



Sankranti or Pongal

To Earth, a Festival of Thankfulness

Hindus acknowledge the sacredness of Earth and all life. Nature is a creative force worthy of respect, even veneration. Each year at harvest time, agrarian communities all over India celebrate this festival with enthusiastic abandon. They dance, fly kites, sing and exchange gifts in a grand thanksgiving celebration.



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What is the nature of this festival?

Makara Sankranti is four days of giving thanks to four great forces of influence and protection: Indra, the giver of rain; Surya, the Sun; gracious cattle and beloved ancestors. This happy occasion is known as Pongal by Tamils, Pedha Panduga among the Telugus and Lohri by Punjabis. It begins on the day the sun enters Makara (Capricorn), between January 13 and 15. This is a special time of giving blankets, pumpkins, sugarcane and other items to the poor. Married women are honored, and gifts are given to newborn children.

What is done on the first day?

The day before festivities begin, Hindus thoroughly clean their homes, discarding unwanted, worn out or broken items and obtaining replacements for the year ahead. This clears away stale, negative energy and brings an influx of dynamic blessings into the home. It is a time for clearing the mind as well, to begin the year with focus and confidence. On this day, Indra, the celestial power of lightning and rain, is worshiped.

What happens on the second day?

Using colored rice flour, women draw patterns on the floor called *kolam* or *rangoli*, depicting the Moon and the Sun in a chariot. Prayers are directed to Surya, the Sun, with offerings of freshly harvested sugarcane and vegetables. The main event happens at sunrise when everyone gathers in a gaily decorated compound where freshly harvested rice is cooked



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with milk in a new pot. In Tamil communities, the moment the pot boils over, all shout, "Pongalo Pongal!" ("It's boiling over!"). All watch to see whether the froth overflows toward the East, which auspiciously indicates abundance for the year ahead. Conches are sounded and children dance for joy. A portion of the boiled rice, the season's first food, is offered to Mother Earth as a gesture of gratitude, and to all creatures and nature spirits. The remainder is eaten by the families. Wearing new clothes, families visit one another, exchanging gifts and enjoying feasts.

What happens on the third day?
On the third day, Hindus offer thanks to cattle,

the farmer's gracious helpers. Bulls and cows are lovingly adorned with cowrie shells, embroidered shawls, colorful ropes and bells. They are fed sweet rice and sugar cane.

How is the final day celebrated?
On the fourth day, ancestors and wildlife are venerated. It is a day for picnic outings and family visits. Young girls and women receive blessings from older women for happiness and prosperity. Youth honor their elders. Brothers and sisters exchange gifts and express mutual respect and allegiance. Poets and their works are revered. In Tamil Nadu, it is also called Tiruvalluvar Day, in honor of the author of the famed ethical scripture *Tirukural*.

Sakkarai Pongal

This recipe for sumptuous sweet rice is from Jaffna, Sri Lanka
Preparation time: 10 minutes
Cooking time: 55 minutes
Serves: 4
Equipment: a medium pot, a skillet and a big spoon

Ingredients
2 cups rice, 1/4 cup raisins, 2 tbsp mung dal, 1 tsp cardamom powder, 2/3 cup sugar, 3/4 cup freshly grated coconut (or frozen grated coconut), 1/4 cup cashews, 1 tbsp ghee

Method

1. Roast mung dal in a dry skillet until it is golden brown.
2. Boil rice and mung dal in five cups of water for thirty minutes, until the rice is cooked.
3. Add sugar and coconut and stir well. Reduce heat and simmer for 10 minutes.
4. Fry raisins and cashews in ghee until nuts are light brown, then add them to the rice along with the cardamom powder.
5. Stir rice well & remove from heat.

Tidbits About the Harvest Festival

Why is the harvest festival so important?
Marked as an inauspicious time, the months before the harvest are fraught with anxiety for farmers and for society. All celebrations, such as weddings, are held off. Months of toil in the fields and uncertainty over the harvest come to an end with Makara Sankranti. The harvest brings prosperity. Agrarian communities all over India celebrate this festival with enthusiastic abandon. Once the crops are harvested and cash flows in, communities proceed to plan weddings and other rites of passage. Over one quarter of the *Rig Veda* is devoted to praises of Indra, the lord of the elements, the exalted Lord of the devas and God of rain, who is essential to the yield.

Are there other festivals during this month? In the Bhogi bonfire, communities heap and burn organic, agricultural waste accompanied by festive dancing to drums. During Kummi, a folk dance is performed

by children, twirling and clapping around a pot to simple poetry chanted in a sing-song manner. For Gombe Ellu, children carry dolls as they visit neighbors with offerings of *ellu bella* (a "trail-mix" made of desiccated coconut, jaggery, sesame seeds and peanuts). They give and receive treats, learning from a small age the value of community sharing.

Hinduism: Fact & Fiction

FACT: Hinduism places great emphasis on giving. *Dana*, charity or giving, is one of the tenets of yoga. Hindus are encouraged to give to the poor, to holy men and to religious institutions. The *Tirukural* inquires, "The benevolent expect no return for their dutiful giving. How can the world ever repay the rain cloud?" Dashamamsha, or tithing, giving one-tenth of income to the religious institution you are affiliated to, is an ancient Hindu practice.

FICTION: It is commonly thought that all Hindus believe that God occasionally incarnates as an earthly being, called an avatar. In fact, this doctrine is specific only to some denominations and traditions.

