

What to take on a wild goose chase.
The journeys of two feathered messengers
in Sanskrit *dūtakāvya*

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Dūtakāvya or *sandēśakāvya*, messenger-poetry, arguably constitutes one of the most widespread literary phenomena in the history of South Asia. Patterned in most part after Kālidāsa's *Meghadūta*, the *Cloud-Messenger*, these poems usually posit a pair of separated lovers, one of whom sends an unlikely envoy – for example a cloud, the wind, a language – with a message to the faraway beloved. Most often, the route the messenger is to take is described in the first half of the poem, while the second imagines it reaching its destination and delivering the missive. Whether the *Meghadūta* was the first *dūtakāvya* poem ever composed in Sanskrit remains unknown, but it is unquestionably the earliest poem of the type to survive to our times. It is clearly the seminal text in the development of Sanskrit messenger-poetry, as all later *dūtakāvya* poets seem to have referred to the *Cloud-Messenger* in some way, whether directly quoting it in their own messenger poems or less directly, by taking inspiration from Kālidāsa's ground-breaking style. Sanskrit messenger poems are usually composed in *mandākrāntā* metre and tend to be no longer than 200 stanzas. The poems are mostly about *viraha*, that is, separation or abandonment and the prevailing aesthetic sentiment is understandably *vīpralambha-śrṅgāra rasa*, love-in-separation. Hundreds of *dūtakāvya* poems have been composed over the centuries in Sanskrit and in the vernacular languages of South Asia.²

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2. See Bronner 2013, Bronner–Shulman 2006, Hopkins 2004, 2009, Pieris 2010, Radhakrishnan 1936, Rossella 2008. For instance, the authors of Sinhala messenger poems have been composing *dūtakāvya*s since around the 14th CE and seem to have predominantly employed bird messengers in their poems. Anoma Pieris writes that over 115 *dūtakāvya* poems in Sinhala have been identified, each over one hundred verses long (Pieris 2010), while Charles Hallisey gives the number of *dūtakāvya* poems composed in Sinhala as 126. He also notes that 'the South Indian

The aim of this paper will be to present the journeys of two very different avian messengers found regularly in *dūtakāvyas* heralding from all over India – the *haṃsa* (bar-headed goose, *Anser indicus*) and the *kokila* (Asian koel, *Eudynamys scolopaceus*). I will concentrate on the way these messengers were approached and coaxed into undertaking their mission as well as on the steps the dispatchers took to ensure that the messenger’s journey was as pleasant as possible, keeping my focus mainly on the birds’ sustenance. Yet this sketch of feathered messengers must be preceded by a brief outline of how these topics were developed in the greatest of all *dūtakāvyas*, the *Meghadūta*, as it is this fundamental work that seems to have set the standard for poets composing *dūtakāvyas* in the subsequent centuries.

One might say that the indelible bond that forms between the hero, the cursed Yakṣa and the messenger cloud from the instant they start to interact is an important building block of the entire poem. It seems that the audience, ready to immerse itself in the fantastical world in which a cloud can act as a messenger for a celestial being, was just as easily expected to accept the instant camaraderie between the two. The Yakṣa asks a significant favour of the cloud and tries to make as enjoyable as possible its tedious journey across the Indian peninsula from Rāmagiri, where he is waiting out his curse, to Alakā, Kubera’s capital where the poor Yakṣiṇī is pining away.

The Yakṣa does not objectify the cloud or treat it as a run-of-the-mill emissary; instead, he befriends it and strives to rouse genuine empathy for his condition. He makes sure that his ally is well looked after and since he realises that the cloud will probably get tired and hungry as it soars, maps out enjoyable pit-stops along the way. This is expressed in the second half of stanza 1.13 of the *Meghadūta*:

First hear from me the path suited to your journey as I describe it to you, and then, O cloud, you will hear my message, agreeable to the ear: – the path which you are to pursue after setting foot [resting] on mountains, whenever fatigued, and also after drinking the wholesome water of streams, whenever you find yourself exhausted.³

and Sri Lankan *sandēśa* poems portrayed the messenger’s journey more realistically than did the *Meghadūta*’ (Hallisey 2003, 699).

3. Kale 2011, 28 (all the translations and the Sanskrit text of the *Meghadūta* in this paper come from this edition): *mārgaṃ tīvaca chṛṇu kathayatas tvatprayānānurūpaṃ saṃdeśaṃ me tadanu jalada śroṣyasi śrotapeyam / khinnāḥ khinnāḥ śikhariṣu padam nyasya gantāsi yatra kṣiṇāḥ kṣiṇāḥ parilaghū payāḥ srotasāṃ copabhujya //* MID 1.13. The mountain peaks on which the cloud rests along the way are only three – Āmrakūṭa in stanza 1.17, Nica in 1.26 and the Himālaya, at the source of the Gaṅgā in verse 1.55. Kālidāsa does not religiously keep to this rule as the cloud also spends one night in the roosting with the pigeons in Ujjain.

As the monsoon cloud travels north, it is expected to constantly purge itself of water and will need a means to replenish its exhausted substance. Apart from one instance (in verse I.35 when it is told to inhale the incense drifting from the windows in Ujjain), this is only accomplished by stopping at the bodies of water, predominantly rivers, which appear along the way.⁴

These rivers, which as we would expect in Sanskrit, are all of feminine gender, feed the (masculine) cloud with their waters as it passes above them or, in some cases, lowers itself to ground level. As women, the waterways are presented as exhibiting their feminine beauty to the passing cloud, and the most erotic description is surely that of the river Gambhīra in verse I.44:

After you will have removed her blue garment in the shape of the water, slipped down from her hips in the form of the bank and appearing to be clutched up by the hand on account of the branches of the canes touching it [the garment in the form of water], it will be with considerable difficulty that the departure of you hanging obliquely, will take place: who that has experienced the pleasure is able to leave a woman with loins uncovered [*lit*, exposed to view]⁵

Kale's quite literal and technical translation perhaps takes away from the suggestive nature of the stanza, but the image is clear; the cloud is to undress the river and then make love to her before it leaves her side with great difficulty as it continues on its mission.

Kālidāsa takes care to strongly underline the natural, mutual relationship that exists between the masculine cloud and the feminine rivers. The exchange was not only of the life-giving substance of water (the cloud fed the river as it rained and the river, in turn, fed the cloud as it evaporated) but also a sexual exchange.

Kokila

Uddaṇḍa Śāstrī (15th century CE), author of the *Kokilasandeśa*,⁶ the *Koel-Messenger*, seems to have been inspired by this dual nature of consumption

4. There are in total seven of these places of consumption along the cloud's path. They are: the Revā – v. I.20, Vetravatī – v. I.25 *pāsyasi svādu* (...) *payo vetravatyaś*, Gambhīrā – v. I.43, 44, Carmanvatī – v. I.49 *tvayyādātum jalam*, Sārasvatī – v. I.52 *kṛtvā tāsām abhigaman āpaṃ sārasvatīnām*, Gaṅgā – v. I.54 *tasyāḥ pātum* (...) *acchasphaṭikaviśada ambhaḥ*, and finally there is lake Mānasa itself, from which the cloud is to drink on arrival at its destination (v. I.65), *mānasasyādādānaḥ salilam*.

5. Kale 2011, 76: *tasyāḥ kiṃcit karadhṛtam iva prāptavānīrasākhaṃ hṛtvā nilaṃ salilavasanaṃ muktarodhonitambam / prasthānaṃ te katham api sakhe lambamānasya bhāvi jñātāsvādo vivṛtajaghanāṃ ko vihātum samarthaḥ // MD I.44.*

6. Srinivasachariar gives a list of 5 *Kokilasandeśas*, the most famous being Uddaṇḍa Śāstrī's. The others are by Varadācārya (son of Vedāntadeśika), Veṅkaṭācārya, Guṇavardhana and Nara-

envisaged by Kālidāsa in the *Meghadūta*. The protagonist of his poem is a man who has been teleported from his home town in Kerala to Kanchipuram in his sleep. After he has spent some time in exile, spring comes and he cannot bear the contrast between his glum disposition and the exuberantly amorous mood of the advancing season.⁷ He sees a *kokila* and decides to send a message to his wife through the bird. *Kokila* birds are the harbingers of spring (*vasanta*) and often portrayed in poetry as accompanying Kāma. In his significant book *Birds in Sanskrit Literature*, Dave remarks that ‘Cuckoos do not pair for the breeding season like other birds and promiscuity is very common with them’.⁸

Particularly interesting is the relationship that the protagonist establishes with the bird and how he ensures its well-being. On seeing the koel feasting on new mango blossoms,⁹ the protagonist says:

Come here, dear friend! You are indeed welcome!
Look over at that mango-bough, sweating fresh drops of sweet nectar.
Friend! Surely she desires your caress.
That bee-eyed one is trembling,
and calls you with her swaying leaves.
She is flushed with passion.¹⁰ (KS 1.6)
Oh! You cause such great joy to unfold in my heart!
I know you are the commander in chief
of the Five-arrowed King’s forces.
O *kokila*, trustworthy companion,
you preach with your honest song,

siṃha (Srinivasachariar 1974, 367). The *Kokilasandeśa* of Uddaṇḍa has been expertly translated into English by Shankar Rajaraman and Venetia Kotamraju. They describe the poem thus: ‘The *Kokila Sandeśa* is particularly rich in historical, sociological and topographical detail, but it is also a lyrical paean to the lush, temple-studded land of Kerala by one of her most talented adopted sons’ (Rajaraman–Kotamraju 2012, iii).

7. It is worth underlining that spring is a time of unrestrained lust and rendezvous between lovers and the whole of nature seems to be working to intensify the desire felt by humans. In the words of Daniel Ingalls: ‘Spring was beautiful not for the beauty of its birds and flowers so much as for the harmony with which human nature accompanied physical nature’s change’ (Ingalls 1965, 112).

8. Dave 2005, 129.

9. It will be remembered that besides the *kokila*, another very prominent symbol of spring is the mango tree (*āṃra*, *Mangifera indica*), as it blooms with the advent of the season. The two are connected in *kāvya* poetic convention – the *kokila* is said to feast on the mango buds and flowers. Therefore, Uddaṇḍa Śāstrī’s hero makes sure to invite the *kokila* to stop as it flies over South India and dine on the mango buds, sprigs and blossoms. See, for instance, *Subhāṣi-taratnakoṣa* 171.

10. All translations of the *Kokilasandeśa* are mine. The Sanskrit text comes from Unni 1972: *atrāyāhi priyasakha nanu svāgataṃ paśya pārśve pratyagrodyanmadhurasakaṇasvedinīm cūtavallīm / tvatsamparkaṃ subhaga niyataṃ kāñkṣate ’sau vilolā lolambākṣi calakisalayaair āhvaṃyanti sarāgā //* KS 1.6.

and occupy yourself with uniting suitors
and their proud beloveds.¹¹ (KS 1.7)

The very first words the protagonist utters to his future messenger evoke the lascivious nature of the bird. He first tries to kindle lust in the *kokila* by describing the suggestive figure of the mango-bough damsel.¹² Thus the koel itself now feels a burning, unfulfilled lust and can sympathise with the poor hero. However, the protagonist is infinitely more miserable because, in his case, separation from his wife means that his yearning cannot be sated, while the koel can indulge in his desire with the mango-bough. The hero then strokes the bird's ego by referring to its prominent role in Kāma's army. In a later verse he entreats the koel:

Take my missive, O lord of birds,
perform this brotherly act.
O articulate one! Console my darling,
wrought with sorrow.
For what are the words of her husband
relayed by a dear friend
but sustenance?¹³ (KS 1.10)

The protagonist speaks of an abandoned woman who is not only morose but 'scorched' (*tāpārtāṃ*), literally burning up. The promiscuous *kokila* should be able to relate to this problem and in the end, of course, it does take the message to the young woman. The man and bird instantly become brothers in arms, who have to face the same dire straits. The entire poem, whether the descriptions are of nature, temples or of passers-by, is tinted with a distinctly sensual tone.

11. *antastoṣaṃ mama vitanuṣe hanta jāne bhavantaṃ skandhāvāraprathamāsubhaṭaṃ pañcabāṇasya rājñah / kūjāvyaṅād dhitam upadiśan kokilāvyaṅābandho kāntaiḥ sākaṃ nanu ghatayase kāmīnīr mānabhājah //* KS 1.7. This may be a reference to Kālidāsa's *Kumārasambhava* 4.16, where Ratī laments the death of Kāma and directs her message to a koel:

Taking on you charming body
and rising up,
appoint once again the kokil's mate
as messenger for the pleasures of love
she so naturally clever in sweet talk. (Smith 2005, 136)

12. Mango trees bloom with small, pale cream coloured flowers; yet the little shoots from which they bloom are a dark pink, hence the blush in the description. The mango is therefore not only intended to be a source of nourishment, but the mango-bough damsel is also an irresistible temptress.

13. *sandesāṃ me naya khagapate sādhyā bhrātrkṛtyaṃ santāpārtāṃ suvacana samāśvāsaya preyasīm me / kāntodantaḥ suhṛdupanato viprayogārditānāṃ prāyaḥ strīnāṃ bhavati kimapi prāṇasandhāraṇāya //* KS 1.10.

The hero takes care to plot out a journey for the koel that will not only take it from place A to B, but will also be a feast for the senses (this is for the benefit of the audience or readers of the poem). He also makes sure that his messenger has the opportunity to satisfy its every culinary need as it traverses the lush Indian South.

The poem's protagonist first sees the *kokila* 'indulging in mango blossoms' (*cūtāṅkūrāsvadanarasikāṃ kokilāṃ sandadarśa* 1.4d) and tells it that the ladies in the garden will delight when they spot it 'going from mango bud to mango bud' (*cūte cūte kusumakalikāṃ tvāṃ ca dr̥ṣṭvā* 1.23a). When the hero imagines the koel reaching his house, he envisages the scene: 'Koel! [you will see] a young mango tree teeming with your kin, greedy to taste its blossom' (*cūto 'stī potas tvajjatiyaiḥ pika parivṛtaḥ pallavāsvādalubdhaiḥ* 2.14ab). The *kokila* is also told to 'drink the floral wine of the trees along the way' (*viṭapinā puṣapmādhvīm lihānaḥ* 1.69b).

Apart from these descriptions which focus strictly on the nourishment the koel will receive from the mango tree, Uddaṇḍa Śāstrī plays with the image of the mango as the bird's lover. The first such verse where this idea appears outright is the already quoted stanza 1.6 and another similar description of this kind may be found in verse 1.33:

Take the time to help yourself to the mango boughs there.
As you kiss the fresh, liquor-filled bloom which is like the *bimba* of the
lower lip,
as you cradle the fresh buds like breasts, do what you want!
What man could possibly want to leave,
when his lover's passion blossoms?¹⁴

There is another such allusion in verse 2.35, in which the *kokila* is addressed: 'perch upon that mango tree and help yourself to its buds red like a beautiful girl's lips' (*sthitvā cūte prathamakathite mugdhakāntādhārābhaṃ / daṣṭvā svairāṃ kisalayaṃ atha*). Thus, the mango trees in *Kokilasandeśa*, like the rivers in the *Meghadūta*, are sources of not only gourmet pleasure but also sexual enjoyment for the messenger which is sent to carry out a difficult task.

Haṃsa

The second messenger of interest for this paper is the *haṃsa*. Like most Indian birds, the bar-headed goose functions as an important constituent of *kāvya*

14. *cumban bimbādharāṃ iva navāṃ pallavaṃ śīhugarbhaṃ prāptāśeṣaḥ stana iva nave korake kāmācārī / bhoktāsi tvaṃ kamapi samayaṃ tatra mākaṇḍavallīḥ kāntārāge sati vikasite kaḥ pumāṃs tyakyum iṣṭe* //KS 1.33.

imagery, evoking a set of standardised themes. It is closely connected with the coming and going of the monsoon rains and is traditionally thought to be able to separate milk from water with its beak. *Haṃsa*'s voices are compared to the 'tinkle' of bracelets and anklets and a perfect woman was either to have the gait of an elephant or a goose. Vogel writes that: 'In addition to swiftness of wing and other visible qualities, Indian imagination endows the *haṃsa* with moral virtues of the highest order. He is the noble bird par excellence, and worth of being elected king of the feathered tribe'.¹⁵ Its pure white colour symbolised its physical and spiritual purity and fortified its position as the ruler of all birds (white being the colour associated with kingly fame).

The reasons *haṃsas* were chosen as messengers in *dūtakāvya* are manifold. Firstly, they were strongly connected with the season of *śarat*, autumn; when the monsoon had finally died down, the majestic geese were thought to leave their lofty resting grounds by Lake Mānasa in Tibet and fly south. As Lienhard notes, autumn is a time when 'love takes its rightful place again'¹⁶ and *haṃsas*, which are said to have one mate for life, symbolise that enduring emotion. Significantly, the end of the monsoon also heralds a reunion between two lovers separated by the torrential rains, so the bird that is innately connected with autumn and the end of the rainy season, came to naturally be a symbol of that reunion. It is worth mentioning that *haṃsas* are said to have fed on lotuses and lotus fibres or stalks and the lotus-flower was also one of the conventional symbols of autumn.¹⁷

Secondly, as previously mentioned, the *haṃsa* is the most noble of birds and could be counted on not only to understand the difficult situation of the protagonist of a *dūtakāvya* but also to help, on account of its natural predisposition for compassion and higher virtues. The third, and most practical, reason the bar-headed goose was so popular in *dūtakāvya* was because it is said to fly the highest of all the birds¹⁸ which made it an ideal choice of messenger because it was sure to reach any destination with no trouble at all. This also bene-

15. Vogel 1962, 12.

16. Lienhard 1984, 33.

17. This is even mentioned by Kālidāsa in the *Meghadūta*, verse 1.11: *kartuṃ yac ca prabhavati mahīm ucchilīndhrām avandhyāṃ tac chrutvā te śravaṇasubhagaṃ garjitaṃ mānasotkāḥ / ā kailāsād bisakīsalayacchedapātheyavantah sampatsyante nabhasi bhavato rājahamsāḥ sahāyāḥ //* 'And on hearing that thunder of yours which is grateful to the ear and which has the power to make the earth covered with mushrooms and fertile, the royal swans, eager to go to lake Mānasa, and having a stock of bits of shoots of lotus-stalks to serve them as provisions on their journey will become your companions in the sky as far as the mountain Kailāsa' (Kale 2011, 25).

18. *Anser indicus* can fly up to 27,000 feet, that is, 8,200 metres, allowing it to cross the Himalayas.

fitted the poem itself because it allowed for an admirable bird's-eye-view description of the lands the *haṃsa* was soaring over.¹⁹

In the corpus of *dūtakāvya*s currently known to us, the *haṃsa* appears to have been the most common avian messenger²⁰ and my preliminary studies have shown that these poems seem to have a tendency to contain religious or mystic strains. This is definitely true of the *Goose-Messenger* examined below – the little-known *Haṃsasandeśa* of Pūrṇasarasvatī²¹ (14th–15th century CE, Kerala). The protagonist of this poem is a woman from the South, a devotee of Kṛṣṇa who sends a gander, first on a tour of her homeland and then to Vṛṇḍāvana in search of her lord.

The heroine first notices the gander as it sits with its wife in a pond nearby. She says:

Tell me brother, did you land on earth well?
Your goose, your lawful wife, is delighted.
Though she was suffering from thirst [/desire] while you were away,
she still holds the sweet lotus-shoot silently
in her *bimba*-red mouth.²²

The goose is shown to be waiting for her husband to return home, with dinner ready, as it were. Apart from the observation that geese tend to eat lotus stalks, the wording of this verse is particularly noteworthy. The phrase *bisakisalaya* was first used by Kālidāsa in the *Meghadūta* and a search of the various text repositories has thus far shown that it appears nowhere else.²³

However, let us return to the question of nourishing the messenger; the *haṃsa* in Pūrṇasarasvatī's poem is also told in further verses to rehydrate itself in the Kaverī river as if it were enjoying a lotus-faced, desired lover (*kāverīṃ*

19. It is worth noting that in the *Kokilasandeśa* the koel never flies higher than the leafy canopy of the forests.

20. There are 11 *Haṃsadūtas* or *Haṃsasandeśas* known to us in Sanskrit (there are many more in the vernacular languages of southern India): *Haṃsadūta*, Raghunāthadāsa; *Haṃsasandeśa*, Vedāntadeśika; *Haṃsadūta*, Rūpagosvāmin; *Haṃsasandeśa*, Vāmana Bhaṭṭa Bāṇa; *Haṃsasandeśa*, Vidyāvidhāna Kavīndrācāryasarasvatī; *Haṃsasandeśa*, Venkaṭeśa; *Haṃsasandeśa*, Pūrṇasarasvatī; *Haṃsasandeśa*, Haṃsayogin; *Haṃsasandeśa*, anonymous (x2).

21. This poem was one of the areas of interest during the Sanskrit Summer Academy in Jerusalem, 2013. I would like to thank the organisers and participants of the seminar for the inspiring work-sessions and thought-provoking discussions on the topic of this *Haṃsasandeśa* specifically as well as *dūtakāvya* in general.

22. All translations of Pūrṇasarasvatī's *Haṃsasandeśa* are mine. The Sanskrit text comes from the 1937 edition: *kaccid bhrātaḥ kathaya kuśalair āgamas tvaṃ dharitrīṃ dhanyā kaccij jayati varaṭā dharmadārāḥ priyā te / dūraṃ yāte tvayi sumadhuraṃ yā tṣārttāpi vaktre bimbātāmre bisakisalayaṃ bibhratī joṣamās te // HS 1.4.*

23. It should be remembered that Pūrṇasarasvatī is actually best known for his commentary of Kālidāsa's *Cloud-Messenger* entitled *Vidyullatā*.

tām kamalavadanām bhuñkṣva kāntām iveṣṭām HS 1.13c) and to drink the lotus nectar, famous for its perfume, which is being offered by its beloved *pādmīnī* women (*pāyaṃ pāyaṃ pathi parimalaślāghinīm padmamādhvīm / modaṃ modaṃ muhur upahrītām padminībhiḥ priyābhiḥ* HS 1.31cd).

Finally, there is verse 1.38 in which the idea of the *haṃsa* eating lotuses in order to regain its strength before a long journey dominates:

You will desire to eat the slippery and tender lotus fibres
which wipe away fatigue,
like the *cakora* strongly thirsting for the thick rays of the moon.
And gathering the juice from every lotus on its [the Yamunā's] banks
Go to Vṛndāvana, accompanied by flocks of your brethren.²⁴

In summary, we may observe that the choice of messenger (in this case, an avian messenger) was not an arbitrary one. It was definitely a selection that set the mood of the poem. Choosing the right courier was essential for the *dūtakāvya* to be cohesive and allowed the poet to establish his messenger poem within a larger context of the genre. Moreover, the correct selection could enrich the poem with further layers of subtle meanings and undertones. We may presume that *haṃsas* could have seemed appropriate for carrying messages in poems that had a devotional slant, while *kokilas* would have been an ideal choice of courier if a poet wanted to emphasise the erotic longing felt by the separated young lovers. One may also get the impression that the opposite would not have met the approval of critics and connoisseurs.

The protagonists of the presented *dūtakāvya*s took considerable care to ensure that the messengers' journeys were as delightful as possible and supplied them with the necessary nourishment of body and soul. The heroes established strong relationships with their messengers in their imagination and, as friends, knew how to map their passage so as to please them. This included providing the food they expected the messenger to consume along the way, hence, the cloud received sweet water, the *kokila* – mango blossoms and the *haṃsa*, lotus shoots and nectar.

It must be noted that the theme of the protagonist 'feeding' the messenger does not appear in all *dūtakāvya* poems, for example, it is not found in the *Kāmasaṃdeśa* of Māṛḍatta, Dhoyī's *Pavanadūta* or in the *Uddhavasandēśa* by Rūpagosvāmin, to name a few that I have studied with the topic of this paper in mind. Therefore, this motif should perhaps not be seen as a staple feature of *dūtakāvya* as a genre but rather as a consequence of the strong relationship that grows between messenger and protagonist in some poems. In *dūtakāvya*s

24. jagdhvā gr̥dhnuh śramaparimṛjaḥ snigdhamugdhā mṛṇālīḥ sāndrāś cāndrīr iva karalatāḥ sphārataraśaś cakoraḥ / padme padme paricitarasas tīrabhāgena tasyā vṛndaiḥ svānām samupacarito yāhi vṛndāvanān tam // HS 1.38.

where the bond is strong and the two are best friends, especially as in the *Meghadūta* and the *Kokilasandēśa*, the protagonist is more likely to concern him or herself with the messenger's welfare.

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