



**Protecting Environment through Poetry**  
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W.H. Auden said- Poetry makes nothing happen...in a poem he wrote as a homage to W.B. Yeats and most of us carry this line in mind however the next lines of this poem are as follows--

For poetry makes nothing happen: it survives  
In the valley of its making where executives  
Would never want to tamper, flows on south  
From ranches of isolation and the busy griefs,  
Raw towns that we believe and die in; it survives,  
A way of happening, a mouth.

and so has the poetry of Kalidasa written in about 5th century has survived.

Both Meghaduta and Ritusamhara are full of flowers, plants, animals, rivers, mountains, forests and clouds. I think it is the power of poetry to operate at all sensory levels and change our consciousness gently that makes it such a powerful agent of change, including changing our mind-set towards protecting environment.

5<sup>th</sup> of June is observed as World Environment day. First held in 1974, it has become a key campaign for raising awareness on major environmental issues being faced by the whole humanity and is celebrated across the globe with the participation of over 140 countries now annually. This year the theme for the World Environment Day is to Celebrate Biodiversity, and will be hosted in Colombia in partnership with Germany. Colombia is home to 10% of the planet's biodiversity. As part of the Amazon rain forest, Colombia ranks first in bird and orchid species diversity and second in plants, butterflies, freshwater fish, and amphibians.

I wrote an Earth Anthem in 2008 which was released on the occasion of World Environment Day in 2013 at the Indian Council of Cultural Relations in New Delhi. Since then it has been translated into over 50 languages spoken across the globe and used by a large number of schools worldwide to celebrate World Environment Day and Earth Day. Here are the words of the Earth Anthem --

Our cosmic oasis, cosmic blue pearl  
the most beautiful planet in the universe  
all the continents and all the oceans  
united we stand as flora and fauna

united we stand as species of one earth  
different cultures, beliefs and ways  
we are humans, the earth is our home  
all the people and the nations of the world  
all for one and one for all  
united we unfurl the blue marble flag.

Please note these words-- 'all the continents and all the oceans/united we stand as flora and fauna/ united we stand as species of one Earth'  
This is key to our survival. Staying united. Staying united as species of one Earth, not just humanity.

Recently, the United Nations played Earth Anthem to celebrate the 50th anniversary of Earth Day in April this year and later in a global online meeting on Global Citizenship hosted by Universidad Ana G. Méndez in Puerto Rico, which shows the importance of poetry in inculcating a sense of global citizenship and protecting our planet.

We can see it clearly, wherever we come from, we share our planet in common. And letting this sense of a shared planetary identity and a sense of responsibility to protect biodiversity, is what poetry can instil in us, in the coming generations.

The first sentence of the preamble of UNESCO constitution states-- 'Since **wars begin in the minds of men**, it is in the **minds of men** that the defences of peace must be constructed'. The UNESCO website states- 'In 1945, UNESCO was created in order to respond to the firm belief of nations, forged by two world wars in less than a generation that political and economic agreements are not enough to build a lasting peace. Peace must be established on the basis of humanity's moral and intellectual solidarity.' Today as we face the greatest challenges of the survival of life and life supporting systems in the history of our planet with runaway Climate Change, Biodiversity Loss and Extinction of Species, we must forge a new environmental and ecological solidarity and establish a new consciousness and new defenses in the minds of children, women and men to deal with these two unprecedented challenges of Climate Change and Biodiversity loss. And what's a better way to create a new consciousness and to build new defenses but to read, recite and write poetry about our fellow species, the silent nations, who do not have a voice in human affairs, in the affairs of the nation-state or the United Nations. Poets must become the voice of these voiceless. Poets should represent them in the Parliaments of Nations and the United Nations General Assembly. This is why I propose that UNESCO should establish the institution of a Poet Laureate for the Planet or Planet Poet Laureate or Earth Poet Laureate who can be the poetic voice of the planet, not just of the humanity but all the species who share our planet with us. This will complement UNESCO's initiative since 1999 to celebrate 21st March as the World Poetry Day.

Similarly, the Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts could also consider to create an institution of an Indian Poet Laureate, may be on the lines of US Poet Laureate where the poet laureate is a consultant at the Library of Congress in Washington DC. Earlier I had written in 2018, why we need a National Poetry Library and the Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts could be the ideal place to host such a library.

The beauty and richness of poetry born out of India's numerous languages is truly mind-boggling and needs to be taken to the rest of the world through translation into the most spoken languages. I realised this while editing an anthology of 100 great Indian poems from 28 of the languages spoken in the country. Most of the works in the anthology come from regional languages.

We need to collect poetry books published across the country, in all languages, at a central poetry library, and translate and publish the best of Indian poetry every year. The poetry library could also double up as the central translation centre taking Indian poetry to the world. In India, the diversity of languages is remarkable and worth preserving — this must be done by letting poets and writers assert their linguistic identities. A central poetry library at IGNCA can help make this possible by hosting regular readings by poets from different parts of India, purchasing their poetry collections and hosting annual national and international poetry festivals. The chief poetry consultant of the Poetry Library could also act as the poet-laureate of India, who could travel across the country to inculcate higher consciousness towards reading and writing of poetry.

Coming back to the works of Kalidasa,

Meghaduta is full of detailed descriptions of flora and fauna of the central and north India as well as of its hills, rivers, mountains, legends, beliefs, traditions, mythologies, rituals, high erotica among others. I have tried my best to preserve the names of the plants and animals, rivers, hills and mountains, traditions and styles, as in the original Sanskrit text of Kalidasa giving their modern names in the notes below each stanza in which they appear. I think it is very important to keep their original names lest we forget them and lose these treasures.

Meghaduta creates a complete magical world in itself full of sylphs, nymphs, spirits, eight-legged animal, the wish fulfilling tree, various kinds of drums, celestial elephants, birds, rare flowers, fruits, plants and trees who help the cloud in his journey to deliver the Yaksha's message to his young wife.

The secret of Meghaduta's continued relevance even today, in my view, is its focus on sensual love and the nature's beauty, the two subjects which are eternally interesting to us and Kalidasa's genius to make them flow into each other. For example, who but Kalidasa can imagine the rivers as a sensuous women, advising his friend cloud to take interest in rivers along the way on his journey from the central Indian plains to the Himalayas—

तस्याः किञ्चित्करधृतमिव प्राप्तवानीरशाखं  
हृत्वा नीलं सलिलवसनं मुक्तरोधोनितम्बम  
प्रस्थानं ते कथमपि सखे लम्बमानस्य भावि  
ज्ञातास्वादो विवृतजघनां को विहातुं समर्थः ॥४१॥

Like the slender arms of the lady river

Vanira branches reach out to take away her  
water garment and expose her thighs, the banks.  
O friend, of course it would take long for you  
to depart, for who has the strength to leave  
a woman after relishing her bare thighs?

41

हस्ते लीलाकमलम अलके बालकुन्दानुविद्धं  
नीता रोध्रप्रसवरजसा पाण्डुताम आनने श्रीः  
चूडापाशे नवकुरवकं चारु कर्णे शिरीषं  
सीमन्ते च त्वदुपगमजं यत्र नीपं वधूनाम ॥६५॥

There, a woman plays with a red lotus in her hand,  
freshly bloomed Kunda in her hair, her graceful face  
painted fair with the pollen of Rodhra, her braid tied  
with fresh Kurabaka, Sirisa in her pretty ears, and  
Nipa at her hair-parting, blossomed on your arrival.

65

This love poem would be unimaginable without all the plants and fragrant flowers described in detail by Kalidasa. This is why Meghaduta should be of interest to the contemporary readers as we deal with biodiversity loss and climate change today. Can we use the imagery/idea of nature as a sensual being presented by Kalidasa in Meghaduta to change the way we see nature—from mother to beloved, from revering it to loving it and from being separate to being part of it? Can it help us in protecting nature if we see clouds, rivers, plants, trees and animals as sensual beings?

Meghaduta also highlights the importance of flowers, plants, animal, seasons, rain, rainbow, wind, sun, moon, stars, stones, rivers, mountains among others things—animate and inanimate in our love lives, without whom we would be reduced merely as bio-robots obsessed with numbers and statistics, dealing with various kind of growth rates, and living a dismal life on a planet marred by loss of biodiversity and extreme climatic events.

Would such a life without plants and animals be worth living? That's the question we all need to ask. What would be our poetry about then?

I see Kalidasa as an eco-poet of very high sensibility in his Ritusamhara as he describes the plight of animals in different seasons and how even animals come together for each other's support and rescue. For example in Summer-

Antelopes unable to bear the sun's blinding glare  
with parched throats and thirsty tongues, jump  
towards the distant sky—dark like the fine powdered  
collyrium, thinking it as a sheet of water in another jungle. 11

Tormented by the sun's savage rays  
scorched by dust, the Cobra pants  
time and again with his hood drooped  
as he creeps to rest in a peacock's shade. 13

Lion, the lord of beasts, lolls his tongue,  
pants loudly, his jaws wide-open, mane  
shaking, powerless with intense thirst  
he ignores the  
elephant though nearby. 14

Unafraid of the lion anymore, elephants  
spray cool water from their trunks  
to soothe their ears from the blistering sun  
suffering from intense thirst  
they roam searching for water. 15

A peacock, breathless, struck with the sun's piercing  
rays like burning flames of sacred fire on the altar,  
lets the snake live, which pokes its head  
into the discs of his dazzling plumes. 16

Singed by the scorching sun rays  
frogs leap out of the muddy marsh

and sit under the parasol hood

of a deadly cobra— tired and thirsty.

18

With foaming mouths and rose tongues

wild buffaloes emerge from the hill caverns

frenzied by thirst, their vision blurred,

snouts raised in the air sniffing water.

21

In the rainy season Kalidasa writes

Like jade fragments, the green grass rises

spreading its blades to catch raindrops,

fresh leaf-buds burst from the Kandali plants,

Indragopaka insects make a riot of crimson, green,

purple and gold, the earth is draped in colourful

jewels like an elegant and charming woman. 5

We would not know the splendour of green grass rising, Indragopaka insects and Kandali plants without this poem stanza of Kalidasa. And hence would lose them forever.

Poetry shows the splendour, majesty of all these species in their finest glory and touches deep reaches of our conscience to come forward to do all to protect and preserve Kandali and Indragopaka and all the beautiful, wonderful species that surround us. For we know that without them we would die, homo sapiens would die, soulless.

Roused by the pleasing sound of thundering clouds

a pride of amorous peacocks fill the air

with their joyous screams welcoming the rain,

throwing themselves into the love-play of billing and fondling

and begin to dance spreading out their resplendent feathers. 6

Look how rains and clouds are equally important in making even peacocks alive with joy, what of humans then?

Wild elephants, delirious, trumpet endlessly  
as if challenging the thundering clouds  
their secreting temples resemble a blue  
lotus frequented by the honey bees.

15

In Autumn

The earth wrapped in Kasa blossoms,  
nights lit up with silver moon  
river currents white with hamsas  
and ponds with newly bloomed lilies  
forests – a riot of saptachadda trees  
bowing gently with the weight of flowers,  
gardens fragrant with malati blooms  
white reigns all around, pleasing our eyes.

2

The sky is deep blue like glossy collyrium  
The earth is glowing like dawn tinged  
pink by Bandhuka pollen, fields bright  
green with blooming Kalama rice,  
whose young heart would not throb  
with sensuous longing?

5

Bandhuka: Jungle geranium, IxoraCoccinea

The breeze caresses gently the blooming flower buds  
and tender young leaves on swaying boughs of Kodivara tree  
Among the soft whispering of the leaves, the delirious bees

suck trickling honey greedily. Whose heart would not overflow  
with joy looking at these lovely trees?

6

Kodivara: Mountain ebony, Bauhinia, Kachnar

The Priyangu creepers' twigs full of flowers  
outrival the grace of women's jeweled arms  
and the malati blossoms entwined  
with flowering Asoka vie with the sparkling  
teeth of women smiling radiantly.

18

In the season of frosts

Young women rub Kalakeya perfumed powder  
on their limbs and make up their faces blossoming  
like lotus with the remains of the laksha juice,  
and give their hair a finishing touch  
with the incense of Kakaguru  
as they get ready to meet their lovers  
in the feast of love.

5

The fields covered with ripened paddy  
as far as eyes can see, their boundaries  
full of herd of does, midlands filled with  
sweet cries of graceful demoiselle cranes,  
ah! what passion they arouse in heart!

8

In Winter

Shining like stars, their full breasts held tightly  
by lovely bodices, gorgeous thighs covered  
in colourful silk, fragrant flowers adorning



their hair, women welcome the winter's arrival. 8

## In Spring

Fresh bloom of Karnikaras on their ears,  
a chaplet of Ashoka flowers and full blooms  
of Navamallika vines on their curly dark hair,  
magnify the sensuality of beautiful women. 5

Crazy cuckoo drunk on mango nectar,  
as drunk with wine, kisses his partner  
honey bees too hidden inside lotus petals  
hum sweet sounds to their sweethearts. 14

Spring has brought forth groves of flowering  
Palasha trees swinging in the wind, bowed  
with loads of flowers resembling raging fire  
and the earth resembles a just-married bride  
dressed in elegant radiant red attire. 19

We must act now while we still have some time left so that our beautiful planet resembles a just-married bride every spring for centuries to come. Let's read, recite and write poetry celebrating the riches of our planet, protect and preserve them for the generations to come.

I have been exactly doing that since my arrival in Madagascar. Madagascar has made me a haijin. When I arrived in Madagascar in March 2019, I had not thought in my wildest imagination that I would start writing haiku here. I began with usual length poems but soon felt that I was not able to capture and express the multiple enlightenments taking place within me while waking up with birdsong, looking at mynahs, hoopoes, black Vasa parrots, red fodies, yellow wagtails, green geckos, colour changing chameleons, butterflies and dragonflies of all possible colours, bees sucking nectar from flowers, making beehives, lying on the grass upside down in headstand yogic pose and looking at the sky, travelling across Madagascar listening to the calls of Indri-Indri, the largest of the surviving lemurs and critically endangered, watching silky Sifakas dance, seeing turtles swimming freely in the emerald sea and watch sunset at the alley of Baobabs and just wandering around like a fakir

following the tradition of Basho, Buson and Issa, though in another island and in another space-time.

These are my very first haiku or haiku-like short poems and I've a steep learning curve ahead of me. Hope you will experience the luminosity these words and images endeavour to conjure up, which I've experienced firsthand in the magical land of Madagascar. Wishing you a rewarding and sublime journey!

owls  
hooting at midnight—  
what's in store?

who could say  
they're not aliens—  
painted mantellas

a hoopoe couple  
nesting in the wall-hole  
how long will they stay?

happy  
then sad, watching—  
the silky sifakas

stretching its arms  
in prayer —  
a traveller's palm

silence—  
between the two  
sea waves

sea waves—

the ocean breathing,  
its vast mouth open

sitting on a bare tree  
singing—  
a red fody

a hut with a view  
of a traveller's palm  
—what else does one need

vanilla flowers  
hand pollinated  
—bees dead

a traveler's palm  
anywhere—  
lights up the heart

not like anything  
in this world—  
aye-aye

half-moon overhead  
fallen leaves under feet  
— a clear sky in Tana

moonless night  
do you hear—  
hissing cockroaches

flames of yellow  
lighting up Ranomafana—  
moon moths

*Madagascan moon moth is native to the rain forests of Madagascar  
Ranomafana is a national park located in south-east of Antananarivo*

a haunting hum  
fills the Andasibe  
—Indri Indri

*Andasibe rainforests are located in the east coast of Madagascar  
Indri Indri is the largest species of surviving lemur. It is critically endangered.*

silky sifaka  
white as snow—  
who needs moon tonight?

*Sifaka is a critically endangered species of lemurs also known as dancing lemurs*

Singing cicadas  
and crickets at the night  
—who needs lullabies!

sky  
filled with stars—  
night passing by

not in a hurry  
to fruit—  
the kaki tree

*kaki: persimmon*

standing  
below a baobab—  
what a blessing!

morning to evening  
poetry of hoopoes—  
what do they sing?

frangipani flower  
shining  
—five-petaled sun

clear sky  
filled with stars  
—crickets' cry

yellow flowering weeds  
blossoming —  
the face of divinity

I leave you with these to read, write and recite your own poetry and help change your own consciousness and with that of the world and in this way protect the environment.