

IQBAL: BETWEEN STARS AND HEARTS

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MUHAMMAD IQBAL's (1877-1938) death anniversary is being commemorated on 21 April, 2003, and it seems to be the right time to rediscover this man of clairvoyant vision and strange ideas - not from the perspective of textbooks, but from the perspective Iqbal would have liked to portray himself.

Iqbal openly claimed two merits for himself: first, that his profound verse is not a romantic lullaby. Instead it is a slogan of valour, incessant action and self-realization. Second, his poetry is not for one nationality alone. His message is far-reaching, and transcends any geography. To these claims, I would like to add a few other shades of his peculiar place in our intellectual history.

He is not a confused philosopher. However, many a time, he is seen posing questions, one after the other, inducing elegant dialogue between his personified conversants. He commits to such exercises of inquiry, not only to reach at answers himself, but also to put his message across. Many of his poems are representative of this dramatic plot.

Iqbal is difficult to understand – because his terminology carries a characteristic meaning. Therefore, like all worthwhile discourses, he needs to be learnt from someone - for one needs the 'blessing of the eye' - an inspired teacher, just like the teachers of Iqbal himself. The moth and the candle, the nightingale and the glow-worm, the tulip and the rose - are all well-retained traditions in Persian and then Urdu poetry, but they assume an altogether new appeal in his cavalcade of ideas. Even the roles of Prophets like Abraham and Moses find unique meanings in his thought cycles. The parables of 'Mahmud' and 'Ghaznavi', 'Farhad' and 'Shirin', 'Laila' and 'Majnun' are all there, in full show, but viewed from a totally different angle - cast in an altogether new die. 'Mu'min', 'Darwesh' and 'Qalandar' and 'Kafir', 'Barhaman' and 'Zandeeq' are all old symbols, but in a new attire. It could be said that he took all the stock of gold from his predecessors in literary tradition and then remoulded it to his ambition's desire.

Being a devoted lover of the Prophet (PBUH), he derives inspiration from the Qur'an. In his quest to intellectually steer his nation he seeks refuge and guidance, from the Prophet (PBUH). Like a submitting Muslim, he supplicates to the Prophet (PBUH) and shares his complaints with his Ultimate Master. Sometimes, he goes a step ahead and establishes a direct communion with God. Sometimes, he assumes the role of a stray observer, a solitary walker, eavesdropping dialogues between Sa'di and Hali, Lenin with God and sometimes Satan with God. So much so, at times, he goes to the blasphemous extent of praising Satan. Parallels to this unique plot are difficult to find in the volumes of our literature.

Iqbal, also addresses the quintessential questions of life and death – trying to understand the higher planes of meaning in the Scripture. He upholds the sanctity of life and death

appears as a meager mirage in the grand scheme of this world - a temporary interlude in the journey. His life is a life beyond calculative measures of the yester and the morrow. The ideal life always moves, never comes to a stop. It subsumes worldly pleasures and is not surmounted by them. It begets, but is not begotten. For example, at many instances he assures that the difference between a 'Mu'min' and a 'Kafir' would be one of 'Ishq', one of 'Khudi', one of being a subjugate to the Commands of Allah and the other being a victim of the writ of fate.

Ishq is his main ingredient of life and is also its driving force – the prime mover behind all universal occurrences. This 'Iqbalic Love' would make man into a creator of and victor over his own ideals, setting him into never-ending motion. Outreaching from one conquest to another, he is never subject to surcease. There are many junctures in one's Life, when one reaches a divergence of passages. Reason alone cannot be the sole guide in such cases. Reason will always give one a sense of fear and deprivation; it safeguards interests in life, but Ishq creates life, procreates life and makes it grow beyond bounds and shine beyond glitters. A litmus test would be that a life of pure reason would dread death, whilst a life of Ishq will welcome it.

To the basic question as to how one could acquire this quality of zest, Iqbal provides a solution too. It is the concept he introduced of 'Khudi', of Self-Realization: seeking purpose in one's life; awakening to the idea that this world is for you; grasp upon the personal gifts bestowed upon you by God and in return "seize the day".

Khudi in turn leads to the qualities of 'Faqr' - pride that never crosses the borders of conceit. Faqr represents dignity and mutual respect, a state of being straight forth in the face of the vain pursuits of this little world. It is this attribute, that makes a man who is but the king of his heart's world, to turn away from princely grandeur. Moreover, Iqbal says that a man could only be dignified, if he is a free man. Freedom from all masters but one, is essential. The false hopes, fragile aspirations and misplaced desires that dwell in a slave's heart, could never grant him the virtues of Khudi and hence most of his value in life would simply be lost. His ideas of freedom and liberty, as opposed to the civil liberties bastioned by the west today, are especially relevant to the world we live in today. To the Muslims of the day, these heart-dwelling figurines are the idols of sect, territory, rites and vain customs and above all false nationhoods.

A man of Faqr would never sell away his fortune in search of temporary goals. He is firm and strong in action. He can never be bent in the ace of peril. He does not droop low to seek sustenance. Such a man is likened to a 'Shaheen', whose niche is the echelons of honour and not the trenches of dependence, like the habitat of a vulture

Iqbal's Inner Eye could go beyond the veils and penetrate into the flaws of the modern society. He attacked western imperialism, their portrayals of democracy, their concepts of colour and race, and their emptiness of warmth or 'Soz', as Iqbal coins it. He had a sip of wine from the cups of disparate civilizations - both the east, being shuddered into the wormholes of ignorance and bigotry, as well as the west, with all its signs of teeming progress. To him, the west was all glitter, with false standards, and soul-less ideals. Their

lives were mere lives of humanoids, mechanically adjusting to daily needs. Iqbal's whole philosophy, on the other hand, had grown out of Purpose. Without Purpose, it would have taken to the ground in no time. Could the west contribute any purpose to life or any direction, at the least?

At the same time, Iqbal also looked beyond mere romanticism with the past glory of Muslims. His vision flew him over and above the cities of Kufa and Baghdad, always waiting for new camps to be drawn, new roads to be taken and new thoughts to be aspired.

Iqbal vehemently rejects asceticism. He arouses a constant clash between the 'madrasah' and the 'khanqah' - the abodes of the 'mullah' and the 'sufi' respectively. He does not respect the philosopher or the narrow mullah - one, he says, summons the death of the heart, and the other blindfolds the eye that looks boldly into the world. He only craves the vastness of his heart and fails to find this opportunity in contemporary Modern Education or 'Sufism' or even the 'Faqih', or further still, the ritualistic leader of our uninspired prayers.

How would they all know, after all, the means to guide a nation?

Iqbal, in short, lived before his age. The volumes of his work are a perfect blend of passion, reason and a gallery of strange ideas.

As we live in a 'free' Pakistan today, we owe a heavy debt upon our shoulders - a debt that can be repaid by understanding this man, who takes us, at the one hand for a ramble betwixt the stars, and at the other, pierces within the hearts of our hearts.