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A Call for Eclectic Mysticism in Dara Shikoh's Majma'-ul-Bahrain

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Abstract

The well-known work *Majma'-ul-Bahrain* is a spiritual treatise written in the Persian language by the young Indian Mughal Prince, Dara Shikoh, the eldest son of the Indian Mughal Emperor, Shahjahan. The prince was deeply interested in the study of religion and philosophy. The title of his monumental work is a Persian phrase which means "The Mergence of Two Oceans". The two Oceans represent the two religions, Islam and Hinduism. The treatise seeks to find the merging point for the two religions. The philosophical work is a literary legendary landmark in comparative religion. It is an earnest attempt to explore the similarities between the two religious philosophies, Islam and Hinduism. It is a spiritual treatise which not only highlights the commonalities between the two religions but also calls for their spiritual synergy for communal harmony. It draws parallels between the mystic ideas preached in both the religious philosophies and thus portrays a picture of eclectic mysticism sought by the prince-philosopher. The mystic unity is achieved by uniting the ideas from both the religions. *Majma'-ul-Bahrain*, thus, Dara Shikoh's ardent plea for pluralism and a clarion call for communal harmony. It proves the wise young Mughal Prince as a true champion of the Hindu-Muslim unity.

Keywords: Dara Shikoh, *Majma'-ul-Bahrain*, communal harmony, comparative religion

Introduction

At times when, unfortunately, the whole world is bleeding with religious strife, it becomes increasingly pertinent to remember, celebrate, embrace and practice the philosophy of such unsung heroes of India's glorious past as Dara Shikoh, who was an epitome of peace, pluralism, multilingualism and multiculturalism.

Dara Shikoh, also called Dara Shukoh, was the eldest son of the Mughal Emperor Shahjahan; however, he did not become the emperor after the father's death. Dara Shikoh was born, not to be an emperor, but to be a scholar, a poet, an artist, an architect, a thinker, a philosopher, a mystic, and an exemplary harbinger of communal harmony and religious tolerance.

The Prince Dara Shikoh was fortunate to be blessed with the teachings of the contemporary spiritual stalwarts. A great patron of art and literature, and a staunch believer in spirituality and mysticism, Dara Shikoh is credited with the translation of the Hindu Scriptures such as *The Upanishads* from Sanskrit into Persian. He authored several prominent spiritual treatises such as *Safinat-ul-Auliya*, *Sakinat-ul-Auliya*, *Risala-e-Haq Numa*, *Tariqat-ul-Haqqiqat*, *Hasanat-ul-Arifeen* and the historic, *Majma'-ul-Bahrain*.

Dara Shikoh's Majma' ul-Bahrain

Written in Persian in 1655, *Majma'-ul-Bahrain* is a landmark in the history of literature on comparative religion. The book attempts to explore the commonalities between Muslim and Hindu mysticism. Its Hindi version is known as *Samudra*

Sangam Grantha, Urdu translation is called *Nūr-i-Ain* and its English rendition is named, *The Mingling of the Two Oceans*. The phrase "Majma'-ul-Bahrain" appears in the Holy Quran, in Surah Al Kahaf (Chapter: 18, Verse 60). It is the Arabic and Persian phrase which means 'mingling of two oceans'.

Haq (1929) ^[3], the English translator of the original Persian text, *Majma'-ul-Bahrain*, observes:

Having collected the views of the two parties and having brought together the points-a knowledge of which is absolutely essential and useful for the seekers of Truth-he (i.e. the author) has compiled a tract and entitled it *Majma'-ul-Bahrain* or *The Mingling of the Two Oceans* (as cited in Bhattacharya, 2019, p. 250) ^[1].

The title *Majma'-ul-Bahrain* or *The Confluence of the Two Oceans* is a metaphor for the merging of two religions, the blend of two beliefs, the convergence of two creeds, the fusion of two faiths, transcending the institutionalised ideologies, surpassing the scriptural regulations and overcoming the doctrinal divisions. Haq (1929) ^[3] claims, "The tract begins with an Introductory Section and twenty sections with the following headings:

1. The Elements
2. The Senses
3. The Religious Exercises
4. The Attributes
5. The Wind
6. The Four Worlds
7. The Fire

8. The Light
9. The Beholding of God
10. The Names of God, the Most High
11. The Apostleship and the Prophethood
12. The Barhmand
13. The Directions
14. The Skies
15. The Earths
16. The Divisions of the Earth
17. The Barzakh
18. The Great Resurrection
19. The Mukht
20. The Night and the Day” (p. 31)

Sengupta (2015) ^[4] writes, “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” (p. 573). All these topics deal with the world within, the world around and the world beyond.

Majma’ ul-Bahrain: A Spritual Synergy for Communal Harmony

Majma’ ul-Bahrain focuses on the similarities between Islam and Hinduism, or more specifically, Sufism and Vedanta. Sengupta (2015) ^[4] aptly asserts, “Dara Shikoh 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” (p. 579). Bhattacharya (2019) ^[1] rightly remarks, “The discourses that the text offers have a distinct philosophical/metaphysical approach with the aim to establish the Monotheistic thoughts” (p. 248). She also adds, “The treaty entitled *Majma’ ul-Bahrain* can be appreciated as one of the most prominent paradigms of transcultural literature in the early modern history of India” (p. 249). She commendably comments, “Dārā’s attempt in *Majma* goes beyond the boundaries of two major religious creeds, i.e., the Muslims and the Hindus. The scriptural traditions of these two religions were developed mainly under the supremacy of two different languages i.e., Persian and Sanskrit respectively, so, *Majma’ ul-Bahrain* beats the borders of these two major languages. (p. 255)

Consequently, it can aptly be concluded that *Majma’ ul-Bahrain* breaks the religious barricades, dismantles the linguistic barriers and transcends the geographical boundaries. Dey (2013) affirms, “It is useful to note that Dara’s eclectic mind was so broad that he did not confine his efforts to explore the commonalities between Hinduism and Islam only. He was also contemplating to work on other religions such as Christianity. Apparently this inclination of Dara was manifested in the year 1640-41, when he carefully studied the Bible” (p. 727). Dara is known to have travelled extensively across the length and the breadth of the sub-continent, to interact with mystics in order to understand God, Soul and Life. His thirst for knowledge, quest for truth and passion for peace manifested in *Majma’ ul-Bahrain* but was thwarted before it could reach its zenith. His early death left the humanity deprived of many more spiritual texts that he had the potential for.

As asserted by Dara, the book highlights the similarities between Sufism and Hindu mysticism. Interestingly, the book does not draw parallels between the two philosophies.

Majma’ ul-Bahrain is, thus, not just a synthesis but a synergy of the semblances, where the total is greater than the sum of its parts; *Majma’ ul-Bahrain* aims at not just a synthesis but a synergy of the similarities between the two seemingly divergent but inherently harmonious philosophies.

Although written in 1655, the book transcends the limitations of time and place. It is Dara Shikoh’s explicit expression and an ardent plea for universal brotherhood, inter-faith dialogue and peaceful co-existence. The text begins with the following remarkably thought-provoking lines, which dissolve all diversities and plead for spiritual unity,

“Faith and Infidelity, both are galloping on the way towards Him.

And are exclaiming together: He is one and none share his kingship

He is manifest in all; and everything has emanated from him, He is the first and the last, and nothing exists, except Him” (Haq, 1929, p. 37) ^[3].

The book, *Majma’ ul-Bahrain*, is, indeed, a call for eclectic mysticism. It has universal philosophical and spiritual significance. It symbolises an attempt at breaking the barriers, and thus, preaches us to introspect, reflect and act to dispel the paradoxes within us to achieve internal harmony and discard our differences with others to practice and strengthen the spirit of universal brotherhood.

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