

MURDER  
IN  
AMARAVATI



# MURDER IN AMARAVATI

Sharath Komarraju





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Editorial Office:

J-39, Ground Floor, Jor Bagh Lane,  
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Tel: 011-24642447/24652447 Fax: 011-24622448

Email: [amaryllis@amaryllis.co.in](mailto:amaryllis@amaryllis.co.in)

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## *The Priest*



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-gaar, 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.

## *Discovery*



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.