



Nakshatra Vanam

Pusam – Pipal



M. Subramanian

Project Officer

C.P.R. Environmental Education Centre

Chennai

Botanical Name: *Ficus religiosa* L.

Tamil Name: Arasu

Sanskrit Name: Aswatha

English Name: Pipal

Habitat:

It is one of the most familiar trees in India. It is a deciduous tree, and reaches up-to a height of 25 m. The aerial roots are absent; the bark is grey and smooth. The exudation is milky. The leaves are simple, alternate and spiral. The new leaves are pink and the stipules are 1-1.5 cm long, lateral, ovate-lanceolate and puberulous. The petiole is 60-120 mm long, stout, glabrous, articulated with a gland at the apex below. The lamina is 5-13 x 4.5-12 cm, broadly ovate, base truncate or sub-cordate, apex caudate-acuminate, and margin entire, undulate, glabrous, shining and coriaceous. It is 5-7-ribbed from the base, the lateral nerves are in 8-10 pairs, pinnate, slender, prominent beneath and looped near the margin. The intercostae are reticulate and prominent. The flowers are unisexual, inflorescence a syconia, sessile, axillary, in pairs, obovoid or globose. The twig wall is thick, the basal bracts are 3, 3-5 mm long, ovate-obtuse, silky-puberulous, persistent with the orifice closed by 3 apical bracts in a disc 2-3 mm wide. The internal bristles are none. The flowers are of 4 kinds. The male flowers are ostiolar and sessile in one ring, the tepals are 2, ovate-lanceolate, free and reddish. The stamen is 1. The filaments are 0.2 mm long. The anther is oblong and parallel. The female flowers are sessile; the tepals are 3-4, linear-lanceolate, free, brownish and glabrous. The ovary is superior, ovoid-oblong and 1 mm and red-brown. The style



is 1.5 mm long and lateral. The stigma is rounded. The gall flowers are similar to the female. The Syconium is 4-8 mm across, ripening pink, purple or black. The achenes are smooth.

Religious Association

The pipal tree has long been associated with both the Hindu and Buddhist religions. The Hindus consider the tree to be incarnation of Lord Vishnu and also a symbol of Goddess Lakshmi. The tree is also linked to the Hindu trinity, namely Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva. According to Buddhist traditions, the Buddha attained nirvana under the pipal tree. Hence this tree is dear and sacred to the Buddhists. The leaf of the tree is shaped like a heart. Hence the Sikhs consider it as “Sweet loving Palm of Thy Hand” (Mitra, 1994). The tree has also been associated with the subject of astrology under the constellation Pusam.



Temples associated with the pipal tree:

District	Village/Town	Temple	Deity
Coimbatore	Perur	Patteswarar	Shiva
Kanchipuram	Tirukachikoil	Ulakalandhaperumal	Vishnu
Madurai	Periyakulam	Pattiperuman	Shiva
Ramanathapuram	Tirupullani	Kalyana Jaganadhar	Vishnu
Thanjavur	Parudhiniyamum	Baskareswarar	Shiva
Thanjavur	Tiruvavadudurai	Maasilamaneeswarar	Shiva
Tiruchirapalli	Pullambodi	Chidhambareswarar	Shiva
Tiruunelveli	Sengottai	Parameswarar	Shiva
Tiruvallur	Irumbai	Mahakaleswarar	Shiva
Tiruvallur	Arasile	Arasilinadhar	Shiva

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

Medicinal uses and benefits

This plant is used in indigenous medicine. The ripe fruit is useful in the treatment of biliousness and diseases of the blood and heart. It is also useful for digestion and to relieve constipation. The dried fruit can be used to treat asthma.

The bark of the tree is used in bone fracture and binding. The juice is useful as a mouth wash and to cure toothache. The root of the bark can cure rheumatic pain of the hip and below the ribs and for curing ulcers (Hocking, 1993).



Bark of the tree

The seed can be used in the treatment of leprosy. The dry powder can be used to treat ulcers (Shanmugam, 1998). The juice of the bark is useful for curing excessive urination during jaundice (Bakhru, 1993).

Ficus religiosa has got many medicinal uses. For example, the leaves and shoots can be used as a purgative and also in curing skin diseases. In addition, the fruit is a laxative, alternative and has a cooling effect (Flora of Pakistan, 2014)

Among its many uses, the decoction of the bark can be used in the treatment of skin disease like scabies. The aerial root can be chewed by women as it is believed that this promotes fertility. In addition, an infusion of the bark can be used as an anti-diabetic and also in the treatment of ulcers and skin diseases. The leaves and twigs of this tree are reportedly effective against animal bites and also can be used as an astringent, anticonorrhoeal, aphrodisiac, and for the treatment of haemoptysis and fistula. It is also said that the fresh sap of the leaves is effective in the treatment of diarrhea, cholera and for healing wounds (Rojo et al. 1999).

Mythology/ Folklore

It is believed that this tree is closely connected with human fertility. The tree is worshipped by all, particularly women for fertility and longevity. The antiquity of this tree goes back to as early as Mohenjodaro and the Harappan culture (Crook, 1991). It has been mentioned from the Vedic period onwards. It has to be worshipped daily after a morning bath (Mahabharata, Vol. X, Anusasana Parva, p.268). In the Bhagavadgita, while describing his Vibhuthi (power and attributes), Sri Krishna narrates:

*“Asvatha sarva vrikshanam devarshinam cha
Gandharvanam chitrarathah siddhanam kapilo munni”*

Bhagavadgita, Ch.10, Sloka: 26

In this text, Sri Krishna said: I am the Asvatha Vriksham, the king of Vrikshas. It is believed that Vishnu was born under this tree and floats lying on a leaf of asvatha. This tree is never cut down by the people as it has been venerated by the people (Dubois, Hindu Manners, Customs and Ceremonies, 652-53). According to another legend, Lord Vishnu prescribed this tree as the dwelling place of Alakshmi, the goddess of ill-luck. According to Padma Purana, Alakshmi, occupies this tree every Saturday, hence it is worshipped on Saturday, the day ascribed to Lord Saturn, who is mostly associated with misfortune (Gupta, 16991).

The sacredness of the aswatha tree could have also originated from the old Vedic ritual of kindling the sacrificial fire at religious ceremonies by friction between two pieces of wood, one of which was the aswatha, and the ceremony was called the birth of Agni (Ragozin, Vedic India, p.159).

According to the Sthala purana of the Patteeswarar temple at Tirupparur, Lord Shiva came with the Devas and performed his divine dance under the pipal tree on the day of Panguni Uttthiram Tirunaal. From then onwards, the pipal tree was worshipped by the people of Tamil Nadu.

Conclusion

It is a large deciduous tree and has many uses. For example, the leaves can be used in marriage ceremonies and other religious functions. The leaves can be also used as fodder for elephants and cattle. It is also believed that one pipal tree releases oxygen requirement for four persons per day. Hence, it can suitably be planted near factories. In India, in almost every village, there is a pipal tree which gives shade and shelter to the people. More specifically, the village Panchayats / gram sabha is conducted under the shade of this very useful tree. It is also believed that problems will be solved if the discussions are held under this tree. Of late, due to construction of highways, many ancient pipal trees have been cut down. Hence, it is essential to replant many pipal trees to replace those that have been lost.

