

ESSAY

In a time of blasphemies

NIGHAT GANDHI

We live in a time of blasphemies. The Encarta online dictionary defines blasphemy as something said or done that shows disrespect for God or sacred things. We, in post-modern times, don't hold anything very sacred. Nothing that ought to be sacred, is. Truth isn't sacred. Life isn't sacred. Love isn't sacred. Compassion isn't sacred. Justice isn't sacred. Rivers, trees, mountains, the list is endless. Blasphemous times. We are beset with blasphemies: honour killings, sectarian killings, ethnic conflicts, wars, and worst of all, our blasphemous pillaging of the planet and its dwindling natural resources.

In the midst of such collective blasphemies, a lone figure, a 17th century messiah of harmonious co-existence, stands out as a beacon of tolerance. We don't learn much about him in school history textbooks, and my discovery of him is recent. He was a student of mysticism, a martyred sufi poet. I am talking about Dara Shikoh, the eldest son of Emperor Shah Jahan and Mumtaz Mahal—beheaded in 1659 in a struggle for succession by his younger brother Aurangzeb, who then became king and appended the title Alamgir (Conqueror of the World) to his name. Aurangzeb commanded his material empire, and Dara in bidding farewell to this material world, ascended to the spiritual kingdom. In hindsight, one could stipulate that Aurangzeb's imperialistic ambitions were an inevitable prop for Dara's martyrdom, his sublime vision of humanity as an ideal of human co-existence. To make Dara's execution palatable to the masses, Aurangzeb had to rely on the support of his sycophantic ulema who brought allegations against Dara of blasphemy. According to Maathiri Alamgiri, the official history of Aurangzeb's reign, Dara's beheading was ordered because his views were a threat to Islam and the state. What was the nature of Dara's blasphemy? Why did Aurangzeb feel so threatened by his heretic brother?

Dara may not have been as great a military general as his brother, but he was a formidable intellectual adversary. Though he is the author of many books, Dara's best known work is the *Majmua-ul-Bahrain* (The Mingling of The Two Oceans), where the two oceans represent the spiritual traditions of the two faiths he studied extensively, Hinduism and Islam. Dara was an early student of comparative religion long before it developed as an academic discipline, and his short life was devoted to writing about matters spiritual which he gleaned from spiritual texts of Hinduism and Islam. He also made a thorough study of the texts of Christianity. He authored many books on Sufism, including biographies of well-known sufis. He was the first to commission the translation of the Bhagavad Gita and 50 Upanishads into Persian, translations that were later re-translated into Latin and Greek in the 19th century, thus making available for the first time the sacred texts of Hinduism to European scholars.

Dara's genuine interest in cross-cultural understanding of religion continued to be a threat for the narrow-minded ulema of the Mughal empire. Dara was well aware that his unorthodox views on 'symbiotics of religion', to borrow a phrase from Johan van Manen's preface to the first English translation of *Majmua-ul-Bahrain*, would not appeal to many. Mahfuz-ul-Haq, a lecturer in Arabic and Persian of Presidency College, Calcutta, was the first to translate the *Majmua* from Persian into English in 1929. In the introduction, Dara clearly states that his book, containing the fruit of his "researches" is intended "for the members of (his) family and (he has) no concern with the common folk of either community." Dara is prescient about the narrow-mindedness of the average members of both communities when he asserts that "discerning, intelligent persons will

derive much pleasure from this tract (Risala), while persons of blunt intelligence of either side will get no share of its benefits." Dara believed that "truth is not the property of any particular chosen race but that it can be found in all religions and at all times." In the opening chapter of the *Majmua* Dara Shikoh writes:

"Now thus sayeth this unafflicted, unsorrowing fakir, Mohammad Dara Shikuh, that, after knowing the Truth of truths and ascertaining the secrets and subtleties of the true religion of the Sufis and having been endowed with this great gift (i.e. the Sufistic inspiration), he thirsted to know the tenets of the religion of the Indian monotheists; and, having had repeated intercourse and (continuous) discussion with the doctors and perfect divines of this (i.e. Indian) religion who had attained the highest pitch of perfection in religious exercises, comprehension (of God), intelligence and (religious) insight, *he did not find any difference, except verbal, in the way in which they sought and comprehended Truth*" (italics mine).

He asserts, based on his discourses with Hindu and Muslim saints and scholars and after a thorough study of monotheistic texts such as the Quran and the Upanishads, that Hinduism is not averse to monotheism, and that any differences to be found in the spiritual aims of Muslims and Hindus is merely linguistic. Dara believed that Truth is not the domain of Muslims alone. Does that mean Dara was not a devout Muslim? On the contrary, Dara was steeped in



Sufism and Islam, and never renounced his faith. But apostasy was precisely the charge brought against him by Aurangzeb. Dara was honest, bold and unorthodox in his understanding of the Oneness of God or the concept of Tawhid, and oneness of God he found in the parallel spiritual traditions of Hinduism and Islam. It was this attempt to synthesize his insights gained from both these traditions, a new kind of intellectual jihad or struggle he waged, that ultimately cost him his life.

The *Majmua-ul-Bahrain* is a dense, brief text consisting of twenty-two short chapters comprising the common teachings of Vedanta and Sufism. The chief principle of submission to the One Truth or the principle of Tawhid is seen as the surest way to liberation from the sufferings of the world. Dara discovered Oneness of Being to be the highest truth in both religions. I will try to illuminate Dara's concept of spiritual salvation, with reference to the section on Mukti (Salvation) in the *Majmua*. Dara explains that salvation can be of three kinds according to Hinduism. The three kinds of mukti seem similar to the stages of self-awareness or maqamat in sufism. The first kind of mukti is *jivan mukti*, or salvation in life:

"*Jivan mukti* consists in one's attainment of salvation and freedom, by being endowed with the wealth of knowing and understanding the Truth, in seeing and considering everything of this world as one, in ascribing to God, and not

to oneself, all (i.e. man's) deeds, actions, movements and behaviour, whether good or bad, and regarding oneself, together with all other existing objects, as in complete identity with the Truth. Further, he should regard God as manifesting Himself in all the stages and should look upon *Brahman*, which the Sufis call *Alam-i-Akbari* (or the Great World) and is the complete form of God, as the corporeal form of God."

The precept that salvation can be attained through accepting the Truth of the cosmos and everything in the cosmos as a creation of God is a familiar concept to all believers, whether Muslims or Hindus.

The second kind of salvation, *sarvamukti*, or liberation from every kind of bondage, comes from annihilation of the individual self in "His Self", similar to the concept of fana in Sufism. Dara Shikoh explains it thus:

"This (salvation) is universally true in the case of all living beings, and, after the destruction of the sky, the earth, the Paradise, the Hell, the Barhmana, and the day and the night, they will attain salvation by annihilation in the Self (of the Lord). And the Holy verse, 'now the friends of Allah—they shall have no fear nor shall they grieve,' (Quran 10:62) is a reference to this very mukti, or salvation."

The third kind of mukti or salvation, is *sarbada mukti* or 'later salvation.' This kind of mukti consists of becoming an Arif or knower of God. An Arif is one who has received gnosis or true knowledge of God. According to Dara Shikoh,



irrespective of whether the Arif is Hindu or Muslim, it is someone who attains freedom and salvation through true knowledge of God:

".....in every stage of the progress, whether this progress be made in this day or night, whether in the manifest or the hidden world, whether the Barhmana appears or not and whether it takes place in the past, the present or the future.....the word *jannat* applies to *ma'rifat* (or knowledge) of God and *abada* refers to the perpetuity of this *mukti* (or salvation); the reason being that, in whatever state one may be, the capacity to know God (i.e. of *ma'rifat*) and to receive eternal favour is absolutely necessary." He quotes a verse from the Quran, "Give good news, (O Prophet) to the believers who do good that they shall have a goodly reward" (Quran 18: 2) to further support this analysis, a perspective he believes is clearly and repeatedly stated in the Quran. Allah has promised the doers of good deeds a goodly reward, that is, a life in heaven.

However, the most startling insight which Dara shares is his elaboration of what this goodly reward in heaven means. Living in the highest heaven or Firdaus-i-Ala, he writes, is not about taking up literal residence in a garden filled with alluring hours, as much as it is about living in nearness of God, i.e. living with *ma'rifat* or knowledge of God. And a good soul, regardless of whether Hindu or Muslim, can ascend to this state of nearness to God in this

life. And hence, the idea of going to heaven receives a new meaning. Heaven, in Dara's conception is thus a spiritual state, not a place one goes to after death. It is about living in a state of complete liberation from worldly fears and desires. Regardless of whether you are a man or woman, Hindu or Muslim, it is the kind of liberation one comes to after a great inner struggle to overcome the trappings of the ego. Such a state of liberation is *ma'rifat*. It is true knowledge of God. Dara was convinced of the idea of heaven as this promised state of nearness to God. Death of the body then becomes symbolic death only. It is the death of the ego that makes *ma'rifat* possible. You die to your ego in order to arrive in heaven, or in a state of nearness to God. Arriving in heaven is about being in a state of certain knowledge of God—in complete humility and tranquility, a state arrived at through the conscious use of one's intellect and expansiveness of the spiritual heart. This struggle is equally arduous for a Hindu or a Muslim seeker.

The stuff of heresy, indeed, this! In all his allegedly heretical writing and discourses, Dara held sacred what ought to be held sacred—the human capacity for self-reflection and the oneness of humanity and oneness of God. He saw the same human striving to reach God set against the overwhelming obstacle of the human ego regardless of whether the seeker sought salvation through the Sufi path or Vedanta. We may not agree with all of Dara's views, but we have to concede to him the practice of genuine multi-culturalism centuries before the term became fashionable. He studied the Hindu and Muslim spiritual traditions with equal devotion. Each tradition originated in a different place, and at a different time—but their coming together and influencing one another through music, poetry, and literature was a fortuitous event and in Dara's writings he celebrates both these streams as two rivers flowing into one ocean of Truth.

Dara was an enthusiastic patron of the arts and music, and a skilled poet. The concept of the greater jihad, the highest struggle, the struggle to overcome one's ego or *nafs* is the prerequisite to spiritual salvation. It is expressed poignantly in a couplet by Dara. Mahfuz-ul-Haq quotes it in his Introduction to the *Majmua-ul-Bahrain*:

Saltanat sahal ast khud ra ashna faqr kun
Qatra ta darya tawanad shud chara gauhar shod
Kingship is easy; make thyself familiar with the ways of asceticism

(For) if a drop can be the ocean, why (then) should it choose to be a pearl?

An uncannily prophetic bit of poetry. Perhaps Dara knew about his fate. He was martyred, and in being sacrificed to the worldly, egotistical machinations of his brother, Dara chose not to become a pearl of this world. Instead, as if willing his own death, he chose to merge himself with the Ocean of Truth. In transcending the limitations of worldly existence, he ascended to heaven, the heavenly state, his soul finding final refuge in Truth or Tawhid.

In our incoherent times, when most political philosophies have lost their relevance, and it takes nerves of steel to survive in an ethical wasteland, many writers and artists and activists have turned to the universal and enlightened vision of Dara. Books have been written about him. Plays have been staged about his life. These literary and artistic efforts express our culture's collective yearning for more Daras, the growing global longing for a spiritual leadership that transcends bickering over literalistic interpretations of different faiths.

What would have been the course of history, if Dara, and not Aurangzeb, had succeeded to the Mughal throne? Would we have had our philosopher king? Who knows?

NIGHAT GANDHI, LITERARY CRITIC AND RESEARCHER, IS BASED IN INDIA

POET'S WORLD

'The colour of those eyes . . .'

AINON N.

Dear Diary...

Throughout our silence many seasons have come and left. The fresh green and birdsongs gave in to the perceptible autumn. The leaves turned crimson and gradually to lifeless brown. And then the earth crawled inward and braced for snow. The blue sky has changed its shade to gray and was grumbling today. And now, raw cold wind is heavy with snowflakes. Inside here the room is warm and luminous. Pleasure seems to spread over burning logs and crackling fire. I feel the seasons in me. I have to confess this change of weather stirs my restless soul.

Tonight my mood is entangled in Anna Akhmatova's words, "From poetry can arise the prose we need, which will give us back the poetry renewed."

Did you know that she refused to be addressed as poetess and thus remained a poet throughout her life? I caught a glimpse of her personality in *Literary Seductions*, a book by Frances Wilson. And, as a friend affirmed many a time that she was a "woman of substance", I could not resist but read her Complete Book of Poems. This volume of close to one thousand pages left me with a sense of deep contemplation wandering off in many directions.

I encountered her youthful mind through her writings about Brodiachaia Sobaka (The Stray Dog) where her debut in public recitation began. It was the center where bohemian personalities of St. Petersburg gathered for poetry reading, experiencing pleasure in music and an occasional dance. About this smoke-filled cabaret she reminisced:

Here we're all drunkards and whores, joylessly stuck together! / On the walls, birds and flowers pine for the clouds and air.

Her poems danced through the whims of young desire that wished to sense the sufferings of unreciprocated love infused with brief moments of happiness. In one of her poems she poignantly reflects:

O, I understand: to know, passionately and intensely, is his delight, / That there's nothing that he needs, and nothing I can deny.

And again love for her meant:

A bright flash in frost, drowsy night-scented stock / Yet, sure and secret, it's far from peace and joy. / ...It knows how to weep sweetly in the violin's yearning prayer; / And is fearfully divined in a stranger's smile.

Such diction in her earlier publications, The

Evening and Rosary, is a testament to her notoriety of being vivacious as she dared to declare openly the conventions considered sensual in nature at that time.

Clearly time was her writings maker. The German-Russian war during World War II diverted her attention to events of the time; and she reflectively announced: "the shadows of passion and songs vanished from my memory." At that stage her poems, in subtle forms, enacted the morality of optimism for the future. Her writings were carved out of history, and of course, hers were 'confessional' poems grounded in her own experience. Much of her is in her writings. She viewed the art of poem and self a discovery for each other --- the interplay fused as one in reality. Her words could not to be suppressed by threats of death or the disappearance of her fellow writers...

And you, my dear friends, ones of the last selection, / My life was saved to ever mourn you. Not, like a willow, to cool in lamentation, / But cry your names the whole planet through! ... was her conviction; her homage to all those lost to the cruelty of time.

She wrote and recited poems when all that was expressed verbally and in writing was censored, purged or destroyed; and this was true of writers of her time as well. She was both loved and hated in the literary community. Poet Vladimir Mayakovsky at one point confessed that he publicly denounced her writings, but in private he would read her poems and weep. Boris M. Eikhenbaum characterized her as "half whore, half nun." He perceived her writings on love and religious piety as contradictory and judged such philosophy to be ideologically harmful. Then there was Osip Mandelstam, her admirer, who remarked that the words of a poet can be 'most disobedient' and truly 'disturbing' to the people and the state. In Akhmatova's case his statement remained true. They all were witness to the distressing period of The Great Purge.

However, Stalin could not prosecute her directly because of her celebrated position in the literary world.

In-spite of her popularity, for fifteen years from 1925 through 1940, the Poets Guild in affiliation with the Central Committee expelled her from poetry readings, and her writings were unofficially banned from the press. In the 1940s the moratorium was briefly lifted, but was reinstated again in 1946 and remained till the end of her career. These verses from her famous poem *Requiem* is a testimony to the un-sayable restraints of working under Stalinist political ideology: *Not under foreign skies protection / Or saving wings of alien birth / I was*



then there – with whole my nation / There, where my nation, alas! was. Even at that stage hers was not a question of ambiguity. She stayed in her oppressed country through personal trials and tribulations, resolutely stating: *I'm not one of those who left their land / To the mercy of the enemy. / I was deaf to their gross flattery. / I won't grant them my songs.* Some years after the end of the Stalin era --- after the 1960s --- she eventually was able to publish all her censored works.

It was during the first phase of 'civic death' (the term she designated for the period when her works were prohibited from being published) that her literary work went through a great transformation. She discovered her

unique style. Her expressions matured in complexity and became anchored in the convention of focusing on aesthetics of human emotions, delivering in words that summoned vivid images. She delicately balanced words and feelings of sorrow, joy, desire and appreciation. Embedded in this trend are these poignant words that reflect her longing for her first husband, poet Nikolai S. Gumilyev, who was executed:

Through darkness and death to his bed, / And brush his shoulder gently with my wings, / And his eyes still laugh into mine, and now it's the sixteenth spring, / What will I do? The angel of night speaks with me till the dawn.

Then there was Osip Mandelstam who was quite charmed by her. He was arrested several times and finally died in a transit camp on his way to Siberia. While recalling his absence she says:

Tallest, most suave of us, why Memory, forcing you to appear from the past, / ...How we debated! / ...Through dark lashes, your eyes, Georgian, looked out, with gentleness, on it all. / Shade, forgive. Blue skies, Flaubert, insomnia, late-blooming lilac flower, bring you, and the magnificence of the year, ... /

Being a woman of distinct bearing, and relying on the strength of her art, it was no surprise that she attracted many writers, poets, socialites.

But it was the vulnerability in her personal life that gave her the *femme fatale* libel. She went through the crisis of divorcing Vladimir Shileiko, her second husband, who was a scholar of Assyria and professor at the Archeological Institute. Her third husband Nikolai Punin, a poet and a scholar of Byzantine art, died in the Gulag camps. Her only son Lev Gumilyev, an established historian, was arrested a number of times to keep her 'in check.' These events and her courtship with many renowned personalities served as precursors to her creative writings.

But of all the men in her life, it was Isaiah Berlin who left a deep impact on Anna. The

man objected to dying, commenting, "I don't mind death, but I find dying a nuisance" (!). He was vehemently opposed to the totalitarian system and was a formidable writer on the themes of liberty, nationalism, pluralistic affairs of state, and political designs of history. In Leningrad, one November night he and Anna met and reminisced about their Russian childhood, and her works, friends, and the war. Her son Lev joined them briefly. Her meeting with this man from the other side of the political divide was the reason for a bar on her writings from being published for the second time. She was once again ousted from the Union of Soviet Writers, and her son was rearrested.

Afraid for his life and the inevitable consequences, she burned the manuscript of *Poem without a Hero* in which Isaiah Berlin received her attentive signature as *The Guest from the Future*. She held the words in memory for safe-keeping only to reproduce them many years later. Their meeting was a catalyst for some of her fine poems, and his ideas on liberty and history. The intensity of their fifteen-hour meeting blurred her existential reality; she enclosed a perfect declaration of those moments as such:

And it seemed to me those fires were about me till dawn, / And I never learnt – the colour of those eyes. / Everything was trembling, singing: / Were you my friend or enemy? / And winter was it, or summer?

You ask, what does it matter to dwell on a personality? Anna allowed poetry to celebrate the durability of life, to remind us again of the incongruities of history, to understand love and pain in many forms. Her words transcend time and space.

And now...the depth of night intervenes, as I stop my thoughts from dwelling on your page. I end by celebrating these words:

You, who was born for poetry's creation, / Do not repeat the sayings of the ancients. / Though, maybe, our Poetry, itself, / Is just a single beautiful citation.

(Anna Andreevna Akhmatova eventually received due recognition in her native Russia for her literary contributions. Many of her works were published posthumously, and all were made available to the public in the later part of the 1980s. She was born on June 23, 1889, and died on March 5, 1966, in Domodedovo, near Moscow).

AINON N. WRITES FROM CARBONDALE, ILLINOIS, USA