

Dara Shikoh

Dara Shukoh, also known as Dara Shikoh was the eldest son of Shah Jahan, the fifth Mughal Emperor of the great Mughal Empire. He was supposed to succeed his father and assume the throne of the Mughal Empire. It was also Shah Jahan's wish that Prince Dara Shikoh succeed him. But, unfortunately, fate had other plans. Due to the unrestrained ambitions of his brother Aurangzeb, a fight for the throne occurred. In the clash that followed, Dara Shikoh was killed by Aurangzeb.

Dara Shukoh was born in the year 1615 in Ajmer. He was the first son of Shah Jahan and his second wife Mumtaz Mahal. After him, Shah Jahan had many more children. Dara's siblings included Jahanara Begum, Shah Shuja, Roshanara Begum, Aurangzeb, Murad Bakhsh, and Gauhara Begum.

When he was 12, his father succeeded Jahangir as the fifth Emperor of the Mughal Empire. Dara literally means glory, and the young prince stood up to his name. He was a bright child and a quick learner. He was intelligent as well as strong. He was a very capable person. Shah Jahan favoured him and loved him immensely.

When he was 18 years old in 1633, Dara Shikoh was wedded to his first cousin, Nadira Banu. Nadira Banu was the daughter of his beloved and powerful paternal uncle Sultan Parvez Mirza. Historians suggest that the marriage between Dara Shikoh and Nadira Banu was a joyous one. Both were very satisfied with each other's company. They loved each other and were devoted and loyal to each other. In fact, after marrying Nadira Banu, Dara Shikoh never married again, even for any political or other gains. This was rare.

Dara Shukoh was widely renowned and popular amongst the common people. He desired peaceful coexistence more than anything. He respected all faiths and religions and loved to debate and discuss about various paths to salvation. Aurangzeb, on the other hand, was a hard core orthodox. Dara Shikoh followed Qadiri Sufi saint Hazrat Mian Mir. According to sources, Dara was also a great friend of the 7th Sikh Guru, Har Rai. Such was his religious tolerance and respect. Dara wanted harmony among various religions and continued to work towards achieving this goal. In this respect, he was like his great grand- father, Emperor Akbar. Dara even

patronised the translation of all Upanishads from Sanskrit to Persian, and even wrote books related to religious speculations and hypothesis. Dara was also a great lover of books and knowledge, He opened a library, which still functions. It is located in the Guru Gobind Singh Indraprastha University, Kashmiri Gate, Delhi.

Dara Shikoh was also a great lover of art and culture. A compilation of his art, paintings and calligraphy called the 'Dara Shikoh' was done and was presented to his wife Nadira Banu. In his lifetime, he commissioned many beautiful and magnificent paintings and architecture. Examples of these are the Pari Mahal in Srinagar, Indraprastha Library in Delhi, etc.

At the same year as his marriage, young Prince Dara was appointed as a military commander in the Mughal army. Due to his talent and skills in the art of combat and military, Dara Shikoh quickly rose through the ranks and in 1642, commanded a huge section of the Mughal army. Observing the talents of his first born son, Shah Jahan wasted no time in appointing Dara Shikoh as his heir in 1642. He also gave him the title of Shahzada-e-Buland Iqbal which literally means 'Prince of High Fortune'. Such was the stature of Dara Shikoh in the Mughal court. Shah Jahan also promoted him in the army and appointed him as the Subahdar (governor) of Allahabad. Consequently, 1648, he was appointed as the Governor or Subahdar of Gujarat.

Unfortunately, soon Shah Jahan's health started to weaken. To strengthen the position of Dara Shikoh, his father increasingly promoted him. In 1652, Dara was appointed as the Governor of the province of Multan and Kabul. In 1655, he received the title of Shah-e-Buland Iqbal which literally means 'King of High Fortune'. He was also further promoted in the army and now had the post of a General.

Dara Shikoh's brother had ambitious goals of their own. They wanted to become the Emperor themselves and did not want to give up the throne for the legal heir, Dara Shikoh. As Emperor Shah Jahan's health continued to deteriorate, agitations and struggles for the throne by the Mughal Princes increased. Shah Shuja started initiating this fight for the throne. In Bengal, he took over the army and announced himself to be the Mughal Emperor. He took his army and proceeded towards Agra to claim the throne. Dara Shikoh promptly defeated his army in what came to be called the Battle of Bahadurpur.

Murad Baksh decided to side with Aurangzeb. Shah Jahan strongly came out in support of his eldest son Dara, and helped him in any way possible. Despite of this, the joint forces of Aurangzeb and Murad was able to defeat the army of Dara in the battle of Samugarh. Dara Shikoh had no choice but to retreat. Aurangzeb gained control of the central fort, the Agra Fort. Shah Jahan had recovered from his illness. But, Aurangzeb had other plans. In 1658, he declared that his father had become incompetent and therefore could not rule anymore. Aurangzeb subsequently proceeded to put Shah Jahan under house arrest in the Agra Fort. In 1666, Shah Jahan breathed his last in his confinement. He was finally put to rest besides his love, Mumtaz Mahal in Taj Mahal.

After his defeat in the battle of Samugarh, Dara Shukoh had no choice but to retreat from Agra to Delhi. Under constant threat, he then moved from Delhi to Lahore and then to Multan and Sindh. Later, he reached Gujarat where he was helped by the Governor of Gujarat, Shah Nawaz Khan. With this new support, Dara Shikoh formed a new army to retaliate against his younger brother and gain back power. In the battle of Deorai that followed, Dara Shikoh was again defeated. This time he had no choice but to flee to Sindh. He took help from Malik Jiwan, an Afghan Chief, who Dara had saved on numerous occasions. But, Malik Jiwan turned out to be traitor. He did not consider Dara's past kindness and cruelly betrayed him. Malik Jiwan cunningly handed over Dara Shikoh and his son to Aurangzeb.

Aurangzeb was afraid of Dara Shikoh as he was very popular and liked by the common people. Aurangzeb did not want to lose to his brother. He did not want to give away his political power. Therefore, he decided to eliminate his own brother. Dara was paraded before the common people on a dirty elephant, bound in chains. He was declared as a threat to the Empire and to Islam. Consequently, Aurangzeb had Dara Shikoh killed, in front of his son, on the ruthless night of 30th of August 1659. Aurangzeb did not even give his own brother a proper burial. Dara was finally put to rest somewhere in Humayun's tomb in Delhi.

Dara Shikoh was an intelligent, capable, calm, tolerant, kind and liberal person. He actively supported fine arts and spread of knowledge. He wanted to live in harmony. He was sincere and loyal. Despite of loving peace, he was a capable military commander. His policies were fair and just. He was loved by all. He encouraged discussions and debates and discouraged orthodoxy.

All these traits have forced not only historians, but everyone to ask, What if it was Dara Shikoh was became the ruler of the great Mughal Empire in place of his orthodox and ruthless brother Aurangzeb? Would India's fate be different? The answer to these questions is something we may never know. But, Dara Shikoh's importance in Indian history cannot be denied. In fact, recently, the New Delhi Municipal Corporation changed Dalhousie Road's name to Dara Shikoh Road, to give him his due respect. Dara Shikoh was a truly great person.

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