

Ali Usman Qasmi

# The Relevance of Iqbal and his Ideas today

Muhammad Iqbal (1877-1938), the poet, political thinker, philosopher and politician, has become, through his manifold engagements and his varied political activities, almost a mythical figure and certainly a point of reference for many diverging trends in religion as well as poetry and politics. That he has been appropriated for substantiating various rather contradictory ideologies is best exemplified by the fact that India, for instance uses Iqbal's early career poems *saray jahan say acha Hinustan humara* (Our India is better than the rest of the World) as a national song while in Pakistan Iqbal is heralded as the chief architect of the idea of Pakistan. However the question remains if Iqbal was really the one who conceived of Pakistani state? If response is in the affirmative then what exactly was his vision for such a state?

Iqbal passed away couple of years before Muslim League passed the famous Pakistan resolution in March 1940 that called for the creation of Muslim 'states' in Muslim majority areas of British India. The suggestion for the establishment of multiple states was rescinded only in 1946 with the explanation that the earlier drafts had "typing errors".

Iqbal, on the other hand, fell considerably short of demanding an 'independent state' or 'states' for the Muslims of South Asia. He had merely stated in his Allahbad address of 1930 that the North West regions of British India should be amalgamated into a single unit. There was no mention of the inclusion of the Muslims of other parts of British India in such an administrative unit. After the publication of the pamphlet *Now or Never* in 1933 by a Cambridge-based student Rehmat Ali, the idea of independent Muslim

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units in various parts of India acquired certain notoriety. Ali had called for the establishment of 'Pakistan' comprising of the areas that Iqbal had mentioned in his lecture. The pamphlet proposed a 'Bangistan' in

Bengal, 'Osmanistan' for Hyderabad Deccan and such ingeniously coined names as Siddiqistan and Farooqistan for areas where Muslims were a significant minority or had important historical-political connection. No wonder that Iqbal dissociated himself from such a scheme in a letter, he wrote to E. P. Thompson on March 4th, 1934:

"You call me (a) protagonist of the scheme called 'Pakistan'. Now Pakistan is not my scheme. The one that I suggested in my address is the creation of a Muslim province, i.e. a province having an overwhelming population of Muslims in the North West of India. This new province will be, according to my scheme, a part of the proposed Indian federation."

One may hasten to add that even if Iqbal was not directly advocating the demand for an independent state, his clairvoyance made him to realize that such an occurrence would be the only viable solution to the communal problems of India. At the time Iqbal was conceiving such ideas, even the Muslim League leadership had not assumed the central role to be the 'sole spokesman' of the Muslim community. It was merely advocating for the constitutional safeguards. The establishment of Congress ministries in 7 out of 11 provinces of British India in the wake of 1937 elections the policy-shift became visible. Iqbal's influence must have been considerable in bringing about this change as can be seen from the letters he wrote to Muhammad Ali Jinnah. These letters were

later published during the 1940s when the Pakistan movement was at its peak. Iqbal's major contribution to the creation of Pakistan was in the construction of a distinct Muslim identity through his powerful poetry. The poetic imagery and thematic focus of his verses helped create an imagined community for Muslims even if its emphasis was on extra-territorial bond among the Muslims of the world in the form of Ummah (universal Muslim brotherhood) devoid of any racial and ethnic differences and not an idealization of territorial nationalism. Hence, in Iqbal's political theory, Muslims could not be a nation in the existing political parlance except by being members of a single Ummah superseding all national bonds and affiliations. Of foremost significance for him was the practical implementation of the egalitarian socio-economic and political ideals of Islam and not essentially a concern for crystallizing the idea of Muslim nationalism, which later on was extracted out of his writings during the Pakistan movement.

Also, Iqbal's envisioning of a consolidated authority for Muslims in a specified territory did not necessarily hinge on constituting a distinct Pakistani nationhood, he rather envisaged the acquisition of political power to promulgate *shari'at* (Islamic law) in its egalitarian spirit and to facilitate the formation of a Muslim commonwealth in addition to reinforcing a spiritual bond among Muslims who already existed as members of one ummah.

In the case of Pakistan as an Islamic state, as envisioned by Iqbal, territorial nationalism was nothing but political fiddle sticks. The locus of Pakistani identity was always meant to transcend its existing frontiers thus assuming a different character than the usual nation state. Its religious and ideological bond with the Muslims was vigorously emphasized. Therefore Pakistani identity or Pakistani nationalism in the strict sense of the world was impossible because of the multiple ethnicities and linguistic groups inhabiting Pakistani territory could not otherwise be lumped together in the form of a singular nation.

Regarding its foreign policy too, Pakistan aspired to champion the cause of Muslims around the globe. In domestic policies, the local cultural traditions were to be ignored at the expense of emphasizing organic unity between Arab Islam and the people of South Asia as the recipients of Islamic religious traditions. A disconnect between the local cultural traditions and historical consciousness required the teaching of history of Muslim invaders from the north at the expense of total neglect of local history. There had to be a complete dissociation from pre-Islamic civilizational achievements as well as religious legacies. The end result of such an orientation towards Islam and cultivation of Islamic identity has been the emergence of a religiously-informed myopic citizenry in Pakistan languishing in the nostalgia of the lost Muslim glory and its revival, and identification with the problems and interests of the Muslim Ummah. It is no wonder then that Pakistan became the recruiting centre for Jihadis fighting in Kashmir, Afghanistan, Palestine, Chechnya and even Bosnia. When a few years back, Pakistan's military ruler General Pervez Musharraf sought to reverse the trend by raising the slogan of "Pakistan comes first", he was severely opposed by the custodians of right wing ideologues on the basis that such a policy was inherently contradictory not only to the tenets of Islam but also to the foundations of Pakistan.

As a concluding statement, it can be said that Iqbal's major concern was for the development of Islamic shariat in its true spirit that could keep up with the challenges of modernity. It was for the realization of such a project that he supported the idea of an Islamic state. Hence, Pakistan as such was not of central importance in Iqbal's over all political theory but the idea of actualizing the egalitarian and progressive spirit of Islam was what he aspired the Muslims to notch up. However such a project has failed miserably in Pakistan is clear but whether it was ever feasible in the first place is another question which needs introspection in all earnestness.