

King Akbar and the poor Brahmin

A Hindu Story

Key Ideas: injustice, wisdom, desire, determination

One winter's morning, King Akbar was strolling along the banks of the River Jumna with his favourite minister, Birbal. The king enjoyed his minister's company for Birbal was a wise and witty man. The two were often to be seen strolling together, talking at length about this and that.

On this particular morning they had hit upon an unusual topic. "It is very strange," said Birbal, "but have you noticed that people will even risk their lives for something they want badly enough." "I don't agree," said the king. While he was speaking, he dipped his fingers in the water of the river. It was icy. He quickly pulled his fingers out again. As he did so, an idea came to him.

"I know," he said, "we will put your idea to the test. I will offer five hundred gold coins to anyone who will stand neck deep in this water from sunrise to sunset, but only if that person uses no means of keeping warm."

The story spread far and wide. Many people were poor, and five hundred gold coins was a fortune. But the weather was cold, and the river was even colder. No one wanted to take up the challenge. They all agreed that five hundred gold coins were no use at all if you were dead.

But there was one man who thought it might be worth it. He was a poor Brahmin, so poor that he had no home, and slept outside in all weathers. He was so poor, that some days he did not eat at all. He volunteered.

The king was amazed that there was someone so poor that it was worth accepting such a challenge. The king ordered his guards to take the man down to the river and watch over him. The Brahmin was to use nothing to keep himself warm.

At sunset the Brahmin emerged from the water, blue with cold, teeth chattering, but alive. He was taken back to the palace, where the king was even more amazed. "How did you manage it?" asked King Akbar, "did you not feel the cold?" "Oh yes," said the Brahmin, "but I could see the lights of the palace, and that kept my spirits up."

"So," declared King Akbar, thumping the arms of his throne, "you used the lights to keep you warm. You have cheated. There is no reward."

Wise Birbal was very unhappy. He knew why the king did not want to give the Brahmin the gold coins, but he felt that King Akbar was being very unjust. He wondered how he could show the king how he felt.

Later that morning, King Akbar realised Birbal was not at court. He sent a messenger to find out what had happened. The messenger returned, saying Birbal would attend court when he had eaten his breakfast.

Time passed. The king became worried and angry by turns. He decided to go and see for himself what was keeping Birbal. When he reached Birbal's house, he was met by a very strange sight. The minister was sitting in his garden, under a large tree. He had lit a small fire, and was feeding it with tiny twigs. "What are you doing?" said King Akbar. "Where is your breakfast?" "It is in the cooking pot," said Birbal, pointing to a large pot hanging high in the tree. "I am waiting for it to cook."

King Akbar became angry. "But that is ridiculous," he said, "the pot will never get warm so far from the fire." As he spoke the words, he realised what Birbal was trying to tell him. He knew he had been unfair, and unjust. He summoned the Brahmin and apologised, giving him a reward of one thousand gold coins, instead of five hundred.