

# TAPAS

A Divine Quest



*Divyakul*

Series: Part 1



**SHREYA**

## Chapter 1

# A Taste of Divinity

Faces flashed by in Mahil's vision as he continued to run as fast as possible.

"He has decided to go meet him."

Down the main corridor, rushing through the parting crowd, he willed his feet to move as fast as possible.

"Why? He didn't say."

The loud ding in front of him alerted him to the fact that someone was keeping the door to the elevator open for him.

Not even bothering to be grateful, Mahil turned sharply to the right in front of the waiting elevator doors. He threw himself through the rarely used door to the stairs, his feet soon tapping on the stairs on his rampage to the ground floor.

"MAHIL! YOU'LL BREAK YOUR NECK! JUST CALL YOUR BROTHER!"

No. No, he couldn't call him. After what he had heard, he wanted to talk to him face-to-face. He wanted to shake him hard. To shake loose the maddening plan that he was set to follow.

"He has decided to go meet him."

Reaching the ground floor, he pushed himself through the gate, finally arriving at the main lobby.

"Where is he?" Mahil thought desperately, turning his head from one side to the other, all in hopes of finding him. His legs ached from exertion, but he could not let the pain stop him.

"MAHIL! WILL YOU STOP AND PLEASE LISTEN?"

"Why is Bhavya yelling at you from your pocket?"

Mahil turned around as fast as he could towards the source of the voice. The action made him lose his balance, and a hand shot forward to steady him.

"Whoa. What's the rush, little brother?"

"VALLABH BHAIYA!<sup>1</sup> THANK GOD! MAHIL'S GONE CRAZY!"

Without breaking eye contact with his brother, Mahil pulled the phone out of his pocket and disconnected the call. His cousin's voice finally vanished.

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<sup>1</sup> Bhaiya: Older Brother | Any older male

"She's going to kill you for that. You know this, right?"

"I heard you're going to meet him," Mahil said instead, not willing to let his brother sidestep the issue.

In front of him, Vallabh sighed and before directing a calming gaze at him.

"It's going to be fine, Mahil."

Mahil would believe his brother, if he wasn't brushing down the front of his suit with his right hand at the same time, letting his fingers run over the buttons of his jacket.

"I can't believe they are letting you go."

"They trust me to know what I am doing, Mahil."

"Just like they trusted the ones before you."

"You wound me. Have I lost your trust so easily?" It's the teasing tone in his big brother's voice that made Mahil snap.

"It's not you I don't trust! It's him! He's killed, what, 57 men by now? All who dared to make the same request that I know you are going to make! Forgive me if I am just a little bit concerned."

There was a hysterical edge to his words, Mahil knew, which was unlike him. However, he found it hard to shake away his fears and frustration.

Instead of answering Mahil, Vallabh pulled him into a hug. Despite his anger and frustration, Mahil couldn't help but slightly melt into it. That was the thing about his big brother. No matter the situation, he had always been able to somehow make him feel safe.

It was frustrating that even though it was Vallabh whom Mahil was angry at, Vallabh was also the only one he felt calm with. For Mahil, whose first memory was that of his brother, it was hard to ever toss his brother out of his mind, even in anger.

"I know the risks, Mahil. But the circumstances are complicated, and I have to give it a try."

"But—"

"You know I have to."

For a few seconds, Mahil said nothing. His hands clenched tightly as he fisted the back of his brother's jacket into his hands.

"Then take me with you."

At that, Vallabh pulled back, looking Mahil in the eye even as his hands remained on Mahil's shoulder.

"You know it's not safe."

"If you're going, then I am going."

"Mahil—"

"You have no argument, Bhaiya. If you stop me for any reason, then the same should apply to you. If you are going to a place you think my brother will be fine, then surely you can take your own brother there as well!"

"..You know it's different," Vallabh whispered, and Mahil let out a tired sigh.

"Usually yes. But given the man you are going to meet? Both you and I are insects to him."

A small smile tugged on Vallabh's face, a clear sign that Mahil had won this round.

"Lead the way."

Somehow, the ease of his brother's agreement scared Mahil more than anything else that had happened until that moment.



"You hung up on me."

"I did," Mahil replied without missing a beat. Despite the frosty look on her face, Mahil refused to give an inch.

Though separated by a screen, Bhavya still leaned forward with narrowed eyes. As if trying to stop him from doing something stupid by just glaring at him.

Like that had stopped Mahil from doing anything stupid in the last 22 years.

"Tell me again," she began, "why you thought this was a good idea."

"I wasn't going to let him go in alone!" Mahil retorted, and the scowl on his cousin's face deepened.

"So you thought that you were the best option?" The finger that she extended was accusing and hurtful, even from the tablet that was stuck to the seat in front of him. Before Mahil could reply, Vallabh interjected.

"Bhavya. Perhaps you can make sure he knows what he's doing then?"

Leave it to his brother to calm down Bhavya by flattering her even in this situation. It was almost funny how easily Mahil knew that Bhavya was going to fold.

"Right. A debriefing." Bhavya nodded her head, leaning back from her camera. One of her hands covered her face as she started to think.

From the gap of her fingers, Mahil could still spot her glaring at her laptop screen. Maybe she wasn't completely over her anger. Mahil smiled at her brightly, at which she let out a huff. It was enough, though, to get her to calm down.

"You're going to IIT Delhi," Bhavya began, bringing down her hand. "Yesterday, Vallabh Bhaiya got a call from Divyajan<sup>2</sup> Ved, a part of Manas, who informed him that they would be entering Delhi."

"How nice of him," Mahil said dryly.

"It was," Vallabh hummed. Mahil chose to ignore him.

"Normally, a call from him regarding a visit to our home city would have ended here."

"But it didn't."

"But it didn't," Bhavya confirmed. "Divyjan Ved stated that he was visiting Delhi because their *guide* was not willing to travel to either Jamshedpur or Bangalore."

"They are pretty far away from the Himalayas," Vallabh mused. Mahil and Bhavya chose to ignore him once more.

"Divyajan Ved went on to add that they would have arranged a meeting in any other city, but their guide had specifically stated that he wanted to talk to the current Vishnubhakta<sup>3</sup>."

"I'm flattered, honestly," Vallabh commented.

"Are you?" Mahil growled, finally looking at his brother again. His brother looked up from his phone, looking confusedly at Mahil for a moment.

Vallabh did make an excellent point, Mahil knew. As a Vishnubhakta, he was the prime and chosen devotee of Vishnu. He was one of the only two Divyajan in Vachi, the karmic priest of the god he was devoted to.

Despite his accomplishments, an invitation from Parshuram himself was still an honour, as far as the world was concerned.

"It's not every day you get an invite from Bhagwan<sup>4</sup> Parshuram." Vallabh pointed out.

"Of course it isn't," Mahil snapped back. "Because he chose to abandon us."

"You know that's not true, Mahil."

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<sup>2</sup> Divyajan: Divya + Jan | Divine people

<sup>3</sup> Vishnubhakta: Vishnu + Bhakta | Vishnu's devotee

<sup>4</sup> Bhagwan: Divine lord

"Is it not? He's a Vishnuavatar<sup>5</sup>. If there was any Divyakul<sup>6</sup> he should have chosen to guide, it should have been us!"

"Mahil—"

"We are Vachi! The voice of Vishnu and Lakshmi on earth! And yet he chose to guide the followers of Brahma and Saraswati instead! It should have been US!"

The light pitter-patter of the rain outside broke through the thick silence in the car as Mahil tried to calm himself. The person driving their car today was professional enough to not say anything.

Mahil stole a glance at Bhavya, who looked deeply troubled. Different they may be, but Mahil knows that she, who is his cousin by blood and sister in all ways that matter, agreed with him on this.

Almost everyone in Vachi did.

Slowly, Vallabh slid his mobile into his pocket.

"Devotion, Ambition, and Guidance. They are the balancing powers of Divyakul. Each Divyakul can have but two of them," Vallabh began. The words he spoke were the same ones that Mahil had heard his grandfather speak years ago.

"Because Vishnu and his avatars have a following so large, temples so diverse, they were deemed to have plenty of devotees. And no one can doubt the ambition of those who follow the path of Vishnu and Lakshmi," Bhavya continued.

"To balance the system, Bhagwan Parshuram chose to be the guide of the Manas. Even as an avatar of Vishnu, he embraced his role as a teacher and claimed his cause aligned more with that of Manas. And so the Vachi were left guideless," Mahil ended the tale, voice tinged with the same bitterness that always colored his grandfather's voice when recounting the events from the past.

"Brahma and Saraswati, Mahil, do not have the worshippers like our patrons," Vallabh continued quietly. "Is it so bad that they have a guide so divine?"

'Bhaiya,' Mahil thought as he turned to look forward, 'is a hypocrite.'

57 Vishnubhakta, since the dawn of Vachi, had gone to plead to Parshuram for his guidance or answers. The Vishnuavatar had been kind enough to return their remains to them.

For all his calmness, Mahil knows that Vallabh yearned for a guide more than almost anyone, is Vachi. After all, Mahil can still remember how his brother would ask their grandfather the same question after every retelling of the dreaded story.

*"Is it so bad? To ask for a guide that can sustain our belief?"*

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<sup>5</sup> Vishnuavatar: Vishnu + Avatar | Vishnu's incarnation

<sup>6</sup> Divyakul: Divya + Kul | Divine clan



"It is quite exciting, isn't it? We have been quite excited to show Divyajay Ved through our institute. Some of the mechanical projects here, we are sure, will absolutely delight him."

In any other situation, Mahil would have been listening to the man's prattle quite intently. In fact, he has been dying to pitch the idea of a household drone for a long time. However, there were certain factors to be considered.

Firstly, the man in front of him, their usher, was singing praises of someone Mahil was not at all feeling charitable about.

Secondly, this was, quite literally, the enemy territory.

It was a strange balance that had made Manas choose IIT Delhi of all places as their meeting point, he knew. As the administrative centre of the country and home to numerous businesses, Delhi was, naturally, the home to Vachi. Home to those who spoke with the voice of Vishnu and Lakshmi.

For Manas, the thoughts of Brahma and Saraswati, IIT Delhi was a haven in foreign territory, given that the place was a monument to both engineering and education.

The third, and largest reason behind Mahil's silence was the indescribable feeling that had infused him the moment he had entered the building.

Mahil could not understand how the man in front of him was able to talk at all. Though Mahil had never been shy of words, he had been unable to give voice to anything for some time.

"He doesn't know," Vallabh said to Mahil softly.

Turning his head towards his brother, Mahil frowned in confusion. What did he not...

...Oh

Mahil took a deep breath in trying to let himself feel again. The action almost rattled his brain around as he started to feel a rush of emotions he did not have words for.

His eyes felt soothed as if taking in the beauty of a meadow in the morning. With every breath, the smell of freshly fallen rain upon the ground made him feel deeply sated.

Even in the middle of an extremely busy building, his ears only seemed to be picking up sounds of cooing birds. Any tiredness from the journey seemed to be seeping out of his body with every single step.

All of this, though, still left Mahil unable to express the true essence of what he was feeling. To ask him to describe it to anyone else would be to ask him to describe to a blind person what the colour green looked like.

How could he describe something he knew they had never felt before? How could he describe the sheer comfort and completeness that left him as baffled as it left him wanting.

His brush with the powers above.

With divinity.

"I'm afraid I'll have to leave you here." The man spoke again, startling Mahil out of his thoughts.

"Thank you very much, Mr. Trivedi. Your ideas surrounding the integrated chips do sound revolutionary," Vallabh replied cordially.

Mahil felt his jaw drop as the men in front of him exchanged more pleasantries. Trying to avoid looking like the rudest person he might have come across, he somehow stammered his own thanks and watched the man walk away. The very next moment, he snapped his head around to look at his brother.

"You were actually listening to him?" Mahil pointed a finger at Vallabh as the two continued to walk down the corridor Mr. Trivedi had pointed out.

"Of course. His ideas were quite fascinating and marketable."

"You know that is not what I meant."

Having just reached the last turn in their path, Vallabh suddenly stopped and looked at Mahil seriously.

"Mahil. You asked me to bring you here, and I have. But, have you really realised just who you are about to meet?"

"What do you..."

"Meeting a divine being, any divine being, is not simple, Mahil. Even their presence can make you lose your senses and inhibitions. What you have been feeling since you stepped into this building is the awe that humans are always in when faced with gods and their avatars. And it will only increase."

"You mean..." Mahil swallowed, and Vallabh put his hands on Mahil's shoulders.

"In his presence, we don't know just what it will feel like, Mahil. Be ready and be patient."

"Why didn't he..."

"Mr. Trivedi can chalk it up to having a good day. Moreover, there is a reason why he won't come all the way. There is a good reason why not everyone knows where I am."

"And you?"

At that, Vallabh finally let go of Mahil as a small, proud smile crept on his face.

"I am a Divyjan, dear brother. I am Vallabh, Vishnubhakta of Vachi. The voice of Narayan and the wielder of chosen powers in his domain and that of his wife. I do have more tolerance than most."

"... Is that your official title, bhaiya? I didn't know you had an official title."

Letting out a small sigh, Vallabh started to walk away.

"Glad to know you are feeling better, brother."

Scrambling, Mahil chased after Vallabh.

"No, seriously! Is that a list of titles all Divyajans have, just you and Indira Di<sup>7</sup> have? Or did you come up with it on your own? Because let me tell you—"

Mahil's next words got lost in his throat as he finally made the turn. Their path had led them to the very centre of the building.

An open square space greeted the guests as several hallways led away from the cemented paths that formed the boundary of the courtyard in front of them.

In the middle of the courtyard was a small patch of grass. With no roof above it, the sunlight lit the grass and the trails left by those who frequently used the path as a shortcut.

In any other circumstances, in any other building, the grassy patch would not have given Mahil even a pause.

However, what he saw in front of him at this moment seemed to be an ancient painting set in the Western world. The pleasantly warm sunlight peeking in after the rain cast an ethereal glow on this unassuming patch of grass.

It might have something to do with just who occupied this small garden.

Standing in the middle of the grass was a man whom Mahil could surely call old but never weak. His white hair and beard reflected the sunlight that seemed to bend around him, giving him a glowing look.

Why did it matter what Vachi felt they were owed?

Why did it matter that Vachi was left without a guide?

What right did anyone have to ask this divine man of anything?

Surely those who came before him with demands deserved it?

Why did it matter what Mahil wanted?

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<sup>7</sup> Di: Short for Didi | Older Sister| Any older female

Why did Mahil matter at all?

Surely nothing mattered at all in the face of this man?

"Bhagwan Parshuram."

Vallabh's strangled voice snapped Mahil out of his trance. Even from this distance, though, the avatar of Vishnu had picked up what Mahil's brother had said.

"Child. Come here." The wind carried Parshuram's words, preserving their softness.

Even without thinking, Mahil allowed his legs to move towards the man who was somehow not a god and yet surely deserved to be called one. He allowed his body to flow how it wanted and let his thoughts wander.

He allowed himself to get on his knees and bend forward until his forehead touched the ground.

"Jai<sup>8</sup> Bhagwan Parshuram," Mahil whispered in a reverent tone. His own words snapped Mahil out of the haze he had fallen into.

What was he thinking? Had he really stopped valuing himself? All that he cared about? And yet he could not feel angry. Even though he had not consciously bowed in front of the man in front of him, Mahil knew better than to lift his head up before he was given permission to do so.

"Vishnubhakta. I do not recall inviting this child to meet me. All I remember is telling Brahmabhakta and Saraswatibhakta<sup>9</sup> to invite you and Lakshmibhakta, should you desire to come. And yet here he is."

What? No. The call to Vallabh hadn't included Indira, had it? But it did make sense. She, too, was a Divyajan.

On a more important note, did Mahil accidentally sign his brother's death sentence without his brother even uttering a single word? Surely not.

No. If Parshuram was going to curse or kill someone, at least it should be the person responsible.

"I beg your pardon, Bhagwan Parshuram. And I apologise for speaking when it was not me you asked this question. But I could not let Vishnubhakta Vallabh come alone."

"Oh?"

Swallowing his fears, knowing well just how easily this man could end his life, Mahil continued.

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<sup>8</sup> Jai: Hail/Long Live

<sup>9</sup> Saraswatibhakta: Saraswati + Bhakta | Saraswati's devotee

"He is a Divyajjan, Bhagwan Parshuram. A Vishnubhakta of an exemplary level with powers mortals can only dream of. But more than that, he is my brother. I could not let him come on his own."

Belatedly, Mahil realised that he had all but accused Parshuram of being a danger to his brother. Especially when the divine avatar had been the one to extend the invite.

A soft sigh echoed in the empty courtyard before Parshuram spoke again.

"Lift your head, children, and stand up"

Slowly, Mahil raised his head and looked up at Parshuram again, who seemed to be staring at him intensely. His bright eyes remained fixed on Mahil even as he stood up slowly.

"57 Vishnubhakta. 83 Lakshmi bhakta. I know the count well. And the world knows of my wrath well. And yet you stand here accusing me. Tell me your name, child."

"Mahil. Mahil, son of Urmila."

"The Vachi adheres to the old namings, then. Good. Tell me why I should spare you, son of Urmila."

"I do not think you should."

"Oh?"

"No," Mahil answered, trying to calm his nerves. "I begged to come, knowing well that I was not invited. I stepped into this building knowing well that I had not earned the right to be in your presence. I came in front of you even as my heart has often been bitter towards you. For that, any punishment you give me, I will accept."

"And will your brother?"

Startled, Mahil turned his head around to look at Vallabh. Vallabh, who still remained bowing, head touching the ground.

"Bhaiya?"

"Vishnubhakta, I see you remain on the ground."

"My brother may claim all the blame, Bhagwan, but it was I who brought him here. For that and as his older brother, it is I whom you should seek to punish."

Mahil's breath escaped him as he stared at Vallabh in horror. This was not how...

A loud laugh interrupted Mahil's thoughts as Parshuram burst out laughing. Bending down at his waist, he lifted Vallabh easily and straightened him. Letting Vallabh go, Parshuram stepped back and regarded the brothers with a smile.

The expression seemed to brighten up Parshuram's face even more, something that Mahil had not thought possible.

"This brings back memories, I must confess. It is also fitting for a Vishnubhakta to have such a reckless brother."

"Bhagwan?"

"Oh, there will be punishment, I assure you, sons of Urmila. But not as severe as you might expect."

"Bhagwan Parshuram." An unfamiliar voice spoke. Dazedly, Mahil realised that in the divine-induced haze, he had completely missed the fact that there was one more person in the courtyard.

"Ah, Brahmabhakta. Speak, my child."

A small bitterness emerged in Mahil's heart before he could stop it. Both Vallabh and he had been "child" to Parshuram, but a Manas was called "my child."

Turning his head around, Mahil instead focused on the unknown man, who was surely Divyajjan Ved. The Brahmabhakta.

Somewhere in his late 40s or early 50s, the man wore a checked shirt over plain black trousers. Combined with his thickly framed glasses, the man could easily be mistaken for a school teacher.

Which did fit the theme of Manas, once Mahil thought about it.

"Surely, this is not a fair bargain."

"You underestimate what devotion means, my child. It is pointless to discuss this further if you only mean to drown in undeserved and unrighteous anger."

"... Of course, Bhagwan Parshuram. As always, your guidance is a boon to me and to all of Manas."

Mahil wondered if the man had truly meant the praise or was simply trying to rub it in. He shook the thought away when Parshuram fixed his eyes on Vallabh.

"Vishnubhakta. Many like you have come before me, asking me one thing. In return, I always asked them one question. Many answered it correctly and yet lost themselves to despair. Will you be brave enough to answer it then?"

"That you would even consider me worthy to ask a question is an honour, Bhagwan. With the depths of my heart, I will try to answer you truthfully."

"Then tell me, should I have been the chhattra<sup>10</sup> of Vachi?"

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<sup>10</sup> Chhattra: Provider of shade

Instinctively, Mahil flinched, trying to erase the word from his mind.

Chhattra. The shade that guided.

That was what Parshuram was to Manas. What he wasn't to Vachi. It was a word none in Vachi ever spoke or even thought, both due to bitterness and hurt.

Why ask such a question?

Then again, if Parshuram wanted to evaluate Vallabh, he could not have chosen a better topic. Blunt, but fitting.

Mahil braced himself as Vallabh took a deep breath in before answering.

"No."

"Explain."

"Bhagwan Parshuram took up weapons to destroy the cruel kings and elevate the teaching class. Time and again, you have shed ambition and worldly pleasures to take a more humble path. Avatar, even if you are of Vishnu, the principles of Vachi would not have soothed your heart."

"Do you think the work of Vachi is immoral to me, Vishnubhakta?"

"That I cannot say, Bhagwan. I do know that amongst all Divyakul, you would abhor us the most. Vachi embodies both the righteous and unrighteous parts of the Kshatriya and Vaishya dharma. It is not a Divyakul you would have ever become as proud of as you are of Manas."

"A smart answer. A well-reasoned one. And though you wish it wasn't so, at least you can acknowledge it."

"I have been taught well."

"Indeed, and so I shall tell you all that I have come for. Listen to me and listen to me well, Vishnubhakta, the three things that I have to tell you."

What? Mahil glanced at Vallabh, who had stiffened up as well. Knowing that the next few words out of Parshuram will change their lives forever, Mahil fixed his eyes on the Vishnuavatar, intent on listening and absorbing every single word.

"First, the balance of Divyakul is no more. The three pillars, two present and one absent, are skewed forevermore."

"Second, Kailashansh will meet tomorrow at dusk, at a place where all go to burn and become a husk."

"Third, the chhattra for Vachi waits to be found. Though only the worthy can bring their guide around."

Utter silence reigned in the wake of Parshuram's three announcements. Each had been more shocking than the previous one.

However, it was the last thought that had rendered everyone speechless. Even the Brahmabhakta looked like he would never close his mouth. Mahil himself could barely comprehend anything, and Vallabh...

A harsh exhale drew Mahil's attention, and he saw Vallabh with his neck stiff and hands clenched.

"Why?" Mahil's brother asked in a heavy voice. "After so much... Why now?"

"That, I am afraid, is a question beyond me, child."

"Where should we even begin?"

"I have found," Parshuram spoke in a light voice, tilting his head to the side, "that humans, even avatars, are quite attached to their beginnings. And, Vishnubhakta?"

"Bhagwan Parshuram?" Vallabh answered in a calm tone, eyes never straying away from the ancient warrior who was now looking at Mahil with a smirk.

"Do take your brother along. It might be a boon that there are two brains here instead of one."

