# EAST AND WEST

First Series:
Founded in 1950 by Giuseppe Tucci
1979-2012 directed by Gherardo Gnoli

New Series:
2020 – published as a bi-annual peer-reviewed scientific journal:
edited by ISMEO – The International Association for Mediterranean and Oriental Studies

# EAST AND WEST

BI-ANNUAL SCIENTIFIC JOURNAL
PUBLISHED BY ISMEO – THE INTERNATIONAL ASSOCIATION
FOR MEDITERRANEAN AND ORIENTAL STUDIES


I S M E O
VOL. N.S. 3 (62) – NO. 2, DECEMBER 2022

*This issue has been published with a grant from the "Progetto MUR Storia, lingue e culture dei paesi asiatici e africani: ricerca scientifica, promozione e divulgazione"*

Digital manuscripts (in English, font: Times New Roman) and figures (min. 300 dpi) should be sent to the International Editorial Board, e-mail: ismeo@ismeo.eu

Yearly subscription:

Italy: € 130,00
Europe: € 140,00
Abroad: € 160,00

Subscription orders must be sent direct to:

Scienze e Lettere S.r.l.
via Alessandro Malladra 33 – 00157 Rome
e-mail: info@scienzeelettere.com
www.scienzeelettere.com

ISSN 0012-8376 ISBN 978-88-6687-244-3



Coordinatore attività editoriali ISMEO: Beniamino Melasecchi

Direttore responsabile: Francesco Palmieri
Registrazione presso il Tribunale di Roma al n. 83/2020 del Registro Stampa in data 6 agosto 2020
Classificazione ANVUR: Classe A per l'Area 10

Finito di stampare nel mese di dicembre 2022
presso Universal Book srl, Contrada Cutura, 236, 87036 Rende (CS)

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# Gardens in Classical Sanskrit Court Plays

by Cinzia Pieruccini

Nel teatro di corte sanscrito i giardini, dei palazzi reali o di altra collocazione, sono una presenza molto frequente e di notevole importanza. In queste pagine si vuole da una parte mettere in luce il ruolo che rivestono nel dipanarsi dell'azione scenica, e dall'altra desumere dai testi notizie sulle forme che questi luoghi avevano nella realtà concreta, pur tenendo conto dell'idealizzazione e della convenzionalità che pervadono questa forma di letteratura *kāvya*. Il lavoro si fonda sull'analisi delle seguenti opere: *Svapnavāsavadatta* attribuito a Bhāsa; *Mālavikāgnimitra*, *Vikramorvaśīya* e *Abhijñānaśākuntala* di Kālidāsa; *Priyadarśikā* e *Ratnāvalī* di Harṣa; e *Mālatīmādhava* di Bhavabhūti. Altre osservazioni riguardano le innovazioni apportate dai singoli autori a questo *topos* letterario e scenico, e l'immaginario condiviso dai poeti e dal pubblico.

In classical Sanskrit court plays, gardens of royal palaces or in other locations are a frequent and extremely important presence. In these pages an attempt will be made on one hand to highlight the role they play in the unfolding of the dramatic action, and on the other to deduce information from the texts regarding the forms that these places actually possessed—always taking into account the idealisation and conventionality that pervade this and the other forms of *kāvya* literature. This work is based on the analysis of the following plays: *Svapnavāsavadatta* (abbreviated to *S*) attributed to Bhāsa, of uncertain date: possibly pre-Kālidāsa;[1] Kālidāsa's *Mālavikāgnimitra* (*M*), *Vikramorvaśīya* (*V*) and *Abhijñānaśākuntala* (*A*), 4th-5th century; *Priyadarśikā* (*P*) and *Ratnāvalī* (*R*) by Harṣa, first half of the 7th century; and Bhavabhūti's *Mālatīmādhava* (*MM*), first half of the 8th century.[2] It is also intended as a continuation of the author's study of the gardens of ancient India illustrated in a series of earlier articles, some of which will be referred to.

## *The Dramatic Role*

The plots and general characteristics of each of these famous plays are well known, and it is certainly not the case to summarise them here; some details will how-

[1] The *Svapnavāsavadatta* is one of the thirteen so-called Trivandrum Plays, named after the place of their first publication, whose manuscripts were discovered and published by Gaṇapati Śāstrī at the beginning of the 20th century. Their dating and authorship are notoriously a matter of great debate; see Tieken 1993 for an analysis that suggests that they might instead have been composed in the Pallava milieu around the year 700.

[2] For this dating, see Mirashi 1996 [1974]: 1-11. The passages from the plays are quoted here according to the editions listed in the Bibliography, with some normalisation and graphic intervention as

ever be given whenever it seems appropriate to recall them. At any rate, their lowest common denominator consists of a love story that is thwarted for various reasons and in various ways and which has to overcome many obstacles before reaching a happy ending; and the resulting difficulties are mostly translated into the need for secrecy and dissimulation. Now, in the works mentioned, a garden, because of its relative isolation, appears to be considered the ideal place to stage manifestations of the most intimate feelings and the most secret encounters, keeping them hidden from the other characters. However, above all, these gardens provide the perfect backdrop for the casual disclosure of these feelings to characters who, as required by the plot, should instead be aware about them. In such circumstances, the setting of the event in a garden is a fundamental expedient that poets employ to promote the development of the drama.[3] It also allows them to embellish the composition with polished stanzas, uttered by the characters as they comment on the beauty of nature, further enhanced by the fact that the preferred season for the setting of these plays (or for their most sentimental episodes) is spring—the season of love.[4]

In summary, the following events typically occur in gardens, or—as we shall see—places purposely assimilated to them:

1. The hero or heroine secretly catches a first glimpse of his or her counterpart and instantly falls in love with her or him (*A*, *P*, *R*, *MM*); the hero, then, may intervene directly in the scene.
2. A character expresses his or her feelings through a soliloquy, and/or reveals them more or less openly to a companion or companions of the same sex (*S*, *M*, *V*, *A*, *P*, *R*, *MM*).
   In this context, the motif of the painted portrait may also appear, played out in various ways, constituting a sort of virtual presence of the loved one in the scene (*M*, *A*, *R*, *MM*).[5]
3. In close connection with the previous point, characters hidden in the garden become aware of the feelings of others by listening unseen to their talks (*S*, *M*, *V*, *A*, *P*, *R*, *MM*).

for the editions of the Clay Sanskrit Library (JJC Foundation). For the *Abhijñānaśākuntala* we adopt the Devanāgarī recension edited by M.R. Kale with Rāghavabhaṭṭa's commentary. The *Mṛcchakaṭikā* attributed to Śūdraka, generally dated to the 4th-5th century, is not considered here because the typology of the "gardens" mentioned in this play is totally different. In fact, this play presents us with a domestic garden, in the home of the courtesan Vasantasenā (Act Four), and a park located outside the city, belonging to Saṃsthānaka, the king's wicked brother-in-law, but open to the general public (Acts Seven and Eight). Let us just point out that the role of this park falls within the discourse mentioned here as a location where events that should remain hidden take place. The relevant passages of this play have been analysed by Voegeli (2013), with specific attention to the concrete forms of such "gardens."

[3] On parks and gardens as liminal spaces and sites of evolution and transformation in various cultural spheres of ancient India, see Pieruccini 2022b.

[4] The link between the works in question and spring is to be found both in the events of the plays themselves and in the "Spring festival" (*vasantotsava*) for which some of them appear to have been composed and staged: according to their Preludes, this is the case for the *Mālavikāgnimitra*, *Priyadarśikā*, and *Ratnāvalī*. See Anderson 1993, whose analysis of the group of festivals that may be collectively referred to as *vasantotsava* also devotes ample space to an examination of the *Ratnāvalī*. We will return to this "Spring festival" later.

[5] The portrait also plays a fundamental role in Act Six of the *Svapnavāsavadatta*, because it leads to the recognition of Vāsavadattā and the disclosure that she is not dead; but in this case context and role are totally different.

4. The garden, its equivalent (*A*) or a particular structure presumably in the garden (*M*), is the place intended for the lovers' intimacy (*R*, *MM*).

As can be seen, these motifs are widely adopted in the plays under consideration; the second and third appear in all of them. But, regardless of how many of these situations actually occur in each individual work, the underlying principle is the same everywhere, namely the need for more or less successful circumspection. Beneath dense pavilions of creepers, behind rows of trees, in the groves of gardens belonging to royal palaces or that are open to the public, and even in the garden of a hermitage in the case of the *Abhijñānaśākuntala*, the characters in these plays may act in real or (mostly) imagined privacy.

In an important article on gardens in the court life of ancient India, Daud Ali links these characteristics to the concrete reality of royal palaces. These appear to be basically made up of "marked" areas, i.e. with specific destinations, where an eminently public life is conducted, constantly under the eyes of the members of the court. On the contrary, the palace gardens, being secluded but relatively "neutral" spaces, may offer isolation and at the same time safe, protected corners, not least for courtship and more or less licit amorous encounters (Ali 2003: 237). In the following pages, a detailed analysis is proposed on the basis of the individual plays, enucleating the relevant lexicon; for as exhaustive a list as possible of the plants and flowers that are explicitly placed by the poets in the gardens of each of these works, see the Appendix.

*Gardens of Royal Palaces*

In *S*, *M*, *V*, *A*, *P* and *R* the plays are staged in gardens of royal residences. Let us consider, first of all, that the description of ancient Indian royal palaces found in such literature shows that they were typically made up of several units: various residential buildings, women's quarters, theatre halls, galleries of paintings, and so on. It also seems that these various structures were often not directly connected to each other, and interspersed with well-kept green areas. But alongside these buildings, the royal residences of the Sanskrit theatre considered here always include areas expressly devoted to gardens. A specific word that designates an actual palace garden is, and particularly in Kālidāsa, *pramadavana*, literally "pleasure grove;" the term *vana* here essentially refers to an area endowed with trees.[6]

The gardens of palaces (and not only of these, as we shall see) are presented in this literature in terms of discrete units of vegetation (cf. Ali 2012: 46-49) which constitute well-defined individual focal points. They also include, as mentioned above, pavilions of creepers, groves and rows of trees, ponds, or even special single trees, towards which the characters move and where they stop and willingly seclude themselves, sitting down if necessary on a seat that is mostly explicitly defined as being of stone: recurrent words are *śilāpaṭṭa*, *śilāpaṭṭaka*, *śilātala*, and *vedikā*. In addition, cer-

[6] On various uses of the term *vana* in Pāli and Sanskrit literature see Pieruccini 2018. Isolated words will be quoted here regularly in Sanskrit, not in Prakrit, and normally in thematic form; as a rule, the specific passages in which the terms appear will not be mentioned if the terms occur regularly and repeatedly. Of course, extended passages will instead be reproduced in the original language of the text.

tain particular structures appear to be integral parts of these gardens, which thus significantly contain artificial elements. Here is a brief review.

Acts Two, Three and Four of the six Acts of the *Svapnavāsavadatta* take place in the *pramadavana* of the palace of Rājagṛha, the capital of Magadha, whose princess is Padmāvatī, King Udayana's betrothed. Alongside the exchange of confidences between the characters and overheard speeches, activities considered to be feminine are depicted, such as playing ball, picking flowers as a pastime and weaving garlands. A particularly interesting image of the place as a whole is offered by these words spoken by the *vidūṣaka*:

> Where did Her Ladyship Padmāvatī go? To the pavilion of creepers? Or to the stone seat named "Ornament of the mountain," sprinkled with *asana* flowers, as if covered by a tiger's skin? Or did she enter the *saptacchada* grove, with its very pungent smell? Or did she go to the wooden hill, filled with painted wild animals and birds? (*S* IV.[1].1)[7]

The carpet of fallen flowers on the ground or on the benches, which here makes the seat appear as if it were covered by a spotted fur, is a recurrent feature of the gardens described in Sanskrit literature;[8] see also below. Also of note is the proper name given to the seat; we shall see later the use of proper names to designate particular gardens or some garden element. Finally, perhaps the most interesting detail is the artificial hill made of wood, *dāruparvataka*, adorned with paintings depicting birds and forest animals. *Dāruparvataka*s are mentioned, along with kiosks of creepers, pavilions with paintings or for amusement, and so on, by the *Rāmāyaṇa* (V.5.34) in the description of Rāvaṇa's residence at Laṅkā.

It does not seem unlikely that the garden also contains the "water pavilion," *samudragṛhaka*, which occupies the scene in Act Five and plays a crucial dramatic role, because this is where a sleeping Udayana sees his beloved wife Vāsavadattā, believed to have died in a fire, only to reluctantly realise that it was only a dream. It is probably a closed structure, since an entrance portal, *mukhatoraṇa* (*S* V.[3]), and a doorpost or door panel, *dvārapakṣa* (*S* V.[7]) are mentioned; moreover, a bed (*śayyā* or the like) is prepared there. A *samudragṛhaka*, which in this case rather clearly appears to belong to the garden area, is also important in Act Four of the *Mālavikāgnimitra*: here, in Agnimitra's palace, the love meeting between the two protagonists is arranged, but ruined by the arrival of the younger of the king's two queen consorts. We are also offered some architectural details in the course of this episode: the place has a door (*dvāra*, *M* IV.[12]+, etc.), a window (*gavākṣa*, *M* IV.[6]+) through which it is possible to spy on the interior, presumably one or more columns (*stambha*, *M* IV.[15]+), and a terrace in front of the entrance (*alindaka*, *M* IV.[15]+) with a "floor (?) of crystal" (*sphaṭikasthala*, *M* IV.[12]+).

It is not explicit what a *samudragṛhaka*, literally "ocean house," consists of. The Monier-Williams dictionary defines *samudragṛha* as "a bath-house, bath-room." *Samudragṛha*s are mentioned in the *Kāmasūtra* (V.5.17) among the attractions of the

[7] *kahiṃ ṇu khu gadā tattahodī padumāvadī ḷadāmaṇḍavaṃ gadā bhave udāho asaṇakusumasañcidaṃ vagghacammāvaguṇṭhidaṃ via pavvadatiḷaaṃ ṇāma siḷāpaṭṭaaṃ gadā bhave ādu adhiakaḍuagandhasattacchadavaṇaṃ paviṭṭhā bhave ahava āḷihidamiapakkhisaṅkuḷaṃ dārupavvadaaṃ gadā bhave.*

Where not explicitly stated otherwise, translations are mine.

[8] See for instance *Kāmasūtra* I.4.15, and the commentary by Yaśodhara.

royal palace; an interesting passage says: *samudragṛhaprāsādān gūḍhabhittisaṃcārāṃś*, i.e. "*samudragṛha*s and terraces (which seems here to be a good translation for *prāsāda*) with secret passages in the walls." The commentator on the *Kāmasūtra* Yaśodhara (13th century) glosses *samudragṛha* with *dhārāgṛha*, and for Monier-Williams the latter word means "a bath-room with flowing water, shower-bath." We will come across a *dhārāgṛha* later, in the *Priyadarśikā*, where the structure is shown to have its own garden. We must obviously think of a type of building refreshed by fountains, or equipped with or surrounded by a pool.[9]

The *pramadavana* of the palace is central to the *Mālavikāgnimitra*. Here it is the *aśoka* tree around which, as is well known, salient moments of this work revolve. Mālavikā is charged with gently kicking it to cause it to blossom, in accordance with the legend that these trees need the touch of a young woman's foot to satisfy their *dohada*, i.e. their pregnancy "cravings." According to the well-known plot, since the first queen, who should have performed the rite, has injured her foot falling from a swing, Mālavikā is entrusted with the task in her place, and this causes the tree to flower even before the five canonical nights have passed. This *aśoka* appears to be considered a very special tree: it is in fact called a *tapanīyāśoka*, a "golden aśoka," probably alluding to a rarer yellow colour of its flowers—as we know, the flowers of the fully bloomed *aśoka* are commonly red, and indeed, it also seems that a "red *aśoka*" (*raktāśoka*) is not missing in the *pramadavana* of the palace (see for instance *M* III.[5]).[10]

A secondary character in the *Mālavikāgnimitra* is the guardian of the garden (*pramadavanapālikā*, *udyānapālikā*); after the golden *aśoka* has been honoured by being kicked,[11] she constructs a bench around the tree (*vedikābandha*, *M* V, *praveśaka*), reminiscent of the circular seats still common in India around selected trees, used both to honour them ritually and to sit and socialise in their shade.[12] The *pramadavana*, we are told, can be reached through a secret passage (*gūḍhapatha*, *M* IV.[4]+). Apart from—presumably—the *samudragṛhaka*, the garden also has a swing, *dolā*, or more precisely a *dolāgṛha* (*M* III.[12]+), literally "house of the swing." This is the place to which, in Act Three, the younger queen has invited Agnimitra in vain, to share a moment of leisure with him; it is presumably a small pavilion, possibly made of creepers, to provide shade. A brief dialogue between the *vidūṣaka* and Agnimitra is specifically devoted to the beauty of the *pramadavana* at the height of spring, as it appears as they enter the place; womanly charm and flowering nature condense into a single image, which imbues both the garden and spring with a divine, feminine aura:

[9] See also the discussion in Balogh, Somogyi 2009: 268, and the note in Doniger 2006: 496. In my Italian translation of the *Kāmasūtra* (Pieruccini 2020: 170) I have rendered *samudragṛhas* as "bathrooms;" the translation may therefore need to be revised. Later on, "mechanical *dhārāgṛhas*" (*yantradhārāgṛha*) are documented: see Ali 2016.

[10] For some observations on the colours of the *aśoka* flowers, see Balogh, Somogyi 2009: 254-255, and Pieruccini 2022a: 218 and fn. 11.

[11] According to Kāṭayavema's commentary, the expression *kidasakkāra*, Skr. *kṛtasatkāra*, might allude not so much to the ritual performed by Mālavikā, but to the fact that the tree was decorated, "e.g. by plastering the ground around it with smooth mud and drawings designs there" (Balogh, Somogyi 2009: 273).

[12] Cf. Balogh, Somogyi 2009: 272.

Jester: What ho, comrade, look closely! Hoping to beguile you, the goddess of the pleasure garden has donned a robe of spring flowers to shame the dresses of damsels.
King: I'm really astonished to see how

The lustre of the red *aśoka* excels
the brightness of lac on *bimba* lips;
the *kurabaka*, red poised against dark,
outclasses face marks:
the *tilaka* flowers, bees clinging to them
like black dots, surpass forehead designs –
the goddess of spring seems to deride the ways
women embellish their faces. (*M* III.[5])[13]

Most of Act Two of the *Vikramorvaśīya* takes place in the palace *pramadavana*. Here too we are in spring, precisely at the moment of its first blossoming; later on, the plot will unravel through other seasons. The king and the *vidūṣaka*, in search of solitude, enter the garden through a door (*dvāra*, *V* II.[4]+), and sit on a seat adorned with precious stones (*maṇiśilāpaṭṭa*) under a pavilion of *atimukta* vines (*atimuktalatāmaṇḍapa*), which have scattered flowers on the seat because of the weight of the bees swarming there (*V* II.[7+];[14] *latāgṛha*, *V* II.[19]+). Nearby is a "pleasure-hill" (*krīḍāparvata*, *V* II.[19]+). Urvaśī and her companion Citralekhā listen to their conversation taking advantage of an enchantment that makes them invisible, only showing themselves once they are certain that the king is in the grip of passion.

In the *Abhijñānaśākuntala* the events of Act Six take place in the *pramadavana* of Duṣyanta's palace; once again, we are in spring, at the time of the *vasantotsava*, the "Spring festival," dedicated to the god Kāma. The garden is guarded by two guardians (*udyānapālikā*, *A* VI.[1]+). The *apsaras* Sānumatī eavesdrops on their conversations and those with an attendant, and then, after the king has sent everyone else away, she also listens to the dialogues between the latter and the *vidūṣaka*, and to later developments. Duṣyanta is in the depths of despair because, since the recovery of the ring has broken the spell, he can remember Śakuntalā and his love for her. The conversation between the king and the *vidūṣaka* takes place in a *mādhavī* bower, in the privacy of which they sit, again, on a seat adorned with precious stones (*mādhavīmaṇḍapa*, *maṇiśilāpaṭṭaka*, *A* VI.[8]+).

The royal palace garden plays a fundamental role in Harṣa's *Priyadarśikā* and *Ratnāvalī*, and is particularly striking in the latter. It is of course important to note that, as is well known, the author of these plays was himself a ruler, who sat on the throne for some forty years in the first half of the 7th century, and whose reign came to extend over much of Northern India. One may therefore wonder whether the gardens in these two plays actually resemble "real" gardens in royal palaces—perhaps Harṣa had the

[13] *vidūṣakaḥ: bho vassa, avahāṇeṇa diṭṭhiṃ dehi! edaṃ khu bhavandaṃ vilohaïdukāmāe pamadavaṇalacchīe juvaïvesalajjāvaïttaaṃ vasandakusumaṇevatthaṃ gahīdaṃ.*

*raja: nanu vismayād avalokayāmi: raktāśokarucā viśeṣitaguṇo bimbādharālaktakaḥ pratyākhyātaviśeṣakaṃ kurabakaṃ śyāmāvadātāruṇam / ākrāntā tilakakriyāpi tilakair lagnadvirephāñjanaiḥ sāvajñeva mukhaprasādhanavidhau śrīr mādhavī yoṣitām //.*

Translation Balogh, Somogyi 2009: 81-83, with minor graphic changes. For another stanza in which Kālidāsa merges the beauty of the *pramadavana* with the advent of spring and feminine beauty, cf. *V* II.[7].

[14] *eṣa maṇisilāpaṭṭasaṇāho adimuttaladāmaṇḍavo bhamarasaṃghaṭṭapaḍidehiṃ kusumehiṃ […].*

gardens of his residences in mind? Or, at least, one might think that the descriptions given in these plays provide us with a quite accurate picture of an ideal garden.

The gardens in Harṣa's works never seem to be called *pramadavana*. In the *Priyadarśikā* we have the *dhārāgṛhodyāna*, the "garden of the *dhārāgṛha*": see above for this building. The place is central to Act Two and part of Act Three. The focal point of this garden and of the scenes that take place there is a pond (*dīrghikā*)[15] filled with lotus flowers, and surrounded by a thicket of *śephalikā*s (*śephālikāgulmāntarita*, *P* II.[3]+); through the trees on its banks one can catch a glimpse of a line of plastered buildings (*taṭataruvivarālakṣitā saudhapālī*, *P* II.[4]), presumably belonging to the royal palace, and nearby there is a banana-bower (*kadalīgṛha*, *P* II.[8]+, etc.; also *kadalīgulma*).

An exchange between the *vidūṣaka* and King Udayana, who has come to this garden in a fit of melancholy, is devoted to describing the luxuriant beauty of the place; here is the beginning of the passage, spoken by the *vidūṣaka*:

> Jester: Come, let's go! (*walking around and looking*) Look, my friend, look how wonderful the garden of the fountain-house is. The various flowers that fall continuously on the surfaces of the stone slabs make them soft. The bees that swarm to the perfume of the *bakula* and jasmine vines and cling to their fragrance are so heavy that they break off networks of their flowers. Unchecked winds steal the perfume of the lotuses and force open the *bandhuka* stalks. And the dense *tamala* trees hide the light of the sun. (*P* II.[1]+)[16]

Note that a "garden deity" (*udyānadevatā*, *P* II.[5]), to whom Priyadarśikā is immediately compared, is also evoked in connection with this place.

The girl has in fact come here in the company of a handmaiden for the task of gathering flowers. Udayana and the *vidūṣaka* are hidden by the vegetation and this is the moment when he catches sight of her for the first time and is instantly fascinated; and, when the girl is attacked by a swarm of bees, he seizes the opportunity to come forward. Let us recall the analogy with the famous episode in Act One of the *Abhijñānaśākuntala* (see below), where Duṣyanta, hitherto secretly observing the protagonist and her friends, comes out of his shelter precisely because Śakuntalā is being annoyed by a bee. At the beginning of the next Act of the *Priyadarśikā*, in the very same garden, monologues and eavesdropping make it clear that both the girl and the king are now tormented by passion. Finally, it may be added that these scenes in the garden do not take place in spring, since immediately after these events the plot unfolds with a theatrical performance to celebrate the *kaumudīmahotsava*, which occurs in autumn. Another festival, *utsava*, is also mentioned in the play, for which the ladies of the court are invited to go to the *manmathodyāna*, the "Garden of the god Love," or "of passion" (*P* III.[3]+).

But it is above all the *Ratnāvalī* that dwells on the garden, or perhaps it is better here to speak of a variety of gardens belonging to the royal palace. The characters move in different areas marked by groves and pavilions, which the text unequivocally

[15] The term *dīrghikā*, derived from *dīrgha*, "long," obviously appears to indicate an oblong-shaped pond.

[16] *bho ehi, gacchamha. (parikramyāvalokya ca) bho vaassa, pekkha pekkha aviradapaḍantavivihakusumasuumālasilāalucchaṅgassa, parimalaṇilīṇamahuarabharabhaggabaülamāladīladājālaassa, kamalagandhagahaṇuddāmamārudaparjavabuddhabandhūabandhaṇassa, aviralatamālatarupihidātapappaāsassa assa dhārāgharujjāṇassa sassarīaaṃ.*

Translation Doniger 2006: 323, with minor graphic modifications.

places in the palace area. However, it seems impossible to establish whether Harṣa was really thinking of a real and realistic map, so to speak, on which to locate these composite and multiform green and flowery spaces, or whether the various elements are mentioned without any attempt to give them a precise position in a logical-spatial scheme. We can summarise these elements as follows:

a) Act One takes place during the Spring festival, dedicated to the god Kāma (*madanamahotsava*), celebrated in the city in a manner reminiscent of modern Holī. On this occasion Vāsavadattā, the queen, invites her spouse Udayana to go with her to the *makarandodyāna*, the "Garden of nectar," to honour the god Love at a red *aśoka*, and part of the Act takes place in this garden, amidst its lush spring vegetation. Here Ratnāvalī, who appears as one of the queen's handmaidens, secretly observes the rite and sees King Udayana: she initially mistakes him for the god Love himself and is fascinated by him.
b) The events of Act Two take place in a banana-bower (*kadalīgṛha*, which according to the Colophon is also the title of the Act; or *kadalīgulma*), near which there is a pond (*dīrghikā*, *R* II.26) filled with lotuses, and among the nearby *tamāla* trees (*tamālaviṭapa*, *R* II.[3]+, *tamālavīthikā*, *R* II.[18]+): this is the setting for the usual soliloquies manifesting love, confidences and overheard words of passion, with the participation of a gracula that has heard and memorised everything. This is also where the king falls in love, his passion initially aroused because he has seen a painting of Ratnāvalī.
c) Act Three is when the contrived love meeting between Udayana and Ratnāvalī should take place, in the evening, in the pavilion of *mādhavī* (*mādhavīlatāmaṇḍapa*, *R* III.[6+], etc.), a meeting that is however bound to fail. This pavilion has special furnishings: it is said to have a stone floor and a bench, both of which are inlaid with emeralds (*masṛṇamarakatamaṇiśilākuṭṭima*, *marakatamaṇiśilāvedikā*, *R* III.[8]+). Perhaps this pavilion is in the *makarandodyāna* itself (cf. *R* III.[7]+); the king and the *vidūṣaka* rely on the scent of the vegetation to reach it in the dark:[17]

> This is certainly the row of *campaka* trees, and
> that is the beautiful *sinduvāra.*
> And this is the dense avenue of *bakula* trees,
> and that the row of trumpet flowers.
> Even though the path is veiled by twice as much
> darkness in this garden,
> you can clearly discern it by the sign of
> the trees that you can identify
> simply by smelling and smelling
> each different perfume. (*R* III.[8])[18]

[17] A description of the way in which the palace garden was regularly laid out with paths and alleys demarcated by flowering trees that offered a reference point in the dark is found in an episode in Daṇḍin's *Daśakumāracarita*, when one of the characters, Upahāravarman, sets out for a secret rendezvous with the queen in a *mādhavī* bower well-appointed for a love meeting (*Daśakumāracarita* ed. Kale 1966: 113 Text; cf. Ali 2003: 238).

[18] *pālīyaṃ campakānāṃ niyatam ayam asau sundaraḥ sinduvāraḥ sāndrā vīthī tatheyam bakulaviṭapināṃ pāṭalāpaṅktir esā / āghrāyāghrāya gandhaṃ vividham adhigataiḥ pādapair evam asmin vyaktiṃ panthāḥ prayāti dviguṇataratamo nihnuto 'pi eṣa cihnaiḥ //.*

Translation Doniger 2006: 193, with minor graphic modifications.

When the encounter fails, Ratnāvalī tries to take her own life by hanging herself from the *aśoka* tree using a noose made from a *mādhavī* creeper. (*R* III.[15]+). Here the love symbolism of the creeper, the woman, clinging to a tree, the beloved man, is indirectly evoked; such symbolism, as is well known, is extremely widespread in *kāvya* and in the Indian literary imagination in general,[19] and is referred to again in the *Abhijñānaśākuntala*. The fact that the tree involved here is the *aśoka* is directly connected to the events in Act One, when Ratnāvalī, secretly observing the worship of the god Love celebrated at this tree, mistakes Udayana for the god himself: one may indeed assume that, in the author's intention, the *aśoka* in question is the same.

But in the first part of this work a sort of unifying thread concerns two other climbing plants, a *mādhavī* in full bloom, which is dear to the queen, and a *navamālikā*, which Udayana, in a playful challenge, wants to make bloom out of season. We immediately come across these two plants in Act One, on the way to the *aśoka* (*R* I.[18]+), and elsewhere there is mention of the fact that the *navamālikā* is not far from the banana bower (*R* II.[19]+). After their introduction in Act One, we learn that a man named Śrīkhaṇḍadāsa, who came from a place called Śrīparvata, has instructed the King on what his favourite plant needs to make it flower early (*R* II, *praveśaka*), and finally that the *navamālikā* has indeed blossomed (see *R* II.[3+]). Note that the passages cited above use the verb *parigrah-*, essentially meaning "to marry," to describe the relationships between the king and queen and their respective plants; the two characters have "married" their favourite creeper. Marriage practices between a man or woman and a tree are documented by folklore right up to modern times in India;[20] one of the purposes of such ceremonies seems to be to eliminate any inauspiciousness that might otherwise fall on an authentic marriage between two persons. Of course, here in the *Ratnāvalī* we have instead a sort of game, perhaps intended to echo precisely such customs, and reformulating them in a light-hearted manner.

As for making plants flower or bear fruit out of season, this seems to be a widespread ambition in the Indian art of cultivation. An allusion found in the *Rāmāyaṇa* (ed. Gorresio, VII.45.3), referring to the *aśokavanikā* of Ayodhyā, where Rāma and Sītā spend their last moments of serenity, makes such results appear to be almost works of magic: "there were trees blossoming out of season, produced by experts, with flowers of many kinds, which seemed to be crafted by magic."[21] Many centuries later, concrete information on these practices is offered by the *Mānasollāsa*, the famous encyclopaedic work composed at the court of Someśvara III, king of the Western Chalukyas, who reigned between 1126 and 1138, and to whom the work's authorship is traditionally attributed. In one of its sections devoted to cultivation and the sovereign's gardens (V.1, *Bhūdharakrīḍā*), the *Mānasollāsa* takes considerable interest in expounding—apparently, rather fanciful—horticultural remedies aimed at achieving, besides other spectacular effects, uninterrupted fruiting or flowering.[22] At any rate,

[19] Cf., in the same *Ratnāvalī*, I.[20].

[20] For information on these practices see Gupta 1960, *passim*, and especially Thankappan Nair's article included there (Nair 1960); and Parkin 1997.

[21] *akālapuṣpās taravaḥ śilpibhiḥ parikalpitāḥ / te puṣpitā bahuvidhā babhur māyākṛtā iva //*.

[22] Stanzas V.1.35-37; 39-41; 44-45; 67-68; 90-94 allude to perennial fruit-bearing or flowering. The reference text is Shrigondekar's edition of the *Mānasollāsa* (vol. III, 1961). A general analysis of this section and the following one, entitled *Vanakrīḍā* (V.2) and entirely dedicated to the wonders of the royal garden and the amusements the ruler should enjoy there, can be found in Ali 2012. The first

the playful challenge, in the *Ratnāvalī* as a whole, suggests an even more personal involvement of the sovereign-poet in the art of gardening.

In the fourth and last Act the *Ratnāvalī* moves away from trees and flowers, but a last glimpse of its gardens is offered by an enchanting stanza describing the illusory burning of the palace by a magician. These gardens may possibly be those of the gynaeceum, with tall trees and a pleasure-hill:

> A fire has just broken out all of a sudden
> in the women's quarters,
> terrifying the women as it flares up.
> Its heaps of flames
> give the palaces beautiful golden turrets.
> The scorched tips of the dense trees
> in the garden show
> how excessively sharp its heat is.
> And the clouds of smoke that fall
> on the artificial hill
> make it look like a dark cloud full of water. (*R* IV.[14])[23]

*Between Temples and Hermitages*

The ten Acts of Bhavabhūti's *Mālatīmādhava* do not depict the love affair of a sovereign: here the male protagonist, Mādhava, and his lover Mālatī are the son and daughter respectively of two ministers; and, while the plots in the works examined above took place entirely or to a large extent in a royal palace, here the settings are different and varied. However, even here some decisive scenes are set in gardens, along the lines we have already encountered; the main difference is that these are not, in fact, the gardens of royal palaces, but rather a garden whose location is not specified, and gardens attached to religious institutions.

In Act One we are faced with a garden within a garden—or, if you prefer, a garden raised to the power of two. In fact, the scene takes place in a garden called the "Garden of the young *bakula*(s)" (*bālabakulodyāna*, *MM* I.[19]+), which is where Mādhava exchanges confidences with his friend Makaranda and is overheard by his own faithful servant, who then shows the portrait Mālatī had painted of him. Mālatī had already fallen in love with Mādhava when, looking out from her window, she saw him passing in the street.

Mādhava's confidences concern the events that took place shortly before in another garden. This garden is initially called *makarandodyāna*, "Garden of nectar" (*MM* I.[15]+), but then it is repeatedly called *madanodyāna*, "Garden of Madana," i.e. of the god Love; it houses a temple of Kāma (*kāmadevāyatana*, *garbhabhavana*, *MM* I.[20]+), and is the location for the spring celebrations in honour of the god

part of the *adhyāya* V.1, which deals properly with horticultural care, is translated and commented on in Sadhale, Nene 2010.

[23] *harmyāṇāṃ hemaśṛṅgaśriyam iva nicayair arciṣām ādadhānaḥ sāndrodyānadrumāgraglapanapiśunitātyantatīvrābhitāpaḥ / kurvan krīḍāmahīdhraṃ sajalajaladharaśyāmalaṃ dhūmapātair eṣa ploṣārtayoṣijjana iha sahasaivotthito 'ntaḥpure 'gniḥ //.*

Translation Doniger 2006: 259.

(*madanamahotsava*, cf. *MM* I.[15]+).[24] The occasional name *makarandodyāna* recalls the *Ratnāvalī* (cf. supra), and may even echo here the name of the protagonist's friend. We learn that in this garden Mādhava had been sitting by a pool of water around a young *bakula* tree (*bālabakulasyālavālaparisare, MM* I.[20]+),[25] whose fallen flowers he used to make a garland—which becomes a pledge of love throughout the play—and here, initially unseen, he caught his first glimpse of Mālatī who had come to visit the temple, instantly falling in love with her. The colophon entitles this first Act *bakulavīthī*, "Row of *bakula*s."

Act Three takes place in a garden called *kusumākara*, roughly "Treasury of flowers," attached to a temple of Śaṅkara, i.e. Śiva (*śaṃkaragṛhasaṃbaddhaṃ kusumākaraṃ nāmodyānaṃ*), where there is a thicket of red *aśoka*s bordering a *kubjaka* arbour (*kubjakanikuñjaparyantaraktāśokagahane*, *MM* III, *praveśaka*).[26] The plan is for Mādhava to see Mālatī again when she comes here to honour the god by gathering and offering him flowers. Mādhava sees her and listens to the dialogues unseen; Mālatī catches a glimpse of him for a moment, but events take a different turn due to the irruption of a tiger, which breaks down the barriers of secrecy—and promotes love between Madayantikā, Mālatī's friend, and Makaranda, who saves her from the ferocious animal. Besides, the text offers us a very brief hint of the garden belonging to minister Bhūrivasu (Mālatī's father), from which fragrant winds of flowers blow towards the young woman, further kindling her passion as she languishes inside the palace (*MM* III.[12]+).

The last of the gardens in which Bhavabhūti sets the events of the *Mālatīmādhava* appears at the end of Act Six. Here the nun Kāmandakī invites Mādhava and Mālatī, who has just escaped marriage to Nandana, to go through a grove of trees (*vṛkṣagahana*) to the "walled garden" (*udyānavāṭa*) that lies behind her monastery (*asmadvihārikāyāḥ paścād*) (*MM* VI.[18]+), where the two can celebrate their wedding. In the invitation, Kāmandakī presents this garden—mentioning, it should be noted, a utilitarian type of vegetation:

> With its fruited areca palms bowed down and skeined with betel vine,
> The vine-leaves pale as the cheek of a lovelorn Kerala maiden,
> And its chatter of artless fowl pecking the jujube berries,
> And its edges of swaying lime-trees, that ground will be prosperous to your love.
> (*MM* VI.[19])[27]

Act Eight is also set here, offering a few more scant details about this *udyānavāṭa*: there is a pond with a stone slab on its bank (*dīrghikātaṭaśilātala*), where the two lovers are sitting after an evening bath (*MM* VIII, *praveśaka*), and also a thicket of trees (*udyānagahana*, *MM* VIII.[8]+; [11]+).

[24] This temple garden is also called *manmathodyāna* (*MM* II.[2]+), *kāmakānana* (*MM* III.[12]+; VIII.[5]+), or *anaṅgamandirāṅgaṇa* (*MM* IX.[43]+).

[25] The term *ālavāla* denotes a small ditch dug around a tree for the purpose of creating a basin for irrigation. See *Amarakośa* I.9.29, and *Raghuvaṃśa* I.51.

[26] The name of the garden recurs several times throughout the Act and beyond, and the temple is constantly called *śaṃkaragṛha*.

[27] *gāḍhotkaṇṭhakaṭhorakeralavadhūgaṇḍāvapāṇḍucchadais tāmbūlīpaṭalaiḥ pinaddhaphalinavyānamrapūgadrumāḥ / kakkolīphalajagdhimugdhavikiravyāhāriṇas tadbhuvo bhāgāḥ preṅkhitamātuluṅgavṛtayaḥ preyo vidhāsyanti vām //.*

Translation Coulson 1981: 375.

Although, as we have seen, Bhavabhūti fully exploits the dramatic potentialities of the garden setting, it must be stressed that he only seems sporadically interested in exalting its natural beauty in the *Mālatīmādhava*. On the contrary, there are ample, spectacular and richly poetic mentions of plants and animals in the passages devoted to wild nature in Act Nine, where Mādhava is desperately searching in the forest for Mālatī who has been kidnapped.[28]

But let us now return to the *Abhijñānaśākuntala*. Here, and this is the point worth noting, the flowery, tree-lined spaces of Kaṇva's *āśrama* and the banks of the Mālinī have essentially the same characteristics and play the same dramatic roles as the places mentioned so far, i.e. real gardens. The events of this work to be commented on here are so famous that it is almost embarrassing to recall them; nevertheless, a brief summary is called for.

We are in the hot season. Interrupting his hunting expedition, Duṣyanta enters the hermitage and catches sight of Śakuntalā and her two companions carrying their jars of water with which they are going to water the young trees. He is immediately fascinated by the vision and secretly observes the scene. The girls' conversations are full of amorous allusions playing on the image of the tree and the creeper mentioned above. While Śakuntalā is standing next to a *kesara* tree, her friend Priyaṃvadā compares her beauty to a creeper embracing the tree (*A* I.[18]+). Next they discuss the *navamālikā* which Śakuntalā herself has called *vanajyotsnā*, i.e. "Moonlight of the wood," and which has "chosen to be the bride" (*svayaṃvaravadhū*) of a mango tree; Śakuntalā's attitude towards the happy union is jokingly read by Priyaṃvadā as indicating her friend's desire to obtain an equally worthy bridegroom (*A* I.[19]+).[29] Śakuntalā is then bothered by a bee which causes Duṣyanta to come out of hiding; he is made to sit (*A* I.[22]+) on a seat, *vedikā*, in the shade of a *saptaparṇa* tree. Now, Kālidāsa seems perfectly aware that this is a displaced scene, so to speak, for later on (*A* II.[12]+) he will have the *vidūṣaka* say to Duṣyanta: "I see you have transformed a penance-grove (*tapovana*) into a garden (*upavana*)."[30]

Again, the banks of the Mālinī where Act Three takes place also share the characteristics of a "garden," with regard to both events and details. Here Śakuntalā, afflicted by passion, is cared for by her friends; Duṣyanta is hidden at first, but, once he hears the reasons for the girl's torment, he comes forward and finally proposes a Gāndharva marriage. The scene occurs in a pavilion of creepers surrounded by reeds (*vetasaparikṣipte latāmaṇḍape A* III.[5]+),[31] with a stone seat (*śilāpaṭṭa A* III.[6]+)[32]

[28] A similar observation can be made about the *Vikramorvaśīya*, where much space is also reserved for wild nature. This happens throughout Act Four, when Urvaśī, in a fit of jealousy and forgetting that women are not allowed to enter the forest of the god Kumāra, violates the ban and is transformed into a *latā*, a creeper, and Purūravas searches for her in despair. As is well known, these passages from these two works are deeply related; see Pieruccini (forthcoming).

[29] The image of the tree and the creeper is a kind of common thread running through the first part of the work: it also recurs in *A* III.[10]+, and in *A* IV.[12+]-[13], here again with reference to *vanajyotsnā*.

[30] *kṛtaṃ tvayopavanaṃ tapovanam iti paśyāmi*. The term *upavana* is defined by the *Amarakośa* (II.4.2) as "artificial forest" (*kṛtrimaṃ vanam*).

[31] Also: *latāvalaya A* III.[4]+; [22]+; [23]+; *vetasagṛha A* III.[24].

[32] Also: *śilātala A* III.[16]+; *śilā A* III.[24].

strewn with flowers to receive Śakuntalā's body burning with love. Here too we have, in essence, the usual ingredients.[33]

However, Kālidāsa presents the trees of the *tapovana*, at least in part, in a mythical-fantastic light, evoking the divinities that dwell in them. In Act Four, Kaṇva asks the trees to consent to Śakuntalā's departure, and the *tapovanadevatā*s grant it (*A* IV.[9]-[10]+). The trees of the hermitage provide Śakuntalā with a kind of dowry:

> One tree put forth an auspicious linen garment, pale as the moon; another exuded the lac for dying the feet; others gave the ornaments, through the hands of the sylvan deities emerging up to the wrist and contending with the sprouting of the new leaves. (*A* IV.[5])[34]

On the other hand, mythical-supernatural elements are an important component of the *Abhijñānaśākuntala* in general terms, just as they are in the *Vikramorvaśīya*. Let us discuss the magical and supernatural (or unnatural) nature in a few concluding remarks, commenting, first of all, on its widespread absence in the gardens considered in these pages.

*Concluding Remarks: Otherworldly Gardens, Innovation, and on the Stage*

If the vegetation in Kaṇva's *tapovana* appears to be endowed with special powers, much more imaginative is the nature briefly alluded to later in the *Abhijñānaśākuntala* regarding a celestial hermitage. In Act Seven, in Mārīca's heavenly *āśrama* we meet in fact—besides the usual jewelled seats (*ratnaśilātala*)—the fabulous *mandāra* trees, wishing trees (*kalpavṛkṣa*) and golden lotuses (*kāñcanapadma*) (*A* VII.[11]+-[12]). Now, in Sanskrit literature, trees and flowers of gold and precious stones, lakes with sand made of gold and so on, variously played out, are characteristic of fabulous, otherworldly and heavenly places. We find them in the *Rāmāyaṇa*, for example in the *aśokavanikā* of Laṅkā (especially V.12-13) and in the country of the Uttarakurus, in the far North (IV.42.39-41), in the description of Indra's paradise in the *Saundarananda* of Aśvaghoṣa (X.19-27), and in terms of extraordinary opulence in the Mahāyāna paradises depicted in the *Sukhāvatīvyūhasūtra*s. I have dealt with these passages in detail elsewhere.[35]

Alongside extensive practical gardening advice, and an extremely ample catalogue of "natural" plants and other precious embellishments, such vegetation is also mentioned in the *Mānasollāsa* (e.g. V.1.102-103; 114-115; 119), regarding the desired features of a king's garden. Of course, it cannot be ruled out that such wonders might sometimes have been created in the gardens of the sovereigns of medieval India. However, in the "human" gardens of the works considered in these pages there is not the

[33] In addition, in an attempt to remind Duṣyanta of their love, in Act Five Śakuntalā mentions an episode that occurred while the two were in a *navamālikā* bower (*navamālikāmaṇḍapa*), evidently located in or near the hermitage (*A* V.[21]+).

[34] *kṣaumaṃ kenacid indupāṇḍu taruṇā māṅgalyam āviṣkṛtam niṣṭhyūtaś caraṇopabhogasulabho lākṣārasaḥ kenacit / anyebhyo vanadevatākaratalair āparvabhogotthitair dattāny ābharaṇāni tatkisalayodbhedapratidvandvibhiḥ //.*

[35] See in particular Pieruccini 2014, 2021, where this comparison with the instead entirely "natural" qualities of Sanskrit theatre gardens is also mentioned, and 2022a. We briefly recall that, just as happens in the hermitage of Kaṇva, we find trees offering robes and ornaments in the passages about the country of the Uttarakurus in the *Rāmāyaṇa* (IV.42.45-46), and about Indra's paradise in the *Saundarananda* (X.20; 22-23).

slightest trace of them, and this leads us to think that it is reasonably certain that corresponding practices were absent in antiquity: this "nature" made of precious substances belongs primarily to the literary fantasy of extraordinary, magical and paradisical places. As a matter of fact, on the whole, and even though they are built on recurring elements and situations, these court plays seem to offer some reliable data on how the gardens of royal palaces and other institutions in ancient India were designed, as well as on how they were enjoyed, albeit through the filter of literary conventions.

As we know, literary conventions are essential to *kāvya*, and we have seen them fully applied here: gardens represent a well-defined *topos* in these plays. It is practically impossible to establish who was the first to fully introduce this topic and in general the *topoi* of *kāvya*, not least because of presumable gaps in the tradition. But I would like to stress the extent to which in the works examined the poets manage to introduce variations on the theme.[36] The first to be considered is the importance given to the garden itself in the context of the work. In this case, the author who gives the greatest space to royal palace gardens is certainly Harṣa, and he does this in a very striking way in the *Ratnāvalī*. A second point involves the introduction of particular interactions between the characters and the garden's vegetation. Here the most significant motifs appear in the *Mālavikāgnimitra*, and again in the *Ratnāvalī*. In the latter work, the "marriage" between a character and a plant may derive, as we have seen, from a folkloric practice. Another very interesting aspect of the motif's elaboration concerns Kālidāsa, who seems to be well aware that Śakuntalā and Duṣyanta's love needs a setting that has all the characteristics of a "true" garden. A further point is the introduction of artificial elements functional to the plot, such as the "water pavilion," *samudragṛhaka* or *dhārāgṛha*. And let us recall that Bhavabhūti, who in turn is well aware of the tradition, chose to transfer the royal palace gardens to places that suit his characters and plot.

To conclude, a last brief consideration may be appropriate. We have dealt here with certain aspects of the texts of the plays, but we have merely touched on their poetic values. Nor have we examined, since this was also well beyond the scope of this article, how the situations were staged, that is the performing techniques. As is well known, classical Sanskrit theatre did not make use of backdrops, painted scenery, or ancillary props; both the action and the identification of the stage areas were totally entrusted to acting, music and dance,[37] and the gardens we have been dealing with were also evoked in this way, in all their details. Now, these described and evoked gardens can certainly be counted among what are nowadays called mindscapes. These gardens are landscapes, or rather a category of landscapes, that undoubtedly stem, as we have tried to underline, from a widespread experience of "real" gardens, which are restructured on the stage in an intermediate point between sensoriality, imagination and competence—both in representation and the necessary understanding by the public of connoisseurs. Thus, the garden of the Sanskrit theatre builds a space charged with experience, acted and induced emotions, and skills, which constitutes in fact a landscape of the mind, created on stage through a consolidated imagery and conventions shared between poets, actors, and audience.

[36] I have devoted a specific paper to the subject (Pieruccini forthcoming), somewhat complementary to the present one.

[37] In the extensive bibliography on the subject Raghavan 1993 [1981] and Vatsyayan 1993 [1981] are of note.

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## Abbreviations

*A = Abhijñānaśākuntala*
*M = Mālavikāgnimitra*
*MM = Mālatīmādhava*
*P = Priyadarśikā*
*R = Ratnāvalī*
*S = Svapnavāsavadatta*
*V = Vikramorvaśīya*

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## Appendix

This list includes the names of plants, trees and flowers that the authors refer to explicitly as being in gardens in the works under consideration. As for the *Abhijñānaśākuntala*, *A1* refers to the vegetation of the places that, according to our analysis, play the same role as "true" gardens in the dramatic plot.

*ambhoruha*: *P*; *āmra*: *A*; *aravinda*: *A1*, *MM*; *asana*: *S*; *aśoka*: *M*, *V*, *R*; *atimukta*: *V*; *bakula*: *P*, *R*, *MM*; *bandhujīva*: *S*; *bandhūka*: *P*; *bījapūraka*: *M*; *campaka*: *R*, *MM*; *cūta*: *M*, *V*, *A*, *A1*; *darbha*: *A1*; *kadalī*: *P*, *R*; *kakkolī*: *MM*; *kamala*: *P*; *kamalinī*: *P*, *R*; *kāñcanāra*: *MM*; *kāśa*: *S*; *kaundī*: *V*; *kesara*: *V*, *A1*, *MM*; *kubjaka*: *MM*; *kunda*: *MM*; *kurabaka*: *M*, *V*, *A*, *A1*; *kuśa*: *A1*; *kuvalaya*: *P*; *mādhavī*: *S*, *V*, *A*, *R*; *mākanda*: *MM*; *mālatī*: *P*; *mātuluṅga*: *MM*; *nalinī*: *P*, *R*;

*navamālikā*: *A1*, *R*; *nīlotpala*: *P*; *padma*: *P*; *padminī*: *R*; *paṅkaja*: *P*; *pāṭalā*: *R*; *priyaṅgu*: *S*, *M*; *pūga*: *MM*; *raktāśoka*: *M*, *R*, *MM*; *sahakāra*: *M*, *V*, *A1*, *R*, *MM*; *saptacchada*: *S*, *P*; *saptaparṇa*: *P*, *A1*; *śephālikā*: *S*, *P*; *sinduvāra*: *R*; *śirīṣa*: *P*; *tamāla*: *P*, *R*; *tāmbūlī*: *MM*; *tapanīyāśoka*: *M*; *tilaka*: *M*; *vetasa*: *A1*.