Sarhul Festival

Prelims – *Social Geography of India*

Mains (GS I) - *Salient features of Indian Society, Diversity of India.*

Why in News?

Adivasis in Jharkhand and the larger Chhotanagpur region will welcome the new year and the spring season with the Sarhul festival on Tuesday.

- **Sarhul** – It literally means "worship of the Sal tree" and is among the most revered Adivasi festivals.
- **Nature worship** - Sal trees (Shorea robusta) are venerated in Adivasi tradition.
- **Sarna faith** - Jal (water), jungle (forest), jameen (land) — these three aspects of nature form the core of the Sarna faith.
- **Sarna Maa** – The Sal trees are seen as the abode of Sarna Maa, the deity protecting the village from inclement natural forces.
- **Union of Sun and Earth** – The festival celebrates the symbolic union of the Sun and the Earth.
- A male priest from the village (pahan) plays the role of the Sun, while his wife (pahen) becomes the Earth.
- **Sowing season** - Only after the rituals are completed, Adivasi folk begin ploughing their fields, sowing their crop, or entering the forest to gather produce.
- **Tribes** - Sarhul has been celebrated by tribes such as the ***Oraon, Munda, Santal, Khadia, and Ho***, with unique names for the festival and particular ways of celebrations.
- **Sarna Sthals** - These are communally protected "sacred groves" and can be found near villages across Chotanagpur, including Jharkhand, parts of Chhattisgarh, Odisha, and Bihar.
- **Sarna flags** - In the lead up, homes and Sarna Sthals are lined with triangular, red and white Sarna flags.



- **Three-day festival** - The main rituals happen on day two of the three-day festival at Sarna Sthals.
- **First day event** - On the first day of Sarhul, the village's pahan, who observes a rigorous fast, fetches water for the ceremonies, houses and Sarna Sthals are cleaned, and Sal flowers gathered for rituals.
- **Second day event** - On the next day, the main rituals take place at the Sarna Sthal.
- The deity is presented with Sal flowers, and a rooster is sacrificed.
- Villagers seek prosperity, safety, and a good harvest.
- Holy water is then sprinkled across the village, with performances of traditional songs and dances such as ***Jadur, Gena and Por Jadur***.
- Later, young men head to nearby ponds and rivers and participate in ceremonial fishing and crab-catching to gather food for the ceremonial feast.
- **Third day event** - The final day is marked by a grand community feast, in which people share ***handia (rice beer)*** and enjoy a variety of delicacies.
- The festival ends with the pahan's blessings and the villagers praying.
- **Evolution** - Over time, Sarhul evolved from being a hunting-centred tradition to one that revolves around agricultural processes, reflecting the evolving lifestyle of Adivasis in Chhotanagpur.
- **Celebration in other countries** - During the 19th and early 20th centuries, when tribes such as the Munda, Oraon, and Santal were sent to faraway places as indentured labour, Sarhul traveled with them.
- Today, the festival is celebrated in locations ranging from the tea gardens of Assam to the Andaman and Nicobar Islands, Nepal, Bangladesh, and Bhutan.
- **Sarhul procession** - In the 1960s, Adivasi leader Baba Karthik Oraon, who advocated for social justice and the preservation of tribal culture, began a Sarhul procession from Hatma to the Siram Toli Sarna Sthal in Ranchi.
- **Siram Toli** - In the past 60 years, festive processions have emerged as a crucial part of Sarhul, with the Siram Toli site becoming a major point of convergence for processions.
- **Political identity** – The procession and gathering has also made Sarhul increasingly political, and an occasion to assert the Adivasi identity.
- **Separate religion** - Adivasis following the Sarna faith have been demanding the

inclusion of a Sarna religion column in the census.

At present, under the census, there are codes for only six religions: Hinduism, Islam, Christianity, Sikhism, Buddhism and Jainism.

Reference

The Indian Express | Sarhul

