

IQBAL'S PARLEYS WITH A BRITISH ECONOMIST

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On a spring afternoon in March, 1912 Hon'able Justice Mian Muhammad Shah Din was at home at his Lawrence Road residence to Prof. Stanley Webb, distinguished left-of-the Centre British Economist and Principal London School of Economics, Dr. Sheikh Muhammad Iqbal Bar-at-Law, Mian Fazal Hussain Bar-at-Law, Nawab Muhammad Ali Khan, Rais-i-Azam, Lahore, Mirza Jalal Din Barrister, Mr. Shah Nawaz Barrister, Munshi Mahboob Alam. Journalist, Mian Taj-ud-Din, Assistant Accountant-General and others.

A verbatim-English translation of the Press Report of the parleys on this occasion, published in Paisa Akhbar, Lahore of March 13,1912 is reproduced below:-

Mr. Stanley Webb and Parleys on the Problems facing India

Mr. Stanley Webb is Principal of the London School of Economics, who, accompanied by Mrs. Webb has been visiting various places in India for the last three months, during which time he has been observing the way of life and political conditions in various Provinces where he has been exchanging ideas with enlightened persons on a variety of Political, Social and Educational problems.

Last Monday evening at 4.30 Hon'able Justice Mian Muhammad Shah Din Sahib, Judge Punjab Chief Court, had invited the following distinguished Muslims of Lahore to meet Mr. Stanley Webb and Mrs Webb and exchange ideas with them. So the Parleys on various matters lasted for two hours.

Nawab Muhammad Ali Khan

Khan Bashir Ali Khan

Khan Sb Faqir Syed Zafar-ud-Din

Khan Sb Sheikh Khair-ud-Din

Sheikh Amir Ali Sh, Judge Small Cause Court

Mian Rahim Bux Extra Asstt. Commissioner

Mian Fazal Muhammad Khan Extra Asstt. Commissioner

Munshi Mahbub Alam Editor

Maulvi Insha Ullah Sh, Editor

Mirza Jalal-ud-Din, Barrister

Dr. Shaikh Muhammad Iqbal Barrister

Mr. Fazal Hussain

Mr. Haq Nawaz”

Mr. Shah Nawaz”

Mian Taj-ud-Din, Asstt. Accountant -General.

Syed Jalal-ud-Din Haider, Prof. Chiefs College.

Mr. Webb seems to be well-acquainted with the affairs and intricate problems of India, and his views are very liberal and enlightened. He wished to explore the best ways of granting more share to the Indians in the affairs of the Government and securing a more sympathetic treatment of the subjects by the Authorities. Regarding the prosecution of seditious newspapers by the Government, the best solution in his opinion would be

that a group of local leaders should shoulder the responsibility on behalf of the Government to admonish and bring to heel the newspaperman to whose attitude the Government takes exception.

On educational matters Mr. Webb's idea was that if instead of English which is after all a foreign language, the College Professors and School Teachers instructed the students in their mother tongue the subjects would be easily understood by the students and learning which remains superficial at present would become effective and the complaint would be removed. Mr. Webb expressed his surprise that the number of Muslim Professors even in the proposed Muslim University would be very small, and they would be lecturing in English.

On female Pardah Mr. Webb very hesitatingly gave his opinion that Pardah certainly appears to be a hindrance in female education and in the four walls of the home the girls cannot derive that benefit from Education which they would in regular Girl Schools staffed by competent lady teachers; and if in future Muslim girls failed to acquire good education like the Hindu girls, the Muslims certainly would fall far behind the Hindus. Therefore, he said just as the Begum Sahiba of Bhopal had travelled up to Europe while wearing Burqa, the Muslim girls also ought to go to school in Burqas.

Thereafter for a while the discussion centered round the question whether during the last twenty or thirty years the financial condition of India had improved or declined. Mr. Webb's view was that during the last three months he had seen large number of passengers boarding third class bogys on Indian Railways which is an evidence of their prosperity. Then topics like the general physical weakness of the Indian people, high-rate of infant mortality etc, were discussed. Mr. Webb told that in England too it was thought a few years ago that the physical condition of the people was steadily deteriorating. But when the Government appointed a Committee of Enquiry which went into the matter for three years, the conclusion it reached was that the English people are sturdier and stronger than before. In fact the coats of

mail of the old Knights are so small that modern people can hardly get into them. Mr. Webb stated how the people were expressing their surprise at the discovery that the Londoners enjoyed better health than the people living in the far-flung areas of England. The reason is that the country folk do not get adequate food. So when they come to London and become sturdier, their clothes have to be enlarged.

In short all kinds of academic matters relating to the reforming of the condition of the country came under discussion in which besides Mr. Webb, Mrs. Webb also took part with equal ability.

Similarly on another day Mr. and Mrs. Webb will hold parleys with the enlightened Hindus of Lahore. Really how fortunate it is that England has thousands of such able men and women as can, if they so wish, fully ascertain the views of the Indian people and convey them to their compatriots and can eliminate for ever such misunderstandings and defects as may be present in the Government of a foreign country, for in future an increasingly larger share in the government is bound to be granted to the people of this country. According to Mr. Webb if there is some defect in the Civil administration or any other system it would be idle to expect the Government to remove it of its own accord. The subjects must tell the Government where the shortcoming is and what reform can be introduced, it will then certainly provide the remedy. Mr. Webb stated regarding the Collector of Gorakhpur that during his tour he gathers the Numberdars, Mukhis and Muqqadams of the villages and with great kindness holds counsel with them on matters of detail.

Would that there were ten or twenty more District Officers like the Collector Sahib! It is a pity that generally such people have access to the Collectors or Deputy Commissioners or they hold such people as reliable or trustworthy as are sycophants or self-seeking. Hence many Collectors cannot learn the deeper thoughts of the subjects and the true condition of the people of the country.

At any rate the assembly benefited from Mr. Webb's interesting views and it is hoped that the Muslim viewpoint was a useful accession to his own knowledge.

It would be interesting to discover what impression Prof. Webb's statements made on his audience. Regarding Iqbal it may at once be said that he viewed the whole proceeding with amusement and a sense of futility. He may indeed have been inwardly enraged also upon the Professors' rather over-clever attempt to play upon the credulity of the assembly.

What did Iqbal, for instance, think of the Professors' Eye-wash statement:

“during the last three months he had seen large number of passengers boarding third class bogys on Indian Railways which is an evidence of their prosperity.”

The question to which this statement was the answer was ‘whether during the last twenty or thirty years the financial condition of India had improved or declined.’ Now who has ever heard of the casual observance of the number of third class Railway Passengers as an Index of a country's prosperity! Clearly the Professor was evading an important question and making a deliberate attempt to hoodwink intelligent men.

We do not know about the others but Iqbal had a thorough grounding in Economics. At a time (1912) when Jinnah, Gandhi and Nehru were not yet public figures, Iqbal alone held the field as an intellectual who viewed the problems of the Indian people from an Economic, historical and international standpoint.

As early as 1903 he had been engaged in the study of Economics and fruit of his study was *Ilm-al-Iqtisad*. (“Science of Economics”). It was the first book on Economics in Urdu. Iqbal had probed into the causes of poverty in

India and opined that (“the study of Economics is almost a necessity of life, especially in India where poetry is widespread”).³⁹

Ilm-al-Iqtisad was no ordinary text book, but was a serious attempt to apply the principles of Economics to conditions in India and offer scientific solutions to Economic Problems.

After a masterly analysis of the Economic process the Book concludes that poverty could be removed only by equitable sharing of wealth between the landlords and tenants on the farms and capitalists and labour in industrial units. At the same time Iqbal regarded a truly national system of education as the sine qua non of Economic development.

The real causes of Indian poverty:

Economic Exploitation of raw material and labour by British Companies and their local agents, costly administration and unfavorable Sterling Exchange, were not hidden from Iqbal. Due to these causes millions of masses in the towns and villages were eking out a bare existence and if a few thousand Indians had enough surplus money daily to pay mostly short-distance fares on the Railways to attend to business, employment or family matters, that was no indication that general prosperity in India had increased.

On Educational matters Prof. Webb’s ideas were, to say the least, half-baked. Prof. Webb advised the adoption of vernacular as medium of instruction even at the College and University level. Was he, one wonders, playing to the gallery, for there was considerable public sentiment then, as it is now, in favour of vernacularizing higher education. But as far as the views of men like Iqbal on this subject were concerned, we may be sure that they were more realistic than sentimental. Iqbal, Fazl-i-Husain, Shah Din and others, we may be sure, were too conscious of the value of English as an avenue to modern science and technology and as a window on the world to

³⁹ Iqbal, Ilm-ul-Iqtisad, Preface, P.23. Karachi, 1961

subscribe to the idea of dropping it as the medium of instruction in higher seats of learning.

To his audience Prof. Webb's endorsement of pardah for Muslim girls must have sounded satisfactory. The others might have taken a traditional view of Pardah, but we know that Iqbal's thinking on the subject was more in consonance with the Qur'anic injunction:

Tell the believing men to lower their gaze and be modest ... And tell the believing women to lower their gaze and be modest..."⁴⁰

Abdullah Chaghtia reports that answering a question on pardah, Iqbal had told an assembly of women in Madras:

"Ghaz-a-Basr (i.e. lowering of the gaze should be practised and it is incumbent both upon men and women"

(Abdullah Chaghtia, Iqbal Ki Suhbat Mein (Lahore, Prof. Webb's side-tracking of the health issue was no less amusing (or deplorable). The 'Paisa Akhbar' report says:

"Then topics like the general physical weakness of the Indian- people, and high-rate of infant mortality were discussed".

No comment by Prof. Webb on low infant mortality rate is reported but on general physical weakness of the Indian people he made an evasive reply. Prof. Webb made no reference to total lack of Government health scheme for the people, under nourishment of the vast majority of men, women and children and general impoverishment of the country due to the exploitation of British Capitalism, administration and their indigenous agents. We know that in Al-Iqtisad, Iqbal had listed all these factors as responsible for the general poverty of the masses. He, therefore, must have concluded that there was a method in Webb's imperial effusions.

⁴⁰ Sura Al-Nur 30, 31

The Hindu and Muslim communities in 1912 had considerable grievances against the British Government. Consequently the whole outlook in India was full of dark forebodings for the British.

In 1911 the British, knuckling under the pressure of the Hindu terrorists, annulled the partition of Bengal, community as a whole felt deeply wounded not only at this blow to their interests but also at other affronts to their National identity.

In 1912 the Muslim demand for raising the M.A.O College to the level of an affiliating University was refused even though the Muslim community, Princes as well as the people had contributed the requisite funds for the scheme.

During the same year the Muslims were further outraged when a portion of a mosque at Cawnpore was pulled down to widen a public street. The Police opened fire on Muslim demonstrators killing and wounding several men. Jails were jam-packed with Muslim youth. The British were adamant and refused to restitute the mosque. On the international front Turkey's pitiable condition shook the Muslim masses to the core. Turkey was involved in a ruinous war against Italy in Tripoli. The Italian soldiers broke all rules of civilized warfare and their advance degenerated into an orgy of indiscriminate slaughter. Turkey was defeated largely because the British refused to allow Turkish armies to pass through Egypt. At this juncture when Turkey stood isolated and friendless the Indian Muslims launched a massive effort to relieve the Turks in their adversity. Large sums of money were collected and remitted to Constantinople. A Medical mission was dispatched to provide First Aid to the Turkish soldiers wounded in battle. Mosques rang with prayers for Turkey. From public stages rose strong voices of protest against British hostility to the Turks. Muslim Lawyers, Doctors and Professors talked

of nothing but the misfortunes of Turks. The banner lines of Muslim newspapers shrieked lamentations at the defeat of Turkey.⁴¹

The Muslim-British relations were in a state of crisis. It was against the backdrop of these events that a spate of British politicians and professors descended on India holding out vague promises of share in the government, and a liberal administration and making pleas for moderate press and public criticism of the British.

Posing as a liberal and left winger Webb sought to influence public opinion by academic chit-chat. Iqbal and he associates, however, were not swept off their feet by Webb' imposing academic authority as Head of the LSE, for his role as mouth-piece of Imperialism was quite visible to discerning eve the 'Paisa Akhbar news writer was voicing Iqbal's own opinion when he concluded his report with the remark:

“At any rate the assembly benefited from Mr. Webb's interesting views and it is hoped that the Muslim viewpoint was a useful accession to his own knowledge”.

⁴¹ Abdullah Chaghtia, Iqbal Ki Suhbat Mein pp.329 Lahore 1977.