

In Search of Wahdat-ul-Wujud : Explorations of Hindu Scriptures

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Dara Shukoh was born in the year 1615 CE. He was the son of the Mughal ruler Shah Jahan (r. 1628-58) and Mumtaz Mahal. Posterity does not remember him so much as an Emperor's son but as a Sufi mystic philosopher whose life long passion was broadening of his understanding of different religions. He wrote extensively, many works were his own compositions but a large number of books were written at his instance or had been dedicated to him as a tribute to his patronage of those authors.

Dara Shukoh was an ardent follower of the ideology of Wahdat-ul-Wujud (unity of being).¹ Both his murshids Miyan Mir (d. 1635) and Mulla Shah (d. 1661/1662) were from the same school of thought and all through their lives they presented a most systematic and effective defense against the revivalist forces in the times of Jahangir and Shah Jahan.

SIRR-I-AKBAR

Section-I

Dara Shukoh's passion for the unearthing of Wahdat-ul-Wujud knew no bounds. With each passing year the craving to find out the 'Truth' had been increasing. He appears to be the real successor of his great grandfather Akbar who invited people of all faiths in the discussions of Ibadat Khana. And as was the norm of medieval times that it was not taken in great stride if people expressed their views as they felt like in the presence of an Emperor. And here lies the greatness of Akbar that to the utmost possible he tried to create an atmosphere of an open ended debate where different people of various faiths could make candid statements. After taking into cognizance these different viewpoints he had remarkable intellectual capabilities to arrive at truth. Dara Shukoh seems to have inherited the same characteristic of his great grandfather where he turns to the classics of various different religions, studies them thoroughly with an absolute open mind. But here absolute open mindedness should not be taken as if he had renounced Islam as his brother Aurangzeb and the Ulema class had accused him of. But the fact is altogether different; he was trying to understand the concepts which had already existed in Islam and in the process of this he studied these very concepts in other religions also. It would not be out of place if we quote Dara from the preface of Sirr-i- Akbar that "he had an ardent desire for seeing the God knowing devotees of the various 'orders' and hear their high utterances regarding pantheism, he had read the various works on mysticism and had himself composed tracts, but, in spite of this, his thirst for understanding Tawhid (unity of being) which is a vast ocean, was increasing more and more. New problems were coming to his

mind, the solution of which was impossible without a reference to the sayings of God or without (quoting) an authority from his omniscient self. Moreover, there were many secrets concealed in the Holy Qur'an and the sacred book whose interpretation was difficult to find. So he desired to read all the revealed Books, for the utterances of God elucidate and explain one another. It may be that in one place it is found in compendium, while in others it may be given in detail, and, as such, the compendium may be understood by the help of the detailed. He read the old and the New Testaments and the psalms of David and other scriptures but the discourse on Tawhid (unity of being) found in them was brief and in a summary form and, from the easy translations which have been made by interested persons, the object could not be realized..."²

The preface of *Sirr-i-Akbar* (The Great Secret) conveys fully the inquisitiveness which Dara Shukoh had inherited from the great grandfather. It was not that right from the beginning in order to understand the concept of Tawhid (unity of being) he had zeroed in on 'Hindu Classics' but he had bothered to acquaint himself thoroughly with what other religions had to offer in the unfolding of this concept of 'tawhid' (unity of being). He must have gone through a very painful process and

even confessed that the mystical problems and ideas with which his mind was bubbling up could not be solved with the help of Psalms, the Pentateuch and the Gospels.³

In the preface of *Sirr-i-Akbar* Dara Shukoh quotes a verse from Qur'an (given below) in which a reference is given in *Kitab-i-maknun* (hidden book)

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.⁴

Dara was very sure that this verse does not refer to Psalms, the Book of Moses or the Gospels; and that the reference to 'revelation' (tanzil) was not to the preserved tablet (*Lauh-i-Mahfuz*)⁵ and the 'Book kept hidden' (*Kitab-i-Maknun*) refers to the 'Upanishads'.

He firmly believed that the translation of Upanishads would be very helpful to both Hindus and Muslims alike who were interested in *Wahdat-ul-Wujud* (unity of being). He observed that conservative Hindu scholars had even deprived a majority of Hindus by not portraying the fact that this was an ocean of pantheistic philosophy.⁶ To quote him from the preface of *Sirr-i-Akbar* "This unsolicitous seeker after the truth had in view the principle of the fundamental unity of the personality and not Arabic Syriac, Hebrew and Sanskrit languages, he wanted to make without any worldly motive, in a clear style, an exact and literal translation of the 'Upanekhat' into Persian. For it is a treasure of pantheism and there are very few thorough conversant with it even among the Hindus. Thereby I also wanted to solve the mystery which underlies their effort to conceal it from Muslims."⁷ It is ironical that Dara was accused of infidelity and deviation from Islam and ultimately put to death whereas the poor soul wanted to unfold the mystery for his community.

Dara Shukoh completed this translation of Upanishads in 1657 A.D; two years well before the succession struggle. But it appears that he was very well aware of the oppositions it might evoke despite the fact that he was the most favourite son of Emperor Shah-Jahan. That's why he is very defensive when he wrote that he had translated the 'Upanikhet' for his own spiritual benefit and for the religious advancement of his children, his friends and the seekers of truth and not for the general public.⁸ A clear message for the conservatives that he didn't want to disturb anything in the

existing scenario but they (Ulema) were not to be convinced.

There were a number of Sanskrit scholars at Shah Jahan's court whom the Emperor had liberally awarded. One finds Banwali Das Wali⁹ Chandrabhan Brahman¹⁰, Jagan Nath Misra¹¹ and Kavindracharya Saraswati¹² of Benaras. We are not sure as to which portions of translation were done by Dara and which were done by the Pundits and Sanyasis who were proficient in the 'upanehet' and were brought in from 'Benaras' for this very purpose.

According to Muktika Upanishad, the total number of upanishads are around 108. But one is not sure of the date of compilations and composition of the above said upanishad. Few people are of the opinion that around 200 upanishads are available and out of these only 10 are considered the most ancient and important ones. They are : Ish, Kena, Kathaka, Prasna, Mundaka, Kushanki, Titari (Taittreya), Itari (Aitreya), Chandogya and Brihadaranyaka.

Dara Shukoh translated fifty Upanishads and a manuscript (no. 6296) in Asafiya Library mentioned that two Upanishads 'Vamaautarabani' and 'Gopalautarabani' were not available and whosoever gets hold of them, he may add them up in the collection of those fifty Upanishads.¹³

According to Prof. Radha Krishnan Brihadaranyaka, Chandogya, Aitreya, Taittreya, Ish, Kena, Kathaka, Prasna, Mundka, Mandukya, Swetasvatara, Kushaniki, Mittari, Supal, Jabal, Bangal, Kewal and Vajra Suchka are the most ancient and original ones.¹⁴ Except Supal and Vajra Suchka all other Upanishads mentioned above have been translated by Dara Shukoh.

It is generally held that Arun, Yjnavalkya, Balaki, Sweta Gita and Shandamelih etc. might have written these Upanishads. But from different sources its almost certain that it was a sort of collective wisdom of many generations which was compiled in the form of Upanishads. There's no doubt that the above mentioned saints were ardent followers of Upanishadic philosophy but its very doubtful that they wrote it.

The thrust and crux of the whole Upanishad is 'pantheistic philosophy', a phenomenon which Dara thought would lead him to 'Truth'. So it was no wonder that despite being aware of the wrath of Ulema such task would bring in; he appears to try his best to sooth their egos by writing that it was not meant for general public at large but solely for him and his family. One just can't deny the fact that he had the streak of real truth seeker, come what may, but he would not deter from the path of exploration. Here some may put the argument that since he was the most resourceful of all the Princes, he had enormous resources in terms of material power that he could mobilize the most learned and scholarly persons of his times. His urge to explore the 'Truth' was such that he took pains to learn Sanskrit himself so that he could translate the essential parts of upanishads which were deeply related to the philosophy of pantheism (Wahdat-ul- Wujud).¹⁵

One finds very interesting incidents in the Upanishads. It won't be out of place if one mentions a few significant examples. Like once a few Brahmins spotted a 'slave boy' at the time of performing some rituals for a dead body. According to the Vedas, they decided that he should be kept away from this place. That 'slave boy' dared to ask them as to what he lacks that they possess? They replied that we belong to a 'Brahmin' caste. Then the boy asked them on what basis you're a Brahmin and I am not? The group replied that whosoever was born into a house of a Brahmin and followed the Vedas faithfully that person is 'Brahmin'. The 'slave boy' raised his finger towards the

dead body saying that even he faithfully followed the Vedas and according to a definition of a Brahmin given by you, he fulfills all the conditions of being a 'Brahmin'. Now, tell me, would you call him a 'Brahmin'? The whole group got very confused and told him that we are not aware as to what exactly has left his body, on the basis of that we are not taking him to be a 'Brahmin'.

It appears that through this illustrative story an effort has been made to establish that nobody can be labelled as 'mean' or 'superior'.¹⁶

The translation done by Dara Shukoh was widely used by European scholars. During the reign of Nawab Shuja-Ud-dawla (1754-75) of Awadh, the French resident, Monseieur Gentil, sent a copy of Dara Shikuh's translation to a French scholar named Anquetil Duperron. He translated the work into both French and Latin. The Latin version was published in 1812, which was further used for German translation in 1882.

A large number of copies available are a reflection of its popularity among those who did not know Sanskrit at all. They could have been Hindus and Muslims both.

GITA

Section-II

A popular verse from the Vaishnaviya Tantra Sara makes out that the Gita reiterates the main teachings of the Upanishads. The Upanishad are the cows and the cowherd's son, Krishna is the milker, Arjuna is the calf, the wise man is the drinker and the nector like Gita is the excellent milk. For centuries Gita has been recognized as an orthodox scripture of Hindu religion possessing equal authority with the Upanishads and the Brahma Sutra and the three together form the triple canon.

Although there were already Persian translations of Gita but even then Dara decided to get it redone. This clearly indicates that he wanted to unearth the philosophy of Gita himself. It opens with a problem where Arjuna refuses to fight and raises difficulties.¹ It raises a very profound question whether one should do 'Karma' (action) or renounce it? Ultimately when Krishna argues and emphasizes the need for 'Karma' and tells him that the solution lies not in dismissing the world as an illusion and action as a snare.² Krishna recommends the full active life of human in the world with the inner life anchored in the eternal spirit. The Gita is therefore a mandate for action. Dara Shukoh must've found in Gita what a human ought to do not merely as a social being but as an individual with a spiritual destiny. Secondly, the way Gita's philosophy tries to reconcile and even effect a kind of unity between the inner spiritual truth in its most absolute and intergral realization and the ground realities of man's life and action which he generally faces. A compromise between the two is generally reached but that can never be a final and satisfactory solution. Thirdly he might have found in Gita, a philosophy wherein it justifies all life to the spirit as a significant manifestation of one divine being and asserts the compatibility of a complete human action and a complete spiritual life lived in union with the infinite, consonant with the highest self, expression of the perfect Godhead. Fourthly, Gita is not framed or intended to support any exclusive school of philosophical thought or to put forward predominantly the claims of anyone form of Yoga. One may say that the whole structure of thought, the combination and balancing of ideas neither represents the sectarian views nor it represents one angle of truth to exclude all the others. Intact one finds a wide range of ideas which is reflective of a vast synthetic mind and a rich syncretic experience. Undoubtedly it can be labelled as one of those great syntheses in which Indian spirituality has been at its best in its creation of the more intensive, exclusive movements of knowledge and religious realization and thus emerges as a reconciliatory and unifying force of different strands of ideas.

Dara Shukoh, after the translation of Upanishads must've found out that like the spiritual synthesis of the Upanishads; this later synthesis (Gita) was spiritual as well as intellectual and on top of it avoids rigid determination which makes it universally appealing. Polemist commentators found this scripture as one of the

three highest vedantic authorities and attempted to turn this into a medium of offence and defence against other school and systems.

But one finds that it opens the gate to the whole world of spiritual truth and the arena of its views seem to cover up every aspect of that supreme region. The best part is that it charts out the path which one should try to follow but at the same time it does not block or confine one's vision. This must've appeared as an incentive to Dara Shukoh. One may say that starting from the vedantic synthesis, Gita upon the basis of its essential ideas goes onto build a harmonious trajectory of power, Love, knowledge and action (Karma).

With the help of this the soul of a human can directly approach and cast itself into the eternal. Lastly, the dualism of the Sankhya philosophy is taken over into non dualism, for 'Purusa' and 'Prakriti' are the two natures of the supreme being i.e. Purusottama. He alone dispenses grace. He is the true object of devotion. For him must all work be done. The traditional rules of Dharma are to be followed because He established and upholds the moral order. The rules aren't ends in themselves, for union with the supreme is the final goal. And here lies the success of Gita wherein it reconciles the different systems of thought for all time and men. For a person like Dara Shukoh this must've acted as the most stimulating factor to get it translated.

Shaikh Abdur Rahman Chishti, the Sufi interpreter of Bhagvad Gita believed that the crucial part of Krishna's teachings could be summed up in the following words:

"O Arjuna! whatever you do, consider Him as its author, associate none with Him and be assured that All is He, that's one and no partner."³

There's no doubt that like Shaikh Abdur Rahman this message of Gita must've been the fascinating one for Dara Shukoh as well. He was pretty sure that the translations of both Upanishads and Gita would be of great help to all the 'truth seekers'. This translation does not mention any date but most probably this was not done before 1657 AD; the year in which Dara translated the Upanishads.

Yoga Vasistha Section-III

A Persian translation of the famous Sanskrit work was undertaken at the instance of Dara Shukoh. Most likely it was done by one of his courtiers unfortunately whose name we don't come across to know. He wanted it to be translated in simple Persian as the one done by Shaikh Sufi (which he himself had studied and claimed that he gained through it) did not serve the purpose for the seekers of the truth.¹

It appears from the book that immediate reason for getting it translated was that both Ram Chander ji and Vasistha appeared to him in his dreams. The latter asked him to embrace Dara as both of them were 'seekers of truth' so they were like brothers. He then asked him to give some sweets to Dara which he took and ate. As a result of this dream the idea cropped up in his mind to get this work translated into Persian. One of his courtiers was instructed to do the work in collaboration with some well known Pundits of Benaras.

The above mentioned passage again establishes the fact that Dara Shukoh was an open minded 'truth seeker' and if he felt that a particular scripture of the 'other religion' would help him out in the achievement of his goal, then he felt like making it accessible for other 'truth seekers' as well. 'Yoga Vasistha' is generally considered an exposition of 'Vedanta' doctrine, though not of the same quality as that of Upanishads and Bhagvad Gita. It appears that the main philosophy of Yoga Vasistha is 'idealistic pantheism'. This was one feature which was most dear to Dara Shukoh and he found that it was easily comprehensible and its illustrative stories would be more useful to those kind of 'truth seekers' who were not competent enough to interpret the complex philosophy of Upanishads. In the times of Jahangir Yoga Vasistha had already been translated by Nizam Panipati with the help of Sanskrit knowing pundits. But it seems that it could not satisfy

Dara Shukoh and he decided a redo. The original Yoga Vasistha was a very lengthy treatise composed in verse. Around 9th century this was summarized by Gauda Abhinanda, a Brahmin Pundit of Kashmir. It was titled 'Laghu Yoga Vasistha'. This contained around 6000 stanzas. In the process of shortening it Pt.

Abhinanda had left many stories and a good deal of the discussion of the original. The essence remains intact. In the 14th century Madhavacharya again produced a shorter version known as Yoga Vasistha Sara

Sangraha. The translation which was done in times of Jahangir (Nizam Panipati) was based on Laghu Yoga Vasistha and the translation by Dara Shikuh is revised version of the same.

The original Sanskrit work was in verse but the Persian translation is in Prose. As far as the name of the translator is concerned that is not known. Prof. Tarachand wrote that there are indications in text which point to Baba Wali Ram² as the likely author.³ Whereas Dr. Abidi was of the view that he could be the translator or one of the translators. He also quotes one of the manuscripts of India office⁴ wherein the translation has been ascribed to a person called Habibullah.

Leaving aside the matter of translator one is very sure of the fact that in Yoga Vashistha Dara Shukoh found the philosophy of Ekam sat (unity of being Wahdat-ul- Wujud). According to Yoga- Vasistha, one may have to cross the seven stages of shubhacaa (the desire of liberation), Vicama (reflection on reality), tanu manasa (purification of mind), Sattvapatti (realization of the self within),

asamasakti (detachment), Padartha Bhavani (realization of the unreality of objects) and turiya (attainment of the absolute experience) in order to reach the absolute and attain liberation.⁵

In fact according to Yoga Vasistha liberation can be attained only through knowledge and realization of that supreme authority. One should indulge in continuous practice of Yoga Abhayasa which would free oneself from the miseries of life and death.

REFERENCES

Section-I

1. Wahdat-ul-Wujud (unity of being) is an Arabic expression, understood in the sense that the individuality of the mystic is ultimately annihilated in the being of God. This concept was developed and elaborated most prominently by Ibn al Arabi. Some Sufis adopted the metaphor of a drop losing itself completely in the ocean of divine unity.
2. Sirr-i-Akbar (The Great Secret) in by Dara Shukoh, Edited by Tara Chand and S.M. Raza Jalali Na'ini, Tehran, 1961, P.20
3. Dara Shukoh, Majma-Ul-Bahrain, Ed. by Mahfuz-Ul-Haq, Place of publication 1929, P.1.13
4. S.A.A. Rizvi, A History of Sufism in India, Vol. II-from 16th to modern century, Reprint 1992, P. 423, New Delhi.
5. According to Muslim belief Lauh-i-Mahfuz are the preserved tablets on which the affairs of mankind have been written by God from all Eternity.
6. Bikramajit Hasrat, Dara Shukoh-Life & Works, revised Edition, 1982, P.265, New Delhi.
7. Ibid, P. 266
8. Ibid, P. 269
9. Banwali Das or Banwari Das, pen named Wali was also known as Baba Wali Ram (d. 1667-68 A.O.). He had been the secretary of Dara Shukoh and was a Persian poet. He had translated 'Prabodhachandrodaya' into Persian Prose titled 'Gulzar-i- Hal'.
10. Chandrabhan Brahman was born at Lahore. First he served as secretary of 'Allami Afzal Khan, whom Shahjahan had appointed his Diwan-i-Kul. Afzal Khan died in 1639 and in 1645 Shah Jahan appointed Chandrabhan Brahman as the Waqi-a-wis-i- Huzur & he was required to accompany the emperor to his campaign of Badakhshan and to prepare a daily of daily events. After about two years he became Dara Shukoh's secretary. After the death of Dara ShikOh he retired to lead the life of a recluse in Benaras and died there in 1662-63. He developed a unique style of writing diplomatic and non-official letters, described the daily occuranecs in stylish Prose and wrote mystical masnawis and ghazals in Persian. He is said to have translated Mukalama into Persian.
11. Jagan Nath Misra was an eminent Sanskrit poet and scholar. Amongst his works are Jagat Simha which are the Eulogies of Dara Shukoh and the Asif Vilasa devoted to the praise of Asif Khan, brother of Nur Jahan. In 1659 after the tragic death of Dara Shukoh he is said to have retired to Mathura and died there.
12. Kavindracharya Saraswati of Benaras is well known for his Sanskrit authology "Kavindra Chandrodaya", this is indicative of his great influence with 'Shah Jahan and Dara Shikuh, both. He is said to have led a deputation of Benaras pundits before the emperor to seek the abolition of Pilgram Tax on Benaras and Allahabad. Shah Jahan conferred upon him the title of Sarvavidyanidhana and gave him a pension of Rs. 2000.
13. Op. at Sirr-i-Akbar, P.116.
14. Ibid, P.112.
15. Op. cit, Bikramjait Harsat, P.266.
16. Op. cit, Sirr-i-Akbar, P.114

Section-II

1. Bhagvad Gita, Tr. by Dara Shukoh, edited by Mahammad Reza Jalali Na'ini, Kitab Khan I tahuri, Tehran, 1980, P. 5-7.
2. Ibid, P.7.
3. S.A.A. Rizvi, A History of Sufism in India, Vol II-from 15th century to modern century to modern century, Reprint 1992, Pg. 391, N. Delhi.

Section-III

1. Bikramajit Hasrat, Life and works of Dara Shukoh, revised Edn. 1982, P.235, N. Delhi.
2. Banwari Das or Banwali Das, mentioned Earlier in ref. no. 8 in Section-I.
3. Yoga Vasistha, Translated by Dara Shikuh, Edited by Prof. Tara Chand and Dr.S.A.H. Abidi, 1948, Aligarh Muslim University.
4. MS.No. 2927, India Office
5. Op. cit, Yoga Vasistha, P.12.