





## THE LOOM OF TIME

Little is known about the greatest poet in classical Sanskrit literature and one of the greatest in world literature. A most self-effacing writer, he has chosen to reveal little of himself in his work. Kālidāsa probably lived and wrote at the close of the first millennium BC, though a date later by some five centuries has been assigned to him by some scholars. It is highly probable too that he lived and wrote in Ujjain, Madhya Pradesh – splendid capital of empires, a centre of culture and India's greatest emporium for a thousand years. Kālidāsa is a dramatist, a writer of epic and a lyric poet of extraordinary scope. In all, seven of his works have survived though tradition has ascribed to him many a spurious work authored by later writers who assumed his style. The two works best known outside the country are the play *Śakuntala* and the lyric monody *Meghadūtam*. Kālidāsa is a courtly poet, but at the same time he is a very learned poet who wears his learning lightly and with grace. It has been suggested that Kālidāsa was a high court official who was sent by the Emperor Chandra Gupta II to other royal courts; and that *Meghadūtam* was written during a long spell of separation from his wife when he was residing at the Vākataka capital of Nandhivardhana, near the Rāma's hill of the poem, as adviser to the widowed Queen Prabhāvatī Gupta, daughter of the emperor, who was ruling the kingdom as regent for her infant son. Kālidāsa's work is instinct with Śiva's presence. The blend of the erotic and spiritual that characterizes Siva-mythology is reflected in the poet's work. A mystic feeling for the transcendental combines with a sensuous feeling for beauty in woman and nature.

CHANDRA RAJAN studied Sanskrit from the age of nine, in the time-honoured manner, with a pandit in Madras. She went to St Stephen's College, Delhi, where she had a distinguished academic record and took degrees in English and Sanskrit. Trained early in Carnatic music, she studied Western music in New York. She has taught English at Lady Sri Ram College, Delhi University, and at the University of Western Ontario, London, Canada. Her publications include *Winged Words; Re-Visions*, a volume of verse; and *Kālidāsa: The Loom of Time* published by Penguin India in 1989. Chandra Rajan is currently working on a children's version of the *Panćatantra* and a translation and critical study of Bāna's famous prose romance, *Kādambari*, and a series of tales belonging to the Vikramāditya cycle: *The Goblin Tales*, also known as the *Vetala-panćavimśati*. She is also involved in a long-term project for the Sahitya Akademi – a translation of the complete works of Kālidāsa.



# The Loom of Time

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A Selection of His Plays and Poems

*Translated from the Sanskrit and Prakrit with an Introduction by*

CHANDRA RAJAN

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Om

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yakṣasvarūpāya jaṭādharaḥ  
pinākahastāya sanātanāya |  
divyāya devāya digambarāya tasmai  
yakārāya namaḥ śivāya ||





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# Acknowledgements

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May the Parents of the Universe

Pārvatī and the Supreme Lord

eternally con-joined as Word and Meaning

grant fittest utterance to my thoughts.

*Āśvina 18, Vikrama 2046*

*Chandra Rajan*

*(10 October, 1989)*

*New Delhi*

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## Abbreviations

|                       |   |
|-----------------------|---|
| ASU                   | Allahabad University Studies  |
| AV                    | <i>Atharvaveda</i>  |
| BM                    | Bharata Mallika—seventeenth century commentator on <i>Meghadūtam</i> ( <i>The Cloud Messenger</i> ) |
| BNM                   | <i>Bharata-Nāṭya-Manjarī</i>  |
| BORI                  | Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute, Poona   |
| comm.                 | commentary  |
| IP                    | <i>Indian Philosophy</i>  |
| JUB                   | <i>Journal of the University of Bombay</i>  |
| KS                    | Kashi Series, Chowkamba Press, of the <i>Nāṭyaśāstra</i>  |
| <i>Kumāra</i>         | <i>Kumārasambhavam</i>  |
| <i>Māl.; Mālavikā</i> | <i>Mālavikāgnimitram</i>  |
| Manu                  | Institutes of Manu  |
| <i>Mbh.</i>           | <i>Mahābhārata</i>  |
| <i>Megh.</i>          | <i>Meghadūtam</i>   |
| MNG                   | <i>Nāṭyaśāstra</i> , ed. with tr. by M.N. Ghosh   |
| NS                    | <i>Nāṭyaśāstra</i>  |
| R                     | <i>Raghuvamśam</i>  |



*Rām.*

*Rāmāyaṇa*

---

*Ṛtu.*

*Ṛtusamhāram*

*RV*

*Ṛgveda*

*S, Śak.*

*Abhijnānaśākuntalam; ŚakuntalĀ for short*

*SB*

*Śata-patha Brāhmana*

*Skt*

*Sanskrit*

*Urvaśī*

*Vikramorvaśīyam*

## Key to the Pronunciation of Sanskrit Words

**Vowels:** The line on top of a vowel indicates that it is long.

a (short) as the *u* in *but*

ā (long) as the *a* in *far*

i (short) as the *i* in *sit*

ī (long) as the *ee* in *sweet*

u (short) as the *u* in *put*

ū (long) as the *oo* in *cool*

ṛ with a dot is a vowel like the *i* in *first* or *u* in *further*

e is always a long vowel like *a* in *mate*

ai as the *i* in *pile*

o is always long as the o in pole

---

ow as the ow in owl

The *visarga*, two vertically lined points ‘:’ is transliterated into roman as an ‘h’ and sounds like the ‘h’ in ‘loch’; e.g. pramattah, bhartuh, Duhṣanta.

Also note, the final ‘i’ in feminine nouns are long in the nominative case but short in the vocative case; e.g. Vetravatī and Vetravati (when she is addressed by name).

**Consonants:** K. is the same as in English as in kitten

kh is aspirated

g as in goat

gh is aspirated

c is ch as in church or cello

ch is aspirated

j as in jewel

jh is aspirated

ṭ and ḍ are hard when dotted below as in talk and dot

ṭṭ is the aspirated sound

ḍḍ is aspirated

ṇ when dotted is a dental; the tongue has to curl back to touch the palate.

t undotted is a th as in thermal

th is aspirated

d undotted is a soft sound—there is no corresponding English sound, the Russian ‘da’ is the closest.

---

dh is aspirated

p and b are the same as in English

ph and bh are aspirated

The Skt v is an English w

There are 3 sibilants in Skt: S as in song, Ṣ as in *shover* and a palatal Ś which is in between, e.g. Śiva.

### Key to Prose Passages in the Play

Lines of prose in the play are referred to using points and plus and minus signs; e. 1.20. + 16-18 refers to lines 16-18 *after* st. 20 in Act 1:3, 36.-2, 3 refers to lines 2 and 3 *before* st. 36 in Act 3.

# A Note on Texts and Translations

Kālidāsa's works have unfortunately come down to us not in their original form, but in several recensions (divergent versions of a text) current in different regions of the country. The ancestry of the recensions is not clear. But it is evident that after his lifetime, Kālidāsa's poems and plays became subject to alterations, the reasons for which are again not clear. It is not uncommon for this to happen in the history of Sanskrit literature. Many factors would have contributed to the process of the *one true text* becoming diverse recensions. The manuscripts of the works, none of them contemporaneous with the author, belong to one or other of the recensions. They display a bewildering variety of readings; the length of the texts themselves as well as the number and order of the verses in them vary; interpolations present a problem. Some of the variants are substantive enough to warrant a somewhat different *reading* of the text, as in the case of *Abhijñānaśākuntalam* (*Śakuntalā* for short).

The translations in this volume differ in their textual basis from the great majority of other translations. The texts of both *Meghadūtam* and *Abhijñānaśākuntalam* follow the Eastern Indian (Bengal) recensions to which insufficient attention has been given. Even though the Bengal version is not the one translators most frequently use, the bibliographical arguments for it, and for *Śakuntalā* in particular, are not unequal to those for other texts and, as I shall endeavour to show, there are strong aesthetic arguments for it.

The text of *Śakuntalā* has been handed down in four main recensions: Eastern or Bengal, Southern, Kashmir and Devanāgarī (Northern). Which of these comes closest to the play as Kālidāsa wrote it and as it was staged during his lifetime is difficult to determine, to say the least. Dileep Kumar Kanjilal attempts this difficult task in his critical edition of the play, *Reconstruction of the Abhijñānaśākuntalam*, 1980. He finds motifs, images and word-clusters specific to the Bengal Recension echoed in later plays, such as Harṣa's. He also examines the Prakrit verses and finds them correct grammatically and metrically in the Bengal text and indicating where they are not in other texts, argues for its superior authenticity. Pischel who edited the play according to the Bengal Recension, in 1877 (reprinted in the Harvard Oriental Series, 1922, after his death), is of a similar opinion.

The Devanāgarī Recension of *Śakuntalā* with Rāghava Bhatta's commentary was published by the Nirnaya Sagar Press, Bombay, in 1883. It is the shortest text of the play and the one most frequently translated. The Bengal Recension, which I have translated, is a longer version containing 35 more verses and a number of additional prose passages. My translation is based on the critical edition produced by Kanjilal, already referred to. In his introduction, Kanjilal

writes that he has reconstructed the play on the basis of the oldest extant manuscript, an early twelfth century Newari manuscript in the possession of the Asiatic Society, Calcutta, supported by other Bengal and Śāradā manuscripts, two of the latter not having been utilized before. The differences between the Pischel and Kanjilal editions are few and minor. I have adopted one Devanāgarī variant in my translation as being more appropriate in the context. In 7.7.2, the Bengal Recension reads *aga*, meaning trees, while the Devanāgarī has *ara*, the spokes of a wheel. This might be an example of the kind of error a copyist of manuscript could have made.

One can argue that the Bengal text is more satisfying, aesthetically. The longer and more numerous prose passages and the additional verses, result in a smoother narrative and fuller characterization. The differences between the two recensions are found mainly in Acts 1 and 3; they are particularly significant in the love episodes which the Devanāgarī treats in a rather perfunctory manner.

The Devanāgarī text (D) seems to make somewhat abrupt transitions in some places, giving the impression of something missing at that point. For example, it does not contain the lines at the end of Act 1, where Anasūyā asks Śākuntalā to hurry up and come with her and Priyamvadā, as well as Śākuntalā's response about the numbness in her thighs—a deft touch which conveys the sudden physical impact an overpowering emotion might make. Again, in Act 2, the Devanāgarī text does not have st. 8 which seems to be an appropriate response to Mādhavya's wry comment preceding it. The conversation regarding the *untimely blossoming* of the Mādhavī bush is not included either (1.20. + 14–30). This passage is important because it foreshadows Śākuntalā's marriage and characterizes it at the same time.

The Bengal text devotes more space to the development of the love of Śākuntalā and Duhṣanta, in Act 3. It presents the courtship as well as the conflict in Śākuntalā's mind in some detail. Stanza 40 at the end of Act 3 reveals something of the complexity of the King's character. The first three lines bring out one aspect, the pleasure-loving and philandering side to his nature, and it articulates his *carpe diem* philosophy—seize the moment before it flies away beyond your reach. But it concludes on a different note, when Duhṣanta says, 'My heart, in the beloved's presence, stands somewhat abashed'. A man of the world, assured and poised and a great King who has fallen in and out of love many times, has had his way presumably and got what he wanted, Duhṣanta now stands dumbfounded before the innocence and purity that Śākuntalā represents. By sharply abbreviating a long section of

verse and prose starting at st. 26 (20 in D) which concludes with the important stanza discussed above, the Devanāgarī text makes a crucial omission. It further omits the delightful prose passage of four-cornered banter which follows st. 23 (st. 18 in D).

The King in the Bengal text is more fully drawn. He is a man of words as well of deed more so than in the Devanāgarī text. He loves as passionately as he fights furiously. And he is a man who is in love with love as much as he is in love with a girl; a man who talks about love and being in love in a highly self-conscious manner. And how beautifully he speaks about it all! By presenting Duṣanta in the first half of the play as a passionate lover, courteous and gallant—too gallant for the liking of the simple hermit girl who mistrusts such gallantry—and as it turns out with good reason—Kālidāsa draws a sharp contrast between this man, debonair, noble and even considerate at times, and the cynical, harsh and cold King of Act 5.

Śakuntalā is also drawn more finely in the Bengal text. The final section of Act 3, already referred to, reveals another side to her character; she is not wholly innocent of the ways of love. Seeing through the King's flimsy stratagems to get close to her, she indicates that she too can play at this game, though not with his expertise. The Śakuntalā of the Bengal text also shows some of the fiery spirit of her ancestress in the epic. Both the hero and the heroine are more idealized in the Devanāgarī text; they are more interesting in the other.

The minor characters come across better in the Bengal text. Priyamvadā has more lines given to her, providing more scope for her bubbling sense of fun and her readiness to tease both Śakuntalā and the King. Mādhavya's sharp wit, always reaching out to deflate Duṣanta's ego and undercut his highflown statements, has more room to play around.

The captions at the end of each Act seem to be a feature of the Bengal Recension. They are not found in the Devanāgarī texts of the plays, though the epic *Raghuvamśam* and the longer poem *Kumārasambhavam* have captions at the end of each canto. In *Śakuntalā*, the captions for the first two Acts, 'The Chase' and 'The Concealment of the Telling' are notable. They contain an element of symbolism. The chase is a central motif in Act 1; the King is not merely chasing a deer, he is after a girl. The deer is closely associated with Śakuntalā through imagery and leads the King into her world, which I have characterized in the introduction as the 'green world' as opposed to the gilded world of the court. The chase motif is picked up in Act 5 where we come across several phrases pertaining to the sport of hunting: the hunter's skill, his elation when he gets the quarry; knowledge of 'the changing responses of fear and anger

of woodland creatures'. (Śakuntalā reminds the King in Act 5, that during his stay in the Hermitage, he once described her and her pet fawn as kin, both 'creatures of the woods'.) A of these phrases conveying as they do the sense of dominance over the prey and gaining possession of it, characterize the initial attitude to and relationship of Duḥṣanta with Śakuntalā.

The interesting point to note about the caption to Act 2, 'The Concealment of the Telling' that it is paralleled by another concealment in Act 4, the concealment of Durvāsā's curse by Śakuntalā's friends. The first concealment in Act 2, moves the plot forward; the second introduces the complication. The theme of concealment has ramifications in the play.

The translation of *Meghadūtam* in this volume is based on the text of the poem on which the early seventeenth century Bengal scholiast, Bharata Mallika wrote his highly informative and sensitive commentary, *Subodhā*. I have used the critical edition of this text with commentary produced by J.B. Chaudhuri. The differences between this critical edition and the critical edition produced by S.K. De for the Academy of Letters (Sāhitya Akādemi, New Delhi) are few and minor. The text of the poem established by Mallinātha, the fourteenth century scholiast from South India, contains a longer version. This text has had wide acceptance and is the one frequently translated. The verses in Mallinātha's text which have not been accepted as genuine by Bharata Mallika (or by De) are placed in Appendix IV.

I have used the Nirnaya Sagar Press edition of *Rtusamhāram* with Maṇirāma's commentary—a rather perfunctory commentary.

We now come to the matter of translation and the translation of Kālidāsa's text specifically. Translation is like serving two masters at the same time. Languages do differ widely in their grammatical and syntactical structures and though one hopes to meet the demands of the source and receiving languages in a balanced manner, it is a fact that compromises have to be made one way or the other. We endeavour to provide the best approximation to the original not only within the limitations set by our own abilities but more so within those set by the receiving language.

Sanskrit is a highly inflected language; and it has some distinctive features which indeed constitute some of its strengths; for example, the extensive use of compound words and prefixes, and an array of synonyms with slight nuances of meaning that colour the expression of what is being said. The inflexional structure and the use of compound words give the

language a tightly knit compactness which is of importance in poetry; this compactness suffers some dilution in translation. Because Sanskrit is a highly inflected language, word order is not of special importance as it is in English; punctuation is minimal consisting of a vertical stroke (I) to mark the end of the second quarter of a stanza and two vertical strokes (II) that correspond to the period in English. Inversions are frequent, with the predicate often separated from subject and object by long clauses consisting of single compound words, with their sub-units linked alliteratively, not only for euphonic but other poetic effects as well. This lends the language a musical quality difficult to convey in another language. This is especially true in the case of poetry which was and still is chanted or sung and not read silently.

Compound words are also able to project images with immediacy: for example the word *paraṣapavanavegotkṣiptasamśuṣkaparnāh* (Ṛtu.: 1.22) conveys strongly the picture of wild winds and their force and energy: by splitting the compound word into its sub-units we have the following:

*paraṣa—pavana—vega—utkṣipta—sam—śuṣka—parnāh*

violent—winds—by great velocity—hurling-up—shrivelled-leaves

Compound words can also articulate ambivalences (see notes on *Megh.*).

Puns, proverbs and certain kinds of wordplay especially those dependent on sound resemblances or identity are almost untranslatable; for example, the phrase *dhanuṣ-khaṇḍa ākhaṇḍalasya*, the literal meaning of which is—a fragment of the bow wielded by the fragmentor (breaker)—we need notes to make the point clear. However this is a difficulty present in all translation; for example, in the following line from Keats: ‘Thou *still* unravished bride of quietness’, something is bound to get left out in translating it into an Indian language; specifically, one would be hard put to find a single word to convey both senses of the word ‘still’.

Kālidāsa’s poetry like much of Indian art is stylized. The stylization is not a rhetorical procedure but part of the self-awareness with which the verse shapes itself. The translator therefore, to be *faithful*, has to somehow contrive to be stylized and readable; to steer clear of a literalness of rendering as well as an identification of readability with contemporaneity. It has been my endeavour throughout this volume of translations to be faithful not simply to *what* the poetry says (its paraphraseable meaning) but also to *how* it says what it says. The



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