IMPACT OF IQBAL ON BENGALI MUSLIM THOUGHT

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The task of tracing out the impact of an author on individuals, groups or classes of people, on communities and nations, is indeed a difficult one. If the author belongs to the same language-group and to the same community to which his influence is to be related, then it becomes a comparatively easy task. Even the slightest shade of resemblance is likely to be found out. If, however, these are different, one needs conclusive evidence from which alone valid inferences can be drawn. In a world of shrinking distances and rapid thought-movements this has become all the more difficult. Different people may be thinking on the same lines and at the same time and it may be silly to trace the influence of the one on the other. Again, a particular idea or thought may originate with several persons in which case to single out the particular person from amongst these may prove wellnigh impossible. It is only when the author concerned is distinguishable because of ideas of a unique nature that his impact on others can be clearly detected.

The fact of the matter is that the impact of Iqbal on the Bengali Muslim mind can, in force and depth, be paralleled only to that of Tagore on the Bengali Mind. Now, while Tagore's influence over the Bengali mind has been frequently acclaimed and rightly too, the impact of Iqbal on Bengalees has yet to be studied and assessed.

This is indeed a difficult task. For one thing, it demands a deep knowledge of Iqbal and the Bengali mind and an equal mastery over both, which is unfortunately rare. Moreover, there has been very little work in this regard either in Bengali or in Urdu. This important field of research our scholars have so far left unexplored—a fact which we all must deplore. I am no scholar, I must frankly confess, and my knowledge of both Iqbal and the Bengali mind is very limited. If I have agreed to tread on unfamiliar ground, I have done so in the hope that others more competent will soon take up this question.

To a Bengali, the name of Iqbal is invariably linked up with the idea of Pakistan. I would, therefore, start my study from this point. Dr. Md.

Shahidullah, a wellknown Bengali writer and linguist, has remarked in his book "Iqbal" that what Bankim Chandra did for the Bengali Hindus, Iqbal did for the Muslims of this sub-continent. Although it may sound paradoxical, the idea of Nationalism among Bengali Muslims owes much to Iqbal's teachings. I say paradoxical because Iqbal himself was no votary of Nationalism but it was undoubtedly he, more than any one else, who gave the Muslims of the Indo-Pakistan sub-continent the intellectual basis for the demand for carving out a home land of theirs. The call to awake, how-ever, came much earlier. It may be traced as far back as Titumir's militarily ill-conceived but politically vehement and spontaneous movement in the first quarter of the 19th century. But the voice which broke through the inertia of the Muslims of the Indo-Pakistan sub-continent and gave them a new feeling of confidence was the voice of Hali. His call was taken up and his voice echoed by Mir Mosharraf Husain, Mozzammul Huq, Ismail Husain Shirazi and others whose exhortations to Bengalees to rise and move for-ward reverberated throughout the length and breadth of the country. But the call was expressed in the most general terms, and ideas and ideals of the new revival were rarely clearly stated and defined. Besides the literary appeal of these writers was not very great. It was, therefore, left to Nazrul Islam in the first quarter of the 20th century to capture the imagination of Bengali Muslims and to create an urge in them for throwing off the century told enslavement. While Nazrul Islam undoubtedly was the greatest single force in rousing the Bengali Muslims to the consciousness of freedom, he unfortunately did not emphasise the role of Muslims as Muslims. Although fully conscious of Islam's cultural role, he did not choose to identify it particularly. Nor did he champion its cause as vehemently and enthusiastically as he did that of the fight against the foreign rulers. In a correct assessment, Nazrul Islam will, therefore, appear as a product of the Indian Nationalist Movement in which Muslims too had undoubtedly played a glorious part, although not always from the same platform, rather than as a champion of the Muslims and the Muslim cause in particular. Uptil now the dominant note in the Bengali Muslim thought was an awareness of the glories of the past, the decadance of the present and the need of throwing off the yoke of foreign rule. And in all these Nazrul Islam's voice rang at the top. While he was the reigning monarch, we first heard the voice of Iqbal through a very able translation of 'Shikwah' by Ashraf Ali Khan, a poet who, driven by poverty, sacrificed his life while still very young. Soon came Iqbal's plea

for a Muslim home-land from the Allahabad Session of the All-India Muslim League. The idea of a Muslim nationhood had at last been clearly defined and stated. And Iqbal overnight wrought a remarkable transformation in the thought-movement of the Muslims of Bengal. The comprehension of Islam and its principles, the depiction of the glories of Islam and the portrayal of Muslim life were nothing new to Bengali Muslim literature. One can trace these as far back as the 16th century and since then there has been no flagging of enthusiasm in Islam and Muslim life, but what Iqbal now brought to us were radically different religious ideas and conceptions of man and society in Islam. He had reinterpreted Islam in terms of the modern world and had given it a new meaning. And what is more he kindled the unique consciousness in man of his true status and importance in relation to God and the universe, so that he may imbibe the necessary impetus for action. In his clarion call for action, the Muslim youth heard his own heart-beats. In Bengal the finest flowering of this new spirit is to be found in Farrukh Ahmed's poetry of which the best example is his "Satsagarer Majhi" (Mariner of the Seven Seas), first published in 1944 in Calcutta. Writing during the tumultuous days of the Second World War, Farrukh had clearly indicated his debt for the ideas to his great master by dedicating the book to Iqbal.

The days of ease and sleep are over: embark on a new voyage. We hear the call of the sea.

I woke up at night and heard the clamorous waves in God's world: stars fall in mid ocean and rock our ship.

Tear yourself away from the balmy rest of nights of ease: unfurl your sails in new waters, O'Sindbad!

Farrukh had used the Sindbad myth to rouse his countrymen from their stupor. He had prompted them to action, so that they might seek new frontiers. To him, however, the goal was crystal clear: he has to reach the golden gate of Hira.

I do not think it necessary to quote from Iqbal to bring out the relationship between the two. It is too obvious.

Not only Farrukh Ahmed, even older poets did not escape the influence of Iqbal. Shahadat Hussain, who was well known for his highly sanskritised diction, wrote a number of poems preaching the idea of a brotherhood of all

Muslim peoples as well as of Muslim Nationalism. So did Gholam Mustafa, but with lesser popular appeal and success.

The note of protest in Kankal (Skeleton), the only printed volume of the late Ashraf Ali Khan, can also be traced to the influence of Iqbal with whom Ashraf Ali was already familar through his translation of 'Shikwah'. He says:

'In my heart burns the fire of pangs; it is now a volcano. Pardon me, for some of it will burst out of the stove. In the mosque of Allah is now the Kingdom of Mulla, whose only work is now to declare revolutionaries as Kafers. Forgetting that in the heart of the devotee is God's seat, they want to imprison Him with their beards and turbans.'

As I have already stated, Iqbal first struck root in Bengali thought through Shikwah. What it lacked in poetic qualities was more than compensated by its sentimental appeal. In point of fact, Iqbal's appeal to Bengalis was greatly an emotional one. The poet rather than the thinker captured their imagination. No wonder his influence first percolated through Bengali poetry. As the burst of emotion gradually calmed down, the serious content of his writings came to be more and more recognised. A signal service in this regard was done by the West Bengal poet, Amiya Chakravarty, who was one of the very first to draw the attention of Bengalis to Iqbal's great genius. Mr. Abdul Huq published translations of the "Lectures on Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam", serially in the Masik Mohammadi. While stray writings on Iqbal and his poetry and message continued in periodicals published by Muslims, Mujibur Rahman Khan wrote a book entitled 'Pakistan' in 1942 which borrowed heavily from Iqbal's writings. The essence of Mujibur Rahman's arguments could be found in Iqbal's Presidential Address at the All-India Muslim League Conference at Allahabad in 1930. But for a fuller mirroring in Bengali of Iqbal's thoughts and ideas, particularly in the religious field, one must turn to post-Independence years.

Writing on the progressive role of Iqbal, Wilfred Cantwell Smith mentioned "throughout his life he devoted himself to inciting activity, to insisting eloquently that life is movement, that action is good, that the universe is composed of processes and not of static things". And again "His Islam repudiated the conception of a fixed universe dominated by a dictator God and to be accepted by servile man. In its place he would put a view of

an unfinished growing universe, ever being advanced by men and by God through man". To quote again, K. G. Saiyidian explained his master's conception of religion thus: "It is a force that liberates, not a force that imprisons. Iqbal's religion—of which he finds the best and most congenial example in Islam—demands breadth of vision and toleration and sets free the dynamic and dangerous power of thought—which religious fanatics have always sought to suppress—because restrictions on this, the most precious of God's great gifts to man, are a denial of his distinctive significance in the scheme of the universe". Both Smith and Saiyidain have quoted so extensively from Iqbal in support of their views—which are now too obvious to any student of the poet—that I need not recount them here again. Yet, this conception of God, universe, man and man's relationship to God and the processes of nature is so revolutionary that no thinking Muslim could ignore or outgrow its radical impact. In fact these teachings have become such common intellectual coins that we rarely credit them today to their original author. To cite an example I quote below from an essay by a Bengali author, Motahar Hussain Chowdhury whose first book "Smnskriti Katha'. (Talking About Culture) was posthumously published sometime back in Dacca. Writing about "our poverty" he lamented that the lack of a sense of religion was our greatest deficiency, to which all our other deficiencies could be traced. "Many of you" he points out, "will be shocked at this statement. 'Don't we strictly follow the tenets of the Scriptures and follow them unquestioningly? "Yet you say we have no religion'. But however hurt one may feel, I cannot avoid saying that religion does not lie in the ceremonies, it is to be found in the heart's comprehension and understanding . We have closed the door to the heart and enchained ourselves to the Scriptures only. That is why although the fear of religion constantly dogs us, we are not properly religiously-minded. By religion, I mean, the leading of an honest and ethical life illumined by love". Now, Motahar Hussain's conception of religion follows, I believe, to a great extent from the liberalising forces which Iqbal's teachings on the subject released. Whether he had borrowed these directly or they were common coin which came to him naturally, is immaterial. These were, however, thoughts which the present generation of Bengali Muslims did not find in any way challenging. They recur in the writings of significant authors quite frequently. Mohammad Wazed Ali, perhaps the most versatile and prolific of all contemporary Bengali essayists who also died a few years back, raised his powerful voice by way of warning,

against what he called falsehoods and hypocrisies of a section of the people. "As a matter of fact here lies the danger. We have the outer garb of religion. Nay, we decorate that garb and make it look more gorgeous and dazzling everyday. But we have entirely given up the desire to search and find out the inner truth lying hidden beneath that garb which alone is of real importance". In 'the desire to search' and 'the seeking of the inner truth', one hears a voice which could be as well Iqbal's.

A surer reflection of Iqbal's teachings is, however, traceable in Ebrahim Khan's socio-theosophical writings. In an essay on "The Status of Man in Islam" he wrote, "At the time of creation of man Allah said, 'I will create a representative on earth'. Can one imagine anything nobler than this for man? In this way Islam has glorified man at every step. Iqbal says man may be so powerful by his own actions that even God would decide his destiny by asking him first". Even if Ebrahim Khan did not mention Iqbal by name, the influence of the "Lectures on the Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam" would be clearly discernible in this essay. But 1 believe the best example in Bengali prose writings of the impact of lqbal's teachings may be found in a book entitled "Dharma Nirapekhya Rastra 0 Islam" (The Secular State and Islam) by Hasan Zaman, a young lecturer in the Dacca University. Zaman's progressive views and attitude towards religion closely follow the liberalism of the 'Lectures'. In point of fact, Iqbal's ideas about man's place in growing evolution and his acceptance of the world and material life have left their imprint on a number of other Bengali writers among whom mention may be made particularly of Gholam Mustafa and Dewan Mohammad Azraf.

It is interesting to note what reaction Iqbal had on a great poet like Jasimuddin. In one of the Seminars on Contemporary Literature conducted by the Dacca University last year, I had ex-pressed the opinion that nowhere else can one find the stamp of the unadulterated Bengali so unmistakably and so completely as in Jasimuddin. His poetry breathes the essence of the land and, therefore, more than any one else he represents the Bengali spirit, but he is little else. My emphasis is on the words: he is little else. Although Jasimuddin today ranks as the foremost East Pakistani poet, his appeal to the educated, intelligent modern Bengali readers, who are closely aware of the central problems of modern civilization and are, therefore, concerned with finer and subtler thought in poetry, is rather limited. He gives the impression

of a mind which has no contact with the world, e.g., beyond the East Pakistani village community. When such a poet writes about another great literary genius, one with whom he has had no personal acquaintance, it naturally attracts wide notice as Jasimuddin's poem on Iqbal Pathbhola Kabi did. In a series of romantic images Jasimuddin extols Iqbal whose abode, he thinks, is the rose Garden. He talks of Iqbal's message being carried far and wide by the nightingales and his poetry traversing the path of the rainbow. To him Iqbal's poetry is highly colourful and a fit material for the bride to transmit to the bridegroom through kisses on the bridal night. These are no doubt highly imaginative pieces, liberally used to convey the uniqueness of Iqbal's poetry but I believe in describing a poet of Iqbal's stature and giving unfamilar readers an idea of his poetry in such highly coloured images as used by Jasimuddin are totally inadequate. Although Iqbal was no votary of intellect, his poetry is anything but romantic and sentimental. To present Iqbal in purely fanciful language appears to me rather incongruous. As it is, while Jasimuddin's veneration for Iqbal is expressed in no uncertain manner, the poem conveys little of the kind of genius Iqbal was. Not only that, Jasimuddin is frankly doubtful if the underdog in his part of the world would find it possible to appreciate Iqbal! Would Iqbal, he enquires, pause for a while and take up their cause? I do not know if Jasimuddin is in sympathy with those critics who thought Iqbal an escapist, one who had no time to devote to thoughts of the 'have-nots'. Nothing could be farther from truth. Iqbal undoubtedly was not a socialist, in the technical sense of the term, but he was fully conscious of the unprecedented exploitation of man by man. He had an abhorrence for the unjust social organisation which bred and perpetuated bitter conflicts between groups and classes. These to him were manifestations of a scientific civilization dizzy with intellect and characterised by lack of love and absence of moral values. Thus the difference between the scientific socialist and Iqbal is really one of approach. While the former's attitude is dictated by necessity and expediency, the latter's is dictated by moral, religious and humanitarian considerations.

Jasimuddin, however, seems to have made amends towards the end of the poem when he says that we have no right to invoke Iqbal,since we did not give human beings their inherent rights. We have played and toyed with them. Our pride and vanity have led us astray. This is a sentiment which is unmistakenly Iqbalian.

I have dealt at length with Jasimuddin's solitary poem on Iqbal because I want it to be clearly understood that the mere fact that there are more meetings and discussions and books and writings on Iqbal in Bengali from year to year is no certain evidence of Iqbal's thoughts and message striking firm roots in East Pakistan's soil. While Iqbal's popularity among Bengalis has been steadily in-creasing, he is not yet fully and even adequately understood. For one thing the educated younger generation, who form the core of Bengali society, are no more as well acquainted with Persian and Urdu as their fathers and grandfathers used to be. For another, Iqbal's translators in Bengali, excepting a few, have not been quite competent. A third factor militating against the spread of Iqbal's poetry and message among the Bengali middle classes has been the militant attitude of some of his over-zealous followers who are more keen to use him for furthering their own social, political or even economic purposes than to provide forums for a correct assessment of his great genius. There is nothing unusual in this, for all great writers in all ages have been claimed by opposite groups, each trying to annex him to its own camp for furthering their its ends, since the ideas of a great creative writer are often so divergent and varied, touching life at so many points, that these are capable of a number of interpretations. This makes the need for a correct evaluation all the more imperative. And this can only be done when one is not emotionally worked up, while having a sincere interest and genuine love for the subject. Here, to my mind, lies the crux of the problem of ensuring for Iqbal his rightful place in the East Pakistani's mind.