

WEST BENGAL

State Tree: Chhatim, Saptaparni (Bengali).

Botanical Name: *Alstonia scholaris* (L.) R. Br.

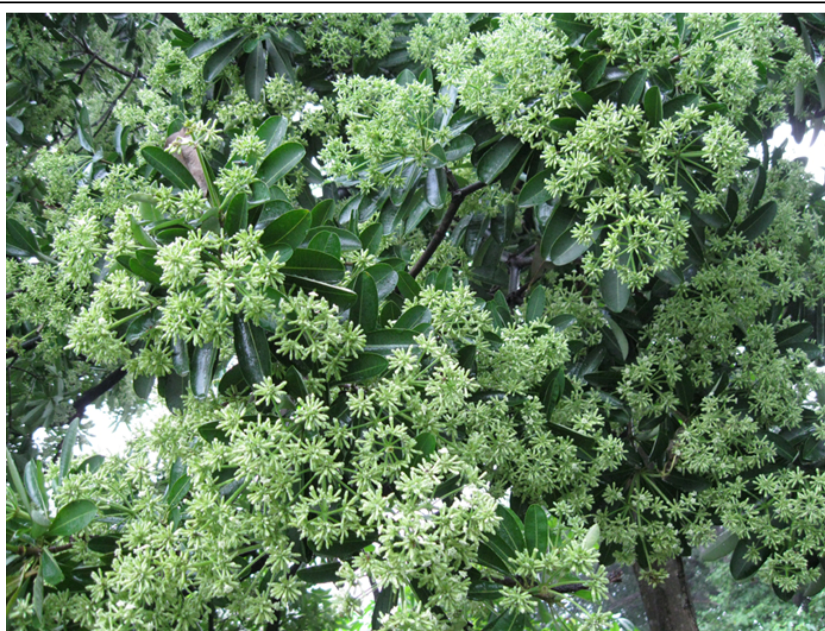
Vernacular Names: Black Board Tree, Indian Devil Tree, Milk Wood Tree, White Cheese Wood (English); Chatian (Hindi); Saptaparna (Sanskrit).

Family: Apocynaceae (Dogbane Family).

Etymology: The generic name '*Alstonia*' derived after Dr. C. Alston (1685 – 1760), a Professor of Botany of Edinburgh University and the specific epithet '*scholaris*' comes from the fact that the wood is good for making black board.

Botanical Description:

An evergreen tree grows up to 40 m tall having greyish bark. Leaves occur in whorls of 3 – 10, narrowly obovate to spatulate with cuneate base and usually rounded apex, 10 – 23 × 4 – 7 cm, leathery, glossy. The upper surface is dark green and lower surface is greenish white. Flowers are in dense cymes, small, fragrant and white,



***Alstonia scholaris* (L.) R. Br.**

[Courtesy: Gopal Krishna]

with 4 – 7 cm long peduncles. Corolla tubular, 6 – 10 mm long with broadly ovate or obovate lobes overlapping to the left. Ovaries are distinct and pubescent. Fruits are linear, pendulous, two-lobed, dehiscent follicles. Seeds are dispersed by wind.

Flowering & Fruiting: The flowers bloom in the month of October.

Range of Distribution: It is native to Indian subcontinent, Southeast Asia, China, Indonesia and Australia. It is also naturalized in several other tropical and subtropical regions of the world.

Economic Importance: The latex provides good quality chewing gum. Bark yields fiber. Wood is regarded as suitable pulp in paper production. Timber is used for making plywood and blackboard. Wood charcoal is used for making gun powder.

Traditional Uses: Since ancient times the tree has been used to make paper in India and other parts of South Asia. Wood is used to make black board for writing. In India, many tribal communities believe that the tree is evil and inhabited by evil spirits. Tantric practioners often write magical mantras on a piece of bark and wear it as an amulet.

Medicinal Uses: Bark is used in Ayurveda medicine to cure fever, malaria, indigestion tumors, ulcers, asthma, and so forth. Leaves and latex are applied externally to treat tumors. In traditional Chinese medicine, the dried leaves are used as expectorant. Seeds contain indole alkaloids, which are known to be psychoactive. Bark contains alkaloids, such as ditamine, echitenine and echitamine and used as an alternative to quinine. Decoction of leaves is used for beriberi.

Ceremonial Uses: It is a customary to give 'Chhatim' leaves to graduating students at the annual convocation of Viswabharti University at Shantiniketan, West Bengal.

Note: The plant can be propagated by seed germination or by grafting. The species is often planted on roadsides, for its good canopy.



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