



UPSC & STATE PCS CURRENT AFFAIRS · UJIYARI.COM

EDITORIAL ANALYSIS

One Sun, Many Harvests – India's Festival Federalism and Intangible Heritage

 **INDIAN EXPRESS**

14 January 2026

SUBJECTS COVERED**HISTORY & CULTURE****SOCIAL ISSUES****POLITY****GS PAPERS****GS1****GS2****CURATED & WRITTEN BY****Bharat Choudhary**

UPSC Educator & Content Creator •

[linkedin.com/in/epicbharat](https://www.linkedin.com/in/epicbharat)

Free UPSC & State PCS Resources

ujiyari.com

One Sun, Many Harvests — India's Festival Federalism and Intangible Heritage

 The Indian Express

14 January 2026

GS1

GS2



The Indian Express

MAINS RELEVANCE:

GS Paper 1

GS Paper 2



INTERVIEW ANGLE

"Makar Sankranti is celebrated as Pongal in Tamil Nadu, Bihu in Assam, Lohri in Punjab, and Uttarayan in Gujarat — all from the same astronomical event. What does this diversity reveal about Indian civilisation? How should India's cultural policy treat intangible heritage like festivals?"

WHY IN NEWS

Makar Sankranti 2026, celebrated on January 14, generated over 20 regional festival traditions across India — from Tamil Nadu's four-day Pongal to Gujarat's kite-flying Uttarayan to Assam's Bhogali Bihu — highlighting the remarkable cultural diversity that India's federal constitution both accommodates and struggles to equally value.

THE FESTIVAL AS CIVILISATIONAL TEXT

Makar Sankranti is, in one sense, the most democratic of India's festivals: it requires no priest, no temple, no scripture to celebrate. Across the subcontinent, on the same calendar day, farmers, fisherfolk, and urban families observe the Sun's northward journey with rituals rooted in their own ecological conditions — the rice harvest in Tamil Nadu, the mustard fields of Punjab, the Assamese riverine landscape, the kite-flying winds of Saurashtra.

The diversity of these celebrations — each with distinct foods, rituals, languages, and agricultural meanings — is a window into what the anthropologist Sudhir Kakar called India's "civilisational plurality": the capacity to generate endless cultural variation from common material conditions. That a single astronomical event (the Sun entering Capricorn) generates Pongal, Bihu, Lohri, Uttarayan, and Gangasagar Mela is not a puzzle to be resolved into unity — it is itself the expression of India's nature.

THE POLITICAL ECONOMY OF CULTURAL RECOGNITION

Yet the Indian state's relationship to this diversity is uneven and sometimes actively distorting.

The Government of India recently declared Pongal a **National Festival** — a designation that immediately generated controversy. Tamil activists pointed out that Pongal has never needed central recognition to survive for two millennia; they were sceptical that a “National” label would elevate Pongal or merely fold it into a homogenising narrative. The same dynamic played out when the Centre proposed standardising **Navratri** celebrations nationally, prompting regional communities to note that the Navratri celebrated in Gujarat (nine nights of Garba dance) is entirely different from the Navratri observed in Bengal (Durga Puja) or Himachal Pradesh.

This points to a structural tension in India's cultural federalism: the Centre's constitutional authority over broadcasting, national curricula, and cultural institutions (the Sangeet Natak Akademi, the Sahitya Akademi, the Archaeological Survey of India) gives it enormous power to frame which cultural expressions are considered “national” and which are considered merely “regional.” Cultural federalism — like fiscal federalism — requires not just formal protection but the affirmative distribution of recognition resources.

INTANGIBLE CULTURAL HERITAGE: WHAT UNESCO RECOGNITION DOES AND DOES NOT DO

India has 14 elements inscribed on UNESCO's List of Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity. The most recent is **Garba** (2023) — the Gujarati dance form associated with Navratri. Tamil Nadu has been lobbying for **Pongal** to receive nomination; Assam for **Bihu**; Kerala for **Onam**.

UNESCO ICH inscription does three things: it raises international visibility, it gives a state government leverage to request central funding for preservation, and it signals to domestic law that the element deserves protection against commercial distortion. What it does not do is prevent the element from changing — all living cultural practices change, and UNESCO's model acknowledges that fixing a practice in amber destroys it as a living tradition.

The controversy around **Jallikattu** illustrates the limits of both legal and UNESCO protection for living cultural practices. The Supreme Court banned Jallikattu in 2014 on Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Act grounds, triggering massive protests in Tamil Nadu in 2017. The eventual resolution — Tamil Nadu's Jallikattu Act 2017 and a central amendment to the PCA Act — was a legislative override of a judicial ruling, made possible by the political intensity of the cultural claim.

This raises a genuine jurisprudential question: when does a cultural practice constitute a fundamental right (Article 25 — right to practise religion; Article 29 — right to conserve culture) that overrides animal welfare legislation? The Jallikattu case has not been finally resolved — a Constitutional Bench of the Supreme Court is yet to deliver its final judgment on the validity of the state law.

THE AGRICULTURAL FESTIVAL AS CLIMATE BAROMETER

Makar Sankranti's agricultural origins make it, increasingly, a climate indicator. In 2026, the **Gangasagar Mela** saw below-normal water levels in the Ganga's distributaries — a downstream effect of reduced snowmelt from the Gangotri glacier, which has been retreating at an accelerated rate. The **Chadar Trek** on the frozen Zaskar River (Ladakh) — culturally significant to Zanskari communities as their winter supply route — was delayed due to thin ice.

The harvest festivals are, at their core, celebrations of predictable agricultural seasons — the expectation that the Sun will return to warm the earth, the monsoon will arrive in June, the Samba paddy will be ready in January. Climate change is disrupting precisely this predictability. When Bhogali Bihu in Assam celebrates the paddy harvest, but paddy yields in Assam declined due to unseasonal flooding in October 2025, the celebratory form persists while the material condition it expresses has been altered.

This is not an argument against celebrating harvest festivals — it is an argument for understanding them as ecological knowledge systems embedded in culture. Pongal's reverence for the Sun, Bihu's for the river, Gangasagar's for the confluence — these are not superstitions but accumulated ecological relationships expressed in ritual form. They are among the oldest climate literacy systems India possesses.

WHAT NEEDS TO CHANGE

India's cultural policy needs to distinguish between three categories of heritage: **living traditions** (like Pongal, which need community resources and freedom from commercial capture), **endangered traditions** (like some forms of classical Thathera brassware from Jandiala Guru, which are dying as demand shifts), and **documented traditions** (recorded and archived before the last practitioners are gone).

The Sahitya Akademi, Sangeet Natak Akademi, and Lalit Kala Akademi — India's three national cultural academies — have budgets that are inadequate for the scale of India's living heritage. A dedicated **National Intangible Heritage Fund**, structured like the National Heritage City Development and Augmentation Yojana (HRIDAY) but for intangible heritage, could give state governments resources to document, support, and protect local traditions without imposing national standardisation.

★ FACTS CORNER — KNOWLEDGEPEDIA

MAKAR SANKRANTI REGIONAL VARIANTS:

Tamil Nadu: Pongal (Jan 13-16); Thai Pongal = Jan 14; boiling new rice; Jallikattu on Maatu Pongal (Jan 15)

Gujarat/Rajasthan: Uttarayan; kite-flying; til-gur; Chikki; Undhiyu

Punjab/Haryana: Lohri (Jan 13 evening); bonfire; rewar, peanuts, gur

Assam: Bhogali Bihu / Magh Bihu; Meji burning; Uruka feast; pitha rice cakes

West Bengal: Poush Sangkranti; pithe; Gangasagar Mela

UNESCO INTANGIBLE CULTURAL HERITAGE (INDIA — 14 INSCRIPTIONS):

Latest: Garba (2023); Durga Puja in Kolkata (2021); Kumbh Mela (2017)

Full list: Vedic chanting, Ramlila, Ramman, Mudiyetu, Kalbelia, Chhau, Sangeet Natak Thatheras, Buddhist chanting Ladakh, Sankirtana Manipur, Yoga (2016), Navroz (2016)

Note: Navroz was inscribed jointly with 12 countries

JALLIKATTU LEGAL TIMELINE:

2014: SC banned Jallikattu (PETA India case; Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Act 1960)

2017: Tamil Nadu protests; Tamil Nadu Jallikattu Act 2017 passed; Centre amended PCA Act 1960

Pending: SC Constitutional Bench to give final ruling on validity of TN Act 2017

CONSTITUTIONAL PROVISIONS ON CULTURE:

Article 25: Freedom of conscience and free profession, practice and propagation of religion

Article 29: Right of minorities to conserve distinct language, script or culture

Article 51A(f): Fundamental duty to value and preserve rich heritage of composite culture

Article 246: Parliament/Centre has authority over broadcasting; state lists include cultural matters

INDIA'S CULTURAL ACADEMIES:

Sangeet Natak Akademi: performing arts (music, dance, drama)

Sahitya Akademi: literature; 24 official languages recognised

Lalit Kala Akademi: visual arts

All three established: 1954; under Ministry of Culture

OTHER RELEVANT FACTS:

Gangotri Glacier: source of Ganga; retreating ~22 metres/year; ISRO monitors via satellite

Chadar Trek: Zaskar River, Ladakh; frozen river trek; disrupted by climate warming

HRIDAY: Heritage City Development and Augmentation Yojana; for built heritage (not intangible)

Bihu (Assam): 3 festivals — Rongali (April), Kongali (October), Bhogali (January)

Vaisakhi: Punjab solar festival (April 13/14); Sikh new year; 1699 Khalsa founding

Sources: Indian Express, UNESCO ICH, PIB

CURATED & WRITTEN BY

Bharat Choudhary

UPSC Educator & Content Creator

 [linkedin.com/in/epicbharat](https://www.linkedin.com/in/epicbharat)

Published on ujiyari.com · Free UPSC & State PCS Current Affairs