

# I

## The Prophet of Selfhood: A Brief Biography

*Surood-e rafta baaz aayad ke naayad*  
*Naseem-e az Hijaaz aayad ke naayad*  
*Sar aamad roozgaar-e eeN faqeere*  
*Digar daana-e raaz aayad ke naayad*

The departed song may come, or it may not  
The gentle Hijaaz breeze may come, or it may not  
The days of this mendicant are at an end  
Another secret-sharer may come, or may not

Muhammad Iqbal was born on 9 November 1877 in Sialkot, Punjab. He came from a family of Kashmiri Brahmins who had been living in Punjab for over 100 years by the time of his birth. Even so, Iqbal would often refer to his Kashmiri lineage with pride. His father Sheikh Noor Muhammad

was a tailor by profession, but over time had studied Sufi texts to the point that he was regarded as a spiritual leader within his community. His mother Imaan Bibi was also an influential woman in the neighbourhood and played a big role in Iqbal's spiritual development.

### *Background*

The socio-political environment in Punjab at the time of Iqbal's birth was tense. The reverberations of the great famine of 1876–1878 were being felt across the subcontinent. At the same time, the Second Anglo-Afghan War of 1878 was about to commence, and the supply lines for the British troops ran across Punjab.

It had also only been a scant two decades since the 1857 War of Independence, following which the British Crown had dissolved the Mughal empire and formalized the administrative takeover of India from the East India Company through the Government of India Act of 1858. Indians continued to be persecuted for their 'treasonous' role in the rebellion, and the colonial powers had decided to deploy a strategy of 'divide and rule'.

In short, the rapacious colonial machine was intensifying the suffering of the people across the subcontinent, delegitimizing British rule in the eyes of common Indians.

However, the population was far too terrorized to consider any concerted mobilization against the British. The contours of an independence movement were taking shape but were riven by the contestations over the

projected roles of a variety of ethnic and religious groups in a sovereign nation. The debate would heat up considerably after the turn of the twentieth century, just as Iqbal was coming into his own as an intellectual and a political figure.

### *Early Education*

As a child, Iqbal began his education at a local madrasa. He exhibited a philosophical bent from an early age, developing a precocious fancy for Ibn-e Arabi, the Sufi scholar of the twelfth/thirteenth century CE, whose work he would eventually repudiate. At the age of fifteen, he transferred to Sialkot's Scotch Mission College, where he continued his study of Arabic and philosophy. He had already started writing poetry a while back with Daagh Dehlavi as his ideal. An early arranged marriage produced two children and soon ended in a separation, although the couple never divorced.

Iqbal received his BA from Government College, Lahore's premier institution of higher education. While his degree was in Arabic, he also took a large number of courses in English literature. It was while he was working towards an MA in Philosophy at Government College that he became friends with the renowned historian of South Asian Islam, Thomas W. Arnold. Arnold had previously taught at another great Muslim university of the time, the Muhammadan Anglo-Oriental College in Aligarh where, at the encouragement of his friend Syed Ahmed Khan, he had written a book titled *The Preaching of Islam*, which went on to

become a classic in the field. Arnold was also a friend of the famous Islamic historian Shibli Nomani and a teacher of the Islamic scholar Syed Sulaiman Nadvi. Arnold's influence played a significant role in Iqbal's decision to go to Europe in 1905, an event that would turn out to be momentous.

### *The Early Writer*

In 1899, Iqbal was appointed as a lecturer at Lahore's Oriental College, where he taught Arabic and English and began making tentative forays into the world of scholarly writing. His first publication *Nazarīa-e Tawhīd-e Mutlaq* (A Position on Divine Unity) was a translation of a famous book by the fourteenth-century Iraqi mystic and scholar Abdul Karim Jili. Jili himself had worked off the treatises on human perfection by the great Ibn-e Arabi, considered one of the pioneers of Sufi philosophy. Even at this early stage, Iqbal's work established him as a significant contributor to Sufi literature in the subcontinent. He was briefly recruited to produce textbooks for the Punjab Educational Department and one of his earliest books in Urdu was a treatise on economics titled *Ilm-ul Iqtisād* (The Knowledge of Economics), which burnished his reputation as a solid and versatile social scientist.

### *The Early Poet*

While at Lahore, Iqbal began to attend and participate in *mushairas* and soon gained a reputation as a competent

poet. He was a relatively good singer and was often asked to recite his verse in *tarannum* (a form of declamation where the poem is sung). His early poetry was influenced by the naturalism of the Romantic poets of England like Wordsworth and Coleridge as well as Urdu modernists like Hali, though his philosophical outlook remained beholden to Iranian Sufis like Bedil and German thinkers such as Nietzsche, Hegel and Goethe. He wrote poems about the Himalayas, the moon, the river and the morning star, celebrated Shakespeare and Ghalib and demonstrated a sensibility that transcended culture and geography with ease.

With the passage of time, Iqbal became increasingly interested in the political realities of the time and the emphasis of his poetry shifted as a consequence. In late 1904, he published a poem titled *Hamaara Desh* (Our Nation) in a journal called *Makhzan*. He would later publish it in his 1924 collection *Baang-e Dara* (Call of the Bell) under the title *Taraana e Hindi* (The Anthem of India). Beginning with the line *Saare jahaaN se achcha HindostaaN hamaara* (Of all the lands of the world, our India is the best), it quickly became popular and to this day remains India's unofficial national song. His 1902 poem *Bachche Ki Dua* (A Child's Prayer) also continues to be recited in many schools across India as well as Pakistan.

In this early period, often labelled his 'nationalist' phase, Iqbal also wrote many poems on non-Muslim religious figures such as Lord Rama (whom he referred to as the *imaam-e Hind*, the leader of India), Guru Nanak

(whom he extolled as a *mard-e kaamil*, a complete man) and Swami Ram Tirtha (whom he called the *Ibraheem-e ishq*, the Abraham of love).

### *The Trip Abroad*

Iqbal's mentor pushed him to consider going to England to pursue higher studies and in 1905, he finally scraped together enough money (thanks in large part to his older brother) to be able to turn that dream into a reality. The passage to England afforded him the opportunity to rub shoulders with people from across the world, ranging from Turks, Egyptians, Chinese and Yemenis to Europeans of different nationalities. His interactions with Muslims from various parts of the world instilled in him the conviction that despite the racial and cultural diversity of Muslims, they nevertheless had something deep and abiding in common.

Iqbal was able to enroll at Trinity College in Cambridge University upon Professor Arnold's recommendation, and immediately signed up for a variety of classes on philosophy. He pursued his course of study with almost maniacal zeal, eager to learn as much as possible, finishing his BA by mid-1907. He had already been working on the intersection between traditional Arabic textual Islam and Farsi-influenced Sufism, which he now wrote up as a dissertation. Upon Professor Arnold's advice, he had it translated into German and submitted it to the Ludwig-Maximilian University at Munich. Notwithstanding the fact that the original work wasn't in German, his scholarship

was impressive enough for him to be considered for a PhD by the university. He travelled to Heidelberg, where he learnt German well enough to defend his dissertation in November 1907. Concurrently, Iqbal enrolled at Lincoln's Inn at the court of London as a prelude to studying for the Bar. By the end of his third year in England, Iqbal had earned a degree from Cambridge and a doctorate from Munich, and had also passed the Bar in London.

### *Time to Return*

When Professor Arnold took a leave of absence, Iqbal was appointed in his place as a temporary lecturer of Arabic at the School of Oriental and African Studies in London, a position in which he took a lot of pride. He began composing poetry in Farsi in order to reach a wider audience. By now, he was also fluent in German. Even though his European sojourn had turned him into an internationalist in spirit, his homeland continued to beckon.

Iqbal's secular-nationalist sentiments first began to be challenged by news of a major British administrative action. Lord Curzon, the Viceroy of India, was planning to divide the huge Bengal Presidency into two administrative regions, which led, in the short term, to the establishment of separate electorates for Hindus and Muslims in 1909. The Hindu community, which would become a minority in the newly proposed borders of the presidency, reacted to this plan with anger. The national consensus on a multi-ethnic nation suffered a setback as Hindus and Muslims

began jockeying for colonial patronage, playing into the British strategy. At that time, Iqbal only heard of this development through the grapevine; he would come to terms with its consequences after his return to India.

In July 1908, just three years after his arrival in England, Iqbal returned home. He had absorbed a great deal of European knowledge and had engaged with Muslims from across the world. He was now as familiar with Nietzsche as he had been with Ibn-e Arabi, as much at ease with Wordsworth as with Hafez. His take on Western civilization was not uncritical, however; he perceived in its stubborn nationalism and cultural intransigence signs of its impending fall. In particular, he was critical of what he saw as its singular focus on materialism shorn of any spirituality. He thought that Islam offered the means to unite the Muslim community across the world despite differences of race and class.

It is tempting to see Iqbal's European sojourn as a point of inflection in his life with the 'pre-Europe Iqbal' representing a believer in territorial secular nationalism and the 'post-Europe Iqbal' embodying a champion of global Islam. However such a reading would be far too reductive. Iqbal had internationalist inclinations even when he was a tailor's son in Sialkot, and he continued to see himself as an Indian Muslim and a son of Punjab long after he had returned from Europe, even after he had been knighted. He had been exposed to international issues through his engagement with Sufi philosophers well before his travels and had composed articles in support



of home rule in India while he was in England. Iqbal's life was an odyssey of ceaseless learning and constantly evolving perspectives.

### *Settling Back in Lahore*

Upon his return to Lahore, Iqbal began to practise law, and edited a legal journal while teaching part-time at Government College. Soon, however, political matters, both at home and abroad, began to preoccupy him. The partition of Bengal had set in motion a process by which Indian Hindus and Muslims were further encouraged to think of themselves as separate nations with different rules, electorates and institutions of governance. On the international stage, the 'Great Game' between Russia and Western Europe was causing immense trauma in the Muslim world as a result of the bombardment of Iran, the Turco-Italian War and, subsequently, the first Balkan War, which weakened the Ottoman Empire considerably. All of these events were playing out within a short three-year period between 1911 and 1914. Iqbal returned to poetry with a vengeance. His long poem *Shikwa*, which he had written in 1909, had proven to be both popular and controversial. His response poem *Jawaab-e Shikwa* was unveiled in 1912 and quelled the controversy, establishing him as a spokesperson for the Muslims of the subcontinent, as well as their ambassador to the broader Muslim world.

The First World War was a bloody period in history. The idea of a global Muslim consciousness suffered a body

blow when after the war, the Turks who had sided with Germany suffered the vengeance of the Allies with the British administrative empire delivering the coup de grâce to the tottering Ottoman Caliphate.

By then, the Indian Nationalist Movement was in full swing. The Jalianwala Bagh massacre of 1919 had put Indian-British relations on the edge, especially in Iqbal's Punjab. Mahatma Gandhi had rattled the British with his first major non-cooperation movement, which had considerable Muslim support. Iqbal began to enter politics, advising the Muslims of Punjab on how to make an effective intervention in the independence movement as well as negotiate their future role in a post-colonial subcontinent. He was on friendly terms with both Nehru and Jinnah, and his word carried weight among Muslims and Hindus.

### *Knighthood and Political Forays*

In 1923, Iqbal was knighted by the British Crown. The translation of his Farsi book *Asraar-e Khudī* (Signs of the Self) into English by the noted orientalist R.A. Nicholson no doubt played an important role in his work coming into international consciousness. Knighthood did not blunt Iqbal's critique of British rule, as is evident from several poems he wrote in the 1920s decrying colonialism, capitalism and the empty materialism of the West. In 1926, he was elected to the Punjab Legislative Assembly, though the bitter election campaign did cause harm to his reputation as an unimpeachable role model for Muslims.

Ironically, he was excoriated by his political rivals in the most incommensurate of terms: as a communist, a Wahabi, a Hindu-appeaser and a 'grave-worshipper' (an epithet used to denounce Sufis). His policy of not responding to smears did not help clarify matters.

Iqbal had married Sardar Begum with whom he had two children, Javed Iqbal (1924–2015) and Muneera Bano (b. 1930). Javed Iqbal would go on to become a senior judge of the Supreme Court of Pakistan and develop an international reputation as a biographer of his father. Muneera Bano has chosen to live as a private citizen, rarely commenting on her relationship with a father who died when she was a child of eight.

During the late 1920s, as the independence of the subcontinent was becoming a real possibility, Hindu-Muslim tensions began to boil over. Iqbal and several other Muslim leaders were looked upon as intellectuals who could chart a way forward for Indian Muslims. Iqbal's outlook tended to favour inter-religious harmony and he reached out to the Muslim leadership with messages to that effect. He decided to present an idea of two coexisting nations to the British and chose to do so before the infamous Simon Commission of 1928, comprising a group of MPs from Britain who were designated to examine constitutional reforms in the colony. However, Indians were incensed at their exclusion from the commission and most leaders, including Gandhi and Jinnah, boycotted it.

Iqbal's decision to speak before the commission proved to be a major miscalculation, and he decided

to retreat from formal politics but not from political engagement per se.

### *Iqbal's Philosophical Maturation*

In 1929, Iqbal travelled across southern India, delivering a set of talks, which were published in 1930 as *Six Lectures on the Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*. These speeches are widely regarded as the most articulate expression of Iqbal's positions on matters that lay at the intersection of politics and spirituality. This was followed by his Presidential Address to the Muslim League in December 1930. Iqbal crafted his lectures in English, clearly seeking a wide international audience for his thoughts.

Many scholars have plumbed Iqbal's writings and ideas during this important period for meaning. Since this book is focused on his poetry, I will not dwell on them except to state that, like most of his work, it has been appropriated by many constituencies across the political spectrum: Indian as well as Pakistani nationalists, secularists and Islamists, modernists and traditionalists. For instance, while Muslim nationalists saw him as a spokesperson for the *ummah*, the secularists could take comfort from his explanation of the pre-occupation with the Muslim world in his poetry:

*'The object of my (poems) is not to attempt an advocacy of Islam. My real purpose is to look for a better social order and to present a universally acceptable ideal (of life and action) before the world, but it is impossible for me, in this effort to outlive this ideal, to ignore the*

*social system and values of Islam whose most important objective is to demolish all the artificial and pernicious distinctions of caste, creed, colour and economic status . . . . No doubt, I am intensely devoted to Islam, but I have selected the Islamic community as my starting point not because of any national or religious prejudice but because it is the most practicable line of approach'.<sup>4</sup>*

### *Trips Abroad*

Political relations between Hindus and Muslims began to sour in the 1930s. Bloody riots in Kanpur, Kashmir and other parts of India shook up the entire British administration. In response to the failure of the Simon Commission, the British government decided to hold a series of Round Table Conferences in England. Iqbal attended the second one held in London in 1931, which gave him an opportunity to observe the transformation that had taken place in Europe in the twenty-odd years since he had returned from his first sojourn. Many of the changes alarmed him profoundly. In particular, he noted the intransigence and hyper-materialism that would soon lead Europe into the Second World War. Iqbal also had the opportunity during this time to interact more meaningfully with a variety of public figures from the subcontinent such as Gandhi, Jinnah, Ambedkar and Sarojini Naidu. Naidu, a poet herself, was inspired by Iqbal, remarking, 'The poems of Iqbal have freed my soul from the narrow confines of nationalism and have enabled me to love the entire humanity.'

The Second Round Table Conference did not yield any consensus on the future contours of a free subcontinent. A third conference followed, which was even more inconsequential. Iqbal attended, but most of the subcontinental heavyweights chose to ignore it. During this visit, Iqbal made several side-trips, meeting philosophers like Henry-Louis Bergson and travelling to southern Spain. He made note of the splendid architectural monuments that harked back to an Islamic presence in Spain, and now marked its decline, which furthered his sense of introspection about a potential Muslim renaissance, which he thought could come through the development of a sense of selfhood (*khudi*), personal courage and a commitment to intellectual development. His exquisite poem on the Mosque of Cordoba embodies that sense of introspection and is widely regarded as one of his finest.

### *Illness and Death*

Iqbal began to withdraw from public life after his return from this European trip. Ill health dogged him throughout the 1930s while his financial woes were somewhat ameliorated by a pension granted to him by the Nawab of Bhopal. A family friend, Doris Landweer (later Doris Ahmed), served him as a housekeeper; she would write a memoir titled *Iqbal as I Knew Him*, which provides insight into the day-to-day existence of the poetic giant in the twilight of his life.

In his final years, Iqbal partnered with his friend Chaudhry Niaz Ali Khan, helping him establish the Dar-ul Islam Institute, which had the expressed mission of educational and social reform in the Muslim world. Belying the absurd opinion of some that he was a Wahabi, Iqbal developed a serious relationship with the Dargah of Shaikh Ali al Hujwiri in Lahore in his later years.

After a protracted illness, the Poet of the East died in his home in Lahore in the early hours of 18 April 1938. Over 70,000 people attended Iqbal's funeral in a spontaneous display of grief. Many of his friends had already reached Lahore, having been alerted to his imminent demise after his health had taken a turn for the worse. The mourners were so numerous that his funeral prayer had to be performed twice to accommodate all attendees.

The Allama (wise man) rests in a mausoleum constructed in the Mughal style in Hazuri Bagh, the garden between the Badshahi Mosque and the Lahore Fort. Choosing not to take British funding for his resting place, his admirers fundraised amongst themselves to build the edifice, which was finally completed in 1950. Its interior walls are decorated with many of Iqbal's Farsi poems. On his tombstone are inscribed these words:

*Na Afghaneem-o na Turk-o Tataareem*  
*Chaman zaadeem-o azyak shaakh saareem*  
*Tamzeez-e rang-o boo bar-ma haraam ast*  
*Lo ma parwar-da yak nau-bahaareem*

Neither Afghan nor Turk nor Tatars are we  
We are all fruit of the same garden and trees  
Separate us not by colour and fragrance  
For we all were raised by the same spring breeze.

### *Iqbal's Afterlife*

In Pakistan, Iqbal is considered the national poet and has been embraced as the ideological father of the nation. His birthday is celebrated as a national holiday. His name adorns streets, universities, schools, sports stadia and stamps. In 1950, the government of Punjab in Pakistan established the first Iqbal Academy. By 1953, it had morphed into an all-Pakistan institution.

In India, Iqbal has remained a respected national figure. Iqbal Academies exist in New Delhi and Hyderabad. His *Saare Jahaan se Achcha* is sung at most official functions and is the melody of the official quick march of the Indian Army. The Indian postal service has issued several Iqbal stamps, the latest in 1988.

The centenary of Iqbal's birth was officially celebrated on both sides of the subcontinental border, although India did so in 1973 (based on the year of birth mentioned in Iqbal's first standard biography), while Pakistan held its commemoration in 1977 (basing their date on the calculations made by the Ministry of Education). Many of Iqbal's unpublished writings were excavated and published posthumously. The field of scholarship on Iqbal remains



alive and vibrant, a waterfall of research that shows no signs of abating.

Born the son of a tailor in a small town in Punjab, Muhammad Iqbal became a world-renowned poet and philosopher during his lifetime for the powerful way in which he fought against oppression and injustice, roused the people of Afro-Asia against their colonial overlords and articulated a modern Muslim subjecthood. It is hardly surprising that his powerful influence continues to be felt today, particularly but not only within the Muslim world ‘from the banks of the Nile to the dust of Kashger’ and beyond. Indeed, he has remained true to his own advice to the youth of his time:

*Sabaq phir paDh sadaaqat ka, adaalat ka, shujaa'at ka*  
*Liya jaayega tujh se kaam duniya ki imaamat ka*

Learn then, the lessons of truth, justice and courage  
 For you will be asked to lead the world in this age