

Discussion Questions for *One Story: Dharma's Chariot*

Here are some questions that can help you explore the various themes and issues in the story on your own or in a group discussion!

1. How old is Palaniappan at the time of the story when he sells the cloth to Jamal?
2. Palaniappan had to make the decision on whether to sell the defective cloth at the expense of the friendship and trust between him and Jamal. Have you ever had to make a decision as difficult as Palaniappan, where friendship and loyalty was tested?
3. What does the story reveal about differences between Palaniappan and Sivasu in terms of their character and personality? How would you describe their relationship?
4. Before the 1990s, Palaniappan's prosperity came through working as commission agents for Japanese sellers who had brought their business to Singapore. What do you imagine Singapore was like when Palaniappan's business was thriving? When Sivasu laments "Ah – those times are gone," are we able to empathise with him?
5. How does the story weave a sense of place into the narrative? What are the details that you found interesting? Are you familiar with any of the streets and places mentioned?
6. Only Palaniappan's wife Hemalatha attended their son's Ramkumar wedding. What does this reveal about Palaniappan's relationship with his son?
7. Why does Palaniappan hold on to a computer he is unlikely to use?
8. Dialogue in the story is spare and interspersed with long silences between Palaniappan and Sivasu. What is the impact of what is left unsaid?
9. Palaniappan did not spend the money from selling the cloth. It was found by his son Ramkumar in a drawer after he died, left untouched for 10 years. What do you think of the ending? Why do you think it was told from the viewpoint of the Ramkumar?
10. How do you think Palaniappan paid the rent in the end?
11. The story never tells us if Palaniappan and Jamal's friendship was eventually affected by the sale of the defective cloth. How do you imagine this played out?
12. What are some other questions left unanswered or ambiguous areas in the story?
13. The Mahabhrata tells the story of the great King Yudhisthira who never once told a lie, the epitome of righteousness. The Mahabhrata says because of his honesty, his chariot never touched the ground – even in the battlefield. However, during the final battle, he was obliged to lie to save his kin. This caused his chariot to crash down to earth. How did the story parallel the epic tale in the Mahabhrata?