

IQBAL AND ‘ARSHI

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‘Arshi was a contemporary of Iqbal for a quarter century and: an active exponent of his message for nearly half a century afterwards. The story of their relationship is an interesting chapter of our literary history. They started as distant admirers addressing poetry to each other. Then they exchanged verbal messages through a mutual friend. Later they had many face to face discussions and came much closer. ‘Arshi’s requiem for Iqbal appeared in the monthly *Balagh* of Amritsar in May 1938. Until his own death in 1985, he continued writing on Iqbal. Some of his essays are included in *Malfoozat-e-Iqbal*, *Naqoosh-i-Iqbal*, *Ibbal Payarnbar-e-Ummid* and *Despite material already published*, Iqbal and ‘Arshi is a topic which calls for intensive study. This writer has had the honour of exchanging letters with ‘Arshi and meeting him several times but claims no expertise on Iqbal. He studies their poetry regularly- Both are his favourite poets, though in the list of their admirers he is at the very bottom. He ventures to present his ideas in the hope that some learned scholar will explore this topic further.

Iqbal and ‘Arshi seem to have nothing in common at first glance. Iqbal was well dedicated. After completing his studies within the country, he qualified in law and philosophy from renowned universities in Europe. Returning home, he resigned his professorship and earned his living through legal practice. He was elected to the Punjab Legislative Assembly and attended the Round Table Conference in London. In his life time he earned national recognition and international fame. On the other hand, Arshi was a middle school drop-out without formal education. Through self-study and sheer hard work, he acquired a wealth of knowledge which did not stand in need of academic approval. He studied eastern medicine but did not practice it. He worked first as a goldsmith and then as the poorly paid editor of monthly *Faiz-ul Islam*. He is not widely known. What this writer said at the time of his death — is still true. “The passage of time is pushing him into obscurity.

Iqbal collected, edited and published his own poetry. Even the portion he discarded has been discovered. His correspondence; statements and other

writings have also been printed. His life events have been recorded in detail. Several books have been written about him and the Government of Pakistan has established an academy to continue research on him. His poetry has been translated in foreign languages. ‘Arshi has not been lucky in this respect. Some of his manuscripts were lost in the upheaval of 1941 and so were the magazines in which his writings appeared. It was not until ‘Arshi was in his eighties that some of his poetry was salvaged by Professor Abdur Rashid Fazil and published under the title *Ruswa Kiya Mujhe*. Mohammad Husain Tasbihi, an Iranian friend of ‘Arshi posted in Pakistan, published some of his Persian poetry as *Naqsh-ha-e-Rung Rung*. The two collections contain only a fraction of ‘Arshi’s prolific writing.

Being poles apart in education and social status, how did Iqbal and ‘Arshi come to have identical thinking? This was brought about by their profound study of, and complete faith, in Islam. Religion was the fountain-head of their inebriation and their source of inspiration. Dressed in western clothes, Iqbal was not a dyed in the wool ‘mister’ but a true Muslim. So was ‘Arshi. He returned to the fold of Islam after a brief wandering in the wilderness of atheism. Though a maulana in his mode of dress, he was the very opposite of the stern theologian. His eastern robes and religious appearance could not rob him of his humility. ‘Arshi and Iqbal were simple folks described thus by Akbar Allahabadi: “Give me a few grains of barley to bake my own bread as I am neither a mister nor a maulana”. Except for contrast in dress and difference in background, Iqbal and ‘Arshi had no conflict in ideas. They treaded the same path and thought in unison, Their first encounter took place in 1918 when ‘Arshi addressed Iqbal in a Persian poem, inviting him to come out of seclusion and actively lead the Indian Muslims. The call was published in *Zamindar*, a popular daily of that time. Zafar Ali Khan, its firebrand editor, seconded ‘Arshi in a stirring Urdu poem *Ferzuddin Tughrai Amritsari*, ‘Arshi’s teacher in poetry, endorsed the call in Persian. Iqbal replied in Persian, assuring ‘Arshi not to think that his goblet had been shattered; he could still offer fresh brew from the tavern of Hejaz. Soon afterwards appeared Iqbal’s *Rumuz-i-Bekhudi*, followed by other works. ‘Arshi’s initiative at that critical juncture deserves honourable mention.

Even after exchanging poetry, ‘Arshi was diffident about meeting Iqbal in person. Perhaps he was overawed by Iqbal’s stature. Nevertheless, he remained his keen admirer and avid reader of his poetry. Often he sought clarifications from Iqbal through Sufi Ghulam Mustafa Tabassum Amritsari, a common friend who was teaching at a Lahore college but visited his home town frequently. ‘Arshi closely studied Javid Namah as soon as it came out in 1932. He had some questions to which he requested Sufi Tabassum to get Iqbal’s answers. Sufi felt that the indirect approach would not help and advised ‘Arshi to accompany him to Lahore and talk to Iqbal himself.

The above is the background of the first meeting between Arshi and Iqbal. It took place on 8th October 1932 at Iqbal’s McLeod Road residence. The topic of discussion was Mansur Hallaj. Thus began the series of meetings which shifted to Javed Manzil, Iqbal’s new house. ‘Arshi claims that without receiving formal lessons he considered himself Iqbal’s student. He also regarded Iqbal as his spiritual guide without ever taking the customary oath. In fact, Iqbal was his guide, friend and mentor. Whenever ‘Arshi visited Lahore, he went straight to Javed Manzil Where he was received with open arms. Even during his last illness, Iqbal had lengthy discussions with ‘Arshi and answered all his questions, much against the advice of his physician. If ‘Arshi did not show up for long, he would enquire from Sufi Tabassum. After Iqbal’s death, ‘Arshi lost his interest in visiting Lahore. Often he would recite the classical Arab poet’s lament: O! the haunts of Salma (his beloved) where has Salma vanished?

Here are some examples selected at random to show the identical thinking of Iqbal and ‘Arshi. In Iqbal’s case, the name and page number of his books are given. All references to ‘Arshi relate to Ruswa Kiya Mujhe, unless stated otherwise.

(1) Iqbal praises Bilal, the son of an Abyssinian slave and the Prophet’s companion who became the first muezzin in Islam (Bang-e-Dara, p. 80). ‘Arshi eulogizes Suhaib. Rumi, another slave companion p. 152). Both were brutally tortured for their belief in One God but did not waver under any hardship. They are shining examples that Islamic brotherhood treats as equals persons of different races, colours and social status. The two poems are in the same meter, embellished with a Persian couplet and end on similar notes.

(2) Iqbal expressed a wish (Bang-e-Dara, p. 46) to live in a modest cottage at the foot of the mountain, as he was sick and tired of this world-. He longed to spend his life in harmony with nature and amidst warbling 1 birds. He prays that his lamentation might move listeners to tears and wake them up from slumber. ‘Arshi feels the same burning desire (p.154). He too wishes to be away from urban tumult and free from daily worries. He likes to live near a brook where he could be a spectator of, nature at its beautiful best.

(3) Iqbal and ‘Arshi were both inspired by Jalal-ud-Din Rumi, the illustrious poet of the 13th century. His major work, dubbed as the Qur’an in the Persian language, was their favourite reading material. Iqbal’s heavenly journey as the Indian follower in Javed Namah was undertaken under Rumi’s spiritual guidance. He quotes Rumi extensively, notably to answer the questions he raised in ‘The Guide and the Disciple’ (Bal-i Jibril, pp. 134-142). ‘Arshi pays tribute to Rumi by saying that his poetry is enjoyed throughout the world. Calling himself the Pakistani follower, he asks Rumi several questions and provides the answers with Rumi’s verses (p. 140).

(4) One of Iqbal’s poems is entitled ‘A dialogue in Paradise’ (Bang-e-, Dara, p. 244). It reports an imaginary conversation between Sa’di of Shiraz, the Persian master poet of the 13th century, and Altaf Husain Hali, an Urdu poet of the 19th century. Sa’di asks about the plight of the Indian Muslims. Hali answers that modern education has shaken their beliefs. They have acquired worldly gain at the cost of their faith. In an imaginary interview with Hali, ‘Arshi reminds him that he had specified hell as the punishment for bad poets and asks him what would happen to had politicians. Hali replies that they too are to be assigned to hell:

(5) Once asked to write about Eid, Iqbal composed six verses to the effect that those who have lost everything cannot really enjoy this festival. The new moon mocks at us by asking us to rejoice (Bang-e-Dara, p. 213). ‘Arshi has dealt with the same topic. He says that living corpses, whose fasting (starvation) never ends, have no interest in Eid. The month of fasting continues for those who are in the grip of perpetual hunger (p. 122).

(6) Iqbal wrote two poems in Persian addressed to the Holy Prophet (peace be upon him). They are: ‘Author’s Petition to the Prophet of Mercy’

(Asrar-o-Rumuz, pp. 166-170) and ‘in the August Presence of the Prophet’ (Pus Cheh Bayad Kard, pp. 48-52). He followed in the foot steps of Imam Busayri, the Egyptian poet of the 13th century, whose celebrated poem continues to be recited throughout the Islamic world. ‘Arshi also wrote two poems in Urdu and called them ‘In the August Presence of the Teacher of Wisdom’ (pp. 172-174). Like Iqbal’s poems, they praise the Prophet (peace be upon him) and are at the same time the poet’s own petitions.

(7) Iqbal says when the sun rises it drives away sleep and opens our eyes. But, being unaware of its beauty, it is not equal to human being (Bang. e-Dara, p. 48). Elsewhere he asks the sun for the light which will improve the inner vision (Bang-i-Dara, p. 43). An echo of this is found in ‘Arshi’s poem in which he tells the sun that we know your true worth. You are under the command of somebody and are following the laws of nature (p.166).

(8) Iqbal tells the story of a maulvi in his neighbourhood who regarded him as a bundle of contradictions (Bang-i-Dara, p. 59). ‘Arshi describes in’ Persian the character of a maulvi who declares sincere Muslims as non-believers. The death of such a maulvi would be a blessing for the Muslim and indeed for knowledge and wisdom. Ironically, he named the poem ‘In Praise of the Maulvi’ but explained in the footnote that such a person has also been called an evil scholar.

(9) Iqbal issued a call for Afghanistan’s awakening in an Urdu poem ‘O! Unmindful Afghan! Recognize Yourself’ (Zarb-e-Kalim, p. 168). Half a century later, when Russians invaded Afghanistan, ‘Arshi sounded an alarm. He warned the Afghans that a super power was bent upon capturing their homes and hearths; their mosques and fortresses, and upon dispossessing them of everything. They should resist the invaders and must not barter away their homeland. In another poem ‘Arshi congratulated the Afghans on their stiff resistance. Their mountains nurture brave fighters who are heirs to Mahmud and Abdali. Both poems, not included in his published work, are preserved by this writer.

‘Arshi has incorporated selected verses of Iqbal in his own poems - a practice which helps to understand Iqbal better, He adds either one hemistich of his to Iqbal’s two to make a triangle, or three hemistiches to Iqbal’s two to form a pentagon. Arshi’s graftings are beautiful additions

which enhance the effect of the original. Examples are ‘Arshi’s creation of a pentagon (p. 147) with Iqbal’s quotation for Zarb-e-Kalim, and a triangle formed with Iqbal’s verses on jihad (p. 108). Iqbal tells a pro-church Muslim cleric that he need not preach in the mosque against jihad because Muslims are unarmed. This advice should be given to the European powers who are rapidly equipping themselves with destructive modern weapons (Zarb-e-Kalim, p. 28).

I Apart from adding to Iqbal’s poetry, ‘Arshi translated some of his Persian poems into Urdu. These are verses about spiritual leaders and mullahs, hell and slavery, jugular vein and stomach, the perfect devil and the proud sinner (p. 148). Also translated is Iqbal’s call to sufis and ulema (p.150). He asserts that Muslims are not aware of mullah’s fabrications. Had they been, they would have grasped the central point of shariat which is this: no man should be depended on another man.

‘Arshi has explained Iqbal’s ideas into his own poems. He describes a celestial gathering (pp. 128-132) where the angels surrounded the Divine Throne, with prophets gathered on the right and sufis on the left. There arrives an Indian poet named Zinda Rud (as Iqbal called himself in Javed Namah) in the company of such Persian poets as Sana’i, Rumi, Attar, ‘Iraqi etc. Welcoming them, Gabriel asks the purpose of their visit. Rumi answers that the Indian poet, a connoisseur of the wine of Hejaz, has come with a petition. Granted permission, Iqbal prostrates and recites his ‘Shikwah’. His audacity astonishes the prophets and makes the angels tremble. Suddenly a voice announces that the petitioner’s plea on behalf of the Indian Muslims is accepted. They will be liberated from colonial rule. Then it will be up to them to husband the resources of the promised land and prove themselves worthy of the bounty bestowed upon them. This will be their biggest test. ‘Arshi then adds how to pass the test: the learned should guide the nation to the right path, elected officials should pay attention to their duty, the armed forces should be ready for any sacrifice and so should be the youth. All citizens should adopt truthfulness, eschewing sectarian and parochial differences. Quoting Iqbal, ‘Arshi reminds that the time has come for the Muslims to unite. Taking all his quotations from Jawab-e-Shikwah, ‘Arshi gives a stirring message which should have been heeded.

A similar poem of ‘Arshi is ‘Awaza-e-Qudsi’ (p. 164). He was taken to a heavenly place where he observed a dazzling illumination. Learning that its source was the Holy Prophet (peace be upon him), he submits that Muslims have no shelter in the whole world and no leader worth the name. The reply was; Be attentive and convey my message to the Muslims. They have shredded the true faith to pieces and disregarded the Qur’an. If this situation continues, they will be wiped out.. Their safety lies in unity. They should unite and have a common purpose. Equipped with this kind of faith, they will live for ever.

Another poem is ‘Address to the Poets from Quaid-e-Azam’s Graveside” (p.158). ‘Arshi reports Jinnah paying a rich tribute to Iqbal saying that he himself was awakened by the melody of the author of Bang Dara. The same clarion call woke up Muslims at large. The Quaid asks the poets to rise up and awaken their nation. This poem echoes Iqbal’s verses describing the nation as a living body of which individuals form different parts, the poets being the seeing eyes (Bang-e-Dara, p. 61)

In his Persian poem ‘At the Graveside of Iqbal’ (Naqsh.ha-e.Rung Rung, p. 104), ‘ Arshi says he turned his back on the world and cloistered himself at Iqbal’s grave, studying Asrar-o-Rumuz day in and day out. One night his eyes opened upon another world. He saw a gathering presided over by the Holy Prophet (peace be upon him). Iqbal appeared there and complained that he had put forward in front of the Muslims precious pearls of wisdom from the Qur’an. They failed to recognize their worth. The Prophet sighed and told Iqbal to convey this advice to the Muslims: The present age is full of disorder. Evil is spreading everywhere. In these circumstances the Qur’an is the only secure fortification where Muslims can find security. However, mullahs and religious guides are ignorant and political leaders ignore it. The poem ends with Iqbal’s verse: If you do wish to live as Muslims, this is not possible without Qur’an.

Food and drugs are often described as hot or cold or producing dryness or phlegm. On this analogy, knowledge is supposed to be hot and the lower its quantity the more heat it is expected to cause. There is another saying that to hold one pound of knowledge requires ten pounds of wisdom. If this ratio between knowledge and wisdom is absent, mental equilibrium can be easily disturbed, Perhaps that is why knowledge has also been called the greatest

barrier. The truth of these sayings is furnished by Iqbal and 'Arshi. Both reached the summit of learning through different paths but remained well balanced. They never made a public display of their knowledge but always acted with humility.

What did 'Arshi find in Iqbal? In his written opinion, Iqbal was an enlightened comrade who never parted company when going was tough, a kind elder who whole-heartedly solved all problems, a perfect guide fully familiar with the ups and downs of the path right up to the destination, a fellow thinker so rare in this world, a beloved friend whose love seems to grow day by day, an accomplished philosopher in whose company worldly worries disappear, and a consummate scholar of the east and the west who had a ready answer to any question.

Once 'Arshi was engrossed in studying Rumi's famous mathnawi at a small village far from centres of learning. He encountered some passages he could not comprehend and keenly felt the need for somebody who could explain them. He looked around but could think of nobody except Iqbal. Returning to Amritsar, he wrote to Iqbal expressing the wish to profit from his mastery of Rumi.

Iqbal's reply dated 19 March 1935 tells us his opinion of 'Arshi. After describing his state of health, Iqbal wrote to 'Arshi: You have already tasted real Islam. If the study of Rumi heightens your interest, you need nothing more than your own enthusiasm. Let your personal interest be your guide. In any event, continue studying the Qur'an and Rumi. Also see me once in a while, not that I can teach you something new, but because the companionship of like-minded persons can sometimes produce results which nobody could foresee.

Contemporary poets and writers rarely think highly of each other. Professional rivalry prevents them from coming close. Contempt, ridicule and libel often source their relationship. False notions of omniscience and exaggerated opinion of self-importance govern their actions. They belittle their contemporaries and overlook their merit. Judged by this criteria, Iqbal and 'Arshi are at the height of greatness. Such cordial relations as existed between them are hard to find in the case of any two distinguished contemporaries, especially when their field of work is the same.