

# **Rooted Memories, Living Ecologies: The Banyan Tree in the Cultural Landscape of West Bengal through the Lens of Plant Humanities and Ecocriticism**

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## **Abstract**

The banyan tree (*Ficus benghalensis*) occupies a distinctive position within the cultural imagination, ecological consciousness, and collective memory of West Bengal. More than a botanical entity, it functions as a living archive of history, folklore, spirituality, and community life. Recent developments in Plant Humanities have encouraged scholars to move beyond anthropocentric approaches and recognise plants as active participants in cultural production and ecological relationships. Drawing upon the interdisciplinary frameworks of Plant Humanities and Ecocriticism, this paper examines the banyan tree as a site where ecological processes, cultural practices, and historical memories intersect. The study explores how the banyan has shaped village life, religious traditions, oral narratives, literary representations, and environmental ethics across Bengal. Particular attention is given to the symbolic significance of the banyan in Bengali literature, folk culture, and regional memory, as well as its ecological role as a keystone species supporting biodiversity. The paper argues that the banyan tree embodies a form of vegetal memory that challenges conventional distinctions between nature and culture. Through its longevity, expansive root systems, and continuous regeneration, the banyan serves as a metaphor for cultural continuity and ecological resilience. At a time when rapid urbanisation and environmental degradation threaten traditional landscapes, the banyan emerges as an important symbol of ecological stewardship and cultural sustainability. By situating the banyan within contemporary debates in Plant Humanities and Ecocriticism, this study contributes to broader discussions concerning the agency of plants, environmental memory, and the preservation of biocultural heritage in South Asia.

**Keywords:** Banyan Tree, Plant Humanities, Ecocriticism, Cultural Memory, West Bengal

## **1. Introduction: Plant Humanities, Cultural Memory and the Banyan Tree in Bengal**

In recent years, the emergence of Plant Humanities has transformed the ways in which scholars understand the relationship between humans and the vegetal world. Moving beyond the anthropocentric assumptions that have long dominated literary and cultural studies, Plant Humanities foregrounds plants as active participants in history, culture, memory, and ecological processes. Rather than viewing trees merely as passive objects within a landscape, contemporary scholars increasingly recognise them as agents that shape human experiences and contribute to the formation of cultural identities. Within the context of Bengal, few plants embody this entanglement of ecology and culture as profoundly as the banyan tree (*Ficus benghalensis*). Revered for its immense size, longevity, and distinctive aerial roots, the banyan has occupied a central position in the social, religious, literary, and environmental imagination of West Bengal for centuries.

The banyan tree's significance extends far beyond its biological characteristics. Across villages, towns, and sacred spaces in Bengal, it has functioned as a site of congregation, storytelling, ritual practice, dispute resolution, commerce, and collective remembrance. Long before the advent of modern institutions, the shaded space beneath the banyan served as an informal public sphere where knowledge circulated through oral traditions and communal interactions. As a result, the tree became deeply embedded within the cultural memory of Bengali society. Unlike monuments erected from stone or brick, the banyan is a living organism whose growth and transformation occur simultaneously with the historical experiences of the communities surrounding it. Consequently, the tree embodies a form of memory that is dynamic rather than static, ecological rather than architectural.

The concept of cultural memory has received considerable scholarly attention through the works of Jan Assmann, who defines cultural memory as the process through which societies preserve and transmit collective experiences across generations. According to Assmann, cultural memory relies upon symbols, rituals, texts, and material forms that enable communities to maintain a sense of continuity with the past. In Bengal, however, memory is not preserved solely through written archives or historical monuments. Rivers, ponds, groves, and trees frequently function as repositories of communal remembrance. The banyan tree represents one of the most enduring examples of this phenomenon because of its exceptional longevity and visibility within local landscapes. Many ancient banyans have survived for centuries, silently witnessing social transformations, migrations, political upheavals, and environmental changes. Their continued presence creates a tangible connection between ancestral histories and contemporary life.

The theoretical foundations of Plant Humanities offer valuable tools for understanding such relationships. Michael Marder argues that plants possess distinctive modes of being that challenge conventional philosophical hierarchies privileging human consciousness. In *Plant-Thinking: A Philosophy of Vegetal Life*, Marder suggests that plants engage with the world through forms of responsiveness and relationality that deserve serious philosophical consideration. Rather than existing as inert matter, plants continuously interact with their environments, adapting to changing conditions while simultaneously shaping ecological systems. This perspective encourages scholars to reconsider the agency of trees such as the banyan within cultural and historical narratives.

Similarly, Emanuele Coccia's *The Life of Plants* proposes that plants constitute the very foundation of life on Earth. Coccia argues that plants create the atmosphere, mediate exchanges between organisms, and establish the conditions necessary for coexistence. Human beings,

therefore, are not separate from the vegetal world but are fundamentally entangled within it. Such insights resonate strongly with traditional Bengali understandings of nature, where trees are often perceived not merely as resources but as living presences deserving respect and reverence.

Ecocriticism further enriches this discussion by examining the representation of nature within literature and culture. Lawrence Buell contends that environmental criticism must move beyond viewing nature as a passive backdrop and instead recognise the reciprocal relationships between human and non-human worlds. Cheryll Glotfelty similarly defines ecocriticism as the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment. These perspectives are particularly relevant to Bengal, where literary traditions have consistently foregrounded intimate interactions between people and landscapes.

The banyan tree occupies a prominent position within Bengali literary culture. Rabindranath Tagore repeatedly associated trees with spiritual renewal, continuity, and freedom. In his essay “Tapovan,” Tagore describes India's ancient forest culture as a source of intellectual and ethical development, emphasising the profound connections between human life and the natural world. Reflecting upon the role of trees in Indian civilisation, he writes that “the trees are the earth’s endless effort to speak to the listening heaven” (*Sadhana* 93). This evocative statement transforms trees from passive botanical entities into active participants within cosmic and cultural dialogues. The banyan, with its immense canopy and expansive root system, embodies precisely such communicative possibilities.

Similarly, the writings of Bibhutibhushan Bandyopadhyay reveal an extraordinary sensitivity towards vegetal life. His celebrated novel *Aranyak* presents forests not merely as settings but as living communities possessing their own rhythms, histories, and forms of agency. The narrator's gradual recognition of the forest's intrinsic value reflects an ecological consciousness that anticipates many contemporary concerns of environmental humanities. Although *Aranyak* focuses primarily on the forests of Bihar, its broader philosophical insights illuminate the significance of trees within Bengali cultural thought.

The poetic imagination of Jibanananda Das likewise demonstrates a profound engagement with Bengal's vegetal landscapes. His poetry repeatedly invokes trees, rivers, grasses, and birds as carriers of historical memory and regional identity. In *Rupasi Bangla*, Das creates an alternative archive of Bengal rooted not in political events but in ecological and sensory experiences. The landscape itself becomes a repository of collective memory, preserving traces of lives that might otherwise disappear from historical records.

The banyan tree's cultural significance is also evident within Bengali folklore and ritual practices. In many rural communities, ancient banyans are associated with local deities, ancestral spirits, and sacred narratives. Women often perform rituals beneath banyan trees seeking familial well-being and longevity. Village fairs, folk performances, and seasonal celebrations frequently take place within the shade of these trees. Such practices reveal that the banyan functions simultaneously as a biological organism, sacred presence, social institution, and cultural archive.

From an ecological perspective, the banyan occupies a crucial role within the environmental systems of Bengal. Botanists classify *Ficus benghalensis* as a keystone species because it supports diverse forms of life. Its figs provide nourishment for birds, bats, monkeys, and numerous insect species, while its vast canopy creates habitats for countless organisms. The tree thus exemplifies the ecological principle of interconnectedness that lies at the heart of both Plant Humanities and Ecocriticism.

This study argues that the banyan tree should be understood as a living archive of Bengal's cultural memory and ecological heritage. Through its physical presence, symbolic associations, literary representations, and ecological functions, the banyan transcends conventional distinctions between nature and culture. It embodies a form of vegetal memory that preserves histories, sustains communities, and fosters ecological relationships across generations. By examining the banyan through the combined lenses of Plant Humanities and Ecocriticism, the present study seeks to illuminate the ways in which plants actively participate in the production of cultural meaning and environmental consciousness within West Bengal.

In an era marked by accelerating urbanisation, ecological degradation, and the erosion of traditional landscapes, the banyan tree acquires renewed significance. Its enduring presence reminds contemporary society that memory is not confined to texts and monuments but is also embedded within living organisms and ecological systems. To study the banyan, therefore, is to explore the intertwined histories of people, plants, and places that have shaped the cultural landscape of Bengal for centuries.

## **2. The Banyan Tree as Cultural Archive: History, Myth and Collective Memory in West Bengal**

The cultural history of West Bengal cannot be understood solely through dynastic chronicles, administrative records, literary texts, or architectural monuments. Equally important are the living landscapes that have preserved memories across generations. Among these landscapes, the banyan tree occupies a unique position. Unlike archives maintained in libraries or museums, the banyan represents a living archive—an organic repository of stories, rituals, social

interactions, and historical experiences. Its longevity enables it to outlive several generations of human beings, thereby becoming a witness to social transformations that would otherwise disappear from collective memory. Through its physical presence and symbolic significance, the banyan tree has become deeply interwoven with the cultural identity of Bengal.

The notion of the archive has traditionally been associated with written records. Jacques Derrida observes that archives serve as sites where societies organise and preserve memories. Yet recent developments in environmental humanities have expanded this understanding by recognising landscapes, rivers, forests, and trees as repositories of cultural knowledge. The banyan tree offers a particularly compelling example because it simultaneously stores ecological, social, and historical memory. Each aerial root descending from its branches signifies continuity, regeneration, and the accumulation of time. The tree grows not by abandoning its past but by incorporating it into an ever-expanding structure. Such growth provides a powerful metaphor for cultural memory itself.

Throughout rural Bengal, the banyan has historically functioned as a communal centre. Before the emergence of modern administrative institutions, village councils frequently convened beneath large banyan trees. Disputes were settled, marriages negotiated, festivals organised, and collective decisions made within their shade. In many villages, the banyan occupied a central location near ponds, temples, or market spaces, reflecting its role as a focal point of social life. Consequently, the tree became associated not merely with nature but with the very idea of community.

The cultural importance of the banyan is reflected in the Bengali term *bat-tala*, literally meaning “beneath the banyan.” Historically, the phrase acquired meanings extending beyond a physical location. During the nineteenth century, *Battala* became associated with a vibrant print culture centred around inexpensive books published in the Battala district of Calcutta. Although the term originally referred to a locality, its symbolic connection to the banyan remained significant. The tree's traditional role as a space for storytelling and public discourse found a modern counterpart in the circulation of printed narratives. Thus, even within colonial urban culture, the banyan retained its association with knowledge production and cultural transmission.

Historical travellers repeatedly remarked upon the social functions of banyan trees in India. The eighteenth-century naturalist Thomas Pennant described the banyan as a natural pavilion capable of sheltering hundreds of people simultaneously. Similarly, numerous colonial observers noted that merchants, pilgrims, and villagers gathered beneath banyans to exchange

information and conduct business. Such observations reveal that the tree functioned as a living institution long before the establishment of modern civic spaces.

The association between banyan trees and memory is further strengthened by their extraordinary longevity. Many banyans survive for centuries, creating a tangible sense of continuity between past and present. In West Bengal, numerous villages identify particular trees as witnesses to historical events such as famines, floods, political movements, and social transformations. Oral narratives often begin with references to an ancient banyan that “saw” or “remembered” a specific event. Although such expressions are metaphorical, they attribute a form of witnessing agency to the tree itself.

This perception resonates strongly with contemporary Plant Humanities. Michael Marder argues that plants challenge human-centred understandings of time because their existence unfolds according to temporal scales that often exceed individual human lifespans. Trees in particular embody forms of duration that connect multiple generations. The banyan exemplifies this phenomenon in an especially dramatic manner. Through continuous growth and regeneration, it remains simultaneously ancient and new. Older trunks may decay while new aerial roots establish themselves, allowing the organism to persist despite constant transformation. As a result, the banyan becomes a living embodiment of historical continuity. The sacred status of the banyan within Bengali culture further contributes to its role as a cultural archive. Across Hindu traditions, the tree is associated with immortality, wisdom, and cosmic stability. The *Bhagavad Gita* famously employs the image of an inverted tree whose roots extend into the heavens and whose branches spread across the world. Although the text refers specifically to the cosmic *ashvattha*, later religious traditions frequently linked such imagery to large sacred trees, including the banyan. These associations contributed to the perception of the banyan as a bridge between earthly and transcendent realms.

In Bengal, numerous local legends reinforce this sacred dimension. Village narratives often portray ancient banyans as dwelling places of protective deities or ancestral spirits. Contrary to modern assumptions, these beliefs should not be dismissed as mere superstition. Rather, they represent cultural mechanisms through which communities establish ethical relationships with the environment. By attributing sacred significance to trees, local traditions create forms of ecological protection that discourage unnecessary destruction.

Women’s ritual practices provide another important example. The observance of *Vat Savitri* and related regional rituals associates the banyan with marital fidelity, longevity, and familial continuity. During such ceremonies, women circumambulate the tree, tie sacred threads around its trunk, and offer prayers. These practices transform the tree into a living participant within

social and familial life. The banyan thereby becomes a medium through which cultural values are transmitted across generations.

The relationship between memory and the banyan is particularly evident in Bengali folklore. Many folktales situate crucial events beneath large banyan trees. Heroes encounter supernatural beings, travellers receive wisdom, and communities confront moral dilemmas within these spaces. Such stories reveal how the tree functions as a narrative anchor connecting individual experiences to broader cultural traditions.

The oral nature of these narratives is significant. Jan Assmann emphasises that cultural memory depends upon repeated acts of transmission. Folktales told beneath banyan trees often become associated with the location itself. Consequently, the tree serves not merely as a setting but as a mnemonic device that facilitates the preservation of communal knowledge. Every retelling reinforces the connection between memory and place.

The famous Great Banyan Tree of the Acharya Jagadish Chandra Bose Indian Botanic Garden in Howrah provides a remarkable example of vegetal memory on a monumental scale. Estimated to be more than two hundred and fifty years old, the tree has survived colonial rule, natural disasters, political upheavals, and urban expansion. Today its sprawling canopy covers several acres and consists of thousands of aerial roots functioning as secondary trunks. Visitors frequently describe the experience of standing beneath the tree as entering a forest rather than encountering a single organism. The Great Banyan thus embodies an alternative model of history—one rooted in ecological persistence rather than human chronology.

The symbolic power of the banyan extends into modern environmental discourse. As urbanisation transforms the landscapes of West Bengal, many ancient trees face threats from road construction, commercial development, and infrastructural expansion. The loss of such trees represents more than ecological damage; it entails the disappearance of cultural memory embedded within specific places. When a centuries-old banyan is removed, communities often lose not only a habitat for birds and insects but also a repository of stories, rituals, and historical associations.

This recognition has inspired increasing efforts to identify and protect heritage trees. Such initiatives acknowledge that ecological conservation and cultural preservation are inseparable. The banyan's value lies not solely in its biological characteristics but also in its capacity to sustain relationships between people, places, and memories. Protecting these trees therefore contributes to the preservation of Bengal's biocultural heritage.

At last, the banyan tree demonstrates that memory is not confined to written records or monumental architecture. It can also reside within living organisms whose existence transcends

individual human lifetimes. Through its role in social life, religious practice, folklore, and historical remembrance, the banyan functions as a living archive of Bengal's cultural landscape. Its roots extend not only into the soil but also into the collective consciousness of the communities that have grown around it. To understand the banyan, therefore, is to recognise the profound entanglement of ecology, history, and memory that characterises the cultural life of West Bengal.

### **3. The Banyan in Bengali Literature: Rabindranath Tagore, Bibhutibhushan Bandyopadhyay, Jibanananda Das and the Literary Ecology of Memory**

The banyan tree occupies a distinctive position in the literary imagination of Bengal. Although it does not always appear as the central subject of literary texts, its symbolic presence permeates Bengali poetry, fiction, folklore, and essays. In the literary tradition of Bengal, the banyan is rarely treated merely as a botanical object. Instead, it functions as a living metaphor for memory, rootedness, continuity, shelter, and cultural belonging. Through its expansive canopy and intricate network of aerial roots, the banyan embodies a vision of interconnected existence that resonates strongly with contemporary theories of Plant Humanities and Ecocriticism. The literary representations of the banyan in the works of Rabindranath Tagore, Bibhutibhushan Bandyopadhyay, and Jibanananda Das reveal how trees participate in the construction of cultural memory and ecological consciousness.

One of the most significant contributions of Plant Humanities is its challenge to the long-standing assumption that literature merely reflects human concerns. Instead, scholars such as Michael Marder and Jeffrey T. Nealon encourage readers to recognise plants as active presences within cultural narratives. This perspective is particularly relevant to Bengali literature, where landscapes frequently possess agency and emotional significance. Trees are not silent background elements; they shape moods, memories, and ethical relationships. Among them, the banyan emerges as a powerful symbol of duration and collective experience. Rabindranath Tagore's ecological imagination provides an important starting point for understanding the literary significance of the banyan. Throughout his poetry, essays, and educational philosophy, Tagore repeatedly emphasised the intimate relationship between humanity and nature. His vision was shaped by both the Upanishadic tradition and his own experiences of rural Bengal. For Tagore, nature was not external to human life but constituted an essential dimension of existence itself.

In *Sadhana*, Tagore famously observes that “the trees are the earth’s endless effort to speak to the listening heaven” (93). Although this statement refers to trees in general, it offers a profound insight into the symbolic role of the banyan within Bengali culture. The banyan’s

upward-reaching branches and descending roots create a visual image of communication between earth and sky, material and spiritual worlds. Through such imagery, Tagore transforms trees into mediators of cosmic dialogue.

Tagore's essay "Tapovan" further illuminates his understanding of the relationship between civilisation and forests. He argues that Indian culture developed not in opposition to nature but in close interaction with it. Ancient sages sought wisdom within forest environments, recognising that intellectual and spiritual growth depended upon ecological awareness. The banyan, often associated with hermitages and sites of contemplation, became an emblem of this tradition. Its vast shade created spaces for reflection, teaching, and communal interaction. Tagore's educational experiments at Santiniketan reflected these ideals. Classes were frequently conducted outdoors beneath trees, challenging conventional distinctions between nature and learning. Although various species populated the campus, the symbolic importance of large shade-giving trees, including banyans, was unmistakable. The educational landscape itself embodied the belief that knowledge flourishes through engagement with the natural world.

The ecological vision evident in Tagore's writings anticipates contemporary Plant Humanities in striking ways. Emanuele Coccia argues that plants create worlds of coexistence by facilitating exchanges between organisms and environments. Tagore's literary and philosophical works similarly portray trees as participants in relational networks that sustain both individual and collective life. The banyan, with its capacity to create habitats and gathering spaces, becomes an ideal representation of such interconnectedness.

If Tagore provides a philosophical foundation for understanding vegetal life, Bibhutibhushan Bandyopadhyay offers one of the most profound literary explorations of ecological consciousness in Bengali literature. His celebrated novel *Aranyak* presents forests not merely as landscapes but as living communities possessing intrinsic value. The narrator, Satyacharan, initially approaches the forest from an administrative perspective but gradually develops a deeper appreciation of its ecological and spiritual significance.

One of the most memorable passages in *Aranyak* expresses the narrator's growing emotional attachment to the forest. Reflecting upon his experiences, he acknowledges the transformative power of the natural world and recognises that human-centred perspectives fail to capture its complexity. Throughout the novel, trees emerge as silent witnesses to human activities, embodying forms of existence that transcend economic and administrative concerns.

Although banyan trees are not the sole focus of *Aranyak*, they participate in the broader vegetal community that shapes the narrator's consciousness. The novel repeatedly foregrounds the

temporal depth of forests, contrasting their enduring presence with the transient nature of human ambitions. This contrast resonates strongly with the cultural role of the banyan in Bengal, where ancient trees frequently outlive entire generations.

Bibhutibhushan's sensitivity to vegetal life aligns closely with contemporary ecocritical principles. Lawrence Buell argues that environmentally oriented literature challenges anthropocentric assumptions by recognising the agency and significance of non-human entities. *Aranyak* exemplifies this approach by encouraging readers to view forests as subjects rather than objects. The banyan, as one of the most culturally significant trees of the Indian subcontinent, participates in this reconfiguration of perception.

The relationship between memory and landscape receives even more explicit treatment in the poetry of Jibanananda Das. Often regarded as the poet of Bengal's lost landscapes, Das created a literary world in which rivers, birds, grasses, and trees function as repositories of cultural memory. His poetry is characterised by an acute awareness of historical loss and ecological continuity. Rather than focusing primarily on political events, Das constructs an alternative archive grounded in sensory experiences and environmental relationships.

In *Rupasi Bangla*, Das repeatedly invokes the rural landscapes of Bengal as sources of identity and remembrance. One of his most celebrated lines declares:

“বাংলার মুখ আমি দেখিয়াছি, তাই আমি পৃথিবীর রূপ খুঁজিতে যাই না”

(“I have seen the face of Bengal; therefore I do not seek the beauty of the world elsewhere”)  
(*Rupasi Bangla*, Poem 2).

This statement illustrates the profound connection between place and identity that characterises Das's work. The “face of Bengal” is not limited to human inhabitants but encompasses the entire ecological landscape, including trees, rivers, and fields. The banyan occupies an important place within this imaginative geography because it embodies continuity amidst historical change.

Das's poetry frequently blurs the boundaries between human memory and environmental persistence. Landscapes become active participants in remembrance rather than passive settings. Trees, in particular, function as carriers of temporal depth. Their longevity enables them to preserve traces of past lives that have vanished from conventional historical narratives. Such representations align closely with the concept of cultural memory articulated by Jan Assmann. Cultural memory depends upon material and symbolic forms capable of transmitting experiences across generations. In Das's poetry, landscapes perform precisely this function.

The banyan, through its enduring presence, becomes a mnemonic structure linking past and present.

The literary significance of the banyan extends beyond canonical authors to encompass folk literature and oral traditions. Village narratives often depict ancient banyans as sites of revelation, encounter, and transformation. Heroes receive guidance beneath their branches; travellers discover hidden truths; communities negotiate moral dilemmas within their shade. These recurring motifs reflect the tree's historical role as a space of assembly and communication.

Folksongs from various regions of Bengal similarly employ tree imagery to express themes of longing, separation, and continuity. The banyan frequently appears as a landmark associated with meetings, departures, and memories. Such representations reveal the extent to which vegetal life permeates everyday cultural experience.

From the perspective of Plant Humanities, these literary traditions demonstrate that plants function as active participants in cultural production. Michael Marder argues that plants challenge human-centred understandings of agency because their forms of existence are fundamentally relational. The banyan exemplifies this principle through both its biological characteristics and its literary representations. Its aerial roots create networks of connection, while its cultural associations facilitate the transmission of memory and identity.

The literary ecology of Bengal thus reveals a remarkable convergence between cultural imagination and ecological reality. Tagore's philosophical reflections, Bibhutibhushan's environmental consciousness, and Jibanananda Das's landscape poetics all recognise the significance of trees as more than decorative elements. The banyan emerges as a particularly powerful symbol because it embodies continuity, resilience, and interconnectedness. Its presence within literature reflects broader cultural understandings of the relationship between humans and the vegetal world.

Eventually, the banyan's literary significance lies in its capacity to bridge multiple forms of memory. It connects individual experiences to collective histories, ecological processes to cultural narratives, and local landscapes to broader philosophical questions. Through the writings of Bengal's major literary figures, the banyan becomes a living archive of cultural imagination, preserving the intertwined histories of people and place. In this sense, Bengali literature anticipates many of the concerns of contemporary Plant Humanities by recognising that trees are not merely objects of representation but active participants in the creation of meaning itself.

#### **4. Folk Traditions, Sacred Rituals, Oral Narratives and the Banyan Tree in West Bengal**

While literary texts offer valuable insights into the symbolic significance of the banyan tree, the fullest expression of its cultural life in West Bengal is found within folk traditions, ritual practices, oral narratives, and everyday community experiences. For centuries, the banyan has functioned not merely as a botanical presence but as a sacred centre of social interaction and cultural transmission. Its importance extends beyond religious symbolism into the domains of folklore, village governance, local memory, performance traditions, and ecological ethics. In many respects, the banyan represents one of the most enduring examples of what environmental humanists describe as a “biocultural entity”—a living organism whose ecological existence is inseparable from human cultural practices.

The relationship between folk culture and the banyan reflects a worldview fundamentally different from modern anthropocentric assumptions. Traditional rural communities seldom regarded trees as passive objects existing solely for human use. Instead, trees were understood as living presences possessing their own forms of vitality and significance. Such perceptions resonate strongly with contemporary Plant Humanities, which seeks to challenge the reduction of plants to mere resources. Michael Marder argues that plants compel human beings to reconsider their assumptions regarding agency, subjectivity, and existence. Rural Bengali traditions anticipated many of these insights long before the emergence of environmental theory.

The sacred status of the banyan occupies a central place in the ritual life of Bengal. Throughout the region, ancient banyans are frequently associated with local deities, village guardians, and ancestral spirits. In many villages, shrines dedicated to folk deities are situated beneath or adjacent to banyan trees. These shrines often lack elaborate architectural structures, relying instead upon the tree itself as a sacred presence. The absence of monumental construction is significant because it suggests that the tree functions not merely as a backdrop to worship but as an active participant in sacred practice.

Such traditions reflect broader South Asian understandings of sacred ecology. Diana Eck observes that many Indian religious practices are deeply rooted in specific landscapes, where rivers, mountains, forests, and trees acquire spiritual significance through continuous cultural engagement. The banyan exemplifies this phenomenon because its sacred status emerges not from abstract theological doctrines alone but from centuries of communal interaction. Through repeated rituals, stories, and ceremonies, communities transform the tree into a repository of collective meaning.

Among the most widespread ritual practices associated with the banyan is the observance commonly linked to *Vat Savitri*. Although regional variations exist, the ritual generally

commemorates the legendary devotion of Savitri, whose determination and wisdom enabled her to reclaim her husband's life from Yama, the god of death. Women circumambulate the banyan tree, offer prayers, tie threads around its trunk, and seek blessings for longevity, marital harmony, and familial well-being. The ritual symbolically associates the tree with endurance, continuity, and resilience.

The significance of this practice extends beyond its religious dimensions. Anthropologically, the ritual reinforces social bonds and intergenerational knowledge transmission. Younger participants learn stories, songs, and customs from elders, ensuring the continuity of cultural memory. The banyan thus functions simultaneously as a sacred object, educational medium, and communal gathering space.

The tree's role as a site of storytelling is equally important. Oral narratives constitute one of the most vital mechanisms through which cultural memory is preserved. Jan Assmann emphasises that memory survives through repeated acts of communication, and folk narratives represent precisely such processes. Across West Bengal, countless stories are associated with ancient banyans. These narratives frequently involve supernatural encounters, moral lessons, miraculous events, or acts of divine intervention.

One common motif portrays the banyan as the dwelling place of spirits. Modern readers may interpret such stories as superstition, yet their cultural significance lies elsewhere. By attributing spiritual presence to trees, communities cultivate attitudes of respect and restraint toward the environment. Trees become entities with which humans maintain relationships rather than objects subject to unrestricted exploitation. In this sense, folklore performs an ecological function by encouraging conservation through cultural values.

Another recurring narrative pattern involves travellers seeking refuge beneath banyan trees. Such stories reflect historical realities. Before modern transportation systems transformed rural landscapes, travellers frequently relied upon shade-giving trees for rest and protection. The banyan's immense canopy made it particularly valuable in this regard. Over time, practical experiences became embedded within folklore, generating narratives that celebrated the tree's hospitality and generosity.

Folk songs further illuminate the cultural significance of the banyan. Throughout Bengal, especially within Bhawaiya, Baul, Bhatiali, and regional village traditions, trees frequently appear as symbols of longing, memory, separation, and reunion. The banyan often functions as a landmark associated with encounters between lovers or as a witness to emotional experiences. In many songs, references to specific trees evoke entire landscapes of memory and belonging.

Baul philosophy provides a particularly revealing example. Baul singers frequently employ natural imagery to explore spiritual and existential questions. Although their symbolism encompasses numerous elements of the natural world, large trees often represent shelter, wisdom, and inner awakening. The banyan's expansive structure and long lifespan make it especially suited to such metaphorical functions.

The relationship between performance traditions and the banyan deserves special attention. Historically, many forms of folk theatre and storytelling took place beneath large village trees. Before the construction of formal performance spaces, the shaded area surrounding the banyan served as a natural amphitheatre where communities gathered to witness performances. Storytellers, singers, and performers transformed these spaces into centres of cultural exchange.

Such gatherings contributed significantly to the preservation of oral traditions. Knowledge circulated through direct interaction rather than written documentation. The tree therefore became an essential component of the cultural infrastructure supporting folk performance. Even today, in some rural areas, community events continue to be organised around ancient banyans, demonstrating the persistence of these traditions despite rapid social change.

The banyan's role in village governance further highlights its importance as a cultural institution. Historically, many informal councils convened beneath large trees to discuss communal concerns. Decisions affecting agriculture, land use, marriage arrangements, and conflict resolution were frequently negotiated within these spaces. The tree thus acquired associations with justice, deliberation, and collective responsibility.

Environmental historians increasingly recognise that such practices contributed to sustainable relationships between communities and landscapes. Because the banyan served important social functions, communities had strong incentives to protect it. Ecological conservation emerged not through formal environmental policies but through cultural practices embedded within everyday life.

This relationship between ecology and culture resonates strongly with the concept of biocultural heritage. Scholars argue that biodiversity and cultural diversity are deeply interconnected. Traditional ecological knowledge, ritual practices, and local narratives often support conservation by fostering respect for non-human life. The banyan exemplifies this principle because its ecological survival depends in part upon the cultural values surrounding it.

The rapid transformation of rural landscapes in contemporary West Bengal presents significant challenges to these traditions. Urbanisation, infrastructural development, and changing patterns

of social life have altered relationships between communities and local environments. Ancient banyans are increasingly threatened by road expansion, commercial construction, and declining community engagement. As a result, not only ecological habitats but also cultural memories risk disappearing.

The loss of a banyan tree frequently entails more than environmental damage. It can disrupt networks of memory connecting communities to their histories. Folktales associated with specific trees may vanish; ritual practices may decline; gathering spaces may disappear. Such losses illustrate the inseparability of ecological and cultural preservation.

Plant Humanities offers valuable insights into these challenges. By recognising plants as participants in cultural life, the field encourages scholars to move beyond simplistic distinctions between nature and society. The banyan is not merely a biological organism existing independently of human culture, nor is it simply a cultural symbol detached from ecological realities. Rather, it exists at the intersection of both domains.

The folk traditions of West Bengal reveal this interconnectedness with remarkable clarity. Rituals, songs, stories, and communal practices demonstrate that the banyan functions simultaneously as a sacred presence, social institution, ecological habitat, and repository of collective memory. Through these diverse roles, the tree contributes to the formation of cultural identity while sustaining relationships between people and place.

The banyan's significance within folk culture lies in its capacity to unite multiple dimensions of existence. It shelters bodies and stories, supports biodiversity and belief systems, preserves memories and ecological processes. In doing so, it embodies a vision of coexistence that contemporary environmental thought increasingly seeks to recover. The banyan reminds us that cultural memory is not stored exclusively within books or monuments; it also resides within living organisms whose roots extend through both landscapes and histories. The folk traditions of West Bengal thus reveal the banyan as one of the region's most powerful symbols of ecological continuity and cultural resilience.

### **5. The Banyan as a Plant Subject: Ecocriticism, Plant Humanities and the Ecological Agency of Trees in Bengal**

One of the most significant intellectual developments within contemporary environmental thought has been the gradual dismantling of the rigid distinction between human subjects and non-human objects. For centuries, Western philosophical traditions largely positioned plants at the lowest level of existence, treating them as passive resources available for human use. Trees were valued primarily for their economic utility, aesthetic appeal, or symbolic significance. Recent scholarship in Plant Humanities, however, has challenged this assumption by arguing

that plants possess distinctive forms of agency, relationality, and ecological influence. Within this framework, the banyan tree emerges not merely as a cultural symbol but as a living participant in the ecological and social worlds of Bengal.

The question of plant agency lies at the centre of contemporary Plant Humanities. Michael Marder argues that plants should not be understood as inert objects because they actively engage with their environments through processes of growth, adaptation, communication, and regeneration. In *Plant-Thinking: A Philosophy of Vegetal Life*, Marder contends that plants possess unique modes of existence that challenge human-centred models of subjectivity. Unlike animals, plants do not move from place to place; yet they continuously transform their surroundings through complex ecological interactions. Their rootedness does not signify passivity but rather a different form of engagement with the world.

The banyan tree provides a particularly compelling example of this argument. Unlike many other species, the banyan expands through aerial roots that descend from branches and gradually develop into secondary trunks. This process allows the tree to spread horizontally across large areas, creating what appears to be a small forest rather than a single organism. The Great Banyan Tree in Howrah, for example, occupies several acres and consists of thousands of prop roots supporting its immense canopy. Such growth patterns challenge conventional notions of individuality. Where does one banyan begin and another end? Is the tree a single entity or a community of interconnected organisms? These questions reveal the inadequacy of human-centred categories when applied to vegetal life.

Jeffrey T. Nealon develops a related argument in *Plant Theory*, where he suggests that plants exemplify forms of distributed existence that resist modern assumptions about autonomy and individuality. Plants survive through relationships rather than isolation. Their lives are constituted by interactions with soil, water, sunlight, microorganisms, insects, birds, and countless other organisms. The banyan demonstrates this principle with exceptional clarity. Its aerial roots depend upon atmospheric conditions; its fruits nourish diverse species; its branches provide habitats for birds and insects; and its extensive canopy influences local microclimates. The tree's existence is therefore inseparable from a broader ecological network.

This emphasis on relationality resonates strongly with Emanuele Coccia's philosophy of vegetal life. In *The Life of Plants*, Coccia argues that plants create the very conditions that make life possible. Through photosynthesis, they produce oxygen, regulate atmospheric processes, and facilitate exchanges between organisms and environments. Human beings, according to Coccia, inhabit a world fundamentally shaped by plants. Rather than existing outside vegetal systems, humanity remains deeply dependent upon them.

The banyan illustrates this ecological centrality in multiple ways. Its enormous canopy moderates temperature, reduces soil erosion, and creates habitats supporting biodiversity. Numerous species of birds, bats, insects, reptiles, and mammals depend upon banyan trees for food and shelter. Ecologists frequently describe fig species, including the banyan, as keystone species because they sustain ecological communities disproportionately larger than their own numbers might suggest. When a mature banyan disappears, entire networks of ecological relationships may be disrupted.

Such observations challenge the tendency to regard trees as static components of landscapes. From the perspective of ecological science, the banyan functions as an active environmental engineer. It modifies soil composition, influences hydrological processes, and shapes the behaviour of surrounding organisms. These capacities suggest forms of agency that differ fundamentally from human action but are nevertheless consequential.

Ecocriticism has increasingly recognised the importance of such non-human agencies. Lawrence Buell argues that environmental criticism must move beyond representations of nature as passive scenery. Similarly, Serenella Iovino and Serpil Oppermann advocate what they term “material ecocriticism,” emphasising the capacity of non-human entities to participate in the production of meaning. According to this perspective, landscapes, rivers, forests, and trees are not silent backdrops but active presences capable of shaping cultural narratives.

The banyan occupies a particularly significant position within this framework because its ecological functions intersect directly with human social life. For centuries, communities in Bengal have gathered beneath banyan trees for worship, storytelling, governance, and recreation. These activities are not imposed upon a neutral object; rather, they emerge in response to the material characteristics of the tree itself. Its shade creates hospitable spaces for gathering. Its longevity encourages associations with continuity and memory. Its expansive structure facilitates communal interaction. In this sense, the banyan participates actively in the formation of social relationships.

The concept of ecological agency becomes even more compelling when considered alongside indigenous and folk understandings of trees. Many traditional communities in Bengal attribute forms of presence, vitality, and even consciousness to large trees. Modern scientific discourse often dismisses such beliefs as superstition, yet contemporary Plant Humanities suggests that they may contain valuable insights regarding human-plant relationships. While trees do not think or feel in human ways, they nevertheless influence and respond to their environments in

complex manners. Folk traditions intuitively recognise these capacities through narratives that portray trees as active participants in community life.

Timothy Morton's ecological philosophy provides another useful perspective. Morton argues that ecological thinking requires recognition of profound interconnectedness among all forms of existence. Human beings cannot be separated from the environments they inhabit because every action occurs within larger ecological networks. The banyan serves as a powerful illustration of this principle. Its roots extend through the soil; its branches host countless organisms; its leaves participate in atmospheric processes; and its presence influences human cultural practices. The tree thus exemplifies the entangled relationships that characterise ecological reality.

The environmental history of Bengal further underscores the agency of trees. Historically, large banyans influenced settlement patterns by providing shade, stabilising soils, and creating suitable environments for social interaction. Villages frequently developed around such trees, integrating them into local economies and cultural practices. The tree's physical characteristics shaped human behaviour just as human activities affected the tree. This reciprocal relationship challenges simplistic distinctions between natural and cultural history.

Recent environmental challenges highlight the continuing relevance of these insights. Urbanisation, climate change, and infrastructural expansion increasingly threaten mature trees across West Bengal. Environmental debates often focus on the economic costs and benefits of development projects, neglecting the broader ecological roles performed by large trees. Plant Humanities encourages a more comprehensive perspective by recognising that trees contribute not only material resources but also forms of ecological and cultural value that cannot easily be quantified.

The destruction of an ancient banyan entails multiple losses simultaneously. Ecologically, habitats disappear and biodiversity declines. Culturally, memories associated with specific places may vanish. Socially, communal gathering spaces are disrupted. Such consequences demonstrate that environmental conservation cannot be reduced to technical management alone. It requires attention to the complex relationships connecting people, plants, and places. The banyan also offers an alternative model of resilience particularly relevant to contemporary environmental thought. Unlike many organisms, the tree survives through continual processes of regeneration. New aerial roots emerge as older structures weaken. Growth occurs through expansion rather than replacement. This capacity for renewal provides a powerful ecological metaphor at a time when communities worldwide confront environmental uncertainty.

From the perspective of Plant Humanities, such resilience is not merely symbolic. It reflects actual biological processes that enable the tree to persist across centuries. The banyan embodies a form of temporal depth that challenges short-term human perspectives. Whereas political institutions, economic systems, and individual lives often operate according to relatively brief timescales, the banyan unfolds across generations. Its existence encourages reflection upon forms of continuity extending beyond immediate human concerns.

Finally, the banyan compels a reconsideration of what it means to be a subject within ecological systems. Plant Humanities does not suggest that trees possess consciousness identical to human beings. Rather, it argues that plants participate actively in shaping the worlds they inhabit. Through growth, adaptation, environmental modification, and ecological interaction, they influence both natural and cultural processes.

The banyan exemplifies this principle with remarkable clarity. It creates habitats, shapes landscapes, supports biodiversity, influences social practices, and preserves cultural memories. Its significance cannot be reduced to symbolism alone because its material presence continuously generates ecological and social effects. In this sense, the banyan is both a cultural icon and a living ecological actor.

By recognising the agency of the banyan, scholars gain a more nuanced understanding of the relationships between humans and the vegetal world. The tree emerges not as an object of human interpretation but as a participant in the ongoing production of ecological and cultural life. Such recognition represents one of the most important contributions of Plant Humanities and Ecocriticism to contemporary environmental thought. It invites us to view the banyan not merely as a tree that exists within history but as an active presence helping to shape the histories, memories, and futures of Bengal itself.

## **6. The Banyan as Living Memory and Ecological Future: Towards a Plant-Centred Ethics of Cultural Preservation in Bengal**

The banyan tree occupies a singular position at the intersection of ecology, memory, culture, and ethics. Throughout the preceding discussions, the banyan has emerged not merely as a botanical species or a literary symbol but as a living archive that preserves and transmits the intertwined histories of people, places, and landscapes. Yet the significance of the banyan extends beyond its historical role. In an age characterised by environmental degradation, biodiversity loss, rapid urbanisation, and cultural homogenisation, the banyan compels us to rethink our responsibilities towards the vegetal world and towards the cultural traditions that have evolved around it. The future of the banyan is therefore inseparable from broader questions concerning ecological justice, cultural sustainability, and environmental ethics.

One of the central concerns of contemporary environmental humanities is the relationship between memory and ecological preservation. Cultural memory scholars such as Jan Assmann argue that societies maintain continuity through symbolic forms capable of transmitting experiences across generations. Traditionally, these forms have included texts, monuments, rituals, and commemorative practices. However, environmental humanities scholars increasingly recognise that landscapes themselves function as repositories of memory. Forests, rivers, mountains, and trees often preserve traces of human experience that cannot be fully captured through written records alone.

The banyan exemplifies this phenomenon with extraordinary clarity. Its longevity allows it to survive beyond individual lifetimes and even beyond the lifespan of many human institutions. A banyan that stands in a village today may have witnessed colonial rule, anti-colonial struggles, independence, migration, economic transformations, and ecological change. Through its continued presence, the tree connects contemporary communities to historical experiences that might otherwise fade from collective consciousness.

The French historian Pierre Nora famously introduced the concept of *lieux de mémoire* or “sites of memory,” referring to places where cultural remembrance becomes concentrated and preserved. Although Nora primarily discussed monuments, archives, and commemorative spaces, the concept can be productively extended to ecological entities such as the banyan. Indeed, the banyan may be understood as a living *lieu de mémoire*, a site where cultural memory is embodied within a continually evolving organism rather than a static monument.

Unlike conventional monuments, however, the banyan does not merely preserve memory; it actively participates in ecological processes. Its roots continue to grow, its branches expand, and its canopy supports countless forms of life. The tree therefore embodies a dynamic form of remembrance that integrates past, present, and future. This characteristic distinguishes vegetal memory from many human systems of preservation. Whereas archives often seek to stabilise historical records, the banyan preserves continuity through ongoing transformation.

Such a perspective aligns closely with contemporary Plant Humanities. Michael Marder emphasises that plants challenge linear understandings of time because their growth involves continual processes of renewal. The banyan, with its capacity to generate new trunks from aerial roots, exemplifies this temporal complexity. Its identity persists despite constant change. Older structures decay while new forms emerge, creating a living model of continuity through regeneration.

This model has profound implications for environmental ethics. Modern environmental discourse often focuses on resource management, conservation policy, or technological

solutions to ecological crises. While such approaches remain important, they sometimes overlook the cultural dimensions of environmental relationships. The preservation of a banyan tree is not simply a matter of protecting biodiversity; it also involves safeguarding the memories, stories, rituals, and social practices associated with that tree.

The environmental philosopher Val Plumwood argued that ecological crises stem partly from dualistic modes of thinking that separate humans from nature. Such separations encourage exploitative attitudes towards the environment by reducing non-human entities to objects of use. The banyan challenges this logic because its cultural significance demonstrates the impossibility of neatly dividing nature and culture. The tree simultaneously belongs to ecological systems and cultural worlds. Its destruction therefore produces both environmental and cultural consequences.

West Bengal provides numerous examples of this interconnectedness. Across the region, ancient banyans continue to function as gathering places, sacred sites, landmarks, and symbols of local identity. Yet many of these trees face increasing threats from infrastructural development, urban expansion, and changing patterns of land use. Roads are widened, markets expanded, and residential projects constructed, often at the expense of mature trees. While development undoubtedly brings benefits, it also raises difficult questions concerning what forms of heritage societies choose to preserve.

The concept of biocultural heritage offers a useful framework for addressing these challenges. Developed within environmental and anthropological scholarship, biocultural heritage emphasises the inseparability of biological diversity and cultural diversity. Traditional ecological knowledge, ritual practices, oral traditions, and local environmental relationships contribute to the preservation of biodiversity, just as ecological systems support cultural practices. The banyan exemplifies this principle because its survival is sustained partly through cultural values, while its cultural significance depends upon its continued ecological existence. Recognising the banyan as biocultural heritage requires a shift in conservation priorities. Environmental protection should not focus exclusively on species counts or ecosystem services; it must also consider the cultural meanings embedded within specific organisms and landscapes. A centuries-old banyan possesses value that cannot be measured solely through economic calculations or ecological metrics. Its importance lies equally in the memories it preserves and the relationships it sustains.

The ecological future of Bengal is increasingly shaped by climate change, making such considerations particularly urgent. Rising temperatures, changing rainfall patterns, and intensified environmental pressures threaten many traditional landscapes. Large trees play a

crucial role in mitigating some of these impacts. They store carbon, regulate local climates, stabilise soils, and support biodiversity. The banyan, because of its size and longevity, contributes significantly to these ecological functions.

Yet its importance extends beyond material ecological benefits. Environmental humanities scholars increasingly argue that societies require compelling narratives capable of fostering ethical relationships with the natural world. Facts and statistics alone rarely inspire long-term environmental commitment. Stories, symbols, and cultural memories often prove equally important. The banyan possesses extraordinary potential in this regard because it already occupies a central place within the cultural imagination of Bengal.

Rabindranath Tagore's reflections on nature offer valuable insights into this ethical dimension. Throughout his writings, Tagore repeatedly emphasised the interconnectedness of human and non-human existence. In *Sadhana*, he warns against treating nature merely as an object of exploitation and instead advocates relationships grounded in respect and reciprocity. Such perspectives remain remarkably relevant in the contemporary context. The banyan embodies precisely the kind of relational existence that Tagore sought to cultivate—a mode of being rooted in coexistence rather than domination.

Similarly, Jibanananda Das's poetry reminds readers that landscapes constitute repositories of collective identity. His recurring evocations of Bengal's rivers, fields, birds, and trees suggest that cultural belonging emerges through intimate engagement with ecological environments. The loss of these environments therefore entails not only environmental degradation but also forms of cultural displacement.

A plant-centred ethics must consequently move beyond simplistic conservation frameworks. Rather than viewing trees solely as resources to be managed or symbols to be admired, such an ethics recognises them as participants in shared ecological futures. This perspective does not require attributing human consciousness to plants. Instead, it acknowledges that human well-being depends upon complex relationships with vegetal life. The banyan's ecological agency, cultural significance, and historical continuity make it an especially powerful example of this principle.

Educational institutions can play a crucial role in promoting such ethical awareness. Environmental education often focuses on scientific information while neglecting cultural dimensions of ecological relationships. Integrating literary texts, folk traditions, local histories, and environmental humanities perspectives into educational programmes could encourage more holistic understandings of the natural world. The banyan offers an ideal focal point for such efforts because it bridges scientific, cultural, historical, and ethical concerns.

Community-based conservation initiatives likewise hold significant promise. Many successful environmental projects depend upon local participation and cultural engagement rather than top-down regulations alone. By recognising the cultural importance of banyans, conservation programmes can build upon existing traditions of respect and stewardship. Such approaches acknowledge that environmental protection is most effective when it resonates with local values and memories.

In due course, the banyan invites a reconsideration of humanity's place within the wider ecological community. Its immense canopy shelters diverse forms of life; its roots connect past and present; its longevity challenges short-term perspectives; and its cultural significance demonstrates the inseparability of ecological and social worlds. The tree stands as a reminder that human histories are always entangled with vegetal histories.

As Bengal confronts the challenges of the twenty-first century, the banyan remains both a witness to the past and a guide towards the future. It embodies a vision of resilience grounded in regeneration rather than domination, coexistence rather than separation, and continuity rather than rupture. Through its living presence, the banyan teaches that memory is not merely something inherited from previous generations; it is also something cultivated through ongoing relationships with the environments we inhabit.

The future of the banyan, therefore, is not solely a botanical concern. It is a question of how societies choose to remember, what forms of life they value, and what kinds of futures they seek to create. To preserve the banyan is to preserve a living archive of Bengal's ecological and cultural heritage. More importantly, it is to affirm the possibility of a plant-centred ethics capable of sustaining both human and non-human communities in an increasingly uncertain world.

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