

## **DARA SHIKOH: MYSTICAL AND PHILOSOPHICAL DISCOURSE**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Dara Shikoh (1615-1659) was the eldest son of Emperor Shahjahan and designated crown prince. But in this discourse the objective is to explore and give an overview of his mystical and philosophical thoughts rather than discussing his royal credentials. He occupies a unique place among the Mughal princes for his comparative study of Muslim mysticism and classical Hindu philosophy. Being a follower of the Qadiri order of Sufis and a disciple of Miyan Mir, Dara believed that the mystical traditions of both Hinduism and Islam spoke of the same truth. His younger brother and main political rival for the throne of Mughal Empire in India, Aurangzeb, on the contrary held fundamentalist spiritual and religious views about Islam. Later, when he became emperor of India after the defeat and assassination of Dara Shikoh his views were clearly reflected in his policy of intolerance against Hindus and Shi'as. Dara Shikoh greatly contributed to the study of ancient Indian spirituality along with Islamic mystical traditions by highlighting commonalities between classical Hindu and Islamic Sufi teachings. Like many Muslim Sufis he was of the views that their mingling could bring about harmony between the Hindus and the Muslims subjects of Mughal Empire. Lack of tolerance is one of the main causes of current wave of sectarianism and religious extremism which is creating havoc in Pakistani society. This piece of study to some extent could be helpful in promotion of so wanted religious tolerance in our society.

**KEYWORDS:** Dara Shikoh, Muslim Sufis, 'Yogavasisathatha', Dara Upanishads

### **INTRODUCTION**

In the beginning of the 13<sup>th</sup> century a new Muslim state – Sultanate of Delhi -emerged in the north India as a result of the conquest of the region by the Turks, Afghans and other conquerors hailing from Central Asia, Afghanistan and Iran. In the Sultanate of Delhi the Sunni version of Islam, the religion of the new rulers became the official religion and Farsi became the official language of the court apart from being the language of poetry and historiography. The links of North India with the Muslim states of Near and Middle East became more frequent. After the destruction of the centers of learning in Iran, and Central Asia by the Mongols, the importance of Delhi, Lahore and other cities of North India began to rise. Many scientists, poets, religious scholars and Sufi mystics from the regions fallen under the Mongol yoke settled in the cities of North India.

In the following centuries, the close interaction between the local Indian cultures and the cultural traditions of the Muslim world led to the evolution of a new phenomenon in Indian history – a mixed Indo-Muslim culture which combined elements of various traditions.

One of the manifestations of this Indo- Muslim synthesis in the domain of spirituality was the emergence and popularity of a number of reformist religious trends. These religious reformers called for bringing the Hindus and the Muslim closer to each other by mutual accommodation of each others' religious teachings. Some of the reformers rejected the cast system of Hinduism and condemned poverty, and social inequality in Hindu society. These teaching are collectively called Bhagti<sup>1</sup>.

The trends of Indo-Muslim cultural fusion were visible not only in the grassroots movements like Bhagti but also in the poetry and philosophy of the Muslim and Hindu feudal aristocracy close to royal courts. However, in the aristocratic version of Bhagti like trends there was no place for the ideas of social equality and protest against the caste system. Most probably, it was the outcome of the partial assimilation of the local Hindu elite by foreign Muslim ruling circles, which joined hands to protect their common political and socio-economic interests. The most astute representatives of the Muslim and local feudal elite realized that the close cooperation among the ethnically and religiously diverse elements of the feudal classes could better protect their social positions and political stability of the newly established Muslim state. The tendencies of collaboration between Muslim and local Hindu feudal elite were particularly visible during the rule of the great Mughal emperor Akbar (1556- 1605). He even introduced a new religion Deen-e-Illahi in which he tried to combine the selected elements of a number of religions- Muslim mysticism, Hinduism, Jainism, Zoroaster-ism and others. The main objective of this venture was to ensure political stability of the Mughal Empire. However, this religion failed to make advance out side the close circle of the emperor.

In the 30-50s of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, the most prominent representative of these syncretistic religious- philosophical thoughts was Dara Shikoh, who by his literary and philosophical works greatly contributed to the spiritual treasure of subcontinent.

Dara Shikoh (1615-1659) was the eldest son of the Mughal Emperor Shahjahan. He was nominated as crown prince therefore occupied an important position in the court. He was the true follower of the religious and philosophical ideas of his great grandfather Emperor Akbar.

From his early years, Dara manifested his keen interest in ancient Indian religious and philosophical literature. On his demand a number of ancient Hindu religious-philosophical treatises- ‘Yogavasishatha’, Bhagavad-Gita and mystic drama ‘Prabodha ‘Chandrodhaya’ were translated into Persian. The interest of Dara Shikoh to religious books of Hinduism provided the Muslim orthodox mullahs and Aurangzeb the pretext to accuse him in 1652 of heresy and deviation<sup>2</sup>.

Dara Shikoh studied not only ancient Indian religious literature like Vedas and Upanishads but also had a good knowledge of Jewish and Christian religious literature such as Pentateuch<sup>3</sup>, New Testament and Muslim Sufi writings<sup>4</sup>. He was not the first among the Muslim aristocrats to show his interest in epical and religious literature of the Hindus. The famous historian of Akbar, Abu Al Fazal and his elder brother Faizi also studied the epical and religious books of the Hindus and took part in the Persian translation of Mahabharata<sup>5</sup>.

Dara Shako’s world outlook was formed under immense influence of Sufi teachings which were very popular in the East for many centuries. The pantheistic ideas of Sufism emerged under the direct influence of classical Persian poetry in which Dara was well versed. At that time a number of prominent Persian poets like Mirza Abdul Qadir Bedil Azeemabadi, Mullah Jami Bekhud, Mir Jalal-ud-Din Siadat Lahori were living in India. At the end of 16<sup>th</sup> and the beginning of 17<sup>th</sup> century many other Persian poets such like Nazim Harwai Harati, Mir Muzzudin Muhammad Fitrat Meshhadi, Sarmad Kashani, Kalim Abu Talib Hamdani also visited India. Many Central Asian poets like Shokat Bukhari, Baba Rahim Mushrab, Maleka Samarkandi and others were frequent visitors of the Mughal court<sup>6</sup>.

It is also known that Dara Shikoh was not only well versed in his contemporary Sufi Persian poetry but he also knew classical Persian literature. He studied great Persian poets like Jalal-ud-Din Rumi (1207-1273), Abdul Majid Majadud Sanai (died in 1131), and Nur-ud-Din Abdul Rahman Jami (1414-1482) and Khamisa of Nizami. In 1651 a copy of this book he presented to Muhammad Hakim Jauhari Tabrezi with his signature.

It should be noted that besides Sufi poets Dara was deeply influenced by contemporary Sufi priests and Hindu Yogis. He was a great patron of not only Muslim but also Hindu, Christian, and Jew religious scholars, philosophers, and poet-mystics. Apart from two prominent Sufi saints Mian Mir and Mullah Shahi Badshahi of the Qadria Order, to which Dara himself belonged, his philosophical and religious outlook evolved under the influence of the Hindu Yogi Baba Lal Das Bairagi, who is considered the founder of various trends in Bhagti Movement<sup>7</sup>.

It is also well known that Dara had relations with Sufi mystic Sarmad Kashani. Sarmad was a Jew from Iranian city of Kashan with a good knowledge of ancient books of Judaism. Later, he was converted to Islam and renamed himself as Muhammad Saeed and migrated to India.

The religious thoughts of Sarmad were even more eclectic than that of Baba Lal Das. In his poetry Sarmad propagated syncretistic religious ideas. Many letters written by Dara Shikoh to Sarmad and vice versa are well preserved. In these letters Dara had addressed Sarmad as 'My Master and Preceptor'<sup>8</sup> while he had used 'My friend' for Dara<sup>9</sup>. It means their relations were quite frank.

Dara had left a substantial amount of literary heritage. His early works include 'Safinat-al- Aulia' 1640, 'Sakinat-al-Aulia' in 1642, 'Risala-e-Haq Nama' (1651-1653). These books are about life and works of Sufi saints. In another work 'Hasanat-al- Arfeen' 1652 Dara has collected sayings of the saints belonging to different orders. "Mukalma-e-Baba Lal w Dara Shikoh" written in 1653 contains Dara's dialogue with Bhagti leader Baba Lal Das Bairagi. This book has invited the curiosity of various scholars interested in the study of Hindu spirituality. There are several discussions in this book mainly on the subjects of Indian philosophy and mythology<sup>10</sup>.

However, the most valuable among the works of Dara are his three last books; 'Majma-al-Bahrain' (Mingling of the Oceans) (1653), and 'Ser-al-Asrar' (secret of the secrets) or 'Ser-al-Akbar' (great secret) a translation of Hindu religious book Upanishad completed in 1657, and collection of his poetry under title 'Akseer-e-Azam' (the mightiest Elixir).

In his work 'Majma-al-Bahrain' Dara had not only explained pantheistic terms of the Indian philosophical literature but also had given their Muslim Sufi synonyms. In this work Dara tried to discover the affinities between Vedic and Sufi perceptions of the ultimate truth.

This work of Dara was re-translated into Sanskrit in 1708 under title 'Samudra Sangma'<sup>11</sup>.

As early as in 1640 Dara began translation of Upanishads with help of some Hindu Pundits from Sanskrit into Persian. Dara believed that the hidden book 'Kitab al-Maknun' is actually the Upanishads that has been mentioned in the Sura 56/78 of the Holy Koran. Since the Holy Koran thus points to it, its knowledge is incumbent upon the Muslims, for it is 'a treasure –house of monotheism'<sup>12</sup>. There are few thoroughly conversant with it even among the Hindus. Thereby he also wanted to solve the mystery which underlies their efforts to conceal it from the Muslims.

At present this work of Dara survives fewer than two rather different titles. In the British Museum it is preserved as 'Ser-al-Asrar' and in Cambridge Royal College as 'Ser-al-Akbar'. As the content of both copies is identical most probably mismatch of titles is due to the mistake of the copy writer.

In 1775, 'Ser-al-Asrar' reached Europe and in 1801-1802 it was published in Latin by a French scholar and traveler, Anquetil Duperron who remained in India for some time. Later, from Latin it was translated in different languages of Europe<sup>13</sup>.

Most probably one of the last works of the Dara Shikoh was the collection (diwan) of his poetry 'Akseer-e-Azam'. The manuscript of this book earlier considered lost forever was found in a personal collection in the 30s of the 20<sup>th</sup> last

century. This manuscript was first published in the Journal of Royal Asian Society of Bengal in 1939. *Akseer-e-Azam*'' is very important for the study of philosophical viewpoint of Dara Shikoh<sup>14</sup>.

In this work Dara has explained his pantheistic world outlook through poetry. In the perception of Dara, the world and nature are parts of God and the emanation of His essence. Therefore, everything that exists in this world carries divine essence. All remaining that does not carry His essence is mirage, and illusion of the man<sup>15</sup>.

According to Dara, man himself is not only the creation of God but also the part of His essence, therefore he calls for cognizing oneself in order to know the essence of God. In his poetry he writes that man is like a drop and the God is like Ocean<sup>16</sup>

It is characteristic of pantheism to consider the unity of opposites as the highest substance. God as the highest unity unifying in Him all seeming incompatible opposites therefore the most important in pantheist philosophy is the problem of unity and diversity, immortal and mortal and in ethical context – problem of good and evil.

In the works of Dara the image of highest substance –God is compared with the image of a limitless sea or ocean. And the world, surrounding the human are like the waves, bubbles and drops made by the movements of the God-ocean. By these images Dara Shikoh emphasizes mortality of all existing and immortality of God- Ocean, which gives birth to all existing, that will at the end return to Him.

The problem of opposites existing in the highest unity –God, led Dara to dialectical conclusion that there is universal link between the opposites and they are inter-dependent on each other. In one of the quatrains Dara writes that without death your name cannot live for ever and no real master can be master without servant, freedom emerges from the chains and if there will be no master there will be no slave<sup>17</sup>.

The ideas of the contrast of good and evil being a part of highest substance-God, is typical for pantheist thinking about the unity of opposites. In the works of Dara the unity of opposites in the form of good and evil is found in man as he is a part of divine essence. He wrote that when you will cognize essence of the truth you will become confident of the secrets of the God. When you will recognize God as creator of good and evil, you will be aware of your guilty and you will become a sinner<sup>18</sup>.

The existence of good and evil in the highest Beginning-God should make human being unconcerned to earthly wrongdoing and injustice therefore, according to the teachings of Sufism, man should renounce worldly concerns. In the one of his quatrain Dara explains the motive of the renouncement of one's 'self'. I have rejected my life and existence .Good and evil have become irrelevant to me. Now it is not possible to pronounce my or His name. If I will choose a name He will be unhappy with me.

In the works of Dara Shikoh we also find the glorification of man and its reasons. As man has developed in himself a divine beginning he has become the object of worship not only for human beings but also for such a spiritual forces as angels, and jinn.

Like other Sufi thinkers we observe anti-mullah trends in the writings of Dara. His poetry is directed against the dominance and inertness of Muslim clergy and the ignorance and hypocrisy of mullahs and urban ascetics .In his work '*Hasanat-al- Arfeen*' he writes that mullahs teach ignorance because they are themselves ignorant. The protest of Dara against clergy to some extent ensues from the essence of the main Sufi dogma about the possibility of direct link between man and God without any mediator. In his verses he writes, that paradise is there, if there is no mullah, because there is no

noise and quarrel. Let the world become free from mullahs. Let nobody follow their fatwa. If a mullah is in a town it means no wise person is there<sup>19</sup>.

Dara was against religious intolerance which was the characteristic feature of the representatives of orthodox Muslim clergy. According to Dara if one struggle for union with God it is the highest point of his/her religious devotion. He wrote ' You call me non-believer because of my distress. I agree with your words. For me are the same greatness and misery. My religion is the religion of seventy two nations of the world<sup>20</sup>.

The religious thoughts of Dara in general, were identical to mystic poet Jalal-ud-Din Rumi who teaches that beliefs of the Muslims, Christians and Jews are the same in Spirit therefore differences in religion are not important for a Sufi<sup>21</sup>.the same ideas were preached by the Bhagats, who rejected the personification of God by the Hindus and Muslims and put forward the idea of single God. Such religious teachings were popular in India since 16<sup>th</sup> century. These ideas were popular not only among the wide section of masses but also in some groups of the ruling class, particularly supporters of centripetal trends of Mughal rulers. Dara was a staunch supporter of Bhagti preaching's and condemned religious ceremonies, as these were integral part of the performance of orthodox religious rites. Thus, condemnation of religious ceremonies, preaching of the concept of private God and personal links with Him ultimately led to the rejection of the need of religious rituals and consequently to the idea of uselessness of the ministers of religion. Therefore, Bhagats and Dara Shikoh were bitterly criticized by the mullahs.

Dara's views in many respect differed from the teachings of the Bhagats. While Dara preferred to keep silence about the inequality of the people and social injustice, the Bhagats in general, supported the idea of the equality of people before God irrespective of their religious affiliation, caste, and social status. These ideas of the Bhagats incited the ordinary people to protest and struggle against existing social inequality, repression and exploitation. Obviously, this thesis of Bhagats was missing in the ideas of Dara Shikoh as it was against the social system, of which he was an integral part. As for as, the idea of the unification of Hindus and Muslims was concerned it suited him because religious merging of both could reinforce the existing system.

The religious and philosophical views of Dara can be characterized as monism tinted, to a certain extent, with pantheism. In the beginning, Sufism played an important role in the formation of Dara's philosophical outlook. However, as result of the influence of Indian pantheism of Upanishad, and Bhagti trends, Dara was declared heretic by the orthodox clergy and official Naqashbandi School of Sufism. The official historian of the Mughal court, Khafi Khan pointed out that 'Following the heretic- Sufis, Dara defamed the essence of Sufism, declared infidelity and Islam twin brothers, and wrote books on this subject. He not only befriends Brahmans and Gosians but also supported their ideas<sup>22</sup>.

The religious and philosophical quest of Dara and his accusations against the official clergy were enough for them to declare him traitor of Islam and his activities and ideas a threat for Islam<sup>23</sup>.

In September 1657, Shahjahan became dangerously ill, resulting in the war of succession among his four sons Dara Shikoh, Shuja, Aurangzeb, and Murad. This war continued for two years and ended with the victory of Aurangzeb, who proved himself more capable military commander and skillful statesman. Dara was no match to him in both qualities. Moreover, Aurangzeb was fully supported by the Muslim orthodox circles.

He was captured in Baluchistan while trying to flee to Iran in search of assistance and was beheaded on September 10, 1659 at the age of 44 years.

## CONCLUSIONS

The works of Dara Shikoh are of great significance not only politically but also academically. In political respect, his attempt to find common ground between Muslim and Hindu spirituality was for creating harmony among the two largest religious communities of Mughal Empire with an objective to consolidate the empire. He could not achieve his objective because Dara was defeated in battle field by his younger brother and rival for the Mughal throne Aurangzeb. Dara Shikoh was put to death by his brother's order. The tragic execution of Dara Shikoh dealt a serious blow to the efforts of the preceding Mughal rulers for a strong, sustained, and centralized state based on communal harmony between the Muslims and the Hindus. The victory of Aurangzeb was the triumph of narrow-minded Muslim orthodoxy. Aurangzeb used brutal methods to suppress all kind of opposition. Though, for some time he was successful in delaying the fall of the Mughal Empire. However, his policies of intolerance against Hindus and Shias severely damaged the very foundations of the empire. After the death of Aurangzeb in 1707, India was overwhelmed by chaos and political disintegration which weakened India at a very crucial point of her history- that was the beginning of the expansion of European colonial powers.

Dara Shikoh's work on mystic Islam and Hindu scriptures particularly his translation of the Upanishads into Persian played a very important role in stirring Western academic interest in the wisdom of subcontinent. Later, from the Persian translations of Dara Upanishads were translated in various European languages. Thus Dara opened the window of Indian Mysticism and philosophy for the intellectual circles of the West.

Dara Shikoh' sought for and found similarities between Islam and Hinduism following Sufi traditions. That is why he was declared heretic and traitor of religion by his contemporary fanatics and fundamentalists. It is not coincidence that today main target of terrorist attacks perpetuated by the fanatics are shrines of Sufi saints because they among others also highlighted common humanistic ethical values of all religions. In such circumstances it is highly pertinent to popularize teachings of the Sufi saints and persons like Dara Shikoh who uphold the truth of all religious traditions.

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