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# THE TALE OF THE BISHNOIS



Today Marwar is a treeless waste of sand and rocks. The only growing things are thorny shrubs, a few tufts of short rough grass and an occasional **stunted** ber or babul tree. But **incredibly** you can, even in this desert, come across the odd village with **groves** of well grown khejdi trees. This cousin of the babul is the kalpavriksha, the tree that fulfills all wishes. A full grown camel can enjoy a midday siesta in its shade, its **foliage** nourishes goat, sheep, cattle and camel; its pods can be made into a delicious curry, and its thorns guard the farmers' fields against **marauding** animals.

Once upon a time the desert of Marwar had not yet **conquered** the vast territory over which it holds **sway** today. Even though the climate was the same as it is today, the land was covered by thousands upon thousands of khejdi trees, and there was plenty of ber, ker, and sangri. These plains were home to thousands of **antelopes**, blackbuck, chinkara, and nilgai; and on this bounty lived the tribal Bhils.

About three thousand years ago, **hordes** of cattle keepers began to pour into India from West and Central Asia. Some of them spread into Marwar. The Bhils resisted their encroachment, but the invaders had horses and superior weapons and pretty soon, took care of the Bhils. In any case the land appeared boundless and the Bhils **retreated** a little towards the Aravallis. The population of Marwar was on the increase.

But as centuries passed, the large herds of cattle began to affect the vegetation. The seedlings and saplings were grazed down and had little chance to grow. **Invaders** and the tribal Bhils found less and less to sustain themselves. Finally, the thirteenth century AD saw the final **conquest** of the Bhils by the Rathores of Kanauj. The Rajputs now ruled the whole of Marwar.

In the year 1451 AD during the reign of Rao Jodhaji, one of the bravest of the Rathore kings, an extraordinary child was born in the village of Pipasar. His father was the headman Thakur Lohat and his mother was Hamsadevi. The boy was called Jambaji. As a little boy, he was given the task of looking after his father's large herd of cattle and sheep. It was great fun to take the animals out grazing, lie in the shade of a khejdi tree and watch the herds of blackbuck. Jambaji was fascinated by the **lithe** grace

of this handsome antelope, and thought that there was no sight more **enthralling** than a fight between two well-grown stags.

When Jambaji was twenty-five years old, a great **disaster** overtook the whole region. The small quantity of rain that used to come regularly ceased altogether. The worst sufferers were the cattle. In the first year of **drought**, they could eat the bajra straw stored in the houses. The second year was very bad. There was not a blade of grass left standing anywhere. People **hacked** at any trees they could find and fed the animals on the leaves, but even so there was not enough **browse** for all the hungry animals. And the drought continued for eight **consecutive** years.

The people had hacked and hacked the last bit of foliage from all the trees, which finally began to dry up. When the stored grain was exhausted people ate khejdi pods and the flour of dried ber seeds. When this too was exhausted, they tore the bark off the sangri trees and powdered and cooked it. They hunted every one of the starving blackbucks, and finally they **abandoned** all hope and migrated in masses. Tens of thousands of cattle **perished** on the way. By now the whole country was barren. There was not a tree in sight for miles together, nor a single cow, or a blackbuck. The only people to hold on were big landlords like Jambaji's father with huge stores of bajra that somehow lasted through the difficult times.

Jambaji was much affected by this drought. Many were the nights he spent in wakefulness because of the suffering he saw around him. The dying cattle, the starving children : they haunted him day and night. And finally, at the age of thirty-four, he had a vision. He saw man **intoxicated** with his own power, destroying the world around him. And he decided to change it all. If life was to flourish again in this **desolate** land, Jambaji saw that man would have to live in a different way, and according to different tenets and beliefs. Jambaji wanted the earth to be covered once again by an abundance of khejdi, ber, ker and sangri trees, he wanted herds of blackbuck to **frollic** again, and he wanted men to work for this. Jambaji knew the way to achieve this, and he began to broadcast his message in the year 1485.

His message included twenty nine basic **tenets**. Its two major commandments were a prohibition against the cutting down of any green tree or the killing of any animal. Jambaji's message of humanity and respect for all living things was eagerly accepted. His teachings **prompted** the inhabitants of hundreds of villages to reclothe

the earth with its green cover.

Jambaji's followers were called Bishnois or 'twenty-niners' (bis=twenty, noi=nine) because they **adhered** to Jambaji's twenty-nine precepts. They preserved the trees around their villages and protected blackbucks, chinkaras, peafowl and all other birds and animals. Gradually their territory became covered by trees, their cattle had abundant browse, their land recovered its fertility and the Bishnois became a prosperous people.

But outside their territory, all continued as before. The land was still being stripped of its green cover and the desert was spreading. The ninth descendant of Jambaji's contemporary Rao Jodhaji now occupied the throne of Jodhpur.

In the sixth year of his reign in 1730, this Maharajah, Abhay Singh, decided to construct a palace for himself - a beautiful palace made of the famous red sandstone of Jodhpur. This would need a lot of lime. Limestone is, of course, quite abundant in this tract, but it had to be cured, and the lime **kilns** would need a lot of fuel.

It was not an easy job to get so much fuel in the desert. But as luck would have it, there was a large settlement of Bishnois just sixteen miles from Jodhpur. These people had accepted Jambaji's precepts nearly two and a half centuries ago and had nursed hundreds of khejdi trees near their villages. And there was excellent limestone too near one of their villages - Khejadali. Abhay Singh's Diwan ordered that the lime kilns be started near Khejadali to begin the construction of the palace.

But when the workers got ready to cut the trees for fuel, they found that the Bishnois would not let them touch the trees. Their khejdi trees must be left alone, to cut these green trees was a violation of their religion. The workers returned to Jodhpur. The Diwan was **enraged**. What **insolence!** He personally accompanied the workers on horseback to Khejadali village and ordered that the trees be cut.

The axes were raised and the whole village gathered. They begged that their religion be not **desecrated**. They pleaded for the preservation of trees that their ancestors had nurtured over generations. But the Diwan was determined: the trees must be cut to fuel the lime kilns. He ordered the workers to go ahead. But the Bishnois were determined too, and the most determined among them was a **veritable incarnation** of Durga - Amritadevi, the wife of Bishnoi Ramkhod. The trees will never be cut down unless you cut us down first, she said, and calling to her three daughters to join her, they clasped four of the trees. The Diwan fumed and ordered that all four of

them be cut down with the trees. The axes fell and the brave women were cut to pieces. But the Bishnois were not to be cowed. More and more of them came forward to hug the trees and to be cut down with them. The news of this **massacre** spread rapidly and thousands of Bishnois rushed from their eighty-four surrounding villages to help their brave brothers and sisters. Altogether 363 Bishnois sacrificed their lives to guard their sacred heritage.

The Maharajah's men, who had never imagined that things could come to such a pass were now truly frightened. They rushed back to Jodhpur to report happenings to Abhay Singh. Abhay Singh saw clearly that the might which had successfully challenged the power of Aurangzeb, could do nothing in the face of such moral courage. He personally rode to Khejadali to mend matters. He assured the weeping, agonised mass of thousands of Bishnois that from now on he would fully respect their religious principles. A copper plate inscribed with this promise was presented to the Bishnois. Henceforth, the **inscription** said, no green tree would ever be cut near Bishnoi village, nor would any animals be hunted in their **vicinity**.

Two and a half centuries have passed since this episode. Bishnois have now been guarding the trees, giving **succour** to the wild animals of Rajasthan, Haryana and Madhya Pradesh for nearly five centuries. Everywhere else, the green cover of the Indian subcontinent has been **ravaged** and continues to be destroyed at an ever accelerating pace. The thousands upon thousands of blackbuck that once roamed the Indian plains have all vanished without a trace. But near the few Bishnoi villages the greenery not only persists, but also is ever on the increase and around their villages the blackbucks roam as freely as in Kalidasa's time near the ashram of sage Kanva. Akbar was so amazed to see these herds of fearless blackbucks near Bishnoi temples that he personally recorded his wonder at witnessing a scene from satyayuga, the age of truth, in this kaliyuga, the corrupt present.

The sight is even more astonishing for us today than it was for the emperor Akbar four centuries ago, for the Bishnois continue to hold on to their magnificent **obsession** to this day. At the village Khejadali where the Bishnois passed the supreme test of fire, there is one ancient Khejadi tree which escaped that massacre. Two years ago, the Bishnois planted 363 more trees around it in memory of their 363 **martyrs**. And these trees, being nurtured with love as they are, are growing fast. Every year there is a religious fair at this spot five days before the full moon in the month of

Bhadrapada. It is an occasion which every tree lover of India should witness at least once in his lifetime.

**Madhav Gadgil**

**About the Author:**

Madhav Dhananjaya Gadgil (born 1942) is an Indian ecologist, academician, writer, columnist and the founder of the Centre for Ecological Science. He is a recipient of the Volvo Environment Prize. The Govt. of India awarded him the fourth highest civilian award of the Padma Shri in 1981 and also the Padma Bhushana in 2006.

**About the Text :**

This tale is about the Bishnoi community that brought a drastic change in the ecology of Marwar in Rajasthan. This area had been very dry for centuries where trees and animals were not in a sufficient number. The Bishnois sacrificed their lives to guard the Khejdi trees and did a big plantation in the area. They contributed a great deal to protect birds and animals.

**GLOSSARY :**

stunted (adj)	:	not fully developed
incredibly (adv)	:	hard to believe
groves (n)	:	a small wood/ plantation
foliage (n)	:	plant leaves collectively / leafage
marauding (adj)	:	going about in search of things to steal / raiding / attacking
conquered (v)	:	captured / seized
sway (n)	:	rule / control
antelopes (n)	:	blackbucks / animal like a deer
hordes (n)	:	a large group of people / crowd
retreated (v)	:	moved back / withdrew
invaders (n)	:	encroachers
conquest (n)	:	victory

lithe (n)	:	moving with ease
enthraling (adj)	:	holding one's attention / beautiful
disaster (n)	:	an event resulting in great loss and misfortune
drought (n)	:	shortage of rainfall
hacked (v)	:	cut
browse (n)	:	leaves etc for eating
consecutive (adj)	:	continuity, serially
abandoned (v)	:	left
perished (v)	:	died
haunted (v)	:	unpleasant thoughts coming to mind
intoxicated (v)	:	excited
desolate (adj)	:	hopeless/ lonely
frolic (n)	:	amusement / fun
tenets (n)	:	principles
prompted (v)	:	motivated / activated
adhered to (p.v.)	:	followed
kilns (n)	:	furnace to prepare bricks or building material
enraged (v)	:	got very angry
insolence (n)	:	shamelessness / disrespect
desecrated (v)	:	misused / abused
veritable (adj)	:	real / actual
incarnation (n)	:	representing qualities of God / Avatar
massacre (n)	:	killing of many people
inscription (n)	:	carve into a surface / record
vicinity (n)	:	nearness
succour (n)	:	help
ravaged (v)	:	damaged badly
obsession (n)	:	thing that somebody thinks about too much
martyr (n)	:	one who suffers death for the sake of



7. What were the two major commandments of Jambaji's message?
8. Why were Bishnois called by this name?
9. What is the use of lime kilns?
10. Why did Diwan send his men to Khejadali?
11. What promise did Abhay Singh make to Bishnois?
12. What was written on the inscription presented to Bishnois?

**D. Answer the following questions in 60 words each :**

1. What was the disaster Marwar faced when Jambaji was twenty five years old?
2. How did Jambaji's teaching affect the villagers?
3. What did Bishnois sacrifice their lives for?
4. How did Bishnois save the trees?
5. Why were Abhay Singh's men frightened?
6. What made Abhay Singh visit Khejadali?
7. What do you learn from this tale?
8. What impressions do you get from the action of Diwan? What would you have done if you had been in place of Diwan?
9. How did Abhay Singh console the enraged Bishnois ?
10. What message was inscribed on the copper plate ?

**ACTIVITY 2: VOCABULARY :**

- A. The negative prefix 'in' is more often used with words of Latin origin whilst 'un' is more frequently found with words of English origin.

Example: **credible – incredible**

**lucky – unlucky**

Now make the following words negative by adding the prefix 'in' or 'un' :

Well, covered, humanity, fertility, quantity, comfortable, affected, die, convenient, acceptable, different, bearable, eligible, reasonable.

- B. We can interchange nouns, verbs, adjectives, adverbs with the help of suffixes.

Example: **human – ity = humanity**

**girl – ish = girlish**

Example : Jambaji's message of humanity was eagerly accepted.

Given below are some suffixes. Use them with the following words appropriately making slight changes in spelling where it is necessary. Use them in your own sentences:

-ly, -able, -ful, -less, -ship, -hood, -dom, -ness, -ar, -or

**Suffixes :** Faith, rapid, consider, noise, mother, dictator, wise, hard, lie, donate.

C. Write one word beginning with the letter given, for the group of words put in bracket. The first one is done for you as an example.

1. Marwar is a treeless **waste** of sand and rocks. (land with very few plants or animals)
2. A camel can enjoy a midday **s**\_\_\_\_\_ in the shade of babul tree. (rest or sleep in the early afternoon)
3. The cattle were the worst sufferers in the first year of **d**\_\_\_\_\_. (dry or no rainfall at all)
4. Jambaji wanted the region to be covered again by an **a**\_\_\_\_\_ of Khejdi, Ber, Ker etc. (in sufficient quantity)
5. Shelly and Keats were **c**\_\_\_\_\_ poets. (belonging to the same period)
6. Abhay Singh wanted to construct a beautiful **p**\_\_\_\_\_ for himself. (official home of kings)
7. We should pay due regards to our **a**\_\_\_\_\_ from time to time. (forefathers who lived a long time ago)
8. Bishnois celebrate the memory of their **m**\_\_\_\_\_ by planting more and more trees. (persons killed because of beliefs)

D. Two groups of words are given here. Make compound words choosing suitable words from each group like **horseback, nine twenty**.

Group (1): black, lender, office, fourth, sand, continent, moon, tree, life, four, some, lords, over, ordinary

Group (2): money, stone, buck, hence, sub, hour, full, lover, time, how, land, took, eighty, extra

**E. Homophones:** also known as sound-alike words, are words that are pronounced identically although they have different meaning and different spellings as well, for example ‘cattle’ and ‘kettle’, ‘plain’ and ‘plane’. Try to find out some more homophones (at least two) in the lesson you have read. Find their homophones using dictionary. Also try to find the homophones of the following words.

Sight, four, won, would, piece, their, heir, allowed, rose, two.

### **ACTIVITY 3: GRAMMAR**

#### **ACTIVE AND PASSIVE VOICE**

**Look at the following sentences:-**

- (i) King Abhay Singh presented a copper plate to the Bishnois.
- (ii) A copper plate was presented to the Bishnois by King Abhay Singh.

In the first sentence the subject of the verb acts, so the verb is said to be in **Active voice**.

In the second sentence the subject of the verb is acted upon, therefore the verb is said to be in Passive Voice. It is the verb that is expressed in the active or in the passive voice.

**When do we use the passive voice ?**

- (i) When we are more interested in the action than the doer of that action: e.g. The bank was looted yesterday. (The thieves looted the bank yesterday.)  
The burglar was caught in the house. (The house owner caught the burglar.)
- (ii) When we don't know the doer of action or when he/she can't be mentioned. e.g.  
The gate was opened. (Somebody opened the gate.)  
Five terrorists were killed in Kashmir. (The army killed five terrorists in Kashmir.)

There are certain rules to be followed when the verb of active voice is changed into passive voice.

- (i) The object of the verb in active voice becomes the subject of passive voice.  
Sita sings songs.

Songs are sung by Sita.

- (ii) Usually transitive verbs are passive voiced, but some intransitive verbs become transitive when a preposition is added to them and they can be passive voiced:

He aimed at a lion.

A lion was aimed at by him.

- (iii) When the verb in active voice has two objects (i.e. direct and indirect) either of them can be made subject in passive voice:

She gave me a gift.

I was given a gift by her.

A gift was given to me by her.

- (iv) We use 'let' while changing imperative sentences of active voice into passive voice. The construction of the sentence in passive voice will be as under:

Let + object + be + Past Participle.

E.g. open the door.

Let the door be opened.

Please sit down.

You are requested to sit down.

**If the imperative sentence is negative**

Let + object + not + be + past participle.

Don't shut it.

Let it not be shut.

- (v) Interrogative sentences in active voice are changed thus:

(a) Who found this box?

By whom was this box found?

(b) Why do you study English?

Why is English studied by you?

(c) Have you finished your homework?

Has your homework been finished by you?

(d) Do you like him?

Is he liked by you?

- (vi) If there is to infinitive in active voice, it is changed into perfect infinitive to form the sentence in passive voice:

It is time to leave the school.

It is time for the school to be left.

Or It is time to shut the mall.

It is time for the mall to be shut.

- (vii) Sentences having, modal auxiliaries in active voice are changed into passive voice thus:

Active: - The aux. + root form of the verb.

Passive: - The aux. + be + Past participle of the root verb

He can lift the box.

The box can be lifted by him.

May God bless you!

May you be blessed.

The teacher should punish the boys.

The boys should be punished by the teacher,

- (viii) Always keep in mind that pronouns are changed in voice thus:-

Subject in active

Object in passive

I

by me

We

by us

You

by you

He

by him

She

by her

They

by them(often omitted)

It

by it

Shyam

by Shyam

Always use past participle form of the verb of active voice to form passive

voice:

(x) Change of Tenses is followed thus:

(a) In the Present Simple Tense 'is', 'am', 'are' are used with the third form of the verb :

He reads English novels.

English novels are read by him.

(b) In the Past Simple Tense 'was', 'were', are used with the third form of the verb.

She taught English in schools.

English was taught in schools by her .

(c) In Future Simple Tense 'be' is used after 'shall/will' :

They will never harm us.

We will be never harmed by them.

(d) In Present continuous and Past continuous tenses 'being' is added to 'is', 'am', 'are', 'was', 'were' and the past participle form of the verbs is used:

The girls are watching the match.

The match is being watched by the girls.

The woman was cooking food.

Food was being cooked by the woman.

(e) In the Present Perfect , The Past Perfect and the Future Perfect Tenses 'been' is added to the perfect tense:

He has sent me a present.

I have been sent a present by him.

I will have written this matter by now.

This matter will have been written by me by then.

Note: There is no passive voice in Future Continuous, and all the Perfect Continuous form of the Present , the Past and the future tenses.

### **EXERCISE**

**A. Change the following sentences into passive voice. Omit the agent.**

1. Somebody had put out the light.

2. People serve ice-cream with meal.
3. They are expecting good news.
4. They admire the bravery of the Indian soldiers.
5. The Principal has dissolved the committee.
6. The Election commission announces elections for the state assemblies.
7. People hold honesty as the best policy.

**B. Convert the following sentences into passive form:**

1. The teacher has appointed him monitor.
2. I opened the door.
3. He can lift the box.
4. Why do you suspect me?
5. Are they offering him a chair?
6. Whom do we like most?
7. Who wrote Macbeth?
8. Put him this question.
9. Show him the way.
10. Don't tease her.
11. Give him a suitable reply.
12. Has someone informed the police?
13. Everyone believed that the movement was a failure.
14. People think that the government is working well.

**(C) Convert the following sentences from Passive to Active Voice :**

1. Khejdi trees are not allowed to cut in Rajasthan.
2. The green cover of the Indian sub continent has been ravaged.
3. Bishnois were not to be cowed.
4. Jambhaji's followers were called Bishnois.
5. The door was painted green by him.
6. By whom is English taught to you ?
7. He was given the task of looking after his puppy.

#### **ACTIVITY 4 : SPEECH ACTIVITY**

Divide the whole class into four to six groups/pairs. Each group will discuss the **contribution of Bishnois to protect the ecology of the desert** amongst them and then the each team leader would present their views before the whole class.

#### **ACTIVITY 5 : COMPOSITION**

1. Write a paragraph in about 150 words on '**Trees are essential for our life**'.
2. Write a short paragraph on '**Importance of animals**'.