IQBAL AT A COLLEGE RECEPTION IN LAHORE

Qazi Muhammad Aslam

I studied for M. A. Philosophy at Government College, Lahore, during the years 1921-23. Professor G. C. Chatterji our brilliant teacher (St. Stephens, Delhi and Trinity, Cambridge) had then just returned from abroad and taken charge of the M. A., class at G. C., which had been suspended or abolished since L. P. Saunders (1911-14) had left G. C., seven years earlier. Saunders himself had relieved Iqbal of his professorship at G. C. I had come to Lahore with a B. A., from Aligarh and from Aligarh I had brought with me a copy of Secrets of the Self, Nicholson's English translation of Iqbal's Asrar-i-Khudi.

Students including Muslim students of our generation; knew Iqbal largely through hearsay, to a lesser extent through direct reading. During a visit to Lahore I had listened to one of his public recitations at the Himayat-i-Islam and had read some of his longer poems then available in print. Whether we understood much or little of Iqbal, there was no doubt we were all proud of Iqbal, great Indian and great Muslim, leader, scholar, poet, and philosopher.

I returned to college from the 1921 winter recess at Amritsar on New Year's day. The newspapers carried the New Year's Honour list. I had barely looked at it in the Civil and Military Gazette when I found that Iqbal had been knighted. It delighted

and even thrilled me. Thinking was in Hindu-Muslim terms. Muslims had to hear criticism issued from Hindu quarters that Muslims were backward in everything, in brains, in business, in the professions, in the services and so on. But here and there evidence cropped up and it was very welcome that Muslims were not so backward after all, that they had brains and professional and managerial gifts, and intellectual gifts sometimes of a very high order. The most outstanding example was Iqbal, Muslim barrister who wrote poetry and pursued philosophy as his hobbies, and who had been chosen now by a Western scholar for projection upon the Western intellectual scene. Iqbal proved that Muslims were not backward. Given the chance to express or assert they could give an excellent account of themselves. Iqbal's verse proved that if Muslims lacked riches or education or social and political importance, they more than made up by their rich past and their promise of a rich future.

It was good Iqbal had been chosen for the honour of a knight-hood. The British conferred this honour on their own distinguished men. Iqbal was not in politics, nor in any other field the British might wish to reward for imperialist ends. Iqbal's knighthood was a recognition of his intellectual gifts. Occasionally such recognition was present in Honours lists produced by the British. Iqbal had been knighted for his eminence as a poet and thinker and for his significance for Muslim Indian, Muslim Asian and Muslim world culture. When the college reopened our small class of 4 or 5 or 6 Hindu, Muslim, Christian, and Sikh students talked about it and without" any effort the decision came that

students of philosophy at G. C., l grouped in the Brett Philosophical Society should hold a reception in,' honour of Dr. (now Sir) Muhammad Iqbal, old G. C. student and professor, distinguished Lahore citizen, and Muslim poet and thinker, whom a Western professor and a Western publisher had chosen for the notice of the West. In crude Indian-Hindu-Muslim terms he could be placed next to Rabindra Nath Tagore, higher than Tagore according to some. If Tagore had been chosen for knighthood and for the Nobel prize Iqbal could also be. Office holders of college societies look for such occasions. The principal working officer of the Brett, in those days was the Secretary, generally chosen from out of the B. A., students. The M. A. students were a minority not available or not important for the purpose. Brett Secretary, Kalimur Rahman, belonged to a family well-known in the cultural circles of Lahore. He was joined by Assistant Secretary Manohar Nath Seth, also a B. A., student, liberal and cosmopolitan by temperament. The mechanics of the reception was in the hands of these two: they raised the money, they chose the caterer, they made up the list of the guests to be invited from outside the hosting philosophical circle. They drew up the programme. The date carefully recorded on the group photograph taken on the occasion was late in January 1922. The honour o carrying the invitation of the Brett Society, which meant an invitation by G. C., staff and students functioning through one of their most celebrated societies, went to the M. A., students. We went in a group consisting of myself, Ranjit Singh who, let me record in sorrow, died a young lecturer in Guru Nanak College,

Gujranwala, and Dina Nath, later of Punjab Police. There could be others, Secretary Kalimur-Rahman, for instance, but I do not remember. The poet had shifted from his Anarkali residence to a bungalow on McLeod Road. We called sometime in an the easy afternoon chair, may be with him a newspaper, e verandah sitting his hookah crosslegged conveniently near and dressed in the easiest and simplest of ways, a shirt and shalwar and something woollen. There was no excitement on our arrival. Only, a visit by a group of students-Hindu, Muslim, Sikh—all from his own old G. C., and all students of philosophy meant something. We carried a letter from Professor Chatterji, addressed to Dr. Sir Muhammad Iqbal Having handed over the letter we did not have to do much. Naturally and easily came the answer. Of course, after necessary inquiries, the answer was yes. The date and time were settled. It was also settled that some of us will come to his house to accompany him to the college. But we were not dismissed soon after. Courtesy and curiosity seemed to intervene. The poet asked us questions. We could not have said much in reply. But he seemed to take us seriously and talked to us as to his equals. One could see there was a big subject on his mind. He revealed some of it at this very meeting, some of it at the reception.

The reception was held in one of the smaller lawns to the west of the college tower. To this we repaired soon after the group photo-graph had been taken by Bali under the well known Indian laburnum which—with its clusters of yellow flowers-has supplied the back-ground of 90% of all G. C., group photographs.

In the photograph can be seen Principal A. S. Hemmy, model of British punctiliousness, who seemed to take a keen interest in our function the equally keen or even keener Professor G. C. Chatterji, head of our department, Professor Ahmad Husain, our only other teacher those days (recently retired at 78 as Principal, Islamia College, Gujranwala), all the M.A., and B.A., students of philosophy and some others. One may see, as indeed in any such photograph may be seen, how some of those who later became important in different walks of life in India and Pakistan looked in their early youth. Also in the photograph may be seen Major Shaikh Fazl Haq whose carefully kept copy of this historic Photograph has been reproduced in this issue of Iqbal Review; also Anwar Sihander Khan who became important in public school administration in West Pakistan.

The reception itself was simple and rational. Tea was served by Lorangs, leading Lahore caterer of the time. Then came the speeches. Only two. One from the college side, the other in reply by Iqbal. There were also recitations from Iqbal. Somehow I had taken charge of the college speech and the recitations. The speech was done by me, for the recitations I asked a friend Kazim Husain, for many years one of the only two or three Muslim members of the faculty of the then Maclagan Engineering College. The recitation (or recitations) came at the end and every one—including Iqbal—enjoyed. Iqbal listened with great dignity, quietly, and somewhat seriously.

As for the college speech. I had written it out and got it up perfectly. A copy of it later went to the Muslim Outlook and was printed verbatim. (Who can now lay hand on this once great Muslim daily published by Maulana Abdul Haq from Bungalow Ayub Shah and edited by a brilliant Muslim Englishman or Anglo-Indian Daud Upson?)

In my speech I had—undersigned--worked on the theme that philosophers differed very much amongst themselves, that philosophy was mostly concerned with defining differences, that students of philosophy had to choose soon enough the philosopher or philosophers they would rather belong to, that their choice depended very much on' the impressions they received from their first readings or their first teachers, that philosophy in short, tended to be personality-dominated. One sentence in my speech ran like this:

Elsewhere there may be Kantians or Hegelians or what not, but we at GC are just Chatterjians!

A key description of my theme and also of how persuasive and popular was our own teacher Chatterji. The speech seemed to have worked well. It raised some laughter. Hemmy and Chatterji were the loudest to laugh. Among the students Ugra Sen later well-known Professor of English Literature sat as chief correspondent of the G,C.,' magazine Ravi. He wrote about it in the Ravi. I cannot say what Iqbal thought of it. Not much, I suppose. Except that it was a welcome speech by a student. But it made me glad to think I had come to his notice.

When Iqbal rose to speak every one adjusted himself, so as not to jmiss a single word out of what he was going to say. Anything that came from the poet's lips was important and had to be listened to with attention. Iqbal did not speak much though. Maybe he was in search of a theme. Before an audience of Hindu, Muslim, Sikh, Christian students and teachers, among them an English Principal, a physicist of some learning, what theme was it best to raise? A completely Muslim theme would not go well with a mixed audience. An Indian theme was hard to invent. A philosophical theme could be tame or tenuous. If there was a search, it was settled by Einstein. Einstein was the rage those days. And Iqbal's interest in Einstein was unusual. In retrospect today, one can say that Iqbal at the time was thinking of what to make of Einstein in philosophy, in higher poetry and in religious experience. Einstein had set new dimensions for philosophical thought and scientific descriptions. No wonder, Iqbal had taken little notice of the speech he had just listened to. He went on to speak about something which, it became quite clear, was very much on his mind. It also became clear that what he was going to say was linked with the conversation he had raised with us when we went to invite him to this GC reception. And in the light of what Iqbal has said and written since (especially in his Reconstruction), we can say that in the 1920's Iqbal was thinking furiously of the philosophy and science of his day and of relating everything important in it to an Islamic world-view reconstructed after his own mind and heart. It is impossible to recall, now aftera bout 50 years, what Iqbal actually said on the occasion. But from

the images which happen to survive I think I could construct his speech in the following way:

My interest in philosophy—the last many years—has centred round the problem of space and time. Our earth and all around it occupies space. It is itself space and moves in space but has its being in time. So at least many of us would say. But how space and time appear to us in our daily experience may not be as they appear to a philosopher or a scientist. Space and time of daily experience may be dismissed as mere appearance. Philosophers have said this since Hegel. But what they are in reality, we have no means of knowing. Nobody knows, therefore there is also the problem of how space and time appear to God. These are problems also for theistic philosophers. And they have thought and speculated about them. In the Muslim scripture—the Holy Quran—there are clear indications that time is important, very important, that there is human time and there is divine time. Divine time is reckoned in a way different from human time. There is also the infinite, unlimited knowledge of God, knowledge without dimensions; without a before and after except perhaps in a sense to be defined carefully; without, that is to say, a sharp distinction between past, present and future.

Muslim mystical poets and thinkers have been attracted to this theme and some of them have expressed themselves in startlingly modern ways. Their modern parallel is the German Professor Albert Einstein who has proved mathematically that our time and space are phenomenal. They may be important phenomenally, but

they are nothing ultimate, nothing in their own right. They are symptoms of a more ultimate reality, to be described in ways very different from the conventional.

Einstein's thought is yet unkown except to mathematicians. Therefore, I have been discussing the subject with professors of mathematics. But they are unable to communicate the meaning Einstein's ideas have for ordinary men and philosophers. In mathematical language, mathematicians tell us, Einstein makes perfect good sense. I believe they are right. But Einstein should make perfect good sense even to the ordinary man and the philosopher. Perhaps not yet I have been studying expositions of Einstein's mathematical work. Everybody says it is startling. And it does seem startling. Exactly what is startling in it, it is not easy to say. My own study of the subject—it is called Relativity—extends over the last many years. I have felt interested in it more and more. For, it seems to bring Islam, the Holy Quran, and the mystics of Islam, on the one hand, and the new physical and mathematical science, on the other, closer together. I have a mind to trace out the two strands and put them together so as to show how significant and how similar they are. The commonsense view of a world of solid matter moving in the stream of time, or of time flowing upon a world of space and solid objects, is not true. It has to change. It is truer to say that space and time are signs of events. The world is made of events. No even can be described in terms of space and time, that is, partly space, partly time, but rather in terms of space and time all at once. We are still able to speak of space and time though. Space has to lose its rigidity and

its status as something ultimate. In any case it is difficult to say which is more important ultimately, space or time? Perhaps time.

I hope I will have another opportunity of meeting you. I should also have time to consider the subject more carefully, also more time talking over and discussing. I may then explain more clearly how mystical religion—at least some mystical thinkers—and modern science are coming closer, trying to say the same thing. The outcome is interesting for every one, for students of religion as well as for students of science.

The speech—Iqbal's speech to the Brett Philosophical Society, Government College, Lahore-was over. Every one looked at every one else and all at Iqbal. A profound effect had been produced. Something very important—something that was yet unfolding—was on the poet's mind. Some of it had found expression; very much more of it was to find expression in its own good time. Iqbal's short speech had been heard by all agog. It was the promise of a longer speech to come. The promise was fulfilled at Madras in Iqbal's famous Lectures on the reconstruction of religious Thought in Islam,

After the speech came the recitations. Kazim Husain had taken charge of these. One piece sung beautifully by Kazim was especially well chosen. Kazim did not live long, He did not live to see all that Iqbal was to become in years to come. And certainly did not live to see Pakistan—Iqbal's conceptual and political child—take birth. So, let this reminiscence serve as a tribute to a

forgotten friend who contributed much to the beauty of this occasion.

This piece I reproduce below from the Bang-i-Dara. It has a Powerful universalist message and it fitted so well into the occasion.

Incidentally, few people realise that Iqbal remained a universalist in his outlook and his thinking even when in politics he changed from an Indian nationalist to a Muslim communalist. For, as a leader of Indian Muslims he continued to argue for his positions not from partisan premises or for partisan ends, but from general premises, for general ends. How much he liked to talk of Asia and Africa and in the same breath! And not of Muslim Asia and Muslim Africa only, but of Asia and Africa as such. By Asia and Africa he meant the back-ward, the down - trodden, the exploited part of the world. The future of this part had to be assured before the future of the world could be assured.

The point is not understood by some of Iqbal's critics especially in India. Indian Muslim communalism was brought to birth by Indian Hindu communalism. But even after it had come to birth, its justification was sought in universalist, humanist terms, in the beauty of variety, in sub-grouping inherent in the political nature of man. This variety, this sub-grouping allowed to grow along healthy lines was bound to organise itself into a rich, meaningful, voluntary unity.

The piece I reproduce below describes the lovers of Iqbal's conception. Iqbal's lovers are devotees of big causes. Wherever found, Iqbal is ready to praise them, to stand up to them and salute them. The piece well-chosen, was as well-received at the Brett reception.

انوکھی وضع ھے سارے زمانے سے نرالے ھیں
یہ عاشق کون سی بستی کے یارب رھنے والے ہیں
علاج درد میں بھی درد کی لذت پہ مرتا ہوں
جو تھے چھالوں میں کانٹے نوک سوزن سے نکالے ہیں
بھلا بھولا رھے یا رب چمن میری امیدوں کا
جگر کا خون دے دے کر یہ بوٹے میں نے پالے ہیں
رلاتی ہے مھے راتوں کو خاموشی ستاروں کی
نرالا عشق ہے میرا نرالے میرے نالے ھیں
نہ پوچھو مجھ سے لذت خانماں برباد رھنے کی
نشین سینکڑوں میں نے بنا کر پھونک ڈالے ھیں
نہیں بیگانگی اچھی رفیق راہ منزل سے
ٹھہر جا اے شرر ھم بھی تو آخر مٹنے والے ھیں
امید حور نے سب کچھ سکھا رکھا ھے داعظ کو
یہ حضرت دیکھنے میں سیدھے سادے بھولے بھالے ہیں
مرے اشعار اے اقبال کیوں پیارے نہ ھوں مجھ کو

مرے ٹوٹے ہوے دل کے یہ درد انگیز نالے ہیں

1, Strange in their ways and different from all the rest! Wherefrom do they come? these lovers, my Lord?

2. Pain I must love, it maybe pain of the wound or pain o the lancet,

The thorns in my wounds I have pulled out with a needle-point.

3. May it ever remain rich and green, this garden of my hopes,

Its tender plants I have watered with the blood of m liver.

4. These still stars, night after night, oh they make me cry! Strange is my love and strange are my love-laments.

5. Ask me not how happy it feels to be without hearth and home, How many nests have I built only to burn away!

6. Eschew not me your fellow-traveller, and Tarry 0 fatas flame, we are doomed alike to destruction.

7. The saint lives on the hope of houries in heaven, His innocence and simplicity are all assumed, all appearance.

8. My couplets, Iqbal, why shouldn't they be dear to me? Mournful laments they, they flow out of a mournful heart.

It only remains to add that Iqbal walked both ways, from his McLeod Road, house to GC and back. We walked with him. An

experience never to be forgotten. Throughout we witnessed an exceptional love of students in a great man. From the moment we went to invite him to the moment we parted with him at his door, he made us feel his equals.

On the subject of Iqbal's interest in students and his simple unassumed kindness towards them it may be mentioned that during a year or so in the late 1930's, a group of students (majority Sikh, 1 think), let by—now the Indian Sikh scholar and leader-Kapur Singh, visited Iqbal, now and then and returned invariably with interesting accounts of these visits. Between them—for a time—they also managed to bring out a Punjabi magazine (in Urdu script) called Sarang. An earlier issue of Sarang carried a full-length interview with Iqbal. The writeup was Kapur Singh's. One of the questions perhaps the main question—discussed was why Iqbal did not write Punjabi. Iqbal's answer was he was not wedded to any language in the creation of his verse. The choice of language depended on the theme to be handled. Iqbal's themes required now Persian, now Urdu, as a vehicle. His famous Lectures he wrote in English. There was no objection to writing Punjabi, therefore. If a theme turned up which required the use of Punjabi, he would write Punjabi.

I know about this because Kapur Singh was then studying for M. A., philosophy and was in almost daily contact with me. He was a brilliant student and passed M.A., a Nanak Bakhsh Medalist of the Punjab University. He entered the ICS but resigned soon after 1947 over some differences. He is very much in politics now.