



Prajnadipti Das, who belongs to a coastal district of Odisha, Kendrapara, holds a Bachelor's degree in Biology. Before joining the prestigious forest service, she served in the State Revenue Department, Odisha, where her close connection with land, people and nature deepened her appreciation for India's diverse ecosystem.

Her deep-rooted passion for forests and trees has inspired her to explore India's rich natural heritage, especially its ancient trees that stand as silent witnesses to history, culture, and faith.

With a keen eye for tree identification and a heartfelt interest in forest ecology, she seeks to blend science with storytelling- bringing to life the timeless bond between people and trees.

Through her work, she seeks to inspire awareness, respect, and conservation of these silent guardians that continue to shape the landscape and spirit of India.



The silent guardians: Stories of India's oldest trees (From my own tour experience)

Prajnadipti Das



**CENTRAL ACADEMY FOR STATE FOREST SERVICE
COIMBATORE**

2025

of the tree, every twisted root, every step across the bridge. It is a living legacy, a whisper of ancient knowledge, and a reminder that nature, when nurtured with respect, can create structures as strong, as beautiful, and as timeless as any human invention.

The silent guardian: India's oldest trees and their stories (Reflections from my study tours)

Prajnadipti Das



**CENTRAL ACADEMY FOR STATE FOREST SERVICE
COIMBATORE**

2025



● FOREWORD ●

Every journey leaves behind a trail of stories, but some stories have been standing for centuries—rooted in silence, breathing history through their leaves. The Silent Guardians: Stories of India's Oldest Trees was born out of our travels across India, where each ancient tree seemed less a part of the landscape and more a keeper of memories.

What began as a simple curiosity—to trace the oldest living beings in our country—soon became a pilgrimage of sorts. From the sprawling banyans of rural temples to the ghostly baobabs by forgotten forts, we found ourselves standing before living witnesses of time. Their roots reached not just into the earth, but into the myths, songs, and daily lives of the people around them.

This book, *“The silent guardians: stories of India's oldest trees”*, is both a travelogue and a tribute. It gathers stories from the road—conversations with villagers, forest guards, and children who grew up under these trees—and pairs them with the quiet awe we felt while standing in their shade. Each tree we visited reminded us that history is not only written in stone and ink, but also whispered through bark and breeze.

V. Thirunavukarasu, IFS
APCCF & Principal,
CASFOS, Coimbatore

● PREFACE ●

In every corner of India, some trees have stood longer than kingdoms, dynasties, or even written history. They have watched empires rise and fall, carried the whispers of saints and poets, and offered shade to generations of ordinary people whose names have been lost to time.

These trees are not just biological beings. They are storytellers, witnesses, and guardians of memory. They remind us that life is measured not only in years but in centuries, in roots that anchor us to the earth and branches that stretch towards the future.

This book is a journey into the world of India's oldest trees. Some are famous—the Kannimara teak of Kerala, the Great Banyan of Kolkata, the Historical Chinara tree of Shalimar Bagh. Others are hidden in forests, villages, and temple courtyards, known only to the communities that protect them. Together, they form a living archive of India's ecological and cultural heritage.

By telling their stories, I hope to remind us of something essential: that in the silence of these guardians lies a wisdom deeper than any scripture, a patience greater than any human endeavour. They have outlived us before, and if we protect them, they will continue to outlive us—carrying forward the memory of the land we call home.

When we think of history, we often turn to books, monuments, and records.

But some of the most enduring witnesses of time are not built of stone or written on paper. They stand in the open air—alive, breathing, and quietly watching the centuries unfold. They are the ancient trees.

- Prajnadipti Das
ACF Trainee SFS 2023-25 Batch
CASFOS Coimbatore

● ACKNOWLEDGMENT ●

This book grew not just from our travels but from the generosity of countless people who shared their stories, time, and wisdom along the way.

I am deeply grateful to the forest officials and villagers who welcomed us into their communities and led us to trees hidden deep within forests, fields, and temple courtyards.

I am profoundly grateful to Principal, CASFOS, Coimbatore, Shri V. Thirunavukarasu, IFS, and Course Director, Dr. C. Vidhyasagar, IFS, for their guidance, encouragement, and motivation in undertaking meaningful work in my area of interest.

I also express my appreciation to the faculty of CASFOS, Coimbatore, for shaping my professional perspective and fostering a focused inclination toward my chosen field. My sincere thanks are due to the Editorial Committee of CASFOS, Coimbatore, including Dr. Ramkrishnan R., Scientist C, and Dr. B. Muhamad Rafi Hussain, for their valuable technical guidance and meticulous editing.

And finally, to the trees themselves—the true guardians of these stories. For their silence, their endurance, and their quiet grace. May we learn from their patience and protect the living heritage they represent.

With regards
-Prajnadipti Das

● CONTENTS ●

No.	Title	Page No.
1.	The Great Banyan of Kolkata: The Forest That Grew from One Tree	1
2.	The Banyan of Cellular Jail: Witness to Freedom's Struggle	4
3.	Kannimara Teak: The Queen of Parambikulam	7
4.	The Thipok Giant: Sentinel of the Andaman Rainforest	10
5.	The Majestic Chinar of Shalimar Bagh, Srinagar	13
6.	The Living Root Bridges of Meghalaya	16

1. The Great Banyan of Kolkata: The Forest That Grew from One Tree

In the heart of Kolkata's Acharya Jagadish Chandra Bose Indian Botanic Garden, stands a being so vast, so sprawling, that visitors often mistake it for a forest. Yet, it is only one tree — the Great Banyan.

Spread across more than 3.5 acres, supported by thousands of aerial roots that have thickened into trunks, the



Fig. 1. Great Banyan of Kolkata



Great Banyan is considered one of the widest trees in the world. Its crown stretches over 450 meters in circumference, sheltering birds, monkeys, snakes, and countless insects. To walk beneath it is to step into a world where time slows, and silence hums with life.

A Tree Older Than Empires

The Great Banyan is believed to be over 250 years old. It has survived two massive cyclones and even a lightning strike that killed its original central trunk in the 1920s. Most trees would have died. But the Banyan has a secret – it does not rely on one trunk alone. Its aerial roots descend from branches like ropes, take hold in the soil, and thicken into secondary trunks. Over centuries, these roots have multiplied, giving the tree the appearance of a forest with over 3,000 prop roots.

In this way, the Banyan defeats death. Even when its heart is gone, its body continues, spreading outward, endlessly expanding.

The Tree of Eternity

In Indian mythology, the Banyan is no ordinary tree. It is the Kalpavriksha – the wish-fulfilling tree, symbol of eternity. Hindu scriptures say that under a Banyan tree, Lord Krishna explained the mysteries of the universe to Arjuna. In villages, Banyans often stand at the centre of community life, hosting marriages, gatherings, and panchayats under their shade.

For Kolkata, the Great Banyan is not just a botanical wonder. It is a living monument, older than most of the city itself, which was formally founded in the late 1600s. It has stood through colonial rule, independence, and modern

urban sprawl—yet it continues to grow, oblivious to the changing human world around it.

The Silent Sanctuary

Step beneath its canopy, and you find yourself in a natural cathedral. Sunlight filters through its countless leaves, painting shifting patterns on the ground. The air feels cooler, quieter. A symphony of bird calls echoes through the branches. The Banyan provides a home to owls, kites, mynas, parakeets, and even bats that roost high in its arms.

For scientists, the tree is an ecological marvel – supporting an entire micro-ecosystem within a city of millions. For ordinary visitors, it is simply awe-inspiring: a reminder that sometimes the most extraordinary structures are not built by humans, but by nature herself.

A Guardian of Time

Despite its resilience, the Great Banyan has not been untouched by change. Cyclones have damaged sections of it, and fungal infections have occasionally threatened its health. Yet, with careful management by the Botanic Garden, it continues to thrive.

Walking away from the Great Banyan, one carries a humbling realisation: that a single tree can outlive empires, rebuild itself after death, and stand as a green giant in a world of concrete.

It is not just a tree. It is a guardian of time, a silent witness to centuries of history, and a forest that grew from one life.



2. The Banyan of Cellular Jail: Witness to Freedom's Struggle



Fig. 2. Banyan of Cellular Jail, A&N Islands

In Port Blair, the Andaman Islands, rises one of India's most haunting monuments — the Cellular Jail, or Kala Pani. Its high walls and silent corridors once held hundreds of freedom fighters in solitary confinement. But within this grim reminder of suffering, life still breathes — in the form of an old Banyan tree.



A Silent Witness

The banyan tree inside the Cellular Jail is not as large as the Great Banyan of Kolkata, yet its presence carries a weight far greater than its size. It stood here when the jail echoed with the cries of prisoners, when men like Veer Savarkar and Batukeshwar Dutt endured years of inhuman punishment.

Where walls confined human freedom, the Banyan's branches stretched outward. Where prisoners were silenced, the tree continued to grow silently, season after season. Today, it stands as a living witness to India's freedom struggle.

The Symbol of Endurance

Banyans are often seen as trees of resilience—able to regrow, expand, and outlive adversity. In the Cellular Jail, the tree became an unintentional companion for the prisoners. Some accounts suggest that inmates would secretly glance at it through the narrow ventilators of their cells, drawing courage from its sight.

For those trapped in isolation, the Banyan represented continuity—life beyond the prison walls, hope beyond despair.

From Suffering to Memory

Today, the Banyan tree remains inside the restored jail complex, offering shade to visitors who walk through the historic grounds. Tourists pause under its canopy, listening to the stories of the jail guides, and often find themselves reflecting: if the walls could speak, and if the tree could speak, what would they tell us?



The walls may speak of cruelty. But the tree would speak of survival.

A Living Memorial

In many ways, the banyan at Cellular Jail is not just a tree — it is a memorial. While plaques and museums preserve history in stone and paper, the Banyan preserves it in life. It connects the pain of the past with the freedom of the present, reminding us that resilience is not only a human quality but also a natural one.

As long as the Banyan continues to stand, the memory of those who suffered within those walls will never fade. It is, like all ancient trees, a silent guardian. But here, it is also a guardian of freedom.

3. Kannimara Teak: *The Queen of Parambikulam*



Fig. 3. Kannimara Teak, Parambikulam, Kerala



Deep in the Parambikulam Tiger Reserve, Kerala, stands a giant that commands silence the moment you see it. Known as the Kannimara Teak, this towering tree is celebrated as the largest living teak tree in the world.

The Giant Among Trees

The Kannimara teak rises over 47 meters (155 feet) high and has a girth of nearly 7 meters (23 feet). Believed to be around 450 years old, it has survived storms, droughts, and human exploitation in an area where teak was once heavily logged.

The Kannimara teak was honoured with the Maha Vriksha Puraskar in 1994 by the Government of India, in recognition of its significance and status as one of World largest natural Teak tree.

The local communities call it Kannimara, which means virgin tree. According to legend, when British foresters once tried to cut it down in the colonial period, blood is said to have oozed from its trunk. Alarmed, the workers abandoned the attempt, and the tree was spared. From then on, it was revered as sacred and left untouched.

The Teak of Legends

Teak has always been a prized timber—used for ship building, furniture, and architecture. Vast tracts of Kerala and Tamil Nadu's forests were logged during the colonial period for teak plantations. But the Kannimara survived because of its mythic status.



To the tribes of Parambikulam, the tree is a living deity. They offer flowers and prayers at its base during festivals. It is not merely wood, but a guardian spirit of the forest.

A Protected Monarch

Today, the Kannimara teak is preserved as a natural heritage tree within the Parambikulam Tiger Reserve. Tourists can walk a forest trail to witness it, and forest guides narrate its story with pride. Standing before it, one feels humbled by its sheer size—the rough bark, the colossal trunk, and the canopy that seems to touch the sky.

Unlike the sprawling banyans, the Kannimara stands tall and straight—a symbol of strength, endurance, and resilience.

The Message of Kannimara

What makes the Kannimara teak special is not only its size but its story of survival. While millions of teak trees were felled for profit, this one was spared because people believed it was sacred. Science and spirituality found common ground here—the respect of humans ensured the survival of a giant.

As you walk away from Kannimara, you realise that the tree is more than a natural wonder. It is a reminder of what reverence can protect, and of how ancient beings still live among us, silently teaching us the value of coexistence.



4. The Thipok Giant: *Sentinel of the Andaman Rainforest*



Fig. 4. The Thipok Giant, A & N Islands

The forest at Chidiyatapu breathes differently. The moment the trail leaves the busy road and dips into the Biological Park, the air cools and thickens with the scent of wet leaves and ancient wood. Light filters through the canopy in

shifting gold, and the chatter of hornbills echoes through the understory. It is not the silence of emptiness — it is the silence of something very old, very alive, and very watchful.

And then the trail opens into a clearing. There, rising like the pillar of a forgotten temple, stands the Thipok tree.

Its trunk is massive — so wide that a ring of people could not encircle it even if they tried. The roots plunge into the soil like ancient anchors, and its great limbs stretch upward as if trying to hold the sky. The tree doesn't merely grow here. It rules the space. Every sound softens around it, as though the forest itself has decided to give this being the floor to speak.

The Thipok is no recent sprout. Forest officials and locals believe it has stood here for centuries — perhaps eight hundred years or more — long before this land became a biological park, before fences and signboards were ever imagined. It has watched the island change: through cyclones, monsoons, and storms that flattened weaker trees. Yet this one remained, as if refusing to be erased.

Among the Andaman's indigenous communities, such trees are more than wood and leaves. They are guardians — keepers of the forest's spirit. Elders speak of them as silent watchers who see everything but speak only to those who know how to listen. Many still say that if you sit beneath a Thipok and let the forest settle around you, you can feel it — not in words, but in a presence.

Ecologists describe *Tetrameles nudiflora*, the species to which the Thipok belongs, as a pioneer tree — a species that arrives early and builds the foundation for others. It shelters birds, bats, orchids, ferns, insects, and entire micro-worlds in



its branches. The tree doesn't live alone; it creates a community around itself. Its wide canopy provides shade to the forest floor, its roots hold the soil firm, and its massive trunk becomes home to other lives. In every sense, the Thipok is less a tree and more an ecosystem.

The 2004 tsunami shook these islands, scarring much of the coastline and felling countless trees. But this one stood. Its bark weathered the salt, its roots gripped the soil, and its branches still spread out like a survivor's arms. In its stillness lies a kind of quiet defiance — the same defiance nature often shows against time itself.

Today, the Thipok is protected inside the Chidiyatapu Biological Park. Visitors approach it slowly, cameras dangling but conversation softening, as if instinctively aware they're entering sacred ground. A small board at its base offers its name and species, but no signboard can explain what it truly is. This tree is older than every building around it. It remembers things no person alive can.

Standing beneath it, one can feel the scale of time differently. The forest whispers in the language of rustling leaves, and the Thipok stands unmoved — patient, unhurried, as it has for centuries. It is not just a tree. It is the heart of this forest.

Long after footsteps fade and voices disappear down the trail, the Thipok remains — watching, holding, remembering. A silent guardian of the Andaman rainforest.

5. The Majestic Chinar of Shalimar Bagh, Srinagar



Fig. 5. Chinar of Shalimar Bagh, Srinagar

Amid the carefully terraced gardens of Shalimar Bagh, a Mughal masterpiece in Srinagar, stands a tree that has silently witnessed centuries of history — the Chinar. Its massive trunk and sprawling branches dominate the garden's landscape, offering shade, shelter, and a living link to the past.

The Chinar (*Platanus orientalis*), with its broad, star-shaped leaves, seems almost sculpted for poetry. In spring and summer, its dense canopy provides a cool refuge for visitors wandering along the stone pathways. Come autumn, its leaves turn golden and fiery red, carpeting the garden in a warm glow, creating a scene that has inspired poets, painters, and travellers for generations.

This particular Chinar is no ordinary tree. Planted during the Mughal era, it has stood through the reigns of



emperors, the arrival of the British, and the rhythms of daily life in Kashmir. Its roots, deep and gnarled, seem to drink from the very history of the garden. Its branches, heavy with age, stretch outward like welcoming arms, inviting anyone beneath them to pause and reflect.

Shalimar Bagh itself was commissioned by Emperor Jahangir in the early 17th century for his beloved queen, Nur Jahan. The garden's design, with its cascading terraces and flowing water channels, is a testament to Mughal aesthetics — a perfect blend of geometry, symmetry, and natural beauty. Yet, amid all this calculated design, the Chinar adds a touch of organic grandeur that no blueprint could replicate.

Local lore whispers that this Chinar has seen countless seasons of life and loss. Lovers carved initials into its bark, poets wrote verses under its shade, and children once played under its branches while the distant bells of the Shalimar Mosque echoed through the gardens. It is a silent guardian, bearing witness to centuries while quietly shaping the garden's identity.

The Chinar is more than a tree; it is a symbol of resilience, continuity, and grace. Its enduring presence reminds us that while human lives are fleeting, nature's guardians carry memory across centuries. Standing beneath its canopy, one cannot help but feel a deep connection to the past, to the Mughal vision of beauty, and to the cultural soul of Kashmir itself.

For travellers and locals alike, the Chinar of Shalimar Bagh is not just a botanical marvel. It is a living monument, a bridge between history and the present, a sentinel of serenity in the heart of Srinagar.



6. The Living Root Bridges of Meghalaya



Fig. 6. Living Root Bridges of Meghalaya

In the dense, mist-laden forests of Meghalaya, India, nature and human ingenuity intertwine most astonishingly. Here, the *Ficus elastica*, known locally as the rubber tree, has been coaxed into forming living bridges that span raging rivers and swollen streams. These living root bridges are not built; they are grown, a testament to patience, skill, and a profound understanding of nature's rhythms.

The Khasi and Jaintia tribes discovered that the aerial roots of the *Ficus* could be guided across streams using



bamboo scaffolding. Over decades, these roots thicken and strengthen, intertwining until they form a sturdy, self-supporting bridge. Some bridges, like the famous Umshiang or Nongriat root bridge, have stood for over 500 years, capable of supporting dozens of people at a time.

Walking on a living root bridge is like stepping onto a moving tapestry of life. The roots twist and weave in intricate patterns underfoot, some as thick as a human arm, others as delicate as ropes, all pulsating with life. Mosses and ferns cling to the roots, adding green velvet to the rough texture, while the sound of water rushing beneath adds an elemental rhythm to the journey.

After a short trek when I finally reached the living root bridge, it felt as though I had stepped into a world where time moved differently — slower, quieter, more deliberate. The air was cool and heavy with mist, carrying the scent of wet earth and moss. As I walked closer, I could hear the gentle murmur of water flowing beneath, blending seamlessly with the soft rustle of the forest canopy above.

The bridge stood before me — not built, but grown. Its roots were strong yet supple, twisted together like the hands of generations who had tended to it with patience and purpose. When I touched the surface of those living roots, I could feel the faint warmth of life within them, as if the tree itself was breathing through every fiber. The rough texture beneath my palm reminded me that nature doesn't hurry, yet everything gets done in its own time.

Crossing that bridge, I realized it wasn't merely a path over a stream — it was a bridge between two worlds: the natural and the human, woven together through trust and

understanding. The people here hadn't forced the forest to yield; they had learned to grow with it. Each strand of root was a lesson in coexistence — of how patience, care, and respect for nature can create something enduring and beautiful.

Standing there, surrounded by silence broken only by the murmuring sound of the visitors in utter disbelief of beauty of the nature, I understood the true meaning of guardianship. The living root bridge was not just a marvel of nature; it was a living symbol of harmony — of how life sustains life. In that moment, I felt deeply connected to the land, to the people, and to the forest itself. It reminded me why I chose this path — to protect, to nurture, and to listen to nature's quiet wisdom, just as these roots have listened to the earth for centuries.

What makes these bridges extraordinary is not just their function but their resilience. Unlike wooden or stone bridges that erode or collapse over time, living root bridges strengthen with age. Each passing year adds new roots, new layers, and new stability. They are living monuments that grow stronger as generations cross them, connecting villages, families, and communities in both a literal and symbolic sense.

These bridges also reflect a deep philosophy: humans do not dominate nature here; they cooperate with it. The Khasi people understood that life is long and slow, and that patience — sometimes spanning decades — yields results far more enduring than any hurried construction. Each bridge carries not just bodies but stories, memories, and cultural wisdom, standing as a symbol of harmony between people and trees.

To see a Ficus root bridge in Meghalaya is to witness a miracle of time and life. Here, the forest is alive in every fibre

