



SHIVA RUPAYA VISHNAVE TRILOGY

What is God?

Every civilisation that has ever existed has asked this question. Every one of them has answered it differently. And every one of them has been willing, at some point, to go to war over their answer.

Perhaps God created humans. Perhaps humans created God. Perhaps both are true simultaneously—that something real and vast exists in the universe, and that we, in our attempt to reach it, built stories around it. Gave it names. Drew its face. Wrote its rules. And then, inevitably, argued over whose drawing was more accurate.

Every religion, at its core, teaches the same things. How to live. How to treat others. What is right and what is wrong. The architecture differs but the foundation is identical—compassion, righteousness, the dignity of human life. No scripture anywhere was written to teach hatred. No god, in their original form, asked for blood.

The problem begins when belief becomes obsession.

When loving your god is no longer enough and proving your god is greatest becomes the purpose. When the difference between my faith and yours stops being interesting and starts being unbearable. When the wall between us, which was always made of human hands, begins to feel like it was built by god himself.

We see this everywhere today. People go to war over political parties, over film stars, and over athletes. They call these things sacred.

They abuse, threaten, and sometimes kill anyone who questions them. The obsession is ancient. Only the objects have changed.

Before all of them there were only gods. And the wars were the same.

This trilogy lives inside that world.

It lives inside the eleventh and twelfth centuries of the Indian subcontinent, when kingdoms were built on a single question—which god rules here? When Vaishnava kings enslaved Shaiva people and Shaiva kings enslaved Vaishnavas. When temples were locked and prayers were crimes and children were born into bondage before they ever learned the name of a god.

But it also lives inside a question older than any of those kingdoms.

What if a god was not born but made?

Hindu mythology holds millions of gods. Each one has a story, a purpose, an origin. Rama and Krishna may not be mythology at all—they may be history. Great kings. Great human beings who made choices that proved to the world that *Dharma* was the only thing worth living and dying for. Because of what they did and how they lived, they became gods. Not despite being human. Because of it.

This trilogy asks—what if that process happened again? What if the chaos of an era, the losses and the blood and the choices of ordinary and extraordinary people, carved a stone, again and again, into something no one planned to create? What if a god emerged not from divine will but from human need—from the accumulated weight of a world that had broken itself apart and was searching, without knowing it, for something that could put it back together?

What if the god simply existed in a story, in a dancer's voice, in a king's choice, in a child pulled from a grave and in existence... quietly dissolved the walls that centuries of obsession had built?

The **Shiva Rupaya Vishnave Trilogy** tells that story in reverse.

The first book, **The Warhorse and the Dancer**, follows a young king trying to build something true in a world that has been broken for generations. Into his story enter two older men—one who becomes his greatest enemy, and one who becomes his family. All three carry histories we do not yet fully understand. By the time the first book closes you will know what they chose and what those choices cost. You will not yet know everything about why.

The second book, **The Burning Inheritance**, answers that. It goes back to when those two older men were young. To the king who was the young king's father. Their war. Their choices. The events that made them exactly the people they were by the time Book One found them. What seemed like fate in Book One will reveal itself as a decision in Book Two.

The third book, **The Nameless Soldier**, goes back further still. To the fathers of those men. To the origin of the wound that bled through three generations. By the time the third book closes every person you met in Book One will look entirely different—not because they changed but because you finally know where they came from.

This structure is not a gimmick. It is the story's argument.

We judge people by what they do. We rarely know why they do it. The reverse chronology of this trilogy is an act of compassion—towards its characters, and perhaps towards the reader's own certainties about the world they live in.

Read the three books and then ask yourself the question again.

What is God?



CHAPTER I

THE BROKEN KING

Early 16th century.

They had been waiting since the first gray of dawn.

Some had been here since the night before, sleeping on the rutted earth wrapped in whatever rags they'd brought along, unwilling to lose their place in a line that now stretched from the city gates to the palace.

As evening settled, the road disappeared beneath the sheer weight of the crowd. There was nothing left but a sea of people—bodies pressed tight, men scaling walls and perching on rooftops, fathers hoisting children onto their shoulders just to see above the heads of the masses.

Three years.

Their king had been gone for three years.

The shout began near the city gates with one voice finding the words, then ten, then a hundred, until the entire road surged with a wave of sound that had been building for three years, and finally hitting the shore.

“Jai Sri Krishna Devaraya! Jai Sri Krishna Devaraya!”

The evening light over Vijayanagara was a heavy, golden glow that descended only in the final hour before dusk. It was a melancholy light, the way all beautiful things carry a certain sadness. It grazed the *shikhara* of the temple before sinking lower, turning the road's dust

into a river of amber. It caught the marigolds as they rained down from all sides, holding each flower suspended for a heartbeat before letting it fall.

The royal chariot pulled through the gates.

Sri Krishna Devaraya stood at the front. He was forty-seven years old with broad shoulders and a lean face. As a ruler of the empire, he had fought many battles, but a certain softness had always remained with him. These three years of war, however, had stripped away whatever softness he once possessed. It was not mere hardness now; he was like a bowstring pulled tight for three years that had forgotten how to go slack.

His eyes were fixed straight ahead, his face offering no hint of smile.

The shout hit him —“*Jai Sri Krishna Devaraya!*”—but something went wrong with the sound before it reached his ears. It arrived changed. It arrived as something else entirely.

It arrived as *men*.

Not these men. Not the people lining the road with their joy and their three years of waiting. The *other* men. The ones who had been standing one second and were gone the next. It was the haunting silence that settled upon a battlefield when the blood had cooled and the earth was heavy with the dead piled all over.

Sri Krishna Devaraya blinked.

The roar of the crowd rushed back, drowning out the silence of the ones who had settled the empire’s victory with their lives. His people were there, their faces bright with a relief they could not hide. More flowers showered over the chariot, and for a split second, the orange petals turned into something else again.

Blood.

He closed his eyes.

And opened them.

Flowers.

Just flowers falling harmlessly around him. Along the road, the lamps were being lit one by one, each flame holding small and certain against the coming night. But Sri Krishna Devaraya, looking between each flicker of light, saw only darkness.

Behind him sat Annapurna Devi, just eighteen years old, her hands folded in her lap with the grace of a princess. She was the daughter of the Gajapati king, now the symbol of peace sealed through a ceremony. Three years of war had narrowed down to this: a young woman in a conqueror's chariot, dressed as a bride, riding into the city that had defeated her father.

She wore a smile.

It was not the wide or unguarded smile of a happy girl; it was the composed, precisely calibrated mask of a woman who had decided to give the world exactly what it demanded, and nothing more. Her gaze moved across the crowd, bowing her head when women threw flowers. She was, by every measure, what a new queen should be. Yet, the chasm between her and the king was clear to any who dared to look.

He stood at the front, lost inside himself. She sat at the back, upright, performing her arrival. They had traveled together for days since the wedding, but the distance between them had not faded—the careful space between two people brought together by a war neither had chosen.

Not once did they care to glance at each other.

As the road curved toward the inner city, Annapurna Devi turned her head. She looked past the cheering throngs and the husband she barely knew toward the line of soldiers on her right. These were men of her own land, the Gajapati escort, who had survived the war only to ride through the city of their conquerors.

One of them rode closer than the rest.

His posture was flawless. To the crowd, he was but a shadow in the escort. But Annapurna Devi watched him for three heartbeats. In her

gaze was a look that had no place in a victory procession. It was not the way a queen looked at a soldier, but the look of a woman reminding him of an oath already sworn.

The soldier's eyes moved by just a fraction. He did not turn his head or change his expression; he did not even break his stride, yet he nodded once, a movement so small that it escaped the eyes of hundreds.

Annapurna Devi faced forward again. Her courtly smile returned as the chariot carried them deeper into the city. The last of the evening light had faded, replaced by lamps that burned steady against the coming dark.

While the city celebrated the victory, Sri Krishna Devaraya remained the monument of unyielding bone. The small exchange slipped his observation, for he was too lost in the canyons of a mind layered with hazy flashes.



The palace of Vijayanagara did not whisper its wealth; it declared it. Gold coated the pillars and lined the door frames, glowing in the oil-light that fell across floors of stone so polished they held the reflections of the world above like still water. The corridors were wide, the carvings on the walls deep and detailed—gods, battles, and animals caught mid-movement. In the flickering warmth of the flambeaux, those figures seemed to breathe.

Everything in this palace had been built to say one thing:

We are unrivaled.

Draped in madder-red and gold silk that flowed with her every step, Annapurna Devi moved toward the wedding chamber with rooted poise. Gold ornaments anchored the intricate coils of her hair, the cold

weight of the metal offering a steadying pressure against her scalp. The heavy timber of the doors loomed ahead but she did not slow, her face held a chiseled calmness.

Silence lingered in the corridor, broken only by the rhythmic chime of her anklets. The palace had retreated for the wedding night, with servants redirected and guards repositioned. It was the privacy arranged by those who understood that some rituals required space.

A soldier from her Gajapati escort stood guard at the wedding chamber door, his presence both familiar and expected. To anyone passing through, he was as unremarkable as the stone pillars.

As Annapurna Devi drew near, he remained a statue; he did not bow, nor speak, nor move a single muscle of his frame. Only his eyes shifted, meeting hers for the briefest of the moments.

That was all.

It indicated something; for a glint flashed in her eyes, two warring truths pressing against each other.

Satisfaction, cold and sharp.

And beneath it, a tightness in her chest. It was a tension that lived in the blood, not the mind—the visceral knowledge that what came next could never be undone.

She took a silent breath and moved past him, pushing open the door. The wedding chamber was thick with the scent of jasmine; it hung in heavy garlands from every wall. A mosaic of petals was swept across the floor in alluring patterns, the work of hands that had spent hours honoring what this night signified.

The union of two kingdoms, two bodies, two souls.

Marigolds were piled in brass bowls, lining the room like smaller suns. The scent hit her instantly—sweet, heavy, and completely indifferent to the burden she carried within. A low table was arranged with fruits and sweets on silver plates, catching the moonlight that spilled from the open windows.

And then, there was the bed.

Majestic.

Beneath the red blanket lay a body turned away from her, the rhythmic rise and fall of an exhausted frame that had finally surrendered to sleep. Annapurna Devi stood at the threshold, her gaze coming to a halt at that figure.

Three years.

Three years of her father's losing battles. Three years of her brother's failing strategies and the shame that had followed him to death. Three years of knowing people who were now nothing more than names. Three years of blood, pain and sacrifice that had ended not in victory, but with her hand placed in Sri Krishna Devaraya's hand.

The man who was responsible for it all!

Her heart was filled with a cold remorse. She swept a glance around the chamber and as predicted, the room was a sanctuary of soft edges. There was nothing here, no blade or heavy ornament, that could serve her purpose. That was why they had been forced to bring their own.

At the far end of the wall, hidden behind a pillar to her right, sat a bundle wrapped in dark cloth. It was a jagged intruder in this perfect room, brought by her escort and smuggled in among the marvelous gifts from her kingdom.

She crossed the room, crouched, and pulled the cloth away. The stone was enormous. Grey, rough, and heavy. She caressed its edges, and confirmed its weight before standing up.

She bent her knees and gripped it. She lifted it slowly at first, finding its center, adjusting her hold as she raised it higher. Above her waist. Above her chest. Finally, above her head as her arms shook with the effort, the tendons in her neck pulled taut.

She looked at the shape in bed one last time. Everything rose in her at one, every name and every day of the last three years. It surged from

somewhere below words, below thoughts, beyond anything that could be managed, controlled and smiled away.

There was a frantic struggle beneath the blankets when the stone struck, a muffled sound that was quickly cut short. Yet, as the life on the bed ebbed, Annapurna Devi felt a hollow lightness, as if a three-year burden was leaving her bones in one violent motion.

Then came the silence.

It was a deafening one that seemed to press against the walls of her chest. It wasn't until the air in the room felt too thick to breathe that she realized she was panting and her lungs were burning with a victory that suddenly felt cold. She took slow steps toward the bed, and with a trembling hand, she flung the blanket back. A cascade of jasmine petals flowed with the silk. Her eyes fell upon the face and the air left her in a shuddering gasp.

It was not Sri Krishna Devaraya. It was not *her* husband.

It was the soldier from her escort, the man who had led the escort in the evening, his hands, mouth, and legs bound tight. The stone had crushed his skull. Her blood ran cold as the harsh reality of the trap finally clicked into place. The blood began to ooze from the bed, a deep crimson tide that struck the floor with a steady *tap-tap-tap*.

Annapurna Devi stood frozen. She had built the trap for the king, but it was she who was caught within its teeth.

Behind her, wood moved against wood.

She turned around and her gaze set into the wall between two pillars, a section of carved timber swung inward. It was fitted so precisely into the wall's pattern that, amidst the decorations of the chamber, she had not seen the seam at all.

Two men stepped through the hidden threshold.

The first was an older man of perhaps sixty. Stripped of everything unnecessary by decades of relentless thought, his lean frame bore only plain clothes and no jewelry. The true weight of him lay in his eyes;

they looked as though they had already lived this moment, holding the difficult grace of a man who felt no satisfaction in being right.

Appaji: the King's minister.

The second man was the King.

Sri Krishna Devaraya looked at her across the wreckage of flowers and scattered petals. The gold embroidery of his robes caught her eyes. He was still wearing exactly what he had worn throughout the day. It was the bitter realization while she was being adorned for him, he had already been five steps ahead, arranging the trap.

The door opened behind her. They came in on their knees, the four of her Gajapati escorts, hands bound, driven by Vijayanagara soldiers. Her soldiers looked at her, but there was no accusation or desperate pleading in their eyes. The Vijayanagara soldiers moved and within four swift strikes, her escort lay dead upon the floor. Droplets fell on Annapurna Devi as she watched every one of them take their last breath. Nothing in her moved except for something deep behind her eyes—a fury so compressed and so old that it had long ago stopped needing her face to carry it.

There was not one grain of guilt.

There was only the burning rage of a mastermind outsmarted, standing amidst the wreckage of her own ruin.

Appaji stepped forward. When Annapurna Devi met his eyes, hers burned with a lethal fury. His, however, remained a blank wall of calm.

Annapurna Devi looked at the sword, hung at her husband's waist. Her mind calculated the distance in a heartbeat and before any of them could process, her fingers were already on the hilt of the sword.

The blade came free with a sharp, metallic ring that sliced the silence.

She turned the weapon, but the King's right hand instantly clamped around her wrist while his left seized the bare steel. Wrenching

the weapon from her body, he held it suspended between them, his crushing grip locking them both in a breathless deadlock.

She threw the entire weight of her broken soul into the blade, and he held it back with the crushing majesty of his crown but neither moved.

She looked up at him.

Every mask she had maintained all evening lay shattered, leaving behind an unguarded truth aimed directly at his heart. The trap was known before she ever set foot in the room, her soldiers lying dead behind her... it was all there, screaming from her eyes.

It hit him somewhere it was not supposed to reach.

For the first time, the calmness in his face faltered. He held her gaze which was the silent collision of wills. Then, with a deliberate strength, he took the sword from her hands and eyed his soldier.

Two soldiers came for her quickly, careful not to exert too much force. Annapurna Devi let them, not because she was finished, the rigid line of her spine said clearly that she was not. But the fight was over for now, for tonight.

The blood had been spilled, the trap had been sprung, and the silence grew too heavy to breathe.

At the door, she turned to have one last look. The vengeance was still there, but there was something else too. It was the humiliation of losing in front of the very man she was losing to. It found him. In that moment, the composure behind his eyes fractured. Then the door closed, and she was gone.

Appaji looked at the King once. He had warned the King beforehand, and the rest had simply unfolded as he had predicted. Without a word, he disappeared through the partition, leaving the King to the silence of the room.

The moonlight sprawled across the petals on the floor, making the blood look like spilled ink. The flowers were everywhere, filling the

chamber with the cloying, sickly smell of a celebration that had never been real.

Sri Krishna Devaraya stood still, his hand white-knuckled around the hilt of his sword. After a long moment, he set it down. He walked to the center of the room and stood there. Every single event of this day, and the three years that had led to it, hit him at once. The noises that had dimmed in the back of his mind grew loud, and then louder. The flashes of battle, the blood spilled, the dying faces of his soldiers, and her eyes... they all flooded back.

He sat on the edge of the ruined bed. As the night deepened, so did the weight of everything still waiting to arrive.



A period of almost thirty days is a long time for a palace to hold its breath.

Since that night, the corridors of the palace had filled with a weight that made the servants move like shadows, afraid to speak. At first, they waited for the King to emerge with an order or a cry. They waited for the anger to break. But as days bled together and the King remained a statue in the center of his chamber, the silence turned into a creeping panic. The empire was moving, but its heart had stopped beating.

The physicians were called in first. Three of the best in the empire, who had spent their entire lives learning the maps of the flesh and where the body hid its secrets. They examined him with practiced hands. They looked for a fever that wasn't there and a wound they couldn't see. Bitter herbs were ground into fine paste. Warming oils were rubbed into his skin to stir the blood. Revitalizing foods were chosen and placed before him on silver platters.

The King took everything they gave him. He was a ghost of a man, compliant and hollow. He swallowed the teas without tasting them and stared at the walls while they worked.

But nothing moved.

The herbs did not bring back his voice. The oils did not soothe the stiffness in his hands. He remained suspended in that room as a conqueror who had won every war, yet could not find his way out of the battle in his mind. Outside, the world continued to turn, but inside the palace, the air remained thin, waiting for the King to exhale.

The priests came next. They were senior men from the main temple, carrying the authority of those who spent their lives negotiating between the human and the divine. For entire nights, fires burned in the palace courtyard, accompanied by chants that filled every corridor with smoke and sound.

The King sat through all of it. He watched the flames as if they were a distant light on a far shore.

The work of the throne shifted into rooms the King no longer entered. The flow of grain, the strengthening of the forts, and the collection of gold—the heavy, daily needs of the land were handled by men who knew that a kingdom could not stop for a man's grief. They sent the King scrolls of the day's decisions, placing them where he could reach them. Some were opened by him, but most were not. They stayed where they were left, slowly being covered by the dust of the room.

In the fourth week, Appaji looked at his council and put the situation in the only language it had left. "Medicine has not reached him. Prayer has not reached him. We have used everything we know." He paused, looking at the tired faces of the advisors. "The *dandora*."

They were at the point where no one could argue. Vijayanagara needed its King, and they had to bring him back.

The announcement stirred the kingdom. The drums carried the message: anyone who could cure the King would receive whatever reward they named. People came, driven by greed, by hope, or by a genuine fear for the throne.

A woman arrived with a clay jar, carrying her grandmother's recipe of roots and herbs. An astrologer came next, laying out gemstones and charts to read the movement of the stars. There was even a man who brought nothing at all, sitting by the gates for two days to offer his silent presence as a cure.

Appaji reviewed each of them himself. He was not unkind, but he was honest. He looked into their eyes for a spark of something the physicians and priests had missed. None of them were brought to the King.

On the twenty-eighth day, a man arrived at the outer gate in the middle of the afternoon. He was alone and empty-handed. He was of medium height, perhaps thirty-five years old, and his clothes were clean but ordinary. His sandals were thin, worn down by a long and dusty road.

The gate guard saw him as nothing but another traveler looking for a fortune.

"Name and purpose."

The man was quiet for a moment. He wasn't hiding anything; he just seemed uncomfortable with the need to announce himself. "I am from Kuchipudi," he said. "From the banks of the Krishna River. I am a dancer. I heard the *dandora*."

"And?"

"I would like to see the King," the dancer said. "I believe I can help him."

The guard waited. "With what?"

"A story," the dancer replied.



Appaji heard of this man differently. He couldn't explain why, but there was something in the detail of a man who arrived with nothing and offered only words. He sat with the thought for a moment before saying, "Bring him to me." He spoke with the dancer for half an hour. Afterward, he sat alone. Then he went to find the King.

Sri Krishna Devaraya was by the window in his private chamber. The afternoon sun hit him at a low angle, revealing how much thinner he had become. He had never been the man of many words, but over the past twenty-eight days, he had hardly spoken.

Appaji stood at a respectful distance. "Maharaja. There is a man from a village called Kuchipudi. A dancer. He came for the *dandora*." He paused. "He says he can cure you with a story."

Something moved in the King's face. It was an involuntary twitch at the corner of his mouth.

Almost mistaken as an amused smile.

He was encountering something so unexpected that his face responded before his mind could stop it. What thirty days of medicine could not reach, what priests and fires could not touch, this dancer had stirred with a single sentence!

It faded as quickly as it came, but Appaji had seen it.

"This evening," the King said. "The council room."

By evening, the council room held nine people. Seven ministers stood along the walls, watching one more idea arrive. Appaji stood by the door. And at the far end of the room, in the high chair, sat Sri Krishna Devaraya.

Sri Krishna Devaraya had made an effort to be present today. His clothes were changed and he sat upright, just how a King should be while receiving a guest! The dancer was brought in. When he walked

in, he looked at the ministers, at Appaji, and finally at the King and bowed.

The King looked at him—this ordinary man with empty hands and road-dust still on his sandals.

“They told me you have a story,” the King said.

“I do, Maharaja.”

“What kind?”

“A true one.”

The King’s eyes moved across the dancer’s face, reading him with the skill of a man who had spent years learning what people hide.

“True stories are rarely interesting,” the King said.

“This one,” the dancer’s voice was calm, “is about a king who won every war and lost himself in the winning. A man who gave his people something precious and had to take it back with his own hands. A man who watched those he loved die for his choices, and kept living after.”

The room went deathly still.

“But before we get to that king,” the dancer said, “we must start with a stone.”

The word landed like a pebble dropped into deep, still water.

A stone.

The ministers glanced at one another. Appaji’s eyes stayed on the dancer. And the King, who had not leaned toward anything in thirty days, waited.

“A stone,” the King repeated.

The dancer smiled. “For this, we have to go back.”

“How far?” the King asked.

“Far enough,” the dancer said, “that the world you know had not yet existed.”