

The Felling of the Banyan Tree (POEM)- DILIP CHITRE**ABOUT THE AUTHOR:**

Dilip Chitre (1938-2009) was a teacher, painter, and magazine columnist. He lived, and taught in Ethiopia and the US, and was a bilingual writer. His major works are in Marathi, but he also wrote in English. Travelling in a Cage was his first and only book of English poems. He also translated from Marathi to English, the chief translations being An Anthology of Marathi Poetry and Says Tuka. Exile, alienation, self-disintegration and death are the major themes in Chitre's poetry. His poetry belongs to the Modernist Movement, reflecting an urban sensibility and cosmopolitan views. This poem is about the cutting down of the ancient banyan tree that stood in the yard in the poet's ancestral house. The act seems to signify the cutting down of roots and the movement to a different and more modern atmosphere, signified by the move to Bombay

POEM:

My father told the tenants to leave

Who lived in the houses surrounding our house on the hill

One by one the structures were demolished

Only our own house remained and the trees

Trees are sacred my grandmother used to say

Felling them is a crime but he massacred them all

The sheoga, the oudumber, the neem were all cut down

But the huge banyan tree stood like a problem

Whose roots lay deeper than all our lives

My father ordered it to be removed

The banyan tree was three times as tall as our house
Its trunk had a circumference of fifty feet
Its scraggly aerial roots fell to the ground
From thirty feet or more so first they cut the branches
Sawing them off for seven days and the heap was huge
Insects and birds began to leave the tree
And then they came to its massive trunk
Fifty men with axes chopped and chopped
The great tree revealed its rings of two hundred years
We watched in terror and fascination this slaughter
As a raw mythology revealed to us its age
Soon afterwards we left Baroda for Bombay
Where there are no trees except the one
Which grows and seethes in one's dreams, its aerial roots
Looking for the ground to strike.

Felling of the Banyan Tree Summary

The poet says that his father asked all the tenants to leave their house so that they could proceed with its demolition. All the houses except for the one in which the poet's family resided and a banyan tree considered holy by his grandmother were demolished. The trees were cut down, including several medicinal and sacred ones. However, the cutting of the enormous banyan tree that was so tall and had deep roots was a big problem. Still, the father gave an order to cut the tree.

The tree was thrice the size of the poet's house, and its trunk had a circumference of about fifty feet. Its aerial roots were thirty feet long and touched the ground. They started by shredding the branches, which caused the insects and birds to leave the tree. Fifty men had to constantly chop its trunk. Everyone saw the tree's ring that showed its age of about two hundred years. The people witnessed this slaughter with fear and fascination. The poet expresses that soon after that, they moved to Mumbai from Baroda, where they could not see many trees. If they could see some trees, it was in their dreams only, as they looked forward to turning into reality and touching the ground, changing into a concrete building.

Analysis of "The Felling of the Banyan Tree"

"The Felling of the Banyan Tree" explores a special time in the life of a sensitive speaker, when family roots were torn out, and when the old way of life had to give way to the new.

- From the first line, the reader is informed that this decision was taken by the patriarch, the father, and the energy which directly affects things is, therefore, masculine.

There is no reason given for such drastic action, and no specific economical or logical details offered as to why this clearance of houses and land should occur.

- In opposition to this masculine approach - **antithetical** - is that of the feminine, represented in the family by the grandmother, a spokesperson for nature, for the sacred aura attached to the remaining trees.

She introduces a religious element, based on tradition, which tells that to harm a tree is an actual crime. The speaker focuses on the names of the trees that are, to put it rather violently, '*massacred*' by the father.

And in the shape of the banyan there is the symbol of family itself, the great rooted tree representing centuries of living, of connection between earth and heaven.

It too is cut down. The second stanza gives the reader all the details...how long, how much, how many. A whole ecosystem is gradually brought down, extinguished perhaps.

- The imagery is clear. The great banyan, helpless to resist, is hacked at by dozens of men. It's like something out of a battle or war...in fact, this felling does seem to foretell the coming environmental struggles that are still ongoing globally, but especially in countries like India, so used to the wilderness but now having to cope with industry, new economics and expanding populations.

The speaker has two emotions - terror and fascination. The former is based on sadness and fear for the future, the latter on the awesome sight of a massive tree coming crashing to the ground, revealing its rings and ancient history.

The family moves to the city and the speaker now is hard hit it seems, for the only trees available are those in the subconscious. But this tree is angry (seethes), perhaps because of the way the move has happened. And there's no telling if the roots will find what they need: nourishment from the earth.

Literary Devices in The Felling of the Banyan Tree

The Felling of the Banyan Tree is a free verse poem of 3 stanzas, with 25 lines in total. There is no set rhyme scheme and the metre varies somewhat, bringing different rhythms to each line.

Theme

The central theme is uprootedness, the idea of leaving a family home. The secondary theme is that of ecosystems and their destruction, specifically that of felling trees for profit, in the name of progress.

In the poem, the two are inextricably linked - the speaker moving home coincides with the tree being cut down. The two are fused together.

Tone

The style is conversational as if the speaker is relaying the tale of the banyan tree to a family member, or a friend. It is like a short story being told. Overall the tone is matter of fact tinged with slight sadness and even anger at the thought of the tree being cut down, effectively killed.

Language/Diction

Note the use of words that reinforce the idea of a masculine versus feminine theme, of destruction versus conservation:

demolished/massacred/removed/terror/slaughter.

sacred/deeper/revealed/fascination.

Metaphor

The banyan tree is a metaphor for the speaker's family history.

In the Hindu religion, the banyan tree (batbriksha) is a symbol of the Triumvirate of Lord Vishnu (the bark), Brahma (the roots) and Lord Shiva (the branches). It brings life and fertility.