

Folk and Feudal Crossover at the Imperial Court

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Abstract

The present paper is based on two anecdotes of Birbal and Tenali Raman's entry in the royal courts of Akbar and Krishan Dev Rai. The researchers have attempted to bring to fore the folk and feudal cross over that takes place in the imperial court. The paper implicitly attempts to problematize the whole idea of representation which seems less effective than the meritocracy that seems at full swing in both the narratives undertaken for research in this paper. The researchers find that the feudal mode of governance provides a democratic space to the folk to enter the ministerial body through wit. On the contrary, the contemporary democratic mode of governance provides this space through 'representation' which is subjected to other factor excluding 'wit' or sagacity or prudence.

Key Words: Anecdote, folk fools, feudal, governance, jesterdom, comic criticism, meritocracy, democracy, folk wit, critique

In the present paper, the researchers undertake a close comparative critical reading of anecdotes of Akbar-Birbal and King Krishan Dev Rai-Tenali Raman with specific emphasis primarily on two aspects: (a) how these folk fools enter the royal courts and (b) how these courtiers treat the irrational in a so called 'democratic space' protecting themselves. The idea of comparing the feudal mode of governance with our contemporary mode of governances, aims at developing a critique of the contemporary one. The present mode of governances provides hardly a democratic

space as writers and politicians are the two opposite poles of a hemisphere in our contemporary times. In this connection it is appropriately remarked:

They seldom meet, and then as strangers: I am referring to our over tired politicians and our uncertain writers with the quickly formulated demands that always cry out for immediate fulfillment. Where is the calendar that would permit the mighty of our day to hold court, to seek utopian advice, or to cleanse themselves from the compromises of everyday life by listening to expositions of preposterous utopias? (Grass, Gunter 275).

As an answer to his question, Gunter Grass quotes the “legendry Kennedy era” (275). In India context, the Mughal Empire and the Vijay Nagar Dynasty fit squarely in the category of the calendar that Gunter Grass searches. The great Mughal emperor Akbar provides this democratic space to Birbal who out wits the king and so as the case with King Krishan Dev Rai who enjoys the company of critically candid Tenali Raman consistently and curiously.

Generally the anecdotes of ‘Akbar and Birbal’ have captivated the interest of the children as they are entirely considered to be fictional characters and fictional narratives. Most of the books which consist of these anecdotes are designed as comic books for children with cartoons of Akbar, Birbal and other characters. However, one may argue that court jesters enjoy great reputation as wise and bold people across the globe as they are the universal characters. Beatrice K. Otto seems supporting the universality of the character of court jesters in a compromised way: “...the jester may not be omnipresent, but he does seem omnifamiliar to anybody writing about him, even when they are describing him in a culture alien to their own” (Beatrice XVII). It would be appropriate to record a significant remark on the universality of court jesters here: “This is global terrain that needs multilingual and ‘multimind’ explores who delight in unexpected links” (Sheila and Lynn 176). The present paper is an attempt to explore the glorious tradition of comic criticism that has being an integral part of Royal Courts in India. In regard to the historicity of the witty encounters of jesters with the kings Beatrice address a common query in the following words:

Records of jesters’ exploits were not necessarily recorded five minutes after the event by witnesses and earnest historians, and even with the efforts of chronicles, ..., it is likely that those skits lost to posterity in the ephemera of spontaneous wit are legion, so that we are left with the tip of an iceberg of incisive social and political commentary (Beatrice XXII).

It has appropriately been mentioned here that the temporal wit emanated from the brightest of the minds was recorded by the masses. Here, Beatrice laments the fact that these events have neither been recorded by ‘witnesses or earnest historians’. He regrets that owing to the absence of proper recording of these events exhibiting the wit of the court jesters, we are deprived of the insightful ‘social and political commentary’. However, one may pacify Beatrice’s discontentment by putting forward the point that though these have not been recorded properly yet due to the vitality of wit these anecdotes are existing till date. Second: it is important to mention here that the temporal fun has all the way been traveling to us till date through their circulation through folk anecdotes. The willing, wide and consistent circulation of these anecdotes in folk culture has

preserved them properly as aural texts and may be in a more effective manner than that of books. It is appropriate to quote the following words here in connection to the problematic question of historicity of court jesters:

Many jesters enjoy legendary status, both in the sense of being real men who have acquired reputation of mythological proportions, such as Birbal, jester to Akbar the Indian Mogul emperor (r. 1562-1605), and in the sense of perhaps having always been figment of many imaginations, such as Tenali Rama, another Indian superjester (XXI).

This follows that Beatrice in his work puts aside the very possibility of any debate over the historicity of Birbal and Tenali Ram. Thus, the problematic question of the historicity of anecdotes does not hold any reasonable ground. Indeed, there lies no difficulty in establishing the fact that court jesters like Birbal and Tenali Ram actually existed. However, these towering figures of wit have not been giving due space on the globe of worldly jesters. Subsequently, they have not received sufficient critical concern in research as well. C.M. Naim in an article entitled: Popular Jokes and Political History- the Case of Akbar; Birbal and Mulla Do-Piyaza gives a detailed account of historical facts authenticating the presence of Birbal. This authenticates the liberal and democratic culture of Mughal Empire.

It is important for us to know that how these folk heroes of wit find a place for themselves in the royal courts. It is interesting to note that by dint of their wit and clarity of expression they raise themselves from village folks to the dignified courtiers. There are parallel narratives telling us the entry of these men of wit into the royal courts. For instance Mahesh Das- later known to be Birbal- meets Emperor Akbar who has lost his way to his capital Agra. The emperor asks him: 'Hey young man! Which of these roads goes to Agra?' As reply to this question Mahesh Das says: 'Everybody knows that roads cannot move so how would these roads go to Agra or anywhere else?' If one looks critically one finds that 'irrational questions need 'rational questions' which seem as 'irrational answers' to uncritical beings. Later on Mahesh Das visits the royal court and through the exhibition of his wit gets appointment as courtier solely because of his intellectual talent. There is an anecdote pertaining to the entry of Gonu Jha in the royal court of Mithila by defeating the black Brahmin of south India in the scholarly discussion. Beatrice makes a precise comment on the recruitment of courtiers in the following words:

The recruiting of jesters was tremendously informal and meritocratic, perhaps indicating greater mobility and fluidity in past society than is often supposed. A man with the right qualifications might be found anywhere (Beatrice 2).

It is necessary to mention here that Beatrice's remark is based on his observation of court jesters' recruitment at global level. Birbal and Gonu Jha's entries in the respective royal courts are similar to the global trend of court jesters' recruitments.

Similar is an anecdote that familiarizes us with the razor-sharp cleverness of Tenali Ram. As per the anecdotal history, Tenali Ram- an equally celebrated court jester with Birbal- does secure his place in the royal court after meeting the standards laid down by King Krishan Dev. Tenali's test is the toughest as compared to the entry tests of Gonu Jha and Birbal. A detailed account of his tests is described in an anecdote entitled: Ramakrishana Exploits his Wits (*Witty Tenalirama* 14-

24). It is so because he enters the court after fixing a deal with the doorkeeper that he would share the half of whatever he gets as reward from the king. Through the wrong entry of Tenali Ram in the ongoing performance leads to the revelation of the fact that Tenali has entered the court by greasing the palm of the doorkeeper. The king gives him the punishment of fifty lashes. He cites the deal done with the doorkeeper that Tenali would share the half of whatever he would receive from the king as a reward with one of the doorkeepers if he allows Tenali to enter the royal court. Tenali's wit impresses the king but it is of no use to him as the king remains determined to punish him for the fraudulent means that he has deployed to enter the court. The punishment is made more stringent as the king declares:

But since you have bribed my guard, which is a cognizable offence, I award you a death punishment. You have managed to escape the punishment of lashes, but let me see how you escape the death sentence. You will be decapitated tomorrow morning (17).

Tenali deploys his death-defying wit dauntingly and dexterously at this dreadful moment. He asks the guards to allow him to take a dip in the Tungabhadra River as his last desire which is accepted by the guards. This way he takes time in a strategic manner. Taking time to spin a strategy is a common facet of the court jesters undertaken for the present paper. These witty minds are seen never in hurry. In Rajasthani language there goes a folk saying: "*Tavlo so bavlo*" - The name of hasty is a fool. It is a prolonged and time-tested folk experience converted into folk wisdom that decisions taken in haste or deeds done in haste turn out to be bad. The courtiers under discussion seem to be the most committed and consistent practitioners of this piece of folk wisdom. They abstain from being hasty and maintain high level of calmness which is prerequisite thing for an individual to think about the solutions of a problem at hand.

Having procured time, Tenali script a dramatic situation of his assassination. He tells the guards: "I shall go into the river in neck deep water, and when I say 'Jai Shree Ram', you cut my head off" (19). Tenali closes his eyes and acclaims: 'Jai Shree Ram'. However, "... as soon as the guards wave their swords to chop off his head, he took a dip and swam away from there" (19). This way he avoids his execution with consummate ease. This episode is recorded by Panchapakesa in his book:

He (Tenali) asked for a purifying bath before dying, requesting that the executioners stand on either side of the bath and chop his head off when he gave the signal. He then signaled, at the same time diving into the water so that the two succeeded only in removing each other's head (*Royal Jester* 39).

Following this incident, the guards take Tenali to the king and narrate the entire episode. The king plans to put him on further tests and says: "You are fortunate that you managed to escape this time, but withdrawing the royal order is out of question" (19). The king once again issues his orders: "Take this cunning guy to the outskirts of the town, bury him up to his neck and get his head trampled under the feet of an elephant. And take care to see that he does not manage to escape this time" (19). This time death seems inevitable for Tenali as the king has laid down the method of executing his order of death punishment awarded to Tenali. But once again, Tenali Ram evades the impending death by applying his wit. When Tenali is buried in the ground up to

his neck, it seems impossible that Tenali would save himself from the death trap this time. Meanwhile, he happens to see a washer man passing by. Seeing Tenali Ram being buried up to his neck in the ground the washer man asks him: “What the hell are you doing young man? Why have you buried yourself?” (20). Quick witted Tenali Ram, devises a plan to evade death and replies:

Dear old man! Don't be surprised to see me in this position. I am in fact curing my hunchback. This was a problem that had made my life a hell. But now I am already feeling cured. I must thank the doctor who advised me to do so (20-21).

Having heard this way to cure hunchback, the washer man too desires to get his lump cured by taking the same treatment as he asks Tenali: “Can I also take the same treatment?” (21). Things start going the way Tenali planned. Responding to the question posed by the washer man Tenali states:

Yes, why not? My doctor has gone to the town and will be back in another three hours from now. Either wait for the doctor for three hours, or help me come out of the pit, and you yourself get into it to straighten your back (21).

The impatient washer man's temptation of getting his hunchback straightens puts him into the pit replacing Tenali Ram. Soon, each thing becomes crystal clear to the washer man when the guards reach there with the elephant. The washer man pleads the guards to pardon him and narrates the complete episode. The guards take him to the king's court where Tenali has already reached. The moment Tenali sees the washer man in the court; he himself explains to the king that how he applied his wit to get out of the mouth of death. Beatrice K. Otto quotes this anecdote in the book *Fool Are Everywhere* Natesa Sastri records this anecdote with a little variation:

The hunchback dug him (Tenali) out and, seeing his straight back, decided to try it for himself. Since it was dark by the time the elephant was brought, the hunchback was trampled. Tenali Rama merely commented that man's wife would be relieved to have lost her deformed husband – a rare sign of brutality from the more usually compassionate jester (Sastri 4-5).

However, the king feels delighted to take the fact that his jester has not died after all. Behaving kindly, the king does order pension to be paid to hunchback's widow. Moreover, Tenali's wit impresses the king more than before. King Krishan Dev Rai bursts into laughter and congratulates Tenali for applying his wit according to the circumstances. The king showers his praise upon Tenali and desires to appoint him as one of his ministers. Tenali thanks the king for the words of praise and at the same time showed his inability to become a minister citing the reason “I have been blessed by goddess Kali to become a jester. I am afraid I shall not be able to carry out the responsibilities of a minister” (22). The open defiance to the king's desire wins insurmountable amount of wrath from the king. The king shouts: “How dare you defy my orders. Leave the court at once and don't show me your face again” (22). Next day, when the court proceedings are in full swing, there comes a strange person at the gate with an earthen pot on his head which has two holes. The king asks this person to disclose his identity. The person wearing the earthen pot speaks: “I am your jester, Mr. Lord” (23). This infuriates the king the most and

he speaks in a thundering voice: “But why have you covered your face with an earthen pot? And how dare you come back” (23). Tenali counters the king’s anger with politeness and precise use of language: “My Lord! You never said that I should not come back. You only asked me not to show my face to you. And hence I have covered my face” (23). These words not only pacify the anger of the king but shows that Tenali Ram makes the most of the linguistic ambivalence.

There are anecdotes concerning the king sending the courtiers in exile – both in case of Tenali and Birbal. However, both of them sidestep the orders of exile through their trick. This facet of jesterdom is not limited to the Indian context alone. It is observed as a global phenomenon of jesterdom by Shulman as he comments:

When jesters were banished, they were often ordered either never again to show their faces or never again to set foot in the area, and these two commands, open to literal interpretation, were commonly obeyed to the letter and flouted in spirit. When Tenali Rama was ordered by the king never to show his face in court again, he simply covered his head with a pot and reappeared (*King and the Clown* 190).

There goes a narrative which has a similar structure. One day, King Akbar receives repeated summons from one of the queens who has been very dear to him. Therefore, not being able to take the risk of offending the dearest queen, Akbar leaves the court when court proceedings are in the full swing. While leaving the court for the palace, Akbar observes Birbal trying to hide his smile. Birbal’s smile makes the king feel humiliated orders: “Birbal, You leave this place at once and never set your foot on this land again or else you shall lose your life” (Vishwa Nath 13). With passing away of time, king’s anger too subsides and the king starts missing Birbal. While watching the world outside through the window of his palace, Akbar sees Birbal passing by. The Badshah orders the cart be stopped and addresses Birbal in an angry tone: “Why did you defy my orders?” (13). Birbal replies: “When I received your orders not to set foot on this land, I headed towards another place and spread the sands of the place upon my cart. Now, live on this and in this way, I am spending the rest of my life as per your wishes” (13). Birbal’s precise answer and innocent but wise behaviour earns his previous title from the king.

Lee Siegel records the entry of Tenali Ram in the royal court of king Krishan Dev Rai in his book. Siegel mentions that Tenali Ram gets his position of a jester by making the King Krishan Dev Rai laugh. As per the anecdote mentioned in the book, Tenali forced the king’s guru to carry Tenali around on his shoulders within the sight of the king. The outraged king due to the humiliation of his guru, sends the guards out to beat the man riding on the guru’s shoulders. Further:

Tenali Rama, smelling impending danger, jumped down and begged forgiveness of the guru, insisting that to make amends he should carry him on his own shoulders. The guru agreed, and when the guards arrived the guru was duly beaten. The king found the trick amusing enough to appoint Tenali Rama his jester (Siegel 322).

There is found a rare occasion when angered Akbar asks Birbal to leave the court and not to return ever. Birbal reminds the king a promise that the king made to him once – Birbal would be

allowed to choose his own punishment in case he ever offends the king. On Birbal's reminder Akbar is annoyed but stands by his words. The conclusion is recoded in the words: "Birbal summoned the five poorest men in the city and asked them to decide his fate. They fined fifty rupees – a fortune to them, but peanuts to the jester" (Souza 54).

Through the case of the manner of the entry of Birbal and Tenalirama in the imperial courts of Mogul and Vijaynagar dynasties one finds: though these empires existed in the feudal era, yet it was in the reach of an ordinary men to enter the ministerial body solely on the basis of one's wit. This much of freedom makes these courts more democratic than the so called contemporary democratic setup. Thus, folk-wit enters the imperial court and blurs the boundary through a crossover between folk and feudal.

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