**Reflecting on the Life of Iqbal: A Visionary behind Pakistan**

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As Pakistanis around the globe prepare to celebrate Pakistan’s Independence Day, I have been reflecting on the beginning of the story, and the life of Muhammad Iqbal, the key player who made this vision a reality.

Iqbal, the great poet and philosopher was indeed the visionary behind the Islamic republic of Pakistan; his life and works have shaped Muslim thought and living history, especially in the subcontinent.

Also fondly known as Allama (most learned), Iqbal was born in 1877 in Sialkot, now in modern day Pakistan. He was born at the crossroads of two worlds and not long after the official collapse of the Mughal Empire. He fondly remembered the past power and glory of Muslims in India. On the other side he witnessed their lowliness, lack of education and inability to adapt to modernisation and scientific advancement.

In his early life, Iqbal had Indian nationalist leanings, but after going to Europe to study law, his outlook changed from Indian nationalist to staunch believer in Muslim unity. This change happened on his travels to Europe to study law. The catalyst for the change was his close exposure to the western world; the powerbase of colonialism, which at the time was spreading like a cancer across the Muslim world.

After Iqbal’s return to India in 1911, his writing became more political, and he was driven to awaken his community and remind them of their great history which was dominated by faith, tolerance, open mindedness and an ability to adapt to change.

After Iqbal’s revolutionary address, the idea of a separate nation for Muslims in India took flight.

Having been brought up in a time where Muslim conquests and advancement in history were still celebrated and the loss of which was lamented, it was hard for Iqbal to digest the absence of self-expression and dignity of Muslims worldwide.

He tried to make sense of the world around him, the declining position of Muslims around the globe, and wanted desperately to find a solution. He would put his ideas and thoughts into the most beautiful Urdu and Persian poetry.

Although Iqbal died before India’s partition took place, his connection to this history is pivotal. He is known as the visionary behind Pakistan. This was because in Iqbal’s 1930 Presidential Address at the All-India Muslim League conference in Allahabad, he called for Muslims in India to have autonomy and self-governance. He believed this should include the Muslim majority provinces of Punjab, North West Frontier Province, Sindh and Baluchistan.

After Iqbal’s revolutionary address, the idea of a separate nation for Muslims in India took flight. It was eventually followed through by Muhammad Ali Jinnah, the first Governor General of Pakistan and the rest is history as we know it.

Whether Iqbal would have wanted Pakistan as it was carved out by the British is a separate contentious argument, nevertheless his works and actions are a very important part of this history.

As well as Iqbal’s frustration at the All-India National Congress’ dealings with Muslims in India, and excluding them from the freedom movement with Hindu idioms and references, he was equally frustrated at Muslims in India, and indeed around the world for the part they played in their own decline.

Iqbal’s poems repeatedly address themes of Islamic greatness from the past, and contrast that to the conditions of Muslims in his time. His classic poem, ‘Shikwa’ or ‘Complaint’ is a grievance to God about the conditions that Muslims have found themselves in. This was seen as controversial at the time. But soon after, he also released ‘Jawab-i-Shikwa’ or ‘Answer to the Complaint’ where God responds and blames Muslims for their own condition as they have lost sight of God’s message.

Iqbal was driven to revolutionise Muslim thought. Iqbal believed strongly that Muslims had to move with the times, and embrace modernisation but without forgetting their Islamic core. He believed that modernisation and Islam were totally compatible, and that change was essential to growth for individuals and the wider Muslim community.

Although he advocated for Muslims in India to have the right to self-expression; it did not take away from his belief in the unity of all human beings. Iqbal clearly had the foresight to realise that leaving Muslims as a minority in India would put them at risk in the future, and prevent them from practising their faith and culture freely.

I strongly believe that Iqbal’s vision of autonomy for Muslims was mainly for their protection and freedom. He did not, however, advocate for divisions along the lines of nationalism, ethnic groupings and tribalism as he saw this as a legacy of colonialism, and the root cause of problems in the world.

Iqbal’s philosophy and poetry were part of his message and gift to the world. He passed away in April 1938, but the legacy of his actions and thinking live on to this day; not least the nation state of Pakistan. Iqbal’s tomb contains a Persian inscription which perfectly sums up his core belief of unity and progression:

“We belong to the garden and descend from the same ancestors;

Distinctions of colour and race are forbidden to us;

We are the harvests of a new spring.”

*The writer is a historian and founder of “Golden Threads: A project exploring shared history, culture and art across the Islamic world and beyond”.*