**Makar Sankranti: A Hindu Celebration of Science and Spirituality**

Hindus are inheritors of a culture which integrated spirituality and science with great pageantry. Hinduism's underlying core belief is that there is only God and everything emanates from that One. All forms are an expression of the divine (*divya*), each representing and showcasing one or many aspects of the divine qualities. The [multi-faceted](http://www.salagram.net/sstp-mgpuja3.html) *Vedic*Hinduism's original name is [Sanatana Dharma](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8ae8vSLKGyo&feature=mfu_in_order&list=UL) (Eternal Order).

Our ancient ones (*rishis*) taught us, at the inner core, the human life is *Sat-Chit-Anand*(Truth-Consciousness-Bliss) and each and every activity in life is meant to lead the individual to that One goal of existential realization. Our customs, our traditions our very way of life is to help the individual coexist with the family harmoniously and realize the[yogic](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9AIM3GBYGgQ&feature=mfu_in_order&list=UL)goal in every step of the journey, from birth to death, regardless of the socio-economic strata of life. [*Yoga*](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9AIM3GBYGgQ&feature=mfu_in_order&list=UL) is the union of individual self with Self and [Ashtanga Yoga](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9AIM3GBYGgQ&feature=mfu_in_order&list=UL) the practical application of the philosophy (*Vedanta*).

Nature is not separated from the human existence. Celebratory events developed by our realized ancestors (*rishis*) are in synch with the cycle of nature (*rita*) and aimed at developing and nurturing relationships with family, friends and neighbors. To bring the science and spirituality to life, the philosophical ideas (*Vedas*) were transformed into beautiful allegorical stories (*puranas*). From these these allegories developed the festivals and traditions to bring family and community together. Underlying it all is the human instinct of joy and happiness and remembrance of the principle of the victory of good over evil in the constant struggle between them.

Thousands of years ago, the Hindu festivals (*utsav*) spread throughout the Indian-subcontinent and in the east as far as Cambodia, Thailand, Indonesia and in the west as far as America, as recorded by Mayans in South America. These festivals took on local hues depending on the climate, agricultural environment, evolving cultural landscape and location. Though somewhat modified over the millenia, many still retain their core essence ans spirit.

Hindus celebrate major cosmic changes, such as the transmigration of the sun from one zodiac sign (*Rashi*) as *Sankranti*. Of the twelve sankrantis, *Makara Sankranti*on January 14th is the most significant; the sun passes through the winter solstice, from the Tropic of Cancer to the Tropic of Capricorn (*Makar*). We witness cosmic, astronomical harmony and prayerfully honor this scientific Truth. The six months of northern movement of the sun is followed by six months of southern movement.

As the earth starts its northward part of the rotation it brings the promise of a harvest of abundance and happiness in many parts of India. and the northern hemisphere around the world. The sowing season starts. Along the river Ganga in places like Ganga Sagar (where the river Ganga meets the Bay of Bengal) and Prayag/Allahabad millions of people bathe to honor the comingling of one life force (Sun) with another (water).

Makar Sankranti is celebrated in myriad ways. Usually there is an exchange of gifts with relatives. The festival reminds us to thank all who have contributed to our well being and of the world around us. An exuberant celebration of peace and harmony! Prayers of thanks and gratitude are offered to the Sun for a good harvest.

On this day, many pray to the deity of education ([Saraswati](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8ae8vSLKGyo&feature=mfu_in_order&list=UL)) for clarity of mind. The festival highlights the importance of withdrawing from unethical and disturbing behavior. Students are encouraged to study science, maths, astrology and astronomy emphasizing the astronomical basis of the festival.

Kites are flown in many parts of the subcontinent. Kite flying while lot of fun to young at heart, conveys a deeper message that God is the *Sutradhara* -- holding the string of man. Tensions of push and pull (of life) allow the kite to fly higher. If He lets it loose, the kite cannot fly.

No festival is complete without sweets. Sankranti sweets are made of sesame seed and sugar. They represent affection and sweetness.

In India and around the world, Makar Sankranti is also known as Gupi, Lohri, Pongal, Thaipusam and by other names.

Here at home, we, the Hindu Americans, see the strength of the Dharmic culture (Hindu and other eastern faiths) through the many ways in which the ancient traditional (*Puranic*) allegorical stories and epics are brought to life through festivals. In America, we recognize that the many festivals (*utsav*) play an important role in expressing the spiritual significance in celebratory, joyous ways while bringing people together. And we have developed our own ways to celebrate this expression of science and spirituality.

We pray in our home or temple, exchange gifts with our loved ones, observe aspects of the tradition that the climate will allow, create new ones and celebrate a meal with our friends and family.

During this time, our tradition encourages *seva* or service. And we are expanding this aspect creatively. For example, we are linking it to the MLK Day of Service, a national American holiday.

FestivalSeva ([*UtsavSeva*](http://www.hinduamericanseva.org/UtsavSeva)) is community service augmenting the spirit of Hindu festivals through seva events organized during this time and connecting them with the cultural heritage. In keeping with the spirit of the festival, our theme for January is [ShantiSeva](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=URjAaLo6Cfc): advancing peace and harmony through service and [civility in our public interactions.](http://onfaith.washingtonpost.com/onfaith/panelists/anju_bhargava/2011/01/weapons_of_destruction_or_armour_for_peace_wordswordswords.html)

The ancient tradition, Makar Sankranti is evolving to meet our needs as we New Americans weave our traditions and culture in the pluralistic tapestry of America.

<http://www.huffingtonpost.com/anju-bhargava/makar-sankrant-a-joyous-c_b_808880.html>