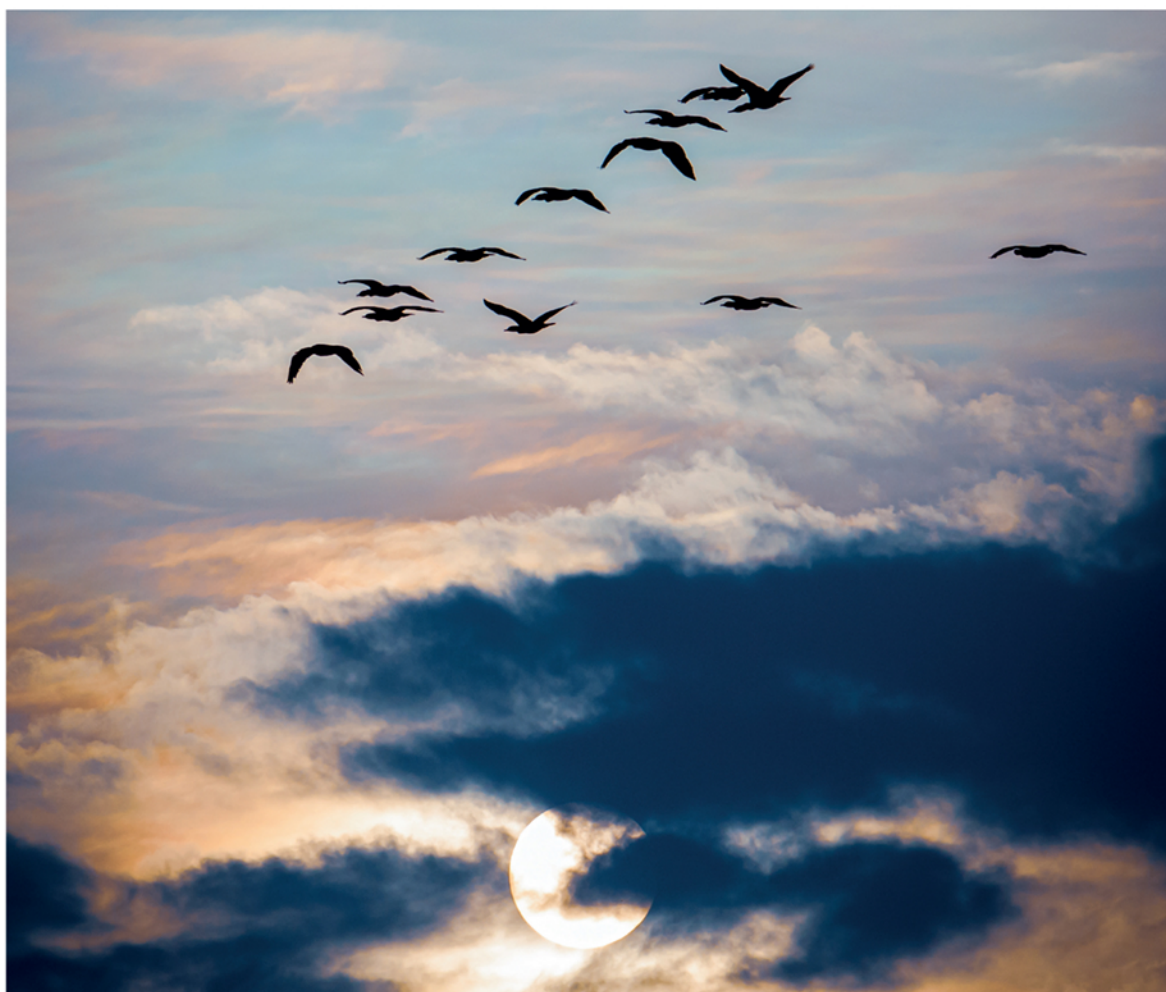


The Routledge Companion to Courier Poetry

From South Asia and Beyond



Edited by Yigal Bronner and David Shulman

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14 Mudgara the Messenger

Andrew Ollett

14.1 Poems for Fun

Most serious readers of Kalidasa's *Cloud Messenger*—that is, people who read it in Sanskrit, consult the commentaries and other written responses with close attention to its phrasing, themes, intertexts—know that there is something unserious about it. It is of course a masterpiece of world literature. But it might also be a joke. Its beautiful expressions of longing, its exercises in detailed imagination, are framed as the delusional ravings of a dwarf. This is not a new idea. The tenth-century commentator Vallabhadeva, puzzled by its genre, ended up calling it a “poem for fun” (*kēlikāvya*).¹ It is not difficult to see a dialectic of seriousness and fun in the long history of literature inspired by the *Cloud Messenger*. The seriousness comes in part from the learning that is required to play the game of messenger poetry and from the religious, literary, or cultural agendas it carries. The fun comes from the game itself: the pleasure of recognition, of adaptation to new worlds and ideas, of assigning new meanings to old expressions.

Ramavatar Sharma's poem, *Mudgara the Messenger* (*Mudgaradūtam*), is certainly a “poem for fun,” partly for the same reasons that Kalidasa's *Cloud Messenger* is, and partly for very different reasons. It was an inside joke: he recited it to friends, colleagues, and students, and they in turn memorized its verses, but it seems not to have made it very far out of his social circle. It was apparently completed in 1914 and published in a Sanskrit periodical, *Saṁskṛta Śāradā*, where hardly anyone took any notice of it.² It was published again in 1949, twenty years after Sharma's death, in the much more prominent *Journal of the Bihar Research Society*, and the editor, K. K. Datta, seemed unaware of its earlier publication.³ Datta noted that *Mudgara's* verses “are often quoted by the friends and disciples of Prof. Sharma.”⁴ Rāmanagīnā Ōjhā surmised on the basis of its vulgarity that it must have been composed primarily to amuse his friends and students.⁵ Sanskrit scholars may take a particular delight in using the language of the gods in the most obscene ways imaginable, but the delight is typically enjoyed in private.

Sharma wrote another piece closely related to *Mudgara the Messenger*, a fictional autobiography in Hindi prose called *The Deeds of Mudgarananda* (*Mudgarānandacaritāvalī*), which he did in fact publish in the pages of the *Nāgarī Pracārīṇī Patṛikā* between 1912 and 1913. My sense is that the *Deeds of Mudgarananda* was a “public” text, written in Hindi and with a much clearer polemical and pedagogical purpose. *Mudgara the Messenger*, by contrast, was a “private” text, written for a close circle of Sanskrit scholars. The language, besides being vulgar, is difficult. Sharma relished coining Sanskrit words for all sorts of things (*Miśraśiprā* is “Mississippi,” a *bhūtāhvānam* is a “séance,” a *vyōmayānam* is an “airplane,” and so on), and the syntax is often very loose. Moreover, the text presumes some

familiarity both with the central character, Mudgarananda, and with certain contemporary persons and events to which it alludes. Sharma's friends and students would probably have had no trouble decoding these references, which they presumably talked about at length.

Rahul Sankrityayan, the noted traveler, writer, and activist, includes some recollections of Ramavatar Sharma in his autobiographical writings.⁶ His first encounter with him was in 1912, as a Sanskrit student in his late teens. Sharma, then about 35, already had a reputation for being one of the most brilliant Sanskrit scholars of his generation. Sankrityayan was studying in Benares, and Sharma was visiting the city, where he had taught between 1901 and 1905 before taking up a position at Patna College in his native Bihar. Sankrityayan writes that Sharma was lured back to Benares in the summers by its famous Langra mangoes, although he clearly enjoyed the intellectual community as well. He and his two wives rented a house where Sharma held court:

In the lower part of the house there was a rather plain room that was transformed into a meeting area. There Sharmajee would sit on the floor. His court was open, and anyone could come and sit and ask questions. Whenever I arrived, I saw him clearing up someone's doubts or talking on some subject. In criticizing the tall tales (*gappēm*) of the *purāṇas*, he composed even taller tales in the name of Mudgarananda in his poem *Mudgaradūta*. Whether *Mudgaradūta* was published or not, I don't know, but at the time I heard its verses from Sharmajee's mouth. In one verse, huge elephants came out when Mudgarananda sneezed. The listeners were compelled to believe that this was a short version of tales from the *purāṇas*.⁷

Apparently, this chance encounter with Sharma, whom Sankrityayan called "the great atheist" (*mahān nāstika*), had a profound effect on the young scholar. His friend Prabhakar Machwe considered this to be his first exposure to the materialist ideas that he would later hold with conviction throughout his life.⁸

Mudgara the Messenger is "fun," in one sense, because of the way it creatively responds to Kalidasa's *Cloud Messenger*. All messenger poetry does this in some way, but Sharma responds to Kalidasa in a unique way that I will propose to call, based on indications in the text itself, "deformation" (*vikāra*). I intend "deformation" as an answer to the question of the poem's genre. Is it a "parody" of the *Cloud Messenger*? Is it a "satire" that speaks to another phenomenon by using the forms and language of Kalidasa's poem? In my view it is closer to the latter. Sharma uses *Mudgara the Messenger*, and the character of Mudgarananda more broadly, to criticize certain developments in the intellectual and religious landscape of India that have absolutely nothing to do with Kalidasa. The primary object of his satire is, in my view, the Orientalist appropriation of "Indian wisdom" by theosophists and the lamentable uptake of their ideas by the English-educated middle classes. Nevertheless, his appropriation of the *Cloud Messenger* for this purpose draws our attention to certain features of Kalidasa's poem that we might have overlooked. Thus, while it does not overtly mock the *Cloud Messenger* as we might expect a parody to do, it does change the way we read it.

14.2 Introducing Sharma

To provide the briefest biographical details:⁹ Ramavatar Sharma was born as Ramavatar Pandey in the town of Chaparā in Bihar in 1877. He belonged to a family of Sarayūpārīṇa Brahmins and studied with his father, Devanarayan Pandey, until the latter's untimely death around 1890. He then went to Queen's College in Benares and earned degrees in

Sanskrit from a number of institutions, including finally his MA from Calcutta University in 1901. He was lecturer of Sanskrit at Central Hindu College in Benares from 1901 to 1905, and Professor at Patna College from 1905 to 1919. He was the Principal of Benares's Oriental College from 1919 to 1922, when he returned to Patna. He died in 1929, apparently from heartbreak after the death of his four-year-old son.

We are primarily concerned with the period between 1912 and 1914. In 1912, the first chapters of *The Deeds of Mudgarananda* appeared, and Sharma was already composing a satirical poem based on Kalidasa's *Cloud Messenger*. The final installments of *The Deeds of Mudgarananda* appeared in 1913, and Sharma evidently finished a draft of *Mudgara the Messenger* in 1914.¹⁰ "His Holiness Mudgarananda" was a fictional character that allowed Sharma to pursue two agendas simultaneously: the critique of charlatanism and superstition (including theosophy in particular), and the advancement of knowledge about history, science, and philosophy beyond the borders of India. For studies of *The Deeds of Mudgarananda*, including the bizarre summary of world history that occupies the majority of the novella, the reader is referred to Harder (2015) and Kumar (2015).

This was the period of Ramavatara Sharma's greatest celebrity and literary and scholarly activity, with articles in Hindi, Sanskrit, and English. A few of them were about Kalidasa, and in them, Sharma insightfully and decisively narrowed down Kalidasa's date to the late fourth and early fifth century CE—a position now almost universally accepted.¹¹ In 1913, he published a brief text in Sanskrit representing his views about a number of philosophical topics (*Adhikaraṇaratnamālā Paramārthadarśanīyā*, roughly "Brief Essays on the True Philosophy"). This represented his first attempt to articulate a system of Indian philosophy that was thoroughly atheistic and in agreement, he believed, with modern science. He also edited Śrīdharadāsa's anthology, the *Saduktikarṇāmrta* in 1912, following his controversial reedition of Bilhaṇa's *Vikramāṅkadēvacarita* in 1911. Somehow he also found the time to be the president of the Indian National Social Conference, the social reform wing of the Congress Party, in 1913. At some point prior to 1914, he was awarded the title of "Mahāmahōpādhyāya," the highest title that the Indian Government could bestow on a scholar of Sanskrit.¹²

The editors of *The Modern Review* of Calcutta, India's most prominent literary review, solicited an autobiographical note in English from Sharma in an issue that also included contributions from Ezra Pound and Adam Mickiewicz:

For some days past there have been remarks on my life in the vernacular and English papers. Hence I wish to make it known to the public that my life is divided into two distinct periods as most men's is. (1) Early, irresponsible orthodox (in the degenerate sense) life up to about 25 and (2) mature, thoughtful life ever since. When in my mature life I began to study the social, educational and religious problems, I found that early marriage, purda, polygamy, caste, illiteracy, forced celibacy of sadhus and widows and sectarian superstitions were the seven curses and shames of the so-called orthodox Hindu life. In early life owing to the society in which I lived I had been a victim to each of these seven curses either personally or indirectly. But ever since I began to think about society, I have been remedying their effects upon my self. I have been trying my best to eradicate them from my society.¹³

14.3 Of Fools and Frauds

I give a rather extensive summary of the poem, because the only scholarly literature available on it is Ōjhā's brief essay (1978), which forms the basis of Śukla's summary and appraisal (2017); their treatment is quite brief and leaves many "question marks" (in Śukla's words) over this difficult text.

In terms of its meter and structure, *Mudgara the Messenger* is close to what we would expect of a messenger poem: it is in the *mandākrāntā* meter throughout, is a bit longer than the *Cloud Messenger* (148 verses as opposed to around 111), and is divided into three sections rather than two.

14.3.1 *Pūrvamudgara*

Murkhadeva leaves his family to take up the celibate life near the “stinking waters” of “Kāmagiri” in an obvious deformation of the *Cloud Messenger*’s first verse (1).¹⁴ He takes up residence at a temple where he begins to gain a following among low-caste people (*car-makārādika-*, 4). He is abusive and insulting toward his own father, preys on young widows, advocates sexual deviance, and generally outrageous and obscene, although the Gāyatrī mantra, and the name Ramakrishna, is never far from his lips (2–17).

Despite his constant abuse of women (including making them get abortions) and desecration of the temple, he manages to become rich and famous by his teachings: that the world as we know it is like a dream or an illusion and that god, who created the world, can easily forgive wrongdoing. His favorite example is a story from the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*, wherein the Brahmin Ajamila, after breaking all of the rules for his caste by cohabiting with a prostitute for years, is saved from death by the mere mention of the name of Krishna. He is fond of the external signs of religion, spiritualist trickery, and astrology, but is dead-set against scientific education on the grounds that everything there is to know is already in the sacred texts; this procedure makes him very popular and wealthy (18–30).

At this time, the poet says, two teachers appeared in India, whom he compares to the famous demons Sunda and Upasunda. One of them claimed to be Rama, and the other made his followers drink his own saliva (31).

Murkhadeva’s life changes, however, when he meets a woman, who is never named, but only described as a disgusting whore (*raṇḍā ... sthūlabībhatsakāyā*, 32). She is violent and deceitful, and Murkhadeva proclaims her to be omniscient and makes his followers worship her. She establishes the Society of Vandhyāputra Followers (*vandhyāputrānusaraṇasabhā*). It promotes “everything that primitive people believe”: ghosts and spirits, prognostication, palmistry. After a few years, however, she leaves the Society, leaving her devotees, and Murkhadeva most of all, very dejected, and leaving a man named Kālakūṭa in charge (32–43). At this moment, as Murkhadeva contemplates “by what means the stupidity of those who live in India might be made eternal,” Mudgarananda walks by, dark-skinned and scrawny, and naked but for a straw hat (44–45).

The listener is evidently expected to be familiar with the character of Mudgarananda, whom Sharma introduced in the *Deeds of Mudgarananda*. He declares “in words as clear as the thundering of clouds” that he has come to earth from Neptune in order to behold Murkhadeva’s magic power. On Neptune, he was the discipline of Vandhyāputra—literally “son of a barren woman,” a stock phrase in Sanskrit for something that does not exist. Vandhyāputra is a Mahatma—an advanced spiritual being who can transcend space and time according to theosophy—who disappeared into Shiva’s *jyōtirlingam*, having drunkenly “manifested” Shiva’s naked form on many occasions previously (47–50).

The *Deeds of Mudgarananda* overlaps with *Mudgara the Messenger* for the period between Vandhyāputra’s disappearance and Mudgara’s meeting with Murkhadeva. In brief, Mudgara goes to planet earth to practice meditation with one body, witnessing the currents of human history with another. He waits in meditation at Prayagraj for the reincarnation of his guru, where he is awakened by the commotion at the Kumbh Mela.¹⁵ He is arrested on

the charge of burning a house, and thereby killing the adults and children inside it, by shitting fire.¹⁶ On being released, Mudgara goes off to meet Murkhadeva (51–61).

Mudgarananda relates that the woman that Murkhadeva loved has reappeared as Rāsabhī (“Mrs. Jackass”), who “had come from the northern country.” If the two of them manage to meet her, she can provide them with an “eyewash of delusion” (*mōhāñjana*) that will plunge India into a cesspool of ignorance and rid people of all their critical faculties (*cintā*) (62–64).

14.3.2 *Madhyamamudgara*

Murkhadeva and Mudgarananda set out in search of the woman in the middle of the night and fall into a sewage pit, where they are compelled to spend the night. At dawn they see to their delight that it was right next to Mrs. Jackass’s temple, whom they eventually catch up with. At their desperate pleading, she offers them the promised “eyewash of delusion” and exposes her “oyster” (*śuktikā*). But she spots her pimp (*viṭapati*) nearby, and disappears, leaving Murkhadeva bereft once again.¹⁷ When he learns that she has gone to another continent, he returns to the sewage pit and laments until Mudgarananda once again appears to him (65–77).

The next verse marks a noticeable change in tone (78):

In his presence, his current of grief flowed with doubled strength,
like the Ganges does, with its hundred mouths, before the ocean.
When one sees a friend, what mortal is able to restrain at once by force
the pain that is born of separation, even if he has his mind under control?

While this verse does not directly echo Kalidasa’s *Cloud Messenger*, it is clear that at this point, a bit more than halfway through the text, Sharma has taken a step away from the straightforward narration and puerile jokes that have so far characterized *Mudgara the Messenger* and toward the poetics of Kalidasa’s poem. We have the “Kalidasa simile” in the first half and Kalidasa’s characteristic “generalization” (*arthāntaranyāsa*) in the second.¹⁸ Most of the verses I will quote from now on are patent reworkings of Kalidasa’s verses.

Murkhadeva “somehow holds back his tears” and, “wanting some news of his beloved,” addresses Mudgarananda much as Kalidasa’s *yakṣa* addressed the cloud (changes *vis-à-vis* Kalidasa’s original are in bold):

Where can I take refuge in my misfortune but you, Mudgara?
For that reason, Your Holiness, I have a small favor to ask,
if you can forgive my importunacy.

(79cd)

I know that you, **Mahatma**, are born into the world-famous family
of the **Varkarānandakas**, a kind of mutant taking any form you will:¹⁹
that’s why I have come to you, far from my beloved thanks to fate.
Better to vainly request something from a **good-for-nothing**
than to get what one wants from someone **exceptional**. (80)

jātaṁ vaṁśē bhuvanaviditē varkarānandakānām
jānāmi tvāṁ vikṛtipuruṣaṁ kāmarūpāṁ mahātman
tēnārthitvaṁ tvayī vidhivaśād dūrabandhur gatō ’haṁ
yācñā mōghā varam apaguṇē nōttamē labdhakāmā (80)

Compare Kalidasa's *Cloud*, v. 6:

I know that you are born into the world-famous family
of the **Puṣkarāvartakas**, a **trusted servant of Indra**, taking any form you will:
that's why I have come to you, far from my beloved thanks to fate.
Better to vainly request something from an **exalted person**
than to get what one wants from **someone low**.

*jātaṁ vaṁśe bhuvanaviditē puṣkarāvartakānām
jānāmi tvām prakṛtipuruṣaṁ kāmārūpaṁ maghōnaḥ
tēnārthitvaṁ tvayi vidhivaśād dūrabandhur gatō 'ham
yācñā vandhyā varam adhiguṇē nādhamē labdhakāmā*

He requests that Mudgarananda go to “the realm of master fraudsters, called ‘False’ (Anṛtā),” and proceeds, according to the *Cloud's* example, to describe the route. Murkhadeva acknowledges that Mudgarananda could, in principle, travel anywhere by the power of his breath control—he has arrived from Neptune, after all—but he might nevertheless want to take a route that will afford him certain pleasures of the flesh. He will take a taxi—or rather, jump into a taxi that someone else has already called—to the local train station. But he will miss his train, due to lovesickness for Mrs. Jackass or opium, so he will have to wait for the next one, acting like a familiar train station tout in the meantime. He should of course board without a ticket and hide in the toilet when the conductor comes by. The train will take him to Bombay, where he should enjoy the company of Parsi women and enjoy the sight of the Bhatia's decked-out girlfriends. Then he'll take a boat, where he can eat to his heart's content, leer at women, and boorishly drink wine with ice cubes (82–92).

After passing by the Persian Gulf, Mudgara's boat will travel over the Red Sea, “red with the blood of Arabs who died in religious wars,” then cross the Suez Canal, “a testament to the engineering skills of the French.” In the Mediterranean, he will see Greece to the north, “the source of ancient knowledge,” and Italy, the home of the Romans “renowned for their daring.” He will proceed to Spain and pass the Straits of Gibraltar. On the far shore he will see, bordering Mexico, the country of the “master fraudsters,” the United States of America, where “even oil-sellers go crazy for knowledge and give millions of dollars to establish schools all over the place” (93–97).²⁰

14.3.3 *Uttamamudgara*

The third part commences with a long description of the United States:

There factories make the cities beautiful,
warships the ocean, observatories the mountains,
bridges the rivers, canals the roads, highways the countryside,
and moon-like electric lights the streets.

(98)

The American travels by steamboat on the rivers,
by motor cars, powered by steam and electricity, on land,
and flies in the air through aerial vehicles —
thinking all three worlds are in his hand.

(99)

Murkhadeva mentions the power of the Americans to defeat the British (*śvētadvīpya*) in battle, their relocation of the native inhabitants of the country, and their abundant crops. They have buildings with many stories, accessible by “mechanical stairs,” with electric lights and fans. The British might have invented the steam engine, but the Americans invented the telegraph (*tantrīvārtā*, 102). They have their own swindlers there—not god-men, but hypocritical preachers, who advocate one way of life for their naïve followers and pursue another for themselves (100–103).

There beautiful women, their bodies the color of moonlight,
their waists as thin as your fist, seek some entertainment
at the end of a long day’s work, and go dancing with young seekers
who are mostly just as dark as you are, who tell them they love them.

(104)

Murkhadeva instructs Mudgarananda to proceed to the Mississippi River, where Mrs. Jackass has apparently been taken by her pimp. He can either take a ferry across, or if he can’t pay for the fare, hold onto a tree trunk or corpse, or just swim across like Tulsidas (106–107).

There he will find the house: it has a tulsi sprig on the door; Hanumān stands guard; Mrs. Jackass, now a “mother,” stays inside. The pimp, for his part, has shaved off his beard and dances with young children, all of them dressed as women. The cloud’s graceful descent to Alakā is transformed into a revolting break-in: Mudgarananda should wait by the stinking outhouse until a client leans out a window during the night, and then he can grab him and climb in; once inside, he should transform himself into a fly and wait in the washroom until he is ready to reveal himself (108–111). (Presumably he could have turned into a fly, or bird, and flown into the house at any time, but Sharma doesn’t miss any opportunities for scatological jokes.)

When Murkhadeva imagines Mudgarananda discovering his beloved, the text approaches the model of the *Cloud Messenger* even more closely. Recall that Kalidasa’s *yakṣa*, after describing his house to the cloud, transitions to a description of his beloved and what he imagines she will be doing in his absence. Murkhadeva does the same. His description of Mrs. Jackass’s physical form (112–115) is a one-to-one inversion of the *yakṣī*’s description in the *Cloud Messenger*, and in fact each verse begins with the exact same words, as discussed below. Suffice it to say here that Mrs. Jackass is painted as a crude, ugly, abusive woman.

The message that Murkhadeva has Mudgarananda convey “in his thundering voice” (117) is, unsurprisingly, a deformation of the cloud’s message in Kalidasa’s poem:

Know me, **you promiscuous widow**, to be a friend of your lord
named Mudgara, come to you **without really remembering his message**.
When crowds of “**nourished**” devotees are rushing on the road,
eager to loosen the **skirt-strings of sweet-taking flirts**,
it is I who **exasperate** them with my **strident insults**. (118)

bhartur mitraṁ capalavidhavē viddhi mām mudgarākhyam
tatsandēśaiḥ smṛtim agamitair āgataṁ tvatsamīpam
yō vṛndāni ślathayati pathi śrāmyatām pōṣitānām
tīvrauddhatyais caṭalakulaṭānīvimōkṣōtsukāni (118)

Cloud 96:

Know me, **unwidowed** as you are, to be a **dear** friend of your lord,
a cloud, come to you **with a message from him in my heart**.
 When crowds of **travelers** are rushing on the road,
 eager to loosen the **braids of their beloveds**,
 it is I who **urge them on** with my **deep rumblings**.

*bhartur mitram priyam avidhavē viddhi mām ambuvāham
 tatsandēśān manasi nihitād āgataṁ tvatsamīpam
 yō vṛṇḍāni tvarayati pathi śrāmyatām prōṣitānām
 mandrasnigdhair dhvanibhir abalāvēṇimōkṣōtsukāni*

When she hears this, “that old prostitute” is likely to burn him with her glances, since—here again is Sharma’s take on Kalidasa’s famous technique of “corroboration”—it only ever pains such women to hear of what their former partners are doing (119). Mudgarananda should nevertheless continue and say, starting another stretch of verses (121–123) that closely mirrors the *Cloud Messenger*’s (99–101):

**Your long-suffering lover, flighty woman, touches your body
 with his**, though he is far away: **his fat against yours,**
ugly-faced woman, his cold sweat against yours, his wounds
against yours, him impotence against yours, and his cool breath
against yours, cold as ice. (121)

*sthūlah sthūlam vikaṭavadanē gāḍha śaityaś ca śītam
 rugṇai rugṇam viratakutukaiḥ kautukēnātisūnyam
 śītaśvāsam tuhinaśīśiraśvāsibhir dūravartī
 jārāḥ svāṅgaiḥ sprśati capalē te ’ṅakam vēdanārttaḥ* (121)

Cloud 99:

In his intentions, though he is far away, **his path blocked**
by hostile fate, he enters your body with his: yours thin and his;
yours pained, his deeply pained; his tears to yours; your longing
to his; your warm sighs to his, somehow even warmer.

*āṅgēnāṅgam tanu ca tanunā gāḍhataptēna taptam
 sāsrēṇāsradravam aviratōktaṅgham utkaṅghitēna
 uṣṇōechvāsam samadhikaratōechvāsinā dūravartī
 saṅkalpāis tē viśati vidhinā vairiṇā ruddhamārgaḥ*

These verses are representative both of Sharma’s strategy in this section and of the pathetically dysfunctional relationship he depicts between Murkhadeva and Mrs. Jackass. *Cloud 99*, famous for the iconic intertwining of the adjectives for the beloved’s body and the *yakṣa*’s, functions in its original context as a statement of how intimacy is possible even in separation. *Mudgara* 121 presents, by contrast, a one-sided fantasy, where Murkhadeva can only articulate his obsession through bitter insults. The following verses, too, allow us to

hear resentment, even hatred, in Murkhadeva's voice, even if they are formed by relatively straightforward, even juvenile, deformations of the *Cloud*'s verses: his beloved is partially evoked by all of the ugly sights he sees, for example (123), as opposed to the beautiful sights that evoke the *yakṣa*'s beloved (*Cloud* 101). We then start to see that the hatred is mutual. Instead of picturing her "feigning anger" (*Cloud* 102), he imagines her poised to kick him (124). And whereas the *yakṣa* imagines the dewdrops from the tree branches to be tears of pity that fall on him as he stretches his arms up to embrace an imagined beloved (*Cloud* 103), Murkhadeva imagines himself being pelted by drops of spit from betel-chewing prostitutes (125). Whereas the *yakṣa* imagines that the winds that blow on him have touched his beloved's body (*Cloud* 104), Murkhadeva seems to imagine an overflow of sewage (126). At this point, Murkhadeva the listener might wonder why Murkhadeva is taking the trouble to send a message at all.

Here the poem moves away from Kalidasa's model and returns to the story of *Mudgara the Messenger*. Through Mudgara, Murkhadeva announces his aspirations to Mrs. Jackass. When the dust of your teaching spreads throughout the sky, he says, the sun of knowledge will be obscured, the stars of action will be invisible, the darkness of delusion will spread, and the wind of fraud will howl (127). But he needs her to come back to India for this to happen, and plans, with her and other charlatans, to establish an "Un-university," literally an "abode of all ignorance" (*viśvāvidyālaya*-, 129). Murkhadeva wants students at this Un-university to learn how to do all manner of stupid, pointless, and impossible things, or rather, they will be so occupied with smearing themselves with chalk and ashes, putting on garlands, and other such things that they won't have any time to study. And when India is finally established in this cesspool of ignorance and delusion, it will have the Society of Vandhyāputra Followers to thank (131–135).

Murkhadeva asks Mudgarananda to pass along a sign of recognition, as Kalidasa's *yakṣa* had done: once Mrs. Jackass awoke from a dream and kicked Murkhadeva, accusing him of consorting with *sakhībhāṇavats*, that is, men who dress as women, pretending to be the female friends of Krishna at Gōvardhana (137). He then expresses his hope that his messenger will return, with a reply from her, which will of course be abusive (139). As in the *Cloud Messenger*, Murkhadeva ends in an *envoi*: he hopes that his messenger will accept the mission, although for some reason Mudgarananda stands there silently, and merely "emits a mighty stream of acrid water" (140) in accordance with Kalidasa's statement that the good reply just by doing what is asked (*Cloud* 110). Finally, he gives a blessing (141), which is almost the same as the *yakṣa*'s (*Cloud* 110).

Based on the *Cloud Messenger*, the poem should end there. But it doesn't. Mudgarananda does as he is asked, but as he relates Murkhadeva's message to the woman, it turns out that her pimp was hiding in the bathroom and hears everything. He kills himself in a rage and returns as a ghost to haunt the woman and Murkhadeva. Mrs. Jackass reunites with Murkhadeva, but they engage in a protracted struggle over leadership of the Society of Vandhyāputra Followers. Mrs. Jackass claimed that a divine light exited from the top of the pimp's head and entered hers, whereupon some magical beings (*siddhāḥ*) proclaimed her head of the association. This claim was enough to convince the naïve membership of the Society, who then elected her President (142–147). Murkhadeva is incensed (148):

Although the poet Amaru had said that you would be really lucky
to be dominated by your girlfriend, that wasn't really to Murkhadeva's taste.
He left the Society of Vandhyāputra Followers in a rage,
and took refuge, for the good of his soul, in *Blākaṭāṇadādeva*.

14.4 Poème à clef

It is best to leave the task of tracing Sharma's references to a specialist of early twentieth-century India. I will note only the most obvious ones. First, as indicated above, the Society of Vandhyāputra Followers is a stand-in for the Theosophical Society, founded by Helena Blavatsky and several associates in New York in 1875, with its Indian headquarters established in Adyar, Madras, by Blavatsky and Henry Steel Olcott in 1882. Blavatsky, originally from Russia, is almost certainly intended as the first object of Murkhadeva's attention, "the woman from the north." She died in 1891, and Annie Besant became one of the movement's leaders, coming to India first in 1893. Besant, who founded the College where Sharma was first employed, is probably "Mrs. Jackass" in the poem. She became President of the Theosophical Society in 1907, following the death of Henry Steel Olcott, likely represented by Kālakūṭa. My best guess for the "pimp" (*viṭapati*) is Charles Webster Leadbeater, one of Annie Besant's close associates and a leader of the movement. As noted above, he resigned from the Society in 1906, after it became public that he encouraged boys to masturbate, but was reinstated soon after Annie Besant became President. It was Leadbeater who "discovered" Jiddu Krishnamurti, whom he and Besant then groomed to be the messiah. I make these identifications with some confidence because, in the 11th installment of *The Deeds of Mudgarananda*, Sharma has the titular character go back to Neptune on hearing that "Bibi Vasanti" (i.e., Annie Besant) had been sued: "I cannot remain on this unholy planet where accusations are made against such Mahatmas!"²¹ This must have been in reference to the 1913 suit brought by Jiddu Krishnamurti's father, Jiddu Narayanaiah, asking for custody of his son to be returned to him from Besant.²² Sharma took a particular interest in this case.²³ Moreover, in *The Deeds of Mudgarananda*, Vandhyāputra prophetically explains why Mudgarananda, despite being able to visit any planet he wanted, will take a particular liking to earth.²⁴ In that passage he referred obliquely to several "deities" who will appear, some of whom can be speculatively identified with the leaders of the Theosophical Society, and others with Indian god-men.

Some readers have seen veiled references to Swami Vivekananda in *Mudgara the Messenger*, especially in the name "Bhekananda" (105, Śukla 2017: 34). Certainly Vivekananda's *guru*, Ramakrishna, was involved in some of the esoteric practices that Sharma critiques in the poem. But so far, I have found little to suggest a direct connection. I wonder whether Sharma had the Parliament of World Religions of 1893 in mind when he placed Mrs. Jackass on the Mississippi River. Chicago is not exactly on the Mississippi, but perhaps close enough. Swami Vivekananda famously represented Hinduism there, and Annie Besant represented theosophy.

Murkhadeva represents an Indian counterpart to the theosophists, the charismatic god-man, whom Sharma sees as prefiguring, complementing, and even assisting the theosophical agenda. Partly because theosophy took inspiration from traditional Indian religions, they share a belief in rebirth and miracles. But Murkhadeva represents other ideas and practices in traditional Indian religions to which Sharma took exception. The practice of dressing up as one of Krishna's female friends (*sakhībhāva*) is mentioned several times. This is a practice associated with the Puṣṭimārga, or Vallabha Sampradāya, a North Indian devotional community. In fact, quite a few other references in the poem point toward charismatic Vaiṣṇava devotion, and the Puṣṭimārga in particular, as an object of critique. One is the appearance of the tulsi plant as one of the icons on the door of Mrs. Jackass's house (108, 110). Another is the substitution of traveling husbands (*prōṣita*) with "the nourished" (*pōṣita*) on Mudgarananda's path, a form of the same root from which *puṣṭi* is formed. And another is the frequent reference to consuming the guru's spit (31, 133) or leftover food (74).

The Puṣṭimārga was a relatively obvious target for a modernizer like Sharma, thanks to the “Maharaj Libel Case” of 1862.²⁵ In that case, Judge Arnould of the High Court at Bombay ruled in favor of a defendant, Karsandas Mulji, who had been accused of libel by one of the leaders of the Vallabha Sampradāya, Jadunathji Maharaj. Mulji had written an editorial claiming that the Vallabha Sampradāya did not represent an authentic form of “Hinduism,” partly for historical reasons, but partly also because the leaders of the community, he claimed, engaged in illicit sexual activity with the wives and daughters of their devotees. The lawyers for the defendant, and the press, represented the leaders of the community as self-styled god-men who peddled in superstition and abused their followers. Reformers like Dayananda Saraswati and scholars like Max Weber would later cite the “Maharaj Libel Case” when they wished to argue that contemporary gurus commanded absolute and irrational obedience from their followers.²⁶

Clear evidence that Sharma had the Vallabha Sampradāya in mind comes from his final reference to Blākaṭānanda. The person who took this curious name authored a number of sensational *exposés* of the Vallabha Sampradāya, including an “inside story” (*kaccā ciṭṭhā*), which appears to have been published around 1907.²⁷ Blākaṭānanda accused the leaders of the Sampradāya of taking sexual liberties with their followers, forcing women to get abortions, and dressing up as women for the purposes of performing the *rās-līlā*.²⁸ Some of these claims seem to be echoed literally in Sharma’s account of Murkhadeva’s career.

14.5 A Deformity of a Poem

Recall that Kalidasa’s *yakṣa* had called the cloud a *prakṛtipuruṣa* of Indra (6), usually taken to mean “minister” or “highly trusted servant.” But the word *prakṛti* also means the “original,” the “basis” or “archetype” for something else, and in this sense contrasts with *vikṛti*, the “derivative,” “ectype,” or even “deformation.” For *vi-√kr* does not just mean to change, but to change for the worse. When Murkhadeva addresses Mudgarananda, he calls him a *vikṛtipuruṣa*- (80). If we had to translate this word, it would mean a “mutant,” a kind of deformed person. But it is one of Sharma’s coinages, not attested to my knowledge in any previous text. Since it is itself a “deformation” (*vikṛti*) of a phrase in the *Cloud Messenger*, we might understand it as announcing the text’s overall relationship to its model. And indeed the words *vikṛti* and *vikṛta* appear frequently in *Mudgara* (25, 68, 80, 103, 116, 123, 137), whereas these words predictably never occur in the *Cloud Messenger*.

What does it mean for *Mudgara* to be a deformation of the *Cloud*? In the most basic sense, Sharma takes some raw material from Kalidasa’s poem—plot, structure, technique, and phrasing—and recreates it, but makes certain key changes that totally transform its tone and impact. The technique is announced in the very first verse, where “Kāmagiri” is substituted for “Rāmagiri,” whose “holy waters” (*puṇyōdakēṣu*) are replaced with “stinking waters” (*pūtōdakēṣu*). Note that when Sharma uses Kalidasa’s own words, he tries to change their *form* as little as possible (substituting a *k* for an *r* in this example), while trying to change their *meaning* as much as possible.

Some verses are almost exactly the same in the two poems, for instance the *envoi* (*Cloud* 111 and *Mudgara* 141). Sharma obviously needs to make some adjustments for the fact that it is a man, not a cloud, being addressed, but the first half is entirely the same. It reads very differently, however. In the *Cloud Messenger*, we are meant to read the *yakṣa*’s statement as modest and diffident: “I have made an inappropriate request of you” (*anucitaprārthanā*-), the poet’s nod to the delusional nature of the *yakṣa*’s address. But in *Mudgara*, Murkhadeva really has made an inappropriate request. Another example of verses that are almost the

same is *Cloud* 109 and *Mudgara* 138. The only difference there is that the romantic sentiment (“affection, when not enjoyed, transforms into an abundance of love”) is transformed into a sexual one (“affection, when not enjoyed, makes one extremely horny”). And of course the complimentary term of address (“dark-eyed woman”) is transformed into an insulting one (“dog-faced woman”).

Comic inversion, where a phrase from Kalidasa’s poem is mutated into something obscene or offensive, is one of Sharma’s main techniques. One of the clearest examples is the sequence of verses at 112–115, where Murkhadeva imagines Mudgarananda meeting Mrs. Jackass. Each verse is a deformation of a verse in the *Cloud Messenger* (83–86). One verse should suffice as an example.

She is **large** and **white**, with a **screeching** voice, her lower lip like a **ripped-up root**,
large around the middle, with **glassy** eyes like a **dog**, her navel **sticking out**,
walking with difficulty because of her **scrawny** hips,
bent all the way down because of her breasts,
she will be there, **like a great ape before the appearance of man**. (112)

sthūlā śvētā pauruṣarasanā śīrṇakandādharauṣṭhī
madhye sphārā stimitaṣṇakaprēkṣaṇā tuṅganābhilī
śrōṇī kārśyāt prakharagamanā dūranamrā stanābhyām
yā tatra syān naravikasanāt pūrvajā vānarīva (112)

Cloud 83:

Her **body** is **thin**, her teeth **pointed**, her lower lip like a **ripe bimba fruit**,
slender around the middle, with eyes **darting like a doe**, her navel **deeply recessed**,
walking slowly from her hips’ **weight**, **slightly slouching** because of her breasts,
she will be there, **the creator’s first attempt, it seems, at fashioning a young woman**.

tanvī śyāmā śikharidaśanā pakvabimbādharauṣṭhī
madhye kṣāmā cakitahariṇīprēkṣaṇā nimnanābhilī
śrōṇībharād alasagamanā stōkanamrā stanābhyām
yā tatra syād yuvatiṣayē sṛṣṭir ādyēva dhātuh

These very clear “deformations,” which but for their profanity resemble Weird Al songs more than other messenger poems, are mostly concentrated at the end of the poem. But as with most messenger poetry in Sanskrit, the borrowings from Kalidasa’s *Cloud Messenger* are even more pervasive than these. They occur at the level of individual words, phrases, and images. The unit of borrowing is often the metrical phrase: either the first four heavy syllables (*gatvā sadyaḥ*) or the subsequent run of light syllables (*nayanaviṣaya*, *virahavidhura*). Sometimes Sharma makes slight modifications to Kalidasa’s phrases (*ciravirahajam* vs. *priya-virahajam*, *sapadi bhavataḥ* vs. *sapadi bhavitā*). In at least one case, Sharma has cleverly taken an image from the *Cloud Messenger*—“darkness that could be pierced with a needle” (37)—and recast it in a different metrical position (66), moving it from the end of the line to the beginning.

What is perhaps most impressive about Sharma’s effort is that he faithfully reproduces Kalidasa’s technique of concatenation, that is, the deliberate use of one word from the previous stanza in the following stanza.²⁹ This is a technique that, according to Schubring,

was known to “every reader of the Mēghadūta,” although nobody before Schubring seems to have written about it, either in Sanskrit or English.³⁰

Sharma seems to have delighted, then, in adhering strictly to the *formal* rules of the messenger poetry game while at the same time creating a shockingly original specimen thereof. I note that the same could be said of Ramavatar Sharma’s contributions to literature and philosophy more generally. He was, on the one hand, a recognized master of traditional systems of thought and literary forms, which he knew inside and out; on the other hand, he was conspicuously modern in his religious and social convictions, if not in his personal habits (which, according to Rahul Sankrityayan, always remained those of a traditional Sarayūpārīṇa Brahmin).

14.6 A Cloud Turned Sleaze

Turning to the larger poetic program, Sharma also effects a “deformation” of the *Cloud Messenger*’s two major sections, the description of the route and the conveyance of the message. As noted above, Sharma engineered the character of Mudgarananda to serve a double function, representing an Orientalist image of an Indian holy man on the one hand, and an omniscient narrator on the other, who can comfortably narrate world history from an eyewitness perspective. The description of the route is therefore actually unnecessary, as Murkhadeva acknowledges: Mudgarananda is omniscient anyway, and he can easily travel to other planets, not to speak of other countries. The description of the route is therefore just Murkhadeva explaining to Mudgarananda how *he*, Murkhadeva, would travel to the United States. I find this to be one of the funnier parts of the poem: Murkhadeva wants to relate a message and calls on an alien visitor to help, but instead of asking him to use his supernatural powers, he imagines a voyage that he, Murkhadeva, could just as well have taken. Murkhadeva is imagining Mudgarananda as a mere extension of his own self—a kind of second body, to use the language that Mudgarananda had used in his autobiographical *Deeds*.

Sharma does not diverge greatly from Kalidasa’s *Cloud Messenger* in this respect. The *yakṣa* not only humanizes the cloud but projects himself onto it. The cloud becomes his “friend” and “brother.” He imagines the cloud doing some of the things he would like to do if he wasn’t exiled in Rāmagiri, from attending the evening *pījā* at the Mahākāla temple in Ujjain to (of course) visiting his beloved at their home in Alakā. What is equally obvious, to me at least, is that the *yakṣa* projects his own sexual fantasies onto the cloud. This is announced in the programmatic verse (13), in which the *yakṣa* promises “a route suitable for your journey,” where the cloud will take support from mountains, imagined as male friends, and take pleasure from rivers, imagined as female lovers. The *yakṣa* imagines the cloud having numerous affairs on his way to Alakā. Sometimes these are very thoughtful and romantic. But sometimes the tone shifts: “could anyone who has had a taste walk away from a woman with her legs open?” (41).³¹

Mudgara the Messenger literalizes this conceit, in the sense that Mudgarananda is doing what the very human Murkhadeva would be doing on the journey—buying a ticket and waiting around the station, for instance—and the number one item that Murkhadeva puts on Mudgarananda’s to-do list, in every place he visits, is to enjoy the local women. Mudgarananda is perhaps best described as a “creep.” He is told to look at women in ways that could only have made them uncomfortable. We are actually relieved when he visits a burlesque in America, since the women are at least paid to be objects of his lustful gaze.

This leads us to ask: is Kalidasa’s cloud a creep, too? He does of course cast his objectifying gaze on the “innocent *siddha* girls” of Rāmagiri (14) and the women of Daśapura (47). He watches the goddesses on Kailāsa take showers (61) and comes pretty close to

watching women on Nīcāiḥ (25) and Āmrakūṭa (19) having sex. But at least when the cloud is described as having affair after affair with rivers and streams (24, 28, 40), he is presented as a considerate and attentive lover, if necessarily a short-term one. Why, nevertheless, do we feel that the cloud is less sleazy than Mudgarananda? For one, Mudgarananda is the “second body” of a character who is clearly developed, in part one of the poem, as a sexual predator. By contrast, Kalidasa withholds everything we might want to know about the *yakṣa*. More importantly, the women in the *Cloud Messenger* are “imaginary,” and not just in the sense that the *yakṣa* imagines them. They are stock characters, with the flitting eyes, darting brows, tinkling anklets, and so on with which young women are invariably furnished in Sanskrit literature. There is a certain lack of reality to them, which is a consequence of Kalidasa’s decision (throughout his poetry, I would argue) to simultaneously aestheticize women and deny them personhood. By contrast, the women in *Mudgara the Messenger* are very real. They are the people sitting next to you in a train compartment or in the dining room of a steamboat. And this is why it seems “sleazier” to sexualize them as Murkhadeva does.

This is not to say that the journey in either poem should be seen as mere sex tourism. The journey from Rāmagiri to Alakā in the *Cloud Messenger* is rich with significance on many levels, not least of which is its thematization of the power of imagination, and specifically literary imagination, to grant us new perspectives and take us to new realms of experience. The journey in *Mudgara the Messenger* has a similarly metapoetic significance: it takes us from the local to the global, and it tells a certain story of the development of human civilization, culminating in the technical achievements of the United States. It is much easier to corroborate this metapoetic agenda in Sharma’s case because we know, from his other writings, that he was an outspoken advocate for the intellectual and technological modernization of India and saw Europe, and even more so the United States, as a model for India to follow in this respect. Hence it is no coincidence that Mudgarananda’s voyage begins near Prayag, symbolically associated with traditional Indian religiosity, and ends in the United States, specifically on the banks of the Mississippi, associated in the early twentieth century with technological progress, Western expansion, and the world-making power of capital.

The journey through the Mediterranean allows Sharma to recapitulate the narrative of the development of human civilization that he had previously offered in *The Deeds of Mudgarananda*. But *Mudgara the Messenger* is a kind of sequel in this respect as well: whereas the story in the *Deeds* essentially ends with Napoleon, in *Mudgara the Messenger* the references to the ancient Greeks and Romans give way, once the Straits of Gibraltar are crossed, to telegram cables and ocean liners.³² Mudgarananda’s arrival in New York is foretold with a seeming-genuine paean to industrial civilization (98–105). But this is Ramavatar Sharma, and we should be careful of taking anything at face value. It is hard to imagine a progressive Indian, in the early twentieth century, commending the white settlers of the Americas for “removing the unfit native inhabitants of the country to distant wildlands” (*vyasyāyōgyaṁ vanacarakulaṁ kānanē viprakṛṣṭē*, 100), and this might be a clue that Murkhadeva’s appreciation of the Americans is meant to be taken as somewhat naïve. America gave us the telegram, but it also gave us the Theosophical Society.

Let us return to the notion of “literalization,” which is one of the ways that Sharma “deforms” Kalidasa’s poem. We’ve already seen that the erotic subtexts of the journey are made uncomfortably obvious. There is another aspect of Kalidasa’s poetry that readers have long appreciated: his striking and creative use of color contrasts (e.g., the description of the confluence of the Ganges and Yamuna in *Raghuvamśa* 13.54–57). The darkness of

the cloud affords him plenty of opportunities to craft contrasting images in the *Cloud Messenger*, for example, the Ganges and the Yamuna (51), Balarama with a dark cloak (59), and a dark nipple on a pale breast (18). In this respect, Mudgarananda is once again a “literalization” of Kalidasa’s cloud. He is depicted as dark-skinned (45), a detail corroborated in the *Deeds*.³³ If literalizing eroticism leads us to ask questions about gender that Kalidasa’s abstraction might otherwise prevent us from asking, literalizing color does the same thing for race.

In fact, race is an important but subtextual theme in *Mudgara the Messenger*. Kalidasa’s cloud is dark, like Vishnu (15, 46, 57) or Shiva’s throat (33). But Mudgarananda’s darkness is racially coded, just like the whiteness of the various female characters in the poem. If we recall that the *yakṣī* is dark-skinned in the *Cloud Messenger* (82, quoted above), the whiteness of “Mrs. Jackass” (112) might seem to be just a comic inversion. But it is notable that skin color is never mentioned in connection with women who are presumed, on the basis of context, to be Indian. This includes the young women that Murkhadeva has sex with in the nearby villages, as well as the women in Bombay (89–90). By contrast, skin color is a salient feature of “Western” women, including Mrs. Jackass herself and notably the American women “with moonlight skin” (104). It is even more salient because Murkhadeva imagines these women being courted by men “whose color is as dark as yours” (104). Sharma thus overlays onto Kalidasa’s fixation on color contrasts a distinctly modern fixation on racial distinction, and that too with an image of white women and black men dancing together. Precisely what Sharma intended by this image—both progressive, in a sense, and charged with moral panic—I cannot say. The salience of skin color among foreigners is indirectly corroborated by Sharma’s use of the word *śvētadvīpa* (lit. “white island” or “island of the whites”) for England, although this usage is older than Sharma.³⁴

Murkhadeva Sharma’s reuse of color imagery in the *Cloud Messenger* inevitably takes on a racial dimension in his own historical context. The very choice of a white woman and a South Asian man as the protagonists of his poem would have triggered a number of associations for his readers.³⁵ We are meant to think, in the first place, of Blavatsky and Besant, and especially the latter’s cultivation of South Asian men as fellow theosophists and potential messiahs (Curuppumullage Jinarajadasa and Jiddu Krishnamurti). But Swami Vivekananda had several important followers who were white women as well, including Josephine MacLeod, Sister Christine, and above all Sister Nivedita. (Mira Alfassa, the French woman who recognized Aurobindo as “the dark Asiatic figure” of her dreams and who was selected to lead Aurobindo’s ashram as “The Mother,” was roughly the same age as Ramavatar Sharma and made her first acquaintance with Aurobindo in 1914, the year when *Mudgara the Messenger* was written.)

While cross-dressing and other forms of gender-subverting behavior are relatively common in Indian literature, they typically appear in the service of a narrative that definitely reaffirms clear gender boundaries and roles. In *Mudgara the Messenger*, there is gender-subverting behavior, but it’s not exactly clear, to me at least, what we as readers are supposed to make of it. Murkhadeva dresses up as a woman and dances in the *rās-līlā* (17) and cavorts with men dressed as Krishna’s female friends (137). Mrs. Jackass’s pimp also dresses up as a woman and has the boys in the house dress up as girls as well (108), which suggests that their clients include men who have sex with men (or boys). Moreover, Vandhyāputra was fond of talking about “gender-atypical” people: masculine women (*pōṭā*) and men who dress as women (*bhrukuṁsa*), besides bastards (*kānīna*, *kuṇḍa*, 50). Vandhyāputra himself appears to have been a devotee of Shiva’s *liṅga* (50). All of these queer allusions might have simply served to indicate to Sharma’s readers the moral degeneracy of Murkhadeva and his

associates. Of course, the “deviance” of certain religious leaders was a major topic in Sharma’s day. But queerness does not seem to have been included in this discourse of deviance: the leaders of the Puṣṭimārga were accused of taking liberties with their devotees’ wives, and the tantric practices that Ramakrishna encouraged (if not engaged in) included *heterosexual* sex. Queerness, by contrast, seems to have been underneath the surface of this discourse, uncovered—controversially—only by scholars in the late twentieth century.

14.7 Why the *Cloud Messenger*?

Śukla (2017) interpreted *Mudgara the Messenger* as an inside joke meant only for Sharma’s scholarly friends. I think that is probably true, but we can also see the poem as an experiment in Sanskrit literary modernity.

The dominant historiography of modern India presupposes that there was a radical break with traditional systems of learning. But even in the early twentieth century, this break was not a *fait accompli*. There were still many public intellectuals who experienced Sanskrit learning as an important part of their own formation and regarded it as a crucial element of India’s intellectual and cultural life. Ramavatar Sharma was one such intellectual. For him there was no question of simply jettisoning the heritage of Sanskrit learning. But he felt just as strongly that traditional modes of expression and systems of thought could not simply be carried forth into the future without a searching critique. In Sharma’s view, India was in desperate need of social reform, and thus needed a reconfiguration of its relationship to traditional ideas about social order as expressed and codified in Sanskrit texts.

Under what conditions could Sanskrit traditions continue to play an important role in modern life? Arguably the answer lies in self-critique. Sharma does not say so explicitly—at least as far as I know—but the ability to formulate critique *from within* a tradition may be the key to persevering in the modern world. Much of Sharma’s output is formulated in this mode: he wrote works of philosophy and ethics (*dharmasāstra*) in Sanskrit that, but for their content, could have been written a thousand years ago. But in fact he argues for profoundly “modern” ideas, including philosophical atheism and a progressive and relatively egalitarian vision of society.

Mudgara the Messenger is a critique in two senses. It is first a social critique, targeting especially Euro-American spiritualism and Indian traditionalism, and it therefore belongs to its historical moment in a way that most Sanskrit poems do not. But I read it as a critique of Kalidasa’s *Cloud Messenger* as well. Its primary mode of engagement with the *Cloud* is through “deformation” (*vikṛti*), producing a text that is as gross and obscene as Kalidasa’s is subtle and sophisticated. Part of the experience of reading such a work consists in appreciating how close the “deformed” result actually is to its model. An appreciation of such a relationship is of course integral to the very project of messenger poetry. But usually we come away with a deeper awareness of the richness and generativity of Kalidasa’s *Cloud*. *Mudgara*, however, leaves us with a lingering sense of ambivalence about it. At first we ask: How could such a “nice” poem turn into something so ugly, so obscene, so uncomfortable? But then we realize that *Mudgara* doesn’t result just from the substitution of individual words but from the literalization of some of its core themes. The aestheticization of color contrasts leads to a heightened awareness of racial differences. The main character makes the messenger his friend and representative—and disturbingly shares his own sexual fantasies with him. The messenger is instructed to enjoy women across his itinerary—and once we think of those women as *real* women, rather than literary tropes, we begin to feel a bit gross. These strategies of literalization lead us to a reappraisal of Kalidasa’s *Cloud*, or at least a heightened awareness of its sexual politics, which are unsurprisingly retrograde.

I do not want to overemphasize this revisionist reading of the *Cloud*, however. One reason is that *Mudgara*'s comic elements make us aware that the *Cloud*, too, has its comic aspects. We are not supposed to take it *all* that seriously, especially if we agree with Vallabhadeva that it is a "poem for fun." The outlandish premise of *Mudgara*, involving an extraterrestrial visitor, is not that different from that of the *Cloud*, where a *yakṣa* who doesn't really exist speaks to a cloud who doesn't really understand. Sharma draws attention to this relationship in various ways, some of them subtle (like having Murkhadeva lose consciousness just before delivering his message to Mudgarananda, thereby opening up the possibility that the latter is just a figment of his opium-addled imagination) and others not so subtle (like having Mudgarananda unleash a stream of urine in response to Murkhadeva's request, acting literally like Kalidasa's silent raincloud).

Another reason is that Kalidasa's *Cloud* made available certain key themes that Sharma was genuinely interested in, above all travel and utopia. Kalidasa's Alakā was itself a kind of utopia, and in reimaginings of the *Cloud*, the destination tends to be figured as a utopian space, even and especially if it is a real place. The substitution of "Anṛtā" for "Alakā" takes a swipe at this utopian tendency, by making the destination a "realm of master fraudsters" and turning the *yakṣī*'s house into a house of sexual degeneracy. But Sharma does find much to admire in "Anṛtā" nevertheless. His idealization of the destination is not based on tropes of leisure and opulence, as Kalidasa's is, but on the scientific and technological accomplishments of the inhabitants.

Messenger poetry starting from Kalidasa's *Cloud* is about travel and the experience of the world, and this, too, is a major theme for Sharma. Sharma himself moved largely between Bihar and eastern U.P., but he was firmly convinced that modernity would never arrive unless India abandoned its provincialism and began to look toward, and learn from, the rest of the world. Early on in *Mudgara the Messenger* (11), Murkhadeva is said to have explained the death of an old scholar in Benares by saying that he was punished for crossing the seas in a boat. This incident is notable for how normal it is: Murkhadeva is not saying anything that Manu did not already say. But clearly Sharma viewed such rules as a symptom of Brahmanical insularity. Moreover, *Mudgara* partakes of a specifically late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century ethos, in which technologies of travel, transportation, and communication were representative of the new possibilities of the modern world and associated in colonies like India with the world-making power of the colonizers: Sharma refers to taxis, trains, telegrams, and ocean liners, alongside Victoria Terminus and the Suez Canal. *Mudgara* celebrates these new technologies while simultaneously lamenting the lack of interest in, and access to, scientific education in the colonies.

Most of all, such a "deformation" is more possible with the *Cloud Messenger* than with any other work of the Sanskrit literary canon precisely because the *Cloud* was memorized by nearly every Sanskrit student. *Mudgara* relies on a kind of intertextuality that is only possible with a "base text" that readers know intimately, from beginning to end, and moreover with a "base text" that invites lighthearted criticism. These features might have made Kalidasa's *Cloud Messenger* the ideal vehicle for a learned but decidedly unserious send-up of the Sanskrit literary tradition, a self-critique which should have opened the door to a Sanskrit literary modernity.

Notes

- 1 See Unni (2016: 193), and on this statement of Vallabha's, Ruiz Falqués (2015).
- 2 Śarmā (1954: 218 n. 12).
- 3 Sāṃkṛtyāyana (1957: 61) also believed that he never published the poem, citing Sharma's constitutional inability to finish projects.

- 4 Sarma (1949–1950: i).
- 5 Ōjhā (1978: 287).
- 6 In addition to the text quoted below, see *Mērī Jīvan Yātrā*, vol. 1 pp. 145–146 (sect. 6, *Banārasa mēm padhāī* (2)), and vol. 2 pp. 436–437 (sect. 25.4, *Paṭanā aura Prayāga mēm*).
- 7 Sāmkṛtyāyana (1957: 60).
- 8 Machwe (1998 [1978]: 14).
- 9 This summary is based on Śukla (2017: 9–13).
- 10 I cite it from the reprint in *Śrīrāmāvatāranibandhāvalī*, pp. 147–199. For studies of *The Deeds of Mudgarananda*, see Harder (2015) and Kumar (2015).
- 11 So far I have only been able to access Sharma (1911), although he evidently wrote a number of other articles on Kalidasa; see no. 2574 and 2810 in Narang (1976), and “Kalidas, His Mind and Art” (1908) referred to in the Sanskrit introduction (p. 5) of Sharma (1994).
- 12 See Śukla (2017) for further details about Sharma’s biography.
- 13 Sarma (1913).
- 14 For example, *kaścit kāntaḥ* → *kaścin mūrkhah*, *snānapuṇyōdakēṣu* → *snānapūtōdakēṣu*, *rāmagiryaśramēṣu* → *kāmagiryaśramēṣu*. See the discussion of “deformity” or *vikāra* below.
- 15 The *Deeds of Mudgarananda* says that Mudgara came to earth at the BNW Railway station, perhaps at Prayag, in 1890, and continued to practice meditation until he was disturbed by the commotion at the Kumbh Mela in 1900 (Śarmā 1954: 155).
- 16 The details of this event can be found in the *Deeds of Mudgarananda*, which concludes with a courtroom scene where the possibility of shitting fire is debated at great length (using the evidence of the *Mahābhārata*, wherein Uttara uses a horse as a flamethrower). See Kumar (2015: 145–148).
- 17 I have translated *viṭapati* literally here, but Ōjhā took it as “British” and Śukla as “British or American.” I think it is a reference to a particular individual, likely Charles Leadbeater (it is perhaps a coincidence that the second part of his surname sounds like Sharma’s Eastern Indian pronunciation of *viṭa*).
- 18 *upamā kālidāsasya*, *Mahāsubhāṣitasāṅgrahaḥ* (vol. 4), no. 7101; on *arthāntaranyāsa*, see Bronner (this volume).
- 19 Varkarānanda is a character in one of Sharma’s short Hindi poems (Śarmā 1954: 200–203). He belongs to a lineage founded by a white goat (*barkarī*, i.e., *bakrī*), and he identifies himself as the grandfather of Mudgarananda, and the father of Bhekananda (200). Sharma defined *varkara-* in his lexicon as a “joke” (*parihāsē*, Śarmā 2024: 381). Note, too, that Devendra Nath Sharma saw Bhekananda as a kind of stand-in for Swami Vivekananda (Śukla 2017: 34).
- 20 He was surely thinking of John D. Rockefeller, the oil-seller who established, among other schools, the University of Chicago. Note that the duo had previously encountered a bad omen (65), namely an oil-seller emptying his bedpan.
- 21 Śarmā (1954: 173).
- 22 *Mrs. Annie Besant vs. G. Narayaniah*, 29 October, 1913 (<https://indiankanoon.org/doc/1214788/>).
- 23 Śarmā (1954: 217–218), from *Khulī Cīṭṭhī* (*Open Letter*), apparently published in *Sudhā* in 1928.
- 24 Śarmā (1954: 151).
- 25 Haberman (1993).
- 26 Weber (1958 [1916]: 315).
- 27 Saha (2020), Vaudeville (2001).
- 28 Saha (2020: 7).
- 29 Here, for example, are the linking-words for the middle section, which is the shortest (just a handful of verses, here marked with “?”, seem to lack a linking-word): *√bhram* 65–66, *mala* 66–67, *rāsabhī* 67–68, *pādaghāta* 68–69, *viññānārka* 70–71, *gandha* 71–72, *śamsan* 72–73, *avatāra* 73–74, *mūrkhā*, 74–75, *viṭa*, 75–76, *gatiḥgata* 76–77, ? 77–78, *priya*, *vaśya/vaśī* 78–79, [*śaraṇa*, 77–79], *vaśil/vaśāt* 79–80, *√jñā* 80–81, *√kath*, 81–82, *sthāna* 82–83, *sthāna* (again?) 83–84, *bāṣpayāna* 84–85, *bāṣpayāna* (again?) 85–86, *sthūlābhyūsa* 86–87, ? 87–88, *labdhvā* 88–89, *aṅganālaṅga* 89–90, *√paś* 90–91, *yāna* 91–92, ? 92–93, *dakṣiṇēna* 93–94, *uttarēna* 94–95, *agrē* 95–96, *atula* 96–97.
- 30 Schubring (1955: 333). See also Salomon (2016) and Bronner in this volume.
- 31 Some versions read the slightly less racy *puṇajaghanām* instead of *viṛṭajaghanām*.
- 32 Śarmā (1954: 190).
- 33 Śarmā (1954: 192).
- 34 Clarke (1919).

- 35 In fact, I suspect that behind the use of the word *ghōrā*, “terrifying,” which is frequently applied to Mrs. Jackass (68, 71, 116), there might be a suggestion of the Hindi word *gōrā* (fem. *gōrī*), “white,” or even an echo of the English word “whore,” as Yigal Bronner suggests to me.

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