

Peepal Tree

Read on to learn about the ecological, medical, and religious value of the peepal tree.

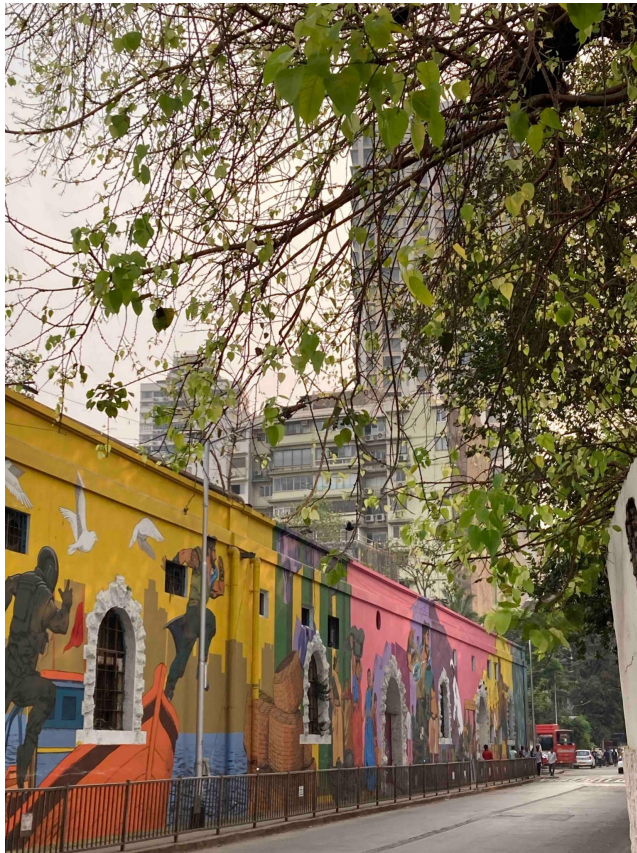


Description and Ecology

Common name: Peepal, Ashwattha, Bodhi, Pimpala, Pipli, Pimpala, Pipro, Jari, Arasu

Scientific name: *Ficus religiosa*

Peepal trees are deciduous trees with widespread branches and without aerial roots. The figs of the peepal tree are dark purple when ripe and are consumed by many animals (starlings, green pigeons, monkeys, etc). The figs (1-1.5 cm diameter) ripen from March to April and from October to November. The flowers are found inside the figs. New leaves are first red or pink before becoming green. The leaves are waxy and have a heart shaped base and a pointy tip.



Peepal trees are stranglers: they can strangle and kill host trees. They can also damage buildings.

Being a keystone species, the peepal serves an important ecological role, supporting a vast array of animal species with its figs for large parts of the year. According to National Geographic, a keystone species is one that “helps define an entire ecosystem. Without its keystone species, the ecosystem would be dramatically different or cease to exist altogether.”

Peepal trees grow large and have a lifespan of 900-1500 years. In one study, the genome of a peepal tree and banyan tree were sequenced and compared. This interesting study found adaptive evolution in genes associated

with the longevity of these trees, and can be found here:

<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.isci.2022.105100>.

Peepal trees, like other fig plants, show obligate mutualism with their wasp pollinators: neither can survive without the other. Ficus plants supply food and shelter required for the pollinators to reproduce. Another interesting article on the genomes of ficus trees and wasp pollinators: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cell.2020.09.043>

Medical Uses

The barks, leaves, root and fruit of the *Ficus religiosa* are used in traditional medicine (such as Ayurveda) to treat disorders as varied as diabetes, asthma, liver disease, diarrhoea, tooth aches, menstrual problems, paralysis, ulcers, cancer and leprosy.

Interestingly, sometimes in different geographical places different parts of the tree are used to treat the same disease. To treat asthma, in Uttar Pradesh the fruit is used, in Nepal the juice of the leaf is mixed with honey, and in Mizoram a root decoction is used.

Contemporary research supports the antimicrobial, anti-inflammatory, wound healing, antioxidant, anticonvulsant and anti-asthmatic properties of the peepal tree.

Religious significance



The Peepal tree, called the Ashwattha in Sanskrit literature, is considered to be one of the most sacred trees in India. The tree is mentioned in the Bhagavad Gita, the Mahabharata, and the Ramayana.

In Hinduism, the tree is closely linked to Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva. The roots are associated with Brahma, the trunk with Vishnu, and the leaves with Shiva. Vishnu is said to have been born under the tree, and the tree is also believed to be Vishnu himself. Prana Pratishtha, a religious ceremony, is carried out to consecrate the peepal tree and invite Vishnu into the tree.

It is believed that Lakshmi, the goddess of wealth, inhabits the peepal tree every Saturday, leading to peepal tree puja on Saturdays.

Peepal trees can be married to neem trees.

Hindus believe that it is the female of the banyan tree.

In Hindu mythology, it is said that the peepal tree holds the souls of ancestors. Following the cremation of an elderly relative, a Ghant (an earthen pot) is hung to the tree, and a ceremony is performed. Times of India notes that, during the second surge of COVID-19, the increase in the number of Ghants were an “indication and witness to the lives lost in the deadly pandemic.”

A boy is said to haunt the tree if he dies during his thread ceremony.

Women worship the tree, pouring milk and water on the roots, offering flowers, and tying thread around the tree. It is believed that the threads disturb the tree spirit, which gives the worshiper a boon.

For these religious reasons, Hindus believe that the tree and its branches should not be cut.



In Buddhism, it is believed that Buddha found enlightenment under a peepal tree. It is hence also called a Bodhi tree, as Bodhi means enlightenment. In the Maya Devi Temple, Nepal, people tie colourful flags to an old Bodhi tree in the hopes that their wishes will be granted.

Given its rich religious significance, it is not surprising that peepal trees are often planted close to temples and monasteries.

