



**Title** *Musings of Sir Mohammad Iqbal on the Place of Muslims in late Colonial India: Letters to Edward John Thompson, 1933-1934*

**Description** Professor Humayun Ansari (RHUL) - 'Musings of Sir Mohammad Iqbal on the Place of Muslims in late Colonial India: Letters to Edward John Thompson, 1933-1934'

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**Contributor** Thank you very much for such inspiring reminiscences. I'm going to be a lot more prosaic.

I think it's important for me to say that, really through moving from one such highly acclaimed literature from India to another one, arguably the greatest Urdu poet of the 20th Century.

I'm going to be looking at him [[as Iqbal 0:00:29]], through a set of letters, nine letters that he wrote to Edward John Thompson. Before we look at Iqbal's letters, nine in all, to Thompson, I think it would be useful, briefly, to have some sense of who these correspondents were.

Edward John Thompson, father of E. P. Thompson, the illustrious author of 'The Making of the English Working Class', went to India as a teacher of English literature at Bankura Wesleyan college in Bengal, in 1910 and stayed there until 1923.

He met the great Bengali poet, Rabindranath Tagore, learnt Bengali and returned to England. He was appointed lecturer in Bengali at the University of Oxford, and as a research fellow of the Indian history at Oriel college from 1936 to 1940.

Thereafter, he devoted the rest of his life to writing novels, poetry and histories of Indo-British relations. Thompson described himself as, and I quote him, "A liberal conservative with a touch of socialism," make of it what you will.

He followed Indian politics closely, in the latter part of his life his visits to India, twice as Guardian correspondent, brought him into intimate contact with Gandhi and Nehru. Both of whom he held in high regard, perhaps less so, Jinnah, the so-called founder of Pakistan. Partly because of his own prejudices and politics.

He desired Indian unity, doubted Muslim solidarity, thought two nations a terrible solution, and considered Pakistan strategically and ethically impossible. Nevertheless, Iqbal he regarded as a friend, and as a central leader of Indian Muslims.

What about Iqbal? Sir Mohammad Iqbal, arguably one of the great Indian Muslim philosophers and poets of all time, came from a Punjabi Kashmiri background with Hindu Brahmin ancestry. T. W. Arnold, a scholar of India, while in India, stimulated his interest in Western philosophy, which he read at Trinity College, Cambridge.

He was called to the bar at Lincolns Inn, and obtained his doctorate from the University of Munich before returning to India in 1910, deeply influenced by Hegelian, Bergsonian and Nietzschean ideas of the boundless evolution of humanity.

These are captured, 'Bal-e-Jibril', thus, and I've put it up there, [[?? 0:03:37]]. And so, really, what we are talking about that evolution that he had been thinking about for some time. And an ending sort of kind of expansive universe, cosmos that was going to go on for a long time.

While he practised as a barrister, to earn a living, it was through his concern for the global plight of Muslims, and his elaboration of strategies for Muslim regeneration, that he had a lasting impact on South Asian Muslim minds.

In order to pull Muslims out of their moral and social lethargy and political decline, he propounded ideas that infused Islamic rationalism with those strands in Western philosophy which affirmed and revitalised individual and collective activism.

His intellectual calibre was recognised through the conferment of a Knighthood in 1923 and from the 1920's, his engagement with Indian politics, both in terms of ideas and practical activity, grew rapidly.

He was elected member of the Punjab legislative assembly in 1926, a seat which he occupied until 1930. At the Allahabad session in 1930, as president of the All India Muslim League, he expounded the concept of two nations in India, one Muslim, the other Hindu.

His politics was underpinned by his evolving philosophy, which he elaborated in his poems and, more systematically, in his speeches and lectures.

When it comes to assessing Iqbal's work, what is clear is that it is not amenable to any rigid encapsulation. He has been popularly hailed as, quote "The Herald of Pakistan", its spiritual father. Others have rejected this claim, and presented him as a champion of Hindu-Muslim solidarity and a "Unique symbol of India's composite culture".

Still, others view Iqbal as a quote, "Karl Marx of the East". An Islamic socialist, and a philosopher of egalitarian universalism. Are these Iqbals mutually exclusive and contradictory, or can we identify an underlying, coherent dynamic in his evolution?

The breadth of his thought, seemingly inconsistent, has, nevertheless, enabled him to appeal to a spectrum which stretches from Muslim modernists such as Jinnah at one end, to fundamentalists such as Molana Maududi at the other.

So, what do these letters tell us? Well, they certainly offer a snapshot of the breadth of his intellectual creativity, and the complexity of his political thought. For instance, in his references to the French scholar, Louis Massignon's biography of Mansur al-Hallaj.

Now, he was a 10th century Sufi who was persecuted and hanged for claiming, "Ana al-Haqq", "I am the truth, I am God.". And to Nicholson's translation of Rumi's [[ 'Mathnawi' 0:07:03 ]], a poetic form in Persian. We have glimpses to his deep engagement with imenentist as opposed to transcendental Sufism, the mystical, spiritual dimension of Islam.

The immense tribute that he pays Rumi in the following verse, reflects his own philosophical inclinations. "He's not a prophet, yet God has granted him a [[?? 0:07:35]]." But, it is in his engagement with political ideals that these letters offer the most interesting insights.

In order to understand the issues on which Iqbal touches on his letters to Thompson, it's important to get some sense of the changing political context in India, and the British government's engagement with it. The Simon Commission, and the Motilal Nehru report in the late 1920's had made a number of constitutional recommendations.

Intense discussions had taken place at the three roundtable conferences in London at the beginning of the 1930's, and a new constitution was about to be promulgated. Iqbal had energetically

presented the Muslim face. From these letters, we obtain an idea of his reasoning with regards to the political positions that he held at this juncture.

More specifically, they offer glimpses of his positions, which he elaborated elsewhere with regards to the relationship between religion and politics, democracy and the idea of Pakistan. Here is what Iqbal says in his letter of 20th June, 1933, with regards to religion, politics and nationalism.

“I’m not interested in politics as such, it was my interest in Islam as a moral polity that drove me to politics. I felt that Hindu nationalism would eventually lead to atheism. I further found that Muslims, on account of sheer ignorance of Islamic ideas, were being swept away before the forces of this so called ‘nationalism’.”

For Iqbal, not only was there an essential relationship between religion and politics, but religion was the foundation of politics. “Islam”, he asserts, “is a single, unanalysable reality. It encompasses politics. The basis of the Islamic state is of moral purpose, and politics has its roots in the spiritual life of man.”

Hence, for him, the separatism between church and state was a qualified one. The separation in an Islamic state is not based on a metaphysical dualism of spirit and matter, which, for him, does not exist in Islam, as it does in the West, but on the, I quote him, “...the performance of different kinds of functions.”

In the 5th February 1934 letter, he specifically refers to this matter in relation to Turkey. “I met a very interesting gentleman, here on representation of the new, Muslim republic in Chinese Turkestan. He gave me a very interesting account of the separation of church and state in Turkey, and the way in which the Osman Turks justified this step on the basis of the Quran.”

For Iqbal, the Turkish view was perfectly sound. As he understood it, and I quote him, “The structure of Islam permits the view that Turks have taken an accentuating separation of church and State. For this separation has meant separation of functions, not of ideas.”

For Iqbal, the idea of a universal caliphate, combining spiritual and temporal negations, had failed in practice, and, I quote him, “...cannot work as a living factor in the organisation of modern Islam.” In the abolition of the [ [?? 0:11:29] ], he says, “Islam has been at work through Atatürk.”

The totally secular state that Atatürk had established along Western lines was not a problem for Iqbal, since, “Muslim norms and values remain hegemonic in Turkish society.” “The truth is,” he declares, “That among the Muslim nations of today, Turkey alone has attained to self-consciousness. She alone has passed from the ideal to the real.”

The separation of religion from the government was only a problem when Muslims were a minority, and were, therefore, unable freely to pursue their chosen cultural and political aspirations. This, however was precisely the situation that Muslims faced in India. Iqbal saw the Indian National Congress as the paramount vehicle for Hindu nationalism.

Jawaharlal Nehru, a major leader of congress, himself agreed that it was, and I quote Nehru here, “...dominated by Hindus and had a Hinduised outlook.” The logic of its secular ideology, of Nehru’s, according to Iqbal, “...godless socialism”, would inevitably lead to the dissolution of Hinduism and produce atheism.

That is why he was concerned about Muslims being swept away before the forces of this so called ‘territorial nationalism’, and why he opposed pro-congress Muslim leaders such as, Maulana Abul Kalam Azad, sometime President of the Congress, and, Maulana Husain Ahmad Madani.

The second set of issues he raises in the letters to Thompson concerns the introduction of a democracy in India. He says “I’m not believer in democracy. The step towards democracy, fatal in my opinion, however, has already been taken. We must now prepare ourselves for the financial ruin, the political chaos and the dissolution of Hinduism which are likely to follow the introduction of democracy in this vast undisciplined and starving country.”

Now, on the face of it, Iqbal appeared to set his face against the concept of democracy. However, if you look at his speeches, articles and statements, the overall message was rather different. He did not seem to be opposed to democracy in absolute terms, nor did he object to it in principle.

On the contrary, he was rather partial to the roles of democracy. Individual freedom to choose, quality, and the repudiation of monarchy, despotism and imperialism. "Islam and the Quran", Iqbal claimed, "accepted the principle of the establishment of government through election by free will of individual citizens."

What he objected to was the manner in which this democracy was thought to be applied in India. This becomes clear from the detailed criticism that he made of the Simon report, the Motilal Nehru report and the various proposal on Indian self-determination, debated at the round table conferences at the beginning of the 1930's.

He argued that the introduction of a limited franchise, based on property and educational qualifications with our safeguards for the minorities would ensure the domination of the Hindu even in Muslim majority provinces.

The proposals for the abolition of separate electorates, and reservation of seats and weightage for Muslims in provinces in which they constituted a majority would deprive, and I quote him, "...the relatively poor and backward group of 80 million Muslims of the real benefits of democracy."

He added that Muslims sought such safeguards, not because they feared the democratic system, but because they wanted to, and I quote him again, "... to avoid the domination of one religious group in the guise of democracy."

A third issue that Iqbal raises in these letters was that of Muslim nationhood, and the idea of Pakistan. In the June 1933 letter, he asserted, "The Muslims of India are a distinct people, and must have an opportunity of free development and their own lives".

While, before his departure for Europe in 1905, there was much of Iqbal's writing that suggested commitment to India's composite culture, a desire for Hindu Muslim unity, and a further for achieving his freedom, after his return from Europe he became much more aware of his Muslim identity, the decline and powerlessness of Muslims as a community, particularly relative to Hindus.

In the last 20 years of his life, he gradually arrived at the conclusion that Muslims in India satisfied all the conditions required to be a nation, and a subjugated one at that. Since he no longer saw a promising future for Muslims through the idea of synthetic culture, or religious pluralism, he thought that if Muslims were to be free again, they had to become a politically self-built community, with their own centre of power.

In 1930, in his presidential address at the Allahabad session at the All India Muslim League, he gave his vision a concrete shape by suggesting the amalgamation of the three North Western Muslim majority provinces, but within an Indian dominion.

In the following October, while Iqbal was in England for the roundtable conference, Thompson, in a letter to the Times, accused him of "Pan-Islamic plotting", and of being the architect of the demand for Pakistan, an independent state on the Indian sub-continent.

Iqbal, in his riposte, delivered a few days later in the same newspaper, denied such a plan, and re-iterated his Allahabad suggestion. Curiously, four years later, Thompson, in his review of Iqbal's reconstruction of the religious thought of Islam, which had just been published by Oxford University press, again seemed to link Iqbal with the idea of Pakistan.

In the letter in March 1934, Iqbal wrote, "I've just read your review of my book. It is excellent and I'm grateful to you for the very kind things you've said of me. But you have made one mistake, which I hasten to point out as I consider it rather serious. You call me a protagonist of the scheme called Pakistan.

Now, Pakistan is not my scheme. The one I suggested in my address is the creation of a Muslim province, i.e. a province having an overwhelming Muslim population in the North-West of India. This new province will be, according to my scheme, a part of the proposed Indian federation.

Pakistan scheme proposes a separate dominion. This scheme originated in Cambridge, the authors of the scheme believe that other Muslim roundtablists have sacrificed the Muslim nation on the order of Hindu or the so –called ‘Indian nationalism’.”

And, again, in his July 1934 letter to Thompson, he insisted that, “The amalgamation of the three provinces in the North-West of India will be of infinite advantage to England, India and Islam.

This train of thought seems to suggest that, while in Iqbal’s view there were countless communities in India, what he wished to do was fashion an integrated whole, such that its unity may not be broken up by its inner diversity. At this stage, he was willing to reconcile the claims of Indian nationalism, provided the cultural identity of Muslims could be preserved.

However, we now know that in the rapidly changing circumstances of the late 1930’s, and, in particular, the concern caused by the behaviour of the congress following its success in the 1937 provincial elections, in the last two years of his life, Iqbal was, so the evidence in his correspondence with Jinnah suggests, gradually moving towards the idea of demanding the establishment of one or more sovereign Muslim states through the division of India.

Finally, what of the idea that Iqbal was a passionate protagonist of social justice and equality, a champion of the poor, the exploited and dispossessed masses?

In the last of these letters, written in July 1934, Iqbal recommended to Thompson his poem, ‘Lenin in the Presence of God’, one of a trilogy in his Urdu collection, ‘Bal-e-Jibril’ that was about to go to the press. Let us look, briefly, at what this poem, an imaginary monologue in which Lenin raises a number of profound issues.

What is this poem about? [ [?? 0:21:22] ]. Now, it’s a long poem, and what I’ve done is just taken a couple of acts, the relevant ones, and put them up there for you.

So, in one of those it says, “ A blaze of ardent science lights the West, with darkness that no fountain of light dispels, In high-reared grace, in glory and in grandeur, the towering Bank out-tops the cathedral roof;

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 men’s blood. Naked debauch, and want, and unemployment. Are these mean triumphs of the Frankish arts..”

And then, finally, “Omnipotent, righteous, Thou; but bitter the hours, Bitter the labourer’s chained hours in Thy world! When shall this galley of gold’s dominion founder? Thy world Thy day of wrath, Lord, stands and waits.”

After acknowledging the ultimate reality, Iqbal, through Lenin’s questioning, develops a provocative critique of the West. He saw Europe being in utter darkness, and its capitalist system ruthlessly exploitative of the East.

There is a great deal here that expresses concern for the suffering of the poor and his intense opposition to oppression of every kind. He railed against feudal excesses, vis-à-vis the peasants. The Russian revolution, in which he saw the possibilities of social justice for the masses, enthused him enormously, so much so that he embraced it in the following way.

“Bolshevism plus God is equal to Islam.” And, while he rejected Nehru’s model of socialism, and had reservations about materialism’s antipathy towards religion and its spiritual bareness, he also saw it as an effective weapon for the liquidation of, and I quote him, “...the theologian and the mystic who purposefully inveigle people with the object of exploiting their ignorance”.

So, Iqbal’s correspondence with Thompson tells us a great deal about his thinking at this point in his life, and the ways in which it changed over time. These letters, these traces illuminate the

ongoing rich and fruitful intellectual connections between Indians and Britons who were in some way, connected with Oxford.

Thank you.

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