**PANCH-PARMESHWAR  
  
Jumman Shiakh and Algu Chowdhry were very close friends. They were partners in cultivation. Some of their dealings were also done jointly. They trusted each other without reservation.  When Jumman had gone on hajj he had left his house under Algu’s care. And whenever Algu went out he left his house to Jumman to look after. They neither inter-dined, nor were they of the same religion. But there was between them  a certain concurrence of views.  And that indeed is the basis of true friendship.**

**Their friendship began when they were boys, and Jumman’s worshipful father, Jumeraati, was their tutor. Algu had served his guru with great dedication, scrubbing many plates, washing many cups. He never let the guru’s hookah remain idle even for  a moment, because he got half an hour’s respite from books every time he went on to light the chillum. Algu’s father was old-fashioned in his views. He believed that serving the guru was more important than toiling to acquire knowledge. He would say that one acquired knowledge, not by reading books but through  the guru’s blessings and kindliness. Therefore, if Jumeraati Shaikh’s blessings or close contact with him did not yield results, Algu should then rest content with the thought that he had tried his best but he did not succeed because he was not destined to acquire knowledge.**

**However, Jumeraati Shaikh himself did not subscribe to this view. He had greater faith in his rod. And because of that rod Jumman was greatly admired in the villages around here. Not even the court clerk could raise any objection to the documents prepared by Jumman. The postman, the constable and the tehsil peon  – all relied on his generosity. As a result, while Algu was respected for his money, Jumman Shaikh was esteemed for his invaluable knowledge.**

**2**

**Jumman Shaikh had an old aunt who had some property. She had no other near relation than Jumman. He had coaxed her into transferring this property in his name by making tall promises. Until the transfer deed had been registered, the aunt was pampered and indulged. She was treated to many tasty dishes. It was raining halwas and pulaos; but this hospitality came to a stamping halt as soon as the transfer deed was stamped.  Jumman’s wife, Kariman, began to dish out, along with rotis, hot and bitter curries of words. Jumman Shikh too became cold. Now the poor aunt had to swallow bitter words every day: Who knows how long would this old woman live! She thinks she has bought us by just transferring a few bighas of barren land. Rotis don’t go down her throat if her dal is not fried in ghee! We would have bought a whole village with the amount of money she has already swallowed!**

**Khaala listened to all this for a few days, and when she could stand it no longer she complained to Jumman. Jumman didn’t think it right to interfere in what was the domain of the mistress of the house. And this unpleasant state of affairs dragged on for some more time. At last the aunt said to Jumman, ‘Son, I can’t carry on like this. You pay me a sum regularly. I shall set up my own kitchen.’**

**Jumman retorted rudely, ‘Do you think we grow money here?’**

**Khaala asked politely, ‘Do I or do I not need a bare minimum?’**

**Jumman replied sternly, ‘We had never thought you had conquered death.’**

**Khaala was offended. She threatened to call the panchayat. Jumman laughed heartily like the hunter who laughs to himself as he watches the deer walking into his trap. He said, ‘Why not? Call the panchayat by all means. Let things be decided once for all. I don’t like these everyday quarrels.’**

**Jumman had no doubt at all who would win at the panchayat. There was no one in the villages around who did not owe him a debt of gratitude; no one who would dare to antagonize him. Angels won’t won't descend from heavens to hold the panchayat.**

**3**

**After this, for many days, leaning on her stick, the old woman moved from village to village. Her back was bent like a bow.  Each step was painful. But the issue had to be settled.**

**There was hardly a soul to whom she did not narrate her tale of woe. A few dismissed her story with just lip sympathy. Some decried the world in general. ‘One may have one’s foot in the grave, yet there is no end to greed! What does a person need? Eat your bread and remember Rama. Why bother about land and tilling now?’ There were some who got an opportunity to poke fun at her. Bent back, toothless mouth, matted hair – so much to laugh at! Just, kind and compassionate people who would listen to this unfortunate woman’s sad story and console her were few indeed. Finally, she came to Algu Chowdhry’s door. She threw down her stick and sat down to rest. Then she said, ‘Son, you should also come to the panchayat meeting.’**

**Algu said, ‘Why call me? There will be many people from the villages around.’**

**The old woman said, ‘I have cried my heart out to all. But now it’s up to them to come.’**

**Algu said, ‘I shall come, but I won’t open my mouth.’**

**‘Why, son?’**

**‘What to say? My will. Jumman is my old friend. I can’t go against him.’**

**‘Son, won’t you stand up for iman for fear of losing your friendship?’**

**Algu had no answer to this question, but these words were echoing in his mind: Won’t you stand up for iman for fear of losing your friendship?’**

**4**

**One evening the panchayat gathered under a tree. Shaikh Jumman had spread his sheet even before. He had made provision for *paan, ilaichi,*hookah and tobacco. Although he himself was sitting with Algu Chowdhry at some distance. He greeted with a discrete salaam everyone who came to attend the panchayat meeting. Soon after sunset, when the flocks of chattering birds had settled in the tree, the meeting began. Every inch of the ground was occupied, but most of those who had come were onlookers. Of those the old woman had invited only they who had a score to settle with Jumman had come. A fire was smouldering in one corner. There the barber was filling up chillum after chillum non-stop. It was impossible to decide whether the smoke rising from the burning cowdung cakes was thicker or that from the puffs exhaled by the hookah smokers. Boys were running all around, shouting, crying. It was a noisy scene. The village dogs too had descended upon the scene in large numbers, hoping there would be a big feast here.**

**The  five members of the panchayat sat down and the old woman began her submission.**

**‘Pansho! It’s three years now, since I transferred all my property in the name of my nephew Jumman. You know all this. Jumman had promised to feed and clothe me till my death. But I neither get enough to eat nor to wear. I have put up with it for a year. I can stand it no longer. I’m a helpless widow. I can’t go to court. Where else should I come with my miserable tale except to you? I shall accept whatever you decide. If I’m at fault slap me. If Jumman is wrong, admonish him. Why does he want to earn the curses of a helpless woman? The word of the panch is the word of Allah. I shall obey your order without questioning it.’**

**Ramdhan Mishra, many of whose clients had been won over by Jumman, said, ‘Jumman *mian*, choose your panchayat. Decide just now. Afterwards you will have to accept its judgement.’**

**Jumman saw that most of those present here were hostile to him for one reason or another. He said, ‘The word of the panchayat is the word of Allah. Let khaala choose whomsoever she wants. I have no objection.’**

**The old woman shouted. ‘O man of Allah, why don’t you name the members? I should also know something.’**

**Jumman retorted angrily, ‘Don’t force me to open my mouth. You have complained. Choose whomsoever you like.’**

**The aunt understood Jumman’s taunt. She said, ‘Son, fear Allah. What’re you insinuating. Members of panchayatdon’t take sides. And if you can’t trust anyone, let it go. Hope you trust Algu Chowdhry. Come on, I choose him as the sarpanch.’**

**Jumman was delighted, but hiding his feelings he said, ‘Let it be Algu. For me Ramdhan Misr and Algu are the same.’**

**Algu didn’t want to get involved in this. He said, ‘Khaala, you know that Jumman is my close friend.’**

**Khala said, ‘Son, no one barters his *imaan* for friendship. Khuda resides in the heart of a *panch*. Whatever the *panch* says is the word of Khuda.’**

**Algu Chowdhry was designated the sarpanch. Ramdhan Mishra  and some others, hostile to Jumman, cursed the old woman in their hearts.**

**Algu Chowdry said, ‘Shaikh Jumman, you and I are old friends.  We have helped each other on many occasions. But at this moment we are not friends. You and khaala are equal in my eyes. You can put forward your case before the Panchayat.’**

**Jumman was sure that he would win the case. Algu was saying all this for a public show. Therefore he spoke in a very composed manner. ‘O members of the Panchayat, three years ago khaala jaan had transferred her property in my name. I had agreed to provide her with food and clothing till her death. Allah is witness, I have never ill-treated her. I regard her as my mother and it is my duty to serve her. My wife and she don’t always see eye to eye. What can I do in this? Khaala jaan is demanding a monthly allowance from me separately. All of you know the value of the property. It is not so profitable that I can provide a monthly allowance to her out of it. Moreover there is no mention of a monthly expense in the agreement. That’s all I have to say. It is now for the members of the panchayat to give their judgement.’**

**Algu Chowdhry needed to go to the court regularly for some or other of his business. This had made him a completely legal minded person. He began to cross examine Jumman.  Every word he said was like a hammer stroke on Jumman’s chest. Ramdhan Mishra was enjoying it all. Jumman was taken aback at Algu’s conduct. Only just now he was talking to him like a friend, and now he seemed so changed and bent upon rooting him up. Was he trying to settle some old score? Will his long friendship be of no help?**

**While Jumman Shaikh was lost in this mental tussle, Algu announced the judgement.**

**‘Shaikh Jumman, the Panchayat has considered this matter. To us it looks fair and just that khaala jaan be given a monthly allowance.  We are of the view that the property is valuable enough to provide khaala jaan a monthly allowance. This is our decision. And if this is not acceptable to you, then the agreement for transfer of property would stand annulled.’  
  
5**

**Jumman was stunned to hear this decision. Your own friend behaving like an enemy, stabbing you on the neck! What else would you call it except the vagaries of time? The very person on whom you had all the faith betrayed you when you needed him most.  Such are the times when friendship is tested. So that is what friendship is in the *Kalyug*. It is such crooked and deceitful people who have brought so many calamities upon the country. The epidemics like cholera and plague were the punishment for such misdeeds.**

**On the other hand, Ramdhan Mishra and other members of the Panchayat were heartily praising Algu Chowdhry’s sense of justice. They said, ‘This is what a Panchayat is. He has separated the grain from the chaff. Friendship has its own place but to follow the *dharma* is the most important thing. The earth has stayed where it is because of such truthful people or it would have sunk underwater by now.’**

**This judgement shook the very foundation of Algu and Jumman’s friendship. The old intimacy was gone. Such an old tree of friendship could not stand just one blast of truth. Surely it had stood on sandy ground.**

**Now their relationship turned very formal, and limited to mere courtesies. They met but just as a sword meets a shield.**

**Algu’s treachery troubled Jumman day and night. He was always looking for an opportunity to take revenge.**

**5**

**The fruit of a good deed done takes a long time to mature, but not so of a bad deed. The opportunity to take revenge came to Jumman very soon. A year ago Algu Chowdhry had purchased a fine pair of oxen from Batesar. The oxen were of the *Pachchain* breed, handsome and having long horns. For months people from the neighbouring villages came to cast their admiring glances at the pair. It was just a chance that one of the oxen died just a month after Jumman’s panchayat. Jumman said to his friends, ‘This is punishment for his treachery. One may rest content but God keeps watch on our good and bad deeds.’ Algu on the other hand began to suspect that Jumman had poisoned the ox. His wife too threw the blame on Jumman. She said Jumman had done some mischief. And one day a war of words broke out between Algu’s wife and Kariman. Words flowed in great streams from both sides. All the similes and metaphors, sarcasms and hyperboles were exhausted. Jumman somehow pacified them. He rebuked his wife into silence and made her quit the battlefield. On the other side Algu used the stick to silence his wife.**

**Now a single ox was of no use. Algu tried to find a matching one but without success. At last he decided to sell him off. There was a trader named Samjhu Sahuji who drove a single-ox cart. He carried gur and ghee from the village to the market and returned with oil and salt, which he sold in the village. He thought of buying this ox. If he had this ox, he would be able to make three trips easily. These days it was difficult to make even one. He looked at the ox, yoked him to his cart for a trial, got the hair on his body examined to know whether he was a propitious animal to buy, bargained the price and finally bought him. He promised to pay the price within one month. Algu Chowdhry agreed, unmindful of any loss.**

**As soon as Samjhu Sahuji had the ox he began to drive him hard. He made three to four trips every day, without caring to feed and water the animal properly. All he cared was to drive him. When he took him to the market he fed him with some dry fodder. And before he could breathe easy he was yoked again. At Algu Chowdhry’s home the ox had a very easy existence. He was yoked to a chariot-like cart once in a while and then he would go racing for miles without care. At Algu’s house his daily diet consisted of clean water, ground *arhar*dal, fodder mixed with oil cake; and not only this, on occasions he had the pleasure of tasting ghee too. From morning till evening an attendant looked after him, brushed his hair, cleaned and patted his body. That life of peace and enjoyment, and this twenty-four hour grind! He became emaciated just in one month. The moment he saw the yoke his mouth dried up. Moving even a step became difficult. Bones became visible. But he was self-respecting. He didn’t like to be punished.**

**One day while on his fourth trip, Samjhu Sahuji put a double load on him. Exhausted after the day’s work the ox was unable to lift his feet. But Sahuji kept on whipping him. He ran with all his strength, and after a short distance slowed down to catch his breath. But Sahuji, in a hurry to reach home, kept on lashing at him with his whip. He once again tried to pick up pace but his strength failed. He collapsed and did not rise again. Sahuji whipped him mercilessly, pulled his legs, pushed a stick into his nostrils, but how would a dead animal rise on his feet? When Sahuji suspected the worst he cast an intent look at the ox, then unyoked him, wondering how to drive the cart home. He shouted but the country pathways, like the eyes of children, close at sunset. He could not find any help. There was no village close by. In anger he delivered a few more lashes to the dead animal, and cursed him, ‘You wretch, if you had to die you should have done it after reaching home. You are dead midway. Now who will pull the cart?' Sahuji was burning with anger. He had sold many sacks of gur and many tins of ghee. So he was carrying two hundred fifty rupees tucked at his waist. In addition there were a few sacks of salt and tins of oil on the cart. He just couldn’t go away leaving them here. Helpless, he lay down on the cart. He decided to spend the night keeping awake. He smoked a chillum, sang a song, smoked again and in this way he tried to keep awake till midnight.  He thought he had kept awake throughout, but when he opened his eyes at the break of day and touched his waist he found the pouch containing the money missing. A few tins of oil were also missing. In anguish the poor man beat his head and fell flat on the ground. He reached home wailing and weeping. When Sahuji’s wife heard the story, first she cried and then started cursing Algu Chowdhry for having sold them an unpropitious ox that had caused the loss of their life-long earning.**

**Many months passed. Whenever Algu went to their house to ask for the price of the ox both husband and wife would fall upon him like dogs and start abusing him. ‘Look. We have lost our life’s earnings. And you are asking for the price of the ox. You had given us a near dead ox and now you want its price. You have deceived us. You hoodwinked us to buy a ruinous animal. Do you think we are fools? We are a family of banias. We can’t be cheated. First go and wash your face in a ditch and then ask for the price of the ox. If you don’t accept this, take our ox and use it for two months. What else do you want?’**

**Chowdhry had plenty of ill-wishers. On this occasion they came together to support Sahuji. So every time Algu had to return home shamefaced after catching an earful of abuse. But it was not easy for Algu to give up his claim of one hundred fifty rupees. He lost his cool one day. Sahuji went home to look for a lathi. Now his wife entered the field to confront Algu. War of words led to a hand to hand tussle. Sahuji’s wife ran home and shut the doors. The villagers gathered there on hearing the hullabaloo. They tried to pacify both the parties. But this didn’t work. They suggested that a panchayat be called to settle the issue. Sahuji agreed.  Algu agreed too.**

**7**

**Preparations for the Panchayat began. Both the parties began to look for their supporters. On the third day the Panchayat assembled under the same tree. The same evening time. The crows were holding their own Panchayat in the fields. They were debating whether or not they had any rights over the pea pods; and until this question was settled they were to continue protesting against the watchman. A flock of parrots sitting in the tree was discussing whether human beings had any right to call them crooked when they themselves had no qualms about deceiving their own friends.**

**The panchayat began its meeting. Ramdhan Mishra said, ‘Why waste time? Let us elect the five members. Come Chowdhry, whom do you elect?’**

**Algu said in a humble voice, ‘Let Samjhu Sahu choose.’**

**Samjhu stood up and said sharply, ‘I choose Jumman Shaikh.’**

**The moment Algu heard Jumman’s name his heart began to beat fast, as if some had slapped him. Ramdhan was Algu’s friend. He could sense the problem. He said, ‘Come, Chowdhry, do you have any objection?’**

**Chowdhry said in a thin voice, ‘No, why should I object?’**

**The awareness of a responsibility often alters our narrow outlook. When we lose our way this awareness becomes our guide.**

**A newspaper editor, ensconced in his comfortable seat, attacks a council of ministers recklessly and brazenly with his aggressive writing. But there are times when he himself joins the ministry, and then his writing becomes so penetrating, so thoughtful and so just. This is the result of the responsibility that falls upon him.**

**A young man’s wild behavior always keeps his parents worried. They fear that he would bring a bad name to the family. But the moment the burden of a family falls upon him, the undisciplined and wayward young man becomes a persevering and sober person, all because of the responsibility thrust upon him.**

**Jumman Shaikh also became conscious of such a responsibility, the moment he was given the high office of the sarpanch. He thought: ‘At this moment I  am sitting on the highest throne of justice and righteousness. Whatever I utter now would be like the word of God, and any bias in my mind must not contaminate that voice. I must not deviate even a bit from truth.’**

**The panchayat began to interrogate both the parties. Both the parties pleaded their cases. There was a difference of opinion among the members of the panchayat All were agreed that Samjhu Sahu must pay the price of the ox. But two members were of the view that he should be given some relief for the loss of the ox. Against this, two members wanted Samjhu to be punished further, in addition to the appropriate payment, so that no one in future would dare to behave with such barbarity towards an animal. In the end Jumman announced the judgement.**

**‘Algu Chowhdry and Samjhu Sahu, the Panchayat has carefully deliberated on your dispute. It is proper that Samjhu should pay the price of the ox. The ox was not suffering from any disease when he bought it. If the price had been paid then, Samjhu would not have been able to raise this question. The ox died because he was forced to work too hard and was not properly fed.’**

**Ramdhan said, ‘Samjhu is responsible for killing the ox and he should be punished for this.’**

**Jumman said, ‘That is another issue. We have nothing to do with it.’**

**Jhagdu Sahu said, ‘Samjhu Sahu should be given some relief.’**

**Jumman said, ‘This is up to Algu Chowdhry. If he agrees, it will be an act of goodness.’**

**Algu Chowdhry was overjoyed. He stood up and shouted, ‘Victory to p*anchprrmeshwa*r!’**

**This was echoed from all sides, ‘Victory to*panchprrmeshwar*.’**

**Everyone admired Jumman’s judgement. ‘This is justice. This is not the work of man. God himself resides in the *panchprameshwar.* It is His doing. Who can prove the wrong as right before the panchayat!’**

**At the end Jumman came to Algu and, embracing him, said, ‘Ever since you had given the judgement against me I had become your sworn enemy. But today I have realized that while sitting on that seat of justice you are no one’s friend or foe. You cannot think of anything except justice. Today I am convinced that God himself speaks through the voice of the panchayat.’**

**Algu began to cry. His tears washed off the bitterness that had rankled in their hearts. The withered plant of friendship had become green again.**

**(Urdu, *Zamaana*, May-June 1916)**