

Cambridge University



Tamil Cultural Society

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Pongal Pooja 19th January 2008



Programme
Pooja of Lord Vishnu
Pongal



According to visible astrology the sun is seen to move into a new zodiac sign on the 14th January. This date is celebrated as an auspicious day throughout India. The celebrations go by different names, such as Thai Pongal, Makar Sankranti, Uttarayan; and with different meaning. Yet the whole idea of "You may be celebrating for that reason and I for this reason, but lets simply come together and celebrate" is the idea of Unity in Diversity in Hinduism.

About the Pooja

Today we will be giving thanks to Lord Vishnu in his forms as Sri Krishna and Sri Ranganatha, for the blessing of the harvest. In all traditional Hindu worship ceremonies, God is revered as a respected, beloved house guest and treated to courtesies such as washing of His hands and feet, bathing in the "five nectars" (milk, yoghurt, ghee, honey and sugar), offering of fine clothes, perfumes, flowers, incense, lamps and decoration, recitation of verses (today in the Sanskrit and Tamil languages) singing His glory, and an offering of food. It is customary, especially on festival days, to offer all food to God before we ourselves consume it; in the process the food is believed to be sanctified by God's glance over it and it becomes a symbol of God's grace (prasaadam). The pooja culminates with an offering of lamps and burning camphor (mangalaarati), signifying that God is the Supreme Light. After this, the food and other items are distributed to the worshippers and everyone enjoys the festive meal!

About the Festival: Thai Pongal

The month of *Thai* (mid January - mid February) is the harvest season in the Tamil homeland. Traditionally during this period, a festival is celebrated marking the harvest; in a sense the Tamil equivalent to thanksgiving.

The dish commonly called "*Pongal*" consists primarily of rice, lentils(*moong daal* or *payaraam parappu*), fresh from the harvest. On the day of the *Thai Pongal* festival (this year, this was on January 15th), these ingredients are traditionally cooked in an earthenware pot in which they are allowed to boil over, symbolizing the bounty of the harvest. Indeed, the name "*Pongal*" itself means "to overflow".

Astronomically, this festival marks the start of the brighter half of the year (*uttarayana puNya kaala*), after the Sun has entered the constellation Capricorn (*Makara* in Sanskrit). This half of the year is peppered with numerous colourful festival celebrations, and all auspicious occasions such as weddings tend to be conducted in the half of the year immediately following the *Thai Pongal* festival.

Some Hindus wish for that their leave from this life takes place after this date, such as *Bhishmapita* who prevented *Yam Raja* [God of death] from taking him until after this date.

About the Festival: Makar Sankranti

The name *Makar Sankranti* is derived from the two words "*Makar*" [Zodiac sign of Capricorn] and "*Sankranti*" [change for the better]. As the sun moves into Capricorn it signals days getting longer and light defeating dark.

||Asato Maa Sat Gamay||

Lead me from Darkness to Light

This is the essence of this festival, that there should be positive revolution in our lives on this day. It is an encouragement to us to resolve to remove darkness in the form of ignorance, anger, laziness, blind faith and superstition from our lives and replace it with light in the form of knowledge, energy and reasoned faith. The word *Sankranti* also implies balanced revolution, meaning a change in attitude and outlook which is brought about through love rather than violence.

There are many traditions associated with the festival. *Tai-Ghor* laddoo's [sesame-jaggery sweets] are given to symbolise the sweetness there should be in our relationships, along with the stickiness to stay together in difficult situations, rather than fractious/strained relationships. People also fly kites on this day-- this is a reminder that God is ultimately controlling our strings. Although we have been blessed with various gifts such as wealth, money, fame and education, we must remember that it is God that is ultimately behind them, for like a kite that is free from its string, a person who is free from "God's string" will eventually fall.