



Nakshatra Vanam

Maham - Banyan Tree



M. Subramanian
Project Officer

C.P.R. Environmental Education Centre
Chennai

Botanical Name: *Ficus benghalensis* L.

Tamil Name: Aal

Sanskrit Name: Nyagrodha

English Name: Banyan Tree

Habitat

Large spreading evergreen tree, epiphytic in early life with numerous aerial roots from the branches which thicken and ultimately become stilts. Bark grayish brown, smooth, younger parts softly pubescent. Leaves elliptic-ovate, 12-18 by 5-8 cm long, margin entire, obtuse at apex, rounded at base, coriaceous, glossy above, glabrescent or pubescent beneath, 5-7 veins, lateral veins 5-7 on either half of mid-vein, looped within the margin, prominent beneath. Petiole 2-3 cm, stipules 1.5-2.5 cm, deltoid, acute, coriaceous. Figs in axillary pairs, sessile, globose, silky pubescent, basal bracts suborbicular. Male and female flowers in the same receptacle. Male flowers numerous near the mouth of the receptacle, perianth segments 4, stamens 1. Gall flowers similar, with a short style, Female flowers with smaller perianth and elongated style. Syconus fruit scarlet red when ripe. (India Biodiversity Portal).



Religious Association

The banyan tree is symbolic of Lord Shiva and is also sacred to Lord Vishnu, Lord Brahma, Lord Maheswara, goddess Kali and goddess Lakshmi. The tree has also been associated with the subject of astrology under the constellation Maham.



Temples associated with the banyan tree

<i>District</i>	<i>Village/Town</i>	<i>Temple</i>	<i>Deity</i>
Cuddalore	Tiruvattadurai	Anandheeswarar	Shiva
Nagappatinam	Tiruvenkadu	Svedaranyeswarar	Shiva
Pudukkottai	Tirumeyyam	Sathiyagiriswarar	Shiva
Tiruchirapalli	Anbilalandurai	Aalandhuraiyaar	Shiva
Tiruchirapalli	Paluvur	Aalandhuraiyaar	Shiva
Tiruvallur	Kachchur	Virundhiteswarar	Shiva
Virudhunagar	Tiruthangal Perumal	Ninra Narayana	Vishnu

(Source – Sacred Trees of Tamil Nadu – 2005 by M. Amirthalingam)

Medicinal uses and other benefits

The juice of the bark of the tree can be applied on bruises and can be used as a pain reliever in rheumatism and back pain. It also gives relief for toothache. The leaves of the tree can be



Collection of barks of banyan tree for medicinal preparation

heated and applied as a poultice for abscesses. The bark is considered to be astringent and the seeds have a cooling effect. According to Ayurveda, the aerial roots can be used in lipid disorders. The latex of the tree is very useful in the treatment of diarrhea and dysentery. The root bark has anti-diabetic properties and is very effective in the treatment of pituitary diabetes. The extract of the tree can be used to treat gum and mouth diseases. The leaves of the tree can help to treat skin abscesses. It is also said that the root bark helps to lower blood sugar levels.

Mythology /Folklore

According to Vishnu Purana, Kashyapa Muni reached enlightenment while meditating under the tree. It is also said that Buddha attained enlightenment under the banyan tree. According to Jain tradition, the first Tirthankara Rishabhanatha received gyana or perfect knowledge under the banyan tree. Thus this tree is sacred to both the Buddhist and Jain religions (Bhattacharya, 1974)

The Hindus consider this tree to be a *Kalpavriksha* or wish fulfilling tree. This tree is worshipped in many religious functions and the aerial roots are considered to resemble the matted hair of Lord Shiva. There is another legend that says that this tree is worshipped in memory of Sati Savithri who brought her husband back to life by worshipping the banyan tree. There is a story in *Vamana Purana* that says that the banyan tree was created by a *yaksha* who was the head of the *yaksha ganas* (Dagar, 1995).



According to *Koorma Purana*, Shiva lives in the tree and the fruits are eaten by the people of Ramyaka Varsha. This tree has been grown in India since ancient times. Its wood is used in religious ceremonies. Especially, this tree is worshipped on the twelfth day of the month of Jyestha. It is believed that a person who worships the tree will gain prosperity and wealth. It is also a symbol of faith and friendship (Birdwood, 1986).

Conclusion

The banyan tree is considered sacred in many parts of India. In olden times, food was often served on banyan tree leaves. In modern times, the use of plastic has degraded the environment. However, the fruits are still eaten by birds, monkeys and bats which continue to use the natural environment for their needs. The aerial roots can be made into tent poles and cart-yokes. The bark fiber and hanging roots are used to make ropes (Cowen, 1984). The tree has also got an antimicrobial effect and can purify the atmosphere. Hence it is planted along avenues, and highways. In some countries, it is considered to be an ornamental tree; however, in India, it has more of religious significance. There is also a need to educate the younger generation about the various aspects of this tree.

