

# Murder in Amaravati

Sharath Komarraju

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# One

IF AMARAVATI HAD had a clock tower, its bell would have chimed four times.

The village was bathed in darkness and the moon was nowhere to be seen. The soft, constant gurgling of River Krishna was the only sound that could be heard. It was a sound Amaravati lived with; one it couldn't live without.

Even at the noisiest times, like the night before when the village gathered at the Mahalakshmi Banyan Tree for Dusshera celebrations, Amaravati could still hear the Krishna. Amidst the din of human conversations, chanting of verses, coconuts smashed on the temple slab, bursting firecrackers; was the sound of the Krishna, flowing at her own unfettered pace, hugging the village and wrapping herself around it like a young mother cradling her firstborn.

And on quiet days, when Amaravati went about its business – when farmers thwacked their oxen; when blacksmiths struck their hammer against the glowing red of molten iron; when housewives sang to themselves while cleaning their front porches; when the headman's maid splashed water on the front yard and traced a white rangoli pattern with expert waves of her hand; and when the village was filled with the sound of people at work and children at play, they were always accompanied by the almost inaudible murmur that came from the riverbank.

Being born in Amaravati, the villagers knew, was being born to the Krishna: They belonged to the Krishna, and the Krishna belonged to them. And now, as they slept without a care in the world, she watched over them with that incessant, loving gurgle.

Garimella Ganapathi Muni Krishna Shastri, known in the village merely as Shastri-gaaru, opened his eyes, blinked twice, and immediately shut them again. Groping around his nawar cot, he pushed himself into a sitting position, and then groaning with the effort, he turned around and stood up. With his eyes still shut, he walked around the sleeping form of his wife on the mat next to his cot and made his way, in five precise steps, to the square shaped niche in the wall. He felt around with his left hand and mumbled in irritation, ‘Where is the matchbox?’

He tried the other side of the niche and found it. He struck a match and opened his eyes at the same time, looking at the picture of Lord Shiva and his consort Parvati that rested against the rear wall. He lit the lamp in front of the picture and put out the match with a wave of his hand. Krishna Shastri reverently joined his palms together in front of his chest, shut his eyes and began his daily prayers in a low, clear voice.

*Brahma Murari Surarchita Lingam,  
Nirmala Bhashita Shobhita Lingam,  
Janmaja Dukha Vinaashaka Lingam,  
Tat Pranamaami Sadaa Shiva Lingam.*

After he had recited the first shloka, he opened his eyes, kept muttering prayers one after the other, lit a couple of incense sticks and set them in their stand, to the left of the divine couple. Next, he dipped a fresh basil leaf into the little glass of holy water and ran it in a circle around his head, sprinkling drops of the water on himself. Pouring some of the water on his left hand, he smeared it on the sacred thread that ran over and around his torso.

*Kailaasarana Shiva Chandramouli...*

His mind began to wander, as it usually did once the important parts of the daily worship were done with. He wondered whether it was worth throwing open the gates of the temple this early in the morning. The whole village had been present at the Dusshera celebrations the night before, and it was not until one in the morning that everyone had returned to their houses. It was unlikely anyone would return to the temple this early.

*Phaneendra Maata Mukutee Zalaale...*

Seetaraamaiah had suggested the same last night, ‘Take some rest tomorrow morning, Shastri-gaaru. You can open the temple a little later than usual. Sleep for an extra hour or so’.

Shastri had agreed, partly because people generally listened when Seetaraamaiah said something, and partly because he himself felt that he could use the extra rest. But now that he was up and was feeling relatively fresh halfway through his daily early morning routine, he wondered if it might not be a good idea to open the temple at its usual time. After all, he was not going to get any rest now so he might as well spend the time in the company of the Mother Kali. If he was too tired he could always have a longer siesta than usual in the afternoon.

As he became aware that he was nearing the end of his prayers he involuntarily grimaced. He had arrived at the most difficult part of his routine. Once again, he considered returning to bed – just for this one day. But he stopped himself even as the thought crossed his mind. He knew that the goddess Kali was watching everything: She would have seen that he had initially wanted to be with her, and would also know that he was thinking of giving up on her just because he was too lazy to draw a few buckets of water from the well.

*Kaarunya Sindhu Bhava Dukha Haaree...*

Tapping his cheeks with his palms repeatedly as a gesture of apology to the divine, he stepped into his new Bata slippers and walked out of the house. The chill of the early morning air made him shiver. With a quick, forlorn look back at his house and the warmth inside it he walked on towards the well, feeling a tinge of envy for his wife Annapurna and all the rest of the villagers who did not have to take an ice-cold bath at four-thirty in the morning.

He held the rope in his small, stout hands and lowered it into the well, his eyes gradually adjusting to the darkness. He could dimly make out the dusty road that ran along his house, the gates, the grey outline of the houses and the trees.

*Thujaveena Shambho Maja Kona Taaree*

When the pail hit the surface of the water, he turned his wrists, buckled his knees and groaned. The groan was more in anticipation of the effort rather than the result of it. His considerable midriff cooperated only reluctantly as he exerted

his stubby arms one by one, gripping the rope and pulling at it in turn, bringing up the pail bit by bit. By the time it came up half the water in it had spilled out.

He cursed himself for not employing a servant to do this job for him. But would god ever forgive him if he bathed in waters that were touched by a servant? No, he thought again – as his groans of effort became more fervent – he had to do this himself. God willed it so.

Panting, he emptied the bucket of water over his head. When the water touched his skin, he shivered and let out a low howl. He quickly drew another bucket, and panting even harder, emptied it again over his head, howling again and trembling feverishly.

As he walked back, his wet slippers squeaking under his feet, Krishna Shastri felt considerably heavier than he did before his bath. None of the activities he took up at the temple during the day drained him out as much as drawing water from the well early in the morning for his bath did.

In the candlelight he peered into the mirror and traced three parallel grey lines of vibhuti across his forehead. His breathing had still not returned to normal. If science was so advanced, he thought bitterly, why couldn't they invent some kind of machine that could pump water up without men having to use their bare hands?

And immediately, he slapped himself on the cheeks and again mumbled an apology, admonishing himself for the sin of even that thought occurring to him.

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## Two

KRISHNA SHASTRI WALKED along the path leading up to the clearing, where the Mahalakshmi Banyan Tree (referred to by the villagers as ‘The Tree’) stood imposingly. If it was true that every village had its most prized possessions, things that people of the village identified themselves with, that commanded a prominent place in their hearts; if it was true that every village had a history and landmarks that acted as reminders of that history, so it was with Amaravati and the Tree.

No one could as much as guess how old it was. People remembered their grandparents talk of their grandparents who played as kids around the Tree. Stories concerning the village always made at least a cursory mention of the Tree, and even the oldest of those tales described it as it stood now – huge, wide, sturdy and green. Fresh aerial roots reached down to the ground even today from its over-grown branches.

As far as the people of Amaravati were concerned, the Tree was as old as the Krishna. So it was no wonder that a few years ago when Seetaraamaiah had announced his intentions of erecting a temple in the village, the choice of location was almost unanimous. Though someone did suggest building the new temple on Krishna’s bank, Seetaraamaiah decided it would be more accessible if it was built under the Tree’s shade, in the middle of the village.

And Krishna Shastri, who up until then had made a living by performing pujas and vratas on an ad hoc basis, found himself with a full-time job as priest at the temple. On the day the temple was opened, Seetaraamaiah handed over to him the keys to the sanctum sanctorum which housed the idol of the goddess



Kali, and he had said, 'Shastri-gaaru, from this day forth, please consider this your temple'.

From that day onwards, Krishna Shastri had made it a habit to open the temple at five'o clock every morning, the Brahma Muhurtam. Even on days no one came to pay their respects to the Mother, the temple stayed open. For him it was a culmination of all the pious deeds he must have done in his previous lives. Why else, how else, would the Mother entrust him of all people with the responsibility – the responsibility he immensely enjoyed bearing – of safeguarding Her?

It was a duty that was God-given, he thought, turning the bend around Sudhakar Rao's freshly painted brick house. The sky had turned a very dull grey. This was the part of his day Krishna Shastri enjoyed the most. It was no wonder the time was called the Brahma Muhurtam: a time when every aspect of creation took on an almost divine beauty; minds of men, it was said, became pure. The eyes of the Lord, it was said, were at their most vigilant.

A rhythmic prayer broke upon his lips, like it usually did when he found himself in a good mood. Yes, it was a God-given duty, he told himself again, a duty that cannot – should not – be given up. Even if he had to go to bed at two in the morning, it was Ma Kali's bidding that he should come back to her at five, like he did everyday. Seetaraamaiah was just being concerned for his health. What did he know of the strength of the holy bond between him and the Mother?

As he neared the end of his walk, Krishna Shastri started breathing heavily. He passed Sanga's little shanty, and Narendra Reddy's general store on the corner. Krishna Shastri had found Sanga sleeping on the temple's premises a few times before. If he found that uncouth wretch there today he would make it a point to raise it with Seetaraamaiah tomorrow. He had told Sanga repeatedly that he was not to come to the temple when he was not present, but these – these dalits!

He walked along the curved path leading up to the central clearing where the temple stood, and halfway down the path, he was aware of a figure walking towards him, away from the general direction of the temple. He could not see clearly who it was, but the gait was authoritative – familiarly so.

‘Sh – Sh – Shastri-gaaru?’

Krishna Shastri recognised the voice immediately. ‘Seetaraamaiah,’ he said. Being a priest meant you could address anyone, even the village sarpanch, in an authoritative tone.

Seetaraamaiah stopped a distance away from Krishna Shastri and said, ‘Ha, yes, it is you. I thought we were not going to open the temple this early today.’

‘Yes, but I couldn’t sleep. What are you doing here this early in the morning?’

‘Ah, I could not sleep either,’ offered Seetaraamaiah. ‘I thought an early morning stroll would do me good.’

Shastri nodded and closed the distance between them, narrowing his eyes so that he could see the other’s face, which was only vaguely visible. The sarpanch was dressed in his usual white shirt and dhoti and even at fifty displayed an erect and commanding posture.

‘Would you like to come with me to the temple?’ Shastri asked. ‘I am going to make a small offering. You can have the prashaad.’

‘No,’ Seetaraamaiah said. ‘I cannot go near the temple at this time. I haven’t even brushed my teeth. Maybe in the evening.’

‘Tell me something, Seetaraamaiah,’ Krishna Shastri said. ‘Did you see Sanga sleeping on the temple steps when you passed the temple just now?’

‘I didn’t go anywhere near the temple, Shastri-gaaru. So I can’t say for sure. Why? Has he been giving you any trouble?’

‘Oh, not trouble as such, but I have found him sleeping in the temple now and then. I’ve been meaning to tell you about it for a while now.’

‘Hmm,’ Seetaraamaiah said. ‘We cannot have that. Let me know if you find him there today. I will see to it that it doesn’t happen again.’

With that, the two men passed each other. Krishna Shastri walked swiftly to the end of the path leading to the clearing and made his way to the centre, where the temple stood dwarfed by the Tree next to it. The clearing was a large one, specially designed to accommodate gatherings during festivals and other occasions. For instance, every month or so, a travelling dance troupe visited the

village and set up camp under the Tree, beside the temple. (Krishna Shastri's protests against this blasphemy had so far fallen on deaf ears.)

He covered the fifty or so metres from the edge of the clearing to the centre and climbed up the stairs, looking around to see if he could spot Sanga lying down anywhere. Once he got to the top of the stairs, he took off his slippers and looked around once more. Once he was convinced Sanga wasn't there he dug into the folds of his biscuit-coloured dhoti and took out the key to the sacred chamber.

As he bent forward to insert the key in the lock a silent prayer played on his lips. A fresh breeze blew across the clearing. No one would visit the temple this early in the morning, especially because it was the day after Dusshera. Before the sun rose he would have rid the temple of coconut pieces, torn flowers, half-eaten fruit – debris of the celebrations the night before. And if he was lucky he would have the time to perform a long puja for Ma Kali just in time for sunrise. He looked at his big, clunky watch – it showed twenty past five. Yes, if he hurried and worked efficiently enough, he would have enough time to perform the puja.

He turned the key in the lock and opened the door. He took a step into the chamber and immediately – with a sharp intake of breath – took a step back. All thoughts of cleaning the temple flew out of his mind.

He took two more stumbling steps backward, his eyes fixed on what had caught them a moment ago. Thoughts of all kinds drifted into his mind and swirled around. He had started panting without being aware of it, and his arms shot out involuntarily and shut the door. His eyes though, were still boring through the green-coloured wooden doors at what lay beyond.

He could still see in front of his eyes the body of the young, beautiful, fresh-faced woman carefully laid out at the feet of the Mother.

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## Three

WHEN VENKAT REDDY alighted from his bicycle and mounted it on its stand at the edge of the clearing – away from the randomly scattered huddles of villagers around the temple – he secretly hoped this would be a quick job. The call from the sarpanch had come to the station just as he was nearing the end of his shift. He had spent the night swatting away mosquitoes and it was just as he was letting his mind wander to the soft bed that he would sink into once he got home that the phone rang.

He should not have picked it up. If he had just let it go the sarpanch would have called back half an hour later and got the day-shift head-constable. After all, it was not like the heavens were going to come crashing down if the death certificate was delayed by a few minutes.

Freeing his lathi from his bicycle's carrier he walked towards the temple. His legs felt the fatigue of cycling fifteen kilometres on a bumpy road but he strove not to let it show. A policeman had to look in control always.

He looked at the mess of branches, creepers and trunks in the middle of the clearing, and grimaced. He had heard about the Mahalakshmi Banyan Tree from tourists and had imagined it to be a prettier sight than this. The ground was littered with twigs, leaves and dried fruits. There were at least four trunks that could easily pass off as the parent, and the roots, slithery and slimy, grew from all of them and were reaching out to grip the earth. Soon, they would spawn more trunks, which would spawn more roots which would spawn more trunks, and...

The whole thing was rather ugly, thought Venkat Reddy. It was huge, yes, and in that the tourists were right. The breadth and density of the canopy formed by the branches could only be correctly described as awe-inspiring. Venkat Reddy

wondered vacantly, how long into the future the tree would survive. Some said it was as old as the Krishna and that it would last as long as the Krishna would.

Foolish village folk!

After all this is done, he would find out more about banyan trees and how long they lived. But none of that changed the fact that it was ugly – horribly ugly.

He made sure not to make eye contact with anyone. Out of the corner of his eyes he saw groups of people converge towards the temple with him. He caught a few stray bits of conversation, some of them whispered, some of them spoken out loud:

‘Shastri-gaaru found her under the Mother’s feet, apparently.’ ‘She must have killed herself as atonement for her life.’

‘If you ask me, it’s good riddance.’ ‘How lucky she died with the Mother!’ ‘Shh, police...’

Venkat Reddy showed no sign of hearing anything. He climbed up the stairs slowly, using his lathi to make his way through the crowd. At the top he removed his shoes and went in to the worshipping area where a group of five men stood in a crude circle. Venkat Reddy knew only one of them by sight.

‘Namaskar, Seetaramaiah-gaaru,’ he said, joining his hands and smiling as he approached the mini-congregation.

Seetaramaiah did not return the greeting. His features, Venkat Reddy noted, were tight with tension. He pointed to a short, rotund brahmin and said, ‘He is the one who found her, sir’.

The brahmin looked at him the same way brahmins looked at everyone else – with an air of nonchalant superiority. Venkat Reddy’s face hardened. His hands dropped. ‘Tell me what happened,’ he said.

The brahmin – Krishna Shastri was his name, apparently – related what had happened that morning: how, on opening the door to the temple he found the body of ... of ... that woman on the feet of the holy mother herself; how he had locked the door again and ran to Seetaramaiah to tell him about the incident and finally, how the temple had become unholy beyond measure.

‘Hold on, Shastri-gaaru,’ Venkat Reddy interrupted. ‘Why do you refer to that woman in such a derogatory tone? Even when I was walking up to the temple

everyone was speaking as though she was a sinner. What did she do to deserve to be talked about like that?’

Shastri looked reproachfully at Seetaramaiah. Venkat Reddy followed his gaze. Wilting under the priest’s look, Seetaramaiah said, ‘Padmavati ... err ... Padmavati was the village hostess’.

This was what Venkat Reddy needed to know. It was not the woman the villagers were attacking; it was her profession. Every village had a hostess – the one Venkat Reddy grew up in had had one too. The hostess was the one person in the village – Venkat Reddy knew from long experience – who didn’t discriminate between a brahmin and a sudra. For her everyone was the same. If you had money with you, you were made welcome at her house. If you didn’t she would politely ask you to go home and get some. A hostess spoke only one language – that of money.

It was the same in every village. Hostesses were rich because they always did roaring business. They were powerful because the most influential people of the village usually patronised them. They were invariably beautiful because their profession demanded that. But, Venkat Reddy thought, theirs was probably the most hated of all professions. Was it just the ‘immorality’ of it all as the villagers said it was, or was there some hidden envy as well?

He felt a sudden sympathy for Padmavati, even though he hadn’t so much as seen her body yet. He had grown up a dalit in his own village and he knew how cumbersome life could seem when one was subjected to ridicule and disdain. Had she indeed taken her own life, tired of it all?

‘Seetaramaiah-gaaru.’ A man wearing a cream-coloured shirt wheeled himself to face the headman. ‘Let’s finish the formalities quickly. What else are we waiting for? I have to board a bus in two hours.’

The fourth, young and boy-faced, looked mildly irritated. From the shape of his nose and the squareness of the jaw, Venkat Reddy could easily identify him as the headman’s son. His voice carried the same authority as his father’s. He said to Venkat Reddy, ‘Sir, if the formalities are complete, we would all like to go back to our daily jobs. But ...’

Seetaramaiah looked up at his son. Everyone in the group fell silent.

Venkat Reddy sighed. ‘Look, Seetaraamaiah-gaaru. I came here to file a police report at your bidding. From what you told me it seemed clear that the lady had taken her own life and that everything was straightforward. Is that true?’

‘Well,’ Seetaraamaiah said. ‘We don’t know. We have all been thinking, and that is the only explanation we can think of right now without investigating it in detail. But there is one point ...’

Amidst all the fidgeting and the averting of gazes Krishna Shastri stood firm, with his lips pursed and his brow set in a frown.

‘What is it, Seetaraamaiah-gaaru?’ Venkat Reddy prodded gently. ‘It’s like this,’ Seetaraamaiah said. ‘There is only one key to the temple door. And ... and...’

‘Yes? Who is the key with?’

The four men fell silent. Just when Venkat Reddy was about to repeat the question, the loud, clear voice of Krishna Shastri shattered the silence, ‘With me. The only key to the temple is with me’.

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## Four

VENKAT REDDY WAS seated on the wooden cot in Krishna Shastri's living room, holding a glass of water in his hand. It was October but the morning sun was starting to burn its way through the mud exterior of the house. Despite the regulator being set at five, the ceiling fan was blowing down hot, dry air. Venkat Reddy loosened the collar of his khaki shirt with his free hand and took a large gulp of water.

He gingerly massaged his forehead. The sleepless night and the long ride to the village were taking their toll. When had he first become aware of the dull ache in his head? Just as he was about to enter the temple, wasn't it? Yes, around that time.

He took another gulp of water and swallowed it immediately.

The face of a doll, he thought. It was the first thought that had occurred to him when he stepped into the temple that morning to examine the body. What struck him as he looked at Padmavati was the immediate impression of innocence her features conveyed. Her skin was a smooth, shiny shade of dark brown, contrasting beautifully with the lustrous gold of her jewels.

Her eyebrows looked like they were lines drawn by an artist. Her nose, though not very thin, was not very long either. Her mouth, though, was exquisite. Even in death, her lips looked perfectly matched in position and shape. Without doubt, Venkat Reddy thought, that childlike innocence emanated from those thin, well-formed lips.

He would have liked to see her eyes. Judging by the rest of her appearance – the dark, wavy hair; youthful arms, oval fingernails, shapely legs – they would have been a sight to behold.

He felt a tinge of regret that he had not seen her when she was alive. How nice it would have been to see those brows set in a frown; those lips curl up in a smile or a pout; those hips move as she walked; those hands push away strands of hair from her face...

Venkat Reddy's mind went back to the temple. He had kept his distance while the doctor examined the body. His eyes had travelled around the sanctum: four sixty watt bulbs hung off the ceiling in a square over the central pulpit. There wasn't enough light to illuminate entire room, the corners were still gloomily dark, but the Kalika idol glowed brightly, casting shadows in all four directions.

The tongue of the goddess Kalika stretched out from her open mouth, glistening with what seemed to Venkat Reddy like real moisture. The tips of the trident she held in her lower right hand were covered with a red, powdery substance. The upper right hand held a sickle-shaped scimitar, the tip of which was directly pointing at him. In her upper left hand she held a severed head by a tuft of hair, and directly under it, as though meant to catch the blood spilling from the neck of her victim, she held a bowl studded with gleaming gems. Her neck was adorned with a necklace of pearls that absorbed the orange light of the bulbs above and glowed back at him in luminescent, white spots.

Probably artificial, thought Venkat Reddy, aimlessly.

Her right foot pressed down on the chest of Lord Shiva, who lay helpless under her, all three of his eyes closed. Immediately next to the foot was the raised hood of a cobra ready to strike, with a part of its body curled up around the neck and shoulders of the Lord in a protective embrace.

And next to the figure of the Lord lay the lifeless body of Padmavati, peaceful and serene, completely at odds with the dramatic idol towering over her.

'Death occurred due to drowning,' said the doctor in a flat voice. He scribbled on a piece of printed paper, tore it off the pad, and handed it over to Venkat Reddy. 'I trust there won't be a need for an autopsy. Nobody here seems to be keen on it.'

Venkat Reddy took the report and nodded. The doctor was right, no one seemed to want an autopsy done. No one seemed to even want to lodge a formal

complaint. If anything, everyone seemed relieved at the death of this woman. At least this report put paid to the suicide theory.

It was then that he had first been aware of a slight twitch on either temple. It had intensified rapidly in the next fifteen minutes into a dull thudding at the back of his skull, and it had persisted all the way back to Krishna Shastri's house. Even now, after half an hour under the fan and downing three glasses of water, the headache refused to leave.

'I have to perform a ten-day fast as penance for having allowed this to happen,' said Krishna Shastri. 'The sanctity of my temple – maligned by the blood of that – that –'

'Shh,' Annapurna warned from the kitchen doorway. Irritated, Krishna Shastri clicked his tongue at her and continued, 'At least it's something for the good of the village. I don't know why that woman chose to end her life, but she did, and she did so at the feet of the Mother. Maybe she realised how sinful her life was.'

Venkat Reddy put down his glass and said, 'Shastri-gaaru, I have the doctor's report with me. He said that Padmavati drowned to death.'

Shastri fell silent. His eyes acquired a distant look, his brows curved into a frown, and his podgy hands started idly playing with the white thread around his torso. Annapurna's eyes widened in shock as she covered her gaping mouth with her palm.

'Yes,' Venkat Reddy reiterated, 'Drowning. Her lungs were apparently soaked with water. Now she couldn't have drowned herself in the temple, could she?'

Krishna Shastri's lips started moving soundlessly. Venkat Reddy waited to see if he would speak, but the man seemed lost in thought. So he said again, 'Add to that there is the question of how she came to be in the sacred chamber – a chamber to which, as you admitted, only you have the key?'

'A duplicate key could have been made easily,' said Krishna Shastri. 'No doubt. But who got it made? That's the question. I am going to

take you into confidence, Shastri-gaaru. I can see how disturbed you are because the sanctum of Mother Kali has been defiled in this manner. I am sure you would like to help me find out who did it?’

Krishna Shastri wedged his tongue between his teeth. His eyes still had the distant look and a steely edge had crept into his voice. ‘Of course, Constable,’ he said, ‘of course!’

Venkat Reddy stopped for a moment and considered whether to correct him. He was, after all, a head constable. But he let it go and said simply, ‘Good, Shastri-gaaru. I knew I could count on you.’

He moved to the edge of the cot, nearer to Krishna Shastri. ‘First,’ he said, ‘I want to know who the people were that we saw at the temple this morning. One of them is the sarpanch, I know, but who are the rest?’

‘The young man is Kishore, Seetaraamaiah’s son,’ Krishna Shastri said.

‘How old is he?’

‘He is twenty-seven. Seetaraamaiah got him educated in town. I think I heard him mention that his son got a big degree of some sort.’ Krishna Shastri paused. ‘A Bachelor of Arts, I think.’

Venkat Reddy nodded appreciatively. ‘Is he here on a visit?’

‘No, he’s back for good. Seetaraamaiah called his son back last year. He’s getting a bit old now, so I guess he wanted Kishore to be by his side.’

‘And Kishore doesn’t mind that?’

‘No,’ Krishna Shastri said, smiling a little. ‘Kishore is a nice kid. I have known him for many, many years now. He is always respectful to his elders and knows his responsibility as the eldest son of the family.’

Venkat Reddy said, ‘And he doesn’t, you know...’

Krishna Shastri shook his head sharply, ‘No, he is a nice kid. He has never so much as glanced at Padmavati.’

‘What about his father?’

Krishna Shastri sighed. Toying with his thread again, he said, ‘I guess things like that don’t stay under wraps for long. It’s true here as it is true in any other village, Constable. That woman had our sarpanch eating right out of her hands’.

‘Shameful, if you ask me,’ Annapurna said from the kitchen, ‘with a woman young enough to be his daughter...’

‘Annapurna,’ Krishna Shastri called out in admonition, ‘We shouldn’t talk about other people that way. How many times do I have to tell you?’

An insolent silence was the only response from the kitchen.

Venkat Reddy said, ‘What about that man in the wheelchair? Middle-aged, with a moustache ...’

‘Shekhar,’ Krishna Shastri cut in. ‘He has some sort of paralysis in his lower body. I don’t know much about them. They moved here only three months ago.’

‘They?’

‘Yes, Shekhar and his wife, Vaishnavi.’

‘And how was his relationship with Padmavati?’

‘Well,’ mused Krishna Shastri and waited, as though choosing the right words, ‘the man is paralysed from the waist down.’ He used his hands to tap at his waist, indicating and nodding.

‘Ah,’ said Venkat Reddy.

‘Yes, so the answer is no. He had no interest in Padmavati whatsoever.’ ‘He seemed to have reason to hate her, seeing how he spoke about her at the temple.’

Krishna Shastri said, ‘There’s a good reason for that, officer; a very good reason why the whole village hated her. It was because of what she was’.

Venkat Reddy merely nodded at that but ventured no opinion of his own. ‘This issue of the key, now, Shastri-gaaru. You said there is only one key to the temple?’

‘As far as I know.’

‘But isn’t it a fairly simple thing to get a duplicate of?’

‘It is, but there is only one blacksmith in the village, Shivam. Everyone would come to know and someone or the other would ask why.’

Venkat Reddy said, ‘So there has been no account of Shivam making a duplicate key for the temple lock?’

Krishna Shastri smiled. ‘Officer, Shivam is a very devout person. He comes to the temple everyday with a full coconut. He is very, very fearful of the Mother Kali. He would not make a duplicate key of the temple’s sanctum’.

Venkat Reddy nodded again. 'Okay, Shastri--gaaru. Thank you for telling me all this. Now could you please tell me exactly what happened this morning?'

Over the next ten minutes, Krishna Shastri told him everything. Venkat Reddy listened with pursed lips, his mouth set tight in disapproval when Krishna Shastri told him of his chance meeting with Seetaraamaiah.

'He was taking a walk?' Venkat Reddy asked.

Krishna Shastri frowned again and responded, 'I know what you're hinting at, officer'.

'I am not hinting at anything.'

'No, I understand what you're saying. But Seetaraamaiah...'

Venkat Reddy looked pointedly at the priest, and left it at that. He had not slept the whole night and had come here in the morning in the belief that he would have to spend no more than an hour drawing up a report. But this was rapidly snowballing into something big – bigger than anything Venkat Reddy had ever handled.

He was merely a head constable and didn't know the basics of investigating even a petty crime, let alone a murder. If he had any sense he would just leave things as they are, file his report, go home and sleep it off. Let the Sub-Inspector handle it, when he came for his weekly visit to the station.

It would not get handled, he knew. Who cared about a hostess's death in a remote village like Amaravati? People had better things to do.

It would probably go down as suicide. 'Prostitute kills herself by jumping in the well,' maybe – or in the Krishna – if the reporter wanted something more dramatic.

It was not any of his concern – definitely not. Nobody would hold him responsible for anything. It was simply not in his job description to do anything, anything apart from issuing a death certificate and filing an FIR. As long as he did that he would not be held responsible or answerable to anybody.

He picked up his lathi and stalked out of Krishna Shastri's house. Yes, he should really just walk away. He should just write a report, sign the death certificate and go home to sleep. Nobody would blame him or question him.

Nobody – he thought bitterly as he got on his bicycle – but that angel he had seen that morning at the feet of Mother Kali.

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# Five

THAT EVENING, by four o' clock, Venkat Reddy was back in Amaravati.

He rode his bicycle around the outer periphery. It was a circle, if a crude one. A good portion of the perimeter nestled back into the river, becoming part of the riverbank. That was what, he thought, caused the annoying gurgling sound that simply won't go away. Eight tar roads had been laid from the edge of the village to its centre. If Amaravati could be viewed from above, it would resemble a giant wheel with the roads for spokes and the central clearing for the axle-groove.

He rode along each of the roads and took in the sights of the village, at the same time keeping an eye on his watch to time his movements. The roads were well-laid and smooth, even smoother than the road he took to get to the village. The terrain was flat and he enjoyed the pleasant breeze.

There were smaller, dusty roads branching off these bigger ones. Houses – mostly shanties and huts, a few cottages and fewer brick houses – lined up next to one another along these roads. It brought to Venkat Reddy memories of the village he had grown up in.

He cycled to the riverbank and stopped there for a second, considering the rapid flow of water in the river. It was one of Krishna's narrowest points, which meant the current was at its strongest. It would take a skilled swimmer indeed to swim in this current, he thought.

The doctor's report mentioned that the water found on Padmavati's body was fresh water. Was there any other freshwater body in this village apart from the Krishna? Venkat Reddy had not found any on his tour. That meant only one thing: Padmavati had drowned to death in the Krishna.



But how did she get to the temple from here, if that was the case? He looked at his watch, and wondered how long it would take for someone to get from the riverbank to the temple. He got off the bicycle and wheeled it along the road leading to the temple.

Ten minutes later, he was at the Tree. The temple was deserted but for the dim light that shone from the chamber that housed the goddess. As he moved closer he also heard a constant tinkling of a hand-held bell. The bell, of course, was in Krishna Shastri's practiced hands.

Walking up the stairs he noticed a smooth ramp on either side of the staircase leading up to the chamber. Venkat Reddy had seen similar ramps at various buildings during his visits to the city. He wondered how many wheelchair-bound people the village had, to warrant a ramp. He had only seen one the previous day.

Taking off his shoes, he walked closer to the chamber and bowed in reverence. On the outer wall of the chamber he found four lines of Telugu script neatly printed in brick-red. It was a shloka Venkat Reddy had read often when he was a child and had long forgotten. As his eyes travelled across the shloka line by line, his lips automatically moved to recite the words, soundlessly, rhythmically:

*Yajna Swaroopaya Jataadharaaya*

*Pinaaka Hasthaaya Sanaatanaaya*

*Divyaya Devaya Digambaraaya*

*Tasmai Yakaraaya Namah Shivaya*

Krishna Shastri looked up and nodded as if to ask him to wait. He finished chanting his prayers, sprinkled some holy water on the idol of the Mother, some on himself, and stepped out, dipping a basil leaf in a small beaker of water.

'Take some teertham,' he said.

Venkat Reddy held out a hand and drank the holy water. Then he nodded at the words on the wall.

Krishna Shastri followed his gaze and smiled. 'Yes, I put up a new shloka every week. I wrote this one just today.' He looked back at Venkat Reddy and asked, 'So what brings you here again, Constable? I thought you had finished whatever you had to do over here'.

‘So I did,’ Venkat Reddy said. ‘But I don’t have much work to do at the station nowadays, so I thought why not spend a few hours of each day over here.’

Krishna Shastri chuckled and offered him a piece of freshly cut coconut.

Venkat Reddy wondered if the priest had seen through his lie. He had found it impossible to sleep after he had gone home that morning. He was tired both from a sleepless night and cycling in the sun for fifteen kilometres. His eyes were heavy and refused to stay open, but he just couldn’t fall asleep. He was aware of every little sound his wife made in the kitchen. The ticking of his wall clock – barely audible at normal times – pounded in his head every second.

He had done everything he could, he thought. What else was he supposed to do? He could not go to the village and investigate the murder, could he? He was no detective. He was merely a head constable.

The thudding continued unabated.

And, he went on thinking rebelliously, she was after all a ... a prostitute! It was not like the prime minister had been assassinated. She was just a nameless, faceless statistic. So many people died in the country everyday. What difference did it make?

The thudding became louder.

He closed his eyes tighter. He fought to drive the vision of Padmavati’s face from his mind’s eye. He cursed his curiosity. Why did he have to go and see the body? All of this would have been so much easier if only he had not seen her – that face looked like the face of Mother Parvati. How could anyone bring themselves to kill someone who looked like that?

The thudding became a little softer.

It was a small village. Nothing would stay secret for too long. He knew. He hailed from such a village. Everyone knew everyone else; everyone made it their duty to find out things about everyone else. If he asked the right people in the right way, he knew he would be able to get to the bottom of this mess. He knew!

Yes, he decided, he would go back to the village in the evening. He owed it to no one, not even to himself. But in some strange way he felt that Padmavati was calling him back. Padmavati, who had the face of goddess Parvati.

The thudding stopped, as though it had never been.

He had slipped into a deep slumber almost immediately after. And he had started for Amaravati as soon as he had woken up.

‘Nobody came to the temple today, officer’, said Krishna Shastri. ‘Not surprising, though.’

Venkat Reddy said, ‘I did not expect you to be here either’.

Krishna Shastri smiled. Venkat Reddy noticed that the smile did not communicate joy or amusement, sarcasm or pity. It was as though he thought smiling was an end in itself – he seemed to enjoy the act of smiling for what it was and not for what it represented.

‘I cannot stay away from the Mother for too long, officer,’ he said. They were both sitting on the topmost step of the staircase. The orange orb of the sun glowed faintly at the horizon. The breeze which had been hot and arid during the afternoon and for most of the evening, now became soothing and cool. The gurgle of the Krishna became more pronounced.

Venkat Reddy took a bite of the coconut piece and nodded at the ramps along the stairs. ‘Who are those for?’

Krishna Shastri followed his gaze. ‘Seetaraamaiah’s daughter.’  
‘Seetaraamaiah has a daughter too?’

Sighing, Krishna Shastri joined his hands limply. ‘If you could call her that, officer; if you could call her anything. She is completely paralysed. She cannot even speak. She has to be moved around in a wheelchair.’

‘Accident?’

Krishna Shastri looked at the sinking sun. ‘She used to be such a lively kid. Kishore was the quieter of the two. Indira had such life about her – always talking, playing some prank or the other – and she was beautiful too. She was the light of Seetaraamaiah’s life, still is.’

‘But what happened?’

‘Two years ago, I think it was. Seetaraamaiah and Indira lived all by themselves in that house. Indira too had asked to go to college in town like her brother, but Seetaraamaiah couldn’t bear to lose her. After she finished high school, he had books brought over from the city for her to read.

‘He protected her like a hawk. She grew up without ever having an angry word directed at her. When Seetaraamaiah asked her not to do anything – and that happened very rarely – it was in a manner of pleading; not of ordering or admonishing. For instance, he had asked her many, many times to not run down the stairs.

‘He came home from the fields that evening, and as usual, Indira ran down the stairs to meet him. He must have been more tired than usual that day, because he didn’t look up to see his daughter come down. If he had, maybe he would have seen her trip; maybe he would have been able to rush up half-way to prevent her from falling.

‘But he looked up only after she had rolled down halfway, and by the time he ran to the staircase, she was already sprawled on her stomach at the base of the stairs. When he rolled her over, she looked like she was dead.’

Venkat Reddy shut his eyes for a moment.

‘Yes,’ Krishna Shastri said. ‘The Lord likes to test good people.’

‘So that’s it?’ Venkat Reddy asked. ‘And she has been like that ever since?’

Krishna Shastri nodded. ‘Yes. Seetaraamaiah had her checked up by different doctors, and all of them said the same thing. She is alive, but she will never talk, walk or do any of the things that living people do. But she can think.

‘So he got her a maid, put her into a wheelchair, and asked Kishore to come back from the city at the earliest convenience. He got this temple built around the same time too. The ramps are for her wheelchair.’

He paused for a moment. ‘Did you see the roads in the village? He got them laid out just so that she could be smoothly wheeled around.’

It became clearer to Venkat Reddy now, why a village such as this had such smooth roads. ‘Do they come here often?’ he asked.

‘Every Friday without fail. Seetaraamaiah has never stopped blaming himself for what happened to his daughter. “If only I had looked up three seconds before I did, Shastri-gaaru, I would have been able to save her,” he says.

‘And Constable, I’ve seen Indira. She scares me. It’s like – it’s like wheeling around a corpse. It’s like bathing a corpse everyday, feeding it, talking to it, it’s –

it's sad. If something like that happened to my daughter...' He shook his head, broke another piece of coconut into two, and gave one to Venkat Reddy.

The sun had set. The sky was steadily turning into darker and darker shades of grey. The dim electric bulb hanging along the bell of the temple now provided all the light. Venkat Reddy could not see the priest's face clearly. Taking off his red-striped hat, he asked, 'What about Shekhar, Shastri-gaaru? Does he use those ramps as well?'

There was a pause. 'Shekhar,' Krishna Shastri said, as though trying very hard to control the emotion of his voice, 'doesn't believe in god.'

'So he never comes here?'

'Yesterday was the first time I saw him here.'

Venkat Reddy put the last piece of coconut in his mouth, and they both munched in silence. From the temple, the clearing looked eerie and ready for more sins. Even the round, ruddy face of Krishna Shastri looked a little sinister.

Venkat Reddy shook his head and stood up. Krishna Shastri stood up with him. 'I think we'd better set off. Annapurna will be waiting for me.'

'We?'

'Yes, of course. Aren't you staying at our place for the night?' Venkat Reddy hadn't given any thought to where he would stay the night. He'd assumed he would return before nightfall, but he couldn't possibly leave now. He accepted the invitation.

'I talked to the doctor today,' he said, as Krishna Shastri walked back to lock the temple door.

'What did he say?' asked Krishna Shastri, at the same time muttering a prayer.

'He said Padmavati died between 3-5 a.m. yesterday.'

Krishna Shastri didn't answer. Venkat Reddy looked back at him to see if he had heard. The priest's back was turned to him. Venkat Reddy went on. 'What time did you say you met Seetaraamaiah yesterday? It was around 5:15, wasn't it?'

Krishna Shastri locked the door and joined him. He put his key deep inside the folds of his dhoti. Sighing, he looked out at the clearing and said, 'Seetaraamaiah has done great things for this village, officer'.

Venkat Reddy did not answer. The two men slowly descended the stairs. As they approached the end of the clearing, Krishna Shastri asked, 'Do you like pomegranate pickle?'

'I do.'

'Good. Purna makes very good pickles.'

They didn't speak again for the rest of the distance.

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