

B Reading comprehension (30 points)**Part 1**

Lesen Sie den Text und beantworten Sie die folgenden Fragen.

**Thimmamma Marrimanu:
The world's largest single tree canopy**

Flourishing within one of India's driest regions, Thimmamma Marrimanu has become an symbol of eternal life – and it continues to grow through recent conservation efforts.

A place of pilgrimage

Compared to other destinations in India, Andhra Pradesh in the country's south-east may not rank highly on popular tourist itineraries. However, it's India's most most-visited state domestically, with more than 120 million people flocking here annually. The majority of them are Hindu pilgrims journeying to Tirupati, a city that holds one of the world's wealthiest temples and most frequented sacred sites.

But one more, somewhat unexpected, place of pilgrimage lies tucked away in the rocky valleys 25km south-east of Kadiri: a natural wonder that holds a Guinness World Records title.

A tree of life

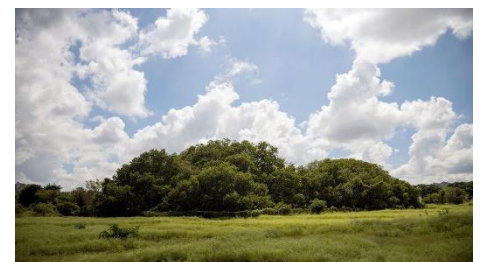
Flourishing within one of India's driest regions is Thimmamma Marrimanu, the world's largest single tree canopy. The banyan tree was first added to the Guinness Book of World Records in 1989 (its entry updated in 2017) as being 550 years old and having the "greatest perimeter length for a tree", spreading over five acres with a circumference of 846m.

Much of this global recognition was due to the work of Sathyanarayana Iyer, a journalist who humorously changed his name to "Regret Iyer" after receiving many "letters of regret" from publications regarding his story ideas. His 1989 discovery about Thimmamma Marrimanu, however, was a success, confirming one of the writer-photographer's speculations – based on rumours he had heard and a subsequent investigation – that Andhra Pradesh was home to a huge banyan tree.

Spreading its roots

The banyan (*Ficus benghalensis*), also called Indian banyan or banyan fig, is part of the mulberry family and is native to the Indian subcontinent. Stretching outward in every direction, it looks more like a grove or a forest than a single tree. Considered a "strangler" tree, it begins life as an epiphyte, a plant that grows on the surface of another plant, first by planting seeds in the branches of other trees and then by sprouting vine-like roots that block the host tree of sunlight as they wind down and eventually anchor themselves into the forest floor. These roots then spread underground, depriving all other nearby plants of water and nutrients, using these resources to then thicken into big pillars that look like tree trunks. The banyan will keep growing and expanding as far as its surroundings permit.

Thimmamma Marrimanu has more than 4,000 roots making up its canopy. It has been damaged by cyclones and droughts over the centuries, with large clumps of well-established



roots having fallen sideways or broken off completely. But nevertheless, the tree is still expanding. The small collection of dusty mountains in which it is nestled provides a small, bowl-like clearing that allows for good drainage and sunlight with plenty of room for the tree to grow.

A national tree

The banyan is considered India's national tree, and its constant expansion and regrowth is seen as a symbol of eternal life, particularly in the Hindu religion. Over time, the tree has also become a world-famous symbol of fertility, life and resurrection. Followers of Hinduism, Buddhism and other religions often tie ribbons to the branches of banyans, which now grow throughout South-East Asia, and place small shrines with religious icons at their roots. But while banyan trees grow in temple courtyards throughout India, Thimmamma Marrimanu is so large that it holds an entire temple at its centre.

From the ashes

Although not directly referenced in the Bhagavad Gita, Thimmamma Marrimanu has its own legend associated with it. Hindus believe that a woman named Thimmamma performed sati (the practice of a widow immolating herself on her husband's funeral pyre) in 1433 in the exact place the banyan tree grows. According to the legend, her husband had been suffering from leprosy and eventually passed away from the disease, and as a devoted wife who had sworn eternal love for her spouse, she could not bear the pain of losing him. It is said that one of the poles supporting the pyre rooted into the ground, allowing Thimmamma to be transformed into the tree and become a goddess. Many believe that the tree has mystical powers and is able to bless childless couples with the gift of fertility.

Ancient rituals

Pilgrims remove their shoes before entering the vicinity of the sacred tree canopy. After walking down a dusty path into the heart of the banyan, they first bow and pray to Nandi, a bull deity who acts a gate-guardian for the samadhi (funerary monument) created as a memorial for Thimmamma and dedicated to Lord Shiva, the god of destruction and rebirth. Next, they visit a small shrine that houses icons of Thimmamma and her husband, to which they offer food such as coconut and spices.

Before approaching the main shrine facing the samadhi, which houses a black stone icon of Thimmamma, pilgrims are blessed by a priest waving a candle flame before them. After listening to a local guide tell the story of the goddess' sacrifice, they circle the samadhi five times to the right, which symbolises walking the "right" path in life.

A perfect harmony

The peaceful and secluded setting that surrounds Thimmamma Marrimanu makes it hard to believe that Bangalore – India's third most populated city – lies less than 180km south-west. Instead of hustle and bustle, the tree is alive with the birdsong of parrots and doves, flying foxes hang from branches within the canopy, and monkeys beg for handouts from the temple's roof.

Of course, the animal residents are also included in the tree's local folklore, which says that birds will not sleep in the tree at night and snakes have vowed to never harm anyone inside the canopy, both out of respect for the goddess.

Whether there is any truth to these tales, Thimmamma Marrimanu has become an enduring symbol of fertility, life and resurrection, and has brought solace to people throughout the ages. The fact that the tree is still growing means that it's likely to continue to do so for many generations to come.

Part 2

Lesen Sie den Text und beantworten Sie die folgenden Fragen.

Inside Japan's most minimalist homes

Close to nature and beautifully minimalist, the Zen-like interiors featured in a new book offer a glimpse inside the Japanese mindset.

**A**

"The home – before it is a place of beauty – is a place for safety, and assessed according to its alignment with its natural surroundings," says Mihoko Iida, whose new book *Japanese Interiors* takes a look inside some of Japan's most interesting private homes. From urban apartments to mountain and seaside escapes, the spaces featured in the book all share this idea of what home interiors mean in Japan, and how they are informed by a sense of harmony and balance with their surrounding environment.

Alongside the homes' proximity to nature is the pared-back simplicity for which Japanese design has become known. "Minimalism has a long history in Japan," explains author Iida, "rooted in the teachings of Zen Buddhism that came to our country via China, and found a foothold beginning around the 12th Century."

In the book, Iida explains how these ideas aligned with Japan's existing religion, Shintoism, "a nature religion that does not worship a central figure but rather considers all things – man-made and natural – to possess a spiritual essence." Interpretations of this vary, she explains. "A simplified explanation is that nothing should be treated poorly, and therefore it is better to have nothing. Or as Buddha said, 'The less you have, the less you have to worry about'." Many modern minimalist homes in Japan are influenced by shrines and temples as a result. Here are some of the most beautiful and most intriguing.

B – Peninsula House

Set among the rocks, sea, wind and sky of the Kanto region, Peninsula House is a monolithic structure that seems to rise up from its surroundings. It was designed by Mount Fuji Architects Studio, and has an arresting, Brutalist simplicity. The spaces of the structure are flooded with light on the ocean side, with double-height walls of windows offering epic views of sea and sky. Iida elaborates: "The scene evokes a contemporary take on *shakkei*, the Japanese concept of scenery borrowed from nature, as is often seen in traditional garden design – with the seascape surrounding the residence, stealing the show as its most defining interior feature."

**C – House A**

Alongside House A, the owners recently added a garden house, a contemporary tea-house-like building surrounded by trees. A simple, one-room structure, it has a tiled roof of steel, underlined with cedar, reflecting its closeness to nature, and giving the interior a textured warmth. Inside there is a blend of traditional touches and sleek modernism. An iconic white paper lantern by master designer Isamu Noguchi is among the classic touches. Surrounded by the stunning garden, it is, says Iida, "the perfect natural escape in the midst of the city".

D – Lotus House

The striking Lotus House was created by award-winning architect Kengo Kuma, and with its innovative, bold checkboard-style walls, it nevertheless blends in with its natural surroundings. The airy home in Eastern Japan faces a pond planted with lotus plants, and is surrounded by dense forest. The residence has, says Iida, "an unusual sense of structural lightness, as though every stone panel... is hovering in the air". Shafts of sunlight, light breezes and forest aromas all seep through the property as a result of this innovative structure.

At Lotus House there is a floating staircase on the rear wall, and the living room overlooks the lotus pond. As the architect Kuma puts it: "The lightness of the stone is an expression of the gentle lotus petals." According to Iida, the term 'interiors' is defined rather differently in Japan. "When Japanese people talk about interiors, it's more about where the sunlight enters a room, how the wind travels through the entrance," she explains. "Or creating a space to withstand the natural elements in the mountains or along the coast."

E – Stairway House

Another defining element of interiors in Japan is, says Iida, "how limited space is used efficiently within the urban confines of a thriving city such as Tokyo". Function, playfulness and a quiet minimalism are combined in Stairway House in Tokyo, created by young design studio nendo to accommodate an extended family of various generations. Central to its structure is a vast stairway-like structure starting in the gravel garden and cutting through the whole interior, rising up to the skylight on the ceiling. "As functional as it is surreally playful, the role of the staircase is clear," writes Iida, "to connect the family members within a single yet private series of spaces." The interior is monochromatic and simple, with plants placed across the steps offering greenery. The result, architects nendo explain, is "a space where all three generations could take comfort in each other's subtle presence."



F – Polygon House

With a futuristic edge, Polygon House sits on a hillside surrounded by forests in Karuizawa, outside Tokyo, and was designed by Makoto Yamaguchi. "Boundaries between inside and out are nearly invisible," explains Iida. "Large south-facing glass windows invite inside charismatic vistas of the changing seasons – from blazing autumnal leaves and leafy summer greens to serene wintertime snowfall." The place, she says, is "imbued with an almost Zen-like minimalist serenity".

G – House S

With walls of glass framing lush garden views, House S feels close to the natural world, despite its central Tokyo location. A roomy family home, the residence was designed by Keiji Ashizawa. A bold open staircase connects all three floors, and a long wall of glass spans an entire side of the building. The whole structure is designed to make the most of the proximity to nature.



Japanese Interiors by Mihoko Iida is published by Phaidon.