

IQBAL: A GREAT HUMANIST

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Muhammad Iqbal (1873-1938) is one of the greatest figures in the literary history of the East. He came at a difficult moment to give courage and hope not only to the Muslims of India (at a time when Pakistan did not yet exist) but to a whole nation sunk into a state of bleak despair.

An original thinker, Iqbal gave his philosophy the garb of poetry and published a number of works amongst which can be quoted: *Asrar-i-Khudi* (*The Secrets of the Self*), *Rumuz-i-Bekbudi* (*The Mysteries of Selflessness*), *Payam-i-Mashriq* (*The Message of the East*) and *Javid Namah* (*The Book of Eternity*, baptised *the Divine Comedy of the Orient*). Knowing Persian as well as Urdu, he expressed himself in both these languages and, sometimes, even in English, as is the case with his doctorate thesis, *The Metaphysics of Persia* (Munich University) and of a collection of lectures he delivered in Madras, entitled "*Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*."

Iqbal had the ambition to bring East and West closer to each other through a synthesis of both cultures. If he criticised Europe which, he thought, was oblivious of spiritual values, he nevertheless set as an example to his country the dynamism of Western thought. He also stressed that material progress can be really fruitful only if it is accompanied by moral progress, and that matter must be conquered in order to free the Mind.

The message of Iqbal, like that of all great poets, has a universal value, and everyone can find in his generous inspiration an answer to his other problems.

Muhammad Iqbal made his appearance at a critical moment in the history of his country. The Muslims of India, forgetful of their past glory, had sunk into a deep slumber, into a bleak despair caused by lassitude and abdication. Europe, on the contrary, was at the acme of her successes at the

end of the 19th century, and all seemed for the best in a world where optimism was the order of the day. Why this contrast? What deep-rooted causes had made of the subcontinent the homeland of a defeated and humiliated people? This is what Iqbal set out to discover. In this universe deserted by happiness and even by the mere joy of living, he was the Awakener, the prophet bearing the message of a new and exhilarating Truth.

Where did the evil come from? According to Iqbal, the importation into Islam of platonician and neo-platonician ideas had sapped the vitality of the Muslims. For Plato, says he:

A wise man looks at death;

Life is like a spark in the darkness of night.

The Greeks of old considered life as an appearance, an illusion of which the famous Myth of the Cavern gives a perfect illustration. They were overwhelmed by the idea of Fatality, and freedom of the will did not exist for them. It is impossible to evade one's destiny: such is the theme of Greek tragedy. The philosophers taught renunciation of the Self and detachment from worldly riches. This movement of thought penetrated into the East and led to an explosion of mysticism whose high priests were the Sufis. A complete divorce was thus affected between Mind and Matter: the soul alone is important and the body must be ignored as a shameful object.

Christianism, according to Iqbal, repeated the same error and was therefore incapable of developing into a perfect *code of life*; it remained an *order* ideally suited to monks whose only interest was the Other World. It arrested the growth of man and condemned him to be torn eternally by an excruciating conflict.

Iqbal raises a protest against this negative and paralyzing influence which prevents man from working to improve and change his condition. Action is

the fountainhead of life, and, in order to act, the individual must cultivate his Ego, for "in building up one's Ego lies the secret of godhead".

"O Sufi, can your cloistered prayers achieve anything?" asks the poet, and he compares the Sufi and the true Muslim:

One seeks God through mortification of the flesh,

The other sharpens his ego on the divine whetstone;

One kills the ego and reduces it to ashes,

The other lights the ego like a lamp.

For Iqbal, every living organism has a more or less developed individuality which determines its place in the scale of being. In Man alone does this individuality become Personality: "Throughout the entire gamut of being runs the gradually rising note of ego-hood till it reaches its perfection in man."

Every atom of this universe burns to reveal itself;

Every particle yearns to be a god.

However, man is not yet a complete individual and, therefore, he is not yet really free. To conquer his freedom, he must first overcome the resistance of matter: "The greatest obstacle in the way of life is matter, Nature; yet Nature is not evil since it enables the inner powers of life to unfold themselves. The ego attains to freedom by the removal of all obstructions in its way. It is partly free, partly determinate, and reaches full freedom by approaching the individual who is most free — God. In a word, life is an endeavour for freedom."

Freedom is therefore a reward to be won. Iqbal has insisted again and again on the necessity and value of effort:

Take not thy banquet on the shore, for there
Too gently flows the melody of life:
Plunge into the sea, do battle with the waves,
For immortality is won in strife.

Everything lives by a continual strife,
I am perpetually thirsty as if I had fire under my feet.

Iqbal goes even further than this and does not hesitate to say that the key to the problem of Good and Evil is to be found in the idea of Personality: "The idea of personality gives us a standard value: it settles the problem of good and evil. That which fortifies personality is good, that which weakens it is bad. Art, religion and ethics must be judged from the standpoint of personality."

And the poet exhorts man to attain his full stature:

Art thou a mere particle of dust?

Tighten the knot of thy ego

And hold fast to thy tiny being!

How glorious to burnish one's ego.

And to test its lustre in the presence of the Sun!

Rechisel thy ancient frame

And build up a new being!

Such being is thy true being

Without which thy ego is but a ring of smoke!

And the miracle takes place:

My being grew and reached the sky,

The Pleiads sank to rest under my skirts.

exclaims the poet in a moment of supreme rupture.

Man must first strive to conquer his environment. This is the initial step he has to take if he wants to discover the inmost secrets of his soul:

The world of the spirit which has no frontiers

Can only be conquered by a persistent crusade.

Strike a dagger in the body of the Universe,

It is full of jewels like the idol of Somnath.

Our mind has failed to realise

That the dust on our path is a dust of diamonds.

Or else:

To become earth is the creed of a moth;

Be a conqueror of earth, that alone is worthy of a man.

And Iqbal defines his position in this way:

"The life of the ideal consists not in a total breach with the real, which would tend to shatter the organic wholeness of life into painful oppositions, but in the endeavour of the ideal to appropriate the real

with a view eventually to absorb it and to convert it into itself and to illuminate its whole being."

Iqbal agrees with the German philosopher, Nietzsche, to say that the Will to Power motivates all the actions of men:

Life is power in action;

It derives from the love of domination and conquest.

That Will to Power is the will to enjoy life in all its fullness and exuberance. It maintains the ego in a state of perpetual tension and helps it to attain perfection:

O thou that wouldst deliver thy soul from enemies,

I ask thee: 'Art thou a drop of water or a gem?'....

The drop was not solid and gem-like;

The diamond had a being, the drop had none.

Never for an instant neglect self-preservation:

Be a diamond, not a dew-drop!

Iqbal does not hesitate to proclaim that power is synonymous with truth and determines the scale of values:

Good is evil if your power thereby decreases,

Evil is good if it increases your power.

And he adds:

Life is the seed and power the crop;

Power explains the mystery of truth and falsehood.

A claimant, if he be possessed of power,

Needs no argument for his claim.

Falsehood derives from power the authority of truth,

And by falsifying truth deems itself true.

Its creative word transforms poison into nectar,

It says to Good: 'Thou art bad' and Good becomes Evil.

Iqbal thinks nevertheless that the unlimited power which science has given to men must be controlled and directed by a higher ideal; it becomes a tool of destruction when it separates itself from religion:

If it (power) is not subjected to religion, it becomes more dangerous than poison;

If it is subjected to religion, it becomes a panacea for all ills.

But Power alone could not ensure the dazzling metamorphosis of man. The most effective weapon in this fight with Heaven, the weapon which makes all victories possible, is Love. Iqbal does not use this word in the derisively narrow sense to which it has been reduced: when he speaks of Love, he speaks of something infinite — it is for him the projection of man outside himself to embrace the whole Universe:

It is love that imparts colour to the tulip,

It is love that agitates our souls.

If you open up the heart of this earth,

You will see in it the blood-stains of love.

And the poet gives men a solemn warning:

Love is eternal and will end only with eternity.

Many will be those who will seek love;

To-morrow, on Judgment Day,

Those who have not loved will be condemned.

It is love which enables man to explore and develop his inner possibilities:

My being was an unfinished statue....

Love chiselled me: I became a man.

However, Love cannot defeat the forces of Evil and give man his real stature if it is not accompanied by detachment — what the poet calls *faqr*. One should not be misled by the word: it has for Iqbal a significance entirely different from the one it had acquired in mystical literature. It has a positive content, and does not imply a turning away from reality but a detaching of the self from the Unessential to reach the Essential: The boat of a *faqir*, says Iqbal, is always tossed by the waves.

Iqbal wants to give back to man his lost dignity:

The position of man is higher than that of the sky;

The essence of culture is respect for man.

He wants to transform the ape-man of Darwin into a godhead. In order to achieve his aim, he takes the Qur'an as his guide: "Verily, we have given honour and dignity to man." "We created you, We gave you shape and then We ordered the angels to prostrate themselves in front of Adam."

Iqbal rejects the traditional idea of the "fall" of man which makes of his earthly life a painful exile. The coming of man is, in his opinion, a glorious event hailed by the whole creation:

Love acclaimed the birth of a being with a yearning heart;

Beauty trembled, for one gifted with vision was born.

Nature quaked, for from the helpless clay was born a self-creating, self-destroying and self-observing being.

Life said: 'I have at last forced an opening into this ancient dome.'

A whisper reverberated around the heavens and reached the abode of the Eternal:

Beware, ye who are veiled, for the one who would rend asunder the veil is born!

It is Satan — *Iblis*, as Iqbal calls him — who will give man the necessary stimulus. He will show him the way to knowledge and perfection. Man will succumb not to evil but to his curiosity. Satan, by rebuking him for his lack of audacity and adventurous spirit, will lead him on from conquest to conquest.

In Iqbal's great work, *Javid Namah (The Book of Eternity)*, Satan complains to God that man is an unworthy adversary. He, therefore, beseeches Him to send a more defiant enemy, a real opponent:

"O Lord of the Just and of the Unjust, the company of man has made me weary, it has reduced me to nothing! Never did he rebel against my domination; he closed his eyes upon his Ego and never found himself! His dust never tasted of bold refusal; it knows not the spark of Power! The prey says to the hunter: 'Take me!' May God save us from too docile a servant! Free me, O Lord, from this prey; remember that I

swore allegiance to thee but yesterday! Man has enfeebled my courage. Alas, Alas! Weak and wavering, he is incapable of resisting the strength of my wrist. I want a servant of thine endowed with a penetrating gaze, a higher, more mature being! Take back this toy of water and clay, old men do not like children's games! What is the son of man? A handful of dry wood which but one of my sparks could set ablaze. And if there is nothing but dry wood in this world, why didst thou give me so much fire? It is easy to melt a piece of glass, but how hard it is to liquefy a stone! I am saddened by my conquests and I now come for my reward: I want thee to give me a being who can deny me; open for me the path to such a man of God! I want a man who can bend my neck, a man whose gaze sets my whole body a-trembling! A man who will tell me: 'Goaway!' A man in front of whom my grain and my wind would be of no value. O Lord! Grant me the joy to subjugate a real man, a worshiper of Truth!"

Once liberated, man will set out on a triumphant march towards the ideal image he has formed of himself:

Rise, O thou who art strange to Life's mystery,

Rise, intoxicated with the wine of an Ideal,

An ideal shining as the dawn,

A blazing fire to all that is other than God,

An ideal higher than Heaven —

Winning, captivating, enchanting men's hearts;

A destroyer of ancient falsehoods,

Fraught with turmoil, an embodiment of the Last Day.

Iqbal has thus placed man at the centre of his philosophy; he makes him the only subject of his preoccupations. He sees in him a creator capable of

transfiguring himself, as well as transfiguring the world. Man, therefore, assumes inordinate proportions in his eyes; he becomes a kind of demiurge who speaks to God as an equal:

Thou didst create night and I made the lamp,

Thou didst create clay and I made the cup.

Thou didst create the deserts, mountains and forests,

I produced the orchards, gardens and groves;

It is I who turn stone into a mirror,

And it is I who turn poison into an antidote.

Man must rebuild a world of his own choice:

God decreed: 'It is like this and you have nothing to say';

Man said: 'Verily, it is like this, but it ought to be like that'.

And the poet asks challengingly:

God made the world; man made it more fair.

Is man destined to become the rival of God?

Iqbal incites man to become what he really is:

Create if thou art alive: seize, like me, the sky with your hands!

How long will you beg light like Moses on Mount Sinai?

Let a flame similar to that of the Burning Bush leap out of your Being!

Break to pieces whatever is not worthy of thee, shape a new world drawn from the depths of your being!

Man of God, be as dazzling and as sharp as the edge of a sword; be the architect of the destinies of the world!

The great Persian poet of the 13th century, Jalal-uddin Rumi — who was Iqbal's master — had also dreamt of the advent of the Perfect Man and, equipped with a lantern, like Diogenes, he had set out to find him:

Yesterday, the master with a lantern was roaming about the city

Saying: 'I am tired of devil and beast. I want a man!

My heart is weary of these weak-spirited companions. I desire the Lion of God and Rustam, son of Zal'.

They said: 'He is not to be found, we have sought him long'.

He said: 'A thing that is not to be found — that is what I desire'.

It is not by a mere chance that Iqbal placed these verses at the beginning of the combined edition of *Asrar-i-Khudi* and *Rumuz-i-Bekbudi*. All his philosophy is indeed a quest or, to be more exact, a conquest of man. The Perfect Man is the end-result of an impassioned search, the glorious affirmation of the dignity, and even of the divinity, of the creature who contemplates its Creator face to face:

Through his self-realisation he becomes the hand of God;

And as he becomes the hand of God, he rules over the Universe.

Man must be bold enough to take this prodigious leap forward:

Transmute thy handful of earth into gold,

Kiss the threshold of a Perfect Man.

He then becomes the *mandi*, the guide, the herald of a new era:

"The *na'ib* is the vicegerent of God on earth. He is the complete ego, the goal of humanity, the acme of life both in mind and body; in him the discord of our mental life becomes a harmony. The highest power is united in him with the highest knowledge. In his life, thought and action, instinct and reason, become one. He is the last fruit of the tree of humanity and all the trials of a painful evolution are justified because he is to come at the end. He is the real ruler of mankind; his kingdom is the Kingdom of God on earth."

This is how the poet hails his coming:

Appear, O rider of Destiny!

Appear, O light of the dark realm of Change! . . .

Silence the noise of the nations,

Imparadise our ears with thy music!

Arise and tune the harp of brotherhood,

Give us the cup of the wine of love!

Bring once more days of peace to the world,

Give a message of peace to them that seek battle!

Mankind is the cornfield and thou the harvest,

Thou art the goal of Life's caravan.

However, Iqbal did not want this Perfect Man to be a myth, nor did he want him to be the excessive dream of a poet. He had understood that man can only live in and for society and that he is closely linked to the group to which he belongs:

The individual exists in relation to the community,

Alone, he is nothing.

The wave exists in the river,

Outside the river, it is nothing.

He had meticulously drawn the plan of this society, whose prophet he was, and he set out enthusiastically to build it because it symbolised for him "universal brotherhood and the fullness of love". He suffered to see mankind divided into warring camps, and all his life he worked for the reconciliation of nations:

Greed has split up humanity into warring camps; so speak the language of love and teach the lesson of brotherhood!

The God-intoxicated *Faqir* is neither of the East nor of the West;

I belong neither to Delhi nor to Isphahan ; I speak out what I consider to be the truth.

In Iqbal's eyes, discriminations based on colour and race are a scourge for humanity. He kept repeating that a harmonious life would remain impossible on the earth as long as such distinctions exist:

Not Afghans, Turks or sons of Tartary,
But of one garden, of one trunk are we;
Shun the criterion of scent and hue,
We all the nurslings of one springtime be.

He had dreamt of a society in which true brotherhood would exist and where the social rank of man would not be determined by his caste, his colour, or his fortune, but by the kind of life he leads: a world, says Iqbal, "where the poor tax the rich, where an Untouchable can marry the daughter of a king, and where capital is not allowed to accumulate so as to dominate the real producer of wealth."

Iqbal cherished the vision of a world-state in which all the Muslims would form an indivisible community. He also dreamt of a world in which politics and religion would be associated so closely that they would be indistinguishable.

A few critics have claimed that the message of Iqbal was meant, above all, for the Muslim world and that, therefore, it could not have a universal value. The poet himself has explained very clearly his point of view on this fundamental question:

"The object of my Persian *Masnavis* is not to attempt an advocacy of Islam. My real purpose is to look for a better social order and to present a universally acceptable ideal (of life and action) before the world, but it is impossible for me, in this effort, to outline this ideal, to ignore the social system and values of Islam whose most important objective is to demolish all the artificial and pernicious distinctions of caste, creed, colour and economic status. Islam has opposed vehemently the idea of racial superiority which is the greatest obstacle in the way of international unity and co-operation; in fact, Islam and racial exclusiveness are utterly antithetical. This racial ideal is the greatest enemy of mankind and it is the duty of all well-wishers of the human race to eradicate it. When I realised that the conception of nationalism based on the differences of race and country, was beginning to overshadow the world of Islam also and that the Muslims were in danger of giving up the universality of their ideal in favour of a narrow patriotism and false nationalism, I felt it my duty, as a Muslim and as a well-wisher of humanity, to recall them back to their true role in the drama of human evolution. No doubt I am intensely devoted to Islam but I have selected the Islamic community as my starting point not because of any national or religious prejudice but because it is the most practicable line of approach to the problem."

Owing to his dynamic and constructive philosophy, to his insatiable curiosity and zest in living, Iqbal succeeded in creating a happy equilibrium between the highest values of the East and of the West. He looked upon the world sympathetically and nothing he saw appeared to him negligible:

For the seeing eye, everything is worth seeing,
Everything is worth being weighed on the scale of vision.
These verses are echoed by those of Jalaluddin Rumi, who said:

Dissolve thy whole body into Vision,
Be seeing, seeing, seeing!

"Everything in the world is strange and wonderful for those who keep their eyes wide open", replies the Spanish philosopher, Jose Ortega y Gasset. And this echo is, in its turn, reverberated by the voice of the great American poet, Walt Whitman:

I believe a leaf of grass is no less than the journey-work of the stars.

This is the way of the poets, this is the way they converse, from one continent to the other, from one century to the other.