

## CALLIGRAPHY OF PRINCE DARAR SHIKOH

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Calligraphy is usually regarded as the noblest of fine arts by the Muslims. The rich and poor alike could participate in the practice of calligraphy. The consideration of piety as well as an inner urge of the aesthetics have induced the Muslim kings and nobles not only to encourage but also to practise this art personally. Their parallel is only found in China where calligraphy has been held in high esteem and even the emperors indulged in its practice occasionally.

Zahiruddin Babur, the founder of Mughal rule in India was scion of such ancestors as were adept in the use of swords. It is indeed a wonder that coming from such a stock he would exhibit almost equal skill in handling both the sword and pen. Babur's descendants down to the unfortunate Bahadur Shah inherited his qualities of head and heart, but none of them could surpass him in using the sword and pen with so even dexterity. But in the practice of the art of calligraphy he had been followed by almost all his descendants except Akbar whose genius could spare him the pains of reading and writing in acquiring knowledge.

Of all the Muslim kings and princes who practised the art of calligraphy either as an act of piety or an artistic pursuit, prince Dara Shikoh was the most outstanding.

Dara Shikoh, the eldest son of emperor Shahjahan, had inherited the scholarly instincts of Babur and liberal disposition of Akbar. Having combined in himself both these qualities he mixed with the followers of the major religions and studied the doctrines of the Vedanta, Talmud and the works of *Sufi* writers. He caused a Persian version of the Atharva Veda and the Upanishads to be made with the assistance of some Brahman scholars and aimed at finding a *modus vivendi* among the apparently hostile creeds. All these led him to compose the great book, *Majma' al-Baharayn*, The confluence of two Oceans.<sup>1</sup>



Perhaps, preoccupation with scholarly activities prevented in him the growth of the qualities of an astute politician or the abilities of a brave general. That is why in the struggle for the throne he was a poor match for his clever and brave brother, Aurangzib.

Besides pursuing research into the different warring creeds and search for unity and ultimate truth, he felt an inner urge to cultivate taste for fine arts and practise the art of calligraphy. Dara Shikoh's impeccable taste for selecting the superb specimens of calligraphy and miniature painting is attested by the *Album*, now preserved in the India Office Library, London. This album which is known as *Dara Shikoh Album* contains paintings and calligraphy which Dara Shikoh carefully collected to present to his beloved wife, Nadira Banu Begum.

Prince Dara Shikoh had the good luck to be taught the art of calligraphy by the famous calligrapher, Abdur Rashid Daylami. Abdur Rashid, popularly known as Aqa Rashid was the most famous calligrapher who lived in India.<sup>2</sup> He was a nephew and pupil of the legendary calligrapher, Mir 'Imad, after whose murder he migrated to India. Emperor Shahjahan, who was a great admirer of Mir 'Imad, welcomed his nephew with open arms and showered on him innumerable bounties. Aqa Rashid is said to have had the pen of proverbial Mani, the mystic painter of ancient Iran, in *nasta'liq* calligraphy.

Two prominent members of the royal family, prince Dara Shikoh and Aurangzib's talented daughter, Princess Zib al-Nisa learnt the art of calligraphy from Aqa Rashid.

Dara Shikoh received special attention from his great master, Abdur Rashid, not only because he was the eldest son of the emperor, but he learnt the art with such extraordinary zeal that he became one of his best pupils. Dara Shikoh learnt this art so skillfully that he could compete with the professional calligraphers of the time.

Dara Shikoh was as good in *naskh* as in *nasta'liq*. He took a special interest in getting the copies of the Qur'an transcribed which he used to make beautifully illuminated and decorated. This act of copying the Qur'an is considered an act of piety in which his predecessors, Babur and Ibrahim Mirza and his younger brother, Emperor Aurangzib, took a particular delight.

The extant specimens of Dara Shikoh's calligraphy confirm the



verdict of his contemporary art critics on the high quality of his art. His style does not have the excellence of that of his teacher, Aqa Rashid, which was considered inimitable. But in drawing the *dawa'ir* that is the curvature or circle of letters like *Nun* and *maddat* which means the extension of letters like *ba*, *ta*, etc., he showed considerable skill. His calligraphy appears to have the qualities of balance, harmony and serene beauty. It is remarkable for a favourite prince of the Mughal royal family to be so much disciplined.

Specimens of Dara Shikoh's calligraphy are available in the various museums and libraries all over the world. They may be collected and put together to be studied by the scholars.

So far I have been able to trace the following the specimens of calligraphy by Dara Shikoh.

1. There is a manuscript of *Risalah-i-Hikmat-i-'Arshi* in the Asiatic Library, Hyderabad, India, in *nasta'liq*.<sup>3</sup>
2. In the same library there is a manuscript of *Sharh-i-Diwan-i-Hafiz*, written elegantly in *nasta'liq*.<sup>4</sup>
3. In the Bodleian Library at Oxford I found a *wasli* written by him in elegant *nasta'liq*.<sup>5</sup>
4. In 1906 an exhibition was held during the session of *Nadwat al-'Ulama* at Benares, India. In that exhibition a *wasli* was displayed in the hand-writing of Dara Shikoh.<sup>6</sup>
5. In 1920, at the second meeting of the Indian Historical Records Commission held in Lahore another *wasli* in *nasta'liq* handwriting by Dara Shikoh, was exhibited.<sup>7</sup>
6. In 1922 another meeting of the Indian Historical Records Commission was held in Delhi. A *wasli* in *nasta'liq* written by Dara Shikoh, from the collection of Lala Sri Ram of Delhi, was displayed in the exhibition held on that occasion.<sup>8</sup>
7. A *wasli* of Dara Shikoh is preserved in the Museum of Archaeology in Delhi.<sup>9</sup>
8. There are two splendid manuscripts written by Dara Shikoh, one in *naskh* and another in *nasta'liq* in the Victoria Memorial Hall, Calcutta. The manuscript in *naskh*, is a copy of the *Panj Surah* of the Qur'an written in gold.<sup>10</sup> The other manuscript is a copy of *Dah Pandi* in *nasta'liq*.<sup>11</sup>
9. There is a beautiful manuscript of the Qur'an written in *naskh* by Dara Shikoh in the Aziz Bagh Library, Hyderabad, India.<sup>12</sup>



From the evidences noted above Prince Dara Shikoh clearly emerges as a consummate calligrapher. But the full assessment of his art cannot be made unless all the specimens of his calligraphy are diligently searched, gathered together and meticulously studied.

### NOTES

1. R.C. Majumdar, *An Advanced History of India*, London, 1950, p. 481. Vide J.N. Sarkar, *History of Aurangzib*, Calcutta, 1925, pp. 271—72, Dara Shikoh wrote in Persian.
  - (a) *Sirr al-Asrar*, Translation of 50 of the *Upanishads*;
  - (b) *Majma'al-Baharayn*, a treatise on the technical terms of Hindu Pantheism and their equivalents in *Sufi* phraseology;
  - (c) Dialogue with Baba Lal;
  - (d) *Safinat al-Awliya'* (lives of the saints);
  - (e) *Sakinat-al-Awliya'* (the life of Mian Mir);
  - (f) *Risalah-i-Haqnuma*, the compass of truth.
2. *Tadhkirah-i Khwushnawisan*, Calcutta, 1910, pp. 95—100.
3. Handlist of the Manuscripts of the Library, vol. XI, pp. 1170—71.
4. *Ibid.*, vol. 1, pp. 718—19.
5. Ouseley, Add. 173.
6. *Al-Nadwa*, vol. 111, No. 6.
7. *Proceedings of the Meetings*, vol. XI, pl. xxiv, No. 124.
8. *Proceedings of the Meetings*, vol. IV, p. 107, No. 145.
9. *Archaeological Survey of India*, Memoirs No. 29, Specimen No. 41.
10. *Catalogue Raisonne of Buhar Library*, vol. I, pl. viii.
11. *Illustrated Catalogue of the Exhibits in the Victoria Memorial Hall*, Calcutta, r. 23.
12. *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal*, 1917, Notes on Arabic Manuscripts, No. 2.