

Iqbal's Ethical Cosmos: *Khudi*, Justice, and the Divine Paradigm

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Abstract

This study explores Allama Iqbal's philosophical framework for a just society, emphasizing the central role of divine values, truth, justice, and bravery realized through the affirmation of *Khudi* (selfhood). The research seeks to answer as to how does Iqbal conceptualize a just society? What role does the individual's spiritual evolution play in societal justice? Employing a qualitative, hermeneutic analysis of Iqbal's poetry and philosophical prose, the study interprets his metaphysical concepts to discover their socio-political implications. The analysis reveals that Iqbal situates justice not merely in institutional reforms but in individual moral and spiritual uplift. Through the metamorphosis of self-negation (*Fana fillah*) and the internalization of divine attributes, individuals transcend base instincts, contributing to collective moral uplift. The findings suggest that for Iqbal, a just society is the natural outcome of spiritually awakened individuals whose selfhood (*Khudi*) reflects divine proximity reflecting in the collective whole. The conclusion underscores Iqbal's integration of metaphysics with social philosophy, proposing a model of justice rooted in inner ethical development.

Keywords: Divine, *Khudi*, Self-affirmation, *Fana fillah*, Self-Negation

The idea of a just society has remained a central concern in philosophical, religious, and political discourse across civilizations. From Plato's *Republic* to Rawls' *Theory of Justice*, thinkers have sought to articulate normative frameworks that ensure equity, individual rights, and legitimate governance. Within the Islamic intellectual tradition, Allama Muhammad Iqbal (1877–1938), the poet-philosopher of the East, offers a distinct and deeply rooted vision of justice that synthesizes Islamic metaphysics, ethical imperatives, and modern philosophical insights. His conception of justice is not confined to legal or institutional arrangements; rather, it is intimately tied to the moral and spiritual development of individuals and the collective, ethical evolution of society.

Iqbal's reflections on justice are not expounded in the form of a systematic treatise. Instead, they are dispersed across his philosophical writings, political speeches, and Persian and Urdu poetry. As such, reconstructing a coherent model of justice from his corpus necessitates an interpretive methodology that attends to both the metaphysical foundations and the socio-historical context of his work (Nasr, 2002; Sachedina, 1988). At the core of his ethical philosophy lies the concept of *Khudi* (selfhood), which underpins individual autonomy, moral responsibility, and the potential for spiritual ascent. For Iqbal, a just society is one that cultivates strong, self-aware individuals within a morally vibrant and spiritually guided community.

Through his time-honored philosophy of *Khudi* (self-affirmation), Iqbal lays down national well-being as a culmination of individual refinement. For entrenching a society based on truth, justice and bravery, it is imperative that individuals seek to internalize these values as a means of self-purification, and a prelude to collective well-being. Therefore, *Khudi* becomes the necessary impetus which triggers self-development through stages of evolution culminating in the endurance of soul *Baqā*. This can be achieved through the assimilation of divine values of truth, justice and bravery, in place of the animal instinct that borders on libidinal and aggressive tendencies translating in fallacy, injustice and cowardice. Self-affirmation results from self-negation '*Fana fillah*' i.e. negation of self to the point of affirmation of divine values which increases proximity to God, the manifestation of the absolute and infinite *Khudi*. Therefore, the foundational underpinnings of a just society are closely akin to the internalization of divine values; an embodiment of 'infinite *Khudi*'; the Deity. By confronting self-centric libidinal impulses and employing the vast diametrical stretches of infinite *Khudi*, a society evolves into an inclusive, all-embracing, just society.

Therefore, this article seeks to examine Iqbal's concept of a just society by exploring the ethical, metaphysical, and political dimensions of his thought. It situates his philosophy within both classical Islamic sources and the Western philosophical traditions he critically engages with, including German idealism and modernist critiques of secular materialism. The study also considers the contemporary relevance of Iqbal's vision in addressing systemic injustice, alienation, and moral fragmentation in modern Muslim societies.

Iqbal's interdisciplinary legacy encompassing poetry, philosophy, and political theory continues to inform discourses on selfhood, justice, and societal organization in Islamic thought. Central to Iqbal's vision is the pursuit of a just society that harmoniously integrates individual self-realization with collective ethical and spiritual development. For Iqbal, justice ('*adl*) is not merely a juridical principle but a comprehensive ontological and ethical imperative grounded in the Qur'anic worldview.

Iqbal's notion of justice transcends positivist and procedural models. Drawing on the teachings of the Qur'an, the prophetic model of Medina, and a critical engagement with European thought, particularly Nietzsche, Bergson, and Hegel; Iqbal constructs a holistic framework in which justice encompasses personal freedom, moral accountability, economic equity, and communal solidarity. His critique of Western materialism and secular liberalism highlights the dangers of spiritual alienation and social atomization, urging a return to a spiritually grounded vision of human flourishing.

This paper aims to elucidate the key elements of Iqbal's concept of a just society by analyzing the philosophical foundations of his thought, the centrality of *Khudi* in personal and social transformation, and the structural and ethical dimensions of the ideal Islamic community (*Ummah*). Through close readings of *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam* (1930), *Asrār-i-Khudī* (1915), and *Rumūz-i-Bekhudī* (1918), along with his Urdu and Persian poetry, this study seeks to reconstruct Iqbal's ethical vision and explore its relevance for contemporary Muslim societies.

Literature Review

The concept of a just society within Islamic and philosophical thought has been explored by a wide range of scholars, yet Allama Muhammad Iqbal's contribution remains unique in its synthesis of metaphysical, ethical, and political dimensions. While Iqbal's work spans poetry, philosophy, and political thought, much of the scholarly focus has either concentrated on his mystical philosophy or his role in the political awakening of the Muslim world, often at the expense of integrating these perspectives holistically.

Iqbal's notion of *Khudi*, a spiritually potent self that evolves toward divine realization, has been extensively explored in the works of scholars like Annemarie Schimmel, who emphasizes the mystical dimensions of Iqbal's thought. Schimmel (1963) interprets *Khudi* as an expression of both spirituality and ethical individualism, noting that for Iqbal, the inner self is not a retreat from the world but a source of dynamic moral energy. However, Schimmel does not fully engage with the socio-political implications of this selfhood in terms of justice and collective ethics.

Fazlur Rahman (1982) positions Iqbal as a modernist reformer who reinterprets Islamic metaphysics to meet the challenges of secular modernity. He notes that Iqbal's insistence on moral autonomy is a rebuttal to deterministic theologies and passive mysticism. Yet, Rahman's analysis is more theological than sociological, and it does not map the trajectory from *Khudi* to societal justice in structured terms.

Justice in Iqbal appears as an ontological praxis. Scholars such as Seyyed Hossein Nasr (2002) and Abdulaziz Sachedina (1988) explore the ethical dimensions of Islamic justice through ontological categories. Nasr underscores that divine names such as *Al-‘Adl* (The Just) represent not just moral injunctions but cosmic principles to be embodied by the spiritually aware individual. Sachedina extends this by analysing jurisprudence tilting towards the concept of *Imamat*, offering insights into how divine justice is realized through leadership and governance. Although these perspectives help ground Iqbal's vision within Islamic tradition, they lack a focused discussion of how Iqbal reformulates these classical concepts in light of modern philosophical challenges.

Iqbal's critique of Western materialism and secular liberalism has drawn considerable academic attention. Wael Hallaq (2013) argues that modern state systems are incompatible with Islamic moral frameworks because they reduce justice to legality and marginalize ethical transcendence. While Hallaq does not focus on Iqbal, his concerns about the moral crisis of modern governance resonate with Iqbal's warnings against spiritual alienation. Similarly, scholars such as S. M. N. Al-Attas (1995) discuss the epistemological rupture between traditional Islamic and modern Western worldviews, aligning with Iqbal's vision of ethical reintegration.

More recently, Iqbal studies have begun to explore his vision of justice in light of contemporary challenges. Dar (1971) examines Iqbal's ethical philosophy as a basis for socio-political renewal, arguing that the poet-philosopher sees justice as both spiritual and structural.⁷ However, the analysis stops short of articulating a systematic model of how individual moral refinement (*Khudi*) culminates in collective justice.

Iqbal deems Hegel's notion of selfhood as 'impersonal' which is insufficiently grounded in the interface with the infinite self. More so, Nietzsche relies on the notion of a superman whom he introduces as an alter ego to the deity. Iqbal differs from Hegel and Nietzsche by grounding the self (*Khudi*) in divine purpose rather than historical reason (as in Hegel) or raw will to power (as in Nietzsche). While Hegel saw the self unfold through the state and Nietzsche called for its liberation from all moral codes, Iqbal envisioned the self as a moral and spiritual being, capable of ascending towards God. For Iqbal, true freedom lies not in egoism or abstraction, but in a disciplined self that reflects divine justice, love, and creativity.

While existing literature has richly analysed Iqbal's metaphysics, ethics, and critique of modernity, it often treats these dimensions in isolation. There remains a significant gap in explicitly articulating how Iqbal's concept of *Khudi* functions as the ethical and metaphysical precondition for a just society. Moreover, few studies have systematically connected Iqbal's metaphysics to his vision of political community and legal justice.

This study addresses that gap by proposing a cohesive interpretive framework that integrates Iqbal's mystical, ethical, and political thought. Through a close hermeneutic reading of Iqbal's key texts, this research offers a systematic understanding of how the inner transformation of individuals leads to societal justice thus demonstrating that for Iqbal, the metaphysical is inseparable from the socio-political.

Research Questions

This study is guided by the following research questions:

1. How does Allama Iqbal conceptualize a just society within the framework of Islamic metaphysics and ethics?
2. What role does the development of *Khudi* (selfhood) play in the realization of a just society?
3. How can Iqbal's vision of justice address contemporary challenges such as moral fragmentation, spiritual alienation, and systemic injustice in Muslim societies?

These questions aim to unravel the underlying philosophical, ethical, and spiritual architecture of Iqbal's notion of justice and examine its relevance for both individual and collective transformation.

Research Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative, hermeneutic methodology grounded in textual analysis and philosophical interpretation. The primary sources include Iqbal's philosophical prose, *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*, and his major poetic works such as *Asrār-i-Khudī* (Secrets of the Self) and *Rumūz-i-Bekhudī* (Secrets of Selflessness). These are interpreted in their historical, linguistic, and metaphysical contexts.

The research proceeds in three stages:

1. Textual Exegesis: A close reading of Iqbal's texts, focusing on recurring themes of justice, *Khudi*, spiritual evolution, and divine values.

2. Philosophical Interpretation: Drawing upon both classical Islamic sources (e.g., the Quran, prophetic traditions, and metaphysics) and Western philosophical interlocutors (e.g., Nietzsche, Bergson, Hegel), this step involves reconstructing Iqbal's integrated vision.
3. Contextual Analysis: The study considers the socio-political conditions of Iqbal's time and extrapolates the implications of his thought for contemporary issues in modern Muslim societies.

Discussion

Khudi as the Foundation of Justice is deduced from Iqbal's peculiarly perceptive insights into the Quranic exegesis. For instance, in *Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam* alone, there are seventy-seven references of the Quranic chapters.

Iqbal's philosophy begins not with the state or external institutions, but with the *self*—the locus of divine potential and ethical responsibility. *Khudi* is both a metaphysical principle and an existential imperative. In contrast to egoism or narcissism, *Khudi* refers to the spiritually cultivated self that internalizes divine attributes through moral striving and spiritual discipline. The discursive context of selfhood is punctuated by the individual vis a vis ones'self or the intrapersonal domain of selfhood, likewise the 'self' and the 'other' or interpersonal interface of selfhood and lastly, 'self' in relation with the 'Deity' or the transpersonal domain of selfhood.

The self's elementary consciousness is marked by the gratification of physiological needs where the biological aspect remains preponderant. It is imperative to note that the self in a bid to fulfil the physiological or basic psychological needs is awakened by the consciousness of the environment. In order to satiate the elementary psycho-social needs, the self learns to recognise 'others' in the process, acknowledging the queer interface with them and the pervasive environment. The self and the other interface precipitates into the phenomena of 'relatedness', 'kinship' and 'belongingness'. Beginning with the natural ties of kinship, for example between the mother and the child, it leads to larger fraternities and communal settings where selfhood learns to identify itself from the lens of the 'other' as much as sees selfhood through 'othering' as the affirmation of plurality. This is to say that selfhood does not evolve in isolation, rather the recognition of the 'other' is integral to its own growth. The need to outgrow from the fixity of conferred societal paradigms transports one simultaneously along the continuum of the temporal and the eternal through the Self and the God matrix. This brings us to the more pronounced yet spiritual connection with God.

The space elapsing between self and the other is fraught with polarities and dichotomies where the need for justice is inevitable to allow self-actualization. Iqbal emphasises the role of religion in formulating the just society by referring to Professor Whithead by quoting from him that religion is a system of general truths, which if upheld in letter and spirit, holds great transformative power over individual character. It is significant to note that Iqbal stresses self's connection with its external environment as much as tracing the course of self-actualization within. Thus, religion in order to create a just space, cannot be treated as a mere 'departmental

affair' as remarked by Iqbal, nor can it be reductively treated as a figment of idea, thought or feeling. It is transcendental as Bergson aptly puts, as an intellect of a higher order.

“The luminous point whose name is the Self
Is the life-spark beneath our dust?” (Iqbal, 1930, p. 325).

Through the evolutionary stages of selfhood, beginning with self-awareness, progressing through self-mastery, and culminating in *Baqqa* (abiding by the Divine Writ), Iqbal outlines a transformational arc. Justice, in this model, is not simply a social ideal but the natural consequence of the ethical metamorphosis of individuals.

Self-negation which imbibes the spirit of negation of spiritual impediments or *Fana* is indeed a just spirit which catapults self in the direction of embracing divinity in whole, or *Baqqa*: the journey proceeds from self-negation to divine integration:

“Twas night: my heart would fain lament,
The silence was filled with my cries to God.
I was complaining of the sorrows of the world
And bewailing the emptiness of my cup.” (Iqbal, 1915, p. 114).

The dialectic of *Fana fillah* (annihilation in God) and *Baqqa* (eternal subsistence through God) reflects a synthesis of metaphysics with Iqbal's dynamic understanding of human agency. By negating the ego-centered, libidinal self, the individual becomes receptive to divine attributes, more specifically, truth, justice, and bravery, which then inform their actions within the world. Therefore, Iqbal deems that the purpose of Quran is to infuse in man a higher order consciousness of his various relations with God and the universe. Comparing with the Christian belief that self-affirmation results from renunciation of external forces, Iqbal presents an interesting thesis. The self's interface with the external forces transpires in a way that the illumination of the self permeates these forces, however calling for a rigorous readjustment of the self to these forces according to the light received by the self from the world within. Thus, self-negation affords inner light which helps the self to rework its relation with the external forces. It is addressed in the “Secrets of the Self”:

“The form of existence is an effect of the Self,
Whatsoever thou seest is a secret of the Self.
When the Self awoke to consciousness,
It revealed the universe of Thought.
A hundred worlds are hidden in its essence:
Self-affirmation brings Not-self to light” (Iqbal, 1930, p. 193).

This internal transformation is essential for Iqbal's vision of social justice. Without it, institutional reforms risk being superficial or co-opted by material or authoritarian interests. Thus, Iqbal links the metaphysical with the political, arguing that only spiritually awakened individuals can sustain a just order. The comparison between the self's base motives translating as Ego in contradistinction to the Divine is recurrent in Iqbal's poetry. Vices are often personified as idols which dissuade self from the service of God. Iqbal further highlights that

even the intellect can prove to a vice, if it does not receive its light from God and become a source of self-worship. It is love that kindles within the self the urge to connect with the divine:

“Intellect has set into my head an idol-temple
But the Khalil of love has turned my monastery into a sanctuary”
(Schimmel, 1963, p. 85).

Justice, thus assumes a holistic, ontological thrust. Iqbal does not treat justice as a mere procedural norm or legal mechanism. Drawing on Qur'anic cosmology, he views justice as an ontological reality embedded in the fabric of existence (*Al-Adl* as a name of God). The just society reflects this divine order through ethical alignment rather than formal structures alone. This conception stands in stark contrast to modern liberal frameworks that separate the private and public spheres. For Iqbal, the health of the state is directly proportional to the moral condition of its citizens. Hence, societal transformation begins at the level of inner transformation.

Iqbal's poetry is often replete with allusions to secular materialism, critiquing it in the favour of a more holistic, ethical atomism. Iqbal's critique of Western secularism and materialism is not merely cultural or civilizational. He identifies a fundamental epistemic and moral deficiency in worldviews that divorce human potential from divine purpose. He warns that such paradigms reduce justice to the rigmarole of legislature and identity to consumption, fostering alienation, inequality, and social fragmentation. In this light, Iqbal's vision serves as a corrective and alternative paradigm, a call to reinvest justice with meaning and transcendence. His emphasis on moral autonomy, spiritual resilience, and collective ethical vision stands in stark opposition to the depersonalized machinery of modern bureaucratic societies.

In an era marked by moral disorientation, authoritarian governance, and economic injustice across much of the Muslim world, Iqbal's thought remains deeply relevant. He calls for the cultivation of spiritually grounded individuals who can resist both internal tyranny (*nafs*) and external oppression. Importantly, Iqbal does not romanticize the past. His engagement with modernity is critical yet constructive, seeking to rebuild Islamic civilization through ethical renewal, educational reform, and spiritual introspection. His just society is not utopian but aspirational, grounded in praxis, not merely ideology.

Iqbal often invokes the figure of Abraham (Khalilullah) as a symbolic archetype of rebellion against the status quo of the material world leading to constructive transformation. In his poetry, Abraham is not merely the patriarch of monotheism but a revolutionary spirit who shatters the idols of his age, both literal and metaphorical. Iqbal reimagines Abraham as the prototype of the spiritually awakened individual who dares to confront the false gods of modernity: materialism, nihilism, and mechanized existence. Iqbal writes, “*But the Khalil of love has turned my monastery into a sanctuary*,” suggesting that it is through Abrahamic love, marked by sacrifice, insight, and divine proximity, that one can reclaim the soul of civilization. Abraham's radical monotheism becomes, for Iqbal, a metaphor for the spiritual clarity and moral courage needed to reconstruct modern life into a livable, meaningful experience. Thus, Abraham is not just a historical figure but an enduring symbol of Iqbal's call to defiance against injustice and ethical renewal in the face of civilizational decadence.

Iqbal employs Abraham as a symbol of devout servitude to God. The fire that he has been hurled becomes an analogy of temptations posed by the material world in the name of 'modernization', but Abraham reinvents roses by navigating his way through the flames on account of his conviction in God.

"I am acquainted with the pain of modern knowledge,
I have entered this fire like Khalil" (Schimmel, 1963, p.259).

This aspirational model of justice, rooted in *Khudi*, is inherently prophetic in nature. Iqbal reclaims the Prophetic role not merely as a conveyor of divine law but as a transformative leader who reawakens collective consciousness. The Prophet Muhammad (Peace be upon Him), in Iqbal's view, represents the highest expression of *Khudi*, an individual who not only internalizes divine attributes but manifests them through social reform and communal uplift.

"The dust of Madina and Najaf is collyrium for my eyes." (Iqbal, 1935, p. 61).

In Secrets of the Self, Iqbal vouches: 'in he is our trust on the Day of Judgment, and in this world too he is our protector'. Iqbal further invokes the blessings of the Holy Prophet (Peace be upon Him) at the summation of the poem *Rumuz i Baykhudi*. (The Secrets of Selflessness) where he juxtaposes the sad plight suffered by the Muslims with his individual illness; bringing out the fact that the Prophetic virtues are a panacea for the individual as well as communal challenges.

The prophetic mission, therefore, becomes the archetype for ethical action, where personal spiritual evolution fuels societal justice. This fusion of the spiritual and the political undercuts both the 'quietude' of certain mystical traditions and the secular reductionism of modern political theory. In aligning with the Prophetic ethos, the self becomes a conduit for divine justice, reshaping the world not through coercion, but through moral example and visionary leadership.

Moreover, Iqbal situates justice within a dynamic historical continuum. For him, the evolution of the self is inseparable from the unfolding of history and the destiny of communities. Just as *Khudi* undergoes stages of refinement, so too must civilizations move from decadence to revival through a reinvigoration of spiritual values. Iqbal's concept of *Ijtihad* (independent reasoning) is central to this revival, underscoring that a just society cannot emerge without intellectual renewal and moral courage. In encouraging *Ijtihad*, Iqbal resists both blind traditionalism and reckless innovation, advocating instead for a reasoned re-engagement with foundational texts in light of contemporary challenges. This dialectical process anchors justice not only in metaphysical truths but in lived realities, where faith and reason converge to inspire collective awakening and principled resistance against injustice.

Javed nama by Iqbal is also distinct as it traces Iqbal's journey through the heavens and is symbolic of the moral order in the universe. Just as order prevails in the cosmos and it operates with balance and harmony, society must be based on justice. Injustice disrupts both spiritual and worldly life. Iqbal takes on the role of 'Zinda-Rūd' (living river) and is guided by Maulana Rumi. On this journey, he encounters great thinkers and poets like Jamaluddin Afghani, Mirza Ghalib, Mansur Hallaj, and even Western philosopher, Nietzsche. The poetry

reads like an epic where dialogues are imbued with resistance against tyranny. This lesson is epitomized in the dichotomy between Despotism (*Mulukiyet*) and *Imamat* (Divine Guidance). Iqbal encounters many despotic rulers who become emblematic of moral decline, showcasing that divorce from the divinely designated course of *Imamat* results in moral rupture. The book teaches that life is not just about harnessing hedonist pleasures of the material world; rather it is about transcending and searching for truth, and reaching spiritual proximity to God. Thus, Iqbal urges the youth as symbolized by his son Javed to attach with divine guidance as embodied in the divine institution of *Imamat* and catapult the fallen world to new heights of moral and spiritual uplift. The failure of despotic kingship is portrayed amidst the ‘Sphere of Jupiter’, where *Zinda Rud* comes across monarchs having ruled unjustly.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Iqbal’s conception of *Khudi* as the foundation of justice offers a profound reorientation of both spiritual and sociopolitical thought. By centering the self as the site of divine potential and moral agency, Iqbal rejects passive religiosity and hollow institutionalism in favour of an active, evolving selfhood that aspires toward the Divine. Justice, in this vision, is not merely a structural or procedural aim but a lived, ontological reality that emerges through the ethical maturation of individuals. Iqbal’s integration of Quranic insights, prophetic models, and philosophical rigor challenges the compartmentalization of the sacred and the secular, insisting that true reform begins within. In an age beset by moral confusion and systemic inequity, Iqbal’s message remains not only intellectually invigorating but existentially urgent, a call to awaken the self, realign with divine justice, and reclaim the moral foundations of community and civilization.

Recommendations

This study recommends that Iqbal’s ethical cosmology be investigated further in light of current ethical concerns, notably those concerning social justice, human rights, and interfaith communication. Furthermore, Iqbal’s philosophical framework provides useful insights for gaining a more nuanced understanding of the relationship between individual moral development and the pursuit of justice.

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