

Dara Shukoh: The Lost Lineage of Universalism

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Abstract

Dara Shukoh represents the great literary and spiritual tradition of India that attempted to construct a 'weave of congruence' in the seventeenth century what Kabir and Akbar had done before him in the fifteenth and the sixteenth centuries respectively. He discovered the roots of Islam in the ancient Indian Upanishad. He also seized upon a Qur'anic passage starting that the Qur'an itself is 'in a hidden Book [that] none but the purified shall touch, a sending down from the Lord of all Beings'. Placing this passage side by side with his monotheistic reading of the Upanishads, Dara convinced himself that the 'hidden Book' mentioned in the Qur'an was in fact the Upanishad. He patronised Sanskrit scholars with whose help he translated the *Bhagavad Gita*, *Jog-Vashistha* (*Yog- Vashistha*), under the title of *Tarjuma-i-Jog-Vashistha* (1656), the famous play *Probodha-Chandrodaya* and 50 volumes of *Upanishads* into Persian. The list may still may not be complete for many of Dara's writings and work of art were deliberately obliterated from the royal catalogues.

Keywords: Dara Shukoh, Majma-ul-Bharain, Risala-i-Haqnuma, Sirri-i-akbar, Tragedy of Dara's life, Prince of Great Fortune, *ya takhta ya tabut*.

'Mughal history's biggest puzzle solved by municipal engineer - where is Dara Shukoh buried'? (Menon, 2021) The above line reads like a dialogue of some sensational television serial, but alas, it is the heading of a news piece claiming to have located the 'grave' of Emperor Shah Jahan's eldest son Dara Shukoh. The news also tells us that the Ministry of Culture, Government of India had set up a seven-member panel of the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) for locating the grave of the Mughal prince in 2020. There are about 140 graves in the Humayun Tomb complex of Delhi, and most of them are 'not marked or inscribed'.

The claims of assistant engineer of South Delhi Municipal Corporation, Sanjeev Kumar Singh are contested by some and confirmed by others, but the fact remains that Dara Shukoh, for whom Shah Jahan is known to hold special affection for, met with one of the most tragic deaths in

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the Mughal history. The question here is less about 'who' killed Dara and 'how', but actually the 'why' of the entire episode. Amongst all the claims and repudiations about the location of Dara's grave, one truth is certainly undisputable, that not only the destiny but also the history has been heartless to this tall personality, who is believed to have opened the gates of the subtle knowledge of ancient India to the world. Not only a gentle luminary been forsaken, but the entire lineage of an ethos has been lost. The present paper seeks to trace the marks of this lost lineage in the history of India.

Dara: Early Life and Times

Dara Shukoh was the eldest son of Shah Jahan and his wife Mumtaz Mahal, born in the suburbs of Sagartal Lake near Ajmer, on 30th March 1615 C.E. His birth was said to be the blessing of the Sufi saint Muinuddin Chishti to the father - Shah Jahan, who had performed earnest prayers for a son, since all the earlier children to him had been daughters. The new-born was hailed as *Gul-i-awwalin-i-gulistan-i-Shahi* meaning "The Prime Rose of the Empire" (Qanungo, 1935, p.2). We know comparatively little about the childhood days of Dara because almost all the official court records describe more about the political events, ranks, promotions, royal gifts and visits of Dara once he attained the teenage. Even in his own account in *Majma-ul-Bahrain*, we get a glimpse of Dara when he, along with elder brother Aurangzeb were handed over to Jahangir (grandfather), as hostages on behalf of their father Khurram, who had turned a rebel against Jahangir. Dara was about ten years and his younger brother Aurangzeb was just about seven, when they witnessed the bloody battle between their father and grandfather's armies. As captives of the royal family, their stay at the imperial court was not easy. They were covetously guarded by their step-grandmother Nurjahan and they hardly knew whether they would re-unite with their family or not. Supriya Gandhi reveals, while the young boys were under their grandparent's surveillance, the royal army of Jahangir constantly fired on the tents of their father Khurram. The bloody ordeal for the three princes was over only at Shah Jahan's accession in February 1628, when they got united with the family. (Shuja, the younger son of Shah Jahan was already in the court with

Nurjahan throughout his father's rebellion, for he was the most beloved of the grandchildren). (2019, pp. 56-8).

Political contestations for the throne have been a common feature for a number of ruling dynasties all over the world. Gruesome fights for the throne in the run-up to a dynastic change was a normal phenomenon of Mughal India. Records by European travellers, traders and historians cite conflicts and homicides in this pursuit. However, Shah Jahan's ascendancy to the royal throne defined a new scale of violence in the bloody war for power. Supriya Gandhi observes in this context that though the Mughal history is replete with examples of rebellions by the sons and severe treatment of brothers, but if we look at the count of princes killed by Shah Jahan on his route to the coveted throne, he did 'set a new standard for bloodiness' (2020, p. 62). Faruqi confirms, that by executing five princes in asserting his exclusive right to the throne, Khurram (Shah Jahan) 'set a bloody precedent for future princely rivalry'. (2012, p. 37) A few years down the history, Aurangzeb, the son of Shah Jahan went beyond his father's standards of brutality in his pursuit for the throne. He not only got his elder brother Dara Shukoh captured, humiliated and killed, but according to Manucci's accounts, is also said to have sent the beheaded skull of Dara to his father Shah Jahan, whom Aurangzeb had kept under his captivity. (Manucci, 1907, pp. 359-60)

In his work on Dara, Kalika Ranjan Qanungo cite Manucci's version of Aurangzeb sending the severed head of Dara to Shah Jahan at the suggestion of Raushanara Begum, but also raises doubts about its authenticity by calling Manucci 'a violent partisan of Dara'. According to him, the contemporary chroniclers and the later historians uphold that the cut-off head of Dara was joined to its trunk and sent for the grave. However, he confirms that the body was not washed and neither were any prayers performed for the deceased prince. Nonetheless, Qanungo does comment that given the character of Aurangzeb, presenting the severed head of the son to the father was 'perhaps not too atrocious' to be credited to him. (Qanungo, 1935, pp. 320-21)

Education, Marriage and Family Life

The official chronicles do not say much about the education of the prince. Hasrat reveals that *Padshahnama* by Abdul Hamid Lahori mentions '*ba maktab raftan*' or 'the going to the school' of the prince at the age of thirteen. Dara did the primary and secondary education like the other Mughal princes – Learning *Qur'an*, the standard Persian poetry and history. He cites Mulla Abdul Latif Sultanpuri, as Dara's guide and teacher, responsible for his 'intellectual advancement' and 'scholarly habits'. (1953, p.3) Dara had a speculative mind from the very childhood for he would study even Quran and Hadith with an open mind, and many a times rejected the commentaries of the orthodox school. He took keen interest in reading Aristotle and Plato. Dara had a taste for fine arts like poetry and calligraphy. Rumi was one of his favourite poets. He learnt calligraphy from the famous calligrapher of his times, Abdul Rashid Dailemi. He took more interest in the mystic readings of different saints rather than the valiant deeds of the past warriors and war heroes. (Qanungo 1935, pp. 5-6). Dara was initiated in the Qadiri order and his close association with Mian Mir, Mulla Badakhashi and other saints is said to have brought about a change in his outlook towards life.

Jadunath Sarkar gives an insight into the education system of the times in his work, *Studies in Mughal India*. According to him, education for both Hindus and Muslims was 'purely a private matter', related intrinsically to religion, since it was not a State's duty even in Europe of the 19th century. The Kings and Sultans used to make hefty grants to mosques, monasteries, individual saints and scholars, which made education available to all. However, there were certain renowned scholars in certain parts of the country like Tatta, Ajodhan, Sialkot, Sarhind, Kanauj, Nagor, Ahmadabad, Pattan, Jaunpur who attracted students because of their dedication and speciality in some subjects, and who also 'maintained high schools and colleges'. These were the times when Arabic was not a popular language, but the 'highest Muhammadan education' was imparted in this language. Persian was one of the common language of communication and was 'studied only as an accomplishment necessary for cultivated society' and not as an important mode to serious learning. Mecca was the centre of higher

knowledge for the Muslims and a degree from Mecca 'commanded the highest respect in India'. A scholar with a degree from Mecca was often sought for the princes to impart education (1919, pp. 299-301).

Two incidences that marked the 'adult status' for a Princes in the royal tradition were: marriage and a 'share' in the 'financial resources' of the empire, which meant official ranks or *mansabs* and territories or *jagir*. Dara's wedding to Nadira Begum in February 1633 is guessed to be the costliest marriage of the Mughal history. The records of the marriage particularly mention the details of the expenditure of this grand event. Qanungo mentions the total expenditure to be thirty-two lakh rupees, of which sixteen lakhs were given by Jahanara (sister) from her own inheritance. (1935, p.12). Peter Mundy, an English traveller (also served in the East India Company), who was present in the city at the time of Dara's wedding gives a vivid description of this extravaganza of more than million lights or *chirag*, and lively but 'loud' noise of hundreds of fireworks as a part of the festivities for many days. (Temple 1914, pp. 201-2). Apart from this, numerous lavish gifts were a part of the event, a description of which runs into pages and Shah Jahan made sure that the *Padshah-nama*, the imperial manuscript by Lahori illustrates the same for 'splendour and posterity'. (Tabatabai cited in Gandhi, 2019, pp. 80-1) Though Dara's harem did have the 'usual supplement of slave-girls', he did not enter into any other marital contract. Manucci does mention one Hindu dancing girl Rana Dil, whom Dara is said to have fallen deeply in love with. But, "all his sons and daughters were born of Nadira Begum", a practice that was quite rare in Mughal India. (Qanungo, 1935, pp.12-19).

When Nadira, Dara's 'constant companion and counsellor' passed away due a prolonged illness, he was totally shaken and stumped. He is said to have grown 'frantic with grief' and lost his 'judgement and prudence'. He was so stupefied with grief that despite strong warnings from his sons and followers, entered the house of Jiwan Malik, who treacherously made Dara captive and brought him to Delhi. After the death of his beloved wife, Dara wanted to spend three days in mourning before proceeding to his next expedition to Persia. Since he wanted to fulfil his wife's last wish of laying her in Hindustan, Dara sent her corpse

to Lahore to be buried in the graveyard of his spiritual master and renowned saint Mian Mir. In his bewilderment, he made the major mistake of sending his trusted officer Gul Muhammad along with all the seventy soldiers as escorts to the coffin. He was 'utterly helpless' and 'dependent of his host's fidelity', when Jiwan Malik captured him, (Sarkar, 1925, pp. 333-5) informed Aurangzeb and brought him to Delhi.

Ranks, Promotion, and Emoluments

The education for a prince of royal families was not considered complete unless the same was substantiated with the professional talent of combat and a hands-on learning in warfare and administrative skills. For the purpose, the princes were assigned independent Jagirs to give them practical experience on the ground. Dara had a command of some very big Jagirs, which were larger than the combined Jagirs of all the young princes put together.

Dara received his first military command or *mansab* on October 5, 1633 with a grand ceremonial honour, when he was in his early twenties. It consisted of 12000 *zat*,* 6000 *sawar* and Hissar (Punjab), a territory associated with Babur (*Zat was a rank in the Mansabdar system in Mughal India). Qanungo says, the choice of the territory by the emperor was "not accidental but made deliberately to proclaim the eldest prince as the Heir Designate to the Throne." (1935, p. 21) Thereafter, Dara was accorded 'rapid' and 'high' promotions, breaking 'all previous records of the family.' Within a period of five years his *zat* got increased to 20,000 and *sawars* to 10,000. The upgradation did not stop here, in 1648 and 1656 Dara received two 'lifts' adding 10,000 *zat* each time. Dara also received an extraordinary rank of 60,000 *zat* and 40,000 *sawars* as a recognition of the care and nursing during the illness his father, the emperor. He commanded the viceroyalty of Allahabad, Kashmir, Punjab, Gujrat, Multan, Kabul and the region between Agra and Delhi etc. during his lifetime. (1935, Chapter 3) Dara was a wealthy prince for his military ranks alone fetched him a salary of two crores, seventy five thousand rupees per year. Besides this, the income from his fiefs and Jagirs was around twenty two lakhs.

A point worth noticing in this context is that while Shah Jahan bestowed on Dara all the resources – military and financial, he failed to give him enough opportunity to utilize them on ground. Dara was seldom sent away from the court. The result was that when he was actually faced with resistance on the field and lead real expeditions, he lacked in political and strategic astuteness to manage them well. At the first expedition against the Persians, the Prince was re-called to Kabul (1639). The second expedition of Dara to Qandahar could be won because of the intelligent decisions by Shah Jahan and able generals in his army. However, Dara was given the honour of a victorious general on his arrival back at the Lahore court. Dara was 'renowned as scholar than a soldier' in his empire. Qanungo observes:

During his official career he [Dara] commanded three military expeditions against the Persians, and of these two were almost holiday parades without any enemy to encounter, but in the third fortune deserted him sadly....The Crown prince was reared up like a green-house plant carefully shielded from dangers and disappointments, and watered by the perennial spring of Shah Jahan's affection. (1935, pp. 26-7)

Avik Chanda recounts when Shah Jahan took along Dara to the war of Deccan in December 1629 but, was deliberately kept away from the frontline. Dara Shukoh did gather a feel of the horrors of war field, but only with a 'second-hand' experience. He describes thus:

When the army was on the march, the Prince could see beyond the fringes of the camp: a reddish, arid ground, starving peasants, bodies of slain rebels heaped like rubbish along both sides of the road....There were also those gruesome trophies of war that made Dara cringe: heads that had been hacked off, unwrapped and rolled onto the ground, kicked and spat on, amidst a general wave of approbation....What more horrors would he witness if he were leading the campaign from the front? (2019, p. 35)

That Dara was kept away from the battle-field by Shah Jahan is a fact that many scholars recount, but the explanations for the same is a subject that has not been seriously discussed. What could have been the reason for the same? Dara's own inaptitude to handle the battlefield? Lack of trust by the Emperor? Shah Jahan's over-affection towards Dara? Or, the fact that as the eldest son, he was proclaimed Heir Beneficiary by the Emperor and thus he wanted to protect the 'would be' Sultan? The answer to these questions is not likely to be definite, for most of the historians count either all, or some of the above explanations to the question. The ambit of the present paper doesn't allow to delve this problem in details. However, we shall look into a related issue - the norms of succession in Mughal India and its political attributes.

The War of Succession and its Political Magnitude

Shah Jahan proclaimed Dara as his Heir and publically indicated it time and again. Firstly, by assigning him Hisar - the ancestral territory associated with the lineage of Babur, as a part of Dara's very first *mansab* in 1633, when he was still in his early twenties. Secondly, by giving him speedy promotions and extending his fiefs to larger than the combined strength of all the younger sons, raising his financial returns to the tune of rupees two crores plus annually. Thirdly, according him the title *Prince of Great Fortune* (shāhzāda-yi buland iqbāl), when he had not even completed thirty. Fourthly, keeping Dara by his side during the royal '*Darshan*' to the public in the morning hours. Since the times of Akbar, *Darshan* was the 'sole prerogative of the Emperor', but Dara's face became familiar to the public as 'he stood beside the Emperor at the *gharokha*'. (Chanda, p. 40) There are other signs in Shah Jahan's chronicles that indicate Dara as his choice for the next emperor. Many historians count this inclination of Shah Jahan as the chief cause of rebellion of the younger princes against their father.

The compelling question here is – if Shah Jahan was fully aware that there was no established 'law of primogeniture' in Mughal history of India, why did he envision such a possibility for his eldest son? There existed an 'unspoken rule' of an open-ended system signifying an equal

share for all males of the royal family in ‘father’s patrimony’, which had its genesis in the ‘Turco-Mongol ideas’. The norm of a Persian phrase – *ya takhta ya tabut* (either throne or coffin) conveys the political necessity of the war of succession at every dynastic change, that assumed the primary mode to decide the next emperor. Since this was an accepted norm, all the princes knew that their very existence depended on their achievements, strengths and skills of manoeuvring their way out, linkages of support, and networks of reliable relations - they were trained from the early age to be ‘independent minded, tough, and ruthless’. (Faruqui, 2012, *Introduction*). A letter written by Muhammad Akbar to his father Aurangzeb bears an interesting testimony to this fact. It reads:

The duty of a father is to bring up, educate, and guard the health and life of his son. Praise be to God, [that] up till now I have left no stone unturned in service and obedience, but how can I enumerate the favors of your Majesty? . . . it is brought to the notice [of Aurangzeb] that to help and side with the youngest son is the foremost duty of a revered father always and everywhere, but your Majesty, leaving aside the love of all the other sons, has bestowed the title of ‘Shah’ upon the eldest son [i.e.,Muazzam] and declared him the heir-apparent. *How can this action be justified? Every son has got an equal right in his father’s property. Which religion permits preference of one over the others?* [Emphasis added] (B. N. Reu, “Letters exchanged between Emperor Aurangzeb and his son Prince Muhammad Akbar,” Proceedings - Indian History Congress cited in Faruqui, 2012, p. 11)

Discussing the succession in contemporary Islamic Empires, Faruqui reveals that during 1362-89 and until early 1600, the Ottoman codes of succession were not only narrowed down to the direct heirs of the ruling emperor, but passed to the prince who managed to kill the other contenders inside the Ottoman royal family. These norms were codified and the ruler Mehmed II (r. 1444-6, 1451-81) issued an imperial decree that plainly stated: “For the welfare of the state, the one of my sons to

whom God grants the sultanate may lawfully put his brothers to death". Even the majority of the 'ulama' consented to this without any objections. (Halil Inalcik, cited in Faruqi, 2012, p. 14) However, the Mughal system in India never codified its law of succession, no matter how brutal the process was. And, this could be another reason for Shah Jahan to gamble a chance in favour of his favourite son, who also happened to be the eldest among the contending princes. Establishing the *raison d'eter* for the Mughal laws of succession Faruqi, in his work *The Princes of the Mughal Empire* says, "no matter the outcome of a particular conflict between father and son, I argue, rebellions served to reinforce the foundations of dynastic power and authority". (2012, p. 12) However, Faruqi leaves one wondering, if the brutal and bloody war amongst the sons and between the sons and the fathers of the same family was a source of 'power and authority', then what could be the reasons for the tumbling of the Mughal Empire.

Whatever may have been the laws of succession in Mughal India, and how bloody the battle amongst the political contenders, the common people did not lose their sense of wisdom, justice, pity and compassion. They may, or may not have taken the relevant action at the appropriate time, but did seem to register their reactions at the injustices, some even at the cost of losing their lives. The gruesome battle for the throne generally limited itself to the royal family and at the most the family confidants. Jadunath Sarkar gives a peek into the day when on August 29, 1659 Dara was paraded on the roads of Delhi in chains along with his fourteen year old son Sipihr Shukoh. He describes the kindness that Dara exhibited in the nastiest of the life situations, in response to the frenzy amongst the audience:

Dara was seated in an uncovered *hawda* on the back of a small female elephant covered with dirt. By his side was his second son Sipihr Shukoh, a lad of fourteen; and behind them with a naked sword sat their gaoler, the slave Nazar Beg....The captive heir to the richest throne in the world...was now clad in a travel-tainted dress of the coarsest cloth, with a dark dinge-coloured turban, such as only the poor wear, on his head, and no necklace or jewel

adorning his person. His feet were chained, though his hands were free. Exposed to the full blaze of an August sun, he was taken through the scenes of his former glory and splendour. In the bitterness of disgrace, he did not raise his head, nor cast his glance on any side, but sat "like a crushed twig". Only once did he look up, when a poor beggar from the road-side cried out, "O Dara! When you were master, you always gave me alms; today I know well thou hast naught to give." The appeal touched the prisoner; he raised his hand to his shoulder, drew off his wrapper and threw it to the beggar. (Sarkar. 1925, p. 336)

The parade was organised by Aurangzeb to ridicule Dara in the public eye. On the contrary, the outcome proved otherwise as the "pity of the citizens swept every other feeling away". The incident proved unfortunate for Aurangzeb and fatal for Dara. Aurangzeb probably did not expect the public outburst of love and sympathy for Dara at the sight of his 'fallen greatness'. (Sarkar. 1925, p. 337). Dara had been popular amongst the 'lower orders' because of his 'lavish charity'. Francois Bernier who stayed for 12 years at the court of Mughals and was present at the scene gives an account of the incident. He says:

...when the prince was brought to the gates of Delhi, it became a question whether should he be sent to Gwalior or should he be passed through the city to strike the terror....The crowd assembled was immense; and everywhere I observed people weeping and lamenting the fate of Dara in the most touching language....From every quarter I heard piercing and distressing shrieks,...men, women and children wailing as if some mighty calamity had happened to themselves...for the Indians have a very tender heart. (1916, pp. 97-9)

The evening of August 29th, the parade day, Dara's fate was the subject of debate in the 'emperor's Hall of Private Audience' or *Diwan-i-Khas* of the Delhi Fort, where some ministers pleaded for Dara's life. But, many others including Dara's own younger sister Raushanara were against any

mercy for the *infidel* who had turned a *kafir*. Sarkar says, "The pliant theologians in the Emperor's pay signed a decree" for the death of Dara on the grounds of "deviation from Islamic orthodoxy". These, so called pillars of the 'Canonical Law and Faith' feared several instabilities and conflicts if Dara was left alive. Thus, the official history published under Aurangzeb's reign 'justified' this act of political murder as a "necessity to protect the faith and Holy Law". For the sake of the State it was considered 'unlawful' to let Dara live, because he had proved to be a 'destroyer of public peace'. (Sarkar. 1925, pp. 337-8). Dara did write to his brother for mercy, but the overall political situation after the parade deteriorated to such an extent that Aurangzeb could possibly not consider the plea of his brother.

As stated earlier, the parade proved *unfortunate* for Aurangzeb and *fatal* for Dara. Unfortunate for Aurangzeb because the very next day a riot broke out in the city. The people came to know about the treachery committed by Jiwan Malik in capturing Dara. On August 30, when he along with his Afghan followers was on their way to the Court, they were first 'mobbed and abused', and then 'hurled stones', 'clods of earth', and beaten with sticks by the people. They are said to have been instigated by one Haibat an *ahadi* (a gentleman trooper - a guard) and joined by 'beggars', 'ruffians' and other 'desperadoes' from every lane and bazaar of Delhi. Not only this, the women joined the commotion from over their roof tops and threw ashes and pots filled with filth on the trope. Some of Jiwan's people were wounded and killed, while he himself had to be escorted under shield.

On the other hand, the parade proved fatal for Dara because immediately after this incident Aurangzeb ordered the execution of Dara. The same night of 30th August 1659, Dara was murdered in the prison, his head brought to Aurangzeb who got it washed and made sure that it was that of Dara and not substituted for some other person. (1925, pp. 339-40). Political murders are with a reason and a target. In order to fulfil the purpose and create the required fright in the public memory, the very next morning Aurangzeb (August 31, 1659) ordered the dead remains of Dara Shukoh placed on the back of an elephant and taken along the bazaars and roads of Delhi. The people standing on the

sides 'wept at the ghastly spectacle'. Haibat, the *ahadi*, who was found to have instigated the fellow citizens to attack Jiwan Malik was sentenced to the cruellest death by Aurangzeb. He was ordered to be 'sawn alive into two halves', an example of atrocious barbarism under Aurangzeb's reign. (Kanungo, 1935, pp. 319-20) Supriya Gandhi cites Muhammad Faiz Bakhsh who condemns Aurangzeb for his hypocrisy in his work *Tarikh-i-Farahbakhsh*:

...that one who clothed himself as Aurangzeb did, with a cloak of godly reverence, piety, devotion, consistency, sanctity and moderation, should treat his own father and brothers so foully as he did; should murder Dara Shukoh pleading the law of the Muslim faith as his authority. . . all this is certainly inconsistent with piety and love of God. (2019, p.248)

Violence breeds violence, for down two centuries, the Great Mughal Epoch closed down with bloodier scene. Sarkar writes:

On 22nd September 1857....Princes Mirza Mughal, Mirza Quraish Sultan, and Mirza Abu Bakht, the sons and grandsons of the last Emperor of Delhi...were shot dead in cold blood by a foreign soldier...devoid of...pity....The bodies of the last of the legitimate Timurids were flung like carcasses on the terrace of the Police Office and exposed to the public gaze, as Dara's had been. *In brother's blood did Aurangzeb mount to the throne, and in the blood of his children did the royal name pass away from his race.* (1925, p. 341)

Dara as a Person

Historians and European travellers like Bernier and Manucci describe Dara as a man of varied qualities, like 'courteous in conversation, polite and extremely liberal', kind and compassionate with a dignified and joyous persona. But, is also said to have carried some typical traits like holding too high an opinion about himself, not open to any useful advice by others. This quality deterred even his well-wishers to inform him about the stratagem of his enemies and brothers. Dara believed

that he could accomplish anything with the power of his mind. At times, he was disrespectful even to the *ulamas*. But, his anger was 'seldom more than momentary'. Born as a Muslim, participated in the activities of all the religions. While he 'publically professed his adherence to his faith, Dara was in private a Hindu to Hindus and a Christian to Christians. He is said to have been in regular touch with Hindu scholars and doctors and also bestowed on them large sums of pensions. Dara is said to have been close to Father Buzie, a Jesuit. (Bernier 1934, p.6)

Niccolao Manucci, was a Venetian, who reached India in January 1656, took service under Dara Shukoh and later Shah Alam. At intervals he set up practice as a doctor without any medical training, travelled all over India and passed his old age at Madras and Pondicherry, dying in 1717. His life in India covered more than sixty years and is said to have been quite friendly to Dara. He also describes Dara as over-confident and despising those who tried to give him advice, but it was 'very easy to discover his intentions'. Manucci marks an over-positivist trait when he says, Dara thought that everyone loved him and also that the fortunes would favour him 'invariably'. Bernier and Manucci seem to converge when it comes to describing Dara's interaction with the peers of different religion, like, praising the tenets of Muhammad while meeting a Mohammedan, admiring Jewish religion when he met a Jew and hailing Hinduism when he met the Hindu saints. He was most 'delighted' in the company of the Jesuit Fathers, and enjoyed the most when they would overcome everyone in their arguments. He sometimes drank with fathers but with discretion. While this attribute of respecting different religions is a streak of open-mindedness in today's context, did not impress the European travellers. They seem to concur with the common impulse of the time that 'Dara had no religion', the reason that Aurangzeb labelled him a *kafir*. (Manucci, 1907, p. 221-4).

When it comes to describing Dara as a person, one encounters varied and conflicting opinions. One of the reason can be that he, being the most prospective contender for the hot seat by the fact that he was indicated in many ways by Shah Jahan as his Heir Designate, Dara was under the sharp scanner of all and was expected to be the perfect person worthy of the Throne in all respects – character, military

strength, political acumen, sharp and diplomatic, kind and compassionate and above all a good Mussalman. In Qanungo, we find a more thoughtful and considerate view of Dara as a person. He says:

...chapters...dealing with his political career, are an ample commentary on the defects of Dara's character. But his virtues were his own, while his weaknesses, which leaned only to virtue's side, were the unhappy accidents of a combination of circumstances. These defects are the more deplorable...because they loom unreasonably large because of his failure in the field of politic and war. However, there was something in Dara which in spite of his weaknesses and indiscretion endeared him to all but his...enemies. Prince Dara Shukoh is often pronounced as a failure in history. This is perhaps an injustice to Dara as well as an insult to the modern conception of history. (1935, pp 373-4)

Qanungo cites Manucci, who happened to meet a person Abdul Qasim on his tour to Patna. He sincerely regretted that he could not get enough opportunity to show his love and devotion to the Prince, while repenting for having done some wrong and injustice to Dara. Qanungo says:

History cannot but judge a man by the criterion of the sum-total of the good done by him to his own species. Judged by this standard, Aurangzeb's half a century of barren rule was the most conspicuous failure in Indian history. (1935, p. 374)

There is no doubt that Dara proved a failure in war and political stratagem, but then by these standards even the other princes of the same family met with almost the same fate, though trained rigorously in all political aspects. Dara devoted his time to some finer task of carrying out literary accruals in order to promote peace and harmony among the nobler minds of Islam and Hinduism, and further the cause of collective concord in the society. The young Abdul Kalam Azad in his twenties (1910) expressed about Dara in an essay that was translated later. He said:

It is a blot on historical veracity that the pen which recorded the history of the Mughal period was always held by Dara Shukoh's enemies...From his early years Dara displayed the attributes of a Dervish...The overwhelming proof of his taste is that in pursuing his goal he lost the distinction between the temple and mosque. (Hameed, Trans. 1991, pp.29-30)

Richard Eaton observes the purpose of Dara's scholarly engagements with pious luminaries like saint Baba Lal:

One of his [Dara's] preoccupations centred on a classic theme of Indian philosophy: the problem of how to reconcile the renunciation of the world, necessary for achieving spiritual liberation, with engagement in the world, necessary for upholding and maintaining a functioning society... for a ruler charged with overseeing the social order of an entire kingdom, the contradiction could be especially acute...While returning to north India from Afghanistan, where he had just led a failed effort to recapture Kandahar from the Iranians, he passed through Lahore, where he visited a Punjabi holy man, Baba Lal. In the wake of his stunning defeat at Kandahar...the question he puts to Baba Lal...focused principally on the compatibility of rulership and renunciation. (Eaton, 2019, p.302)

We are reminded of Majumdar here when he says, "Herein lies the greatest tragedy of Dara's life. He had an aptitude for a higher spiritual life, but he had to spend his days amid the sordid materialism of the Mughal palace. His special qualities of the head and heart were meant for the ennobling of mankind, but he was called upon to use them for gaining a royal throne." (Majumdar in Foreword to Qanungo, 1935 p. vi)

The literary activities of Dara can be distinctly divided into two phases. Till the completion of his *Risala-i-Haqnuma* in 1647, he engaged himself mainly with the familiarity of mystic Islam and Sufi theosophy, under

the guidance of Mian Mir and Mulla Shah Badakhshi, the two Sufi saints. From 1647 till 1657 Dara dedicated himself to the study of Jewish, Christian and Hindu religions with the purpose of discovering the underlying principles of these religions and to harmonize them with the tenets of Islam. It was during this period that he met, among others, saint Sarmad; the four Christian Jesuit Fathers – Estanilas Malpica, Pedro Juzarte, Father Henri Busee and Heinrich Roth.

The Books authored by Dara Shukoh in Persian:

(1639) *Safinat-ul-awliya* – or Lives of Muslim Saints, his first work.

(1642) *Sakinat-ul-awliya* - dealing mainly with life of Sufi Mian Mir.

(1647) *Risala-i-Haqnuma* – or Compass of the Truth.

(1650-56) *Majma-ul-Baharain* - or Mingling of Two Oceans

(1657) *Sirr-i-Akbar* – or The Great Secret or The Secret of Secrets - the last and the greatest literary achievement of Dara Shukoh.

Minor works:

(1652) *Hasanat-ul-Arifin* –written mainly to meet the public criticism of his pantheistic views, seen as un-Islamic by the orthodoxy.

Tariqat-ul-Haqiqat – another work on pantheism.

Translation Work

With the help of Sanskrit scholars whom Dara had patronised, he commissioned translation work of the *Bhagavad Gita*, *Jog-Vashistha* (*Yog- Vashistha*), under the title of *Tarjuma-i-Jog-Vashistha* (1656), the famous play *Probodha-Chanrodaya* and 50 volumes of *Upanishads* into Persian.

The list may still be only partial because many of Dara's literary and work of art were purposefully destroyed from the royal collections. We come across various royal edicts, writings, travelogues and chronicles that describe Dara as the doomed prince. But, one cannot deny the fact that close to fifty years of Aurangzeb's rule after the assassination of Dara was long enough a time for the emperor to ensure the obliteration of Dara Shukoh's memory from all tangible records. Supriya Gandhi reveals:

The new emperor was likely responsible for having his brother's name scratched or blotted out from the valuable manuscripts that bore his autograph... Though a manuscript of Dara's earliest work, the *Safinat-ul-auliya*, still survives, written and corrected in the prince's distinctive hand, there do not seem to be any remaining autographed manuscripts of Dara's *Majma-ul-bahrain* or *Sirri-i-akbar*." (2019, p. 248)

Conclusion: The Lost Lineage of Universalism

Scholars and historians see a political motive behind Dara's engagement with saints and seers of different religions. Whereas Hasrat rejects any political intent behind his spiritual probes, which was the case with Akbar for he wanted to build a 'political synthesis' for the 'divergent creeds' in India, (1953, p.6-7) Munis Faruqi (2014, p. 57-9) and Supriya Gandhi (2019, p.189) seem to converge on the political reasons behind his literary endeavours, for Dara wanted to project himself as the most worthy for the throne. Whereas the possibility of a political motive behind all of Dara's religious and spiritual endeavours cannot be ruled out, one argument may well be considered. To pursue the political motive of being a 'worthy monarch in the public eye', fifteen years of scholarly engagements seems little too long a period. It would have been enough for Dara to have sponsored the projects under his name and guidance, rather than meticulously engaging with *sufis, saints and yogis* and carrying out the literary work. The area of religious philosophies may not be that enlivening so as to enlist the interests of

anyone for that long a period (till death), unless one starts finding the inquiry satiating of a 'Spiritual Quest'.

Dara was not the first to show reverence to Sufis and saints, Jahangir and Shah Jahan both are commonly known to visit Hindu saints and Sufis quite often. As a teenager, when Dara had fallen seriously ill, Shah Jahan had taken him to Lahore to Mian Mir, the famous Sufi Qadiri of Punjab. The blessings had cured Dara, but at the same time left a mark of deep veneration for the Sufi saint, which finds a mention by him in his work *Safinat-ul-awliya*. In fact, Dara is said to have accepted the governorship of Allahabad in 1645 because of his inclination towards philosophy and mysticism. Allahabad was the seat of Allah Mohammad Allahabadi, the most famous interpreter of the philosophy of Ebn al-Arabi (1165 - 1240) in that period. Inquiring into the influences of *Majma-ul-Bahrain* or Mingling of Two Oceans, Manisha Mishra discusses in details how Dara strove to 'reconcile' the philosophies of Hindus and Muslims, knowing well the 'intricacies' of the two. Not only this, he also sought to 'synthesise' the diverse Indian 'philosophical schools of Ramanuja's *Vishistadvaita*, Shankara's *advaita Vedanta*' and the prevailing 'Pauranic views' of the times.

After completing *Majma-ul-Bharain*, Dara started the translation work of the Upanishads and established a close connection between these texts and the Quran. He got deeply convinced that the religious truth is not only contained in the books that Quran explicitly mentions - the Torah, Psalms, and the Gospels. In Quran itself a 'hidden book' not yet discovered is mentioned. Dara claimed that the "protected book" literally 'hidden' or well-guarded (*kitab maknun*) mentioned in the Quran is non-other than the Upanishads. He said this, one; because the Upanishads talk about the same concept of the transcendental unity of the absolute as does the Quran. Two; they are the oldest revelation, as contained in the Vedas and in particular the Vedanta. Since Dara deemed it necessary to reveal this wisdom to his fellow Muslims, he embarked upon his famous work - *Sirr-i-akbar* or the Secret of Secrets, by undertaking the translation of 52 Upanishads with the help of a team of Brahmin scholars. In the preface to *Sirr-i-akbar* Dara Shukoh communicates that he translated the Upanishads with the help of

pandit scholars of Banaras 'without any worldly motive'. That he regards them as 'Divine Secrets' and this is the reason that he gives them the title of *Sirr-i-akbar*. To him, the Veda seemed 'the essence of Monotheism', and also the 'most ancient book' that held in them the guarded secrets. This is how the things that were unknown became known, and that which was 'incomprehensible became comprehensible to this *faqir*'. Having made the 'bold assertion' that might send a shock wave to the orthodoxy, Dara takes a step back and writes in the preface itself, saying that the translation of Upanishads is undertaken for the benefit of his children, seekers of truth and his own self and "not for the general public". (Hasrat, 1953, pp. 268-9) According to Friedmann, "Dara Shukoh's view of the relationship between the Hindu religious literature and the Qur'an seems to be his most significant contribution to Islamic thought." (cited in Hayat, 2016, p. 52) Hayat also cite Filliozat and Tara Chand who acknowledge the scholarship of Dara and describe *Sirr-i-akbar* as a 'masterpiece' and an "achievement of the highest order."

In the house of Timurs, Dara Shukoh was undoubtedly the most learned prince, with a 'passion' to discover the 'principle of unity-in-plurality in revealed religions'. He took the initiative and the courage to sincerely venture into activities of literary discussions and researches in different religions. He was convinced that the diverse religions differ only in manifestations and not in their essence. Believed that by popularising the 'great truth' of *tawhid* or divine unity, he would be able to 'balm' the soring wounds of religious discords in the society that was 'eating into the vitals of the mankind'. He tried to establish this "not by repudiating the religion of Muhammad but by reading an original meaning into it, by removing the stigma of narrowness from the noble brow of Islam".

Even if we discount the chronicles, official records, travelogues and the writings done especially during the time of Aurangzeb, there is no dearth of material on Dara that is not only sympathetic to him, but is full of affection, and reverts him for the value that his work carries to the world of knowledge and wisdom. In fact, Dara's work thrived after his death. After some years of his killing, his literary work started getting

picked up by readers beyond the known circles of people and topography. A Persian copy of *Majma-ul-Bahrain*, along with a text of Dara's dialogues with saint Baba Lal was found in the collection of a Hindu writer and a seeker Debi Das, apparently having no connection with either the royal court or Dara. Debi Das is said to have completed his compilation *Khulasat-ul-khulasa* (or Quintessence of the Quintessence) in the thirteenth year of Aurangzeb's rule. Another copy of *Majma-ul-Bahrain* was found in Arabic translation, bearing more than one names of the owners, reflecting its journey through a 'lineage of Qadiri-affiliated Sufis'. With notes written on the margins in Arabic, the manuscript not only suggests the 'transregional reach' of Dara's work, but also indicate the 'curiosity of the Arabic-speaking migrants or travellers to India' who would have found the text fascinating and thus worthy of translation.

Sirr-i-akbar or 'The Great Secret' found notable readers amongst the Persian reading Hindus of the subcontinent. In the absence of the photocopier machines in those times, the texts were usually written down by transcribers. A few copies of *Sirr-i-akbar* had Muslims transcribers who had scribed the text for their Hindu patrons like the case of some 'Ashraf Ali' who is said to have 'copied the text for Rai Sankat Prasad, the rais of Benaras in 1875'. The details can be corroborated since several copies were found with the 'opening invocation' to Lord Ganesh, the Hindu God. One place in India, where *Sirr-i-akbar* was extensively found is Kashmir, where one can find several manuscripts bearing the names of Kashmiri Pandit scribes.

Dara's work proved to be ground-breaking, lending it the universal streak for all times to come. It was through this work that the West got introduced to the Upanishads of India. French Orientalist A. H. Anquetil-Duperron, who was keenly interested in Hindu scriptures for a long time, got hold of Dara's Persian copy of *Sirr-i-akbar* through a friend Gentil in India. Gentil, who was appointed as a French Resident at the court of Oudh and was aware of the significance of *Sirr-i-akbar*, sent a copy to his friend Duperron in France in 1775, who meticulously translated it to Latin. (Cross, 1998, pp. 123-9) This is how the Upanishads reached Europe, found their way to Libraries and the

“bedside of the German philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer. By such circuitous pathways, interest in ancient Indian philosophy quickened in nineteenth-century Europe.” (Eaton, 2019, p. 303) Dara could not possibly have foreseen that the Latin translation of his work by A. H. Anquetil Duperron, which appeared in Europe in 1801 under the title *Oupnek'hat, Id Est Secretum Tegendum*, would arouse among European thinkers an immense interest in Indian mystical philosophy and would lend India an image of a ‘home of all mystical wisdom’. (Huart and Massignon, p. 287, cited in Encyclopaedia Iranica).

Few events prove to be the ‘significant milestones of world’s history’ for they carve the pathway to the future course of mankind. One such event was the defeat of Dara at the battle of Samugarh (1658) that categorically outlined the fact, that the ‘Age of Akbar’, signifying a ‘period of nationalism in politics and culture’ and the ‘revival of letters and fine art’, was over. (Qanungo, 1935, pp. 258-9) Aurangzeb is abominated as a religious bigot, impelled by the hatred of Hindus. His aspiration to Islamize its non-Muslim populations at all costs did invite a looming threat of disintegration on the Mughal Empire. No matter, what the norms of open-ended struggle lay before the contenders, Dara is generally seen as a more tolerant and open-minded person, universally glorified as a champion of Mughal pluralism - *a lineage of universalism*. There cannot be more apt words to affirm the contribution of Dara Shukoh than these word of Qanungo, “The world has not become richer in any way by the long reign of Aurangzeb; but it would have been certainly poorer without a Dara Shukoh.” (1935, p. 375) It is high time that we accorded Dara Shukoh the prestige and recognition that is due to him in the history for so long. In fact, anyone intending to find a viable solution to the religious acrimony and bitterness that can be witnessed around the world in the present times, should step into the footsteps of Dara and begin the work where he has left. The message that Dara conveyed by his work was one of *Unity of Divinity*. If this motive is termed as ‘political’, so be it, for noble politicians are a rarity in this world.

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