

The Decline of Ijtihad and Its Revival in Iqbal's Vision

Abstract:

This article delves into Allama Iqbal's concept of ijthihad, emphasizing its significance in revitalizing Islamic thought and practice. Ijtihad, or independent reasoning, emerged as a response to the need for legal reasoning beyond the Quran and Sunnah. Iqbal advocated for ijthihad to empower Muslims, promote intellectual freedom, and integrate modern scientific and philosophical advancements. Iqbal's vision for ijthihad was deeply practical and forward-looking, seeking to reclaim Muslims' intellectual and cultural independence. He believed that Islam's core principles were timeless, but their application needed constant reevaluation to address changing societal needs. This article explores the relevance of Iqbal's concept of ijthihad in the modern world, highlighting its potential to foster a balanced approach between tradition and modernity. By examining Iqbal's ideas, this research aims to contribute to the ongoing discourse on Islamic reform and intellectual revival.

Keywords: Iqbal, Ijtihad, Decline of Ijtihad, Revival of Ijtihad, Muslim history, Tradition, School of thought, Modernity in Islam, Intellectual decline, Taqleed (Imitation), Jurisprudence

Ijtihad, the process of independent legal reasoning within Islamic jurisprudence, holds a crucial role in ensuring Islam's adaptability across changing social, cultural and historical contexts. Its significance has been acknowledged by many Islamic scholars and reformers, none more so than Allama Muhammad Iqbal, who viewed ijthihad as essential to revitalizing and modernizing Islamic thought. Ijtihad holds immense importance as it serves as a dynamic and essential tool for Muslims

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to navigate the complexities and challenges of the contemporary world while remaining true to the principles of Islam. Throughout history, ijthihad has played a crucial role in shaping the evolution of Islamic thought and addressing the ever-changing social, cultural and technological landscape. Islam is a comprehensive religion that provides guidance for all aspects of life. However, new ethical, social and technological challenges continually emerge over time. Ijtihad allows scholars to apply the timeless principles of Islam to contemporary issues and provide practical solutions. It ensures that Islamic teachings remain relevant and applicable in the face of evolving circumstances.

According to Allama Iqbal:

Ijtihad literally means 'to exert'. The idea, I believe, has its origin in a well known verse of the Quran _ 'And to those who exert We show Our path.'¹

Muslims have historically practiced ijthihad especially in the early centuries of Islam when scholars and jurists engaged in active interpretation of Islamic principles to address evolving needs. However, by the 12th century, a period of "closing the doors of ijthihad" occurred, and many Muslim societies saw a decline in the practice of independent reasoning. This shift away from ijthihad led to intellectual stagnation and rigidity in Islamic jurisprudence, a situation that Allama Muhammad Iqbal later critiqued passionately.

Several factors contributed to the decline of ijthihad:

One of the key factors contributing to the decline of ijthihad in Islamic thought was the widespread practice of taqlid (blind imitation). Taqlid refers to the unquestioning adherence to established interpretations of Islamic law and theology, as formulated by early jurists and scholars. Over time, this practice became a dominant trend, as scholars and religious leaders increasingly relied on the authority of classical texts and legal precedents, rather than engaging in critical inquiry or adapting Islamic principles to new circumstances. Initially, taqlid emerged as a practical solution during the formative period of Islamic jurisprudence (fiqh). The early jurists, such as

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Imams Abu Hanifa, Malik, Shafi'i, and Ahmad ibn Hanbal, developed comprehensive legal frameworks to address the needs of their respective communities. Their efforts were essential in codifying Islamic law and providing guidance on a wide range of issues. However, as these schools of thought became institutionalized, later scholars began to view their interpretations as definitive and unchangeable.

علامہ کو اس حقیقت پر گہرا دکھ اور افسوس تھا کہ ہندوستان میں اکثر حنفی مسلمان
اجتہاد کے دروازوں کو بند سمجھتے ہیں۔ اپنے درد دل کا اظہار کرتے ہوئے علامہ نے

صوفی غلام مصطفیٰ تبسم کے نام ایک خط میں لکھا: "میں نے ایک بڑے عالم کو یہ کہتے
سنا ہے کہ امام ابوحنیفہ جیسا عظیم عالم آج کے دور میں ممکن نہیں ہے۔"²

Furthermore, the jurists of four major Sunni madhabs (Hanafi, Maliki, Shafi'i and Hanbali) and several Shia schools of thought developed comprehensive legal systems that addressed a wide range of issues, reducing the perceived need for independent reasoning. Iqbal respected the intellectual contributions of the madhabs but argued that Islamic thought should not be confined to a specific school. He believed that rigid adherence to one madhab could lead to dogmatism and hinder adaptability. He advocated a unified approach to Islamic jurisprudence, where scholars could borrow and build upon insights from all madhabs, fostering a more dynamic legal system.

Allama Iqbal says:

The theoretical possibility of Ijtihad is admitted but in
practice it has always been denied ever since the establishment of these schools of law.³

This led to the belief that all significant legal and theological questions had been resolved, rendering further ijtihad unnecessary. The consequences of this shift were profound. The emphasis on taqlid discouraged intellectual curiosity and stifled the spirit of inquiry that had once characterized Islamic civilization. Scholars and students of Islamic law were trained to memorize and follow established rulings rather than engage in critical thinking or develop new interpretations. As a result, Islamic thought became static, losing its capacity to adapt to changing social, political, and economic contexts.

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Allama Iqbal, a visionary philosopher and poet, was a vocal critic of taqlid. He regarded it as a form of intellectual stagnation that undermined the dynamism and vitality of Islamic thought. For Iqbal, taqlid represented a departure from the original spirit of Islam, which encourages reflection, reasoning, and the continuous pursuit of knowledge. He argued that blind adherence to tradition not only restricted the intellectual growth of Muslims but also hindered their ability to address the challenges of modernity. Iqbal pointed out:

نظر آتے نہیں بے پردہ حقائق ان کو
آنکھ جن کی ہوئی محکومی و تقلید سے کور⁴

Iqbal believed that taqlid led to a loss of creativity and innovation within the Muslim world. By discouraging independent reasoning, it prevented scholars from reinterpreting Islamic teachings in light of contemporary realities. This, in turn, limited the ability of Muslims to develop effective solutions to the social, political, and economic issues they faced. For Iqbal, the failure to engage in ijthihad was a critical factor in the decline of Islamic civilization and its marginalization in the modern world.

جو عالم ایجاد میں ہے صاحب ایجاد
ہر دور میں کرتا ہے طواف اس کا زمانہ
تقلید سے ناکارہ نہ کر اپنی خودی کو
کر اس کی حفاظت کہ یہ گوہر ہے یگانہ⁵

Iqbal criticized taqlid as a form of intellectual laziness, arguing that it led to a loss of creativity and innovation in Islamic thought. The rise of taqlid marked a period of intellectual stagnation in Islamic history, as it discouraged independent reasoning and innovation. Allama believed that taqlid restricted Islam's adaptability and prevented Muslims from addressing contemporary issues effectively. Iqbal's critique of this practice underscores the need to revive ijthihad as a means of revitalizing Islamic thought and addressing the challenges of the modern

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world. His vision of a dynamic and progressive Islam offers a path forward for Muslims seeking to reconcile their faith with the demands of contemporary life.

تقلید کی روش سے تو بہتر ہے خود کشی
رستہ بھی ڈھونڈ، خضر کا سودا بھی چھوڑ دے⁶

Moreover, as Islamic empires such as the Abbasids and later the Ottomans faced political and military challenges, they prioritized stability and unity over intellectual diversity. To maintain order, they discouraged independent reasoning and encouraged taqlid to ensure consistency in religious and legal practices. Consequently, scholars feared that ijthihad could lead to conflicting interpretations, causing division within the Muslim community. To avoid sectarianism, they emphasized uniformity and limited ijthihad to a narrow group of scholars. This led to a conservative approach where established rulings were rarely challenged.

شکایت ہے مجھے یارب! خداوندانِ کتب سے
سبق شاہیں بچوں کو دے رہے ہیں خاک بازی کا⁷

Iqbal believed that the fear of diversity led to a climate of intellectual conformity which discouraged Muslims from engaging deeply with their faith. Iqbal was confident that the unity of Islamic principles would prevail despite differences in interpretation and he called for a more open-minded approach that valued diverse perspectives. Iqbal recognized that political stability was essential but he argued that intellectual stagnation harmed the Muslim world's progress. He believed that prioritizing control over creative interpretation weakened the Islamic world's intellectual vitality, preventing Muslims from keeping up with scientific, economic and social advancements in the West. As Allama Iqbal puts it:

ہند میں حکمت دیں کوئی کہاں سے سیکھے
نہ کہیں لذت کردار، نہ افکار عمیق
حلقہ شوق میں وہ جرات اندیشہ کہاں

In addition, the growth of Sufism or Islamic mysticism, led to a shift in emphasis from intellectual reasoning to personal, spiritual experience. Sufi practices encouraged inward reflection and personal devotion rather than legal and social reform which further reduced the emphasis on ijtihad. Iqbal deeply appreciated certain aspects of Sufism, particularly its focus on personal spiritual experience and inner transformation. He recognized that Sufism had played a significant role in the spread of Islam especially in the Indian subcontinent by emphasizing love, compassion and devotion to God. While Iqbal admired Sufi spirituality, he argued that an excessive focus on mysticism detracted from Islam's practical social teachings. Iqbal criticized Sufi practices that encouraged disengagement from social, political and economic issues. He believed that this withdrawal weakened the Muslim community and made it vulnerable to external domination. He also opposed the fatalistic attitude that some Sufi orders promoted which he saw as contrary to Islam's emphasis on action, responsibility and striving for justice. Allah says in Quran:

“انہوں نے اپنے دین میں سے ایک رہبانیت اخترع کی جو ہم نے ان پر
فرض نہیں کی تھی، اس لیے کہ وہ اللہ کی خوشنودی حاصل کرنا چاہتے تھے،
لیکن انہوں نے اس پر پورا اترنے میں ناکامی کا اظہار کیا۔” ⁹

Iqbal argued that the excessive focus on personal spirituality led to the neglect of ijtihad, which is essential for the intellectual and social renewal of the Muslim ummah. He believed that Islam was a comprehensive way of life, involving both spiritual and worldly aspects. For Iqbal, ijtihad was essential for addressing the social, political and economic issues that Sufi mysticism largely overlooked. He pointed out:

صوفی کی طریقت میں فقط مستی احوال
ملاکی شریعت میں فقط مستی گفتار
وہ مرد مجاہد نظر آتا نہیں مجھ کو
ہو جس کے رگ و پے میں فقط مستی کردار ¹⁰

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With the decline of prominent Islamic educational institutions like the House of Wisdom in Baghdad and the Madrasas in Andalusia, the Muslim world lost critical centers for scientific and philosophical inquiry. As intellectual freedom diminished, scholars increasingly relied on past rulings rather than engaging in new reasoning. Iqbal argued that the decline of educational institutions and the restriction of intellectual freedom weakened the capacity for critical thinking among Muslims. He advocated for a revival of educational systems that emphasized ijthad, integrating modern knowledge with Islamic teachings. This, he argued, would help Muslims regain their intellectual independence and compete with the advancements of the Western world. As per Dr. Syed Abdullah's perspective:

یہ تسلیم شدہ امر ہے کہ یورپ میں نشات ثانیہ کا آغاز اسلامی حکمت کے زیر اثر
ہوا اس کا اعتراف بھی یورپ کے بعض مفکرین کر چکے ہیں۔ جن میں بر فالٹ
(کتاب: تشکیل انسانیت)، جارج سارٹن (کتاب: مقدمہ تاریخ سائنس)، ڈریپر،
لیبان اور دیگر شامل ہیں۔¹¹

Moreover, during the colonial period, many Muslim-majority countries were influenced by Western legal systems. Some colonial governments discouraged ijthad and promoted secular legal codes, further undermining Islamic jurisprudence. In response, some Muslims adopted conservative approaches to protect traditional interpretations which discouraged innovation. Iqbal viewed colonial influence as detrimental to the Islamic world's intellectual autonomy. He believed that, instead of resisting Western influence through rigidity, Muslims should use ijthad to reform Islamic law in ways that aligned with both modern advancements and Islamic principles. He saw this as a way for Muslims to reclaim their cultural and intellectual independence. He pointed out:

ان غلاموں کا یہ مسلک ہے کہ ناقص ہے کتاب
کہ سکھاتی نہیں مومن کو غلامی کے طریق! ¹²

In addition, many Muslim societies faced social and economic challenges, such as poverty and illiteracy, which limited access to education and knowledge. This made it difficult for individuals to engage in or appreciate the need for ijthad, as basic survival and daily life needs took

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precedence. Iqbal argued that the socio-economic backwardness of Muslim societies was both a cause and effect of intellectual stagnation. He believed that reviving ijtihad would help address socio-economic issues by encouraging progressive interpretations of Islamic teachings that could inspire social reform, economic development and scientific advancement. Iqbal stated:

سمجھتا ہے تو راز ہے زندگی
فقط ذوق پر داز ہے زندگی¹³

According to Iqbal, a failure to engage in ijtihad can result in a rigid and conservative approach to interpreting Islamic law. This may lead to a lack of flexibility in dealing with evolving societal norms and changing conditions, potentially causing a disconnect between the legal framework and the needs of the Muslim community. Moreover, the absence of ijtihad in Muslim societies has far-reaching consequences, particularly in the realm of law and ethics. When Muslims are unable to find relevant, context-specific solutions to their legal and ethical dilemmas within the framework of Islamic jurisprudence (fiqh), they may turn to non-Islamic legal systems for guidance. This reliance on external legal frameworks can lead to a gradual dilution of Islamic principles, weakening the influence and authority of Islamic legal scholarship in the process. Historically, ijtihad served as a mechanism for adapting Islamic law to the evolving needs of Muslim societies. However, as ijtihad declined, Islamic law became increasingly rigid and disconnected from the realities of modern life. This rigidity left many contemporary issues unaddressed, creating a vacuum in Islamic legal thought. Iqbal says:

تین سو سال سے ہیں ہند کے میخانے بند
اب مناسب ہے ترا فیض ہو عام اے ساقی¹⁴

In the absence of dynamic and contextually relevant Islamic legal solutions, Muslims may feel compelled to seek answers from secular or non-Islamic legal systems. These systems, while often effective in addressing practical concerns, are based on principles that may not align with Islamic values. As a result, the adoption of non-Islamic legal frameworks can lead to a gradual

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erosion of Islamic identity and a diminished role for Islamic law in shaping the moral and ethical fabric of Muslim societies. Iqbal questioned:

کون ہے تارک آئین رسول مختار؟
مصلحت و وقت کی ہے کس کے عمل کا معیار؟
کس کی آنکھوں میں سما یا ہے شعرا اغیار؟
ہو گئی کس کی نگہ طرز سلف سے بیدار؟¹⁵

Ijtihad is crucial for Muslims grappling with complex ethical, social and technological dilemmas of the modern world. Issues such as bioethics, human rights, environmental concerns and finance require a fresh examination through the lens of Islamic principles. The practice of ijtihad allows scholars to engage with these challenges, considering the underlying spirit and objectives of Islamic law while adapting to the evolving needs of society. Through ijtihad, contemporary scholars seek to bridge the gap between tradition and modernity, harmonizing Islamic values with the demands of the present age. Muhammad Suhyl Umer wrote in his book:

اسلامی معاشرے کے زوال کی جتنی وجوہات علامہ نے بیان فرمائی ہیں
اگر ان کو ایک مرکزی وجہ میں مرکوز کیا جائے تو وہ دراصل اسلام کے مقصود
سے غفلت اور اس کے حصول کے لیے شعوری کوشش کا فقدان ہے۔¹⁶

Furthermore, Iqbal believed that ijtihad should not be limited to scholars alone but should involve the active participation of the wider Muslim community. Iqbal emphasized the importance of incorporating various fields of knowledge including science, philosophy and social sciences into the process of ijtihad. He believed that Muslims should be at the forefront of intellectual advancements, exploring new ideas and engaging with the broader global discourse. Iqbal's philosophy of ijtihad encompassed the vision of a unified and inclusive Muslim ummah. He believed that ijtihad should not lead to sectarian divisions or narrow interpretations but rather foster unity and a shared sense of purpose. Iqbal emphasized the need for dialogue, mutual respect and collaboration among scholars from different schools of thought, cultures and backgrounds. Iqbal stated:

منفعت ایک ہے اس قوم کی ' نقصان بھی ایک

ایک ہی سب کا نبی ' دین بھی ' ایمان بھی ایک

حرم پاک بھی ' اللہ بھی ' قرآن بھی ایک

کچھ بڑی بات تھی ہوتے جو مسلمان بھی ایک¹⁷

For the revival of ijthihad, it is crucial to invest in education and scholarship, fostering an environment that produces scholars with a deep understanding of Islamic sciences and a strong foundation in Islamic law. This includes providing comprehensive training in fields such as jurisprudence, theology, Arabic language and Quranic exegesis. Universities and institutions should prioritize the study of Islamic sciences and encourage critical thinking and independent research skills. It is crucial to foster an environment that encourages independent thought and intellectual debate within the Islamic scholarly community. Scholars should be free to express diverse opinions and engage in respectful discussions on matters of Islamic law. Encouraging a culture of critical thinking and constructive dialogue can help generate new insights and interpretations. Dr. Khalifa Abdul Hakeem wrote in his book:

اقبال کا نظریہ حیات نہ صرف اپنی ملت کے احیاء کا باعث بننا چاہتا ہے
بلکہ پوری نوع انسان کے ارتقاء کی راہ ہموار کرتا ہے۔ یہی وجہ ہے کہ اقبال
قدامت پرستی اور تقلید کی جگہ تحقیق اور حریت کو ترجیح دیتے ہیں۔¹⁸

Iqbal emphasized the need for continuous ijthihad to navigate the complexities of the modern world. He argued that Muslims should engage in ijthihad to reconstruct Islamic thought in light of new circumstances and challenges. According to Iqbal, ijthihad was not merely a legal process but a comprehensive intellectual endeavor. He believed that ijthihad should extend beyond legal matters to encompass social, political and cultural dimensions. Allama Iqbal's philosophy of ijthihad emphasized the dynamic interpretation of Islamic teachings, the integration of modern knowledge and the reconstruction of Islamic thought. Iqbal wrote a letter to Sufi Tabbasum:

اقبال صوفی غلام تبسم کے نام ایک خط میں لکھتے ہیں: میرا یقین ہے کہ جو شخص
موجودہ دور میں قرآنی بصیرت سے فقہی اصولوں پر تنقیدی نظر ڈالے گا اور قرآنی
احکام کی روشنی میں ان کی وضاحت کرے گا، وہی اسلام کا حقیقی مجدد ہوگا اور
انسانیت کا سب سے بڑا خادم۔¹⁹

His vision for ijthad aimed at addressing contemporary challenges, revitalizing the Muslim community and fostering a progressive and harmonious society. His ideas continue to inspire Muslims to embrace ijthad as a means for personal growth, intellectual advancement and the promotion of unity and inclusivity within the ummah. It enables Muslims to find ethical and practical solutions for complex problems such as bioethics, artificial intelligence, environmental conservation, social justice and human rights. The revitalization of ijthad enables Muslims to address contemporary challenges, integrate modern knowledge with Islamic principles, maintain relevance and contextualization, promote intellectual engagement, foster unity and empower individuals and communities. By embracing ijthad, Muslims can tap into the rich intellectual heritage of their tradition while embracing the dynamism.

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