



Learn English Through Stories

F Series

F41

**Adapted and modified by
Kulwant Singh Sandhu**

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

Contents

- 1. Rani Sarandha.**
- 2. Grammar Page.**

Rani Sarandha

By Premchand

1.

In the silence of the night, the water of the river Dhansan lashed against rocks rhythmically, making a pleasurable sound like the grinding of millstones. On the right bank of this river was a hillock on which stood an ancient fort. Tall grasses and moss sprouted from its walls. At some distance in the east was a small village. The fort and the village were both symbols of a Bundela chief. Centuries have passed and several dynasties have thrived and perished in Bundelkhand. The Muslim rulers have come and gone; Bundela kings rose and fell. There was not a single hamlet or a region where they haven't left their mark. But no enemy could ever hoist their flag on the fort, nor could any foe ever step into this village. It had good fortune in this regard.

Anirudh Singh was a valorous Rajput. In that age people needed physical strength and courage to survive. On the one hand, Muslim troops were always ready to occupy any territory; on the other, the powerful Bundela kings had their greedy eyes on smaller estates. Anirudh Singh had a small but vigorous troop of infantry and cavalry. He safeguarded his family's honour and dignity with their help. But he could not afford to rest in peace even for a moment. Three years earlier, he had married Shitala Devi. But he had to spend his days and nights in the jungles, away from the comforts and luxuries of home, and his luckless wife spent her time praying for his safety. She pleaded with him many a time with folded hands not to leave her alone. She begged him, 'Take me to Haridwar or Brindavan or even to the forests. I can't bear separation from you.' She tried all means at her disposal—entreaty, obstinacy, humility—but to no avail. Anirudh, after all, was a Bundela. All her persuasions had no effect on him.

It was a dark night. The whole world slept while the stars blinked in the sky. Shitala Devi was tossing about on the bed while her sister-in-law, Sarandha, sat on the floor and sang mellifluously,

Bin Raghubir katat nahin rayn . . .

Raghubir, without you the night hangs heavy

'Don't torment me. Can't you go to sleep?' asked Shitala.

'I'm singing you a lullaby,' Sarandha replied.

'Sleep has vanished from my eyes.'

'She must've gone looking for someone!'

They were bandying words when the door suddenly opened and a tall, handsome youth entered. It was Anirudh. His clothes were wet and he was unarmed. Shitala got off the cot and sat on the floor.

'Bhaiya, why are your clothes wet?' asked Sarandha.

'I had to swim across the river to get here.'

'Your weapons?'

'They've been snatched away.'

'And your men?'

'They're lost in the field.'

'God has been kind,' muttered Shitala in an undertone.

But Sarandha frowned, as her face turned red in royal pride. 'Bhaiya, you have violated the tradition of the family. Such a thing has never happened before.'

Sarandha adored her brother. Hearing these accusatory words, Anirudh felt deeply embarrassed. His manly courage, that had been momentarily suppressed by love, was ignited like fire. He stepped back right there and walked out saying, 'Sarandha, you have taught me a lesson I won't forget in my entire life.'

The night was still dark. The stars were still blinking in the sky. Anirudh left the fort, reached the other side of the river in no time and was enveloped by the darkness. Shitala had followed him but as he leapt from the ramparts, she sat down on a rock and wept.

In a while Sarandha, too, reached there. Shitala turned on her like a female cobra, 'Is tradition so dear?'

'Yes.'

'If you had a husband, you would've sheltered him in your heart.'

'No. I would've pierced a dagger in his heart.'

'You'd conceal him in your heart. Mark my words,' came the angry retort.

'When the occasion comes, I'll act on my words.'

Three months later, Anirudh conquered Mehrauni fort and returned. A year later, Sarandha was married to Raja Champatrai of Orchha. The words bandied between the two women that day continued to rankle in their hearts.

2.

Raja Champatrai was a courageous Rajput with quiet determination. The Bundelas held him in high esteem. A mere hint from him was enough for armies to attack and destroy principalities. From the moment he ascended the throne, he stopped paying taxes to the Mughal emperor and concentrated all his might on expanding his kingdom. The Muslim armies repeatedly attacked him, but were repulsed. Every person in Bundelkhand was willing to sacrifice his life in the name of Champatrai. It was at this moment that Sarandha was married to Champatrai. Sarandha's prayers were answered. Her wish that her husband should be a shining star of the Bundelas was fulfilled. Although Raja Champatrai had five exceedingly beautiful wives in his harem, he soon realized that the one who idolized him the most was Sarandha.

Circumstances arose, however, that forced Champatrai to approach the court in Delhi. He entrusted his kingdom to his brother, Paharh Singh, and left for Delhi. Those were the last days of Shahjahan's reign. Dara Shikoh was looking after the affairs of the state. The crown prince was generous and noble. He had heard of Champatrai's brave encounters and treated him with great civility. He honoured Champatrai with the endowment of the estate of Kalpi which fetched a revenue of about nine lakhs.

This was the first time in his life that Champatrai had some relief from constant struggles with enemies and could administer his realm with pomp and grandeur. With leisure came all the trappings of aristocracy. Dance parties and musical soirees were held. The king surrounded himself in sensual pleasures while his queens occupied themselves in decking up with ornaments. Success seemed to have intoxicated everyone. Sarandha, however, looked sad and withdrawn, rarely present in the assemblies of revelry. She didn't like the atmosphere of festivities that pervaded everywhere.

One day Champatrai asked her, 'Saran, why do you look so sad? I rarely see you smile. Are you angry with me?'

Sarandha's eyes brimmed over as she replied, 'Oh my lord, why should you think so? I'm happy in your happiness.'

'Ever since my return, I haven't seen that captivating smile on your face. You haven't even offered me a paan made by your hands, nor have you tied my turban. Also, you haven't armed me with weapons. Tell me the truth. Don't you find me youthful anymore?'

'My life, you ask me questions to which I have no answers. There's no doubt that I'm not in the best mood these days. I do want to remain cheerful, but there is a burden that weighs me down.'

Champatrai frowned. 'I see no reason for your melancholy. God has blessed you with everything. After all, what did you have in Orchha that is missing here?'

Sarandha's face turned red as she asked, 'I hope you won't be angry if I say something?'

'Not at all. Go ahead.'

'In Orchha, I was a queen and you were a king. Here, I'm the woman of a feudal lord. In Orchha, my status was equal to that of Kaushalya in Ayodhya. Here, I'm the wife of an emperor's lackey. The emperor to whom you bow down your head today used to shake in fear till yesterday when he heard your name. I can't be happy falling from the status of a queen to that of a maid. You have paid a heavy price for this comfort and these evening parties.'

It was as if a veil had been lifted from Champatrai's eyes. So far, he had been unaware of her great spirit. The memory of Orchha brought tears to his eyes just as an orphan's eyes fill up with tears when people talk of his parents. With the true faith of a devotee he touched Sarandha's feet. From that day onwards, he vowed to renounce luxury and return to the earlier ways of austerity.

3.

Just as a mother is overjoyed when her lost child is restored to her, the people of Bundelkhand were happy at the return of Champatrai. He was the reigning star of the Bundel region. The fortunes of Jairach fort rose again. Problems disappeared. Sarandha's Narcissus eyes sparkled with a smile once again.

Several months passed since their arrival. Meanwhile, Emperor Shahjahan fell ill. There were rivalries among the princes. With the news of the emperor's illness, the flames of enmity and feud were ignited. Confrontations were imminent. The princes, Murad and Mohiuddin, marched from the Deccan with their armies. It was the rainy season. The streams and rivulets were in spate. The mountains and fields were covered with lush green grass. Murad and Mohiuddin marched with utmost haste. They soon reached the banks of the Chambal near Dholpur, where the imperial army was waiting to confront them.

The princes stood perplexed. The river lay before them like a tall, insurmountable iron wall. Helpless, they sent Champatrai an urgent message to come and help them out.

The king went to her palace and asked Sarandha, 'What reply shall I give?' 'You must help them,' she replied.

'That would invite Dara Shikoh's wrath.'

'That's true. But we need to help people who seek our refuge.'

'Saran, you've answered without giving much thought to the question.'

'My love, I know it is a difficult decision that will result in shedding the blood of our warriors like water. We shall do so and litter the Chambal river with corpses. Believe me, as long as the river keeps flowing, people will sing the glory of our warriors. As long as a single man of Bundelkhand remains alive, the blood shed by the warriors shall shine on his forehead like a saffron tilak.'

Dark clouds were marching in the sky. An army of valiant Bundelas issued forth like the dark clouds from the fort of Jairach and marched towards the Chambal. Every soldier was imbued with the desire to show off his valour.

Queen Sarandha embraced her two sons. She offered a paan to the king, saying, 'The honour of the Bundelas is in your hands. May God turn your sword into Indra's thunderbolt.'

That day, every pore of her body was filled with joy and her heart was bursting with exuberance. Just as a desert traveller dances with joy when he sees an oasis, the Mughal princes could not contain their joy when they saw the approaching army of the Bundelas. Champatrai knew every inch of the land like the back of his hand. He commanded his army to stay in hiding and guided the scattered forces of the princes along the riverbank towards the west. Dara Shikoh surmised that the enemy was crossing the river at some other ford. He withdrew his army from the riverbank. The soldiers of Bundelkhand hiding on the banks were waiting for this opportunity. They came forward and plunged into the river with their horses. Champatrai hoodwinked Dara Shikoh and, turning his forces, he followed the Bundela army across the river. This manoeuvre took him seven hours but when he took stock he found that seven hundred Bundelas had perished.

When they saw their king, the courage of the Bundela soldiers returned. Mohiuddin's troops gave the clarion call 'Allahu Akbar' and fell on the enemies. Just as a storm creates a tumult of waves in the sea, their attack created a commotion in the imperial forces. The Bundelas had already given them a hard time, and now this attack broke their rank and file. Hand-to-hand combat began, swords were unsheathed and bloodletting went on till dusk. The sky was red because of the sunset and the land, because of blood.

Darkness had descended. Swords were tired, waiting for the hostilities to cease. Suddenly, a wave of Bundela soldiers appeared from the west. They fell upon the imperial forces from the rear with such ferocity that the enemy was completely routed. Victory slipped out of their hands. People wondered where this divine assistance had come from. Many believed that they were angels of victory, come in support of the princes. But when Raja Champatrai went closer to take stock, the chief of this group got off the horse and bowed his head in reverence. The king's chest swelled with pride. It was Sarandha.

The sight of the battlefield was edifying for humanity. Just a while ago the field had looked like a huge mountain teeming with soldiers. Now, it was filled with lifeless bodies. From the beginning of civilization, human beings have killed so many of their own, and so ruthlessly!

Then, the victorious army fell on the loot. Thus far, living men were fighting living men. That was a picture of heroism and valour. Now when men attacked corpses, it was a horrific spectacle of greed and bestiality. Men, who had been just animals earlier, had now turned themselves into devils.

In this free-for-all, people noticed the half-dead Wali Bahadur Khan, the commander of the imperial army, lying prone in blood. His horse stood near his body, swishing its tail to keep away the flies.

Champatrai was a connoisseur of horses. He was simply fascinated by this one. It was a fine animal of Iraqi breed. Each part of its body was finely moulded. It had a leonine chest, a leopard's waist, and its two eyes shone with vitality. People were charmed by its love and loyalty towards its master. The king commanded, 'Let no one harm this horse. Capture it alive. It will add to the lustre of my stable. The person who captures it will be rewarded with wealth beyond measure.'

Veteran horsemen from all around converged at the spot, but no one dared to go near it. Some tried to cajole it, others tried to trap it in a noose, but no strategy worked. In a short while, a big crowd of soldiers gathered there to see the spectacle. Then Sarandha emerged from her tent and walked up to the horse fearlessly. Her eyes had such a magic, the horse bent its head. She placed her hand on its neck and began stroking its back. The horse hid its face in her bosom like a child. A flood of tears streamed from its eyes. She gently wiped the tears with maternal affection, caught hold of its reins and led it towards her tent. The horse followed her meekly, as though it had known her for a long time. People were amazed to see this spectacle wrought by affection.

But it would have been better if the horse had been hostile to Sarandha. In times to come, this beautiful horse would prove to be the disguised golden deer of the Ramayana to the family.

4.

The world itself is a battlefield. The general who seizes the opportunity emerges victorious in this field. He makes a tactical retreat from the field with alacrity, as he forges ahead when it's the right moment. Such a man founds empires and history honours him with greatness and fame.

Yet, one sometimes encounters another breed of soldiers in battlefields who only know how to march forward at an opportune moment, but do not know how to make a tactical retreat when faced with a critical situation. They throw away victory for the sake of principle. They will take their entire army to a total rout but won't step back from their positions. Few of these ever attain any success in worldly affairs, but their defeat is usually more glorious than victory. While experienced and pragmatic generals found empires, it is the soldier who lays down his life for the sake of the country's honour and who doesn't know how to

retreat who uplifts the spirit of the nation and strengthens its moral fibre. Such soldiers may not achieve worldly success, but when their names are mentioned in assemblies, listeners break out into spontaneous applause and a spiritual halo surrounds their names. Sarandha was one of those soldiers ready to die for the sake of honour.

Prince Mohiuddin proceeded to Agra from the banks of the Chambal, and fortune smiled on him paving the way for greater things. When he reached Agra, this victory won him the throne.

Aurangzeb didn't lack in the understanding of human character. He forgave the errors of the emperor's chiefs and restored them to their positions. He gave Champatrai rank and title for his valiant assistance. Further, the region between Orchha and Benares, and from Benares to Jamuna, was given to him as a reward. The Bundela king once again became a vassal of the Mughal emperor. Evening *mehfils* given to sensual pleasures and drinking were held again. Rani Sarandha sank into depression once again.

Wali Bahadur Khan had a way with words. With his glib talk he soon wormed into the heart of the emperor. At court, people began to treat him with esteem.

The loss of his horse rankled in his heart like a thorn. One day Prince Chhatrasal went out riding on this horse. It so happened that he rode past Khan Sahib's palace. Wali Bahadur was waiting for just such an opportunity. He immediately signalled to his attendants. What could the prince do all alone? He walked back home and told the whole story to Sarandha. Her face flushed with anger. She said, 'I'm not sad that the horse has been taken away. I'm sorry that you've returned home alive after losing the horse. Doesn't the Bundela blood course through your veins? Never mind if you had lost the horse. But you could have at least shown them that it's not a joke to snatch a horse from a Bundela youth.'

So saying, she ordered twenty-five of her soldiers to get ready. She took her arms and reached the residence of Wali Bahadur Khan along with the soldiers. The Khan had gone to the emperor's court riding the horse. So Sarandha set out for the court with the swiftness of the wind. Her arrival caused a commotion among the members. Officials poured in from everywhere to watch this spectacle. The emperor, too, appeared in the courtyard. Nobles clutched at their swords as they stood up and there was a general din all around. Many remembered how once Amar Singh's sword

had flashed in the court.

‘Khan Sahib,’ said Sarandha peremptorily, ‘it’s shameful. The courage you ought to have shown on the banks of the Chambal, you have shown today before a mere child. Was it proper for you to snatch away the horse from him?’

Wali Bahadur Khan’s eyes were blazing. ‘How dare a stranger take that which rightfully belongs to me?’ He asked in a curt tone.

‘It’s not yours. It’s mine. I found it in the battlefield and it belongs to me. You can’t snatch it away from me so easily. I’ll shed the blood of a thousand soldiers for it.’

‘I cannot give away that horse. You can have my entire stable instead, if you like.’

‘I shall only have my horse.’

‘I can give you gold and jewels equivalent to the weight of the horse, but not that horse.’

‘Then it’ll be decided by the sword.’

The Bundela soldiers drew their swords and were at the point of letting loose a flood of blood when Emperor Alamgir intervened. ‘Rani Sahiba, please ask your soldiers to stop. You shall have the horse. But you’ll have to pay a heavy price for it.’

‘I’m ready to stake everything for that horse.’

‘Your estate and title?’

‘The estate and title are nothing to me.’

‘Your kingdom too?’

‘Yes, the kingdom too is nothing to me.’

‘For one horse?’

‘No. For that which is the most invaluable thing in the world.’

‘And what is that?’

‘One’s honour.’

In this way, Queen Sarandha lost her vast estate, her title and royal honour for the sake of a horse. Not just this, she also earned the enmity of the emperor in the future. From that moment till his death, Champatrai knew no peace.

5.

Raja Champatrai once again began to live in Jairach fort. He was deeply saddened by the loss of the estate and title, but he did not utter a word of reproof, because he knew well Sarandha’s nature. A few days passed peacefully. But the emperor had not forgotten Sarandha’s harsh words. As soon as he had dealt with his brothers, he sent a huge army under the command of twenty-two experienced generals to crush Champatrai’s pride. Shubhkarn was an imperial subedar in Bundelkhand. Though he was a childhood friend of Champatrai and both grew up together, he took on the responsibility of vanquishing Champatrai. Several other Bundela chieftains broke with Champatrai and joined the emperor’s subedar. A huge battle ensued. The swords of soldiers dripped with the blood of their brothers. Even though Raja Champatrai emerged victorious in this battle, his power was seriously hampered forever. Champatrai’s nobles, who were once his allies, now received favours from the emperor. Some friends came to Champatrai’s rescue, but others deserted him. His own kith and kin began to turn away from him. However, even in these difficult times, Champatrai did not lose heart. He left Jairach and spent the next three years hiding in the dense jungles of Bundelkhand. The emperor’s armies hovered all over the state like beasts of prey. The raja had to face skirmishes frequently where his personal courage saw him through. Sarandha was always by his side, egging him on. In great and critical encounters when courage deserts one and hope also disappears, it is one’s sense of honour that gives one sustenance. After three years of pursuit, Emperor Alamgir’s subedars informed him that the lion of Bundelkhand could not be hunted down by anyone other than the emperor himself. They received instructions to withdraw the troops and lift the siege. Raja Champatrai thought that the danger had receded and he returned to the fort at Orchha. But just as the sun shines for only a little while through black clouds during the rainy season, it was a temporary respite for Champatrai.

After several months of quiet existence, the king had to leave his abode and wander about in the wilderness.

6.

For three weeks, the imperial army laid siege to Orchha. Cannonballs had pierced the ramparts of the fort just as harsh words pierce the heart. About twenty thousand people were trapped in the fort. Most of them were women and children. The number of men was decreasing every day. All the entry and exit points were sealed. Even air couldn't pass through! The stock of provisions had depleted. Women starved to keep their men and children alive. The fear that in a few days all of them would starve to death made them already half-dead.

Women raised their hands towards the sun god and cursed the enemy. Children hid behind the ramparts and pelted stones at the enemy, but these scarcely crossed the ramparts. Raja Champatrai was down with fever and had been bedridden for the past few days. People drew courage from his presence but his illness had created chaos in the fort.

The raja said to Sarandha, 'The enemy will surely find their way into the fort today.'

'God forbid! May God not keep me alive to see this day.'

'I'm concerned about the women and children. The chaff will be ground with the grain.'

'What if we leave this place?'

'And leave behind all these helpless people?'

'We've brought this calamity on them. If we are not here, the enemy will probably take pity on them.'

'No I can't leave them. I cannot abandon the women and children of the men who have laid down their lives for us.'

'But by remaining here, we can't help them in any way.'

'We can at least die along with them! I'll stake my life for their protection. I shall plead for them with the imperial forces and bear the rigours of imprisonment. But I can't forsake them in this crisis.'

Sarandha bowed her head in shame and was lost in thought. 'There's no doubt that it's not proper to leave behind one's friends to burn in fire and save oneself. How could I be so selfish?' But the anxiety regarding her husband's safety had taken precedence over her sense of humanity. Then she asked the raja, 'If you're convinced that no injustice will be done to these people, will you have any objection to leave this place?'

'And who can give me this assurance?' The king asked after some reflection.

'A note from the emperor's commander-in-chief.'

'Well, I shall consent to leave then. But on one condition—these people will bid me goodbye cheerfully.'

Sarandha was now lost in deep thought. How could she extract such a promise from the emperor's commander-in-chief? Who would take the message to him and why would the tyrant make such a covenant? They are sure of victory, why should they agree to such a condition? And when they will get to know that they have been tricked, all their wrath will fall upon our wretched subjects? How can I find someone who is both pragmatic and eloquent enough to perform this task? Chhatrasal can probably accomplish this.

Led by this thought, the queen sent for Chhatrasal. He was the most intelligent, courageous and soft-spoken of her four children and she loved him the most. When Chhatrasal came and saluted her, the queen's eyes filled with tears and she heaved a deep sigh of grief.

'Mataji, what command do you have for me?'

'What's today's news from the battlefield?'

'Fifty of our men have been killed.'

'The honour of the Bundelas is now in God's hands.'

'We're thinking of carrying out a raid tonight.'

The queen explained her plan briefly and asked, 'Who can be entrusted to accomplish this task?'

'I,' he replied.

‘Will you be able to see it through?’

‘Yes. I’m sure.’

As Chhatrasal was going to leave, the queen embraced him and gave him her blessings, saying, ‘May God allow me to see your face soon again.’ Then she cried for a long while. Raising her two hands heavenwards she said, ‘My Lord, I’ve dedicated my young, brave and capable son to the cause of Bundela honour. Now, I pray to you to safeguard his honour. I’ve offered what is most valuable to me. Please accept it.’

7.

Early next morning, Sarandha bathed, placed the puja paraphernalia on a platter and went to the temple. Her face looked pale and her eyes were darkening. Sleep cannot have its calming effect on a mind troubled with worries. She had reached the temple entrance when an arrow fell on her platter. There was a note wrapped to the tip of the arrow. When Sarandha placed her platter at the temple’s altar and read the note, the glow on her face returned. But her joy was short-lived. ‘Ah! Have I lost my dear son for the sake of this small piece of paper? Who would’ve paid such a heavy price for a tiny piece of paper?’

On her return from the temple, Sarandha went to Champatrai and said, ‘Lord of my life, please fulfil the promise you’d made last night.’

The king asked hesitantly, ‘Have you fulfilled yours?’

Sarandha handed over the written covenant to the king. Champatrai read it closely and replied, ‘I am satisfied and shall leave now. God willing, I shall once again colour my sword with the blood of these enemies. But Saran, tell me the truth, what price did you have to pay for this covenant?’

‘A very dear price,’ she replied tearfully.

‘Well?’

‘A young son.’

The king was stunned. He screamed out, ‘Who? Angadrai?’

'No.'

'Ratansah?'

'No.'

'Chhatrasal?'

'Yes.'

Chhatrasal sprang up from his bed and fell back unconscious, like a bird that flutters its wings on being shot and then falls to the ground lifeless. Chhatrasal was very dear to him. All his plans centred on him. When he regained consciousness after half an hour, he said, 'Saran, had I known earlier, I would not have let Chhatrasal go. Should he die, the Bundela dynasty will be wiped out from the face of the earth.'

It was a night of mourning and lamentations for the people in the fort. Women fell at Sarandha's feet and begged her not to forget them. The men implored the king, 'We've followed you like your shadow. Please take us along with you.' There was commotion all around. Sarandha embraced the women and Chhatrasal bade farewell to the menfolk. Leaving behind thousands of people in tears, he sat in a palanquin. Each person knew in his heart that he might not see Chhatrasal again. This was their last meeting and they wanted to cry their hearts out. It seemed more a funeral procession than a farewell.

It was a dark night. Countless stars shone in the sky though their light seemed feeble like those of candles in graveyards. Gloom pervaded the walls and gates of the fort. Heart-wrenching sounds of lamentation could be heard. Sarandha, attired in a soldier's habit and riding a horse, escorted Chhatrasal in a palanquin out of the fort through an underground passage.

Many years ago, Sarandha had seen another sad and dark night like this. Then she had not known the joy of love. Shitala Devi's prophecy had come to be true today. Would Sarandha's reply also prove to be so?

It was midday. The sun was in the middle of the sky, sending down shafts of fire. A fierce wind was blowing that scorched the body and was setting fields and deserts aflame. It seemed as though the fire goddess's entire force was advancing furiously. A haze of hot dust had filled the space between the earth and the sky. Rani Sarandha was leading Champatrai on his horse towards the west. Orchha was thirty miles behind them, and they now felt assured that they had escaped danger. The king lay unconscious in the palanquin while the palanquin bearers were drenched in sweat. Five horsemen followed the palanquin. The entire caravan was tormented by thirst. They felt parched and were desperately looking for some shade or a well.

Sarandha abruptly turned around to see a group of horse riders approaching. She sensed that all was not well. 'They must be in pursuit of us,' she thought. Then it occurred to her that it could be her son coming with his men to assist her. Human beings continue to hope, even through hopelessness. For a while she vacillated between hope and fear. When the group came close and the dress of the riders became clearly visible, Rani Sarandha took a deep breath and cursed her fate. They were soldiers from the emperor's army.

Sarandha ordered the palanquin bearers to stop. The Bundela soldiers drew their swords. The king was in a pitiable state. But he tried to shake off his weakness and rise up, much like a suppressed flame fanned into a fire. Seeing the critical situation they were in, his lifeless body sprang to life. He lifted the curtain of the palanquin, came out and picked up his bow and arrows. But the bow, which earlier spelt death for the enemy, now simply turned in his hand. He felt giddy, his feet wobbled and he crashed to the ground. He felt that he no longer had the blessing of Fate. Champatrai rose and fell like a wingless bird that attempts to flee from a snake but then falls into its mouth. Sarandha helped him sit up and in a tearful voice, simply said, 'My Lord.' He couldn't utter another word. On such occasions, silence becomes more eloquent than voice. Poor Sarandha, at that moment, looked like any other ordinary woman. However, to an extent, this vulnerability is a woman's asset too.

Champatrai said, 'Look, Saran, one more of our soldiers is claimed by death. What a pity! The disgrace I dreaded throughout my life has caught up with me at the moment of my death. The enemy will lay their hands on your delicate body right before my eyes and I won't be able to lift a finger! O

Death, when will you come?’

As he spoke a thought occurred to him. He reached for his sword but his strength failed him. Then he said to Sarandha, ‘Saran, you have saved my life on many occasions.’

As she heard this Sarandha’s weakness disappeared, her tears evaporated and her wilted face shone in delight. Her spirits rose thinking that she could still be of some use to her husband. She looked at the king and said, ‘If God wills it so, I will do it until I die.’

The queen had thought that the king wanted her to give up her life.

‘You have always abided by my instructions,’ Champatrai reminded her. ‘And I shall do so till my dying day.’

‘This is probably my last request. Please do not refuse.’

Sarandha drew her sword and, holding it against her chest, said, ‘This is not because you ask me to do so. It is my heartfelt wish that my head should be at your feet when I die.’

‘You have not understood what I meant. Would you leave me in the enemy’s hands to be chained and taken around the streets of Delhi as an object of laughter?’

The queen looked up in surprise. She did not yet grasp what he meant.

‘I’m going to ask a boon of you.’

‘Sure. Go ahead.’

‘This is my last request. Will you do as I say?’

‘I will, most humbly. Just say it.’

‘You’ve made me a promise. Don’t refuse now.’

‘Please tell me,’ she said trembling.

‘Pierce your sword into my chest.’

A thunderbolt struck the queen. She said, 'My Lord! Can this ever be possible?'

'I cannot bear to live in chains.'

'How can I do this?'

The fifth and the last of the Bundela soldiers fell to the ground, wounded. The king said, annoyed, 'So much for your tall talk about defending my honour!'

The emperor's soldiers leapt towards the king, when the queen drew her glittering sword and thrust it deep into Champatrai. The boat of love sank into the ocean of love. Blood was flowing from Champatrai's heart, but his face wore a smile.

What a terrible sight it was! The woman who would give her life for her husband, had to be his assassin! Sarandha's sword had pierced the heart that was entwined with hers when she enjoyed the pleasures of youth, the heart that was the centre of her hopes and desires, the heart that nursed her love and preserved her honour. Her boat of love was now floating on this ocean of love. Her sword was the weapon of duty, the love's arrow. Had a woman's sword ever done such a deed?

What a sorrowful end to self-respect! Such examples of self-respect and honour could not be found even in the exploits of Udaipur and Marwar. It's quite easy for a woman to give up her life. But this was something only Sarandha could do. Women have taken the lives of their husbands for reasons such as self-delusion and jealousy. But no one had made such a sacrifice on the altar of *pativrat* and for preserving one's self-respect.

The emperor's soldiers were stunned by Sarandha's courage and fortitude. Esteem took precedence over enmity. The commanding officer came forward and said, 'Her Majesty, God is our witness, we are your slaves. We will carry out your orders with utmost respect.'

Sarandha smiled and said, 'If any of our sons is alive, please hand over our two bodies to them.'

So saying, she ran the blood-stained sword into her heart. As she fell on the ground, her head rested on Champatrai's chest.

2. Grammar Page



GRAMMAR STUDY: Tense Contrast

Simple present or present continuous

⇒ We use the simple present tense for facts, present affairs and permanent states, but the present continuous tense for unfinished or temporary actions, or to talk about trends and changes, or about situations happening now that are different from normal.

I live in Pokhara. (*This is my home. I live here permanently.*)

I am living in Pokhara with my friend. (*A temporary situation until I buy my own house.*)

Hot air rises. (*A scientific fact.*)

House prices are rising. (*A trend happening now.*)

He drives to work every day. (*His routine or habit.*)

He is walking to work this week. (*His car is being repaired.*)

⇒ Some verbs cannot be used in the present continuous tense. This is because they already suggest permanence.

→ Verbs of possession – own, have, belong

→ Verbs of the mind – believe, know, think, forget

→ Verbs of emotion – love, hate, detest.

→ Verbs of the senses – see, hear, smell, taste

→ Verbs of geographical location – lie

Present perfect or present perfect continuous

⇒ We usually use the present perfect to talk about a single event or a short action, and the present perfect continuous for longer actions (activities).

Somebody has thrown water on her. (*Throwing is a short action. It takes short time.*)

They have been playing in the rain. (*Playing is a longer activity.*)

She has put on her dress.

He has been ironing his dress.

He has fallen in the river. Come and help him.

They have been digging the field for five hours.

⇒ We usually use the present perfect when the result is more important than the activity and the present perfect continuous when the activity is more important than the result.

He has been painting the wall. He is covered in paint. (*It doesn't talk about the completion or the result of the action.*)

He has painted the wall. It looks beautiful now. (*It talks about the completion of the action, and the result.*)

⇒ The present perfect stresses the result of some activity or complete actions, while the present perfect continuous stresses the duration of this activity before the result or incomplete action.

I've been reading this novel for two days. (*I'm still reading it.*)

I've read this novel. (*It's complete.*)

He has been living here for years.

He has lived here for years.

She has been sleeping for 2 hours already.

She has slept for 2 hours already.

We have been reading many books lately.

We have read many books lately.