

***Aurangzeb* by Indira Parthasarathy**

An Introduction to the author: R.Parthasarathy known by his pen name Indira Parthasarathy is a renowned Tamil language writer and playwright. As a modern playwright his works take a glance at the principle concerns of contemporary Indian society. *Aurangzeb* written by Indira Parthasarathy is a play that deals with one of the most turbulent periods of Indian history. He has painted a brilliant canvas of imperial ambitions, opposing ideologies and familial conflicts with resonances for the present day.

Indira Parthasarathy sets his play at the time when an ailing Mughal emperor Shah Jahan sees his sons fighting to succeed him. He favours his eldest son, the liberal Dara Shikoh, as he believes Dara will fulfill his vision of raising a twin Taj Mahal in black marble. However, the emperor's younger son Aurangzeb ascends the throne, killing his other brother and Dara, and leaving a trail of blood to fulfill his all-consuming goal of "one language, one nation and one religion".

Aurangzeb is a story of dreams and obsessions — of a father's dream of immortalizing beauty in stone, and a son's obsession to abjure beauty and art in any form. It is a story of contrasts: of brothers whose views are diametrically different, and sisters who do not see eye to eye. It is about liberalism and fanaticism, loyalty and treachery. But above all, it is a tale of the timeless and universal — of the enduring fascination for power, the fickle-mindedness of the public which worships success, and the human emotions of greed and envy.

While the older sister Jahanara supports Dara, her younger sister Roshanara espouses Aurangzeb's cause fuelled by jealousy of her sister who is her father's favourite. Having banished music and the arts from his kingdom, Aurangzeb is left desolate at the end of his reign. He is haunted by the ghosts of the past and his sanguinary actions.

Parthasarathy's play *Aurangzeb* (1974 -) is about the contradictory nature and outlook towards life exhibited by the two sons, Dara Shikoh and Aurangzeb of Emperor Shahjahan. The play captures the attention of the viewers more for Dara as a tragic hero though the title is *Aurangzeb*. According to Aristotle a tragic hero is doomed when he starts a chain of action in the play that somehow evolves from a fatal flaw in his otherwise noble character. It is of paramount consideration for the tragic hero to belong to a socially high family with a plenty of good characteristics to evoke pity and fear in the viewers of a tragic play. This is true in the case of Dara who dreams of a secular nation based on ideals of truth and spirituality.

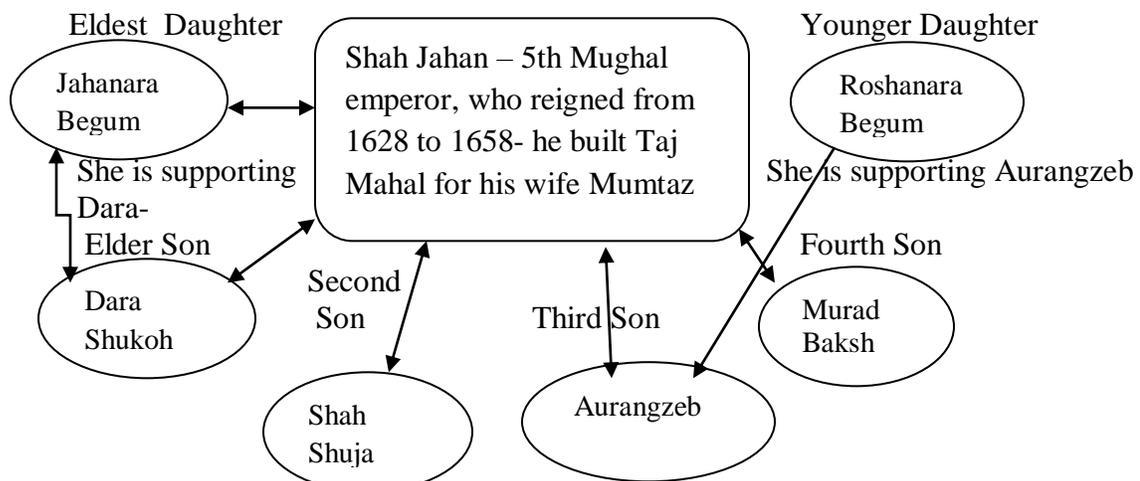
The Trajectory of a Tragic Hero : Dara: The play opens with a conversation between two of Aurangzeb's spies in Fort Agra who discuss others spying on them thus indicating Aurangzeb's suspicious nature, as well as his attempt to be in control. The play telescopes, selects, and fuses events to capture the fissures, as well as the peaks of a period of history. In the war of succession to the throne the major protagonists represent issues and ideologies as seen in Shah Jahan who symbolizes decadent, self-indulgent, romantic aestheticism, Dara who projects himself as a philosopher-statesman striving to preserve a pluralist society and nation and Aurangzeb who articulates his thoughts and fights to establish an Islamic fundamentalist state. Shah Jahan has fallen ill and a war of succession has become imminent among Shah Jahan's four sons, Dara Shikoh, Shuja, Aurangzeb, and Murad.

The prologue foregrounds premonitions about the disintegration of the Mughal Empire in the future. The conversation between the soldiers unleashes before the audience a sense of skepticism regarding the dynasty war. Notwithstanding the crumbling empire, the aging emperor is hesitant to shed his old clothes that offered him power and authority. His unwillingness to the transfer of power is mainly due to his obstinate romantic dream that has lost its charm and

relevance Shah Jahan wants an assurance from his sons that his dream plan of building a black marble Mahal on the other side of river Yamuna facing Mumtaz's Tajmahal would be fulfilled.

The artifice stands between the transfer of power and authority and the main contenders to the throne. Dara and Aurangzeb differ on this issue while Shah Jahan's two daughters Jahanara and Roshanara, support Dara and Aurangzeb respectively. The emperor himself weighs his feeble support on his eldest son Dara, the only one of the four brothers, who is present at Agra and sympathetic to Shah Jahan's dream. Jahanara and Roshanara are more vividly portrayed than the male characters as they are stronger, vocal, and more faithful to their political aspirations. Roshanara appears in the opening scene as an antithesis to Jahanara just like Dara and Aurangzeb.

Roshanara is against Shah Jahan's dream and remains the driving force behind Aurangzeb without fear of earning her father's wrath. Shah Jahan's preference for Jahanara and Dara evoke a sense of sibling rivalry in both Roshanara and Aurangzeb. ShajJahan lives in the decadent past



The plot – a mixture of History and Imagination: The plot of the play hinges on the war of succession and the issues and ideologies that the major characters represent. Shajahan symbolizes a decadent, self-indulgent, romantic aestheticism. Aurangzeb pleads for and fiercely fights to establish an Islamic fundamentalist state. Dara is a philosopher – statesman striving to preserve a pluralist is a realist who is caught helplessly between a vengeful Roshanara and a father who lives in a world of dreams.

When Shajahan falls ill, a war of succession breaks out among his four sons. Of them, Dara Shukoh, the eldest and Aurangzeb, the third, are the main contenders. Jahanara, the elder daughter and Roshanara, the younger, support Dara and Aurangzeb respectively. Dara banks on popular support due to the good name he has earned among the people. He is a philosopher, who is thorough with the Hindu scriptures as well as the holy Koran and the Christian scriptures. He fondly hopes and tries to establish a secular government where people of all religion live in freedom and harmony. Aurangzeb on the other hand, hates Dara on personal grounds and considers him an enemy of Islam. His favorite slogan is “one nation, one language, one religion”.

Dara is defeated in the battle of ‘Samugarh’ as he is let down and betrayed by the Rajputs and his other fiends. He is hunted down, arrested and sentenced to death. Aurangzeb keeps his father under house arrest with only Jahanara to comfort him. Shuja and Murad, the other sons of Shajahan are also murdered. As the new emperor, Aurangzeb ascends the throne on the blood of his own brothers and their families. A hater of music, the life breath of the universe, that he is, he

has no regret about all that he has done. But when the woman who represents the spirit of Nature points out to his heartlessness and the load of sin he carries with him, he seems to relent and subjects himself to self-scrutiny. Finally, he consoles himself with these words;

“History alone shall tell ... I have run my course ... I have become history.”

Indira Parthasarathy's vision of history is partly Marxist. For, he sees the position of the common people in a feudal state as helpless, shaped by forces beyond their control. Dara's vision of establishing a plural society where the people live in harmony and unity in variety is created with contemporary social relevance. The dramatist also seems to point out that a government built on the basis of religious fundamentalism can be fratricidal conflicts. Parthasarathy established himself as a masterly writer of dialogues when sharp plays of intellect on political issues are involved.

Compare and contrast Dara and Aurangzeb : Dara, the oldest son of Shajahan, is an idealist and not a realist. The legal heir to the throne, he projects himself as a philosopher-statesman striving his best to preserve a pluralist society and nation. He is well-versed in the Vedas, the Holy Koran and the Holy Bible. He has even translated the Hindu Vedas under the title 'Ai – ul – Asrar'. As the two spies remark Shajahan 'holds him dearer than life' and the people consider him, 'the darling of the nation'. Dara's patriotism and his love for the country is manifested at two levels. At the personal level, he wants his dead wife to be buried only within 'Hindustan'. In the national perspective, Dara is distressed and disappointed that 'the people of this country do not think and act as worthy heirs to great philosophical traditions'. His distress is not merely a vague sentimental sense of loss. He anguishes that in their greed for political power, people often give up their precious individual and religious identities. For instance, the Rajputs give up their traditional bravery and the Frontiersmen their rugged honesty and transparency.

Dara is not a heretic as Aurangzeb and wants the people to believe. Dara's assertion that "the Prophet is not God's messenger, the Prophet is God himself" shows his learning towards the mystical school of the Sufis. He ardently believes in the co-existence and inter-animation of all religious faiths as the nation's only hope. Dara is almost prophetic about the danger posed by the European merchants who had just then arrived in Hindustan and seemed to be buying up the country itself. What distresses him most is the fickleness of the people like Malik Jeevan.

Aurangzeb, the titular hero of the play appears in less than half of the entire text, but the spirit of Aurangzeb is all pervading. The play begins with a conversation between two of his spies who give an indication of Aurangzeb's suspicious nature as well as his attempt to be in control of everything. Unlike Dara, he conceives of religion as a code rather than as a philosophy. Since he passionately believes in the 'One nation, one religion, one Language', he wants one singular code which all Indians would strictly follow. In his opinion, the common people are no better than sheep; they have to be guided firmly by a shepherd that would only be possible in a political system based on one religion that lays down right and wrong. Such an attitude makes him declare, "There is no place anymore in Hindustan for music and dance. All these arts corrupt morals and turn human beings into wasters. But there is no questioning the sincerity of his puritanical asceticism.

Indira Parthasarathy does not present Aurangzeb simply as a monster of a certain politico-religious ideology. He makes the play "an interesting and a moving pathological study of a prince who felt orphaned by his parents and longed for their love and attention." Aurangzeb is both scandalized and infuriated at Dara's assertion that "the Prophet is not God's messenger, the Prophet is God himself."

He orders the killing of Murad without any hesitation for the latter's immoral ways of life. He has no qualms about welcoming Dara's betrayers. He even goes to the barbarous extent of hunting down the fleeing Dara, beheading him and hanging his emotional sin of shattering his father's dreams and imprisoning the ailing Man. The play ends with Aurangzeb confessing mournfully that he has none to call his own except Allah. He subjects himself to self-examination and asks, "Am I a devout Muslim or a fanatic?"

Thus, Indira Parthasarathy has portrayed Dara and Aurangzeb in two opposing extremes. Dara, in the end evokes our pity and sympathy in the proper perspective in order to comprehend the dealings of history. The creative works of Indira Parthasarathy are characterized by intellectual vigor, societal concerns and strong historical forces that present times. His historical imagination selects telescopes and fuses events to capture the fissures as well as the peaks of Shajahan's reign.