

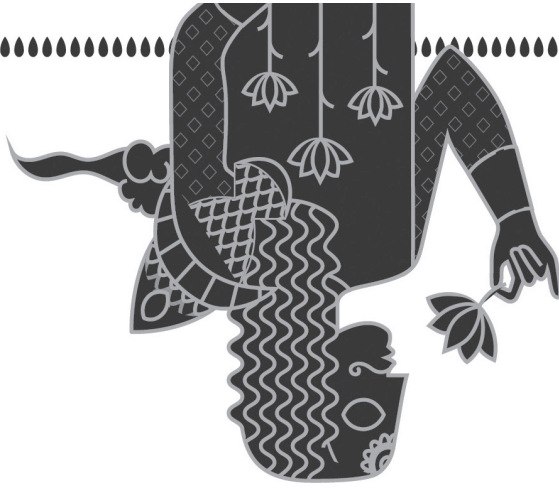
Praise for the Book

‘Witty, surprising and joyous, this book banishes notions of solemnity and turgid scholarship that one might nurse about translations from the Sanskrit. Several translations here wear their learning lightly, as good poems must, reminding us that centuries are separated “by historians, not poets”. A book to pick up, a book to gift.’

– Arundhathi Subramaniam

‘This is a beautiful book, with wonderful contemporary translations of love poetry in Sanskrit (with some in Prakrit). The translations will charm and entice readers to read the originals. A difficult book to write, but since the two editors wear their scholarship lightly, they make it seem easy. A book that will delight the reader.’

– Bibek Debroy



HOW TO
Edited and Translated by
LOVE IN
Anusha Rao & Suhas Mahesh
SANSKRIT
Poems

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Introduction

You've probably done a little Sanskrit in school, learnt a few prayers at home, or at least heard them somewhere. What do you think of Sanskrit? The fusty-musty language of hymns, priests and godmen? Here's a surprise for you: love has been the overwhelming obsession of Sanskrit poets for over two thousand years. Fling a mean barb in a lover's quarrel? Brew a love potion? Turn someone crimson with a compliment? You're in luck. They've done all the hard work for you – grace, sophistication and wit included. We know of high Victorian romance with its strict etiquette, romantic letters and ballroom dances, brought to life in so many period dramas and novels. Love in Urdu with its intoxication, melancholy and madness is only too popular in the subcontinent. But what is it like to love in Sanskrit?

Love in Sanskrit is when you first laid eyes on him and it felt like an arrow struck you right in the heart. Had you lived till that moment? You weren't sure. Would you live again? You weren't sure. Your heart secretly bubbled and simmered on the inside, like a wet log on the hearth. A friend spilled the beans to him. You met by the lonely thickets on the riverbank. Sometimes you had entire conversations with your eyes because your parents were around. When he had to go away, the one little choked sob you gave while saying goodbye sliced right through his heart. You couldn't stop missing him. You wrote him a letter. The words weren't important; the smudge of the kohl that flowed with your tears spoke more eloquently. He was alone in his agony too. When the doe in the woods gave him a shy glance, he thought of your eyes. The rumble of the rain clouds felt like a weight in his chest. He thought it would drive him to insanity when the air turned dense with the fragrance of the ketaka blossoms, so dense that he could cup his palms and drink it in. You tossed and turned, praying for cursed sleep so you could at least dream of him in peace. When he finally returned, you kept it a secret so you could have him all to yourself for a day. Once you fought and resolutely refused to look at each other, but your eyes met, and you both burst into laughter. When you felt his goosebumps as you held his hand at your wedding. When he reached for your blouse and found it unhooked already as you pulled him close. When he woke up in the

morning and saw your tousled hair and thought you looked even lovelier than the night before. And after a lifetime of sharing all joy and grief, when he died, you felt like he was saved, and you, in fact, were dead.

Like all great literature, Sanskrit tells us something about love by typifying its farthest possible extremes. It is about the cruel hand of fate. It is about ecstatic lovemaking. It is about clever flattery and quarrels of passion. But more than anything else, it is about yearning at its extreme. Mad yearning that strikes you like thunder, seizes you with frenzy, and drowns you in grief. We have an uneasy relationship with such grief today. It is to be medicated away, or kept muzzled except in solitude. In Sanskrit though, yearning is what nourishes love's plant and makes it burst into flower. Shared experiences of grief connect us, challenge us, and enrich us. As one poet asks: if you're not yearning, is it really love?

None have escaped heartbreak or grief, and you will discover that the old Indian heart is quite similar to Chinese, American or Indian hearts today. But the particular fashion in which romance plays out can be puzzling to the modern mind. To give you an extreme example, consider death. In Sanskrit, the death of your lover may not be a permanent tragedy, but a mere glitch in the timeline that will be corrected by reuniting in a future rebirth. The most acclaimed prose novel in Sanskrit, *Princess Kadambari*, kills off two main characters midway through the story, but brings them back in a different timeline for a happy ending.

We can also now tackle the question we're frequently asked: how do you say I love you in Sanskrit? The answer is simple. You don't say *I love you* in Sanskrit. It is simply not the way the Sanskritic mind does things. One way is to dispatch a close friend with a love letter containing a soppy poem you've written. This is what Shakuntala does in Kalidasa's *Recognition of Shakuntala*:

I can't read your heart, cruel one.
But as I long for you
love sets every bit of me on fire
day and night.

Or if you're absolutely sure they like you, you could offer them help with something, cheekily remarking that you're happy to put in 'every bodily effort'. Chandrapida does something like this in *Princess Kadambari*. In other words, Sanskrit resists linearity and matter-of-factness. Remember that this is a language in which you can open conversations with: *What letters are lucky enough to be a part of your name?* If you still insist on a literal translation, we prefer *tvayi sānurāgāsmi* (*tvayi sānurāgo 'smi* if you're a man).

This book is an invitation to Sanskrit love poetry in the way that an invitation to tea is an invitation to tea, biscuits and pakoras. Of the 200-odd entries in this book, around 150 are Sanskrit, around fifty are Maharashtri Prakrit, a couple in Apabhramsha, and one is Pali. All four are closely linked

A Tour of the Translators' Workshop

A Sanskrit poem is like an Indian wedding – people flit about in glitzy clothing, raucous children mill all around, horses neigh, bells tintinnabulate, priests chant and food beckons. It may not even be clear who the bride and groom are, unless you know where to look. Every now and then, some long-forgotten word or expression pops up, like some ancient elder, and you shake their gnarly hands and try your best to hold a conversation.

The Sanskrit translator's job is to take it and replan it as a solemn church wedding in England. You could probably serve samosas without a kerfuffle, but you will be thought mad if you trot down the aisle on a horse. In short, translation is largely a game of compromise. Luckily, translators of exotic languages, especially poetry, have a secret advantage.



HOW TO FLIRT



1. Inferiority complex

Seeing the lovely red
of your lips, darling
the cherries hang themselves
from a tree in despair.

Kumarapala's Awakening, Somaprabha Suri, 1200 CE, Gurjara

Who do you think wrote this gem of a verse? A young romantic?
It was actually the Jain monk Somaprabha Suri.

3. Why I am an atheist

When the creator made her

if he had his eyes open
would he have let her leave heaven?
Surely not.

If he had his eyes shut
could he have achieved such perfection?
No chance.

Therefore it is proved
that the Buddha was right:
There is no creator.

Treasury of Verse-Jewels, 1000 CE, Bengal

This verse is attributed to Dharmakirti, a heavyweight of Buddhist philosophy. By some accounts, he was based at the great monastic university of Nalanda (now in Bihar).

5. Dimples

After creating her
God must have
gazed at his work admiringly
holding her face in his hands
thumb on each cheek.

That's how she got
her two perfect dimples.

Deeds of the Nishadha King, Shriharsha, 1100 CE, Kanyakubja?

Some say that *Deeds of the Nishadha King* is the most
challenging poem in Sanskrit.

6. Dangerous driving

First her high breasts
then the deep valley
of her waist
then the steep incline
of her hips –

with all these
curves and bends
is it a surprise
that every onlooker
goes off track?

Sharngadhara's Anthology, 1300 CE, Ranthambore

7. Can't take my eyes off you

On whatever bit of her
the gaze first lands,
there it stays pinned.

No one knows her
in all her loveliness.

Seven Hundred Gahas, 100 CE?, Deccan

Seven Hundred Gahas is the most celebrated Prakrit work, written in a metrical form called the gaha. Many other well-known works are its imitations, such as Govardhana's *Arya Saptashati* (Sanskrit) and Bihari's *Satsai* (Brajhasha).

19. Tricks of the trade

'Look, darling
there's the thorn
clear as day.
Now draw it out
with your nails
but be gentle.'

She placed her foot
on his lap.

There was no thorn.

Sharngadhara's Anthology, 1300 CE, Ranthambore

Besides poetry, *Sharngadhara's Anthology* also contains much practical advice about such topics as archery, veterinary science, digging wells and medicine. If you've been poisoned, grind together pepper, salt, ghee, honey and neem fruits and eat the paste, he says, for it will purge you of the poison – from both ends.

20. Game theory

Desire works
in a backwards fashion:
If they're disinclined
you desire them more.
If they dance to your tunes
your desire slackens.

Therefore, if you want
the greatest pleasure
practise playing hard to get.

Heart's Delight, Someshvara, 1100 CE, Karnata

Heart's Delight is a thick encyclopaedia by King Someshvara III that includes (amongst other things), old recipes for idlis (idarika), vadas (vataka), dosas (dhosaka) and a variety of wines.

27. Going all in

First
a hug was wagered
and won.
They played some more.
Lips were staked
and kisses won.

Then he asked her:
'What are you betting next?'

Cheeks thrilling
from hiding
her rising excitement
beads of sweat coating her hand
she moved her pawn
across the board
without a single word.

Treasury of Verse-Jewels, 1000 CE, Bengal

31. Marksmanship

She raises her left arm
and reaches back
to undo her brassiere.

It's like
she's reaching back
into a quiver
to draw an arrow
and shoot straight at his heart.

Enlivener of Connoisseurs, 1600 CE, Mithila



HOW
TO
KEEP
IT A
SECRET



32. Open secret

You can conceal many things.
Love, however, is different.
The harder you try to hush it up
the more painfully obvious it becomes.

Princess Lilavai, Kouhala, 800 CE

Princess Lilavai is a Prakrit romance centred around the Satavahana King Hala and Princess Lilavai of Simhala.

33. What gave it away?

When he came home
I didn't look at him
I didn't speak to him
I didn't offer him anything.

That's how they guessed.

37. Kuch to log kahenge

Darling,
people like to talk.
But you can't give up love.

We worry about lice
but who stops wearing clothes?

Vidyakara Mishra's Thousand, 1800 CE



HOW TO DAYDREAM



49. Pearls and corals

A white blossom enfolded
in the blush of fresh shoots –

A pearl set
in flaming coral –

Only they might hint at the perfection
of her dazzling smile
and red lips.

Birth of Kumara, Kalidasa, 400 CE?

Through the story of how Shiva and Parvati came to be together, *Birth of Kumara* weaves together a series of meditations on the pursuit of love, inevitability, supreme divinity and the power of penance. Parvati stands out as an unusually strong lead.

50. Extrasensory perception

‘She does every little thing I like,’ he gushes.

Little does he know

he likes every little thing she does.

Light on Love, 1000 CE, Malwa

Light on Love goes so far as to argue that love is the *only* rasa or aesthetic sentiment.

51. Sui generis

In all the world
filled as it is with lovely women
this much may be said of her:
only her right half
is a match for her left.

Seven Hundred Gahas, 100 CE?, Deccan

52. Class topper

Vatsyayana (of *Kamasutra* fame),
Madanodaya, Dattaka,
Vitavritta, Rajaputra,
and all the other sexperts of yore –
forget what they wrote.

What they so much as breathed –
her heart knows it already.

Bawd's Counsel, Damodaragupta, 800 CE, Kashmir

The *Kamasutra* opens with a long listing of the erotic texts that came before it. It is said that the original *Kamasutra* (with a thousand chapters!) was written by Nandi. This material was reused by many authors to produce many derivative works. Finally, Vatsyayana wrote the small but comprehensive summary that we know as the *Kamasutra*.

53. In my heart

Has she melted into my heart?
Or is she reflected there?
Perhaps she's been painted?
Or engraved?
Or studded
like some precious gem?
Or consecrated
like a goddess on her plinth?
Or buried
like some invaluable treasure?
Or pinned
by the Love God's five arrows?
Or sewn tight
into the fabric of my heart
by the threads of my thoughts?

Malati and Madhava, Bhavabhuti, 700 CE, Kanyakubja

Bhavabhuti stands out among Sanskrit poets for his interest in depicting the stirrings of the mind.

54. Every time you touch me

It teeters on that edge
between pleasure and pain.
Is it a daze? A dream?
Poison swirling in my veins?
Or is it madness?

Your every touch
blurs my senses
with a numbing cold
and a searing heat
all at once.

What Rama Did Next, Bhavabhuti, 700 CE, Kanyakubja

What Rama Did Next is a brilliant exploration of morality, obligation and conscience through the episode of Rama's abandonment of Sita. It is one of the highest achievements of Sanskrit theatre.

55. Seal of approval

Her cherry lips look
like God's official seal
certifying her
as a treasury
of perfect loveliness.

Treasury of Gahas, 1000 CE

The king's seal used to be stamped in sindoor (vermilion), validating such matters as the payment of tax. We have slightly adapted the idea in translation.

List of Verses in the Source Language

- pariṇaya-mālā-vinimaya-samaya-sakalaham catuṣṭayam doṣṇām | duritam apaharatu śaurer ghaṭita-kṣīrodajā-vijayam || *maṅgalācaraṇam suhāsasya* | mālā-vinimaye ahamprathamikayā vadhū-varau spardhete karṇāteṣu |
- 1. eī ahara-hariyāruṇima-maraṭṭāī lajjamāñāim | bimba-phalāim ubbaṃdhaṇam va vallīsu virayaṃti || [etasyāḥ adhara-ḥṭāruṇima-garvāṇi lajjamānāni | bimba-phalāni udbandhanam iva vallīsu viracayanti ||] *Kumārapālapratibodha* p. 269
- 2. uddhaccho piaī jalaṃ jaha jaha viralamgulī ciraṃ pahio | pāvāliā vi taha taha dhāraṃ taṇuaṃ pi taṇuei || [ūrdhvākṣaḥ pibati jalaṃ yathā yathā viralāṅgulih ciraṃ pathikaḥ | prapā-pālikā api tathā tathā dhārāṃ tanukām api tanūkaroti ||] *Gāhāsattasāī* 161
- 3. yātā locana-gocaraṃ yadi vidher eṇekṣaṇā sundarī neyaṃ kuṅkuma-paṅka-piñjara-mukhī tenojjhita syāt kṣaṇam | nāpy āmilīta-locanasya racanād rūpaṃ bhaved īdṛṣaṃ tasmāt

- sarvam akartṛkaṃ jagad idam śreyo matam saugatam ||
Subhāṣitaratnaśo 440
4. tvām sraṣṭum satṛṇam sadābhyavaharan nārho vidhiḥ prārthito
navyo 'nyo nitarām idamprathamatā-'vaidagdhya-śikṣākulaḥ |
sollekhā ca ghuṇākṣarīṇa-sadrśī vaktum na yuktā sthitiḥ
tvat-sargānumitau vimuhyati tarām ittham janah tārkiḥ ||
Sūktāvali (Folio 10 recto, line 3). Some emendations have
been made.
 5. vilokitāsyā mukham unnamayya kiṃ vedhaseyam suṣamā-
samāptau? | dhṛtyudbhavā yac cibuke cakāsti nimne manāg
aṅguli-yantraṇeva || *Naiṣadhīyacarita* 7.51
 6. stana-yugam atīva-tuṅgam nimno madhyaḥ samunnatam
jaghanam | iti viṣame hariṇākṣyā vapuṣi nave ka iva na
skhalati? || *Śārṅgadharaḥpaddhati* 3370
 7. jassa jahim cia paḍhamam tissā aṅgammi ṇivadiā ditṭhī | tassa
tahiṃ cea ṭhiā savvaṅgam keṇa vi ṇa ditṭham || [yasya yatraiva
prathamam tasyāḥ ange nipatitā dṛṣṭiḥ | tasya tatraiva sthitā
sarvāṅgam kenāpi na dṛṣṭam ||] *Gāhāsattasā* 234
 8. dṛṣṭim dehi punar bāle! kamalāyata-locane! | śrūyate hi purā
loke viṣasya viṣam auṣadham || *Śrīṅgāratilaka* 15
 9. eīe bālāe loyaṇa-lāyanna-lāha-luddhāim | muddhāi maya-
kulāim vaṇa-vāsa-vayam va sevamti || [etasyāḥ bālāyāḥ
locana-lāvaṇya-lābha-lubdhāni | mugdhāni mṛga-kulāni vana-
vāsa-vratam iva sevante ||] *Kumārapālapratibodha* p. 269
 10. locane hariṇa-garva-mocane mā vibhūṣaya natāṅgi! kajjalaiḥ |
eka eva yadi jīva-hāraḥ sāyako na garalena lipyate ||
Rasikajīvana 4.34
 11. virājate 'syās tilako 'yam añcito vikuñcita-bhrū-latikāntare
nṛpa! | vijitya loka-dvitayam divam prati smareṇa bāṇo
dhanuṣīva saṃhitaḥ || *Navasāhasāṅkacarita* 7.15
 12. etat te bhrū-latollāsi pāṭalādhara-pallavam | mukham nandanam
udyānam ato 'nyat kevalam vanaḥ || *Nāgānanda* 3.11