

# SABIR'S HOUR

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GREAT ARTISTS ARE CREATED BY TRADITIONS. HOWEVER, GENIUSES CREATE TRADITIONS THEMSELVES AND THE PATH THEY OPEN SUBSEQUENTLY TURNS INTO A SCHOOL AND MODEL FOR HUNDREDS AND THOUSANDS OF PEOPLE, AND SOMETIMES, A WHOLE NATION AND MANY OTHER NATIONS.

**A**zerbaijani poet Mirza Alakbar Sabir Tahirzadeh was born in the city of Shamakhi, which maintained the ancient cultural traditions not only of his homeland, but also of the entire Middle East. It was 1862, and six or seven years later, this kid was supposed to go to school. The school was not a new European-oriented school. Just like several centuries before, Azerbaijani children were educated in religious schools, and since everything was based on well-established and stable traditions in their environment, the school where this child was supposed to be educated was able to nurture at best an excellent cleric.

Alakbar was not only a child of par-

ents who were ordinary people, but also of the environment in which he was raised. The family in which he was born, the environment in which he was raised, the school where he was educated, the books he read and the knowledge he acquired could have prepared him to be the head of a Muslim family in the future.

However, time turned him into a genius that led his nation and country.

He did not fit into the 19<sup>th</sup> century in which he lived most of his life and the 20<sup>th</sup> century of which he saw only 11 years, and there was no doubt that he would not fit into the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Sabir spoke everyone's language and used everyone's words in Azerbaijan, but he focused on the subjects





that no-one had mentioned before. And he mentioned them in a way that no-one had done before.

In an environment where respect for traditions and observance of canons was almost the norm, he was a rare exception. But when we compare Sabir with the geniuses of other countries and peoples, we see that such geniuses are all alike regardless of the country where they were born and the people they belong to.

Based on his literary education, Sabir was supposed to write poems about love, nature, the world and human beauties. Since he was a talented creator, he could have done it more vividly than his contemporaries. In fact, he did write such poems and proved that he could write this way and be greater than not only his contemporaries, but also many of his predecessors in this style.

However, history assigned a different mission to him. Though he was supposed to be one of the hundreds of lyricists, he became an unmatched satirist.

The fate of a satirist has always been difficult at all times of history and everywhere in the world. As for the environment in which Sabir lived, it was doubly difficult.

His pen was against leftovers from the past and the backwardness that got in the way of development. His pen wanted to see people's inner world and the environment in which they lived as free. He wanted his native Azerbaijan and countrymen to make progress and be one of the leading nations in the world. He wanted Azerbaijan, which is located at the crossroads of the East and the West and Europe and Asia, to be not just an Eastern country, but also to be-

come European, to remain loyal to its national roots and to adopt the positive trends coming from Europe.

It was impossible to make a living by writing poems and provide for your family, and Sabir had chosen a profession as his livelihood. He made and sold soap in order to provide for his large family.

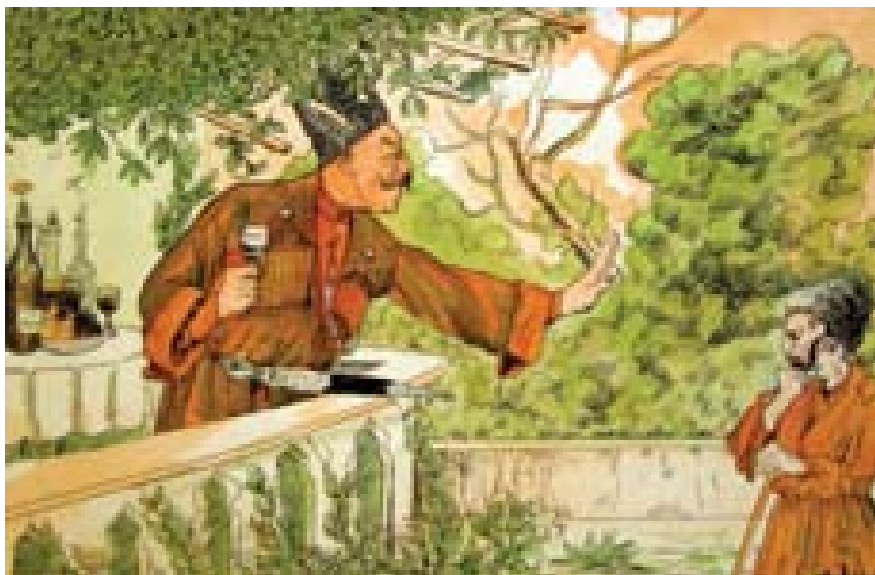
People needed soap for washing.

Sabir immediately sold all the soap he had made.

The environment in which he was raised and the religion this environment professed urged people to be clean, and society had accepted this.

However, Sabir wrote his poems to do the job that soap did. Sabir wrote his poems in order for people to read them and clear their inner world and for society to become purer and healthier from a spiritual point of view.

But this "soap" had no customers.



Even if it did, there were very few of them.

Because he did not describe or say sweet words, he criticized, exposed and laughed with irony.

(People normally never liked this at all times in history and anywhere in the world).

Also, Sabir did not consider himself an Azerbaijani poet only and did not feel responsible only to his own people as a thinker and writer.

He was an eastern poet. The 19<sup>th</sup> century was about to end and the 20<sup>th</sup> century was about to start, a new time with new requirements was coming and the great artist was appealing to the entire East. His thoughts covered a vast area from the Caucasus to Central Asia, from Iran to India and from Russia to Europe. His criticisms targeted not just his close environment – his poems touched upon all the serious public-political and spiritual problems of neighboring and distant countries.

He made his soap, taught little children at school, took up journalism publishing his critical articles in the press which had just appeared in Azerbaijan and the Caucasus, and quickly expressed his attitude to the most important issues of world politics and turned them into poems. He interfered in the affairs of India, Iran,

Russia and the Ottoman Empire, tried to “make them wiser” and to awaken people in those countries.

But he did not say “Wake up!” like a passionate speaker or hot-tempered revolutionary. He said “Sleep!” with irony and sang a lullaby saying “sleep, my little one, sleep and become backward” and “I don’t want anyone to wake up those who are sleeping”.

He was a hard-working person, but never said “work hard, love to work and create”, because he realized that few people listened to advice. On behalf of self-satisfied people who suddenly became rich and were spiritually poor despite their wealth, he seemed to be deriding workers, farmers, students, publishers, intellectuals and those who served their people.

This way of speaking was unexpected and startling. You can wake up those who are sleeping more easily not by stroking and lulling them, but by pinching and frightening them.

Mirza Alakbar adopted the poetic penname of “Sabir”.

Sabir means “patient, tolerant”. But during his lifetime, he never tolerated injustice and inequality. He did not remain indifferent to the shortcomings he saw and included them in his poems.

He also had a different pseudonym

– “Aglar-gulayan” (Crying and laughing). This is an accurate phrase directly related to the essence of his creative work.

He described what he saw with laughter. But deep down he cried, because his wish and mission was to lead his people and country to the progress they deserved and make them live happily.

**He who loves people is in love with liberty,**

Sabir loved people and wanted to see them as free, and therefore, he was confident that he who loved freedom and independence would definitely love people, and wrote with confidence:

**Yes, when there is liberty, there is humanity.**

Do his words apply only to the Azerbaijani people?

These two lines of the immortal humanist Sabir are important for every country and every people at all times and will always remain important.

In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, Azerbaijan was entering a totally new stage in its development. The capital Baku was an oil-rich city and was gradually becoming the focus of attention in the world. The industry was developing, the city was growing, construction and renovation work was under way, and a number of positive trends of the new time were taking root in Baku, which maintained closed contacts with Europe.

At the very beginning of the century, Azerbaijan was going through a media boom – dozens of new newspapers and journals opened one after another.

Although cinema had just appeared in France in 1895, this new art was already loved in Baku, and several local films were made from 1898.

The first operetta of the East appeared in Azerbaijan in 1908 and people who were used to eastern mugams listened to symphonic music concerts and Europeans operas and

operettas with pleasure in Baku.

In tolerant Baku, Catholics and Orthodox Christians had their own churches. Muslims went to their own mosques, while Jews prayed every day in synagogues located near mosques.

In 1906, Molla Nasraddin magazine also joined the growing ranks of newspapers and magazines in Azerbaijan, a country which was able to keep abreast of and live in harmony with the new life and new time.

Molla Nasraddin is a folklore char-

acter whom about 40 peoples in the Middle East regard as part of their folklore. From its inception, Molla Nasraddin belonged to the entire East.

In fact, this quality has always been characteristic of Azerbaijani intellectuals, literary critics and scholars. They believed that they belonged to the entire region and addressed this large area. In the 12<sup>th</sup> century, the genius Azerbaijani thinker Nizami Ganjavi thought in the same way and among his characters are representatives of almost all the civilized peoples of the time.

Centuries passed, but this tradition lived on. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the enlightener Mirza Fatali Akhundzadeh also united the East and the West in his works, raised problems of a vast geographic area, considering not just Azerbaijan but the entire region as his homeland and was not indifferent to their problems and concerns.

numerous people in the Caucasus, Iran, Central Asia, India and Russia in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century who had subscribed to Molla Nasraddin magazine, which was founded by the prominent Azerbaijani writers and enlighteners Jalil Mammadguluzadeh and Omar Faig Nemanzadeh, with which most of the talented writers of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century cooperated and of which Mirza Alakbar Sabir was one of the most active writers. They looked forward to every edition of the magazine, saw



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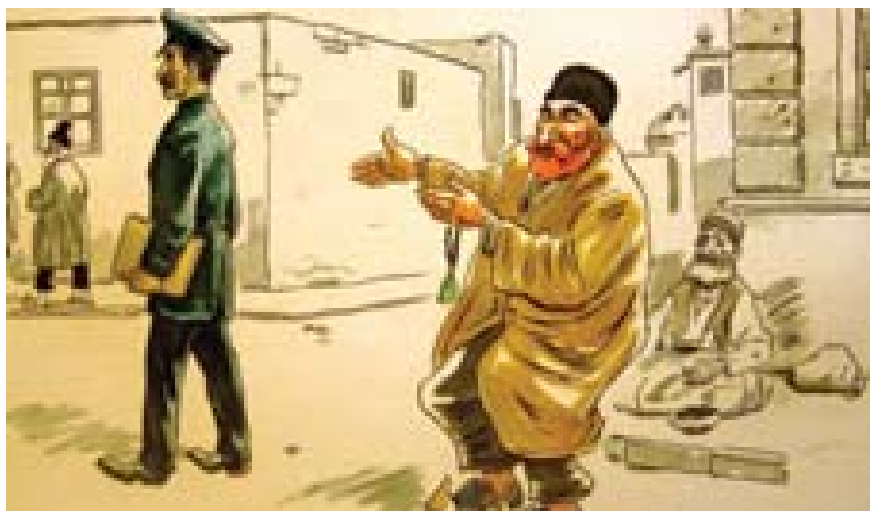
Sabir also had the same thinking, and so did Huseyn Javid, who worked after Sabir and was called the Shakespeare of the East, and many Azerbaijani intellectuals who lived before and after them.

If it is promoted at the appropriate level, everyone will accept that Molla Nasraddin was one of the most remarkable phenomena of world media, journalism and satire. There were

their desires, wishes and lives there, read its articles from the very beginning to the very end and handed it over to others.

They distinguished, highly valued and respected Sabir as one of the most active authors who created Molla Nasraddin, determined the image of this magazine and turned it into a common asset for so many peoples.

Sabir taught at junior schools in



Baku and Baku villages, educated oil workers and had students who directly confronted him. But unbeknown to himself, he nurtured so many followers in Azerbaijan and neighboring countries and in so many regions, cities and villages where Molla Nasraddin was distributed. They regarded Sabir, whom they had never seen, as their

teacher, and remaining in Baku, Shakhmaki and Azerbaijan, Sabir crossed the borders, managed to become international and turn into a school.

In one of his poems, Sabir likened himself to a big mountain standing in the sea.

**I am like a big mountain that stands in the sea.**

As a poet, his expressions were to the point, and literary solutions were accurate in this poem just like in his every line.

He was really in a choppy sea. He was in the middle of the sea, not on its coast. He came under waves of attacks and accusations from all sides. Although Sabir looked weak externally, he was so strong and had so much exceptional internal power that he could bravely stand up to all these attacks.

In one poem, he admitted an important truth that showed his world outlook, philosophy and mission as a personality.

In response to those who told him to “shut up”, he said “Yes, Sir, I will shut up!”

To those who did not want him to see what was happening around, he said: “Ok, I will close my eyes, and to those who told him not to hear, he promised to “close his ears”.

But he could not promise only one

thing: "I will not speak, I will not hear, I will pretend that I am blind, but I cannot fail to realize and understand!"

The only problem with realization and understanding is that after understanding things, you cannot remain silent, dumb and deaf.

Sabir understood, felt and realized, which is why he was never blind, dumb and deaf and always told and wrote the truth.

More than a century has passed since the death of Sabir.

He is still speaking, having his say and criticizing, and as was the case at the time, not everyone agrees with him.

Sometimes even among the most patriotic people, there are those who disagree with Sabir, saying: "Why did he criticize us so much and write only about negative things?"

We should not forget that only great people and great nations can look at their shortcomings critically with a smile on their face and without any inferiority complex.

Unlike false "patriots", Sabir sincerely loved his nation and homeland and was not only a good son of his nation and homeland, but also treated his nation and homeland as his dear child and tried to treat its pain and illnesses rather than hide them.

Sabir's living words and views are looking at things in the same way as he did in his lifetime.

Although Sabir had a difficult and eventful life, he was a happy person.

He was happy, but failed to be happy to the very end and was a person and poet who had a constantly restless life.

Because he is always modern.

For this reason, he was a creator who was happy, but at the same time, failed to be happy to the very end.

He is happy because although decades have passed, he lives, his poems are being read and his memory lives. But he is also a person and poet who was not totally happy because most of



the shortcomings in people and society, which he wanted to eliminate in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, still live.

How can the restive spirit of the poet rest and become comfortable until humanity is totally rescued from them?!

Salmaz Mumtaz, one of the most interesting persons in Azerbaijan in the 20<sup>th</sup> century and a connoisseur and researcher of Azerbaijani and Eastern literature, who was eliminated by the political regime as a victim of the wave of state terror and terrible repression against intellectuals and dissidents in the Soviet Union in the 1930s, once went to Shamakhi to meet with Sabir in order to put questions to the poet, get detailed answers and write about him.

Surprised by the fact that Sabir often looked at the clock and thinking that he wanted to end the conversation as soon as possible, Salman Mumtaz recorded that the sensitive poet realized my surprise and said: "You might think that I am looking at the clock because of you. No. You know that I make soap. I have put the kettle on the fire, and it should be taken off

the fire at a certain time. I am looking at the clock not to miss that time."

Sabir's words on the eternal fire of time are always relevant.

Those words will never separate from the fire.

Sabir's clock is the clock of the land of which he was a loyal citizen, of the nation of which he was a favorite child and of humanity of which he was a child who crossed all the borders without a visa.

He has long gone beyond the framework of belonging to one people.

Sabir will turn into a monument and be erected in many cities around the world.

Sabir will be translated into many languages, will speak many languages he has not spoken yet and many people will discover this planet of words and thoughts for themselves.

We will continue to try to synchronize our incorrect and slow watches with Sabir's correct and accurate clock.

Sabir's eternal clock continues to work. ❀

Paintings by Najafgulu.

Mirza-Alekper Sabir (Tair-Zade)

**Ploughman**

Don't wail, don't cry, don't pretend you're unhappy, ploughman!  
 You old, sly fox, you won't catch us napping, ploughman!  
 Under some pretext or other, daily you stand at my door;  
 Don't beg, don't ask me, don't stretch out your hand at my door!  
 I'm sick of seeing the whole of your clan at my door!  
 Don't get ideas, don't wear out my patience, ploughman!  
 Be dumb and obey me while I am gracious, ploughman!  
 If the year brought you peasants no gain, what do I care?  
 If there was no rain and no crop of grain, what do I care?  
 If drought spoiled the rice and barley again, what do I care?  
 If last year your debt with your blanket you paid, what do I care?  
 Now carry your rug to the market to sell, ploughman!  
 Be dumb and obey, for assistance don't yell, ploughman!  
 Don't try to explain that from hunger you're dying, wretch!  
 You'll never persuade me, so no use trying, wretch!  
 Pay what you're due—don't tell me you can't—lying wretch!  
 Bring me barley and wheat, and rice, ploughman,  
 Or I'll take off your skin in a trice, ploughman!  
 Swear as much as you like that you can't—I'll have it!  
 By Allah almighty, I'll get what I'm due—I'll have it!  
 You'll be whipped and flogged black and blue—I'll have it!  
 Don't forget yourself, pay your arrears, ploughman,  
 Don't overreach yourself, don't spill vain tears, ploughman!  
 Your job is to plough; eat millet yourself; give me wheat, ploughman!  
 As long as it's softer than stone—any stuff you can eat, ploughman.  
 If you don't have water, their's plenty of snow to heat, ploughman!  
 You have never seen butter or cream or meat, ploughman,  
 You're used to a simple life, like a beast, ploughman!  
 Haven't I always declared that I want good relations?  
 All an aristocrat wants is leisure and relaxation,  
 Idling, gambling, drinking and eating without cessation.  
 Such is a gentleman's life by tradition, ploughman;  
 It was Allah appointed to us such an earthly mission, ploughman!

Translated by *Dorian Rottenberg*



## To the Workers of Baku

The wheel of fortune's turning in a new way  
nowadays; The working men begin to think they're human nowadays.  
They poke their noses everywhere and always nowadays.  
What are we coming to when working men breathe freer nowadays?  
They fight for rights and disobey the *overseer* nowadays!  
The wheel of fortune's turning in a new way nowadays;  
The working men begin to think they're human nowadays.  
Now tell me, why do you demand respect, a simple worker?  
Why raise your voice, and what can you expect, a simple worker? !  
All you should do is serve the rich, though they neglect a simple worker.  
Well-paid or not, you must be gratefully subdued, you simple worker,  
But the wheel of fortune's turning in a new way nowadays;  
The working men begin to think they're human nowadays,  
Don't plunge yourself into distress, take care, beware, rich man;  
If any worker speaks the truth, don't give him ear, rich man!  
Don't let the poor breathe freely—don't you dare, rich man!  
Don't yield, don't budge an inch, don't give in anywhere,  
rich man! For the wheel of fortune's turning in a new way  
nowadays; The working men begin to think they're human nowadays!  
Don't pay attention, even though they may complain, the poor.  
They've no expensive clothes nor homes—they've got no brain, the poor.  
No property, no riches do they ever gain, the poor.  
All they possess are ragged coats, shoes torn, clothes  
plain, the poor. But the wheel of fortune's turning in a new way  
nowadays; The working men begin to think they're human nowadays.  
If you intend to be both free and merry in this world,  
Just think about yourself, don't have a worry in this world.  
If you would have no load of woe to carry in this world,  
Forget that other people's lots are sorry in this world!  
Yet the wheel of fortune's turning in a new way  
nowadays; The working men begin to think they're human nowadays.  
To think about the plight of your poor nation? By no means!  
To sooth poor orphans and to stop their lamentation? By no means!  
To help the poor, to give them consolation? By no means!  
Yet fortune's wheel is turning in a new way nowadays;  
The working men begin to think they're human nowadays!

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