

THE EVOLUTION OF IQBAL'S POETIC THOUGHT

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A Myth Exploded

It is high time that a myth which has for long reigned supreme in the intellectual and literary circles should be exploded. It is this: To begin with, Iqbal was a nationalist poet of the secular Congress brand. During the closing years of his life his mind underwent a sudden metamorphosis and he began to consider it his duty to represent the cause of Islam and the Muslim people in India. Like all other wrongs, this myth is founded on the misinterpretation of a fact. It is true that there is a remarkable difference in the early and later poetry of Iqbal. But what is regarded as a change of heart in Iqbal is nowhere visible in his works. He did not suddenly change his religion at forty or forty-five at which period of his life he is credited to have turned away his face from the god of secular nationalism to bow before the ideal of a religio-political nationhood. Iqbal was born a Muslim, lived as a Muslim and died as a Muslim. All through his life he studied and adored the Islamic lore. Historical evidence suggests that the direction of his mind never changed from the beginning to the close of his life. All that the young poet who published "Kohistān Himālyah" in the first issue of the Makhzan may be accused of is patriotism, and patriotism does not make one a secularist. "Nayā Shiwālah" was only a plea for peace and sanity in a riot-torn country and this too cannot be equated with the advocacy of a single nationhood for India. His most consistent message from which he did not deviate for a single moment all through his life is contained in the couplet:

یہ دور اپنے براہیم کی تلاش

میں
ہے
صنم کدہ ہے جہاں لا الہ الا
اللہ

He spoke as a Muslim nationalist, an Indian patriot and as a champion of Asia's struggle against Western capitalistic hegemony. He was not dramatising his emotions, but actually feeling them. Not a Shakespeare or a Ghālib was he, but a Milton or a Ḥālī. His was not an individual Odyssey, but the Odyssey of a nation, of an age. Freedom of the subcontinent, and of the East, and reconstruction of the world on the pattern of Islam—these were the three tiers of his intellectual and practical endeavour. It is the usual custom to divide the evolution of Iqbal's poetic thought into three stages. Let us follow this pattern and look at the evidence thrown up by each stage. In the early stage of his poetry which closes with the poet's departure to Europe, we find in him a restless energy for action. He is engaged in exploring the ground.

لاؤں وہ تنکے کہیں سے آشیانے
کے لیے
بجلیاں بے تاب ہوں جن کے جلانے
کے لیے

His gaze rests on the Himalayas which border his land; he delves into the past glories of Islam, takes cognizance of the plight of the orphans, or the civil strife in the subcontinent. Then he leaves for Europe to take a broader look at the world. For the first time his mind grasps the facts of international life. The most crying problem, it appears to him, is the resolution of the conflict between the Exploited East and the Exploiting West. This realisation kindles in him a restless spirit to turn a practical fighter in the cause of human liberation and abandon his Muse for good. A friend and confidant of the poet at this time, Shaikh Abdul Qadir, in his preface to Bāng-i Darā tells

us: “Shaikh Muhammad iqbāl one day told me that he had resolved to take a vow to abandon his Muse for good and devote the time spent in writing poetry to some other productive effort. I said to him that his Muse was not of the kind which should be abandoned. His poetry had that healing effect which might cure the ills of our backward nation and our unfortunate land. Hence it would not be proper to suspend such a useful God-gifted power. Shaikh Ṣāḥib [Iqbāl] was rather impressed by my argument and it was agreed that the final decision would be taken according to the opinion of Arnold. If Arnold agreed with me Shaikh Ṣāḥib would alter his decision to abandon Muse. If, however, he agreed with Shaikh Ṣāḥib, then Shaikh Ṣāḥib would carry out his design. I consider it fortunate for the world of learning that Arnold expressed his agreement with my view and it was decided that Iqbāl's decision to abandon the Muse was unjustified.” [Translated from Urdu]

He was persuaded to remain wedded to his Muse, but the Muse had to adapt to deliberations upon relations between East and West, the rise and fall of nations, the social, political and above all economic problems facing mankind. The world to him is a battlefield ; the sharpest weapon is a stable Ego.

Asrār-i Khudī and Rumūz-i Baikhudī are representative poems of this period, wherein the poet has mapped his ground, has entrenched himself and has clearly marked his targets. All that remains now is to start the action. “Ṭulū'-i Islām” (Urdu) and Payām-i Mashriq (Persian) launch the third stage of his poetic evolution, which corresponds to the last one and a half decades of his life.

Not content with expounding rules and ideology, the poet attacks from his chosen standpoint the problems of the day with reference to particular men and matters.

Significantly the appearance of “Ṭulū'-i Islām” provoked critical comment. “It appears that the imagination of the poet has weakened” which meant only that the poet was not using an embellished diction.

Iqbal shot back straight: “My intellect has clearly grasped the message which I wish to convey. Following the tradition of Arabic poetry I will say things now in clear and plain language.”

Evidence suggests that from then onward the poet was more anxious that his meaning was clearly understood rather than catering to the critics' palate with elegant diction. For a time, Urdu as a vehicle of thought receded from his mind and Persian took its place. Apart from “Ṭulū'-i Islām” and “Khic;r-i Rāh,” Iqbal expressed his new ideals in Persian only. Payām-i Mashriq.

Zabūr-i 'Ajam and /avid Nāmah followed. And then the poet again turned to Urdu.

Bāl-i Jibrīl has all the characteristics of plainness and elegance of expression which are the distinctive features of the best Arabic verse.

Critics, mostly Western-oriented, believe that the poet took too harsh a view of Western civilisation and that his opposition to the West smacks of vindictiveness. But, then, these critics perhaps consider that Iqbal was only indulging in an academic argument against the West, which he was not. In this last phase of his life and poetry, Iqbal was a practical fighter against all forms of oppression. He was displaying the outlook of an em-battled soldier against the enemy. The enemy was the West which exploited the East, the landlord who drank the blood of the tenant and the capitalist who sucked the very life out of the labourer and, of course, the Anglo-Hindu alliance that had conspired to keep the Muslims enslaved.

There was no place for him in the Congress ranks. How could there have been? He was a convinced Muslim, a believer in the socialistic

interpretation of Islam, the conceiver of a separate homeland in India for Islam, and a pan-Islamist.