

MERA PAYAM AUR

Symposium on Mohammed Iqbal (1877-1938) at Oxford University

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Pakistanis sometimes claim proprietary rights over Iqbal. But while venerating him to the fullest, they often lose sight of his wisdom and poetical finesse – concentrating only on his vital symbolism as a poet of the nation. This, sometimes transforms Iqbal into a mere ‘courtier poet’. Whereas, his works have been hailed as a great driving force in the revolutionary history of neighbouring Iran, our curricula only pay a muted tribute to his reformist, revivalist and rationalistic appeal. One wonders why Iqbal is subject to this selective appreciation and selective avoidance! The rulers throughout Pakistan’s chequered political history dread his calls of defiance, but use him, at the same time, in upholding their national pride. The *imam* on the pulpit, cites free-handedly from his verse, but fails to recognize his spirit of reconstruction. School teachers, would relate to their pupils when Iqbal speaks of the past glory of Muslims, but would at best, avoid speaking about his open criticism of eastern political systems. The aversion of the English-speaking high circles to the Muslim thinker is clear – to them, religion is a private, non-communalist undertaking. The intolerance of the Muslim jurist is clearer – to them, religious jurisdiction is a sacred appointment, beyond the need for any modern reinterpretation.

On the other hand, appreciating Iqbal in the west, is ever more difficult, as people grapple with the very idea of religion and God. As religion plays a diminishing role in the lives of western communities, Iqbal’s message will not be received with much enthusiasm. With these mixed feelings in mind, the Pakistan Discussion Forum took upon the task of introducing Iqbal in Oxford University in a possibly comprehensive and delicate manner. The motive was to touch upon, both his poetry and philosophy and especially the latter’s relevance to modern times.

Pakistan Discussion Forum, was established in 2001, by some zealous Pakistani Rhodes Scholars studying at Oxford University. The main objective behind its formation was to encourage discussion on the myriad challenges

facing Pakistan, and the Muslim and developing worlds in Oxford's academic settings and also to engender cross-pollination of themes between the eastern and western civilizations.

The symposium on Iqbal, which was titled *Mera Payam Aur* (My Message is Unique) took place on 24 May, 2003.

As the audience were seating themselves in the Nissan Lecture Theatre in St. Antony's College, they were greeted by some fine music – recitations of Iqbal's poetry, prepared and shipped for the occasion, by the Iqbal Academy, Pakistan. The audience were a fine mix of different nationalities; students and academicians. Several groups of Pakistani and Iranian students and researchers from London, Cambridge and Sheffield were also present.

The symposium was chaired by Prof James Morris, Head of the Department of Islamic Studies at the Exeter University. His area of expertise lies in Islamic spiritualism and the medieval Sufi Ibn-e-Arabi.

I had the privilege of introducing the spirit behind the symposium, caressing upon the international relevance and timeless appeal of Iqbal's message. What makes Iqbal different; his audacious conversations with God; his characteristic poetic terminology; his concept of the self, the *kebudi*; his remarkable blend of honour and detachment, of intellect and love; and his emphasis on human fate augmenting heavenly fate – were some of the concepts I tried to introduce. In my welcome address, I also read from the poem *Iltija-e-Musafir* (The Prayer of the Wayfarer) from *Bang-e-Dara*, where Iqbal is embarking on his westwards journey in search of education, and makes a profound prayer⁵⁴:

‘I say farewell to my garden, like a rose’s scent,

Now I have submitted myself to the test of patience.

My desire to satiate my thirst of knowledge,

Is pushing me out of the gallery I call my homeland.

⁵⁴ Translation by Muhammad Sabieh Anwar

I am a solitary tree in a desert, my eyes are clung to the laden clouds,

Their shower can make me flower without the aid of the gardener.

O Lord, always keep me miles ahead of my kindred,

So that they can consider me as their destination.

O Lord, grant me the chance, once again, to lay my head at the feet of my parents,

By whose blessing, I possess the secret of love.”

Prof David Matthews is a renowned scholar on the languages of the subcontinent, especially Urdu and Nepali. His lifelong association with the School of Oriental and African Studies and the Iqbal Academy, speaks of his love and command over Iqbal’s message. He introduced Iqbal’s poetic artistry to the audience. His authority over Iqbal’s Urdu verse, at first, stunned the audience. He gradually traversed the different phases in Iqbal’s poetic upbringing – starting from his early years: the recitals organized by the *Anjuman-e-Punjab* in his college days, followed by his publications in Sheikh Abdul Qadir’s magazine *Makhzan*. He presented a historical progression of Iqbal’s metaphor and his poetic themes. He also spoke of Iqbal’s massive popular charisma as he recited his famous *Shama aur Shair* (The Candle and the Poet), *Shikwa* (Complaint) and *Jawab-e-Shikwa* (Answer to the Complaint) at the meetings of the *Anjuman-e-Himayat-e-Islam* in the Islamia College, Lahore.

Dr Matthews paper was studied with beautiful readings from various poems such as *Himala* (The Himalays), *Saaqi Nama* (The Message of the Cupbearer) and *Eik Sham* (An evening – alongside the banks of River Neckar, Hidelberg, Germany)⁵⁵:

*“The moon’s light is silent,
The branches of every tree are silent.
The songsters of the valley are silent,
The green trees of the mountain are silent.
Nature has become unconscious,*

⁵⁵ Translation by M.A.K. Khalil

It is sleeping in the night's lap.

*Some spell of serenity does exist,
That Neckar's flow is also serene.*

*The caravan of stars is silent,
The caravan is moving without the bell.
Silent are the mountains, forest, river,
As if Nature is absorbed in deep meditation.*

*O Heart! You should also become silent,
And taking grief in your lap, must go to sleep.”*

Iqbal's poetic appraisal was followed by a dramatic rendition of excerpts from Iqbal's Urdu masterpieces *Shikwa* and the *Jawab*. Ali Abbas rendered the Urdu, while Fasi Zaka responded with succinct interjections in English. Both Ali and Fasi are students at Oxford University.

The translation of all selections being read throughout the symposium, were being projected in the background. The display of the actual verse accompanied by the translation, synchronized with the rendition, gripped the audience's attention. For the multicultural audience, language seemed to be no barrier!⁵⁶

*“O Lord! The aimlessly wandering nation of Islam faces the Ka'ba once again,
The wingless nightingale cannot resist its innate urge to fly,
The scent of love simmers in each and every bud in the garden,
The instrument awaits the pluck of the spectrum; so Lord! Please pluck its' strings!
The waves of music are anxious to escape the stringed prison,
The mount of Sinai longs to burn in the same effulgence that had once incinerated it.”*

⁵⁶ Translation by Ali Abbas and Muhammad Sabieh Anwar

Dr. Yahya Michot is a Fellow of Islamic Studies at the Oxford Centre for Islamic Studies and the Faculty of Theology, Oxford University. His specialty in the classical Muslim theologians Avicenna and Ibn-e-Taymiyya gives him a sound knack of traditional Muslim thought. He discussed Iqbal's religious reinvigoration in light of classical thought. In his paper titled "Mohammed Iqbal: Muslim thought for the 21st century?", Prof Michot claimed that Iqbal was the last great Muslim thinker in the lineage of illustrious intellectuals such as Ghazali, Razi and Shah Waliullah. He skillfully presented an overview of Iqbal's religious contributions and hailed them as a vitalizing spirit in the enervating pulse of modern Muslim intellectualism.

Dr. Homa Katouzian, who is permanently based in Exeter University, is a multi-dimensional personality with authorship in politics, economics and Persian literature. He shared his heartfelt association with Iqbal, with his Farsi renderings from the magnum opus *Javid Nama*. His exposition was in the *Dervish* style, common in Turkey, where artists frequent this style at Rumi's mausoleum. The *Javid Nama* is in fact, a journey of ascension taken up by Iqbal, in the leadership of Rumi, during the course of which he comes across several figures of importance. Dr. Homa read from Jamal-ud-Din Afghani's address to the poet wandering near the firmament of heaven ⁵⁷:

"A world is still lost in my heart,

And a world is still waiting for the call to 'Rise',

A world that is cleansed of dichotomies of color and race,

Will set into an evening, brighter than any dawn the West can ever produce."

Bihani Sarkar, a young classical singer from Indian Bengal and an Oxford student, grasped the audience with her performance of Iqbal's Urdu ghazal *Wohi Mere Kam Naseebe* (My Haplessness is Still the Same) ⁵⁸:

“Is	this	a	world	of	mine,
Or	a	magic	of	Thy	art?
Is	this	the	world'	of	the
					body,

⁵⁷ Translation by Muhammad Sabieh Anwar

⁵⁸ Translation by Naeem Siddiqui

Or the world of the soul?
My days and nights are tossed.
In a storm of confusion,
In the yearnings of a Rumi,
Or the bewilderment of a Razi.”

It was the first time, Bihani was reciting Iqbal, but her skill and inspiring melody was much appreciated.

Dr. Salman Asif, a literary critic, well rounded in Sanskrit, Urdu, Hindi and Persian languages, recited a selection of Iqbal’s Persian quatrains from *Payam-e-Mashriq* (Message of the East). He also talked about Iqbal’s fondness towards his homeland, and pointed out how he used Sanskrit vocabulary and figures of narrative from Hindu folklore and mythology. His well selected Persian verse, highlighted Iqbal’s concepts of never ending motion and mankind’s supremacy as being the vicegerent of God.

The keynote speaker at the symposium was Revd Keith Ward, a well known author and Chair of the Faculty of Theology at Oxford University. His book “God: A Guide for the Perplexed” enjoys wide readership in Britain. His paper was titled “Iqbal from a Western Philosophical Standpoint” – a difficult undertaking, but his clarity and objectivity, simplified complicated theological questions in a befitting manner. Towards the end of the proceedings, his lively style and candid responses kept the audience on the edge of their seats. He took up the novel task of explaining to his audience, how Iqbal viewed God and how his outlook differed from a traditional Greek conception of the divine. Greek philosophy had upheld a static concept of God: who had made the universe once for all, set the laws of nature and then retired into a merely passive supervision of the grand scheme of things. This Greek picture of God is sometimes referred to as *Deus Otiosus*.

Iqbal’s concept of God, remarked Dr Ward, was however, inspired from the Quranic proposition:

يَسْأَلُهُ وَمَنْ فِي السَّمَوَاتِ وَالْأَرْضِ كُلَّ يَوْمٍ هُوَ فِي شَأْنٍ ﴿٢١﴾

“Every (creature) that is in the skies and the earth begs of Him. Every day He appears in a new majesty.” (Al-Qur’an 55:29)

Keith Ward elaborated the verse and suggested that Iqbal considered God’s creative energy as a dynamic driving force in the universe, unleashing itself in a multitude of ways, each passing day, each fleeting second. So God is present in full glory, for *all times*. The concepts of “now” and “then”; “past”, “present” and “future” lose meaning in Iqbal’s temporal understanding of God. So God is approachable at all times – the means to approach him, being fervent prayer. In the same connection, Prof Ward also highlighted Iqbal’s meaning of the concept of “prayer”. He pointed out, that Iqbal’s theological understands are in full accord with his pervasive ideas about free human will, never-ending motion and the principle of permanent change in the universe.

The keynote address concluded with his apt epitome, “...and I think whatever Iqbal said of God, he was right”.

After the keynote address, Burzine Waghmar from the School of Oriental and African Studies, London University paid tribute to the late Professor Annemarie Schimmel.

In his concluding address Prof James Morris, spoke of the perfect balance of beauty and content in all great works of art and philosophy. Ali Abbas, principal coordinator of the Pakistan Discussion Forum, expressed his heartfelt gratitude to all speakers and audience. The symposium was formally concluded by Bihani’s performance of the famous ghazal *Kabhi Ay Haqeeqat-e-Muntazar* (O The Awaited Reality!) ⁵⁹:

Whenever I place my head on the ground in humble prostration before the Lord!

⁵⁹ Translation by Muhammad Sabieh Anwar

The earth instantly speaks up: “What meaning does this prayer have, when idols inhabit your heart”.