



## ***Majma’-ul-Baḥrain: Transcending Cultural Boundaries in the Quest for “Truth of Truths”***

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### **Abstract**

The Paper focuses on a particular text of early modern India, entitled *Majma’-ul-Baḥrain* (Mingling of Two Oceans), composed by Prince Dārā Shikoh. The discourses that the text offers have a distinct philosophical/metaphysical approach with the aim to establish the Monotheistic thoughts. In that quest for “Truth of Truths”, Dārā was highly inspired by the observations of *Vedānta* and Sufism, which eventually got the identity of *Majma’-ul-Baḥrain*. The current discussion would relocate the very text in the framework of transcultural literature, analyzing how it transcended different boundaries. In this regard, Dārā’s own ideology to project something new in the field of spirituality, with the reference to the happenings of his life and work in the scenario of the then India, will configure the arguments here.

### **Keywords**

transculture, *Vedānta*, Sufism, monotheistic thought, Dārā Shikoh

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The term “Transculture” grossly encompasses a particular kind of paraphernalia that expands beyond the boundaries. Whenever we talk about a transcultural literature the most significant question that determines the transcultural character is what kind of boundary/s does it cross – topographical, social, religion, lingual or something else. In this paper I would like focus on the early modern India where the Mughal court of 1560-1660 was crafted “as a space defined by multiple cultural frontier” (Turschke 231). The treaty entitled *Majma'-ul-Bahrain*<sup>†</sup> can be appreciated as one of the most prominent paradigm of transcultural literature in the early modern history of India. The author was Dārā Shikoh, the heir apparent to the Mughal crown, though never became a king<sup>‡</sup>.

Dārā Shikoh (1615-1659), the eldest son of Shāh Jahān, composed *Majma'-ul-Bahrain* in 1655<sup>§</sup>. The text demands unique attention in the field of Indo-Persian trend of literature. The mentioned literary-trend had a hoary antiquity in the world history. In the 6th century the migration of Sanskrit fable text *Pañcatantra* to the middle-east and its translation to Pahlavi or Middle Persian language by Burzui under the patronage of Sassanian King Anushiravan can be treated as one of the earliest evidences of the Indo-Persian literary tradition. A portion of the fundamental structure of “the *Indo* part” (Turschke 227) of that very tradition was configured in the court of Mughals, specifically at the court of Akbar, Jahāngir and Shāh Jahān. There the prominent literary activities were seen chiefly of two types, viz., (i) composition of Sanskrit texts by the Sanskrit scholars, and (ii) translations of Sanskrit texts to Persian. Both of them were done either under the supervision of Mughal crowns or having patronage from the court. *Majma'-ul-Bahrain* does not comprise either category – it is a different kind of literary piece – an outcome of the metaphysical as well as spiritual realization of the prince of the Mughal court. In terms to relocate *Majma'-ul-Bahrain* in the framework of transcultural literature the current paper would try to find out its significance as a single text and its voyage, as well as purpose for transcending the barriers.

*Majma'-ul-Bahrain* (hereafter *Majma*) is written in Persian language and contents twenty-two topics. The meaning of the title, as decoded by M. Mahfuz-ul-Haq, is “The Mingling of the Two Oceans”. Dārā himself pointed out the feature of his composition:

<sup>†</sup> Regarding the spelling of this title I found another version, viz. *Majma' al-bahrayn*. (See Supriya Gandhi 70). For this paper I have taken the edition by M. Mahfuz-ul-Haq, published from the Asiatic Society of Bengal, Calcutta, in 1929; hence, I have used the title of that very edition.

<sup>‡</sup> Dārā was executed in 1659.

<sup>§</sup> The date of composition is not beyond doubt, some mentioned 1656.

...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 it is a collection of the truth and wisdom of *two* Truth-knowing (*Haḳ Shinās*) groups. (Haq 38)\*\*.

The “two parties”/ groups that Dārā insisted were Isalam and Hindu, or more particularly, Sufism and *Vedānta*††.

In 9<sup>th</sup> Century the new era of Sufism began, that emphasized particularly on the mysticism and metaphysical thoughts (Chaudhury 10). Regarding the origin of Sufistic mysticism and its association with Indian philosophy scholars argue in different points. Edward G Browne discoursed:

...certain obvious resemblances which exist between the Súfí doctrines in their more advanced forms and some of the Indian systems, notably the Vedanta Sara, assumes that this similarity (which has, in my opinion, been exaggerated, and is rather superficial than fundamental) shows that these systems have a common origin, which must be sought in India. (419)

Browne further pointed out the counter arguments:

The strongest objection to this view is the historical fact that though in Śāśanian times, notably in the sixth century of our era, during the reign of Núshirwán, a certain exchange of ideas took place between Persia and India, no influence can be shown to have been exerted by the latter country on the former (still less on other of the lands of Islam) during Muhammadan times till after the full development of the Şúfí system, which was practically completed when Al-Bírúní, one of the first Musulmáns who studied the Sanskrit language and the geography, history, literature, and thoughts of India, wrote his famous Memoir on these subjects. (419)

Beyond the mentioned debate, the fact that has a general acceptance is certain similarities of Sufistic thoughts with the doctrine of *Vedānta*.‡‡ Therefore, while Dārā is

\*\* English translation of *Majma* is taken from the edition of M. Mahfuz-ul-Haq, done by Haq himself.

†† *Vedānta* is one of the famous theist schools of Indian philosophy.

‡‡ *Vedānta* has different schools, viz. *Advaita*, *Viśiṣṭādvaita*, *Dvaita*, *Dvaitādvaita* etc. Lot of similarities can be found between *Advaita* Vedantic and Sufistic thoughts. For example, both admit the existence of Omni-present Omni-potent God/ Supreme Self. Both recognize oneness of God. God is the ultimate truth and

declaring that he “collected the views of the two parties” and brought them together in *Majma*, the significant question develops — does the text only project the resemblances among the Sufism and *Vedānta*? Or Dārā’s objective was more to harmonize two ideologies from a specific spiritual perspective?

The thrust area of *Majma* can indicate the path to find out the answer of the mentioned questions. Twenty-two topics, on which discussions were made, can be grossly divided into two categories, viz. – the world around and the world beyond.<sup>§§</sup>

In these discussions Dārā often used some significant terminologies that are chiefly coined by the Hindu scripture like *Veda* and *Upanisad*. *Māyā*, *avidyā*, *jīvanmukti* are such words that often come into the discourse of Śaṅkara’s<sup>\*\*\*</sup> *Vedānta* philosophy. It is evident that *Majma* places the thoughts of *Vedānta* and Sufism together, but the way it presents the views does not match entirely either doctrine. The similarities of names of physical and metaphysical phenomenon are mostly prominent, but as per as the content is concerned, they differ from the doctrines what *Vedānta* in original mentions. For instance, Dārā stated “The first thing to come out of chid akās was Love (or *Ishk*), which is called *māyā* in the language of Indian monotheists” (Haq 39). But, this definition of *māyā*, one of the most significant key-term of *Advaita Vedānta* theory, goes far from its scriptural meaning.<sup>†††</sup> Again, Dārā’s inner perception towards the life helped him to develop some new ideas and relocate/ replace/transplace the traditional Hindu philosophical proclamations. This kind of attempt can be traced while he categorized the internal senses in five classes, viz., common, imaginary, contemplative, retentive, and

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creator of the Universe. Both *Advaita* and Sufism accept salvation within life (*jīvanmukti*). Yet, in some points some major differences also occur. Sufism does not accept the concept of *karma* and rebirth. *Advaita Vedānta* emphasizes on knowledge and admits it as the means for achieving salvation; but Sufism emphasizes more on devotion. (See Choudhury 161-167)

<sup>§§</sup> The topics are – (as mentioned by Haq): Elements (*Anāṣir*), Senses (*Hawāss*), Devotional exercise (*Ashghāl*), Attributes of God, the Most High (*Ṣifāt-i-Allāh Ta’ālā*), Soul (*Rūḥ*), Air (*Bād*), Four worlds (*‘Awālim-i-Arba’ā*), Sound (*Āwāz*), Light (*Nūr*), Vision of God (*Rūyat*), Names of God, the Most High (*Asmāi Allāh Ta’ālā*), Apostleship and Saintship (*Nubuwwat wa Wilāyat*), *Brahmānd* [the World], Directions (*Jihāt*), Skies (*Āsmānhā*), Earth (*Zamīn*), Division of the earth (*Kismat-i-Zamīn*), World of *Barzakḥ* (interval between the death of a man and resurrection), Resurrection (*Kiyāmat*), *Mukt* (Salvation), Day and Night (*Rūz wa Shab*), Infinity of the cycle (*Adwār*)

<sup>\*\*\*</sup> Śaṅkara (8<sup>th</sup> Century) is the profounder of *Advaita Vedānta*, one branch Vedantic philosophy.

<sup>†††</sup> According to Śaṅkara’s *Advaita* thoughts only *Brahman* (Supreme Self) is the ultimate and absolute truth. The world-appearance is false, a mere product of *māyā*. By the term *māyā* what Śaṅkara pointed out is the illusion, which has no real existence, it is only the false knowledge. “For the *māyā* can neither be said to be “is” nor “is not”.... It cannot be said that such a logical category does not exist, for all our dream and illusory cognitions demonstrates it to us. They exist as they are perceived, but they do not exist since they have no other independent existence than the fact of their perception....Brahman, the truth, is not any way sullied or affected by association with *māyā*, for there can be no association of the real with the empty, the *māyā*. The illusory.” (Dasgupta 442)

fancying. He admitted that “in Indian system, however, they are four in number, namely, budh, man, ahankar and chit – a combination of which is called antah karana and this, in its turn, may be looked upon as the fifth” (Haq 41). Therefore, it can be said that his endeavour to build a new ontological pattern in respect of philosophical perspective was a very much conscious attempt.

It is also coherent that physical and metaphysical are the two perspectives that Dārā wished to focus on, and that very point, where he found the two apparently different religious thoughts meet, is Monotheism<sup>+++</sup>. Dārā declared his view in clear terms before he delved into the discourses of his book:

...after knowing the Truth of Truths and ascertaining the secrets and subtleties of the true religion of the Ṣūfīs and having been endowed with this great gift (i.e. Ṣūfistic inspiration), he [Dārā Shikuh] 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 attended 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. (Haq 38)

The mystic approach of Sufistic theology fascinated Dārā Shikuh which finally led him towards the quest for “Truth of Truths”. In his childhood, Dārā was educated like the Prince of Mughal court used to. *Qur’ān*, Persian Poetry, History of Timūr etc. were the common study materials (Hasrat 3). Abdul Laṭīf Sulṭānpurī was appointed as his teacher. In his further studies Dārā used to come to interact with many famous Hindu and Muslim mystics and sages. Miān Mīr (1635) and Mullā Shāh Badaḡhshānī (1661) were two most influential persons, who made Dārā aware of the generous and devotional views of Sufism of *Qādiriyya* community. Dārā came to contact of other mystics like Shāh Muḥibullāh, Shāh Dilrūba, Shāh Muḥammad Lisānullāh Rostakī etc. The personality, who highly inspired the prince to know about the metaphysical doctrines and mystic symbolism, was Bālā Lāl Das Bairāgī. He was also a silent follower of Kabīr and founder of Baba Lalis sect. Dārā conversed with this Hindu yogi at least seven times on comparative mythology of Hindu and Muslims. Among the Hindu Pandits, Jagannātha Mīśra was most prominent who “suggested his mind the idea of establishing a short of

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<sup>+++</sup> Belief in existence of one God, who created the Universe.

*rapprochement* between the apparently divergent principal of Islamic mysticism and Hindu philosophy” (Hasrat 6). Banvalī Dās, Chandra Bhān Brahman, Kavīndracarya Sarasvatī are some more names who had deep association with Mughal court of Shāh Jahān and used to enjoy the monitory patronage directly from Dārā (Hasrat 214-215). So, a number of Muslim and Hindu mystics/ philosophers/ scholars we found in Dārā’s life and court, and it is easily comprehensible that their direct and indirect influences trained Dārā’s mind to search the compatibility between these “two parties”.

The theory of Sufism is constructed on the core idea of God’s oneness and omnipresence. (Chaudhury 17). At the very beginning of *Majma* Dārā quoted a quatrain of Jāmī that explicitly reflects what message Dārā wished to convey:

The neighbour, the companion and the co-traveler is He,  
In the rags of beggars and the raiments of kings, is He,  
In the conclave on high and the secret chamber below,  
By God, He is all and, verily by God, He is all. (Haq 37)

To understand this monotheistic thoughts Dārā did not bind himself in the boundaries of Islamic tradition, rather he expanded his area of experience towards the dogma of other religions, and finally he found the “religion of the Indian monotheists” holding the similar views of oneness.

The general notion for the ancient Indian gods, specifically Vedic deities is polytheistic; it can be defined rather as “a simple primitive stage of belief to which both of these may be said to owe their origin” (Sengupta 17). The faith in more than one god is coined by the term Polytheism, while, Monotheism is the believe that accepts the ultimate principle of the reality is an omnipotent and omnipresent God.<sup>§§§</sup> The *Mantra/Saṃhitā* and *Brāhmaṇa* portions<sup>\*\*\*\*</sup> of the *Veda* focus mostly on the ritualistic practices like *yajña*, the other portions, i.e., the *Āraṇyaka* and *Upaniṣad* offer the metaphysical and philosophical discussions. The segment that intensely approached to Dārā’s search is the *Upaniṣads*. With the evolution towards a monotheistic tendency *Upaniṣads* possess the matured idea of Omni-present, Omni-potent, All-pervading Supreme Self -

<sup>§§§</sup> See “Monotheism”. *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*.

Dasgupta coined this tendency as semi-pantheism. “...pantheism may be understood positively as the view that God is identical with the cosmos, the view that there exists nothing which is outside of God, or else negatively as the rejection of any view that considers God as distinct from the Universe”. (“Pantheism”. *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*.)

<sup>\*\*\*\*</sup> *Vedas* are four in number, viz. *Ṛg*, *Sāma*, *Yajuh*, *Atharva*. Each *Veda* is configured with four portions, viz. *Mantra*, *Brāhmaṇa*, *Āraṇyaka*, *Upaniṣad*.

“*ekamevadvitiam*” [the only one, without second](*Chandogya Upaniad*). Famous theist Śaṅkara (8<sup>th</sup> Century) reshaped that idea of oneness and configured the theory of Monism or *Advaita Vedānta*. To construct the theory of *Vedānta* what became his primary sources are definitely those verses and sentences of *Upaniṣads* that project the Omnipresence of the Supreme Being, the *Brahman*.

Therefore, very expectedly, Dārā discovered the *Upaniṣads* as the foundation of Indian Monotheism. It was his quest for *tawhid*, which Dārā defined as “boundless ocean” (Harsat 264, Preface *Sirr-i-Akbar*). The term “*tawhid*” usually decodes the “act of believing and affirming that God is one and unique (*wahid*), in a word monotheism” (Faruqui 31). This search led him towards the gigantic effort of translating fifty Upanisadic texts into Persian language in 1657. The work was entitled as *Sirr-i-Akbar* (The Great Secret).

In the introductory part of *Sirr-i-Akbar* he disclosed his journey to the source text of Monotheism: “...whereas the holy *Qur’ān* is mostly allegorical, and at the present day, persons thoroughly conversant with the subtleties thereof are very rare, he [Dārā] became desirous of bringing in view all heavenly books, for the very words of God itself are their own commentary;”. Thereafter, Dārā came to know about four *Vedas* and realized “...the *summum bonum* of these four books [four Vedas], which contain all the secret of the Path and contemplative exercises of pure monotheism, are called the *Upanekhats*.”. And finally he revealed “...without doubt or suspicion, these books are first of all fountain-head of the ocean of Unity, in conformity with the holy *Qur’ān* and even a commentary thereon”. He further continued “...the *Upanekhat*, which are a secret to be concealed and are the essence of this book, and the verses of the holy *Qur’ān* are literary found therein,...” (as quoted in Hasrat 265-267).

If we admit *Sirr-i-Akbar* as the summit of Dārā’s quest for *tawhid*, *Majma* can be considered as a strong threshold towards that search. His journey of this search was begun by his writings on Sufi saints and mysticism; some prominent works are - *Safīnat-ul-Awliyā*’ (1639), *Risālā’i Ḥaq Numā*’ (1646), *Ḥasanāt-ul-‘Ārifīn* (1651). Gradually, his study on Hinduism and Sanskrit inspired him to take some venture to compose the literature like *Majma* and translate Hindu *śāstras*. It was *Tarīqat-ul-Ḥaqīqat* (1648-49) that can be considered as the significant point in which Dārā’s thoughts started shifting towards a new dimension. In this very composition, he argued clearly that both Hinduism and Islam speak about the same Ultimate Truth. (Faruqui 39). *Majma* (1065) was the first treaties of Dārā in this new genre, thereafter was followed by the translations of *Yoga-*

*vāsiṣṭha* (1655), *Upaniṣads* (1657) and *Bhagavad-gītā* (1657). So, Dārā's constant mission that is the search for *tawhid* in Hindu tradition is distinctly seen in this literary pieces; and what is notable here is that all the texts that were translated from Sanskrit to Persian are the major pillars of *Vedānta* philosophy.

The estimated question for the current discussion is - what are the boundaries that *Majma* surpassed and why does the current paper claim to consider *Majma* as an excellent example of transcultural literature of early modern age? Before the composition of *Majma* the prime tendency of the literary-tradition of Mughal court, specifically that had an association with the Hindu people of the country, was to present the translations of Sanskrit texts or offer Mughal sponsorship to compose new texts; this kind of attempts was more concerned with the question of the distribution of political power.<sup>††††</sup> But in the case of Dārā it was rather a struggle to present a philosophical synthesis where the goal was fixed to the knowledge of Truth. In clear terms Truscshke opined that Dārā's task was not to complete the vision of Akbar's "*waḥdat al- wujūd*" (unity of being) (225).

Dārā's attempt in *Majma* goes beyond the boundaries of two major religious creeds, i.e., the Muslims and 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* beats the border of these two major languages. Though in Mughal era Persian language became the language of official works in royal court, but the origin of it was sematic. As a result, *Majma* also exceeds the topographical boundaries – it becomes a part of the long tradition of Indo-Persian literature, as mentioned in the beginning of the paper. The contact zone where different boundaries meet and then overlap each other is the quest for "Truth of Truths".

Therefore, though Dārā declared that that he collected the Sufistic and Vedantic views together, yet his work is not a mere comparison of two religious doctrines, it produces a subtle synthesis out of two different cultures. Very clearly he mentioned who are the target people of his new thinking - Dārā announced what he wrote in *Majma* is for his own family and he had "no concern with the common folk of either community" (Haq 38). It is quite logical that the ultimate truth which Dārā was searching for cannot be apprehensible by the common people, only those who are trying to attain the spiritual

<sup>††††</sup> In that very perspective some scholars accepted Dara's endeavour as the political calculation of an heir-apparent to the crown of Mughals. Historian like Satish Chandra disagreed with such possibility. (Faruqui 57). Dara's great grandfather Akbar's approaches towards *Dīn-i-Ilahī* (A syncretic religion propagated by Akbar in 1582) can be consider as "an attempt to weld into a political synthesis, the divergent creeds and different racial elements of India" (Hasrat 6).

realization can have the potentiality to understand the philosophy that he wanted to establish. Dārā envisioned a particular group of people who would go beyond the socio-religious margins and embrace the monotheistic thoughts of the ultimate truth. To elucidate the views of *Muvaḥḥidān-i-hind* (the monotheists of India) is major focus of his project.<sup>††††</sup> This term, according to Supriya Gandhi was “used to identify and privilege a class of Indic saints as superior to other Hindus, akin to Sufis in their mystical insight and commitment to affirming divine unity” (70).

Hence, Dārā's approach is not just a collating process of two religious and spiritual creeds, it restored the essential values of each the group and tried to produce a common culture that surpasses the boundaries of two major socio-religious groups of the then India. While Śaṅkara's *Advaita* doctrine does not admit *bhakti* or devotion as the direct means (way) to achieve the salvation<sup>§§§§</sup>, the other *Vedānta* schools, like of Rāmanuja, Vallava, Madva, Caitanya etc. emphasized more on *bhakti mārga*. On the other hand, the Sufistic thoughts are in believe to practice the devotion for attaining the ultimate truth. Basically Dārā's thoughts were a collective product of the socio-religious configuration and happenings of the pre-modern era of the country. Practicing *bhakti* or devotion became a common and most prominent feature of that time – we find number of sadhus, fakir, religious reformers who used devotion as an important tool to convey their message and that had a deep impact on the social structure and spiritual identity of this country.

Mysticism was that very point where Dārā found the common ground of two different religious communities and also the beginning point for a new cultural identity. This synthesis is the consequence of a long journey of Indian mysticism. Kshitimohan Sen distinctly illustrated the journey Indian mysticism:

Rich though it was from its early (Upanisadic) period, Indian mysticism became doubly so when Islam came to be power in India. Impact of this new and powerful faith released the latent forces of India's religious life, and it was by her mystics that a synthesis was sought to be brought about between the conflicting elements of the two.” (xvii-xviii).

Sen further opined that the persons who took part in the synthesis process were generally from the lower caste/class of the society, and because of that, were free from the

<sup>††††</sup> In *Majma* Dārā proclaimed that with the subtitles of Islamic mysticism his projected the thoughts of a particular group of Indian people, who believe in the Oneness of God. Dārā used the term *Muvaḥḥidān-i-hind* to identify this group of people.

<sup>§§§§</sup> Śaṅkara admitted *jñāna* (knowledge) of the *Brahman* as the means to achieve the *moḁṣa* (liberation).

“bondage of scriptures or any institutional religion” (Sen xviii). But among those *sādhakas*, who explored their own path to put forth their principles, we find Dārā achieving a different position – he was not from the lower class, contrarily he belonged to the most powerful royal family of the then India; even then also, that very identity did not distract him from his search for *tawhid*, rather places Dārā in a unique position of the entire history of Indian mysticism.

The mysticism of India always has a different approach that surpasses the boundaries of conventional socio-religious customs. Tagore spoke about the spirituality of India's own:

...India has a *sādhanā* of her own and it belongs to her innermost heart. Throughout all her political vicissitudes its stream has flowed on. A wonderful feature of this has been that it does not glide along any embankment of scriptural sanctions, and the influence of scholasticism on it, if any, is very small. In fact, this *sādhanā* has mostly been unscriptural and not controlled by social laws of any kind. Its spring is within the innermost heart of the people whence it has gushed forth in its spontaneity and broken through the barriers of rules, prescriptive as well as proscriptive. (Sen ii-iii)

*Majma* perfectly reflects that inner ethos of Indian spirituality with a distinct identity of divine harmony. Dārā himself acknowledged that divine unity as “boundless ocean”, where the Truth is the one for everybody. The title *Majma'-ul-Baharain* or *Mingling of Two Oceans* is perhaps the symbolical representation of this boundlessness, that transcended the limitation of institutional religion, scriptural rules, lingual individuality and doctrinal differences; moreover, it offered a new culture for the Monotheists of India, though it is not beyond doubt how much success has it achieved.

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