

Nehru Bal Pustakalaya

Better than the Best

Ramendra Kumar

Illustrations

Khalid Bin Sohail



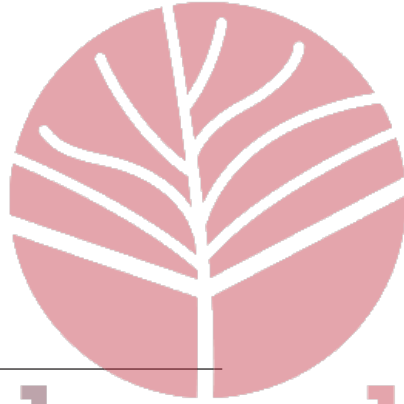
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NATIONAL BOOK TRUST, INDIA



ISBN 978-81-237-5093-4

First Edition 2007

Reprints 2009, 2012, 2013, 2014, 2019 (twice),
2020 (*Saka* 1941)

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₹ 35.00

Published by the Director, National Book Trust, India
Nehru Bhawan, 5 Institutional Area, Phase-II
Vasant Kunj, New Delhi-110 070

www.nbtindia.gov.in

nbt.india

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Thirty-five year old Gautam was sitting in the Krishna temple on the outskirts of his village, thirty-five miles from Lucknow.

He was watching two urchins playing with a mongrel under a banyan tree.

Suddenly one of the boys said something to the other who nodded in agreement. The first boy removed a ball from his pocket and issued instructions to the dog. He threw the ball, which, as far as Gautam could gather, was made of a paste of wild fruits and leaves. The ball landed at a distance of hundred metres.





The boy yelled, “Go.” His friend and the mongrel shot off. In the beginning the dog seemed to be leading. But slowly the boy began to close in. The boy reached the target ahead of the dog. He picked up the ball, turned around and headed straight back, his feet literally flying. By the time he reached the banyan tree and collapsed, the dog was still a good three metres behind him.

As Gautam watched the strange race, his heart started racing in excitement.

“Who are these two?” he asked the Pujari, who was sitting beside him.

“The boy who threw the ball is Lakhan, the cobbler’s son and the fellow who ran is Krishna, an orphan. He was left on the steps of this temple around twelve years ago. I named him after the Lord, whose blessing he is. Since then he has grown up here, eating the *prasad* of the temple,

sometimes helping me in the daily *puja* but more often just roaming around playing the fool.”

“Can you call him? I want to talk to him.”

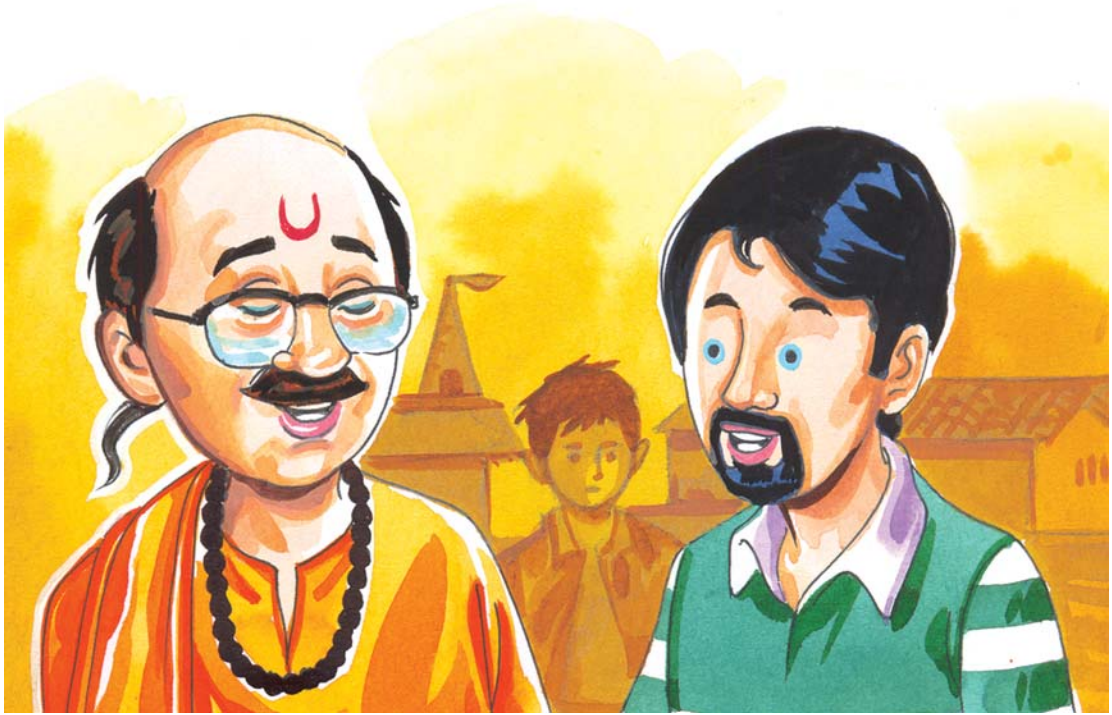
“Sure,” the Pujari replied and shouted, “Krishna, come here. Gautam *babu* wants to talk to you.”

Krishna ran towards where they were sitting and stood looking at Gautam with the natural curiosity of a twelve year old.

Gautam looked at him carefully. Krishna was quite tall for his age, with a lean but wiry physique. He had long legs which seemed sturdy enough to give him speed and stamina.

“Krishna can you run as fast as you have ever run in your life, touch the tree and come back?” Gautam asked.





“Yes.” Krishna stared at Gautam, wondering what the stranger was up to.

Gautam looked at his watch and shouted, “Start!”

Krishna’s legs simply flew. He touched the banyan tree which was around fifty metres from his starting point and came back.

Gautam looked at his watch and nodded to himself pleased with his little experiment.

The next day Gautam again went to the temple and spoke to the Pujari.

“Baba, let me come straight to the point. You, like the other villagers know me only as the zamindar Rai Saheb’s son with landed property and more or less a fixed income. But there is another side to me. In my school career I was a champion athlete. Later, I was appointed by the Uttar Pradesh Athletic Federation as the State athletics coach for

school students. I was doing rather well with my boys and girls shining on the national scene. Last year one of my students failed a drug test."

"What is that?" the Pujari asked.

"Some times sportsmen take drugs to enhance their performance."

"What is wrong with that? In our times also the *pehelwans* used to take *ghee*, milk, *badam*, etc. in ample measure, to increase their strength," the Pujari said.

"*Baba* there is a difference. The stuff which you mentioned is a part of a diet which anyone or everyone can take. The drugs I am talking about are banned substances which when taken give an unfair advantage to the person who consumes them."

The Pujari nodded his head. "Yes, I think I am beginning to understand. What happened next?"

"Well once the student was caught, there was a huge uproar and I was accused of giving him the drug. They sacked me immediately without even giving me a chance to defend myself."

"Could you find out who had given the child the drug?"

"It was his father; an ambitious doctor who thought that if his son came first and broke the national record, his future would be made."

"But then why didn't you report it to the people who sacked you?"

"I had no proof."

"Gautam *babu* where does Krishna come into all this?"

"Krishna is a natural athlete. He is a fantastic runner. If

his skills are honed he can become a champion. I want to take him to Lucknow, groom him and then make him participate at the national level. I am confident that he would do well.”

The Pujari thought for some time. “See Gautam *babu*, Krishna is an orphan. The only person he can call his own is me. But let me tell you clearly, he has a mind of his own. You can talk to him and if he agrees I’ll have no objection. I’ll surely miss him but if by being with you he can make something of his life, I’ll be the happiest person.”

“*Baba* I feel you should first talk to him. You know me since my childhood. If you vouch that I’ll take care of him, he will easily be convinced. I’ll come tomorrow morning and if he agrees I’ll take him with me.”

The next day when Gautam reached the temple he found Krishna waiting for him, an old and battered suitcase in his





hand and a wide grin on his dark and round face.

They bid goodbye to *Baba* and left by Gautam's motor bike for Lucknow.

Two days later Krishna's routine started in real earnest. He would get up in the morning at six. From six-thirty to seven Gautam taught him yoga. From seven to eight Krishna would practice running. After completing other chores and having breakfast, Krishna would get down to study by nine.

Gautam had engaged a teacher who would come home and teach Krishna all the basic subjects. In the evening from four to seven Krishna would again practice his sprints

under the ever watchful eyes of Gautam. His training would include lots of stretching exercises and a spot of football as well. He would end the day by finishing his homework. By the time Krishna would go to bed it would be ten.

A month went by and Gautam was quite satisfied with Krishna's progress.

A week later, one morning Gautam got up a bit earlier than usual and looked around. Krishna wasn't sleeping in his usual spot. In fact his bed didn't even look slept in. He went inside. Krishna's suitcase was missing.

Gautam quickly changed, locked the house and took out his bike. By nine he was in the temple.



“Beta, Krishna arrived late last night,” the Pujari told him even before Gautam could ask anything.

“But why did he come away without telling me?”

“I am calling Krishna. It is better you ask him.”

A couple of minutes later Krishna was standing in front of Gautam, a sullen and defiant expression on his face.

“What happened Krishna? Why did you run away without informing me.”

“I...I don’t want to stay in Lucknow. I am happier here in the village.”

“What! I can’t believe this! Krishna your future is with me in Lucknow. You have tremendous potential and I can make you a champion athlete. Why do you want to ruin your life here?”

“One month with you was enough for me. From morning till night I felt as if I was in a jail.”

“But Krishna I was doing all that for you, to make you a champion.”

“You were doing everything not for me but for yourself. Baba told me your story. You want to prove to people you are a champion coach. That is why you want to make me a champion athlete.”

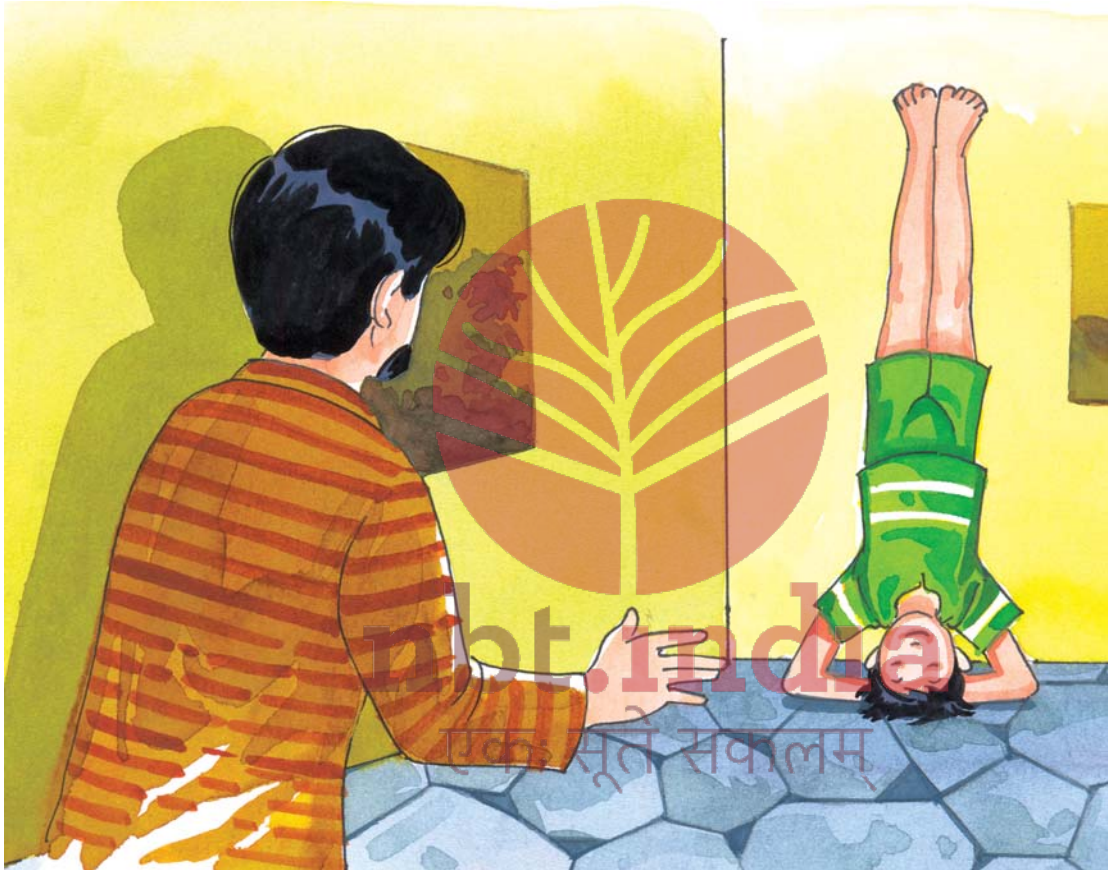
“You are partly right. When I first saw you I thought in you I had someone who could bring glory to me. But believe me, after staying with you for a month my view has changed. Now I don’t see you merely as a trainee to be coached. I see a lot of me in you. I too was like you—raw, untapped talent. During my school days I was considered the best and a national champ in the making. However,

after school I did not get a proper coach and my talent was wasted. I don't want the same thing to happen to you."

Gautam looked at Krishna who stood staring at the ground, his expression still sullen.

Gautam shrugged, turned and walked back, his shoulders sagging.

The next day Gautam got up. He was feeling quite low. Without Krishna the house looked empty and gloomy. Just then he heard a noise and peeped out. In the veranda Krishna was sitting performing *sheershasana*—his favourite pose.





Days flew by and Krishna showed steady improvement. Gautam was training him in 100 metres, 200 metres and long jump. There was an abandoned field close by and that was now Krishna's training ground. Gautam had got a track prepared and a pit made for long jump.

In November the Uttar Pradesh athletic meet was held. Krishna came second in 100 metres and long jump, and fifth in 200 metres. Gautam was disappointed but didn't show it.

"Great performance Krishna. You have qualified for the nationals in 100 metres and long jump. I think your lack of experience put you behind a little bit or else you could have done better. Anyway now that we know where you stand we have to try that much harder."

The national meet was three months away and during these ninety odd days Krishna worked as he had never worked before. Every waking moment except when he was engaged in studies, he was absorbed in thinking about the athletic championship.

Soon the big day arrived. The very first event was long jump. Krishna made it to the finals which were the next day. In the finals all the athletes were given eight chances. Krishna's first two jumps were fouls. He got nervous and started taking his jump quite a bit behind the starting line. As a result he ended up a poor sixth. He was shattered.



“Relax, my boy. This is not the end of the world. Tomorrow is the big race—the hundred metres heats and finals will be held the same day. You have to put your heart and soul and make it to the top three.”

Next morning Krishna won the heats and qualified for the finals. In the finals there were eight participants out of whom four had recorded timings better than his, in the recent past.

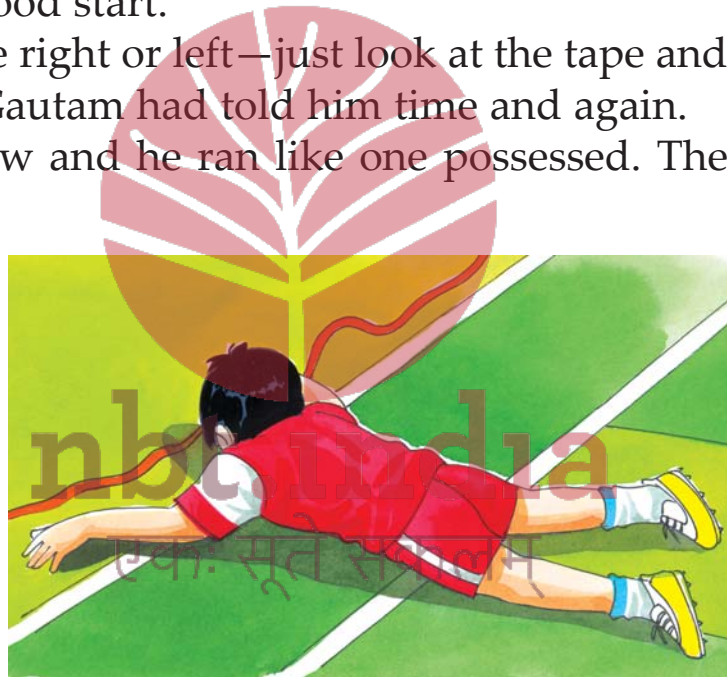
As he took his position, for a fraction of a second Krishna looked up. Gautam’s face was tense—his eyes were closed as if he was offering a silent prayer. Krishna knew he had to do something out of the ordinary—not for himself—but for this selfless man who had literally stopped living for himself over the last sixteen months.

The starting gun went and Krishna took off. He sensed that he had had a good start.

“Don’t look to the right or left—just look at the tape and run for your life,” Gautam had told him time and again.

Krishna’s legs flew and he ran like one possessed. The tape seemed to be coming at him first slowly, then faster and then finally it crashed into him as he collapsed on the ground.

He didn’t know whether he had won or lost—all he





knew was that he had tried his best.

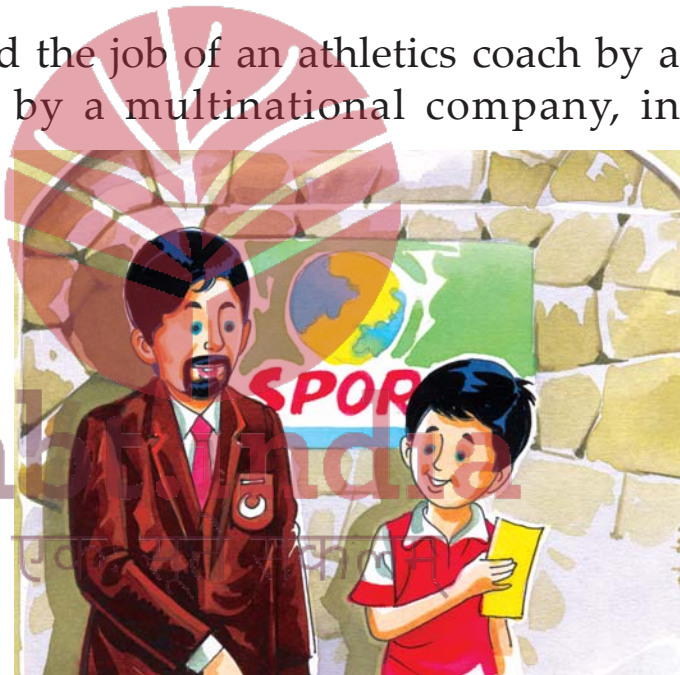
Someone was picking him up and hugging him. It was Gautam.

“My God Krishna! You have performed a miracle. You have broken the national record for 100 metres in the under twelve category. You were

simply fantastic. I have been timing you for the last sixteen months and you have bettered your best by two full seconds!”

Gautam hugged him again as he led him to the victory podium.

Gautam was offered the job of an athletics coach by a sports academy run by a multinational company, in Lucknow and he accepted. Krishna joined the academy on a scholarship and is considered one of its brightest prospects not only in 100 metres but also in 200 metres and long jump.





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