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Smart Talib: Illustrated in Cleverness Against Cruelty

Translators's Comment: *The story of Samir vividly illustrates the pervasive fear and suffering under the Taliban's brutal administration, which masquerades as Sharia law. Written by Mr. Noori in 1997 during the first period of Taliban administration in Afghanistan, it still reflects the grim reality he envisioned with his powerful imagination, intuition, and writing aptitude.*

In this story, Samir's encounter with Mullah Gulmir exposes the extortion and manipulation rampant in the Taliban regime. The Taliban's arbitrary demands and cruel tactics, such as breaking a valuable cassette and then exploiting Samir's desperation, reveal their inhumane and oppressive rule. The constant threat and unpredictability faced by ordinary people like Samir underscore the harsh reality of living under a regime that thrives on fear and control.

These narrative paints a stark picture of a society where the Taliban's barbaric and proxy administration instils terror, dehumanizes the people, and strips away any sense of security or justice. However, they were put in power through an orchestrated plot in the Doha meeting under the guise of the peace process in Afghanistan. They committed serious crimes against civilians and infrastructure through bombing, robbery, and suicide attacks. Yet, unfortunately, their proponents, in a strategic policy pursuit, continue to engage with this unlawful administration for their interests.

During this period, the fanatic attitude has not changed at all. The people of Afghanistan currently experience the same cruelty, even harsher than in 1997. This story stands as a non-fiction tale of the current situation under which women, girls, and young educated people suffer

Written by: Sulaiman Kabir Noori, Summer 1997, Kabul.

Night had fallen over the city, transforming its once familiar landscape. The citizens gradually embraced the stillness, as the city seemed cloaked in dark clouds. Pedestrians, with thick beards, turbans, and colourful hats, wandered the streets. It felt like a Thursday, with the Taliban of Madrasas passing each other, eager to reach home for the weekend, their faces a blend of dullness and pain.

Vendors lined both sides of the road, engaged in new enterprises. Large tents covered the sidewalks, offering stale, hard bread to sombre customers. This regrettable necessity drew people with a heavy heart.

At regular intervals, armed groups from "Amr Be Maruf and Nahi Azmenkar" ("to promote virtue and prevent vice"), mockingly referred to by the youth as "Abdul Maruf Bei Nikar" ("Abdul Maruf without underwear"), filled the streets with the victory songs of Ahmad Shah Durrani's sons, blaring from the loudspeakers of Datsun cars. These

vehicles patrolled without the melody of musical instruments, their presence alone enough to inspire fear. The Datsun vehicles were as terrifying as giant armoured tanks, roaring down the road, ready to shoot at passersby.

The shadow of Taliban terror cast its dark veil over Kabul. The once beautiful city now wore a mourning black robe, happiness uprooted and gone. More than half of the residents, the women, were imprisoned in their homes by the Taliban orders. The ban on music led to cassette tapes and video cassettes being punished, hung on the branches of the city's trees. Shaken by the wind as if dancing, they flashed as a constant reminder of the oppressive regime. Watching it kept the fear of black rule awake.

At this unpleasant time, Samir Haji Qasim's father was busy organizing the wedding party of his only son.

It was Samir's wedding day. Haji Qasim leaned against the wall in the corner of the yard, chatting with Khalifa Hashem, the cook, who was busy with his tasks, a handkerchief on his shoulder. In the yard, ten to fifteen men and several young family members were occupied with their assigned tasks, cooking quickly and efficiently.

While preparing food, Khalifa Hashem placed a smoky black aluminium kettle into the cauldron fire to make green tea. He would offer it to those nearby, saying, "Take it! You've never had such hot tea in your life." Watching from under his eyebrows, he expected to hear praise, something like, "Ha, it's very tasty." And indeed, the tea was commendable.

From a distance, it was difficult to recognize people due to their thick beards. They all seemed as if they had hung the black, smoky kettle of Khalifa Hashem around their necks. Among the young men, Samir stood out in his white shirt, turban, and a black kurta delicately embroidered with Kandhari cream. With a well-balanced body, broad shoulders, fair skin, sharp eyebrows, and sheepish eyes, his thick round beard contrasted with his father's portly figure.

Haji Qasim was a rice merchant and a wealthy man. His portly figure and dark brown skin made him easily recognizable. From a distance, his stomach reminded one of "Baba Ramadan Porter," a man known for his strength, carrying fifty kilos of flour from house to house in the winding alleys of Deh Afghanan in Kabul, up to the top of the mountain, for just two or three Afghans. Haji Qasim, the rice seller, had a belly that resembled a sack of rice.

The black rule of the Taliban was so terrifying that fear and terror had spread throughout the city's alleys, and no one could see smiling lips anymore. Even a half-smile would be hidden under a beard and moustache. Getting married and celebrating a wedding, the biggest dream of a young boy and girl, was nothing more than a terrible nightmare for Samir that day. Samir wished to celebrate his wedding as grandly as possible, but he knew that wish would not be fulfilled. The city's oppressive atmosphere made every joyful gathering feel like a gathering for Quran recitation.

Samir and his cousin Hamed, who used to make their families' happy gatherings memorable with music and singing, faced a dilemma. What could they do to celebrate their wedding under the Taliban's oppressive rule? They had made their decision a week ago. Samir, with his father's agreement, had prepared one of the large rooms in the basement for a fun and music gathering. His father had bought eight flower pots, saying, "These jars will prevent the sounds of instruments and vocals from escaping the room."

That night, the wedding ceremony, organized with the participation of close families, was going well. Samir asked everyone to go to the basement, and after half an hour, everyone was there.

Hamed put on a happy, upbeat song and began dancing himself. The others clapped for him, but with trepidation and fear. It felt as if evil spirits were roaring from some invisible corner. Mari, Hamed's mother, and his grandmother, who was also Samir's great-grandmother, looked confused and fearful. They remembered the day they had raised a curtain in a shop to choose a fabric, only to feel the sting of a sudden whip on their bones.

Hamed encouraged the others to join in the dancing. Slowly, the young people came forward, enjoying themselves when suddenly a voice echoed from the gate: "Hey, the Taliban are here."

It was as if a monstrous force had risen and swallowed all the musical instruments and silenced the songs. Everyone was paralysed, their faces turning pale like statues in a museum. The cry travelled through the cold silence, freezing breaths in their chests. Hamed turned off the music in a flash and covered the equipment with a pre-prepared tent. He whispered to the audience: "Don't be scared! We have done nothing wrong. It's a wedding, and we're happy." In a lower voice, he added: "Remember, we haven't heard any music."

Samir's father, who was walking on the terrace, heard the cars stopping and warned his nephew to turn off the music. As soon as the music stopped, the alley gate bell rang, piercing their ears like an ambulance siren. Haji Qasim moved to the side of the house. His worst fear was confirmed. In front of him stood the armed Taliban men, like terrifying, wrathful sheriffs from the Middle Ages. It felt as if a powerful laser beam had penetrated his entire body, changing him in an instant. He remembered what their neighbour, Ustad Hasan, always said: "These men are more dangerous than an atomic bomb."

His heart rate doubled, echoing in his ears like the rapid movement of a train (crack-crack, crack-crack). The water in his mouth dried up, like a pitcher empty in the scorching summer heat. A Talib asked: "What is going on here?" In his 50 years of life, Haji Qasim had never experienced such a terrifying nightmare. Struggling to control himself and appear calm, he answered: "Moulavi Sahib, praise be to God, everything is good, perfect." One of the Taliban sneered: "Good and perfect, you say?" Haji Qasim stammered: "It was a wedding; it was a wedding. My son Samir Jan's wedding. Praise be to Allah, it is over. And now it is over. Praise be to Allah, we got through it perfectly well." One of the Taliban asked: "Was there music?" Haji Qasim, holding his hand over his large belly, answered obsequiously: "No, no, Moulavi Sahib, everything is perfect by the grace of God."

As the Taliban questioned Haji Qasim, several young people and children stood on the terrace at the entrance of the corridor, listening to their conversation. Everyone wore their hats.

The Taliban ensured there was no music at this wedding. One of the curious Talib approached the group of young people and children gathered at the entrance of the hall, scrutinizing their faces. Everyone feared this Talib was inspecting beards and heads, looking to punish someone with a short beard. Fortunately, everyone's beards were long and untrimmed, in accordance with Taliban rules.

At the end of the corridor, the sharp-eyed Talib spotted Mushtaq, a young man with a video camera in his hand. The Talib ordered Mushtaq to come closer, shouting, "Come on, come on!" The Talib burst into laughter, looking at his companions, and shouted aloud, "I found him myself, by God's help! I found him in my own way."

Mushtaq, a young man of medium height with a thin body, was witty and mischievous. Hearing the Talib's voice, he turned pale and began to tremble. His throat was dry, and

his mouth felt parched. He thought to himself: "Well, everything is ruined. It was all my fault. I made a mistake and ruined everything."

The young people, their hearts pounding with fear, looked at Mushtaq with oppressed and questioning eyes, wondering why he had made a fool of himself and ventured into the hallway of the basement. Feeling weak and trembling in his legs, Mushtaq slowly walked toward the Talib, while others opened a path for him. He stood in front of the Talib, head downcast. The Talib, still laughing, grabbed Mushtaq's beard and gave it a firm shake, saying: "You heretic young man, watching movies! Ignorant of Islamic Sharia law. Still committing blasphemy."

Mushtaq felt as if his chin had been plunged into boiling water. But the burning pain soon vanished, overshadowed by the fear of severe punishment and torture. The Talib took the camera from Mushtaq's hand and slapped him hard, saying: "Go ahead, let's go to the police security station."

Meanwhile, Samir and Hamed were rubbing their grandmother's hands and feet after pouring cold water on her. She had fainted upon hearing the Taliban's song. They informed Samir that, "The Taliban will take Mushtaq to the Security Zone (Police Station) with his camera."

Samir and Hamed rushed out of the basement and ran to the gate of their house. There they saw Haji Qasim pleading with the Taliban to release Mushtaq. Seeing that the Taliban were not listening to his father, Samir intervened and said to them, "The wedding is mine, and the poor man has committed no sin, he is innocent. Talk to me if you have any issues!"

The Talib with a weapon on his shoulder called out, "He is also a criminal. He is also young. We will take him with us too." All the guests were on the porch. Samir's mother, aunt, and sisters were crying. Haji Qasim advised the others to take his wife and daughters inside. He wanted to go to the police station with Samir, Hamed, and Mushtaq. But who could calm the crying and whimpering of his wife and daughters? Samir's mother came to the gate, moaning and crying.

"Where are you taking my Samir? Where are you taking the piece of my heart? Where are you taking our groom?" Samir's sisters started crying, saying: "Oh God! What sort of day have you faced us with? Oh God, please listen to us."

Seeing Hamed with Samir and Mushtaq, Haji Qasim returned to calm his wife and bring her back home. The Taliban, who had arrived in two Datsun cars, left with Samir and Hamed in one car and Mushtaq in the other. The three so-called "criminals" had no idea what fate awaited them. As the cars moved, most of the women, girls, and children began to cry.

The space of Haji Qasim's home had turned into chaos on the night of his son's wedding. The women's cries and wails broke the night's silence far and wide. The darkness had opened its arms and was eagerly chasing away the light.

Samir and Hamed sat in the first car, both distressed over the video recording of the wedding now in the hands of the Taliban. They wondered if this video would have any unfortunate consequences for them. Hamed glanced at Samir with a furtive look and regretfully thought, "What kind of trouble has he suffered on this wedding night?"

The Talib who had taken the camera from Mushtaq sat in the back seat with Samir and Hamed. After a moment, Samir slowly and calmly turned to the Talib and said, "Look, Sir, you are a young man like me and other young people, with many aspirations and wishes. But my only wish in my life was my wedding and its impressions and memories, which are contained in this wedding cassette and nothing else. You seem like a blunt and zealous young man. If you do me a favour and give me this cassette, you and God will be pleased, and you will make me very happy. How does it sound, brother?"

The Talib heard Samir's plea but said nothing in response. Meanwhile, the driver of the car turned to the Talib who had "hunted" the camera and said with a laugh, "Mullah Sahib Gulmir, surely you are very smart." The Talib, whose name turned out to be Mullah Gulmir, replied, "Do you still doubt my intelligence?" The driver responded, "No, no, Mullah Sahib, I knew from your past that you are a very clever person." Both Taliban laughed.

Samir thought he should make good use of this opportunity and said softly to Mullah Gulmir, "Look, a young man is requesting, listen to me today as a young man!" Again, the Talib said nothing, holding his weapon between his legs with his fingers around the trigger.

After about twenty minutes, the cars stopped in front of the security area. The car doors opened, and a voice was heard saying, "Finish." Everyone got out. Mullah Gulmir, carrying a weapon in one hand and a camera in the other, asked the others to follow

him, walking ahead like a hero. They entered the foyer, and Mullah Gulmir opened the gate of one of the rooms and ordered, "Take off your hats; enter again." He instructed the other Taliban to go to their rooms.

The three "accused" entered the room with Mullah Gulmir. There was no one inside. The office had a large carpet and a mattress with a red pillow on top. Although all the windows were open, the room was full of the stench of foot sweat, which burned their noses and changed the state of all three "criminal hostages."

Mullah Gulmir opened the gate and called out, "Maulavi Saeb! Where are you?" A voice, neither distinctly male nor female, responded: "I am coming right now. I am performing ablution for the night prayer."

Moments later, a Maulavi with a fawn-colored beard, thin but long, entered the room. He was rolling down his sleeves after ablution, using his maxi-like skirt to dry his face. When he entered, the "accused" greeted him formally: "Assalamu alaikum wa Rahmat Ullah wa Tohu. (Peace and mercy of Allah be upon you.)" With a brief nod, he replied: "Wa alaikum Salam, (same to you)."

He adjusted his turban while straightening his beard with his fingers, then asked Mullah Gulmir: "What have these boys done?" Mullah Gulmir replied: "They had a wedding ceremony that did not adhere to the Muhammadian Sharia and the rules of the Islamic Emirate of the Taliban. There was no music, but they were filming. We arrested and brought them here."

The Maulavi asked: "Who are the witnesses?" Mullah Gulmir extended his hand towards Mushtaq and replied, "No, it was this young man who was filming. The others were the wedding organizers." The Maulavi stood up and repeated twice, "Lord, repentance, penitence! These men do not understand Islamic law at all." He then commanded, "Mullah Gulmir, break the camera in front of me first. Tell this filmmaker to come back tomorrow; his head will be shaved dry in the morning. Because he committed a major sin, he will receive 120 lashes. The other two, for their minor sins, will receive 60 lashes each. This is a Sharia and Islamic decision." Mullah Gulmir responded: "I myself am a witness." The Maulavi asked further: "Were all of them filming?"

Mullah Gulmir, addressing Samir, said: "I need to perform the night prayer before it is missed." Samir was deeply disappointed, and fear gripped his heart. Listening to Mulla Gulmir's words, he lowered his head in regret and remained silent. Mulla Gulmir

repeated: "Yes, I am a blunt man, zealous! Speak! If I give you the filmed cassette, how much will you pay?" Shocked, Samir realized that asking for the cassette was a mistake, and now he would pay for it. Mulla Gulmir repeated his question: "I said, how much might you pay?" Samir replied, "Mullah Sahib, the cassette disappeared and was smashed. I don't want anything else anymore." Mulla Gulmir persisted: "If it were available, how much would it be worth?" Samir responded, "It was very valuable to me, Mullah Sahib." Mulla Gulmir asked, "If I give you the cassette, will you give me two hundred thousand rupees (Afghanis)?"

Samir wondered what other plans Mulla Gulmir had in mind. He knew that the Taliban had started extorting money during those days. They even took money from the coffin of a migrant family being transported from Pakistan to Afghanistan through the Torkham border. Samir said again, "There is no one now, Mullah Sahib." Mulla Gulmir took out a cassette from his inner vest pocket and said, "The cassette I broke with my foot was an Indian film cassette. This is your real filmed cassette."

Samir looked at the tape with doubt, then saw it was labelled: "The second tape of the wedding of Samir Jan and Mahnaz Jan." Realizing that the Talib was telling the truth, Samir pressed the cassette to his chest, breathed deeply, and took out all the money in his pocket, handing it to Mulla Gulmir. "Mullah Sahib, thank you immensely. Take this money; it is almost four hundred thousand." Then he cautiously and helplessly added, "Can we go now?"

Mulla Gulmir, who was laughing, quickly pocketed the money and opened the gate. He instructed the security guard, "Let those people go." Mulla Gulmir whispered something in Samir's ear and prayed for him. Samir, Hamed, and Mushtaq left the Taliban's security area. Each heaved a deep sigh, feeling as if they had found strong wings to fly away from disaster.

Samir remembered Mulla Gulmir's words as he prayed for him: "Don't think of me as a stupid Taliban! I am a vigilant, smart Talib.

The end.