

CHAPTER - V.

LEGENDS ABOUT SULTĀN MAHMŪD SHĀH

Sultān Mahmūd, like Akbar and Sidharaj Jaysingh, became a favourite figure with story tellers both Rajasthani and Gujarati. Even to-day the people of Gujarat hear legends about him with great interest. The European travellers who visited India during the early years of the sixteenth century appear to have been greatly impressed by him and the strange account which they gave of his personal habits, made his name familiar in Europe.

Controversies about the Sobriquet "Begada" :-

The real derivation of the epithet "Begada" under which Sultān Mahmūd Shāh I, is known to the posterity, has been a matter of controversy.

Sikandar gives two accounts about this title of Mahmūd Shāh. His conquest of two forts, viz. Junagadh and Pavagadh - Champaner, is said to be the source of this title. According to the other version "Vegado" is the name given in Gujarati to a bullock whose horns stretch to right and left like the arms of a person about to embrace, and this was applied to Mahmūd because his moustaches were like those horns. The author makes no attempt to

come to any conclusion but contents himself with the remark, "God alone knows what is true." ¹

Firishtah also repeats both these theories without coming to any conclusion. ²

The Bolognese traveller Ludvico di Varthema, who visited Gujarat about the year 1506, writes about the Sultan, "The Sultān had moustachious under his nose, so long that he ties over his head as a woman would tie her tresses." ³ Jahāngīr, who, on his visit to Ahmedabad in 1618, went to Sarkhiz to visit the tombs of Shaikh Ahmad Khattu and Sultān Mahmūd Shāh I, remarks in his memoirs "Bigara, in the language of people, signifies a turned up moustaches on this account they call him Bigara." ⁴

Wolsely Haig, the author of Cambridge History of India thinks that "the conquest of two forts" by the Sultān is responsible for the Sobriquet Begada. ⁵ Dr. A.K. Majumdar, the author of "Delhi Sultānate" published in the

1. MS - Trans, (F) pp. 41-42.

2. TF - Text, IV, II, p. 404.


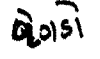
3. The travels of Ludvico di Varthema, (Hak Soc) p.108.

4. Rogers and Beveridge - Memoirs of Jahāngīr P. I p.429.

5. CHI - Vol. III, p. 316.

Bhavan's series of "History and Culture of the people of India", agrees with the theory accepted by Wolseley Haig. Dr. Majumdar argues that with the conquest of Champaner, it seems, Mahmūd received the sobriquet of Beghara, i.e. the conqueror of two forts, on the opposite sides of his Kingdom." ⁶

Prof. Commissariat and Mr. R.B. Jote say that the peculiarly shaped moustaches of the Sultan is responsible for the origin of this sobriquet.

Prof. Commissariat argues that the Sultān's "peculiar moustaches" had resembled the up - turned horns of a kind of bullock known in Gujarat as "Vegado", which connotation is still common in the pastoral classes in Kathiawar. Thus, "If the conquest of two forts secured for Mahmud the sobriquet of Begada, his title would be written as "  " and not as always has been done "  ". ⁷ Therefore "Begado" is the Variant form of "Vegado".

Mr. Jote considers the theory of "the conquest of

6. A.K. Majumdar, Delhi Sultanate (Pub. Bhartiya Vidya-Bhavan) p. 163.

7. M.S. Commissariat - History of Gujarat, Vol. I (Longmans) pp. 232-233 and n.

of two forts "as far from historical and literary truth. He agrees with Prof. Commissariat's arguments and adds that among various types of ships of Gujarat, there was a particular type of ship, which was known in old Gujarati as "Vegado" and the form of this ship was like the horns of "Vegado" bullock. ⁸

In *Mā'athir-i-Mahmūdshāhī*, a contemporary history of Sultan Mahmud's reign, we do not find any mention of this epithet of Sultān Mahmūd. The author describes the Sultān's administrative capacity, religious mindedness etc. but does not say anything about this. Hence it is difficult to accept either of the two theories, about the origin of this sobriquet.

Besides Ludvico di Varthema, another contemporary source of our information, states that he had no chance to see the Sultan in person and he collected heresay information from the people. The traveller describes only the form of moustaches, but does not like Jahāngīr say anything about the derivation of this sobriquet.

The Persian chroniclers and the memoirs of Jahāngīr were written during the Mughal period and it seems that the epithet "Begado" became popular during the last years

8. R.B. Jote - Cultural history of Gujarat (Text) - Islam Yug, p. II (Gujarat Vidya Sabha) pp.476-477.

of the sixteenth century.

About the theory of the "up-turned horns of Gujarati Bullock", it seems unlikely that the personality of Sultān Mahmūd, would have allowed the people to compare his moustaches in such a derogatory fashion to the bullocks. During his life time he might have been popularly known as "Begado" particularly in the village people of Gujarat.

This title can also be explained in context of the popularity of the two forts, which the Sultān conquered. Junagadh and Pavagadh are considered as the seats of Ranakdevi, the Sati and Goddess Kali respectively.⁹ The conquest of these two forts was the great achievement of Sultān Mahmūd Shāh I and therefore to distinguish him, the epithet of "Begado" after the conquest of Champaner must have been given to him. This epithet had come from the people and not from the scholars and so it is very likely that this word might have been incorrectly pronounced as "Begado". To-day too there is a difference between

9. Pavagadh is known for the residence of Kali, the Hindu goddess and Junagadh for Ranakdevi, the Sati. Many legends are connected with these two forts and women in Gujarat sing "Garbas" based on them. Hence these two forts have great connection with the cultural life of Gujarat.

the spoken Gujarati and written Gujarati.

After the decline of the Sultānate in Gujarat, the stories about the immense moustaches of Sultān Mahmūd might have spread in the town and hence popularised the Sultan as "Vegado", but certainly this sobriquet was not popular among the rural population, Jahāngīr's and travellers' accounts seem to be based on the information given by the urban & people.

Therefore, it appears likely that the sobriquet "Begado" has its origin in "the conquest of two forts" and the theory of "up-turned horns of a Gujarati bullock" developed later, that is after the decline of the Sultānate of Gujarat.

There is another theory given by Imām Shāhīs about the origin of this sobriquet. This explanation in itself is not very common. The Sultān married his daughter to the son of Hadrat Shāh Imām-ud-dīn. Imām Shāh, the son of Pīr Haspan Kabīr-ud-dīn of Uchh near Bhavalpur came to Gujarat and settled in Girantha, near Pirana during the reign of Sultān Mahmūd.¹⁰ The saint became popular among the village people for his preachings and miracles. Once Sultān Mahmūd invited the saint for dinner. The

10. Pirana is about nine miles south of Ahmedabad
Cf. W.Ivanow "The sect of Imām Shāh in Gujarat"
JBBRAS (1936 - new series) Vo. XII

Sultān deliberately, to test the spiritual power of the saint, gave him, it is said a cat cooked as meat, the saint got annoyed and said to have made the cat come alive and told the Sultān "Maḥmūd Tu Bighara" (Maḥmūd, you are spoiled). Hence from this day, the Sultan got the sobriquet "Bighara".

The Sultān's enormous appetite and the story of poison :-

The Persian chroniclers describe the gastronomic capacities of Sultān Maḥmūd as quite in keeping with the description given by the European travellers, Ludvico di Varthema and Barbosa. It seems that the quantity of Sultān Maḥmūd's regular meal consisted of one Gujarati maund in weight.¹¹ Five seers of parched rice was used as dessert after the regular meal and two plates of "Samosas" were kept on both sides of his bed. A cup of honey and of a ghee (purified butter) with hundred and fifty golden plaintains was his morning breakfast." Conscious of his inordinate appetite Maḥmūd used to say

11. MS - Trans, (F) pp.41-42 For Abūl Faḥal, Akbar's one of the nobles, similar story is related. It is believed that he used to consume twenty two seers of food. cf. Blochmann 'Ā'in-i-Akbari, I - XXVIII

"If Allah had not given his unworthy slave rule over Gujarat, who would have satisfied his hunger ?" ¹²

Ludvico di Varthema's account of the Sultan's
Personal habits :-

Varthema, in his account, has referred about the poison saturated constitution of the Sultān. He writes that the Sultān was in habit of taking certain quantity of poison everyday and he had become immune to its effect. Whenever he wished to kill any person, he could do so by spitting on that man. He adds that the garments, that were taken off by the Sultān, were never again touched by others. ¹³

Barbosa's Account about the poison :-

Barbosa, a native of Portugal and in the service of the great Albuquerque, writes that the Sultān was given poison in small quantities from the childhood and gradually increased it, so that his body became poison saturated. Further the author informs us that this made him keep up the regular habit of taking poison. ¹⁴

12. MS - Trans (F) -pp.41-42.

13. The Travels of Ludvico di Varthema (Hak Soc.pub)
pp.108-110.

14. Duarte Barbosa, A description of East Africa and
Malabar in 1514. (Pub.Hak Soc.) p.57.

On the basis of the descriptions of European travellers, Samuel Butler, in famous satiric poem "Hudibras", described the Sultān as "The Blue bird of Indian History". His description about the Sultan's food is exaggerated.

" The Prince of Cambay's Food
Is asp and basilisk and toad."

The story of poison Truth and Fiction :-

The Persian chroniclers are silent about this habit of the Sultān.

These travellers accounts are second hand information, for Varthema and Barbosa, both agree that they got this informations from merchants. Hence, it seems that it has more of fiction than of fact.

It is possible that there is some truth in these exaggerated accounts. Varthema has given reasons for this habit of taking poison by the Sultān, and it is likely in the light of the political intrigues of those days and keeping in view the earlier hostility of Qutb-ud-dīn Shāh towards him. Varthema writes, " My companion, asked how it was that this Sultan eats poison in this manner. Certain merchants who were older than the Sultān, answered that his father had fed him poison from his childhood." 15

At the same time it seems unlikely as Barbosa writes, that Sultān Mahmūd took poison in large quantities. This or his subsequent account, cannot be taken as whole truth for it is very likely that the Sultān's habit of taking poison might have made his body poisonous and due to this a man or flies, accidentally, might have succumbed to death.

15. Contd. The Travels of Ludvico di -Varthema. Hak Soc. Pub. pp. 108-110.