



Learn English Through Stories

H Series

H23

**Adapted and modified by
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Trouble in Gangtok

By Satyajit

Two

Although our hotel was called Snow View and the rooms at the rear were supposed to afford a view of Kanchenjunga, we didn't manage to see any snow the day we arrived, for the mist didn't clear at all. There appeared to be only one other Bengali gentleman among the other guests in the hotel. I saw him in the dining hall at lunch time, but didn't get to meet him until later.

We went out after lunch and found a paan shop. Feluda always had a paan after lunch, though he admitted he hadn't expected to find a shop here in Gangtok. The main street outside our hotel was quite large. A number of buses, lorries and station wagons stood in the middle of the road. On both sides were shops of various kinds. It was obvious that business people from almost every corner of India had come to Sikkim. In many ways it was like Darjeeling, except that the number of people out on the streets was less, which helped keep the place both quiet and clean.

Stepping out of the paan shop, we were wondering where to go next, when the figure of Mr Bose suddenly emerged from the mist. He appeared to be walking hurriedly in the direction of our hotel. Feluda waved at him as he came closer. He quickened his pace and joined us in a few seconds.

'Disaster!' he exclaimed, panting. 'What happened?'

'That accident . . . do you know who it was?'

I felt myself go rigid with apprehension. The next words Mr Bose spoke confirmed my fears. 'It was SS,' he said, 'my partner.'

'What! Where was he going?'

'Who knows? What a terrible disaster, Mr Mitter!'

'Did he die instantly?'

'No. He was alive for a few hours after being taken to a hospital. There were multiple fractures.'

Apparently, he asked for me. He said, “Bose, Bose” a couple of times. But that was all.’

‘How did you find out?’ Feluda asked, walking back to the hotel. We went into the dining hall. Mr Bose sat down quickly, wiping his face with a handkerchief. ‘It’s a long story, actually,’ he replied. ‘You see, the driver survived. What happened was that when the boulder hit the jeep, the driver lost control. I believe the boulder itself wasn’t such a large one, but because the driver didn’t know where he was going, the jeep tilted to one side, went over the edge and fell into a gorge. The driver, however, managed to jump out in the nick of time. All he got was a minor cut over one eye. But by the time he could scramble to his feet, the jeep had disappeared with Shelvankar in it. This happened on the North Sikkim Highway. The driver began walking back to Gangtok. On his way he found a group of Nepali labourers who helped him to go back to the spot and rescue Shelvankar. Luckily, an army truck happened to be passing by, so they could take him to a hospital almost immediately. But . . . well . . .’

There was no sign of the jovial and talkative man who had accompanied us from Bagdogra. Mr Bose seemed shaken and deeply upset.

‘What happened to his body?’ Feluda asked gently.

‘It was sent to Bombay. The authorities here got through to his brother there. SS had married twice, but both his wives are dead. There was a son from his first marriage, who fought with him and left home fourteen years ago. Oh, that’s another story. SS loved his son; he tried very hard to contact him, but he had vanished without a trace. So his brother was his next of kin. He didn’t allow a post mortem. The body was sent to Bombay the next day.

‘When did this happen?’

‘On the morning of the eleventh. He had arrived in Gangtok on the seventh. Honestly, Mr Mitter, I can hardly believe any of this. If only I was with him . . . we might have avoided such a tragedy.’

‘What are your plans now?’

‘Well, there’s no point in staying here any longer. I’ve spoken to a travel agent. I should be able to fly back to Bombay tomorrow.’ He rose. ‘Don’t worry about this, please,’ he added. ‘You are here to have a good time, so I hope you do. I’ll see you before I go.’

Mr Bose left. Feluda sat quietly, staring into space and frowning. Then he repeated softly the words Mr Bose had uttered this morning: 'One chance in a million . . . but then, a man can get struck by lightning. That's no less amazing.'

The Bengali gentleman I had noticed earlier had been sitting at an adjacent table, reading a newspaper. He folded it neatly the minute Mr Bose left, and came over to join us. 'Namaskar,' he said to Feluda, taking the chair next to him. 'Anything can happen in the streets of Sikkim. You arrived only this morning, didn't you?'

'Hm,' said Feluda. I looked carefully at the man. He seemed to be in his mid-thirties. His eyes were partially hidden behind tinted glasses. Just below his nose was a small, square moustache, the kind that was once known as a butterfly moustache. Not many people wore it nowadays.

'Mr Shelvankar was a most amiable man.' 'Did you know him?' Feluda asked.

'Not intimately, no. But from what little I saw of him, he seemed very friendly. He was interested in art. He bought a Tibetan statue from me only two days before he died.'

'Was he a collector of such things?'

'I don't know. I found him in the Art Emporium one day, looking at various objects. So I told him I had this statue. He asked me to bring it to the dak bungalow. When I showed it to him there, he bought it on the spot. But then, it was a piece worth having. It had nine heads and thirty-four arms. My grandfather had brought it from Tibet.'

'I see.' Feluda sounded a little stiff and formal. But I found this man quite interesting, especially the smile that always seemed to hover on his lips. Even the death of Mr Shelvankar appeared to have given him cause for amusement.

'My name is Nishikanto Sarkar,' he said.

Feluda raised his hands in a namaskar but did not introduce himself.

'I live in Darjeeling,' Mr Sarkar continued. 'We've lived there for three generations. But you'd find that difficult to believe, wouldn't you? I mean, just look at me, I am so dark!'

Feluda smiled politely without saying anything. Mr Sarkar refused to be daunted. 'I know Darjeeling and Kalimpong pretty thoroughly. But this is my first visit to Sikkim. There are quite a few interesting places near Gangtok, I believe. Have you already seen them?'

'No. We're totally new to Sikkim, like yourself.'

'Good,' Mr Sarkar grinned. 'You're going to be here for some time, aren't you? We could go around together. Let's visit Pemiangchi one day. I've heard it's a beautiful area.'

'Pemiangchi? You mean where there are ruins of the old capital of Sikkim?'

'Not just ruins, dear sir. According to my guide book, there's a forest, old dak bungalows built during British times, gumphas, a first class view of Kanchenjunga—what more do you want?'

'We'd certainly like to go, if we get the chance,' said Feluda and stood up. 'Are you going out?'

'Yes, just for a walk. Is it necessary to lock up each time we go out?'

'Well, yes, that's always advisable in a hotel. But cases of theft are very rare in these parts. There is only one prison in Sikkim, and that's here in Gangtok. The total number of criminals held in there would be less than half-a-dozen!'

We came out of the hotel once more, only to find that the mist hadn't yet cleared. Feluda glanced idly at the shops and said, 'We should have remembered to buy sturdy boots for ourselves. These shoes would be no good if it rained and the roads became all slushy and slippery.'

'Couldn't we buy us some boots here?'

'Yes, we probably could. I'm sure Bata has a branch in Gangtok. We could look for it in the evening. Right now I think we should explore this place.'

The road that led from the market to the main town went uphill. The number of people and houses grew considerably less as we walked up this road. Most of the passers-by were schoolchildren in uniform. Unlike Darjeeling, no one was on horseback. Jeeps ran frequently, possibly because of the army camp. Sixteen miles from Gangtok, at a height of 14,000 feet, was Nathula. It was here that the Indian border ended. On the other side of Nathula, within fifty yards, stood the Chinese army.

A few minutes later, we came to a crossing, and were taken aback by a sudden flash of colour. A closer look revealed a man—possibly a European—standing in the mist, clad from head to foot in very colourful clothes: yellow shoes, blue jeans, a bright red sweater, through which peeped green shirt cuffs. A black and white scarf was wound around his neck. His white skin had started to acquire a tan.

He had a beard which covered most of his face, but he appeared to be about the same age as Feluda

—just under thirty. Who was he? Could he be a hippie?

He gave us a friendly glance and said, 'Hello.' 'Hello,' Feluda replied.

Now I noticed that a leather bag was hanging from his shoulder, together with two cameras, one of which was a Canon. Feluda, too, had a Japanese camera with him. Perhaps the hippie saw it, for he said, 'Nice day for colour.'

Feluda laughed. 'When I saw you from a distance, that's exactly what I thought. But you see, colour film in India is so expensive that one has to think twice before using it freely.'

'Yes, I know. But I have some in my own stock. Let me know if you need any.' I tried to work out which country he might be from. He didn't sound American; nor did he have a British or French accent.

'Are you here on holiday?' Feluda asked him.

'No, not really. I'm here to take photographs. I'm working on a book on Sikkim. I am a professional photographer.'

'How long are you going to be here for?'

'I came five days ago, on the ninth. My original visa was only for three days. I managed to have it extended. I'd like to stay for another week.'

'Where are you staying?'

'Dak bungalow. See this road on the right? The dak bungalow is on this road, only a few minutes from here.'

I pricked up my ears. Mr Shelvankar had also stayed at the same place.

‘You must have met the gentleman who died in that accident recently—’
Feluda began.

‘Yes, that was most unfortunate,’ the hippie shook his head sadly. ‘I got to know him quite well. He was a fine man, and—’ he broke off. Then he said, more or less to himself, ‘Very strange!’ He looked faintly worried.

‘What’s wrong?’ Feluda enquired.

‘Mr Shelvankar acquired a Tibetan statue from a Bengali gentleman here. He paid a thousand rupees for it.’

‘One thousand!’

‘Yes. He took it to the local Tibetan Institute the next day. They said it was a rare and precious piece of art. But—’ The man stopped again and remained silent for a few moments. Finally, he sighed and said, ‘What is puzzling me is its disappearance. Where did it go?’

‘What do you mean? Surely his belongings were all sent back to Bombay?’

‘Yes, everything else he possessed was sent to Bombay. But not that statue. He used to keep it in the front pocket of his jacket. “This is my mascot,” he used to say, “it will bring me luck!” He took it with him that morning. I know this for a fact. When they brought him to the hospital, I was there. They took out everything from his pockets. There was a notebook, a wallet and his broken glasses in a case. But there was no sign of the statue. Of course, it could be that it slipped out of his pocket as he fell and is probably still lying where he was found. Or maybe one of those men who helped lift him out saw it and removed it from the spot.’

‘But I’ve been told people here are very honest.’

‘That is true. And that is why I have my doubts—’ the man seemed lost in thought. ‘Do you know where Mr Shelvankar was going that day?’

‘Yes. On the way to Singik there’s a gumpha. That is where he was going. In fact, I was supposed to go with him. But I changed my mind and left a lot earlier, because it was a beautiful day and I wanted to take some photographs here. He told me he’d pick me up on the way if he saw me.’

‘Why was he so interested in this gumpha?’

‘I’m not sure. Perhaps Dr Vaidya was partly responsible for it.’ ‘Dr Vaidya?’

This was the first time anyone had mentioned Dr Vaidya. Who was he?

The hippie laughed. 'It's a bit awkward, isn't it, to chat in the middle of the road? Why don't you come and have coffee with me in the dak bungalow?'

Feluda agreed readily. He was obviously keen to get as much information as possible about Shelvankar.

We began walking up the road on our right. 'Besides,' added the hippie, 'I need to rest my foot. I slipped in the hills the other day and sprained my ankle slightly. It starts aching if I stand anywhere for more than five minutes.'

The mist had started to clear. Now it was easy to see how green the surroundings were. I could see rows of tall pine trees through the thinning mist. The dak bungalow wasn't far. It was rather an attractive building, not very old. Our new friend took us to his room, and quickly removed piles of papers and journals from two chairs for us to sit. 'Sorry, I haven't yet introduced myself,' he said. 'My name is Helmut Ungar.'

'Is that a German name?' Feluda asked.

'Yes, that's right,' Helmut replied and sat down on his bed. Clearly, he didn't believe in keeping a tidy room. His clothes (all of them as colourful as the ones he was wearing) were strewn about, his suitcases were open, displaying more books and magazines than clothes, and spread on a table were loads of photographs, most of which seemed to have been taken abroad. Although my own knowledge of photography was extremely limited, I could tell these photos were really good.

'I am Pradosh Mitter and this is my cousin, Tapeshe,' said Feluda, not revealing that he was an amateur detective.

'Pleased to meet you both. Excuse me,' Helmut went out of the room, possibly to order three coffees. Then he came back and said, 'Dr Vaidya is a very interesting person, though he talks rather a lot. He stayed here in this dak bungalow for a few days. He can read palms, make predictions about the future, and even contact the dead.'

'What! You mean he can act as a medium?'

'Yes, something like that. Mr Shelvankar was startled by some of the things he said.' 'Where is he now?'

'He left for Kalimpong. He was supposed to meet some Tibetan monks there. But he said he'd return to Gangtok.'

'What did he tell Mr Shelvankar? Do you happen to know anything about it?'

'Oh yes. They spoke to each other in my presence. Dr Vaidya told Mr Shelvankar about his business, the death of his wives, and about his son. He even said Mr Shelvankar had been under a lot of stress lately.'

'What could have caused it?' 'I don't know.'

'Didn't Shelvankar say anything to you?'

'No. But I could sense something was wrong. He used to grow preoccupied, and sometimes I heard him sigh. One day he received a telegram while we were having tea on the front veranda. I don't know what it said, but it upset him a good deal.'

'Did Dr Vaidya say that Mr Shelvankar would die in an accident?'

'No, not in so many words; but he did say Mr Shelvankar must be careful over the next few days.'

Apparently, there was some indication of trouble and bad times.'

The coffee arrived. We drank it in silence. Even if Mr Shelvankar's death had been caused truly by a freak accident, I thought, there was something wrong somewhere. It was evident that Feluda was thinking the same thing, for he kept cracking his knuckles. He never did this unless there was a nasty suspicion in his mind.

We finished our coffee and rose to take our leave. Helmut walked with us up to the main gate. 'Thank you for the coffee,' Feluda told him. 'If you're going to be here for another week, I'm sure we shall meet again. We're staying at the Snow View. Please let me know if Dr Vaidya returns.'

In reply, Helmut said just one thing: 'If only I could find out what happened to that statue, I'd feel a lot happier.'

2. Critical Thinking

The Importance of Critical Thinking

Critical thinking is a vital skill that every individual should cultivate, especially in today's fast-paced and complex world. It is the ability to analyze, evaluate, and interpret information effectively, enabling individuals to make reasoned judgments and decisions. In the academic realm, critical thinking is highly valued as it enhances learning, promotes intellectual growth, and prepares students for future challenges.

One of the key aspects of critical thinking is the ability to assess the credibility and reliability of information. With the abundance of information available online, distinguishing between fact and fiction has become increasingly challenging. Students need to develop the skills to discern biased sources, recognize logical fallacies, and verify the accuracy of information before accepting it as truth.

Furthermore, critical thinking encourages students to approach problems from multiple perspectives. Rather than relying on rote memorization or following prescribed steps, critical thinkers are adept at exploring alternative solutions and considering the consequences of each option. This fosters creativity and innovation, essential qualities in an ever-evolving global landscape.

Moreover, critical thinking instils a sense of intellectual curiosity and scepticism. Instead of passively accepting information at face value, students are encouraged to ask probing questions, challenge assumptions, and seek evidence to support claims. This not only deepens their understanding of various subjects but also equips them with the tools to navigate the complexities of the world around them.

In conclusion, critical thinking is an invaluable skill that empowers students to become independent learners and responsible citizens. By honing their analytical abilities, students can navigate the vast sea of information with confidence, make informed decisions, and contribute meaningfully to society.