



Learn English Through Stories

F Series

F73

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1. An Old Story

The ascetic sold pakoras and revelled in his own paradise, while the thief stole and enjoyed life with his family. Thus, the ascetic was content in his own state, the thief was delighted with his loot, and time marched on in its own rhythm.

"The beginning of the story itself is absurd!" Dari, the weaver, interrupted.

"What kind of story is this going to be?"

Baba Bhoj, the storyteller, was annoyed at being interrupted and snapped,

"What's absurd about the beginning? You tell me first!"

Dari didn't take offense at Baba's tone. Smiling, he said, "You always say that a thief's house never has a lamp lit. Now you're saying the thief was enjoying life with his family, and the pakora-selling ascetic remained an ascetic even after selling pakoras?"

Master, sitting nearby, came to Dari's defence. "Baba, listen to Dari for a moment! He's saying that if the shopkeeper and the thief aren't brothers by blood, they're surely cousins. One robs the customer, the other robs his kin."

Ignoring Master's comment, Baba Bhoj retorted, "A lamp never burns in the house of a wretched thief like you, who wakes up in the morning and steals the mosque's oil to rub on himself before bathing."

Before Baba could finish, Dari laughed and said, "Every morning, I draw a hundred buckets from the well to fill the mosque's water tank. If any worshiper has ever drawn even one bucket, call me a liar. If I take a drop of oil from the pot, what's the sin in that? If I don't take it from Allah's house, where else will I get it?"

Baba couldn't help but laugh at Dari's "where else will I get it" quip. He said, "Son, if you didn't have the habit of waking up to rub oil and bathe, you wouldn't even glance at the mosque. Go rub oil every day. Then, to loosen your body, draw ten or twenty buckets and fill the tank. Won't you come to bathe on your own then? You've never had the fortune to pray. But mark my words, stealing from Allah's house... you'll die a leper, and worms will eat your body."

The mention of leprosy and worms made Dari shudder. Defensively, he said, "I swear on my mother, I don't do this anymore! Just last Thursday, I donated one and a quarter rupees' worth of oil to the mosque."

"Now you don't steal oil from the mosque to rub on yourself... now you just steal animal fodder!" Baba Bhoj seemed to accept Dari's first defence.

Dari, justifying himself, said, "Come on, Baba! How much fodder do I take? Just enough for my cow and my little calf. Do I steal fodder every day? Sometimes I cut and collect grass from public places, other times I take fodder from that stingy Jatt who never gives anything when asked. In the morning, the Jatt knows Dari took his fodder at night. He laughs it off, and so do I. Baba, tell me honestly, if Dari doesn't take fodder for his cow in this village, where else will he get it? Should he take fodder from another village and stir up trouble?"

Baba Bhoj burst out laughing. Chuckling, he said, "Oh, man! I've told you a hundred times, if you can't find fodder elsewhere, take from us. But don't steal fodder from other people at night. Don't do things like that. Getting killed while stealing fodder—is that any kind of deed? Such a person's life is worth nothing."

Dari said, "Haven't you heard, Baba? Once, a thief broke into his own sister's hut. He got caught right then and there. What could the sister and her husband say? Instead, they fed him food and water and sent him off. The thief, returning to his friends, started boasting about his theft. When they asked, 'What happened when you got caught?' he laughed and said, 'What could happen? Seeing me, the sister and her husband were the ones who died of shame.'"

Baba and Master burst into laughter. Baba Bhoj, with affection, said to Dari, "You're a master of spinning tales."

Just then, Ustad, coughing and dragging his feet, joined the group. "Come, Ustad!" Baba Bhoj welcomed him, seating him on the cot. "Tell us, what's up?"

"What's up?" Ustad, out of breath from walking just ten steps, said in a weary voice, "If I lie down too long, I can't sit up. If I force myself to sit, my legs won't stand. If I struggle to stand, I can't walk. And if I drag myself from home to your mansion, barely making ten steps, I'm out of breath for hours. Curse this old age."

Dari, laughing cheekily at Ustad's complaints, said, "Ustad, the wise have said, 'Youth is a treasure, but old age is a curse.'" Everyone, including Ustad, laughed.

Baba Bhoj and Ustad, both in their seventies or eighties, were old companions. Both had studied up to the fourth grade in their village school before taking up their trades—Bhoj in farming, Ustad in making pots and transporting goods on donkeys. Bhoj's sons and grandsons now managed his fields, while Ustad's brother took over the pottery wheel, making pots all day, firing them, and selling them village to village through his nephew. Ustad, however, had neither

wife nor child. For some reason, he never found a wife his whole life. And for some reason, the entire village called him Ustad. Their group also included two other friends: Master, a middle-aged man, and Dari, the young weaver. The four of them gathered every evening at Baba Bhoj's mansion, chatting about this and that.

"Move forward, Baba!" Dari urged.

"You talk about moving forward at your age!" Baba Bhoj retorted with a spark. "Back in the day, we'd walk eighty miles to Lahore to pay taxes, tying bread to our waists, chanting Allah's name: 'Heavy loads on travellers, eighty miles to Lahore!' We'd reach Lahore by the third morning, pay taxes, and return in two days, laughing and jumping. And the next day, we'd go plough the fields, still cheerful. You dare mock us about moving forward, you who waits half a day at the station for a train to travel two miles!"

"Trains have ruined people!" Ustad grumbled. "They've taken the strength out of our bones and knees. Back when there were no trains, young men were full of vigour."

Master, usually quiet, couldn't resist. "Trains have made life easier, Baba! Get on a train in the morning, pay taxes in Lahore, and return to the village by evening. What took you six days now takes six hours. No blisters on your feet, no sores on your body—just sit in peace and even sleep if you want."

Dari, trying to steer the conversation, said, "I told you, move the story forward!"

"What story?" Baba Bhoj asked casually, as often happened when one topic led to another, and the original story got lost in the chatter.

"The one about the pakora seller and the ascetic!" Master reminded him.

"Oh, right!" Baba Bhoj, looking at Dari, said, "Now don't interrupt, and I'll tell you a true story!"

At the mention of a true story, Ustad perked up. Scratching his patchy beard, he said, "Truth is like a jewel—put it in a story, and the story shines." Baba Bhoj continued, "The pakora seller had a regular customer who came every day, ate pakoras, burped, stroked his moustache, and left without paying. The seller never asked for money, and the customer never offered any. The seller thought, 'One day, this freeloader will feel ashamed and stop this daily deceit.' But the customer never felt shame, and the seller never pointed it out—whether out of weakness or kindness, who knows? This went on for a year or two."

Dari couldn't hold back. "The seller should've filed a complaint at the police station. They'd have dragged that cheating customer away, skinned him alive along with his coins."

Annoyed at the interruption, Baba Bhoj snapped, "There were no police stations back then, and you had to plead before the ruler. Would a poor pakora seller have access to a ruler?"

"Alright, then what?" Dari looked at Baba.

"One day, the freeloader came twirling his moustache. He saw the pakora stall closed, the pan washed and upside down, and the seller sitting with his head in his hands."

"What happened? No pakoras today?" the customer asked.

"You've eaten everything I've had over the years," the seller said in a tearful voice. "I've run out of capital. How can I make pakoras now?"

"Alright," the customer said after a pause. "Open your stall tomorrow, and I'll come at this time."

The next day, as promised, the customer arrived. He handed the seller a bundle, folded his hands, and said, "If you'd told me earlier, your stove would never have gone cold. Keep your stall running, and when this runs out, whisper in my ear!" Leaving the seller stunned, he walked away.

The bundle was filled with gold coins, pearls, and diamonds—wealth the pakora seller had never even dreamed of.

Seven or eight days later, a proclamation was made in the city: a notorious thief was to be hanged. He had robbed a chieftain's house but refused to confess or return the loot. The execution was set for the city's main square, and people gathered to watch, including the pakora seller. At the gallows, he recognized his daily customer, bound and standing tall. In a flash, he understood everything. "If the stolen goods are returned, maybe the thief's life can be spared," the seller thought, pushing through the crowd toward the gallows. As he got closer and raised his hand to speak, his eyes met the thief's. The thief, reading his intent, smiled and shouted to the crowd, "Even if the stolen goods are returned, they'll hang me anyway. So, let the good man who has my loot keep it. If he doesn't want it all, let him keep what I owe him and use the rest to dig wells and build inns for the people of the city."

And so, the thief was hanged. Baba Bhoj paused, as if catching his breath. Dari, laughing, said, "The seller probably kept everything for himself."

"No, brother!" Baba Bhoj replied. "Back then, people still had a shred of honour. The seller kept what he was owed and used the rest of the wealth to dig ten wells and build an inn for travellers in the city. For centuries, the people of Lahore and travellers from afar drank from those wells and blessed the thief."

"Centuries?" Master asked, astonished.

"Yes," Baba Bhoj said, looking into Master's eyes. "This story is some four hundred years old, but it's true. That's why it lives on today."

"Truth never grows old, never ages, never dies," Ustad declared firmly, placing his hands on his knees as he stood up.

2. Comprehension

Question 1: What are the main occupations of the two characters introduced at the beginning of the story?

Question 2: How does Dari justify taking oil from the mosque?

Question 3: What does Baba Bhoj warn Dari about regarding his habit of stealing?

Question 4: How does Dari defend his practice of taking fodder for his cow?

Question 5: What is the relationship between Baba Bhoj and Ustad, and what are their backgrounds?

Question 6: What complaint does Ustad express when he joins the group?

Question 7: How does Master describe the advantage of trains compared to Baba Bhoj's past experiences?

Question 8: What is the daily routine of the pakora seller's customer in the story Baba Bhoj tells?

Question 9: What does the customer give the pakora seller after the stall closes, and how does it affect the seller?

Question 10: What does the pakora seller do with the wealth given by the thief after the thief's execution?

Answers

Answer 1: The ascetic sells pakoras, and the thief steals to support his family.

Answer 2: Dari justifies taking oil from the mosque by saying he draws a hundred buckets of water daily to fill the mosque's tank, so taking a drop of oil is minor.

Answer 3: Baba Bhoj warns Dari that stealing from Allah's house will lead to him dying as a leper with worms eating his body.

Answer 4: Dari defends taking fodder by saying he only takes enough for his cow and calf, sometimes from public places or from a stingy Jatt who laughs it off.

Answer 5: Baba Bhoj and Ustad are old companions in their seventies or eighties; Bhoj was a farmer, now managed by his sons and grandsons, while Ustad made pots and transported goods, now handled by his brother and nephew.

Answer 6: Ustad complains that old age makes it hard to sit, stand, walk, or even breathe after walking just ten steps.

Answer 7: Master says trains make life easier by reducing a six-day trip to Lahore for taxes to six hours, with no blisters or sores, allowing comfort and rest.

Answer 8: The customer eats pakoras daily, burps, strokes his moustache, and leaves without paying.

Answer 9: The customer gives the pakora seller a bundle of gold coins, pearls, and diamonds, leaving the seller stunned with wealth he never dreamed of.

Answer 10: The pakora seller keeps what he was owed and uses the rest of the wealth to dig ten wells and build an inn for travellers in Lahore.

3. Grammar Page

Write the sentences in the indirect speech using the prompts given:

1. "Are you doing anything at the weekend?"
Kunal asked Nina.....
2. "Are you enjoying yourself?"
He asked us.....
3. "Do you live near your family?"
He asked her.....
4. "Does your father work here?"
She asked me.....
5. "Don't be late, Neha."
Neha's father told.....
6. "How did you get to school?"
He asked his friend.....
7. "I have to go out now."
Pukar said to Riya.....
8. "I would like to go out for dinner."
Mother said to Father.....
9. "The government will have to resolve the problem of unemployment."
A councillor argued.....
10. "We can save energy by using solar power."
The scientist claimed.....
11. "Why can't you help me with my homework?"
Mona asked Ravi.....
12. "Where have you been all night?"
My parents wanted to know.....
13. "I'll definitely return it tomorrow."
He promised.....
14. "Please fasten your seatbelts before taking off."
The stewardess requested.....
15. "What a clever boy you are!"
Anjali exclaimed with surprise.....

Answers

- 1 Kunal asked Nina if she was doing anything at the weekend.
- 2 He asked us if we were enjoying ourselves.
3. He asked her if she lived near her family.
- 4 She asked me if my father worked there
5. Neha's father told her not to be late.
- 6 He asked his friend how he had got to school
7. Pukar told Riya that he had to go out then
- 8 Mother told Father that she would like to go out for dinner
9. A councillor argued that the government would have to resolve the problem of unemployment
- 10 The scientist claimed that they could save energy by using solar power
- 11 Mona asked Ravi why he couldn't help her with her homework
12. My parents wanted to know where I had been all night.
13. He promised that he would definitely return it the following day
14. The stewardess requested to fasten my seatbelts before taking off.
15. Anjali exclaimed with surprise that I was a clever boy