The sixth Dalai Lama said
'If only white cranes,
Do grant me wings;
I shall not go far;
Only to Lithang, then home.'
He promised this to his love but he never returned.

We come across similar praise of cranes in other literature as well.

In many countries cranes and Sarasa cranes were pet birds. In Australia, the fascinating dance of Brolga forms the basis of aboriginal dances. In Chinese legend the crane was a bird ridden by immortals. It symbolizes happiness and longevity. Many Chinese emperors liked to keep cranes and enjoyed literary pieces depicting them. In the Jaina religion it is believed that the symbol (-lined up) of fifth Tirthankara – Sumatinatha is the crane. In the Buddhist literature the crane is found in mystical context. It is one of the birds that meditated on the discourse of the Buddha. The Great Crane expressed highly philosophical thoughts. It said,

'One must observe unsullied moral purity as the root of all dharmic action.
One must observe the need to abandon whatever belongs to this world, and that includes the bonds of life in the various heavens.
One must observe that indolence and sloth hinder the doing of good.
One must observe that the demons of meanness hinder generosity.
Let these things also enter well into your minds.'

Sometimes the references to cranes (Krauncha) and Sarasa in Sanskrit literature create confusion because rarely the descriptions of ‘Krauncha’ point to the Sarasa crane. The word Sarasa (Saras) is to be derived from the word ‘Saras’ (Saras) meaning ‘the lake’. This word is not found in the Rigveda, but is seen in the Vajasaneyi Samhita and in the Brahmana text.

A) Cranes

Oldest references to the crane (Vedic period)

= Let the crane be offered to Indra and Agni.
– Vajasaneyi Samhita

= indeed, the Sama called Krauncha is of the nature of speech.
– Tandya Brahmana

Etymology and Synonyms of the Crane

The word ‘Krauncha’ appears to have been derived from the root verb Krunc- (1p) ‘to call, to make sound’. The Amarkosha gives a synonym ‘Krun-’ derived from the same root. The Abhidhanachintamani text gives the etymology of the word ‘Krauncha’ (Krauncha) is one that gives out calls.

Mythological reference to the crane

In the Skanda purana, there is a story about a demon namely Krauncha. This demon took the shape of a mountain and hindered the way of Sage Agastya. Lord Subrahmany entered him with an arrow.
Reference to augury

The ‘Vasantarajashakunam’ text describes augury in relation to the crane.

= 'If a pair of (Sarasa cranes and) the cranes is seen in every direction you will accomplish whichever is desired. If its call is heard at the backside then one should not go out as one’s desired object is obtained at home.'

Description of cranes in epic and classical poetry

Sage Valmiki saw a pair of cranes moving about in the forest, never parting from one another and making a charming noise. A hunter killed one of the pair of birds and he was cursed by the sage. Valmiki was inspired to compose the Ramayana, when he saw a female bird wailing.

= '(A female bird lamented as) she was parted from her mate and companion, the bird, that was endowed with a coppery head was inflated with passion and courting had distended its wings.'

From the description of the bird – the Krauncha here – must be the Indian Sarasa crane since it is the commonest resident and breeding crane in India.

In the Meghaduta of Kalidasa there is a reference to the 'Krauncharandhra' (the gate of the cranes) in the Himalaya.

Strategic formation of infantry

One of the strategic formations of infantry is known as ‘Kraunchavyuha’, which has eight strategical positions.

Superstition regarding the crane

= 'One who insults the elder brother – equal to one’s father, is born as the crane after one’s death.'

Refernce to the crane in Indian music and prosody

= 'A group of musical notes namely – kraunchapada is sung with the help of Pada and Swara. It is in the same metre known as ‘Kraunchapada’ or is in the free metre.'

Reference to the crane in Ayurveda

= The bones (of the crane) are useful in curing urinary problems. (Today such references may best be disregarded in the presence of better and proven medicines. – author)

Description of cranes in the Mrigapakshishastra

= ‘(Cranes) have long legs and long beak.’

B) Sarasa Cranes

Synonyms of the Sarasa crane

= ‘The head (of the Sarasa crane) is red. It moves about in water, so it is called Sarasa. It is called Lakshamana because it has a particular mark (lakshama).’

Mythological reference to the Sarasa crane

In the Mahabharata the Sarasa was said to be the son of Garuda (eagle).

Description of the Sarasa cranes in Sanskrit poetry

= ‘At times raising up their faces at the Sarasa birds, who sweetly warble, and, by flying together in a line seemed to form a garland at the archway without supporting pillars.’

Reference to the crane in Ayurveda

= ‘The Sarasa crane is an aquatic bird. Its bones are useful in urinary problems.’

Description of the Sarasa crane in Mrigapakshishastra

= ‘(The Sarasa cranes) are very soft to touch and (their) call is melodious. (These) aquatic birds give pleasure to the eyes.’

Sanskrit literature views cranes in various perspectives. References to migratory routes and mountain passes used by birds are encountered in Sanskrit lit-
Sanskrit continues to play an important role in life, thought and expression of Indian people. It is a window to our ancient knowledge and it is necessary for us to understand our compassionate heritage.

Several birds feature in the Sanskrit literature. The cranes appear to have made a distinct impact on the ancient Indian mind. A few examples are cited in the present text. The cranes continue to do so even today. The reduction in the numbers of the cranes is therefore all the more distressing. More than ever, it is most necessary that we now imbibe the nobel tradition of conservation and compassion towards all wild life. That is the only hope.