

Section-A

English Prose

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CHAPTER

A Girl With A Basket

William C. Douglas

➔ About the Author

William C. Douglas, a judge of the Supreme Court of United States of America, visited India in 1950. During his visit, he happened to travel from New Delhi to Ranikhet, a hill station in the Himalayas. He was a realist and supporter of labour. He also loved self-respect and self-confidence. He was fascinated and charmed with the natural beauty of India, 'A Girl With A Basket' is one of his famous essays.



➔ About the Lesson

'A Girl With A Basket', has been written by William C. Douglas who came to India after the partition of the country in 1950. At that time, India was full of refugees who were driven away by the communal fanaticism of Pakistan. He had a unique experience at one of the railway stations. Many refugee children were selling small articles like baskets and fans. He was impressed with a little girl of nine years. This essay is the recollection of his valuable experiences.



I had left New Delhi for the Himalayas. I was going as far as Bareilly by train and then by car to Ranikhet—an old British army hill station located on a 6,000-foot ridge opposite a 120-mile stretch of snow-capped Himalayas. The train was slow; and it stopped at all the way stations. At every stop, I swung open the door of my compartment, and walked the platform.

The platforms were packed with people—Sikhs, Moslems, Hindus; soldiers, merchants, priests, porters, beggars, hawkers. Almost everyone was barefoot and dressed in loose white garments. I would ask at least three people before I could find one who spoke English. We would talk world affairs and every major topic, the news of the day produced. In this way I was trying to get a feel of the pulse of the nation, checking opinion against official attitudes and reports.

The route lay through one of the richest of India's agricultural areas. This was the plain of the upper Ganga River, a thousand feet above sea level but tropical. The Ganga

was brown silt, swollen with flood waters, its overflow inundating thousands of acres of rice. To the north were jungles—great expanses of grass, higher than a man's head and unbroken except for an occasional clump of trees—the home of tigers, elephants, pythons, and cobras. Everywhere else there was flat land running to the horizon, but dotted here and there by the sacred banyan tree or by rows of pakar trees, shaped like elms and having thick twisted trunks. Hot, humid air was moving in from the south-west. Monkeys—some of them mothers with babies clinging to them and riding underneath—swung off trees at the stations, looking for food. The villages we passed, had walls made of mud mixed with water and cow-dung. Their peaked roofs were thatched—bundles of grass tied to bamboo poles, stretched across the rafters. That day the pumpkin vines that grew over them, were in bloom, trailing streaks of yellow over drab walls.

At one station, my routine of talking with the people was interrupted. As soon as I alighted, a group of young children gathered around me. They were selling baskets—hand-woven, reed baskets with simple designs and patterns. They held the baskets high, shouting words I did not know but conveying unmistakably their desire.

These were refugee children. When partition between India and Pakistan was decreed, hundreds of thousands of people pulled up their roots and changed their residences. Nine million people left Pakistan and came to India, driven by the fear of religious fanaticism. They were poor people to start with; they were poorer as they began their long trek, for all they could carry, was a bit of food and a few belongings. Soon they were out of food. A few days after they started, they began to fall by the way-side from the weakness of hunger, and died, where they fell.

The children selling baskets were sons and daughters of these refugees. They or their parents or relatives had gathered in the cities, setting up stalls, manufacturing simple articles, trying to make a living in markets, already overcrowded. They lived in cloth and grass sheds that lined the streets. The peasants among these refugees, had been accustomed to little all their lives for the annual income of an agricultural family does not exceed, on an average, one hundred dollars a year. The average unskilled labourer makes thirty cents a day or less than two dollars a week. There is one meal a day—an onion, a piece of bread, a bowl of pulse with milk, perhaps a bit of goat cheese. No tea, no coffee, no fat, no sweets, no meat. One hundred dollars a year is not two dollars a week, yet even that small amount is hard to earn by selling baskets to people too poor to buy them. That no doubt is the reason these little children descended on me like locusts. I, an American, was doubtless the most promising market they had seen.

I bought one tiny basket for a few annas, another fruit basket for a bit more, a beautiful waste paper basket for a rupee, a lovely sewing basket for a rupee, a few fans for an anna or two a piece. My arms were filled and I had not spent fifty cents. The children passed in, shouting their wares. I was a prisoner, completely surrounded, unable to move. The most diligent, aggressive vendor was a beautiful girl of nine right in front of me. She had a lovely basket with handle; and she wanted a rupee and a half for it or about thirty cents. She was an earnest pleader. There were tears in her eyes. She pleaded and begged in tones that would wring any heart.

My arms were full. I had no room, let alone any need, for another basket. Balancing my baskets and fans on my left arm, I reached into my right coat pocket and got a handful of change—perhaps fifteen cents in all—which I deposited in the basket that the young girl held imploringly before me. I tried to explain that I could not buy the basket

but extended the gratuity as a substitute. I realized at once what offence I had given. This child of nine, dressed in rags and on the edge of starvation, raised her chin, reached into the basket, and with all the pride and graciousness of a lady, handed the money back to me. There was only one thing I could do. I bought the basket. She wiped her eyes, smiled and dashed down the platform, headed for some grass hut that would have at least thirty cents that night.

I told this story to Prime Minister, Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru. I told him, it was one reason I had fallen in love with India.

The people I saw in India—those in the village as well as those in high office—have both pride and lively sense of decency and citizenship. They also have a passion for independence. This beautiful child—born in squalor and poverty, uneducated in both grammar and manners—had given me a glimpse of the warm soul of India.

||Glossary||

located	— situated (स्थित)
ridge	— long mountain range (लम्बी पर्वत शृंखला)
stretch	— continuous extent (फैली हुई)
snow-capped	— covered with snow (बर्फ से ढकी हुई)
swing open	— threw open (खुले में फेंकना)
packed	— crowded (भीड़भाड़युक्त)
hawkers	— vendors (बेचने वाला)
major topic	— important topic (महत्त्वपूर्ण विषय)
a feel of the pulse of the nation	— to know the attitude of the people of a country (व्यवहार समझना एक देश के लोग)
opinion	— view (विचार)
attitude	— behaviour (व्यवहार)
route	— way (रास्ता, पथ)
silt	— loose sand; soil (बिखरी बालू या मिट्टी)
inundating	— covering (जल प्लावन)
expanses	— wide with open lands (खुली भूमि में विस्तृत)
unbroken	— continuous (निरन्तर)
clump	— group (समूह, झुगमुट)
horizon	— the place where the sky and the earth seem to meet (क्षितिज)
humid	— moist (नमीयुक्त)
underneath	— below (नीचे)
swung off	— jumped off (कूदना)
rafters	— beams (कड़ियाँ)
trailing streaks	— hanging lines (लटकती पंक्तियाँ)

interrupted	— disturbed (बाधित, व्याकुल)
alighted	— got down (घोड़े पर से उतरना)
hand-woven	— hand-made (हाथ से बना)
conveying	— saying (कहना, सन्देश देना)
unmistakably	— correctly (त्रुटिरहित, सही)
decreed	— declared (गजाज्ञा, निर्णय, घोषित कर दिया)
residences	— houses (घर)
fanaticism	— religious madness (धार्मिक पागलपन)
a bit	— a small piece (एक छोटा टुकड़ा)
belongings	— things (वस्तु)
manufacturing	— making (बनाना)
peasants	— farmers (किसान)
accustomed	— habitual (आदती)
exceed	— go up (बढ़ना, ऊपर जाना)
promising market	— a good buyer (एक अच्छा खरीददार)
shouting their wares	— shouting the names of their items (अपने सामानों का नाम लेकर चिल्लाना)
diligent	— laborious (परिश्रमी)
agressive	— forceful (आक्रामक)
earnest pleader	— sincere supporter (गम्भीर तर्क देने वाला सहयोगी)
pleaded	— requested (अनुरोध किया)
wring any heart	— move any heart (हृदय परिवर्तन)
no room	— no place (कोई स्थान नहीं)
imploringly	— requesting earnestly (उत्साहपूर्वक प्रार्थना)
extended	— gave (दिया)
gratuity	— money as a gift (धन दान)
substitute	— something in place of another thing (विकल्प)
edge of starvation	— almost dying of hunger (भूख से मरना)
decency	— good manner (मर्यादा, सुशीलता, विनय)
squalor	— dirty condition (गन्दा वातावरण)
passion	— strong desire (दृढ़ इच्छा)
independence	— freedom (स्वतन्त्रता)
glimpse	— a quick view (झलक)

|| Exercise ||

➔ Passages for Explanation :

Explain with reference to the context of the following passages :

(a) They were poor people.....they fell.

- (b) The most diligent, aggressive.....wring any heart.
 (c) I realized at once.....back to me.
Or I tried to explain I bought the basket.
 (d) This beautiful child of India.
 (e) At one station their desire.
 (f) One hundred dollars they had seen.
 (g) The people I saw the warm soul of India.
Or The people I saw passion for independence.
 (h) My arms were money back to me.

➔ Short Answer Type Questions :

Answer the following questions in not more than 30 words each :

- (i) Where was the writer going ?
 (ii) What did the writer do to get a feel of the pulse of the nation ?
 (iii) Who were these children, selling baskets ?
 (iv) What was the plight of the refugees ?
 (v) Why did the refugee children descend like locusts on the writer ?
Or Why did the children descend like locusts on the author?
 (vi) Which vendor among the children drew the writer's attention most and why?
 (vii) What were the children selling at a railway station according to William C. Douglas? Why were they doing so ?
 (viii) What forced the writer to buy the little girl's basket ?
 (ix) What one reason did the writer give to Pandit Nehru for having fallen in love with India ?
 (x) What did the writer think about the people of India ?
 (xi) Describe the things and scenes, the author saw on his way from Delhi to Ranikhet ?
 (xii) Why did millions of people leave Pakistan for India ?
Or What misery did partition between India and Pakistan cause to the people ?
 (xiii) Why did the girl not accept money as charity ?
 (xiv) How did William C. Douglas try to know something about India ?
 (xv) Why was the author highly impressed by the conduct of the little girl in the lesson 'A Girl With A Basket'.
 (xvi) What is an average annual income of an agricultural family as given by William C. Douglas?
 (xvii) Which qualities of character did W.C. Douglas find in Indian people?

➔ Vocabulary :

- (a) *Below are some pairs of words. Use them in your own sentences to make out the difference in their meanings :*
- (i) wine, vine, (ii) lose, loose,

- (iii) plain, plane, (iv) feat, feet,
(v) root, route.

(b) Fill in the blanks with suitable words given below :

wring, soon, basket, unskilled, refugees

- (i) The children selling baskets were sons and daughters of these
- (ii) The averagelabourer makes thirty cents a day or less than two dollars a week.
- (iii) they were out of food.
- (iv) I bought one tinyfor a few annas.
- (v) My arms were and I had not spent fifty cents.
(tied, filled, empty, vacan)
- (vi) She pleaded and begged in tones that would.....any heart.

(c) Give the Antonyms of the following words :

- (i) open, (ii) loose, (iii) great, (iv) skilled, (v) able, (vi) offence, (vii) educated
(viii) major, (ix) independence, (x) warm.

(d) Give the Synonyms of the following words :

- (i) garments, (ii) sacred, (iii) partition, (iv) peasants, (v) extended, (vi) glimpse,
(vii) brave, (viii) candid, (ix) effort, (x) clever.

(e) Use the following expressions in your sentences so as to bring out their meanings clearly :

- (i) to wring the heart, (ii) on the edge of, (iii) to catch a glimpse of, (iv) a handful of.

(f) In the fable the ant stands for

- (i) hard work (ii) kindness, (iii) enjoyment (iv) idleness.

(g) Fill in the blanks in the following sentences selecting the most suitable words from those given within the brackets :

- (i) The people of India have a for Independence.
(hope, passion, hatred, gratitude)
- (ii) These were children. (rich, poor, refugee, honest)
- (iii) I, an American was, the most promising market they had seen.
(doubtless, certainly, necessarily, definitely)
- (iv) The children selling basket were sons and daughters of these
(gives, decides, awards, judges)
- (v) They lived in cloth and sheds that lined the streets.
(iron, stone, cement, grass)

