

MAKAR SANKRANTI: SUGAR AND SPICE: ALL THAT'S NICE

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Ananda Bazar Patrika, 12 Jan 2015

(English Version)

We talk a lot about India's 'unity in diversity', a phrase that was popularised by Jawaharlal Nehru to describe the complex state of equilibrium between the Indian nation and its many linguistic, religious or even cultural constituents. Most of us do not seek any further proof of this concept, but if we did look for evidence, all one has to do is to observe any one of the many pan-Indian celebrations. They do retain a lot of their own historic regional differences and yet converge on a fixed date or period in tandem with the rest of India. Our new year, for instance, is not celebrated on one common day but on a range of dates that are usually in mid-April, around the first day of Vaisakh, though the official Saka calendar begins almost one month before. To gather evidence of these phenomena, one has literally to struggle with sparse nuggets of facts that our religious history and folklore weave in through tales. The rest has to be gleaned through anthropological analysis of tales that have to be considered more as 'allegorical' than factual. These 'united festivals of diverse Indians' come full out in play not only during Holi and Diwali, or in Navaratri and the Durga Pujas, but also in many other pan-Indian festivals.

Makar Sankranti is one such festival that offers a good case study of this phenomenon of unity in diversity and it is held normally on the 14th of January, or a day before or after. In most states it is a one day celebration, but in certain regions it can go on for even four days and vary a lot in the rituals. It is called Paush Sankranti in Bengal, Pongal in Tamil Nadu, Uttarayan in Gujarat, Bhogali Bihu in Assam, Lohri in Punjab and Jammu, but it is also known as Maghi in that state as well as in adjoining

Haryana and Himachal. It is Makara Sankramana in Karnataka and Saen-kraat in Kashmir. It goes by its standard all-India name, 'Makara Sankranti' in Odisha, Maharashtra-Goa, Andhra-Telangana, Kerala and the rest of north India, but it co-exists with local names like Sukaraat in Madhya Pradesh or Khichdi Parwa in parts of Bihar, Jharkhand and Uttar Pradesh. It is not that Hindu celebrations enjoy such variety only in India: they are equally diverse in other countries that were influenced by the Hindu religion. In Nepal it is Maghe Sankranti, in Thailand it becomes Songkran, in Cambodia the event is Moha Sangkran, in Myanmar it is Thingyan and in Laos it is celebrated as Pi Ma Lo.

But why was this date important? Its astrological significance is that the sun enters Capricorn (Makara) zodiac constellation and the 14th of January has remained constant in the Gregorian calendar for several decades, though a thousand years ago this astrological event was on the 31st December. In the next thousand years or so, the date would shift to February, so even the more reliable Gregorian solar calendar also moves its dates around though not as rapidly as the lunar calendar that determines the Muslim festivals and many Hindu celebrations as well. Makar Sankranti ends the inauspicious phase of the preceding month that is called called Paush in many parts of India, i.e., from mid-December to mid-January. Traditionally and scientifically, it is said to mark beginning of the end of biting winter. The celebration of the northward journey of the sun, Uttarayan, is marked with more gaiety in colder countries that lie north of India and the winter solstice of 22nd or 23rd of December is indeed a very big day. People in western civilisations believed that the worst was over with this solstice and it is this pre-Christian Yuletide festival that was absorbed by the Church, to be celebrated as Christmas!

Let us take a look at the variety with which this Sankranti is observed all over India. We may begin with Tamil Nadu, where it comes with a lot of fervour, starting

from the last day of our Paush to the third day of the next month that they call Thai. Telegus also celebrate it over four days, though most other regions prefer just one or two days. On the first day, the Tamils light a bonfire, which reminds of the Lohri celebrations in Punjab, and old clothes and rejected household materials are thrown into it. The idea is both to destroy the outgoing and prepare for the new, as well as to reduce stuff that cluttered our homes, that were traditionally rather small. The next day, new 'fried' rice and moong-dal are boiled in milk and jaggery, until the milk and rice actually spilled over. This is exactly the auspicious sign that the household was waiting eagerly to see and once the burning smell fills the air, families break out into congratulatory celebrations. It is greeted with cheers of "Pongalo Pongal" and with the blowing of many conch shells. It is interesting to see how the two primary objects of pan-Indian celebrations, sugar cane and sesame are 'superseded' by rice and milk in Tamil Nadu though these are also present. This state gets two rainy seasons and Pongal marks the harvest of paddy that the South-Eastern monsoon has gifted it, rather specially. Thus, it is a harvest celebration for three crops: paddy, sugar-cane and sesame, with paddy getting primacy over the other two.

But what have sugar-cane and sesame to do with religion? Plenty: because these two crops lie at the very root and are the reason for observing the Sankranti celebrations. This is where analysis takes over, to explain that numerous religious events do not centre on some archaic superstition but are actually celebrations of man's covenant with his eco system. It took centuries to arrive at dates or periods as humans realised that certain times of the year herald specific solutions to their eternal problems and insecurities. Every householder knew throughout the ages that there were four essentials that his kitchen required to cook decent meals, and this applied to every culture or nation. These four fairly-common but essential items that one required, other than cereals, vegetables, protein-foods and fuel, were salt, sugar, oil and spices or flavouring

agents. Salt and pepper were indeed very critical to European civilisation that just had to have them to preserve their precious meat and add some taste as without these they could hardly survive through the dark, long winters. European nations undertook, therefore, both trade and conquests to grab salt and spices. This quest were responsible for Europe's perennial wars with various West Asian people, before Islam or after it, which gained momentum through the bloody Crusades. It also led to the exciting race for discovering a sea route to India, that was finally won by Vasco da Gama, and Christopher Columbus discovering the Americas, in a fit of serendipity. They are expressions of their sheer desperation for salt, pepper and other spices. This is not to belittle the importance of items like cotton and silk, that surely mattered, but our focus here is on salt and spices. No self respecting dining table in the West or in cultures influenced by the West can afford to do without salt and pepper: maybe just for comfort or as symbols of their historical triumph for these two taste enhancers.

Where India was concerned, both salt and spices were in abundance and domestic traders ensured their free flow within the subcontinent. Special ceremonies or wars were, therefore, not called for in India where these two commodities were concerned. But householders and societies were indeed tense and expectant where the other two kitchen essentials were concerned, i.e., oil and sugar. Europeans could and did use animal fat like the lard of pigs to fry and cook, but in India this was totally taboo. Vegetable oils were essential and the very fact that the root word for 'oil' in Sanskrit is 'tailam' or the oil of sesame seeds called 'til' indicates that this was the mother of all vegetable oils in India. Thus the sesame crop was tended with care as the whole year's cooking medium lay within its tiny seeds. In the same manner, the annual supply of the traditional sweetening agent in our kitchens and many million kitchens outside this country depended on how well the sugar cane crop turned out to be. The householder

prayed to the almighty for these crops as they were two of the four essential commodities that mattered where his daily meal was concerned.

And, lo and behold, both the crops normally ripened in almost all parts of India around the same time, i.e., early January that falls in the latter half of the Indian month of Paus. Now the pieces fall in place and we understand why the traditional condiments that are prepared at this time of the year consist of both sugar or indigenous jaggery and sesame or til or gingley. North India enjoys its rewri or sugary sweets coated with white sesame seeds and gajjak or light crunchies made from both, while other regions produce their own variants of both sugar and sesame. It is also time to celebrate, rejoice with friends and family and, of course, thank god for his munificence. It is my submission Sankranti is celebrated at this juncture because of the almost simultaneous arrival of the two of the four critical kitchen items that India is worried about.

It is interesting to observe how the ripened sugar-cane and til crops dominate the festival from Punjab to Tamil Nadu, and sweet items made of both are distributed almost mandatorily, all over the Indian subcontinent. But wet States like Kerala and Bengal, that did not traditionally have much of either crop, celebrate Sankranti with lesser fervour than the rest of India. These two States thus share not only certain brands of politics in common and their love for passionate arguments: but they also ensure that coconut sweets find their place in Sankranti. Bengal has another difference, as palm gur is often used in place of cane-sugar jaggery, and this is also the right occasion for sweet delicacies: its pulir pitha, paati-shapta, tiler naru that are sweetmeats made from ground coconut, local palm sugar, a bit of sesame and other items. Frankly, most Bengalis are not obsessed with this date and this celebration as other states are, though they do observe it. South Bengal and Kolkata actually wake up to Paus Sankranti only when they see huge crowds from neighbouring States thronging and over-crowding all

roads and launches to Ganga Sagar for the holy bath at the confluence of the mighty river with the sea.

Assam has a new rice crop, therefore, its Bohgali Bihu is a harvest festival, marked with fast, feast and bonfires. All over the north, from Punjab to Bihar, the kihchdi of dal, rice and seasonal vegetables, is an additional treat, beyond til, jaggery and milk-based sweets. But halwa is another popular in certain States like Punjab and Maharashtra, and many use suji as a base, while Tamils and others prefer milk, rice pudding and sweet payasam. But Ganga-snan or the ritual bath is common throughout India, even in Kerala and Bengal, and Brahmanism ensures rather conveniently, that the Ganga can easily be substituted by the local river. Even cattles are taken for a ritual bath in this cold water, whether they like it or not. In some regions, their horns are coloured or tied with fancy ribbons, small bells and beads and brought out in processions. Some southern States hold bullock cart races and Tamil Nadu goes one step ahead, by organising ‘bull taming’ contests, called Jalli-kkattu: something close to bull fights in Spain. Human strength and skills are pitted against these angry beasts, but the injuries and death to both men and cattle in this 'sport' prompted the Supreme Court recently to prohibit this dangerous custom. But then, law enforcement in India is often notoriously slack in many social spheres.

In this manner, many rituals have found their way into Makara Sankranti, which has slowly converted into an “agreed festival” and is celebrated in all parts of India. Even kite flying is included in States like Gujarat and Jharkhand. There is reason to believe that some of these customs were in existence for centuries when one observes tribes like the Bhuinya tribals of Odisha and the western frontier of Bengal celebrate their ‘Tusu’ during this period. In Manipur too, many tribes pray to Lining-thou, their supreme god, and even in far off Arunachal Pradesh, the Ramayana, Mahabharat and Kalika Puran are invoked during this seasonal worship. One grand Brahmanical

ceremony appears to reign supreme at Brahm-kund and attracts thousands of pilgrims on this day even though it is at the farthest end, so near to India's borders with China. Incidentally, even crows are invited with claps and rhythmic folk songs in the hilly regions of Uttarakhand: the variety is, thus, mind boggling! It is really difficult to say today as to whether formal Hinduism borrowed customs from indigenous religion, or vice versa, but the uniting and harmonising role of Brahmanism is evident, all through.

The erstwhile Buddhist deity 'Saastha', who now resides in the extremely popular Hindu temple of Sabarimala, also receives his dues from lakhs of pilgrims who undergo a lot of self torture for penance, just to meet him on this very day. This wide range of celebrations truly represent the remarkable diversity of our plural culture, but what is more remarkable is how almost all the different festivals did come together through an unwritten agreement to 'unite' on a narrow band of dates for their observance. It is obvious from several cultural traces that are still visible to the trained eye that the whole process must have taken centuries of persistent Brahmanical persuasion. It is quite possible that it was accompanied by some amount of appropriation of local beliefs and their assimilation, but the fact is that it must have also taken a lot of patience to standardise so many widely-different local festivals to finally come under a common banner. What emerged from this long and almost unique process was a unity that was called Bharatvarsh or India.

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