



## ABRIDGED PASTS OF SONEPUR MELA - A SAGA OF PILGRIMAGE AND POWER POLITICS

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**Abstract:** *Sonepur is widely recognized for hosting a month-long cattle trade fair; popularly known as the Sonepur fair. Its roots are traced back to antiquity and puranic legends. In contrast to the divinity of the Sonepur fair, the paper tries to understand the historical processes that came to shape the landscape of the Sonepur fair as an exclusive site with multiple meanings attached to it with time. To the colonial state and the colonized subjects, it has been a site of power play and identity formation; for the former, it was a powerful conduit of political control, disease, rumours, and sedition that demanded tight regulations, whereas for the latter it was a sacred sphere engendering the imagination of a shared past and eventually becoming a ground for rooting nationalists' ideology among the masses. In this process of defining and redefining, there were moments of conflict and compliments that came to shape the 'modern roots' of the Sonepur fair. To understand the 'modern' beginning of the mela in the public sphere, the paper analyses the print culture and the coming of railways in the nineteenth and twentieth century that shaped public opinion about its historicity and played an important role in contextualising the importance of the fair among the masses.*

**Keywords:** Sonepur, nationalism, colonialism, politics, pilgrimage, public sphere, fair

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Sonepur is a town situated on the confluence of two rivers, the Ganga and the Gandak, in West Bihar of the Saran district. It hosts a month-long cattle trade fair, popularly known as the Sonepur

Mela (also known as *Harihar Kshetra Mela* or *Chhattar Mela*). It takes place every year in the month of *Kartik Purnima* (full moon day), the most auspicious month as per the Hindu calendar,

which usually falls in the month of November. The fair is considered to be the largest congregational cattle trade fair in Asia, spread over five to six kilometers. In the late seventeenth century, John Marshall wrote that people had 'come thither from the remotest parts of India' and some from far away as 'Tartary Central Asia' (Marshall:1927: 142). The trade fair was said to boast of all breeds of animals such as dogs, camels, buffaloes, donkeys, ponies, monkeys, chimps, Persian horses, elephants, sheep, rabbits, fowls, bears, cats, guinea pigs, birds, fishes, and poultry. In addition, the specialised markets such as *Haathi Bazaar* (Elephant Market), *Ghoda Bazaar* (Horse Market), *Chiriya Bazaar* (Bird Market), and *Meena Bazaar* (Market for daily products) was the centre of main attractions of the fair.

Sonepur's attraction as a once-famous cattle market for displaying exotic and rare animals has now become a piece of history due to the enforcement of the Wildlife Protection Act, of 1972. It has rendered the trade of animals or bird's illegal, leading to the shrinking of spaces for animals in the fairs. Hence, a shift to the display of decorated elephants and horses for pomp and prestige can be seen. This has altered its content and diminished the bazaars of exotic and rare animals giving new connotations to its existence. The alteration of space in the fair has been catalyzed by incorporating new forms of entertainment, such as showmanship, acrobats, magic shows, theatres, *tamasha*, or *nautanki* providing a cheap source of visual pleasure. The cabaret performances of young girls on Bhojpuri and Hindi songs are nocturnal affairs that attract hundreds of people. Other sources of entertainment are the rides, ferries, wheels, stunts in the Well of Death (*Maut ka Kua*), and wrestling competition (*kushtidangal*) which creates a carnival of atmosphere. The *mela* in the present day has developed into avenues for new kinds of community ties. But was this process a spontaneous one or whether its roots of origin can be traced to the colonial period unlike the popular belief of obscure roots in time immemorial? The

paper tries to resuscitate the 'modern' beginning of the *mela* in the public sphere by understanding the historical processes that came to shape the landscape of Sonepur *mela* as an exclusive site with multiple meanings attached to it from the nineteenth century.

### Roots of Sacredness

The origin of the sacredness attached to Sonepur Mela is vague and remote. The legends regarding the origin of the *mela* and the temple varies, but they are intertwined together to establish the religiosity of the *mela*. The most popular legend is enshrined in Puranic mythology. The *Gajendra Moksha* or The Liberation of *Gajendra* from the eight *skandhas* of the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* is popularly believed to provide the textual basis of the temple cum cattle fair's origin. The popularity of Sonepur is attributed to the *Hariharnath Maha Deo* temple, which enchanted the place as a holy site even before the cattle fair. It is believed that the annual fair gradually became intertwined with the temple's tale and began to organize gatherings in commemoration of Vishnu, a Hindu god who, in the *avatara* of *Hariharnath*, rescued the *Gajendra* (elephant) from being maimed by *Gandharva Huhu* (crocodile), when the former was paying him obeisance (Prasad:1961:32). This legend has over the centuries attracted millions of Hindu devotees to make the pilgrimage to the *Hariharnath* Temple for a holy dip at the confluence of the rivers. Its sanctity further derives from the belief that a ritual bath at the confluence is equivalent to giving away a thousand cows as a gift (Yang:1998:123). In other narrations, local folktales believed the temple to be built by Rama on his way to the court of King Janak for *Dhanush yagya* to win the hand of Sita. Another version outlines the tussle between the two sects of Hinduism, Shaivism, and Vaishnavism which kept the region disturbed for a long period. Finally, the harmonious settlement between the two sects led to the establishment of the *Harihar* temple, which placed the idol of Vishnu (*Hari*) and Shankar (*Har*) together. Since then, the place

came to be known as *Harihar Kshetra*. It was a religious experience located in a sacred time and space to the pilgrims that provided significant meaning to the congregation. William Tayler, a contemporary observer wrote: “The mystic “sungum” or junction of the holy river, so sacred in the mind of the superstitious Hindoo, yearly attracts a vast concourse of religious bathers, who, at the full of the moon, rush at a given signal, with the force of a torrent and the roar of a cataract, into the confluent waters to be cleansed of all sin” (Tayler:1882: 492).

The religiosity narratives were so popular among the pilgrims that they did away with most of the distinctions of caste and sex during such times of sacredness. The contemporaries describe the fair as a congregational place for bringing people of all communities together by cutting across the distinctions of caste, sex, and other barriers of social structure (Yang:1989:17).

### Historicising Sonapur Fair (Mela)

The long-standing historical tradition of the fair dates back to the later Vedic age when it used to attract buyers and traders from places as distant as Central Asia. It is believed that Chandragupta Maurya (340 BCE - 298 BCE), the founder of the Maurya empire, used to buy horses and elephants from its market. The antiquity of the site is further evident from the archeological excavation of the stone pillar of the Sunga period at Sonapur (184 BCE-75 BCE) (Chaudhury 1960, 498). The fair emerged as a centre of political importance from the early period as evident in the decision to shift the venue to Hajipur in the sixteenth century due to political consideration. But the problem of recurrent flood prompted the fair to return to Sonapur (Yang:1989:15). It also invoked the interest of the royal families and big landlords such as the Maharajas of Hathwa, Dumraon, Bettiah, Ticcree, and Darbhanga who contributed trophies to the horse race in the mela (Abbott:1896:61). The increasing interest in the fair was a display of power play to establish a relationship with its subjects.

With the establishment of *pax Britannica*, the importance of the fair began to expand. As the interest of colonial rulers shifted to the expansion of their empire, transportation networks became an important mark of their physical presence in the distant areas of the region. The coming of railway lines multiplied the pilgrims to Sonapur mela and opened the process of different means of control under the colonial state. The venue of Sonapur mela implied different meanings for the British. To some, it was an escape from the lonely and dull life to an exotic land, whereas, for others, it was an opportunity to establish British control by keeping an eye on their subjects (Tayler:1881:496).

The social event of the fair was popular among British officials and planters for its sporting events like horse races, cricket, polo, gymnastics, and ballroom dancing. It provided an amusing ground for mega-carnival activities since the 19th century (Abbott:1896:54). Minden Wilson recalls the enthusiastic response of Lord Mayo and Sir Jung Bahadoor of Nepal to the annual Sonapur horse race meets (Wilson:1908:161). The native traders remembered the delight they experienced when the *Burra Lat Sahib* (the big Lord Sahib) came to Sonapur on the occasion of the most successful race which is till date an important record. (Wilson:1908:164). Later in 1873, Lord Northbrook organized a grand feast in his Durbar on the occasion of his visit to Sonapur by giving a ball at the race-stand ballroom (Wilson:1908: 166). The romanticised details of the fair by a British planter during his stay in the Tirhoot region recalls the charm of Sonapur in its large picnics full of life and gaiety, grandeur *shamianahs*, and dinner parties. The social gatherings at the fair for the British community in India were like ‘what Christmas is to home folks’ (Abbott :1896:5).

William Tayler underlines the contrasting image of the fair with the sarcasm of rural India. His portrayal can be read as the typical gaze of the Orientalist where rural space was a marker of uncivilized culture. He writes, “At Sonapur, the large assemblage of Englishmen with their

wives, families, and attendants, monopolize the ground, with its race course and cricket fields, while the picturesque, though unmeaning, exhibition of bears, monkeys, mendicants, and other half-disgusting, half-horrible objects are in the background” (Tayler:1881: 503).

The Britishers attended the congregational gatherings not for the sole purpose of entertainment but also for inspecting illegal activities as fairs were considered a nursery of crime (Yang:1989: 25). The spectre of crowd activity continued to generate official anxiety as reflected in the zealous effort of the magistrate to intercept the mela-bound litigious cases by convening his court on the ‘high road’ to Sonapur (Yang:1989:31). The large assemblage of people in Sonapur was managed by the Scouts of Bihar Provincial Association, the channel to establish colonial authority in the interiors of the countryside (The Times of India, henceforth TOI 1938). It tied the century-old practice of pilgrimage to the political context of the colonial state.

The activities of distributing non-cooperation literature of counter-propaganda aroused close surveillance at the fair. Large police and two platoons of the 5<sup>th</sup> Fusiliers from the nearest troop station, Dinapore (Danapur) were deployed for this purpose (NAI, 1921). Colonial Reports mentions the prosecution of Baijnath Chaudhury under section 124-A, IPC for distributing an inflammatory pamphlet at Sonapur (Fortnightly Report, 1930). The authorities extended the Seditious Meetings Act to the Tirhut division of Bihar in 1921 to avoid disturbances due to organizational meetings on communal lines. Moreover, these official supervisions were done in disguise to assure the peace required for business at the fair (NAI, 1921).

Cholera or other tropical ailments were common during the colonial period. Recognizing the threat of the rapid spread of contagion at any mass gathering, the colonials focused on the sanitization process in the melas, and efforts were made for compulsory inoculation by army doctors (Fortnightly Report, 1944). The alarming cases

of Cholera in the countryside led the colonial authorities to discourage people from making visits to the fair. The authorities launched the scheme of tube wells and pipe water supply to ensure the safety of people at Sonapur (TOI, 1929). To meet the maintenance at mela and prevent the sudden outbreak of epidemics, the colonial officials made sanitary arrangements and medical interventions. For instance, in 1938, a grant of Rupees 5000 was allotted by the government to the district board of Saran for sanitary arrangements at the fair (Tiwari, 1939). Temporary arrangements were made for medical relief during the fair by the district board (Das, 1922). It thus became the ground for demonstrating authority as well as forging links with the natives. The scope of medical services was also extended to develop a treatment for animals as evident in the construction of a temporary camp at the Sonapur fair. An investigation by the District Traffic Superintendent of Bengal and North Eastern Railway reported that 3,123 animals including 429 cows, 2,284 buffaloes, 188 Ox, 218 horses, and 13 elephants were booked on the Sonapur bound train (Veterinary Report, 1942). The indifference of some colonial officials like A.L. Clay towards the annual premier social event at Sonapur was lamented by bards in 1886 as,

Who thinks Sonapur

An awful bore—

Dislikes the fair’s golgopra [disorder]

Who’ll nothing know

Of indigo—

He’s not the man for Chupra (Abbott: 1896:174).

### **Roots of Nationalism at Sonapur Fair**

The Sonapur fair was an integral part of the freedom struggle, its roots can be found in the revolt of 1857. The zamindars and rajas of Bihar province, under the leadership of Kunwar Singh, held a secret conference in the tent of Khwaja Hussain Ali Khan on the occasion of the Sonapur fair (Dutta:1957:150). The purpose of this



meeting was to win over the sepoys of Dinapur (Danapur). By the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century, the celebration at fairs was being employed in the nationalism project. It became the site for the crystallization of political movement. Fairs assumed morality and meaning in their core as they served to educate, unite and morally uplift the people by presenting symbols of historic greatness, and glories of civilization (Rearick 1977). This was the period when the nationalists were mobilizing people from all streams. They looked upon the mela as a symbol of indigenous culture entrenched in its traditional roots of Indianness. It also became a hotbed for militant and revolutionary activities against colonial rule as mela played an essential role in disseminating information. For instance, the regional supporters of the Indian National Congress met in 1908 at the Sonapur fair to establish the Bihar Provincial Congress Committee under the leadership of Nawab Sarfaraz Hosain Khan Bahadur (Dutta:1957: 150). Inspired by Mahatma Gandhi's experiment of social service in rural areas, a relief association was sent to the Sonapur fair in 1919 (Dutta:1957: 279). Likewise, the Sonapur fair was chosen by the Bihar Provincial Kisan Sabha in 1929 as a platform for its inauguration to reach the peasants coming from the countryside with Swami Sahajanand Saraswati as the president (Pradhan: 2018: 69). Later on, the disciples of Gandhi opened Sevashram at the venue to assist and evoke the spirit of patriotism among the visitors thronging to the fair. These activities brought the colonial gaze to report news from the fair. For instance, the fortnightly reports of November 1924 mention, "At the Sonapur mela, there has been some talk of starting Satyagraha and some of the Mahanths north of the river are becoming uneasy" (Fortnight Reports 1924).

Fairs became enmeshed in the economic, social, and cultural concerns of the nationalist project in the nineteenth century. For example, in 1916, the Maharaja of Rewa during the Sonapur fair complained about the trading of cows, and

a circular forbidding cow sacrifice in fairs and *melas* was drafted (Patel: 2004). Later, in 1921, *sadhus* camped at Sonapur with two members of the Calcutta Gaurakshini Society and thirty volunteers against the slaughter of cows (NAI 1921). It was initially done to control the 'law and order situation', but gradually it transformed into pronouncements on community rights. It was substantially visible from the first meeting of the Indian Association of Cow Protection at Sonapur by the leaders of the Hindu revivalist organisation (Yang:1989:18). Special propaganda was carried against untouchability by the Muzaffarpur District Committee at Sonapur fair by organising lectures and distributing handbills and leaflets (Dutta:1957:198). Intensive war propaganda and war exhibits attracted large gatherings during the fair in the winter of 1941. Confidential documents of the government report such as one man buying a Defence Saving certificate from the stall of the post office for Rs.5000 at the fair has been recorded (Fortnight Reports 1941).

The future of Indian nationhood depends on the qualities of its men and women today, which in turn will depend not only on the valor of the soul but also on the mind and body. Inspired by these Gandhian ideas, C.F. Andrews drew attention to the anti-social activities happening at the fair in reference to the letter sent by M. Shephard to Rajendra Prasad on December 17, 1937. Shephard mentions in her letter describing the distressful state at the fair:

Here the rich and respectable Indian merchants are themselves engaged in the hideous trafficking of women and fairs like Sonapur provide ample opportunities to engage in the process. Here women are sent by the king and landlords and their medical examination is done in the Nakhas area of the fair. Young girls demand up to Rs 100 per head which is a profitable business for the landlord (Choudhary :1984: 145).

Thus, the venue of Sonapur Mela became the basis for dealing with many evils of society. For example, in 1937, Rajendra Prasad, while writing a letter to the Director of Public Health, asked for information on prostitution happening

in Sonpur and proposed to alert the organizations working for social upliftment for its prevention (Choudhary:1984:152). In response, the director admits the government's inefficiency while providing figures of a year-on-year increase in the number of *vaishyas* (prostitutes) at the Sonpur fair (Choudhary:1984:156).

Sonepur also increased the trade prospect of the mercantile class due to its large congregations. It became the annual market junction of north and south Bihar, where cattle and commodities were traded. The markets for cattle expanded the transaction horizon bringing traders from the northeast to regions of the southern part of the Indian subcontinent for the sale and purchase of high-quality breeds. It used to meet the demands of agricultural implements and items of daily usage in the pre-railway days. The fair was dominated by shops selling goods from Manchester, Birmingham, Delhi, Kanpur, Punjab, Kashmir, and Afghanistan at reasonable prices (Wilson :1908:171). The place also became the recruiting zone for labourers belonging to the lower castes (Jha: 1999:19). Thus, the site of the fair had no single meaning rather it carried a variety of motives and meanings.

### **Modern Beginnings of Ancient Sonepur Mela**

The studies on the public sphere in colonial South Asia have brought a significant shift in 'the public' analytical categories (Freitag: 1991). The dichotomy between 'public' and 'private' as put forward by Jürgen Habermas was argued to be inconsistent in the South Asian context as it could not adequately reflect its cultural and historical traditions (Habermas: 1974). Scholars like Kathryn Hansen moved beyond rationalized debates to processions, rituals, devotional activities, street theatre, and indigenous protests as essential in forming a public opinion (Hansen :1992). These different avenues for the crystallization of public opinion in colonial South Asia replaced the term 'public sphere' with 'public arenas' to grasp the local and enacted nature of public space (Freitag:

1989). Taking inspiration from this theoretical understanding, this section will explore the process in which public opinions were shaped in the understanding of fair like Sonepur over centuries. When literacy was limited, pilgrimage places and melas formed an essential site for shaping discourses in the pre-print age (Anderson:1983). It allowed them in speaking a common language of ritual and purity. The language of discourse began to change with the coming of print culture in India. It codified and restructured the popular narratives of the mela. For instance, a revised form of the ancient Sanskrit genre of writings known as the *mahatmya*, 'a laud, a hymn of praise or glorification' became prominent as a genre of writing. It provided the statement of faith and legacy to the sanctity of Sonepur fair by deriving stories from the Puranas (Eck:1983: 22). This literature eulogized the origin of the mela in booklets and pamphlets and circulated it widely in vernacular languages at inexpensive rates. For instance, the first edition of the *Harihar Kshetra Mahatmya*, or 'The Greatness of Harihar Kshetra as a Place of Pilgrimage,' was published in 1924 and priced at one anna (Yang :1998: 138). This led to the standardisation of stories and legends of the mela's origin.

Sonepur in the 1920s began to acquire a significant place in cultural activities. It hosted the first session of Bihar Hindi Sahitya Sammelan on 8 and 9 November 1919 (Dutta :1957: 166). The availability of cheap printing technology generated publicity for melas and fairs leading to the rise in the popularity of pilgrimage centres. For instance, advertisements on the Sonepur fair were placed in a wide range of vernacular and English newspapers such as *Samvad Kaumudi*, *Bharati*, *Times of India*, *Searchlight*, etc. The impetus for the widening of public interest in the fairs was also encouraged by modern means of transportation such as railways, bridges, etc. As a result, Sonepur emerged as a major centre of grain storage and distribution in the twentieth century (Malley:1908: 98). It lay on the main trade route of the Bengal and North Western Railway

where seventy-five percent of the trade was done by the railway (Malley: 1908: 99). The British government later built many railway workshops here.

Bholanauth Chunder, a contemporary traveller to Sonapur describes the railway as a ‘marvel and miracle’ that widened the streams of pilgrims (Chunder :1869: 141). The British authorities deliberately laid out new railway lines to intersect the important pilgrimage centre across south Bihar to Bengal (Jenkins 1866). The motive behind the expansion of railways at pilgrimage centres was to levy taxes and control heavy traffic. All these aspects led to the popularity of the Sonapur attracting people from distant places at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Contrary to these changes at Sonapur, Ramgopal Singh Chowdhari recorded in his book *Rambles in Bihar*, published in 1917, that although the temple of Shri Harihar Baba Nathji has been built at present, the history of the idol established here is a symbol of faith since remote times (Chowdhari :1917:130). The decline of the indigo trade impacted the annual horse races of the fair as the Europeans did not muster strong participation after the revolt of 1857 (Chowdhari :1917: 132).

The annual event transformed the locality of Sonapur into a canvas town and market. It is a visual reminder of the traditions of life and elements of culture, which carries a tiny universe within itself. The gigantic kaleidoscopes turn the surreal terrain of the countryside into a symbiotic ecosystem where past and present, love and longing, religion and desire, magic and politics jostle and exist alongside the margins of a bustling city while impacting the lives of those who have a “deep immersion” in this spectacle. Its historicity goes deep into the past, but its ways and forms have evolved with time. The site has today become an epitome of the socio-religious interface as different religious organizations put up their camps where life, philosophy, and social services are expounded. A shift from religious paraphernalia to community services in the forms of *langars* and *Bhandara* is an integral

part of the fair today. The rural feat is making a gradual transmission to the global world by accommodating new practices in the mela.

Apart from the socio environ, the century-old Sonapur Mela has also metamorphosed into an arena of exhibiting political power and agenda. It serves as an advertising billboard by putting up stalls of different agencies to flagship its policies for both the government and the companies. In addition, other policies and programs of sectors like agriculture, education, health, railways, small cottage industries, and handicrafts are advertised to outreach groups and communities visiting from the countryside. It also caters to the market for electronic items like TV, refrigerators, cellphones, home appliances, garments, toys, utensils, and agricultural implements. The fair has become congregational grounds for tantriks and mendicants other than the pilgrims throng to observe tradition and propitiate deities. Its sanctity gives place to events of daily rituals like *mundan*, a ceremonial cutting of hair, and seeking arranged marriages in the temple’s compound.

## Conclusion

Thus, in contrast to the divinity of the Sonapur fair, it is the historical processes that came to shape the landscape of the Sonapur fair as an exclusive site with multiple meanings attached to it with time. To the colonial state and the colonized subjects, it has been a site of power play and identity formation; for the former, it was a powerful conduit of political control, disease, rumours, and sedition that demanded tight regulations, whereas for the latter it was a sacred sphere engendering the imagination of a shared past and eventually becoming ground for rooting nationalists’ ideology among the masses. In this process of defining and redefining, there were moments of conflict and compliments that came to shape the ‘modern roots’ of the Sonapur fair. The process was a ramification of the print culture and the railways that shaped public opinion about its historicity and played an important means in contextualizing the importance of the fair among



the masses. Its ceremonial parts were shared by people of varying degrees of different classes and occupations. But what it metamorphoses over time is the world within a world, a microcosm that relieves one of its monotonous lives and transforms a surreal terrain into a symbiotic

ecosystem. Its landscape facilitates socializing, pilgrimage, traditions, heritage, commerce, capital, cultural folkways, and entertainment. Hence, although the Sonapur Mela has been modernized in its content, the core has endured the puranic legends.

### Illustrations



Figure 3.1. Collections from Hasting Painting- The Harihar Kshetra mela at Sonapur, Bihar by Shiv Dayal in 1820.  
(Source: <https://www.rarebooksocietyofindia.org/grid-layout.php?q=Sonapur>)

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