

# Iqbal's Socialism and Controversy

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Many students of Iqbal have been totally bewildered by Dr. Javid Iqbal's long article entitled, "Iqbal - A Theistic Socialist" which appeared on the 9th, 10th, and 11th of June, 1973, in the columns of *The Pakistan Times*, not only because this article distorts Iqbal's philosophy and personality but also because from the offspring of the great thinker one expected better understanding of the Issues involved.

In order to show that Iqbal was not a Socialist, Dr. Javid Iqbal sets out determinedly to explain, or rather to explain away, most of Iqbal's references to Socialism. Realizing that his philosophical position is almost untenable, Dr. Javid Iqbal seeks to confuse the issues by throwing in a lot of material which has little to do with Iqbal's viewpoint regarding Socialism. Without wishing to enter into the controversy between Dr. Javid Iqbal and "Zeno," one would like to try to clarify Iqbal's position, not for the sake of the intellectual elite who tend to read their personal meanings into other people's thoughts but for the lay-person who has no time for sophistry but who wishes to understand simple facts simply stated.

## Sympathetic

Undoubtedly Iqbal was sympathetic to the Socialist movement, mainly because he regarded it "as a storm that sweeps away all the foul airs in the atmosphere." (*Stray Reflections*, p. 110) K. A. Hakim, himself a distinguished philosopher, thus summarizes the reason responsible for Iqbal's attitude: "The '*laissez faire*' capitalism of the industrial West had pulverized humanity into hostile national groups, and within every nation too there was class-war because the classes of haves and have-nots were at loggerheads. His (Iqbal's) own country was predominantly 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." (*Iqbal 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 members 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.” (*The Encyclopedia of Social Sciences*, edited by Seligman and Johnson, Volume XIII-XIV, p. 189))

Iqbal’s sympathy for Socialism flowed out of 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*, p.p. 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 Bal and Dagon of the Church!

(*Zarb-e-Kalim*, p. 143; *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.” (*Speeches and Statements of Iqbal*, p. 167).

Iqbal attacked “Atheistic 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.” (*Letters of Iqbal to Jinnah*, p. 19). When Iqbal said that if he were a dictator of a Muslim state, he would first make it a socialist state (M. D. Taseer has quoted Iqbal in *Introduction to Aspects of Iqbal*, cited by W. C. Smith in *Modern Islam in India*, p. 11) he was thinking in terms of the social democracy, he mentioned in his afore-quoted letter to Jinnah.

Following W.C. Smith, in recent years many people have said that Iqbal did not know what Socialism was. One variety of Socialism is “Dialectical Materialism” and 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 are treated as being the only possible philosophical positions.” (*The Concise Encyclopaedia of Western Philosophy and Philosophers*, p.117) If by Socialism is meant only Dialectical 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, as W.C. Smith does, that Iqbal assumed “in this part of his thinking that there is a dichotomy of matter and spirit” (*Modern Islam in India*, p. 113) is surely to misunderstand the words, “Communism has nothing to do save with 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 philosophically. 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.

W.C. Smith and his followers admit that Iqbal’s writings are “throughout tinged socialistically.” 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 if Iqbal wrote socialistically, then he must have known some kind of Socialism. According to the *The Encyclopaedia of Social Sciences*, Volume XIV, p. 188), 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.

All these six characteristics are present in Iqbal's socio-political thought.

From the fact that Iqbal did not understand the complex nuances of twentieth century dialectical materialism (he might have come to understand them had he lived longer) it may not be inferred that he knew nothing at all about Socialism. Socialism is a very wide concept, it is not "a concomitant of modern industrialism nor is it, as Nietzsche and some of his reactionary followers contend, simply the resentment of the hungry and the oppressed, a kind of slave uprising against the natural privileges of the superman. There has been a remarkable continuity in the socialist movement, which is derived from a deep common stock of ideas and emotions. It is not bound to any form of social or economic organization, but arises everywhere and at all times when this common inheritance of human nature is offended." (*The Encyclopedia of Social Sciences*, Volume XIV, p. 209)

### **Socialist Movement**

For Iqbal, original Islam had been a socialistic movement. To establish a social democracy was to return to the purity of Islam, for as M. Siddiqi 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 a result of its equalitarian 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." ("Socialistic trends in Islam," in *Iqbal*, July 1952, p. 81)

According to Dr. Javid Iqbal, all that Iqbal believed in could be circumscribed within, and denoted by, the term "Islam" and so there is no need for a term such as "Socialism" which serves only to confuse the lay-person and is liable to be exploited. But Dr. Javid Iqbal forgets that "Islam" is a very wide term and that occasionally it is necessary to use other terms in conjunction with it to elucidate ideas and points-of-view. Words can always be misinterpreted and misused but for that reason one does not give up their use altogether. When Iqbal himself did not hesitate to use the term "Islamic Socialism" one wonders why some of his commentators should be so allergic to it.

"Iqbal's Socialism and Controversy," in *The Pakistan Times*, Lahore, Pakistan, July 6, 1973