Sanskrit Citrakāvyas and the Western Pattern Poem: A Critical Appraisal

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Until recently little was known of the striking similarity between Sanskrit citrakāvyas and western pattern poems. In the category of visual poetry in Sanskrit fall ākāracitras such as club, sword, wheel, lotus, umbrella, banner, trident, bow, arrow, and plough – some of which are common to the western carmina figurata – and caticitras like all-moving, half-moving, horse-step, elephant-step, the varieties of cow-urinating design, a Sanskrit semblance of the western leonine verse. Modern letter poems in the west can be seen as parallel to letter designs of citrakāvya. The present paper is an attempt to highlight the points of close convergence between the two genres and to bring home the basic unity underlying them.

Until recently, at least in India, it was believed that citrakāvya was found only there (Kapāḍinā 1954:60). Perhaps the credit of unravelling the fact that related work is written widely outside India goes to my colleague Dick Higgins. In the West this literature generally goes by the broad names of "visual poetry" or "pattern poetry," *technopeignia* or *poesia visiva,* although the titles connote somewhat different things. Ordinarily, visual poetry is understood to be the broader circle, encompassing within it pattern poetry. However, I believe the other way round, and some scholars like Higgins (1977) seem to be with me. The argument is simple but compelling: visual poetry is the poetry with only visual patterns, whereas pattern poetry might also denote poetry with aural or other patterns. But as we are concerned only with written literature and as citrakāvya does not include sound poetry in the modern sense visual and pattern poetry can be bracketted together here.

Visual literature has been important for any country, linguistic unit, or group of people since ancient times as a vehicle for the communication of uniquely visual qualities. Specifically, it is pre-eminently a verbo-visual system suggesting closeness between word as composition and as representation (Doria 1979:70). Here we deal not so much with words as with coefficients, exponents, or linguistic tools which have use value rather than signification (Essary 1979:98). Visual literature is a construction of concrete elements which become expression in the process of synthesis and arrangement (Rahmings 1979:98), where the form of the work is part of the content. In other words, whatever expression there is in the work originates with the form.

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In citrakāvya also the words and images are used to form a literary polyphony. This oriental variety of poetry, in any form, reflects the idea of some image or picture. In Sanskrit *kāvya* denotes both verse and prose and so what is true of poetry is true of prose also. In western parlance we often hear of "shaped prose" encompassing both fiction and essay. Therefore, visual literature may be defined as language structure whose principal means of coherence and/or enchantment are visual rather than syntactical, or as images with or without words that function like a poem, a fiction, or an essay (Kostelanetz 1979:9).

In Sanskrit Bhāravi, Māgha, Srī Harṣa, Ratnākar, Nītivarman, Parāśara Bhaṭṭa, Guṇaballavasūri, Venkateśwara, Guṇabhadra, and Krisṇamūrti are some of the writers of this literature most of whom, barring the beginning few, have composed complete works on citrakāvya, replete with either chimes (Sanskrit sound poems) or puns or patterns or bandhas of several varieties. As for Sanskrit rhetoricians, it is peculiar that almost all have touched upon the topic, though most of them cursorily, taking this variety of poetry to be of the lowest stratum.

Visual literature deserves especial notice for in order for it to be fully effective and visual perception of language is necessary. In the modern context it occupies a position of importance in cartography, diagramming, signage, video programming, films, and photography (Marcus 1979). It is with this in mind that writer and critic George Steiner (1970) has recently predicted the end of traditional book culture. In fact, visual literature begins where language leaves off; the verbal aspect becomes transcendent to its visual embodiments. In western literature the modern visual poetry has been quite distinct from the old one: the latter was more mimetic but the former is more expressive and improvised in the manner of an abstract expressionist painting (Higgins 1983:32) On the other hand, citrakāvya, though written even today, has its selfsame age-old rhetorical standards.

There is still a great deal of similarity between the occidental and oriental counterparts so far as the beginning of this genre is concerned, but it is strange that, while no new horizon appeared on the firmament of citrakāvya, the history of visual or pattern poetry in the West is full of ups and downs characterizing the appearance of several new horizons. Traditionally citrakāvya has been a mannerist poetic form, though I have tried to salvage its position (Jhā 1975:16-23). In western literary history pattern poetry has appeared four times as an extensive movement: during the Alexandrine period, the Carolingian renaissance, the baroque period, and the present day with movements like dadaism, neo-dadaism, concrete poetry, minimal art, etc.

It cannot be gainsaid that pattern poetry appeared at the end of one cultural epoch and the beginning of another. According to Geoffrey Cook (1979) visual poetry is a cry by the poet that the content of the past is cancerous and a new skin must be sewn to contain the dreams of the future. Certainly as death gives rise to birth cultural decadence is followed by a new era and vision. This is also the law of nature. In both East and West the times of such literary ferment have been the periods of mannerist propensities. Visual poetry was and is also a sign

of ferment — of decadence resolving itself into something else, some other kind of literary mannerisms. This is why Higgins declares: "The word is not dead; it is merely changing its skin" (1979:66). In fact many a visual poet has been an innovator in forms and literary experiments.

Citrakāvya is found primarily in Sanskrit and Prākrit, and secondarily, in the descendant modern literatures of India like Gujarāti, Tāmil, etc., and the *lingua franca* Hindī. In Sanskrit it is found as early as the Vedas and the Mahābhārata in the form of the kūṭas or enigmatic verses. Pattern poetry in the modern sense — in clear, full-fledged shapes and designs — appeared first in Bhāravia, a poet of the seventh century though in stray verses (cf. his *Kiraātājunīyaṃ,* cantos v and xv). About this time Jain Ācāryas were, perhaps, the first to have written complete works. They were later to adapt Sanskrit overwhelmingly, instead of the usual Prākrit, contributing a great deal to this branch of literature, of which an account has been given by Hirālāl R. Kapāḍiā (1954-6). Being a Gujarāti, he has also written a faithful resumé of citrakāvya in Gujarātī literature (1957).

But in spite of the early advent of pattern poetry in India, its genesis is not so clearly traceable here as in western literature. Plato in *Cratylus* associates the shape of the letter "O" to the meaning of the word "round." Another Greek, Simmias of Rhodes (ca. 300 BC), in three shaped poems formed an axe, a pair of wings, and an egg by varying the length of horizontal lines. This was, really, the beginning of the pattern poetry concommitant to the Sanskrit bandhakāvya, a sub-genre of citrakāvya. In this variety the lute by Robert Angot (1634/1872), a French baroque poet, is perhaps the most representative as it is a developed design and an uncommon one, considering the age in which it was written. Syrinx, pyramid, pillar, love-knot (on the pattern of Sanskrit serpent-knots), sword, altar, Easter wings, etc., are the other patterns preferred by the occidental pattern poets, while the lotus, wheel, umbrella, banner, and many others are the verbal images in Prākrit and Sanskrit.

In the West acrostics are poems where the initial and/or the terminal letters of each line read vertically, forming words or groups of words. The resemblance of Sanskrit half-moving design *(Ardhabhrama)* or the all-round-moving design *(Sarvatobhadra)* to this is striking. In the Carolingian renaissance around the eighth century the monastic poets developed pure acrostics into a complex system by carefully spacing the letters in each line and using alternate spellings to make each line equal in length (cf. Josephus Scottus' poem in Kostelanetz 1979:24). Peculiarly, some acrostics are used by François Villon in numerous poems, often signing his name in the envoy of a ballad in the fashion of Sanskrit lotus design which has the name of the poet inscribed in the middle filament portion (cf. Jhā 1975, figs. 7-8 in appendix 2; Kapāḍiā 1954, figs. 9, 10, 12 and p. 84; Kapāḍiā 1955, figs 30, 31, 32 and p. 134; and Kapāḍiā 1956, fig. 71 and p. 113).

Similar to acrostics but slightly different in form, are mesostics. Mesostics developed mostly in the seventeenth century in anonymous verses by cavaliers and court poets. One of the poems in such a collection of satire, "Le cabinet satyrique" (1618), hides a surprise ending and lewd suggestion in the letters of

the acrostic (Kostelanetz 1979:28) and draws a parallel to Sanskrit riddles, pure and interrogative, concealing the import of the speaker (cf. Kapāḍiā 1954:71, fn. 1). In this connection Stephen Scobie's reference (1978) to Ian Hamilton Finlay's use of every variety of pre-constrained linguistic formulae, cliché, proverb, riddles, etc., is important.

The rebus is also a variety of visual literature in the West — a more complex device demanding that a poem be deciphered as one reads it. It is generally based on the placement of the words or parts thereof in relation to each other, as: stand is read: "we understand." In another type of rebus, numerals
we

and letters are used for their homonyms, as "T-4-2" would mean "Tea for two." Isidore Isou and members of the modern Lettriste movement rely heavily on the rebus, seeing it as an advanced form of communication. In this very style is the rondeau, which is nothing less nor more than a complex rebus used in every line of the verse (cf. the poem by Jean Marot in Seaman 1979). There is yet another class of poetry requiring oral reading of written letters (cf. the translation of Marot's poem). There is no clear counterpart, perhaps, of this genre in Sanskrit or Prākrit, though slight similarities may exist within the compass of the above-said riddles, as may a large variety of kūtas in Sanskrit (cf. Jhā 1975:70-93) which are actually close to the juggled verses or "vers batelés" of the Renaissance and later Middle Ages. Jean Bouchet and Jean Meschinot are the two important names in this context (Kostelanetz 1979:25, 32). It is noteworthy that western pattern poetry includes puzzle poems in the style of the afore-said Sanskrit riddles as well, though not every puzzle poem, or, for that matter, even every rebus, is visual.

In Sanskrit citrakāvyas there were alternate periods of general appreciation and abhorrence. Likewise, in occidental poetry. While the rationalists of eighteenth century Europe rejected pattern poetry as frivolous, the Epicureans, on the contrary, were hosts to more visual poetic figures and designs like goblets and flasks (cf. Peignot 1978, where Apollinaire's pieces are on pp. 97-9). This genre, in fact, resulted from distortions and suppressions of the verse woof by the poets, while preserving the regularity and orderliness of the figured warp. Although citrakāvya stands generally for only two categories of the so-called lower order of poetry in Sanskrit — śabdacitra and arthacitra — the third category, ubhayacitra, though propounded by only a few rhetoricians, has been necessitated and dealt with here for the sake of comparison of some concepts.

Although the general run of rhetoricians has said very little about the citrakāvyas, a few, including the versatile Bhoja, have delved a little more deeply. Metres played a vital role both in oriental and occidental visual poetry. The rhythms constitute, to my mind, a particular variety of sound poetry in Sanskrit over and above the complicated types of chime and onomatopoetic sounds. So far as western *carmina figurata* are concerned, not only is the number of letters in each line fixed and immutable, but also some letters in certain positions are obligatory (cf. Caruso and Polara 1969:114). In modern varieties of sound poetry onomatopoeia and the subordination of sense to

sound and intonations are important factors, though there are nonsense poems and notated sound poetries as well (Higgins 1983:40-52).

Among the varnacitras (peculiarities pertaining to letter, vowel, or consonant) ekākṣarabandha (single-letter verses) and dwyakṣarabandha (double-letter verses) — as in Bhāravi's *Kirātārjunīyam,* Canto xv, vss. 5, 14, 38, etc. — are quite uncommon in any literature and might somehow parallel the alphabet or letter or monogram poems of the West (Doria 1979). Sthānacitra, denoting the peculiarity pertaining to the place of origin or pronunciation of letters in the mouth, is not important, and ākāracitras and bandhacitras, having no prominent points of distinction, constitute the bandhakāvya proper, analogous to the western pattern poetry in the narrow sense. The gaticitras, or the citra-variety of poetry pertaining to the movement of letters as in chess play (cf. Jhā 1975:60-1; Kapādiā and Jakobi 1896) comprising turaṅgapadabandha and śarayantrabandha, etc., and the various types of gomūtrikābandha denoting the crisscross sprinkling of urine of the moving, urinating cow (cf. Kapādiā 1954:64), especially the latter, are the oriental counterparts of the occidental leonine verse, perhaps relating to the presumed walk of a lion.

The above bandhas or designs relating to the moves in chess play, might truly be said to be a parallel genre to the western chessboard poems constituting almost a sub-genre of the western labyrinth. In the latter one works one's way to the desired meaning of the verse, much as one would proceed through a maze or labyrinth. Thus, the acrostic-resembling ardhabhrama or savratobhadra and the sthānacyuta variety of riddles or the Kliṣṭānvya type of kūṭa (where the natural position of the words is disturbed and prose-order is difficult to arrive at) bear a major degree of resemblance to the labyrinth. Within the purview of citrakāvya, there are some riddles where concealment of a verb, any of the various cases or case-endings, gender, compound (kriygūpta, kārakagupta, etc.), or dropping (or, the other way round, adding) of a half or a full syllable, bindu, visarga, or a letter lends charm to the particular verse as in the western *carmina cancellata,* a variety of mesostic where any letter or letters, if cancelled out according to some interior shape, also form words or groups of words. Hemacandra (1938) quite oddly puts these under the guḍhacitra and cyutacitra varieties of citrakāvya which Bhoja (1934) does not corroborate.

Then there are proteus poems in which the elements are permuted line by line. For instance, the first four lines of such a poem might run: "love me you witch/ me love you witch/ me you love witch/ me you witch love . . .". This is in the nature of kramapātha or ghanapātha or jaṭāpāṭha, a peculiar reading of Vedic texts in ancient India. For example, compare this reading:

> "Agnim îḍe îḍe purohitaṃ yajñasya devam, devam ṛtwijaṃ ṛtwijaṃ hotāraṃ, hotāraṃ ratnadhātamamṃ ratnadhātamamṃ hotāraṃ . . .".

for the *Rigveda* i.i.l.:

> "Agnimīḍe purohitam yajñasya devamṛtwijaṃ hotāraṃ ratnadhātamam . . .".
>
> I implore Agni, the God, the priest, the ministrant of sacrifice, the giver of oblations, and the best bestower of splendid wealth. . . .

Lapidary inscriptions are another form of pattern poetry. In these the letters look as if they had been carved, as if on stone, and give a somewhat visual finish to the poem (for a modern example, see Arrigo Lora-Totino, "Spazio," in Williams 1968).

Magical inscriptions are also sometimes impressive, and might come close to the Tantric Yantras or incantational designs of India (cf. Mayer 1978:11). In the West, the Enigma of Sator has been quite a matter for talk in sophisticated circles; it is nothing but a magic word square that has been treated as a pattern poem (Atkinson 1951). The Abraxas charm is also widely known in some circles; we get from it the familiar "Abracadabra" of popular magicians. Calligraphy has also been an effective factor in western visual poetry. The calligrammes of Apollinaire, already mentioned are a testimony to this. The calligraphic poems by Paul Reps are important in so far as English literature is concerned. It is remarkable that this new form of art has been so strikingly prevalent in Arabic, Persian, and Chinese literatures. But, though this was cultivated as an art in ancient India, it never gained either the form or the status of pattern poetry here.

Some forms of citrakāvya, such as akṣaramuṣṭikā (which has two subvarieties, akṣaramudrā and bhūtamudrā), bindumatī, bhāṣācitras, pratimālā, durvācakayoga, mlecchitavikalpa, sampāthya, mānasī, and ākīrnamantra, etc. (of which the first few are the more significant), were literary recreations in ancient India, as were the hui-wen in China. Among these, akṣaramudrā is a sub-genre where the concealment of certain letters with a view to unfolding some purpose, engenders charm. In Bhūtamudrā, concealment is done for effecting brevity. It has several subvarieties, including one where, from every foot, we get a four-footed verse of murajabandha (percussion design, cf. Jhā 1975:98). In bindumatī, on the basis of a given verse, there arises another verse of the same meaning, of which indications are given through bindu or dots. For example.

OOOTOOOTOTOT OOO OOO OO: I
OTOOOTOO TOT OOO OO OTOO: II

This might be treated as the Indian counterpart to the western mathematical poem (cf. Pozzi 1981:42-3; and Mayer 1978:11; also compare the designs on Pozzi's p. 43, esp. "tabulae ii-vii," with Indian Tāntric designs). Bhāṣācitra is made up of a verse or verses appearing to have been composed in more than one language, thereby giving some suspense to the reader. In the West, also, we have macaronic verse, resembling the bilingual or perhaps multilingual citra-varieties of poetry. Other varieties are less important, but in every instance there is either some concealment or unravelling of some concealed purpose, giving the poem a quality of suspense or enthralment of the spirit. This quality, common in both the eastern and western pieces of pattern poetry, both old and new, can be said to be its life-core. As a matter of fact, these pattern poems or the citrakāvyas are like art pieces telling posterity the story of the development of art and culture at a particular time. One can also go deeper into the enquiry as to why and how particular pieces were accepted and others

discarded during a particular age. Thus, they can also reflect the taste and culture of the people of that age. Linguists, too, can find in them their share of excitement, particularly in pieces that have some sense of linguistic dissections and juxtapositions. Again, look at some pieces of modern western concrete poetry we can say that they represent a certain school of expression in painting and art. Thus, both citrakāvya and pattern poetry are of interest, not only to poets and theoreticians of language and literature, but also to linguists, artists, cryptologists, and cultural and social historians as well as to comparatists.

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A Garland of Citrakāvyas

Because citrakāvyas are so unknown in the West and because Kalānāth Jhā's article has no illustrations, we felt we should offer a representative selection of them, chosen for their historical as well as their artistic interest. Citrakāvyas are, it will be recalled, poems which are classed according to their stock visual forms, called "bandhas," each of which has its own traditions and associations. Thus we find repeating images of drums, swords, lotuses, and wheels (classified according to the number of their petals or their spokes), garlands, cruciform butter-churn handles, trees, etc. Besides the examples in Sanskrit and the Prākrits, Burmese, Tāmil, and Marathi, we know of citrakāvyas in Gujarati and Hindi, and they are said to exist in Malayalam and Telugu, Nepalese and Tibetan, and in Bengali. —D. H.

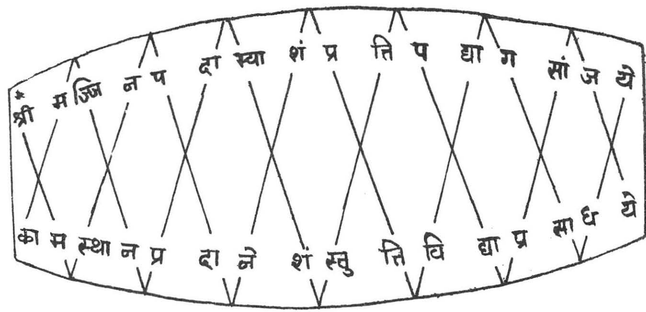
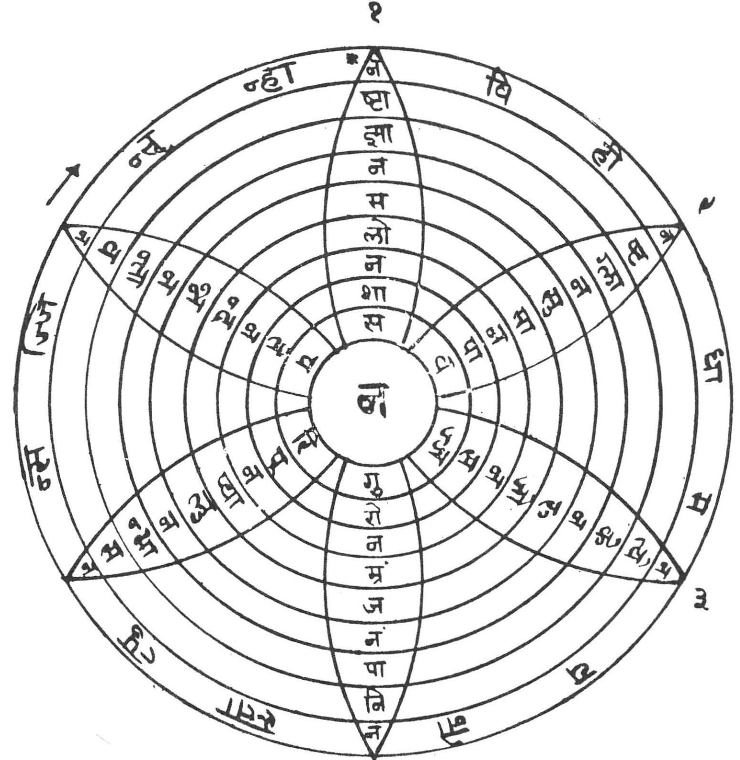


Figure 1. These relatively simple Sanskrit pieces are rather early, although Vālmīki, "the first Sanskrit poet," is said to have written such works, too. These are from Samantabhadra or Sāntivarman's *Jinasataka* (7th century) and are in the forms (bandhas) of iṣṭapāda (top) or muraja (middle & bottom) drums. For all: read from the asterisk in the upper left.

Figure 2. A six-spoke wheel, in the cakra-bandha, from the *Siddhipriyastotra* of Devanandin (8th century), a Digambara poet.



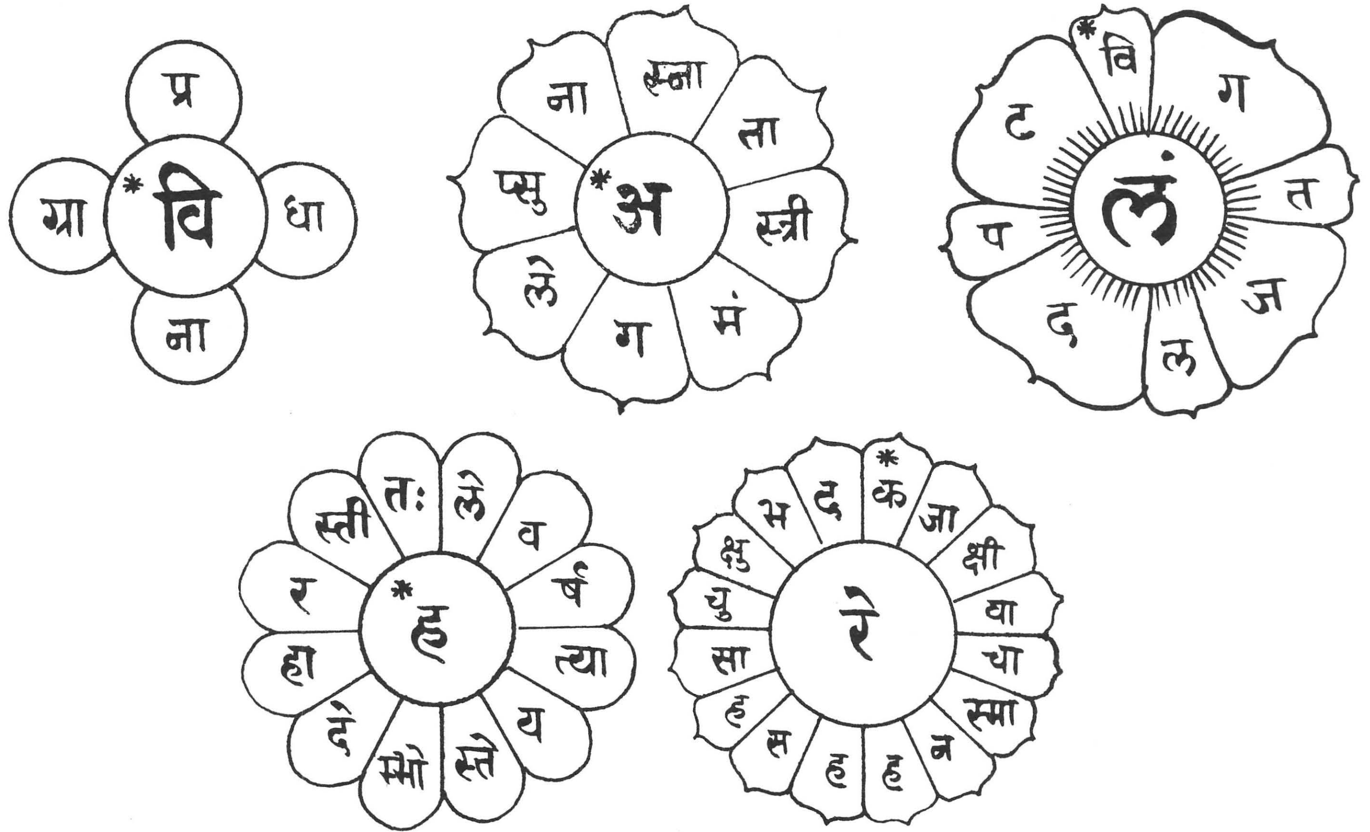


Figure 3. From Jinavallabha Sūri's *Prasnasataka* (ca. 1135). They are examples of 4-, 8-, 12-, and 16-petal lotuses.

Figure 4. These prākrit snakes come from the *Alankāracintāmani* of Ajitasena, another Digambara writer (later than 9th century).

Figure 5. A pair of snakes and a peacock in Tāmil, probably also from the 18th century. Both are printed from the *Sithira kāvi malai* (''Pictorial garland of poems'') of P. V. Abdul Catoor Sahib Pulavar (Madras: Avvaiahem, n. d.).

இரட்டைநாக பந்தம்

மயில்வாகனப் பந்தம்

Figure 6. Although Burma is not part of India, her culture has, at various times, been deeply influenced by her larger neighbor. Here is a palm-leaf fan from the *Porāna-dīpanī kyan* of U Thein (Hbo and Hmawbi), who also prints 12- and 7-petal lotuses, two butter-churn handles, and a wheel. He calls these pieces "jewel writing," and seems unaware of their connection with citrakāvyas. Undated.

Figure 7. According to R. K. Joshi of Bombay, who sent us this conch-shell shaped citrakāvya in Marathi by Dasopant (1551-1615), the original was written on a piece of cloth four by forty feet and it included 1600 couplets on vedanta.