

VISUAL ETHNOGRAPHY OF SONEPUR CATTLE FAIR

Design Research Seminar
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BY

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GUIDE

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SONEPUR CATTLE FAIR

Special Project

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Visual Communication

Guide: Nina Sabnani

IDC, IIT Bombay

Approval Sheet

This project titled "Visual Ethnography of Sonepur Cattle Fair" by Vidya Bhushan, is approved in partial fulfillment of the requirements for Master of Design Degree in Visual Communication.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Nina Sabnani", with a long horizontal stroke extending to the right.

Prof. Nina Sabnani
Project Guide

Date:

Declaration

I hereby declare that this written submission submitted to IDC, IIT Bombay, is a record of an original work done by me. This written submission represents my idea in my words, I have adequately cited and referenced the original source. I also declare that i have adhered to all principles of academic honesty and integrity and have not misprinted or falsified any Idea/ fact/ source in my submission. I understand that any violation of the above will be cause for disciplinary action by the institute and can also evoke penal action from the sources which have thus not been properly cited or from whom proper permission has not been taken when needed.

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Acknowledgment

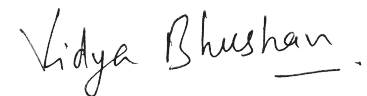
Here I express my heartfelt thanks and sincere gratitude to all the people, without whose help, successful completion of this project would not have been possible.

I would sincerely like thank my project guide Prof. Neena Sabnani for her guidance and support throughout the project.

I also like to thank Mr. Sanjeet Kumar (Sonepur), Mr. Ram Narayan Ram (Bamboo artist from Benushilp Gram), Mr. Alfaraj Alam (Kashmiri trader of woolen cloths), Ms. Rama Devi (Madhubani artist), Yamuna Devi (Paper mache artist) whom I met during the journey and helped me in making this project so eventful. Their effort and cooperation can't be underestimated as their willingness to help in bringing this project come to life.

&

My family and friends, for being an unconditional pillar of strength and support throughout.



Vidya Bhushan
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Date: 27 March 2017



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Abstract

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The Project idea came in my mind from the childhood memory which I had about the Asia's one of the largest animal fair Sonepur Mela or Harihar-Kchetra Mela. I still remember when I was a kid, my father used to take me to this Mela along with my siblings. It used to be one of the most fascinating and most awaiting time of the whole year. Crowds and lots and lots of toys, Big giant rotating swings, Magic shows, The well of death and the most attracting, the animal and bird market. I used to insist my father to buy a rabbit from there. Although he never bought it. Apart from all these attraction there were so many things which I still remember as a beautiful experience.

Having this opportunity to study visual ethnography, I thought it would be a great experience for me to again go back to the place where my beautiful memories lies i.e. The Sonepur cattle fair. Through this study, an in-depth sense of cultural and social behaviour could be developed.

Introduction

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The Sonapur Cattle Fair or Sonapur Mela (सोनपुर मेला) is held on Kartik Purnima (the full moon day) in the month of November in Sonapur, Bihar, on the confluence of river Ganga and Gandak.

It is also known as Harihar Kshetra Mela or Malegaon Mela. Till date, it is the biggest cattle fair of Asia and stretches on from fifteen days to one month. It has its origins during ancient times. The Sonapur Cattle Fair attracts visitors from all over Asia.

They say there is no bird or animal breed, which is not sold here. Come to think of it. All Fifty Lakhs people who come here do not even buy a sparrow. But they come here for fun.





How to reach here

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Sonepur is a town located in the Saran District of Bihar and is easily accessible via Railways, Roadways, Waterways and Airways.

Roadways: Sonepur is nearly 3 Km from Hajipur and 25 km from Patna and 58 km from Muzaffarpur in Bihar & 60 km from Chhapra, the headquarter of Saran District. Buses, Taxis and Auto-rickshaws are easily available.

Railways: The Nearest Railway Station is Sonepur Junction railway station. It has the 8th Largest Railway Platform in the World. It has trains connecting almost every part of India. It is the divisional headquarters of the East Central Railway of the Indian Railways.

Waterways: BSTDC organizes ferries to Sonepur during the Season of Sonepur Cattle Fair for easy transportation.

A brief history

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The Sonepur mela has a profound historic grandeur. According to the travelogue of a British administrative officer, W.W. Hynter, in 1919, the Sonepur mela used to be held in over 43 villages.

It has its origins during ancient times. This is when Chandragupta Maurya used to buy elephants and horses across the river Ganges. The mela used to attract traders from places as distant as Central Asia. Originally, the venue of the fair was Hajipur and only the performance of the puja used to take place at the Harihar Nath temple of Sonepur. However, under the rule of the Mughal Emperor Aurangzeb, the venue of the fair got shifted to Sonepur. The temple of Harihar Nath is believed to have been originally built by Lord Rama, on his way to the court of King Janak to win the hand of Mata Sita. It is further said that Raja Man Singh later got the temple repaired. The Harihar Nath temple, as it stands today, was built by Raja Ram Narain, an influential person during the late Mughal period.

Legend has it

Gajendra Moksha legend is associated with the temple in Sonepur. It involves

the story of king Indrayamuna and the Gandharva chief Huhu, who were turned into an elephant and a crocodile respectively by the curse of great sages Agastya and Dewala muni. One day the elephant's leg was caught by the crocodile. It is said that both of them fought hard for many years with their herds. But ultimately the King Elephant weakened and prayed to the supreme god Vishnu (Hari) to save him. Vishnu heard his prayer and cut down the crocodile with his Chakra. But the touch of the chakra released Huhu from the curse. Vishnu also released Indrayamuna from his curse and took him to his aboard Vaikuntha. Since Sonepur is situated at the convergence of the sacred rivers Ganga and Gandak, the Hindus regard it as a holy site. One of the purposes of the people visiting the Sonepur Cattle Fair, apart from the fair, is to take a holy dip at the convergence and pay respects at the Harihar Nath Temple.

In Hindu mythology, the crocodile is believed to have been in its previous birth a Gandharva chief named Huhu. Huhu had gone to have a bath in this lake and, it is

said, caught a holy sage by his leg in a truculent manner. The sage, Dewala Muni, turned furious and cursed the Gandharva chief and changed him into a crocodile as a punishment.

He lived in the lake in the form of a huge crocodile until he was restored to his Gandharva life by the sacred touch of Vishnu (Hari) who, with his "chakra" or discus, cut the throat of the crocodile while rescuing the elephant from his jaws.

On the other hand, the elephant, in its former existence, was a king of the Pandyas, Indradyumna by name, who was a pious man. Once, however, he did not pay his respects to a sage, Agastya. The sage cursed him and made him an elephant. He, too, was saved by Hari's touch, and was allowed to accompany Him to "vaikuntha" or heaven.

As per the tradition, lakhs of Hindus from all over the country assemble at different ghats of Harihar Kshetra at Hajipur and Sonepur on the eve of Kartik Purnima and take holy dip at the confluence of the Ganga, the Gandak and the Mehi rivers. The full moon day of the month of Kartik

(November) is regarded as one of the most auspicious days for the Hindus. The devotees offer Gangajal to the Harihar Nath temple and this ritual marks the beginning of the Sonapur mela.

Gajendra Moksha sculpture at the entrance of the city.



Methodology

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Being a resident of Hajipur, I have always been the regular visitor of this mela since my childhood. Hence I always had an idea about his mela. But as a visual ethnography project I started this journey from a new beginning. The idea was to visit this cattle fair with a more open eye towards every surrounding elements, meet visitors, local people, and find elements which creates this environment.

As the area of this mela was quite big. So firstly, I started to roam around the entire mela to understand the key attraction points and things which makes this mela happen. This took me two days to just look at everything with detail and understand. As the crowd was very huge, so riding a two-wheeler was not possible. I was just walking with my camera and taking the videos of the movements and events happening there.

After two days I had enough idea about the places and things in and around the mela. Later on I talked with local people to understand the relevance of this mela in their life and to this city.

My next approach was to talk to the

people who came from different places around the city as well far places like Kashmir, Lucknow, Gorakhpur, Agra etc. The main concern for talking to these people was to understand that why and since when these people are coming to this mela.

Apart from these people, local artisans and craftsman also attend this mela with great enthusiasm. So talking with them and understanding the role of Sonapur mela in their life was also the main concern.

Understanding of the fair land

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The whole mela had certain hierarchy and pattern. It was divided in Government and private sections. Government sections had exhibitions and other stalls showcasing their work and providing information to public. Private sections had multiple stalls, shops, eateries, and fun zones.

Then there were the famous cattle trade zones. Various kinds of animals and birds were being sold there.

Women cooking pudu kachodi beside the main road.

The Journey

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On day one, entering the mela after crossing the old bridge of Gandak from Hajipur the first things which I encountered was the enthralling crowd and the local road side food stalls. They all were making so many things like chaat, pakodas, litti-chokha, jalebi, halwa, etc. After that on the same road it was the government exhibition section which had multiple stalls. These stalls had exhibited various government departments and their works. These stalls provides information to all visitors regarding various small cottage industries, healthcare, agriculture and fishery, and many more.

Basically the whole government exhibition section acts as an information kiosks and advertising space for government and public companies which provides subsidies to local people in various things. Like agriculture department showcases the farm machineries and products. It provides information to farmers regarding various subsidies and loan facilities available to them. Likewise; Fishery departments, small cottage industry department, irrigation department, electricity department, and



more had same kind of information for all kind of people with different needs. As Bihar tourism department had taken the responsibility of branding this mela hence proper management was done.

On day 2 I found that apart from advertisements, these government exhibitions were organizing events like; nukkad naatak, workshops, training programs, entertainment shows and many more. The cultural department of Bihar also organizes various cultural activities in the exhibition space. Later on i was informed that Famous singers like Alka Yagnik, Udit Narayan were the guests on the inauguration day of Sonepur Mela. On the same day I attended the cultural performances by various artists on folk songs and Bollywood songs too. A huge crowd was gathered around the cultural ground of the mela. I was astonished by looking at the enthusiasm of the people. They all were so excited. It was around 8:30 PM and the crowd was increasing. Within one hour the whole ground was full. The crowd during the night was way

too much than the day time. People were enjoying and the whole Mela was well lit.

Amongst all the government exhibition the railway department had a separate exhibition ground. They were showcasing the new development in the design and

planning of railways in Bihar. All miniature models were set there. Crowd was gathering to look at those working miniature models. A Small toy train was also there. One could buy tickets and enjoy the ride. It was a real fun for small kids. Railway department was not only unique because

Government exhibitions and information stalls.





Nukkad natak performances for social awareness.



Toy train inside Rail Gram exhibition.

Childrens looking at mniature train model.

People looking at miniature models.

of its grand exhibition but also because of the food stalls it had in their ground. It was a nice food zone for Families, small groups or any visitor. I noticed that there were many families who after the long mela darshan were relaxing in the food plaza.



On day 3 i woke up early to visit the mela and directly go to the cattle ground. The weather was too cold and foggy. The cattle grounds were on the periphery of the central mela area. The first cattle market was of cows, buffalo's, and oxen. The ground was full of varieties of these animals. People were gathered to trade these animals. And the trading was done in their known code languages. No one was openly bargaining for the price. The buyer and the seller both were shaking hands under a towel. Seller gave some indication and the buyer understood. If deal is not final again they were holding hands and fighting under the towel. It was really new and kind of entertaining experience for me.

After that I visited to horse trade ground. Variety of horses were there. "Chetak", this was the name given to the most beautiful and highly decorated horse there. "Sohan shah" was the seller of this horse. People were coming, asking the price, age, strength and what not about the horse as if this horse was a groom.



Cow and buffalo market in Sonapur Mela.





Cow and buffalo market in Sonepur Mela.

Buyer and seller bargaining the price.



Beside this ground there was elephants shed area. Selling of elephants is illegal still these giants are sold here in this mela. Usually each year large number of elephants used to come. But this year there were few elephants only.

"Bhola Prasad" was the name given to the elephant which was highly decorated. I asked the mahawat about the number of elephants which came this year. He said that sadly this year there were only twelve elephants. Because of less buyers even these mahawat were going back.

Apart from trade concerns what I really found interesting were the crowd. Everyone knows, either from first-hand experience or from some other secondary resources that these cattle's are unique and not be missed seeing. Hence the crowd comes, enjoys watching these giants and leave with memories. I was informed by one seller that each year various races happens amongst these animals like, horse race, elephant race, etc. the winner gets prize and usually keeps his/her cattle's price higher. This year also the race was organized but I was unable to see that as it happens only in the

first week of mela inauguration.

After almost roaming all around the mela for three days I sensed some key factors which were creating this amusing environment. These key elements were the soul of this mela. These were the major attractions of Sonapur mela.

Elephant market in Sonapur Mela.





Elephant with mahawat in Sonepur Mela.

Major attractions of Mela

- Harihar Nath Temple and Kartik Poornima snaan

On Kartik Poornima (full moon) day in the month of November huge crowd comes to take bath on the confluence of holy Ganges and Gandak near Sonapur. By the time I reached Sonapur these activities were however not extensive although there were many people taking a dip in the river and then going to the temple for puja. A belief is associated with Harihar Nath temple that whatever wish one asks for, God Vishnu fulfills it. I was told by one of the pujari ji of the temple about this.





- **Animal Market**

Birds fair, Cow fair, buffalo fair, Goat fair, horse fair, elephant fair, camel fair, and what not. All variety of animals and birds can be seen here. Although gradually the numbers are reducing year by year still people come for trading.



- **Wood Market**

While I was moving around birds market I noticed a huge wood market. Carpenters were making various kinds of furniture. Curiously I asked the price of one sofa-set and found it relatively cheaper. However the quality of wood used is always a point of doubt I had. Still people from far places like Buxar, Patna, Ara, and other places were coming to buy furniture from here.

Apart from all this, “Laathi” is the item which catches everyone’s eyes. These Laathi’s are poured with oil and they look lustrous. Wood Market’s laathi are famous for its durability and the quality. One of the seller named Mithun Rai who was selling these laathi said that his laathis are way stronger as he had poured oil for 2 weeks and dried under scorching sun.





- **Metal Market**

Just before the birds market there was the whole stretch of metal shops alongside the road. These small and big shops had all the daily use metal utilitarian items. Items such as knives, utensils, plyers, chains, bells, metal jaalis and what not. Apart from all these small items the most eye catching item was the “swords”. These beautiful swords easily attracts every visitor’s eye. I asked one of the shopkeeper (about 35 years old) about the cost and reason for selling these swords and since how long he was coming to this mela. He said people of this land has always been fond of swords. Swords are famous because of the rulers this land had, like Chandragupta Maurya and Mughals. People take pride in buying beautiful and expensive swords. They showcase these swords in their drawing room. I somehow agreed to his points as I was the resident of Hajipur and I had always seen people taking so much interest in buying swords each year. Swords are one of the key item of Sonapur Mela.





- Theatre

When I was a kid I was never allowed to look at these theatre posters of Sonapur Mela. It was believed to be obscene. We were not allowed to look through the gates of these theatres. But as I grew older it became clear to me through news articles about the kind of sexual vulgarity that these theatres used to spread in the name of art. This time also out of curiosity I asked one of my friend Sanjeet to come along with me. Sanjeet lives in Sonapur. So I thought he would be knowing better and by his help things will become easier. So the moment he heard my proposal of coming to a theatre his reaction was hilarious. "Bhai paagal ho gaya hai kya, Mai nahi jaane wala wahan. Agal bagal ke Sabhi log pehchaante hain mujhe. Faltu ki badnaami hogi. Tujhe jaana hai to tu chala ja." I started laughing. I tried to convince him. But he didn't come. Anyway I took one ticket of 80 rupees and sat on the back side of the theatre. The front rows were quite costly. After half an hour the whole theatre was full. A loud Bollywood song was played and





around 15-20 girls came on the stage. They all started dancing. But it was not at all any performance. Everyone were hooting. After spending few more minutes I came out. It was now clear to me that why people had such an image about theatre. But still each year these theatres come to mela and people believes that Sonapur mela is incomplete without theatres.

I asked one of the Local chaat vendor who was there in front of a theatre about the popularity of theatres. He first laughed and then said, "Theatre hai to lights hai, light hai to gaana hai, gaana hai to dance hai aur dance hai to hungama hai. Sonapur mela mein theatre na ho to logo ko maja hi nahi aayega."

Theatres in Sonapur Mela had certain audience who enjoys it. Hence each year these theatres come and continue the legends of Dance and entertainment.

- Jhoola

Whenever we hear the word “mela”, the one major thing which pops in our head is big jhoola. The fun doesn’t start unless you get some rise up to the sky. A bit of real fun is collected when one gets a ride to one of the scraping “jhoola”. So I rode the jhoola and yes it was the real fun. The entire mela was visible from top. Huge crowds were moving all around Sonapur. Jhoola in Sonapur mela had unique role to play. There were more than 6 big jhoolas. Dreamland Park had three big jhoolas. This park was the fun spot for kids and families.





- Well of death (Maut ka kuaan)

The most daring stunt with bikes and cars inside a well made up of wood and iron. The ticket collector along with a mike person takes the ticket. One person keeps on announcing about the daring act by the person on loudspeaker. The style of announcement is very particular. The screaming sound of bikes creates very dramatic atmosphere which attract visitors to come and see the act.

I met the bike person named Raj. He was from Rajasthan. He said that he learnt this stunt from his uncle who used to come to this mela. Now he performs this stunt in all over India. I asked him if he ever got injured while performing the stunt. He laughed and said that the day before yesterday his bike was slipped. He showed me his injured legs. I asked that doesn't he feel scared. He smiled and said that when he first did it with his uncle then only he was scared. After two or three attempts his fear was gone. His mother doesn't want him to do this but he said he enjoys it.





He said that after each performance he feels like a hero. Such was the level of his enthusiasm.

- **Meena Bazaar**

Either its Kolkata Meena bazaar or chandani chowk ka meena bazaar in Sonapur Mela, every Meena bazaar is famous for its diversity. It has almost everything related to a household. Either its toys for children or bangles for women it has everything. And the most important thing is the price. All Meena Bazaar has their prices fixed. Usually an announcement keeps engaging the crowd's ear with the low price and variety of items it has. I still remember those days when I used to ask for toys to my father. It certainly gives memories to kids like I have.

Rupesh Satyarthi on of a shopkeeper of Meena Bazaar told me that Sonapur mela was the integral part of their family. Each year they book this place in advance. He was the resident of Gorakhpur, U.P. but as he was coming to this mela for many years the land owner knows him very well and things are easier for him here.











*A visitor, looking at his own weight in talking machine.
People enjoy a lot knowing their wait from this machine.*



"Let me find something useful here."

A small girl in Meena Bazaar looking at things to buy.

- Cloth Market (Garm kapde ka bazaar)

Usually Sonapur mela runs for one month i.e. from November to December, but cloth market is the only market in Sonapur Mela which continues till the end of January.

Chandra Prakash a visitor and resident of Hajipur said that woollen clothes of Sonapur Mela is famous because of the available varieties. He said that People waits for the entire year to buy woollen cloths from this mela. They find so many varieties and options here. Shops vendors from Gorakhpur, Kashmir, Agra and other far places come here.

He added that price bargaining is an art that you must know if you are buying clothes from this market. A good bargainer can buy clothes at an almost four times less than quoted by the seller.





Cloth Market in Sonapur Mela. A big attraction amongst people for woollen cloths.

- The famous sweet

"Sonepur Mela aaye aur Chaand Mithai nahi khai, to bhala kya kiya!"

This was the statement given by the sweet seller Ayub khan who was selling the most popular sweet of Sonepur Mela called Chaand Mithai. As the name suggests the shape of this sweet is like the moon. It is made by mixing maida, sugar, mawa, milk and gudd.

People also call this sweet as katkatta or paapdi. Ayub khan's grandfather used to come to this mela. He was a kid since when he is coming to Sonepur. Making this sweet was his family's only profession. His shop was quite famous too.





The kitchen of these shops were on the backyard. So i went to see inside one of the shop to see how they were making this famous Chaand Mithai. It was nice to see them making the sweet and buying some fresh sweets for myself.

- **Art and Craft Market**

The art and craft section of Sonapur Mela has its own charm. All different kinds of art forms of Bihar can be found here. Either its Madhubani painting or Paper Mache, Bamboo art or jute ki karigari, Almost variety of art stuffs can be found here.

I met with Ram Narayan Ram who was from Benushilp Gram of Bihar. His entire family generation does bamboo craft work. Even he was awarded by state government for his art and given state award in art practices. These art works are the only source of their family income and he said that people appreciate it. All his works were sold within 10 days of the Mela. He further continued saying that this mela was very important for their family and they have been coming here since more than 20 years. Their art gets recognition because of this Mela.

Jamuna devi is a Paper Mache artist from Madhubani district. She makes sculpture out





of waste paper. In this Art and Craft Mela ground government has provided her space to showcase her skill to people. She has also been awarded by state government for her art practices. She also does Madhubani Paintings on various utilitarian items like kettle, cup, Cloths, Bags etc. She too believes that this mela provides a good opportunity for her art recognition.

Vishwanath Jha is a Jute artist. He makes jute products like shoes, Bags, wallets, etc. He has been working with jute since last 12 years. Sonapur Mela helps him in showcasing and selling his Products. He himself runs a training program to teach people about jute art and make them self-dependent and successful with this art form. He believes that with jute products and its quality it's easy to beat down china market.

- **Circus**

Circus has always been a part of fairs in India. The tradition of circus is very old. I do have memories of Magician (Jaadugar) O.P.Sharma who used to come to Sonapur Mela. During this visit I was thinking of going to the magic show again. But this year there was no magic show happening in the mela. However there was one circus show at the main entrance of mela ground. I took the ticket. The show starts after an hour. The crowd was not so big. But still all the available chairs were full. Around 50-60 people were there. The show runs for an hour.

Dharamnath Thakur, the owner of the circus has been into this line since 20 years. Earlier he used to work for big circus companies. But in 2006 he bought his own circus. Now he has around 15 staff and artists working in his small circus company.

While talking to him I realized that he was not happy because of the declining interest of people about circus.





He believes that if it happens the circus artists will have to leave this profession and this art will be lost.



Insights

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“अगर भीड़ न हो तो फिर मेले में लोगों के बिछड़ने की कहानियाँ झूठी ना हो जाए”

Sonepur Mela is not only a fair it's like a festive celebration for locals and visitors and this festival runs for an entire month. The enthralling crowd and vividness of the mela is unmatched. It still holds the soul of a village mela. However with the changing time and the commercialization of markets, and emergence of malls, multiplexes, amusement parks and food courts, Sonepur Mela too is losing its true attraction.

Migration from small towns is also affecting its charm. But in spite of every changes each year mela brings something new from its own ground. It offers opportunity for artisans, and local people to sustain. People waits for this mela entire year. It still holds the memory of childhood. Still today we get magic show tickets of 10 rupees. Still today we get the mud whistles and ghirni. We still gets the same crowd.

Times changes but there are certain memories which remains unchanged. sonepur Mela brings back those memories from childhood. It's like a carnival which is actually enjoyed by people of every class.

And then the carnival ends with a promise to come again with more surprises.

Conclusion

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The glorious legacy is sinking and biggest amazement is that nobody seems concerned and even the government is in the mood of despair, which was supposed to take up the issue with real heart and zeal. NOW, the final ball is in the people's court and it is time to get involved, engage, raise and take up their duties and responsibilities so that, the people of Bihar, who is really sensitive and cares for their heritage, which is gathering dust anyhow manages to pass into the hands of future generations. The only little contribution one can make at their level is through the little involvement/engagement, mostly making it popular and promote at any platform wherever they are and whatever they do, using any platform they are interested and comfortable at.

Any heritage has to be kept alive for the generations so that it can go into the annals and remembered for the contributions of our forefathers in learning how we are shaped today or, what we received from them. We should strive hard at our level best towards that end so that we shouldn't be

blamed for the neglect and misinformation by the generations to come. As it is well said that "Without a template of glorious past (history), no future can be written and created".

*"Long live Sonapur Mela,
Long live the culture".*

Pictures from Sonapur Mela

Harihar Nath Mandir at Sonapur.





















Song performance by Bollywood singer Javed Ali on the closing ceremony of Sonepur Mela.

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Thank You