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Medaram Jatara 2026: Asia's Largest Tribal Festival

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UPSC Educator & Content Creator •

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

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WHY IN NEWS

The Sammakka-Saralamma Jatara (Medaram Jatara) — described as Asia’s largest tribal festival — is scheduled to begin on January 28, 2026, in Medaram village, Mulugu district, Telangana, drawing preparations from across the state. Held biennially inside the Eturnagaram Wildlife Sanctuary, the festival draws over one crore devotees and is conducted entirely by Koya Adivasi tribal priests.

THE JATARA — ORIGIN AND LEGEND

The **Sammakka-Saralamma Jatara** (also called **Medaram Jatara**) is centred on the story of **Sammakka** and her daughter **Saralamma** — revered as tribal deities by the **Koya Adivasi** community of the Dandakaranya forest region.

According to oral tradition, Sammakka was found as an infant by tribal hunters in a forest clearing, surrounded by tigers — believed to be a divine sign. She was raised by the Koya tribe and became their leader. Her daughter Saralamma was married into a powerful tribal family.

The Legend of Resistance

Around the 13th century CE, during the reign of the **Kakatiya dynasty** of Warangal (Andhra Pradesh), the Koya tribes in the Dandakaranya region faced a severe drought. When the Kakatiya ruler demanded **tax payments** despite the famine conditions, Sammakka and her family refused. The Kakatiya army attacked. Sammakka, Saralamma, and their kin fought back — most of the family was killed in battle. Sammakka reportedly transformed into a handful of kumkum (vermilion) near a tree on a forest hilltop, believed to represent her divine ascension.

The community deified Sammakka and Saralamma as symbols of **tribal sovereignty, resistance to unjust authority, and feminine strength**. The Jatara began as an annual propitiation ritual; it expanded over centuries into one of India’s largest gatherings.

THE RITUALS — NON-BRAHMINIC, INDIGENOUS, FOREST-ROOTED

The Medaram Jatara is remarkable in that it operates entirely **outside the Brahminic temple tradition**:

There is **no permanent idol** at the site — the deities are represented by bamboo totems, sacred pots (gaddelu), and clan flags (dalgudda)

Priests are exclusively Koya tribal men from specific hereditary clans — not Brahmin priests

The rituals involve **invocation of the deities into bamboo poles** — carried from the forest to the sacred clearing in a procession

No Vedic hymns are used — rituals are conducted in Koya language and oral tradition

The sacred site is located **inside a forest (Eturnagaram Wildlife Sanctuary)**, not in a built temple

This makes the Jatara an important example of **intangible cultural heritage** outside mainstream Hindu practice — relevant to understanding India's diverse religious traditions for GS-1.

The Bangaram Offering

The most distinctive ritual feature is the offering of **bangaram** — raw jaggery (unrefined brown sugar made from sugarcane or palm sap). Devotees weigh out jaggery equal to their own body weight and offer it to the deities.

The symbolism is significant: jaggery represents the **agrarian economy of the tribal community** — the produce of their fields, not purchased gold or silver. It signals that the deities belong to a subsistence agricultural tradition, not a mercantile or elite one. This egalitarian aspect makes the Jatara distinctively different from temple economies.

THE GEOGRAPHY — ETURNAGARAM WILDLIFE SANCTUARY

The Medaram Jatara takes place within the **Eturnagaram Wildlife Sanctuary**, one of the forest reserves of the Dandakaranya region in what is now **Mulugu district, Telangana**. The sanctuary is part of the broader forest landscape that extends into Chhattisgarh and Odisha.

Eturnagaram Wildlife Sanctuary:

Location: Mulugu district, Telangana (formerly Warangal district)

Area: ~806 km²

Forest type: Southern Tropical Moist Deciduous Forest

Key wildlife: tiger, leopard, wild boar, spotted deer, sloth bear

Rivers: Godavari and its tributaries flow through the region

Part of the larger Dandakaranya forest complex

The use of a wildlife sanctuary as a pilgrimage site creates a tension between conservation regulations (particularly under the Wildlife Protection Act and Forest Conservation Act) and indigenous rights (under the Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act, 2006). The Forest

Rights Act recognises community forest rights including the right to worship at sacred groves — the Jatara has historically been exempt from WPA restrictions during the biennial event.

THE SCALE — BIGGER THAN KUMBH MELA?

The Medaram Jatara regularly draws **over 1 crore (10 million) devotees** over its 4-day biennial run — making it comparable in attendance to the Ardh Kumbh Mela. It is described as:

Asia’s largest tribal festival (by attendance)

The **2nd largest gathering in India** (after the full Kumbh Mela)

The challenge of managing 1 crore devotees in a forest sanctuary location — with limited permanent infrastructure, no railway connection to Medaram, and sensitive ecosystem concerns — has driven the Telangana government to invest substantially in temporary infrastructure for each edition: pontoon bridges over the Jampanna Vagu stream, helipads for VIP access, mobile health units, and real-time crowd management systems.

KOYA TRIBE — BACKGROUND

The **Koya** (also spelled Gond-Koya or just Koya) are a **Scheduled Tribe** community primarily inhabiting the forests along the Godavari river basin — present in Telangana, Andhra Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, and Odisha. They are linguistically related to the Gondi-speaking communities.

Key facts about the Koya:

Language: Koya language (Dravidian family, closely related to Gondi)

Primary occupation: shifting cultivation (podu), forest produce collection, settled agriculture

Governance: clan-based social structure; hereditary roles for ritual functions

WPA Schedule V areas: Koya inhabit Schedule V (Tribal Sub-Plan) areas in Telangana and AP

Forest Rights Act (2006): many Koya communities hold Community Forest Rights (CFR) and individual patta rights under FRA

The Koya retain exclusive rights to conduct the Medaram Jatara ceremonies — outsiders, including other tribal communities, participate as devotees but not as officiants.

HERITAGE STATUS AND CONSTITUTIONAL DIMENSIONS

The Medaram Jatara has been recommended for inclusion in UNESCO’s **Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) list** by cultural heritage advocates, though it has not yet been inscribed.

Constitutional relevance:

Article 29: Right to conserve distinct language, script, and culture — applicable to Koya's right to their ritual traditions

Article 25: Right to freely profess, practise, and propagate religion — the Jatara is a religious right

Fifth Schedule (Article 244): Special provisions for tribal areas in states including Telangana; establishes Tribal Advisory Councils

Forest Rights Act, 2006 (Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers Act): community forest rights, sacred grove rights

UPSC RELEVANCE**Prelims:**

Sammakka-Saralamma Jatara / Medaram Jatara — location (Medaram, Mulugu district, Telangana)

Setting: Eturnagaram Wildlife Sanctuary (Dandakaranya forest)

Tribe: Koya Adivasi

Frequency: biennial (every 2 years), Magh full moon

Offering: Bangaram (jaggery) — NOT gold

2026 dates: January 28–31

Scale: 1 crore+ devotees; Asia's largest tribal festival

Mains GS-1: Indian society — tribal cultures; intangible heritage; religious diversity; non-Brahminic traditions **Mains GS-2:** Tribal rights; Forest Rights Act; Fifth Schedule; tribal self-governance **Mains GS-3:** Conservation vs cultural rights in wildlife sanctuaries

★ FACTS CORNER — KNOWLEDGEPEDIA

MEDARAM JATARA — CORE DATA:

Full name: Sammakka-Saralamma Jatara
 Location: Medaram village, Mulugu district, Telangana
 Setting: Inside Eturnagaram Wildlife Sanctuary (Dandakaranya forest)
 Tribe: Koya Adivasi (Dravidian; Godavari basin)
 Frequency: Biennial (every 2 years); Magh full moon (January-February)
 2026 dates: January 28–31
 Attendance: 1 crore+ devotees; Asia's largest tribal festival; 2nd largest in India

RITUALS:

No permanent idol; no Brahminic priests
 Deities represented by bamboo totems, sacred pots (gaddelu), clan flags (dalgudda)
 Priests: Koya tribal priests (hereditary clans only)
 Offering: Bangaram (jaggery) — body-weight equivalent
 Ritual language: Koya language (oral tradition)

LEGEND:

Sammakka: forest-born; raised by Koya tribe; fought Kakatiya dynasty taxation
 Saralamma: daughter of Sammakka; died defending tribal rights
 Time period: ~13th century CE (Kakatiya dynasty, Warangal)
 Symbolism: tribal sovereignty, resistance to unjust authority, feminine power

ETURNAGARAM WILDLIFE SANCTUARY:

District: Mulugu, Telangana
 Area: ~806 km²
 Forest type: Southern Tropical Moist Deciduous
 Key species: tiger, leopard, sloth bear, spotted deer

FOREST RIGHTS ACT 2006 (FRA):

Full name: Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act, 2006
 Rights recognised: individual patta, community forest rights (CFR), sacred grove rights
 Relevant: Koya have CFR including right to conduct Jatara within sanctuary

OTHER RELEVANT FACTS:

Koya language: Dravidian; related to Gondi
 Fifth Schedule (Article 244): tribal areas; Tribal Advisory Councils
 Kakatiya dynasty: Warangal, Andhra (12th–14th century CE); known for Ramappa Temple (UNESCO WHS)
 UNESCO ICH: Intangible Cultural Heritage; Medaram Jatara recommended (not yet inscribed)
 Bangaram symbolism: agrarian egalitarianism; tribal subsistence economy vs mercantile gift-giving

Sources: Telangana Tourism, The Hindu, Ministry of Tribal Affairs

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

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