

ISLAMIC IDENTITY IN INDIAN SUBCONTINENT- THE CASE OF MOHAMMAD IQBAL

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Abstract

From an avowed nationalist penning Sare jahan se accha (“My India is the best”) to fathering one of the first religiously motivated modern state, Mohammad Iqbal has found himself in the annals of history in a dichotomous role of poet-philosopher to religious communalist. This article seeks to link these seemingly disparate ideological phases in his life and argues that there was no contradiction between them. He was an original philosopher and had traces of proto-Gandhianism, postmodernism, romanticism, reformism, rationalism and Islamism.

The name of Mohammad Iqbal is connected with an important stage in the development of Muslim social thought in the Indo-Pakistan subcontinent- the formative stage of the Muslim nationalism. Iqbal’s religious, political and social views fully reflected the complexity and the contradiction of social nature of Muslim strata that were taking part in the national liberation movement for the independence of people of colonial India.

Key words: Islamic nationalism, Allama Iqbal, India-Pakistan

IQBAL’S METAPHYSICAL MOORINGS-

“I therefore demand the formation of a consolidated Muslim State in the best interests of India and Islam. (...) Communalism in its higher aspect, then, is indispensable to the formation of a harmonious whole in a country like India (...) In conclusion I cannot but impress upon you that the present crisis in the history of India demands a complete organization and unity of will and purpose in the Muslim community, both in your interest as a community, and in the interest of India as a whole”¹

Sir Iqbal was intellectually and spiritually moved by an array of philosophers, political theorists and religions across time and space. History has been unkind in its judgement of his eclecticism and depth of understanding. His brief stint in the west introduced him to Plato, Hegel, Kant, Nietzsche and Bergson. The latter made him disapprove of the Platonic claim on ‘Being’ and rather move towards Heraclitus’ view on time as ‘Becoming’. However, in a departure from the strict dichotomy of Being and Becoming in the western philosophical parlance Iqbal synthesised the possibility of knowledge or God by emphasising on the eternal and yet ever changing universe. The Italian theorist Alessandro Bausani identified the divine inspiration as the source of the forces of nature in Iqbal’s religio-philosophical system.

It is important to know that Iqbal did not advocate a single universal truth. His staticness in this regard is only limited to its essential nature and not the content. This is reflected in Iqbal’s admiration for Shah Waliullah’s historicism that interpretations of religion can be differing to space and time but the “essence of religion”² i.e. monotheism is universally applicable. Iqbal accommodated Kantian individualism with the eventuality of purposeful activity. And yet he agreed with Nietzsche in his critique of liberal rationalism. As Gordon-Polonskya mentions

As with Nietzsche, the man personality “ego” is at the center of Iqbal’s philosophical conception, despite its religious nature. As with Nietzsche’s superman, a characteristic of the ego striving towards constant action.³ Thus indigenising western rationalism from religious vantage has been Iqbal’s original contribution. Far from celebrating stagnant traditions, impressed by Hegelian dialectics he illustrated the dynamism in Islam by referring to Ibn-i-Muskawaih’s theory of life as progressive and evolutionary while dismissing any attempts fixing the nature of this movement such as historical materialism, which was fashionable in the contemporary circles. In Asrar-i-Khudi and Ramiz-i-Bekhudi Iqbal mentioned the imperative of combining the reformation of Islam with its ethical postulate of “the philosophy of man-activist.”⁴ Iqbal gave a static concept of truth while rationalising an a priori concept of God. By rejecting the determinism stemming from historical time, he struck a balance by giving eminence to the causal action and its creative interpretation (ijtihad). This surety and

¹ Iqbal : 7-8

² Gordon-Polonskya : 124

³ Ibid : 113

⁴ Ibid: 118

fundamental faith in knowledge led him to negate of speculative and dialectical Greek thought. Iqbal's appreciation of pantheistic Sufism describes his avowed fascination with unity with God and mystic truth.⁵

He blamed the Greek influence on Persia as the reason for later decay in the original Arabic Islamic thought. Greeks followed the precepts of “theoretical rationalism” in which the Sophistic argumentative tradition merits attention. Iqbal, on the other hand, praised the Koran for its “practical rationalism and knowledge through sense perception.”⁶ He was a critic of the decadent avatar of mysticism or tasawouf which led to endless philosophical meanderings in the quest for God. In his doctoral thesis *The Development of Metaphysics in Persia* he criticised this obstructionist and destructive philosophy as hindering Islam. He rationalised religion by imputing Nietzschean rationalist method in his assessment of the twelfth century philosopher Ghazali. This ‘Kant of Islam’ voiced for the limits of human reason while criticising Greek philosophy. The “reign of unbelief” meted out by rationalist and metaphysical assault on religion could be demolished by retrieving the original Islamic interpretations. In this vein, Iqbal dons the romanticist hat.

In a series of lectures *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*, he has voiced the embodiment of justice, scientific temper in religion for the all round development of human personality. He borrowed from the Ash'arite school of atomistic theory to reconcile the eternal creative imagery of God with perpetual and ceaseless activity in the universe. He arrived at a dialectically creative metasystem of existence which is sustained by absolute and relative truths.

IQBAL'S POLITICAL THOUGHT

The rationalist and praxis oriented approach of the holy text made him adopt a similar tactic in politics. He noted a “profound duality”⁷ in the political scene of colonial India. His role as a reformer of Islam made him visualise the revolutionary potential who Indian masses despite their utopian socialist aspirations were religiously conservative. Recognising this peculiar ‘modernity of tradition’ Iqbal was thoroughly impressed by Sir Sayyid Ahmed Khan for accommodating this contradiction. The latter voiced “the anti-imperialist ideology of Muslim nationalists and the pro- British “communalist” ideology of the elite of the Muslim community”.⁸

However Iqbal differed with Khan in latter's political somnolence with the British. His poems *Tasvir-i-Dard* and *Khuftaganj-i-Khak Say Istafar* (A Land Asleep) reflects the anguish of a young nationalist Iqbal. His association with *Anjuman-i-Himayat-i-Islam* disappointed in its support for British education and concerns of Muslim bourgeois classes. It is not remarkable that the secular and all embracing character of nationalism in Iqbal which is epitomised in *Naya Shivala* to pan Islamism advocated in *Shama Awr Shair* as would be seen later.

The 1857 revolt had placed Indian muslims under suspicions of anti British activities. The former class of Persian and heavily Persianised Islamic nobility has suffered tremendously under the new regime. Khan's advocacy for “national self help” matched the call for evaluating self or khudi by Iqbal. The estrangement caused by dethronement of the Khalifa in Turkey and collapse of Ottoman empire had psychological impact on Muslim selfhood across the world. Allama Iqbal's theory of self or khudi beckoned introspection within Islam as it had acquired a self denying and deprecating character in assimilation with new cultures. The renaissance of Islam was nothing but a reevaluation of the sad decline, something which critics have found as checking the liberal and progressive elements among Islamic intellectuals.⁹

However, reformation and change was inevitable to Iqbal in his appreciation of the October Revolution. His piece *Nava'i Mazdur* celebrated the proletarian revolutionary potential. He combined this simmering energy with the nacharia theory of nature by Sir Sayyid Ahmed Khan which has expolated the utilitarian use of knowledge of nature. Iqbal modified his theory to envision the creative possibilities for human action amidst the loss of consciousness in the modern world. Iqbal's works *Ramiz-i-Bekhudi* and *Asrar-i-Khudi* paint a Kafkaesque nightmare of loss of personality in an increasingly despondent society.

Iqbal found a cultural alternative to the British, somewhat similar to Gandhi's anti colonial stratagem to which Ashis Nandy refers to in *Intimate Enemy*. Like Iqbal's self doubts over Islamic heritage, the meaning of history in evolution of knowledge; Gandhi underscored the ‘living past’ in conjunction with the Karmic view of history. He had met Iqbal intellectually in simultaneously borrowing from the great and little traditions to create a

⁵ See Engineer A. A., 1980 for a more historical understanding of the advent of Islam in the mercantilist and surplus rich Persian society from the nomadic and desert peoples of Arabia. The material prosperity of the former enabled the proliferation of a separate intellectual class leaning towards rationalism.

⁶ Ibid : 59

⁷ Gordon-Polonsky : 109

⁸ Ibid : 110

⁹ Engineer A. A., 1980 : 62

totality of Indian civilisational values and battle the British with “power” and “activism”. It is worthwhile to quote extensively

“He (Gandhi) rejected history and affirmed the primacy of myths over historical chronicles (... This) was the salience given by Indian culture to myth as a structures fantasy which, inits dynamic of the here-and-the-now, represents what in another culture would be called the dynamic of history. In other words, the diachronic relationships of history are mirrored in the synchronic relationship of myths. (...) Public consciousness was not seen as a causal product of history but as related to history non-causally through memories and anti-memories. (...) Gandhi, however, was a product of society which conceptualised the past, as a possible means of reaffirming or altering the present. (..) While this position does not fully negate history and interpretations of myths as history, (...) the Gandhian position does make a subsidiary anti-historical assumption that, because they (myths) faithfully contain history, because they are contemporary and, unlike history, are amenable to intervention, myths are the essence of a culture, history being at best superfluous and at worst misleading.”¹⁰

This is strangely reminiscent of idealism in Iqbal’s attempts at philosophising Islam and the need for its resurgence. He was influenced by Jamal-ud-din Afghani’s attempt to resist the west’s overbearing dominance through Islam. This was the genesis of pan Islamism in Iqbal’s political moorings. He was univocal in the need for modernism in Muslim states and had criticised the then Iranian state for vesting powers to ulama in political affairs. He rejected theocracy of any kind and maintained the call for equality of all men and need for solidarity to resist domination. He also questioned Kemal Ataturk’s position of a dominating state and subservient religion.

Iqbal’s analysis of several Islamic concepts like qawm, ummah, millat provide a fruitful analysis in his transition from a nationalist to supposed communalist. He has rejected the society-nation-religion dichotomy and yet maintained the independence of these social terms. Millat refers to the followers of the Prophet whereas qawm is a social group. There was space in Koranic interpretation to allow for alliance between followers and non believers for the cause of nationalism. Most importantly, Iqbal in his review of Koranic concepts refers to the possibility of a qawm (nation) having millat (religion) but not “quam of millat” or nation of sharia. This meant that the Koran called for Ummah or worldwide affiliation of believers. The universality of this Koranic injunction refers to the “spiritual brotherhood of Islam”.¹¹

The later historical development of proliferation of medieval Islamic states relegated quamiyat or nationalism to refer to believers. This evolved the concept of quam to denoting a nation with territory. Allama Iqbal transitions from this pan Islamist phase to concrete nationhood following the historical evolution of Islamic thought and political power. His transformation from abstract philosophical journeys to political realities does not reflect a break but rather a continuity in his thought system.

“The religious ideal of Islam, therefore, is organically related to the social order which it has created. (...)The unity of an Indian nation, therefore, must be sought, not in the negation but in the mutual harmony and cooperation of the many. (..) I entertain the highest respect for the customs, laws, religions, and social institutions of other communities. (...)”¹²

He and Abul Kalam Azad were closely associated INC but he separated later in his quest for equality and self determination of Muslims. This stemmed from the elitist and bourgeois affiliations of INC which Subhas Chandra Bose was to criticise later also due to Muslim League’s catchphrase for Pakistan.

CONCLUSION

He linked the social and political question together, unlike Gandhi who avoided pernicious aspects of caste and religion altogether. Why did Iqbal demand a Muslim state in India ? To him, the question of decadence in Islam, political subjugation of India, the plight of worker and peasants were linked in an intractable mass of system of dominance that stretched to the realms of knowledge production to actual social relations. The colonial reality had produced a series of confounding questions of self doubt within ancient traditions and a way to resolve the contradictions had to found by confronting . It is apt to sign off with his extracts of his legendary monologue

“During the last five hundred years religious thought in Islam has been practically stationary. (...) With the reawakening of Islam, (...) it is necessary to examine; in an independent spirit. (...) Besides it is not possible to ignore the antireligious and especially anti-Islamic propaganda in Central Asia which has already crossed the

¹⁰ Nandy A., 1983 : 55-58

¹¹ See Madani. 2005

¹² Iqbal,1930

Indian frontier.¹³ (...) The task before modern Muslim is, therefore, immense. He has to completely rethink the whole system of Islam without completely breaking with the past.¹⁴

Given the current conundrum of identity in Islam and dilemmas of statehood and nationalism, Iqbal's prophetic diagnosis of the crisis in religions in the modern world can be reassessed. His separatist anguishes can be seen as unavoidable diatribes in an atmosphere of blatant elitism in social and political circles. As the spiritual and cultural founder of Pakistan and Bangladesh, Iqbal's fundamental dilemma has plagued one of the most volatile and yet culturally compatible geographical regions in the world.

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¹³ Iqbal, 2009: 6

¹⁴ Ibid, 107