



Satyavati

a poem by C. John Holcombe

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INTRODUCTION

Satyavati is fiction, but derives from the popular romances of pre-Mogul India. The speaker is Hushang ibn Dilawar, ruler of the small sultanate of Malwa in what is now Madhya Pradesh in north-central India. Hushang came to the throne in AD 1406, inheriting the kingdom from his father who had declared himself independent of the Sultans of Delhi after Tamberlane's invasion of 1398. Hushang introduced a policy of religious toleration, encouraged sufis and Islamic clerics to settle in the kingdom, and employed many Rajput (Hindu) soldiers in his army. Most of Hushang's wars were with neighbouring sultanates, but he is shown in the poem as a typical Islamic ruler—dispensing justice at the durbar, maintaining a splendid court, and in extending the power of Islam. Hushang died in 1435, his ineffectual son was deposed a year later, and Malwa

was then ruled by other noble families until annexed by Akbar in 1568.

India has many poems telling the love of Islamic rulers for Hindu princesses, most of them ending badly. Hushang's misfortunes stem from his character—his distrust of Satyavati's brother, whose death he engineers, his massacre of Chatrapati's court, and his attack on the stronghold of Satyavati's family at Ujjain. The Rajputs practised sati, and Satyavati's death is likewise inevitable: she dies by taking powdered diamond.

SATYAVATI

The durbar's ended and the hours,
now stiff and yellowed in this heat
as calico or sun-browned wheat,
repose as supplicants—asleep.

I leave for prayer and soft impress
of bodies as the years are shed
in ministrations, tenderness:
the hot breath falters on my head.

And afterwards there's music, delicate
as moonlight dew-spread in the grass,
or ripples in the fountains lingered
over as the night winds pass.

In all India Oudh for evening,
dawn, Benares, shimmering white,
but dusty as it is Mandu
withholds its splendour for the night.

Hushang ibn Dilawar.
Sharp Sword of the Sultanate,
Pillar of the World and Faith,
And not in all a poppy-weight

of what I would be were my fate
in just relation to my state,
or if the plucked sarangi spelt
the syllables that choke the heart.

Wide are my realms—hot, mellow
wheatlands, thick with cotton and
with saffron, pomegranates, yellow
citrons: scented all of them

with pungent odours of the fields,
with smell of rodents and of oxen,
and cool that every coppice yields
in steeps of quietness and shade.

A regal land, and won by conquest.
Mu'izz on his golden throne
casts his eye, covetous —
the envy in it chill as stone —

to lands of harvest, lands where still
the francolin and whistling dove
out of the air spring, and pleasant
hours follow the hunter as at will.

Here the tiger, skulking from
his fierce and fatal leap through trees
has the drum and beaters bring
him snarling forward to his knees.

Here the chamois and gazelle
skitter on the mountain slopes,
and sharpnesses of morning spell
contentment when the evening's come.

A land of peace encircled by
the Rajput princes. As I am
a true believer, son of Ghiyath,
of Mohammed and of Sam,

I strengthen and I build up
all the walls of old Malwa:
not as soul, impregnable,
is fortune when the heart is full.

But as those days which were a dawn
that seems uncertainly to touch
with a soft, slight pencil the silhouette
of temple and of minaret.

So is my recollection flooded
out with fever and regret,
as peacock of the sky at evening
turns in to indigo and jet.

And yet there was magnificence
in all that summer stretched before us.
A ripeness, plumpness: in the ground
a closed-in sense to every sound.

And with the days there grew the heat.
The trees turned yellow; springs dried up;
water-peddlers filled the street,
the sick child coughed itself to sleep.

Yet all the while more openly
of Satyavati, queen to be,
I gave my hopes full reign and they
rode beside me, constantly.

Her laughter full as running water
at the screens each day I heard,
or saw in merriment of dancers,
poplars when the tall winds stirred.

As days grew hot we rode away
but each man checked his water bottle,
that toggled, moist, thick lump of clay
beneath whose crust cool waters lay,

While through my courts in torrents twisting
like a stallion, plumed, at play,
from the fountains, wind assisting,
foamed the ephemeral flowers—

which soon burst, of course, with wealth
of steam on the hearth of stone,
but ever ringlets of bright water
fell oblivious, shimmering, alone,

That with the sound of showered thousands
of tiny droplets, diamond bright,
both by daylight and by moonlight
flowed the wail of wind-borne music.

Through the palace was such dancing,
heel to hand and heart to follow
the throb of drums and the dancing girl
has her sequined sashes whirl.

Weaving round the red hibiscus,
the perfumed mask, the auburn eye—
how long ago it was when I
rode beneath that jewelled sky.

A mottled, cool and kindly light
spread out from the fields and hills.
We reigned and recollection fills
again, again, what should have been.

One hundred strong we were, yet all
were well-armed, practised, each one tried
in exercise and daily battle:
Malwa's regulars were Hushang's pride.

That night went swiftly, then another.
No fires were kept as we went through
forest, mountain defile, keeping
wide from villages, so few

could know our progress or report
on path or purposes. We camped
and from the hills crept down and took
the sentinels and outer fort.

The realm was ours if we could seize
the Rajput princes in their palace.
But how forbidding were those walls,
the bristling sentries, lookout calls!

And most of all the deep, wide moat,
for still security was his
unless within that very hour
we took this fortress by the throat.

And into morning when the cool
autumnal moon had thrown a pool
of spangled silver in the water
that dipped and winked as we went in.

How level and how wide the thin, smooth
surface seemed to stretch away.
If only action could allay
the fears that brimmed from those walls.

At length we gained them, and their guards.
We gagged or throttled, threw them down —
when seventy men, aloft and breathless,
turned their thoughts toward the town.

The worst time was it for my doubt,
or hint of indecision, yet
in all I could not hope to trust
that somehow not a word was out.

I could not think the palace held
but sleepers in their garrisons:
my greatest venture, failure spelled
the end of this and all campaigns.

I have no recollection now
the source of this strange rush of fear,
or why that Dharmasoka loomed
so large in speculations here.

I knew inaction would restrain
the Prophet's mission in the plain
of Sind, of Gujarat, Bengal:
bring darkness to the land of Cain.

And yet because we came as sons
of Mahmud countless as the poplar
leaves turn yellow on the far
blue borders of the Darya,

because the same we came in triumph
through obsequious unbelievers,
bringing their land, their fat land, fallow,
under the yoke, under the harrow,

and more because of all on earth
I wanted one, an infidel,
as closest bride to beauty's self,
you think I did not know my worth?

I ruled as men must always rule:
in greatness and in magnificence:
from oppression deliverance
comes from greater, which is God's.

And also there was territory:
my father granted all their claims,
loyalty for loyalty,
he had no cause to turn his head.

And could the brother of my love,
my only love till days shall dim,
break off the manacles that held
me even as I looked on him?

To him in counsel, in affection,
constant as the evening star,
the fixed point through the storm and blaze,
the compass of my quiet ways.

His every look rekindled hers.
I saw her laughter, quick dark eyes,
her profile and impetuosity,
the sweep and follow of her dress.

But seventy men were with me; of
them Dharmasoka knew the most—
the plan to scale, where sentries post,
the route we took if all were lost.

Such heavy and abhorrent thoughts
was my heart weighed down with, I
could foray forward or forego
her laughter ever in my courts.

That shall not be. Mere janissary
can still between the night and day
return as sultan or delay
a shadow in the revelry.

We moved, and I made doubly sure
that Dharmasoka was not free
to act but in our plan as we
circuitously took the gate.

So all those fearsome walls fell ours
and only on one parapet
remained a knot of men who yet
with unwet steel awaited us.

To these I led my men and made
that Dharmasoka leap, and when
he would be followed I first bade
my men hold back and see what happened.

He dropped, and they drew back a pace,
then coolly and most civilly
called him traitor to his face:
went to meet him with drawn swords.

He fought, and well. The steely light,
for dawn was breaking, clear and bright,
flashed from his short sword and defied
all courses but to paradise.

Half mesmerised, amazed at me,
by Dharmasoka who would hew
by valour of his arm alone
a pathway to men's memory,

My men had wondered where they stood,
then stood no longer but leapt down,
and so did I, at once, but late.
Ill-fortune hemmed my brother round

and while it fought for him it sucked
out his blood and breath. My brother:
give me space to show this heart.
I did not plan this further part.

But he could mock and did, and dead,
still mocks me from his marble bed.
But we carried him with all
pomp and honour to his walls.

But would his sister there consent,
though all the vows be good as made,
the dowry even almost paid,
to be my consort nowl and queen?

Slow and formal as was fitting,
sad as though our souls were flitting,
down through daybreak, onto starlight:
do not wake him while we ride.

The razzle-dazzle of the dawn
fell sharp around us. Wearisome
we were, we were so too, and numb,
when we reigned at Ujjain.

And from them got such ugly words:
foolish, senseless, blasphemous:
No seed of ours shall salve your lust,
no daughter so dishonour us.

Would they so? And after this?
Hunt them up that I have sense.
Unless you'd have your kinsmen kiss
the blade that severs, obey in this.

Nothing. Therefore, soon as said,
as all was done for Chatrapati:
the fort, the family, the guards:
the whole of that vast palace dead.

Such blood there was, such blood I know
that sometimes even I awake
in a cold sweat, shuddering,
to feel inside the blow on blow.

But who shall mock the Dilawar?
The Merciful, the Compassionate
ascribe to Allah, we below
enforce observance of His state

requiring a submission absolute
to the Book and to the Life.
upon the lazy, superstitious,
we lay the knotted cord and knife.

And yet, and yet in Satyavati,
close to heart if not in faith,
such laughter, how the dark eyes shone:
I could not think her beauty gone.

Not here, at least, at Ujjain
beyond whose very parapets
she walked, she lingered, and had been
arrayed before me as a queen.

Where was she now? I tried for parley,
posed regretful, would release
to the last one any prisoners,
looked as hitherto for peace.

Nothing. No one. On the walls
but sentinels, indifferent.
I tried again: the trumpet calls
slow faded in the dry sand hills.

The fort was small, would not resist
for long the tumult of my men.
my terms were shouted; once again
the silence gathered, till it grew

hateful to my ears. I thought
of crimes that could be perpetrated
by a desperate, vengeful court.
I thought of all I'd planned and fought.

Show me Satyavati where
I see her living or you'll bear,
worse than torment or the cage,
the slow edge of my sword and rage.

Assault began. My men went out
and up the walls and overran
the promontories, and in the chambers
the faint smoke of the fires began

immediately, as though by signal
and each a cold spot on the heart.
We hastened the attack, but felt
victory at length depart.

For they fought well, the Rajput princes.
To the fires their jewelled wives
stepped behind as they as fiercely
to our swords gave up their lives.

Though we in desperation raced
up, down through rooms and dragged
the women from the fires and danger —
each one dazed and as a stranger

Shrieking, cursing—how they laughed,
their small eyes venomous with hate:
your queen is gone, gone, Prince!
Conqueror you come too late!

Screens we burst through, doors, curtains,
of hiding places all was bare,
until, in one last room and waiting
there was Satyavati, there

in greatest splendour. I have seen
the sky at evening damascene
with emerald and with tourmaline,
to her that beauty was a dream,

but with the radiance there was fretted
through a sorrow and a grief.
Slowly she moved, and from the sheaf
of inmost thought shook out its sense.

That is no sign or recognition
of the danger in the scene:
the fire and fire-wrecked devastation,
or she within it, wraith and queen.

Slowly she moved, her long arms
folded in respectful greeting.
Was this my recompense then, this
vague, sleepwalking sort of greeting?

She stopped and, as a liquid settles
languidly to its longed-for place,
moodily, regretfully
returned the brightness to her face.

Prince, be swift, make all withdraw.
There is not long for me to speak.
The poison in me turns its claw,
the life-blood in me stemmed. Remember—

eyes dimmed a moment, and dilated
as the consciousness was lost:
some thought beset her, who had crossed
the streams that bound our strip of life.

I do not know what more she sought
who staggered, recovered, caught
the sari-lengths of dress as breath
again filled up approaching death—

Prince, be valiant, and if
victorious, be compassionate.
Life is a strange dream, sharp but brief:
the wisdom in it comes too late.

Make virtue foremost. Do not pretend
the example empty of our kings
who ruled before you and will tend
our people to the end of things.

I wish you wives, honour, blest
with sons about you all your life:
stirruped in blood but honourable,
think of me when you have rest.

The pain grows deeper, I can feel
the ending on me sharp as steel.
Listen to me, Prince, when all
you have of life is as the dust.

Here you walked at times, and with
an arm stretched out accorded conquest
for me until the wastes of Sind,
to Kashmir, Ghazni in the west.

What is this now, Prince, to me
when family are gone, and fame
of home, faith, land and name
are empty as a childhood game?

I caught her but she swooned, heavily,
the last breath spilling out with blood.
Her eyes turned in, and all I'd won
was glittering and silent and undone.

Time turns raptures of the air
from radiance to emptinesses:
of those high lands, hard lands, where
is conquest when the fever lifts?

Though I, the son of the Dilawar,
went on the same, yet where I fought,
in shimmering mihrab or in marble court
I built as though in memory—

not because the concupiscent
shadow chisels the soft stone,
nor because her blackest umber
glows in arches after noon,

but because of some ineffable
embodiment of birth, of fate
inscrutable that governs all.
My court collects: the hour is done.

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GLOSSARY

Durbar. Public audience. Traditionally a court where the ruler would hear petitions or administer justice, generally before retiring to spend the hot afternoon hours in the harem.

In all India Oudh ... Popular Indian saying.

Mandu. Hoshang's capital.

Hushang ibn Dilawar. Sultan of Malwa 1406-35.

Sharp Sword of the Sultanate ... Laqabs, honorary titles adopted by Islamic rulers.

Sarangi. Musical instrument.

The syllables ... Presumably Satyavati's name.

Mu'izz. Mu'izz al din Mubarak Shah II, Sultan of Delhi 1421-34.

Francolin. Type of partridge.

Rajput princes. Rulers of Hindu kingdoms to northwest of Malwa in what is now Rajasthan.

Son of Ghiyath ... Islamic princes commonly claimed descent from famous figures of the past. Babul, founder of the Mogul Empire, claimed descent from Genghis Khan and Tamberlane, for example, and in this poem Hushang names the Goid conquerors of India.

I build up all the walls... Malawi was several times invaded by the Sultans of Gujarat and Delhi.

Satyavati. Hindu princess, sister to Dharmasoka.

At the screens ... Harem, usually extensive. Hushang's successor, Ghiyas Shah, collected 16,000 slave girls in his palace.

Dharmasoka. Hindu retainer at Hushang's court. Brother of Satyavati.

Chatrapati. Rajput ruler and relative of Dharmasoka.

The Prophet's mission ... Sind, Gujarat and Bengal, though all won for Islam by this time, were always under threat.

Land of Cain. Moslems include the Old Testament in their holy books.

Sons of Mahmud. Mahmud of Gazni, the first Islamic ruler to conquer large areas of India.

Darya. Syr Darya, draining the traditional homeland of the Turcoman peoples who founded many of the contemporary Islamic dynasties.

Janissary. Islamic troops of foreign origin, often Christian. Birth was no impediment to high office in Islamic world and many ex-slaves became generals or sultans.

Paradise. Soldiers fighting for Islam are promised paradise.

Ujjain. Town in Malwa, then in Hindu hands.

I gave my orders ... Massacres of families or entire inhabitants of forts and towns were not uncommon in the five hundred years of fighting in India between Hindus and Moslems.

To the fires ... Rajput women would usually commit sati rather than fall into the hands of Mohammedan invaders.

Sind. Delta of Indus and surrounding deserts, now Hyderabad in Pakistan.

Kashmir. A great prize, in fact seized for Islam by Shah Mirza in 1334.

Ghazni. Town in Afghanistan, formerly an Islamic state made famous by the conqueror, Mahmud of Ghazni, 971-1030.

Dilawar. Title bestowed on Hushang's father when Governor for the Sultans of Delhi.

Mihrab. Prayer niche in mosque, usually highly ornamented.