

THE JUDGEMENT-SEAT OF VIKRAMADITYA

UNIT-A

Deep in the hearts of the Indian people, one name is held ever dear—the name of Vikramaditya, who became King of Malwa, it is said, in the year 57 before Christ.

He was so strong and true and gentle that the men of his own day almost worshipped him, and those of all after times were obliged to give him the first place, though they had never looked in his face, nor appealed to his great and tender heart—simply because they could see that there had never been a king loved like this king. But one thing we do know about Vikramaditya. It is told of him that he was the greatest judge in history.

Never was he deceived. Never did he punish the wrong man. The guilty trembled when they came before him, for they knew that his eyes would look straight into their guilt. And those who had difficult questions to ask, and wanted to know the truth, were thankful to be allowed to come, for they knew that their King would never rest till he understood the matter, and that then he could give an answer that would convince all.

And so, in after time in India, when any judge pronounced sentence with great skill, it would be said of him, ‘Ah, he must have sat in the judgement-seat of Vikramaditya!’ And this was the habit of speech in the whole country. Yet in Ujjain itself, the poor people forgot that the heaped-up ruins a few miles away had been his palace, and only the rich and learned, and the wise men who lived in kings’ courts remembered.

The story I am about to tell you happened long, long ago; yet there had been time for the old palace and fortress of Ujjain to fall into ruins, and for the sand to be heaped up over them, covering the blocks of stone, and bits of old wall, often with grass and dust, and even trees. There had been time, too, for the people to forget.

In those days, the people of the villages, as they do still, used to send their cows out to the wild land to graze.

Early in the morning they would go, in the care of the shepherds, and not return till evening, close on dusk. How I wish I could show you that coming and going of the Indian cows!

Such gentle little creatures they are, with such large wise eyes, and a great hump between their shoulders! And they are not timid or wild, like our cattle. For in India, amongst the Hindus, everyone loves them. They are very useful and precious in that hot, dry country, and no one is allowed to tease or frighten them. Instead of that, the little girls come at daybreak and pet them, giving them food and hanging necklaces of flowers about their necks, saying poetry to them and even strewing flowers before their feet! And the cows, for their part, seem to feel as if they belonged to the family, just as our cats and dogs do.

If they live in the country, they delight in being taken out to feed on the grass in the daytime; but of course someone must go with them, to frighten off wild beasts, and to see that they do not stray too far. They wear little tinkling bells, that ring as they move their heads, saying, ‘Here! here!’ And when it is time to go home to the village for the night, what a pretty sight they make!

One cowherd stands and calls at the edge of the pasture and another goes around behind the cattle, to drive them towards him, and so they come quietly forward from here and there, sometimes breaking down the brushwood in their path. And when the herdsmen are sure that all are safe, they turn homewards—one leading in front, one bringing up the rear, and the cows making a long procession between them. As they go they kick up the dust along the sun-baked path, till at last they seem to be moving through a cloud, with the last rays of the sunset touching it. And so the Indian people call twilight, cowdust, ‘the hour of cowdust’. It is a very peaceful, a very lovely moment. All about the village can be heard the sound of the children playing. The men are seated, talking, round the foot of some old tree, and the women are gossiping or praying in their houses.

Tomorrow, before dawn, all will be up and hard at work again, but this is the time of rest and joy.

UNIT-B

Such was the life of the shepherd boys in the villages about Ujjain. There were many of them, and in the long days on the pastures they had plenty of time for fun. One day they found a playground. Oh, how delightful it was! The ground under the trees was rough and uneven. Here and there the end of a great stone peeped out, and many of these stones were beautifully carved. In the middle was a green mound, looking just like a judge’s seat.

One of the boys thought so at least, and he ran forward with a whoop and seated himself on it. I say, boys,’ he cried, ‘I’ll be judge and you can all bring cases before me, and we’ll have trials!’ Then he straightened his face, and became very grave, to act the part of judge.

The others saw the fun at once, and, whispering amongst themselves, quickly made up some quarrel, and appeared before him, saying very humbly, ‘May your worship be pleased to settle between my neighbour and me which is in the right?’ Then they stated the case, one saying that a certain field was his, another that it was not, and so on.

But now a strange thing made itself felt. When the judge had sat down on the mound, he was just a common boy. But when he had heard the question, even to the eyes of the frolicsome lads, he seemed quite different. He was now full of gravity, and, instead of answering in fun, he took the case seriously, and gave an answer which in that particular case was perhaps the wisest that man had ever heard.

The boys were a little frightened. For though they could not appreciate the judgement, yet his tone and manner were strange and impressive. Still they thought it was fun and went away again, and, with a good deal more whispering, concocted another case. Once more they put it to their judge, and once more he gave a reply, as if it were out of the depth of a long experience, with incontrovertible wisdom. And this went on for hours and hours, he sitting on the judge’s seat, listening to the questions propounded by the others, and always pronouncing sentences with the same wonderful gravity and power. Till at last it was time to take the cows home, and so then he jumped down from his place, and was just like any other cowherd.

The boys could never forget that day, and whenever they heard of any perplexing dispute they would set this boy on the mound, and put it to him. And always the same thing happened. The spirit of knowledge and justice would come to him, and he would show them the truth. But when he came down from his seat, he would be no different from other boys.

Gradually the news of this spread through the countryside, and grown-up men and women from all the villages about that part would bring their lawsuits to be decided in the court of the herd-boys on the grass under the green trees. And always they received a judgement that both sides understood, and went away satisfied. So all the disputes in that neighbourhood were settled.

UNIT-C

Now Ujjain had long ceased to be a capital, and the King now lived very far away, hence it was some time before he heard the story. At last, however, it came to his ears. ‘Why,’ he said, ‘that boy must have sat on the Judgement-Seat of Vikramaditya! He spoke without thinking, but all around him were learned men, who knew the chronicles. They looked at one another. The King speaks the truth, they said; the ruins in yonder meadows were once Vikramaditya’s palace!’

Now this sovereign had long desired to be possessed with the spirit of law and justice. Everyday brought its problems and difficulties to him and he often felt

weak and ignorant in deciding matters that needed wisdom and strength. If sitting on the mound brings it to the shepherd boy,' he thought, 'let us dig deep and find the Judgement-Seat. I shall put it in the chief place in my hall of justice, and on it I shall sit to hear all cases. Then the spirit of Vikramaditya will descend on me also and I shall always be a just judge!'

So men with spades and tools came to disturb the ancient peace of the pastures, and the grassy knoll where the boys had played was overturned. All about the spot were now heaps of earth and broken wood and upturned sod. And the cows had to be driven further afield. But the heart of the boy who had been judge was sorrowful, as if the very home of his soul were being taken away from him.

At last the labourers came on something. They uncovered it—a slab of black marble, supported on the hands and outspread wings of twenty-five stone angels, with their faces turned outwards as if for flight—surely the Judgement-Seat of Vikramaditya.

With great rejoicing it was brought to the city, and the King himself stood by while it was put in the chief place in the hall of justice. Then the nation was ordered to observe three days of prayer and fasting, for on the fourth day the King would ascend the new throne publicly, and judge justly amongst the people.

At last the great morning arrived, and crowds assembled to see the Taking of the Seat. Pacing through the long hall came the judges and priests of the kingdom, followed by the sovereign. Then, as they reached the Throne of Judgement, they parted into two lines, and he walked up the middle, prostrated himself before it, and went close up to the marble slab.

When he had done this, however, and was just about to sit down one of the twenty-five stone angels began to speak. 'Stop! it said, 'Thinkest thou that thou art worthy to sit on the Judgement-Seat of Vikramaditya? Has thou never desired to rule over kingdoms that were not thine own?' And the countenance of the stone angel was full of sorrow.

At these words the King felt as if a light had blazed up within him, and shown him a long array of tyrannical wishes. He knew that his own life was unjust. After a long pause he spoke. 'No,' he said, 'I am not worthy.'

'Fast and pray yet another three days,' said the angel, 'that thou might purify thy will, and make good thy right to seat thyself thereon. And with these words it spread its wings and flew away. And when the King lifted up his face, the place of the speaker was empty, and only twenty-four figures supported the marble slab.

And so there was another three days of royal retreat, and he prepared himself with prayer and with fasting to come again and essay to sit on the Judgement-Seat of Vikramaditya.

But this time it was again as before. Another stone angel addressed him, and asked him a question which was still more searching. 'Hast thou never,' it said, 'coveted the riches of another?'

And when at last he spoke and said, 'Yea, I have done this thing; I am not worthy to sit on the Judgement Seat of Vikramaditya!' The angel commanded him to fast and pray yet another three days, and spread its wings and flew away into the blue.

At last four times twenty-four days had gone, and still three more days of fasting, and it was now the hundredth day. Only one angel was left supporting the marble slab, and the King drew near with great confidence, for today he felt sure of being allowed to take his place.

But as he drew near and prostrated himself the last angel spoke. 'Art thou, then, perfectly pure in heart, O King?' it said. 'Is thy will like unto that of a little child? If so, thou art indeed worthy to sit on this seat!'

'No,' said the King, speaking very slowly, and once more searching his own conscience, as the judge examines the prisoner at the bar, but with great sadness; 'no, I am not worthy.'

And at these words the angel flew up into the air, bearing the slab upon his head, so that never since that day has it been seen upon the earth.

But when the King came to himself and was alone, pondering over the matter, he saw that the last angel had explained the mystery. Only he who was pure in heart, like a little child, could be perfectly just. That was why the shepherd boy in the forest could sit where no king in the world might come, on the Judgement-Seat of Vikramaditya.

- Sister Nivedita

About The Story

This story retells a famous Indian legend that highlights the importance of purity. The story starts with the chance discovery by some shepherds of a mound underneath which the mythical judgement seat of Vikramaditya is discovered. An innocent shepherd boy needed only to sit on the mound for the spirit of knowledge and justice to flood him, not so the king. The story tells us why.

Sister Nivedita was Irish and her original name was Margaret Elizabeth Nobel. She was attracted to Indian spiritualism after attending lectures delivered by Swami Vivekananda in England. She left her home to live and work in India and was re-christened Prabhavati Nivedita by Swami Vivekananda. She became a disciple of Swamiji and served India all her life. She deeply loved India and her people.

GLOSSARY

look straight into : see that they were guilty

dusk : the time just before it gets quite dark

hump : round lump on the back

precious : of great value

pet : fondle, treat with affection

brushwood : rough low-growing bushes

peeped out : stood out
 mound : small hillock
 whoop : a shout of joy
 grave : serious
 your worship : title of respect used for a magistrate
 frolicsome : playful and merry
 gravity : seriousness
 concocted : made up
 incontrovertible : too clear to be questioned
 propounded : brought to be answered, proposed
 pronouncing : declaring, announcing
 perplexing dispute : quarrel difficult to settle
 set : (here) seat
 cease : stop, come to an end
 chronicles : history
 yonder : over there
 sovereign : king
 knoll : small hill, mound
 sods : lumps of earth and grass
 prostrated himself : lay flat on the ground with his forehead touching the ground
 worthy : fit, deserving
 countenance : face, including its appearance and expression
 blaze : shine brightly
 array : line, (here) list
 tyrannical wishes : wishes for more power
 retreat : religious meditation; a period of seclusion or solitude
 essay : try
 coveted : wanted keenly to have
 conscience : consciousness with oneself of right and wrong
 prisoner at the bar : prisoner brought to the court for trial
 bearing : carrying
 pondering : thinking

COMPREHENSION

(A) Tick the correct alternative:

- King Vikramaditya was known—
 (a) For politics (b) For administration (c) For justice (d) None
- The story 'The Judgement Seat of Vikramaditya' highlights the importance of—
 (a) Purity (b) Straightforwardness (c) Impurity (d) Dedication
- The judgement seat of Vikramaditya was discovered by—
 (a) Shepherds (b) Tribals (c) Brahmins (d) Kshatriyas

(B) Answer the following questions in about 10-15 words each:

1. What qualities of head and heart made Vikramaditya a well--loved king?
2. How long ago, roughly, did Vikramaditya rule over Malwa? Does the present story belong to his time?
3. Who do you think the writer is talking to: Indians or people from other countries?
4. Why is the cow a special animal for many Indians?
5. Mark the rhythm of the language and note how the writer has been successful in creating an evocative picture of an evening in rural India.

(C) Answer the following questions in about 20-30 words each:

1. Why did the boys feel 'a little frightened' even though they were just playing at court scenes?
2. How was the boy's conduct when he was on the seat different from his normal behaviour?
3. How did the king react when he heard of the court of the herd-boys?
4. Why did the king want to have the judgement-seat of Vikramaditya? Were his intentions good or bad?
5. How was the king prevented again and again from taking Vikramaditya's seat?
6. What was the last angel's question? What is the significance of this question?

(D) Answer the following questions in about 60-80 words each:

1. Why is Vikramaditya known as the greatest judge in India?
2. Why could the shepherd boy sit on the judgement seat and not the king?

(E) Say whether the following are True or False. Write 'T' for True and 'F' for False in the bracket:

1. Vikramaditya became the King of Malwa in the year 57 year before Christ. []
2. Vikramaditya was the greatest judge in history. []
3. Vikramaditya, though the greatest King in history, was deceived several times. []
4. Sister Nivedita, the author of 'The Judgement Seat of Vikramaditya' was an Indian. []
5. The Shephard boy could sit on the judgement seat of Vikramaditya because only a child could be perfectly just pure in heart. []