

The Mughal Dynasty in India - Stories of Akbar and Birbal

Background :

Stories of Akbar and Birbal are extremely popular in India. The several instances when Birbal uses his wit and intelligence to calm the ire of Emperor Akbar and amuse him at the same time, are told to children from a very early age. It used to be part of the oral tradition of storytelling, but in recent years these stories have been compiled into books by various authors.

Akbar was the third Mughal Emperor to rule over India in the 16th century. He is also known as Akbar the Great for his contributions in the areas of art, architecture and music. It said that in his reign, Hindus and Muslims lived side by side in syncretic harmony. He was illiterate himself, but provided patronage to fine arts and literature. In his court he had Nine Jewels or 'Navr tans.' These were poets, musicians, advisers and learned men.

The Story of how Birbal came to Akbar's court

Emperor Akbar loved to go hunting. On one such trip, he came across a young man named Mahesh Das. In the meeting that occurred, the Emperor was extremely impressed by the wit of Mahesh Das. The Emperor gave Mahesh Das his ring and asked him to come and visit him in his palace at any time.

A few years later Mahesh Das decided to try his luck in the city and to take the emperor up on his offer. He reached the city of Agra where Emperor Akbar had his fort on the banks of the Yamuna River. At the gate of the fort he was greeted by the guards. He told them that he had come to visit with the emperor. The guards looked at him in disdain (since he was not very well dressed) and asked him why they should let him in. He showed them the ring that was given to him by the emperor as proof. One of the guards realized that this individual obviously was of importance to the emperor and gave him permission to enter, based on one condition: the young man would share half of what he received from the emperor with the guard.

Mahesh Das promised to do so and was given access into the court of Emperor Akbar. He bowed to the emperor as he went in and showed him the ring. The reputedly benevolent Emperor Akbar recognized the ring and the young man and immediately offered him anything he wanted. The young man thought a while, and asked the emperor for fifty lashes of the whip.

The emperor was amazed but he knew that Mahesh Das was a very astute young man and asked him for his reason for his wish. Mahesh Das revealed to the emperor that deal that he had made with the guard outside the fort. The emperor was thoroughly amused and angry at the same time. He awarded the fifty lashes to the guard for his impertinence and his habit of bullying people. He rewarded Mahesh Das by including him in his court and giving him all the comforts he could desire. He also bestowed on him the name of Birbal.

Till this day, stories of Birbal's wit are told to children in India.

Reader's Theater -

Divide the students into groups and give each group this and other stories of Akbar and Birbal. Students will rewrite the story in Reader's Theater format and enact it in for the rest of the class. After the presentation of each story, students will provide input on the moral behind each incident.

As a follow up, they will write a story where wit was used to amuse or as way out of a sticky situation. This can be from personal experience or a story that they might have heard or read.

Other Lesson Ideas :

- * Research on the lives of Akbar and Birbal
- * Comprehension questions
 - 1) Describe the characters of Akbar, Mahesh Das (Birbal) and the guard.
 - 2) What can you tell about the Mughal Dynasty based on the information from the story?
 - 3) If you could give a title to the story, what would it be?
 - 4) What would you ask Emperor Akbar and Birbal if you met them?
 - 5) What would you have asked Emperor Akbar if you were in the place of Mahesh Das (Birbal)?