



# Satyavati

a poem by c. j. 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 suppliants — 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 dew collected in the grass,  
or ripples in the fountains lingered  
over as the night winds pass.

In these realms it's 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 full 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 evening's spread of quiet 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 on his knees.

Here the chamois and gazelle  
skitter on the mountain slopes,  
and sharpnesses of morning spell  
contentment when the day is done.

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  
the ancient ramparts of Malwa:  
not as the 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 silhouette  
of temple and of minaret.

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



And yet there was magnificence  
unbridled in the months 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.

So the torrents saw 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  
the 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 rose at those far 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 treachery of 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 my true 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 lives shall dim,  
break off the manacles that held  
me even as I looked on him?

His every look rekindled hers.  
I saw her laughter, quick dark eyes,  
her profile and impetuousness,  
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 broad 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 path to immortality,

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 now and queen?

Slow and formal as was fitting,  
sad as though our souls were flitting,  
down through daybreak, onto starlight:  
so 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  
the last of any prisoners,  
looked as hitherto for peace.

Nothing. No one. On the walls  
but sentinels, indifferent.  
I tried again: the trumpet calls  
but faded in the far dry 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 their fires began

immediately, as though by signal  
and each a cold touch on the heart.  
We hastened the attack, but knew  
our victory would 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.

So slowly moving, her long arms  
now folded in respectful greeting:  
was this my recompense, this poor  
vague, sleepwalking sort of meeting?

She stopped and, as a liquid settles  
but slowly to 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  
their 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 to 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, at length undone.

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

So I, the son of the Dilawar,  
went on the same, yet where I fought,  
in shimmering mihrab or in marble court  
became as though the 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 and fall,  
the ineluctable that governs all.  
The court collects: my hour is done.

## 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 Gorid 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.