

Iqbal's Message to Us

Riffat Hassan

Allama Iqbal's message which had filled millions of Muslims with revolutionary zeal and galvanized them into action, has been all-but-forgotten in Pakistan. How could this happen when so many Pakistanis love Iqbal's poetry which they often quote, and when both Iqbal's birthday and death anniversary are nationally commemorated?

Iqbal's message was a powerful source of inspiration when Pakistan came into existence in 1947, and in its early years. Every morning Radio Pakistan would broadcast Iqbal's prayer for children which left a permanent imprint on their minds. However, after some time, this prayer with which children began their day, ceased to be broadcast, and there are very few children today who are familiar with it.

It is particularly ironic that though Iqbal is loved by millions of Pakistanis for his poetry, his philosophy and vision are understood by a select few. In one of his most popular verses, he urges his readers to develop their "*khudi*" (Selfhood) to such a high degree that God would ask them what they wish their destiny to be. Though this verse is often quoted, how many people understand Iqbal's philosophy of "*khudi*" whose development is an arduous, ongoing process which involves great discipline, knowledge, wisdom, and commitment?

Why has Iqbal suffered such amazing neglect in the country where he is hailed as the "spiritual" founder? To answer this question, one has to understand the moral, intellectual, social and political degeneration that, unfortunately, has characterized most of Pakistan's history. Iqbal, the undaunted thinker who urged the oppressed masses to revolt against all forms of totalitarianism - religious, political, cultural, intellectual, economic or any other - was the vital force that was needed to free the Indian Muslims from their internal shackles and external bondage. But his words, his voice, his message, constituted a grave threat to those power-wielders in Pakistan who wanted to keep the people subservient, so that they would not challenge them or claim their own rights. To achieve this end they had to silence Iqbal's anti-authoritarian voice as much as possible. The relegation of Iqbal's vision and message to obscurity was, therefore, not by accident but by design.

It is important not to be misled by the lip-service paid to Iqbal by those who consider him a useful symbol that can be used to give legitimacy or worth to many things. What needs to be asked is whether this invocation of Iqbal's name, image or words translates into any activity that is designed to bring about a transformation of the self and society?

It is high time that Pakistanis realize what has happened to Iqbal in their state and society. They need to investigate why the writings of Iqbal - an invaluable resource - have been systematically excluded from the educational system and have been confined mostly to students in a few specialized disciplines. They need to reflect on why the vision and message of Iqbal have not been utilized for inculcating those qualities in the youth that would enable them to become exemplary leaders, or for the moral and intellectual development of Pakistan as a whole. They need to become aware of the grievous loss that they have suffered due to the obscuring of Iqbal's ideas and insights. They need to begin the process of reclaiming their precious legacy and restoring Iqbal to his rightful place in their thinking, in their lives, and in their community.

Only when Pakistanis have done justice to Iqbal by making the effort to understand his thought and what he struggled to achieve, and resolving to make his vision a reality, will they be able to find the direction they need to take to make Pakistan what it was intended to be.

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