

King Akbar Writes a Law



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King Akbar stormed into Birbal's office and towered angrily over his chief advisor sitting at his writing table.



“Birbal, why have you advised all servants in my palace to wash with soap each time they leave the latrine? Do you think they are careless enough to return to work with poop on their hands? My Chancellor of the Palace would throw them in the dungeon for life!”



That fussy chief servant had scurried into Birbal's chamber closely behind the king, and now nodded his double chins in agreement.



Birbal hastily put down the *parathas* and pickles he had been eating and replied: “Your wisdom is as deep as the oceans, my lord. I was, of course in error. If there is nothing to see, then there can be no contamination. I will cancel my order at once.”



But as Birbal forward leaned to write the new order, he bumped against his plate. A drop of pickle oil splattered just far enough to land on the king's hand.

“Oh, pardon me *Jahanpanah* [my lord]. I am most sorry.”



King Akbar turned to his Chancellor, “Well, clean it



off – and quickly!” The Chancellor moved with surprising speed for one so round, grabbing a nearby pitcher and pouring water over the King’s hand.

Birbal, clearly relieved at the Chancellor’s quick work, continued: “As we were saying, hands that appear clean can never be contaminated. As his Highness suggests, I will require soap only when hands look dirty.”



Although Birbal was speaking, the king had stopped listening. Instead, his highness sniffed the back of his hands and wrinkled his nose. Apparently, some of the smell from the pickle oil had remained, even after rinsing with water.



King Akbar now held up his hand, and Birbal paused. “Wait,” the king said, “I have had a Royal Idea. The *correct* rule is: Require soap only when hands appear dirty *or* are smelly.”



“I can no more count your wisdom, my lord, than the grains of sand on the beach. Of course I was wrong to insist on soap only when the contamination can be seen. As your royal nose points out, contamination can remain even when it cannot be seen. Fortunately, when the eyes cannot see it and the nose cannot smell it, we know there is no contamination. None can doubt your highness’s wisdom on this point.



“Quite right,” the Chancellor of the Palace puffed. “In fact, if something were present but neither seen nor smelt, it must truly be the work of the devil!”

“My colleague’s keen mind moves much faster than my own,” Birbal replied. “In fact, possession of devil’s work is usually a crime punishable by death.

“I see your point,” King Akbar added. “Yes, I shall make that law.”



“Your understanding, my lord, is as vast as the sky,” added Birbal. He picked up his quill pen to write the new law, but he paused with his pen just above the page. “If we announced this law in the open court, criminals might flee with their devilish secrets out of the kingdom. The border police must be alerted before we announce the new law.”

“Hmm, a good point,” King Akbar replied. “But how can we be sure criminals do not learn of it before the border police? Summon the Panther. He may have ideas.”



The Chancellor of the Palace scurried off, and returned trailing the Panther, the well-deserved name of the king's chief general. At two meters tall, the Panther towered over the Chancellor. The Panther's solid muscle also contrasted with the rounded curves of the plump chief servant. The Panther was the only advisor allowed to carry a weapon in the presence of King Akbar— in part because nobody else could lift the great sword he kept by his side.

The Panther bowed his muscular frame to the king. His voice rumbled deeply, sounding as one might imagine the speech of a mountain: "How may I serve you, my Lord?"

Birbal explained, "We must write a new law, but we fear criminals will escape our borders when they hear of it. Thus, we want to send it first to all corners of the kingdom without the criminals learning about it.

The Panther settled his massive head in his even larger hands. "That is a puzzle," he declared as he began to think deeply. Seeing him lost in thought was a bit like watching a volcano waiting to explode.

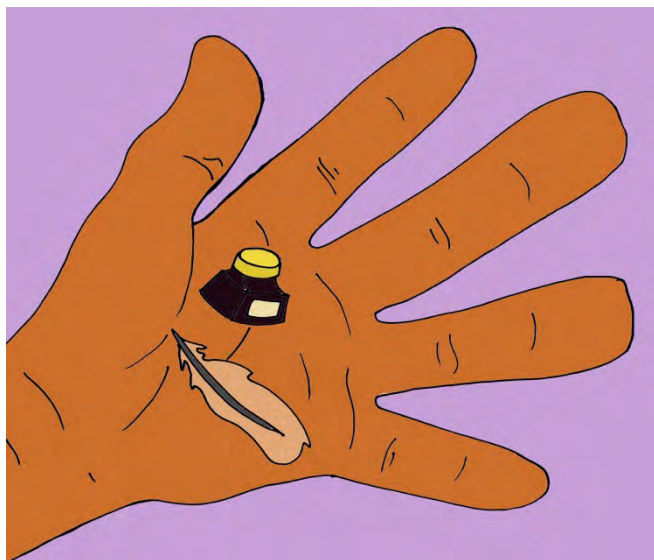


Suddenly his eyes shot up, and even the brave King jumped back in surprise as the Panther clenched his fists in excitement.

“I have it! We have recently begun sending letters to our ambassadors in foreign lands using a special ink.”

“But might our enemies read the letters as they travel?” the king asked.

“Ah, that’s what makes it special. I write with *this* ink...” With that, he reached deep into a pocket of his cloak. One imagined him withdrawing a scimitar or throwing knife, but he pulled out only a quill pen and a small ink bottle, looking like children’s toys cupped within his massive hand.





“Observe, my Lord.” the Panther said as he dipped the quill in the ink and wrote rapidly on a piece of parchment from Birbal’s desk.



The king peered over the Panther's tall shoulder, watching the pen move but seeing no change to the parchment. "But there is nothing there!" Akbar grabbed the paper to peer at it closely, but there was no sign (or even odor) to show the ink had passed over the page.



“Ah, but as I said, that is what makes it special.” Now the general walked to the fireplace and waved the parchment just above the flames.



The king watched in amazement as letters appeared.

“What magic is this!?” He rushed over and grabbed the previously blank letter from his giant general’s hand.

Where a moment before there had been nothing, now the letters clearly read: “This ink cannot be seen, heard, or smelled, but it still carries a message.”



Birbal walked over and read the message. “Ah, it is a sad thing,” he muttered, shaking his head with a gloomy expression.

“What is?” Akbar replied.

“To have to execute such a fine general.”



The muscle-bound giant's eyebrows shot up in surprise. Nobody saw his massive hand even move, yet somehow the Panther had managed to draw his long sword and was now holding its sharp point at Birbal's throat!

Even the king, brave when hunting the most dangerous wild animals, shifted his body away from the Panther on the prowl.

"Wait, wait, Birbal," the king quickly said. "Your understanding of my newest law is mistaken. A new Royal Idea has struck me, and there shall be no executions today."

Watching the giant general's body relax was like watching a mighty python uncoil. Birbal did not start to breathe until the Panther returned his great sword to its scabbard.



The King continued hurriedly, “We all know, of course, that some substances can be present, even if one cannot see or smell them.”

“Ah,” Birbal replied, “Your thoughts run more swiftly than any deer. I am so glad you corrected my error before I wrote such a foolish law.”

“But I have thought more on contamination,” Akbar went on. “We have no need for *any* law requiring soap, as my servants use only their right hands to touch food. Thus, contamination cannot spread, even if it exists!”

Birbal nodded in agreement, “My lord, you have more insights than there are stars in the sky.”



The Panther was confused, so Birbal explained, “When one of the king’s servants leaves the latrine, they might have contamination on their left hand, but it cannot spread to food, so the king is safe.”

“But can you be sure?” the Panther asked.

At that moment the *Mir Bakawal*, the head of the royal kitchens, appeared, bearing a platter of snacks for the King and his advisors.



Birbal took advantage of this opportunity and replied, “Let us demonstrate the unfailing wisdom of our noble king.” With that he took a pinch of the yellow saffron powder that always accompanied royal meals, and smeared a bit on the left palm of the Chancellor of the Palace and a pinch on the left palm of the *Mir Bakawal*.



“Come, my friends, will you join the king for a bite?” Birbal arranged cushions on the beautiful carpet so the Chancellor and *Mir Bakawal* could each share a samosa with King Akbar. Both were honored to sit with their king. Each sat demurely, with their yellow-tinged left hand resting carefully in their laps.

“You see,” Birbal explained to the General-in-Chief, “As they eat only with their right hands, no contamination can spread.”

“Hmm...,” the Panther replied, “I have great respect of your intelligence, Birbal, but perhaps you are not as clever as you think.



The king had no idea what his giant general was referring to. Nevertheless, a few minutes after the *Mir Bakawal* returned to the royal kitchens, the King willingly followed the Panther's lead. Birbal asked the Chancellor of the Palace to meet them in a few minutes in the throne room.

The giant general led King Akbar and Birbal down passages his highness had never seen before, all the way to the royal kitchens.



There they saw the *Mir Bakawal* preparing the king's next meal. As he rolled and kneaded the white dough for the king's *naan*, they saw small yellow dots mixing in.

The king looked repulsed by what he had seen, as his cheeks turned a pale green.

The *Mir Bakawal* noticed King Akbar watching, but misunderstood his anxious gaze. "Oh, don't worry about a trace of saffron. It is too little for you to detect the smell or taste. In fact, it won't even be visible once the *naan* is cooked." The king's complexion turned a deeper shade of green, and he looked about to be ill.



“It is time to go,” King Akbar exclaimed as he rushed up the stairs to his throne room. He was relieved to find nobody there was cooking with stained hands. He sat in throne and caught his breath.



A moment later he called, “My scepter, please.” The Chancellor rushed over, knelt on one knee, bowed his head low, and held out the scepter flat on his two hands: “My lord.”

The king leaned forward to pick up his scepter – but it was no longer there! Almost faster than a human eye could see, the Panther leapt halfway across the room to grab the scepter from the Chancellor before the king could reach it.



“What is the meaning of this!” the king demanded.



“I am most sorry, my lord, but look what contaminates the scepter.” The king looked at the top of the scepter the Panther now held gingerly from the bottom. High on scepter, where the king usually held it, the king could see yellow powder!



“My friend Birbal,” the King began, “I have had yet another Royal Idea. Contamination from the latrine can exist even if it is invisible and has no odor. In addition, contamination can spread from the left hand to food and to objects. Thus, the new law shall be: All servants must wash with soap each time they leave the latrine”



Birbal bowed low and replied in a humble voice, “I am your servant, my lord. I shall write this law, and all shall see your wisdom.”

THE END

And they had clean hands happily and ever after