



Learn English Through Stories

F Series

F19

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1. Fellow feeling

The Madras-Bangalore Express was due to start in a few minutes. Trolleys and barrows piled with trunks and beds rattled their way through the bustle. Fruit-sellers and *beedi*-and-betel-sellers cried themselves hoarse. Latecomers pushed, shouted and perspired. The engine added to the general noise with the low monotonous hum of its boiler; the first bell rang, the guard looked at his watch. Mr Rajam Iyer arrived on the platform at a terrific pace, with a small roll of bedding under one arm and an absurd yellow trunk under the other. He ran to the first third-class compartment that caught his eye, peered in and, since the door could not be opened on account of the congestion inside, flung himself in through the window.

Fifteen minutes later Madras flashed past the train in window-framed patches of sun-scorched roofs and fields. At the next halt, Mandhakam, most of the passengers got down. The compartment built to 'seat 8 passengers; 4 British Troops, or 6 Indian Troops now carried only nine. Rajam Iyer found a seat and made himself comfortable opposite a sallow, meek passenger, who suddenly removed his coat, folded it and placed it under his head and lay down, shrinking himself to the area he had occupied while he was sitting. With his knees drawn up almost to his chin, he rolled himself into a ball. Rajam Iyer threw at him an indulgent, compassionate look. He then fumbled for his glasses and pulled out of his pocket a small book, which set forth in clear Tamil the significance of the obscure *Sandhi* rites that every Brahmin worth the name performs thrice daily.

He was startled out of this pleasant languor by a series of growls coming from a passenger who had got in at Katpadi. The newcomer, looking for a seat, had been irritated by the spectacle of the meek passenger asleep and had enforced the law of the third-class. He then encroached on most of the meek passenger's legitimate space and began to deliver home-truths which passed by easy stages from impudence to impertinence and finally to ribaldry.

Rajam Iyer peered over his spectacles. There was a dangerous look in his eyes. He tried to return to the book, but could not. The bully's speech was gathering momentum.

'What is all this?' Rajam Iyer asked suddenly, in a hard tone.

'What is what?' growled back the newcomer, turning sharply on Rajam Iyer.

'Moderate your style a bit,' Rajam Iyer said firmly.

'You moderate yours first,' replied the other.

A pause.

'My man,' Rajam Iyer began endearingly, 'this sort of thing will never do.'

The newcomer received this in silence. Rajam Iyer felt encouraged and drove home his moral: 'Just try and be more courteous, it is your duty.'

'You mind your business,' replied the newcomer.

Rajam Iyer shook his head disapprovingly and drawled out a 'No.' The newcomer stood looking out for some time and, as if expressing a brilliant truth that had just dawned on him, said, 'You are a Brahmin, I see. Learn, sir, that your days are over. Don't think you can bully us as you have been bullying us all these years.'

Rajam Iyer gave a short laugh and said, 'What has it to do with your beastly conduct to this gentleman?' The newcomer assumed a tone of mock humility and said, 'Shall I take the dust from your feet, O Holy Brahmin? O Brahmin, Brahmin.' He continued in a singsong fashion: 'Your days are over, my dear sir, learn that. I should like to see you trying a bit of bossing on us.'

'Whose master is who?' asked Rajam Iyer philosophically.

The newcomer went on with no obvious relevance: 'The cost of mutton has gone up out of all proportion. It is nearly double what it used to be.'

'Is it?' asked Rajam Iyer.

'Yes, and why?' continued the other. 'Because Brahmins have begun to eat meat and they pay high prices to get it secretly.' He then turned to the other passengers and added, 'And we non- Brahmins have to pay the same price, though we don't care for the secrecy.'

Rajam Iyer leaned back in his seat, reminding himself of a proverb which said that if you threw a stone into a gutter it would only spurt filth in your face.

'And,' said the newcomer, 'the price of meat used to be five annas per pound. I remember the days quite well. It is nearly twelve annas now. Why? Because the Brahmin is prepared to pay so much, if only he can have it in secret. I have with my own eyes seen Brahmins, pukkah Brahmins with sacred threads on their bodies, carrying fish under their arms, of course all wrapped up in a towel. Ask them what it is, and they will tell you that it is plantain. Plantain that has life, I suppose! I once tickled a fellow under the arm and out came the biggest fish in the market. Hey, Brahmin,' he said, turning to Rajam Iyer, 'what did you have for your meal this morning?'

'Who? I?' asked Rajam Iyer. 'Why do you want to know?'

'Look, sirs,' said the newcomer to the other passengers, 'why is he afraid to tell us what he ate this morning?' And turning to Rajam Iyer, 'May not a man ask another what he had for his morning meal?'

'Oh, by all means. I had rice, ghee, curds, *brinjal* soup, fried beans.'

'Oh, is that all?' asked the newcomer, with an innocent look.

'Yes,' replied Rajam Iyer.

'Is that all?'

'Yes, how many times do you want me to repeat it?'

'No offence, no offence,' replied the newcomer.

'Do you mean to say I am lying?' asked Rajam Iyer.

'Yes,' replied the other, 'you have omitted from your list a few things. Didn't I see you this morning going home from the market with a banana, a water banana, wrapped up in a towel, under your arm? Possibly it was somebody very much like you. Possibly I mistook the person. My wife prepares excellent soup with fish. You won't be able to find the difference between *dhall* soup and fish soup. Send your wife, or the wife of the person that was exactly like you, to my wife to learn soup-making. Hundreds of Brahmins have smacked their lips over the *dhall* soup prepared in my house. I am a leper if there is a lie in anything I say.'

'You are,' replied Rajam Iyer, grinding his teeth. 'You are a rabid leper.'

'Whom do you call a leper!'

'You!'

'I? You call me a leper?' 'No. I call you a rabid leper.'

'You call me rabid?' the newcomer asked, striking his chest to emphasize 'me'.

'You are a filthy brute,' said Rajam Iyer. 'You must be handed over to the police.'

'Bah!' exclaimed the newcomer. 'As if I didn't know what these police were.'

'Yes, you must have had countless occasions to know the police. And you will see more of them yet in your miserable life, if you don't get beaten to death like the street mongrel you are,' said Rajam Iyer in great passion. 'With your foul mouth you are bound to come to that end.'

'What do you say?' shouted the newcomer menacingly. 'What do you say, you vile humbug?'

'Shut up,' Rajam Iyer cried.

'You shut up.'

'Do you know to whom you are talking?'

'What do I care who the son of a mongrel is?' 'I will thrash you with my slippers,' said Rajam Iyer.

'I will pulp you down with an old rotten sandal,' came the reply.

'I will kick you,' said Rajam Iyer.

'Will you?' howled the newcomer. 'Come on, let us see.'

Both rose to their feet simultaneously.

There they stood facing each other on the floor of the compartment. Rajam Iyer was seized by a sense of inferiority. The newcomer stood nine clean inches over him. He began to feel ridiculous, short and fat, wearing a loose dhoti and a green coat, while the newcomer towered above him in his grease-spotted khaki suit. Out of the corner of his eye he noted that the other passengers were waiting eagerly to see how the issue would be settled and were not in the least disposed to

intervene.

'Why do you stand as if your mouth was stopped with mud?' asked the newcomer.

'Shut up,' Rajam Iyer snapped, trying not to be impressed by the size of the adversary.

'Your honour said that you would kick me,' said the newcomer, pretending to offer himself.

'Won't I kick you?' asked Rajam Iyer.

'Try.'

'No,' said Rajam Iyer, 'I will do something worse.'

'Do it,' said the other, throwing forward his chest and pushing up the sleeves of his coat.

Rajam Iyer removed his coat and rolled up his sleeves. He rubbed his hands and commanded suddenly, 'Stand still!' The newcomer was taken aback. He stood for a second baffled. Rajam Iyer gave him no time to think. With great force he swung his right arm and brought it near the other's cheek, but stopped it short without hitting him.

'Wait a minute, I think I had better give you a chance,' said Rajam Iyer.

'What chance?' asked the newcomer.

'It would be unfair if I did it without giving you a chance.'

'Did what?'

'You stand there and it will be over in a fraction of a second.'

'Fraction of a second? What will you do?'

'Oh, nothing very complicated,' replied Rajam Iyer nonchalantly, 'nothing very complicated. I will slap your right cheek and at the same time tug your left ear, and your mouth, which is now under your nose, will suddenly find itself under your left ear, and, what is more, stay there. I assure you, you won't feel any pain.'

'What do you say?'

'And it will all be over before you say "Sri Rama".'

'I don't believe it,' said the newcomer.

'Well and good. Don't believe it,' said Rajam Iyer carelessly. 'I never do it except under extreme provocation.'

'Do you think I am an infant?'

'I implore you, my man, not to believe me. Have you heard of a thing called jujitsu? Well, this is a simple trick in jujitsu perhaps known to half a dozen persons in the whole of South India.'

'You said you would kick me,' said the newcomer.

'Well, isn't this worse?' asked Rajam Iyer. He drew a line on the newcomer's face between his left ear and mouth, muttering, 'I must admit you have a tolerably good face and round figure. But imagine yourself going about the streets with your mouth under your left ear...' He chuckled at the vision. 'I expect at Jalarpet station there will be a huge crowd outside our compartment to see you.' The newcomer stroked his chin thoughtfully. Rajam Iyer continued, 'I felt it my duty to explain the whole thing to you beforehand. I am not as hot-headed as you are. I have some consideration for your wife and children. It will take some time for the kids to recognize Papa when he returns home with his mouth under... How many children have you got?'

'Four.'

'And then think of it,' said Rajam Iyer. 'You will have to take your food under your left ear, and you will need the assistance of your wife to drink water. She will have to pour it in.'

'I will go to a doctor,' said the newcomer.

'Do go,' replied Rajam Iyer, 'and I will give you a thousand rupees if you find a doctor. You may try even European doctors.'

The newcomer stood ruminating with knitted brow. 'Now prepare,' shouted Rajam Iyer, 'one blow on the right cheek. I will jerk your left ear, and your mouth...'

The newcomer suddenly ran to the window and leaned far out of it. Rajam decided to leave the compartment at Jalarpet.

But the moment the train stopped at Jalarpet station, the newcomer grabbed his bag and jumped out. He moved away at a furious pace and almost knocked down a coconut-seller and a person carrying a tray-load of coloured toys. Rajam Iyer felt it would not be necessary for him to get out now. He leaned through the window and cried, 'Look here!' The newcomer turned.

'Shall I keep a seat for you?' asked Rajam Iyer.

'No, my ticket is for Jalarpet,' the newcomer answered and quickened his pace.

The train had left Jalarpet at least a mile behind. The meek passenger still sat shrunk in a corner of the seat. Rajam Iyer looked over his spectacles and said, 'Lie down if you like.'

The meek passenger proceeded to roll himself into a ball. Rajam Iyer added, 'Did you hear that bully say that his ticket was for Jalarpet?'

'Yes.'

'Well,' he lied, 'he is in the fourth compartment from here. I saw him get into it just as the train started.'

Though the meek passenger was too grateful to doubt this statement, one or

two other passengers looked at Rajam Iyer sceptically.

2. Grammar Page

14. Subjects with 'apostrophe, not only...but also'

→ When nouns are joined by 'not only...but also, apostrophe' the verb often agrees with the number of the noun or pronoun nearest to the verb.

Not only Riya but also her brothers *know* the answer.
Not only the students but also their teacher *was* in the park.
Riya's brothers *are* intelligent students.
The boys' school *is* very far from here.

15. Collective nouns

→ Collective nouns may agree with either singular or plural depending on whether we are thinking of them as a single body or a number of individuals.

The family *comes* from India.
The family *are* always quarrelling.
The committee *consists* of eleven members.
The committee *disagree* about everything.
The choir *has* won the competition.
The choir *disagree* among themselves.
The team *is* in a meeting.
The team *are* in disagreement about the findings.
The government *has* been in power for too long.
The government *are* clearly in disarray.
The crowd waiting outside *was* causing a commotion.
The crowd *were* murmuring in appreciation.
The audience *was* nearly all men.
The audience *were* laughing and shouting.

→ Collective nouns with the structure 'collective noun + of + plural noun' usually agree with singular verbs.

His bunch of keys *was* lying on the floor.
A kilo of apples *is* required for this recipe.
A team of players *was* welcomed at the airport.
A series of books *has* been published on oil.
A bouquet of flowers *was* given to the patient.
That pile of books on the floor *looks* untidy.
A fleet of ships *has* been destroyed.

→ But quantifying expressions such as 'a lot of, a number of, the majority of, the rest of, etc' are plural determiners and agree with plural verbs.

A lot of students *were* there.
A number of letters *were* written to her.
The majority of students *have* failed in Science.
The rest of the workers *were* allowed to go home.

16. Relative pronouns

→ The relative pronouns 'who, that, which, etc' become singular or plural according to the noun directly in front of them.

Prem is the **journalist** who writes this report.
He is one of the **men** who were invited to the party.
The **boy** who has done this work is intelligent.
The **boys** who have done this work are intelligent.