



Learn English Through Stories

F Series

F67

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1. Why Does the Child Cry?

By Mulk Raj Anand

Abdul Latif, the potter's son, was called Late Latif by everyone. The fact was that, at eleven, he had the energy of a seven-year-old and could not walk quickly enough from home to school. Of course what he lacked by way of physical vitality he made up in mental agility. This lack had sharpened his curiosity about birds, which he wanted to catch and bring home as pets. So he lingered on the way from anywhere to anywhere. But as he could seldom catch one of these birds, he was always late. And then his other passion was to go fishing with his friend Ali, the fisherboy, on the Padma, and fishing being a long business, he was frequently delayed.

On the day when they sang the Bangla Desh song of Tagore at the end of school hours, Abdul Late Latif lingered in the school premises to write down the words, so that he could remember the whole poem by heart. He had felt the same feelings about the paddy fields and the Padma and the fishermen's cries as the poet. But he had not found words of his own to explain to his father and mother why he had stolen a papaya from Jalal's garden; and how he had been nearly drowned in the river when his companion gave him a ducking; and how Ali had saved him. His waywardness had been dubbed as a kind of idiocy by his father, though his mother excused the slow crawl home of Abdul Late Latif, in spite of the anxiety she felt when he did not turn up until hours after the other boys.

As he hoped to recite to his mother the words of the Bangla Desh poem, he felt he had an alibi today. Having copied the song, he salaamed his master, Ilias, solemnly and fairly ran towards home, a mile away. Even if they had opened a school in the Nadi Nagar hamlet of fishermen, where his father and mother made clay pots, he would still have preferred to walk to and back from school in the big village of Rangpur, because Master Ilias recited new poems during every period, while there was no poetry in his native place except the fishermen's song, *Hia, Hia*, as they pulled the boats upstream.

'*My Golden Bangla Desh...*'. The word 'golden' seemed to lift the broken-down huts of Nadi Nagar in his mind and give them a charm which he had never felt before. And he was reconciled to the idea of reaching home sooner or later.

Meanwhile he decided, as per usual, to drift towards the Padma to catch fish for the evening meal. He sighted his friend Ali, the son of fisherman Zain-ul-Abdin, already proceeding towards a side stream. Ali was his class fellow but a duffer at words and figures and much despised by everyone, except by Abdul Late Latif.

'Oh Ali!' Abdul shouted. Ali did not stop.

'Oh Ali-i-i-i!' Abdul prolonged his shout after taking a deep breath.

Ali did not stop but began to run, taking cover behind the trunks of fallen trees on the track leading to the lagoon off the Padma.

In a panic of not knowing why his friend was evading him, Abdul began to run and chase Ali. He was soon out of breath, because his tubby little frame had never put in so much exertion. He stopped and shrieked: 'Ali... Ali...e...ee! Oh Alee!'

As Ali did not heed his call, Abdul looked hard at the dissolving figure of his school fellow and felt angry with frustration. That his friend, who usually waited at home to go fishing with him in exchange for the gram which he, Abdul, gave him, ignored him was something unusual. Abdul was sure that Ali had heard his call. He even thought the fellow had turned round to look at him. But then the fisherboy had deliberately run away and was hiding somewhere. Perhaps he had stolen sweets from his mother's box and wanted to eat them alone. Abdul nearly wanted to cry.

He sat down on the stump of a tamarind tree which had been freshly cut down. He saw Ali ahead, jumping out from behind one felled banana tree after another.

But why had all the trees in the grove by the lagoon been felled?

He craned his neck to look beyond the felled plantain trees to keep Ali within sight even though his friend had not stopped. The boy was still hopping from behind one shelter to another.

As soon as he had a breather, Abdul felt he would go and catch Ali.

Suddenly, he had the feeling that he was like one of his father's empty pitchers, which had cracked. He could not even make a sound. He remembered his father's words: 'My son, you are as yet unbaked clay. We can fill you with empty words and you will remain intact. As soon as we fill you with water, you will begin to leak.'

This reminded him that he had been asked to come direct from school and take the donkey with the loaded pitchers to Rangpur to Bania Mukhia's shop. Not to be able to catch fish – because Ali had deserted him – and to go back home to do the chores for his father irked Abdul. In his empty mind arose the verse which his mother always repeated after each fairy story:

Why does a child cry?

Oh why, oh child, dost thou cry? Oh, why does the ant bite me?

Oh why, oh why, ant, dost thou bite me? Koot! Koot! Koot!

Mother was funny. She was illiterate. But she had told him more stories than Master Ilias had taught him poems.

'She does not know what she is saying,' he acknowledged, 'but she burr- burrs like the water flowing in the mainstream of the Padma. She says it is a good thing to have no sense of why and how and what – but rely on Allah Mian!'

And her complaint against his father was that he had not brought her a mat to say five prayers all these years, nor taught her the suras of the Koran. Father said he was God incarnate, because he made pots and there was no need for prayers to Allah Mian. Why could not she pray to him?

As he had been brooding by himself, sitting on the stump of the tamarind tree, he saw the hulk of the tree further down, in a pit, and discovered a monstrous army tank. By the side were two dead soldiers.

He got up and ran away. 'Ma!' his soul cried out. 'Ma!' He felt like a top spinning.

And yet he was moving towards Nadi Nagar. There were some uprisings of rubbish dump of the peasant's manure, heaped up to put into the harvest. A startled peacock shrieked and flew, heavy-bottomed, up from a pit, from one empty paddy field to another.

The evening light was enveloping the fields, making the cacti hedges look like horny ghosts.

Abdul explored the mound of Nadi Nagar, with its straggling fishermen's houses, for the evening lights. There seemed to be no lights today. Perhaps it was early, though the fishermen, who had their food before dark to go for night fishing, did burn their hurricane lamps before twilight.

Suddenly, he felt that the approach road crescent around Nadi Nagar seemed eerie. There were deep pits where the cart grooves had been. And...Oh, there was another giant tank, with its gun pointing to the sky, while some corpses lay scattered about.

'Ma!' Abdul cried spontaneously. And he plunged into Karim's potato patch, to skirt round possible jinns of the spirits of dead soldiers and reach home. He was like a ball of fire, only made of straw. He felt he would soon burn out, fall and die.

His father's potter's yard was a clearing which the family had annexed from the edge of a mosque by the grave of a pir.

'Ma!' the boy called as though the aura of the pir's ghost was preventing him from crossing the field.

'If only Ali had not run away!' And, for comfort, he called out to the she-donkey: 'Oh Begum! Begum Donkey! Are you ready loaded with the pitchers?'

The momentum of fear of the ghosts carried him up the plinth of his father's yard.

'Horror!'

All the pitchers lay broken. And, underneath the heap of baked clay lay Begum, ashen white, with mouth open, the teeth jutting out.

'Ma...Ya Allah!' Abdul's hoarse throat cried out. And he stumbled and fell on the heap of broken pitchers.

For a moment he was stunned. His breath came and went quickly. His head swam. He felt he had bruised his knees on the edges of the hard baked clay. His mouth was open but no sound came from the jaws. His throat was parched. His body was covered with sweat. And this liquid mixed with his tears. He lay inert, as though to silence his shrieking nerves.

His head was raised towards the straw hut above the plinth, which was his home. The cottage had caved in.

He heaved himself up and made the effort to go and look for his father and mother, crying hysterically: 'Ma? Ma? Where are you?'

Only the hookah of his father stood near the doorstep, looking like a question mark.

Abdul tried to lift the fallen straw wall. He could not do so. He lay flat and burrowed into the gaping hole, calling: 'Ma!' At the same time he was frightened that he might touch her dead body suddenly and the jinn of her spirit might come and catch him for comfort and he might be whisked off by the angel Gabriel to keep her company.

There was nothing inside the hole.

He explored the dark floor of the house with a sweep of his arms, anxious to find the dead bodies and yet crazed by fear and whining a protracted whine:

'Why does a child cry?'

There was nothing for it but to stop and shout. 'Ma!'

Hoping that the more resourceful father might turn up, he at last cried out: 'Papa?' There was no answer.

Only the muggy warmth of the space under the caved-in straw roof filled his nostrils, mixed with the smell of his own sweat and wet earth.

He crawled out slowly, feeling that he had hurt himself on the face and hands in rubbing with the straw. As he emerged on to the plinth, he lay sweating and dazed and empty like the 'unbaked pitcher' his father had always called him. Only, now he was not cracked but broken.

'Where had they gone? Oh where?' He cried out without words. 'And where am I to go?'

Lying there on the level ground, he listened for any sounds that there might be. Even of gunfire. Or the gyrating wheels of tanks. Or of the Fauji Officers shouting orders.

Peering into the half-light, he saw that the huts on the mound of Nadi Nagar had all caved in. And only the silence spoke back, charged with the eerie soundless shrieks of jinns and bhoots of the spirits of the dead.

Master Ilias had told the boys that the Faujis were razing villages to the ground. 'Ma!' the shriek came out of his stomach, up his throat and fell with a thud on the darkness. And there was emptiness again.

A beetle whined far away, almost with the sound of a machine-gun firing away in a cantonment. The sound came from the riverside.

'Ali...he might be there fishing!'

Abdul did not pause to think. If his mother and father were not there and other villagers had fled, the only person who might help him was Ali. He had seen his friend alive, running towards the Padma. He would go and look for him. And he must hang on to his friend now that he was... he did not wish to pronounce the word to himself, and yet the word came up to his head: 'Orphan'. But to mitigate the terror of the word, he thought: 'Perhaps Ali is also an orphan.'

After the resolve to go and look for Ali, there was the task of lifting himself up and going, past the pir's tomb, to the Padma.

'Ma!' he cried for help.

His limbs were inert, as though he had died. And yet he heard his own breathing.

'I am alive,' he told himself under his breath.

'Why does a child cry?' his mother's nonsense verse came back to him. 'Why does the ant bite me?'

And he heaved himself, weak-kneed, but with his torso uplifted towards Venus, which had risen above the Padma. Curiously, the light of Venus put faith in him to go through the dark. He felt for the gram in his pocket. There were some remnants of the monkey nuts from the morning.

'I will give Ali the nuts...and he will be my friend.'

Not quite sure, he however found enough strength in his legs to begin walking. The need to escape from the jinns helped him run a few steps at a time. He remembered the time Ali had saved him from drowning. 'Ali,' he cried out as he reached the banana grove. 'Ali, wait for me! My friend, wait!'

And he felt a tremor go through him at the thought that he would put his arm around Ali's waist – as they had always done when they came back from truancy and had each other's support in spite of the fear of a beating from their parents.

'Ali!' he called out into the dark.

2. Comprehension

Question 1: Why was Abdul Latif called "Late Latif" by everyone?

Question 2: What were Abdul's two main passions mentioned in the story?

Question 3: Why did Abdul linger at school on the day they sang the Bangla Desh song?

Question 4: How did Abdul feel about the word "golden" in the Bangla Desh poem?

Question 5: Why did Abdul chase after Ali when he saw him running toward the lagoon?

Question 6: What did Abdul notice about the grove by the lagoon?

Question 7: What did Abdul's father compare him to, and what did this metaphor mean?

Question 8: What shocking discovery did Abdul make when he reached his father's potter's yard?

Question 9: Why was Abdul afraid while searching for his parents in the collapsed hut?

10. Question: What motivated Abdul to search for Ali despite his fear and exhaustion?

Answers

Answer 1: Abdul was called "Late Latif" because he was often delayed due to his slow walking and distractions like bird-watching and fishing.

Answer 2: Abdul's passions were catching birds to keep as pets and fishing with his friend Ali on the Padma River.

Answer 3: He stayed to write down the words of the Bangla Desh poem by Tagore to memorize it.

Answer 4: The word "golden" gave the broken-down huts of Nadi Nagar a charm in his mind, uplifting his perception of his home.

Answer 5: Abdul was confused and frustrated because Ali, his usual fishing companion, was ignoring his calls and running away.

Answer 6: He noticed that all the trees in the grove had been felled, which was unusual.

Answer 7: His father compared him to an "unbaked clay pitcher," meaning Abdul was impressionable and fragile, likely to "leak" or break under pressure.

Answer 8: He found all the pitchers broken, the donkey dead, and his family's straw hut caved in.

Answer 9: He feared touching their dead bodies or encountering their spirits (jinns), which might whisk him away.

10. Answer: Abdul believed Ali, who he had seen alive, might be his only remaining companion, especially since he suspected he might be an orphan.

3. Grammar Page



GRAMMAR STUDY: Changes in Tenses

- If the reporting verb is in the past tense, the tense of the verb in the reported speech must be changed to one of the four forms of the past tense (simple, continuous, perfect, perfect continuous).

She said, "I'm a teacher."

She said that she was a teacher.

She said, "She likes teaching."

She said that she liked teaching.

She said, "I'm teaching English."

She said she was teaching English.

She said, "I've been teaching since 2001."

She said she had been teaching since 2001.

She said, "I taught voice yesterday."

She said she had taught voice the previous day.

She said, "I was teaching earlier."

She said she had been teaching earlier.

She said, "I'd already been teaching for ten minutes."

She said she'd already been teaching for ten minutes.

v ¹ /v ⁵	- v ²
v ²	- had + v ³
has/have + v ³	- had + v ³
is/am/are	- was/were
has been/have been	- had been
was/were + v ⁴	- had been + v ⁴
was/were + NP	- had been + NP
shall/will + v ¹	- should/would + v ¹
may/can + v ¹	- might/could + v ¹
has to /have to + v ¹	- had to + v ¹
had to + v ¹	- had had to + v ¹
shall have	- should have
will have	- would have
don't /doesn't + v ¹	- didn't + v ¹
didn't + v ¹	- hadn't + v ³
do/does (without 'not')	- v ¹ to v ²
did (without 'not')	- had + v ³

- In some cases, the simple past tense remains unchanged.

She said, "I had already started the lesson when he arrived."

She said she had already started the lesson when he arrived.

He said, "Columbus discovered America in 1492."

He said that Columbus discovered America in 1492.

He said, "I was watching TV when the telephone rang."

He said that he had been watching TV when the telephone rang.

- The following changes need to be made to the modal auxiliary verbs:

shall/will + v ¹ - should/would + v ¹	may/can + v ¹ - might/could + v ¹	shall have - should have
will have - would have	must (necessity) - had to	must (duty/law/truth) - no change
would/could/ might/ought + v ¹ -(no change)		

She said, "I can teach English well."

She said she could teach English well.

She said, "What shall we learn today?"

She asked what we should learn that day.

She said, "May I sit here?"

She asked if she might sit there.

She said, "I must type the letter."

She said she had to type the letter.

"I would like to help," said Anu.

Anu said that she would like to help.

- If the reporting verb is in a present or future tense, the tense of the verb in the reported speech is not changed.

She says, "It's a sunny day today."

She says that it's a sunny day today.

She says, "I was working late last night."

She says that she was working late last night.

She has said, "She will take a short test next week."

She has said that she will take a short test next week.

She will say, "I'll teach reported speech tomorrow."

She will say that she will teach reported speech tomorrow.

Time adverbials also do not change when the reporting verb is in a present or future tense.