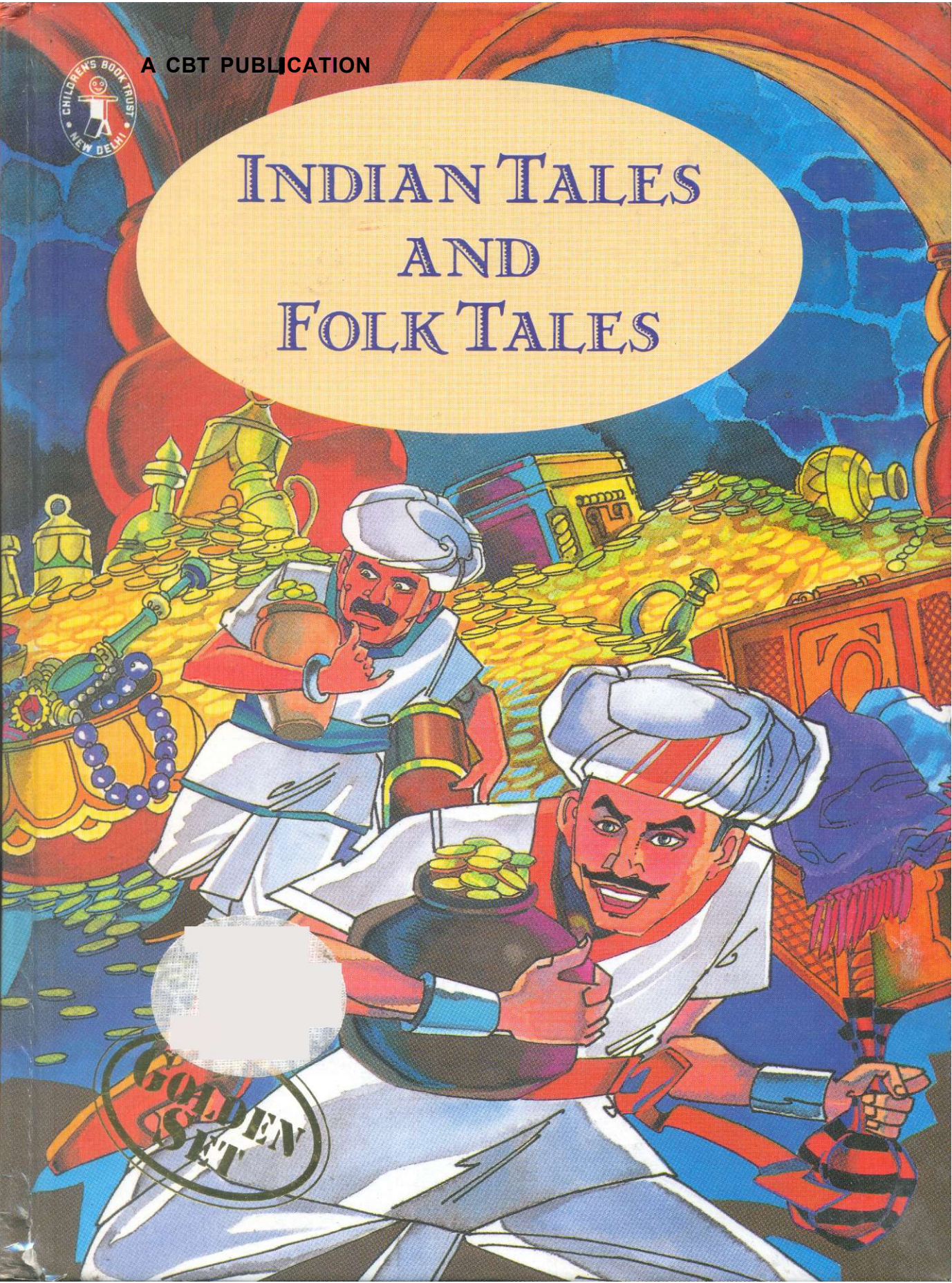




A CBT PUBLICATION

# INDIAN TALES AND FOLK TALES



GOLDEN  
SET





# INDIAN TALES AND FOLK TALES

Illustrated by  
Surendra Suman



**Children's BookTrust, New Delhi**

The stories in this collection are prize-winning entries in the category Indian Tales/Folk Tales in the Competition for Writer's of Children's Books organized by Children's Book Trust.

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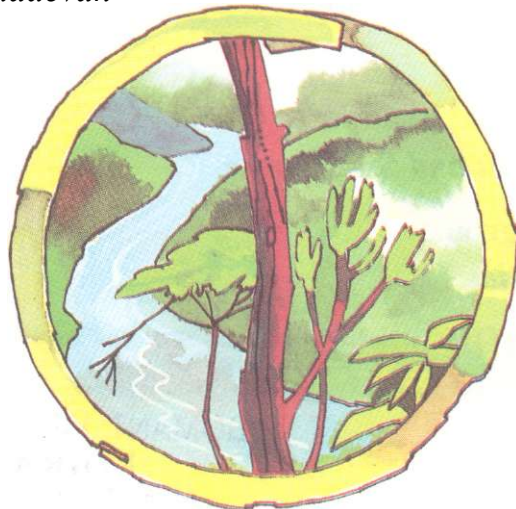


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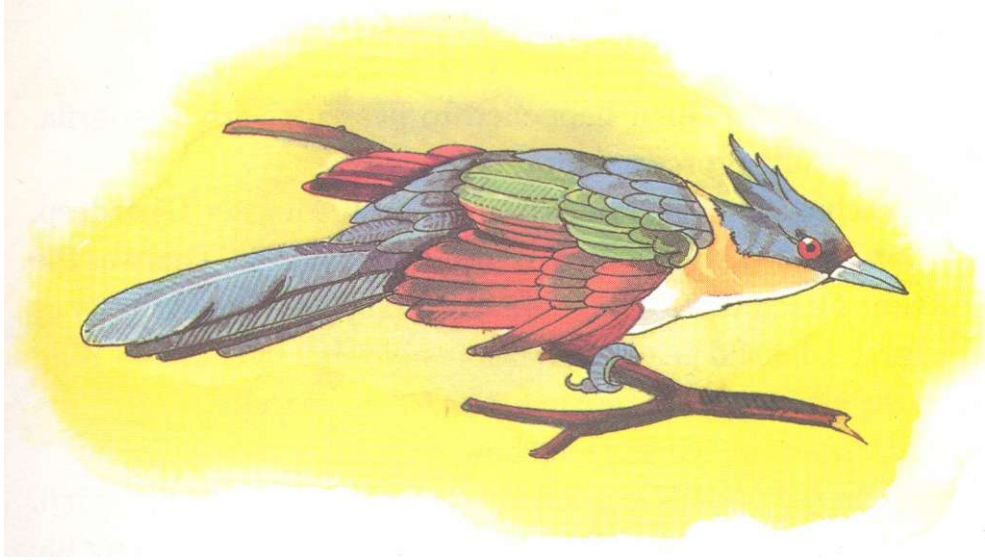
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## **The Magical Bird**

*Ramendra Kumar*

Long ago there was a small kingdom at the foot of the Nilgiri Hills. It was called Shangrila and was ruled by a wise and gentle king, Rishi Raj. The king was kind, just and loved by his people. Shangrila was a beautiful place dotted with gardens and greenery. Flowers bloomed throughout the year, birds chirped and animals frolicked in gay abandon. Love and peace reigned supreme.

According to a legend all this was because of Kokila—the cuckoo bird. Kokila lived on a banyan tree that grew in a garden in front of the King's palace. Kokila was blind but she had an enchanting voice. She sang the whole day and her melodious voice wafted across the kingdom spreading, love, peace and happiness.

On the other side of the Nilgiri Hills was another kingdom called Dongrila. If Shangrila epitomized love, peace and joy, Dongrila was the picture of hatred, infighting and misery. It was ruled by Jagat Guru, a mean, ill tempered and selfish king.



One day, Jagat Guru happened to pass through Shangrila. He was greatly impressed by what he saw.

On reaching home he summoned his Prime Minister, Gyan deep.

"Gyan, this morning, I passed through Shangrila. This was the first time I had been there. It is a fantastic place. It is as pretty as a picture, calm and peaceful. It is like heaven. Find out how King Rishi Raj manages to maintain his kingdom so well?"

"Yes, *Maharaj*?" Gyan Deep bowed.

The same day, Gyan Deep left for Shangrila disguised as a hermit. He spent his time in the kingdom talking to people, roaming the streets and observing things minutely. Finally, after ten days, satisfied with the information he had collected, he returned to Dongrila.

On the morning after his return, he went to meet the king in his chamber. "*Maharaj* I have found out the secret behind King Rishi Raj's success."

"What is it?"

"It is a bird called Kokila," Gyan Deep began and told the king about the legend of Kokila.

"Then, I must somehow get this bird to Dongrila. Gyan, prepare for war. Let us attack Shangrila and forcibly take the bird."

"*Maharaj*, that would be unwise. You know in our army the generals are busy fighting with each other. It is divided into many factions, one opposing the other. Shangrila's army, on the other hand, is strong and well-knit. Our army will never be able to vanquish it."

"Then what do you want me to do?"

"Go to Shangrila and request King Rishi Raj to lend you the magical bird for a few days. He is a kind-hearted and magnanimous king. I am sure he will agree."

"Yes, I think I will do that."



A week later, Jagat Guru went to Shangrila with a lot of gifts for King RishiRaj.

The king welcomed him with open arms and organized a grand cultural programme followed by a lavish dinner in his honour.

The next day before leaving, Jagat Guru said to King Rishi Raj, "I have a small request to make."

"Anything you ask is yours, my friend," King Rishi Raj generously offered.

"I want to borrow Kokila."

"Kokila!" King Rishi Raj was taken aback.

"Yes, only for a few days. I want to use its magical presence to bring peace and happiness in my kingdom."

Poor King, what could he do? He had already given his word to



Jagat Guru. He parted with Kokila, his heart heavy and eyes full of tears. He also sent five of his most trusted soldiers to ensure the safety and well being of Kokila.

As soon as the king reached his palace he put it in a golden cage.

"*Maharaj*, please do not keep it in a cage. It is used to flying free, please do not enslave it," the soldiers protested.

"Shut up, you fools! Kokila is now my property. I will do what I want with it!" he thundered. Then turning to Gyan Deep he said, "Throw these idiots into the dungeons. They will rot here for the rest of their lives. Kokila is mine, and will be with me forever."

"*Maharaj*, King Raj will not keep quiet..." began Gyan Deep.

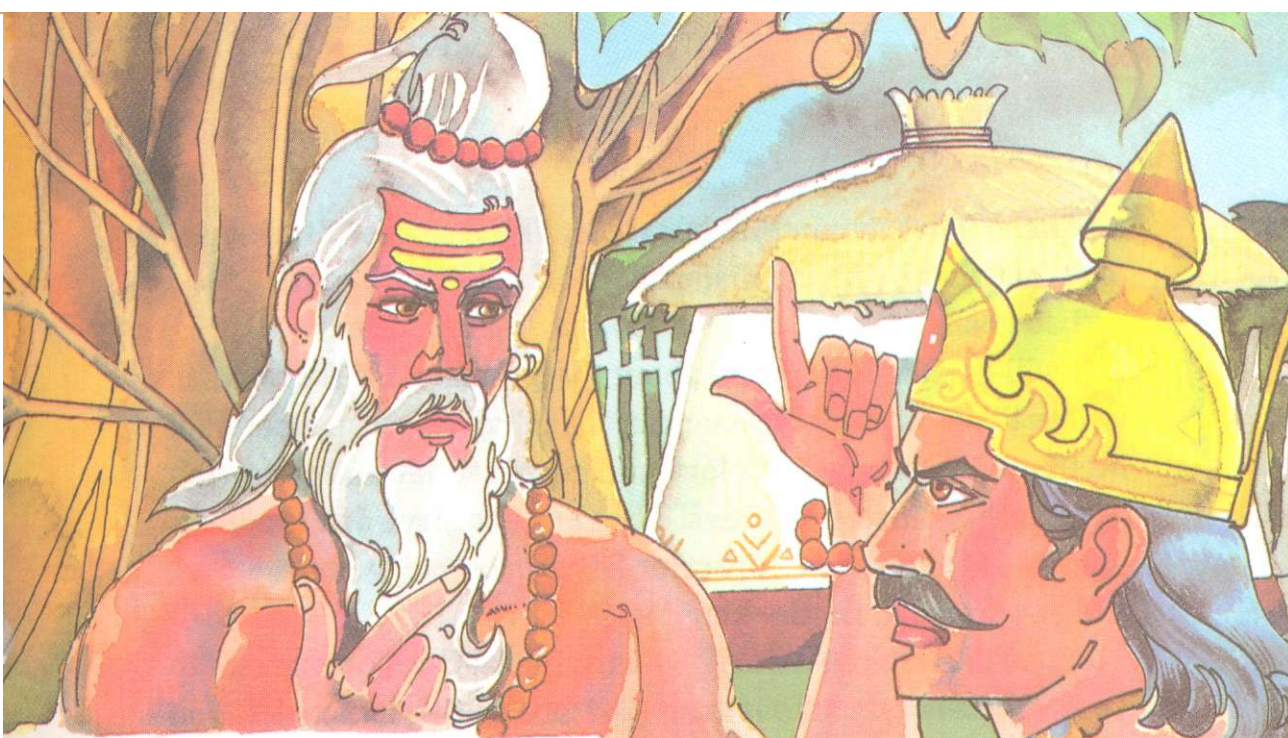
"He will not attack Dongrila. He is a peace-loving fellow. For the sake of a bird, he cannot risk the lives of hundreds of his soldiers."

Gyan Deep remained silent. He knew there was no point in arguing with someone as stubborn as Jagat Guru.

And so, poor Kokila was kept in a golden cage and given the choicest fruits to eat. But Kokila refused to sing. Jagat Guru coaxed, cajoled, begged and even threatened her, but it was of no use. Kokila just would not sing.

Jagat Guru started getting desperate. He called a number of doctors and got them to examine Kokila. But there seemed nothing wrong with the bird. Finally, he came to know of a wise old man, said to be more than a hundred years old, who lived in a tiny cottage on the Nilgiri Hills. His name was Prashant *Baba*.

One day, Jagat Guru went alone to Prashant *Baba's* ashram. He saw a hermit, clad in white, sitting under a banyan tree meditating. Though he had white hair and beard, his face was very youthful. It had a kind of radiance Jagat Guru had never seen in his life before. He touched Prashant *Baba's* feet and sat



down. After a few minutes the sage opened his eyes. The king explained the purpose of his visit and told him the entire story.

The sage looked at him for a few minutes, then said, "Do you really believe Kokila is a magical bird."

"Yes, of course *Baba*, that is why Shangrila is..."

"You are a fool!" Prashant *Baba* cut him short.

"What! How dare you call me, Jagat Guru, the king of Dongrila, a fool!" Jagat Guru got up, his hand reaching for his sword.

"Shut up and sit down," commanded the *Baba*. There was so much authority in his voice and such power in his gaze that Jagat Guru sat down meekly.



"The magic is not in Kokila's voice. The magic is in the deeds of Rishi Raj, the King of Shangrila."

"I do not understand."

"I will explain. I know all about the problems of Dongrila as well as the prosperity of Shangrila. Rishi Raj is kind and merciful; he treats his people with love and respect. Naturally they too have imbibed these qualities. The ripples of love and kindness generated by the king at the centre have grown bigger and bigger and enveloped the entire kingdom."

Prashant *Baba* paused and looking at Jagat Guru continued, "In your case the opposite is true. You are selfish and cruel. You ascended the throne by killing your elder brother. You have always been greedy and treated your people like slaves. Your subjects too have imbibed your qualities. I am sure you have heard the Sanskrit saying—*Yatha Raja Tatha Praja*—as is the king so are the subjects."

Jagat Guru remained silent.

"How long have you kept Kokila with you?" *Baba* asked.

"One month."

"Go and have a look at Shangrila. Even in Kokila's absence it is still as peaceful as ever. Love and happiness still reign supreme in Shangrila, while in Dongrila..." Prashant *Baba* looked at Jagat Guru and slowly shook his head.

"Why has Kokila stopped singing?"

"She found the atmosphere of Dongrila suffocating. Moreover, in Shangrila she was a free bird while in your palace she has been encaged. Take Kokila back to Shangrila and apologize to Rishi Raj. Instead of stealing the so-called magical bird, try to emulate the 'magical' qualities of Rishi Raj."

Jagat Guru went to his kingdom and released the soldiers who had accompanied Kokila. He then took the bird to Shangrila.

"I am sorry, my friend, I was blind to my own faults," Jagat Guru apologized to King Rishi Raj.

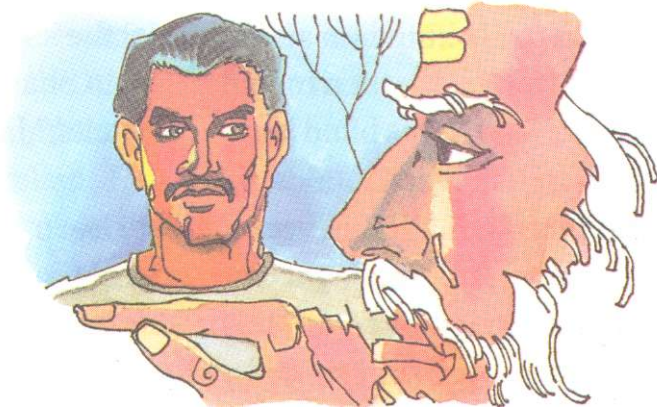
The King embraced him. "It is never too late to learn," he said.

A year later, a hermit entered Jagat Guru's court. For a moment Jagat Guru did not recognize him. Then suddenly it dawned on him. He rushed to touch Prashant *Baba's* feet and made him sit beside him.

"Son, I have come to give you my blessings. I am happy you took my advice. I was passing through your kingdom and it was a lovely sight. I could hear the voices of hundred's of Kokila's singing their magical songs. In fact, for a moment I was not sure whether I was in Shangrila or Dongrila. I am indeed proud of you."







## **Ends And Means**

*Ramendra Kumar*

*Swami* Agnivesh was a monk who roamed the villages along the river Ganges with his small group of followers. They went from village to village collecting alms.

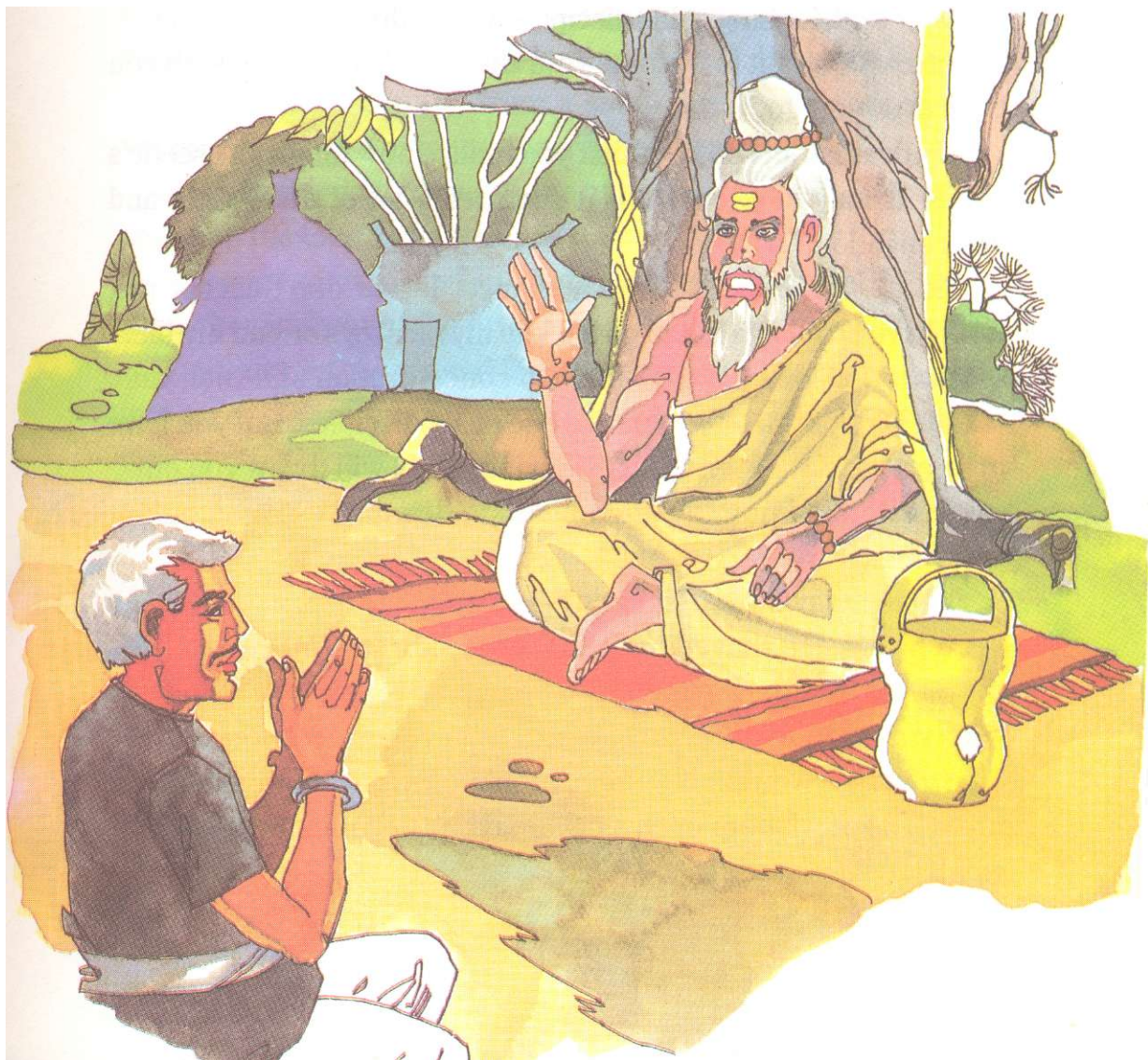
During the day they would collect the offerings, and at night either enjoy the hospitality of a kind and generous host or take shelter under a tree.

One evening, *Swami* Agnivesh was sitting under a banyan tree addressing a group of faithfals. He was a good speaker and had the ability to hold his audience spellbound for hours together. He was giving a discourse on *The Geeta* and its relevance to the common man.

After the discourse everyone left, discussing among themselves the sage's words of wisdom. Only one man stayed back. He was Birju, a petty thief. He had wandered in on seeing the crowd and sat down. He had been hopeful of getting a chance

to pick a pocket or two. In the beginning his attention kept wandering as he searched for prosperous-looking faces. Gradually he was drawn to what the *Swamiji* was saying. The *Swamiji* was speaking in a simple language which even an illiterate boor like him could understand. As he listened carefully, he found himself getting completely absorbed in *Swamiji's* words.

After everyone had left, Birju approached *Swamiji* with folded hands and a lot of hesitation.



"*Swamiji*, I.. I am Birju, a petty thief."

"Birju, you have come to the wrong person. I have nothing to offer you but my wisdom. Steal that, " *Swamiji* said, smiling benevolently, as his followers laughed.

"*Swamiji*, your words have made a great impact on me. Suddenly my entire life flashed before my eyes and I realized I have completely wasted it. I have decided to change. I want to lead an honest life. I want to repent."

"That is very good. It is never too late to realize one's mistakes," *Swamiji* said, looking at his disciples who nodded in agreement.

"*Swamiji*, I want to become your disciple. I want to be with you wherever you go."

"My dear Birju, I do not think you realize how tough an ascetic's life is. It may look easy but it requires a lot of dedication and determination."

"Please, *Swamiji*, give me a chance. If you don't accept me, I will have no choice but to go back to my old ways or end my life."

*Swamiji* closed his eyes in deep concentration and then said. "Okay, Birju, from today you are one of my disciples. But you have to be careful. Any sign of misbehaviour and I will throw you out."

Birju nodded humbly, then bending down, prostrated before the sage.

The next day onwards, Birju was a member of *Swamiji's* band of followers. He shaved his head, wore saffron clothes and lived the life of a wandering monk. *Swamiji* was very happy with Birju who was now called Birijanand. Wherever *Swamiji* gave a discourse he would give the example of Birju. "On listening to my words of wisdom even a criminal has become a *sanyasi*," he would declare proudly.



One night, *Swamiji* and his followers reached the outskirts of the village of Lohban and camped under a *peepul* tree. It was cold.

"Can someone go to the village and get some firewood so that we can keep ourselves warm?" *Swamiji* asked.

Birju volunteered and set off quickly to fulfil his master's command.

It was pitch dark. All windows and doors were shut. Birju went from door to door hoping to see a light or movement somewhere. It was all quiet; everyone seemed to be asleep. Birju did not want to disturb the villagers in the dead of night. He was wondering what to do, when he heard a familiar sound. He looked around. It seemed to be coming from a small hut in one corner of the village. It was as if someone was frying something.

He walked quickly towards the hut. It had a small window. Birju stood on his toes and peeped in.

A young woman, clad in a tattered saree, was sitting on her haunches in front of the fireplace. A frying pan was on the fire.

Two children, a girl aged five and a boy aged four were huddled in a corner. They were thin with their bones sticking out of their torn clothes.



As Birju watched, he found the mother doing something strange. Every few seconds she would take a few drops of water and sprinkle on the pan. She also kept mumbling to her children. Birju could not make out what she was saying. As Birju watched, she kept repeating the same thing.

Curiosity overtook Birju. Standing at the door he said, "Devi, I am Birijanand, a disciple of *Swami Agnivesh Maharaj*."

The young woman was surprised to see a person in saffron clothes. She stood lip and walking towards Birju touched his feet. "*Maharaj*, I am indeed fortunate to have your blessed feet enter my humble abode. However, I am equally unfortunate because I have nothing to give you."

"*Devi*, I have been observing you for the last few minutes. All you have been doing is sprinkling water on the pan. Why have you been doing that?"

"*Swamiji*, there is not a grain of rice in the house. My children have been screaming the whole evening for food. By sprinkling water on the pan I was giving them the impression that food was being cooked. The sound of water on the pan kept them under the illusion that something was being fried. Poor wretches, they are too innocent to differentiate between reality and illusion. See, with the hope that food is getting ready, they have gone to sleep."

Birju looked at the two kids huddled together like pups. Tears welled up in Birju's eyes. Without uttering a word, he walked out of the hut.

He searched the lanes of the village and finally found what he was looking for—a grocery store. He worked on the huge lock on the front door and within minutes, had succeeded in opening it.

"It seems I have not forgotten my skills," he muttered and went

in. He emerged ten minutes later, carrying two sacks. He went into the hut and placed the sacks at the woman's feet.

"*Devi*, these provisions should last you for three months at least," he said and walked out before the women could ask any questions.

When he returned, he found *Swami* Agnivesh still waiting for him.

"What happened? What took you so long? Where is the firewood?"

Birju narrated the entire story.

"What? I cannot believe it!" *Swamiji* jumped up. His face turning red. "You committed a theft? *Swami* Agnivesh's follower a thief! What will people say?"

"B...but...*Swamiji*...the poor children..."

"Stop talking nonsense! You cannot justify your action by making lame excuses. A sin is a sin. The end cannot justify the means. This is your last day with me. Tomorrow morning I want you to go away. I do not ever want to see your sinful face again."

The next morning, when Birju opened his eyes, there was a dazzling light in the sky. He looked around. *Swamiji* and his followers were getting up, rubbing their eyes. A huge bird-like creature was descending from the sky.

"It is a Pushpak *viman*," someone shouted.

"Yes, you are right. I think Lord Indra has sent his messenger to take me to heaven," *Swami* Agnivesh said.

His followers prostrated before him and he raised his hand in benediction. "Today my moment of *nirvana* has come. Finally I will be freed from the endless cycle of birth and death. I will be attaining salvation. My entire life, I have never deviated from the



path of *dharma*. I have lived like a monk and never committed a single sin. And this is a reward for all my noble deeds."

A young man clad in fine clothes got down from the *viman*. *Swamiji* stepped forward. "I am Brahmadrutt. I have been sent by Lord Indra," he said.

"I know, I know. I was just telling my disciples the same thing. I am ready to go with you."

"I have not come to take you," Brahmadrutt said, looking around.

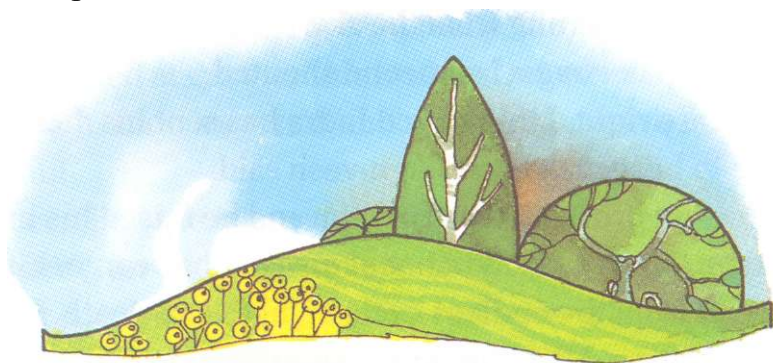
"Not come to take me?" *Swamiji* stuttered, quite sure he had not heard right.

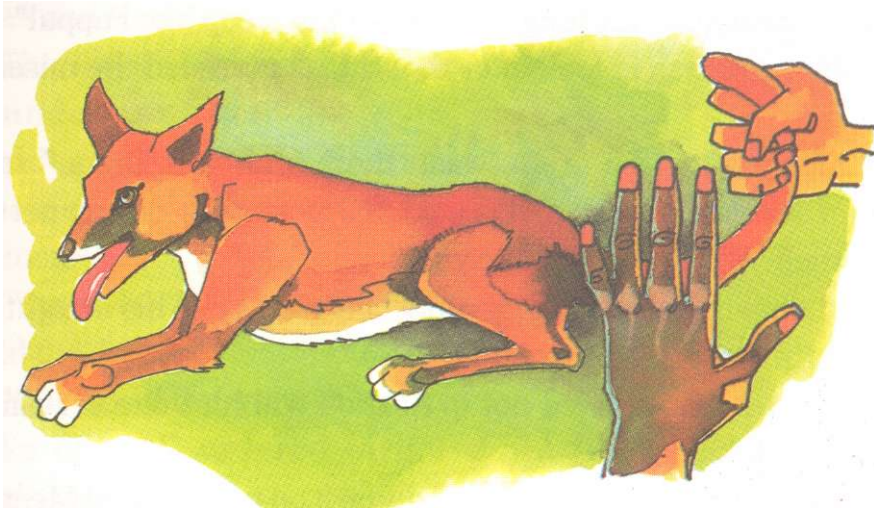
"No, I have come to take him," Brahmadrutt said, pointing at Birju who was standing in one corner.

"Birju," *Swamiji* could not believe his eyes, "that thief!"

"Yes, his kind act last night surpassed all the virtuous deeds of yours. If the end is noble then the means are not all that important. Lord Rama killed Bali by treacherous means. Lord Krishna resorted to deceit quite a few times in the Mahabharata, because he knew the end was right. Even though Birju's means were improper, his end was virtuous."

*Swamiji* stood speechless as Birju followed Brahmadrutt into the Pushpak *viman*.





## **The Workaholic Servant!**

*Hema Rao*

Makhan Lai was a rich farmer. He had acres and acres of wheat fields. His farm had a large number of cows, oxen and buffaloes. There were so many servants in his household that no one had any work to do!

His wife and children were happy. They had enough food to eat, lots of money to buy anything and servants at their beck and call. Makhan Lai should have been happy. But he was not. He hated the money he had to spend to keep servants. Makhan Lai was a miser!

"What work does Pappu do?" grumbled Makhan Lai. "He just eats and sleeps the whole day long!"

"Pappu looks after our grandchildren," retorted Meenu, his wife. "He feeds them, plays with them and takes them wherever they want to go, a more devoted man I am yet to see. So what if he sleeps when the children sleep? It is a tiring job. Try chasing

six kids the whole day long. You too would sleep like Pappu!"

"Babloo just has to look after the cattle," persisted the miserly farmer.

"Milk them, graze them, wash them and walk them," said Meenu sarcastically. "If that is not hard work, why do you not do it yourself? Work would make you fit and fine."

"And able to live till ninety-nine!" giggled Teja, his daughter, handing him a glass of sweet *lassi*.

Makhan Lai pretended not to hear. "I will hire one servant!" declared Makhan Lai.

"If my workload increases, I will dump it on you!" vowed Meenu.

"*Pitaji!*" exclaimed Teja. "You are mad! Who will look after all the chores on this huge farm?"

"One servant!" said Makhan Lai, thrilled that he would have to pay only one salary!

"Pray, where will you find this extraordinary man?" asked his daughter.

"Wait and see!" retorted her father.

Makhan Lai now had a problem. He had to find a servant. Someone who would look after the house, the garden, the cattle and the fields. He then had a wonderful idea.

"I shall go to Mrigu *Maharaj*," declared Makhan Lai, triumphantly.

The farmer went to Mrigu *Maharaj*. Mrigu *Maharaj* was a *sadhu*. He had tantric, magical powers.

"*Maharaj!*" pleaded Makhan Lai. "Give me one man to do all my work."

The *sadhu* placed some firewood on the ground. He closed his eyes and went into deep meditation. He then opened his



eyes and chanted some words.

There was a frightening clap of thunder as the firewood suddenly burst into flames. There emerged a dark, muscular demon.

"Your wish is my command!" said the demon.

"Go! Do all the work this man asks of you!" ordered Mrigu Maharaj.

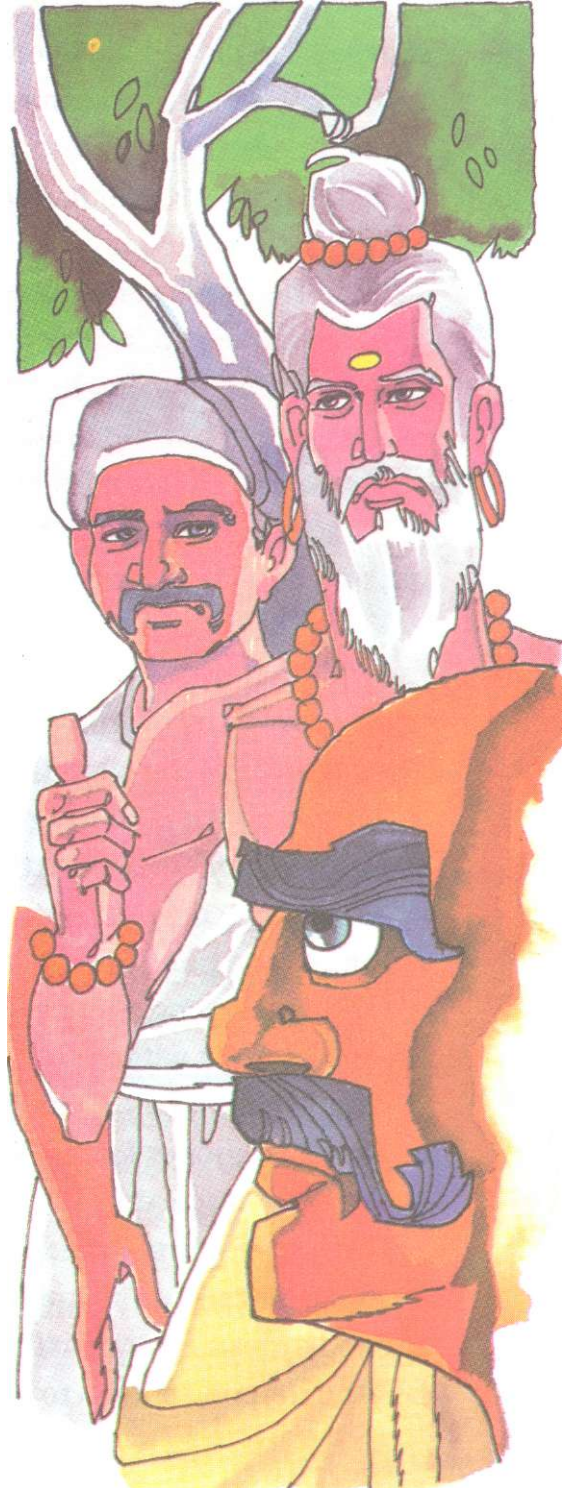
"Done!" said the demon. "But he should give me no time to rest! I have to work all day and all night. Otherwise I will gobble him up!"

"There is tons of work on my farm," declared Makhan Lai happily.

Makhan Lai went home with his new servant. He dismissed all his servants. Now he would be able to save his precious money! He had to pay only one person, that too a measly amount.

"Go and plough the fields," ordered Makhan Lai.

The demon went outside. Makhan Lai lay down on a



*charpoy* and closed his eyes. It was time for a good nap.

"Eeeeeeeeeeeee!" screamed Makhan Lai in fright, a few minutes later, as someone ruthlessly pinched him.

"Give me work," demanded the demon. "I have ploughed the fields!"

"Sow the seeds and water the fields," said Makhan Lai settling down on his *charpoy* to sleep again.

"An earthquake!" yelled Makhan Lai, a few minutes later, as every bone in his body rattled. It was the demon shaking him!

"Work! I need work!" shouted the demon.

"Feed the cattle, give them a wash in the river and take them grazing outside the farm," ordered a tired Makhan Lai.

Makhan Lai settled down once more on his *charpoy*. At this rate he would never be able to sleep. Thinking up chores was tiresome. His previous servants never asked him what to do. They knew exactly what they had to do!

"It is raining! It is pouring!" shouted Makhan Lai, moments later, as water fell on him. It was the demon pouring cold water on him!

"Work! I need work!" grumbled the furious demon.

"Empty the pond and fill it with fresh water said Makhan Lai.

"Then make cow dung cakes, cut wood and cook food," added Meenu, a silent witness to her husband's plight.

Poor Makhan Lai! That day he had no rest. His brain got tired concocting chores for the work-hungry demon. His ears ached as the demon roared, "WORK! WORK! MORE WORK."

The house was spic and span. The fields were well-tended and so were the cattle. The kitchen work was also all done. The cattle shed was clean. Every part of Makhan Lai's body craved for sleep. But the demon refused to let him sleep even for a few minutes!



He packed the demon off to the market. It was a busy place. That would keep him occupied for a while!

Meanwhile night was falling.

"What work shall I give him?" wondered the hapless farmer.

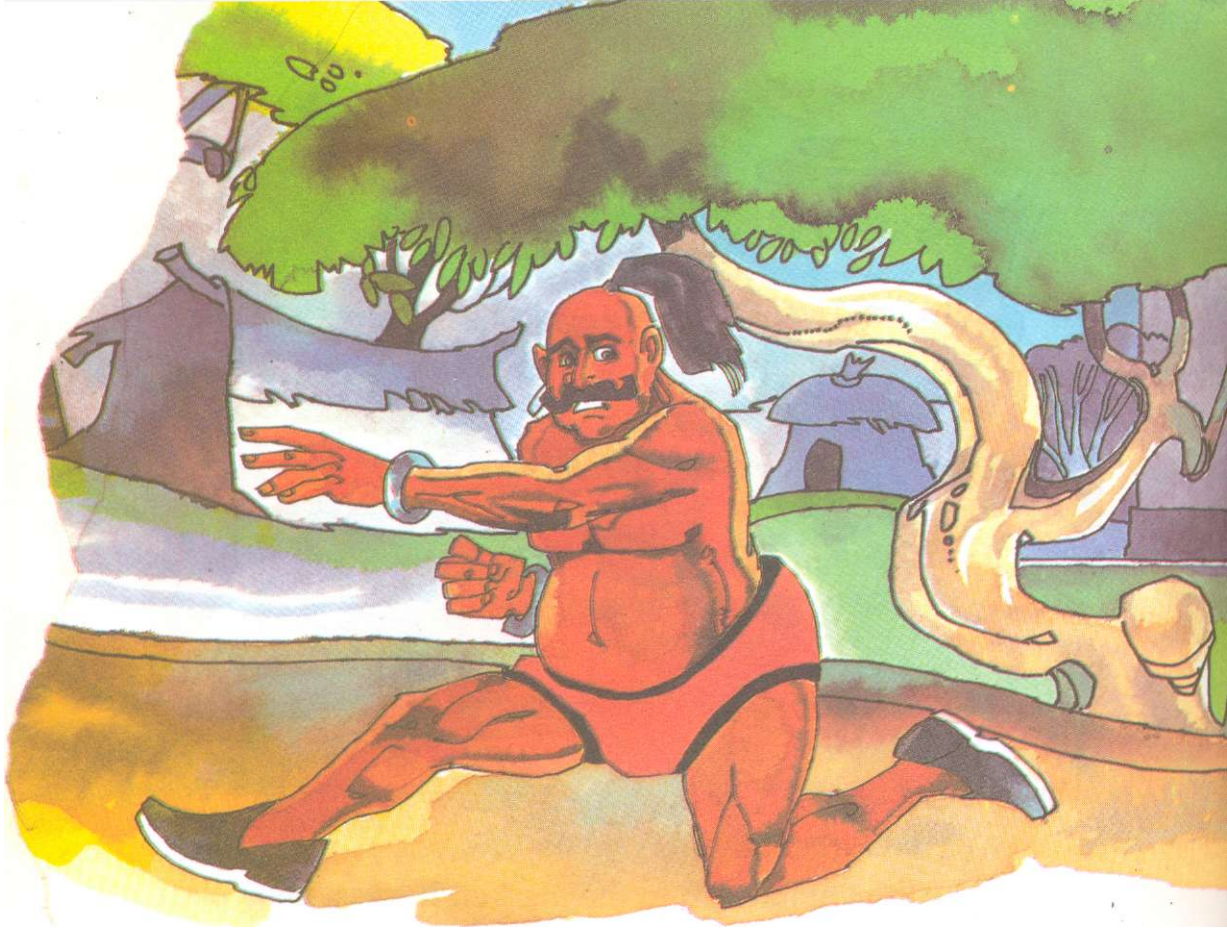
"Work!" demanded the demon.

"Be the night chowkidar," said Makhan Lai happily "Guard my fields and cattle. See that no one dares to enter. Not even a mouse!"

Makhan Lai could not sleep that night. He kept thinking of all the chores he would have to give the demon the next day. He tossed and turned the whole night long. Finally, he fell into a troubled sleep. In sleep, as well, he was running away from little demons shouting, "WORK! WORK! GIVE US MORE!"

Morning came. It brought back the demon. He did not seem tired or weary. He was as fit as a fiddle, while Makhan Lai felt like a tired, old man.





"This time I have work for you!" said Meenu to the demon. Her husband was shocked. "See that dog in the corner? His tail is curled. Please straighten it for me!"

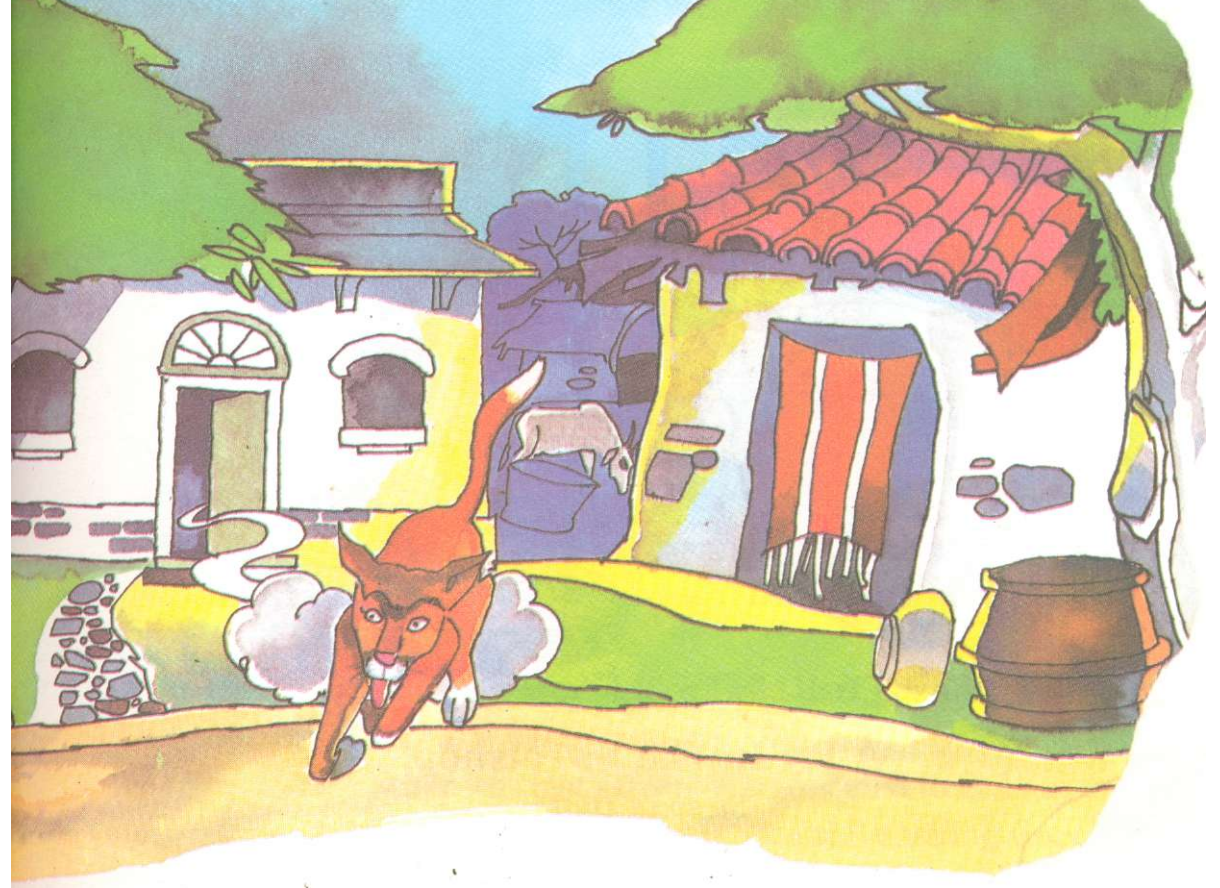
The demon went to the dog, Moti. The dog was feeling very happy. He had just had a huge bowl of milk, eaten two chapattis and chased a mouse. His curly tail wagged happily. The demon gently held the tail and straightened it out!

"Grrrrrr!" growled Moti, softly.

The demon let go of the tail. It promptly curled. The demon once again pulled the tail straight

"Grrrrrrrrrrrrrrrr!" growled the angry dog, puzzled by the demon's behaviour.

The demon hurriedly let go of the tail which promptly curled. The angry demon again pulled the tail hard!



"GRRRRRRRRRRRRRR! BOW-WOW! BOW-WOW! barked a furious Moti.

"Help!" screamed the demon in terror, as Moti ran after him barking furiously.

The demon ran round the house. The dog followed him.

"Help! Please help me!" pleaded the hapless demon.

No one came to his rescue.

"Run away!" shouted Meenu, the farmer's wife, "Run away! Moti will eat you!"

The demon did just that. He ran as fast as he could. Moti came back home. The enemy had been vanquished!

Makhan Lai re-hired his servants. He has now become generous and spends his money freely. He never goes out alone as he is scared he will meet his workaholic servant again!





## **A Fly In The Sweetshop!**

*Swapna Dutta*

It was a lazy, summer afternoon. All grown-ups were either asleep or resting. Gopal, sleeping cosily on a mat, snored loudly. His wife having completed all her afternoon chores, was asleep too. But Hari, Gopal's son, felt far from sleepy. The village school where he studied was closed for a few days. Most of his friends had gone off, somewhere or the other. Young Hari was bored with nothing to do. Bored and very, very hungry! True, there were the usual things to eat in the house—puffed rice, jaggery home-made coconut *naroos* and pickles of various kinds. But Hari wanted none of those. What he craved for at the moment were proper sweets sold in the shop.

Hari shook his mother who was fast asleep.

"Ma, please give me some money," he told her.

His mother merely grunted and turned over.

"Ma, I am hungry?" he said a little louder. "Please wake up."



It was really difficult to wake her when she had her mid-day nap. But Hari's repeated shouts made her yawn and open her eyes. "What is the matter?" she said, very cross. "Why are you buzzing over my head like a fly?"

"I told you I am famished," said Hari, crossly.

'Then go and eat something for goodness' sake. There is enough food in the house to feed an army," said his mother, closing her eyes again. "I roasted ajar full of puffed rice only this morning and there are enough pickles and coconut sweets to go with it.

"I do not want puffed rice or pickles," said Hari, pouting, "I want *rosogollas*, *chum-chum*, *pantu*, and *jilipi jalebi*."

But Hari's mother was fast asleep! Hari decided to call out to his father. "*Baba*, I want some money," he said, shaking Gopal. Gopal snored louder!

"*Baba*, there is a new sweetshop round the corner. I want to buy some sweets," he shouted.

Gopal continued to snore.

"*Baba*, please listen to me," cried Hari in a desperate voice.

Gopal opened his eyes. "What is it?" he asked, yawning.

"I want to eat some *rosogollas* and *chum chum* and..."

'Then go and eat them instead of hovering like a fly," said Gopal, turning the other side.

"How can I? I do not have any money," said Hari but Gopal was asleep once again.

Hari came out of the house very disappointed. He walked up to the new sweetshop and peeped inside. He gazed longingly at the snow-white puffy *rosogollas* swimming in the clear syrup, bright maroon *pantuas* in pale yellow syrup, yellow *laddoos* and creamy

*pedas* heaped on *thalis*, red and white *bundia* in huge brass containers. Everything that he longed to eat was here, right inside the shop! If only he could get some without having to pay!

He wondered if he could ask for some, and tell his father to pay up later. Then he dismissed the thought. He would never get the shop keeper to agree! He was an old miser and no one had got the better of him yet! A fresh thought struck Hari. Everyone told him that his father, Gopal was so clever—always able to get whatever he wanted. Well, could he not, Gopal's son, do it too? Get the sweets free without actually being in the wrong, so that no one could blame him? Now, that would be a real achievement!

The whole village knew how tight-fisted the keeper of the sweetshop was. He had never given any one anything free to date. Could Hari make him do it? Something which even his father had not managed to do?

Hari kept a close watch on the sweetshop from a distance. He waited until the shopkeeper put aside his large account-book, counted the money, put it in his safe and finally lay down on his mat at the back of the shop. He too never missed his afternoon siesta! Hari heard him call out to his son, telling him to take charge of the shop.

"I don't think anyone is likely to come, it is hot!" he told his son, "but if anyone comes, make sure to count the change properly every time. And mind you, do not give a jot more than the actual weight of the sweets. Give less in case of any doubt. And of course, palm off the stale ones first Tell them that they are freshly made."

"Yes, *Baba*" said his son, obediently.

Hari crept inside the shop quietly when he heard the shopkeeper snoring.



"What do you want?" asked the shopkeeper's son.

"*Rosogollas, sandesh, chum-chum an&pantua* to start with," said Hari with a broad grin.

"Give me the money first," said the shopkeeper's son.

"I do not need to. I can eat them free," said Hari.

"Oh no, you do not," said the son. "You do not know my father! He never gives anything free."

"He will not mind my eating his sweets," said Hari.

"I do not believe you," said the son, incredulously.

"Go and ask him then," said Hari, popping a couple of juicy *rosogollas* into his mouth.

"My father will beat you if you don't pay for those."

"Tell him I am here and see what he says," said Hari, picking up a handful of *laddoos*.

"Wait here then and do not eat any more until I have told him," said the son.

"I told you he will not say anything," said Hari, polishing off four *pantuas* at one go.

The shopkeeper's son was in a fix. He could not believe his father would allow anyone to take anything free. But the boy seemed so confident. He did not even seem a bit afraid of his father!

"Who are you?" he asked at last, "some relative I have never met?"

"Good heavens, no! I am just a boy like yourself!" said Hari.

"What are you called?" asked the son.

"A fly," said Hari, winking at him.

"Surely that cannot be your name!"

"My parents just call me that," said Hari, "Go on, tell your father."

The shopkeeper was fast asleep and snoring loudly. He was hopping mad to be woken up so suddenly by his son. "What's up? Is the shop on fire?" he bellowed.

"No, Baba."

"Thieves have broken in then?"

"N...o."

"Then what is it?"

"Fly is here. He is eating the sweets."

"A fly? You dared to wake me up because of a fly?" shouted the shopkeeper.

"He is eating the sweets."



"You are crazy to bother me for a mere fly," roared the shopkeeper, "How much can a fly eat? Leave it alone and do not dare to wake me up again."

"Yes, *Baba*," said his son obediently.

By the time he came to the counter, Hari had already had his fill and was grinning broadly.

"Well?" he asked, "what did your father say? Did I not tell you he will not mind my eating the sweets?"

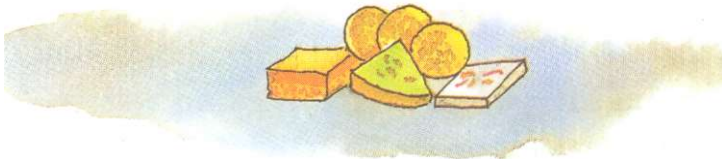
"He asked me to leave you alone," said the boy, still looking puzzled! "I do not understand."

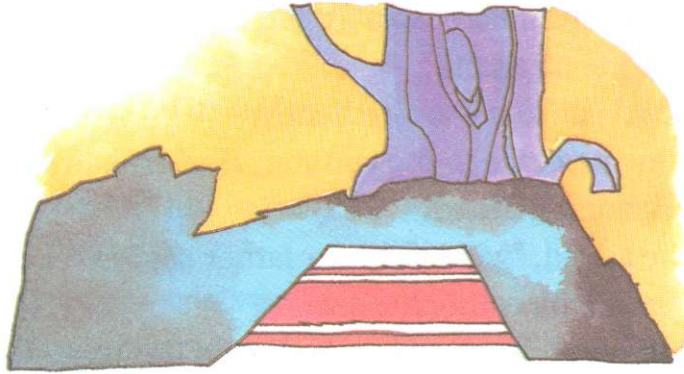
"He would have beaten me if I had dared to eat half as many sweets as you have eaten."

"Try being a fly next time," said Hari mischievously. "And please thank your father on my behalf. It was a gorgeous feast!"

"It is funny..." said the shopkeeper's son.

But Hari was already on his way home, grinning from ear to ear and smacking his lips contentedly!





## **The Price Of A Shadow**

*Sarla Bhatia and S.K. Bhatia*

Bhimgaon, a village of about 200 inhabitants, lies on a parched land nearly 60 km from Jhansi. Small hillocks abound all around. For almost 25 acres surrounding the village well, there is hardly a piece of green grass. There is only one *peepul* tree in the entire village, but no one dares to go near it. Madho, the village *bania*, declares it as his property, because the tree stands next to the wall of his house.

Jhunia, the *dhobi*, happened to deliver the Madho family's weekly washing. It was noon and the sun was at its peak. Bundelkhand's heat has no parallels. Even Jhunia's donkey lay sprawled in the niggardly shadow of the *peepul* tree when he came out of the house with the *bania* family's dirty clothes. Jhunia too opened out one sheet and lay down. Soon he was snoring. The heat in the open was extremely punishing.

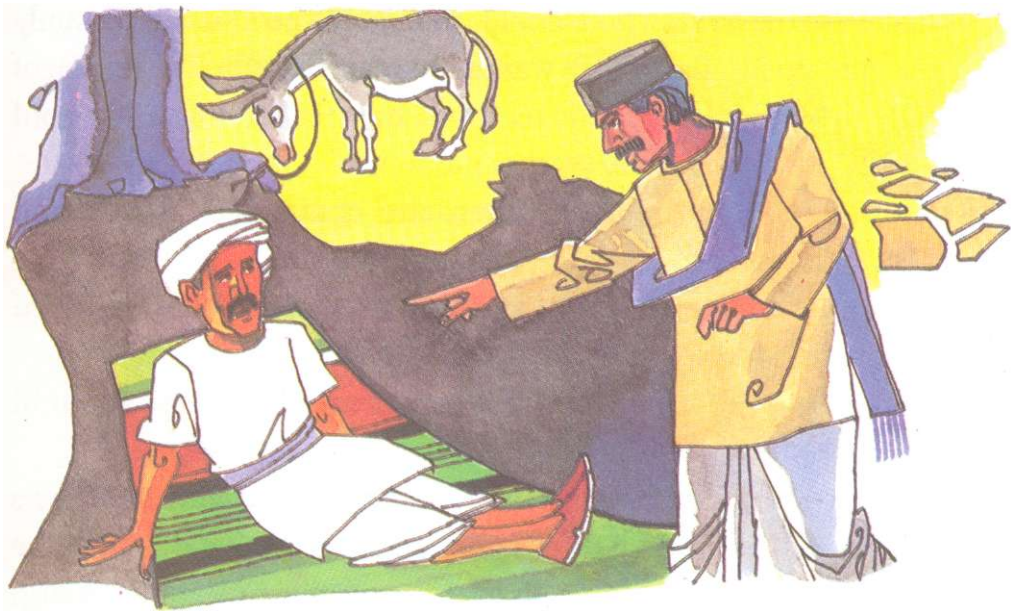
"Eh, you there. Who allowed you to make this your place of

rest?" Madho shouted at the sleeping Jhunia. The washerman was rudely awakened and took a few minutes to collect himself. "Pardon me, Sir, I just dozed off. It is too hot in the sun," he urged.

"This land does not belong to you. This tree is mine, the whole village knows it. I cannot stand any trespasser in front of my house," the *bania* was stern and forthright.

"*Malik*(master), I came to deliver your washed clothes. My father also worked for your household for twenty-five years. After all, I do have a right to rest in the shadow for a while. This act of mine does no harm to you," Jhunia pleaded meekly.

The *bania* stiffened. He thought to himself, 'Does this fellow have a right? If I accept it today, he may, on another day, ask to sleep in our courtyard. I cannot allow this liberty.' He came out. "No. You have no right to rest even for a minute under the shadow. Nothing comes for free in this world, my dear."



"Do you want money even for the shadow?" asked Jhunia.

"Why not?" responded Madho curtly.

"All right, quote your price," the *dhobi* demanded.

"Rs.10 for the shadow," the *bania* answered.

"I will be ruined, master. Be reasonable," appealed Jhunia.

"Not a pie less."

"I can pay you Rs. 2."

"All right, let us compromise at Rs. 5. But you must sign a pledge tomorrow in the presence of a *sarpanch*. And now, do not waste my time in fruitless conversation," Madho *bania* declared.

"You have left me no choice, *Malik*. I will be here right this time tomorrow," agreed the helpless washerman. He departed rather depressed, his donkey towing behind him. Madho was extremely pleased with himself. Rs. 5 would buy him more than ten acres. After all, what worth was this shadow, which neither he nor any of his family members ever utilized. There was jubilation in the *bania's* household. Jhunia was no fool. He certainly had a plan up his sleeve. He wanted to teach Madho the lesson of his life time. Containing his feelings, he reached home and told his wife, "Rangi, give me your ornaments."

Rangi was struck dumb. Then she composed herself and asked, "Whatever for?"

"I want to mortgage them and buy the shadow of the *peepul* tree in front of Madho *bania's* house," said her husband.

His wife could not believe her ears. For a while she thought her husband had lost his mind.

"Did you say you are buying a shadow? Can you hold it as property? My dear, a shadow is not an asset. Our money will be lost forever because this shadow cannot be resold," Rangi



explained all aspects of this strange bargain to her husband and tried to desist him from his thoughtless plan.

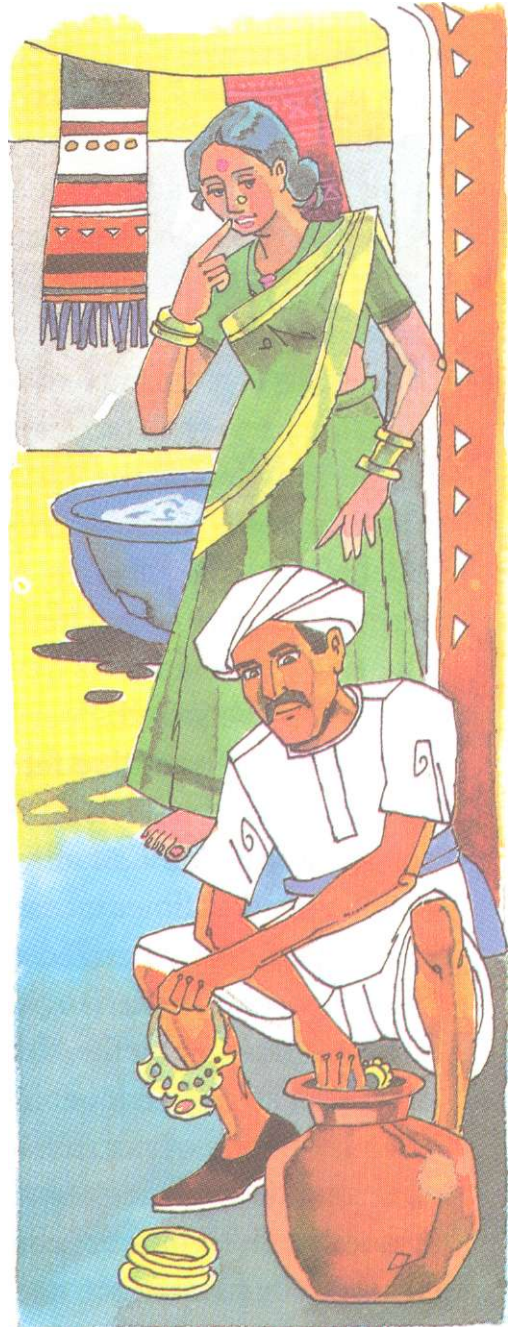
But Jhunia was adamant.

Rangi tried once again, "With the same money we can buy a big piece of land and cultivate profitable crops and be rich one day," she said.

"Look, Rangi," Jhunia raised his voice, "I know my oats. First, I am a washerman and I cannot become a good farmer overnight. Second, farming is a risky game in these arid lands. And finally, it will take me ten years to earn as much by tilling the land as I hope to earn through the shadow in six months."

"Will you bring back my ornaments?" Rangi asked, knowing that her husband was not going to change his mind.

"I swear I will return every piece of your jewellery with a bonus of a silver necklace." Thus assuring his wife of his good intentions, Jhunia collected a bag



full of ornaments that were mortgaged for Rs. 7 with the village goldsmith.

As prearranged, he arrived at Madho's *peepul* tree at the appointed

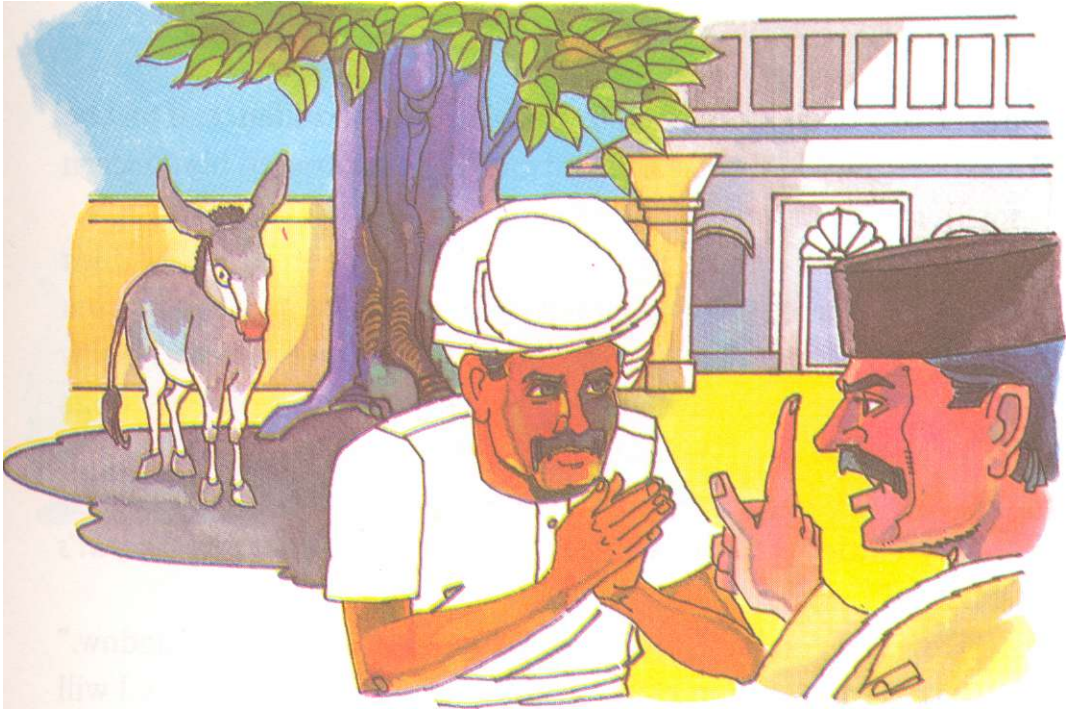
hour. Madho had arranged the *sarpanch* to be available to secure the deal. The Sale Deed read:

"Madho Ram s/o Sadho Ram sells the shadow underneath the *peepul* tree to Jhunia s/o Gunia for his free use in lieu of Rs. 5. If either party fails to implement his part of the agreement, then the defaulting party shall pay a fine of Rs. 10 to the other party."

Madho signed on the Sale Deed, while Jhunia affixed his left thumb impression. The *sarpanch* verified and guaranteed the deal on behalf of all the villagers, nearly twenty of whom had collected there out of curiosity. They were unanimous in their opinion: "The sale of a shadow is never heard of before. And Madho is too clever to be fooled. Poor Jhunia."

It had become routine for Jhunia to sleep in the shade, on a *charpoy*, from afternoon till evening. The donkey was tied to the *charpoy*. For the *bania* family it was rather disturbing when the animal brayed, at times incessantly, without rhyme or reason. The two gentlemen exchanged greetings as usual and sometimes chatted for a while exchanging views of Bhimgaon's households to stay updated of births, deaths and weddings. Madho sensed something strange happening, but initially failed to pin point it. When he could not restrain himself any longer he said, "Jhunia, I see you and your donkey resting next to the boundary wall of my house. First, you were confining yourself underneath the tree only. Are you planning to occupy my house shortly?"

"No, Master. I shall stay within my rights; that is, underneath



the shadow only. As the sun goes westward, the shadow moves eastward, towards your house. I will never move beyond the shadow for which, as you know, I have paid you handsomely."

The *bania*, though enraged, had no logic to rebut the washerman's argument.

"I am not sure of my legal rights yet. Giving due regard to our long association, I will forego any claim to the shadow falling within the boundary of your house. You can believe me that I have no ulterior motive," was Jhunia's reply.

Madho could not be sure of the *dhobi's* motives, but had to be content for the time being. However, some uneasiness was beginning to rise within his stomach. Since nothing more or different happened for a few weeks, the rich man cooled off.

Then Jhunia disappeared suddenly. Madho was surprised, but had no clue of the *dhobi's* whereabouts for many days. Had his

adversary been kidnapped by dacoits? 'Good riddance, if that be so,' thought, Madho, though outwardly he expressed his concern for Jhunia to Rangji and the other village folk.

The fateful day came sooner than expected. The *bania* returning home after closing his shop, saw more than a few dozen villagers collected beside his house. As he came nearer, he saw Jhunia on a *charpoy* surrounded by a few dozen sheep, two dogs and two buffaloes. The donkey was there too.

"What is this game, Jhunia?" asked an angry Madho.

"My cattle, Sir. We will henceforth stay under the *peepul's* shadow."

"How can you have them on my land? I only sold the shadow."

"True, Master. You can take away your land elsewhere. I will retain the shadow only."

Madho was stumped for words. The villagers hissed and giggled at the *bania* who always professed to be the cleverest of them all. Not to be beaten, Madho blurted, "Jhunia, you can take away your shadow somewhere else."

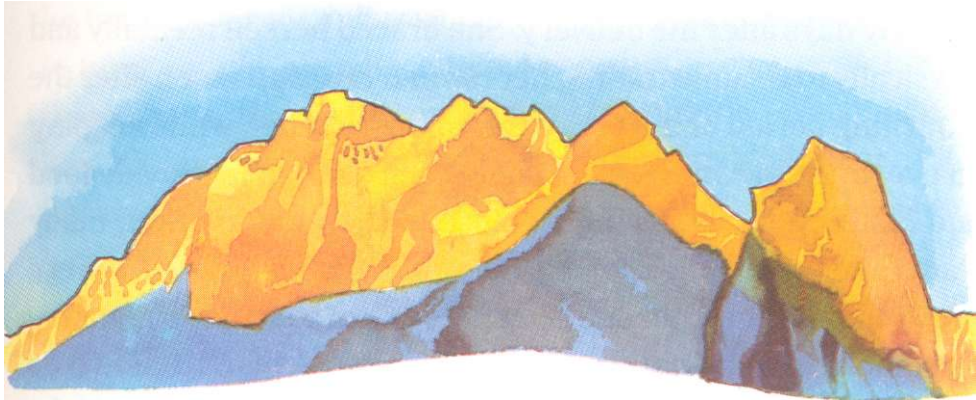
"Think again, Master. For I will then take away *the peepul* tree because the shadow is inseparable from it."

Madho went and consulted his family and friends. How could he allow Jhunia to remove the sacred tree planted by his ancestors. There was no choice but to pay up the fine of Rs. 10

Jhunia earned his money and departed by saying. "Madho master, this shadow is God's gift. It is priceless. Let us all share it!"

Jhunia gave Rangji all that he had promised her. Their house glowed with a hundred *diyas* that evening!





## **The Bridegroom**

*Sari a Bhatia*

Many, many decades ago, Bhagyawanti lived in a village 60 kms from Nainital. Her husband, Narayan, died the day she delivered triplets. 'What a worthless name her parents had given her,' she thought. Thereafter, everyone called her Narayani, to keep alive the dead man's memory.

Narayan was not a pauper. By working hard he had earned enough to build a two-room house near the grain market. Then, he married Bhagyawanti who, like him, had neither parents nor any relatives. Bhagya, as Narayan nicknamed her, could cook delicious *channas* (horse grams). Her soft and round *chappatis* attracted a sizeable clientele when the two of them bought a *thela* and traded their *channa-chappati* combination. Just then this tragedy struck. The death of her husband made her more tough than ever before. She was determined to bring up her sons to become useful citizens.

Narayani did not even follow the convention of staying indoors for forty days after the delivery. She braced herself mentally and physically to resume trading her *channa-chappatis* soon after the mourning period of thirteen days. In this manner, while keeping an eye on her newborns, she could earn enough to provide food and clothing for all. Being so close to the grain market, many traders became well-known to her. Meanwhile, the boys were growing and they needed to be educated. For that she had to earn more. She let out the second room on rent to traders who came from far off to sell their grain and needed a place to stay for the night. Thus Narayani came to be known as 'hotelwali'. Besides charging for the night-stay, she also made dinner and breakfast for her guests. Narayani never complained about her bad luck or the day and night tasks that she had to perform. She knew that only hard work rather than mere sympathetic talk would help her through her mission—to raise her sons well.

The boys were named Vaish, Yidur and Vikas. It was a coincidence, perhaps, that their teacher praised all three for their dedication to studies. They went through their school winning laurels in every examination. They helped their mother in every thing. In due course, the two-room tenement became a four-room *sarai*. Narayani's *channa-chappati thela* was replaced by a small eating room. More dishes were added for the convenience of overnight guests. Day traders, too, ate here when they came for buying and selling.

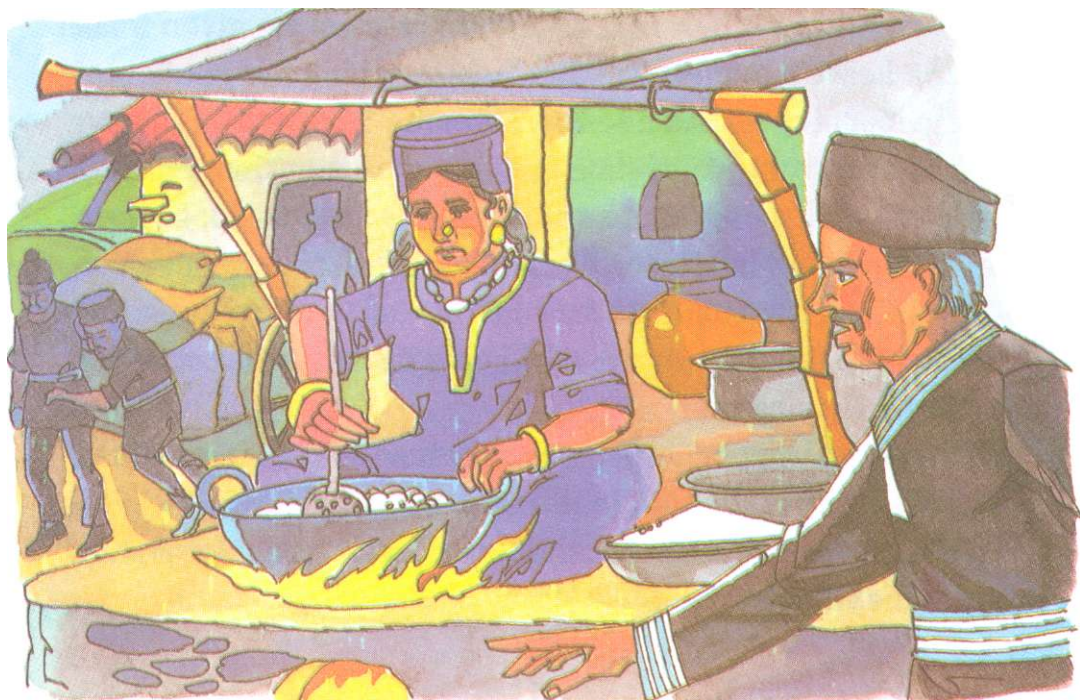
Gyaneshwar owned five acres of land where he grew wheat in winter and rice in the *kharif* season. A few visits to the grain market (once every quarter) were a must for him. His home being nearly thirty kilometers away, necessitated his staying at

Narayani's *sarai* on all these occasions. Thus, over the years, he became very familiar with Narayani and her sons. The boys, in turn, sought his advice to advance in their careers. Each of them chose the vocation suited to his aptitude—Yaish liked to join his mother in running her eating establishment. Vidur became a *pujari* in the local temple. Vikas was somewhat at a loose end. Sometimes he worked for a zamindar and at other times he leased a field or two on crop-sharing basis. Narayani was somewhat worried about his future.

"Narayani, I have a serious matter to discuss with you. Can you ask the boys to give us an hour by ourselves," Gyaneshwar asked one evening.

The boys were intelligent enough to walk away. "What is the matter?" said Narayani.

"I like your boys. They are grown up enough to marry. I have





only one daughter. Tell me which one of your boys would you choose for her, in case you approve of my proposal."

"What an honour it is for me to get a daughter-in-law from such a decent home. You have put me in a dilemma on the matter of choice."

"Be open, lady. I can trust you to be thoughtful for my daughter. She is very beautiful, I can assure you. And she is eighteen, the right age to be a housewife."

Narayani agreed but said, "I cannot choose one from the other. Have you a solution?"

Gyaneshwar, too, felt that all the three must be given a fair chance. "Leave it to me. I will think of something tonight."

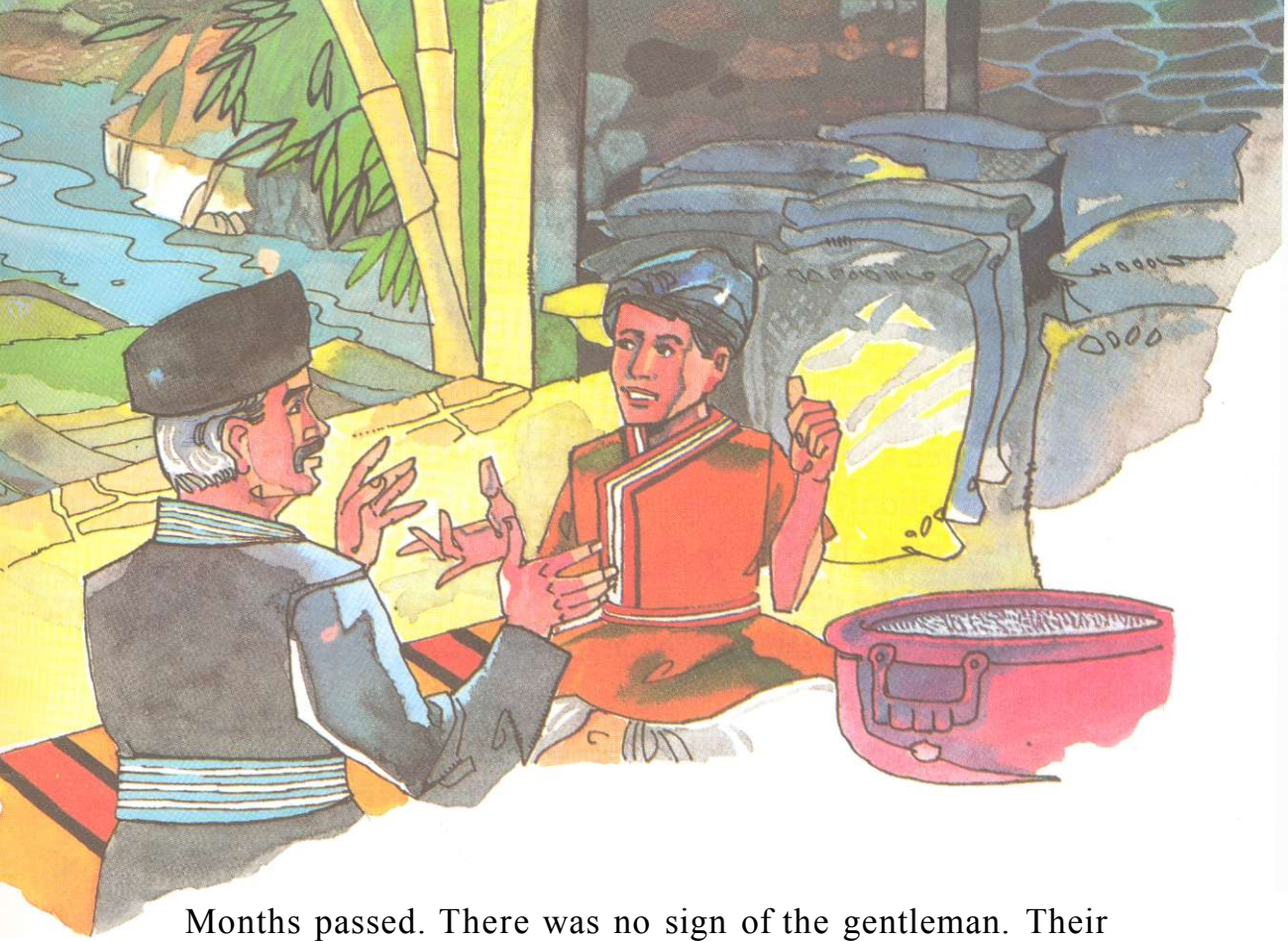
In the morning he had a session with the family. "Boys, I have received a message from home that I should return immediately. I have three bags of grain to sell. I do not want to dispose them off in a hurry and be a loser. Can you do me a favour, Vaish?"

"Say, Uncle, what can I do for you?"

"Son, keep one bag for me till I come back. It will not be too long," said Gyaneshwar.

In the same way, he left one bag each with Vidur and Vikas. Narayani easily understood the game, but considered it wise to let it remain a secret between the two elders. Gyaneshwar went away to his village.





Months passed. There was no sign of the gentleman. Their mother gave them no advice on the disposal of the bags of rice. Unfortunately, the winter was intense and long. Narayani got soaked in the rain one day and caught pneumonia. She did not survive the illness. Vaish, being the eldest, inherited the property, a part of which he sold out to provide shares to the other two. Vidur took away all his belongings, including the bag of grain to live in the temple premises. Vikas bought two acres of land and built a hut to live in with his pots, clothes and grain.

One evening, Gyaneshwar appeared just out of the blue. Vaish gave him a detailed account of all that had happened in the past twelve months. That evening he went away admiring the perseverance and fortitude of Narayani.

The next morning Gyaneshwar asked, "Can I have my bag of grain, Vaish? I would like to sell it for whatever I can get for it."

"Uncle, I sold the bag for Rs. 100 before the grain rotted or the rats spoilt it. "Here is your money," said Vaish.

"I am very obliged to you. You are very thoughtful. I would not have got even a rupee for it had it rotted," said Gyaneshwar with deep satisfaction.

He then made his way to the temple, where Vidur was busy with the morning *aarti*. After a while, when he was free from the daily rituals, he exclaimed. "Nice to see you, Uncle. Where did you vanish?"

"I am also happy to see you, Vidur. It could not be helped. There was a court case which dragged on," replied Gyaneshwar.

"You must be looking for your share of grain. Please do not worry. I've used it on your behalf for a good cause," said Vidur.

Gyaneshwar was anxious to know more. "Uncle, when you did not come back for six months, I had the grain husked and cleaned. Many poor children, men and women come to this temple every day. A few women volunteered to cook that rice which was then distributed to those hungry souls for a month. They all blessed you with their prayers."

Gyaneshwar could not hold himself any more. "Vidur, you are a gem of a man. You have made me secure in my Lord's abode. God bless you, Son. Let me now see your brother, Vikas."

The sun was already hot, yet bearable. Just at the foot hills of Tarai was a small, clean one-room hut where Vikas lived. He welcomed his uncle and offered him a glass of cool water. For a thirsty throat, nothing else could be as welcome. The narrative about the happenings in the past year was necessary before

Gyaneshwar popped the question. "You have my bag of grain safely stored, Son?"

"I cannot give you back your grain, but..."

The old man got excited. "But what? Tell me the rodents ate it away or someone stole the bag, or..."

"Peace, Uncle, peace. I am going to give you more than one bag, but not your bag."

"What do you mean?" asked Gyaneshwar.

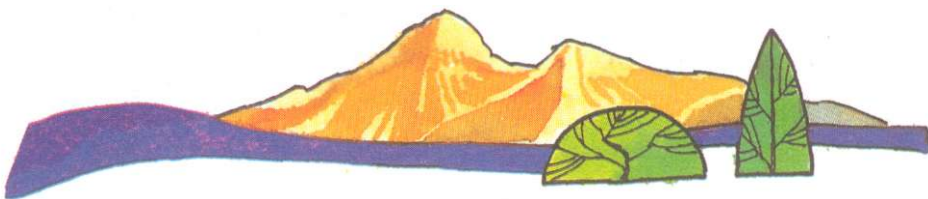
"I used the grain as seed because you had not appeared till the sowing season. I now have 20 bags. Can I have ten of them towards my labour?"

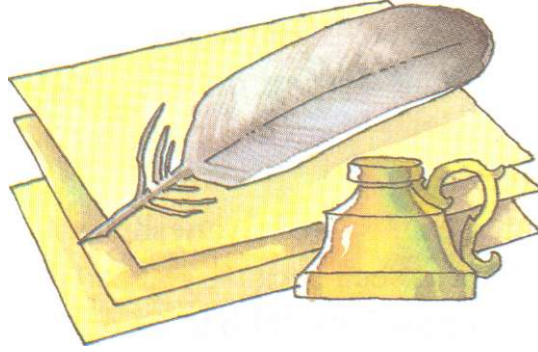
Gyaneshwar stood amazed, "You can have all the bags and also my daughter."

Yikas failed to understand this outburst. Gyaneshwar got the brothers together and confided in them the discussion he had with their mother on the day when he had asked them to leave the two of them alone for a while.

The brothers took the villagers in a procession, led by a band, to the bride's village. Gyaneshwar had the *mandap* decorated with flowers and colourful buntings. The food was plenty and the variety of dishes gladdened everyone.

Narayani once again came to be called Bhagyawanti, even though she was now no more in this world.





## **The Limits Of Knowledge**

*Scharada Bail*

Our country has a vast number of people who lack education. This lack of literacy makes people very vulnerable, since they are not fully aware of their rights and others can exploit them. And yet, there have been times in Indian history when even rigorous searching has not been able to produce a single illiterate person! During the reign of King Bhoj, of the Central Indian kingdom of Malwa, between 1010 and 1055 AD., such a search showed that even the poorest of the poor could read and recite Sanskrit.

King Bhoj was a worshipper of the Goddess Saraswati. He believed in scholarship, not of the kind that stays buried in books, but the kind that strives relentlessly to extend the limits of human knowledge. In his court, the greatest honour was accorded to learning and the people who pursued it. He himself was well-versed in language and grammar, poetry, sculpture, architecture,



science and engineering, astrology, music, theatre and the highest questions of ethics and philosophy.

He authored thirty-five works on these different topics, some of which have survived even today. Many historians and scholars have commented on the high calibre of learning reflected in these texts. The *Champu Ramayan* is one of his poetic works. In the *Ckanakya Rajniti Shastra* he discusses statecraft. The *Saraswatikanthabharanam* is a literary work of great beauty, as is the *Shringar Prakash*. However, from the modern point of view, what is remarkable is the description of the construction and the uses of various types of machines. This is given in a work entitled *Samarangan Sutradhar*. It is worthy of a king who had engineered great dams and reservoirs, including the large lakes that even today nestle in the midst of Bhopal.

Such scholarship on the part of the king had a beneficial effect



on the aspirations of his subjects. These tales of that time reveal this truth.

Once, a learned visitor from South India named Lakshmidhar, arrived in Dhar, the capital of King Bhoj. Not having a spare house for the guest to use, Bhoj deputed his courtier, Amatya, to turn someone temporarily out of their dwelling and accommodate the guest. But who could be persuaded to agree to this?

After a long and frustrating day of enquiry, Amatya zeroed in on a humble weaver. This illiterate man will be easily persuaded to leave his house,' he thought.

Instead, the man went running to the court of the king. Prostrating before Bhoj, he recited a poem in Sanskrit which went thus: "O King! I too write poetry, but it does not turn out beautiful. I am sure, with effort, I could write beautiful verses. O Emperor, whose sandals are adorned with the jewels from the crowns of vanquished kings! Let me have your instruction—Must I write poetry? Weave cloth? Or leave my home and your kingdom?"

The king and his entire court were stunned at the literary prowess of a man they had assumed to be uneducated. Bhoj immediately ordered that alternate arrangements be made for the guest and rewarded the weaver.

What emerges from this story is the strength that common people derive from their education. They are well able to safeguard their rights. Not only this, it is also obvious that in ancient India, there was ample opportunity for a healthy dialogue between a king and his subjects. This indeed is the foundation on which our modern democratic state is built.

Another memorable story that brings out the extent of the common people's wisdom, as well as their freedom to address



the king, concerns King Bhoj and an old woman.

Once, Bhoj went walking out in the countryside with a very learned scholar from a neighbouring kingdom. As they walked, both were deeply immersed in literary and philosophical discussion. This caused them to lose their way. Arriving at a village where an old woman was tending her field, they stopped and asked, "Respected Mother, where does this road go?"

'The road does not go anywhere. It stays here. Only the people who walk on it will go somewhere. So tell me, who are you?' said the woman in response.

"We are travellers," they replied.

The old woman smiled. "Travellers there are only two. The sun and the moon. Tell me truly, who are you?"

"Sister, we are guests," said the scholar.

"Guests there are only two. One is wealth and the other is youth. Now tell me which are you?" said the old woman.

"We are kings," said King Bhoj.

"There are only two kings. One is Indra (king of the gods) the other is Tama' (god of death). Tell me now, which one are you?" enquired the old woman.

King Bhoj and his companion were by now truly astonished.

"We...we are two of great ability," they said.

'There are only two of great ability," said the woman. "One is the earth, the other is woman. But you look neither of them. Say now, who are you?"

"Sister...we are *sadhus* (holy men)," said King Bhoj, getting desperate.

"You do not look like *sadhus* to me," said the woman nodding her head in disagreement.

"Anyway, *sadhu* there are only two," she went on, "one is modesty, the other contentment."

Now the scholar plucked courage and spoke up. "Sister, we are *pardesi* (not the local people, migrants)

But the woman would have none of it. "*Pardesi* you are not," she said. "Only the soul and the leaf of a tree can be *pardesi*. Now, who are you?"

The king and the scholar were becoming increasingly lost for words in the face of the woman's astonishing replies. But how could they admit defeat in a duel of words with a mere old woman? They tried to go further. King Bhoj said, "We are poor."

'There are only two poor creatures in this world," said the woman with glee. One is a lamb born for slaughter, and the other is a girl to be given away in marriage. Now, which one are you?"



It was the scholar's turn to say something. "Sister...we are clever," he said.

"There are only two clever things in this world—grain and water. Which one are you?" countered the old woman.

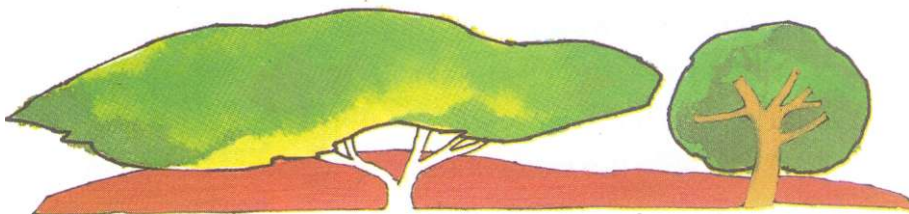
At this, both King Bhoj and the visiting scholar groaned and said, "We are defeated."

"There are only two defeated people in the world," said the woman. "One is a man burdened with debt, the other is the father of a girl without good qualities. Why do you not tell me truthfully, who are you?"

Throwing up their hands in despair, King Bhoj and the scholar said, "What can we say, sister? The truth is, we seem to know nothing. It is you who know it all."

At these words, the face of the old woman broke into a smile, then she turned serious. In a kind and soothing voice she said, "Both of you had become too proud of your wealth and learning. I knew right from the beginning that you are King Bhoj and he is your scholarly guest. This was my way of bringing you back to earth. Go on this path," she gestured, "That is the way back to Dhar."

The king and the scholar bowed deeply to the poor old woman who had helped open their eyes to their own faults. They had much to think about on their way home.





## **King Vikram In Disguise**

*Lalitha Sridhar*

King Vikram was the fair and just ruler of the prosperous kingdom of Ujjain. Besides attending to all the administrative duties that a king was required to do, he would also go in disguise to check on his citizens.

He said to his aide one day, "Be ready tonight. I would like to see for myself whether my subjects are safe and sound."

So as not to draw attention, the King allowed only one assistant to accompany her for security. His aide, remembering the Prime Minister's warning that he would be held responsible if anything were to happen to the king, he asked, "Sir, what disguise do you propose for this evening?"

The king replied, "I will leave that to you. However, since I wish to inspect areas outside the walls of the city we must leave before the gates close at twelve and return only by dawn. Are you willing?"

"Of course, Your Majesty. But, please sir, if you do not mind,

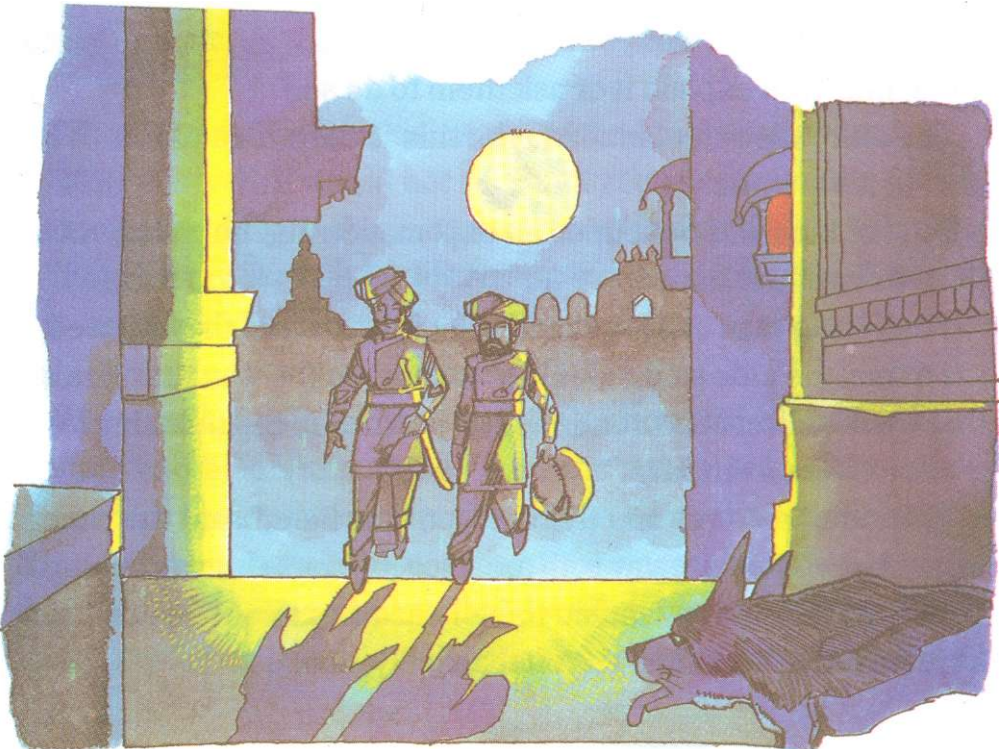
you must come disguised as my servant," said the aide.

"Why?" asked King Vikram.

"Because you insist on speaking only the truth which can lead to great trouble. Remember the last time? You told the thieves you were King Vikram in person. Luckily their chief thought it was a joke! Otherwise we would have been murdered! If you come dressed as my servant, I can answer any questions addressed to you, even cook up a story!"

"Fine," laughed the king, "From midnight to dawn, we reverse our roles!"

They set out, via the West Gate, on the road leading to the port of Baragaza, pretending they were travellers from Java. The still night was moonless. There was



silence everywhere.-Sometimes a watchdog would bark or an owl would hoot. Every half-hour the clock in the fortress of Ujjain would chime in the distance.

The aide declared that all was well and they should find an inn to get some sleep since the king had a full schedule the following day.

But King Vikram said, "Listen! There is music coming from that poor locality. Let us go and see why anyone so downtrodden would be entertaining himself at this hour of the night."

On reaching closer the king said in a low voice, "So shabby, lonely and broken down this hut is. Yet, he who lives here is singing merry songs. Strange!"

The king peeped surreptitiously through a crack in the crumbling wall.

"Look!" he said to his aide, "the old man in that corner is weeping. The woman dancing gaily is a widow or a nun—see her shaven head? And the young man who sings, appears to be in mourning. You explain it or ask them to do so."

The aide was reluctant. "Maybe this is their idea of fun. Why should we intrude?"

But the king was bent upon an explanation and he called out to the owner of the house.

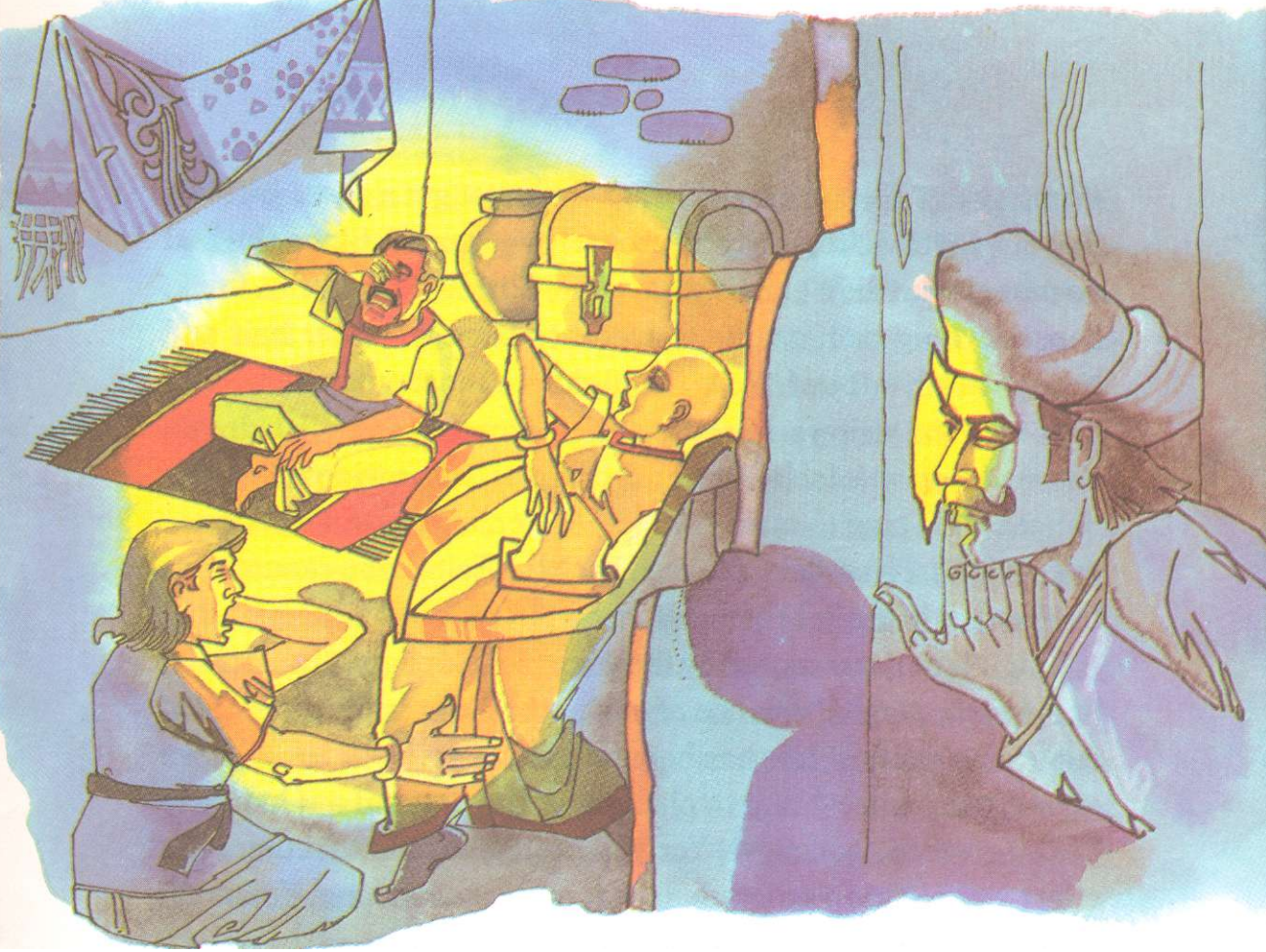
The young man came out and asked them what they wanted.

To this, the aide said, "Could you show us the way to an inn so that we could rest and continue our journey in the morning? We are travellers from Java."

"This is a poor area and there are no inns here," said the young man. "And you cannot stay with me since my house is in mourning."

"But there is happy music to be heard from your house!" the king said in a voice that was unabashedly curious.





"That is none of your business," replied the young man.

"If all was well, it would not be. But if you are mourning, then it becomes my duty to share your sorrow," insisted King Vikram.

"Forgive my servant for his strong words," pitched in the aide, hoping to avoid trouble. "As per the tradition in Java, my man is only trying to lessen your burden."

"Very well, I will tell you my story, though I do not believe anyone can be of help to me," said the young man. "My father spent a lot of money on educating me to be a scribe in the court. No exams have been held for a long time since no post has become available. So I am unemployed and we have no money. Suddenly, today, my father had this vision that we were going to have a visit

from royalty. He told my wife that she must get a silver bowl so that our royal visitors may be properly welcomed. Since she had no money, she didn't know what to do. She did have shiny, thick, superbly long hair, so she shaved her head, sold her hair and brought a silver bowl. Now, the night is almost over and we still have no royal visitors. My father cries because his foolish dream has made my wife look like a nun, or worse still, a widow. My wife dances and I sing to make him feel better, but he still weeps.

That is all. Please take the road back to Ujjain—you cannot miss the fortress in the light of the dawn hour, which is almost upon us."

King Yikram was moved by the young man's plight. "I am struck by how supportive you are of each other. Certainly a family of superior qualities! Life has been unkind to you, but I do believe your fortunes are going to change for the better. I am happy to be the giver of good news. You will be glad to hear that there is a court examination scheduled for tomorrow morning. You must appear for it!"

"A court examination? Tomorrow? I have not heard of it at all!" The young man was taken aback and hopeful at the same time.

"Oh, but there is! Why do you think we have travelled all the way from Java to Baragaza to take the road to Ujjain? We too hope to compete in the test," said the aide pitching in convincingly, having understood the king's idea.

The king continued, "You should certainly try. You seem capable, and this is your chance! Who knows, your father may yet see you become a royal scribe. Good luck to you, then!"

The young man was delighted to discover this opportunity to prove his worth. He bid his unusual visitors farewell after thanking them sincerely for their useful information.

King Vikram and his aide returned to the palace. The first order the king issued for the day was to the town criers. They were to announce the time of the court examination for a royal scribe—to be held that very day! Many scholars who lived in Ujjain were astonished that they knew nothing of it till late the previous night. The young man in mourning heard the town crier's call too.

He hurriedly readied himself and gave his wife instructions to explain his absence to his father when he woke up. "You can tell him that last night's visitors, though not royal, had the appearance of good, blue-blooded lineage. That may make him feel better."

Then the young man made his way to the great hall of the Ujjain University where the examination was to be held. He found many scholars assembled there to compete. At the appointed hour, the subject was announced by the king's aide. The competitors had to write an essay on the given topic. The title was a strange one. It had been chosen by none other than the king himself. It required the contestants to write on a young nun or widow dancing to the tune of gay songs sung by a young man in mourning, while an old man wept. Everyone was bewildered about the odd topic. Everyone except the young man. Only he could link the different characters together, give a reasonable explanation and make proper sense of the unusual and strange subject.

While the rest struggled in confusion, the young man finished a perfect presentation. Of course, all the examiners unanimously awarded him the first place and he was duly appointed as the royal scribe. He was then presented to King Vikram.

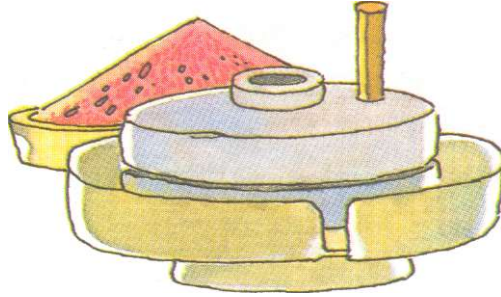
The king smiled graciously, looking resplendent in his silken robes and glittering, *navaratna*-studded crown. He was totally unrecognizable from the way he had looked the previous night in



the faded clothes of a humble servant. He congratulated the young man on being awarded the high office and told him he could now afford to buy his wife's tresses back. Later, recounting the dazzle of the court of Ujjain to his happy wife, the young man wondered aloud, "How did King Vikram know about your shaven head?"

To him, the mystery remained unresolved, he knew not that his father's dream of having royal visitors the previous night had actually been fulfilled.





## A Wise Lady

*Lata Kaku*

Once upon a time, in the kingdom of Pithugarh, ruled a proud king, Dheema. He had two very affectionate daughters—Kamlibai, who was good-natured, very talkative and careless; and Haribai, who was also good-natured but quiet and careful.

When the time came for them to be married, the king found a rich merchant for his elder daughter, Kamlibai. She was married with great pomp and show as befitted the status of the king. Everyone was very happy.

After the marriage, Dheema would often go and sit with his younger daughter, Haribai. One day, while visiting her in her room, Dheema's eyes fell on a placard hanging on the wall on which Haribai had written: 'The home that has a wise lady in it will always prosper/

"Who told you that?" asked Dheema, indicating the placard.

"No one. But I do believe it," answered Haribai.

The king was surprised and not very pleased. "See, I am the king and because of me everything is prospering. How do you say that only a wise lady can make a home prosperous?"

"It is true. Mother was a wise woman," Haribai maintained.

King Dheema was very angry. "How dare you say such a thing! Better correct yourself."

But Haribai stuck by her statement. The king went away fuming. He resolved to marry her to any pauper just to see if she prospered! Soon he saw a poor woodcutter. He called him.

"You shall marry my daughter, Haribai," the king said.

"Sir, I am just a poor woodcutter. I cannot afford the comforts and luxury the princess is used to!" protested the woodcutter.

"You have little choice," the king warned him. "Either you marry her, or I shall have you beheaded."

And so, despite the remonstrations of his ministers and other people of the realm, the king got Haribai married to the woodcutter. Haribai too did not protest. Confident she followed her husband, Nandu, the woodcutter to his small hut at the edge of the woods.

Every morning, Nandu would take his axe, cut wood the whole day and return in the evening after purchasing flour, some dal or vegetables from the money he earned. The princess Haribai would prepare this into a simple meal.

During the day, Haribai would do the household work and still have time to spare. One day she told her husband, "From today let us miss one meal a day. From the money we save, we can purchase another axe, then both of us can cut wood and earn more."

Very soon they had purchased a new axe. Now Haribai began to go along with Nandu and together they got a bigger haul of wood. Their earnings increased as also their savings.



A few days later, Haribai had another idea. She saw that her neighbour had a grinding-stone with which she ground the wheat into flour. She calculated that if they too purchased a small grinding-stone their savings would further increase. Nandu was pleased by the idea and so, from their savings they bought a grinding-stone.

Soon they had enough to build a stock-pile of wood in their own yard. Now people could come to them any time to buy wood. Haribai had by now enough savings so that she did not have to go out for cutting wood. Instead, she attended to the work at home.

There followed a winter so severe that firewood was in great demand. One night a prince passing through the forest had to spend the night in the bitter cold. He sent his men to get wood

for a big campfire. Nandu's was the only place nearby which had the required quantity of wood. They bought a huge stock of wood from him and Nandu made huge profit. Now the husband and wife lived in reasonable comfort and were very happy.

One day, while cutting wood, Nandu came upon a tree which was different. As he chopped off its branches, the air was filled with a special fragrance. He took a few branches to show to his wife.

Haribai was delighted. "It is sandalwood!" she exclaimed when she saw the wood. "It is rare wood and sells at a high price," she told Nandu. "You must get more of it to build up a stock." As a princess she knew how kings and rich people cherished sandalwood, using it for *pujas*, *havans* and other ceremonies.

From the next day, Nandu started collecting sandalwood. He discovered more of these trees in the forest and carefully chopped off some branches from each of them so that the parent tree could continue to survive and grow. In this way, he ensured a good stock of sandalwood. He kept adding to it from time to time.

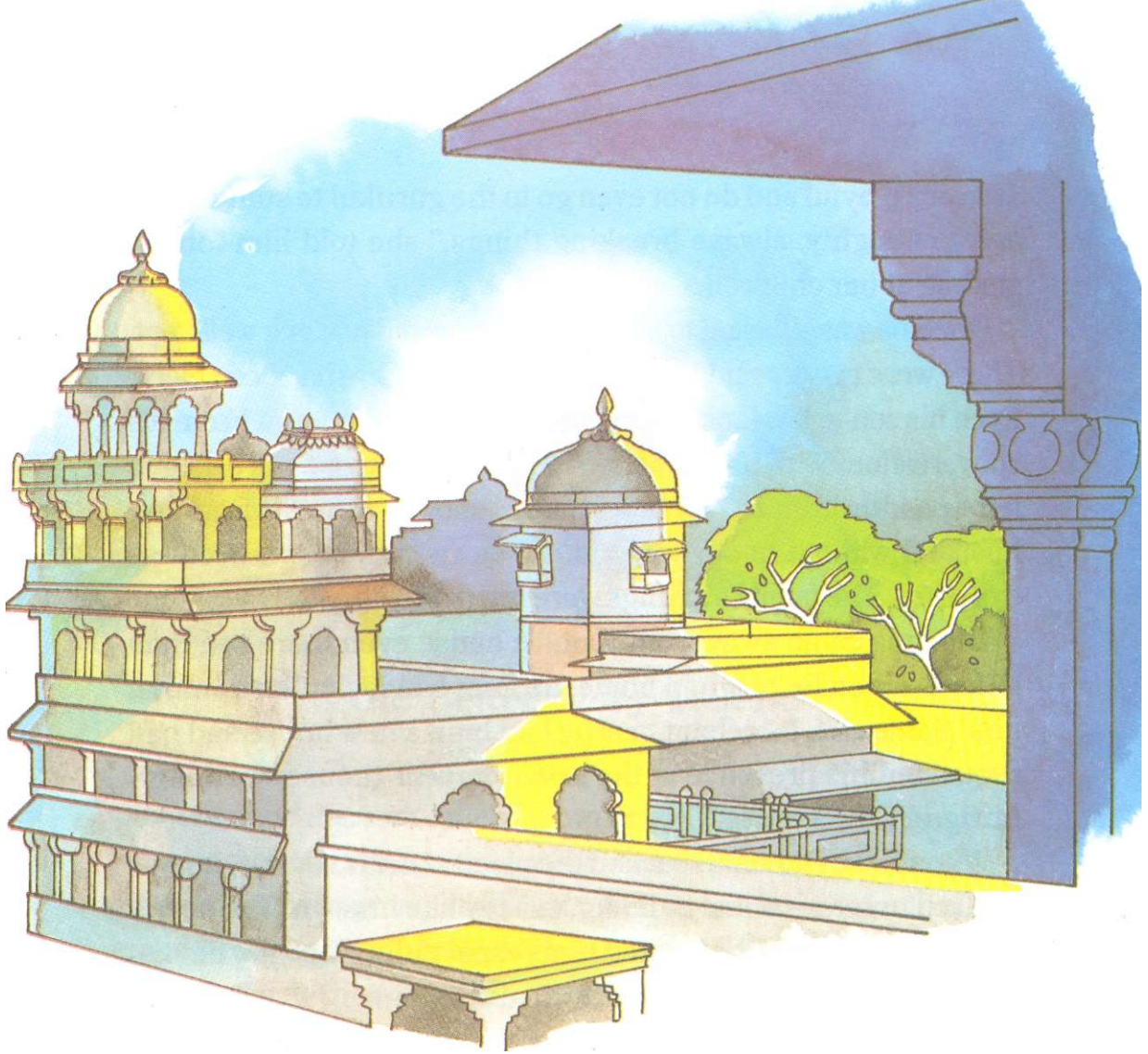
Now it so happened that a king in a neighbouring land had died. Before dying, he left instructions that only sandalwood be used for his funeral pyre. No one in the kingdom had the required quantity of sandalwood. Then someone told the king's men, "There is a woodcutter named Nandu in the neighbouring province of Pithugarh. It is said that he has a huge pile of sandalwood."

The dead king's son was pleased when he heard this. He sent his men to Nandu and ordered them to get the wood at any price.

Reaching Nandu's house, the men were relieved to find that what they had heard was indeed correct. They purchased the entire stock of sandalwood from Nandu and paid him handsomely for it.

Now Nandu and Haribai were really rich. They had a palatial





house built on the site, an exact replica of Dheema's palace.

Meanwhile Dheema was alone in his palace. He regretted his arrogance and the off-hand way in which he had married off his daughter, Haribai. Feeling guilty and remorseful, he went to see his elder daughter, Kamlibai. "At least she will be living happily and in comfort," he thought to himself.

"Kamli, my daughter, how are you?" he asked, on reaching her house. He had taken many gifts for her.

"Father it is nice to see you. Meet your five grandchildren. They

are very playful and do not even go to the gurukul to study. They are so naughty, always breaking things," she told him fondly, smiling at her children.

Dheema was shocked to see that the house did not look well-kept. There were two servants now, whereas earlier there had been many. Even his son-in-law looked somewhat shabby and uneasy. From his conversations with Kamli, he came to realize that it was all owing to her spendthrift habits. She demanded more and more from her husband without in any way cutting down on her own needless expenses. The family's savings were fast dwindling.

Dheema came away from Kamli's house even more sad than before. When he reached home, he found an invitation awaiting him. Some rich merchant nearby had built a new house and had requested his presence at the *griha pravesh* (house warming). Intrigued, the king decided to go.

When King Dheema reached the place with his retinue, he was amazed to see a palatial building, exactly like his own. The owner of the house came and saluted him respectfully. The king did not know him. Then the king saw Haribai come out.

"Welcome to our humble house, Father," said Haribai. She was dressed in fine clothes and looked every inch a princess.

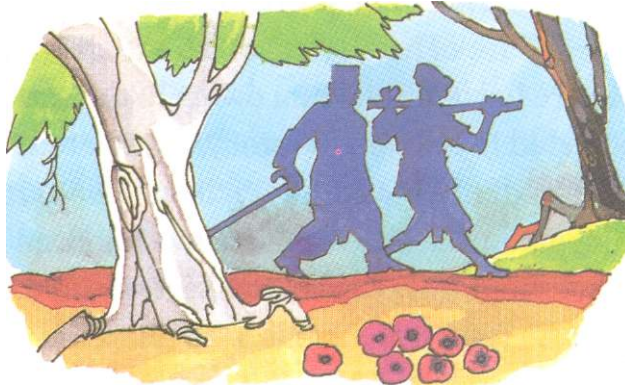
"Dear daughter, is this your house?" asked Dheema, astonished.

"Yes, Father."

"But.. .but how did all this happen?" he asked.

"Remember, Father, the words I had written. Then, modestly she told him how it had all come about.

The king bowed his head and finally admitted that what she had written was indeed true: The home that had a wise lady in it, did indeed prosper!



## The Better Story Teller

*Meenakshi G. Jain*

There once was a *jat* called Chowdhary Charan Singh. He used to make monthly visits to the *mahajan* of the nearby town to repay the loan his great grandfather had taken from the *mahajan's* great grandfather against his land. Though the initial amount of loan taken to repair the roof of the house was very small, the interest had compounded over the fifty years taking the loan amount to one thousand rupees. This amount was so big that he could not ever hope to get his land released.

On one such trip he met the *mahajan* who was on his way back from the nearby village. They both got talking. Soon the *mahajan* suggested that as the town was a long distance away, they should narrate stories to amuse each other. The *jat* readily agreed. But the *mahajan* was very cunning. He had always looked down upon the poor like this *jat*. Taking the *jat* to be a simpleton he put a condition that, however untrue the story be, the other person

could not call it a lie, else he would have to pay one thousand rupees to the storyteller. *The jat* readily agreed. The *mahajan* smiled to himself sure of having fun at his expense. He knew the *jat* would not dare to contradict him owing to the condition set by him. He proceeded to tell him his story. He started thus:

"My great grandfather was the richest *mahajan* in all the villages of this region. He once sailed with a hundred ships full of jewels and spices and travelled all over the world making great fortunes. When he returned, he had with him a life-size statue of gold which could speak."

*The jat* said, "How wonderful."

The *mahajan* continued, "The statue was special as it could answer any question. So people from all over came and addressed their queries. One day, your great grandfather too came with a question. He first asked, 'What caste of men are the wisest?'

"The statue replied, 'The *mahajans*.'

"Then your ancestor asked, 'What caste of men on earth are the most foolish?'

"The statue replied, 'The *jats*.'

Saying this, the *mahajan* looked at the *jat*, certain that he would object to this. But the *jat* nodded his head and said, "That is true. Why else would I still be repaying the small amount of loan my father had taken from your ancestors?"

Disappointed, the *mahajan* continued, "Then your ancestor asked the statue, 'Who will be the most foolish man in my family?'

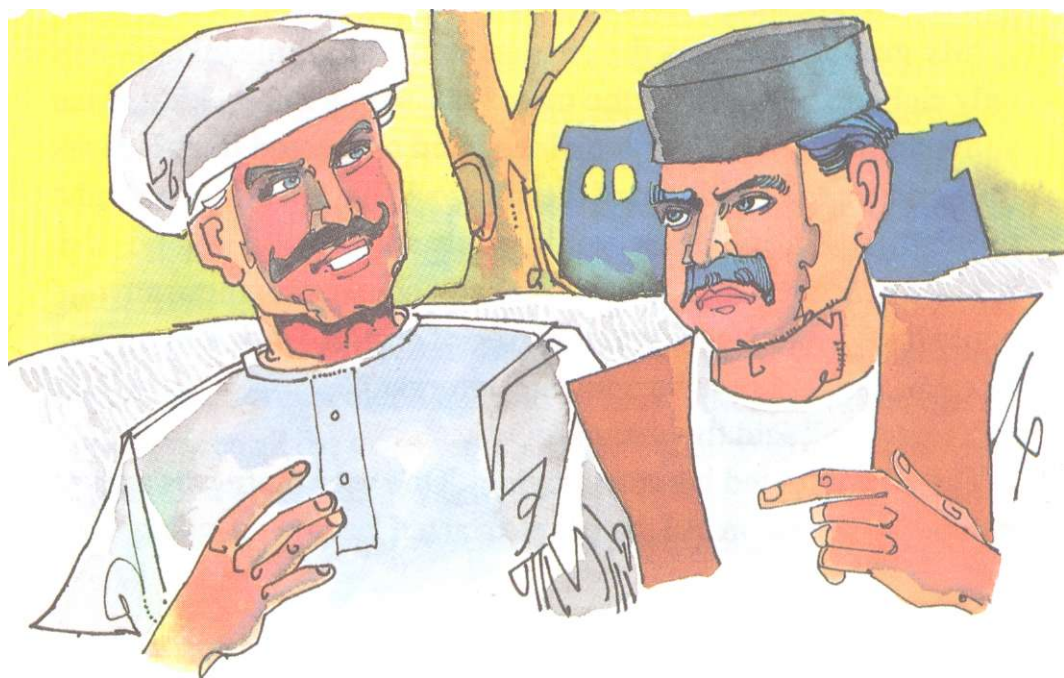
To this the statue answered, 'Chowdhary Charan Singh.'

Saying this, the *mahajan* burst out laughing, sure that now at least *the jat* would contradict him. But *the jat* still nodded his head and said, "How true, Shahji."



Meanwhile, the *makajan's* taunt had caused him great pain and he made up his mind to repay him in a way the *mahajan* would remember for a long time. So he patiently waited for his turn.

The *mahajan* continued, "The fame of the statue reached the king and he himself came to our house to request my ancestor to become his prime minister in exchange for the statue. My ancestor, though already richer than any employee of the king agreed out of respect for the king. Your ancestor was a very poor man and requested my great grandfather to keep him in his service. Kindhearted as my ancestor was, he could not refuse and your great grandfather became his doorman. He used to sit outside the door day and night and keep watch. Being a blockhead, your ancestor would often receive thrashings from my great grandfather. But actually he was very useful to keep away the thieves, as he was so ugly that the thieves used to get frightened on seeing him. For this reason he had to keep his face covered with the end of *his pugree* (turban) during the day time."



Saying so, the *mahajan* again laughed, as if to provoke the *jat* to contradict him.

*The jat* was very hurt but still only said, "How true, Shahji."

The *mahajan* continued, "It was as our doorman that your great grandfather, one day, asked my ancestor for a loan of a hundred rupees. My ancestor agreed, though he knew your ancestor would be unable to repay him as he earned only fifty rupees a month. It is thus your ancestor's lack of planning and foresightedness that has led you to misery."

"True, Shahji, true," was all that the *jat* muttered.

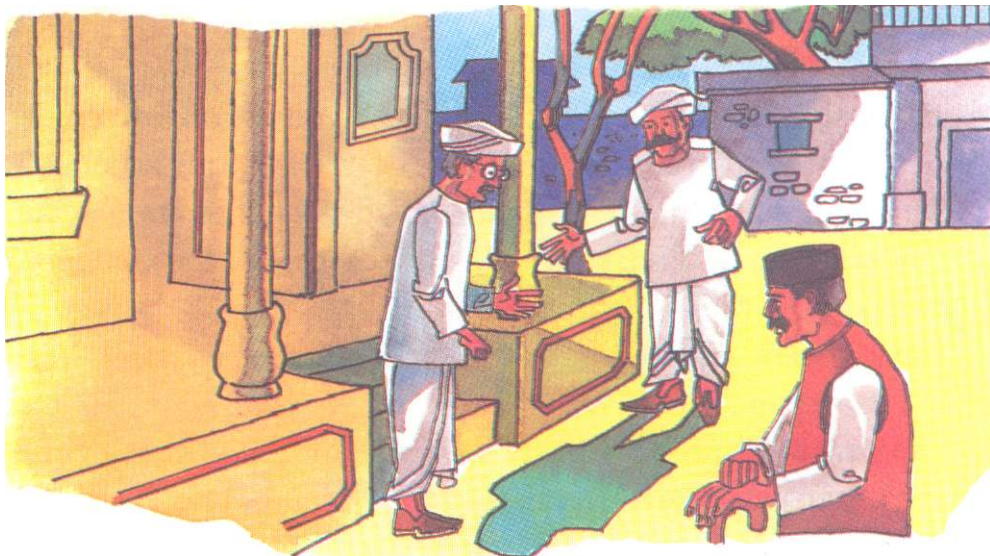
Though the *mahajan* had been unable to make *the jat* lose the contest, he was pleased with himself for having had some fun at the expense of the *jat*. "Now it is your turn," he announced magnanimously, sure that the illiterate/a f could not really match his talent at concocting a story.

The Chowdhary humbly said, "Your story was so true, Shahji. Though my story is also true, it might not be as interesting as yours." Saying this, he related the following story:

"My grandfather was the richest *jat* in the whole village. Not only richest, he was also the most handsome, noble, kind, wise and magnanimous. Everyone loved and respected him. He was thus chosen the headman of the village. Whenever anyone had a problem, my grandfather would easily solve it and no one ever refused to accept what he said. He had a shop from where anyone could take whatever he wanted, free of cost. He also lent money like you, but without charging any interest."

"How nice," said the *mahajan*.

*The jat* continued his story saying, "One year there was a great famine in the region. All the people started leaving the village. My



grandfather refused to leave the village and bought the land of all those who were leaving. He then travelled to far away places in search of water. Wherever he found a river, he got canals made upto his village and then ploughed and sowed all the land only with the help of his family members as all others had left the village. He reaped a great harvest that year. The grain was of such excellent quality that the likes of it had never been seen before. People came from all over the country to buy the grain. He made a good profit and also distributed a lot to the poor. One day, your grandfather came to him asking for a job. He had lost everything in the famine and his condition was very pitiable. He was in rags and had not eaten for days. So my grandfather first fed him, then kept him to weigh the grain. Your grandfather was not only poor but also a clumsy and foolish man. He often caused losses to my family. But my grandfather, being kind, never scolded him and let him continue working there. Finally, when all the grain was sold, there was no work left for your grandfather and he had to leave."

By then the two had reached the *mahajan's* shop. So the *jat*

said, "Shahji, it is getting late. Kindly ask your *munim* to come here so that as soon as I finish my story I can settle my account."

Smiling to himself, the *mahajan* called out to the *munim*. As the *munim* came and sat next to them, the *jat* asked the *mahajan*, "Do you agree with what I have said so far?"

The *mahajan*, not wanting to be caught disagreeing, said, "Yes, I do. Please continue."

The *jat* continued, "Before leaving for his village, your grandfather asked my grandfather for a loan of one thousand rupees."

The *mahajan*, anticipating that the story was about to end, prompted the *jat* to continue. "So my grandfather gave him one thousand rupees, that too without charging any interest as was his policy. But your ancestor never cared to return it."

'True, Chowdhary, true,' said the *mahajan*, eager for the story to end as he did not like his grandfather to be described as a poor man.

"So you owe me one thousand rupees that your grandfather had borrowed from my grandfather. If my grandfather had charged interest it would have been much more. Anyway, now return the money so that I can settle my account."

The *mahajan* realized that he had been caught in his own trap. He had agreed to the debt in front of his own *munim*. If he said it was merely a story, he would still have to pay one thousand rupees to the *jat*, as per the conditions set by him at the beginning of the contest. So he paid the *jat* one thousand rupees with which he repaid his loan and got his land back.

The *jat* was a happy man. He had not only got his land back but had also taught the *mahajan* a lesson for trying to belittle him.





## Where The Earth Is Red

*Dipavali Debroy*

Where the earth is red and nothing grows other than palm trees tall and short, where shallow streams flow through banks full of pebbles, there live the *santhals*, a people as simple as they are brave.

Dark, smooth and shiny are their skins. Curly, black and thick their hair. Their arrows are sharp and they shoot straight. The rabbit hurrying through the ups and downs of the earth, the boar grunting its way through the bushes, will tell you how well the *Santhals* shoot!

Jalpa Murmu was the leader of a tribe of *santhals* that lived on the bank of the Kopai in Birbhum, on the border of Bihar and West Bengal. He had a son named Hala.

After Jalpa, Hala was to be the leader of the tribe.

"Hala is brave and a wonder with his arrow," said Jalpa Murmu to himself. "But that is not enough for someone who has to be the leader of the tribe."

He summoned Hala. "Son," said Jalpa Murmu, "You must get a couple of ideas for yourself. You will need them to be the leader of the tribe after me."

"Just tell me where to get them, Father," answered Hala. "I will be back with them in a minute."

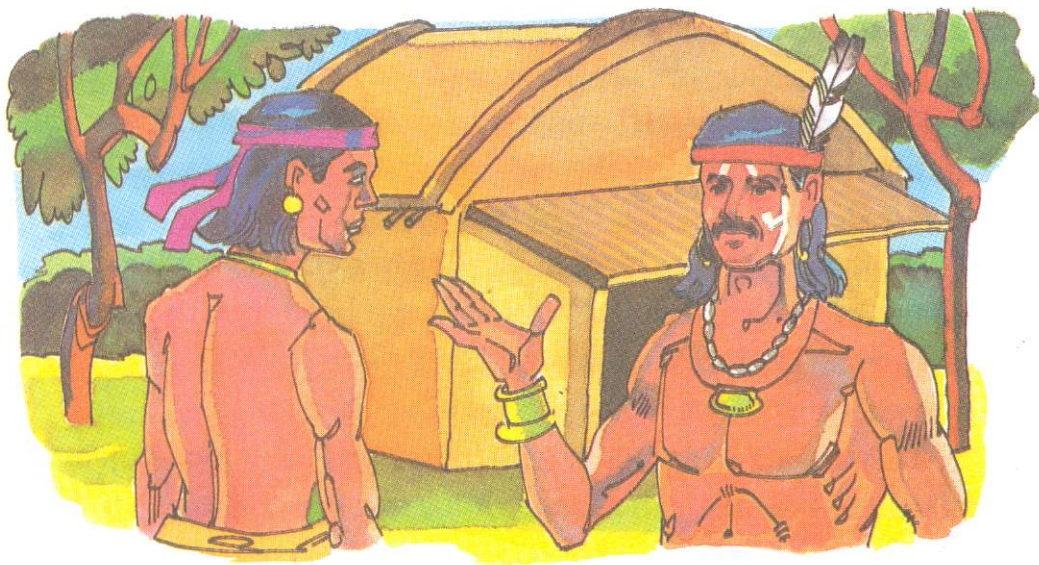
"Not so fast, Son," replied Jalpa Murmu. "I cannot tell you where to get ideas from. You will have to think for yourself. Every leader of this tribe has to. Only then is he made a leader."

For, as you were told just now, the *santhals* are brave, but simple. Their arrows are sharper than their wits.

Early next morning, Hala Murmu set out from his village to look around for some ideas.

He had a red scarf round his head and another round his waist.

His body was bare except for the short, white, hand spun *dhoti* that came up to his knees. In the folds of his *dhoti* and under the red band round his waist, he had two gold coins that his father had given him.



The red earth of Birbhum stretched out all round him and he wondered which way he should go.

The eastern sky was aglow with the rising sun. "Let me go east," he decided.

As he walked, the earth below his feet changed colour. It became darker and softer, and finally turned wet and green. There were paddy fields and lotus ponds around him now, instead of palm trees and pebbles.

The sun was now right in mid-sky. Sweat was pouring down Hala's smooth, dark skin. He was feeling hungry and hot. As he crossed the River Ajay, which lay wide and shining between the districts of Birbhum and Burdwan, he saw a farmer working in a field of paddy.

"What place is this, brother farmer?" Hala stopped and asked.

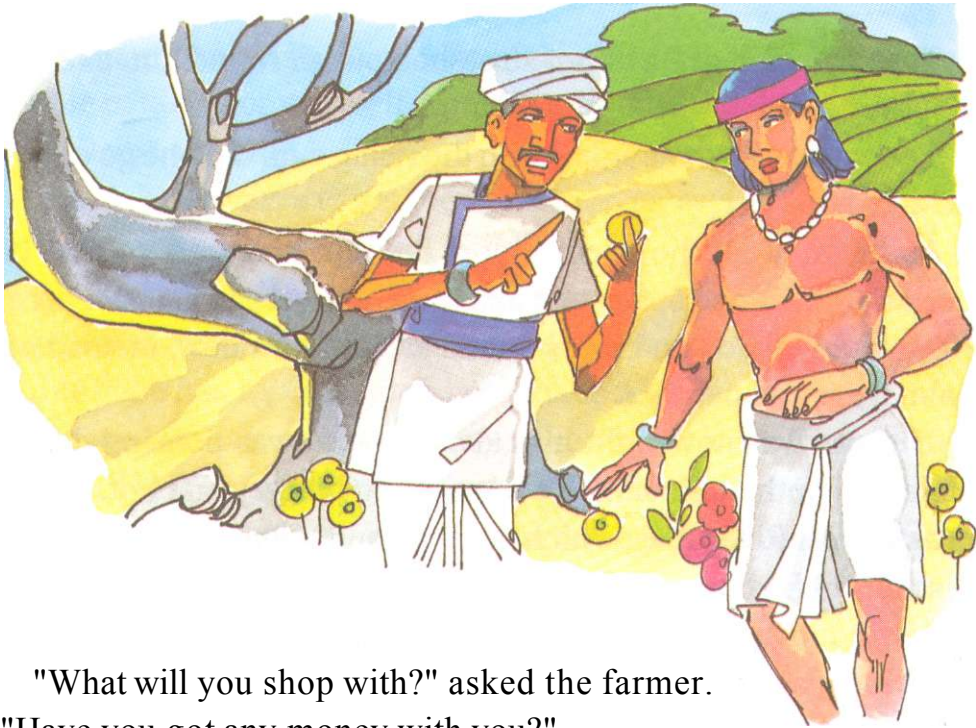
"Fool, do you not know? This is Burdwan on this side of the river and that is Birbhum, over there."

Hala did not like being called a fool. So he said, "I may be a fool, but I am not going to stay one. I am going to get some ideas for myself, then go back and become the leader of my tribe after my father."

"I see," remarked the farmer, stopping his work. "So that is why you are here. But tell me, how are you going to get those ideas of yours. Will you go shopping for them?"

Hala was simple, like all *santhals*, and did not know that the farmer was laughing at him.

He thought for a while. "What I had thought was that I would hunt for them," he answered very seriously. "But if you can tell me which shop they are sold at, I do not mind shopping for them, either."



"What will you shop with?" asked the farmer.

"Have you got any money with you?"

"Of course, I do," said Hala. "I have two big gold coins with me. Just tell me where I should go with them."

"Well, actually there is no need to go anywhere," said the farmer. "If you give me those gold coins, I can sell you the ideas I have got myself."

"That is great," answered Hala. "That will save me a lot of trouble."

He brought out the gold pieces and handed them over to the farmer.

The farmer tucked the money into the folds of his *dhoti* and smiled.

"Now, here are my ideas: One, whenever I visit a house and find a *chatai* or mat spread on the floor, I never sit down at once. It gives the impression that what suits the others, suits me as well. I move it a little away from where it is placed. Two, whenever I go for a dip in



a pond, I never use the side everyone else is using. It gives the impression that I am just the same as them. I always bathe a little away from the others. And now that you have got your money's worth, move off and let me work."

With that the farmer began to tend his field once more and Hala moved off.

He crossed the river back and began to turn homewards. But he lost his way and some hours later found himself totally off-track.

The sun had begun climbing down the sky. It was growing dark and Hala was getting tired. There was a village in the distance. He could see its mud huts with their thatched roofs. From the look of it, it was not a *Santhal* village. The shape of the huts was different. The people were dressed differently too.

With aching legs, he dragged himself there.

Just where the village began, there was a pond with people bathing in it.

On one side of the pond, steps had been cut into the mud. The villagers were going up and down those stairs and taking their dips.

Hala thought he would take a dip before going into the village to seek shelter for the night. A bath, he felt, would refresh him.

He walked up to the steps on one side of the pond, where the people of the village were having their baths. But he stopped short of going down to them. For, had he not bought the idea that one should never use the side of the pond that everyone uses? That one should be different from the rest?

He went over to the other side. This was overgrown with grass and weeds, and it was difficult to climb down its muddy slope. But that is what Hala began to use.



What was that now? As Hala went down for his dip,, something shiny caught his eyes.

It was in fact a huge pot of gold coins that some thief had stolen from somewhere and hidden there. As no one used that side of the pond, and it was full of grass and reeds, it had been a good hiding-place indeed.

But now Hala had found it and pulled it out of its hiding place. It was now his.

Dancing with joy, he took it and ran to the villagers.

"Who are you and what is that you found just now?" asked the villagers, who had been watching him all this while.

Hala explained who he was, why he happened to be there, and what he had come upon just then.

"I have lost my way and can find it only tomorrow when it is day," said Hala in the end. "Can you take me in for the night?"

"Of course!"

"Sure!"

"At once!"

So welcoming were the villagers, that Hala had a tough time deciding which of them he should go with. Finally, he went along with the one who had made his offer first.

By now it was dark and earthen lamps had been lit in most of the huts.

Hala's host took him to his hut and asked him to wait a little outside.

"Let me go and tell my wife that I have brought a guest along and that she should spread out another mat and get you something to eat."

He kept Hala waiting for quite a while before he was back.

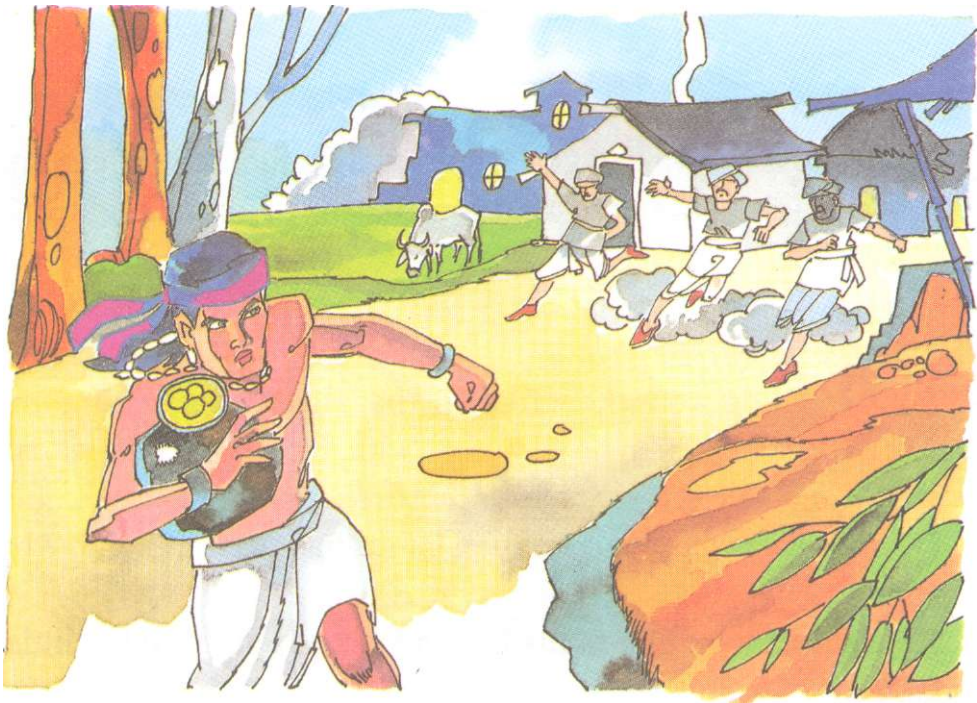
"Come in," he said and led Hala in through the courtyard. Beyond, there stood the house with a *dawa*, that is<sup>^</sup> a raised platform of mud running round it.

As was the custom in those parts, the floor of this platform was always kept clean and smoothed over with cow dung. This is where visitors to a household usually sat, ate their food and slept the night.

A *chatai* had been spread on this platform and his host asked Hala to sit on it.

Before the mat, there was a copper plate piled high with food. A copper pot too, full of water.

'You must be tired and hungry," said his host to Hala. "Put your pot of gold down and settle down on the mat."



Hala kept his pot down and went up to the mat. He was about to sit on it when he remembered the second idea he had bought.

Was he not supposed to never sit down exactly where the mat was spread out for him. Was he not supposed to change its position before he sat on it?

Yes, he was. And Hala picked up the mat from where it had been placed.

Gaping at his feet was a deep pit, freshly dug.

Simple though he was, Hala sensed at once what his host had planned. As soon as Hala sat on the mat, he would have fallen into the pit below. He would have been either dead or hurt so badly that he would not have been able to clamber out of the pit. His host would then have filled the pit and smoothed the floor above it with fresh cow dung. All Hala's gold would then have been his.

But Hala was not going to let that happen now. In a flash, he picked up his pot of gold and ran out of the house.

His host ran out after him.



The villagers ran too, as they had guessed what had happened. They were all after Hala's gold!

Tired and hungry, Hala outran the villagers. He ran into the dark night, not caring which way he went. He ran and ran. As the sky began to grow lighter, he saw that somehow he had reached back where he had started from—the village of Kopai which was his home.

"Back within a day!" exclaimed Hala's father and leader of the tribe, Jalpa Murmu. "Did I not tell you to go get a couple ideas for yourself? You can never be a leader of this tribe till you have got them."

"But I have got them, Father!" said Hala.

"How could you have got them overnight?" asked Jalpa Murmu, disbelievingly.

"Well, I bought them with the two gold coins that you had given me, and I got much more than my money's worth."

Hala told his father his adventures and Jalpa Murmu had to admit that Hala had got more than his money's worth. He had got a pot of gold and he had got a new lease of life!

'It is because he went to a side of the pond that was not in use that he came upon buried treasure. It is because he moved his mat from where it had been placed that his life was saved. He has indeed got hold of a couple of ideas that are wonderful,' thought Jalpa Murmu. 'He can indeed be made the new leader of the tribe now.'

Hala turned out to be a very good leader and his tribe was most happy under his leadership.

Even though Hala is long dead, the *santhals* of his tribe still follow the two rules he set up. Whenever they are offered a seat, they move it a little away before sitting on it. Whenever they wash themselves, they do it a little away from where the others are.

They still use Hala's ideas, in Birbhum, the land of the red earth.



## **So Funny, Yet So Clever!**

*Kamlesh Mohindra*

Almost half a century ago, in a village in Uttar Pradesh, lived a poor little boy, Mahesh Das. Mahesh was a very unusual child. He could think on his feet.

To help out his parents, the young boy would often go into the nearby forest to collect firewood. No matter where Mahesh went or what he did, he always had fun. Such a happy boy he was!

The village folk adored the dark-skinned, bright-eyed, cheeky-looking Mahesh for his ready wit and funny stories about himself and others. His clever jokes brought smiles and tears of joy on so many sad and serious faces.

One warm afternoon, after having made a massive bundle of firewood, Mahesh was returning home from the forest. Suddenly he heard the sound of galloping horses.

In a matter of minutes seven valiant-looking horse-riders pulled up right in front of him.

"Hey, boy! where can we find water? Where will we find a spring, pond, stream, or any place to quench our thirst. In vain we have been hunting all morning. We have also lost our trail," said one of the riders. "We must soon head for the city."

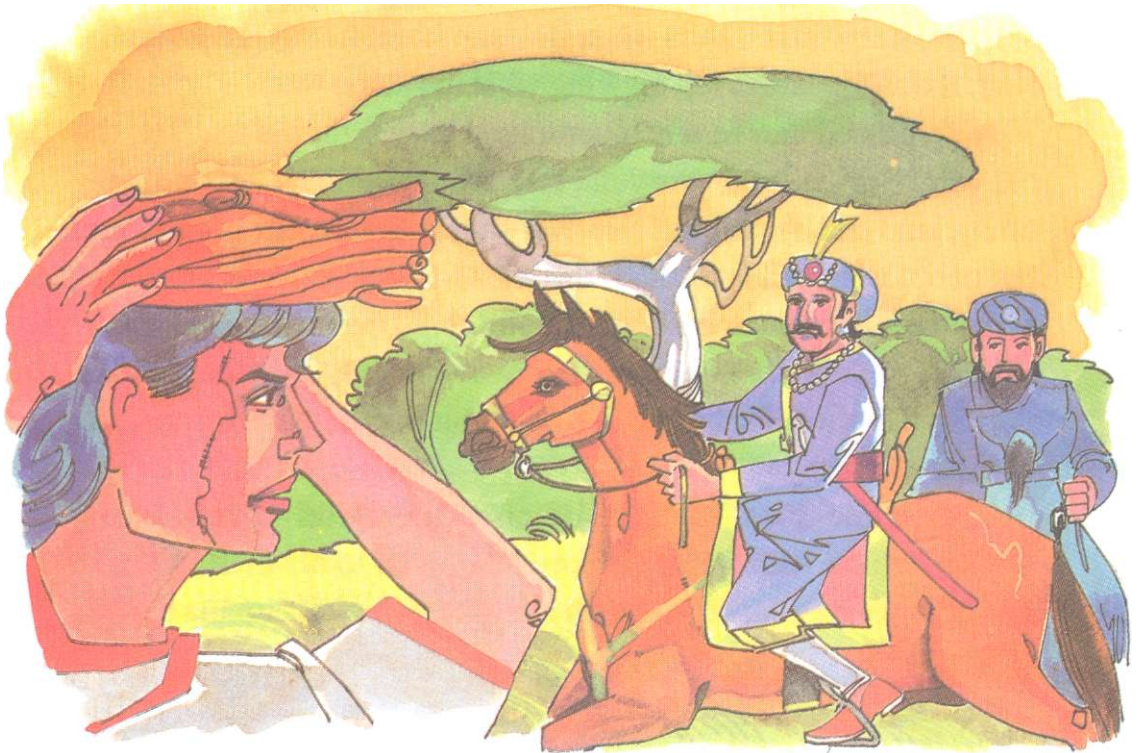
"I am afraid there is not a drop of water around here. You have no choice but to come to my poor little hut," Mahesh offered, looking up at the magnificent troupe, grinning from ear to ear, despite the heavy weight on his head.

"Come along up. You can sit in front of me," one of the riders pulled him up, while the other took his bundle of sticks.

"Now lead us, boy," said one of them.

As soon as the hunting party had enough water to drink, the most splendidly-dressed rider looked at the young boy's face with great interest.

"Do you have a name, boy?" he asked.



"Do you have one?" asked Mahesh, looking up with a charming grin. Little did he know that he was being cheeky to the greatest Mughal Emperor, Akbar the Great.

"Do you not know me?" asked Akbar, taken aback. He was used to a lot of politeness and flattery.

The boy looked up at the not so tall and not so slim rider and gave him a mischievous smile. "Do you know my teacher in the village?" he asked.

This was even a greater shock to Akbar. Nobody had ever dared to talk to him like that. Yet, he was rather charmed by the bold, witty and jolly-faced child. "Here, have my ring. It will tell you who I am," he said, and commanded his horse to take off.

Then he turned round and shouted to the boy, "Farewell, boy. Grow up. I shall wait for your visit to my Delhi court Do you hear me?"

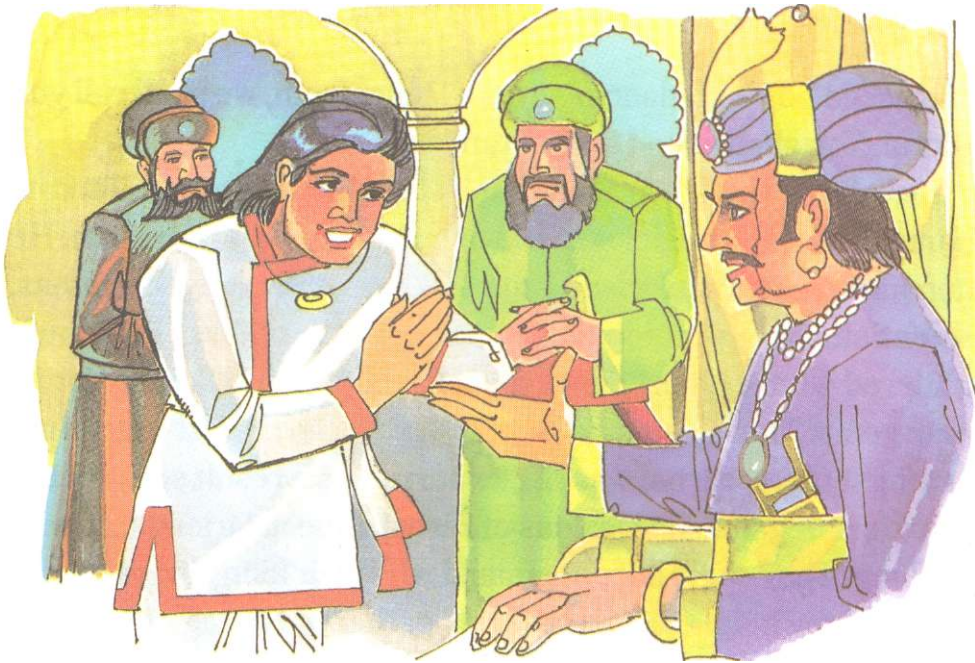
Mahesh had heard every word of what His Majesty had said and also the amused laughter of the hunting team. Naturally, Mahesh's surprise knew no bounds when he examined the royal seal on the ring. It was too late to tell the king what his name was.

Time passed and Mahesh continued to delight his teacher, the old village priest, and everyone else around him. He was not only funny, kind and helpful, but also ever-willing to solve the problems of the people. His plans to catch the wicked were remarkably clever and almost always successful. Nobody could ever match his wit.

Little wonder then why, with a heavy heart, the villagers bid goodbye to their darling, when Mahesh had to leave for the city to earn a living.

After a few days, Mahesh reached the Delhi Fort (*Purana Quila*), where Akbar lived before he moved to his new palace in Fatehpur Sikri near Agra. With a few clever tricks up his sleeve,





Mahesh managed to enter the marvellous court to keep his date with the Emperor. His eyes quickly took in the scene of the beautifully carved marble walls, floors, ceilings, and fountains. At the far end, on a high throne, sat Akbar chatting with some of his courtiers. Mahesh joined the audience and kept inching forward.

"Which flower should top the list of all the beautiful flowers?" he heard Akbar asking those around him. The marigold rose, jasmine, and many other such flowers were suggested.

"Your Majesty, in my opinion, the cotton pod is the most beautiful flower on this earth," piped the sixteen-year-old Mahesh. His reply made the courtiers roar with laughter. Without any fear, Mahesh went ahead to give his reasons. "From this very flower comes the finest and the softest cotton cloth, which when dabbled in lovely colours makes the people look beautiful."

Akbar was very impressed with this unusual idea. It was not long before Akbar's sharp memory recalled the chubby-cheeked,

jolly-faced boy with dancing eyes. "Henceforth, we shall call you Birbal. You shall spend a lot of time with me."

Birbal could talk on most subjects. Akbar, though illiterate himself, liked having clever and talented people around him. He honoured artists, musicians, sculptors, dancers, actors, historians, scientists, writers, poets, and religious teachers. His court glittered with such brilliance that it became world famous for its nine gems. These gems being scholars of the highest order. And amongst them, Birbal was his favourite. As a result some of the courtiers began to feel jealous of Birbal's special friendship with the king. They could not understand why their king always turned to Birbal for help. One day, they all gathered courage to ask the king why he did not take their advice any more.

"Birbal is a clever man who has an answer for everything. Perhaps you can try to help me with one question that has been bothering me," asked Akbar.

"Certainly, Your Majesty, we will feel honoured," they bowed their heads really low.

"I wish to know how many crows live in Delhi. You have exactly a minute to answer," asked the amused king.

The listeners were stunned by this strange problem.

Just then, Birbal walked in. Akbar put the problem to him, too. "Your Majesty, Delhi has a population of sixty thousand three hundred and four crows," Birbal replied, without batting an eyelid.

"How do you know? There could be less or more than that."

Sure. I cannot account for the ones who have gone off to other places to visit friends or relatives. As also those who have come to see His Majesty's beautiful city," was Birbal's cool answer. Akbar clapped and praised his wit.



## **A Barber For Babar**

*Akhila Girirajkumar*

All the courtiers in emperor Akbar's court were very vexed with the emperor's preference for Birbal. One day, they complained to him, "*Jahanpanah*, your preference for Birbal saddens us."

"Are we not worthy of your affection?"

"Birbal is not really clever, *Shahenshah* he is cunning and just very lucky."

Emperor Akbar listened to these complaints, silently. Then he said, "Let Birbal come to court. And I will prove to you that Birbal's wit is superior to everyone else's."

Soon Birbal entered, bowed to his emperor and took his seat. Then the emperor announced, "Today I was kicked on the chest. What punishment shall I inflict on the perpetrator of this crime?"

The court was in an uproar as the courtiers jumped on their feet and hurled forth all kinds of suggestions as punishment.

"Cut off the leg that dared to do this heinous crime!"

"Cut off both legs and hands!"

"Cut off his head!"

The emperor raised his hand for silence and then asked Birbal. "You say nothing, Birbal what are your thoughts on this matter?"

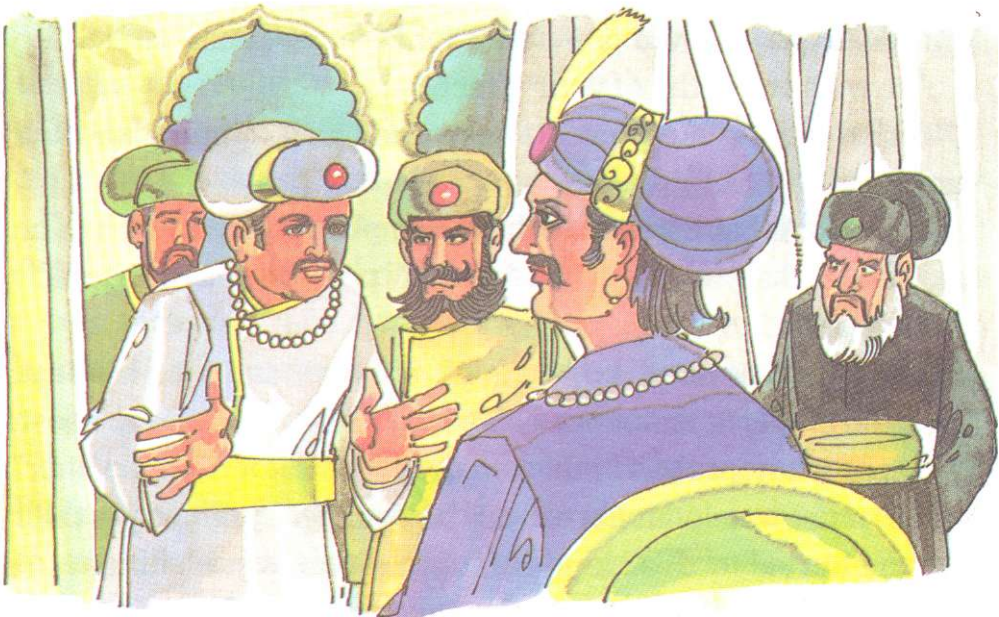
"O, *Shahenshah!* Call the Goldsmith and order him to make a pair of golden anklets for the perpetrator of the crime," replied Birbal.

Once again the court was in an uproar as the courtiers castigated Birbal, "You must be mad!"

"What happened to your loyalty to our *Jahanpanah!*"

"You must be beheaded first!"

Emperor Akbar was merely amused. He realized that once again Birbal had perceived the truth which the other courtiers had been blind to! But he had to prove it to the others so he asked, "Why, Birbal?"





"O, *Shahenshah!* There is no one in this wide world who can kick your chest without your permitting it! Two, you smile fondly as you speak about the incident. So the perpetrator can only be your grandson who kicked your chest as you lifted him! That is why I said you should order the goldsmith to adorn the foot that kicked your chest," replied Birbal.

"That is true!" said the emperor, as he broke into an amused laughter. Then he looked meaningfully at the courtiers who had complained. They hung their heads in shame and understood that as long as Birbal was at the court none of them had any chance of shining and impressing the emperor with his wit and they could never dream of enjoying the special favours that the emperor bestowed liberally on Birbal.

Some of the courtiers met privately and decided to give up plotting Birbal's downfall, instead they decided to plot his death!

The emperor's barber had been with him for many years. One day, he sent a substitute with a message that he would be back after two months. When he returned to work the emperor enquired, "Where have you been?"

"I visited my grandfather, *Jahanpanahl!*" replied the barber.

"And where does he live?"

"He is *dead, Jahanpanahl!* I visited him in heaven!"

"What!" exclaimed the emperor sitting up straight. "You cannot go to heaven until you are dead!"

"With due *respect, Jahanpanahl!* Permit me to disagree! I did go to heaven. I even saw your father, the great Humayun and your respected grandfather, Babar."

Emperor Akbar stared at the man wondering if he had gone mad!

Seeing the doubt in the emperor's eyes, the barber insisted, "It is

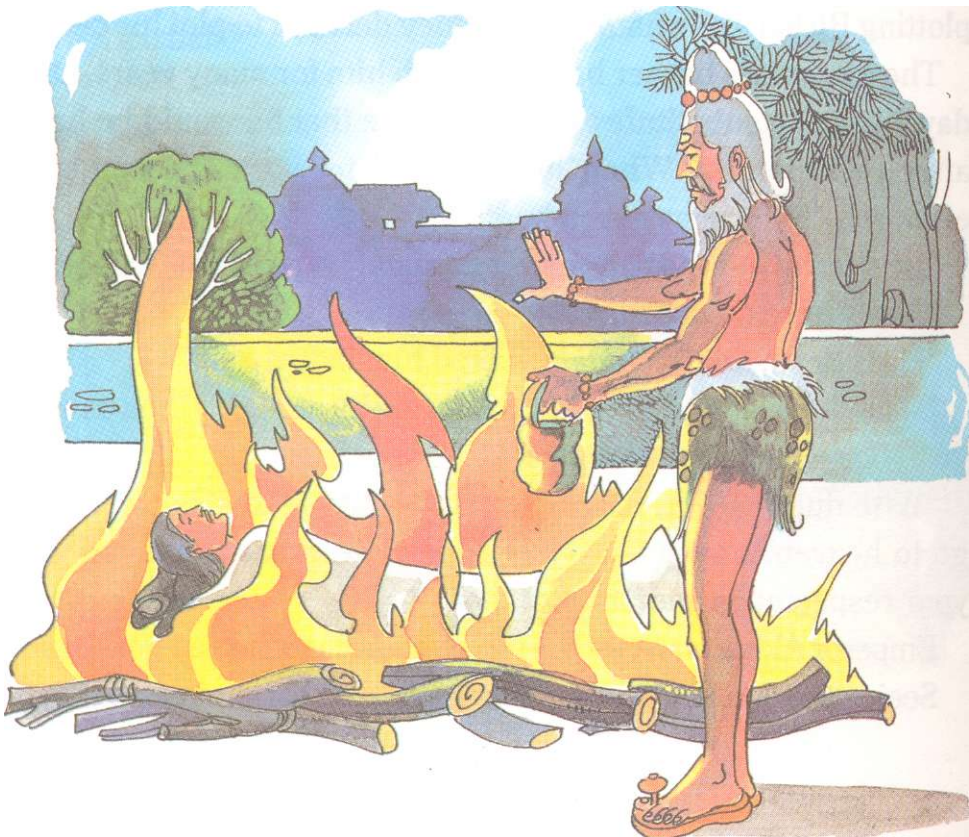
true. There is an old *yogi* in the ashram at the northern end of the fortress. He made me sit on a piece of holy ground. Then he piled wood all round and over me and set fire to the logs chanting *mantras*. Suddenly everything went black. When I opened my eyes, I found I was in heaven, lying with my head on my grandfather's lap!"

The emperor shook his head in wonderment. 'This is truly amazing! How did you get back?'

'That was easy *Jahanpanahl*!' replied the barber. 'You cannot stay for long in heaven if you have not fulfilled your earthly duties. So they sent me back!'

"Were you not afraid?"

"When the *yogi* piled the logs around me and lit them I was very scared, *Jahanpahahl* But I chanted the lord's name and soon found myself in heaven!"



The emperor instructed his spies to check the veracity of the barber's story. They reported back that the barber had been absent for two months. He was being revered in the area as one who had visited his dead grandfather; what was more he had given away some of his property to his cousin on the basis of his grandfather's instructions. Also, there was a *yogi* to be found at the ashram at the northern end of the fortress who claimed he could send anyone with the necessary courage to heaven!

After receiving confirmation of the barber's story, Emperor Akbar announced in court that he was going to visit his forefathers in heaven!

Every member of the court raised his voice in protest. "Do not go *Jahanpanahl* How will the kingdom survive for months without your guidance?"

"What if an enemy takes advantage of your absence and attacks us?"

Faced with so much opposition, the emperor gave up his idea. But there is so much I need to know from my forefathers!" he exclaimed. "How will I do that if I do not go!"

"Send someone whom you trust, O *Jahanpanahl* said one of the plotters.

"Send Birbal! He is the best man in court!" said another.

Birbal who had been pondering at the madness that had seized the emperor, was taken by surprise. He knew that he was cornered. When the emperor turned to him and asked, "Well, Birbal, will you go?" he stood up, bowed deeply and said, "I will consider it an honour O, *Shahenshahl* But I humbly beg you to grant me a period of three months to set my affairs in order!"

The emperor agreed graciously.

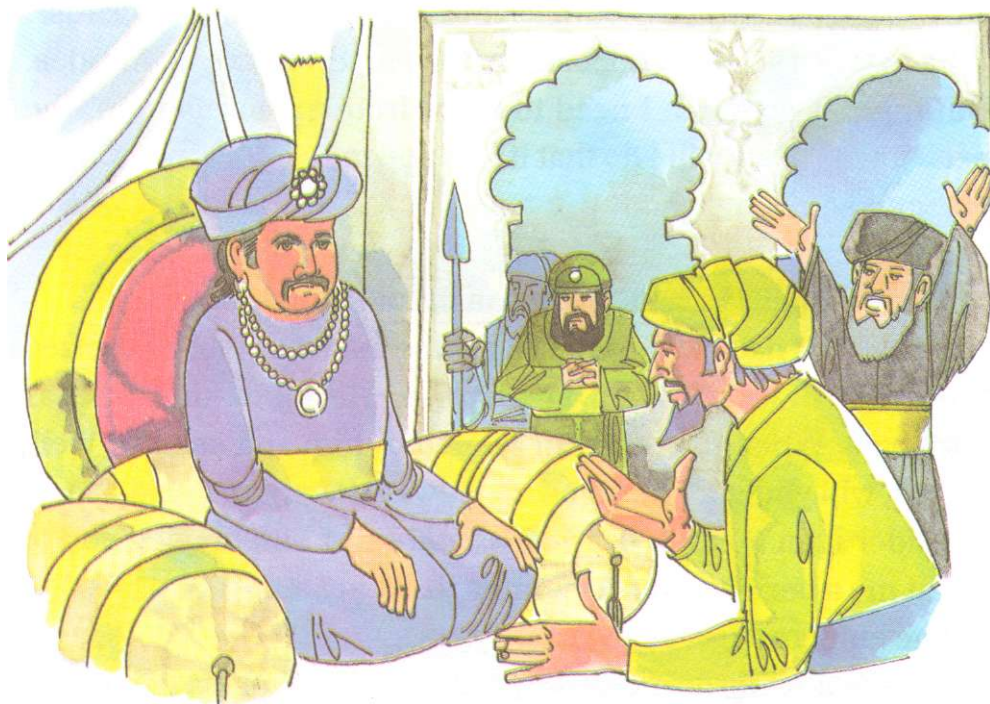
For the next three months Birbal, with two trusted labourers,

worked hard and dug a tunnel from the designated holy ground to his sister's house. When the tunnel was complete, Birbal went to the emperor and said he was ready to go to heaven.

On an auspicious day, the *yogi* performed a great many ceremonies. Finally, Birbal was made to sit on the holy ground and logs of wood were piled around and on top of him. Amid loud chants the logs were set on fire with great rituals.

As soon as he was covered by logs on all sides, Birbal made sure no one could see him. Then he opened the trap-door to the tunnel, and nipped down, closing the trap-door securely, he went through the tunnel to his sister's house. There he lived in quiet solitude.

Meanwhile, the plotting courtiers decided that they were finally rid of Birbal, forever. Delirious with joy, they celebrated in private and did their best to entertain the emperor.





At the end of two months Birbal dressed himself in rich clothes and entered the emperor's court. The evil courtiers almost died of shock when they saw Birbal. But the emperor was delighted and greeted him with great joy.

"Birbal I am so happy to see you!" he exclaimed. The court has not been the same without you!" And he eagerly asked Birbal about his father and grandfather.

"Are they well? What did they say about my reign?" he asked expectantly.

"They are very proud of you O, *Shahenshah!* Indeed they had no words to praise your valour, your diplomacy, your administrative abilities. You need no advice to rule this bountiful kingdom!" they say.

Emperor Akbar was very pleased. "That is praise indeed! I am truly happy that I have made my ancestors so proud of me!" He continued, "Did you ask them if there was anything I could do for them and their comfort? Do my honoured forefathers lack anything?"

"Only one thing, O, *Shahenshah!* They only lack a good barber! In fact your grandfather, the great Babar, commanded me to tell you to send him a good barber immediately!"

"Are there no barbers in heaven?" asked the emperor in surprise.

"Alas! No good ones, O, *Shahenshah!*" replied Birbal.

"This must be rectified at once! My forefathers must not lack for anything! Make arrangements to send my barber to heaven right away!" he ordered.

When the barber heard this he panicked, for his life was in danger. He cast himself at the emperor's feet and begged pardon. "Forgive me, *Jahanpanah!* Show me mercy! I lied to you about

going to heaven. I was a fool to yield to greed! I will confess everything. Please do not burn me!" he pleaded!

The emperor was furious and astounded. "You lied to me!" he thundered. "Why?"

Pointing to the plotters who were shaking with fear, the barber said, "They wanted to kill Birbal. So they paid me a lot of money to convince you that I had really gone to heaven, *Jahanpanah*! I was a fool to have yielded to greed! Show me mercy!" he begged.

The courtiers realized their game was up. They joined the barber in his plea for mercy. "We meant no harm!" they said. "We were only jealous of Birbal. Forgive us, O, *Jahanpanah!*" they pleaded.

When he pieced together the whole story, Emperor Akbar was very angry! So angry that he banished the dishonest barber from the country and he banned the plotting courtiers from court. The *yogi* who was another accomplice, was jailed!

And he issued a stern warning: "Henceforth plotting against Birbal will be considered as a conspiracy against me and treated as treason. Those who try will be hanged!"

With that peace reigned at Emperor Akbar's court again!





## The Stingiest Miser

*Santhini Govindan*

Once upon a time, there lived a wealthy man called Surender. Surender was so wealthy that he had three huge barns heaped high with gold and silver, rare diamonds and precious stones. But he was a terrible miser, too. He was so stingy that he was loathe to spend any of his carefully hoarded treasure. He bought the cheapest and dowdiest and the most ordinary clothes for his children. For food, he stopped just short of starving his family. They supped on gruel most of the time, so that more money could be saved!

Now, one day it so happened that when Surender was walking through the market-place, he saw a man eating a *ladoo*. It was a large, soft, yellow *ladoo* rich with raisins and cashewnuts. As the man bit into it, Surender's mouth began to water. It looked so delicious! Surender could almost feel its sweetness tickling his tongue. It had been a very long time since Surender had eaten a *ladoo* and he desperately yearned for one. His wife, Vandana,

was an excellent cook and Surrender knew that if he asked her, she would make him a *ladoo*. But she would naturally make one for herself, too, and one for each of their four children, and perhaps some for their servants and their friends, too. The thought of wasting all that money on the ingredients made Surrender quite ill. He decided he would say nothing about his longing for a *ladoo*.

When he got home, Surrender found that his craving for a *ladoo* would just not go away. He wanted to eat one so badly that he began to drool. His legs grew weak and his stomach began to rumble loudly.

"What is wrong with you, dear husband?" Vandana asked in concern.

Surrender rubbed his stomach and groaned in anguish.





'Tell me, what I can do to help you," Vandana said, anxiously.

"Get me a *ladoo* to eat," Surender muttered, "One sweet *ladoo* is all I need to put me out of my misery."

"One *ladoo*? Why, I can make dozens for you! Vandana replied, happily, "Then we can share them with our children and neighbours and servants, too."

"Dozens?" Surender squeaked in complete horror, appalled at the thought of his precious money being wasted to make so many *laddos*. "No! I do not think the neighbours or the servants need to have any share of the *laddos*."

"All right," said generous Vandana, disappointed. "I shall make just enough for the two of us and our children."

"Do you think the children really need to have a *ladoo* each?" Surender asked, meanly.

Vandana hung her head in shame at her husband's miserliness. But she was a dutiful wife and without protesting she quietly said, "Very well then! I shall make just two *laddos*—one for you and one for me!"

"But you do not even like *laddos* very much," tight-fisted Surender continued. "There is no reason for you to have one, just to keep me company. So make one single *ladoo*, just for me!" Vandana did not say a word in reply to this. She went straight to the kitchen to make the *ladoo* for her husband.

A little while later, she served Surender the *ladoo*. It was large and sugary and crumbled deliciously in Surender's eager mouth! How greedily he devoured it, without even the slightest bit of remorse that he was not sharing even a crumb with his family.

Now, it so happened that when all this was going on, Sakka, the King of the Gods and Ruler of the Heavens, peeped out of his

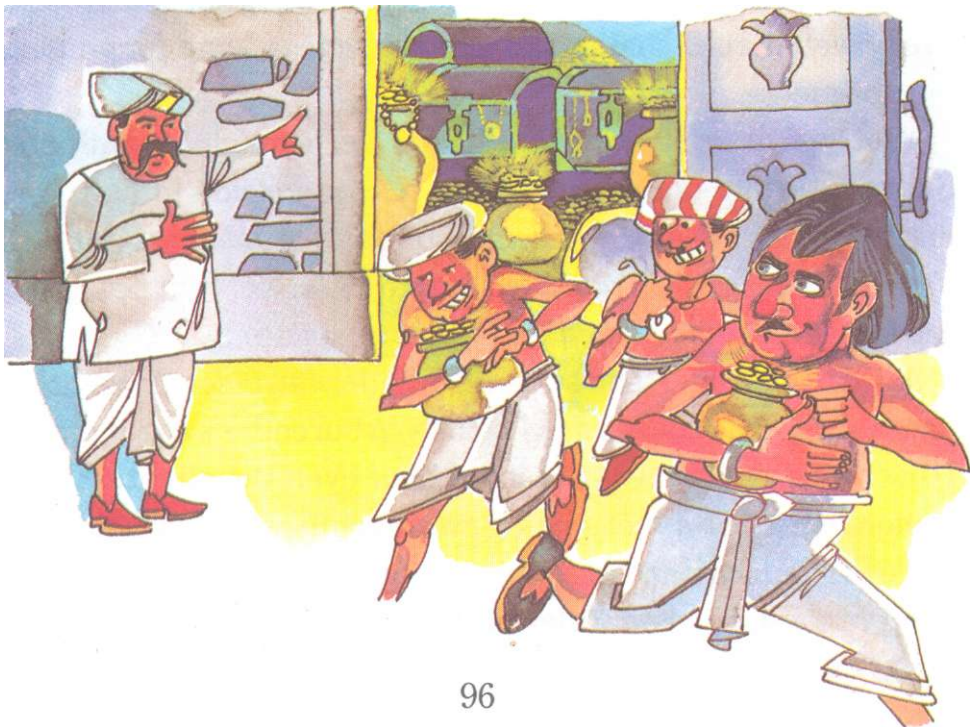
magnificent palace high in the heavens. "In all the aeons I have lived through, I have never seen such a terrible miser!" he cried. "It is time that I taught him a lesson!"

The next day, when Surender went for his morning walk, Sakka assumed Surender's own form and walked in through his front door.

"Today I am going to share my wealth," he said to an astonished Vandana. "So throw open the door of my treasure houses, and invite all the townfolk to take what they wish!"

"Bless your change of heart!" Vandana exclaimed, delightedly to the make-believe Surender. She dispatched a servant immediately to summon all the people and threw open the doors of the huge barns.

Soon the common people arrived, running as fast as they could. The make-believe Surender stood at the door of the barn and invited them in. "Take as much as you can!" he cried, heartily.



"Do not be afraid! If an impostor who looks like me comes to threaten and stop you, drive him away fearlessly!"

The amazed and overjoyed townsfolk leapt into the barn and began to grab the hoarded treasure. They filled their bulging pockets and bags till they could hold no more and were ready to stagger home when the real Surrender arrived. He almost fainted with shock to see the doors of his treasure houses thrown open and his precious hoard being merrily plundered.

"Thieves! Robbers!" he cried, wildly running forward in rage.

"Aaaah!" said the people, "this must be the impostor we were warned about! After him!" They began to chase the real Surrender.

A bewildered Surrender ran to the king's palace where he threw himself before the king.

"Your Majesty!" he cried in anguish, "I am being robbed and looted of all my treasure by the towns-people! When I protested, they began to chase me!"

"But I heard your own servant invited them to do so!" the king exclaimed. "Did you not give him the order yourself?"

"Never!" said Surrender, uttering a strangled cry. "Let the one who gave the order be brought here at once!"

The king sent a messenger to Surrender's house and soon the make-believe Surrender arrived with Vandana and the children.

The real Surrender shrieked when he saw the impostor.

"You are a fraud!" he cried.

The make-believe Surrender glared back at him. "No! it is you who is the deceiver!"

The puzzled king looked from one to the other. "I cannot tell the difference between the two," he told a speechless Vandana.

"So now you have to decide which one is your husband!"

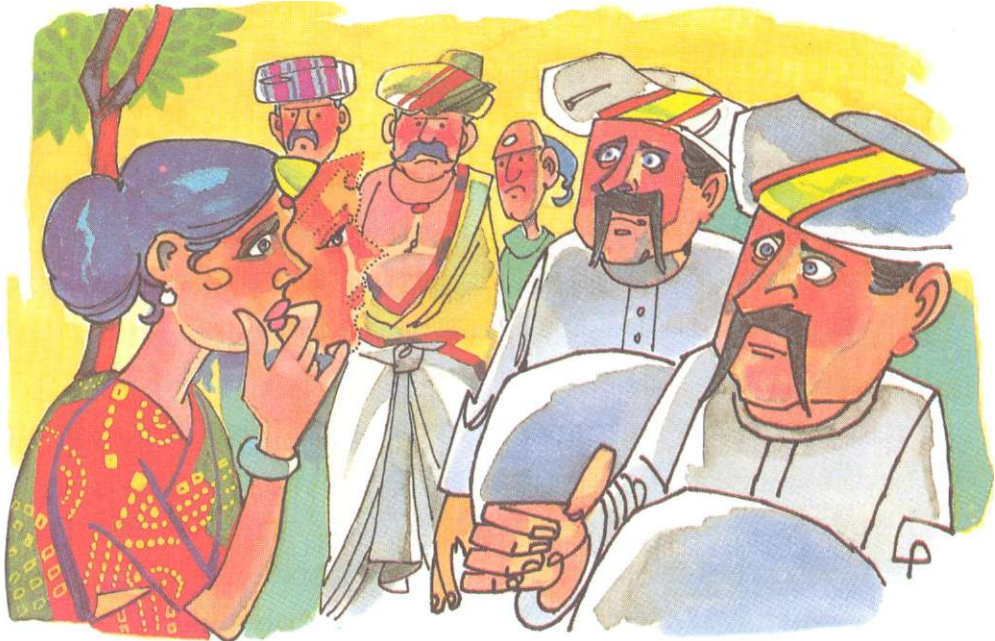
"I shall ask them each a question, Your Majesty," Vandana replied quietly. She turned to the God Sakka and asked, "Is it better to be generous to yourself, your family, your neighbours and friends, or your servants?"

To all!" Sakka replied promptly. "When you are generous, others also become generous and so everyone is happy and prosperous!"

Then she turned to Surrender. "Is it better to be generous to yourself, your family, your neighbours and friends, or your servants?"

"To none!" Surrender howled in wrath. "Being generous only wastes precious wealth that can never be recovered!"

Vandana gathered her children close and squaring her shoulders, she drew close to God Sakka. "Your Majesty," she said, solemnly, "this is my true husband, Surrender."





Surender let out an agonized cry of grief and disbelief, "No! my dear wife and children!"

At this God Sakka stepped forward and with a blinding flash of light, reverted to his original form.

"I am not Surender, but Sakka himself," he said to the king. "I came down from the heavens just to teach this petty and mean miser a lesson!" He turned to a trembling and woebegone Surender and said. "Do you see what your miserliness has done? Even your own wife and children do not want you!"

Tears sprang into Surender's eyes and he sobbed inconsolably.

"Your only hope for salvation is for you to stop being a miser," Sakka said. "Can you bring yourself to be more generous?"

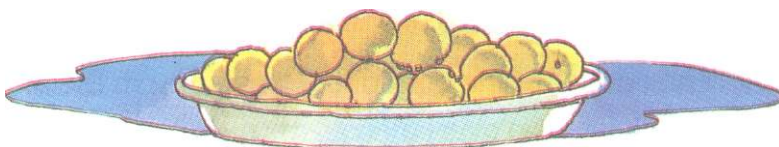
Surender paused. "Yes," he said, reluctantly, "I will try to be a little more generous.

"You will have to be a lot more generous," warned Sakka, "or I will be back for you!" God Sakka vanished in a cloud of smoke. Surender embraced his wife and children happily.

"I am so relieved that this ordeal is over," he told Vandana.

"Shall we celebrate?" Vandana asked, shyly. "I can make dozens of *ladoos*."

"Dozens of *ladoos*?" the words rose sharply to Surender's lips. Once more, he felt faint at the thought of all the expense. But he clenched his fists and swallowed the words that came spontaneously to his tongue. Instead, he nodded his head and said very softly, "Very well!"





## **The Road To Heaven**

*Arnit Pandey*

Long-long ago, in a kingdom of South India, there lived a famous saint. It was said that even as a youth he had renounced the world and devoted his life to severe penance and search of God. He was blessed and supposed to have great spiritual powers. People far and wide respected him and looked upon him almost as an incarnation of God himself.

The saint had a large number of followers. He kept receiving invitations from his rich disciples to come and visit them. The saint always obliged by granting these requests. He frequently delivered sermons to crowds of thousands on such occasions. This called for long, continuous journeys from one place to another. Realizing the saint's need for comfort on such journeys, he was promptly provided by a palanquin and bearers by one of his wealthy disciples. At first the saint refused. Soon, the comfort of travelling in the shade and comfort of the palanquin overruled all his moral arguments.

As his popularity grew, so did his luxuries. His tongue cultivated a taste for fine delicacies, his body got used to the feel of exquisite silken drapes, and his mind was much less in pursuit of God than delivering more and more crowd-pulling sermons. On a hot, summer day, the palanquin bearers were huffing and puffing their way up a long road carrying the ever-increasing bulk of the holy man. Suddenly, the palanquin came to a halt.

"What happened," asked the saint irritably, "why are you stopping in the middle of the road?"

'There is a man blocking the way, Oh! holy one," said one of the palanquin bearers.

"What does he want?" asked the saint.

"I need your help," a strange voice announced.

The saint stuck his head out from the palanquin to see the very unkempt figure of a man. He was standing right in the middle of the path with hands outstretched to block the way. From his manner and appearance, the man looked almost mad.

"I need your help," the stranger repeated.

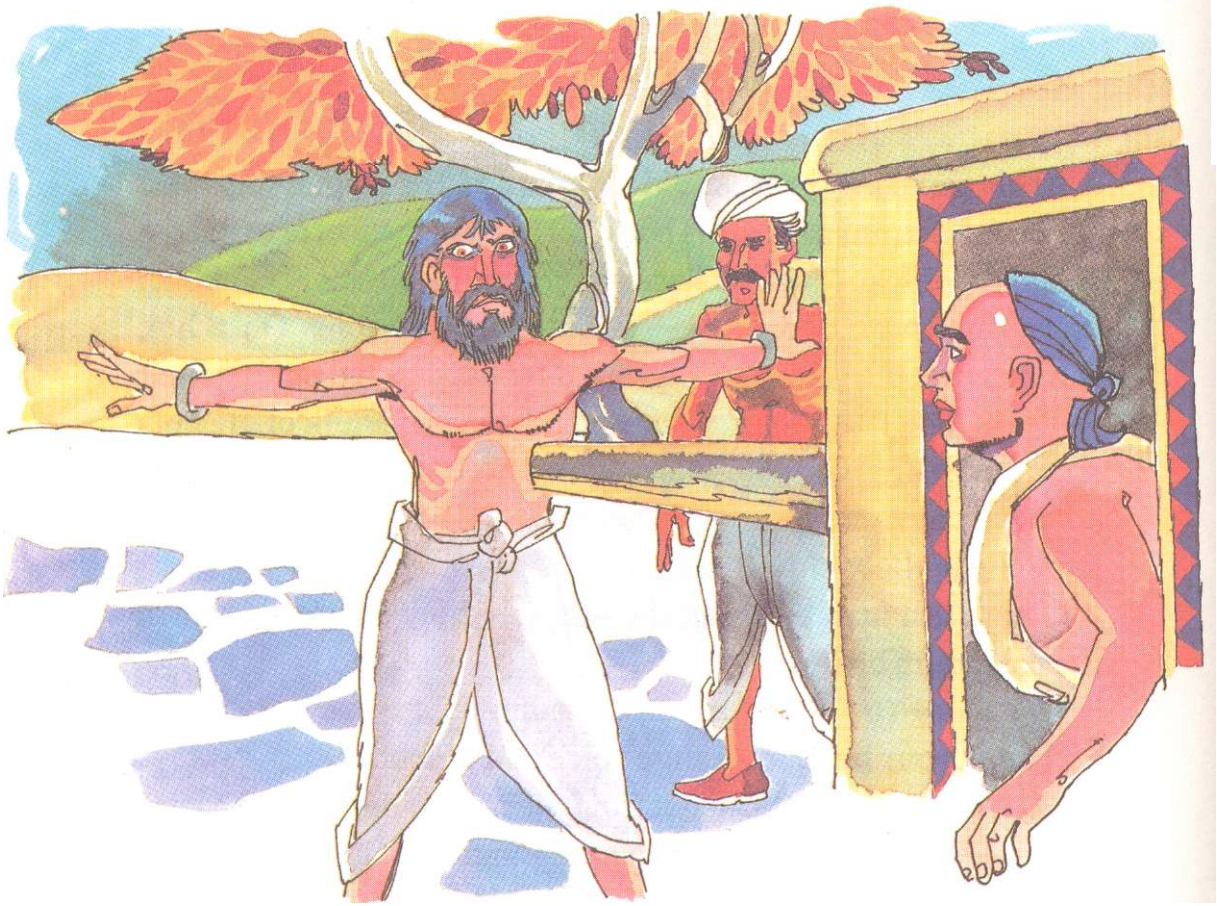
"What can I do?" the saint asked, in a hurry to get on his way.

"I want to go to heaven," said the man.

"How can I be of help," asked the saint, now thoroughly convinced that the man was crazy.

"People say you know where the place called heaven is," said the man. "I want you to show me the way."

'He talks as if I have been to heaven several times,' thought the saint, amused. But he had to find an answer. The man was in no mood to give way, and now the palanquin bearers were also getting restless. So he said aloud. "The way to heaven is very straight. Just stand on the side of the road with your eyes and



hands raised up towards the sky and you will go to heaven."

"It is that simple," said the man with an innocent chuckle. "Thank you, Oh! holy one, thank you." Saying this, the fool immediately proceeded to stand on the side of the road with his eyes and hands raised towards the sky. Smiling at his own smartness, the saint urged the palanquin bearers to proceed with the journey. For the next few days, the saint thought about the incident once in a while and smiled to himself. Soon, he forgot about it altogether.

Years passed. Now the saint had a sprawling *ashram* set up by hefty donations from rich merchants and traders. Hundreds of disciples stayed at the *ashram* to gain spiritual knowledge. People came from far-off places to see the great man and hear him speak about the mysteries of life. There were talks of miracles happening

by his touch or mere presence. The saint spent most of his time surrounded by wealthy men trying to show how devoted they were to God by spending money in building temples.

The saint's journeys also became more elaborate. Now a hoard of disciples, attendants and devotees followed his palanquin wherever he went. Although the saint had not been corrupted much by all the pomp and show around him, yet, he found very little time to devote to his own prayers and penance. From the man of God he once was, he became a man of the masses. So great was his influence that even kings came to bow before him on several occasions.

A hot summer day found the saint and the procession of his followers travelling down a deserted road. It was the same road where the saint had met the madman twelve years ago. The holy man was too preoccupied with his thoughts to remember the incident. He was looking out absentmindedly when suddenly they rounded a corner and the saint saw a very strange sight.

In a distance he saw a frail man whose body had been almost reduced to bones. His dishevelled hair matted and falling all over his face and back. The long, tangled beard hung much below his knees. Open-mouthed, the man stood with his hands raised towards the heavens, his eyes, rivetted on the sky.

Suddenly it all came back to the saint. He remembered the meeting with the madman, how he had tricked him to get on with his journey. "Poor man," the saint muttered softly, "he must really have been out of his mind to have believed me."

But as they neared, the saint's ideas began to change. He saw that inspite of his battered look, the madman's upturned eyes glowed with a strange light. The man was in a deep trance. All his life's energies concentrated on his only goal—to go to heaven.



Then, a miracle happened. Even as the saint watched, a flash of divine light flashed onto the pitiful figure. The next moment, ever so slowly, the madman started to lift up in the air. It was as if a divine hand was slowly pulling him up. The saint knew what was happening.

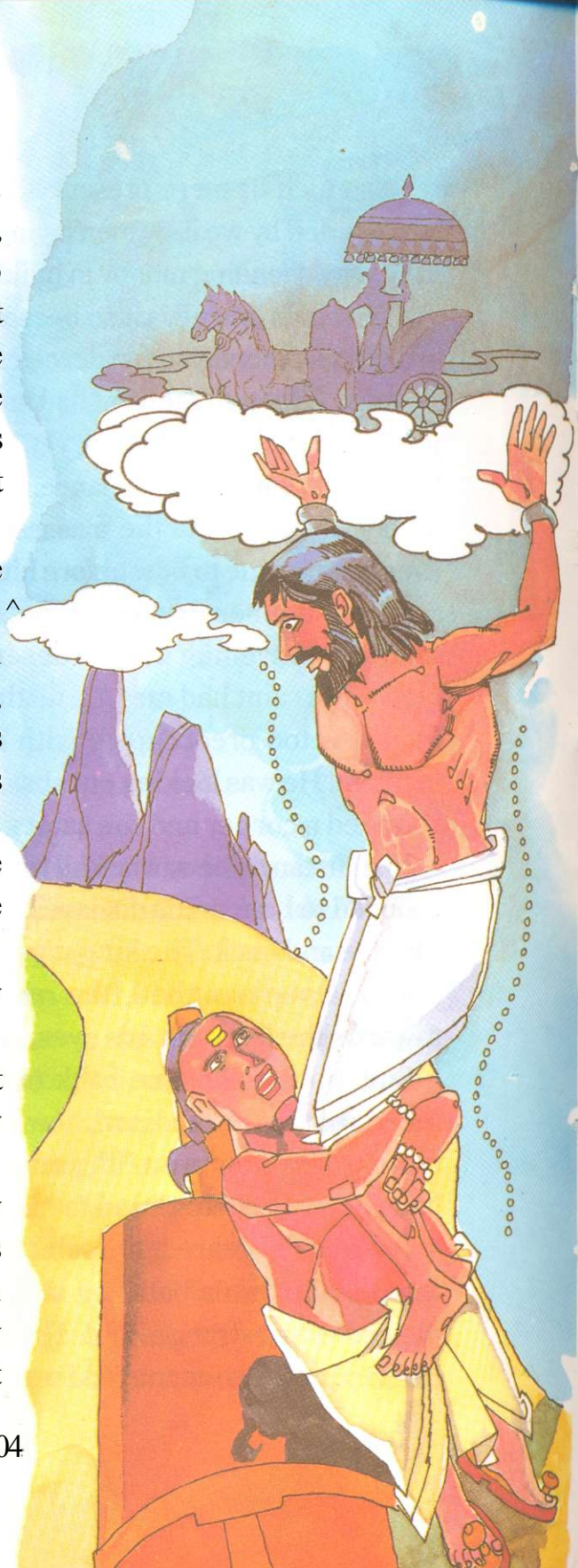
"Put the palanquin down," he shouted.

As the startled palanquin bearers and disciples watched, the saint got out and ran towards the madman. By now he was quite above the ground. Gathering all his strength, the saint leaped up and caught the madman's feet.

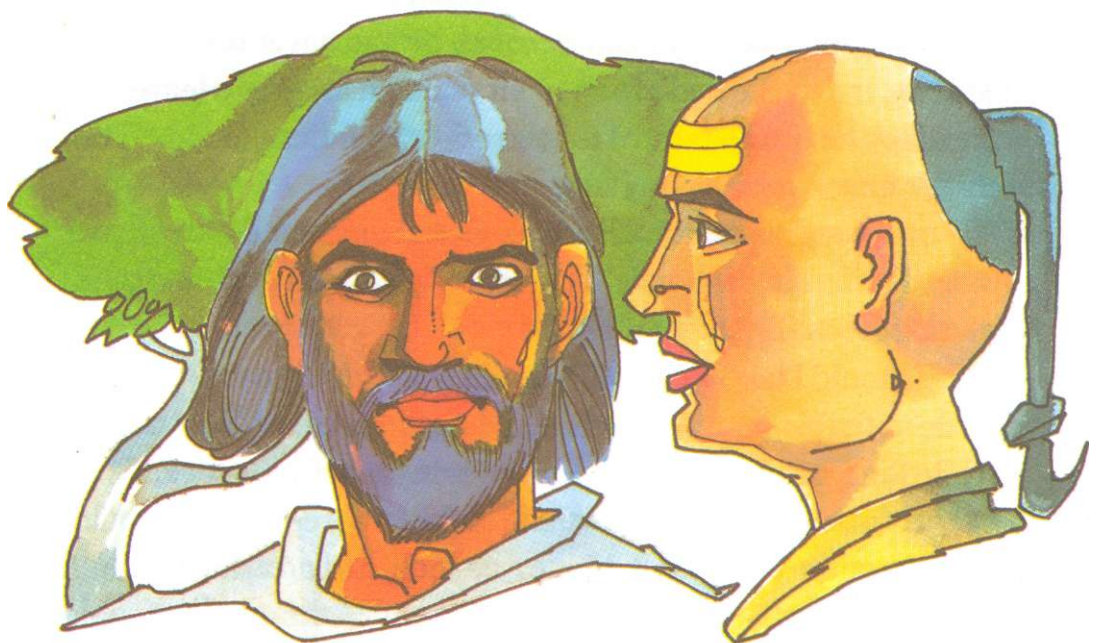
"What are you doing, Oh! Holy one," disciples asked.

"Why are you, the greatest saint of all, clinging to the dirty feet of an idiot?"

Suspended in mid-air, slowly rising up the saint delivered his final sermon. "The one you call an idiot," he said, "is more holy than a hundred saints like me put



together. All my life I preached, but never could practice the devotion to God which this madman has shown. I preached to thousands, but not one of them could rise above the pleasures of the world. And this madman became a sage by one remark which was made to fool him. I am not clinging to the dirty feet of an idiot. Instead, I am holding on to the feet of my *guru*. This madman taught me that the road to God's abode is not through reading scriptures or giving sermons. In fact it is through single-hearted devotion. A desire for God so strong, that you do not desire anything else. So remember, whatever your goal in life, if you dedicate yourself to it, nothing, not even heaven, is beyond your reach." Saying this, the saint rose to heaven, clinging to the feet of the madman.





## **Guileless Gokul**

*M.S. Mahadevan*

Gokul worked in the fields of a rich zamindar. Though his village was but an hour's journey from Benares, he had never been to that fabled city. In fact, he had never taken so much as a day's leave.

"Perhaps he cannot afford it." the other farmhands said. "The overseer may not be paying him well enough."

The overseer heard this. He took Gokul aside and placed ten new silver coins in his hand. "Tomorrow is your day off," he said. "Go to Benares. Enjoy yourself."

"Why should I take a day off?" Gokul asked, indignantly. "What will I do with this money?" Gokul had a genuine problem.

While the farmhands took their wages in cash, Gokul took his in the form of grain and cloth. If anything special was required he would barter one or the other for it. Money, as such, had no value for him.

"Go to Benares. Buy presents for your family," the overseer said.

Gokul's wife, Ganga, was delighted with the windfall. "A fourth

of this should be offered to the Lord Vishwanath," she said.

"With the rest I will buy presents," Gokul said. "They say you can get everything in the bazaar at Benares—from an elephant to a *Kalpatharu*."

"I will be happy with something less exotic," Ganga smiled. "A brocade *sari*."

"I want a horse and a sword!" said their son, Shishu.

"A red handkerchief and a pair of gold sandals for me," said little Bina.

The next day, Gokul rose much before his usual hour. He bathed and prayed and then picking up a stout stick he set off for Benares.

He reached the city just as the morning sunlight touched its gleaming domes and elegant spires. The stone steps of the bathing ghats were awash with its soft glow. He found his way through the narrow serpentine streets to the holy shrine of Kashi Yishwanath. There, with deep reverence, Gokul offered prayers and slipped three coins into the *hundi*.

Now that he was free to shop around, Gokul headed for the bazaar and its razzle-dazzle. Crowds surged around. Strange hands rifled through his pockets. The noise and confusion was too much for him. He thought longingly of his village. But first he had to buy presents. With this in mind, he entered a big silk shop.

"Show me your finest stuff," he said.

The shop-assistant took in his rustic appearance and accent and murmured something to the owner.

"He is probably a rich farmer," the owner said, "show him our best brocade."

Bolt after bolt of gorgeous silk was unfolded before Gokul. He selected one.



"As a special discount for you, I will give it for five thousand rupees," the owner beamed.

"Five thousand!" Gokul's jaw fell open. "Do you mean rupees like these?" he pulled out the coins.

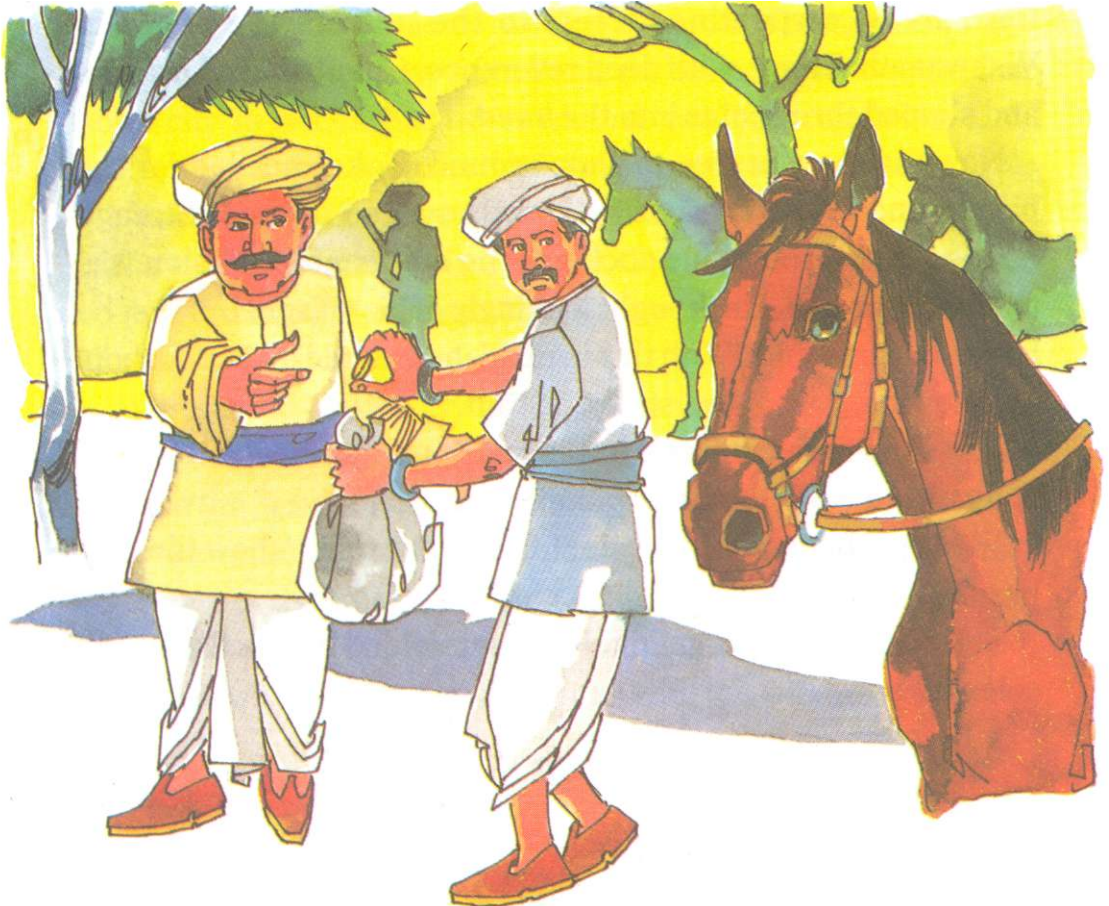
It was the owner's turn to stare. He knew that farmers were thrifty. They loved to bargain. But this was the first time he had met one who expected to beat the price down from five thousand to five rupees.

"I am sure you must be talking about some other rupees." Gokul said. "Not this kind."

"There is no other kind," said the shopkeeper. "It is a bargain at five thousand."

"Poor Ganga," Gokul sighed.

"Ganga?"





"My wife," Gokul replied. "She wanted a silk *sari*. But how can I pay five thousand rupees?"

"Then do not waste my time," the shopkeeper said, angrily.

'Maybe, I will have better luck at the horse-market,' thought Gokul. He made his way there.

A canny horse dealer cornered him at once. "What kind of horse are you looking for?"

"A good one," Gokul replied. "For my son."

"I have just the right animal for your son," the dealer said.

A smart grey pony cantered up.

Gokul's mind was made up. 'Tell me the price,' he said, reaching into his pocket.

"One hundred and ninety."

"You mean rupees? Like these?" Gokul pulled out the coins.

"What else? It is cheap at that price."

"Five rupees," Gokul said. "That is all I have to offer."

"Then go buy an ass tail for your son!" the horse dealer snapped.

Poor Gokul! It was the same story when he tried to buy gold sandals for Bina. He was directed to the nearest asylum.

At sunset, disappointed and heart-sick he headed home. On the way, he passed a beggar.

"A little charity," the beggar pleaded, "the Lord will repay you thousandfold."

Gokul dropped all the coins into the beggar's bowl.

In the entire city of Benares, you are the only man with whom I am ready to make a deal," he said. "Take these seven rupees in the name of the Lord. See that I am repaid a thousandfold. I need that kind of money to buy presents."

The money had brought Gokul nothing but heart-ache and

disappointment. He went home, a saddened man.

Ganga listened patiently as Gokul narrated the day's events. When he came to the part about the beggar, she grew alarmed. "Did you give him all the money?"

"I did. In that city of crooks, he was the only honest man. He promised me a thousandfold return."

"You will be the death of me," Ganga wailed. "I am tired of your stupidity. You refuse wages and I have to run around bartering corn and cloth for the innumerable little things needed to run a house. What have I done to deserve a husband like you? Can't you see a joke?"

"What joke?"

"Can anyone buy silk for five rupees?" she ranted. "Or a horse? Or gold sandals? I thought you would buy a toy horse and a pair of slippers. Have you no common sense?" Lamenting loudly, she went off to the overseer's house to complain about Gokul.

The next day, the overseer told Gokul to dig a well all by himself. "This will bring you to your senses," he said, severely.

Gokul did his work without complaint. He worked very hard and completed the task. The overseer was pleased and gave him a day's leave.

"But what do I do with the jar of bean-shaped pebbles I found while digging the well?" Gokul asked.

"Eat them," shouted the exasperated overseer. "Sell them. Do whatever you want. Show some common sense for a change!"

Gokul tried eating the pebbles but they were too hard. Then, he recalled seeing similar pebbles in a shop in Benares. 'Maybe, I can barter them,' he thought.

The next day, he set off for Benares. This time he went straight to the shop where he had seen the pebbles.

Pointing to the showcase he asked the owner, "Would you like to buy some more of that?"

"Certainly. How many do you have?"

"A jarful. You can have them all in exchange for a wooden horse and a pair of slippers."

"You must be joking!" the shopkeeper laughed. "Show me one."

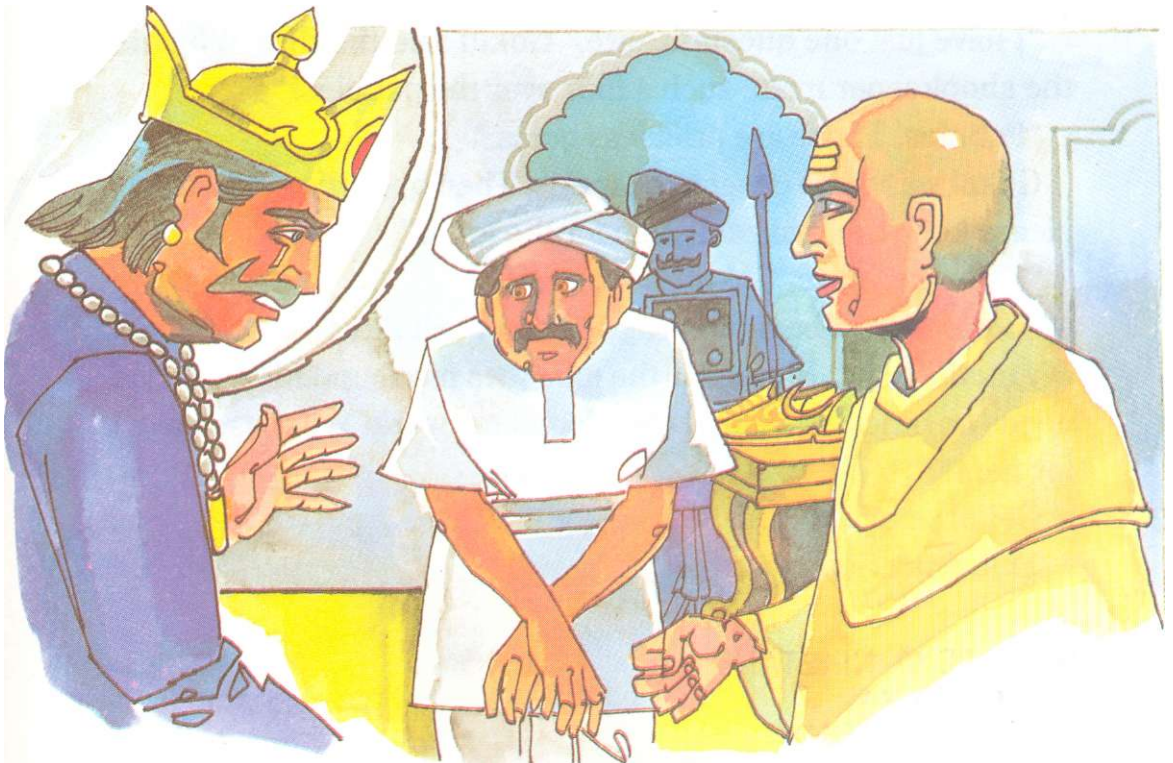
Gokul dropped a handful of pebbles before him.

The shopkeeper paled. "Please wait here," he stammered. "I will be back."

He returned with the *kotwal* and several policemen. Before Gokul knew what had happened he was handcuffed and taken away to the prison.

"What have I done?" he wailed.

"What have you not done?" the jailor shouted. "You are a robber and a murderer."



"No. I am just an ordinary peasant," Gokul cried. He narrated the whole story. It was such an amazing tale that the jailor felt that it might be true. He went to the king.

The king was sitting with the high priest when Gokul was dragged into his presence. To everyone's surprise both the king and the priest looked at him and jumped up, saying. "He is the man we are looking for."

They embraced him.

It turned out that both the men had seen the same dream night after night. A voice told them that the Lord wanted them to help his devoted servant, Gokul the peasant. They saw Gokul toiling in the fields, digging the well. But they had no clue about his address.

"I saw that you wanted to buy brocade for your wife, a horse and sword for your son, gold sandals for your daughter. The presents are ready for you. Where should they be sent?" the king asked.

Gokul demurred. But the king insisted.

"I have just one question, sire," Gokul said timidly. "Why did the shopkeeper make such a fuss over the pebbles?"

"Pebbles! Those are priceless gems."

Gokul was quite upset to hear this. Then he had an idea. "Sire, please keep them in exchange for the gifts?"

"They are yours, Gokul!"

"Gems would be a blessing for those who know their value. My mother said: Blessed is the man who has found his work. He needs no other blessing. I have found my work. What use have I for gems?"

Gokul returned home with the gifts.

This time, Ganga was very pleased.







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