Khizr-i Rah: The Pre-Eminent Guide to Action in Muhammad Iqbal's Thought

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If Khizr were to break the ship in the sea
A hundred good reasons lie in Khidr’s deed.

Al-Khîdhr (variously pronounced as al-Khaḍīr, Khīzr, Hīzir or simply Khidr) is known as the immortal guide in the Islamicate tradition. He is the Muslim equivalent of Elijah, a prophet by some accounts and a mysterious “servant of God” by others. Although he has many names, al-Khîdhr itself means “the green one”, perhaps indicative of his characteristic of making things green, or to his regenerative qualities in general. The story of Khidr is embedded in the Qur’ān as God’s “servant” while his name appears in the tafsīr literature. According to many muḥaṣṣirūn, the mysterious person mentioned in Sūrah 18:65 (Khîdhr-Moses episode) is none other than Khîdhr. In Islamic history, many have made use of the symbolism that Khîdhr carries — in poetry and other Sufi writings as well as in the massive literature known as qīṣās al-anbiyyā’ (stories of prophets). Poets such as Rūmî and Hāfiz to Ghâlib and Iqbal all

1 I wish to acknowledge my gratitude to Professor Riaz Umar, former principal of Zakir Hussain College, University of Delhi, who over a decade ago, first encouraged me to pursue “Khîzr-i Rāh” and to attempt to discover the unique manner in which Iqbal looks at the person of Khidr.


3 Wheeler M. Thackston, The Tales of the Prophets of al-Kisā‘ (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1978). For a brief discussion of Khidr in Islam, see A.J. Wensinck, “Khadir”, in The Encyclopaedia of Islam, no. 29 (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1925) and Irfan A. Omar, “Khidr in the Islamic Tradition”, Muslim World, 83 (July-October 1993), 279-94; for Khidr in the Qur’ān and tafsir literature, see Hīfīz al-Rahmān, Qīṣās al-Qur‘ān (Delhi: Nadwat al-Muṣannīfīn, 1975) and various other tafsīr from both the classical and modern periods. For myths and legends surrounding Khidr, see Haim Schwarzbaum, Biblical and Extra-Biblical Legends in Islamic Folk Literature (Waldorf-
have invoked Khidr for the purpose of highlighting their respective visions through him. In Iqbal, however, Khidr occupies a rather nuanced role; a role that both conforms as well as distinguishes itself from that given to Khidr by many previous mystically-inclined poets. This essay explores the role of Khidr in Muhammad Iqbal’s thought.

Muhammad Iqbal (1877-1938), the poet-philosopher of the south Asian subcontinent, is famous for his bold, uplifting and inspiring poetry. Iqbal was a poet first, and remained that throughout his life, but he was also a thinker and a philosopher. The combination of the two gave him the charisma that captured the Muslim imagination. Iqbal was no doubt the most sought out Muslim figure of the twentieth century; both the religiously inclined as well as the literary minded drew inspiration from him. Through his poetry, which deeply reflected his philosophical thinking, Iqbal sought to awaken the Muslim mind to the growing indifference to eternal values in the name of rational thought and material prosperity. He had a deep reverence for spiritual traditions, in particular for Sufism, but the form of spirituality he advocated required activism rather than resignation from the world as such.

Iqbal’s philosophy of ‘action’ is rendered mostly in verse and in that he has effectively used the symbolism of Khidr to convey his message against stagnation and taqālid (unquestioned following of traditions) and in support of a regenerative, life-giving action. The preeminence of Khidr in Iqbal’s thought is nowhere more obvious than in his poem titled “Khidr-i Rāḥ” (The Guide), which is one of the last poems in the collection called Bāng-i Dārā (The Call of the Way); Iqbal’s first published collection of Urdu poems. Here Iqbal describes Khidr as an unseen but pre-eminent guide to a searching believer. In “Khidr-i Rāḥ” Iqbal explores a vision of life, which, although seemingly ravaged by the passing of time, in fact represents a dynamic nature of reality. Out of the ordinary movement of life evolves a “rhythm” reflective in the story of Khidr — unceasing and unhindered, where death is viewed as but a small wayside station in the ultimate journey. It is in the context of Khidr, then, that for Iqbal in the midst of “the devastating aspect of time” emerges another concept of time which can be described as a “ceaseless duration”.


From this perspective life is not measurable in serial time; it is rather seen as "overflowing, eternal and evergreen." 

This theme of eternity within, in spite of our bondage to, this serial time permeates Iqbal’s other poems as well. In Asrar-i Khudi (The Secrets of the Self), Payam-i Masbriq (Message from the East) and also in Nawā’-i Waqt (The Melody of Time), Iqbal consistently deals with the problem of time, destiny and the relationship between the Infinite and the finite where Khidr symbolism plays an important part in the equation.

Khidr appears in Iqbal in a variety of ways; sometimes in the context of “greening of the mountain tops” and sometimes referring to the foiled attempt of Alexander in finding the ‘fountain of Life’; in all instances a sense of an untiring wanderer echoes evenly:

Call these farmers the embodiment of Khidr of toil and labour;
As they turn the mountain rocks into green.

and,

Give up searching for the living water as God knows whither;  
O Alexander, Khidr has hidden it.

Like many other poets in history Iqbal used the imagery of Khidr to enhance his message of optimism in immortal terms. He depicts the figure of Khidr as a spiritual “guide”. Iqbal himself drew spiritual guidance from Khidr and expressed the possibilities of conventional wisdom in the guise of lyrical beauty. In the following verses from “Khizr-i Rāh”, Khidr relates the answers to Iqbal’s questions concerning the condition of the Muslim world:

What do you relate the story of the Turk and the Arab?  
The tragedy of the people of Islam is nothing of a secret to me.

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8 Ibid.
But to Iqbal the person of Khi4r represents more than just a guide (Khizr-i Râh); rather he sees him as an embodiment of the secret of immortality. In many ways Iqbal revises the logic of viewing Khidr's role by proclaiming him both an 'immortal guide' and a 'guide to immortality'. In the former sense, Khidr exists as part of a long tradition of attracting seekers to spiritual discipline where the latter draw upon him for spiritual guidance.

In the latter sense, the immortal status of this guide presupposes a state of immortality, which is the goal of all seekers. Thus while Khidr's immortality ensures his continued guidance forever, what draws one to immortality is the state of being called maqâm al-Khidr, where the epitomization of essential Khidran traits become a reality. This state of being is the state of "positive action". For in Iqbal, the virtue of "action" is life itself and so long as there is action, there is life. Again Iqbal, putting the words in the mouth of the Prophet Khidr, says:

\[\text{Constant circulation makes the cup of life more durable,}
\]
\[\text{O ignorant one! This is the very secret of life's immortality.}\]

This philosophy of action expressed in Khidrian terms is quite similar to the story of Gilgamesh. As the Epic of Gilgamesh, the Sumerian hero, poses the perennial question, that is of immortality, it very much seeks to highlight Gilgamesh's attempt to achieve "personal immortality, eternal youth, [and] lasting fame. . . [but] only to fail in every attempt." In the end, however, as the author of *The Sunlight Dialogues* puts it, Gilgamesh finds the answer to the question of immortality in the "ultimate act, the act which comes when the gods command it", an utterly impersonal act of death.

It seems that death is impossible to overcome and immortality is nothing but an illusion of the mind. And yet when all "illusions of personal immortality are stripped away, there is only the act to maintain the freedom to act." For in Iqbal also we find that the immortality of the human soul is seen not in the simplistic, dualistic opposition of the soul to the body, but

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rather in its (soul’s) interplay with the ego, which Iqbal called *khud*. Iqbal says, “the life of the ego is a kind of tension caused by the ego invading the environment and environment invading the ego”.

Thus, immortality is not simply being human and possessing a soul, rather it lies in an active interplay of the ego with the environment which in turn creates a constant tension between the two, contributing to the ever-enhancement and perfection of the ego drawing oneself away from the clutches of fatalism (*qismat*).

Ego in Iqbal is seen as a “unity of mental states”. It is a free personal causality that is primarily of the will, with the body being its instrument; this unity, moreover, is “absolutely unique.” Furthermore, the selfhood or self-affirmation is this ego’s worldly manifestation. Achieving this unity will allow the Divine will to “flow through the human soul, filling and transforming it, until one reaches conformity with one’s destined fate.”

To Iqbal, the development of the ego is the most important task that ultimately leads one to the highest form of self-affirmation, that of being an “individual” which is self-contained, unique and centred. Thus as Iqbal remembers McTaggart by saying, the “Universe is an association of individuals” and God Himself is an individual although He in his majesty represents the Perfect Individual, the Absolute Ego, the Center of all centers.

Iqbal, like Rumi, believed in personal immortality (of the soul) and that achieving this immortality required a strong determination on the part of each individual. In other words, it is by self-effort and strong will that one may attain it, just as we have seen in the example of Gilgamesh. Thus the imagery and symbolism of Khidr in Iqbal’s thought highlights the need for the ultimate effort (action) on the part of human beings. Iqbal says, “personal immortality, then, is not ours as of right; it is to be achieved by personal effort.” This personal effort is translated into the notion to act where an individual attains immortality by virtue of his/her will and an acquired power to act rather than by virtue of just being. In this sense, immortality is not a given thing; it is not just there, it is an “earned immortality.”

The German poet Goethe (1749–1832), one of Iqbal’s Western mentors, whom he read and

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18 Ibid.
admired, echoes a similar philosophy of action, "striving and willing and accomplishing."

He who toils forever striving;
Him can we redeem.²⁴

There is much here that resembles Iqbal's notion of khudi and his perception of Khidr as one who epitomizes, albeit symbolically, striving and action. It is not surprising that Iqbal is said to have had a meaningful engagement with Goethe despite the latter's likeness for Ḥāfiz whom Iqbal criticized.

Immortality implies some sense of continuity of what we call life. In Iqbal, this continuity is spelled out in terms of a continuous development of the ego. As the ego in this physical life aims at its perfection by use of the physical structure — that is our body — it actually aims to survive this structure itself, which is necessitated at the event of death. Beyond death the ego survives, if it does, in a different state of consciousness which, in the Islamic tradition, is known as 'ālam al-barzakh — a state between death and resurrection.²⁵ But the ultimate stage for the integration of the immortal ego is its attainment of eternity or, religiously speaking, heaven, which is the culmination of both life and love:

\[
\text{[If] the essence of life is love,} \\
\text{The essence of love is ego.}²⁶
\]

Even as the ego (khudi) contains the potential of perfection of the soul it seeks the guidance of those perfected egos that have, by their own striving as well as God's intervention, already had a glimpse of that elevated state of consciousness. Khidr, in Iqbal's view, symbolizes one such guiding Ego. Furthermore, as one whom God calls "one of Our servants" Khidr typifies the act-bound Ego, who is busy implementing divine will in human space.²⁷ Therefore, it is by virtue of his power to act that Khidr is immortal.

²⁵ Iqbal, The Reconstruction of Religious Thought, 120.
²⁶ Fayyaz Mahmood, "Iqbal's Attitude Towards God", in Raziuddin & others, Iqbal as a Thinker (Lahore: Sh. Muhammad Ashraf, 1973 [1944]), 277.
²⁷ As mentioned above, the Qur'an (18: 65) refers to Khidr, without naming him as such, as "one of Our servants, on whom We had bestowed Mercy from Ourselves and whom We had taught knowledge from Our own presence". English tr. Abdullah Yusuf Ali, The Meaning of the Holy Qur'an, New Edition (Brentwood, MD: Amana Corporation, 1992).
In the nurturing of *khudi* lies the secret of Godhead.\(^{28}\)

The concept of *khudi* (self or ego) characterizes Iqbal’s thought more than anything else. The essence of his message lies in understanding the “secrets of the self.” Iqbal, as evidenced from the above verse, disdained those who make no effort on their part to nurture their *khudi* and are simply waiting for another ‘messiah’ to appear, whether it is Khidr, Mahdi or Jesus. For Iqbal, the ego is both “single and manifold, both hidden and open.”\(^ {29}\) The ego is preserved as a separate entity; separate from the divine and yet completely dependent. Thus Iqbal’s philosophy is opposed to the monistic understanding held by some Muslim mystics, such as those of the school of Ibn ‘Arabi, who argued in favor of the idea of *wahdat al-wujūd* or the “unity of Being.”\(^ {30}\) As mentioned above, Iqbal conceives the idea of unity in terms of “will” rather than “being”, arguing that there is no “Universal life” from which all else emanated and hence longs for reunification, constituting the great oneness of all. In Iqbal, God and human beings are distinct, and there is hardly any room for self-annihilation; rather it is the opposite, the self-affirmation, which allows the full realization of the Self. Unlike in pantheistic Sufism where the human soul seeks to merge itself into the Divine, in Iqbal the human will seeks to unite with the Divine will which allows the latter to flow through the former, hence preserving the individuality of both, and fulfilling the human goal of the realization of the self. To Iqbal, the ego never merges itself into the “ocean,” as it were, of the Godhead to the extent where it (like a drop of water in the ocean) completely loses its identity. But there hangs always this paradox of union in separation and separation in union:

\[
\text{غودی رنی رنگ کوچنی است}
\text{رسالی لای یقلا از نور رنگ است}
\text{چندی از متنان وصال}
\text{و صال از متنان چندی است}
\]

The Self is brilliant by the light of Divine grandeur,
Its reachings are from its not-reaching,

\(^{28}\) Mahmood, “Iqbal’s Attitude Towards God”, 282.
\(^{30}\) The notion of *wahdat al-wujūd* was enunciated by the famous Andalusian Sufi, Ibn ‘Arabi (d. 536/1240) who believed in the ultimate unity of the human soul and God. See William C. Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Love* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1985).
Its separation is a station of the stations of union,  
Its union is one of the stations of separation.

Iqbal stood against the resigning spiritualism of his day, whose origin he attributed to the development of the Persian Neoplatonism within the intellectual history of Islam.\textsuperscript{32} Thus we can see that despite his love for the Jalāl al-Dīn Rūmī, Iqbal rejected the pantheistic elements in Mevlānā's thought. However, in Rūmī he saw more than pantheism; he saw an "advocate of spiritual development...[and] the infinite quest for God."\textsuperscript{33} Through his poetry of "action" Iqbal drove out all three: the poet from the tavern; the Sufi from his khānqāh (monastery), and the preacher from his mosque. His poetry is essentially a critique of the perpetual inaction of these three roles, traditionally manifested by a self-centred poet, a resigned mystic and a literalist religious imām. He confronts these three characters by way of a dialogue with Khīḍr who, as a symbol of life through action, appealed to Iqbal in almost every aspect of his philosophical outreach. Iqbal was certainly not against these vocations per se; rather, he sought to drive out the stigma of spiritual and social stagnation that these roles seemed to have brought about.

One day Khīḍr appeared to Iqbal and said, "If the eye of the heart be open, the destiny of the world is unveiled." Iqbal, therefore, questioned Khīḍr:

Away from inhabitation you roam the desert,  
Your life is devoid of day and night; today and tomorrow;  
What is the secret of life; what is kingship  
And what is this conflict between capital and labour.

To this Khīḍr replied:

Why do you wonder over my rambles in the desert?  
This constant motion is the potent sign of life.


\textsuperscript{34}Muhammad Iqbal, “Khīḍr-i Rāh” in \textit{Kulliyāt-i Iqbal: Urdu}, 256.

\textsuperscript{35}Ibid., 257
Create your own world if you are among the living,
Life is the secret of Adam, the conscience of life itself.  

Iqbal’s message is filled with optimism as he constantly reminds us to “hope.” It is hope that motivates one to action that eventually leads one to self-determination and self-affirmation as opposed to self-annihilation a la monistic Sufism. In this, Iqbal invites every individual to become, as it were, a substitute for Khidr just as the latter is seen to substitute for Moses’ “perceptivity” in the Qur’anic episode narrating the encounter between Moses and Khidr.


Being a Khidr to the Moses of perception.

But the optimism of Iqbal uses the figure of Khidr in an antinomian way as well. Reminding us of the “fool of God”, who, unlike so many others, does not seek help from Khidr, Iqbal says:


Happy is the man who, though thirsty in the sun,
Does not beg of Khizr a cup of water in such need.

Iqbal’s reference here is to the Prophet Muhammad (peace be on him) as the “Perfect Man” which highlights the idea of complete trust in God (tawakkul).

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36 Ibid., 259.
37 Anwar Beg, The Poet of the East, 198ff, translation modified.
41 Iqbal, Asrar-i Khudi, translated by Nicholson, The Secrets of the Self, 24. Iqbal often portrays various prophetic figures such as Adam, Abraham, Moses and Khidr with having various strengths. At times Moses is seen as “superior” to Khidr and at other occasions, as in the case above, Khidr seems to be substituting Moses’ superior perception (iddrāk). Cf. Schimmel, Gabriel’s Wing, 264.
43 Beg, The Poet of the East, 124.
It seems that Iqbal wants us to look up to Khîdr as a guide but not become completely dependent on him. In fact each seeker should strive to be Khîdr-like. Hajvîrî in his _Kashf al-Mahjûb_ mentions one of the "servants" of God named Ibrâhîm b. Ahmad al-Khâwâs who was asked by Khîdr for his company. Al-Khâwâs refused fearing that he "might put confidence in him [Khîdr] instead of in God." Similar, while protesting against _taqlîd_, Iqbal says:

```plaintext
تقليد ك روحٍ تُؤَثَّر بِهِ تَوَّادُكَ
ستر بِهِ زِمْهٍ | رَكَّزَكَ مِنَ الْمَحْرُور

تَبَاهِرُ دَلٍّ يُبِينُ قَطًا كَمَا نُذُوَّل وَكَيْل
اوَّر اَطْلَقُ مِنْهُ وَعُسْكَى مِنْهُ مَطْرُر

Better annihilate yourself than to follow blindly,
Forget the dealings with Khîdr, rather search on your own;
See the descent of divine in the sanctuary of your heart,
And quit waiting for Mahdi or Jesus.45
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In conclusion, it should be noted that although Iqbal’s philosophy — not unlike many schools of Sufism — validates Khîdr’s high function as a guide, it cautions against spiritual dependence of others, Messiah included, for one’s ultimate salvation. For Iqbal _taqlîd_ is synonymous with death and creativity and self-action is life. Thus though Khîdr is indeed a guide sought out by many, yet he should be a _guide to action_ rather than to a sort of spiritual resignation found among many mystics who invest great hopes in the supposed spiritual powers of their guide (_shaykh_).

Iqbal appeals primarily to the heart rather than to the mind.46 His poems are filled with passion. Iqbal’s understanding of esoteric Islam furnishes him with ideas that lie dormant in a normal state of being. But his usage of the Khîdr symbolism evokes the riot in his expression which, coupled with his ability to express it passionately through the medium of verse, renders it very unconventionally. But more than anything, to Iqbal a true poet is analogous to Khîdr in that they both seek to guide others to the “fountain of Life” (in Iqbal, synonymous with action) and hence the poet is likened to “Khîdr-i Râh.”47

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45 Abdul Hakîm Khalîfa, _Fikr-i Iqbal_ (Lahore: Bazm-i Iqbal, 1957), 20. [For the first couplet, see Muhammad Iqbal, “Ghazîlayî” in _Bang-i Dra_ in _Kulliyât Iqbal: Urdu_, 107. However, we could not locate the second couplet there. Ed.]
47 Schimmel, _Gabriel’s Wing_, 61.
so far as Iqbal somehow confounds the role of a poet with a Sufi. He thus describes the poet:

\begin{quote}
فَكَثُرَ آيَاتُ النَّبِيِّ لَهُ مِنْ شَكِّ
فَخُذَّ أَزْوَاجَكُمْ وَجَعَلْنَاهُمْ مِنْ نُورٍ
\end{quote}

His thoughts dwell with the moon and the stars,
He creates beauty in that which is ugly and strange;
He is a Khizr, and amidst his darkness is the Fountain of Life:
All things that exist are made more living by his tears.49

Such a person as described in these verses is not just a poet who calls people to action for just any reason but rather who calls people to ‘act’ in the path of God, striving to achieve unity with the Divine. Here Iqbal combines the roles of a mystic and a poet into one wholesome being such as Khidr who is at once a “knower” as well as a proactive “guide”. His is a prophetic calling and he undertakes acts that are seemingly defiant of God’s law (as Khidr appeared to Moses in the story related in Qur’an 18: 60-82) but in actual fact are divinely ordained and ultimately beneficial to all. Thus, it is not surprising that such an ideal poet in Iqbal’s mind is none other than the great master Rumi, who is both a mystic — having attained the knowledge of God (‘irfan) — and a poet, who communicates or transmits this knowledge to others in subtle ways and in sublime verses. In another poem in collection Bang-i Darā Iqbal says:

\begin{quote}
کام دنبیا نام زبردستی نہ مرا
مَجُورُ پرْسَحُ مَا جوْنَ شی
\end{quote}

My task is to be a guide in this world
Like Khidr I am constantly on the go.

Not only did Iqbal see himself in this fold of being as an embodiment of the role of Khidr but he himself perceived Rumi, the great mystical genius, as his own “Khidr” who had tremendous influence over him both in the content of his thought, and the style of his expression of that thought.51 In fact, the

50 Muhammad Iqbal, “‘Aql-ō Dil” in Kulliyāt Iqbal: Urdu, 41.
51 M. M. Sharif, About Iqbal and his Thought (Lahore: Institute of Islamic Culture, 1964).
Khizr in Iqbal's famous poem, "Khizr-i Râh" is symbolized by none other than Rumi.\textsuperscript{52}

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\textsuperscript{52} Schimmel, \textit{Gabriel's Wing}, 264, 357. Professor Schimmel reports that in recognition of the spiritual connection Iqbal had to Rumi, the Turks have carved out a 'maqam' for Iqbal in the garden adjacent to the mausoleum of Mawlana Rumi in Konya. See her \textit{Deciphering the Signs of God}, 55.