

## BIRBAL AND TENALI RAMA – EXEMPLARY HUMORISTS OF INDIAN HISTORICAL FOLKTALES

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**Key Concepts:** *Folk-hero, Folklore, Intellect, Humour, Wit*

According to the famous author Alan Dundes, Folklore provides a socially sanctioned outlet for the discussion of the forbidden and taboo. In the current scenario, with the growth of science and technology, there has been a dip in moral values. From the age old times, moral values have been considered as the good values that are very essential to imbibe and nurture communal wellbeing. The moral values include aspects such as compassion, being generous and honesty, showing sympathy and kindness with utmost integrity. It is also important to be polite with perseverance thereby to have self - control and self – respect among individuals. People who are without these qualities find it very difficult to manage their survival in the society.

Folk tales and folklore are traditions that cultivate moral values among the people of the society who automatically transform these traditions into the assets of the society. People who manage to lead a disciplined life not only are good by themselves but also aim and help others in bringing out best qualities of those around them. Such people carry out all aspects in a dedicated manner with a deep sense of helping nature that is always appreciated. The parents of today's world want their children to have good and moral characters as Indian families are very particular in imbibing good values. They make sure to impress upon the significance of these values, so that children will grow up in a responsible manner right from their early age (Meenakshi 2014, 129).

Folktales are as such popular folklore that enable the young minds to learn a lot as they grow up. The moral values and other good aspects of the folktales make children to be more responsible towards the society. Also, the moral values that have been imparted through folktales and traditional folklore results in happiness. In the contemporary world, moral values have been altered extensively due to stress. The youth of these days are totally inclined towards attaining happiness through all possible means, due to western influence and attraction towards that culture.

### **Significance of Folk Tales and Folklore**

Folktales are always fascinating. Even adults transform in to children when it comes to listening to stories and folktales. Stories have always been appealing to everyone. Folklore mostly refers to a particular dimension of culture that usually comprises of certain traditional forms of art, culture, popular beliefs, music, dance, and visual art that are usually articulated by individuals. A folktale can be considered as an old or historical story that has been passed on from one generation to the other mostly by word of mouth (Stith 11977, 5). These folktales form part of oral tradition and culture. Most of these folk tales are moral stories with humour aspect in them to make it interesting. They are rarely available in written format. The story telling traditions including myths and fairy tales formed the part of local folklore.

Folklore is a concept or practice that has been passed on through the ages with great artistic communication (Alastair 2013, 13). This type of art form encompasses aesthetic and moral dimensions of the society and its culture. It has been the practice of the grandparents to tell historic stories, made up stories, anecdotes and folktales to their grandchildren mostly to engage them when they are tiny tots. Parents, uncles and aunts also engage in entertaining children with these stories. Experienced teachers at times impart education by giving examples of folktales to make their classes interesting. There are also many community experts and politicians, who quote folk lore with traditional and generic formulae (Lalitha and Ruth 1999, 23). All these features have evolved into folklore and it is used majorly in education, historical reviews and even in contemporary scenarios.

### **Feature of Folklore and Folktales**

The features of folklore and folktales are unique in character. They have specifications which may not be understandable in general. Folklore consists of the concrete, verbal, auditory, kinetic, and behavioral artifacts that can be described as instantiations of any group's culture (Eugene, Provenzo, John and Asterie 2009, 347). People use folklore to connect to their past, but also as resources to accomplish particular goals through performance and communication in present social settings. For those seeking to apply folklore and folkloristic research to fields of education, particularly salient and prevalent definitions of folklore describe it as “people’s knowledge” and “non-institutional”— though it is recognized that folklore can also be co-opted and used to promote antidemocratic, politically institutionalized goals (Francois 2009, 36).

As early as 1938, a Progressive scholar called Benjamin Botkin, defined folklore as a form of traditional belief, practice, and countenance passed down by word of mouth, exterior of commercial and theoretical communications. This definition rightly highlighted the expression and expertise of folklore as an existing, popular and dominant cultural aspect. Folklore is now usually spread through the media (Jeff 2016, 154).

It has a sagacity of national identity. It is acknowledged as a discipline complementary to the disciplinary approaches of the society. In general, folklore’s original authors are mostly anonymous. They transform dynamically and are often performed by experts. Folklore usually is used to validate social prerogatives and dogmatic projects. It should be rightly understood that folklore has no prototype. Original folklore is not usually reproduced exactly in the same manner. Folklore also refers to a larger community of people who publicize different types of knowledge by conveyed stories.

### **Objectives of the Study**

This study aims to focus on two significant, rather prominent personalities in the history of India, Birbal and Tenali Rama. Birbal was one among the *Navratnas* (9 gems) in the royal court of Akbar. He was a unique gentleman with extraordinary intellects. Birbal was popular for his witty nature and his bondage with Akbar (Symist 2017, 33). Tenali Rama, the court poet of Krishnadevaraya of the Vijayanagara empire was considered as one of the most beloved characters in Indian history who is acclaimed for his smart approach (William New York, 37). This study will portray the character of Birbal and Thenali Rama, their designations in the royal court, position and association at the royal court and the ruler, their wit, their intellect, the utilization of their humour in the royal court, the power of humour and the depiction of both in

folktales and their uniqueness. Wit is considered to be a form of intelligent humour. It has the ability to convey things in a clever and funny manner. Birbal and Tenali Rama have both handled wit in such a way that the rulers who employed them used them as stress busters. To have a better understanding of the above statement it is important to know the background of both these personalities.

### Birbal

Jalaludden Mohammed Akbar Padshah Ghazi was the Mughal ruler of India from 1560 to 1605. He appointed the *Nav Ratnas* or the nine jewels of the Mughal Crown. Among these nine jewels, five of them were very prominent. They were Tansen, Todarmal, Abul Fazal, Maan Singh and Birbal. With these great men at his side nobody, could make out that Akbar was an illiterate. This statement was written by Jehangir. Though Akbar was an illiterate, he patronized experts in various fields, worked very hard and was always successful. Birbal's duties in Akbar's court were both administrative and military and was also a military advisor. Being a close friend of Akbar, he was made *Kavi Priya* or poet laureate and named him Raja Birbal.



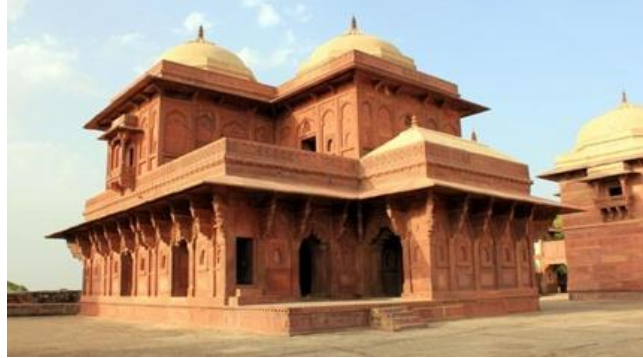
**Birbal**

Birbal's original name was Mahesh Das. He was born in 1528 in Trivikrampur near the river Yamuna as the son of Ganga Das and Anabha Davito. He was educated in languages such as Hindi, Sanskrit and Persian. He also specialized in music and poetry, which acquired him more popularity. Initially, he served the Raja of Madhya Pradesh, Ram Chandra of Rewa. At that point of time he was popularly called "*Brahma Kavi*". Birbal's pen name was '*Brahm*'. His prolific writings are maintained in the Bharatpur Museum, Rajasthan. Birbal's managed to marry into a rich family after which he was appointed at Akbar's imperial court. He served as the key member of the group of nine popularly called the *Nava Ratnas* who were advisors, to Akbar, the Mughal emperor. The job responsibility of Birbal was administrative and military duties. He was a very close associate to Akbar. He was dear friend rather than an advisor. Birbal also known as *Brahma Kavi*, had *Brahmas* as his pen name.

Akbar loved Birbal's wisdom, efficient sense of humour and his ever-subtle wit. Birbal was also a poet and an author. His writings were appreciated and loved by children and the adults. Many generations of India and abroad have grown up listening to the awe-inspiring folktales of Birbal and Akbar (Dirk 2013, 33). Basically, Akbar was illiterate. His greatness lies in the fact that he respected the talented people. He had patronized experts from various fields in his royal court. The conversations and events in their lives have been written as many stories and have been published in several volumes. The intimacy of Akbar and Birbal made the other courtiers jealous to such an extent that they incessantly plotted for Birbal's downfall. Even such plots have been written as stories and recorded in books. Birbal is said to have died while he led an expedition to Afghanistan and was killed by treason (Kiran 2009, 139).

### Position and Association

The reputation of Birbal was very high and he served Akbar for 30 years. In 1572, Birbal led an attack from Akbar's brother, Hakim Mirza, after which he accompanied Akbar to Gujarat. Though Birbal was not a military expert, he often accompanied Akbar in most of his campaigns. Birbal resided at Fatehpur Sikri, close to Akbar's palace. Akbar's religion *Din-i-Ilahi*, had been followed by Birbal and this has been mentioned in the *Ain-i-Akbari*. Akbar called Birbal as the brightest jewel. The Mughal emperor was so favouring to Birbal as he had saved Birbal's life in two instances. The painting called *Akbari Nao Ratna* has been placed in Victoria hall at Kolkata (Vicki 1998, 67). This painting beautifully depicts Birbal seated next to Akbar. Akbar bestowed Birbal with a two-storey house within the palace complex, that was very close to Emperors chambers. Birbal was the only courtier to get that privilege and one of the gates has been named Birbal's gate in his honour (Vicki 1998, 67).



**Birbal's two-storey house, Fatehpur Sikri**

### Tenali Rama

Ramalinga or Ramalingacharyulu was the original name of Tenali Ramakrishna and he was born in a Telugu family. He was a court jester cum poet at the court of Krishnadevaraya, the Vijayanagara emperor. Tenali Rama was called *Vikatakavi* (Raghunatha Rao 1989, 38). He served as one of the *Ashtadiggajas* at the court of Krishnadevaraya. Tenali Rama was a Shaivite initially who later converted to the Vaishnava sect. After conversion, he changed his name to Ramakrishna. As he was born in Tenali, a town in Guntur, his father died early, he was brought up by his uncle. He couldn't get proper education.

Tenali Ramakrishna 'Bhagavatha Mela' performers his inspiring performance. him as the comic poet in his just a comic poet, but was so the Vijayanagara empire from Rama is quite often compared the King Krishnadevaraya in where he died from a snake-bite



**Tenali Ramakrishna**

joined a troupe of and impressed everyone with Krishnadevaraya appointed court. Tenali Rama was not influential that he protected the Delhi Sultans. Tenali to Birbal. After the demise of 1530, he returned to Tenali (Kavitha 2016, 147).

Tenali Rama was highly appreciated for his intelligence and wit. Tenali Rama was also an exceptional literary scholar. His work, *Panduranga Mahatyam* has been considered as one of the Five Great Kavyas among Telugu literary works. Tenali Ramakrishna was not only the court poet of Krishnadevaraya but was also considered as the folk hero of his times (Murali 2016, 167). The king of Vijayanagar patronized his *Ashta diggajas* (eight poet stalwarts) and gave

them the required space to grow. So, Tenali Rama not only became the court poet, but also soon became a good friend and associate of the King. He had also extensively contributed to the religious literature, due to his empathy towards the Shaivism (Robert, Fernao and Domingo 2000, 56). His devotion to Vaishnavism was reflected in *Panduranga Mahatyam*. He was also called as *Kumara Bharathi*.

Tenali Rama served King Krishna Deva Raya who was popularly called as *Kannada Rajya Rama Ramana* and *Andhra Bhoja*. He was one of the dominant rulers of the peninsula India. Krishnadevaraya was considered to have ruled the most powerful and extensive empire in the subcontinent. Though the king was only of a medium height, he was a cheerful person and highly appreciated the *Ashta Diggajas* and encouraged them. He took their advice accordingly. Though Tenali Rama was the court jester, he was given importance and his advice was taken in maintaining the law. Historical writings indicate that the king was an able administrator, military general, and a doctor who attended the wounded at the war front. He claims to have been inspired by Tenali Rama and his consideration. A special Pavilion is situated near the Zenana at Hampi, close to the Royal Centre of the Vijayanagara Empire. The pavilion was built in honour of Tenali Rama for witty and impressive poetry. No other *Ashta Digaja* has this speciality. Tenali Rama had been a very influential person in the life and court of Krishnadevaraya that Tenali Rama couldn't survive in the empire after the ruler's death (www.aceengacademy.com).



**Tenali Rama Pavilion**

### **Wit and Intellect of the Exemplary Humorists Duo**

Intellect is the term that is used to study the human mind. It is the tendency of the mind to arrive at conclusions and resolve issues. Historically speaking, the term has been derived from the Greek term *intellectus* which means to understand. This term is a branch of intelligence reflecting logical and rational aspects (1984, 316). Birbal folk tales were propagated by oral tradition. In these folktales Birbal outsmarted the other courtiers in a humorous manner with shrill and intelligent responses. The Emperor had also tested Birbal's wit several times and Birbal always made him realise his mistake that amused and impressed Akbar. He also challenged Birbal's poetic tests. The earliest reference of Birbal's wit was in the 18th-century dictionary, called the *Ma'athir al-Umara* where Akbar mentions about Birbal (archive.org › MaasirAl-umara\_english\_vol.1\_djvu.txt).

Similarly, the Vijayanagara emperor, Krishnadevaraya and Tenali Ramakrishna were also closely associated with each other. Krishnadevaraya and Tenali Rama, were good friends who made fun of the imperfections of the king and offered a correction to it. Krishnadevaraya being influenced by Tenali Rama presided over his empire at its zenith and came to be considered as an iconic ruler. Due to his close association with the ruler, Tenali was hated and he earned the enmity of the other ministers at the royal court. Krishnadevaraya never expressed his superiority

towards Tenali Rama (Raghunatha Rao 1993, 129) as Tenali Rama's intellect and wit had earned Krishnadevaraya a lot of booty.

Both Birbal and Tenali Rama were exemplary humorists who portrayed their intellect and wit in a worthwhile manner. They were both important persons in the lives of both the rulers. Both Akbar and Krishnadevaraya enjoyed the company of these exemplary humorists. They went to the extent of taking their advice on military and administrative lines in spite of their different designations. The rulers were so confident of their intellect that they served also as their confidants. If wit and intellect had taken people to greatness, Birbal and Tenali Rama were the pioneers.

### **Power of Humour**

Humour is the tendency to incite laughter and deliver amusement. The term is derived from ancient Greece that controlled human health. All people respond to humour. Humour has many genres. It reaches to a multitude of audience. It should be understood that humour and laughter have both psychological and physical benefits. Humour, laughter, wit and intellect enables to comfort nervousness and fear. It manages hindrances more successfully. It diffuses several fights and resolves divergences (Brian 2016, 189). It results in strengthening various relationships and the related emotional connections. It relieves stress to a great extent, apart from boosting immunity and improving energy levels. Incorporating the aspect of humour into one's life is simple. Humour strengthens the bond between people. This was what led to the intimacy between Akbar and Birbal and Krishnadevaraya and Tenali Rama.

### **Depiction in Folktales**

#### **Birbal**

The folk tales depicted Birbal as Hindu, elderly man. He succeeded with his awesome skill as a humorist. He was depicted as a person who has both political and personal influence over Akbar. He became Akbar's good friend as he used intelligence and wit. He was a person with a considerable amount of capacity and genius who was also appreciated for his generosity. Abul Fazl valued him by highlighting on his spiritual distinction and position as a confidant of the Emperor rather than as a wit or poet. Birbal influenced Akbar's administrative policies to some extent. He has been depicted in most of the folk tales like *Amar Chitra Katha*, *Chandamama* children's comics and many other books as a very intelligent and witty person (Karline 2009, 178). There are several editions, films, textbooks, booklets and plays with Birbal's character on the lead. The television animated series based on Birbal, titled, Chota Birbal and Akbar & Birbal are very popular among kids. The development of folklore based on the original historical stories connected to them were their speciality.

#### **Tenali Rama**

Tenali Rama has usually been depicted as a Brahman who accompanied Krishnadevaraya at all his errands. He is also portrayed at the Royal court seated close to the ruler. Folktales and stories on Tenali Rama show his brilliance and quick wit. These have been portrayed in the compilations of Tenali Rama Stories under different headings. Tenali Rama stories, usually had a moral value imbibed in it. The folktales were mostly events and incidents that happened at the royal court and in the life of Tenali Rama. They are both hilarious and thought provoking

(Vishal 2010, 17). The folktales of Tenali Rama are still popular among today's kids, which makes it clear that his wit is beyond times.

### **Popular Folk Tales on Birbal and Tenali Rama**

Folk tales of Birbal, like Pot of wit, Hundred gold coins and Birbal, Farmers well and witty Birbal, Birbal's Kichri, the wicked Barber's plight, Birbal's Wisdom, the emperors ring etc. and the stories of Tenali Rama and the cat, Raman the thief catcher, Tenali Rama and the weight lifter, Raman the horse trainer, Kaalima's gift to Tenali, Reward and punishment are very popular tales. Akbar and Birbal folk tales have been featured in the *Amar Chitra Katha* and *Chandamama* children's comics. Best of Akbar and Birbal, Birbal the clever courtier and many other books are available containing folktales of Birbal and his wit. The development of folklore was primarily based on the stories connected to them and their speciality. Stories of Tenali Rama, Delighting tales of Tenali Rama, Entertaining tales of Tenali Rama, Witty Tales of Tenali Rama, Jokes of Tenali Rama, Crowing a Clown and other stories, The best of Tenali Rama, 365 Folk tales, Raman of Tenali, Folk Tales of Karnataka, Delighting tales from the Panchtantra, Encyclopedia of folk heroes, Adventures of Tenali Rama, Tenali Rama: Tales of Wit and Wisdom are popular books on Tenali Rama.

Birbal and Tenali Rama were hated by the other courtiers but loved by the rulers. They were men who were omitted mostly in books of History or merely mentioned as a courtier. But the folktales and folklore connected to Birbal and Tenali Rama portray them as exemplary humorists in Indian History who have held a significant place in the royal court and among the ministers. They were the best of their times. This is evident from the envious ministers who went to the extent of killing them. The rulers appreciated them and acknowledged their intellect, wit and humour to the maximum. They even enjoyed their company and were close friends with them. The irony is that they were not identified as very great men during their lives. It should be noted that both the rulers cherished their company and advice. Thus, Birbal and Tenali Rama have lived exemplary lives as humorists and humane beings bringing about a difference in the lives of the rulers who they served.

All these makes it clear that the folktales are becoming more historical these days, due to their authentic nature and peoples' trust in history. Historical characters and personalities are always appreciated and acknowledged for their brilliance and excellence. Super heroes have been inspired by several historical and mythological characters. Historical personalities have not been given weightage at several sectors. However, when it comes to folklore, history, historical events and facts are the one that get highlighted. Folklore and folktales bring out the deep buried intricate aspects of a historical character that is usually not depicted in text books and lessons. These enable the reader or the viewer to enjoy the folktale to the maximum. Sometimes they even connect to them and draw a line of similarity in their lives.

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