

King Porus - A Legend of Old

- Michael Madhusudan Dutta

The life of Madhusudan Datta was a turbulent one. He faced poverty, maltreatment and misunderstanding. His early schooling was in Bengali and Persian. In 1837 he entered Hindu College where most of his education was in English. At first Madhusudan's literary career was directed toward English literature. Later he wrote in Bengali. In 1848 he moved to Madras where he worked as an English teacher. There he published his best and longest poem in English, 'The Captive Ladie' along with other English works.



His principal Bengali works, written mostly between 1858 and 1862, include a number of dramas written in prose, long narrative poems, and many lyrics. His most important prose drama *Sharmishtha* (1858) is based on an episode in Sanskrit from the *Mahabharata*. His poetical works include the *Tilottamasambhava* (1860) a narrative poem on the story of Sunda and Upasunda; the *Meghanada-vadha-kavya* (1861), an epic on the Ramayana theme; *Vrajangana* (1861), a cycle of lyrics on the Radha-Krishna theme; and *Birangana* (1862), a set of 21 **epistolary** poems on the model of Ovid's *Heroides*.

The poem *King Porus-A Legend of Old* describes the historical incident when Alexander the Macedonian king attacked king Porus, the scenes of battle field, and the image of milk white elephant, king's jeweled regal diadem and how the Euthanian conqueror saw him with gaping wounds and ordered his men to desist; and how Porus walked upto him not as slave but stood like an oak in Himalyan majesty, the scenes of battle field and when the mighty king of Maedon asked 'how he should be treated' he replied in royal pride, 'as a king.'

The poet describes the king as a whole heart that 'bled for freedom' with the heroic glow; as Ind's haughty son. The poem glorifies King Porus as a hero of Indian past and beseeches all to tower above others patriotism and uphold the glory of India.

turbulent / 'tɜːbjələnt /

epistolary / i'pɪstələri /

I

Loudly the midnight tempest sang,
Ah! it was thy dirge, fair Liberty!
And clouds in thundering accents roar'd
Unheeded warning from on high;
The rain in darksome torrents fell,
Hydaspes' waves did onward sweep,
Like fiery passio's headlong flow,
To meet th' awaken'd calling deep;
The lighting flashed bright- dazzling, like
Fair women's glance from 'neath her veil;
And on the heaving, troubled air,
There was a moaning sound of wail!
But, Ind! thy unsuspecting sons
Did heedless slumber,- while the foe
Came in stealthy step of death,-
Came as the tiger, noiseless, slow,
To close at once its victim's breath!
Alas! they knew not 'midst this gloom'
This war of elements, was burst,-
Like to an earthquake in the womb
Of a volcano,- deep and low-
A deadlier storm-on them to burst!

II

'I was morn' the Lord of Day
From gold Sumero's palace bright,
Look'd his own sweet clime,
But lo! the glorious flag,
To which the world in awe once bow'd,
There in defiance waved
On India's gales- triumphant-proud!-
Then, rose the dreadful yell,-
Then lion-king, each warrior brave
Rushed on the coming foe,
To strike for freedom-or the grave!
Oh Death! upon thy gory altar
What blood-libations freely flow'd!
Oh Earth! on that bright morn, what , thousands
Rendered to thee the dust they ow'd!
But 'fore the Macedonians driven'

womb / wu:m /

Fell India's hardy sons,-
Proud mountain oaks by thunders riven,-
That for their country's freedom bled-
And made on gore their glorious bed!

III

But dauntlessly there stood
King Porus, towering 'midst the foe'
Like a Himala-peak
With its eternal crown of snow:
And on his brow did shine
The jewell'd regal diadem.
His milk-white elephant
Was deck'd with many a brilliant gem.
He reck'd not of the phalanx
That 'round him closed-but nobly fought'
And like the angry winds that blow
And lofty mountain pines lay low,
Amidst them dreadful havoc wrought,
And thinn'd his crown and country's foe!
The hardest warriors, at his deeds,
Awe-struck quail'd like wind-shaken reeds:
They dared not look upon his face,
They shrank before his burning gaze,
For in his eye the hero shone
That feared not death;-but high-alone
A being as if of lightning made,
That scorch'd all that is gazed upon-
Trampling the living with the dead.

IV

Th' immortal Thund'rer's son,
Astonish'd eyed the heroic king;
He saw him bravely charge
Like his dread father,- fulminating:-
Tho' thousands' round him closed,
He stood-as stand the ocean rock
Amdist the lashing billows
Unmoved at their fierce thundering shock.

triumphant / traɪ'ʌmfənt /
havoc / 'hævək /

diadem / 'daɪədəm /
warriors / 'wɒrɪə /

But when th' Emathian conqueror
 Saw that with gaping wounds he bled,
 'Desist-desist!' -he cried-
 'Such noble blood should not be shed!'
 Then a herald was sent
 Where bleeding and faint,
 Stood, 'midst the dying' and the dead,
 King Porus,- boldly, undismayed:
 'Hail, brave and warlike prince!'
 Thy generous rival bids thee cease-
 Behold! there flies the flag,
 That lulls dread war, and wakens peace!'

V

Like to a lion chain'd,
 That tho' faint-bleeding-stands in pride-
 With eyes, where unsubdued
 Yet flash'd the fire-looks that defied;
 King Porus boldly went
 Where 'midst the gay and flittering crowd'
 Sat god-like Alexander;
 While 'round' Earth's mightiest monarchs bow'd.
 King Porus was no slave;
 he stooped not-bent not there his knee,-
 But stood, as stands an oak,
 In Himalayan majesty.
 'The mighty king of Macedon:'
 'Ev'n as a King,' replied
 In royal pride, Ind's haughty son.
 The conqu'ror pleas'd,
 Him forth releas'd:
 Thus India's crown was lost and won.

Glossary

dagzling	-	so bright that one cannot see for a short time
heaving	-	full of something/somebody
wail	-	a long loudcry expressing pain
stealthy step	-	quiet step/secretly
nurst	-	cared for
clime	-	a particular type of climate

fierce / fræs /
 monarchs / 'mɒnək /

lion / 'laɪən /

defiance	-	refusal to obey somebody
dreadful yell	-	fearful cry of pain/excitement
blood	-	libations
gory altar	-	altar covered with blood
rendered	-	to present something
Macedonias	-	of Macedonia
riven	-	divided (because of disagreement
gore	-	thick blood that has flowed from a wound in a violent situation
dauntlessly	-	not easily frightened
regal diadem	-	a crown worn especially as a sign of royal power
decked	-	decorated
phalanx	-	a group of people or thing standing close together
lofty	-	high
quailed	-	frightened
reeds	-	a tall plant with a hollow stem
scorched	-	burnt due to extreme heat
immortal	-	that lives for ever
heroic	-	great / courageous
fulminating	-	criticising angrily
gaping	-	wide open
desist	-	to stop doing something
herald	-	a person who carried messages from a ruler (in the past)
hail	-	to call, to greet, to attract attention
cease	-	to stop happening

Exercises

Word Power

(a) The poet has used a figure of speech **simile** in abundance through out the poem. A simile is a departure from the ordinary form of expression in order to produce a greater effect. In a simile a comparison is made between two objects of different kinds which have however at least one point in common. The simile is usually introduced by such words as like, as or so. Here are some examples from 1st 14 lines.

1. The lightning flashed bright dazzling, like
Fair woman's glance from neath her veil.
2. Came in stealthy step of death, came as the tiger, noiseless, slow,
3. This war of elements, was nurst,
Like to an earthquake in the womb of a volcano, deep and low.

Reread the stanzas that follow and pick all the simile's that appear in the poem and explain them in your own words bringing out the similar features/characteristics of the two things being compared.

(b) The poet has beautifully woven in a number of adjectives as **epithets** to bring out the

quality of the noun it is used for. Explain the following expressions in sentences of your to bring out their meaning.

troubled air, moaning sound, unsuspecting sons, heedless slumber, stealthy step, dreadful yell, gory altar, hardy sons, regal diadem, angry winds, burning gaze, lashing billows, gaping wounds, noble blood, generous rival, fluttering crowd.

Comprehension

(A) Write answer to the following questions in three or four sentences:

- (1) How does the poet describe the heroic King Porus in the battle field?
- (2) What did Alexander do when he saw Porus fighting on with his gaping wounds?
- (3) Porus is compared to a chained Lion as he walks to the Macedonian king. What qualities of Porus is the poet trying to highlight?
- (4) Why does the poet say 'Thus India's crown was lost and won explain'?
- (5) What quality of Alexander is also inherent in his act of forgiveness?

(B) Explain the following stanzas in your own words.

- (1) "But, Ind! thy unsuspecting sons did heedless slumber,
while the foe came in stealthy step of death,"
- (2) But dauntlessly there stood King Porus, towering midst the foe,
Like a Himala - peak with its eternal crown of snow:
- (3) Tho 'thousands' round him closed,
He stood - as stands the ocean rock
Amids the lashing billows
Unmoved at their fierce thundering shock.
- (4) 'How should I treat thee?' asked the mighty king of Macedon.
'Ev'n as a king,' replied
In royal pride, Ind's haughty son.

Speaking Activity

A legend is a story from ancient stories about events and people which may and may not be true-A legendary figure is a person who is talked about by many people in a way which shows admiration. The poet calls the poem 'a Legend of old' find out other meanings of the word legend and hold a discussion in the class about the poem as a legend. Discuss the following points:

1. What is a legend?
2. Is the poem correctly titled as a legend?
3. Is it a true legend?
4. Does it describe historical facts or its poet's imagination only?

Work in groups and share your points with the class in a speech form (five minutes for each group)

Writing Activity

- (a) What is the rhyming scheme of the poem. Working with the first stanza onwards see if the poet has maintained it through out the poem. If there is a deviation point it out.
- (b) The poet says that the Tempest in the war of elements was nothing as compared to what followed the next morning compare the two stanzas and how they describe the two happenings.
- (c) The third stanza describes the milk-white Elephant and Porus fighting his enemy explain the scene in your words bringing out the beauty of epithets used by the poet.

Things to do

- (A) Read the following poem by Alfred Tennyson and mark the simplicity and depth of emotions. Compare and write a critical appreciation in a paragraph. Based on the following points.
- (1) Central idea of the poem
 - (2) What qualities of war heroes are these poems trying to bringout.
 - (3) The rhythm of the poem.
 - (4) Rhyming schemes of the two poems.
 - (5) Special quality of the poem.

The Charge of the Light Brigade

Half a league, half a league,
Half a league onward,
All in the valley of Death
Rode the six hundred.

“Forward, the Light Brigade!
Charge for the guns!” he said:
Into the valley of Death
Rode the six hundred.

“Forward, the Light Brigade!”
Was there a man dismay'd?
Not tho' the soldier knew
Some one had blunder'd:
Theirs not to make reply,
Theirs not to reason why.
Theirs but to do and die:
Into the valley of Death
Rode the six hundred.

Cannon to the right of them,
Cannon to the left of them,

When can their glory fade?
Oh, the wild charge they made!
All the world wondered.
Honour the charge they made!
Honour the Light Brigade -
Noble six hundred!

- Alfred Tennyson

Explain the following expressions and images in your own words.

- (1) 'Someone had blundered'
- (2) Canon to the right of them canon to the left of them
- (3) 'When can their glory fade'
- (4) 'Honour the light Brigade- Noble six hundred.'

(B) Find other poems about war and collect them for class discussions for example:

- (i) Incident of the French Camp.
- R. Browning
- (ii) Casabianca
- Felicia Hemens