

ANTHRO BULLETIN

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A digital magazine that celebrates cultural diversities of India.

ABOUT ANTHROPOS INDIA FOUNDATION

Founded in 2011, Anthropos India Foundation (AIF) promotes the discipline of Anthropology, its philosophy and its methods to engage in applied and action research. Our work seeks to address issues of local communities through a bottom-up approach unique to their cultures and people. We conduct community-based research rooted in local knowledge systems, local culture and ecology to inform policy initiatives and drive transformational impact. AIF also conducts workshops, trainings and advocacy on various issues, especially on children. AIF promotes Visual Anthropology through vibrant, authentic, meaningful ethnographic films and photo documentation.

ABOUT ANTHRO BULLETIN

Starting from January 2025, AIF's monthly Newsletter has been upgraded into a monthly digital magazine called *Anthro Bulletin*, with a renewed focus and energy. As anthropologists, we have always been keen on covering the diversity of our country from various perspectives. Over time, we have explored a wide range of topics, and seeing the richness of the emerging content, we have transformed the Newsletter into something more appropriate and culturally stimulating. From now on, our monthly *Anthro Bulletin* will feature articles on themes related to Indian art, crafts, culture, and festivals from a unique, anthropological perspective, highlighting the country's rich diversity and traditions besides sharing the regular news updates. We are also excited to introduce a new column '**Young Scholars**' from the next month. This column would feature fieldwork, travelogues, or PhD-related work of young and bright scholars, providing them a platform to share their valuable insights and experiences here as well. Please write to us if you want to submit your article!

We also welcome you to share high-resolution, portrait-size, self-clicked pictures of cultural events, traditions, and festivals to be featured on our magazine's cover page every month. Please note that the selection of articles and pictures is at the discretion of our editorial team and is based on several factors, including how well the submissions align with our objectives.

All submissions can be emailed to aif.newsletter2025@gmail.com. We also welcome sponsors who would like to support this magazine.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

FROM THE MANAGING EDITOR'S DESK.....	02
Dr. Sunita Reddy Founder-Chair, Anthropos India Foundation	
CHIEF EDITOR'S MESSAGE.....	02
Prof. (retd.) Shalina Mehta, Department of Anthropology, Panjab University	
ARTICLE 1.....	03
The Harvesting Season in India: One Festival, Many Names by Team AIF (Dr Sunita Reddy, Rithitha Senthilkumar, Debi Saha, and Rakhi Yadav)	
ARTICLE 2.....	05
Lohri: Celebrating Harvest and the Indian Heritage by Ria Ghosh, Managing Director Forency LLP	
ARTICLE 3.....	07
Sacred Gatherings and Social Unity: A Deep Dive into Kumbh Mela Rituals by Yash Mishra, Shivaji College (graduated), University of Delhi	
ARTICLE 4.....	09
Akhadas in the Maha Kumbh Mela: Sadhu, Sanyasi and Bairagi by Rakhi Yadav, AIF	
ANTHROPOLOGIST OF THE MONTH.....	11
Prof. Kishor K. Basa interviewed by Saba Farhin, AIF	
DISTINGUISHED GUEST LECTURE.....	14
A Report by Saloni Tare, AIF	
BOOK REVIEW.....	15
Indigenous Knowledge Systems and Practices among PVTGs in India - II, Book Review by Angana Goswami, AIF	
OTHER NEWS AND UPDATES.....	16
Forthcoming Events, Fellowships and Job Alerts	

Dr. Sunita Reddy, Founder-Chair, Anthropos India Foundation

Dear Readers,

As a passionate anthropologist, I am often struck by how little awareness there is about this dynamic and profound discipline. Anthropology is more than just the study of humans—it is a holistic exploration of our existence, encompassing philosophy, perspectives, and methodologies that shape our understanding of the world and our place within it.

Long before 'startup' became a buzzword, I founded Anthropos India Foundation in 2011 with a mission to bring this fascinating field into the spotlight. Our goal has always been to showcase the richness of anthropology and its relevance to society, emphasizing our interconnectedness with the larger ecosystem.

What began as a simple monthly newsletter documenting AIF events soon evolved into a vibrant digital magazine, celebrating the diversity of cultures, traditions, and people.

Today, we take another step forward with the launch of *Anthro Bulletin*, an expanded platform that delves deeper into the many facets of human cultures. Each issue will bring to you a fascinating mix of art, craft, festivals, and rituals from across India, offering a window into both well-known and lesser-known traditions. More importantly, this is a participatory magazine, and we invite you to be a part of this journey. Share your stories, perspectives, artwork, paintings, and photographs with us. Selected works may even be featured on our cover page, credited to you. We look forward to exploring the rich tapestry of human cultures together.

Happy reading!



CHIEF EDITOR'S MESSAGE

Prof. (retd.) Shalina Mehta, Department of Anthropology, Panjab University

Dear Friends,

Welcome to the first edition of *Anthro Bulletin*, another innovative initiative of Anthropos India Foundation to celebrate holistic understanding of humankind. For over a century anthropological approach has cemented foundations of humanism by incorporating empirical understanding of human diversity, pluralism and multiculturalism. The beginning of 2025 is about celebrations. Ushering of a new year, as per English calendar on 1st January to auspicious days of 13th and 14th January in the Hindu calendar, mark the transition of the Sun into the zodiac sign of Capricorn, which is symbolic of new beginnings, festivities and rituals associated with prosperity and harvesting. The day is celebrated across India in different states as *Makar Sankranti* in Punjab, Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Jharkhand, *Pongal* in Tamil Nadu, *Poush Sankranti* in West Bengal, *Bihu* in Assam, *Uttarayan* in Gujarat and so on, symbolizing a unique cultural synergy in a hugely diverse country. I am particularly glad that *Anthro Bulletin's* first issue brought together stories of celebration for the harvest festival this year. Also, this year on *Makar Sankranti*, after 144 years, celebrations of *Maha Kumbh* started at *Triveni Sangam*, Prayagraj. As we know, all celebrations are symbolic of cultural and mythological histories, identity assertions, belief systems and accompanying rituals. In anthropological discourse rituals are described as processes of reinforcement, regeneration, and healing if you see the works of Edmund Leach, Clifford Geertz, Max Gluckman and Victor Turner respectively. Moreso, festive celebrations

are known to provide mechanisms to deal with individual and social tensions and generate spaces for conflict resolutions. Social beings are also known to engage with rituals with the intensity of psychic self-experiencing, explained by Émile Durkheim as "*collective effervescence hardwired into the*

human psyche". These are moments of exhilaration, spiritual transformation and salvation.

The ongoing Kumbh Mela is not only symbolic of the largest congregation of human beings ever anywhere in the World, but also represents an ethnographic maze waiting to be chronicled for its ability to absorb differences, prejudices, hierarchies, fears and susceptibilities of any kind that human beings experience in their day-to-day lives. I congratulate the AIF Team for not only bringing in articles related to the Maha Kumbh Mela in this issue but also for including Akharas as one of the representations of diverse Indian culture. All the structured Akharas exemplify ancient Indian practice of Guru-Shishya Parampara and its legacy of transference of knowledge that requires anthropological analysis of its tenacity. This social phenomenon is a momentous occasion, and Prayagraj presents an uncommon field site. Through the medium of this magazine, I encourage young anthropologists to come forward and continue to write experiential accounts and their learnings for future research on peaceful human co-existence.



The Harvesting Season in India: One Festival, Many Names

by Team AIF



Dr Sunita Reddy



Rithitha Senthilkumar



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Harvest festivals are celebrated all over South Asia in various ways. As far as India is concerned, it is celebrated as *Pongal* in Tamil Nadu, as *Makar Sankranti* in Odisha, Maharashtra, Karnataka, and Goa, as *Sankranti* in Andhra Pradesh, as *Makar Sankranti* in West Bengal, as *Magh Bihu* in Assam, as *Maghi Saaji* in Himachal Pradesh, as *Shishur Senkrath* in Kashmir, as *Uttarayana* in Jammu, Gujarat and Uttar Pradesh, as *Sakrat* in Haryana and Rajasthan, as *Ghughuti* in Uttarakhand, as *Dahi Chura* in Bihar, as *Til Sakraat* in Mithila, as *Tusu* in the tribal areas of West Bengal, Jharkhand and Odisha, as *Lohri* in Punjab and most of North India, and as *Bhogi* in Telangana and parts of Karnataka. The festival is also celebrated as *Lal Loi* in Sindh, Pakistan and as *Maghe Sankranti* in Nepal. The bounty of the harvest season ranges from colourful fruits, grains and legumes to green vegetables. These add to delectable dishes prepared during this festival in various states.

These festivals, while celebrated under different names and with unique customs and rituals across various regions, are united by their spirit of gratitude for a bountiful harvest. They mark a time for communities to come together, share traditions and enjoy the fruits of their labor. Despite the diversity in cultural practices, the underlying message of prosperity, gratitude and renewal resonates universally. Following is a description of how some states celebrate this festival.



1. Pongal Being Cooked on Thai Pongal in an Earthen Pot
2. Rituals for Sun God
3. Decorative Kolam depicting Pongal festival; (Picture Courtesy: Rithitha Senthilkumar)

Pongal of Tamil Nadu: *Pongal*, one of Tamil Nadu's most significant festivals, celebrates the harvest season and pays homage to nature's bounty. Falling in mid-January, *Pongal* marks the Tamil month of *Thai*, symbolizing prosperity and new beginnings. Derived from the Tamil word "*Pongu*," meaning "to boil over," the festival represents abundance and gratitude. During the festival, a sweet dish called *Pongal* is prepared by boiling new rice, milk, jaggery, and cardamom in a pot and the overflowing milk is celebrated with the joyous exclamation, "*Pongalo Pongal*." Sugarcane, vegetables and spices are also offered to God during this festive occasion. The four-day celebration begins with *Bhogi*, where old belongings are discarded and homes are cleaned to welcome positivity. On *Thai Pongal*, the second day, the Sun God is worshipped for his role in agriculture. Decorative *kolams* are drawn at the house entrances and the day marks the beginning of the Tamil month, *Thai*. The third day, *Mattu Pongal* is dedicated to honoring cattle which is vital to farming. Adorned with polished horns, flower garlands, beads and bells, they are worshipped. The traditional bull-taming sport, *Jallikattu*, is also conducted to celebrate strength and bravery. Cows decorated with garlands and bells for *Mattu Pongal*, being worshipped for their vital role in farming.

Kaanum Pongal focuses on family reunions and social gatherings, strengthening bonds among loved ones. They gather for vibrant traditional folk dances like *Mayilattam* and *Kolattam*. Exciting activities such as *Vazhukku Maram* (slippery pole), *Mallar Kambam* (a mix of gymnastics and yoga), *Uri Adithal* (breaking a hanging pot blindfolded) and *Kabaddi* add to the festivities. *Pongal* is a testament to Tamil Nadu's agrarian roots and cultural richness. Its rituals foster gratitude, joy and togetherness, making it a cherished occasion for communities.

Poush Sankranti of West Bengal: In Bengal, the last day of the Bengali month of *Poush* is celebrated as *Poush Sankranti* or *Makar Sankranti*. Locally, there are variations in rituals and traditions. The focus here is however is on the *Poush Parbon* celebration in North Bengal, near the Bangladesh border. The festivities begin with newly harvested rice and date palm jaggery (*gur*).

Every household cleans their utensils and homes, then creates a paste from the fresh rice (*atop chal*). Before drawing intricate designs, known as *Alpona*, they clean the courtyard with cow dung and water. The *Alpona* features a curly-haired male figure, *Pushna*, and a curly-haired female figure, *Pushni*, along with their daughter and son, depicted in a mud house. The design includes banana trees, a *Mangol Ghot*, and utensils commonly used in the household. The community worships *Pushna* and *Pushni* with a special food offering called *Mita*, made from soaked rice, jaggery, and ginger, wrapped in gourd leaves and jute rope. They place the *Mita* on each element of the *Alpona* as *prasad*. The worship involves flowers, incense sticks, and lighting of lamps. The next morning, they take the *Mita* as *prasad*. Traditional rice flour *Pithas*, such as *Sada Pitha* or *Chitai Pitha*, are prepared on this day. Different regions have unique *pitha-puli* variations, like *Pathisapta*, *Chandra Puli*, and *Dudh Puli*. The following morning, another worship ceremony takes place before sunrise, followed by the preparation of *Chitai Pitha* again. The first *Pitha* is offered to the cow, and then consumed by the people. However, they must first take the *Mita* as *prasad*.

Pushna and *Pushni* are believed to represent a happy family, although no one seems to know the

origins of the mythological story behind this celebration. Interestingly, some households worship *Pushni* as Goddess *Lakshmi*, symbolizing the fulfilment of the harvest season. On this day, people also offer *Tilua* (sesame seeds) to their ancestors, and it is considered mandatory to consume items made with it.

Khichdi of Bundelkhand: *Makar Sankranti* in the Bundelkhand region of Uttar Pradesh, and some parts of Eastern Uttar Pradesh is celebrated by the name of *Khichdi*, where the celebration is again unique. The dishes prepared here include *Khichdi* (a mixture of rice and *moong/udlad dal*), eaten with other traditional dishes like various *dal-pakodi* locally known as '*bada*' and '*magoda*', with curd, sugar, and *ghee*.

Another tradition of this festival is that brothers visit their sister's homes every year on this day with rice and *dal*. This festival is also known as *Khicharai* in some parts of India. On this auspicious day, people of the region take a dip in the rivers like *Ganga*, *Yamuna*, or *Narmada* or any river near their place. They offer water to the Sun and then eat this special traditional food. Both the river water and the Sun are given special importance on this day as they are considered necessary for winter crops like wheat, mustard etc.



1. Traditional Art (Alpona of Pushna and Pushni); (Picture Courtesy: Debi Saha)
 2. Traditional Khichdi thali with a variety of festival-related dishes
 3. Traditional way of preparing paste using *sel batta* (manual stone grinder); (Picture Courtesy: Priya Yadav)
 4. Traditional Cuisines (*Chitai Pitha*, *Tilua* and *Kheer*); (Picture Courtesy: Debi Saha)

Lohri: Celebrating Harvest and the Indian Heritage



by Ria Ghosh

Lohri is one of the most vibrant and cherished festivals of India, celebrated with immense zeal and enthusiasm. Marking the end of winter and the arrival of the harvest season, *Lohri* is a cultural and social occasion steeped in traditions, folklore, and joyous festivities. Primarily observed as such in Punjab and parts of Haryana, Himachal Pradesh, and Jammu, *Lohri* holds great significance for our agrarian communities and is a symbolic representation of gratitude, prosperity, and togetherness.

Origins and significance of *Lohri*:

The origins of *Lohri* are shrouded in legends and folklore, each contributing to its cultural richness. The festival is believed to have agrarian roots, coinciding with the harvest of rabi crops, particularly sugarcane and wheat. *Lohri* is celebrated on 13th of January, a day before *Makar Sankranti*, marking the culmination of the winter solstice. It is a time when the sun begins its northward journey, known as '*uttarayan*', symbolizing longer and warmer days ahead. In the context of rural life, *Lohri* represents a thanksgiving to nature. Farmers express gratitude to the Sun God, Earth, and Fire for a bountiful harvest. Traditionally, the harvested crops like sugarcane, peanuts, sesame, and jaggery play a vital role in the celebrations as they symbolize fertility, abundance, and prosperity.

Legends associated with *Lohri*:

Several fascinating legends are associated with *Lohri*, adding to its mystique and unique charm.

- *Dulla Bhatti*

One of the most popular tales revolves around *Dulla Bhatti*, a local hero of Punjab during the Mughal era. *Dulla Bhatti* is remembered for his bravery and kindness. He rescued young girls from being abducted and sold into slavery, and arranged their marriages. Folk songs sung during *Lohri* often narrate the heroic deeds of *Dulla Bhatti*, making him an integral part of the festival's folklore.

- Tales of the Sun God

Lohri is also linked to the Sun God, as the festival celebrates the return of longer days and warmth. The bonfire, a central element of *Lohri*, symbolizes the Sun's energy, offering prayers and gratitude for the life-giving heat and light.

- Seasonal transition

In ancient times, *Lohri* was believed to mark the end of the coldest month, *Paush*, and the beginning of *Magha*, a more favourable time for agricultural activities. This transition aligns with the natural cycle of seasons and has cultural significance.

Rituals and customs of *Lohri*:

Lohri is celebrated with a plethora of rituals and customs, each carrying symbolic importance and fostering a sense of community.

- Bonfire celebration

The highlight of *Lohri* is the bonfire, around which people gather in the evening. The bonfire holds spiritual significance, representing purity, renewal, and warmth. Families and friends throw offerings such as sesame seeds, popcorn, jaggery, and peanuts into the flames while chanting prayers. These offerings symbolize gratitude for the harvest and a wish for prosperity.

- Traditional songs and dances

Music and dance are integral to *Lohri* festivities. Traditional Punjabi folk songs, including those honoring *Dulla Bhatti*, are sung with vigor. The rhythmic beats of the *dhol* (a traditional drum) set the tone for energetic dances like *Bhangra* and *Giddha*, performed by men and women dressed in vibrant traditional attire. These cultural expressions reflect the joy and unity of the community.

- Distribution of *prasad*

After the bonfire rituals, *prasad* is distributed among the participants. This typically consists of sweets made from jaggery, peanuts, *gajak*, and *rewri*. Sharing *prasad* is a way to strengthen bonds and spread goodwill.

- Special feast

Lohri is incomplete without a sumptuous feast. Traditional Punjabi dishes such as *sarson da saag* (mustard greens) and *makki di roti* (cornbread) are prepared and enjoyed with family and friends on this occasion. The feast showcases the agricultural bounty and the culinary heritage of the region.

- Children's celebrations

In many regions, children go from house to house singing *Lohri* songs and collecting treats or small gifts, much like carol singing during Christmas.

This practice fosters a sense of community and celebrates the innocence of childhood.

Regional variations of *Lohri*:

While *Lohri* is predominantly celebrated in Punjab, the festival has variations across regions, each adding its unique flavour.

- In Haryana, *Lohri* is celebrated with a similar fervour, often marking the beginning of the wedding season. Newlyweds and newborns are given special attention during the festivities.
- In Himachal Pradesh, the festival is observed with bonfires, folk songs, and dances, reflecting the state's cultural ethos.
- In Jammu and Kashmir, *Lohri* is known as "*Lohri pooja*" and is celebrated by lighting bonfires and offering sweets, grains, and nuts into the flames.

Celebrating new beginnings:

Lohri is considered auspicious for new beginnings. It holds special importance for families with newborns or newlyweds, as it symbolizes fertility, growth, and prosperity. The first *Lohri* of a child or a newly married couple is celebrated with grandeur, often involving elaborate rituals, gifts, and community gatherings.

***Lohri* in modern times:**

In the contemporary world, *Lohri* continues to thrive as a festival that bridges tradition and modernity. Urban celebrations often incorporate elements of traditional customs with modern entertainment, such as DJ nights and theme parties. Despite the changing times, the essence of *Lohri* – gratitude, unity, and joy – remains intact.

Lohri has also become a global phenomenon, celebrated by the Punjabi diaspora worldwide. In countries like Canada, the United States, and the United Kingdom, *Lohri* serves as a means of preserving cultural roots and fostering a sense of belonging among communities.

Environmental concerns and sustainable celebrations:

In recent years, environmental concerns have prompted efforts to celebrate *Lohri* sustainably. The traditional bonfire, while central to the festivities, contributes to air pollution. Many communities are now adopting eco-friendly practices, such as using smaller bonfires or symbolic lamps. Additionally, initiatives to plant trees and reduce waste during the celebrations are gaining momentum.

Lohri is more than just a festival, it is a celebration of life, nature, and cultural heritage. It brings people together, transcending barriers of caste, creed, and geography, to rejoice in the gifts of nature and the promise of a prosperous future.

As the flames of the *Lohri* bonfire rise high into the night sky, they illuminate not only the joyous faces gathered around but also the enduring spirit of a community deeply connected to its roots. *Lohri* is a reminder to cherish traditions, nurture relationships, and express gratitude for the abundance of life. Whether celebrated in the heart of rural Punjab or amidst the bustling streets of any metropolitan city, *Lohri* remains a festival that warms hearts and kindles the spirit of joy and togetherness.



Sacred Gatherings and Social Unity: A Deep Dive into Kumbh Mela Rituals



by Yash Mishra

The *Maha Kumbh Mela* stands as a testament to India's rich intangible cultural and spiritual heritage, drawing millions of pilgrims to the sacred confluence of rivers for ritual bathing and communal harmony. The *Maha Kumbh Mela* is a historic Hindu religious festival and pilgrimage, regarded as the world's largest peaceful gathering. Held once every twelve years at four rotating locations in India—Haridwar, Prayagraj (Allahabad), Nashik, and Ujjain—the *Kumbh Mela* attracts countless pilgrims from all over the world who come to take a holy dip in the sacred rivers. Prayagraj, where the *Ganga*, *Yamuna*, and *Saraswati* rivers meet, is a key site for the 2025 *Maha Kumbh Mela*. Rich in temples and history, the *Triveni Sangam* is a must-visit spiritual landmark. Pilgrims to the *Maha Kumbh Mela* come from all sections of the religion ranging from *Sadhus* (saints) and *Naga Sadhus* who practice '*sadhana*' and keenly follow a strict path of spiritual discipline, to Hermits who leave their seclusion and come to visit the civilization only during the *Kumbh Mela*, to seekers of spirituality, and to common people practicing Hinduism (*Kumbh Mela*, n.d.).

Historical significance of the *Maha Kumbh Mela*

The roots of the *Kumbh Mela* trace back to ancient Hindu scriptures, specifically the *Rig-Veda*, which mentions the *Samudra Manthan* or churning of the cosmic ocean. This celestial event led to the emergence of a pot (*Kumbh*) containing the nectar of immortality. The battle for possession of this nectar spanned twelve divine days, with drops falling at four sacred sites—Haridwar, Prayagraj, Nashik, and Ujjain—becoming the locations for the *Kumbh Mela*.

The first historical mentions of the *Mela* appear during the Maurya and Gupta periods, where it gained prominence as Hinduism flourished. Prayagraj (then Prayag) became a major site under the Gupta dynasty's patronage. In the medieval period, royal support, particularly from the Chola, Vijayanagara, and Mughal Empires, further elevated the significance of the *Kumbh*. During Emperor Akbar's reign, in 1565, the historic alliance with the *Naga Sadhus* symbolized the *Mela*'s inclusive nature, transcending religious and cultural differences (Kumar, 2016) cultural heritage

through art, music, and dance, while preserving its profound spiritual essence. After the monumental *Maha Kumbh Mela* in 2013, the event in 2025 marks another extraordinary gathering at Prayagraj, where millions of devotees are expected to witness the confluence of faith, culture, and spirituality, celebrating the traditions that have stood the test of time. With a profound sense of reverence and zeal, the 2025 *Maha Kumbh* promises to be a grand spectacle, filled with devotion and unity.

Community dynamics and social cohesion at the *Kumbh Mela*: Unity in diversity

The *Kumbh Mela* is a powerful demonstration of the Indian principle of "Unity in Diversity," a vibrant confluence of spirituality, culture, and social cohesion. It draws millions from various corners of the nation—pilgrims, ascetics, and devotees representing a wide array of faiths, languages, socio-economic backgrounds, and communities. Despite this diversity, there is a seamless blending of different cultures, with participants uniting in shared religious practices, underscoring the pluralistic spirit of India's spiritual and cultural fabric. The major ritual highlights of the *Kumbh Mela* include the '*Shahi Snan*' (Royal Bath), where sect leaders lead processions to bathe in the holy rivers, marking the most auspicious moment. Vibrant *Akhada* processions feature *sadhus* performing martial arts and chanting, showcasing sect diversity. The mesmerizing ritual of offering lamps through the Evening *Ganga Aarti* and Fire rituals, such as *Yajnas* and *Havan*, connect the disciples to the divine through sacred flames and *Vedic* chants. Spiritual discourses provide reflection, while cultural performances celebrate India's artistic heritage. Additionally, *Sannyas* allows spiritual transformation, and *Annadan* (free food distribution) strengthens the community. Together, these rituals create a transformative experience for all who seek wisdom and spiritual growth.

From an anthropological standpoint, the *Kumbh Mela* is a treasure trove of insights into human behavior, social structures, and cultural practices. Researchers note that the pilgrims' motivations range from seeking religious merit and spiritual fulfillment to

experiencing a strong sense of community and belonging. The act of pilgrimage, for many, is both a personal journey of transformation and a collective religious experience, highlighting the deep-rooted cultural and social bonds that shape this extraordinary event.

During the *Maha Kumbh Mela*, a temporary city emerges, meticulously organized to accommodate millions of pilgrims. This transient metropolis ensures essential services like sanitation, healthcare, and security, thanks to the collaboration of government agencies, religious organizations, and volunteers. The *Mela* also serves as an economic hub, with bustling markets and fairs exchanging religious artifacts and everyday goods. This commercial activity not only supports the local economy but fosters cultural exchange, blending tradition with modern-day commerce.

In conclusion, the *Kumbh Mela* or *Maha Kumbh* is more than a religious festival; it is a dynamic social phenomenon that encapsulates the complexities of Indian society. Through its rituals and the intricate web of community dynamics, it offers profound insights into human spirituality, social organization, and cultural resilience. As the festival continues to evolve, it remains a vital subject for

anthropological inquiry, reflecting the enduring human quest for meaning, belonging, and transcendence. The *Kumbh Mela* faces challenges like health risks from large crowds, as seen in the 2021 event with COVID-19 concerns. Environmental issues, such as river pollution and waste management, also arise. To address these, sustainable practices and improved healthcare systems are increasingly prioritized. Today, recognized by UNESCO in 2017 as an intangible cultural heritage, the *Maha Kumbh Mela* has evolved into a global phenomenon, drawing millions of pilgrims and international attention.

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Akhadas in the Maha Kumbh Mela: Sadhu, Sanyasi and Bairagi



by Rakhi Yadav

For a long time, the *Maha Kumbh Mela* has been the epitome of tradition, culture, faith, and religious beliefs. The *Kumbh Mela* takes place in Prayagraj in the *Magh* month of the Hindu calendar, so it is locally known as "*Magh Mela*". The faiths and beliefs transform the *Mela* into the world's largest religious mass gathering. People gather from all around the country and the world for a holy dip in the rivers to be freed from all their past sins and seek liberation from the cycle of birth and death. *Kumbh Mela* has also been added to the list of UNESCO's World Intangible Cultural Heritage.

According to the legends, during the cosmic ocean churning, a pot (*Kumbh*) containing the elixir of immortality (*Amrit*) appeared. The celestial struggle for possession of this divine nectar led to a celestial battle between *Devas* and *Asuras* (Gods and Demons), that spanned twelve divine days, equivalent to twelve human years. Drops of the nectar, fell at four places of the Earth during the struggle, marking the sites where the *Kumbh Mela* is celebrated. The *Rigveda's* oldest Brahminical scriptures and literary historical records also speak of this event called the "*Sagar Manthan*" or 'churning of the cosmic ocean', which is considered the genesis of the *Maha Kumbh Mela*. The time for each *Kumbh Mela* festival is astrologically determined, based on the positions of the planet Jupiter, the Sun, and the Moon. The *Mela* is held at Haridwar when Jupiter is in Aquarius (*Kumbha*) and the sun enters Aries; at Allahabad, when Jupiter is in Taurus and the Sun and Moon are in Capricorn; at Ujjain when Jupiter is in

Leo and the full Moon appears in the lunar month of Bishakha; and at Nasik when Jupiter is in Leo during the lunar month of *Shravan*. These alignments occur about every twelve years, but this year's *Kumbh Mela* at Prayagraj took place after 144 years as per astrological data of the Hindu philosophy. The Prayagraj *Maha Kumbh* is unique as it can only take place here at the confluence of three holy rivers i.e. *Ganga*, *Yamuna*, and the mythical *Saraswati*.

Sadhus, *Sanyasis*, and *Bairagis* are the central attractions of this mass gathering. People all around the world come to see the ash-smeared *Naga Sadhus*, skeleton-donning *Aghoris*, and ascetics. Here, the question arises as to what makes these *Sadhus* so special? The answer lies in their different philosophies which comes from their affiliation with different '*Akhadas*'. The term *Akhada* literally translates to 'a wrestling ground', and is derived from the Sanskrit word '*Akhand*', which means inseparable.

As per the Government's official website on *Kumbh*, the term *Akhada*, is derived from the word *Akhand*, meaning indivisible or eternal, and signifying unity and resilience. Adi Shankaracharya, the 8th century philosopher and theologian, was the founder of these *Akhadas*, to unite ascetics and for the preservation of ancient religious philosophies and teachings. As per James G. Lochtefeld, the *Kumbha Mela* was organized by the great philosopher Shankaracharya to promote regular gatherings of



(Naga Sadhus, From Maha Kumbh Mela Prayagraj 2025, Source: Hindustan Times)

learned and holy men, as a means to strengthen, sustain and spread Hindu religious beliefs. The *Kumbh Mela* is colourless without *Akhadas*. *Akhadas* fill all types of cultural and traditional colours in the *Mela* in several ways, as with different philosophies, and unique ways of *tapasya* and *sadhana* to get *moksha* (liberation). In the modern day, *Akhadas* are not only grounds of religious practices but also for physical training, yoga, and meditation. People all over the world are attracted to this knowledge.

There are a total of thirteen *Akhadas* at the *Maha Kumbh Mela*, which are divided into various sects based on ideologies, philosophical teachings, and Godly symbols of worship. They are divided mainly into three sects, *Shaiva*, *Vaishnava*, and *Udasin*. There are a total of seven *Akhadas* of *Shaiva* tradition namely *Mahanirvani*, *Juna*, *Niranjani*, *Atal*, *Anand*, *Aavahan*, and *Agni*; three *Vaishnava* *Akhadas* such as *Nirvani*, *Nirmohi*, and *Digambar*, and the other three coming from *Sikha-Shaivas* *Akhadas* like *Bada Udasin*, *Naya Udasin*, and *Nirmal Akhada*. Recently, the *Kinnar Akhada* was added to the list, following a very new philosophy inspired by the *Juna Akhada*.

The *Sadhus* who belongs to the *Shaiva Akhadas* are known as *Sanyasis* and *Dasnamis* as per sect tradition, and the *Sadhus* who follow the *Vaishnava* sect or belong to *Vaishnava Akhadas* are known as *Bairagis*. At present, Akhil Bhartiya Akhada Parishad, the apex body of *Akhadas*, oversees harmony among these religious institutions and coordinates their participation in the *Kumbh Mela*. The large numbers of *Sadhu* members of these *Akhadas* follow discipline and strict rules. The thing that turn *Akhadas* into reasons of attraction to the *Maha Kumbh Mela* is their royal entry into the mela's city, that is '*Peshwai*', with several *Sadhus*, *Sanyasis*, and *Bairagis*, showcasing the timeline tradition of *akhadas*. The other important ceremony from the *Akhadas*, for which thousands of *Sadhus* come after years to participate in *Kumbh* is the *Shahi Snan* or *Amrit Snan*



(Sadhu from Maha Kumbh 2025, Prayagraj, Source: The Hindu)

(Royal or Sacred Baths), the sacred bath rituals happen during the most auspicious days of a month-long *Maha Kumbh Mela*. The *Amrit Snan* begins during the '*Brahma Mahurat*' at around 3am. These holy baths are believed to free people from all their sins and find them the path to salvation. After the *Shahi* or *Amrit Snan* of the *Akhadas's Sadhus*, *Sanyasis*, and *Bairagis*, the other *sansari* people (the people involved in the ordinary, physical world) take a holy bath at the *Triveni Sangam*, i.e. at the confluence of the the three holy rivers.

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(Amrit Snan by the Sadhus, Maha Kumbh 2025, Prayagraj, Source: AFP)

Prof. Kishor K. Basa



Interview by Saba Farhin

Before delving into the profound insights shared by Prof. Kishor K. Basa in an exclusive interview with AIF, it is essential to highlight the journey that has shaped his illustrious career. Born in 1958 at Baripada, Odisha, Prof. Basa stood first in Odisha in HSC Exam 1973 and was First Class First in BA History Hons. exam 1977 at Utkal University. An MA in History from Delhi University and another MA in Anthropology from Utkal University, he completed his Ph.D. in Archaeology from the University of London and was a Commonwealth Academic Staff Post-Doctoral Fellow at the University of Cambridge. A former Head, Department of Anthropology, Utkal University, Prof. Basa has the rare distinction of heading seven leading organisations of the country, which include serving as the Director of Indira Gandhi Rashtriya Manav Sangrahalaya in Bhopal, Indian Museum in Kolkata and Anthropological Survey of India; as Vice Chancellor of Maharaja Sriram Chandra Bhanja Deo University in Baripada and Fakir Mohan University in Balasore, and as Director General of Archaeological Survey of India and Chairman of National Monuments Authority. Recipient of two Gold Medals - the Surajmal Saha Memorial Gold Medal and Prof. Ghanshyam Das Memorial Gold Medal - Prof. Basa was also a Tagore National Fellow of the Ministry of Culture. He was the President of Anthropological and Behavioural Sciences Section of Indian Science Congress (2007), Archaeology Section of Indian History Congress (2007), and delivered the Presidential address at the Annual Conference of ISPQS in 2011. He has delivered 12 memorial lectures in various parts of the country. Twelve students have been awarded Ph.D. under his academic supervision. He has widely published in the fields of anthropology, archaeology and museum studies. He has even excavated the sites of Malikhoja, Bang-Harirajpur and Gouranga Patana in Odisha, and is the Founder Editor of the journal *Humankind* and was the General Editor of a series on Intangible Cultural Heritage of India.

At present, Prof. Basa is the Chairman of the Indian National Confederation and Academy of Anthropologists (INCAA) and Chairman of the

National Monuments Authority. His passion for research and education is both inspiring and enlightening. Our conversation covered a wide range of topics, from his groundbreaking research to his vision for future advancements in the field.



How did you come to the discipline of Anthropology?

I would consider my coming to the Department of Anthropology, Utkal University, Bhubaneswar in 1980 a coincidence. I was a topper in History (Hons.) from Utkal University in 1977 and had finished my M.A. in History (Ancient Indian History) from University of Delhi in 1979 with an A Grade. A friend of mine drew my attention to an advertisement for a vacancy in Department of Anthropology, Utkal University wherein the eligibility was Master's degree in Anthropology or Ancient Indian History with prehistoric archaeology. I applied for the job and was fortunate enough to get it. I joined the Department of Anthropology, Utkal University on the 30th January, 1980 and retired on 31st March, 2018. I had an interesting experience the day I had joined. When I wished Dr. (now late) Usha Deka, a very senior faculty member and a topper in Anthropology from Calcutta University in 1952, she was very blunt and said, "I do not like a student of History coming and joining the Department. If you have done so, you must have a Master degree in Anthropology." I was shocked and dismayed and thought whether I could survive there. Later I found out how caring she was. She was concerned about the future of a young man in the disciplinary rigidity of the University system. This led me to do another degree in Anthropology. Utkal University then had a strong faculty led by the dynamic and visionary Prof. L. K. Mahapatra. The academic ambience was vibrant and challenging there. I became integrated into it and have never looked back.

How has been the journey of your life?

A few months after joining Utkal University, I was sent for training to Deccan College, Pune for three months under Dr. V. N. Misra, a celebrated prehistorian. Usually there are two traditions in Archaeology (including prehistoric archaeology) - historical and anthropological. I was lucky to have been trained in both the traditions. Thus, in a formative phase of my life, I moved from History to Archaeology to Anthropology. My background in historiography as a history student and theoretical understanding of social anthropology enabled me to evaluate archaeology from diverse perspectives. This was further strengthened by undertaking some course work at the Institute of Archaeology, University College London - while a research scholar - on archaeological theory and museum studies. I did my Ph.D. under the academic supervision of Dr. (now late) Ian C. Glover on the topic *The Westerly Trade of South East Asia from c.400 BC to c.500 AD with Special Reference to Glass Beads*.

I availed a Commonwealth Academic Staff Fellowship at Cambridge to work on *Social Theory and Indian Archaeology: A Historiographical Study* under the supervision of Prof. Dilip K. Chakrabarti, who had taught me earlier at Delhi University. Returning from Cambridge, I became a professor and subsequently headed the Department from 2001 to 2003. I was the first Professor to have been appointed as Director of Indira Gandhi Rashtriya Manav Sangrahalaya, Bhopal (IGRMS) (2004-08), then became Director of Indian Museum, Kolkata (2008-10), and Director of Anthropological Survey of India (2009-10). After my return from the Indian Museum, I became Co-ordinator, Centre of Advanced Study, Anthropology, Utkal University until my retirement in 2018. Post retirement, I acted as a Senior Domain Expert for Tribal Affairs for Govt of Odisha and then was associated with IGRMS, Bhopal as a Tagore National Fellow. There was a time period when I contracted COVID-19 and was literally dying, but somehow managed to make my way out of it. Then I became Vice Chancellor of MSCB University, Baripada in November 2020 and remained in-charge of Fakir Mohan University, Balasore also. On being nominated by the Govt of India, I became Chairman of National Monuments Authority in November, 2022 for a period of three years. Meanwhile, I held the additional charge as Director General of Archaeological Survey of India for seven months during 2023.

What are your major contributions to the field?

My contributions have mainly been in the field of archaeology and museum studies. With regard to archaeology, my fieldwork was of three types:

studying bead collections in museums in various countries in South Asia, Southeast Asia and Europe, undertaking archaeological exploration and excavation in Odisha, and documenting tribal mortuary practices for ethnoarchaeology. Our excavations at the Neolithic-Chalcolithic site of Bang-Harirajpur yielded 3 skeletal remains - one man, one woman and a child -, evidence of circular hut, a copper pendant, remains of plant, animal and pottery implying the emergence of village farming communities in coastal Odisha. Besides, a small-scale excavation was undertaken at the Iron Age site of Malikhoja in Angul district and at the Early Historic site of Gourangapatana on the bank of Chilka lake. Moreover, punch-marked coins were recovered and reported from Ghumal in Khadkhai river valley in Mayurbhanj. On ethnoarchaeology, I studied the tribal mortuary practices of the Gadabas and Parajas and their implications for megalithic traditions. In these studies, we went beyond the usual discourse of studying the rituals and introduced survey of burial/cremation ground as a methodological innovation for documentation. I also published on the history of archaeology, culture, politics and identity construction in colonial and post-colonial Odisha, its maritime archaeology, cultural relations with Southeast Asia from an archaeological perspective and emergence of complex society in Odisha. My work on archaeology of trade included my doctoral research on early trade between India and Southeast Asia as well as subsequent publications on Indo-Roman trade.

In archaeological theory, I tried to contextualize the centre-periphery relationship in an ancient world system in my doctoral work. This contributed to post-processual archaeology. Historiography was another major aspect of my theoretical engagement which was mainly in five areas: social theory and Indian archaeology during the colonial period, a historiographical review of Indian writings from 1889 to 1990 on early history and archaeology of Southeast Asia, a historiographical study of Odishan archaeology, situating V. N. Misra in Indian archaeology and historiographical study on Indian beads. I also highlighted the anthropological perspectives in Indian archaeology emphasising four aspects - two types of diffusionism - West-Asiatic diffusionism (Sankalia) and modified diffusionism (Wheeler), application of 'new' or processual archaeology in India which was not necessarily a replica of the Western viewpoints, ethnoarchaeology of Odisha, and implications of globalisation and nationalism for Indian archaeology.

With regard to Museum Studies, it has two aspects, (a) my work as Director of two leading museums in India - IGRMS, Bhopal and Indian Museum, Kolkata and (b) my publications relating to museum studies. With regard to the former, Veethi Sankul - the indoor museum building in IGRMS - was inaugurated in March, 2005. Subsequently, a number of open air exhibitions like traditional technology, house types, etc. were added. I edited a volume on the importance of specialized museums in India. A journal - Humankind - was started by IGRMS from 2007. During my tenure as Director of Indian Museum, preparation was made for its Bi-centenary celebration in 2014. In a review on anthropology and museums in India, I had studied the trends and trajectories of museums in India from a colonial construct to post-colonial engagements. The challenges for anthropology museums are basically two fold - how to engage communities in a museum and how to take museums to communities.

In the university system, apart from holding different positions including Member Syndicate, I was Director of Internal Quality Assurance Cell, Utkal University when it was awarded A+ Grade by NAAC in 2016. Besides, as Vice Chancellor of MSCB University, Baripada, I also played a key role in transforming a University of B+ Grade to a University of A Grade by NAAC.

You have the rare experience of heading two Universities and five major organisations of the Ministry of Culture, Govt of India. How did Anthropology help in shaping your academic leadership and institution-building?

As a discipline, Anthropology teaches us some fundamental things. First, it teaches us to respect all cultures. Second, it drives us to think for the marginalised and vulnerable sections of the society by attempting to provide a voice for the voiceless people. Third, culture is central to understand a society in Anthropology. All these perspectives helped in shaping me to grow as an academic administrator.

I have two distinct perspectives on academic administration. While an administrator usually gets his things done by instilling some sense of fear among his subordinates, an academic administrator must command reverence from his colleagues which would encourage them to do their best without being afraid of their boss. Second, while hierarchy is a necessary component of administration, on academic issues one should seek the views of even the bottom-most persons in the

hierarchy, dismantling the rigidity of hierarchy. This is a big challenge since it involves simultaneously both maintaining and dismantling hierarchy in the system. While I always lead from the front without vested interests, I do not exhibit myself. Learning from anthropology I always give credit to my colleagues for their contributions and do not appropriate their achievements. This motivates them further to contribute to the organisation to the best of their ability. I try my best to build a consensus. I follow a simple maxim: the Institution is bigger than everybody and when an Institution grows, most of the people in that Institution also grow. The test of success for an academic administrator is to make a critical evaluation of self by gauging the magnitude of difference in the state of the institution when he joined and when he left. I believe that my training in Anthropology has helped me to remain grounded, unlike a few others.

What are the challenges for anthropology and anthropologists in the contemporary time?

While anthropological methods are being appropriated by other disciplines, Anthropology as a discipline is facing a number of challenges. Generally, anthropologists have been studying other cultures. They often represent the perspectives of the vulnerable sections of the society. Now community members themselves have started studying themselves. For example, autoethnography has emerged as an important trend in northeast India. Besides, anthropologists have been studying local cultures and local problems. Some anthropologists are urging us to study global problems like climate change at a local level. While study of tribal, folk and rural cultures has been the mainstay for anthropologists, new areas have emerged emphasising, among other things, urban and metropolitan issues, such as corporatisation of health, critical medical anthropology, business anthropology, impact of social media on culture, experience of virtual world, technological impact on agriculture, etc. Thus, the place and nature of fieldwork in anthropology is changing. Anthropologists have to face these challenges and to develop their field methods accordingly. The silver lining is that the scope of job opportunities is no longer confined to academics, research and NGO sector. Rather there is increasing scope for anthropologists in social media, eco and immersive tourism, private museums, business, fashion technology, forensic anthropology and start up, etc.

The task is to accept the challenge and devise appropriate strategies for the appropriate goal.

GUEST SPEAKER: Prof. Kishor Kumar Basa

TOPIC: 'Anthropology and Museums in India: From the colonial period to the contemporary times'



A Report by Saloni Tare



Anthropos India Foundation organized a Distinguished Guest Lecture by Prof. Kishor Kumar Basa, Chairman of Indian National Confederation and Academy of Anthropologists (INCAA) also of the National Monument Authority. He is the former head of the Department of Anthropology, Utkal University. He has the rare distinction of heading seven leading organisations of the country, which include Indira Gandhi Rastriya Manav Sangrahalaya (Bhopal), Indian Museum (Kolkata), Anthropological Survey of India, Maharaja Sriram Chandra Bhanja Deo University (Baripada), Fakir Mohan University (Balasore), Archaeological Survey of India and National Monuments Authority. He has delivered 12 memorial lectures in various parts of the country, having published widely in the fields of anthropology, archaeology and museum studies.

At first Pratham and Dr. Shaweta introduced the organisation and its Founder-Chair Dr. Sunita Reddy. This was followed by introducing Prof. Basa and Prof. Amareswar Galla, alumnus of Jawaharlal Nehru University and Australian National University, and presently pro-chancellor and distinguished professor of Indigeneity and Inclusive Museum and Heritage Studies, Kalinga Institute of Social Sciences and Kalinga Institute for Industrial Technology, Bhubaneswar. Other than Prof. Galla, senior anthropologists like Prof. Amitabh Pande (Director of IGRMS, Bhopal) and Prof. K.K. Misra (Prof. of Anthropology at Hyderabad University) also graced the occasion and made it into a very insightful session with their added questions and discussions with the distinguished Speaker.

In his lecture, Prof. Basa spoke about Anthropology and Museums by dividing his talk according to time periods and events happening around those periods. The following were the three distinct parts of his talk.

ANTHROPOLOGY AND MUSEUMS DURING THE COLONIAL PERIOD (1784-1947):

Prof. Basa spoke about how anthropology emerged as an academic discipline and the establishing of the Asiatic Society of Bengal. He also noted and discussed the two composite museums - Indian Museum (Kolkata) - 1814, and the Government Museum (Chennai). He further spoke about different scholars and their work during this period.

ANTHROPOLOGY AND MUSEUM AFTER INDEPENDENCE (1947- till date):

The distinguished Speaker discussed the perspectives between anthropology and museum studies which changed gradually through the process of globalisation along with engaging with the issues related to social, political and cultural dimensions. While stating some of the Indian scholars and their work on museums, he also highlighted many museums like the Arna Jharna Museum, Rajasthan and the Partition Museum, Amritsar and many more, in-depth.

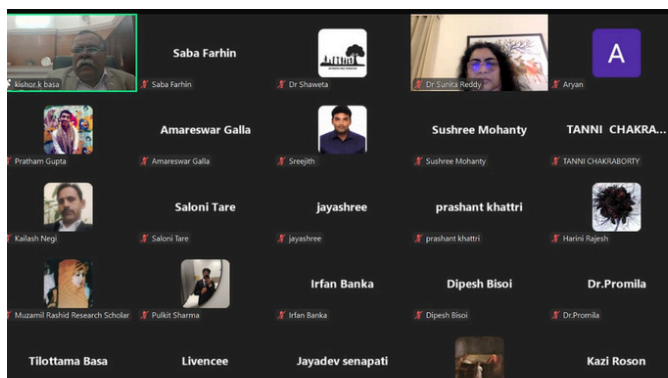
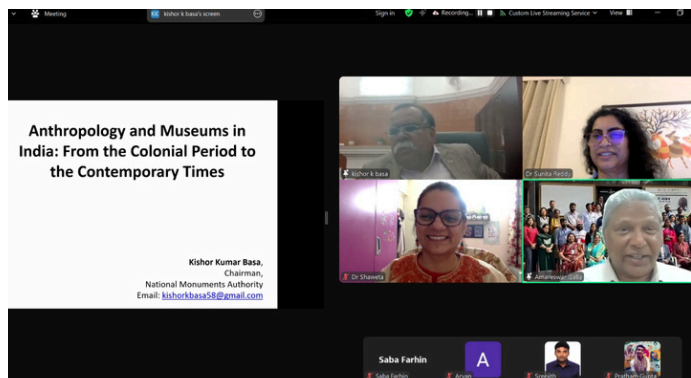
IMPLICATIONS FOR COVID-19 FOR MUSEUM ANTHROPOLOGY:

Under this thematic, Prof. Basa explained how unemployment, domestic violence, and labour migration affected the tribals during Covid-19. How museums created an image of a desirable future for various communities and so on.

Later, Dr. Reddy also spoke about the Covid-19 situation and shared her experience of helping women from the marginalised community during that period. After that, the floor was opened for discussion.

The participants were from various fields of study like museology, anthropology, sociology, history, and disaster studies among others. The lecture was held on Zoom platform and was also simultaneously telecast on YouTube live with a total of 63 participants in all.

Access the lecture on YouTube live by [clicking here](#).



BOOK REVIEW

Indigenous Knowledge Systems and Practices among PVTGs in India - II



Book Review by Angana Goswami

Introduction

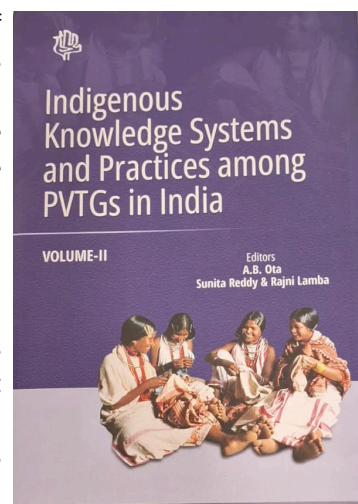
This book is unique in its choice of a theme as it is devoted to the cause of Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PVTGs). More specifically, the book aims to understand the culture and indigenous knowledge systems of diverse tribal communities in India.

Prof. A.B. Ota, Dr. Rajni Lamba and Dr. Sunita Reddy document original research work that gives importance to studying the winds of change sweeping across tribal landscapes in general, and PVTGs in particular. It outlines the stress and strains experienced by the tribal communities due to the accelerated pace of modern life and the introduction of new legal, administrative, and economic systems. The book examines the PVTGs that are undergoing transformations and, in some cases, are in the process of disappearing. In assessing the present situation of tribals in the country, the editors emphasize the urgency of documenting how their inherent expertise has enabled them to maintain sustainable lives.

Scope and structure of the book

The editors make a modest attempt to put together the indigenous knowledge systems and practices of PVTGs by taking stock of the existing research being conducted by scholars and experts on the subject.

The book consists of 21 chapters contributed by several authors across the country, which have been further divided under four sections. The first section, Indigenous Traditional Knowledge Systems and Practices to Meet Sustainable Development Goals and Addressing



their Challenges, highlights ancient wisdom of various tribal communities especially from the Himalayas and Andaman Archipelago. The second section, the PVTG's Sustainable Living, Food, Agriculture, and Natural Resources, covers ethno-ecological knowledge and traditional practices among the Chuktia Bhujima tribe, Koraga tribe, Kutia Kondh tribe and Birhor and Dongria Kondh inhabiting different parts of India. The third section, Indigenous Health, Healing, and Ethnomedicine Knowledge, brings out themes related to the health care practices with reference to the Sahariyas,

Baiga, Lodhas, and Buksa. The final section, the **PVTGs' Material Culture, Art and Crafts, and Rites de Passage**, discusses the use of natural resources and challenges for development among the tribal communities. It is clear that the editors as well as authors of the individual chapters in the book have sound and solid understanding of their specific focus areas within the book.

This book provides an analytical, intellectual, and cultural analysis of the measures taken by PVTGs to ensure survival, adaptation, and sustainability. It has the potential to become a useful and frequently sought-after resource for academicians, researchers, scholars, students preparing for competitive exams, as well as policymakers and administrators. A significant strength of this manuscript lies in its presentation, since the text is written in an academic yet accessible language. Despite its regional focus, the book's appeal extends beyond India, since the issues discussed are of international significance.

FORTHCOMING EVENT

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