Khaldunia
Journal of Social Sciences
Vol. 5 No.1 2025

eISSN: 2707-6229
pISSN: 2707-6210

Allama Iqbal's Poetry as a Catalyst for Social Reform

DOI: https://doi.org/10.36755/khaldunia.v5i1.145





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Abstract

For the Muslim Ummah, Allama Muhammad Iqbal (1877–1938), a poet and philosopher of the contemporary Muslim world, envisioned a dynamic synthesis of intellectual awakening, social reform, and spiritual revival. This study examines Iqbal's views, including Khudi (selfhood), moral and social criticism, education, economic justice, anti-colonial resistance, and optimism. It uses a qualitative research approach and draws on textual analysis of Iqbal's major works, including Asrar-e-Khudi, Bang-e-Dara, Rumuz-e-Bekhudi, Bal-e-Jibril, and Zarb-e-Kalim, as well as Qur'anic verses, Hadith references, and scholarly interpretations by Schimmel (1963), Malik (1971), and Nadwi (1953). Selfhood, social critique, education, economics, anti-colonialism, and optimism are the six thematic categories into which the data is arranged. The results show that Iqbal's idea of Khudi is the cornerstone of moral empowerment and spiritual self-realization, allowing people to transcend imitation and passivity. His criticism of Western materialism, moral decay, and sectarianism highlights the necessity of moral reconstruction in Muslim societies. Iqbal's focus on economic justice and education is a reflection of his vision of a just and awakened society based on action and faith. Courage, inventiveness, and reform are embodied in his unwavering optimism and appeal for mard-e-momin, or the spiritually strong believer. Overall, the study comes to the conclusion that Iqbal's ideas offer a timeless framework for moral leadership, empowering young people, and reviving Islamic culture in modern society.

Keywords

Allama Iqbal, Khudi, Muslim Ummah, Spiritual Revival, Education, Economic Justice, Anti-Colonialism, Optimism.

Received: 02-09-2025 **Revision:** 15-10-2025 **Online:** 31-12-2025
Accepted: 08-11-2025

eISSN: 2707-6229
pISSN: 2707-6210

Introduction

Allama Iqbal's thought represents a synthesis of Islamic spirituality, modern education, and socio-political activism. Living during the decline of Muslim power under British colonialism, Iqbal tries to awaken the Ummah by combining self-awareness with social responsibility. Central to his philosophy is Khudi (selfhood), which empowers individuals to achieve spiritual and material excellence. His poetry and prose critique social evils, sectarianism, slavish imitation of the West, and moral decay, while promoting education, ethical economy, and unity. The present study aims to examine these facts to understand Iqbal's comprehensive approach to revival and reform.

Significance of the Study

Iqbal's philosophy continues to influence contemporary Muslim thought and education. By studying his ideas:

1. Youth are inspired toward self-development and leadership.
2. Societies gain insights into balancing spiritual and material progress.
3. Scholars and policymakers can apply his philosophy in education, ethics, and social reforms.
4. It highlights the relevance of Islamic thought in addressing colonial legacies, modern challenges, and moral decay.

Literature Review

Post-1857, Indian Muslims faced political marginalisation, poverty, and cultural domination, fostering despair and loss of self-confidence. Iqbal's works emerged as a response to these challenges, advocating spiritual revival, social reform, and empowerment of the youth. His writings are a bridge between classical Islamic thought and modern socio-political realities (Schimmel, 1963; Malik, 1971). The research interprets Iqbal's philosophy within the historical, cultural, and ethical framework of the early 20th century.

Objectives

1. To analyse Iqbal's concept of Khudi (selfhood) and spiritual revival.
2. To examine his critique of social evils, sectarianism, and Western imitation.
3. To study his perspectives on education, economic justice, and anti-colonial resistance.
4. To highlight the relevance of Iqbal's philosophy for modern Muslim societies.
5. To explore the role of optimism and moral courage in Iqbal's thought.

Research Methodology

This study employs qualitative research based on textual analysis of primary sources, including:

1. Iqbal's major works: Asrar-e-Khudi, Bang-e-Dara, Rumuz-e-Bekhudi, Bal-e-Jibril, Zarb-e-Kalim.
2. Quranic verses and Hadith references.
3. Scholarly analyses: Schimmel (1963), Malik (1971), Nadwi (1953), and contemporary research articles.
4. Data were organised thematically into: selfhood, social critique, education, economics, anti-colonialism, and optimism. Numbered citations are used throughout to link references precisely.

Discussion

Cultivation of Selfhood (Khudi) and Spiritual Revival of Muslims

Allama Muhammad Iqbal, one of the most influential poet-philosophers of the modern Islamic world, placed Khudi (selfhood) at the center of his thought. In his work Asrar-e-Khudi, he described Khudi as self-realisation, spiritual awakening, and empowerment, making it the foundation of social reform (Iqbal, 1915). Unlike egotism, Khudi represents awareness of one's inner essence and divine potential. Neglect of the self, Iqbal warned, leads to decay, echoing the Quranic reminder:

> *"And do not be like those who forgot Allah, so He made them forget themselves" (Quran 59:19).*

For Iqbal, Khudi was the bridge between mankind and Allah. When nurtured, it elevates individuals above mediocrity, enables them to confront oppression, and fosters collective revival. In the colonial context, it was a philosophy of empowerment, urging Muslims to overcome inferiority complexes and reclaim leadership (Schimmel, 1963). He stressed that the self attains its highest form by aligning with Allah, uniting the temporal with the eternal, and engaging fully in worldly responsibilities. In The Secrets of the Self, Iqbal articulated the stages of self-development, affirming faith in the infinite potential of human beings:

> *"When a drop of water gets of self's lesson by heart, it makes its worthless existence a pearl" (Iqbal, 1920, p. 22).*

Spiritual revival in Iqbal's poetry centers on Khudi, urging Muslims to rediscover inner strength, establish a living connection with Allah, and transcend material limitations.

Influenced by Rumi and Sufi traditions, Iqbal employed symbolic imagery to inspire a renaissance of Muslim identity. His verses combined material progress with moral integrity, positioning spirituality as the foundation for modern reform (Malik, 1971). For instance:

> *"Tundi-e-baad-e-mukhalif se na ghabra ae uqab, yeh to chalti hai tujhe uncha udane ke liye."*
> *(Don't fear the fierce winds, O eagle, for they blow to lift you higher.)*
> *"Mard-e-momin hai wo darvesh ke jo zinda rahe."*
> *(A true believer is like a humble dervish who remains alive in spirit.)*

These lines reflect his conviction that spiritual awakening equips believers to endure struggle and rise above adversity.

Iqbal's Concern with Muslim Decline

Through poems like Shikwa and Jawab-e-Shikwa, Iqbal criticized moral decline, hypocrisy, and indifference among Muslims. He portrayed decay as the root cause of their downfall, urging them to embrace honesty, sacrifice, and collective responsibility (Iqbal, 1924).

Though primarily known as a poet and philosopher, Allama Iqbal was deeply aware of the social problems Muslims faced, especially in India after 1857. The loss of sovereignty, poverty, and cultural subjugation created despair and pessimism. Issues such as slavery, weakening of faith, Hindu-Muslim tensions, exploitation by moneylenders, sectarianism, and alien cultural influences shaped Iqbal's thought.

Condemnation of Sectarianism

Iqbal strongly condemned sectarianism, which he saw as a major cause of Muslim decline. He warned:

وا نہ کرنا فرقہ بندی کے لیے اپنی زبان
چھپ کے بیٹھا ہوا ہنگامۂ محشر یہاں

> *(Do not use your tongue for sectarianism; terrible dangers lie hidden in it) (Iqbal, 1924).*

He reinforced this warning:

شجر ہے فرقہ آرائی، تعصب ہے ثمر اس کا
یہ وہ پھل ہے کہ جنت سے نکلواتا ہی آدم کو

> *(Sectarianism is a tree and prejudice its fruit, one which caused Adam's*

expulsion from heaven) (Iqbal, 1927).

Critique of Orthodoxy and Liberalism

On orthodoxy, he ridiculed narrow-minded Mullas:

آئینِ نو سے ڈرنا طرزِ کہن پہ اڑنا
منزل کٹھن یہی ہے قوموں کی زندگی میں

(Nations' hardest stage is fearing the new and clinging to the old) (Iqbal, 1936).

Against liberalism, he warned:

آزادیٔ افکار سے ہے ان کی تباہی
رکھتے نہیں جو فکر و تدبر کا سلیقہ

(Liberalism ruins those without originality of thought) (Iqbal, 1936).

Rejection of Blind Modernism and Western Imitation

Iqbal criticized blind imitation of the West:

اٹھا کر پھینک دو باہر گلی میں
نئی تہذیب کے انڈے ہیں گندے

(Throw out the rotten eggs of modern civilization) (Iqbal, 1936).

On Western culture, he declared:

فسادِ قلب و نظر ہے فرنگ کی تہذیب
کہ روحِ اس مدنیت کی رہ سکی نہ عفیف

(Western civilization corrupts heart and mind; its soul could not remain pure) (Iqbal, 1924).

Slavery and Loss of Selfhood

Iqbal condemned slavery and servile mentality:

بندگی میں گھٹ کے رہ جاتی ہے اک جوئے کم آب
اور آزادی میں بحرِ بیکراں ہے زندگی

(Bondage narrows life like a shallow stream, while freedom is a boundless ocean) (Iqbal, 1936).

In Dar Bayan-i Funnn-i Laṭifah-i Ghulaman, he lamented:

مرگ ہا اندر فنونِ بندگی
من چہ گویم از فسونِ بندگی

(The fine arts of the slaves contain deaths; how can I describe the evil of slavery) (Iqbal, 1927).

Slavery, he argued, robs creativity and selfhood:

در غلامی تن ز جاں گردد تہی
آدمی از خویشتن غافل رود

(In slavery, the body is emptied of life; man forgets himself) (Iqbal, 1927).

He contrasted this with the arts of free nations, which inspire dignity and courage:

ہمتِ مردانہ و طبعِ بلند
در دلِ سنگ ایں دو لعلِ ارجمند

Courage and dignity are the two jewels imprinted even in stone) (Iqbal, 1927).

Condemnation of Opportunist Religious Leaders

Iqbal harshly condemned opportunist Ulama who reshaped Quranic teachings to suit rulers:

اسی قرآں میں ہے اب ترکِ جہاں کی تعلیم
جس نے مومن کو بنایا مہ و پرویں کا امیر

(The same Qur'an that made the believer sovereign of the stars is now read as teaching renunciation) (Iqbal, 1936).

He also mocked those who justified slavery through religious interpretation:

ان غلاموں کا یہ مسلک ہے کہ ناقص ہے کتاب
کہ سکھاتی نہیں مومن کو غلامی کے طریق

(These slaves say the Book is deficient because it does not teach slavery) (Iqbal, 1936).

Loss of Originality and Decline of Nations

Iqbal argued that slavish imitation of Western culture killed originality:

کس درجہ یہاں عام ہوی مرگِ تخیل

ہندی بھی فرنگی کا مقلد، عجمی بھی

(Originality has died; Indians and Persians both blindly imitate the West) (Iqbal, 1924).

This loss of Khudi led to humiliation:

ہوئی ہے زیرِ فلک اُمتوں کی رسوائی

خودی سے جب ادب و دیں ہوئے ہیں بیگانہ

(Nations fall into disgrace when literature and religion lose their selfhood) (Iqbal, 1936).

Thus, he urged Muslims to reject servility, rediscover Khudi, and reclaim freedom as the path to revival.

Unity of the Ummah

In Islam, the Ummah signifies a spiritual and moral brotherhood transcending race, language, and territory. The Quran states: "Mankind was one community" (Quran 2:213). The Prophet صلى الله عليه وسلم emphasised this unity: "The believers, in their mutual love and compassion, are like one body" (Muslim, Hadith 2586). Iqbal revived this vision through his poetry, presenting Muslim unity as the foundation of revival.

Iqbal as the Voice of the Ummah

Iqbal shifted from individual to collective concerns, urging Muslims to rediscover their spiritual identity and stand as one nation:

"Be attached to the community, as the branch to the tree; Stay connected to the roots, for therein lies your spring" (Iqbal, 1990, p. 25).

Rejection of Narrow Nationalism

Iqbal denounced divisions of race and territory as artificial barriers imposed by colonialism:

"Be one as Muslims for the guardianship of the Ka'bah, From the banks of the Nile to the lands of Kashghar" (Iqbal, 1990, p. 72).

The Universal Brotherhood

He envisioned a universal Ummah transcending sectarian and ethnic differences:

"Greed has shattered mankind into pieces; Speak the language of love, revive the message of brotherhood" (Iqbal, 1990, p. 57).

"The individual exists through the community; Alone, he is nothing, like a wave

eISSN: 2707-6229
pISSN: 2707-6210

outside the ocean" (Iqbal, 1990, p. 190).

Muslim unity, rooted in Islam's universal message, remained essential for revival. Iqbal's poetry continues to guide Muslims toward collective strength and cohesion (Nadwi, 1953).

Role of Education

Iqbal considered education the foundation of social reform and nation-building. Unlike many theorists, he was directly involved in the field of education, serving as teacher, examiner, and curriculum designer for nearly 15 years (Shahid, 1982). His educational philosophy integrated Islamic teachings with modern thought, aiming to prepare a generation capable of balancing spirituality and modernity.

Engagement with Education

Iqbal co-authored the Silsala Adabiya series for schools and served in Punjab University as an examiner and syndicate member. He emphasised practical reforms grounded in a philosophical vision (Shahid, 1982).

Observation of Nature

Education should develop the habit of observing nature, reflecting Quranic guidance. Iqbal called youth to "see the stars, winds, and skies" as signs of God's wisdom (Ashraf, 1978).

Education as Active and Transformative

Rejecting passive learning, Iqbal advocated education that fosters self-discovery, freedom of thought, and shaping destiny:

خودی کو کر بلند اتنا کہ ہر تقدیر سے پہلے
خدا بندے سے خود پوچھے بتا تیری رضا کیا ہے

(Iqbal, 1972).

Role of Students and Youth

He addressed youth directly in poems such as Khattab ba Nojawan-e-Islam and Javed Nama, urging them to embrace selfhood and action:

جہانِ نو ہے ابھی پردۂ تقدیر میں
میری نگاہوں میں ہے اس کی سحر بے حجاب

(Iqbal, 2009).

Education and Politics

Iqbal linked education with political consciousness. He opposed colonial systems designed to produce passive subjects and criticized both Western materialism and stagnant Eastern madrassa education. His vision advocated a synthesis of Western scientific inquiry with Eastern spirituality (Munawar, 1982; Nadwi, 1975).

Selfhood (Khudi) and Moral Development

Education should cultivate self-awareness, creativity, and responsibility:

افراد کے ہاتھوں میں ہے اقوام کی تقدیر
ہر فرد ہے ملت کے مقدر کا ستارہ

(Iqbal, 1973).

Iqbal envisioned education that fosters moral, intellectual, and social development, creating a generation capable of leading the Muslim Ummah toward revival.

Economic Justice

Allama Muhammad Iqbal considered youth the architects of the future. He employed the metaphor of the "Shaheen" (eagle) to symbolize ambition, vision, and independence. His poetry sought to awaken young Muslims to leadership and innovation (Vahid, n.d.).

Philosophy of Change and Power

Iqbal equated life with perpetual change and regarded stagnation as death. He admired the "powerful man" who shapes his environment: "The powerful man creates environment, the feeble adjust to it" (Iqbal, 1972). He celebrated revolution as the spirit of nations:

جس میں نہ ہو انقلاب موت ہے وہ زندگی

(Bal-e-Jibril, 1935).

Cultural Approach to Poverty

Iqbal abhorred poverty, calling it "a vice" that erodes spirituality and morality (Iqbal, 1973). He argued that poverty is the root of crime and must be eradicated to build a just society. Economics, for Iqbal, could not be separated from ethics; wealth has value only when serving higher purposes (Iqbal, 1972).

Morality and Economics

Iqbal stressed the symbiosis of morality and economy: "If we want good workers,

shopkeepers, artisans, and citizens, we must first make them good Muslims" (Iqbal, 1973).

Man, Nature, and Struggle

He envisioned man as Allah's vicegerent, tasked with subduing matter for higher goals:

مقام بندۂ مومن کا ہے ورائے سپہر

(Armaghan-i-Hijaz).

Struggle against obstacles sharpens insight and fosters creativity. Matter, for Iqbal, is not an enemy but an opportunity for growth (Iqbal, 1973).

Action and Practical Attitude

Action was central to Iqbal's philosophy: "The man of action is the beloved of Nature" (Iqbal, 1973). He denounced knowledge without practice:

افکار کے نغمہ ہائے بے صوت
ہیں ذوقِ عمل کے واسطے موت

(Zarb-e-Kalim).

High ideals inspire conviction, and conviction inspires action. For Iqbal, new worlds arise from *"new ideas, not bricks and stones" (Iqbal, 1973*). His economic thought fused ethics, action, and cultural reform, emphasizing spiritual health, eradication of poverty, and ceaseless striving (Hashmi, n.d.).

Resistance Against Colonialism

Iqbal was a vocal critic of Western imperialism, exposing exploitation of resources and erosion of cultural identity (Hussain, 2017).

Critique of Western Superiority

Iqbal saw European materialism as spiritually bankrupt, similar to T.S. Eliot's critique in The Waste Land (Eliot, 1922). He rejected claims of Western superiority over Indian and Arab literature, glorifying Islamic contributions to knowledge and justice (Iqbal, 1991). Islam, for Iqbal, represented equality and universal brotherhood (Iqbal, 1991).

Khudi as a Philosophy of Resistance

Iqbal's concept of Khudi (selfhood) emphasized action and opposition to stagnation. Rooted in Islamic spirituality "whosoever recognizes his self recognizes his Allah", Khudi ignites dignity and collective struggle, motivating political and cultural resistance against colonial

eISSN: 2707-6229
pISSN: 2707-6210

rule (Iqbal, 1955).

Revival through Past Glory

Iqbal frequently invoked Muslim history, not for nostalgia but as inspiration. Poems like Taranah-i-Milli and Address to Islamic Youth revived confidence and prepared Muslims for struggle (Fanon, 1963). By awakening selfhood and celebrating Islamic tradition, Iqbal envisioned a future of freedom and dignity (Schimmel, 1963).

Revival of Islamic Heritage

Iqbal drew inspiration from the Quran, the Prophet صلى الله عليه وسلم, and classical Muslim thinkers. By reconnecting Muslims to their heritage, he instilled pride and self-confidence essential for reform (Schimmel, 1963; Khamene'i, 1984).

Iqbal's Awakening

Following the political marginalization of Muslims in India, Iqbal raised the banner of awakening through Khudi, urging rediscovery of identity and dignity (Iqbal, 1955). In Asrar-e-Khudi, he emphasized self-realization and struggle:

"The ideals we create sustain us,
It is the ray of our aspiration that illuminates us."
Love (muhabbat) for the Prophet صلى الله عليه وسلم was central to unity:
"Through love, the Self becomes ever more lasting,
More alive, more fervent, more enlightening" (Iqbal, 1955).

Tawhid and Universal Message

In Rumuz-e-Bekhudi, Iqbal emphasized tawhid as the driving force of existence, warning against modern idols race, nationalism, and creed that divide humanity:

"Human mind is always carving idols
His names are: color, country and creed" (Arberry, 1953).

Ummah and Prophethood

Nubuwwah (prophethood) is foundational for Ummah-building. Without prophetic guidance, nations remain fragmented (Iqbal, 1953):

"Man was worshipped by man in this world,
Bound in chains by kings, priests and lords."

Iqbal's vision integrated selfhood, religion, and resistance, aiming to restore equality, justice, and Quranic values of taqwa:

"The noblest of you in Allah's sight is the most God-fearing" (Qur'an 49:13).

Love for the Ummah

Iqbal dedicated his poetry to the Ummah rather than worldly rewards:

"With my poetry I fashion mirrors; It freed me from Alexander's favor Never bowing to others' grace" (Iqbal, 1927).

The revival of his works Asrar-e-Khudi, Rumuz-e-Bekhudi, and Javaeed Nama, especially in Persian, is essential to preserve his legacy (Khamene'i, 1984).

Optimism and Hope

Iqbal consistently rejected despair, portraying it as the greatest enemy of reform. His poetry encouraged perseverance, optimism, and continuous self-improvement (Zulfiqar, 2022).

Optimism as a Central Theme

Rooted in Qur'anic guidance, *"Do not despair of Allah's mercy" (Quran 39:53),* Iqbal's optimism countered un-Islamic fatalism. In Shikwa and Jawab-e-Shikwa, he redirected complaints toward hope and self-reform (Zulfiqar, 2022).

Poetry as a Source of Hope

In allegorical works such as Shama wa Sha'ir (1912), Iqbal transformed despair into hope:

"The evening of grief but gives news of the morning of Eid, A ray of hope appeared in the darkness of the night" (Bang-e-Dara, 1912).

In Naveed-e-Sobh, he urged Muslims to awaken:

"Muslim dreamer, wake up! Even if there is a commotion, even if it shines, the horizon is hot" (Bang-e-Dara).

Prophetic Optimism and Struggle

Optimism is linked with action; in Khudi, self-elevation enables shaping one's destiny:

"Elevate yourself so much that before every destiny, God Himself asks His servant: tell me, what is your desire?" (Bang-e-Dara).

Vision of the Believer

The true believer (مؤمن) is fearless, self-reliant, and morally strong:

"If he is a believer, he is the destiny of God;

He does it even in poverty, fights without hesitation" (Bang-e-Dara).

Iqbal's optimism inspires courage, faith, and moral strength, positioning hope as the lifeblood of faith and progress (Zulfiqar, 2022).

Conclusion

Allama Muhammad Iqbal's philosophy represents a timeless call for spiritual, moral, and intellectual awakening. At its heart lies Khudi (selfhood), a dynamic principle urging individuals to realize their divine potential and rise from passivity to purposeful action. Through Khudi, Iqbal redefined human freedom as a sacred trust, linking the individual's inner transformation with the collective revival of the Muslim Ummah. His vision transcended narrow confines of race, geography, and sect, reviving Islam's universal message of unity, equality, and justice. Iqbal's critique of social evils, colonial domination, and blind imitation of the West was not mere reactionary rhetoric; it was a reformist endeavor grounded in the Quranic ideal of human dignity. He envisioned education as the cornerstone of nation-building, a process that cultivates moral strength, creativity, and independent thinking. His economic and political thought emphasized the inseparability of ethics from social progress, calling for justice, hard work, and compassion as essential components of a healthy civilization. For Iqbal, revival was both spiritual and practical: rooted in self-purification yet expressed through courageous action. He sought to harmonize faith with reason, and tradition with progress, drawing from the Prophet's صلى الله عليه وسلم example to demonstrate that Islam is not a retreat from life but a guide for its transformation. His celebration of hope and optimism stands as a powerful antidote to despair reminding Muslims that every fall is a prelude to rise, and every struggle a step toward divine nearness. Ultimately, Iqbal's message is not confined to any era or geography. It remains a living philosophy urging humanity to rediscover the power of self-awareness, the beauty of faith, and the responsibility of freedom. His poetry continues to echo across generations, inspiring individuals and nations to build within themselves the strength, courage, and vision to shape their destiny in accordance with the will of Allah.

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eISSN: 2707-6229
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