

IQBAL ON DEMOCRACY

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Iqbal was basically a democrat. He was not only a theoretical politician, but he also practically participated in the politics of Indo-Pakistan subcontinent. In 1926, he stood for election and was chosen to the Punjab Legislative Council. As Dr L.S. May writes, Iqbal was “an active member of this Council, speaking often on land revenue and taxation, demanding greater justice in land assessment and even land revenue deductions in hardship cases.”⁶⁸ In his speech of 10 March 1927, he pleaded the case for compulsory primary education,⁶⁹ and in his speech of 5 May 1927 on the 1927-28 Budget he advocated for better sanitation conditions in villages as well as for medical aid to India’s women?⁷⁰ He started his political career as a member of the National Liberal League but later on joined the A11-India Muslim League. When the Muslim League was split in 1928, Iqbal became Secretary of the Shafi’ branch, from which position he later resigned. Iqbal was actively involved in the political broiling of the sub-continent and, in many important respects, he rather moulded the destiny of Muslim India which was later to become Pakistan. Thus, Iqbal lived a full political life as a democrat. In Bāl-i Jibrīl, he ushers in the democratic era in these strong words:

سلطانی جمہور کا آتا ہے زمانہ
جو نقش کہن تم کو نظر آئے مٹا دو⁷¹

⁶⁸ Dr L.S. May, Iqbal: His Life and Times, p. 169.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ P. 110.

and links it, somehow, with the destiny of the teeming millions of India. He is opposed to all forms of feudal lordism, kingship, despotism, etc., and pleads that the people should be the captains of their own destinies.

To Iqbal, the form of government is a very important determining factor of human destiny and life. He disagrees with Alexander Pope who held: "Let fools fight for the forms of government," and says, "To my mind government, whatever its form, is one of the determining forces of a people's character. Loss of political power is equally ruinous to a nation's character."⁷² History bears out his opinion because we find that people under dictatorial or despotic rules are generally submissive and meekish. Again, one of the reasons for the moral deprivation of Muslims was their loss of power in the subcontinent. Iqbal endorses the democratic system on the ground that it gives the individual a maximum of freedom and a fair play to his potentialities and capabilities. Democratic rule has its impact on scientific thought also. As Iqbal says: "The growing spirit of individualism in politics is not without its influence on contemporary scientific thought. Modern thought regards the universe a democracy of living atoms."⁷³ Thus, the government determines the character as well as the thought of a people; it has its inroad into the philosophical and scientific ideas of a nation. He goes on to add that a democratic system exerts a healthier influence on the thinking and conduct of a people. But "what is democracy to Iqbal?

Democracy is primarily a science or a methodology rather than an ideology or a philosophy, and this is how Iqbal seems to treat of it. It is a way to ensure and confirm a certain ideology through common suffrage. Iqbal subjects democracy as a methodology to searching criticism. To start with, it is a methodology and should be treated as such but as used in the West, this methodology is quantitative. Iqbal expresses this fact in the following verse:

⁷² 5. Dr. Javid Iqbal, Ed., [Iqbal's] Stray Reflections, p. 14.

⁷³ Ibid, p. 41

جمہوریت اک طرز حکومت ہے
کہ جس میں
بندوں کو گنا کرتے ہیں تو لا نہیں
کرتے⁷⁴

In this method no discrimination is made on the basis of education, talent, mental calibre, and individual potentialities it fails to differentiate between a Fidel and an infidel, a Muslim and a non-believer; that is why Iqbal compares it to an unsheathed sword. He says in Gulshan-i Rāz Jadīd.

زمن ده اہل مغرب را پیامی
کہ جمہور است تیغ بے نیامی
چہ شمشیری کہ جاں ہامی ستاند
تمیز مسلم و کافر نداند
نہ ماند در غلاف خود زمانی
بردد جان خود و جان جہانی⁷⁵

It overlooks the important individual differences which modern psychology accentuates. A quantitative democratic system is prone to ignore these very important differences. The basic principle of this democracy is the utilitarian rule of justice: “Everyone to count for one, and nobody for more than one”⁷⁶ —the absolute principle of justice which is hardly just. Iqbal refers to the same quantitative approach to democracy when he says:

گریز از طور جمہوری غلام

⁷⁴ Darb-i Kalīm, p, 150.

⁷⁵ 8. Pp. 167-68.

⁷⁶ The utilitarian principle of Justice or Equity as enunciated by H, Sidgwick.

پختہ کاری شو
کہ از مغز دو صد خر فکر انسانی
نمی آید⁷⁷

Here Iqbal beautifully brings home the implicit fallacy of composition ingrained in the qualitative approach and urges that thinking of two hundred asses will not make one human brain. It was this argument which disillusioned Iqbal with the Western concept of democracy.

Again, democracy being a methodology, it will endorse any ideology which gets a common suffrage, irrespective of its moral import or its worth as an ideology. It is a method, as said before, and can be used to introduce or perpetuate any ideology for which is being used. This method is responsible for a motley variety of governments in the world, right from kingship and dictatorship to people's government; it perpetuates capitalism with as much force and justification in one country as socialism in another. Where it is fostering kingship in Britain and a presidential form of government in the U S A., it is endorsing dictatorship, the Russians claim. The capitalists, who have their leadership in America today have the pretensions that only capitalism is democratic because it does not interfere with individual rights; the socialists, divided into two blocs, assert that socialism and democracy are indivisible.⁷⁸ In the name of democracy, history tells us, thousands of atrocities have been committed in the world. In the hands of infidels, this method perpetuates infidelity, and has failed to mitigate the miseries and black spots of the world. In Bāl-i Jibrīl, Iqbal reports the Satan as saying:

جمہور کے ابلیس ہیں ارباب سیاست
باقی نہیں اب میری ضرورت تہ افلاک!⁷⁹

⁷⁷ Payām-i Mashriq, p, 135.

⁷⁸ Article by N. Podgorny, "Socialism : Theory and Practice," June 1977

⁷⁹ P. 162.

Again, Iqbal condemns democracy which is divorced from religion or belief. The European democracy is pestered with this ill. Iqbal says:

مری نگاہ میں ہے یہ سیاست لادیں
کنیز اہرمن و دوں نہاد و مردہ ضمیر
ہوئی ہے ترک کلیسا سے حاکمی آزاد
فرنگیوں کی سیاست ہے دیو بے زنجیر⁸⁰

The European democracy is not only irreligious and faithless. it is also wrought by the capitalists for their own sinister designs. He says:

تری حریف ہے یا رب سیاست افرنگ
مگر ہیں اس کے پجاری فقط امیر و رئیس!⁸¹

As said before, democracy can be equally efficaciously used to ensure supremacy of a ruling class or a community. In one of the verses Iqbal reports Satan saying:

ہم نے خود شاہی کو پہنایا ہے جمہوری لباس
جب ذرا آدم ہوا ہے خود شناس و خود نگر⁸²

Thus, democracy is also used to camouflage the same old king-ship and despotism. It is subservient to the perpetuation of same old system by sugar-coating it, and democracy provides the requisite sugar-coating. When Iqbal was disillusioned at this outer garb of democracy, he was forced to reject it in so far as it retained the racial and status preferences. He says:

⁸⁰ Darb-i Kalim, pp. 152-53.

⁸¹ Ibid., pp. 142.

⁸² 15. Armaghān-i Hijāz (Urdu), p. 7.

شریک خریدتے حکم ہیں غلاموں فقط ان کا کر نہیں سکتے
ادراک! ⁸³ جوہر ان کا ان ان ان ان ان

It is sometimes not good for a community to have a democratic approach. It may be very useful to a majority, but it will always keep a minority suppressed and wretched. This is also another use of democracy. It was in view of such a situation in the subcontinent that in 1886 Sayyid Ahmad Khan urged that “if the democratic principle was introduced in India, the Muslims would find themselves completely at the mercy of the Hindu majority.”⁸⁴ Democracy is not advisable if it is manipulated to suppress a minority, because it is, in itself, the handmaid of majority, irrespective of their views and the moral value of those views. If the case between the early Muslims and the non-believers of Mecca were decided by a common suffrage rather than in the battlefield of Badr, Islam would have been buried there and then. Iqbal very rightly says that democracy, being a methodology, is in itself neither good nor bad; it is the use to which we put it that decides its value, and which is again relative. He says:

خیر ہے سلطانے جمہور کا غوغا کہ شر؟
تو جہاں کے تازہ فتنوں سے نہیں ہے باخبر! ⁸⁵

It is not the rule of democracy, but the wicked designs of the present world which are pertinent, because democracy in itself is amoral like any other method. It is a sword, as Iqbal said, which knows cutting only, and not whom it cuts—a fidel or an infidel, a socialist or a capitalist, the bourgeois or the proletarian. But its forms in vogue, as we find in the West, are very malicious and devised to serve some sinister designs of the Western world. Again, talking of the ills of democracy in the West, Iqbal writes: 'Democracy

⁸³ Darb-i Kalim p. 139.

⁸⁴ Dr L.S. May, op. cit., p. 171.

⁸⁵ Armaghān-i Hljāz (Urdu), p. 7.

has a tendency to foster the spirit of legality. This is not in itself bad; but unfortunately it tends to displace the purely moral standpoint and to make the illegal and the wrong identical in meaning.”⁸⁶ This tendency we have witnessed in the West, which has become more and more legal-minded, but has left the moral standpoint far behind. Democracy is among those potent reasons which have been responsible for the gradual consignment of morality to the grave. Keeping in view all these ills of the Western democracy, Iqbal epitomizes his polemic thus:

تو نے کیا دیکھا نہیں مغرب کا
 جمہوری نظام؟
 چہرہ روشن، اندروں چنگیز سے
 تاریک ترا!⁸⁷

Iqbal analyses his discussion on Western democracy in the following words: “The idealism of Europe never became a living factor in her life and the result is a perverted ego seeking itself through mutually intolerant democracies whose sole function is to exploit the poor in the interest of the rich.”⁸⁸ He points out that the uses of imperial ambitions in Europe indicate that the Westerners are tired of democracy. This reaction against democracy in England and France has not only purely historical causes, but also deeper psychological causes.⁸⁹

But where to get democracy free from all these ills? What is the proper use of this methodology? To Iqbal, unless man has right notion of life and is imbued with love and fraternity, democracy cannot be but oppressive and demonic. Democracy, free of all these ills, is possible only in a society which knows no apartheid, no racial or caste discrimination, no feudal relation-ship

⁸⁶ 19. Javid Iqbal, Ed., op. cit., p. 120.

⁸⁷ Armaghān-i Hijāz (Urdu), p. 8.

⁸⁸ The Reconstruction, p. 179.

⁸⁹ Pp. 121-22.

between master and slave, no hatred of one against the other. Only Islam has envisaged such a polity in which Maḥmūd (signifying the master) and Ayāz (signifying the slave) stand in the same ranks. Dr K.A. Hakim delineates Iqbal's notion of democracy thus:

“Islam imbibes constituents of the best possible democracy and, according to Iqbal, they need to be embedded in specific institutions. It was Islam that gave the lesson of equality of rights and practised it, included the concept of a republic among its basic teachings, taught that government should be run by a Council or *mushāwarat*. An ordinary subject could summon the *Amīr al-Mū'minīn* to the court as a respondent. Islam declared the freedom of conscience; gave the concept of a welfare state, the duty whereof was not only to run administration, but also to provide for the basic needs of the people; dispelled the colour and race differences. Everybody was at liberty to choose his own avocation and way of life. Islam played the pioneer in teaching that wealth should not concentrate in a few hands.”⁹⁰

Islam at the moment is beset by narrow-mindedness and obscurantism, but “if it is freed from this narrow-minded and obscurant approach of the *mullā*, if the Muslims take to developing their spiritual potentialities rather than paying heed to the superficial form, they can offer the world such a kind of democracy that the political systems of England and America will feel shy and small.”⁹¹

This system will not be a quantitative approach, like counting of heads; it will be a qualitative assessment of the participants and the principle of equity ensuing upon it shall be: “Everyone according to his deserts, rather works”—in short, *Musāwāt-i Muḥammadī*.

As against the Western democracy, which I have described as quantitative in approach, the Islamic democracy delineated in the above

⁹⁰ Dr. K.A. Hakim, *Fikr-i Iqbāl*, pp. 287-88.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, op. 288-89.

paragraph, I describe as “spiritual democracy” with a qualitative approach. This is possible only in a society consisting of developed egos, practicing Islamic or “Muhammedan” equality. Such a society Iqbal calls the Kingdom of God on earth.

In a letter to R.A. Nicholson he briefly, but clearly, describes what he means by the Kingdom of God. He writes:

“The Kingdom of God on earth means the democracy of more or less unique individuals, presided over by the most unique individual possible on this earth.”⁹²

Thus, “Kingdom of God” and “spiritual” democracy mean the selfsame thing, according to Iqbal. The establishment of such a democracy necessitates enforcement of the Islamic Law, which is useful only after the Ijtihād or necessary reorientation of that Law to the demands and requirements of the time has been affected. What is worth noting, Iqbal believes that Ijtihād or reorientation in law can well be affected through democratic process. In the words of Iqbal:

“The republican form of government is not only thoroughly consistent with the spirit of Islam, but has also become a necessity in view of the new forces that are set free in the world of Islam.”⁹³

Iqbal, in agreement with Turkey, believes that “the Caliphate or Imamate can be vested in a body of persons, or an elected Assembly.”⁹⁴

In his discussion of Ijmā', as a source of Ijtihād, Iqbal re-commends that, in view of the present needs, the power of Ijtihād can best be vested in a Muslim legislative assembly rather than in a single representative individual. He says:

⁹² 25. A.J. Arberry (Eng-tr.), *Iqbal's Namah*, Intro., p. 11.

⁹³ *The Reconstruction*, p. 157.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*

“The transfer of the power of Ijtihād from individual representative of schools to a Muslim legislative assembly which, in view of the growth of opposing sects, is the only possible form Ijma can take in modern times, will secure contributions to legal discussion from laymen who happen to possess a keen insight into affairs. In this way alone we can stir into activity the dormant spirit of life in our legal system, and give it an evolutionary outlook.”⁹⁵

He, however, suggests that “The Ulema should form a vital part of Muslim legislative assembly helping and guiding free discussion on questions relating to law.”⁹⁶

Iqbal concludes his chapter on “The Principle of Movement in the Structure of Islam” (Ijtihād) in the following suggestion:

“Let the Muslim of to-day appreciate his position reconstruct his social life in the light of ultimate principles, and evolve, out of the hitherto partially revealed purpose of Islam, that spiritual democracy which is the ultimate aim of Islam.”⁹⁷

The spiritual democracy, unlike European democracies, did not emerge from any economic considerations. In 1916, Iqbal said:

“The Democracy of Islam did not grow out of the extension of economic opportunity; it is a spiritual principle based on the assumption that every human being is a centre of latent power, the possibilities of which can be developed by cultivating a certain type of character.”⁹⁸

Had it grown out of the extension of economic opportunities, it would have been no less quantitative in its approach than the European democracy.

⁹⁵ 28. Ibid., p. 174.

⁹⁶ Ibid., p. 176.

⁹⁷ Ibid., p. 180.

⁹⁸ Dr. R.A. Nicholson, *Secrets of the Self*, Intro., p. xxix, n.32. Quoted in Dr. Bilgrami, *Glimpses of Iqbal's Mind and Thought*, p. 94.

The very basis for such a type of democracy was laid down by the Holy Prophet (peace be upon him) in his famous address of the Dhil-Hijjah (7 March 632). He said:

“The aristocracy of old time is trampled under my feet. The Arab has no superiority over the non-Arab. And a non-Arab has no superiority over the Arab. All are children of Adam, and Adam was made of the dust of the earth.”⁹⁹

The fundamental basis of Islamic democracy is Tawḥīd. As Iqbal expresses:

“Islam, as a polity, is only a practical means of making this principle [of Tawḥīd] a living factor in the intellectual and emotional life of mankind. It demands loyalty to God, and not to thrones.”¹⁰⁰

Again, Iqbal’s concept of democracy, as rightly said by Dr. H. H.

Bilgrami, is not limited to any particular geographical, racial or linguistic boundaries. Iqbal urges, while talking of Islam:

“As an emotional system of unification it recognizes the worth of the individual as such, and rejects blood-relationship as a basis of human unity.”

And this stress on the worth of individual is the very basis of democracy.

⁹⁹ The Reconstruction, p. 147.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., p. 146.