

## MEDICO - HISTORICAL STUDY OF “*AŚVATTHA*” (SACRED FIG TREE)

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### ABSTRACT

*Aśvattha* (*Ficus religiosa* Linn.) is a tree which has got mythological, religious and medicinal importance in Indian culture since ancient times. As per *Vedic Index* *Aśvattha* means horse stand, a place or site or an object where or under which horses stand. *Aśvattha* is also known as *Pipal* and *Bodhidrma*. This tree is the oldest depicted tree in India. In *Vedic* times it was used to make fire by friction and considered sacred. *Atharvavēda* associates it with the third heaven. It discusses medicinal properties of *Aśvattha* along with *Soma* and *Kuṣtha*. *Aśvattha* is associated with the triad of Gods-*Brahma*, *viṣṇu* and *śiva*. Reference to *Aśvattha* is found in *Rāmāyana*, *Mahābhārata*, *Bhagavadgīta*, Buddhistic literature, *Arthaśāstra*, *Purāṇās*, *Upaniṣads* etc. non- medical literature also. According to *Āyurvēda* it has several synonyms. Most of them symbolize its sacredness. *Aśvattha* is useful in various ailments like consumption, vomiting, ulcers in oral cavity, burns, gynaecological problems etc. Thus its medico-historical importance, regional nomenclature, morphological features in brief etc. are being presented in this article with few illustrations.

### Introduction

According to *Āyurvēda*, '*Aśvattha*' is the name of a tree which has got mythological, religious and medicinal importance in Indian culture since ancient times. In *Vedic Index* the word *Aśvattha* has been translated as horse stand, a place or site or an object where or under which horses stand i.e. are stationed or live. In *Śatapātha Brāhmaṇa*, '*haya*', '*vajin*', '*arvan*' and '*Aśva*' words were used for horse. '*Aśva*' means that carries men. The name of this philosophically representative tree-image being '*Aśvattha* horse '*Aśva*' the animal that the Vedic Indo-Aryans must have brought

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with them is seen to have left its impress on Indian culture. There was perhaps one well known town bearing a name based on 'Aśvattha' is situated in South-East Malwa or Malwa intrusion into what is known as Berar. *Aśvatthanagara* was identified with *Astapura* in Elichpur district, Berar figures in a Vakataka queen's inscription of 5th century A.D.

### Historical background

The reason for a large number of plants not having any commercial use and still associated with myths and traditions are difficult to understand. The only explanation for their association with religious beliefs can be that these plants perhaps because of the resemblance to the emblem of a particular diety or the name of sage associated with them made the plants sacred. For this reason alone, a large number of plants are considered sacred in India and are called the *Bōdhi* trees as certain sages received enlightenment under them. *Aśvattha* is the Bodhi tree of *Śākyamuni* or Buddha; *Nyagrōdha* of *Kaśyapa* etc.

*Aśvattha* is also a mythical plant and is known that *Kuṣṭha* plant grows in the third heaven under the *Aśvattha* tree along with *Sōma* plant. Images for worship by the *Kṣatriyās* are made from *Ariṣṭha*, *Aśvattha*, *Khadira*, *Bilva* etc. *Aśvattha* is sacred to planet *Brhaspati* (Jupiter) after whom *Brhaspativāra* (Thursday) is named.<sup>10</sup>

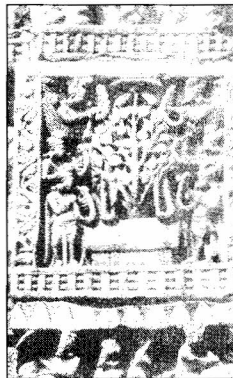
Here *Ficus* means fig and *religiosa* shows that it is venerated. The Sanskrit word *Aśvattha* means under which horses stand. *Bōdhadṛma* means the tree of perfect wisdom. The name *pīpala* has an interesting origin. The *pīpala* tree has a resemblance to the Polar tree in that its leaves also shake. *Āryan* immigrants seeing the tree for first time gave it the name of the Polar or Pappel, a tree they were familiar with in the northern latitudes. Even now in Italy the transplanted *pīpala* is called *Populo delle Indie* or the Indian Polar.

The *pīpala* is the oldest depicted tree in India. In vedic times it was used to make fire by friction. Considering it as sacred tree *pīpala* is seldom cut. It is associated with the triad Gods; the roots being *Brahma*, the stem *viṣṇu* and each leaf being the seat of God *Śiva*. The *Aśvattha sūtra* says "I bow to the sacred fig tree, to *Brahma* in the root to *viṣṇu* in the trunk and to *Śiva* in the foliage. In another myth *viṣṇu* was born under a *pīpala* and is therefore considered the tree itself. Yet another legend has *Śiva* and *Pārvati* talking and playing together when the other gods eavesdrop. An enraged *Pārvati* curses

all of them to be reborn as trees. *Brahma* becomes *Palāśa*, Rudra the *Ficus indica* and *viṣṇu* the *pīpala*.

Some communities believe that the spirits of the dead do not get water in the next world. The *pīpala* is considered a pathway. *pīpala* is often married to the Neem tree or the Banana. If the trees grow together they are considered husband and wife. Neem is considered symbolically a female except in Rajasthan & Punjab where the same is considered a male. *Mānasa*, the goddess of serpents, worshipped in Bengal is said to live on this tree. *Kṛṣṇa* was shot by a hunter's arrow while he sat under the *pīpala* tree.

*pīpala* is sacred to Buddhists as prince *Siddhārtha* received enlightenment under it in *Bōdh Gaya* and became Buddha. Hence it is also called the Bodhi tree or tree of enlightenment. The Chinese traveller Hiun Tsang gives an account of this tree. In the olden days, he says, when Buddha was alive this tree was several hundred feet high. Buddha reached perfect wisdom under it, so it is called the *Samyak Sambōdhi* or tree of knowledge.



*Aśvattha (Ficus religiosa)*

*Sāñci*, Madhya Pradesh, India, 1st century A.D.

(Courtesy : Plant Myths and Tradition in India - Shakti M. Gupta)

From antiquity and veneration, the *Aśvattha* is unrivalled throughout the world. It is mentioned from *Vēdic* times onwards. It is mentioned in '*Bhagavadgīta*' as 'One that is not the same tomorrow' with reference perhaps to this world which is ever changing. Sacredness of the *Aśvattha* is due because its form cannot be known nor its beginning, end or support.<sup>10</sup>

The sacredness of the *Aśvattha* tree comes perhaps from the old *Vēdic* ritual of kindling the sacrificial fire at religious ceremonies by friction between two peculiarly shaped pieces of wood, one of which was the '*Aśvattha*' and the ceremony was called, 'the birth of *Agni*'.

The *Atharvavēda* in which '*Aśvattha*', *Ficus religiosa* finds its earliest mention declares it to be "stationed in the third heaven" and as the "seat of Gods"(AV V. 4.3- 4; XIX. 39.6). The *Chāndōgya Upaniṣada* speaks of '*Aśvattha*' as '*Sōmasavana*'; one of the items met with in the super natural world, where only pious men reach after death (VIII.5.3).

This eternal *Aśvattha* (the riddle of the universe) has roots up (in the world) and branches down below. Known to be the essence, the *Brahma* etc. and lord *Kṛṣṇa* through his *Bhagavadgīta* (X. V.1; X.26) carried the image and the concept to a much larger world when he dilated upon them fixing up the vedas and the constituted elements of human personality into them. In addition he intensified the awe and reverence already felt in the society towards the tree which has led the scientists to distinguish the particular tree from others of its kind by adding 'religiosa' to ficus by identifying himself with '*Aśvattha*' the best of all trees'.



*Aśvattha (Ficus religiosa)* Mohenjodaro seal, 3rd - 4th Century B.C.  
(Courtesy : Plant Myths and Tradition in India - Shakti.M.Gupta)

To this mythic tree which represented macrocosm, wonderful medicinal properties are ascribed in the *Atharvavēda*. The medicine chest of the vedic physician and the cup to contain the *soma* are to be made of it; its branches are *Vēdās*. This tree is worshipped on Saturdays, in the month of *Śrāvaṇ* and on 'Somvatis' or 'lunar days'. Women perform *pradakṣaṇa* ("walking round it from left to right") to secure the survival of their husbands and good luck generally as *Sāvītri*, the wife of *satyavāna* is said to have recovered her deceased husband by its worship. The thread ceremony and marriage of the tree with the *dūrva* (*Cynodon dactylon*) is also performed by women. Sacrificial spoons are still made from its wood. *Ficus religiosa* is the *Bōdhidṛma* or tree of wisdom, of Buddha an enormous *Aśvattha* sprung from the centre of universe, an offshoot, no doubt of the vedic and cosmogenic tree.<sup>7</sup>

A story in the *Mahābhārata* and *viṣṇu Purāṇa* mentions the importance of *Aśvattha* in the ritual of kindling the sacred fire of *hōma*. *Pururāvās*, the son of Ila and Budh saw the heavenly nymph *Ūrvasi* sporting with her friends and fell in love with her. She also desired him and both lived together happily for many years. *Ūrvasi* had to ultimately return to her heavenly abode as an 'Apsara' cannot live for ever with a mortal. *Pururāvās* became inconsolable and the 'gandharvās' took pity on him. Since it was not possible for *Ūrvasi* to live with him on earth, 'gandharvās' decided to include *Pururāvās* among

them. They gave him the devine fire and asked him to wish before it for permanent life with *Ūrvasi* and his wish would be granted. *Pururāvās* left the fire in the forest and went for a bath. On his return he found the fire and the pan turned into the '*Aśvattha*' and the '*Śami*' tree respectively. In fact '*Aśvattha*' was growing out of the '*Śami*' plant. Having lost the fire, *Pururāvās* could not wish for permanent life with *Śami*. So he asked *Gandharvās* again for the fire. They asked him to make the fire drill or '*Āraṇi*' from the wood of the two trees into which the fire produced, and thus wish would be granted. *Pururāvās* first made the fire drill with two twigs of the *Śami* plant but it was not the right type of fire, Then he took two twigs of '*Aśvattha*' for the upper part and the lower of *Śami* and the fire thus produced was the right type. By wishing before it he obtained his wish. Symbolically '*Aśvattha*' was the male component and *Śami*, the female component. Since the fire was produced by friction between the *Aśvattha* and the *Śami* plant in the sacred *Hōma* ceremony, the analogy between this and the intercourse of sexes is apparent, and *Agni* or fire thus produced is the child. *Agni* once hid in the *Aśvattha* tree and because of it being the temporary home of *Agni*, the God of fire, the tree became sacred.



*Aśvattha* (*Ficus religiosa*) and Nimba / Neem (*Azadirachta indica*)  
 Growing together, in a Hindu temple  
 (Courtesy : Plant Myths and Tradition in India - Shakti M. Gupta)

## Non medical literature and *Aśvattha*

### Hindu literature

**Vedas :** The *R̥gvēda* society named *Aśvattha* one of India's greatest trees for vessels made of the wood of the *Aśvattha* are mentioned in the *R̥gvēda* where size of it was mentioned (I.135.8 and X.97.5). Later on in *Atharvavēda* also it is constantly referred and still the people of India began to call it *pīpala* or Peepal which is also its current popular name. It is a positive testimony to the interpretation of the *R̥gvēda* culture into the total complex of Indian culture that this wood too should have been found used in the *R̥gvēda* poetry. It is the berry of the tree *Pīpala* that is mentioned as sweet fruit and not the tree itself at I.164.20.<sup>8</sup>

The *Atharvavēda* which was the source of *Āyurvēda* declares it to be stationed in the third heaven and as the seat of Gods. Here *Aśvattha* was mentioned with other plants like *Soma*, *Kuṣṭha* which are having special properties to cure all types of diseases and can also kill worms. If *Aśvattha* grows on *Khadira* (*Acacia catechu*) it is treated as very potent plant with special characters like potent man gives birth to equally potent progeny (V.4.3.& XIX.39.6.). *Aśvattha* tree is treated like a hero born of a hero. May this tree destroy the enemies (diseases) like a valient horseman; valient general on the battle filled killing the trees (III. 6.1-6,7,8.). At one place *Atharvavēda* mentions that, where there are great trees like *Aśvattha* and *Nyagrōtha* and also peacocks, disease causing germs will run away otherwise they will be ascertained (IV.37.4.).

*Atharvavēda* also mentions that *Aśvattha*, *plakṣa* (*Ficus lacor*), *Khadira* (*Acacia catechu*), *Bakula* (*Mimosops elangi*) trees are source for a resin which has wound healing property (V.5.5.) and *Aśvattha* grown on *Śami* plant can be used by woman for getting a male child. (VII.11.1). The description of this type of treatment is available in *Āyurvēda*

*Atharvavēda* clearly mentions that this holy fig tree, *Darbha* (sacrificial grass), (the king of plants), *Vrihi*, *Yava* etc. posses medicinal properties and they are highly healing balms and nourish us from heaven like sons. Devichand , the translator of *Atharvavēda* is of opinion that decoction of the leaves of *Aśvattha* are useful in curing consumption (VIII. 7. 20). There is a reference of prayer made to *Aśvattha* in *Atharvavēda*

saying 'O *Aśvattha* you please destroy the enemies who are attacking in the form of diseases'. Here *Aśvattha* and *Khadira* are compared as soldiers (VIII. 8.3.).<sup>6</sup>

***Rāmāyana*** : One of the great two epics of India written by *vālmiki* referred a large number of plants. *Aśvattha* was one amongst them. It has been referred while describing the *Bharadvāja's āśram* (Ayodhya khanda 91/49). Existence of *Aśvattha* was referred as it was available near *Pampa* named *sarōvara* (lake) (*Aranya khāṇḍa* 73/3). There is a poetical hyperbole that *Aśvattha* tree began to dance when *Bhārat* visited *Bharadvāja's āśram* and to make entertainment to Bharata.<sup>11</sup>

***Mahābhārata*** : The second great epic of India was written by *Vēda vyāsa*. It is an encyclopedic work which has got importance in different kinds of sciences including medical science. In this work about 179 medicinal plants were referred in several contexts. *Aśvattha* was also one amongst them (Bulletin of Indian Institute of History of Medicine; Vol XXV, 1995 pp 20-37). This epic covers the story about the importance of *Aśvattha* in the ritual of kindling the sacred fire of Home, which was discussed earlier in this paper. According to the footnotes given by Ganguli in his translation of *Mahābhārata* "Upwards and downwards" words used while describing *Aśvattha* mean from the highest to the lowest of the created things. Enlarged by the qualities ie. the qualities appearing as the body, the senses etc. The man who worships *Aśvattha* daily, worships the whole universe. Even though the tree is mainly associated with *Viṣṇu*, some consider *śiva* as the patron deity of the tree.

***Bhagavadgīta*** : Although widely published and read by itself, *Bhagavadgīta* originally appears as an episode in the *Mahābhārata*. Lord *Kṛṣṇa* spoke this to his friend and devotee Arjuna at the beginning of *Kali yuga* (age). *Bhagavadgīta* had intensified the awe and reverence already felt in the society towards the particular tree from others of its kind by adding religiousa to Ficus by identifying Himself with *Aśvattha* the best of all trees. *Bhagavadgīta* mentions *Aśvattha* as one that is not the same tomorrow, with reference perhaps to this world which is ever changing. In text 26 there is a verse referring *Aśvattha*, ie

*Aśvattha sarva vṛkṣānām dēvarāsinam ca nāradaḥ  
gandharvānām citrarathah siddhānām kapilo munih*



Lord *Kṛṣṇa* says, "I am the *Aśvattha* tree and of the sages among the demigods I am *Narada*. Of the *Gandharvās* I am *Chitraratha*, and among perfect beings I am the sage *Kapila*". It shows the importance and sacredness of the *Aśvattha*.<sup>2</sup>

### **Buddhist Literature**

*Aśvattha* is *Bōdhidṛm* or tree of wisdom of the Buddhists and Jains, who relate that at the birth of the universe, an off shoot no doubt of the vedic and cosmogenic tree. This literature also carries some medical information not only on plants but also on different branches of medicine. Vegetables were divided into five groups corresponding to germinative power and they are propagated from root (*mūlabīja*); stem (*kandabīja*); knot (*phalubīja*); cutting (*aggabīja*) and seed (*bīja*). *Aśśattha* or *Aśvattha*, *Niggōtha* or *Nyagrōdha* (*Ficus bengalensis*), *Pilakka* or *Plakṣa* (*Ficus infectoria*), *Udumbara* (*Ficus glomerata*) and *Kapittana* (*Feronia elephantum*) or whatever others are born from a stem and arise from a stem.<sup>13</sup>

***Pāṇini Aṣṭādhyāyī*** (*Sūtra*) (7th or 5th century B.C.) : It contains valuable information regarding plants and plant sciences. *Pāṇini*, the author of this work followed the *Vēdic* tradition in dividing the plant kingdom into two broad divisions. *ōśadhi* (herbs & shrubs) and *Vṛkṣa* (tree). He had only replaced the word *Vanaspati* by *Vṛkṣa* for trees. He had mentioned a large number of plants in various ganas. For example *Palāśādi gaṇa*, *Plakṣādigaṇa*, *Haritakyādi gaṇa*, etc.

*Aśvattha* has been mentioned in *Plakṣādigaṇa*, which contain *Ficus* plants such as *Plakṣā*, *Nyagrōdha* and *Aśvattha* etc. (4. 2. 22 ; 3. 48). *Pāṇinīya Gaṇapatha* also refers *Aśvattha* at 7 places along with other 164 plants. i.e.

<i>kāsādi kumudādi</i>	(4.2.80)
<i>Utkarādi</i>	(4.2.90)
<i>Parpādi</i>	(4.3.67)
<i>Plakṣādi</i>	(4.3.164)
<i>Pilwādi</i>	(5.2.24)
<i>Ghoṣādi</i>	(6.2.85)
<i>Gaurādi</i>	(4.1.41)

**Patanjali's Mahābhāṣya** (2nd century B.C.) : *Patanjali* had given many valuable informations regarding plants. He has not only described the characters of plants but also given information about the trade route of plant products. *Aśvattha* has been mentioned by him that, its twigs are useful as sacrificial fuel (1.1.2).

### **Purāṇa**

*Vāmana purāṇa* refers *Aśvattha* at 5 places and mentioned that *Nārada* Muni was meditating under this tree (15/22). This *Aśvattha* propitiates from *Yama* (15/38). It can prevent the bad dreams if people remember it with devotion (58/69). It has been given a important place in religious events i.e. after performing *Homa* for prosperity one should touch some auspicious objects, *Aśvattha* tree is one of them(14/37). The origin of *Aśvattha* was mentioned as from *Ravi* (18/8).<sup>9</sup>

*Vāyupurāṇa* refers *Aśvattha* as *vanaspati* (vegetable) which grows on the summit of the *Vipula* mountain. *Indra* had once garlanded this, a fact from which the name of *Kētumala-dvīpa* is derived. It is also mentioned that *Aśvattha* tree grow at the source of the river, *Kāvēri* on the *Ausīra* mountain. Its sticks are recommended for use in *śradtha*. It symbolizes the spirit of kingship. The fire which was presented to king *Pururāvās* by *Gandharvās* was prepared with the sticks of *Aśvattha*.<sup>16</sup>

*Agnipurāṇa* : it refers *Aśvattha* with the synonyms like *Pīpal*, *Bōdhidṛma*, *caladala* etc.(108/12). While describing beautiful female, her *Yoni* was compared with the shape of leaf of *pīpala* (243/1,4). *Pancha pallavas*, *Nyagrotha*, *Udumbara*, *Peepal*, *Parīṣa*, *Plakṣa* were also referred (224/39). At another place *Śrī*, *Kamal* (root), *Aśvattha* and milk etc. were indicated for getting a male baby (302/18-20).<sup>15</sup>

### **Upaniṣad**

*Candogya Upaniṣad* - It speaks of *Aśvattha* as 'sōmaśavana', one of the items met with in the supernatural world where only pious men reach after death (VIII.5.3.).

*Kathakaupaniṣad* - Actual image of the spreading tree with its peculiarity of branches dangling down to the ground. "This eternal *Aśvattha* (the riddle of the universe) has roots up (in the other world) and branches down below (in this) know that to be essence, the *Brahma* etc.

At one place, it is mentioned that. "ūrdhvamūlō vaksaka esośvatthah sanātanah" (III.3.1)

Which means, *Aśvattha* bears the names of *sūd*, *brāhman*, *amṛta*, and the world rest upon it; beneath it there is nothing. The wood of the *Aśvattha* when rubbed against that of *Śami* (*Acacia suma*) engenders fire, which is symbolic of reproduction, the female energy. At the marriage functions of the Hindus both of these plants are necessary.

**Kauṭilya's Arthaśāstra** : It was written by *Kauṭilya* also known as *Viṣṇugupta* and *Cāṇakya* on ancient Indian polity. It refers to *Aśvattha* along with *Jivanti* (*Leptadenia reticulata*) *Śvēta*, *Muśkika* to make a pill which acts as a antidote i.e. while describing the counter measures against injuries to one's own troops (XIV.4.179). At another place *Aśvattha* was mentioned as one of the ingredients of an oil for protecting from burns where author discusses the methods for deceiving the enemy by means of occult practices (XIV.2.178).<sup>18</sup>

### Āyurvēdic Literature

*Aśvattha* mentioned in almost all the *āyurvēdic* texts. It was classified into two groups i.e. 1) *Mūtrasaṅgrahaṇīya* (anti- diuretic) and *Kaṣāyakanda* (Astringent group of drugs) by *Caraka* in *Sūtra Sthāna* (4/33), *Vimāna Sthāna* (8/144). It was classified in *Nyagrōdhādi gaṇa* (*Ficus* group) of drugs by *Suśruta* in *Sūtra Sthāna* (38/48). Where as *Vāgbhāta* of *Aṣṭāṅga Hrdaya* has classified this in *Kṣīravṛkṣa* (latex producing) group and *Pañca valkala* group (five plants with useful bark) of drugs.

*Aśvattha* has several synonyms, most of them symbolize its sacredness for example *Yāgnik* (sacrificial) and *sēvyā* (worthy of worship) etc. *āyurvēda* considers its properties as follows. *Rasa-Kaṣāya* (Astringent), *Madhura* (Sweet); *Guṇa-* Guru (heavyness) & *Rūkṣa* (roughness); *Vipāka- Kaṭu* (pungent); *Vīrya-Śīta* (coldness).

*Narahari*, the author of *Rājanighaṇṭu* and others refer as many as 32 synonyms of this tree. They are 1. *Bōdhidṛma*, 2. *Caladal*, 3. *Pippalaha*, 4. *Kuñjarasēna*, 5. *Ityamaraha*, 6. *Calamantraha*, 7. *Pavitrakaha*, 8. *Śubhadaha*, 9. *Bōdhivṛkṣa*, 10. *Yāgnika*, 11. *gajabhakṣakaha*, 12. *Śrīmana*, 13. *kṣīradṛma*, 14. *Vipra*, 15. *Māṅgalya*, 16. *Śyāmala*, 17. *Guhyapuṣpa*, 18. *Sevyaha*, 19. *Satyaha*, 20. *Sucidṛmaha*, 21. *Dhanuvṛkṣaha*, 22. *Nāgabandhu*, 23. *Kṛṣṇavāsa*, 24. *Dēvātma*, 25. *Mahādṛma*, 26. *Kapītana*, 27. *Ateyutavāsa*, 28. *Calapatra*, 29. *Gajāsana*, 30. *Kcśavālaya*, 31. *Caityadr*, 32. *Bodhitaru* etc.<sup>1</sup>

Authors of *Bṛhatrayee* (three big compendia of *āyurvēda*) viz *Caraka*, *Suśruta*, *Vāgbhatta* had mentioned *Aśvattha* approximately at 46 places i.e. 25; 7; 14 places respectively.<sup>23</sup>

*Rājanighaṇṭu*, *Dhanvantari* and *Sōdhala Nighaṇṭus* have classified *Aśvattha* in *Amarādivarga* (*Mangifera indica* group). Whereas *Madanapāla Nighaṇṭu* and *Kaiyadeva Nighaṇṭus* have classified it in *Vaṭādi varga* (*Ficus benghalensis* group) and *Ośadhi varga* (medicinal plant group) respectively. *Śāligrāmavaiśya* also classified it in *Vaṭādi varga*.

**Useful Parts:** Stem bark, fruit, leaves, apical bud, latex and root.

### Actions & Uses

This is said to be pacifier of *Kapha* & *Pitta dōṣās*. It improves completion, heals wounds, burns, analgesic, anti-inflammatory. Bark: Useful in vomiting, diarrhoea and dysentery; Ripened fruit: In abdominal colic, constipation; Young shoots: Purgative.<sup>18, 21</sup>

**Dose:** Juice- 10 – 20 ml; Decoction – 50-100 ml ; Powder – 1-3 gm.

### Chemical Constituents

Beta- Sitosteryl- D- glucoside (bark); Vitamin-K, n- octacosanol, methyleanolate, lanosterol, lupen-3 one and phytosterolin, bergaptin bergapitol and 4% of tannin (stem bark; protein and amino acids (leaves). Air dried bark yields 11.7% of ash.<sup>21</sup>

According to *Nadkarni's Materia medica*, *Aśvattha* seeds act as cooling, laxative, refrigerent; leaves and young shoots are purgative; bark is cooling, astringent, sweet has nutritive powers and also a corrective of *Kapha* and *Pitta Dōṣās* (humors). Fruit is laxative and digestive. Infusion of bark is astringent. Stem bark or root of *Aśvattha* is employed as substitute for *Sōma* (*Ephedra gerardiana* Wall.).<sup>14,21</sup>

*Āyurvēda* texts indicated that, *Aśvattha* is useful in consumption (*Bhēla Saṁhitā*), vomiting (*Bhāva prakāśa*), *Vātarakta* (*Caraka saṁhitā*), *Pramēha*, as aphrodisiac, fractures (*Suśruta Saṁhitā*), burns (*Vṛnda Mādhava's* text), *Mukhapāka* or apthous ulcers (*Cakradatta*) etc.

There are some important preparations of *Aśvattha* and used for different diseases for example, 1) *Aśvattha mūlādi mōdaka* (*Bhēla Samhita, Cikitsā Sthāna* 4/54-70); 2) *Pañcavalka Kaṣāya*, 3) *Nyagrodhādi Cūrṇa*, 4) *Karanjādyā ghṛta*, 5. *Sārivādyāsava* etc.<sup>1,19-22</sup>

Ainslie, the author of 'Materia Indica' also states that the seeds of *Ficus religiosa* are supposed to possess cooling and alternaive qualities and quotes the following passage from Basloleo's Voyage to the ' East Indies'. "Pulverised and taken in water for fourteen days together, the fruit removes asthma and promotes fruitfulness in woman"(Part-II)<sup>24</sup>

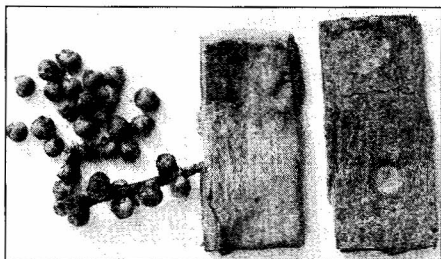
### Botanical description of *Aśvattha*

Botanical name: *Ficus religiosa* Linn.

Family: *Moraceae*

Vernacular names

Arabic	-	Shajratul, Mutrash
Bangla	-	Asvath, Ashuth, Ashathwa
English	-	Sacred fig tree, Peepal tree
French	-	Figuier-ou-arbre des pagodes
German	-	Religiöser Fiegenbaum
Gujarati	-	Peepalo, Jari, Pipro, Pupul
Hindi	-	Peepal, Pipal, Pipli
Kannada	-	Arali, Asvattha
Konkan	-	Pimpala
Malayalam	-	Arayal, Arachu, Ashvattham
Marathi	-	Pimpala, asvatha
Parsei	-	DarakhatLarja
Punjabi	-	Pipal, Bhor
Tamil	-	Arak, Arasu, Arasha-maram, Arasan, Asvattham
Telugu	-	Raavi, Bodhi, Raavichettu, Raiga, Rai, Kulla-Raavi, Ashvatthamu



*Aśvattha (Ficus religiosa)*

(Courtesy : Data Base on Medicinal Plants used in *Āyurvēda*; CCRAS)

A large genus of trees & shrubs often climbers with milky juice, widely distributed throughout the tropics of both hemispheres but particularly abundant in South-East Asia and Polynasia. About 65 species occur in India; the genus is remarkable for the large variation in the habit of its species. All species of *Ficus* yield latex, best example is *Ficus elastica* which is known source of rubber. Many species are reported as hosts of the Indian lac insect.

A large deciduous tree, epiphytic when young with spreading branches and rotund or broadly ovate, caudate, more or less pendulous leaves; fruits sessile in axillary pairs, depressed globose, c. 1/2" in diameter, black or purple when ripe. The tree is found wild or cultivated nearly throughout India and is considered sacred by Hindus and Buddhists. It is planted as an avenue or road side tree. It grows fast and can be raised from seeds. It can also be propagated by cuttings, but these do not strike so well as those of *Ficus benghalensis*. (Synonym: *Urostima religiosum* Gasp.).

The fruits and tender buds are occasionally eaten in times of scarcity. The fruits are eagerly devoured by birds. The leaves and twigs are lopped for cattle and elephant fodder. The tree is one of the recorded hosts of the Indian lac insect in Madhya pradesh, Bengal and Assam. The bark contains 4% Tannins and is astringent. An infusion of it is used for ulcers and skin diseases. An aqueous extract of the bark shows anti-bacterial activity against *Staphylococcus aureus* and *Escherichia coli*. Leaves and tender

shoots are used as purgative and in skin diseases. The fruit is laxative and the seeds are considered to be cooling, alternative and laxative.<sup>3</sup>

William Dymock, describes *Aśvattha* as it is given below, *Ficus religiosa* is a tree and its leaves long petioled, ovate, cordate, narrow acuminate, acumen, one third the length of the leaf, entire or repandly undulated towards the apex; fruits receptacles axillary, paired, sessile, depressed, size of a small cherry appearing in the hot season and ripening in the rainy season, purple when ripe.<sup>7</sup>

In addition Dymock states that *Aśvattha* is an inhabitant of india. He refers *Kathaka Upanishad* where, an etrnal and cosmogenic *Aśvattha* or *Pippal tree* is described. Dymock also refers *Rājanighaṇṭu* also which carries the synonyms for *Aśvattha*, i.e. *Yāgnic* - sacrificial, *śrīmāna* - fortunate, *Vipra* - wise, *sēvya* - worthy of worship etc. Indications of *Aśvattha* given are ulcers, leucorrhoea and excessive salivation. The powdered root bark of the *Aśvattha*, rubbed with honey is applied to the aphthae and unhealthy ulcers to promote granulation.

## Conclusion

*Aśvattha* (*Ficus religiosa* Linn.) is a tree which has the medicinal value and religious importance. It is an inhabitant of India and is sacred for Hindus and Buddhists all over the world. It is well described in ancient medical and non-medical literature.

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## सारांश

### पवित्र वृक्ष अश्वत्थ का चिकित्सिकीय-ऐतिहासिक अध्ययन

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अश्वत्थ वृक्ष का प्राचीन समय से भारतीय संस्कृति में पौराणिक, धार्मिक और चिकित्सिकीय महत्त्व है। वैदिक सूची के अनुसार अश्वत्थ का अर्थ वह स्थान है जहाँ अश्व (घोड़े) निवास करते हैं। अश्वत्थ पीपल और बोधिद्रुम के नाम से भी जाना जाता है। भारतवर्ष में यह वृक्ष सबसे पुराना चित्रित वृक्ष है। वैदिक काल में इसका उपयोग घर्षण के द्वारा अग्नि प्रज्वलित करने के लिए किया जाता था। इसे पवित्र माना जाता है। अथर्ववेद के अनुसार यह तीसरे स्वर्ग से सम्बन्ध रखता है। अथर्ववेद में सोम और कुष्ठ के साथ ही अश्वत्थ के चिकित्सिकीय गुणों पर विचार विमर्श किया गया है। अश्वत्थ ब्रह्मा, विष्णु और शिव तीनों देवताओं से सम्बद्ध है। अश्वत्थ के सन्दर्भ रामायण, महाभारत, भगवद् गीता, बौद्ध साहित्य, अर्थशास्त्र, पुराण, उपनिषद् आदि अचिकित्सिकीय साहित्य में भी है। आयुर्वेद के अनुसार इसके बहुत पर्याय हैं। उनमें से अधिकतर इसकी पवित्रता के प्रतीक हैं। अश्वत्थ क्षय, छर्दि, मुख व्रण, दाह, स्त्रीरोग आदि विभिन्न व्याधियों में उपयोगी है। इस लेख में इसका चिकित्सिकीय ऐतिहासिक महत्त्व, क्षेत्रीय पारिभाषिक शब्दावली एवं आकृति मूलक कुछ चित्र भी प्रस्तुत किये जा रहे हैं।