

IQBAL, ISLAMIC FAITH, AND ISLAMIC CIVILIZATION

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Allama Muhammad Iqbal (born 9th November 1877), being a poet, philosopher, intellectual, political thinker, and statesman, had keenly studied the Islamic religious heritage, amplified the Prophet's philosophy, and cultivated a highly refined literary taste both in poetry and in prose.

The early years of Iqbal's life (in the last two decades of the nineteenth century), spent initially at a *madrasa* (religious school) and then at a mission school, together with his parents' training, gave Iqbal a deep religious and mystical orientation, which he was to retain for the rest of his life. His love for the Islamic scripture, the Quran, is well-known. Iqbal has himself claimed that his poetry is no more than an elucidation of the Quranic message. His father once advised him to read the Quran as if it were being revealed to him directly from God, for only then, he said, would Iqbal truly understand it. This remark left an indelible impression on Iqbal's mind. In one of his verses, Iqbal pleads to the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH):

If indeed there is anything in my words other than the Quran,
Then, O Prophet... ... Disgrace me on the day of reckoning,
And do not allow me the honour of kissing your feet.

On the other hand, in his three years as a student in Europe (1905–1908), Iqbal made close and critical study of Western civilization, on which he was to comment in much of his later work. While he admired certain aspects of that civilization, he was critical of its secular character and warned Muslims of blindly imitating the West. "The storm from the West has transformed Muslims into real Muslims" wrote Iqbal in his landmark poem *Tulū-i Islam* (The Rise of Islam), an observation that applied first and foremost to Iqbal himself as he underwent a major change in his view and estimation of nationalism.

Iqbal had previously championed the cause of Indian nationalism and had worked to foster Hindu-Muslim unity. To him, loyalty to the country could co-exist without any serious tension with one's commitment to one's religion. But here he witnessed first-hand the deep discord that jingoistic nationalism had caused among the major European powers and that, several years later, was to climax in World War I. Iqbal's dedication thus turned to the ideological universalism of Islam, and this transformation had far-reaching consequences for his poetry and thought.

In 1911, just three years after Iqbal returned from Europe to his homeland and settled in Lahore, the British government under Hindu pressure reversed the 1905 partition of the Bengal province, which caused grave disappointment to the Muslims. Also, the International scene was depressing from the Muslim perspective such that Italy had occupied Libya, France annexed Morocco, and several Balkan states attacked Turkey, divesting it of its East European possessions. And thus the culminating local and international events had caused incredible despair and helplessness in many sensitive Muslims, including Iqbal, whose life from this point on is marked by a growing earnestness of purpose.

In both his poetry as well as his prose, Iqbal thus began to address the global plight of Muslims, and, in this process, his philosophical and political ideas started to create an enduring architecture. The global Muslim community – the *Ummah* – became a major focus of Iqbal's attention, and a part of his sense of mission, in the post-Europe period. From being an Indian nationalist who had written "We are Indians and India our country is the best in the whole world..." he now wrote the Islamic Community Song, proclaiming, "We are Muslims, and the whole world is our country."

Formerly a supporter of Hindu-Muslim unity, Iqbal eventually became doubtful about the viability of the project – he stood for Hindu-Muslim rapprochement but did not think Hindu-Muslim unity a practical proposition – concluding that the Muslims of India must maintain their distinct religious and cultural identity as he spoke of the need of a separate electoral system for Hindus and Muslims.

In December 1930, at the annual meeting of the All-India Muslim League held at Allahabad, Iqbal delivered his famous presidential address in which he proposed the creation of a separate homeland for at least the Muslims of northwest India. In 1931, he represented the Muslims of India at a meeting of the World Islamic Congress held in Jerusalem. In 1931 and 1932, again representing India's Muslims, Iqbal participated in the London Round Table Conferences held to decide India's political future. In 1933, he travelled to Afghanistan at the invitation of Nadir Shah, who wished to consult with Iqbal about Afghanistan's political system.

Although he did not live to see the creation of Pakistan in 1947, he is revered as its spiritual father and as its national poet. Iqbal died in Lahore at dawn on

21st April 1938. His funeral, which was led by the Imam of the historic Badshahi Mosque at Lahore, Maulana Ghulam Murshid, was attended by more than fifty thousand people. He is buried beneath the high walls of the Badshahi Mosque, Lahore, in a simple mausoleum designed by Nawab Zain Yar Jang of Hyderabad, Deccan, the exterior of which is made of red stone imported from the city of Dholpur in India and the white marble inside is gifted by Nadir Shah of Afghanistan.

Both as religion and as civilization, Islam occupies a central place in Iqbal's thought and poetry. The main focus of his work – particularly his poetry – unlike that of a typical Muslim theologian, is Islam as a living faith and a lived reality.

Iqbal was a keen and appreciative student of early Islamic history. He firmly believed in the validity of the Islamic Project initiated by the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) in seventh-century Arabia. Guided by Divine revelation, the Prophet aimed at establishing a model community that would at once be religious and humane, spiritual and egalitarian. But, in Iqbal's view, while the Islamic Project under Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) and his immediate successors did produce the desired results, it later went off course, with disastrous results – even though, from time to time, and here and there, the project was revived in part, leading Muslims to make remarkable achievements in diverse areas. As the political system degenerated from Caliphate to kingship, justice-based *Sharia* was replaced with a system of treachery and palace intrigues. The resultant decadence and barrenness of the *Ummah* thus became Iqbal's main pre-occupation.

Iqbal argues that the essence of *Tawhid* (Islamic monotheism), as a working idea is equality, solidarity, and freedom. The state, from an Islamic standpoint, is an endeavour to transform these ideal principles into a realization of definite human organization. In a short poem in his first Urdu collection *Bang-i-Dara*, Iqbal refers to a nation as a body and the individuals comprising it to its limbs: those in industry are the nation's hands and feet, those who help to administer the government are its beautiful face, and those who cultivate arts – Iqbal mentions poets as representing this class – are its eyes.

It follows that the failure of society's leaders or representatives can have disastrous consequences for the entire society. This understanding lies behind Iqbal's

scathing critique of the leaders of historical Muslim societies. Iqbal holds the following three factors especially responsible for the general decadence of the Muslim world in recent centuries:

(1) *Mullaism*. This is the name Iqbal gives to the hidebound attitude of the *mullas*, the conventional *ulema*, or religious scholars. Always a source of strength to Islam', the *ulema*, 'during the course of centuries, especially since the destruction of Baghdad in 1258... became extremely conservative and would not allow any freedom or *ijtihad*, i.e. the forming of independent judgment in matters of law.

(2) *Mysticism*. In the history of Muslim societies, mysticism used to be, in the words of Iqbal, 'a force of spiritual education'. In the later centuries it disintegrated, cutting off Muslims from the actualities of life. Mystical practices increasingly became a mere means of exploiting the ignorance and gullibility of people. He adds that this created in Muslims the tendency to ignore the Law – the only force holding together Muslim society, and replaced Muslim Democracy with Spiritual Aristocracy.

(3) *Kingship*. Protection of their 'dynastic interests' being their first priority, Muslim kings did not hesitate to sell their countries to the highest bidder.

Iqbal's criticism of mullaism, mysticism, and kingship as the main factors responsible for the decadence of Muslim societies is not a blanket criticism of Muslim legists, mystics, and rulers. Iqbal held that, in early Islamic history, the three institutions of law, mysticism, and politics embodied, for varying lengths of time, the dynamic Islamic spirit. In later periods, however the legists became prisoners of formalism, the mystics were seduced by a false dichotomy of spirit and matter, and the rulers sacrificed collective interest at the altar of personal gain.

Thus, all in all, the Muslim of Iqbal's era is barely a shadow of his former self: bereft of military as well as financial power, he is also totally disconnected with the genuine nourishing roots of his tradition – the Book of God – as observed by Iqbal in his last Persian work *Armaghan-i-Hijaz*:

His pure blood has lost its brilliance,
And tulips no longer grow in his wasteland.

His scabbard is empty, just like his purse,
And his book is in the vault of a house in ruins.

Yet, Iqbal believes, that all is not lost. Just as Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) was the final Messenger, sent by God to direct humankind, so, according to Iqbal in his early Persian work *Rumuz-i-Bikhudi*, the Muslims are the final community. The poet conceives the name *khatam-i-aqwam*, the “seal of the nations” inspired by the Quran (33:40), where Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) is called *khatam al-nabiyyin*, the “seal of the prophets”, sent by God to promote truth and justice in this world. For Iqbal, the Muslim community still has a spark of life: he observes in *Armaghan-i-Hijaz*, “the old bough still has some moisture left in it” and in *Payam-i-Mashriq*, yet another Persian work, “this wine-cup still has a few drops of drink left in it”.

Iqbal is certain that the Muslims are capable of creating a new world and marshalling a new era – a Muslim believes in God and possesses some of His attributes (*Armaghan-i-Hijaz*), and it was from the Muslim civilization that the modern West drew its inspiration, with many of the furnishings and accessories adorning the West’s mansion being borrowed from Muslims (*Asrar-i-Khudi*). Armed by this optimism, Iqbal posits a program for the renewal of the internationalised Muslim community.

Instead of calling for a wholesale rejection of tradition, Iqbal aims at reinvigorating it – by subjecting it to a critical scrutiny, with a view to retaining its kernel and discarding its husk. Iqbal emphasizes that the existence of competent leaders is crucial to a society’s viability and progress, but so is the well-being – especially the economic well-being – of the masses. “It is the masses who are the backbone of the nation; they ought to be better fed, better housed, and properly educated” he wrote in a letter, adding that “Muslim social organizations should realize that their main obligation is to elevate the masses, not to exalt an individual”.

On the spiritual side, Iqbal is emphatic that Muslims must begin by renewing their commitment to their religion, to emulate the Prophet in their lives, to hold fast to their foremost source of guidance and inspiration, the Quran: by truly acting upon it, they can, like their illustrious forefathers, bring about earth-shaking changes in the world (*Armaghan-i-Hijaz*).

Iqbal explains in detail what, to him, are the four basic pillars of the Islamic community. First is *Tawhid*, being belief in one God, which is the source of all good, all insight, and all power, which serves as the focal point for thought, feeling, and action, which gives hope and courage, which cuts off fear and despair, and which establishes equality and freedom among Muslims. Second is Prophecy, being the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) who conveyed and explained the message of God to Muslims, who practically established an egalitarian system of law and ethics, and who unified the *Ummah* not on the narrow basis of territorial nationalism but on the basis of the belief that the creatures of one God make one humanity. Third, the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) brought with him the Quran, a book that must serve as the foundational text and eternal source of guidance for Muslims, setting out the *Sharia* as the Islamic code of conduct. Fourth, the *Ka'bah* where Muslims from all over the world come to perform the pilgrimage, serves as the real and living centre of Muslim unity.

But Iqbal asserts in his Persian work *Payam-i-Mashriq* that commitment to Islam will not by itself work miracles. Muslims must realize that life is a struggle and not a set of rights to be claimed unconditionally. They should understand that the particular community to which they belong requires them to sink their tribal, ethnic, cultural, racial, and linguistic differences so that they might create a body politic that is founded on Islam's universal and inclusive principles; a Muslim's first identity is as a Muslim, and not as an Afghan, Turk, or Tartar. They must also learn the lesson of self-reliance: they should be like the self-respecting Turkish sailor who sang as he rowed his boat, saying that if he ran into trouble on the high seas, he would call upon none other than the storm itself for help.

Iqbal's analysis of the Muslim community and his program for its global renewal conclude with the vision that Islam is an active and living source of inspiration, that Muslims in their entire history were able to turn Islam into a world religion and a world civilization on the totally valid assumption that life calls upon one to act – with vision and mettle – and that barren speculation and dull formalism in a community are guaranteed signs of death and decay.

It must also be stated, in conclusion, and with relevance to contemporary times, that Iqbal believes Islam shuns violence and promotes peace, that Islam encourages the emancipation of women, and that Islam promotes fierce pursuit of higher education and technical knowhow.

In a widely quoted paper of his, Iqbal posits 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.” He elaborates that all wars fought during the life of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) were defensive ones, and that even in defensive wars the Prophet 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.”

Iqbal also believes that Muslim women have a key role in an ideal Islamic society – to them 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.”

Lastly, Iqbal also asserts that a system of proper and well-grounded education could truly bring about a renaissance of thought and action in the Muslim world, since, to him, 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. 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:"

He observes that it is "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" and that "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."

Iqbal undoubtedly 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:

"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..."