

Iqbal and Socialism

Riffat Hassan

In recent years Iqbal's attitude to socialism has been the subject of growing interest. Iqbal was sympathetic to the Socialist movement because he regarded it "as a storm that sweeps away all the foul airs in the atmosphere." (J. Iqbal, Editor, *Stray Reflections*, p. 110). The reasons mainly responsible for his attitude have been summarized thus: "The '*lasses faire*' capitalism of the industrial West had pulverized humanity into hostile national groups, and within every nation too there were class wars because the classes of haves and have-nots were at loggerheads... (Iqbal's) own country was pre-dominantly an agricultural country where no industrial proletariat had developed but the conflict of the landlord and the tenant was becoming an acute socio-economic problem. The usurious money-lender was even more callous than the landlord ... Iqbal would welcome a revolution in which the do-nothing absentee landlords, or the usurious money lender, is swept away." (K. A. Hakim, *Islam and Communism*, p.136).

The revolution Iqbal would have liked to see was not along the lines of Communistic Socialism with its ideal of absolute equality, representing "an unlimited extension of the ideal of the family to the State," and finding its expression in the maxim "from each according to his capacity to each according to his needs." It was more along the lines of the Socialism which has as its ideal "not a mechanical equality of all over less of society but rather a potential equality in the sense of the maxim of Saint-Simon's followers, 'from each according to his capacity to each according to his merit,' which has as its fundamental tenet not common ownership, but the elimination of all unearned increment." (E. R. A. Seligman and A. S. Johnson, Editors, *The Encyclopaedia of Social Sciences*, Volume VIII, Macmillan Company, 1957, p. 189).

Dislike for Injustice

Iqbal's sympathy for Socialism flowed out his passionate dislike for injustice and despotism. Economic injustice had starved and depraved the body and religious despotism had shackled the spirit. He was one with Lenin when the latter protested against Western civilization in the presence of God:

What they call commerce is a game of dice:
For one, profit, for millions swooping death.
There science, philosophy, scholarship; government
Preach man's equality and drink man's blood,
Naked debauch, and want and unemployment –
Are these mean triumphs of the Frankish Arts!

(*Bal-e-Jibril*, p. 146; translation by V. G. Kiernan, *Poems from Iqbal*, pp. 42-43)

Iqbal was also relieved to see the house of God purged of idols:

Unsearchably God's edicts move; who knows
What thoughts are stirring deep in the world-mind!
Those are appointed to pull down, who lately
Held it salvation to protect, the priests;
On godless Russia the command descends:
Smite all the Baals and Dagon of the Church!

(*Zarb-e-Kalim*, p. 143; translation by V. G. Kiernan, *Poems from Iqbal*, p. 72)

That Russia was godless, Iqbal knew. That she would remain godless he did not anticipate as is apparent from his letter to Sir Francis Younghusband, "the present negative state of Russian mind will not last indefinitely for no system of society can rest on an atheistic basis." ("Shamloo", Editor, *Speeches and Statements of Iqbal*, p. 167).

Iqbal attacked "Atheist Socialism" but never "Socialism" for to him, "Bolshevism plus God is almost identical with Islam." (*Speeches and Statements of Iqbal*, p. 167). In a letter to the Quaid-e-'Azam, he wrote: "If Hinduism accepts social democracy, it must necessarily cease to be Hinduism. For Islam the acceptance of social democracy in some suitable form is not a revolution but a return to the original purity of Islam." (M. A. Jinnah, Editor, *Letters of Iqbal to Jinnah*, p. 19). When Iqbal said that if he were a dictator of a Muslim State, he could first make it a Socialist State he was thinking in terms of the social democracy he mentioned in his aforementioned letter to the Quaid-e-'Azam.

It has often been said that Iqbal did not know what Socialism was. To be a "dialectic materialist" is to "regard nature as primary, to hold that matter is independently real, and that the mental develops out of the material and must

be explained in physical terms. This view has to be understood as negation of the Hegelian idealism. The reality of thought and other mental phenomena, is not denied, only their primary idealism and materialism are treated as being the only possible philosophical positions." (J. O. Urmsion and Jonathan Ree, Editors, *The Concise Encyclopaedia of Western Philosophy and Philosophers*, London, 1960, p. 117). If by socialism is meant "dialectic materialism" which is largely based on the writing of Engels and Lenin and is the official philosophy of the Communist world, then it is probable that Iqbal did not investigate its philosophical basis. But to say that Iqbal assumed "in this part of his thinking, that there is a dichotomy of matter and spirit" (W. C. Smith, *Modern Islam in India*, p. 113) is surely to misunderstand the words: "Socialism has only to do the body" (*Javid Nama*, p. 69) on which this judgment is based. To say that a human being has spiritual as well as physical needs is not necessarily to admit the duality of spirit and matter. Had Iqbal admitted such a duality, he could not logically have said that if religion were added to Socialism, it would almost be the same thing as Islam (symbolic of a human being's material and spiritual unity and development) for such a statement assumes an organic relationship between matter and spirit. Human life is, for Iqbal, an organic unity, but it has different aspects and he criticizes atheistic socialism precisely because it neglects the spiritual aspect of life.

It is admitted by most writers that Iqbal's writings are "throughout tinged socialistically." (*Modern Islam in India*, p. 113). At the same time it is held that Iqbal wrote socialistically without knowing what he was doing. It is possible for a poet to be of the Devil's party without knowing it (as has been said of Milton) but it is more than likely that Iqbal knew some kind of socialism. According to *The Encyclopaedia of the Social Sciences*, the six characteristics common to all socialistic ideologies throughout history are, "First, a condemnation of the existing political and social order as unjust; second: an advocacy of a new order consistent with moral values; third, a belief that this ideal is realizable; fourth: a conviction that the immorality of the established order is traceable not to a fixed world order or to the changing nature of man but to corrupt institutions; fifth: a programme of action leading to the ideal through a fundamental remoulding of human nature or of institutions or both; and sixth: a revolutionary will to carry out this programme." (Volume XIV, p. 188). All these characteristics are present in Iqbal's socio-political thought.

For Iqbal, original Islam had been a socialistic movement. To establish a social democracy was to return to the purity of Islam, for as one writer observes, "Islam is not only consistent with a moderate form of Socialism but its implementation as a set of socio-economic principles and regulations is dependent on the establishment of a socialistic society. Its success in the past was the result of its egalitarian trend and spirit which ensured to every new entrant in its fold, not only a greater amount of social dignity but also an assurance of economic justice." (M. Siddiqi, *Socialistic Trends in Islam, in Iqbal*, Volume I, No 1, 1952, p. 81).

"Iqbal and Socialism," in *The Pakistan Times*, Lahore, Pakistan, April 21, 1968