

# BEYOND THE HARVEST: EXPLORING THE SOCIO-CULTURAL AND ECOLOGICAL DYNAMICS OF THE INDIAN FESTIVAL MAKAR SANKRANTI

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## Abstract

*This research paper studies the harvest festival of Makar Sankranti, highlighting its socio-cultural and ecological dimensions, exploring how the festival has changed over time, and the factors that have influenced its transformation with consumerist culture leading to commercialization of the festival. A combination of different methods is adopted. Data gathered through surveys, interviews, and focus group discussions has provided qualitative insights from diverse perspectives. Analysis of content related to Makar Sankranti in media, literature, and social media platforms has complemented the survey data by providing a historical and cultural context. Review of published research and observations of experts have contributed to an understanding of the festival's environmental impact on issues such as waste generation, pollution, and resource consumption during the festival as well as the potential for its value as an instrument of change for the present and future generations to initiate positive action. Ethnographic research involving prolonged engagement with the community has given the researchers an opportunity to understand the social dynamics, cultural practices, and ecological interactions associated with Makar Sankranti. The paper also offers recommendations for reimagining its celebration to enable people to reconnect with its original spirit that is a celebration of human life in sync with nature.*

**Keywords:** Makar Sankranti, ecological interactions, consumerist culture, resource consumption, original spirit

## INTRODUCTION

*Samudra-Vasane Devi Parvata-Stana-Mannddale |  
Vissnu-Patni Namas-Tubhyam Paada-Sparsham Kssamasva-Me ||*

Are we distracted from the spirit of unity with Nature? The conscious awareness of engaging with all living organisms could be the first step in this reflection. The power of communicating with Nature and our physical environment would help rebalance the energy and establish a communal consciousness that requires an alignment with the natural world rather than we, acting as threats to it and fighting against it. This form of co-creation involves tapping on both the scientific and traditional indigenous systems.

India is a storehouse of living traditions (lok sanskriti or folklore) with rich cultural heritage and their repositories in folk, rural communities that manifest themselves through oral and aesthetic forms deeply rooted in the seasonal, agrarian festivals and rituals. They form a vital role in the shaping and development of cultural identities of the communal groups and of the country at large. These traditions also establish intercultural dialogues and create a global cultural milieu. With the rapid advancement in technology and globalisation, the trends of forced displacement and migration emerged leading to a gradual disappearance of these traditions, lifestyles and communities.

India, with its varied and rich cultural heritage could serve as a roadmap with its focus on living heritage that evolved from the ecology and association with Nature. India's concept of harnessing indigenous cultural practices and knowledge systems including both the living and non-living beings lies in the five elements of nature- earth, water, fire, air and space. The Pancha tattvas reflect the idea of mutual co-existence and interdependence rather than orienting ourselves towards an anthropocentric worldview. Communities and groups continuously recreate this living heritage in response to their environment, interacting with nature, and history. The reverence for natural resources is primarily ecocentric and inclusive rather than anthropocentric. India, primarily being an agrarian economy, the presence of farming is strongly reflected in the cultural landscape of the country. Most of the Indian festivals or celebratory events have multiple rituals and beliefs that in turn nurture and enhance community relationships. The concept of festivals and rituals associated with traditional societies was to create a shared knowledge system among people that instilled in them the sense of belongingness and identity. Social anthropologists such as Emile Durkheim and Sir James George Frazer further

defined the concept of festivals based on secular dichotomy. Falassi (1987) identifies the typological distinction of rural and urban festivals.

“Rural festivals are supposedly older, agrarian, centred on fertility rites and cosmogony myths, while the more recent, urban festivals celebrate prosperity in less archaic forms and may be tied to foundation legends and historical events and feats. Another typology can be based on power, class structure, and social roles, distinguishing among festivals given by the people for the people, those given by the establishment for itself, and those held by the people for the establishment, by the establishment for the people, and by the people against the establishment.” (Falassi 3)

Ritualistic festivals are celebrated across the world. One of the first festival events could have been associated with seasonal occasions such as sowing and harvesting as agriculture was a major occupation for most of the people. Harvest festivals mark the transition of our evolution into a settled agrarian society. They are grounded in both historical and geographic contexts as they provide insights into the community’s experience of the festival, their rich cultural heritage and rituals. Though harvest festivals are grounded in tradition and identity, they are not attached to specific localities. The synthesis of natural elements along with thoughtful human intervention is the key to a successful yield or harvest. It is therefore important that celebrating a harvest symbolises much more than the manifestations. It is about a deeper understanding of the symbiotic relation between man and nature that in turn is beneficial to all the people across the globe.

Today, most of the resources are not utilised efficiently leading to destructive consumption, environmental degradation and climate change. This global phenomenon requires intervention programs at both national and local level. Appadurai (1996) stresses that globalising and localising processes, or “global homogenization” and “heterogenization” feed and reinforce each other rather than being mutually exclusive, and he calls for more anthropological study on the “production of locality”. These local activities could impact communities and ecosystems across the world.

## OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY

The agrarian traditions and harvest festivals have not been thriving in the contemporary context because of sustainability issues. So, could we promote sustainability by modifying these festival traditions or rituals? The study aims to understand the key elements of celebrating the Indian harvest festivals retaining their original purpose that encourage modern sustainable practices thus reviving our cultural heritage. It explores how Makar Sankranti, the Indian harvest festival has changed over time, and the factors that have influenced its transformation with consumerist culture leading to commercialization of the festival. Furthermore, India being an agri economy, the festival impacts the economic and cultural sustainability.

## FRAMEWORK OF THE STUDY

Colonialism in India left a deep impact on its agriculture sector. The famine that struck the country after World War II, made India import large quantities of foodgrains after independence. Five decades after independence, India achieved the highest ever exports in staples such as rice, wheat and cereals. However, India still has many growing concerns in this field. Though the Indian economy has diversified and grown over a period of time, there is a steady decline in agriculture's contribution to Gross Domestic Product (GDP) from 1950 to 2020, according to Food and Agricultural Organisation (FAO), India.

India achieved self-sufficiency in grain production in the recent decades but investing in resources for intensive agriculture poses sustainability issues too. Similar changing trends could be observed in social and cultural practices associated with agriculture and farming. Agriculture, a productive resource, is therefore not only a means of production but a way of life. Hence, many cultural practices could be traced back to our agrarian society. These practices are closely associated with agriculture that differ in various regions of the country. Additionally, India, a home to vast agro-ecological diversity, has climatic variations that represent great diversity of ecosystems. Agriculture and its allied sectors provide the largest source of livelihood in India. About 70 percent of the rural population still depend primarily on agriculture for their livelihood. In our country, the rich biodiverse areas celebrate more harvest festivals than other regions. Consider Arunachal Pradesh, Jharkhand and Odisha where the indigenous communities commemorate more than 10 harvest events. They offer a plethora of tribes rich in culture and traditions and hence their festivals are mostly connected to agriculture and nature.

Makar Sankranti is an important pan-Indian harvest festival celebrated in various parts of India. It is an occasion of celebration and thanksgiving to all elements of Nature marked by various rituals and traditions. Unlike other festivals that follow the traditional lunar calendar, Sankranti is a solar event. It usually falls on January 14 annually though its time and date are analogous to the sidereal time of the Sun entering the zodiac sign of Capricorn. The event also brings about a change of Sun’s direction from South to North. It is therefore referred to as Uttarayana.

The festivities associated with Makar Sankranti are referred to by various names in different states of India- Makara Sankranti in Kerala, Sankranti in Andhra Pradesh and Telangana, Pongal in Tamil Nadu, Makar Sankranti in Odisha, Maharashtra, Karnataka, Mokor Sonkranti in West Bengal, Sakrat in Haryana, Magh Bihu in Assam, Sakraat in Rajasthan. It is also celebrated internationally as Thingyan in Myanmar, Maghe Sankranti in Nepal and Songkran in Thailand.

What does the festival represent?

Makar Sankranti has historical, spiritual as well as scientific significance. Makar Sankranti is mentioned in the epic texts of Mahabharata and also the Puranas. In Bhagavad Gita (3.14), Lord Krishna says:

*annād bhavanti bhūtāni  
parjanyaād anna-sambhavaḥ  
yajṣād bhavati parjanya  
yajṣaḥ karma-samudbhavaḥ*

**Translation:** All living bodies subsist on food grains, which are produced from rain. Rains are produced by performance of yajña [sacrifice], and yajña is born of prescribed duties.

During the Vedic period, prayers had a universal outlook (well- being of all elements of nature). Agriculture was a means of living and crop cultivation considered an auspicious beginning of happiness and prosperity. The importance of agriculture is evident from Kshetrapati Suktam:

*śunaṃ vāhāḥ śunaṃ naraḥ śunaṃ kṛṣatu lāṅgalam  
śunaṃ varatrā badhyantām śunamaṣṭrāmudīṅgayaḥ*

**Translation:** May the Oxen drawing the Plough bring Welfare and Prosperity to all, May the Farmer driving the Oxen bring Welfare and Prosperity to all, May the Plough making Furrows bring Welfare and Prosperity to all.

Preserving such a tradition that formed the base for the Indian rural economy continued as a practice for generations. Parasara, in Krishi-Parasara, offers recommendations regarding harvest. He states “ A wise man should harvest paddy in the month of Pousha, get the corns thrashed properly, and weighted with an adhaka”.

Makar Sankranti is therefore celebrated during January (Pousha) when the harvesting is complete. It ushers in longer and warmer days with the onset of spring in India. The day also holds special significance for Indians due to the social gathering events of Kumbh Mela and Ganga Sagar Mela. KumbhMela is held every 12 years at various locations such as Haridwar, Prayag, Nashik and Ujjain. Kumbh Mela, the largest peaceful congregation of pilgrims. Due to the cultural and social significance associated with the events, Kumbh Mela was included in the UNESCO Representative list of Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity in 2017.

The intangible cultural heritage of India such as traditions, folklore and languages share close ties with the bio-environment. Societies progressed and developed constantly by including the traditional practices and knowledge to address fundamental needs and social issues across time and space. Additionally, traditional health practices, food, social gatherings, celebrations and knowledge transmission systems play a significant role for communities to achieve inclusive social development.

## METHODOLOGY

The research paper is based on a case study of the Makar Sankranti festival. The historical approach reveals the changing perspectives to the festival and the need to establish sustainable practices for the future. Qualitative research methods were used in the study. An online survey was conducted with 275 respondents supported by narrative inquiry, personal interviews (133) and focus group discussions (17 with 7 - 8 members per group). The researchers used recorded interviews and narrative inquiry to ensure validity of data. An audio recording of the respondents was documented and the observations were noted to understand the changing dynamics of the festival. For Content analysis, a pan-India questionnaire based survey was conducted between 1st December and 20th December 2023. A Google form based questionnaire (12 questions) was circulated through social media groups and e-mail to contacts from the Telugu speaking states of Telangana and Andhra Pradesh, Arunachal Pradesh and Assam.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The data analysis revealed that initially the festival was rooted in Indian cultural practices by consciously planning and crafting our present and future through agriculture. But now, the celebrations showcase concerts, folk performances and social gatherings reflecting the changing dynamics of the festival in contemporary times.

### Changing Dynamics of the festival

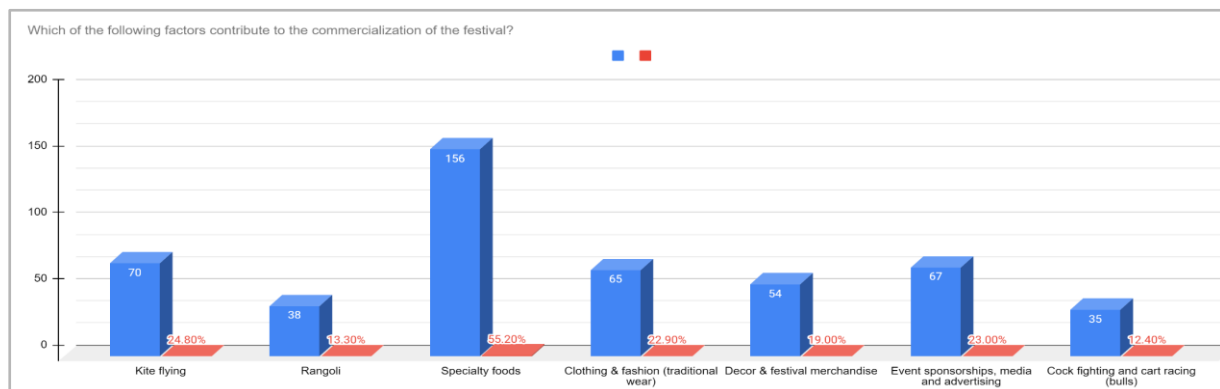
The participatory group members from Gudavalli village in the Guntur district of Andhra Pradesh and Avancha village in Medak district of Telangana opined that harvest festivals were earlier celebrated collaboratively. The initiatives and celebratory events involved community enrichment that led to self-sustained learning. The members of the community were deeply engaged with the practices of the festival. However, the joy and spirit of these occasions and events is gradually lost in the face of urbanisation and the changing lifestyles. In an urban context, the harvest festivals have evolved to encourage practices that are harmful for the environment thus leading to growing concerns about sustainability.

Participant 1: “Makar Sankranti has lost its significance in urban areas, and has been commercialised”. (translated from Telugu to English)

Participant 2: “Agree, especially the way it is celebrated in cities - kite flying. Also, even in the village we are using disposable plates and glasses, as we need to cut a lot of banana trees if we use banana leaves or *vistharakulu*. So, it is also not an economical option. We don't get so many leaves of good quality for the 3 or 4 days to accommodate all the people who come to the village for the festival”.

Participant 3: “Green initiatives could be taken up to help mitigate global challenges such as food shortage and climate crisis. People should be aware of the rationale behind traditions and practices of the festival. Educational initiatives to encourage and support impactful participation in the agri sector could be encouraged. Technological interventions for sustainable farming and eco-friendly agricultural practices should be employed”.

Since ancient times, in Indian villages, the focus during the harvest festivals was on folk performances, food, competitions based on skills, and other performative forms. These activities established the tradition of celebrating the harvest conducive to mobilising villagers to devote themselves to fully tapping local and natural resources, displaying their unique cultural events and promoting the development of rural festivals. In recent years, the focus has shifted to food and clothing. About 78% participants opined that attempts to promote new fashions in the name of tradition and commercialization of specialty foods harnessed the power of consumerism in the festival celebrations.



### Urban and Rural Spaces

Makar Sankranti not only represents inherited traditions but also contemporary rural and urban practices in which diverse cultural groups actively participate. Beck speaks of the necessity of an 'inclusive distinctiveness' - presenting the old national-local forms on new global-local conditions (Beck, 82)

The shared experiences of the individuals during festivals is not specific to a group of people but celebrated in both rural and urban areas. The survey respondents, therefore, include participants from rural, urban and metropolitan cities within India and those from other countries.

Participant 4: “It is an opportunity for community bonding, where families come together to share traditional foods, and revel in the festive spirit”.

The participants shared that these practices contribute to social cohesion and individuals relate themselves to the society at large and not with independent communities in agreement with UNESCO that includes inclusivity as one of the components of intangible cultural heritage.



“Whether they are from the neighbouring village, from a city on the opposite side of the world, or have been adapted by peoples who have migrated and settled in a different region, they all are intangible cultural heritage: they have been passed from one generation to another, have evolved in response to their environments and they contribute to giving us a sense of identity and continuity, providing a link from our past, through the present, and into our future”.

**Income and Economy:**

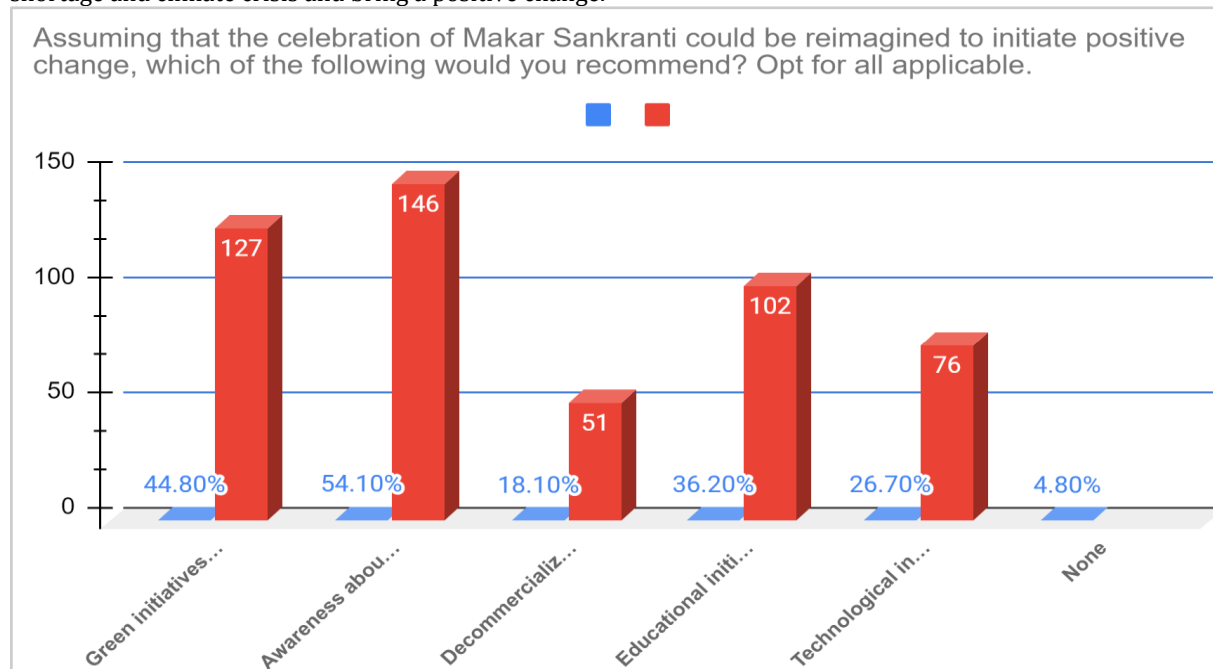
Majority of Indian youth, between the age group of 15-35 years, constitute about 35% of India’s population. According to the 12th Annual Status of Education Report, 79% of youth are into agriculture but only 1.5% of them aspire to be farmers. Those leaving rural areas in search of better economic opportunities are usually younger, better educated, and more skilled. The factors such as overpopulation, declining size of farms and economic development create a web of intangible problems for farmers in developing nations.

Global cities have emerged as centres for new professional groups forming major sources of attraction and repulsion for capital flows. This growing hegemony leads to sweeping consequences for the mobilisation of communities who have limited access to the new social hierarchies. This would call for a realignment and rethinking of the existing policies. It is therefore important to popularise the idea of intervention programs among the younger generation. According to a scoping review conducted by Wenda Geza & et.al most of the agricultural interventions are production-centric that result in low income and inadequate social protection. There is an immediate need for policy changes that could focus on integrating agricultural interventions with technology that address the needs or a context-specific approach rather than productivity. This would, in turn, reshape the existing food system production for the future generations with the young people taking the initiative.

Another reason could be ageing acceleration in rural populations. The FAO report of the UN published in 2017 mentions that ageing in rural areas tends to start earlier than in the urban populations and proceed faster than national averages would indicate. Ageing in farmers has major implications on the rural labour force, patterns of agricultural production that would also affect the social organisation within rural communities, and socio-economic development in general. The average age of Indian farmers is 50.1 as mentioned by Agricultural Census Division in 2016. The advancement in age of farmers would influence the growth of agriculture due to lack of human resource leading to a drop in the economic potential of the agriculture sector. In our country, this led to a phenomenal growth of ‘uneconomic cultivators’ who produce crops without necessary resources.

**Adopting a proactive approach:**

The most important lessons could be learnt from these celebrations and a positive change could be initiated by every individual leading to great changes in the approach to the festival. Most of the participants in the survey group also agreed with this view that creating an awareness in youth about the rationale behind the traditions and practices of the festival and adopting green initiatives could help mitigate global challenges such as food shortage and climate crisis and bring a positive change.



These ritualistic modifications or changes could offer fresh perspectives to the existing issues on sustainability and realign our ideas to imagine a sustainable future. The study's findings can be applied to other Indian festivals to determine how rituals when reimagined foster sustainable goals and prove effective to create an impact on the society.

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the harvest festivals not only act as seasonal observances but provide a platform for communities to come together, strengthening bonds through social events and rituals. It is therefore recommended that these festivals be included in Intangible Cultural Heritage with tangible outcomes. People would then understand these rituals as a shared memory of the whole community and not view them as representations of show and pomp but actually think of ways to make a difference in how the festivals are celebrated. Individuals and community heads could take a lead role in taking up initiatives in rural areas by inviting their friends and relatives to rural areas during these celebrations to demonstrate the significance of these long standing rituals. Initiatives at the local level have an impact but these can be multiplied and sustained with government intervention and the corporate sector.

The results of statistical data and research analysis by economists, the need of the hour is the educational initiatives and policy changes by the government. The current generation is not encouraged to take up agriculture as a profession and only few youngsters who made it big are coming back to villages to contribute and create an impact. Therefore, the industry experts could proactively contribute to research and innovation in this field to assure sustainability. The heightened sense of environmental awareness in various spheres could emerge as a social movement rather than individual concern. In this scenario, the call for a greener future would be eco-social renewal of our society.

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