

Horse of the Servant: Synopsis

Blood and Thrones Series, Part 1 by RV Menon

The Book

Horse of the Servant is a work of historical fiction set in 18th-century South India, following a Maratha cavalryman who survives Portuguese torture and shipwreck to become a pivotal figure in the kingdom that defeated the Dutch East India Company.

Key Arguments and Uniqueness

This novel fills a significant gap in Indian historical fiction. While the Mughal era and British colonialism dominate the genre, the remarkable story of Travancore under Marthanda Varma remains largely untold in literary form. The Battle of Colachel (1741), where an Indian kingdom defeated a European power and captured their commander, predates the better-known Indian Rebellion by over a century, yet it rarely appears in fiction.

The novel's uniqueness lies in three elements:

First, it centres an outsider's perspective. Nagoji Sawant arrives in Travancore as a shipwrecked stranger, allowing readers to discover the matrilineal Nair system, the pepper coast's political complexity, and the kingdom's strategic genius alongside him.

Second, it explores the human cost of state-building without easy heroics. Marthanda Varma's consolidation of power crushed the *Ettuveetil Pillamar* (Eight Noble Houses) and transformed a collection of feuding polities into a unified state. The novel asks what such transformation costs those caught in its machinery.

Third, it portrays the Dutch not as colonial monoliths but as desperate merchants, and gives historical figures like Captain Eustachius De Lannoy (who became Travancore's military architect after his capture) dimensionality rarely afforded to European characters in Indian historical fiction.

Storyline

The narrative spans 1738-1753, structured in four parts:

Book I: Chains and Surf - Nagoji is interrogated by the Portuguese in Goa, shipped south as a slave, and survives a monsoon shipwreck that claims his young comrade Keshavrao. He washes ashore on the Malabar coast and is brought to the attention of King Marthanda Varma and his cunning Diwan, Ramayyan.

Book II: Court of the Tiger - Nagoji trains cavalry for Travancore's nascent army, discovers the power

wielded by Malabar women through the matrilineal system, and falls into a dangerous attraction with Princess Revathi Bayi. The Dutch presence grows offshore as war approaches.

Book III: After the Dutch - The Battle of Colachel shatters Dutch power. Captain De Lannoy enters Travancore service, becoming both Nagoji's partner and his rival. To anchor Nagoji to the land, the King arranges his adoption into a Nair house and his marriage to Revathi Bayi, though she warns him he will always be a "guest" in his own children's lineage.

Book IV: Teeth of the Tiger - Nagoji rises to command cavalry under De Lannoy but faces a test when Pune offers him estates and status to return with intelligence. He burns the letter. When Dutch-backed revolt threatens the kingdom, Nagoji orders a scorched-earth strip through his adoptive mother's pepper fields, saving the state but wounding his marriage. The novel culminates in 1750's *Thrippadidanam* ceremony, when Marthanda Varma surrenders the kingdom to Lord Padmanabha, making it "God's own country." An aged Nagoji, asked what Travancore was like before, answers: "I miss what it cost."

Why This Story Matters

The novel recovers a pivotal moment when Indian polities demonstrated they could defeat European military forces, adapt foreign military technology without losing sovereignty, and build durable state structures. It offers contemporary readers a counter-narrative to stories of inevitable colonial victory, while honestly depicting the violence and moral compromise such resistance required.

The Series

Horse of the Servant is the first instalment of *Blood and Thrones*. The second book will follow Dharma Raja, Marthanda Varma's nephew and successor, as he faces Tipu Sultan's terrifying southward expansion. Dharma Raja held back the tide for years before making the fateful decision to seek British alliance, a choice that preserved the kingdom but planted the seeds of a different subjugation.

Word Count (Complete Manuscript): Approximately 120,000 words **Genre:** Historical Fiction / Literary Fiction