



DIVIDE AND RULE - IQBAL

A FIRESIDE CHAT WITH ONE OF PAKISTAN'S FIRST EXPLICITLY POLITICAL RAPPERS

IQBAL is a recent graduate from the Lahore University of Management Sciences. As a member of the university's famous music society, which has produced the likes of Ali Hamza, Natasha Noorani and Zahra Paracha, IQBAL has taken the Pakistani hip-hop scene by storm.

His first two albums, Baaghi and Jiski Lathi Uski Bhens, were huge hits – resonating with thousands across Pakistan, primarily for their political messaging. One of his better known songs are Khudday Line, in which he goes after corruption, feudalism, gangsterism, religious extremism and the general toxicity pervading across almost all facets of Pakistani society. Another is Sab Maya Hai, the music video of which is a real treat. Here, IQBAL depicts the mainstream politicians of Pakistan engaged in a tug of war battle among themselves while the ordinary citizen is left to fight for the scraps. The heavy symbolism, in terms of the satire and direct language, has created ripples across young audiences – particularly of the progressive bent.

We sat down with IQBAL to discuss his most recent album, Divide and Rule, for a deep dive into the mind of the budding star to try exploring his history and the overarching philosophy of his craft – and to get his thoughts on the music industry of Pakistan.

Talk to us about your journey as a budding artist in Pakistan – who were the artists/influences that originally appealed to you and what was it about their music that inspired you take up the craft yourself?

If I go back and think about what might've influenced the specific kind of rap music I now make, I'd have to say it began with other political underground rappers such as Immortal Technique from the US and Latin America, Lowkey from the UK, Vinnie Paz, etc. – particularly the first two.

I gravitated towards these artists at a young age, perhaps 16 or



17, because even though I'd explored the various sides of hip-hop growing up, there was something about political rap music – the aggression, and more importantly the element of relatability, that really struck a chord with me. The kind of society we come from, which I was a part of, I could see being reflected in their music. Other rappers, like Drake and Eminem for instance, are great in terms of their music – but as far as relatability goes I found them lacking. With folks like Immortal Technique, I was able to see a clear connection between their lyrics and, say, things I saw on the news. So it hit differently.

In terms of ideas and the themes my own songs take, I'd say they're heavily inspired by the texts I happen to be reading at any given point. With *Divide and Rule* in particular, I was reading a lot of Bhagat Singh prior to putting together the record – and listeners will experience that I'm sure. In today's age, the media – such as television series – that I'm consuming also naturally inspires me and finds its way into my music, which does tend to have a lot of pop culture references.

What is the overarching idea behind *Divide and Rule* and what message are you trying to deliver through the tracks?

Personally I've always been fond of consuming art that is open-ended. I say this for shows, films, any kind of art really – because it leaves room for discourse which tends to foster a movement towards a conclusion that multiple different people, sometimes from drastically divergent schools of thought, can ultimately agree on. As an artist, if you define the message at the outset then naturally it will limit the interpretations that listeners would otherwise be able to entertain. Just like I have various kinds of thoughts while producing my music, I'd like my listeners to have a similar kind of experience rather than specifically informing them what the take-home message is. That will lead to questions, discussions, exchange, etc. and function to educate and move the conversation forward on whatever the salient theme happens to be.

There's no overarching idea to my music, but I do try to maintain an element of subversion, sarcasm, and even pessimism to what I do. I wouldn't exactly call it 'revolutionary', which some circles have associated with me, but I'm very pessimistic in terms of macro level change – I think our institutions are incredibly solidified in terms of their pathologies – so there is a kind of bleakness, if you'd like to call it that, which I want my listeners to walk away with. We're consuming idealistic slogans all the time, and I like to challenge that sort of utopian thinking.

How is this record different from your previous ones - in terms of genre, inspiration, and overarching theme?

This record is much more polished, in the sense that when I look back at my previous work – *Jiski Laathi*, *Uski Bhens* and *Bhaagi* – it was much more direct. With this one, I go much deeper in terms of analysis, referencing, etc. It's much more cryptic, but also cohesive: there's a theme and atmosphere. The old ones didn't exactly have anything that tied them together, this one does – as the name suggests.

Importantly, my primary motivation is to always make music for my own consumption. I tend to produce what I like to listen to myself, and as I age I have to ensure my music reflects my own evolution over time. Naturally that'll mean every record will have its own distinct feel and flavour – and I'd like for that to continue as I progress as an artist.



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'Fraudiye' was my personal favorite track off the record, not only in terms of the symbolism but also sonically - Eva's presence is central and adds so much depth. Talk about the song and your experience working with her.

First off, thanks a lot – Fraudiye is one of my favourites too. Yes, the symbolism is there but also the collaboration aspect – Eva and I have known each other for 3-4 years and have been meaning to collaborate for a long time. I'm not someone who collaborates for the sake of collaboration, so I wanted to wait for the right time to go through with this. I always want my collaborators to really add something to the track. Eva was perfect for Fraudiye – the minute I completed the beat and concept for the song I knew I had to share it with her, she was the first person that came to mind. So yes, my experience working with her was great and I really look forward to working with her more. She's one of my favourite rappers in the entire South Asian hip-hop scene.

Maanu, who you have a song with on the record is a Luminite like yourself. What are your thoughts on his trajectory and what was it like working with him on 'Rehn Do'? LUMS seems to have produced quite a lot of great talent over the past few years. What is it about the place?

I'm extremely proud of what Maanu has accomplished and he has a lot more in store, and I wish him the best of luck obviously. Him and I have been very closely, musically, since we met at the Music Society of LUMS. In terms of my collaboration with him on the record, he was also one of the people who I knew I had to work with at some point. It was actually a challenge for me doing this, because I knew I had to step up into a world – which is his world – which was quite new for me personally. In terms of the beat, lyrics, etc. I had to change my style a bit. And I think it was the same for him, incorporating a political dimension to his music was something new that he was doing. We found a solid middle ground with Rehn Do.

About LUMS, I think what drives the incubation of talent there – and I was recently talking to someone about this actually – is that it allows you to make mistakes. For example, even just in terms of student societies and how they're run – the kind of money that you have to manage as a student and the responsibility that comes with it – and the sort of mistakes that you inevitably make during that particular experience all prepares you for life post graduation. The skills you learn through those engagements help not just in music, but in whichever field you happen to be a part of once you're out of the place. It sounds like a trivial thing, but I think it's huge: it's what gives you the confidence and ability to avoid repeating those mistakes when the stakes are a lot higher. That is what makes LUMS so unique.

Your songs have always been political in nature - is that deliberate? If so, what is the philosophy behind the approach?

I see my art as a means through which people can have difficult conversations among themselves – which they would otherwise not be able to, or would be reluctant to. Writing a song, for me, is similar to how I'd approach a research paper at university – a lot of what I'm reading shapes what I ultimately end up writing. Some political books that have influenced me recently are Rule by Fear, by Ammar Ali Jan; Wages of Rebellion by Chris Hedges; various books by Slavoj Žižek for instance; Faiz Ahmed Faiz; and even things outside of non-fiction. So it's a mixed bag.

I think a lot of rappers in Pakistan are political. Some of them might not be overtly political, but they do touch upon various themes that can be seen as political. Is mental health, for instance, not a political issue? A lot of rappers talk about those things now. As far as colonial referencing goes I do feel like I'm on a bit of an island – which at times makes it difficult to collaborate with other artists. One of the best

things about it, though, is that political music will never be irrelevant: politics is never going to go away.

On this particular album I've focused on things like South Asian identity, domestic violence, freedom movements, colonial history, and toxic culture more generally. For instance in *Fraudiye*, when I say, 'Baher hota kuch, kartay ghar per tor por,' it is about a pervasive issue in South Asian communities where the anger and bitterness of the outside world is sort of taken out at home – which needs to be highlighted and talked about more. There have to be broad conversations about real life experiences that people are having, and I think art is a great way to achieve that.

Even in terms of the album art, if you look closely, the separation in the centre actually represents the border between

Pakistan and India – and the text is from the same page too, just transitioning from Urdu to Hindi. So there are all these political messages embedded into every aspect of what I do.

Today's era in former colonies is hardly dissimilar from what was taking place while the colonizers were still around – whereby lines were drawn between communities for purposes of control, subjugation, and exploitation. The way we treat our minorities today is a great example of that. It's a cycle of violence. And at some point I think the onus is on us to break away from the wrongs of the past and chart out a new path for ourselves.

I think we're making some progress in that direction, for instance the response to the Queen of England's passing was such that there were two camps – one mournful and the other less sentimental, to say the least. Another example is the ongoing discussions around the transgender rights bill. I'm glad we're finally having these debates and it's a start. Hopefully my work can contribute to these developments in some way.

Do you do music full time? If not, why - and what is your day job? Tell us about that!

I have two things I'm passionate about: teaching and music. Both represent the act of performing to me, when I'm on stage and when in the classroom when I'm teaching History and World Affairs – particularly South Asian history. Teaching gives me the same sort of fulfilment as music does, so I'd like to continue doing both. Maybe at some point I'll have to let it go, especially if the music grows to the point where I'm unable to grant teaching the time it deserves – but as things stand I'd want to be involved with both for sure, dividing my time equally between the two. The value I assign to both is pretty much at par and I wouldn't want to miss out on either.

Being a young artist yourself, what advice do you have for someone who might just be starting off in the music industry of Pakistan?

First of all, I'd like to say that I'm just barely starting off myself, even though it's been about 7 years doing it. I say that because I'm still figuring things out all the time, for instance in terms of marketing myself and how that is done – particularly in the age of social media. The advice I'd give someone who's just starting off is to try creating the music that you like to consume, and to not take yourself too seriously. If you try to focus on trends, especially in the Tik Tok era where a song that is 5-6 seconds long will go viral for a few days before disappearing into obscurity as the next one comes around, it will always be a failing strategy.

Sure, you should experiment – but at the end of the day there has to be a strong foundation to your music. And have something to fall back on in terms of your sound. Focus on music you want to consume – in terms of production, lyrics, etc. – and then consider what others would enjoy.

IQBAL's music may be found on Spotify and he is on Instagram as @iqbalofficial.

