

Spring blossoms and forgotten poetry

Verses that celebrate the mango, the rose-apple, the jackfruit and all things spring

■ BY NARESH KEERTHI

The heat wave makes it hard to believe, but it is indeed spring. And just as the trees put on a show with lush blossoms and luscious fruit, and excited bees and cuckoos launch into orchestral extravaganzas, bhasha poets too have responded to spring down the ages with their own fertile creations.

The spirit of spring, personified as Vasanta, is usually described as a trusted helpmate of the god of love Manmatha, casting a spell on all creatures. The classical poets of most Indian languages use *shringara*, the mood of love, to create striking images of spring.

Typical accounts of spring wax eloquent over the magnificent mango, ashok and palash trees. Here are some samples from lesser-known (and sometimes anonymous) poets.

Pampa, hailed as Kannada's first poet or adikavi, was from Warangal, the Telugu-dominated realm of the Vengi Calukyas, but his poetry brims with affection for Kannada, the town of Banavasi, and its landscape. Here is a verse from his *Vikramarjunavijaya* about the mango that exhausts all superlatives:

*You have the most charming sprouts,
the best foliage—yours,
most lush blossoms—yours, loveliest
buds—yours,
matchless luscious fruit—yours;
King Mango,
adored by all the world—
bees, cuckoos and parrots;
are mere trees any comparison
to you?*

Pampa considered the mango a way of life, and finds it blasphemous that some would deign to call it a 'tree', as if

the mango can be clubbed with such botanical riffraff. Sadaksaradeva, a bilingual monk-poet from 17th century Mysore, in his Sanskrit kavya '*Kavikarna-rasayanam*' has a whole string of extravagant metaphors for the mango tree, even one where he likens it to Hanuman. In this verse, he compares it to Krishna:

*Glistening bumblebees his
dusky hue,
shining new leaves his golden robe;
cuckoos' song his flute's
sweet melody,
The Mango tree with a crown of
pollen-kissed flowers is
Krishna holding aloft Govardhana
hill.*

The *palash* or flame of the forest comes ablaze with vermilion and orange boat-shaped petals in spring. It is spectacular to see the forests of the Western Ghats lit up by clusters of *palash* in full bloom. The tree gave its name to the grove where the historic battle of Plassey was fought, and is an

integral part of Holi celebrations in east India. This verse from the Prakrit anthology *Gaha Sattasai*, said to have been compiled by the Satavahana king Hala, offers an unusual image of the *palash*.

*The palash flowers resembling
parrots' beaks,
strewn on the forest floor;
are like a congregation of monks,
paying homage to the Buddha.*

You appreciate the beauty of this image when you see a *palash* blossom lying face down; it looks exactly like a bhikkhu kneeling in prayer, complete with a dark furry perianth for a shorn head. The celebrated Vijayanagara ruler Krishnadevaraya from the 16th century CE was also an accomplished poet. This verse from his poem *Amuktamalyada* paints a vivid picture of the *Verupanasa* or jackfruit tree. The verse compares each part of a rutting elephant to the tree, right down to the swarms of bees that resemble the iron shackles restraining the elephant.

The jack fruit burst forth from

*the ground,
Covered in mud, oozing sap,
attracting strings of bees;
like Spring's battle-elephant,
dusty, sticky with musth
running down his forehead,
and bound by black iron fetters.*

Another champion of spring is the rose-apple (*Jambu Nerale*) tree. Its deep purple fruit that stains hands, mouths and clothes is a favourite with children, bats and birds alike. Probably because of the Jambu's distribution all over the subcontinent, the Asian landmass was called *Jambu-dvipa* in Puranic geographies.

The early Kannada poet Ranna has a memorable verse about the tree in his famous account of the Mahabharata, *Gadayuddha kavya* (11th century CE). He describes a scene after the 18-day battle when Duryodhana hid in a lake to avoid confronting the Pandavas. When Bhima tracked him down, the Jambu trees on the bank gave him a clue...

*The branches of the Jambu tree,
swaying in the breeze,
seemed to point
the Wind-born (Bhima)
to Duryodhana's hideout.*

The *Gaha Sattasai*, a treasure of minimalist verses that paint simple yet forceful pictures, has this charming verse about the Jambu: *The monkey draws away, shakes the branch, swipes at the fruit again, chattering loudly; [but] doesn't pluck the rose-apple, taking it for a bee, once bitten, twice shy.*



Worship A palash flower bent over as if in prayer G.J. LINGARAJ

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