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2026**RESEARCH ARTICLE****INTERPRETATION AS ECO-TRANSLATION: MM HARAPRASAD SHASTRI AND SATYA CHURN LAW'S QUEST FOR SAUNDARYA IN KALIDASA'S MEGHADUTAM****Dr Santanu Banerjee^{1*}, Dr Manish Prasad²**^{1*}Assistant Professor, Department of English, Kazi Nazrul Universitysantanu.banerjee@knu.ac.inORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1734-2579>²Assistant Professor, Department of English, St. Xavier's University, Kolkatadrmanish.asansol@gmail.comORCID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0006-4034-6091>DOI: <https://doi.org/10.54513/JOELL.2026.13307>**ABSTRACT****Article history:**

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This article examines how two remarkable early twentieth-century scholars in Bengal, Mm Haraprasad Shastri and Satya Churn Law, reinterpreted Kalidasa's classical Sanskrit poem, *Meghadutam*. Rather than treating the ancient masterpiece as a static historical text, they looked at it through an innovative lens known as eco-translation. By bridging the gap between ancient literature and modern thought, they successfully combined the creative arts with natural sciences. Shastri analysed the text using archaeology, geography and psychology to create a lively prose commentary centred on *Saundarya*. The ornithologist Satya Churn Law integrated biological and ecological sciences to study the poem's detailed descriptions of birds. Together, they proved that Kalidasa's poetic imagination was deeply rooted in regional biodiversity rather than pure fantasy. Their combined work challenged the common assumption that colonial-era Indian research served only as passive data collection for the British Empire. Instead, they offered a fresh, decolonial perspective, showing that genuine beauty lies in a shared, conscious harmony between humanity and the natural environment.

Keywords: *Fusion of Horizon, Eco-translation, Saundarya, Interdisciplinary Scholarship, De-colonising.*

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**INTRODUCTION**

In this article, we will specifically examine how Kalidasa's *Meghadutam* (4th – 5th C) was interpreted in some innovative ways in early 20th-century Bengal (1902 -1934) by two noted figures – Mm Haraprasad Shastri (1853 – 1951) and Satya Churn Law (1888 - 1984). Shastri was a great scholar, critic and litterateur, while Law was an ornithologist. Interestingly, there was a mentor-mentee relationship between them. We argue that Shastri and Law performed the acts of "eco-translation" (Cronin 3) while, through their interpretations, confirming "fusion of horizons" (Gadamer 300 - 305) between ancient Sanskrit literature and early 20th-century discourses. Doing this, they radically transformed the predominant mode of appreciating *Meghadūta*'s an old artifact into a model text for understanding *Saundarya* in terms of ecological harmony. While placing this argument, we shall have to quote a few relevant but longer passages from Shastri and Law in our translation. Since no English translation of these books is available, our argument cannot be otherwise established.

BENGAL TRADITION OF SCHOLARSHIP (16 TH – 18 TH C) ON MEGHADUTAM

To begin with these two interpreter-cum-translator's unique contributions, one has to recall the extremely rich background of interpretations and translations of *Meghadūta* in Bengal, already existing before their arrival. The Sahitya Akademi's critical edition (1957, 1960) of the poem notes several manuscripts of the poem that were either written or copied in Bengali characters rather than Devanagari. It also notes that alongside the earliest commentators on the text,

namely Sthiradeva (10th - 11th Century), Dakṣiṇavartanatha (12th - 13th Century) and Mallinatha (14th - 15th Century), it was from the sixteenth Century onwards that Bengal developed a highly specialised, multi-dimensional school of commentary in Sanskrit which uniquely balanced spiritual devotion with linguistic defence.

To be specific, Sanatana Gosvamin (16th Century), Kalyāṇamalla (16th – 17th Century), Bharata Mallika (17th Century), Ramanatha Tarkalankara, as well as Haragovinda Vacaspati (18th Century) made significant contributions to both textual preservation and scholarship of *Meghadutam* in Bengal. Sanatana Gosvamin argued that the lover's yearnings and the cloud's journey was an allegory for the human soul's longing for God. Kalyāṇamalla focused on syntactical transparency and a step-by-step reordering in prose to untangle complexities in Kalidasa's sentences. Bharata Mallika's approach was that of a grammarian; he defended the poet's lexical and linguistic choices. And Ramanatha Tarkalankara and Haragovinda Vacaspati worked towards systematizing word-parsing methods to clarify Kalidasa's use of idioms.

Later on, some of these Bengali manuscripts and commentaries were utilised by several Indian and Western scholars to build their editions of *Meghadutam*. In the year 1813, Horace Hayman Wilson published the first printed edition of the poem in Calcutta. He solely relied on the Bengali-script Colebrooke manuscript and the local commentators. When European scholars such as J. Gildemeister (1841, Bonn) applied Western textual criticism to the poem, they used Wilson's text as their baseline.



In 1869, Pt. Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar published his own precise edition of the poem in Calcutta. He added critical notes and highlighted spurious stanzas that had crept into the text over the centuries. The German scholar Adolf Friedrich Stenzler published his critical edition in 1874 at Breslau and he also explicitly used extracts from the five traditional Bengal commentators of the sixteenth to the eighteenth centuries. (De, 1- 32)

OVERVIEW OF TRANSLATIONS (1821 – 1900)

As in the nineteenth century print culture took root in Bengal and literary endeavours flourished in Bengali as never before, many authors attempted to translate *Meghadutam* into their mother tongue. (Jana 10 - 12) In 1821, Dharanidhar Sharma published his translation in the traditional *Payar* meter. In 1836, Sanatan Tarkaratna combined his rhythmic verse-rendering with an elementary commentary, making dense Sanskrit idioms clear to his readers. In 1848, Jagachchandra Chakraborty developed a smoother *Payar* structure for leisurely narrative reading. In 1850, Prannath Dutt Chowdhury took just the opposite approach. He decided to use a highly ornate style loaded with *Tatsama* words. In 1856, another translator, Jadunath Nyayaratna, rendered the poem in a *Champu* style, which was a mix of prose and verse. In 1860, Rabindranath Tagore's elder brother Dwijendranath Tagore tried to replicate in Bengali the slow and deep cadence of the *Mandakranta* meter of Kalidasa by inventing complex variations of both *Payar* and *Tripadi*.

In 1869, Krishna Kamal Bhattacharya published an academic translation that preserved the complex rhetorical figures of the original Sanskrit text. In 1874, Rajkrishna Ray, a prominent playwright and

theatre personality, infused his translation with some elements of high lyrical drama and operatic musicality. In 1882, the first complete and major prose translation in Bengali appeared; its translator, Rajanikant Gupta, is still remembered for his elegant, dignified, and highly lucid phrasing. In 1891, Nabinchandra Das created a strict, stanza-by-stanza poetic conversion, mapping every single original Sanskrit verse into an exact, corresponding Bengali stanza. Exceptionally, in 1894, Romesh Chunder Dutt took a Bengali scholarship back to London. In his work *Lays of Ancient India*, he translated 84 selected stanzas of *Meghadūta* into English. In 1895, Baradakanta Majumdar's Bengali translation appeared with detailed textual parsing, word-for-word semantic breakdowns, and extensive footnotes. Moreover, as the twentieth Century arrived, in the year 1901, two more translations were published. Another brother of Rabindranath, namely Satyendranath Tagore, the first ICS, made his own version known for its metrical versatility and linguistic grace. Another poet cum translator, Debendranath Sen, is remembered for capturing so well the visual imagery of Kalidasa's nature descriptions. However, this list is not exhaustive.

Any close examination of this tradition reveals that before the twentieth Century, interpretations were largely confined by rigid grammatical preservation or strict metrical replication and translations were also largely influenced by that inflexibility. Only after knowing this can the significance of the interdisciplinary interventions of Shastri and Law be properly understood.

Moreover, there are certain hints within their texts on some Sanskrit commentaries and Bengali



translations they were familiar with. The list certainly includes Mallinatha and Wilson. Perhaps, it is not possible to dismiss the intertextual relationship between them. However, it is another matter of a separate investigation – how much and in which ways Shastri and Law were actually indebted to these and other predecessors in developing their own approach.

SHASTRI – LAW DUO

We wish to call the approach of Shastri and Law – interpretation as eco-translation. Apparently, the two acts of interpretation and translation are different. Yet in *Truth and Method*, Gadamer argued that every translation is, at the same time, an interpretation (546–553). For him, a translator cannot simply reproduce a text. He actually highlights certain aspects of the text while letting others participate to frame the meaning within a new language world. Since interpretation is also an active reception of a text's intent, a similar sort of dialogue happens between the text and its interpretation. Be it a translation or an interpretation, horizons of the world of the text and the world of the reader meet and transform each other.

It is noted that Shastri's *Meghdut Byakhya* (1902) rejected the traditional mode of literary interpretation, which was akin to solving word puzzles through a prescribed five-step linguistic analysis. Instead, he focused on *Saundarya* in *Meghadutam* and used his knowledge of various disciplines, namely archaeology, geography, and psychology. He translated the verse's nuances into a highly enjoyable prose format for modern readers. His mentee, Satya Churn Law, further expanded this art. In *Pakhir Katha* (1922) and *Kalidaser Pakhi*

(1934), he similarly interpreted a substantial number of poetic descriptions of birds in *Meghadutam* and other works of Kalidas by translating them into the discourses of the biological and ecological sciences. While doing this, he too denied compromise with the *Saundarya* of these literary texts. Shastri was very much alive when Law's first text was published. He had contributed a Foreword to it, proudly welcoming the young ornithologist to the world of literary studies.

Though they were not translators in the strict linguistic sense, Shastri and Law successfully established a creative dialogue between Kalidasa's *Meghadutam* and various other disciplines, including science. Their contributions in early 20th-century Bengal exemplify how prose interpretations of poetic texts can also be translations. To borrow from A.K. Ramanujan: they had to "let [the] poetry [of Kalidasa] win without allowing [their own] scholarship to lose." (Love and War 297) Their novel efforts establish how powerfully translations break down narrow walls of disciplinary and generic confinements and help a classical Sanskrit masterpiece take new life in a modern Bengali world. Although some of Bankim Chandra Chatterjee and Rabindranath Tagore's essays show great analytical depth and fair understanding of Kalidasa's poetic talent, we believe that none of them dared to approach the *Meghadutam* so innovatively.

QUESTION OF SAUNDARYA

Nevertheless, a fundamental question remains: How do these two interpreters understand *Saundarya* in *Meghadutam* that they wanted to help their readers experience? Reading Shastri and Law closely, it



appears that there are two interrelated aspects of this unchangeable phenomenon.

Shastri clearly pointed out the first of the two:

In the *Purvamegha*, the entire non-human world is full of consciousness. The cloud is conscious, Ramagiri is conscious, Amrakuta is conscious, Narmada is conscious; Betravati, Nirvindhya, Gambhira, and Gandhavati are all conscious. The rivers, specifically, are full of consciousness, full of love, and intoxicated by passion. In every word, Kalidasa has shown their consciousness, intellect, and heart; they are all desperately in love with the cloud. Whatever human beings do when they are overwhelmed by love, they are doing all of those things; we can no longer even think of them as lifeless.

In this way, from Ramagiri to Alaka, Kalidasa has brought the entire non-human world to life. It is as if the rivers, mountains, caves, land animals, birds, and water creatures of all these places — even a tiny *Punti* fish — are saddened by the Yaksha's sorrow and distraught by his separation. The cloud is traveling to Alaka as the Yaksha's messenger; everyone is coming together to try and please the cloud. Someone is offering it a place on a mountain peak; someone is holding it atop a grand building; someone is giving it water to add strength to its body. Someone else is drawing water out to make its movement lighter and faster.

It is as if a unified spirit has been born across the entire creation. The cloud is the Yaksha's very soul — as the cloud travels, it is as if we are watching the Yaksha's own soul racing forward. And whatever it sees, it adapts for itself, makes it its own, and blends it with its own soul with a loving and passionate spirit. That is why so much beauty has blossomed in the world. (*MeghdutByakhya* 48 - 49)

In fact, in the above passages, Shastri laid stress on Kalidasa's grand imaginative power and extraordinary sense of empathy that binds the whole poetic world together and infuses life into it. Though the Yaksha and the Yakshi are anthropomorphic protagonists, the entire drama of their separation, longings, and mental unification is constituted through networks of relationships with the world that surrounds them — breathing, throbbing, and pulsating. Perhaps, the key to *Saundarya of Meghadūta* lies here.

On the other hand, Satya Churn Law remarks:

In Kalidasa's works, nature is constantly painted as the background for the heroes and heroines of his stories. A curious reader looking for deeper truth will find a great harmony between humans and their surroundings in these tales.

To truly understand this, we must see how Kalidasa used his matchless skill to bring human characters to life against a vast natural backdrop of skies, clouds, mountains, and riverbanks. At the same time, the surrounding vines, trees, birds, and flowers are shown brilliantly, perfectly balanced and full of fresh beauty.



Human feelings like happiness, sadness, pain, separation, and joy were not just tools to build characters or simply a way to show off his brilliant writing. To truly express these feelings, he found it necessary to paint a picture of the deep connection between people and the natural world around them.

A casual lover of literature might sometimes fail to notice this. Unless Kalidasa's genius is explored scientifically, this topic cannot be truly understood. If critics and scholars do not shine a light on the great poet's work from many different angles, its full beauty will remain hidden. (*Kalidaser Pakhi*1 - 2)

In the above block quote, it appears that, as a scientist, Law did not fully rely on Kalidasa's genius. Rather than with an objective approach, he sought to rediscover an already existing connectivity between the human and the natural realms in the text of *Meghadutam*. Law was reading the text-in-the-world, not the textual world alone. Kalidasa's *Meghadutam* is grand imagination, no doubt, but there are real flowers in this imaginative garden. Law proved that science and poetry are not mutually exclusive domains; they can co-exist by sharing the same space.

Nonetheless, it seems that Shastri and Law took the entire landscape in *Meghadutam* as the basis for interpretation and, in a specific form of translation, argued that, in Kalidasa, nature has its own voice, power, and agency, which co-exist and are not subservient to human actions. It may be surmised that they did eco-translation through re-inventing

connections between nature and culture in their interpretations.

Their objective of appreciating *Saundarya* is therefore not a luxury for humans to enjoy in isolation. It must be realised as a shared harmony between people and the earth. It leads to an understanding of how subject, object, feeling, form, world and emotion are deeply interrelated in a harmonious poetic vision.

FUSION OF HORIZONS AND ECO-TRANSLATION IN PRACTICE

It should be mentioned here that a highly acclaimed Bengali modernist poet, critic, translator and scholar Buddhadeva Bose, pointed out in the 'Preface' to his own poetic translation of *Meghadutam* namely *Kalidaser Meghdut* (1957) that in India the chief interest of the colonialists was in gathering more information about the country, its people, and their cultures. Therefore, any reading of a classical literary text beyond the literary discipline in the colonial period could be another attempt at colonial data collection. (Bose 5 - 7) However, reading Shastri's text, we get a completely different impression. Here is an example of his art of interpretative translation:

Yaksha is substantially rich. Any idea of his wealth? Mind you, it was not just a crore or two. After a crore comes an *arbuda*, then a *vrunda*, then a *kharba*, then a *nikharba*, then a *shankha* (conch), and after that, a *padma* (lotus).

His wealth amounted to one *padma* and one *shankha*—11,000,000,000,000. Apparently, there was absolutely no fear of thieves or



bandits in the city of Alaka, which is why a lotus and a conch were painted on the Yaksha's doorway. That alone was enough to let people know how much money he had. Just as Ltd. Co.s advertise their capital nowadays, the Yakshas used to advertise their reserve funds in this manner. The modern style of advertising had not yet caught on; otherwise, one would have had to do a lot of investigation just to dig up the facts. How they used to show the exact amount of money by drawing large bags next to the conch and lotus can be easily understood by anyone who looks at the exhibit of the *Kalpavriksha* (the mythic wish-fulfilling tree) in the new (Indian) museum.

The Yaksha was a man of such immense fortune. For a human, this wealth would be extraordinary, but in Kubera's capital — while not bad — it does not seem to have been considered top-tier. We know this because he held a job in Kubera's government, and it does not appear to have been a very high-ranking post; after all, Kubera punished him for neglecting his duties. Could anyone do that to a Salisbury or a Chamberlain? Yet, it was not a completely minor job either, because Kubera kept a close eye on him, and Kubera had punished him in quite a fit of anger. This suggests he was one of the juniors, a rising and promising officer. But why did Kubera get so angry?

Because the fellow was neglecting an important piece of work. Why did he neglect

it? Kalidasa has not written about that, but we can easily guess. He had a decent amount of money; as for age, Yakshas only ever know perpetual youth. On top of that, the poor fellow was quite young, and his wife was beautiful. He felt incredibly blessed to have her. He probably felt he had found a priceless treasure far grander than any lotus or conch. He would arrive late; he would make mistakes at work. At first, Kubera might have noticed and let it slide; then perhaps he gave him a sharp warning. But when he saw the condition was incurable, a remedy became necessary.

The offense, after all, was proven. What punishment could be given? The Yaksha Penal Code has no provision for whipping, imprisonment, or fines; it features only separation. So, Kubera handed down exactly that sentence: separation for one whole year. (*MeghdutByakhya* 7 - 9)

Modern economic terms like "Ltd. Co." and references to important British political figures like Salisbury and Chamberlain are used. Shastri dragged the mythic horizon of Kubera's court into the horizon of the early 20th-century world.

And another example may be taken from Law's *Kalidaser Pakhi*:

Addressing the cloud, the Yaksha says—

Having spent the night on the eaves of a house where pigeons are peacefully asleep, alongside your lightning-wife who is exhausted from her constant flashing, you must endeavour to travel the remainder of



your journey once the sun rises—no one delays after committing themselves to fulfilling a friend's task.

Regarding this pigeon that takes shelter and sleeps on the house-eaves at night, a scientist might ask a question: Is this bird a common domestic pigeon, or a dove? Mallinatha, quoting from the *Amarakosha*, has written “*paravataḥkalaravaḥkapotaḥ*”; however, *kapota* denotes a pigeon as well as another bird —

‘*paravataḥkapotaḥsyatkapotovihangantare*’ according to the *Vishva-kosha*. This ‘other bird’ undoubtedly refers to the dove. Now, which of these is the *paravata* mentioned in *Meghadūta*? To a scientist, the pigeon and the dove belong to the same family of birds. Mr. Blanford has written, “There is no doubt that Pigeons and Doves must be regarded as forming an Order by themselves.” It is the habit of both birds to spend the night taking shelter in human habitations. Regarding this very habit of the Rock Pigeon, the aforementioned author has written — “A bird haunting rocky cliffs, old buildings, walls, and when encouraged, human habitations generally, nesting in all the places named.”

Of course, although pigeons and doves share a natural similarity in this respect, it is incredible to think that the Yaksha would advise the cloud-messenger — who is intent on performing an auspicious task — to spend the night with a dove instead of a pigeon. This is because the dove is a harbinger of ill fortune; it is traditionally

known by names such as ‘destroyer of homes’, ‘fearsome’, ‘companion of fire’, and ‘burner’.

There is no doubt whatsoever that the *paravata* of *Meghaduta* does not mean a dove, but rather refers to the ‘eloquent one’, ‘home-dweller’, ‘desire-awakener’, ‘captivator of minds’, the ‘domestic pigeon’, or common pigeon. This Indian Rock-Pigeon (*Columba intermedia*) is found right across India. (Law 59 - 61)

Law distinguished the pigeon (*paravata*) from the dove (*kapota*) using Mr. Blanford’s scientific classifications. But his use of colonial ornithological data was not to fulfil any colonial objective. He accomplished the task of proving the fact that Kalidasa’s poetic choices were rooted in actual biodiversity and ecological reality.

BEYOND COLONIAL DATA COLLECTION

It is unknown whether Buddhadeva Bose read Shastri’s or Law’s text. We find no mention of them anywhere in Bose’s Preface or notes to his translation. However, as a postcolonial translator, he was not correct in believing that all Bengali scholars of the colonial period, interpreting or translating *Meghadutam*, had subscribed to only colonial ideology and objectives. Shastri and Law had used both their literary and non-literary knowledge to appreciate *Saundarya* in *Meghadutam* in an interdisciplinary manner. Thereby reclaiming and validating a key concept of art through their interdisciplinary lens, they have clearly established a de-colonial stance. Conventionally, the concept of *Saundarya* is understood in an essentially human-



centric way. Undoubtedly, the Shastri–Law duo worked within an anthropocentric framework of critical thinking, though they juxtaposed the conventional way of appreciating beauty with the notion of ecological harmony. Shastri's arguments assert that human feelings like happiness, pain, and separation in *Meghadutam* were not exclusively human. The *Shringara Ras* central to this poem is produced through the *Rati Bhava*, which is created through those *bibhava* and *sanchari bhava* that are essentially not human. This approach is scientifically redefined through Law's convictions and examples, concluding that *Saundarya* is a verifiable connectivity between human emotion and natural biodiversity.

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