

# AKBAR & BIRBAL

TALES OF HUMOUR



MONISHA MUKUNDAN

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TAPAS GUHA



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**To  
Muk  
Govind and Vasundhara**

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# Introduction

Akbar, the third Mughal emperor, had many talented and clever people at his court. Among them was a man called Raja Birbal, who was a special favourite of the emperor because of his quick wit. Raja Birbal wrote poetry, and Akbar gave him the title of Poet Laureate. He liked to have Birbal near him, because he enjoyed his conversation and his clever way with words.

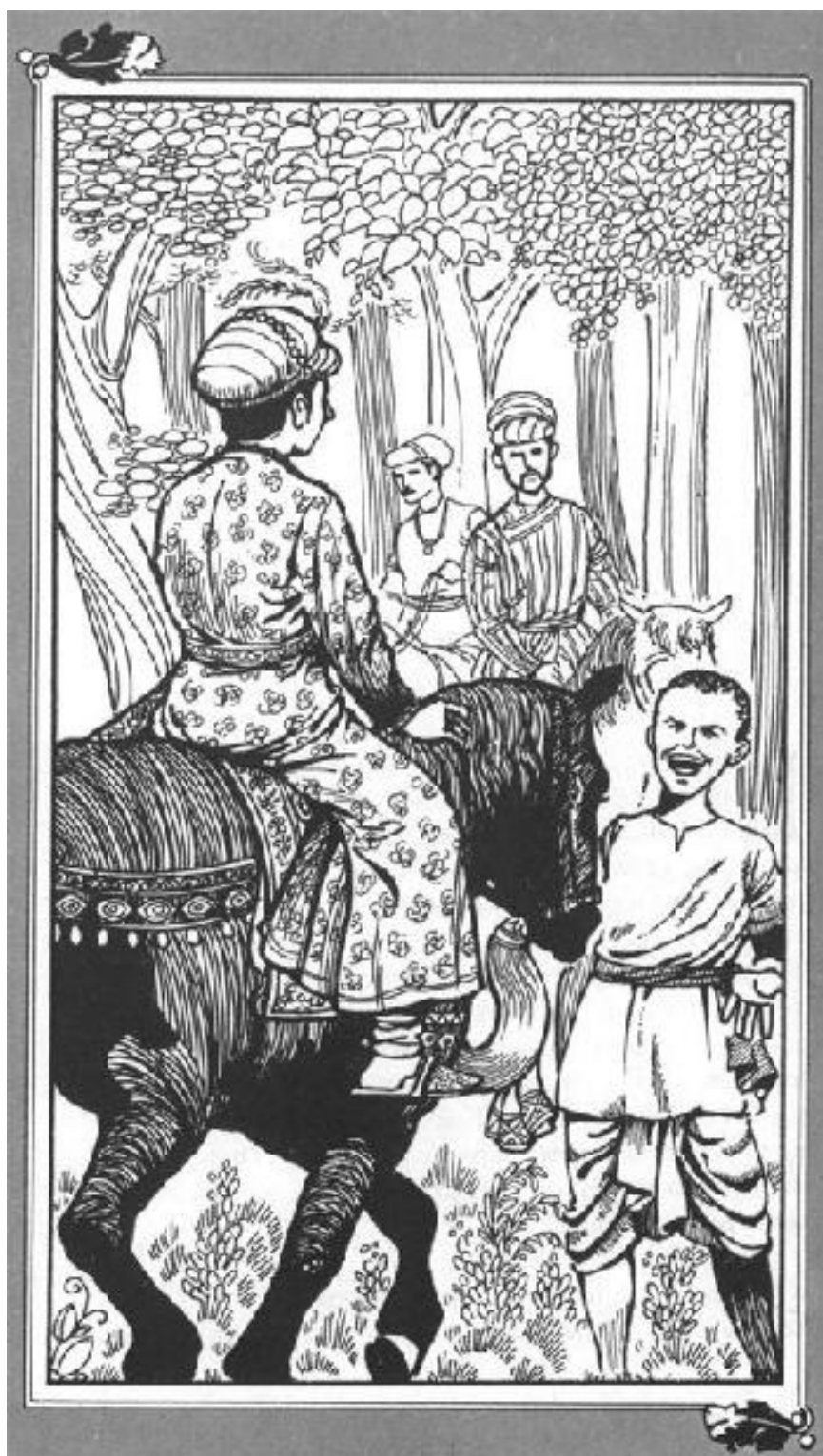
In the four hundred years since Emperor Akbar ruled India and since Birbal's poems and sayings and ready answers made the great emperor laugh and think, many stories have been told about them. Some may be true, many are not. They are folk tales, or stories that people have passed on from one generation to the next, by telling them again and again. Storytellers have added to the stories and changed them. Nevertheless, they remain popular because they are fun to hear and to read and they make us laugh. And, sometimes, they make us think about what is true and good in our lives.

## How They Met

Emperor Akbar loved to go hunting. Even as a child, he would run away from his lessons and his tutors in order to go riding and hunting. When he grew up, he was a better rider and a more fearless hunter than any of his courtiers. One day, chasing a tiger, Akbar and a few brave soldiers rode so fast that they left all the others behind. They had gone a long distance from the royal capital at Agra and, as evening came, they realised that they were lost. They went on slowly. They were hot, dusty, and tired. Presently, they reached a place where three roads met. "Ah, at last", the emperor exclaimed. Then, turning to his men, he asked, "Which way shall we go? Which road goes to Agra?"

The roads all looked the same. It was hard to tell which road led to Agra. The men looked at each other. They looked at the road. Then they looked at the dust beneath their horses' hooves. Nobody said a word.





Just then, a young man came walking down one of the roads. Glad to have something to do, the Emperor's men called out to him and ordered him to come forward. He did so, looking up at the richly-dressed hunters with bright, curious eyes. "Tell us, boy", said Emperor Akbar, "which road goes to Agra?"

The young man began to smile. "Huzoor, everybody knows that roads cannot move. How can this road go to Agra, or go anywhere else?" he said, and he chuckled delightedly at his own joke.

There was absolute silence. The emperor stared down at the youth. His soldiers held their breath. They knew the emperor's temper. Not one of them dared to say a single word. "People travel", the boy went on, not seeming to notice the ominous silence, "roads, don't, do they?"

"No, they don't", the emperor cried suddenly and began to laugh. Nervously, his soldiers began to laugh too. The youth ignored them and continued to look up at the emperor with twinkling eyes.

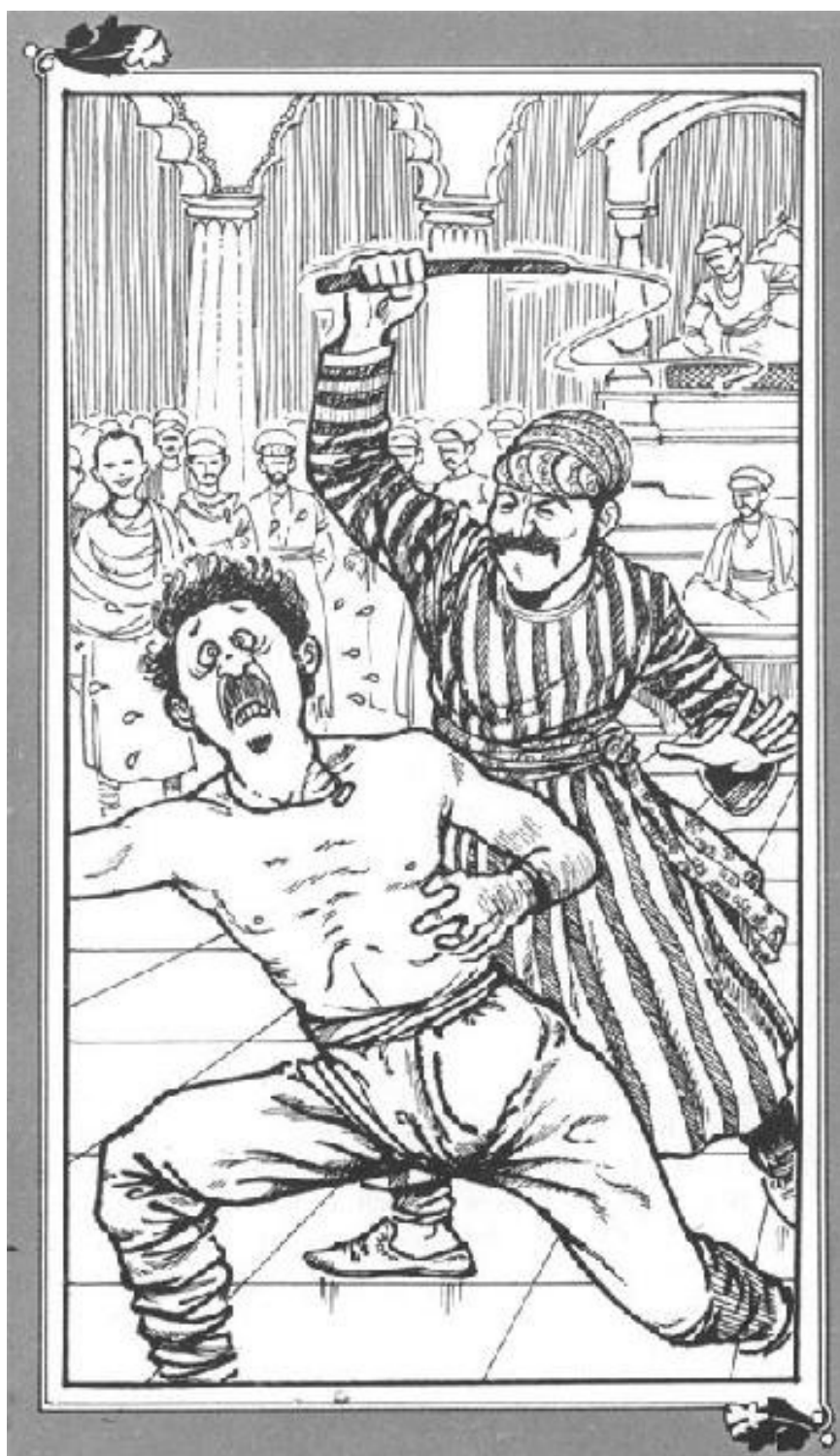
"What's your name?" Emperor Akbar asked the young man. "Mahesh Das", he replied. "And what is your name, Huzoor?" The emperor pulled off an enormous emerald ring which he wore on his hand. Leaning down, he gave it to the young man.

"You are speaking to Akbar, Emperor of Hindustan", he said. "We need fearless young men such as you at our court, Mahesh Das. Bring this ring with you when you come, and I shall recognise and remember you. And now, show us the road we must take in order to go to Agra."

Mahesh Das bowed low and pointed towards the capital. The emperor turned his horse and galloped away, followed by his soldiers. Mahesh Das watched until a bend in the road hid them from his sight.

## Mahesh Das and the Sentry

A few years later, Mahesh Das decided to travel to the emperor's court at Agra to seek his fortune. He had finished his studies and was ready to see the world. When he arrived at Agra, he walked through the bazaar and past the great havelis in which the nobles lived. It was all very confusing to a young man who had spent all his life in the village. But Mahesh Das was no ordinary individual. He held on to the cloth bag in which he carried the emperor's ring and he looked around him with interest. It was evening by the time he reached the massive fort on the bank of the river Yamuna in which the Emperor of Hindustan lived. Even though he was a brave and resolute young man, Mahesh Das felt very small as he neared the enormous studded gate of the fort. The huge wooden gate was open and important-looking people hurried in and out. Two guards stood outside, holding spears in their strong, muscular hands. Mahesh Das took a deep breath and then going up to one of the soldiers, he said, "I have come to meet the emperor. He invited me to come to court."



"Ho!" said the soldier, looking at the young man's dusty feet and simple cotton clothes. "So the emperor invited you to his durbar, did he? To the Diwan-i-Khas, no doubt, the Hall of Private Audience, where he meets high-ranking nobles!" A few passersby stopped to watch, smiling at the simple village lad's discomfiture.

"Perhaps", Mahesh Das answered boldly, keeping his voice steady even though he felt very frightened. "And I have his ring to prove it." From his bag, he pulled out the richly worked ring which Emperor Akbar had given him. "Oh", said the guard, in sudden doubt.

"That's no ordinary ring", said a pundit who had stopped to watch. "You'd better let the young man in."

"We-ell", said the guard, sorry to have lost an opportunity to bully and to tease. "I'll let you go in on one condition. When you see the emperor, he is sure to give a gift. I'll let you in if you swear to give me half of whatever the emperor gives you."

People standing nearby began to murmur. They knew the guard and his greedy ways, and wondered how the young man would deal with him. But to their surprise, Mahesh Das agreed at once, without even trying to argue or bargain. The guard said again softly, threateningly, "Don't forget, or I'll make you very, very sorry."

Mahesh Das nodded. "I won't forget", he said, and he walked into the fort.

Emperor Akbar was in the Diwan-i-Am, the Hall of Public Audience. Lamps lit up the carvings on the wall and the rich carpets which were spread on the floor. The great pillared hall was full of courtiers dressed in the finest and most beautifully woven garments. But Mahesh Das had eyes only for the emperor, who sat grandly on a platform at the far end of the hall. Bowing low, he made his way towards the throne. The courtiers murmured to each other in surprise. Who could this be? But Emperor Akbar happened to glance up. He recognised the young man at once and asked him to come forward. "I remember you, Mahesh Das", he said. "And I am pleased that you have come. Ask for anything your heart desires and it shall be yours."

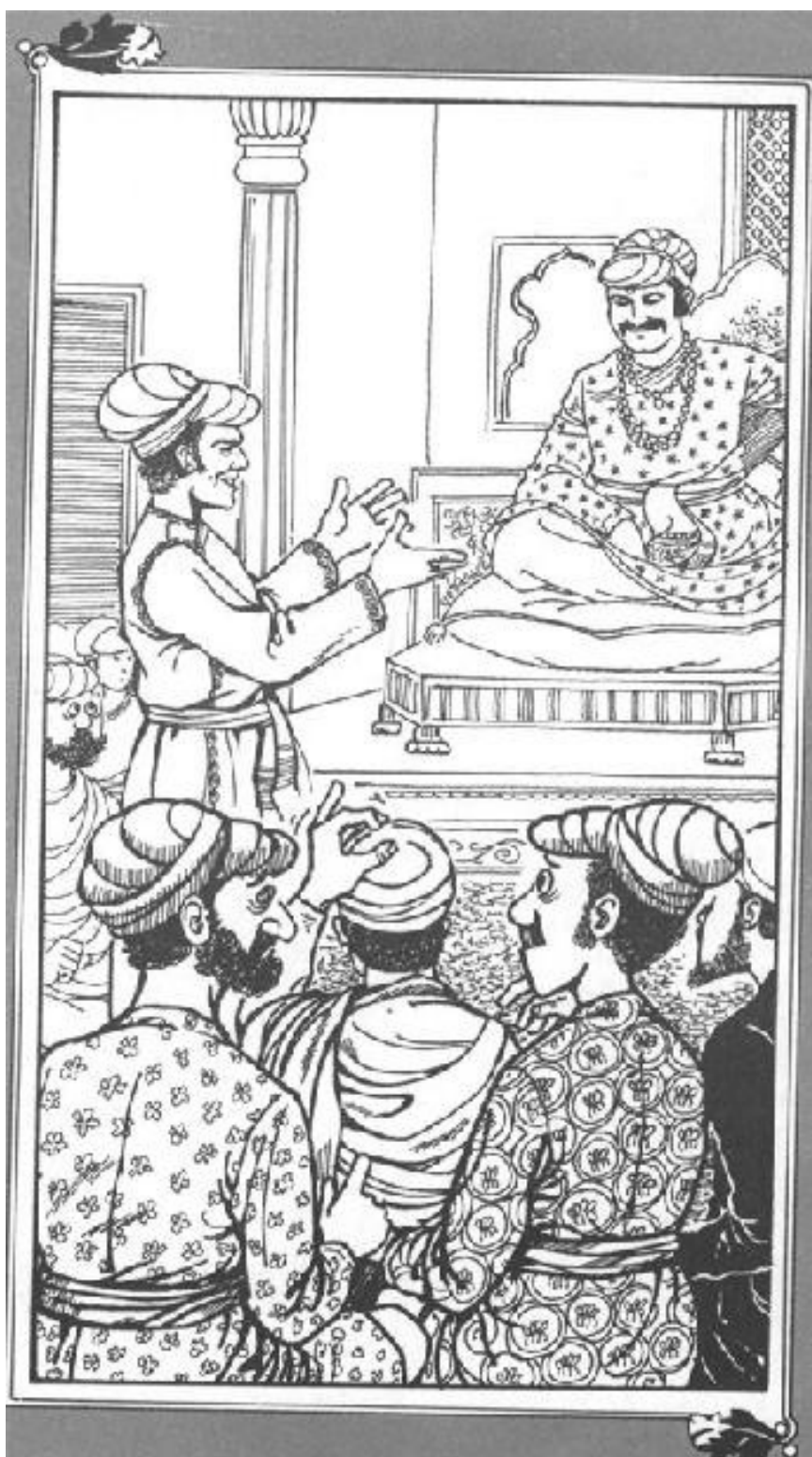
"Jahanpanah is most gracious", Mahesh Das answered. "If Huzoor pleases, my dearest wish is to be given fifty lashes of the whip!"

"Mad, the boy must be mad", people whispered to each other. But the emperor liked the bright, straightforward look in his eyes and he said, "Before we grant this strange wish you must tell us why you want such a gift."

Then Mahesh Das bowed once again and said, "Before the sentry who guards Jahanpanah's fort permitted me to come into the palace, he made me promise that I should give him half the gift that I received. I am ready to bear twenty-five lashes, in order to share this with the guard."

When Akbar heard this, he grew very angry. "Are our people to be kept away by a greedy, wicked guard?" he thundered. "Send for the rascal!"

The guard was sentenced to the entire gift of fifty lashes and never again tried to bully poor people who sought an audience with the emperor. And, Mahesh Das was given a place at the court, with all the comforts that went with it. "We confer on you the title of Raja Birbal from this day on", the emperor declared. "And you shall stay near us and amuse and guide us henceforth!"



## A Matter of Crows

Close to the emperor's private apartments was the Diwan-i-Khas, the Hall of Private Audience. It was not as large as the Diwan-i-Am, but it was beautifully decorated and luxuriously furnished. Here, special courtiers and the highest nobles in the land met the emperor to discuss matters of state. Sometimes the emperor liked to discuss other things too, such as where the best melons came from or who the wisest sage was. Occasionally, he liked to pose questions which his courtiers thought were unanswerable. To Emperor Akbar's delight, Birbal always had an answer no matter how absurd the question.

One morning, the emperor took his seat on the throne in the Diwan-i-Khas and demanded, "Tell us at once: How many crows are there in all of Agra? It is important that we have this information immediately. And if it is not absolutely correct, there will be serious trouble, I warn you."

The courtiers looked at each other in alarm. What were they to do? Some had a reasonable idea of how many elephants there were in the city. Many knew more or less how many horses there were. One man had even kept track of how many pet parrots there were. But crows? Some courtiers began to pray desperately for a flash of divine inspiration. Others tried to hide behind their friends. A few began to examine the sky anxiously, wondering if they could make a quick count of all the crows they could see and calculate the total on that basis. Only Raja Birbal remained calm and smiling. "Jahanpanah", he said after several minutes. "There are exactly ten thousand, six hundred and sixty-six crows in all of Agra."

"Oh?" said Emperor Akbar with a gleam in his eye. "You shall not bluff your way out of this one, Birbal, my friend. We shall have a proper count to confirm your estimate."

"By all means, Huzoor", Birbal replied, unmoved. "But I cannot vouch for all the crows remaining in Agra until that is done. Some may go away to visit their friends and relatives in Dilli, in which case you may find that there are fewer than the number I gave you. Or, it is possible that their friends and relatives from Dilli and elsewhere may come to pay them a visit, and so increase the number. But I can say with utter certainty that at this exact moment and only at this moment, there are ten thousand, six hundred and sixty-six crows in Agra!"

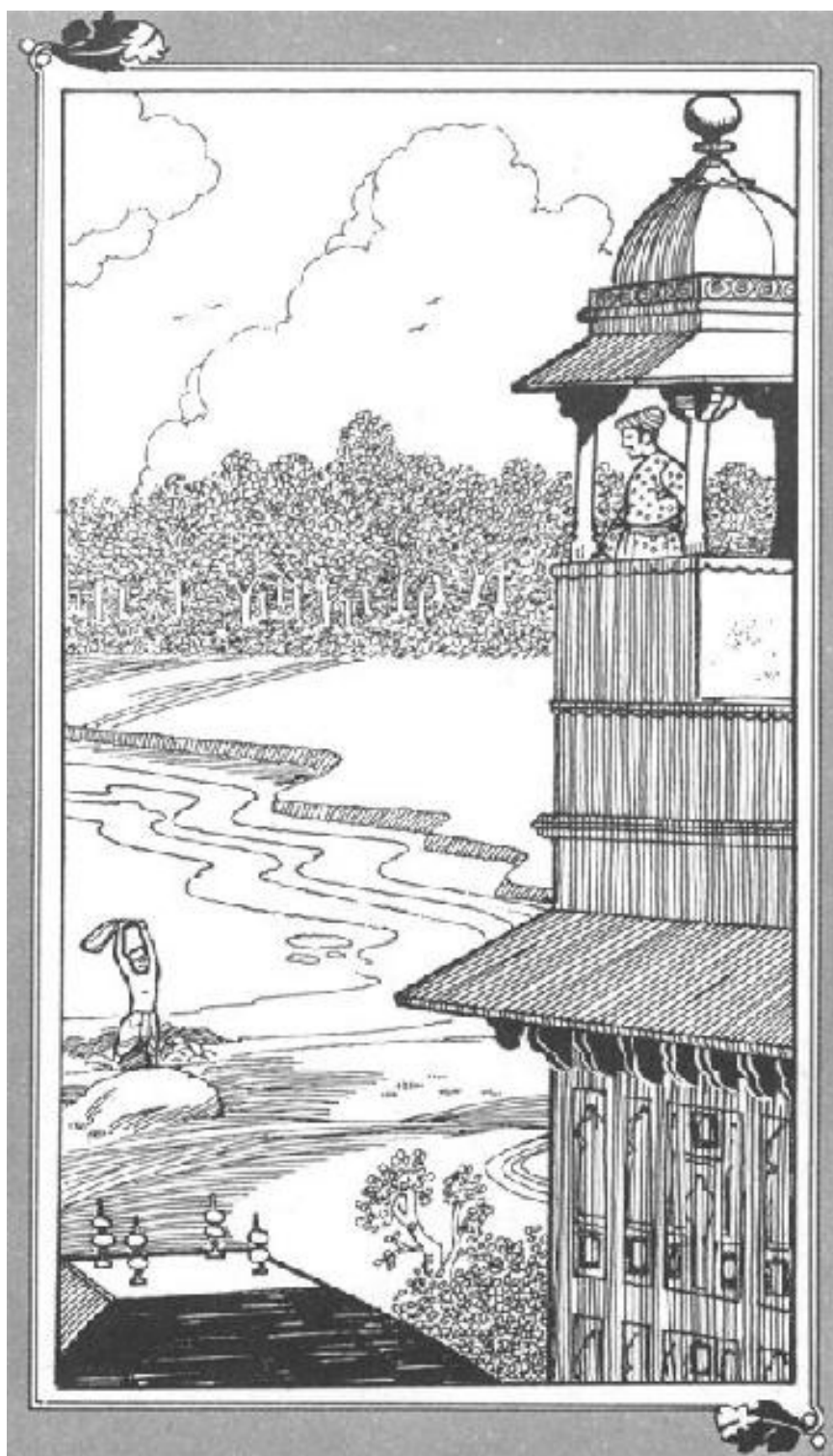
"Birbal you are incomparable", Akbar exclaimed as he burst out laughing. "And now, let us go on to more important matters."

## Inauspicious Omens

Many people at Emperor Akbar's court were superstitious about all kinds of silly things. One popular superstition was that people's faces could be auspicious or inauspicious. If the first person you saw in the morning had an auspicious face, it was believed, you would have a happy day. But if you saw someone who had an inauspicious face, things would go wrong all through the day. Emperor Akbar heard of this belief. He wasn't sure whether he believed it or not, but somehow, it stuck in his memory. One morning, he awoke very early and looked out of his window. He saw a poor washerman scrubbing clothes in the river Yamuna. "Hmm", Emperor Akbar mused. "I wonder if it is a good omen or a bad one to see a washerman at the start of the day."

The washerman happened to glance up at the fort just then. He caught a glimpse of the emperor's face at the window and at once he went down on his knees in joyous respect. The emperor smiled and turned away. Later that morning, as the emperor went up the steps of the Diwan-i-Khas, he tripped and bumped his shin. The royal hakims hurried to apply soothing oils and ointments, but the Emperor's leg was badly bruised and hurt him when he walked. He decided he would not go out riding that day and went for a stroll in the garden instead. He stopped to admire a particularly fine rose and as he bent towards the flower, a bee flew out and stung him on the hand. His attendants rushed around in distress, trying to help him, urging him to go inside, begging him to sit down. "What an ill-omened day, that our Shahanshah should be stung in his own garden", one of them lamented.





Akbar heard him and his face grew thoughtful. "Ill-omened?" He said slowly. "The first person I saw today was the washerman by the river. Perhaps it is he who blighted my day? Perhaps he had an inauspicious face?"

"Oh yes, Jahanpanah", some silly courtier cried. "It must be so indeed. The inauspicious face of the washerman has brought pain to your royal person."

"May he suffer for his evil presence!" cried another.

"May no unfortunate being ever look upon his ill-starred face", cried a third.

"He doesn't deserve to live!" cried yet another. "One who brings so much misery should certainly die!"

"Put him to death!" rose a babble of voices. "He caused our Shahanshah pain and he should die for it. It was all his fault. Put him to death!"

Birbal arrived as more and more courtiers were raising their voices against the washerman, imploring the emperor to send for him at once in order to sentence him to death. Tansen, the celebrated musician, was standing on the edge of the agitated crowd. He smiled in relief when he saw Birbal arrive. Drawing him aside, he told him all that had happened. Birbal shook his head in amazement. Then he pushed his way to the emperor's side. "Jahanpanah!" he cried in his ringing voice. "I am extremely sad to hear of your injuries." Akbar nodded. "Tell us, Birbal", he said. "Shall we behead this ill-omened washerman?" "Ill-omened, Huzoor?" Birbal asked. "You saw his face and you have a bruised shin and a bee-sting. Jahanpanah, the washerman saw your face early this morning and is now about to lose his head! Which do you think was the more inauspicious of the two?"

Emperor Akbar stared at Birbal for a moment. Then he began to smile. "You are right, Raja Birbal!" he said. "It is really a very foolish belief."

"Jahanpanah", Tansen called. "I have a special song that I would like to present to you to celebrate the victory of sense over nonsense."

"Let us have music, then", Emperor Akbar commanded. "And let us all think as we listen."

## The Scribe's Dream

There was once a poor scribe in the city of Agra. He copied other people's writings and books. He earned barely enough to support his family. But, no matter how difficult it was, he and his wife always managed to feed themselves and their children. The scribe was proud of the fact that he had never borrowed a single copper coin. "We must never fall into the hands of the moneylender", he often told his wife. "For if we do, we will surely be ruined."

The scribe worried so much about his lack of money and his fear of borrowing that his worries even found a place in his dreams. One night he dreamt that he had borrowed one hundred gold coins from the moneylender. He woke up in terror, thinking, "One hundred gold coins! Where, oh where will I ever find such wealth!" Still trembling from his nightmare, he woke his wife and told her all about it. They talked quietly for a while and soon the scribe began to feel better. He was able to lie down again and was soon asleep once more.



The next day, as the scribe's wife drew water from the well at the end of the street on which they lived, she told her friends of her husband's dream. "Imagine!" she exclaimed. "He dreamt that we'd borrowed not one or two, but one hundred gold coins from the moneylender!" Her friends laughed with her. A few of them thought it was a very good story and repeated it to their husbands when they got home. The story spread and a few days later, it reached the moneylender's ears. He laughed when he heard it but his eyes began to glitter greedily. That evening, he put on his turban and, picking up his walking stick, strolled over to the scribe's small house.

"I've come", he announced to the nervous and worried scribe, "to remind you of the money you owe me."

"Money?" squeaked the scribe in a panic. "I owe you?"

"Yes, bhai" , answered the moneylender firmly. "One hundred gold coins. Surely you cannot have forgotten?"

"One -one-one h-h-hundred gold c-c-coins ." gasped the scribe in a failing voice, tottering to the nearest chair.

The scribe's wife, who had been listening from an inner room, came hurrying out. "But it was only a dream!" she cried. "You cannot ask us to return money that has only been borrowed in a dream!"

"Money is money", the moneylender said, unmoved. "And money borrowed must be returned. You will have to start tomorrow. I am a kind man, a good-hearted man, and so I shall not demand it all back at once. One gold coin a month will do. And then there will be the interest above that as well." And with these words, he stood up and left.

The scribe began to moan softly. His wife sat down suddenly, her knees giving way beneath her. They sat in silent despair. Suddenly, from the depths of her misery, the wife had an idea. "Husband", she said, sitting up straight. "We must beg Raja Birbal to help us. Only he can save us from utter ruin." At this, the scribe sat up. Strength and energy seemed to flow into his limbs. "I shall go to his house at once", he said. "If anyone can save us it is he."

Birbal listened to the poor scribe's tale of woe. Then he brought out a bag of gold coins and emptied them on to a table. He counted out a hundred and put the rest away. Then he placed a large mirror in front of the coins.

"Huzoor, huzoor!" the scribe said in a distressed voice. "I did not come here to beg or to ask you to pay the moneylender. Surely there is another way!"

"There *is* another", Birbal answered with a smile. "Compose yourself and go and call the moneylender to my haveli. Tell him his debt is about to be paid."

Full of doubts, the scribe hurried to the moneylender's house with Birbal's message. The moneylender smiled when he heard and got up at once to accompany him.

When they arrived at Birbal's house and were shown in, the moneylender spotted the pile of gold coins on the table. He smiled and smiled, unable to take his eyes off them. The mirror behind the coins made the pile look larger and more glittering.

"So the scribe borrowed a hundred gold coins from you in his dream, did he?"

"That is so", replied the moneylender, never taking his eyes off the coins on the table.

"Well", said Birbal. "You may take all the coins in the mirror," said Birbal. The real coins belong to me, but all those in the reflection are yours in return for the dream loan!"

The moneylender knew he had met his match. Without a word, he turned and left the house. Never again did he try to bully the scribe or anyone else in the city of Agra.

# The Best Vegetable of All

One evening, as Emperor Akbar and a group of his courtiers strolled along a terrace which overlooked the river, the emperor remarked, "Brinjals are the finest vegetables, without a doubt." All his courtiers were quick to agree. "Oh", said one. "Brinjal is said to be excellent for one's health." Another commented, "And the taste! Brinjal cooked with lamb or any other meat is delicious."

To everybody's surprise, even Birbal began to praise the brinjal. "What delicacy! What subtle texture! What fine colour!" he cried. "Oh, brinjal is the emperor of vegetables to be sure. It is a veritable gift from heaven!" And he went on and on, even reciting a small poem in praise of the brinjal. This was a bit too much, even for Emperor Akbar, who was accustomed to flattery and to fawning courtiers. He was certain that Birbal was teasing him and mocking all the courtiers who surrounded him. So, a few days later, the emperor declared, "There can be no better vegetable in all the world than spinach!"

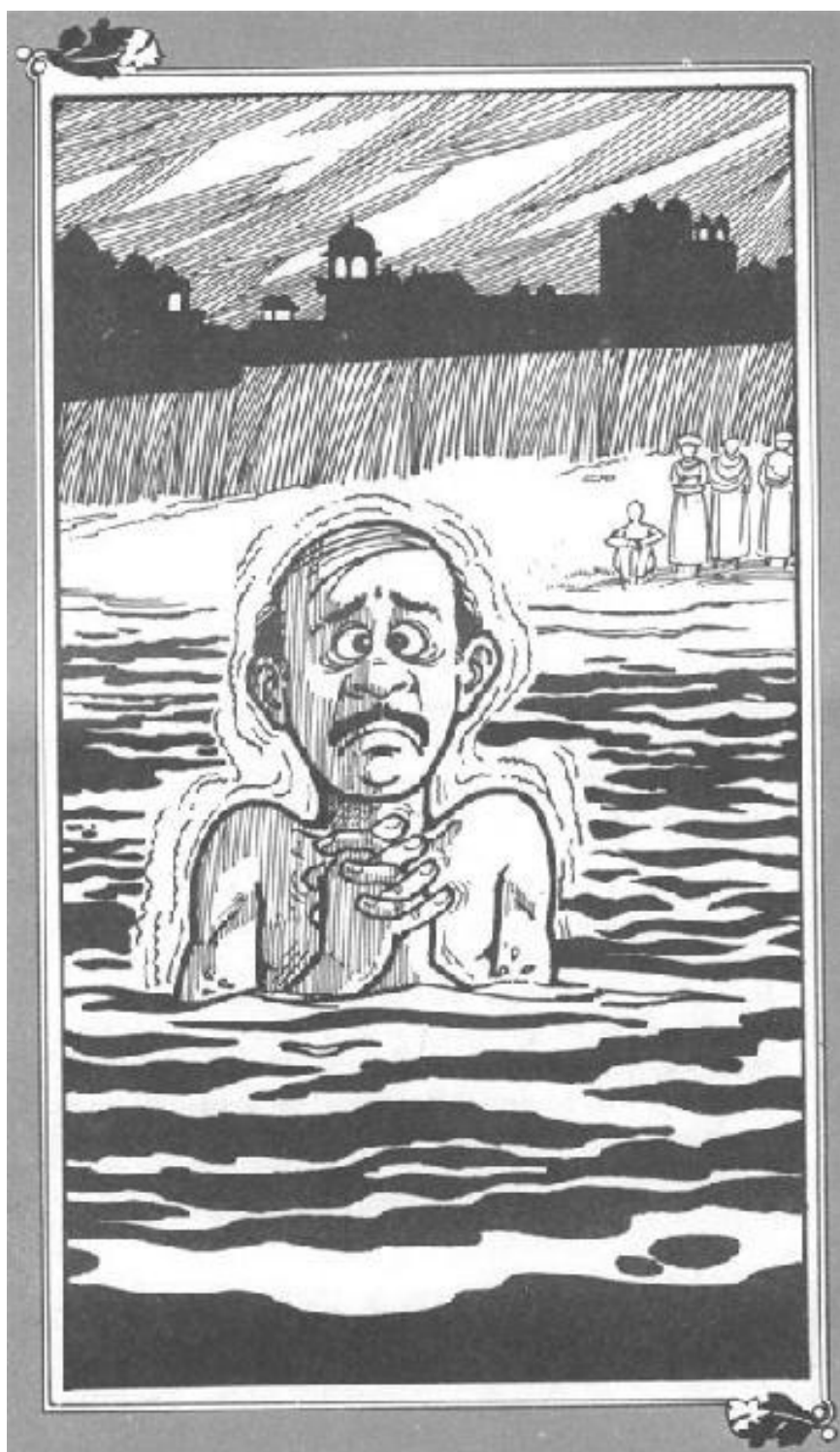
At once, all those around him began to praise spinach. "It's so good for the digestion", said a very fat man who loved to eat. "And full of goodness", said his extremely thin friend. "And it is excellent with meat", added a man whose wife was notorious for her bad cooking.

"Never has there been a tastier vegetable", Birbal's voice rose over all the rest. "What delicacy! What fine colour! Oh, spinach is the emperor of all vegetables. It is a veritable gift of the heavens!"

"Birbal!" Emperor Akbar cried in an outraged voice. "Only last week you were praising the brinjal in exactly the same words. Have you no loyalty to your beliefs, no faithfulness to the truth!"

Birbal's eyes twinkled. "Jahanpanah", he said, bowing very low. "My loyalty and faith are given only to you, my Shahanshah, from whom all bounty flows. What do I care for brinjal and spinach if I may be near you?"

Akbar looked around at all his courtiers, who were too nervous of him to ever question anything he said. He understood that Birbal was mocking their sheep-like behaviour, as he proved his own loyalty in his own witty way. He smiled appreciatively. "Wah, Wah! Birbal", he said. "You never fail to teach us something even when you make us laugh!"



# Lamplight

Emperor Akbar was amazingly brave and strong. On one occasion, he fought a tiger single-handedly. On another, he rode a maddened elephant and brought it under control, even though he almost died in the attempt. The emperor admired those who had as much stamina and courage as he did. One cold January day, he sent messengers through the city of Agra to announce a contest. "He who can spend the entire night standing chest-deep in the icy waters of the Yamuna river", declared the messengers, "shall be awarded one hundred gold coins by the emperor himself!"

There was great excitement all through the city. Athletes and wrestlers and war-toughened soldiers all wanted to try their luck. Some oiled their bodies well so that they would be protected from the cold water. Others ate fistfuls of almonds, which were said to warm the blood. A few drank flasks of wine all through the day in an effort to warm themselves for the ordeal. As night fell, hundreds of men of all ages waded into the river. Among them was a poor stonemason, who needed enough money to pay for his son's education. He was too poor to buy almonds to eat, or oil to rub over himself, but he was determined to win the money for his beloved child.

As night wore on and the river water began to get colder, a large number of men began to leave. By midnight, only a handful were left. Their friends called encouragingly to them from the river bank. One by one, even they began to leave. They could not stand the icy chill that set in during the last few hours before dawn. By the time the first rays of the sun lit the battlements of the fort, only the stonemason was still in the river. He was so cold, he could not move. His friends had to help him out of the water and revive him with a massage and a hot drink and wrap him in a blanket.

That evening, as the emperor prepared for the evening durbar in the Diwan-i-Am, one spiteful courtier said, "Jahanpanah, the prize you are about to award was not won by fair means."

"Oh?" said Emperor Akbar. "And how is that?"

"Huzoor", said the man, his eyes glittering with malice. "It is said that the man drew warmth and comfort from the sight of the lamplight from the palace. If he was warmed by the lamps of the palace, then he did not truly withstand the icy waters of the river. He won the contest by unfair means, Huzoor!"

Emperor Akbar began to think. Could the courtier be right? It was strange that the stonemason had succeeded when all the wrestlers and athletes and soldiers had failed. He was so busy thinking and wondering that he did not notice Raja Birbal slipping away.

It was some time later that Akbar decided to ask Birbal for his advice, and found that he was not there. The emperor frowned. Messengers were despatched to summon him at once. They returned with a message from Birbal to say he was waiting for his meal of *khichchri* to be ready, and would join them shortly. An hour went by. The time for the durbar was drawing close and the emperor wanted Birbal to be present. More messengers were sent to call him. They returned with the same message. Birbal was waiting for his *khichchri* to be cooked. "*Khichchri* does not take so long!" the Emperor said angrily. He decided to go to Birbal's house himself to find out what the matter was. He found Birbal on the terrace of his house. In front of him was a pot, filled to the brim with water, rice and lentils. The pot was set in a wooden frame which was tilted so that the bottom of the pot faced the Emperor's palace.

"Birbal, have you gone completely mad?" Emperor Akbar roared as Birbal rose to greet him.

"Huzoor, if the poor stonemason was able to warm himself by the light of the lamps in the royal



palace, then surely that same heat will cook my *khichchri*, especially since I am so much closer to the royal lamplight", Birbal said quietly.

In reply, the emperor put his arm around Birbal and asked the treasurer to hand him the bag of gold coins. "You shall have the honour of holding the award when I present it to the stonemason this evening", he said. Then, pulling off the rope of perfectly matched pearls which he wore around his neck, he slid it over Birbal's head. "And now, shall we proceed to the durbar?" he said, leading the way down the stairs.

"Huzoor", Birbal murmured in gratitude as he followed his emperor down the stairs. Together they walked towards the Diwan-i-Am where the stonemason was waiting.

## A Hairy Tale

It was a hot summer morning. Emperor Akbar had not slept very well the previous night. It was clear to everyone that the emperor was not in a very good mood. "I've asked the keeper of the royal forests to prepare for a tiger hunt", Raja Man Singh whispered to Birbal. "At such a time, what cheers the emperor most is to be out riding and camping in the forest away from the palace and the fort and the cares of government." Birbal nodded. But in the meanwhile he knew he had to keep the emperor in good humour. So, when Emperor Akbar asked abruptly, "Who can answer this? Why is it that no hair grows on the palms of my hand?" Birbal stepped forward at once. "Huzoor", he replied, "How can hair grow on the palms of your hand? It is just not possible, because your munificence, your generosity is so great that the constant flow of gold and gifts that slip from your hands into the hands of your worthless servant wears away any hair that might grow there."

Akbar nodded and even smiled, but he was still a little irritable. "Is that so?" he said. "In that case, how is it that no hair grows on the palms of *your* hands, Birbal?"

Birbal held out his hands to the emperor. "Jahan-panah, your generosity in filling these worthless hands with gold and gifts wears away every last hair that might grow there."

"And the others?" Emperor Akbar pointed to all the courtiers who stood around them, filling the hall. "What about them? Am I so generous to each and every person gathered here? I'd soon have an empty treasury if I were as generous as you say." Several of those standing nearby smiled at each other. Even Birbal, clever Birbal would find it difficult to answer that one, they thought, and waited expectantly to hear him admit that he was at a loss for words.

But Birbal smiled back at them and replied without a moment's hesitation, "Huzoor, when my fellow servants see the magnificence that your generosity bestows on my worthless being, they cannot stop wringing their hands in jealousy. In doing this, they have rubbed away every single of hair that might have grown on their palms!"

At this, even Emperor Akbar burst out laughing. Soon others joined in the laughter and a wave of merriment filled the hall. "Well done, Birbal Bhaiya!" Raja Man Singh whispered to him. "You've saved the day!"

## The Reader of Minds

Some years after Birbal had come to the imperial court at Agra, Emperor Akbar had a magnificent new capital built at Fatehpur Sikri, about twenty kilometres outside the city. The emperor and his queens moved into exquisite stone palaces in the new capital and some of the more important courtiers were given houses close to the emperor's palace. Among them was Birbal. Many of the other courtiers had to build their own havelis below the hill on which Fatehpur Sikri was built. Some built their homes in the village of Sikri. They could not understand why Raja Birbal had been shown such special favour. It made them feel very envious indeed. They wished there was some way to make Birbal look foolish in front of the emperor. But Birbal was too clever for them. So they grumbled to each other and longed for the day that the emperor would ask him a question that he would be unable to answer.



One of these courtiers, a man called Yusuf Khan, went a step further. One day, when Birbal was away to a distant kingdom, on a special mission for the emperor, Yusuf Khan thought of a plan. That evening, at the durbar, he said to Emperor Akbar, "Jahanpanah, it is said that Raja Birbal now claims that he can even read the thoughts of others. Is he not extraordinarily clever?"

"Oh, he is a genius, of that there is no doubt", commented another jealous courtier. "There is surely nothing that he does not know."

"Is he so clever?" the Emperor asked, reacting just as Yusuf Khan hoped he would. "We shall soon find out."

Some days later, when Raja Birbal returned from his mission, he attended the small private durbar in the emperor's palace. Yusuf Khan and his friends waited anxiously for the emperor to ask the fateful question. They were sure it would put Birbal in a spot. How would he answer? Would he protest and deny that he had ever said such a thing? Would he try to bluff his way out? Could he? Yusuf Khan was certain it was not possible to do so. He waited gleefully for the business part of the

darbar to end. Birbal made his report on his successful mission to end the rebellion of a minor ruler and Emperor Akbar congratulated him warmly. Other reports were heard and decisions given to commanders of the army and to various officials. Then, when all the work was done, Emperor Akbar asked Birbal, "It is said, my friend, that you can even read minds now. Is this true?"

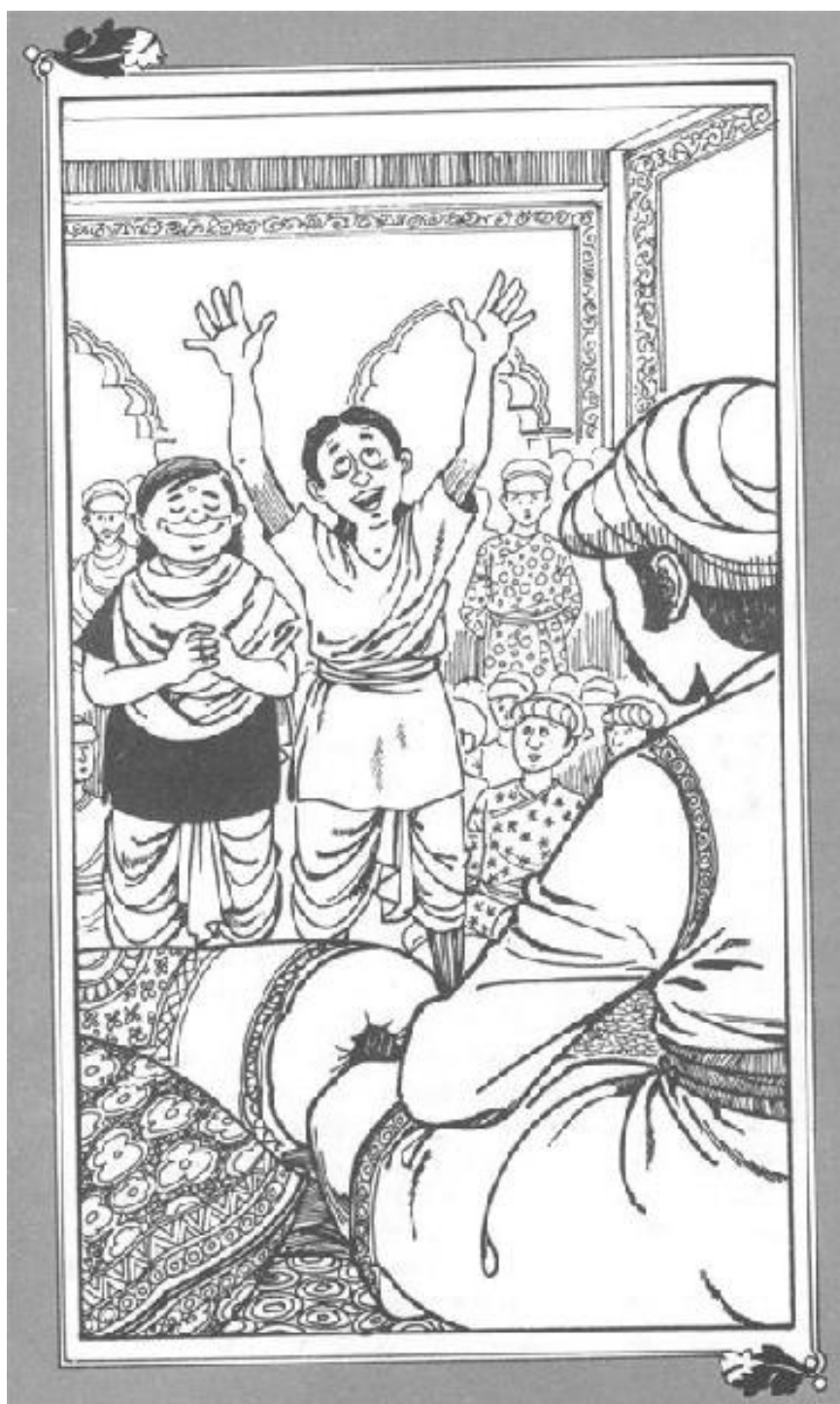
Raja Birbal glanced around the hall and saw the nasty smiles on the faces of Yusuf Khan and his group. He turned back to the emperor and answered calmly, "Jahanpanah, I would not dare to presume enough to think that I could ever read the subtle mind of Your Highness. However, I can certainly tell you the thought that fills the minds of each and every other person present here this evening." He paused and smiled at Yusuf Khan. "Each of Jahanpanah's servants who are gathered here today has but one thought in his mind. They are thinking: May God bless our emperor in his mercy and wisdom and allow him good health so that he may rule over us for ever and ever!" Then, turning to Yusuf Khan, he asked, "Am I not right, my dear friend?"

Yusuf Khan met Birbal's bright eyes and knew that he was beaten. He didn't dare deny that he was thinking only of the emperor's welfare and nothing else. Forcing a smile upon his lips, he bowed and said, "Shahanshah, he is absolutely right!" A murmur of agreement rose from all who were gathered there. Not one dared to admit that he was thinking of anything else but the emperor.

Birbal turned to the emperor with a look of immense amusement on his face. He and the emperor both understood exactly what had happened. Emperor Akbar began to laugh. "Birbal, you are incomparable!" he cried, while Birbal's enemies fumed in helpless silence.

## Greater Than Gods

Emperor Akbar enjoyed listening to stories and poems from distant lands, and travellers to Fatehpur Sikri were welcome and treated kindly. One day, two poets from a faraway kingdom arrived at the court. They delighted all who listened with songs and poems and the emperor, with his customary generosity, rewarded them well. The poets had seldom seen so much gold before. They had certainly never been given a whole bag of gold coins each in their entire lives. They were overwhelmed. And, when the emperor ordered the treasurer to give them a set of clothes each, one of the poets begged permission to offer a poem of thanks. Emperor Akbar nodded and the poet began his recitation. He spoke of the emperor's bravery and kindness. He praised the emperor's learning and wisdom and in the final verse, inspired beyond sensible limits, he ended by declaring that Emperor Akbar was the greatest king that had ever ruled "over this world or any other. He is greater than Lord Indra himself!" cried the poet as he bowed and left the hall.



There was a moment's silence. Many of those in the hall were absolutely shocked that the poet had compared a mortal to a god. Emperor Akbar looked around and his eyes began to twinkle mischievously. "So", he said, "it appears that I am now even greater than the God Indra!"

All the people in the hall looked at their emperor in horror. Had he really believed the poet's word? Surely not! And yet, they weren't entirely sure. Emperor Akbar looked back at his ministers and commanders, his nobles and his counsellors, wondering if any of them would have the courage to speak the truth. The ministers, commanders, nobles and counsellors looked back at him. Nobody stirred. "In that case", said the emperor, beginning to feel irritated, "You all agree, then. Your emperor is greater than the God Indra himself!"

Nobody dared to disagree. Slowly, one by one, the courtiers bowed to show that they agreed. A low, ashamed murmur of "Ji, Huzoor. It is so, Jahanpanah", filled the hall.

Emperor Akbar thought that the foolishness had gone far enough. He turned to Birbal with a frown. "And you, Birbal. Do you agree?" he asked.

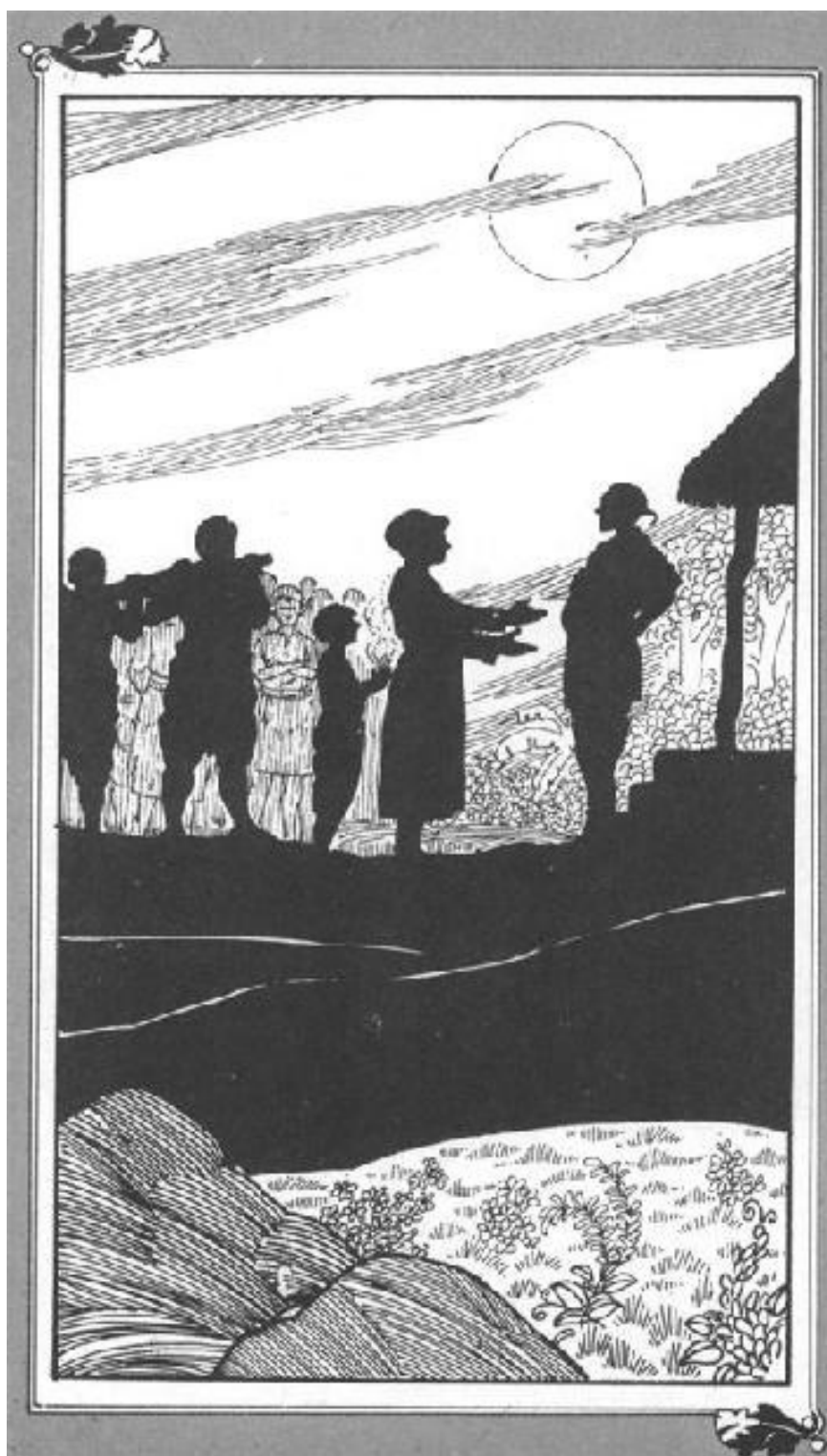
"Oh yes", Birbal replied immediately. The emperor's frown grew. "Huzoor, you can do something even God cannot!" Birbal said. "If any of your subjects displeases you, Jahanpanah, you can send him on a pilgrimage, or banish him from your empire, never to return. But God cannot. For God rules over the entire earth and the sky and the heavens. There is no place in this world or any other that does not belong to God. So he cannot banish any one of his creatures!" Emperor Akbar's frown vanished. "Well said, Birbal", he cried delightedly. And, from every corner of the court, relieved courtiers began to smile weakly and then to laugh. Birbal had done it again!



# Temper

In the village below Emperor Akbar's capital at Fatehpur Sikri, there lived a quick-tempered priest and his wife. The priest used to eat only one meal a day and his wife took a great deal of trouble to cook something delicious. Wonderful aromas would drift out of the kitchen, so when afternoon came and the priest sat down to eat, he would be very hungry indeed. One day, as he broke off a piece of freshly made *roti* and dipped in into the bowl of fragrant, steaming *dal*, the priest noticed a hair floating on the dal. He flung the food away in a rage, shouting to his wife. "This food is bad! It's been ruined! There's a hair in the *dal* and it's not fit to eat!"

The priest's wife came running when- she heard her husband. She wept when she saw the *dal* and *rotis* scattered all over the courtyard. There was no time to make a fresh meal and the priest had to go without his food that day. He got angrier and angrier and when evening came, he said, "Beware, wife. If ever I find a hair in my food again, I will shave off every last hair on your head."



This frightened his wife and she became even more careful, pulling her hair back tightly and covering her head with her sari. A week went by. The priest ate his daily meal with all his usual enjoyment. And then, one day, as he was about to bite into a morsel of brinjal and *roti*, he saw another hair. It was embedded in the *roti*. The priest sprang to his feet with a terrible roar and rushed towards the kitchen, shouting, "Bring me a razor. Now I shall have to shave off your hair!" His wife gave a howl of terror and, before he could reach the kitchen, she sprang up and slammed the door shut.

"Open this door at once!" shouted the enraged priest.

"Oh, no, no, no, no!" wailed his wife. "Punish me, starve me, only promise you won't cut off my hair Oh, forgive me, forgive me!"

The woman's heart-rending cries and the priest's bellowing voice could be heard all over the village. People came running to see what disaster had befallen them. When they understood what had

happened, some began to laugh and others began to argue. A few tried to reason with the priest. He turned upon them with a snarl. The crowd grew bigger and bigger as more and more people arrived. And all the while, the priest's wife wailed and wept unceasingly from behind the locked kitchen door.

Finally, one very old woman murmured to her grandson. "Only Raja Birbal can solve this problem, *beta*. Run as quickly as you can and beg him to come to the rescue of this wretched woman. The boy nodded and ran up the hill to the double-storied red-stone house in which Birbal lived. Birbal listened to the tale and nodded. Then he gave the boy certain instructions. The boy smiled and hurried away to do as Birbal had asked.

Half an hour later, Birbal led a small procession towards the priest's house. It looked like a funeral procession. Two men carried a bamboo bier. It was empty, however. Another man carried some logs of wood. The boy carried some flowers and incense. They arrived at the priest's house and stopped beside the priest. He turned and asked angrily, "What's going on? Has somebody died? Why have you brought the bier here?"

"I heard that someone had died here", said Birbal. "Only widows shave their heads, don't they? I heard your wife was about to shave her head and so I thought you must have died. Are you about to die? We've made all the preparations for your funeral."

"He'll have to die first, won't he?" cried a cheeky little boy in the crowd.

"But then who'll shave his wife's head? He wants to do it himself!" cried another. People began to laugh. The priest hung his head in shame. He understood what Birbal was trying to show him. Slowly, he went towards the kitchen. "Come out, wife", he said quietly. "I will try never to be so foolish again." His wife unlatched the kitchen door and came to stand beside him. "And I'll be even more careful when I cook, from now on."

Smiling, Birbal and the village people went home in cheerful good humour.

# The Sadhu

**A**kbar came to the throne when he was only thirteen years old. In the years that followed, he built one of the greatest empires of his time. He lived in unimaginable splendour. He was surrounded by courtiers who agreed with every word he said, who flattered him and treated him as if he were a god. Perhaps it was not surprising that Emperor Akbar was sometimes arrogant and behaved as if the whole world belonged to him. One day, Birbal decided to make the great emperor stop and think about life.

That evening as the emperor was going towards his palace, he noticed a sadhu lying in the centre of his garden. He could not believe his eyes. A strange sadhu, in ragged clothes, right in the middle of the palace garden? The guards would have to be punished for this, thought the emperor furiously as he walked over to the sadhu and prodded him with the tip of his embroidered slipper. "Here, fellow!" he cried. "What are you doing here? Get up and go away at once!"



The sadhu opened his eyes. Then he sat up slowly. "Huzoor," he said in a sleepy voice. "Is this your garden, then?"

"Yes!" cried the Emperor. "This garden, those rose bushes, the fountain beyond that, the courtyard, the palace, this fort, this empire, it all belongs to me!"

Slowly the sadhu stood up. "And the river, Huzoor? And the city of Agra? And Hindustan?"

"Yes, yes, it's all mine", said the Emperor. "Now get out!"

"Ah", said the sadhu. "And before you, Huzoor. Who did this garden and fort and city belong to then?"

"My father, of course", said the emperor. In spite of his irritation, he was beginning to get interested in the sadhu's questions. He loved philosophical discussions and he could tell, from his manner of speaking, that the sadhu was a learned man.

"And who was here before him?" the sadhu asked quietly.

"His father, my father's father, as you know."

"Ah", said the sadhu. So this garden, those rose bushes, the palace and the fort — all this has only belonged to you for your lifetime. Before that they belonged to your father, am I right? And after your time they will belong to your son, and then to his son?

"Yes", said Emperor Akbar wonderingly.

"So each one stays here for a time and then goes on his way?"

"Yes."

"Like a *dharmashala*?" the sadhu asked. "No one owns a *dharmashala*. Or the shade of a tree on the side of a the road. We stop and rest for a while and then go on. And someone has always been there before us and someone will always come after we have gone. Is that not so?"

"It is", said Emperor Akbar quietly.

"So your garden, your palace, your fort, your empire . . . these are only places you will stay in for a time, for the span of your lifetime. When you die, they will no longer belong to you. You will go, leaving them in the possession of someone else, just as your father did and his father before him."

Emperor Akbar nodded. "The whole world is a *dharmashala*", he said slowly, thinking very hard. "In which we mortals rest awhile. That's what you are telling me, isn't it? Nothing on this earth can ever belong to a single person, because each person is only passing through the earth and must die one day?"

The sadhu nodded solemnly. Then, bowing to the ground, he removed his white beard and saffron turban and his voice changed. "Jahanpanah, forgive me!" he said, in his normal voice. "It was my way of asking you to think about . . ."

"Birbal, oh, Birbal!" the emperor exclaimed. "You are wiser than any philosopher. Come, come at once to the royal chamber and let us discuss this further. Even emperors are but wayfarers on the path of life, it is clear!"

Tales of Akbar, the great Mughal emperor, and his intelligent prime minister Birbal have been told since time immemorial. Yet, they never cease to amaze and delight us. Replete with ancient wisdom and wit, each story in this collection promises to both entertain and educate. Accompanied by illustrations that make them come alive, these stories will appeal to young and old alike.

**Monisha Mukundan** spent her childhood travelling and though she has lived in Delhi ever since, she still loves to travel and to read of far-away places and far-away times. She has hundreds of travel plans and an equal number of stories, all of which she hopes will happen one day.