



Tarnetar Fair: A Living Tradition of Sacred Union and Cultural Continuity in Gujarat

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Abstract

The Tarnetar Fair, conducted yearly in the Surendranagar area of Gujarat, exemplifies a significant amalgamation of mythology, ritual, and social history. Originating from the "Swayamvar" legend of the Mahabharata, the fair functions as both a spiritual trip to the Trinetreshwar Mahadev Temple and a culturally endorsed matrimonial assembly among tribal clans. This study examines the historical roots, mythical influences, architectural legacy, and modern social relevance of the Tarnetar Fair. The study highlights the fair's multifaceted importance in preserving tribal identity, enabling matchmaking, and supporting local economy. The study elucidates how the Tarnetar Fair operates as both a celebration and a venue for cultural continuity and transition, viewed through the combined perspectives of anthropology, history, and religion studies. The fair's lasting allure stems from its capacity to connect historic customs with contemporary communal life, thereby maintaining its significance across generations.

Keywords: Tarnetar Fair, Tradition, Sacred Union, Cultural Continuity

Introduction

India is a nation where tradition is not an artifact of history but a dynamic, influential force that actively shapes the contemporary landscape. Fairs and festivals prominently exemplify this continuity, particularly in the rural regions of states such as Gujarat, where culture and community seamlessly intertwine. Fairs represent dynamic interconnections of faith, folklore, business, and social life, transcending mere periodic festivals. They establish environments in which ancient myths are reenacted, rituals and customs are transmitted, and identities—both individual and communal—are formed and validated. The Tarnetar Fair is a prominent and culturally intricate event in the region. The fair, conducted yearly in Tarnetar hamlet of Surendranagar district, serves as both a religious assembly and a social institution, profoundly ingrained in the local consciousness. Numerous individuals from Gujarat and adjacent regions gather here, not just to honor the Trinetreshwar Mahadev Temple but also to engage in the captivating social ritual of the 'Swayamvar'-inspired matching practice. The Tarnetar Fair is distinguished from other religious or tribal gatherings by its exceptional amalgamation of spirituality, mythology, and courtship. Inspired by the Mahabharata's mythical account of Draupadi's 'Swayamvar', the fair rejuvenates a mythological ethos and modifies it to fulfill modern societal roles, particularly within the Rabari, Bharwad, Kathi, and Ahir populations.

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The Tarnetar Fair exemplifies the intersection of myth and lived experience, illustrating how religious venues may fulfill significant secular and societal functions. The fair is commonly termed a "marriage market"—a culturally endorsed event where young men and women don traditional attire, engage in dances, showcase crafts, and pursue prospective life partners. The emblematic employment of ornamental umbrellas by young men and the elaborate needlework donned by ladies serve not only as aesthetic manifestations but also as coded indicators of amorous availability and cultural affiliation. This behavior, while superficially romantic, is fundamentally anchored in communal values, traditions, and generational expectations. The fair additionally fulfills economic and tourism-related roles. Artisans, entertainers, vendors, and photographers discover opportunities here, establishing a seasonal micro-economy that supports local livelihoods. In recent decades, the Tarnetar Fair has garnered attention from cultural academics, anthropologists, and travel enthusiasts, attracted by its vibrant visuals, mythological significance, and sociological distinctiveness.

This study paper seeks to examine the multifaceted aspects of the Tarnetar Fair, including its historical beginnings, mythical associations, ritual acts, and social importance. This text analyzes the architectural and spiritual significance of the Trinetreshwar Mahadev Temple and explores its ongoing relevance for modern cultures. This research aims to comprehend not only the nature of the Tarnetar Fair but also its significance to the participants, the traditions that influence it, and the culture it perpetuates.

Importance of Fairs

Fairs hold a prominent and complex role in India's cultural landscape, especially in areas such as Gujarat, where tradition and communal life are intricately connected. These assemblies are not mere instances of celebration; they are social institutions that fulfill diverse functions—religious, economic, social, and cultural. The significance of fairs in India is paramount; they represent a potent manifestation of living heritage, particularly in rural and semi-rural regions, where contemporary infrastructure and communication may be deficient, yet cultural life persists vibrantly.

In Gujarat, fairs have traditionally served as seasonal focal points, signifying agricultural cycles, religious holidays, and communal rites. They offer a venue for spiritual practices, enabling adherents to congregate in significant numbers for worship, engage in communal rituals, and strengthen their collective belief systems. Temples and sacred water bodies frequently serve as the focal point of such fairs, imparting a hallowed atmosphere and attracting pilgrims from various areas and occasionally from neighboring states. The Trinetreshwar Mahadev Temple acts as the spiritual core of the Tarnetar Fair, grounding the festival in religious history and imbuing all surrounding events with profound sacred significance. In addition to religious practice, fairs function as significant social platforms. In closely connected yet geographically scattered rural communities, these gatherings serve as venues for reunions—locations where extended families convene,

youth engage, and social ties are revitalized. In conventional Indian societies where arranged marriages prevail, fairs have traditionally been socially sanctioned venues for wooing. The Tarnetar Fair, featuring a 'Swayamvar'-inspired framework, exemplifies this position most vividly. It enables young men and women to interact in a public setting, sanctioned by cultural rituals and traditions. This imparts to the fair a socio-cultural role that transcends its spiritual origins.

Fairs provide essential chances for small-scale commerce and craft trade. Local craftsmen, weavers, potters, and merchants establish stalls to offer their goods—frequently items that are inaccessible via conventional economic avenues. These venues are vital for preserving traditional crafts and cottage businesses, which may otherwise face challenges in a contemporary, urban-focused economy. Fairs function as micro-markets, facilitating direct engagement between producers and consumers while sustaining indigenous economic systems based on barter, trust, and communal interdependence. Fairs serve as venues for performance and artistic expression within cultural contexts. Folk dances, music, puppet performances, storytelling, and dramatic reenactments flourish in these environments, characterized by audience participation and a backdrop rich in emotional and historical significance. These performances are essential acts of cultural transmission, safeguarding the continuity of oral traditions and performing arts throughout generations.

Therefore, the significance of fairs resides in their capacity to integrate various aspects of life. They are not isolated occurrences but interconnected social mechanisms that support belief systems, promote social cohesion, stimulate local economies, and safeguard cultural memory. They exemplify the endurance of tradition in an evolving world, and in locales such as Tarnetar, they maintain significant relevance beyond generations.

Tarnetar Fair: Historical Origins and Mythological Roots

The Tarnetar Fair holds a distinctive role in Gujarat's cultural landscape, functioning not merely as an annual event but as a vibrant tradition intricately linked to mythological symbolism and historical remembrance. Although numerous village elders, especially within the Rabari and Bharwad villages, assert that the fair has existed "since time immemorial," historical records indicate that its organized iteration probably commenced approximately 200 to 250 years ago. Nonetheless, its symbolic importance extends far earlier, linking its spiritual and cultural heritage to the epic tales of ancient India, especially the Mahabharata. Legend states that the Tarnetar Fair is inspired by the 'Swayamvar' of Draupadi, the princess of Panchala. In this narrative, suitors from many countries are summoned to vie for Draupadi's hand in matrimony. The task, imposed by her father King Drupada, required stringing a colossal bow and putting an arrow through the eye of a whirling fish suspended over a bowl of water—without direct visual focus. Arjuna, the illustrious archer of the Pandavas,

accomplished the assignment, thus securing Draupadi. The act of martial prowess, coupled with the sacred ceremony of marriage selection, constitutes the mythological foundation of the Tarnetar Fair.

The Panchal region, home to Tarnetar, considers itself the spiritual heir of this mythical history. For numerous residents, the fair's location is not just historically significant but also cosmologically revered. The conviction is so profound that submerging the ashes of one's forebears in the three sacred kunds at Tarnetar is regarded as akin to doing the rite in the Ganga at Haridwar. This profound veneration bestows upon the fair a significance that surpasses simple celebration—it transforms into a pilgrimage, a replay of sacred history, and an opportunity for the divine. The Trinetreshwar Mahadev Temple, devoted to Lord Shiva, is pivotal to this mythic-historical amalgamation. A flag extending 52 yards is raised on the temple annually on Bhadarva Sud Pancham, coinciding with the observance of Rishi Panchami, an important day in the Hindu lunar calendar. This act signifies the spiritual initiation of the fair, establishing a ritual connection to cosmic cycles and the agricultural calendar.

The fair's mythological foundations additionally fulfill a practical social function. By evoking the 'Swayamvar' tradition, it establishes a culturally endorsed framework for marriage negotiations, particularly within Gujarat's tribal and pastoral tribes. Young men sport intricately embroidered jackets and carry umbrellas, signifying preparedness and courting, while ladies adorn themselves in traditional garments embellished with mirror work and jewelry, reflecting their identity and ambitions within a culturally acquired mythos. Consequently, the Tarnetar Fair is neither a contemporary creation nor simply a vibrant celebration. It serves as a ritualistic locus of memory and myth, where historical narratives are reinterpreted in modern practice, and where people gather not only to commemorate but to engage in a tradition that intertwines romantic selection, spiritual devotion, and ancestral veneration. The historical and mythological dimensions that underpin the fair have allowed it to endure not merely as a spectacle, but as a sacred tale perpetually experienced and revitalized by the people of Gujarat.

Tarnetar Fair: A Marriage Fair in Gujarat

The Tarnetar Fair is especially distinguished for its function as a traditional marriage fair among the several roles that Indian fairs serve—religious, cultural, and economic. Tarnetar is distinguished by its amalgamation of mythology, tribal customs, and active societal role. This distinctive fair revitalizes the ancient tradition of 'Swayamvar', usually confined to mythical literature such as the Ramayana and Mahabharata, fostering a dynamic social environment where matrimonial matches are initiated, examined, and formalized. The fair, conducted yearly in the Hindu lunar month of Bhadrapad, often occurring in August or September, is situated in Tarnetar hamlet, approximately 39 kilometers from Chotila in Gujarat's Surendranagar district. While grounded in religious tradition, the fair is also a social event, attracting hundreds of people from not just the

surrounding villages of Gujarat but also from all regions of India and worldwide. Tourists, photographers, and cultural scholars converge to observe this uncommon convergence of romantic tradition and spiritual practice.

The Tarnetar Fair serves mostly as a culturally endorsed matchmaking occasion. Young men from the Rabari, Ahir, Bharwad, Kathi, and other tribal or pastoral populations don vivid traditional garments, frequently bearing intricately embroidered umbrellas referred to as *chhatris*. These umbrellas transcend mere decoration; they symbolize courtship and have exquisite designs that showcase the artisan talents of the bearer or their family. Women, adorned with mirror-work blouses, substantial silver jewelry, and vibrant *ghaghra*s, accompany their families, showcasing themselves as prospective brides. In this communal, ceremonial environment, eye contact, synchronized movements, and nuanced gestures function as non-verbal indicators in a process of reciprocal engagement and familial discourse. It is essential to recognize that, in contrast to metropolitan dating or planned marriage contexts, the Tarnetar Fair preserves a nuanced cultural equilibrium. It offers a public yet conventional framework for personal decision-making—a unique and intricate social environment where tribe traditions and individual autonomy intersect. Although weddings may not be immediately concluded, the fair facilitates discussions between families, frequently resulting in subsequent engagements or talks following the event. This fair is distinguished by an atmosphere that venerates love and togetherness as both sacred and joyous. The fairgrounds resonate with folk music, traditional dances such as *Rahado*, *Dandiya Raas*, and *Garba*, alongside performances that embody Gujarat's rich cultural history. These are not only forms of entertainment; they are courtship rituals that provide venues for dance-oriented interactions among prospective spouses under the observant yet tolerant scrutiny of the community.

This blend of historical symbolism with experiential practice draws not only locals but also cultural anthropologists, documentary filmmakers, and travel writers, many of whom regard Tarnetar as a unique exemplar of indigenous matchmaking, differentiated from both planned and contemporary love weddings. Tarnetar is not merely a fair; it is a marriage custom manifested, where spiritual symbolism and social pragmatism converge under the auspices of culture, dancing, and heavenly blessing.

Trinetreshwar Mahadev Temple

The Trinetreshwar Mahadev Temple is the central edifice of the Tarnetar Fair, providing the festival with its spiritual significance and historical continuity. The temple functions as the spiritual foundation of the fair, influencing its schedule, ceremonies, and sacred landscape, rather than merely serving as a backdrop to the celebrations. The temple attracts devotees during the fair and serves year-round as a symbol of architectural history, religious devotion, and cultural memory.

Historical documentation and architectural examination indicate that the Trinetreshwar Mahadev Temple may belong to the 10th century, with numerous academics crediting its construction to the Gurjara-Pratihara dynasty, who governed significant regions of North and Western India. The Pratihara monarchs, recognized for their support of Shaivism and their inclination towards erecting magnificent temples for Lord Shiva, are thought to have either built or subsequently restored the Trinetreshwar shrine. Their influence is apparent in the temple's stylistic features—sculpted stone columns, intricate reliefs, and the general design that reflects other Pratihara-era temples. Archaeological evidence indicates that the Pratiharas had a notable presence in the Saurashtra region as early as the 8th century. This aligns with local oral traditions, which assert that the temple has perpetually remained a hallowed spot. Regardless of being a humble village shrine or a grand royal commission, its spiritual significance predates the structured fair, intertwining the site with mythology, ritual, and geography.

A distinctive characteristic of the Trinetreshwar Temple is the existence of two Shivlings. Local legend holds that the larger Shivling is the more ancient of the two, deemed anadi (without origin), whilst the smaller one rose to prominence after the remodeling initiatives of Karan Singhji in the early 20th century, particularly around 1906 CE, when the temple garnered renewed attention. The duality in the shrine's imagery signifies a complex spiritual past, merging ancient sacred veneration with contemporary restoration initiatives. The vicinity of the shrine enhances its sacredness. A lake is situated directly in front of the temple, accompanied by three sacred ponds or kunds: Vishnukund, Shivkund, and Brahmakund. These water bodies are regarded as spiritually significant, with numerous believers asserting that ritual bathing in them—particularly during the fair—can cleanse the soul and pay homage to deceased ancestors. For anyone unable to visit the Ganga or Haridwar, Tarnetar presents a local option that is similarly revered in the cultural consciousness of the area. The temple governs more than 100 bighas of agricultural land, underscoring its historical importance as a landholding entity, potentially supported by royal patronage or temple economy. The temple has been designated for protection by the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) due to its architectural and cultural significance. This guarantees the preservation of the complex stone carvings, mythological representations, and sculptural integrity of the temple for future centuries. In summary, the Trinetreshwar Temple serves as both a spiritual hub and an architectural icon, intricately woven with the essence of the Tarnetar Fair. Its spiritual symbolism, historical heritage, and visual magnificence render it a living temple and a silent observer of millennia of cultural evolution, reflecting the enduring rhythms of devotion and community.

Conclusion

The Tarnetar Fair is not merely a lively rural celebration; it is a cultural institution, a revered tradition, and a social phenomena intricately woven into the communal memory of Gujarat. Tarnetar is distinguished from other fairs not merely by its scale or vibrancy, but by its deep ties to mythology, architecture, ritual, and social

customs. It resides in the confluence of myth and personal experience, where grand tales such as Draupadi's 'Swayamvar' are not merely recalled but are symbolically re-enacted through contemporary customs of matchmaking and courtship among tribal societies.

The fair's historical and mythological origins establish a basis that is both sacred and inclusive. Inspired by the epics, particularly the Mahabharata, the fair promotes a perspective in which spirituality and interpersonal connections are interconnected, and the choice of a life partner transcends personal or familial considerations, becoming a public celebration and communal endorsement. The dual significance—ritualistic and romantic—renders the Tarnetar Fair particularly distinctive among India's numerous celebrations. The fair's enduring success and cultural vitality are upheld by the Trinetreshwar Mahadev Temple, whose historical significance and architectural splendor consistently draw pilgrims and scholars. The sacred ponds, dual Shivalings, and artistic grandeur transcend the fair from a simple celebration to a spiritual pilgrimage. The temple serves as the fair's central site and a temporal and spiritual anchor, where the community annually reconvenes to reaffirm its connections with the divine and each other.

The fair is crucial for the establishment of tribal identity, particularly for communities such as the Rabaris, Bharwads, Kathis, and Ahirs, who view it as an appropriate and esteemed venue for establishing marital partnerships. In a society where matrimonial rituals are strictly regulated by caste, clan, and ritual, the fair provides a venue that harmonizes freedom and tradition. It emphasizes the principles of community solidarity while discreetly permitting individual choice within a firmly entrenched cultural framework. Tarnetar has evolved into an economic center for rural craftsmen, performers, and local merchants, who depend on this annual event to market crafts, textiles, and food, while engaging in Gujarat's intangible cultural economy. The rising prominence in the tourism sector has heightened awareness of the significance of heritage preservation, encompassing not just monuments but also rituals, languages, and artistic expressions. Within the broader framework of Indian culture, where modernity frequently jeopardizes traditional frameworks, the Tarnetar Fair exemplifies how legacy may evolve while preserving its core identity. It illustrates that rituals can transform, myths can be experienced, and fairs can act as connections between the past and the present. Tarnetar is not static; it is a dynamic institution that perpetually embodies the aspirations, convictions, and identities of its annual attendees.

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