

Makara Sankranti

Importance:

Makar Sankranti is one of the most auspicious day for the Hindus, and is celebrated almost universally across the country, in many forms and hues, with great devotion, fervor & gaiety. As the first festival in the year's calendar, it is eagerly awaited, especially by the agrarian sections. Considering India's size and diversity, it is no surprise that the celebration of Sankranti is varied, and is celebrated in many different ways. The celebration of this festival has more than spiritual reasons to it though. Deep scientific and cultural reasons also exist for the gaiety and vibrancy of the festival and its deep ingraining in the psyche of the Indian people.

Scientific Significance:

As the earth orbits around the sun over the course of one year, it also wobbles about its axis, just like a spinning top. This makes the sunlight fall on different parts of the world at different angles, and changes the seasons. For half the year, the sun seems to travel northwards, and the other half of the year, it travels southwards. When the Northern hemisphere has winter, the Southern hemisphere has summer. In the Northern Hemisphere, December 21 is the day when we are tilted the furthest away from the sun. That is the shortest day of the year, the winter solstice. When the sun is travelling southwards, the days become shorter, colder, there is less sunlight and crops don't grow as well as other times. Thus, for Indians, the northward journey of the sun is advantageous and eagerly awaited.

According to the Hindu astronomy, on *Makar sankranti*, the sun enters the *Makara rashi* (Capricorn). On Makar Sankranti day, 14th January, the sun no longer moves southward and begins its northward journey (*Uttarayan*). *Makar Sankranti* marks the end of a long winter with the return of the sun to the Northern Hemisphere and hence the name *Uttarayan*. After this day the days start becoming longer & warmer, and thus the chill of winter is on decline. It signifies the end of winter and the beginning of spring, when the trees start becoming green again, the flowers bloom and the weather becomes pleasant.

For the sons of the soil, Sankranti represents the beginning of the farming season. With the end of winter, farmers across the country joyously look forward to the start of sowing, and can begin to plan out their crop growing for the rest of the year. They begin the tilling of the land, and the preparation of their fields for the all important sowing. With agriculture being the life blood of this country, it is no surprise that Sankranti is universally celebrated and welcomed with glee by the farmer community, who pray to the gods on this occasion to bless them with bountiful harvests that year.

Astrological Significance:

Unlike other festivals, which are based on the traditional Indian Calendar, which is set according to Lunar positions, *sankranti* is a solar event. Thus, while the dates of all Indian festivals keep changing every year, the English calendar date of *Makar Sankranti* is always the same - 14th January.

Makara Sankranti is the transition of the Sun from Sagittarius to Capricorn, during the winter solstice, and is celebrated in the Hindu month of Magha. From this day begins the six-month long *Uttarayana*, considered very auspicious for attaining higher worlds.

In Sanskrit, *Makara* signifies Capricorn; *Sankranti* means 'transition'. Each month, there is a sankranti, when the sun passes from one sign of the zodiac to the next. There are twelve signs of the zodiac, and thus there are twelve *Sankrantis* in a year. Each of these has its own relative importance but the two most important are the *Mesha* (Aries) *Sankranti* and the most important, *Makara* (Capricorn) *Sankranti*.

Religious and Mythological Significance:

1. According to the Puranas, on this day, the Sun visits the house of his son, Shani, who is the presiding deity of *Makara Rashi*, and resides there for a month. Even though, according to Mythology, Surya and Shani do not get along, the Sun god still visits his son on this day. Thus, Sankranti symbolizes the special relationship between father and son, and the son's responsibility to carry forward his father's dream and the continuity of the family.
2. According to Hindu cosmology, one human year is a single day for the Gods. *Uttarayana* represents the 'day', while *Dakshinayana* is said to be the 'night'. Uttarayana is also called as Devayana, and the next half is called Pitrayana. Just as most auspicious activities are carried out during daytime, and especially during sunrise, Uttarayana is considered auspicious, and Makara Sankranti is considered to be the most propitious time to begin any good activities.
3. It was on this day that Lord Vishnu ended the threat of the Asuras by destroying them and burying their heads under *Mandara Parvata*. Thus, *Makara Sankranti* also represents the end of negativities and beginning of an era of righteous living.
4. The 60,000 sons of King Sagara had been cursed by Maharishi Kapila, whose penance they had disturbed. Kapila instantly turned the princes into ashes at his Ashram (near present day Ganga Sagar). To give their souls peace and liberation and to wash away their sins, Maharshi Bhagiratha performed great penance to bring Ganga to earth.

After much penance, It was on Makara Sankranti that Bhagirath finally received his boon and was able to do *tarpana* with Ganges water for unfortunate ancestors, thereby liberating them from the curse. After visiting *Patala* to wipe away the curse of Bhagirath's ancestors, Ganga finally merged with the sea. Even today a very big Ganga Sagar Mela is organized every year on this day at the confluence of River Ganges and the Bay of Bengal. Lakhs take dip in the water and do tarpan for their ancestors.

There is another spiritually symbolic aspect to this story. The 60,000 cursed sons of Maharaj Sagar represent our thoughts, which are dulled and deadened by uncultured & blind ambition. Enlightenment can only be achieved through dedicated hard work to achieve Brahma-Vidya.

5. Probably the most well known reference to Makara Sankranti comes from the *Mahabharata*, when Bhishma, declared his intent to leave his mortal coil on this day. He

had the boon of Ichha-Mrityu from his father, so he lay on a bed of arrows till this day and then left his mortal coil on *Makar Sankranti* day. It is believed that the person, who dies during the period of Uttarayana, achieves *moksha*.

Ritual and Practice:

The people of India celebrate Makara Sankranti in many names, in different forms and ways. With the northward ascent of the sun indicating the end of a hard and cold winter, the beginning of spring and the farming season, this festival is eagerly awaited by the farmers. Sun worship is universal, as is the giving of gifts to invoke prosperity and bountiful harvests.

In North India, millions of people take a dip in holy places like Ganga Sagar & Prayag and pray to the Sun god to grant them prosperity and bountiful harvests. Gujarati's not only look reverentially up to the sun, but also offer thousands of their colorful oblations in the form of beautiful kites all over the skyline. In the South, it is celebrated with pomp and pageantry as Sankranthi and Pongal, and in Punjab, as Lohri & Maghi.

Sun worship is a very common part of all celebrations. For Hindus, the Sun represents *Pratyaksha-Brahman* – the manifest God, who symbolizes, the one, non-dual, self-effulgent, glorious divinity blessing one & all tirelessly. The Sun transcends time and is also the one who rotates the proverbial Wheel of Time. Thus, his northward journey is universally awaited.

The use of til (sesame) is another common aspect of all celebrations. Til is a high energy food, and keeps the body warm, especially important since the festival is celebrated in mid winter. With the start of spring being heralded by winds, kite flying is a pastime that forms a common part of celebrations in North and West India.

The different names by which Sankranti is known are:

Makar Sankranti or Sankranti - Andhra Pradesh, Bihar, Goa, Sikkim, Jharkhand, Karnataka, Kerala, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, Manipur, Orissa, Uttar Pradesh, Uttaranchal and West Bengal.

Uttarayan - Gujarat and Rajasthan

Maghi - Haryana, Himachal Pradesh and Punjab

Pongal - Tamil Nadu

Magh Bihu or Bhogali Bihu - Assam

Shishur Saenkraat - Kashmir Valley

Makara Vilakku Festival - Sabarimala Temple (Kerala)

Sankranti is also celebrated in other countries under different names and in different ways

Nepal – the Tharu people celebrate it as **Maghi**, others as **Maghe Sankranti or Maghe Sakrati**

Thailand - สงกรานต์ **Songkran (in April)**

Laos - **Pi Ma Lao**

Myanmar - **Thingyan**

Cambodia - **Moha Sangkran**

Tamil Nadu:

In Tamil Nadu, Sankranti is known by the name of “**PONGAL**”, which takes its name from the surging of rice boiled in a pot of milk, and this festival has more significance than even Diwali. It is very popular particularly amongst farmers, since it is the most important harvest festival.

Pongal is traditionally dedicated to the Sun God Surya. Tamils thank the solar deity for the good harvest and consecrate the first grain to him on this '*Surya Mangalyam*'. Rice and pulses cooked together in ghee and milk ('*Pongal*') are offered to the family deity after the ritual worship. The day before Sankranti is known as Bhogi Pandigai or Bong. On this day, people discard old things and focus on new belongings. The house is cleaned, painted and decorated to give a festive look.

Karnataka:

The celebration of Makara Sankranti is very similar in Andhra Pradesh and Karnataka. In Karnataka, this is the *Suggi* or harvest festival for farmers of Kaveri basin of Karnataka. Since sugarcane is widely grown, it plays a prominent role in the celebrations, as the first harvest of the season.

In Karnataka, a proportionate mixture of til, chana dal, finely cut pieces of jaggery, dry coconut and roasted groundnuts are mixed to prepare a delicious combination. This along with sugar cubes crafted in varieties of shapes, a piece of sugar cane, fruits, betel leaves and any other attractive fancy items and goodies are distributed among relatives, neighbors and friends (called “*Yellu Beerodu*”).

This is an occasion for excitement and festivity especially for the children, who dress in new clothes and receive gifts from the elders in the family. Small children, below five years of age are considered divine, and this festival is used to pray for their wellbeing. A ritual called “*Phala Eriyadu*” is performed in many households, where pieces of sugarcane, mixture of til, jaggery, channa dal, Copra, and groundnut, a few coins and Jujube berries (called '*yellachi kai*', a small, red, sour berry) is dropped over the child's head into a bowl in the evening. This is then distributed later. This ritual acts to invoke blessings and prosperity for the child.

For farmers, the welfare of the cattle also plays an important role. Cattle are bathed and cleaned in the morning, their horns painted and decorated, and they are worshipped. They are adorned with colorful cloth on their back. In the evening, after sunset, the cattle are then taken in a procession to the fields and are made to jump over burning coals. This ritual, called *Kicchu haisodu*, is believed to ward off any evil, enhances the immunity of the cattle and keeps diseases away.

Andhra Pradesh:

Sankranti is celebrated for four days in Andhra Pradesh.

The day preceding Makara Sankranti is called Bhogi. On this day, people discard old and derelict things and buy new things, representing change or transformation. At dawn, people light a bonfire, and offer the old items to it. Symbolically, old habits, vices, attachment and materialism is also sacrificed.

Similar to the ritual in Karnataka, infants and children are showered with the Indian Jujube fruit (called "*Regi Pandlu*" in Andhra). Sweets in generous quantities are prepared and distributed. It is a time for families to congregate. Brothers pay special tribute to their married sisters by giving gifts as affirmation of their filial love. Landlords give gifts of food, clothes and money to their workforce. The second day is Makara Sankranti , also called "*Pedda Panduga*" (which translates to "the big festival"). On this day, everyone wears new clothes, prays to God, and make offerings of traditional food to ancestors who have died.

Kerala:

At Sabarimala temple in Kerala, the 40 days anushthana by the devotees of Lord Ayyappa ends on this day in Sabarimala with a big festival. On this day, the Makara Vilakku celebrations take place, and the much awaited Makara Jyothi is seen.

Maharashtra:

In Maharashtra on Sankranti, people exchange multi-coloured *til-guds* made from *til* (sesame seeds) and jaggery and *til-laddus* made from til and sugar. *Til-polis* are offered for lunch and these are specialties of Maharashtrian cuisine. When exchanging tilguls as tokens of goodwill, people greet each other saying – "*til-gul ghya, god god bola*" meaning "accept these tilguls and speak sweet words". The under-lying thought in the exchange of tilguls is to forget the past ill-feelings and hostilities and resolve to speak sweetly and remain friends.

Makara Sankranti is a special day for women in Maharashtra. Married women are invited for a get-together called "*Haldi-Kumkoo*" and give each other gifts of utensils by the lady of the house.

Gujarat:

The observance of Sankranti in Gujarat is more or less the same as in Maharashtra. In addition, there is also a custom of giving gifts to relatives. The elders in the family give gifts to the younger members of the family. Gujarati Pundits on this auspicious day grant scholarships to students for higher studies in astrology and philosophy. This festival is thus an important way to maintain the social relationships within the family, caste and community.

Bundelkhand and Madhya Pradesh:

In Bundelkhand and Madhya Pradesh, Sankranti is known by the name "**SUKARAT**" or "**SAKARAT**" and is celebrated with great pomp merriment accompanied by lot of sweets.

Punjab:

Sankranti is celebrated in Punjab as **LOHARI**. December and January being the coldest months of the year, huge bonfires are lit on the eve of Sankranti. Sweets, sugarcane and rice are thrown in the bonfires, around which friends and relatives gather around. The following day, which is Sankranti is celebrated as **MAGHI**. A sumptuous meal is prepared on this day, and revelers also celebrate the festival through dance, like the Bhangra.

Uttar Pradesh:

In UP, Sankranti is called "**KICHERI**". The most important aspect of this day is to have a dip at holy places. A sea of humanity can be seen bathing in the Sangam at Prayag (Allahabad)

where the rivers Ganga, Jamuna and Saraswathi flow together. At the confluence of these holy rivers every year Kumbh Mela is held for full one month.

Bengal:

In Bengal every year a Mela is held at Ganga Sagar where the river Ganga is believed to have dived into the nether world and purified the ashes of the sixty thousand ancestors of King Bhagirath. This mela is attended by a large number of pilgrims from East India.

Tribal Celebrations:

For many tribals, Sankranti represents the start of the New Year, and they celebrate it by lighting bonfires, dancing, gathering the entire family together for a festive feast. The Bhuya tribals of Orissa have their Maghyatra, in which small home-made articles are put for sale.

In many places, the temple of the Community Goddess is decorated with dazzling lights. The Goddess is worshipped by the upper castes and lower castes alike, and the "bhog" to the Goddess is prepared by both. Tribals participate in the Mela together as one single family.

No matter the state or the culture of the people celebrating it, Makara Sankranti represents a few things that are common to the whole of India. Animals, especially cows are revered. Travel is generally considered to be inappropriate, as these days are dedicated for re-union of the families. Sankranti in this sense demonstrates their strong cultural values as well as a time for change and transformation. Devotees seek out their Gurus and seek their blessings. Farmers worship the sun god to pray for bountiful harvests in the season to come. The old is discarded and a new season is ushered in. Old hurts and faults are forgotten, a new page is turned, and everyone resolves to act with goodwill. This festival occupies a significant place in the cultural history of our country and symbolizes the victory of order over chaos and of love over hate.