

The Mango Motif in Sanskrit Poetry

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Celebration of spring is a major theme in Sanskrit love poetry. Spring is the season when Kāma, the God of Love, accompanied by his friends Vasanta, the Spring, and Dakṣiṇānila, the Southern Breeze, stirs up the passions of the young. It is fancied that Kāma carries a bow made of sugar cane or of flowers; the string is made up of black bees; their buzzing the twang of the bow. The lovely flowers that bloom in spring are used as arrows by Kāma to target the youth. Among the wide range of vernal flowers, five have the honour to be his arrows: Mango, Asoka, Navamallika, Red Lotus and Blue Lotus.¹ Of these, the mango blossom is the most potent. It is ubiquitous: one cannot imagine any human habitation or woodland in India without a mango grove. Its fragrance is such that the black bees leave every other flower in its favour.² More important still is that of all the five flowers, it is only the mango flower that finally produces a fruit.³

The pale green blossoms and the slender fresh leaves of the mango usher in spring. The cuckoo feasts on the fresh mango sprouts; their pungent juices open up his

melodious voice, and he sings of the glories of spring. When the tree is laden with myriads of tiny flowers, black bees flock to the tree and fill it with their buzzing noise. It is as though the mango tree itself humming a tune.

When Kāma holds sway over man and beast and discharges his flowery arrows, lovers who are together cannot have enough of one another; lovers who are away find the separation beyond endurance. Girls who are angry with the lovers cannot keep up the anger any more; they melt in the lovers' embrace without much persuasion. These then are the various elements that the Sanskrit poet dwells on in his description of spring. In all these elements mango forms the major motif.

As in many other aspects, here too Kālidāsa is the path-maker.⁴ Himālaya, we are told in the *Kumārasambhava*, had already a son, yet he was not happy until he had the daughter Pārvatī. This special love for the daughter is compared to the bees' special attachment to the mango.

*mahībhṛtaḥ putratō 'pi dṛṣṭistasmīnnapatyē na
jagāma tṛptim
anantapuṣpasya madhorhi cūte dvirephamālā
saviśeṣasaṅga*⁵

In spring there is an infinite variety of flowers; yet the row of bees have a special attachment to the mango.

In Sanskrit, mango is called *āmra*. A particularly fragrant variety has the name *Sahakāra*, literally that which cooperates or assists (Kāma) or that which brings (lovers) together. Poets play upon these two derivational meanings. Thus in an anthology put together by Sārṅgadhara:

*kati pallavitā na puṣpitā vā taravaḥ santi samantato
vasante
jagatīvijaye tu puṣpaketoh sahakārī sahakāra eka eva*⁶

How many trees are there not in spring,

which put forth fresh leaves and flowers?

But in the conquest of the world by Kama,

mango is the only one that effectively cooperates.

For another poet, the mango tree is the concert hall, where Vasanta, the king of seasons, listens to music:

*śrīmadvasantarturājavilāsabhūmir
bhrātar vibhāti sahakāramahīruho 'yam
tānapradāyīṣu ṣaḍanghriṣu kokilo'yām
atra prapañcayati kañcana pañcamam yat*⁷

The mango tree in all its splendour

is the pleasure palace of Spring,

His Majesty the King of all Seasons.

Black bees provide the buzzing keynote

and the cuckoo sings the fifth note.

In the *Mālavikāgnimitra*, the king finds the touch of the southern breeze very soothing: "This southern breeze, fragrant with mango blossoms, is caressing me like the hand of spring."⁸ Some other poet whose name we do not know declares: "Neither camphor, nor sandal wood, neither musk, nor any other kind of flower or fruit, has such fragrance as the mango does."⁹

With the onset of Spring, Kāma, the Warrior of Spring, sets forth to break the hearts of the lovers. In Kālidāsa's *Ṛtusaṁhāra*, a lover informs the beloved:

praphullacūtāṅkuratīkṣṇasāyako
dvirephamālāvīlasaddhanurguṇaḥ
manāṁsi bhettuṁ surataprasaṅgiṇaṁ vasantayoddhā
*samupāgataḥ priye*¹⁰

With sharp arrows made of full blown mango blossoms,

with the shining bow string made out of rows of black bees,

the Spring's warrior has arrived, oh darling,

to pierce the hearts of the pining lovers.

The onset of Spring fills the hearts of women with deep longing for the lover. The major agents in this business are the mango trees in bloom. As Kālidāsa says in his *Ṛtusaṁhāra*:

tāmrpravālastabakāvanamrās cūtadrumāḥ
puspitaḥcāruśākhāḥ
kurvanti kāmāṁ pavanāvadhūtāḥ paryutsukāṁ
*mānasāṁ aṅganānām*¹¹

Bent with the weight of coppery sprays of fresh leaves, with branches full of blossom,

shaken by the gentle winds from the south,

the mango trees fill with longing

the tender hearts of all young ladies.

The male cuckoo sings his celebrated fifth note of the scale only in Spring. He can sing only after he partakes of the fresh mango sprouts, the bitter sweet juices of which clear his throat and open up his melodious voice. In the view of an anonymous poet, the cuckoo and the mango tree make the best pair of the singer and the listener. The mango tree is so carried away by music that he has gooseflesh all over the body, in the form of the blossoms that cover the whole tree.

gātā kokila eva jñātā ca rasāla eva niyataṁ idaṁ
yaḥ pañcamāṁ udgāyati yasyāsthiṣu
*pulakamukulāni*¹²

It is indeed pre-ordained

that the cuckoo is the only singer

and the mango the true connoisseur.

He sings the high fifth note,

and this one has gooseflesh-buds all over.

The cuckoo's song is melodious indeed. But it also has a stern message to the proud ladies who had been offended by carefree lovers. In the *Kumārasaṁbhava*, the poet informs us:

Cūtāṅkurāsvādakāṣaykaṅṭhaḥ puṁskokilo yan
madhuraṁ cukūja
manasvinīmānavighātadakṣaṁ tad eva jātaṁ
*vacanaṁ smarasya*¹³

Whatever the male cuckoo proclaimed,

having his voice mellifluous rendered,

after partaking the mango blossoms,
that became the decree of God of Love,
to the effect that all the anger
of offended ladies is hereby cancelled.

Another poet whose name has not come down to us
offers a variation on this theme:

*āmriśikhām aruḍhaḥ kokilataruṇā vadanti nārīṇām
gacchata ramaṇam śaraṇam madano 'sti
mahātatāyīva¹⁴*

Perching on the top of the mango trees
cuckoo lads tell the ladies of the realm;
go back to your lovers forthwith,
or face the wrath of Love God.

While the captivating fragrance of the mango blossom
gladdens the black bee, the cuckoo and the lovers in union,
it torments the hearts of those whose love has not yet been
reciprocated. The onset of spring makes their suffering
all the more poignant. The mango tree, the prominent
representative of the Spring and the agent-in-chief of the
God of Love, more often than not, plays the role of the
tormentor of the youth. In Kālidāsa's *Vikramorvaśīya*, the
love-lorn Vikrama finds the sight of the mango tree
unbearable:

*idaṁ asulabhavastuprārthanādumivāram
prathamam api mano me pañcabāṇaḥ kṣiṇoti
kim uta malayavātonmūlitāpāṇḍupatrair
upavanasahakārair darśiteṣvaṅkureṣu¹⁵*

This mind of mine that cannot be restrained
from longing for a thing that is hard to get,
is already tormented by him with the five arrows.
What to say about the sight of these mango trees
that put forth new blossoms after
the pale old leaves have been blown off by wind.

It is the same story with Nala in Sriharsa's
Naisadhiyacarita. Hoping to get his mind off the pretty
Damayanti, he goes for a stroll in his garden. But the
trees there do nothing but torment him. In particular, the
mango tree threatens him, shaking a stern finger, under
the guise of gently swaying sprays of flowers.

*rasālasālaḥ samadrśyatāmunā
sphurddvirephāravaroṣahuṅkṛti
samīralolaīr mukulaīr viyogine janāya ditsann iva
tarjānābhiyam¹⁶*

There he saw the mango tree,
snorting in anger with the sound of the bees,
with sprays of flowers shaking in wind,
as though shaking a threatening finger
at the poor lover in separation.

Those who are not kings have often to travel abroad
for a living. The plight of these travellers when they
encounter mango trees in bloom is a favourite motif of
our poets. Magha, for example, fancies that the grains

of pollen falling on the poor travellers from the flower-laden mango trees has the same burning effect as the sparks flying from straw fire.¹⁷ Kalidasa's *Rtusamhara* has a milder image:

*rucirakanakakāntim̄ muñcataḥ puṣparāśin̄
mṛdupavanavidhūtān̄ puspitaṃscūtaṃkṣān̄
abhimukhaṃ abhivikṣya kṣāmadeho 'pi mārgē
madanaśaranighātair mohaṃ eti pravāsi¹⁸*

Seeing in front of him mango trees in bloom,
shaken by a gentle breeze, which shed
golden-hued flowers all around,
the poor traveller falls in a faint,
shot by Kama's arrow as it were.

More pathetic still is the plight of the wife who eagerly awaits the return of the traveller. Here is a lament from one such girl in the *Vasanta Vilasa Phagu*:

*kimśukaḥ kusumitaḥ kalakaṇṭhikūjitair mukharitāḥ
sahakārāḥ
nāgataḥ priyatamaḥ sakhīha me kā gatiṃ madhur
upāgata eva¹⁹*

The *Kimśuka* is in full bloom,
the Mango resounds with the cuckoo's song.
The spring is already here,
but the one I love has not returned.
Tell me, friend, what I should do.

In Vallabhadeva's anthology, *Yaśodharavardhana* the Scribe employs this poetic conceit:

*jvalitaṃ kusumaprabhayā pathikāṅganayā vilokya
sahakāraṃ
dahanabhayād iva siktaṃ nayanajhitavāriṇā
hṛdayaṃ²⁰*

Seeing the mango tree aflame with blossom,
and afraid that it would burn her heart,
the traveller's wife poured upon it
streams of water from her eyes.

Another girl was luckier. She was so lost in sorrow that she did not even get to see the Spring. As recounted by Srivibhramavarman in Vallabhadeva's anthology:

*mañjaryo na vilokitā kusumitāścūtasya bāṣpāndhayā
nāghrāta sakhi saṃtataśvaśitayā vātas tadāmodinaḥ
bhṛṅgānām alakāvṛtaśvaṇayā nodgītam ākaṇitam
kṣemeṇādya viraṅghito dhṛtiharo diṣṭyā madhur
bālayā²¹*

She was blind with tears,
could not see the sprays of mango blossom.
Busy as she was sighing deeply,
she could not smell the air fragrant with the mango
smell.
Her hair was disheveled and blocked the ears;
so she did not hear the high-pitched songs of the bees.

Thus fortunately the traveller's young wife passed the spring season which otherwise took away one's courage.

In the *Śākuntala*, Kālidāsa alludes to a charming custom. When a girl sees the first buds on the mango, she greets them with the words:

*ātammahariapaṇḍura jīvidasavvaṃ vasaṃdamāsassa
ditto si cūakoraa udumaṅgala tumaṃ pasāemi*²²

I see you, mango sprout,
reddish, green and white,
life's essence of the vernal month,
season's lucky sign,
my greetings to you.

The spray is then plucked and offered to God Kama with the words:

*tumaṃ si mae cūdarṅkura diṅṅo kāmassa
gahīdacāvassa
pahiajaṇajuvailakkho paṃcabbhahio saro hohi*²³

I give you, mango sprout,
to Kama with the mighty bow.
May you become the sixth arrow
to target the traveller's wife.

Though the mango tree is rather squat in appearance, poets are so tender towards it that they see it occasionally

as a delicate creeper. Kālidāsa introduces the custom in the *Raghuvamśa*:

*abhinayān pariceturṃ ivodyatā
malayamārutakaṃpitapallavā
amadayat sahakāralatā manaṃ sakalikā
kalikāmajitām api*²⁴

Intent on practicing dance steps,
its tender leaves shaken by the southern breeze,
the mango creeper full of blossom,
enthralled even the ascetics' heart.

At other times, the mango is seen as a male youth and ladies find pleasure in marrying him off to supple creepers like the Atimuktaka-lata (= Mādhavī, *Hiptage madablota* Gartn), Priyaṅgu-latā (= Phalini, *Callicarpa macrophylla* Vahl) or Navamallikā (= Vāsantī, *Jasminum samboc* Ait). In the *Raghuvamśa*, Indumatī plans the marriage of her favourite mango tree with a Priyaṅgu creeper.²⁵ Śakuntalā is compared to a Navamallika that found support of a mango tree.²⁶ In the *Mālavikāgnimitra*, Agnimitra suggests to Mālavikā that she be the Atimuktaka creeper and he the mango tree.²⁷ In the *Raghuvamśa*, the Asoka is conceived as a creeper and is paired with the mango.²⁸

Preoccupied as they were with love poetry, Sanskrit poets seem to pay greater attention to the mango blossom than to the delicious fruits that follow. But they did not neglect it altogether. Here too, it is Kālidāsa who has the apt word: "The blossom becomes irrelevant, when the

sarasijaṃ arunam hṛdaye kucayoś cūtaṃ dṛṣor
aśokaṃ ca
śirasi śirīṣaṃ yonāu utpalaṃ etāni pañca bānāḥ syuḥ

Cf. also Vidya Niwas Misra, "The Mango-Blossom Imagery in Kālidāsa," *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, 82 (1962), pp. 68-69.

² *Raghuvamśa* 6.69:

na hi praphullaṃ sahakāraṃ etya vṛkṣantaraṃ
kāṅkṣati ṣaṭpadālī

³ Misra, op. cit.

⁴ V. N. Misra, op. cit.: "For Kālidāsa the mango-blossom has therefore a treble meaning, as an object of nature, as an emblem of fruitful love and the Spring of youth and lastly as an (sic!) symbol of womanhood realized in its completeness in motherhood. It also signifies the continuity of human existence and secondarily an offspring."

⁵ *Kumārasambhava* 1.27.

⁶ *Sārṅgadharapaddhati*, 1018.

⁷ *Vasantavilāsa Phāgu*, ed. Madhusudan Chimanlal Modi, Rajasthan Oriental Series 36, Rajasthan Oriental Research Institute, Jodhpur, 1960, Longer Recension 8.

⁸ *Mālavikāgnimitra* 3.4:

aṅge cūtaprasarasurabhir dakṣiṇo māruto me
sāndraḥ sparsaḥ karatala iva vyāpṛto mādhavena

⁹ *Śārṅgadharapaddhati* 1016:

na tādrk karpūre na ca malayaje no mṛgamade
phale vā puṣpe vā tava bhavati yādrk parimalaḥ
param tv eko doṣas tvayi khalu rasāle 'dhikaguṇe
pike vā kāke vā gurulaghuvīṣeṣam na manuṣe

¹⁰ *Rtusamhāra* 6.1.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 6.17.

¹² *Śārṅgadharapaddhati* 1015.

¹³ *Kumārasambhava* 3.32.

¹⁴ *Vasantavilāsa Phāgu*, Shorter Recension 17.

¹⁵ *Vikramorvaśīya* 2.6.

¹⁶ *Naiṣadhīyacarita* 1.89.

¹⁷ *Śīsūpālavadha* 6.6:

smarahutāśanamurmuracūrṇatām dadhur
ivāmrvanasya rajaḥkaṇaḥ
nipatitāḥ paritaḥ pathikaurajān upari te paritepur ato
bhṛśaṃ

¹⁸ *Rtusamhāra* 6.30.

¹⁹ *Vasantavilāsa Phāgu*, Longer Recension 44.

²⁰ Vallabhadeva's *Subhāṣitāvalī*, ed. P. Peterson and Durgāprasāda, Bombay Sanskrit Series, Bombay 1886, No. 1664.

²¹ *Ibid.*, No. 1683.

²² *Abhijñānaśākuntala*, in Revaprasada Dvivedi (ed), *Kālidāsa-Granthāvalī*, Varanasi, 1976, 6.2.

²³ *Ibid.*, 6.3.

²⁴ *Raghuvamśa* 9.33. Note also that in the *Abhijñānaśākuntala*, Act 6, one of the palace maids is named *Cūlatatikā*, "mango creeper".

²⁵ *Raghuvamśa* 8.61:

*mithunaṁ parikalpitas tvayā sahakārah phalinī ca
nanu imau
avidhāya vivāhasatkriyām anayor gamyata ity
asāmprataṁ*

²⁶ *Abhijñānaśākuntala* 4.13:

*cūtena saṁśritavatī navamālikeyam asyām ahaṁ tvayi
ca saṁprati vītacintaḥ*

²⁷ *Mālavikāgnimitra* 4.13:

*visrja sundari saṁgamasādhvasaṁ mayi cirāt prabhṛti
praṇayonmukhe
parigrhāṇa gate sahakāratām tvam
atimuktalatācaritaṁ mayi*

see also *Abhijñānaśākuntala*, Act 3, p. 464:

*ko daṇiṁ sahaāraṁ aṁtareṇa adimuttaladaṁ
pallavidam sahedī.*

²⁸ *Raghuvamśa* 7.21:

*hastena hastaṁ parigrhya vadhvāḥ sa rājasūnuh
sutarām cakāśe*

*anantarāśokalatāpravālaṁ prāpyeva cūtaṁ
pratipallavena*

The fresh leaves of both Asoka and mango are reddish and long, and look like the tapering fingers of a woman. This idea was used to good effect by Harṣadeva in his *Ratnāvalī*, 1.21. When the queen touches the Aśoka tree, her slender fingers look like another cluster fresh leaves.

*sprṣtas tvayaīva dayite smarapūjāvyaḥprtena hastena
udbhinnāparamṛdutarakisalaya iva lakṣyate 'śokaḥ*

²⁹ *Raghuvamśa* 4.9:

*mandotkaṅṭha kṛtās tena guṇādhikatayā gurau
phalena sahakārasya puṣpodgama iva prājaḥ*

³⁰ *Subhāṣitasudhāratnabhāṇḍāgāra*, or *Treasury of Sanskrit Poetry, being a Collection of Amusing, Sarcastic and Instructive Verses*, compiled and annotated by Pandit Shivadatta Kaviratna... Shri Venkateswara Steam Press Bombay, 1928, Section on Rasala, No. 30.

³¹ *Ṛtusaṁhāra* 6.38.

Selfishness is the only sin; Meanness is the only vice; Hatred is the only criminality. All else could be turned into good.

– *Sri Aurobindo*