

The
MAN
Who Still Walks
BESIDE ME

A MEMOIR OF FRIENDSHIP,
LOVE, AND LOSS

WASEEM BARI



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Dedication

To *Madiha*, *Maliha*, and *Inaaya*

This memoir is lovingly dedicated to the three greatest treasures of your father's life. To the world, he was a scholar, a teacher, a colleague, and a friend. To me, he was a brother in spirit whose presence enriched my life beyond measure. But before he was any of these, he was your *Baba*.

There was a quiet radiance that appeared on his face whenever he spoke about the three of you. His words carried pride, his eyes reflected hope, and his heart overflowed with prayers. He wished nothing more fervently than to see each of you grow into women of dignity, compassion, wisdom, and unwavering faith, women whose lives would be marked not merely by personal success but by meaningful service to humanity.

There is one more aspect of your father's life that I cannot leave unmentioned. Whenever he spoke about your mother, Rafi, it was with unmistakable respect, genuine affection, and heartfelt gratitude. Never once did I hear him speak of her in any manner that diminished her. Instead, his words consistently reflected appreciation for the companionship, understanding, and strength she brought into his life. As a friend, I came to admire not only the love he held for his family but also the dignity with which he spoke of the woman who shared his journey. In remembering him, I also remember, with deep respect, the quiet partnership that helped shape the home in which the three of you were nurtured with love and values.

Although this memoir is primarily the story of our friendship, I hope it also becomes a window through which you may discover another side of your father, the young student who laughed wholeheartedly, the loyal friend who stood steadfast in every season of life, the compassionate son who never ceased to miss his mother, the devoted son who remained concerned for his father until his very last breath, the loving brother whose affection never diminished, the teacher who inspired many, and above all, the remarkable human being whose goodness touched countless lives.

No book can ever contain an entire life. There will always be memories too sacred for words and moments too precious for paper. Yet within these pages lives *the Zamir* I was blessed to know, the friend who still accompanies me in my thoughts, my conversations, and the values by which I strive to live.

May you always find strength in the legacy he has left behind. May you carry forward the kindness, integrity, humility, and love that defined his life. And may you always know that your father continues to live, not only in your hearts, but also in the memories of the many lives he quietly transformed.

With affection, respect, and prayers.

Waseem Chachu

The Soil That Nurtured Our Friendship

Every story has its visible characters. There are also silent characters, those that never utter a word, yet influence every conversation, every relationship, and every destiny. This memoir revolves around the life of my beloved friend, Dr. Zamir Ahmed Bhat, and the extraordinary bond we shared over more than three decades. Yet, there is another protagonist whose presence quietly permeates every page of this book. That protagonist is Aligarh Muslim University (AMU).

Before I recount the memories of a friendship that has become one of the greatest blessings of my life, I consider it both a privilege and a moral obligation to bow my head in gratitude before the institution that made such a friendship possible. It is impossible to narrate our journey without first acknowledging the visionary who dreamt of an educational movement that would transform generations, not merely by imparting knowledge but by shaping character, broadening minds, and nurturing humanity.

That visionary was *Sir Syed Ahmad Khan*.

History remembers Sir Syed as an educationist, a reformer, a philosopher, and the founder of one of the greatest educational movements in the Indian subcontinent. Yet, these descriptions scarcely capture the magnitude of his contribution. He understood, long before many of his contemporaries, that ignorance was a greater enemy than poverty and that education was not merely a means of earning

a livelihood but the foundation upon which a community could rebuild its dignity.

In the aftermath of the Revolt of 1857, when despair had engulfed large sections of Indian Muslims and opportunities for modern education appeared distant, Sir Syed refused to surrender to hopelessness. Instead, he chose to build. He believed that the path to revival did not lie in isolation but in embracing modern scientific education while remaining rooted in one's moral and cultural values. This philosophy eventually culminated in the establishment of the Muhammadan Anglo-Oriental College, which later evolved into the Aligarh Muslim University (AMU).

More than a century has passed since that remarkable vision took shape. Today, its influence extends far beyond the boundaries of the Aligarh campus. Thousands of scholars, scientists, administrators, judges, diplomats, physicians, engineers, artists, teachers, entrepreneurs, and public servants across the world trace a part of their intellectual ancestry to AMU, Aligarh. Its alumni have served nations, advanced science, enriched literature, strengthened institutions, and inspired countless young minds. The impact of Sir Syed's dream cannot be measured merely by buildings or degrees; it is reflected in generations of people who learned to think critically, live honorably, and serve society.

I count myself fortunate to be one among those countless beneficiaries. When I entered Aligarh Muslim University as a young undergraduate student in Physics, I imagined that I was merely joining a university. I soon realised that I had entered an entire civilization of learning.

The classrooms certainly educated us, but Aligarh's education never ended when the lectures concluded. Learning continued

in the hostel corridors, in the dining halls, on the walkways lined with old trees, in the canteens, at the famous *dhabas*, and during countless evening conversations that often stretched late into the night. Every corner of the campus seemed to encourage dialogue.

The hostel system, perhaps more than any formal curriculum, became a remarkable institution in itself. Students from every corner of India, and often from different parts of the world, shared the same rooms, the same mess, the same tea, the same joys, and the same hardships. Language ceased to be a barrier. Religion became a subject of respectful curiosity rather than division. Regional identities slowly gave way to a larger identity, that of being an *Aligarian*.

The diversity one encountered every single day was itself an education. A student from Kashmir debated ideas with another from Kerala. Someone from Rajasthan shared stories with a classmate from Assam. Opinions differed. Ideologies clashed. Yet friendships flourished. One learned not merely to argue but to listen. One discovered that wisdom often resides in perspectives different from one's own. It was within this extraordinary environment that my friendship with Zamir blossomed.

Looking back today, I often realise that had we met elsewhere, perhaps we would still have become acquaintances. But only AMU could have transformed acquaintances into brothers. There was something magical about the culture of conversation that Aligarh nurtured. The famous *dhabas* around the university were not merely places where students came to satisfy their hunger. They were informal academies. Cups of tea often lasted longer than the conversations they accompanied. Discussions moved effortlessly from physics to philosophy, from poetry to politics, from economics to ethics,

from religion to science, from world affairs to the smallest incidents of everyday life. No one needed an invitation to join a discussion. One simply pulled up a chair. Ideas were welcomed before identities. Arguments were appreciated more than agreement. Respect was earned through sincerity rather than status. Those evenings quietly taught us something that no textbook ever could, *the art of thinking*.

Our debates were never about defeating another person. They were about discovering another perspective. It was during these countless conversations that I saw Zamir's extraordinary intellect unfold. Although formally trained in Political Science and later in West Asian Studies, he moved effortlessly across disciplines. He could discuss international relations with remarkable clarity, explain social movements with uncommon sensitivity, appreciate literature with refined taste, and then, to my amazement, explain my own research in physics to others with astonishing accuracy.

I often wondered whether universities produce such individuals or whether remarkable individuals simply happen to study there. Today, I believe the answer lies somewhere in between. Exceptional individuals certainly possess rare gifts, but institutions like AMU provide the soil in which those gifts find nourishment. The university never asked us merely to become professionals. It encouraged us to become thoughtful human beings. It taught us that disagreement need not become hostility, that knowledge demands humility, and that education is incomplete unless it enlarges both intellect and compassion. Many years have passed since those youthful evenings in Aligarh. Life scattered us across different cities, responsibilities, and professions. Time claimed many things that once seemed permanent. Some friendships faded. Some dreams changed. Some companions departed forever. Yet the

values that AMU quietly planted within us have endured. Even today, whenever I engage in meaningful dialogue, encourage a student to think independently, appreciate a viewpoint different from my own, or find joy in an evening conversation over a simple cup of tea, I realise that a part of Aligarh still lives within me.

And so does Zamir.

As I place these memories before my readers, I offer my deepest gratitude to Sir Syed Ahmad Khan, not only for founding a university but for creating an intellectual tradition that continues to illuminate lives across generations.

I also express my heartfelt gratitude to Aligarh Muslim University, whose classrooms educated our minds, whose hostels taught us companionship, whose *dhabas* nurtured friendships, whose diversity broadened our vision, and whose culture of dialogue transformed young students into lifelong seekers of knowledge.

If this memoir is, at its heart, the story of an enduring friendship, then Aligarh Muslim University is the fertile soil in which that friendship first took root, grew, flourished, and became one of the greatest blessings of my life. For that priceless gift, my gratitude shall remain lifelong.

Waseem Bari

Enrolment No.: X-4595

The Hands That Held Him

No life is lived in isolation.

If this memoir tells the story of one extraordinary friendship, it also quietly acknowledges the many friendships that enriched Zamir's life. Throughout these pages, readers will encounter moments that belonged to just the two of us. Yet there were countless other moments that I never witnessed, countless conversations I never heard, and innumerable acts of kindness that took place beyond my presence. They, too, are part of the story, even if they remain unwritten.

Zamir had a rare gift for making people feel valued. He built friendships effortlessly and nurtured them with remarkable sincerity. Wherever life took him, from the corridors of AMU, Aligarh to the lecture halls of the schools where he taught, from academic conferences to neighborhood gatherings, he left behind people who remembered him with affection, admiration, and respect.

It is neither possible nor fair for me to recount every relationship or every shared memory. Nor could I mention every name within the chapters of this memoir without interrupting the natural flow of the narrative. Yet I would consider this book incomplete if I did not pause to acknowledge those whom Zamir cherished and who, in turn, cherished him.

There are friendships that are built by two people, and there are friendships that are quietly nurtured by the presence of many others. As I look back upon my years with Zamir, I

realise that our friendship did not grow in isolation. It blossomed within a remarkable circle of friends whose companionship transformed ordinary days into some of the most cherished memories of our lives. I hesitate to call this an acknowledgement, for to acknowledge them would almost suggest that they stood outside our story. They did not. They were part of it. They laughed with us, argued with us, shared meals, dreams and disappointments with us. The story of my friendship with Zamir would lose much of its colour, its joy and its meaning if these dear companions were not remembered.

With affection and gratitude, I recall Khalid Ayaz, Dr. Jaleel Ahsan, Abdul Rahman (Tinku), Ajaz Ahmad (CPO), Zia Ahmad Khan (PO), Ruheed Gul, Dr. M. Amin Mir, Shahid Malik, Safdar, Dr. Fayaz Ahmad (SKUAST), Shaida Fayaz, Dr. Fayaz Ahmad (Islamic Studies), Shabir Hussain (KAS), Saadat Khaki, Dr. Younus Iqbal Bhat, Dr. Tariq Bhat (Botany), Dr. Primrose, Dr. Ghulam Nabi Dar, Bashir A. Ganaie, Dr. Shabir Dar, Dr. Farooq Dar, Dr. Rafiq Zargar, and Arshad Hussain. Whether they realise it or not, each of them occupies a cherished place in the memories that this memoir seeks to preserve. Their friendship was not merely a backdrop to our lives; it was one of the foundations upon which our bond was built.

Beyond this close-knit circle were many others whose affection, care and companionship enriched Zamir's life, particularly during his years as a teacher and in the difficult period of his illness. Some of them I had the privilege of meeting personally, while many others I came to know only through Zamir's heartfelt words. He spoke of them with deep respect and genuine affection, and through his stories I came to appreciate the goodness they brought into his life. To his

colleagues in the Department of Education, his friends, well-wishers and all those who stood beside him with kindness and sincerity, I offer my heartfelt gratitude. I would especially like to remember Abdul Qayoom Zargar, Sheikh Tasleem Arif, Nisar Ahmad (DLO), Nisar Ahmad (DDC), Ruheed Gul, Sajad Ahmad (Education Department), Ghulam Rasool Bhat, Farooq Ahmad Sheikh, Ms. Anjum, Ms. Sabiha, Ms. Anjali Om Raina, Muzaffar Ahmad Haji, Naveed Gull, Aijaz Abdullah, Showkat Ahmad Fataing, Tariq Ahmad Mughloo, Rayees Ahmad Mir, Ayaz Ahmad Dar, Mohd. Yaseen Mir, Bilal Ahmad Sheikh, Bilal Ahmad Bhat, and Shameem Ahmad Sheikh. Your concern, companionship and support meant more to Zamir than words could ever express, and for that, his family and I shall always remain grateful.

Many of his relatives were very close to his heart. He had great regard for his cousin Dr. M. Ashraf Bhat and his brother-in-law, Advocate Suhail Beg. He adored his late uncle, Mr. Mohd. Akbar a lot. He was inspired by his ideology to a large extent.

There are, undoubtedly, many more whose names are absent from these pages but whose presence in Zamir's life was invaluable. Please accept this acknowledgement as being extended to each one of you. Absence of a name here is not an absence of gratitude. If, during his journey, you shared a classroom with him, worked beside him, laughed with him over a cup of tea, debated ideas late into the evening, travelled with him, stood by him during moments of joy or adversity, or simply offered him your friendship, then you have, in your own way, become part of the story this memoir seeks to preserve.

On behalf of all who loved him, and as one who was privileged to call him a friend, I offer you my sincere thanks. You helped

shape the life of a man whose memory continues to illuminate the lives of so many.

For that, this book, and its author, remain forever grateful.

There is one more acknowledgment that I feel compelled to make, though it comes with a quiet confession. Readers may notice that this memoir says very little about Zamir's family. This omission is not because they were any less significant in his life, quite the opposite. Their place in his story is so profound that doing justice to it would require another book altogether. I have therefore chosen to remain within the boundaries of the friendship I was privileged to witness, while pausing here to offer my deepest respect to those who formed the very foundation of the man I came to know and love.

Among them, his mother occupies a place that words can scarcely describe. She was a woman of remarkable grace, humility, and deep faith. There was a serenity about her that left an impression on everyone who had the privilege of knowing her. To me, she always appeared as one of those rare souls whose goodness required no proclamation. It radiated naturally through her simplicity, her warmth, and her unwavering trust in the Almighty. Her passing left a wound in Zamir's heart that never truly healed. I was a witness to the anguish through which he lived after losing her. Time, as people often say, heals many wounds. But there are some absences that time merely teaches us to live with; it never erases them. The void created by his mother's departure remained with him throughout his life. Even years later, one could still sense that quiet ache in his words, in his silences, and sometimes in the expressions that crossed his face when her memory surfaced unexpectedly. If his mother's departure became his greatest sorrow, his father became his greatest responsibility.

Until the very last days of his own life, Zamir remained deeply concerned about his father's well-being. It was never a matter of duty alone; it was an expression of profound love. He worried constantly about *Chacha's* comfort, his health, his happiness, and, above all, about how he would cope if left alone. Even when Zamir himself was passing through immense physical suffering, his thoughts frequently wandered to his father. There was something deeply moving about that concern. It reflected the kind of son he was, a son whose love did not diminish in adversity but became even more evident.

Zamir's affection extended with equal sincerity to his younger brother. In all the years of our friendship, I cannot recall a single conversation in which Zamir spoke about his brother without his affection becoming immediately apparent. His words carried warmth; his face reflected pride; his voice revealed genuine concern. One did not need to ask how deeply he loved his brother. It was evident in the tenderness with which Zamir spoke of him.

The Family That Became His Strength

There is another family whose love and sacrifices deserve a place in these pages. During the most difficult chapter of Zamir's life, when illness had quietly entered his world and every passing day brought new uncertainties, I had the privilege of witnessing a remarkable example of what a family can become when love is tested. Their care was never loud, never demanding, and never intended to draw attention to itself. It was expressed through silent sacrifices, unwavering presence, and an extraordinary willingness to place another's comfort before their own.

Among them, I bow my head with profound respect before Zamir's father-in-law. Life had already placed a heavy burden upon him. The lingering effects of the COVID pandemic had left him physically fragile. An oxygen concentrator had become an inseparable companion in his daily life, a constant reminder of his own struggle for breath. Yet, astonishingly, even while fighting his own battle, his thoughts seldom revolved around himself. Time and again, I witnessed moments that revealed the extraordinary measure of the man. Whenever concern was shown for his own health, he would gently set it aside and direct every attention towards Zamir. He would ask his son not to worry about him but to remain beside Zamir. He would lovingly tell his wife that he required little care for himself, urging her instead to devote herself to Zamir's comfort and well-being. Watching those moments, one realised that true sacrifice seldom announces itself; it quietly gives away what little it possesses for someone else's peace. He was a man of principles, dignity, compassion, and selflessness. His love for his daughter found its purest expression in his unconditional concern for the family she had built. Though he eventually departed from this temporary world before Zamir, the memory of his sacrifices continues to live in the hearts of all who witnessed them. May the Almighty grant him the highest ranks in His infinite mercy and reward him abundantly for the love he so selflessly gave.

Equally deserving of my deepest admiration is Zamir's mother-in-law. If I were asked to describe her in a single word, that word would be "*gratitude*." Throughout the years I have known her, I have never once seen dissatisfaction overshadow her acceptance of the Divine Will. She possesses that rare simplicity which the modern world often mistakes for weakness but which, in reality, is among the greatest forms of

spiritual strength. Raised in the innocence of rural life, untouched by the needless complexities of modern living, she embodies purity, faith, humility, affection, patience, and unwavering trust in Allah. During Zamir's illness, her prayers became a source of strength for everyone around her. She served quietly, loved unconditionally, and accepted every trial with remarkable composure. After Zamir's departure, that strength did not diminish. Instead, she became one of the firmest pillars supporting Rafi and the three daughters, standing silently behind them with the same love, the same patience, and the same steadfast faith that had carried the family through the darkest days. Whenever I think of her, words such as sacrifice, composure, faith, patience, tolerance, resilience, and unconditional love naturally come to my mind. They are not qualities she merely speaks about; they are qualities she lives every single day.

There is, however, one individual whose contribution during Zamir's illness deserves a special acknowledgment. That person is *Asrar*. I had known Asrar long before Zamir fell ill, but it was only during those difficult months that I truly came to know the man behind the name. Perhaps his very name offers an apt metaphor. In Urdu, *Asrar* (اسرار) signifies **secrets**. It was during this painful period that the hidden strengths, the beautiful secrets, of his character gradually revealed themselves before all of us. From the very first day of Zamir's illness, Asrar stood beside him with unwavering commitment. To describe him merely as present would be an understatement; he became, in every sense, Zamir's shadow. His companionship brought reassurance during moments of uncertainty, courage during moments of despair, and comfort during moments when silence itself became difficult to bear.

Many acts of kindness are too personal and too numerous to find a place within these pages. Some sacrifices are best preserved in the hearts of those who witnessed them. Yet I can confidently say that Asrar fulfilled every responsibility that life placed upon him with remarkable grace. He proved himself to be an exceptional brother to Rafi, ensuring that she never had to face the burden of those difficult days alone. At the same time, he maintained the responsibilities owed to his own family with admirable balance and dignity. In him, I witnessed not only a devoted brother but also a caring son, a responsible husband, and, above all, a man of uncommon integrity. People often speak of relationships in terms of obligation. Asrar transformed obligation into compassion and responsibility into quiet service. He asked for no recognition, sought no appreciation, and expected nothing in return. It is therefore both my privilege and my duty to place on record my heartfelt gratitude to him, for everything he did during Zamir's illness, for the strength he gave to Rafi and the family, and for the unwavering support that he continues to extend even today.

The Hands Within My Home

I must reserve a special word of gratitude for my wife, Dr. Rifat Ara, whose contribution to these pages, and, more importantly, to those difficult days of Zamir's illness, was quiet, selfless, and profound. Whenever friendship called me to Zamir's side, she never made me feel that I was leaving responsibilities behind. Instead, she willingly carried the weight of home and family, giving me the freedom and peace of mind to be where I felt I was needed most. In doing so, she became, in her own unobtrusive way, a part of the care and companionship that surrounded Zamir during his difficult days. Her generosity extended equally to the friendships I brought home. Over the years, she

graciously welcomed Zamir and many of my friends into our home, treating them with warmth, dignity, and a hospitality that made them feel not like guests, but like family.

And while I wrote this memoir, often lost for hours in memories, emotions, and a past that repeatedly returned to occupy the present, she once again gave me the patience, space, and understanding I needed. Some acts of love announce themselves; others simply make it possible for us to fulfil the obligations of our hearts. Rifat's love has so often been of the latter kind. For that quiet strength beside me, for all that she carried without complaint, and for allowing me to honor a friendship that meant so much to me, I remain deeply and lovingly grateful.

I must also acknowledge my three children, Sidrah, Raqeeem and Fatihah, whose affection and care for Zamir were especially touching during the most difficult phase of his illness. Whenever he stayed with us, they did everything they could to comfort him, lift his spirits and make him feel at home. At times, they would sing for him. Raqeeem would play the harmonium, filling those otherwise difficult moments with warmth and joy. Their presence brought Zamir happiness and offered me strength when I needed it most. They have been wonderful children, a constant source of solace, ease and gratitude in my life. May the Almighty always protect them, guide them and bless them with the very best in this world and the Hereafter.

A Companion in Growth and Grace

Professor Naseer Iqbal, presently serving as the Registrar of the University of Kashmir, has been a cherished friend and co-traveller in my personal and professional journey for many years, long before we became colleagues at the Department of

Physics. His honesty, integrity, sincerity and candid counsel have enriched my professional life and, in many ways, helped me grow as a human being. Through me, he also came to know Zamir and thus became a part of our shared story. Zamir and I would occasionally drop by his office, where brief pleasantries would often turn into engaging intellectual conversations, something Zamir particularly cherished. Looking back, those seemingly ordinary encounters have acquired a special place in memory. I acknowledge Professor Iqbal, therefore, not merely as a valued colleague and an old friend, but as a companion who enriched my own journey and, through those shared moments, became a part of the story of friendship that lies at the heart of this memoir.

To the Keepers of Memory and Knowledge

In bringing this memoir to completion, I have drawn upon hundreds of online resources, digital archives, institutional websites, historical accounts, articles and other repositories of knowledge. These sources helped me better understand and present the places, events, traditions and personalities that form part of this narrative. It is impossible to identify individually every writer, researcher, historian, archivist and institution whose work illuminated my path; nevertheless, my debt to them is sincere and substantial. I remain deeply grateful to all those who gathered, preserved and made this valuable knowledge accessible. Their largely unseen contribution enriched the historical and cultural texture of this memoir and enabled me to place personal memory within the wider landscape of time and place.

Waseem Bari

Preface

There are some people who enter our lives quietly and become so deeply woven into the fabric of our existence that it becomes impossible to imagine life without them. They begin as acquaintances, become friends, and before we realise it, they become part of our family, our memories, our joys, our sorrows, and our very identity.

This book is about one such person.

As I sit down to write these pages, I find myself overwhelmed by a flood of memories, memories that span more than three decades, memories filled with laughter, companionship, arguments, dreams, struggles, achievements, and countless moments that helped shape the person I am today. At the center of all these memories stands one man: my dear friend, my companion, and my brother in spirit, **Dr. Zamir Ahmad Bhat**, whom I fondly used to call **Zambhattaa**.

Writing about Zamir is perhaps one of the most difficult things I have ever attempted. Not because there is too little to say about him, but because there is so much. Every memory opens the door to another memory; every story leads to another story. The challenge is not remembering him. The challenge is deciding where to begin.

Even today, I sometimes find it hard to accept that he is no longer with us. There are moments when I instinctively reach for my phone, thinking of sharing a piece of news with him. There are occasions when I hear a remark or witness an incident and immediately think, "I must tell Zamir about this."

Then, for a brief and painful moment, reality returns, reminding me that the friend with whom I shared some of the best years of my life is no longer there to answer my call.

The passing of Zamir after his courageous battle with cancer left a void in the lives of all who knew him. For his family, it was an immeasurable loss. For his friends, it was the loss of a companion whose presence had become a source of comfort, wisdom, and joy. For me, it felt as though a chapter of my own life had suddenly come to an end.

Yet this book is not a book about death. It is a book about life.

It is about a friendship that began in the most unexpected manner and grew into one of the most cherished relationships of my life. It is about a young man from Kashmir who possessed a rare combination of intelligence, warmth, wit, courage, and humanity. It is about a friend who could transform an ordinary evening into an unforgettable experience, who could make strangers feel like old friends, and who could engage equally passionately in discussions about politics, society, history, literature, science, or life itself.

Zamir had a remarkable gift that cannot be measured by degrees, titles, or professional accomplishments. He had the ability to make people feel important. When he spoke to you, you felt heard. When he listened to you, you felt understood. When you were troubled, he comforted you. When you succeeded, he celebrated your success as if it were his own.

Over the years, I came to realise that friendship is not measured by the number of years two people know each other. It is measured by the depth of understanding they share, the trust they build, and the impact they leave on each other's lives. By that measure, Zamir was among the greatest blessings life bestowed upon me.

The news of his illness came as a shock. Watching him confront cancer was heartbreaking for all of us who loved him. Yet even in the face of pain and uncertainty, he displayed a courage that inspired admiration. There were moments when his body seemed exhausted, but his spirit remained remarkably strong. He bore his suffering with dignity, patience, and faith, teaching us lessons in resilience even during the most difficult phase of his life.

This memoir is my humble attempt to preserve not merely the memory of Zamir, but the essence of the man himself. It is an effort to capture his laughter, his wisdom, his eccentricities, his convictions, his generosity, and above all, the extraordinary humanity that defined him.

The pages that follow are not intended to be a chronological biography. Rather, they are a collection of memories, reflections, and stories drawn from a friendship that spanned more than three decades. Some stories will make you smile. Some may make you laugh. Others may bring tears to your eyes. Together, however, they paint the portrait of a man whose life touched far more people than he himself may ever have realised.

I write this book for many reasons. I write it for his family, who loved him most. I write it for his friends, many of whom continue to miss him every single day. I write it for those who knew him only briefly and deserve to know the remarkable person behind the name. And I write it for myself, because remembering him is one of the ways in which I keep him alive.

There is a saying that some people leave footprints on our hearts. I believe Zamir left much more than footprints. He left memories that continue to comfort us, lessons that continue to guide us, and friendships that continue to bind us together

long after his departure. Time may eventually soften the pain of his absence, but it can never diminish the affection, admiration, gratitude, and love that we hold for him.

As you turn these pages, I invite you to walk beside me through the journey of a friendship that enriched my life beyond measure. This is the story of Zamir as I knew him, not a perfect man, for no human being is perfect, but a genuinely good man whose kindness, intelligence, humor, and humanity made the world a better place for those fortunate enough to know him.

And if, by the time you reach the final page, you feel that you too have come to know him, then this book will have achieved its purpose.



Dr. Zamir Ahmad Bhat
(02.05.1973 – 27.01.2026)

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I

The Friendship That Began With A Dispute

*"Neither of us knew it then, but destiny was quietly
listening to our argument."*

The memories of my first encounter with Zamir remain astonishingly vivid, despite the passage of more than three decades. Time has blurred many faces, erased countless conversations, and softened innumerable memories, but that particular afternoon remains etched in my mind with remarkable clarity. Perhaps it has survived so vividly because of the irony it carries. What began as a tense and rather unpleasant encounter would eventually grow into one of the most treasured friendships of my life.

The year was 1992. We were both young men, standing at the threshold of adulthood, carrying our ambitions, dreams, and uncertainties into the sprawling world of Aligarh Muslim University. I had enrolled in the B.Sc. (Honours) Physics a year ago, immersed in equations, laboratories, and the mysteries of the physical universe. Zamir had joined B.A. (Honours) Political Science, preparing himself for a journey into the equally complex universe of politics, society, and human affairs. At that time, however, none of this mattered. We were complete strangers. We had never met, never spoken, and certainly had no idea that our lives would become deeply intertwined over the decades that followed. I was residing in

Muhammad Habib Hall, one of the most vibrant student hostels on the campus. My room partner had recently completed his studies and vacated one of the two seats in Room No. 271. The vacant seat had subsequently been allotted to a Kashmiri student who happened to be a close friend of Zamir. Years later, that young man would become an officer in the Kashmir Administrative Services, but on that day he was simply a student waiting to move into his newly allotted room.

One afternoon, after attending a long and exhausting schedule of classes, I crossed the road from the hostel and settled into my usual place at the famous Pappu's Dhaba. For generations of AMU students, this roadside tea stall was much more than a tea stall. It was an institution in itself, a place where friendships were formed, debates flourished, and stories were born. I remember ordering a cup of tea and sinking into a rare moment of solitude. The aroma of boiling tea leaves mingled with the sounds of students laughing, arguing, and discussing everything from examinations to politics. It was an ordinary afternoon, or so I thought. As I sat there, two young men approached my table. "May we sit here?" one of them asked. "Of course", I replied. The taller of the two immediately drew my attention. He was broad-shouldered, handsome, and carried himself with a confidence that was difficult to ignore. His thick curly hair framed a face that seemed both determined and expressive. Beside him stood another young man, shorter and heavier in build. There was a seriousness about both of them that suggested they had come with a purpose. No sooner had they sat down than the taller young man got straight to the point.

"Are you the occupant of Room 271?" he asked.

"Yes", I replied.

"My friend has been allotted the vacant seat in your room", he said. "We have been told that you are refusing to let him move in."

The statement caught me completely off guard. For a moment, I simply stared at him.

"Who told you that?" I asked.

"That is what we have heard," he replied firmly. "And if the seat has been allotted to him, he has every right to occupy it."

There was something in his tone that immediately signalled he was prepared for a confrontation. He had come to defend his friend and appeared fully convinced that an injustice had been done. Unfortunately, he had encountered someone equally young, equally stubborn, and equally unwilling to be accused unfairly. I was barely eighteen years old at the time. Like many young men of that age, I possessed more confidence than patience and more conviction than diplomacy. "Listen," I replied, perhaps with more irritation than wisdom, "you have heard only one side of the story. Nobody has even discussed the matter with me." What followed was a spirited exchange that quickly escalated into an argument. Zamir defended his friend with remarkable passion. I defended myself with equal determination. Neither of us was prepared to retreat. Looking back now, I can almost laugh at the image of those two young men sitting across a table, arguing intensely over a hostel room while their cups of tea slowly cooled beside them. At one point, he leaned forward and declared:

"If the room has been allotted to him, then he should be allowed to move in immediately."

"And who told you I am preventing him?" I responded sharply.

Neither of us yielded an inch. To us, it was a matter of principle.

Today, after all these years, the entire episode appears amusing. At the time, however, it felt extraordinarily important. Youth has a remarkable ability to transform small disagreements into matters of great significance. Eventually, the discussion ended without any meaningful resolution. We parted on less-than-friendly terms. I remember walking away with a distinct impression of the tall, curly-haired Kashmiri boy. He struck me as unnecessarily aggressive, fiercely loyal to his friend, and perhaps a little too quick to believe rumours. What I did not realise then was that beneath that apparent aggression lay one of the defining qualities of Zamir's personality: his unwavering loyalty to those he cared about. Years later, I would witness that same loyalty again and again. Curiously, the very friend for whom Zamir had argued so passionately never moved into Room No. 271. For reasons that I can no longer recall, he never occupied the allotted seat. Instead, a few days later, another student from Bihar was assigned the room and eventually became my roommate. The incident appeared to have reached its natural conclusion. As for Zamir, he disappeared from my thoughts almost as quickly as he had entered them. Or so I believed. Life, however, was quietly writing a different script. Neither of us could have imagined that the brief argument at a roadside tea stall would become the opening scene of a friendship that would span decades. The young man whose determination had irritated me that afternoon would eventually become one of the closest friends I would ever have. We would share countless conversations, dreams, struggles, triumphs, disappointments, and moments of laughter. Together, we would navigate some of the most formative years of our lives.

Today, when I think back to that afternoon at Pappu's Dhaba, I am struck by the strange and beautiful unpredictability of life. Sometimes, the people who change our lives forever do not arrive with grand introductions or dramatic gestures. They arrive unexpectedly, disguised as strangers, carrying misunderstandings, arguments, and inconvenient opinions. Mine arrived with curly hair, a determined voice, an unwavering sense of loyalty, and an argument over a hostel room. Little did I know then that I had just met one of the greatest blessings of my life.

I had met Zamir.

II

Tea, Tales, and Friendship

*"Friendship is not born in a moment; it is brewed slowly, like tea
shared among companions."*

If my first meeting with Zamir was written by chance, then our friendship was written by repetition. For many weeks, and perhaps even several months, after our rather unpleasant encounter at Pappu's Dhaba, Zamir drifted completely out of my thoughts. University life at Aligarh Muslim University moved at a relentless pace. Lectures, laboratory sessions, assignments, hostel life, examinations, friendships, and the endless distractions of youth left little room for dwelling on a brief disagreement with a stranger. Yet somewhere in the recesses of my memory lingered the image of a tall, curly-haired Kashmiri boy who had confronted me with surprising confidence over a hostel room. Occasionally, I would see him from a distance. Sometimes he was sitting in the canteen of Muhammad Habib Hall, surrounded by friends. At other times, I would spot him at any of the dhabas around *Purani Chungi*, leaning over a cup of tea and animatedly discussing some subject that appeared to hold his complete attention. Whenever our paths crossed, we acknowledged one another with a nod. Nothing more. At that stage, we were merely familiar faces inhabiting the same campus. Even today, I cannot accurately identify the precise moment when acquaintance transformed into friendship. Memory has preserved the friendship itself but has erased the exact point

at which it began. If someone were to ask me who deserves the credit for bringing Zamir and me together, I would not name a person. I would name a place: Pappu's Dhaba. To outsiders, it was an ordinary roadside tea stall. To generations of AMU students, it was something far greater. It was a parliament without elections, a university without classrooms, a social club without membership, and a debating society without rules. Ideas were exchanged there more freely than currency. Friendships were formed there more naturally than anywhere else on campus. Dreams were discussed there with an optimism that only youth can sustain. Looking back now, I sometimes feel that this particular dhaba was as much a part of our education as any lecture hall or laboratory. The mornings had a rhythm of their own. Students crowded around wooden benches and battered tables, discussing examinations, cricket scores, campus politics, current affairs, and occasionally their future plans. The aroma of tea mixed with that of freshly prepared omelets and bread. The menu itself had acquired an almost legendary status among students. "*Mattree omelette.*" "*2 Andey ka Half Fry and 4 Slice.*" (Two Half fried eggs with Four slice.) The orders were repeated so often that they became part of the vocabulary of hostel life. I was a regular visitor. My classes in the Physics Department usually began at eight o'clock in the morning, and breakfast at Pappu's Dhaba became an almost sacred ritual before the start of each day. Interestingly, I rarely encountered Zamir during those early hours. Years later, I discovered why. Zamir and mornings maintained a relationship of mutual disagreement. While I was already sitting in a classroom trying to understand the mysteries of the physical universe, Zamir was often still negotiating peace terms with his alarm clock. His classes generally started later, and he considered sleep a blessing not to be sacrificed unnecessarily. The

evenings, however, belonged to him. As the day gradually gave way to dusk, the social life of the university shifted to the *dhabas* and tea stalls that dotted the campus. Whether it was Pappu's Dhaba, the bustling eateries at Purani Chungi, or the tea stalls around V. M. Hall, students gathered there in groups that often remained unchanged for years. It was during those evenings that I truly began to know Zamir. The conversations began casually. A comment about a class. An observation about campus politics. A joke. A cricket match. A newspaper headline. Then another discussion followed. And another. Without either of us noticing, brief encounters became regular meetings, regular meetings became long conversations, and long conversations gradually evolved into friendship. The remarkable thing about Zamir was that conversation came naturally to him. Some people talk. Others communicate.

Zamir connected.

Within minutes of meeting someone, he could make them feel as though they had known him for years. He possessed an extraordinary social warmth that dissolved barriers almost effortlessly. People felt comfortable around him because he possessed that rare quality of making others feel important. His intelligence certainly impressed people. His humour won them over. His warmth kept them there. More often than not, Zamir was accompanied by one of his closest friends, "Saeba." For those of us who knew them during those years, the names Zamir and Saeba almost belonged together. Where one appeared, the other was rarely far away. Saeba, possessed a personality entirely his own, and together they formed a partnership that brought life to every gathering. Whenever the two arrived, there was an almost guaranteed possibility of laughter, storytelling, debate, and mischief. It was through these gatherings that I began to discover another fascinating

dimension of Zamir's personality. He was a gifted storyteller. In fact, he elevated storytelling into an art form.

At AMU, students often used the expression "*phenkna*" to describe the playful exaggeration of facts or events. Zamir was a master practitioner of this unique cultural tradition. Yet his exaggerations were unlike those of most people. They never sought attention. They never sought personal gain. They never came at someone else's expense. Instead, they were acts of entertainment. Acts of friendship. Acts of generosity. He exaggerated not to deceive but to delight. One of the finest examples involved Saeba.

For nearly a year, Zamir managed to convince a surprising number of students that Saeba was not merely his friend but his officially designated bodyguard. According to Zamir's carefully constructed narrative, the Government of Jammu and Kashmir had assigned Saeba to provide security to him because Zamir was a politically significant individual whose safety required special protection. The brilliance of the story lay not in its content but in the conviction with which it was narrated. Zamir delivered every detail with complete seriousness. No smile. No wink. No indication that the entire story was a fabrication. Whenever someone expressed doubt, he calmly introduced another detail. Whenever questions arose, additional explanations followed. The legend grew. And astonishingly, many people believed it. When the truth finally emerged, nobody felt embarrassed. Nobody felt deceived. Instead, we laughed. We laughed because the story was so imaginative, so harmless, and so perfectly executed that it became part of the folklore of our student years. Such was Zamir's charm. Even his exaggerations became treasured memories. Yet behind the humour, the laughter, and the endless storytelling stood a man of remarkable seriousness

and conviction. His interest in politics was genuine. His concern for public issues was sincere. His loyalty to his beliefs was unwavering. He could spend one moment making an entire gathering laugh and the next moment engage in a passionate discussion about social justice, political developments, or the future of Kashmir. What impressed me most was that these were not merely intellectual exercises for him. He cared deeply. He believed deeply. He committed himself fully. Sadly, life would later prove that dedication to ideals does not always bring comfort or reward. Politics often complicated his life more than it eased it. Yet he never abandoned the causes he believed in. The same loyalty that had once driven him to argue with a stranger over a friend's hostel seat remained with him throughout his life.

Looking back today, I realise that our friendship did not begin with any dramatic declaration. There was no memorable moment when we decided to become friends. No formal introduction. No conscious agreement. Friendship simply happened. It emerged slowly through shared meals, countless cups of tea, endless conversations, mutual trust, and the comfortable familiarity that grows between two people who genuinely enjoy each other's company. What began as recognition became acquaintance. Acquaintance became companionship. Companionship became friendship. And friendship eventually became brotherhood. Many years later, after all the conversations had ended and after life had carried us through triumphs, disappointments, responsibilities, and hardships, I came to understand a simple truth. The most meaningful friendships rarely arrive with fanfare. They grow quietly. Almost unnoticed. Until one day you realise that the person who was once a stranger has become an indispensable part of your life. That is exactly what happened with Zamir.

And if our first meeting was the opening sentence of our story, then those evenings at *dhabas* were the pages on which that story truly began to be written.

III

From Big Bang To Human Dignity

*"The lessons that shaped us were often learned far away from books
and classrooms."*

My own academic journey was taking shape in a field that, at first glance, appeared far removed from Zamir's area of interest. As a researcher in Physics, I was engaged in studying collisions between atomic nuclei at extremely high energies. These collisions were designed to recreate, for an infinitesimally brief moment, a unique state of matter known as the Quark-Gluon Plasma (QGP). According to modern theories of particle physics, this extraordinary phase of matter existed naturally during the first few microseconds after the Big Bang, when the universe was unimaginably hot and dense.

Under ordinary conditions, quarks, the fundamental constituents of protons and neutrons, are permanently confined within the nucleons. However, when nuclei are accelerated to velocities approaching the speed of light and made to collide, temperatures exceeding several trillion degrees are produced. Under such extreme conditions, protons and neutrons melt into a primordial soup of freely moving quarks and gluons, recreating a state that has not existed naturally since the birth of the universe. In a sense, our experiments sought to transform modern laboratories into tiny time machines. By recreating the conditions that prevailed fractions of a second after the Big Bang, we hoped to

understand how matter acquired its present form, how the universe evolved from an extremely hot plasma into galaxies and stars, and ultimately how the visible world around us came into existence. To me, this research represented one of humanity's oldest quests: the search for origins. Philosophers, theologians, and scientists throughout history have asked the same fundamental question: "How did everything begin?" High-energy physics approached this question not through speculation but through observation, experimentation, and mathematical theory.

Zamir's intellectual world, however, revolved around a very different set of questions. While I was trying to understand the origins of matter, Zamir was trying to understand the forces that shape societies. His interests lay in West Asian Studies, political movements, social structures, historical conflicts, and the experiences of ordinary people living amidst those realities. He was fascinated by questions of power, identity, culture, governance, and social justice.

At first sight, our respective disciplines appeared to inhabit entirely different universes. One dealt with quarks, gluons, and elementary particles; the other dealt with nations, communities, and human beings. One explored events occurring within fractions of a second after the Big Bang; the other examined centuries of political evolution and social change. Yet the more we talked, the more I realised that both disciplines were, in their own ways, attempting to answer similar questions. Physics seeks to understand how complexity emerges from simplicity. It asks how a handful of fundamental particles combine to form atoms, stars, planets, and ultimately life itself. Social sciences pursue a remarkably similar objective. They seek to understand how individual human beings, each with their own hopes, fears, ambitions,

and beliefs, come together to create families, communities, institutions, and civilizations.

I often explained to Zamir that the Quark-Gluon Plasma represented a state of perfect chaos from which order gradually emerged as the universe cooled. He would smile and point out that societies often undergo similar phases. Periods of conflict, revolution, migration, and upheaval may appear chaotic, yet they frequently give birth to entirely new social and political orders. When I described how tiny fluctuations in the early universe eventually gave rise to galaxies and large-scale structures, Zamir would draw parallels with history. Small ideas, he would argue, can transform entire societies. A single movement, a powerful ideology, or even an individual voice can influence the destiny of nations. These conversations taught me something invaluable: knowledge is never as compartmentalized as universities make it appear. The laws governing matter and the forces shaping societies may belong to different disciplines, but both seek to understand patterns, relationships, origins, transformations, and the emergence of order from complexity. Perhaps that is why Zamir and I found so much common ground despite our different academic backgrounds. While I was studying the evolution of the universe, he was studying the evolution of societies. While I was exploring the behaviour of matter under extreme conditions, he was examining the behaviour of human beings under historical, political, and social pressures. In retrospect, I realise that our discussions were not merely exchanges between a physicist and a social scientist. They were conversations between two individuals attempting, through different routes, to understand the same world.

IV

Words That Returned Later

"Some lessons are understood when they are heard; the deepest ones are understood only when life begins to test them."

Among the many discussions that occupied our evenings at the countless tea stalls scattered across the AMU campus, some have faded with time while others remain etched in my memory with remarkable clarity. One such discussion concerned women, their place in society, and the conditions necessary for them to live meaningful and fulfilling lives. At that stage of our lives, we were young university students. Like most young men, our conversations often drifted towards subjects such as friendship, relationships, marriage, and the social realities around us. Yet whenever these discussions touched upon women, Zamir would invariably elevate the conversation to a level far beyond the superficial observations that young students typically make. His reflections on women were never casual opinions offered merely to sustain a conversation. They were thoughtful, structured, and surprisingly mature observations rooted in a deep concern for human dignity. Many of the ideas he articulated in the early 1990s were far ahead of the social discourse prevalent among young men of our generation.

Zamir often argued that if one truly wished to understand the condition of a society, one needed to examine the condition of its women. He was particularly influenced by the social and

political realities of West Asia, a region that constituted the focus of much of his intellectual engagement. Through his discussions, many of us were introduced for the first time to subjects such as the experiences of Arab women, the challenges faced by women in conflict-ridden societies, questions of identity, social restrictions, and the insecurities that accompanied everyday life in many parts of the world. Long before terms such as “gender studies”, “women empowerment”, and “inclusive development” became common in public discourse, Zamir was already engaging with these questions in a thoughtful and analytical manner.

Among the many ideas he shared, one has remained with me throughout my life. Zamir believed that every woman seeks three fundamental forms of security, without which neither personal happiness nor social harmony can be fully realised.

The first, he would say, is *financial security*. According to Zamir, economic dependence often lies at the root of many forms of vulnerability. A woman who possesses financial security possesses not merely money but dignity, confidence, and the ability to exercise meaningful choices. He believed that opportunities for education, employment, and economic participation were not privileges to be granted but rights essential to a just and progressive society.

The second was *emotional security*. This, according to him, was the foundation of every meaningful human relationship. A woman should feel respected, valued, heard, and understood. She should live in an environment where trust outweighs fear and companionship replaces loneliness. Zamir often emphasized that relationships survive not merely because of material comfort but because individuals feel emotionally safe within them.

The third and perhaps the most striking of his observations concerned *sexual security*. Today such discussions are far more common, but in the social environment of our student days, these were subjects rarely spoken about openly. Yet Zamir addressed them with remarkable clarity and confidence. He argued that a woman has the right to feel safe, respected, and secure in matters concerning her body, her dignity, and her personal autonomy. He believed that no relationship could be genuinely healthy unless this fundamental security was present.

What impressed me most was not merely the content of his arguments but the conviction with which he articulated them. He spoke neither as an activist seeking applause nor as a scholar quoting textbooks. He spoke as someone who had thought deeply about human relationships and who genuinely cared about justice and dignity. At the time, I listened with interest but perhaps without fully appreciating the depth of what he was saying. Years later, life itself became the teacher that helped me understand the wisdom hidden in those conversations. As I moved beyond the world of academic research and gradually assumed administrative responsibilities, I found myself speaking on a wide variety of subjects. I was invited to address gatherings on women's empowerment, social development, education, youth issues, mental health, human dignity, and community welfare. Many of these subjects lay far outside the formal boundaries of my training as a physicist. Yet whenever I reflected upon these issues, I discovered that the seeds of many of my ideas had been planted during those evenings spent with Zamir. I had entered academia to study the universe. My research focused on collisions between atomic nuclei at extreme energies, the formation of Quark-Gluon Plasma, and the quest to understand conditions that existed in the earliest moments after

the Big Bang. I spent years trying to understand how matter behaved under extraordinary circumstances and how the universe itself came into existence. Zamir, on the other hand, was studying societies, histories, political movements, cultures, and human relationships. In retrospect, I realise that while I was studying the origin of the universe, Zamir was helping me understand the complexities of the human condition. His discussions taught me that societies are not built merely through economic growth or political power. They are built through dignity, justice, compassion, and security. They are built when human beings feel valued and respected.

Many years later, standing on public platforms and addressing audiences on issues far removed from particle physics, I often found myself unconsciously drawing upon insights that I had first heard from Zamir. Those conversations had quietly become part of my intellectual framework. The remarkable thing about Zamir was that he never knew he was teaching. There was no classroom, no syllabus, no examination. There were only cups of tea, animated discussions, youthful debates, and a curious mind eager to understand the world. Yet some of the most enduring lessons of my life emerged from those conversations.

Today, when I look back upon those evenings, I realise that Zamir's greatest gift was not merely the information he shared but the perspective he offered. He taught us to look beyond ourselves, beyond our disciplines, and beyond our immediate concerns. He taught us to think about people, relationships, dignity, and society. And perhaps that is why, even today, many years after those conversations took place, his words continue to return to me, carrying with them the wisdom of a friend who understood life far more deeply than most of us realised at the time.

V

Faith Without Pretence

"True spirituality is not measured by the length of one's prayers, but by the depth of one's compassion."

To understand Zamir's faith, one must first understand the land that shaped him. Faith, after all, does not emerge in isolation. It is often nurtured by landscapes, traditions, communities, and the silent lessons absorbed during childhood. In Zamir's case, his spiritual outlook was deeply intertwined with the geography of his native village, Hutmurrah, and the timeless spiritual traditions of the *Lidder Valley*.

Whenever I think about Zamir's religious inclinations, I find myself thinking not first of mosques, sermons, or theological debates, but of rivers, mountains, forests, and shrines.

I think of *Hutmurrah*.

Nestled in the breathtaking landscape of South Kashmir, Hutmurrah is a place where nature and spirituality appear to coexist effortlessly. The crystal waters of the Lidder River flow past the village with a calm and reassuring rhythm. Dense forests rise abruptly into the surrounding mountains, creating a natural sanctuary of silence and reflection. Just a short distance away stands the sacred shrine of *Hazrat Sakhi Zain-ud-Din Wali^(RA)* at Aishmuqam, one of the most revered spiritual centers of Kashmir. It is difficult to imagine growing up amidst such surroundings and not being touched by their

influence. In many ways, Zamir was a reflection of that landscape.

Like the Lidder River, he possessed a remarkable calmness. Beneath the surface of his energetic personality and lively conversations flowed a deep current of patience and emotional steadiness. Even during difficult moments, he rarely allowed himself to become bitter or cynical. His approach to life was gentle yet resilient, much like the river that continued its journey regardless of the obstacles placed in its path. The mountains and forests surrounding his village left an equally profound imprint upon his character. They taught him humility.

In a world increasingly obsessed with visibility, recognition, and self-promotion, Zamir remained remarkably unpretentious. Despite his academic accomplishments and intellectual abilities, he never carried arrogance with himself. There was a simplicity about him that made people feel comfortable in his presence. He listened more than he spoke. He respected differing viewpoints. He was never interested in proving himself superior to others.

I often feel that the quiet dignity that characterized Zamir's personality was born as much from the forests and mountains of Hutmurrah as from any formal education he later received. Yet nature alone does not explain Zamir's spirituality.

The second and perhaps more profound influence came from the spiritual atmosphere of Aishmuqam and the enduring legacy of *Hazrat Sakhi Zain-ud-Din Wali^(RA)*. For centuries, the shrine of this Sufi saint has occupied a special place in the spiritual imagination of Kashmir. The saint's life represents the highest ideals of the Kashmiri Rishi-Sufi tradition, humility, self-purification, service to humanity, and complete

devotion to God. Zamir was deeply influenced by this tradition. His admiration for the saint was not merely devotional; it was transformative. He viewed the saint not simply as a historical figure but as a living example of how one ought to live. The values associated with the saint, simplicity, compassion, patience, self-restraint, and love for humanity, found expression in Zamir's own life.

What distinguished Zamir's religiosity was its absence of pretence. He never wore faith as a badge of superiority. He never used religion as a tool to judge others. He never measured people by sectarian labels or outward displays of piety. Instead, he approached religion as a means of self-improvement and human connection. His faith was deeply personal yet remarkably inclusive.

As a devoted admirer of Sufi thought, Zamir viewed religion through the lens of compassion rather than exclusion. He was drawn to the mystical dimensions of faith, the purification of the heart, the struggle against the ego, and the search for a deeper connection with the Divine. For him, religion was less about drawing boundaries and more about building bridges. This outlook naturally shaped his interactions with people. Whether speaking to a fellow Muslim, a Sikh, a Hindu, or someone with entirely different beliefs, Zamir approached them first as human beings. He possessed an innate ability to see beyond labels and identities. This quality was not accidental. It was a direct reflection of the environment in which he had grown up.

Hutmurrah itself stood as a living example of *Kashmiriyat* and *Insaaniyat*. The village's social fabric reflected the spirit of coexistence that has long characterized the finest traditions of Kashmir. Muslims, Sikhs, and Hindus lived alongside one another with mutual respect and shared belonging. The

presence of the Sikh population alongside traditional Muslim neighbourhoods created an atmosphere where diversity was not merely tolerated but lived. Growing up in such an environment profoundly influenced Zamir's worldview. He learned early that humanity is larger than identity and that respect is greater than difference. These lessons later became visible in both his personal relationships and his academic pursuits.

As a scholar of West Asian Studies, Zamir explored some of the most complex political, social, and cultural questions facing contemporary societies. Yet he never approached these issues through the narrow lens of ideology or prejudice. Instead, he sought to understand people, histories, and civilizations in all their complexity. His scholarship reflected the same values that guided his spirituality. He believed that knowledge should illuminate rather than divide. He believed that understanding should replace suspicion. He believed that dialogue was superior to hostility. Perhaps this is why so many people found his company intellectually stimulating. He was capable of discussing politics without becoming intolerant, religion without becoming dogmatic, and identity without becoming divisive. The scholar and the believer coexisted harmoniously within him. In many respects, his academic pursuits became an extension of his spiritual outlook. For Zamir, knowledge was not merely a professional endeavour; it was a form of service. Research, teaching, discussion, and intellectual engagement were ways of contributing to society. Scholarship was not separate from faith, it was one expression of it.

This understanding echoed the classical Islamic and Sufi tradition in which the pursuit of knowledge is itself regarded as an act of devotion. Today, as I look back on his life, I realise

that Zamir's greatest spiritual quality was not his attachment to any particular ritual or doctrine. It was his humanity. He possessed a rare ability to make people feel respected, valued, and understood. He treated others with dignity. He offered friendship generously. He forgave easily. He remained loyal to those he loved. These qualities, more than anything else, reflected the essence of his faith.

The world often associates religion with grand declarations, visible symbols, and public expressions of devotion. Zamir taught a different lesson. He demonstrated that true spirituality can reveal itself in kindness, humility, empathy, and service. He showed that faith need not be loud to be profound. And perhaps that is why the title of this chapter feels so appropriate. Zamir's faith was genuine precisely because it was free from pretence. It flowed quietly through his life, nourishing everyone fortunate enough to know him, much like the *Lidder* River that flowed through the valley he called home. Today, when I remember Zamir, I remember not only a friend and a scholar, but a deeply spiritual human being whose faith was expressed not through what he preached, but through the way he lived. And that, perhaps, is the highest form of faith any human being can aspire to possess.

Faith in Action: The Sufi Heart of Zamir

If I were asked to identify the single most defining characteristic of Zamir's spiritual life, I would say it was this: he never separated faith from affection. For him, religion was not confined to rituals, sermons, theological arguments, or public displays of piety. It manifested itself in concern for others. His faith found expression in friendship, compassion, generosity, and sincere prayers offered quietly for the well-

being of those he loved. This was perhaps the most beautiful aspect of Zamir's spirituality.

Many people pray for themselves. Zamir prayed for everyone else.

Throughout our friendship, I noticed a remarkable pattern. Whenever I was preparing for an important event, a promotion interview, an academic selection process, a professional challenge, or any significant turning point in life, Zamir would invariably call me with news that would sound almost routine coming from him. "Abba, I have offered *Niyaz* at such-and-such shrine." Let me mention here that Zamir used to call me *Abba*. It was his way of expressing his love for me. Sometimes he would call me and say, "I visited the shrine today and prayed for your success." Initially, I would smile and thank him. Over time, however, I came to realise that this was not an occasional gesture. It was a deeply ingrained habit. Every important event in the lives of his friends somehow became a matter of personal concern for him.

Whenever one of us faced uncertainty, Zamir sought comfort not merely in advice or practical assistance but also in prayer. He genuinely believed that the blessings associated with saints and shrines could bring solace, protection, and divine favour to those for whom he cared. What moved me most was that he never expected anything in return. The donations were often made from his own modest resources. The prayers were offered quietly. There was no desire for recognition. No attempt to impress anyone. No expectation that the beneficiary would even know about it.

For him, it was simply an act of love. Even during our student days at Aligarh Muslim University, when resources were limited and every rupee mattered, Zamir remained remarkably generous in this regard. If a friend was ill, facing

difficulties at home, struggling academically, or experiencing emotional distress, Zamir would often visit a nearby shrine and offer prayers on their behalf. Many times, I learned about these gestures only afterwards. There was a sincerity in them that touched everyone who knew him.

To be honest, my own understanding of such practices was somewhat different. My personal belief system did not always align completely with Zamir's views regarding saints, shrines, and Niyaz. Yet I never found myself arguing with him about these matters. Nor, to the best of my recollection, did any of our close friends. The reason was simple. What mattered was not the theological question. What mattered was the affection behind the act. We all understood that when Zamir spoke of offering Niyaz or visiting a shrine for someone's welfare, he was expressing concern in the language of his faith. And that concern was genuine.

During our countless gatherings, particularly in the evenings, Zamir would often narrate stories connected with saints, shrines, miracles, and spiritual experiences. Some of these accounts were inherited from local traditions; others were personal experiences; still others had travelled through generations of Kashmiri storytelling. Whether one agreed with every detail or not was beside the point. What captivated us was the conviction with which he spoke. We listened attentively because we knew these stories mattered deeply to him. They formed part of the spiritual universe in which he lived. These conversations were not merely discussions about shrines. They were windows into Zamir's heart. Perhaps the most moving example of this aspect of his personality emerged only after his passing. Among the many stories that surfaced following his demise, one in particular affected me profoundly. I learned that during the final days of his life,

when he was fully aware of the seriousness of his illness and when most people would naturally be preoccupied with their own suffering, Zamir had given a special instruction to his brother-in-law, Asrar that donations should be offered at every shrine between Bijbehara and Hutmurrah. When I first heard this, I was deeply moved. Here was a man standing at the threshold between life and death, confronting one of the most difficult journeys any human being can face. Yet even then, his mind turned instinctively toward the spiritual traditions that had guided him throughout his life.

To some, this may appear to be a simple act. To me, it reveals something profound. It demonstrates the depth of his faith. It reveals a man seeking comfort not in despair but in devotion. Not in fear but in hope. Not in bitterness but in remembrance.

Even at the end, Zamir remained Zamir.

Another characteristic that defined him was the manner in which he responded whenever someone faced difficulties. Whether the problem was personal, professional, financial, or emotional, Zamir invariably assumed the role of comforter. His first instinct was always to console. He would listen patiently. He would reassure. He would encourage. And somewhere during the conversation would come a familiar sentence: "Insha'Allah, things will improve. I shall offer a Niyaz." Those words became a source of comfort for many people. They represented more than a religious act. They represented solidarity. They meant, "*You are not alone.*" I can honestly say that I could narrate hundreds of such incidents. His faith was not an isolated aspect of his personality. It was woven into the very fabric of his friendships. It informed the way he cared for people. It shaped the way he responded to suffering. It influenced the way he expressed love.

Yet perhaps the most beautiful manifestation of Zamir's spirituality was his inclusiveness. Like many followers of the Kashmiri Sufi tradition, he possessed a natural openness towards people from different backgrounds, cultures, and faiths. One incident from our days at Aligarh remains particularly vivid in my memory. Late one night, perhaps around one o'clock in the morning, we were returning from a late night dinner at the *Soot Mill* area on my LML Vespa scooter. The roads were relatively quiet. Suddenly, we encountered a Sikh wedding procession moving through the streets. The *baraat* was vibrant and joyous. Men wearing colourful turbans danced enthusiastically to the rhythm of the band. Laughter filled the night air. Before I could fully comprehend what was happening, Zamir asked me to stop the scooter. He stepped off, walked directly into the procession, and began dancing with the *Baraat*s. Not awkwardly. Not self-consciously. Not as an outsider. He danced as though he belonged among them. For more than a kilometer, he remained part of that celebration. The wedding guests welcomed him warmly. They laughed with him. Danced with him. Celebrated with him. Watching the scene unfold, I realised that this was Zamir's understanding of faith. His spirituality did not create barriers between people. It dissolved them. He saw joy as something universal. Humanity as something universal. Love as something universal. That was the essence of the Sufism he cherished.

The same spirit revealed itself during the annual Aligarh Exhibition, affectionately known as the *Numaish*. For Zamir, one of the highlights of the exhibition was the Qawwali nights. He remained remarkably informed about the schedule of performances and ensured that we attended whenever possible. Those evenings held a special attraction for him. The

poetry. The music. The devotion. The longing for the Divine expressed through melody. All these resonated deeply with his temperament.

Even years later, whenever we travelled together to Delhi, a visit to the shrine of *Hazrat Nizamuddin* often became part of the journey. It was never merely tourism. For Zamir, such visits were acts of spiritual connection. They linked him to a tradition of love, tolerance, service, and devotion that he deeply admired.

Zamir's greatest spiritual quality was not his devotion to saints, shrines, or rituals. It was his devotion to people. His faith made him more compassionate. More generous. More forgiving. More inclusive. The saints he admired taught love, and he practiced it. They taught service, and he practiced it. They taught humility, and he practiced it. Perhaps that is why, when I think of Zamir today, I do not remember a man who merely believed in Sufism. I remember a man who lived it.

The Pilgrims Who Passed Through His Childhood

Another important influence on Zamir's worldview came from a phenomenon that was woven into the annual rhythm of life in Hutmurrah, the sacred *Shri Amarnath Ji Yatra*. Every year, thousands of Hindu pilgrims travelling towards the holy cave shrine of Amarnath passed through the region surrounding his village. For the people of Hutmurrah, the Yatra is not a distant religious event belonging to another community. It is something they witness, experience, and participate in directly. The village comes alive during the pilgrimage season. Roadside stalls appear in abundance. Local families open businesses catering pilgrims. Even today, one can find dozens of juice stalls and refreshment centers lining

the roadside through Hutmurrah, many of which derive a significant portion of their livelihood from the Yatra season.

For generations, local Muslims have consistently welcomed and assisted pilgrims making their arduous journey towards the sacred cave. Hospitality became a shared cultural practice that transcended religious boundaries. Growing up amidst this atmosphere undoubtedly left a deep impression on Zamir. Long before terms such as “interfaith dialogue” or “religious pluralism” entered academic discourse, he had already witnessed their practical expression in everyday life. He saw people of different faiths interacting not as rivals but as fellow human beings. He saw economic cooperation, mutual respect, and coexistence functioning naturally within the social fabric of the valley.

Equally significant was the presence of the ancient *Martand Sun Temple*, one of Kashmir's most remarkable historical monuments, located not far from his native village. Although belonging to a much earlier era of Kashmir's history, the temple stood as a silent reminder of the region's rich civilizational diversity. The ruins of Martand and the shrine of Aishmuqam existed within the same geographical landscape, symbolizing the continuity of Kashmir's spiritual heritage across centuries and traditions. I often feel that these influences quietly shaped Zamir's understanding of faith. For him, religion was never a tool for erecting walls between communities. He had grown up in a place where sacred geographies overlapped naturally, where a Muslim saint's shrine, a Hindu pilgrimage route, a large Sikh population, and the remains of an ancient temple all formed part of the same cultural landscape. Perhaps this is why his spirituality carried an instinctive inclusiveness. He never felt threatened by diversity because diversity had always been part of his world.

The *Kashmiriyat* that many people speak about as an abstract ideal was, for Zamir, a lived reality. He had witnessed it in the streets of his village, in the hospitality extended to pilgrims, in the shared economic life of the community, and in the mutual respect that existed among people of different faiths. His secular outlook was therefore not a political position acquired later in life. It was a natural extension of the environment in which he was raised. The Sufi tradition he cherished taught him to see humanity before labels, and the landscape of Hutmurrah gave him countless opportunities to practice that lesson from an early age.

A Lesson from Baba Bamuddin^(RA)

Among the many sacred places that occupied a special place in Zamir's spiritual world, none perhaps was closer to his heart than the shrine of *Baba Bamuddin^(RA)*, situated on the serene banks of the Lidder River, not far from his native village of Hutmurrah.

To understand Zamir's attachment to this shrine, one must first understand its place within the spiritual history of Kashmir. According to local tradition, Baba Bamuddin^(RA) is revered as one of the great spiritual figures of the valley and is widely regarded as the spiritual guide and mentor of the celebrated Sufi saint, Hazrat Sakhi Zain-ud-Din Wali^(RA) of Aishmuqam. While Hazrat Sakhi^(RA) went on to become one of the most beloved saints of Kashmir and a towering figure of the Rishi-Sufi tradition, local memory continues to honour Baba Bamuddin^(RA) as the spiritual source from which much of that wisdom flowed.

In the language of Sufism, the relationship between a disciple and his spiritual master is sacred. The *Murshid* is not merely a teacher; he is a guide who illuminates the path of inner

purification and closeness to the Divine. For devotees of Hazrat Sakhi^(RA), therefore, the shrine of Baba Bamuddin^(RA) carries a significance that extends far beyond its physical location. For Zamir, it was a place of profound personal connection. Over the years, I travelled with him on numerous occasions between Anantnag and Hutmurrah. Many of those journeys remain vivid in my memory, but one recurring scene stands out above all others. As we approached the shrine of Baba Bamuddin^(RA), Zamir would almost invariably ask me to stop the car. It did not matter whether we were in a hurry or whether the journey had already been long and tiring. The stop was rarely optional. There was something almost instinctive about it. The moment the shrine came into view, Zamir's attention shifted. The conversation would pause. The journey itself seemed momentarily suspended. He would step out of the vehicle, straighten himself, and walk towards the shrine with quiet reverence. Often, he would call for the caretaker, greet him warmly, and spend some time in conversation. There was always a sense of familiarity, as though he were returning not merely to a shrine but to a place that formed part of his spiritual home. Afterward, he would offer Niyaz, make a modest donation, and spend a few moments in prayer. These were not hurried gestures performed out of habit. There was sincerity in them. There was affection in them. And perhaps above all, there was gratitude. On several occasions, I sat waiting while Zamir remained near the shrine, absorbed in reflection. Sometimes he would emerge and narrate stories associated with the two saints. At other times he would recount incidents from his own life which he believed had been touched by the blessings of these saints. Whether one interpreted these experiences spiritually, psychologically, or symbolically was beside the point. What mattered was the depth of conviction with which Zamir spoke.

For him, these shrines were not monuments of the past. They were living centers of spiritual memory. They connected him to generations of believers who had sought comfort, guidance, and hope at these very places. What impressed me most was that these visits never revolved around material gain. I rarely heard Zamir speak about wealth, status, or worldly success in relation to these shrines. More often, his prayers concerned the welfare of family members, friends, neighbours, and acquaintances. He prayed for healing. He prayed for success. He prayed for relief from difficulties. He prayed for peace.

These visits revealed something fundamental about Zamir's understanding of faith. His spirituality was rooted not in fear but in affection. His relationship with saints resembled the relationship one has with respected elders whose lives continue to inspire long after their physical departure. To him, the two saints were not distant historical figures. They were part of a living spiritual lineage that linked the mountains, rivers, villages, and people of the Lidder Valley across generations. Even today, whenever I pass through that region and catch sight of the shrine standing quietly beside the Lidder, I find myself remembering those journeys. I can almost see Zamir stepping out of the car, walking towards the shrine with familiar confidence, greeting the caretaker, offering Niyaz, and spending a few moments in silent prayer. The journey would then resume. But somehow, after every such stop, Zamir seemed calmer, lighter, and more at peace. Perhaps he had left something behind there. Or perhaps he had received something that cannot easily be described in words. Either way, the shrine of Baba Bamuddin^(RA) remained one of the most enduring landmarks in the spiritual geography of Zamir's life.

Among the many stories associated with Baba Bamuddin^(RA), one particularly fascinated Zamir and he would occasionally recount it during our conversations. According to tradition, a man once came to Baba carrying a bottle gourd (*Lauki or kaddu*). With great excitement, he presented it before the saint and declared: "Baba, this is no ordinary vegetable. It has come from Paradise itself." The people gathered around were intrigued. The gourd indeed appeared unusual. It was perfectly formed, fresh, and beautiful. The man was convinced that he possessed something extraordinary and expected the saint to confirm its heavenly origin. Baba Bamuddin^(RA) looked at the gourd carefully. After examining it for a few moments, he calmly asked: "If this has truly come from Paradise, then where is its end piece?" The man was taken aback. He had no answer. He looked at the gourd repeatedly but could not understand what the saint meant. The portion where the flower naturally attaches to the fruit was missing. Embarrassed, he replied: "I do not know, Baba." According to the tradition, Baba Bamuddin^(RA) then smiled gently. Reaching into the folds of his garment, he produced the missing piece and placed it before the astonished gathering. The spectators stood speechless. The man who had brought the gourd was overwhelmed. Baba then is said to have remarked that if something truly comes from Paradise, it comes complete. Human beings often see only a part of reality and become captivated by appearances, while the deeper truth remains hidden from them. The miracle itself was not the point. The lesson was. The saint was reminding those present that true spiritual insight is not measured by outward appearances or extraordinary claims. What matters is completeness of understanding. Human beings are often quick to make declarations about divine matters while possessing only partial knowledge. The story became a symbol of the saint's

spiritual perception, the belief that those who are close to God see beyond what ordinary eyes can perceive. For generations, devotees have narrated this incident as an illustration of Baba Bamuddin's spiritual wisdom and his intimate awareness of realities hidden from ordinary understanding.

Whenever Zamir narrated this incident, I felt that what fascinated him was not the miracle itself but the lesson hidden within it. He often believed that life, like the gourd from Paradise, reveals only a part of itself to us. The rest remains hidden until wisdom, experience, or divine grace uncovers it. Looking back today, I feel that Zamir himself possessed something of that quality. He had an uncanny ability to look beyond the obvious and perceive dimensions of people and situations that many of us overlooked.

VI

The Golden Years At Aligarh

"We arrived at Aligarh to earn degrees. We left carrying friendships, stories, and memories that no university could ever record on a transcript."

Every human being has two birthplaces. The first is where he is born. The second is where his personality is born. For me, and for thousands of young men and women who have had the privilege of studying within its historic walls, that second birthplace is Aligarh Muslim University. It has often been said that one goes to a university to earn a degree. That statement may be true for many institutions. It is certainly not true for Aligarh Muslim University.

One arrives at Aligarh with a suitcase full of clothes and a head full of dreams. One leaves carrying something far more precious, an entirely different way of looking at life. Founded in the nineteenth century through the extraordinary vision of Sir Syed Ahmad Khan, Aligarh Muslim University emerged at a critical moment in India's history. It was conceived not merely as an educational institution but as a movement, a movement to awaken minds, reconcile tradition with modernity, and prepare a generation capable of engaging confidently with the changing world while remaining rooted in its ethical and cultural values. More than a century and a half later, that vision continues to breathe through every road, every hostel, every classroom, every library, and every tree-lined avenue of the campus. Aligarh Muslim University is not

simply a university. It is a living civilization. Its history cannot be measured merely by the number of degrees it has awarded, the distinguished scholars it has produced, or the eminent personalities who have walked through its gates. Its true legacy lies in the countless lives it has quietly transformed.

There is an old saying among *Aligs* that once Aligarh enters your heart, it never leaves. Having lived there, I know this is not an exaggeration. There is something almost magical about the place. The campus seems to possess its own rhythm, its own language, and even its own philosophy of life. Education at AMU never begins with the first lecture, nor does it end with the final examination. The classrooms certainly teach knowledge. The university teaches wisdom. Every corner of the campus becomes an extension of the classroom. The dhabas teach debate. The hostel corridors teach friendship. The dining halls teach coexistence. The Students' Union teaches democracy. The libraries teach scholarship. The sports fields teach resilience. The annual exhibition teaches celebration. Even silence teaches reflection. One quickly discovers that learning at Aligarh is not confined to books. It lives in conversations.

Some of the finest lectures I ever attended were delivered not by professors standing behind lecterns, but by ordinary students sitting around a wooden table with steaming cups of tea in front of them. A discussion that began with cricket could end in philosophy. A conversation about examinations could drift into politics. Someone would quote Ghalib. Someone else would invoke Einstein. Another would narrate an incident from history. Before one realised it, midnight had arrived and nobody wished to leave.

That was Aligarh. It never slept. Even after the classroom lights were switched off, the university remained awake. Ideas

remained awake. Friendships remained awake. Dreams remained awake. Entire nights would pass in discussions that ranged from religion to science, from poetry to politics, from love to revolution, from Kashmir to Kanyakumari, from Aristotle to Allama Iqbal. No one announced these discussions. No one prescribed them. No one graded them. Yet many of us would later realise that these conversations had shaped our thinking more profoundly than many formal lectures.

One of the greatest strengths of AMU has always been its extraordinary diversity. Students arrive from every corner of India and from many parts of the world. Each brings with him/her a different language, culture, cuisine, history, and worldview. The university quietly performs its miracle. Without erasing individual identities, it teaches people how to live together. Within a few months, a student from Kashmir shares a room with someone from Bihar. A young man from Kerala debates politics with a friend from Rajasthan. A student from Assam discovers Urdu poetry through a roommate from Uttar Pradesh. Religious identities remain. Regional identities remain. Yet gradually a larger identity emerges. One becomes an *Alig*. That identity is difficult to define but impossible to forget. Perhaps that is why former students speak of AMU not with nostalgia alone but with affection. It is impossible to remain emotionally detached from a place that quietly participated in the making of one's personality.

When I arrived at Aligarh in 1991 as a young student of Physics, my aspirations were largely academic. Like every young researcher, I wanted to understand the laws that governed the physical universe. What I did not know was that alongside Physics, AMU would teach me sociology without enrolling me in Sociology, politics without admitting me to

Political Science, literature without requiring me to study Urdu, philosophy without offering a formal course, and humanity without ever announcing a lecture. Some of those lessons came from professors. Many came from friends. One of the greatest among them was Zamir. Much of what this chapter narrates took place outside lecture halls. It happened over cups of tea at the roadside teas-stalls of AMU. It happened during late-night walks through Muhammad Habib Hall. It happened at the annual Numaish. It happened during heated Students' Union elections. It happened in cinema halls, hostel rooms, railway compartments, roadside eateries, and on the long journeys between Aligarh and Kashmir.

Looking back today, I realise that those ordinary days were, in fact, extraordinary. At the time, we believed we were simply living our student lives. We had no idea that we were creating memories that would sustain us for the rest of our lives. The pages that follow are not merely recollections of university days. They are an attempt to revisit a world that shaped us, a world where friendships were deeper than acquaintances, conversations lasted longer than the tea they accompanied, disagreements strengthened relationships rather than weakening them, and every evening promised another story waiting to be told.

For us, Aligarh was never simply a destination. It was a way of life. And if friendship has an address in my memory, it will forever bear the name:

"Aligarh Muslim University"

Muhammad Habib Hall: Our First Home Away from Home

My earliest days at Aligarh were marked by the uncertainty that naturally accompanies arrival at a new university, a new hostel and an unfamiliar city. At a time when I was still learning to find my way, both within the University and beyond its gates, a few seniors extended to me a kindness that I have never forgotten. Their warmth and willingness to help stood in reassuring contrast to the distance, and sometimes severity, with which newcomers were treated by some other seniors. Through guidance, encouragement and simple acts of consideration, they made the difficult process of settling into hostel and university life considerably easier.

Among those whose support left a lasting impression upon me were Abdul Hamid Wani of Botany; Pirzada Shariefuddin, Ilyas Ahmad, and Tariq Chishti of Mathematics; Ajaz Ahmad of Sociology; and Jan Mubarak of Computer Science. There were many others as well whose names time may not have preserved with equal clarity, but whose gestures of goodwill remain part of my memories of those formative years. They may not have realised how meaningful their help was to a young student trying to establish himself in an unfamiliar place. Yet, in one way or another, each contributed to my growing confidence, my sense of belonging and, ultimately, my successful journey at Aligarh Muslim University. I remember them all with affection, respect and enduring gratitude.

Although I joined Aligarh Muslim University in 1991, my association with Muhammad Habib Hall began even before I officially became one of its residents. Like many students in those days, I first entered hostel life not through a formal allotment but as a “guest boarder”. My first shelter was Room No. 275, occupied by one of my seniors from a neighbouring

village, Tariq Mahmood Qureshi, who was then pursuing his LLM. Tariq Bhaie welcomed me with remarkable warmth and generosity. In those early days, when I was still trying to find my feet in a new city, his room became my first home in Aligarh. Interestingly, Room No. 275 continued to remain a part of our lives for many years. Even after Tariq Bhaie completed his studies and left the university, one after another, close friends managed to secure allotment in the same room. Amongst them Dr. Javaid Ahmad Lone was one companion who became the host at this room for years together. Because of Javaid Bhaie, it became something of an unofficial headquarters for our group, a room that always had familiar faces, endless conversations, and an open door.

Another person to whom I owe a great debt from those days was our senior, Mansoor Bhai from Punjab. Among the students of Muhammad Habib Hall, Mansoor Bhai enjoyed a unique reputation. He was well connected across the campus and seemed to know everyone, from student leaders and hostel authorities to those colourful characters who were affectionately known in student slang as the *jugaadu* experts, people capable of solving almost any problem through contacts, persuasion, or sheer resourcefulness. Alongside them were the legendary *dadas* of the campus, whose influence often extended far beyond their classrooms. Mansoor Bhai knew them all. More importantly, everyone seemed to know him. His room, Room No. 281, located in the same wing, was always bustling with visitors. Yet despite his popularity and influence, he was remarkably kind to younger students. For quite some time after my arrival, he almost adopted me under his guardianship. Whenever I encountered difficulties, he was among the first people to step forward. Looking back now, I realise how fortunate I was to have someone like him

watching over a newcomer who had left Kashmir for the first time to pursue higher education. Years later, Mansoor Bhai migrated to Australia, where he eventually settled with his family. Even today, whenever I think about those early days in Aligarh, his smiling face inevitably comes to mind. It was largely because of Mansoor Bhai's intervention that I finally obtained accommodation in Muhammad Habib Hall.

In those days, securing a hostel room was anything but easy. The early 1990s witnessed an unprecedented influx of students from the Kashmir Valley into Aligarh Muslim University. Hostel accommodation was scarce, and hundreds of students competed for a limited number of seats. Merit alone was not always enough. As students jokingly remarked, *jugaad* often proved just as valuable. Fortunately, I had Mansoor Bhai. Through his guidance and support, I was allotted Room No. 271. At that time, I regarded it as merely another hostel room. Little did I know that it would become my home for the next ten years. Few places have influenced my life as profoundly as that modest room.

If Mansoor Bhai was the influential guardian who helped many of us find our footing in the practical world of hostel life, another senior left an equally profound impression on us in an entirely different way. He was Mubarak Ahmad Butt, affectionately known to everyone simply as Mubarak Bhai. Like Mansoor Bhai, Mubarak Bhai also hailed from Punjab and was pursuing his LLM at the University. Yet the similarities ended there. Where Mansoor Bhai's strength lay in his wide network of contacts and his remarkable ability to solve problems, Mubarak Bhai possessed something quieter but equally valuable, wisdom, generosity, and an extraordinary gift for making every newcomer feel at home. His room, Room No. 235, was unlike any other room in Muhammad Habib

Hall. The door seemed never to close. One did not need an invitation. One did not even need an introduction. It was enough to knock gently, and almost invariably a warm voice from inside would say, "Come in". What always amazed me was that Mubarak Bhai never seemed concerned about whether he knew the visitor personally. A first-year student from Kashmir, a senior from another department, a friend of a friend, or even someone who had simply heard about his hospitality, all were received with the same warmth and effortless grace. I often think that Room No. 235 functioned less like a hostel room and more like a community center. Students came seeking advice, companionship, a cup of tea, or simply the comfort of conversation. Nobody left disappointed. One of Mubarak Bhai's greatest passions was cooking. Long before "self-cooking" became fashionable among students, he had mastered the art of preparing simple but delicious meals in his room. His prized possession was an *ulta tawwa*, (an inverted pan used to cook chapatis) on which he would prepare fresh chapatis with remarkable ease. The aroma of those hot chapatis would often travel down the corridor, drawing hungry students toward Room No. 235 almost instinctively. Many evenings, I found myself sitting cross-legged on the floor of his room, enjoying freshly prepared chapatis while conversations flowed effortlessly around us. There was something deeply satisfying about those meals. Perhaps it was not merely the food. It was the affection with which it was served. Mubarak Bhai believed that feeding a student who lived hundreds of kilometers away from home was itself an act of kindness. In retrospect, I realise that many of us received not only nourishment for our bodies in that room but also reassurance for our hearts. Yet food was only one part of his hospitality. His real feast was intellectual. Religious discussions were among Mubarak Bhai's greatest

strengths. He possessed an impressive command over Islamic history, theology, jurisprudence, and comparative religious thought. Unlike many who speak merely to display knowledge, Mubarak Bhai discussed religion with humility, patience, and remarkable clarity. His room often transformed into an informal seminar. Students from different disciplines gathered there, asking questions about faith, ethics, history, and philosophy. Disagreements were welcomed. Questions were encouraged. Nobody was ridiculed for expressing a different opinion. Those discussions frequently continued late into the night. For many of us who had just entered university life, they became an important part of our intellectual growth. Mubarak Bhai rarely lectured in the conventional sense. Instead, he gently guided us, encouraging us to think critically while remaining firmly grounded in values of humility, tolerance, and respect. Whenever I think of Room No. 235 today, I do not remember its walls or its furniture. I remember the warmth. The fragrance of freshly made chapatis. The endless conversations. And above all, the reassuring presence of a man whose greatest gift was that he never allowed a stranger to remain a stranger for very long.

Looking back after so many years, I realise that Muhammad Habib Hall was fortunate to have personalities like Mansoor Bhai, Tariq Bhai and Mubarak Bhai. One taught us how to navigate the practical realities of university life. The other taught us how to navigate life itself. All the three, in their own distinct ways, became elder brothers to an entire generation of Kashmiri students who arrived in Aligarh carrying dreams, uncertainties, and hopes for the future.

Room No. 271 witnessed my journey from an uncertain undergraduate student to a researcher, a teacher, and eventually a far more mature individual. It witnessed

friendships, disappointments, celebrations, examinations, sleepless nights, dreams, and countless conversations that would shape the course of my life. Even today, when I close my eyes, I can walk through its doorway. Muhammad Habib Hall itself occupies a special place in my memory. Standing proudly on what was then known as Anoopshahar Road, midway between Purani Chungi and Jamalpur, the hostel possessed a quiet dignity that reflected decades of student life. When I revisited Aligarh a few years ago, I naturally made my way to Habib Hall. The building stood exactly where it always had. Its familiar walls remained almost unchanged. Yet something had altered. The roads had become congested. The open spaces had disappeared beneath shops and traffic. The neighbourhood no longer possessed the serenity I remembered. The building was the same. The surroundings were different. Perhaps the greatest change, however, had taken place within me. I was no longer the young student who had first walked through its gates carrying a suitcase full of dreams. Habib Hall was much more than a hostel. Within its premises stood a mosque that called students to prayer and a canteen that called them to conversation. The dining hall and mess occupied the ground floor, serving meals that, to hungry students living away from home, often tasted far better than they deserved to. There was a spacious common room where students gathered to watch television, discuss politics, or simply spend time together. Adjacent to it stood the billiards room. For us juniors, that room possessed an almost mythical status. Entering it was unthinkable. Even peeping inside from the doorway required courage. Billiards, in those days, was considered a privilege reserved almost exclusively for senior students. Similarly, the front row of sofas in the common room carried an unwritten rule. They belonged to the seniors. No one had written the rule anywhere. Yet every junior knew it

instinctively. Such was the hostel culture of those years. Respect for seniority was not enforced by regulations. It was simply understood. The corridors of the hostel told another story. Every evening, they were lined with bicycles. Almost every student owned one. A motorcycle was a luxury. A car was almost unimaginable for a student. Before vacations, we would carry our bicycles up the staircases, wheel them into the verandas outside our rooms, and chain them securely to the iron grills before leaving for home. Those bicycles were our lifelines. They carried us to departments, libraries, tea stalls, cinema halls, markets, and sometimes simply through the tree-lined roads of Aligarh on pleasant evenings.

The nights at Habib Hall possessed a charm that is difficult to describe. Unlike today's hostels, where silence often prevails behind closed doors, Habib Hall remained awake long after midnight. Music drifted through the corridors from cassette decks playing in senior students' rooms. Some preferred ghazals. Others played Hindi film songs. A few explored Western music. The juniors, however, rarely dared to play their own music loudly. The unwritten codes of hostel life demanded restraint.

Perhaps my favourite moments came during the hot summer nights. After dinner, I would often drag a chair into the veranda outside Room No. 271 and simply sit there for hours. The sky above Aligarh appeared vast and endlessly inviting. I would gaze at the stars, lost in thought, while a gentle breeze wandered through the corridors. Sometimes conversations floated from distant rooms. Sometimes only silence accompanied me. Those quiet nights taught me something that no classroom ever could, the value of solitude. Even today, whenever life becomes overwhelmingly busy, I find myself mentally returning to that veranda, sitting beneath the

same stars, feeling once again the peace that only youth seems capable of offering. In those early years, I regularly availed myself of the hostel mess. Meals were simple, dal, rice, two *rotis*, and occasionally two pieces of meat, but to us that was more than sufficient. There were evenings when discussions at the dhabas stretched far longer than intended and I returned after the dining hall had closed. Yet even then I was never truly hungry. Our wing's waiter, affectionately known as *Maulana Sahib*, understood the habits of students better than we ourselves did. Without being asked, he would quietly place my dinner outside the door of Room No. 271, a plate of dal, rice, rotis, and meat carefully covered and waiting patiently for my return. By the time I arrived, the food had often grown cold. Occasionally, one of the hostel cats had already helped itself to a portion of the meal before I could rescue it. Yet strangely enough, I do not remember ever complaining. Those simple meals remain among the most satisfying I have ever eaten. Perhaps it was not the food itself that tasted so wonderful. Perhaps it was youth. Perhaps it was friendship. Or perhaps it was simply the feeling that, in that remarkable place called Muhammad Habib Hall, one was never truly alone.

When “Zambhatta!” Echoed Through Habib Hall

As I have already mentioned, after our rather unusual first meeting, I would occasionally come across Zamir at one or another of the tea stalls around the university. We recognized each other, exchanged a few words from time to time, and gradually became familiar faces. Yet we were still not close friends. That changed in late 1992. Zamir was allotted Room No. 81 in Muhammad Habib Hall. His room was located on the ground floor, almost directly below my own room, Room No. 271, on the second floor. I sometimes wonder whether

destiny had quietly decided that enough distance had existed between us and that it was now time for our friendship to begin. The physical distance between our rooms had suddenly become almost insignificant. The emotional distance soon disappeared as well. Initially, our meetings remained casual. We would run into each other in the hostel canteen, at the *dhaba* across the road, or during gatherings of Kashmiri students residing in Habib Hall. Our conversations, which had once lasted only a few minutes, slowly began extending into half an hour, then an hour, and eventually entire evenings. Without consciously deciding so, we had begun seeking each other's company. It did not take long for both of us to discover that our intellectual frequencies were remarkably similar. Although I was immersed in Physics and Zamir in Political Science and later West Asian Studies, our curiosity extended far beyond our respective disciplines. We were both fascinated by ideas. Politics, history, religion, philosophy, literature, science, society, everything became worthy of discussion. The more I listened to Zamir, the more I realised that I was sitting in the company of an extraordinarily well-read young man. His knowledge surprised me. His confidence impressed me. But above all, it was his ability to connect seemingly unrelated ideas that fascinated me. He could begin with Kashmir and end with Palestine. He could start with a political incident and conclude with a lesson from history. He could narrate an ordinary event in such a captivating manner that even the simplest conversation became memorable. Gradually, our meetings became a daily routine. Soon they became a necessity. Whenever I needed company, there was one call that echoed through the corridors of Muhammad Habib Hall. Standing in the veranda outside Room No. 271, I would lean over the railing and shout at the top of my voice,

“Zambhattaaa...!”

It was a nickname I had lovingly given Zamir. Almost instantly, a familiar face would appear from the ground floor. No further explanation was necessary. He knew exactly what that call meant. It could mean that tea was ready. It could mean dinner. It could mean a game of cards. It could mean that I simply wanted company. Within minutes, he would climb the staircase and appear in Room No. 271 as though responding to an unspoken summons. No formal invitation was ever required. That was the beauty of friendship in those days. Around 1995 or perhaps 1996, our friendship acquired another important dimension during the Students' Union elections at Aligarh Muslim University. Those elections were unlike any ordinary campus elections. They were festivals of democracy. Entire hostels transformed into campaign headquarters. Students forgot sleep. Posters covered walls. Discussions continued until dawn. Every vote mattered. During this election, Zamir and I found ourselves campaigning enthusiastically for a Kashmiri student contesting for a position in the Students' Union Cabinet. Our rival group was supporting another Kashmiri candidate. The contest became intense. By then, a small but influential group had begun taking shape around us. It consisted of six or seven close friends who shared not only political interests but also deep personal trust. Besides Zamir and me, the group included Khalid Ayaz, Farooq Dar, Younus, Javed Bhai, Saaba, and several others who frequently joined us. Together, we campaigned tirelessly. When the election results were declared, the candidate we had supported emerged victorious and became a Senior Cabinet Member of the Students' Union. The rival candidate lost. Victory brought satisfaction. But more importantly, the election strengthened our friendship.

Campaigning together taught us how each of us thought, worked, argued, and made decisions. By the end of the election, we were no longer merely friends. We had become a family. Room No. 271 gradually evolved into the unofficial headquarters of our group. Saturday nights acquired a ritualistic significance. As evening descended, friends would begin arriving one after another. No one needed an invitation. Everyone knew where to come. Soon the floor would be occupied by six or seven young men sitting cross-legged around a pack of playing cards. Someone shuffled the cards. Someone dealt. Someone accused another of cheating. Someone laughed. Someone argued. And the game continued. Tea, however, remained the true constant of those nights. Outside my room, in the veranda, stood a sturdy wooden table upon which rested a large circular electric heater. Beside it were always sufficient supplies of milk, tea leaves, sugar, and utensils. Throughout the night, one or another among us would quietly prepare fresh tea for the entire group. No one was assigned the duty. Whoever happened to be free simply stood up, boiled water, brewed another kettle, and returned with steaming glasses of tea. The cards continued. The conversations became deeper. Morning gradually approached unnoticed. By sunrise, exhaustion would finally defeat enthusiasm. Somebody stretched. Someone yawned. The cards were abandoned. Without ceremony, everyone simply spread blankets on the floor and went to sleep wherever space was available. The following day usually began sometime after noon. Looking back today, I realise that those nights were never really about playing cards. Cards merely provided an excuse. The real game was conversation. Nothing was considered too trivial. Nothing was too personal. Politics, Religion, Morality, Science, Love, Marriage, Family problems, Career anxieties, Financial struggles, Dreams, Failures found

place around that circle of friends. If one of us faced a problem, everyone else immediately began proposing solutions. No issue remained exclusively personal. We carried one another's burdens almost instinctively. And at the center of almost every gathering sat Zamir. He was unquestionably the soul of our group. His presence transformed ordinary evenings into unforgettable experiences. He narrated stories with a flair that I have rarely encountered in another human being. Many of us knew that several of those stories were generously embroidered with imagination. Some were only half true. Others perhaps belonged entirely to the remarkable world that existed inside Zamir's mind. Yet none of us cared. The truth of the story was never the point. The joy of listening was. He spoke of political leaders as though they were personal acquaintances. He narrated astonishing tales of his political connections. He described impossible adventures. He spoke about his romantic escapades with such confidence that one almost forgot to question their authenticity. Each story was delivered with absolute seriousness. Not a flicker of doubt crossed his face. By the end, even the most skeptical among us found themselves wondering: "What if it actually happened?" That was Zamir's extraordinary gift. He could make the improbable appear perfectly believable. More importantly, he could make every gathering come alive. People often accused me of encouraging him too much. "You have spoiled him", Khalid Ayaz would joke. "Every time he tells one of those impossible stories, you are the first person to applaud." Perhaps he was right. I enjoyed every moment of his storytelling. Today, when I look back with the maturity that age has brought, I understand why. It was never the stories alone. It was Zamir himself. His company brought comfort. His laughter dissolved anxiety. His presence lightened burdens. Even on difficult days, an evening spent with Zamir

somehow restored our spirits. Without realizing it, we had all become addicted, not to his stories, but to his companionship. Years later, I have forgotten many lectures I attended at the university. I have forgotten many examinations. I have forgotten countless dates and events. But I have never forgotten those Saturday nights in Room No. 271. Whenever I remember Muhammad Habib Hall, I do not first see its corridors or its rooms. I hear a familiar voice calling from the second floor,

“Zambhattaaa...!”

, and almost instantly I see Zamir climbing the staircase, smiling as though another unforgettable night of friendship was about to begin.

Love Stories That Became Hostel Legends

There are certain conversations that belong only to university hostels. They cannot be reproduced in classrooms. They cannot be recorded in lecture notes. They cannot even be fully understood by those who have never experienced hostel life. They are born somewhere between late-night cups of tea, unfinished card games, half-burnt cigarettes, examinations postponed until tomorrow, and friendships that quietly become lifelong relationships. For us, those conversations almost always revolved around one irresistible subject. Love. No matter how serious our discussions began, whether they concerned politics, philosophy, Kashmir, examinations, cricket, or the future, they somehow found their inevitable destination. Sooner or later, someone would mention a girl's name. Within moments, the entire room would burst into life. That was the magic of youth. During those years at Aligarh Muslim University, our little group had almost become a family. Every member possessed a unique personality. Every

member carried a different story. And almost every member, at some point or another, was believed to be hopelessly in love. Whether those stories were entirely true never really mattered. They became part of the folklore of Muhammad Habib Hall. There were evenings when the only purpose of gathering in Room No. 271 seemed to be discussing somebody's latest romantic development. Someone had seen someone near the *Kennedy Hall*. Someone had exchanged a glance outside the Arts Faculty. Someone claimed to have received a smile while crossing the university road. Another insisted that it was not merely a smile but an unmistakable indication of mutual affection. The debate could continue for hours. Every witness narrated the incident differently. Every narrator added a new detail. Every listener became an expert on human emotions. The stories became richer with every retelling. Naturally, Zamir occupied the center of this colourful universe. His romances shall find their place in the later pages of this memoir. But he was by no means alone. Khalid Ayaz possessed stories that were equally capable of keeping us awake deep into the night. Each one of us became, at one time or another, the subject of relentless teasing. No one escaped. If a friend happened to walk twice along the same road in a single afternoon, suspicion immediately arose. If he suddenly began wearing freshly ironed clothes more regularly than usual, the interrogation began. If someone was unexpectedly absent from the hostel for an hour, a complete investigation followed upon his return. No explanation was accepted without rigorous cross-examination. Every innocent action acquired romantic significance. Even complete coincidence was transformed into destiny. Whether these stories were based upon reality, misunderstanding, imagination, or youthful optimism is perhaps no longer important. What remains unforgettable is the atmosphere those conversations

created. Entire evenings passed discussing possibilities that today appear almost charmingly innocent. I realise that none of us ever intended to invade anyone's privacy or make anyone uncomfortable. There was no malice. No character assassination. Only youthful curiosity. And endless laughter. If someone genuinely succeeded in speaking to the girl he admired, he instantly became the hero of the week. If he merely exchanged greetings, the achievement was celebrated almost as though he had conquered the world. If the conversation lasted more than five minutes, he was expected to narrate every single sentence upon returning to the hostel. No detail was considered insignificant. "What exactly did she say?" "What colour was her dress?" "Who was with her?" "Did she smile?" "Who spoke first?" Questions poured in from every direction. The unfortunate hero would spend the next two hours answering an interrogation more thorough than any conducted by a police officer. The funniest part was that everyone secretly hoped the next interrogation would be his own. Perhaps that was the greatest beauty of those years. Love was less about possession than participation. One person's story became everybody's entertainment. One person's happiness became everybody's celebration. One person's disappointment became everybody's concern. Sometimes the stories never progressed beyond imagination. Sometimes they quietly faded without reaching any conclusion. Occasionally they found happy endings. More often they simply became beautiful memories. Yet none of them was ever wasted. Because the real destination of those stories was never marriage. It was friendship.

Today, when I reflect upon those evenings, I realise that the girls whose names occasionally entered our conversations probably never knew that somewhere inside Room No. 271

they had unintentionally become part of an entire generation's emotional education. They taught us anticipation, patience, respect, disappointment, hope, courage, and, perhaps most importantly, the ability to laugh at ourselves. The teasing never stopped. Months after a supposed romantic incident had ended, somebody would suddenly revive it during dinner. The entire group would immediately erupt into laughter. The embarrassed friend would protest. Someone else would produce a fresh "piece of evidence." Another would invent an entirely new chapter to the story. Within minutes, reality surrendered to imagination. The laughter resumed. No one objected. Because everyone knew that his own turn would arrive soon enough. In retrospect, I believe those evenings gave us something far more valuable than amusement. They taught us to celebrate one another's joys without envy. To comfort one another's disappointments without judgement. To preserve one another's secrets without betrayal. And to laugh together without ever laughing at one another. That was the unwritten code of our friendship. The remarkable thing was that none of us measured those moments by their outcome. We never asked whether a particular romance ultimately succeeded. We rarely discussed whether love had reached its destination. Time eventually answered those questions in its own way. Life carried each one of us along different roads. Some dreams were fulfilled. Some quietly dissolved into memory. Yet, strangely enough, the stories never disappeared. Even today, whenever our old friends meet after many years, it takes remarkably little time before one familiar name resurfaces. "Khalid, do you remember...?" "Jaleel, what does philosophy say about this.....?" "And Zamir... if only he were here, he would have narrated the whole incident differently." The room once again fills with laughter. For a few precious moments, we are no longer ageing

professionals burdened with responsibilities, families, and careers. We become those young students of Muhammad Habib Hall once more, sitting on the floor of Room No. 271, surrounded by cups of tea, arguing passionately over love stories that perhaps never happened exactly as we remembered them. And perhaps that is precisely the point. The purpose of those stories was never to become history. Their purpose was to become memories. Beautiful memories. Memories that still make us smile long after the passage of three decades.

Tasveer Mahal and Our Cinema Education

Every university has its unofficial classrooms. Places where no attendance is taken, no examinations are conducted, and no degrees are awarded, yet some of life's most enduring lessons are quietly learnt. For us at Aligarh Muslim University, one such classroom was *Tasveer Mahal*. To an outsider, it was merely a cinema hall. To us, it was much more. It was where friendships deepened, where laughter echoed louder than the dialogues on the screen, where dreams were nurtured, and where an ordinary Sunday afternoon could become a memory that would survive for decades. Going to Tasveer Mahal was never an individual affair. Watching a movie alone was almost considered an act of betrayal. A film outing always began inside Muhammad Habib Hall. Someone would suddenly appear at Room No. 271 and announce, "*Picture chalein?*" (Shall we go to a movie?). Within minutes, the room transformed into a planning committee. Which film was running? Who had already watched it? Who had money? Who could borrow money? Who would pay today? Who would pay next week? The discussion often lasted longer than the film itself. Eventually, after considerable debate, five, six, sometimes even ten of us would set out together, laughing all

the way to Tasveer Mahal. The excitement began long before the opening scene. Standing in the ticket queue was itself an experience. There was always someone trying to bargain for a better seat, someone claiming to know the booking clerk, and someone confidently predicting that the film would either become a blockbuster or turn out to be a complete disaster. Zamir, naturally, belonged to the second category. Long before the film began, he would often declare with remarkable confidence, "I already know the ending." Whether he actually knew it or not was another matter altogether. We had learnt by then that half the pleasure of accompanying Zamir lay in listening to his confident predictions, most of which were as entertaining as the film itself. Inside the theatre, we were perhaps among the most enthusiastic audiences one could imagine. We laughed loudly. We applauded dramatic scenes. We whistled when the hero finally defeated the villain. We mourned tragic endings with surprising sincerity. Some films left us speechless. Others became subjects of endless ridicule. No movie ended when the final credits appeared. In fact, that was where the real entertainment often began. As soon as we stepped out of Tasveer Mahal, the review session commenced. Everyone suddenly transformed into a film critic. One praised the hero. Another criticized the director. Someone admired the music. Someone declared that the heroine deserved all the awards. Another insisted that the story had been copied from an older film. No opinion remained unchallenged. The debates often continued until we reached our next destination. And that destination was almost always food.

Just outside Tasveer Mahal stood several modest vegetarian dhabas that possessed a charm no luxurious restaurant could ever equal. Their wooden benches, aluminium utensils, smoky kitchens, and ever-busy cooks became familiar landmarks of

our student life. Those humble eateries witnessed as many debates. For Zamir, the movie was only half the programme. The meal afterwards was equally important. Among all the delicacies available there, one particular dish occupied an almost legendary status in our group; *Andey ki Burji* (Scrambled Eggs). Prepared with astonishing simplicity yet unforgettable flavour, andey ki burji seemed capable of satisfying even the most exhausted student after a long movie. Zamir adored it. No matter how intensely we had discussed the film, the conversation would momentarily pause when this delicacy finally arrived on the table. Another favourite was the rich, creamy *Dal Makhani*, (Dal enriched with butter) slowly cooked for hours until every spoonful carried the comforting warmth that only simple North Indian dhabas can produce. Served with freshly prepared tandoori rotis, it became one of Zamir's preferred meals. During the month of Ramadan, these humble eateries assumed an even greater significance. Many evenings after *Maghrib*, our destination became these vegetarian dhabas. The day's fast would end not with elaborate feasts but with simple, honest food shared among friends. There was something profoundly satisfying about those meals. No one worried about expensive menus. No one cared about sophisticated surroundings. We cared only that everyone had enough to eat. If one among us happened to be short of money, as was frequently the case, the others quietly contributed. No accounts were maintained. No calculations were made. Somebody paid today. Someone else paid next time. Friendship itself became our accounting system. Those dhabas fed us with much more than food. They nourished companionship. Many of our deepest conversations took place over plates of dal makhani and andey ki burji. Films that had begun as entertainment gradually became windows into larger discussions. A patriotic film inevitably led to

debates on history and nationhood. A romantic story reminded us of somebody's latest love affair, resulting in endless teasing. A film based on social injustice opened discussions on politics, poverty, and morality. Sometimes we even argued over whether cinema had a responsibility towards society or existed merely for entertainment. Remarkably, these conversations often became more intellectually stimulating than many formal classroom discussions. Perhaps that was the real education Aligarh offered us. The university taught us through professors. Life taught us through friendships. And somewhere between Tasveer Mahal and those modest roadside dhabas, both forms of education quietly merged into one.

Today, multiplexes offer reclining seats, digital sound, online booking, gourmet snacks, and every imaginable comfort. Yet, if someone were to ask me which cinema I would choose for one final evening, I would not hesitate for a moment. I would return to Tasveer Mahal. Not because of the building. Not because of the films. But because I know that if I close my eyes for a moment, I shall once again find Zamir sitting beside me, laughing at a dialogue before anyone else has understood it, confidently predicting the ending, and then insisting, after the film is over, "Come on... now let us have andey ki burji and dal makhani. A movie is incomplete without burji." Today the cinema hall may have changed. The dhabas may no longer look the same. Many of those wooden benches may have disappeared. But in the theatre of memory, nothing has altered. The film is still running. The discussions continue. The dal makhani still arrives steaming hot.

And somewhere across the table, Zamir is still smiling, turning an ordinary evening into a memory that time has never been able to fade. For us, Tasveer Mahal was never merely a cinema

hall. It was another classroom of Aligarh. One where the syllabus consisted of friendship, laughter, shared meals, and the priceless art of living together.

VII

Before Mobile Phones, There Was Love

"We belonged to a generation that measured love not in text messages but in waiting; not in video calls but in handwritten letters; not in emojis but in the trembling voice heard after standing for an hour outside an STD booth."

There are moments in every generation when history quietly changes direction. Those who live through such moments rarely recognize their significance. Only years later, while looking back through the corridors of memory, do they realise that they belonged to the last generation to experience one world before another completely replaced it. My generation stood precisely at such a crossroads. We grew up in a world that had not yet been invaded by mobile phones, social media, instant messaging, online banking, or digital conveniences. Ours was perhaps the last generation that learned the art of waiting before technology taught humanity the habit of immediacy. When I entered Aligarh Muslim University in 1991, communication still travelled at the speed of patience. Letters carried emotions. Postmen carried hope. Friendships depended upon presence rather than connectivity. Love demanded courage more than convenience. Even silence had its own language. Ironically, the first mobile phone I ever saw came almost a decade later, after I had submitted my Ph.D. thesis in 2001. It was a large, bulky device with a long antenna,

more a symbol of technological novelty than a practical means of communication. It certainly was not something that could comfortably disappear into a pocket as today's phones do. Looking back now, I sometimes smile at how unimaginable today's world would have appeared to us then. Yet I also find myself wondering whether we unknowingly lived through the final chapter of an age that possessed its own quiet beauty. We waited. And because we waited, we valued. Every week, almost instinctively, our eyes searched the corridors of Muhammad Habib Hall for a familiar figure. It was *Pandit Ji*, the postman. For today's students, a postman may be little more than a disappearing profession. For us, he was an ambassador of home. The sight of him entering the hostel instantly altered the atmosphere. Conversations paused. Doors opened. Students stepped into the corridors, each hoping to hear his own name called out. A single inland letter could brighten an entire week. A money order or a bank draft from home could rescue an entire month. One letter was rarely read only once. It was unfolded repeatedly, read slowly, folded carefully, then read again. The handwriting itself seemed alive. One could almost hear the voices of parents between the lines. No digital message has ever been able to recreate that feeling. Our financial lives followed the same rhythm. Today, if a student runs short of money, a brief message or phone call is enough. Within seconds, money arrives through UPI, online banking, or digital wallets. Our world was different. There was no Google Pay, no PhonePe, no internet banking, no emergency transfer. If the pocket became empty, one simply learned to wait. One adjusted. One postponed. One calculated. One planned. Sometimes we borrowed from friends. Sometimes we managed with astonishing creativity. Sometimes we simply learned that certain desires could wait until the next bank draft arrived

from home. Strangely enough, those limitations rarely made us miserable. Instead, they quietly taught us lessons that no classroom could ever teach. We learned the difference between necessity and luxury. We learned that planning was not merely a financial skill but a way of life. We discovered that delayed gratification often produced deeper satisfaction than instant fulfilment. Scarcity became an invisible teacher.

Today, as I watch my own children effortlessly transferring money, ordering meals, booking tickets, attending classes, and speaking to friends scattered across the globe with a device that fits inside a pocket, I cannot help admiring the extraordinary achievements of science and technology. Human civilization has undoubtedly benefited in countless ways. Distance has almost disappeared. Knowledge has become accessible to everyone. Communication has become instantaneous. Life has become easier. There is no wisdom in denying these remarkable achievements. And yet, somewhere within that progress, I sometimes feel we have quietly surrendered a few beautiful human habits; patience has become impatience, expectation has become entitlement, waiting has become inconvenience and silence has become discomfort. The joy of anticipation has yielded to the demand for immediacy. Perhaps every generation believes that its youth was somehow more meaningful than that of the next. Perhaps nostalgia itself is a gentle illusion created by memory. I readily accept that possibility. Yet I also believe that every generation possesses certain strengths born from the circumstances in which it lives. Our generation's greatest teacher was not technology, it was limitation. Because we could not communicate instantly, we cherished every conversation. Because money was scarce, we learned discipline. Because journeys were long, friendships became

deeper. Because waiting was unavoidable, gratitude came naturally. Most importantly, because we could not escape loneliness by reaching into our pockets, we learned to seek people instead of screens. Perhaps that is why the friendships of those years still feel so alive. We met without appointments. We talked without glancing at watches. We laughed without photographing the moment. We sat together for hours without feeling the need to announce our happiness to the world. The memory itself was enough. The stories narrated in the pages that follow belong to that disappearing world. A world where a letter from home was an event. A trunk call was a celebration. A bank draft brought relief. An evening at a roadside dhaba was richer than many expensive restaurants today. A friendship required nothing except time. And perhaps that is why it endured.

This chapter is not merely about university life. It is about a generation that learned to love slowly, to wait patiently, to spend carefully, to dream sincerely, and to treasure companionship above convenience. Technology has undoubtedly transformed our lives. I would never wish to reverse that progress. But if I could borrow just one gift from that earlier world and bring it into the present, it would not be the letters, nor the bank drafts, nor even the absence of mobile phones. It would be the extraordinary ability we once had to be completely present with one another. Looking back after more than three decades, I realise that what I miss most is not the world without technology, it is the world where human presence was our greatest technology. It is in that world that this story begins.

When Every Minute Had a Price

If there is one invention that today's generation will perhaps never fully appreciate, it is the *Subscriber Trunk Dialing (STD) booth*. STD booths were among India's most important centers of long-distance communication. For nearly three decades – particularly during 1980s, 1990s and early 2000s – the familiar yellow and black “STD/ISD/PCO” sign was visible in markets, bus stands, university campuses and residential neighbourhoods. For those who grew up in the era of smartphones, unlimited calling, and instant video conversations, it may be difficult to imagine that there was a time when speaking to a loved one required planning, patience, courage, and sometimes almost an entire month's pocket money. That was the world in which we lived. Every conversation had a beginning, a duration, and, most importantly, a price. Every passing minute meant more money. Every additional sentence carried a financial consequence. Ironically, perhaps because every minute was so expensive, every word spoken during those conversations became infinitely more valuable. My own association with the world of STD booths began after my engagement. Like countless arranged marriages of that era, my engagement to Dr. Rifat Ara was solemnized by our parents while I was away at Aligarh Muslim University. I had never seen her. Not even once. There were no exchanged photographs on mobile phones. No social media profiles. No video calls. No opportunity to casually know one another before the engagement. All I possessed was a name. A relationship that had suddenly become the center of my future. And one precious telephone number, the landline number of her home in Shopian, Kashmir. That number gradually became the most important sequence of digits in my life. Looking back today, I

smile at how a few numbers scribbled on a small piece of paper could possess the power to alter the rhythm of an entire week. Those numbers became hope, curiosity, excitement, anxiety, sometimes happiness, and sometimes despair. Most evenings, I would wait impatiently for the night. Calling during daytime was almost impossible. Telephones were family possessions, not personal devices. Privacy hardly existed, and trunk call charges were significantly higher. Like thousands of students across the country, I learned the economics of communication. The late-night concession rates became our greatest allies. As darkness descended over Aligarh, another world slowly awakened; the STD booths. They were extraordinary places. Some were no bigger than a small room, a glass cabin, a wooden counter, a telephone, a calculator, a register and outside a queue. Always a queue; students, workers, parents, young men in love and people waiting patiently for their turn to speak with someone hundreds of kilometers away. Sometimes the line moved quickly. Sometimes it hardly moved at all. There were evenings when one waited for nearly an hour before finally entering the narrow booth. Even then, there was no guarantee that the call would immediately connect. The operator would try once, then again, then perhaps a third attempt. Occasionally the line remained engaged. Sometimes there was no response. Sometimes the voice at the other end appeared so faint that one wondered whether the conversation was taking place across a telephone line or across the clouds themselves. Yet nobody complained. Waiting had become part of loving. Almost never did I make those journeys alone. My closest friends invariably accompanied me. Among them, Zamir was almost always present. While I disappeared into the telephone booth carrying a head full of expectations, they remained outside. Waiting, talking, laughing, or predicting how long the conversation

would last. Someone invariably kept an eye on the clock. Someone jokingly calculated how much money I had already spent. Another would speculate whether today's conversation would end peacefully or whether another disagreement was waiting to unfold. The moment I emerged from the booth; every face turned towards me. Nobody asked whether I had spoken. That much was obvious. The real question was written on their expressions. "How did it go?" Some evenings my face answered before I spoke. If the conversation had gone well, I walked out smiling, almost floating. The world suddenly seemed beautiful. Even the cold Aligarh nights felt warmer. Those evenings inevitably ended with endless teasing. Zamir was particularly gifted at it. He would imitate my tone of voice. Invent imaginary dialogues. Predict the future of my married life with absolute confidence. The entire group would burst into laughter while I tried unsuccessfully to defend myself. Yet beneath the humour lay genuine affection. They were happy because I was happy. Other evenings were different. Relationships between two strangers, even those united by engagement, are rarely simple. We belonged to different families., different upbringings, different temperaments and different experiences. Naturally, misunderstandings occurred. Words spoken in haste acquired meanings never intended. Silences became longer than conversations. Sometimes a minor disagreement would unexpectedly grow into an emotional storm. There were nights when I emerged from the STD booth carrying not happiness but disappointment. The conversation that had begun with hope had ended in confusion. The bill, however, remained substantial regardless of the outcome. It was not unusual for a single conversation to continue for well over an hour. When emotions became involved, time quietly disappeared. Only afterwards did reality return in the form of

the bill. On more than one occasion, the amount I owed approached my entire monthly pocket money. As students, such expenses were enormous. There were evenings when I simply stared at the bill, wondering how I would manage for the rest of the month. Before I could begin worrying, however, one of my friends would quietly reach into his pocket. Someone else followed. Without discussion, without embarrassment, they would pool whatever money they had. "Pay it first", someone would say. "We shall see the rest later." Looking back today, I realise that I was never alone in those conversations. Although only one voice travelled through the telephone line, an entire circle of friendship stood silently behind it. No one embodied that friendship more beautifully than Zamir. Whenever a conversation ended badly, he somehow knew exactly what to say. He never dismissed my worries. Nor did he exaggerate them. Instead, he possessed the rare ability to transform anxiety into perspective. He would patiently listen while I narrated every sentence of the conversation, sometimes word for word. Then, with remarkable calmness, he would smile and say something that immediately reduced the burden I had been carrying. "Relationships are not built in one conversation, Waseem." "Two people who have lived in different worlds cannot begin speaking the same language overnight." "Give it time." "Tomorrow will be different." His optimism was contagious. By the time we reached the hostel, my disappointment had already begun to fade. Today, after more than two decades of married life, I often smile while remembering those nights. Many of the disagreements that then appeared so serious now seem almost innocent. Perhaps that is how every meaningful relationship begins. Two strangers slowly learning one another's fears, hopes, expectations, strengths, and weaknesses. Love rarely arrives fully formed. It grows.

Conversation after conversation. Misunderstanding after misunderstanding. Forgiveness after forgiveness. The telephone merely became the bridge. Life itself built the relationship. I acknowledge that those expensive telephone calls taught me lessons far beyond communication. They taught patience. They taught listening. They taught compromise. They taught that affection is strengthened not by the absence of disagreements but by the willingness to overcome them. Above all, they taught me the immeasurable value of friendship. For every conversation that took place inside the telephone booth, there was another conversation waiting outside. One connected me to my future wife. The other connected me to friends who quietly ensured that I never had to walk through life's uncertainties alone.

As, I think of those STD booths today, I do not first remember the telephones. I remember the queue. The anxious waiting. The laughter. The teasing. The unexpectedly large bills. The comforting hand on my shoulder as we walked back towards Muhammad Habib Hall. And among all those familiar faces, I remember one most vividly Zamir. He never entered the booth with me.

Yet somehow, he was part of every conversation I ever had.

When Hearts Broke, Friendship Healed

Love has its own way of educating the human heart. Sometimes it teaches through fulfilment. More often, it teaches through disappointment. During our years at Aligarh Muslim University, almost every one of us, at one stage or another, found himself travelling through that mysterious landscape where hope and heartbreak often walked side by side. Some relationships quietly faded before they had truly begun. Some letters remained unanswered. Some telephone conversations

ended in painful silence. Some expectations simply dissolved with time. A misunderstanding that today might have been resolved within seconds through a mobile phone often lingered for weeks. A single unpleasant conversation could disturb one's peace of mind for days, because there was no possibility of immediately calling back to explain oneself. Pride, hesitation, financial limitations, and the sheer difficulty of communication often allowed small misunderstandings to grow much larger than they deserved.

We suffered not because we loved more than the present generation. We suffered because every emotion took longer to travel. And yet, perhaps for the very same reason, every emotion acquired greater depth. Whenever one among us experienced disappointment, none of us remained alone for very long. There was no need to announce one's sadness. Friends somehow knew. A silent face at dinner. An unusually quiet evening. A prolonged absence from the dhaba. These were enough. Someone would quietly knock at the door of Room No. 271. Another would arrive and offer to prepare tea. Someone would produce a pack of cigarettes. Before long, half a dozen friends would be sitting together, saying very little in the beginning. Words came later. Presence came first. Looking back now, I realise that before psychologists, counsellors, motivational speakers, and online support groups became part of our vocabulary, friendship itself performed that role. It became our first therapy. Among all of us, Zamir possessed an extraordinary gift for comforting distressed hearts. Perhaps because he himself carried hidden emotional burdens, he instinctively understood the pain of others. He never dismissed heartbreak with casual advice. He never laughed at another person's disappointment. Instead, he listened, patiently and completely. He allowed people to empty their

hearts before attempting to refill them with hope. Often, he would narrate one of his own romantic adventures, or at least one of the stories he so beautifully narrated. Whether every detail belonged to reality or imagination never mattered. The purpose was not comparison. The purpose was consolation. By the end of the evening, the person who had begun the conversation burdened with sorrow often found himself smiling again. That was Zamir's remarkable gift. He possessed an almost magical ability to replace despair with laughter. If conversation became the medicine for wounded hearts, music became its silent companion. Every generation leaves behind its own soundtrack. Our generation certainly did.

Long before playlists and streaming platforms entered our lives, we carried our emotions inside cassette tapes. Every hostel room possessed a tape recorder that was treated almost as a member of the family. Some were elegant two-in-one systems. Others were modest cassette players that had survived years of student life. Beside them lay small piles of carefully labelled audio cassettes, each preserving not merely songs but memories. Whenever words became inadequate, someone quietly reached towards the tape recorder. A cassette would begin to rotate. The familiar hiss of magnetic tape filled the room. Then came the voices that understood our hearts better than we ourselves could. The velvet sadness of Mehdi Hassan. The soulful poetry of Jagjit Singh. The intoxicating melancholy of Pankaj Udhas. Their ghazals became companions to our loneliness. Every verse seemed written for someone sitting inside a university hostel far away from home. We did not merely listen to those ghazals. We lived inside them. Many evenings passed with hardly anyone speaking. The music itself conducted the conversation. Sometimes a single couplet expressed what none of us possessed the

courage to say aloud. Film songs occupied an equally cherished place in our lives. They accompanied long evenings, endless card games, hostel gatherings, bicycle rides through the university roads, and quiet nights spent beneath the open skies of Muhammad Habib Hall. Every song gradually attached itself to a particular memory, a friend, a conversation, a season, a face. Even today, whenever I accidentally hear one of those melodies, I am no longer standing in the present. Within moments I find myself transported back to Room No. 271, to Pappu's Dhaba, to the verandas of Habib Hall, and to the circle of friends whose laughter once filled those spaces with life. Music became our diary. Each song preserved an emotion that words alone could never fully capture. Today, more than three decades have passed since those unforgettable years. The world around us has transformed beyond recognition. Letters have disappeared. STD booths have become museum pieces. Cassette tapes survive only in memories. The patient queues outside telephone booths have given way to instant video calls across continents. Technology has conquered distance. Yet I sometimes wonder whether it has also quietly shortened our capacity to wait, to long, and to value. We possessed very little. Yet our emotions were abundant. We had no smartphones, no social media, no instant messaging, no video calls. Yet somehow we knew one another's hearts better than many people seem to know today. We waited, we wrote, we listened, we laughed, we argued, we teased and sometimes we cried. But above all, we remained together. Perhaps that was our greatest wealth. Looking back now, I do not miss the technology we lacked. I miss the patience we possessed. I miss the handwritten letters that carried the fragrance of home. I miss the anxious wait outside STD booths. I miss the excitement of hearing a familiar voice after weeks of silence. I miss the tape recorder that

transformed lonely nights into memorable evenings. Most of all, I miss those remarkable friends with whom every joy became greater and every sorrow became smaller. Among them all, one figure continues to stand at the center of those memories. Whenever I remember those years, I do not first see the hostel buildings, the classrooms, the dhabas, or even the university itself, *I see Zamir*; sometimes laughing, sometimes narrating another impossible story, sometimes teasing someone whose heart had just been broken, sometimes quietly placing a reassuring hand on a friend's shoulder. He taught us that friendship is not merely about sharing moments of happiness. It is about refusing to let another human being suffer alone. Perhaps that is why, when I look back upon the world before mobile phones, I do not remember it as a world without technology. I remember it as a world overflowing with human presence. And among all the voices that filled that beautiful world, the one I miss most is still Zamir's.

VIII

The Romantic Who Lived In Stories

"Every group of friends has someone who tells stories. We had Zamir. Long after we forgot whether his stories were true, we remembered how happy they made us."

There are people who make friends. Then there are a few extraordinary individuals who make everyone feel like a friend. Zamir belonged to the second category. Looking back today, after more than three decades, I often ask myself what made him so different from the rest of us. We were all students living on the same campus, attending the same university, walking along the same roads, drinking tea at the same dhabas, and sharing the same hostels. Yet, somehow, Zamir's world was infinitely larger than ours. Most of us lived within invisible boundaries. We had our own circle of friends, our own departments, our own hostels, our own favourite tea stalls, and our own familiar routines. We felt comfortable among people who resembled us in background, interests, or temperament. Rarely did we venture far beyond those circles. Zamir recognized no such boundaries. He seemed to possess an extraordinary ability to become part of every world he entered. On some days, he would disappear completely from Muhammad Habib Hall. We would wonder where he had gone, only to discover later that he had been staying in Hadi Hasan Hall among students pursuing MBBS. Medical

students, because of the demanding nature of their studies, generally formed a close-knit community that remained somewhat separate from the rest of the university. Yet Zamir moved among them as naturally as though he had been one of their own. The following evening, we might find him sitting with research scholars discussing politics, history, or developments in West Asia. On another day, he would be engaged in animated conversation with university teachers. The next morning, he might be sharing tea with a rickshaw puller or laughing with a dhaba owner who greeted him not as a customer but as an old friend. His friendships ignored every visible line that society usually draws. He was equally comfortable in the company of professors and ordinary workers, intellectuals and labourers, student leaders and those colourful campus characters whom every university inevitably produces. He knew the influential. He knew the forgotten. He knew the celebrated. He knew the unnoticed. What fascinated me most was that every one of these people seemed genuinely pleased to see him. He never adjusted his personality to suit his audience. He never wore different masks. Whether he was speaking to a professor of Political Science, a tea vendor, a cycle mechanic, a hostel waiter, or a student leader, he remained unmistakably Zamir. Perhaps that authenticity explained his extraordinary acceptance. His circle of acquaintances extended across the entire university. He had close friends in the Faculty of Arts. He was equally at home in Tibbia College. He knew students in the Science Faculty, in the hostels, in the Students' Union, and among the research scholars. He enjoyed warm relations with people from Bihar, Azamgarh, Kashmir, Kerala, and countless other places represented at Aligarh Muslim University. Even groups that normally viewed one another with suspicion somehow accepted Zamir. It was a rare social gift. He often laughingly

described himself as a Marxist, greeting friends with a cheerful "*Lal Salaam*." Whether that label reflected a formal political commitment or simply his instinctive concern for ordinary people hardly mattered. What mattered was that he genuinely believed in the dignity of every human being. He judged people neither by their social status nor by their financial condition. His measure of a person was always the person himself. Helping others came to him as naturally as breathing. Looking back now, I realise that many students completed their education at Aligarh because, at some critical moment in their lives, they happened to find themselves in Zamir's room. Some needed emotional support. Others needed practical guidance. Some required financial help. Many simply needed someone willing to listen. Zamir rarely turned anyone away. His room became a refuge for countless students navigating the uncertainties of university life. Years later, he would occasionally narrate stories about people whose lives had intersected with his own. Some had gone on to become successful professionals. Others had settled abroad. Many never looked back. A few forgot him completely. There were moments when I sensed a quiet disappointment in his voice while recalling such incidents, not because he expected repayment or recognition, but because gratitude had disappeared where friendship had once existed. Yet even then, he never spoke with bitterness. Instead, he smiled gently and concluded by saying that at least he had been able to help someone when help was needed. That was enough for him.

I believe Zamir possessed a rare understanding of human relationships. He never collected friends as one collects names in an address book. He collected people in his heart. Some stayed for a lifetime. Some disappeared after their needs had been fulfilled. He accepted both with remarkable grace.

Perhaps that is why, even today, when I think of Zamir, I do not first remember his scholarship, his political opinions, or even his remarkable storytelling. I remember something far simpler and perhaps far greater. Wherever Zamir went, people felt they belonged. And perhaps that is the highest compliment one can ever pay another human being.

The pages that follow are not merely stories of his romances, his humour, or his celebrated habit of embellishing reality with imagination. They are stories of a man whose greatest talent was not simply telling stories, it was making people feel that they mattered. That was the real magic of Zamir. And that is why his absence is still felt wherever his presence once brought people together.

Romances, Reveries, and the Beautiful Madness of Youth

If there was one quality that lay beneath Zamir's wit, scholarship, humour, and remarkable storytelling, it was his profoundly emotional heart. For all his laughter, I often sensed an unspoken sadness within him. Years later, I came across a saying that seemed to describe him perfectly:

"The people who laugh the loudest are often the ones carrying the deepest sorrows."

Whenever I remember Zamir, that thought returns to me. He laughed wholeheartedly. He made others laugh even more. Yet somewhere beneath that cheerful exterior lived a sensitive soul searching for something that perhaps life was reluctant to grant him. Among the many aspirations that occupied his youthful mind, none appeared more important than his longing to experience true love. Like most young men living away from home, he dreamed. But unlike the rest of us, he possessed the extraordinary gift of transforming those dreams into stories so vivid that they acquired a life of their own. Every year, after

returning from the summer vacations in Kashmir, Zamir became the undisputed attraction of our circle. The moment he arrived at Muhammad Habib Hall, we knew that another season of stories was about to begin. Someone would inevitably ask, "So... what happened this summer?" That single question was all the invitation he needed. Then the performance would begin. Among the stories he narrated, one occupied a special place. It revolved around a woman from his hometown who, according to Zamir, had fallen deeply in love with him. Out of respect for privacy, and because certain memories deserve discretion even decades later, I shall not reveal the code name by which he referred to her among us. To Zamir, she was not merely a character in a story. She became the emotional center around which countless evenings revolved. He narrated every encounter with astonishing detail. A chance meeting, a stolen glance, an unexpected conversation, a brief exchange of words. He recreated each moment with such conviction that one almost felt present at the scene itself. His narration never appeared hurried. He relived every incident before our eyes. His expressions changed with the story. His voice softened during emotional moments. His pauses created suspense. His confidence eliminated doubt. Looking back today, I believe that his greatest talent was not storytelling alone. It was his ability to make emotion appear real. Deep within our hearts, most of us probably understood that the boundaries between memory, hope, imagination, and reality were not always clearly defined in Zamir's narratives. Yet none of us ever felt the need to interrupt him. We were not listening as investigators searching for facts. We were listening as friends sharing another friend's emotional world. There are moments in friendship when truth becomes less important than compassion. Those evenings taught me that lesson. Whether every detail had occurred exactly as narrated was ultimately irrelevant. What mattered

was that, for two or three precious hours, the worries of examinations, financial difficulties, homesickness, and uncertain futures quietly disappeared. The stories themselves became therapy. Zamir became both narrator and healer.

There was another young girl, closer to his own age and belonging to his locality, about whom he often spoke with remarkable sincerity. Unlike the earlier stories that sometimes carried an air of romantic mystery, this affection appeared deeply personal. He opened before us the innermost chambers of his heart. He spoke of hope, of waiting, of silent expectations, of dreams that only youth has the courage to nurture. None of us ever doubted his sincerity. We were convinced that his feelings were genuine. Whether those emotions were equally reciprocated by the young woman was something we never truly knew. Perhaps she never even realised the depth of his affection. But strangely enough, that uncertainty never diminished the beauty of the conversations. One evening someone jokingly remarked, "What difference does it make whether she knows or not? Zamir's love is enough for both." We all laughed. Yet hidden within that laughter was a profound truth. Love, particularly in youth, often seeks expression before it seeks fulfilment. Sometimes the feeling itself becomes more important than its destination.

Another chapter of those youthful years unfolded within the campus of Aligarh Muslim University itself. A Kashmiri girl student from another department quietly became the center of Zamir's admiration. Like many unforgettable stories of university life, this one rarely progressed beyond stolen glances and silent anticipation. There was a tea stall near the Purani Chungi, *Jai Jawaan Jai Kisaan Dhaba*, managed by a veteran freedom fighter and later a soldier, Thakur Sahib, where we frequently gathered. On certain afternoons,

however, we all knew that the tea was merely an excuse. Zamir would sit there for remarkably long periods, waiting for the moment when she would pass by in a rickshaw on her way to or from her department. The appearance of that rickshaw instantly transformed his face, conversation stopped, eyes followed, hope quietly resurfaced, the rickshaw disappeared, reality returned. We teased him mercilessly. He accepted every joke with a smile. Over time, he made several sincere attempts to draw her attention. Unfortunately, destiny seemed determined to keep their worlds separate. As far as we could understand, the young woman remained almost entirely unaware, or perhaps politely indifferent, to the emotional drama unfolding in Zamir's heart. Yet even this became another treasured chapter in the folklore of our friendship. Hours were spent analysing every glance, every coincidence, every possibility. Each insignificant incident acquired extraordinary importance. Looking back today, I realise that we were never really discussing those young women. We were celebrating youth itself. We were living through that magical age when hope required very little evidence. A smile could sustain dreams for weeks. A brief conversation could illuminate an entire month. A passing glance could become the subject of endless discussion over countless cups of tea.

Today, with the maturity that life eventually bestows upon all of us, I smile at those memories. Most of those dreams quietly dissolved with time. Life carried each of us in different directions. careers, responsibilities, marriages, families, and countless unforeseen events gradually replaced the emotional intensity of those university days. Yet I have never laughed at Zamir's dreams. On the contrary, I cherish them. Because they remind me of the extraordinary innocence with which we once experienced life. Perhaps that is what youth really is. Not the

certainty of success. Not even the certainty of being loved. But the courage to dream with complete sincerity. And if those dreams occasionally borrowed a little help from imagination, they still succeeded in giving a group of homesick young students something priceless; hope, laughter, companionship. For us, Zamir's romances were never merely love stories. They were evenings filled with friendship. And today, long after I have forgotten many facts of those years, I still remember how brightly those evenings glowed whenever Zamir began with the familiar words,

"Let me tell you what happened this summer..."

The Storyteller Who Made Life Lighter

Looking back after more than three decades, I often smile at the innocence of those evenings. With the maturity that age eventually brings, I think it would be fair to say that most of us, at least somewhere in the recesses of our minds, understood that not every story narrated by Zamir belonged entirely to the world of reality. Some were undoubtedly inspired by real incidents, some carried traces of truth beautifully embroidered with imagination, while others perhaps belonged more to the world of dreams than to everyday life. Yet an interesting question arises. If we suspected that some of his stories were embellished, why did none of us ever interrupt him? Why did no one expose the contradictions? Why did no one insist upon separating fact from fiction? The answer, I believe, is surprisingly simple. Because none of us wanted the story to end. We were not sitting there as judges examining evidence. We were not historians verifying dates. Nor were we investigators searching for inconsistencies. We were simply a group of young friends, gathered after long and exhausting days of

lectures, practical classes, examinations, financial worries, homesickness, and uncertainty about the future. And in those moments, the factual accuracy of a story became almost irrelevant. What mattered was the happiness it created.

There is a beautiful distinction between a lie and a story. A lie seeks to deceive. A story seeks to delight. Zamir's narratives always belonged to the second category. He never narrated them to gain money, status, sympathy, or admiration. He narrated them because he genuinely enjoyed making people laugh. He delighted in watching anticipation appear on our faces. He enjoyed the laughter that followed an unexpected twist. He loved those moments when every one of us forgot, even if only briefly, the burdens we carried. That was his real audience. Not our intellect. Our hearts. In retrospect, I realise that we too became willing participants in those performances. Whenever he began with the familiar words, "Do you know what happened during the vacation?" or "You won't believe what happened yesterday...", we instinctively settled into our places. Some leaned against the wall. Some stretched out on the floor. Someone quietly prepared another kettle of tea. Someone lit another cigarette. The game of cards momentarily slowed down. The room itself seemed to prepare for another unforgettable performance. Deep inside, each of us silently entered into an unwritten agreement. For the next hour or two, reality would respectfully step aside. Imagination would take over. And nobody wished to disturb that fragile magic. I think what we protected was not the story. We were protecting Zamir's joy. His stories were an extension of his personality. To interrupt them would have been to interrupt his happiness. Friendship sometimes demands honesty. At other times, it demands kindness. Those evenings called for kindness.

University life, despite all its romance in memory, was not always easy. Most of us came from modest families. Money was perpetually scarce. Letters from home were anxiously awaited. Bank drafts arrived late. Examinations created constant pressure. Many of us carried responsibilities far greater than our age. There were uncertainties about careers. There were political anxieties surrounding Kashmir. There was homesickness that quietly visited us after the lights went out. There were personal disappointments that remained hidden behind smiling faces. Each of us carried burdens invisible to the others. Perhaps Zamir understood this better than anyone else. Whether consciously or instinctively, he discovered a remarkable way of healing people. He told stories. He made us laugh. He made us argue. He made us wonder. Most importantly, he made us forget ourselves. For a few precious hours, worries surrendered to laughter. Anxiety surrendered to curiosity. Loneliness surrendered to companionship. Today, psychology tells us that laughter reduces stress, strengthens emotional resilience, and creates social bonds. We did not know any of these scientific explanations then. We simply knew that whenever Zamir was present, life somehow felt lighter. Years later, after life had scattered all of us across different professions, different cities, and different responsibilities, I began reflecting upon those evenings with a different understanding. I no longer ask whether Zamir's stories were true. That question no longer interests me. Instead, I ask another question. Why did they make us so happy? The answer has gradually become clear. We were never really listening to the stories. *We were listening to Zamir.* The stories were merely the vehicle. The destination was friendship. His voice filled our rooms with warmth. His imagination filled our ordinary days with colour. His laughter transformed simple gatherings into memories that have

survived the passage of more than thirty years. Remarkably, I have forgotten many of the stories themselves. I can no longer recall every detail of the romances, the impossible coincidences, the exaggerated adventures, or the dramatic encounters that once kept us spellbound. Memory has quietly erased many of those narratives. Yet one thing remains astonishingly clear. I still remember how those stories made us feel. I remember the laughter echoing through the corridors of Room No. 271. I remember friends rolling on the floor, unable to control themselves. I remember tea growing cold because nobody wished to interrupt the narration. I remember Zamir's sparkling eyes as he watched us react to every twist in the story. Those moments remain untouched by time. Perhaps that was Zamir's greatest achievement. He did not merely narrate stories. He created moments. He did not merely entertain friends. He built friendships. He did not merely fill evenings. He filled lives. Some people leave behind possessions. Some leave achievements. Some leave photographs. Zamir left behind something far more enduring. He left behind a thousand evenings that continue to live in the hearts of those fortunate enough to have shared them. And perhaps that is why, whenever old friends meet today, we rarely begin by asking about careers, promotions, or worldly accomplishments. Sooner or later, someone smiles and says, "Do you remember one of Zamir's stories?" And suddenly, after all these years, the room once again fills with the same laughter that echoed through the corridors of Muhammad Habib Hall. For a brief moment, Zamir returns. Not through history. Not through photographs. But through the joy he left behind. Perhaps that is the finest legacy any friend can leave. Not that people remember what he said. But that they remember how happy they were whenever he was there.

IX

The Politics of Compassion

“Politics is at its noblest when it begins with compassion and ends in service.”

Every human being is eventually remembered for something. Some are remembered for the positions they occupied. Some for the wealth they accumulated. Some for the fame they enjoyed. A fortunate few are remembered for the values they lived by. Zamir belonged to the last category.

Throughout this memoir, I have attempted to portray different dimensions of his personality, as a friend, a scholar, a storyteller, a seeker of knowledge, and a deeply spiritual human being. Yet there was another important aspect of his life that deserves to be understood, not because it made him politically significant, but because it revealed the depth of his character. That aspect was his engagement with public life. This chapter is therefore not about politics in its conventional sense. It is not about political parties. It is not about electoral victories or defeats. Nor is it an attempt to persuade the reader to accept one ideology over another. It is, instead, an attempt to understand how one thoughtful young man, growing up during one of the most turbulent periods in the history of Kashmir, chose conviction over convenience, service over ambition, and nation over narrow identities.

The early 1990s were years of extraordinary uncertainty in the Kashmir Valley. Ideas collided as fiercely as events. Young

minds were exposed to competing narratives, powerful emotions, and difficult choices. For many of my generation, politics arrived long before we were mature enough to understand its complexities. It entered our homes, our classrooms, our streets, and our conversations. It shaped friendships, divided families, and influenced the aspirations of countless young people. Amidst that atmosphere, Zamir stood apart. He was never content to accept an opinion simply because it was popular. He questioned. He read. He analysed. Before arriving at a conclusion, he searched for historical context, geographical realities, civilizational continuity, and geopolitical consequences. Long before the word *geopolitics* became fashionable in everyday conversations, Zamir was already speaking its language. He possessed an astonishing command over history. He could effortlessly move from ancient Indian civilization to contemporary international relations, from the freedom movement to developments in West Asia, from the philosophy of Mahatma Gandhi to the political thought of Jawaharlal Nehru, from the teachings of the Buddha to the message of Guru Nanak, from the poetry of Allama Iqbal to the constitutional vision of Dr. B. R. Ambedkar. Listening to him often felt less like participating in a casual discussion and more like attending an informal seminar conducted by someone who had quietly transformed himself into a living encyclopaedia. For Zamir, India was never merely a political entity enclosed within geographical boundaries. He viewed Bharat as one of humanity's oldest and most enduring civilizations, a land whose strength lay not in uniformity but in its astonishing diversity. He admired the countless streams that had flowed together over centuries to create the Indian civilization: its philosophies, faiths, languages, literature, art, music, and traditions. He often reminded us that no single community, religion, or region

could claim exclusive ownership over India because every civilization that had touched this land had also contributed to its collective identity. His patriotism was therefore neither loud nor performative. It did not seek applause. It did not require slogans. It arose from knowledge. The more he studied history, the more deeply he loved the country. The more he understood its diversity, the stronger became his belief that India's greatest strength lay precisely in its plurality.

During those emotionally charged years, when many young people found themselves swept away by anger, slogans, and political romanticism, Zamir remained remarkably composed. He disagreed with many of the ideas that gained popularity during that period, including the separatist narratives that appealed to sections of Kashmiri youth. His dissent did not arise from fear. Nor from political opportunism. It arose from conviction. He believed that disagreement should emerge from study rather than emotion and that loyalty to one's nation did not diminish one's love for one's region, culture, or people. That intellectual courage often came at a personal cost. Yet he never considered changing his convictions merely to make life easier.

Back home, he remained closely associated with a mainstream political tradition inherited from his father, whose commitment to public life remained unwavering throughout his own lifetime. Zamir embraced that legacy with equal sincerity. Yet what always fascinated me was that he never viewed politics as a pathway to personal advancement. In a world where many entered public life seeking influence, position, or privilege, Zamir appeared almost indifferent to personal gain. He spent his time. He spent his energy. He spent his modest financial resources. He sacrificed precious moments that could otherwise have belonged to his own

family. He helped others rise. He worked tirelessly for causes and for people. He campaigned. He persuaded. He connected. He solved problems. He stood beside those who had nobody else to approach. Yet when recognition eventually arrived, it usually arrived at someone else's doorstep. Strangely enough, he never complained. Many of us questioned him. We often argued that those for whom he had sacrificed so much rarely remembered him afterwards. Some occupied important positions. Others built successful careers. A few disappeared entirely once their purpose had been served. Zamir listened patiently to our criticism, smiled in his characteristic way, and quietly moved on. Perhaps he understood something that we were still too young to appreciate. Service loses much of its purity the moment it begins expecting repayment.

Looking back today, I realise that politics was never Zamir's destination. People were. Every contact he cultivated, every acquaintance he made, every influence he earned eventually became another opportunity to solve someone's problem. Whether it involved a poor student seeking admission, a family searching for medical assistance, a villager requiring official documents, or a young person hoping to continue his education, Zamir instinctively placed himself between difficulty and the person experiencing it. That was his politics. Not the politics of power but the politics of compassion. Not the politics of slogans but the politics of service. The pages that follow are therefore not intended to recount the political history of a man. They seek instead to understand the humanity that gave meaning to his politics. For when I remember Zamir today, I do not first recall the leaders he knew or the campaigns in which he participated. I remember the countless ordinary people whose burdens became lighter simply because, at some crucial moment in their lives, Zamir

chose to stand beside them. Perhaps that, more than any title or office, is the truest measure of a public life well lived.

Politics Without Ambition

If there was one quality that distinguished Zamir from many people engaged in public life, it was the complete absence of personal ambition. This statement may appear paradoxical. How could a man so deeply involved in politics have so little interest in political power? Yet that was precisely the mystery of Zamir. His association with mainstream politics did not arise from the desire to occupy office, acquire influence, or accumulate personal advantages. It was an inheritance of values before it became an inheritance of political affiliation. His father had devoted himself to public life with remarkable loyalty, and Zamir naturally grew up in an atmosphere where politics was viewed not merely as an instrument of authority but as a responsibility towards society. He embraced that legacy with sincerity. Once Zamir accepted a cause, he served it with unwavering commitment. He gave his time without counting the hours. He spent his money without keeping accounts. He invested his energy without expecting recognition. He travelled tirelessly. He campaigned enthusiastically. He persuaded people. He organized meetings. He connected communities. He stood behind leaders whom he believed could contribute to society. In today's political vocabulary, people like Zamir are often described as kingmakers. I find the description remarkably appropriate. He possessed an extraordinary ability to identify capable individuals, mobilize support for them, and work quietly behind the scenes until they achieved success. Ironically, he never wished to become the king himself. Many of the people for whom he sacrificed countless days and sleepless nights eventually occupied important positions.

Some became influential political figures. Others rose to positions of authority and public prominence. Zamir, however, remained exactly where he had always been. The same modest life. The same simple home. The same humble means. The same generous heart. Whenever we met, many of us would express our disappointment. "Why do you exhaust yourself so much for people who hardly remember you afterwards?" "You have spent years helping others build their careers. What have you received in return?" These questions often emerged from genuine concern. We could see the imbalance. We could see that many people had climbed the ladder with Zamir's support only to forget the hands that had steadied them during the ascent. Some rarely returned. Some never expressed gratitude. A few behaved as though they had reached their destination entirely on their own. If anyone had reason to complain, it was Zamir. Yet remarkably, he never did. He would simply smile with that familiar calmness which so often ended our arguments before they had truly begun. Then he would quietly say something that revealed the extraordinary simplicity of his heart. "If someone's work has been accomplished, what more should I ask for?" Those words remained with me. Even today, I struggle to understand how a person could serve so selflessly without allowing disappointment to poison his generosity. Perhaps the answer lay in the fact that Zamir never viewed service as an investment. For him, helping another human being was not a transaction. It was a moral duty. He neither expected repayment nor kept accounts of kindness. Looking back now, I realise that his greatest political strength was not strategy. It was selflessness.

Influence Used As Responsibility

There is another aspect of Zamir's personality that deserves special mention. Most people cultivate contacts. Zamir cultivated relationships. There is an important difference between the two. Contacts are often maintained for personal benefit. Relationships are nurtured for mutual trust. Zamir possessed an astonishing network of acquaintances. Politicians knew him. Government officials knew him. Teachers knew him. Journalists knew him. Doctors knew him. Lawyers knew him. Social workers knew him. Village elders knew him. Ordinary labourers knew him. Yet what impressed me most was the purpose for which he used those relationships. Never for himself. Always for others. During my own professional career at the University of Kashmir, I became a happy witness to this remarkable habit. Hardly a month would pass without receiving a telephone call from Zamir. "Abba, there is a student from a remote village..." "Abba, this boy's degree has been delayed..." , "Abba, this girl deserves admission...", "Abba, please see if hostel accommodation can somehow be arranged..." There was always someone; a struggling student, a worried parent, a young scholar, a family facing bureaucratic difficulties. Occasionally I would jokingly ask him, "Tell me honestly, who is this person?" His answer was almost always the same, "I don't know him very well." Sometimes he had met the person only once. Sometimes they had been sent by someone else. Sometimes they belonged to villages he himself had never visited. It never mattered. If someone approached Zamir with genuine difficulty, he immediately assumed responsibility. That was simply his nature. The remarkable thing was that he never used his influence to seek personal favours. He rarely asked anything for himself. His requests almost invariably

concerned strangers. Looking back, I often wonder whether he himself realised how much of his life was quietly being spent solving other people's problems.

His Real Constituency Was the Common Man

Gradually I came to understand that politics, for Zamir, had become something much larger than political activity. It had become humanitarian service. His real constituency was not defined by electoral boundaries. It consisted of ordinary people, the poor, the forgotten, the anxious parents, the struggling students, the patient waiting outside a hospital, the young man searching for employment, the villager bewildered by official procedures. These were the people for whom Zamir reserved his greatest energy. He believed passionately that education possessed the power to transform lives. Whenever opportunities arose, he travelled to remote areas to address students, encouraging them to pursue higher education and to dream beyond the limitations imposed by geography or circumstance. He considered every educated youth an investment in society's future. Medical emergencies affected him deeply. If someone required hospitalization, Zamir rarely remained a distant sympathizer. He became an active participant. He accompanied patients to hospitals. He searched for specialists. He telephoned doctors. He requested appointments. He persuaded acquaintances. He arranged recommendations. If medicines were urgently needed and the family lacked financial means, he never hesitated to purchase them himself. Many nights that should have been spent resting at home were instead spent beside hospital beds, comforting anxious relatives or keeping vigil over patients who had nobody else to accompany them. I personally witnessed several such occasions. To Zamir, compassion was not an emotion, it was an action. Many people speak

eloquently about serving humanity. Zamir rarely spoke about it. He simply practised it. What touched me most was that he never differentiated between people according to religion, political affiliation, social status, or economic background. Need itself became the only qualification. If someone required help, Zamir responded. The person's identity came afterwards. Years later, during the days of mourning following his departure from this world, I encountered countless individuals whom I had never met before. One after another they approached us. Each narrated a different story. "Zamir helped my son secure admission." "He arranged treatment for my father" "He guided my brother." "He stayed with us throughout the night in the hospital." "He never allowed us to feel alone." As I listened to those voices, a profound realization slowly dawned upon me. The true measure of a human being is not found in the positions he occupies. It is found in the number of lives that become lighter because he passed through them. That was Zamir's politics. A politics without greed. A politics without bitterness. A politics without ambition. A politics in which compassion became the highest form of public service.

Looking back today, I no longer think of him as a political worker. I think of him as a humanitarian who happened to use politics as one of the many instruments through which he served humanity. Perhaps that is why he left behind neither wealth nor power. He left behind something infinitely more valuable; *Grateful hearts.*

X

When Time Began To Whisper

"Some lives become extraordinary not because they escape suffering, but because they teach others how suffering can be endured with grace."

Every life has its seasons. There is a season of innocence, when dreams seem limitless and tomorrow appears eternal. There is a season of youth, filled with friendships, laughter, ambition, and the comforting illusion that the people we love will always walk beside us. There is also a season of maturity, when experience slowly replaces certainty and life begins to reveal both its beauty and its fragility. Until now, these pages have been illuminated by memories of those brighter seasons. We have wandered through the bustling lanes of Aligarh, shared countless cups of tea at roadside dhabas, laughed at Zamir's impossible stories, debated politics late into the night, reflected on faith, and celebrated the remarkable friendship that quietly shaped both our lives. If this memoir has occasionally sounded like a celebration, it is because Zamir himself was a celebration of life. He possessed that rare ability to transform ordinary moments into unforgettable memories and ordinary friendships into lifelong bonds. Yet life, in its unfathomable wisdom, eventually presents every human being with a chapter he never wished to write. For Zamir, that chapter arrived in the form of an illness whose very name has the power to fill hearts with fear. *Renal Carcinoma*; the word itself seems heavy with finality. But this chapter is not about

cancer. It is about the extraordinary human being who encountered it. It is about the quiet courage with which Zamir faced uncertainty, the unwavering faith that steadied him when the future became clouded, the compassion he continued to extend to others even while carrying his own pain, and the remarkable dignity with which he walked one of life's most difficult roads. Suffering often strips away every mask that comfort allows us to wear. In times of illness, titles lose their importance, achievements become secondary, and possessions cease to matter. What remains visible is character, its strength, its vulnerabilities, its generosity, and its truth. It was during those difficult months that I came to understand Zamir more deeply than ever before. The man who had once filled hostel rooms with laughter now taught us the meaning of patience. The storyteller who had entertained us with impossible tales now began writing, through his own life, a story more profound than any he had ever narrated. The political worker who had spent years serving others discovered that the truest measure of a life is not the influence one accumulates, but the love one leaves behind. And the friend whom we had always relied upon became the teacher from whom we learnt perhaps life's greatest lesson: that courage is not the absence of fear, but the quiet decision to continue living with hope, dignity, and compassion even when every circumstance invites despair.

The pages that follow are, without question, the most difficult I have ever written. They required not only memory, but tears. Not only recollection, but acceptance. If, while reading them, you occasionally find yourself pausing in silence, then perhaps you have begun to know Zamir as I was privileged to know him, not merely as a scholar, a friend, or a political worker, but

as a human being whose greatest qualities became visible precisely when life tested him the most.

The Winter That Changed Everything

There are moments in every human life when destiny changes direction so quietly that no one notices it at first. There is no thunder. No warning. No dramatic announcement. Life simply continues its familiar rhythm until, without our realizing it, an ordinary day becomes the dividing line between what was and what will never be again. For Zamir, that turning point arrived during the winter of 2023.

Among Kashmiris, particularly those who have the means to do so, it has become increasingly common over the last few decades to maintain a second home in Jammu. The harsh winters of the Valley, especially for elderly family members and school-going children, often make seasonal migration both practical and desirable. For many families, Jammu becomes a temporary refuge, a place where life continues at a gentler pace while the Valley sleeps beneath its blanket of snow. Some build elegant homes in the city's newer colonies. Others, constrained by modest means, find comfort in smaller houses tucked away in quieter neighbourhoods. Regardless of their size or location, these winter homes represent much more than bricks and mortar. They are symbols of adaptation, resilience, and the determination of Kashmiri families to create comfort amidst the changing realities of life. Several years earlier, Zamir too had purchased a modest house in Jammu for precisely this purpose. Since both he and his wife, Rafi, were serving as teachers in the School Education Department of Jammu and Kashmir, their professional calendars matched perfectly, allowing the family to shift to Jammu during the annual winter vacations and return to the Valley when schools

reopened in the spring. Gradually, this seasonal migration became one of the happiest chapters of Zamir's yearly routine. He genuinely loved his winters in Jammu. And perhaps equally important, his friends loved them too. For us, his Jammu residence was never merely another house. It was another extension of Zamir's generous heart. Almost every winter, one or another friend would find an excuse to visit him. I was certainly among the regular visitors. Many times I stayed for days together, and each visit soon developed into a celebration rather than a mere social call. Rafi welcomed every guest with extraordinary warmth. Her hospitality possessed the effortless grace that only genuine affection can produce. She never allowed anyone to feel like a visitor. Before long, every guest became part of the household.

Those evenings in Jammu remain among my happiest memories. As dusk settled over the City of Temples, Zamir would invariably suggest that we go out for a walk. He loved walking through the bustling streets of Jammu. Our favourite destination was often the historic *Raghunath Bazaar*, where winter evenings acquired a life of their own. The narrow streets remained crowded with shoppers, many of them fellow Kashmiris who had temporarily made Jammu their home for the season. Shopkeepers enthusiastically displayed warm clothes, dry fruits, utensils, and household goods, calling out to passing customers with the familiar optimism of experienced traders. From there, our footsteps often carried us towards *Talab Khatikan*, another place that seemed to pulse with life during the winter months. We would watch people hurrying through the busy lanes, families strolling leisurely after sunset, children running between the shops, and worshippers making their way towards the historic Jama Masjid. There was a special energy in those evenings. Jammu

had become, for a few months every year, an extension of Kashmir itself. No outing with Zamir, however, was ever complete without food. He delighted in introducing his guests to the best street food the city had to offer. We savoured spicy chaat from roadside vendors, lingered over cups of tea, and eventually found ourselves seated near Jama Masjid, enjoying succulent kebabs while conversations flowed as effortlessly as they had years earlier in Aligarh. Often, while sitting there, I would silently smile. The city had changed. The years had changed. Our professions had changed. But the friendship remained exactly the same. It felt as though the spirit of our Aligarh days had quietly travelled with us and found a new home in the streets of Jammu. Our dear friend Jaleel, who also owned a house in Jammu, lived a little farther away. Yet Zamir never allowed distance to become an excuse. Whenever any one of us visited, he would immediately telephone Jaleel. "Come over, " he would insist. "The gang is incomplete without you." And before long, the old circle was reunited. The conversations resumed precisely where they had paused months earlier. Politics, religion, humour, AMU memories, current affairs, old stories that had already been narrated dozens of times somehow became fresh again. Laughter filled the room exactly as it had filled Room No. 271 decades earlier. Many times, while travelling to Punjab with my family, Jammu naturally fell along our route. Whenever Zamir learnt that I would be passing through the city, refusal was simply not an option. "You cannot cross Jammu without stopping, " he would declare. Lunch would already be prepared. No matter how busy he was, he insisted that we spend at least a few hours together before continuing our journey. On those rare occasions when circumstances compelled me to take the alternate route, bypassing Jammu altogether, Zamir would react with genuine disappointment. He would scold me

almost like an elder brother. “Abba; how could you pass without meeting me?” There was no pretence in those complaints. They sprang entirely from affection.

Such was Zamir.

His greatest joy lay not in being invited, but in inviting. Not in being served, but in serving. He possessed that rare gift of making every guest feel that his arrival had brought happiness to the house. Those ordinary winter evenings were, in reality, extraordinary blessings. None of us knew how precious they would soon become. The winter of 2023 began no differently.

Plans had already been made. Schools were scheduled to reopen after the winter vacation, and Zamir intended to return to Kashmir on 14th of February, 2023 along with his family. This time they had decided to fly from Jammu to Srinagar. Our own plans were already settled. I would receive them at the airport. They would come to my home for lunch. After spending a few relaxed hours together, I would drive the family onward to Hutmurrah. We spoke repeatedly over the telephone during those days, discussing nothing more serious than travel arrangements and the routine excitement of returning home after winter. Everything appeared perfectly normal. Or so we believed. During one of those conversations, however, Zamir casually mentioned that he had been experiencing pain in one of his shoulders. The complaint sounded ordinary. Nothing in his voice suggested alarm. He told me that he had already spoken to one of our common friends, a doctor, who had prescribed some medicines. He had begun taking them. We discussed it briefly and moved on to other matters. Neither of us imagined that this seemingly insignificant pain was the first whisper of a much greater storm. As the days passed, the medicines failed to provide relief. Fortunately, during that period, Rafi's brother-in-law , a

medical practitioner, visited the family. After listening carefully to Zamir's symptoms, he advised him to undergo an ultrasonographic examination. It seemed a sensible precaution. Nothing more. Later, Zamir himself narrated to me what happened inside the radiology room that day. Initially, the doctor began examining the shoulder region. Almost casually, he suggested that since Zamir was already there, it might be worthwhile to perform an abdominal ultrasound as well. Zamir readily agreed. What happened over the next few minutes remained permanently engraved in his memory. As the ultrasound probe moved across the region of the kidneys, the radiologist suddenly paused. He looked at the monitor carefully. He moved the probe again. Paused once more. Returned to the same area. Examined it from another angle. The silence inside the room gradually became heavier. Zamir immediately sensed that something was unusual. Finally, unable to contain his anxiety, he asked, "Doctor Sb... is there any problem?" The radiologist remained quiet for a few more moments before gently lowering the probe. Then came the sentence that changed everything. "You need to undergo a CT scan immediately. I am seeing something in the kidney that concerns me." In that single moment, the ordinary rhythm of life came to an abrupt halt. Later, Zamir told me that although he immediately sensed the seriousness of the situation, he somehow managed to remain calm. The towering, confident personality whom we had always known refused to surrender to panic. He underwent the CT scan the very same evening. By nightfall, the report had arrived. The words written upon that sheet of paper seemed almost impossible to believe. *Suspicious of Renal Carcinoma*. Carcinoma is a single word, yet powerful enough to divide life into two distinct parts. Everything before. Everything after. The shock that descended upon the household that evening can scarcely

be described. Zamir was shattered. Rafi was shattered. The children sensed that something deeply troubling had occurred. His in-laws, who happened to be in Jammu at the time, reached the house almost immediately. Questions flooded every conversation. What should be done? Where should treatment begin? Whom should they consult? Which hospital offered the best hope? The house that only days earlier had echoed with laughter now became the center of urgent consultations. Telephones rang continuously. Friends from different parts of the country were contacted. Doctors were consulted. Every suggestion, every recommendation, every possible avenue of treatment suddenly assumed immense importance. When a loved one is diagnosed with a life-threatening illness, even the smallest piece of guidance begins to feel like a lifeline. Several renowned hospitals were considered. The Tata Memorial Hospital in Mumbai. Rajiv Gandhi Cancer Institute in Delhi. Other reputed centers. Finally, our close friend, Dr. Amin Mir, who was working in Delhi and possessed valuable professional contacts, strongly recommended the Postgraduate Institute of Medical Education and Research (PGIMER), Chandigarh. Through his timely intervention and personal efforts, arrangements were made with remarkable speed. Admission was secured without the delays that often accompany such cases. Looking back today, I cannot help but feel that, in moments of crisis, God often sends help through the hands of friends. Within a very short time, preparations were underway. Zamir left for Chandigarh accompanied by his wife, his devoted brother-in-law Asrar, and Rafi's brother-in-law. As they travelled towards Chandigarh, I remained in constant contact with him. I called him repeatedly. I searched for words that might strengthen his resolve. I reminded him to remain hopeful. To trust God. To keep faith. Perhaps, without explicitly saying so,

I was also trying to tell him something else. "You are not alone." Our friendship, which had begun decades earlier over a misunderstanding in a tea stall at Aligarh, had now entered its most difficult examination. I cannot truly describe what was passing through Zamir's mind during that journey. Nor can I fully describe my own uncertainty. We were both travelling into unfamiliar territory. He was travelling towards a hospital. I was travelling towards the painful realization that life had suddenly become frighteningly unpredictable.

Neither of us knew then what lay ahead. We knew only this; the journey that had begun with a slight pain in the shoulder had become a battle for life itself.

XI

The Battle Begins

"The storm did not announce its arrival. It came quietly, disguised as an ordinary pain, and forever changed the landscape of our lives."

There are battles in life that no one volunteers to fight. They arrive uninvited, indifferent to age, profession, reputation, or dreams. They interrupt carefully made plans, redraw the future overnight, and compel ordinary families to acquire extraordinary courage. For Zamir, that battle truly began at the Postgraduate Institute of Medical Education and Research (PGIMER), Chandigarh. After travelling overnight from Jammu, accompanied by his devoted wife Rafi, his brother-in-law Asrar, and another close member of the family, Zamir reported to the medical team whose consultation had been arranged through the timely efforts of our friend, Dr. Amin Mir. Looking back today, I remain deeply grateful for Amin's intervention. In moments of crisis, one often discovers that relationships built over decades quietly become lifelines. His personal efforts ensured that Zamir received prompt attention at one of India's premier medical institutions, sparing the family the additional agony of procedural delays. Yet, as events soon unfolded, we all realised that admission to the hospital was merely the beginning of a much longer journey. The following days were filled with investigations; blood tests, radiological examinations, clinical evaluations, repeated consultations. Every report seemed to generate another

investigation. Every investigation raised another question. The doctors were not merely trying to diagnose an illness. They were attempting to understand the full extent of an enemy that had already begun spreading silently through Zamir's body. Then came the results that none of us had wished to hear. The PET scan revealed that the disease had not remained confined to the kidney. It had already affected the lungs. It had also reached the bones. It had its footprints in the brain. The diagnosis instantly assumed a far greater seriousness. The illness was no longer local. It had become systemic. The cancer had already begun extending its shadow beyond its place of origin. Inside the conference rooms of PGIMER, multidisciplinary teams deliberated over the reports. Specialists from different disciplines discussed the possible course of treatment. The family was gradually informed about the seriousness of the situation. Every option carried risks. Every decision involved uncertainty. The battle ahead would be neither short nor easy. Back in Kashmir, however, medical terminology mattered very little. What mattered was one simple truth.

Zamir was seriously ill.

News travelled rapidly through circles of friendship, family, colleagues, neighbours, former students, political associates, and well-wishers. Soon it seemed as though an entire community had begun praying for one man. Mosques remembered him in their supplications. Hands were raised after every prayer. Special *duas* were offered. Relatives requested others to pray. Friends telephoned one another seeking updates. People who had not spoken to Zamir for years suddenly remembered him with tears in their eyes. One remarkable aspect of suffering is that it reveals how deeply a person has touched the lives of others. Many people discover

their true wealth not in bank accounts, but in prayers. Zamir was one of those fortunate souls. Throughout those anxious days, communication remained limited. Naturally, he was unable to speak to everyone. Yet somehow, he managed to remain in contact with a small circle of close friends. I was among those fortunate enough to receive regular updates. Sometimes the information came directly from Zamir himself. At other times, Asrar patiently informed us about the latest medical developments. Every telephone call became important. Every new report was discussed repeatedly. Every encouraging sentence from the doctors became a source of renewed hope. Every uncertainty produced another wave of anxiety. Even from hundreds of kilometres away, we felt ourselves participating in the struggle. Although none of us could physically share his pain, we wanted him to know that he was not carrying the burden alone. Throughout this difficult period, one aspect of Zamir's personality remained remarkably unchanged. His faith. Long before illness entered his life, faith had always been his refuge. Now it became his greatest source of strength. He continued offering prayers with sincerity. He arranged acts of charity according to his lifelong beliefs. He sought blessings in the same humble manner with which he had lived throughout his life. There was no trace of bitterness. No complaint against destiny. No anger towards God. Only quiet hope. Only prayer. Only patience. After several rounds of deliberations, the medical team finally reached a decision. The affected kidney would have to be removed. A *radical nephrectomy* offered the best possibility of slowing the progression of the disease and reducing the further damage it threatened to inflict upon other organs. Before the operation, the doctors spoke frankly with Zamir and the family. They explained the magnitude of the procedure. The risks were substantial. The surgery itself

carried serious dangers. Later, when Zamir narrated those conversations to me, he recalled one particular sentence from the surgeon with remarkable clarity. The doctor had said, in essence, "The operation is undoubtedly risky. But if it succeeds, it can give you more time." Sometimes medicine cannot promise certainty. It can only offer hope. And hope, at that moment, was enough.

The day of surgery finally arrived. Early in the morning, Zamir was wheeled towards the operation theatre. One can only imagine what passes through the mind of a person during those final moments before entering a major surgery. Perhaps memories. Perhaps prayers. Perhaps loved ones. Perhaps complete silence. As the doors of the operation theatre closed behind him, another kind of battle began. Not inside the operating room but outside it. For the next nine and a half hours, time seemed to lose its ordinary meaning. Those long hours tested not only the skill of the surgeons but also the endurance of every heart waiting outside. I often try to imagine what Rafi must have experienced that day. The woman who had stood beside Zamir through every stage of his illness now found herself sitting outside an operating theatre, watching hours pass with agonizing slowness. Every time the doors opened; hope rose. Every passing minute felt unusually long. Beside her stood Asrar. I have often wondered how he managed to remain composed. He was carrying responsibilities that would have exhausted many stronger men. He had to support his sister, coordinate with doctors, answer telephone calls, inform anxious relatives, update worried friends, maintain hope and somehow continue believing that everything would be alright. Meanwhile, hundreds of kilometres away, the rest of us waited with equal restlessness. Telephones remained constantly active.

Messages travelled from one friend to another. Every small update was immediately shared. The operation had begun. The surgery was still continuing. The doctors were progressing. Another hour had passed. Then another. For many of us, that day became one of the longest days we had ever lived. No one truly concentrated on work. No conversation remained complete. Our minds were all waiting outside the same operation theatre, though physically we were scattered across different cities. And throughout the Valley, prayers continued. When, after nearly nine and a half hours, news finally arrived that the operation had been completed, an almost indescribable sense of relief spread among all of us.

Zamir had survived.

Late in the evening he was shifted out of the operation theatre. He remained unconscious. Machines surrounded his bed. Intravenous lines hung from tall metal stands. The journey towards recovery had only just begun. The following evening, I received a photograph from him. I remember looking at it for a long time. There lay the same Zamir whose laughter had once filled the corridors of Muhammad Habib Hall. Now he rested silently beneath green hospital blankets, tubes and drips surrounding him from every side. The image shook me deeply. Yet strangely, it also filled me with gratitude. Because beneath those blankets lay something infinitely precious.

Hope.

The surgeons had declared the operation successful. For the first time since the diagnosis, we allowed ourselves to breathe a little more freely. Months later, whenever Zamir and Rafi narrated those unforgettable days, one truth became increasingly clear to me. Illness does not merely reveal the strength of medicine. It reveals the strength of relationships.

Hospitals can provide treatment. Surgeons can perform operations. Medicines can fight disease. But no prescription can replace the quiet hand that refuses to leave yours while you wait outside an operation theatre. No hospital protocol can manufacture the unwavering devotion of a spouse. No medical textbook can teach the silent sacrifice of a brother who forgets his own comfort while caring for another. In those difficult days, I witnessed not only the remarkable courage of Zamir, but also the extraordinary humanity of those who surrounded him. Rafi became far more than a wife. Asrar became far more than a brother-in-law. Together they transformed caregiving into an act of love so profound that words alone can scarcely do justice to it.

The surgery had been won. But the war was far from over. Ahead lay months of immunotherapy, repeated hospital visits, endless investigations, painful treatments, uncertain reports, and a struggle that would demand every ounce of faith, endurance, and courage that Zamir possessed.

The battle had only begun.

An Embrace That Spoke More Than Words

After several anxious weeks at the Postgraduate Institute of Medical Education and Research, Chandigarh, the most difficult part of Zamir's treatment had, for the moment, been successfully completed. The surgery had gone well, and after careful observation the doctors finally permitted him to leave the hospital. Yet discharge from the hospital did not mean the battle was over. In many ways, it had only entered a new phase. The doctors had advised frequent follow-up consultations, regular investigations, and continuous monitoring. Returning immediately to Kashmir was neither

practical nor advisable. Consequently, the family decided to remain in Chandigarh for some time. A modest hotel in *Naya Gaon*, situated close to PGIMER, became their temporary home. Two rooms on the ground floor were rented. One room was occupied by Zamir and Rafi. The adjoining room became the residence of Asrar and another close member of the family. Within a day or two, the hotel had quietly transformed itself into something much more than temporary accommodation. It had become a home built upon love, hope, and sacrifice. Because Zamir's recovery depended heavily upon nutritious and hygienically prepared food, Rafi immediately improvised a small kitchen inside the room. Simple cooking arrangements were made. Every meal was prepared with extraordinary care, keeping in mind the dietary restrictions prescribed by the doctors. Looking back now, I realise that caregiving often consists of hundreds of invisible acts that rarely receive recognition. Preparing one carefully measured meal. Ensuring medicines are administered on time. Helping a patient sit up. Supporting him while walking. Remaining awake when he cannot sleep. These quiet acts seldom appear in medical reports. Yet they are among the greatest expressions of human love.

As soon as I learnt that the family had settled into the hotel and that visitors were permitted, I decided to travel to Chandigarh. The flight itself was uneventful. The emotional journey had not yet begun. It began the moment my aircraft landed. As I sat inside the taxi travelling from Chandigarh Airport towards Naya Gaon, I found myself struggling with emotions I had never experienced before. This was not an ordinary visit. I had travelled to meet my closest friend. But I was not going to meet the Zamir I had known for more than thirty years. I was going to meet a man who had just survived

a life-threatening surgery. A man who had suddenly been forced into a battle no one chooses. Throughout the taxi ride, I kept asking myself the same question. "How do I face him?" I had always considered myself emotionally strong. Life had taught me to remain composed during difficult situations. Yet, strangely, on that day I felt extraordinarily vulnerable. Perhaps because some relationships occupy such a sacred place in our lives that the possibility of losing them becomes almost impossible to contemplate. As the taxi approached the hotel, I quietly gathered myself. I reminded myself that I had not travelled merely to express sympathy. I had come to tell Zamir something much more important. That he mattered. That he was deeply loved. That none of us intended to allow him to fight this battle alone. I walked slowly towards his room. For a brief moment, I paused outside the door. Then I entered. The sight before me remains permanently etched in my memory. Zamir was resting on the bed. His body had visibly weakened. The robust, energetic friend whom I had known throughout my life now bore unmistakable signs of the immense physical ordeal he had just endured. Yet the moment our eyes met, something remarkable happened. Without saying a word, he attempted to get up. Despite the pain. Despite the weakness. Despite everyone's efforts to stop him. He stood. He walked towards me. And then he embraced me. What followed cannot adequately be described through language. For several long moments, neither of us spoke. We simply held one another. Then, quite unexpectedly, Zamir began weeping. Not the restrained tears of polite emotion. He wept like a child. Perhaps they were tears of relief. Perhaps gratitude. Perhaps accumulated fear finally finding its way out. Perhaps all of these together. I instinctively embraced him even more tightly. At that very moment, Rafi, who had been quietly witnessing the scene, could no longer contain her own

emotions. Her tears began flowing as well. Only minutes earlier, I had entered that room believing that I would console them. Instead, I found myself equally overwhelmed. The composure I had so carefully gathered during the taxi ride disappeared completely. My own eyes filled with tears. Within moments, the room had become a place where words had surrendered to emotion. For nearly ten minutes we remained like that. Holding one another. Weeping. Offering silent gratitude to the Almighty. Again and again, Zamir whispered words of thanks to God for granting him another chance at life. It was one of the purest moments of friendship I have ever experienced. No philosophy was needed. No elaborate conversation. Only human presence. Sometimes that is the greatest comfort one friend can offer another.

I remained in Chandigarh for three days. Those three days have become among the most precious memories of my life. Gradually, conversation returned. We spoke for hours. Not merely about the illness. In fact, cancer occupied surprisingly little of our discussions. Instead, we spoke about life itself. About the strange unpredictability of destiny. About friendship. About spouses and the immeasurable sacrifices they silently make. About parents. About children. About gratitude. About faith. About prayer. About the extraordinary value of relationships that reveal themselves fully only during moments of suffering.

Illness had slowed Zamir's body. It had not diminished his intellect. Nor had it weakened his remarkable capacity for reflection. Every conversation seemed deeper than those we had shared before. Perhaps suffering has a way of stripping away unnecessary words, leaving only those that truly matter. Whenever his strength permitted, I encouraged him to walk a little outside the hotel. The walks were short, measured and

slow. He tired easily. The surgery had left its unmistakable mark. Yet what impressed me most was not his physical weakness. It was his determination. He had accepted that the road ahead would be long. He knew that difficult treatment cycles still awaited him. He understood that uncertainty had become part of everyday life. Yet I never heard him surrender to despair. He wanted to fight. Not merely for himself. But for everyone who loved him. As my visit drew to a close, the time came for me to return to Kashmir. Farewells had always been difficult between us. This one was perhaps the most difficult of all. Before leaving, I held his hand and made him a promise. I told him that this battle belonged not only to him but to all of us who loved him. That we would remain beside him throughout the journey ahead. That whenever he needed us, he would find us standing exactly where friendship had always placed us. By the grace of God, I returned safely to Srinagar. Yet a part of my heart remained behind in that modest hotel room in Naya Gaon. Those three days changed something within me. I had travelled to Chandigarh believing that I was merely visiting an ailing friend. I returned having learnt profound lessons about courage, love, marriage, sacrifice, faith, and the immeasurable strength that genuine relationships provide during life's darkest hours. Some classrooms teach through lectures. Some teachers instruct through books. And then there are rare moments when life itself becomes the teacher. Those three days in Chandigarh were one such classroom. The lessons I learnt there continue to guide me even today.

XII

Beyond The Hospital Walls

“The longest battles against illness are seldom fought inside hospitals. They are fought in homes, on endless roads, in sleepless nights, and in the hearts of those who refuse to give up.”

When people hear the word *cancer*, they usually imagine hospitals, operation theatres, medicines, and doctors. Very few realise that hospitals occupy only a small part of the journey. The real battle begins after the patient returns home. It is then that cancer quietly enters every room of the house, every conversation, every financial decision, every family gathering, every sleepless night, and every prayer. It no longer remains merely a disease of one individual. It gradually becomes the burden of an entire family. After nearly two months in Chandigarh, the doctors at PGIMER finally permitted Zamir to return to Kashmir. The surgery had been successful, and he was physically stable enough to travel. However, the doctors made it abundantly clear that the journey was far from over. The battle had merely changed its battlefield. Before his discharge, the treating team at Chandigarh carefully outlined the future course of treatment. Zamir was advised to return to PGIMER periodically for annual evaluation, but the day-to-day management of his illness would now be undertaken by the Department of Medical Oncology at Sher-e-Kashmir Institute of Medical Sciences (SKIMS), Soura, Srinagar. The doctors at Chandigarh had already communicated with Dr. Nisar, one of the

oncologists at SKIMS, regarding Zamir's condition and the treatment protocol they proposed to follow.

Barely a week after his return to Kashmir, we travelled together to SKIMS. Zamir was accompanied by Rafi and Asrar. I joined them there. That visit remains vivid in my memory. The corridors of the Oncology Department were crowded with patients from every corner of Jammu and Kashmir. Some had travelled through the night. Others had been waiting since early morning. Every face carried its own story, its own fear, and its own hope. Cancer has an extraordinary way of making strangers feel like companions. No introductions are necessary. The eyes understand what words often cannot.

Watching Zamir, who had devoted so much of his own life to nurturing relationships and standing beside others in their times of need, I often found myself silently wishing that fate had written this chapter differently. Life, however, does not always distribute companionship equally. It teaches us, often painfully, that relationships are measured not by blood alone but by presence. After carefully examining the reports from PGIMER and discussing the surgical findings, the doctor proposed the next stage of treatment. The cornerstone of Zamir's future management would be *immunotherapy*. One infusion every twenty-one days. Simple words. Yet they would soon govern the rhythm of the next two years of Zamir's life. The treatment plan appeared straightforward. Its cost, however, was staggering. I volunteered to locate the authorised distributor of the medicine. Only then did we discover the financial reality before us. The surgery had already consumed enormous financial resources. Now another mountain stood before us. Cancer has a cruel way of attacking not only the human body but also the economic foundations of an entire household. One illness can quietly

consume the savings of a lifetime. Behind every expensive medicine lies a family desperately trying to calculate what can still be afforded. Rafi was already carrying burdens beyond imagination. For almost three months, as Zamir later told me, she had scarcely enjoyed a proper night's sleep. Whenever pain kept Zamir awake through the night, she remained awake beside him. When exhaustion finally overcame him during the daytime, she could not afford the luxury of sleeping herself. Medicines had to be arranged. Meals prepared. Hospital appointments remembered. Reports organised. Visitors attended. Hope sustained. She silently accepted every responsibility without ever allowing Zamir to feel that he had become a burden. Watching her during those months taught me that marriage reveals its deepest meaning not during celebrations but during suffering. A spouse becomes more than a companion. She becomes courage itself. Once again, providence chose to work through the kindness of friends. Dr. Amin Mir, in consultation with Dr. Nisar, informed us about a patient-support programme run by the manufacturers of *Keytruda*, the immunotherapy drug prescribed for Zamir. The scheme offered eligible patients some concession. To qualify, however, every patient had to undergo a rigorous verification process. Documents had to be submitted. Financial details scrutinised. Medical records verified. Telephone interviews conducted. During this process, I became Zamir's officially registered caregiver. All correspondence with the company passed through me. The registration formalities occupied almost an entire week. Several long conversations took place over the telephone. Numerous documents travelled back and forth. Finally, approval arrived. Zamir had been sanctioned a meagre relief under the support programme. Even this concession felt like an enormous blessing. Thereafter, a new routine quietly became part of our lives. A few days before

every scheduled infusion, the doctor at SKIMS issued a fresh prescription. I would immediately forward it to the company.

The company would then authorise its distributor in Chandigarh. Once the payment was made most of time through online banking, a representative carrying the medicine in specialised cold-storage packaging would begin the overnight journey to Srinagar. He would usually arrive the following morning, the very day of the infusion. Before handing over the medicine, he would complete several formalities. As the registered caregiver, I signed every document acknowledging receipt. Sometimes heavy snowfall or landslides along the Jammu-Srinagar National Highway delayed the delivery. Whenever that happened, the treatment schedule had to be postponed by another day. Over time, this complicated sequence ceased to feel unusual. It simply became another part of life. Cancer teaches families to reorganise their entire existence around hospital calendars. The day of every infusion gradually developed into an almost sacred routine. For most of his illness, Zamir stayed at Aishmuqam with his in-laws, whose home became his sanctuary during those difficult years. Early in the morning, he would leave for Srinagar accompanied by Rafi, Asrar, and any one of his close friends. No one wanted Rafi and Asrar to shoulder the burden alone.

Our circle of friends quietly created an unwritten roster. On different occasions, Nisar DLO, Jaleel, Jaleel's brother Qayoom Sb., Abdul Rahman, Khalid Ayaz, sometimes a relative, and other friends accompanied Zamir to the hospital. It was our small way of reminding him that friendship had not weakened under the weight of illness. If anything, it had grown stronger. Meanwhile, I would receive the medicine and, whenever necessary, keep it refrigerated overnight. On the morning of

the infusion, Zamir would first stop at my home before we proceeded together to SKIMS. Those mornings gave birth to one of the most beautiful rituals of our friendship. Before every hospital visit, my wife, Rifat Ara, prepared *Noon Chai* especially for Zamir. No matter how anxious the day promised to be, he never wished to miss that cup of salted pink tea. Everyone accompanying him joined us. The tea somehow transformed an ordinary morning into something comforting. Zamir praised Rifat's Noon Chai with such enthusiasm that one would have thought it was the finest beverage in the world. He never accepted it merely as tea. He accepted it as affection served in a cup. At every opportunity, he would speak about it with gratitude. Whenever friends gathered, he would proudly narrate how "Rifat Bhabhi's Noon Chai" had become an inseparable part of his treatment days. The sincerity with which he expressed his appreciation elevated even the smallest gesture into something memorable.

Looking back now, I realise that illness changes one's understanding of hospitality. During healthy times, elaborate feasts are remembered. During illness, one lovingly prepared cup of tea acquires the value of an unforgettable feast. After finishing our tea, we would leave for SKIMS. The Day-Care Center of the Oncology Department gradually became another familiar destination in our lives. Every visit there humbled me. The waiting area was almost always overflowing with patients. There were more patients than beds. Many beds accommodated two patients at a time, each waiting patiently for his or her turn. Elderly men, young women, children, middle-aged fathers, mothers, every age and every background was represented there. Cancer makes no distinction between wealth and poverty, profession and status, education and illiteracy. It visits every household with

equal indifference. The nursing staff worked under tremendous pressure. They were clearly fewer in number than the demands placed upon them. Yet I must place on record my appreciation for their dedication. Despite the heavy workload, despite the endless queues and the visible exhaustion on their faces, they continued working until every patient scheduled for the day had received the prescribed infusion. Many evenings, they remained on duty long after normal working hours had ended. Their quiet commitment became another reminder that compassion often survives even within overburdened institutions. Eventually, Zamir's turn would arrive. The precious vials, having travelled overnight from Chandigarh, would finally be opened. The transparent liquid that slowly entered his veins carried with it all our hopes. Every infusion represented another opportunity. Another twenty-one days. Another chance. Another reason to continue believing. Yet the infusion itself was only the beginning. The hours that followed were often the most difficult. For nearly six to eight hours after every treatment, Zamir would experience severe discomfort. He often described the sensation in strikingly simple words. "It feels as though my entire body has been placed inside an oven." His body would burn. Restlessness would overtake him. At times he became unusually irritable, something entirely unlike the Zamir we had known throughout our lives. But none of us ever misunderstood those moments. Pain changes behaviour. It does not change character. Those accompanying him never reacted to his occasional impatience. Instead, we quietly adjusted ourselves to the demands of his suffering. We understood that the irritation belonged to the illness, not to the man. Gradually, we also discovered a simple yet surprisingly effective remedy; conversation. Whenever the discomfort became intense, whoever happened to be accompanying

Zamir would immediately begin making video calls to other friends. One after another, familiar faces would appear on the screen. Someone from Srinagar, someone from Anantnag, someone from Jammu., sometimes an old university companion, sometimes a colleague, sometimes a childhood friend. Within moments, the conversation would drift away from medicines and hospitals. Instead, we found ourselves laughing over old memories from Aligarh. Remembering Pappu's Dhaba. Recalling hostel incidents. Arguing over forgotten political debates. Retelling stories that we had already heard a hundred times. For those few precious minutes, cancer quietly withdrew into the background. Friendship became the medicine. During these conversations, Zamir would often become deeply emotional. He spoke about people more than he spoke about himself. He enquired about everyone's families. He worried about the health of elderly parents. He remembered birthdays. He asked about children. He expressed gratitude for even the smallest kindness shown to him. Sometimes, while speaking, his voice would suddenly become heavy with emotion. At other times, he would smile exactly as he had smiled during our hostel days. Illness had weakened his body. It had not diminished his capacity to love. Watching him during those months taught me something that no university, no classroom, and no book had ever taught me. Cancer is not merely a biological disease. It is an emotional earthquake. It tests marriages. It tests friendships. It tests faith. It tests financial stability. It tests patience. It tests hope. It tests every relationship that surrounds the patient.

Some relationships quietly disappear beneath the weight of prolonged suffering. Others become stronger than anyone could have imagined. In Zamir's life, I witnessed both. I saw friendships deepen into brotherhood. I saw ordinary acts of

kindness become extraordinary sources of strength. I saw a wife transform herself into a tireless caregiver without once allowing fatigue to overshadow her devotion. I saw a brother-in-law forget his own comfort while carrying responsibilities that few sons would have fulfilled with greater sincerity. I saw friends willingly reorganize their personal and professional lives simply to ensure that Zamir never travelled to a hospital feeling alone. Those monthly journeys to SKIMS eventually became much more than hospital visits. They became pilgrimages of hope. Every twenty-one days, the same journey was repeated. The same roads, the same waiting rooms, the same infusion bed, the same uncertainty, the same prayers. And above all the same determination.

And every time we returned home, we thanked the Almighty for granting us another cycle completed, another small victory won, and another opportunity to continue fighting. Looking back today, I no longer remember the exact dates of every infusion. I no longer remember the countless prescriptions or laboratory reports. What I remember are the faces. The hands that held Zamir when he was too weak to walk. The voices that refused to let silence overpower him. The prayers whispered by people who expected nothing in return. The cup of Noon Chai that became a symbol of affection. The courage of Rafi. The steadfast devotion of Asrar. The laughter of friends echoing through hospital corridors. Those are the memories that remain. Because, in the end, cancer was only the disease. Humanity was the cure that surrounded it.

XIII

The Wealth That Cannot Be Measured

"When illness stripped away everything that appeared important, only one wealth remained, people who refused to let him walk alone."

One aspect of a prolonged illness is seldom discussed openly. While medical reports describe the progress of the disease and physicians speak about treatment protocols, there exists another battle that quietly unfolds alongside the medical one. It is fought not in operation theatres or intensive care units but around dining tables, family discussions, and sleepless nights. Every new investigation, every hospital visit, every journey, and every advanced therapy carries with it practical responsibilities that can gradually become overwhelming.

Cancer, therefore, tests not only the physical endurance of the patient but also the collective strength of everyone who stands beside him. I mention this aspect of Zamir's journey not to speak about material considerations, but to acknowledge something far more meaningful, the extraordinary humanity that revealed itself during those difficult years.

As news of his illness spread, it became evident that Zamir had spent his entire life investing in relationships rather than possessions. Years earlier, during our student days at Aligarh Muslim University, we had often joked that Zamir knew

almost everyone and that everyone, somehow, knew Zamir. At the time, those friendships seemed simply to enrich our youthful lives. None of us imagined that one day they would become one of his greatest sources of strength.

The first circle to quietly gather around him consisted of the friends with whom he had shared his formative years at Aligarh. Time, distance, careers, and family responsibilities had taken each of us in different directions, yet the affection that had been forged over countless evenings at Pappu's Dhaba and in the corridors of Habib Hall had never diminished. When adversity arrived, those friendships awakened almost instinctively. No one waited to be asked. No one calculated obligations.

Each friend, according to his own circumstances and capacity, found a way to stand beside Zamir. Some travelled to see him. Some remained in constant contact. Others offered guidance, encouragement, or practical assistance whenever needed. Every gesture, whether large or small, carried the same message:

"You are not alone."

Watching these friendships come alive after more than three decades was deeply moving. It reminded me that genuine friendship does not measure itself by the frequency of meetings but by the certainty of presence when life becomes difficult.

As the months passed, however, the journey grew longer and more demanding. Treatments continued. Follow-up visits multiplied. New challenges emerged with each passing season. It gradually became clear that this was not going to be a brief struggle but a sustained one requiring patience,

perseverance, and collective resolve. It was during this phase that another remarkable chapter unfolded.

Zamir's professional fraternity, the teachers with whom he had worked for many years, displayed a rare sense of solidarity and compassion. Among them, one individual deserves special mention. Ruheed Baldev, a common friend from our Aligarh days and Zamir's colleague in the School Education Department, quietly assumed a role that reflected the very highest ideals of friendship and professional brotherhood. Throughout the years I had known Ruheed, I had always admired his integrity, his sincerity, and his unwavering commitment to principles. Yet it was only during Zamir's illness that I came to appreciate another dimension of his personality, his remarkable ability to inspire people towards a common humanitarian purpose.

As I look back today, I feel no hesitation in expressing my deepest gratitude to every one of those friends and colleagues. They reminded me that human beings possess a remarkable capacity to lessen one another's burdens. Sometimes they do so through words. Sometimes through presence. Sometimes through quiet acts of generosity that are never spoken about publicly. And perhaps that is exactly how such kindness should remain, known fully only to God and to the hearts that experienced it. If there is one lesson that Zamir's illness taught me, it is this:

A person's greatest wealth is not accumulated in bank accounts or measured by worldly possessions. It is accumulated quietly over a lifetime through honesty, compassion, loyalty, and the countless relationships nurtured with sincerity.

When the most difficult chapter of Zamir's life arrived, it was this invisible wealth that surrounded him. It became evident that he had spent his life enriching others.

In his hour of need, that richness returned to him, not as an obligation, but as love. That, perhaps, was one of the greatest rewards of a life lived in service of people.

XIV

The Last Promise

"The hardest promises to keep are not the ones we forget, but the ones that time refuses to let us fulfil."

By the winter of 2026, nearly three years had passed since cancer had first entered Zamir's life. It had become an unwelcome companion that accompanied him through hospitals, investigations, medicines, immunotherapy sessions, moments of hope, and painful setbacks. Yet despite everything he had endured, he had never surrendered his faith. He continued to live one day at a time, celebrating every small blessing that life still offered. As was now his yearly routine, Zamir shifted with his family to his Jammu residence for the winter months. This time, however, the atmosphere was different.

One and a half year earlier, in 2024, the family had suffered another profound loss with the passing of his father-in-law. I have deliberately postponed mentioning this until now because I wanted to acknowledge the remarkable courage displayed by Rafi. Losing one's father is among life's deepest sorrows. Yet even while carrying that grief within herself, she never allowed her personal loss to interfere with the care she devoted to Zamir. Day after day, month after month, she remained exactly where she had always been, beside him. Looking back, I often think that devotion is tested not when

life is easy, but when one sorrow arrives before another has even begun to heal.

The beginning of January 2026 brought fresh complications. Zamir's health deteriorated, and he was admitted to Batra Hospital in Jammu. There was another painful irony that none of us could ignore. It was around this very time that his daughter's Class X examination results were declared. She had achieved outstanding success, an accomplishment that would normally have filled the entire household with celebration. I remembered one of Zamir's deepest wishes. Many times during his illness he had quietly told me, "I only pray that I live long enough to see my daughter achieve something before I leave this world", God, in His infinite wisdom, granted him that wish. He saw her succeed. Yet instead of celebrating beside her, he lay on a hospital bed. Life, at times, grants our prayers in ways that leave us both grateful and heartbroken.

As soon as we learnt of his admission, we decided that we had to be with him. There are journeys one undertakes out of necessity. There are others that one undertakes out of love. This journey belonged entirely to the latter. Tinku Abdul Rahman, Khalid Ayaz, Younus Iqbal Bhat, and I planned to travel together from Kashmir to Jammu. Each of us attended our respective duties during the first half of the day. I completed my responsibilities at the University, while Tinku and Younus attended their offices. By afternoon we had all gathered at the agreed meeting point, where Khalid waited patiently with his car. As we began the journey, none of us imagined that we were travelling towards our final meeting with Zamir. The road from Kashmir to Jammu had witnessed countless conversations over the years. This one was unlike any other. For nearly the entire journey, the conversation revolved around only one person.

Zamir.

We spoke about his kindness.

His humour.

His political convictions.

His generosity.

His remarkable gift for storytelling.

The sacrifices he had quietly made for others.

The countless lives he had touched.

The difficulties he had endured without complaint.

Every few kilometers another memory surfaced. Someone would recall an incident from Aligarh. Someone else would remember a joke that only Zamir could have narrated. Sometimes we laughed. Sometimes silence replaced conversation.

The road itself seemed to understand that it was carrying four anxious friends towards someone they loved deeply. By the time we reached Jammu, night had already fallen. Our friend Jaleel, who had arrived earlier, insisted that we first come to his home for dinner before proceeding to the hospital. His wife, Jennifer, had lovingly prepared a meal for all of us. The hospitality was warm. The food was delicious. Yet I doubt whether any of us truly tasted it. Our thoughts had already reached the hospital long before our bodies did. Soon afterwards, we arrived at the Batra Hospital. Zamir had been shifted to the Intensive Care Unit. Only one visitor was permitted inside at a time. One after another, my companions entered the ICU and returned after a few minutes. Something in their expressions immediately unsettled me. None of them spoke much. There was disappointment. There was concern.

There was an unspoken fear. I was the last to enter. Even before I stepped inside, I had begun preparing myself. Yet nothing could have prepared me for what awaited me. The ICU was dimly lit. Its silence was unlike ordinary silence. It was punctuated by the rhythmic sounds of cardiac monitors, infusion pumps, oxygen machines, and ventilators, a strange orchestra where every machine seemed to be negotiating between life and death. Almost every bed was occupied. Some patients were asleep. Others were only partially conscious. Some stared blankly towards the ceiling. The atmosphere itself seemed heavy with uncertainty. I had visited intensive care units many times during my father's illness. Those visits had been painful. This one was different. Then I had sensed struggle. Here, I sensed surrender. As I slowly walked towards Zamir's bed, our eyes met. I cannot adequately describe what passed between us in that single glance. It was as though words had become unnecessary. He smiled faintly. A tired smile. A smile that carried courage, exhaustion, affection, and acceptance all at once. I sat beside him. We spoke quietly. As always, I tried to lighten the atmosphere. I cracked a few jokes. I reminded him of our plans after his discharge. I spoke about future gatherings. About meals we still had to share. About journeys we still had to undertake together. Normally, Zamir would have responded enthusiastically, adding his own stories and exaggerations. This time his responses were gentle. His smile appeared only briefly. The laughter that had once echoed across hostel corridors had become soft and fragile. After a while, he looked at me and said quietly, "My shoulder is hurting... massage it a little." I immediately began massaging his shoulder. As my hand rested upon him, an indescribable emotion overwhelmed me. For the first time, I felt unable to reconcile the image before me with the Zamir I had always known. The

contrast was simply too painful. After a few moments, he asked for the medicated lotion he normally used. Rafi quietly brought it. My own emotions had begun overpowering me. Sensing my condition, Tinku gently took over the massage while I remained beside Zamir, continuing our conversation. A little later, Khalid also entered. Together we once again tried to bring life back into the room. For a few moments, we succeeded. The old Zamir briefly returned. He smiled. He responded. He even attempted a little humour. It was only for a short while. But those few minutes remain priceless.

That evening, Jaleel arrived carrying freshly prepared chicken soup from his home. Rafi carefully fed Zamir spoon by spoon. Watching that simple act, I realised that love often expresses itself through the smallest gestures. Hours later, we prepared to leave. We promised to return the following morning. As we stepped out of the ICU, my eyes met those of *Rafi* and *Asrar*. Throughout the previous years, both had remained astonishingly optimistic. No matter how difficult the circumstances became, they somehow managed to reassure everyone around them. That night was different. Neither of them needed to say anything. Their eyes had already spoken. For the first time, I sensed that they too understood the battle had entered its final stage. Yet none of us had the courage to acknowledge it aloud. Hope, even when fragile, refuses to leave easily.

Among those attending Zamir was his younger brother, *Imuji*, who had travelled from Kashmir but unfortunately fell ill himself and had to rest at Zamir's residence; his devoted friend Rockey, a well-known hotelier from Pahalgam, whose dedication never wavered; and another close friend, Nisar Sahib, who visited him regularly. Each, in his own way, tried to lessen the burden that illness had placed upon the family.

Late that night we left the hospital. Jaleel returned to his home in Sidra. The four of us drove to the Kashmir University Guest House at Bathindi, Jammu where I had arranged our accommodation. Although we had travelled nearly three hundred kilometers that day, sleep refused to visit us. The body was tired. The mind remained awake. Every one of us lay silently, carrying the same fear.

The following morning, we returned to the hospital after breakfast. Again, we visited Zamir one by one. Despite lying in the ICU, he surprised us by asking whether we had slept comfortably, whether the guest house was satisfactory, and whether we had taken breakfast.

That was Zamir.

Even while fighting for his own life, he remained concerned about the comfort of others. Some habits become so deeply woven into a person's character that not even illness can erase them. We spent almost the entire day in and around the hospital, taking turns to sit with him whenever ICU regulations permitted. By evening, the time had come to return to Kashmir. The farewell that day remains one of the most difficult moments of my life. I held Zamir's hand and told him, "After the Republic Day celebrations at South Campus, I will come back. This time I shall stay with you for several days." He nodded gently. It was not merely a casual assurance. It was a promise. A promise made by one friend to another. As we walked away, I glanced once more towards Rafi and Asrar. No words were exchanged. None were needed. We all knew that something within us feared this might be the last goodbye. Yet none of us wished to betray that fear before the others. Hope continued to speak, even as reality remained painfully silent. I returned to Kashmir carrying every intention of fulfilling my promise. Fate, however, had

already written a different ending. During the night between 26 and 27 January, before I could return to Jammu, Zamir quietly departed from this temporary world. For many months afterwards, one thought continued to haunt me. Throughout our friendship we had kept countless promises to one another. This was the only one I could not fulfil. Not because I forgot. Not because I neglected it. But because destiny did not grant me the time. Even today, whenever I remember that final meeting, I do not think first of the machines, the medicines, or the ICU. I remember a tired friend worrying whether we had slept comfortably. I remember a shoulder that needed to be gently massaged. I remember a faint smile that struggled to survive pain.

And I remember a promise that still echoes within me, a promise that remains forever unfinished, not because friendship failed, but because time itself came to an end.

XV

The Day The Valley Became Silent

*"When a beautiful soul departs, it is not only a family that mourns.
Entire landscapes seem to lose a familiar light."*

There are days that divide a life forever. Until they arrive, time flows naturally from one morning to another. Afterwards, every memory is measured as either before that day or after it. For me, 27 January 2026 became such a day. The previous day had begun with celebration.

It was Republic Day, and as Director of the South Campus of the University of Kashmir, I had the honour of unfurling the National Flag before faculty members, students, officers, and staff. Despite relentless snowfall and rain throughout the day, the celebrations had been conducted with dignity and enthusiasm. Standing before the Tricolour, I had spoken about the blessings of living in the world's largest democracy and the responsibilities that accompany citizenship.

I returned home that evening physically exhausted but inwardly satisfied. I had no idea that within a few hours life would place before me one of its greatest sorrows. After dinner, as had become my daily routine, I telephoned Asrar to enquire about Zamir. The moment he answered, I sensed something was wrong. His voice had changed. It carried a fatigue that only prolonged suffering can produce. In the background I could hear faint sounds from the hospital room. I asked him directly, "How is Zamir?" After a brief silence,

Asrar replied with words that still echo in my ears. "I don't think he is receiving the treatment he needs. They are only managing him." His concern was genuine. I could also hear, from the background, that Zamir was struggling with pain. Within minutes our conversation shifted from concern to planning. We discussed the possibility of immediately shifting Zamir to Srinagar. If he could reach SKIMS, perhaps another opinion, another intervention, another opportunity might still exist. Soon afterwards, a conference call connected Jaleel, Nisar Sahib (DDC), Tinku, and me. Everyone contributed. Everyone searched for possibilities. Dr. Amin Mir, speaking from Delhi, advised that because of Zamir's serious lung infection he should first be admitted to the Chest Diseases Hospital, Srinagar. Using his professional contacts, he immediately arranged for a bed to be kept ready. The decision was taken. An ambulance would leave Jammu during the night. Asrar and Rafi would accompany Zamir. We would receive him in Srinagar and continue the battle from there. For a brief moment, hope returned. Around half past midnight, after speaking once more with Asrar, I told him, "Keep me informed. I shall keep my phone beside me. Call me the moment you start." With that, I lay down. Sleep never truly arrived. Perhaps somewhere deep within me I already sensed that the coming dawn would not resemble any dawn I had known before. At approximately 4:40 in the morning, the telephone rang. The screen displayed Asrar's name. Half awake, I instinctively assumed they had begun their journey. I answered immediately. There was no greeting. Only a single sentence. "*Aapka dost chala gaya.*" (Your friend has left.) For a few moments I could not understand the words. They seemed impossible. Unreal. Rifat, who was beside me, looked at my face and immediately asked, "Is it about Zamir?" I could not answer. The silence itself became my reply. She understood.

The struggle had ended. The battle had not been lost by courage. It had simply reached the point where human effort could proceed no further. Death had claimed its inevitable victory. For several minutes I remained seated on the edge of the bed, unable to move. Then instinct slowly returned. There were people to inform. Journeys to arrange. Responsibilities to fulfil. Dr. Amin Mir telephoned from Delhi. Our conversation was brief. There are moments when condolences require very few words. I informed Khalid. I spoke to Jaleel, who was already making arrangements at the hospital.

Asrar was preparing to leave Jammu with Zamir's mortal remains. Jaleel, Nisar Sahib, Rockey, Dr. Fayaz of SKUAST, and several others were helping the family with remarkable dedication. An ambulance was arranged. Zamir would travel one final time from Jammu to the Valley. Accompanying him were Asrar and his brother, while other friends followed in separate vehicles. Outside, snow had begun falling gently. The weather itself appeared to be mourning. After offering my morning prayers, I prepared to leave for Hutmurrah. Every movement that morning seemed unusually slow. The familiar routines of bathing, dressing, and stepping out of the house had suddenly acquired an unfamiliar heaviness.

Around seven o'clock I began the journey. The snowflakes descended quietly from the sky. The road ahead lay covered beneath a pale white silence. As my car entered the highway, something extraordinary happened. For nearly the entire journey, my mind ceased to notice the road before me. Instead, another road unfolded. A road stretching back more than three decades. Memory after memory began passing before my eyes like scenes from an endless film. Our first argument over a hostel room. Room No. 271 in Muhammad Habib Hall. The endless nights of cards and tea. Pappu's Dhaba. Tasveer

Mahal. Journeys between Aligarh and Kashmir. The laughter. The impossible stories. The debates. The political discussions. The youthful romances. The Sir Syed Day gatherings at Aharbal, Pahalgam, Nigeen Lake, Gulmarg. The immunotherapy days at SKIMS. The cups of Noon Chai at my home. The kebabs after hospital visits. His generosity. His hospitality. His endless concern for everyone except himself. Everything returned. Everything.

My hands remained on the steering wheel. But my soul travelled somewhere else entirely. I do not remember driving faster than forty kilometers an hour. I was not driving towards a funeral. I was travelling through thirty-five years of friendship. By around nine o'clock I reached Hutmurrah. The ambulance was still on its way. Jaleel kept updating me about their progress. Strangely, despite the season and the weather, they encountered almost no traffic on the Jammu-Srinagar Highway. It was as though the road itself wished to allow Zamir one final uninterrupted journey home. Gradually, friends began arriving. Tinku. Younus. Khalid. Ajaz. Many others. Soon people from neighbouring villages also started gathering. Then came teachers. Government officers. Businessmen. Political workers. Farmers. Neighbours. Former students. People from every walk of life.

Standing there, I realised once again that the true measure of a human being is not found in the positions he held, but in the number of hearts that feel empty after his departure. No one among us had yet accepted the reality. One friend would begin crying while another attempted to console him. Moments later, the roles would reverse. Grief had become collective. Around eleven o'clock Jaleel telephoned. "We shall reach in ten minutes." The entire gathering became restless. Within minutes the ambulance appeared at the entrance to the

mohalla. As it came to a halt, the rear doors opened. The first person to step out was Asrar. He broke down immediately. His tears needed no explanation. Many people rushed forward to hold him. Then came Imuji. And finally, Zamir. The same friend whose arrival had once filled every gathering with laughter now returned wrapped in silence. He was carried into the very room that had witnessed countless evenings of conversation, hospitality, debate, storytelling, and friendship. Once again the room became full. This time it was not laughter that filled its walls. It was the sound of grief. His father arrived with remarkable composure. Rafi, her mother, and Zamir's three daughters were inconsolable. I remember very little of the next hour. Only tears. Prayers. Embraces. The cries of relatives. Neighbours trying to comfort one another. Friends weeping openly without embarrassment. Outside, preparations for the funeral had already begun. Members of the local committee quietly attended to every responsibility. The grave had been prepared. The final ablution was completed. Around half past one, Zamir was ready for his last earthly journey. By then the snowfall had intensified. Heavy flakes descended continuously upon Hutmurrah. His bier was placed in the local Janazah *Gah*. People continued arriving until the very last moment. No one seemed concerned about the falling snow or the bitter cold. Everyone wished to stand one final time beside the man called Zamir. At approximately two o'clock, the funeral prayer was offered. Thousands of hands rose together in supplication. The same hands that had prayed for his recovery now prayed for his eternal peace. Thereafter, friends, relatives, neighbours, colleagues, and strangers together carried him towards the graveyard. The final resting place that had awaited him in the soil of his beloved village now received him with quiet dignity. As the first handfuls of earth fell upon the grave, an era quietly came

to an end. One by one, people completed the burial. Many slowly dispersed. Many remained standing in silent prayer. Our group of friends stayed much longer. None of us wished to leave. We sat there mourning the departure of our dear Zamir. Sometimes one of us consoled another. Sometimes the one offering comfort became the next to break down. Words had become unnecessary. Only one truth remained. Zamir had gone. The circle of friends that had once revolved around his laughter had suddenly become incomplete. The most charming voice in our gathering had fallen silent. Life, however unwilling we were to accept it, had turned another page.

And for the first time in more than three decades, we began the journey home without Zamir.

XVI

The Man We Thought We Knew

"A person's true biography is often written not by the words he speaks while living, but by the stories others tell after he is gone."

The days immediately following Zamir's burial became, for me, an education unlike any I had ever received. I had known him for more than three decades. I had shared classrooms, hostels, railway journeys, political discussions, cups of tea, moments of celebration, days of illness, and finally the painful months of his battle with cancer. I believed I knew him as completely as one friend could ever know another. Those three days taught me how little I actually knew.

After the funeral, a few of us decided to remain in Hutmurrah until the traditional fourth-day prayers had been completed. Tinku, Ajaz, Jaleel, and I stayed at Zamir's home throughout each day, receiving visitors alongside the family. At night, we would retire to Jaleel's house in a nearby village, only to return early the next morning before another endless stream of mourners began arriving. Those days now seem like a continuous flow of humanity. People came from every direction.

Teachers.

Students.

Neighbours.

Government officers.

Political workers.

Religious scholars.

Businessmen.

Farmers.

Lawyers.

Shopkeepers.

Former classmates.

Senior citizens.

Young boys whose lives Zamir had quietly influenced.

Parents who had never met us before.

Even people from different faiths and different political persuasions walked into that modest home with the same purpose, to pay their respects to a man whom each believed had touched his life in a meaningful way.

Inside the house, Zamir's father, whom we all affectionately called *Chacha* , received the visitors with remarkable composure. Age and experience had perhaps taught him to bear grief with dignity, but no father can truly conceal the emptiness left by the departure of a son. Beside him sat family members, relatives, neighbours, and friends, while visitors arrived in an almost unending procession.

What struck me most was not the number of people who came. It was the remarkable unanimity in what they had to say. Whether the speaker was an Imam, a political worker, one of Zamir's former students, a senior colleague, an Alig from our university days, a neighbour from Hutmurrah, or even someone who had once differed with him politically, every voice converged upon the same conclusion.

They all spoke of a good man. Not a perfect man. Not a powerful man. Not a wealthy man. Simply, and perhaps most importantly, a genuinely good human being.

As one person finished narrating an incident, another would begin. Each story revealed a Zamir whom I had never encountered. More than once I found myself asking silently, "How is it possible that I never knew this?"

A lawyer narrated how, as a struggling student with limited means, he had received timely guidance and encouragement from Zamir at a moment when he was on the verge of abandoning his studies. He spoke not of financial assistance or dramatic intervention, but of something equally valuable, the confidence that Zamir had instilled in him when he had almost lost faith in himself.

A political worker described Zamir's unwavering loyalty to principles, recalling countless occasions on which he had worked tirelessly behind the scenes without ever seeking recognition, position, or reward. Listening to him, I realised once again that Zamir had always been more interested in building people than in building his own career.

An Imam associated with an orphanage shared stories of Zamir's quiet generosity towards orphaned children. There was no publicity attached to these acts, no announcements, no photographs, and no expectation that anyone should know. He simply helped whenever he believed help was needed.

A young man stood up and spoke about his father's prolonged illness. During those difficult months, he said, Zamir had repeatedly visited the family, arranged consultations, accompanied them to hospitals, and remained available whenever they felt helpless. Until that day, I had never heard that story.

Then came students. One after another. Some had travelled long distances simply to offer a prayer for their teacher. Many spoke through tears. They remembered not merely the lessons he taught inside the classroom but the encouragement he had offered outside it. They spoke of recommendations he had written, problems he had solved, careers he had quietly shaped, and confidence he had restored in moments of self-doubt. Their parents, too, expressed gratitude. Several admitted that before meeting Zamir they had regarded education as merely a means of obtaining employment. Through his encouragement, they had begun to see it as a pathway to dignity, self-respect, and social transformation.

His colleagues contributed yet another collection of memories. They recalled his willingness to shoulder responsibilities that others often avoided, his readiness to help without hesitation, and his remarkable ability to unite people despite differences of opinion. Even those who had disagreed with him professionally or politically spoke with unmistakable respect.

As the stories accumulated, I slowly realised that I was not merely attending a condolence gathering. I was attending the unveiling of an invisible life. Throughout his lifetime, Zamir had quietly planted seeds of kindness in places where very few people noticed. Only after his departure did those seeds bloom together. By the end of the third day, I no longer felt that I was listening to isolated anecdotes. Together, they had become a portrait. A portrait far larger than the one any single friend could have painted. Until then, I had known Zamir as my companion through youth, friendship, politics, laughter, and suffering.

Those three days introduced me to another Zamir, a teacher who inspired, a neighbour who cared, a guide who quietly transformed lives, a man whose greatest achievements were

rarely spoken about by himself. As I left Hutmurrah after the fourth-day prayers, one thought remained firmly engraved upon my heart. We often believe that we know those closest to us. Perhaps we know only the chapters of their lives in which we ourselves appear. The remaining chapters are written quietly in the lives of countless others. It was only after Zamir had departed that I began reading those unwritten pages. And in doing so, I discovered that my friend had lived a life far richer, far wider, and far more beautiful than even I had imagined.

XVII

The Man Who Still Walks Beside Me

"A beautiful friendship does not end at the grave. It continues quietly in the choices we make, the stories we tell, and the people we become because someone once walked beside us."

The first few months after Zamir left us were perhaps the most difficult phase of my grieving. His burial had taken place, the rituals had been completed, friends had returned to their respective lives, and yet somewhere deep within me, my heart had quietly refused to accept what my mind already knew. For more than three decades, Zamir had become such an integral part of my daily life that speaking to him had become almost instinctive. Whenever something interesting happened, a successful programme at the University, an engaging discussion with colleagues, an unexpected political development, or even a humorous incident during the day, my first impulse was always the same. I would reach for my phone. The next moment would come like an electric shock. "Zamir is no longer there." I cannot count how many times this happened. Each time, the silence on the other end of that imaginary phone call seemed louder than before.

One habit, in particular, became especially painful. Whenever I travelled from Hutmurrah towards Srinagar after meeting Zamir, he would invariably call me three or four times during the journey. "Where have you reached?" "Have you crossed

Khanabal” “Drive carefully.” He would continue tracking my journey until I reached home safely. It was his way of expressing affection. After he departed from this world, every journey on that road became strangely incomplete. The phone never rang. No familiar voice asked where I had reached. No one followed my journey anymore. The road remained the same. The mountains remained the same. Only the voice had disappeared.

Many times, after participating in an academic discussion or delivering a lecture, I would find myself thinking, “I must call Zamir this evening. I want to hear what he thinks about this.” Then reality would quietly return. There would be no discussion. No debate. No alternative perspective. No laughter at the end of the conversation.

Even today, while writing these pages, there are moments when my heart refuses to believe that he is gone. Perhaps this is how true friendships survive death. The mind accepts the loss. The heart continues waiting for one more phone call.

The Gatherings That Became Quieter

Looking back today, I realise that Zamir was much more than another member of our circle of friends. He was its center of gravity. He was the invisible thread that held together people of remarkably different temperaments, professions, ideologies, and personalities. Teachers, administrators, political workers, businessmen, doctors, government officers, and ordinary villagers, all somehow found common ground in his company. He possessed a rare gift. He could make everyone feel that they belonged. Since his departure, we have certainly met on several occasions. Yet every gathering has carried an unmistakable emptiness. The conversations still take place. Tea is still served. Stories are still narrated. But

something essential is missing. Or rather, someone. There is no longer that familiar voice capable of transforming an ordinary evening into an unforgettable one. No one now invents impossible stories with such conviction that everyone willingly chooses to believe them. No one suddenly changes the direction of a discussion from politics to philosophy, from humour to history, and from history back to laughter. No one effortlessly convinces us to extend the gathering for another cup of tea. Sometimes, while sitting together, one of us quietly remarks,

"If Zamir were here..."

The sentence is never completed. It does not need to be. Everyone already knows the rest. For a few moments someone recalls one of his famous stories. Another imitates the way he used to narrate it. We laugh. And then, almost immediately, silence returns. Perhaps the greatest tribute to Zamir is this: Even in his physical absence, he remains the central topic of our conversations. I now understand that friendships are not sustained merely by affection. Sometimes they are held together by one extraordinary human being whose presence quietly keeps many hearts connected.

For us, that person was Zamir.

The Lessons I Continue to Teach

Long before I assumed administrative responsibilities at the University, I had developed the habit of carrying ideas from our discussions into my own lectures and public addresses. Those evenings with Zamir were never merely social gatherings. They were classrooms without walls. Over cups of tea, during late-night conversations, and in endless debates stretching into the early hours of the morning, we

unknowingly educated one another. Today, whenever I stand behind a podium as Director, as a professor, or as a speaker invited to address an audience, I often realise that many of the ideas I present did not originate with me alone. They carry Zamir's fingerprints.

Whenever I speak about women's dignity and empowerment, I hear echoes of those thoughtful discussions we once had at Pappu's Dhaba.

Whenever I emphasise compassion, social responsibility, or the importance of education, I remember the countless examples he shared from his own life.

Whenever I participate in an intellectual discussion, I often find myself anticipating the very questions that Zamir would probably have asked.

Sometimes, while delivering a speech, a thought suddenly occurs to me. Almost instinctively I think, "Zamir would have appreciated this point." Or, "He would certainly have challenged me on this argument." At such moments, I no longer feel that I am speaking alone. His presence continues quietly beside me. Perhaps this is the greatest legacy a friend can leave behind. Not merely memories. But ideas. Ideas that continue to influence another person's thinking long after the voice that first spoke them has fallen silent. That is why I sincerely believe that Zamir still walks beside me. Not in physical form. But in every thought that has made me a better teacher, a better administrator, and perhaps a better human being.

Love Does Not End With Death

After Zamir's departure, visiting his family gradually became something much deeper than a social obligation. It became a

responsibility. Rifat and I visited Rafi and the children on several occasions. We wanted them to know that although Zamir had physically departed, the friendships he had nurtured throughout his life had not disappeared with him. His mother-in-law, whose quiet strength had supported both Rafi and Zamir throughout the long years of illness, continued to stand firmly beside the family. Her presence brought stability to a household that had endured years of suffering before finally facing the greatest loss of all.

On other occasions, we visited as a group of old friends. Those gatherings naturally centered around Chacha. We would sit together, remember Zamir, and allow the conversation to flow gently from one memory to another.

Over time I came to understand something important. The purpose of these visits was never charity. Zamir's family, by the grace of God, possesses dignity, self-respect, and the ability to look after itself. Our visits were about something far more valuable. They were about reminding them that Zamir had earned something that death could not take away. He had earned enduring friendships.

If our presence offers even a small measure of comfort to Rafi, to the children, to Chacha, or to the rest of the family, then I feel we are merely continuing a responsibility that Zamir himself would have fulfilled had our roles been reversed.

Watching the family gradually come to terms with God's will has also brought me a measure of peace. Grief never disappears. It simply learns to live quietly beside hope.

The Victory Beyond Death

Cancer eventually claimed Zamir's body. It weakened his strength. It tested his endurance. It altered his appearance.

Finally, it separated him physically from all of us who loved him. But there were many things it could never conquer. It could not take away his humour. Even in pain, he searched for reasons to smile. It could not erase his stories. Those impossible tales continue to entertain us whenever old friends meet. It could not diminish his philosophy. His ideas continue guiding many of my own thoughts and conversations. It could not destroy his friendships. If anything, they became stronger after his departure. Above all, it could not erase his influence. Influence does not reside in the body. It resides in the lives one has touched.

Whenever friends gather, whenever someone helps another without expecting recognition, whenever compassion triumphs over indifference, whenever laughter unexpectedly appears in the middle of difficulty, I feel Zamir's presence among us.

Disease defeated his body. It never defeated the values by which he lived. Perhaps that is why, even today, I do not think of him as someone who has disappeared. I think of him as someone whose physical journey ended, while his influence quietly continues through the lives of those fortunate enough to have known him.

The Last Scene

Many months have passed since that cold January afternoon when we laid you to rest beneath the snow-covered earth of Hutmurrah. Life, as it always does, has resumed its rhythm. The University remains busy. Students continue to arrive with dreams in their eyes. Meetings are held. Lectures are delivered. Files continue to accumulate on my table. People still smile. The world has not stopped. Yet, every now and then, it pauses quietly within me.

One afternoon, without informing anyone, I decide to visit you. The familiar road winds through the Valley exactly as it always has. The mountains stand unmoved. The Lidder continues its timeless journey, whispering the same melodies that once accompanied our youth. Nothing in nature appears to acknowledge that one of its finest sons no longer walks these paths.

I park the car and begin walking slowly towards the graveyard. There is no hurry. There never was. The air is still. Only the occasional rustling of leaves disturbs the silence. I reach your grave. For a long moment, I simply stand there. No words come. Perhaps they are unnecessary. I gently place my hand upon the cool earth beneath which you now rest. A thousand memories pass before me without asking permission. Pappu's Dhaba. Room No. 271. The endless nights of cards. The train journeys. Your impossible stories. Your laughter. Your philosophy. Your unwavering faith. Your concern for everyone except yourself. The hospital corridors. The shoulder massage in the ICU. The promise I could never

keep. Everything returns. I realise that I have not come here to mourn you. I have come to thank you.

Thank you for teaching me that friendship is one of God's greatest gifts. Thank you for showing me that kindness is never wasted. Thank you for proving that a life need not be long to become meaningful. Thank you for making an ordinary boy from Kashmir richer than he could ever have imagined, not with wealth, but with memories.

The silence between us feels strangely familiar. For the first time, I understand that friendship does not require words. It only requires presence. And somehow... you are still present. I smile. The same smile that once followed one of your beautifully exaggerated stories. I gently brush away a few fallen leaves from the grave. Then, almost without thinking, I speak the words that had echoed through the corridors of Muhammad Habib Hall so many years ago. The words that only you could answer. Softly, almost as a whisper, I say,

"Zambhatta... I have come."

The Valley remains silent. But my heart hears your laughter.

I turn around and begin walking back.

Not alone.

Never alone.....

“If Your Name is Missing....”

Memory is faithful to the heart, but imperfect in detail. If your name has escaped these pages despite your place in Zamir's life, please accept my heartfelt apology. Your absence from this book is only an omission of memory, never an omission of gratitude. Every person who loved him has, knowingly or unknowingly, contributed to preserving his legacy.

Glossary

Abba – Abba is an affectionate and respectful word for father, widely used in Urdu. However, Abba often conveys not only the relationship but also warmth, respect, authority, and emotional closeness

Alig. – It refers to a person who has studied at or graduated from Aligarh Muslim University (AMU). It is an identity proudly used by AMU alumni.

Andey Ki Burji – An Indian dish made from scrambled eggs cooked with ingredients such as onions, tomatoes, green chillies, spices, and sometimes coriander.

Baba Bamuddin^(RA) – Baba Bamuddin Rishi^(RA), also written Baba Bam-ud-Din or Buma Rishi, was an important fifteenth-century saint of Kashmir's indigenous Rishi-Sufi tradition. According to Kashmiri tradition, he was originally known as Bama Sadh and belonged to a Kashmiri Pandit family of Bumzoo (Bumzu), near Mattan in Anantnag district. He is described as having been a Hindu religious priest before meeting Sheikh Noor-ud-Din Noorani^(RA), popularly known as Nund Rishi or Sheikh-ul-Alam^(RA). After prolonged spiritual discussions with Sheikh Noor-ud-Din^(RA), he embraced Islam, became his disciple and received the name Bamuddin.

Baraat – Baraat is the ceremonial wedding procession in which the groom, accompanied by his family, relatives, and friends, travels to the bride's home or wedding venue for the marriage ceremony.

Baraati – The groom's companions are called baraatis.

Bijbehara – Bijbehara, locally pronounced Vejibyor or Vejibror, is one of the oldest and historically important towns of South Kashmir. It is located in Anantnag district, approximately 7 kilometres north of Anantnag town and about 50 kilometers south of Srinagar.

Dada – Dada refers to someone who exercises considerable power, authority or dominance within a locality or group.

Dal Makhani – Dal Makhani is a rich and creamy lentil dish originating from the Punjab region of the Indian subcontinent. Its name literally means “buttery lentils”: dal means lentils, while makhani means buttery or prepared with butter.

Dhaba – A dhaba is a small, informal roadside restaurant serving freshly cooked, affordable food. Dhabas originated along the highways of northern India, where they provided meals and rest to truck drivers and travellers. They later became common near markets, railway stations, universities and hostels.

Hazrat Nizamuddin Auliya (RA) – Hazrat Nizamuddin Auliya (RA) was one of the most revered Sufi saints of the Indian subcontinent. He belonged to the Chishti spiritual order, which emphasised love, compassion, humility, service to humanity and closeness to God. The Dargah of Hazrat Nizamuddin Auliya is one of the most important Sufi shrines in India. Located in the Nizamuddin area of Delhi, it contains the tomb of the saint

Hazrat Sakhi Zainuddin Wali (RA) – Hazrat Sakhi Zainuddin Wali (RA), was one of the principal disciples of Hazrat Sheikh Nooruddin Noorani (RA) (Nund Rishi/Sheikh-ul-Alam) and an important saint of Kashmir’s Rishi-Sufi tradition. He lived during the fifteenth century and established his spiritual center at Aishmuqam, near Pahalgam in Anantnag district.

Insaaniyat – Insaaniyat is an Urdu word meaning humanity, humaneness, compassion and humane conduct. It comes from insaan, meaning a human being.

Jamalpur – Jamalpur is a densely populated residential and commercial locality adjoining Aligarh Muslim University, particularly the side associated with Medical Road, Anupshahr Road and the Jawaharlal Nehru Medical College area.

Jugaad – Jugaad is a widely used South Asian expression meaning an improvised, resourceful solution to a problem, especially when proper resources, time or official arrangements are unavailable.

Jugaadu – Jugaadu is used for a person who is skilled at jugaad, someone who can find an inventive, quick or inexpensive solution to almost any practical problem.

Kaddu – Kaddu is the common Urdu and Hindi word for pumpkin. Depending on the region, it may also refer broadly to certain varieties of squash or gourd.

Kashmiriyat – Kashmiriyat broadly refers to the distinctive cultural identity, shared heritage and collective spirit of the people of Kashmir. It is derived from Kashmir and denotes “Kashmiriness”, the qualities, values and traditions associated with being Kashmiri.

Lal Salaam – Lal Salaam literally means “Red Salute.” It is a greeting and slogan traditionally used by communists, socialists, trade unionists, farmers’ organisations and other left-wing political movements in South Asia.

Lidder – Lidder, also spelled Liddar, generally refers to the Lidder River, one of the most beautiful and important rivers of South Kashmir. It flows through the Lidder Valley and Pahalgam in Anantnag district before joining the River Jhelum.

Lauki – Lauki is bottle gourd, a light-green vegetable commonly cooked as lauki ki sabzi.

Maghrib – Maghrib is an Arabic word meaning “the west” or “sunset.” In Islamic usage, it most commonly refers to the obligatory prayer performed immediately after sunset.

Martand Sun Temple – The Martand Sun Temple is one of Kashmir’s most magnificent ancient monuments. Situated on a high karewa plateau near Mattan, roughly 8–10 kilometres from Anantnag town, its ruins command a panoramic view across the Kashmir Valley. The temple was dedicated to Surya, the Sun God. Martand is a Sanskrit name for the solar deity, often interpreted as the sun born from the cosmic egg. The surviving monumental complex is generally attributed to King Lalitaditya Muktapida of Kashmir’s Karkota dynasty, who ruled during the eighth century CE. Some historical accounts suggest that an earlier shrine already existed at the site and that Lalitaditya greatly expanded it into the imposing complex whose remains survive today. The Archaeological Survey of India identifies it as an eighth-century temple constructed under Lalitaditya.

Mattree – Mattree is a thin, round, mildly salted and characteristically crisp bread. It is prepared from leavened flour dough, rolled into flat discs and baked slowly. Its texture lies somewhere between a flatbread, a crisp bun and a large savoury biscuit. Mattree remains a familiar breakfast and tea-time food in AMU’s residential halls, canteens and roadside dhabas. Served with butter or enclosing a hot omelette, it sustained generations of students and remained, for many Aligs, a taste of home long after they had left the University.

Murshid – Murshid is an Arabic and Urdu word meaning guide, teacher or one who shows the right path. It comes from a root associated with guidance, wisdom and right conduct. In the Sufi tradition, a murshid is a spiritual guide who trains and directs a seeker on the path towards closeness to God. The disciple or spiritual seeker is called a murid.

Niyaz – Niyaz in the context of charity and religious practice, refers to food, money or another offering given for the sake of Allah, often with the intention that its spiritual reward be conveyed to a deceased person, saint or other revered individual.

Noon Chai – Noon Chai is Kashmir's traditional salty pink tea. In Kashmiri, noon means salt, so the name does not refer to midday. It is also called Sheer Chai, Gulabi Chai or Kashmiri pink tea. More than a beverage, noon chai is part of everyday Kashmiri social life. It is served to family members, neighbours and guests and appears at weddings, religious gatherings and condolence meetings. Sitting together over repeated cups often creates space for conversation, news and companionship.

Numaish – Numaish means an exhibition or public display. In Aligarh the word usually refers to the city's celebrated annual fair: the Rajkiya Audyogik Evam Krishi Pradarshini, or State Industrial and Agricultural Exhibition. The Aligarh Numaish began in 1880, initially as a horse exhibition. Raja Har Narayan Singh reportedly suggested developing it into the Aligarh District Fair. In 1886, it was renamed the Industrial and Agricultural Exhibition, while the construction of Darbar Hall in 1914 gave it a more organised institutional form. An important link with AMU history is that Sir Syed Ahmad Khan and Shibli Nomani reportedly participated in a theatrical performance at the fair to raise funds for the Muhammadan Anglo-Oriental College, which later became AMU. The Numaish is held at the permanent Numaish Ground in Aligarh, generally during the winter months of January and February.

Phenkna, Phenku – Phenkna literally means "to throw." In informal North Indian, and particularly student, slang, however, it means to exaggerate, boast, bluff or tell highly embellished stories with great confidence. A person who habitually does this may be called a phenku.

Shri Amarnath Ji Yatra – The Shri Amarnath Ji Yatra is an annual Hindu pilgrimage to the sacred Amarnath Cave in the Kashmir Himalayas. The cave is situated at an altitude of approximately 3,888 metres, at the farther end of the Lidder Valley. Inside the cave, water dripping from its roof freezes and gradually forms a naturally occurring ice stalagmite. Devotees worship this formation as the Shiva Lingam, representing Lord Shiva. The pilgrimage is mentioned in old Kashmiri religious and historical traditions. One widely known account associates the cave's rediscovery with Buta Malik, a Muslim shepherd. According to the legend, a holy man gave him a bag of coal that later turned into gold. When Malik returned to thank him, he found the cave at the place where the holy man had disappeared.

Purani Chungi - Chungi, more precisely Purani Chungi, is a well-known entrance and neighbourhood adjoining Aligarh Muslim University. It lies on the Anupshahr Road side of the campus,

Soot Mill – Soot Mill is a well-known landmark on G.T. Road/Delhi Road, on what was traditionally the north-western outskirts of Aligarh. The Hindi word soot means yarn or spun thread. The locality took its name from a mill established there for the production or processing of yarn.

Tasveer Mahal – Tasveer Mahal was one of Aligarh's best-known single-screen cinemas and an important landmark in the social life of generations of AMU students. Its name literally means "Palace of Pictures." The theatre was constructed near the Civil Court sometime after 1950 and was initially known as Hindustan Theatre. It later became famous as Tasveer Mahal. Contemporary recollections describe it as one of Aligarh's most modern cinemas of its time. Tasveer Mahal stood relatively close to the AMU campus, one account places it roughly 500 meters away, and therefore attracted large numbers of students.

Ula Tawwa – Ula tawa literally means an “inverted griddle.” It is a large iron tawa turned upside down so that bread is cooked on its rounded, convex outer surface.