

# ENCOUNTERING MODERNITY: IQBAL AT CAMBRIDGE

Saeed A. Durrani

Iqbal's stay in Europe (1905-08) transformed his thinking and outlook. He arrived in Cambridge at the age of 27 in September 1905 and enrolled in Trinity College, Cambridge, as an Advanced Student. In his application to the College he stated that he would like to "make a contribution to the knowledge in the west, of some branch of Muhammadan Philosophy. I would propose as a subject of *Research*— "The genesis and development of Metaphysical concepts in Persia" or some contribution to the knowledge of Arabic Philosophy..." (My personal guess is that in proposing the above fields of research he may have been guided by his erstwhile mentor at the Government College, Lahore, Professor Thomas Arnold— to whom Iqbal was greatly devoted.) By 1905, Iqbal was already a fairly well-established young poet of Urdu with an India-wide reputation. But he was, essentially, a poet of nationalistic leanings<sup>114</sup>— despite his early education at a madrasah in

---

<sup>114</sup> Since this is a theme that has been emphasized by Dr. Durrani and a part of his presentation relies on the "fact" of Iqbal's development from a nationalist to a "pan-Islamic" for mounting his argument, a brief response seems in order. It was forwarded by Khurram Ali Shafique, our associate scholar from Karachi, and was discussed after Dr. Durrani's paper. See below. (Editors)

To say that Iqbal was a nationalist before 1905 and became an Islamist later is an oversimplification. It overlooks the following facts:

1. Iqbal wrote "Islamist" poetry even in the days when he praised India as a homeland. Even in his prose essay "Qaumi Zindagi" (National Life) he used the word "qaum" (Nation) for Indian Muslims and not for all the Indians, and his definition of the organic unity between religion and culture in this essay was essentially the same which he later offered in his mature philosophy. This essay was published around the same time as his famous poem "*Saray jahan say achha Hindustan hamara*" (Our India, the best of all the world!)

Sialkot on highly traditional Indo-Islamic lines. Iqbal had always been proud of his Kashmiri Brahmanic lineage; and had, indeed, published several poems clearly and expressly deriving from Vedic sources— e.g. his poem entitled “Āftāb”— The Sun— stated by the poet to be the translation of the Hindu scriptures, *Gaiteri*. In another poem, entitled *Naya Shivala* (the New Temple) in his first book *Bang-i Dara* (The Call of the Caravan Bell) he had declared that [*Kulliyat, Urdu, Urdu, p. 74*] ‘Every atom of my motherland is a (demi-)god for me’— which had raised eyebrows amongst the orthodox Muslims of India. I quote these instances to demonstrate the pre-1905 leanings of Iqbal towards nationalism and an essentially Hindu-oriented sentiment. And, of course, in his most celebrated poem ‘Ode to India’ (still widely regarded as the unofficial national anthem of India today) he had declared: [*Kulliyat, Urdu, p.109*]

*Better than the whole world is our own India*

*We are its nightingales: It, verily, is our rose-garden.*

Thus spake Iqbal, as he came up to Cambridge as a Freshman towards the end of September 1905. But when he left England less than three years later, on 8<sup>th</sup> July 1908, he had a different personality altogether. What were the influences that transformed him? I shall attempt to unravel some of these

---

2. Likewise, even in his later period there is no dearth of poetry that is almost in the same vein as his earlier so-called “nationalistic” poetry: for instance, the lines in praise of the Nehrus in the *Javid Namah*.

3. The misconception is actually based on an underlying political concept, viz., Indian nationalism was always there and Muslim nationalism emerged later. That was the dogma upheld by the Congress and opposed by Iqbal, Jinnah and other Muslim leaders. If you believe in this dogma, then you also tend to believe that Iqbal must have followed the same path: nationalist first and Islamist later. If you believe that the Indian nationalism was a later development that happened at the turn of the century, then you understand that Iqbal’s “love of India” in the pre-1905 days was something else, and to confuse it with the Congressite version of “nationalism” would be an *Anachronism*, since that kind of nationalism almost did not exist at that time!

strands in the present paper, and— to mix my metaphors— try to fathom these deeps to reach the undercurrents operating there. In this context, it would, perhaps not be remiss to point out that Iqbal himself was aware of this watershed of European sojourn in his modes of thought. For, in his first book, mentioned above (*Bang-i Dara*), he made a clear demarcation, viz. Part 1: “Up to 1905”; Part 2: “1905 -1908”; and Part 3: “1908-”.

While researching for his dissertation, submitted in mid-March 1907 with the title: *The Development of Metaphysics in Persia*— for which he got a ‘Distinction’ in his B.A. degree by research on 13 June 1907— Iqbal made a deep study of both ‘Eastern’ and ‘Western’ systems of philosophy. His dissertation started with an examination of the thoughts and belief—systems of ancient Persian sages, Zoroaster, Mani and Mazdak; and then went on to Islamic scholars, e.g. Ibn Maskawaih (d. 1030) and Ibn Sina (Avicenna, d. 1037). Iqbal analysed the influences of Greek (whom, in this context, we shall consider to be ‘Western’) philosophers, such as Plato, Aristotle and Plotinus, on these Persi-Islamic thinkers. Iqbal’s very perspicacious and fascinating review of the interplay of classical Greek systems of thought with ancient Persian, Islamic, Sufic and Vedantic concepts is still worthy of careful study today— even though Iqbal modestly remarked in his Introduction: “Original thought cannot be expected in a review, the object of which is purely historical...” The present writer not being a professional philosopher— who is, indeed, a mere physicist by training, not a metaphysicist— cannot presume to pass judgement on the minutiae of Iqbal’s analysis of the development of metaphysical concepts in Persia spanning the period from a few centuries BC to the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century AD, covered by him in his dissertation (that earned him a degree of PhD from the Ludwig-Maximilians-Universitaet, Munich, on 4<sup>th</sup> November 1907). Suffice it here to say— as quoted by his nominal supervisor at Munich, Professor Fritz Hommel (cf. my book: *Navadir-i Iqbal Europe mein*— published by Iqbal Academy Pakistan: Lahore, 1995)— that his erstwhile mentor, Professor T. W. Arnold, to whom, indeed, Iqbal later on dedicated his published thesis (rather than to his nominal supervisor at Cambridge, the noted neo-Hegelian philosopher, J.M.E. McTaggart) wrote about this thesis as follows for the attention of his Munich University examiners:

“Whitehall, India Office, Oct. 2<sup>nd</sup> 1907

I have read Prof Muhammad Iqbal's Dissertation "The Development of Metaphysics in Persia" with interest. So far as I am aware, it is the first attempt that has been made to trace the continuous development of ancient Iranian speculations as they have survived in Muhammadan philosophy and so bring out the distinctively Persian character of many phases of Muslim thought. The writer has made use of much material hitherto unpublished and little known in Europe, and his dissertation is a valuable contribution to the history of Muhammedan philosophy".

(sd) T. W. Arnold, Prof. of Arabic, University of London.

While at Cambridge, Sheikh Muhammad Iqbal came into close contact with such giants of orientalism as Professor E. G. Browne and R. A. Nicholson. The latter, in fact, acted as a Referee for his dissertation in 1907– and in 1920 was to translate into English Iqbal's Persian *Mathnavi, Asrar-i Khudi (Secrets of the Self)* and thus introduce Iqbal's name to European readership. Professor Browne referred to Iqbal's work in the 2<sup>nd</sup> volume (pub. 1906) of his *opus magnum, A Literary History of Persia (1902 et seq.)* Apart from the orientalist, Iqbal also came into contact with various Cambridge philosophers of a high stature, including his neo-Hegelian supervisor at Trinity, J. M. E. McTaggart, A. N. Whitehead, W. R. Sorley of King's (the Knightbridge Professor of Moral Philosophy) and Professor James Ward. At that time, Cambridge was the abode of such towering personalities of the world of philosophy as Ludwig Wittgenstein, Bertrand Russell and George Moore – but I do not know whether Iqbal ever met them or attended any of their lectures. From the sources quoted in his Dissertation, however, it is quite obvious that he was a most conscientious, hard-working, and widely-read research scholar, who spent his time with great diligence. (Indeed, it is well known that he nearly gave up writing poetry around that time– sending a message to his erstwhile friend and promoter, Sheikh (later Sir) Abdul Qadir, Editor of *Makhsan*, Lahore, declaring that: [*Kulliyat*, Urdu,p.162] "... Nations that have work to do have no time to indulge in literary pursuits ...". It was only Professor Thomas Arnold who persuaded Iqbal not to give up writing poetry that was of service to his nation.)

It is my belief that his time at Cambridge was a period of great 'input' to his mind and personality. The 'output' over the next decade or so was his

great poems and *mathnavis* that he published in both Urdu and Persian upon his return to India. At Cambridge— and subsequently in Germany and upon his return to London (November 1907— July 1908)— he assimilated much and thought much. This was a very formative period for young Iqbal (who was at that time 27— 30 years of age): it seems to have transformed his personality, his perceptions, and his outlook. His observation, at first hand, of Western culture, civilization and political machinations had already yielded such prophetic poems as the one he wrote in March 1907 (soon after submitting his dissertation, I suspect) where he declared: [*Kulliyat*, Urdu, p.167]

*Your civilization will commit suicide by using its own dagger.*

*A nest that is built on a slender bough cannot have much permanence!*

Such were Iqbal's thoughts after only a year and a half of sojourn in England. The three and a half months that he subsequently spent in Germany— where he formed a bond of deep affection for his tutor in the German language at Heidelberg, Emma Wegenast, a beautiful, sincere and serious-minded girl of 27, who taught him the works of Goethe, Heine and other German poets— were also a time that made a lasting impact on Iqbal's personality and emotions. It is my belief that it was not the works of German philosophers such as Kant, Spinoza, Schopenhauer, Hegel *et al.* that were the prime factors in this impact— for he was already well acquainted with them in India and in England. It was, rather, the fact that Iqbal, for the first time in his life, lived in a country where he did not feel the oppressive yoke of colonial subjugation. He was able to breathe the fresh air as a liberated human being in an environment where he was at a par with other humans, who were his equals: not his superiors or masters. This, too, boosted Iqbal's self-confidence— so that he returned to India with a fresh fire in his belly. From being a narrow nationalist, Iqbal had transformed into a pan-Islamist— even a cosmopolite and a visionary. Indeed, in a post-1908 poem, entitled *Wataniyat* (Nationalism) and subtitled: (“i.e. Homeland as a Political Concept”), he declared: [*Kulliyat*, Urdu, p.187]

*Amongst these new gods, the greatest is Nationhood*

*Its robes are the funeral shroud of religion.*

*This idol, that has been carved by today's civilization*

*Is the destroyer of the land of our Prophet's faith.*

And he goes on to explain: [Kulliyat, Urdu, p.187]

*Your sinews are strengthened by your belief in One God*

*Islam is your homeland: the blessed Prophet your sustainer.*

The famous author of the aforementioned [tarana-i Hindi] (Ode to India), now wrote his [tarana-i Milli] (Ode to the Islamic Nation), in which he extended his idea of nationhood to a global scale. He declared: [Kulliyat, Urdu, p. 186]

*China is ours, Arabia is ours, and so, too, is India*

*We are Muslims; the entire world is our homeland!*

Apart from this Islamic slant, a very significant change that took place in Iqbal's outlook and system of thought through his close encounter with European civilization— which the organizers of this Seminar have termed *Encountering Modernity*— was his disillusionment with the image of the West that had seemed to bedazzle the Indian— indeed entire colonial populations. He now understood its exploitative, imperialistic and materialistic *modus operandi*, and both overt and covert policies. This led him to declare: [Kulliyat, Urdu, p. 305]

*The iridescence of modern civilization dazzles our eyes*

*But this artistry is an artifice of false jewellery.*

And then: [Kulliyat, Urdu, p. 373]

*The splendour of the knowledge of the West failed to bedazzle me*

*The dust of Medina and Najaf is the collyrium of my eyes.*

Note his caustic remarks in the poem entitled “Lenin in the Presence of God”: [Kulliyat, Urdu, p. 435]

*This knowledge, this wisdom, this statesmanship, this governance*

*They suck blood, and teach the tenets of equality!*

*Unemployment and promiscuity and inebriation and destitution:*

*Are these not victories enough for the civilization of the West?*

Furthermore: [Kulliyat, Urdu, p. 605]

*Is this the zenith of your civilization?*

*Man without work, and woman without a child?*

But this did not mean that Iqbal had become so blinkered, narrow-minded and partisan that he could not see and admire the strengths of the Western civilization and its positive advances; for he freely declared: [Kulliyat, Urdu, p. 690]

*It is no sin to drink deep at the wells of new learning*

*Open to all are the winehouses of the West.*

And he went on to explain: [Kulliyat, Persian, p. 648]

*The strength of the West comes not from the dulcimer or the lyre*

*Nor does it spring from the cavorting of veil-less beauties*

*Its solidity does not stem from godlessness*

*Nor does its ascendancy result from the Latin script.*

*The strength of the West is based on science and technology*

*This is the fire that lights its lamp so brightly.*

.....

From the above quotations— both critical and laudatory of the West – one must not conclude that Iqbal was preoccupied with Western attitudes and attributes alone. He was equally concerned with identifying the strengths and weaknesses of the East as well. For lack of time, I shall cite only one example each of the two sides of this oriental coin, as Iqbal saw it.

*The tavern of the East still holds in its vaults*

*That wine – which sets alight men’s consciousness*

*The forest of learning and invention is devoid of lion-hearted men*

*What is left is but the slaves of the Sufi and the Mullah, O Sagi!*

*Who has stolen the sharp sword of creative passion?*

*The learned hold an empty scabbard in their hand, O Sagi!*

[*Kulliyat*, Urdu, p.351]

The best solution of this dichotomy prevalent in both systems is, for Iqbal:

[*khuz ma Safa wa di‘ ma kadir*] “pick that which is clean and reject what is unclean” from each discipline.

He thus gives the following advice to a man of tolerance and reconciliation: [*Kulliyat*, Urdu, p. 621]



*Shun not the East– nor fear the West*

*It is the command of Providence that every night be turned into a new dawn!*

A marriage of the two systems – an amalgam of both traditions – is, in Iqbal's view, the best option for this new era, a New Dawn. Or, as he puts it in *Javid nameh*: [Kulliyat, Persian, p.538]

*For the Westerners, Intellect is the maker of life;*

*For the Easterners, Love is the secret of the cosmos.*

*Intellect recognizes the truth through Love*

*Love consolidates its works by Intellect.*

*Rise, and draw the blueprint of a New World*

*Go, and make an amalgam of Love and Intellect!*

I end my peroration by saying that Iqbal's encounter with modernity that started during his stay here in Cambridge a hundred years ago, propelled him throughout his life to try to seek a solution of this great puzzle– how to build a world of peace, amity between nations, intercultural tolerance, love and understanding rather than confrontation and conflict? Iqbal's answer was to seek reconciliation between these two polar forces. Combine your strengths – so that the whole is greater than the sum of the parts! Moderation and tolerance is the message of the wise Arabic aphorism: [*Khayr-ul umuri awsatuba*] The best of things is the middle of things.

Addendum