

INDIVIDUAL AND SOCIETY IN IQBAL'S THINKING

The Concept of Self and Selflessness

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In a previous paper of mine, entitled *Iqbal's Relevance to the Present World*¹, I observed that some critics have superficially regarded Iqbal as a mere national poet with dogmatic religious views, while others have tried to link him with the ideas of Nietzsche, Bergson, Goethe and Dante. A close study of Iqbal's writings rejects these extreme views. He was neither a nationalist in the limited meaning of the word, nor a follower of Western philosophers. He was, above all, the product of his social and historical environment. His imagination and philosophy were rooted in his society and culture, and were inspired by his love for the millions of working people who either were unable to speak for themselves or were silenced by social and political oppression.

In this paper I shall attempt to discuss Iqbal's idea of *Asrār-i Khudī* (*The Secrets of the Self*), and *Rumūz-i Bekhudī*, (*The Mysteries of Selflessness*), which were published in 1915 and 1918. Many books and papers by both European and Eastern critics have been written on these works. Some have interpreted the idea of Self in terms of Nietzsche or other philosophers, or have discussed it on an abstract and metaphysical level detached from reality.

It seems more fruitful and imaginative, however, to examine the books in the light of Iqbal's social background and life-experience. In this context it will then be seen that *Asrār-i Khudī* and *Rumūz-i Bekhudī* are neither mere philosophical concepts nor metaphysical speculations. They are rather an extension and expression of Iqbal's deeply-held ideas.

Iqbal's other Persian works, including *Payām-i Mashriq*, *Zabūr-i 'Ajam*, *Jāvid Nāmāh* and *Armaghān-i Hijāz*, express his social and political views. He opposed colonialism and Western imperialism, and challenged the philosophy of Plato and some Western philosophers who, he considered, alienated Man from his creative Self and the world of reality. These ideas, no

¹ "Iqbal International Seminar," New Delhi, 29 October to 3 November, 1977.

doubt, have also been expressed in his Urdu writings. In *Asrār-i Khudī* and *Rumūz-i Bekhudī* Iqbal develops his ideas by giving depth and a sense of universality.

Now we come to the questions: “What is Man as an individual, and what are the secrets of his Self?” and “What is the relationship between the individual or Self and other men or society?”

The Secrets of the Self and The Mysteries of Selflessness are among the most important works of Iqbal. In writing them, Iqbal has attempted to chase away the clouds of mysticism and cast out the spectre of God or gods which has hung over Man for centuries. He believed this was possible only by stressing that Man has a creative self. The basic difference between Man and lower creatures lies in Man’s creativity. Man creates his natural surroundings by giving names to objects.

پیکر ہستی ز آثارِ خودی است پرچہ می بینی ز اسرارِ خودی است

خویشتن را چون خودی بیدار کرد آشکارا عالمِ پندار کرد

در جہاں تخمِ خصومت کاشت است خویشتن را غیرِ خود پنداست است²

[The whole of Existence is the manifestation of Self,

Whatever you see is derived from the secrets of Self.

When Self awakened itself,

It revealed the world of Imagination... .

The seed of enmity is sown in the world

And Man has become alien to himself.]*

² *Asrār-i Khudī*, p. 12.

* All translation are Mine

Here “Self-awakening” and ‘Man’s becoming alien to himself’ are the key points. What does Iqbal mean by “Self-awakening”? Iqbal, among many great thinkers such as Rūmī from the East and Blake from the West, believed that Man is a creative being and that he creates his own surrounding world. In other words, Man by his sense-perception receives impressions from the material world and recreates these worldly objects in his imagination. Being aware of the existence of such creative power in oneself is the beginning of ‘Self-awakening’. This gives Man a sense of self-identity and determination. He brings Nature under his control, and gives meaning, colour and a name to it Iqbal, praising the creative soul of Man, and Nature as a vehicle of its development, writes:

برقها خوابیده در جان من است	کوه و صحرا بابِ جولانِ من است
پنجه کن با بجرم ار صحراستی	برق من در گیر اگر سیناستی
چشمه حیوان براتم کرده اند	محرم رازِ حیاتم کرده اند
ذره از سوزِ نوایم زنده گشت	پرکشود و کرمکِ تابنده گشت ³

[Sparks are hidden in my soul,
Mountains and fields are gateways for my wanderings.
Mingle with my ocean if you are a field,
Catch my sparks if you are Sīnā'ī
I am given the spring of life
And made the confidant of my life.
The particle gained life from my song,
Grew wings and became a firefly.]

³ 3. Ibid., p. 6.

This creative self or imagination is neither the characteristic of a nation nor a literary movement. The difference between ancient and modern writers or between writers from so-called “developed” or “undeveloped” countries is not a difference in the quality of the creative mind or imagination, but the difference of objects and means of creation or production. In other words, ancient Man had an equally creative and powerful mind and used his mind equally well as modern Man; the difference between the two lies only in the use of objects—an axe made from stone or steel. The Creative Self is as old as Man. Men in caves carved or drew pictures of the Nature or world surrounding them. In order to conquer their natural environment, they first conquered it in their imagination. Poets animated mountains, rivers, trees, sun, moon and stars, giving them the power that they themselves desired to have. In his imagination the poet brings water to barren lands, and the barren lands blossom with joy and fruit. His people are being saved from starvation and want. He invites the people to translate his imagination into action within society.

خیز و پا بر جادهٔ دیگر بنه جوش سودامی کهن از سر بنه

حرکتِ اعصابِ گردون دیده ام در رگِ مه‌گردشِ خوان دیده ام

بهر احسان چشمِ من شبها گریست تا دریدم پردهٔ اسرارِ زیست

من که این شب را چو مه آراستم گردِ پای ملتِ بیضاستم

ملنی در باغ و راغ آوازه اش آتشی دلها سرودِ تازه اش⁴

⁴ Ibid., pp. 9-10

[Rise and step on a different road,
 Give up living in the past...
 I have seen the nervous system of the universe
 And the blood circulation in the veins of the moon.
 For humanity I lamented many nights,
 Till I have torn the veil of mysteries...
 Like a moon I have brought light into this dark night
 And have shed my light at the feet of my people.
 I have become their songs in gardens and fields
 And the fire of their hearts and fresh songs.]

Iqbal suggests that, by giving up the past, Man will become a living and creative being rather than a slave to the abstract and passive teachings of the past. This suggestion might raise the question in our minds: Since Iqbal urges us to give up the past and step on a different road, why does he then advise us to follow the path of Muḥammad and Rūmī? By urging us to give up the past, Iqbal in fact tells us not to be idol-worshippers and passive followers: not to worship the objects, images and stories that the creative Self of men like ourselves has created in the past. In other words, he tells us that we should not forget that we have our creative Self and that we are living in the reality of the present, in a different world. This is the principle that Muhammad teaches us in the Qur'an and which Rūmī stresses in his poems. Iqbal, stressing the value of Man as the successor of God on earth, writes:

شمع خود را همچو رومی بر فروز	روم را در آتش تبریز سوز
هست معشوقه نهان اندر دلت	چشم اگر داری بیا بنائمت

در دلِ مسلمِ مقامِ مصطفیٰ است آبروی ما ز نامِ مصطفیٰ است

امتیازاتِ نسبِ را پاک سوخت آتش او این خس و خاشاک سوخت

عاشقے؟ محکم شو از تقلیدِ یار تا کمندِ تو شود یزدانِ شکار

اندکے اندر حرّامے دل نشین ترکِ خود کن سوئے حقِ ہجرتِ گزین

محکم از حقِ شو سوئے خود گامِ زن لات و عزامے ہوس را سر شکن

تا خدائے کعبہ بنواز د ترا شرحِ انیِ جاعلُ ساز د ترا⁵

[Light your candle as Rūmī did

And burn Rome in the fire of Tabriz.

There is a beloved part hidden in your heart,

Let me show it to you if you have the eyes....

The vision of Muṣṭafā (Muhammad) is in the heart of Muslim,

Our reputation stems from the name of Muṣṭafā...

He burned down all family privileges,

His fire burned all this rubbish... .

Then, are you a lover? Be firm on the path of your friend, Till God (sky or supernatural God) is caught in your net. Reside in the free land of the heart,

⁵ Ibid., pp. 19-23.

Give up yourself and depart towards *Haqq* or the “Truth”.

Trust *Haqq* or the “Truth” and step on the way of “self,” rely on your creative self.

Suppress irresponsible and selfish fancies. . . .

Ask the God of the Ka’bah to cherish you,

And make you His vicegerent on earth.]

Iqbal, by telling us to “rise and step on a different road” and “give up living in the past,” is in fact urging us to rise against any sort of social injustice and exploitation of man by man — either physical or spiritual. The elite and the privileged class, while living at leisure amid material wealth, teach the love of Allah and the denial of worldly love. By this negation they thwart the creative and most valuable part of Man, that is to say, the Self. The creative Self can develop only within the material world or society, not in a vacuum. Food and favourable living and social conditions are most essential for the development of Self. The creative Self loses its creativity and fruition in an unfavourable condition.

خستگی ہائے تو از ناداری است اصل درد تو ہمین بیماری است

می رباید رفعت از فکر بلند می کشد شمع خیال ارجمند⁶

[All your tirednesses are the result of poverty,

The main cause of your illness is the same disease.

Poverty or need of wants steals power from great thought,

And kills the candle of creative imagination.]

Iqbal believed that a human being has a creative mind by which he or she can create images of things in the outside world, think over them and recall them whenever he or she wishes. This creative mind or Self is perhaps the most essential difference between animals and human beings. This

⁶ Ibid., p. 24.

creative and dynamic part is potentially in every man and is his true Self. But Man has been alienated from his creative Self in two ways. Firstly, Man has created his own myth and allegory, but, later on, forgetting and ignoring his creative Self, he has allocated these mythological and allegorical tales to God or gods.

دل بتدریج از میانِ سینه رفت جوهرِ آئینه از آئینه رفت

آن جنونِ کوششِ کامل نماند آن تقاضایِ عمل در دل نماند

اقتدار و عزم و استقلال رفت اعتبار و عزت و اقبال رفت

پنجه بائے آهنین بے زور شد مرده شد دلها و تنها گور شد

زورِ تن کاهید و خوفِ جان فزود خوفِ جان سرمایهٔ همت ربود

صد مرض پیدا شد از بے همتی کوته دستی بیدلی دون فطرتی

شیرِ بیدار از فسونِ میش خفت انحطاطِ خویش را تهذیب گفت⁷

[The heart gradually departed from Man's breast,

The lustre of the mirror departed from the mirror.

The mad enthusiasm for full effort is no more,

The demand for action is no more in the heart.

The power, determination and independence have gone,

Reputation, honour, prosperity have gone.

⁷ Ibid., p. 33.

The creative iron hands lost their strength,
The hearts died and became only a graveyard.
The strength of the body wasted away and tee fear of the soul increased,
The mortal fear stole away the reserves of determination.
Hundreds of diseases appeared because of irresoluteness:
Poverty, despair and inferiority.
The alert lion fell asleep under the spell of the ram, And thought his
decline was a great refinement.]

All these have happened because Man forgot his true Self and creativity.
Iqbal, like Rūmī, criticises mullās and priests for using these allegorical tales
for the enslavement of Man:

من از درسِ خردمندان گریبان چاک می آیم!

گهر پیچد جهان بر من، گهر من بر جهان پیچم

نه اینجا چشمکِ ساقی نه آنجا حرفِ مشتاقی

ز بزمِ صوفی و مُلا بسے غم ناک می آیم

وسد وقتے کہ خاصانِ ترا با من فتد کارے

کہ من صحرائیم پیشِ ملکِ بیباک می آیم⁸

⁸ Zabūr-i `Ajam, p. 43.

[I am returning from the lesson of the Wise unhappy and disturbed,
Sometimes the world on top of me and sometimes I on top of the
world.

Here is neither winking of the wine-giver nor is there a word of lover,

I am returning from the feast of *Mullā* and *Ṣūfī* very sad,

A time will come that your Elect will peed me,

Because I am a man front the desert who is coming to visit the king
without fear].

Islam, which originally rose against idol-worshipping and against all sorts of privileges, turned later on to idol-worshipping by ignoring human creativity. Social and philosophical systems have played an important role in this process. The Greek philosophy which kept Europe asleep until the fourteenth century had found its way among Muslim religious thinkers. Plato, for example, negated the world by his metaphysical and abstract teachings. Muslim philosophers and scientists, such as Abū 'Alī Sīnā', Rāzī and al-Bīrūnī, stressed the importance of the material world and human experience, and created scientific and cultural advancement between the ninth and the thirteenth centuries. All this was gradually forgotten, and Muslims turned to the dream-world of Plato and the empty world of passive Sufism. Thus Muslims, whose knowledge had given ideas and inspiration to Western thinkers in the seventeenth century, became beggars of knowledge at the doors of others. Criticising Muslims who lost their identity by following the abstract ideas of others and gathering crumbs of knowledge from other people's doors, Iqbal writes in *Asrār-i Khudī*:

سوزِ عشقِ از دانشِ حاضرِ مجوے کیفِ حقِ از جامِ اینِ کافرِ مجوے

دانشِ حاضرِ حجابِ اکبرِ است بتِ پرست و بتِ فروش و بتگرِ است⁹

⁹ *Asrār-i Khudī*, p. 77.

[Do not seek enthusiasm from ready-made knowledge,
Do not seek of “Truth” from the cup of the faithless...
Ready-made knowledge is the veil of great imagination,
It is idol-worshipper, idol-seller and idol-maker.]

راهبِ دیرینه افلاطون حکیم از گروه گوسفندانِ قدیم

آنچنان افسونِ نا محسوس خورد اعتبار از دست و چشم و گوش برد¹⁰

[The philosopher Plato, the ancient monk,
Was one of the flock of old sheep...
He cast such an invisible spell through his teachings,
Which killed the power of hands, eyes and ears.]

عشق افلاطونِ علتِ هائے عقل به شود از نشترش سودائے عقل¹¹

[Platonic love is based on passive reason,
Your reason will be cured by its destruction.]

ائے گدائے ریزه از خوانِ غیر جنسِ خود می جوئی از دکانِ غیر

پیزمِ مسلم از چراغِ غیر سوخت مسجدِ او از شرارِ دیر سوخت

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 34.

¹¹ Ibid., p. 78.

کعبه آباد است از اصنامِ ما خنده زن کفر است بر اسلامِ ما
شیخ در عشقِ بتان اسلامِ باخت رشته شیخ از زنار ساخت

دل ز نقشِ لا اله بیگانه از صنمِ های هوس بت خانه
می شود هر مو درازم خرقه پوش آه ازین سودگرانِ دین فروش
با مریدان روز و شب اندر سفر از ضرورتِ های ملت بیخبر¹²

[O beggar of crumbs from the tables of others,
You are seeking your own goods from the shops of others.
The Muslim's feast is lit by the light of others,
His mosque is lit by the flames of the temple...
Ka'bah or Mecca flourishes with our idols,
Non-Muslims are laughing at our Islam.
The Shaikh has lost his Islam by idol-worshipping,
And his beads are made of *ẓunnār*¹³ ...
His heart has become alien to *lā-ilāh*,

¹² Ibid., p. 78-79.

¹³ The Christian's or Jew's girdle, distinguishing him from a Muslim.

And he has created idols from his caprices.

Every man with long hair becomes a *ṣūfī*,

Alas for these traders in religion.

He is travelling with his followers day and night,

But is unaware of the people's needs.]

Iqbal is not against religion, science or learning, but against the use of these in opposition to human values and interests. He believed that religion, science, law, literature and all sorts of learning must be based on the understanding and knowledge of human values. In other words, religion, science, law and literature must have a moral and human commitment. In *Asrār-i Khudī* Iqbal writes:

آگهی از علم و فن مقصود نیست غنچه و گل از چمن مقصود نیست

علم از سامانِ حفظِ زندگی است علم از اسبابِ تقویمِ خودی است

علم و فن از پیش خیزانِ حیات علم و فن از خانه زادانِ حیات

ما ز تخلیقِ مقاصد زنده ایم از شعاعِ آرزو تابنده ایم¹⁴

[Gaining information about knowledge and science is not the only end,
The buds and flowers cannot replace the meadow,
But knowledge ought to be a means for the security of life,
It ought to be the means of self-assertion.

¹⁴ *Asrār-i Khudī*, pp. 17-18.

Knowledge and science grew and rose with life,
They were born and brought up with human existence...
We live by recreation of ends,
We shine by the light of desire.]

Iqbal's desire and aim were to create society and protect its interests rather than to use knowledge for his limited and selfish interests. When he attacks philosophers like Plato, and the elite, he attacks abstract knowledge and the irresponsible nature of the knowledge which is used by the ruling class to teach love, affection, brotherhood, justice and democracy which they do not put into practice.

مُردِ چون شمعِ خودی اندر وجود از خیالِ آسمان پیمای چه سود¹⁵

[The creative Self is extinguished within you like a candle,
What is the use of sky-wandering imagination ?]

علمِ حق را در قفا انداختی بهر نای نقدِ دین در باختی¹⁶

[You have hung the science of truth on your neck,
But you have lost your faith for a piece of bread.]

مسلمی؟ آزادِ این زنار باش شمعِ بزمِ ملتِ احرار¹⁷

[Are you a Muslim? Be free from this *zunnār*

And become a candle in the feast of free people.]

Iqbal believed that Man is not free but that he should be free. This freedom takes place in society and within the individual. Freedom of Self, as we pointed out before, is freedom from intellectual or spiritual enslavement;

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 67.

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 76.

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 81.

secondly, freedom from hostility and terror which exist within society:

در جهان تخمِ خصومت کاشت است خویشتن را غیرِ خود پنداشت است¹⁸

[The seed of enmity is sown in the world
And Man has become alien to himself.]

How is it that Man, we might ask, who, according to Iqbal, is originally a creative man, becomes alien to his true Self and others? Iqbal believed that error, enmity, is created within society but that *Haqq* or the creative Self is eternal. In other words, every man is born potentially with a creative self, but not every man is born in the same social condition of life. The Self develops in its own particular social circumstances. In this development and self-awakening there are two possibilities on two kinds of Self: (1) a limited and egoistic Self, (2) an unlimited and prophetic or prolific Self. The limited Self sees only himself, that is to say, only his own limited impressions. He associates self-awakening only with certain individuals who, in terms of Nietzsche, can be supermen. Such a limited Self finally dies in its cocoon of individualism. This is the beginning of alienation from oneself and of tyranny over others.

The unlimited Self, after awakening, casts out its limited and selfish memories or “dead bones” by joining a bigger Self or society. Thus, the Self is formed within society; and one Self is limited and selfish and the other Self unlimited and selfless. We must now act ourselves. To what kind of social Self did Iqbal belong? Iqbal has answered this question in a letter to his son Jāvīd Iqbāl. He writes:

“A rich man’s ways are not mine
I am a fakir,
My advice is: do not sell your selfhood;
Find your fulfilment even in poverty.”

Iqbal’s self-identity is rooted in the *fakir* class rather than in that of the

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 12.

Lords, or *kbāṣṣān* (the ruling class). Iqbal's *Rumūz-i-Bekhudī* is the expression of this kind of social outlook, which clearly defines the role of a poet, a prophet and a leader as an individual in society. The people are the source of strength and inspiration for such an individual:

فرد را ربطِ جماعتِ رحمت است جوهرِ او را کمال از ملت است

تا توانی با جماعت یار باش رونقِ پنگامهٔ احرار باش

حرزِ جان کن گفتهٔ خیر البشر هست شیطان از جماعت دور تر¹⁹

[For the individual the bond with the masses is a blessing,

The maturity of his essence is from the people.

Be as close to the masses as you can,

Be a supporter of freedom-fighters.

Give up yourself to the masses as *kbair al-bashar* or Muḥammad has said:

Only Satan is separated from the masses.]

The interests of prophets or true leaders are not separated from the masses. Prophets serve the people but Satan rejects the will or the interests of the people. It is interesting to note that the personality of the prophet and of Satan, which is described in the Qur'ān, should be observed and understood in the social context.

Iqbal's idea of the individual and society is not one of a superficial link. It is based on the essential needs of life and the unity of the interests of the individual and society. The individual cannot be free unless he sees that his interests and freedom are identical with those of the whole of society. Otherwise individual freedom without the whole of society is the freedom of the jungle. In other words, individualism, the ignoring of the interests and love of the masses, leads to chaos in thought and action which eventually can

¹⁹ Ibid., pp. 97-98.

turn against the people. Iqbal writes in *Rumūz-i Bekhudī*:

فرد می گیرد ز ملت احترام ملت از افراد می باید نظام
فرد تا اندر جماعت گم شود قطره وسعت طلب قلزم شود

فرد تنها از مقاصد غافل است قوتش آشفستگی را مائل است²⁰

[The individual gains his respect from the people
And society receives law and order from individuals.
When the individual dissolves himself among the masses,
The expanse-seeking drop becomes a sea... .
The isolated individual is heedless of basic issues,
His power of imagination leads him to chaos.]

Nietzsche is an example of such an individual.

Iqbal believed that if a man is truly aware of *Haqq* or human value, he never rests from giving life and hope to the masses. He destroys their fears and doubts by laying stress on action and human creativity or work:

بیم و شک میرد عمل گیرد حیات چشم می بیند ضمیر کائنات
چون مقام عبده محکم شود کاسه در یوزه جام جم شود²¹

[When fear and doubt die and action gains life,
Then the eyes see the essence of the universe.

²⁰ Ibid., pp. 98-99.

²¹ Ibid., pp. 105

When the position of the common man becomes secure,
He turns a clay bowl into Jām-i Jam.]

بندہا از پاکشاید بندہ را از خداوندان ربایید بندہ را

گویدش تو بندہ دیگر نہ زمین بتان بے زبان کمتر نہ

تا سوے یک مدعایش می کشد حلقہ آئین پیایش می کشد

نکتہ توحید باز آموزدش رسم و آئین نیاز آموزدش²²

[He breaks the bonds from the slave's feet,
And rescues him from the cords.
And he tells him, "You are not a slave any longer;
You are no longer looked upon as less than these dumb idols."
Finally he leads him towards his aim
And replaces his bondage by principle or faith.
He teaches him the meaning of *Tamhīd* again,
Teaches him what he needs and how to achieve it.]

Iqbal's nationalism is neither an emotional one in the superficial meaning of the term, nor a limited one. He believed that a nation is formed above all by the unity of material and cultural interests. And when he frees his people from exploitation, this freedom is not the end but a beginning for the freedom of other oppressed nations. For this reason Iqbal is regarded as a revolutionary Muslim poet who believed in one race and one interest, that is, the human race and human interest:

²² Ibid., pp. 103-04.

ملت از یک رنگی دلہاستے روشن از یک جلوہ این سیناستے

قوم را اندیشہ با باید یکے در ضمیرش مدعا باید یکے

جذبہ باید در سرشتِ او یکے ہم عیارِ خوب و زشتِ او یکے

گر بناشد سوزِ حق در سازِ فکر نیست ممکن این چنین اندازِ فکر²³

[A nation is formed by the unity of hearts or of interests,

The light of Sīnā'ī is a manifestation of this.

The people must be united in their vision and thinking,

The essence of their aim must be one.

Their basic interest or desire must be essentially one,

The standard of moral good and bad must be the same.

If there is no desire of *Haqq* or "Truth" in the song of your thought,

Then such a thought is impracticable]

What is the use of seeking the origin of a nation in a home? What is the use of worshipping water and land? In other words, only by the unity of hearts, deeds and interests does a nation become creative, productive and powerful.

ما ز نعمت ہائے او اخوان شدیم یک زبان و یک دل و یک جان شدیم²⁴

[We became brothers because of one natural resources,

We chose one language, one heart and one soul.]

²³ Ibid., pp. 106-07.

²⁴ Ibid., p. 107.

This is realism, this is the social outlook of Iqbal and his true “Self”.