Learn English Through Stories

H Series

H27

Adapted and modified by

Kulwant Singh Sandhu

https://learn-by-reading.co.uk

Contents

1. The Golden Fortress

Three

Half an hour ago, we boarded a train at the Agra Fort station to go to Bandikui. We had about three hours to kill in Agra. So we went to see the Taj Mahal again—after ten years—and Feluda gave me a short lecture on the geometry of the building.

Yesterday, before leaving Calcutta, we had to attend to some important business. Perhaps I should mention it here. Since the Toofan Express left at 9.30 in the morning, we were both up quite early. At around six o'clock, after we'd had tea, Feluda said, 'We ought to visit Uncle Sidhu before we go. If he can give us some information, it will really help.'

Uncle Sidhu lives in Sardar Shankar Road, which is only five minutes from our Tara Road. Uncle Sidhu is a strange character. He spent most of his life doing various kinds of businesses, earning a lot of money, and then losing much of it. Now he has retired. His main passion is books. He buys them in large numbers, and spends some of his time on reading, and the rest on playing chess all by himself. Sometimes, he consults a book on chess in between making moves.

His other passion is food—or rather, experimenting with food. He likes mixing one item with another. According to him, yoghurt mixed with an omelette tastes like ambrosia. To tell the truth, he is not related to us. He used to live next door to us back in our ancestral village (which I have never seen). So he's like an elder brother to my father, and we call him 'uncle'.

When we reached his house, he was seated on a low stool, blocking the entrance through his front door, and having his hair cut by his barber, although he has no hair except for some around the back of his head. Upon seeing us, he moved his stool a little and allowed us to go through. 'Make yourselves comfortable,' he said. 'Yell for Narayan, he'll give you some tea.'

Uncle Sidhu's room was very simply furnished. There was only a divan, two chairs and three very large bookcases. Books covered half the divan. We knew that the little empty space on it was where Uncle Sidhu liked to sit, so we took the two chairs. Feluda had remembered to bring the book he'd borrowed,

which was still covered with newspaper. He slipped it back into an empty slot on a shelf.

The barber continued to work on Uncle Sidhu's hair. 'Felu,' said Uncle Sidhu, 'you are a detective. I hope you've read up on the history of criminal investigation? It doesn't matter what you specialize in. If you know something about the history of your profession, you'll gain more confidence and find your work much more interesting.'

'Yes, of course,' Feluda replied politely.

'Who was the first to discover the technique of identifying a criminal through his fingerprints? Can you tell me?'

Feluda winked at me and said, 'I can't remember. I did read about it somewhere, but now . . .'.

I could tell that Feluda knew the answer all right, but was pretending that he didn't, just to please Uncle Sidhu.

'Hmm. Most people would immediately tell you that it was Alphonse Bertillon. But that's wrong. The correct name is Juan Vucatich. Remember that. He was from Argentina. He was the first to emphasize the importance of thumbprints. Then he divided those prints into four categories. A few years later, Henry from England strengthened the system.'

Feluda glanced at his watch and decided to come straight to the point. 'You may have heard of Dr Hemanga Hajra, the parapsychologist—?'

'Certainly,' said Uncle Sidhu, 'Why, I saw his name in the papers only the other day! What's he done? Something fishy? But he's not the kind of man to get mixed up in funny business. On the contrary, he has exposed others . . . cheats and frauds.'

'Really?' Feluda looked up. We were about to hear an interesting story.

'Yes, don't you know about it? It happened about four years ago, and was reported in the press. A Bengali gentleman—no, I should not call him a gentleman, he was actually a scoundrel—started a centre for spiritual healing in Chicago. Bang in the city centre. Clients poured in every day. The Americans have plenty of money, and are easily impressed by new ideas. This Bengali claimed that he could use hypnotism and cure even the most complex diseases. The same sort of thing that Anton Mesmer did in Europe in the

eighteenth century. Perhaps the Bengali managed to cure a couple of patients— that's not unusual; a few stray cases would be successful. But, around the same time, Hajra arrived in Chicago on a lecture tour. He went to see things for himself, and caught the man out. Oh God, it was a scandal! In the end, the American government forced him to leave the country. Yes, yes .

. . I can remember his name now . . . he called himself Bhavananda. That man, Hajra, though, is a solid character. At least, that's the impression one gets from his articles. I've got two of them. See in the right hand corner of that bookcase on your left. You'll find three journals of the Parapsychological Society.'

Feluda borrowed all three journals. Now, sitting on the train, he was leafing through them. I was looking out of the window and watching the scenery. A little while ago, we had left Uttar Pradesh and entered Rajasthan.

'The sun here has a different brilliance. No wonder the men are so powerful!'

These words in Bengali came from the bench opposite us. It was a four-berth compartment, and there were four passengers. The man who had spoken those words looked perfectly meek and mild, was very thin and probably shorter than me by at least two inches. And I was only fifteen, so it was likely that I'd grow taller with time. This man was at least thirty-five; there was no chance that his height would ever change. As he was dressed in a bush shirt and trousers, I had been unable to guess from his clothes that he was another Bengali.

He glanced at Feluda, smiled and said, 'I've been listening to your conversation for a long time. I'm lucky to have found fellow Bengalis so far away from home. In fact, I'd assumed that for a whole month I'd be forced to boycott my mother tongue!'

Feluda asked, possibly purely out of politeness, 'Are you going far?

'Up to Jodhpur. Then I'll decide where else I might go. What about yourselves?'
'We are going to Jodhpur, too.'

'Oh, wonderful. Are you also a writer?'

'Oh no,' Feluda smiled, 'I am only a reader. Do you write?'

'Are you familiar with the name of Jatayu?'

‘Jatayu?’ I asked. ‘The writer of all those thrillers?’ I had read one or two of his books—Shivers in the Sahara and The Ferocious Foe. I had borrowed them from our school library.

‘You are Jatayu?’ Feluda asked.

‘Yes, sir,’ the man flashed his teeth, his head bent in a bow. ‘I am Jatayu. At your service. I write under that pseudonym. Namaskar.’

‘Namaskar. My name is Pradosh Mitter. And this is Sreeman Tapeshranjan.’

How could Feluda keep a straight face? I could feel laughter bubbling up inside me, threatening to burst forth. This was Jatayu? And I used to think a writer who could write such tales would have looks to match—perhaps even James Bond would be put in the shade!

‘My real name is Lalmohan Ganguli. But please don’t tell anyone. A pseudonym—like a disguise— must never be revealed. I mean, if it is, then it loses its impact, don’t you think?’

We had bought a packet of sweet gulabi rewri in Agra. Feluda offered the packet to Jatayu and said, ‘You seem to have been on the move for some time!’

‘Yes, that’s . . .’ Jatayu picked up a rewri and suddenly broke off, looking a bit confused. Then he threw a startled glance at Feluda and asked, ‘How can you tell?’

Feluda smiled. ‘The strap on your wristwatch slips at times. When it does, it exposes the only part of your arm that isn’t sunburnt.’

Jatayu’s eyes grew round. ‘Oh my God, what terrific powers of observation you have got! Yes, you’re right. I left home about ten days ago, and travelled to Delhi, Agra and Fatehpur Sikri. So far, I’ve only written about adventures in foreign lands.

‘I live in Bhadreshwar. So I thought I should travel a bit, see new places, it would help me in my writing. Besides, these areas are much better suited to adventure stories, aren’t they? Look at those barren hills, rising high like biceps and triceps. Our Bengal has no muscles— except, of course, for the Himalayas. You can’t have a successful adventure on the plains!’

The three of us continued to eat the rewri. Then I caught Jatayu casting sidelong glances at Feluda.

Finally, he asked, ‘What is your height? Please don’t mind my asking.’ ‘Nearly six feet,’ Feluda replied.

‘Oh, that’s a very good height, the same as my hero’s. Prakhar Rudra—you do know his name, don’t you? Prakhar is a Russian name, but it suits a Bengali, too, don’t you think? The thing is, you see, I’ve got my hero to be everything I could never be myself. God knows I tried hard enough. When I was in college, I saw advertisements of Charles Atlas in British magazines. There he was, standing proudly, his chest and all his muscles expanded, his hands on his waist. He looked like a lion! There was not even an ounce of fat on his body. His muscles rippled like waves, from head to toe. And the advertisement said, “If you follow my system, you will look like me within a month!” Well, that may be true of Europeans. In Bengal, that kind of thing is impossible. My father was well off, so I wasted some of his money, sent for their lessons and followed them religiously.

‘Nothing happened. I remained just the same. Then an uncle said, “Try swinging from a curtain rod. You’ll grow taller in a month.” A month? For several months, I swung from a rod until, one day, it came off and I fell down. That dislocated my knee, but my height remained stuck at five feet and three-and-half inches. That told me plainly that even if I were pulled in different directions by two teams— as they do in a tug-of-war—I would never grow any taller. So, eventually, I thought enough was enough. There was no point in thinking about the muscles in my body. I decided to pay more attention to the muscles in my brain. And increase my mental height. I began writing thrillers. But I knew Lalmohan Ganguli was not a name that would help sell books. So I took a pseudonym. Jatayu. A fighter. Just think of the fight he put up with Ravan!’

Although our train was called a ‘fast passenger’, it was stopping at so many stations that it was not able to run for more than twenty minutes at a stretch. Feluda left the journals on parapsychology and began reading a book on Rajasthan. It had pictures of all the forts. Feluda was looking at those very carefully and reading the descriptions.

On the upper berth opposite us was a man whose moustache and clothes proclaimed clearly that he was not a Bengali. He was eating oranges—one after another—and collecting the peel and other debris on a sheet of a Urdu newspaper spread in front of him.

Feluda was marking a few places in his book with a blue pencil, when Lalmohan Babu said, ‘May I ask you something? Are you a detective?’

‘Why do you ask?’

‘No, I mean . . . you could tell so easily about my travelling!’ ‘Well, I am interested in that kind of thing.’

‘Good. You’re also going to Jodhpur, didn’t you say?’ ‘Yes.’

‘In connection with a mystery? If so, I am going to join you . . . I mean, if you don’t mind, that is.

I’ll never get such a chance again.’

‘I hope you wouldn’t object to riding a camel?’

‘A camel? Oh my God!’ Lalmohan Babu’s eyes began to glint. ‘Ship of the desert! It’s always been my dream. I have written about Bedouins in one of my novels—Bloodbath in Arabia. And I’ve mentioned camels in Shivers in the Sahara. It’s a fascinating creature. Just picture the scene. An entire row of camels, travelling through an ocean of sand, mile after mile, carrying their own water supply in their intestines. How romantic—oh!’

‘Er . . . when you wrote your novel, did you mention that bit about the intestines?’

Lalmohan Babu began looking uncertain. ‘Why, is that incorrect?’ Feluda nodded. ‘Yes. You see, the source of the water is actually in a camel’s hump. The hump is really an accumulation of fat. A camel can oxidize that fat and turn it into water. So it can survive without drinking any water for ten to fifteen days. But, once they do find water, camels have been known to drink as much as twenty-five gallons at one go.’

‘Thank goodness you told me all this,’ said Lalmohan Babu. ‘I must correct that mistake in the next edition.’

Four

The train was slow, but at least it wasn't running significantly late. When one has to take connecting trains, it can cause great problems if the first train is delayed.

We saw the first peacocks on reaching Bharatpur. Opposite our platform, there were three of them roaming freely on the tracks. Feluda said to me, 'You will find that peacocks and parrots are as common here as crows and sparrows in Calcutta.'

All the men we saw had turbans on their heads and sideburns on their cheeks—the size of which seemed to be getting larger as we travelled. They were all Rajasthanis, wearing short dhotis which reached their knees, and shirts with buttons on one side. On their feet were heavy naagras. Most men were carrying stout sticks in their hands.

We went to the refreshment room in the station in Bandikui to have dinner. Tucking into his roti and meat curry, Lalmohan Babu remarked, 'See all these men? There's a high probability that some of them are bandits. The Aravalli Hills act as a den for bandits—you know that, don't you? And I'm sure I don't have to tell you how powerful they are. When they are thrown into prison, they can push apart the iron bars on their windows with their bare hands, and escape through the gap!'

'Yes, I know,' Feluda replied. 'And do you know how they punish those who cross them?' 'They're killed, surely?'

'No. That's the beauty of it. If a bandit is annoyed with someone, he will hunt him down—no matter where that person is hiding— and then chop his nose off with a sword. That's all.'

Lalmohan Babu had just picked up a piece of meat. He forgot to put it in his mouth. 'Chop off his nose?' he asked.

'Yes, so I've heard.'

'It sounds most barbaric! Like something straight out of the dark ages. How terrible!'

We caught a train to Marwar in the middle of the night. It did involve scrambling in the dark, but we found enough room for ourselves and slept well.

In the morning, when I woke up, I glanced out of the window and saw an old fort in the distance, on top of a hill. Only a minute later, the train pulled into a station called Kisangarh.

'If you see the word "garh" attached to the name of a place, you may assume that somewhere in that area there is a fort on a hilltop,' Feluda said.

We got down on the platform and had tea. The earthen pots in which the tea was served were much larger and stronger than the pots used in Bengal. Even the tea tasted different. Feluda thought camel's milk had been used. Perhaps that was why Lalmohan Babu ordered a second pot when he finished the first.

When I'd finished mine, I found a tap on the platform and quickly brushed my teeth. Then I splashed cold water on my face and returned to our compartment.

There was a Rajasthani man sitting at one end of Lalmohan Babu's bench. On his head was a huge turban. One leg was folded up on the bench, and he was resting his chin on his raised knee. He had wrapped a shawl around himself, hiding most of his face. But I could see the colour of his shirt through the shawl. It was bright red.

Lalmohan Babu saw the man and promptly abandoned his bench and moved to ours. He tried to huddle in one corner. Feluda said, 'Why don't you two sit more comfortably?' He moved across to the other bench and sat down beside the Rajasthani.

I began to peer more closely at the man's turban. Heaven knew how many twists and turns the fabric had made before it was finally wound so tightly round his head. Lalmohan Babu addressed Feluda and said softly, 'Powerfully suspicious. He is dressed as an ordinary villager, but how come he is in a first-class compartment? Look at that bundle. God knows if it's packed with diamonds and other precious stones.'

The bundle was placed next to the man. Lalmohan Babu's comment made Feluda smile, but he said nothing.

The train started. Feluda took out the book on Rajasthan from his shoulder bag. I took out Newman's Bradshaw timetable and began looking up the

stations we would stop at. Each place had a strange name: Galota, Tilonia, Makrera, Vesana, Sendra. Where had these names come from? Feluda had told me once that a lot of local history was always hidden in the name given to a place. But who was going to look for the history behind these names?

The train continued to chug on its way. Suddenly, I could feel someone tugging at my shirt. I turned to find that Lalmohan Babu had gone visibly pale. When he caught my eye, he swallowed and whispered, 'Blood!'

Blood? What was the man talking about?

Lalmohan Babu's eyes turned to the Rajasthani. The latter was fast asleep. His head was flung back, his mouth slightly open. My eyes fell on the foot on the bench. The skin around the big toe was badly grazed. It had obviously been bleeding, but now the blood had dried. Then I realized something else. The dark stains on his clothes, which appeared to be mud stains, were, in fact, patches of dried blood.

I looked quickly at Feluda. He was reading his book, quite unconcerned. Lalmohan Babu found his nonchalance too much to bear. He spoke again, in the same choked voice, 'Mr Mitter, suspicious blood marks on our new co-passenger!'

Feluda looked up, glanced once at the Rajasthani and said, 'Probably caused by bugs.'

The thought that the blood was simply the result of bites from bed bugs made Lalmohan Babu look like a pricked balloon. Even so, he could not relax. He continued to sit stiffly and frown and cast the Rajasthani sidelong glances from time to time.

The train reached Marwar Junction at half past two. We had lunch in the refreshment room, and spent almost an hour walking about on the platform. When we climbed into another train at half past three to go to Jodhpur, there was no sign of that Rajasthani wearing a red shirt.

Our journey to Jodhpur lasted for two-and-a-half hours. On the way, we saw several groups of camels. Each time that happened, Lalmohan Babu grew most excited. By the time we reached Jodhpur, it was ten past six. Our train was delayed by twenty minutes. If we were still in Calcutta, the sun would have set by now, but as we were in the western part of the country, it was still shining brightly.

We had booked rooms at the Circuit House. Lalmohan Babu said he would stay at the New Bombay Lodge. 'I'll join you early tomorrow morning, we can all go together to see the fort,' he said and went off towards the tongas that were standing in a row.

We found ourselves a taxi and left the station. The Circuit House wasn't far, we were told. As we drove through the streets, I noticed a huge wall—visible through the gaps between houses—that seemed as high as a two-storeyed house. There was a time, Feluda told me, when the whole of Jodhpur was surrounded by that wall. There were gates in seven different places. If they heard of anyone coming to attack Jodhpur, all seven gates were closed.

Our car went round a bend. Feluda said at once, 'Look, on your left!'

In the far distance, high above all the buildings in the city, stood a sprawling, sombre-looking fort —the famous fort of Jodhpur. Its rulers had once fought for the Mughals.

I was still wondering how soon I'd get to see the fort at close quarters, when we reached the Circuit House. Our taxi passed through the gate, drove up the driveway, past a garden, and stopped under a portico. We got out, collected our luggage and paid the driver.

A gentleman emerged from the building and asked us if we were from Calcutta, and whether Feluda was called Pradosh Mitter.

'Yes, that's right,' Feluda acknowledged.

'There is a double room booked in your name on the ground floor,' the man replied.

We were handed the Visitors' Book to sign. Only a few lines above our own names, we saw two entries: Dr H.B. Hajra and Master M. Dhar.

The Circuit House was built on a simple plan. There was a large open space as one entered. To its left were the reception and the manager's room. In front of it was a staircase going up to the first floor, and on both sides, there were wide corridors along which stood rows of rooms. There were wicker chairs in the corridors.

A bearer came and picked up our luggage, and we followed him down the right-hand corridor to find room number 3. A middle-aged man, sporting an

impressive moustache, was seated on one of the wicker chairs, chatting with a man in a Rajasthani cap. As we walked past them, the first man said, ‘Are you Bengalis?’ Feluda smiled and said, ‘Yes.’ We were then shown into our room.

It was quite spacious. There were twin beds, each with a mosquito net. Set apart, at one end, was a two-seater sofa, a pair of easy chairs, and a round table with an ashtray on it. There was also a dressing table, wardrobes and bedside tables. Lamps, glasses and flasks of water were placed upon the tables. The door to the attached bathroom was to the left.

Feluda asked the bearer to bring us some tea and switched the fan on. ‘Did you see those two names?’ he asked, sitting down on the sofa.

‘Yes, but I hope that man with the thick moustache isn’t Dr Hajra!’ I replied. ‘Why? What if he is? Why should it matter?’

I couldn’t immediately think of a good reason. Feluda saw me hesitate and said, ‘You didn’t like the man, did you? You want Dr Hajra to be a pleasant, cheerful and friendly man. Right?’

Yes, Feluda was absolutely right. The man we just met appeared kind of crafty. Besides, he was probably quite tall and hefty. That was not how I would picture a doctor.

The tea arrived just as Feluda finished a cigarette. The bearer placed the tray on the table and left. Someone knocked on our door almost at once. ‘Come in!’ said Feluda in a grand manner, sounding like an Englishman. The man with the moustache moved aside the curtain and came in.

‘I am not disturbing you, am I?’ he said.

‘No, not at all. Please sit down. Would you like a cup of tea?’

‘No, thanks. I’ve just had some. Frankly speaking, the tea here isn’t all that good. But then, that’s true of most places. India is the land of tea, yet how many hotels, or dak bungalows, or circuit houses serve good quality tea, tell me? But if you go abroad, it’s a different story. Even in a place like Albania, I have had very good tea—would you believe it? First-class Darjeeling tea, it was. And if you went to Europe? Every major city would give you good tea. The only thing I don’t like is the business of tea bags. Your cup is filled with hot water, and you’re handed a little bag packed with tea leaves. A piece of string is tied to this bag. You have to hold it by this string and dip it in the water to make your own tea. Then you might add milk to it, or squeeze a lemon, as you

wish. Personally, I prefer lemon tea. But you need really good tea for that. The kind of tea they have here is very ordinary.'

'You have travelled a lot, have you?' Feluda asked.

'Yes, that's all I've done in life,' our visitor replied 'I am what you might call a globetrotter. And I'm fond of hunting. I got interested when I was in Africa. My name is Mandar Bose.'

I had heard of the globetrotter Umesh Bhattacharya, but not of Mandar Bose.

He probably guessed what I was thinking. 'I don't suppose my name will mean anything to you,' he said. 'When I first left home, my name appeared in the press. But that was thirty-six years ago. I've been back in India for only three months.'

'Really? I must say your Bengali has remained pretty good, considering you've been out of the country for so long.'

'Well, that's something entirely up to the person who's travelling abroad. If you want to forget your own language, you can do so in just three months. And if you don't, you'll not forget it even in thirty years. But I was lucky in that I came across other Bengalis frequently. When I was in Kenya, I ran a business trading in ivory. My partner there was a Bengali. We worked together for almost seven years.'

'Is there any other Bengali here in the Circuit House?' asked Feluda. I had noticed earlier that he seldom wasted time on idle chit-chat.

'Yes! That's what I find so surprising. But one thing's become clear to me. People in Calcutta are fed up. So they get out whenever they can. This man here, though, has come with a purpose. He's a psychologist. It's all a bit complicated. There's a little boy with him, about eight years old. He's supposed to be able to recall his previous life. Says he was born in some fort in Rajasthan, once upon a time. This man is roaming around everywhere with the boy, looking for that fort. What I can't tell is whether this psychologist is a fraud, or the boy is simply telling a pack of lies. His behaviour is certainly odd. He doesn't talk properly with anyone, doesn't answer questions. Very fishy. I've seen a lot of cheats and frauds all over the world— never thought I'd come across something like this back in my own country!'

'Was it your globetrotting that brought you here?'

Mr Bose smiled and stood up. ‘To tell you the truth, I haven’t yet seen much of this country… By the way, I didn’t catch your names!’

Feluda made the introductions. ‘And I have never stepped out of this country,’ he added.

‘I see. Well, if you come to the dining hall at around half past eight, we’ll meet again. I believe in early-to-bed and early-to-rise, you see.’

We left our room with Mr Bose and emerged into the corridor outside. A taxi was coming in through the gate. It stopped under the portico, and a man of about forty got out of it, accompanied by a thin little boy. I did not have to be told that they were Dr Hemanga Hajra and Mukul Dhar.

2. Grammar Page

Unit 134 Verb + preposition 3 **about** and **of**

A

hear ABOUT … = *be told about something*
- Did you **hear about** the fire at the hotel?

hear OF … = *know that somebody/something exists*
- A: Who is Tom Hart?
  B: I have no idea. I've never **heard of** him. (*not* heard from him)

hear FROM … = *be in contact with somebody*
- A: Have you **heard from** Jane recently?
  B: Yes, she called me a few days ago.

B

think ABOUT something = consider it, concentrate your mind on it:
- I've **thought about** what you said and I've decided to take your advice.
- A: Will you lend me the money?
  B: I'll **think about** it. (*not* think of it)

think OF something = produce an idea:
- It was my idea. I **thought of** it first. (*not* thought about it)
- I felt embarrassed. I couldn't **think of** anything to say. (*not* think about anything)

We also use **think of** when we ask for or give an opinion:
- A: What did you **think of** the movie?
  B: I didn't **think** much **of** it. (= I didn't like it much)

Sometimes the difference is very small and you can use **of** or **about**:
- When I'm alone, I often **think of** you. *or* … **think about** you.

You can say **think of** *or* **think about** doing something (for possible future actions):
- My sister is **thinking of** going to Canada. *or* … **thinking about** going …

C

dream ABOUT … (when you are asleep)
- I **dreamt about** you last night.

dream OF/ABOUT being something / doing something = *imagine*
- Do you **dream of** being rich and famous? *or* … **dream about** being rich …

I **wouldn't dream OF** doing something = *I would never do it*
- 'Don't tell anyone what I said.' 'No, I **wouldn't dream of** it.'

D

complain (**TO** somebody) **ABOUT** … = *say that you are not satisfied*
- We **complained to** the manager of the restaurant **about** the food.

complain OF a pain, an illness etc. = *say that you have a pain etc.*
- We called the doctor because George was **complaining of** a pain in his stomach.

E

remind somebody **ABOUT** … = *tell somebody not to forget*
- It's good you **reminded** me **about** the meeting. I'd completely forgotten about it.

remind somebody **OF** … = *cause somebody to remember*
- This house **reminds** me **of** the one I lived in when I was a child.
- Look at this photograph of Richard. Who does he **remind** you **of**?