



Learn English Through Stories

E Series

E18

**Adapted and modified by
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1. Catastrophe

By Premchand

In Banaras District, there is a village called Bira in which an old, childless widow used to live. She was an Adivasi (indigenous) woman named Bhungi. She didn't own either a scrap of land or a house to live in. Her only source of livelihood was a parching oven. The village folk customarily have one meal a day of parched grains, so there was always a crowd around Bhungi's oven.

Whatever grain she would get for parching, she would grind or fry it and eat.

She slept in a corner of the same little shack that sheltered the oven. As soon as it was light she'd get up and go out to gather dry leaves from all around to make her fire. She would stack the leaves right next to the oven, and after twelve, light the fire. But on the days when she had to parch grain for Pandit Udaybhan Pandey, the owner of the village, she went to bed hungry. She was obliged to work without pay for Pandit Udaybhan Pandey. She also had to fetch water for his house. And, for this reason, from time to time the oven was not lit. She lived in the Pandit's village, therefore he had full authority to make her do any sort of odd job. In his opinion if she received food for working from him, how could it be considered as work done without pay?

He was doing her a favour, in fact, by letting her live in the village at all.

It was spring, a day on which the fresh grain was fried and eaten and given as a gift. No fire was lit in the houses - Bhungi's oven was being put to good use that day. There was a crowd worthy of a village fair around her. She had scarcely opportunity to draw a breath. Because of the customer's impatience, squabbles kept breaking out. Then two servants arrived, each carrying a heaped basket of grain from Pandit Udaybhan with the order to parch it right away. When Bhungi saw the two baskets she was alarmed. It was already after twelve and even by sunset, she would not have time to parch so much grain. Now she would have to stay at the oven parching until after dark for no payment. In despair she took the two baskets. One of the flunkies (*chamchey*) said menacingly, "Don't waste any time or you'll be sorry."

With this command the servants went away and Bhungi began to parch the grain. It's no laughing matter to parch a whole mound (*dher*) of grain. She had to keep stopping from the parching in order to keep the oven fire going. So by sundown not even half the work was done. She was afraid Panditji's men would be coming. She began to move her hands all the more frantically.

Soon the servants returned and said, "Well, is the grain parched?"

Feeling bold, Bhungi said, "Can't you see? I'm still parching it."

"The whole day has gone, and you haven't finished any more grain than this!

Have you been roasting it or spoiling it? This is completely uncooked!

How's it going to be used for food? It's the ruin of us! You'll see what Panditji does to you for this."

The result was that that night the oven was dug up and Bhungi was left without a means of livelihood.

Bhungi now had no means of support. The villagers suffered a good deal too from the destruction of the oven. In many houses even at noon, cooked cereal was no longer available. People went to Panditji and asked him to give the order for the old woman's oven to be rebuilt and the fire once more lighted, but he paid no attention to them. He could not suffer a loss of face. A few people who wished her well urged her to move to another village. But her heart would not accept this suggestion. She had spent her fifty miserable years in this village and she loved every leaf on every tree. Here she had known the sorrows and pleasures of life; she could not give it up now in the last days. The very idea of moving distressed her. Sorrow in this village was preferable to happiness in another.

A month went by. Very early one morning Pandit Udaybhan, taking his little band of servants with him, went out to collect his rents. Now when he looked toward the old woman's oven he fell into a violent rage: it was being made again. Bhungi was energetically rebuilding it with balls of clay. Most likely she'd spent the night at this work and wanted to finish it before the sun was high. She knew that she was going against the Pandit's wishes, but she hoped that he had forgotten his anger by then. But alas, the poor creature had grown old without growing wise.

Suddenly Panditji shouted, "By whose order?"

Bewildered, Bhungi saw that he was standing before her.

He demanded once again, "By whose order are you building it?" In a flight she said, "Everybody said I should build it and so I'm building it."

'I'll have it smashed again. "With this he kicked the oven. The wet clay collapsed in a heap. He kicked at the trough again but she ran in front of it and took the kick in her side. Rubbing her ribs she said, "Maharaj, you're not afraid of anybody but you ought to fear God. What good does it do you to ruin me like this! Do you think gold is going to grow out of this small piece of land! For your own good, I'm telling you, don't torment poor people, don't be the death of me."

"You're not going to build any oven here again," said Panditji.

"If don't make it - how am I going to be able to eat!" said the poor woman.

"I'm not responsible for your belly," shouted Panditji.

"But if I do nothing except chores for you, where will I go for food!" cried Bhungi.

"If you're going to stay in the village you'll have to do my chores," barked Panditji.

"I'll do them when I've built my oven? I can't do your work just for the sake of staying in the village," said Bhungi.

"Then don't, just get out of the village! said Panditji.

"How can I! I've grown old in this hut. My in-laws and their grandparents lived in this same hut. Except for Yama, king of death, nobody's going to force me out of it now."

"Excellent, now you're quoting Scripture!" Pandit Udaybhan said. "If you'd worked hard I might have let you stay, but after this, I won't rest until I've had you thrown out." To his attendants he said, "Go get a pile of leaves right away and set fire to the whole thing; we'll show her how to make an oven."

In a moment there was a tremendous racket. The flames leapt towards the sky, the blaze spread wildly in all directions till the villagers came clustering around this mountain of fire. Hopelessly, Bhungi stood by her oven watching the conflagration. Suddenly, with a violent dash, she hurled herself into the flames. They came running from everywhere but no one had the courage to go into the mouth of the blaze. In a matter of seconds her withered body was completely consumed.

At that moment the wind rose with a gust. The liberated flames began to race toward the east. There were some peasants' huts near the oven which were engulfed by the fierce flames. Fed in this way, the blaze spread even further. Panditji's barn was in its path and it pounced upon it. By now the whole village was in a panic. They began to band together to put out the fire but the sprinkle of water acted like oil on it and the flames kept mounting higher. Pandit Udaybhan's splendid mansion was swallowed up; while he watched, it tossed like a ship amid wild waves and disappeared in the sea of fire. The sound of lamentation that broke out amidst the ashes was even more pitiful than Bhungi's grievous cries.

2. A Fair Deal

By Sudha Murty

Himakar and Seetapati were two young men living in neighbouring villages. Once, a fair was being held nearby and they set off from their homes hoping to do some business there. Himakar filled his sack with some cheap cotton, overlaid it with a layer of fine wool and, slinging the sack over his shoulder, set off for the fair. Seetapati too collected wild leaves from some bushes, put a layer of fine betel leaves on top and made his way to the fair.

On the way, both stopped to rest under a big tree and got talking. "I have the finest wool in my sack. They come from the most special sheep," boasted Himakar.

"I have the best betel leaves in my sack. They are so soft they melt in your mouth. Usually I don't sell them, but this time I need the money, so I am going to the fair to sell them without telling anyone," said Seetapati.

Quickly the two crooks struck a deal. They would exchange their goods and, since wool was more expensive, Seetapati would pay Himakar an extra rupee. But Seetapati had no money on him. So after agreeing to pay Himakar the rupee later, the two made their way home, secretly laughing at the other's folly.

However, it did not take long for them to discover that they had been duped.

The very next day, Himakar landed up at Seetapati's door and yelled, "You cheat! Give me my rupee at least." Seetapati was drawing muddy water from his well and was unperturbed by Himakar's words. "Of course I will pay," he said. "But first help me find the treasure lying at the bottom of this well. If we find it, we can divide it." Both were soon hard at work and there was no more talk of wool or betel leaves. Himakar went inside the well where he would fill with muddy water the bucket Seetapati lowered to him. Seetapati would then pull it up. With each bucket Seetapati pulled up he exclaimed, "Oh, no treasure here. Try again."

This went on for a few hours. It started getting dark and Himakar realized that Seetapati was using him as free labour to clean his well. There was no treasure. He was sure that if he stayed much longer, Seetapati would abandon him in the well for good. So he gave a loud shout, "Here is the treasure! Watch out, it is heavy."

Seetapati was amazed that there really was treasure hidden in the well. He pulled hard, and as soon as he pulled up the bucket, he threw away the rope so that Himakar could not come up. But what, or rather, who did he find in the bucket but Himakar, covered in mud. They started fighting again. "You tried to cheat me!"

"You were going to leave me in the well!"

Soon it got too dark to argue and they left for their homes. But Himakar was not one to give up. He arrived at Seetapati's house after a few days, demanding his one rupee. Seetapati saw him coming and told his wife, "I will pretend to be dead. You start crying loudly. Himakar will then have to give up trying to get the money from me."

But Himakar was clever. As soon as he heard Seetapati's wife wailing, he understood the trick being played on him and rushed out to gather the villagers. "My friend has died," he shouted. "Let's take his body for cremation."

Seetapati's wife got scared. "No, no, go away. I will arrange for the cremation myself," she said.

But the villagers thought she was too grief-stricken to know what she was saying and carried Seetapati to the cremation ground. There Himakar told the villagers, "It is getting dark. We cannot burn the body now. You go home and come in the morning. I will watch over him in the night."

As soon as the villagers had gone, Himakar said to Seetapati, "Stop pretending now. Get up and give me my money..."

As they were fighting, a gang of thieves came to divide their loot in leisure at the cremation ground. They saw one person sitting on a pyre and another standing next to him. Both were arguing loudly. Thinking them to be ghosts, the thieves dropped their bag of stolen goods and fled at top speed. The two heard the commotion and saw the bag full of gold and silver ornaments lying on the ground. Quickly they divided it up between themselves. Himakar made sure he got an extra gold coin for the rupee that was due to him and the two men made their way back to their homes, the account settled at last!

3. Grammar Page

Interrogative Determiners

The words **what**, **which** and **whose** are used before nouns to ask questions. **Interrogative determiners** appear just before nouns.

What time is it?

Which boy is your brother?

Whose pen is this?

Possessive Determiners

The words **my**, **your**, **his**, **her**, **its**, **our** and **their** are used before nouns to show ownership. They are called **possessive determiners**.

I gave my sandwich to John.

Is this your desk?

Alan crashed his bike into a wall.

Mrs. Park keeps her house very clean.

The dog was licking its paws.

There's a snake in our garden.

Susan and Peter have invited me to their party.

Notes

The possessive determiner **your** can be used when you are talking to one person or more than one person:

I'm very angry with you, John. Your behavior has been very bad today.

Jake and Josh, your dinner is ready.

This table will help you remember how to use possessive determiners.

singular personal pronoun	possessive determiner	plural personal pronoun	possessive determiner
I (subject pronoun)	my	we (subject pronoun)	our
me (object pronoun)	my	us (object pronoun)	our
you (subject/object pronoun)	your	you (subject/object pronoun)	your
he (subject pronoun)	his	they (subject pronoun)	their
him (object pronoun)	his	them (object pronoun)	their
she (subject pronoun)	her		
her (object pronoun)	her		
it (subject/object pronoun)	its		

Numbers

Numbers are determiners, too. Numbers are often used **before nouns** to tell you exactly how many people or things there are.

Our family has two dogs.

There are twelve months in the year.

We bought three pizzas.

My grandfather lived for a hundred years.

Using Determiners Together

You can use quantifying determiners with each other and with numbers.

Some people like winter but many more people prefer summer.

There's a little less space in this cupboard than in that one.

There are five fewer children in my class than in your class.

Use **of** between a quantifying determiner and another kind of determiner.

I don't like **any** of **these** drinks.

Some of **my** friends don't like country music.

Each of **the** boys answered the question correctly.

I've had **enough** of **your** bad behavior!

Five of **these** girls are taller than **any** of **the** boys.

The quantifying determiner **all** may be used with or without **of**. For example you can say:

We ate **all of** the food in the fridge. *or* We ate **all** the food in the fridge.

He spends **all of** his time playing football. *or* He spends **all** his time playing football.

She likes **all of** my friends. *or* She likes **all** my friends.