King Akbar Writes a Law

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Thanks to those children who helped make this book what it is today.
King Akbar stormed into Birbal’s office and towered angrily over his chief advisor sitting at his writing table.
“Birbal, why are all servants advised 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 nodded his double chins in agreement.
Birbal hastily put down the parathas and pickles and replied:

"Your wisdom is as deep as the oceans, my lord. 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 a drop of pickle oil 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, 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. Apparently, some of the smell from the pickle oil had remained, even after rinsing with water.
"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.

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.”
But as Birbal picked up his quill pen, he paused 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 quickly returned trailing the Panther, the king’s giant general.

The Panther bowed his muscular frame to the king. His voice rumbled deeply: “How may I serve you, my Lord?”
Birbal explained, “We must write a new law, but we must secretly inform the border guards so criminals cannot hear of it first and escape.

“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. "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. Swiftly, he pulled out 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 to see (or even smell)!” Akbar exclaimed.
"Ah, but as I said, that is what makes it special" the general explained as he waved the parchment near the flames of the fireplace.
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.

“What is?” Akbar replied.

“To have to execute such a fine general.”
Nobody saw his massive hand even move, yet the Panther’s long sword was now at Birbal’s throat!

“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.”
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 more royal thoughts on poop. 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.

Birbal replied, “Let us demonstrate the unfailing wisdom of our noble king.”

Biral smeared a pinch of the yellow turmeric powder that always accompanied royal meals onto the left palms of the Chancellor of the Palace and Mir Bakawal.
“Come, my friends, will you join the king for a bite?” The Chancellor and Mir Bakawal were honored to share a snack with their king. Each ate 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 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 Mir Bakawal noticed King Akbar watching, but misunderstood his anxious gaze. “Oh, don’t worry about a trace of tumeric. 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.”
“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.
A moment later he called, "My scepter, please." The Chancellor rushed over and held out the scepter: "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 ever after