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Pongal

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THE FESTIVAL OF TAMILNADU – PONGAL

Introduction

Pongal is a harvest festival celebrated on a grand scale in Tamilnadu, Puducherry and Srilanka. And hence, is known as ‘Tamil Festival’. It is celebrated at the end of harvest season over four days i.e. from the last day of Tamil month ‘Margazhi’ to the third day of the Tamil month ‘Thai’. Out of four days, the second day, i.e. the first of ‘Thai’ is the main day of the festival and known as ‘Thai Pongal’. The name of the festival is derived from the meaning of the Tamil word, Pongal – ‘to boil over’ or ‘over flowing’ which signifies ‘abundance and prosperity’. Agriculture was the only major activity in those days unlike the industrial and IT revolution experienced today. The riches gained from good harvest formed the economic prosperity and affluence in the society. Hence the whole festival is all about ‘thanks giving’ to Sun-god who is the sustainer of all agricultural activities and cattle that helped ploughing the land to prepare the land for next season. Also, the cattle helped transportation of the agricultural produce.

Tamils often quote the famous proverb “Thai piranthal vazhi pirakum” meaning “commencement of Thai opens out new opportunities” and strongly believe that advent of ‘Thai’ will bring solutions to long-standing family problems. Emotionally connected with the day-to-day activities of Tamil people, ‘Thai Pongal’ is referred to as ‘Tamizhar Thiru Naal’.

First Day

The first day is celebrated as ‘Bhogi’ in honour of Lord Indra, who is the Lord of clouds that bring in rains. This is the day when old things are discarded, the house is cleaned, painted, decorated to give a festive look. At dawn, a fire is lit and old, useless and used articles are burnt, the best way for disposal of dead stocks.

Second Day
This is the most important day of the festival. Pooja (worship) is performed with devotion to Sun-god who is the major source of energy for cultivation. The intensity of devotion is to be seen to be believed, in the villages in rural Tamil Nadu. An uniform pattern can be seen in the worship of Sun-god. Kolam, an auspicious design traced in white lime powder before the house in the early morning is the first offering to Sun-god.

A turmeric plant is tied around the pot in which rice is to be boiled. Two sticks of Sugarcane, coconut and bananas in a plate are kept behind the pot. Then rice is boiled with milk in the earthenware pot till it overflows which is the symbolic offering to Sun-god along with other oblations. All people wear traditional dress and markings and an interesting ritual follows wherein the head of the family and his wife give in charity the elegant utensils used for the pooja to the needy and lesser privileged in the society.

**Third Day**

On the third day, Thanks-giving is offered to the cows and cattle for their enormous role in Indian farmstead for ploughing, transporting, providing dairy products and fertilizer [cow-dung]. And hence, is known as “The Pongal day for cows” which translated into Tamil reads “Mattu Pongal”. Multi coloured beads, tinkling bells, sheaves of corn and flower garlands are tied around the neck of the cattle by way of recognition and affection. After applying kumkum on their foreheads, they are fed with Pongal, jiggery, honey, banana, fruits etc and then are taken around the village. Their horns are painted with different colours. The high decibels of their resounding bells attract villagers and often, there is a race among each other’s cattle. The entire atmosphere is full of fun and revelry. Adventurous games like Jallikattu, taming of wild bull are features of the day. Arati [Pooja] is performed for the cattle in the evening. In short, this third day is “Worship of cattle”. Hindu way of worship of cattle is a lesson to the world as intellectuals today strongly emphasize vegetarian food and non-violence to animals in support of the voiceless.

‘Kanu pidi’ is the tradition observed by the women folk on this day. They pray for the welfare of their brothers and request god that their brother-sister ties remain strong forever. For this purpose, they feed birds with ‘kanu pidi’ which means the ‘feed measuring a handful’, a small quantity but quite sufficient for birds. ‘Kanu pidi’ consists of different...
kinds of coloured rice, cooked vegetables, sweet Pongal, banana etc. which are spread over a ginger or turmeric leaf. Usually crows descend on them in hordes to enjoy “kaka pidi- kanu pidi”. While birds are feeding on them, ladies and young girls of the house offer prayers with strong conviction that their relationship with brothers will turn out to be as strong as the family of crows.

**Fourth Day**

This is time for family reunions. On the day, landlords present gifts of food, clothes, money etc to their workforce. Brothers give special gifts to their married sisters. Relatives meet each other, youngsters pay respect to elders.

Hence this is a day of visit for relatives and friends. In Tamil ‘kaanum’ means ‘to visit’. So, this day is rightfully termed as “Kaanum Pongal”. This is a day of relaxation from the hard work people put in during cultivation and also enables one to recoup from the exhaustion that results due to celebrations, fun and revelry in the previous 3 days.

**Some Observations In General On Pongal**

The second day of Pongal festival, i.e. the first day of Tamil month ‘Thai’ coincides with ‘Makara Sankaranthi’ which is a harvest festival celebrated throughout India in winter. This marks the start of Sun’s Six-month long journey northwards (in Sanskrit – Uttarayanam). This day also represents the sun entering the 10th house of Indian Zodiac i.e. Makaram(or Capricorn).

This festival is celebrated in Andhra Pradesh, westbengal, Uttar prades, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, Bihar, Orissa, Karnataka, Gujarat, Rajasthan, Goa, Kerala, Manipur, and Nepal as “Makara Sankaranthi” and in Haryana, Punjab, Himachal Pradesh as “Lohiri” and in Assam as “Bhogali Bihu”. Hence, this is a grand festival celebrated throughout Bharat.

**Sangam Era And Pongal Festival**

As part of Pongal festival, the womenfolk in Sangam Era observed ‘Pavai Nonbu’ and “Thai Neeraadal (the sacred bath in Thai)”. Throughout Tamil month ‘Margazhi’, girls pray for rain and prosperity for the ensuing year; they avoid milk and milk products; they would not oil their hair and will not speak harsh words; they worship Goddess Katyayani which would be carved out of wet sand; they would end their penance on Thai Pongal day (the second day of Pongal festival) by taking Holy Bath i.e. “Thai Neeraadal”. During Pallava Rule, (4th to 8th century), ‘Thai Neeraadal’ was a major item in Pongal festival. According to the inscription found in Veeraraghava temple in Thiruvallur, the Chola king, Kulothunga used to gift lands to the temple, especially for Pongal festival. Sangam literature (200 BC to 300 AD) abounds with references on Pongal festival. Andal’s ‘Thiruppavai’ and manikavasagr’s
‘Thiruvembavai’ vividly describe ‘Thai Neeraadal’ and the ritual of young girls observing ‘Pavai Nonbu’.

**Legends Associated With Pongal**

Two legendary stories out of Indian mythology deserve mention here.

According to one legend, Lord Siva ordered Nandikeswara to convey the message to mortals that they should have oil massage & take bath everyday and eat once in a month. By mistake, Nandikeswara announced that everyone should eat daily and take oil bath once in a month. Enraged Lord Siva cursed Nandikeswara (Bull) that he should be on earth as cattle forever and help the mortals in cultivation. Thus is the association of cattle with Pongal.

Another legend is that Lord Indra, the Master of clouds, once, became very arrogant. To punish him, Lord Krishna suggested his people to stop pooja to Lord Indra on the First Day of Pongal, i.e. Bhogi and instead offer the same to Govardhan Hill. Lord Indra got angry thinking Lord Krishna a mere mortal and sent heavy rains with thunder storms for 7 days continuously. Lord Krishna lifted Govardhan Hill to save all humans and cattle. Defeated and helpless, Lord indra, came down on earth & apologized to Lord Krishna in person. The conqueror became the conquered. Thus Lord Krishna himself gave importance to cattle and strengthened the belief in Pongal festival.

**Let this Thai Pongal bring prosperity and affluence to all of us.**

**Wishing you all a very “Happy Pongal”**
Aum Sri Ramanarpanamastu