

Report

Documenting the Celebration of Makar Sankranti across India

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Declaration

I hereby declare that the project “Documenting the Celebration of Makar Sankranti across India” was carried out by me under the guidance of Prof. Ravi Pooviah, at IDC School of Design, Indian Institute of Technology, Bombay, India.

The interpretations made are based on the conducted interviews and my reading and understanding of the cited texts.

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Approval Sheet

The DRS Project entitled “Documenting the celebration of Makar Sankranti across India“ by Kuldeep Singh Rathod, roll number 176330001 is approved, in partial fulfilment of Masters in Design Degree in Interaction Design at the Industrial Design Centre, Indian Institute of Technology, Bombay.

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1. Abstract

This project study was undertaken to document the different ways of celebrating the festival of Makar Sankranti across the country. The festival has layered concepts and significance as we move from State to state. The ways to celebrate also changes along with food, music and dances. Even after so many significant differences, the common thing to observe is that all the cultures celebrate this festival to honor and worship the Sun God called Surya Dev, Agni Dev or so many other names as they use to describe it. Since it revolves around the Sun God, Fire is the key element in the celebration. The day also denotes the closing of harvest season and used to develop bonding between families and communities.

2. Introduction

Makar Sankranti is a culturally significant festival in India which is celebrated to honour the Sun God. Sun God is regarded as a symbol of wisdom and divinity in Indian mythology and referred by different names across the cultures.

2.1 When is it celebrated?

Most of the Indian festivals are celebrated according to the position of the moon i.e., lunar calendar. So, the dates of these festivals in Gregorian calendar changes every year. But, Makar Sankranti is one of the festivals which falls on the same (almost) date every year (13th/14th/15th January) because it follows solar calendar. However, due to the revolution of the sun, this date postpones by one day, once in every eighty years.

4.2 Significance

The word 'Sankranti' means the movement of the sun from one zodiac sign to another. This is why, there is a Sankranti every month with this movement. 'Makar' represents sun-sign of Capricorn, making this festival about movement of sun into Capricorn. Makar Sankranti holds significant place in Indian festival calendar as it falls on the equinox i.e., the length of day and night is believed to be exactly same. Although every region describes a different concept of why and how to celebrate this festival, but it basically represents the onset of spring with the end of harvest season. On this day, sun starts making transition towards north making days longer and warmer.

This is the first Indian festival in the Gregorian year and the whole country celebrates it especially the Indian countryside. The celebration is full of food, music, dance, folk tales and myriad cultural forms varying with localization, culture, geography and traditions. Its celebrated as Pongal in Tamil Nadu, Makar Sankranti in Bengal, Magha Bihu in Assam and Tai Pongal in Kerala.

3. Lohri

3.1 Introduction

Lohri is celebrated in the States of Punjab and Haryana marking the wintry end of Pausha and sunny onset of Magha month as per the Bikrami calendar. The main crop of this region is wheat and it's harvest is done with the grand celebration of Baisakhi in April. But in the month of Lohri, farmers celebrate the harvesting of Rabi crops like sugar cane, sesame seeds, mustard seeds and prepares their fields for the golden crop of the region. The festival is also known to prompt people in showing their gratitude towards God and celebrate his creations. For many people, it also marks as the beginning of a new financial year as they settle the ending year crops.

3.2 Origin

Lohri has various stories behind it's name as well. Some says that the festival's name is derived from the root 'Loh', which means the tava on which chapatis are made for the community feasts. While according to some stories, the name of this festival comes from 'Loi', who was the wife of mystical sikh poet and scholar Saint Kabir Das from 15th century.

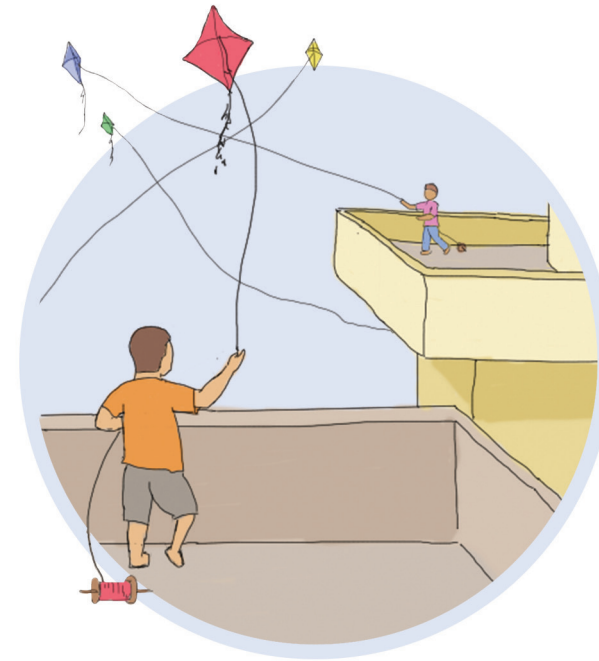


Fig 3.3a Kids flying kites

3.3 Celebration

Punjab is known for its zeal, verve and enthusiasm and this is exactly how they celebrate this festival.

The celebrations are centered around the whole community and starts in a different manner for different age groups and social groups. Although it is a one day festival but preparations starts well in advance of two to three days. Groups of maiden girls (fig 3.3c) and kids (fig 3.3b) from the community gather up and visits each household singing and asking for cow-dung cakes, sweets, jaggery and other lohri items required for celebration. These songs are mostly regionals like praises of Dulha Bhatti (a Punjabi version of Robin Hood). Nobody turns them empty handed as it is considered very un-auspicious. All this material is collected and stored at the place where celebration will take place.

On the day of Lohri, people clean their homes and courtyards with water. For the kids, the day is filled with kite flying, fun and sweets (fig 3.3a). The whole sky is full of kites and people start preparing for evening festivities. People wear new clothes and exchange gifts and sweets with others. In the evening, the whole community gathers up in a common place around a bonfire (fig 3.3d) which is built from the wood logs and cow-dung cakes collected earlier. Fire holds a special significance during the celebration as most of the rituals are performed around it. It is considered a homage to the Sun God as well. With the rising flames, all the elders forms a circle around the fire along with their respective spouses. They take handfuls of



Fig 3.3b Kids singing folk songs and collecting sweets



Fig 3.3c Maiden collecting cow-dung cakes for Lohri bonfire

puffed rice, popcorn and other jaggery sweets and start circling the fire, throwing the munchies in it. This circling action is known as 'Parikrama'. Parikrama is done with the popular chanting "Aadar aaye, dilather jaaye", which means 'May honor come and poverty vanish'. This chanting represents the prayer to the Sun God, asking him to bless their land with prosperity and abundance. Afterwards, younger ones repeats the same ritual. For newly weds or houses with new born babies, it is considered as a very auspicious occasion and celebrated in a grander manner. The offerings made to the fire also represents different prayers in different areas like sesame seeds are thrown to pray for a son. Also, it is believed that these offerings purify our bodies and the atmosphere and the warmth of fire prepares us for the upcoming harshness of the summer season.

After the parikrama, people gather around the fire and festivities gain momentum with Punjabi folk songs and dances like Bhangra and Gidda. Food is one more significant element of this festival. It starts with distribution of the prasad which is made of til, gajak, jaggery, peanuts and popcorn. For the lohri dinner, a very traditional Punjabi meal of sarson ka saag and makki roti is served. Lohri works as a bonding festival for the couples, families and communities.

The following day of lohri marks the beginning of Magh and known as Maghi day. It is a common belief to give away charity on this day for prosperity and society welfare.



Fig 3.3d Lohri night celebration around bonfire

4.Pongal

4.1 Introduction

Tamil Nadu celebrates makar sankranti in an elongated four day long festival called Pongal. The word pongal has several meanings for tamilians which are reflected in this festival throughout. It represents “To overflow”, where people show their love and respect for their parents, teachers, guests and above all, the nature similar to the western festival of Thanksgiving. Pongal also means “to boil” and they have a sweet dish of boiled rice, milk and jaggery named after the festival which is cooked during this time.

The Tamil new year starts from the first day of the pongal and marks the start of the month Thai. That’s why, it is also known as Thai pongal. The four day long pongal is celebrated to mark the closing of traditional farming season for Tamilnadu with major crops of sugarcane, rice and turmeric. The farmers shows their regard to the nature, Sun God and the animals for their support in the successful harvest and rest of the people thanks farmers for their efforts. With the rituals of puja for nature and animals, newly harvested grains are cooked for the first time. The occasion brings families and communities together with joy and celebration.

4.2 Bhogi Pongal

Starting from 13th January, the first day of pongal called “Bhogi”, people make bonfire out of cow dung cakes and wood. Useless items of household are thrown into the fire like old clothes etc. representing the start of new chapter for everyone in the house. This ritual is known as Bhogi Mantalu(fig 4.2a) and done on the last day of Margazhi.



Fig 4.2a Bhogi Mantalu

4.3 Perum Pongal

Second day, known as Perum Pongal, is dedicated to the worship rituals for Sun God and it's entire creation that sustains life. Sun God, Surya is considered as the source of all life force around us and people seek his blessings to prosperity in their lives. The day starts early in the morning with women decorating their homes with beautiful kolams made of rice flour and red clay. They cook pongal payasam in an earthen pot, tied to a turmeric plant, with the sunrise and it is offered as prasadam to the Sun God along with sugarcane, banana and coconuts. In the evening, people visit each other's home with gifts, sweets and warm wishes.



Fig 4.3a Lady Cooking Pongal

4.4 Mattu Pongal

Mattu Pongal, the third day of the pongal is for worshipping the farm animals and cattles which supports farmers in agriculture. Villagers mainly worship cows and buffaloes. These animals are washed and decorated with bells, garlands. Afterwards, they are worshipped and offered sweet payasam in order to show regard and respect for ploughing their lands. The famous controversial festival of Tamil Nadu, Jallikattu festival (fig 4.4a) is also celebrated on this day in parts of the state. It sees a spectacular participation of people where humans attempt to hold on to the hump of a bull in order to bring him to a stop.



Fig 4.4a Jallikattu Festival

4.5 Kannum Pongal

The fourth and the last day of the festival, Kannum Pongal sees the celebration of family and human bond. Families go out for picnics near river banks and have a sumptuous meal together (fig 4.5a). People also pay their respect to the women of the family, pray for the well being of their brothers, sort out feuds and miscommunications.



Fig 4.5a Family outing

5. Magh (Bhogali) Bihu

5.1 Introduction

Makar sankranti in Assam is known by names like Bhogali Bihu or Magh Bihu. It is their second largest festival and celebrated with the closing of harvest season. Although the festival is for one day but the celebrations start the previous day itself i.e., on the last day of the month 'Puh'.

5.2 Celebration

The festival is celebrated among the community where young men of the village build a bonfire structure made of wood and clay straw on the previous day evening. This structure is known as Meji. All the families from the community are supposed to guard the Mejis all night, so they build makeshift tents around them called "Belagar" to stay. Everyone feasts and celebrates throughout the night and stays in Belagars (fig 5.2b). The women of the community prepare for this feast for days making sweets and snacks. They carry the food items to the Meji and serve Jolapan, pitha to everyone.

The next day, festivities start early at the dawn when everyone takes bath and gathers around Mejis. The most elderly member of the community lights up the fire in Meji (fig 5.2c) and the community performs various rituals with offerings of coconut, betel nut etc. These offerings are made for the Sun God similar to other states. Apart from this, children and old people roast various types of potatoes in the fire and eat them. In some parts of Assam, people also burst locally made crackers of bamboo called 'Hiloi'. After the

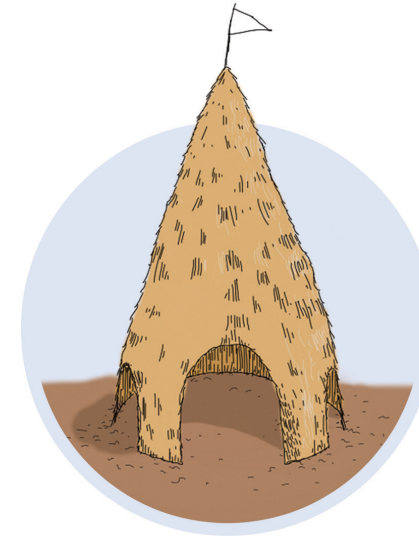


Fig 5.2a Belagar



Fig 5.2b Night celebration in Belagar

fire is down, burnt pieces of wood and Ash is collected and spread across the cropping fields. It is believed to bring prosperity, luck and better harvest for the season.

During the day time, people visit family, friends and relatives distributing rice cakes, sweets, gifts and exchange Bihu greetings. At the end of the day, Belagars are burnt. In some parts of Assam, traditional sports like Buffalo fights, egg fight, cock fight, Dhop-khel are also organised throughout the day. Some communities also celebrate it with fishing and family outings. There are various other ethno-cultural groups like Me-dam-me-phi, porag, Kherai which have conventional celebrations not followed elsewhere.

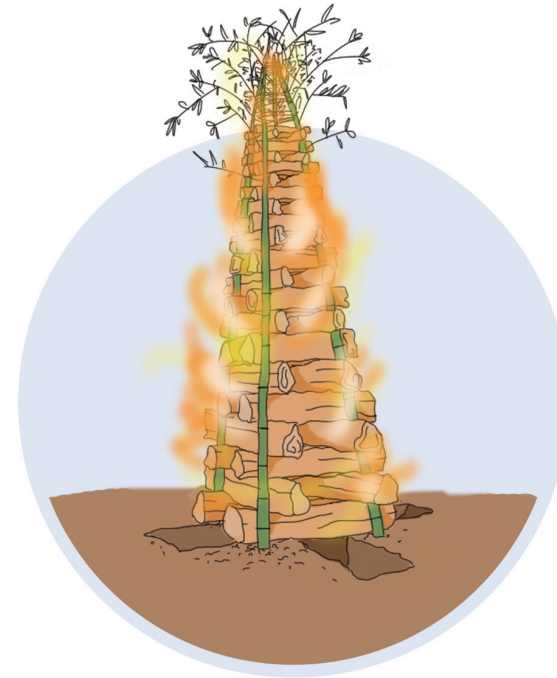


Fig 5.2c Meji on fire

6. Image References

- Fig 3.3a :** Kids flying Kites (Author)
- Fig 3.3b :** Kids singing folk songs and collecting sweets (Author)
- Fig 3.3c :** Lohri night celebration around bonfire(Author)
- Fig 3.3d :** Lady cooking Pongal (Author)
- Fig 4.2a :** Belagar (Author)
- Fig 4.3a :** Night celebration inside Belagar (Author)
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