

Chapter 5

Madness of Speech: Truth, Power and the Birbal Way

In the evening, the chief of the king's army came to the king. He bowed his head and announced, 'My lord! Except the jackals and the dogs, you'll not hear any sound from anyone's mouth in this village.'

The chief minister said, 'the honour of the king has been ordained / restored.'

The priest said, 'the goddess is on the king's side.'

The Vidūṣaka said, 'My lord! Give me the permission to leave now.'

The king said, 'Why?'

The Vidūṣaka said, 'My Lord! Neither can I beat someone nor can I kill, by the grace of god I can only laugh. I'll forget to laugh if I stay in your court'.¹

- Rabindranath Tagore, "Bidushak"

The narratability of the human life—unique and unrepeatable for every individual—is considered to be the “prepolitical and prehistorical condition of history”² by Hannah Arendt. The lived life of an individual, which is comprised of a peculiar mixture of intentions and accidents, reveals a “design” beyond the individual's conscious realization as he is always already immersed in the flow of life itself. “[T]he design”, writes Adriana Cavarero, “is what that life, without ever being able to predict or even imagine it, leaves behind.”³ A person is a living story open to be read by others. It is not essential that the design, which is unique and unrepeatable for every individual and comes after life, has to be determined, rather it varies and depends upon the tellers who have a strong feeling—love, hate, admiration—for someone and recounts the tale after his or her death.

Life is Hi/story

The archival documents regarding the life of Mahesh Das (1528-1586) are very scanty. All we know is that he was born in a bhatt-brahmin family in 1528 in a village near Kalpi. In the court of the Raja of Rewa, he was a poet writing in Braj bhasha. There he was adorned with the title *brahma kavi*. When and how he came to Akbar's (1542-1605) court is not known, but according to Abul Fazl—the historian at the emperor's court—he came to be noticed by Akbar around 1563. Fazl respectfully mentioned about his spiritual qualities and intimacy to Akbar but he did not mention anything about his poetic capability or witticism. To the other historian of the court, Abdul Qadir Badayuni, he was a “bastard”.⁴ However it is the stories which make the hero ‘super’ by providing him a mythical status and within one hundred years of his death, writes C. M. Naim, Birbal became a cult figure in popular imagination.⁵

If we look at the etymology of his name, ‘Mahesh’ is a shorter form of ‘Mahewasra’ who is one of the supreme deities in Hinduism and the title ‘Das’ refers to a ‘servant’ or ‘devotee.’ In contrast to Mitra's Ghanashyam Das, who probably belongs to the lower-middle region in the caste ladder in Bengal, Mahesh was born in a Brahmin family. Following Walter Benjamin, Cavarero writes on the paradox of naming a new-born baby:

As Walter Benjamin notes, the names that parents give a child ‘do not correspond – in a metaphysical rather than etymological sense – to any knowledge, for they name newborn children.’ The name announces the uniqueness, in its inaugural appearing to the world, even before someone can know *who* the newborn is; or who he or she will turn out to be in the course of their life. A unique being is without any quality at its beginning, and yet it *already* has a name. The newborn does not choose this name, but is given it by another, just as every human being do not choose how to be. The uniqueness which pertains to the *proper* is always a given, a *gift*.⁶

The name that had been carefully chosen for him and the family he belongs to suggest for him a religious life devoted to the gods, but quite paradoxically, he becomes a courtier and a poet devoted to a Muslim emperor. The emperor adorned him with the title Birbal or Raja

Birbar. S. H. Hodivala suggests that the title might have been borrowed by Akbar from *Vetala Panchavinshati*—a Sanskrit text—where there is a person named Vira Vara who was so much devoted to the king that he willingly sacrificed his own son.⁷



Portrait of Raja Birbal Seated with Bow and Arrow

In search of his destiny—Mahesh Das—a common man from the village with a modest background, came to Delhi, the capital of the Mughal Empire. Nobody knew him and he also scarcely had any idea that one day he would become one of the Nine Jewels of the emperor’s court. What he had buried deep in his heart was, as Cavarero would say, a “desire” for a story that would instantly reveal to people ‘who’ he was. The end of Birbal’s eventful life mark the closure but kept him alive in the narrative memory of people who upheld him as a champion of justice—a superhero. The death opened up an opportunity for the birth of a unique and meaningful series of narratives out of his lived life or flesh and blood existence.

The actuality of Birbal's life seems to have been obliterated from the bosom of time and we rely chiefly on the historical memory as recorded in his narrative biography.

This narrative biography over the historical, philosophical or discursive formation of the subject is the central concern for Adriana Cavarero. The "narratable self", to use Cavarero's term, is consistent with the life and blood existence of a person in the mind of the man to come: "'who' someone is...is revealed and made manifest through that person's actions and speech – words and deeds which, *ex post facto*, form the unique life-story of that person"⁸. This gives birth to a new politics away from the discursive construction of the human subject and allows it "a relatively 'autonomous' agency or voice" because unlike the historical or philosophical discourse, "the tale is not 'indifferent' to the one whose life it reveals; on the contrary, the tale is for that unique existent."⁹

If Tansen, as the saying goes, had the superheroic ability to bring rain or even ignite fire by the melody of his songs, Birbal's gift was sheer, sparkling, and unprecedented wit and imagination. The command over language and narrative authority lent Birbal an unusual capacity to solve puzzles by using a unique and sophisticated technique. The puzzles are presented in the court as a bolt from the blue and he usually have no premeditated plan but a sheer presence of mind to solve them. His spectacular practice of doing things, partly as a spontaneous response to a complex situation and partly as an act of active self-disclosure, had such a dramatic affect that the emperor did not hesitate to bestow his trust on Birbal's wisdom. The sense of humour and the spectacularity of his method, which is often well rehearsed, make them memorable and eventually narratable in the public sphere. We do not get the inner world of Birbal as we find in the modernist novels but his world of performance and immersion in the rituals of the courtly culture.

The Court-jester, the Vidūṣaka and the Mirror Affect

In Bharat Muni's *Nāṭya Śāstra*, the physical appearance of the vidūṣaka has been described as "dwarfish, should possess big teeth, and be hunch-backed, double-tongued, bald-headed and tawny-eyed".¹⁰ As far as his function is concerned, he is one "who looks to people's pleasure, can imitate manners of all people, resorts to various (means) and mixes with women, is ready-witted in disclosures made through pleasantry, or in Covert Pleasure and is clever, and can give censure through his words, is to be known as a jester (vidūṣaka)."¹¹ The essential aspects of the notorious vidūṣaka are, therefore, physical deformity, cunning ingenuity and the ability to produce pleasure by imitating other people. He is often crude and lacks subtlety of thought and action. Noticing this characteristic feature, David Dean Shulman has differentiated between a radical court-jester of the folk culture and the vidūṣaka of Sanskrit drama who are often presented as the foil to a virtuous hero and is deformed, ugly, insensitive, foodie, and a laughing stock to the audience:

The jester's stories are marked by a boldness and an intensity never attained by the Vidūṣaka...although the jester has inherited many of the Vidūṣaka's traits...the clown is now gifted with pure intentionality and a comic inventiveness entirely legitimate within his assumed context. He is entirely self-conscious; his *raison d'être* lies in his wit. Unlike the Vidūṣaka, even at his most foolish the jester can never be a fool.¹²

The radical court-jester of the folktales is often presented as someone fighting for the cause of the common people often overshadowing the ruler himself. Taking life lightly and providing humorous solutions to the serious social, political, and ethical problems of life is his profession. He plays a dangerous game of wit, but as he is always one step ahead of the others, he always escapes the wrath of the emperor and "provides "the necessary corrective to the king's human inadequacies and deviations from the truth."¹³ The sovereign emperor is often surprised, irritated, and angry at the jokes at his expense but he is liberal enough to applaud the jester's confidence and boldness which frequently reach to the verge of audacity

and insolence. The elusive vidūṣaka compliments the ruler as an eye opener, without him his reign is miserable and incomplete.

The “narratable self” lays bare from birth within a shared and interactive space which Arendt calls “political”.¹⁴ In his attempt to prove his point in the shared space of the court where he lived the most part of his life, Birbal is always dramatic. He writes a play in which he manipulates others—often unwilling or unaware—to participate as actors in spite of their hesitation and the play ends in a way he desires it to end. This method of conjuring reality is part of the profession of a vidūṣaka but this is a highly distorted reality that allows opening up fresh avenues for critical thinking. “For, in my case, a poor Brahmana,” Says the vidūṣaka in Sudraka’s *Mrichchhakatika*, “everything turns out in a contrary manner: just like the reflection in a mirror, the left appearing to the right and the right to the left.”¹⁵ There are several narrative versions of Birbal’s first meeting with the emperor and one of them is particularly interesting in this context:

One day the emperor went to a village with his mobile court. Soon after, an announcement was made declaring that if any artist could draw the most realistic picture of the emperor, he would be awarded a huge sum of money. A number of artists tried their best but no one could make the emperor smile. He frowned, grimaced, felt amused, became indifferent and even became angry but never pleased. When everyone failed, a small boy named Mahesh Das produced an oval object wrapped in paper and carefully handed it over to the emperor. The emperor shook it, held it up, became puzzled for a moment, opened the wrapper, paused for a moment and then started laughing. The oval object was nothing but a mirror, and therefore produced the most realistic picture possible of the emperor. Realizing the trick, Akbar declared him the winner, gave him the award and in addition gave him his royal seal inviting him to his court when he comes of age.¹⁶

The mirror can reveal an exact likeness, yet with an exception, quite embarrassingly for the viewer, the mirror turns the left into right and the right into left. Years later, Birbal joins the emperor’s court where he goes on holding up a mirror in front of the emperor to let him realize the hidden ‘reality’ of life. This perceptual refiguring of reality which Shulman says,

“emerge from the outer zone of unstructured potentiality”¹⁷ is his road to truth and allows him a transformative power. What Birbal is gifting the emperor is a power of seeing things from a different perspective which he does not possess and in the process revealing the hidden treasures of his own self. These polyphonic mirror-effects give the emperor a second birth and a performative recurrence of these tricks brings before us a unique biography of Birbal as a superhero without excavating into the lost archive of his lived life.

The utterance of his name which was given to him at birth would not reveal *who* Birbal is; rather it is determined by *praxis*—his active engagement with life. It became essential to create an affect otherwise he would lose himself in the crowd of illustrious men at the court. To reveal his difference Birbal becomes dramatic and intensifies the situation. To attract the attention of the emperor he beats his own drum silently. He takes the risk of exposing himself in the life of the Mughal court and gradually manifests himself as a public figure of great accomplishment. This is apparent from the story of his first entry into the court. On the very first day in his new beginning, a corrupt gatekeeper of the court allows him in only in a condition that he has to hand over half of the reward from the emperor to him as bribe, and Birbal insists on getting hundred lashes from the emperor as his reward, half of which will be shared equally with the gatekeeper. The emperor realizes his hint and takes necessary actions to remit the shortcoming.¹⁸ To respond instantly to the questions life poses before us becomes an integral part of his life. There is no blueprint of action or preconceived theoretical knowledge available to him—no *sophia* but *phronesis*. As practical and creative he is, it leads him rethink life in his own terms. The emperor provides him employment not because of a single and bare display of intelligence but realizing the hidden potentiality of the boy—a possibility which he could foresee in advance. We see the primacy of the practical life where the unexpected and the uncanny take over the life of the mind that produces a stable theory. The boredom and normalcy of everyday life is often disturbed with the eruption

of the new, unexpected, or even uncanny. Birbal's job is to tackle new people and new problems and regain the authority and control over the aberrant life. And he performs this serious business without taking it seriously—with sunny humour. Eventually he earns a new name—a gift from the emperor for his work—which is not an interpellation signalling a paradoxical death in language and the old name Mahesh Das goes into oblivion.

The Technique

What activates the narrative memory of people is not so much the intellectual process how Birbal solves the puzzles, a mathematician can do it too, but the outcome of it and the production of laughter at the end. There is a set task for Birbal at the court—one of solving the puzzles or lawsuits by using his creative imagination. The nature of his job always brings new challenges one after another, and never allows him to be complacent because just as in a game of trapeze, one failure could lead to defamation and even death. In many occasions, only one interpretation of a problem is presented to him; he comes to realize the whole thing within a minute, and then finds out a way of retelling the story turning it upside down. He often buys a day or two from the emperor and apparently digresses from the point but all these are done in order to create the exact situation necessary for the comic timing. It leads to an ironic reversal of the whole situation and a revelation of another perspective which no one except Birbal could realize before. Shulman calls it a “double direction” or “internal oscillation” of a court-jester which “is meant to propel us toward a still greater freedom of perception, to a stance within an unstructured and always unfinished creative domain.”¹⁹

One important thing of his life is humour but it does not turn his life into a joke. For him being funny is a choice and he is not condemned to be funny as the court jester of Raja Krishnadevaraya of Vijayanagar—Tenali Rama.²⁰ This choice adds a pressure of performance and responsibility. He can mock, leg-pull, and irritate even the emperor himself without causing any offence. Yet though he has the impunity of a jester, as a responsible

courtier he has to maintain a limit. Strangely everyone is bound to take him seriously, which is quite unusual for a jester, and he achieves what other jesters cannot because of the important role he plays in running the empire.

The riddle is a language game that harbours an ethical challenge originating from everyday life. Presented as child's play, it is a serious meditation with hidden trapdoors of narration. There is always a design or structure in Birbal's way of doing things. "Birbaliana"—his method—is another name of the faculty that notices contradiction or manufactures one in order to solve a problem. There is a Sanskrit tradition known as *samasya purti*—solution / satisfaction of a problem—which poses a challenge to complete a verse where only one half is provided and the other half is to be fulfilled. That Birbal was a poet, this practice of making a poem must have been familiar to him and he internalizes the technique to solve the problems presented to him. His command over language is extraordinary and the linguistic playfulness often plays a vital role in this process:

One day Akbar Badshah was riding along on his open palanquin. Raja Birbar rode along in attendance at his side. And Birbar's mother's name was well known to be Kali [=black], and Akbar Badshah's esteemed mother's name was Ni`mat [=blessing]. It happened that on the road a black bitch was coupling with a dog. The king's gaze fell on her. He said to Birbar, "Look what that black bitch [or, that bitch Kali] is doing." Birbar submitted, "Refuge of the World, according to you she is Kali/black, but to that dog she is indeed a Ni`mat/blessing!"²¹

The inherent sexism of the joke is quite insidious but for the time being we can overlook this in order to look at Birbal's comic timing. Returning an equally insulting reply—the other half of the story—to the emperor Birbal makes him speechless. If the first half of the joke disturbs the balance of the situation by provocation, the second half restores it with a warning to the emperor not to transgress the limit. Interestingly, Birbal does it by crossing the same line that the Emperor crossed, thereby providing him impunity by the logic of the riddle from the possible rage of the emperor.

Does Birbal laugh?

There is an interesting Bengali proverb which says that the idiot laughs thrice: first, he laughs without knowing the point of the joke at all; second, he laughs after comprehending the joke; and third, he laughs realizing that he was a fool not to understand the joke earlier. Akbar does not laugh thrice but the entire effort of Birbal is often to make the emperor laugh an uneasy laughter, the third of its kind, at the expense of his own stupidity. Simon Critchley rightly argues that “humour recalls us to the modesty and limitedness of the human condition, a limitedness that calls not for tragic-heroic affirmation but comic *acknowledgement*, not Promethean authenticity but a laughable inauthenticity”.²² The invention of laughter at the end also works as a defence mechanism for Birbal against the wrath of the emperor. Gradually his performance becomes ritualized. There is a double bind at work in Birbal’s performance: his jokes are rites in the sense that it is reiterated again and again and understood by a particular group of people in the court (Mary Douglas’s sense of jokes as rites), and anti-rites, a liberation from the ritual in the sense that it mocks the ritualized power of the emperor (Simon Critchley’s notion of jokes as anti-rites).²³ As the audience do not understand the situation or what is going on in Birbal’s mind, it creates a tension in their mind and the affect is a guilty pleasure—a recognition of one’s own foolishness ending in tongue-in-check laughter. This is not what Kant describes as “the sudden evaporation of expectation to nothing”²⁴ but a production of something, in that case, a sudden spark of meaning foregrounding the vulnerability of the ritual or norm. Yet Birbal is not radical because his performance does not change the present power structure though it has a subversive potentiality. It is a temporary defamiliarization of the norm; just after the momentary jolt is over, everything returns to normal social consensus. Just as the comic book superhero, the messianic power of Birbal can only provide us, as Peter Berger calls “a signal of transcendence”;²⁵ he cannot provide us any permanent solution to the problems of life.

What Birbal can show us is only what Gilles Deleuze calls an “outlandish” view of life.

Simon Critchley writes:

Humour effects a breakage in the bond connecting the human being to its unreflective, everyday existence. In humour, as in anxiety, the world is made strange and unfamiliar to the touch. When I laugh or just smile, I see myself as the outlandish animal that I am, and begin to reflect on what I had previously taken for granted.”²⁶

This alternative view, not fully outside the scope of common-sense morality of his time, works as an implicit satire urging the emperor to change the way he views life and the world—a mirroring act that reveals to the emperor his own image to himself.

Birbal’s technique serves as a way to return to common sense by an inversion of the world of common sense. The humour made the emperor and the courtiers, albeit temporarily, come out of the inertia of thought and the unanticipated shock forces them to think critically about a particular problem at hand. In such an instance, a wealthy merchant requests Birbal to catch a thief who seems to be an insider to the house, most probably one of the servants. Birbal agrees to help and gives one stick to each of the servants saying that the guilty man’s stick will grow one inch within a night. The next day it is found that one of the servant’s stick is one inch short. The psychological game that Birbal plays with the thief makes him believe in something irrational. To use Critchley’s words, the “real” is rendered “surreal”²⁷ to make us smile. This solves the problem and the reality is restored at the end.

Bergson notices a “momentary anaesthesia of the heart”²⁸ in the act of laughing. Something unanticipated halts us for a moment and then an uncontrollable gesture shakes our body to its core which we call laughter. The point of realization occurs in between the pause and laughter. But does one who makes us laugh also laugh with us at the expense of his own joke? It seems that his laughter rather smile is of a different kind. Of course, he does not laugh at the upright down situation which he himself creates. He smiles a smile of fulfilment

when everything is over and the order of things is established—a Blakean laughter after the creation of the tiger.

Jeffrey T. Nealon writes: “Political truth functions not on the logic of the fact, but on the logic of the joke...you can’t outflank performative truth solely by serious appeals to the really true.”²⁹ In order to aggravate the situation Birbal even does not deter to present himself as ridiculous, which ultimately serves as a reminder of the limitedness against the fallacy of the emperor believing himself the sovereign. He cannot show himself off as a superior wit to the emperor and thereby has to play himself down. To outflank a performative mode, it needs another performative which follows the subversive logic of sense and cripples it from inside. The right wing intolerance of the jokes is an example of its power in alluding to something alternative to the present:

Serious people in tweed coats or lab coats, arguing in scholarly journals or on news programs, won’t get the whole job done; and it’s clear that a right-wing strongman like Trump fears, above all else, laughter at his expense. So if theory really does want to engage the world, it had better learn to tell some good jokes. Taking a hand in the game of power requires performative engagement, not solely insistence on the unforced force of the constative “truth.”³⁰

The joke manipulates what Jeffrey T. Nealon calls the “plastic space” between saying and meaning.³¹ The illocutionary force of the utterance creates a situation compelling the audience to think and its perlocutionary effect traps the audience to accept their ignorance by laughter.

Of Friendship

If friendship is *homonoia*—a recognition of oneself in the face of the other—as it is to Aristotle, it is difficult to plant a seed of friendship between the emperor and his subject. Moreover Daud Ali and Emma J. Flatt opine that “it was a common complaint in colonial narratives that Indians failed to comprehend a distinction between patronage and friendship.”³² The question of equality does not arise as no emperor would like to see himself

in the face of the other, rather he might recognize someone as a friend, who, among the crowd of sycophants, can entertain, converse, and sometimes show him his own image—his greatness and occasionally his folly albeit not without the danger of being decapitated causing the emperor's displeasure. The politics of the empire makes Akbar befriend many kings and princes formally but Birbal is the person whom the emperor trusts fully—he becomes his confidante.

If *filia* or friendliness is “a virtue that holds the middle between the vices of obsequiousness and flattery,” Birbal finely maintains the balance without losing his dignity despite the “strangeness” and “infinite distance”³³ he has with the emperor. They perfectly fit in Derrida's “asymmetrical and heteronomical curvature of the social space”, which is “a relation that confounds and disrupts human autonomy and social reciprocity.”³⁴ The radical otherness of Birbal—social, intellectual, religious, authorial—brings in an outsider's view inside the court. The friendship here arises out of the responsibility towards the other by a suspension of rivalry and an acceptance of each other's greatness without any question. Even if there is any rivalry, it is a battle of wit where the emperor stays at the receiving end as an inferior intelligence, an acceptance of which makes him a better ruler if not a better human. The jokes play a performative role of a prayer by producing an experience—“of waiting, of promise, or of commitment”³⁵—that opens up a possibility for the future.

Being the emperor's favourite also harbours a risk because it often leads to unhealthy rivalry where someone can become an object either of respect and fear or of derision to the other courtiers. These oppositional feelings of respect and disgust can be noticed in the writings of the court historians of Akbar: “Abul Fazl and Abdul Qadir Badayuni were diametrically opposed contemporaries; the former described Birbal in respectful terms, the latter called him a 'bastard'.”³⁶ Abraham Eraly describes the courtly culture of winning the

emperor's heart in the Mughal court where even a poet who was not necessarily a warrior could be assigned to command an army:

To rise in service was to rise in the emperor's favour. Artful sycophants thrived in this environment. Though the Mughal emperors were generally clear-eyed enough to see through the fog of adulation that enveloped the court, and pick out true talent...still, to get ahead in imperial service it was necessary for an officer, however talented he might be, also to have the talent to win and hold the emperor's favour. On the whole, those who did well at the Mughal court were ambidextrous men, who could please the emperor as well as perform well in office. Thus, Todar Mal, who was both competent and courtly, flourished, while Shah Mansur, who did not have courtly graces though he was brilliant as finance minister, lost his life.³⁷

Adaptability, presence of mind, the ability to manipulate the emperor's mood, and overall, an unquestionable devotion—Birbal had everything that the Mughal emperors praised. More than anything else, the emperor sensed no fear from him. He was not a threat to the throne—one without any desire to be the sovereign. There is no wonder that it is often said that he belongs to a group of three people, along with the musician Tansen and the poet Faizi, who had never been punished by the emperor. Not having any risk of losing his throne or life to him, Akbar opened himself to Birbal. They seem to be inseparable where one cannot survive without the other. Akbar was so affectionate that he built a stone palace only for Birbal at Fatehpur Sikri so that they could stay close to each other and he left the place forever after his death.

There is historical record of an incident where Akbar takes the risk of his own life to save his friend revealing the depth and intensity of friendship between two people who are unequal in terms of age, wealth, and power:

An incident in 1583 in Fatehpur Sikri was further demonstration of the close bond between Akbar and Raja Birbal. During an elephant fight organized in the grounds of Akbar's court, one of the elephants, 'unique for violence', suddenly rushed towards Birbal, and seized him with his trunk. Akbar turned his horse around and galloped towards the elephant, charging at him, while all around him his soldiers and

courtiers shouted out in alarm. The elephant then turned towards Akbar but, inexplicably, faltered, and Birbal was saved.³⁸

There are three kinds of friendships for Aristotle—of utility, of pleasure, and of virtue. For Akbar, his friendship with Birbal provides all—utility (to govern the empire), security (to trust in internal affairs of the empire), and pleasure (witty company loaded with anecdotes, jokes, and fun). The third parameter which indicates towards the ‘uselessness’ or virtue of friendship where one is ready to sacrifice one’s life for a friend seems to be the most important to Akbar. There is something beyond the usual parameters that instigates the emperor to rely on this man with an eye towards the future.

In his obituary of Jean-Marie Benoist, Derrida ponders over the intricate relationship between friendship and mourning. The friends know in advance that one of them will have to depart before the other:

To have a friend, to look at him, to follow him with your eyes, to admire him in friendship, is to know in a more intense way, already injured, always insistent, and more and more unforgettable, that one of the two of you will inevitably see the other die. ...and so will carry the other within him a while longer, his eyes following without seeing, the world suspended by some unique tear, each time unique, through which everything from then on, through which the world itself—and this day will come—will come to be reflected quivering, reflecting disappearance itself: the world, the whole world, the world itself, for death takes from us not only some particular life within the world, some moment that belongs to us, but, each time, without limit, someone through whom the world, and first of all our own world, will have opened up in a both finite and infinite—mortally infinite—way.³⁹

The audacity of Birbal’s thought with its ironic bent of humour, fearlessness, and love of intellectual freedom leave such a permanent mark on Akbar’s memory that only death can impart. The mourning cannot be fully focussed towards the friend who is now deceased but an interiorized idea of the friend within the self. Losing a friend always arrives, Derrida suggests, with remorse as well as a feeling of guilt. Remorse, for he will never be able to have his eloquent presence in the court, guilt, for he could have saved his friend’s life by

deciding not to send him in a war. In losing Birbal Akbar loses a part of himself; in sending him to a battle he authorizes the death of the friend as other and the friend within the self.

Derrida's insistence on the visual nature of friendship is breached violently in Birbal's death. When Birbal died in a war with the Pashtun Yusufzais in 1586, his body could not be found and he did not have a proper cremation in a Hindu way. When the emperor heard the news of Birbal's death, he closed himself indoors, did not talk to anyone, and did not eat anything for two days. So much so that the emperor left Fatehpur Sikri forever in 1585, one possible reason of his departure might be the death of his friend. This public performance of mourning reveals the affective impact of losing a shared life in friendship. The emperor performs his duty as a friend and it also is a burden that he cannot discard. In one of *dohas* Akbar writes:

Deen dekhi sab din, ek na dinho dusah dukh

So ab ham kan din, kachhahun nahin rakhio Birbal

(He saw the poor and gave them all, but never distributed sorrows

Now that he has given even [sorrow] to me, Birbal has kept nothing for himself)⁴⁰

That Birbal keeps nothing for himself is both literal and metaphorical—he loses everything he has in death including his corporeal body which could not be found, and he sacrifices the most precious thing, his life itself for the emperor. The gift of death is that it produces an individuating effect which is irreplaceable and the emperor has to mourn for this loss forever. Another *doha* popularly attributed to Akbar, reveals the nature of the bereavement of the emperor at Birbal's demise:

Pithala so majlis gai, Tansen so rag

Hasibo ramibo bolibo, gayo Birabara satha.

(Social life disappeared with Pithala; music disappeared with Tansen

And laughter, repartee and conversation with Birbal)⁴¹

In a letter to Abdur Rahim after Birbal's death Akbar writes: "The world is like a mirage to beguile thirsty souls... at the end of this frenzy is simply a mist—a fume."⁴² "No one owns a

tree”⁴³—Birbal teaches the emperor when he indulges himself with the vanity of owning the material world. Whenever the Muslim emperor becomes arrogant or exhibits pride in his material possessions, it is the Hindu Birbal who brings him back to the path of virtue. The death makes him realize the intense existential agony and despair in a finite world. Birbal is a tragic superhero who does not die in a battle of wit, but in an actual war, an action where one often faces situation at the wit’s end.

On Parrhesia

Parrhesia or truth-telling, however unpleasant it is on the face of the authority, is an ancient Greek practice. The person who is ready to accept the danger of this act is called in Greek a *parrhesiastes*:

Parrhesia is a form of criticism, either towards another or towards oneself, but always in a situation where the speaker or confessor is in a position of inferiority with respect to the interlocutor...The *parrhesia* comes from “below,” as it were, and is directed towards “above”.⁴⁴

There is a difference between *parrhesia* or free-speech and rhetorical speech in the sense that whereas the rhetorician uses different devices in order to persuade his audience, the *parrhesiastes* catches the audience unaware and throws the bare truth on face. He does not persuade but provides a shock with a sudden revelation. The ‘parrhesiastic game’ requires courage because it involves a kind of sincerity towards the truth without thinking about the consequences of going against the power—the emperor or the majority. Beatrice K. Otto calls it the “death-defying wit”⁴⁵ of the court-jester because it often reminds a not so democratic tyrant his foolishness, shortcoming, or his duties with the risk of being beheaded. Shulman rightly says: “The danger is, nevertheless, entirely real, an essential component of the jester’s experience, while his triumph over it is no simple victory but more of a continuous, dialectical battle between fear and wit.”⁴⁶

As a respectable courtier, Birbal’s technique is not one of buffoonery; he does not only talk but dramatize. The ability to think otherwise provides Birbal a relative autonomy, a

tongue-in-check freedom of speech from courtly convention and normativity and he injects subversion with delight. The power of suggestiveness is so powerful that the emperor cannot deny in public even if he wants to deny something:

Akbar, his son Prince Salim and Birbal went hunting. When the day warmed up, Akbar and Salim took off their heavy coats and gave them to Birbal to carry. Then Akbar said to Birbal in jest. 'It looks like as ass's load.' Birbal replied, 'No, your majesty, more likely of two asses.'⁴⁷

A little boy in Nirendranath Chakraborty's poem "Ulanga Raja" ["The Naked King"] dares to ask the king, who believes that he is wearing very fine cloths when he is wearing nothing, a simple question: "O king! Where are your clothes?"⁴⁸ Only Birbal has the ability to speak to the emperor in this way and the laughter produced as an effect is a superheroic laughter. Shulman rightly says that "the jester is always only one step away from the abyss. A major part of his appeal lies in his insouciance in the face of terror."⁴⁹ Birbal plays a vital role in curbing the immense power of the emperor by reminding him his duty and limitations. He just hints at the emperor's mistake, often coughs politely to disagree and argues in a very subtle way which provokes the emperor to think:

Once Akbar and Birbal were enjoying a boat ride on the Jamuna when a string of pearls fell into the river from the emperor's hand. Akbar said to Birbal. 'Birbal, *mala de*', i.e., 'Get me the string of pearls', which could also be heard as, 'ma la de', 'Get me your mother'. Birbal promptly replied, 'Refuge of the world, *bahnedo*,' i.e., 'Let it flow away', which could also be interpreted as, 'bahne do', i.e., 'give me your sisters.' The emperor fell silent.⁵⁰

One remarkable thing about Birbal is that he beats nonsense with nonsense and has this remarkable capacity to transgress the line in order to bring the emperor back in limit.

In "monarchic *parrhesia*", the threat comes from displeasing the emperor, yet the *parrhesiastes* speaks the truth because he thinks that it is his duty to speak the truth. Birbal can easily play the role of a yes man at the cost of his own self-respect, but it is his moral duty to stop the abuse of power. He makes *parrhesia* the 'art of his life' with a slight technical imperfection because he creates an affect by using many rhetorical and storytelling

devices instead of speaking the truth on the face of the emperor—a cautious move yet less foolish, more effective, and desirable than his ideal counterpart.

The jokes have a remarkable capacity to expose the fallibility and transitoriness of any accepted form or pattern. Critchley writes: “By laughing at power, we expose its contingency, we realize that what appeared to be fixed and oppressive is in fact the emperor’s new clothes, and just the sort of thing that should be mocked and ridiculed.”⁵¹ To say that the emperor can also speak nonsense and be stupid is a challenge to the symbolic power of the emperor as a sovereign ruler. However telling the truth on face of power without any protective measure is foolish and Birbal’s addition of humour in *parrhesia* gives him a relative autonomy. Birbal is a bureaucrat who has eaten ‘salt’ from the emperor and so he cannot be as radical as to turn the power structure on its head. He’s happy to hint at things which are unwelcome and how the existing structure can be made better. There is no malignancy but a generous critique of the empire, its emperor, the society and its politics of which he himself is an integral part. Critchley writes:

A real comedian – that’s a daring man. He dares to see what his listeners shy away from, fear to express. And what he sees is a sort of truth about people, about their situation, about what hurts or terrifies them, about what’s hard, above all, about what they want. A joke releases the tension, says the unsayable, any joke pretty well. But a true joke, a comedian’s joke, has to do more than release tension, it has to liberate the will and the desire, it has to change the situation.⁵²

Counterperformativity

Intimacy with the emperor breeds jealousy. The rivals want to see one fail from favour. There are challenges which Birbal has to face from within the court both from the other courtiers and the emperor himself. They are not always ready to accept his superiority—moral or intellectual—and try to beat him in his own game. In the slippery space of the Mughal court one can suddenly fall out favour without even understanding what has gone wrong. Abul Fazl writes about an incident where he becomes a victim of Salim’s plot but eventually it was the

emperor himself who realises everything and tells him not be worried.⁵³ At times, it is the emperor himself who tries to establish his own sovereignty in all respect:

In great many other stories, the Indian kings seem to go out of their way to pose irrational questions to their jesters or set them impossible tasks. They seem to hide secret doubts about the total superiority they overtly claim, and need a final victory over the jester to reach the perfection they desire.⁵⁴

In one of these stories, Akbar wants to know the exact number of crows in Agra from his courtiers. As no one knows the right answer, it creates a pin-drop silence in the court. It is Birbal's turn now and he promptly replies with an exact number. The other courtiers protest. They ask what if the number is more or less. Birbal ingeniously replies if the number is more it means that some crows have come to see their friends in Agra and if the number is less then it means that some have gone to other places to see their friends. However every story does not necessarily reveal a mere battle of wit producing happy, if not innocent, laughter. Often Birbal has to avoid dangerous death-traps set by his colleagues:

A few jealous courtiers wanted him to die. They made a plan. They used the royal barber who had close access to the emperor. While shaving, the barber told the emperor that he knew a holy man who could send people to heaven and bring them back. The barber also added that the emperor could send one of his trusted courtiers if he wanted to know how the emperor's departed relatives were doing in heaven. And who was more trusted other than Birbal? When the emperor requested him to be his emissary in heaven, Birbal bought some time from the emperor for preparation. He secretly appointed people to build a long underground tunnel from the place where he would be burned alive. When the pyre was lighted, Birbal easily escaped and returned after a few months with dishevelled hair and long beards. The emperor was eager to know how his father was doing in heaven and Birbal informed him that he was fine in heaven except one thing—there were no barbers in heaven and so his father had requested him to send the royal barber as soon as possible.

In their essay "Counterperformativity," Alice Bamford and Donald Mackenzie elaborate on the idea of "deliberate counterperformativity": "the use of a model with the conscious goal of creating a world radically at odds with the world postulated by the model."⁵⁵ There is also an oppositional set of stories in which Birbal is presented as a loser in

a Battle of wit with Mulla Do-Piyaza—probably a fictional figure and a guardian of orthodox Islam. Do-Piyaza uses the same technique on Birbal that he uses to outwit his adversaries. Reminiscing Freud’s theory of jokes, Naim finds a suppressed religious tension in these folktales:

One day a learned brahmin told the emperor that it was an excellent omen to see two crows together at dawn. Birbal, who was present, also- confirmed it. The Mulla, however, whispered in Akbar's ear, 'Your majesty ought to test it'. Akbar ordered Birbal to let him know immediately if any morning he saw two crows together. One morning, Birbal rushed in- and woke the emperor. Akbar was quite peeved, for it was a cold winter morning, but he followed him outside, only to find one lonely crow - the other had flown away. Losing his temper, he gave Birbal a few slaps. Later that day, a Rajput princess was presented to the emperor in marriage. Then the Mulla stepped forward with folded hands and said, 'Your majesty, if you had seen those two crows you wouldn't have received this gift, for we know what he received who saw them.' Birbal was utterly shamed.⁵⁶

Truth, Justice and the Birbal Way

Arendt provides us a critique of the concept of the genius as a Renaissance phenomenon. The idea of the genius for her puts more emphasis on the person rather than the craft and the creation. The genius becomes a reified producer promoted in a way as if he has full control over the process of his own formation—one who he is.⁵⁷ The court is a serious place for serious people where no frivolity is allowed in front of the emperor. The courtiers have to be cautious lest they displease the emperor and get punished. They are often expected to play the role of lampposts saying yes to whatever the emperor says. The comic imagination of Birbal has the capacity to solve complex political, ethical and whimsical questions in an effortless and witty way. This is something different—a liquid yet effective response to life which he learns through experiences. Not only the solution but the way he reaches to it or the craft is something which makes him popular. Only one person dares to break the normative rules of the court and make a fool of the emperor himself.

David Dean Shulman rightly observes that the importance of the court jester lies “in the imaginative working out of a reflective perspective that profoundly alters the normative attributes of the king”.⁵⁸ Birbal is different because he is not only a jester but a warrior. He is a poet and a statesman with a personality that causes laughter but does not allow others to disrespect him as a buffoon as the other court jesters like Gopal Bhar and Tenali Rama. The liquidity of his ludic style helps Birbal in two ways: it allows him to take a momentary control over the emperor through a “symbolic violation of the norm” and pacify any possibility of his anger with laughter. There is no aim to criticize and transform radically rather his purpose is to make the emperor think in a different way, a corrective method which is difficult to achieve in any other serious mode. It works as an eye opener for the emperor about his human limitations. Powerful as he may claim to be but he is not omnipotent; there are grey areas outside his control and authority.

Abul Fazl, the historian of the court, writes about Akbar’s excellent ability to judge and pronounce verdict to the guilty. Instead of blindly adhering to the yardstick of evidence and objectivity, he follows his own instinct to find out loopholes or inconsistencies in the presented narrative and solves it in his own dramatic way. The demonstrative approach of Birbal to establish justice is effective because rather than using brute force and pronouncing verdict upon the guilty, it creates a creative ambience for justice where everyone is amused to realize the source of the trouble. Small things that escape the notice of others—an oily bag obviously belongs to an oil merchant and an old woman who cannot see well cannot stitch in a professional way—become his chief weapon to understand a case:

There was an old man who left his lifelong savings to his neighbour before going to a long pilgrimage. When he returned, the neighbour totally denied it leaving the old man no choice but to appeal to the court. When Akbar ordered Birbal to solve the puzzle, he asked the old man if there were any witness for him. There were none. The old man told him that the exchange occurred under a mango tree. Birbal advised the old man to go to the tree and request it to come to the court. The bewildered old man left

for the place but even after one hour did not show any sign of return. The court became impatient but Birbal tried to appease them saying that the old man would return soon. Hearing this, the impatient neighbour suddenly said that it would not be possible for the old man to come back for several hours because the mango tree was far away.

There are simple traps to play with the psychology of the guilty person. The neighbour feels secure (the tree cannot bear witness), and waiting for long, becomes irritated losing his patience. He might even have started thinking about the sanity of Birbal as a judge. Yet this unusual and even useless (to others) order from Birbal plays the trick. Totally unaware of the implication of what he is saying, the neighbour reveals everything. In these stories, the matter is often of trust which has been broken by people who seem to be honest and trustworthy—a neighbour, a Brahmin or a servant—and Birbal has to restore the balance of the existing structure of loyalty by unveiling the rule breaker.

Often whimsical and moody, the Mughal emperor orders Birbal to find out five greatest fools in Agra. In spite of trying his best Birbal manages to get only three—a woodcutter who sits on its back but carries the load on his own head out of concern for his old donkey; a husband who slips and falls on the ground but fails to get up because he is not willing to change the position of his hands indicating the measurement of cloth he needs to buy for his wife; and a merchant who searches for his diamond ring in a place far away from where it is lost because that particular place is dark. When Akbar asks him about the rest of the two fools, he easily designates himself as the fourth one because he wasted a whole day on such a foolish mission. Till now it is a funny story with little food for thought. What Birbal starts after that is an elaborate gesture to demonstrate his infallible devotion to the emperor:

At this Birbal prostrated himself flat on the floor, and placed the emperor's feet upon his head. Then he kissed the royal feet and stood up.

'May the sun and the moon revolve around you! May you live for a thousand years! May the world sing your praises for another ten thousand years! But if Your Majesty will forgive this worthless

servant's impertinence—may I dare to humbly suggest, that the fifth fool is *you* for having sent me on such a foolish mission.'

Akbar laughed... 'This is why I love you, Birbal. You can make me laugh and forget for a moment how important I am!'⁵⁹

Despite being a common man, Birbal never fails to bring the emperor back on earth from his ivory tower existence. Shulman writes: "Yet he [the court-jester] always has the upper hand with his royal patron, who, at least in the popular perception, relies upon the jester to maintain his precarious relation to reality and to truth."⁶⁰

Rabelais' defines the court-jester in the following way: "Irreverent, libertine, self-indulgent, witty, clever, roguish, he is the fool as court jester, the fool as champion, the fool as good to the wise and challenge to the virtuous, the fool as critic of the world."⁶¹ This is only a half-truth about Birbal. He is ever respectful and though witty and clever, he is never self-indulgent and roguish. The virtue of his critique is "not a judgement, but a practice"⁶² and questions the "uncritical habits of mind" not with anger but humour and activates a hope that it will modify if not bring change into the world. Birbal expands and stylizes the practice of his critique which eventually constitutes his identity—the superhero. Critchley rightly argues that humour as a critique not only marks the aberrations from the normativity of social life by bringing in the 'unthought,' but also indicates a future possibility of change:

I want to claim that humour also indicates, or may be just adumbrates, how these practices might be transformed or perfected, how things might be otherwise. That is, humour might be said to project another possible *sensus communis*, namely a *dissensus communis* distinct from the dominant common sense. In laughing at a joke I am also consenting to a certain ideal image of the world. In this sense,... laughter has a certain messianic power.⁶³

Endnotes:

¹ Rabindranath Tagore, “Bidushak,” in *Rabindra Rachanabali [The Collected Works of Rabindranath Tagore]*, vol. 9 (Calcutta: West Bengal Government, 1988), 634. Translation mine.

² Paul A. Kottman, “Translator’ Introduction,” in *Relating Narratives: Storytelling and Selfhood* (London and New York, Routledge: 2000), x.

³³ Adriana Cavarero, *Relating Narratives: Storytelling and Selfhood* (London and New York: Routledge, 2000), 1.

⁴ C. M. Naim, “Popular Jokes and Political History: The Case of Akbar, Birbal and Mulla Do-Piyaza,” in *Cultural History of Medieval India*, ed. Meenakshi Khanna (New Delhi: Social Sciences Press, 2007), 29.

⁵ Naim, “Popular Jokes,” 31. Naim also mentions the Eighteenth century biographical dictionary of the nobles at Mughal court *Ma’athir al-Umara* as the first text to mention Birbal as a famous wit.

⁶ Cavarero, *Relating Narratives*, 19.

⁷ Naim, “Popular Jokes,” 29-30.

⁸ Kottman, “Translator’ Introduction,” vii-viii.

⁹ Kottman, “Translator’ Introduction,” xxii

¹⁰ Bharata-Muni, *The Nāṭyaśāstra: A treatise on Hindu Dramaturgy and Histrionics*, trans. Manomohan Ghosh, vol. 2 (Calcutta: The Asiatic Society, 1961), 224.

¹¹ Bharata-Muni, *The Nāṭyaśāstra*, 226

¹² David Dean Shulman, “A Kingdom of clowns: Brahmins, Jesters, and Magicians,” in *Cultural History of Medieval India*, ed. Meenakshi Khanna (New Delhi: Social Sciences Press, 2007), 4.

¹³ Meenakshi Khanna, “Introduction,” in *Cultural History of Medieval India* ed. Meenakshi Khanna (New Delhi: Social Sciences Press, 2007), xiv.

¹⁴ Kottman, “Translator’ Introduction,” ix-x.

¹⁵ Sudraka, *The Mrichchhakatika of Sudraka*, trans. M. r. Kale (Delhi: Motilal Banarasidass Publishers, 2015), 67.

¹⁶ This is my own version of the Birbal story shorn off of the page-filling tendency in most of the retellings of the Birbal tales. This has been maintained throughout except stated otherwise.

¹⁷ Shulman, “A Kingdom of clowns,” 6.

¹⁸ Historically, on 11th March 1582, Birbal requested the emperor to appoint trustworthy people in his service so that the wronged people can reach him with complaints without any trouble and in 1583 the emperor appointed Birbal as the overseer of the Department of Administration. See, Amrita Sarin, *Akbar and Birbal* (New Delhi: Puffin, 2005), 19.

¹⁹ Shulman, "A Kingdom of clowns," 15

²⁰ Shulman, "A Kingdom of clowns," 17

²¹ Frances W. Pritchett, "Unpublished translations by FWP from several Akbar-Birbal joke books,"

http://www.columbia.edu/itc/mealac/pritchett/00litlinks/txt_akbar_birbal_fwp.html

²² Simon Critchley, *On Humour* (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), 102.

²³ Critchley, *On Humour*, 5.

²⁴ Critchley, *On Humour*, 5.

²⁵ Critchley, *On Humour*, 17.

²⁶ Critchley, *On Humour*, 41.

²⁷ Critchley, *On Humour*, 10

²⁸ Critchley, *On Humour*, 87.

²⁹ Jeffrey T. Nealon. "Jokes and the Performative in Austin and Derrida; or, the Truth is a Joke?,"

Cultural Critique 95 (2017): 19.

³⁰ Nealon, "Jokes and the Performative," 20.

³¹ Nealon, "Jokes and the Performative," 8.

³² Daud Ali and Emma J. Flatt, "Friendship in Indian History: Introduction," *Studies in History* 33, no. 1 (2017):

3.

³³ Fred Dallmayr, "Derrida and Friendship," *Critical Review of International Social and Political Philosophy* 2, no. 4 (1999): 108, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13698239908403293>.

³⁴ Dallmayr, "Derrida and Friendship," 108-09.

³⁵ Dallmayr, "Derrida and Friendship," 110.

³⁶ See, Ira Mukhoty, *Akbar: The Great Mughal* (New Delhi: Aleph, 2000), 309. Badauni writes: "By means of conversing with the Emperor and taking advantage of the idiosyncrasies of his disposition, [Birbal] crept day by day more into favour, until he attained to high rank and was honoured with the distinction of becoming the Emperor's confidant and it became a case of thy flesh is my flesh and thy blood my blood."

³⁷ Abraham Eraly, *The Mughal World: Life in India's Last Golden Age* (New Delhi: Penguin, 2007), 240-41.

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- ³⁸ Mukhoty, *Akbar*, 310.
- ³⁹ Jacques Derrida, “Jean-Marie Benoist (1942-90),” in *The Work of Mourning*, ed. Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas (Chicago and London: Chicago University Press, 2001), 107.
- ⁴⁰ Mukhoty, *Akbar*, 314.
- ⁴¹ Moti Chandra, “Who really was Miyan Tansen, the singer who could ‘start a fire with his music’?”, *Scroll.in*, Oct 8, 2017, <https://scroll.in/magazine/853181/who-really-was-miyan-tansen-the-singer-could-start-a-fire-with-his-music>
- ⁴² Mukhoty, *Akbar*, 314.
- ⁴³ Sarin, “The Golden Touch,” in *Akbar and Birbal* (New Delhi: Puffin, 2005), 47.
- ⁴⁴ Michel Foucault, *Fearless Speech*, ed. Joseph Pearson (Los Angeles: Semiotext (e), 2001), 17-18.
- ⁴⁵ Beatrice K. Otto, *Fools are everywhere: The Court Jester around the World* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press), xvi.
- ⁴⁶ Shulman, “A Kingdom of clowns,” 6.
- ⁴⁷ Naim, “Popular Jokes,” 26.
- ⁴⁸ Nirendranath Chakraborty, “Ulongo Raja” [“The Naked King”], in *Kobita Samagra [The Collected Poems]*, vol. 1 (Kolkata: Ananda, 2015), 14.
- ⁴⁹ Shulman, “A Kingdom of clowns,” 6.
- ⁵⁰ Naim, “Popular Jokes,” 26.
- ⁵¹ Critchley, *On Humour*, 11.
- ⁵² Critchley, *On Humour*, 9-10.
- ⁵³ Eraly, *The Mughal World*, 242.
- ⁵⁴ Naim, “Popular Jokes,” 35
- ⁵⁵ Alice Bamford and Donald Mackenzie, “Counterperformativity”, *New Left Review* 113 (2018): 100.
- ⁵⁶ Naim, “Popular Jokes,” 28
- ⁵⁷ Julia Kristeva, *Hannah Arendt: Life is a Narrative*, trans. Frank Collins (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2001), 47
- ⁵⁸ Shulman, “A Kingdom of clowns,” 5.
- ⁵⁹ Amrita Sarin, “The Five Greatest Fools in Agra,” in *Akbar and Birbal* (New Delhi: Puffin, 2005), 82-83.
- ⁶⁰ Shulman, “A Kingdom of clowns,” 16.
- ⁶¹ Otto, *Fools are everywhere*, 6.

⁶² Judith Butler, “What is Critique? An Essay on Foucault’s Virtue,” *kritik* (May 2001),

<https://transversal.at/transversal/0806/butler/en>

⁶³ Critchley, *On Humour*, 90.