

# Popular Jokes and Political History

## The Case of Akbar, Birbal and Mulla Do-Piyaza

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*Anonymous popular tales and other folklore can contribute to our understanding of political history, so long as we do not view them as essentially a kind of commentary on it. Folktales are themselves history of a sort. They are not just artefacts, but also processes aiming quite varied effects within different traditions and contexts.*

### I

ONE bitter winter night, Akbar and his boon companion Birbal were enjoying the comforts of the fort at Agra, when a poor brahmin was ushered in. He described his abject poverty and asked for help. Akbar said, 'I understand brahmins can perform amazing feats. Can you walk into the Jamuna till the water reaches your chest, then stand there all night? If you do that without any help, I'll give you everything you want.' Next day, when the court had assembled, Akbar asked about the brahmin. He was told that the man was waiting for his reward. 'Bring him in. I would like to question him', he ordered. When the brahmin was brought in, Akbar said, 'Tell me honestly, how did you manage to stay warm all night?' 'Sir', the brahmin replied, 'as I stood in the river under the palace I noticed a light in one of the windows. I fixed my eyes on it - that kept me warm.' 'Aha!', exclaimed Akbar. 'So you warmed yourself with the help of a light from my palace! That's not how you were supposed to do it'. And he had him thrown out. As the brahmin was leaving the fort he ran into Birbal. When Birbal learned what Akbar had said, he gave the brahmin some instructions, then himself went in to attend upon the emperor. Later that day, the emperor and his close companions rode out to hunt in the forest nearby. Suddenly they saw a column of smoke rising in the air. They rode over to investigate and found that a man had lit a fire under a tall tree. High above the fire, from a branch of the tree, hung a pot. 'What are you doing?' Akbar asked. 'Cooking some rice, sir', the man replied. Akbar burst out laughing and said, 'You fool, why have you put your pot in the tree when your fire is down here on the ground? What good is that going to do?' Then Birbal stepped forward and said, 'Your Majesty, he is that poor brahmin whom you accused of warming himself with the light from your palace window. Surely, if he could do that, he can now cook his pot of rice.' Akbar realised that he had been outwitted and gave the brahmin a suitable reward.

This is my version of a story I heard as a child. There were many other such bedtime stories. They always ended with Birbal coming up with a witty rejoinder or explanation, thus turning some impossible situation to his own favour, often making a fool of his master, Akbar. The tellers were

illiterate Muslim men and women. Later, I found some of the same stories retold in textbooks, and many more in cheap booklets sold on sidewalks. Printed in both Hindi and Urdu, these can still be found in similar abundance. Here are a few examples to indicate the range and variety of this 'Birbaliana'.<sup>1</sup>

Once the emperor posed a riddle by asking Birbal two questions which the latter had to answer with one sentence. The questions were: 'Why did the brahmin go thirsty? Why did the donkey feel depressed?' (*brahmin kyo pyasa? gadha kyo udasa?*). Birbal immediately replied, '*loTa nu tha*', making a pun on the word *loTa*. As a noun, it answered the first question: the brahmin was thirsty because he had no pot with him for water. And as a verb, it answered the second question: the donkey felt depressed because it hadn't rolled in dust for some time.

Another type of 'challenge' stories are those in which the emperor gives a half-line of poetry to which Birbal must add other lines and make a short poem. This challenge is called 'samasya purti', i.e., the resolution of a problem or filling of a gap. It is a fairly popular literary game in Sanskrit and associated languages, as also elsewhere.<sup>2</sup>

One day as the emperor was enjoying the street scene from a palace window he saw a young woman go down the street carrying a pot on her head, and water was splashing out of the pot. Akbar wondered: why did the water splash? Then he answered the question himself: because the pot was heavy and the woman carrying it was young and delicate. He promptly composed a half-line: 'Why did the water in the pot splash?' Later, he asked Birbal to perform samasya purti on that half-line. Without a moment's hesitation, Birbal recited a verse that said: 'A girl, intoxicated with youth, went to fetch water from the well. As she pulled up the heavy pot, the strain unstitched part of her tight bodice. She became agitated because she couldn't fully cover her shame. That's why water splashed from the pot.' The emperor was very pleased.

Now some jokes.

Akbar, his son Prince Saleem and Birbal went hunting. When the day warmed up, Akbar and Saleem took off their heavy coats

and gave them to Birbal to carry. Then Akbar said to Birbal in jest, 'It looks like an ass's load'. Birbal replied, 'No, your majesty, more likely of two asses.'<sup>3</sup>

Once Akbar said to Birbal, 'Last night I saw in a dream that I fell into a pit of honey. Then I saw you, and you had fallen into a pit of shit.' 'How amazing, your majesty!' Birbal promptly responded, 'I saw the same dream. And when we finally got out of the pits; first I licked your majesty clean, then you kindly did the same favour to me.'

One day Akbar said to Birbal, 'I want you to get me some bull's milk'. Birbal asked for a day's time, then he went home to his daughter and gave her some instructions. Late that night, Akbar was awakened by the loud noise of someone washing clothes under his window that overlooked the Jamuna. A soldier was despatched and the culprit was brought before the king. It was a young girl. 'Why are you washing clothes at this late hour of night?' Akbar asked. 'Can't you do it during the day?' 'Your majesty', the girl replied, 'I was busy all day long because my father gave birth to a son. Only now could I get out of the house'. 'What do you mean, your father gave birth to a son?' Akbar angrily asked. 'Who has ever heard of such a thing!' 'And who has ever heard of bulls giving milk, your majesty?' the girl responded.

Once Akbar and Birbal were enjoying a boat ride on the Jamuna when a string of pearls fell into the river from the emperor's hand. Akbar said to Birbal, 'Birbal, *mala de*, i.e., 'Get me the string of pearls', which could also be heard as, '*ma la de*', i.e., 'Get me your mother', Birbal promptly replied, 'Refuge of the world, *bahne do*, 'Let it float away', which could also be interpreted as, '*bahne do*', i.e., 'give me your sisters'. The emperor fell silent.

Does any of these jokes have a reference to any event recorded in history? I have come across only two that do.

Akbar said to Birbal, 'I have joined two months and made them into one'. Birbal replied, 'That is extremely kind of your majesty. Previously people enjoyed moonlight for only 15 days, now they will enjoy it for thirty.'

Abdul Qadir Badayuni, who wrote what may be called the 'unauthorised' history of Akbar's reign, tells us that in 1582 Akbar

ordered that "the beginning of the reckoning of the Hindi month should be from the 28th and not from the 13th (which was the invention of Raja Bikramajit, and an innovation of his), and that they should fix the well known festivals of the Hindus according to this rule, But it never attained currency, although farmans went forth to this effect from Futhpur to Gujarat on one side, and Bengal on the other."<sup>4</sup>

Akbar said to Birbal, 'Birbal, you must recite my *kalima* [i.e., adopt my religion]'. Birbal replied, 'Your majesty, I already recite your *kalima* [i.e., I am totally devoted to you], but I shall not recite the *kalima* that would ruin my religion'.<sup>5</sup>

This exchange has some echo of the remarks attributed to Raja Man Singh, Akbar's nephew by marriage and perhaps his greatest general. When in an intimate gathering he was pressed by Akbar to join his circle of 'disciples', Man Singh bluntly replied, "If discipleship means willingness to sacrifice one's life, I have already carried my life in my hand: what need is there of further proof? If, however, the term has another meaning and refers to faith, I certainly am a Hindu. If you order me to do so, I will become a Musulman, but I know not of the existence of any other religion than these two." "At this point", Badayuni informs us, "the matter stopped, and the emperor did not question him any further..."<sup>6</sup>

Once I became aware of communal tensions between Muslims and Hindus, these Akbar-Birbal jokes took on a different hue. Most of them seemed to express the contempt of a Hindu narrator for the Mughal ruler. No matter what trick the slightly foolish, slightly irrational, and generally aggressive Muslim king employed, his wily Hindu courtier always managed to come up one better. As I learned more about Akbar, particularly about his religious eclecticism, his fondness for Hindu epics, his abolition of the *jizya* and 'pilgrim' taxes levied exclusively against Hindus, his intimate ties with prominent Rajputs, and his fierce tussle for authority with Muslim religious dignitaries, the issue took on more complexity. Here was a Muslim king who had done much to remove discrimination against his non-Muslim subjects – even to the extent of antagonising a great many of his co-religionists – and yet he appeared in such bad light in these stories which apparently had a communal thrust.

Ever since Freud published his book on humour and its relation to the Unconscious, it is commonplace to regard jokes as an expression of some suppressed aggressive urge. "[Jokes] make possible" wrote Freud, "the satisfaction of an instinct (whether lustful or hostile) in the face of an obstacle that stands in its way. They circumvent this obstacle and in that way draw pleasure

from a source which the obstacle had made inaccessible."<sup>7</sup> Should we then call these stories "tendentious jokes" – using the classification offered by Freud – and view them as the expression of a suppressed Hindu rage against the Mughals? But then going by popular wisdom, the more obvious target for that rage should have been Aurangzeb, not Akbar. That didn't happen. Aurangzeb may have been roundly disliked, but there are extremely few jokes aimed at him.<sup>8</sup>

On the other hand, viewing jokes as an expression of suppressed aggression, the anti-Akbar sentiment of Badayuni and some later Muslim writers seems to explain a different set of similar stories, namely, the exploits of Mulla Do-Piyaza, allegedly another jokester at Akbar's court. Usually the witticisms of the Mulla are directed at other people, but in several stories he is shown to get the better of both Birbal and Akbar. It may therefore be argued that the Mulla was the champion of orthodox Islam in such battles of wits. Two examples:

Once the emperor and the Mulla were walking in the garden when the emperor broke wind. To cover his embarrassment, the emperor looked up in the sky. The Mulla promptly pressed his stomach and squeezed out a sound; then he too looked upward. The emperor was incensed. 'Why are you looking at the sky?' he said angrily, 'Look at me.' The Mulla replied, 'Refuge of the World, I was merely checking to see whose went higher.' The emperor was terribly embarrassed.

One day a learned brahmin told the emperor that it was an excellent omen to see two crows together at dawn. Birbal, who was present, also confirmed it. The Mulla, however, whispered in Akbar's ear, 'Your majesty ought to test it'. Akbar ordered Birbal to let him know immediately if any morning he saw two crows together. One morning, Birbal rushed in and woke the emperor. Akbar was quite peeved, for it was a cold winter morning, but he followed him outside, only to find one lonely crow – the other had flown away. Losing his temper, he gave Birbal a few slaps. Later that day, a Rajput princess was presented to the emperor in marriage. Then the Mulla stepped forward with folded hands and said, 'Your majesty, if you had seen those two crows you wouldn't have received this gift, for we know what he received who saw them.' Birbal was utterly shamed.

Needless to say, there are also stories in the Birbal collections which have the Mulla as the loser. In a few instances, the story is identical except for a different winner, which might suggest a similarity in intentions.

Putting it together, we are faced with a rather curious image of Akbar in these popular and anonymous tales. He seems to get it from both sides of a communal divide. Clearly, an explanation in terms of some

suppressed religious hatred made manifest through jokes will not suffice. The question needs further examination.

## II

### First a Closer Look at the Three Protagonists

Akbar was born in 1542 and died in 1605. His father was a Sunni Turk, his mother a Shi'a Iranian, and he was born in the house of a Hindu raja with whom Humayun had taken shelter during his flight to Iran. Humayun eventually recovered his kingdom, but died shortly after in 1556. Akbar, thus, became king at the young age of 13 years and a few months. By 1562, however, he was his own master. That year he also received the first of his several rajput wives (who didn't convert to Islam). By 1565 he had abolished the discriminatory taxes against his Hindu subjects, but he was still a devout Muslim who said his obligatory prayers and showed respect to Muslim religious dignitaries. Over the next decade, he became increasingly more dissatisfied with the sectarian fanaticism of many of his Muslim officers; he also felt that some of them often acted against the good of the state. In 1577, he had a 'mahzar' issued by a number of Muslim scholars – some of whom signed under duress – which tantamounted to a decree of the emperor's 'infallibility'.<sup>9</sup>

Meanwhile Akbar had become curious about other religions. He brought together scholars from different traditions to discourse before him on religious topics. Eventually he put together an eclectic collection of practices to satisfy his spiritual yearnings. He began to regard himself a spiritual master and even initiated 'murid' or 'disciples'. But he didn't introduce a new religion, neither did he force any member of his court to convert. H Blochman, who coined the term 'the Divine Faith' for Abul Fazl's "rules for [spiritual] guidance", could identify only 18 such 'disciples' in the works of both Badayuni and Abul Fazi.<sup>10</sup> Only one of them was a Hindu – Raja Birbal.

Birbal's original name was Mahesh Das. He was born in a bhatt-brahmin family in 1528 in a village near Kalpi.<sup>11</sup> He took up the profession of a poet, writing in Braj, and made a name for himself at rajput courts. It is not clear who brought him to Akbar's attention, but by 1563 Birbal was in a position at Akbar's court to intercede on behalf of a former patron, the raja of Rewa.<sup>12</sup> He is listed by Abul Fazl among those who had held the rank of a commander of 2000, but there is no information about the rank he started from. It is, however, agreed upon that his name at the rajput courts had been brahama kavi and that the new name and title came from Akbar. This is how Badayuni, no admirer of Birbal, introduces him:

The emperor from his youth up had shown a special predilection and inclination for the society of religious sects, such as brahmins, and musicians, and other kinds of Hindus. Accordingly at the beginning of his reign a certain brahman musician, Gadai Brhmaidas (*sic*) by name, whose whole business was perpetually to praise the Hindus, and who possessed of a considerable amount of capacity and genius, came to the court. By means of conversing with the emperor and taking advantage of the idiosyncrasies of his disposition, he crept day by day more into favour, until he attained to high rank, and was honoured with the distinction of becoming the emperor's confidant, and it became a case of 'Thy flesh is my flesh, and thy blood my blood'. He first received the title of Kab Rai, meaning Prince of Poets, and afterwards that of Raja Birbar meaning 'Renowned Warrior'.<sup>13</sup>

S H Hodivala offers an interesting explanation for the title:

The title 'Birbar', Sans Vira Vara, best warrior, is not common and its origin or the reasons for its bestowal upon a 'begging' Bhat has not been elucidated. It may be therefore permissible to offer the suggestion that Akbar borrowed it from the *Vetala Panchavinsati* or *Baital Pachisi*, 'The Twenty Five Tales of Vampire'. In the third story of this collection, a man named Vira Vara offers his services to the king and fully earns the extraordinarily high pay allowed to him, by giving undeniable proofs of his loyalty and devotion to his master.<sup>14</sup>

This is quite plausible. Akbar was fond of the story literature of both Iran and India. He had several Sanskrit works translated into Persian for his enjoyment. Though this particular collection is not listed among the translated books, Akbar was familiar with an earlier Persian translation of the *Katha Sarit Sagara* which includes this tale. More importantly, Akbar must have known about Raja Vikramaditya, for he unsuccessfully tried to change his calendar. He also ordered the translation of the *Sinhasan Batisi* or the *Vikramacharitra*, in which the legendary king is praised in glowing terms.<sup>15</sup> He probably also knew that his first great Hindu opponent, Hemu, had the ambition to be known as another 'Vikramaditya'.<sup>16</sup>

Evidently, Birbal received recognition from Akbar not merely as a poet but as a devoted and trustworthy companion. Viravar in the *Vetala* story was remarkable in two aspects: he gave away most of his enormous daily wage in charity, and when an occasion arose he willingly sacrificed his son's life to prolong the life of his master.<sup>17</sup> These qualities of generosity and devotion to his patron were also characteristic of Birbal. The Brajhabasha poet Rai Hol, a contemporary of Birbal, has a 'chhand' in praise of Akbar and his

companions; in it the special quality ascribed to Birbal is generosity.<sup>18</sup> As for Birbal's devotion to Akbar, we have already noted that he was Akbar's only Hindu *murid*.

The emperor was no less devoted to Birbal.<sup>19</sup> He had a special house built for Birbal close to his own chambers, an honour not bestowed on any other courtier; an equally rare honour were the four visits that the emperor made to Birbal's various homes. On another occasion, Akbar, at the risk of his own life, saved Birbal from getting trampled by an elephant. Badayuni's immense hatred for Birbal is a vivid indication of Akbar's high regard for the latter; it was indeed a case of "Thy flesh is my flesh, and thy blood is my blood".

Akbar was devastated when Birbal was killed in 1586 in a disastrous campaign against the Yusufzai Afghans. He took no

food or drink for two days, and ordered a court mourning. Badayuni writes:

His Majesty cared for the death of no grandee more than for that of Bir Bar. He said, 'Alas! they could not even get his body out of the pass, that it might have been burned'; but at last, he consoled himself with the thought that Bir Bar was now free and independent of all earthly fetters, and as the rays of the sun were sufficient for him, there was no necessity that he should be cleansed by fire.<sup>20</sup>

Some months later, rumours began to circulate that Birbal had been seen alive in the northern hills. This is how Badayuni describes what followed:

When the malignant Hindus perceived that the inclination of the heart of the emperor was fixed on that unclean one, and saw that through his loss he was in trouble and distress, every day they circulated a rumour, that

## CENTRE FOR STUDIES IN SOCIAL SCIENCES, CALCUTTA

### CULTURAL STUDIES WORKSHOP

The Centre for Studies in Social Sciences, Calcutta, will hold its annual All India Cultural Studies Workshop on 18-23 November 1995 at the Administrative Training Institute, Mysore. The theme for this year's workshop is "Cultures of Modernity" in which the focus will be on the question of production of Indian-modern forms in literature, art, film, performance, etc. The workshop is intended to give young researchers in the field the opportunity of intensive discussion of their work with senior scholars. The faculty will include distinguished scholars from India and abroad. The CSSSC will bear the expenses of travel within India for all participants and will extend full hospitality to them in Mysore.

Post-doctoral scholars or those in advanced stages of doctoral work and preferably under the age of 35, who wish to join the workshop may apply with c.v. and a description of their current research. Applications are to be sent by **August 14, 1995** to the Registrar, Centre for Studies in Social Sciences, Calcutta, 10 Lake Terrace, Calcutta-700029.

people had seen him at Nagarkot, in the northern hills, in company with Jogis and Sannyasis; and that he was walking about. And His Highness believed that it was not improbable that [someone] like him, who had become detached from the attractions of the world, should have assumed the garb of a faqir, and on account of shame for the misfortune he had sustained at the hands of the Yusufzais should not have returned to court. [An officer was sent to Nagarkot] and investigated the matter, it turned out that this report was nothing but an idle tale.<sup>21</sup>

Abul Fazl and Abdul Qadir Badayuni were diametrically opposed contemporaries; the former described Birbal in respectful terms, the latter called him a 'bastard'. But neither reports anything that may be called a witticism of Birbal. In a letter written on Akbar's behalf to Abdur Rahim Khan-Khanan, Abul Fazl used 25 honorific titles before Birbal's name – the same number he used for Khan-Khanan – of these, many more refer to Birbal's spiritual excellence and his position as a confidant of the emperor than to his superiority as a poet or a wit.<sup>22</sup>

To my knowledge, the first reference to Birbal as a famous wit occurs in *Ma'athir al-Umara*, an early 18th century biographical dictionary of the nobles at Mughal courts. The author, himself a grandee, reports, "[Birbal's] rising fortune brought him to [the emperor's] court, where his poetry and wit (*suxan-sanji wa latifa-go'i*) found him a place among the close and select companions of the king; but he gradually outranked them all. The emperor often called him 'my wise courtier' (*musahib-e danishwar*)."<sup>23</sup> Later the same author writes, "Raja Birbar was indeed among those incomparable people of his time who were renowned for generosity and munificence... His verses are famous, and his witty remarks and stories (*lata'if wa nikat*) are on the lips of all and sundry."<sup>23</sup> In other words, within a hundred years of the two protagonists' deaths, Akbar-Birbal stories were well known in north India.

Mulla Do-Piyaza is the third member of this triad. I have found no reference to him in any work from Akbar's period. (The only 'do-piyaza' Abul Fazl refers to is the well known meat dish cooked with enormous amounts of onions.) Several pamphlets on his life and jokes were published near the end of the last century; these were examined and rejected as forgeries by Hafiz Mahmood Shirani in an article published in 1939.<sup>24</sup> Shirani owned an early 19th-century manuscript containing a number of miscellaneous stories, anecdotes, and letters in Persian. In it were two long pieces, allegedly written by someone named Ashlaghi, who claimed to be the Mulla's son and 'student' ('*farzand wa shagird*').

According to Ashlaghi, the Mulla was born in India but left for Iran in 990 A H (1582 AD). He returned after 36 years, during the reign of Jahangir, but died shortly thereafter in 1030 A H (1620 AD). His original name was Abd al-Momin; Do-Piyaza was an adopted name which became famous. According to several other sources mentioned by Shirani, the Mulla's grave exists in a remote place in central India, suitably called 'handiya' ('Cooking Pot'). On the basis of this evidence, Shirani concluded that the Mulla must have been a historical figure. There are several reasons, however, to believe that the evidence is to the contrary.

(1) No other information exists on Ashlaghi. Even the name is most unusual; neither 'ashlaghi' nor 'ashlaghi' is found in any dictionary. The only way to make sense of the word would be to derive it from 'shalagh' 'to crack open heads', a rather rare word given in *Farhang-i Anandraj*. Ashlaghi might then mean: one who is most adept at cracking open heads. This speculation might not be too far-fetched given the anti-Shi'ah polemic nature of some of the anecdotes.<sup>25</sup>

(2) Ashlaghi reports that when the Mulla went to Herat in 1582, he visited the house of the poet Fasihi (d 1632). Fasihi didn't offer him any food, making the excuse that his wife was not home. The Mulla rejoindered: "The guest desires bread, not your wife's..." This is in fact an anonymous joke recorded in an anthology of witty stories, whose author died in 1532!<sup>26</sup>

(3) Several 15th century manuscripts of the satirical and comic works of Ubayd-i-Zakani contain a section titled 'Ta'rifat-i-Mulla Do-Piyaza.'<sup>27</sup>

The witty Mulla existed in Persian lore much before Akbar's time. One may, of course, argue that was exactly the reason why the man born Abdul Momin adopted the name Mulla Do-Piyaza, but it does not bring him any closer to Akbar's court. None of the jokes quoted by Shirani from Ashlaghi contains any reference to Akbar. In fact, according to Ashlaghi, the Mulla left India in dejection during Akbar's reign and did not return till 23 years after his death.

On the basis of the above, we may safely conclude that the Mulla, as opposed to Birbal, is totally fictional: a comic figure whose origins lie far back in the folklore of Iran and central Asia and who has nothing to do with the historical Akbar.

We end up with two comic figures, one with more basis in history than the other, but both equally legendary in reputation and function. They apparently entertain Akbar, sometimes engaging each other in duels of jesting and practical jokes, but more often by turning their somewhat acerbic wit on the royal patron himself. The stories of their

drollery seem to gain circulation in north India at roughly the same time, i.e. after the Mughal rule in India had been firmly in place for nearly a 100 years.

Earlier it was suggested that the Mulla and Birbal could represent two opposing communal groups and express the latent hostility they separately felt against Akbar and against each other. But it was also noted that the hypothesis didn't seem quite satisfactory. It proposed a highly antagonistic – and exclusively communal – relationship between Akbar and the Hindu masses of his and later times. Obviously it projected onto the past a great deal of later communal polarisation. Secondly, it placed these entertaining stories exclusively within the context of political history and ignored their generic context. We shall now consider these two matters.

First, the question of Birbal being a symbol of an implied Hindu hatred of Akbar. To make sure I was not missing anything, I looked into the most vitriolic anti-Akbar book I could find: *Who Says Akbar Was Great?* by PENO.

Akbar... has often been represented as a great man and a noble king. This assessment of his personality is thoroughly unjustified. All of Akbar's ancestors were barbarous and vicious. And so were his descendants... down the line. In no way was Akbar less cruel than any of his ancestors, descendants or contemporaries. If anything his crafty, scheming and treacherous nature and the unlimited power that he wielded over a vast region qualifies him to be considered one of the foremost tyrants and sadists in world history, leave aside India's alone.<sup>28</sup>

The above quotation, made out of the first two sentences of three early chapters in a book of 25 chapters, should be enough to indicate that my choice was right. Next I checked PENO's opinion of Birbal, expecting some approving comment. To my surprise I found this: "Some cheap stories of Akbar-Birbal repartees and witticisms current in India have been invented by some ingenious writer and added to from time to time by others, giving them a historical Akbar-Birbal background. The real Birbal led a horrid, precarious and deeply detested existence far removed from any humour or poetry."<sup>29</sup>

I then turned to *The History and Culture of the Indian People* published in several volumes by the Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan. Written by a galaxy of scholars, it is charged with a patriotic fervor that barely masks chauvinism. Birbal didn't come out looking like a hero in it either. Described merely as a wit and a court jester, he was dismissed in a few scattered sentences.<sup>30</sup> In the context of Akbar's reign, it was Hemu, "the forgotten Hero", who was accorded special honour with a chapter for himself.

Changing tactics, I looked at some Hindu authors who had approvingly written about Birbal, to see if they simultaneously also offered a negative image of Akbar. That wasn't the case. The political historian who wrote a dissertation on Birbal presented Akbar as a bold and just king, who loved and trusted his wise and brave courtier.<sup>31</sup> Likewise, the literary historian who wrote about the Hindi poets at Akbar's court, glowingly praised him for patronising such luminaries as Brahma Kavi (Birbal) and Narhari.<sup>32</sup>

I also examined a full length Hindi play on Birbal by a popular and prolific author, Vrindavan Lal Verma, which by 1965 had gone through six printings.<sup>33</sup> Verma views the jokes as "expressing the wishful thinking of the common people", but does not use them because he considers them 'inauthentic'. Not that his play is charged with any greater authenticity. More significantly for our inquiry, its cast of characters includes our three protagonists. The Mulla in Verma's play is predictably the butt of many jokes; he talks like a rabid Muslim, but in the end must seek Birbal's help to protect his own honour. But Akbar, despite being overly fond of women, also possesses some virtues: he is concerned about his subjects' welfare and his heart yearns for some spiritual truth. Birbal is wise and witty; he is also devoted to the cause of the common man; and he guides Akbar out of his doubts into that moment when he, Akbar, has a vision of Krishna, gives up meat and wine, reduces his harem, and orders a temple to be built in Mathura!

Clearly, for these Hindu authors, there was a certain interdependency between Akbar and Birbal. If one was 'good', the other had to be good too. And if one was 'bad', the other was equally bad.

A very different source for a 'Hindu' view of Akbar's rule in India is that curious book called *Bhavishya Purana*.<sup>34</sup> It is one of the established Puranas, though not a major one, and its oldest portions have variously been dated to 500-1200 AD.<sup>35</sup> Its chief importance lies in the detailed instructions it contains concerning numerous Hindu holy days. But it also has sections on Hindu royal dynasties and, for our purpose, much comment on the Muslim presence in India. It always refers to the Muslims as either Mlecchas, Paisachas, or Daityas. Assorted sections contain references to Muslim Kings, but Akbar is the only one after whom an entire section is named. *Akbar Badshaha Varnan* consists of 97 Sanskrit verses. Perhaps partially composed a bit earlier, it must have been incorporated within the *Bhavishya Purana* some time in the 18th century, for the narration – in its own fashion – covers the events up to the period of Shah Alam (d 1806) and concludes with a description

of the English.<sup>36</sup> This is how it tells the story of Akbar's birth:

Brahmachari Mukunda, who was born in the gotra of Shankaracharya, was performing tapas in Prayag with his twenty disciples. When he saw that Babur, the cruel king of the Mlecchas, had dishonoured gods, he cast his own body into fire in a Havana. In order to destroy the Mlecchas, his disciples also similarly sacrificed themselves. But Mukunda had swallowed a cow's hair with the milk, consequently he was born to a Mleccha mother... When the child was born, a Voice in the Sky said: 'This is a miraculous child; he holds power over destiny. Neither earlier did he follow the violent Paisacha ways, nor will he do so now. That's why, O Homayu, your son will be called Akbara. He who had twenty famous disciples, it is that Mukunda who has been born in your house.'<sup>37</sup>

The 20 disciples are also born as Akbar's contemporaries, and those who were closest come and join him. Among them is one who in the previous birth had been called Devapi; he is now born with the name Vira Bala, "a Paschimat Brahmin [with] a boon from Vagdevi [i.e., Saraswati]." The narration continues. "That king named Akbara ruled unchallenged, and he enjoyed his rule for fifty years. Then, together with his disciples, he went off to paradise."<sup>38</sup> To my knowledge, Akbar is the only Muslim king so honoured in a pan-Indian Hindu scriptural text – a clear warning against projecting on previous centuries our contemporary communal concerns.

Next, the matter of generic context. Consider what happens when we place these jokes within the context of other

humorous stories from Islamic lands and India that involve kings and jesters. Popular literatures of these countries offer several such pairs: Haroon al-Rashid (r 786-809) and Buhlool,<sup>39</sup> Mahmood of Ghazna (r 998-1030) and Talhak,<sup>40</sup> and Shah Abbas (r 1587-1629) and Enayat<sup>41</sup> on the one hand, and on the other, the Vijayanagara king, Krsnadevaraya (r 1509-1529) and his nemesis, the brahmin Tenali Rama,<sup>42</sup> and Raja Krsnachandra of Nadiya (Bengal, 18th century) and the barber Gopal Bhar.<sup>43</sup> In each instance, we find a king whose power and magnificence verges on the fabulous for that region and time, who is paired with a jester whose wit and cunning is equally legendary. Chronologically in the above list Akbar would come after Krsnadevaraya but before Shah Abbas. Unfortunately my access to the stories involving the Islamicate jesters has been limited to scattered references in dictionaries and a few anthologies. Much more, however, was available for their two Indian analogues. It was, therefore, easy to discover that the joke about the pits of honey and filth was told in south India in a version involving Tenali Rama,<sup>44</sup> while the story about the brahmin in the river was narrated in Bengal with Gopal Bhar as its sharp-witted protagonist.

My lack of material on the Islamicate clowns makes it difficult to make precise comparisons, but some curious facts do suggest themselves. The Islamicate clowns take liberties with their royal patrons and can even be insulting, but they are not aggressively challenged by the kings as their Indian counterparts are. As mentioned earlier, there is in *The Arabian Nights* a story

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involving Haroon al-Rashid and the poet Abu Nuwas which is similar to the samasya purbi stories of Akbar and Birbal, but in both cases the challenge can be said to be a reasonable one, as opposed to the irrational challenge in, for example, the 'bull's milk' story. In great many other stories, the Indian kings seem to go out of their way to pose irrational questions to their jesters or set them impossible tasks. They seem to hide secret doubts about the total superiority they overtly claim, and need a final victory over the jester to reach the perfection they desire. As David Shulman puts it in his illuminating discussion of Krsnadevaraya and Tenali Rama, "Without his jester, the ruler is stuck, preyed upon by a literal reality and by his own inner falseness, a parodic counterfeit of the proper royal image that he can no longer aspire to, or even properly perceive."<sup>45</sup> Shulman connects this tension to the fact that in the normative scheme of Hindu kingship, the brahmin priest holds legitimating and corrective powers over the kshatriya king.

This directs our attention to a second difference. In the Islamicate pairs, there is no caste distinction between the kings and the clowns. Nor do the clowns belong to any professional group that would in itself have significance for any king. In the two Indian pairs, one jester is a brahmin whose ritual role has been alluded to; the other is a barber, one of whose duties would be to keep track of the royal genealogy – another potent, legitimising act. In other words, the Indian clowns come from those classes of people who would, in the ideal scheme of things, hold some power to legitimise the claim made by any aspiring king. In contrast, the social origins of the Islamicate jesters are not significant; in fact, they are not even mentioned. In symbolic terms, they represent the subjects of the king as a whole, and not their own particular social group within the larger body politic.

In India and in Islamicate lands, the relationship between the king and the jester as delineated in these popular tales is organic and fundamental. "The folk perception of a mighty king", writes Shulman, "requires the presence of his irrepressible jester. Whatever the king constructs – together with his ministers, his wives, his brahmin priests and advisers, his poets – the jester can be counted on to undermine or unravel. The two constitute the two contrary vectors of a single process of life and movement."<sup>46</sup> He proposes that "the king is felt to be in need of the jester's corrective power."<sup>47</sup> To which we can add that, in the Indian stories, the king may also be seen as needing the legitimising power the jester possesses by virtue of belonging to a particular social group.

James Ryan in a brief paper presented at a conference took the 'bull's milk' story and,

putting it within the context of world folklore, traced it through the Jatakas, a Sri Lankan version, and a story cycle in the Philippines. He concluded, "There are human universals of humour and thought which occur everywhere in the world. Myth and folklore exhibit this trait again and again. If there is no discernible pattern to variations on the themes of the Birbal stories, it is because they play upon universals which are simply inserted into different backdrops as the situation requires. What is significant is that they are arrayed around the relationship of Birbal and Akbar like filings around a magnet."<sup>48</sup> The last sentence suggests an important question, perhaps the most important: why did these 'universals of humour' get arrayed around Akbar and Birbal? In other words: why Akbar, and not Firoz Tughlaq or Aurangzeb? Why Birbal, and not Man Singh or Todarmal? And why Mulla Do-Piyaza?

Akbar received this privileged status from posterity because, in deed and word, he had been the most dominant of all Muslim rulers of India. How uniquely powerful his image was in his own time can be gauged from this account of his death in the autobiography of a Jain trader of Jaunpur:

In Vikram 1662, during the month of Kartik, after the monsoon was over, the great emperor Akbar [*chhatrapati akbar sahi jalal*] breathed his last in Agra. The alarming news of his death spread fast and soon reached Jaunpur. People felt suddenly orphaned and insecure without their sire. Terror raged everywhere; the hearts of men trembled with dire apprehension; their faces became drained of colour. I was sitting up a flight of stairs in my house when I heard the dreadful news, which came as a sharp and sudden blow. It made me shake with violent, uncontrollable agitation. I reeled and losing my balance, fell down stairs in a faint... The whole town was in a tremor. Everyone closed the doors of his house in panic; shop-keepers shut down their shops. Feverishly, the rich hid their jewels and costly attire underground; many of them quickly dumped their wealth and their ready capital on carriages and rushed to safe, secluded places. Every householder began stocking his home with weapons and arms. Rich men took to wearing thick, rough clothes such as are worn by the poor, in order to conceal their status, and walked the streets covered in harsh woollen blankets or coarse cotton wrappers. Women shunned finery, dressing in shabby, lustreless clothes. None could tell the status of a man from his dress and it became impossible to distinguish the rich from the poor. There were manifest signs of panic everywhere although there was no reason for it since there were really no thieves or robbers about. The commotion subsided after ten days...<sup>49</sup>

In marked contrast, when Jahangir died, the author barely mentioned the event.

There was no panic. It was not as if an age had ended, or a miraculous lord had passed away.

If Akbar's inclusion in the *Bhavishya Purana*, in the guise of a reborn Vaishnavite ascetic, was a form of apotheosis in popular religious literature, then his selection as the royal protagonist in these anonymous jokes was also a form of apotheosis – within secular, popular literature. The Akbar-Birbal jokes are indeed 'tendentous', but their purpose is more to integrate and humanise – implicitly, even glorify – Akbar, than to direct some suppressed communal anta-gonism towards him. Their generic function requires that they cluster around someone who inspired in the masses awe and reverence, not contempt or hate. No doubt they also have a subversive aim, but through the agency of laughter, they merely humanise what pretends to be super-human, not dehumanise it into a demon. Akbar remains the king; Birbal remains his favourite companion.

Birbal was chosen to be the other protagonist, not so much because he was a poet, but because he was a brahmin. He thus fitted the Indian symbolic type for these stories more closely than did either of the other two prominent Hindus at Akbar's court: Todar Mal, a khatri, and Man Singh, a rajput. In Akbar and Birbal of these stories we have the counterparts of Krsnadevaraya and Tenali Rama, who in their turn represented the ideal of Hindu polity: a powerful ksatriya king with an equally powerful brahmin advisor. "Together, these two figures appear to delimit the field of politics; they comprise the minimal field of statehood in classical theory, and this theory clearly recognises their mutual dependence: there are no ksatriyas without brahmins, and vice versa."<sup>50</sup>

Turning to the Mulla, we note that, in the Islamicate model, the clown had no inherent, socially granted power or role. He functioned only within the symbolic structure of these stories, and there primarily, mirror like, to offer back to his patron his image slightly distorted. To that extent he was an equalising agent: he forced the king to recognise his human imperfection. In that respect Mulla Do-Piyaza and Birbal are alike. But the Mulla could also be a champion of his patron's cause. There are several stories where he defends the honour of Akbar and India against Iranian challenges. In the Ashgali manuscript where the Mulla goes off to Iran, a few anecdotes quoted by Shirani show that he never sells himself short nor his Sunni religion. It seems possible that the Mulla first appeared in jokes that reflected rivalries between various Muslim religious or racial groups within India, which rivalries were more successfully curbed by Akbar than any other king.

Gradually, as the posthumous image of Akbar became magnified in popular mind, the Mulla was assigned a place in his legendary court. The next steps, naturally, were for him to become a rival of Birbal and then a "champion of Islam" vis-a-vis both Birbal and Akbar. His symbolic character contained all these possibilities.

Anonymous popular tales and other folklore can contribute to our understanding of political history, so long as we don't view them as essentially a kind of commentary on it. Folktales are themselves history of a sort. And they are not just artefacts, but also processes aiming at quite varied effects within different traditions and contexts. As processes, these amusing stories can be said to be as much politically affirmative as subversive. D M Goldman, the Russian translator of Birbal stories concluded that they project a "social utopia" and embody "the optimism of the people in their darkest hour".<sup>51</sup> But, since there are no 'dark times' as such in these stories, one can also argue that for their tellers a 'utopia' had existed in an earlier time, in contrast to the less glorious times that followed. On the other hand, an Akbar-Birbal joke may be used to signify 'Hindu' subversion of 'Muslim' power.<sup>52</sup> After all, how can anyone prove that the first time someone linked one of these floating jokes with Akbar, it was not out of a dislike for the Mughal(s) or the Muslims? We must not forget that when the *Bhavishya Purana* raised Akbar to its pinnacle of approval, it simultaneously cast the rest of the Muslims into the lowest depths of its detestation. No, Freud's insight cannot be totally denied. One can only counter, it is not the whole truth either. Jokes not only make us laugh, they can also make us cry. And though the words might be identical, laughing with someone and laughing at someone are totally different acts in intention. Perhaps the only safe conclusion would be not to view these jokes too closely in the perspective of our contemporary concerns or lose sight of their diverse generic identities. A failure to do so would keep us tied to our preconceptions and preclude any discovery of their multiple contexts.

As artefacts, however, these anonymous jokes are as visible and valuable an indicator of Akbar's impact on Indian history as are the ruins of his four forts, the chronicles written by his historians, and the miniatures painted by his artists. They enormously add to the stature of their royal protagonist. For, if the favourable comments of the *Bhavishya Purana* make Akbar unique among the Muslim kings of India, his being apotheosised in the universe of folklore by being linked with, not one, but two jesters makes him unique among all the monarchs of the subcontinent – perhaps of the world.

## Notes

[This paper began as a response to a panel on 'Courtiers and Kings' at the Annual Conference on South Asia, University of Wisconsin, Madison, November 1986. A longer version was presented as the Aziz Ahmad Memorial Lecture at the University of Toronto in 1987, and I dedicate this revised essay to the memory of the late novelist/scholar who could also tell many a joke. Sheldon Pollock, Harbans Mukhia, and Ravinder Kumar may not recognise here any benefit of their comments but they were indeed helpful to me.]

- 1 All translations are mine unless otherwise indicated. I have, however, often re-told a joke instead of translating it verbatim. My thanks to Frances Pritchett, whose collection now deposited at the University of Chicago was a valuable resource.
- 2 There is an anecdote in *The Arabian Nights*, involving Haroon al-Rashid and the poet Abu Nuwas, which is strikingly similar to this story. See Mia I, Gerhardt, *The Art of Story-Telling* (Leiden: E J Brill, 1963), p 459. There are similar poetic contests in the Perso-Arabic literary tradition to which Urdu also belongs.
- 3 This, to my knowledge, is one of the oldest recorded Akbar-Birbal jokes; it is one of the three listed in a late 18th century Persian manuscript in Patna. *Mir'atal-Istilah*, author unknown, date of composition, 1158 AH (1745 AD), Khuda Baksh Oriental Public Library, Patna, f 221a. I am grateful to A R Bedar for making the text available.
- 4 Abdul Qadir bin Malik Shah, a k a Al-Badaoni, *Muntakhab-ut-Tawarikh*, Tr W H Lowe (Calcutta, Asiatic Society of Bengal, 1884), II, pp 367-68.

- 5 The last two jokes are also from the 18th century manuscript mentioned above. Different versions are also found later.
- 6 Al-Badaoni, II, p 375. Cf also the remarks ascribed to Raja Bhagwan Das, the father of Man Singh. In the account of the year 990 AH/1582 AD, Badayuni reports: "Raja Bhagwan Das said to the Emperor: 'I would willingly believe that Hindus and Musalmans have each a bad religion, but only tell us what the new sect is, and what opinion they hold, so that I may believe'. His Majesty reflected a little, and ceased to urge the Rajah." Al-Badaoni, II, p 323.
- 7 Sigmund Freud, *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious* (New York: W W Norton, 1960), p 401.
- 8 I know of only eight jokes involving Aurangzeb, six of which are indeed tendentious. These are included in *Aja'ib-e-Hind* of Lala Deji Prashad (Lucknow: Newal Kishore Press, 1925; first published before 1895?) They depict Aurangzeb as mean-spirited, opportunistic and fanatical, and disfavouredly compare his times with the times of his predecessors – Akbar's times, predictably, being ideal. The radical difference is that they do not use any one particular person as a foil to the Emperor – Aurangzeb has no 'Birbal'. The significance of that fact will become clear below. Debi Prashad describes his book as the Urdu translation of the original in Marwari language; he prepared the translation some time before 1825.
- 9 The decree itself was quite in line with the orthodox position, for the authority of the king was confined to measures which had to be "not only in accordance with some verse

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- of the Quran, but also of real benefit to the nation." But in practice, of course, "it became an excuse for the exercise of unrestrained autocracy". S M Ikram, *Muslim Civilisation in India*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1964), pp 159-60.
- 10 Abu 'L-Fazl 'Allami, *The A'in-i Akbari*, Tr H Blochmann (Calcutta: Asiatic Society of Bengal, 1927, 2nd ed), p 219.
  - 11 P P Sinha, *Raja Birbal: Life and Times*, (Patna: Janaki Prakashan 1980), passim.
  - 12 Sinha, p 39.
  - 13 Al-Badaoni, II, p 164. Most Persian manuscripts of the time spell the name with an 'r' at the end; it is only later that a linguistic shift seems to affect the change from 'r' to 'l' and gives us the now familiar name, Birbal.
  - 14 S H Hodivala, *Studies in Indo-Muslim History* (Bombay, 1939), p 555, Muhammad Husain Azad, in an article on Birbal published in 1876, suggests that in Sanskrit Birbar meant 'Blessed by Jupiter.' This does not exclude Hodivala's interpretation. See *Maqalat-i-Maulana Muhammad Husain Azad*, Vol I, edited by Agha Muhammad Baqir (Lahore: Majlis-i-Taraqqi-i-Adab, 1966), p 461.
  - 15 The translator was none other than the redoubtable Badayuni, who called his translation *Nama-i Khirad-Afza* (The Book to Increase Wisdom), Puruk'hotam, a brahmin, wrote a commentary on it. When later the book was either lost or stolen, Akbar's displeasure fell on Badayuni, Al-Badaoni, II, pp 186, 265, 389.
  - 16 Hemu, after conquering Delhi and Agra, ascended the throne "with the imperial canopy raised over his head, issued coins in his name, and assumed the historic name Vikramaditya or Raja Bikramajit." R C Majumdar (ed), *The History and Culture of the Indian People (The Mughal Empire)* (Bombay: Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, 1974), p 100.
  - 17 Richard F Burton (Tr), *Vikram and the Vampire* (London: Tylston and Edwards, 1893), pp 106-17.
  - 18 Saryu Prasad Agrawal, *Akbari Darbar ke Hindi Kavi*, (Hindi Poets At Akbar's Court) (Lucknow: Lucknow University, 1949), p 35.
  - 19 In *Baitala Pachisi*, the patron of Vira Vara tried to kill himself when he discovered how his servant had sacrificed himself and his family for his sake, and was saved only by the intervention of the Devi. Raja Vikram of the story considered it as the noblest of actions, superior to all the acts of Vira Vara, Burton, p 117.
  - 20 Blochman's translation (Allami, p 214). The translation by Lowe (Al-Badaoni, II, p 362) seems incorrect.
  - 21 Al Badaoni, II, p 369. Later a second rumour put Birbal in his estate at Kalinjar. Akbar ordered for him to be brought to the court. This time a local Hindu officer deceived the Emperor by reporting to him that though Birbal had reappeared and was recognised by his barber, "death had overtaken him before he had attained the felicity of coming to Court." Akbar mourned for him a second time. The ever churlish Badayuni ends the account by adding, "He [i.e., Akbar] sent for the [Hindu officer] and others, and kept them for some time in the stocks as a punishment for not having told him before; and on this pretext the Emperor got a good deal of money from him."
  - 22 Sinha, Appendix, facsimile of the letter from a manuscript of *Muktubat-i 'Allami* at Khudabakhsh Oriental Public Library, Patna.
  - 23 Shah Nawaz Khan, *Mu'athir al-Umara*, edited by Abdur Rahim and Ashraf Ali (Calcutta: Asiatic Society of Bengal, 1890), II, pp 118-22.
  - 24 'Mulla Do-Piyaza aur Ja'far Zatali ki Sawanih-'Umri ka Ja'iza aur Tanqid' in Hafiz Mahmood Shirani, *Maqalat-i Shirani* (Lahore: Kitab Manzil, n d), pp 59-123. I am grateful to M H K Qureshi, who made Shirani's article available. According to Beni Prashad, it originally appeared in the *Oriental College Magazine* (Lahore: November 1939). B Prashad, 'Raja Birbal - A Biographical Study, and an Account of his Articles of Worship', *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Bengal*, X (1944), p 43, fn 5.
  - 25 Another speculation would be in the direction of connecting the name with the word for turnip, 'shalgham', thus indicating a 'vegetational' relationship between the 'father' and the 'son'.
  - 26 Shirani, p 87. Cf Fakhruddin Ali Safi, *Lata'if al-Tawa'if*, Ahmad Gulchin Ma'ani (ed), (Tehran: Eqbal, n d), p 370.
  - 27 Paul R Sprachman, *The Comic Works of 'Ubayd-i Zakani; A Study of Medieval Persian Bawdy, Verbal Aggression, and Satire*, unpublished PhD dissertation, University of Chicago, 1981, p 13 et passim. It is excerpts from these pithy definitions ascribable to Zakani that are included in *Shahid-i Sadiq* of Muhammad Sadiq, a compilation from Shahjahan's time. Both Shirani (above) and R P Tripathi (*Some Aspects of Muslim Administration*, Allahabad: Central Book Depot, 1959; p 144, fn 37) mistakenly take them to be by our Mulla.
  - 28 PENO, *Who Says Akbar Was Great?* (Delhi: Author, 1968), pp 1, 52, 71. PENO is a pseudonym of P N Oak, the author of *The Taj Mahal is a Hindu Palace* and other amazing texts and a founder of the Institute for Rewriting History.
  - 29 Ibid, p 366. Cf Badayuni's comment on the aftermath of the campaign of Nagarkot, which Akbar had given to Birbal as jagir: "So many brahmans, sojourners in the temple, were killed, that both friends and strangers heap a thousand thousands of curses on the head of Birbal, who reckoned himself a saint among the Hindus (curse on them!)." Al-Badaoni, II, p 165.
  - 30 R C Majumdar, pp 137, 149, 167, 567.
  - 31 P P Sinha, passim.
  - 32 S P Agarwal, passim.
  - 33 Vrindavan Lal Verma, *Birbala* (Jhansi: Mayur Prakashan, 1965, 6th printing). Verma is the author of 23 novels, mostly historical, 10 story collections, 14 full-length plays, also mostly historical, and 6 collections of one-act plays. All seem to have gone through several printings.
  - 34 *Bhavishya Purana*, two Vols, edited with a Hindi commentary by Shriram Sharma Acharya (Bareilly: Sanskriti Sansthan, 1968). I am grateful to Arvind Sharma, who brought this book to my attention, and to Vishwajit Pandya and K C Bahl, who helped me read it.
  - 35 Ludo Roche, *Puranas*. Vol 2 fasc 3 of *A History of Indian Literature*. Jan Gonda (ed) (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1986), pp 151-54.
  - 36 It calls the English 'Gurundikas', and connects their origin to the monkeys who had died fighting against Ravana and were then reborn and rewarded.
  - 37 *Bhavishya Purana*, II, pp 270-71.
  - 38 Ibid, p 276. Muhammad Husain Azad in his *Darbar-i Akbari*, first published in 1910, gives the story differently (Lucknow: Maktaba Kaliyan, n d, pp 93-94). According to Azad, some brahmans brought to Akbar an ancient document which allegedly had been written by Mukunda Brahmachari, with prophecies about his rebirth. Then some Muslims brought an old book which suggested that Akbar was the promised Mahdi. Azad, unfortunately, does not document his sources.
  - 39 According to the *Da'ira al-Ma'arif Farsi*, Buhlool pretended to be mad and was also reputed to be related to the caliph (Tehran: Franklin, 1345/1966, I, p 479). In *The Perfumed Garden* by Shaikh Nafzawi, there are several coarse jokes involving Buhlool with the caliph al-Ma'mun (r 813-33).
  - 40 *Da'ira al-Ma'arif Farsi*, I, p 987, article 'dalqak', where this word is given as a generic term for various clown figures at the courts of kings and caliphs during the history of Iran and Islam. The author suggests that perhaps this word was derived from the name of Mahmood's jester, Talhak. He concludes by saying that these men were not ignorant or dim-witted, that they in fact used their witty or comic acts to help the people and expressed in the guise of jokes what could not be expressed otherwise. Also, Fakhruddin Ali Safi, pp 295-96.
  - 41 *Da'ira al-Ma'arif Farsi*, I, p 987; II, p 2248; Muhammad Taqi Mir, *Zikr-i Mir*, final section, manuscript at the Riza Library, Rampur. I am grateful to Akbar Ali Khan, Arshizada, for providing a copy.
  - 42 David Dean Shulman *The King and the Clown in South Indian Myth and Poetry*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1985, pp 180-200.
  - 43 Tony Stewart, 'Courtly Humour and Peasant Wit in Medieval Bengal', a paper read at the panel on 'Courtiers and Kings'; also, Edward C Dimock, Jr, *The Thief of Love*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1963, pp 183-88.
  - 44 In the Tamil version, the king tells his dream one day, then the following day Tenali Rama offers its 'continuation'. Curiously, there is also an Islamicate analogue of this story dating back to early 10th century, but it is in the form of an exchange between Ash'ab, a legendary comic, and his mother! Franz Rosenthal, *Humour in Early Islam* (Leiden: E J Brill, 1956), p 64.
  - 45 Shulman, p 199.
  - 46 Shulman, p 195, emphasis original.
  - 47 Shulman, p 197, emphasis added.



- 48 James Ryan, 'The Birbal Tales in Brouder Perspective', a paper read at the panel on 'Courtiers and Kings'.
- 49 Banarasidasa (1586-1641?), *Ardhakathunaka*, translated and annotated by Mukund Lath (Jaipur: Rajasthan Prakrit Bharati Sansthan, 1981), p 38.
- 50 Shulman, p 95.
- 51 D M Goldman and V V Tsvetkova, [*The Amusing Stories about the Supremely Wise and Clever Birbal*] (Moscow: Oriental, Eastern Literature, 1978). Introduction. Other comments: "These stories strengthen the

people's faith in their own power... Akbar is there only for contrast, in order to show that the real power lay with the people. Virtue and Justice are personified in Birbal." I am grateful to Colin P. Masica for translating relevant passages.

52 Cf. Lee Siegal, *Laughing Matters: Comic Tradition in India*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1987, pp 297-312. Recently, I am told, Sadhvi Rithambara also used some Akbar-Birbal jokes in one of her denouncements of Indian Muslims, perhaps unaware of what PENO thought of them.

on to greener pastures, women move in to fill in the spaces. And that too at a much slower pace than men: for the invisible glass ceiling is a fact of life in many areas of employment.

But to return once again to Dipankar Gupta's obsession with what he sees as the exclusiveness of feminism, and concomitantly, his lament for the male feminist. As "feminist scholarship will typically ignore those areas where women interface with men", they are only interested in menstruation, the wondrous process of childbirth, the joys of lesbianism. In other words, the female body and its mysteries are deified. Not unexpectedly then, the male feminist, even the kind who has travelled along the post-modernist way, feels left out, poor soul. After all, he can hardly become a woman, intellectually or otherwise. One would only like to ask where are these male feminists, of the post-modern or other varieties? As one who has taught in two of the country's leading universities and has had substantial exposure to international academic discourse, how many students or colleagues has Gupta encountered with a genuine interest in the study of gender relations? Why does it have to be women who study dowry, wife abuse, changes in law and so on? Why cannot male feminists of whatever hue or vintage engage in some rigorous self-analysis on peer behaviour? Or would that smack too horribly of subjectivity? It is a little difficult to believe that they are driven away by their female comrades-in-arms. Post-modernism apart, except for a few studies in labour economics, studies of the family, kinship and marriage, male academics have hardly treated gender relations as areas of serious concern. And it is not enough for Gupta to hide behind the bogey of post-modernist feminism which keeps the men away. Nor is he justified in ending his litany of complaints against what he sees as feminism by holding out an olive branch to those "anguished men" and "confident women" (what a combination!) outside the charmed sorority of post-modern feminists. If he is really serious in going some way in righting the wrongs of those he views as feminists, Gupta needs to interface with men as well as women on an alternative discourse and world view.

## DISCUSSION

### Feminification of Theory

Malavika Karlekar

IN his 'Feminification of Theory' (*EPW*, March 25), Dipankar Gupta claims that feminism, uncharted and untethered, found post-modernism a convenient peg on which to hang its blouse. According to him, like post-modernism which, following Jacques Derrida, "allows multivocal (actually equivocal) readings", feminism too revels in a specific nihilism, where individual experience, particularly those pertaining to the body, gain paramount importance. It is interesting that Gupta should read multivocal as equivocal; perhaps it is this reading which allows him the freedom to dismiss feminists as a bunch of bra-burning, hysterical women who have little respect for theory or for immutable truths.

But who are these feminists? For Gupta they appear to be the privileged few who find a voice in the pages of *Signs* and are well-honed in Irigary, Cixous, Lacan and so on. As *l'écriture féminine* dominates, there is no need to be bothered with theory but only with the practice of discovering the body. The author is not mistaken in identifying a trend among a section of western feminist studies. However, by painting all feminists with the same brush, he is falling into a trap similar to the one he accuses the poor feminists of finding themselves in: of listening only to those voices which suit him. Here again, a quick glance at a few recent issues of *Signs* will indicate the selective nature of Gupta's enquiry: looking through the 33 main articles in an issue each of 1993 and 1995 and all four issues of 1994, one finds an entire volume on feminism and law including articles on domestic violence in Ghana, Chinese legal studies and racial and sexual violence. Contributions in other issues deal with Japanese social protest, the equal opportunities law in that country, missionary education in China in the last century, African-American intellectuals and an analysis of dependency in US welfare

literature. There is not much evidence of *l'écriture féminine* in these articles, most of which are rooted fairly well in a kind of disciplinary analysis which Gupta should find comfortable. In any case, feminism can hardly be limited to what appears in the pages of a single journal, and that too which had its early beginnings in the Departments of English in the US. Interestingly, Gupta chooses not to define his universe, unforgivable for a social anthropologist. Feminist, feminism, gender studies are used interchangeably without any reference to their social or geographic context. None of these categories is internally, intellectually, or even in terms of action, united and homogeneous. (Nor, for that matter, one would imagine is the section of Indian Marxists whom Gupta lumps together as "old leftists".)

Gupta's feminists not only laugh bawdily in male strip-tease joints while men watch their female counterparts in "hushed silence", applauding politely but never without a significant pause when they are collecting themselves, they also wrest jobs away from cornered men, citing Andre Beteille (*Feminism in Academia: Changes in Theory and Practice*, *The Times of India*, December 27, 1994), he notes that women are coming into their own in a variety of fields. But there is no axiomatic link between feminism (or in the case of Beteille's argument, women's studies) and increasing middle class women's employment. This growing trend is a product of changing family values, requirements of the job market as well as individual family economies, expanding educational and occupational choices and so on. In fact, quite often, many of these women are unaware of the debates within women's studies, nor are they recipients of affirmative action-type of employment policies. As is well known, as men move

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