

Iqbal's Ancestry and Date of Birth

Riffat Hassan

Muhammad Iqbal's ancestors hailed from Kashmir. According to Iqbal¹ they came from Chaku Pargan Advan in Tehsil Kotgan. Long before 1857², they had left Kashmir and settled in Sialkot, near the river Chenab, an industrial town lying on the trade-route between Western Punjab and the Province of Jammu and Kashmir.

Iqbal's ancestors were Brahmins of "Sapru" sub-caste. Brahmins belonged to the highest caste of Hindus and were known for the subtlety of their intellect and fine aesthetic sensibility. Iqbal was proud of his Brahmin ancestry.

میر و مرزا بہ سیاست دل و دین باخته اند
جز برہمن پسرے محرم اسرار کجاست^۳
تنم گلے ز خیابان جنت کشمیر
دل از حریم حجاز و نوا ز شیراز است

(*Payam-e-Mashriq*, p. 214).³

مرا بنگر کہ در ہندوستان دیگر نمی بینی
برہمن زادہ رسز آشنائے روم و تبریز است^۵

Regarding his ancestor's sub-caste "Sapru," Iqbal himself throws light on the etymology of the word: "With the advent of Muslims in Kashmir, the Brahmins of Kashmir were, by virtue of their conservatism or for some other reasons, not favourably inclined towards the Muslim sciences and their language. The first group among them that devoted itself to a study of the Persian language etc., and after attaining proficiency therein won for itself the confidence and trust of Muslim rulers earned the title of 'Sapru.'"

"'Sapru' is ordinarily understood to mean a person who is the first to take a step towards learning...My father held that the epithet was used by the Brahmins of Kashmir to express their disapproval and contempt for 'those of their kinsmen who had instead of their ancient literature applied themselves to the pursuit of Islamic studies. Gradually the name acquired a permanent association and came to be regarded as a sub-caste. The late Diwan Tek Chand, once a Commissioner in the Punjab, was a great student of philosophy. In a meeting at Ambala he told me that the word 'Sapru' was derived from Shahpur., an ancient Iranian

King, and that the 'Saprus' were of Iranian origin who had migrated to Kashmir before the advent of Islam in Iran. They came, however, to be regarded as Brahmins because of their superior intellect and wisdom."⁶

One of Iqbal's ancestors was known as "Lol Haji" (Lover of Hajj)⁷ who performed many pilgrimages to Mecca on foot. He became a disciple of Baba Nasir-ud-Din who was an outstanding saint.⁸ One of the descendants of "Lol Haji" was a mystic Muhammad Akbar whose piety was held in esteem.⁹ In the third line of his succession was Sheikh Jamal Din. Either he, or his four sons namely, Abdur Rahman, Muhammad Ramzan, Muhammad Rafiq and Muhammad Abdullah, migrated to Sialkot at the end of the eighteenth or the beginning of the nineteenth century. Sheikh Nur Muhammad, who was the father of Iqbal, was the eleventh son of Sheikh Muhammad Rafiq.

Nur Muhammad had a small but successful clothing business in Sialkot. He had four daughters and two sons. Iqbal was the younger of the two sons. Sheikh Nur Muhammad had not received a regular education but he was by no means illiterate or mentally unsophisticated.¹⁰ He was a deeply religious man who lived his religion and added to his piety was a deep strain of mysticism. Iqbal learned a good deal from his father. To his last day he was to remember how one day his father said to him that while reading the Qur'an it was necessary for him to believe that the Book was meant especially for him and that Allah Himself conversed with him.¹¹ Perhaps it was the memory of his father's exhortation which inspired the lines:

ترے ضمیر پر جب تک نہ ہو نزول کتاب
گرہ کشا ہیں نہ رازی نہ صاحب کشاف

(*Bal-e-Jibreel*, p. 112)¹²

Iqbal has also referred to his forefather's predilection for mysticism. To his son Javid he wrote

جس گھر کا چراغ ہے تو
ہے اس کا مذاق عارفانہ

(*Zarb-e-Kaleem*, p. 86)¹³

A reference to it was made also by Akbar Allahabadi who wrote on the death of Iqbal's mother

حضرت اقبال میں جو خوبیاں پیدا ہوئیں
 قوم کی نظریں جو ان کے طرز کی شیدا ہوئیں!
 اس کی شاہد ہیں کہ ان کے والدین ابرار تھے
 با خدا تھے اہل دل تھے صاحب اسرار تھے¹⁴

No account, however brief, of Iqbal's family background, would be complete without a mention of his mother Imam Bibi, who belonged to a Kashmiri family in Sambaryal, District Sialkot. She was a wise and pious lady known for her kindness and spirit of self-sacrifice. To her memory Iqbal has dedicated one of the most beautiful and moving elegies in the language. His glowing tribute to her

تربیت سے تیری میں انجم کا ہم قسمت ہوا
 گھر مرے اجداد کا سرمایہٴ عزت ہوا
 دختر ہستی میں تھی زریں ورق تیری حیات
 تھی سراپا دین و دنیا کا سبق تیری حیات

(*Bang-e-Dara*, p. 256)¹⁶

has made immortal the image of a lady who passed her days in quiet anonymity amongst her dear ones.

Iqbal's devotion to his elder brother Sheikh Ata Muhammad (1859-1940) deserves to be mentioned. Sheikh Ata Muhammad looked upon Iqbal almost as a son and helped him in every way. Many incidents are known which point to the great love the two brothers had for each other. For his brother the poet prayed:

وہ میرا یوسف ثانی ، وہ شمع محفل عشق
 ہوئی ہے جس کی اخوت قرار جاں مجھ کو
 جلا کے جس کی محبت نے دفتر من و تو
 ہوائے عشق میں پالا ، کیا جواں مجھ کو
 ریاض دہر میں مانند گل رہے خنداں
 کہ ہے عزیز تر از جاں وہ جاں جاں مجھ کو

(*Bang-e-Dara*, p. 99)¹⁷

One thing stands clear even after a cursory glance at Iqbal's background. He was proud of his heritage because, in a sense, it had made him what he was - a man not very well-

off by worldly standards but well- aware of his spiritual wealth and his love for God. Perhaps it is possible to see in the quiet pride which Iqbal took in his lineage and legacy the reflection of a greater pride - the supreme pride in being human which the unfearing, audacious poet flung as a challenge before the Almighty.

متاع بے بہا ہے دزد و سوز آرزو مندی
مقام بندگی دے کر نہ لوں شان خداوندی

(*Bal-e-Jibreel*, p. 21)¹⁸

In the vast annals of history, it is hard to find a person who took more joy and pride in being human than the humble tailor's son who was born in a small Punjab town and whose birth was not even registered.

Date of Birth

Iqbal was born in Sialkot. Unfortunately, while there is complete agreement about the place of his birth, there is considerable disagreement about the date on which he was born. Most often the date is given as 1873¹⁹, or more specifically as 22nd February 1873.²¹ The main reason for regarding this year and date as Iqbal's date of birth is that in the municipal records there is an entry relating to the birth of a son born to Sheikh Nur Muhammad. One research scholar²² has been able to collect the evidence of members of Iqbal's family and affirms that the record is authentic but that the son referred therein is not Iqbal but an elder brother who died in infancy. Iqbal's own birth was not recorded but such an occurrence was by no mean an uncommon practice at that time.

Some writers have given Iqbal's year of birth as 1876.²³ When Iqbal submitted his Ph.D. thesis at Munich University in 1908, he attached a biographical note to it. In this note he wrote that his date of birth was the 3rd of Dhul Qa'd 1294 A.H. (1876 A.D.). 1876 was, therefore, accepted as the correct year of his birth. Professor Jan Marek²⁴ has, however, shown that the correct conversion of 3rd Dhul Qa'd 1294 to a date in the Christian era would be to November, 9, 1877 A.D. Faqir Sayyid Waheed-ud-Din²⁵ supports the idea of November 9 as being the date of Iqbal's birth by means of his personal contact with members of Iqbal's family. (For instance, he mentions that it was common belief in Iqbal's family that he was born on a Friday. Now from the years 1298 A.H. to 1296 A.H. only the 3rd of Dhul Qa'd of the year 1294 falls on a Friday.²⁶ It has also been pointed out²⁷ that if November, 9, 1877 is accepted as Iqbal's date of birth it would accord better with the different phases of his academic life at school, college and University than if it is assumed to be as early as 1873. Since the conversion of the Muslim era into the Christian era is a very complicated process involving complex mathematical calculations, Iqbal made an approximate rather

than an accurate conversion.²⁸ After the publication of the illuminating studies²⁹ devoted to the clarification of this point, it is now generally being accepted that November 9th, 1877 is the date of Iqbal's birth.

ENDNOTES

1. F. S. Waheeduddin, *Rozgar-e-Faqir*, Karachi, Volume I, 1950, p. 238.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 239.
3. My body comes from the paradise of Kashmir; my heart from the sanctuary of Hejaz; and my song from Shiraz.
4. Mir and Mirza have staked their heart and faith on politics.
It is just this son of a Brahmin who knows the secrets (of reality).
5. Look at me for in Hindustan you will not see another son of Brahmins familiar with the secrets Rum and Tabriz.
6. Iqbal's letter to Munshi Muhammad Din Fauq, editor of the *Kashmir*, Lahore, dated 16-1-1934, referred to by M. A. Qureshi, in "Aspects of Iqbal's Biography," in *Iqbal*, Vol. VII, July, 1948, No. I, Bazm-i-Iqbal, Lahore, pp. 65-66.
7. *Rozgar-e-Faqir*, Vol. II, p. 114.
8. M. D. Fauq, *Tawarikh-e-Aqwam-e-Kashmir*, Vol. II, pp. 219-323.
9. "Aspects of Iqbal's Biography," p. 69.
10. *Rozgar-e-Faqir*, Vol. I, p. 240.
11. Mentioned by A. S. Nadvi, , *Iqbal-e-Kamil*, 1948, Azamgarh, p. 4.
12. Unless the Book (the Qur'an) is revealed to your conscience,
the knots cannot be untied by Razi or the author of the *Kashshaf* (Mahmud Zamakhshari).
13. The House of which you are the light,
has a taste for mysticism.

14. The qualities which were born in Iqbal which endeared his name to the nation. bear witness to the fact that his parents were pious, godly and charitable and understood the secrets (of reality). Quoted in "Aspects of Iqbal's Biography," p. 70.
15. *Rozgar-i-Faqir*, Vol. II, pp. 133-146.
16. Because of your guidance my destiny became luminous as a star, the House of my forefathers became a storehouse of honour. In the Book of life your life was a golden page; it was a lesson in the ways of religion and the world.
17. That second Yusuf to me - the light of love's assembly- whose brotherhood is the comfort of my life, whose affection obliterated the differences of you and I, and reared me in an atmosphere of love, May he be as happy as a rose in the garden of this world, For he - life of my life - is dearer to me than life.
18. Priceless treasure is the agony and burning of desire - I would not exchange my humanity for the glory of Godhead.
19. *Hayat-e-Iqbal*, published by Taj Co, Ltd., Lahore, p. 10; A. M. Schimmel, "Muhammad Iqbal (1873-1938)," *Welt des Islam*, No. III, 1954, p. 145; A.A. Bilgrami, *Glimpses of Iqbal's Mind and Thought*, Orientalia, Lahore, 54; N. B. Roy, "The Background of Iqbal's Poetry," *The Visva-Bharati Quarterly*, Volume XX, 1955, p. 321
20. For instance, A.M. Salik, *Zikr-e-Iqbal*, Bazm-i-Iqbal, p. 10, 1955, A. Bausani, *It Poema Geleste*, Rome, 1952, p. 9, A. S. Nuruddin, *Islam Tassawaf and Iqbal*, Iqbal Academy Karachi, Volume XX, 1959, p. 187.
21. For instance, M. Anwar Beg, "*Poet of the East*," Shaikh Muhammad Ashraf, Lahore, 1961, p. 4.
22. *Rozgar-e-Faqir*, Vol. I, pp. 239-237.
23. For instance, W. C. Smith, *Modern Islam in India*, London, 1946, p. 1010, G. Taffarel, "Notizie Biografiche Su Mohammad Iqbal," *Oriente Moderno*, Rome, Volume XVII, 1938, pp. 322 - 323/ 122 -123; *Oxford History of India*, 3rd Edition,

1961, p. 805

24. Jan Marek, "The Date of Muhammad Iqbal's Birth," *Archiv Orientalni*, 26 Praha, 1958, pp. 617-620
25. *Rozgar-e-Faqir*, Vol. I, pp. 229-237.
26. *Ibid.*, p. 232.
27. A. M. Schimmel, *Gabriel's Wing*, Leiden, 1963, p. 35.
28. S. A. Vahid, "Date of Iqbal's Birth," *Iqbal Review*, Oct. 1964, pp. 21-32.
29. In particular, the writings of F. S. Waheed-ud-Din, J. Marek, and S. A. Vahid

"Iqbal's Ancestry and Date of Birth," in <i>The Pakistan Review</i> , Lahore, Pakistan, Volume XVII, No. 4, April 1970, pp. 4-6,12
--