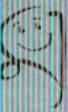


Touring May and June 2017  
Mashi Theatre presents



# TALES of BIRBA

Timeless and treasured fables  
from the Indian sub-continent

by **Sayan Kent**

from an original concept by **Trina Haldar**



Illustration: Daniela Terrazini

## EDUCATION PACK

# Who were Akbar and Birbal?

These stories date back to the 16th century, around the time of Elizabeth I in England. At this time, there was a mighty Moghul Emperor known as Akbar the Great, ruling in Hindustan. During his reign he controlled most of the Indian subcontinent. He was known as Akbar the Great as he united his kingdom by respecting all religions and cultures equally, thus providing a harmonious land to live in.

Akbar had many wise advisors that helped him in the court, but he had nine special advisors called the nine jewels (or Navratnas) of the court. Each had a special talent, for example singing or being very witty. Birbal, a Hindu, was one of his of the Navratnas and was thought to be the Akbar's favourite. Akbar surrounded himself with great scholars and poets to learn how to be the best Emperor he could be. However, even Emperors make mistakes sometimes, and how do you tell an Emperor when he's made a mistake? Well, ask Birbal...

Birbal was esteemed for his wit and wisdom in problem solving. If someone had cheated, or lied, or there was a problem to solve, everybody knew that only Birbal would know the answer. The other courtiers would often be jealous of Birbal and his cleverness and they would try to trick him, but nothing could outsmart Birbal. Nobody knew this better than his good friend and the Emperor of Hindustan, Akbar.

Akbar and Birbal folk tales have been passed down through oral tradition throughout the Indian Subcontinent, indeed from Mashis (aunties) of the past. Each tale has survived through the love of children wanting to hear them, from generations upon generation. Now Mashi Theatre brings them to you.

## How did Akbar and Birbal meet?

Akbar used to love going out on hunting expeditions. Once, when Akbar was out on one such expedition, he and some of his courtiers lost their way somehow. At last, they came to a junction of three roads. Akbar was very happy as he thought that now he could reach his capital, Agra, through one of these roads. He was not sure as to which of the three roads led to Agra. No courtier was able to tell which road went to the Emperor's capital. Just then, they saw a young man coming towards them on one of the three roads. Akbar called out, "Wait up young man!" and asked him, "Could you tell us which road goes to Agra?" The man smiled and said, "Sir, none of these roads go to Agra."

Everybody was shocked at the young man's audacity. Akbar kept his anger in check and asked the young man again, "What do you mean?"

The man said once more, "People travel, not roads. How can roads go anywhere?"

The Emperor's anger vanished on hearing this clever reply. He laughed and said, "Yes, you are right. Tell me, what is your name?"

The man said, "My name is Mahesh Das, sir! Now tell me about yourself. Who are you and what is your name?"

Akbar said, "You are talking to Emperor Akbar, the King of Hindustan! I need fearless and witty people like you in my court." He took off his ring, gifted it to the young man and said, "If you want to be a part of my royal court, come to meet me with this ring and I will recognise you immediately. Now, show us the way to reach Agra. All of us are exhausted and need to reach Agra before the sun sets." And this was how Akbar met Birbal for the first time.

Birbal's real name was Maheshdas and he was born in the city of Trivikrampur or Tiwkapur in 1528. The name Birbal comes from Bir Bar or Vir Var which means courageous and great, taken from a character in the folk tale Vetal Panchvinshati. This featured a courtier called Vir Var who showed great loyalty to his king. Akbar gave the name Birbal to Mahesdas and this was what he came to be known by.

## Who were the other Navratnas or Nine Jewels of Akbar's court?

Akbar's court had Navaratnas (Nine Jewels), meaning a group of nine extraordinary people. They included:

- Abul Fazel (Akbar's chief advisor and author of Akbarnama)
- Faizi (Akbar's poet laureate)
- Mian Tansen (a singer)
- Birbal (a noble known for his wittiness)
- Raja Todar Mal (Akbar's finance minister)
- Raja Man Singh (trusted general of Akbar)
- Abdul Rahim Khan-I-Khana (a noble and a renowned poet)
- Fakir Aziao-Din (Mystic)
- Mullah Do Piazza (Advisor)

# Exercises you can try at school with your classes.

## 1. Recreating the Old Man scene from the show

Listen to the story again. Maybe you can act this section out in small groups in your class with someone playing the Old Man (he is played by a puppet in the show), or teachers can read this to the class for them to create their own version of the story.

Sayan Kent © The following extract is copyright of Sayan Kent.

Akbar            Tell me, my clever Birbal, do you think a man would do anything for money?

Mashi            Birbal thought about it, long and hard.

Birbal            Um... tricky. Yes, I think it is possible a man would do anything for money.

Akbar            You see that lake of freezing cold water? I bet a man would not spend a whole night in that lake for any amount of money. Not even Dynamo (*or other current danger man*)

*For a second Birbal thinks that he might have been wrong, then -*

Birbal            My good King, I think I could find such a man.

Akbar            Indeed. Hmm. Then find him. And I will give him a thousand gold coins if he succeeds.

*Akbar leaves. Mashi takes off the turban and moustache.*

*Birbal consults the children.*

Birbal            This is a difficult challenge the King has given me. What kind of person would spend the whole night in a freezing cold lake for a thousand gold coins?

*The children may make suggestions.*

Birbal            I think I've bitten off more than I can chew this time. I must find a man who could do this or the King will have my guts for garters.

*Mashi brings on the Old Man puppet.*

Mashi           An Old Man had overheard the conversation and came up to Birbal. Birbal  
Hello Old Man, don't bother me now, I'm thinking.

Mashi           The Old Man said that *he* would spend the night in the cold lake for a  
thousand gold coins.

Birbal           Why would you do that?

Mashi           The Old Man explained that he loved his grand daughters very much, but  
they were very poor. He needed the money to buy them food and pay the  
rent, otherwise they would be homeless.

Birbal           You're a brave Old Man, but I don't think you're strong enough. You'll die of  
cold.

Mashi           But the Old Man insisted.

*Birbal gets a large reflective bowl to be the lake.*

*Birbal takes the Old Man puppet from Mashi.*

*Mashi takes some percussive items out of the box, and something that represents a moon.*

Mashi           So, as the sun went down –

*Mashi plays a swanee whistle descending for the sunset (or another instrument).*

*– and the moon came up –*

*She plays something else for the evening.*

*– Birbal showed the Old Man to the lake.*

*Birbal takes the Old Man to the lake.*

Mashi           And in it, the frail Old Man stepped. The cold water came up to his knees and  
he shivered. (*Mashi plays shivering sounds*) Then it came up to his waist  
where his skinny ribs rattled like a xylophone. (*Mashi plays a xylophone*) And  
finally up to his neck where all that could be seen was his head. And  
the Old Man stood, silently in the deep, dark cold water and looked into the  
distance, and he saw a streetlight, and seemed to go into a trance.

*Mashi lifts the moon, slowly arcing over the lake.*

Mashi           All night long the Old Man didn't move and the water didn't ripple. The  
nocturnal animals got up and went about their business, and the owls hooted  
and the bats hung around upside down. And next morning, as the sun rose

and shone down on the lake, the Old Man came out of his trance and stepped out. None was more surprised than King Akbar.

*Mashi puts down the sun and moon and becomes Akbar.*

Birbal            Oh great and wise King, this Old Man has spent the night in the lake and amazingly he's still alive. He well deserves the thousand gold coins reward.

Akbar            It is not possible, it must be a trick.

Birbal            There's no trick. I stayed up all night watching him.

Akbar            Tell me Old Man, how did you do it?

*Bhanji now takes over the Old Man story.*

Bhanji            And the Old Man said, in the far distance he could see the glow of a street lamp, he kept his eyes on it, and it took his mind off the freezing water he was standing in.

*Akbar frowns.*

Akbar            Aha! I see. Old Man you have cheated. The light from the street lamp kept you warm all night. You will not receive a thousand gold coins.

*Akbar leaves.*

*Bhanji is Birbal again.*

*The Old Man looks to Birbal.*

Birbal            That's not very fair is it? *Birbal speaks to the children. What an old meany! What do you think I should do now?*

*The children make suggestions.*

Birbal            Excellent suggestions. I have an idea. Old Man, trust me. You'll get your thousand gold coins if I have to rob a bank to get them. *(To the children)* I wouldn't really rob a bank, but I will get that money for the Old Man.

*Birbal puts the Old Man puppet away in the cart and, in his kitchen area, puts some rice in a pan and sets up a light a fair distance away from the pan of rice.*

*Tick Tock Song.*

Birbal            Lunch. Pan. Rice. Light.  
*Everything will be alright  
Wait a while and sing a song*

*Read the paper all day long*

*Tick tock, tick tock, tick tock, tick tock (Getting fainter).*

*Birbal picks up a newspaper and sits to read it while waiting.*

*Mashi puts on Akbar turban.*

Mashi            The next day King Akbar was waiting at court for Birbal to show up.

*Mashi turns over a large hourglass. The sand drops through all at once.*

Mashi            *(Surprised)* That hour passed very quickly.

*Turns it upside down again and again and it empties repeatedly.*

More hours went by. Lots of them – And King Akbar waited and waited.

*Mashi tears the days of a week off the calendar quickly.*

– The days went by quickly, Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday... But then they went by more slowly... *(in slow motion)* Thurs-day, Fri-day. EVENTUALLY... the King got very bored with waiting and decided to go and visit Birbal in his home.

*Puppet Akbar goes to where Birbal is waiting by the pan of rice. Akbar coughs and clears his throat to get Birbal's attention.*

*Birbal bows down low and welcomes the King.*

Birbal            Welcome to my humble home your Majesty.

Akbar            *(Extremely annoyed)* What are you are you doing here? You should be at work, advising me on very important matters of state.

Birbal            I came home to cook my kichiri for lunch, Oh Great One, because my brain doesn't work on an empty stomach.

Akbar            You've been here for five days. Five days! Kichiri doesn't take five days to cook.

Birbal            I don't understand it. I placed my pan of rice here, and over there I placed the light that will warm it up. And yet I've been waiting for all this time and the rice is still stone cold.

Akbar            What's the matter with you? Everyone knows that a light will not heat a pan of rice. Haha... A light, heat a pan of rice! Even that lot *(the children)* know a light wouldn't heat a pan of rice and they're not even allowed to heat up pans of rice.

Birbal           And yet you said that the streetlight warmed up the Old Man in the freezing water and so refused him his reward.

*Akbar looks to the children, then back to Birbal as he realises his mistake.*

Akbar           What? What? Oh.... once again, clever Birbal, you are right. I was too proud. Your wit has shown me how to see humanity in a more forgiving light.

## 2. Creating a soundscape for the Old Man scene

The set is made from recycled material that Mashi and Bhanji have collected on their travels. What items do you remember from the show? Using items from your classroom or objects that you can recycle, for example plastic bottles, bin liners, wooden spoons, your own bodies, think about the Old Man character. Create, perhaps in two groups, a section of music for each stage of the Old Man's story. Listen to each group and then ask the observing group to act out being the Old Man in the lake, responding to the music.

The sections of the music/soundscape can be determined as follows or ask the children to identify when they feel there is a change in the mood. As a guide you could use:

- How do you think he felt when he heard about the thousand gold coin prize. What does it sound like?
- How does the Old Man feel when Birbal says he is too old to survive? Why does he want to take this challenge? How does your music change?
- Change the music for the Old Man stepping into the water for the first time.
- Up to his knees.
- Up to his waist.
- Up to his neck.
- Hearing the animals in the dark night.
- Seeing the light in the distance? How does this change how he feels, what changes in your soundscape/music?
- The sun comes up. How do the sounds change?
- Sees Emperor Akbar and steps out after the long, cold, dark night in the water.
- Akbar tells the Old Man he cheated.
- Akbar refuses to give the Old Man a thousand gold coins. This is the end section for your piece.

Practise your piece of music and play it back for the rest of the class. See if they can guess how your group thought the Old Man was feeling at different times of the task.

### 3. What is the Old Man story about?

Place a chair in the middle of the classroom or hall space. The closer you stand to the chair the more you agree with the statement; the further away you stand the more you disagree. Ask the following questions and allow the children to discuss by saying why they chose to stand at a particular distance from the chair. They can change where they are standing if they wish after hearing the thoughts of others. You can always add your own statements or ask the children if they have any too.

- a. The Old Man cheated.
- b. It was a fair challenge that Akbar asked the Old Man to do.
- c. The Old Man kept himself warm using the light.
- d. The Old Man shouldn't have done the task.
- e. The Old Man shouldn't have been allowed to do the task.
- f. Bhanji liked the shoes that Mashi gave her.
- g. Mashi loves Bhanji.
- h. Birbal could have told Akbar that he should give the money to the Old Man.
- i. Anyone will do anything for money.

## 4. Make a character from the show

The puppets in the show were made from recycled materials:

- Akbar was made from milk cartons
- the Old Man puppet was made out of cardboard, paper and sellotape
- the Crows were made from old plastic bags

Can you make a character from the show using recycled materials?

### A rubbish puppet:

We collected objects we found around the house. Can you tell what they are?



A lampshade, a bowl painted gold, a milk carton and old hose (covered in papier-mâché), a wooden spoon with slots cut in.

This is the finished puppet for King Akbar.

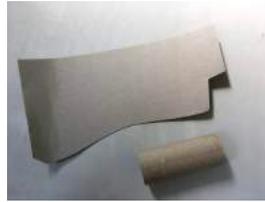


What rubbish could you recycle?

Who could you make into a rubbish puppet?

## A rubbish puppet!

Bhanji made a crow puppet from rubbish she found on her travels.  
What are these bits of rubbish?



An old sock, a black bin bag, some scrap cardboard and bottle tops



This is the finished crow puppet

What rubbish could you recycle to make a bird puppet?

Your hand goes inside the sock.

You could also use a glove.

The beak is made from cardboard.

Different coloured plastic bags make different types of birds.



How would it move?

What noise would it make?

## 5. Riddle Writing Exercise from 'Tales of Birbal' writer Sayan Kent

Part of Birbal's skill was that he understood how riddles worked. Which was very useful as King Akbar liked to try and catch him out, and it got him out of some sticky situations!

One way you can create a riddle is to describe something without saying what it is and then ask at the end: What is it? or What am I?

Think of something you want to describe but don't say what it is, keep to about 4 or 5 lines. Use all or some of the following to help you describe your object:

I look like ...  
I sound like...  
You find me ...  
I have...  
I am ...  
I feel ...

Then at the end write: What am I?

For example:

I am round and bright  
I make a squishy noise  
You find me in a salad  
I am smooth to touch What am I?

When you have done the above you can add a second part to each line of the riddle. You can also make it rhyme if you want to. Here's an example:

I start off green but then turn red  
You'll find me in a kitchen but not under a bed  
You can eat me cooked but also raw  
If you bite me too fast I squirt onto the floor  
What am I?

(Answer: A tomato)

## 6. Learning Akbar and Birbal's theme song, by Musical Director and Composer Arun Ghosh

Arun Ghosh © The music and lyrics are copyright of Arun Ghosh.

Download the music for the song from the Mashi Theatre Website: [mashi-theatre.co.uk/education](http://mashi-theatre.co.uk/education). Use the sung version and the lyrics below to learn the song, and then sing along to the instrumental track. The music is also available on the following links.

INSTRUMENTAL MP3   SUNG MP3

### **Lyrics**

Akbar and Birbal, nah nah nah nah nah nah

Akbar and Birbal, nah nah nah nah nah nah

How could you survive in a freezing cold lake?

Birbal knows! Birbal knows!

How do you get to heaven and back?

Birbal knows! Birbal knows!

How many crows are in this land?

Birbal knows! Birbal knows!

Who would dare to pull the King's moustache?

Birbal knows! Birbal knows!

Akbar and Birbal, nah nah nah nah nah nah

Akbar and Birbal, nah nah nah nah nah nah

Akbar and Birbal, nah nah nah nah nah nah

Akbar and Birbal, nah nah nah nah nah nah