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Goethe and 'the East' of Today

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'East' and 'West' are popular and often useful categories, but how the terms are understood can vary from decade to decade, or place to place. There was a time when people in Goa on India's west coast, or in Mozambique on Africa's east coast, imagined 'Portugal' when 'the West' was mentioned, while persons elsewhere thought of Spain, Belgium, Holland, France or England.

After the Second World War in the last century, 'the West' to many meant the United States, and the 'East versus West' phrase frequently signified the Soviet-American conflict. Yet in the first decade of the same century, when Japan and Russia clashed, Russia was 'the West' not only to most Japanese, but also to other Asians. When Japan won, Asians including Indians felt glad that after two centuries of European trading companies ruling over much of the Orient, an Asian country had finally triumphed over 'the West'.

Goethe wrote his *West-Eastern Divan* in the period between 1814 and 1819, exactly one hundred years before the First World War years. His *Divan*'s 'East' was the Muslim East, more a religio-cultural space than a geographical bloc of nations. However, Islamic Turkey, Islamic Egypt and Islamic Iran must also have seemed physically remote to most Europeans. Interestingly, Goethe in his *Divan* seemed to assume a commonness, bestowed by Islam, among Arabs, Persians and Turks.

If they are even faintly aware of recent headlines – about the Rohingya, for instance, or of attacks on religious minorities in India, Pakistan, Bangladesh or Sri Lanka – few today would see 'the East' and 'the Muslim world' as synonyms. And fewer would lump Arabs, Persians and Turks together. Not when Arab lands, Israel and the USA seem aligned on one

side, and Iran and Palestinians on the other, while Turkey hobbles somewhere in between.

A phenomenon like Goethe is not likely to re-emerge in our times. If he does, a twenty-first-century Goethe might need to compose more than a dozen *divans* merely to foster dialogue inside the Muslim world, and dozens more to get 'West' and 'East' to know each other!

Today 'the West' too, howsoever understood, is a splintered category, while the Muslim 'East' is brutally divided. Other Eastern spaces, whether Buddhist, Hindu, Confucian, Sikh or whatever, are also at odds with one another. As former president Barack Obama recently said to a close aide, 'Maybe people just want to fall back into their tribe.'[1]

Fully aware of the difference between 'Muslim' and 'Eastern', Goethe ignored labels in order to expose realities common to all. One can only marvel at his cheek, early in the nineteenth century, in telling fellow-Europeans that in their predicaments or longings they were like Muslims. Wrote Goethe in his *Divan*:

> How foolish that everyone praises his own opinion in what pertains to him. If *Islam* means submission to God, we all are living and dying in Islam.[2]

Expressing an insight like this, I suspect, was probably as unusual in the Europe of the 1810s as it would be today. For one thing, the defeat and death in 1799 of England's stubborn foe, Tipu Sultan of Mysore, was for Europe a recent and also a greatly celebrated event. Mysore's ruler had been portrayed as a cruel and resourceful Muslim fanatic as dangerous to England as Napoleon whom the British would defeat in 1815 at Waterloo.

It was fully expected, moreover, that Napoleon and Tipu would join hands and fight the British together. In the end, the Duke of Wellington who proved victorious in Waterloo (in 'the West') was the very Arthur Wellesley who sixteen years earlier had played a crucial role in Tipu's fall in Mysore (in 'the East').

In such a climate of phobia, Goethe expressed a courageous thought. He said that in wanting human beings to obey God and respect one another, the prophet of Islam was only urging what Jesus and Moses had prescribed.

The Goethe saying this was now in his sixties. His supremely successful novels and poems, as also his scientific and administrative accomplishments, had brought him an exceptional stature. Even so his *Divan* sold poorly. His fellow-Europeans were not enthusiastic about recognising Islam's virtues.

It would appear that in addition to being prodigiously gifted, Goethe was honest. He loved Rumi's verses as also the later output of Hafiz, the fourteenth-century Persian poet, which he had read in a German translation. He appeared to respond positively to a page in the Qur'an, brought from Spain by a soldier in the Napoleonic wars, which asked the reader-listener to seek refuge in God. Conducted by Bashkir soldiers arriving from Russia, an Islamic prayer service in a Weimar auditorium seemed to impress Goethe.[3] Liking what he encountered in Islam, the honest Goethe said so in his book's verses, which sailed with grace and could be read with ease.

A little more than a century later, Muhammad Iqbal (1876–1938), one of South Asia's greatest poets and the man who would give Pakistan its ideological foundation, ran into the *Divan.* Iqbal at this point was someone shaken by the Muslim world's pathetic situation. In *Shikwah* ('Complaint'), he had levelled a charge at the Almighty.

> There are nations beside us; there are sinners among
> them too,
> Humble folk and those intoxicated with pride, slothful,
> careless and clever,
> Hundreds who detest Thy Name,
> But Thy Grace descends on their dwelling;
> And nothing but the lightning strikes us![4]

When Iqbal wrote these lines, India's Muslims were facing, many of them thought, a double humiliation: rule by the West and likely rule in the future by India's majority Hindus, relations with whom had long been fraught.

Iqbal was bowled over by Goethe's cheerful appreciation in his *Divan* of Islam's message of submission to God. The *Divan* evoked from him the remarkable *Payam-i-Mashriq* ('The Message of the East'), which was

published in 1923. Here are some of the *Payam*'s lines (translated by M. Hadi Hussain):

> Do not come to my garden if you have
> An uninquiring mind, which does not crave
> To know the souls of flowers. My spring is not
> Mere smell and colour, no mere surface wave.
>
> A wonderful show, God, is Your world. All
> Things seem to have drunk from the same wine-bowl.
> Eye intimate with eye; but heart from heart
> And soul from soul divided by a wall.
>
> Life keeps expressing itself in new ways:
> Content with one fixed form it never stays.
> You have no spark in you if your today
> Is just a copy of your yesterdays.
>
> You ask how close the link between my soul
> And body: that link is beyond compute.
> Mere swirling, choked-up breath while in it, I
> Am music when I issue from the flute.[5]

A century has passed since Iqbal wrote the Persian originals of these verses, which was a century after Goethe had written his *Divan*. The *Divan* and the *Payam* seem to converse with each other while descending the steps of time.

India's greatest modern poet, and a playwright, artist and composer as well, Rabindranath Tagore (1861–1941), who received the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1913, made visits in the 1920s to Germany, where he was most warmly received. Books of his poems translated into German were widely sold. I have however not managed to locate a reaction by Tagore to the *Divan,* which does not mean that he never voiced it.

Nor am I aware of a response by Mohandas Gandhi to the *Divan,* though the *Divan*'s gesture of boldly removing the locks to inter-faith dialogue was certainly reproduced more than once by Gandhi. We know

in addition that Gandhi studied Goethe's *Faust* during his first incarceration by the British in India, which occurred from March 1922 to February 1924. In a notebook he procured in Pune's Yeravada prison, Gandhi copied these words of Gretchen (Margaret) from *Faust:*

> My poor sick brain is crazed with pain
> And my poor sick heart is torn in twain.[6]

*

The conversation noted above between Goethe and Iqbal had in fact started centuries earlier with Hafiz, Shiraz's deathless poet who lived in the fourteenth century. After the Mongols destroyed much of Iran in the thirteenth century, a brief stable phase was followed by a chain of petty dynasties in the next century, until Timur the fierce (Tamerlane), also possessing Mongol blood, conquered Persia's Shiraz and Esfahan and set much of India too on fire.

Creativity did not insist on a peaceful world. It was in the heated Timurid era that Hafiz composed the poetry that would engage future generations in and beyond Iran. In the 1810s, it would inspire Goethe. We are told that soon after Goethe read Hafiz, 'a storm of verses would break forth from him – two, three and more poems a day, on trips, at an inn, amid conversations and other activities'.[7]

We learn, too, that Goethe declined requests to write poems summoning nationalist passions, explaining his position in these words:

> How could I write songs of hatred when I felt no hate? . . . I never hated the French, although I thanked God when we were rid of them. How could I, to whom the only significant things are civilisation and barbarism, hate a nation which is among the most cultivated in the world, and to which I owe a great part of my own culture?[8]

Acknowledging the existence of hate at some levels, Goethe added:

> But there exists a level at which it wholly disappears, and where one stands, so to speak, above the nations, and feels the weal or woe of a neighbouring people as though it were one's own.[9]

Isn't this the key for our world today, a wish to feel a neighbour's pain as our own? On his part, Iqbal seemed to say something similar when he asked us to realise

> that life cannot effect a revolution in its environment before it has had, in the first instance, a revolution in the inner depths of its being, nor can a new world assume external form until its existence takes shape in the hearts of men.

In support of this assertion, Iqbal invoked, in his words, 'that immutable law of the Universe, which the Qur'an has enunciated in the simple but comprehensive verse: "God does not change the destiny of a people unless they change themselves."'[10]

Not everyone can be a poet. Of those that are, how many rise to the level where, in Goethe's image, they stand above the nations and feel a neighbouring people's woe?

Yet perhaps there is a role for everyone, including for the non-poet. That role is suggested in a letter that Iqbal wrote, upon learning of her father's death, to a German woman, a Miss Wegenast, whose first name is not provided in the source.

> Dear Miss Wegenast: I am extremely sorry to hear the sad news of your father's death; and though my letter must reach you a good many days after this sad event, yet neither time nor distance can make my sympathy with you in your bereavement any the less warm…
>
> '*Verily we are for God and to God we return.*' This is the sacred text that we recite when we hear the news of death. And I recited this verse over and over again on reading your painful letter. You remember that Goethe said in the moment of his death — 'More Light!' Death opens up the way to more light…
>
> I remember the time when I read Goethe's poems with you and I hope, you also remember those happy days when we were so near to each other —so much so that I spiritually share in your sorrows. Please write to me when you feel inclined to do so … May God be with you. Yours ever, Mohammad Iqbal.[11]

The 'East' and 'West' of Iqbal's times have disappeared along with Goethe's 'East' and 'West', and along with any notions of 'East' and 'West' that Hafiz may have held. Whether Muslim or non-Muslim, the East now lives in the West, sometimes right next door to it.

In racial or religious composition, today's England, today's Germany and today's Europe are more mixed than they were twenty years ago, not to speak of Goethe's times. Yet proximity to a different race or faith has not produced either the bond or the richness that the German poet sought through his astonishing *Divan.*

The conversation he had with Hafiz, and the one that Iqbal had with him, is not being attempted today between residents living less than twenty yards apart in Europe's towns. Or in the towns and villages of America, Asia, Africa or Australasia.

Not everyone is a poet. Yet anyone may become a sympathiser, a listener, a sharer of sorrows and joys. A friend. Perhaps friendship is the heart of the *payams* – the messages – of Hafiz, Goethe and Iqbal.

The last-named was sustained by conversations in his Lahore home with friends (and fans) of different faiths. They were Sikh, Hindu, Christian and Muslim. As for Goethe, let me end with two quotations from the *Divan*:

> And when people are divided in a mutual contempt, neither will acknowledge that they are striving for the same thing.[12]

> Whoever knows himself and others will recognise this as well: Orient and Occident are no longer to be separated.[13]