INTIZAR HUSAIN

The Account of a Senseless Upheaval: An Exemplary Tale

For a great while it has been the deepest desire of this humble being to record, after research and investigation, events and impressions regarding the period of senseless upheaval, and thus prepare an instrument of warning about the future for wisdom-seekers. Friends thought the work useless, maintaining that the bygone era was like the wrong word justly erased. How would you right the wrong? How bring to light an era when all traces of its foundation are gone? And why bring to your candle just that period, out of all the others? This one possesses nothing to merit the illumination of your flame. After all, what is there in that time to be proud of? But, sir, your humble servant was not convinced; instead, I sought to convince the doubters: O honorable ones, if nothing else, then we can at least remember that period as a unique item in the museum of our past. Moreover, why should we be ashamed of a wonder of our history? Why not learn a lesson or two from it? So saying that, and pondering over it for some time, spineless creature that I am, I girded my loins and decided to pen the chronicle of an era, one which when read or heard by men with heart would make them at times choke with laughter, and at other times weep.

This insignificant writer had grave obstacles to face, too, since the memoirs and history books written in that period are mostly extinct now, but what little I managed to lay my hands on was scribbled in a language called Urdu, which was written from right to left. Even before the unearthing of the ancient city, the researchers of our time had already suggested the likely existence of such a language, but they could not be certain of it in the absence of solid proof. After the excavation, its existence and common use in past days became incontrovertible fact. During the process, the excavators discovered bricks inscribed in that very language.

These bricks were different, however, from the ones found in Mohenjo-daro and Harappa, in their use as well as their manufacture, for they were mainly employed for two purposes: construction and destruction. On the one hand, they were used for building, and on the other, for smashing the windows of automobiles and buses, which would then be left to rust away, or on occasion the buses were set on fire. The masterpiece built with these bricks, however, was an edifice built by a group of dissenters with a brick and a half—the proverbial "Mosque of a brick and a half." Following this tradition, a building would be fabricated in such a way that one could not distinguish, by observation, whether the building was being raised or razed. Then, soon enough, nothing of the bricks remained, nor the people who made and used them.

After further excavation, the searchers discovered huge stores of manuscripts, discourses, and innumerable publications, for this city must have been at some point in history a center for libraries, educational institutions, and printing presses. Seeing this evidence, the researchers let the horses of their imagination run wild and came up with remarkable conclusions. First they tried to map out the actual area of the city. On the site of the present-day city there used to be a dense forest where caravans were looted in broad daylight; it was a haunt of the decoits. Gradually, the decoits did not feel restricted to the confines of the jungle, and decent people would be robbed left and right in the middle of the city. The decoits would appear in the bazaars in broad daylight and rob jewelers and cloth-merchants and customers by the thousands, with such thoroughness that their victims were left with only the clothes on their backs. Bang, bang! They would enter a bank and would not leave until they had scoured the safes clean to the last penny. Now, where a city once bustled with life, there stands only desolation, yet we have a handful of ruins and remnants of the bygone era. At first, the language in which the excavated letters, discourses, and other publications were written was considered quite bizarre. As researchers worked on the question of the mysterious tongue, they eventually concluded that during its heyday the same language, Urdu, had been the national language of this very country, or come close to being one. Since everything that was adopted as a national symbol in the era of the upheaval had first been disgraced, then annihilated, the language too, once popular and respected, fell into disgrace upon being anointed the national language, then ceased to exist. Another group of researchers maintains, however, that it was never the national language, only a link language. But, as the restless tribes and different ethnic groups during that time of mad chaos used to say, "Link—big

deal. Like a whelp baring its fangs at mastiffs." So the men of courage and great ardor finally did away with this language too, as they had done away with other means of linking and connecting, and thus became free of any bonds of connectedness.

Thus I thought it imperative to acquaint myself with this extinct language, but had no idea how to achieve this. But as the saying goes, one who seeks, finds, and in my wanderings I chanced upon an old man whose forefathers had been famous *panvaris* of their times and had inhabited the very town which the ancients' books refer to as Lalu Khet. Learning of the honorable man's acquaintance with the language, I felt as though a rare pearl had fallen into my lap. As though I had lost the use of my limbs and given up the world, I stationed myself at the door of his house. In the beginning, the old man refused to yield, insisting that the language was a family secret which he was not allowed to reveal. The eldest person in the family, he said, is the only custodian of the secret, and it is he who, before dying, summons the next heir, whispers something into the heir's ear, embraces the heir, and closes his eyes. That is how the treasure of Urdu, he said, has traveled, locked in one breast after another, to reach me. Now it will be passed on to the next rightful owner in the family. You are a stranger, how can I divulge it to you? But this lowly writer was not to be put off and did not budge from his door. I put up with his insults, filled up his hookah with tobacco, but would not leave his threshold. In the end, the old man took pity; he realized that my passion was pure, and that to send me away empty-handed would violate the rules of kindness. Thus he taught me a smattering of the Urdu language and lit the fire of knowledge in my heart. The old sage recounted a few tales he had heard from his elder, who in turn had heard them from his elder, and so on. Then I shook the dust from the memoirs and historical documents that had been recently unearthed. Praised be to God! after much research and close scrutiny I am able to recount, if only fragmentarily, a few events from that era, and also to show how famous men, each one greater than the last, vanished into the palace of oblivion.

The circumstances of those days strike me as quite peculiar, and the people most unusual; there seem to have existed things so strange that despite a thousand proofs a listener would still remain unconvinced of their existence. Would you believe, dear reader, that there were flowers then which exuded fragrance? Among them a flower called *chambeli*, matchless in its pristine whiteness and scent. But they made it the national flower and it came to be displayed in every garden, and, thus cheapened, gradually ceased to exist. Along with that, the chroniclers

cited another flower called *motia*. It had the good fortune not to be the national flower, and so survived and enjoyed a longer life. That it too possessed fragrance is undisputed by the researchers, though they are still undecided about its color. Historians do say, color aside, that waves of fragrance wafted from it, and women would tie a string of those flowers around their hairbuns. It is extremely difficult to express in words what a hairbun is, but "hairbun," "braid," and "*dupatta*" are all items that deserve our serious attention. Only briefly will I mention that the women of those days had a strange affinity for letting their hair grow. If the hair was wound over the head, it was called a bun, and if plaited and left hanging, then a braid. In ancient books of history one finds plenty of pictures of such women. This Lalu Kheti sage once told me that one of his elders, who had seen it with his own eyes, described to him a woman with extremely long hair who had even added a tassel at the end of her braid, letting it sway against her waist. This woman also wore a piece of very light fabric over her breasts, exquisitely accentuating her two moons by its many folds. Perhaps that piece of fabric was called a *dupatta*.

I have referred to the old man from Lalu Khet as a *panvari*, and thus a brief comment on that word is in order, for it would be good to learn a little about the people belonging to the lower strata of society in that era. My research shows that the word *panvari* meant a person who sold *pans*. But what is *pan*? My research on that continues. Ancient physicians have inventoried various roots and plants along with their unique qualities, yet the qualities of the *pan* plant baffle the mind, and one would need an entire volume to convey even the gist of it. I hope, indeed, to attempt it before my work is done. But for right now, it will suffice to know that it was a leaf which was folded around one hundred and one *masalas* before people put it in their mouths. Soon after it was eaten, the tongue would turn as red as a parrot's beak, and the eater would be inspired to extemporize ghazals. Consequently, whoever ate *pan* tossed out a ghazal, too, and whoever tossed out a ghazal was inevitably a *pan*-eater. So *pan* was synonymous with ghazal, and the ghazal's popularity owed more to the *pan* than to the talent of the poets. Now the *pan* is a fabled bird and the ghazal extinct. The goat of time has grazed the two to nothing. So now one must explain to people, though they still do not understand, what a unique gift *pan* was, and what wonders the ghazal-reciters! But in those times, both were in abundance. The *pan*-sellers were found in every lane, and the ghazal-reciters came in wave after wave. In Lalu Khet, especially, they teemed like cockroaches. They considered themselves the Fifth Rider among the other fops and dandies of the era, but it seemed the horse had

dashed ahead from between their thighs, and that is why in the modern dictionary, with much talent and sophistication, they have translated Fifth Rider as Fifth Nation. When it rains it pours! By the grace of God, a new nation sprouted with every dawn.

In putting together this brief history of things and events, the hardest part of all is to address the ghazal. If to err is human, then to write is human too, and so there seems to have been an army of ghazal-poets like an ever rising wave, and poets of other kinds besides, flexing their muscles in different genres, poets who seem to have generated heaps of new ideas on various subjects. Indeed, we too have prose writers who have experimented with prose in every possible way and have planted flowers of a thousand colors in the Garden of Paper. Shall I be able to contain a river in the guglet of this brief history? But as God helps those who help themselves, I have girded my loins and set to the task.

Praise be to the True Lord, for though he created so many of us, each face is different, and the same was true for the ghazal-poets, for though they all wrote the same ghazal, each ghazal was different. Each poet was a bird of a unique variety, chirping in its own unique twitter. One precept, however, was shared among them: that the literati must affirm the Truth in the face of a tyrant. Yet, in the words of Ahmad Mashkook, alias Suspicious, that was the very thing missing from their works. Ahmad Mashkook, too, was a poet with his own distinct style. And he too wrote a chronicle, which is now lost.

This humble supplicant has searched through countless libraries in pursuit of that chronicle and found it nowhere, but if he had, it would have stripped the veil off all the writers of that time. Only a few fragmented statements of his have reached me. The little I have been able to find out regarding his personal life so far is this: He was a native Lukhnavi who was born in Amritsar; he came to Lahore after emigrating and decided to call it home, for he preferred a settled existence; he became a permanent fixture in a teahouse that was an ancient landmark. Only once in a while would he step out, as though with the intention to look at the color of the sky, and standing by the sidewalk glower as the cars driven by money-hoarders, high officials, and their toadies zipped by. The sight would enrage him, and he would return to his table for another cup of tea. Once, in the midst of writing a ghazal, he was seized with the passion for speaking the Truth and unleashed a river of prose from his pen—his chronicle—setting down all the details about the hypocrite writers of the time, who according to him were agents of the CIA. In fact, he was a man with the eyes of a saint and knew the inner designs of evil-minded people

by looking at their faces. Knowing the future of the nation, he was in a constant state of mourning and would express his sadness to see so many people obsessively mimicking American ways. One day, in his usual state of grieving, he was smitten by a burst of rage and burned his house down, and after everything had turned to ash, he stood up as if freed of every burden. Taking his wife and children along, he set out on a journey, and when the neighbors asked where he was off to, he answered, "To try my luck at the Doorstep where the rest of the nation goes to prostrate itself." Saying that, he departed and disappeared into the ghostly jungles of New York.

Ahmad Mashkook had the honor of being the pupil of Ustad Mansoor. Ustad Mansoor was a rare gem of a sage, sharp-eyed as a hawk in the art of pigeon-flying and equally keen at reciting ghazals. The pigeon leaving his grasp would turn into a star, and a couplet leaving his lips, into a heart-piercing arrow. Other famous teachers, known for their excellence in both domains, bowed to his talents and avoided competing with him. But through a hand of bad luck, a cloud of locusts did away with his pigeons in one fell swoop, and his collection of ghazals was stolen. He never recovered from these two blows, and departed this world leaving not a pigeon nor a couplet to posterity.

It appears to have been a strangely depressing time. Everyone was fighting someone: faction against faction, region against region, brother against brother, poet against poet. Narrow-mindedness and a culture of accusation prevailed and brotherhood ceased to exist; tales of someone killing his own brother were commonplace. Two patriarchs who were the greatest usurpers and evildoers of their time remained at loggerheads with each other for fifty years. Their pens kept rolling with such zeal that their towering accomplishments came to be referred to as minarets of skulls. One of them, Shadeed Ali, more ruthless than death itself, never once unsheathed his sword nor laid down his pen. It has been brought to my attention, dear reader, that even when he slept, his pen did not cease writing. Thus countless articles were written in a state of sleep, but with such mastery that each one robbed the man's opponent of his sleep.

The business of saints and disciples was much in vogue in those days. Foremost of all the saints was Pir Shitabi the Hasty, who made the *Shitabia* order famous. He held a high official position as well. Kings appeared on the chessboard of that era and were continually checkmated, but not he. On the contrary, he kept climbing up the ladder of progress. Then he suddenly grew disenchanted with his high official position, and one day, in a fit of restlessness, he said, "O dear ones, I am off!" and dis-

appeared forever. Only his wooden clogs were left behind. A kitchen has been excavated in recent years where the workers have found a pair of clogs buried under the manuscripts of a number of TV serials, and a cast-iron skillet under tons of earth. Analysts are certain that this is the same kitchen where Huma Bano would sit cooking dinner and writing her plays. She had been known to complete a play in the time it took her to cook a meal, and this was due to the blessing of Pir Shitabi's clogs, which she always kept in a niche built next to the hearth. Also, be it known that the cast-iron skillet was first a utensil for cooking a novelty called a *chapati*, but when the chaos of the upheaval befell them, people started to tie it on top of their heads like a helmet.

Munshi Safi too belonged to the order of *Shitabia*. In his early days, he had been an apostle of Freud and wandered long in the thankless valley of sexual psychology. Then, once he had the chance to sit at Pir Shitabi's feet, he became one of the *Shitabias* and did not budge from his threshold, making that seat his permanent abode in the belief that whatever he was going to find, he would find there. After Pir Shitabi vanished, Munshi Safi lived in anguish for a long time. Then one day he received a message in a dream, grabbed his pen, and did not rise from his seat until he had finished an entire treatise, which he called *The Utterances of Shitabi*. In it he recorded in detail Pir Sahib's saintly graces. On another occasion a strange and sudden madness possessed him and he set to rewriting the Tales of Amir Hamza in a modern idiom. His new version filled page after page, to the point that the original Tales of Amir Hamza blushed with shame as though dust in its presence, then turned to dust itself. It is recorded that during the chaos and unrest, a crowd of ignorant, untutored people set fire to his house, and the Tale burned for three days and three nights.

Yaqeen Kandhalvi was Huma Bano's husband; he wasted the precious years of his youth writing short stories, but once he came to his senses, he made a vow to abstain from this and turned to producing moral literature. God blessed him in his new pastime, for the demand for this sort of book increased. He was also among the followers of Pir Shitabi and was a member of the Admonishment Order. People thought of him as the dog of the world, but behind the veil of this reputation he climbed the rungs of spirituality, filling his heart with the divine light of knowledge. Some researchers suspect that his knowledge was of a worldly nature. Only God knows the truth.

Another name worthy of mention is Gumnam Samarqandi; he was very proud of his ancestral link to Samarqand, and to recite a ghazal and

lament were among his prime occupations. Weeping, one day, he left town in the hopes of reaching Holy Karbala, but the devil turned his feet astray, and he found himself in the wonder-jungle of London. When he first set his eyes on the Frankish-houris, his last few strands of good sense slipped from his grasp. He held out his hand to a houri par excellence. This was to invite disaster, for a huge black giant the size of an elephant appeared and gave him a shove so forceful that when he opened his eyes, he found himself back in his familiar, desolate abode. He would emit an anguished sigh and say, I have seen her once, and desire but to see her once more. Thus he spent half his life weeping and the rest emitting anguished sighs.

Qalandar Falki, his contemporary and close friend, was an expert astrologer and a poet as well. He harbored only one desire in life—to encounter at least one person who could be called a true Muslim. He used to moan at the moral state of his friend Gumnam Samarqandi, complaining that he had only one friend, and that one a heretic, and if the officials labeled him a non-Muslim, then Qalandar Falki would have to part with the right to offer prayers at his funeral. He had known other sorrows of this nature, and sadness gnawed at him continually. Finally, he became possessed, and one day as he was reciting a ghazal, he stood up and tore the ghazal in two. He mounted his horse and went off to the jungle, never to return to the city again. His work was lost during the great unrest.

In the same era, there lived a poet known for her thousand qualities. She had a pleasant name, Ghairet Naheed, she was a bulwark for those in need in Pakistan, and a nightingale in the orchard of the Urdu language. Her words were rainbows with seven shades of meaning; her mastery in every field, every art form, was unquestionable, including both poetry and prose; she played countless tricks in the genre of the prose poem, and had also acquired a reputation for making the tenderest of *koftas*, such that any writer who ate them became a fixture at her dining table. She was equally popular among the rebels and the bureaucrats, and enjoyed an equal following among atheists and the faithful.

Jamid Kashmiri: a good-for-nothing. Activities: falling in love, reading books, character-assassination of friends. He dashed off a tome of poems and handed it to friends, asking them to burn it after his death, but the friends understood the signal and had them published. That was how he came to be a published poet. He knew sorcery; he would recite a new charm each night before going to bed, and when he awoke in the morning he would find a coin worth two rupees under his pillow. Some

maintained that he worked black magic.

Salim Ali, Aslamur Rahman, Salimul Haq: these names have appeared in different places in connection with the same author. This writer believes, however, that the actual name was different and had a pleasant ring to it. This man spoke seven languages and was revered as a stylist. He wrote Chaucerian English and composed Urdu in the style of Mulla Vajhi. Educated people would sit with dictionaries by their side when reading his work. What he wrote begs for further research. Dr. Memon put forth what he claimed were English translations of this author's Urdu short stories, but the originals have remained untraceable. When researchers failed to discover the Urdu versions, they opined that the stories had been written in English by the honorable Professor himself, who out of friendship had given credit for them to the distinguished writer in question.

Abid Sajid—vocation: romancer. He has been credited with turning the short story into a veritable puzzle. Meanings appeared in his stories like fireflies in a dark night. Only the experts could catch them, hiding them inside their caps and then pulling them out to astound people.

It is thought that around the same time there lived a woman named Sita Haran, who rewrote the Ramayana in a contemporary idiom. Her style was considered unique, for she wrote Sanskrit in Urdu and Urdu in English. She spent some time in this land, but one day made the mistake of crossing the Lakshman-*rekha*[1] and was led astray; afterwards she was seen in the land of Hind. She left her precious stones and jewelry behind her, though.

Muftakhir Jullabi belonged to the *Jullabi* order and fathered a new style of speech. If by mistake an easy word made its way into one of his sentences, he would cross out the entire thing. Once when his readers claimed to have understood the meaning of one of his poems, he removed the poem from his collected works. People would listen to his verses and shake their heads, unable to grasp what was meant. Those who did understand them, shook their heads even more. In his last days he became obsessed with the idea of inventing a completely new language. It was as if he had sculpted a clay man but the charmed water spilled before he could sprinkle it on, so the clay creature, on the point of coming to life,

[1]This was the line that Lakshman drew with his arrow around Lord Rama's and Sita's home so she would not follow Lord Rama to the jungle. But Ravana, disguised as a deer, entices her to cross the line.

reverted to its inanimate state. This jumbled Muftakhir Jullabi's brain, and he began frothing pure gibberish. The other followers of the *Jullabia* order believed the gibberish to be the newly invented language and began using it in their modern poetry.

Aali Gohar Jamali: he was among the handsomest princes of Jahanabad, but when the waters of Jahanabad flowed in the direction of Karachi, he too was swept along. He was very fond of petting birds, but most of his birds turned on him and, with a hostile flash of their eyes, flew away. He was so patriotic that he gave up poetry altogether and took to writing national anthems. But it was as though the chicken gave up its life for the diners who didn't care for its taste, for the demanders of patriotism did not value his brand of it. This caused him to grow melancholic. He railed at working writers and went to all lengths to aid the poor unfortunates who were not among them.

Kismet was fundamentally a revolutionary poet, but then he turned revolutionary, and revolution took care of his poetry. And time took care of the revolution. No matter what path he took, a black cat always managed to cross in front of him, causing the whole building to collapse thunderously. It was discovered that all this was due to the spell of a sorcerer. So a rival sorcerer got hold of a black cat of his own and had it walk past to break the spell. This affair affected him so deeply that the elderly Muqaddar, who previously considered despair the gravest sin, now succumbed to it himself. He was known to lament that he had wasted half his life writing Urdu and the other half longing for revolution.

Then there was Mian Mustafsir Tirar Kheli, whom a few researchers have mentioned as Mustaghfir Tarar Kheli, some as Mustashriq Tarad, and others as Mustadrik Tarari. The latest research shows him as Mustasim Tarar Kheli. This name created countless twists of the tongue for its speakers, but this only made him all the more famous. As if his feet were a whirlwind, he was always on the move; he was like a tool for measuring the earth, forever traveling and forever writing travelogues. Movement is a blessing, as they say, and God had blessed his pen, which was never still. He also had the distinction of having written more travelogues of his journeys than the number of journeys he took; his travelogues, placed end to end, were longer than the Great Wall of China. Literary mimics found the form a sure thing and earnestly took up their pens. Soon anyone who made a single journey generated a pyramid of travelogues. Then a handful of others, stricken with jealousy, decided that even if they were not blessed with the means to travel, they ought not to be deprived of the right to produce travelogues. So they set to work and wrote travelogues of

such stature that even Mian Mustasim Tarar laid down his pen.

Nasheb-o-Faraz (alias Rise-and-Fall) Khan wrote pleasantly, was more famous than Satan, and was extremely popular among minors; adolescent girls found his verses particularly helpful, and studded their love letters with them.

Mohajir Husain, pen-name "Hijrati," was a native of Kankar-Khera, a highly illiterate individual who lived a perfectly settled life. His Muslimness remained under suspicion and his patriotism even more so. He wrote short stories which the purists and hard-liners had trouble accepting as such. He dreamed of Kankar-Khera one night, and come morning he told his friends that he was off on a journey, and when they asked why and where, he said, to his country, and so saying he closed his eyes forever.

Naz Niazi: a poet without peer, always in an irritable mood, full of himself, constantly belittling others. He lived in the jungle of poetry like a lion, but one loath to share the space with another lion. He was an ingenious planner, but alas, every one of his plans was stolen, except for the grand scheme for the sky-kissing building of Circle of Friends with Taste, which the thief didn't touch. As long as it remained with him, this gutsy man was beset with all manner of hardship, earthly and divine. Finally one day, he rolled it inside a lump of dough and cast it into the river, and thus spent the rest of his days in peace.

Tasleem Ahmad: half man but all poet, he loved to compose couplets and enjoyed arguing as well. He preached religion tirelessly, every way he could, but it was his "Ahmad Halva" which finally brought him fame.

Shakira Nazneen was, God be praised, as beautiful as a creature of heaven. The moon-struck and the virtuous alike were enamored of her beauty of discourse and smitten by her incomparable physical charms.

Then there was Suroor Masroor, who while half as a witness, due to her womanhood, was complete as a writer.

As a few pieces of rice tasted speak volumes about the entire cauldron, this writer is of the opinion that the handful of examples provided above should suffice for an understanding of the ancient era. But then this insignificant writer, whose taste may be found lacking, ponders, "How can one enjoy the full range of the tastes and aromas simply by relishing a few pieces of rice?" Because the persons I have mentioned were only writers, who spent their lives writing and earned a place among artists. Yet one finds in that era writers who were not indebted to their pens for fame. This chronicler understood this subtle point after being driven to distraction for a long time. I rummaged through countless libraries and

manuscripts, all to no avail. I could not unearth even a single line, let alone their complete works. If I did find a piece or two, it turned out to have been written by their teachers, who had sold the work to be published under the student's name. Moreover, I had difficulty finding any reference to their works in the writings of the serious critics of the time. But I did find their names and photographs prominently displayed on the literary section of the newspapers, even more prominently displayed in TV programs, and yet more prominently in the list of literary awards.

After research and investigation, this humble chronicler concluded that the truly smart writers of the period found writing a wasteful occupation and instead resorted to the modern methods of gaining notoriety as a writer. They were of two types: signature-writers and exhibition-writers.

The signature-writers merely appended their signatures to statements published in a newspaper. Remember that the writers then wrote less and issued statements more, for this was the only method they knew of raising the banner of Truth against the tyrant of the time. I have scrutinized these statements carefully and after studied research have put together a list of the names of distinguished writers whose signatures are found in every newspaper statement. These statements are a valuable treasure indicative of the level of creativity in that era. The ones who signed thus ensured their eternal safety; the ones who missed the train veered from the principle of commitment to the cause and hence were labeled as co-opted and deniers of the Truth.

The signature-writers were generally ignored. However, a short period did come when they too were considered deserving of literary awards and gifts. That period is known as the Moonlight of Four Days. In the period of the Moonlight of Four Days every signature-writer was called a Defender of Democracy by virtue of his signatures, and the Rightful Recipient of Awards. Foreign historians speak disparagingly in their books about the era of a woman's rule, with particular reference to her father-in-law and husband, but the writer of Tears of Wives referred to that era as a golden age.

The exhibition-writers, although not overly enthusiastic about putting their signatures to newspaper declarations, were not averse to having their color photographs published in papers. They would go to all lengths in hinting that special evenings be organized in their honor, and would appear in TV commercials quite frequently as well. Patriotism had seeped into every pore of their beings, and they were the most ardent champions of Islam, for which they were amply rewarded in this world, and also ensured a good recompense in the world to come. The thought of medals

and titles bored them, but, alas, these two things pursued them unceasingly, and were showered on them every year like a rain of bliss. This trend is demonstrated by the case of Hazrat Kalanchvi, an aide-de-camp. He detested boasting of the services he had rendered to the state. But then one Truth-seeking researcher brought to light his contributions to the nation and revealed that in his youth, when the movement for the establishment of the country was at its height, he had participated in a rally and shouted slogans. When the incident was made known, the highest literary award of the time was bestowed upon him. In gratitude, he composed a poem extolling the then-ruler of the country, which was acclaimed as the most significant poetic achievement of the year and deemed worthy of a cash award. There is some indication that the writer under discussion wrote other pieces of prose and poetry along the same lines, but solid evidence is lacking. Still, that poem alone outweighs several collections put together. Another example at hand is that of Sharar Payami, who filled an entire column praising the democracy-loving, justice-working, sword-wielding ruler of the time, who rode a bicycle, and when he reached a red traffic light, came to a stop and shook the hand of the traffic constable. This column was blessed with immortal fame, and on the basis of this column its author was acclaimed as the greatest prose writer of his time. There followed a spate of columns, essays and poems in praise of the blessed bicycle and its rider. Of course, it must be acknowledged that the others only mimicked what Sharar Payami had created, but all the same, everyone profited from it to one degree or another. What had been achieved earlier could not be surpassed.

The ruler mentioned above was indeed wondrous. The other rulers of that age, of course, were quite marvelous too—those who preceded him and those who followed him. There had been a ruler who was known to sleep six months out of the year and stay awake the rest. He would issue orders while asleep, and had set aside the time when he was awake for playing dice. Once the enemy attacked his country when he had just lain down to sleep. The loyalists rushed to him to break the news, but the servant announced that he had just gone to sleep. The noise of the argument woke him up, and he inquired what the clamor was about. The loyalists answered that the enemy had descended upon them, and the sultanate was in an extremely vulnerable state. He asked why they had woken him up. They explained that half of the country had already slipped away, to which he answered, "The other half is still with us, isn't it?" and went back to sleep.

The next ruler was even a notch higher than his predecessor. He

glowed with the radiance of ingenuity, but that is to be expected from the Plato of his time. The writer of *Tears of Wives* provided some facts and commentary on him, adding that he was a larger-than-life figure with great dreams. One night he dreamed that he was riding a white horse and holding a naked sword; he tore through the enemy's ranks to assault the front wall of the Red Fort and mounted his flag there. The dream gave him a shot in the arm, but alas, as the story goes, life betrayed him. His Commander-in-chief found out through his spy network that the ruler's Head Chef had hatched a conspiracy against him. The Commander rushed on his horse to the ruler's palace where dinner arrangements had been made and all were sitting down to eat. As he entered the palace, seeing the Head of State bring the first morsel to his mouth after dipping it in the gravy, he snatched the morsel from his hand and threw it to the cat sitting nearby. The cat died the moment it swallowed, and the Commander revealed the conspiracy to the ruler. In a fit of rage, the Head of the State summoned the Head Chef and, imposing the traditional punishment, ordered him to assume the posture of a rooster. He followed the order. He then commanded the Minister to pull his ears in repentance. He did so. He then ordered him to stand facing the wall. The Head Chef complied. When the Minister completed this punishment, the Head Chef fell at the ruler's feet and cried huge crocodile tears, begging forgiveness. Feeling compassion, the ruler spared his life and said, "From now on you shall be Commander-in-chief," and he told the Commander, "And you are my new Head Chef."

His hands clasped before him, the resourceful Minister ventured to say that he failed to understand the logic behind appointing the Commander as Head Chef. The ruler explained that a person who could snatch a morsel out of his hands could snatch the kingdom from him as well. The Minister understood the wisdom behind this and praised the decision, but then asked why he had promoted the rascal who tried to kill him. The ruler answered that the conspiracy had shown him that the bastard had a good brain and that perhaps the tasks which the ruler might not be able to accomplish, the other man would. That new Commander did exactly that. Upon becoming Commander-in-chief, the first thing he did was to dispatch the ruler. After seizing the throne, he brought to completion some of the tasks left unfinished by the martyred ruler and then carried out a few of his own devising.

By virtue of his heroic feats, this ruler far surpassed his predecessors. He too had a dream: Samarqand and Bokhara stood before him while he stood atop a minaret of skulls to celebrate his victory. But the miser Life

shortchanged him as well. What emerges is that every ruler of that land dreamed a dream, but time after time, before the dream could come true, the ruler's life betrayed him, or Jews or Hindus conspired against him. Still and all, by virtue of his feats he left his predecessors far behind, even the proverbial Caliph Haroon al-Rasheed. Disguised as an ordinary person, he would venture out to the streets on a bicycle, as he was very good at bicycling and loved to shake everyone's hand. During his rule a healthy crop of at least 73 factions of Islam flourished, and his reign gave birth to many Faithful who, while crusading against idolatry, eventually began discovering idolaters among Muslims themselves. It turned out that entire factions spent their days in the bog of impiety and dwelt in the palace of humiliation and vileness. One by one, each of them was declared a non-Muslim minority, so that in the end the non-Muslim minorities were in the majority and the Muslim majority in the minority. Among the non-Muslim majority there was a great teacher by the name of Qalandar Falki, who used to say with intense longing and sadness that he wished to see just one true Muslim in his life. Helpless, in his last days he willed that his beloved friend by the name of Gumnam Samarqandi be allowed to attend his funeral, for, he reasoned, since everyone else's Muslimhood was suspect, why should someone like him, who had been his friend through thick and thin, be singled out and prevented from attending the funeral? Upon his death, family members and friends were pitted against each other on this issue in his will. The wise ones pointed out rightly that this humble man had spent his entire life on the road of asceticism and piety, but in the end left a will that turned all his piety to dross.

In that era, righteousness was highly stressed. There is evidence of crusades against pornography. The assigned staff would hunt down practitioners of nudity and pornography, bring them in by the nape of the neck, and summarily execute them. A man with twisted tastes paid dearly for the sole crime of being caught reading the fifth chapter of *Gulistan-e Sa'di*. The sages of the society liked to remain quiet, however, on the issue of "gang rape," proffering the wisdom that to err is human. This humble writer has tried his best to ascertain the meaning of the phrase "gang rape," what language it came from, and what it meant. All I have been able to find out so far is that the phrase was borrowed from English. The meaning in one Urdu dictionary comes across as "a shareable cooking-pot." Perhaps the phrase meant what it said. It is evident that the expression was quite common, as was the practice—the act of sharing the meal from one pot, we may conjecture. What also becomes evident is that the meal in the pot was never shared in the open, and it was thought wisest

that the issue not be discussed at all. But on one occasion, the pot was smashed open in public and the meal shared right in the middle of a thoroughfare, and this provoked the pot to speak up. This strange act seems to have scandalized every decent person—a pot that had the audacity to speak! According to the records, there was more than one reason to be astonished at the event. The first was that the act was against nature, because, they reasoned, the pot could be used to cook the food, it might even be passed around and shared, but speak—never! Secondly, on the very issue regarding which even the most respectful members of that society had always been silent, the pot had decided to speak up. Finally, the era in which those people lived was one of shortage and want. The population had little to wear or to eat. Hunger had sapped all energies. There was not enough strength left for horses to neigh or humans to raise their voices. In the midst of all that, a cooking-pot decides to speak! All were surprised, dumbfounded, not knowing what to make of it. One intelligent person offered that to speak is to bear witness. But the dignitaries of the society argued that this was a cooking-pot, an object with no tongue. The intelligent one offered again that among the signs of the Day of Judgment, one was that the hen would crow and the cooking-pot would speak. Given the times, this would be tantamount to bearing witness. Backed into a corner, the learned and the noble offered the compromise that since it was a cooking-pot, its witness was only a half-witness.

The history of that era is full of strange events and curious happenings, and were I to go on writing, volume after volume could be filled, but as I do not wish to burden the reader with lengthy stories, I have but chronicled some of the important events and given a mere sprinkling of information on the famous and unique personalities of that time. If life permits me, I should like to gather and write down a more detailed rendering of this Exemplary Tale. But for the time being, your humble chronicler begs that what little he has presented be deemed sufficient, and that he be allowed to end the chronicle now, on this couplet:

> The wounds of the heart must be kept ever fresh
> by revisiting often this tale of the past. ❐

—Translated by Moazzam Sheikh and Elizabeth Bell