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“Guzrā huā Zamānā”¹

Sir Syed Ahmed Khan
Introduced and translated by
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Introduction:

Sir Syed Ahmed Khan (17 October 1817 – 27 March 1898) was a 19th-century Islamic pragmatist, reformer, and philosopher from British India. His work focused on bringing about reform in Indian Muslim society, through promoting scientific and Western educational thought among the masses. One of his most significant contributions was the establishment of the Aligarh Muslim University, which began as the Muhammadan Anglo-Oriental College. The curriculum offered at this institution included scientific and Western subjects alongside traditional Oriental ones and religious thought. Sir Syed aimed to create an institution that could compete with Oxford and Cambridge, where both secular values and modern scientific and religious education would be provided to students of all religions and sects. Despite opposition from Orthodox religious sects, who saw Western education as corrupt and irreligious, Sir Syed remained committed to promoting a scientific mindset and encouraging rational and liberal interpretations of Islamic scriptures. He saw education as a means of uplifting the Muslim community and remained steadfast in his pursuit of this goal.

¹ Sir Syed’s “Guzrā Huā Zamānā” has been translated as “Time Bygone: A Nightmare”. It has been translated from *Maqalāt-e Sir Syed* compiled by Muhammad Ismail Panpati in 12 volumes Vol 5 (*Lahore: Majlis Taraqqi-e Adab*, 1962). This is the first English translation of the piece.

Syed Ahmed began focusing on writing, from the age of twenty-three (in 1840), on various subjects including mechanics and educational issues, mainly in Urdu. He published a series of treatises in Urdu such as *Āsar-us Sanādīd* (Great Monuments), *Jila-ul Qulūb bi Zikr-il Mahbūb* (The Purification of Heart through remembrance of the beloved), *Tuhfa-i Hasan* (The gift of Hasan), *Namiqa Dar Bayān Masala Tasavvur-i Shaikh* (A letter explaining the teachings of Tasavvur-i Shaikh) and *Silsilat-ul Mulk* (Subtle expressions regarding the concept of the Shaikh). He was the first Muslim scholar from the subcontinent who wrote a commentary on the holy Bible and argued that Islam was the closest religion to Christianity with both the religions having a common Abrahamic lineage.

Time Bygone: A Nightmare

It is the last night of the year. An old man sits alone in his dark house. The night is pitch-dark and frightening. Lightning strikes again and again and the howling wind makes horrifying noises. The old man is distressed; he worries and trembles in fear. It is not the dark night nor the thunderstorm that makes him distraught. Neither is he worried because of the howling wind. It also matters not to him that it is the last night of the year. It is his own state of mind given over to reminiscent, retrospective thought which makes him tense. Recalling his past saddens him. He feels dismayed when he looks back at the life he has lived. The more he recalls his past, the more it pinches him. He sobs uncontrollably, his hands clasped over his face.

The memories of the past flash in his mind: his careless childhood and the nonchalant attitude he had, the time when sweets were more valuable to him than coins and bills. Everyone in his family; his father, mother, brother and his sister loved him dearly. He would carry his school bag under his arm and rush to school just for the sake of spending his day somehow. The memories from his time at school remind him of his schoolmates and the old man starts missing his friends too. He gets sadder and cries out in anguish,

“O Time! O Time! O time bygone, how sad that you are gone.”

He recalls his youth. He had a sturdy body, strong muscles, ruddy cheeks, sharp eyes, a brave heart and great passion. This was the age when his eyes were eclipsed by arrogance. His parents would advise him and preach lessons of goodness, but he would ignore them and say:

"It is too early; I have much time left to do good deeds. Let me cherish this moment for now."

He never gave any thought to getting old and knew nothing about the passing away of youth. He recalls his youth and regrets that he spent his prime recklessly without caring about growing old. He bewails the fact that he did not spend his youth on godliness and good deeds.

“Oh! The passed time. Oh! The lost time! What lies in lamenting now when I procrastinated at the right moment?”

Saying so, he gets up from his seat and shuffles slowly towards the window to open it. The night is still dreadful and cloudy. Darkness shrouds everything. Lightning jolts his nerves, gusty winds are blowing, shaking the trees, shedding leaves and breaking the twigs. He cries out aloud:

“Oh! My lost youth is as sombre as this dark night,” and then returns to his seat.

Meanwhile, the faces of his parents and siblings, whose bodies would have decomposed in their graves by now, appear before him. His mother shows him sympathy by hugging him and reminds him that the time has passed. His father's bright face appears before his eyes and reminds him that he would advise him for his own good to make a nobleman out of him. His siblings are standing in a corner, pressing their fingers under their teeth as if their innocent faces are saying that they feel sorry for his current state but are completely helpless.

This scene gets melancholic, and he is reminded of his days when his behaviour towards all his kin was crass and the rude utterances he would make are disgusting and hurtful to him now. Now, seeing these half-decayed boney skeletons so sympathetic towards him, he hangs his head in shame. He is heartbroken and a painful sigh escapes him:

“Ah, time! Ah, time. You are gone, how shall I redeem you? ”

Trembling with fear, he pushes himself towards the window, opens it and finds that the wind has slowed down, the lightning strikes less now, but the night is still pitch dark. This helps him pacify himself a little and he comes back to sit on his chair.

Now, his retrospective mood leads to a chain of memories to the mature phase of his youth when he dedicated himself to doing some good

deeds. He recalls how he was comparatively a better soul for he fasted in the name of Allah, offered prayers, went out on religious pilgrimages, gave alms to the poor, built mosques, and had wells dug for the people. Recalling this period of his life soothes his heart. He invokes the Pirs whom he obeyed and served and begs for their assistance. He wants to receive rewards for all the good he has done so that he can have some peace of mind for now. But no, nothing like that happens! The void inside him remains unchanged. His miseries continue to trouble his heart and engulf his soul.

His good deeds have benefited no one. The hungry are still starving; the mosques are either dilapidated or deserted, and the wells are filled up to the brim. None of his spiritual mentors or saints come to his rescue. No one lends him an ear at this distressing hour. He is all by himself, agonizing in his desolation and introspecting his gains, thus far. ‘Why did he love those mundane things which are of no use to him now?’ despairing, he howls,

“O! Help me, O time! O time! Why did I lose you?”

Horrified, once again he walks up to the window, opens the windowpanes, and looks out to see a clear night sky full of stars. The wind has abated. No more clouds, no more lightning, the sky looks beautiful, full of heavenly bodies. The old man gazes at the night sky for a long time, and all of a sudden, he sees a patch of light appearing in the sky from which a beautiful maiden emerges. He is fascinated by this sight and slowly the maiden descends towards him. She is so close to him that he can feel her. His heart is filled with joy. This state of ecstasy wipes off his fears and worries.

"Who are you?" asks the old man.

“I am the reward of an eternal virtue” the maiden replies.

“Can you belong to me?” He asks again. “Can I get you?”

“Yes, you can” she assures. “It is simple, yet difficult.”

The old man becomes puzzled by her oxymoronic reply; he stares silently at her with his eyes wide open. She continues:

“He who dedicates himself to the service of mankind and obeys Allah shall have me forever. Everything in your world is subject to decay. Only man will live to witness the end of the world. An act in the service

of others repays for the rest of life. Self-serving deeds remain confined to you only and are buried with you in your coffin. But service to mankind bears fruit which you will eat all your life and, in the hereafter, as well. You ask me who I am. I am your conscience. You must live for others and give up self-serving deeds to keep me alive."

Saying this, the maiden disappears. The old man helps himself back to his seat.

Once again, he starts scanning his past for the good deeds he has done, but this time with a different perspective and finds that he did nothing for others during his childhood or in the prime of his youth. All that he had done during those years was in self-serving interests. Every good deed he did was intended to get rewards from Allah. He realizes that he was not fit, as per the criteria set by the maiden to lay his claim on her. And there was no hope of doing good in the future for he was in the final stage of his existence. He cries out of despair:

"O Time! O Time! Come back to me." O! I would pay you a hundred thousand gold coins to get back my youth." Saying so, the old man sobs till he faints.

After a little while, some melodious voices begin to echo in both his ears. His dear mother approaches him and kindly pats his face. His father and his siblings surround him. They all inquire about his worry. 'Why is he sobbing and sighing?' 'Why is his body trembling in fear and sweat rolling down his forehead?' His mother consoles him and asks him to get up, get dressed and celebrate the new year.

"Your friends and siblings are waiting for you."

The boy awoke to realize that he was dreaming. Yes, it was a dream! He had grown old in his dream. He narrated his dream to his mother. After listening carefully, she added to the maiden's speech – the deeds a man does in the service of others live longer and pay generation after generation. Offering obligatory prayers, going on the holy pilgrimage, and fasting are confined to a man's self. Death carries them all away, but a deed done in favour of mankind is immortal, serving the doer eternally. The mother advises the boy not to follow in the footsteps of the old man and regret at the eleventh hour; rather, she encourages him to follow the maiden's advice so that he can, at some point in time, claim her.

The young boy is thrilled with joy and tosses himself about on his bed, yelling out loudly:

“This is the first day of my life. I shall not waste my life and regret at the end as the old man did, but I will follow the maiden’s advice sincerely.”