

# A syncretic sage prince

**D**ara Shukoh: *The Faqir and the Throne of Thorns* is not an academic account of the life of Shah Jahan's eldest son. It is a paean to that great sage of syncretism, a tribute to the unity of faiths he preached. Power corrupts, but Amit Ranjan's Dara is incorruptible. In eloquent, lyrically arranged lines, Ranjan discusses how Dara lived in pursuit of the "Him who has got no name but who responds to whatever name you choose to call Him by."

From the various fictional works about the philosopher prince to the princesses who adored him, from the European companions at his court — later accepted as Orientalists of renown — to his vassals who betrayed him, Ranjan weaves the silky fabric of Dara's narrative with innumerable such threads, some as interstitial asides to the main action of fratricide. The result is a fine tapestry of an age drenched equally in the milk of human kindness and the blood of royal ambition. There is no veil drawn over the ugly bits; for instance, Roshanara's "tales of ribaldry" even as Aurangzeb tries to project himself as a pious ruler

## DARA SHUKOH: THE FAQIR AND THE THRONE OF THORNS

By Amit Ranjan,  
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are discussed in as much detail as Aurangzeb's deeds, which led him to be described as "a king of deception". A particular strength of the book is Ranjan's unorthodox narrative spine. Every chapter begins with a quotation from a Leonard Cohen song. One such chapter, describing the Qalandars — *faqirs* who had been released from the polite bonds of society "by faith or grace alone" — ends with a line describing the difference in Aurangzeb's dichotomous treatment of Sufi saints and Qalandars, stating that "[a] Sufi sheikh would be a matter of reverence for Aurangzeb, but a freelancer fiend would meet the lance, and be beheaded in a glance."

But alas, that is where the book's fatal flaw lies; it is too expansive in vision, too ambitious, and almost Miltonic in grandeur. It could have been more approachable for, more amenable to, the average reader had



A miniature portrait of Dara Shukoh © Rijksmuseum

Ranjan simply written of the prince who failed "to learn how not to be good". But perhaps he was simply trying to wake us up out of our collective saffron stupor.

The book begins with a compassionate letter addressing Dara's mag-

nanimous naiveté in imagining he could be "a devotee of Chist, Christ and Krishna at the same time". Four centuries later, do we, the citizens of a secular India, have this luxury?

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