

Dara Shikoh: A Forgotten Mughal of Interfaith Personality in Indian History

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ABSTRACT

The present article on the life and contribution of Dara Shikoh is prepared for the general readers to understand him in the 21st century when Medieval Indian history has been painted with dark shades, even the Mughal policies of tolerance flaccid under the Mughal are being underlined. The rule particularly under Aurangzeb, who brought violence in the face of religious plurality, as it is stated by a group of Modern Historians, but the period of Dara Shikoh is considered to be altogether different from early Mughals. He resonated the Mughal ideals of harmony among the people of the empire through his understanding and acceptance of holy texts and culture from other religions such as Hinduism, Christianity and Sikhism apart from Islam. It is also noted that he was an eminent scholar of Sufism and Vedanta philosophy and worked for the amalgamation of the Hindu and Islamic Cultures. The present research paper has tried to explore the interfaith of religious cognizance by Dara Shikoh who has been forgotten by Indian in modern era. He was the only Mughal emperor without crown who dedicated his whole life and worked for humanitarian foundation.

Key Words : Dara Shikoh, Mughal, Hinduism, Christianity

INTRODUCTION

Dara Shukoh popular as Dara Shikoh (1615-1659), the eldest son and heir-apparent of Mughal emperor Shah Jahan, was designated with the title *Padshahzada-I – Buzurg Martaba* (Prince of High Rank) and a favourite of his father, occupies a distinctive position among the Mughal princes for his comparative studies of Islam and classical Hindu philosophy. Being a follower of the Qadiri order of Sufis and a pupil of Mian Mir, Dara Shikoh believed that the mystical traditions of both Hinduism and Islam spoke of the same truth. The prince witnessed change in his life after the initiation in the Qadiri order in 1640 A.D. and his close association with Mian Mir, Mulla Badakhshi and other saints. This was a remarkable phase of his life when he spent his major time in the royal Library busy in intensive studies in mysticism, the philosophy and the principles of the Qadiri order. This resulted in the

publication of his major works on Sufism namely, the *Sufinat-ul-Auliya* (1640), the *Sakinat-ul-Auliya* (1643), *Risala'i Haq Numa* (1647), the *Tariqat-ul-Haqiqat* and the *Hasanat-ul-Arifin* (1653). The first two books are biographical dictionaries of the Sufi saints and the last three contain his exposition of some of the Sufi fundamental doctrines. This was in fact a period of intellectual pursuits for Dara Shikoh. Haroon Khalid's famous book '*In the Search of Shiva*' wrote about the relationship of Mian Mir who encourages Dara Shikoh to work for tolerance. He writes:

Mian Mir, on the other hand, was a close friend of Guru Arjan, the fifth Sikh Guru, and came to his rescue when he was being persecuted by Mughal authorities. Under Dara Shikoh, one can argue that the Mughal throne was heading towards embracing not only religious tolerance but also religious pluralism, which had been

*shunned by both Shahjahan and before that, Jahangir, at various points for political expediency.*¹

Noted historical works of Dara Shikoh entitled *Majma-ul-Bahrain* (the Mingling of Two Oceans), a comparative analysis of Hindu and Muslim religious beliefs and practices “*Sirr-e-Akbar*” (The Great Secret). His speculative hypothesis that the work referred to the Qur’an as the ‘*Kitab-al-maknun*’ or the *hidden book*, is none other than the *Upnishads*.² His translation of the *Upnishads*, in Persian, is highly scholastic in nature which has depicted the true Indian culture that was the amalgamation of Hindu and Muslim culture. His hear trends are Persian translations of the *Yoga Vasishta* and *Bhagvad Gita* which are philosophic proven record of his intellectual interfaith of religious diversity. These works have occupied a high place among historical records and his acceptance of people’s faith for other than crown culture. He was uncrowned man in *Mughalia Sultanat* throughout his life. He loses in war but not in scholarship.

*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.*³

Dara Shikoh knew that India is a land of multiplicity, various traditions, religious broadmindedness, educational and cultural exchanges, dialogues and continuity between various religious and cultural forms. He, as a historical person represents such glorious principles of Indian history, culture and heritage, has made him to respect the Indian society. He was tolerant of other faiths and enjoyed strong military and political support from Muslims as well as non-Muslims.

Indian History and Dara Shikoh:

Dara Shikoh was married with Nadira Banu Begum and he avoided the practice of polygamy which was prevalent and general practice at the time. He never contracted any other marriage.⁴ In the war of succession which ensued after Shah Jahan’s illness in 1657, Dara Shikoh was defeated by his younger brother Prince Muhiuddin (Aurangzeb) and was executed in 1659 on Aurangzeb’s orders in a bitter struggle for the imperial throne.⁵

History of Mughals in itself witnessed that the Mughal dynasty produced warriors and intellectually curious men such as Jalal-ud-din Muhammad Akbar (1556-1605) but Prince Dara Shikoh was its lone scholar who justifiably so, for him it can be said that he had an eclectic and assimilative mind. He was a liberal and secular minded unorthodox Muslim as opposed to the orthodoxy of Aurangzeb. A great patron of the arts and literature, he was also more inclined towards philosophy and mysticisms rather than military pursuits. He judiciously studied the Holy Quran, the holy books of the Jews and Christians and had a deep knowledge of the *Vedas* and the *Upnishads*. He was an avid yoga practitioner and laid the foundations of the *Ganga-Jamuni Tahzeeb*.⁶ How different things have been for India if Dara Shikoh would have defeated Aurangzeb in the war of succession is over the alternative histories. Only a single example is enough to understand the popularity of Dara Shikoh in Indian communities that he was invited along with Mian Mir to Amritsar by the Sikhs to lay the foundation stone of the golden temple. Dara Shikoh subsequently developed a friendship with the seventh Sikh Guru, Guru Har Rai. Guru Har Rai also promised him military assistance against Aurangzeb in the impending war of succession. The Sikhs and Jats also respected Dara Shikoh greatly. So it was possible to think that entire course of world history was changed due to one battle for succession.

1. Haroon Khalid, *In Search of Shiva: A study of Folk religious practices in Pakistan*, <https://scroll.in/article/814923/lahores-ionic-mosque-stood-witness-to-two-historic-moments-where-tolerance-gave-way-to-brutality>
2. Gyani Brahma Singh ‘Brahma’, Dara Shikoh-The Prince who turned Sufi in *The Sikh Review*, the reference in Al-Quran to the hidden books-ummaukund-Kitab-was to the *Upnishads*, because they contain the essence of unity and they are the secrets which had to be kept hidden, the most ancient books.
3. Latif Shahid Abdul Qadir Mushtaq, *Dara Shikoh: Mystical and Philosophical Discourse*, GC University, p.1
4. Hansen, Waldemer, *The Peacock throne: the drama of Mogul India*, Motilal Banarasidass, p.121
5. Ira Mukhoty, *Aurangzeb and Dara Shikoh’s fight for the throne was entwined with the rivalry of their two sisters*, p.7
6. The Pioneer ‘*The Philosopher Prince*’ 29 April 2017

Personality perception of Dara Shikoh:

The Mughal had brought with them a rich Persian culture, with strong ties to the wider Islamic world, a culture that perpetuated and preserved itself in the course of many centuries of dominant Mughal rule in northern India. It was around 1656 that the crown prince Dara Shikoh began to assemble a team of Pandit-translators to help him in his project of rendering into Persian three great Hindu religion texts: the *Upanishads*, the *Bhagavadgita* and the *Yogavasistha*.⁷ The historians dealing with work of the legacy of Indian secularism often quotes his name related to the Bhakti and Sufi movements. Inside the walls of the Mughal stronghold and in the ambiance of dominion, Dara Shikoh interlaces together and celebrated the synonymous nature of the Hindu and Islamic cultures. Dara's efforts in bringing together the two religions by translations of primeval texts like the *Vedas* and the epics like the *Mahabharata* worked to place the huge number of cultures on the same platform. It was considered by the historian that Shah Jahan had chosen Dara Shikoh as his rightful heir not because of his seniority but because of his vision of harmony and unity among people. Shah Jahan knew that India could not be ruled by force alone but through the spiritual philosophy of harmony and recognition of interfaith could help him to win people as it was said that if you can't win hearts of people you can't rule. Dara Shikoh had a deep interest in Sufism, and also attempted to find common language between Islam and Hinduism.⁸ Dara Shikoh has contributed to the rich pluralism of the Indic tradition. If fortunately did not start nor did it end with Dara Shikoh. The works of the younger Mughal prince are part of one of the greatest and longest movements of translation in human history.

Of Dara Shukuh's perception, Ernst says:

What is most distinctive about Dara Shukuh's approach to Indian texts is that he treats them as scripture, in the same category as the Psalms of David, the Gospel, and the Qur'an. Sufis such

as Mirza Mazhar Jan-I Janan (1781) also made this theological concession, but typically with the stipulation that such ancient scriptures had been abrogated by the most recent revelation, the Qur'an. Dara Shukuh viewed the Upanishads as hermeneutically continuous with the Qur'an, providing an extended exposition of the divine unity that was only briefly indicated in the Arabic scripture.⁹

He was of the firm opinion that the 'Great Secret' of the Upanishads is the monotheistic message, which is identical to that on which the Qur'an is based. He was searching common elements in Hinduism and Islam and he had drawn remarkable parallels between the concepts described in the holy Qur'an and the Upanishads with respect to 'tauhid' or unity of God.

Mughal without Crown:

The title for Dara Shikoh which may be suited to him is 'Indian Mughal' because of his philosophical epics in Mughal era. Dara Shikoh was founding father of secularism in India. Union Minister of External Affairs in Modi Government, called him 'a child of India' who lost the battle of life but won the war of harmony among different religion bodies.¹⁰

No doubt that Dara Shikoh is a historical personality. He had the imperial army with him. His army was far more powerful than the allied army of his major opponents. But with this army he lost the war. This means that he was neither a good general nor a good fighter in the battle field. He was never able to win any war. He never learned the art of war. But Dara Shikoh was so kind about plural society that given him scholastic perception as reacted in the writings of Ganeri Jonardon:

Dara Shikoh's hospitality had its roots in different idea altogether that the stranger, if welcomed and understood, would turn out to be no stranger at all. Dara Shikoh hoped to show that treating the Hindu as an alien and another was a fundamental mistake, that there existed

7. Ganeri, Jonardaon, 'Migrating Texts and Traditions: Dara Shikoh and the Transmission of the Upanishads to Islam', p. 1

8. Dara Shikoh, Aurangzeb Misunderstood, *Ummid*, 30 December, 2011 12:18:59 IANS

9. Ernst, Carl W. "Muslim Studies of Hinduism? A Reconstruction of Arabic and Persian Translations from Indian Languages", *Iranian Studies*, 36.2 (2003), pp. 173-95

10. International Meet titled 'Dara Shikoh: Reclaiming the Spiritual Legacy of India' held in Delhi organized by Indian Council for Cultural Relations, New Delhi.

*between Hinduism and Islam a pre-existing affinity, even an identity. The cosmopolitan right to hospitality is, perhaps, the right to have one's common humanity affirmed.*¹¹

Lahore's iconic mosque stood witness to two historic moments where tolerance gave way to brutality.¹² However, according to folklore in the oral tradition, many Lahoris refused to offer their prayers here, calling it a bloody mosque constructed on the body of their prince, Dara Shikoh. It shows that the love and affection of Dara is not only in divided India but even other continent has high degree of respect for the prince.

Interfaith Religion Cult:

Dara Shikoh was engaged in the study of major religious texts and in discourses with religious scholars of the time. He was convinced that there is unison in all religions. He was encouraged in his search by the great Sufi saint, Hazrat Sarmad.

Hazrat Sarmad was a key to shaping Dara Shikoh's political outlook. An Armenian Jew, who made him home in India, he called himself a Hindu priest, a Christian Monk, a Jewish Rabbi, a Muslim as well as an infidel. He went around naked saying that only those with blemishes needed to cover themselves. His open support for Dara and his refusal to submit to any form of authority became serious problems to an orthodox and ambitious Aurangzeb, as believed by many historians. He was really an interfaith cult in Indian Mughal dynasty. Dara's tireless learning, his translation of Sanskrit texts into Persian, as well as his work as a writer and philosopher, made him rather unconscious of what it took for a Mughal prince to ascend the throne.

Dara's comparative treatise is far from being the first one. Mir 'Abd-al-Wahid Bilgrami writes in the

Haqiq-i-Hindu or Indian Truths (1566 C.E.) that the 'truths of India' overlap with the truths of Islam. As Orsini tells us, Bilgrami wrote his treaties in a larger context of Sufi poetic engagements with Krishna stories, songs and devotional lyrics called *bishnupad*.¹³ Dara Shikoh is widely renowned.¹⁴ He was tolerant epitome of the harmonious coexistence of heterodox traditions on the Indian subcontinent. He was an erudite champion of mystical religious speculation and poetic diviner of syncretism, that promote cultural interaction among people of all faiths. Dara Shikoh devoted much effort towards finding a common mystical language between Islam and Hinduism. Towards this goal he completed the translation of fifty Upanishads from their original Sanskrit into Persian in 1657 so that they could be studied by Muslim Scholar as well.¹⁵

*...Dara Shikoh translated the names of the Vedic Gods in terms of Sufi parallels. For example, Mahadeva becomes Israfil, Visnu becomes Mika'il, Brahman Jibra'il or Adam; likewise brahma-loka is rendered sadrat-ul-muntaha, om as ism-i-A'zam....*¹⁶

Conclusion:

Rightly said, 'Aurangzeb assassinated Dara Shikoh once but by not remembering what he represents in today's multi-cultural India, we killed his spirit many times over.' The school of thought that Dara Shikoh represented can be inculcated for finding solutions for today's problems in societies and among cultures which emphasizes on the essence of tolerance and introducing great civilizations like India to the world. It is important to bring nations together and teach each other to accommodate and appreciate each other through we have our differences of opinion. Professor Lokesh Chandra reclaiming Dara's

11. Ganeri, Jonardaon, '*Migrating Texts and Traditions: Dara Shikoh and the Transmission of the Upanishads to Islam*', p. 2
12. Haroon Khalid, *In Search of Shiva: A study of Folk religious practices in Pakistan*, <https://scroll.in/article/814923/lahores-iconic-mosque-stood-witness-to-two-historic-moments-where-tolerance-gave-way-to-brutality>
13. Orsini, '*Krishna is the Truth of Man: Mir Abdul Wahid Bilgrami's Haqiq-i-Hindu and the circulation of Dhrupad and Bishnupad*' in Thomas Bruijijn and Allison Busch eds. *Culture and Circulation: Literature in Motion in Early Modern India* (2014)
14. The Hindu, see for example this article in *The Hindu*
15. Professor Amartya Sen notes in his book *The Argumentative Indian* that explained Dara Shikoh's translation of the *Upanishads* that attracted William Jones, a Western scholar of Indian literature, to the *Upanishads*, having read them for the first time in a Persian translation by Dara Shikoh, Sen Amartya, *The Argumentative Indian*.
16. Hasrat, Bikrama Jit, '*Dara Shikoh: Life and Works*', Vishvabharti Shanti Niketan, Islamic Studies Centre, 1995, pp.259-60

holistic legacy, said that Dara has a significant contribution, to heal the torn extremities of Indic solidarity. “*Because of Dara Shikoh, the whole process of the study of India’s culture began. We have seen the Mughal courts only as Islamic courts and not seen their Mongol dimensions or the dimension of encouraging Sanskrit. There were pundits present in all Mughal courts.*”¹⁷ His vision, his works, his memory need to be resuscitated to be presented to modern India. I observed that Dara Shikoh’s death at the hands of Aurangzeb was a watershed event in the history of Mughal India, representing the death of a syncretistic Mughal culture, the death of *Taseer* too represents the end of secular progressive politics. Government of India recently has renamed Dalhousie road in Delhi in the name of Dara Shikoh. It becomes clear that the country had undergone a paradigm shift and recognized Dara Shikoh, who was the icon of tolerance in the history of Mughal India. The environment would have been different if Dara Shikoh would have become the Mughal emperor instead of his younger brother Aurangzeb.

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