The shrike in Sanskrit literature since 400 BC

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Abstract: The shrike, which is a common Indian bird, was noticed by ancient Indians. This is a brief treatise on some references to the shrike in ancient Indian texts, written in the Sanskrit language. Original Sanskrit verses are deliberately mentioned in this brief communication. The knowledge of Sanskrit language, a true window to the ancient Indian knowledge and culture, can thus give a modern reader a delightful and mesmerizing experience of serious avian observations from ancient India.

Key words: shrike, India, Sanskrit, ancient literature

There are numerous references to birds in the Sanskrit literature. Many birds can be traced back to 2500 BC. However, it is often difficult to exactly identify the particular species mentioned in the ancient literature if no proper description of the bird is available. In such cases, one may allot the ancient name to a particular present-day bird, basing on its name, if the name describes a peculiar habit of the bird. In other cases, one has to go back from the present name of the bird, analysing step by step the derivation of the present name from the earlier versions, in accordance with the rules of grammar, until one arrives at the root word in the Sanskrit language. This is often a tedious process and sometimes may be unsuccessful, as a particular name may remain ambiguous and one has no option but to let it remain so. Only rarely the task is easy because the ancient name is retained till the present day. Fortunately, we have a reliable present-day Sanskrit derivation of the name for the shrike.

Many Indian languages have evolved from the parent Sanskrit language. One of these languages is Marathi, the regional language of the Maharashtra state. It is in this language that a few peculiarly descriptive names for the shrike are mentioned, viz. Khatik (the butcher) or Naklya Khatik (the butcher who mimics). Another name, which has a special reference to one of the popular ancient Indian epics, is Gandhari. The epic is the ‘Mahabharata’, the longest poem in any language, and Gandhari is the name of the blind-folded Kaurava Queen. She chose to wear a mask over
her eyes, probably to share the same life as her blind husband Dhrutarashtra. The Southern Grey Shrike (*Lanius meridionalis*) is called in Marathi *Gandhari*, which is a befitting name to this masked pied bird.

The oldest reference to the shrike in Sanskrit literature is also in the ‘Mahabharata’ (400 BC – 400 AD), where it is mentioned as *Latvaka*. It is interesting to note that the Sanskrit name for a staff, with a bulbous club at the top, is *Khatvanga*. *Latva*, which is another Sanskrit name for the shrike, could originate from *Khatvanga*, because – like the staff – shrikes have relatively large heads for their size, as compared to flycatchers and bulbuls. The Sanskrit name for the butcher is *Khattika*, probably an original form of the Marathi name *Khatik* for the butcher bird, reflecting its habit of impaling and wedging prey on thorns or in forks. The name *Latva* is mentioned in ancient Sanskrit lexicons, like ‘Kalpadrukosha’ (1660 AD) and ‘Koshakalpataru’ (1644 AD). In these lexicons the shrikes are grouped with flycatchers and bulbuls.

Some shrikes are well-known vocal mimics. The Long-tailed Shrike (*L. schach*), Bay-backed Shrike (*L. vittatus*), and Southern Grey Shrike (*L. meridionalis*), which are commonly found in Maharashtra, all mimic the calls of other birds. Two Sanskrit names for the shrike – *Latva* (a small bird) or *Latushaka* – are possibly derived from the root verb *lat* or *rat* (to cry). Shrikes are known for their harsh chuckles and mimicry. *Latvaka* has probably two constituents, namely *rat* (to cry) and *vak* (to speak). This explanation may not be in accordance with the classical Sanskrit grammar, but such words are accepted as sanskritized versions. Another derivation of *Latushaka* is also offered elsewhere: from the word *lat* (to cry) and *ushas* (morning and evening light) – thus the bird that vocalizes and hunts from daybreak till late evening is the *Latushaka* or the shrike (*Dave* 1985).

There are numerous references to the shrike in the ancient Indian medicine, i.e., Ayurveda. Ancient Indians used this bird for ascribed medicinal properties. The prominent texts, namely the ‘Charakasamhita’ and the ‘Sushrutasamhita’ (both 2nd century AD) refer to the shrike as *Lattushaka*. The observations of ancient Indians are to be appreciated here, since they classified shrikes in the class ‘Pratuda’, consisting of pecking birds. The Sanskrit texts describe the ‘Pratuda’ class as birds that hit, beat or pierce the prey with their beaks prior to eating! Modern ornithology has also confirmed this habit of shrikes. Shrikes are also mentioned in a medieval text ‘Vasantarajashakunam’, which is devoted to augury – for interpreting omens from bird and animal behaviour. Here the shrike is called *Ladva*. The text mentions a belief that if a shrike is seen or heard in front of a person, this omen grants him his wish.

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