

News letter of 
**Bangalore
 Environment
 Trust** (Regl.)

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FICUS GENUS

FICUS BENGALENSIS

Sanskrit : Nayagrodha, Hindi : Bargad, Kannada : Ala mara

India has over 80 known species of the Ficus family of which the Banyan (*Ficus Bengalensis*) is the most prominent followed by the Peepal tree (*Ficus religiosa*).

The Banyan tree has been, for millennia, the best known tree of India. Pliny the Elder, in A.D. 70, described this tree of India as "the tree that plants itself; it spreads out mighty arms to the earth, where in the space of a single year the arms take root and put forth anew." Much before Pliny the Aryans sweeping across the arid wastes of Asia were awestruck by this mighty shade giving tree. The Aryan chiefs, imbibed ritually of the Banyan sap believing that the liquid would bestow immortality on them, increase their vitality and empower them to control the lands they had conquered.

Many millennia later, Milton writes of the Banyan:
 "The fig-tree, not that kind for fruit renown'd;
 But such as at this day, to Indians known,
 In Malabar or Decan spreads her arms
 Branching so broad and long, that in the ground
 The bended twigs take root,
 And daughters grow
 About the mother -tree, a pillar'd shade
 High over-arch'd, and echoing walks between"
 Paradise Lost, ix, 1101.

The Banyan was so named by the first Europeans who came to India who noticed, that merchants particularly Banias from Gujarat conducted their business under a Banyan tree. There is a Banyan tree on record which started adjacent to a small village in Gujarat and has moved linearly (with the original trunk/trunks having withered away) and now stands 2 miles away from where it began life 200 years ago resulting in it being referred to as "the tree that walks".

The oldest Stock Exchange in India, the Bombay Stock Exchange, first conducted business under a Banyan tree in 1851 where Horniman's Circle is located today. With the construction of Horniman Circle and the cutting of the Banyan tree the Stock Exchange moved to conduct business under another Banyan tree this time at the intersection of Mira Road and Mahatma Gandhi Road, till they were forced by an expanding Bombay to move out in 1874 to Dalal Street which is their current address. Thus, the oldest Stock Exchange in India conducted business for 23 years under the shade of 2 Banyan trees.

The largest Banyan tree today is in Andhra Pradesh and has been known to house over 20,000 people. It is literally a small forest. The Banyan is a tree with a huge spread with characteristic aerial roots which upon touching and entering the earth, draws sustenance from the earth, thickens/lignifies and becomes a new trunk. The leaves are leathery and oval shaped with the berry or figs emerging in pairs which are globose and ripen to a red colour. Typically the flowers – male and female and gall flowers all grow radially inwards towards the centre of the hollow berry or fig. The tree is evergreen though briefly leafless at the peak of the hot season in dry localities. The leaves are fodder for cattle, elephants and camels. In many princely states the felling of Banyans was forbidden within a mile of camping grounds as the leaves supplied elephant fodder.

The figs provide food for a variety of animals particularly birds and have been used as a famine food by man.

The leaves traditionally have been made into "green" plates with slivers of Bamboo stitching up the leaves.

*The Banyan is known as *Ficus bengalensis* after the great Banyan tree in the Botanical gardens at Calcutta where its origin has been traced to undigested seeds dropped by a bird in the crown of a date palm in 1782. This tree today occupies over one and a half hectares and has a circumference of a little less than half a kilometer with 100 subsidiary trunks and 1775 prop roots. It is interesting to note that Alexander's army sheltered under a Banyan tree and their conception of "roots" and "stems" were shaken.*

The Banyan tree has numerous uses in medicine. A fusion of Banyan seeds makes a very effective aphrodisiac and the latex from the Banyan applied externally speeds up the healing of wounds and open sores. Ayurveda has used the Banyan in medicine which assist in blood clotting. Banyans contains astringent and antiseptic properties while an infusion from the Banyan bark alleviates diabetes.

The many footed Banyan is the most prominent sacred tree in India. The Banyan when fully grown is a majestic sight. From within the tree and standing amongst the multitude of trunks the Banyan gives the impression of a many pillared cathedral. For rural folk across India the Banyan casts a benediction on the surrounding land on which they live.

For sometime now we have been greatly concerned at the loss of green cover in Bangalore City. Bangalore is losing its appellation as the Garden City of India. Very little has been done to take effective steps for re-greening Bangalore. Zafar Futehally has taken the initiative to recreate an awareness of the value of trees among the officials of the concerned Government organizations and the citizens by organizing a Tree Meet.

Mr. Pradip Krishen who has brought out a bestseller on Trees of Delhi has agreed to give an audio visual Presentation on the 6th of January 2007. Justice Saldanha has agreed to preside over the meeting. There will also be a Presentation on Techniques of Transplantation of Trees and on Heritage Trees and Exotics in Bangalore.

Mr. Krishen's audiovisual Presentation shall cover:

- 1. Selection of appropriate trees for a city and the approach to this with emphasis on ecology.*
- 2. How to accommodate trees/tree planting and green areas in city planning – planning methodologies and modeling need to change; the importance of integrated conservation of planning for a city.*
- 3. Arboriculture Manuals; the importance of recording and passing on data about trees.*
- 4. Awareness & Consciousness raising to move away from the didactic and boring when trying to enthuse students in tree planting or when taking care of trees – how to go about this?*
- 5. Protecting trees – tree acts etc.*

Samir Whitaker will give a Presentation on collection of data on trees and local micro environment to establish the effect of trees on the mitigation of environmental degradation, pollution and reduction in particulate matter.

Mr. Prasad, Senior Horticulturalist of the Taj Group West End Hotel will give a Presentation on transplantation of trees. West End hotel has considerable experience on transplanting fully grown coconut trees, plumerias and even a 70 ft. auracaria tree in their own premises. This together with Mr. Prasad's experience elsewhere of transplanting trees will form the core of the Presentation.

Mr. Mahesh Srinivas and V. R. Thiruvady will give a photo Presentation on Heritage Trees of Bangalore and some of the beautiful flowering exotics in Bangalore to build up an awareness of our heritage as well as the visible beauty of trees in bloom.

With this as a first step, BET wishes to generate awareness and interest in the re-greening of Bangalore.

Rebuke to Banyans

*Red-berried banyan, still unsatisfied,
For all your swelling bulk and verdurous pride
Of sweeping branches, throwing out new sprays
And fibres ever, seeking still to raise
Fresh pillars and augment your kingdom vast,
Fenced from the sun and the destructive blast
Of the wild month of rains, that strips and tears
Tough pipals and to earth the siris bears,
Uproots the sturdy jack, and maims the teak!
Somewhat in envy, banyan, do I speak;
Yet not unjustly. If my_tree could show
One-tenth so rich a pomp, such scarlet glow
Of green-set fruit that feeds the scuffling bats
And eager birds, and even for sordid rats
Scatters a largesse. . . such a shining roof
Of glossy leaves, Night's temple huge, sun-proof,
With cool, deep glooms where gods and flies awhile
Shelter from noon... with many a dappled aisle,
Where rays of light in harmless arrows fall,
And tired winds sleep, and birds forget to call...*

*If this were mine, I should not grab more land
Or seek proportions vaster, lot more grand;
I would not still of waxing empire dream,
Chamber to chamber add, and giant beam
With beam inlay, and endless swink and toil;
With nervous, itching fingers still more soil
Grasp and for yet more swollen kingdom strive!
No! I should rest, and save my soul alive.*

EDWARD THOMPSON

LIST OF TRUSTEES

1. **Capt. S. Prabhala**
Director, Infotech Pvt. Ltd
2. **Mohan Bopaiah**
Architect
3. **Zafar Futehally**
Environmentalist
4. **David Lobo**
Director
M/s DeeJay Enterprises
5. **Urmila Devi Kotda Sangani**
International Music & Art Society
6. **G. Govardhan**
Retd. Addl. General Manager, BHEL
7. Air Vice Marshall
S.G. Heble
Retd., Indian Air Force
8. **Hari Parameswaran**
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Creativity Consultant
9. **Vijayraman**
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Chakra Infrastructure Consultant
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10. **Hiroo Advani**
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Global Executive Search
11. **Andrew Lobo**
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14. **C. Gopalakrishnan**
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