

IQBAL AND THE PROCESS OF HISTORY

PROF. D.M. AZRAF.

Iqbal is not a philosopher of history in the technical sense of the term. For he has not attempted an explanation of the process of history, as had been done by Ibn Khaldun, Kant, Herder, Hegel, Comte, Karl Marx and Spengler. Yet his writing in prose and poetry make it abundantly clear that he has a philosopher's insight into the meaning of history as a single principle which is the key to unlock the door of the mystery of historical process.

Though his views about the meaning of history have been to a large extent inspired by the teachings of the Qur'an, yet these can be studied apart from the teachings of the Qur'an and in their own right and status as intellectual views and one can find in them much to prove that he has contributed new elements to man's knowledge of the process of history. In fact he had studied the Qur'an with an eye fully saturated with all the lights of the sciences and philosophies of the modern era and his theory of history has taken quite a new shape. One can ill-afford to forget that he was as great as a philosopher as a theologian.

His views on the processes of history can be gathered from three sources.

1. His ideas about evolution.
2. His ideas about Politics.
3. His ideas about the principle of movement in Islam. II

Evolution which has been accepted as a fact of Biology, has been the bone of contention since Darwin propounded it as a theory. Though Darwin did not dare to divest his theory of the activity of the Godhead, he could hardly accommodate Him either in his theory which was out and out mechanical. Darwinism interpreted literally leaves no room for end, or purpose, and may safely be characterized as a reflex of Materialism in biological sphere. But in spite of all its achievements, it may be said to be a

delineation of the order of evolutionary process — the 'how' of it but not its explanation or the 'why' of it . Though the supporters of Darwin in later period tried to give an explanation of it with reference to a purpose, it was also out of joint with the main organism of the theory.

Darwin's main objective also did not permit him to go beyond the 'Descent of Man'. He forgot that the 'Descent' is not the final step in Evolution, even if it were accepted as a principle. The 'Descent' might have its own 'Ascent' and the process might run on till eternity. His supporters particularly Herbert Spencer wanted to enlarge the concept of Evolution and began from the Cosmic phase and drew it right upto the society. He tried to synthesize the findings of Laplace with that of Darwin. But so far as development is concerned, the categories used for explanation were almost the same and the end was envisaged to be more complexity. The process of evolution according to them is a passage from homogeneity to heterogeneity, from simplicity to complexity.

But the difficulty that appears in human level can hardly be solved in this way. At human level, there emerge some phenomena which can only be understood through the concepts of choice, initiative, and enterprizes which have no parallel in other fields of existence.

As a matter of fact, we find a marvellous progress of a particular people in science and technology, in arts and crafts, in literature and philosophy. How all these are to be interpreted? Why and how all these developments take place in nations (both in its secular and religious meanings)? Neither from Darwin nor from any other supporters of mechanical evolution can a satisfactory answer be found.

The attempt to explain the development of man in his post-descent period had been made by Kant, even before the contribution of Darwin startled humanity. The keys were found in human psychology by Kant. As he had been a rationalist in philosophy, in pursuance of his inclination towards

it, he had set his theory as a directive in course of enquiries into the historical processes.

Kant found in human psychology two opposite traits which lead to the progress. His own language is very clear on this point. "Man has an inclination to associate himself with others since in such association he feels himself more than man, so as to his being able to develop his natural capacities. On the other hand, he has a strong propensity to cut himself off from his fellows. Since he finds in himself simultaneously the anti-social propensity of wanting to order everything according to his own ideas, as a result of which he everywhere expects to meet with antagonism knowing from his own experience that he himself is inclined to be antagonistic to others. Now it is this antagonism which awakens all the forces of man, forces him to overcome his tendency to indolence and drives him by means of the desire for honour, power or wealth to produce for himself a position among his fellows whom we can neither get on with nor get on without But for these anti-social properties unlovely in themselves, whence, springs the antagonism every man necessarily meets with in regard to his egoistic pretentious, man might have lived the life of the Arcadian shepherds, in perfect harmony, satisfaction and mutual love, their talents for ever undeveloped in the bud").⁵

Kant had evidently before his eyes "a form of society which combines with the greatest possible freedom and antagonism of its members, the most rigid determination and guarantee of the limits of this freedom in such a way that the freedom of each individual may co-exist with that of others."⁶

The history of human race as a whole "may be regarded as a realization of a secret plan of Nature for bringing into existence a political constitution perfect both from the internal point of view and so far as regards this

⁵ Kant's works, Berlin Edition, Chapter VIII, P 20-22.

⁶ *ibid* P-223

purpose, from the external point of view also. Such a constitution being the sole condition under which Nature can fully develop all the capacities implanted in human nature.⁷

But Kant has not been clear as to the effect of this tension between the social and unsocial tendencies in man. Nor had he been clear as to whether these were the only factors necessary for the course of evolution.

His successor Herder's contribution is, in a sense, an improvement upon his. Herder not only takes the psychological characteristics into account but also takes note of geographical and biological conditions. He is impressed by the fact that there is a continuous series of gradations from the simplest form of inorganic matter to man, the highest, because the most complex form of animal life and he propounds the hypothesis that the whole universe is animated by a single organising force or unified set of organising forces, working for the free emergence of spirit. Man is the highest product of this life force (for so it may be called) on the earth and all else exists to subserve his development but it would be wrong to think of him as the only spiritual creature in the universe. On the contrary everything goes to suggest that he stands half way between two worlds, forming the connecting link between them a world of animal beings of which the highest and one of spiritual beings of which he is the lowest member".⁸

It is evident therefore in the interpretation of history that Kant accepted a heuristic pole, a purpose, to which he was very much opposed in *Metaphysics*. Herder also relied on the hypothesis of an organising force which drives all elements forward for the emergence of a spirit.

But he also does not specify the activity of the organising force nor can he attribute any motive to it.

⁷ *ibid.*

⁸ W.H. Walsh, *An Introduction to Philosophy of History*, P-133.

III

Iqbal had very rightly taken up this task and has delineated the stages as well as the end of Evolution. Though his conception of Evolution is in line with that of Kant and Herder, he unlike them clearly attributes full consciousness to Nature or to the organising principle. Iqbal with the fullest conviction conceived this force to be self-conscious. Here he supports Aristotle in the sense that for the production of a thing, four causes are needed of which the final cause is as important as the others are.

"According to Iqbal the reality of the universe is an all-powerful consciousness which is conscious of itself. This entity which he denotes by the name of self-consciousness of self (*Khudi*) is the creator of the world."⁹

"The Central and the most fundamental attribute of this self-consciousness or self of the world (of which full reflection is to be found only in the human being who alone of all the creation has acquired self-consciousness) is to love an ideal and to act and strive for its realization".¹⁰

"The universe is the result of the creative activity of the world-self and the ideal that the world-self is realising through this activity is the perfect Man i.e. the perfect human society of the future."¹¹

It is of course very difficult to conceive of this process of evolution. For it is in a sense inverted. Darwinism. According to Darwin, man appears at the last stage of evolution. Consequently his consciousness also appears at the last stage. But here not only consciousness but fully developed self-consciousness is accepted to be the root cause of evolution of which the emergence of man is supposed to be the end towards which the entire course of evolution is moving. Self-consciousness, therefore, is the beginning as well as the end of this process. The question naturally

⁹ Dr. M. Rafiuddin, "Iqbal's Concept of Evolution", Iqbal Review, April 1960, P-20

¹⁰ *Ibid*-P 21.

¹¹ *Ibid*-P 21-22

turns up: how can consciousness which is immaterial bring into existence matter which is diametrically opposed to it? Iqbal's answer to this question is: Matter as conceived in popular thought to be something hard indestructible and standing on its own foot is not to be found anywhere. What it really means is that there is something which evokes under such and such conditions such and such sensations in us. The gulf between matter and mind has further been bridged by the recent researches of Sir Arthur Eddington, Sir James Jeans and the philosopher Whitehead. Eddington and Jeans have showed that there is ample evidence to prove that material bodies or atoms have affinities with human mind and Whitehead has shown that "Nature is not a static fact situated in an adynamic void but a structure of events possessing the character of a continuous creative flow which thought cuts up into isolated immobilities out of whose mutual relations arise the concepts of space and time".¹²

If Nature be a creative flow then there can be no difficulty for the creative consciousness to have it in existence out of his own will. In fact the stages through which evolution passes will speak for themselves the plausibility of their actuality in experience.

"The whole of the creative activity of the world-self which occurred in the past now belongs permanently to history and we have no means of reproducing it. But since the process of creation is still going on and a portion of this creative activity is stretched before our eyes into the present, we are eminently in a position to study it and to understand its nature as a whole."

"The fact that the creative activity of the world-self in the universe has a single purpose, the perfection of man and this driving force is love; it has its concomitant of Hate since the creator loves everything that is favourable to his ideal. He hates everything that is unfavourable to it. The result is that the driving force of evolution expresses at early level of creation in particular

¹² Iqbal, Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam, P-35.

forms of attraction and repulsion which are suitable to that level. During the material stage of evolution it expressed itself in the attraction and repulsion of the particles of matter on account of which matter continued to develop in complication and organization till all the physical laws came into existence and matter became ripe for further production of the first living cell. On reaching the biological stage the driving force of evolution expressed itself in the animal's instinctive attraction for everything that is favourable to its existence and repulsion from everything that is unfavourable to it. As the animal expressed its instincts of attraction and repulsion in its activities, its biological constitution became more and more complicated and organised and its instincts too developed in number and quality, till man, the most highly organised animal, came into existence. As living creatures strove to realize their desires and purposes arising from their instincts, their efforts or struggle brought the driving force of the desire of the world-self more and more into play with the result that they developed new characters and capacities needed by them for the realization of their ends and thus actualized a little more of the potentialities of life and came a step nearer to the final objective or evolution, namely, the human form of life, with all its qualities and characteristics. It is by effort or struggle that birds have grown wings and learnt to fly or walk or sing and we, on our part, have developed such complicated organs as the eyes, the ears, the hands, the teeth and the brain of such useful faculties as thought, intelligence, imagination and memory. In man life has come to its own and regained its quality of self-consciousness with its fundamental attribute of love for an ideal i.e. an idea of the highest beauty and perfection, i.e. an ideal which has all beautiful and admirable attributes that he can imagine and is free from all the defects and shortcomings that he can think of.¹³

"To say, that struggle is necessary for evolution means that life meets at every step, with some resistance which it has to overcome. This resistance comes in the way of life from life itself, it comes from the whole of life's

¹³ Dr. M. Rafiuddin, Iqbal's Concept of Evolution. *opt. cit.* p. 25

past. The reason is that the tendencies of life are not only hormic but mnemonic. Life not only strives for the realization of ends but also safeguards and preserves the ends it has already achieved."¹⁴

"During the ideological stage of evolution that is now going on, life is meeting resistance not only from the physical laws but also from the instincts which like physical laws it had itself developed for its own protection. The past of life at every distinct step of its ideological evolution includes not only the physical laws and the instincts in man and other species but also the ideals of all the ideological communities which had come into existence previous to that step. Hence at this stage of evolution every ideological community meets resistance not only from the physical laws and instincts but also from the objectives of all the contemporary ideological community that proceeds in accordance with a moral code which exists potentially in its ideal and becomes actualized gradually in the life of the community. In due course of time it becomes fixed, automatic and permanent and is known as the constitutional, the civil and military law of the community. At this stage if the members of the community desire to change over to a higher ideal they have to struggle against this law in order to shatter its resistance. If they succeed, the event is known as a Revolution otherwise, a Rebellion."¹⁵

This is in nutshell Iqbal's theory of evolution. His idea of the struggle is here much in conformity with Lamarck's idea. Efforts and struggles are necessary in order to create new values. But whereas Lamarck confined it to Biological sphere, Iqbal has extended this concept to ideological sphere also.

IV

But as we find here the struggles are very many. In history we find so many struggles to record, with awe and dismay. Clans fought against clans, tribes fought against tribes and nations fought against nations. The

¹⁴ *Ibid*, p-25.

¹⁵ *Ibid*, p 26-27.

world has been torn asunder by two global warfares which broke out in 1914 and 1939 respectively, If the tendency of the world soul is to produce perfect man who will be attracted towards the ideal through love all that retards that progress must therefore be counted as evil and the foremost amongst them is the sense of nationality fostered during the recent period. As a matter of fact it has been noticed in history that sooner or later clans have to be merged into tribes and the tribes have to be amalgamated in order to form nations. The basis of nationality which has been bolstered up in the recent periods has been found to be very obscure. It is neither race nor language, nor ethic consideration nor geographical environment. But it is a Tradition evolved from all or anyone of the factors which bind together a group of people for a pretty long time and enable them to resist aggression from outside. This is really a negative aspect of the national spirit. But in its positive aspect it glorifies its fatherland and finds a fair justification to exploit others in others' land. Nationalism based on geography had the worst effect on different nations and has been denounced by all right thinking man on humanitarian grounds. The principal opponent of geographical nationalism in our time is Bertrand Russell who has exposed both its recent growth and pernicious effects in unparalleled language.

Iqbal's own conception of geographical nationalism tallies with that of all the great humanitarins of our age. But his conception of Nationalism differs from others in this that he believes in Ideological nationalism which brings all the members of a people together and fosters in them a sense of fraternity. The early history of Islam gives us a full account of the growth of Ideological nationalism. Soon after the revelations were received by the Prophet (peace be upon him) and Islam was preached, the Quraishites who were the kith and kips of the Prophet rose against him and wanted to extirpate Islam from the Arabian Peninsula. The cause is known to all. The Prophet declared in unequivocal terms the abolition of priesthood and aristocracy which were the

cornerstone of the Arabian life, particularly of the Quraishites. They therefore could not brook the abolition of the principles they imbibed from their fathers. Islam preached the sovereignty of Allah and the Vicegerency of men. It abolishes distinctions of race, colour, geography and language and unites them on platform of humanity.

The call of the Prophet though resented by his own people was responded to by foreigners who joined either his rank and file or supported him indirectly. Bilal from the Negro land of Africa and Solman from Faras accepted this ideological nationalism and joined the Prophet as his lieutenants; whereas Negius the first, willingly housed the fugitives who migrated from Mecca as a result of persecution. So, Negius the first may rightly be characterized as a member of the Muslim fraternity though he was not physically converted, while even the uncle of the Prophet, the affectionate Abu Talib cannot be ranked as a member of the Muslim fraternity.

To Iqbal, therefore, the world process and with it the process of history in moving towards the production of *Insan-i-Kamil* who will have fraternity amongst themselves and who will have federation of states built on ideological nationalism. But this is now thwarted by the obnoxious growth and rise of geographical nationalism which according to Iqbal's conception of Evolution was once a step forward for fostering a sense of homogeneity amongst the members belonging to it. So in order to have that advance every nation has to outgrow this limitation and move forward towards higher stages.

As a consequence the ideas of modern nationalism which are by themselves pernicious have been imbibed by the Muslims only to drag themselves downwards — towards a lower stage. Iqbal has condemned this evil spirit of the age in clear terms. His language sounds like the notes of a lament. "Is this going to be the end of all this progress and evolution of civilization, they ask, that man destroy one another in mutual hatred and

make human habitation impossible on this earth. Remember, man can be maintained on this earth only by honouring mankind and this world will remain a battleground of ferocious beasts of prey unless and until the educational forces of the whole world are directed to inculcating in man respect for mankind. Only one unity is dependable and that unity is the brotherhood of man which is above race, nationality, colour or language. So long as this so-called democracy, this accursed nationalism and this degraded Imperialism are not shattered, so long as men do not demonstrate by their actions that they believe that the whole world is the family of God, so long as distinctions of race, colour and geographical nationalities are not wiped out completely, they will never be able to lead a happy and contented life and the beautiful ideas of liberty, equality and fraternity will never materialize."¹⁶

Not only the deadly spirit of geographical Nationalism but also the respect for so-called democracy is a cause of retardation of the progress of the universe towards its highest goal. Democracy which is so much extolled in modern times without regard to the highest values of life is nothing but a counting of heads which are more inclined to acquire something for their own personal ends or for the sake of their own nations. Democracy divested of higher values means to Iqbal "a step no better than a blind and mechanical counting of heads and political wisdom and justice are apt to become mere functions of a numerical majority".¹⁷ There are other grounds on which modern Democracy may be assailed. Laski has very nicely criticized the concept of the sovereignty of numbers which coupled with the sovereignty wealth leads to a contradiction. Even from a purely secular and non-ideological view, modern democracy is full of so many contradictions of which the one referred to above is the most damaging. On the one side, in democratic atmosphere, every body is free to cherish his own views on any political creed, he is also free to cast his vote in favour of any person he likes. But in practical life even in so-called democratic countries, people are divided

¹⁶ Iqbal, *Whither Civilization*, quoted, *Iqbal Review*, April, 1960

¹⁷ K.G. Saiyidain, 'Progressive Trends in Iqbal's Thought,' *Iqbal as a Thinker Lahore*, p. 89.

into the rich and the poor, and in some extreme cases into the 'haves' and 'havenots'. The rich people can easily purchase the votes and be the masters of the poor. So democracy, divested as it is now of all higher values in life, is not a progress towards the highest good which Iqbal conceived to be the final stage in human evolution. As a deduction from this view, we have the further consequence of exploitation of man by man, of nation by nation and of country by country.

The values of secular democracy as evolved against autocracy and despotic rule during the French Revolution do constitute an obstacle or to use Iqbal's own expression, 'resistance' to further progress.

V

The resistances thus far mentioned are more clear in Iqbal's estimation of the movement of Islam within its own structure.

As is well-known Iqbal conceives Ultimate Reality to be the spiritual basis of all life. This, according to him, "is eternal and reveals itself in variety and change. A society based on such a conception of Reality must reconcile, in its life, the categories of permanence and change. It must possess eternal principles to regulate its collective life, for the eternal gives us a foot-hold in the world of perpetual change. But eternal principles when they are understood to exclude all possibilities of change which according to the Quran, is one of the greatest 'signs' of God, tend to immobilize what is essentially mobile in its nature. The failure of Europe in political and social science illustrates the former principle, the immobility of Islam during the last 500 years illustrates the latter. What then is the principle of movement in the structure of Islam? This is known as *Ijtihad*." ¹⁸

Though he has taken *Ijtihad* to be the source of movement in Islam, he is inclined to accept it as a complete authority in legislation which is practically

¹⁸ Iqbal- *Reconstruction* p. 147-148.

confined to the founders of the schools. Here he exposes the faults of the extremists in a very critical manner. Islam has been interpreted and practised in different periods of history in a different way, for no other reason than the extremist views which the Muslims held with regard to the static and dynamic attitude in Islam.

Conservative thinkers like the later "Rationalists and the Sufis wanted to make the structure of their legal system as rigorous as possible"¹⁹ whereas the Turkish people in our times are trying to separate the church from the state by all means. The rise of the Turks is an indication of the awakening of the Muslims in one part of the world from their slumber. Iqbal heartily welcomes this liberal movement in Islam but he also finds a danger in it. For "liberalism has a tendency to act as a force of disintegration and the ideas which have evolved among the Turks, of nationalism and race may tend to disintegrate the Muslims as had been done earlier by Reformation amongst the Christians."

The question which is most important in this connection is whether the laws of Islam are capable of further evolution? It is a fact of history that "the Muslim has always adjusted his religious outlook to the elements of culture which he assimilated from the peoples that surrounded him. From 800 to 1100, says Horten, not less than one hundred systems of theology appeared in Islam, a fact which bears ample testimony to the elasticity of Islamic thought as well as the ceaseless activity of our early thinkers Turning now to the groundwork of legal principles in the Quran, it is perfectly clear that far from leaving no scope for human thought and legislative activity the intensive breadth of these principles virtually act as an awakener of human thought".²⁰

So in his opinion — "the teaching of the Quran that life is a process of progressive creation necessitates that each generation, guided but

¹⁹ *Ibid* p. 150

²⁰ *Ibid* pp. 163-168 .

unhampered by the work of its predecessors, should be permitted to solve its own problem." .²¹

Here also Iqbal's views of the movement of Islam are in line with his idea of evolution. As in each successive stage there are two forces which either lead to progress or retard it, similarly in the progressive development of Islam there are opposing forces — one that leads to progress and the other that retards it. Here the values stated in the Qur'an are the progressive elements but the diehard opposition to it by the most conservative elements is the retarding force. As there can be no evolution simply by change, so there cannot be any evolution in Islam if there were no nucleus from which the development must start.

The concept of development in this evolution, as in biology, is the fullest realization of the inner potentialities of men as individuals and to create a society of free individuals who will be bound together with a sense of love and fraternity with each other and there will be a confederation of states without any sense of separation from and animosity with each other.

As he was an optimist he believed that though it has not been realised in the past due to the bifurcation of man's nature into political religious, in Europe, it is sure to be realised by the Muslims in future.

VI

While discussing Iqbal's views on the process of history two points may be raised.

- 1) Whether the trend of evolution is really towards the production of perfect man or *Insan-i-Kamil*? and
- 2) Whether the values evolved in the Qur'an are really eternal in character?

²¹ *Ibid* p. 168

The trend of evolution as we have indicated above shows a tendency towards that end. The 'descent' of man as propounded by Darwin is really the 'ascent' of an animal fully equipped with an apparatus of body which may, with successive trials and errors, unravel the mysteries of the universe and also be a master of it. The progress of humanity from the life in the cave to this sputnik age is a clear indication of the truth of this theory

This is also a postulate of all the sciences. It is accepted as a postulate that man is after all the only animal, who can determine his position along with others in a universe which is full of so many beings. It is he and he alone who can command Nature to obey her. To him alone Nature reveals all her secrets. Without this postulate not a single step in science and philosophy is possible.

As to the second point, doubt has been expressed in many quarters as to the eternal principles of Islam. Even a disinterested political thinker like late M.N. Roy has indirectly cast a shadow of doubt on it. In his well-known work *The Historical Role of Islam* he has brought forward the contributions of Islam during the dark mediaeval period but has not given us any hope about Islam's future achievements. That indirectly means that the values of Islam have long been outmoded in the present context and that any progress in the present age is not possible in and through the values of Islam. Equality of women, abolition of the different strata of society, share of each in the production of the state and also contribution according to capacity to it, are supposed to be the newest values which have been evolved and are also supposed to have superseded the Islamic ones.

One thing which may be pointed out in this connection is that these acutest minds often identified Islam with the Muslims. They forgot that Islam had a history which should be differentiated from Islam as a principle of life. Though after the mediaeval period Muslims have ceased to be the pioneers in any walk of life, Islam as a force comprised of so many lofty ideals still works forcefully. The rise of so many schools of thought after the

advent of Imam Ibn Taymiyya testifies to the vitality of Islam. Moreover the values that Islam has set up had been wrongly interpreted in the past, due either to the conservatism or over-liberalism as pointed out before.

Interpreted in the light of the modern world, Islamic values are synthetic in character and are based on the fundamental nature of man which demands satisfaction in all its spheres. Modern values are either found to be dehumanising or despiritualising man. For example Freud in his psychological interpretation has used some concepts which give a direct lie to all higher values. Socialism on the other hand, laying great emphasis on the economic equality of man, has conceived him to be divested of any sense of spiritual values such as love, generosity, feeling of kinship etc.

As a matter of fact, however, it is found that man is a combination of an unlimited number of propensities which require co-ordination and synthesis with reference to an ideal which is to be achieved. Without this attracting force of this ideal there would have been chaos and confusion in a man's life. Similar is the case of nations. They have been guided by one-sided propensity and the history of civilization may very successfully be interpreted economically as well as psychologically. The ancient world was ruled by power which is supposed by Adler to be the supreme moving force in man. Since Renaissance there was a tendency to extol freedom of the individual which culminated in French Revolution. The Revolution in Russia in 1917 has ushered in a new era of thought and has demanded equality in the share of production which is quite natural in us — the gregorian animal. The votaries of different creeds have forgotten altogether that besides these propensities there are other equally important phases in man's life which require satisfaction. These also require fullest co-ordination in order to enable man to lead a harmonious life. The existence and activity of the ideals also cannot be gainsaid. The ideals are sometimes misinterpreted. Sometimes physical pleasure, sometimes physical torture are counted to be the ideals which lead men from one contradiction to the other. Unless the ideals be

comprehensive there will be one experiment after another without leading to a good result.

History, therefore, to Iqbal has made experiments after experiments and has not been able to achieve anything substantial. What it requires is the keen insight into ever vitalising force working within men and driving him onward towards the realisation of his fullest nature which alone can set right the order which has been lopsided by the false gods of our times.