

Makar Sankranti

Introduction

Our Rishis have given us many Utsav, or celebrations. The question that comes to mind is why create utsav. What is the purpose of the utsav? Why is the utsav on a specific date? What is my connection to the utsav? What special functions happen on the utsav day? What are the meanings of the functions and how do they relate in my life?

The festival of Sankranti (transition) is a festival of nature. In the month Posh (third month of the Vikram calendar) a transition of sun from Dhaana (Sagittarius) to Makar (Capricornus), the tenth sign of zodiac, occurs and, therefore, this festival is called Makar-sankranti. The sun's orbit in relation to earth shifts northward. Therefore, it is also called Uttarayan (movement towards north). When one looks at the world there are three major latitudes that are called tropic of Cancer, Equator and tropic of Capricorn. Look on the map and see where Bharat, India, is located. Bharat is located in the northern hemisphere. Since we, here in the U.S.A., are also located in the northern hemisphere, the same logic applies to us also. Makar-sankranti is celebrated throughout the world on January 14th, based on the solar (Western) calendar. This is the modern concept; in the old days in Bharat, it was based on the lunar calendar. Our days are going to get longer after Makar-sankranti. But one can argue that the shortest day is around 22nd of Decemeber, so why wait until January to celebrate the utsav. The sun is not exactly in the center of our earth's orbit. After Makar-sankranti, the sun is getting closer to us in the northern hemisphere; i.e. the radius, distance between the sun and earth, is decreasing. Not only the days are getting longer, due to the tilt of the north-south axis, but we are also getting closer to the sun. Sankranti means change in direction, and from this day forth, the sun is getting closer to earth and gives more of its energy to us so we may enjoy life more fully. You are heard of depression during the months of winter in the very north. This is caused by not enough sun light during the day. After this date, animals come out of hibernation, the birds migrate back to their homelands, and even a lot of humans start to cheer up. We celebrate this awakening of nature that is caused by the sun moving closer to us. It has physical, mental, and psychological effects on all of us. Transition of life is also connected with the transition of the sun. From this point of view, there is unique cultural significance to this festival.

Celebration

There are many ways we celebrate on this day. Two that come to mind are eating sesame seed sweet balls and flying kites. We create special foods, like sesame ladoos. Both the sesame and the gud (molasses) used to make the ladoos are harvested during the winter in India. According to the Ayurved, the sesame seed is a vital food at this time of year. In the winter, our skin becomes very dry and we can benefit from the natural oils of the sesame seed. Also, the ghee is very nutritional. The Gud (molasses) provides us with natural sugars for energy. The ingredients of laddoo remind us to develop our relationships with the fellow men like sweetness of Gud and cohesiveness like the sesame seed oil. This is the day to forgive and forget the differences with our relatives, friends, etc. and give our life a new direction. When we hold on to the old differences, we feel lonely in the society. The tradition of placing a coin inside a sweet ball of sesame seeds explains the significance of a graceful charity. The society should quietly sustain the livelihood of the brilliant Brahmin who works for the culture. The ghee (clarified butter) in the sweet balls of sesame seeds is nourishing. A missionary worker for culture must be of sound

mind and intellect. Firm commitment to do God's work is as difficult as walking on the edge of a sword. There is no place for people with weak mind and unsteady intellect. Today, we have forgotten the true meaning behind the sweet balls of sesame seeds and only practice it superfluously. In the old days Brahmins did not work for a living; their sole job was to educate everyone else. So we tried to help them out with their daily needs.

Another famous activity of Makar Sankranti is flying a kite. All over India, from rooftops, in parks, there are kites sparkling in the air on this day. It is encouragement for people to start going outside and enjoying the sunlight, which is increasing. During winter we wear clothes covering most of our body, and hence do not get sufficient sunlight. Sunlight is good for the body, as in production of Vitamin-D when the sunlight hits the skin. Sunlight also increases the activities under the skin, which in turn benefits the whole body. The person flying a kite has the full control of it by holding on to the string. He may let it fly high or bring it down in one jerk to the string. In an existential view, we can look at the kite as being symbolic of our life, flying free on the wind, and the only thing keeping it from going off into oblivion is the thin string of control held by God. The kite reminds us that our lives are totally controlled by God. He can give us all the wealth and facilities for us to enjoy; or take it all away without notice. We have to put our faith in God's hands and believe that he will guide and protect us.

The kite's existence lasts only while its thread is in the hands of its flier. Once a kite is cut off, it is found in a torn or deformed condition lying over a branch of trees or on electric poles. Man separated from God is also found devoid of color, pale and unhealthy within just a few days. In short, on this occasion, if the sunlight, the sweetness of the balls of sesame seeds, and the kite's confidence in its flier take deep root in our lives, only then could it be considered a proper transformation of our lives.

Spiritual significance

We celebrate also on this day a victory of light over darkness, because this festival occurs near the shortest day of the year, and so the days start getting longer and brighter. The Vedic rishis' prayer of moving from darkness to light is likely to be fulfilled by the tradition of determined efforts of this day. Karmayogi (selfless dedicated worker) sun sheds off its momentary negligence and makes a firm determination to assault the darkness on this day. From this day onwards, the darkness lessens; in other words, the days get longer. It is the beginning of auspicious days for doing good deeds. Religious Hindus wish their death would come only after Makarsankranti. Bhishma, who stilled his death until Uttarayan, is an excellent example of this. The motion full of fire, flame and light is called shukla gati (bright movement) and the motion full of smoke and darkness is called Krishna gati (black movement). In this context, the ambition of death during Uttarayan means the desire of a bright and lustrous death. A life full of terrifying darkness drags a man towards an inferior death.

Makar-sankranti means the triumph of light over darkness. Men's life is full of darkness and light. On this day, a man should resolve to make a move for improvement. Ignorance, superstition, blind faith, dullness, vices, arrogance, anger, greed and jealousy are all manifestations of darkness. A man has to remove ignorance by knowledge, superstition with science, blind faith by reason based faith, dullness by vitality and vices by virtues. Arrogance, anger, greed and jealousy can be removed by understanding one's relationship to God and asking God for help in the removal of them. That alone would be the true transformation in his life. But we have not the power to overcome these dark things by ourselves. For if we keep in bad company, these evils are unconquerable. We are to associate with those who can teach us how to

conquer the evils; those who have studied the scriptures and are educated. The youth should associate with others who are not involved in bad habits, and who take pride in their culture, and have high moral values.

Sankranti means *samyak kranti*. There are many concepts associated with *Samyak*. Concepts like proper, parallel, association (*sang*), and collectively (*sangh*) are various thoughts that go with *samyak*. In *kranti* (revolution) there is a strong expectation of transformation of circumstances whereas in *Sankranti* there is a noble desire of establishing proper circumstances. For this to happen, not only the context but also the human mind should be changed, which is possible through ideological transformation. Violence may be important in a revolution, but in *Sankranti* only prudence prevails. The true meaning of nonviolence is 'love others' which is visible every moment and in every facet of *Sankranti*. *Sankranti* does not mean cutting off one's head, but it means changing one's thoughts inside, and that is a true triumph.

To say *sang kranti* is to say “a revolution of association”, or “a change” in the company we keep. This is the kind of revolution that leads to victory of light over darkness in us. As said earlier, this is the day to disassociate with the darkness from our lives like ignorance, arrogance, etc.; and join the people who have managed to do that. For example, the people like Karna who associated with Kauravas were eventually killed in the battle of Mahabharata. One should try to become free from desires (for sensual pleasure), anger, greed, delusions, arrogance and jealousy as much as possible. We should use our freedom of association to slowly turn to the association of the realized souls, meaning we should associate ourselves with the people who are free from bondage in life. Only such people can provide proper direction and guidance to our revolution. To say *sangh kranti* is to say “a revolution of unity” or “collectively”. When we want to tackle a difficult task, we need collection and cooperation of masses. When one hears the word “revolution”, one pictures bloody battles and coups d'état, and this is a form of *sangh kranti*. It is not, however, the desirable form. The more successful and lasting changes in this world are brought about by bloodless revolutions, like India's fight for Independence. Trust in God is in the base of this type of revolution. To fight this battle, Gandhi went to the multitudes and explained to them their rights to freedom and the concepts of *ahinsa*, non-violence, and *satyagraha*, non-cooperation. He taught them how to fight a non-violent battle in the name of truth and justice. Instead of filling their hands with guns and swords, he filled their heads with new thoughts.

This last kind of revolution is known as *sam-yak kranti*, “a parallel revolution”. That means that once we have changed our thoughts for the better, our actions will change in a parallel way, and this will bring about change in our lives. Once Gandhiji taught the people of India the way to fight for independence without weapons of war, they were able to put these thoughts into action, with glorious results. Similarly, great saints put good thoughts into the minds of millions of people around the world. These thoughts have changed their actions for the better, and by this change in attitude made their entire lives better.

Concept of in-dwelling God promotes the ideals of He is my helper and protector. So if God resides within me, how can I abuse myself by consuming alcohol or taking drugs? In India, many poor alcoholics stopped drinking and put the money they saved towards their family or towards the community.

Not only God is within me, but he created me, and he gave me life. He provides for us in the form of *smrutidaan*, *shaktidan*, and *shantidaan*. And therefore we have learned to be thankful to God, and we do this in many ways. The simplest of thanks is the recital of *Trikal Sandhya* for the daily gifts from God.