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**Dr. Dhruvajit Sarma**

Assistant Professor Senior and  
Head, Department of Sanskrit,  
Darrang College, Tezpur, Assam,  
India

## The geographical references depicted in the *Meghadūta* and the problems of identification in the modern contexts

**Dr. Dhruvajit Sarma**

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### Abstract

The *Meghadūta* i.e. the 'cloud-messenger' of Mahākavi Kālidāsa is a Khaṇḍakāvya dealing with the activities of an imaginary Yakṣa who was exiled from Alakā by his master Kuvera due to his negligence of duties. Being separated from his wife, the Yakṣa tried to pacify himself by sending a message to his wife through a patch of moving cloud. At the intense of emotion, the Yakṣa could not distinguish between animate and inanimate beings and hence he chooses a cloud, made of smoke, light, air and water, to be a messenger. By way of depicting the path towards Alakā, the poet depicts the nature and places and also legends connected with those localities. It is full of imaginations, suggestions, grand scenes and descriptions, picture of places with sympathetic, natural and religious ideas. The poem is composed in Mandākrāntā metre and the *rasa* is Vipralambha Śṛṅgāra and the alāmkāras are mostly Arthāntaranyāsa, Pariṇāma, Samāsokti etc. Kālidāsa's *Meghadūta* is a lyrical poem of the first order. It is undoubtedly one of the best love-poems in the literature of the world. The first part of the poem is, almost as a whole, the description of the circumstances in which the Yakṣa has to send the insentient cloud as the messenger to his beloved wife. There is again, in the *Pūrvamegha*, the route of the cloud-messenger has been depicted with due reference to the context. During the description of the path of the cloud-messenger, the poet has given an unmatched description of the geography of ancient India. As a Khaṇḍakāvya, strictly to the literal sense, it is very much short in size or form. In spite of its smallness, it is complete in all respects. It has given a full picture of the desired subject-matter or theme. In complete relevance to its theme, it has presented the reference to the geography and nature within the scope of the poem. The *Meghadūta* is consisting of about 120 verses only but in this small sphere there are sources of varied knowledge. One cannot satisfy himself or herself by reading the poem once only. As many times as one reads it, its melody charms the reader. Its diction, its rhythm, its description of nature, geographical information, mythological references, proverbial sayings and last but not least the philosophical conclusions charm one's mind. There is an oft-quoted saying *meghe māghe gatam vayah* i.e. "life has been spent by studying the *Meghadūta* of Kālidāsa and the *Śisupālavadhā* of *Meghapandita*".

**Keyword:** Geographical references, *Meghadūta*, identification, modern contexts

### Introduction

In the *Meghadūta* of Kālidāsa, various geographical elements are conspicuous by their existence. Kālidāsa has drawn, as if, a map of the northern part of ancient India in his *Meghadūta*. Through the description of the cloud-messenger's route, the poet has presented a geographical account of several places, hills, rivers, with a unique fusion of poetic fervour. Again, in many cases, these sites, hillocks, streams are shown by the poet in personified forms. Thereby, it seems. Kālidāsa tries to re-establish the intimate relationship between human beings and the geographical elements.

Kālidāsa describes every place, hills and rivers as accurately and minutely just like an eye-witness. Such kind of detailed description without the proper geographical knowledge of a certain place seems practically impossible. From this we can infer that the poet might have, probably travelled a lot throughout India and consequently acquired the required knowledge of geography of India. Kālidāsa's knowledge of geography has been reflected mainly in the *digvijaya* of Raghu in the *Raghuvamśa* and in the cloud-messenger's route in the *Meghadūta*. Not to speak of the *Raghuvamśa* even the *Meghadūta* provides ample examples of geographical elements.

**Corresponding Author:**

**Dr. Dhruvajit Sarma**

Assistant Professor Senior and  
Head, Department of Sanskrit,  
Darrang College, Tezpur, Assam,  
India

But it should be remembered here that the *Meghadūta* is primarily a lyric poem and Kālidāsa is essentially a poet rather than a geographer in the true sense of the term. However, one may consider it as a mixed form of poetry and geography. This conglomeration, at one hand, makes the *Meghadūta* a relishable form of unprecedented poetry and on the other hand, makes things more confusing. Sometimes geography, poetic portion and mythology are intermingled with one another in such a manner that one finds problem in proper geographical investigation. The real problem occurs when one tries to identify and inter-relate the ancient sites with the modern ones. However, the names of the places, rivers, etc. mentioned by Kālidāsa are of great antiquity and identification of them is tried to be done on the basis of some internal evidences as well as similarities, mostly on conjecture. Thus this identification procedure, without which the real interest is far-gone, is actually a hard nut to crack. However, the geographical elements in the *Meghadūta* are captivating the minds of the scholars notwithstanding the conventional character of Kālidāsa's geography.

Let us now discuss the places, hills, rivulets, and streamlets etc. which are important from the standpoint of geography, one by one, following the same order as in the original work. For this, let us first begin with the geography in the *Pūrvamegha* and then in the *Uttaramegha* respectively. In fact, from the very first verse of the *Pūrvamegha*, the geographical part of the poem starts and it comes to an end as soon as the cloud has reached the boundary of Alakā, a region of utter imagination. Alakā is said to be the residence of the lord of wealth i.e. Kuvera and his attendants i.e. the demigods. Alakā is also the destination of the cloud-messenger, wherein it has to deliver the message of the Yakṣa to his beloved. Thus the two extreme starting and ending points of the cloud-messenger's journey are Rāmagiri and Alakā. The geographical locations of the places, rivers falling between these two extreme points has been somehow ascertained, but it is not the case with all the places such as Kailāsa, Alakā and others. Here, H.H. Wilson is the path-finder in identifying these places. He is of the opinion that though there is slight difference of nomenclature, still greater number of these places can be ascertained even today with great perfection<sup>[1]</sup>.

### Rāmagiri

The exact geographical location of this hill is uncertain. Vallabhadeva as well as Mallinātha, the renowned commentators understand by the appellation Rāmagiri, the mountain Citrakūṭa in Bundelkhand<sup>[2]</sup>. This identification has its origin probably in the fact that Rāmagiri, literally means the mountain or hill of Rāma and it may be applied thus to any hill, on which Rāma and his companions have resided during their sojourn. This, along with the idea that Rāma had spent some days on the Citrakūṭa, might probably have led Mallinātha and others to identify Rāmagiri with Citrakūṭa<sup>[3]</sup>. Again, tradition has bestowed on another mountain, a part of the Kimoor range, the privilege of offering shelter to Rāma, Sītā and Lakṣmaṇa during their peregrinations<sup>[4]</sup>.

Wilson identified Rāmagiri with Ramtek or Ramtinki. It is nothing but the Mārāṭhī equivalent of the Sanskrit term Rāmagiri meaning Rāma's hill. It is covered with buildings, consecrated to Rāma and his companions<sup>[5]</sup>, still a place of pilgrimage, as it is believed that the Rāmagiri is imprinted with the footprints of Rāmacandra on its sides. This Ramtek is situated at about 24 miles to the north of Nagpur. According to Vasudev Vishnu Mirashi also, this conjecture is supported

by an inscription of Pravarasena II. Mahāmahopādhyāya Haraprasad Sastri and others identify Rāmagiri with Mount Ramgarh in the former Sarguja district in Madhya Pradesh. H.C. Chakladar marks the geographical location of this hill as 21°24'N and 79°20'E, 24 miles north-east of the city of Nagpur by road and 13 miles from the Ralwa railway station<sup>[6]</sup>.

### Māla or Mālakṣetra

First of all, the Yakṣa has instructed the cloud-messenger to start towards the north and ascend the Māla or Mālakṣetra, the high plateau containing the mar or the black cotton soil. By Māla, Mallinātha understands a plateau or an elevated hilly spot - c.f. *mālam mālākhyam kṣetram śailaprāyamunnatasthalaṃ*. It seems Mallinātha is quite justified in believing that Māla instead of referring to any particular place just means an elevated table-land, rightly implied by the word *āruhya*<sup>[7]</sup>. Vallabhadeva also interprets it as an alluvial plateau. cf. *mālamuddāram kṣetram*. Again, some other commentators try to interpret it as *mālākhyao deśaḥ or mālayogān mālava iti prasiddho deśaḥ, kṣetra-samūha, vana-bhūmi, grāmāntarāṭavī* etc<sup>[8]</sup>. According to M.R. Kale, Mallinātha's observation is preferable, as the cloud would like to get up to an elevated spot rather than a district<sup>[9]</sup>. By Māla, Wilson means a particular district, identifies it with a place called Malda, nearby Ratanpur, the chief town of the northern half of the province of Chattisgad<sup>[10]</sup>.

### Āmrakūṭa

The cloud is directed by the poet to move on towards the western direction and reaching the Mount Āmrakūṭa it should quench the thirst of the forest-fires and rest on its peak. Mallinātha suggests that the term Āmrakūṭa means that hill, whose summits and the surrounding forests are abounding in mango trees. cf. *āmrāścūtāḥ kūṭeṣu śikhareṣu yasya* (under v. 17) of the *Pūrvamegha*. Some others understand by this *āmrāṇām kūṭo rāsiryatra*.<sup>[11]</sup> M.R. Kale supports Wilson in identifying Āmrakūṭa with the mountain Amarakaṇṭaka. It is the source of the river Narmadā, variously known as Revā. This very mountain, which forms the eastern part of the Vindhya Range of mountains, occupies a very much celebrated position, not only in the geography of India but also in the mythology of India. Again, some identifies it with Mahādeva hill. In the book entitled *The Geography of Kālidāsa*, p. 66, H.C. Chakladar ascertains the location of this hill or rather the plateau of Amarakaṇṭaka as 22°41'N and 81°48'E, situated at the north-eastern apex of the Satpura range in Rewah (Central India).

### Revā

This river is identified with the Narmadā. It springs forth from the Vindhya rocks and parted into streamlets at the rugged foot of the mountain.

### Daśārṇa

The cloud has to pass through the country of Daśārṇa i.e. the country having ten strongholds or citadels. Some scholars are of the opinion that it is actually a river, rising in the Vindhya Mountain into which ten other rivers flow. Daśārṇa is again said to be the south-east part of Madhyadeśa. However, there is not a single trace of this once celebrated name in the modern maps. Even then, Wilson tries to identify it with the modern district of Chattisgad. This forms the eastern part of Malva. Vetravātī is its chief river<sup>[12]</sup>.

**Vidiśā**

Wilson identifies Vidiśā, the capital of Daśārṇa as the modern Bhilsa, in the province of Malva, situated on the banks of the river Betwa.

**Vetravatī**

The Vetravatī is the modern river Betwa. The river rises on the northern side of the Vindhya Range, traverses the province of Malva, and falls into the Yamunā near Kalpee towards the north-east corner of Allahabad.

**Nicaiḥ hill**

Nicaiḥ hill, a hillock so called according to some, either for its small height or for little importance. The *Sāroddhāriṇī* commentary says *kharvanāmānam vāmanagiriṃ kharvadhithanam* [13]. But according to some other, Nicaiḥ, as the very name implies, it has nothing to do with its small height. Some again take it as the low range of Bhojapura hills lying to the south of Bhilsa. But this name is not found for any hill now. However it is surmised that it may be in the vicinity of ancient Vidiśā and perhaps be either the Udayagiri hill or the present Sancī hill [14]. Wilson also identifies it with the Sancī of modern maps.

**Vanandī, Navanadī and Naganadī**

The cloud has to proceed by the garden on the banks of the Vanandī, Navanadī and Naganadī. This may be either a petty streamlet or it may just mean a river flowing through a forest. Mallinātha takes it in the sense of forest-rivers. Wilson admits the variant reading Naganadī and says that it may have been the name of a small stream, west of Betwa, named now Pārvatī, which rising in the Vindhya chain runs north-west, till it joins another river by the name Śīprā and the two together falls into the Chambal [15].

**Ujjayinī**

The cloud has to turn slightly towards the west in a circuitous route, because the poet insists that he must not miss Ujjayinī, at any rate. Ujjayinī, or the modern Ujjain is also called Viśālā. It is the capital of the country called Avantī. Again, it is also supposed to have been the residence of Kālidāsa and his royal patron. The Hindu geographers calculate their longitude from this city, taking it as their first meridian. The modern Ujjain is about a mile south of the ancient city. [16] This is still regarded as a place of sanctity and pilgrimage.

**Nirvindhya:**

Wilson admits that it may be one of the smaller streams between Pārvatī or Naganadī and Śīprā, sprung from the Vindhya Mountain. It flows north-ward. According to some, it may be a small tributary of the Chambal between the rivers viz. Betwa and the Kālī Sindh [17]. This stream has not been found in modern maps.

**Sindhu**

About this stream, maps are not acquainted with this name. However, some try to identify it with modern Kalisindhu or simply Kali which flows into the Chambal. Again, some other commentators including Mallinātha understand by Sindhu not a particular river, but rivers in general and they refer to the river Nirvindhya. Wilson remark that, it may be some kind of a river, nearest to Ujjain.

**Śīprā and Gandhavatī**

The river Śīprā, on the banks of which, Ujjain is situated, is a well-known entity. The cloud, as mentioned by the poet

would reach there at the holy temple of Mahākāla or Caṇḍīśvara and the river Gandhavatī. Some guess the Gandhavatī as a tributary of Śīprā. [18] Again, it is also surmised that the Gandhavatī was a fine stream at the time of Kālidāsa, but afterwards it shrunk into a mere drain running through the heart of the modern city.

**Gambhīrā and Devagiri**

Leaving the celebrated Ujjayinī, the cloud would next meet the river Gambhīrā. It is a small river in Malva, also mentioned by Jinasena [19], in his *Ādipurāna*, ch. XXIX. As it is a very small one, thus it hardly deserves the name of a river. Even today, it is known by the name Gambhir River [20]. Along the side of this stream, at a little distance, the hill named Devagiri is there. It is a hill hardly of 200 feet of height [21]. It is said to be the dwelling place of Lord Skanda or Kārtikeya. Wilson observes that this might be the same as the modern Devagad, situated south of the Chambal, in the centre of the province of Malva. Pathak supports Wilson. According to Dr. Fleet, the village of Devagad is situated about sixty miles south-west of Jhansi [22]. It may be mentioned here that Wilson's identification has been criticized by many [23], Paranjape even thinks that Devagad cannot be Devagiri and this place requires fresh identification [24].

**Carmaṇvatī and Daśapura**

The cloud is to cross over the Carmaṇvatī. The name of this river is not actually mentioned in the text proper, but the commentators have mentioned it. [25] It is supposed to rise from the north-west portion of the Vindhya Mountain. Wilson identifies it with the modern Chambal River. Then the cloud would reach Daśapura or Mandasor. Mallinātha calls it the capital of Rantideva. According to Chakladar, it is the headquarter of the district of Mandasor in Gwalior state in Central India (24°4'N and 75°5'E) on the left bank of the Śīvana (Seuna or Sau) River, a tributary of the Śīprā [26]. Again, it is identified with the modern Rantimpore or Rantampore because of its said mythological association with Rantideva, the king of Daśapura.

**Brahmāvarta and Kurukṣetra**

From Daśapura, the cloud going straight towards the north, would reach the country of Brahmāvarta and the Kurukṣetra. Brahmāvarta is in north-west of Hastināpura and it is adjacent to Kurukṣetra. According to *Manusmṛiti*, II. 17, this region lies between the divine rivers Sarasvatī and Dṛṣadvatī. Actually Brahmāvarta is that area, which is situated to the west and north-west of Delhi i.e. the present Karnal district of Haryana. Kurukṣetra is one of the sacred places of India, well-known in Haryana and still known by the same name [27].

**Sarasvatī, Kaṅkhala and Carāṇa-nyāsa**

Sarasvatī, one of the sacred rivers of India, falling from the southern portion of the Himālaya Mountain, runs into the great desert, where it is said to be lost in the sands. It flows a little to the north-west of Kurukṣetra. Thereafter the cloud has to pass over Kaṅkhala, a holy place still surviving by the same name, near Haridvāra. This village is situated on the west bank of the Ganges. [28] Wilson remarks that after forcing its way through an extensive tract of mountainous country, Jāhnavī or Ganges here first enters into the plains. Again there is the river Jamunā, described as much darker than those of the Ganges, at the point of their confluence, at Prayāga or Allahabad, As Wilson admits, the meeting place of the two rivers along with the subterraneous addition of the Sarasvatī is



a place of distinguished holiness. Again Caraṇa-nyāsa, a sacred spot in the Himālayas, so called from its having a foot print of Lord Śiva. Wilson identifies it with Harkā Pāiri i.e. the steps of Śiva near Haridvāra<sup>[29]</sup>.

#### **Krauñcarandhra or Haṁsa-dvāra, Kailāsa and Mānasa or Mānsarovara**

Krauñca-randhra means the door for the geese i.e. a passage for the flamingoes to the Mānasa Lake. It is mentioned in the Purāṇas as the gap made by Paraśurāma in the Krauñca Mountain. The geographical location of this place is not known<sup>[30]</sup>. The Kailāsa Mountain is said to be the mountain of costly gems or crystals, the mythological abode of Lord Śiva and Pārvaṭī. The Kailāsa Mountain (altitude 22, 028 ft.) is situated due north from the centre of the Mānasa Lake (altitude 14,900 ft.; area 133 sq. miles). It is 16 and 32 miles respectively from the north and south edge of the lake.<sup>[31]</sup> It may be mentioned here that the Mānsarovara is the source of the mighty Brahmaputra River.

Here actually the geographical part of the *Pūrvamegha* and also of the poem ends. There after the cloud, in the *Uttaramegha* gets into the Alakā, the mythological adobe of Kuvera and the Yakṣas. It is supposed to be situated on the slopes of Mount Kailāsa. Alakā is a region of mere fantasy and hence the geographical location of the so called residence of the Yakṣa is unknown.

#### **Conclusion**

Thus, we get an interesting picture of the geography of India in the *Meghadūta* of Kālidāsa. Of course, we find many confronting identifications of these sites and rivers in most of the cases, even then we must admit it that the *Meghadūta* is primarily a *kāvya*, not actually a work on geography in the proper sense of the term. Again, Kālidāsa's geography is of conventional character. Despite some drawbacks, the *Meghadūta* of Kālidāsa has presented a unique picture of the ancient geography of India at its best.

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