

NATURE AND VALUES OF IQBAL'S IDEAL SOCIETY

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Through the medium of his poetic and philosophical works, Iqbal consistently comes across as a firm believer in the elevation of the human being – the transformation and well-being of man – at the individual and collective levels, through self, selfhood, and self-identity as embodied in his concept of *khudi*. His teachings furnish the formulae on how to strengthen, intensify, and raise one's self, and also highlight what dissipates, destroys, and disintegrates that selfhood, both at the individual and the collective levels.

In this regard, alongside the emphasis Iqbal lays on the importance of the individual human, there is an equal measure of emphasis on the primacy of society as an entity larger than the totality of its members – society as a powerhouse of human synergy – as he observes in a lecture delivered at Aligarh in 1910, “Society is much more than its existing individuals; it is in its nature infinite; it includes within its contents the innumerable unborn generations, which, though they ever lie beyond the limits of immediate social vision, must be considered as the most important portion of a living community... in the successful group-life it is the future which must always control the present.”¹

Iqbal's ideas on point, expressed in the depth and breadth of his published works, instruct with clarity and conviction, and it is the purpose of this paper to accordingly explain, that a strong and robust society, a truly elevated society, or an ideal society, is one that is driven by modern and reconstructed Islamic ideals, and is therefore one that is united, integrated, egalitarian, properly educated, morally emancipated, technically trained, scientifically sound, peaceful, and socially democratic.

First and foremost, Iqbal opines that the essence of *Tauhid* (Islamic monotheism), as a working idea, is human unity, human equality, and human freedom, and that these ideal principles must be transformed into a realization of definite human organization.² This opinion, that humanity unites in divinity, that humanity attains equality in divinity, that humanity attains freedom in divinity, that if this divinity were denied and disrespected, mankind would be divided and disintegrate, serves as a beacon light towards tolerance, national integration, interfaith harmony, and the dialogue of civilizations in this day and age. From Iqbal's perspective, “The political ideal of Islam consists in the creation of a people born of a

free fusion of all races and nationalities...”³ and “...The moment our grasp of the Islamic principle is loosened, the solidarity of our community is gone.”⁴

Secondly, in Iqbal’s view, a society’s rise and fall would largely depend on the conduct of the individuals who lead it and act as its agents. In a short poem published in his first Urdu collection *Bang-i-Dara*, Iqbal refers to a society as a body and the individuals comprising it to its limbs: those working in industry are called its hands and feet, those who help to administer the government are likened to its beautiful face, and those who cultivate arts – Iqbal places poets in this category – are its eyes.⁵ Consequently, the failure of those who lead or represent a society would drive that society to disaster. Iqbal thus points to three causes that led to the decline of the Muslim world in the last few centuries, namely, decadence in the fields of *Mullaism*, *Mysticism*, and *Dynastic Kingship*.⁶ But in this exposition, Iqbal does not reject outright Muslim legists, mystics, and rulers *per se*, but points out that in early Islamic history these very three areas of law, mysticism, and politics from time to time represented the dynamic spirit of Islam. Only at later stages, he believes, legists started dwelling on form over substance, mystics got sucked into matter over spirit, and rulers started placing self-interest over the interests of the masses.

Driven by the Quranic force that God has infused his own spirit in man, Iqbal’s teachings are emphatic about man bearing witness that God is indeed present in him for therein lies the essence of moral and spiritual life. Iqbal thus condemns every economic, moral, or socio-political structure, may it be internal or international, which depresses the dignity and sanctity of man and is keen to reconstruct it in a manner that may restore the vicegerency of man in this world. To Iqbal, therefore, it is of paramount importance not to discard, but to reform, the same three institutions of law, mysticism, and politics that at one time served Islam as forces of progress and at another time as forces of decadence.⁷

While having competent leaders is undoubtedly critical to a society’s progress and endurance as far as Iqbal is concerned, the socio-economic wellbeing of the masses is expressed by him to be of equal importance. He observes, “It is the masses who constitute the backbone of the nation; they ought to be better fed, better housed and properly educated.”⁸ Lamenting on the impoverished state of the lower strata of the Muslim community of his time and in his surrounds, he questions:

“Have we ever realized that the duty of our *Anjumans* and Leagues is to work for the elevation of the masses and not to push up the individuals? The most important problem before the Muslim public worker is how to improve the economic conditions of his community. It is his duty to make a careful study of the general economic situation in India and the causes which have brought it about. How much of this situation is due to the larger economic forces that are working in the modern world, how much to the historical antecedents, customs, prejudices and ethical shortcomings of the people of this land, how much, if at all, to the policy of the Government, these are the questions, which in preference to other questions, must occupy his brains. The problem will, of course, have to be approached in a broad, impartial non-sectarian spirit; since the economic forces affect all communities alike.”⁹

Thirdly, Iqbal further believes that a system of proper and well-grounded education could truly bring about a renaissance of thought and action in the Muslim world, and this is an area in which his views, in some senses, represent an advancement of, and in some senses contrast with, the teachings of his reformist predecessor Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan. While Sir Sayyid Ahmed Khan, who Iqbal admired, attempted to push Muslims towards the need to acquire modern education for purposes of social advancement – enabling them to secure governmental and other similar jobs, and helping them regain their past status of honour in Indian society – Iqbal believes that the value of education lies way beyond the sole purpose of securing employability: it is a multi-faceted means of character-building through which a society survives and continues.¹⁰ This, to Iqbal’s mind, necessitates the inculcation of the social, ethical, and political ideals of Islam, because the “flame of life cannot be borrowed from others; it must be kindled in the temple of one’s own soul. This requires earnest preparation and a relatively permanent programme.”¹¹

“Economic considerations alone ought not to determine our activity as a people, the preservation of the unity of the community, the continuous national life, is a far higher ideal than the service of merely immediate ends... ...No community can afford to break entirely with its past and it is more emphatically true in the case of our community

whose collective tradition alone constitutes the principle of its vitality...
...It is, therefore, absolutely necessary to construct a fresh educational ideal in which the elements of Muslim culture must find a prominent place, and past and present come up in a happy union. The construction of such an ideal is not an easy task; it requires a large imagination, a keen perception of the tendencies of modern times, and a complete grasp of the meaning of Muslim history and religion.”¹²

This inculcation is also laden with socio-political overtones: a poetic tribute to Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan penned by Iqbal in 1903 titled ‘The Sayyid’s Tombstone’ (published in the Urdu work *Bang-i-Dara*), contains an exhortation to the Muslims that Islam does not teach them to renounce the world, and, “Courage is the staff in the hands of political activists” (Urdu: *Hai daleri dast-i arbab-i siyasat ka ’asa*), heralding Iqbal’s frequently-enacted imagery of the rod of Moses (*Zarb-i-Kalim*) as a symbol power, mostly in the political sense.¹³ Overcoming fear and developing courage thus serve as recurring themes in Iqbal’s socio-political discourse as he postulates:

“The highest stage of man’s ethical progress is reached when he overcomes fear... ...The central proposition which regulates the structure of Islam then is that there is fear in human nature, and the object of Islam is to free man from fear... ...and thus to give him a sense of his personality, to make him conscious of himself as a source of power.”¹⁴

Over and above that, Iqbal comes across as a firm believer in submission to the comprehensive, multifarious, unified vision, and a higher ethical or revelation-based code furnished by Islam as guidance in all spheres of life:¹⁵

“The faith which you represent recognizes the worth of the individual, and disciplines him to give away all to the service of God and man. Its possibilities are not yet exhausted. It can still create a new world where the social rank of man is not determined by his caste or colour, or the amount of dividend he earns, but by the kind of life he lives; where the poor tax the rich, where human society is founded not on the equality of stomachs but the equality of spirits, where an

untouchable can marry the daughter of a king, where private ownership is a trust and where capital cannot be allowed to accumulate so as to dominate the real producer of wealth. This superb idealism of your faith, however, needs emancipation from the medieval fancies of theologians and legists...”¹⁶

Iqbal also has his views on the education of Muslim women, to whom, according to him, nature has allocated different functions than men, which have to be performed right, because they are equally essential for a human family to be healthy and prosperous. He rejects the Western notion of emancipation of women as harmful and one leading to complex social problems, and presents his own formula:

“The Muslim woman ...is the principal depository of the religious idea. In the interests of the continuous national life, therefore, it is extremely necessary to give her, in the first place, a sound religious education. That must, however, be supplemented by a general knowledge of Muslim history, domestic economy, and hygiene. This will enable her to give a degree of intellectual companionship to her husband, and successfully to do the duties of motherhood... ...All subjects which have a tendency to de-womanise or de-muslimise her must be carefully excluded from her education.”¹⁷

Yet another aspect of Iqbal's emphasis on education and training relates to his concern for the economic welfare of the masses, which is consonant with the teachings of eighteenth-century Indian reformer Shah Wali'ullah, who believed that a just economic system is an essential part of an ideal society. Being in an era that fell about 150 years after Shah Wali'ullah, and mindful of first the industrial revolution followed by the communist revolution that both spanned the same century and half, Iqbal stresses on technical education as a path towards greater economic prosperity:¹⁸

“The Muslim public worker... ...has hitherto concentrated almost all his energies on the point of securing our due share in government service. The effort is certainly laudable... ...but he must remember that government service as a field for the production of wealth is

extremely limited. It offers prospects of economic elevation only to a few individuals; the general health of a community depends largely on its economic independence... ...we must have a system of technical education which is, in my opinion, even more important than higher education. The former touches the general economic condition of the masses which form the backbone of a community, the latter only a few individuals who happen to possess more than average intellectual energy. The charity of the wealthier classes among us must be so organised as to afford opportunities of a cheap technical education to the children of our community. But industrial and commercial training alone is not sufficient. In economic competition the ethical factor plays an equally important part. The virtues of thrift, mutual trust, honesty, punctuality and co-operation are as much valuable assets as professional skill... ...If we want to turn out good working men, good shopkeepers, good artisans, and above all good citizens, we must first make them good Muslims.”¹⁹

Fourthly, Iqbal is of the firm view that an ideal society must also be a peaceful one as he truly believes that “Islam is essentially a religion of peace...” and “...all forms of political and social disturbance are condemned by the Quran in the most uncompromising terms.”²⁰ He elaborates that all wars fought during the life of the Holy Prophet (PBUH) were defensive ones, and that even in defensive wars the Holy Prophet (PBUH) had prohibited unnecessary cruelty towards the defeated, hastening to add, “I quote here the touching words which he [the Holy Prophet (PBUH)] addresses to his followers when they were starting for the fight:

“In avenging the injuries inflicted upon us, disturb not the harmless votaries of domestic seclusion, spare the weakness of the female sex, injure not the infant at the breast, or those who are ill in bed. Abstain from demolishing the dwellings of the unresisting inhabitants, destroy not the means of their subsistence, nor their fruit trees, and touch not the palm.”²¹

Iqbal further explains that the “ideal of Islam is to secure social peace at any cost. All methods of violent change in society are condemned in the most

unmistakable language. Tartushi – a Muslim lawyer of Spain – is quite true to the spirit of Islam when he says: 'Forty years of tyranny are better than one hour of anarchy'."22

Finally, a discussion of the nature and values of Iqbal's ideal society would be incomplete until such a society is also declared to be democratic in nature, because, to Iqbal's mind, democracy "is the most important aspect of Islam regarded as a political ideal."²³ He additionally posits that, contrary to the democracy of Europe, the democracy of Islam "did not grow out of the extension of economic opportunity, it is a spiritual principle based on the assumption that every human being is a centre of latent power..."²⁴ and, "It is clear that the fundamental principle laid down in the Quran is the principle of election; the details or rather the translation of this principle into a workable scheme of government is left to be determined by other considerations. Unfortunately, however, the idea of election did not develop on strictly democratic lines, and the Muslim conquerors consequently failed to do anything for the political improvement of Asia."²⁵ This reveals Iqbal's thinking that Islamic political doctrine is, by some measures, consistent with the prevailing Western doctrine, and that by proposing the adoption of the Western notion of election, Muslims will, in some part, be embracing their own tradition. He is but "...careful to base his argument in this regard on the primary textual source of Islam, the Quran; he not only rejects centuries-old Muslim historical practice of dynasticism, he subjects it to severe critique... ..he throws the door wide open for a fresh formulation of Muslim political theory in the light of today's circumstances."²⁶ In a letter written by Iqbal in the last year of his life (on 28th May 1937) to the Founding Father of Pakistan, Mohammad Ali Jinnah, Iqbal also brings to light his social democratic leanings and their consonance, subject to some possible adjustments, with Islamic political doctrine:

"The question... ..is: how is it possible to solve the problem of Muslim poverty? And the whole future of the [All India Muslim] League depends on the League's activity to solve this question. If the League can give no such promises I am sure the Muslim masses will remain indifferent to it as before... ..Happily there is a solution in the enforcement of the Law of Islam and its further development in the light of modern ideas. After a long and careful study of Islamic Law I have

come to the conclusion that if this system of Law is properly understood and applied, at last the right to subsistence is secured to everybody... ..For Islam the acceptance of social democracy in some suitable form and consistent with the legal principles of Islam is not a revolution but a return to the original purity of Islam... ..Perhaps this is the best reply you can give to the atheistic socialism of Jawahar Lal Nehru.”²⁷

Therefore, Iqbal’s ideas, in conclusion, instruct with clarity and conviction that an ideal society is one that is driven by modern and reconstructed Islamic principles of human unity, human equality, and human freedom, working under a peaceful, socially democratic system, and the moral, social, political, and economic amelioration of the masses through proper training, education, and engagement. It would be apt here to close this paper with a quote from the final paragraph of Iqbal’s historic Allahabad address of 1930 in which he is said to have first presented the idea for a separate homeland for the Muslims of India, which later became Pakistan:

“Rise above sectional interests and private ambitions, and learn to determine the value of your individual and collective action... ..in the light of the ideal which you are supposed to represent. Pass from matter to spirit. Matter is diversity; spirit is light, life and unity... ..If today you focus your vision on Islam and seek inspiration from the ever-vitalising idea embodied in it, you will be only reassembling your scattered forces, regaining your lost integrity, and thereby saving yourself from total destruction. One of the profoundest verses in the Quran teaches us that the birth and rebirth of the whole of humanity is like the birth and rebirth of a single individual. Why cannot you who, as a people, can well claim to be the first practical exponents of this superb conception of humanity, live and move and have your being as a single individual?”²⁸

NOTES AND REFERENCES

¹ Muhammad Iqbal, "The Muslim Community – a Sociological Study", in *Speeches, Writings and Statements of Iqbal*, ed. Latif Ahmed Sherwani (Lahore: Iqbal Academy Pakistan, 5th Edition 2009), p. 120.

² Muhammad Iqbal, *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*, ed. Saeed Sheikh (Lahore: Iqbal Academy Pakistan, 1996) p. 122.

³ Muhammad Iqbal, "Political Thought in Islam", in *Speeches, Writings and Statements of Iqbal*, op. cit. p. 141.

⁴ Muhammad Iqbal, "The Muslim Community – a Sociological Study", in *Speeches, Writings and Statements of Iqbal*, op. cit. p. 125.

⁵ Mustansir Mir, *Iqbal* (Lahore: Iqbal Academy Pakistan, 2006), p. 123.

⁶ Muhammad Iqbal, "Islam and Ahmadism", in *Speeches, Writings and Statements of Iqbal*, op. cit. pp. 231–232.

⁷ Mustansir Mir, *Iqbal* op. cit. p. 124.

⁸ Muhammad Iqbal, "Islam as a Moral and Political Ideal", in *Speeches, Writings and Statements of Iqbal*, op. cit. p. 109.

⁹ Muhammad Iqbal, "The Muslim Community – a Sociological Study", in *Speeches, Writings and Statements of Iqbal*, op. cit. p. 136.

¹⁰ Mustansir Mir, *Iqbal* op. cit. p. 130.

¹¹ Muhammad Iqbal, "Presidential Address Delivered at the Annual Session of the All-India Muslim Conference, Lahore, 21st March 1932", in *Speeches, Writings and Statements of Iqbal*, op. cit. p. 45.

¹² Muhammad Iqbal, "The Muslim Community – a Sociological Study", in *Speeches, Writings and Statements of Iqbal*, op. cit. pp. 132–133.

¹³ Mustansir Mir, *Iqbal* op. cit. pp. 131–132.

¹⁴ Muhammad Iqbal, "Islam as a Moral and Political Ideal", in *Speeches, Writings and Statements of Iqbal*, op. cit. pp. 102–103.

¹⁵ Mustansir Mir, *Iqbal* op. cit. p. 122.

¹⁶ Muhammad Iqbal, "Presidential Address Delivered at the Annual Session of the All-India Muslim Conference, Lahore, 21st March 1932", in *Speeches, Writings and Statements of Iqbal*, op. cit. p. 44.

¹⁷ Muhammad Iqbal, "The Muslim Community – a Sociological Study", in *Speeches, Writings and Statements of Iqbal*, op. cit. pp. 134–135.

¹⁸ Mustansir Mir, *Iqbal* op. cit. pp. 126–127.

¹⁹ Muhammad Iqbal, "The Muslim Community – a Sociological Study", in *Speeches, Writings and Statements of Iqbal*, op. cit. pp. 134–135.

²⁰ Muhammad Iqbal, "Islam as a Moral and Political Ideal", in *Speeches, Writings and Statements of Iqbal*, op. cit. p. 112.

²¹ *Ibid.* p. 111.

²² *Ibid.* p. 113.

²³ *Ibid.* p. 115.

²⁴ Muhammad Iqbal, "Muslim Democracy", in *Speeches, Writings and Statements of Iqbal*, op. cit. p. 157.

²⁵ Muhammad Iqbal, "Political Thought in Islam", in *Speeches, Writings and Statements of Iqbal*, op. cit. p. 153.

²⁶ Mustansir Mir, *Iqbal* op. cit. pp. 136–137.

²⁷ G. Allana (ed.), *Pakistan Movement Historical Documents* (Karachi: Department of International Relations, University of Karachi, 1969), p. 129.

²⁸ Muhammad Iqbal, "Presidential Address Delivered at the Annual Session of the All-India Muslim League, Allahabad, 29th December 1930", in *Speeches, Writings and Statements of Iqbal*, op. cit. p. 29.