



## Nakshatra Vanam

### Avittam - Indian Mesquite Tree



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**Botanical Name:** *Prosopis spicigera* L.

**Tamil Name:** Vanni

**Sanskrit Name:** Shami

**English Name:** Indian Mesquite

### Habitat

The Vanni tree is a medium sized evergreen tree that grows up to a height of 15m to 18m. It has a large crown with branches surmounted by short compressed prickles. It is suitable to grow in different types of soil including saline soils. However, it can grow best in sandy loamy soils with good moisture.

### Religious Association

There is a common belief that the *shami* tree is an incarnation of Devi. It is believed that *shami* has fire in it. Rudra is considered to be a form of fire. Hence Siva or Rudra are *Yupa* post made of *shami* wood (Jobes, 1949 -50). It is also believed that Agni resides in the *shami* wood. This is the reason why the *shami* tree is considered sacred tree and its wood is used in the sacrificial fire. In fact, there are references to this tree which have been found in the ancient scriptures such as *Rig Veda*, *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana*. The



*vanni* tree is also sacred to *Sani* or Saturn (Stutley, 1985). The *Vanni* tree has also been associated with the subject of astrology under the constellation *Avittam*.

## Temples associated with the Indian Mesquite tree as sthala vriksha

<i>District</i>	<i>Village/Town</i>	<i>Temple</i>	<i>Deity</i>
Chennai	Tiruvanmiyur	Marundheeswarar	Shiva
Cuddalore	Vridhachalam	Vridhagireeswarar	Shiva
Erode	Kodumudi	Mahudeswarar	Shiva
Karur	Karur	Kalyanapasupathiswarar	Shiva
Nagappatinam	Agasthiyanpalli	Agastheeswarar	Shiva
Ramanathapuram	Rameswaram	Ramalingeswarar	Shiva
Ariyalur	Gangai Konda Cholapuram	Brahadheeswarar	Shiva
Tanjavur	Tiruvanniyur	Agnipureeswarar	Shiva
Tiruchirapalli	Pullambodi	Chidambareswarar	Shiva
Tiruvarur	Tirumarugal	Rathnagiriswarar	Shiva

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

## Medicinal uses and other benefits

This tree has many medicinal uses. For example, the bark of the tree can be used for treating muscular and joint pains. In cases of miscarriage, the pulverized mixture of flower and sugar can be used. Methanol can be extracted from the bark and the water soluble extract can be used since it contains anti-inflammatory properties (Gupta, 1993). The juice of the leaf can cure flatulence, joint and muscle disorders, bilious disorders. In case of snake poisoning, a powdered mixture of leaf, fruit and bark along with honey is very useful (Shanmugham, 1989).



## Mythology /Folklore

There are many legends connected with this tree. Once Mandharaka came to the forest with his wife Shami, there they met the sage Brusanthi who had taken the form of Vinayaka. They laughed at him for his arrogance. The sage became angry and cursed them to become a *vanni* tree. However, Lord Vinayaka blessed them and said that they would be in the form of *vanni* tree and he would be seated under the tree. Hence then, the *vanni* tree is always planted in the north-eastern corner of the temple (Gupta, 1991). According to another story, an *asura* by name Taraka was troubling the gods. Hence the gods approached Lord Brahma. In fact, Lord Brahma had given a boon to Taraka by which he could not be killed by the

gods, *asuras* or *rakshasas* but only by their offspring. However, due to Uma's curse the gods could not have any offspring. But there was a way out. At the time of the curse, Agni was not present. Hence the curse could not take effect. Thus was born Skanda who killed Taraka. It is believed that those who pray at the *sthala vriksha* of the Vridhagireeswarar temple at Vridhachalam will be blessed with a male child. It is also said that *vanni* tree is the tutelary tree of the Vanniyar community of Tamil Nadu. (Singaravelu Mudaliar, 1923)

## Conclusion

The wood of the tree makes for excellent fuel wood. By planting this tree, we can control soil erosion and it can also be used as a wind breaker. The *vanni* tree is also very useful in afforestation of dry lands (Gupta, 1993). The plant is also a good nitrogen fixer and improves the soil fertility. It increases the atmospheric nitrogen due to microbial activities. The soil status is also improved due to leaf litter decomposition (Jatasra and Paroda, 1981). Due to extensive exploitation of the various products of this tree, the insects, small animals and birds that depend upon this tree are deprived of their habitat and sustenance. This tree is relatively rare and found in few temples of India. Hence there is a need to plant more of these trees so that this species does not die out.

