

# Banyan tree

The banyan tree is native to the Indian subcontinent. It is one of the most beloved and easily recognisable trees of the city and is the national tree of India. The tree, which is sacred to Hindus, Buddhists, and Jains, is as much a Mumbaikar as any human resident!



Species: *Ficus benghalensis*

## **History, Culture, and Religion**

It became known as the banyan tree because of Thomas Herbert who, in an early 17th century trip to what is now Bandar Abbas (then in Persia), noticed a tree embellished with ribbons by traders (called 'banians') from India.



The tree is also called “Kalpavriksha”- translating to the tree that grants wishes, highlighting its valuable role in Hindu mythology. The tree is revered and considered sacred, and is thought of as the peepal tree’s male consort.

It is supposed to be a representation of the Trimurti (trinity of supreme Hindu gods Shiva, Brahma and Vishnu), with Brahma (‘the Creator’) symbolising the roots, Vishnu (‘the Preserver’) symbolising the bark and Shiva (‘the Destroyer’) symbolising the branches or aerial roots.

Ancient Hindu texts describe a ‘world tree’, an inverted banyan tree with its roots in heaven, and its trunks and branches towards the Earth to bless humans.

However, the Banyan tree also assumed a darker role in colonial India. The British used to hang Indian rebels from the branches, and often force the locals to watch in order to exert control and scare the public.

### **Notable Banyan trees in Mumbai**

- The Krishna’s Buttercup- *Ficus benghalensis* var. *krishnae*, found in Mumbai’s Rani Bagh’s botanical garden, is a rare mutant. It is named because of its distinct, cup shaped leaves, which have a story associated with them: the Hindu god Krishna was stealing butter and to avoid punishment from Yashoda, his foster mother, he rolled it in a leaf of the tree. The leaves retained that shape, hence resulting in the unique pocket-like folds on the underside of the leaves. This tree is one of Rani Bagh’s most beloved.
- Just outside Horniman Circle stands a massive banyan tree that once played a critical role in the city’s financial history. It’s believed that a group of traders used to meet beneath its leafy branches in the 1850s to trade in stocks, and that it was from those humble beginnings that the Bombay Stock Exchange was born. In fact, many believe that the name “banyan tree” comes from the word Baniya (trader) because of this old connection.





*A picture of the famous Horniman Circle banyan tree*

### **Notable Banyan trees in India**

- Akshaya Vata- or the Immortal Banyan- is the only tree in Hindu scriptures referred to by a proper noun. It is said to be the final tree left standing when the world cycle elapses. According to the Matsya Purana, Lord Shiva permanently protects this tree with his trident.
- Thimmamma Marrimanu is the world's largest single tree canopy, first added to the Guinness Book of World Records in 1989. It is believed to be over 550 years old. The tree is thought to have the ability to help childless couples get pregnant. It is named after a widow, Thimmamma, who committed sati in 1433, and some Hindus believe a pole of the funeral pyre grew into the Banyan tree following her death. The villagers claim a total of 20,000 people can stand under the canopy of the tree.

### **Strangler Trees and Designer Wasps**

Banyans are “strangler trees”, they are originally epiphytes- a plant growing on another plant. Their seeds germinate on the surfaces of other trees and they grow prop roots to



the ground. These roots not only hinder the host tree's ability to access sunlight by winding around the tree but also spread underground, reducing the water and nutrients available to other nearby plants.



Since the tree's aerial roots extend to the ground and grow into strong prop roots that support the branches over them, the banyan tree can be very wide and is noted by Guinness World Records as the species covering the most area. India, as of 2020, had 6 banyan trees covering at least 1 hectare.

Banyan trees are called "keystone" species because their leaves, figs and canopies provide shelter and food to multiple birds, animals and reptiles.

Every fig (ficus) tree and a specific species of wasp have a relationship in which both are completely dependent on each other for the survival of the species. Each ficus species has an associated designer

species of wasp that pollinates it, and neither fig tree nor wasp can survive without the other. The banyan tree's fig- a receptacle of microscopic flowers- sends an aroma to attract the wasp, which enters the fig through an opening and lays eggs. Once the larvae turn into wasps and mate, the pregnant females travel to the figs of other trees of the same species to lay eggs, carrying pollen with them.