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Ficus benghalensis

[Synonyms : *Ficus benghalensis*, *Ficus indica*]

BANYAN TREE is an evergreen tree. Native to India and Pakistan it has fig-like, crimson fruit (receptacles).

It is also known as *Akshaya vruksham* (Sanskrit), *Ala* (Kannada), *Alamaram* (Tamil), *Avaroha* (Sanskrit), *Bad* (Hindi), *Bahupada* (Sanskrit), *Banian* (French), *Baniano* (Spanish), *Banyan*, *Banyán* (Czech), *Banyanbaum* (German), *Banyan fig*, *Bar* (Bengali, Hindi, Nepalese, Punjabi), *Baragachha* (Oriya), *Bargad* (Hindi), *Bargat* (Hindi), *Barh* (Hindi), *Bat* (Bengali, Hindi, Sanskrit), *Bath* (Bengali), *Bengal fig*, *Bengalischer Feigenbaum* (German), *Bengarū bodaiju* (Japanese), *Bhringi* (Sanskrit), *Bor* (Hindi, Punjabi), *Bot* (Bengali), *East Indian fig*, *Figuier des pagodes* (French), *Figuier d'Inde* (French), *Fikovník posvätný* (Slovak), *Fikuso Bengala* (Esperanto), *Higo* (Spanish), *Higuera de Bengala* (Spanish), *Indian banyan*, *Indian fig*, *Indian laurel*, *Indijska smokva* (Serbian), *Indisk figen* (Danish), *Jatalo* (Sanskrit), *Maha nuga* (Sinhalese), *Marri* (Marathi), *Meng jia la rong* (Chinese), *Nyagrodha* (Sanskrit), *Nyagrodhah* (Sanskrit), *Pagoda tree*, *Peddamarri* (Marathi), *Peddamatti* (Telugu), *Peraal* (Kannada), *Peral* (Kannada, Kerala), *Pudavam* (Tamil), *Pyin vaung* (Burmese), *Pyi nyaung* (Burmese), *Sai* (Thai), *Vad* (Gujarati, Marathi), *Vad* (Marathi), *Vada* (Marathi), *Vada tree*, *Vadlo* (Gujarati), *Vat* (Sanskrit), *Vata* (Sanskrit), *Vatah* (Sanskrit), *Vatam* (Kannada), *Vatavarksam* (Kannada), *Wad* (Marathi), and *Weeping Chinese banyan*.

Shellac is a dark red, transparent resin and is found on banyan twigs that have been nibbled at by lac insects.

Benghalensis means ‘of or from Bengal, India’.

The name *Banyan* is a reminder of the traders or ‘banians’ who could be seen resting and bartering under the tree’s canopy.

The area that the canopy can encompass is phenomenal – as much as several hundred acres. It is thus hardly surprising to learn that when Alexander the Great (356-323 BC), king of Macedonia, invaded India in 326 BC, his entire army (estimated at that time to have been about 20,000 men) is said to have sheltered beneath one tree. It is believed that the banyan tree growing in the Calcutta:Botanic Gardens is about 200 years old and is said to have over 1,700 trunk-like, aerial roots.

The trees are sacred to the Hindus who take an interest in their cultivation and preservation. For Buddhists also it has a particular significance. According to some tradition it was while sitting and contemplating underneath a banyan tree (others say a fig, *Ficus carica* or peepul tree, *Ficus religiosa* – both from the same genus) near Buddh Gaya in the Bihar region that the founder of Buddhism, Prince Gautama Siddhartha, who had renounced his previous worldly associations and is widely known today as Buddha, was said to have received enlightenment.

Locally banyan’s fairly hard, grey wood is made into furniture, doors, yokes, cart shafts and pestles, and the bark fibre has been used for coarse ropes, slow matches, and for producing paper. The aerial roots provide straight poles that have found service as tent poles, poles for palanquins and umbrella handles.

In India its ripe fruit have been eaten fresh, or dried for emergency use as a famine crop.

The leaves, which have sometimes been used in parts of India as dinner plates, are eaten both by Indian elephants and a species of silkworm.

In Lahore the banyan's sticky latex is used to oxidise copper, and it also provides bird-lime for local use, and a remedy for painful cracks in the soles of the feet.

Shellac can be used as a commercial ingredient in hair styling preparations.

Medicinally, in India and Pakistan the latex is used externally to ease rheumatism and arthritic pain, and an infusion of bark is employed as a tonic and for treating dysentery, diarrhoea and diabetes. The leaves are applied in poultices to abscesses and root fibres are used to treat some venereal disease.