

## *GOD LIVES IN THE PANCH*

□ Jumman Sheikh and Alagu Chowdhari had been close friends from their childhood. Their friendship was founded on a common outlook and a deep trust in each other. They ploughed their fields together and were partners in a money- lending business.

□ In the course of time, Jumman came to be held in high esteem by the village folk for his learning and achievements, while Alagu was respected for his wealth.

□ All went smoothly until there arose a dispute between Jumman and his old maternal aunt. The old woman, hoping that her nephew would look after her, had transferred all the property she owned to him. As long as the deed of the transfer of property remained unregistered Jumman and his wife made every effort to please the aunt. However, once the deed was registered their attitude changed and they began to ill-treat the old lady.

□ Jumman's wife Kariman, in particular, lost no opportunity to insult her while Jumman remained indifferent. When the aunt could no longer endure this humiliation she decided to live separately and asked for a small allowance from Jumman. When even this was rudely refused by her nephew Jumman, she decided to take the case to the panchayat.

□ Jumman was not perturbed at this, and in fact, was secretly pleased. He felt that his friends Alagu in the panchayat would side with him. The old lady, however, went around the village narrating her tale of woe to all – some were sympathetic while most were quite indifferent towards her.

□ At last, tired and exhausted, she came to Alagu and requested him to attend the panchayat. He was reluctant at first and said that he would rather not take direct part in the proceedings as Jumman was his close friend. The aunt then asked him whether he would rather remain silent and see injustice done. This had an immediate impact on Alagu and his conscience was stirred.

□ Ramadhan Misra, who nursed a grudge against Jumman, now arose and asked Jumman to appoint a person of his choice as head-panch. Jumman, realizing that most of those present were against him, discreetly replied that he would leave the choice to his aunt; and when the old lady nominated Alagu, Jumman could hardly believe his luck.

□ Alagu at first hesitated and told the aunt that perhaps she was unaware that Jumman was his close friend. The aunt said that she was aware of this fact but she was also quite confident that Alagu would follow the dictates of his conscience.

□ The case began. Alagu asked Jumman if he had anything to say in his defence. Jumman said that he was not obliged to pay her an allowance as it was not specified in the deed.

□ Alagu, being well versed in legal matters, did not agreed with Jumman's explanation, Jumman was amazed and perplexed at this sudden change in his friend and stood dumb-founded. Alagu then pronounced the verdict. The considered opinion of the panchayat was that Jumman was liable to pay his aunt a monthly allowance or else the deed of transferring her property to him would be null and void. The verdict shocked Jumman. He could hardly believe his ears and felt that Alagu had betrayed him. Ramadhan Misra and the others were overjoyed and were all praises for Al agu.

□ This incident strained the relationship between two friends. They were now seldom seen together and in fact avoided each other. Jumman thought of nothing except how he could avenge this humiliation. And soon enough an opportunity presented itself.

□ Alagu owned a pair of healthy bullocks but unfortunately one died.

□ He now having no use for the other bullock, sold it to Samjhu Sahu, a cart-driver, who promised to pay the price after a month. Samjhu over-worked and ill-treated the animal in his greed till finally, the poor animal died of torture.

□ Samjhu Sahu and his wife were very annoyed by their loss and they cursed Alagu for having sold them the bullock. Several months later, when Alagu asked for the price of the bullock, all that they were prepared to do was to offer Alagu their bullock on loan for two months.

- After a good deal of quarrelling between the parties the matter was finally put before the panchayat.
- When the panchayat had assembled, as before, nominations were invited for a head-panch; and when Alagu stated that Samjhu Sahu should propose one, Samjhu Sahu happily named Jumman. Hearing this, for obvious reasons, Alagu's heart sank!
- After hearing both men the panches decided that Samjhu Sahu must compensate Alagu and finally it was decided that the amount must be the full price of the bullock that had been agreed upon.
- Alagu was overwhelmed with joy at this decision. He loudly praised the panchayat – and indeed this was justice at its best. Everyone realized that the panch is a symbol of democracy, truth and justice. Good indeed lives in the heart of the panch!
- Through 'God Lives In The Panch' the author shows that invariably when a person is placed in a responsible position his conscience is awakened and he tries to prove equal to the task.

#### Critical Appreciation:

- This short story "God Lives In The Panch" is written when the colonial Britishers were ruling India. Premchand, through this story is criticising the judicial system of the Britishers saying that Indians already have a rural judicial system (Panchayat) where impartial enquiry and judgments are already prevalent. When one is placed as a Panch or as the head of the Panch, he forgets about his earthly ties and gives judgement only according to the norms of morality, legality and ethics. Thus the primary theme of the short story is indigenous judicial system, though there are many other themes present in the story.
- Panchayat □ Panchayat is a system of administration of rural India where the elected or selected representatives of the village take decisions for the development and day to day running of the village. Even while there are disputes in the villages, the villagers approach the Panchayat for immediate remedial measures. Both Jumman and Alagu went to the Panchayat with their disputes, both of them also served as the Head-Panches. When they were Head-Panch, they decided in favour of the righteous the good at that moment, while one

is the head Panch doing justice, one is like a God delivering judgement with impartiality. Thus Premchand is celebrating the indigenous rural administrative and judicial system known as Panchayats.

□ Friendship: □ The short-story also deals with themes like friendship (between Jumman Sheikh and Alagu Chowdhari), property disputes (Jumman's act of getting his aunt's property registered in his own name and then maltreating his aunt), etc. Premchand through these multiple themes is trying to present different facets of India but what he intends to champion primarily in this short story is the role of the Head-Panch in a Panchayati system.

Characterisation:

□ Jumman Sheikh: □ Jumman Sheikh: Jumman is a very good friend of Alagu Chowdhari, but he like other human beings became subject to greed when he registered his aunt's property under his name and maltreated her, and didn't want to pay her any monthly allowance. When the aunt reached the Panchayat, Alagu Chowdhari, the head-panch gave the sentence in favour of Jumman's aunt, leading to a break in the friendship between them. It is only when Jumman became a head panch and Alagu was brought as a party of dispute to the Panchayat, Jumman realized that Alagu did right when his aunt approached the Panchayat. This realisation of Jumman revived their friendship. In short, it can be said that Jumman is a normal human being with his shortcomings (greed) but a man who can transcend his earthly ties when he becomes the head-panch

□ Alagu Chowdhari : □ Alagu Chowdhari is presented in the story as a good man who when given the role to be a head-panch; didn't favour his friend by being partial towards him. Moreover, he insisted on his friend's mistakes and gave an order which is righteous. Sometime later Alagu sold a bullock to Samjhu Sahu for which he received no money and the bullock died because of it being made to over-work. Alagu took the matter to the Panchayat where to Alagu's surprise, Jumman, the head-panch, (his friend turned foe) gave the judgement in favour of him. Alagu is presented in the story as a good man trying to live life according to the morally lustifiable paths.

□ Jumman's Aunt : □ Though an unnamed character in the story, Jumman Sheikh's aunt has a significant role to play in the plot. She is an old lady, with white hair, toothless mouth, and a body bent as a bow. She is weak and infirm and walks leaning on a staff. She is related to Jumman on the mother's side. She owns some property, which she decides to transfer to Jumman, through an agreement with the condition that he will look after her. In the beginning Jumman is obliging towards her, and is considerate of all her needs. But, the moment the deed is registered, he becomes indifferent towards his aunt. His wife starts abusing and taunting her and the old lady is not given proper food and clothes. Thus, the aunt becomes a helpless victim of Jumman and his wife's ill-treatment.

□ Jumman's aunt is firm and persistent. She goes about from one villager to another requesting them to attend the panchayat. There are people who laugh at her and make fun of her appearance; some advise her to make it up with her nephew; a few feel genuine pity for her. Still the old woman does not give up.

□ Jumman's aunt has an unshakable faith in the panchayat's justice. According to her, the panch has no personal feelings; he knows neither friend nor enemy. She says, "Allah lives in the being of the panch, and his voice is the voice of God."

□ Samjhu Sahu □ Samjhu Sahu is a cart-driver, who lives in the same village as Alagu and Jumman. He carries on business between the village and the town, taking the village commodities to the town for sale and on his way back, bringing to the village such goods which have a ready market there.

□ Samjhu Sahu is a shrewd businessman with crooked ways. When he hears of Alagu's decision to sell his bullock, he thinks that if he buys the animal, he would be able to make multiple trips to the town daily, and thus increase his profits. He first takes a trial of the ox, and then buys it on credit, promising to pay the price in a month's time

□ Sahu is greedy to the core. In his greed to earn a large profit, he overworks the bullock. He uses the animal to make three trips to the town daily, sometimes even four. He is so cruel that he does not feed the ox properly. His carts are always overloaded. The starved animal

is soon reduced to a skeleton. When it fails to drag the overloaded cart, or if its speed slows down, Sahu hits it mercilessly. The poor animal cannot bear such severe treatment and it dies.

□ In the panchayat assembly, Sahu acts clever enough and proposes Jumman's name for the head-panch, for he knows about his hostility towards Alagu. He is quite confident that Jumman will pronounce the decision in his favour, for he has been waiting for an opportunity to avenge himself of Alagu.