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Poverty, Feudalism, and Land Reform— The Continued Relevance of Iqbal

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After half a century of development experience, one-third of the population of Pakistan today is condemned to struggle below the poverty line, howsoever defined. In absolute terms, this size of the population of the poor is larger than the total population of [West] Pakistan at the time of independence in 1947. The incidence of rural poverty is greater than in urban areas.

Iqbal died nine years before the state of Pakistan was established in 1947 and 2 years before the adoption of the Lahore Resolution in 1940. Territorially, the present-day Pakistan is closer to Iqbal's idea of the Muslim State presented in his famous presidential address at the annual session of the Muslim League held at Allahabad in 1930: "I would like to see the Punjab, North-West Frontier Province, Sindh and Balochistan amalgamated into a single State" [Brelvi (1977), p. 63]. The same, however, would be hard to say in regard to his vision of economy and society. Poverty as a problem, feudalism as the cause and land reform as a solution formed the most important part of this vision.

Why did the Muslims of India require a state of their own? Iqbal elaborated this point later in a letter written to the Quaid-i-Azam in May 1937. He wrote: "The problem of bread is becoming more and more acute. The Muslim has begun to feel that he has been going down and down during the last 200 years. Ordinarily he believes that his poverty is due to Hindu money-lending or capitalism. The perception that it is equally due to foreign rule has not yet fully come to him. But it is bound to come. The atheistic socialism of Jawaharlal is not likely to receive much response from the Muslims. The question therefore is: how is it possible to solve the problem of Muslim poverty? And the whole future of the League depends on the League's activity to solve this question. If the League can give no such promises I am sure that Muslim masses will remain indifferent to it as before. Happily there is a solution in the enforcement of the Law of Islam and its further development in the light of modern ideas. After a long and careful study of Islamic Law I have come to the conclusion that if this system of Law is properly understood and applied, at last the right to subsistence is secured to everybody. But [this] is impossible in this

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country without a free Muslim state or states. This has been my honest conviction for many years and I still believe this to be the only way to solve the problem of bread for Muslims as well to secure a peaceful India” [Brelvi (1977), p. 86].

Poverty of the Muslims, who were largely poor and based in rural areas, was thus the main issue. The obstacles to solving this problem, such as the Hindu money lenders, could be overcome only by enforcing a modern, egalitarian view of Islam, which required the establishment of an independent Muslim State. In his presidential address at the All India Muslim Conference held in Lahore in March 1932, Iqbal went to the extent of observing that “the future of Islam in India depends on the emancipation of the Muslim peasantry of the Punjab”.

Iqbal’s speeches as a member of the Punjab Legislative Council during 1926–30 reveal more than a passing interest in the land question. When the Punjab Government decided to sell 370,000 acres of land in the Nilibar (in Sahiwal) to the rich and the powerful, Iqbal brought a motion before the house to distribute half of it among the tenants. He also argued for exempting smaller holdings from land revenue for the same economic reasons considered relevant to provide a threshold under the income taxation. A number of proposals were made by Iqbal to improve health and sanitation in the villages. In his view, no government had claimed ownership of land in the entire history of India. [Hussain (1984), pp. 6-7]. According to an anecdote, a Punjab Pir approached Iqbal to write an application to the government for allotment of land. Iqbal told him that land belonged to Allah. If the Pir Sahib so wished, he would write the application to Allah [Musleh (n.d.), p. 22].

Iqbal’s poetry is full of verses relating to the trials and tribulations of peasants, ownership of land and the suggestions of reform. From *Bang-i-Dara* to *Armaghan-i-Hijaz*, one comes across severe indictments of feudalism and associated behaviour patterns.

The first published work of Iqbal related neither to poetry nor philosophy, but to economics proper. It was written in Urdu, called *Ilmul Iqtisad* or “The Science of Economics”, and printed in 1904. Some of the most moving paragraphs in *Ilmul Iqtisad* relate to poverty. Again, Iqbal is at his assertive best in siding with the peasant, as and when it comes to discussing the peasant-landlord relationship. These ideas cannot be dismissed as his early attempt to write a textbook. Iqbal quickly moved away from economics to the creative realm of poetry. However, as already noted, he followed through these ideas with far greater eloquence in his literary works as well as his public pronouncements.

Poverty, as a critical issue of scientific inquiry, is not a recent phenomenon. At the turn of the twentieth century, not a few analysts considered poverty as much a part of the world system as was slavery in the Aristotle’s view of civilisation. According to Iqbal, “Aristotle thought that slavery is a necessary element in the establishment of human civilisation. But religion and present day education have emphasised the natural freedom of man and the civilised nations felt gradually that

this barbaric class distinction, instead of being a necessary element to establish civilisation, disestablishes it and exercises an extremely despicable influence on every aspect of human life. In the same way the question has arisen in the present age whether poverty is also a necessary element in the world system. Is it not possible that every individual be free from the suffering of poverty? Can it not be that the heart-rending calls of those quietly groaning all over the place silence for ever and the sad spectacle of poverty that frightens a caring heart, disappear from the face of the earth like a blot on the landscape?"

Iqbal was fully conscious that "to give a categorical answer to this question is not the task of economics because, to some extent, the answer depends on the moral abilities of human nature for whose discovery the experts in this science do not have any particular method in their hands. But since the answer also largely depends on the events and outcomes which enter the sphere of inquiry of economics, this science is therefore of immense interest to man and its study is very nearly among the necessities of life. The study of this science and reflecting on its results is particularly important for the Indians, as poverty is becoming a common complaint here. Due to the lack of universal education, our country is totally unaware of her weaknesses and also of the social factors, the understanding of which is judged as a panacea for national welfare and prosperity. History of man is witness to the fate befalling nations who neglected their social and economic conditions" [Iqbal (1904), pp. 4-5].

To Iqbal, poverty was a social problem as well, with an intimate relationship with a high rate of growth of population. As he put it: "... Poverty is the source of all crimes. If this great calamity is defeated the world will present a model of paradise But under the present circumstances the only way to freedom from the clutches of this evil spirit is a smaller population of the mankind so that the economic resources can support it (p. 210).

"In our country economic resources are limited but the population is growing day by day. Nature cures it by famine and disease. But we should also free ourselves from the limitations placed by the practice of marrying in childhood and the number of wives Our only aim here is to have fewer children. The desire to marry is a natural urge, the suppression of which is also not healthy.... This aim can be achieved by marrying late or, in other words, by reducing birth rate and by generally restraining sexual urges" (pp. 212-213).

Iqbal took serious note of the view that "Private property is the source of all evils. The welfare of the nations of the world therefore lies in the elimination altogether of these unreasonable distinctions and the restoration of traditional and natural principle of joint ownership of things. If nothing else, this principle should at least be implemented in the ownership of land, as this thing is not the result of the labour of a particular individual or nation but the common gift of nature to which

each individual of the nation has an equal right. In the present academic debates, this discussion is extremely interesting and conclusive, but we do not wish to go into its details in this elementary text” (pp. 150-151).

Among the significant events recorded in respect of the period of Iqbal’s childhood, at least two serve to bring out clearly the profound influence of early childhood experience on his later thinking.

The first event was related by Khushia, Iqbal’s childhood friend, in an interview in these words: “The two of us made a programme to watch Imam Sahib’s Fair without telling other friends. Bala [Iqbal] got two annas from home and I got an eight anna piece from my father after some argument. Before entering the fair I gave the eight anna piece, too, to Bala, as he used to take good care of money. After going here and there in the fair, I said to him: Dear friend! We should have something to eat and drink? Bala replied with a smile: ‘But I have nothing in my pocket. . . I have given all the money to the blind beggar who was crying for help from the visitors of the fair’ . . .” [Shaheen (1975), pp. 267-268]. Siddiqui (1987) views this event as early evidence of Iqbal’s concern for the deprived sections of society.

Iqbal’s acute consciousness of peasant exploitation was noted in another incident of childhood. It was narrated by Syed Zaki Shah, a friend of Iqbal and son of the Indian teacher he most admired, Syed Mir Hassan. In an interview with Manzur Anwar Qureshi, Syed Zaki Shah talked of a visit by some friends to the outskirts of the city. Iqbal stopped by an old farmer in worn-out clothes who was ploughing the field and asked him about the owner of the land. The old peasant replied: “I own the land but I do not know who owns the blooming wheat on it”. Surprised by the reply, Iqbal asked again: “If you own these pieces of land but nothing that grows on them, then why are you working so hard?” The old man smiled and said: “If you are the son of a farmer, wait till some years. You will get the reply to this question yourself” [Shaheen (1975), pp. 267-268]. Hasan (n.d.); Hussain (1984) and Siddiqui (1987) see in this event the source of inspiration of Iqbal’s well-known revolutionary poetry relating to peasantry.

It is interesting to note that the discussion of land reform very nearly disappeared from the scene after the seventies. It resurfaced in the approach paper to the aborted Ninth Plan, but the emphasis was given to efficient management of agriculture and water. The paper observed that “the seed-fertiliser technology is now subject to diminishing returns. The limits to cultivable land have also been reached. There are no prospects to augment the supply of irrigation water by any significant amount. When resources are given, as is the case in agriculture, efficient management is the only way to improve productivity and sustain continually higher contributions to growth”. But as “land has become a critical constraint on agricultural growth, the question of distributive reform is assuming greater significance. A considerable body of evidence exists to support the view that output per unit of land has an inverse relationship with the size of holding. Implementing

land reform is, however, another matter. The two earlier land reforms are cases in point. In any case, land reform is not the only means to achieve the objective of higher agricultural productivity. An undistorted land market, a scrupulous implementation of the laws against eviction in the 1972 land reform and effective re-direction of incentives-structure of official policies towards smaller farms are some of the measures envisaged for ensuring better utilisation of available land in the Ninth Plan. Consideration will also be given to lease marginal and waste lands to the educated unemployed to become farmers after undergoing crash training programmes” [Planning Commission (1996), pp. 17-18].

This approach was suggested before the numbers about the rising poverty in the nineties became known. As studies after studies began to confirm this trend, with rural poverty presenting a far worse picture, the issue of land reform has resurfaced. It is a strange coincidence that 100 years on, the issues raised by Iqbal in *Ilmul Iqtisad* in regard to rural poverty and the approach to overcome continue to be relevant. In the first place, the Social Policy and Development Centre (2001) came out with the conclusion that the incidence of rural poverty falls by 55 percent if a rural household possesses physical assets. Secondly, the results coming out of the Participatory Poverty Assessment started in 2000 indicate poor access to land as the principal source of Rural Poverty (Planning Commission/DFID). Thirdly, the recent World Bank poverty assessment presents some startling numbers. It finds a skewed pattern of ownership: “More than one-half of the rural population in Pakistan is landless. The incidence of rural poverty is highest among those who own no land and falls steadily as the ownership of land increases. Over 40 percent of landless households are poor and together constitute 70 percent of the rural poor, while less than 3 percent of households owning 10 acres or more are poor” [World Bank (2002), p. v]. Fourthly, the Rural Support Programmes have recently started dialogues with communities on the Interim Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper (I-PRSP). Some of the pilots conducted have shown acute assetlessness [Punjab Rural Support Programme (2002)]. Finally, the latest report by the Mahbub ul Haq Human Development declares poverty in South Asia to be “mostly a rural phenomenon.” A key message is that “small farms should be the centre of the revival of agriculture and rural development. The incentive system that is being provided to corporate farming in South Asia should not be at the expense of the vast majority of the rural populace” (p. 2). According to the report, land reform remains a critical policy initiative to diffuse political power.

All of these messages, in one form or the other, could have been gleaned from Iqbal’s economic writings, political statements and poetry.

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