

'Allama Muhammad Iqbal's concept of Muslim Nationalism

Mohammad Nasir Ali Raja

The purpose in this article, in view of the existence of extensive literature on Allama Muhammad Iqbal's political philosophy, is limited to describe his perception of Muslim nationalism in India with his concept of *khudi* as its basis. Politics was not a significant sphere of his activity.¹ Thus he was not a politician in the traditional sense of the term. His major contribution in this field, was that of a Muslim philosopher who served as a guide for the leaders of the Pakistan movement. Iqbal himself was an ardent advocate of cultural nationalism. His contention was that India consisted of two major distinct nationalities, the Muslims and the Hindus. In opposition to Iqbal's cultural nationalism was the composite nationalism of Abul Kalam Azad.² It was this debate between the Muslim Nationalists and Nationalist Muslims that finally determined the political fate of the subcontinent of India; the contest was at last won by Muslim Nationalists.

There is hardly any doubt that it was Muhammad Iqbal who articulated clearly the need for a separate Muslim state in the subcontinent. His enunciation of this idea through his presidential address to the All India Muslim League session at Allahabad on December 29, 1930, is considered to be the the genesis of the "two

Mohammad Nasir Ali Raja is Deputy Director Colleges, Lahore.

1. Latif Ahmad Sherwani, *Speeches, Writings and Statements of Iqbal*, (Lahor: Iqbal Academy, 1970), iv
2. Abul Kalam Azad belonged to that group of Muslim nationalists who subscribed to the nationalist politics of the Indian National Congress and supported the idea of composite nationalism. This group rejected the idea of two or more nationalities in India contending that politically speaking India was one country and diverse cultures existing therein contributed to its oneness.

nations" theory. This idea took a decade to become the basis of the Lahore Resolution adopted by Muslim League in March 1940.

Muhammad Iqbal, to whom one turns to find the philosophical moorings of the "two nations" theory, had to travel a long way between his early reputation and mature years. He first gained popularity as a poet who supported nationalism and patriotism that unmistakably echoed his love for Indian nationalism.³ Therefore, it would not be wrong to assume that when Iqbal left India for higher studies in Europe, he was an ardent supporter of nationalism and patriotism.

On closely observing the effects of secular nationalism and territorial patriotism in Europe, Iqbal started developing strong disgust with all these human sentiments.⁴ As a result Iqbal entered an important phase of his mental development as a statesman which continued during his three years' study in Europe. Thus his post-European poetry was a radical break from his earlier works in the matter of content. He gradually and irrevocably turned his back to his earlier views and concluded that the construction of human solidarity on the foundations of race, language, color and territory, or fighting and dying for it was not only inhuman but contrary to the universally accepted spiritual values of equality and brotherhood of man. The poetical works by Iqbal between 1908 and 1918 like *shikwah* and *jawab-i shikwah*, *du'a*, *asrar-i khudi* and *ramuz-i bekhudi* are quite indicative of this change that had taken place in his thought. In these poems he focused his energies to convince Indian Muslims that, Islam being central to their existence, they were culturally different and separate from the Hindus with definite political goals and that they should not get absorbed by the larger Indian nationalism.⁵ His message also pointed out the sharp difference between the Muslim community

3. There are a number of poems by him in which he expressed his support for human values pertaining to Indian territorial nationalism. These are: *Taswir-i dard*, *nala-i yatim*, *abr-i ghubar*, *parinde ki faryad*, *tarama-i Hindi*, *naya shiwala* and *Hindustani bachon ka qawmi geet*.

4. W.C. Smith, *Modern Islam in India: A Social Analysis* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1964), 118.

5. For a discussion on this issue see Anwar Syed, *Pakistan: Islam, Politics and National Solidarity* (Lahore: Vanguard Books, 1984), 48-58; Hafeez Malik, ed., *Iqbal: Poet-Philosopher of Pakistan* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1971), 108-59.

and the followers of other faiths. Articulating the same point in his lectures delivered in post-1908 period, Iqbal maintained that the Muslim concept of nationality was not linked with territory, language, race or economic interests but with Islam alone. Iqbal's changed message, based on denunciation of pantheism as a negative philosophy, presented his views on the individual and collective *khudi* in the light of Islamic teachings. *Khudi* for Iqbal meant self-reliance, self-confidence and self-realization. This *khudi* in turn becomes instrumental in developing and giving the realization of all physical and spiritual powers to man. Iqbal seems to be stressing that Muslims should wake up and try to relocate their lost personality. He said:

*Tu apni khudi ko kho chuka hai
Khoi hui shay ki justaju kar.*⁶

Khudi in man, he believed, is the mysteries of the Supreme Self made manifest. It is the same selfhood, developed and fully realized, that leads the freedom movements in all parts of the world. The question of Self is very complex. In simple words, it could, however, be said that *khudi* means to know one's self. A careful study of this concept suggests that Iqbal's concept of *khudi* was not just an esoteric doctrine but enched in al-Qur'an. The explanation of this concept can be found in very explicit terms in two of Iqbal's poems *asrar-i khudi* (1915) and *Ramuz-i bekhudi* (1918). In one of his verses he says:

*Khudi ka sirre nihan la ilaha illallah
Khudi hay tegh-i fasan la ilaha illallah*⁷

It was through his philosophy of Ego that he advised the Muslims to overcome their inferiority complex both intellectually and politically. He strongly denounced their passive behaviour which destroyed man. In fact, al-Qur'an being his principal source, Iqbal he attempted to interpret afresh the teachings of Islam in its light. In *asrar-i khudi* he emphasized the dynamism of Islam and freely quoted al-Qur'an to prove it.

Iqbal lived during the period when Muslims were confronted with problems not only in India but throughout the world. Shackled to their historical achievements of the past, they had become mostly inert.

6. Muhammad Iqbal, *Kulliyat-i Iqbal* (Lahore: Ghulam Ali, 1972), 351.

7. Yusuf Salim Chishti, *Sharah Asrar-i Khudi* (Lahore: Ishrat Publishing House, n.d.), 155.

Iqbal, through his poetry tried to give them hope. He rejected negative thinking and reconstructed Islamic thought along the central theme of Islam. He emphasized creativity through activity which gives life its true meanings and laid stress on the development of individual and collective *khudi*. In *ramuz-i bekhudi* he presented an analysis of the relationship between the individual and the community. By community Iqbal meant the *millat-i Islamiyah* that in his view meant a religious community based on *shari'ah*. Therefore *millat* constituted by Islam, Iqbal believed, was not to be identified with any one particular country. It was this interpretation of the *millat* that made him strongly attack the racial or territorial nationalism in the West. In one of his addresses, he said that "I am opposed to European nationalism as it is understood in Europe ... because I see in it atheistic materialism which I look upon as greatest danger to humanity."⁸ Thus Iqbal condemned secular nationalism as "another god ... which lived on the moral decomposition of man."⁹ Iqbal's lectures and speeches, in the coming years, were "oriented around this core demand."¹⁰ Iqbal clearly rejected the idea of any social order that was subject to the territorial limitations or was nationalistic in its outlook. The realization that nationalism was against the spirit of Islam made Iqbal oppose the western concept of nationalism and tried to convince Muslims that it would not only shatter the foundations of the unity of *ummah* by promoting racial and tribal superiority.

That is why Iqbal objected the Indian leaders' attempt to evolve one single nation in India based on secular values. He considered all such ideas as destructive and full of ill-feelings for the Muslims of India. He stated: "Is it possible to retain Islam as an ethical ideal and to reject it as a polity in favour of national politics in which religious attitude is not permitted to play any part."¹¹

Besides denouncing the concept of Indian nationalism Iqbal started popularizing the Islamic concept. He said:

8. Sherwani, *Speeches, Writings and Statements of Iqbal*, 27-8.

9. Muhammad Ashraf Chaudhri, *The Muslim Ummah and Iqbal* (Islamabad:NIHCR, 1994), 139.

10. Sheila McDonough, *The Authority of the Past: A Study of Three Muslim Modernists* (Pennsylvania: American Academy of Religion, 1970), 17.

11. Sherwani, *Speeches, Writings and Statements of Iqbal*, 252.

It is not the unity of language or country or the identity of economic interests that constitutes the basic principles of our nationality ... We are members of the society founded by the Prophet of Islam. Islam abhors all material limitations ...¹²

The above denouncement of nationalism does not mean that Iqbal rejected the concept of nationalism outrightly. Nationalism in fact is not contrary or inconsistent with Islam in all cases. It clashes with Islam only when it becomes a political concept and starts pushing Islam as a private affair. Otherwise Iqbal accepted it as "a healthy factor in the growth of communities."¹³ He however justified territorial nationalism in the sense of patriotism. He points out that:

Nationalism in the sense of love of one's country and even readiness to die for its honor is a part of the faith of a Muslim. It comes into conflict with Islam when it begins to become the sole principle of national solidarity, demanding that Islam should recede in the background as a mere private opinion and ceases to be a living factor in the national life.¹⁴

It was for this reason that he did not support the Muslim-Hindu joint political struggle based on Indian nationalism. Muslims and Hindus, he believed, were two separate nations. These two different nations could not have the same aspirations and goals. Therefore he worked to make the Muslims a force to be reckoned with. Iqbal maintained that Islam constituted a *millat* which could not and should not be identified with one particular country. This *millat*, in his view was "in its essence ... non-temporal, non-spatial",¹⁵ possessing homogeneity. He said:

The political ideal of Islam consists in the creation of a people born of a free fusion of all races and nationalities. Nationality with Islam, is not the highest limit of political development, for the general principles of the law of Islam rests on human nature, not on the peculiarities of particular

12. Vahid, *Thoughts and Reflections of Iqbal*, (Lahore: Muhammad Ashraf, 1964), 376.

13. *Ibid.*, 257.

14. *Ibid.*, 256-90.

15. *Ibid.*, 173.

people. The inner cohesion of such a nation could consist not in ethnic or geographical, not in the unity of language or social tradition but in the unity of the religious and political ideal; or in the psychological fact of 'like-mindedness'.¹⁶

Iqbal laid much emphasis on this like-mindedness and considered it as a condition for the fulfillment of this ideal. It was the lack of the same like-mindedness which, in his view, was the reason that made him doubt the efficacy of the ideal of common Indian nationhood. Soon after his return to India, in 1909, Iqbal refused to join an Amritsar based Hindu-Muslim-Sikh body. His reason was:

I have myself been of the opinion that religious differences should disappear from this country and even now act on this principle in my private life. But now I think that the preservation of their separate national entities is desirable for both the Hindus and Muslims. The vision of a common nationhood for India is a beautiful ideal and has a poetic appeal ... but appears incapable of fulfillment.¹⁷

Repeating the same ideas in 1927 he said:

... the talk of a united nationalism is futile and will perhaps remain so for a long time to come. The word has existed on the lips of the people of this country for the last fifty years, and like a hen it has crackled a great deal without laying a single egg in this country one community is always aiming at the destruction of the other. The present state of things is such that the communities do not trust each other, they have no faith in each other.¹⁸

Thus based on these thoughts, Iqbal advocated that the Indian Muslims were fully entitled to develop themselves on the lines of his own culture and tradition in India. In 1930, he was elected as President of the All-India Muslim League where he delivered an address, commonly known as the Allahabad address, in which he articulated the

16. *Ibid.*, 59-60.

17. *Ibid.*

18. Shamloo, *Speeches and Statements of Iqbal* (Lahore: n.p. 1948), 73.

prospects for a Muslim India within India. The address began with the words that

... I lead no party; I follow no leader. I have given the best of my life to a careful study of Islam, its law and its polity, its culture, its history and its literature. This constant contact with the spirit of Islam, as it unfolds itself in time, has, I think, given me a kind of insight into its significance as a world-fact. It is in the light of this insight, whatever its value, that while assuming that the Muslims of India are determined to remain true to the spirit of Islam, I propose, not to guide you in your decisions, but to attempt the humbler task of bringing clearly to your consciousness the main principles which, in my opinion, should determine the general character of these decisions.¹⁹

This is how Iqbal introduced the basis of his thought and understanding of the Muslim problem in India to his audience. Gradually he moved to the crux of the Muslim problem. Accepting Islam as "an ethical ideal plus a certain kind of polity," he declared it to be "the chief formative factor in the life-history of the Muslims of India." It is the,

basic emotions and loyalties [of Islam] which gradually unify scattered individuals and groups, and finally transform them into a well-defined people possessing a moral consciousness of their own ... India is perhaps the only country in the world where Islam, as a people-building force, has worked at its best. In India as elsewhere, the structure of Islam as a society is almost entirely due to the working of Islam as a culture inspired by a specific ethical ideal. What I mean to say is that Muslim society, with its remarkable homogeneity and inner unity, has grown to be what it is under the pressure of the laws and institutions associated with the culture of Islam.²⁰

The Muslim society based on the culture of Islam, he felt, was being threatened by the western ideas since it was:

19. Vahid, *Thoughts and Reflections of Iqbal*, 3.

20. *Ibid.*, 4.

Rapidly changing the outlook of the present generation of Muslims both in India and outside India. Our young men, inspired by these ideas, are anxious to see them as a living force in their own countries, without any critical appreciation of the facts which have determined their evolution in Europe.²¹

He warned the Muslims against the danger of treating Islam as private affair like the Christians understood their religion. If Muslims consider Islam as "other-worldliness", then what,

happened to Christianity in Europe is perfectly natural. The universal ethics of Jesus is displaced by national system of ethics and polity. The conclusion to which Europe is consequently driven is that religion is a private affair of the individual and has nothing to do with ... man's temporal life.²²

In Islam, he said, there is no such thing that divides human life into temporal and profane because "in Islam God and the universe, spirit and matter, church and state, are organic to each other."²³

Dealing with the political problems faced by Indian Muslims he highlighted Islam's role in national and political matters. Iqbal pointed out that united nationalism,

might have been a fact in India if the teachings of Kabir and the Divine Faith of Akbar had seized the imagination of the masses of this country. Experience, however, shows that the various caste units and religious units in India have shown no inclination to sink their respective individualities in a larger whole. Each group is intensely jealous of its collective existence.... The unity of Indian nation must be sought, not in the negation, but in the mutual harmony and co-operation of the many.²⁴

21. *Ibid.*

22. *Ibid.*, 4-5.

23. *Ibid.*, 5.

24. *Ibid.*, 7.

Iqbal suggested that instead of trying to achieve artificial national unity, then the better course would be to work for communal harmony and co-operation between the nations settled in India. He assured his audience that if the

Indian Muslim is entitled to free development on the lines of his own culture and tradition in his own Indian home-lands is recognized as the basis of a permanent communal settlement, he will be ready to stake his all for the freedom of India.²⁵

In an attempt to convince the non-Muslims that a Muslim true to his traditions and loyal to his communal interest does not mean that he is communal. In his view "a community which is inspired by feeling of ill-will towards other communities is low and ignoble." Giving his personal example, Iqbal maintained:

I entertain the highest respect for the customs, laws, religious and social institutions of other communities. Nay, it is my duty, according to the teachings of the Qur'an, even to defend their places of worship if need be. Yet I love the communal group which is source of my life and behaviour; and which has formed me what I am by giving me its religion, its literature, its thought, its culture, and thereby recreating its whole past, as a living operative factor, in my present consciousness ... So also without the fullest cultural autonomy, and communalism in its better aspect is culture, it will be difficult to create a harmonious nation.²⁶

Reaching the conclusion that "communalism, in its higher aspect, then, is indispensable to the reformation of a harmonious whole in a country like India", he pleaded that the "Muslim demand for the creation of a Muslim India within India is, therefore, perfectly justified."²⁷

I would like to see the Punjab, NWFP, Sind and Baluchistan amalgamated into a single state. Self-government within the British Empire, or without the British Empire, the formation of a consolidated

25. *Ibid.*, 8.

26. *Ibid.*, 9

27. *Ibid.*

North-West Indian Muslim state appears to me to be the final destiny of the Muslims at least of North-West India.²⁸

His proposal, Iqbal declared, need not "alarm the Hindus or the British." India being the "greatest Muslim country in the world" will be further strengthened because "possessing full opportunity of development within the body-politic of India, the North-West Indian Muslims will prove the best defenders of India against a foreign invasion."²⁹ Reassuring the Hindus that the proposed state will not be a religious state he said:

The character of a Muslim state can be judged from what the Times of India pointed out sometime ago in a leader on the Indian Banking Inquiry Committee. "In ancient India," the paper points out, "the state framed laws regulating the rates of interest; but in Muslim times, although Islam clearly forbids the realization of interest on money loaned, Indian Muslim states imposed no restrictions on such rates." I, therefore, demand the formation of a consolidated Muslim state in the best interests of India and Islam. For India it means security and peace resulting from the internal balance of power; for Islam an opportunity to rid itself of the stamp that Arabian imperialism was forced to give it, to mobilize its law, its education, its culture, and to bring them into closer contact with its own original spirit and with the spirit of modern times.³⁰

Pointing out the future lines of action, Iqbal stated that he would never "advise the Indian Muslims to agree to a system ... which ... fails to recognise them as a distinct political entity."³¹

Taking stock of the constitutional rights of the Muslims which the Muslim League leadership must safeguard them, Iqbal said:

The Muslims of India cannot agree to any constitutional changes which affect their majority

28. *Ibid.*, 10.

29. *Ibid.*

30. Wahid, *Thoughts and Reflections of Iqbal*, 173.

31. Sherwani, *Speeches, Writings and Statements of Iqbal*, 14.

rights, to be secured by separate electorates in the Punjab and Bengal, or fail to guarantee them 33 per cent representation in any Central Legislature. There were two pitfalls into which Muslim political leaders fell. The first was the repudiated Lucknow Pact which originated in a false view of Indian nationalism, and deprived the Muslims of India from chances of acquiring any political power in India. The second is the narrow-visioned sacrifice of Islamic solidarity in the interest of what may be called Punjab Ruralism resulting in a proposal which virtually reduces the Punjab Muslim League to condemn both the pact and the proposal.³²

In conclusion, Iqbal warned the Muslims that if their proposals as articulated in All-India Muslim Conference or at the Round Table Conference are not accepted by the non-Muslims then a question of very great and far-reaching importance will arise for the community.

In conclusion I cannot but impress upon you that the present crisis in the history of India demands complete organization and unity of will and purpose in the Muslim community, both in your own interest as a community, and in the interest of India as a whole ... I cannot conceal from you the feeling that in the near future our community may be called upon to adopt an independent line of action to cope with the present crisis. One lesson I have learnt from the history of Muslims. At critical moments in their history it is Islam that has saved Muslims and not vice versa³³

There is, however, much disagreement on the understanding of Iqbal's address in regard to whether he demanded a sovereign state for Muslims or a "Muslim India within India" Perhaps a true understanding of what Iqbal meant in 1930 would be easier in his own words. In October 1931, Edward Thompson published his letter in the *Times*, in which it had been stated:

I am not arguing against the establishment of Muslim 'communal provinces' in North-West

32. *Ibid.*, 19.

33. *Ibid.*, 25-6.

India. But what Sir Muhammad Iqbal demands is a confederation 'within or without' the Indian Federation. Look at the map and see what sort of defensible frontier would be left to the rest of India.³⁴

Iqbal's reply was that he did not

put forward a 'demand' for a Moslem state outside the British Empire, but only a guess at a possible outcome in the dim future of the mighty forces now shaping the destiny of the Indian sub-continent. No Indian Muslim with any pretense to sanity contemplates a Muslim State or series of States in North-West India outside the British Commonwealth of Nations as a plan of practical politics ... I am still for a re-distribution of India into provinces with effective majorities of one community or another on lines advocated both by the Nehru and the Simon Reports. Indeed my suggestion regarding Muslim provinces merely carries forward this idea. A series of contented and well-organized Muslim provinces on the North-West Frontier of India would be the bulwark of India and of the British Empire against the hungry generations of the Asiatic highlands.³⁵

In the late 1930's, alarmed by Nehru's Muslim-mass contact movement, Iqbal wrote letters to Jinnah with a bit changed bent of mind. In March 1937 Iqbal wrote to Jinnah:

It is absolutely necessary to tell the world both inside and outside India that the economic problem is not the only problem in the country. From the Muslim point of view the cultural problem is of much greater consequences to most Indian Muslims.³⁶

34. *The Times*, (London, England) October 3, 1931.

35. *Ibid.*, October 12, 1931.

36. Muhammad Iqbal, *Letters of Iqbal to Jinnah: A Collection of Iqbal's to the Quaid-i-Azam* (Lahore: Muhammad Ashraf, n.d.), 14.

In May Iqbal wrote to Jinnah that,

in order to make it possible for Muslim India to solve the problems, it is necessary to redistribute the country and to provide one or more Muslim states with absolute majorities.... Don't you think that the time for such a demand has already arrived?³⁷

A month later Iqbal wrote in June "Why should not the Muslims of North-West India and Bengal be considered a nation entitled to self-determination just as other nations in India and outside India are?"³⁸

Concluding the discussion of Iqbal's concept of Muslim nationalism, it is observed that Iqbal's logic of cultural nationalism was based on the practical necessity of first acquiring a Muslim state, which would then make it possible for Indian Muslims to proceed with their experiment of building a state in accordance with the principles of Islam.

37. *Ibid.*, 19.

38. *Ibid.*, 24.