

WHOSE IQBAL — OURS OR THEIRS?

A REPRESENTATIVE SEMINAR

AT THE

SAHITYA ACADEMY— NEW DELHI

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In the evening of November the 9th a literary and cultural soiree was organized at the Sahitya Academy auditorium in New Delhi. The occasion was the 124th birth anniversary of south Asia's famous poet and philosopher, Dr. Muhammad Iqbal. The function was organized by the Communicators Cooperative India a collective of media and arts professionals, in remembrance and contemplation of what Iqbal and his works mean to us today, especially as a common heritage of south Asia.

The evening started with the rendition of Iqbal's poetry in musical/singling form. It was followed by a short seminar on the relevance of Iqbal in which eminent scholars Prof. Mohammad Hasan, Prof. Abdul Haq, and Prof. Naseer Ahmad Khan, among others, participated. Besides, there was an exhibition of Iqbal's archival photographs and graphic artwork using his poetry in calligraphic form.

The following reportage profiles Iqbal and his life and thoughts in the light of the discussion that took place in the seminar.

Flicking though the television channels last Friday, I happened to pause at PTV for a few moments, as a newscaster was announcing the celebration of the birth anniversary of “their” national poet, Allama Iqbal, across Pakistan. It was being discussed with conviction, how Iqbal was really the originator of the idea of Pakistan. At that moment, I found myself humming the tune of “lub pay aati hai dua ban kay tamanna meri” a prayer song composed by Iqbal that I used to sing when I was a school kid. And then I wondered how Iqbal could be the originator of Pakistan when I always have thought of him to be ours.

As I came to attend the literary evening on Iqbal that day, I heard a similar story. A few years ago, reminisced Professor Naseer Ahmad Khan (of the Department of Urdu, Jawaharlal Nehru University). When he invited a Pakistani Scholar to participate in a seminar on Ghalib, he received a curious reply. The Pakistani scholar wrote back that since Ghalib was an Indian poet, he would not be able to speak on him. However, he expressed his desire to India any way to hear what Indians has to say on this great “Indian” poet. Later, on telephone, Dr. Khan asked him who was “their” poet. “Iqbal,” said the erudite voice from the other side.

With the partition of India, india’s cultural heritage was partitioned too. Ghalib apparently fell on India’s side, and Iqbal was tossed across to Pakistan. When Iqbal died, his grave was in India. After 1947, it became the property of Pakistan.

“If Iqbal belongs to Pakistan just because his grave falls within their geographical boundaries, then what about the Harappan civilization of which the largest number of sites fall on the other side of the border? Does it make Harrapa a Pakistan heritage only?” asked Dr. Khawaja Ikramuddin of JNU’s Department of Urdu, How can a Iqbal who vouchsafed for Hindu–Muslim unity and targeted the exploitative religious figures, be labeled as a Muslim communalist– good enough to be exported to Pakistan? How can an Iqbal who said “Khak-e watan ka mujh ko har zarra devta hai” [Each dust particle of my motherland is god to me], be considered a poet of the Muslims?

Iqbal has described his dream of a new India in these words:

Sach keh doon aye Brahmin gar to bura na mane

Tere sanam-qadon ke b’ut ho gaye purane

Sooni padi huyi hai muddat se dil ki basti

As ek naya shiwali hum phir se yan bana de’n

Shakti bhi shanty bhi bhakto ke geet me hai

Dharti ke waasiyon ki mukti preet me hai

Mullahs had issued a fatwa on Iqbal for daring to see this dream for a new India. Yet, after his death, Iqbal was reviled as an Islamic poet. This was Iqbal's tragedy. "It is wrong to assume that Iqbal is the poet of Muslims or he belongs to Urdu literature alone. No Iqbal transcends all boundaries. You cannot put him in any category. Like all great poets, he belongs to the whole mankind," said Professor Abdul Haq.

Allama Iqbal was born in Sialkot in 1877. He learned Arabic and traditional eastern education under the guidance of famous scholar Meer Hasan. After M. A. in Philosophy, he received Ph. D. from Cambridge and German University. Passing the examination of Barrister, for some time he became professor of Arabic in London University. In 1908, he returned to India and became professor in Lahore. One and half years later he started practicing law. British government bestowed the title of "Sir" on him in 1922. In 1926, on the invitation of Madras University, he delivered series of 6 lectures on Islam. He was appointed as a member of Punjab Legislative Council. He presided over All India Muslim League in 1930. In 1931, he represented India in second "Round Table Conference". In 1932, on Shah of Afghanistan's invitation he participated in welcome Celebrations in Kabul, along with Syed Sulaiman Nadwi and Sir Ross Masood. He died on April 21, 1938.

After partition, Iqbal was claimed by Pakistan, so the argument goes, because he is credited to have originated the idea of Pakistan, a holy land for the Muslims. "This is not the whole Truth," said Professor Abdul Haq, an eminent Urdu critic. "Iqbal foresaw a federal structure for a free India, in which a Muslim-dominated north-western region could be a cultural unit like many others," he said. As far as the idea of Pakistan is concerned, Iqbal denied that he was the originator of this idea. "Iqbal has clearly denied this in his letters to Raghbir Hussain. People don't talk about these letters since they don't favour their point of view," said Dr. Haq.

"When nations begin to diminish in stature and gallop back to their annihilation, they begin to put things in categories: this is Hindu, this is Muslim, this is this and this is that," said Dr. Naseer Ahmad Khan of JNU's Department of Urdu. Iqbal's being dubbed as a Pakistani or a Muslim poet is a reflection of our intellectual poverty. It is not Iqbal's personal loss but reflective of our own inadequacies, Dr. Khan added.

“I’m not bothered whether Iqbal originated the idea of Pakistan. What matters to me, and should matter to everybody, is how far Iqbal is relevant to us today,” said Professor Mohammad Hasan, an eminent expert on Iqbal. He said that Iqbal’s greatness, as a poet is undoubted. Along with Ghalib, he is the only poet in Indian literature who had equal command over two languages: Urdu and Persian.

Dr. Abdul Haq said that Iqbal is the most misunderstood poet of the 20th century. “We must look at Iqbal in totality if we want to understand him,” He said. Iqbal’s tragedy was that his poetry was used by different groups to serve their own interests. His poetry had so many facets that he seemed to assume different roles in different phases of his poetry: he was a staunch nationalist, a vocal communist, an advocate of Hindu-Muslim unity, a humanist, a believer in Islamic revivalism, a freedom fighter, and an advocate of international brotherhood. “No poet in Urdu, and I’m sure in any other Indian language too. Has shed as many tears on India’s misery and colonial captivity as Iqbal,” said Dr. Haq.

Iqbal warned his countrymen by these words:

Watan ki fikr kar nadan musibat aane wali hai

Teri barbadiyon ke mashware hain aasmano me

Professor Haq said that in order to under to understand Iqbal, we must see him at three levels: as an Indian, as a Muslim, and as a humanist advocating universal brotherhood. As an Indian, Iqbal’s patriotism is indubitable.” *Saare jahan se achha Hindustan hamara,*” said Iqbal so blatantly. His poetry is full of patriotic fervor and a pride for India’s ancient civilization. In one of his couplets, Iqbal extolled Ram as the leader of the East.

Professor Hasan quoted from his most mature work, *Javid Nama* a couplet where he was traveling in the heavens and saw Prophet Jesus Christ, and Gautam Budhha seated side by side before the Lord God. “From a Muslim point of view, what Iqbal says in this couplet is sheer apostasy; yet, Iqbal is unfortunately understood as a communalist,” said Professor Hasan.

Iqbal also seems to be sympathizing with communism. He apparently believed that if you simply add God to the communist philosophy, it becomes Islam. Professor Haq said that Iqbal had the gall to put Marx on the pedestal of prophethood. He quoted a line from Iqbal wherein he had said that though Marx was not a prophet, but he has the book (*Das Kapital*) like the revealed ones. No wonder then, the Russian Revolution of 1917 prepared the background for themes of capitalist system and jostling of labor class in his poem “Khidr Raah”. He presented revolutionary views before moderate leader. He conveyed the message to class of laborers to get organized and unified.

Uth kea b daore jahan ka aur he andaz hai

Mashroq-o-Maghrib me tere daur ka aghaz hai

et up now that he syle of the world has changed

the beginning of your age in the East and West.”]

Iqbal, while attaining a philosophical height in his poetry, was also writing “Decree of God to Angels” for the youth.

Uthho meri duniya ke gharibon ki jaga do

Kakhe umara ke daro deenar bila do

Jis khet se dehqan ko mayassar no ho rozgi

Us khet ke her kbosha-ye gandum ko jala do

Iqbal was unhappy with the situation of the Muslims in the world. Everywhere they were lorded over by the colonialists. In one of his poem, depicting the political situation of a particular period, he addresses Muslims and says that Allah has bestowed upon you with all qualities, you are the best people, you have to lead the whole world. So, regenerate the qualities of valor, justice, and truth in yourself.

“Read the lesson again of valor, of justice, of truth

You will be required to lead the world.”

Talking about Iqbal being branded a communalist, Professor Haq said, “it is unjust to label Iqbal a communalist. Every thinker, philosopher and creative artist turns to spiritual resources in his later life. The same also happened with Iqbal. Do we talk about the communalism of Aurobindo? Being religious does not mean being a communalist. You are communal only when you talk about harming the people of other communities. How can you put Iqbal in that category when he dreamt of building a ‘Naya Shivala’. Appreciating Iqbal, Dr. Haq said that Iqbal was the only Urdu poet, and perhaps the only poet in any other Indian literature, who linked the native literature to the world events. He made the events around the world the core of his poetry. Dr. Hasan said that if we look at his verses, we find them reflecting all the major events of the world of his times.

Dr. Hasan said that Iqbal was not without flaws. For example, he did not agree with his views vis a vis women. Iqbal does not allow much room for action to women. However, his poetry and his farsightedness cannot be flawed, he urged.

Dr. Hasan said that Iqbal’s entire philosophy can be summed up in one word: Khudi (which have meanings much deeper than simply, “self”). It is not an Islamic word or Islamic philosophy. It is mantra of action and struggle for any individual or nation to survive and succeed. That is his message to the world. Iqbal believed in action and continuous struggle. He quoted one of his Persian couplets which means:

Someone (supposedly a divine voice) asked me, are you happy with the way this world is I said no.

The answer came, then go smash it up and make it the way you wish (it to be)

Iqbal favours Iblees (Devil) over Adam for his action and his daring to defy Allah’s command. Iqbal’s concept of the Shaitan (devil) is that he is the leader of those who count their destiny responsible for their evil deeds and count their punishment already destined. He complains to Allah.

Harfe istakbar tere saamne mumkin na tha

Haan magar teri mushiyat me an tha mera sajoon

When he is put a question:

Kab kbhula tujh par ye raaz? Inkaar se pehle ke baad

He answers:

Baad! Aye teri tajalli se kamalat-e wajood

Then he realizes that he has understood it after having denied it and he dared to do it because of his weak nature. When you take it forward, we find out that he has envy and jealousy that is why he dislikes man to sit as the viceroy of God. It means that he considers man superior to himself because he complains in *Javd Nama* that man easily becomes a prey in his web. This is despite the hope from man that he fights him and tries to dominate him. Therefore, Iqbal sees in Iblees a power which helps in the development of man and his world; he alone brings out his best in real life through the struggle of good vs. evil Iblees invitation—“defeat me” —is a clear evidence that establishes that he wants to be the prey of a Mard-e Kamil (Perfect man).

Professor Al-e Ahmad Suroor has explained it this way: Iblees was in search of the perfect man as he refused to bow before a newborn Adam. It seemed as if Iqbal gained freedom from the devil by interpreting him in this fashion. He had achieved the power of action, faith in truth, self-respect, self-dependence and self-defense.

Teri zindagi isi se teri aabro isi se

Jo rabi kbhudi to shahi na rabi to ru-siyahi

That Khudi is Iqbal’s universal message. It is not only for the Indians or the Pakistanis but for the whole mankind to adopt and learn from. People may deep on fighting about Iqbal being our heritage or theirs. In his own lifetime, Iqbal had outgrown all categories. He is a shared heritage for the whole world.

Dhoondta phirta boom aya Iqbal apne aapko

Aap hi goya musafir aap hi manzil hun mein

(I keep looking, oh Iqbal, for myself,

As if I am the traveler as well as the destination itself)

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64TH DEATH ANNIVERSARY AND SEMINAR OF ALLAMA IQBAL'S