



Learn English Through Stories

F Series

F23

**Adapted and modified by
Kulwant Singh Sandhu**

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The Pyre of Sin

By Premchand

Chapter 1

Kunwar Prithvi Singh, the son of Maharaja Jaswant Singh, was gifted with the spirit of gallantry as well as the adornment of beauty. He had travelled far and wide to the lands of Iran, Egypt and Syria, and had great command over several languages.

He had a sister, Raj Nandini, an ethereal beauty with a mellifluous voice, pleasant manners and pure thoughts. So deeply did she loathe sinfulness that often she would argue at length with the maharaja over matters of ethics and morality. If she found the maharaja committing an act of indiscretion, she would do everything in her capacity to stop him.

Raj Nandini was married to Kunwar Dharam Singh who was the heir apparent to a small princely state and was appointed a high rank in the army of the maharaja. He was a man with a reputation for valour and skill in all his endeavours. It was for these qualities that the maharaja had chosen him for his daughter. The couple lived together in great harmony.

Dharam Singh was mostly posted in Jodhpur. Prithvi Singh was a dear friend of his and the two shared a bond of closeness rarely found even between brothers. Both were each other's confidantes. Just like the two princes, the princesses too loved each other deeply. Prithvi Singh's wife Durga Kunwar was a lady of great piety, sobriety and generosity. Ordinarily, sisters-in-law have bad blood between them. These two, however, adored each other. They also shared common interests in their zest for Sanskrit literature and culture.

One afternoon, the two princesses were out for a leisurely walk in the palace gardens when a chambermaid appeared and handed a note to Raj Nandini. The princess opened it to find a letter written in Sanskrit.

Having read it, she said to the maid—'Summon this person to my presence.' In a short while the princesses saw a woman walking towards them, dressed in worn-out clothes. She looked not more than twenty-five years of age, but had a pale look, eyes that seemed odd on her delicate face and parched lips. Yet, there was a grace in her gait and attractiveness about her frame. Surely it was her present circumstances that had made her condition so miserable. At one time she must have been a woman of stunning beauty.

Raj Nandini gave her the once-over, from head to toe, and asked, 'What's your name?'

'They call me Braj Bilasi,' she replied.

'Where do you live?'

'At a three-day journey from here is a village called Vikram Nagar. I've a house there.'

'Where did you learn Sanskrit?'

'My father was a scholar of Sanskrit. He taught me whatever little I know of the language.'

'You're married, aren't you?'

The word 'marriage' brought a flood of tears to Braj Bilasi's eyes. 'I will answer that some other day, my lady,' she said. 'Mine is a tale full of pain and sorrow, hearing it will fill your hearts with grief too. I beg to be excused for now.'

Braj Bilasi had begun living in the royal palace. She had a flair for Sanskrit literature and was a lover of Sanskrit verses. Every day she read out Sanskrit poetry and prose to the princesses. Over time, her sense of humour and vast gamut of knowledge won her immense love and respect, so much so that the distinctions of class soon blurred away. Braj Bilasi became a close friend of the princesses.

Chapter 2

Several months passed. Both Kunwar Prithvi Singh and Dharam Singh were away with the maharaja on an expedition to Afghanistan. The painstaking hours, days and months of separation were spent in the perusal of the verses of *Meghdoot* and *Raghubansi*. Braj Bilasi had an exceptional liking for the poetry of Kalidasa, and she elucidated his poems in a style so innovative that her interpretations would send the two ladies into a state of trance.

One evening, the two princesses were taking a stroll in the palace gardens when they saw Braj Bilasi at a distance, lying on the grass, with her eyes closed and tears streaming down her eyes. There she was, looking like a princess out of a storybook. The affection, unbounded generosity and indiscriminating attitude of Raj Nandini and Durga Kunwar had greatly enhanced the beauty of Braj Bilasi's personality. But despite their efforts to keep her in good humour, the poor girl was often found crying in moments of solitude. It seemed she harboured a grievous injury in her heart that didn't allow her a moment of peace. Seeing her in such agony, the two princesses went over and sat down beside her. Raj Nandini lay her head on her lap, and stroking her rosy cheeks gently, asked her— 'Friend, will you not tell us what it is that grieves you so? Are we still strangers to you? It is heartbreaking for us to watch you suffer and burn in the fire of your own sorrow.'

Braj Bilasi gathered herself and replied, 'Sister, I'm an unfortunate soul. Let my story be.'

'If you don't mind, can I ask you something?'

'What is it? Go ahead.'

'The same question I asked you the other day. Are you married?'

'Well, what do I say? Not yet.'

'Is your heart wounded by the arrow of someone's love?'

'No! God's my witness.'

'Then why are you so sad, dear? Does your heart ache for love?'

'No. There's no place in my heart for anything except grief.'

'We must try making room for love in your heart, child.'

Braj Bilasi understood the hint and said, 'Leave this topic alone, dear sister.'

Raj Nandini: 'I must get you married! Have you seen Diwan Jai Chand?'

Braj Bilasi replied tearfully, 'Princess! I've taken a vow in the past and to fulfil that vow is the sole purpose of my life. I live to accomplish the task I've set for myself. I've endured such pain that it has killed the desire in me to live. My father was a *jagirdar* in the village of Vikram Nagar. I was his only child and he loved me deeply. It was for my sake that he spent years learning Sanskrit. A great warrior, he had served in many a battle. I recall an evening when the cows were making their way home from the pastures. I was standing at the threshold of my house. Just then I spotted a man coming towards me with a swagger of a gallant hero, wearing a foppish turban. Mohini, my beloved cow, had returned from the meadows only a short while ago and her tiny calf was frisking about playfully outside the house. It just so happened that the calf came under the foot of this man and let out a cry. Hearing her baby's cry, the cow pounced on the man. The Rajput was full of daring. Knowing that fleeing in such a situation would tarnish his reputation of gallantry, he pulled out his sword from its sheath and attacked the cow. The cow was in a fit of rage, and showed no sign of fear. Before my very eyes, the Rajput took the life of my dear cow! In no time a large crowd gathered there and people began cursing and admonishing the man. My father returned from his evening puja to find hundreds of villagers at his doorstep and his dear cow writhing in a pool of blood, her baby bellowing helplessly with grief. Hearing his voice, Mohini let out a groan of utmost agony and gazed at him with such pain-stricken eyes that my father's fury knew no bounds. Mohini was all that was dear to father besides me. He bawled at the crowd—"Who has killed my cow?"

The man came forward with his head hung in shame—"It was I."

"Are you a Kshatriya?"

"Yes, I am."

"So why didn't you take up a fight with a Kshatriya, an equal instead?"

Hearing this, the Rajput's eyes flashed with anger. He said—"Let a Kshatriya appear before me!"

Not a single man from the crowd found the courage to confront this Rajput. Seeing this, my father brought out his sword and attacked the man. What ensued was a battle between the two men. Old age got the better of my father, who fell

to the ground after receiving a fatal wound in his chest. The men of the village carried him into the house. His face was sallow and eyes ablaze with wrath. I appeared before him, weeping. Seeing me, he signalled the men to leave. When he and I were alone, my father said to me—“My daughter! Are you a Rajputni?”

“Of course, yes,” I replied.

“Rajputs are known to be true to their word, my girl.”

“Indeed.”

“You shall avenge this Rajput for the murder of Mohini.”

“Your wish is my command, father.”

“Had I a son, this burden would never have fallen on your frail shoulders.”

“Your daughter will fulfil this duty by all means.”

“Do I have your word of promise?”

“Absolutely.”

“You will fulfil your promise?”

“I shall try to the best of my capability.”

Handing me his sword, he said, “Here, till such day as you drive this sword into the heart of that brute, do not allow yourself a moment’s peace.”

Saying this, my father breathed his last. From then on, I took on the life of an ascetic and have been roaming this world carrying my father’s sword, looking for the Rajput. Years rolled by, I would sometimes wander into villages and hamlets, and at others look for him in frenzy—in hills and dales, but to no avail.

One day as I sat in a desolate place, crying over my ill-fortune, I saw that very man coming towards me. He stopped and asked me, “Who are you?”

“I am a miserable Brahmani. Have mercy and give me something to eat.”

“All right, come with me.”

I sprang up to my feet. The Rajput had not the slightest inkling who I was. Quick as lightning I drew my sword and pierced it through his chest. Just then, some

men came in our direction. In a frenzy, I fled the spot leaving my sword behind. For three long years I hid in forests and hills. Of the thought of killing myself entered my mind, but life is a precious thing, you know. God knows what disgrace and abjectness I have to face that I'm still alive. When I grew tired of living like a wild animal in the jungle, I made my way to Jodhpur. Hearing tales of your kindness to people I brought myself to you. Since then I've been living a life of comfort at the mercy of your kind affections. There's my life story, my ladies.'

Raj Nandini took a deep breath and said—'Oh! The strange stories this world is full of! Anyway, your sword has put an end to his life.'

'Oh no. He survived, the wound wasn't deep enough. I once saw a man exactly like him, hunting in the jungles. It was hard to tell if it was the same Rajput or a look-alike.'

Chapter 3

Several months passed. Ever since the princesses had heard Braj Bilasi's account, their love and sympathy for her only increased. Earlier, there was occasional teasing or banter, but now they did all they could to keep the poor girl in good cheer. On a cloudy day Raj Nandini said—'It's a perfect day to listen to Bihari Lal's verses. He has written some exquisite couplets on the beauty of the monsoon!'

Durga Kunwar—'What a masterpiece of a book! Friend, it is kept in the cupboard next to you. Would you mind fetching it for us?'

As Braj Bilasi brought out the book and opened it, the book left her grasp and fell open to the ground. On its very first page was a portrait. It was the face of her father's murderer staring back at her. Braj Bilasi's eyes flashed with mad rage and her brow was tense with anger. Her promise to her father began resounding in her head. A thousand questions came flooding into her mind.

What is this man's portrait doing here? What relation could he have with these kind ladies? Oh will she have to forego her promise to her father under obligation to the kindness of these women?

Casting a glance at her agonized face, Raj Nandini asked—'What's the matter friend? Why this sudden fit of rage? Is everything all right?'

Braj Bilasi faintly replied—'It's nothing. I just felt a little dizzy.'

Today, a new dilemma entered Braj Bilasi's life. 'Will I truly have to go back on my word?'

2. Grammar Page - Concord



Test Yourself



Fill in the blanks with suitable verbs choosing from the brackets:

1. The number of big rivers in this country.....ninety. (is, are)
2. A red and a yellow bird.....sitting in that tree. (is, are)
3. Either the driver or the passengers.....responsible for paying the parking ticket. (is, are)
4. There.....a lot of poetry books in the library. (is, are)
5. Either your coat or my shoes.....always on the floor. (is, are)
6. Neither the boys nor the girls in the park.....eating ice-creams. (was, were)
7. There.....twice as many pigs in Denmark as people. (is, are)
8. Neither you nor I.....there. (was, were)
9. A series of books.....been published on oil. (has, have)
10. A small percentage of the grain.....ruined by the prolonged rain. (was, were)
11. After class, Tina always.....for a computer class. (run, runs)
12. Either of those books.....adequate. (is, are)
13. All of the clocks in the city.....at about the same time. (strike, strikes)
14. One-third of the people.....unemployed. (is, are)
15. Politics.....what he enjoys the most. (is, are)
16. The number of students taking the exam.....eighty. (is, are)
17. Everyone in this school.....very friendly towards my brother. (was, were)
18. Precisely thirty years.....his tenure of office. (was, were)
19. Quite a few people.....to think that Karan is innocent. (seem, seems)
20. These materials.....been synthesized from a variety of sources. (has, have)
21. Neither Mary nor her brothers.....what happened. (know, knows)
22. Two hours.....not enough to complete the task. (is, are)
23. Either my father or my brothers.....decided to buy this house. (has, have, is)
24. A lot of people.....Alok to be too quiet. (consider, considers)
25. Neither of us.....able to predict the outcome of today's game. (was, were)
26. Eight minus two.....six. (is, are)
27. One family in ten.....a dishwasher in that country. (own, owns)
28. Everyone.....inner doubts. (has, have)
29. The power cuts in Nepal.....likely to last for five or six years. (is, are)
30. Every man and woman.....the right to good medical care. (has, have)
31. These scissors.....designed for left-handed people. (is, are)
32. Those trousers.....made of wool. (is, are)
33. Neither of the statements.....true. (is, are)
34. Three hours.....the maximum length of time allowed for the exam. (is, are)
35. My father says there.....never anything worth watching on TV. (is, are)
36. My friends who are in the band.....me to play a musical instrument. (wants, want)
37. Sabnam and her brothers.....at school. (is, are)
38. Several of the students.....decided to join the course. (has, have)
39. Two-thirds of the work.....left undone. (was, were)
40. Watching violence on TV.....some children more aggressive. (make, makes)
41. No dresses of that colour.....available with us. (is, are)
42. Ali and Imran often.....with each other. (argue, argues)
43. Some of the books on the shelf.....dusty. (is, are)
44. Two multiplied by six.....twelve. (equal, equals)

Answers

1. Is 2. Are 3. Are 4. Are 5. Are 6. Were 7. Are 8. Was 9. Has
10. was 11. Runs 12. Is 13. Strike 14. Are 15. Is 16. Is 17. Was
18. was 19. Seem 20. Have 21. Know 22. Is 23. have 24. Consider
25. were 26. Is 27. Owns 28. Has 29. Are 30 has 31. Are 32. Are
33. is 34. Is 35. Is 36. Want 37. Are 38. Have 39. Was 40. Makes
41. are 42. Argue 43. Are 44. equals