

Makar Sankranti

Makar Sankranti is a very important festival for Hindus and Sikhs. It is celebrated all over India in different forms. It is the only festival which falls on the same day i.e. 14 January. Sankranti word is taken from Sanskrit term "Shankramana" means "to begin to move". The day on which the sun begins to move northwards is called Makara Shankranti.

Makara Shankranti has a special significance. As the Sun moves towards North similarly all good traits fill our life.

History

Sankranti is considered a Deity. According to a legend Sankranti killed a demon named Sankarasur. The day followed by Makar sankranti is called Kinkrant or Karidin. On this day, the female deity (devi) slayed the demon Kinkarasur.

Importance

The northward movement of the sun begins on this day. The period from Karkasankranti (the passage of the sun into the zodiac sign of Cancer) to Makarsankranti is called the dakshinayan. A person who dies in the dakshinayan period has a greater chance of going to Yamalok (southward region), than one who dies during uttarayan (northward revolution).

Importance from the point of view of spiritual practice:

On this day, from sunrise to sunset, the environment has more chaitanya (Divine consciousness); hence those doing spiritual practice can benefit from this chaitanya.

The time from sunrise to sunset on Makar-sankranti is auspicious. A Holy dip during this period carries special significance. Those who take a Holy dip in the rivers Ganga, Yamuna, Godavari, Krishna and Kaveri at the Holy places situated on the banks of these rivers acquire the highest merit.

Celebrations

This festival is celebrated differently in different parts of the country.

Uttar Pradesh:

In Uttar Pradesh, Sankranti is called 'Khichiri'. Taking a dip in the holy rivers on this day is regarded as most auspicious. A big one-month long 'Magha-Mela' fair begins at Prayag (Allahabad) on this occasion. Apart from Triveni, ritual bathing also takes place at many places like Haridwar and Garh Mukteshwar in Uttar Pradesh, and Patna in Bihar.

Bengal:

In Bengal every year a very big Mela is held at Ganga Sagar where the river Ganga is believed to have submerged into the Bay of Bengal. This mela is attended by a large number of pilgrims from all over the country.

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. Rice and pulses cooked together in ghee and milk is offered to the family deity after the ritual worship. In essence in the South this Sankranti is a 'Puja' (worship) for the Sun God.

Andhra Pradesh:

In Andhra Pradesh, it is celebrated as a three-day harvest festival Pongal. It is a big event for the people of Andhra Pradesh. The Telugus like to call it 'Pedda Panduga' meaning big festival. The whole event lasts for four days, the first day Bhogi, the second day Sankranti, the third day Kanuma and the fourth day, Mukkanuma.

Karnataka:

In Karnataka, the festival is marked by visiting one's friends and relatives to exchange greetings, and by the preparation of a dish called Ellu (made with sesame seeds, coconuts, sugar blocks, etc). A common custom found across Karnataka is the exchange of sugarcane pieces and Ellu with one's neighbors, friends and relatives. In Karnataka, Pongal is known as 'Sankranti', and cows and bullocks are gaily decorated and fed 'Pongal'- a sweet preparation of rice. Special prayers are offered. In the evening, the cattle are led out in procession to the beat of drums and music. In the night a bonfire is lit and the animals are made to jump over the fire.

Makar Sankranti is marked by men, women and children wearing colorful clothing; visiting near and dear ones; and exchanging pieces of sugarcane, a mixture of fried til, molasses, pieces of dry coconut, peanuts and fried gram. On this auspicious day, people in Karnataka distribute Yellu and bella (Sesame seeds and Jaggery) and greet with the words "Ellu bella thindu, Olle Maathu Aadu" (Eat sesame seeds and speak only good). The significance of this exchange is that sweetness should prevail in all the dealings.

Maharashtra:

In Maharashtra on the Sankranti day people exchange multi-colored tilguds made from til (sesame seeds) and sugar and til-laddus made from til and jaggery. Til-polis are offered for lunch. While exchanging tilguds as tokens of goodwill people greet each other saying - 'til-gul ghya, god god bola' meaning 'accept these tilguds and speak sweet words'. The under-lying thought in the exchange of tilguds is to forget the past ill-feelings and hostilities and resolve to speak sweetly and remain friends. This is a special day for the women in Maharashtra when married women are invited for a get-together called 'Haldi-Kumkum' and given gifts of any utensil, which the woman of the house purchases on that day. Hindus wear ornaments made of 'Halwa' on this day.

Gujarat:

In Gujarat Sankranti is observed more or less in the same manner as in Maharashtra but with a difference that in Gujarat there is a custom of giving gifts to relatives. The elders in the family give gifts to the younger members of the family. The Gujarati Pundits on this auspicious day grant scholarships to students for higher studies in astrology and philosophy. This festival thus helps the maintenance of social relationships within the family, caste and community. Kite flying has been associated with this festival in a big way. It has become an internationally well-known event.

Punjab:

In Punjab where December and January are the coldest months of the year, huge bonfires are lit on the eve of Sankranti and which is celebrated as "LOHARI". Sweets, sugarcane and rice are thrown in the bonfires, around which friends and relatives gather together. The following day, which is Sankranti, is celebrated as MAGHI. The Punjabi's dance their famous Bhangra dance till they get exhausted. Then they sit down and eat the lavish food that is specially prepared for the occasion.

Kerala:

The 40 days anushthana by the devotees of Ayyappa ends on this day in Sabarimala with a big festival.

Bundelkhand:

In Bundelkhand and Madhya Pradesh this festival of Sankranti is known by the name 'Sakarati' and is celebrated with great splendour accompanied by lot of sweets.

Tribals of Orissa:

Many tribals in our country start their New Year from the day of Sankranti by lighting bonfires, dancing and eating their particular dishes sitting together. The Bhuya tribals of Orissa have their Maghyatra in which small home-made articles are put for sale.

Assam:

In Assam, the festival is celebrated as Bhogali Bihu.

Importance of Sesame seeds:

It is considered that who donates sesame seeds is free from all his sins. During Sankranti maximum use of Sesame seeds is made. People consume sesame seeds in form of sweets and also donate to Priests.

According to Ayurved: Since sankranti falls in winter, consuming sesame seeds is beneficial.

Forbidden acts

During the period of sankranti, brushing teeth, talking harshly, cutting trees or grass and acts provoking sexual urges should be avoided.