



DARA SHUKOH  
*A Play*

GOPAL GANDHI



205

TRANQUEBAR PRESS  
DARA SHUKOH

Gopal Gandhi took voluntary retirement from the Indian Administrative Service in 1992, was Director of The Nehru Centre, London, from 1992 to 1996, and later High Commissioner for India in South Africa and Sri Lanka, Ambassador of India in Norway, secretary to the President of India and Governor of West Bengal. Gopal (or Gopalkrishna, to use his full name) is married to Tara and they have two married daughters.

If there were to be an anthology of the really worthwhile original Indian plays written since the twentieth century, it would be one of the slimmest books in the world. And Gopal Gandhi's play would occupy pride of place in it. Ever since the merging, so to say, of theatre and cinema in India via the talkies, when all theatrical talent was sucked into the obviously more lucrative cinema, a no-win situation seems to have continuously prevailed in the writing spheres of both cinema and theatre. While in films our screenplay writing has never outgrown the influence of the early talkies and thus of early theatre, the craft of the playwright in our country too has languished and has always seemed to be searching for a direction to evolve in. Gopal Gandhi, by writing this play, has done theatre a double favour. He has provided us with some of the most recitable poetry ever and he has drawn a riveting portrait of the fascinating Dara Shukoh within the framework of a deeply moving story. The writing, while being a sly reminder of the 'grand old' traditions of Indian theatre, is also engagingly modern; the reader will unquestioningly accept the charming anachronisms that appear occasionally. Oh, if only history had been taught to us thus in school!—*Naseeruddin Shah*

What makes Gopal Gandhi's *Dara Shukoh* unique is that it is not just another play about another historical figure but in effect a statement of the author's own philosophy, expressed through the life of a person who tried to embody it but failed—tragically, for the history of India. And the tragedy, vast in its consequences and still reverberating, is expressed in verse, which is admirable for its clarity and control.—*Girish Karnad*

Gopal Gandhi's wonderfully moving and insightful tragedy elegantly and imaginatively revisits one of Indian history's great what-if moments, making us ask again how different things might have been if it was heterodox mystic Dara rather than the puritanical bigot Aurangzeb who had won the civil war and led Mughal India—would Islam and Hinduism have been able to bridge their differences? Would the united Mughal lands have managed to stop the colonial conquests? Would Partition have been impossible? *Dara Shukoh* is a thoughtful and thought-provoking text.—*William Dalrymple*

# DARA SHUKOH

*A Play*

GOPAL GANDHI



TRANQUEBAR

TRANQUEBAR PRESS

An imprint of westland ltd

Venkat Towers, 165, P.H. Road, Maduravoyal, Chennai 600 095  
No.38/10 (New No.5), Raghava Nagar, New Timber Yard Layout, Bangalore 560 026  
Survey No. A-9, II Floor, Moula Ali Industrial Area, Moula Ali, Hyderabad 500 040  
23/181, Anand Nagar, Nehru Road, Santacruz East, Mumbai 400 055  
47, Brij Mohan Road, Daryaganj, New Delhi 110 002

First published by Banyan Books 1993, a division of the Business India Group of Publications, Mumbai

This edition published by TRANQUEBAR PRESS 2010

Copyright © Gopal Gandhi 2010

All rights reserved

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

ISBN: 978-93-80658-52-0

The painting of Dara Shukoh on the cover is reproduced by permission of The British Library Board, The British Library, Oriental and India Office Collections, 197 Blackfriars Road, London SE1 8NG. The author would like to thank Akhilesh Mithal for drawing his attention to it, and Kapila Vatsyayan, for facilitating access to it.

Typeset in Bell MT by SŪRYA, New Delhi  
Printed at Manipal Press Limited

This book is sold subject to the condition that it shall not by way of trade or otherwise, be lent, resold, hired out, circulated, and no reproduction in any form, in whole or in part (except for brief quotations in critical articles or reviews) may be made without written permission of the publishers.

DEDICATED

*To the Peri Mahal,  
The magical 'Fairies Palace'  
Built by Dara Shukoh  
On a barely accessible spur  
Overlooking Lake Dal  
In Srinagar.  
Intended by Dara  
To be a centre  
For the study of celestial bodies,  
The magnificent structure  
Is now derelict,  
Its broken terrace  
A reminder of the precariousness  
Of lofty visions.*

## A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR



Dara's name is spelt in the Roman variously as Dara Shukoh, Dara Shikoh and Dara Shikuh. 'Shikoh' is the more commonly used form but as I have understood the matter from historians and scholars of Persian, 'Shukoh' is the more appropriate spelling as 'Shukoh' means 'glory' in Farsi and 'Shikoh', 'terror'. The Mughal Prince was surely meant to betoken and herald glory. The distinguished biographer of Dara Shukoh, the late Professor Kalikaranjan Qanungo, of Dacca University, has also used 'Shukoh', not 'Shikoh'.



*Excerpts from*

THE OXFORD HISTORY OF INDIA

By  
*Vincent A. Smith*  
(1958 edition)



The four sons of Shahjahan were Dara Shikoh, Shuja, Aurangzeb, and Murad Bakhsh, all men of mature age in 1657, aged respectively 43, 41, 39 and about 33 years. All the four had had considerable experience in military and civil affairs on a large scale. The eldest, who remained with his father, was viceroy of the Punjab and other provinces on the north-west, which he administered through deputies. Shuja ruled the great territories of Bengal and Orissa. Aurangzeb controlled the Deccan, while Murad Bakhsh governed Gujarat and the west . . . All the princes possessed the soldier's virtue of personal valour, which was displayed conspicuously by both Aurangzeb and Murad Bakhsh. Dara Shikoh's considerable natural abilities were neutralized by the violence of his temper and an intolerable arrogance of manner, which gained him hosts of enemies. Shuja, an agreeable man, with some skill as a general, was rendered ineffective by his love of pleasure, and his unreadiness to take instant action at the decisive moment. Murad Bakhsh was a passionate, headstrong, tyrannical man, the bravest of the brave, but drunken, dissolute and brainless. It is needless

to draw a formal sketch of the character of Aurangzeb, whose consummate ability as an unscrupulous intriguer and cool politician is apparent on the face of the narrative. Although his failures in Balkh and at Qandahar may be regarded disparaging to his skill as a commander of armies, his imperturbable self-possession enabled him to emerge with success from most embarrassing tactical situations during the war of succession. His indomitable resolve to win the throne at any cost and by any means carried him through and gave him victory.

The unorthodoxy of Dara Shikoh was an important factor in the struggle. That prince, while continuing to conform to the Sunni ritual and to be a professed Muslim of the Hanafi school, was deeply imbued with the pantheistic mysticism of the Sufis. He also associated gladly with Hindu philosophers . . . He was so intimate with Father Busee and other priests that he was believed by some persons to be within measurable distance of embracing Christianity. That attitude towards Islam infuriated Aurangzeb, who certainly was a devout Sunni Muslim, whatever judgment may be formed of his moral character. He regarded his eldest brother as a pestilent infidel, deserving of worse than death.

*(By permission of  
Oxford University Press)*

## THE TIME

Between 1655 and 1660 AD

## THE VENUE

Delhi, Agra and their extended environs

## DRAMATIS PERSONAE

Shah Jehan	Emperor of Hindostan
Dara Shukoh	His eldest son
Aurangzeb	His third son and Viceroy of the Deccan
Nadira	Dara's wife
Jahanara	The emperor's elder daughter
Roshanara	The emperor's younger daughter
Sulaiman Shukoh	Dara's elder son
Sipihir Shukoh	Dara's younger son
Sadullah Khan	Vizier in Shah Jehan's court
Jester	Dara's elfin companion
Kavindracharya	
Saraswati	Sanskrit scholar of Varanasi
Niccolao Manucci	Venetian gentleman of fortune serving in Dara's artillery and self-styled physician
Father Busee	Flemish Jesuit in Delhi
Jean Baptiste Tavernier	Jewel merchant from France
Francois Bernier	French physician in the Moghul court
Mir Jumla	Persian adventurer, Commander-in-Chief of the King of Golconda and, later, ally of Aurangzeb
Malik Jiwan Khan	Afghan vassal of the Moghul, later Chief of Dadar
Daud Khan	Loyal soldier on Dara's side
Nazar Beg	Slave in the employ of Aurangzeb
Kanhoji	Robber on the Rajasthan-Gujarat-Cutch border
Sarmad	Jewish mystic in Delhi
Abhaichand	Sarmad's Jaina disciple

Heralds, attendants, soldiers, women of the harim, residents of Delhi.



# ACT ONE



*Shahjehanabad, Delhi. The Imperial capital's exclusive sector, where the Red Fort and other mansions of the aristocracy are located.*

## SCENE 1

*The Red Fort's Darwan-i-Khas, the Hall of Special Audiences. A throne is positioned at the centre. Carpets, cushions are spread on the floor. Six liveried heralds are on duty. A herald near the left entrance sounds the bugle which alerts other heralds and sends some half a dozen women (behind a grilled alcove to the side of the throne) into a shiver of nervous excitement. Shah Jehan, the Moghul emperor, is about to enter this exclusive chamber in his palace.*

*Herald* [Loudly, for everyone in the Hall

Witness! with a measured pace  
His Royal Majesty arrives!  
To feel his sandals, trimmed with lace,  
Each gleaming marble floor-tile vies!

*Second Herald* [Equally loud

Behold the royal countenance!  
Allah has fashioned it—  
Giving the Earth a radiance  
The sun can scarce requit.

*Female Attendant*

[From the alcove, almost swooning

He comes, he comes, the badshah comes!  
My heart he ignites, my feet benumbs!

*Second Female Attendant* [Stern-facedly, under her breath

Don't let Princess Roshanara  
Catch you in euphoria.

*First Female Attendant*

Killjoy princess, killjoy you!  
Go drown yourself, you parvenu!

*First Herald*

[To second Herald, dropping his voice

Yesterday, on elephant back  
At the great mosque, did you glimpse  
The King scatter from his velvet sack  
Gold, in rich munificence?

*Second Herald*

Indeed I did, and also saw  
Our goodly prince Dara Shukoh  
Command at once such love and awe  
As would incense his wily foe.

*First Herald*

Not so loud, friend, not so loud,  
The Deccan has ears in these walls.  
A spy in every south-bound cloud  
Carries tales from Delhi's halls.

*Second Herald*

I know that well. I can see it:  
This court's a traphouse of intrigue  
Where rumour, envy and deceit  
Are all in sweet-talking league.  
Power, leverage, spell and sway  
Everyone propitiates.  
If one has a fine to pay  
But not the means, he insinuates  
A present into his salaam,  
And can contrive from the rear  
A waiver by the warmed palm.  
Why, Jean Baptiste Tavernier  
Himself must transact business  
In court by lubric exertions.  
And 'look after' with finesse  
Its unembarrassed minions!

*First Herald*

How right you are, my good friend!  
This place thrives on lubricity.  
Here you will see vassals bend  
Low with sick mendacity  
Before some strutting courtier:  
*'Will you please put in a word  
To our magnificent vizier  
Whose counsel and insights are heard  
By our King enchantedly?'  
The very wretch will then glide  
Towards the rivals, abjectly,  
'Nobles on our Prince's side,  
Pray, this Nobody, patronize,'*

And looking over his shoulder  
Whisper . . . *'In a wicked enterprise*  
Like Sher Khan's, only bolder,  
*The vizier's men at Abu*  
*Have planned a daring coup . . . '*

*Second Herald*

And thus foment Dara's mind  
To provocation ever inclined.

*[In the other corner of the hall,  
Third Herald speaks, moving  
towards Fourth Herald*

*Third Herald*

Have you noticed those two mumbling  
Constantly to each other?  
I can tell you, their grumbling  
Is not about the weather.

*Fourth Herald*

*[In a whisper, with teeth clenched*

They're clearly of Dara's party,  
I've named them: Sharp and Smarty.  
Prince Aurangzeb will hear of this,  
With a swelling of irises  
And Mir Jumla, made wise,  
Will serve them a nasty surprise.

*First Herald*

There, the Emperor's now seen!  
He inclines a bejewelled ear  
Towards his windbag vizier,  
And makes that rascal preen.



*First Female Attendant*

[*Swaying*

Hush! My Imperial Majesty nears!  
His limbs to caress, the curtain veers.  
His every footstep the carpet hugs,  
Each straining knot, a tassel tugs.

*Second Female Attendant*

Be still, you dizzying dreamhead,  
You fluttering bi-ped.  
Display your nervous tension  
When all his attention  
Is yours; when washed, refreshed, he dines  
Or later, heavy-lidded, reclines  
Contemplating the curl  
Of some new-got slave-girl.  
Not here! This is the Diwan-i-Khas  
Not the place to swing your. . . .

*Third Female Attendant*

There comes Dara, mystic prince,  
Every damsel heart he wins.  
Do you know of royal eyes  
Like his which can mesmerize?

[*The Emperor enters, with  
Dara Shukoh, Sadullah Khan,  
some noblemen and attendants.  
They are engaged in banter.  
Shah Jehan seats himself on the  
throne*

*Shah Jehan*

So how, my vizier,  
Do our crops appear;  
How does the inflow  
Of revenues go?

*Sadullah*

My Emperor, most kind,  
Tonight, before you've dined,  
I will show you the sheets  
Of our State receipts  
Takings, rents, taxes, fines,  
Profits gained from our mines.  
And by dawn, before  
You rise, I will have more  
Reports on the reasons  
Why, despite the season's  
Being good, collections  
Trail expectations.

*Shah Jehan*

Thank you my good vizier  
That will make it easier . . .

*Dara*

Majesty, forgive me please  
For thus interrupting you.  
The vizier has won a lease  
Of time, just to bamboozle you!

*Shah Jehan*

Haughty Prince Dara,  
Naughty Prince Dara!

*Dara*

You asked if the crops were good  
To know where the coffers stood.  
He must say they are all right  
Or are not, so the court might  
Consider what is proper, wise:  
Peace—or some fool enterprise  
To annex yet more acreage  
By ploy, perfidy, pillage.

*Sadullah*

*[Clearing his throat*

My young prince is, well, young,  
Gives his mind a ready tongue.  
But, Majesty, I'm older  
Slower, an upholder  
Of the dictum: speak not  
Half-bake, lest you be caught  
(Like a feline's useless runt)  
In a pair of mother jaws  
Executing nature's laws.

*Dara*

Diplomatic softspeak,  
Can muffle conspiracy's creak  
Working to subvert this throne  
By means known and unknown.

*[Sadullah appears provoked and  
starts to speak, but the Emperor  
gestures to calm him down*

*Shah Jehan*

Son, aren't you being hasty,  
Unfair, or just feisty  
When you say the vizier  
Dissimulates here?  
Sound advice in his aim  
He has no deeper game.

*[The princesses Jahanara and  
Roshanara appear at the alcove.  
Roshanara sits behind the grille,  
while Jahanara remains  
standing, listening attentively,  
as Dara speaks*

*Dara*

Their game is to seal the fate  
—And before it is too late—  
Of those of us here  
Who stand for India.  
And of those who wish to make  
Of our royal line, no fake  
'Heavenly Protectorate'  
But a truly inviolate  
Agency for human good  
As part of a larger Godhood.  
They'll use every manoeuvre  
To try pull the wool over  
Your eyes, as they draw up their plan,  
With all the devilry of Man,  
To manipulate the course  
By stealth first, and then by force,

Of our royal lineage.  
That is why, father, I rage.

*Shah Jehan*

I have known of your rage—  
When I was your age  
My father knew of mine!  
It's so with every line  
Of rulers dynastic.  
A fancy fantastic  
Drives them all to fury,  
Doing some injury  
Sometimes, but often good.  
And if I've understood  
Your own rage correctly,  
And contextually,  
Indignation's the name.  
You suspect a game  
To overthrow this court  
And install in the Fort  
An order which will freeze  
Akbar's tolerant decrees  
And use my indulgences  
Of the five known senses,  
To, themselves, the sixth use  
A proper time to choose  
For a usurpation  
Of this royal station.

*[Sadullah tenses, while  
Dara seems appeased*

*Dara*

Father, you've spoken my mind,  
In words I couldn't hope to find.

*Shah Jehan*

*[Addressing all those present*

Dara hates bigotry  
He wants faiths to be free  
And encouraged to preach  
Concordance each to each,  
He sees for himself here  
A role that goes near  
Akbar's, minus the crown.  
And when he sees this drown  
In courtcraft's slurry  
He cannot but worry!  
Yet Dara, be assured,  
Your fears will be cured.

Here's a proclamation:  
No one's machination  
Will shake the Peacock Throne.  
If anyone be prone  
To tricks or subterfuge  
He'll pay a price, so huge  
As to rue the evil day  
He went foul treason's way.

*[Sadullah is now in  
consternation and starts to speak,  
but the Emperor again prevents  
him*

That should satisfy you,  
Dara! Nor displease true,

Good, Sadullah.' Now  
Tell me, vizier, how  
Our inlayers-in-charge,  
Have embellished the Taj-  
The pure marble bare  
I know, is past compare,  
But the 'finishing touches'  
Put our targets in crutches!

*Sadullah*

Most benign Emperor,  
Art's unique connoisseur!  
I was there the other day  
To see if the inlay  
Being done on the grave  
And the front architrave  
Would clash with the marble  
And so doing, garble  
The vault's lucent message.  
But no, edge rivals edge.

A painter using dew  
And fresh pollen in lieu  
Of tincts: a lucid night's  
Bespangled stars for whites  
And the sky for his blues  
Would envy the lambent hues  
Our inlayers create.  
The grooves they now striate  
See gem blending with stone  
And shape fusing with tone.

I wish to create  
Art so immaculate  
As will set a standard  
By craft to be pandered  
For an eternity  
Of emmarbled beauty.  
The Taj, through moonlight strobes,  
(Like a nymph who disrobes  
But keeps her ornaments)  
In all her adornments

[*Dara looks at his father,  
disapprovingly*

Will flash in lunar light:  
Now blue, now white.

Forgive that image, son,  
You know my interests run  
On three paths: gems, buildings  
And that passion of kings  
I need not name. I choose  
All three well made, refuse  
Those that aren't. All three should  
Be, seem, and feel, good.  
I know you disapprove  
Of my simile; view  
Erotics with distaste.  
Let that picture go waste.

I will try another,  
Worthier of your mother:  
Time's silent oyster-womb



Will, in its hidden room  
With gentle love, fashion  
A pearl of perfection  
So it shall ever rest  
Unflawed, on Sorrow's breast,  
Transporting some future  
Bard to say in rapture,  
'This monument sublime  
Is the Tear of Time.'

*Sadullah*

[*In an aside*]

He wanders in his daydreams  
While my papers grow by reams!

I must now change my accents,  
My rhythms, metre, and song.  
And ensure that he attends  
To business which mustn't prolong.

[*Addressing the Emperor*]

Majesty, may I assure  
You: that lustrous monument,  
That white masterpiece so pure,  
Writes your name on Time's parchment?

*Shah Jehan*

Your kind reassurance  
Does me good, faithful friend,  
For I now often glance  
At the shadows which extend  
On the stern sundial  
Of my life. Time holds it  
In both hands—my phial

Of wine—and drains it.  
He drinks me to the lees.  
I'm 'aged', if you please!  
I have to now prepare  
For that final journey  
To which God does not spare  
Men for your company.  
I've to go to that shore  
Where no one is 'common',  
No one King, any more.  
And, jobless, lies Mammon.

*Jahanara*

*[She rises to speak from the  
alcove. Princess Roshanara  
continues sitting and looks away  
as her elder sister begins*

Father, speak not in that strain.  
It causes such pain  
As I can neither express  
Nor try to suppress  
In the pulse of my fear  
Or a withheld tear.  
You can recall, I am sure.  
Sixteen forty-four,  
When my fine muslin attire  
Touched a lamp, caught fire  
And two maids saving me, died.  
You stayed at my side  
And for my flickering life, prayed  
Till I was spared.  
And so I cannot bear to see.  
You in mind of death. For me  
More hangs by your life, Father,  
Than heaven and earth together.



*Roshanara*

*[Disdainingly]*

Just this hangs by a King's life:  
At his waist, a knife.  
Without it the crown he wears  
Is a load he bears—  
No better than a dumb milkmaid's.  
And so the good blade's  
Transference on his demise,  
Must be very wise . . .

*Dara*

*[Quaking with rage]*

She insults you, Father, she does.  
How dare she speak to you thus?  
You are her father, her King.  
No child she is schooling!  
'His demise', what does she mean?  
Father, ask her to come clean.  
This concept of 'knife' I refute  
Totally, I also impute  
A motive, both mean and low  
To her and to her fellow . . .

*Roshanara*

I was talking to him;  
Stop being so dim!

*Dara*

*[Almost choking]*

'Him?' 'Dim?' Just how can you dare?  
He's the King, and don't you glare  
At me like that, understand?  
I know the venom of your brand

And its antidote as well  
Which can consign you to hell.

*[Dara moves to a corner and leans against a wall emotionally drained and, after a minute, begins to soliloquize. A spotlight rests on him as the others continue to prattle inaudibly*

*Dara*

Princess Roshanara,  
I was once so fond of you!  
Your once-loved Prince Dara.  
O woe, that now you view  
My friends as your foes, and my  
Foes as friends. I can't bear this  
Transformation of a shy  
Sister's breath into a hiss.  
But there's ambition for you!  
The finest natures it can taint  
And make them break the queue  
Of natural restraint.

*[The spotlight goes out. The Emperor begins to rise from his throne, when his vizier speaks. He holds on official document in his hand, given to him by an attendant. The Emperor resumes his seat*

*Sadullah*

There is one little matter left  
Which, If Your Majesty permits,  
I could just mention in the weft,  
So to say. A prisoner sits,  
Outside: Jiwan Khan from Multan.  
He is charged with plotting treason  
And planning to become a sultan,  
(Would you believe it?) this season  
Of figs. The evidence is strong  
Against him; the defence, weak.  
It will not take the court long  
To establish guilt and seek  
Your Majesty's decision  
On the Governor's petition.

*Shah Jehan*

[*Taking his hand to his eye*

My eyelid has a flutter  
Does Fate some warning utter?

*Sadullah*

[*Moving, with quick-reflex  
solicitude, towards the Emperor*

My wife makes an ointment  
For the eyes. An unguent . . .

*Shah Jehan*

[*Reverting to business*

This matter should have come  
Before me at the 'Am  
Not here at the 'Khas.  
Never mind; let that pass.

*[Sadullah, in embarrassment,  
seeks to apologize but the  
Emperor continues*

I've decided. The rogue  
Must get what is in vogue  
For crimes against the State:  
The elephant's dire weight  
Upon his scheming head,  
Till hé is pronounced dead.  
Then, tied to the beast's tail  
The corpse will regale  
The people of Delhi  
As 'Treachery's Folly'.  
We do not countenance  
The slightest insouciance  
From the likes of this man,  
Golcondan or Afghan.

*[Sadullah bows gratefully and  
drops the document into the  
attendant's hand. An elegant  
disposal! Shah Jehan rises,  
looking towards the female  
attendants in the alcove.*

Now! for some well-earned rest  
In a soft, feathered nest.

*Dara*

If the vizier thinks he can  
Make this court dance to his score  
He is in error. His plan  
Can go flying on this floor!

Father, I have something to say  
In this case of Malik Jiwan.

*[Shah Jehan, a trifle irritated,  
sits down*

Before the sun has set today  
Your sworn enemies would have won.

*Shah Jehan*

Enemies I have none  
But one, my son, but one.

*Dara*

But one *son*, father, one son!  
And he it is who's won.

*[Sadullah and Roshanara  
exchange glances and Roshanara  
rises to protest*

*Shah Jehan*

My one enemy  
Is loneliness. It grips me.  
It drives me to commit  
Excesses or omit  
Some important action,  
Preferring the distraction  
Of Mumtaz in my dream  
Or of my choice harim.

Dara

*[After a pause when he seems to  
be collecting his thoughts*

Malik Jiwan's, I am told,  
Is the kind of vassalage:  
Quick-muscled, gallant, bold  
Which gets termed as 'brigandage'.  
Some people would like to play  
On your brusque approach to law  
And shape your thoughts like clay  
Toys. They'll turn into an outlaw  
Him who will not conspire  
With them to subvert this throne.  
All that Jiwan did aspire  
Was some acreage of his own.  
We could have counted on  
Jiwan to then utilize  
It as a buffer, not a pawn  
On the chessboard of enterprise.  
But honey-talk, not honesty  
Works here. In a few hours  
We will watch truth's travesty  
Enacted. One who towers  
In his homeland as Delhi's  
Soldier will by Delhi's fiat  
Be trampled—with what ease!—  
Under four elephant feet.

Delhi, Agra and Lahore  
May be our empire's hard core.  
But then we have rimlands  
Of soft snow and softer sands,  
Which need gentle handling  
Care and understanding.





We cannot hold our borders  
On the strength of Court Orders!  
Maps aren't just glued-up charts  
They're a protocol of hearts  
—And minds—like Jiwan Khan's  
And Emperor Shah Jehan's.  
Forgive him, Father; free him, King.

*[Roshanara is visibly agitated*

Let us make a fresh beginning.

*Shah Jehan*

Beside your obiter  
(Which offends your sister)  
There's much in what you say  
On the matter per se.  
'Loyal' and 'disloyal'  
Are but adjectival  
Prefixes. Much can rest  
On who applies the test.

If the Crown Prince thinks so  
I cannot just say 'No  
Go on, execute him.'  
My heart says 'Release him,'  
My head, the opposite.  
But then your plea does it.  
He is free, your Afghan,  
To go home, a free man.

*[Sadullah stands transfixed.  
Dara bows. Shah Jehan rises  
and departs. The Court disperses.  
Roshanara lingers at the alcove  
and buttonholes Sadullah*



*Sadullah*

[*In an aside*]

Lord! There comes the daughter  
Turning my blood to water!

*Roshanara*

The King has overruled  
You, for Dara has fooled  
The King. But despair  
Not. This you can repair  
Soon enough, provided  
You are by him guided  
Who rules the Deccan, nimbly  
Today and will—Insh-Allah—Delhi!

But to change the subject  
To—my garden project.  
Most noble vizier!  
The Frenchman, Bernier,  
I am told, has a flower  
With teeth that can devour  
Insects; also rare seeds  
From France. My garden needs  
New blood (as does the State!).  
Soft, namby flowers grate  
On my nerves. Rainbow hues,  
Those golds and sky blues  
Sicken me. I would like  
The smart Frenchman to spike  
His manure with acids  
Which will burn the flaccids  
In their seed-roots to make  
Them yield, for my sake,  
Freak petals, and very bitter,  
Black, styptic nectar.

*Sadullah*

Please rest assured, Princess,  
Your word is 'State Business'!  
I will get through to him  
With all dispatch and vim.

*[Roshanara leaves. Sadullah, the  
heralds and attendants, both male  
and female, converge into a  
group. They chant in chorus*

*Sadullah*

We are nameless  
Civil Servants,  
We are blameless  
Civil Servants!

*All*

We are blameless  
Civil Servants!

*Sadullah*

We take no sides,  
We Civil Servants.  
Let him who rides  
Us, Civil Servants,  
Ride us, chide us, bully us,  
Servants  
Punctilious (though bilious!)  
Servants.

*We* never flatter,  
We Civil Servants.  
We but serve a platter—  
Of Gems for their sarcophagi,  
Unguents for the eye!

*All*

Gems for their sarcophagi,  
Unguents for the eye!

*Sadullah*

And besides the nitty-gritty  
We possess—integrity!

*All*

We possess—integrity!

*[Many heralds and attendants  
take out necklaces, cash pouches  
and suchlike from their pockets,  
putting them back with a wink*

*Sadullah*

We have ac-ui-ty,  
Servants,

We give con-tin-uity!

We give con-tin-uity!

We bear no malice,  
Civil Servants,

We drink deep the chalice.

What if it be poisoned,  
Servants,

What if it be poisoned?  
What if *I* mayn't stay alive,  
Our *species* will survive!

*All* [*They troop out, chanting the refrain*

Yes!  
Our species will survive!  
We are nameless  
    Civil Servants,  
We are blameless  
    Civil Servants. . . .

## SCENE II

*It is late afternoon, the following week, at Prince Dara's mansion, Delhi. Dara is seated in his private room, on the floor, in front of a low sloping desk. He is writing. Dara's companion, Jester, is watching the prince at work.*

*Jester*

Pondering, reading, writing  
All, except being Prince.  
Eldest son of the mighty King  
Will your learning ever convince  
Anyone of your ability  
To rule India as it should  
Be ruled: with spunk and celerity  
Or—as Aurangzeb would?

*Dara*

Jester mine, you jest on;  
That's your nature, calling, skill.

While I on Fate's road quest on,  
A trusting servant of Allah's will.

*Jester*

Now that's where you baffle me.  
Are you Prince or Saint?  
Must you for all time be  
At once, a 'may' and 'mayn't'.?  
Make up your mind now: sage or  
Soldier; a seer  
Or ruler, but not both. For  
God's sake, be clear!

*Dara*

*[Looking out of a window*

There is no doubt in *my* mind.  
My pattern is well defined.  
Babur laid the foundation  
For our future nation;  
Humayun saved it from marauders  
Within and beyond its borders.  
Then Akbar built in granite brick  
Stalwart walls, elephant thick,  
To withstand siege, storm or quake  
Which none but God could shake.  
A strength that came not from rock  
Or some man-excluding lock  
But from the versatility  
Of Hindostan's plurality.  
Jehangir made the howdah  
Of statehood even prouder  
By a measured ostentation  
Which my father's celebration  
Of power has finally crowned.

But this elation can be drowned  
In the Lake of Narcissus  
Unless—may God help us—  
We begin to see ourselves  
Not just as dynastic shelves  
In a stately cabinet  
But as the legitimate  
Heirs of a Higher Will meant  
To found more than a government:  
A Wider Kingdom, lofty, grand,  
In this many-rivered land  
Where, awash and self-renewed,  
India is from herself rescued,  
And where man with man and nature  
Comes to acquire his true stature.

*Jester*

Hold it, you Prince-cum-Moses,  
Give me wisdom in smaller doses!

*Dara*

India needs a thinker  
On the Peacock Throne.  
A thinker, who will link her  
With creation's ozone,  
Who will proclaim an 'ilahi'  
Greater than ever thought of yet,  
Not for a better badshahi  
But a re-defined badshahyat  
That will transform Delhi's ruler  
From a sway-sozzled, lusty  
King of varying demeanor  
Into India's First Trustee.

I can see I will rule;  
I will rule, I see.  
I am not the fool  
You take me to be.  
India needs a scholar  
On the Peacock Throne.  
Anyone who is smaller.  
That seat will now disown.

*Jester*

*[Miming every sentence*

Ho! a bookworm on the glittering  
Couch, lost amid its emerald posts,  
Pearly curves and rainbow-scattering  
Diamond rays. Your peacock hosts  
Are tickled, but not for long. Angered,  
They train on you their ruby eyes:  
'Out, you creepy, crawly fish-turd,  
Out!' and quake their tail-sapphires  
In a paroxysm of rage at you.  
But you, of course, are not to be rushed.  
Only when their enamelled beaks spew  
Fire, do you see you have trespassed.

*Dara*

I know I will ascend  
The Peacock Throne one day.  
So why should I pretend  
To be another lay  
Aspirant: jealous, sly,  
Vengeful? I know, of course,  
That my brothers will try  
And are trying, to force  
Their way to what is mine



By right—I am eldest.  
But quite apart from Line,  
There is another test:  
I am—Allah be praised—  
Truly—trusted by all.  
Frankly, I am amazed

*[A knock is heard*

To see . . . Did someone call?

*[Jester goes out to find who has  
knocked. In the meantime, Dara  
stands up and soliloquizes*

Why do you assure me,  
Lord, of infinite Grace,  
And tell me Destiny  
Has kept a special place  
For me and yet give no  
Sign of any such thing?  
Should you not sometimes show  
Me proof that I will be King?

*Jester*

*[Jester returning*

Khan Malik Jiwan is here  
With mules bearing  
Gifts, to see you. I fear  
He's in a most tearing  
Hurry. Saying he must meet  
You and 'place his salaam  
At your exalted feet'  
He's promptly warmed my palm!

*Dara*

Then you must have held it out, you tease,  
And, of course, you'll blame the times!  
I'll meet him: bring him in please.  
Good luck requits his crimes.

*[Jester goes out and returns with  
Malik Jiwan Khan, who falls at  
Dara's feet.*

*Dara*

Rise, brave Pathan  
My good Afghan!

*Jiwan*

*[Half rising*

I cannot look you in the eye;  
You are Allah's voice for me  
I will serve you till I die;  
My soldiers are your army.

*Dara*

Rise, good friend. A silver rift

*[Jiwan rises and stands  
respectfully*

In your cloud of misfortune  
Has let in life's greatest gift  
To man: contrition, hewn  
Out of guilt. I knew, Jiwan,  
You were not guiltless. I knew  
Of your violent acts. But one  
Thing stood out in all that you



Did: You were no manipulator.  
Angered, you could be vicious  
But never turn conspirator.  
That's why they grew suspicious.

*Jiwan*

My Prince, my benefactor,  
You are right. There is much  
That I must atone for.  
But if they as much as touch  
You, Prince, they will have to reckon  
With Jiwan Khan, the Pathan  
Whose soldiers will take them on,  
In open battle at Multan.

*Dara*

I know that, Jiwan, know it well.  
And thank you for your loyalty.  
Insh-Allah all will go well  
With this line of royalty.  
But give up carnage, please,  
It is sheer insanity.  
Now, go; may your tribe increase  
In God' magnanimity.

*[Jiwan bows and turns to go*

*Jester*

And the gifts, Prince, can we keep them  
Too, in God's magnanimity?  
The Khan has given me a gem  
I think, in sheer sanity.



*[Jiwan, without waiting for Dara's reply, leaves. Another knock is heard. Jester goes to check. Dara soliloquizes again*

*Dara*

More visitors! And not one verse  
Have I done into Persian  
Today. Sanskrit is taut, terse,  
Like tightly coiled hessian  
String. I will not percisize  
Its thrift with sound, not try  
Change its original guise.  
I will not, with Khayyam, vie.

*[Jester returns with  
Kavindracharya Saraswati*

Acharj! You are well-arrived.  
I was reading the *Geet*.  
Help me, learned friend, decide  
What meaning is more meet  
For this stanza: 'Whenever

*[The Acharya sits down beside  
Dara, listening*

Dharma declines, O Bharat,  
(And this will be true forever)  
I will myself body forth?  
Now 'Bharat', you have explained,  
Stands for 'Arjun'; so 'O Bharat'  
Is 'O Arjun'. And yet, declaimed,  
I feel they mean by 'Bharat'

No person, but 'India'.  
The Lord promises our nation  
Succour when evil reigns here  
And the good are in desperation.

*Jester*

Doubtless you see yourself, chariot-  
Borne, a discus swirling in your  
Hand; a Krishna on the quiet!  
But, no. You can't as much as ensure. . . .

*Dara*

Shush! Enough of your jesting.  
The Acharj does not have time  
For it. Forgive my suggesting

*[Turning to Acharya*

A version which might not rhyme  
With yours. But then that's Sanskrit!  
See a word so, and it will denote  
This; but so, and the word will fit  
An altogether new coat.

Arjun's doubt plagues India;  
All of us have sinned here.  
Who's so blameless as to blame?  
Who, from guilt, can exemption claim?

Either through the April haze,  
We see a truant moon to spy,  
Or bethreaded, at Kasi, praise  
The virtues of the sun and sky.  
All of us will bathe and swathe  
Then expatiate on Faith.

Yet at Help's threshold we'll linger.  
And when someone's in distress,  
For fear of soiling a little finger,  
To More Urgent Business we'll press.

*Kavindrachrya*

I'm supposed to be a pandit  
But more 'spirituality'—  
I wouldn't recommend it.  
We need more humanity!  
Plain scholarship is just effete  
When the need is for action.  
Of Thought, we have a surfeit,  
Of human care, a fraction.  
And *that's* confined to our own kind,  
To our own interest.  
Is never inclined  
To think for the Rest.  
In fact we travel further,  
On the road to cleavage:  
Each other we'll murder,  
Destroy hut and tillage  
In the name of religion  
And of Otherness.  
We're but duck and widgeon,  
But lord, the bitterness!

That's why India's in decline.  
'Dharma' must not incline  
To idle contemplation  
But opt for intervention.  
On the wages of mutual neglect  
(And worse) we must all reflect.  
All of us have this weakness:

We deny others' sacredness.  
Denying it, we then kill  
And use the blood we spill  
In a sick libation of our  
Own altars to inveigle power.  
The price of millennial decay  
Let us all now prepare to pay.  
It is time we revised taboos,  
Time we erased tattoos.  
India can well replace  
Arjun, and invoke His grace.

*Jester*

[*Interrupting Kavindracharya*

But tell me Acharj please, will not  
This avtarhood unleash never-  
Ending combat: A 'good' plot  
Against a 'bad', a high fever  
That wracks the body  
Before leaving it dead?

Will India be a Tragedy  
For God to read in bed?

*Kavindracharya*

That's not the Song's longer aim,  
Eternal combat's not the name  
Of its purpose. It is really  
The opposite: To finally  
End, not enemies but enmity  
And seek, with humility  
And love to befriend the foe  
Making of arrow and bow  
—Kaurav weapons of treachery—  
Mere instrument of archery.

*Dara*

I wish I could see the day  
When my foes brothers become  
Or that I could see my way  
To . . . Insh-Allah the day will come!  
In the meantime, tell me friend,  
How things fare at Varanasi;  
Has the infamous head-rent  
Been waived or is Delhi fussy?

*Kavindracharya*

I could not meet the vizier  
To tell him how the jizya  
Is by all of us just—hated!  
We feel so humiliated  
At having to pay this tax  
And that to a State so lax  
About human security.  
In Prayag's vicinity  
Crime and rapine in the fiefs  
Are perpetrated by—bailiffs!  
Their malignant zest  
Clips crime to self-interest.  
Patronage can hush a murder  
And ugly mayhem, launder.

*Dara*

When will this anarchy end,  
Order from disorder rise;  
When will you, O Lord, extend  
To us the mercy of your eyes?



*Jester*

When you cease soliloquizing  
That's when! Cease being a poet  
Ever romanticizing  
Life, instead of being alert.  
Take my advice: By one swift swerve  
Swat your foes, so they can't revive.  
Even God would need some nerve  
In India to survive!

*[Another knock is heard and  
Jester goes out*

*Dara*

Ignore him, please, Acharj, Jester  
Means well. He jolts me out of  
Self-pity. Though a waster  
Of precious time he is, of  
Time he is also a symbol:  
He gives me chance after chance  
To measure up to the label  
'Prince' but threatens change of stance  
At will; he lives on a pittance;  
Stays more for love. I will  
Never give him quittance,  
The laughing, scoffing, devil!

*[Jester returns with Niccolao  
Manucci*

*Manucci*

My prince Dara! Do I intrude  
Upon some contemplative  
Work, with my rather crude  
And unimaginative  
Arrival? I see the Acharj  
Is here and must beg his  
Pardon, too. But there is at large  
A rumour which to your notice. . . .

*[Dara rises and goes with  
Manucci to a corner,  
Kavindracharya begins to read a  
manuscript which lies on the  
floor. A spotlight falls on Jester,  
dimming the others from view.  
Jester speaks to the audience*

*Jester*

He thinks I'm here for love, he does.

That's but half the story.

Witnessing is more my purpose,

Witnessing tragedy.

I often cry when he siestas,

Though weeping's not my line.

Dara will never know that Jester's

Eyes can brim with brine.

Manucci holds the prince urbane,

Gracious, compassionate.

And so he is. But far too vain

To quite appreciate

Frank advice. He's always polite  
To his friends but can turn  
Abusive at the very sight  
Of knaves Fate does not spurn.

A latitudinarian,  
Dara can be narrow-  
Tempered! A complex Hadrian,  
In mood, muscle, marrow,  
He can also be very naïve!  
He wears a Hindu ring  
And promptly sends a whole beehive  
Of objections, buzzing.  
They don't know Dara who speaks thus  
And may well think this odd:  
Dara's unlike the rest of us:  
He has experienced God.

*[The spotlight goes off, the stage  
is re-lit and the focus returns to  
where Dara and Manucci have  
been talking*

### *Manucci*

So that's what I've heard, my master  
Heard it at the gunnery,  
That Mir Jumla having amassed  
Men and muskets, there's no worry  
Any more, about Golconda.  
He's sure to be raised to Five  
Thousand and I won't wonder  
If he's made a minister, why,  
Chief minister, if the mission

Succeeds. But more sinister, sires,  
A grander designation  
Tempts him whom Jumla inspires,  
And him who trusts Jumla now:  
To fetch Deccani gem and stone  
And enjewel, with his knowhow,  
The climb to the Peacock Throne.

*Dara*

Thank you my friend, I will speak  
To my father; speak to him today.  
I'll tell him not to be so weak  
As to let treason get away.  
For treason's what this is, this rifling  
Of the South, despite clear  
Orders that we should do nothing  
That might occasion fear.

Aurangzeb's blinded by wealth,  
By pastures that aren't his own.  
Tiptoeing, with hyena stealth,  
He springs on sinless fawn.

*[The muezzin is heard.  
Kavindracharya and Manucci  
withdraw, bowing*

*Dara*

Its time for prayer, I find.  
Go fetch the princess, Jester dear,  
Since yesterday, she hasn't dined,  
Quaking with some nameless fear.

*[As Jester leaves, Dara begins  
another self-colloquy*



Nadira, India's future queen,  
There's nothing to be afraid of.  
The voyage is done; the shore, seen  
Our canoe has touched the wharf.

[*Nadira enters*

*Nadira*

I will be with you, always, Dara,  
But, tell me, should we not amend  
Being King as your One End  
Or my wearing a queen's tiara?

Ambition's fatal, prince, even  
In those by custom anointed  
As you are, and appointed  
To conserve a line, by Heaven.

It's not that I some dream have seen  
(Trust me, I have no paranoia)  
But two days back a falcon here  
Spied and grabbed my pet ermine.

Nature permits such an exit,  
But we'd grown fond of each other!  
It went screeching into ether,  
While I did nothing to help it.

Ever since then I keep seeing  
Our sons torn from us by falcons  
Borne away, screaming, on talons  
Leaving us dazed, disbelieving.

What is there in being king?  
The crown's a bauble, power specious.

Our children are what's truly precious;  
Let us to their heartbeats, cling.

*Dara*

Don't read into Nature's cycle.  
Lamb in leopard jaws, lambkin  
In serpent bind; be literal.  
There is, in life, no 'lose or win'.  
We just fulfill our destiny.  
Do you the sly gecko reproach  
For slinking out of its cranny  
And terminating a roach?

In our exquisite album  
The studies of bird and flower  
Reveal an equilibrium  
Twist those that do and don't devour.

Take our divine Peri Mahal  
Mist-veiled, in Sirinagar,  
That monument ethereal  
Which overlooks the Dal from a spur.

Within the lake's placid waters  
Murders take place by the minute.  
Fish eat fish; are eaten by otters.  
Violence marks every thing in it.

Nature cleanses, scavenges,  
Puts things in place. And, so doing,  
All contrariness, balances.  
Join karma to this proceeding,  
And you have a deeper perspective!  
Our own conduct has been guiltless,  
That of our foes, most defective.

We should be safe; don't be listless.  
You have been under stress, princess  
But are bound to feel better  
When, in your sacred prayer recess  
You commune with our Begetter.

*[The call to prayer is heard as  
the curtain comes down*

### SCENE III

*An evening some months thereafter, at Niccolas Manucci's lodgings. The Venetian entertains Jean Baptiste Tavernier and Father Busee. The parlour has some western style furniture, although the windows and doors suggest a typical building in Shahjehanabad. A large drawing of Mary and the child Jesus adorns the main wall.*

*Manucci*

To keep his ageing spirits young,  
On his harim's jasper wall  
Shah Jehan has had mirrors hung  
Which reflect and repeat a voile's fall  
From the dancer's face and shoulder  
In a hundred multiplying frames,  
Tantalizing the beholder.  
And then the chandelier flames  
As its droplets miniaturize  
The swirling form and, like a Jury,  
Her gesture, movement, mood, assize.  
I've seen there, Kathak danced in fury  
To such beat of feet as would alarm  
Spain's best tapdancer into retreat:

*Thaam-tha-thaam-thaam-thaaam!*  
I've never known dance to raise such heat.

*Busee*

I sometimes wonder how it is  
That Prince Dara has survived  
The vibrations harims release  
Slyly, into the lion's pride.  
It's not just that he sides  
A regime of wise continence  
But that he delights  
In a *superior* Dalliance.  
A Jesuit knows but one meaning  
Of that mystic word: 'rapture'.  
I had a plan of binding  
This (with some sufi ligature)  
To Dara's religious baggage.  
But, I found, there was no need to!  
He knew each chapter and passage  
Of the New Testament and so  
Taught me, instead, the true purport  
And conveyance of Christ's Passion.  
Prince Dara's studies to support  
With converse, is now my mission.

*Manucci*

I know what you mean, Father,  
Dara is a slave of God.  
A philosopher-prince, rather  
Than a pea with peas in a pod.  
That's why I've chosen to join  
His service. He's no employer,  
But mentor; no dumb duke but doyen



Of civilized behaviour.  
He reminds me, spontaneous,  
Of Rome's philosopher-king  
Brave Marcus Aurelius  
Who governed, meditating.

*Busee*

A somewhat kindred thing  
I have heard from Bernier:  
Once Aurangzeb, while fighting,  
In battle-smoke, sat down to prayer  
Unafraid of the leaden rain  
That fell about him unabated.  
One would have thought him insane.  
He was not; just insulated.

*Tavernier*

I am no philosopher  
Nor even too educated;  
I cannot with Bernier  
Or Father Busee be rated.  
But my long experience  
With buyers of precious stones  
Has afforded me the chance  
To observe human *tones*.  
I have come to know the Shah  
Of Persia, and the Moghul  
Court. I must say that by far  
The noblest, truly regal  
Of all the lords I have met  
Is Dara Shukoh. Regal is  
That regal does. I try to get  
A present or two for his

Minions but he will not himself  
Receive without giving double.  
When I gave him a four-door shelf  
He responded with a crystal!  
While other nobles' sole interest  
Lies in prices to bargain,  
Dara asks how an amethyst  
Differs from sapphire and again  
How a pearl of lively waters  
Perfectly round and transparent  
Would in knowledgeable quarters,  
Rank with one of higher carat.

*Manucci*

When I first reached his presence  
I offered my most practiced  
Version of due obeisance.  
He seemed more than simply pleased  
To see a Venetian youth  
Do this without awkwardness  
Or in a manner uncouth.  
I had official business  
With him—handing a Latin  
Letter from an ambassador—  
Which was written on vellum skin.  
After my work as translator  
Cum courier (with fulsome  
Praise from Dara) had been tied  
Up, he asked about the vellum:  
'Not quite paper, not quite hide;  
What is the substance so choice?'  
I explained that European

Kings used this fine-grained device  
For long-distance communion.

*Attendant*

[*Entering, very short of breath*

Sire, I've just this minute heard:  
*The vizier's dead!* The bird  
Flew off (don't hold me frolic)  
After being hit by colic.

*Busee*

[*Crossing himself*

I never liked his role  
But, well, God Bless His Soul!

*Tavernier*

I gave him gifts in too much haste  
They must now all go to waste!

*Manucci*

[*Thoughtfully, almost as if in a  
reverie*

So is Sadullah, then, dead?  
He was never a friend of ours.  
And I can hear it being said:  
Lethal seeds of poppy flowers  
(Or suchlike) were subtly mixed  
In the good man's betelchew  
Or, in his aperient, fixed  
(The poor man was always 'due')  
By none else than—Dara's faction.  
'*This deed's the work of Dara's men*'  
Will be one sure reaction,  
'*Trying their damn'dest to stem  
Aurangzeb's bid for power.*'

But how very off the mark  
That would be! Rumours devour  
Reputations like a shark  
With an underside mouthslit  
That smiles as it ingests  
Honour's unblinking fleet  
And then, nudging coral, rests.

*Tavernier*

I cannot say I am grief-  
Struck at Sadullah's demise.  
It's more a sense of disbelief  
(Death sifts not, wise from unwise.)

Sadullah thrived through flattery.  
He did, too, through intrigue.  
He was the skilful votary  
Of a faith that doesn't fatigue.  
Faith, not in a just God  
But in man's intelligence,  
A faith to which I cannot  
Subscribe without great reticence.

Cleverness is clever for a span  
Alone. Unexpected Death can  
Make the smart look quite sorry:  
Placed, with brain baggage, in her lorry.

But having said this, I believe,  
History won't be unkind  
To Sadullah. He'll yet retrieve  
An aroma from the rind  
Of his life's desiccated  
Story, partly because good

Persisted with the low-rated  
In it, but also since he would  
Be succeeded by men who are  
Living gargoyles, not men.

Mir Jumla's not all that far  
And plans to cross the Deccan's fen  
To come, salute and—win the King.  
He brings from Kollur's diamond mine,  
A lustrous stone too large to ring  
But, for crowns—anodyne!

*Manucci*

Clearly, Delhi is in pain.  
She has been, before. But, alas,  
There is a difference: To gain  
Her Crown they'll now sell the lass!

# ACT TWO



*At Mir Jumla's camp on the outskirts of Delhi. He is on his way to the Imperial Capital to wait on Shah Jehan. And, later, in and around the Red Fort.*

## SCENE 1

*The inside of Jumla's tent. Mir Jumla's coat of mail, sword and escutcheon are hung up on the tent's inner wall. A simple bed lies to one side. Jumla is seated on the carpeted floor. It is night. A lamp burns near him as he dictates letters to two secretaries who are standing on either side of him. Mir Jumla holds letters in the intervals between his fingers and—toes!*

*Jumla*

*[Addressing the amanuensis to his right*

*Now take this down, with no mistake*

*Soever: 'Exalted*

*Master, Prince Aurangzeb: I'll stake*

*My well estimated*

*Career in arms and business*

*On this undertaking.*

*Golconda was ours; its fortress*

*Almost in our keeping*

*Until the so-called peace party*

*At Delhi botched our plan*

*And snatched the urn of victory  
 Waiting in the Deccan.  
 But with Bijapur, I promise,  
 I will take no chances.  
 What melting hearts made us miss  
 With self-righteous stances  
 Will now be 'ours'—I mean—'yours'.  
 Get that right: 'Yours' not 'ours'.  
 And resume: 'Bijapur's forts  
 Will yield within hours  
 Of my besieging Kalyan.  
 All I need is consent.  
 The Emperor of Hindostan  
 May not, I feel, dissent  
 When we give him this reason:  
 Bijapur's latest king  
 Is not his predecessor's son  
 But a baseborn offspring.*

*'But what will finally click,  
 Is not the "bastardy".  
 I will daze the dove-clique,  
 And place it in true jeopardy  
 By using another,  
 Much more irresistible,  
 Ploy: of the jeweller!  
 "The South is a crucible  
 Of gem-making sap,"  
 I'll tell him. "Its rich lava-flows  
 Have formed the Deccan Trap  
 Where fluids metamorphose  
 Into rocks and turn gems."  
 I will then show him evidence:  
 Topaz petals, ruby stems*

*But above all, Great Heaven's  
Own gift to Kollur:  
The radiating diamond  
Someone's termed "Kohi-i-nur".  
That will be my last argument.  
Yours, most obediently,  
Mir Jumla,' Now transcribe  
That fast. Neatly, evenly  
And on it superscribe. . . .*

*[A soldier enters, bowing*

Yes? What's it that brings you here?  
I see you're not alone.  
I thought I had made it clear  
That . . . but you're just a drone.

*[The soldier is at a loss to  
understand his master's wishes.  
Jumla dispels the doubt*

Speak,  
You leak.

*Soldier*

Most noble sire, I've been sent  
With four prisoners who're meant  
To be produced before you here  
Since their crimes took place near. . . .

*[Jumla pulls out two papers from  
between his toes and addresses  
his amanuensis, ignoring the  
soldier who remains standing*



*Jumla*

Send these two letters to Delhi  
And see they positively  
Reach the Princess Roshanara  
By morning. And see Prince Dara  
Does not manage to get scent  
Of them, else my fury I'll vent  
On you and you and . . . well any rodent  
Within sight of me that moment.

*[The man takes both papers,  
bowing, while Jumla disengages  
another script from his left hand*

Now this other little note  
That I, a while ago, wrote  
Must be sent to my son  
Through a rider other than  
Him who takes the letter  
To Aurganzeb. It had better  
Be sealed by me directly  
And confidentially.

*[Affixes a seal himself and notices  
the soldier still standing*

I'll see your prisoners now.  
Fetch the first and tell me how  
He's in fetters. Did he plunder  
Rape or commit murder?

*Soldier*

*[Bringing in the first prisoner*

This one entered a house  
Slew a woman on some grouse

Together with three infants  
And an explanation invents. . . .

*Jumla*

Chop his hands and feet,  
And dunk him in some field  
Near the main roadways,  
To bleed away his days.

*[There is a moment of shocked  
silence. Jumla illustrates his  
intention with gestures*

Didn't you hear?  
Get it clear:  
Chop, hop,  
Hop, chop.  
Finger chips  
In chilly dips!

*[The first prisoner, in a trance,  
is pushed out and the second  
brought in*

*Soldier*

This one stole on the high road  
A pilgrim party's heavy load.

*Jumla*

Slit his stomach for seeking gain  
Illicitly. Then fling him in a drain.  
Gut in a gutter  
Is better

Than brain in a drain.  
Don't complain!

*[The second soldier exits, dazed,  
as two others are ushered in*

*Soldier*

These two are bandits plain,  
They rob with complete disdain.

*Jumla*

Disengage their brainholders  
From their flabby shoulders.

*[The two are ejected from the  
tent. The soldier bows and leaves.  
Mir Jumla returns to his  
paperwork, extracting a folded  
note from between the toes of his  
left foot*

Read out this closely-written note  
From our office at Melkote.

*First Amanuensis*

*[Reads*

*'My most noble chief  
And lord of this fief. . . .'*

*Jumla*

Cut out the salutation,  
Come straight to the disputation.

*'We have a strange case with us  
Of a Rajput lineage  
That is not just idolatrous  
(It came here on pilgrimage)  
But barbarously customed.  
A weak-livered man of this host,  
To our water unaccustomed  
Sickened and gave up his ghost.  
Now he was married to one  
Who is no more than a child;  
She is but twelve (I won  
A bet on this), gentle, mild.  
But on the day they burnt him, sire  
They tried to force the poor girl  
To mount the still-unlit pyre.  
The little creature was in a whorl  
Of terror, trembling, weeping  
As she neared the spot.  
Her agony as the leaping  
Torch neared the fatal cot  
Cannot be described in words.  
Her kin had got her fastened tight  
Lest she run away. I envy birds.  
They pair but when the mate has died  
Are free to just fly away.  
We stopped the grim proceedings  
In time. (The corpse was burned next day.)  
The fair child to her in-laws clings  
But they treat her as offal.  
We have detained the lot of them  
But on policy, we waffle.  
We can be sure of one outcome*

*If they are freed: They'll abandon  
Her. We need our Chief's orders  
On this. Tell us if what we've done  
Is right. Should within our borders  
Customs beyond ours, prevail?  
Should the South, the civilized South,  
Not make such an attempt and fail?  
Forgive us for raising this doubt.'*

*[The first amanuensis retires to  
one side. The second responds to  
his master's instruction*

*Jumla*

*Take this down: 'I am amazed  
By your doubt.  
Whoever interfered was crazed,  
Or a tout.  
He should be sacked at once.  
Your notion  
That there is room, in governance,  
For emotion  
Is wrong. It is also stupid.  
Don't waste time  
On issues like this vapid  
Pantomime.  
Customs are best left alone.  
A beehive  
Congealed with honey may moan  
But just try  
Intervening and you'll see  
For yourself.*

*If you want nectar, avoid the bee.  
Do not delve  
Into the why and wherefore  
Of men's deeds.  
Law is law, custom custom. Therefore,  
Their decrees  
Cannot overlap. We uphold  
The former.  
Leave convention to some bold  
Reformer  
Of a future age. Do not dabble  
With men's mores  
Or the manners of the rabble.  
It's their crores  
Stashed away in stores that interests  
Aurangeb.  
Release your wretched Rajput "guests".  
Don't be vague  
On first principles. What becomes  
Of the wench  
Isn't your business. Who succumbs  
To a wench  
Or matters of sentiment  
Is unfit  
For a role in Government.  
That is it.*

*Now take this down for headquarters.  
In a letter  
From one of our subalterns  
On a matter  
With no importance to it  
He has confessed*

*That he gambled. (Won a bet.)  
I should've guessed  
His nature earlier but never mind.  
He talks of birds.  
Philosophises. We've been too kind  
To men of words.  
Government can't afford thinkers.  
Have him transferred  
As Jail Warden, where the clinkers  
Reek of turd.'*

*Soldier*

*[soldier enters*

Most noble sire! I have the honour to report  
Execution of the four orders of this court.

*[Soldier and both amanuenses  
withdraw. Jumla rises, puts his  
remaining notes into a box and  
stretches his limbs, yawning.*

And now on to Delhi!  
May it fill the belly  
Of our great enterprise.  
Not noble, perhaps, but so wise!

*[He blows out a lamp, preparing  
to sleep. Jackal cries are heard  
as the stage lights dim and the  
curtain falls*

## SCENE II

*Two months later, in Shah Jehan's private apartments. It is very early in the morning. The emperor is ill and lives in bed behind a screen which conceals him from view. He has, at his side, Prince Dara, Princess Jahanara, Bernier, and a hakim. Jester stands by himself in a far corner.*

Dara

*[Addressing his father near his bedside*

I know you're feeling wan  
But, both doctors agree,  
—It's now half-past three—  
That you'll be better by dawn.

Jester

*[To himself, in a spot of light*

No! not by a half-chance  
Though all his doctors dance.  
He'll be ill awhile, I'm sure.  
There won't be an easy cure.

Let me for the record  
Proceed now to set out  
The unfolding events  
Of the next few moments.

The poor king struggles  
And with Time, haggles  
For a few more years.  
But Time never hears  
Pleas for an extension  
Without suspicion.

*'Tell me what's so special  
In you?' An official*



Speaking for Death, enquires.  
Shah Jehan now perspires.

What should he volunteer  
And what, never hear  
Repeated? 'Well, I've been  
A king.' *'Of kings I've seen  
Plenty! Another,  
better reason, please.'* 'Sir,  
I've been a good monarch.'  
He adds. 'Please see my work:  
Forts, a mausoleum. . . .'  
*'O that! that's just Time's rheum.'*

The man knows his Bible  
And so chucks this pebble.  
On the King's stained-glass painting  
(Which comes, facedown, crashing:)  
*'What hast Ye done to Excess?'*  
Shah Jehan is in a mess.  
His 'excesses' he dare  
Not repeat. And from where,  
In this bad disorder  
Of his, can he order  
A list of his good deeds?  
But the official needs  
It, if he is to speak  
To Death. The case is weak.

But as often happens,  
Someone else stirs and pens  
A compassionate prayer  
To the Lord and Master.  
Princess Jahanara



And the Crown Prince, Dara,  
Maintain that Shah Jehan  
Is no vagabond khan.

He has established  
The Rule of Law, banished  
The Rule of the Jungle.  
(They have a drafting bungle  
There—Dara's a nature buff!)  
But if that's not enough,  
The son and daughter add,  
Their good father has had  
Just no end of trouble  
From his three ignoble  
Younger sons. No sooner  
Then they've said 'younger',  
Their prayer gets cut short  
By this stinging retort:  
*'Younger sons? Now come, come  
Was he not Prince Khurram  
A younger son and prince,  
Junior to Khusro, whence  
Arose a contention  
Between Prince Two and One  
Which ended with Khurram  
Enthroned, and "justice" mum?'*

The man knows his History  
And the family tree.  
He will not change his views,  
He says, and continues:

*'Khusro was the eldest,  
He was also the best.*

*But Khurram though younger  
Proved himself stronger.  
I know that Khusro died  
(How, I will never find;  
I was on leave that day,  
A colleague bore him away)  
Before Khurram was crowned  
And the debate got drowned.  
But next in line after  
Khusro wasn't your pater  
But Khusro's eldest son  
Now, by choice, a Persian.  
So I will buy no yarn  
From dear old Shah Jehan  
About seniority  
And propriety.'*

These thoughts of Death Office,  
Cold and heartless, suffice  
To strike son and daughter  
As callous manslaughter.

Dara is distraught.  
But Jahanara is not.  
She loves him clearly,  
Her father. Tenderly  
She goes to where he lies.  
Touched, he opens his eyes.  
'By prayer time this dawn  
Your illness will be gone,'  
She whispers in his ears.  
Is't an angel he hears?

If asked to summarise  
What went before my eyes,  
I'd say it went like this  
(More or less, that is:  
Shah Jehan was dying,  
Dying very slowly.  
Shah Jehan was lying,  
Lying to history,  
When a loving daughter's  
Fervent prayer in verse  
Made death change his orders  
And recall the hearse.

*[The spotlight goes, the stage is  
fully lit. It is now dawn and an  
elated Bernier addresses Shah  
Jehan.*

*Bernier*

I was, I confess, cynical  
But your pulsebeat's turned rhythmical!  
The heat has left your brow;  
You will feel better now.

*Jahanara*

Allah the Merciful be praised,  
Allah, the Compassionate!  
To His glory let hands be raised  
To Him, who determines our fate.

Dara

*[Going down on his knees. The stage dims slightly, as a spotlight covers him alone*

If I was being tested, Allah,  
I know I've failed, my Bismillah.  
I quailed before approaching death,  
My faith pattered as Father's breath  
Your Holy Name tried to suspire,  
And I saw that what I aspire  
Most is not his health or India's,  
But *my* smooth climb to the dais.  
In the prospect of Father dying  
I saw my succession flying  
Away like a Blue Rock Pigeon  
Chased by the Shahin Falcon.  
This peregrinator's hind claws  
Struck primogeniture's soft laws  
Mid-air, in one swift loop of power,  
And took them to a crag to devour.  
This vision, or one akin,  
Princess Nadira had seen.  
I had ridiculed her imagining  
But now I saw myself fearing  
Much the same thing. My thoughts wandered  
From my father's bed and squandered  
My bounty of faith in ambition's  
Fickle bazaar. True contrition's  
What is called for. I place it,  
Allah, at Your Forgiving Feet.

I know that this illness began  
With the dreaded Jumla's plan  
Of inveigling the House of Timur  
By his gift of the Koh-i-Nur.

The emperor was transfix't  
By the luminous gift.  
His pupils dilated large and gazed  
At the fiery rhombus, dazed.  
The phosphorescent stone osmosed  
The optic rays and composed  
A like response. The pair of eyes  
And the stone then synchronized.  
But diamonds are notorious  
For flaws, or what various  
Astrologers have termed *dosh*  
(With which lapidarists don't close.)  
These can afflict the owner  
Most hurtfully and on a  
Powerful owner spell  
Disaster. Now who can tell  
What *dosh* the Koh-i-Nur holds  
But that it certainly bodes  
Ill became clear to me soon  
Enough. What seemed a boon  
Was indeed a curse. The king  
Has not been well since: something  
That cannot be explained in terms  
Of Doctor Bernier's 'germs'.  
He is totally puzzled now  
And within himself wonders how

The king has revived. He dare  
Not admit it was prayer  
That wrought the miracle.  
He's science's Oracle!

*[The second call for prayer is heard. Jahanara moves to a corner of the room. All the men gather at the opposite end. Bernier withdraws from the room as namaz is offered. When it is over, all rise, Jahanara leaves and Dara goes to his father*

*Dara*

I have not known you to pray from bed  
And can well imagine how frustrated  
You must feel. But it is entirely  
In order for those unwell merely  
To use their hands and pray that way alone.  
Should that too not be doable, to just intone  
The prayer. And failing even that, offer  
To Him, in complete stillness, your faith's coffer.

*[Bernier returns and moves up to Dara, touching him on the shoulder. Dara and he proceed to a side.*

*Bernier*

In my medical career  
Of many a long year  
I have not known a patient



Become quite insentient  
And within hours recover  
By the power of prayer.  
My medical attendance  
Was reduced to a redundancy!

*Dara*

My good friend, can there is two views  
On what's better: To have for doctors,  
For the very best of them, no use  
Or become their helpless prisoners?

*Bernier*

God forbid that anyone  
Should be dependent on me.  
But I do not want someone  
—Not the King!—think me a zombie.

*Jester*

*[Whispering to Bernier  
mischievously]*

By the way, Doctor Bernier,  
Is it really hernia?

*Bernier*

*[Responding in embarrassment,  
under his breath]*

O dear me, it is *not* hernia!  
Its true nature I find unbecoming  
To describe. Suffice it to say none here  
Would have ever considered risking  
His health for an aphrodisiac  
Trip like the king had undertook  
Against all advice, on a bivouac  
Organized by some foul eunuch.



*Jester*

*[To himself*

Alley on alley is sure to resound:  
'For weak males Bernier a cure has found!'

*[Jahanara returns and speaks to  
Dara*

*Jahanara*

I am told word is going round  
That the king has died and the ground  
Is being prepared to proclaim you  
His successor. It seems a few  
Have even converged at the fort's gate  
And will be quite happy there to wait  
Until they have heard and got  
News of whether Dara is king or not.

### SCENE III

*A turret on the walls of the Red Fort, Delhi. A crowd, mostly poor, has gathered outside it. It is early morning. First and Second Heralds are talking to the people from their vantage point in the tower.*

*First Herald*

Go home, don't waste your time,  
There is no news.  
Don't draw from me, in rhyme,  
Some choice abuse.  
Do you not have some shame?  
Vultures flock thus  
On hearing sickness' name.

*Paanwala*

Don't think it's the King's health  
That bothers us;  
It's India's! Our wealth  
Makes you pompous,  
Fat. It's *we* who have built  
This huge Red Fort.  
And so we feel no guilt  
Of any sort  
About assembling where  
We have a stake.  
Therefore don't you dare  
Make that mistake.

*Sabziwala*

We have a stake,  
Make no mistake!

*Doodhwala*

We built  
This Fort;  
No guilt  
Of any sort!

*Paanwala*

I take pride in temerity  
But also in brevity.  
So what I have to say ought  
To be both sharp and short.  
It's we who pay the taxes  
But *you're* the one who waxes.

All the nation's resources,  
The imperial forces  
Gobble. Why should we bear the strain  
Of maintaining this huge drain?

*[The crowd purrs in  
appreciation. Paanwala is  
encouraged to resume*

If the prince takes a fancy  
To some dandified pansy,  
Or the king builds a mansion  
For the object of his passion.  
Why, if an officer of state  
A wedding to celebrate  
Needs funds, who provides it?  
Who but us—the people—damn it!

We mayn't even mind a prodigal state  
If at least in its bounds, we felt *safe*.  
We can't go to Agra or Muttra.  
Thanks to dakus, thugs etcetera.  
And so if the king is seriously ill  
Don't expect us to sit at home, still!  
We feel we're entitled to find out  
Which of the princes is in, which out,  
If Dara, the eloquent waverer,  
With Jahanara (and those who favour her)  
Will sieze power or will become  
A Khusro plastered by Khurram.

*Sabziwala*

The man has wit,  
Let us grant it!

*Second Herald*

*[Incensed, he shouts at all of them*

Just go, I tell you, *git!*  
Filthy vermin!  
Are any of you fit  
To determine  
The state of India's health?  
Has even one  
Of you used *your* own wealth,  
Or a distance run  
For someone else's sake?  
No, you have not!  
So don't you talk of 'stake'  
And suchlike rot.

*First Herald*

*[To Paanwala*

Tell me, sitting here, just this:  
Have you given  
Away, free, one single *paan*?  
A good haven  
You've found to vend your ware.  
'India' today  
Is your business, not care,  
You roll, I pay!

*[Addressing all the crowd*

The king's ill. But what's new in  
Being unwell?  
He is also human!  
Have you been well  
All your lives? And when not,  
Would you like it

If all your children got  
Together to sit  
And speculate your demise  
Or your last Will?  
You would, I surmise, feel  
Yet more ill.

*Thelawala*

He speaks both wisely and well;  
The paanwala's wily as hell.

*Mochi*

[To Thelawala

I know the herald's a good man;  
He always leaves a tip.  
He once an obstacle race ran,  
Which caused his shoe to rip.  
(The cleavage was where the upper  
The undersurface meets.)  
'Keep this extra for your supper,'  
He says, 'Get yourself some eats.'  
Then he takes my hand  
And says, 'You know you've played a role  
You'll never understand.'  
'What?' I ask. 'You've just Saved My Sole.'

[There is some excitement from  
behind where the heralds stand.  
Dara appears

*First Herald*

Hail, Prince Dara Shukoh,  
Crown Prince Dara Shukoh!

*Dara*

Friends, you have been waiting long  
For some news, I know.  
The news I have, I won't prolong;  
Its brief, like life, but so . . .

*Thelawala*

Life is brief, he said  
The news must be bad.  
His face looks quite red,  
Anxious and sad.

*Dara*

[*Continues*

. . . So nuanced as to need explaining  
Too. But for the news, first.  
The king *was* ill, complaining  
Of fever, aches and thirst.

*Sabzirwala*

'Was,' he said. So he must be better.  
The king must have recovered later.

*Dara*

[*Resumes*

The French doctor Bernier  
Tried western medicine.  
He is very sincere  
And fights illness to win.

But medicament works not  
If faith is frayed—  
A truth I had forgot,  
But my sister prayed. . . .

*A Voice*

Which sister,  
Boil or blister?

*Another Voice*

One's a stunt  
The other a . . .

*[Dara tauts with rage. But  
restrains himself as well as the  
two heralds who want to jump  
into the crowd to teach it a lesson*

*Dara*

For some months now I have been studying  
With a Jesuit priest  
Holy scripture and its scripts.

It has been a treat  
To hear him on the use, abuse  
Of words, both wrong and meet.  
I've often thought about swear words,  
Urban and bucolic.

I think these go with culture,  
In naukhar or in malik.  
Someone here, I see, employs  
His own brand: Pure Phallic

I can only pity the man  
Who fouls his mouth with these.  
His abusive tongue's gone fungoid:  
It rots the word it speaks.  
The profanities just heard  
Are thick, viscid grease.

I am not renowned for a cool head  
But I'll stay calm today.  
My morning namaz I can yet hear,  
So I'll keep anger at bay.  
The toxin jabbed into me just now—  
I'll stop in a tourniquet.

I will not let my bloodstream carry  
Poison to the brain today.  
Anger and like passions can perhaps  
Be permitted play  
On days of normal circumstance.  
But today, Fate holds sway.

All of you, I am quite sure, believe  
That life's a journey  
In which you have a destination  
And, perhaps, the money.  
But getting there depends not just on  
You, but on Destiny!

Almost everyone of you has  
A daughter to wed  
A complex spouse to take care of,  
A parent in sickbed.  
Sometimes all these situations  
Land at once on your head.

And some of you may be afflicted  
With other tensions  
Too: a crazed sister, hare-lipped son  
Showing predilictions  
Of the most unbecoming kind.  
These are enervations.



Stretch the scene and you have: debts unpaid,  
A pathan you must dodge;  
And because of lingering blood feuds,  
A complaint you must lodge  
Which, in turn, involves waiting on  
Some bureaucratic podge.

[Dara pauses

*Sabziwala*

He sure understand us,  
Dara does.

*Dara*

One person who understood people  
And their humanity  
Was our Holy Prophet Mohammed.  
He brought equality  
Between rich and poor, weak and strong.  
Brought solidarity

Through means of a common prayer  
That went beyond kinship.  
Unions of family and tribe  
Cannot confine worship.  
Everyone was free to come and pray,  
Child, cobbler and Lordship.

*Doodhwala*

It's as if he's been to our homes  
Not just stayed amid power's domes.

*Dara*

But alongside these demands of life  
Which drain your energy,  
You have another, exacting goal  
That admits no lethargy.  
A goal that calls for nothing less than  
The purest synergy.

*Paanwala*

*[Barracking Dara again*

What be *that*  
Cat or rat?

*Dara*

If I have used a strange-sounding word,  
It's strange only in sound.  
Its sense—harnessing man's will to God's,  
Powering square with round—  
To each of you is self-evident.  
The poor can be profound.

*[There is a murmur of  
appreciation as Dara continues*

Each of you has talent but also  
More, though you don't know it:  
An ability to turn matter  
Into the purest spirit.  
Else how does a benighted weaver  
Make fabric that's sunlit?

How does a yokel's wife transform,  
With a half-broken quill  
The walls of her rude tabernacle  
Into an epic 'Still'?

It is because she has a margin  
That has transcended skill.

*Paanwala*

The only margin we know of  
Is one that you would scoff. . . .

*Dara*

[*Addressing Paanwala*

Let *me* interrupt you for a change.  
I well know *your* margin;  
The profit margin you seek to widen  
To your glee, our chagrin,  
By camouflaging unworthier leaves  
In a slick of resin.

[*Paanwala rises to protest but  
changes his mind and sits down  
again.*

*Thelawala*

You can say that again.  
What won't he do for gain!

*Mochi*

[*To Thelawala*

From just one look at men's feet  
I can spot a cheat.  
It's not that theirs are dirtier  
(Dirt's not my *métier*)  
But theirs are larger and splayed  
With toegaps displayed.  
And yet in slim shoes compressed,  
Like perversion repressed,

Cheats would like their feet, outsized,  
To reside, disguised.  
For pairs of feet, there's nomenclature  
That goes by their nature.  
Paanwala's I'd say, are classical  
'Perfect Rascal'.

*Blind Beggar*

Don't stop, Prince Dara,  
Ignore Paanwala.

[Together

Ignore him,  
Ignore him.

*Dara*

[Pleased with the clear shift in  
public opinion

Every one of you has this margin,  
You can take it from me:  
An unknown, great dimension.  
Consider our friend, Dhunki.

[Dhunki has been sitting  
unnoticed all this while. He gets  
a start at the mention of his  
name

He doesn't just fluff up our quilts,  
He also thrums a ditty!

Why? Who told him to? Did you, did I?  
Take Bhishti sitting there.

[Now it is Bhishti's turn to be  
startled

His goatskin-bag's a mystic symbol, not  
Just a water-carrier.  
The slain beast says, 'I'll slake your thirst  
Though you didn't heed my prayer.'  
Or take that miserable wretch  
Who sits alone, yonder.

[Nur, a madwoman sits at a far  
end, oblivious

People call her mad, and so she is,  
But for reasons beyond her!  
Her crow's foot eyes were lovely once till  
A young man duped her.

He promised marriage but, post-facto.  
Nur obliged, 'What matters?'  
Sure enough, he evaporated, and  
She rued, 'Life shatters.'  
When a baby came to her, unwed, her image  
(And brain) went tatters.

But how many of you know this  
'Mad' Nur can fortune read  
Not by the criss-cross on your palm  
As much as from rapeseed?  
She'll make you choose one from a heap and  
Unerringly, proceed.

*Blind Beggar*

[For all to hear

I know that. She'd warned me decades ago,  
That I'll be blind before I'm forty  
Unless—I fed my pet cat more!  
I laughed, and saying 'Don't be dotty,'

Chucked the seeds (and made her grumble).  
Today, when I'm as blind as a bat,  
Coming this way I hear Nur mumble:  
'That comes of being unkind to a cat.'

*[There is general laughter. Only  
Paanwala remains unimpressed,  
unamused*

*Dara*

Why am I saying all this to you?  
Some of you may wonder.  
Heralds may even start worrying  
What pressure is Dara under?  
Why does he speak of Dhunki, Bhishti  
And Paanwala, sunder?

Is there some method to his madness  
Or is it unalloyed?  
Dara's not mad by any means but—  
His taste for pelf has cloyed.  
With me Panoply sits ill at ease.  
She's happier, viceroied.

*Some Voices*

Dara Shukoh, Zindabad  
Murad, Shuja, Murdabad!

*Dara*

Let us not wish Death to anyone.  
That's base.  
All of us have God's breath in us,  
In any case.

We live and have our being  
With His Grace.

You know I have been made Crown Prince,  
*Shah-i-Buland-Iqbal.*

My mother wanted all this for me,  
The late Mumtaz Mahal:  
A golden seat beside Father's throne  
And honours at Durbar.

It is not that I don't value these.  
I do, most gratefully.  
I won't shirk responsibility.  
*But I won't use a pulley*  
To wheel, raise or hoist myself to power.  
*And I won't be a bully.*

*[There is applause, Paanwala  
alone demurring*

*Paanwala*

Oh yeah,  
Dara?

*Thelawala*

We know you won't.  
Don't heed his taunt.

*Dara*

I feel my true place is not in mansions  
But in a hermitage  
Where those like Great Sarmad,  
And many a blessed sage

Practise rigour of mind and body  
And God's dominion, presage.

My place is also here, with you,  
Somewhere in these mewses.  
For if this spot is one where our  
Paanwala abuses,  
It is also a place where, surely,  
Some new Rumi muses.

I for one have always held  
That on these very cobbles,  
Right amidst our day's companions  
Some unknown Surdas hobbles.  
Tell me, don't you rate his songs higher  
Than palace baubles?

*Blind Beggar*

God will bless you, Dara,  
And the Begum Nadira!

*Dara*

I have often contemplated  
Priests engowned in surplice.  
Yet wouldn't you say ill-clothed Kabir just  
Routs those in God's office?  
He sure tempts *me* to bid all Power a  
Polite 'khuda hafiz'.

I wish I had no compulsions:  
A father's loving hope,  
Brothers who though ambitious,  
With India cannot cope,



The court's several functionaries  
Who in ignorance, grope.

I spoke just now of India  
And also made a mention  
Of ignorance. By the first I meant  
No physical nation  
But the fact that India is a—  
Civilization.

*Blind Beggar*

Yes, a civilization,  
Not just a nation.

*Dara*

*[Warming to the response*

India is a sanctuary for  
The world's earliest faiths  
When they are banished or distorted  
By corporeal wraiths.  
But more, India gives protection  
As our sage sayeth,  
To the faith underlying all faiths:  
That Man is half-divine,  
Is meant to complete the process  
And his base self, refine  
By giving up strife, envy, deceit,  
Notions of 'mine' and 'thine'.

India is not meant to be a theatre  
For belligerence.  
Not meant to be witness  
To a dance of ignorance.  
And yet—those in charge of her—  
Prefer intemperance

Of every kind! I am no prig.  
But those who are in power  
Have been given a sacred trust  
Though for a brief hour.  
They just cannot come to treat it  
As their in-law's dower.

My office, palace, golden seat,  
Parallel *your* day's woes,  
Your chores, your cares, your debts, your feuds  
With near and distant foes.  
My jurisdiction represents  
The tough soil a peasant hoes.

Just as all of you balance  
Your duties to your folk  
With a duty to your own *within*,  
Your Self, with your Daily Soak,  
So do I too equilibrate  
My yearnings with my yoke.

*Paanwala*

A yoke?  
What a joke!

*Dara*

[*Taking no notice of his heckler*

I know that as a prince I need  
To custom conform.  
I know that as Crown Prince I should  
Certain duties perform.  
But most of all I know I *must*  
Some practices reform.

*TheLawala*

Yes, Dara, please perform,  
Please reform!

*Dara*

Of these the first pertains to when  
The Emperor is ill.  
Princes are prone to view that time as  
A vacuum they can fill.  
Instead of praying for his health  
They start to scour his Will.

*Sabziwala and Doodhwala*

Shame,  
Shame!

*Dara*

Worse, they start to forge his 'Will'  
As also alliances.  
They read the khutba in their names  
And taking no chances  
Quietly ensure that their force  
To Delhi, advances.

Now, last night, when Father lay ill  
My mind was filled with fear:  
Will this dread sequence re-enact  
In high or low gear?  
This thought disturbed me so much,  
I forgot my prayer.

Though I forgot to say my prayer  
Yet Allah intervened.

After the longest night I've known  
Or so to me it seemed,  
Father recovered—a miracle—  
And the doctor beamed.

I come to tell you this today,  
But not this alone.  
I also mean to tell you that  
Dara can atone.  
Atone for forgetting Allah  
Who yet has mercy shown.

*Thelawala*

No more atonement is needed  
When the prayer's been heeded.  
That should your dilemma resolve,  
And guilt, if any, dissolve.

*Dara*

Those are sage words, so simply said,  
Simple words, sagely expressed.  
Before returning to Father's side  
I would like this stressed  
Whenever it is time for me  
I *can* climb the crest.

*Blind Beggar*

You must, Dara, you must,  
You must climb the crest!

*Dara*

Yet I will do *with* all of you,  
As your friend, not ruler.

When I, if called upon, *your* throne ascend,  
No one will be my broker  
Save all of you, my people,  
And—our common Maker.

*Thelawala*

I'll be with you always  
On bylanes, roads or highways.

*Mochi*

I'll make the slippers  
For your coronation.  
They'll have silken uppers,  
Subtle decoration.

*Blind Beggar*

Don't forget to invite me  
Dara! Be sure to sight me.

*Subziwala*

Hail Prince Dara,  
Crown Prince Dara!

[Dara salaams and leaves. He  
does not hear Paanwala's parting  
shot

*Paanwala*

Don't think this halleluiah will crown you.  
Murdered Sadullah will drown you.

[There is commotion, with the  
crowd pouncing on Paanwala  
who yells in pain

*First Herald*

[*To second Herald*

I am afraid, it's started already  
The beginning of the end, so bloody.

*Second Herald*

The wicked are provoking the good;  
While the good are quite unwise.  
Agitation has never stood  
Athletes well; they drop the prize.

# ACT THREE



*Two weeks later, at Dara's mansion, Shahjehanabad.*

## SCENE I

*Father Busee and Dara are in conversation in Dara's private room. Both are seated on chairs. It is morning.*

*Dara*

I've longed for a pastoral lease,  
Holding a shepherd's crook  
Watching soft, slow-moving fleece,  
Beside a gurgling brook.

*Busee*

The shepherd's crook,  
Its slender hook,  
Are symbols  
That help assemble  
Men's thoughts which stray,  
To the pews to pray.

*[Jester bounds in, breathless*

*Jester*

Sulaiman Shukoh. Sends a message:  
Shuja's doings presage

War. Shuja's proclaimed: *'The King is dead.'*  
Murdered by you, he's said.  
His father's 'slaying' he will avenge.  
Will take his own revenge.  
He's sending forces. Will climb the throne.  
He calls you a trombone.  
Only fit, he says, to blow a trumpet.  
(Also, slave of a strumpet.)  
No one, Shuja says, can try convince  
Him the King lives, no prince  
Anyway. He heads towards Agra  
And dares you, Prince Dara,  
To stop him. Should his revered parent  
Still live, 'Heir Apparent'  
Says he will, in joy, his two feet kiss.  
But on you, he'll jet a . . .

Dara *[Rising in a delirium of anger*

Shuja, you malignant tumour,  
Cyst of rumour,  
Suppurating abscess  
In pig's recess!  
You ingrown, grime-lined toenail,  
You lizard-tail,  
I'll excise you with triple slicers,  
Dice with my incisors.  
Don't you dare, just beware. . .

Busee *[Touching his elbow*

Prince, noble prince, forbear.  
It's not easy  
Under such an unfair  
And sleazy



Attack, to maintain calm  
Yet try this balm:

*[Crossing himself*

You must indeed wield a knife,  
But steadily.  
A surgeon's shake can end life,  
Unwittingly.  
Please go to your father,  
Take his counsel,  
Staying cool rather  
Than thermal.

Christ once swept rogues,  
And money-changers  
Out of a synagogue's  
Foyer. Scavengers  
Must be resolute, not angry.  
Ignore dog-snaps,  
Look confident, not hungry  
For the street's scraps.

*Dara*

*[Regaining his composure  
somewhat*

Shuja's been known for indolence.  
What's new is insolence.  
Let him be a voluptuary,  
Ours is a free country!  
But let him not for a moment presume  
He can assume  
Power through disinformation,  
Character assassination.

I know I shouldn't have lost my temper  
    (Anger's such a tempter!)  
But when I heard that wicked bit  
    About 'slave of strumpet'  
My composure's little ampoule burst  
    And my slanderer I curst.

Even now, when I think ...  
—Jester, get me a drink—  
Of Shuja as he busies,  
My sight blurs, my mind dizzies ...

*[Dara rushes out even before  
Jester can fetch water*

## SCENE II

*In Shah Jehan's apartment. He lies, bolstered by huge cushions on a couch. Dara and Jahanara stand beside him. Sulaiman Shukoh stands to a side.*

*Dara*

I have now seen the entire text.  
    Shuja's dropped his mask.  
Whatever it is that he does next  
    I think I know my task.  
What he's trying to do does not behove  
    A scion of Timur.  
Shuja must be made an example of,  
    An example that'll endure.

    Though you have been unwell,  
He knows that you are much better now

And yet at Rajmahal  
Crowns himself, assembling a force somehow  
Crosses into Bihar.

And ravaging villages down the route,  
Shows his hand from afar:  
'Delhi I'll sieze and on the way, I'll loot.'

An army must be sent at once  
To combat Shuja  
He must not be permitted  
To cross the Ganga.  
He must be turned straight back  
From Darbhanga.

*Shah Jehan*

*[Speaking with difficulty*

Let Shuja's advance be stayed  
And by ...  
(Please do not be dismayed)  
One I  
Love, trust and can command  
To go,  
My grandson Sulaiman  
Shukoh.

*Dara*

*[Somewhat take aback*

You've made me proud—and worried!  
My son is brave.  
He's always been ready to  
Jump into the fray.  
Yet this is sudden. My father,  
Just one thing I'll crave.

Let Sulaiman command a force  
That is strong in men

—Some twenty-two thousand at least—  
With boats to cross the fen  
And Jaipur's Raja Jai Singh to serve  
As his wise guardian.

*Shah Jehan*

All this, please take as done.  
Now godspeed,  
My beloved grandson!  
Mind your meed.

*Sulaiman*

I will leave at once,  
Leave at once, I will;  
I give a fond grandson's  
Word: This rising I will still.

*[Sulaiman bows deeply before  
Shah Jehan and Dara who  
embraces him. Father and son  
leave the room together,  
accompanied by Jahanara. Shah  
Jehan is alone and soliloquizes*

*Shah Jehan*

I must say I like  
His mettle.  
And yet, Allah, I'm  
In a nettle!

Parenthood's strange:  
Shuja has rebelled.

And I can easily gauge  
He must be expelled  
From this town, that village.  
But ought he to be *felled*?

No, I will tell good Jai Singh,  
Go flay  
Shuja's small uprising,  
Don't slay  
The poor, 'dopey princeling!  
I must not delay.

*[Claps to call attendants,  
who rush in. The curtain falls as  
Shah Jehan begins to give them  
instructions*

### SCENE III

*Some days later, in Dara's apartment. Dara, who is in high spirits, and Nadira, are talking. She stands while he is seated at his floor desk. Jester stands, typically, leaning against a wall.*

*Dara*

It has been a signal win,  
A great victory.  
Our valiant son has saved  
India's glory.  
He and Raja Jai Singh have made  
History.

At the head of mail-clad horsemen  
Brave Sulaiman

Surprised Shuja's unvigilant troops  
Which then ran  
For dear life, is grapeshot disarray,  
Blasting Shuja's plan.

Mirza Raja Jai Singh's help  
And guidance  
Have meant a great deal,  
Have done immense  
Good to our cause. He is endowed  
With a sixth sense.

He deserves a *saat-hazari*,  
I'll tell the king.  
A robe, a mansion in Delhi,  
Or some such thing  
That will vouchsafe his family's  
And his well-being.

*Nadira*

I am not a Rajput princess,  
Who only wants her son to *win*.  
I have a mother's heart within,  
Which seeks his good, nothing else.

For me, a son gone to battle,  
'Midst flutt'ring pennants, glinting swords,  
Is still the babe in swaddling clothes  
Clenching his tiny rattle.

I hope he won't take long to come.  
His young wife and children are here,  
Deeply wracked by nervous fear  
Though she wears a smile and seems calm.

Babur's sons have now fought enough.  
Please give yourself a chance to live.  
Forget pride and greed, forgive.  
Tread the smooth road, give up the rough.

*Jester*

Your lady speaks most wisely.  
But who wants wisdom?  
Good sense, too, is miserly  
In this mad fiefdom.

*[Nadira prepares to retire. Jester  
urges her to stay*

If the Begum does not mind  
I've something hard to say—  
To both of you: Please be resigned  
To going either way:  
Success and a joyous return  
For good Prince Sulaiman  
Or—failure and a rude turn  
Of events. That man  
Jai Singh's no sage counsellor.  
He let Shuja escape.  
While your son, a clear victor  
Stood shocked and agape.

*[Dara tries to question Jester  
but he continues regardless*

I have it on good authority:  
The prince was quite matchless  
In courage, tactic, celerity,  
But the Raja, callous—

On purpose! Sulaiman's prize  
Reached him, to be snatched.  
But before he could organize  
Chase, a small plot was hatched.  
Prince, your new Seven Thousand  
Wallah is treachery  
Incarnate. His perfidy'll land  
Your cause on slippery  
Slopes, just you mind! He had been asked  
—Was he not?—to see to't  
What Sulaiman was tasked  
To do, worked? He's done the opposite.

*[Sipihr Shukoh darts in*

*Sipihr*

Our bhishti is just back from court.  
Watering the grass  
Outside the Diwan-i-Khas  
He heard a report.  
It's frightening, Abbajan.  
Crossing the river at  
Akbarpur they now aim Dharmat,  
The hordes from the Deccan.  
And, Abbajan, Gujrat's forces  
Under Uncle Murad  
Have teamed up, and stand guard  
With the Deccan's horses.

*[Dara rises, tensing, like a newly  
stretched bow*



*Dara*

Am I Crown Prince or a slave  
That news of this import  
Should reach me via a bhishti  
Rather than from the Court?  
Intrigue lines every nook and  
Corner of the Red Fort.

*Jester*

*[To himself, in a spotlight*

Now opens the Tale of Treason  
When princes' greed,  
Beyond all reason,  
Outstripping need,  
Will turn brothers into butchers,  
Some into gnomes,  
Make them produce savage ruptures  
Within their own homes.

*Dara*

*[The spotlight shifts to Dara*

I do not quite know  
What this is, though.  
A challenge to be crushed  
With troops rushed  
Or a stupid little attempt  
Meriting mere contempt.  
I cannot believe that Jai Singh  
Has betrayed the cause,  
Has let Shuja take wing,  
Quiet loyalty's laws.  
Or could it be that his gambit  
Was cleared *here?*

Was he *asked* to transit  
Shuja, for fear  
Of Sulaiman's righteous wrath?  
I will never know.  
And now on Narmada's froth  
Comes he deadlier foe.

Aurangzeb and Murad combined  
—Sharp brain upheld by brawn—  
Are more than we had bargained  
For. Shuja has flown,  
While the younger two have junctioned.  
So if Delhi hasn't lost  
Yet, it has not quite functioned  
Either. I must  
Now enter the proceedings  
Myself, not trust  
The court to handle these things.

#### SCENE IV

*Shah Jehan's apartments in Red Fort. He is now able to sit on a large throne-like chair. Dara and Jahanara occupy smaller seats.*

*Shah Jehan*

Ganged up, have they, those two?  
The sly brats.  
Too scared, singly, to face you.  
Sewage rats!

Let Dharmat be their doom,  
Can't they see



I'm alive, my court's in bloom,  
Prosperity  
Rules the land? Let your mailed fist  
Smite their faces  
Give their heads so tight a twist  
Their act collapses.

Let Karim Khan and Jaswant Singh  
Be your generals.  
Let their vim and valour bring  
The minerals  
Of a successful expedition  
To our smeltery  
For a final separation  
Of gold from emery.

*Dara*

Father I must beseech you to bestow  
All I may need to power  
The State's war machine. I cannot go  
Into battle and cower. . . .

*Shah Jehan*

*[Interrupts Dara by clapping his hands for attention. Some half a dozen men, including officials, enter*

Let every courtier,  
Officer of State,  
As may chance to be here  
Hear me ordinate:  
Prince Dara's *mansab* is increased  
By ten thousand *sowar*  
Ten thousand *zat*; through *his* decrees  
Speaks *my* power.

I leave for Agra tomorrow,  
To convalesce.  
Dara's words my thoughts borrow;  
The two coalesce.  
He will now be your Sovereign  
In any affair,  
Whether internal or foreign,  
Everywhere.  
Heed him and him alone,  
Turn to no other.  
After I, to Agra, have gone  
Dara is your ruler.

*[The courtiers bow and withdraw. Dara rises and follows them. Shah Jehan talks to Jahanara*

*Shah Jehan*

I love him most dearly  
But also fear for him.  
His nature is pearly  
White, but with a sharp rim!

As for the other three  
—the world's well aware—  
Shuja's just too carefree,  
Murad not quite 'there'.

While the third, Aurangzeb  
Is, in exact balance,  
At once wily and brave.  
The two spell competence.

And also disaster  
For all his relatives  
(Excepting one sister)  
Who seem alternatives.

I wish he was not brave  
And wily, half and half,  
But brave three-quarters, knave  
One quarter. On behalf  
Of wiliness, I'll say  
A State needs cleverness.  
One like Tavernier  
Could have saved us this mess.

Yet, Aurangzeb's kind of cunning  
Leaves me cold and wondering  
If my kingship and parentage  
Will collapse, a moral wreckage.

Dara is not wily,  
He is God's warrior.  
But with zero savvy  
Still, a foe-harrier.

Dara is impetuous,  
Fighting for good causes,  
But most tempestuous,  
A fire-spewing Moses.

I want him to be King.  
For he's a noble son.  
But I can't help worrying  
He's not the ablest one.

Just see my child, this fate.  
I have a large estate

To leave behind to sons.  
Should I choose the sharper ones  
Or him who is good?  
The answer wears a hood.

*Jahanara*

I know you are for Dara,  
Why then this palaver?  
Aurangzeb's my brother  
Too, but you know him, Father.

*Shah Jehan*

I'll put it this way.  
I want Dara to win.  
Want goodness to hold sway,  
Nadira to be Queen.

And let me be quite frank:  
Aurangzeb is a freak  
(I sometimes wish he drank!)  
The other two, too weak.

But, and there is a but,  
I have a paranoia:  
If the war at Dharmat  
Kills my beloved Dara  
And leaves the other two  
Crippled or crazed for life,  
Who'll rule India, who?  
The sole survivor's *wife*?

*Jahanara*

You can never be sure  
Who'll die, who will endure

In this or that battle.  
But one thing I'll foretell:  
If Aurangzeb succeeds  
At Dharmat, he proceeds  
To Delhi. Not to 'kiss  
Your feet' but establish  
Himself as Emperor,  
Father, your successor  
Even when you're alive!  
And the Court will connive  
With him in this. If only  
You gave Dara free scope, Delhi  
Would be safeguarded. But  
He's restricted; he's undercut.

*Shah Jehan*

*[With some irritation*

Ifs and buts don't make kings;  
Kings make ifs and buts.  
It's their right to shape things  
By promptitude and guts.

I know my duty clear:  
Both Kasim and Jaswant  
Will be told to adhere  
To this line: 'Recalcitrant  
Princes need a lesson.  
Give it loud and clear.  
Yet protect their person  
From gun and rapier.'

As for Dara he must  
Stay here. He must rule  
In my stead and should trust  
My judgment; not be a fool.

## SCENE V

*The Diwan-i-Khas. Dara is seated on a smaller throne beside Shah Jehan's which is empty. Attendance in court is poor. An officer wearing a tilak on his forehead stands near him, depressed.*

Dara [Wringing his hands

I should have gone myself,  
    Directly faced the brunt.  
But deferring to the King  
    Lapsed my own judgment.  
This error will not repeat;  
    I'll now be a combatant.

Flesh out the fiasco for me:  
    Who held the Narmada,  
Who crowned what eminence  
    To halt the invader.  
Did they, to hold one river,  
    Want a whole armada?

*Officer*

Most noble prince, being summer, the river  
    Was fordable and the enemy  
On the other bank, fatigued and in fever.  
    In fact just a part of its army  
Had come up. If we had only crossed the ravine,  
    Victory would have been in our hand.  
Some officers in their artillery opine  
    They were unprepared to fight and  
Feared we would cut them off from the water.  
    But we did not cross the bank to fight.



Had we done so, the resultant encounter  
Would have ended on our side that night.

We gave the enemy a gift of three days' rest  
After which it opened cannon fire  
And moved forward under that cover to wrest  
Its victory. Most noble sire,  
Raja Jaswant Singh showed exceptional mettle,  
Disputing every single inch of ground.  
Eight thousand Rajputs were with him in this battle.  
Almost all of them were slain in that round.  
Kasim Khan turned traitor; he gave no support.  
His crucial division let us down.  
The Khan fled the field, leaving Jaswant to report  
Defeat and turn towards his hometown.

#### *Dara*

Has Kasim Khan shown up somewhere?  
Has he opened his mouth?  
He cannot hope to run away,  
That miserable lout.  
I must get an explanation  
For his strange performance.  
Was it fear—an abomination  
In soldiers—or worse—malevolence?

#### *Officer*

The defeat and carnage were the direct result  
Of advice Delhi gave Kasim Khan.  
He was told to adopt the Jai Singh gestalt.  
There was a clear, though secret, ban  
On taking the battle to conclusions which might  
Injure, much less kill, the two princes.

This restraining order for Kasim Khan sufficed.  
He obeyed with the 'right' devices.  
But Jaswant Singh on being sounded, straight refused.  
Like seed unto a vedic firepit,  
Jaswant and his valiant Rajputs were used.  
As the fire climbed, the skies were lit.  
Full golden grains of Rajput sire and son  
Chanting 'Har, Har' plunged in, turned carbon.  
And all this while, Kasim Khan's men stayed back, tight.  
The ladle pours, but itself stays safe.  
Prince, Kasim Khan's men fed the fire's huge appetite.  
He's home at Agra; Jaswant's a waif.

#### *Dara*

Someone tells me Jaswant's proud queen  
Their fortress doors has barred.  
To him for having survived defeat.  
A Rajput, battle-scarred.  
If vanquished, sands disgraced for life.  
Jaswant has learnt that, hard.

But his valour will be rewarded.  
Homeless wanderers  
Are preferred in Heaven's judging eyes  
To power-panderers  
Or to Delhi's fast growing tribe  
Of trust-squanderers.

But, to turn now, to where action lies.  
I will now to Agra vault,  
And give battle, a battle I will win.  
No one dare Dara halt.  
Dara will smite and dispatch his foes  
Like a thunderbolt.

The King's mind is now distracted,  
A passive canister  
For others' thoughts, both good and treacherous.  
I see one minister  
Urging that diplomatic messages  
Go to Prince Sinister.

I see another pleading with  
Princess Jahanara:  
'*Please suture wounds,*' then going straight to  
Rouse Roshanara:  
'*Now's the time, the ideal time, to cut*  
*Poet-Prince Dara.*'

War-mongers will propose peace, as  
Peace-makers opt for war.  
I will be called a belligerent,  
A man who thirsts for gore.  
They'll say I cry for fraternal blood  
While they '*just knocked at our door*'.  
The King, I know, still hopes against hope  
To turn the princes back,  
He thinks they can be reasoned with,  
Saved from getting the sack.  
He does not see the invaders' game  
Will make India crack.

Rao Chhatrasal and brave Rustam Khan  
Will not to the Chambal go.  
The two will hold in strength the line;  
They will humble the foe  
Even before I have got there,  
Or Sulaiman Shukoh.

Sulaiman's army hastens here  
    To help curb this rebellion.  
A son, a father and grandfather  
    Will together rely on  
Cosmic justice to teach the rebels  
    Their life's biggest lesson.



# ACT FOUR



*Aurangzeb's camp in the woods of Mandu, three days later.*

## SCENE I

*The Viceroy of the Deccan sits at a plain desk in an austere tent. An informer from Delhi who stands near him has just told Aurangzeb of Dara's faith in cosmic justice.*

*Aurangzeb*

Remove the 's' from cosmic,  
And you will Dara mimic.  
Dara is a pygmy,  
A dwarf, if you ask me.

If I had been eldest  
Yet not, alas, the best  
I would have left power  
For a hermit's bower.

Would have let abler men  
Do what's beyond *my* ken.  
Would not have turned jealous  
And let War befall us.

The other two have merit,  
You cannot deny it.  
Shuja as a viceroy  
Holds Bengal like a toy.

Murad, as another,  
Keeps Gujrat in tether.  
As for me, I'm a mere  
God-trusting *fakir*.

Much rather calligraph  
Bind folios in soft calf.  
I would not disappoint  
Adze or nib-point.

My life-style is subdued  
*I'm* not the one to feud:  
I am a man of prayer,  
Of His will, an obeyer.

I cannot speculate  
As Dara can, or meditate.  
I am, as I've told him.  
Just a simple Muslim.

I have no ambition,  
No false sense of mission.  
I would rather sew caps  
Than pore over war maps.

But in this quatrain,  
From self-praise I'll refrain.  
(My vaunted self-restraint  
Is real, not a feint!)

I covet seclusion,  
Dislike all profusion.  
Not for me music, dance  
Rhapsody or romance.

Yet Dara calls me names.  
Says I am playing games.  
Calls me a *namazi*  
And Shuja a *hafizy*.

What, may I ask, is *he*?  
A fluttering pansy.  
A pansy in a crown!  
That man is but a clown.

Tell me, *can* Hindostan  
Be left to such a man?  
Dara's a good wordling,  
*He is not meant to be King.*

I'll leave word-formulae  
To him. I am a lay  
Believer who is pious  
And minds his own business.

But will *he* leave statecraft  
For his true field: wordcraft?  
Of course Dara will not;  
A 'teacher' can't be taught!

If the King were not ill  
I might have remained still.  
But now the die is cast,  
The suspense cannot last.

I have told Prince Murad  
'You're too big for Gujarat;  
Timur's throne awaits you.  
You have skill and sinew.

'After the war's over  
(The King can't recover)  
You—Murad—will be crowned  
While I stay Deccan-bound.

'Meanwhile I go to war,  
For you in Dholpore.  
I'll seal off the Chambal  
And see his ego tumble!'

## SCENE II

*A week later, at the Diwan-i-Am at the Fort, Agra. Shah Jehan has had a setback and is standing with difficulty. His arms rest on Dara's shoulders. The hall is full of ministers, courtiers, attendants. Bernier and Manucci are also present.*

*Shah Jehan*

I feel like some ancient grandsire,

    A *Mahabharat* man

—I can't get his name—Mother didn't tire  
    Of repeating it.

Was it Bhishm, Dhritrashtra, I forget.

    The fact is I am ill.

And deep inside me a hollow gong

    —Tabla struck in the eye—

Goes *dhung, dhung, mridhung!* What's gone wrong?

    What? Nerves, head, heart? I don't know.

My blood congeals, bones sag. I get

    The warning my pulse beat strays.

I send my beloved son to battle

    With whom? Two others sons.

A grandson just returns, whose prattle

    My ears remember.

From where? From another engagement.

    With another son.

As recently as one week ago

    I thought this would avert.

In Delhi I still felt like King, but oh,

    Now I feel like dying.



You rightly counsel restraint.  
I am old and infirm.

My well-beloved and cherished son!  
I hoped to see you king  
Peacefully, without battles lost or won.  
But who can fathom Allah?  
I had also hoped to go forth against  
The two unworthies myself.

I have just one advice to give:  
Prolong the proceedings  
Till Sulaiman returns, so you can weave  
A net of warp and weft  
In which to trap those two rascals  
Unfit to be brothers.  
Trap them son, but . . . those two are uncles  
To your boys, remember.

I won't see one son slay another,  
Uncle behead nephew.  
I would rather that your mother  
Had smothered them at birth. . . .  
What am I saying? I am sorry, son.  
I know I am rambling.

I can see that I now forfeit  
My right of converse.  
Forgive me, Dara. Forgive my bleat.  
But that's what I've become:  
A goat transvestised into a lamb,  
A lamb for the slaughter.

I bid you, Dara, Win This War!  
Not so I can stay King;

So I can stay *sane* and the State, inure,  
Take one hundred thousand horse  
Twenty thousand foot  
Eighty legs of cannon.

*Dara*

Father, as from today,  
I am a combatant.  
Soldiers are not to say  
That they have sentiment.

I proceed to Dholpore  
For to win this battle  
I will trace the spoor  
Of this snake-with-rattle.

I will surely get him,  
Slinking in his outlet.  
I will then de-fang him,  
His venom I'll goblet.

And all this I will do  
Quite emotionlessly  
For passion can undo  
The future of Delhi.

I'm a man of feelings,  
Very strong attachments,  
But hearts need low ceilings  
In soldiers' cantonments.

This I do assure you,  
I go as Timurs go:  
Not just for victory,  
But to make history.

Our lives are a river  
That flows from source to sea.  
Most see it and shiver  
But some others, get busy.

Father, give me blessing,  
Your soldier-son needs it.  
But send me no Jai Singh  
Close on heels, to mess it!

### SCENE III

*A corridor in the The Fort, Agra. Jester stands alone, against  
a wall*

*Jester*

That was Dara, classic.  
Using words like plastic.  
But I know he forced them.  
For form, he composed them.

Composed them in croc-skin  
Cold, scaly, plasticine.  
How can the heart reside,  
In protocol's dead hide?

Take his bit on the river  
And how most men shiver.  
I know what he'd have wished  
To say, but hubris dished:

'Our lives are a river  
That flows from source to sea.  
Some try dam its vigour,  
Others just let it be.

I'm not sure who is right:  
The ones who opt for peace  
Or those who go with might  
To wall up its soft crease.'

*That* is what Dara feels.  
When free, not when he kneels  
And tries form to appease.  
*His* choice? The soft crease!

I'm going to the war  
I am not staying back.  
I've never been before

*[Dara enters, Jester does not  
notice*

In a soldier's shack.  
I want experience  
Of the actual thing  
And perhaps my clairvoyance  
Could help our future king.

*Dara*

Ho, pipsqueak! And, as always,  
*I, my, I!* Look, you just can't

*[Jester gets a start*

Come to the front. And who says  
Armies need a clairvoyant?

But you won't listen. So all right,  
Then, come along.  
But just stay out of sight  
When the fight's on.



## SCENE IV

*Shah Jehan's apartment. He peers through a balcony. The dome of the Taj can be seen framed by it. Jahanara is beside him.*

*Shah Jehan*

There he goes, my noble son.  
In a cloud of dust.  
May he come back after he's won,  
Like a tusker in musth  
But I fear he won't return.

*[Jahanara looks at her father,  
anguished*

At least, not victorious.  
You know of Nur the Taciturn—  
The one in Delhi's mews?—  
While viewing one of the Taj's designs  
Once, I heard Nur mutter  
'Who builds mansions for the dead, consigns  
His sons to the gutter.'

*Jahanara*

As opposed to that, there is this  
Rain of blessings  
Prayers, charms, hosannas,  
Love's outpourings,  
Which have been showered on Dara  
By folk with feelings.  
Simple folk with simple leanings.  
And he carries with him the  
Benediction

Of that great Comforter of Souls  
(My addiction)  
Khwaja Muinuddin Chishti.

## SCENE V

*Roshanara's parlour in the Fort, Agra. The princess is talking to a female attendant.*

*Roshanara*

Ask the eunuch to ride post-haste,  
Overtake the retinue  
And reach Aurangzeb this message:  
'Dara plans to dupe you  
With a seeming halt-and-wait  
By his assorted crew  
Manning Manucci's cannons.

'But his real intention's to  
Send one flying column  
Under a dashing officer  
—Chhatrasal or Rustam—  
To watch your movements right along  
The Chambal variorum.  
And thus prevent your crossing.

'So you must ford the river  
East of where Dara's headed.  
It's lucky the stream is subtle  
And complex its bed.  
Dara also brings new matchlocks  
With (it is said)  
Greater speed of delivery.

'But the most important message  
Is: we are fortunate  
Khalilullah Khan himself  
Paid me a visit.  
Before he left with Dara.  
I'll be brief: *he'll do it.*  
He is Jai Singh and Kasim incarnate.'

## SCENE VI

*Aurangzeb's tent at camp. It is night, past ten. He is reading softly, reverently, from the Holy Qur'an by lamplight. During a pause, a rustle is heard. Aurangzeb continues. It is heard again. He pauses from his reading.*

*Aurangzeb*

What is it this rustle, this vibration,  
This unwelcome insinuation?

*[Turning towards his right*

Ah, a snake outside its radius!  
Scaly, cold and hideous.  
It calls for a quick transition  
From Arrival to Excision.

*[Aurangzeb draws a little sword and with one swing separates the reptile's head from its body. He claps. Attendants rush in and are aghast. Aurangzeb does not speak but with gestures asks them to clear the mess. He then resumes his reading. When it is over, he stops. A messenger enters*

*Messenger*

Most Noble Prince, we have learnt  
Of your swift dispatch of the serpent  
That strayed into this honoured tent.  
More than a snake, to its end, has been sent.  
A message has gone; we've seen an Omen!  
Aurangzeb will be King! Amen.

Only he can rule India, who stays calm.  
India's safe in Aurangzeb's palm.

*Aurangzeb*

My sword is *His* dagger  
I've no right to swagger.

*Messenger*

Our good princess Roshanara  
Has sent me as a signaller.  
Knowing its contents I'll prefer,  
If you permit me to whisper.

*[Whispers into his ears  
Roshanara's information.  
Aurangzeb responds after a  
minute*

*Aurangzeb*

Bless you, Roshanara  
For this sweet cantata.  
I was getting distraught  
About my future fate.  
Reports had come to me  
About the enemy.



'Dara's is a pageant,  
A great war regiment:  
Tuskers from Anuradh  
Stallions from Baghdad.  
Cannons and musketry,  
Masses of cavalry.'

One of my brave Baluch  
Quoted the gunner Manooch:  
'We move like an ocean  
In tremulous motion.  
Dara 'mid his squadron,  
Resplendent like the Sun.

'Shines, a crystal tower  
That brightens by the hour.  
Around him ride Rajput  
Of the highest repute.  
Their tall lances sparkle,  
Their red glances crackle.

'Dara's own elephant  
Is just magnificent!  
Tusks with gold-encrusted  
Blades which can't be rusted.  
That pachyderm, Fath Jang,  
Itself is rippling young.'

All this made me wonder  
If I hadn't made a blunder  
Pitting my resources  
Against Agra's forces.  
I began to miss Jumla,  
And his battle éclat.

Miss him most keenly.  
And with hourly  
News of war imminent  
I turned hesitant  
To pit my small war-skills  
'Gainst Delhi's power mills.

But, denied Mir Jumla  
I've now got Khalilullah!  
He will be at Dara's end,  
My unsuspected agent!  
Nothing can be better  
In war than an abetter.

## SCENE VII

*Samugarh. May 1658. Dara's war-shack. It is situated on a promontory, commanding a view of the battle. Swords and helmets lie about. Jester is its sole occupant. He is watching the proceedings from the shack's opening. The sound of cannon fire is heard intermittently.*

*Jester*

It's started a little too soon,  
Sulaiman is not yet here.  
Dara should've waited till noon.  
Sulaiman is so very near!

Dara's a prisoner today.  
Prisoner of his destiny  
Will it, or will it not permit  
The mystic to match the 'hermit'.

Dara's exposed himself to death.  
He would just not listen.  
Rustam said 'Look they're on the heath,  
We're above—a safe position.

'Logic and practice tell us:  
Be still, like a gecko; don't fuss.  
Reserve your final part  
Till you can up and dart.'

Sage counsel can sound dull.  
More so when cunning's at large.  
Spoke Khalilullah: 'Don't mull  
Over tactics; just charge.'

Now, nothing spurs Dara as much  
As a hint that he has lost touch.  
'To the attack!' he thundered,  
Poor Rustam just surrendered.

Time, I'm sure, will bear me out,  
Khalilullah's a treach'rous rogue.  
No single act can bring a rout  
To Dara as this prologue.

Rustam's back in his division  
(Khalil is in levitation!)  
Dara's now mounted Fath Jang.  
'Jai, jai!' proclaims every tongue.

But in the pit of my stomach  
I have this feeling: Dara's sunk.  
For I can see Khalil slink back,  
And *he* had said 'Don't funk!'

Dara smiles in self-confidence.  
He signals his men: 'Come, sons  
Join me in this victory!'  
Orders drums to sound history.

I notice the foe does not stir.  
He waits for Dara to near,  
Precisely what Rustam said's wise.  
Rustam gave such good advice.

*[Cannonfire is heard*

There! the enemy has fired:  
Cannons and dread musketry.  
Men and tuskers both get mired.  
And shaken is our cavalry.

But Dara smiles again! He waves:  
'Continue the advance!' Rustam raves.  
His men fall. Yet with Chhatrasal  
He groups and rushes to Dara's call.

Now what's Dara trying?  
Like rolled-back seawaves  
He spirals and—comes lashing!  
Great God, the foe caves!

He has rammed into the enemy's face—  
Through darting arrow and flying mace.  
They lie prostrate, stupefied,  
Some, from shame, their face hide.

Dara's broken through their guns  
Ripped their camp, put it to rout.  
See, see how that fellow runs!  
Without doubt, he's won this bout.

Some of his brave soldiers—Daud  
And Firuz Mewati—have proved  
That if your cause is just,  
Your enemy will bite the dust.

Missiles hiss out in greed  
Prince Dara to receive.  
His shield's got filigreed,  
His morion's a sieve.

Is it courage or conviction  
Or just a mental affliction?  
The man's mad, in one sense,  
Madness can twin innocence.

Aurangzeb's 'touched' as well.  
Unmindful of Dara's challenge  
He asks for his ranks to swell,  
To try return the lunge.

But Khalilullah, it is plain,  
Has no desire to be slain.  
He has stayed off the engagement.  
He won't, with Luck, experiment.

Brave Chhatrasal and Rustam  
Tear through enemy barriers  
Such is bravery's custom.  
They are its noble carriers.

I can see Dara greeting them.  
'Well done!' he is telling them.  
They put his hand to their breasts  
As for one moment, Dara rests.

Dara looks composed and ready  
For another joust with death.  
Lord! this tournament is already  
Out of breath.

As Dara's mahout pricks the tusker,  
He misses an arrow by a whisker.  
This battle has no ground logic.  
It proceeds by sheer magic.

They charge again and again  
The Rajputs shout 'mar, mar!  
A speared horse screams in pain.  
'Khuda Hai!' comes from afar.

'Khuda Hai!' Aurangzeb bellows.  
His steed bursts a varicose.  
He now mounts a tusker: 'Forward!  
But it stands rooted, trunk lowered.

Dara's the clear victor,  
A clear victor is he!  
His brother will be taken,  
Taken he surely will be.

But wait . . . Dara pauses. He bends.  
Listens to news someone sends.  
Looks shaken, turns, touches his chest.  
Lord! What is this sudden test?

[A herald rushes into the  
warshack

*Herald*

Even as our prince was winning,  
Traitors in our ranks were plotting

Dreadful murder. It is said.  
Chhatrasal and Rustam are dead.  
Shot by arrows from *our* side.  
Now where will loyalty hide?

*[He leaves and Jester resumes  
his observation*

*Jester*

If Dara breaks now, it's over.  
But . . . he erupts! His elephant  
And he are a ball of fire!  
They singe the enemy's front.

They hurtle to its left flank.  
Which at once goes blank.  
They turn now towards the right  
To take on Murad's dread might.

Murad too is elephant-borne.  
His howdah's now a porcupine:  
Arrows its four sides adorn.  
Murad gives and takes rapine.

Elephant faces elephant:  
This deadly, that defiant.  
Brother faces brother;  
Both hiss at the other.

They are far, I can't see faces.  
But I think as Dara raises  
His spear, Murad grimaces.  
Does he say: 'My eyesight glazes.

'Is that Dara who embraces?  
Dara can melt in love's mazes.  
But of course, I am dreaming.  
Dara's spear tip is gleaming!

But what's this now? Khalilullah!  
Whispering to Dara? Dara's quiet.  
Hey! He dismounts! Allah!  
The howdah's empty. There's a . . . riot!

'Where is Dara? Dara's gone!  
His soldiers cry forlorn.  
The mahout helps clear the doubt  
'There he is!' But now it's a rout.

Anarchy has taken over.  
No one listens, no one cares  
The traitors are in clover.  
And how well rumour fares!

When Murad is all but finished  
Gullible Dara's vanished!  
Why did he leave the elephant?  
His enemy is triumphant!

Dara's men wail, 'He's killed!  
They scatter in confusion.  
Dara sees he has been diddled;  
Regrouping's now out of question.

Through my tears I see him ask  
'Where is that bloody a . . . ?'  
Where *but?* Dara asks too late.  
Khalilullah's well past the gate.

With Five Thousand Horse (his strength)  
He's gone over—he's bolted—



To Aurangzeb; he's done the length.  
He's jumped, pole-vaulted!

Not *one* of his men got a scratch,  
Not one! Rustam is a red patch,  
Chhatrasal, fallen dead.  
On both the fleeing forces tread.

Dara runs from someone crying  
For water to another  
Reduced to a stump, dying  
With a soundless moan, 'Mother!'

Dara darts from slain horse to soldier.  
He touches one, shakes the other.  
And over corpses, leaping,  
He finds young Sipihir weeping.

Sipihir was in command himself,  
I'd seen him brave, confident  
Till his division rushed to help  
His father, when it all *went!*

Samugarh will mark a turn,  
From which Dara will not return.  
Why did it have to end thus?  
Busee! Cut your cant on Jesus!

Acharj! Drop your drip on dharmal  
Dara was on goodness' side.  
He had impeccable *karma*.  
Dara's been taken for a ride.

His men and faith lie slain here.  
Tell me, Lord, that art Supreme  
Wilt thou help Dara clear  
The debris of his dream?

## SCENE VIII

*Three kos from Samugarh, on the route to Agra, stands a shady tree. Dara arrives under its canopy with some half a dozen attendants. They have dismounted, earlier, from their horses.*

*Dara*

*[Taking off his helmet and sitting down beneath the tree*

Is this for what Hind  
Has been destined?

*[Distant kettledrums of victory, sounded by the Aurangzeb-Murad forces are heard. Sipihir lies down beside Dara, placing his head on his father's lap*

*Sipihir*

I can't understand this.  
Abbajan, I can't stand this.

*Dara*

Nor, son, can I.  
An evil eye,  
Perhaps,  
Traps  
Us.

*[The boy closes his eyes. Dara strokes his head*

Traps  
Us, perhaps . . .  
A very evil eye.  
Neither you, son, nor I  
Can understand  
This, or stand  
Here . . .  
Sipihhr . . .  
Sipihhr sleeps  
And in his slumber, weeps.  
His grandfather paces forlorn  
Between empty hall and a vacant throne.  
Is it true, Dara, that you've been routed?  
Your victory had not been doubted!  
The King wanders  
And ponders  
The reason:  
Treason.

### SCENE IX

*Dara's apartment at the Fort, Agra. It is nearly midnight. Dara has just about managed to return from Samugarh with his personal guards. He leans on a table, talking to Nadira.*

I can't bring myself to face the King.  
I don't know how I fell in the ring.

How can I tell him I was betrayed.  
By a trick Aurangzeb played.

He will say, rightly too, a soldier  
Ought to be an integer.

Ought to be able to play a role  
That's not split up but whole.

I should not have been just audacious  
But sly and suspicious.

For every soldier deployed  
A spy too I should have employed.

For every volley of cannon fired,  
I should have had a rumour sired.

In the fabled *Mahabharat* war,  
Truth lied to switch the score.

'*Ashvattham is dead!*' the message went  
When Bhim slew the namesake elephant.

'Ashvattham, the warrior, was prized.  
Great Dron the father stood, paralysed.

Dron had arched his bow when guile  
Neutered the projectile.

If the righteous Pandav could lie  
Why should mundane Dara not try?

In war, manners are not a good creed.  
You must sow division's seed.

Lies punctuate war's grammar;  
They put truth in inverted commas.

Perfidy is the steaming kiln of tricks  
That provides War Monument its bricks.

Father, with pain etched on his brow,  
Will rail at me for my poor knowhow:

*'You were meant to snatch your victory,  
Not go down in Failure's history.*

*'Snatch it by leaning where quick wit leans,  
Not bothering over ends and means.*

*'Gone is my dream, gone your enterprise.  
Gone your 'ilahi; shattered, hope lies.'*

*I will not know what response to make.  
No explanation his thirst can slake.*

*'Khalilullahs will manipulate  
Don't decry them, rather, emulate!*

*'He asked you to quit the howdah  
Ostensibly to dodge gunpowder.*

*'His true aim was, of course, different  
In wanting you off the elephant.*

*'A howdah without an occupant  
Like a necklace without its pendant,*

*'Turns all individual heroes  
Into just as many zeros.*

*'You're seated now, strong, brave, Titanic,  
And now, gone! There is instant panic!*

*'He did his duty as per his lights.  
Did you have to go by Jesus Christ's?'*

*Father will twit me with questions.  
Fling at me countless aspersions.*

*I cannot and will not so submit  
To probings which don't God admit.*

*I go now, princess mine, not vowing  
Triumph—that's pride—but, still, unbowing.*

Unbowing to strength and stealth alike.  
I have no compromises to strike.

I will leave before dawn has broken,  
Will go before the thrush has spoken.

There is no time for me to squander.  
I will, for quite some time now, wander.

My flight will not be for Delhi's throne  
But for avenging Rustam's moan.

I will avenge the brave Chhattrasal  
Who has joined his head to the *Harmal*.

My fight will not be just blood-for-blood,  
That's orthodox. *I will be a flood.*

I will treason's fortress inundate.  
Honour my slaughtered soldiers' mandate.

*Nadira*

I am going with you.  
I know nothing of blood,  
—And do not see any flood—  
But I'm going with you.

*Dara*

You are hardly strong enough!  
My home will be a wild course.  
My plate, my palm; my glass the trough  
I'll be sharing with my horse.  
Princess Jahanara will  
Take care of you and Sipihir,  
Till Sulaiman returns. Still. . . .  
If you are bent, so be it.

# ACT FIVE



*The routes along which Dara moves, with Nadira, and a progressively diminishing force.*

## SCENE I

*The Red Fort, Delhi. Dara is in the Diwan-i-Khas which is empty, except for Sipahr Shukoh, Jester and about three or four officers. Nadira sits in the ladies' alcove. First Herald enters and addresses Dara who is seated on his smaller throne.*

*First Herald*

My Lord, Agra suffers collapse.  
Prince Aurangzeb now has the Fort  
And our King is in prolapse.  
This is the distressing report.

*Dara* [Stung by the news, he stands up

O, that I should be here  
In Delhi's safety  
When Father, you're a prisoner  
Of Fate's cruelty.  
I will yet play a role, Father,  
I'll defy this travesty.  
I know for sure that Aurangzeb  
(That snake 'mid vermicelli!)

To proclaim himself Badshah  
Will now turn to Delhi.  
But he won't find me here  
Though search he every alley.

## SCENE II

*That night at a rear gate of the Red Fort, Dara talks to First Herald.*

*Dara*

Good Herald, take this message  
To Prince Sulaiman Shukoh:  
I fly to Punjab, with his mother,  
Prince Sipihr and retinue.  
He must join me there very quickly  
And let Prince Shuja go.

*First Herald*

I curse fate that I should say farewell  
Thus, to my noble lord.  
But worse has overtaken Second Herald:  
He fell to the enemy's sword  
At Agra Fort three black nights ago  
While fighting the horde.

The good seem to be dying out,  
While the bad go to town.  
Yet lord, surely, it cannot be that  
Destiny's a let-down.  
If you do not succeed, my prince,  
In the Jumna I'll drown.

But consider this: You and Prince Shuja  
In league in the East;



Punjab and Kabul unsubdued, Golconda  
Without its beast  
(Jumla will move north), Jaswant Singh  
Angry, to say the least.

This, with Prince Murad's disenchantment  
And Prince Sulaiman beckoned,  
Still constitute a formidable force  
Prince Aurangzeb's not reckoned.  
The cause is not hopeless, though we cannot  
Rest; not for one single second.

*Dara*

I thank you truly for your thought,  
The sweeter for being unsought.

### SCENE III

*A spot on the eastern bank of the river Beas. It is evening.  
Dara, Sipih, Jester, Daud Khan and three soldiers are seated.  
Nadira is reclining, propped up by Sipih.*

*Dara*

I'd hoped Shuja would rise in Bihar,  
Jaswant in Rajasthan,  
So Aurangzeb can get off our trail  
And we save Hindostan.

*Daud Khan*

The Prince yields too quickly to despair  
The Qur'an holds despair infidel.  
There's time yet our future to repair  
And break treason's foul citadel.

## SCENE IV

*Multan. Dara speaks to soldiers who want to desert him.*

*Dara*

Are you fighters or freebooters?  
Have you no loyalty?  
Soldiers who flee from their armies  
Must face a penalty:  
A loss, for all time to come, of  
Their credibility.

*A Soldier*

That word's too big for me,  
My good Prince.  
But I get the message.  
Eloquence  
Is not needed to put me  
In my place.

You are entitled, Prince, to scold us,  
You have suffered.  
And we are grateful to you for all  
You've offered.  
You've been kinder than many who are  
More coffered.

But a soldier only speaks soldier;  
I'll be plain.  
In battle, we'll face most dreaded risks  
With disdain.  
But Prince! We can't for ever follow your  
Luckless train.



## SCENE V

*Dara's reduced camp on the right bank of the river Indus.  
Daud Khan and Jester stand beside him.*

*Dara*

So Murad, you said, is now taken prisoner,  
The poor sodden fool!  
By flattery beguiled, by temptations inveigled.  
'Not I, Murad will rule,'  
Protested Aurangzeb: the 'hermit', Aurangzeb,  
'I'm just his vestibule.'

Aurangzeb has used him, ambition has seduced him.  
By a metastasis,  
Where Murad would have sat, Aurangzeb is seated.  
The two brothers' axis  
Proceeds unerringly now to our  
Dynasty's catharsis.

*Jester*

*[To himself, in a spotlight*

Murad's in the cooler,  
Aurangzeb's ruler.  
Shuja on the run,  
Heightens Aurangzeb's fun.  
And as for Dara  
—Our solfatara—  
His occupation  
Now is air emission.

## SCENE VI

*Sirohi, near Ajmer. In a small, shack-like tent, Dara is dictating a letter slowly to Jester, addressed to the ruler of Mewar, the senior Rajput prince.*

*Dara*

*Begin by saying, 'Hail, Maharana Raj Singh,  
You are, verily, the Sun of the Hindu race.  
I recall, with great pleasure, our last meeting  
When, thanks to the late vizier, you had to face  
Impending ruin. It was my great privilege  
To intercede in the case and see justice done.'  
Your Highness is aware that our King and liege  
Has been held captive after the usurpation  
Of his throne. Hundreds upon hundreds of Rajputs  
Pathans, Hindus and Muslims have been slaughtered  
By the upstart prince who, now in Delhi, bruits  
Unqualified triumph. Some of us are quartered  
In your territories. We entrust our honour  
To your keeping and come as guests of Rajasthan.  
You're head of this vast tract, I am in a corner.  
I seek your help and that of the whole Rajput clan  
To liberate our great King, restore his throne.  
My specific plea is for Two Thousand Horse  
With which to help the King, harkening to his groan.  
I trust on you alone; I have no other source.'*

*Jester*

What about the family matter?  
It's lost in political chatter.

Dara

Add this as a postscript:  
*'My wife is indisposed.  
I might be, thus, adrift  
For days: she must repose.  
Can your gracious Ajmer  
Be home away from home  
For her, showing the care  
I cannot, since I roam?'*

## SCENE VII

*Two days later, at the same venue. A rather stiff messenger of the Maharana is standing near Dara. Daud and Jester stand a little apart.*

*Messenger*

His Royal Highness, the Maharana  
Sri Raj Singhji, Pride of Rajputana,  
Has commanded me to convey regards  
To Prince Dara. The Maharana guards,  
He says, the fortunes of a mighty race  
By being its protective carapace.  
Joining Prince Dara in his enterprise  
Could his whole community, jeopardize.

*[He leaves with a nominal bow*

Dara

A new principle I now propound;  
As Dara's law to be renowned:  
*Mistrust The Person You Rescue,  
He Will Be The First to Ditch You.*

## SCENE VIII

*The following week, March 14, 1659, at Deorai, just south of Ajmer. Jester, as at Samugarh, is in Dara's war shack. A battle is on between Dara's rudimentary force and Aurangzeb's army. Jester records its progress.*

*Jester*

Aurangzeb has chased him  
To Mewar's outer rim.  
Dara is on the mat  
For yet another combat.

Shunned by every Rajput,  
Dara's tried like Canute  
To wish war-waves away.  
They return, anyway.

But this one wave he'll fight,  
Dispute his brother's might.  
Dara stands on one hill  
To baulk Aurangzeb's will.

Flushed with his victories  
Over 'refractories',  
Aurangzeb also stands  
Upon a prominence.

Dara's soldiers, though few,  
Are nonetheless of his hue:  
Audacious, brave and bold,  
They dare Aurangzeb's hold.

Ahmedabad's Shah Nawaz  
Able, gregarious  
Has joined Dara with guns,  
Large, crackling cannons.

But Dara's out-martialled,  
He's out-generalled.  
Aurangzeb's massed forces  
Can mark Dara's solstice.

Brother sees his brother,  
Sons of the same mother,  
At his own antiphon,  
One shrill, one baritone.

They stand silhouetted,  
Each to each rivetted.  
Who'll fire the first shot,  
The tension will unclot.

*[A cannon is fired*

There, it goes with a boom!  
Dara's won elbowroom.  
His horsemen now descend  
On Aurangzeb's hill end.

Sulaiman's erstwhile 'guide'  
Is at Aurangzeb's side:  
Mirza Raja Jai Singh—  
That wound without dressing.

His sight ignites Dara:  
'You bastard let-downer!  
Killer of my son's pride  
I'll rip your turncoat hide.'

But Dara this time round  
Wishes to be more sound  
In the style of his fight.  
He will stay out of sight.

He monitors each move  
From a cautious remove.  
But this can lower, snarl,  
His men's battle morale.

But what's that commotion?  
A whole hill's in motion.  
Dara's men rush forward—  
To be overpowered.

They've zoomed into a spot  
Where Shah Nawaz, I thought,  
Was in command.  
But Death is a gourmand.

It's picked brave Shah Nawaz,  
Shattered the top brass  
Of Dara's small army.  
It has sided the enemy.

'Fire!' Dara bellows.  
'Jai Singh an answer owes,  
To Sulaiman Shukoh,  
And Nawaz, now no more.'

*Plonk!* They shoot. *Plonk, plonk, plonk.*  
Dara wonders 'What is wrong?'  
There's silence in the ranks.  
The guns have fired blanks.

'*Bl . . . blanks?* But how, why?'  
'Don't talk,' they say, 'just fly.'  
Aurangzeb's forces climb.  
They've won an ally: Time.



It's getting to be night.  
Dara's in the twilight.  
The Sun, red, luminous  
Lends Dara a nimbus.

But against the fire-disc  
Dara runs a risk.  
He's seen, as he tenses,  
Through Aurangzeb's lenses.

'For God's sake, run,' he's told  
'You'd be silly, not bold  
If you just stand and wait  
To meet Nawaz's fate.'

Dara knows its over.  
Deorai. Samugarh.  
Sipihir and good Daud  
Point at deserters, queued.

'We're not superhuman,'  
They say. 'We've got children.  
Some risks we'll surely take  
But suicide's a mistake.'

At Samugarh traitors,  
Here infiltrators,  
Have dashed Dara's chances.  
Aurangzeb now advances.

Dara has been taken,  
In his trust mistaken.  
His highly trained gunmen  
Had, in their ranks, villains.

Too easily suborned  
These trust-betrayers pawned  
Their office and their ranks,  
Switched cannonballs with blanks.

They now cheer, wildly;  
Aurangzeb smiles, mildly.  
'Wasn't that *too* easy?'  
Jai Singh nods. (He's wheezy.)

I am just putting words  
To faces and gestures  
But cannot be far wrong:  
Dara's sold for a song.

He leans on a large rock,  
In a state of shock  
Not known to him before.  
'Were they *duds*? Are you sure?'

## SCENE IX

*Disappointed and betrayed in Rajasthan, Dara lurches further east. Nadira is grievously ill. Bernier chances upon the benighted caravan on a highway. He examines her and reports to Dara, somewhere along the route.*

*Bernier*

Time runs out for her now, I fear.  
Her end, with each breath, draws near.  
She has will-power, in plenty,  
But even that's a futility  
In circumstances like the present,  
Prince, a mishap I can't now prevent.

*Dara*

I have this satisfaction, good friend,  
That towards this very bitter end  
The ailment was studied by your eyes.  
I know you are frank, you are wise.  
Know, also, that Fate is merciless;  
It is shredding me with a cutlass.  
There is, for Nadira, no hope.  
But why was it silent, her horoscope?

*Bernier*

I do not know of a sorrier  
Tale of swindling than Deorai.

*Dara*

After the 'rout by duds', worse followed.  
Infiltrators did not spare my stores.  
My wagons with treasure had billowed.  
These were plundered, left with but their doors.  
Protectors turned marauders; guards, thieves,  
Having looted their fill, they scampered.  
Nadira said, 'I have your album's leaves,  
They're with me; can never be tampered:  
A treasure no one can take from us.'  
That placed a poultice on my great ache.  
I saw that man's truest possession's  
Love and its small tokens; the rest's fake.

## SCENE X

*Dara's rump now staggers towards Gujarat. The party is waylaid by a robber, Kanhoji.*

*Kanhoji*

*[Brandishing a sword, challenges  
Dara who rests on a large rock*

Halt! Quietly pass up all you've got;  
Koli robbers for compliance, wait not.

*Dara*

*[Smiling, after an initial shock*

A robber, are you? At least you're honest!  
Clean robbery such as yours, is best.  
I've been robbed already, robbed spotless clean.  
My caravan yonder, too, has been.

*Kanhoji*

I saw it parked there, saw it silent;  
Wondered what its quiet meant.  
But tell me first, who or what you are.  
You are unusual. I see, by far.  
A nobleman fallen on bad days.  
A prince, perhaps, repelled by the world's ways?

*Dara*

Why, you are no robber, but fortuneist!  
As for me, you're right, I've been through a twist.

*Kanhoji*

You aren't Prince Dara by any chance,  
Are you? His news precedes his advance.

*Dara*

If indeed, I were he,  
What would your reaction be?

*Kanhoji*

I would tell him, robbers can be gentlemen  
And 'gentlemen', robbers; a court's no heaven.  
I would tell him, now a refugee,  
'Fear not. I *will* pilot thee'.

*Dara*

Dara, I am, my noble friend,  
Pilot me to this desert's end.

## SCENE XI

*Kanhoji escorts Dara and his small party to Cutch, from where Dara crosses over to the borders of Afghanistan, seeking both refuge and allies. He camps near Dadar, Malik Jirwan Khan's sief, with Nadira who is now sinking, Sipih, Jester and a few faithfuls. A vaidya and hakim are attending on her. Dara is in his tent with Jester.*

*Dara*

If only Manucci had been there,  
No gunman would have dared betray  
His office or dare insinuate  
Blanks into our side to create....

*[A soldier enters, quaking*

*Soldier*

My lord, my prince, forgive me; I wish I had fallen dead  
At Samugarh or Deorai, bathed in battle red

Than that I should be chosen to give this news: She is  
gone  
Our noble princess, India's queen-to-be is now gone.

*[Dara freezes as Jester breaks into sobs*

*Dara*

*[Forcing each word out*

I was dreading this moment; I had seen it coming, though.  
Closer by the minute, a many-bladed dart.  
It has got me now; cut me into a hundred bits.  
Each too stunned to fall, too weak to stay apart.  
I have to take but one step and I will break into shards:  
Husband, prince; lover, soldier; one part head, one  
heart.

I would that you did not stand there where you do, to  
speak thus.  
But you do. I see your news is very real.  
Cold and hard as the mail you wear; curved and sharp as  
the sword  
You bear. I wish you had the power to heal  
The wound you have caused on my heart, my soul, my  
whole being.  
Fortune has orphaned me. Now this, my fate does  
seal.

*[The vaidyas and hakim enter, hesitantly*

Come, gentle physicians. I have the news. She is gone.  
My Nadira is gone to her rest. Gone from this mad  
world.  
You did your utmost, you both did, as did Bernier,  
earlier.  
But she was past potions, herbs. Her flag she had  
furled.

What could have saved her, tell me, when the Fates are  
against me?

She's dead, Nadira is. Into her grave, she's curled.

And yet I never thought she could die. I thought her  
deathless.

But then which thought of mine has ever proved  
true?

Damned fool, Dara! Damned fool to have thought Nadira  
could

Survive so many draughts of my life's bitter brew.

My life's been that of a stag hounded by sharp-toothed  
cheetahs

Up creeks, down ravines, deserts and forests, through.

Zigzagging through thorns and thickets, across oceans of  
sand,

Was I not mad, tell me, to bring with me my doe?

Luckless fate has dug its fang on her ere it bears me  
down;

Dug its fang and sucks away her life so . . .

'Sucks?' I have my tenses wrong, I see. It's over, I know.

I see your thoughts, good void. 'He's unhinged, poor  
fellow.'

But, of course! I should be, even if I am not. Unhinged  
From a throne, from home, from friends, why, from  
Luck!

I was thought unhinged at the best of times. In court,  
wily

Sadullah said as much of me. Now *he* had pluck.

Unhinged, he said. He's mental, not just temperamental.

He covered my reputation with unhinged muck.



But wait, do I dwell too much on myself? I do, always.  
'Your thoughts beguile you, my prince,' Nadira said,  
too.

'Your thoughts are like peacocks. They come, preen,  
unfurl their plumes  
And dazzle you.' So they do, I owned, so they do.  
'But then they immobilize you, make you their prisoner,'  
She protested. This took place at Fatehpur.

It was evening, the zephyr was abroad. Her garment  
billowed,  
Her earrings tinkled. I said to her: 'Princess mine,  
My would-be queen, if my thoughts, you say, like a  
peacock prance  
Be my mate, and with me dance tonight, princess  
mine;

Let us to the riverbed go, a Moghul belle and beau;  
Let us dance by the Jamna tonight, princess mine!

She held as her true ideal, the noble Khadijah  
Our Holy Prophet's faithful and loving wife  
Who gave the Prophet support during his despondency  
And when, as Ibn Ishaq tells us, his meed was strife.  
Khadijah was God's instrument to comfort the Prophet  
When he faced the scorn of men as, indeed, of life.

*[Jester breaks down*

Well you might sob, Jester; you more than others. She's  
gone.

It's you who conveyed her from city to camp,  
Then from camp to camp, camp to hideout to hideout,  
Under the fire-pouring sun (fools call it 'Heaven's  
Lamp'),

Which maddened our frothing horses, gladdened our  
gabled foes.



It's you who helped her on disappointment's steep  
ramp.

Jester, yesterday, with two other horsemen rode off  
Saying, 'I'll get a hakim.' He knows my thinking  
And so added, 'A baid as well; somehow I will get them.'  
Three dust-trails rose in their tracks, not to my  
liking.

They formed themselves into three gnome-like shapes:  
Shuja, Murad  
And Aurangzeb, who now is India's King.

*Vaidya*

It's our prayer  
*You'll* be our saviour.

*Dara*

Not any more,  
It's all over.

*Hakim*

Your noble son, Prince Sipahr, awaits you.  
He hasn't moved from where his mother lies.  
He's very quiet as he sits askew,  
By her side. One hand he's placed on her eyes,  
The other he's cupped into hers; his warm,  
Hers cold; his red, hers marble. They are one  
Become, like statues that come from Rome  
Of lifeless Christ and Mary. Except now it's *her* turn.

*Dara*

Take me to them, my friends.  
All my life's meaning, ends.

## SCENE XII

*Inside Nadira's tent. Her bed is screened from view. Sipihr emerges from there, as Dara enters accompanied by others.*

*Sipihr*

So it's all over, Father; she sleeps.  
That last hour was Allah's pure gift.  
No one, at such a going, weeps.  
Her eyes were closed, though her hand could lift.

'*My journey's over, my son,*' she said,  
Touching my fingers with gentle strength.  
'*But yours and your brother's lie ahead.*'  
I forbade her from speaking any length,  
Much less words like those. But it was not  
Mother speaking, it was a phantom.  
She seemed of skies, not of earth, begot.  
One for whom the firmament was home.

'*It's time to go,*' she turned and whispered,  
'*Angels call me; they sing some strange text.*  
*Their voices seem quite far and dispersed*  
*One moment; as close as yours, the next.*  
'*My mind sees all my past,*' she went on,  
'*In one swift flash: my birth, youth,*  
*Nuptials, motherhood, home and mansion,*  
*Strife, battles, escape, exile—Life's truth.*  
*I see all this from yon high mountain.*  
*The music, son, is becoming loud.*  
*I can see the fall of the curtain,*  
*The readying of a purple shroud.*  
*The music seems, quite strangely, white.*  
*Odd, isn't it, for sound to show hues?*

*And yet it's so: symphonies seem bright.  
Colour every single wound, imbues.'*

Then she said, 'There's a favour to ask:  
Your gentle sisters will need support.  
You cannot fail me in this task,  
Else they will lose faith in life's purport.  
Promise me, you won't neglect them;  
Our system does; it relegates us  
-Women—to the role of garment's hem,  
Folded, sewn-up, but continuous.  
Keeping mankind's frayed edges rolled  
With contrivance's needle and thread.'

I promised her that I would hold  
My sisters' hands in mine, till they wed.

'Let me touch your head, son,' she then said,  
Moving her hand towards me. 'Ah, there!  
I can hear coming from your head,  
In the clearest tones, a prayer!'

I broke down and said I will fetch you,  
But she said I should wait. 'He cannot  
Bear to see me go; you see we grew  
Together. We've formed a tender knot.'

[*Sipih* is overcome

Hakim

I asked the princess if she had instructions.  
She opened her eyes, looked at me and said, 'Yes.  
You must not think I have pretensions  
But, you see, I have never been homeless  
Before. I die now in a wasteland,  
A fugitive. What request can I make

*Save this: inter me in Hindostan,  
Beside a tranquil, lotus-bearing lake.'*

*Sipih*

She then closed her eyes and intoned, ever so soft,  
'*Alhamdu li'lahe Rab'ilalamin.*' She had Will.  
I wept in her hands, which had dried my tears so oft.  
When I lifted my head next moment, all was still.

*Dara*

Still. All is still. Still this tent,  
This night. Still my love, my life.

[*Moving towards Nadira's body*

And still I live, breathe, grow—why?  
What a word! *Why*. Double you, aitch, vye.  
There is more, much more, in that word's  
Space than in all the world's  
Vocabularies put together: *Why*.  
Ask a pandit, mullah, pir, padre  
Or fakir: *Why*, why all this, this birth  
This death, this day, this night, this earth,  
Sky, why you and me, why *Creation*?

They'll look at you with condescension:  
'The man's mad: means well, poor fellow,  
Give him a few years, he'll mellow.'  
O Fates, why do you make and break,  
What pleasure, in murder, do you take?  
No artist does that to his work, unless  
It be flawed. Nadira, were you not flawless?

# ACT SIX



*At Malik Jirwan's headquarters. Dara, coming to terms with his isolation, accepts an offer from the man who owes the prince his life.*

## SCENE I

*Dara's soldiers are assembled under a tree. He addresses them, standing on a raised platform. He has aged almost overnight.*

*Dara*

Sons, you have a free choice: Either with me to turn  
Further westward to Persia for help or return  
To your homes and hearths in beloved Hindostan  
—Something which I will, most readily, understand.

*A Soldier*

Prince, do not think we are in a huff,  
But we have had just about enough.

*Other Soldiers*

Yes, enough  
Is enough.

*First Soldier*

Yet we sure wish you every good luck, prince.  
Take us back, when you return, into your service.



*Other Soldier*

Yes, we will join your service,  
If—when—you are back, good prince.

*Dara*

We've broken bread together,  
Drunk water from the same cup.  
You have called me 'Father'.  
But now my time is up.

Each soldier's a Sipih  
To me, I would you know.  
Sipih a plain soldier,  
Though he be a Shukoh.

Dynasties are eyesores  
Unless they have merit.  
Thrones must be deserved; crowns  
Are not hand-me-downs.

You've all done me proud,  
In every single fight.  
I will proclaim this loud:  
You took on treason's might.

Now, as you return home,  
Say this to those you meet:  
Dara will never roam  
Too far from Timur's seat.

*Soldiers*

Dara Shukoh Zindabad!  
Aurangzeb Murdabad!



*Dara*

Don't murdabad my brother please.  
Don't wish Aurangzeb's decease.  
He may be a usurper,  
But he's still my blood-brother.  
Besides, he has not got me yet  
And so you'd better save your bet!  
Malik Jiwan Khan here  
Is a good old friend.  
Some time back he came near  
Death—a most undeserved end.  
Allah made me play a role  
Although you might think this droll,  
It's titled: 'Elephant's Tail'  
I will be his guest awhile  
Here under his coolant roof  
And plan my next fugitive mile.  
Godspeed you, sons, on a fast hoof.

*[The soldiers leave, saluting  
Dara. Many touch his feet*

*Malik Jiwan*

Come in, my prince, into my fort  
So some mattes we can sort. . . .

*[Jiwan conducts Dara, Sipahr,  
Daud and Jester towards the  
building. As they are about to  
enter, ten soldiers of Jiwan's rush  
out and overpower Dara and the  
others*

*Dara*

Rascals! What are you trying?  
Don't you dare touch me you knaves!

*[Looks at Jiwan who merely smiles*

Jiwan, is this your doing?  
Is this how a host behaves?

*Sipih*

*[Resisting with all his might*

You filthy curs,  
You bloodsuckers,  
Keep your hands off  
You dirty sons of. . .

*[A soldier pinions Sipih and  
ties his hands behind his back*

*Jiwan*

Fasten them tight;  
To each other,  
Prince, son, soldier—  
And that sprite.

To Delhi they will go  
And face the Emperor.

*Dara*

And *you!* You will face your Maker!  
You faith-forsaker  
You perfidious plotter,  
You maggot-infested rotter!  
Finish, finish, ungrateful wretch,



Finish, my life's luckless stretch.  
We are victims, now immune,  
To the blows of an evil fortune  
And a brother's unjust passion.  
Yet I'll make this admission:  
If I now merit death  
It is only for my faith  
In the likes of Malik Jiwan  
Who have my carriage driven  
Straight, to the rim of my grave.

But remember: My son, brave,  
Strong, has had his hands tied  
Behind his back; no one's tried  
Such an outrage on royal blood  
Before. *Untie his hands, you clod!*

*[Jiwan, after a moment's doubt,  
gestures to his men to unfasten  
Sipihr's hands*

## SCENE II

*Dara and Sipihr have been brought to Delhi by Jiwan in fetters. They are ordered by Aurangzeb to be lodged in the servants quarters of a mansion at Shahjehanabad, under the wickedly watchful eye of Nazar Beg, a trusted slave of the new king. Nazar Beg has an audience with Aurangzeb, in the Diwan-i-Khas. Aurangzeb sits on Shah Jehan's throne. Dara's seat has been removed.*

*Aurangzeb*

Tell me: how do the 'princes' fare;  
Do they talk . . . or sit and stare?

*Nazar Beg*

Wildcats, the princes sometimes scream  
But mostly, Lord, they daydream.

*Aurangzeb*

'Daydream?' you disgraceful wretch!  
To dream they must be well indeed,  
Well-fed, well-slept, free to stretch  
Their limbs and minds in good meed.

*Nazar Beg*

[*Quailing*

Infidel father and insolent son  
Fettered now have furl'd their pride  
And in a rude stone dungeon  
Like caged panthers curl and hide.  
Lord of the Earth! Pray tell your slave  
(Who kisses the dust your slippers tread)  
Should their vault's dim architrave  
Bats aside, hold greater dread?  
Fanged millipedes I could release  
Or taut-tailed scorpions, into that cell,  
Tie the twosome to ant-crawling trees  
And give them a foretaste of hell.

*Aurangzeb*

The Emperor's word gives contours;  
It's you who must fill in the shades.  
If but sharp minds, not senile boors  
Comprised this 'Court of Pearls and Jades'  
Would all my time on plans be spent  
While the public's spleen on me is vent?  
That's all I need say in firman!  
So on with it. . . . But just a moment.

Tell the diligent Jiwan Khan  
To take the infidels on elephant  
Back, through every street and twisting gully  
So to instruct the people of Delhi.

[Nazar Beg withdraws

### SCENE III

*August 29, 1659, Chandni Chowk, Delhi's main market centre. It is crowded with the city's anguished residents, rich and poor, men and women. Father Busee, Manucci and Bernier stand on a shop's balcony. They are watching Dara and Sipahr being paraded through the city by Malik Jiwan Khan, as Aurangzeb has ordered, on the back of a female elephant made repulsive by a coat of slime. Women's wails and the sound of horses' hooves are heard, together with the repetitive sound of the elephant's bell.*

*Blind Beggar*

Dara Shukoh, prince of woe!  
Prince of woe, Dara Shukoh!

*Bernier*

To rig up all this magnificence  
—Swords drawn, bows taut with arrows—  
Betrays a contorted malevolence.  
Aurangzeb's mind, no one knows.

*Busee*

His uncanny sense, his 'touch', are sure.  
But this graceless spectacle, this insult

To a much-loved prince with heart so pure  
Will, in nameless miseries, result.

*Manucci*

*[The elephant bell sounds closer*

It is truly the most disgraceful  
Show I have ever seen  
Dara, brave, noble, sagacious,  
Has through these alleys been  
So often, counseling, listening, and  
To assist, so keen.

To take him now, thus broken and crushed,  
Through sites of his glory  
Tells us of spite, of course, but also  
Of another story.  
It tells us that Fate's favourite  
Reading, is Tragedy.

*Mochi*

*[Loud enough for Dara to hear*

Dara Shukoh, I'll nail his toe  
When next I go, to shod your foe!

*[Two cavalrymen 'escorting'  
Dara enter, dismounted, with  
lances pointed at the crowd*

*First Cavalryman*

Khamosh! You lice-filled curs, stand back!  
Or else your walnut heads I'll crack.

*Thelazwala*

*[Moving menacingly with  
Subziwala towards the two  
cavalrymen*

O yeah? You sewer rat's offspring  
Don't dare to point your lance at us!  
You unwashed spittoon of the king  
Don't dare you fling that glance at us!

*Sabziwala*

Out, you cawing crows;  
Aurangzeb's bubos!

*[The cavalrymen disappear, to a  
great cheering by the crowd*

*Mochi*

Dara looks like a crushed flower,  
Sipihr like a bud.  
Aurangzeb's may be King but our  
Minds are made up:  
Dara will rule our hearts, our soul  
As no one ever could.  
Dara will enter Time's scrolls  
As Dara, the Good.

*Manucci*

*[To Bernier*

Babar was Babur The Brave,  
Humayun: The-Very-Close-Shave;  
Akbar, well, Akbar the Great,  
Jehangir, why, the Luxuriate,  
Shah Jehan, the Aesthete,  
And Dara. . . .

Nur

*[Who sits directly beneath the balcony, without looking up*

Virtue's Defeat.

*The Crowd*

Dara Shukoh, Sipihir Shukoh!  
Sipihir Shukoh, Dara Shukoh!

*Blind Beggar*

With what will I remember you?  
I wish your noble face I knew!  
Leave behind something for me  
Even if a trifle it be.

*Doodhwala*

What can he give the beggar,  
Dara's a fugitive.  
Except what's on his figure,  
He has nothing left to give.

*Blind Beggar*

Dara, please do not go  
Without leaving a memento!

*The Crowd*

A memento, memento  
From Prince Dara Shukoh!

*[There is a lull. All sounds still*

*Mochi*

He lifts his face,  
Such infinite grace!

He raises his arm,  
What studied calm!  
He turns it round,  
(There's not a sound!)  
To lift his mantle  
What a tantal!  
He gives it a spin  
And it is—in!

*[Dara's shawl flung by him,  
comes on to the stage and mantles  
Blind Beggar. There is a roar of  
acclamation*

*Busee*

That was a benediction,  
    No gift.  
A spiritual action,  
    God-kist.

*[The procession moves away, as  
can be told by the diminished  
sound of hooves and elephant  
bells. A disturbance, off stage,  
ensues*

*Thelarwala*

A scuffle,  
I notice,  
They muffle  
With finesse.

*Blind Beggar*

Who between,  
Lout and Lean?

*Thealawala*

Neither.  
It's either. . . .

*Manucci*

The crowd's beating up Paanwala  
—I know the wily fella—  
For offering a *paan*  
To Malik Jiwan Khan.

#### SCENE IV

*The following day at the Diwan-i-Khas. Aurangzeb is seated on the throne. An assortment of noblemen and courtiers are present. Jiwan and Nazar Beg stand near Aurangzeb. Roshanara sits behind the alcove.*

*Aurangzeb*

So they turned violent.  
And you were all silent.

*[Some courtiers rise nervously in self-defence. Aurangzeb bids them be quiet*

There is no harm in that,  
It's not always tit-for-tat.  
It is good strategy  
To let caulked energy



Steam-off in incidents  
Of sudden violence.

I prefer a riot  
To a grumbling quiet.  
Quick to start, quick to end,  
With no reports to send  
On the whys and wherefores.  
It's over; no therefores!

But this crowd's different.  
It was irreverent.  
Yet it must not be touched,  
No houses should be searched  
For those who rioted  
And dung-missiles pelted  
On Malik Jiwan Khan  
(I believe he likes *paan*).

*[Jiwan smiles sheepishly*

Going back, it was wrong  
I think to make one who's strong  
Look sorry, victimized.  
Losers are sympathized  
With, by all Indians  
In these dominions.

I'm no psychologist  
Nor an Indologist  
But this I sure know  
Indians always crow  
Over a bully's fall.  
But the next moment, all  
Is forgiven; he's down

You see! And the crown  
Has passed to another,  
Perhaps, bully's brother!

The question now's what next?  
We must find a context  
—Not *pre* text—(watch your thoughts  
Expunge such words with dots)  
To punish the ex-prince  
And end this whole sequence.

*Roshanara*

[*Rising in the alcove*

Great King! I'll watch my words.  
Dara and Sipihr rest.  
They rest—please mark my words—  
In peace, like angels blest.  
They expect rebellion,  
Popular uprisings,  
A great pandemonium  
In which all the Jai Singhs  
And Jiwan Khans of life  
Will be just brushed aside  
And, after the great strife,  
(When all of us will hide)  
They will, finally, rise,  
Proceed to the Red Fort  
And from your soldiers prise  
The keys to this great court.  
I know this can't happen  
But that is not the point.  
People want it to happen  
And *that* is the point.  
Dara executed  
May be more reputed

Than Dara imprisoned  
And under-provisioned.  
But more reputed—when?  
A century, or ten,  
After we are all gone!  
Who thinks of night, at dawn?  
The 'context' is simple—  
Dara's an infidel.  
Have him dubbed a heretic,  
The rest is automatic.  
Not under your title;  
Make it sacerdotal.

## SCENE V

*A week later, in Dara's prison. Dara and Sipihr are seated, on the floor cooking their meal for fear of eating poisoned food. The date is August 30, 1659.*

*Dara*

Lentils take long to boil;  
But they do not spoil!  
They will outlast today;  
Will I? I cannot say.

Strange, do you not find it,  
That I, who am to quit  
Life any moment now  
Should be so keen somehow

To avoid being poisoned.  
I am inquisitioned:  
'How did Sadullah die?  
Can you your role, deny?'

God knows the role I played,  
Who was by who, betrayed.  
So this writer of books,  
This brave fighter, now *cooks!*

What won't man do to live?  
Anything but forgive,  
I suppose, to postpone  
Entering the Unknown.

I wanted a repast,  
A rich dramatic cast  
Of man, woman and beast,  
Playing, God's eyes to feast.

*[Moving the pot from the fire*

But, by a divine switch,  
(I first thought it a 'hitch')  
Allah just shifted me.  
Bodily lifted me.

From audience to stage  
And said: 'Now go and wage  
Your war, the last and best,  
At Misfortune's behest.

'Put losers in your script,  
They've lived in a closed crypt.  
End their enforced silence,  
And give them utterance.

'You have fought tragedy  
In wars that were heady.  
But now you must do more,  
*Become* the hurtful sore!



'Don't be grief's pedestal,  
Rather, its great symbol.  
Noble in misfortune,  
Verily, a tribune.

'For the world's failures,  
Its blasted careers,  
Undeserved vanquishments  
Unexplained punishments.

'Become a synonym,  
A dirge, a plangent hymn,  
For unclever virtue  
In its unrelieved rue.

'Rob triumph of stature  
In honour's prefecture,  
As a prince whose defeat  
Made triumph counterfeit.'

When I saw this vision  
Of my life's fruition,  
My heart felt a great peace,  
Unconcerned with life's lease.

*[Serves the lentils into two earthen bowls*

I now see Allah's will  
In the course of my rill.  
It sure has meandered  
Flowed thin and gone under,

To but re-appear,  
Pure, cool, crystal-clear,  
My little destiny  
Concerns epigoni.

A prince who will never  
Be an 'ex' or a 'future'.  
A prince, ever present,  
Like a good Vice-Regent:

A promise of merit  
You reach, not inherit.  
A wisdom to be used  
With humility, fused.

Princes trivialize  
What they so greatly prize:  
Their office, crown and throne.  
That pattern, I disown.

By His switch in my role,  
Allah has saved my soul.  
I will always be seen  
A forever might-have-been.

A promise, not regret,  
No prince degenerate.  
I will capsule men's hope  
In humanity's scope.

They thought I eyed the crown.  
I won't that taint disown.  
But go a step ahead  
And offer them—my head:

You said I sought the crown  
So here, I've renounced.  
Not just my crown—my head!  
Let Murder go ahead.

I think *that* sacrifice  
The paying of that price



Will be a worthwhile stand  
By a prince of Hindostan.

From our Holy Prophet  
We have learnt the secret  
Of being unafraid  
Of injury or death.

We know Death is certain  
And yet are so afraid  
Of the falling curtain,  
Our exit we degrade.

I'll go like a soldier,  
But not resisting Death,  
Nor hating the ogre  
Who comes to still my breath.

Hereafter I'll prefix  
All norms of succession  
An inconvenient jynx  
Who'll embarrass Ambition.

I hoped our monarchy  
Would quickly terminate  
Rule by oligarchy,  
Justice inaugurate.

I thought Moghul rulers  
Would, progressively, be  
More than builders—healers,  
With human sympathy.

Each Moghul advancing  
His precursor's efforts  
Some physic to bring  
For India's deep hurts.

Her wars, her crimes, her hates  
Her wrongs—man's doings, all—  
Till our people's pain abates  
And, together, we honour His call.

I just said 'our people'  
Did I not? *Mark that phrase!*  
In mosque and in temple  
Dwells the Almighty's grace.

The Rab'ilalamin  
Is everybody's !  
A truth great Musalmin  
—Unlike our court toadies—

Have known well, but, pity!  
We've chosen, we Timurids,  
To treat two out of three  
Sons of Ind as mean hybrids,

Mongrel. Oh, how unwise,  
And low! After Ghazni,  
Ghori, who did not disguise  
Their aim: Indian money,

And sped with sacks of loot,  
We got the chance—a gift—  
To take Gangetic root;  
Not put down, instead, lift

India's sons and daughters  
Into a Tree of Life  
Where sky's dew, earth's waters,  
Could nourish peace, end strife.

We got the chance to build  
Great palaces in stone



But also more—to weld  
Forts with huts poor folk own,

In a purpose so pure,  
So selfless and true  
As would of course ensure  
Our line, but also hew

Trust out of suspicion,  
And faith out of fear.  
But no, cheap ambition  
Cannot counsel hear,

The counsel of insight.  
'Our people?' 'What on earth!'  
Retorted Moghul might  
In power-drunk mirth.

'We are here to rule  
India's unwashed mob.  
Dara's a bloody fool,  
Meant but to sit and sob.'

But, son, they're mistaken  
It is *they* who will grieve,  
When forlorn, forsaken,  
They run through history's sieve.

Run through they will, crown and clan,  
Chortling into the void  
For no other reason than  
Their never having *tried*

To get under India's skin,  
Inside her wondrous soul,  
Never trying to win  
Her trust, which is her all.



But I would not bemoan  
The dying of a line,  
So many, known, unknown  
Have passed on just like mine.

What is truly tragic  
Is we are ensuring  
Our future will be sick,  
Vengeful, unforgiving

Will hatch a reaction  
Much worse than our action.  
The future will pay  
For the present's delay,

Its failure of role  
To see, understand  
India's textured whole  
And stay Division's hand.

We were meant to unite  
Those we have taught, now, to fight.  
That is my true regret  
The rest, my fate, I can forget.

Now, dying, let me intone  
God's holy name, and own  
I've sprung from the same earth  
As any of mundane birth.

Like an eager rainbow  
Let me to the sky go,  
A vestibule of hues  
Where hope and regret fuse.

Where pain and forgiveness,  
Man's faith and faithlessness;



His desire for height  
And, alas, this short sight.

The dead weight of life's tare—  
All these—become Light; where  
Man's instincts, no more savage,  
With his Spirit, voyage.

Victory is heady,  
But a true tragedy  
Can serve humanity  
For an eternity.

If I have served that purpose,  
If I have made men feel  
(As true tragedy does)  
The hurt they did not heal

The gulf they did not close  
The shame they did not share,  
I'll go, Heaven knows,  
Without a single care.

Kasi's Poet—Acharj  
Living on Ganga's marge  
Has with patience explained  
What the *Geet* has ordained.

But we can wait no more  
For those Descents of yore.  
We must interiorize  
The mercy of His eyes

A lot of pain there'll be  
From snowmelt to sea.  
Sickness contorts our land.  
Sickness of the mind and



Sickness of the soul.  
That's where I 'lost' my role.  
A 'proper' succession  
Or a 'smooth' transition,

My vanity had thought,  
Would bring the rogues to naught.  
I was myopic, wrong  
To think myself so strong.

Or even deserving  
Of the status of King.  
My life will now end  
Not story, but legend.

So I have no regret  
(It's others who must fret).  
As I prepare to go  
To where, I think, I know.

But I will—must—admit  
I cannot deny it  
—I am wholly human—  
I miss Sulaiman.

He was our House's hope,  
Seen through Time's telescope  
As the ace progeny  
Redeeming epigoni.

With succession profaned,  
Sulaiman's now orphaned.  
Who knows what awaits him?  
May Allah be with him.

And then there persists, yet  
Another pang of regret:



Jester's disappeared:  
Murdered, it is feared.

But I can't believe it:  
He's such a free spirit!  
I pray he's not in fetters,  
Or that, in pain, suffers.

More faces come to mind:  
Friends whom I leave behind.  
Daud Khan the doughty,  
And Firuz Mewati.

I can't forget Jaswant,  
Once brave and valiant  
Later by threats seduced  
And in stature, reduced.

When I think great Sarmad  
—Our living Talmud—  
Is but four *kos* from here,  
Angels I can hear.

A strange peace emanates  
From him and permeates  
My being. Mian Mir,  
The unparalleled Pir

Had that effect on me.  
Mian Mir beckons me.  
As does your late mother,  
And yes, my own mother.

Take care of your sisters,  
And stay in touch with mine.  
Kin should be banisters  
To lean on the incline.

I hope they'll take you soon  
To meet your grandfather.  
In Aurangzeb's high noon,  
He is a prisoner.

I now await beheading,  
But why should *you* be finished?  
It is I who was to be King.  
Why should you too be punished?

*[A sound of rusty padlocks being  
opened is heard. A very agitated  
Father Busee enters, followed by  
Nazar Beg who walks with  
calculated composure*

Father Busee! Are you alone?  
No, you are not; you are not.  
You have come with Death's clone;

*[Turning to Nazar*

A very good likeness, you've got.  
What weapon do you carry,  
You poor little devil?  
I see you will not tarry,  
To do your bit of evil.

*[Sipihr goes and clings to Dara*

*Busee*

I was told an hour back  
To come and be with you;  
Was told that this manjack  
Has orders to . . .

*Dara*

Execute me. Well, go on,  
But don't you touch my son!

*[Addressing Sipihr*

*Nazar Beg*

Get up,  
Pup!

*[Incensed*

*Dara*

You mongrel's eczema,  
Perfidy's smegma,  
Don't you dare berate  
A ranking Prince of State!

*Nazar Beg*

Exceed not your limits,  
You palm without digits.

*Dara*

*[Stunned by the insult but  
controlling his fury*

Go tell my usurper  
Brother . . .

*Nazar Beg*

I am no message-bearer;  
I am an executioner

*[More soldiers enter. They tear  
Sipihr from his father's clasp.*

*Dara sends one, two, three  
soldiers hurtling. There is a pause  
in the grim scene*

*Busee*

My brief is brief,  
I cannot stay.  
And my grief . . .  
I must pray  
With you, prince  
And since . . .

*Dara*

*[Touching Busee's shoulder,  
redemptively*

I will now pray in paradise  
In the light of Allah's eyes.

Leave my son; just let him be.

*[The father in Dara now tries a  
different gambit. He speaks  
moving towards the soldiers, one  
step forward with each sentence*

Not he, I, am your enemy.  
He's still Prince, don't forget!  
Your King's daughter he might wed.  
Your King can get quite angry  
You know; his temper's hungry.





*Sipih*r

Abbajan, take care!  
They have a rapier!

*[A screaming Sipih*r *is bundled out. The soldiers pounce on Dara who staggers but does not fall*

*Dara*

Hold it,  
One minute,  
I knew  
Some of you.  
Tell your king,  
*Dara* *kings him not!*  
He has loathing  
For what Aurangzeb's got.  
Because that is *not* Hindostan;  
Certainly not its soul. . . .  
But he will *never* understand.  
Power, after all, was his only goal.

*[Even as Sipih*r's *screams continue to be heard, the executioners overpower Dara and behead him*

# ACT SEVEN



*Shahjehanabad and its vicinity. News of the prince's execution has slouched into the city's alleys.*

## SCENE I

*Later that evening in a ruin not far from the scene of Dara's execution. Jester hides amidst its crumbling walls. As he talks to himself, Jester keeps hearing Dara's voice.*

*Jester*

What was it for,  
This bloody war?

What did you prove?  
That failures move?

That they uplift,  
Are 'Heaven's gift'?

All that is crap,  
Scented giftwrap,

For what is inside:  
Fiasco's dead hide.

You have been licked.  
(Don't you say 'tricked')

But not just you;  
Virtue's virtue!

*That's* what's been trounced,  
Its death, announced.

'Goodness can't pay,  
Is what they'll say.

'Cleverness, does.  
Don't think; see us!

I won't agree,  
I am zany.

Besides, I've loved you,  
Soul and sinew.

But I remain  
And you are slain.

You've been quartered  
(Don't say '*martyred*')

By Aurangzeb's  
Grotesque slaves,

Twixt floor and wall.  
I've heard it all.

Heard the story.  
It is gory.

It's got you, prince,  
Your awful jinx

By your throat,  
Like a stoat.



Your story's dead  
Before it's read.

Dara you're gone!  
*Will be reborn?*

Dara you're dead!  
*I've lost my head?*

Dara, you've quit!  
*I'm just a twit?*

You're the forgotten.  
Wool-of-cotton,

*[Speaking at nonstop speed, so  
as not to be interrupted by 'Dara's  
voice']*

The lint bandage  
—Hurt's appendage—

Which the King tied  
On injured pride

When, deflated,  
Isolated,

He needed aid,  
Found you prepared

To play that role.  
—Heart and soul—

The role of sling  
For supporting

His hand gone slack  
From a hairline crack.

The limb's now dated,  
Amputated,

Chucked with disdain  
For human pain,

Bone, flesh and skin,  
—Into the bin.

The king's no king,  
God save his sling!

*[He collapses, exhausted by his  
effort. After a moment, resumes,  
contrite*

Dara, have I hurt you?  
I will not continue.

Why are you so silent  
When I've been violent?

Weren't you interrupting  
And contradicting

Me a moment ago  
Right here, on this floor?

Repeat that, please, my prince,  
I can't endure silence.

Speak to me, Dara, speak,  
I'm Jester, your pipsqueak!

Silence . . . of course, silence.  
You're gone; crossed the Fence.

I was hallucinating.  
You couldn't have been talking.

You are 'dead and gone'  
Like all that's ever born.

If God is a Designer  
You were, well, His error.

A defect in design,  
To which men will resign.

After all, God's human  
Not superhuman.

He was, perhaps, withdrawn.  
Or to some problem drawn

When you lay on his Wheel  
A dollop he could feel

Shape, elongate, reduce  
According to the use

But forgot all about.  
So you were taken out

Just as you'd shaped yourself  
—Unfit for any shelf—

Except your very own,  
Condemned to be alone.

In rigid seclusion,  
To the exclusion

Of normal company,  
Society's symphony.

'Dara is peerless,  
Dara's sui generis!'



All right, so bloody what?  
What has Peerless got?

A dagger on his neck,  
His dream a ruddy wreck.

And where were you, great God  
When your good Servant called?

He needed your succour,  
Help from his Begetter,

In whom he placed such trust  
As had *us* embarrassed

But no, you were busy  
You sent Father Busee

(*Such* consideration.  
*Great* commiseration!)

As your Special Envoy  
—In Murder's own convoy!—

To tut-tut when the dread  
Knife severed Dara's head.

Now *aren't* you quite pleased?  
You have honoured the deceased.

And well you might conclude  
—Stifling a yawn—'*Though rude,*

*Dara's death's been condoled,  
Mourned; well-handled, all told.'*

But Mister just you wait,  
Don't you try exculpate

Yourself in this grim tale  
Or try your role, to veil.

Don't you see how justice  
Is slain by injustice?

Goodness trapped, chained, butchered  
By Evil and vultured

By Satan's avengers,  
His hungry scavengers?

Do you not see all this?  
What does your Book call this?

Are you completely blind  
Or just out of your mind?

A not unnatural stage,  
Perhaps, in one your age.

Will you tell me, Mister,  
(Or. since you administer

Life and Death in sharp draughts).  
Doctor God, sir, what crafts

Must human goodness learn  
To your blessed favour, earn?

More fundamentally  
I beg you, enlighten me:

You, who in virtue dwell  
Do you govern Luck as well?

Or is Luck (Christ save us!)  
Totally autonomous?





I am afraid she is  
Or at least she perceives

Her smart self to be,  
In ceaseless vanity.

Those whom you have fielded  
Need, next, to be shielded.

But you're no good at that  
So Luck issues her diktat.

While you just sit and stare,  
Perhaps you do not care.

And so do not resist.  
Perhaps you don't exist. . . .

How can he care or dare,  
Doctor God's just not there!

Life's a suppurating bog,  
Home of cur and filthy hog,

Other crawling fungi  
Lidding deeper algae

Where cell-eats-cell-eats  
Tissue-breeds-tissue-breeds. . . .

And in the shrink-expand  
Of lymph, duct and gland

In the world's faecal bake,  
This orgiastic lake,

What is Honour, Rectitude  
And what is Ingratitude?

What has Virtue got to do  
With a libidinous loo?

Never let thought travel  
Life's truth to unravel.

Life is no Great Riddle  
It's just a plain swindle!

Let us not rue Dara Shukoh;  
He's gone the way all creatures go.

'Some go, their blood unspilled,  
Some miserably killed.'

But *all* to the dungheap  
On mushroom beds to sleep.

*Bravo!*  
Bravo?

Did someone say bravo?  
Surely not Dara Shukoh?

There! There we go again  
On our favourite refrain:

'May be Dara exists,  
Light in Darkness persists,

*[There is a flash of lightning*

'May be God watches us,  
Man and beast and fungus.'

Dara! when will doubting end  
How long will you pretend



That I'm out of my senses  
And these aren't coincidences?

*[Another flash which alters Jester's tone*

I suppose . . . there will be a doubt. . . .  
Till the last man goes out.

*[A final burst of lighting is  
followed by the muezzin's call, a  
particularly soft, sublime call,  
which Jester hears with silent  
receptivity*

## SCENE II

*That night, in the austere dwelling of Sarmad, the mystic. He  
is seated on the floor, surrounded by devotees of all faiths.  
Abhaichand, his disciple and 'host' enters.*

*Abhaichand*

Great Teacher, the deed is done;  
Evil over Good has won.  
Dara has been beheaded  
Virtue wails; gleeful are the wicked.

His remains, bloody, disjointed,  
Are to be paraded, flaunted,  
By Aurangzeb's decree,  
For the 'benefit' of Delhi.  
And then interred without fuss  
Near Emperor Humayun's.

*Sarmad*

*[After a pause*

Beheaded  
Is God-headed.

Clouds part,  
Reveal His Heart.

From its throne,  
The peacock has flown.

### SCENE III

*The Diwan-i-Khas, after some weeks. The Moghul Emperor Aurangzeb is about to enter. Heralds—Third and Fourth—await him. The ladies' alcove is unoccupied.*

*Third Herald*

Who are the King's visitors today?  
Does something fresh come our way?

*Fourth Herald*

There is Mir Jumla's proposition  
For Sarmad's execution.  
And we have old Tavernier, bringing a new jewel.  
Business Is As Usual.

*[Taking out a necklace from his inner pocket—a brand new present from the French merchant*

*Excerpt from*

## **SARMAD SHAHEED**

An essay written by  
MAULANA AZAD

*In 1910—a hundred years before this publication  
(Translated by Syeda Saiyidain Hameed and published  
by the Indian Council for Cultural Relations,  
New Delhi, 1991)*



During the last days of Emperor Shahjehan, Dara Shikoh was heir-apparent. A man of Sufi temperament, he was unique among Mughal princes. It is a blot on historical veracity, that the pen which recorded the history of the Mughal period was always held by Prince Dara Shikoh's enemies. Behind the screen of political manoeuvres, the real picture has become blurred. From his early years Dara displayed the attributes of a Dervish. He always kept company with philosophers and sufis. His writings indicate that the author was a man of excellent taste. The overwhelming proof of his taste is that in pursuing his goal he lost the distinction between the temple and the mosque. The humility with which he met the Muslim divines was matched by the devotion with which he bowed his head before the Hindu saints and sadhus. Who can deny the purity of this principle?



## OWNINGS & ACKNOWLEDGINGS



For providing archetypes, John Dryden's seventeenth-century play in rhymed verse, *Aurang-Zebe* and Alfred Tennyson's *Akbar's Dream*. For inspiration, Ramchandra Gandhi. For the datum-line: Francois Bernier's *Travels in the Moghul Empire*, tr. A. Constable, Westminster, 1891; Niccolao Manucci's *Storia d Mogor*, tr. William Irvine, London, 1907-08, 4 vols: Jean-Baptiste Tavernier's *Travels in India*, tr. V. Ball, London, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition. 1925. 2 vols. in one; Jadunath Sarkar's *History of Aurangzeb*, vol. I, 1921, Longmans; Kalikaranjan Qanungo's *Dara Shukoh*, 1934, Dacca; Vincent A. Smith's *The Oxford History of India*, 1958, OUP, reprinted in 1966; Bamber Gascoigne's *The Great Moghuls*, 1971, Jonathan Cape, London. For his patient typing in precious leisure hours, V. Ayyaswamy. For valuable comments on the script, Ramachandra Guha, Ravi Dayal, Nasreen Rehman, P.R. Chari and Keshav Desiraju. For light on the meanings of 'Shukoh' and 'Shikoh' in Farsi and the appropriate Romanisation, Professor Irfan Habib. For the character of Jester and any other suggestion of poetic licence, the author's imagination. For the liberties with Sanskrit and other name-spellings to suit plausible Moghul mispronunciation, the same. For what is not intended so to be but reads like allegory, the timely and timeless ring of all tragedy.

G.G.











Gopal Gandhi's wonderfully moving and insightful tragedy elegantly and imaginatively revisits one of Indian history's great what-if moments, making us ask again how different things might have been if it was heterodox mystic Dara rather than the puritanical bigot Aurangzeb who had won the civil war and led Mughal India—would Islam and Hinduism have been able to bridge their differences? Would the united Mughal lands have managed to stop the colonial conquests? Would Partition have been impossible? *Dara Shukoh* is a thoughtful and thought-provoking text.

WILLIAM DALRYMPLE

What makes Gopal Gandhi's *Dara Shukoh* unique is that it is not just another play about another historical figure but in effect a statement of the author's own philosophy, expressed through the life of a person who tried to embody it but failed—tragically, for the history of India.

GIRISH KARNAD

Gopal Gandhi, by writing this play, has done theatre a double favour. He has provided us with some of the most recitable poetry ever and he has drawn a riveting portrait of the fascinating Dara Shukoh within the framework of a deeply moving story. The writing, while being a sly reminder of the 'grand old' traditions of Indian theatre, is also engagingly modern; the reader will unquestioningly accept the charming anachronisms that appear occasionally. Oh, if only history had been taught to us thus in school!

NASEERUDDIN SHAH

DRAMA



TRANQUEBAR

₹ 250

ISBN 978-93-80658-52-0



9 789380 658520