

STORY TO READ – 17/SEPTEMBER/2025

Whispers of the Banyan

In a quiet village called Sundarvan, there stood an ancient banyan tree at the edge of a lake. Its roots hung like silver threads, dipping into the water, and its broad canopy stitched shadows across the ground. The villagers called it “Baba Vriksha,” the grandfather tree, for no one could recall a time before its presence. Children learned to walk under its branches, lovers carved initials on its bark, and elders rested against its trunk after a day in the fields.

But Baba Vriksha carried secrets in his sap. He could feel — not in the way humans did, but in pulses that trembled through his xylem, in songs hidden within his leaves. He remembered every hand that had touched him, every story whispered in his shade.

Though he could not speak aloud, he listened, and he loved.

A Seed's First Dream

Centuries earlier, Baba had been only a seed dropped by a wandering bird. He sprouted beside the lake, small and tender, reaching for sunlight. Rain tasted like laughter then, and the breeze was a mother's hand. Each year he stretched taller, weaving himself into the landscape. He watched fishermen mend nets, brides fill brass pots with lake water, and temple bells stirring dusk.

He learned that humans, too, grew like saplings — fragile, yearning for light. Their joys nourished him; their sorrows wrapped around his trunk like mist.

The Bond with Anaya

One summer, a girl named Anaya began visiting the banyan every evening. She was ten, slight as a reed, with eyes that carried the

shimmer of moonlit ripples. She would sit cross-legged on the roots, sketching the lake and the tree in a battered notebook. Baba felt her weight as a warm flutter along his bark.

Anaya spoke to him in hushed tones. She told him of her dreams to become a painter, of her father who sold vegetables in the market, of the loneliness she felt in a world that often overlooked quiet souls. Baba longed to wrap his branches around her in comfort.

When she laughed, leaves trembled with delight. When she cried, his roots soaked tears fallen into soil.

Years passed, and Anaya's sketches blossomed into paintings. She left the village for art school, promising Baba she would return. Her absence was an ache in his cambium, yet he stored the memory of her smile like sunlight caught in resin.

The Time of Wounds

As Baba aged, Sundarvan changed. The lake shrank under heat. Motorbikes replaced bullock carts. A developer arrived, eyeing the lakeside for a resort. One dawn, machines trundled close, their blades glinting. Baba sensed unease ripple through nearby neem and tamarind trees.

Workers tied a red cloth around Baba's trunk — a mark of felling.

Panic surged through his rings. He wanted to roar, to tell them he had watched their children grow, had given them air, shade, quiet counsel. Instead, he sent frantic signals through his roots, warning saplings, steadying frightened shrubs. Birds screamed from branches; squirrels darted in confusion.

Just as the chainsaw's teeth kissed his bark, a familiar voice cut through the commotion.

It was Anaya, now a young woman with windblown hair and a satchel slung across

her shoulder. She stood before the workers, pleading. "This tree is older than our memories," she said. "You can build walls, but you cannot rebuild a soul like his."

Her words were leaves rustling inside Baba's heartwood. Villagers gathered, moved by her urgency. Petitions spread; schoolchildren drew pictures of the banyan. For weeks, Baba stood trembling as debates raged around him. At last, authorities declared him a "Heritage Tree." The machines rolled away. Relief coursed through every branch like spring rain.

Stories in the Bark

From that day, Anaya came often. She painted under his shade, teaching local kids to mix colours from crushed petals and clay. Baba delighted in their laughter; his roots hummed lullabies to tiny toes dancing on his soil.

At dusk, when everyone left, Anaya would lean against him, whispering thoughts she shared with no one else — fears about her art, guilt about city life pulling her away, gratitude for the strength he offered. Baba answered with soft rustles, weaving encouragement into the breeze.

He also kept other memories — a couple who met secretly beside his roots, a farmer who once tied a prayer cloth seeking rain, an old widow who leaned on him while mourning her husband. Each story was a scar etched lovingly into his grain.

Seasons of Parting

Time, relentless, carved new chapters. Anaya's career flourished; exhibitions carried her paintings far beyond Sundarvan. Yet she always returned, sometimes with students, sometimes alone, always with reverence. She treated Baba not just as a muse but as an elder who had shaped her voice.

One winter she arrived quietly, face pale. She placed a palm on his trunk and let tears slip into his crevices. “The doctors say I’m ill,” she confessed, words quivering. “I don’t know how much time I have.”

Baba felt the tremor ripple through every cell. He wished he could shed leaves to wrap her, to absorb the sickness. All he could do was release a fragrance — subtle, earthy — as if to remind her of roots deeper than pain.

She spent long hours painting there, capturing the banyan in every mood: dawn soaked in saffron, noon luminous, twilight brooding. She told him, “Even if I go, you’ll stay. People will look at you and know I loved beauty.”

When spring came, blossoms sprinkled across his branches like blessings. She sat beneath, frail but serene, signing her last canvas.

Legacy of Leaves

Anaya passed that summer. Villagers laid garlands around Baba's trunk during her funeral. Children pressed their cheeks against his bark, seeking the comfort he had once given her.

For weeks he stood in silent mourning. Birds nested quietly, as if aware of grief vibrating through his limbs. Rain washed over him, cleansing sorrow but not erasing memory.

Then, one dawn, a small boy approached — Rohan, one of Anaya's pupils. He placed a paintbrush at Baba's roots. "She told me you listen," he said. "Will you listen to me too?"

Hope flickered within Baba's sap. More children came, bringing colours, stories, songs. They painted murals on boards propped against his aerial roots: lakes alive with fish, skies bursting with suns, portraits of Anaya smiling among leaves. Baba sheltered them, letting laughter seep into hollows where loss had been.

The Heartwood's Secret

Inside Baba's trunk lay a hidden chamber of memory, formed where years of growth folded around emptiness. There, feelings pooled like amber: joy, sorrow, gratitude. He realised that love, even when met with axes or death, could sprout again through new shoots.

He understood his purpose was not merely to survive storms or offer shade but to remind people of connection — to earth, to each other, to stories larger than themselves.

When evening winds rustled through Sundarvan, they carried whispers from Baba Vriksha: *Cherish what breathes beside you. Every root holds a heartbeat; every leaf is a letter from time.*

A Promise in the Wind

Years later, travellers came to the lake and marveled at a massive banyan encircled by

paintings. They saw children learning to draw under its canopy, elders drinking tea on benches, couples photographing themselves in dappled light. Few knew the full story, but they felt something — a calm that steadied restless hearts.

And sometimes, when dusk brushed gold across the water, they swore the tree swayed just a little, as if bowing to an invisible friend.

Because Baba still felt Anaya's presence in every breeze. Her laughter was stitched into his leaves, her tears into his roots. She had not left; she had merely become part of his seasons.

He would guard her memory for as long as he stood, letting each generation hear, in the soft sigh of branches, that trees, too, can love — fiercely, quietly, eternally.