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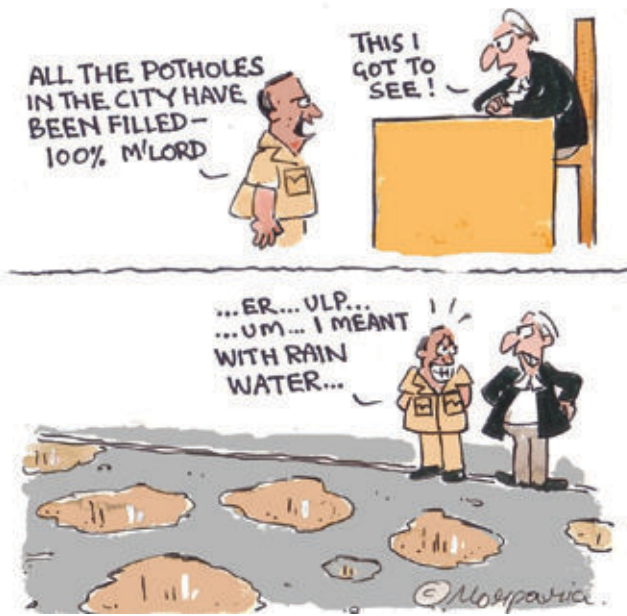
THE SACRED DANCE OF NATURE

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Face to Face

SALIM ARIF



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DODDAMANE
SAKAMMA



DR. MANGALA JAYANT
NARLIKAR



CAPTAIN ANSHUMAN
SINGH, KIRTI CHAKRA



Editor

Anuradha Dhareshwar

Design

Ananta Art Services

e-mail: oiopfoundation@gmail.com

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Explore the wide spectrum and flavour of Indian Festivals

India's vibrant cultural landscape is a tapestry woven with majestic festivals, each reflecting the country's rich traditions and diverse heritage. Holi, the festival of colors, brings people together in joyful revelry, while Raksha Bandhan strengthens the bond between siblings with sacred threads. Makar Sankranti marks the harvest season with kite-flying and traditional foods. Dussehra celebrates the victory of good over evil, and Diwali lights up the nation with lamps symbolizing hope and prosperity. The Kanwar Yatra sees devoted pilgrims walking great distances in reverence, while the Pandharpur Wari exemplifies the deep-rooted spiritual journey of millions, showcasing India's unparalleled devotion and unity through countless such celebrations.

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A journey through faith and devotion

Embark on a transformative journey where ancient legends and unwavering devotion converge, as millions of Kanwaris traverse sacred paths to honour Lord Shiva! **Anushka Singh** weaves a fascinating tale of the Kanwaris walking barefoot, abstain from consuming alcohol and meat, and maintain a state of purity and celibacy – a journey marked by communal harmony and a vibrant display of devotion.



The Kanwar Yatra takes place during the Hindu month of Shraavan (July-August), a period considered highly auspicious for worshipping Lord Shiva

The Kanwar Yatra, an annual pilgrimage of immense spiritual significance, traces its roots back to ancient traditions and legends. Devotees, known as Kanwaris, undertake this arduous journey to fetch holy water from the sacred river Ganga and offer it to Shiva temples, most notably the Jyotirlingas. This religious expedition is not merely a physical journey but a profound expression of faith and devotion, deeply intertwined with India's ancient cultural heritage. The narrative of the Kanwar Yatra is enriched by its historical origins, the legends that surround it, and the significance of the temples visited by the Kanwaris.

The origins of the Kanwar Yatra are spotted with references found in Hindu scriptures and folklore. The most widely accepted legend attributes the ritual to the celestial episode of 'Samudra Manthan'—the churning of the ocean. It is believed that during this cosmic event, a deadly poison emerged, before the 'amrit' or the nectar churned out, threatening to destroy the universe.

To save the cosmos, Lord Shiva consumed the poison, holding it in his throat, which turned blue, earning him the epithet Neelkanth. The nectar, on the other hand, was distributed amongst the gods. To alleviate the heat generated by the poison in the throat, the gods and the devotees began offering and pouring Ganga water to Lord Shiva.

The Samudra Manthan is one of the most significant events described in the Hindu Puranas. The event united the gods or the devas and the demons or the asuras. The churning of the ocean followed a curse by Sage Durvasa who was furious over Indra and cursed the devas to lose their power and kingdom. Everything changed such as Goddess Lakshmi parted ways with Vishnu and left Devlok which made the devas lose all their riches, Chandra disappeared, Indra lost his vahana, etc.

Worried, the devas approached Lord Vishnu who told

them to churn the ocean, Kshir Sagar, to get the amrit or the immortality nectar which will return the power and the glory to the devas. The asuras or the demons also wanted the elixir so joined forces and used Mandara Parvat and Shiva's garland which is the serpent king Vasuki for the manthan.

Another legend narrates the tale of Ravana, the king of Lanka, who was a devout follower of Shiva. According to this legend, Ravana would carry water from the Ganga to offer it to his deity, thus marking the origin of the Kanwar Yatra. He brought the Ganga water using Kanwar and offered it to his lord in Shiva's temple in *Puramahadev*. The journey symbolises a devotee's surrender to the divine, mirroring the devotion and penance of Ravana himself. And today, Shiva's devotees continue the tradition of pouring water from the holy river on the *shivalingas* every year in the auspicious month of Shravan.

The journey

The Kanwar Yatra typically takes place during the Hindu month of Shravan (July-August), a period considered highly auspicious for worshipping Lord Shiva. The pilgrimage begins with devotees visiting holy places along the Ganga, such as Haridwar, Gaumukh, and Gangotri. They collect water from these sacred sites in specially designed pitchers called 'kanwars,' which they carry on their shoulders throughout the journey.

The Kanwarias follow a strict code of conduct, often observed with great reverence. They walk barefoot, abstain from consuming alcohol and meat, and maintain a state of purity and celibacy. The journey is marked by communal harmony and a vibrant display of devotion, with temporary camps set up along the routes offering free food, medical aid, and other necessities.

During this journey, the devotees visit many temples as well. The Neelkanth Mahadev Temple in Rishikesh, situated amidst the serene surroundings of the Pauri Garhwal district, holds immense significance in the Kanwar Yatra. The temple is dedicated to Lord Shiva, who is believed to have consumed the 'vish' or the poison from the Samudra manthan here.

Another important temple visited during this time is the Kashi Vishwanath Temple in Varanasi. One of the twelve Jyotirlingas, the Kashi Vishwanath Temple is a prime destination for Kanwarias. Varanasi, the spiritual capital of India, resonates with the chants of devotees, creating a mystical aura. Known as Baba Dham, the Baidyanath Temple in Deoghar, is another major pilgrimage site visited during the Kanwar Yatra. It is believed that offering Ganga water here grants devotees' wishes, making it a pivotal stop for the Kanwarias.

The Trimbakeshwar Temple in Nashik, Maharashtra is situated near the Brahmagiri mountain, and is another significant Jyotirlinga and an ancient Hindu pilgrimage town. The Jyotirlinga here is unique as it features a three-faced Linga representing the Tridev — Lord Brahma, Lord Vishnu, and Lord Shiva. The temple is not only a religious hub but also a marvel of ancient Indian architecture. The holy river Godavari, the longest in peninsular India, which is

considered sacred by the Hindus originates here near Trimbak. The current Trimbakeshwar temple, erected by the third Peshwa Balaji Bajirao, stands on the site of an ancient temple. The temple is designed with entry gates on all four cardinal directions: East, West, South, and North. According to beliefs, the East signifies the beginning, the West - maturity, the South - fulfilment and the North symbolises revelation.

Ujjain's Mahakaleshwar Temple, one of the most sacred Jyotirlingas, is another revered destination of the Kanwarias. The temple's sanctity is heightened during the Kanwar Yatra, with devotees flocking to offer their collected Ganga water. This temple is situated along the holy river of Shipra. One of the most interesting things here is the *shivalinga* is believed to be Swayambhu.

Cultural impact

The Kanwar Yatra is more than a pilgrimage; it is a cultural phenomenon that brings together millions of devotees from diverse backgrounds. The journey exemplifies the resilience and unwavering faith of the Kanwarias, who endure physical hardships to fulfil their vows. The vibrant atmosphere, marked by devotional songs, chants, and a sea of saffron-clad devotees, transforms the yatra into a moving mural of India's spiritual diversity.

The Yatra also plays a crucial role in reinforcing community bonds. The collective effort in organising the pilgrimage, providing amenities, and ensuring the safety of the pilgrims highlights the spirit of unity and cooperation. Moreover, the pilgrimage significantly impacts local economies, with markets bustling with religious paraphernalia, food stalls, and accommodations catering to the needs of the Kanwarias.

The Kanwar Yatra is a testament to the enduring faith and devotion that form the bedrock of Indian culture. It is a journey that transcends mere physical movement, offering a path to spiritual enlightenment and inner peace. The legends, rituals, and temples associated with the yatra create a rich heritage of tradition and devotion, leaving an indelible mark on the hearts of the devotees. As the Kanwarias return home, their journey becomes a symbol of spiritual fulfilment and a reaffirmation of their unwavering faith in the divine.

Presently, the legendary pilgrimage is also one of India's largest religious congregations where millions of devotees and saints traverse through the country to reach their destinations. The Kanwarias often chant 'Bam Bam Bholey', 'Har Har Mahadev' and bhajans and religious songs during their journey signifying their devotion for Shiva. The journey is an experience in itself for the participants and for the spectators when millions of Kanwarias from Delhi, Rajasthan, Haryana and Uttar Pradesh make their way to meet their god!

Anushka Singh works with DraftCraft International as a Media Researcher and writes mostly on issues affecting the Fourth Estate. She likes reading contrarian literature and analysing sources of news.

Pandharpur Wari - A sublime tradition

*The Pandharpur Wari is more than a journey; it's a living testament to Maharashtra's deep-rooted spiritual and cultural heritage. As millions walk the sacred paths to honour Lord Vithoba, they engage in a collective act of devotion that transcends centuries. This pilgrimage, rich with legends and rituals, unites devotees in a harmonious blend of humility, music, and faith, celebrating the Bhakti movement's enduring legacy and the transformative power of divine love. **Sayali Karade** takes a look.*



Pandharpur Wari - The procession is a melange of devotion, with rhythmic drumming, the tinkling of cymbals, and the mellifluous notes of flutes filling the air

The Pandharpur Wari, an ethereal pilgrimage or procession that transcends the mundane, stands as a monumental testament to the timeless devotion embedded within the Warkari tradition. This sacred journey, a festival in itself, undertaken in honour of Lord Vithoba -- an incarnation of Krishna -- resonates with the harmonious echoes of ancient hymns and the fervent footsteps of millions of devotees. Vithoba or Vitthala or Pandurang is worshipped predominantly in Maharashtra and Karnataka.

As pilgrims tread the historical paths towards Pandharpur, in Maharashtra, they are not merely traversing geographical distances but engaging in a profound, introspective voyage that melds the temporal with the eternal. This journey is deeply interwoven with legends and lore, marking a cultural and spiritual renaissance that has persisted through centuries. It is one of the largest festive observances in the region.

The inception of the Pandharpur Wari is enveloped in the mists of antiquity, closely associated with the Bhakti movement—a transformative epoch that emphasised personal communion with the divine over ritualistic orthodoxy.

This movement found a fertile ground in Maharashtra, where saint-poets like Dnyaneshwar, Tukaram, Namdev, and Eknath promulgated a gospel of devotion through their soulful *abhangas*. These hymns, steeped in devotional fervour, continue to inspire and guide the Warkaris on their centuries-old pilgrimage.

The festive odyssey

A central legend integral to the Wari's ethos is the story of Pundalik, a devout son and ardent devotee of Lord Krishna. As the narrative unfolds, Pundalik, engrossed in serving his elderly parents, inadvertently delayed welcoming Lord Krishna, who arrived to bless him. In a gesture of reverence, Pundalik placed a brick for the deity to stand on, symbolising his unwavering devotion.

Lord Krishna, touched by Pundalik's filial piety, chose to remain standing on the brick, thus assuming the form of Vithoba. This divine manifestation is enshrined in the Vitthal-Rukmini Temple in Pandharpur, the ultimate destination of the Wari pilgrimage.

The Pandharpur Wari unfolds in the auspicious

month of Ashadha (June - July), culminating on Ashadhi Ekadashi, a day imbued with profound spiritual significance. The pilgrimage initiates from the revered samadhi shrines of the saints, notably the Sant Dnyaneshwar Maharaj Sansthan in Alandi and the Sant Tukaram Maharaj Sansthan in Dehu. These origin points, known as Palkhi Dindis, carry the revered sandals (padukas) of the saints in ornately decorated palanquins, accompanied by a multitude of devotees chanting the divine names and singing abhangas.

The Warkaris, distinguished by their white dhotis, tulsi mala (basil garlands), and saffron flags, observe a disciplined lifestyle during the pilgrimage. They embody the virtues of humility, asceticism, and communal living, sharing simple meals and accommodations. The Wari procession or yatra is a melange of devotion, with rhythmic drumming, the tinkling of cymbals, and the mellifluous notes of flutes filling the air. The pilgrims walk in synchrony, their voices united in a melodious chorus, creating an atmosphere of divine communion.

Religious epicentres

The spiritual epicentre of the Wari, the Vitthal-Rukmini Temple in Pandharpur, stands as a beacon of divine grace. The temple houses the iconic idol of Vithoba, depicted standing on a brick, with Rukmini, his consort, by his side. This temple is not merely a physical structure but a sacred space where the collective aspirations of millions converge, seeking blessings and solace.

Alandi, sanctified by the presence of Sant Dnyaneshwar's samadhi, is a pivotal juncture in the Wari. The serene town, nestled along the banks of the Indrayani River, pulsates with the spiritual energy of the saint's teachings and writings, particularly the 'Dnyaneshwari,' a revered commentary on the Bhagavad Gita. Sant Dnyaneshwar was a 13th-century poet, philosopher and saint who, in a short life of 21 years, gave the world Dnyaneshwari and Amrutanubhav which are considered cornerstones of Marathi literature and are the oldest surviving literary works in the language.

Dehu, the birthplace of Sant Tukaram, serves as another vital node in the pilgrimage. Saint Tukaram Maharaj Sansthan in Dehu, overlooking the Indrayani River, echoes with the saint's abhangas, which extol the virtues of a simple, devoted life. The *palki* from Dehu, bearing Tukaram's *padukas*, is a symbol of the saint's enduring legacy. He was a saint of the Warkari community in his village and a devotee of Vithoba. His abhangas created awareness on social ills, reforms, etc.

The temple of Muktabai, the enlightened sister of Sant Dnyaneshwar, is an important waypoint for the Warkaris. Muktabai's contributions to the Bhakti literature, particularly her hymns, continue to inspire and elevate the spiritual consciousness of the pilgrims.

In her life, Muktabai wrote over 40 *abhangas* of which the most popular is called 'tati ughada dnaneshwara' which basically elaborates a conversation with Dnyaneshwar. Her teachings have a connect with the devotees as she believed a saint is one who can happily

accept criticism which is clear from her work 'sant jene vahave, jag bolane sosave'. Narsi, a quaint village imbued with spiritual significance, is renowned as the birthplace and final resting place of Sant Namdev. Sant Namdev, a seminal figure in the Bhakti movement, is revered for his devotional compositions that highlight the omnipresence of the divine. His abhangas, infused with deep philosophical insights and devotion, form an integral part of the Warkari tradition.

The samadhi of Sant Namdev in Narsi is a sacred site where devotees congregate to pay homage and seek spiritual solace. The Warkaris, during the Wari, visit this holy site, immersing themselves in Namdev's teachings that advocate the path of devotion as a means to transcend the material world. The serene environment of Narsi, coupled with the spiritual vibrations emanating from the samadhi, creates a conducive space for meditation and contemplation, allowing devotees to connect with the divine essence of Namdev's life and works.

Cultural significance

The Pandharpur Wari is an enduring manifestation of Maharashtra's spiritual and cultural ethos. It encapsulates the quintessence of the Bhakti movement, promoting an egalitarian philosophy where devotion transcends the boundaries of caste, creed, and social status. The Warkaris, walking hand in hand, embody the ideals of humility, selflessness, and collective spirituality. The pilgrimage serves as a profound reminder of the impermanence of worldly attachments and the importance of a life oriented towards divine service.

The cultural resonance of the Wari extends beyond the realm of spirituality. It has spawned a rich tradition of literature, music and art, with the *abhangas* and *kirtans* forming an integral part of Maharashtra's cultural heritage. The Wari's influence permeates through various art forms, from folk performances to classical music, enriching the cultural landscape. Economically, the pilgrimage invigorates local markets, with bustling trade in religious wares, food, and accommodation, thereby supporting local livelihoods.

The Pandharpur Wari stands as a luminous beacon of devotion, an odyssey that transcends mere physical exertion and enters the realm of spiritual exploration. It is a pilgrimage that weaves together Maharashtra's rich cultural and spiritual heritage, reflecting the timeless values of devotion, humility, and unity. The legends, rituals, and sacred sites associated with the Wari are not merely historical artifacts but living traditions that continue to inspire and uplift countless souls. As the Warkaris culminate their journey at the sanctum of Lord Vithoba, they are not just participants in an age-old tradition but pilgrims on a timeless quest for spiritual enlightenment and divine grace.

Sayali Karade is a volunteer with The History and Heritage Project – a DraftCraft International Initiative dedicated to documenting details, analysing facts, and addressing gaps that may arise due to oversight or the advancement of national or foreign agendas within the realms of History and Heritage across India and beyond borders.

The splendour of Diwali & Dussehra

Diwali and Dussehra, two of India's most cherished festivals, embody the timeless struggle between light and darkness, and good and evil. Diwali, the festival of lights, rejoices in the return of Lord Rama and the blessings of Goddess Lakshmi, while Dussehra commemorates the vanquishing of demons by Lord Rama and Goddess Durga. Together, these festivals weave a vibrant tapestry of legends, rituals, and cultural splendour, drawing millions to their sacred sites and infusing India with a spirit of joy, reverence, and renewal, observes Ruchi Verma.



The Ram Ki Paidi ghats in Ayodhya along the Saryu River become a mesmerising sight during Diwali as thousands of diyas illuminate the night

Among the festivals celebrated in India, Diwali and Dussehra stand out as two of the most significant and widely celebrated, each steeped in deep historical, cultural, and religious significance. These festivals are not merely rituals but are woven into the very fabric of Indian life, symbolising the eternal victory of good over evil, light over darkness, and knowledge over ignorance. They also mark auspicious periods when devotees flock to revered temples and pilgrimage sites, seeking blessings and participating in grand celebrations.

Diwali, also known as Deepavali, is perhaps the most widely celebrated festival in India, transcending religious and cultural boundaries. The name 'Diwali' is derived from the Sanskrit words 'Deep' (light) and 'Avali' (row), which together mean 'a row of lights'. The festival, which lasts for a few days, is a celebration of light, prosperity, and joy. It marks the triumph of light over darkness and is associated with several legends and historical events.

Return of Lord Ram

Diwali celebrates the return of Lord Ram, along with his wife Sita and brother Lakshman to Ayodhya after a 14-year exile, and the defeat of the demon king Ravana. According to the epic Ramayan, the citizens of Ayodhya welcomed their beloved prince by lighting rows of oil lamps, thus marking the beginning of the festival of lights. This symbolises the victory of righteousness and the restoration of dharma.

Another significant legend relates to the worship of Goddess Lakshmi, the deity of wealth and prosperity. It is believed that on Diwali, Goddess Lakshmi emerged from the ocean of milk during the churning of the sea (Samudra Manthan) and married Lord Vishnu. Hence, Diwali is also a time for performing Lakshmi Puja, where devotees seek the goddess's blessings for prosperity and well-being.

In Jainism, Diwali marks the nirvana, or spiritual awakening, of Lord Mahavir, the last of the 24 Tirthankaras. On Diwali, Mahavir breathed his last to attain nirvana, in a place called Pavapuri in modern-day Bihar, and end the cycle of birth and rebirth. During this time, devout Jains meditate, fast, pray, etc., and listen to the Uttaradhyana Sutra which contains the final teachings of Lord Mahavir. On the third day, Indrabhuti Gautam who was the chief disciple of Mahavir attained enlightenment too.

Similarly, in Sikhism, the festival is celebrated to commemorate the release of Guru Hargobind Sahib and 52 princes from the Gwalior Fort under Emperor Jahangir, symbolising freedom and justice. The auspicious day of Diwali is a day to remember the revered guru of the 17th century and is known among them as Bandi Chhor Divas i.e., Liberation Day.

Diverse celebrations

Diwali is celebrated with great enthusiasm and grandeur. The festivities begin with Dhanteras, a day dedicated to wealth, where people buy new utensils and gold, symbolising good luck. This is followed by Narak Chaturdashi or Choti Diwali, commemorating Lord Krishna's victory over the demon Narakasura. The main day of Diwali is marked by Lakshmi Puja, where home and the place of work are cleaned and decorated with rangoli, and oil lamps are lit to welcome Goddess Lakshmi. Diwali is observed on the darkest night of the year called Kartik Amavasya which falls in the Hindu month of Kartik. The celebration continues with Govardhan Puja and culminates with Bhai Dooj, celebrating the bond between brothers and sisters.

During the festival, the birthplace of Lord Rama, Ayodhya holds immense significance. The city is adorned with countless earthen lamps, recreating the welcome given to Lord Ram. The Ram Ki Paidi ghats along the Saryu River become a mesmerising sight as thousands of diyas or oil lamps float on the water, illuminating the night. Amritsar's Golden Temple, the holiest shrine of the Sikhs, is spectacularly lit up, and the reflections of the illuminated temple in the holy Sarovar (pond) create a breathtaking scene. The day is marked with kirtans, langar (community meals), and fireworks.

The town of Shirdi, in Maharashtra, home to the revered Sai Baba, sees thousands of devotees during Diwali. The Sai Baba Temple is decorated with lights and flowers, and special prayers and bhajans are conducted. Devotees offer sweets and seek the blessings of Sai Baba for peace and prosperity. The twin cities of Mathura and Vrindavan, associated with the life of Lord Krishna, celebrate Diwali with unique rituals. The temples, especially the Banke Bihari Temple and the Krishna Janmabhoomi Temple, are beautifully decorated. The Govardhan Puja, performed the day after Diwali, is especially significant here, commemorating Lord Krishna lifting the Govardhan Parbat (Govardhan mountain) to protect the villagers from Indra's wrath in form of torrential rains.

In Goa, Diwali is celebrated with processions and festivities seeing the burning of Narkasur, the demon king who was killed by Lord Krishna on Naraka Chaturdashi. A

big effigy of the demon king is burned symbolising the victory of good over evil. The effigy is built with great care and detail by the youth of Goan villages and vaddos or settlements.

Good over evil

Dussehra, also known as Vijaydashami, is another major Indian festival that symbolises the victory of good over evil. Celebrated on the tenth day of the Hindu month of Ashwin, it marks the culmination of the nine-day festival of Navratri. Dussehra is celebrated with great fervour across the country, with diverse customs and traditions reflecting the rich cultural heritage. The most renowned legend associated with Dussehra is the victory of Lord Ram over Ravana, the ten-headed demon king of Lanka.

According to the Ramayan, after an epic battle, Ram defeated Ravana to rescue his wife Sita. The burning of effigies of Ravana, along with his brothers Kumbhakarna and son Meghnad, is a central part of Dussehra celebrations, symbolising the destruction of evil. Another legend associated with Dussehra is the victory of Goddess Durga over demon Mahishasura. The goddess fought the demon for nine nights and ten days, finally vanquishing him on the tenth day. This victory is celebrated as Dussehra, particularly in the eastern parts of India, where it coincides with Durga Puja.

In the southern state of Karnataka, particularly in the city of Mysuru, Dussehra celebrations are a spectacle. Known as Mysore Dasara, it commemorates the triumph of the goddess Chamundeshwari or Durga over demon Mahishasura. The Chamundeshwari Temple on Chamundi Hill, dedicated to the fierce form of Goddess Durga, becomes a focal point of devotion. The Mysore Palace is illuminated, and a grand procession featuring the idol of the goddess on a golden palanquin is a highlight of the celebrations. One of the oldest living cities in the world, Varanasi celebrates Dussehra with great religious fervour. The Kashi Vishwanath Temple, dedicated to Lord Shiva, is a major pilgrimage site. The city is known for its unique Ramlila performances, which culminate in the symbolic killing of Ravana on Dussehra.

In Kolkata, the capital city of West Bengal, Durga Puja and Dussehra are celebrated with unmatched enthusiasm. The city's numerous pandals house elaborate idols of Goddess Durga. The immersion of these idols in the Hooghly River, accompanied by chants and music, is a significant event. In Himachal Pradesh, the Kullu Dussehra is a week-long festival that attracts visitors from all over India and abroad. Unlike other parts of India, where effigies of Ravana are burned, the Kullu Dussehra focuses on the worship of Lord Raghunath. The festival features a grand procession and cultural events, highlighting the unique traditions of the region.

Ruchi Verma is a media researcher with The History and Heritage Project – A DraftCraft International Initiative to document details, analyse facts and plug lacunae generated by oversight or to further national or foreign agenda in History and Heritage Across India and Beyond Borders.

A divine chariot of devotion, culture

*The Jagannath Rath Yatra transforms Puri into a vibrant spectacle of faith and celebration. This grand festival, dedicated to Lord Jagannath and his siblings, features colossal chariots paraded through the streets, drawing millions of devotees. Steeped in ancient mythology and rich traditions, the Yatra symbolises the triumph of devotion and collective spirituality. With its intricate rituals, colourful processions, and profound cultural impact, the Rath Yatra is a vivid expression of unity, humility, and divine grace, finds **Nandini Rao**.*



Jagannath Rath Yatra is a grand spectacle, characterised by the procession of three enormous, intricately decorated wooden chariots, each carrying one of the deities Lord Jagannath (an incarnation of Lord Vishnu) and his siblings Balabhadra and Subhadra

The Jagannath Rath Yatra, one of India's most iconic and grandiose religious festivals, is a vibrant expression of devotion, culture, and spirituality. This annual chariot festival, dedicated to Lord Jagannath—an incarnation of Lord Vishnu—along with his siblings Balabhadra and Subhadra, transforms the coastal city of Puri, Odisha, into a spectacle of faith and celebration. The Yatra, marked by the majestic procession of colossal chariots, draws millions of devotees and tourists from across the globe. It is a journey steeped in rich mythology, profound cultural significance, and an unwavering devotion that transcends all barriers.

The history of the Jagannath Rath Yatra is deeply intertwined with the temple of Lord Jagannath in Puri, one of the four sacred Char Dham pilgrimage sites in India. The origins of this festival are enveloped in both historical records and mythological narratives, dating back to ancient times. The earliest references to the festival can be traced to the Puranas, ancient Hindu scriptures, which describe the

grandeur of the procession and the divine significance of the deities' journey.

Unique deity

A pivotal legend associated with the Rath Yatra revolves around the appearance of Lord Jagannath. According to popular lore, King Indradyumna of ancient kingdom of Avanti which is in present-day Malwa, after having a divine vision, commissioned the construction of the temple and the idol of Lord Jagannath. The temple's deity is unique, depicted with large eyes and stumps instead of hands, symbolising an unfinished sculpture. The story goes that Lord Vishnu, in the guise of a carpenter, promised to carve the idols of Jagannath, Balabhadra, and Subhadra, provided he was left undisturbed. However, the impatient king opened the door before the idols were complete, leading to the iconic unfinished form of the deities.

The Rath Yatra also commemorates the annual visit

The Rath Yatra also commemorates the annual visit of Lord Jagannath, Balabhadra, and Subhadra from the main temple to the Gundicha Temple, their birthplace, located a few kilometers away. This journey represents the divine visit to their maternal aunt's home, an event eagerly awaited by millions of devotees who believe in receiving the Lord's blessings during this period. Records indicate that the festival gained significance during the rule of the Gajapati kings of Odisha.

The Rath Yatra is a grand spectacle, characterised by the procession of three enormous, intricately decorated wooden chariots, each carrying one of the deities. These chariots, constructed anew every year, are marvels of traditional craftsmanship, adorned with vibrant colours, motifs, and intricate carvings. The largest chariot, Nandighosa, carries Lord Jagannath; the second, Taladhwaja, carries Lord Balabhadra; and the third, Darpadalana, carries Devi Subhadra.

Divine rituals

The journey from the Jagannath Temple to the Gundicha Temple is a vibrant affair, with devotees thronging the streets, chanting hymns, singing bhajans, and dancing their hearts out. A whole flurry of rituals is performed by the priests in the days preceding the Rath Yatra and among these the most famous is called the Snana Yatra where the beloved deities are bathed in 108 water pots.

The pulling of the chariots by thousands of devotees is a central ritual of the Yatra, symbolising the collective effort of humanity to seek divine intervention. The act of pulling the chariots is considered a pious activity, believed to cleanse the soul and grant divine blessings. The Yatra also includes several traditional rituals, such as the ceremonial sweeping of the chariots by the Gajapati King of Puri, a practice that underscores the humility and equality before the divine.

The Yatra begins with the ceremonial bathing of the deities, known as Snana Purnima, followed by the deities' stay in a secluded area, called Anasara, where they are believed to recuperate from illness. During this period, devotees do not get darshan (sight) of the deities. The Yatra culminates with the return journey, known as Bahuda Yatra, where the deities are brought back to the Jagannath Temple, after a brief halt at the Mausi Maa Temple.

Towering temples

The primary temple, dedicated to Lord Jagannath, is an architectural marvel and a central hub of devotion. The temple, with its towering spire and intricate carvings, is not only a religious site but also a cultural icon. It houses the triad of deities—Jagannath, Balabhadra, and Subhadra—who are worshipped with great reverence. The temple's sanctum sanctorum is a mystical space where devotees seek divine grace and spiritual solace.

The Gundicha Temple, also known as the Garden House of Jagannath, is the destination of the Rath Yatra. *This temple, situated at a distance of about three kilometers from the Jagannath Temple, is believed to be the*

the place where the deities' aunt, Gundicha, resides. The temple holds immense significance as the deities stay here for nine days during the Yatra. The journey to the Gundicha Temple symbolises the annual visit of Lord Jagannath and his siblings to their birthplace.

Also known as the Ardhasani Temple, the Mausi Maa Temple this small shrine dedicated to Goddess Ardhasani, considered the aunt of Lord Jagannath, is a significant stop during the Rath Yatra. According to legend, the goddess offered the deities *poda pitha* (a special pancake made of lentils and rice) to appease their hunger during their journey. The Mausi Maa Temple visit symbolises the divine family's connection with the extended family and the blessings received from the goddess.

Rich tradition

The Jagannath Rath Yatra is more than a religious festival; it is a cultural phenomenon that unites millions of people in a shared experience of devotion and celebration. The festival embodies the inclusiveness of Hinduism, allowing people from all castes, creeds, and social backgrounds to participate in the sacred rituals. The tradition of the Gajapati King sweeping the chariot path highlights the message of humility and the idea that before the divine, all are equal.

A devout, King Indradyumna, in order to express his love, humility and devotion for his Lord, decided to sweep the path of the chariot himself. To do so, he got into the clothes of a sweeper and carrying a golden broom in his hand, swept the chariots of Lord Jagannath, Balabhadra, and Subhadra. This is called the Chhera Pahara and it is an important tradition of the Rath Yatra.

Culturally, the Rath Yatra has inspired a rich tradition of music, dance, and art. The vibrant folk performances, the melodious kirtans, and the intricate decorations of the chariots are all expressions of the deep-seated devotion and cultural heritage of Odisha. The festival also boosts the local economy, with the influx of tourists and devotees generating significant revenue for the region.

The Rath Yatra has a profound impact on the devotees, offering them an opportunity to witness the deities outside the sanctum of the temple, which is otherwise restricted. This 'public darshan' is a unique aspect of the festival, symbolising the Lord's accessibility and compassion for all beings. The physical act of pulling the chariots is seen as a spiritual exercise, a symbolic effort to draw oneself closer to the divine.

Nandini Rao is a media researcher with The History and Heritage Project – A DraftCraft International Initiative to document details, analyse facts and plug lacunae generated by oversight or to further national or foreign agenda in History and Heritage Across India and Beyond Borders.

Celebrating the sibling bond

*Raksha Bandhan and Bhai Dooj, two cherished Indian festivals, celebrate the profound bond between siblings. Raksha Bandhan, with its protective and loving rituals, and Bhai Dooj, marking the bond with blessings and feasting, are steeped in mythology and tradition. **Vedika Jain** says these festivals not only reinforce familial ties but also highlight the deep emotional and cultural values that bind brothers and sisters together. Through these celebrations, the essence of sibling affection and duty is vividly brought to life.*



Raksha Bandhan and Bhai Dooj are festivals celebrating sibling love

The Indian culture vividly portrays the bond between siblings as one of its most cherished and enduring relationships. Amidst the spectrum of festivals that highlight familial love and duty, Raksha Bandhan and Bhai Dooj emerge prominently, each encapsulating unique rituals and deep-seated legends and significance. These celebrations transcend mere tradition, imbuing profound cultural and emotional resonance, thus reflecting the quintessential values of familial bonds within the Indian society.

Raksha Bandhan, colloquially known as Rakhi, epitomises the protective and affectionate bond between brothers and sisters. The term 'Raksha Bandhan' translates to 'the bond of protection', symbolising the brother's vow to shield his sister from adversities and the sister's prayers for his long life, prosperity and well-being. Celebrated on the full moon day, Shukla Paksha Purnima, of the Hindu month of Shravan (usually August), Raksha Bandhan is marked by a series of rituals and ceremonies.

Mythological origins

The origins of Raksha Bandhan are steeped in mythology and history, enriching its cultural narrative. One of the most renowned legends comes from the Mahabharat, where Draupadi ties a strip of her sari around Lord Krishna's finger to stop his bleeding. Moved by this gesture, Krishna vows to protect her, a promise he upholds during the infamous disrobing incident in the Kaurav court.

Another historical story involves Rani Karnavati and Mughal Emperor Humayun. The Rajputs were embattled in trying to prevent the Muslim invasion. Mewar regent Karnavati, following the death of her husband Rana Sanga and her son being of minor age, was attacked by Bahadur Shah of Gujarat.

Facing an imminent invasion, Rani Karnavati sent a rakhi to Humayun, appealing for protection. Touched by her

plea, Humayun, despite being in another war, honoured the call of Raksha Bandhan and rushed to her aid, albeit too late to prevent the fall of the Rajput army at Chittor. To protect her honour, the queen performed Jauhar. However, upon Humayun's arrival, Shah retreated and Karnavati's son Vikramjit sat on the throne.

The festival also finds mention in historical texts, observed among royals and commoners alike, transcending social and religious boundaries. It is said that Rabindranath Tagore used rakhi to promote unity and solidarity among Hindus and Muslims during the partition of Bengal, emphasising the festival's universal appeal beyond familial ties. Raksha Bandhan's rituals, though simple, are profoundly significant. Sisters prepare a ceremonial platter containing a rakhi (sacred thread), roli (vermilion), rice grains, and sweets.

The day begins with sisters performing an *aarti*, applying a tilak on their brother's forehead, and tying the rakhi around his wrist, praying for his long life and happiness. Brothers, in return, give gifts and pledge lifelong protection. The exchange of gifts and sweets is accompanied by laughter, nostalgia, and the rekindling of childhood memories. Raksha Bandhan is not confined to biological siblings; it is also celebrated among cousins, close friends, and even neighbours, symbolising a broader social fabric of mutual care and protection. In contemporary times, the festival has evolved as well.

Keeping tradition alive

Bhai Dooj, also known as Bhau Beej, Bhai Tika, or Bhai Phota, is another festival celebrating the bond between brothers and sisters. It falls on the second day of the fortnight of the Hindu month of Kartik, just after Diwali. So, it is celebrated on the Dwitiya Tithi of the Krishna Paksha (waning phase of the Moon). The festival, akin to Raksha Bandhan, underscores the affectionate and protective nature of the sibling relationship, focusing on the sister's prayers for her brother's well-being and the brother's promise of protection.

The origins of Bhai Dooj are rooted in various mythological tales. One prominent legend, mentioned in the Puranas, speaks of Yama - the god of death - visiting his sister Yamuna on this day. Yamuna, delighted by her brother's visit, prepares a sumptuous meal for him. Touched by her love and hospitality, Yama grants her a boon that any brother who receives a tilak from his sister on this day shall be blessed with long life and prosperity. Since then, Bhai Dooj has been a day of celebration, symbolising the eternal love and protection between siblings.

Another popular story involves Lord Krishna and his sister Subhadra. After Krishna's victory over the demon Narakasur, Subhadra welcomes him with a tilak and aarti, praying for his safety. This act of affection and reverence has become a key ritual in the Bhai Dooj celebrations.

On Bhai Dooj, sisters prepare a pooja thali with sweets, flowers, and a special tilak often made from sandalwood paste and vermilion. The ritual begins with sisters applying the tilak on their brothers' foreheads,

followed by an aarti and the offering of sweets. Sisters also perform a ritual where they wave a plate containing water, a lamp, and other items in front of their brothers, a gesture meant to ward off evil and bless them with good fortune. In return, brothers give gifts to their sisters as a token of their love and appreciation. The festival is also an opportunity for family gatherings and feasting, strengthening familial bonds and sharing moments of joy and laughter.

Celebrating familial bonds

While Raksha Bandhan and Bhai Dooj are the most widely recognised festivals celebrating sibling love, other regional festivals also emphasise the significance of this relationship and other familial bonds. In the mosaic of Hindu festivals, certain celebrations extend beyond the traditional observances of Raksha Bandhan and Bhai Dooj.

These include Karva Chauth, Kajari Teej, etc. reflecting unique regional customs and cultural significance. These festivals, while primarily focused on different aspects of the familial relationship, also underscore the enduring love and support siblings offer one another.

Karva Chauth is a prominent festival observed predominantly in North India, where married women fast from sunrise to moonrise for the longevity and well-being of their husbands. The origins of Karva Chauth are steeped in mythology and folklore. One popular legend recounts the story of Veeravati, a devoted wife who, after fasting for her husband's long life, falls into a state of despair when she hears of his death. Moved by her devotion, goddess Parvati intervenes, restoring her husband's life and making her an exemplar of wifely devotion.

On Karva Chauth, married women dress in traditional attire, often red or pink sarees, and perform a series of rituals. They prepare a Karva (a clay pot) filled with water, which is used during the pooja. The fast is broken only after sighting the moon through a sieve, followed by performing a final aarti for their husbands.

Karva Chauth also sees a reciprocal gesture of love between siblings. Brothers, acknowledging the dedication and sacrifice demonstrated by their sisters, present them with gifts, which often include jewellery, clothing, or money. This tradition underscores the supportive role brothers play in their sisters' lives, complementing the festival's focus on marital devotion with a celebration of sibling affection.

Another popular festival, Kajari Teej is primarily celebrated in the northern states of India such as Uttar Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh. It is observed by married women who pray for their husband's long life and prosperity and for the safety and well-being of children. On this day, married women fast for an entire day. Parents often present their married daughters observing a fast with jewellery, new clothes and sattu (roasted gram flour).

Vedika Jain is a legal researcher with www.thewomansurvivor.com – an initiative of DraftCraft International to protect and empower women by bringing on one platform the latest on rights and issues, strategic case studies, state initiatives and informed legal opinions.

The sacred dance of Nature

*Indian festivals weave a vibrant tapestry celebrating the deep bond between humanity and nature. From the sun's journey marked by Makar Sankranti to the rejuvenating arrival of spring on Vasant Panchami, these observances honour nature's cycles and elements. Through rituals, feasts, and pilgrimages, festivals like Chhath Puja and Sarhul not only highlight our dependence on the natural world but also reflect ancient wisdom and reverence. They reaffirm our spiritual and cultural connection to nature, avers **Harshita Singh**.*



Chhath puja celebrations

Among the festivals celebrated in India, nature emerges as a central theme in many, interwoven with sacred rites and rituals that celebrate the cyclical harmony of life. Hinduism, deeply rooted in the veneration of nature, reflects a profound understanding of the interdependence between humanity and the natural world.

This reverence is manifest in festivals that honour various aspects of nature, from the harvest and the rain to the earth and the elements. These festivals are not mere celebrations; they embody ancient wisdom and spiritual practices that acknowledge and celebrate nature's divine presence.

Nature and prosperity

Makar Sankranti, a festival observed in mid-January, stands as a radiant celebration of the sun's journey through the zodiac sign of Capricorn (Makar) and the onset of the harvest season. This festival, marking the transition from winter to spring, is a significant event in the Hindu calendar, intertwining astronomical phenomena with agricultural



Kite-flying as part of Makar Sankranti celebrations

prosperity and cultural traditions.

Makar Sankranti not only highlights the sun's crucial role in sustaining life on earth but also encapsulates a deep reverence for nature's cycles and the harvest's bounty. Astronomically, the festival celebrates the sun's northward shift, known as the Uttarayan, which signifies the end of the winter solstice and the beginning of longer daylight hours. This transition is pivotal in agrarian societies, as it heralds the start of the harvest season, when crops are gathered and stored.

A hallmark of Makar Sankranti is the pilgrimage to the sacred rivers. Devotees flock to revered water bodies such as the Ganga, Yamuna and their tributaries to perform a ritualistic dip, believed to cleanse the soul and purify sins. This act of purification is not merely a physical immersion but also a spiritual renewal, symbolising the cleansing of past deeds and the embracing of a new phase marked by growth and prosperity.

The Kumbh Mela, which coincides with Makar Sankranti, witnesses a massive convergence of pilgrims at

the confluence of these sacred rivers, exemplifying the festival's significance in fostering communal and spiritual unity.

Taking sun's blessings

The festival's customs are a lively celebration of the harvest and the sun's blessings. Kite flying is a prominent tradition during Makar Sankranti observed in central India, especially in the state of Gujarat. In Punjab, Haryana and Himachal, it is observed as Lohri where bonfires are lit to symbolise the sun's return and the warmth it brings. The ritualistic bonfire serves as a communal gathering point where people offer seasonal produce, sing traditional songs, and perform dances.

Feasting is another essential aspect of Makar Sankranti. In Maharashtra, traditional sweets like til gul - a sweet preparation made from sesame seeds and jaggery - are prepared and shared among family and friends. The Sun Temple in Konark, Odisha attracts numerous pilgrims during the festival which is known by different names in different parts of India and among diverse communities. For example, it's called Pongal in Tamil Nadu, Magh Bihu in Assam, Uttarayan in Gujarat, etc.

Chhath Puja, observed mainly in the northern and eastern regions of India, especially in Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Jharkhand, and parts of Nepal, is a festival dedicated to honouring the Sun God and the forces of nature. The four-day celebration, held in October or November, involves fasting, prayer rituals, and immersing oneself in sacred rivers. Devotees seek the Sun God's blessings for family health and prosperity. The festival's customs are rooted in ancient texts, such as the Rigveda, and are also referenced in the Mahabharat, where Draupadi is depicted performing the Chhath Puja rituals.

Tree, the life giver

Sarhul is a significant festival celebrated across the tribal state of Jharkhand in central India, marking the arrival of spring. It is typically celebrated in March or April when the Saal tree sprouts new leaves. Held on the third moon day in the first month of the Hindu calendar, the festival involves prayers to trees, expressing gratitude to nature for its abundance. The celebration begins with dancing and feasting on an indigenous fruit sarai and drinking rice beer.

The three-day festival reaches its peak with a vibrant procession where tribal communities and visitors fill the streets with song and dance. Sarhul is predominantly observed by the Oraon, Munda, and Ho tribes in the tribal belt. Unique to this festival, the rituals and food are all tree-based. The Prasad, called handia, is made from tree leaves, rice, and water, while other specialties include pahan, khadi, and various fish dishes. Some tribal communities offer prayer to nature and perform symbolic wedding of mother earth with the sun god.

Tribal women wear typical white saree with a red border and dance in processions carrying pots filled with grains. 'Sarhul' means 'worshipping trees and nature' and the festival is a reminder that man cannot exist without nature.

Goddess of knowledge and spring

Vasant Panchami, celebrated in late January or early February, marks the advent of spring and is dedicated to Goddess Saraswati. This festival signifies a transformative period, heralding the arrival of spring and representing a time of cultural and agricultural renewal. Vasant Panchami is a celebration of the changing seasons.

One prominent legend associated with Vasant Panchami is the story of Goddess Saraswati's birth. It is said that the goddess emerged from the cosmic waters of the great ocean, symbolizing the purity and clarity of knowledge. As the embodiment of wisdom and learning, the goddess is often depicted holding a veena (a musical instrument), a book, and a rosary, signifying her mastery over arts, education, and spiritual pursuits.

Another legend links the festival to the renewal of the earth's energy. Saraswati's arrival is thought to bring forth a rejuvenation of nature, as the earth shakes off the remnants of winter and prepares for the vibrant growth of spring. This association with nature's renewal underscores the festival's role in celebrating the cyclic rhythms of the natural world. The Saraswati Temple in Basar, Telangana – also known as Sri Gnana Saraswati Devasthanam - transforms into a vibrant centre of devotion and learning on this day. Pilgrims and devotees visit these temples to offer prayers, perform rituals, and seek the goddess's blessings for wisdom and success.

Other significant temples visited by devotees on Vasant Panchami include Saraswati Temple in Narkanda, Himachal Pradesh and Koothanur Saraswati Temple in Tamil Nadu. The Kshir Bhawani Temple in Tullamulla, Jammu and Kashmir has a sacred spring which is believed to change colour depending on upcoming events. It is also an important temple visited by pilgrims on Vasant Panchami.

Indian festivals that celebrate nature reflect a profound reverence for the natural world, highlighting the interdependence between human life and the environment. From the solar celebrations of Makar Sankranti to the vibrant colours of Holi and the springtime renewal of Vasant Panchami, these festivals offer a window into the deep cultural and spiritual connection people have with nature.

Temples and pilgrimage sites across India serve as focal points for these celebrations, embodying the sacred relationship between humanity and the natural world. Through these festivals, the essence of nature is honoured, its cycles celebrated, and its divine presence acknowledged, ensuring that the wisdom of the past continues to resonate in the rhythms of the present.

Harshita Singh is a researcher with The History and Heritage Project – A DraftCraft International Initiative to document details, analyse facts and plug lacunae generated by oversight or to further national or foreign agenda in History and Heritage Across India and Beyond Borders.

Celebrating India's cultural diversity

*From ancient battles to vibrant celebrations, India's festivals embody the timeless dance between good and evil. Holi, Onam, and Bonderam: each festival paints a unique picture of triumph, unity, and the rich tapestry of cultural resilience. Join in the vivid tapestry of traditions where history and joy intertwine, reflecting a nation's spirit in full colour. **Nimisha Lakhia** paints a colourful picture of a colourful festival.*



The colourful Holi celebrations at Banke Bihari Temple in Vrindavan

India, through its timeless epochs, has stood as the crucible of conflict, a land where battles of both myth and history have left an indelible mark on the collective consciousness of its people. From the celestial clash of the Mahabharat to the very real conquests of emperors, the subcontinent has been a theatre where strategies were honed and victories celebrated, where the spoils of triumph were not only material but woven into the cultural fabric of the land.

Holi, one of India's most exuberant and widely celebrated festivals, is not merely a riot of colours and festivity. It is deeply intertwined with ancient mythology, symbolising the perennial victory of good over evil. At the heart of this vibrant festival lies the poignant legend of Prahlad, a story that has shaped Holi's essence as a celebration of faith, devotion, and the eventual triumph of righteousness.

Epitome of devotion

Prahlad, the son of the tyrant king Hiranyakashyap, stands as a symbol of unwavering belief in the divine. His story is a testament to the power of devotion that transcends

fear and adversity. Despite being born into a family that defied and rejected the gods, Prahlad's heart remained firmly devoted to Lord Vishnu.

This created a profound rift between him and his father, who sought to be worshipped as a god himself. Hiranyakashyap, enraged by his son's steadfastness in worshipping Vishnu, subjected Prahlad to a series of brutal trials, each more lethal than the last. Yet, Prahlad's faith was his armour, and no force—no matter how vicious—could bend his spirit.

The pivotal moment comes with Hiranyakashyap's decision to invoke his sister Holika. Holika, endowed with a magical boon that rendered her immune to fire, was tasked with carrying Prahlad into the flames, hoping to incinerate his unyielding faith. However, as legend would have it, divine justice prevailed.

While Holika's immunity failed her and she perished in the fire, Prahlad emerged untouched, protected by his devotion to Vishnu. This act of divine intervention not only secured Prahlad's safety but also immortalised the victory of goodness over malevolence, devotion over tyranny, and faith

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Know India Better



Kolhapur: A hidden gem of heritage & modernity

Nestled in the heart of Western India, Kolhapur offers a captivating blend of ancient temples, grand architecture, and vibrant culture. From the revered Mahalakshmi Temple to the majestic New Palace, this city weaves its rich historical tapestry with modern vibrancy. Explore Kolhapur's dynamic markets, indulge in its renowned cuisine, and immerse yourself in its lively festivals for an unforgettable journey through tradition and progress. Nandini Rao sketches the contours of a fascinating city steeped in history.

Photos : Draft Craft



Panchganga Ghat

Kolhapur, located in Western India in the state of Maharashtra, is often overlooked by tourists visiting India's iconic cities such as Mumbai and Pune. However, this charming city boasts several ancient temples, magnificent architectural marvels, picturesque tourist spots, and rich historical significance which make it a destination worth exploring.

A city steeped in history and culture, Kolhapur stands as a testament to India's rich socio-cultural heritage that has enamoured visitors from far and wide. Nestled in the southwestern part of Maharashtra, this city is more than just a dot on the map; it is a living, breathing repository of tradition, art, and architectural grandeur. From its ancient temples to its bustling marketplaces, Kolhapur embodies a unique blend of the old and the new, seamlessly merging its historical roots with the pulse of modern life.

The history of Kolhapur is a captivating saga that dates back centuries ago. Founded by Kolhasur, a demon who was later vanquished by the Goddess Mahalakshmi, the city is believed to be blessed by the deity herself. The Mahalakshmi Temple, a marvel of ancient architecture, remains the city's spiritual nucleus. Believed to be first built circa 700 AD Chalukyas, the temple is an epitome of architectural brilliance, drawing thousands of devotees and tourists alike.

It is believed that Goddess Mahalakshmi started living here after a fight with her husband i.e. Lord Vishnu. Here, she killed Kolhasur as he used to torment and oppress the locals of the region. It was his dying wish that the place be named after him, hence the name Kolhapur. The beautiful

city is located at the banks of the Panchganga River amidst the Sahyadri hills.

The formative years

Kolhapur was ruled by various dynasties including Satavahanas, Rashtrakutas, Kadamba Dynasty, and finally, Marathas. Over time, the city witnessed many battles, invasions, and cultural exchanges resulting in its diverse heritage. During the rule of Shivaji Maharaj, Kolhapur emerged as an important administrative centre, attracting skilled artisans, architects, and warriors from across India.

His legacy still lives on through historic sites in the region reflecting his vision of creating a strong empire. Kolhapur remained under British rule until India gained independence in 1947 but managed to preserve its distinct identity throughout colonial rule thanks to the resilience of its people and rulers.

The Bhonsle dynasty, which ruled Kolhapur from the 18th century, left an indelible mark on the city's cultural and political landscape. The New Palace, an architectural gem built in 1884, serves as a reminder of the city's regal past. The architectural style prevalent in Kolhapur reflects centuries of Marathi culture and influence. One of the prime examples of exquisite architecture is the New Palace which is built in black polished stone and took seven years to complete.

This majestic structure, with its Indo-Saracenic style, now houses a museum that offers a glimpse into the life and times of the Bhonsle rulers, showcasing artifacts, weaponry,



The Mahalakshmi Temple

and memorabilia that narrate the city's glorious past. The ruling family of Kolhapur princely state, the Bhonsle dynasty, are the descendants of Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj - the Great Maratha ruler. It was Chhatrapati Shahaji II Puar who ruled the state of Kolhapur in the end.

The palace houses beautiful gardens, wrestling ground, zoo, lake, etc., and the entire building is eight-angled with a tower in the centre. The famous Darbar Hall is situated in the middle of the palace and its walls have stained glass depicting scenes from the lives of the dynasty rulers including Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj. The museum has several rare possessions such as a letter from the British Viceroy and Governor General of India, Aurangzeb's sword, stuffed tigers and animal heads including that of wild buffalo, lion, black panther, tiger, etc.

Cultural richness

Kolhapur's cultural ethos is a vibrant mosaic of traditions and practices that have been passed down through generations. The city is renowned for its folk art forms, particularly *Lavani* and *Tamasha*, which reflect the exuberance and resilience of its people. *Lavani*, a traditional dance form of Maharashtra, is characterized by its powerful rhythm and expressive storytelling, often performed to the beats of the *dholki*. *Tamasha*, on the other hand, is a form of



Idol of the deity



Lavani dance performance

Marathi theatre that combines dance, music, and drama, providing a window into the socio-political commentary of the times.

The city's culinary landscape is equally rich and diverse. Kolhapuri cuisine, known for its bold flavours and robust spices, is a gastronomic delight. The famous Kolhapuri misal, a spicy curry made with sprouted moth beans and served with pav, is a must-try for anyone visiting the city.

Kolhapur boasts a unique cuisine influenced by its diverse historical background, blending elements of Maratha and South Indian cooking styles. Visitors can indulge in mouth-watering dishes like Kolhapuri masala rice, Kolhapuri sopara (betel leaves stuffed with minced meat, nuts, and dried fruits), and Panderi halwa (sweet rice flour cake flavored with cardamom).

Street food lovers should try Kolhapur's famous chat (Indian snacks) and chickpea flour pancakes called Bhakar. Local restaurants serving authentic Kolhapuri fare offer patrons a chance to sample flavorful meals made using traditional recipes passed down through generations.

The unique Kolhapuri chappals, handcrafted leather sandals, are another cultural hallmark, symbolising the city's artisanal excellence. The region is also known for its unique local jewellery known as Kolhapuri Saaj which is a special type of necklace worn by the women.

Visiting markets in Kolhapur allows travellers to experience daily life in the city and purchase souvenirs

featuring local craftsmanship. Kolhapur markets sell everything from clothing to jewellery, handicrafts, toys, and fresh produce. Some markets specialise in silk sarees, cotton fabrics, gold jewellery, and marble artifacts. Tourists seeking bargains should negotiate prices with sellers; however, remember to haggle politely and respectfully.

Kolhapur is famous for hosting numerous cultural festivals year-round. The Ganesh Chaturthi festival celebrated with great enthusiasm showcases giant idols of Lord Ganesha installed temporarily in public spaces within the city. Navratri, another popular event, celebrates nine nights of devotion towards Goddess Durga and involves colourful processions, dance performances, and musical concerts. Kolhapur hosts various drama, music, and dance festivals showcasing talent from across Maharashtra and India, giving locals and tourists alike ample opportunities to immerse themselves in traditional arts forms.

A modern metropolis

Despite its deep historical roots, Kolhapur is not a city trapped in the past. It has evolved into a vibrant metropolis, embracing modernity while preserving its cultural essence. The city's educational institutions, such as the Shivaji University, have made significant contributions to the field of academia, fostering a spirit of intellectual inquiry and innovation. Shivaji University was established in 1962 and inaugurated on 18th November by the then President of India, Dr. S. Radhakrishnan.

Kolhapur's thriving industrial sector, particularly its foundries and textile mills, has positioned it as an economic



Shivaji University

powerhouse in Maharashtra. The city’s markets, abuzz with activity, offer everything from fresh produce to traditional handicrafts. Literary and cultural festivals and events are a testament to the city’s growing prominence on the cultural map, attracting patrons and tourists from across the globe.

Kolhapur is a city that defies easy categorisation. It is a place where history and modernity coexist harmoniously, where the past is not forgotten but revered and integrated into the present. The city’s unyielding spirit, its commitment to preserving its heritage while embracing progress, makes it a unique and captivating destination. Whether it is the call of the ancient temples, the allure of its folk arts, or the promise of a modern metropolis, Kolhapur offers a journey through time and culture that is both enriching and unforgettable.

Religious epicentre

One cannot talk about Kolhapur without mentioning its numerous temples that showcase remarkable craftsmanship and symbolism. Among them is Mahalakshmi Temple, dedicated to Goddess Lakshmi and considered one of the oldest and most revered temples in Kolhapur. Visitors can witness beautiful murals depicting Hindu mythological stories adorned inside the temple walls.

Also known as Shri Ambabai Temple, it is one of the three and half Shakti Peeth (a place associated with Shakti, the goddess of power) documented in various Hindu puranas. This makes the Kolhapur Shakti Peeth a place of religious significance.

The idol of Mahalakshmi is mounted on a stone platform and is made of sandstone. In her four hands, Ambabai holds mhalunga (a citrus fruit), a large mace (kaumodaki), a shield (khetaka), and a bowl (panpatra). Here, the deity faces the west so in the evening the rays of

the setting sun fall on the face of the deity on specific days, unlike in most temples where the idol faces in the north or east direction.

In the Mahalakshmi Temple, there are several other shrines in the venue including Mahishasuramardini, Vitthal-Rakhmai, Navagrahas, Surya, Krishna, Mahavishnu, Panchanganga, Ram, Laxmi Narayan, Swami Smarth Dashavartar, Khandoba, Atibaleshwar, Kalbhairav, Sinhwahini, Tulja Bhavani, etc., and some of these date back to the eleventh century.

The many temples in the region reflect the city's deep religious traditions and cultural heritage, making it an essential stop for spiritual seekers. Throughout the year, devotees visit these famous temples which hold immense religious significance as well.

Things to do

Apart from these, Kolhapur offers various attractions for tourists looking for leisure activities or a glimpse of local life. One such attraction is Panhala Fort, perched atop a hilltop overlooking the city. The fort served as a strategic military base and now attracts adventure enthusiasts who climb its steep steps to reach the top and admire panoramic views of Kolhapur city and its surrounding landscapes.

The Panhala Fort is a silent sentinel that has witnessed numerous battles and sieges. Built by the Shilahara dynasty in the 12th century, the fort’s strategic importance is underscored by its massive ramparts and intricate gateways.

The fort is strategically located over a pass in the Sahyadri which, notably, was an important trade route connecting the interiors of Maharashtra to the outside



A festival underway in Kolhapur



The famous Kolhapuri chappals at a stall

coastal areas. As a result, it was always the centre stage of many fights and battles in the zone particularly involving the Marathas, the Mughals and the British.

Tarabai Ranisaheb, the queen regent of Kolhapur, spent her formative years at Panhala Fort which is also known as the 'Fort of Snakes' owing to its zig-zag shape.

It was built between 1178 and 1209 CE by Shilahara ruler Bhoja II and was one of the 15 forts built including Satara, Bavda, Vishalgad, etc.

The Panhala Fort is one of the largest in Deccan region expanding to 14 km with 110 lookout posts and built in Bijapuri style of architecture. It has many tunnels underneath the ground of which one is almost a kilometre long.

Additionally, Panchganga Ghat, located near the banks of River Panchganga, provides an ideal spot for picnics, relaxing walks, and photography sessions. It is one of the oldest spots in the city and here the civilisation emerged in Kolhapur along the banks of the historic river.

The ghats are idyllic and have a serenading effect. An old temple along the banks of the river is visited by devotees and tourists round the year.

Shivaji Bridge on the river can be seen from the jetty



The strategically located Panhala Fort built by the Shilahara dynasty

along the banks that offers a breathtaking view of the zone. An annual fair held at the ghat is attended by thousands of people from across Maharashtra, locals and visitors.

The Rankala Lake, an idyllic spot in the heart of the city, is another architectural marvel. Believed to have been constructed during the reign of Chhatrapati Shahu Maharaj, the lake is surrounded by ancient temples and gardens, offering a serene escape from the hustle and bustle of urban life.

The intricate carvings on the lake's embankment, depicting various mythological scenes, are a testament to the city's artistic heritage. The southeast side of the lake opens to the Padmaraje garden and at two spots one can reach the waters at Rajghat and Maratha ghat.

The magnificence

Kolhapur stands tall among India's lesser-known destinations due to its exceptional blend of spirituality, culture, architecture, and natural beauty. From holy temples to majestic forts and palaces, Kolhapur offers visitors ample opportunities to explore its fascinating past and absorb its vibrant present.

Travelers have multiple transportation options available to reach Kolhapur. Direct trains connect Mumbai to Kolhapur, taking roughly five hours.



Kolhapuri Misal Pav

Alternatively, buses operated by MSRTC and private operators run regularly between Kolhapur and neighbouring cities like Mumbai and Pune.

Taxis and auto-rickshaw services are readily available for short distances within the city. Luxury hotels offering comfortable accommodation cater to tourists' needs ranging from budget accommodations to upscale resorts equipped with modern amenities.

Camping facilities are also available in select locations for adventurous travellers wanting to spend their nights outdoors immersing themselves in nature. Kolhapur presents itself as a mesmerising destination that



The picturesque Rankala lake

encapsulates India's rich cultural heritage seamlessly. With its stunning temples, incredible architecture, scenic tourist spots, delicious food, vibrant festivals, bustling markets, and warm hospitality, it welcomes visitors from around the world to discover its hidden treasures and bask in its spiritual atmosphere.

Traveling through Kolhapur promises to be not only a visual feast but also a journey of self-discovery filled with memorable experiences and invaluable insights into India's

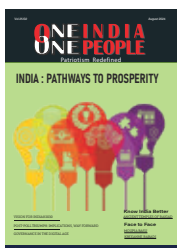
diverse landscape.

Nandini Rao is a media researcher with The History and Heritage Project – A DraftCraft International Initiative to document details, analyse facts and plug lacunae generated by oversight or to further national or foreign agenda in History and Heritage Across India and Beyond Borders.

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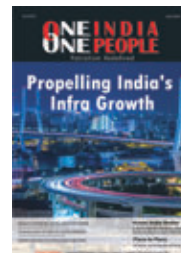
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“Trivialisation of art is more worrisome than its commercialization.”

An innovative streak and a novel approach mark **Salim Arif's** creations - be it his directional adventures in theatre or his costume designing in films like *Maachis* and *Sardar* and TV serials like *Chanakya*, *Mirza Ghalib* and *Bharat Ek Khoj*. His blending of traditional with the contemporary reflects in his body of work -- which is not only diverse but covers a wide spectrum of audience as well. In a freewheeling interview with **Tuhina Banerjee**, he talks about his chequered journey, his convictions about art and artists and how he envisions the future.

It has been a long, chequered journey for you. How did you embark on it and what were the initial challenges ?

I have grown up literally under the shadow of a cinema hall that was originally designed as a theatre, in Chaulakhi area of Lucknow. My initial interest came from the large hoarding and banner painters who would bring alive hand-painted larger-than-life images and cut outs of stars. I would copy the graph method of enlargements at home creating my own compositions. My family, hailing from Ghatampur in UP, has an aristocratic lineage. Arts were more of a hobby than something that needed to be a full time occupation. My grandfather was a patron of light classical music, poetry and would be part of the mehfil and baithaks in pre-independence days. My father trained to be a civil engineer and worked in a government department. My eldest brother is an engineer while the other is a doctor. You can imagine the pressure I have gone through in my teens, to be a civil servant as my family aspired.

In college, I was asked by a friend to design the poster for the play *King Oedipus* that got me in touch with theatre and was later pushed to act by them besides designing lights and sets. I was fortunate to meet some stalwart artistes from the city in that period who became my informal mentors. Krish-



Salim Arif with noted director Shyam Benegal and poet & lyricist Gulzar

na Narain Kacker, Raj Bisaria, Kunwar Narain ji , Ranveer Sing Bisht and Surya Mohan Kulshreshtha encouraged me to pursue Art as a career. Bansi Kaul was doing *Ala Afsar*, in Lucknow. It was a very good production using nautanki style of presentation that was an inspiration. Then the plays of Habib Tanvir and NSD repertory company came to Lucknow. It completely changed my vision of theatre and I realised that this is what I should be doing. I then joined the Bhartendu Natya Akademi. Here Raj Bisaria, Hemendra Bhatia and Anupam Kher taught me the nuances of theatre. Then I got selected in NSD with a scholarship and that changed my life.

How have you evolved as an artist over the years?

NSD provided theatre training with a multi-disciplinary broad-based vision, with each student shaping almost like a pyramid peaking to a pinnacle in his or her respective area of specialisation; yet capable of having the ability to work in other areas with distinction. We could also get exposed to various national and international plays and performers on a regular basis and interact with artists who were celebrity names for us. The surrounding auditoriums like Sri Ram Centre, Kamani, FICCI and the art galleries like Lalit Kala Akademi, Triveni Kala Sangam and Art Heritage made it all

the more exciting.

Film screenings at Max Mueller Bhavan, Russian Cultural Centre, American Centre and Pragati Maidan were the other outings one loved to have. No wonder all of us cherish the time we spent at the NSD. It gave us the confidence to be on the national stage and empowered us to work anywhere in any condition.

You have donned so many roles -- director, designer etc. Which is the role that you most enjoy?

I have always tried to explore newer terrains in my career. It all depends on the challenges a project offers. I have been fortunate to get assignments that have been very substantial and meaty. I enjoy working with new directors, new content and fresh ideas. I have a comprehensive and unified approach to Design and Direction. Even when I have designed for other directors, I have always kept the vision of that director in mind. Be it Rajiv Sethi in *Apna Utsav* of 1986 in Delhi where I designed sets and lights for 22 monuments like Pura Qila, Jamali Kamali Tomb etc., or designed lights for KN Pannikker and Ratan Thiyam shows, there has been an effort to enhance what they had visualised as an experience. In films and TV projects like Shyam Benegal's *Bharat Ek Khoj*, Gulzar Saab's *Mirza Ghalib*, Dr Chandraprakash Dwivedi's *Chanakya*, and Neerja Guleri's *Chandrakanta*, Ketan Mehta's *Sardar Patel*, Gulzar Saab's *Maachis*, all have been in sync with the style and treatment of those directors. But doing my own project as Director Designer is most fulfilling because I am in complete control of the presentation. I have directed several TV shows and left that medium once the interference from channels and programmers became stifling.

You are known for bringing innovation into whatever you do -- be it in theatre or films, direction or designing. Does it come naturally to you?

I think it comes from trying to find an unusual or fresh perspective to a proposition that is established in terms of form and presentation. It gets further empowered when you have enlightened directors like Mr Shyam Benegal or Gulzar Saab appreciating a fresh take on visual elements. The use of white colour in costumes with soft earthen colours gave *Bharat Ek Khoj* and *Mirza Ghalib* its distinct look as compared to *Mahabharat* and *Bahadur Shah Zafar* serials. On stage in *Ismat Apa Ke Naam*, Naseer (Naseeruddin Shah) Bhai liked the idea of a sketched backdrop of a Haveli and the costumes did the rest. There is also a tendency to explore newer ways and idioms in presenting content that is unusual. The form is subservient to content and one needs to find elements that can lend to innovation. I must also admit that I get restive if I continue doing something for long; it makes me feel stifled, that's why I go to various institutions like NSD, BNA, MPSD, FTII, Whistling Woods, NIFT regularly and do workshops on design, classes on direction, productions of plays with students that keeps me in sync with changing times and rejuvenates me.

You are also a master of blending the traditional with the contemporary. How do you achieve this fusion?

It is my fellowship of NSD and work on interaction between

traditional and modern Indian theatre with Habib Tanvir, KN Pannikker, Ratan Thiyam, BV Karanth that has been of great help. It is important to find a sense of continuity and organic connect between living traditions and contemporary trends to create any thing that can be called modern. I have been fortunate to work with maestros not only in theatre but films and television. Each of these mediums have enhanced my understanding of the other medium and components; I draw from all three in my work on stage or screen.

Your list of achievements is endless. Which is the assignment you think you did the best? And the one you thought lacked the impact you wanted it to give?

Salim Arif: Fortunately, I have done very selective work that by now is acknowledged worthy as referential or authentic. My costume design work in *Bharat Ek Khoj*, *Chanakya*, *Mirza Ghalib* is now considered the most defining work of those periods. I was directing telefilms that were well received and my serials had good runs. It was around 2000 that I felt my content was being controlled by programmers and channels. I was losing control as director of saying what I wanted to say, I left that field and got full time into theatre that gave me creative freedom of expression on issues that I felt were important. I also started sharing my experience with students of various disciplines in reputed national institutes and I am pretty happy to now go to the US and take up the responsibility as the Resident Director for Theatre and Arts in The Matrix Club, Naperville IL.

I now do feel the projects I got were beyond my age and experience, but they prepared me for my later work. There are no regrets.

Is it always possible that art can be for art's sake at a time when commercialisation is ruling the roost and true artists are gasping for breath?

Art for art's sake would mean you are conforming to the existing status-quo and creating art that at best can be decorative. You cannot isolate yourself from your surroundings and create art that would be relevant or exciting. At the same time for art to be effective or meaningful as an instrument of sensitisation or change, it will have to fulfill the aesthetic criteria of good art or that stream before it can be termed as socially relevant.

Commerce is an important aspect of our lives and we need to learn to live with it as artists. More than commercialisation, it is the trivialisation of issues and art that is more worrisome. The dumping down of education and arts by market forces need to be countered by more vigorous and forceful artistic efforts and deeper enquiry into our everyday reality.

How do you think Indian theatre has changed, say from 1970s-80s to now?

It has changed drastically. Sets and lights have acquired an insignificant role, we are happy to find excuses to present lethargic, verbal theatre. There is no concern to build an economic base of self-sufficient theatre. We are happy to



I.K.Gujaral former Prime Minister of India felicitates Salim Arif watched by Gulzar after a show

perform in a 50-seat auditorium and present plays of uneven aesthetic quality. Theatre in Mumbai is now most vibrant as major artists have found professional work there in films and TV. The city also has benefit of major talent from Marathi, Gujarati, Hindi and English theatre coming together on platforms and finding inspiration from each other. The Inter Collegiate competitions are a constant source of new content and performers that forms a vital talent pool. Now, we have some very capable writers, actors and directors creating new content for an audience that patronises them. What we lack are new performing spaces that can make theatre a commercially viable proposition.

We are still working with auditoriums made in 70s in obsolete infrastructure. Just to inform you, the last scheme to built new theatres was way back in 1964 in the Tagore Centenary year. We have some of the worst multi-purpose auditoriums in the world. Theatre, sadly, is not on the radar of our planners and leaders.

Your interests are diverse - from Ghalib and Manto to O Henry and Shakespeare. It reflects on your body of work. How does it help you in your craft?

It is a wide repertoire of content to select from, and all of them are great writers. Each of these masters and even contemporary writers like Gulzar Saab, Pavan Varma and Javed Siddiqi have their distinct ways of treating words with care and concern. They are all very different from each other, and demand different treatment. The world they create with their vocabulary has a strong cultural base that gives it a very strong literary value. This base of good literature is at the root of my work and I draw inspiration from their writings

to create a diverse and eclectic body of plays that have always been received well by audiences around the world.

What are the key projects you are working on currently?

I just finished a play Comedy Of Errors with Sri Ram Centre Repertory Company in Delhi. My new project is a play Chaabi written by Javed Siddiqi on a story by Gulzar besides workshops in the US.

If you were asked to give three important tips to budding artists, what would they be?

You have chosen the life of an artist who will be looking for opportunities to express yourself, it is a struggle creatively and socially and would remain so till the end of your life. Don't expect charity or short cuts. Prepare yourself well so that when the big opportunity comes, you can make the most of it. You will get what you deserve, success may take a longer time to come than what you expect, but it will happen. Be yourself.



The writer is a freelancer who specialises in lifestyle and wellness issues.

over cruelty.

It is from Holika's demise that the festival of Holi derives its name. Her death marked the destruction of evil and the safeguarding of virtue, a theme that echoes through the ages. The night before the festival begins, this myth is commemorated in the ritual of Holika Dahan, where large bonfires are lit to symbolise the burning away of evil. Communities gather to witness the flames, a moment that is both spiritual and symbolic, reinforcing the eternal truth that darkness cannot withstand the light of righteousness. With the dawn of the next day, the sombre reflection on faith and sacrifice gives way to an explosion of joy and colour. The festival of Holi transforms into an exuberant celebration of life, renewal, and the vibrancy of human spirit. People of all ages and backgrounds come together to drench each other in colours, symbolising the breaking down of barriers—be they social, religious, or personal. The hues of Holi, bursting in reds, yellows, blues, and greens, signify the spectrum of life itself, a reminder that, just as nature renews itself in spring, so too can humanity find renewal after trials and hardships.

Holi is more than just a festival of colours; it is a reaffirmation of the undeniable truth that goodness, though often besieged by adversity, will ultimately prevail. This ancient legend of Prahlad and Holika speaks to the eternal human quest for justice and virtue, the triumph of moral fortitude in the face of overwhelming odds. Across India, several temples witness the grandeur of Holi celebrations including the Banke Bihari Temple in Vrindavan, Sri Dwarkadhish Temple in Mathura, Radha Rani Temple in Barsana, Sri Krishna Math in Udupi, etc.

Cultural ethos

The Mahabharat, an epic of unmatched depth, tells the story of a war whose reverberations echo through the centuries. The Battle of Kurukshetra was not just a war of succession between the Pandavas and Kauravas; it was a cataclysm that shaped the moral and spiritual fabric of the subcontinent. The traditions that followed in its wake set the stage for a culture that venerates victory, celebrates sacrifice, and honours the indomitable spirit of warriors.

The story of Iravan, though overshadowed by the grandeur of the Mahabharat's central characters, is a deeply moving narrative that resonates powerfully in the cultural consciousness of South India. His name may not be as widely recognised as Arjun, Bhima, or Krishna, yet Iravan's sacrifice is immortalised in the hearts of the Tamil people, particularly within the Draupadi cult, where he is revered as Kuttantavar. His tale is a potent symbol of selflessness and devotion—an archetype of personal sacrifice for the collective good, a virtue that transcends time and finds deep relevance in Indian cultural traditions. His sacrifice has left an indelible mark on the cultural landscape of Tamil Nadu.

The annual Koovagam festival, celebrated in Villupuram, Tamil Nadu, is a vivid re-enactment of this ancient story, where devotees gather for 18 days to honour Iravan's memory. This festival, imbued with rituals and rites, is a unique homage to a hero who epitomised the theme of sacrifice. It's a striking example of how local customs can

elevate a character from the margins of myth into the focal point of living tradition. Central to the festivities is the symbolic "marriage" of Iravan, where transgender women, known as Aravanis, symbolically wed the deity before ritually mourning his death. This union, a profound reflection of the multifaceted nature of devotion, showcases the inclusivity and adaptability of Indian spirituality, where personal identity intersects with divine narratives. Iravan's story has thus become a beacon for the transgender community in South India, reflecting broader themes of identity, love, and sacrifice.

Generosity over greed

In Kerala, the festival of Onam paints yet another portrait of victory, one that is less about battle and more about the triumph of humility. The homecoming of King Mahabali, the beloved demon king who was sent to the underworld by Lord Vishnu in his Vamana avatar, is a celebration of benevolence over arrogance, of generosity over greed. The floral pookalam that adorns homes, the grand Onam sadya feast, and the vibrant vallamkali (boat races) are all tributes to the enduring legacy of a king who, despite his exile, is remembered for the prosperity and happiness he brought to his people. Goa's Bonderam festival, celebrated on the quaint island of Divar, stands as a vivid testament to the creative rebellion of a people against their colonial rulers. The name itself, derived from the Portuguese word "Bandeira," meaning flag, speaks to its roots in a symbolic yet charged protest that took place during the 17th century when the Portuguese, in an attempt to bring order to land disputes among local villages, planted flags to demarcate boundaries.

But the villagers of Divar, resilient and proud, found the solution more divisive than unifying. What followed was an iconic defiance—villagers would knock down the flags, challenging the imposed order in a spirited, almost mischievous, show of resistance. Today, Bonderam transforms this historic confrontation into a celebration of unity and playfulness. The festival is a sight to behold, with the island's peaceful landscape coming alive with colour and jubilation. Rival factions from different villages take part in this re-enactment, armed with bamboo sticks called "fotash" to gleefully topple each other's flags, now symbols of friendly rivalry. The streets become a sea of floats, each one more elaborate than the last, adorned with traditional designs, while participants don vibrant costumes that reflect Goa's rich cultural heritage. Yet, Bonderam is more than just a reenactment. It's a festival that draws people together, blending the fervour of competition with the warmth of community. The laughter of children, the rhythm of Goan folk music, and the echoing cheers from the crowd merge into an intoxicating atmosphere of joy. As the procession winds through the island's narrow lanes, locals and visitors alike are swept into a celebration that is both a nod to history and a vibrant expression of modern Goan identity.

Nimisha Lakhia is a trainee with DraftCraft Media Network - an initiative of DraftCraft International – a platform for media students, experts, and professionals to quash populist trends and help create unbiased and independent news.

Rising rape scourge: Seeking solutions

*India's crisis of sexual violence: Every hour, every day, a staggering reality. As rape cases rise, so must our resolve for justice and reform. From the heartbreak of Kolkata to nation-wide outrage, it's time to act decisively and protect every victim, suggests **Raju Korti**.*



Citizens protest against the Kolkata rape-murder at RG Kar Hospital

Amid the country's outrage over the rape and murder of a 31-year-old trainee doctor in Kolkata, the statistics of rape, paint a grim picture. As per the annual National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) report, between 2017 and 2022, a total of 1.89 lakh rape cases were reported in India, involving 1.91 lakh victims. In at least 1.79 lakh cases, the rapist was a known person while in 9,670 it was someone the victim did not know. What is staggering is; every hour, India recorded almost four rape cases and in more than three of these, the rapist was known to the victim.

Further, the highest number of rape victims in India is between the ages of 18 and 30 years. Of the 1.89 lakh cases, 1.13 lakh were from this age group. So, of the 86 rapes recorded every day, 52 are from the age group between 18 and 30 years. The remaining cases, 35 per day, could be from any age.

Even as statistics paint a very disturbing picture, in recent years, India has been rocked by a series of horrific rape cases that have shocked the nation and galvanised widespread calls for justice and reform. The recent rape case in Kolkata has sparked outrage and calls for justice, highlighting ongoing issues with safety and legal accountability. Among the most harrowing incidents was the 2012 gang rape of a young woman in Delhi, which became

a turning point in national consciousness and sparked massive protests and demands for legal and societal changes. More recently, the brutal gang rape and murder of an eight-year-old girl in Kathua and the violent assault of a young woman in Unnao have further underscored the pervasive and deeply troubling nature of sexual violence in the country. These cases, marked by their extreme brutality and the subsequent struggles for justice, have exposed the systemic failures in addressing rape and highlighted the urgent need for comprehensive measures to protect victims and hold perpetrators accountable.

India has faced a troubling surge in reported rape cases over the past decade. High-profile cases and persistent media coverage have brought the issue into the spotlight, highlighting both systemic problems and the urgent need for reform. While rape and sexual violence are global issues, the situation in India presents unique challenges and requires targeted interventions. This article explores the rise in rape cases in India, examines what can be done to address this crisis, and considers how the situation compares to other countries.

An alarming rise

Recent statistics paint a stark picture of sexual violence in India. The National Crime Records Bureau records that there were 33,000 reported rape cases in 2022

alone. This figure, though staggering, may not fully capture the extent of the problem, as underreporting remains significant due to societal stigma and fear of retaliation. The increase in reported cases can be attributed to greater awareness, improved reporting mechanisms, and a growing willingness among survivors to come forward. Nevertheless, the persistence of the problem highlights deep-rooted issues in India's legal and social systems.

Traditional gender roles and patriarchal values play a significant role in perpetuating sexual violence. In many parts of India, women are still seen as inferior and their autonomy is often disregarded. These attitudes contribute to a culture where sexual violence is normalised and excused.

Although India has laws against sexual violence, their enforcement is often inadequate. The legal process can be lengthy and traumatising, discouraging many survivors from seeking justice. Additionally, the legal framework sometimes fails to address the nuances of sexual violence effectively. Police and judicial systems are frequently criticised for their lack of sensitivity and responsiveness. Victims may face victim-blaming attitudes, and investigations can be marred by corruption and inefficiency.

Economic disparities and lack of access to education and social services can exacerbate the problem. Women from marginalised communities are particularly vulnerable to sexual violence.

Strengthening legal framework

There is a need for comprehensive legal reforms to address gaps and ensure stricter punishments for perpetrators. The implementation of laws must be consistent, and legal processes should be streamlined to reduce the trauma for survivors. The focus should be on creating a supportive environment that encourages reporting and provides protection for victims.

Training for police and judiciary members is crucial to ensure sensitivity and efficiency in handling sexual violence cases. Specialised units within police departments and fast-track courts dedicated to sexual violence can help expedite cases and deliver justice more effectively.

Addressing the root causes of sexual violence requires a cultural shift towards gender equality. Education campaigns that challenge traditional gender norms and promote respect for women's rights can help change societal attitudes. Schools and communities should engage in dialogues that emphasise the importance of consent and mutual respect.

Providing adequate support services, such as counselling, legal aid, and medical care, is essential for survivors of sexual violence. Establishing crisis centres and helplines can offer immediate assistance and long-term support for victims.

Media campaigns and public education programmes can play a significant role in raising awareness about sexual violence and encouraging societal change. Highlighting stories of survivors and advocates can help to challenge

stigmas and build a culture of support. Grassroots organisations and community leaders can be instrumental in driving change at the local level. Initiatives that engage communities in prevention efforts and promote collective action can have a significant impact.

Situation in other countries

While India's situation is particularly acute, sexual violence is a global issue with varying degrees of prevalence and response. Comparing India's situation to other countries provides valuable insights into potential solutions and best practices. The U.S. has a well-established legal framework for addressing sexual violence, including the Violence Against Women Act (VAWA) and various state-level laws. Despite this, challenges such as underreporting, disparities in legal representation, and victim-blaming persist. Public awareness campaigns and education programmes play a significant role in addressing these issues.

Known for its progressive stance on gender equality, Sweden has implemented comprehensive measures to combat sexual violence. The country has robust legal frameworks, specialised support services, and a high level of public awareness. However, recent reports suggest that even in Sweden, challenges remain, particularly regarding sexual violence in immigrant communities.

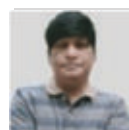
South Africa faces a high rate of sexual violence, exacerbated by socio-economic inequalities and a legacy of apartheid. Efforts to address the crisis include specialised courts and support services, but challenges such as underreporting and systemic issues persist. Community-based initiatives and collaborations with NGOs are critical in addressing the problem.

Japan has made strides in addressing sexual violence through legal reforms and support services. However, cultural factors and societal stigmas can hinder reporting and effective legal responses. Recent efforts focus on improving public awareness and encouraging more open discussions about sexual violence.

Conclusion

The rise in rape cases in India is a multifaceted issue that requires a comprehensive approach to address effectively. Strengthening legal frameworks, improving law enforcement, promoting gender equality, supporting survivors, and enhancing public awareness are crucial steps in combating sexual violence. By learning from the experiences of other countries and implementing targeted interventions, India can make significant progress in addressing this grave issue.

It is essential for all stakeholders—government bodies, civil society organisations, and communities—to work together to create a safer and more equitable society. Only through concerted and sustained efforts can we hope to eradicate sexual violence and ensure justice for survivors.



Raju Korti is a senior journalist with over four-decade experience of working in media institutions.

Against odds: Women in Indian Sports

*From groundbreaking victories to systemic hurdles, Indian women athletes defy barriers. Their resilience and success spotlight a broader struggle for recognition and respect in the world of sports. **Shoma A. Chatterji** enumerates the triumphs and trials of women in sports.*



Vinesh Phogat at Paris Olympics

Vinesh Phogat is an Indian professional freestyle wrestler. She is a multiple Commonwealth Games gold medalist, having won golds at the 2014, 2018, and 2022 Games. She became the first Indian woman wrestler to win a gold medal at the Commonwealth and Asian Games after she won the gold medal in the 2018 Asian Games. She just won two bronze medals at the Paris Olympics, the first Indian woman to do so. But she is a woman and an Indian woman at that. This automatically places her in a discriminatory position in the eyes of the Indian “fathers” of the Olympics. She is not the only woman in sports to be chosen for discrimination. And she is not the first and certainly not the last. She was on the forefront of the women wrestlers’ and weightlifters’ collective protest against the sexual harassment of women and girls by the “immune” Brij Bhushan Sharan Singh who escaped by virtue of his political immunity.



Sunita Rani

Sports and women do not quite go together in the sense that sports and men do. Even when women enter sports in a big way, they run an obstacle race right from the beginning. This is a global phenomenon and differences in attitudes if any, are more of degree than of kind.

There is the old belief that women’s participation in sports is restricted by their roles as women – they menstruate, they conceive and they reproduce. But this belief is belied by fact. At the 1976 Olympics, an American swimmer won three gold medals and broke a world record while at the height of her period. After the 1964 Games, the Russians revealed that ten out of their 26 female participants were pregnant when they won their medals. Blankers-Koen, Irena Swezinska and Shirley Strickland competed both before and after they became mothers. Pat McCormick, an American swimmer, won the diving double for the second

time when her son was eight months old! The genetic gap between men and women is said to be muscle power. But this gap, say scientists, can be reduced if girls understand the need for physical exercise from an early age. The same discrimination applies to the system of appointing sports coaches. Here too, male dominance is obvious.

The Busan Asian Games, Korea, 2002, framed Indian women athletes in gold, silver and bronze in diverse field events, archiving their competitive performance forever in India's sporting history. This 'gold' has nothing to do with the *mangal sutra*. But many of these women also wear the *mangal sutra*, the sign that they are married. But they are women for whom, the *mangal sutra* has proved to be more of a performance booster than an obstacle, as is commonly believed.

K.M. Beenamol, Anju George, Neelam Jaswant Singh, Saraswati Saha and Madhuri Singh made India proud with their excellence at the Asian Games. The now Famous Five made Indian track and field look fabulous for the first time after the memorable era defined by P.T. Usha, M.D. Valsamma, Shiny Abraham Wilson, Vandana Shanbag and Vandana Rao. (Of these women, Beenamol, Jaswant and Saraswati are married.) Add to this the feathers in Sunita Rani's cap. Beenamol (27), won the gold in the 800m and 4x400m relay (Soma Biswas, Manjeet Kaur and Jincy Phillips were the others in the quartet) and silver in the 400m. She was bestowed the *Samsung Most Valuable Performance by an Indian Award* upon her return. Anju George, who emerged victorious in the long jump, had prepared for the Asiad with a bronze in the Commonwealth Games at Manchester.

The other gold medal winners were Saraswati Saha of West Bengal in the 200m and Neelam Jaswant Singh of Punjab in the discus throw. Till then, Saraswati was the first Indian woman to go below the 23-second mark in the 200m, setting a national record of 22.82 seconds in the National Athletic circuit in August 2002. Singh (31) set a new Asian Games record by hurling the discus to a distance of 64.55 meters. None of these triumphs have come without hard struggle, facing family opposition, heavy practice, overcoming physical strain, lots of tears and often, a few heartbreaks. For women who have chosen sports as a way of life, life in Indian tracks and fields has never been a cakewalk.

In the last week of December 2002, a letter from the Olympic Association acknowledged that there were "discrepancies" in the dope tests done during the Busan Asian Games on Sunita Rani, adding that there was no need for the Olympic Council of Asia to press the matter further. Sunita Rani was tested positive for a banned drug, Nandrolone, found in her urine samples taken after winning the gold medal in the women's 1500m and the bronze in the 5000m at Busan. True that Rani's getting her medals back avenges her. But does this erase the memories of public humiliation and insult, transcending borders of information through the international media? It is poor consolation for the mental torture she had to undergo, knowing all the time that the charges levelled against her for testing positive for dope were false.

No one remembers Saroj Bala. She was a member of the National team for women's hockey when they went to play at Moscow in 1981. She went on to bring glory at the World Hockey Championships at Argentina in 1985 and at the 1986 Asian Games. This woman, who now works as sports officer at the Punjab Electricity Board at a salary that would put a corporate peon to shame, brought back some of the best honours in women's hockey for the country. She is virtually without work because few people are even aware that there is a sports officer at the Punjab Electricity Board. She was not promoted even once during the first 15 years of service.

Kamaljeet Sandhu, the first Indian woman athlete to bag gold at the Bangkok Asian Games many years ago, laments, "giving birth is the natural function of a woman. Then why must she be ignored and cast aside from sports like a bad coin – even as a coach – after she got married and became a mother? Haven't P.T. Usha and Shiny Wilson returned to the track after marriage and motherhood?" Sandhu has experienced this humiliation at first hand. Only once did she get a promotion in the first 18 years of her service at the NSNIS and got recognition as coach. But P.T. Usha did not support the women wrestlers and weight lifters in their recent rebellion and nor did Mary Kom, who maintained a stoic silence.

Certain attitudes in Asian countries like India, Bangladesh and Pakistan are so steeped in tradition and outdated mores that these prove to be a barrier for women who step into sports. Our notions about how a woman should dress, be it at home, at work, in the field or at the swimming pool, are strict and imposing. Girls in badminton and tennis courts still prefer to wear short skirts rather than the more practical shorts. The same applies to athletics and team sports like hockey. Many small-town girls in West Bengal who excel in swimming because there are many ponds there, are expressly prohibited from taking up swimming seriously because they will have to wear a swimsuit! A world of talent remains untapped forever, just on grounds of dress!

But the show goes on. Lack of sponsorship, lack of opportunity, lack of official encouragement, lack of media coverage, lack of sports fields exclusively allotted to women, lack of exclusive pools for girls and women, lack of encouragement from the family are absences structured into women who aspire for a career in sports within the larger framework. Within sports, there are presences like – politics, sexual harassment, needless dope tests taken after medals have been won, etc. Yet, the sportswomen in our country have the spirit of survival. They have the courage of their convictions and their determination to face challenges – within the field and out of it.



Shoma A. Chatterji is a freelance journalist, film scholar and author. She has authored 17 published titles and won the National Award for Best Writing on Cinema, twice. She won the UNFPA-Laadli Media Award, 2010 for 'commitment to addressing and analysing gender issues' among many awards.

New India's eco-friendly travel gem

Discover the enchanting Kumaon Himalayas, where majestic peaks and rich tribal cultures create a unique travel experience. Embrace "slow tourism" in a pristine, carbon-neutral paradise where natural beauty and indigenous heritage flourish. From breathtaking vistas to eco-conscious innovations, Uttarakhand is redefining the journey to serenity, observes Subhasish Chakraborty.



Majestic Himalayan vistas seen in Kumaon

The North Indian state of Uttarakhand, blessed with magnificent Himalayan vistas, is emerging as one of New India's most sought-after travel destinations for many compelling reasons. The natural splendour of the Kumaon region, encompassing Almora and its surroundings, has long attracted writers, poets, and artists seeking rejuvenation. As one anonymous traveller aptly described, "Kumaon is so beautiful that there is nothing wrong in calling it the staircase to heaven." Recently, the rich indigenous culture of Kumaon has resonated deeply with today's discerning traveller. A journey through this rugged mountain landscape offers an unparalleled sensory experience, rich with culture, cuisine, history, heritage, and dance.

In a world grappling with global warming and climate change, Uttarakhand emerges as a breath of fresh air. The snow-capped peaks of Nanda Devi (7816m), Chaukhamba (7138m), Panchchuli (6904m), and Trishul (7120m) stand as vigilant sentinels, while the peace-loving people of



Dhamas village

Uttarakhand, alongside the state's Tourism Department, are committed to safeguarding the fragile Himalayan ecosystem. This commitment is reflected in eco-friendly measures such as promoting home stays and immersive village holidays.

The Uttarakhand government's recent move to transform the Haldwani Zoo into a Carbon Neutral Zone has garnered praise from environmentalists. The state has also pioneered its own climate change action plan. Additionally, the establishment of India's first green energy-based solar panel plant in Rudrapur by Luminous Power Technologies, with an annual production capacity of 500 MW, is a notable achievement for Uttarakhand.

Post-COVID, there has been a global shift towards carbon-neutral destinations where nature remains pristine, and cultural heritage is preserved. The Kumaon Himalayas, with their majestic peaks and a rich tapestry of tribal



Kumaoni couple

communities including the Tharus, Bhotiyas, Jaunsaris, Buksas, and Rajis, offer a compelling draw for travellers. The fascinating lifestyles, belief systems, cuisine, jewellery, and folklore of these communities have captivated discerning visitors.

A tribal tour of the Kumaon Himalayas can be transformative, offering a "slow tourism" experience characterized by deep engagement with local people. Despite challenging roads, the breathtaking natural scenery, flora, and fauna make every trek rewarding. The region's tribes each possess unique belief systems: the Tharus follow a matrilineal system with women as societal leaders, the colorful Jaunsaris are among the world's last polyandric societies, and the Bhotiyas, known for their Tibeto-Mongoloid features, excel in weaving.

Having grown up in Assam amidst diverse tribal communities such as the Nagas, Mizos, Bodos, Kacharis, and Monpas, I am heartened by the work of my friend Chandan Koranga from Almora. Through his travel company, he has been guiding visitors from countries such as the USA, UK, Canada, Australia, and Germany, with many returning to Kumaon, attesting to the region's profound beauty and charm.

International visitors seeking peace and solitude are accommodated in high-quality, self-service Wood Villa cottages in the picturesque village of Dhamas. Chandan's dedication to showcasing both the Kumaoni Himalayas and the region's rich tribal diversity has fostered meaningful connections with local communities in Sitlaket and Balsa Gaon. These villages, now frequented by international visitors, have formed bonds of friendship, with minimal demands placed on the local inhabitants. Visitors appreciate



Kedarnath

the "Slow Tourism" approach, valuing the preservation of the villages' centuries-old charm despite less-than-ideal transportation.

It is a joy to witness local residents preparing traditional dishes with care, while men guide visitors on treks and assist along the way. The preservation of Kumaon's fragile ecosystem and indigenous diversity remains a priority. The Uttarakhand government continues to promote the region as a global tourism destination. Despite perceptions of Uttarakhand as a remote and challenging location, the state offers compelling reasons for both domestic and international tourists. It is a spiritual capital with numerous pilgrimage sites such as Dev Haridwar, Rishikesh, Kedarnath, Gangotri, and Yamunotri, with Rishikesh renowned as the Yoga Capital of the World. Uttarakhand also boasts two UNESCO World Heritage Sites, the Valley of Flowers and Nanda Devi National Park, and is home to the sacred rivers Ganga and Yamuna. Jim Corbett National Park, India's oldest national park established in 1936 to protect the Royal Bengal Tiger, and the Govind Ballabh Pant University in Pantnagar, which was instrumental in the Green Revolution, further highlight the state's significance. Strategically, Uttarakhand shares its international borders with China to the northeast and Nepal to the southeast.



Subhasish Chakraborty has been working as a travel journalist for the past two decades and specialises on India's North East and the Himalayas, promoting Responsible Travel and Indigenous/ Tribal Tourism.

A wake-up call for eco-fragile regions

*As landslides continue to claim lives in the Western Ghats and Himalayan regions, **Bharat Dogra** says urgent action is needed to address flawed development practices and ecological degradation. The recent disaster in Kerala's Wayanad district underscores the growing risks from climate change and human negligence.*

The recent landslides in India's Western Ghats and Himalayan regions have brought into sharp focus the increasing threat posed by these natural disasters. On July 30, a catastrophic landslide struck Wayanad district in Kerala, a state often celebrated for its progressive development but now facing the consequences of long-term ecological neglect.

Kerala, known globally for its social achievements, is also grappling with the darker side of development—ecological degradation. The state, along with the broader Western Ghats region, has seen a disturbing rise in the frequency and intensity of natural calamities, particularly floods and landslides. These disasters are often triggered by a combination of heavy rainfall, likely exacerbated by climate change, and irresponsible human activities. In the early hours of July 30, three villages in Wayanad were devastated when debris from a landslide flowed into a nearby river, creating a deadly torrent. This surge of water and debris cascaded down the hillsides, leaving a trail of death and destruction in its wake. The tragic loss of human life is estimated to be around 350, a grim reminder of the deadly consequences of ignoring ecological warnings.

Amidst this tragedy, there were also stories of heroism. Rescue teams managed to save about 1,500 people from the affected areas, working tirelessly under extremely challenging conditions. Their efforts, though commendable, are a stark contrast to the preventable nature of this disaster. Ecologist Madhav Gadgil, who chaired the Western Ghats Ecology Expert Panel, was quick to point out that this tragedy could have been largely averted if the state government had heeded the panel's recommendations. Gadgil noted that the affected area was classified as highly ecologically sensitive, where activities like construction and quarrying should have been strictly regulated.

The torrential rains that contributed to the landslide are likely a symptom of the broader impacts of climate change, which has led to increasingly erratic and extreme weather patterns. However, the human role in exacerbating these natural disasters cannot be overlooked.

In northern India, particularly in the Himalayan region, landslides have become an all-too-common

occurrence during the monsoon season. These landslides are increasingly linked to a combination of climate change-induced extreme weather events and irresponsible development practices. The widespread and indiscriminate construction, excessive mining, and quarrying have destabilized the region's fragile ecosystems, making them more prone to such disasters.

Himachal Pradesh, in particular, has witnessed a surge in "cloud bursts," where intense rainfall occurs in a short period over a small area, often leading to landslides. In many instances, these landslides have been triggered by large-scale infrastructure projects, such as the widening of highways and the construction of tunnels and dams. The felling of tens of thousands of trees and the use of flawed construction practices have further compounded the risk.

During a visit to one such affected community, residents voiced their desperation, pleading for resettlement in safer locations. Their plight underscores the urgent need for a more cautious approach to development in these ecologically sensitive regions. The lessons from these disasters are clear: there must be a greater focus on disaster prevention, particularly in mitigating human-made risks. Immediate action is needed to ensure the safety of those still living in high-risk areas, and comprehensive support must be provided to those who have lost loved ones and livelihoods.

The larger challenge, however, lies in identifying high-risk zones and taking preventive measures to avoid future tragedies like the one in Wayanad. Most importantly, there is an urgent need for ecologically sensitive development policies that prioritize environmental protection in hilly regions. This includes halting deforestation, regulating construction, and restricting mining activities. Only by adopting such measures can we hope to protect vulnerable communities and prevent further loss of life in India's ecologically fragile regions.

The writer is Honorary Convener, Campaign to Save Earth Now. His recent books include *India's Quest for Sustainable Farming and Healthy Food, Man over Machine* and *A Day in 2071*.

DODDAMANE SAKAMMA (1880-1950)

Karnataka's coffee entrepreneur

A custom in the culture of Karnataka State, is drinking hot filter kaapi first thing in the morning. Bengaluru, the state's capital, epitomises this also the link that connects it to one of its most trailblazing entrepreneurs, an extraordinary woman.

Sakamma Coffee Works played a significant role in supplying authentic cured and powdered coffee to the people of the royal State of Mysore at the start of the 1900s, despite the company's name not being often mentioned in the chronicles of Indian entrepreneurs. Doddamane Sakamma (1880 - 1950) was born in a middle-class family village Bidare, in Tumkur District. Despite financial hardships, her parents ensured she received schooling, a rarity for girls then. She was among the very few girls of her generation to pass the secondary school examination in Mysore Province.

Moving to then Bangalore in search of a better livelihood, the family however fell on hard times and Sakamma was forced by circumstances to marry at 16, Savkar D.C. Setty, an affluent Coorgi coffee planter who already had two wives. Even as she was opening her eyes to the realities of the society around her, she lost her husband within two years of her marriage. His other two wives followed in quick succession.

The young girl, in a twist of fate, was landed the difficult responsibility of running her late husband enormous coffee estate all by herself. Her education however helped her face the calamities that befell upon her. She waded through life's worst points, picked up the skills to manage a coffee estate quickly, and the plantation began to prosper again.

Fueled by determination and a pioneering spirit, in 1920, Sakamma made the bold decision to relocate from Coorg to Bangalore, the bustling epicenter of commerce and opportunity. She opened a tiny coffee powdering and curing shop at Basavanagudi, setting the groundwork for her business venture.

Her Coffee Pudi quickly became an essential fixture in Bangaloreans' daily lives. Coffee was never the same again! Her name spread by word of mouth and a pioneer of entrepreneurship was born. Her first coffee unit became a

household name and her name was etched in history. Buoyed by the thundering response, the young entrepreneur set up centres in different areas across the Bangalore, earning herself the popular nickname Coffee Pudi (Coffee Powder) Sakamma. Her thriving business significantly impacted Bangalore's community and she dedicated herself to various social causes, leaving an indelible impact on her community.

She gained recognition and affection for her achievements that went beyond the corporate world, such as her support of social justice and educational programmes. The Mysore government called her as a corporate leader to help plan the industrial growth of the State. She established the Kuruhina Shetty Kendra Sangha and Hostel in Basavanagudi and made large donations.



In recognition of her exceptional contribution to the State's trade and social welfare, she was honoured with the title of Lokaseva Pararyane (one devoted to service of society) by the Maharaja of Mysore, Sri Krishna Raja Wadiyar IV. Even the British in awe of her achievements awarded her the Kaiser-i- Hind (Jewel of India) medal. She became one of the first women to be nominated to the erstwhile Mysore Representative Assembly in 1928. The Indian Post released a special envelope honouring her. She received numerous honours and recognitions for her incredible accomplishments.

Among the first few devotees of Sathya Sai Baba, who spent many months in her house, Sakamma spoke Telugu fluently and treated Baba as her child and cooked food for him. Her pioneering spirit paved the way for future generations of women entrepreneurs, to pursue their dreams against all odds. Sadly, stories of women like her often remain overshadowed by those of their male counterparts. She died aged 75.



A. Radhakrishnan is a Pune based freelance journalist, poet and short story writer.

DR. MANGALA JAYANT NARLIKAR (1943-2023)

She made Maths easy

Mangala Jayant Narlikar, nee Rajwade was a distinguished Indian mathematician, teacher and scientific educator. She conducted research in pure mathematics. Real and complex analysis, analytic geometry, number theory, algebra, and topology were her main areas of interest.

Born in Mumbai (then Bombay), in a middle-class Hindu family, Mangala completed her Bachelor's and Masters of Arts degree in Mathematics in 1962 and 1964 securing the first rank and the Chancellor's gold medal, from Bombay University. After a stint from 1964 to 1966 with the Tata Institute of Fundamental Research (TIFR), Mumbai as research associate and research student, Mangala married Jayant Narlikar, a well-known cosmologist and physicist in 1966. She was better recognised as his wife simply because she frequently had to put her family's needs ahead of her own research.

When the pair moved to Cambridge, England, where Jayant became well-known worldwide, it caused the first pause in her academic career. As professor at the University of Cambridge's undergraduate school from 1967 until 1969, she oversaw a few undergraduates, but her two daughter's births made it difficult for her to pursue research full-time. Her story was perhaps representative of the lives of many women of her generation who though well educated, always put household responsibilities before their personal careers.

The couple returned to Mumbai in 1972 with Jayant taking up a position at TIFR, Mumbai. She returned to work at TIFR from 1974 until 1980. A doctorate in analytic number theory came from the University of Bombay in 1981. From 1982 to 1985, she was Pool Officer at TIFR. In 1989, the couple moved to Pune where Jayant became the founder-director of Inter-University Centre for Astronomy and Astrophysics (IUCAA), among the finest research institutions in the country. They were a permanent fixture on the IUCAA campus till old age and ill-health confined them to their home.

She oversaw the Maharashtra State Bureau of Textbook Production and Curriculum Research's mathematics subject committee as its chairperson; helped

revise the math curriculum for schoolchildren and was in charge of adding more interactive features to math textbooks for grades I to X.

She was the fellow trustee and governing body member of the Bhaskaracharya Pratishthan, from 2006 to 2010. She also made stellar contributions to school mathematics education in Maharashtra, via her work for Bal Bharati, the textbook bureau, as Chairperson. She felt mathematics was extremely easy. All one had to remember was 0-9 numbers and four signs of division/multiplication/addition and subtraction. She attempted to introduce a simpler Marathi method of number identification, similar to the English method, by suggesting vees-don for 22 instead of baweets, but she encountered resistance.

She wrote books to make mathematics interesting and accessible to students who feared the subject. Her well-known books and scientific papers in English, Hindi and Marathi, include Theory of Sieved Integers; Hybrid Mean value Theorem of L-Functions; An Easy Access to Basic Mathematics; A Cosmic Adventure; Ganitachyaa Sopya Vata, a book in Marathi for schoolchildren; An Easy Access to Basic Mathematics and Fun and Fundamentals of Mathematics. She won the Vishwanath Parvati Gokhale Award in 2002 for her book Gargi Ajun Jeevant Aahe in Marathi.

Mangala missed being a full-time scientist and was a happy-go-lucky part-timer but felt she could have done much more, had she studied Physics along with Mathematics. She advised students to choose M.Sc. with Maths as it also included studying physics at a respectable level. She was a hands-on wife and mother, did community work for the underprivileged, was a regular yoga practitioner, and planted many of the lovely and diverse trees on the IUCAA campus. Mangala, aged 80, died of cancer, in Pune. She is survived by her husband, three daughters and five grandchildren.



A. Radhakrishnan is a Pune based freelance journalist, poet and short story writer.

CAPTAIN ANSHUMAN SINGH, KIRTI CHAKRA (1997-2023)

Hero of Operation Meghdoot rescue

Captain Anshuman Singh came from Bardiha Dalpat village in Deoria district, Uttar Pradesh. He was born in September 1997 to Subedar Ravi Pratap Singh, an army veteran, and Manju Singh. He was the youngest of three children, with an older brother and sister. He studied at Rashtriya Military School, Chail in Himachal Pradesh. There, his interest in the Armed Forces grew, and he decided to pursue a military career. He initially qualified to join an engineering college.

Anshuman Singh completed his medical studies in AFMC (Armed Forces Medical College) Pune. AFMC is a prestigious institute that provides training in military medicine, high-altitude medicine, and injuries incurred in warfare. After completing his MBBS, Captain Singh did an internship in Agra.

Once he graduated, he joined the AMC (Army Medical Corps), which provides medical services to army personnel. He rose to the rank of captain in 2023. Same year he married Smriti on February 10. After two months of marriage, he was deputed in Operation Meghdoot at Siachen Glacier Area. Captain Anshuman Singh was posted as medical officer in the 403 Field Hospital of 26 Punjab Battalion on attachment from 26 Madras Regiment.

The area remains inaccessible during the winter months and the soldiers face extreme risks in manning the forward posts in inhospitable terrain at heights of over 19,000 feet under extreme weather conditions. Captain Anshuman Singh functioning as a Regimental Medical Officer was responsible for providing medical care to all the troops deployed in the area.

On 19 July 2023, a short circuit caused a fire. Spotting a fibreglass hut engulfed in flames, Captain Singh immediately acted to save those trapped inside. He rescued five individuals but the fire soon spread to the nearby medical investigation room.

Perhaps being mindful of the fact that replacing supplies like medicines and equipment is very difficult at high altitudes, Captain Singh went back into the fire and was trapped inside while trying to retrieve some life-saving drugs. Despite his best efforts, he could not escape the blaze and died inside.

He was cremated with full state honour at his native place in Uttar Pradesh's Deoria district on 22 July 2023. He is survived by his parents, wife, and two siblings.

President Droupadi Murmu on 5 July 2024, conferred Kirti Chakra, India's second-highest gallantry award, to Captain Anshuman Singh posthumously. Visuals of Captain Singh's wife Smriti and his mother, Manju Singh, receiving the award from the President at the Rashtrapati Bhavan went viral.

With tears in her eyes, Smriti Singh, dressed in a white saree, stood there as her late husband was praised for his supreme sacrifice. Anshuman Singh met Smriti on the first day of their engineering college before he was selected for the AFMC (Armed Forces Medical College) Pune.

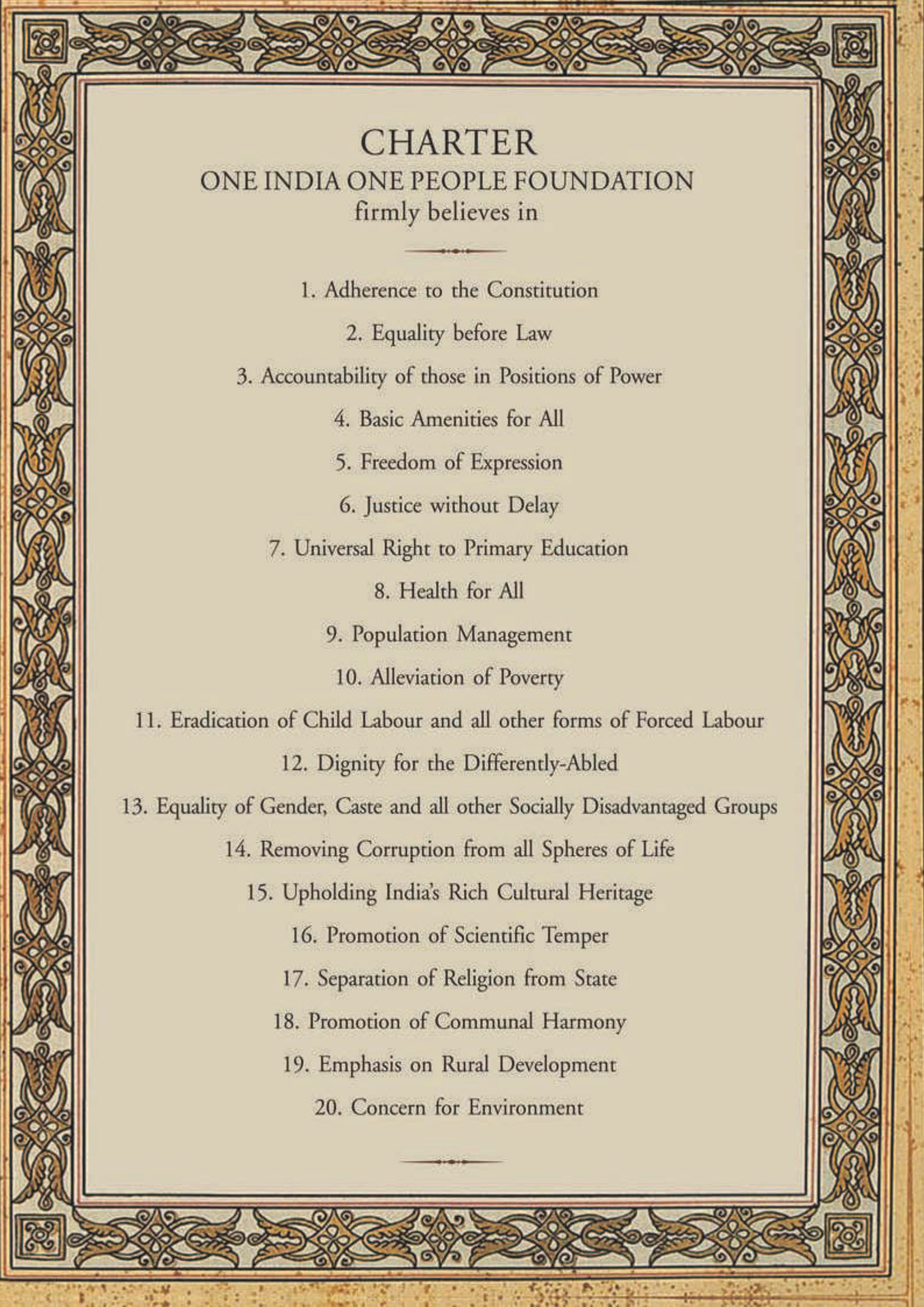
"We met at an engineering college but then he got selected in a medical college. Super intelligent guy. From then on, after just one month of meeting, it was a long-distance relationship for eight long years," she added. "Then we decided to get married. Unfortunately, within two months of our marriage, he got posted in Siachen," Smriti recalled.

Remembering her late husband, she added, "He would tell me, 'I would die with the brass on my chest. I would not die an ordinary death.'"

Captain Anshuman Singh's service period spanned from 19 March 2020 to 19 July 2023.



Contributed by Renu Prakash from the data bank of Late Brig. Suresh Chandra Sharma.



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-

WHO AM I?



Am I a Hindu first or an Indian first?

Am I a Muslim first or an Indian first?

Am I a Christian first or an Indian first?

Am I a Buddhist first or an Indian first?

Am I a Brahmin first or an Indian first?

Am I a Dalit first or an Indian first?

Am I a South Indian first or an Indian first?

Am I a North Indian first or an Indian first?

Am I the President of India first or an Indian first?

Am I the Prime Minister of India first or an Indian first?

Am I the Commander-in-Chief first or an Indian first?

Am I a supporter of any 'ism' first or an Indian first?

Am I a white-collar/blue collar worker first or an Indian first?

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Sadanand A. Shetty, Founder Editor
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