

Iqbal's Ancestry and Background

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My body comes from the Paradise of Kashmir,
my heart from the sanctuary of Hejaz and my song from Shiraz

(*Payam-e-Mashriq*, p. 214).

Muhammad Iqbal's ancestors hailed from Kashmir. According to Iqbal they came from Chaku Pargan Advan in Tehsil Kotgan. Long before 1857, they had left Kashmir and settled near the river Chenab, in Sialkot, 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:

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).
Look at me for in Hindustan you will not see another son of Brahmins familiar
with the secrets Rum and Tabriz.

(*Zabur-e- 'Ajam*, p. 17).

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 favorably 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." (Iqbal's letter to Munshi Muhammad Din Fauq. See *Iqbal*, Vol. VIII, No. 1., July, 1958, pp. 55-56.)

One of Iqbal's ancestors was known as "Lol Haji" (Lover of Hajj) who performed many pilgrimages to Mecca on foot. He became a disciple of Baba Nasir-ud-Din who was an outstanding saint. One of the descendants of Lol Haji was a mystic Muhammad Akbar whose piety was held in esteem. 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. 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 conversed with him personally. Perhaps it was the memory of his father's exhortation which inspired the lines:

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).

(*Bal-e-Jibreel*, p. 112)

Referring to his forefather's predilection for mysticism., Iqbal wrote to his son Javid: "The House of which you are the light, has a taste for mysticism." (*Zarb-e-Kaleem*, p. 86). A reference to this was made also by Akbar Allahabadi who wrote on the death of Iqbal's mother:

The qualities that became apparent in the venerated Iqbal,
which to the nation's vision his ways endeared,
bear witness to the fact that his parents were pious,
godly and kindly, and understood the secrets (of reality).

(Quoted by M. A. Quraishi, "Aspects of Iqbal's
Biography," *Iqbal*, 1958, Volume 111, Number 1, p. 70)

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 wise and pious, and 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 has made immortal the image of a mother who passed her days in quiet anonymity amongst her dear ones:

Because of your guidance my destiny became luminous as a star,
the House of my forefathers became a storehouse of honor.
In the Book of life your life was a golden page
which embodied the essence of true faith and earthly wisdom.

(Bang-e-Dara, p. 259)

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:

That second Yusuf to me - the light of love's assembly-
whose brotherhood is the comfort of my life,
whose love burnt away the distinction of I and you,
and reared me in an atmosphere of grace,
May he remain happy as a rose in the garden of this world,
for he - life of my life - is dearer to me than life.

(Bang-e-Dara, p. 99)

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 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 valued more than the highest station:

Priceless treasure is the agony and burning of desire -
I would not exchange my humanity for the glory of Godhead.

(Bal-e-Jibreel, p. 21)

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

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