

Syncretic philosophy and eclecticism in the religious views of Dara Shikoh**-Chandni Sengupta****Research Scholar, Department of History, School of Social Sciences****Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU), New Delhi**

“Here is the secret of unity (*tawhid*), O friend, understand it;

Nowhere exists anything but God.

All that you see or know other than Him,

Verily is separate in name, but in essence one with God.”

-Dara Shikoh, Risala-i-Haqnuma

Islam in the subcontinent displayed two distinct trends- the inclusive, mystical trend and the exclusive, prophetic trend. Throughout history, there was a tussle between these two trends in which there was no clear victor. Different historical phases were marked by distinct epochal changes that varied swung from liberalism to catholicity and from rigidity to fluidity. These trends were in existence from the very beginning and became more evident in the conflict between Akbar’s ideals of *Sulh-e-kul* and the reactionary ideals of the *Naqshbandiyya* order at the beginning of the 17th century.¹ This conflict later aggravated and took the shape of a blood bath during the War of Succession between Aurangzeb and his brother Dara Shikoh. It was not a clash of personalities; it was a clash of ideas, and as scholars in the past have interpreted, it was a contest between religious bigotry and religious harmony, fanaticism and eclecticism.

¹ Annemarie Schimmel, ‘Religious Policies of the Great Mughals,’ in Zeenut Ziad ed., *The Magnificent Mughals*, Oxford University Press, 2002, p. 61

When the Mughals came to power in 1526 they took over many of the religious organizations established under the previous Turkish and Afghan dynasties, which had ruled northern India from the turn of the millennium onwards, when Mahmud of Ghazni invaded the northwest of the subcontinent. During Babur's short reign little time remained for a change in the religious offices and his son Humayun largely followed the inherited practices. During the Sur interregnum the role of the leading religious dignitaries remained the same and after Humayun's return from Iran and before his sudden death in 1556, there was little time left for the Emperor to tackle the religious problems of his empire. Religious institutions, therefore, remained largely untouched in the early years of Mughal rule. Significant changes occurred during the reign of Emperor Akbar who established new religio-political institutions that helped him in strengthening his rule in India. In the post-Akbar period, status quo was maintained as far as religious policies were concerned and Jahangir and Shah Jahan largely maintained a neutral policy, though they were seen to be more orthodox than Akbar. The reign on Akbar's successors is not viewed as an era of experimentation in terms of socio-religious institutions but rather as a period of dispassionate policy making as far as religion was concerned.

Muhammad Dara Shikoh, the eldest son of Shah Jahan and Mumtaz Mahal, exhibited signs of a mystic at a very early age. He dabbled in mystical discourses and believed in the essential oneness of all religions. Although he was condemned to be a heretic by the theologians of his time, Dara never considered himself to be an apostate of Islam. In his writings he quoted the *Quran* and *Hadith* as the final proofs and treated the word 'Allah' to be the best name among the names of God.² However, Dara like Akbar had realized that without understanding the mind and heart of India - including its people, their religion, customs, rituals, and traditions – one could not rule the country, which was so diverse in terms of cultural and religious orientations. He was of the opinion that no one could become a just Emperor without respecting the manners and ways of both the Hindus and the Muslims in the country. Therefore, he tried to understand the texts of all the major religions in depth and interpreted them in his own original way so that they could be useful to the existing society. He, in fact, tried to go deeper than the verbal (*lafzi*) layers of the text.

² S.P. Dubey, 'Dara Shikoh and Comparative Study of Religion,' in Hamid Naseem Rafiabadi, *World Religions and Islam: a critical study*, Part I, Sarup and Sons, New Delhi, 2003, p. 52

The great dream of his life - a dream shattered by his untimely death - was the brotherhood of all faiths and the unity of mankind. The *Safinat ul-Auliya* was the first work written by Dara Shikoh. In his first work itself he has proclaimed his respect and regard for the Sufis and religious divines. Dara recorded the lives of almost 411 divines of Islam including that of the Prophet and his wives. In his second work, the *Sakinat ul-Auliya*, he recorded the life of Miyan Mir, the spiritual guide of his *pir* and *murshid* Mullah Shah. This work is replete with various discussion on the Sufi path. In the *Risala i-Haknuma*, the third text written by the mystic Prince, the emphasis again is on the various stages of spiritual development and spiritual perfection. Therefore, the first three texts written by Dara dealt with Sufism. Very clearly, then, it can be argued that Dara had a penchant for everything spiritual. His Sufi leanings were, therefore, clearly pronounced in the texts composed by him early in his days of youth. That the 'other-worldly' matters appealed more to him became apparent and manifested itself in the way in which he projected himself—he was not meant to wield the sword, he was a man of letters.

In his subsequent works, Dara argued that in the *Quran* it has been stated that no land has been left without prophetic or scriptural guidance, so this land (Hindustan) also has similar true and divinely ordained scriptures in the form of the *Vedas* and *Upanishads*. With this point in mind, he argued in the introduction to the *Sirr-i-Akbar* (translation of the *Upanishads* done by Dara Shikoh) that the mysteries which have been left unexplained in the *Quran* can be unfolded by studying the *Upanishads* in depth. With the help of the *yogis* and *sanyasis* of Benaras he tried to comprehend the concept of 'unity of being' (*wahadat-ul-wujud*) in the *Upanishads* and simultaneously tried to unfold some of the concepts of mysticism, which had been left unexplained in the *Quran*.

Dara Shikoh held religious, intellectual discourses not only with Muslim mystics like Miyan Mir, Mulla Shah, Muhibullah Allahabadi, Shah Dilruba, Sa'id Sarmad but also with Hindu ascetics like Baba Lal Das, Jagannath Mishra and various other *pundits* of Benaras. Initially his concept of *wahadat-ul-wujud* was based on Ibn-al-Arabi's ideas but later because of his contact with Hindu *sanyasis* this concept became wider and he tried to assimilate the principle ideas of Hinduism to make it more broad-based. In one of his works, *Hasanat-ul-Arifin*, meaning 'ravings of Sufi saints during spiritual ecstasy,' he wrote that the statements of Mansur Hallaj like *Anal Haq* should not be berated and considered to be blasphemous. Instead, an effort should be made to understand the implicit meaning of the statement, rather than just

clinging onto the statement as an independent entity. In 1657, Dara wrote *Majma-ul-Bahrain* (The mingling of the two oceans) in which he argued that there was no basic difference between the essential nature of Hinduism and Islam. This was the first attempt of its kind to reconcile the two apparently divergent religions.

The *Majma ul-Bahrain* contains twenty sections with themes such as the elements, senses, religious exercises, attributes, wind, the four worlds, fire, light, beholding of God, names of God, apostleship and prophetship, the barhmand, the directions, the skies, the earths, the divisions of the earth, the barzakh, the great resurrection, the mukt, and the night and day. From a deeper analysis of the contents of this text, it becomes apparent that the mystic Prince through the pages of this work tried to establish the similarities between the two divergent religions by using these themes through which he established the synthesis between Hinduism and Islam.

Texts written by Dara Shikoh not only establish his intellectual and literary brilliance but also provide significant information about influences which marked Dara's life. The fact that Dara wrote so eruditely about spiritual development and the link between the two religions which were considered to diametrically opposite to each other goes on to suggest that Dara was inspired by a zeal to bring about a middle path or a mid-way wherein a religious synthesis would be possible. The initial texts dealt primarily with Sufism and the later texts written by Dara dealt essentially with syncretism. *The Majma ul-Bahrain* was one such text which not only tried to establish a synthesis between the two religious orders but also revealed Dara's deeper understanding of both Hindu and Islamic philosophy.

Being the favourite and the eldest son of the Emperor, Dara claimed himself to be the heir apparent. He prematurely anticipated his brilliant future. However, Shah Jahan had made no formal declaration in favour of Dara. This created natural jealousy among his other sons and Shah Jahan, busy safeguarding the fortunes of the empire, could not exert much influence on his sons. As was probably destined, Dara was executed in the year 1659 AD. Contemporary European travelers like Manucci and Bernier opine that it was because of his work *Majma-ul-Bahrain* that the Prince had to meet such a sad fate. His

brother, Aurangzeb procured a decree from the legal advisers that Dara Shikoh had “apostatized from the law and having vilified the religion of God, had allied himself with heresy and infidelity.”

The religious views of Dara Shikoh have been studied by many scholars and most of them have concluded that the prince was indeed a mystic in the true sense of the word, showing interest in religious syncretism and forwarding the cause of eclecticism. The religious views of Dara Shikoh have been studied conventionally in the context of Aurangzeb and the War of Succession between the sons of Shah Jahan in which Aurangzeb and Dara were the main contenders. This approach is more political in nature and discusses the power struggle in-depth, focusing less on the religious demeanour of the Prince. However, Dara Shikoh, his life, his many literary works and his views on religion have also been studied independently by some scholars. According to scholar Renuka Nath “the eldest son of the Mughal Emperor Shah Jahan was a liberal minded man. He had an inquisitive mind and critical insight from the early days. Lives of great saints and miracles done by them always attracted him. He was an ardent champion of Hindu-Muslim unity and honoured Hindu yogis and pundits as freely as he did the Muslim mystic and scholars.”³

The influence of Dara Shikoh on the religious policies of Shah Jahan have also been studied by scholars who have established a link between the eclectic trend under the Emperor’s rule and the influence of his son. Many gaps, however, remain as far as a complete analysis of Dara and his religious views are concerned. This is also because the Prince is seen more as a religious aberration in the Islamic scheme of things, which Aurangzeb wanted to implement. Another reason could also be that Dara Shikoh’s character was such that not much attention was paid to him considering that he was defeated and came to be remembered in history only as Shah Jahan’s son and Aurangzeb’s brother whom the latter beheaded. The historiography on the religious views of the ill-fated Prince can be categorized on the basis of the influence he exercised on the religious policy of the Mughal Empire under Shah Jahan and Dara Shikoh and his religious views as an independent subject of study.

³ Renuka Nath, ‘Prince Dara Shikoh: a representative of Indian cultural synthesis,’ *Anusandhanika*, Vol. IX, No. I, January 2011, pp. 29-32

To begin with the first categorization, some scholars have also elaborated upon the religious views of Dara in the context of his influence over his father's (Shah Jahan) religious policy. According to I.H. Qureshi Shah Jahan was orthodox in his leanings as well as his beliefs and he took some measures to show that orthodoxy was back in power. Sri Ram Sharma in his work 'The Religious Policy of the Mughal Emperors' has explained the influence of Prince Dara on the religious views of his father Shah Jahan who was more orthodox in comparison to his father and grandfather. According to Sharma, Shah Jahan changed the spirit of religious toleration that had characterized the Mughal government till the reign of Jahangir.⁴ Some new temples were destroyed by Shah Jahan, however, the Emperor under the influence of his favourite son and the heir apparent Dara, reversed some of his policies.

Shah Jahan himself had no leanings towards Sufism but under the influence of Dara he did patronize some Sufis of his time. He also patronized some Hindu poets. According to Sharma, "As Dara's influence in the court increased, Shah Jahan's ardour as a great proselytizing king cooled down when he discovered in the heir-apparent, and his deputy in many state affairs, a religious toleration equaling that of his grandfather Akbar."⁵ Renuka Nath in her article on the interaction between Dara Shikoh and the great Hindu Gnostic saint Baba Lal contends that the mystic prince's "continuous search for the truth, took a steep turn when he met Baba Lal, who was a Hindu gnostic. His discourses with Baba Lal demonstrated his growing interest in comparative religion."⁶ She concludes that Dara was a gentle and pious Sufi intellectual and a true representative of Indian cultural synthesis.

M. Athar Ali in his work 'Mughal India: Studies in Polity, Ideas, Society, and Culture' has given a vivid description of the religious environment under Shah Jahan and Aurangzeb. According to him, much of the belief that Shah Jahan reversed or modified the religious policy of his grandfather rests on his order of the sixth regnal year (1633-34), in which he is said to have ordered the destruction of temples whose construction had not been completed. Beyond this, however, the period of Shah Jahan was quite similar

⁴ Sri Ram Sharma, *The Religious Policy of the Mughal Emperors*, Book Enclave, Jaipur, 2001, p. 104

⁵ Ibid, p. 114

⁶ Renuka Nath, 'Prince Dara Shikoh: a representative of Indian cultural synthesis,' *Anusandhanika*, Vol. IX, No. I, January 2011, pp. 29-32

to the time of his grandfather and there were remarkable attempts made to bridge the gap between the Hindus and the Muslims. The most celebrated spokesman of this trend was Prince Dara Shikoh.⁷

Most scholars, therefore, agree that the religious ideology of Dara did leave an impression on statecraft during the time of Shah Jahan. To what extent the influence of mystic ideas helped in promulgating policies is a matter of debate. However, it is clear from a reading of contemporary sources that Dara's religious views did have an impact on Shah Jahan and the Mughal realm governed by him.

Having discussed the historiography of Dara's religious views in the context of their influence on Shah Jahan, it is now imperative to discuss the views of scholars on the syncretic approach of Dara Shikoh as an independent field of study. Niccolo Manucci claimed that "Dara Shikoh had no fixed religion and praised every religion in the presence of its followers. When with Mohamedans he praised the tenets of Muhammad; when with Jews, the Jewish religion; in the same way, when with Hindus, he praised Hindusim."

An article published in the Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal tried to explain the religious disposition of Dara Shikoh. According to this article, Dara was not an atheist as was claimed by Aurangzeb, neither did he renounce his religion of birth. He had a firm belief that Islam stands on the same level as all other religions and, therefore, there should be no religious discrimination. Dara never really renounced Islam. He visited the *dargahs* of all important Muslim saints and provided valuable historical details of his visits.⁸ According to S.P. Dubey in his monumental work on Dara, "Nanak and Kabir preached, positively and negatively, virtually the same as Dara professed. But they were not executed, as they did not have any political designs. However, Dara had the fate of Mansoor Al Hallaj (AD 922) who, in his ecstasy, used to utter *Anal Haq* (I am God) and was executed."⁹

⁷ M. Athar Ali, *Mughal India: Studies in Polity, Ideas, Society and Culture*, Oxford University Press, 2008, p. 202

⁸ *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal*, Vol. 39, Part I, p. 274

⁹ S.P. Dubey, 'Dara Shikoh and Comparative Study of Religion', in Hamid Naseem Rafiabadi, *World Religions and Islam: a critical study*, Part I, Sarup and Sons, New Delhi, 2003, p. 55

Dubey has categorized the spirito-academic life of Dara into two phases. The first phase was up to 1647 when he edited *Risala-i-Haqnuma* for the elites and selective people of the two communities. Till 1647, he was busy propagating pantheism as per the Sufi tradition. In the *Risala* he records the disclosure of the 'Path of God' and 'Realization.' He proclaims to be a pantheist and claims that divine knowledge has been especially bestowed upon him. He was, till then, confident that pantheism was the only beneficial doctrine for the Hindus and the Muslims of India in general.

The second stage of his spiritual life covers the period of about a decade from 1647-57 when he became engrossed in studying the doctrines of Judaism, Christianity and Hinduism. During this period he tried to find out the unity of all religions and their harmony with Islam.¹⁰ Dara claimed himself to be a Qadir, a Hanif, and an Arif Kamil (one having knowledge of God head). Being a complete man, the Arif he considered himself to be beyond the prescriptions and prohibitions, hence, having no inclination to pray as prescribed by Islamic law. He, according to S.P. Dubey, abjured outward Islam and dispensed with *Namaaz* and *Roza*. He also wanted to save Islam from the *mullahs* and *maulavis* and can, therefore, be compared with Martin Luther who registered his protest against papal orthodoxy. According to Dubey, Dara was an extremely good student of comparative religion; he had a mission and a vision. His mission, however, could not succeed in the War of Succession.

The suspicion that Dara aroused in the eyes of the piety-minded *ulema* also needs some detailed enquiry. Beginning in 1641, Dara Shikoh, following the Quranic injunction that no land has been left without prophetic guidance, became convinced that the *Vedas* and the *Upanishads* constitute the concealed scriptures mentioned in the *Quran*. He began to regard the *Upanishads* as the ultimate source of all monotheism, including Islam. Using techniques of lexical similarity Dara posited that the cosmologies and mystical practices of Muslim sufis and those of the *Upanishads* correspond. For example, the *ruh* or soul in Islam corresponded with the *atman* in Vedic Hinduism.¹¹ John F. Richards in his work 'The Mughal Empire' says that this approach of Dara convinced most Indian Muslims, particularly the class of theologians, that Dara was an apostate of Islam who did not even observe the obligatory prayers and other rituals of Islam. Extended discussions with and patronage of three Jesuit

¹⁰ Ibid. p. 57

¹¹ John F. Richards, *The Mughal Empire*, Cambridge University Press, UK, 1995, p. 152

priests who formed part of his household confirmed this impression. This made Dara vulnerable to attacks by the *ulema*.

The mystical dimensions of Islam and Hinduism inspired Dara to find a common denominator for both the religions. However, the Prince, in his efforts, encountered a lot of opposition not only from the orthodox theologians but also from some Hindu sages. Annemarie Schimmel in her work 'Mystical Dimensions of Islam' cites one such difficulty which Dara encountered with the Hindu sage Baba Lal Das in his attempt to solve the problem of a common mystical language between Hinduism and Islam. Schimmel contends that "Dara despised the representatives of Muslim orthodoxy in the same way as many early Persian poets had."¹² He once wrote "Paradise is there where there is no *mullah*. Where there is no noise and disturbance from the *mullah*!" Dara Shikoh's syncretism was not a movement away from Islam towards Hinduism; it was a sincere effort to underline what he believed to be common between them. He wanted his syncretism to find favour with the Hindus as much as with the Muslims. M. Athar Ali opines that "Unlike Akbar, Dara found no harm in even image worship." He said that under every image, faith lies hidden.

Dara had transformed the Mughal court into an arena for inter-religious debate (much like his great-grandfather). The religious associations of Dara with people of different faiths not only spelt doom for the Mystic Prince but also for people with whom he was associated closely, for, example Sarmad, the Naked Fakir, of whom Dara was a student. Sarmad was beheaded by Aurangzeb, not only because of his 'strange ways' but also because of his close association with Dara Shikoh. In his work on Sa'id Sarmad, Nathan Katz opines that "As Aurangzeb was against Dara Shikoh, automatically Hazrat Sarmad came under suspicion."¹³ Zahiruddin Faruki, however, is of the opinion that the murder of Sa'id Sarmad was not an unusual event. Whenever a Sufi or any other religious person became too powerful and went out of bounds, he was executed, for example the execution of Mansur bin Hallaj by the Abbasids.

¹² Annemarie Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam*, The University of North Carolina Press, USA, 1975, p. 364

¹³ Nathan Katz, 'The Identity of a Mystic: The Case of Sa'id Sarmad, a Jewish-Yogi-Sufi Courtier of the Mughals,' *Numen*, Vol. 47, No.2, 2000, p. 150

Dara Shikoh's eclectic views, as expressed by him in his literary works and as quoted by contemporary scholars and travelers, played a role in establishing a syncretic religious environment in the country during the 17th-18th century. Whether or not this became the dominant discourse of the time is a matter of debate but the fact that it did have an impact is evident by the way in which people associated with these ideas were ostracized and persecuted. The potential of Dara's eclectic views was immense and it trickled down through literary works that were preserved. Dara can be considered as a champion of Hindu-Muslim unity who as early as the 17th century began to espouse syncretic views and helped in initiating a cultural synthesis which brought about a fusion between Hinduism and Islam.

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