

Building Tomorrow's Leaders: Iqbal's Philosophy of Self-Realization for Youth Empowerment

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Abstract

In today's world, where there are leadership crises and identity challenges, Iqbal's philosophy of *khudi* (self-realization) gives the youth a blueprint for personal progress and ethical leadership. This study seeks to analyze the relationship between *khudi* and leadership, exploring how his philosophy can cultivate leadership qualities in youth, and assessing its relevance for modern leadership training and educational systems. The study uses a qualitative methodology and conducts a textual and thematic analysis of Iqbal's writing—particularly *Bal-e-Jibril*, *Bange-e-dara*, and *Zarb-e-Kalim*—with a focus on metaphors like *Shaheen* and *Mard-e-Momin*. The findings reveal that *khudi* can cultivate leadership qualities in youth and provide practical insights into how young individuals can nurture resilience, integrity, and a sense of social responsibility, making his ideas of youth leadership relevant. The study offers a practical model for leadership development in educational and political contexts. The study concludes that embracing *khudi* can empower youth to rise above all the challenges, be responsible, take control of their lives, and lead societies towards a progressive future.

Keywords: Iqbal, *khudi*, self-realization, leadership, youth empowerment, societal progress.

The growth of any society depends on how its young people understand their own values and purpose. Iqbal understood the importance of youth, so he urged them, through his poetry, to stand for the right and bring change into society.

It is important to understand the background of Iqbal to grasp his philosophy fully. He was born in 1877 in the colonial Indian subcontinent, a time when Muslims were struggling in many ways. They had lost much of their political power and found it hard to

keep their culture and religious identity alive. Iqbal noticed that the problem was not only external but also internal. Iqbal believed that real change could only come when youth woke up, realized their potential, and took responsibility for improving both themselves and their community. (Anwar, 2024). He wanted young Muslims to learn from their ancestors, who had led with courage, faith, and wisdom. By following their example, youth could build confidence, moral strength, and leadership skills. He believed that when young people grow strong in character and spirit, they have the power to change their own lives and the world around them. He urged them to build a new nation, based on the two-nation theory, for Muslims to live freely. This became the foundation for the emergence of Pakistan (Dr. Naseem Akhter et al., 2023, pp. 137–138).

Iqbal emphasized that societal transformation begins with the individual. As the Qur'an states:

إِنَّ اللَّهَ لَا يَغَيِّرُ مَا بَقِيَهُ مَا يَغَيِّرُوا مَا بِأَنفُسِهِمْ ۗ

“Verily, never will God change the condition of a people until they change it themselves (With their own souls).” (Ar-Ra'd; 13:11)

Therefore, to transform the world, the youth should understand this principle and begin to change themselves. Instead of looking at leadership as just having power over others, Iqbal introduced his khudi philosophy as a journey of self-realisation and self-transformation. This approach turns leadership into a personal responsibility where the goal is to improve one's own character first. By using this method to build leadership qualities, a person stops following the crowd and starts leading with a clear purpose. This internal strength is what ultimately enables him to bring the greater good to society by setting an ethical example that others want to follow.

Research Objectives

The research revolves around the following objectives:

1. To analyze the role of *Khudi* in shaping leadership.
2. To explore how youth can cultivate leadership qualities through Iqbal's philosophy
3. To assess the practical relevance of these ideas for modern leadership development programs.

This research provides a framework for youth to embrace the timeless values of courage, independence, moral integrity, and service to humanity, which are essential for the leaders of the modern era.

Research Questions

This study deals with the following research questions:

1. How does Iqbal's framework of *Khudi* (self-realization) function as a foundation for developing leadership qualities?
2. How can the youth apply Iqbal's idea of self-realization to develop leadership qualities?
3. What core values can be derived from Iqbal's philosophy for future leaders, and how do these values translate into real-world leadership practices for today's youth?

Research Methodology

This research involves a qualitative methodology by delving into a thorough analysis of Iqbal's philosophical writings, particularly his concept of *Khudi* (self-realization). The research focuses on his literary work to explore how his ideas can guide youth leadership development. It focuses on a textual and thematic analysis of primary sources like *Bang-e-Dara*, *Bal-e-Jibrel*, and *Zarb-e-Kalim*. The analysis involves a close reading of selected texts, identifying recurring themes and metaphors that reflect the leadership qualities. Special attention was given to key metaphors such as the *Shaheen* (falcon) and *mard-e-momin* (true believer), and how they symbolize leadership qualities like courage, independence, vision, and moral integrity. To highlight the continued relevance of Iqbal's thought, the findings from this analysis were then compared with contemporary discussions on youth leadership and empowerment. This methodology connects the classical philosophical insights with

modern leadership challenges, making it practically relevant for leadership training and educational programs today.

Iqbal's Philosophy of *Khudi* (Self-Realization) and Leadership

Khudi in Iqbal's thought

The translation of the word *khudi* is quite difficult as it is a multidimensional concept, and terms like self-realization or self-awareness can't capture its complete essence. It is essential to revisit the source and Iqbal's vision for this word to fully understand the term. According to Dr. Israr Ahmed, Iqbal once explained the source of this term, which was the ayah of the Quran (*Iqbal's Falsafa e Khudi*, 2016):

وَلَا تَكُونُوا كَالَّذِينَ نَسُوا اللَّهَ فَأَنْسَاهُمْ أَنْفُسَهُمْ أُولَٰئِكَ هُمُ الْفَاسِقُونَ

“And be ye not like those who forgot God, And He made them forget their own souls! Such are the rebellious transgressors.” (Al-Hashr; 59:19).

This verse highlights that another self transcends the physical or material being; this elevated being or self, Iqbal referred to as *Khudi*. If a person forgets Allah, he loses the connection with the divine aspect of the self, distancing himself from his ultimate existential purpose. He introduces this term in his work *Asrar e khudi*, where he proves that the whole universe obeys the will of the “self”. The journey of self-realization and self-knowledge can ultimately enable the self to become the vicegerent of Allah on earth (Khaliq, 2011, pp. 122–123).

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

(Iqbal, 1935, p. 81)

Develop the self so that before every decree

God will ascertain from you: “What is your wish?” (Iqbal, 2014b, p. 267)

A person has to achieve this level of selfhood, which requires an evolutionary process. Iqbal's own writings provide the true meaning of Khudi. , خودی کا سرِ مہاں لا الہ الا اللہ . The secret of the Self is hidden in the words "No God but Allah alone". (Iqbal, 1983, p. 1). It means that the true essence of *Khudi* is found in the fundamental Islamic belief of *Tawheed* (the oneness of Allah). By embracing the principle of the oneness of Allah, a person can unlock the highest potential of the self, aligning personal purpose with divine will and ultimately achieving true empowerment and self-awareness through faith. Moreover, it is not just a declaration of faith but a way of life. It means living life according to the teachings of Islam, rejecting all false gods, including one's own ego. Therefore, by embracing this principle, a person develops a deep connection with himself and his God, making him morally and spiritually enlightened (Javaid, 2023).

Alois Van Tongerlo (2006) provides a comprehensive guide that requires a person to pass three stages to achieve this level of elevation. The first stage is "obedience," where a person submits to the divine will and lives their life accordingly. This step provides an ethical and moral guideline, giving strength to a person to pursue their goal with a purpose. The second step involves "self-control", where a person takes control of his actions. It reinforces the idea of self-identity and personal responsibility within an individual. Lastly, the person achieves the role of God's vicegerent or representative on Earth. A person transcends the material world and its limitations and becomes a reflection of divine love. At this stage, his *Khudi* reaches its highest form, guiding him toward a life shaped by a higher purpose. He takes the responsibility of moral and spiritual leadership, guiding and inspiring others around him (2006, pp. 152–153).

Leadership through Personal Mastery

Khudi is the representation of self-realization and inner strength, which is a vital part of leadership. The modern literature and leadership programs highlight the importance of self-mastery for effective leadership. A deep sense of self-awareness encourages individuals to reveal their inner potential by cultivating self-mastery. This awareness allows a person to become an effective leader who adapts to the challenges, thinks strategically, and, instead of

simply achieving tasks, elevates themselves to fulfill a higher purpose (Swavely & Gallagher, n.d.).

Self-awareness is a fundamental force that motivates a person to become a leader, as it provides the inspiration for self-realization, which is essential for leadership. Along with that, it helps in the execution of leadership (Condon, 2011, p. 13). A leader needs to recognize their strengths and weaknesses, which can lead to improvement in their personal and professional life. It also enables a leader to effectively manage their emotions, so that their personal preferences do not cloud their judgment, resulting in clear decision-making (Cecchi-Dimeglio, 2024).

The journey of self-realization transforms the leader as a person; he becomes a positive, empowered person who can serve his community in the best way possible. The force of *Khudi* can push a person beyond their limits and help them overcome all the challenges and failures, resulting in a strong, resilient leader. Through the continuous development of *Khudi*, a person can lead with purpose and focus on the service of their people. As Iqbal encourages youth to find their true self through the journey of self-realization:

اپنے من میں ڈوب کر پا جا سراغِ زندگی
تُو اگر میرا نہیں بنتا نہ بن، اپنا تو بن
(Iqbal, 1935, p. 48)

Delve into your soul and there seek our life's buried tracks;

Will you not be mine? Then be not mine, be your own right! (Iqbal, 2014b, p. 258)

Results

Iqbal's Vision of Leadership for Youth

During the colonial period, Iqbal urged the Muslim youth to stand up for themselves, inspiring them to become strong ethical leaders. Through his poetry, he tried to instill the qualities in youth that guide them through the complexities and challenges of the world. He sought the resilient and brave leaders who would bring revolution and guide society towards justice and progress. He used metaphors in his poetry, like *Shaheen* and *Mard-e-Momin*, to

encourage youth to embrace self-reliance, moral integrity, and fearlessness (Jawad, 2024, p. 18).

Iqbal's Shaheen Metaphor

Iqbal used the metaphor of *Shaheen* (falcon) for the Muslim Youth. According to him, *Shaheen* is the representative of *Khudi*, as it embodies its essential qualities. It encompasses self-awareness (*Khud shanasi*) and self-respect (*khuddari*). Therefore, in his poetry, he highlights different qualities of a falcon that Muslims should adopt (Rehman, 2021). Instead of living like weak birds, like sparrows or crows, Muslims should be brave, strong, and self-reliant. It encapsulates the essential leadership traits, embodying these traits, youth can become true leaders of tomorrow. Some of the key features of *Shaheen* are:

1. **Far-sightedness:** The *Shaheen* has a sharp vision, symbolizing the ability to see beyond the surface and understand deeper realities. There is a well-known phrase, "eagle-eyed," which highlights his ability to see beyond the surface (Rehman, 2021). A leader should also have a vision, see beyond the surface and immediate, and take action for future challenges.

عقابی رُوح جب بیدار ہوتی ہے جوانوں میں
نظر آتی ہے اس کو اپنی منزل آسمانوں میں
(Iqbal, 1935, p. 162)

When an eagle's spirit awakens in youthful hearts,

It sees its luminous goal beyond the starry heavens. (Iqbal, 2014b, p. 285)

2. **Fearlessness:** The *Shaheen* is a fearless bird that flies to great heights and is resilient. Just like that, a true leader is also fearless and resilient, faces challenges with courage, and overcomes all obstacles. He doesn't give up, but rather uses his unwavering strength to fight through any difficulty. As Iqbal highlights the high goals of *Shaheen*, and how he is never tired of achieving them. Thus, a great person aims high and persists despite the challenges and never settles for less. (Mehmood, 2022, p. 25)

شاہیں کبھی پرواز سے تھک کر نہیں گرتا
پُر دم ہے اگر تُو تو نہیں خطرہ اُفتاد
(Iqbal, 1936, p. 70)

The hawk is never tired of flight and does not drop gasping on the ground:
If unwearied, it remains on wings, from hunters" dread is safe and sound. (Iqbal,
1983, p. 43)

3. **Self-reliance:** Another key trait of *Shaheen* is his self-reliance and self-respect (*Khudari*). Unlike vultures, it takes responsibility for its own survival, relying on its own strength and skills rather than scavenging from others. *Shaheen* refuses to depend on others. Similarly, a great leader is independent and values self-respect. He is dignified, empowered, and works hard to achieve his goals through merit, instead of relying on others.

پرواز ہے دونوں کی اسی ایک فضا میں
کرگس کا جہاں اور ہے، شاہیں کا جہاں اور
(Iqbal, 1935, p. 208)

The vulture and the eagle soar
In the same air, but in worlds apart. (Iqbal, 2014b, p. 296)

4. **Solitude and Non-Conformity:** *Shaheen* sets himself apart from other birds; rather, he finds strength in solitude. This solitary nature creates independence and self-discovery that leaders must embrace. Solitude is important for self-reflection, finding purpose, and revealing insights that elevate the mission. Moreover, *Shaheen* does not build a home or remain confined to one place. It symbolizes that a leader should adapt to the conditions around them. He should be free from worldly attachments and focus on higher goals.

پرندوں کی دُنیا کا درویش ہوں میں
کہ شاہیں بنانا نہیں آشیانہ
(Iqbal, 1935, p. 219)

I am the dervish of the kingdom of birds—
The eagle does not make nests. (Iqbal, 2014b, p. 298)

Iqbal uses the *Shaheen* as a model for individual agency and leadership. Instead of just a poetic image, this metaphor serves as a critique of social conformity. Iqbal argues that a leader must develop 'self-realization' (*Khudi*) to remain independent from corrupt or stagnant societal pressures. By focusing on spiritual and intellectual elevation, he suggests that true leadership comes from personal excellence rather than social status. However, this model mainly focuses on the 'ideal individual.' It assumes that one person's spiritual strength is enough to change a society, which may overlook the complex legal and institutional systems that often limit what a leader can actually achieve.

Iqbal's Mard-e-Momin

Iqbal's concept of *Khudi* (Selfhood) is embodied in his idea of the Mard-e-Momin (the true believer). This figure represents a leadership model where an individual has fully realized their inner potential and aligned their actions with divine principles (Amin et al., 2022). Rather than a mere description of personal piety, the *Mard-e-Momin* serves as a theoretical framework for proactive leadership, urging individuals to guide society through spiritual awareness and ethical purpose. This model, however, prioritizes individual moral charisma over institutional governance. Iqbal's vision relies on a moral elite to lead, yet it remains unclear how this individual-centered leadership integrates with the objective, codified laws required to protect a diverse and evolving society. The following key features illustrate how this internalized spiritual power manifests as practical leadership qualities within Iqbal's vision:

- 1. Representative of God:** The *Mard-e-Momin* is the true representative of God on earth. This man is perfect in every aspect, and he has great love for Allah. He has submitted his will to Allah, and all his actions align with the command of Allah. His moral conduct is exemplary, making him a man of action rather than just words. He is just and fair in his dealings and truthful in his talk. The extraordinary individual is an exemplary model for the entire Muslim Ummah, and there is no one like him. According to Iqbal, the perfect

man is the one whose every moment reflects a new standard and grace. His speech and actions are the embodiment of God's guidance (Mengal & Magsi, 2023, p. 103). As Iqbal says:

ہر لحظہ ہے مومن کی نئی شان، نئی آن
گفتار میں، کردار میں، اللہ کی برہان!
(Iqbal, 1936, p.57)

A Muslim truly gets grandeur anew with moment's change and every hour:
By words and deeds, he gives proof of Mighty God, His reach and power. (1983, p. 35)

- 2. The Dual Nature-Compassion and Strength:** A true believer is a person with a blend of compassion and resilience, depending on the situation. As the Quran explains about the Prophet (peace be upon him) and his companions, they have unbreakable resilience against enemies, yet they are very compassionate with each other. These opposite qualities provide a balance to a person's life. He should be compassionate and kind to his friends and the people around him. However, in times of adversity, he should be firm like steel and stand against wrongdoings. In the struggle between good and bad, he should never show softness or compromise but rather stand firmly on his beliefs and principles (Parwez, 1975, pp. 22–23). This dual nature makes him an ideal leader who embodies kindness and strength, adapting to each situation with wisdom and balance.

ہو حلقہ یاراں تو بریشم کی طرح نرم
رزم حق و باطل ہو تو فولاد ہے مومن
(Iqbal, 1936, p. 41)

A man whose faith is firm and strong is soft as silk in friendly throng:
In a skirmish between wrong and right like a sword of steel, he stands to fight
(Iqbal, 1983, p. 24)

- 3. Service Ease for others:** A true believer is one whose actions reflect divine compassion and will. He tries his best to make things easy for others and help them in their

time of need. His actions serve as the extension of God's mercy, and he symbolizes God's hand (Nissa et al., 2023, p. 14). Therefore, a leader brings ease to others. He is a problem solver, so people depend on him, and he effectively serves his community. True leadership is not self-serving but about contributing to the greater good, leading with a sense of service to humanity.

ہاتھ ہے اللہ کا بندہ مومن کا ہاتھ
غالب و کار آفرین ، کار کشا ، کار ساز
(Iqbal, 1935, p. 132)

The might of the man of faith is the might of the Almighty:

Dominant, creative, resourceful, consummate. (Iqbal, 2014b, p. 278)

- 4. Transformative Vision:** Iqbal believed in the immense power and potential of the *mard-e-momin* to transform destiny. He is not bound by fate, but rather his self-awareness and faith have the potential to redefine it. He holds an unparalleled strength and vision that can not only transform his life but also the fate of the whole community (Dar, 2023, p. 53).

کوئی اندازہ کر سکتا ہے اُس کے زور بازو کا!
نگاہِ مردِ مومن سے بدل جاتی ہیں تقدیریں
(Iqbal, 1954, p. 309)

Can anyone even guess at the strength of his arm?

By the glance of the man who is a true believer, even destiny is changed. (Iqbal, 2014a, p. 220)

Youth as Agents of Change:

In Iqbal's thought, youth is the driving force that can change the course of society and reform it. Therefore, Iqbal urged the youth to develop all these skills in them to transform the destiny of the Muslim Ummah. He believed in the potential of youth to save the Muslims of the subcontinent from slavery and destruction. If youth focus on their inner strength and true

destiny, they can become a catalyst for change and revolution. Iqbal's idea of youth encapsulates the qualities of a *mard-e-momin* (true believer), *shaheen*, and the man of *Khudi* (selfhood). By incorporating all these traits, youth can reach great heights and bring change to society. As Iqbal expresses:

مجت مجھے اُن جوانوں سے ہے
ستاروں پہ جو ڈالتے ہیں کند
(Iqbal, 1935, p.206)

The youth to whom the stars are not out of bounds
Are the ones I love indeed— (Iqbal, 2014b, p. 278)

Moreover, Iqbal urged Muslim youth to firmly stand upon Islamic values and teachings. He warned against the dangers of Western capitalism and advised resisting these oppressive forces. He advocated for the revival of Islamic values, including justice, equality, and moral integrity. In his opinion, true empowerment comes from great personal sacrifice and standing firm against exploitation and injustice. To motivate the youth, he gave examples of historical figures like Isma'il (AS) and Hussain (RA). These two important figures are the inspiration for youth as they showed courage and conviction in the face of adversity. Both of them showed the spirit of resistance against tyranny, even at the cost of martyrdom. They are the role model for the youth today; by following their footsteps, youth can embody these values and become proponents of justice, willing to fight against oppression and stand up for their own and others' rights (Abbasi, 2024, p. 19).

غریب و سادہ و رنگیں ہے داستانِ حرم
نہایت اس کی حسینہ ابتدا ہے اسمعیلؑ
(Iqbal, 1935, p. 93)

The tale of the Holy Shrine, if told, is simple, strange and red in hue:
With Ismail (A.S.) the tale begins and ends with Husain (R.A.), the martyr true.
(Iqbal, 2014b, p. 270)

Discussion

Implications of Iqbal's Philosophy

Iqbal's philosophy has far-reaching implications that can be applied in society in several ways, particularly in education and politics. His ideas provide a framework for youth empowerment and self-realization, making them important individuals of society who can transform the fate of the community.

Education System

To nurture strong and empowered individuals who can become leaders of tomorrow, it is important to incorporate the philosophies of Iqbal in our education system from the beginning. The generation of critical thinkers, who live their lives with a sense of purpose and identity, can be fostered by integrating his ideas into the curriculum.

Our education system should work to develop self-awareness, self-regulation, and self-expression into the teaching methods. This will help in developing crucial skills in students like resilience, independence, and decision-making (Flavian, 2016, p. 98). The nurturing of self-awareness from an early age will prepare students for the challenges of the world and help them become proactive learners and leaders of tomorrow.

Along with that, it's important to foster leadership skills in the students. The education system can play an important role in nurturing strong and empowered leaders. Teachers should encourage social and experiential learning as it can help in developing leadership skills in students. Learning should be based on activities that encourage reflection, active participation, and leadership opportunities (Channing, 2020, p. 142).

The professional leadership programs, based on Iqbal's ideas, should also be initiated. These programs can be highly effective when combining formal training with real-world experience. The focus of the training should be on human relations, communication, policy, and conflict resolution. Moreover, experiential learning methods, by working closely with experienced leaders and engaging in meaningful tasks, enable individuals to apply learned

concepts effectively. These programs can contribute to the development of confident, adaptive, and insightful leaders (Channing, 2020, p. 143).

Political System

It is very crucial for Muslim countries, especially Pakistan, to incorporate the ideas of Iqbal in their political system, as his ideas are based on Islamic ideology. He stands against secularism. According to him, politics cannot be separated from religion. An individual's life and destiny are deeply influenced by the form of government under which they live. Therefore, he advocated for a political system where the moral and ethical values of Islam guide governance (Tayib & Perveen, 2018, p. 260).

Iqbal introduced the concept of Muslim nationalism, that true Islamic universalism can only be achieved through the strengthening of Muslim identity and unity. He believed that Muslims are one Ummah, despite their ethnicity and geographical location. This idea helps in strengthening a sense of identity and unity among the Muslims. His idea of an ideal Islamic state is a welfare state that is dedicated to providing peace, security, and prosperity to its citizens (Tayib & Perveen, 2018, p. 261).

However, after seventy years of the creation of Pakistan, the nation appears to have forgotten Iqbal's message. We have adopted Western ideologies and are dependent on them; therefore, we are struggling with issues of extremism, terrorism, and provincialism. To change this situation, we can still learn from Iqbal's ideology, found in his poetry. Now, the youth have to work diligently, wisely, and intelligently toward the reconstruction of the Islamic state. It is still possible to regain Pakistan's lost glory if we embrace and act upon the message of Allama Iqbal, our great political thinker (Tayib & Perveen, 2018, p. 261).

Conclusion

In the 21st century, the world has advanced and entered into post-modernity; however, leadership crises and identity challenges persist for the youth. Despite the modern developments and changes, Iqbal's philosophy provides a relevant conceptual framework for

today's youth. By following the teachings of Iqbal, today's youth can find *khudi*, which can help them bring change in themselves, along with the world around them.

Although we have been freed from colonial rule since 1947, intellectual dependency on Western models remains a challenge. Iqbal has warned Muslims about the influence of the West and how we have forgotten our Islamic values. He encouraged youth to connect back to their roots, as that's the strategic way to progress and development. The true strength lies in reviving Islamic values, which help foster personal growth and community development. Therefore, by integrating Iqbal's ideas with modern social realities, we could build a strong Islamic society that upholds its unique culture and values.

According to Iqbal's philosophy, personal growth, moral integrity, and spiritual depth are the foundation of effective leadership. His teachings offer a holistic approach to leadership, as *khudi* is not just related to the material world, but rather it's a connection to the outer world. By realizing one's own self, an individual can navigate the complexities of the modern world. However, for this vision to be effective today, individual spiritual excellence must be supported by robust institutional and legal frameworks. Therefore, today's youth should embrace Iqbal's vision to nurture leaders who are not only competent but also analytically and ethically empowered. A meaningful societal revolution begins with individual reform, but it must ultimately result in systemic progress.

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