

From our Cultural & Literary Heritage

Paradise for a Loaf of Bread

M.K.Raina



[There is a phrase in Kashmiri we often use in our conversation. It says 'tsôchivâris janath tshàndún' - 'Asking paradise for the cost of a bread'. How did this phrase evolve? Read the story below.]

Haroon Rashid was an Arabian Caliph. He had one brother. His name was Bahlol. Bahlol was a simple man, a mendicant and he lived by begging. One day, he went to a King's palace and asked for some food. Shabbily clothed and entering the palace without permission, King asked his counsellors to throw him out, and so they did. King also ridiculed him.

Next day, Bahlol went into a forest. Hungry and exhausted, he sat under a tree and rested a while. Then he collected some wooden pegs and started fixing them into the ground in a pattern. The Queen, seated on her royal carriage, passed by. On seeing Bahlol busy with something, she alighted from her carriage to meet him. She already had the knowledge of his ill-treatment at the hands of her husband.

Queen asked, "O Darvesh, what are you doing?"

Bahlol replied, "Building Paradise".

Queen was amused. She said, "Will you sell it to me?"

Bahlol replied, "Why not?"

Queen asked, "What is the price?"

"One loaf of bread", said Bahlol. Queen agreed. She knew Bahlol's words had no meaning. He was hungry and wanted something to eat.

Queen handed a loaf of bread to Bahlol and watched him eating it, passionately. On finishing, Bahlol collected the grounded pegs, made them into a bundle and

handed it to the Queen. Queen went away, quite pleased, not because she got the paradise, but because she fed a hungry Bahlol.

On reaching her palace, the Queen related Bahlol's story to her husband, the King. King had a nasty look at the bundle of wooden pegs and laughed at the wisdom of his wife. Queen did not say anything. She carried the bundle to her room and secured it on a shelf.

King was fast asleep. He saw a dream. He was standing in front of a high stone wall with a big gate. There were guards standing in front of the gate. They would not allow him to come closer. King peeped through the small opening in the gate, from a distance. Behind the gate, he saw a spacious and beautiful garden with all kinds of fruit bearing trees and flowery plants. He also saw meandering streams inside, carrying crystal clear water and honey. Colourful birds were resting on trees and chirping. It was really a paradise.

Some distance away, under the shade of a big tree, there was a lady with royal robes and diamonds on her, sitting graciously on a throne made of gold. Near her, gorgeously dressed maids were in service and on guard. King looked with curiosity. He wanted to see who the lady was, but could not see her face. He requested guards to allow him to come a little closer. Guards agreed. As soon as he came closer to the opening, the lady looked right into his eyes with a mysterious smile on her face. The King was amazed. It was his queen only.

The King asked the guards, "Which place is it and how is that lady there?" "It is the Paradise and the lady has recently purchased it", replied the guards. King was greatly amused. He wanted to cry with joy and tell the guards that she was his queen. But no sooner than he opened his mouth, he was awake. He was still on his bed in the palace. He looked around. The queen was in deep sleep but her face had the same mysterious smile on her face as in the paradise.

Next day, King visited the forest, his wife had told him about. Bahlol was busy, playing with wooden pegs. King came nearer and asked, "What are you doing Darvesh?"

Bahlol replied, "Building Paradise".

King said, "Will you sell it to me?"

Bahlol replied, "Why not?"

King asked, "What is the price?"
"Seven treasures of seven kings", said Bahlol.

King was shocked. He never expected such a reply from Bahlol. He said, "But yesterday, you sold it only for a loaf of bread."

Bahlol said, "Yes. I sold it for a loaf of bread only because she did not know what I was selling. You have already had a glimpse of the Paradise, so this price." King left the place hanging his head in shame. He was fully aware how he had ridiculed Behlol the other day.

*[Material source : 'kähiri talmih', a publication of J&K Academy of Art, Culture & Languages, Srinagar, Rewritten in Devanagari-Kashmiri at www.mkraina.com.
English Translation: M.K.Raina].*