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## Makar Sankranti: A Pervading Connect Across Skies, Lands and Peoples

[D K Hari & D K Hema Hari](#) · Jan 16, 2022, 09:34 am IST in Bharat, Delhi, Culture



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*Indian notion of festivals is rooted in the civilisational philosophy of SarveBhavantuSukhinah – May Everyone be Happy. Festivals like Makara Sankranti, closely associated with the transition of Sun, is celebrated with different names across India and Asia*

*Kranta* means to step into, sweep into, spread across, cross over, pervade into, invade into—a space, realm, boundary etc. That is how we get the word *Kranti* for revolution, which means a movement that spreads across people, crossing over boundaries that have hitherto kept them away.

Every *Kranti*, every revolution brings about a change.



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**While *Kranti* is a revolution, we celebrate a Sankranti as a festival. Why so?**

Sankranti is also a movement that spreads across in a good way, which is why the prefix *San*, which means that which augurs well.

**What is this movement and what is it spreading?**

Space is not still even for the shortest duration of time. It is the most dynamic place ever. Everything is moving in Space, but we do not always perceive it. We know and can see the Moon to move around the Earth. We see the Sun moving in the sky but we know that it is a perceived movement of the Sun and it is actually the Earth, which is both, rotating about its own axis, as well as revolving around the Sun in its orbit.

The Sun, however, is also moving around the hub of its mother galaxy, the Milky Way Galaxy. But, this we are not able to perceive or see from Earth in our own lifetimes. Like this, there are a zillion different movements happening and Space is never the same from one instant to another.

It is Sankrantis that help us detect and track the changes in Space in units of humanly perceivable time and change.

As the Earth moves around the Sun, to keep track of its position in its orbit with respect to the Sun, our ancients had divided the orbital path into 12 areas called *Rasi*, meaning cluster of stars. It is known as Zodiac in Western astronomy. The *Rasi* was identified and named, based on the cluster of stars that were prominently visible in that region of the sky. All the planets, moon and the Sun can be seen to be sweeping through these 12 *Rasis*, when seen from Earth. The entire circle is called the *Rasi Chakra* or Zodiacal belt.

Even as the Sun moves from East to West across the sky due to the Earth's rotation, the Sun also moves from one *Rasi* in the background sky, into another *Rasi* over a month. Such a transit or entry from one *Rasi* into another *Rasi* is called a Sankranti.

It is a *kranthi* since the Sun is sweeping into and spreading over its presence into a new *Rasi*. It is going to pervade that section of the sky as seen from Earth for the next one month. As the movement of the Sun augurs well for Earthlings, it is also a Sankranti.

Thus, the transit of the Sun into every *Rasi*, Zodiac has been called a *Sankranti* starting with *Mesha Sankranti* when the Sun transits into Mesham, Aries. In present day Solar based calendars, it occurs around mid-April. Hence, the traditional Indian New Year is celebrated in mid-April as *Mesha Sankranti*.

Around mid-January is when the Sun transits into *Makara*, Capricorn and that is when the Sun based calendars of India and hence the people following it across India, celebrate it as *Makara Sankranti*.

We thus see a beautiful connect with the Skies in our celebration of *Makara Sankranti*.

But, what is so special about the *Sankranti* into *Makara*, called *Makara Sankranti*?

The *Makara Sankranti* is an occasion that is today celebrated for at least 4 special reasons:

- The singular aspect of the Sun being in Makara Rasi
- *Uttarayanam / Uttarayan*
- Harvest Festival
- Commemorating the arrival of the Ganga River

### Noteworthy Aspect When Sun Is In Makara Rasi

Indian thought has symbolised the Cosmos in the form of the Trinity – Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva along with their spouses, families and attendants, where,

- Brahma is revered as the principle, Tattva of Space and Growth to keep the Cosmos evolving in Time.
- Vishnu is revered as the principle, Tattva of all the pervasive forces that sustain the order and workings of the Cosmos at both Macro and Micro scales of time, space, matter and consciousness.
- Shiva is revered as the principle, Tattva of auspiciousness to manifest, exist and regenerate, thus keeping the Cosmos existing in Time and between cycles of Time.

Amongst these, Vishnu is associated with the star, *Nakshatra Sravana / Thiruvonam*, which is the triad Altair, Alshain and Tarazed stars in Aquila constellation. These form part of the Capricorn or *Makara Rasi* where the Sun can be seen starting from Makara Sankranti.

Shiva is associated with the *Arudra Nakshatra*, i.e. the star Betelgeuse which is in the Orion constellation and can be seen rising in the east, exactly opposite to the Sun in the *Makara Rasi* as the Sun sets in the west in the evenings.



Brahma is the Space that lies between them in the sky. Thus, when the Sun is in *Makara Rasi*, one gets to see the Trinity in the sky for the whole month, especially in the darkness that sets in early during Winter evenings.

It is a period that is held to augur well for all.

### Uttarayan

Even as we see the Sun moving from one Rasi into another, every month, the point from where the Sun rises on the Eastern Horizon every day, is not the same each day. This changes, day on day, due to the 23.5-degree tilt of the Earth's axis with respect to the plane of its orbit around the Sun which gives rise to seasons as the Earth orbits around the Sun.

The orbit of Earth being almost circular, the point of sunrise keeps oscillating between a northern most point called the Tropic of Cancer and a southern most point called the Tropic of Capricorn.

These northmost and southmost extremes in the Sun's apparent oscillations are called the Summer and Winter Solstices respectively and they give rise to the longest day in the year and the longest night in the year respectively too. The points in the orbit, when the Sun's rays fall exactly at the centre, along the equator giving rise to equal day and night, are called Equinoxes.

The sun's constant movement between the Tropic of Cancer and Tropic of Capricorn has been called in the Indian context as *Dakshinayanam* and *Uttarayanam* respectively.

*Uttarayanam* / *Uttarayan* therefore heralds the period when the Sun, which is in the Tropic of Capricorn in the Southern Hemisphere, has started moving northwards towards us in India / Northern hemisphere. This means we start having longer days.

*Uttarayan* being an event that bears significance to season, warmth, light and hence all other dependent aspects such as food and climate, has been celebrated by many civilisations in the Northern Hemisphere.

The *Uttarayan* day has been held in high significance not only by the Indian civilisation but also other Nature worshipping civilisations such as the pre-Christian Roman civilisation. The Romans had celebrated this day as *Natalis Solis Invicti* or the Nativity / Birth Day of the Invincible Sun. It used to be celebrated on December 25, the day when the Winter Solstice use to occur about 1700 years ago, before the start of the celebrations of Christmas on the same day.

The day of Makara Sankranti, at one point in time, millennia ago, used to be the day of *Uttarayan* too. This association of Makara Sankranti with *Uttarayan* has stuck in people's memory and hence *Uttarayan* has been another reason to celebrate Makara Sankranti.

### **Harvest Season**

Coming down from the skies to the ground, *Uttarayan* and its associated seasonal implications have also meant that it is Harvest time in many parts of India.

We thus find that, people across almost all of India, celebrate Makara Sankranti as Harvest festivals in their own local traditions, with different names, but for the same reason – thanking nature for its bounty. India has also been celebrating *Mesha Sankranti* as New Year but under the various names of Baisakhi, Poila Baishak, Vaishak, Vishu, Rongali Bihu, Puthandu etc. Let us now look at some of the salient aspects of some of the Makara Sankranti festivals to see the sweet "Unity in Diversity" within India.

### **United By Sweetness**

It is beautiful to behold how almost entire India celebrates this festival with one or another form of Jaggery. Fundamentally, after all the rains and plenty of water, it is time now to relish the sugarcane that has grown in abundance across the lands. But, even before sugar is got from sugarcane, what is produced is jaggery, a more natural, nutrient rich produce from sugarcane. Most sweets of Indian festivals are therefore prepared from jaggery and sometimes, just plain and fresh jaggery is also relished during this festival.

Tamil Nadu celebrates Makara Sankranti as Thai Pongal Pandigai with the preparation of a rice dish made with jaggery called Pongal. In Telugu land, this festival is called Pedha Panduga, meaning the big festival and is also celebrated similarly.



In the northern parts of India, in Uttar Pradesh and Bihar, Khichdi festival is celebrated on Makara Sankranti with preparation of Khichdi—a rich dish and a separate sweet dish made of jaggery and sesame.

We find that all parts of India are united in celebrating Makara Sankranti.

All are united in celebrating it as a Harvest festival.

All celebrate it with rice, lentils, jaggery and seasonal vegetables.

### **Ring out the Old and Ring in the New**

*Makara Sankranti* is preceded by a day of cleaning the house/barns etc. and lighting a bonfire to get rid of all waste from the home and all ill will from one's hearts. Commonly called *Bhogi*, it takes on different names in different regions but the underlying sentiment and the way of expressing it, has been the same across times, across these regions and across the hearts of the people.

Prior to the *Bhogi* day, every household is cleaned of its cobwebs. All the unwanted stuff is taken out, accumulated and burnt as bonfire at sunrise or sundown, much like the concept of spring cleaning.

This makes way for the new to enter. New harvest, new wealth, new goals, new pacts and newfound energy and happiness.

### ***Bhogi* and The Celebration of Three Harvests**

The word “*Bhogi*” comes from *Bhog*, meaning “bountiful harvest”. India has three *Bhogs* every year.

During the medieval times, the living conditions in Europe were very tough from many perspectives, including the climatic conditions, due to which only one harvest was possible in a year.

On the other hand, in the local literature of India, in different vernacular languages, the capability of this land to yield three harvests or *Bhog*, is discussed frequently. Even to date, the term “three *Bhog*”, continues to be the yardstick to measure the industrious nature of the agriculturist and the yield of his land. India still has 3 harvest seasons which are today called Kharif, Rabi and Zaid.

### ***Bhogi* – Tamil Nadu to Maharashtra**

In South India, the day before Sankranti / Pongal is celebrated as *Bhogi* and likewise in Maharashtra too. In Tamil Nadu and Telugu land, *Bhogi* fires are lit at dawn in front of every house to discard the waste in the house. Small fires are lit to the accompaniment of small drums played by the children of the house. We thus see a bonfire connect across India from deep South, Tamil Nadu's *Bhogi* to Northwest in Punjab's Lohri to Northeast Assam's Uruku and Meji.

### **United By Sharing**

The Sankranti festival also has an inherent angle of sharing the harvest with all, including birds and animals.

### **Mattu Pongal in Tamil Nadu**

For instance, in Tamil Nadu, Sankranti is followed by a day of feeding birds and animals, of washing and decorating the cattle and of conducting games to show off the virility in bulls and young men of the village. For, what follows from Makara Sankranti is also the marriage season in South India.

### **Cher Chera/ Chherchhera Festival of Chhatisgarh**

The local tribals of Bastar, which is in the Chhota Nagpur region of Chhattisgarh, also celebrate the Sankranti Festival as Cher Chera festival—a harvest festival, giving thanks to the sun, the field and the cattle that helped in bringing forth the harvest. In some parts, it is also called the Cherta, meaning “to give, to part with.”

### **Twin Perspectives**

Thus, Sankranti festival has twin perspectives of partake and share, live and let live, give and take.

When one shares the harvest with the birds and animals big and small, in a ceremonial way, then one is also consciously recognising the role played by them in assuring a good harvest. It is also a way of recognising one’s own co-existence with them, rather than as a competition from them for the grains. Doing it one day of the year in a ceremonial way, ensures that the thought will stay and the trend will continue through the year. Such festivals and their traditional way of celebration bring in a sense of compassion for our fellow creatures. It is a day of thanking every contributor in the food chain as an Annadatta with the prayer “*Annadatta Sukhi Bhava*”, “May The Food Provider Be Ever Happy”. Included in this prayer is also the prayer for the Jawan, the armed forces who safeguard the food chain and the food for the people of their motherland.



### **GangaSagar Mela – A Water Connect**

In Sankranti, we also see yet another connect that has transcended times, regions, heights, legends and even heavens. For, Makara Sankranti also marks the day when Bhagirathi, the river brought down by King Ram’s ancestor Bhagiratha, from the heights of Himalayas, reached the Sea – the Bay of Bengal, at Ganga

Sagar/Sagar Island. As a mark of rejoicing, people prayed and marked this day as Ganga Sagar Mela and have been taking a dip at Sagar Island, where the river joins the sea. This has been a tradition from the times of Bhagiratha, which is more than 7100 years old.

### **Realising The Various Connects**

In the case of Sankranti, we are not just celebrating a festival of a religion. We are celebrating the joy of being one with nature and a joy of being human as we share the fruits of labour, yielded by mother earth, with all. It is this understanding that we have lost in our modern lives. It is time we see and celebrate the festivals in the true light with which they have been celebrated since time immemorial.



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