

Under the Banyan

By Lucy Pawlak • Illustrated by Kathia Recio



Gayatri sweeps around the roots of the banyan tree. She has been sweeping all day, but she's not even halfway around it. It will take four days of hard work. Gayatri isn't slow or lazy. She is 76 years old, but she can still work hard and move fast. It will take Gayatri four days because the banyan is **gigantic**. The tree has thousands of hanging roots that stretch down from the branches and into the ground. From far away, it looks like a forest, but really it is just one tree. The shade of the banyan spreads over an area bigger than a soccer field. There are banyan trees like this all across India. The widest tree in the world is a banyan. It covers almost 2,000 square meters and is about 550 years old.

Gayatri lives in the shade of the banyan tree, on the edge of the rural town of Kalipi in South India. She takes good care of the tree because the tree has taken good care of her. Gayatri has been taking care of it for over 40 years. She found the great banyan tree when she was walking alone in the forest. Her family had moved far away to the north, so she was feeling sad. She saw that the tree was weak and needed to be taken care of. Near its trunk, she built a small cabin where she could sleep. To this day she has never left the tree. It has **thrived**, growing healthy and strong with her help. These days, the cabin is a little bit dusty and many of the clay sculptures are broken. Gayatri knows it needs to be cleaned and painted, but she is getting old, and she can't do everything.

Today Gayatri's friend Sumona is helping her sweep. Sometimes they stop to tie small bags of soil to roots that do not reach the ground so that the tree will be well fed. Sometimes they put wet clay between the roots that reach into the ground so that they do not become **loose**. Sumona is an artist; she loves to photograph banyan trees. Sumona and Gayatri are working on a project. They meet to take photos and tell the story of life under the banyan tree. Gayatri worries about who will look after it when she is too old. She is happy that Sumona understands the importance of the tree.

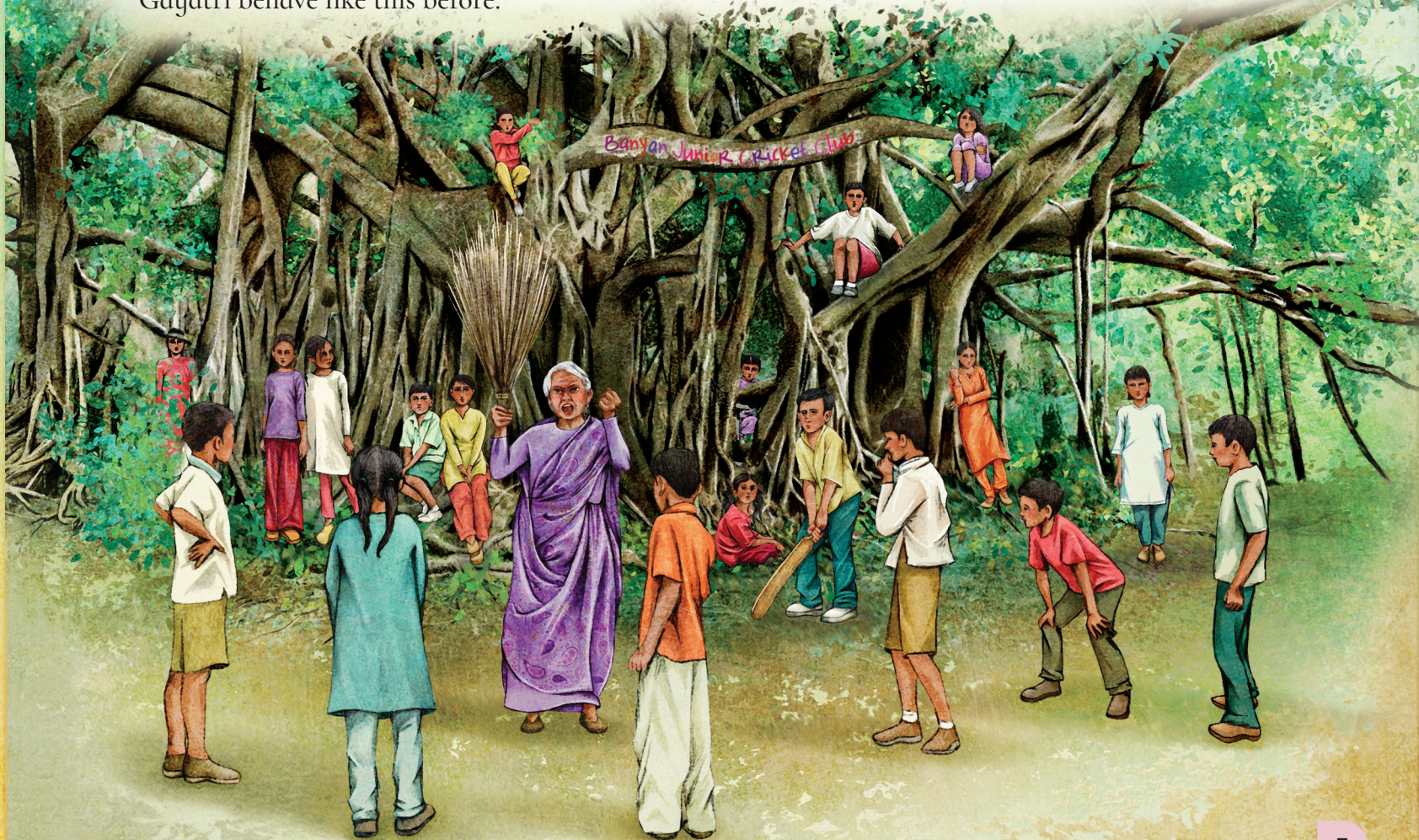
For some people, banyans are the tree of life because they can live for hundreds of years. They are home to many insects and animals. Each part of the tree is used for making different medicines. Other people believe it's actually the tree of death because nothing grows under it and banyans are often found close to graveyards. And other people think the tree's long hanging roots **resemble** the hair of a wise old man. Gayatri likes the fairy tale about the tree being like a mother: once upon a time, a banyan saved two babies, who had been left alone in its shade, by feeding them its milk-like sap. Caring for this banyan has given Gayatri a home in this place.



Now many visitors make long journeys to visit the tree. Gayatri enjoys showing them around and sharing her knowledge, but recently, like today, there have been some **unwelcome** guests. Gayatri and Sumona, sweeping around the tree, hear a crack and then cheering and laughter. Gayatri peers through the vegetation. The kids from the village are playing **cricket** under the tree. The ball cracks against a root. "Out!" They cry. Gayatri is furious; she hates to see them harm her poor banyan!

Arjun got the cricket bat for his birthday. Ever since, he has been playing nonstop with his friends. It's too hot in the sun, so they play in the shade of the great banyan tree. The spot is perfect, except for the angry old woman who lives there. They call her Mrs. Angry because she is always shouting and interfering with their fun. The kids play in the afternoon, when Mrs. Angry is napping. They chose their spot carefully, as far away as possible from where she sleeps. The children love playing cricket in the shade. They practice all the time and are becoming very good. They decide to make a club and name it after the tree. They paint a beautiful sign along a branch that reads "Banyan Junior Cricket Club."

The day that Gayatri and Sumona decide to sweep around the banyan is an important day for the Banyan Junior Cricket Club. Arjun and his friends are playing their first official match. When Gayatri and Sumona look through the roots to see who is cheering, they are surprised to see more than 20 children. Sumona turns to Gayatri to ask her what is going on and is surprised to see the old woman is transforming: her face is becoming very red, and her eyes seem to be on fire. Gayatri is as frightening as a great tiger; she has turned into Mrs. Angry. Sumona watches as Mrs. Angry runs out into the center of the game, shouting: "What is the meaning of this? I have forbidden you to play cricket under my tree!" The children are frightened and silent. Just then, Mrs. Angry sees the sign they have painted on the branch. "You have even attacked my tree with graffiti! Get out! Go! Or I will call the police!" she shouts. Sumona is surprised; she has never seen Gayatri behave like this before.



After the children have left, Sumona takes the old lady back home for a cup of calming tea. She slowly turns back into the Gayatri who Sumona knows and loves. Sumona feels sorry for her, but she also sympathizes with the children. They looked so happy playing cricket, and the sign they painted was original and colorful.

The following day, Sumona decides to look for the children and get their side of the story. She finds Arjun and his friends playing cricket in the hot sun that afternoon. Arjun tells her about the Banyan Junior Cricket Club and Mrs. Angry who refuses to let them play.

“Why is she so mean to us? We just want to play cricket in the cool shade of the tree! The tree is big enough for all of us!”

“Yes,” agrees Sumona. “The tree is big enough for everyone.”



Sumona can see Arjun’s point, but she also thinks the children should respect the banyan tree. She knows that, when Gayatri’s family left her, she put all her love into the tree. She sees herself as the protector of the tree. Sumona walks among the hanging roots thinking about a way to solve the problem. “Help me banyan tree,” she says aloud. “After all, maybe there’s a way you can benefit, too!”

She stops and looks around; she has reached Gayatri’s little cabin near the center of the tree. Clay models of people as well as animals and bowls are displayed all around. Many of them are broken and everything is very dirty and in need of paint. Sumona wipes mud off a clay horse and has a great idea—it’s a long shot, but it might just work.



Three weeks have passed, and Sumona's plan is working perfectly. The faded, dusty little cabin has been transformed; it is clean and freshly painted. Gayatri is nearby having her afternoon nap, and not much further off are Arjun and the entire Banyan Junior Cricket Club. They are sweeping around the banyan; they greet Sumona happily and ask her if she would like to join them for cricket practice later.

These days the cricket club helps Gayatri, they re-paint the clay animals and people and take care of the surrounding flora and fauna in the forest. In return, they can continue to play cricket in the banyan's shade. They have grown to love the tree too, so caring for it is not a chore. If everyone respects the banyan, there should be no reason why they cannot all enjoy its huge umbrella of shade, its endlessly expanding branches, its deep roots, and its **diverse** worlds.

