"You May Say I'm A Dreamer": Dara Shikoh's Dream of Translating Prince to Philosopher

AMIT RANJAN

Studies on Dara Shikoh, the heir-apparent in the Mughal Empire of Shah Jahan, have discussed manytimes his life and works playing out a binary on different fronts between his brother Aurangazeb and himself. Some accounts resent Dara as unorthodox and therefore unsafe to certain interests, others draw attention to him as a visionary, poet, dreamer etc. As far as the presentation of his works is concerned, Dara Shikoh could even be compared with the modern day researcher. This paper intends to elaborate on some of these aspects reflected in Dara's works, especially, the translations.

Keywords: Dara Shikoh, Aurangazeb, Mughals, Sirr-i-Akbar, Upanishads, Risala Haqnuma

Tegh ba-kaf, kaf ba-lab, aata hai qatil is taraf,
Muzhdabad! Aye aarzoo-e marg-e Ghalib, Muzhdabad![1]

(Sword in hand, froth on lips, the killer draws near
Greetings! O death-wish of Ghalib, greetings!)

Dara Shikoh (1615-1659) is perpetually caught in a "what-if" moment – what if Dara had become king instead of Aurangzeb? The Dara/Aurangzeb binary is played out as "good Muslim"/"bad Muslim", poet/bigot, dreamer/general et cetera. It is ironic that in his own time, Dara was charged with being a "bad Muslim," or rather more seriously, heretic, and killed. The dreamer/general binary also needs to debunked at the outset – Aurangzeb was not fighting Dara's army, he was up against Shah Jahan's mighty Mughal might. In *A Pepys of Mogul India*, Manucci tells that Aurangzeb was close to being captured in the 1658 battle of Samugarh (Manucci 65), that Dara's advisor Khalilullah Khan deliberately misled his prince. A number of Dara's generals defected in the middle of the battle, either because Aurangzeb was a smart defection manager, or because many of the court elite and Ulemas saw Dara

[1] This is a rare and barely known bayt from a ghazal of Ghalib, which he wrote at age of 18 or 19. It is in a Bhopal manuscript, in his own hand. Natalia Prigarina believes that Sarmad's beheading two years after Dara's killing may have been the influence on Ghalib here.
See Prigarina, Natalia. "Ghalib and Sarmad," *Indian Literature*, Vol. 46, No. 5 (211) (September-October, 2002), pp. 154-176

as their nemesis. Dara with his posse of faqirs and poets was an imminent threat to the traditional power structures.

Downsizing Dara to Augment Aurangzeb

Audrey Truschke, in her recent book *Aurangzeb: The Man and The Myth* does a commendable job in alleviating Aurangzeb from the image of a bigot, and demonstrating that he was an astute politician who did what was necessary for his survival. He murdered Dara's associates and desecrated the temples built by the latter's patronage – this Aurangzeb did out of what he considered political necessity, and not out of some religious fervor. Aurangzeb also had the biggest number of Maratha bureaucrats and generals, from amongst all Mughals; and therefore to argue that he hated the Marathas is also unfounded. So far, so good. However, in her exercise to redeem Aurangzeb, she falls into the same trap of operating in binaries, she downsizes Dara to make Aurangzeb look better. She discredits Manucci as a source when he tells that Shah Jahan suffered from venereal disease when rumour about his imminent death spread, and tells that Shah Jahan probably suffered from some stomach ailment. The same Manucci becomes a credible source when he tells that Dara, in his hour of death, said that if he had won, he would have had Aurangzeb quartered and his body hung at four gates of Delhi. It could well be Manucci's own view, for he was very fond of Dara and fought with his army. Even if the statement were to be true, would a dying man's statement – a man who's lost his kingdom, wife, father, and about to lose his sons and his own life – be taken as a statement of his personality, and taken as an example of hatred mirrored in Aurangzeb's hatred? At some point Truschke says Dara was too much of a court man and a dreamer to have won the battle; at another she demonstrates Dara's cruelty when all of Lucknow was drenched in blood in his battle against Murad. To Truschke, it seems that alleviation of Aurangzeb is possible in some ways only through casting aspersions on Dara. Dara still remains a foil. He is the "other" of Aurangzeb, and rarely studied for his intellectual oeuvre. History, it seems, prefers a militaristic timeline to an intellectual one.

Translating Organized Religion into Spirituality

Dara knew that he was the inheritor of great grandfather Akbar's syncretic ideas, and so was the belief of father Shah Jahan. On the day of Id-ul-Fitr in 1634, Dara's first daughter died, en route to Lahore. The prince and his wife Nadira Begum, aggrieved went to seek spiritual consolation from Mian Mir, a renowned Sufi saint of Qadiriya order. Shah Jahan saw Mian Mir thrice during this year, and on the third trip, returning from Kashmir, held with him, "some discussions on theology and intricate points of spiritual sciences which were the source of joy and cheerfulness to that recluse" (Qanoongoh 99). Mian Mir died the next year before making Dara his disciple, but put him in the hands of his successor Mulla Shah, with whom Dara would have life-long

association. Dara got initiated into the Qadiriya order and started signing his books as Dara Shikoh "Qadiri".

Akbar was unlettered, and yet a great visionary. He started two new cults – *Din-i-Ilahi* (religion of God) and *Sulah-i-Kul* (congregation of all), both of which failed in his own lifetime. Dara, highly learned and well read, understood his legacy and was determined to refine it. His attempt was to reignite the idea of *Din-i-Ilahi* without naming it – he would operate from within the Islamic fold, so as not to be rejected outright by the religious orthodoxy. It is another matter that Akbar ruled a full term, whereas Dara lost his life even before beginning his tryst with the crown. Dara's singular contribution is that he is perhaps the only politician to have envisioned a new world order through a new spiritual order based on synthesis. The *Holy Quran* mentions a hidden book available only to the enlightened. Dara declared that he was the enlightened one, and the hidden book was nothing other than the Upanishads, and therefore Islam and Hinduism are hermeneutically continuous. He was operating well within the rules of the book after studying myriad texts of both religions, and was careful not to tread into the territory of apostasy. His timing was perhaps wrong; he should have accelerated his activities after becoming king. Or contrariwise, his timing was right, for he knew the war with Aurangzeb could go either way, and it was best to prepare his legacy before he came face to face with the war of succession. The translation of Upanishads, from Sanskrit to Persian, was carried out in record time of two years, and brought out in 1657 as *Sirr-i-Akbar* (secret of the greats). If we view the title as a pun, it also means the secret of Akbar, the king – Dara is acknowledging his legacy, and unpacking the agenda of Akbar. The most interesting aspect of this translation of fifty Upanishads is that it was carried out by the pundits of Benares, which points out to the fact that they knew Persian as well as they knew Sanskrit.

Dara's claim in *Sirr-i-Akbar* is a serious claim – he lays out the premise in his preface, and argues through the mammoth translation, which is more of a trans-creational act in comparative theology than translation. In the preface, he tells that he had visited the "Paradise-like Kashmir" in 1050 AH (1640 CE, when he was twenty five). He says that "there were many secrets concealed in the *Holy Quran* and the Sacred Book, whose interpreter it was difficult to find. So he (addresses himself in third person) desired to read all the revealed Books, for the utterances of God elucidate and explain one another…I read the Old and New Testaments and the Psalms of David and other scriptures but the discourse on Tawahid found in them was brief and in a summary form…the object could not be realized" (Haq 13). He then goes on to the matter of Hindu philosophical texts, and says that they don't negate monotheism, and that he found the monotheistic verses of the Vedas had been collected in the "Upanikhat". He therefore, undertook, a "literal and correct" translation of these texts with the help of sanyasis and pundits of Benares. He goes on to say that "Any difficult problem or sublime idea that came to his mind and was not solved despite best of efforts, becomes clear and solved

with the help of this ancient work, which is undoubtedly the first heavenly Book and the fountain-head of the ocean of monotheism, and, in accordance with or rather the elucidation of the *Quran*" (Haq 13).

It is noteworthy that Dara says that Upanishads are "in accordance" or rather "elucidation" of the *Holy Quran*. He is aware of the dangers of stepping outside "the Book" and treads carefully at all times. At another place in the preface he says he likes to learn about other religions, and confabulate with people inhabiting them, but brings it back to monotheism quickly, and with Hinduism also, he is careful to invoke only that part.

Dara quotes a verse from Chapter 56 of the Holy Quran:

> Innahu laqur'aanun kareem /Fee kitabim maknoon/ La yamassuhu illal mutah'haroon /Tanzeelum mirrabbil aalameen
>
> (Ch 56: 77, 78, 79, 80)
>
> (That (this) is indeed a noble Qur'an/ In a book kept hidden/ Which none toucheth save the purified/ A revelation from the lord of the Worlds)

Using this verse, he says, "It is ascertainable that the above verse does not refer to the Psalms, the Pentateuch and the Gospels, nor the Sacred Tablet, as the word *tanzil* (revealed) cannot be applied to the latter. Now, as Upanikhat is a hidden secret… and the actual verses of the *Quran* can be found in it, it is certain that the hidden book (or *kitab-i-makhnun*) is a reference to this very ancient book" (Haq 14). Dara's claim is very interesting. In a way he is saying that revealed religions have derived from pagan philosophies, and that there was a global flow and currency of Hindu philosophy in this case, with which the *Holy Quran* had interacted.

Dara is assertive in his claim, and yet he is conscious all the time that this won't go down well with Islamic orthodoxy of his time. He always adds a disclaimer that his work is meant for "true seekers" and those who have cast aside prejudice. He goes on to say, "This Fakir has known unknown things and understood un-understood problems through the medium of this book. And he had no other object in view (in translating this work) except that he would be personally benefited or that his issues, friends and seekers of the Truth would gather its fruits. The graced one, who having set aside the promptings of passion, and casting off all prejudice, will read and understand this translation…will consider it divine utterance" (Haq 1929: 14).

Another striking claim that Dara makes in his preface to this work is that the *Holy Quran* is "mostly allegorical" and "at the present day persons thoroughly conversant with the subtleties thereof are very rare" (Hasrat 1982: 265) wherein he became desirous of pursuing this truth, and read various texts as have already been mentioned above. Dara is providing a premise (monotheism in both *Quran* and *Upanishads*), arguments (comparing terms between Upanishads and Islamic theology), methodology (quoting verses of *Quran* to provide a framework), and a bibliography, as a modern researcher would do. So there are two important radical claims – one that Upanishads are

the *kitab-i-makhnun* and that the *Holy Quran* is allegorical, and not literal as it is mostly taken to be in Islamicate philosophy and theology.

The text of *Sirr-i-Akbar* is a cartographic exercise, wherein terms from Sufism have been mapped onto terms from Upanishads. For example, *ruh* is equated with *atma*, *abul-arwah* with *paramatma* and so on. The whole text is an exercise in finding resonances between these two worlds.

Preceding *Sirr-i-Akbar* is *Majma-Ul-Bahrain* (1655) (The Mingling of two Oceans) which is a sort of pre-thesis statement – a short book which summarizes what to expect in the forthcoming work. The book is divided into twenty sections which include nature's elements, light and darkness, prophets et cetera. The work is, a statement of essence, in many ways, in which again, he compares Sufic and Upanishadic ideas and terms. It postulates again, ruh/atma/soul which is a part of abul-arwah/paramatma/higher soul. Soul is the elegant aspect of a human, and body the inelegant aspect. There is a soul that was determined in the Eternal Past and is known as *ruh-i-azam*, or the Supreme Soul. Dara says, "The inter-relation between water and its waves is the same as that between body and soul or as that between śarīr and ātmā. The combination of waves, in their complete aspect, may be likened to abul-arwāh or paramātmā; while water only is like the August Existence, or sudh or chitan" (Haq 1929: 44–5). The triad of *sat, chit, anand* is thus evoked and mapped onto *ruh, abul-arwah, ruh-i-azam*. Another triad that Dara compares is thus, "The Indian devotees name them tirmurat, or Brahma, Bishun, and Mahesh, who are identical with Jibrail, Mikhail, and Israfil of Sufi phraseology" (Haq 1929: 44).

Another work of Dara, *Risala Haqnuma* (Compass of truth) (1056 AH/1646 CE) draws parallels between Hindu yogic practices and Sufi practices. In this book, amongst several other things, he talks about *Sultan-ul-azkar*, a Sufic practice similar to yogic practice of *pranayam.* He tells that it took Hazrat Akhund (Maulana Shah) a whole year to learn this practice from Hazrat Mianji (Mian Mir); and Hazrat Akhund then told Dara the secret in riddles, which he decoded in six months.

Thereafter, those who learnt from him, had been able to learn the art in just three or four days. This points to the hole in Dara's personality – that he was susceptible to flattery. What took Dara's accomplished teacher Hazrat Akhund a whole year to learn – to believe that Dara's disciples learnt that in a few days, is difficult to fathom, and shows that the prince was susceptible to flattery. Qanungo comments on this matter saying, "This is not surprising in a country and an age when the maxim prevailed – 'If the king says it is midnight at midday, one would do well to add, 'Yes I see myriads of stars" (Qanungo 114). This would become Dara's nemesis. He was not able to calculate at the time of war with Aurangzeb, as to who he should trust and who he should not. He ended up having the fate of mythical warrior Karna of Mahabharata, who was constantly demotivated and misled by his charioteer Shalya. Dara, similarly, had Khaliullah Khan by his side, constantly feeding him misinformation.

A Vision is not a Scheme

Coming back to the matter of translation, it could also be conjectured that Dara, through his cartographic exercise, created bridges between two philosophical cultures, Hindu and Sufi. Having had apparently mutually exclusive historical trajectories, many of these terms would not have been translated before Dara's time. These are not material objects that would have a ready equivalent. As already demonstrated, Dara mapped equivalents of the triad of Hindu Gods and soul levels onto Sufi principles. This would need a deeper philological investigation which is beyond the scope of this paper.

What was Dara attempting through such exercises? Ganeri suggests that he was trying to find a mirror image, as a Sufi host, in his Hindu guest. He did not need to please the Hindu pundits despite a Hindu majority demographic, as the Mughal kingship was well entrenched. He already had the support of the Sufi orders, he himself being a part of the Qadiri order, and the Mughals being traditionally close to the Chistis. He was trying to solve the equation between revealed and pagan systems; he was trying to philologically reach history unknown to mankind. Politically, he was envisioning a Sufi kingship. Had he been crowned – that is academic counterfactual moments – he may – like Ashoka spread Buddhism – have zealously made Sufism a part of all walks of life. This is what became his undoing, playing his cards in the open, and upsetting the Ulema who had held court power for centuries.

Politically, Dara's vision is a 'dare' to world history – no one has attempted to fuse the pagan and the revealed into one melting pot. And yet, Dara was not a "freak" – Akbar had already tested his new religion, Jahangir and Shah Jahan constantly flirted with, or had to acknowledge the Sufi saints. Aurangzeb, Dara's antithesis, himself got buried in the same compound as a Sufi saint. On the ground, what Dara envisioned, was already happening. There were several communities like Sada Sohag, Jasnathis, Nizarpanthis that had taken the Sufic way – they were an amalgam of Hindu and Islamic cultures.

There were Khojas and others who practised forms of religion that were hybrid mixtures of Hindu, Islamic and Sufic practices. Colonial intervention started casting these hybrid forms into the image of British colonisers' understanding of religion vis-à-vis Christianity. The Khojas read the *Dasavatar* text which eulogizes ten avatars of Vishnu, with a little tweak – the tenth avatar for them was Ali instead of the eschatological, messianic Kalki. Through three cases in the Bombay High Court in 1847, 1851 and 1866, pertaining to Khojas, the judges Erskine Perry (in the first two) and Arnold (in the third) redefined their identity and defined them as Muslims of the Shia sect who were "not Muslim enough." Thereafter, the community re-formed itself accoring to mainstream Islamic precepts (Purohit 2012, Ranjan 2017: 53-65).

The terms "syncretic" and "secular" do not do justice to Dara's vision. Ganeri argues through Seyyed Nasr that "the translations of Dārā Shukoh do

not at all indicate a syncretism or eclecticism" (Nasr 1999: 141), for syncretism presupposes difference. There have to be different creeds that agree to disagree and live in harmony with that. That is an apriori for Dara, he wants to march ahead of that. The term "secular" at its etymological heart, presupposes a civil society and kingship standing against the might of church, and vying for separation of powers. Dara was indeed standing against the might of the church, but asserting that he was operating from within it. His way of life and kingship was through spirituality, not in its opposition. Ganeri uses the term "religious cosmopolitanism" which is an interesting term but difficult to unpack, for it is difficult to unpack both its abstract constituent terms. I would go with "Sufi order" for the word "Sufi" also has been divested of its political and social history, and ably appropriated to be now understood only as a cultural term, or as an appendage to mainstream Islam. Sufism needs redefinition, and Dara is perhaps the best point of departure.

Trans-lation to Trans-nation

Ganeri also floats another interesting idea – that Dara was seeing what already existed; that Sufism had resonances with Vedanta not after coming to India, but in its genesis itself. He says that "many scholars have noted interesting affinities between the philosophy of the Upaniṣads and the thought of Plotinus (204–270 CE), the founder of Neoplatonism" (Ganeri 2012). An Egyptian, Plotinus joined an expedition against Persia in 243 CE with the hope that he would find a passage to India where he would be able to study Upanishads. He could not reach India, and instead ended up in Rome. It is not known what Upanishads Plotinus was able to study, but there are striking similarities between Neoplatonic doctrines and Upanishads (Ganeri 2012, Staal 1961). This Neoplatonism interacted with Islam in its inception, and that was the birth of Sufism, around ninth century.

These are influences Dara was rediscovering, and perhaps had the desire to go even farther back in history. Dara's own book *Sirr-i-Akbari* was translated by Frenchman Antequil Duperron into Latin from Persian. We have an interesting Sanskrit-Persian-Latin triad here, with two classical languages reaching each other through a contemporary modern language. This translation was accessed by German philosopher Schopenhauer, who was ensnared by the Upanishads, to say to the least. He spoke of Upanishads as the future of philosophy, and openly acknowledged his influence. There is an interesting anecdote related to the philosopher. He was a contemporary of Hegel, and held the latter in contempt. In his introduction to *On the Will in Nature*, he referred to "Hegel's philosophy of absolute nonsense." In 1819, both the philosophers were at the University of Berlin, and Schopenhauer demanded that his classes be held at the same time as Hegel's. Two hundred students enrolled for Hegel's course as opposed to just five for Schopenhauer (Cartwright 2005: 73-74).

However, while Hegel's ideas of "dialectical materialism" were in currency, Schopenhauer's works were also influencing a lot of people. The

English Romantic poets were influenced by Sufism.[2] William Blake also accessed Duperron's translation of *Sirr-i-Akbar* , and was also influenced by Schopenhauer. Next we see John Keats, the poet of poets, talking of "negative capability" in a letter to his brothers George and Thomas. In the letter, he extols the writings of Shakespeare which demonstrate this idea – Shakespeare became what he became, because he was not looking for philosophical certainty, he was rather looking for artistic beauty. This idea of "negative capability" deeply resonates with Sufi ideas. In Sufi theology, the term that comes close to these ideas is *himma,* which Robert Moss says, is "the mode of creative imagination – charged by the deepest passion – that has the power to create objects and produce changes in the outer world."

The antecedent of Keats' negative capability is in the legend of Sarmad, as also other Sufi legends. Sarmad, the naked wanderer and Sufi Qalandar, who also had a same-sex lover Abhai, was the closest friend and mentor of Dara. He had predicted that Dara would be king, and Aurangzeb wanted to punish him after Dara had been killed. It was not easy to bring Sarmad to gallows, for he had immense following. Aurangzeb got to know that Sarmad never uttered the full *kalma*. He was summoned and asked to recite the *kalma,* the declaration of faith - la ilaha il'allah Muhammad ur rasul'allah – There is no God, except Allah, and Muhammad is his messenger. The fakir uttered "la ilaha" – "There is no god," and went silent. He was beheaded on the steps leading to Jama Masjid on the charge of apostasy and heresy.

The legend of Sarmad uttering just "la ilaha" also cannot be verified from any primary sources – this is in the realm of legend. This is probably a Sufi legend from just after this incident of beheading. The idea is that Sarmad is so lost in his longing and quest for the divine, the beloved, that he does not know the end of his journey. For Sarmad, longing itself is love. This is the idea that resonates throughout German and English Romanticism, two centuries hence.

Another unusual influence of Dara's translations was on the infamous raider Nadir Shah who had razed Delhi to ground in 1739. He was so inspired by Dara's work that he went and had the Holy Quran and Gospels translated to Persian (Proceedings 1949: 176). Globalisation, thus, we see was not a westerly wind in till early 19th century as is understood today. It was an Oriental whirlwind of powerful ideas, and Dara was at the helm of it.

To conclude, a few other works of Dara must be mentioned. *Safinat ul Auliya*, his first work is a lengthy dictionary of Sufi saints of various orders, the Prophet's family with separate chapters about his wives and daughters, and female mystics. It is noteworthy that the later Sufi canon forgot the female saints. Dara went to the graves of most of these saints across India and found out about their legends. The second work *Sakinat ul Auliya* (1642), is a biography of his mentor Mulla Shah's teacher Mian Mir, and his disciples.

[2] See, for example, a mention of this idea as early as late 19th century in Ed. Lection, J. "A Pageant and Other Poems. By Christina G. Rossetti" *The Athaeneum.* London: John Francis, Jul-Dec 1881. 327.

Hasanat ul Arifin is a compendium of sayings of Sufi saints, which include radical quotes like that of Sarmad. Here also, Dara mentions that the text is for use of those who have cast off their prejudices. What he is also saying through omission is that there is a long tradition of questioning organised faith, and that he is just one in the line of that norm. These three works also must be regarded as translations. Translation, etymologically means "removal of a saint's body or relics to a new place." Dara has served the old, literal meaning of translation through these books – he's removed his saints to books and ensured that their ideas and words would live on (Haq 1929).

A distych from Abhai Chand tells about the identity of all three – Abhai, Sarmad and Dara:

> "I am at once a follower of the Quran, a priest,
> A monk, a Jewish rabbi, an infidel and a Muslim"
> (Goshen 2017: 36).

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