve his social status and purity. In his analysis of scribal manuals, Guha also links the legendary Gangu to the well-known minister of late Yadavas, the Brahman Hemadripant, who is said to have devised the rules and ideals of scribal conduct.[39] Seeing Hemadri in Gangu may have mattered for the Brahmans at the courts as well to those of more modest scribal occupation across the Maratha countryside. What mattered too was to see the minister as an example of Brahmanic learning and purity. This other, socio-religious, or dharmic, aspect of the legend transpires from both the bakhars and hagiographies, and thus offers an extension of the myth's meaning and a pretext for 20th century debates. Thus, promoting the superiority of Brahmanic learning over the barbarian (mleccha), the authors of bakhars also employed the image of a kingdom and a king devoted to Brahmanic ideals (*Brāhmaṇī bādśāhī*).

There are several bakhars that narrate the Sultan and Brahman legend and I will focus on the two of them: 1) *Bakhar Brāhmaṇī bādśāhīcī* – Bakhar of the Brahmani kingdom (BBB) and 2) *Sultān Āmadśā va Bīdarce bayāval: Bahāmanī gharāṇyācī bakhar* – Sultan Ahmad Shah and the foundation of Bidar: Bakhar of the House of Bahmanis (ABB).[40] Both were copied down in the second half of 19th century by Bhimrav Shrinivas and Sultan Surli Krishnajipant Bidarkar, respectively.[41] Both are also claimed by their publishers to be extended versions of the 18th century *Catur Sābājīcī bakhar* (Bakhar of Clever Sabaji),[42] a narrative about a clever Brahman minister of the Bahmani sultan, who is credited with making the kingdom prosper but who is unjustly killed, and after whose death the kingdom perishes. It is true that this narrative is part of both the *bakhars* under review. In fact, all three texts share identical narratives and

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39  *Ibid.*, 516-518.
40  Shri Rangunath Kulkarni, "Bakhar Brāhmaṇī bādśāhīcī", *Marāṭhī Svādhyāy-Saṃśodhan-patrikā* 7, 1972, 49-70 and V. D. Kulkarni, "Sultān Āmadśā va Bīdarce bayāval (Bahāmanī gharāṇyācī bakhar)", *Marathi Research Journal* 15, 1989, 27-56. I have also consulted the following manuscripts: '*Bidar*', British Library. Marathi Mss. ADD 26 477, and '*Nakal Gangarespantancī*', Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar Marathwada University (BAMU), Marāṭhī saṃśodhan vibhāg, no. 1007.
41  Although S. R. Kulkarni claims BBB to be from the early 17th century, this does not seem likely. For instance, its note on Rohilla and Sikh armies makes space for doubting Kulkarni's claim. The published texts certainly come from the second half of the 19th century. On their dating, see S. R. Kulkarni, "Bakhar Brāhmaṇī…", 55-57 and V. D. Kulkarni, "*Sultān Āmadśā…*", 37.
42  Vasudev S. Bendre, *Mahārāṣṭreitihāsācī sādhane*, Vol. 2, Mumbaī: Mumbaī Marāṭhī Granthasangrahālay, 59, 'Catur Sābājī', 206-213.

contain the Gangaras/Hasan story,[43] although they differ in several minor details. ABB offers the longest and most elaborate version of the three and is more concerned with details related to Bidar (e.g. the building of a madrasa by a man of foreign origin, a symbolic reference to Mahmud Gavan, or a note on Bidar's water system), extending the narrative into the Aurangzeb period. For our context, it is important to note the claim of both *bakhars* that after the death of the Brahman minister, the kingdom falls. This is yet another allusion to the unfortunate fate of Mahmud Gavan,[44] but, clearly, it is another attempt to narrativize the greatness and abilities of Brahmans in sultanate service. Given that all three bakhars were most likely composed in the 18th century, a century strongly influenced by the rule of Marathi Brahman Peshwas,[45] one wonders whether Brāhmaṇī bādśāhī[46] is imagined not only as a domain of the Marathi Brahman scribe, but also as an experienced reality and a form of lip service to the powerful Brahmana legalist. Let me show some examples from the texts of BBB and AAB and contextualize them.

> Roaming through the kingdoms someone came near to Bidar town and stopped at the river's bank. His name was Yetim Shah and his wife's name was Fakir Bibi. The name of their daughter was Fatima Bibi and their son's name was Hasan. When reaching (the river) all four prayed and proceeded to the town. They started asking the people whether a person learned in the affairs of the world and beyond (*dharmātma*) lives there. The people told them that Gangaraspant is a man they seek […] (Gangaras) started asking them: where are you living, in what kingdom, and who is its king (*bādśāh*)? The fakir answered: there is no place of ours, nor a kingdom. One day we stay in one village and next day we move on. Like this we roamed many kingdoms and came here. We heard a lot about your fame and that the Pant[47] is truly a man learned in the matters of dharma (*dharmaparāyaṇ*). Therefore, we came here, met you and became very happy. Hearing this the Pant was glad and suggested to the fakir that they should stay with him.[48]

Afterwards the fakir and his wife died. Gangaras took care of Hasan and his sister. When she reached adulthood, he married her off to one of the viziers of the town. Hasan decided to help in the household and started grazing calves. One hot day he took nap under a tree. A cobra came to him.

43  Gangaras, i.e. Gangu.
44  H. K. Sherwani, *The Bahmanis*…, 333-334.
45  Peshwa was a title for the Prime Minister of the Maratha king overseeing domains of different Maratha families. The Peshwas, however, overpowered the king and, in fact, it was they who ruled.
46  AAB does not employ '*brāhmaṇī bādśāhī*' and spells the kingdom's name as *bāmanī*. This might be a spelling variant of *brāhmaṇī* as suggested already by Ferishta. The words '*pādśāne āple nāv ṭheun ghetle*', however, suggest the adoption of Gangu's name, and perhaps, refer also to his Brahman caste.
47  A learned man, a pandit.
48  S. R. Kulkarni, "Bakhar Brāhmaṇī…", 59.

It spread its hood and started dancing over Hasan's head (*mastakāvar kheḷū lāglā*).[49] Seeing all this, a peasant called Gangaras there. After chasing the cobra away, Gangaras took great care of Hasan. He bathed him, gave him new clothes and ceremoniously fed him. Hasan enquired about the reason of such a treatment, and Gangaras explained:

> As there are five sons of mine, you are the sixth. Hasan was happy. Taking the boy away from others, the Pant started asking him: if you became a king what will you give me? Hasan answered: I am your adopted son (*pālakputra*). What order you give will be carried out and nothing else. Even if something other comes in the way, I will do what I promised. The kingdom is yours. The Pant became happy.[50]

Gangaras had Hasan educated in languages (*hindī, phārsī*) as well as in performing and martial arts (*tālīm, dāṇḍpaṭṭā*). He also arranged his marriage and during the wedding Hasan was introduced to the king (*bādśahā*), who took a great liking to him. Then the kingdom was attacked and because of Hasan's valor the danger was thwarted. The king was old and without offspring. As advised by the royal astrologer, an elephant was commanded to choose the new king by placing a garland on the neck of one of the eager candidates. The elephant chose Hasan. Meanwhile, the king died. Hasan went to see Gangaras and out of gratitude offered him the kingdom.

> Mine is a divine kingdom, so this would not work (said Gangaras). I was provided by God. The kingdom is yours. God the almighty gave it to you, therefore mount the throne and rule. That time Gangaras held a parasol. He made Hasan sit on the throne and raised the parasol over him. The kettledrums started to beat, and the news was sent all over the kingdom that the Brahmani kingdom was created.[51]
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> After the birth of (Hasan's) son, Padshah (i.e. Hasan) died and was buried in a great tomb. At the site miracles started to occur! Muslims called him Sultan Amadsha and Hindus Alamprabhu. The miracles still occur at that place. There is no doubt about it, understand it to be true! Anyone who would oppose it will reach hell. There is no doubt about it. Hasan Gangu Bamani Sultan Amadshaha was not a son of Padshah. He who made him sit on the throne (i.e. Gangaras), his name Sultan Amadsha accepted and ruled happily.[52]

There is a lot of 'memory-work' of the Bahmani kingdom going on in both texts. They project contemporary ideals by employing historical themes and persons as their memories fade and are passed down through generations of the literati. Allusions to Brahmans in the sultans' service; to Mahmud Gavan, after whose unjust death the Bahmani kingdom declined

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49  AAB makes cobra shading Hasan from the sun (*sāvlī dharūn kheḷat hotā*).
50  S. R. Kulkarni, "Bakhar Brāhmaṇī…", 60-61.
51  *Ibid.*, 63-64.
52  V. D. Kulkarni, "Sultān Āmadśā…", 49.

and the sultan died within a year; or to Sultan Kallimulah, Malik Ambar, or Aurangzeb all provide the texts with an aura of the past and allow their authors to say only as much as they knew (*mi thoḍebahut jāṇat āho te kaiphiyāt kī jāhar karī*).[53] This is well illustrated not only by emphasizing that the king brought up by the Brahman was a just king (*dharmarāj karīt astā*), but also by blurring the memories of four different historical persons – Alauddin Hasan Bahmani, Hasan Bahri and his son Ahmad Nizam Shah, and Ahmad Shah Wali Bahmani (the name *Āmadśā* occurs in both *bakhars*). The first three relate to the foundation of the kingdom (both Bahmani and Nizam Shahi), where Brahmans found employment, and Hasan Bahri – a Brahman converted to Islam – was, in a way, adopted by the Bahmani sultan. Ahmad Shah Wali, in turn, is remembered as a saint even today.[54] Whether yet another of Ferishta's legends in which Ahmad Shah Wali's prayers for rain were answered by God was a trigger that earned him the epithet '*walī*' – a friend of God – or whether it was his engagement with the Nimatullahi Sufis, his tomb has become a place of veneration for Lingayats, who, like the author of AAB, regard him as an avatar of the Lingayat holy man Allama Prabhu. It is precisely this religious aspect in remembering Bahmanis and their sultans in Marathi texts that offers another venue for the peregrinations of the Sultan & Brahman legend, to which I will now turn.

### Sultan from Bidar in the Marathi hagiographies

Even if from a lower caste (*yātihīna*), he (the king) inherited good qualities. He was generous and treated all people equally (*ekobhāve*). Thanks to his conduct in past life, he loved specifically the Brahmans and never allowed harming the temples in the country. The priests of his home (*gharce purohit*) lectured him: born as a Mleccha (i.e. Muslim), you should trouble gods and Brahmans. But you serve them and gain nothing good from that. It is proper to show respect to your own origin, understand! See, those dull-witted Brahmans worship stones and say that God is everywhere in wood, in trees, in rocks […] The king answered: as you described, God is completely contained even in the smallest particle, in grass, in wood. All creation comes from the Lord […] Understand that though the bodies are different, the Lord is one. Like a moon is single in the sky and appears multiple in its various reflections in the jars […] Similarly, there are many castes in the world, but the Lord of them is one. Do not make differences! […] Seeing the great pomp that the king orchestrated to Guru all were greatly amazed and talked (among themselves). Mlecchas said: look at him, he worships Brahmans, behaves inappropriately, today he cast away his own people (*jātidharma sāṇḍilā*). Those, whose face should not be seen, he serves them happily! The king will destroy everyone, so spoke the

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53  S. R. Kulkarni, "Bakhar Brāhmaṇī…", 59.
54  S. Mondini, "Architectural heritage…".

Mlecchas. Seeing all that the Brahmans were exceedingly happy. The king has become a servant of Brahmans (*viprasevak*). Now the country will prosper![55]

This is how the mid-16th century hagiography *Gurucaritra* narrates the episode of the holy man's encounters with the Sultan from Bidar. It is not clear what king was meant, certainly not Alauddin Bahman Shah/Hasan Gangu – the founder of the Sultanate. However, given that the text describes the life of a saint living sometime in the 15th century, it was most likely referring to a Bahmani king. Written by Sarasvati Gangadhar, *Gurucaritra*, as Jeremy Morse interprets it, can be seen both as a conservative, even anti-Muslim work that sees "Muslims and Muslim rule as uniquely discriminatory and destructive", but also as a text that criticizes Brahmans who submit to their rule.[56] Indeed, the text contains other descriptions of encounters openly hostile to the king. The context of such presentation is "serving the barbarian" or serving at the door of the Muslim (*seva karito dvāryavanī*).[57] Morse understands *Gurucaritra* in terms of "*śāstric bhakti*".[58] It expresses devotion to the guru in tune with the ideology of the superiority of Brahmanic learning in social and religious matters, with an emphasis on ritual and ethical conduct. Nevertheless, the text also displays the conditions under which the Sultan's authority can be acknowledged. This happens, as the quotation from *Gurucaritra* clearly illustrates, when the king respects the Brahmans and caters to their needs.

John Stratton Hawley has convincingly shown in his magnum opus that Muslim monarchs had a rather pragmatic political agenda when dealing with religious representatives. Patronizing Brahmanic scholarship was part of this agenda.[59] The vizier Dalapati praising in his *dharmaśāstra* Ahmad Nizam Shah, an apparent patron of the work, would stand as a Deccani example of this policy, right from the time of *Gurucaritra's* author. Moreover, the mechanisms of governmentality found in South Asia are far from the Eurocentric pastoring model. Intergroup relationships that include but are not necessarily organized by the state, as discussed by

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55  Ramachandra K. Kamat (ed.), *Śrīgurucaritra*, Mumbaī: Kéśav Bhikājī Dhavaḷe 1993, chapter 50, verses 5-21, 231-234.

56  Jeremy G. Morse, "The Datta saṃpradāya and its 'Others'", in: Gil Ben-Herut – Jon Keune – Anne Monius (eds.), *Regional Communities of Devotion in South Asia: Insiders, Outsiders, and Interlopers*, London: Routledge 2021, 137-159: 145.

57  R. K. Kamat (ed.), *Śrīgurucaritra…*, chapter 14, verse 13.

58  J. G. Morse, "The Datta saṃpradāya…", 137.

59  See the parts on 'Mughal bhakti' in John Stratton Hawley, *A Storm of Songs: India and the Idea of the Bhakti Movement*, Cambridge (MA): Harvard University Press 2015, 74-81.

Indrani Chatterjee,[60] function more through an economy of the exchange of honors, prerogatives, as well as practical and symbolic materials, a process which creates networks of mutual dependencies – such dependencies that allow one to view the processes of exchange in a contrasting manner, depending at which end of the chain of exchange one stands. Preferring an orthopractic standpoint over a political one, the author of Gurucaritra seemingly struggled with the articulation of his own position.

Marathi hagiographies, like *bakhars*, were often composed by upper caste literati. For instance, Mahipati, the most well-known Marathi hagiographer, was a Brahman employed as an accountant by a Muslim landowner. Similarly, Saraswati Gangadhar, about whose life not much is known, was a descendant of the aforementioned Brahman serving at the Sultan's door. Conversely, Hanumadatmaj and Cidghan, to whose work I shall soon turn, do not appear to be Brahmans despite their rhetoric.[61] However, even materials of Brahmanical provenience go against essentializing Brahmans. Indeed, there are differences between being a village administrator, a *bhakti* hagiographer and a travelling performer (*kīrtankār*), a ruler's direct associate, or a ruler oneself, as the peshwas were. The set of interrelated and differently narrated versions of the Sultan and Brahman story thus relates more to the social context of the literati than to their simple caste status. The hagiographic genre of *bhakti* then allowed the Sultan to be both appropriated when the upper caste dharmic conditions were met, and turned into *bhakta* and even a holy man himself.

Marathi hagiographies, therefore, do more than simply promote who the ideal king should be. Their goal certainly was not to record the past, yet, similarly to *bakhars*, they address it. However, the primary goal of these texts was the eulogy of holy men, and in the early modern setting, also the promotion of devotional (*bhakti*) ideals, often in an edifying and sectarian manner that promoted the ideas, practices and deities emanating from chosen devotional networks (*sampradāys*), whose followers had various social backgrounds.[62] Moving away from the social constraints of the Sanskrit *dharmaśāstric* register to vernacular Marathi and situating the goal in matters of devotion allowed literati who may have been familiar with both languages not only to address the wider audience, but also to

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60  Indrani Chatterjee, "Monastic 'Governmentality': Revisiting 'Community' and 'Communalism' in South Asia", *History Compass* 13/10, 2015, 497-511.

61  Gangadhar D. Khanolkar (ed.), *Marāṭhī Vānmaykoś. Khanda pahilā. Marāṭhī Granthakār 1050-1857*, Mumbaī: Mahārāṣṭra rājya sāhitya sanskruti mandaḷ 1977, 237, 402-403, 418.

62  Here Varkari, Datta and Ananda sampradays. The first promotes Vaishnava devotion to Vitthala or Vithoba, the second and third Vaishnava-inflected devotion to the god of ascetics and Brahmans – Dattatreya.

broaden the scope of the promulgated ideals. Therefore, apart from asking the sultan to respect Brahmans, as *Gurucaritra* does, most Marathi hagiographies also asked the sultan for devotion.

This does not mean that the lamentations of the upper caste authors over the former social order disturbed during the Sultanate period disappeared from their texts. The shift in genre and the social environment from *śāstrika* to *bhakti* publics, however, enabled the hagiographers to subordinate the sultan to a broad range of holy men from different social strata who represented *dharma* conceived against the social order of the sultan. In one case, the hagiographers transformed the sultan himself also into a holy man! In terms of the histories of early modern literati, the approach of the hagiographers is, in my opinion, a significant shift that extends the legitimation of the scribe's ideologically argued worth to include and project the devotional self of the literati within the world in which they lived. *Bakhars* with the devout fakir and Gangaras the *dharmātma* are also facets of this shift. In other words, the literati did not abandon the *śāstrika* ideal altogether, but the appeal of the devotional groups whose voice was more and more heard through texts, songs and gatherings, a voice that argued against the rigidness of the Brahmanic social order, provided them with different rhetorical tools to accommodate sultans in their works.[63] In the words of Uddhav Cidghan, a 17th century saint who put them in the mouth of Mrutyunjay, an alleged king of Bidar: "Vithoba, give me a knowledgeable guru (*śāstra guru maja deī Viṭhobā*)!"[64]

The process of accommodating the sultan to Marathi hagiographic discourse is realized through the image of the sultan of Bidar, who became the symbol for the hagiographers of the power shifts in the Deccan, and whose memory gradually faded away after the decline of the Bahmani Sultanate. Bidar's king dominates many accounts of Marathi saints. Shripad Shrivallabha, Narasinha Sarasvati, Cangdev, Kanhopatra, Uddhav Cidghan, Sena the Barber, Mrutyunjay or Shanta Brahmani, Damajipant, Dasopant or Dattananda, all in one way or another encounter the king who, initially portrayed as a villain, later surrenders to the abilities of holy men who either represent divine power themselves or are helped by divine intercession. In some cases, the king is even represented as one who be-

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63 For the engagement of Brahmans in anti-Brahman sentiment, see an important article by Christian L. Novetzke, "The Brahmin double: The Brahminical construction of anti-Brahminism and anti-caste sentiment in the religious cultures of precolonial Maharashtra", *South Asian History and Culture* 2/2, 2011, 232-252.

64 Narayan C. Kelkar (ed.), *Mahārāṣṭrakavi Uddhav Cidghan Kruta Kavitāsaṃgraha*, Kāvyasaṃgraha 37, Mumbaī: Nirṇaya sāgara 1902, 10. I am grateful to Rohini Shukla for sending me a copy of this old and rare book.

comes enlightened by the encounter.[65] It does not seem to be an accident that the king portrayed in the Marathi hagiographies is the king of Bidar, the second capital of the Bahmanis. A place that he narratively and mnemonically shares with Hasan Gangu, but also with Ahmad Shah Wali Bahmani.

Although the subordination of the sultan to holy men in the Marathi hagiographies shifts the interpretative context of Sultan and Brahman engagements from scribal legitimation myth to the sultan's devotional representation, the Marathi holy men appear in a yet different context. Prachi Deshpande has shown how Ramdas, a well-known Marathi Brahman saint, in his *Dasbodha*, recommended a self-discipline resembling almost that of ascetics, in terms of scribal practice. He also made narrative use of lamentations over the trauma of the decline of Brahmans, proposing the goal of restoring the disturbed social order from a Brahmanical perspective.[66] Establishing a network of institutions (*math*) where Ramdas' teachings were copied and transmitted thus enabled his Brahman followers to combine both the worldly and spiritual perspectives (*prapanca* and *paramārtha*), creating a writerly self that did not accept the barbarian (*mleccha*). The perspectives of *bhakti* hagiographers, as shown above, differed. Their world of imagination that evolved in parallel with Indo-Persian histories, the production of *bakhars*, as well as Ramdas' activities on the cusp of the rising Maratha kingdom that turned into real '*brahmaṇī bādśāhī*' culminated in making the *mleccha* holy, and importantly, the *mleccha* king of Bidar.

Such sacralization of the king is seen in the works of Uddhav Cidghan, Mahipati and Hanumadatmaj. Cidghan, who is the earliest of the three, refers to the king as Shah Muhammad Bamani, Mahipati as Shanta Brahmani, and Hanumadatmaj only as Bidar's king. All three hagiographers basically narrate the same story, although with some variations. In it, the king of Bidar is unhappy with his life, leaves the palace and joins the Vaishnava Varkaris on their pilgrimage to Pandharpur. In Pandharpur, the king obtains the book *Vivekasindhu* (Ocean of right judgement)[67] and is told to see guru Sahajananda in Kalyani, a former capital of Chalukyas some 80 kilometers west of Bidar. To test his sincerity, Sahajananda makes the *mleccha* pass through an ordeal by fire. He succeeds, which earns him the new name Mrutyunjay (victor over death). After the ordeal, his sincerity is doubted by the local Lingayats (recall Shah Ahmad Wali and Allama

65  E.g. S. R. Devle (ed.), *Śrībhaktavijaya*, Puṇe: Sarasvatī grantha bhāndār 2002, chapter 40, verse 164.

66  P. Deshpande, "The writerly self…", 457, 463-464, 466.

67  *Vivekasindhu* is an advaita-vedanta work attributed to Mukundaraj. The dating of this work is still disputed and varies between the late 12th and 15th centuries.

Prabhu). However, the king-turned-saint miraculously teaches them a les-
son in devotion by letting their *linga* symbols disappear and appear from
the mouths of dogs aptly named Vedanta and Siddhanta.[68] Importantly,
however fictious this story may be and the trajectories of its transmission
tied with its transmitters and their social and religious goals, an aging
tomb located near Kalyani and associated with Shah Bahmani alias
Mrutyunjay remains a place of devotion even today.

The 17th to 18th century narratives about the king from Bidar turned
holy man, as well as the king who was bettered by the holy men from the
16th century *Gurucaritra*, produced a narrative rendering of a tenuous re-
lationship that Richard Burghart explained a long time ago as the "incon-
gruity and mutual dependence of Brahman, ascetic and the king".[69] The
historical kings, forgotten as they were, reappeared as a generic king of
Bidar, because it was this Bahmani capital that still lingered in the mem-
ory of the hagiographers. Thus, the king stripped of any historicity in the
hagiographies and subordinated to their goal of eulogizing holy men be-
came a legend himself. Moreover, the king became idealized not just as a
servant of Brahmans, but also as a servant of holy men, those idealized
keepers of *dharma*, whether by their ascetic practices or knowledge.

### Late combination of Indo-Persian histories,
### bakhars and hagiographies

The peregrination of Sultan and Brahman legend comes full circle in its
modern rendering by Bhimashankar Deshpande, a literary scientist and
lawyer, but mainly a supporter of Ananda sampraday – a network of devo-
tees who revere the god Dattatreya and currently promote a conservative
Brahmanical social order.[70] We could observe how modern historians,
writing at a time of an increasingly sharpened divide between monolithi-
cally conceived notions of Hindus and Muslims, could not altogether avoid
such discourse even in their contemporary positivism. Deshpande in his

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68 Vedanta is the most popular Hindu religious philosophy, founded on Upanishads,
which gained high prestige among South Asian Muslim scholars, Sufis as well as
kings. Siddhanta refers to a conclusive explanation of the espoused philosophy or
practice – a teaching. For the popularity of Vedanta among Muslims, see in S. Nair,
*Translating Wisdom*…; and Supriya Gandhi, *The Emperor Who Never Was. Dara
Shukoh in Mughal India*, Cambridge (MA) – London: The Belknap Press of Harvard
University Press 2020.

69 Richard Burghart, "Hierarchical Models of the Hindu Social System", *Man*, *New
Series* 13/4, 1978, 519-536: 524.

70 Indeed, the only available monograph on Ananda sampraday is Bhimashankar
Deshpande, *Ānanda sampradāy āṇī paramparā (Sadānanda va tyānca sampradāy)*,
Āḷand: Deśpānde sāhitya sanśodhan 1988.

rendering of the legend espoused it and creatively utilized all hitherto discussed materials.

Focusing on Mrutyunjay, the saint-king, his main claim is that he was not a Muslim by birth, but a Hindu. He further adds that there is strong evidence (*sabaḷa purāvā*) to identify Mrutyunjay with Hasan Gangu Bahmani.[71] This evidence supposedly comes from Hanumadatmaj's Marathi *Pūrṇānandacaritra*, when combined with information provided by a certain Amalananda in the Sanskrit work *Sadānandacaritra*. *Pūrṇānandacaritra*, a work from the first half of the 19th century, repeats with some variations the stories related by Cidghan and Mahipati. Yet, neither Deshpande's own edition nor manuscript of *Pūrṇānandacaritra* contains a reference to Hasan Gangu. *Sadānandacaritra* referred to by Hanumadatmaj, where possibly such a reference occurs, is nowhere cited.[72] Not to mention that it is a rare Sanskrit text, perhaps from Deshpande's personal collection, and that Deshpande nowhere gives the exact source of his rendering of the legend. Therefore, what has been claimed as strong evidence is more likely an attempt to reinterpret the Sultan and Brahman legend to serve the agenda of modern religious conservativism. But these details and source-related inconsistencies are less important than the actual rendering of the legend, to which we will now turn.

We are told that north of the Narmada River at the time of a famine, a certain fakir's daughter found a crying child in a burning village.[73] She brought him to her father, who named him Hasan. Together, they headed south and stopped at the banks of Krishna River. Later, the fakir and his daughter died and the Gangaras from Miraj took care of Hasan. Gangaras' family goddess (sic!) told him in a dream that the boy would be a king. Gangaras armed the boy and sent him to fight in the north. There he met a sadhu (*avadhūt*)[74] who threw stones at his visitors. Hasan, however, caught the stone, whereupon the sadhu told him that wherever the stone stuck to the ground would be Hasan's capital. This happened in the city of Gulbarga. He took the name after the Brahman Gangaras and became Hasan Gangu Brahmani, the latter word later corrupted into Bahmani. While hunting, Hasan met the sadhu again. Feeling love for him, he left

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71 '*Paṇ to jātine yavan navhatā*' or '*to janmane musalmān navhatā*', B. Deshpande, *Ānanda sampradāy…*, 39, 54, 60.

72 B. Deshpande, *Ānanda sampradāy…*, 11, 33; B. Deshpande (ed.), *Śrīpūrṇānandacaritra*, Lātūr: Ārṭī Ofseṭ Prinṭs n.d., 238-240; Cf. *Pūrṇānandacaritra* [online], <https://eap.bl.uk/archive-file/EAP023-1-1-151>, [8 March 2024], 234-243.

73 As is symptomatic in such modern renderings (cf. story of Kabir or Sai Baba), unknown origin means Hindu origin.

74 God Dattatreya is often represented in the guise of *avadhūt* – the one who discarded social norms and lives an ascetic life.

his kingdom and went to Kalyani to the holy man's ashram. There, he was tested by fire ordeal three times and became known as Mrutyunjay.[75]

Deshpande tries hard to contextualize his version of the legend with Mahipati's and Hanumadatmaj's versions and concludes that Hasan Gangu Bahmani was Mrutyunjay. To authenticate his claims, he refers to P. N. Joshi, a well-known Marathi medievalist, and his note on the Gangaras/Hasan story.[76] However, what Deshpande sees as much more important evidence is the Marathi vedantic poetry attributed to Mrutyunjay, including a manuscript of Mrutyunjay's text containing a painting of 'Mrutyunjay Badshah'; or the existence of a dargah, where the latter is currently revered; or even the alleged coal deposits found in Kalyani's ashram – apparently an allusion to the burning of the king.[77] It is perhaps no surprise that Deshpande, in an attempt to ensure the veracity of his rendering of the legend, avoids the debate not only among the historians of Bahmanis but also among literary historians. The latter are cautious enough to concede that although there may have been a member of the Bahmani house who rejected his royal duties, was buried near Kalyani, and is later remembered as a holy man who wrote some poetry, the matter is far from certain. They add that the vedantic poet Mrutyunjay was most probably a different person altogether.[78] Be it as it may, I hope that the peregrination of the Sultan and Brahman legend as discussed in this article is enough to suggest that it is the claims beyond its appropriation by various social agents, the literati, that need to be historicized.

## Conclusion

The Sultan and Brahman legend thus shows the narrative intentions of the literati, who, though connected by their learning, differed in their social backgrounds and their ideas on the king. Although the legend, as recorded by Ferishta, is narratively linked with the *bakhars*, the Indo-Muslim authors writing from the Deccan and Brahman literati had rather different purposes in mind in creating their accounts. The former, being the employees of the Sultans, either creatively sidelined the painful question of the origin of the first Bahmani sultan, or like Tabataba, omitted the discussion. Yet, they preserved the memory of the Sufi patronage of the Bahmanis – a move that also suited their royal patrons – and shaped the

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75  B. Deshpande, *Ānanda sampradāy…*, 55-59. The whole story is more ornate and longer, but I have shortened it to highlight the most important details.

76  *Ibid*., 57.

77  *Ibid*., 66.

78  E.g. Vishveshvar A. Kanole, "Śrīmrutyunjaysvāmīviṣayī kāhī navīn va udbodhak māhitī", *BISM Traimāsik* 141-144, 1955-1956, 55-59.

legend shared in the Deccani courts. The authors of the *bakhars*, by elevating the Brahman Gangaras' agency in the making of the king, turned upside-down their own subordination within the Sultanate administration. Hagiographers, whose works run parallel to or even precede the authors of the *bakhars*, broadened the scope of reinterpretation of the subordination by connecting the sultan not only with the Brahman, but with the ideal of the holy man. Given the Brahmanic origins of most hagiographers, the holy man was also accordingly imagined as a representative of the upper caste ideals of the social, and importantly, the world order. However, taking part in the *bhakti* discourse also allowed the hagiographers to sacralize the sultan and step out of the Brahmanic social order, provided that the conditions for recognizing the authority of holy men were met.

What unites these narrative renderings of the Sultan and Brahman legend, as well as its transmitters and creators, is the shared ideal of a king who is just and sensitive to the needs of his subjects, whether in royal or devotional terms. The modern debate, in its positivistic search for his origins set in contemporary Hindu-Muslim schematism, has completely buried this shared ideal. Whether they were court historians, hagiographers, or authors of *bakhars*, they all had their audience in mind. Sharing the legend, however, not only served their socially informed intention to place the king where their audience would expect him to be, but also displayed their beliefs about the ideal king. The learned discourses about the king, regardless of which tradition they came from, allowed for convergences, and the writer's creativity in shaping the legend provided the chosen content. After all, why would there be just one story when there can be many?

SUMMARY

**The Sultan as a Servant of Brahmans?**
**Tracing the Peregrinations of an Early Modern Legend**

   The paper analyzes a series of legends from the Deccan region of India, which situate the Bahmani Sultan in the position of a Brahmin servant. It starts with a discussion of the intense debates between historians about the origin of the sultan, which took place in the first half of the 20th century. Drawing on these debates, it argues that the legends, as available in Persian and Marathi primary sources, reveal the personal and contemporary goals of their Muslim and mostly Brahmin authors and are directly related to their authors' contemporary ideal of the king (from a just king to a sacralized king), rather than contribute to the knowledge of his personal history as the 20th century historian would interpret them. The article, thus, both contrasts and connects early modern sensibilities and the modern search of the historical past, which bears the repercussions of the past divided into its modernly imagined Hindu and Muslim parts.

**Keywords:** Sultan; Brahman; legend; Bahmanis; kingship; Deccan

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