

BOTANICAL SYMBOLISM IN LALITA SAHASRANAMA

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ABSTRACT

The *Lalita Sahasranama* is a sacred hymn rich in poetic and symbolic language, where numerous plants and flowers are invoked to describe the beauty, power, and grace of the Divine Mother. This study explores the role of flora such as lotus, champaka, kadamba, and betel leaf in the text, highlighting their spiritual symbolism, ritual significance, and cultural context. These botanical references not only enhance the visual imagery but also reflect the deep connection between nature and divinity.

KEYWORDS: Lalitasahasranama, Champaka, Kadamba, Ashoka, Japa, Padma, Tambula

INTRODUCTION

Among the 18 puranas, Brahmanda purana is well known for the extolation of Lalita. It explains in detail the appearance of the Goddess Lalita to save the world from the clutches of the demon Bhandasura. Lalita trishati and Lalita Sahasranama are dialogues between the sage Agastya and the god Hayagriva. Hayagriva is the incarnation of Vishnu who assumed the form of a horse to kill a demon by the same name. Agastya was a sage of great renown. He is the patron saint of Tamilnadu being a founder of a system of medicine called Siddha, and also having drunk the whole ocean in his kamandala¹.

Sri Lalita Sahasranama a revered hymn comprising one thousand epithets of the Divine Mother Lalita Tripurasundari is not only a theological and philosophical text but also a poetic tapestry rich in natural symbolism. Among its many layers, the mention of flora holds significant cultural, spiritual, and metaphorical value. This paper explores the botanical references embedded within the Lalita Sahasranama, examining over twenty distinct plant names including Champaka, Ashoka, Kadamba, Lotus (Padma), and Tambula (betel leaf) and their symbolic, devotional, and ritualistic contexts. Study covers textual analysis and correlation with Ayurvedic and classical Sanskrit literature, regarding botanical reference. The flora in

Lalita Sahasranama thus offers a unique lens through which one can understand the interplay between nature, devotion, and sacred aesthetics.

Botanical Symbolism

The *Sri Lalita Sahasranama* richly incorporates references to various plants and flowers, which serve as symbolic representations of the Goddess's divine qualities. These botanical elements are not merely decorative but convey deeper spiritual meanings, linking the natural world with sacred attributes. For instance, the lotus (*padma*) frequently symbolizes purity, transcendence, and divine beauty, reflecting Lalita's immaculate nature². Similarly, fragrant flowers such as *campaka* and *punnaga* emphasize the enchanting presence of the Goddess, evoking both sensory and spiritual delight³.









Ritual and Cultural Context










Plants and herbs mentioned in the Sahasranama also hold significant ritualistic value. The betel leaf (*tambula*), for example, is frequently referenced as a sacred offering and adornment, highlighting its importance in daily and ceremonial practices⁴. This intertwining of ritual and botanical symbolism illustrates how the Goddess is both transcendent and immanent, engaging directly with the tangible elements of worship. Botanical studies identify many of these sacred plants, such as the kadamba tree (*Neolamarckia cadamba*), confirming their widespread cultural significance in Indian religious traditions⁵. Such identifications enrich the understanding of textual references and their connection to lived devotional practices.




Broader Symbolic Framework

The symbolic use of flora in the Lalita Sahasranama resonates with a universal theme found across many religious traditions, where plants serve as metaphors linking the material and the spiritual worlds. As Kandeler and Ullrich⁶ discuss in their study of plant symbolism, flowers and trees are often employed to communicate abstract concepts such as purity, fertility, and divine presence. This broader cultural framework helps illuminate why the Lalita Sahasranama employs detailed floral imagery not only to enhance the hymn's poetic beauty but also to embody the multifaceted nature of the Divine Mother.

Table No. 1 List of herbs from Lalitasahasranama

Sl.No	Sanskrit Name	Common / Botanical Name (Approximate)	Context / Usage in Lalita Sahasranama	Picture
1	चम्पक (Campaka)	Champaka (<i>Magnolia champaca</i>)	Hair adornment — “campakaśoka-punnaga ...”	
2	अशोक (Aśoka)	Ashoka (<i>Saraca indica</i>)	Flower in Her hair; symbolizes joy and love	
3	पुत्राग (Punnaga)	Alexandrian Laurel (<i>Calophyllum inophyllum</i>)	Fragrant flower in Her hair	
4	सौगन्धिक (Saugandhika)	<i>Stereospermum colais</i> (possibly)	Another flower adorning Her hair	
5	कदम्बमञ्जरी (Kadamba-manjari)	Kadamba (<i>Neolamarckia cadamba</i>)	Used in ear ornaments or described near Her ears	
6	पद्म (Padma)	Lotus (<i>Nelumbo nucifera</i>)	Symbol of beauty, throne, eyes, feet appear frequently	
7	मन्दारकुसुम (Mandara-kusuma) Paribhadra?	Coral Tree Flower (<i>Erythrina indica</i>)	Mandara is a divine flower in Vedic cosmology	
8	पतालीपुष्प (Patali-puṣpa)	Trumpet Flower (<i>Stereospermum suaveolens</i>)	Possibly mentioned in poetic references	

9	जपपुष्प (Japa-puṣpa)	Hibiscus (<i>Hibiscus rosa-sinensis</i>)	Associated with Her red hue; used in Devi worship	
10	दाडिमीकुसुम (Daḍimi-kusuma)	Pomegranate Flower (<i>Punica granatum</i>)	Her complexion compared to this flower	
11	ताम्बूल (Tambula)	Betel Leaf (<i>Piper betle</i>)	Used in Her enjoyment, offerings, and beauty description	
12	नागकेशर (Nagakeśara)	Cobra's Saffron (<i>Mesua ferrea</i>)	Fragrant flower; often used in poojas	
13	पारिजात (Parijata)	Coral Jasmine (<i>Nyctanthes arbor-tristis</i>)	Symbol of divine fragrance and celestial beauty	
14	कुन्द (Kunda)	Star Jasmine (<i>Jasminum multiflorum</i>)	Compared to Her teeth (pearly white simile)	
15	कुटज (Kuṭaja)	Conessi Tree (<i>Holarrhena antidysenterica</i>)	Used symbolically; also, a known Ayurvedic herb	
16	करवीर (Karavira)	Oleander (<i>Nerium oleander</i>)	Sacred, used in worship and symbol of strength	
17	हरिद्रा (Haridra)	Turmeric (<i>Curcuma longa</i>)	Implied in complexion/auspiciousness; widely used in Devi rituals	

18	चन्दन (Candana)	Sandalwood (<i>Santalum album</i>)	Used in anointing and as fragrance	
19	अगुरु (Aguru)	Agarwood (<i>Aquilaria agallocha</i>)	Precious fragrant wood, sacred incense	
20	तगर (Tagara)	Valerian or Tagar Plant (<i>Valeriana wallichii</i>)	Aromatic root used in herbal oils and incense	

DISCUSSION

The presence of flora in the *Lalita Sahasranama* is not incidental but deeply embedded in the symbolic framework of the text. Each plant, flower, or herb mentioned whether explicitly like *padma* (lotus) and *champak*, or subtly implied through metaphor contributes to the portrayal of Lalita Devi as the embodiment of natural beauty, abundance, and cosmic order. The floral elements often serve as metaphors for divine attributes: the lotus symbolizes purity and transcendence, *kadamba* and *mandara* evoke celestial fragrance and joy, while *japa* (hibiscus) and *dadimi* (pomegranate flower) are linked to Her radiance and vitality. Furthermore, some plants such as *tambula* (betel leaf) are used in ritual contexts, suggesting that the Goddess is both an object of devotion and a participant in sacred rites.

The botanical references in the *Lalita Sahasranama* are not mere poetic embellishments; they form an essential part of the Goddess's worship. Flowers such as *champak*, *ashoka*, and *punnaga* are repeatedly highlighted for their divine fragrance and beauty, symbolizing the Goddess's enchanting presence³. Ritual objects like the *tambula* (betel leaf) reinforce this connection, serving as tangible links between devotees and the divine⁴. Additionally, botanical identifications of these plants, supported by scientific research⁵, confirm their cultural and ritual significance across Indian religious contexts. This multifaceted role of flora exemplifies the inseparability of nature and divinity in Hindu thought, inviting devotees to experience the sacred through natural elements. The recurrence of fragrant and flowering plants further aligns with Indian aesthetic theory (*rasa*), where sensory beauty is a path to spiritual realization. In this sense, flora serves not just a decorative role but becomes a bridge between the devotee's senses and the formless essence of the Divine.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the Lalita Sahasranama uses floral imagery to express the Divine Mother's beauty, power, and accessibility. The inclusion of specific plants and flowers enriches the text's spiritual symbolism while grounding it in the lived traditions of ritual, worship, and poetry. These botanical references are not merely ornamental they are essential to understanding the multidimensional character of Lalita Devi. By highlighting the sacred relationship between flora and divinity, the Sahasranama reminds us that nature itself is a manifestation of the Goddess. This approach resonates with universal themes of plant symbolism in religion, where natural forms become vehicles for spiritual meaning. Moreover, identifying these plants through botanical studies enriches the understanding of their role in worship and cultural practice. Ultimately, the flora of the Lalita Sahasranama invites devotees to see the sacred in the natural world, affirming the Goddess's presence in every aspect of life.

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