

**National Tree:** The Banyan

**Botanical Name:** *Ficus benghalensis* L.

**Family:** Moraceae

**Common Names:** Bar, Bat Gaach, Bath, Bot (Bengali); Banyan Fig, Banyan Tree, East Indian Fig Tree, Indian Banyan, Weeping Chinese Banyan (English); Vad, Vadlo, Vor (Gujarati); Bargad, Barh, Vatavriksh (Hindi); Aalada Mara (Kannada); Aalamaram, Peraal (Malayalam); Vada, Wad, War (Marathi); Bara Gacha (Odiya); Nyagrodha, Vat Vriksha (Sanskrit); Aalamaram (Tamil); Marrichettu (Telugu); Bar (Urdu).

**Etymology:** The common name, banyan, is derived from 'banias', Portuguese used this word to refer specifically to Hindu merchants, who used to conduct their business under this tree. Eventually 'banyan' became the name of the tree itself. The generic name, **Ficus** is a Latin name for figs and the specific epithet, **benghalensis** is named after the place of its origin, Bengal.

**Description:** A very large, evergreen tree grows up to 20 m tall with spreading branches and many pillar-like aerial, prop roots. Leaves ovate-cordate, entire at margins, rounded at apex, 8 – 20 × 6 – 15 cm, coriaceous, glarous above, fine-pubescent beneath, 3 – 5-veined at base; lateral veins 4 – 6 pairs; petioles stout, 1 – 5 cm long, with a broad smooth greasy gland at apex, ventrally compressed, hairy.

Inflorescence a hypanthodium (fig), in axillary pairs, sessile, globose, 1.5 – 2 cm, hairy, subtended by 3



A panoramic view of the Great Banyan Tree at AJC Bose Indian Botanic Garden, Howrah  
Courtesy: P. Dayanandan, Chennai

minutely hairy bracts, green, turning red on ripening. Flowers minute, 3 kinds: male, female and gall; male flowers numerous, near the ostiole of fig, pedicellate; tepals 3; stamen 1; female flowers sessile; gall flowers pedicellate, with a developing insect. Fruit an achene, globose-ellipsoid, creamish-brown.

**Flowering & Fruiting:** April – July.

**Range of Distribution:** Native to India, Bangladesh and Pakistan; occurring naturally in tropical forests throughout the subcontinent.



A portion of the Great Banyan tree showing pillier-like prop roots  
Courtesy: P. Dayanandan, Chennai

**Economic Importance:** Fiber obtained from bark and aerial prop roots is used for making paper and coarse ropes. Wood is hard and durable and is used for furniture and house-building. Wood is also suitable for paper pulp. Twigs and prop roots are used as tooth stick. Figs are edible, can be eaten fresh or dried. Application of a mixture of coconut oil and pulp of the fig promotes hair growth.

**Medicinal Uses:** The aerial prop root is styptic.

It is useful in treating syphilis, biliousness, dysentery and inflammation of liver. Bark is astringent and is also used in dysentery and diabetes. Its latex is aphrodisiac, tonic, vulnerary, maturant, lessens inflammations, useful in piles, nose-diseases and gonorrhoea. Latex is externally applied for pains and bruises and as an anodyne in rheumatism and lumbago. It is also a remedy for toothache. Infusion of young buds is useful in diarrhoea and dysentery. Leaves are heated and applied as poultice to abscesses. Seeds are considered cooling and tonic.

**Religious Significance:** It is one of the most venerated trees in India. The tree is considered sacred to Hindus and Buddhists.

**Notes:** Flowers are pollinated by a single species of wasp, **Eupristina masoni**. Seeds are dispersed mainly by fruit-eating birds like Indian Mynas. Propagation is through seed, transplanting and stem-cutting. A banyan tree at Thimmamma Marrimanu in Anantapur



The largest Banyan tree in the world at Anantapur,  
Andhra Pradesh  
Courtesy: P.V. Prasanna

district of Andhra Pradesh is the largest tree in the world, covering an area of 2.5 ha, and is 650 years old. Their branch spread over 8 acres and has 1 650 prop roots. It was recorded as the biggest tree in the Guinness Book of World Records in 1989. The Great Banyan in the AJC Bose Indian Botanic Garden, Howrah, is the widest, as well as one of the largest trees in the world. It is more than 250 years old. It has about 2900 prop roots, and covers an area of 1.5 ha. Circumference of its canopy is about 450 m and has been recorded in the Guinness Book of World Records.

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