

9. The Voice of God

Premchand

① Premchand (1880–1936) was the pen-name of Dhanpat Rai Srivastav who was a great writer of short stories and novels in Hindi. He was born in a village near Banaras (Varanasi). His father was a clerk in the village post office. His parents died when he was still a student and he had to struggle hard to support the family. After matriculation, he worked as a school teacher and then as a Deputy Inspector of Schools. Disregarding social taboos, he married Shivrani Devi, a child-widow. Greatly influenced by Mahatma Gandhi, he gave up his government job, started a printing press, edited the journals *Jaagaran* and *Huns* and wrote many articles about colonial rule, inequality and injustice. His book of short stories, *Soz-e-Watan*, was considered seditious and its copies were burnt.

② Premchand was the first great writer to introduce realism in his stories dealing with the problems of common people, feudalism, communalism and corruption. He presided over the first All-India Conference of Progressive Writers in 1936. Many of his famous stories have been made into films and television serials. Satyajit Ray filmed his stories 'Shatranj-Ke-Khiladi' and 'Sadgati' and in 1918, 'Sevasadan' was made into a film in which the renowned singer M S Subbulakshmi played the main role.

Premchand's stories were translated into English by Gurdial Mallik, a teacher working in Rabindranath Tagore's Shantiniketan. *Mansarovar* (a collection of his short stories), *Mazdoor*, *Godaan*, *Pratigya*, *Godhooli*, *Oka Oori Katha*, *Nirmala* and *Vardan* are some of his important works. In 'The Voice of God', Premchand shows how disputes in villages may be settled amicably and how the Panchayat can play a vital role in restoring peace and harmony.

Jumman Sheikh and Algu Chaudhari were fast friends. They were also partners in farming. They had an unshakeable faith in each other's love and loyalty. When Jumman was going on a pilgrimage, he entrusted his household to the care of Algu. And the latter, too, whenever he had an occasion to leave the village would place his family in the charge of his friend. But they differed from each other in their social customs and in their religious beliefs. Though they neither

ate nor worshipped together, still they shared in the same likes and this, indeed, is friendship's real foundation.

Their friendship began when they were still boys. Jumman's father, Jumarati, was a teacher. Algu had served him with all his heart and had scoured his pots and pans while the teacher sat and puffed away at his bubble-bubble. Algu's father belonged to the old school. He was one of those who believe that the primary duty of the pupil is the service of the teacher, rather than the study of certain tenets at his feet; he used to say that knowledge comes only by the blessings of the teacher.

Jumarati Sheikh himself, however, held a different opinion. He relied more on the rod than on his radiant love for driving home the truth to his students. And the fear of that rod was at the root of the high esteem in which he was held in the neighbouring village. So while Algu attended on his master, Jumman pored over his books.

Jumman had an aged aunt who had a little property. As she had none of her near relations living, Jumman, by making all sorts of promises, cleverly managed to get the property registered in his own name. During the negotiations he showed her great respect and also saw to every detail of her comfort. But no sooner was the deed executed than all his courtesy and considerateness to her ceased. Thenceforward Jumman's wife, Kariman, also began to season the food she gave his aunt with a daily phial of verbal vitriol. The old woman suffered this indignity in silence, for whenever she complained to Jumman, he would turn round and retort, 'You have not given me such a princely property—just a fraction of an acre – that you should expect anything better at our hands.'

At last, one day, growing tired of the constant ill-treatment at the hands of Jumman and his wife, the aunt said, 'Son, as we cannot get on well with one another at the same hearth, you may, instead, give me some money every month and I shall cook my own food separately.'

Jumman replied wrathfully, 'Does silver grow on trees?' The aunt became furious. She threatened to refer the matter to the Panchayat, the village council of elders.

Jumman chuckled at this, just as a hunter, seeing a deer making unwarily for his net, might laugh to himself, and said, 'Certainly, let the Panchayat decide, because I also do not like your complaining constantly.'

Jumman said this because he felt sure that the matter was bound to be decided in his favour. For, who was there in the whole locality who was not indebted to him for some favour or other?

For some days the aged aunt, with her back bent like a bow, hobbled up and down the village, supporting herself on a staff. There was not a single good man in the village before whom she did not weep out her tale of woe. Some sent her away with an ambiguous assurance of help, while others were shocked at the high-handedness of Jumman. A few advised her to be reconciled to her lot, for, they added, that as she was living within a stone's throw of the graveyard she had better spend the evening of her life in peace and prayer. Hardly one or two sympathized heartily with the old woman in her sorrow. At last she went to Algu Chaudhari and said to him, 'Son, please come to the Panchayat when my case comes up.'

Algu replied, 'There is no need for me to go there, for I am quite sure many others will attend.'

The old woman rejoined, 'I hope so, for I have told every one of my trouble. Well, it is now their look-out whether they come there or not.'

'I will come, but excuse me if I do not open my mouth.'

'Why, son?'

'You know very well that Jumman is my old friend. I don't want to break off with him.'

'For fear of displeasing will you refrain from speaking the truth?' Saying this she went back home.

All the wealth of conscience may be stolen without a man's ever knowing it. But let him hear a challenge to his sense of right and wrong and it is there again—vigilant and unconquerable! Algu had no reply to the old woman's words, but in his heart they kept resounding, 'For fear of displeasing him will you refrain from speaking the truth?'

At last the day for the Panchayat session came. Sheikh Jumman had a big carpet spread under a tree and had arranged for a good supply of betel-nuts, cardamoms and tobacco. The village people began to pour in. Whenever any one came, Jumman and Algu, who were sitting in a corner of the carpet, would rise and bow and welcome him. The sun had set. On the trees overhead the birds seemed to be holding their own council. The barbers were busy feeding the bubble-bubbles with small bits of live coal and tobacco. The children were scampering about. The village dogs, thinking that some group feast was afoot, gathered all round in full force.

When everything was in order, the old aunt rose respectfully and made her deposition:

'Members of the Panchayat, three years ago I transferred my property to my nephew, Jumman, on condition that he would guarantee me bed and board as long as I lived. But he has not been giving me sufficient food and clothing and now I cannot stand his ill-treatment any longer. I am a helpless widow. I can't sue him in a court of law. And so I have come to you for justice. If you find I am in the wrong, punish me unhesitatingly. If Jumman is guilty, persuade him to do the right thing. I assure you that I will accept your verdict unreservedly.'

Ramdhhan Misra, many of whose tenants had now settled down in Jumman's village and who therefore had a grudge against him, rose and said, 'Jumman, whom do you appoint as the head of the Panchayat?'

Jumman noted that especially those people were present who had some grudge or other against him. So he replied,

'The decree of the Panchayat is the decree of God. Let my aunt nominate any one and I shall have no objection.'

'O good man of God,' the aunt exclaimed, 'why don't you give the name?'

Jumman became very angry and retorted, 'Don't make me open my mouth at this time! You have had your way, you may nominate any one you like.'

The aunt understood the innuendo in his words. 'Fear God,' she said. 'The Panchayat is neither a friend nor a foe of any one, so you should not hesitate to nominate some one unless, of course, there is no one in whom you have any faith. But I am sure you trust Algu Chaudhari. Well, then I nominate him.'

Jumman felt happy inwardly but, hiding his true feelings, said, 'All right, let it be Algu Chaudhari. As far as I am concerned, Algu and Ramdhan Misra would be the same.'

But Algu did not wish to be dragged into the dispute. So he said to the aunt, 'You know already of my intimacy with Jumman.'

She replied solemnly, 'Yes, but, son, for the sake of friendship one should not sell the truth. In the heart of the Panchayat dwells God. Whatever comes from the lips of the Panchayat comes from God.'

So Algu Chaudhari was ultimately appointed as the head of the Panchayat. Ramdhan Misra and Jumman's other enemies inwardly cursed the old woman for this.

The hearing of the case commenced. Algu Chaudhari first addressed Jumman, 'Sheikh Jumman, you and I are old friends, who have stood by each other in the past. But now you and your aunt are equal in my eyes. Tell the Panchayat what you have to say.'

Jumman was cocksure that the die would be cast in his favour and that Algu's speech was meant to be a mere formality. He, therefore, deposed with an easy mind:

'Members of the Panchayat, three years ago my aunt trans-

ferred her property to me on condition that I would maintain her as long as she lived. God is my witness that, ever since, I have treated her as my mother and have not caused her the least trouble. There has been, however, for some time a tension between her and my wife. Now my aunt demands a separate monthly allowance for maintenance. Gentlemen, you are aware of the fact that her property yields no appreciable return. Furthermore, at the time of the execution of the deed no such stipulation was made. However, I leave everything to the wise verdict of the Panchayat.'

Algu Chaudhari was accustomed to working in courts of law, therefore, he knew the ways of litigation rather well and hence he began to cross-examine Jumman. This sounded on his heart like so many hammer-strokes. Ramdhan Misra was simply spell-bound at Algu's skilful cross-examination, while Jumman was wondering what had come over this friend and why he was questioning him in that strain. 'Even now,' he told himself, 'this very Algu was chatting with me. What has come over him so quickly that he is now bent on digging me up by the roots! What fault of mine can it be for which he is now trying to get even with me! We have been friends for a long time. Is such a long standing friendship of no worth whatever?'

Jumman was still engaged in solving the mystery when Algu Chaudhari pronounced the decision: 'Jumman Sheikh, the Panchayat has carefully considered the matter, referred to them, and they have come to the decision that your aunt should be granted an adequate monthly allowance for her maintenance, for they believe that her property is sufficiently substantial to warrant it. If you do not accept our award, then you may consider the deed cancelled.'

The Panchayat's verdict stunned Jumman. A friend had behaved like an inveterate enemy, had pierced his heart with a dagger, had failed him in his hour of need! 'Truly,' he told himself, 'such occasions as this prove what friends are true and what false. And this friendship of ours was false. No wonder our country is in the grip of such serious epidemics.'

-ferred her property to me on condition that
I would maintain her

as cholera and plague, for with such cheats and liars as this, how could things be otherwise?"

Ramdhan Misra and other members of the Panchayat, however, were openly praising the righteousness of Algu, 'This,' they said, 'is what a true Panchayat does; like a swan it separates water from milk, milk from water, truth from falsehood.' Of course, friendship has its place but it should always be subordinated to truth and justice. It is because of such truth-speakers as Algu Chaudhari that the world goes on, else long ago it would have sunk to the bottom of Hell!

This decision shook the roots of Algu's and Jumman's friendship. No more were they to be seen chatting together. One breath of truth had blown down their tree of friendship as it had been planted on the shifting sands. And whenever, if at all, they happened to pass each other on the road they met as sword meets shield. Jumman now harboured a secret desire to take revenge on Algu and so all the while he was devising ways and means towards that end.

Good deeds take a long time to be accomplished, while bad deeds are done overnight. So Jumman got an early opportunity to avenge himself on Algu.

Algu Chaudhari had a pair of strong, beautiful bullocks which he had purchased the previous year. They were the cynosure of the whole village. As luck would have it, a month after the Panchayat's decision one of the animals died. Jumman exploited the incident, saying Algu had been rightly served by God for his unjust award. Algu began to suspect that, perhaps, the death of the bullock was due to its having been poisoned by Jumman. Algu's wife also was of the same opinion. So one day she picked up a quarrel with Jumman's wife and an endless exchange of abuse and invective followed between their ladyships till, at last, Jumman dragged his lady from the battlefield and silenced her with strong language. Algu Chaudhari, on his part, silenced his queen with his highly argumentative bamboo club.

Centre
of
affection

The surviving bullock, singly, was useless for any service. Algu, therefore, tried to get another animal to complete the pair but failed. Eventually he decided to sell it.

Now in the village lived a cart-driver, Samjhū Sahu by name, who used to carry various commodities from the village to the market and back. He had set his heart on the bullock, for, he said to himself, that if his cart was drawn by that strong creature he could make two or three trips instead of one, and thus increase his daily income. He therefore, approached Algu and, after a great deal of higgling, at last a bargain was struck and Sahu promised to pay rupees one hundred and fifty to Algu within a month.

Sahu began to tax the poor bullock to the limit. What was worse, he did not feed it properly. What a contrast to its easy-life existence as the property of its former master! In those days only once in six months or so it was yoked in service and then it jumped, and ran for miles in pure joy. But now there was no such play, now there was an unending round of work – and well-nigh starvation! No wonder that a month of such treatment made its ribs stick out. Why, the very sight of the bullock-cart was enough to make its blood run cold.

One afternoon Sahu stowed in the cart double the usual load. The poor creature, already exhausted by three previous trips, could hardly lift its feet. Sahu whipped it hard to make it go. The bullock started and covered a short distance but again stopped. Its master whipped it again, this time harder than before. The poor thing fell down on the ground, alas! never to rise again. Sahu feared that, perhaps, the creature was dead. He, therefore, unyoked it. Then he began to wonder how he would be able to get the cart home. He raised a hue and cry for help, but no one was to be seen because the roads of a village are like the eyes of children – closed in sleep as soon as evening comes.

Sahu was in rage. That day he had earned about two hundred and fifty rupees from the sale of gur and ghee. This amount he was carrying in his belt. In the cart there were

several bags of salt. He could not, therefore, go home leaving the cart behind. He finally decided to sleep in the cart for the night. He had a few puffs. Thus he spent half the night in warding off sleep. Then he fell asleep. He tried to sleep lightly as he was afraid lest somebody might rob him of his money. Nevertheless, when he got up in the morning he found that the money was missing. Several tins of oil were also missing. He threw himself on the ground weeping and then made for home. On arrival he told his wife of his mishap, whereupon she burst out, 'What an ill-omened bullock that fellow Algu sold to us that it died so soon and we have lost our life's savings!'

Three months passed. One day Algu went to Sahu's place to demand his dues. No sooner did the cart-driver and his wife see him than they flew at him like mad dogs, 'You wretch, we have lost our life's savings and you have come to ask for money. Are you not ashamed of yourself for throwing dust in our eyes by selling a bad animal, an aged bullock, to us? Go and first wash your face in a ditch and then try to get the money. The best we can do is to make payment in kind and that, too, in part. You can take away our own bullock and you can yoke it for a month or two and then return it.'

Algu, at first, felt like returning home crest-fallen but he had not the heart to let go his one hundred and fifty rupees. So he, too, got angry. Sahu went inside the house to fetch a stick while his wife held the field. From arguments they advanced to blows. Then Sahu's wife went inside the house and closed the door and raised a cry. In a moment a crowd gathered in front of the house. At last some of the good-hearted villagers persuaded both Algu and Sahu to have their quarrel settled by the Panchayat.

Preparations for the holding of the Panchayat began. Both the parties to the dispute commenced canvassing the support of their friends. On the third day the Panchayat met. In the fields the crows were in council. They were discussing whether they had a right to the peas growing in the fields. It

appeared that until this matter was decided they were bent upon expressing their disapproval of the watchman's vigilance by cawing vociferously. The parrots on the trees were debating whether men had any right to call them faithless when, amongst men, too, one's own friends do not refrain at times from deceiving one another.

Ramdhan Misra asked Algu Chaudhari whom he would like to nominate as the President of the Panchayat. Algu replied meekly, 'Let Sahu do it.' Sahu rose and said in a harsh voice, 'I appoint Sheikh Jumman.'

Hearing the name of Jumman, Algu's heart began to beat fast and he felt as if somebody had slapped him in the face. Ramdhan observed this and asked, 'Algu, have you any objection?' Algu replied despairingly, 'No, why should I object?'

Verily, the sense of responsibility often works a great change in a person. Behold the editor in his sanctum - with what recklessness he launches his fiery denunciations of our Ministries! But the day comes when he, too, takes his seat in the Cabinet and then how prudent, how full of sound judgment and good sense and understanding his writings are! This is the sense of responsibility. Or take the hot-headed young man of yesterday over whom his parents were grieving, for a little while the weight of responsibility for a family lies on his shoulders and how patient and moderate becomes our lawless youth!

Sheikh Jumman in like manner began to feel a sense of responsibility, for now he was sitting in the seat of justice, and he knew that whatever he would speak from there would be accepted by the people as the very voice of God. He should, therefore, not allow his own personal feelings to sway him one way or another.

Algu and Sahu made their respective statements fully and forcefully. The members of Panchayat, after hearing them, were all agreed on at least one thing, namely, that Algu must get the price for his bullock. Two of them, however, were in favour of reduction in the price because Sahu had lost

his means of livelihood. But at the same time they wanted to punish him and make an example of him so that others might be deterred from treating their animals cruelly.

At last Jumman announced his verdict. 'Algu Chaudhari and Sahu, we have considered your dispute carefully. Our decision is that Samjhу Sahu should pay the price in full because, when the transaction was made, the animal was not suffering from any disease. The creature died of starvation and hard work.'

Ramdhан, interposing, said, 'Samjhу Sahu deliberately killed the creature and he must be punished severely.'

Jumman replied, 'That is a different question.'

Sahu thereupon pleaded for a reduction in the price.

Jumman answered, 'That is left to the goodwill of Algu Chaudhari.'

Algu was beside himself with joy. He rose and shouted, 'Hurrah! Victory to the Panchayat!' and the whole audience echoed that cry.

'This is justice,' the people were heard saying, 'verily, in the Panchayat dwells the Divine.'

Shortly afterwards, Jumman went up to Algu and, embracing him, said, 'At long last I have realized today that the Panchayat is the voice of God.'

Algu began to weep. His tears watered the dry and dying creeper of their love and gave it another lease of life.

Glossary

scour	: to clean by rubbing with a brush
tenets	: beliefs, principles
rely on	: to depend on
esteem	: respect, admiration
pore over	: to study something carefully
negotiate	: to arrange by discussion
considerateness	: considering the needs and difficulties of others

phial	: a small bottle or container
vitriol	: referring to anger, rage
indignity	: humiliation or shame
retort	: to reply in an angry manner, to snap at
hearth	: fireplace
chuckle	: a quiet or inward laugh
indebted	: to be grateful or obliged to be in somebody's debt
hobble	: to walk with difficulty
ambiguous	: of doubtful meaning
high-handedness	: using power without proper consideration
reconciled to	: resigned to, prepared to accept
refrain	: to avoid doing, to cease
vigilant	: watchful
resounding	: echoing, ringing
hubble-bubble	: a hookah (tobacco pipe for smoking)
afoot	: taking place, going on, under way
grudge	: (n) complaint, a feeling of bitterness
decree	: decision of the Panchayat
innuendo	: indirect reference, usually something unfavourable
dispute	: argument, quarrel
cocksure	: offensively sure or confident
formality	: required by custom or rule
depose	: to give evidence before the elders of the Panchayat
stipulation	: a necessary condition
litigation	: court case, legal action
cross-examination	: questioning closely to test the answers already given
pronounce	: to utter
to warrant	: to justify
inveterate	: deep-rooted, long-established
harbour	: (here) to hold in the mind
cynosure	: the centre of attention or admiration
higgling	: negotiating or quibbling