



**Learn English Through Stories**

**G Series**

**G44**

**Adapted and modified by**

**Kulwant Singh Sandhu**

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# 1. The Sword of Vikrmaditya

By Premchand

## 1

A long time ago, a strange miracle occurred in Peshawar's Mah Nagar village. It was a dark night. At some distance from the village, under a shady banyan tree, people noticed a flame of light which gradually took the shape of a bright burning lamp. News spread fast in the village. The villagers came out of their homes and gathered at places to witness this strange spectacle. Women, busy in their kitchens, rushed out, dough on their hands. Old men, carrying small children on their shoulders, stood there coughing. Newlywed, coy girls, who could not leave their homes, peeped out through slits in the doors to satisfy their curiosity. In the bottomless darkness of the night, under the dome-shaped banyan tree, the feeble glow of the flame seemed to symbolize the human soul enveloped in a cloud of sin.

Tek Singh nodded his head wisely and said, 'I know, it's an assembly of spirits.'

Pandit Chet Ram made a profound intervention. 'You don't know a thing! I know exactly what it is—a snake's left its *munn* (*gem*) and gone sniffing around.

Anyone who doubts this can go and verify it.'

Munshi Gulab Chand said, 'Anyone who can pick up the munn will certainly become a king one day. But it can prove fatal.'

Param Singh, an old Jat, was sitting and listening to these wise souls.

Param Singh was alone in the world. He had led a very eventful life for many years. But when he reached the evening of his life and once again returned to his hut, the abode of his early days, he felt a strange yearning in his heart. 'What a pity!' he thought. 'I have no one in this world. How I wish I had a child! It is this yearning that makes birds return to their nests at sunset, that makes animals return to their abodes at dusk.' Now this wish arose in Param Singh's heart.

There was no one to call him *dada* in the mornings, no one to climb to his lap, no one whom he could feed at mealtimes, no one to put to sleep by singing a lullaby at night. Never before had Param Singh felt such a desire in his heart. The loneliness was bearable during the daytime but it grew more intense at night.

One day, Param Singh was going to the market. On the way, he saw a house in flames and the horrific flames were leaping high in the skies. A woman was standing near the entrance and weeping inconsolably. She was a poor widow. Her child had been sleeping inside when the house had caught fire. She rushed to call the villagers to extinguish it but the fire had spread rapidly. Now, the rising flames were like an ocean that separated her from her child. The woman's wails moved Param Singh deeply. He fearlessly jumped into the burning house and emerged with the sleeping child. The widow clasped the boy in her arms, kissed his delicate cheeks again and again and said tearfully to Param Singh, 'Whoever you are, Maharaja, I give my child to you. God must have blessed you with children. Take care of this orphan along with them. You're a kind man. The goddess of fire has robbed me of all I had. I have nothing left except the clothes I'm wearing. I'll somehow earn a livelihood working as a labourer. This child is now yours.'

Param Singh's eyes brimmed over. He said, 'Daughter, don't say this. I'd like you, too, to come and stay with me. We can share whatever God has given me. I'm a lonely man. There's no one to give me even a drop of water when I'm thirsty. Who knows, God might have willed us to meet in this way.'

When Param Singh returned home that evening, he had a smiling child with rosy cheeks in his arms and behind him was a pale-looking and feeble woman. His home seemed to come to life that day. Then onwards, no one saw him sitting silently by the river in the evenings.

Param Singh wanted to get that snake's munn for his child and made his way towards the banyan tree at midnight with cautious steps, his sword hanging by his side.

As he came close to the tree, he could see the munn glowing brightly, but the snake was nowhere to be seen. Param Singh was very happy. He thought the snake had gone looking for food. But when he held out his hand to pick up the munn, he could only see a bit of bare earth. The old Jat was stunned and his hair stood on end. Then he saw something hanging before him. Param Singh drew his sword and leapt at the object. But there was nothing except the banyan's roots.

By now, fear had deserted him. He began to dig at the spot where he'd seen the glow. He had dug about a foot when his sword hit something hard and sparks flew. It was a small sword, but as soon as he laid his hand on it, its glow disappeared.

It was a small sword, but rapier sharp. It's hilt was embedded with precious stones and had the name 'Vikramaditya' inscribed on it. This was the sword of Vikramaditya, the emperor who had shone like a bright star and whose glory is sung in every home even today. This sword was witness to the poetic works of Kalidas, the immortal poet of India. When Vikramaditya would go out at night in disguise to witness his subjects' sufferings and to ascertain whether they were treated with cruelty of any kind, this sharp and shining sword would be hanging by his side. The weapon didn't have a small role to play in Vikramaditya's reputation as a man of justice and compassion. It was always with him when he sat on the throne, the same throne on which even Raja Bhoj had never had a chance to sit.

The sword had a brilliant glow. Even after being buried in the ground for a very long time, there was no trace of rust on it. Dark houses would be brightened in its glow. It shone like the stars through the night. Just as the moon shines through the clouds that cover it, this sword also shone through its sheath.

But whenever anyone laid their hand on it, it lost its brightness and this stunned people.

The roar of the Lion of Punjab reverberated through the country those days.

Ranjit Singh was the Vikramaditya of his time in benevolence and bravery, kindness and justice. He went to Lahore after crushing the vanity of Kabul which had suppressed Hindustan for centuries. Bewitched by the verdant fields and clusters of trees of Mah Nagar, Ranjit Singh set up camp there. Bazaars were established, tents and pavilions sprung up. When night came, smoke from twenty-five thousand ovens enveloped the fields and orchards. In this firmament of smoke, the fire in the hearths, lamps and candles looked like stars in the sky.

Song and music could be heard in the royal encampments. The Sikh chiefs had captured hundreds of Afghani women from the area around the border. As the convention of war was in those days, the captive women had to entertain their captors. These women sat on the grass beneath the shady trees and sang out of tune. There were frequent bursts of laughter from the audience; they were more interested in enjoying themselves than in appreciating the songs. Some merry soldiers went around with flaming torches mimicking the singers, followed by crowds of people. The soldiers were determined to celebrate their victory by indulging in all kinds of merriment.

It was about nine at night. A man with a staff in his hand, wrapped in a black cloak, emerged from the royal tent and slowly walked towards the hamlet. Mah Nagar was bursting in pleasure. Candelabras with multiple candles were burning at doorsteps and courtyards were swept clean. If the sound of the *shehnai* emanated from some places, bhajans could be heard at others. The man draped in the black blanket looked about cautiously and walked towards the *chaupal*.

This chaupal was well-decorated and the village elders sitting there were debating about a suitable gift to offer Maharaja Ranjit Singh. The maharaja had lent glory to the village by setting foot there. Now, it was incumbent upon the villagers to present him an appropriate gift. Shouldn't they have the opportunity of kissing his feet, as such auspicious occasions come but rarely? They were all lost in thought and unable to come up with a helpful suggestion. They did not have a treasure of gems to offer the maharaja. For a full hour, no one raised his head. Then, suddenly, old Param Singh stood up and said, 'If you so desire, I can offer Vikramaditya's sword.'

Everyone in the assembly was overjoyed at this declaration and a wave of excitement washed over them. This is when the man in black entered the chaupal and greeted the assembly. 'Brothers! *Waheguru ki jai*.'

'Who are you?' asked Jeet Ram.

'I am a traveller . . . on my way to Peshawar. It's quite late at night, so I thought I would sleep here.'

'Yes, no problem . . . sleep here. If you need a charpoy, let me know,' said Tek Singh.

'No. Why should you take the trouble? I'll lie on this sack. I heard you talk of the

sword of Vikramaditya, which made me come here and join you; otherwise, I'd have slept outside. Does anyone here possess that sword?'

The traveller's tone and idiom suggested that he was a gentleman. His voice had a quality that drew people towards him. All eyes turned towards him. Pandit Chet Ram spoke. 'Yes, the sword was unearthed here some time ago.'

'How do you know that it is Vikramaditya's sword?' asked the traveller.

'His name is engraved on the hilt.'

'The sword must be a big one!'

'No, it's like a small dagger.'

'There must be something special about this weapon,' the traveller persisted.

'That's right. It has unusual qualities, which are bewildering. Place it anywhere and it glows like a lamp.'

'Really?'

'Yes, but as soon as someone lays their hand on it, the glow vanishes.'

The traveller was overwhelmed, like a child bewitched by a wondrous tale.

His eyes and actions reflected his inner tension. He exclaimed, 'Vikramaditya! Blessed be your glory!'

After a while, he spoke again, 'Who's the fortunate person who possesses this precious object?'

'It's with me,' said Param Singh with pride.

'May I also have a glimpse of it, please?'

'Yes, I'll show it to you tomorrow. But wait a minute, we're presenting it to Ranjit Singh in the morning. If you want, you can see it now.'

Both the men left the chaupal. Param Singh led the traveller to his home and made him stand near the dagger. The room was aglow with light, though there was no lamp. The traveller exclaimed loudly, 'Vikramaditya! Blessed is your glory! Even after all these years, your sword hasn't lost its brightness.'



Overcome by his enthusiasm, he held out his hand to grab the dagger. The moment he touched it, the glow vanished and the room became dark.

The traveller immediately placed the dagger on the wooden plank. He looked crestfallen. He said to Param Singh, 'You are presenting this to Ranjit Singh? He doesn't deserve to take it in his hand.'

Saying this, the traveller quickly walked out of the room. Brinda, the widow, was standing at the door. The traveller stared at her for a second but did not say a word.

More than half the night was over, but the soldiers still indulged in revelry. Their insatiable urge for entertainment had driven the sleep away from their eyes. If anyone yawned or stretched their limbs, the other soldiers would make them stand on one leg. Suddenly, the news spread that the maharaja was ready to march forward. People wondered why the maharaja decided to leave in the dark of the night. There was quite a stir among the soldiers preparing to leave at that odd hour. Ranjit Singh left with a few veteran commanders. Everyone was puzzled by this.

Just as the water gushes out in full force when an embankment is broken, the officers and soldiers broke out in an orgy of pleasure as soon as the maharaja left the scene.

Brinda had been a widow for three years. Her husband was a carefree person with a romantic temperament. He loved song and music and sacrificed whatever property he had at the altar of goddess Saraswati and her devotees. He squandered property worth three lakhs in less than three years. But he succeeded in what he had set out to achieve, with goddess Saraswati's blessings. In music, he excelled so much that even experts in the field did not have the courage to compete with him. He loved music as much as he loved Brinda. If his heart lay in music, his love for Brinda filled his heart. He taught Brinda his music, initially for fun, but later as an amateur. And then, she too became fond of music.

Three years had passed since her husband's death; she had abandoned all worldly pleasures. No one now saw even a smile cross her rosy lips but music still drew her. Whenever she remembered the past days and felt sad, singing provided her solace. But she didn't sing to derive pleasure. Whenever she sang an interesting raga, she imagined her husband standing before her and smiling happily in appreciation. Her songs were a way of remembering him. They were a means of paying tribute to her husband.

More than half the night had passed. The moonlight in the sky had dimmed. Deep silence reigned all around. In this atmosphere of silence, Brinda was sitting on the ground and singing in a soft voice—

*Bata de koi prem nagar ki dagar . . .*

Let someone tell me the way to love's abode . . .

There was both ache and suppleness in Brinda's voice. It could provide solace to restless minds and also rouse dormant emotions. Even the songs of birds sitting in tall trees at dawn were not as sweet as Brinda's voice. Her music was capable of sending mystics into fits of ecstasy. It touched the core of the human heart—

*Bata de koi prem nagar ki dagar . . .*

*Main bawri pag pag per bhatkoon*

*Kaahu ki kucch naahi khabar*

*Bata de koi prem nagar ki dagar . . .*

Let someone tell me the way to love's abode . . . I search and lose my way at every step, I've no idea how to reach there. Let someone tell me the way to love's abode . . .

Suddenly, there was a knock at the door. Several people called out, 'Whose house is this? Open the door.' Brinda stopped singing. Param Singh got up and opened the door. A number of soldiers were standing in the courtyard outside. Several soldiers entered the veranda as soon as the door was opened. 'There was someone singing in your house. We want her to sing for us.'

'There is no singer here,' answered Param Singh sharply.

Hearing this, some soldiers grabbed Param Singh and said, 'We just heard someone singing in this house.'

'Why don't you tell us who it is?' one of the soldiers demanded.

'That was my daughter, but she's not a singer.'

'It doesn't matter who she is; we must hear her sing today.'

Param Singh shook with rage. He chewed his lips and said, 'Friends, I have spent my life in the army but never have I . . .'

No one heard Param Singh's words in the ensuing commotion.

A young Jat whose eyes were red with intoxication challenged him. 'Just pluck out this old fellow's moustache.'

Standing like a statue, Brinda observed all this from the courtyard. She could not take it when she saw two soldiers grab Param Singh and pick at his moustache. She marched fearlessly amidst the soldiers and asked loudly, 'Who wants to listen to my song?'

When the soldiers saw her, they released Param Singh and said, 'We'll listen to your song.'

'Sit down, I'll sing for you.'

Some of the soldiers insisted, 'Let's take her to our camp, it would be more fun.'

As Brinda set off for the camp with the soldiers, Param Singh called out, 'Brinda, if you go with them, you won't be allowed to step into this house ever again.'

When she reached the camp, she witnessed a wild orgy. The goddess of victory, having vanquished the enemy, was now bent upon trampling over the humanity and gentleness of the victors. Not satisfied with the blood of the enemy, the bloodthirsty demon of bestiality was now sucking the blood of human feeling. Brinda was taken to a well-furnished tent. A drinking session was on and cups of wine lay scattered all over the place, which was illuminated by lamps placed on the floor. Brinda sat huddled in a corner, scared stiff like an innocent lamb trapped amidst ferocious animals. The demon of lust, with its army fully arrayed in the onlookers' minds, threw arrows of lust towards her.

The arrows, drenched in poisonous drink, pierced Brinda's delicate and pure heart. She silently prayed, 'O Lord Krishna! You protected the honour of Draupadi despite the Pandavas who were bound by their own dharma. I'm totally helpless now. Won't you protect my honour?' With this silent prayer, she sang Mira's famous bhajan—

*Saiyyan Raghubir bharoso aiso . . .*

O Raghubir, my saviour, I place my trust in you . . .

Brinda sang movingly. Her sweet tune conveyed Mira's devotion. Ostensibly, she was singing for the drunken soldiers, but in her imagination she was standing with folded hands before the flute-playing Krishna and paying obeisance to him.

Silence reigned for a short while in that raucous assembly. The lyric of divine love had a magical effect on the demon of lust that lurked in the hearts of the men. Fine music can tame even a wild elephant. Brinda's song kept the soldiers spellbound for one whole hour. Suddenly, the clock struck five. The soldiers and their commanders got up with a start. They came back to reality and remembered that they had to traverse a distance of forty leagues. Preparations for departure were made hurriedly, tents were dismantled, horsemen fed the horses. There was great commotion all round. With the rising of the sun, the trumpet was blown to announce departure. The evening before, the field had resounded with life; in the morning no one could hear even a bird chirp. The only relics that remained were ashes in the hearths and tent nails strewn about the place.

When Brinda saw the soldiers busy preparing to decamp, she stepped out of the tent. No one noticed her, but her heart was pounding with the apprehension that someone might catch her again. As she emerged from the cluster of trees, she felt a sense of relief. The weather was pleasant, the wind blew over the tall trees with a rustling sound. A red carpet of velvet was spread across the eastern horizon to welcome the majestic sun. Brinda wanted to walk towards home but

stopped in her tracks. She remembered Param Singh's warning not to return to the house. She sighed deeply and sat down on the ground. There was now no refuge for her on this earth.

Imagine the condition of that unfortunate bird who is freed from her cage only to realize that her wings have been clipped by her cruel trapper. She looks wistfully at the shady branches of the trees again and again, but cannot lift her wings to take flight. Eventually, the poor creature wishes that the trapper imprisoned her in her cage once again. Brinda's condition was that of such a bird.

For a while, she was lost in thought. Then she stood up and walked slowly towards Param Singh's house. The door was ajar but she could not enter. She looked at the house longingly and then walked back into the jungle.

A beautiful three-storey house stood on the main road in a well-known area of Lahore. Madhavi, who loved flowers and creepers, had decorated the walls and arches of the house tastefully. Sitting on a silken carpet in an opulent room, Brinda was teaching a colourful, attractive mynah to sing. The wall was painted a light shade of green and beautiful pictures hung from appropriate places on the wall. The fragrance of sandalwood and khus pervaded the room. An old woman was pulling the fan. Despite all the luxury that surrounded her, Brinda looked sad. Her pale face had grown paler, like a faded *maulsari* blossom.

Brinda was now one of Lahore's most famous singers. She had been there barely three months but had earned a name for herself. She was known as Shyama in the city. Everyone in the big city could tell where Shyama lived. There was such an arresting quality to her voice that people from all walks of life became devoted fans. There was no dearth of beautiful women in Lahore. In those days it was the centre of arts and excellence. Many of the singers had mellifluous voices like the koel and the nightingale. But there was none like Shyama. She sang the Dhrupad more frequently than the other ragas. That is why people had named her 'Dhrupadi Shyama'.

There were several maestros of the Tansen school of music in Lahore who sang according to the strict rules of the ragas and the raginis. They did not like Shyama's songs as, according to them, Shyama often sang incorrectly, without the proper knowledge of the ragas. But their criticism had little impact on those who loved her music. Whatever Shyama sang—good or bad, right or wrong— people were enchanted by it. The secret of her success lay in the fact that she sang from her heart. She felt the emotions her songs sought to evoke and did not imitate the measured notes like a puppet. Without her, musical soirees became lifeless. Her presence became an essential element of such gatherings. She might sing a single couplet, but the audience would be content. She was the lifeline of the musical gatherings. She had won over people's hearts so completely that whenever she went out for a walk on the road, people showered her with flowers.

Three months had passed since Maharaja Ranjit Singh's return from Kabul, but there was no party held to celebrate the victory. For quite some time after his return he looked sad, and then people noticed a change in his disposition. He seemed to hate the victory of Kabul and turned away his face from anybody who congratulated him. The joy and delight that people had seen on his face when he had reached Mah Nagar had now disappeared. The conquest of Kabul had been

the greatest ambition of his life. He had achieved what no Hindu raja could think of accomplishing in a thousand years. He had hoisted the Hindu flag in a country that had kept Hindustan enslaved for a thousand years. The hills of Ghazni and Kabul were strewn with human blood. But Ranjit Singh was not happy. No one knew the reason for this change in him. If anyone could understand it at all, it was Brinda.

This state of things continued for three months. Then he started recovering his former self. The courtiers were just waiting for this to happen. One day, they requested the maharaja to organize a grand celebration. At first, he did not agree, but eventually the courtiers succeeded in persuading him.

Grand preparations for the event began. The royal dancing hall was decorated.

Famed dancing girls were invited from Patna and Benares, from Lucknow and Gwalior, from Delhi and Poona. Brinda, too, received an invitation. After a long time, one could see a hint of a smile on Brinda's face.

The day of the celebrations was fixed. Bright flags fluttered on the roads of Lahore. Rajas and nawabs came from all directions with their royal trappings. Master decorators had done up the dancing hall in the best possible way. It looked like a magnificent house of leisure.

The royal court assembled in the evening. The maharaja took his place on the throne. Riding their horses and elephants, nawabs, rajas, nobles and the rich appeared in a splendid procession to pay tribute to Maharaja Ranjit Singh.

Spectators lined both sides of the road. Happy occasions are always associated with colour and, on that day, wherever one looked one saw a riot of colours. It appeared as if a swelling river gushed through flower beds of bright hues.

In their excitement, sometimes people tend to lose their sense of proportion on such occasions and behave improperly. Dressed in his coarse, short jacket and round cap, a pandit was observing the spectacle. Some mischievous fellow pinched his paunch and he ran away from the scene, his paunch heaving ludicrously. People had a hearty laugh. At another place, a maulvi stood outside a shop, wearing a flowing achkan. The shopkeeper said to him, 'Maulvi Sahib, you must be feeling uncomfortable standing all this while. Here's a chair, why don't you sit?' Maulvi Sahib was very happy, thinking that it was because of his impressive demeanour that he was being shown that honour. But shopkeepers are a clever judge of human character. There were thousands standing around but the shopkeeper did not offer a chair to anyone except Maulvi Sahib. As he smiled and

sat, the chair caved in and Maulvi Sahib fell backward into a ditch.

His clothes were drenched in the muck. He cursed the shopkeeper a thousand times, but everyone present there had a good laugh. The chair had only three legs.

At yet another place, an opium addict had come to watch the spectacle. His back was bent, he was toothless and the hair on his head was thinning. His beard was dyed with henna and his eyes were lined with collyrium. He was completely lost in observing the spectacle before him and that was when a vendor of sweets approached him carrying a tray of delicacies on his head. 'Khan Sahib,' said the vendor, 'these are rose-scented *revadis* sold on Thursdays. Today, I'm charging just one paisa for half a *pao*. You must make good of the offer or you'll regret it.' The opium addict put his hand in his pockets but they were empty. He was disappointed and his mouth watered. What a chance to miss! Fragrant *revadis* and half a *pao* for a paisa! If he had the money, he would have bought several kilos. The vendor could sense his inner struggle and said, 'Please don't worry about the money. You can pay later. You are not someone unreliable.' The addict was flattered. He took a *pao* of *revadis* and thought mentally, 'Who's going to pay? I'm not going to get out of my house, so there's no question of payment.' He wrapped the *revadis* in a kerchief but could not resist the temptation of sampling them right then. But the moment he placed the first *revadi* in his mouth, he began to writhe in pain. Like a mad dog, he began to search frantically for water. Water flowed from his eyes and nostrils. He opened his mouth and sucked in fresh air to soothe his tongue. When he got some relief, he began to curse the sweets vendor and people began to laugh again. On happy occasions, people do indulge in such harmless pranks and they are considered excusable, no more than overflowing steam in a pan.

At nine in the night, the dance hall was packed with people. The entire palace was lit up with lanterns and lamps. Its inner chambers were illuminated with chandeliers. An imaginative workman had created a fountain which was suspended in the air right in the middle of the dance hall. Its fine spray soaked the assembly with the sweet scents of khus, *kewra*, sandalwood, amber and rose. Happiness had reached its zenith on that day.

Maharaja Ranjit Singh arrived at ten. He wore a white *achkan* of *tanzeb* and a turban that was tilted to one side. Just as the sun casts its dazzling radiance, unaffected by the colours of the horizon that surround it, Maharaja Ranjit Singh's figure shone bright even though it was unadorned by any precious gems.



Several famed poets had composed panegyrics on the maharaja to suit the occasion. Seeing the eager faces of the people around as they waited for the music, the maharaja ordered the singing to begin. The beats of the tabla led as the instrumentalists synchronized their tunes. Eyes that were heavy with sleep were suddenly wide awake. The singing began.

## 7

Music animated the royal assembly throughout the night. The ecstatic waves of ragas like Piloo, Prich, Des and Behag reverberated through the hall. The captivating dancers regaled the audience with their performances and several times they were asked for encores. Some performers captivated the hearts with their delicate movements; others received applause for their voices. However, there were only a few connoisseurs who appreciated the songs for their refined taste.

At about four in the morning, it was Shyama's turn. The audience was agog with anticipation. They eagerly moved forward. Members of the audience were startled as Brinda entered the hall and stood with her head bowed. People wondered at her simplicity—she wore no glittering jewels nor was she attired in a *peshwaz* or a gown of dazzling colours. She simply wore a plain saffron sari. Just as the golden rays of the setting sun shines on rose petals, her rosy lips were lit with a smile. Free from artificial embellishments, her beauty stood out in its natural glow. Real beauty does not need cosmetic enhancements. The joy that one derives from the unalloyed beauty of nature cannot be derived by observing an artificially laid out garden. Brinda sang.

*Sab din naahi barabar jaat . . .*

Times change . . . all days are not the same. . .

People had heard her singing this composition before but the kind of impact it had on them that day had never been seen before. It's true—all days are not the same. They had often heard this proverb. However, its meaning was really brought home to them on that occasion. Someone in the audience remembered the day he had worn a crown, but was now reduced to a mere subject; another remembered how he was pampered during his childhood; yet another remembered the days when he had cherished romantic dreams, but, sadly, those dreams had now faded away. Brinda, too, was reminded of her past. There was a day when *atais* or self-taught singers thronged her house and happiness

filled her heart. But that day, Brinda could think no further. Comparing the two phases of her life was too heart-breaking, too distressing for her. Her voice grew heavy; there was a lump in her throat.

Maharaja Ranjit Singh watched Shyama's style and mannerisms very closely. He was trying to gauge her innermost thoughts. People were wondering why he had no words of appreciation for her. He was unmoved—neither happy nor unhappy. He just seemed lost in thought. He sensed that this woman was not one to sell her art. Suddenly, he stood up and announced, 'Shyama, I would like to hear you sing again on Thursday.'

Saying this, he left the gathering. Brinda also stopped singing.

## 8

Brinda's rosy-cheeked son Raja woke up rubbing his eyes the morning after his mother left and asked, 'Where is Amma?'

Param Singh took him in his lap and answered, 'She's gone to fetch sweets for you.'

Raja was happy. He went out and began playing with the other children. After a while, he began to whine, 'My Amma! My sweets!' Param Singh fetched him some sweets but he continued to ask for his mother. He probably thought his Amma's sweets would be sweeter than Param Singh's.

Finally, Param Singh lifted him on to his shoulders and wandered about in the fields till midday. Raja clung to him but asked again and again, 'Where is Amma?'

The old soldier had no answer to this question. He did not leave the child alone even for a moment and tried to distract him in various ways so he wouldn't ask questions about his mother. Children are easily distracted. Raja was restless for several days. But gradually, the memories of this mother faded away.

Children love sweets but could an endless supply of sweets wipe away a child's memories of his mother?

Three months passed. One day, Raja was playing in the courtyard when he saw Brinda approaching. Raja looked at her sharply, hesitated for a moment and then rushed into her arms. He cried out, 'Amma's come, Amma's here.'

Tears streamed down Brinda's eyes. She lifted Raja in her lap and, clasping him tightly, said, 'No, my son, I haven't come back. I'll do so some other time.' Raja could not understand what she meant. He grabbed her hand and started pulling her towards the house. The child's love took Brinda to the threshold but she did not cross it. Raja pulled hard but she did not move. Then Raja's big eyes filled with tears, his lips fluttered and he began to cry.

Param Singh heard him crying and came out to see Brinda standing at the threshold. Startled, he exclaimed, 'Brinda!' but she could not say a word.

Wiping away her tears, she said, 'I won't step in.'

'Please do come in. Don't take it to heart what your old father said on the spur of the moment.'

'No, Dada. I can't come in.'

'Why?'

'I'll tell you some other time. Now, I've come to take that sword from you.'

'What will you do with it?' Param Singh asked in amazement.

'I'll avenge my dishonour.'

'On whom?'

'On Ranjit Singh.'

Param Singh fell to the ground. He pondered for a while what she had said and then asked, 'How will you get the opportunity, Brinda?'

Sometimes, when the dust rises, even an ant can fly in the sky with it.

'But how can a lamb fight with a tiger?'

'With the help of this sword.'

'But this sword has never killed anyone by stealth.'

'Dada! This is Vikramaditya's sword; it has always helped the weak.'

Param Singh brought out the sword and handed it over to Brinda. She hid the weapon in her garment and walked in the direction from where she had come.

Though the sun had set, there was still a glow of light in the western horizon.

From the pastures, cows and buffaloes were returning eagerly to their calves, mooing all the way. But Brinda, leaving her weeping child behind, was going back into the fearful jungle in the gathering darkness of the evening.

## 9

It was a Thursday and the clock had struck ten at night. Maharaja Ranjit Singh was in his abode of pleasure. A seven-branched candelabra lit up the place. It looked as though a glittering bride was surrounded by her bridesmaids. Brinda sat before the maharaja, wearing a saffron sari. She held a flute in her hand as she sang a delightful song.

The maharaja said to her, 'I'm very happy to hear your song. What reward should I give you?'

Shyama bowed down her head and replied, 'Your honour is all powerful.'

'Would you like a *jagir*?'

'Give me something that will help spread your fame.'

The maharaja looked closely at Brinda. Her simplicity indicated that she cared very little for material possessions. Her looks and her demeanour made it clear that she was above such temptations.

The maharaja again asked, 'Would you like to have the Kohinoor?'

'It looks appropriate in your majesty's crown,' was her reply.

Puzzled, the maharaja said, 'Then tell me what you want?'

'Would you give me what I want?' Brinda asked courageously.

'Of course.'

'Then give me justice as blood.'

Maharaja Ranjit Singh was taken back. He stared at Brinda. 'What does it mean?' he wondered. *Justice does not demand blood. This woman must have suffered at the hands of an oppressive raja or noble. Her husband could quite*

*probably be a raja somewhere. That's what it is . . . someone must have killed him. Justice demands blood only in such a situation . . . I've promised to grant her what she wishes, but she has asked for something invaluable— blood as justice! She should get what she asks for. But whose blood does she want, I wonder.*

The maharaja changed his posture, but continued to ponder—whose blood?

But then he thought, *I'm here to give that blood which justice demands. It doesn't matter whose blood it is. Justice does not discriminate between one and the other.*

*But could justice be delivered by shedding blood? Who could decide? Human beings who are mean should not be allowed to sit in judgement. Very often, one harsh word, one biting remark, is enough to make a person pay for another's blood. The fire ignited by one sarcastic remark cannot be doused without the spraying of blood. I've given this woman my word. I've committed a mistake—I should not have promised anything without knowing the full implications.* These thoughts occupied his mind for a few minutes. Then he spoke, 'Shyama! Tell me about yourself. Who are you?'

'A helpless woman.'

'Where is your home?'

'In Mah Nagar.'

Ranjit Singh again stared at Brinda. He could recall that several months ago he had seen a woman there and her innocent face had stayed in his memory. The woman standing before him bore a strong resemblance to her. The difference, however, was that on the previous occasion, her looks were not as fearless, and that the earlier shyness was now replaced by an air of self-assurance. What was then an unalloyed pearl had become sullied now.

'Shyama! Whose blood does your sense of justice demand?' the maharaja inquired.

'The one who, according to you, is responsible for my plight. The day you pitched your camp in Mah Nagar, your soldiers dragged me out of my house at night and took me forcefully to their camp. I was not in a condition to return home. I was made the target of their lewd looks, their filthy utterances and their obscene gestures. They destroyed my honour. While you were present there, your men subjected a helpless woman like me to such cruelty. Who's

responsible for that? Whose blood does justice demand? That is something for you to decide now.'

Ranjit Singh listened to her, keeping his eyes fixed on the ground. Brinda paused for a moment and then continued, 'I'm a widow. You are the protector of my honour and reputation. I lived the life of a *tapasvini* for three years after my husband's death. But your men spoiled my *tapasya*. I'm not fit to return home. I can't embrace my child and can't meet my old father's gaze. I can't face the women of my village. My honour has been ruined. Who does not know that for a woman her honour is everything? A majestic dynasty fell in Lanka for the sake of a woman's honour. The Kaurava dynasty was destroyed because of a woman. Rivers of blood have flown and dynasties have been wiped out for the sake of women's honour. Your men outraged my modesty. Who is accountable for that? Whose blood does justice demand? Judge for yourself.'

Brinda was red in the face. Maharaja Ranjit Singh was amazed to observe the courage, the thoughts and utterances of a village woman.

Glass, when broken, can turn into sharp shingles. That is true of a broken heart.

The maharaja let out a deep sigh and said in a wistful tone, 'Shyama! Justice demands my blood. I'm the one who's responsible for your plight.'

Ranjit Singh's face was seething with an excess of emotion. Overwhelmed by emotions, the human heart can reach the heights of the heavens, even if momentarily. One who is accustomed to thorny barbs becomes so used to suffering that he can pierce his chest with his own sword at such moments.

Someone scared of being drenched in water can wade through waters so deep that an elephant can drown in them. In such situations, the hearts of human beings experience the extraordinary power of emotions and enthusiasm. In such a state, man can commit the meanest acts or rise to such heights of nobility that would put even the gods to shame.

Maharaja Ranjit Singh stood up impatiently and said in a loud voice, 'Shyama! I'm the one whose blood justice demands. I am responsible for the injustice inflicted on you. The elders said that, in the eyes of God, it is the king who is responsible for the misdemeanours of his officials.'

Saying this, Raja Ranjit Singh promptly opened the fastenings on his *achkan* and knelt before Brinda. 'Shyama,' he said, 'there's a miraculous sword hidden under

your dress. That is Vikramaditya's sword, which has dispensed justice many a time. Today, let it quench its thirst with the blood of an unfortunate king. Certainly, a ruler in whose domain people are oppressed is an unfortunate one.'

There was a great change in Brinda's heart. The urge for revenge was replaced by love and regard. Raja Ranjit Singh had accepted his responsibility. He stood before her like a supplicant, ready to accept his punishment. His life was now in her hands. She could put an end to his life or let him live. These thoughts were enough to mitigate her passion for vengeance. When the wealthy and the powerful descend from their golden thrones and beg for mercy, people tend to be forgiving. Brinda pulled out the sword from her side with a heavy heart but she could not bring it down on the maharaja. The sword fell from her hands.

Maharaja Ranjit Singh understood that Brinda's courage had failed her. He advanced quickly and picked up the sword. He lifted his right hand like a mystic and exclaimed, 'Long live Waheguru.' Just as he was about to plunge the dagger into his heart, Brinda stood up with a scream and grabbed his hands with all her might. Ranjit Singh tried to shrug her off but that weak woman clung desperately to his hand just as lovers cling desperately to their loves. Rendered helpless, the maharaja could only say, 'Shyama! Let justice slake its thirst.'

## 2. Grammar Page

Unit  
44

### Passive 3

#### A I was offered ... / we were given ... etc.

Some verbs can have two objects. For example, **give**:

- My grandfather gave me this watch.  
*object 1    object 2*

It is possible to make two passive sentences:

- I was given** this watch (by my grandfather). *or*  
**This watch was given** to me (by my grandfather).

Other verbs which can have two objects are:

**ask    offer    pay    show    tell**

When we use these verbs in the passive, most often we begin with the *person*:

- I've been offered** the job, but I don't think I want it. (= somebody has offered me the job)  
 **You will be given** plenty of time to decide. (= we will give you plenty of time)  
 I didn't see the original document, but **I was shown** a copy. (= somebody showed me a copy)  
 Tim has an easy job – **he's paid a lot of money** to do very little. (= somebody pays him a lot)



#### B I don't like being ...

The passive of **doing/seeing** etc. is **being done / being seen** etc. Compare:

*active:* I don't like **people telling me** what to do.

*passive:* I don't like **being told** what to do.

- I remember **being taken** to the zoo when I was a child.  
(= I remember **somebody taking** me to the zoo)  
 Steve hates **being kept** waiting. (= he hates **people keeping** him waiting)  
 We climbed over the wall without **being seen**. (= without **anybody seeing** us)

#### C I was born ...

We say '**I was born ...**' (*not I am born*):

- I was born in Chicago.  
 Where **were you born?** (*not Where are you born?*) } *past*

*but*

- How many babies **are born** every day? *present*

#### D get

You can use **get** for the passive:

- There was a fight, but nobody **got hurt**. (= nobody **was** hurt)  
 I don't **get invited** to many parties. (= I'm not invited)  
 I'm surprised Liz **didn't get offered** the job. (= Liz **wasn't offered** the job)

We use **get** only when things *happen*. For example, you cannot use **get** in these sentences:

- Jessica **is liked** by everybody. (*not gets liked* – this is not a 'happening')  
 Peter was a mystery man. Very little **was known** about him. (*not got known*)

We use **get** mainly in informal spoken English. You can use **be** in all situations.

We also use **get** in the following expressions (which are not passive in meaning):

**get married, get divorced**  
**get lost** (= not know where you are)

**get dressed** (= put on your clothes)  
**get changed** (= change your clothes)