



Learn English Through Stories

F Series

F24

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The Pyre of Sin Part 2

By Premchand

Chapter 4

After what felt like an unending period, the passage of sixteen months concluded with the return of Kunwar Prithvi Singh and Dharam Singh from their voyage to Afghanistan. The royal expedition had had to face many a hurdle, for it had now begun to snow heavily in Afghanistan. The mountain passes were buried overnight under a white sheet of snow and communication was completely blocked. Matters worsened when daily provisions began to run scarce and soldiers started starving to death. It was then that Afghanistan took its chance and led nightly raids on them. Eventually, vanquished, Shahzada Mohiuddin had to return to India.

With every step that the two princes took towards home, their hearts overflowed with enthusiasm and anticipation. Oh, the joy of reunion after all this agony of separation for a long time! The desire to see the face of their beloveds brought a spring to their steps. They travelled ceaselessly, day and night, sleepless, tireless. All the wounds of war to the body and soul could not suppress their cheer. Prithvi Singh had brought an Isphahani rapier for Durga Kunwar and Dharam Singh had brought a special Kashmiri shawl as a token of his love for Raj Nandini. Their hearts were filled with longing.

When the news of their return reached the princesses' ears, a similar air of celebration began to sweep through the palace, intoxicating the women in love. Thus, began the preparations—hours being spent before the mirror, adorning themselves with jewels and sindoor. Their faces were aglow with sheer delight, as if crimson roses grew in their cheeks. The anticipation of union often brought tears of happiness to their eyes. They would playfully tease and then hug each other in ecstasy.

It was the month of Aghan. The banyan trees had doubled up under the weight of the flowers that grew on them. From the fort of Jodhpur came the celebratory firing of cannons, marking the return of the princes. News spread that Kunwar Prithvi Singh was back, hale and hearty. The two princesses stood at the palace gate, holding trays of *aarti* in their hands. Kunwar Prithvi Singh entered the royal palace amidst the greetings of his courtiers. Durga Kunwar performed *aarti* and the two were beside themselves with joy.

Dharam Singh too, entered his palace like a valiant hero. But just as he set foot inside his house, he heard someone sneeze and his right eye began to twitch. Raj Nandini rushed towards her beloved husband with the aarti, but, call it coincidence or not, her foot slipped and she lost balance, dropping the aarti which came tumbling down to the floor. Dharam Singh was taken by fright and surprise and all colour drained from Raj Nandini's face at this ill omen.

Chapter 5

On hearing the news of their return, Braj Bilasi had written two heart-warming odes for the princes. Next morning when Kunwar Prithvi Singh finished his prayer rituals, Braj Bilasi appeared before him and presented the ode to him. Eagerly, Kunwar Prithvi Singh reached out for the rolled paper and read what she had written. Although the poetic skill was not of a very high standard, the verses were fresh and innovative. Kunwar Prithvi Singh was gifted with a fine taste for poetry and reading Braj Bilasi's ode delighted him. He gifted her a pearl necklace as a token of his appreciation.

Braj Bilasi then proceeded to Dharam Singh's chambers. He sat narrating tales from the battlefield to his wife. As soon as Braj Bilasi set eyes on him, she reeled back in horror. Dharam Singh too saw her and turned pale. His mouth dried up and his hands began to tremble. While Braj Bilasi retracted hurriedly and disappeared, Dharam Singh collapsed on his charpoy, his hands covering his face. Watching his distress made Raj Nandini break into a cold sweat.

Something wasn't right.

All day long Dharam Singh tossed in bed in anguish. His face acquired a paleness that comes from a prolonged illness. Raj Nandini spent the entire day making untiring efforts to lift his spirits. But all proved futile.

Having somehow made it through the day, Kunwar Sahib retired as evening began to fall, stating fatigue as his excuse. Raj Nandini was left wondering as to what the matter was after all. Is Braj Bilasi thirsty for my husband's blood? Is it even possible that my noble, high-thinking man be so brutal at heart? No! That cannot be! Much as she tried to pull him out of his depression, she failed to do so, and eventually embraced sleep.

It was late at night. Darkness had fully engulfed the world. From somewhere far the wind carried the sad wails of a crane. It also brought to the ears the voices of the fort sentries. Raj Nandini woke up in the middle of the night to find Dharam Singh not in bed. Acting on her instinct, she hurriedly made her way to Braj Bilasi's chamber and peeped through the door. Her suspicions turned to belief when she saw Braj Bilasi standing with her sword drawn and Dharam Singh on his knees before her, begging for mercy.

Raj Nandini's head began to spin and her body went numb. She staggered

her way back to her chamber and lay down. Strangely, not a single drop of tear came to her eyes.

Chapter 6

The next day, in the early hours of the morning, Prithvi Singh visited Dharam Singh. He urged him enthusiastically—‘It’s such a pleasant day, brother! How about joining me for a hunt in the jungle?’ Dharam Singh was lost deep in his train of thoughts. Absent-mindedly he raised his pale face towards Prithvi Singh and asked bewildered, ‘What?’

‘Want to go for a hunt?’

‘Why not, let’s go.’

The two men got their horses ready and set out on horseback towards the hunting grounds. Prithvi Singh was fresh and joyful as a blooming flower, every step of his filled with vigour and vitality. On the contrary, Dharam Singh’s body was colourless and lifeless. Prithvi Singh tried cheering him up with jokes, but realizing that this man seemed extremely aggrieved, left him alone. They soon reached the lake. Dharam Singh suddenly halted and declared to Prithvi Singh, ‘Last night I took a vow.’ Saying this, his eyes filled with tears.

Prithvi Singh turned and asked—‘What sort of vow?’

Dharam Singh, ‘Have you heard Braj Bilasi’s story?’

‘Yes, I have.’

‘I’ve vowed that I will avenge her father’s murder and send the vile murderer to hell.’

‘You’ve indeed made a noble vow.’

‘Provided I am able to keep it. Why, isn’t such a man worthy of being beheaded?’

‘Not simply beheaded, such a pernicious tyrant should be beheaded with a blunt knife!’

'Indeed, this is my belief too. Tell me Prithvi Singh, if for some reason I fail to keep my promise, will you do it for me?'

'I will be honoured, my friend. Do you recognize him?'

'Oh yes, very well!'

'It's better if you allow me to perform this task for you. Chances are you might end up showing mercy to him.'

'Very well then,' said Dharam Singh. 'But bear in mind, this is a very lucky man. He has slipped out of the clutches of death repeatedly. Who knows, even your heart might soften for him! Hence, I want you too to take the oath of sending him to the dungeons of hell.'

'I swear by the name of Durga that I shall quench the thirst of my sword only with the blood of this tyrant!'

'It is decided then. Together you and I will accomplish this task. You promise to stand by your words?'

'Why, am I not a true soldier? Once I resolve to do something, it shall be done, even if that means giving up my life.'

'Come what may?'

'Oh yes.'

'And what if he turns out to be a dear one?'

'Whatever do you mean?'

'Yes, it is possible that the murderer may be one of your kith and kin.'

'So what! I would bury my own brother if I had to.'

Dharam Singh got off his horse. His face had a withered look and his hands trembled. He pulled out his sword and placing it on the ground, called out to Prithvi Singh, 'Prepare yourself, Prithvi Singh, that tyrant has been found.'

Bewildered, Prithvi Singh looked about here and there, but there wasn't a

soul around besides the two of them.

‘Draw your weapon.’

‘But I see nobody.’

‘He stands before you. That blackguard, that noxious fellow is none other but I, Dharam Singh.’

Unnerved, Prithvi Singh cried out, ‘Oh! Such hard-heartedness?’

‘Fulfil your promise if you are a true Rajput!’

Taking up Dharam Singh’s challenge, Prithvi Singh drew his rapier and sent it through Dharam Singh’s chest, into his stomach. Blood spurted out and Dharam Singh fell to the ground. He whispered to his friend, ‘Prithvi Singh! I am forever indebted to you. You are a true soldier, a true Rajput who kept his word like a man should.’

Prithvi Singh sat down beside his dying friend and cried bitterly.

Chapter 7

Today is the day that Raj Nandini becomes a sati. With great care she has dressed up and adorned herself with flowers, jewels and all that is beautiful. Her forehead is decorated with sindoor, wrists bejewelled with bridal bangles, feet dyed with henna and her delicate, flower-like body draped in crimson clothes. She is fragrant like a meadow of heaven, because today is the day that Raj Nandini becomes a sati.

Her face is aglow like a full moon in all its grandeur—a glow so bright that one's eyes are dazzled. Every inch of her body is intoxicated with the ecstasy that her love has brought to her. Her eyes emit the glorious, spiritual lights of the heavens, and she looks like a divine deity. Every step she takes, every movement of her body, radiates the intoxication of her love. She walks over, swaying to the rhythm of her love, and taking her beloved's head in her lap, sits down in the middle of a pyre made of khus, ood and sandalwood.

The entire city of Jodhpur had assembled to behold this spectacle. Music was playing and flowers poured down from the skies.

The sati was sitting ready in her pyre when Kunwar Prithvi Singh came rushing to her and said with folded hands, 'Maharani! Please grant me forgiveness!'

The sati retorted, 'It is beyond this sati's capacity to forgive you. You have taken the life of a young Rajput and you shall meet the same fate. Have the words of a sati ever been disproved? Never.'

All of a sudden, a flame leapt up in the pyre and began to grow. People around began to hail the sati. Raj Nandini's face glowed in the fire like the fiery sun shining across the horizon—lone, majestic, beautiful.

Moments later, all that was left behind was a heap of ashes.

Oh! The truth that this sati's nature held! The day before when she saw Braj Bilasi secretly entering Dharam Singh's chamber, seeds of suspicion were sown in her mind. But when at night she saw her husband pleading haplessly with Braj Bilasi, her doubts turned into conviction. And this conviction brought with it the irrepressible sentiment of upholding the truth. The following morning, when Dharam Singh awoke, Raj Nandini ordered him to bring to her the head of Braj Bilasi's enemy. To this, Dharam Singh replied, 'Before night falls, your orders shall be complied with.' And it was done. In

her act of sacrifice, Raj Nandini herself created the circumstances for her own sati—for she was the upholder of truth!

What a lofty ideal of moral conduct! What a heart-wrenching saga! The fire of sin so savage and its flames so unsparing! One sinful act annihilated so many lives. In no time, the four pillars of the royal household were reduced to ashes in this lethal pyre of sin. The words uttered by the sati proved to be true. Within a week Prithvi Singh was slain in Delhi and Durga Kunwar stepped into the fire of self-sacrifice, accepting defeat to the ruination of the pyre of sin.

2. Grammar Page - Tenses

Present Simple Uses:

We use the simple present tense to show:

⇒ *present affairs/ permanent or long-lasting situations.*

His father works in a school.	He teaches English.
She lives in Kathmandu and works at a bank.	These shops sell beautiful toys.
He speaks English very well.	A nurse works in a hospital.
He never forgets his wallet.	His grandfather wears glasses.
Sabnam always forgets her purse.	Where do you work?
The park opens at 9 o'clock.	When does the bus usually leave?
The bus leaves every morning at 8 am.	How many sons does she have?

⇒ *habitual actions/repeated actions/daily routines.*

I always take tea without sugar.	Sony always gets up early.
I usually work till 8.	Pemba has a shower every morning.
We often buy cheese at this store.	Atul likes warm weather.
She doesn't often go to the cinema.	Priya walks to school every day.
Do you water your plants once a week?	When do they usually have lunch?

⇒ *truths and facts true of all times/sayings and proverbs.*

The sun sets early in the winter.	Wood floats on water.
Water freezes at 0 degrees Celsius.	Earth is a planet.
What does 'strange' mean?	Pandas feed on bamboo shoots.
Every twelve months, the Earth circles the Sun.	History repeats itself.
Water is one of the necessities of life.	Birds do not like milk.
Rivers flow into the sea.	Gas expands when heated.
Canada lies north of the United States.	Five plus five equals ten.
Slow and steady wins the race.	Honesty is the best policy.

⇒ *fixed time table.*

The meeting starts sharp at 4 pm.	The bus doesn't arrive until 10.
When do term exams begin this year?	The new club opens this Sunday.
His father retires next year.	The show starts in 2 hours.
The department store opens at 9 a.m.	The next meeting is on June 12.

⇒ *with verbs of sensations, mental or emotional state, mental or sense perception, possession, likes, dislikes and other types of state or condition.*

The fish smells a bit odd.	He seems to be confused.
Do you see that clock?	Your hand feels cold.
I love swimming during the summer.	This tastes quite delicious.