



Learn English Through Stories

F Series

F37

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1. The Travels of a Dervish

By Premchand

Part 3

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Dear reader! I cannot simply describe in words the impact that this lady's account had on me. It is regrettable how my countrymen point fingers even at the land that produces such women. I can sacrifice a thousand European women for her. We have a limited notion of marital relationship as simply a worldly one. We are far, far away from its spiritual dimension. This is the reason why, in spite of centuries of civilization, our country cannot offer such great examples of female purity and chastity. Unfortunately, our society is moving in directions that will preclude the possibility of such human miracles of purity in the future.

Surely, honour has a unique spiritual power and if one wants to observe its miraculous influence, one should go to the sacred land of India. If Germany takes pride in its army, France in its culture and England in its trade, then India is proud of its chaste women. Isn't it a shame for Europeans that poets of the stature of Homer and Virgil, Dante and Goethe, Shakespeare and Hugo, could not portray a single woman like Sita or Savitri? The truth is that European society is bereft of such lofty ideals of honour.

I bade farewell to Gyan Sagar reluctantly and left for Europe the very next day. Word about my return had already spread. When my ship touched the Hamburg port, I found thousands of people and hundreds of scholars waiting to welcome me. As soon as they saw me, they broke out in a loud cheer and congratulated me. From there I was led in a splendid procession to my home.

Such honour was suitable for a head of state. That evening I was given the honour of dining with the kaiser. The scholars of the country sang my praises in their speeches and for several months I had to attend to various requests from newspapers, club houses and universities. My travelogue was published in hundreds of newspapers. Messages of congratulations also came from several other countries. Many organizations in France, England and Russia invited me to

deliver lectures on my experiences, pledging thousands of pounds for each lecture. Honorary titles were bestowed on me by several intellectual forums and syndicates of universities. The Russian emperor honoured me by sending his autograph. The King of Spain presented me with an aircraft. However, amidst all these engagements, I continued to remember the Himalayas. The beautiful banks of the Gyan Sagar, that cave, and that soft-spoken lady were ever-present in my mind. Her gentle voice echoed in my ears. I went to theatres and saw the beautiful women of Spain and Georgia, I went to clubs and enjoyed dance and music and watched the bewitching beauties of Europe, their grace and refined manners, but the image of that Himalayan apsara could not be dislodged from my mind. Her bewitching image was etched in my memory. I would often imagine that image of purity descending from the skies. Often I grew restless and wanted to somehow reach the banks of the Gyan Sagar. I longed to hear her speak. This longing increased by the day; it slowly became an obsession.

Eventually, I packed my bags one day and took my seat on a ship bound for Bombay. And I reached the banks of the Gyan Sagar once again, exactly a thousand days after my first visit.

It was morning. The Himanchal stood there wearing a golden crown. A gentle breeze was blowing that created ripples in the waters of the Gyan Sagar. The lotus flowers reflected the rays of the sun and danced like the heart of a sage who has discovered the secrets of spiritual truth. Colourful ducks swam in the midst of these flowers, like some chaste maiden who went her way ignoring the lustful glance of Kamadeva with contempt. I looked towards the cave wistfully to find that a huge, tall palace stood there. On one side of the palace was a beautiful garden and on the other, a magnificent temple whose golden spires pierced the skies. I was stunned to see this transformation and went to the main gate. There I found two guards dressed in velvet uniforms of violet and wearing gold-embroidered turbans. They held gold batons in their hands.

I asked them, 'Whose palace is this?'

'The grand queen of Arjun Nagar's.'

'Has this been built recently?'

'Yes. But, who are you?'

'I'm a traveller from another country. Could you inform the queen about my arrival?'

‘What’s your name?’

‘Just tell her that it’s a traveller from Europe who wishes to kiss her feet.’
The guard went in and, returning in a moment, said, ‘Come with me.’

I accompanied him. After crossing the veranda, I reached a *baradari*, a structure with twelve gateways, made of white marble. I hadn’t seen such fine artwork except in the Taj Mahal. The inlay work on the floor was truly astounding. The paintings of several master artists hung on the walls. The fragrance of rose and sandalwood permeated the mind. I sat down on the floor when a tall and imposing man entered the hall. He had a majestic air and his eyes shone with masculine pride. His black moustaches were pointed like spears and filled the onlookers with awe. His curly, jet black hair spread over his shoulders. His chest was perhaps wider in proportion to his torso. It was difficult to imagine a more impressive image of manly valour.

‘Do you recognize me?’ he asked, smiling.

I stood up respectfully. ‘I don’t think I had the privilege of knowing you,’ I replied.

He sat on a finely carved ivory throne at the entrance of the hall and said, ‘I’m Sher Singh.’ I was stunned.

Sher Singh continued, ‘Aren’t you happy that you didn’t make me the target of your pistol? I was an animal then; I’m human now.’

‘I congratulate you from the core of my heart,’ I replied.

‘Thank you very much for your greetings.’

‘With your permission, may I ask a question?’

‘I know what you wish to ask. Go ahead,’ he said, smiling.

‘Was there any basis for Vidyadhari’s suspicion?’ I asked.

Sher Singh lowered his head in embarrassment. Some moments later he said, ‘Yes, there was. The moment I held her wrist, I felt tremors run through my body. Each one of my limbs trembled with desire like the leaves of a tree are shaken by the wind. I shall remain obliged to Vidyadhari as long as I live. Her curse proved to be a blessing in disguise. Despite the penance, I cannot overcome the sense of shame. Nothing in the world is static but the stain of sin is eternal. One’s good reputation is wiped off with the passage of time but not the stain of sin. I think even God cannot erase this stain. No compensation, no atonement, no penalty can

wash off the stigma of sin. Intercession, penance and confession are the inventions of worldly wise devout men. The fire of sin burns a soul's greatness and freedom to ashes.'

While we were talking, the curtain of the inner door was lifted and Queen Priyamvada entered. It seemed as if the full moon had descended on the earth. When I had seen her earlier, her beauty was subdued by the ache in her heart. When I saw her now, she looked utterly transformed, leaving scope for no further improvement by nature. I paid my curtsies and congratulated her. She smiled and asked, 'Traveller, did you ever remember us when you were in your far-off country?' Had I been an artist, I would have caught the magic of her smile and surpassed even the grand old masters in their art. Her smile was graceful. But I didn't expect this question from her. Had I answered it with the same informality with which she had asked, Sher Singh's attitude could have changed. I could not tell her that the happiest days of my life were those that I had earlier spent on the banks of the Gyan Sagar. There was no harm in saying this much, but, perhaps, I had no faith in the innocence and purity of my words as much as the queen had in hers. 'Am I not human?' I replied softly. Sher Singh broke out in a loud, manly guffaw which indicated that my reply was not all that bad.

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Three days passed and during these three days I came to realize why the East is known for its hospitality. Another person from Europe, unfamiliar with it, would have found it exasperating but I, experienced in the manners of the East, have learnt to value it for its real worth. In comparison with the Eastern hospitality which is zestful, spirited, sometimes oppressive, its European counterpart seems a shame.

On the fourth day, at my insistence, Queen Priyamvada continued with the remainder of her story—'Traveller! I've already told you that I had handed over the responsibility of governing the state to Pandit Sridhar. He did his job with great competence and farsightedness. It's rare that a scholar who has spent his life reading books should handle the affairs of a state. But, like Raja Birbal, Pandit Sridhar had multiple abilities. I had given him the responsibility merely to test his abilities and he proved that nature had endowed him well for this task.

When he began work, this state was a barren jungle; now it is a well-laid-out

garden with flowerbeds and pathways. There's not a single nook or cranny that has escaped the keen scrutiny of Panditji's eyes.

'Within a few months, people in general were drawn to him by his cultured manners. Raja Randhir Singh also became fond of him. Earlier, Panditji used to live in a temple outside the city but as his interaction with the raja grew, he was brought to the palace to live there. Their friendship grew to such an extent that the distinction of hierarchy disappeared. The raja took lessons in Sanskrit from the Pandit, and spent a good deal of his time at Panditji's house. It's sad that these visits were not due to the raja's love for knowledge or friendship; rather it was the attraction for beauty that drew him to the Pandit's house. If I had the slightest doubt at that time that Raja sahib's warmth was due to some other reason, this friendship would not have ended as it did. The raja had seen Vidyadhari when she lived in the temple and had been smitten by her beauty which led to unpleasant consequences. The raja, by disposition, was an upright and noble man but the beauty that could lead my angelic husband astray could do anything to anyone.

'The innocent Vidyadhari was completely unaware of this development. Just as a deer leaps gaily towards green grass set as a trap by the hunter, Vidyadhari was drawn towards her ruin, blissfully unaware of the web of lust laid around her. She would prepare paan cones for the raja with her own hands and grind sandalwood paste for his puja. She also grew close to the queen who didn't allow her to be away from her even for a moment. Together, they walked in the garden, sat on the swing and played dice. They helped each other in braiding their hair and in their make-up. In other words, the queen accorded Vidyadhari the status which I had once enjoyed at the palace. But how was the poor woman to know that when she walked in the garden, sensuality was waiting to trap her; when she sat on the swing, carnality swayed with her? Lust was trying to ensnare this simple, innocent woman from all sides.

'A year went by. The raja's associations with her grew more intimate by the day. When I found that this companionship was standing in the way of Panditji's work, I devised a plan. I suggested that he should travel the far-flung districts of the state in an effort to ascertain people's response in matters of establishing granaries and the kind of assistance the state can get from them. Panditji was happy at the suggestion and set out on this mission the next morning. But Vidyadhari did not accompany him. Till then, Vidyadhari would accompany him

like his shadow in all his travels. She had never thought of her own discomfort or hardship. No matter how much Panditji had tried to highlight the hardships and discomforts in an effort to dissuade her, she would be unwilling to leave his side. But this time, the thought of hardship kept her away from the path of her obligations. Earlier, her pativrata was the tree which alone drew the nectar of her love. But now, other plants had sprouted buds which relied on the same source for sustenance.'

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'Traveller, six months went by but Pandit Sridhar didn't return. The snow on the mountains melted and began to flow into the rivers. Multi-hued flowers danced on the mountains. Moonlight caressed the flowers. Migratory birds returned to their nests after completing their yearly peregrination but Panditji became so entangled with the affairs of the state that he could not return to Arjun Nagar despite my frequent requests. It was surprising that he had also turned indifferent towards Vidyadhari. Earlier, he could not bear her separation even for a moment. What's more surprising was that Vidyadhari contented herself merely by writing letters and didn't show any inclination to join him in his exile. She would often write in her letters, "My lord, I yearn for you; nothing makes me happy here. Have you forgotten me? What wrong have I done? Don't you have any pity for me? I keep crying bitter tears." Her letters were filled with such painful thoughts. There was no doubt that whatever she wrote was the truth. She wrote all these letters enumerating her complaints but it never occurred to her to go visit him.

'The weather was pleasant. Lotus swayed in the Gyan Sagar like youthful hearts filled with longings. The auspicious occasion of Raja Randhir Singh's twenty-fifth birthday came. Preparations for celebrations began in the city. Women moistened earthen lamps so that they did not absorb too much oil. Old women pasted their houses with mud. It was the full moon night in the month of Chait but the sparkling lamps outshone the moonlight. I had ordered a sword studded with jewels for Raja sahib. Other nobles of the court had also brought him presents. When I went to Vidyadhari's house, I saw her making a garland of flowers. I stood in front of her for half an hour but she was so lost in her work that she did not notice my presence. I called out softly, "Sister!"

'She looked up with a start. Then she quickly hid the garland amongst the

flowers and asked apologetically, “Have you been waiting here for long?”

“For over half an hour,” I replied.

‘Vidyadhari’s face grew pale. Her eyes became downcast, she hesitated and looked nervous. Then she said diffidently, “I’ve made this garland for the god.”

‘I could not understand at the moment why she was looking so nervous. Was it shameful to weave a garland for the god? We’d done this many a time earlier. Even an artful gardener could not have made better garlands than us. What was there to be embarrassed about? The mystery became clear to me the following day—the garland was a gift for Raja Sahib.

‘It was indeed a beautiful object. Vidyadhari had used all her skills in making it. This was probably the most valuable gift that she could have given Raja sahib. She was a Brahmin, the Raja’s venerable *gurumata*. Her gift was the most appropriate. But why did she try to hide it from me?

‘I could not sleep that night. I lost my regard for her after this one action of hers. Once, while I napped, I saw her in my dream—she appeared as a beautiful flower that had lost its fragrance. She rushed to embrace me but I stepped back, and cried out, “Why did you hide this fact from me?”’

2. Grammar Page

The Past Perfect Tense

Structures:

Affirmative: *sub + had + v³ + obj*

Negative: *sub + had not + v³ + obj*

Questions: *Had + sub + v³ + obj + ?*

WH + had + sub + v³ + obj + ?

Active: *sub + had + v³ + obj*

Passive: *obj + had + been + v³ + by + sub*

He had written a letter.

He had not written a letter.

Had he written a letter?

Why had he written a letter?

He had written a letter.

A letter had been written by him.

Uses:

⇒ *The past perfect tense expresses the idea that something occurred before another action in the past. It can also show that something happened before a specific time in the past.*

After I had got a new job, I left the previous one.

The police had cleared the road before the rally approached.

By the time the police came, the unruly crowd had dispersed.

I did not recognize Dev because he had grown a beard.

We ran to the bus stop but the bus had already left.

I noticed that Jiya had left her book behind.

We soon remembered that we had seen the movie before.

The police found out who had stolen the bike.

I had only just put the phone when it rang again.

The grandfather suddenly recollected where he had hidden the money.

The teacher arranged extra classes for the students who had failed the term exams.



GRAMMAR STUDY: The Past Perfect Continuous Tense

Structures:

Affirmative: *sub + had been + v⁴ + obj*

Negative: *sub + had not been + v⁴ + obj*

Questions: *Had + sub + been + v⁴ + obj + ?*

WH + had + been + sub + v⁴ + obj + ?

Active: *sub + had + been + v⁴ + obj*

Passive: (no passive structure)

He had been writing a letter.

He had not been writing a letter.

Had he been writing a letter?

Why had he been writing a letter?

He had been writing a letter.

Uses:

⇒ *We use the past perfect continuous tense to show that something started in the past and continued up until another time in the past.*

They had been talking for over an hour before I arrived.

How long had you been waiting to get on the bus?

Shilpa wanted to sit down because she had been standing all day at work.

She had been working in a hospital before she found a new job.

She had been frying some onions when she burnt her fingers.

⇒ *We use the past perfect continuous tense before another action in the past to show cause and effect.*

Kabir was tired because he had been digging the field for three hours.

Bhim gained weight because he had been overeating.

Suman failed the final test because he had not been attending class.