

Pigeons and Doves in Classical Sanskrit Literature

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Abstract: The main aim of the present study is to indicate the most salient elements of the image of pigeons and doves in Classical Sanskrit literature (*kāvya*). The author has identified three groups of such elements, which are dealt with in three separate sections of the paper: pigeons and doves are discussed as birds closely associated with humans, as well as symbols of love and sorrow. With the help of this information, in another section of the paper, selected *kāvya* stanzas featuring pigeons or doves are analysed in more detail.

Keywords: pigeons, doves, Classical Sanskrit literature, *kāvya*

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1. Introduction

In South Asia, the Columbidae family is currently represented by as many as 33 species of pigeons, doves, green pigeons and imperial pigeons divided into eight genera (PRAVEEN and JAYAPAL 2022). The most common species include the rock pigeon (*Columba livia*; also known as the blue rock pigeon, common pigeon or rock dove), the Eurasian collared dove (*Streptopelia decaocto*; also known as the ring dove), the red collared dove (*Streptopelia tranquebarica*; also known as the red turtle dove), the spotted dove (*Streptopelia chinensis*) and the laughing dove (*Streptopelia senegalensis*; also known as the little brown dove), as well as the yellow-footed green pigeon (*Treron phoenicopterus*; also known as the common green pigeon).¹

K. N. Dave, in chapter 53 ('Pigeons and Doves') of his impressive study, *Birds in Sanskrit Literature* (DAVE 2005: 250–264), searches a wide range of source texts (including Vedic *saṃhitās*, the *Mahābhārata* and the

¹ According to ALI 1943: 278–285.

Rāmāyaṇa, *purāṇas*, *dharmasāstras*, Sanskrit medical treatises and lexicons, Classical Sanskrit literature, etc.) in order to determine the names by which the species of the Columbidae family common in South Asia are referred to in Sanskrit. He claims, e.g., that the rock pigeon is known as *nīlakapota* or *bhasmāṅgapārāvata* in Sanskrit sources, while the Eurasian collared dove, the red collared dove, the spotted dove and the laughing dove are referred to as *dhavalakapota*, *aruṇakapota* or *kāṇakapota*, *citrakapota* or *citrapakṣakapota* and *kumkumadhūmrakapota* or *dhūsarakapota*, respectively (DAVE 2005: 251).

However, in Classical Sanskrit literature (*kāvya*), such names for the members of the Columbidae family occur only exceptionally (see stanzas 951 and 1175 of Vidyākara's anthology *Subhāṣitaratnaḥ*,² both discussed below). Three broader terms are commonly used instead.

The name *hārīta* (from *harita* 'yellowish, pale yellow, fallow, pale red, pale, greenish [...], green', MONIER-WILLIAMS 2002: 1291) appears to be reserved for South Asian green pigeons (members of the genus *Treron*), arboreal frugivores remarkable for their beautiful colouration (ALI 1943: 279; WHISTLER 1949: 392–394), which we will not be concerned with in the present paper.³

The names *kapota* and *pārāvata* are probably treated as synonyms in *kāvya* literature; the authors seem to use them for both pigeons and doves in general. Elsewhere, as DAVE 2005: 250–251 points out, *kapota* is applied to doves and *pārāvata* refers to pigeons, or to the wild rock pigeon in particular; in other texts, *pārāvata* is reserved for pigeons, while *kapota* is a broader term. DAVE 2005: 250 admits, however, that 'the poets have not always observed the distinction'.⁴

Klaus Karttunen devotes several paragraphs to pigeons and doves in his excellent paper 'Ornithology and Poetry: Ideas and Fancies Connected with Birds in Classical India' (KARTTUNEN 2020: 199–201). It would be difficult to add a lot of new material to his thoroughly searched source texts (ranging from Vedic *saṃhitās* to Classical Sanskrit literature, similarly to Dave's sources) or to substantially enrich his conclusions. I make no such attempt in this paper.

² Probably 11th or 12th century AD (STERNBACH 1974: 15). Cf. INGALLS 1965: 30: 'the latter half of the eleventh century A.D.'; D. D. Kosambi in SRK, p. vii: 'The first edition was compiled about A.D. 1100, the expanded edition about A.D. 1130'; STERNBACH 1978: 3: 'cca 1100–1130'; WARDER 2004: 1: 'the beginning of the +12'.

³ According to DAVE 2005: 251, 259, however, the Asian emerald dove (*Chalcophaps indica*) is also called *hārīta* or *hārīta kapota* in Sanskrit sources.

⁴ He goes too far, though, in claiming that 'Kālidāsa and other poets do not refer to a Dove as such and both the terms *kapota* and *pārāvata*, when used by them, always mean a Pigeon, domestic or wild' (DAVE 2005: 252).

The paper focuses on Classical Sanskrit literature (*kāvya*), which is my main area of research. I have explored here a few new texts in addition to those used by Karttunen. Firstly, I have decided to take into account selected treatises on branches of knowledge relevant to *kāvya* literature. I have found useful pieces of information in Vātsyāyana's *Kāmasūtra* and in the *Nāṭyaśāstra*. I have also examined Daṇḍin's⁵ *Kāvyaḍarśa*, from which I have taken only one – but very interesting – stanza (KĀ 2.10). As for *kāvya* itself, I have searched one more anthology besides Vidyākara's *Subhāṣitaratnaśoṣa*, namely Śrīdharadāsa's *Saduktikarṇāmr̥ta*,⁶ which contains a separate section with five stanzas on pigeons and doves (*pārāvata*). However, only two of them (SKA(1) 5.5.1 = SKA(2) 2021; SKA(1) 5.5.2 = SKA(2) 2022) have turned out to be new, as one of the three remaining stanzas (SKA(1) 5.5.3 = SKA(2) 2023) is the above-mentioned KĀ 2.10 and two are also included in the *Subhāṣitaratnaśoṣa* (SKA(1) 5.5.4 = SKA(2) 2024 = SRK 1154; SKA(1) 5.5.5 = SKA(2) 2025 = SRK 1153).

The main aim of my study is to indicate, on the basis of careful examination of the source texts, the most salient elements of the image of pigeons and doves in Classical Sanskrit literature. I have identified three groups of such elements, which will be dealt with in sections 2–4 of the paper. In each section, I will try to point out which characteristics of the appearance and behaviour of pigeons and doves are of interest to *kāvya* authors and to show how they are represented in their works, including their metaphorical uses and symbolic meanings. With the help of this information, I will analyse selected *kāvya* stanzas featuring pigeons or doves in more detail in section 5.

2. Pigeons and doves in Classical Sanskrit Literature as birds closely associated with humans

The rock pigeon needs no introduction, as it is one of the most familiar birds of the world and the first species that comes to mind when talking about pigeons. In South Asia, there are colonies of wild rock pigeons breeding on coastal cliffs and inland rock formations, as well as populations of semi-domesticated or feral rock pigeons breeding on buildings in practically every village, town and city of the region (ALI 1943: 280; WHISTLER 1949: 388–390).

The Eurasian collared dove, the spotted dove and the laughing dove also keep close to human habitations, in both rural and urban areas. All three species are confiding birds that freely enter village roads and paths, gardens

⁵ 7th or 8th century AD (GEROW 1977: 228).

⁶ 1205 AD (STERNBACH 1974: 16).

and residential compounds. Sometimes they build their nests on the cornices of houses, in the rafters of the verandas or on the window-sills (ALI 1943: 283–284; WHISTLER 1949: 396–400).

The only exception here is the red collared dove, which is rarely found in the immediate proximity of men (ALI 1943: 283; WHISTLER 1949: 401–402). Therefore, the species will not be discussed further in this paper.

The situation must have been very similar as early as the Classical period. Classical Sanskrit literature, indeed, frequently depicts pigeons and doves as birds closely associated with humans. In some texts, we see them feeding in the fields (see SRK 264 and SRK 315, both by Yogeśvara⁷) or hear them cooing in a village garden (see SRK 1175, anonymous). Elsewhere, they appear in an urban setting.

In descriptions of cities and city scenes, pigeons or doves usually roost on the turrets or pinnacles (*valabhi/valabhī*⁸ or *viṭaṅka*⁹) of tall buildings (see stanza 8.37 of Aśvaghoṣa's¹⁰ *Buddhacarita*, stanza 6.8 of Aśvaghoṣa's *Saundarananda* and stanza 40 of Kālidāsa's¹¹ *Meghadūta*). They are among the first objects that characters in urban scenes notice upon going out onto the roofs of their mansions. For example, in S 6.8 mentioned above, Sundarī, who has been waiting for the return of Prince Nanda in a pavilion on the top of their palace, suddenly hears a noise; certain that her beloved husband is back, she hurries towards the stairs – and scares the pigeons on the roof with the clinking of her anklets.

Since all the species of pigeons and doves most common in South Asia, with the exception of the red collared dove, thrive near humans, in both rural and urban areas, and are quite tame, it is easy to watch them at close quarters. No wonder that we find extremely detailed depictions of these birds' appearance and behaviour in *kāvya* works.

Tellingly, in his famous treatise on literary theory (*alaṃkāraśāstra*) *Kāvyaḍarśa*, while dealing with figures of speech (*alaṃkāra*), Daṇḍin illustrates the discussion of *kriyāsvabhāvokti* (a type of *svabhāvokti* 'realistic description' in which the behaviour of the subject is described in great detail,

⁷ Second half of the 9th century AD (STERNBACH 1980: 275). Cf. D. D. Kosambi in SRK, p. xcii: 'not later than the ninth century'; INGALLS 1965: 32: '800–900'.

⁸ MONIER-WILLIAMS 2002: 927: 'the ridge of a roof, top or pinnacle of a house [...]; a turret or temporary building on the roof of a house, upper room'.

⁹ MONIER-WILLIAMS 2002: 961: 'the loftiest point, tip, pinnacle'.

¹⁰ 1st century AD (WARDER 1990a: 144).

¹¹ 5th century AD (WARDER 1990b: 123).

GEROW 1971: 324–325) with an exquisitely accurate depiction of a courting male pigeon:

*kalakvaṇitagarbheṇa kaṅṭhenāghūrṇitekṣaṇaḥ /
pārāvataḥ paribhramya riraṃsuś cumbati priyām // KĀ 2.10*

A pigeon wanders about with eyes rolling
and soft cooings coming from its throat,
and, desiring its mate, kisses her. (Trans. GEROW 1971: 325).

Here, the name *pārāvata* must refer specifically to the rock pigeon, with its characteristic courtship routine,¹² which is very different from aerial courtship displays of the Eurasian collared dove (ALI 1943: 284), the spotted dove (WHISTLER 1949: 397) and the laughing dove (BAKER 1913: 217).

Edwin GEROW 1971: 324–325 argues that the poetic basis of the figure of *svabhāvokti* ‘is probably to be sought in the genre called *jāti*: short verses, extremely condensed yet full of minute detail, each one attempting to seize the instantaneous totality of a certain event, or an individual as wholly characteristic of a genus’.

The whole section 35 of the *Subhāṣitaratnaḥ* is dedicated to the genre of *jāti*¹³. Unsurprisingly, among other stanzas, it contains two examples of verses that depict the appearance and behaviour of pigeons or doves in great detail (SRK 1153 and SRK 1154). Let us have a look at SRK 1153¹⁴ (SRK 1154 will be discussed below):

*paṅśābhyaṃ sahitau prasārya caraṇāv ekaikaśaḥ pārśvayor
ekikṛtya śirodharopari śanaiḥ pāṇḍūdare paṅśatī /*

¹² ‘The male coos long and frequently [...]. He stretches his neck now up, now down and, with puffed out breast, displays to full advantage his brilliant iridescent feathers. His tail is spread and scrapes stiffly on the ground and his wings are drooped slightly. At times the amorous bird advances and retreats, pirouettes now this way now that [...]. At times he makes little jumps into the air, and occasionally flies a few feet. At times [...] he caresses his mate by kissing or billing [...].’ (TOWNSEND 1915: 308–309).

¹³ In his translation of Vidyākara’s anthology, Daniel H. H. INGALLS 1965: 326 renders the term as ‘characterization’ and explains it as ‘a verse which portrays an object or scene by means of a few characteristic traits and with a minimum use of figures of speech. The traits must be carefully drawn from the poet’s observation of nature, but are strictly limited in number. The method, then, is the method of impressionism; the result, in the hands of a good poet, can be vividly realistic.’

¹⁴ It is also included in the *Saduktikarṇāmṛta* as the fifth stanza of the section on pigeons and doves. It is ascribed to a certain Bhṛṅgara (SRK, p. 207) or Śṛṅgara (SKA(1), p. 281; SKA(2), p. 550).

*nidrāśeṣaviśeṣaraktanayano niryāya nīḍodarād
āṣṛkkāntavidāritānanapuṭaḥ pārāvato jṛmbhate //*

SRK 1153 = SKA(1) 5.5.5 = SKA(2) 2025

From his sides the pigeon stretches
one by one his feet and wings,
slowly joining above his neck
his wingtips, feathered white beneath.
Then, coming from his nest,
his eyes deep red from their unfinished sleep,
he yawns, stretching to its corners
the hollow of his beak. (Trans. INGALLS 1965: 329).

This realistic miniature portrait of a bird waking up at dawn and getting ready for the day ahead most probably also depicts a rock pigeon, since these birds have brownish-orange irises and the underside of their wings is indeed very pale grey or white (cf. *pāṇḍu* ‘pale’ in the original Sanskrit text of the stanza) in contrast to the rest of their plumage, which is darker, slate grey almost throughout (WHISTLER 1949: 392).

Predictably, as such a well-known constant component of urban life in Classical India, pigeons and doves figure in similes and metaphors that draw on the domain of the city in *kāvya* literature. Thus, in Subandhu’s¹⁵ *Vāsavadattā*, the moon in the sky is compared to a white pigeon or dove (i.e. either a white domestic pigeon or a Eurasian collared dove¹⁶) perching on a palace.¹⁷ In SRK 951 (anonymous), the night sky is also conceived of as a palace, whitewashed with moonlight, with the moon for its turret.¹⁸ The dark spots on the moon are here imagined as ‘a blue pigeon’ (*nīlapārāvata*, i.e. a rock pigeon) on the turret’s roof:

*gate jyotsnāsītavyomaprāsādāddṛkatulyatām /
himāṃśumaṇḍale lakṣma nīlapārāvātāyate //* SRK 951

Its mark, like a blue pigeon,
sits upon the moon, which seems to be
a turret of the palace of the sky,
whitewashed with moonlight. (Trans. INGALLS 1965: 281).

¹⁵ 6th century AD (WARDER 1990b: 234).

¹⁶ The species is usually called *dhavalakapota* ‘white dove’ in Sanskrit (DAVE 2005: 251).

¹⁷ *ambaraprāsādasya pārāvata iva* (V1: 192); *śvētapārāvata ivā ’mbaramahāprāsādasya* (V2: 175).

¹⁸ INGALLS 1965: 535: ‘I emend *-prasādāddṛka-* to *-prasādātṭaka-*; *aṭṭaka* means a turret or minaret’.

In their descriptions of the moon in the night sky, both authors utilise the image of pigeons or doves roosting on the roofs of tall city buildings to create effective figures of speech, appealing to the listeners or readers thanks to their familiarity with the appearance and behaviour of the birds.

3. Pigeons and doves in Classical Sanskrit literature as birds of love

Many characteristics of pigeons and doves make them ideal candidates for the role of birds of love in the literatures of the world.

Modern research suggests that all the species of the Columbidae family are monogamous and mate for life (BRITANNICA, PIGEON). While this could not have been known for sure in Classical India, other facts about South Asian pigeons and doves are easier to notice.

All the species that interest us here have a long breeding season. In the Indian subcontinent, the laughing dove breeds from January until October (WHISTLER 1949: 398); the breeding of the rock pigeon (ALI 1943: 280; WHISTLER 1949: 394), the Eurasian collared dove (ALI 1943: 284; WHISTLER 1949: 400) and the spotted dove (ALI 1943: 283; WHISTLER 1949: 397) continues practically throughout the year. As already mentioned (see the discussion of KĀ 2.10 above), the courtship routine of all four species is quite conspicuous.

Bonded pairs stay close together, even among the rock pigeons, which are gregarious birds. The male and the female frequently caress each other.¹⁹ Both sexes share in building the nest, incubating the eggs and feeding the young (ALI 1943: 280, 283, 284; BAKER 1913: 139, 208, 217).

Most of these traits of South Asian pigeons and doves (with the exception of sharing parenting duties) are indeed accurately depicted in Classical Sanskrit literature. A detailed description of a courting male rock pigeon presented in KĀ 2.10 has already been discussed above. Not only the courtship but also the

¹⁹ 'The mutual caressing commonly indulged in by pigeons (at least by all species of *Columba* and *Streptopelia* known to me) is a behaviour-pattern that appears to have both psychological and "utilitarian" significance. [...] The caressing consists of gentle-looking nibbling movement of the bill, which is thrust into, and moves about among, the partner's feathers apparently in contact with the skin. [...] The rump, back, wings and breast of the partner may be treated very briefly in this manner, but in general the caressing bird confines its attentions to the other's head and nape. [...] I think there can be no doubt that the function of caressing – on the physical level – is the removal of ectoparasites, and perhaps also other foreign bodies, from the mate's head. [...] the bird caressing its mate [...] appears [...] to be in a mood of affectionate tenderness' (GOODWIN 1956: 31–32).

subsequent copulation of pigeons is sometimes mentioned in *kāvya* works. In the second chapter (*ucchvāsa*) of Daṇḍin's²⁰ *Daśakumāracarita* (DKC, p. 122), a cunning female character Śṛgālikā, while standing next to Princess Ambālikā on the roof of the royal palace, throws a waterlily at a male character who appears below to attract his attention (she intends to trick the man into believing that Ambālikā is in love with him); the sneaky woman, however, pretends that she just wants to scare off a pair of copulating pigeons (*pravṛttakuharapārāvata*). Daṇḍin quite convincingly makes Śṛgālikā use this particular pretext (boldly suggestive and thus perfectly suitable for the occasion), as the copulations of these confiding birds with a long breeding season are a common sight. In one of the aphorisms attributed to Bhartṛhari (Bh 797), the author even maintains that male pigeons get sexually aroused (*kāmī*) every day and wonders at their high libido.²¹ The strong sexual appetite of pigeons is possibly alluded to in the *Kāmasūtra* as well (KS-V 2.7.8): the cooing of these birds (*pārāvata*[...] *virutāni*) is placed at the top of the list of sounds that women are advised to imitate when hit by their partners during intercourse (obviously, this practised moaning is meant to serve as further stimulation for the men).

The affectionate behaviour of male and female pigeons towards each other is also not ignored in *kāvya* literature. Let us look, for example, at the charming first stanza of the section on pigeons and doves in the *Saduktikarṇāmṛta* (ascribed to a certain Pāṇini²²), which is a unique depiction of a bonded pair of wild rock pigeons resting in a mountain cave where they have taken shelter from the heat:

asau gireḥ śītalakandarasthaḥ
pārāvato manmathacāṭudakṣaḥ /
gharmālasāṅgīm madhurāṇi kūjan
saṃvījate pakṣapuṭena kāntām // SKA(1) 5.5.1 = SKA(2) 2021

This male pigeon, while staying in a cool mountain cave,
 coos sweetly, skilful in loving flatteries,
 and fans his beloved, whose limbs are languid from the heat,
 with his curving wings. (Translation mine).

²⁰ 7th century AD (WARDER 1983: 165).

²¹ As pointed out by KARTTUNEN 2020: 200. I probably would not have found this stanza myself.

²² STERNBACH 1980: 41: 'Probably different from the famous grammarian and posterior to him. [...] If different from Pāṇini, the grammarian, must have lived in the beginning of the 12th century or earlier [...] but probably earlier.'

See also the second stanza of the same section of the *Saduktikarṇāmyta* (SKA(1) 5.5.2 = SKA(2) 2022²³), in which it is a female pigeon or dove (*pārāvati*) that lovingly takes care of her mate after their copulation (*līlā*).

Stanza 1154 of the *Subhāṣitaratnaḥ* (already mentioned above), which is found in the section devoted to the genre of *jāti*,²⁴ is worthy of special attention:

*prātar vāravilāsiniṅjanaraṇanmañjīramañjusvanair
udbuddhaḥ paridhūya pakṣatipuṭam pārāvataḥ saspr̥ham /
kiṃcituñcītalocanām saha carīm samcumbhya cañcivā ciraṃ
mandāndolitakaṅṭhakuṅṭhitagalāḥ sotkaṅṭham utkūjati //*

SRK 1154 = SKA(1) 5.5.4 = SKA(2) 2024

The cock pigeon wakes to the sound of jingling anklets
as the prostitutes walk home at dawn.
He shakes his curving wing tips and kisses with his beak
his companion's half-closed eyes.
Lovingly he coos with throat that is muted
by the gentle swaying of his neck. (Trans. INGALLS 1965: 329).

The stanza depicts a pair of pigeons or doves roosting close to human habitations in great detail, as required by the genre. The description contains elements which we have encountered before: the male bird wakes up at dawn, is immediately filled with desire (*saspr̥ham*) and eagerly (*sotkaṅṭham*) caresses his mate.

However, the text introduces us to yet another aspect of the perception of pigeons and doves in Classical Sanskrit literature. Prostitutes, who return home at dawn after entertaining their clients, are here juxtaposed with a bonded pair of birds that has spent the whole night together – evidently, the male and the female are perfectly happy in each other's company. This clearly demonstrates that a pair of pigeons or doves not only stands for mutual love and tenderness, but also symbolises conjugal fidelity in *kāvya* works. (See also S 6.30 discussed below).

²³ Ascribed to Mātāgarāja (SKA(1), p. 281) or to Matirāja (SKA(2), p. 550) but actually taken from the drama *Tāpasavatsarāja* by Anaṅgahaṛṣa (9th century AD). See STERNBACH 1978: 67–68.

²⁴ It is also included in the *Saduktikarṇāmyta* as the fourth stanza of the section on pigeons and doves. It is ascribed to Vikramāditya (SKA(1), p. 281; SKA(2), p. 550) or 'Vikramāditya and an ascetic' (*vikrāmadityatapasvinoḥ*, SRK, p. 207). D. D. Kosambi in SRK, p. xcix: 'a legendary figure from the usual prose-poetic tales'.

4. Pigeons and doves in Classical Sanskrit literature as birds of sorrow

From the times of the *R̥gveda*, doves (*kapota*) have been considered birds of ill omen and harbingers of death in Indian culture (DAVE 2005: 250, 252, 260–263; INGALLS 1965: 548). Although I have not found any direct expression of this belief in Classical Sanskrit literature, doves and pigeons (*kapota/pārāvata*) do seem to be associated with the emotion of sorrow in *kāvya* works, especially that caused by the loss of one's beloved (separation from him/her or his/her death). This may be a natural extension of their role as birds of love or an echo of the unfavourable perception of doves.

According to the *Nāṭyaśāstra*, the compassionate aesthetic flavour (*karuṇarasa*), which has the emotion of sorrow (*śoka*) as its basis, is 'dove-coloured' or 'pigeon-coloured' (*kapota*; NŚ 6.42), i.e. grey²⁵. Kālidāsa uses this symbolic meaning of the colouration of doves and pigeons in stanza 4.27 of his *Kumārasambhava*, which will be discussed in detail below.

More often, however, it is the mention of the familiar, easily recognisable call of pigeons or doves in the background of the scene that helps to convey a character's sorrow in *kāvya* works (see BC 8.37 and S 6.30, both discussed in detail below), and/or to create an overall atmosphere of sadness, as in the following anonymous stanza from the *Subhāṣitaratnaḥ*:

*kaiścid vītadayena bhogapatinā niṣkāraṇopapluta-
prakṣīṇair nijavaṃśabhūr iti mitair atyajyamānāḥ kulaiḥ /
grāmā nistr̥ṇajīrṇakuḍyabahulāḥ svairam bhramadbabhrahvaḥ
prāyah pāṇḍukapotakanṭhamukharārāme na yānti utkatām // SRK 1175*

When villages are left by all but a few families
wasting under undeserved disaster
from a cruel district lord
but still clinging to ancestral lands,
villages without grass, where walls are crumbling
and the mongoose wanders through the lanes;
they yet show their deepest sadness
in a garden filled with the cooing of gray doves.

(Trans. INGALLS 1965: 333).

²⁵ Monier-Williams: 'lead-grey' (MONIER-WILLIAMS 2002: 251); Ghosh: 'ash-coloured' (GHOSH 1951: 107); Masson and Patwardhan: 'light grey' (MASSON and PATWARDHAN 1970: 48).

The name *pāṇḍukapota* (lit. ‘pale dove’ or ‘white dove’) that appears in the last *pāda* of the stanza most probably refers to the Eurasian collared dove.²⁶ The distinctive call of this species ‘is a trisyllabic “coo” repeated softly two or three times’ (BAKER 1913: 224). Baker describes the sounds as ‘very melodious and sweet’ and ALI 1943: 284 considers them ‘pleasant’. However, anyone who has heard this persistent, monotonous cooing will surely agree that it can also indeed be perceived as hauntingly sad.

5. Selected stanzas in more detail

We will now analyse four selected *kāvya* texts featuring pigeons or doves (all already mentioned above) in more detail. Let us begin with two stanzas by the Buddhist author Aśvaghōṣa, taken from his two Sanskrit court epic poems (*mahākāvya*), which are the earliest examples of the genre. Since the stanzas are quite similar, it will be best to discuss them both together.

In the fifth canto (*sarga*) of the *Buddhacarita* (*The Life of the Buddha*), Prince Sarvārthasiddha flees the royal palace and the city of Kapilavāstu on horseback, accompanied by his faithful groom Chandaka. Having reached the forest, the future Buddha sends Chandaka back with the horse (canto 6) and enters the ascetic path of life (canto 7), which will eventually lead him to his enlightenment and liberation. In the eighth canto, the groom returns to Kapilavāstu. Upon seeing him without his master, the whole city, beginning with Sarvārthasiddha’s wife Yaśodharā and other women in the royal palace, is overcome with grief. Even the mansions seem to lament:

imāś ca vikṣiptaviṭaṅkabāhavaḥ prasaktapārāvataḍṛghanisvanāḥ /
vinākṛtās tena sahāvarodhanair bhṛśaṃ rudantīva vimānapañktayāḥ //
 BC 8.37

And these rows of pavilions seem to weep together with the women, on separation from him, casting up their pinnacles for arms and heaving long sighs with their enamoured doves. (Trans. JOHNSTON 1936: 112).

In the fifth canto of the *Saundarananda* (*The Beautiful Nanda*), the Buddha tricks his younger half-brother, Prince Nanda, into leaving Kapilavāstu and following him to the monastery, as he wants to make him enter the path to liberation. In the sixth canto, Nanda’s wife Sundarī, who has been waiting for her beloved husband’s return in a pavilion on the top of their palace, learns that he has just been ordained a monk. Predictably, she plunges into despair:

²⁶ Usually called *dhalalakapota* ‘white dove’ in Sanskrit (DAVE 2005: 251).

*sā cakravākīva bhṛṣam cukūja śyenāgrapaksakṣatacakravākā /
vispardhamāneva vimānasamsthaiḥ pārāvataiḥ kūjanalolakanṭhaiḥ //*
S 6.30

She moaned loudly, like a *chakra-vaka* bird when a hawk has wounded the tip of her mate's wing, as if to compete with the pigeons gathered on the palace roof, their throats tremulous with cooing. (Trans. COVILL 2007: 123).

In each of the above two stanzas, all three aspects of the image of pigeons and doves in Classical Sanskrit literature that have been pointed out in this paper are skilfully combined into one coherent whole.

Firstly, since both texts depict an urban scene, the mentions of pigeons and doves, these common city dwellers, should not surprise us here. On the contrary, it is completely natural that upon entering the royal palace in Kapilavāstu, Chandaka is greeted by the sight and sounds of pigeons (BC 8.37). It is also perfectly normal that Sundarī, while waiting for Nanda on the palace roof, sees and hears pigeons nearby (S 6.30), as the turrets and pinnacles of tall buildings are their favourite roosting spots.

However, in both stanzas, pigeons and doves are much more than just typical elements of the urban landscape. They are obviously to be perceived as birds of sorrow. The author makes the coos of the city pigeons, which he compares to sighs (BC 8.37) or moans (S 6.30), echo the lamentations of the women, and thus he is able to emphasise the intensity of their grief.

As we remember, in *kāvya* literature, pigeons and doves are also symbols of love. This aspect is perhaps less obvious but equally important in our two texts. In BC 8.37, it is activated through the use of the epithet *prasakta* (lit. 'attached'; MONIER-WILLIAMS 2002: 696), which may refer to spatial or emotional closeness (and hence the differing translations: OLIVELLE 2008: 223: 'cuddling' but JOHNSTON 1936: 112: 'enamoured'). Both interpretations, however, conjure up the same image of an affectionate bonded pair of doves or pigeons roosting side by side. In S 6.30, a similar effect is achieved by juxtaposing pigeons with another symbol of love and conjugal fidelity in Classical Sanskrit literature, i.e. a pair of *cakravāka* birds or ruddy shelducks (*Tadorna ferruginea*).²⁷ The listeners or readers are thus reminded of the times when the women in the royal palace in Kapilavāstu could happily enjoy the company of Prince Sarvārthasiddha, as well as of the marital bliss of Sundarī

²⁷ For information on the ruddy shelduck, see ALI 1943: 412–413 and WHISTLER 1949: 524–525. For more on *cakravāka* birds in *kāvya* literature, see KARTTUNEN 2000: 202 and DAVE 2005: 450–453.

and Nanda. This makes the descriptions of the present suffering of the women in separation ever more poignant.

Let us now turn to two stanzas by the eminent Kālidāsa. In both of them, the mentions of pigeons or doves are very short but surprisingly rich in meaning.

The fourth canto of the *Kumārasambhava*, one of Kālidāsa's two *mahākāvya*s, is devoted to the lamentations of the goddess Rati over the loss of her husband, the god of love Kāma, who has just been burnt to ashes by the great god Śiva with his fiery third eye. In stanza 27, Rati addresses Kāma's friend Vasanta (spring):

*iti cainam uvāca duḥkhitā suḥṛdaḥ paśya vasanta kiṃ sthītam /
tad idaṃ kaṇaśo vikīryate pavanair bhasma kapotakarburam //*

KS-K 4.27

And grief-stricken she said to him,
'See, Spring, what remains of your friend:
these particles of ash, dove-gray,
blown about in the wind.' (Trans. SMITH 2005: 143).

The variegated (*karbura*; MONIER-WILLIAMS 2002: 258) grey colouration of doves and pigeons is a perfect standard of comparison for the colour of burnt body remains. Surely, however, it was not chosen by the author merely because of its visual resemblance but also due to its symbolic associations with both love and sorrow. Similarly to BC 8.37 and S 6.30, the stanza indirectly compares the happily married couple Kāma and Rati to a bonded pair of doves or pigeons. The grieving Rati, who is devastated by the loss of her beloved husband, is thus to be conceived of in terms of a female dove that has lost her mate. This beautiful, moving metaphor aptly conveys the pain of the goddess to the listeners or readers and cannot but fill their hearts with compassion.

In the first half of stanza 40 of Kālidāsa's *Meghadūta* (*The Cloud Messenger*), the hero advises his messenger, a rain cloud, where to spend the night in the city of Ujjayinī:

*tām kasyāṃcid bhavanavalabhau suptapārāvātāyām
nītvā rātriṃ ciravilasanāt khinnavidyutkalatraḥ / MD 40*

You should pass the night
on some rooftop where pigeons sleep,
your wife lightning exhausted
from her long *lovmaking* : *display* [...]. (Trans. MALLINSON 2006: 47).

At first glance, pigeons or doves appear in the stanza just as a typical element of urban scenes, especially those taking place on the roof. However, when imagining a fluffy dark rain cloud next to a pair or flock of grey-feathered birds, which respond to the cloud's gentle rumbles with their soft cooing, we start to wonder if perhaps not merely their juxtaposition but also their indirect comparison was intended by the author. A closer look at the text seems to confirm this. As Mallinson rightly notices in his translation, the word *vilasana* has two meanings here. The cloud messenger's wife, lightning, is exhausted in the evening not only from her constant flashes in the sky but also from making love all day long – and so are probably all the female pigeons on the rooftop, given the well-known high sexual drive of their mates! As we can see, the suggestion of similarities between the rain cloud and pigeons enhances the erotically charged atmosphere of the stanza and adds to its charm.

6. Conclusions

Summing up, in Classical Sanskrit literature, pigeons and doves are depicted as birds closely associated with humans. Their appearance and behaviour are often described in great detail. They sometimes appear in a rural setting; however, they are especially frequent in descriptions of cities and city scenes. In an urban setting, the birds are usually seen roosting, and heard cooing, on the roofs of tall buildings. They also figure in similes and metaphors that draw on the domain of the city and its elements.

Moreover, pigeons and doves play the role of birds of love in *kāvya* literature. The authors depict their courtship and copulation, wonder at the high sexual drive of the male, point out the affectionate behaviour of both sexes towards each other. An image of a bonded pair of pigeons or doves can sometimes be interpreted as a symbol of marital fidelity.

Pigeons and doves are also symbols of sorrow in *kāvya* works, especially that caused by the loss of one's beloved. By mentioning the birds, their grey colouration and their distinctive calls, the authors are thus able to create an overall atmosphere of sadness in their texts and to convey the sorrow felt by the characters.

Kāvya texts featuring pigeons or doves should be read very carefully. They sometimes combine all three aspects of the literary image of these birds into one coherent whole. Even the short mentions of the birds can be surprisingly rich in meaning.

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**ACTA ASIATICA
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No. 35**

Warsaw 2022



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Warsaw 2022

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Publication co-financed by the programme of the Polish Ministry
of Education and Science entitled ‘Development of Scientific Journals’
for the years 2022–2024 (project no. RCN/SP/0163/2021/1)

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Polish Academy of Sciences, Warsaw 2022

ISSN 0860-6102

eISSN 2449-8653

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