

Legend of Suheldev

Amish is a 1974-born, IIM (Kolkata)-educated banker-turned-author. The success of his debut book, *The Immortals of Meluha* (Book 1 of the *Shiva Trilogy*), encouraged him to give up his career in financial services to focus on writing. Besides being an author, he is also an Indian-government diplomat, a host for a TV documentary series, and a film producer.

Amish is passionate about history, mythology and philosophy, finding beauty and meaning in all world religions. His books have sold more than 6 million copies and have been translated into over 20 languages. His *Shiva Trilogy* is the fastest selling and his *Ram Chandra Series* the second fastest selling book series in Indian publishing history. You can connect with Amish here:

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AMISH
&
THE IMMORTAL WRITERS' CENTRE



HarperCollins *Publishers* India

First published in 2020

This edition published in India by HarperCollins *Publishers* in 2022
4th Floor, Tower A, Building No. 10, Phase II, DLF Cyber City,
Gurugram, Haryana – 122002
www.harpercollins.co.in

2 4 6 8 10 9 7 5 3 1

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P-ISBN: 978-93-5629-103-4

E-ISBN: 978-93-5629-104-1

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Typeset by SŪRYA, New Delhi

Printed and bound at
Thomson Press (India) Ltd



This book is produced from independently certified FSC® paper to ensure responsible forest management.

Om Namah Shivāya
The universe bows to Lord Shiva.
I bow to Lord Shiva.

Nāsti me jātiḥ nāsti me dharmapantḥāḥ
Nāsti vā bhāṣā nāsti me rājyam
Eko'yaṁ paricayaḥ ekaiva vyaktitā
bhāratamātuḥ sutā bhāratamātuḥ sutā
Jīvanam mama ātmā vā
Karmam mama śraddhā vā
Bhāratamātre khalu bhāratamātre khalu
Yadi mokṣaprāptiḥ yadi vā sampraśnam
Ekā pratyuktiḥ ko'si praśnasya
pṛcchet adhyakṣaḥ yadi vā parameśaḥ
Ekā pratyuktiḥ bhāratamātuḥ sutā
Eko'yaṁ paricayaḥ ekaiva vyaktitā
bhāratamātuḥ sutā bhāratamātuḥ sutā

*Neither caste, nor religion,
Neither language, nor kingdom (state),
Only one identity I bear,
I am a child of Mother India.
My life, my soul,
My work, my faith,
Is all for Mother India.
Whether I attain Moksha,
or I stand on Judgement Day,
When asked who I am,
By the One Most High,
There will be only one answer:
I am a child of Mother India.
Only one identity I bear,
I am a child of Mother India.*

To the late Himanshu Roy,
My brother-in-law.

There is no person that I have admired more. Ever.
You were the shade that protected me.
The light that guided me.
There is no fear of death now.
For you are on the other side, my brother.
I will keep breathing. I will keep walking.
For you would expect that of me, my brother.
But the feet will stop someday ...
And that will be a good day.
For you will be on the other side.
Till we meet again ...
Till we meet again, my brother.



Acknowledgements

The acknowledgements written below were composed when the book was published in 2020. I must also acknowledge those that are publishing this edition of the Legend of Subeldev. The team at HarperCollins: Swati, Shabnam, Akriti, Gokul, Vikas, Rabul, and Udayan, led by the brilliant Ananth. Looking forward to this new journey with them.

Professionally, the last few years have been fabulous. Personally, they have been terrible beyond imagination. There was a time when I was so exhausted by the repeated blows of fate, that in one of my morning prayers, I looked up and screamed at Lord Shiva to stop testing me further. How this phase of my life will end, I don't know. Our ancients said that grief is the path to personal growth. I hope they were right ... But I know what has kept me going these last few years: my writing. It has been my refuge. It stops me from giving up. I'd like to thank all those who help me live, by helping me write.

My father-in-law the late Manoj Vyas, and my brother-in-law the late Himanshu Roy. Two men I have admired deeply. Their sense of honour, grace and dignity continues to inspire me.

Neel, my young son, my life, the purpose of my soul. The purest joy in the world is having him run into my arms shouting, 'Daaaaad!'

Bhavna, Anish, Meeta and Ashish, my siblings and my sister-in-law, for all that they do. They read the first draft, usually as each chapter is written. More importantly, they pick me up when I'm down. They are the souls I chose to be born with in this life. My soul chose well.

The rest of my family: Usha, Vinay, Shernaz, Preeti, Donetta, Smita, Anuj, Ruta, Mitansh, Daniel, Aiden, Keya, Anika and Ashna. For their consistent faith and love.

Gautam, the CEO of my publisher Westland, and Karthika, Shikha, Deepthi and Sanghamitra, my editors. If there are people outside of my family who are the closest to this project, it is this group. More than friends, they are like family now. Special thanks of course to Deepthi, who is in charge of the Writers' Centre. I look forward to doing many books in the Writers' Centre with her. The rest of the marvellous team at Westland: Arunima, Christina, Divya, Jaisankar, Krishnakumar, Madhu, Mustafa, Naveen, Neha, Nidhi, Raju, Sanyog, Sateesh, Satish, Shatrughan, Srivats, Sudha, Vipin and many others. They are the best team in the publishing business.

Aman, Vijay, Sharvika, Shubhangi, Padma, Seema and the rest of my colleagues at my office. They take care of my business work which gives me enough free time to write.

Hemal, Neha, Hitesh, Harsh, Punit, Beverly, Geetika, Prakash, Harshada and Team OktoBuzz. They have made most of the marketing material for the book, including the fantastic cover, and all the digital activities. I have worked with them for many years. Like fine wine, they get better with age. Mayank, Deepika, Sneha, Naresh, Vishaal, Sarojini, Kirti and the Moe's Art team, who have driven media relations and marketing alliances for the book. Calm and wise in media relations, they are among the best media managers I have ever seen.

Ashish Mankad, a brilliant designer, and more importantly, a thinker, who helps guide and drive the art for my books.

Satya and his team who have shot the new author photos that have been used on the inside cover of this book. He made a rather ordinary subject look better.

Preeti, a publishing industry wizard, who works on the international deals for my books.

Caleb, Kshitij, Sandeep, Rohini, Dharav, Heena, Mohan and their respective teams, who support my work with their business, legal and marketing advice.

Mrunalini, a Sanskrit scholar, who works with me on research.

Aditya, a passionate reader of my books, who has now become a friend and a fact-checker.

Brij, Narayan, Archana, Navin, Sandeep and Ravichandran, my team at Nehru Centre, London, for their love and support.

Rajinder Ganju, from Sürya, who has typeset this book.

And last, but certainly not the least, you, the reader. Your consistent affection, understanding and encouragement is what I deeply cherish. Thank you so much. Lord Shiva bless all of you.



Foreword

I have always said that all my stories are the blessings of Lord Shiva. How they come to me, how they develop in my imagination, how I see them, everything, is His blessing. But He has blessed me beyond my capacity. I cannot write faster than a book every one-and-a-half to two years. And at that pace, I will die before I write down all the story ideas that He has already blessed me with. I cannot carry these stories to my cremation pyre.

Hence, the idea of a Writers' Centre. It was a suggestion from my team, and it made eminent sense to me. I work with a team of writers, to whom I relate the complete story, and the research material to be read. They then write the first draft, which I then work upon. So, the genesis of the story and the final writing is done by me, while a team drives the first draft. We have tried our best to ensure that the books from the Writers' Centre read like any other book of mine. But we wanted to honestly state, upfront, that these books are a result of a team effort, and not just my sole work. The writers in the Writers' Centre are paid, regardless of the fate of the book. And their names are on the cover, if they choose it. If they choose to remain anonymous, for whatever reason, then the co-credit is given to the Writers' Centre.

Now, what is this book about?

A giant tide of history for the last 2,000 years was defined by a flood of horrific violence. It wiped out all the ancient cultures of the world: Pagan Rome, mystical Egypt and Greece, Zoroastrian Persia, idol-worshipping Central America, and too many others. But one ancient civilisation stubbornly refused to die. One proud culture refused to break or be overwritten. It retreated at times, but is one of the rare few still left standing. And that civilisation is India.

When invaders came to our land, we needed heroes and heroines to lead us. Defend us. And we had many such—brave men and women who had the courage and determination to fight. But if you read our history in detail, you will find that the biggest challenge for these heroes and heroines was to somehow unite our fissiparous society to fight those foreigners. We did have a national consciousness, as the millennia old Vishnu Purana evidences, but the default tendency in us Indians is to fight each other. Infighting is our favourite pastime, which we stop only briefly when the enemy is at our doorstep. So this was the biggest challenge that confronted all our heroes and heroines—from Harihara and Bukka Raya, to Maharana Pratap, to Chhatrapati Shivaji, to Lachit Borphukan, to Rani Abbakka, to Maharaja Ranjit Singh, to Mahatma Gandhi, to Netaji Subhash Chandra Bose, to countless other great men and women. The challenge, always, was how to stop our constant infighting.

These leaders succeeded where others failed. They succeeded in uniting us.

Sadly, many of these heroes and heroines have been airbrushed out of our history books. And if there is one thing these great men and women demand from us, their descendants, is that we remember their tales. That we share their stories. That we celebrate them. And learn from them.

Today, more than ever, we need to hear these stories, the chronicles of these great people who united us and saved our land by making us confront the brutal foreign invaders, beat them back and survive.

This book is of one such hero, a fictional story inspired by real events. The story of the magnificent King Suheldev of the 11th century.

It is depressing that most people across modern India have not even heard of the name of this great son of India, let alone know his story.

But worse, and heartbreakingly, at present, we are a divided India. And therefore, there is dispute over which caste or community he belonged to. Many communities claim that he was one of them. British gazettes, written many centuries after the life of this remarkable warrior, can be used to support many competing claims. I don't know what the truth is. My truth is that he was Indian. A proud son of Mother India. So, I have not taken any stand on this. I do not say which caste he belonged to.

All I say in this book is that King Suheldev was a proud Indian, who fought to protect Mother India at a time when our land was threatened by the most vicious of foreign invaders. He united all—Hindus of all castes, Buddhists and Indian Muslims—under his leadership. They fought for their motherland. And won us a glorious victory. Heady, the thought, but there also is a learning from this great son of India: when we unite, as Indians, we are unbeatable.

My patriotism and love for Mother India compels me to narrate this story. But there also is another reason.

Regardless of community claims, one thing almost everyone agrees on is that King Suheldev was a *Shiva bhakt*—a devotee of

Lord Shiva. And as I said earlier, I believe that my storytelling skill is a blessing from the Mahadev too. One day I will leave this mortal body, and before I enter my next life, I may get an opportunity to stand before Lord Shiva. And then, the Lord may demand an answer from me. He had given me a talent: I could tell stories; then why did I not tell the story of one of His greatest devotees, King Suheldev? I will not hang my head in shame before my God. I must write. I will tell you the story of the time when, led by this great hero, India stood up, united, and defeated an army made of the fiercest and most brutal warrior-race that the world has ever seen, the Turkic hordes from Central Asia. We had not invited them. We had not picked a fight. They came. They plundered. We fought. We won. We saved our culture. When we Indians stand together, shoulder to shoulder, we are undefeatable.

If only we can be united.

If only ...

I dream of the day when we will all say in one voice:

Jai Suheldev! Jai Maa Bhaarat!

Glory to King Suheldev. Glory to Mother India.



Chapter 1

Somnath, India, 1025 AD

The Indian warrior snarled, the veins on his forehead standing out starkly, his powerful biceps straining with effort, as his large, calloused hands squeezed the life out of his Turkic opponent. His foe hammered desperately on his broad chest, then clawed at his eyes. But the Turk's strength was almost spent and his feeble efforts made little impact on the grim warrior, who continued to ruthlessly strangulate the man he straddled.

The Turk's face turned red and his eyes bulged. Then his tongue protruded and he lay motionless. The Indian warrior continued to press down on his enemy's neck for a little while longer, then raised the head and banged it down hard on the rocky ground, cracking the skull. Just to be certain. Suddenly overcome with weariness, he let go of the dead man and staggered to his feet.

The warrior stood tall, with taut muscles that rippled across his lean frame, broad at the shoulders and chest, narrowing down to a slim waist and muscular legs. Innumerable scars criss-crossed his dark skin. Several new wounds had been added to his body today. He gingerly stretched his battered limbs, trying to ease the exhaustion and pain pervading his body.

A wounded Turk, a short distance away, saw his opportunity.

With massive effort, he got up, grabbed a sword and swung hard at the Indian warrior. Despite his tiredness, the warrior's innate agility and battle-honed reflexes saved him. He swayed back, the sword narrowly missing him. The momentum of the swing carried the sword safely past the warrior and left his attacker's right side exposed. The warrior punched him hard on the jaw, knocking him down. The sword slipped out of the Turk's hand.

The stunned Turk slowly tried to get up again. He managed to get into a kneeling position. The warrior scooped up the sword that had clattered to the ground, raised it high and thrust it down vertically into the back of the Turk's neck, right up to his heart. An instant kill.

The warrior rested on the sword. Exhausted. Bleeding. But he knew that there was no respite to be had. He was the crown prince of Shravasti, in the north of India. His soldiers and he had come rushing to Somnath, in the western coastal land of Gujarat, to join the Indians gathered there to protect the legendary Shaivite temple from the Turkic invader, Mahmud of Ghazni. They had just battled the advance guard and skirmishers of the Turks. They knew that the main Turkic army was yet to arrive. They had to rally. Once again.

The Indian warrior from Shravasti spoke to himself. *Come on, Malladev. Straighten up. Get moving. Regroup.*

But he continued to stand there. Leaning on the sword that was buried into the kneeling Turk. Breathing hard. Pumping oxygen into his lungs. Giving his fatigued body some more time.

'My prince ...'

Malladev turned towards the sound. He saw his loyal comrades all around him. All lying prone on the ground.

All dead. All except one. One look at the man's wounds and Malladev knew that it was only a matter of time before he would join the others. But he tried not to let it show on his face.

'Come on, Wasim,' Malladev said, his voice hoarse and tired. 'Are you going to let a few scratches like those slow you down?'

Wasim smiled weakly, then grimaced as his body was wracked by a bout of coughing, phlegm and blood coming to his lips. Malladev gently held him, massaging his back.

As his coughing subsided, Wasim spoke softly. 'We showed those Turkic bastards ... didn't we?'

'We sure did,' Malladev said and smiled.

'But ... there will be more ...' said Wasim.

Malladev kept quiet. He knew Wasim was right.

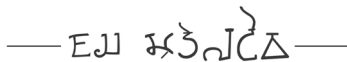
'Great prince ... You need to fall back ... into the sanctum sanctorum. ... It's the last line ... of defence.' Wasim's words came out in an agonised whisper. Then his body spasmed, and he lay still.

Malladev embraced Wasim's body, then gently laid him down. 'May our Mother India bless you, my friend. May she always honour your sacrifice.'

Then Malladev rose slowly, whispering the words that always gave him strength. 'Om Namah Shivaya.'

The universe bows to Lord Shiva. I bow to Lord Shiva.

Then he limped slowly. Towards the main temple. Wasim was right. There was no time for rest. His job was not done. His life was not done. Not yet.



Outside, the ocean waves lazily washed the land as they did every day, oblivious to the human tragedy taking place on the

seashore. As the water swallowed more of the evening sun, the nearly cloudless sky glowed with vibrant shades of red, orange and purple. It was a surreal, beautiful sight, which may have been admired in a different time. But, at this point, the world seemed to be surrendering to vicious savagery. For at one of the holiest sites of probably the oldest surviving religion of the world, bodies of over-civilised people, and the temples of their Gods, were being laid to waste by foreign barbarians.

The Turkic forces were spreading rapidly through the huge temple complex, moving inexorably towards the main structure at the heart of the massive compound; the great shrine to Lord Shiva, in His form as the *Lord of the Moon God*, the *SomNath*. To the Indians, the Turks looked like the Chinese, with their round faces and slit-like eyes. But the actual Chinese knew the Turks as barbaric warrior nomads from Central Asia, and considered it wise to be afraid of them. For the Turks were people who were trained for one art alone: the art of killing.

Columns of smoke rose from various buildings of the temple complex. The corpses littered the ground. Statues of silver and gold lay strewn across the floors—broken, damaged, defiled. A group of Turkic soldiers laughed as they yanked at the golden horns on a massive statue of Lord Shiva's bull, Nandi. As the horns finally came loose, the men roared with glee and shouted obscenities.

As reverberations of the Turkic victory grew, so did the desperate pleas of the injured Indians barricaded in the sanctum sanctorum, the inner refuge of this, one of the greatest temples on the planet.

'Save us, great Mahadev ...'

'Show your power ...'

'Strike down those fanatics ...'

‘Why are you testing us like this?’

There did come a response—just one.

Thud! Thud! Thud!

A loud, menacing hammering at the doors of the sanctum sanctorum.

Malladev, who had remained silent till now, looked up at the barricaded door. His tears mingled with the blood that trickled down his face. The viscous mixture seeped into his mouth.

Bitter.

Like the destiny of his land. Of his faith. Of his people.

He looked up at the great *Shiva Linga*, the symbol of Lord Shiva, the *Mahadev*, the *God of Gods*.

His companions, just a dozen of them, edged closer together and exchanged anxious glances. This motley, ragtag bunch of bruised, battered men—many of them Brahmins who had never lifted a weapon till this day—were all that was left of an army of almost fifty thousand that had gathered to protect the fabled, stupendously wealthy Somnath temple.

A Turkic officer bellowed from the other side of the door. ‘Open the door now or be tortured to death!’

Malladev drew in a deep breath. But he did not say anything. He held the Shiva Linga tight. Drawing strength from the magnificent idol.

On the other side of the door, even as the looting and the pillaging continued, one column of soldiers maintained discipline and marched resolutely towards the sanctum sanctorum. They were Sultan Mahmud’s personal guards, elite warriors handpicked to accompany him everywhere in battle. Unlike the rest of the Ghazni army, which wore green tunics, the Sultan’s guards had their own distinctive uniforms. In peacetime, they wore white. But when they went into battle,

they were dressed all in black, the image of a roaring lion embroidered on their sleeves in white thread.

The marks of the long, exhausting battle were clearly visible on them, but they were in far better shape than the last defenders of the temple.

At a signal from their Turkic captain, ten men charged at the massive doors of the sanctum sanctorum with a battering ram. It crashed into the doors with a resounding bang, but barely made any headway. The doors stood resolute.

The Turks backed up. Took aim again. And charged. Heavy timber slammed into the doors with greater force this time. A minor creak escaped from the doors. The battering ram was readied again. Positioned just right. To collide with the central joint. The Turkic officer gave the order and the battering ram assaulted the door once again. Some of the doors' mighty hinges finally gave way. A crack of light filtered through, revealing the flickering shadows of the Indians who still clung on to the hope of defending their God, of defending their land's honour.

Malladev now touched his forehead to the idol's base, his eyes closed. Giving his final veneration to his God. He knew that he would not get another chance.

He whispered, 'We may die today, great Shiva ... But we will return. We will return in the millions ...' Malladev turned to his fellow defenders of the noble land of India, as his voice rose louder. 'We will return! We will rebuild! We will reclaim our Lord's honour! I swear on the name of the holiest of them all, Lord Shiva!'

The words infused the power of the Lord into the men huddled around him. Straightening their backs. Stiffening their resolve.

Malladev raised his hand high, pointing his sword at the door. 'Until death!'

'Until death!' bellowed the proud Indians alongside him.

And then, one of them shouted ancient words of immense power. Words that have electrified Indians for millennia. Words that reminded the Indians that they were Gods. That each one of them was a Mahadev.

'Har Har Mahadev!'

We are Gods!

Thud. Thud. Thud.

The battering ram was still at it with machine-like precision. The Turkic cries of maniacal pleasure at wreaking havoc were growing louder.

'Har Har Mahadev!'

We will die like Gods!

The huge doors of the sanctum sanctorum burst open with a loud crash.

'Har Har Mahadev!'

We will return like Gods!

The Turks charged into the hallowed sanctum sanctorum of one of the holiest temples in the world, screeching like beasts.

'Har Har Mahadev!' roared Malladev, as he and his fellow Indians charged at the Turkic defilers.

The rage and defiance of the defenders stopped the advancing Turks in their tracks. The barbarians did not expect such resistance. Many Turks were killed in the initial rush. But they outnumbered the defending Indians by many multiples. They just kept coming. And coming. And coming.

Each Indian took down at least five Turks before he fell. But fall they all did.

Fall they all did.

Till the only one left standing was Malladev. Exhausted beyond measure. Injured beyond human capacity to bear. Bleeding desperately. Screaming all the time. He kept fighting. Kept fighting.

Alone.

Against too many to count.

He did not throw his sword down in surrender. He did not waver. He did not plead for mercy. He kept fighting.

Malladev thrust his sword into the belly of an attacker. As his victim fell to the ground, the sword slipped out of Malladev's blood-soaked hand. He reached quickly to his side for his last knife. Swung it across to slash through a Turk's throat. Some enemies pushed him hard against the wall. The knife slipped out of his hands.

There were ten people around him now. All stabbing him at the same time. Slicing blades into him. Again. And again. And again. Brutally. Without respite.

And yet, without any weapons, Malladev kept fighting. He kept fighting. Slashing his nails across the eyes of one opponent, punching another in the throat. Screaming in fury all the time.

A loud commanding voice was heard. 'Step back!'

The Turks immediately obeyed. Their heads bowed in respect. A massive man, with an ugly, battle-scarred face, came forward.

Malladev was against the wall. Panting desperately. Bathed in blood. Drowning in agonising pain. Staring with defiance at the gigantic man standing in front of him.

The sultan. Yamin-ud-Dawla Abul-Qasim Mahmud ibn Sebuktegin. More commonly known as Mahmud of Ghazni.

Mahmud held his right hand out. His mighty war sword, dripping with blood, came into view.