THE TALKING ANIMALS

and Other Stories

A book by
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Dedication

This book is lovingly and respectfully dedicated to my grandfather Late Shri M.P. Thard.

He was a man of strong principles and unwavering discipline. To many, he appeared strict and firm, someone who believed in doing the right thing, no matter how difficult it might be. His words carried weight, and his expectations were high, but every lesson he taught was rooted in a desire to shape us into better human beings.

As a child, I often saw his strictness before I could fully understand it. But as I grow older, I began to see the warmth that lay beneath that firm exterior the quiet care in his action, the concern hidden behind his guidance, and the love that did not always need words to be felt.

He was a caring and protective grandfather who wanted nothing, but the best for his family.

I Siddharth Tharad, offer this book as a humble tribute to his memory with love, gratitude, and deep respect. His teaching will forever remain a guiding light in my journey.

Forever remembered, Forever Cherished.

Acknowledgement

With immense joy and gratitude, I present this little collection of stories for young readers. This journey of writing this book has been both exciting and deeply fulfilling.

I would like to express my heartfelt thanks to my family, whose constant encouragement and support gave me the confidence to turn my imagination into words. Their belief in me made this dream possible. I am also grateful to my friends and well-wishers who inspired me to take the first step towards writing.

A special thanks goes to all the children whose curiosity, and love for stories have been my greatest inspiration. Their laughter and wonder are what these stories truly belong to.

Introduction

Since ancient times, stories have been a part of our lives, stories told by our grandparents under the shade of a tree, stories whispered at bedtime, and stories that stay in our hearts forever. These stories not entertain us but also teach us how to live with wisdom, kindness and courage.

In this book, The Talking Animals, you will find a collection of five such delightful tales. Here animals speak with intelligence, kings rule with thought and responsibility, and fairies bring magic into the lives of those they meet. Each story takes you to a different world- sometimes into deep forests, sometimes into grand kingdoms, and sometimes into places filled with wonder and magic, Like the tales of old, these stories carry simple yet powerful lessons. Through clever animals, wise kings, wise kings, and you, magical beings, you will learn about honesty, friendship, bravery, and importance of making the right choices. So, sit back, turn the pages, and let these stories, guide and entertain you, just as the timeless tales of your land have done for generations.

May these stories bring you fun and wisdom. Lastly, I Siddharth Tharad feel proud and humbled to share my book with you. I hope these stories bring smiles, lessons, and a touch of magic Into the lives of young readers.

Thank you for being part of this journey.

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Mannu and the Hidden Fairy

A young girl Mannu, aged ten, lived in the nondescript town of Soham in Himachal Pradesh. She was only eight when she lost her father. He was a brave firefighter who lost his life while saving people trapped in a building.

Mannu was very proud of her father and felt honored to be his daughter. Not a day passed when she didn't miss him. Her mother was barely able to make the ends meet. Often Mannu would wake up in the middle of the night and begin sobbing, as she remembered her father. She knew very well that seeing her in tears would break her mother's heart. So, she used to go outside the house and spend hours talking to herself. She was not afraid of the darkness outside. All that mattered to her was her father's absence in her life.

Once her mother, woke up in the night and, not finding Mannu in the bed, began searching for her frantically. She called out to her many times, but there was no response. She went outside only to find her daughter sitting alone in a somber mood.

Mannu was staring into the darkness, lost in her thoughts about her father. Tears silently rolled down her cheeks. Her mother rushed to her and held her tightly, understanding the pain her little heart was carrying.

"What is the matter, my dear child?" she said to Mannu.

"Nothing, Maa," Mannu said and went inside the house with her mother.

Though Mannu did not say anything to her mother, she knew what Mannu was going through. She was worried about Mannu and prayed to God to bring her peace.

One day, a young fairy descended from her fairyland to Mannu's quite little town of Soham. It was her visit to the human world, and her heart fluttered with excitement.

Fairies were allowed to leave their fairyland only after taking permission from Mother Fairy, but strict rules have to be followed. First, they had to remain invisible to humans, no matter how curious they felt. Second, they had to return to fairyland before the first ray of dawn touched the sky.

If any fairy broke even one of the rules, all her fairy powers were taken away

The young fairy Sona was very happy to travel on her own for the first time. She had always wanted to go alone, but according to the Fairyland rules, a fairy was allowed to go alone only if she was eighteen years old.

Sona was a very kind- hearted and compassionate fairy, and her calming demeanor and charming personality made her everyone's favorite in the fairyland.

The first time Sona saw Mannu, she wanted to go to her and ask her the reason for her sorrow, but she was not allowed to reveal her identity to anyone. She then went to other places and returned to the Fairyland before dawn.

This went on for a few days. But one day, the fairy Sona could not resist and went to Mannu.

"Hi! What's your name and why are staring at the sky?"

Mannu was surprised to find a beautiful fairy standing in front of her.

"Who are you and where are you from?" said Mannu.

The radiance on the fairy's face was enough to suggest that she was no ordinary person. Even on the moonless night the glow on her face illuminated the surroundings.

"I am a fairy and my name is Sona," said the fairy.

Mannu was very happy to see a fairy in front of her. Her mother had told her many fairy tales, but she had never imagined that one day she would actually get to meet one.

Mannu instantly took a liking to her and told her about her father's heroism.

"Your father was a brave man and so should you be," said the fairy.

Mannu felt comforted by such kind words.

This became a daily affair. Every day at midnight, the fairy would come to meet Mannu, and Mannu would also look forward to meeting the fairy.

By then, the fairy had understood that it was very hard for Mannu's mother to make both ends meet.



The next time fairy came to meet Mannu, she brought a glass bowl with her. She put one grain of wheat into the bowl and rotated her stick over it. She then asked Mannu to take it and give it to her mother.

“What have you done, dear fairy?” said Mannu

“You will get to know soon,” said the fairy and she left.

In the morning, when Mannu went to the kitchen, she was surprised to find the bowl full of wheat grains. She immediately ran to her mother and narrated the whole incident to her. Her mother initially did not believe her, but when she took a handful of grains from the bowl, she was stunned to see that the bowl was still full. Her mother exclaimed with joy. After a long time there was happiness in the house.

The next time Mannu met Sona, Mannu’s mother was also with her. She profusely thanked the fairy. The fairy smiled at Mannu and placed her hand on Mannu’s head. Instantly, Mannu’s simple clothes turned into a beautiful attire. She then, for the first time, went inside Mannu’s home. Seeing the house in such a dilapidated state, the fairy was heartbroken. She then waved her wand, and voila the walls of the house were now shining with beautiful colours.

The fairy then said to Mannu’s mother, “What do you do for a living?”

“I sew clothes,” said Mannu’s mother

“Wonderful!” exclaimed the fairy. “From now on, you will sew my clothes and I shall pay you for that.”

“I shall forever be grateful to you.” said Mannu’s mother.

Mannu’s mother then stitched a new dress for the fairy, which she really liked. The fairy was very happy to see her new dress. She gave Mannu’s mother a gold coin for her service.

“I can’t take this gold coin. My stitching is not worth this much.” said the mother but the fairy was adamant that she take the coin.

From then on, for every dress that Mannu’s mother stitched for the fairy, she received a gold coin. Soon, their lifestyle changed, and they had everything one needs for a comfortable and easy life.

One night, when the fairy came to see Mannu, Mannu said to her, “Dear fairy, how can I visit your fairyland for I want to see how you all live there.”

The fairy then asked Mannu to get a wooden stick. She then shaped the wooden stick according to her specifications and cast a spell on it.

“Here you go. Take the wand and you just have to say, ‘Oh my stick! Take me to the fairy wherever she is.’ The stick will bring you to me wherever I am. But remember you have to say the exact words to make this stick work.

Mannu was very happy to receive the stick and told the fairy that she will soon visit the fairyland with her mother.

Mannu kept the stick safely in her almirah and went to sleep.

One of Mannu’s neighbours, Maya was very curious to find the reason behind the changes in Mannu’s fortune. So, one day she called Mannu to her house and offered her lots of chocolates and cookies.

“Mannu, can I ask you one thing?” said the neighbour.

“Yes aunty.” said Mannu

“Mannu, for the past few weeks I have noticed that you and your mother look very happy. You have been wearing new clothes every few days. What is the secret dear?” said the neighbour.

Mannu understood that her neighbour, Maya aunty, wanted to know reason of their new found fortune and that is why she had offered her chocolates and cookies

Mannu was too clever to fall into the trap. She told Maya aunty that her mother's sewing business was doing well and that was the reason they are now better off.

Mannu went back to her home, but Maya was not convinced. She realized that Mannu had lied to her.

The next day, when Mannu was at school, Maya went to Mannu's house. She was astonished by what she saw. The house which had been in a dilapidated condition just a few months earlier, was now shining brightly. The cracked walls were gone, replaced by smooth, beautifully painted surfaces. Every window was adorned with new colourful curtains that fluttered gently in the breeze.

Maya stood there in disbelief. The small broken house she remembered had been transformed into a warm and beautiful home. It was clear to her

now that something extraordinary had happened, and Mannu's family was hiding a secret far greater than she had imagined.

Maya then went to Mannu's mother and asked her well-being. Mannu's mother nodded to convey that everything was fine. Maya then cleverly asked Mannu's mother whether they were doing anything illegal to amass so much fortune in such a short time. Mannu's mother was a simple village woman. She was frightened by Maya's question and in her fear, revealed the truth. Having learnt the secret, Maya returned to her house with a smile on her face. She had succeeded in her mission.

Maya began to think of a wicked plan. The very next evening, she prepared a bowl of sweet rice pudding. Secretly, she mixed a sleep-inducing liquid into it, her eyes gleaming with mischief.

Holding the bowl carefully, Maya went to Mannu's house. In an unusually sweet voice, she said," My dear child Mannu, see what I have made for you." Her sudden kindness surprised Mannu, as this was very unlike Maya Aunty.

Although Mannu felt something was strange, she did not think much about it. Soon, both she and her mother tasted the dessert. The pudding was delicious and they enjoyed it a lot.

About half an hour later, Mannu and her mother began to feel drowsy. Within moments, they slipped into deep sleep, unaware of the danger that lay ahead.

Slowly midnight arrived - the time the fairy usually came to visit Mannu. Sona appeared at her usual hour, glowing softly in the moonlight, but Mannu was nowhere to be seen.

The fairy waited for a while and looked around the house. Thinking that Mannu might be away that night, she turned to leave quietly. Just then, something unexpected happened.

Suddenly, Maya appeared from the shadows, accompanied by three men. Before the fairy could react, one of the men snatched away her magical stick. The other two quickly overpowered her, stuffing her into a gunny bag.

The fairy tried to cry out for help, but it was too late. In a matter of moments, the men lifted the bag and whisked her away into the darkness, while Maya watched with cruel smile on her face.

It was an hour before dawn when Mannu suddenly woke up and hurried outside. The air was still and silent but fairy was nowhere to be seen. Mannu's heart sank – she was disappointed at being late. She thought the fairy must have already gone back.

She was about to return inside the house when something on the floor caught her eyes. It was the fairy's ring lying helplessly in the dust. Mannu picked it up, her hands trembling. The fairy would never leave without her ring.

It did not take Mannu long to understand that something was terribly wrong. Fear gripped her heart, but her eyes filled with determination. Wherever the fairy was, she knew she had to her- and fast.

She had to do something to save the fairy and that too before dawn. She quickly took out the stick that the fairy had given to her and started chanting the spell,' Oh my stick! Take me to the fairy.'

But nothing happened. She again tried saying, 'My stick, my stick, take me to the fairy, please.' Mannu was devastated for forgetting the spell at this crucial juncture. She felt remorseful. Suddenly she remembered that she had written the spell in her notebook. She then uttered the correct spell, 'Oh my stick! Take me to the fairy wherever she is.'

She was instantly taken to the fairy. The fairy was kept in a dark room, with both her hands and legs tied and her mouth taped. Mannu felt a surge of fear and disbelief. She then quickly untied the fairy's hands and legs and removed the tape from her mouth.

The fairy quickly explained what had happened and told Mannu that those who had kidnapped her wanted her to make them rich. When she refused, they tied her up and threw her into the room.

Mannu then said to Sona,' Where is your wand?'

"They took the wand and it is with them." said Sona.

Mannu knew that the fairy's power was in the wand. She then said to Sona, "Do you remember this wand that you had given me that day? Why don't you use this one?" she said softly. Seeing hope return to Sona's eyes, Mannu gently handed her wand to her.

Sona was delighted to see the wand and said to Mannu, "Oh yes, I had completely forgotten! Now see what I will do to them."

Sona flung the door with her magical powers. Maya and her associates froze in shock at the sight of her standing free gripping another wand. They were stunned to see her free, and even more shocked to notice the wand in her hand. One of them lunged forward to snatch but this time Sona was ready. She raised her wand and pointed it at the man. In an instant, he turned into stone. Seeing this, Maya and her associates trembled with fear. Maya fell to her knees and begged for forgiveness, but it was of no use. The

fairy's anger burned fiercely. Without hesitation, she lifted her wand again and turned all three of them into stone.

The fairy thanked Mannu and was about to leave when Mannu stepped forward and pleaded, 'Dear fairy, you are so kind hearted. Please forgive them for their mistakes.'

The fairy, was very fond of Mannu, and could not refuse her heartfelt request. Though her anger had not completely faded, Mannu's kindness softened her heart.

"Okay, I shall restore them to their original selves, but as a punishment they shall not have any memory of the past ten years."

Mannu had no choice but to agree. After this incident, the fairy made it a point to meet Mannu every day, just as she had done before. However, things were different now. She would meet Mannu inside her house, where she remained visible only to Mannu and her mother, hidden from the rest of the world.

Monkey and the Crocodile Part 2

You all have read about the story of the monkey and the crocodile. The crocodile who, under immense pressure of his wife Croco, took his monkey friend on his back to cross the river and how the intelligent monkey saved his life when he came to know about the wicked plan of the Croco and his wife.

Now let's find out what happens next in part II of the story.

The crocodile, saddened and depressed, reached his home late in the evening. The Croco's wife, lost in the thought of the sumptuous meal that she would savor soon, was delighted to see her husband home. Never before she had waited so eagerly for him. Her eyes glowed in anticipation as she waited to spot the monkey. After a brief moment when there was no sight of the monkey, the crocodile's wife enquired about him. The crocodile, who was by now mired in guilt burst out in tears and narrated the whole incident to his wife. The crocodile house which they had named 'Crocs' was the witness to the fierce verbal duel between the crocodile and his dear wife for close to two hours.

The crocodile's wife was angry and upset with him for his foolish behavior whereas the crocodile was angry with his wife for spoiling his friendship with his best friend. Their relationship was never the same anymore. Things even worsened with time and soon they started living separately.

It was now more than a year since the crocodile and his wife had separated. They both longed for each other but no one was willing to make the first move.

The crocodile used to visit the river bank almost daily and would look at the monkey with teary eyes. The monkey would not reciprocate the gesture but the intensity of grudge that he held against the crocodile was also not the same anymore. He, too, missed the company of the crocodile and remembered the good old days, but would then quickly overcome his emotions. He had not yet forgotten the deception by the crocodile.

Time went by and it was now more than three years since the crocodile couple had started living separately. In these three years rarely, a day had passed when the crocodile had not gone to the banks to see his monkey friend. By this time, the monkey was also convinced that the crocodile had repented and that he should be given another chance.

So, one day, when the crocodile went to the bank to see the monkey, the monkey threw some mangoes at the Croco. The crocodile's joy knew no bounds. He looked at the monkey who was smiling with a wide grin. The crocodile smiled back. Finally, they were friends again. The news of their re-union reached his wife's ears. She was furious at the news thinking that the monkey was more important to his husband as in these years he never took any pain to cajole her. She decided to teach the monkey a lesson, a lesson that he would remember for the rest of his life.

She started keeping an eye on the monkey. In two months, time she had a fair idea of the monkey's schedule. Every second and fourth Saturday of the month the monkey would visit his uncle who lived in a faraway village. The monkey's uncle had no son and he treated him as his own son, and the monkey was also very fond of his uncle. The monkey and his uncle both used to look forward to the second and fourth Saturdays of every month. The monkey had very fond memories of his uncle's place where he had grown up. He had a wonderful childhood with his parents and his uncle's family. A

few years ago, his parents passed away in an accident, and after that, he left the place as he could not bear the pain of their loss. His uncle tried his best to persuade him not to leave, but the monkey promised that he would visit his native place as often as he could and he always kept his promise, a promise which was now threatening to change the course of his life.

Croco's wife hatched a wicked plan and asked one of her friends to help her execute it properly. The friend was reluctant at first, but when Croco's wife kept pestering her, she finally agreed. Croco's wife had a very devilish idea- she decided to dig a ditch along the very path the monkey took to visit his uncle. They decided to execute the plan on Friday night. A ditch was dug, and it was covered with dry grass and twigs to hide it perfectly well. They hid themselves behind the tall grasses and waited for the monkey to pass through the next morning. They did not have to wait for very long before they saw the monkey coming.

The monkey came walking and singing unaware of the lurking danger. He was lost in the thoughts of meeting his dear uncle and his loving family. when suddenly he found himself stuck in the ditch. He tried his best to come out but the ditch was really deep and all his efforts went in vain. This was exactly what the Croco's wife and her friend were waiting for. They quickly went to the ditch carrying large stones in their mouths. Their plan was to throw those stones at the monkey so as to injure him grievously. Just when they were about to throw stones at the monkey, the crocodile appeared from behind the marshes. Seeing him, both his wife and her friend fled away.



The crocodile was horrified to see his dear friend monkey struggling to come out of the ditch. The crocodile threw a rope to the monkey and pulled him up. The monkey was visibly shaken and thanked his friend profusely for saving his life.

The monkey then hopped on the crocodile's back and the Croco carried him to his home. On their way back home, the monkey asked the crocodile as to how he came for his rescue and was he aware of the plan? To this the crocodile replied that one of his cousins had overheard the conversation his wife was having with her friend and that is how he knew what was going to happen. But the crocodile felt sorry that he could not prevent the incident to take place. He was also ashamed for his wife's actions.

From then on, the monkey and the crocodile remained the best of friends all throughout their lives.

The Haunted Tree and the Brave Boy

During the 16th century, in Central India, there ruled a king named Surajdev Rai. The king was a just ruler and the people of the kingdom were happy and content. The king was a nature lover and always encouraged his people to plant trees. Illegal cutting down of trees was completely banned in his kingdom. Such was his love for environment.

The primary vocation of the people in the kingdom was farming. The Kandharva kingdom had rich, fertile where various fruits and vegetables flourished, and the excess produce was sold to nearby kingdoms. As a result, the people of the kingdom lived prosperous lives.

One day during his visit to the countryside, the king saw a huge banyan tree. He was amazed to see the tree as he had never seen such a huge banyan tree in his lifetime. He called for the farmer on whose land the tree was planted.

'What is your name?' The king asked the farmer.

'My Lord, my name is Shyamlal and I am the owner of this land.' said the farmer.

'Very well. Tell me what special have you done that this banyan tree has become so huge.' The king said to the farmer in a curious voice.

‘I am myself surprised to see that the tree has become so big and that too so fast because till the last month this tree was half its size.’ said the farmer in worried tone.

The king was surprised by his answer but nevertheless decided to celebrate this occasion.

The next day was declared a state holiday and the king organized a large fair at the site where the huge banyan tree was present. People from the nearby kingdoms also flocked to witness the tree which had, by now, become a big talking point amongst the villagers.

The festivities continued till late in the evening and there was an atmosphere of jubilation all around the kingdom.

Few days passed and the farmer, owner of the banyan tree, came to meet the king.

‘Hail the king,’ said the farmer.

The king did not take long to recognize the farmer.

‘How are you and how is the banyan tree?’ said the king.

‘The banyan tree has grown manifold since you last saw it.’ said the farmer.

The king was happy to hear that but the farmer looked worried. The king was quick to notice that.

‘What is the matter, why are you not sounding happy?’ asked the king.

“I was happy that the banyan tree grew so large, but now it has started causing harm to my crops,” the farmer said with a trembling voice. “. Older banyan trees develop aerial roots that grow into thick, tangled trunks and their broad branches form a dense canopy. The same has happened with my tree. Its roots have turned into heavy trunks, and its wide branches now cover my entire field. Because of this, hardly any sunlight reaches my crops. They are slowly dying, and I feel helpless.” The farmer broke down in tears

There was complete silence in the court.

After a brief moment, the king's voice broke the silence.

'What do you want from me?' said the king.

The man, still inconsolable, said to the king in a feeble voice,' Honorable king, I know you are a nature lover. But I request you to allow me to cut down that tree.'

The king was in a dilemma and asked the farmer to wait for some time outside the court. The king then discussed the matter with his council of ministers and after a long discussion it was decided that the farmer would be allowed to cut the tree. He also said that professional wood cutters would assist the farmer to carry out hacking of the tree.

The farmer went away happily and started preparing to cut the tree. It was decided that the process of cutting the tree would take place on the first day of the next month.

The day arrived and there was large crowd at the sight to see the cutting of the giant tree.

Ten professional wood cutters started the task in the morning. It was a difficult and tedious job, and by evening they had managed to cut only half of the branches and trunks. So, it was decided that the remaining work would be resumed the next day.

The next day when the wood cutters gathered at the site, they were stunned to see that the tree had grown back to its original size. They did not have the courage and strength to start all over again. They thought it right to apprise the king of what had happened.

When the king heard this, he could not believe his ears. This was something he had never heard before so; to check the veracity of the claim, he decided to send his environment minister to get an accurate update on the matter.

The next day the minister visited the place and could not believe what he saw. The tree was back to its original form in its full glory.

The minister immediately reported the matter to the king. The king became worried on hearing this and immediately called an urgent meeting with his council of ministers. It was decided in the meeting that the tree had become a menace, and since it was difficult to cut it down, it would be better to burn it completely.

The king ordered his ministers to arrange for the materials needed to carry out the burning of the tree.

The next morning, a large team gathered at the place where the tree stood. The king's men poured inflammable liquid on the tree and set it ablaze. The king himself was present to oversee the operation.

Everything was going according to the plan when suddenly it started raining heavily. The heavy rain doused the fire, and the people gathered there were astonished to see the tree regaining everything it had lost in the fire. It was now clear to the king that some evil external force was at work and that great danger was lurking over his kingdom.

For the first time, the king felt truly helpless. He could not think of any solution, and the constant worry slowly began taking a toll on his health. He fell ill often, and neither he nor anyone else in the kingdom could find a way to solve the problem. After a few days, Shyamlal's eighteen years old son, Mohan, returned to the village. He was studying at Magadh University and had come on a short break. Mohan was surprised to see the usual carefree environment of his village missing. He reached home and said to his father,

"What is the matter? I have never seen such despondency in our village before.'

Mohan's father then told him about the devilish tree.

Mohan immediately decided that he will not go back till he finds a solution to the problem. The next day in the morning, Mohan along with his father went to their farm. Mohan had never seen such a big tree before in his life. He marveled at the sheer grandeur of the

tree, but reality quickly hit him. This tree had ruined his father's farming and was now threatening to devour other farms as well.

Mohan asked his father to go back home as he would stay there. He started to closely observe the tree and walked along the full length of the tree to find any aberration. Almost midway, he found a black mark on the trunk of the tree.

The peculiarity of the colour and the unusual calmness in the air were too difficult to ignore. It was apparent to him that something was not right. Since it was late in the evening, he felt it would not be safe to stay there any longer. He quietly picked a small stone from the ground, made a mark on the tree, and left.

The next morning, he came back to the same spot. He was astonished to see that though the mark he had made was still there, the black spot that he had seen the previous evening had vanished.

It did not take him long to realize that the evil power behind all this had visited the spot during the night. He wondered, "If that evil power was here yesterday, how did I not see it."

Mohan had no answer to his question and thought the evil power was probably invisible to the human eyes.

Mohan had a unique skill - he could communicate with birds in their language. He called few birds to him and spoke to them for few minutes. Then he left for his house.

The next day, Mohan went to his field again. He was pleasantly surprised to see that two birds were waiting for him. They exchanged pleasantries and afterwards the birds informed him that the previous night, towards the end part of the tree, a witch had come to the far end of the tree, sat there for a while, and then flown away.

"In which direction did she fly?" Mohan asked one of the birds.

"She went towards the east," said the bird.

‘Very well, thank you!’ said Mohan. He then asked the birds to be vigilant when the witch visited the place again. He also instructed them to follow her on her return journey.

The very next morning, the birds told him that the witch lived in a black house. They also told him that when they started following her, it was pitch dark, and by the time they reached her house it was morning. In no time, Mohan calculated that it would take around three hours in the eastward direction to reach the wicked witch’s house.

Mohan narrated all the details to the king. The king consulted his council of ministers, and it was decided that a small contingent of soldiers in simple clothes, along with Mohan, would trace the location and try to neutralize the witch.

The same night they began their expedition. As they neared the place, a strange sense of wretchedness filled the air. They knew their destination was close, and now they had to be more careful.

After about half an hour of searching, they finally located the witch’s house. It was surrounded by thick vegetation and hence could barely be seen from the outside. Though they had reached their destination, all of them were apprehensive, as nobody had any idea what challenges they would face inside the house.

They quietly approached the house. The soldiers and Mohan spoke in hushed tones, lest the witch hear them. Mohan volunteered to enter the house first, as he was relatively shorter. Soon, the soldiers followed him. Inside, they saw the witch sleeping on her cot, with her stick kept beside her. Just then, her caged parrot made a sound. The witch quickly got up, and on seeing Mohan and other men, she became very furious. She instantly grabbed the stick and pointed it at Mohan. A ray of fluorescent colour shot towards Mohan, but he quickly moved aside. The soldier standing just behind him was not so quick and was turned into a rabbit. Seeing this, Mohan and the other soldiers panicked. They knew they had to act fast- really fast. One of the soldiers quickly drew his sword and pierced it into the

witch. A shriek filled the air. It was the end of the witch... but was it really her end?

No sooner had the shriek ebbed than the witch got up. Her fiery, big red eyes were filled with anger. Her hands were trembling with rage.

'Now I will kill you all and eat your flesh,' said the witch.

The booming voice caused fear and trepidation among the soldiers and Mohan. Nobody had an idea what to do. They felt their end was near.

Just then, Mohan caught glimpse of the parrot that had alerted the witch earlier. He had never seen such a parrot before. Instead of the usual green colour, this parrot was black. Mohan was a bird enthusiast and had tremendous knowledge about birds, but he had never seen such a black- coloured parrot before.

It did not take long for Mohan to understand that it was not exactly a parrot, but the soul of the witch herself and if the parrot were to die so would the witch.

Mohan signalled to the soldier standing near the parrot to grab the cage and run outside with it. Just as the soldier was about to take the cage, the witch pointed her stick at him and turned him into a frog. In the melee, Mohan seized the opportunity and pushed the witch. She fell to the ground and her stick slipped from her hand. Sensing this as a golden opportunity, Mohan grabbed the cage and ran outside. One of the soldiers ran out with him. Mohan immediately opened the cage and took the parrot out. By now, the witch had also come out and was rushing toward them. The soldier saw the witch charging at him and immediately grabbed the parrot and severed its head. The parrot died and the witch's body also began splitting from the middle. Soon, there was a blast and the witch's body blew into pieces. The witch was no more.

Mohan and the soldiers exulted with excitement. The soldiers who had been turned into a rabbit and a frog returned to their original forms.



Mohan and the soldiers then went to the king and narrated the entire operation to him. The king was ecstatic to know that the wicked witch had met her end. The king was anxious to learn the fate of the banyan tree.

They all went to the place where the giant tree had stood and were relieved to see that it was now of regular size. The king profusely praised Mohan and the soldiers and gave them huge rewards. The whole village erupted in joy, and the king declared a state holiday for the next day

The Justice of Emperor Akbar

This story dates back to the 16th century, when Emperor Akbar ruled India and Birbal, a very intelligent man, was his chief advisor. Two prominent gem merchants, Sharafat Ali and Liaquat Ali, were the best of friends. They grew up together in Agra, went to the same school, and later entered the same trade. They had other things in common as well. Both had lost their parents at an early age, and both of them made big in the gem trade on their own.

As they accumulated a lot of wealth, they purchased a big plot just on the periphery of Agra city and built their homes there. They made sure that both houses were identical, with the same number of rooms.

Although both were busy with their businesses, they made it a point to meet every evening in their garden adjacent to their homes. The beautiful garden was part of their complex and it was laden with mango, guava and jamun trees.

Time passed swiftly, and one day Liyaqat Ali thought of going for Haj. Haj is a sacred pilgrimage, and it is believed that every Muslim should perform Haj at least once in their lifetime.

Performing Haj in those days used to take more than three months. Liyakat Ali thought of carrying enough gold coins with him for the journey. The remaining coins he kept in a sack. He then dug a deep pit next to the mango tree in his garden and placed the sack inside it. Finally, he covered the pit with soil.

The next day, at the time of leaving for Haj, he met Sharafat Ali and told him about the sack that he had hidden next to the mango tree. He asked his friend to remain vigilant until he returned. Sharafat Ali replied. “Don’t worry, my friend I will take care of it”. He then wished Liyakat Ali a happy and safe journey.

Both the friends bid adieu, and Liyaqat Ali proceeded on his pilgrimage. Gradually, three months passed, and it was time for Liyakat Ali to return.

Four months passed, but there was no news of Liyakat Ali. Sharafat Ali enquired about him from those who had gone for Haj with him, but none knew anything about his whereabouts.

Six months had passed, but still there was no word from Liyakat Ali. Sharafat Ali tried his best to gather information about him, but his whereabouts could not be traced.

Slowly, a year passed, and by this time Sharafat Ali had lost all hope of ever seeing his friend again. Two years had passed and Sharafat Ali by this time had lost all hope of ever seeing his friend again. He was sure that his friend must have met with a mishap and was no longer alive.

His mind was now filled with thoughts of the immense wealth that Liyakat had left behind. Eventually, greed got the better of him, and one night he dug up the soil and unearthed the bag. His eyes lit up in the darkness at the sight of the glittering gold, and he could scarcely believe his luck. He invested half of the gold in his business

With the remaining money, he bought many luxury items such as ornaments and jewellery. He also purchased large parcels of land. Life was like a bed of roses for Sharafat Ali until one day Liyakat Ali suddenly returned. Sharafat was shocked to see his friend, but he kept his emotions in check. He embraced him with a forced smile and asked Liyakat Ali where he had been all these four years.

“I met with an accident while returning to returning to India and was unconscious for a long time. Luckily a doctor of great repute brought me back to health,” said Liyakat.

“So good to see you, my dear friend.” said Sharafat.

They spoke for some time. Liyakat Ali was very pleased to hear that Sharafat doing so well in his business.

After taking a few days’ rest Liyakat Ali decided to resume his business. He went to the place where he had hidden his entire wealth and began digging the soil. After about an hour, he reached the spot where he had kept the bag and was delighted to find it. Thereafter he covered the pit with some soil. He opened the bag but to his horror found it empty. He was devastated. Tears rolled down his cheeks. He felt as if his life was over. After a few minutes, he regained his composure and began to reason out what could have happened. It was difficult for him to believe that his dear friend could have done this to him. He went straight to Sharafat Ali and told him about the missing coins.

Sharafat pleaded innocence but the tremor in his voice and his body language were enough to suggest that he was the one who had stolen the coins.

Liyakat Ali said to him, “I can understand that after waiting for me for four years, you presumed that I was dead and took my money to expand your business. I do not hold that against you, but now I need my money to meet my needs and to resume my business.”

Sharafat Ali told Liyakat that he could not understand what he was talking about. He also said that by making such an allegation, Liyakat was trying to cast aspersions on their friendship.

Liyakat did not take long to understand that greed had got the better of his friend and that he would have to find some other means to recover his wealth.

The next day, he went to the court of Emperor Akbar. Akbar, a very powerful ruler, was also known for his just and fair

judgements. Justice in his court was delivered purely on merit, and person's rank and or status was of no significance.

Liyakat Ali bowed before the Emperor and requested to be heard. The king asked him to take his seat and wait for his turn.

After nearly an hour, the king said to Liyakat Ali in his booming voice, "What is the matter?"

Liyakat Ali introduced himself as a resident of Agra and then proceeded to narrate the entire incident to the king.

Akbar told his finance minister to provide a loan of fifty gold coins to Liyakat Ali so that he could restart his business. He then asked Birbal to enquire

Into the matter within a month so that justice could be served. Birbal assured the emperor that he would get to the bottom of the matter within the stipulated time.

The very next day, Birbal called both Liyakat Ali and Sharafat Ali to his chamber and asked them to present their versions. Liyakat Ali narrated the same story that he had earlier told the king, while Sharafat Ali pleaded innocence.

Birbal asked them to leave and then summoned his most trusted spy, to whom he handed a note. The spy read the note, nodded in agreement, sought Birbal's permission and went away.

After ten days, the spy returned to Birbal and revealed information that was in sync with Birbal's assumptions. He reported that Sharafat Ali was a reputed gem merchant, but over the past two years he had made tremendous progress and that his fortune had suddenly surged. The spy also confirmed that Liyakat Ali and Sharafat Ali were the best of friends, that they used to live in the same campus, and that Liyakat Ali had indeed gone for Haj, where he met with an accident.

The spy also gave details of the wealth and fortune that Sharafat Ali had amassed over the last three to four years.

By then, Birbal had gathered all the information he needed, he then asked the spy to leave.

That night, Birbal was in deep thought, wondering how to make Sharafat Ali confess his crime, as there was no other way to prove him guilty.

The next day, Birbal instructed one of his staff members to summon Natwar Shah

Natwar Shah was a renowned thief, and at that time he was behind the bars in the Agra Jail. He was brought before Birbal. Natwar was scared to be presented in the king's court, as he thought there was a new complaint against him.

However, Birbal assured him that there was no such reason behind his presence in the court that day and that he would be set free if he agreed to do one task for Birbal.

Natwar's eyes lit up with excitement and he said to Birbal, "Yes sir anything for you."

Birbal then whispered something into his ear and told him to complete the job in two days. Natwar Shah assured Birbal that the work would be done.

After two days, Natwar Shah met Birbal and delivered the item Birbal had asked him to obtain. As per the deal, Birbal set Natwar Shah free but warned him to refrain from committing any theft henceforth.

The next day, Birbal called both Liyakat Ali and Sharafat Ali to the Emperor's court.

Birbal said to Akbar, "Shahenshah! I have found the culprit."

The whole court was curious to know who the guilty person was.

Birbal then took out a diamond ring that was covered with little soil.

Birbal said, "Does this ring belong to you, Sharafat Ali?"

Sharafat Ali looked at the ring carefully and answered in the affirmative. Birbal then continued with the argument that if the ring indeed

Belonged to Sharafat Ali, how was it possible that it was found at the place where Liyakat Ali had hidden his wealth?

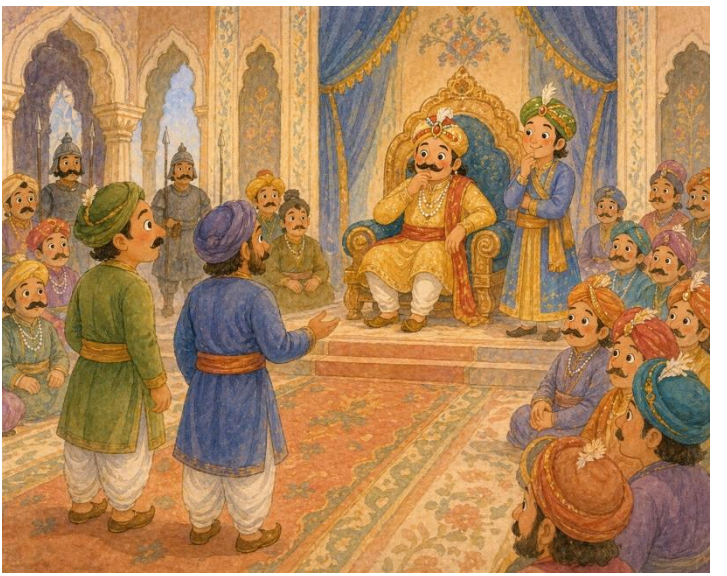
“No, it is not possible,” said Sharafat Ali.

“Why is it not possible?” thundered Birbal.

Sharafat Ali then repeated in a higher pitch that it was not possible. Birbal also raised his voice and again asked, “Why is it not possible?”

Everyone’s gaze was fixated on Sharafat Ali, and he felt humiliated.

Birbal then raised his voice a notch higher and said that the ring being found in the soil was a clear indication that Sharafat Ali had lost it while digging the soil.



By this time, Sharafat Ali had lost his cool and said that it was not possible because he had purchased the ring three years ago, while he had dug the soil only two years ago.

There was complete silence in the courtroom. Birbal had succeeded in forcing Sharafat Ali into confessing his crime.

Sharafat Ali was put in jail and his wealth was confiscated. Liyakat Ali got his wealth back, and the surplus money recovered from Sharafat Ali was deposited in the treasury.

Akbar was very happy with Birbal and praised him profusely for solving such a complex case in such a short time and for helping deliver justice.

The Lonely Bear and the kind Forester

An intense fight was going on between Ballu and Victor, both black bear in the dense jungle of Ratnagiri

After about ten minutes both were badly injured and bruised and were even unable to stand on their feet.

Victor somehow managed to return to his base but Ballu had no energy left to move and lay there motionless.

A day passed and Ballu's condition began to deteriorate. He was thirsty, hungry, and injured, and there was no one to help him. He was losing all hope of survival, but God had other ideas. Just then a forester passed by and he saw Ballu lying motionless. The kind forester took pity on little Ballu, brought him to his village, and started his treatment immediately.

After a few days Ballu showed signs of improvement and after about a month he was fit and healthy enough to walk on his feet. The forester was very happy to see Ballu hale and hearty.

He used to stay alone, so he decided to keep Ballu with him in his home.

Ballu was also happy in his new home, and he started liking human company.

Children from the village, and even from nearby villages, used to converge at Ballu's house every evening and played various

games. The kids used to play Kabaddi, Pithu, Kho-Kho, and many other games.

Most of the games that children played were team games, and every team wanted to have Ballu with them.

Ballu loved all the attention he received and would eagerly wait for the evening to descend so that he could be among his friends.

Sometimes his friends would bring honey and other food items, which Ballu happily shared with everyone.

It was now clear to all that Ballu was a friendly soul and would not harm anyone.

Time passed gradually, and it had been close to a year since Ballu started living in the village.

He had grown tall and strong, but he was still the gentle soul that everyone loved.

The kind forester decided to celebrate Ballu's birthday on 27th June- the day he had found him in the forest.



The forester decorated his small house with birthday banners, balloons and props.

Ballu's friends were treated to different delicacies, and they also played games. All the kids had

lots of fun, and no one was willing to leave, but finally it was time to say goodbye to Ballu.

Ballu was ecstatic to see so many gifts.

The forester asked Ballu whether he was happy with the arrangement.

Ballu did not say anything but came to the forester and embraced him.

Both father and son had tears in their eyes, and such moments are rare in anyone's life when words are not needed to express feelings.

A year went by and Ballu was now an adult bear. He stood nearly 6 feet tall when upright and weighed almost 200 kilograms.

His forester father was both ecstatic and worried. Ecstatic because the small bear he had saved was now a full-grown adult, and worried because he wondered how he would meet Ballu's growing food requirements with his meagre earnings.

The forester took a small amount loan from a moneylender, but he knew that the amount would not solve the problem, and that he would have to find a solution quickly.

He decided to meet his childhood friend Subhash to find a way out.

Subhash was forester's childhood friend, and they had grown up together in the village.

Later, Subhash moved to the city and started his own business, and now he was a well- respected man there.

Subhash was very happy to see the forester after so many years, and they both started talking about their village life. Subhash asked how Ballu was doing.

“He is doing fine and has grown tall and strong; exclaimed the proud father.”

Subhash was pleased to hear that and asked the forester the reason of his visit.

“I am worried about Ballu as expenses are rising and I am unable to make ends meet.

A solution has to be found soon, because I am going to retire and then I will only have my pension to fall back on; he said with a trembling voice.”

“Yes, I know that you will be retiring in about six months, and something needs to be done fast.”

After few minutes, Subhash suggested that Ballu could join a circus. This way, Ballu’s expenses would be

taken care of by the company, and he would also earn money, which would ease the financial situation.

“No, I won’t send Ballu to any circus company, as they are known to exploit animals.”

“Yes, I know some circus companies do exploit animals, but the company I am suggesting is known to take good care of their team. Moreover, the owner is someone I know, and I will personally go the circus owner with you to speak about Ballu.”

The forester was reluctant, but after much persuasion, he decided to meet the circus owner.

Upon arriving at the place, they were led to the circus owner’s cabin and the owner welcomed them warmly.

“How are you Mr Subhash and what can I do for you.”

“I have come here with my friend, and he wants to see how animals are trained and treated at the circus.”

“Sure, why not,” said the circus owner and he led them to the place where animals were kept and fed.

They are were led to the elephant enclosure first. The elephants, Raja and Appu were being bathed with a water pipe, and the Mahout was scrubbing their bodies while the jumbos played with the water.

Next, it was the turn of the tiger cage. The Royal Bengal tiger, Amber was being fed, and his roar was enough to show that he was the peak of his prowess.

The forester looked relieved but at the same time, he was anxious to see as to how bears were treated at the circus.

Finally, they were taken to the place where bears were kept. It was a big enough enclosure for two bears.

One of the bears, Somu was playing by himself, while the other bear, Mimi was sleeping. The forester decided to stay there so that he could observe them.

The bears looked in good health, and the place where they were kept was tidy and well- illuminated.

The forester was now convinced that the animals were being properly taken care of.

The forester spoke to Subhash "I am now convinced that Ballu will be properly taken care of, and I am sure he will enjoy the company of other animals."

Subhash nodded his head in agreement, and then they both then said good bye to the circus owner and left the place.

The forester reached his village and, after a few days decided to broach the topic with Ballu, but he was not sure how Ballu would react. The thought of Ballu going away also made him emotional.

"Son come here I would like to discuss some important thing with you". Ballu knew something was brewing because he had never seen his father so animated before.

"What is the matter? is everything all right?"

“Yes, everything is fine, but today I want to make a decision and I also want your opinion on it.”

“Yes, Father. Please tell me what the matter is.”

The forester quietly explained everything to Ballu, who listened patiently.

‘No Father, I don’t want to go to any circus, and moreover, I do not want to leave you.’

The forester did not want to force Ballu, so the conversation ended there, but he was determined to send Ballu to the circus and wanted to convince him rather than force him.

One day, that opportunity came. That circus arrived in their village, and the forester decided to take Ballu and his friends to watch the show.

The circus ground was buzzing with people, and the area had a festive look.

As soon as the entry gates opened, there was a mad scramble to get in first. Nobody wanted to miss even a single minute of action.

Ballu and his gang got the front- row seats, and after a few minutes, the circus started.

First came the jokers and clowns and their outlandish costumes, painted faces, and exaggerated acting had everyone in splits.

Next came the gymnasts and acrobats, and after bowing to the audience they started their jumps, twists, and handstand acts. The performance lasted for nearly 20 minutes,

and when they ended, the audience gave them a thunderous send-off.

After few other acts, Somu and Mimi finally appeared, wearing colourful dresses, to a rousing reception. The sounds and cheers from the public filled the air, and the organizers had to request everyone to settle down so that the act could begin.

Somu stood on its front legs, took a scooter from the gallery, and started riding it at full speed without losing balance.

Now it was Mimi's turn to show her skills. The trainer blindfolded her and gave her basketballs.

Mimi started putting the balls into the basket and out of eight attempts, she succeeded seven times. It was a feat even Michael Jordan would be proud of.

They were then, both given hoops, and in a flash, they started twisting them.

The audience witnessed a healthy competition to see whose hoop would fall first. Even after two minutes, when the hoops did not come off, the trainer declared them both winners. The audience was thrilled to witness such a performance and gave them a standing ovation.

Ballu was a witness to the popularity that both Somu and Mimi enjoyed and was proud of the fact that someone from his clan was so highly rated by the audience.

Some other performances followed, and then the circus got over.

The forester, Ballu and his friends were very happy when they came out, and everyone was talking about

Somu and Mimi.

After reaching home, the forester asked Ballu how he liked the circus, to which Ballu replied that he was thoroughly entertained.

Ballu said to his father, "Father, I want to join the circus, and I think I would also be able to do what Somu and Mimi were doing."

The forester was very happy hearing this, as his plan of taking Ballu to the circus had worked.