

AKBAR
and
BIRBAL

AMITA SARIN



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*To my grandfather
Rai Sahib Shyam Das Vohra*

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The Magic Sticks



Once, a wealthy merchant came to seek his friend Birbal's advice. He had noticed that every now and then, a money bag or two would be missing from his storeroom. As the room had not been broken into, it was obvious that someone who was familiar with the house was stealing the money. It had to be one of his ten servants. But which one? The merchant was a kind man who could not bear to accuse any of his trusted men of stealing unless he was absolutely sure. If he complained to the authorities, they would arrest all ten men, and question and beat them until one of them confessed.

Birbal came to his rescue and promised to help him catch the thief. He accompanied the merchant to his home and asked him to assemble all his servants. In his

hand he held a bundle of sticks, all of equal length. He gave one stick to each of the men.

"These are magic sticks," he told the servants. "Someone has been stealing money from this house. We do not believe that anyone of you is guilty, but these sticks will find the real thief. The stick that is held by the thief will grow one inch longer overnight. Tomorrow morning, when we compare the sticks, we will have the answer."

The servants were led to separate rooms to spend the night. The next morning, Birbal examined each man's stick and measured them all. One stick turned out to be an inch shorter than the others. Birbal pounced on the owner.

"This is our thief! His stick is one inch shorter than the rest."

"But . . . but . . ." the man blustered, "you said that the guilty man's stick would *grow* one inch, not become shorter."

"I said that because I knew that the guilty man would try to cut his stick short, thinking that it would grow one inch at night!" Birbal said triumphantly. "By cutting the stick short, you revealed your guilt."

The thief hung his head; he had nothing to say. The merchant was filled with admiration.