



Nakshatra Vanam

Poorvphalgun (Puram) – Flame of the Forest



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Botanical Name: *Butea monosperma* (Lam.)Taub.
Tamil Name: Purasu
Sanskrit Name: Palasa
English Name: Flame of the Forest

Habitat

Deciduous trees, to 10 m high, bole crooked, irregular; bark 5-6 mm thick, grey to greyish-brown; exudation red; branchlets densely tomentose. Leaves trifoliate, alternate; stipules small, lateral, caudaceous; rachis 12-20 cm long, stout, pubescent, pulvinate; stipules subulate; petiolule 5-10 mm long, stout, pubescent; lateral leaflets 8.8-13.7 x 5.5-11 cm, broadly oblong-ovate or suborbicular, base oblique, apex obtuse, terminal leaflet 11-15 x 12.5-15 cm, widely rhomboid, base obtuse, apex emarginate, silky pubescent on both sides when young, glabrous above, silky pubescent beneath when mature, margin entire, coriaceous; lateral nerves 4-8 pairs, pinnate, prominent; intercostae scalariform, prominent. Flowers bisexual, 5 cm long, bright red, in terminal or axillary, densely fascicled, racemes; calyx broadly campanulate, teeth 5, deltoid, short, upper 2 connate, velvety; corolla much exerted; petals 5, standard petal 5 x 2.5 cm, lanceolate, clawed, wings falcate 4.5 x 1.5 cm adnate to keel, keel united 4.5 x 3 cm, curved; stamens 9 + 1; vexillary stamens free; anthers uniform; ovary 2.5 cm, inferior, 1-celled, ovules 2; style long, incurved, beardless; stigma small. Fruit a pod, 12.5-28 cm long, oblong, the base flat, wing-like and indehiscent, the tip splitting round the apical seed; seed obovate, compressed. (India Biodiversity Portal).



Religious Association

It is sacred to both the Hindus and Buddhists. The Hindus consider it sacred because of the trifoliate formation of its leaves representing Vishnu in the middle, Brahma on the left and Shiva on the right (Hopkins, epic Mythology). The orange red flower of this tree is offered to the Goddess

Kali. According to Stutley (1982), Palasa is a dwelling place for the *gandharvas* and the *apsaras*. According to Birdwood (1986), it is sacred to the “Host of the Heaven” such as Soma or Chandra. The flower contains the orange red colour used to dye the robes of Buddhist monks. Wearing this dress shows symbolically that they have burnt all their desires. It is often depicted in the Buddhist *Jatakas* (Jataka Stories). The tree has also been associated with the subject of astrology under the constellation *Puram*.

Temples associated with the Flame of the Forest:

<i>District</i>	<i>Village/Town</i>	<i>Temple</i>	<i>Deity</i>
Nagappattinam	Parthanpalli	Thamaraiyalkelvan	Vishnu
Nagappattinam	Nagapattinam	Soundararajar	Vishnu
Nagappattinam	Vanpurudothamum	Vanpurudothaman	Vishnu
Tanjavur	Tirukanjanur	Agneeswarar	Shiva
Tiruvarur	Thalachengadu	Sangaaranyeswarar	Shiva
Tiruvarur	Vellakulam	Sri Narayanan	Vishnu
Tiruvarur	Thalachengadu	Naanmadhiyaperumal	Vishnu
Tiruvarur	Devanarthogai	Madhavaperumal	Vishnu
Tiruchirapalli	Tirupernagar	Appakudathan	Vishnu

(Source – *Sacred Trees of Tamil Nadu – 2005* by M. Amirthalingam)

Medicinal uses and other benefits

The flowers can be collected (*Butea Monosperma*) and their juice can be extracted. Then Indian beech seeds can be added and let it be soaked for 48 hours. Then the seeds can be removed and made into a paste added with water. This paste can be applied to the eyes and cataract will be cured. Collect some *Butea monosperma* flowers and make into a soup by adding sugar and water. Take 100 ml of the soup twice a day. This will cure the burning sensation while urinating and also dissolve stones in the kidney. The same soup can be used in curing liver related problems. For curing diabetes, collect some



Butea monosperma flowers and clean and dry them. Then soak it in water for one night; next morning take the juice and drink it. Continue this for 45 days. Check your blood sugar level every nine days. Before the 45th day, the blood sugar level will drop (www.astrogle.com). The bark is an aphrodisiac, laxative and anthelmintic. It is also useful in the treatment of dysentery, piles and hydrocele as well as in cold and cough. The seeds are used as a laxative and anthelmintic. The seeds can also be made into a paste which can be used in the treatment of ascaris (small intestinal roundworms) and ringworm. (<http://www.mpbd.info>).

Mythology /Folklore

The tree is associated with the moon and is believed to have sprung from the feathers of a falcon intoxicated with soma, the drink of the gods and is thus immortalized (Cowen, 1984). It is also associated with Brahma, as he was converted into a *palasa* tree after being cursed by Parvati (Padma Purana, Uttarakanda). During the thread ceremony of a Brahmin boy, he must hold a stalk of palasa wood and the sacred utensils used are also made of this wood (Cowen, 1984). The wood is used in ceremonies connected with Krishna Ashtami Vratam and the digging of tanks (Purana Index, Vol. II). According to Gupta (1991), the tree is considered sacred partly on account of its use in producing the sacred fire and partly because of its orange flowers which are used to dye the coloured dust that is thrown during the Holi festival. According to an ancient ritual, the sacrificial post was to be made out of the wood of the *kadhira* or *bilva* or *palasa*. Dry twigs of the plant are used to feed the sacred fire. In the bridal car is said to be adorned with its flower. (Source – Sacred Trees of Tamil Nadu – 2005 by M. Amirthalingam)



Conclusion

Butea monosperma is a traditional Indian tree which is used in the performance of rituals and religious purposes. It is also an ornamental tree because of its red flowers and hence it is known as “flame of the forest”. Even though it is considered to be an ornamental tree, it has many uses such medicinal qualities, useful in dyeing of fabrics and is the nesting place for birds. The tree also acts as a useful agent for controlling air pollution. Scientific experiments have proved that both leaves and bark of the tree can be used in the treatment of diabetes. Usually this tree is worshipped only during the time of Sivaratri. Hence it is necessary to inculcate awareness about this tree at all times. The tree is also regarded as an incarnation of Agni, god of fire. The many useful qualities of this tree should be widely propagated among the public. This tree can be planted in gardens, along the roads, schools, colleges, and various religious places.

