

*Ficus religiosa*

[Synonyms : *Urostigma religiosum*]

**PEEPUL** is an evergreen tree. Native to tropical south-eastern Asia (especially Burma – often called Myanmar today – and India) it has purple fruit (receptacles).

It is also known as *Aracha* (Tamil), *Aswatha* (Singhalese), *Bodi* (Malay), *Bodi-arbo* (Esperanto), Bohdi tree, Bohd tree, Bo tree, Buddha tree, *Bunut kaloja* (Javanese), *Drasi* (Tamil), *Feigenbaum* (German), Peepal, *Pho* (Thai), Pipal (English, Hindi), *Piplo* (Gujarati), *Pipul* (Indian), Sacred fig, *Sali* (Thai), and Strangler tree.

The leaves are tremulous because of the freedom of movement allowed by the flattened stalk. The seeds are distributed by birds.

*Religiosa* is Latin (holy, sacred) meaning ‘sacred or used in religious ritual’.

Birds are partial to the fruit and the seeds pass through them undigested often to land in the most surprising places, including crevices in walls of buildings and bridges, and the tops of palms and other trees. In these unlikely situations the seed still germinates and the seedlings have to be removed from structures by non-Hindu or Buddhist believers as the tree is sacred to both. (The former cannot countenance the possibility of harming it in any way and anyone who plants a seed is especially blessed.) Those seeds that end up in the treetops are another matter as they lead to the explanation of the name ‘strangler tree’. As the seedling develops it drops its roots down around the trunk of the unwitting ‘host’ tree. These interlace, effectively strangling the supporting plant and the seedling’s leaves also create an unsought depth of shade so that the ‘host’ tree rots away to leave the peepul tree in its place.

In Indian folklore the peepul tree is viewed as the female to the banyan’s male. It is also for some Buddhists the tree under which Prince Gautama Siddhartha (c.563-c.483 BC) received spiritual enlightenment at Bodh-Gaya. Not least because of the religious connotations it is a familiar sight in Indian villages, and it is also cultivated in avenues in urban areas. In Myanmar (Burma) the tongues of Buddhist temple bells are often shaped like the leaf and leafstalk.

One of the oldest trees in Sri Lanka was introduced from India to Anuradhapura in the northern part of the Country in 288 BC and is said to have been an offspring of the tree that sheltered Buddha. Some authorities have suggested that all peepul trees seen today in Sri Lanka are descended from that hallowed Indian tree. Certainly for many Sri Lankans the tree’s survival once signified the continued power of their Country’s ruling dynasty.

As referred to earlier the tree has religious connotations for Hindus as well. Hindu couples who desire to have a child will circle a peepul tree 100 times while reciting a given prayer or mantra.

Despite religious strictures on the use of the peepul tree a species of silkworm has been fed on its leaves, particularly in Assam in north-eastern India. The tree also yields an inferior lac from insect secretions and this is used to make a shellac for local banglemakers. Its milky latex has provided a sealing wax for mending ornaments and an alternative to bird-lime.

The fruit are edible but in some areas are only eaten as a famine food.

In Burma (also called Myanmar today) the bark fibres have been used to make paper. Locally it has also been made into rope, and used for tanning and dyeing.

The durable wood has been used for making packing cases and boxes, and spoons and bowls. It has also been used for manufacturing matches – and has provided a source of fuel. Medicinally, the latex has been used in local remedies for treating toothache and has been applied as a gum massage.