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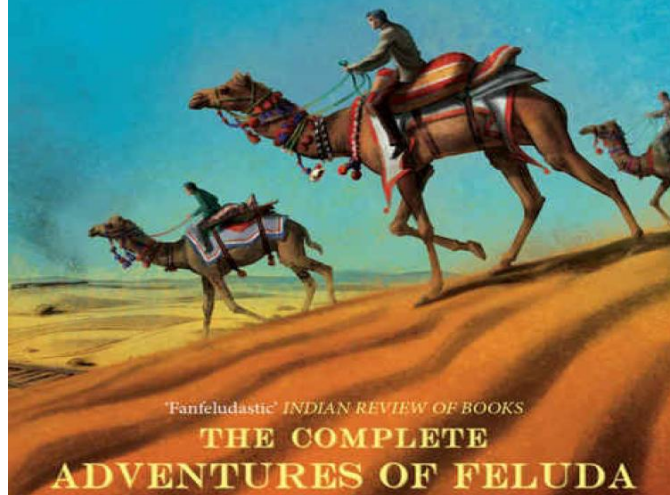
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# SATYAJIT RAY



'Fanfeludastic' *INDIAN REVIEW OF BOOKS*

**THE COMPLETE  
ADVENTURES OF FELUDA**

# The Mystery of the Elephant God

## One

Lalmohan Babu—alias Jatayu—broke open a groundnut carefully, and promptly transferred its contents into his mouth. Then he dropped the shell into an ashtray, rubbed his hands and asked, ‘Have you ever seen the Vijaya Dashami celebrations in Varanasi? You know, when Durga Puja ends and all the idols are immersed in the river at Dashashwamedh Ghat?’

Feluda was sitting with a chessboard in front of him, and a book called Great Games of Chess by his side. He had recently started playing chess by himself. Jatayu had arrived when he was almost halfway through the game. He told Srinath, our cook, to bring a fresh pot of tea and began answering Jatayu’s questions between moves.

‘No,’ he replied briefly.

‘Oh, it’s . . . it’s really a spectacular affair! You can’t imagine what it’s like!’

Feluda made the last move, stared for a second at the board and asked, ‘Are you trying to . . . tempt me?’

‘Well, yes, you’ve guessed it. Heh!’

‘In that case, Lalmohan Babu, you’ll have to describe the scene much better than that. What you just said won’t do at all.’

‘Why?’ Lalmohan Babu raised his eyebrows.

Feluda began putting the chessmen away. ‘Because,’ he said, ‘the word “spectacular” does not, by itself, evoke an image. It doesn’t explain why Vijaya Dashami is special. You are a writer, Lalmohan Babu. You should be able to be a bit more graphic.’

‘Yes, you’re right, of course,’ said Lalmohan Babu quickly. ‘It was nearly twenty-five years ago, you see, when I saw the celebrations. So the details are a little hazy in my mind. But I still remember both my eyes and ears being dazzled by what I saw.’

‘There you are! You said it. Eyes and ears. Your description should have something that appeals to one’s senses.’

‘What?’

‘Yes. Try to think of exactly what you saw or heard or even smelt! Don’t look so surprised. A particular place has a particular smell, haven’t you noticed? The little alley that leads to the Vishwanath temple in Varanasi smells of incense, flowers, cow dung, dust and sweat. If you came out of the alley and began walking towards the river, you’d pass through a relatively smell-free zone, until you came face to face with a herd of goats. The smell would then be most unpleasant, I can tell you. But then you’d walk on and would soon be greeted with another scent which would be a mixture of the scent of the earth, water, oil, sandalwood, flowers and more incense.’

‘Hey, that means you’ve been to Banaras!’

‘Yes, when I was in college. I’d gone to play in a cricket match with the Hindu University.’ Lalmohan Babu began fishing in his pocket.

‘The paper cutting you’re looking for,’ said Feluda, ‘slipped out of your pocket and fell on the floor as soon as you walked in. There it is, near that stool.’

‘Eh heh . . . when I took my handkerchief out, it must have . . .’ I picked it up and handed it to Lalmohan Babu.

‘Is it that story about the sadhubaba in Banaras?’ asked Feluda.

‘You knew!’ Lalmohan Babu complained. ‘Why didn’t you say something? Isn’t it a strange story? All very mysterious.’

I took the cutting back from him and read it. It said:

### **Machchli Baba in Varanasi**

*The arrival of a certain holy man in Varanasi last Thursday has created quite a stir. A senior resident of the city, Abhaycharan Chakravarty, was the first to meet this sadhu at Kedar Ghat and discover that he possessed very special supernatural powers. The sadhu has since been staying in Abhaycharan’s house. His devotees call him ‘Machchli Baba’. According to them, he arrived in Varanasi from Prayag, floating on the river.*

Yet another Wonder Man. The report did not strike me as anything extraordinary, but Lalmohan Babu was clearly very excited about it.

‘Just imagine!’ he said. ‘Maybe he began his journey from Tibet, right from the source of the Ganges. Oooh, the very thought gives me goosepimples!’

‘Who told you the source of the Ganges was in Tibet?’

‘Oh, I’m sorry. Do I mean the Brahmaputra? But never mind. The Ganges starts from the Himalayas, doesn’t it? Isn’t that good enough?’

‘Would you like to meet this man?’

‘Wouldn’t you? I mean, can’t you smell a mystery in all this? Machchli Baba—even the name is unique!’

‘Yes, the name is somewhat unusual, I admit,’ said Feluda, ‘but that’s about the only thing in that story that makes an impression. If one must go to Banaras, why should it be because of a certain sadhu? I would go back just to taste the *rabri* you can get in Kachauri Gali.’

‘And suppose you found that the man who makes the *rabri* was murdered by a person or persons unknown . . . and his blood had splashed on the white *rabri* and turned it pink—well, that would make your day, wouldn’t it? You’d have a case in Kashi, and earn some cash, ha! You haven’t been very busy lately, have you?’

This was true. For about three months Feluda had not accepted a single case, because none had been challenging enough. He had spent the time reading, doing yoga, trying to cut down on smoking, playing chess and seeing films. He even tried growing a beard for a week. On the eighth day, he had taken one look at himself in the mirror and reached for his razor.

‘Look,’ Lalmohan Babu continued, ‘you haven’t got a case, and I haven’t got a plot. For the first time, I couldn’t think up a plot good enough for the Puja sales. For the first time, there won’t be a new book by Jatayu for the pujas. I could have lifted ideas from foreign books and films and produced something anyhow, but I knew you would have caught me out. So I thought that if we could get out of Calcutta, maybe a few original ideas for a story would come floating along.’

‘All right. I’ll go with you. But there is a risk.’

‘What is that?’

‘Have you considered the possibility that a visit to Varanasi may well fail to provide you with a plot, and me with a case?’

Feluda was proved wrong. Lalmohan Babu did find a plot, although when his book eventually came out, the story sounded suspiciously like a certain Tintin comic.

And Feluda? He got a case that pitted him against the most cunning opponent he had ever had to deal with. He told me afterwards, 'All my life, Topshe, I had been waiting for a man like this. Fighting against such a man—and winning—worked like a tonic!'

The Calcutta Lodge stood by the side of a road that led to Dashashwamedh Ghat. It was a fifty-year-old hotel, run by Bengalis. Lalmohan Babu's cousin knew the manager and had made reservations for us. We arrived at about ten in the morning.

The manager, Niranjan Chakravarty, happened to be away. Another gentleman helped us check in, and a bearer took our luggage up to our room. The room turned out to be a mini-dormitory, with four beds in it. One of them had a suitcase under it, a bedroll carelessly rolled up, and a few clothes on a rack by the bed.

Feluda glanced at these objects and said, 'Lalmohan Babu, the sound of snoring doesn't disturb your sleep, I hope?'

'Why? You don't snore.'

'I'm not talking of myself. I mean our roommate.'

'You mean you have deduced that the man snores just by looking at his clothes and his suitcase?' 'No, I'm only making a guess. You see, usually it's large men who tend to snore. The size of this man's clothes suggests that his build isn't slight. And look, on that shelf over there is a bottle of nasal drops. So perhaps the man gets a blocked nose occasionally. That increases the chances of snoring.'

'My goodness! Is there anything else you've guessed about this man in these few seconds?'

'Well, you'll see that there isn't a shaving kit in sight. So unless he's hidden it somewhere, I'd say the fellow has a beard.'

A few minutes later, the bearer brought us tea. We took our cups and came out on the balcony. The road to Dashashwamedh Ghat stretched before us.

'If you were asked to leave Calcutta and come and settle here, do you think you could?' Feluda asked me.

I thought for a moment and said, 'No, I don't think so.' 'And yet, you're quite excited to be here, aren't you?'

Feluda was right. I wouldn't wish to spend my whole life in Banaras, but knowing that I would be spending only a little more than a week here, it seemed a very nice place to be in.

'Do you know why you feel like this? It's because you're thinking of the ancient traditions we associate with Banaras. Kashi, Banaras, Varanasi—each name evokes a special feeling, doesn't it? Not just because it's considered a holy place, but also because of the age of the city. Every old building could tell a story of its own. To a newcomer, that is what counts, no matter how dirty or filthy the place might be. That is the magic of Varanasi.'

Lalmohan Babu had slipped inside. Now he reappeared with a gentleman, who turned out to be Niranjan Babu, the manager of the hotel. About fifty years old, salt-and-pepper hair parted in the middle, his mouth slightly stained with the juice of a paan, he smiled as he greeted us.

'Lalmohan Babu has just told me who you are. It's a privilege to have you stay in our hotel. Come to my room, sir. Allow me to offer you another cup of tea.'

We trooped downstairs. With the tea came a plate of sweets. 'You must sign my own visitors' book,' said Niranjan Babu to Feluda. 'A number of famous people have stayed in this hotel. I would like to see your name added to the list.'

'I hope you're aware,' Feluda replied with a slight smile, 'that my friend here is no less famous as a writer?'

Lalmohan Babu tried to look modest. The manager laughed, 'Of course! His cousin has already told me about him. Your coming was a total surprise, so . . .'

Lalmohan Babu intervened at this point. Clearly, there was something on his mind, and he wanted to get it off his chest.

'We saw in the papers before we came . . . is it true about the sadhubaba?'

'Who? You mean Ebony Baba?'

'Ebony? Why ebony? I thought he was called Machchli—'

‘Yes, yes. It’s the same man. The locals are calling him Machchli Baba. I decided on Ebony. You’ll know what I mean when you see him.’

‘Did he really swim all the way?’

Lalmohan Babu was asking all the questions. Feluda was listening in silence. Niranjan Babu shook his head. ‘I don’t know,’ he said. ‘So they say. He’s supposed to have started from Haridwar. From here he’ll go to Munger and Patna. After that, who knows?’

‘What about his supernatural powers?’

‘I can only tell you what I’ve heard. Abhaycharan Chakravarty is seventy years old. For the last thirty-five years, he’s been going to Kedar Ghat at four in the morning every day to bathe in the river. He doesn’t see very well, but that doesn’t stop him from going to the ghat, come rain or shine. On this particular day, as he went down the steps and reached the edge of the river, he stepped on something soft. When he looked closely he saw that it was a man, apparently unconscious. His skin was all wrinkled, as though he had been in the water for a long time. Before Abhaycharan could say or do anything, the man opened his eyes and said, “Look, there’s water everywhere. Why are you still afraid of fire?” And that was that. Old Abhaycharan was won over instantly.’

We stared. Niranjan Babu explained further, ‘You see, Abhaycharan once used to live near Calcutta. His wife and child got killed in a fire. After such a tragedy, he found it impossible to go on living in the same place; so he moved to Kashi. He’s a very amiable, simple old man. So you can imagine what an impression Machchli Baba’s words made on him!’

‘And the Babaji has been staying in his house since then?’

‘Oh yes. Apparently, Abhaycharan has been specially initiated by the Baba. Word spread like wildfire. People started pouring in. Abhaycharan’s house is not far from the river. There is an open courtyard inside. This is where Babaji receives visitors. Each one is given a fish scale, blessed and purified by the holy man.’

‘A fish scale? Oh, I see. In keeping with his name? But does one have to eat it?’  
Lalmohan Babu made a face.

‘No, no. All you have to do is go to the river the next day before sunrise and drop it in the water.’ ‘Has it really made any difference to anyone?’

'I don't know about anyone else. I can only talk of myself. I had been getting a mild pain in my stomach. My doctor told me it might be a colic pain, and told me to take Mag Phos, which I did. Then I heard about Machchli Baba's arrival and went and got a fish scale. I dropped it in the river the next day, and now the pain has gone. Whether it's thanks to homoeopathy, or fishopathy, I don't know!'

'How long will he stay here?'

'He doesn't stay anywhere for very long. But it is always his followers who decide when he must leave.'

'How?'

'If you come with me this evening, you will find out.'

## Two

We chatted in Niranjan Babu's room for a while, then went for a walk. Niranjan Babu came with us.

We came out of the hotel and began walking towards the river. The road turned right and a slope began, to join the steps of the ghat. Beggars lined the steps and amidst them, a large number of goats roamed freely.

'What a nose you must have, Felu Babu!' exclaimed Jatayu. 'I recognize the smell now, but how could I have forgotten it?'

A strange noise rose above the general noise of the traffic. It was simply the din that came from Dashashwamedh Ghat. Hundreds of people milled around, doing hundreds of different things. 'Spectacular' was the word that automatically came to my mind, but I didn't dare mention it.

I could see the railway bridge from the steps of the ghat. Across the river lay Ram Nagar, where the Maharajah had his palace.

We walked over to Man Mandir Ghat, which was adjacent to Dashashwamedh. There was a building here that contained some astronomical instruments designed nearly three hundred years ago. It was a mini 'Jantar Mantar', like the one in Delhi. Feluda began walking towards this building, possibly with a view to looking at these instruments, when something happened.

It was much quieter here. All that could be heard were strains of a Hindi song being played somewhere on a loudspeaker, and the noise of people washing clothes at the ghat, a few feet below. On our right was a banyan tree. Its top branches leant towards the roof of a yellow two-storey house. A shout from the roof made us all glance up quickly.

A boy was standing on the parapet on top of the roof, facing a red house just opposite. There was obviously someone on the roof of the red house as well, though he was hidden from sight. It was this unseen figure the boy was shouting at.

‘Shaitan Singh!’ he shouted again, like a film hero.

‘That child’s from the Ghoshal family,’ whispered Niranjan Babu. ‘A reckless devil!’

My stomach began to churn. If the boy lost his balance just once, he’d drop straight to the concrete pavement. No one could save him.

‘There is no point in hiding anymore!’ he yelled. ‘I know where you are!’

Lalmohan Babu spoke this time. His voice sounded hoarse. ‘Shaitan Singh is a creation of my rival writer Akrur Nandi.’

‘I am coming to get you!’ said the boy. ‘Get ready to surrender.’ The boy disappeared. An instant later, a long bamboo pole appeared from one corner of the roof of the yellow house, stretching to that of the red one, making a bridge between the two.

‘What is he trying to do?’ Feluda said softly.

‘Shaitan Singh, I’ll grab you before you can finish counting up to ten!’ What followed made us break into a cold sweat.

The boy climbed over the railing, and began swinging from the bamboo pole. ‘One . . . two . . . three . . . four . . .’

Shaitan Singh was counting from the red house. The boy started making his way to his adversary, still hanging from the pole.

‘Do something!’ urged Niranjan Babu. ‘My colic pain’s coming back!’

‘Sh-h-h,’ hissed Feluda. There was nothing we could do, except watch breathlessly what happened next.

‘ . . . six . . . seven . . . eight . . . nine . . . ’

The boy had reached the opposite house. Now he swung himself over the wall and dropped on to the roof. This was followed by a piercing scream from Shaitan Singh and gleeful laughter from our hero.

‘Did he actually kill him, do you think?’ Lalmohan Babu asked anxiously. ‘I thought I saw something like a dagger hanging from his waist.’

Feluda began striding towards the red house. ‘God knows what the villain is like, but the hero is clearly remarkably brave,’ he said.

‘We must tell the child’s father,’ observed Niranjan Babu.

We didn’t actually have to enter the red house. Just as we reached its front door, we heard footsteps coming down a flight of stairs, and the voice of the first boy.

‘ . . . Then he’ll fall into the river with a loud splash, and the river will carry him straight to the sea. Then a shark will come and swallow him. But when this shark charges at Captain Spark, Captain Spark will strike it with a harpoon, and . . . ’

He couldn’t finish, for the two boys had come out of the door and seen us. They stopped abruptly, staring. The first one was a very good-looking child, about ten years old. The other seemed a bit older, and clearly not from a Bengali family. Both had chewing gum in their mouth.

Feluda said to the first boy, ‘I can see that your friend is Shaitan Singh. Who are you?’ ‘Captain Spark,’ said the boy sharply.

‘Don’t you have another name? What does your father call you?’

‘My name is Captain Spark. Shaitan Singh killed my father in the jungles of Africa with a poisoned arrow. I was seven then. My eyes sparkle with the light of revenge. That’s why I am called Captain Spark.’

‘Good Lord!’ exclaimed Lalmohan Babu. ‘This boy seems to have memorized every word Akrur Nandi ever wrote!’

The boy glared at him, then walked away with his friend with infinite dignity. Soon they were both out of sight.

‘A born actor,’ remarked Lalmohan Babu.

‘Do you happen to know the Ghoshals?’ Feluda asked Niranjan Babu.

‘Of course. Everyone in Kashi knows them. They have been living here for nearly a hundred years. That little boy’s grandfather, Ambika Ghoshal, lives here permanently. He used to be a solicitor, but has retired now. The boy’s father, Umanath Ghoshal, lives in Calcutta. He runs a business of his own.

He comes here with his family every year before Durga Puja. They have the puja in their own house. Theirs is an old aristocratic family. I believe they once used to be zamindars in East Bengal.’

‘Would it be possible to meet Umanath Babu, do you think?’

‘Why, certainly. We might see him this evening where Ebony Baba is staying. I heard something about Umanath wanting to be initiated as well.’

One look at Ebony Baba told us why Niranjan Babu had chosen the name. I had never seen anyone quite so dark. But that was not all. His skin was so smooth that it seemed as though he was wearing a tight-fitting black costume. His wavy hair rippled down to his shoulders; his beard came down to his chest. Both were jet black. He was well-built, and he didn’t appear to be older than thirty-five. Naturally, he could not swim so much if he wasn’t young and strong. He wore a scarlet lungi, and around his shoulders was draped a red silk scarf. This made him a particularly impressive figure.

The four of us were standing behind a group of devotees. Babaji was sitting on a mat spread on the veranda that faced the courtyard. Behind him were two bolsters covered with yellow velvet. On his left sat an old man with folded hands, his eyes closed. This must be Abhaycharan Chakravarty, I thought. Another man was sitting in one corner of the veranda, singing a Hindi bhajan. Machchli Baba sat in padmasan, swaying his body gently to the rhythm of the song.

He was not going to give out fish scales today. We were to witness something quite different. Today, the Baba’s followers would tell him how long he was to stay in Varanasi. No one appeared to know quite how this was going to be accomplished.

Lalmohan Babu seemed to have turned quite religious since his arrival here. This morning I had heard him shout ‘Jai Baba Vishwanath!’ more than once at the ghat. Now the very sight of the Baba had made him fold his hands. How did he hope to think up a plot for a thriller if he let his religious fervour carry him

away? Or was he hoping the Baba would appear in his dream and reveal a suitable idea for a story?

At this point, a young man came in and joined us. He looked at the crowd, perhaps wondering how he could push his way forward. Niranjan Babu leant towards him and asked, 'Hasn't Mr Ghoshal come with you?'

'No,' replied the young man. 'Some guests arrived from Calcutta today, so he decided not to come.' The man had a polished, smart appearance.

'Allow me to introduce you,' Niranjan Babu said. 'This is Vikas Sinha, Umanath Ghoshal's secretary. And this is Pradosh Mitter, who's visiting with his cousin Tapesh here and friend, Lalmohan Ganguli.'

Vikas Sinha frowned. 'Pradosh Mitter? You mean the Pradosh Mitter, the investigator?'

'Yes, yes,' Niranjan Babu raised his voice in excitement, none other. Of course, Mr Ganguli here is also—'

He pointed at Lalmohan Babu, but Mr Sinha continued to stare at Feluda. It seemed as though he wanted to say something, but didn't know how to begin.

'Where are you staying?' he asked at last.

'In my hotel,' Niranjan Babu answered for Feluda.

'All right, I mean . . .' Vikas Sinha still hesitated. 'It might be wise . . . never mind, I'll contact you tomorrow.' He said 'namaskar' to all of us and disappeared into the crowd. At this precise moment,

Machchli Baba spoke.

‘One!’ he shouted. The bhajan stopped. Everyone in the crowd fell silent. I noticed for the first time that opposite Abhaycharan was sitting another man with a brightly designed bag in front of him. Next to the bag, lying in a heap, were some strange black objects.

‘There is only one sun, and one moon. One!’ Babaji continued. ‘Two ears and two eyes and two hands and two feet. Two!’

This sounded like pure nonsense to me. There was no way of telling whether anyone else could make head or tail of it. But the Baba was still speaking. ‘The past, present and future—three! The east, west, north and south—four! Water, air, fire, earth and the sky—five! One, two, three, four, five!’ He stopped. Every eye was fixed on him. ‘Thrilling!’ whispered Lal Mohan Babu into my ear. The Baba went on counting in this rather cryptic manner until he reached ten, referring to the six seasons, the seven stars in the Great Bear, the eight metals considered pure and very special, the nine planets and, finally, the ten incarnations of Vishnu. Then he stopped and nodded at the man with the bag, who whispered something to him and turned to face the crowd.

‘This bag contains blank pieces of paper,’ said the man in a thin, squeaky voice. ‘You are requested to take a piece of paper and a piece of charcoal from here and write any number from one to ten. Please return the paper to me with your chosen number on it.’

Feluda turned to Niranjan Babu.

‘Will the number that’s written by most people determine the length of his stay?’ he asked. ‘Maybe. He didn’t say, did he?’

‘If that is the case, I don’t think he’s going to be here for more than seven days.’ ‘Are you going to write a number?’

‘No. I’m not interested in the Baba’s stay. What I am curious about is something quite different. Tell me, are all these people just stooges, or are there a few well-known people present here?’

‘What are you saying, sir?’ Niranjan Babu raised his eyebrows. ‘Many of these people might be called the cream of Kashi. Look, see that man over there in a white shirt? He’s Srutidhar Mahesh Vachaspati, a Sanskrit scholar of renown. And there’s a well-known doctor, and a bank manager. The man with the bag over there is Abhaycharan’s nephew. He’s a professor of English in Aligarh.’

You'll find somebody from every profession, I can tell you. Look at how many women are here. Some of them are well-known and highly qualified, too. And look, look—' he nodded towards a rather large man, clad in a white kurta, a white zari cap on his head. He was sitting with his back to us.

'Do you know who he is? That's Maganlal Meghraj. The richest and most powerful man in Banaras.'

'Maganlal Meghraj? That seems to ring a bell.'

Niranjan Babu lowered his voice. 'The police raided his house twice. His office in Calcutta was raided, too.'

'But nothing was found, I take it?'

'No, of course not. A man like him knows how to protect himself and keep the police happy.'

We started walking towards the exit. Just as we reached it, Mr Sinha emerged from the crowd. 'Are you leaving?' he asked Feluda anxiously. Then continued before Feluda could reply, 'Do you think you could come to our house right away? I think Mr Ghoshal would be pleased to meet you.'

Feluda glanced at his watch. 'There's no reason why we can't go with you. Only Niranjan Babu may have to return to the hotel.'

'That's right,' said Niranjan Babu. 'You three go along. But don't be late getting back if you want your dinner served hot. I've ordered a special chicken curry for you!'

## **Comprehension Questions**

Question 1: Why does Lalmohan Babu want to go to Varanasi?

Question 2: What smells does Feluda describe in Varanasi?

Question 3: What does Feluda guess about their roommate?

Question 4: Who is Machchli Baba?

Question 5: What do Machchli Baba's devotees do with fish scales?

Question 6: What does the boy at Man Mandir Ghat do?

Question 7: Who is Captain Spark?

Question 8: What does Machchli Baba count in his ritual?

Question 9: Who is Maganlal Meghraj?

Question 10: Why does Vikas Sinha ask Feluda to visit the Ghoshal house?

## **Answers**

Answer 1: Lalmohan Babu wants to see Vijaya Dashami and find a story idea.

Answer 2: Feluda describes smells of incense, flowers, cow dung, dust, sweat, earth, water, oil, and sandalwood.

Answer 3: Feluda guesses their roommate might snore and has a beard.

Answer 4: Machchli Baba is a holy man who floated down the Ganges with supposed powers.

Answer 5: Devotees drop blessed fish scales in the river before sunrise.

Answer 6: The boy swings on a bamboo pole between rooftops, chasing "Shaitan Singh."

Answer 7: Captain Spark is the boy's name, inspired by Akrur Nandi's story.

Answer 8: Machchli Baba counts one to ten, mentioning sun, eyes, directions, elements, etc.

Answer 9: Maganlal Meghraj is a rich, powerful man with a shady reputation.

Answer 10: Vikas Sinha asks Feluda to visit because Umanath Ghoshal wants to meet him.