

Rasāla Books
(www.rasalabooks.com)
**Annotated by Lidia Szczepanik (Jagiellonian University,
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Rasāla Books is a publishing company co-founded by Venetia Kotamraju (née Ansell) and Shankar Rajaraman in 2011 in Bangalore. Venetia, who holds a MA in Classics and Sanskrit from Oxford University, embarked on the unique mission of publishing pearls of Sanskrit literature long forgotten with delightful English translations. In the short time since its establishment, Rasāla has already published two volumes: “The Message of the Koel” (*Kokilasandeśah*) by Uddaṇḍa Śāstrī, transl. Shankar Rajaraman and Venetia Kotamraju, Rāsala 2012, Bangalore and a selection from “The Conquest of Madhurā” (*Madhurāvijayam*) by Gaṅgādevī, transl. Shankar Rajaraman and Venetia Kotamraju, Rāsala 2013, Bangalore. A forthcoming volume, “Translations of the Divine Woman: Śyāmalā Daṇḍaka and Āryā Śataka,” translated by Usha Kishore and M Sambasivan has already been announced.

The Kokilasandeśa, a charming erotic poem that belongs to the genre of messenger-poetry (*dūtakāvya*), centres around a male hero, kidnapped from his wife’s side by an unidentified woman. He is deserted in Kanchipuram in Tamil Nadu when spring arrives, pushing the natural world into a flurry of erotic excitement, leaving the poor protagonist feeling the pangs of separation from his beloved even more intensely. He implores a passing koel to take a message

to his abandoned wife in order to alleviate somewhat the pain that both he and the woman are feeling.

In the Rasāla edition of the poem, the whole Sanskrit text is given in *devānagarī* along with the English translation of all 162 verses. A glossary of the Sanskrit terms the translators decided to keep is given at the end as well as a map of the koel's journey through Kerala and Tamil Nadu. The translation is engaging and expresses the erotic and playful nature of the poem as well as the tension felt by the separated lovers.

The *Madhurāvijaya*, a *mahakāvya* poem from around the 14th century C.E. is unique for many reasons, the most important being that the author, Gaṅgadevī, was a woman and a princess of the Vijayanagara Empire. It tells the story of the author's husband, prince Kampa, and his campaign against Persian aggressors, which culminates in an epic battle for Madurai (*Madhurā*).

The translators decided to include 200 of the 500-odd verses of the manuscript in their edition of "The Conquest of Madhurā." They also chose to renumber some of the verses but give a list of corresponding verse numbers to those found in the manuscript. The selection of verses spans over all nine cantos of the original work, which allows the reader to savour the complexity of the poem. A glossary is also given at the end of the volume.

In both books we will not only find a short introduction to the respective texts but also a lengthy foreword entitled "The Wonderful World of Kāvya." It is particularly useful to those only beginning their adventure with Sanskrit literature and its choice of conventions, because it briefly characterizes some of the main elements found in the fantastic world of *kāvya*, such as the significance of certain animals, the seasons or, for example, the gods.

Rasāla has clearly embraced technology and expects its readers to do so as well, as a lot of extra data on the texts that we would expect to find in the published book, such as detailed information on the manuscripts used as well as the textual notes, can only be found and downloaded from their website, www.rasalabooks.com. It would seem that

the website is to be taken as a key part of the reading experience. The website itself is a treasure trove of information on *kāvya* in general as well as the specific books published by Rasāla. It also allows the readers to take part in an interactive game of sorts under the tab “Verse of the Week.” Readers can send in their propositions of interesting verses along with their translations and there is also the possibility of hearing the given verse being sung. It is a fascinating resource that is not bound by traditional conventions of writing and publishing about Sanskrit literature.

Another interesting feature is the “Anthology,” also a project engaging readers and users of the website. Rasāla has decided that every year they will publish an anthology of selected Sanskrit verses based on those that were sent in by the readers themselves. Interestingly, the publishers decided to include modern Sanskrit poets as well, so the volume promises to be a captivating blend of both the most famous and well-loved Sanskrit poetry and contemporary Sanskrit stanzas. The “Rasāla Anthology Volume I: Sharvari, The Night”, transl. by Shankar Rajaraman and Venetia Kotamraju, described on the website as “a collection of Sanskrit’s most beautiful verse on the night and all her charms,” has already been announced as forthcoming.

Rasāla is a fascinating project that promises to greatly develop in the years to come and one can only applaud the effort the owners put in to publishing the volumes themselves as well as running the complementary website.

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Sources:

Rajaraman, Sh. and V. Kotamraju (transl.). 2012. *The Message of the Koel (Kokilasandēśah)*, *Uddaṇḍa Śāstrī*. Bangalore: Rāsala.

Rajaraman, Sh. and V. Kotamraju (transl.). 2013. *The Conquest of Madhurā (Madhurāvijayam)*, *Gaṅgādevī*. Bangalore: Rāsala.

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