

Winter Solstice

Lohri / Makar Sankranti / Pongal

For many Hindus, mid January marks the beginning of the spring harvest and the commemoration of the winter solstice. Throughout India, this festival has many names. In the northwestern state of Punjab it is called Lohri. In other parts of northern and central India, it's referred to as Makar Sankranti. And in the southern Indian state of Tamil Nadu, it's called Pongal.

Lohri

Lohri is celebrated by both Hindus and Sikhs, especially in the states of Punjab, Haryana, Himachal Pradesh, and in the union territory of Jammu and Kashmir. For much of India, the winter crops produce corn and wheat, which is sown in October. By January, the fields begin to crop up with little grains, which is marked as a celebratory way of giving thanks for the upcoming harvest. This is often referred to as a desire for a golden harvest.

Used to mark the coldest day of the year, Lohri signifies the start of winter solstice and is followed by the longest night and shortest day of the year. As it is quite cold during this time, many will build a fire to keep themselves warm, win over gods—Surya (the sun god) and Agni (god of fire)—and pray for

the well-being of loved ones. Often referred to as the Bonfire Festival or the Festival of Farmers, Lohri is a time to be thankful and socialize around the fire with festive songs and dances to mark the arrival of longer days. It is thought that the larger the fire, the more warmth will be provided by the gods during the upcoming cold days and nights.

Some believe the word Lohri derives from *loh*—a large iron griddle where Indian breads like *chapatis* and *rotis* are made, honoring the grain used to make these breads. Others believe that Lohri is celebrated because of Dulla Bhatti, the Robin Hood during the time of the Mughal empire—he stole from the rich

and gave to the poor. Legend has it that he saved young women from being kidnapped and is regarded as a hero. There are several songs that relay this story and young children will often go from home to home singing these songs for “loot” such as candy, puffed rice, and peanuts among other treats.

The day after Lohri—called *maghi* or *maagha*—is the start of the new month and is also referred to as Makar Sankranti.

Makar Sankranti

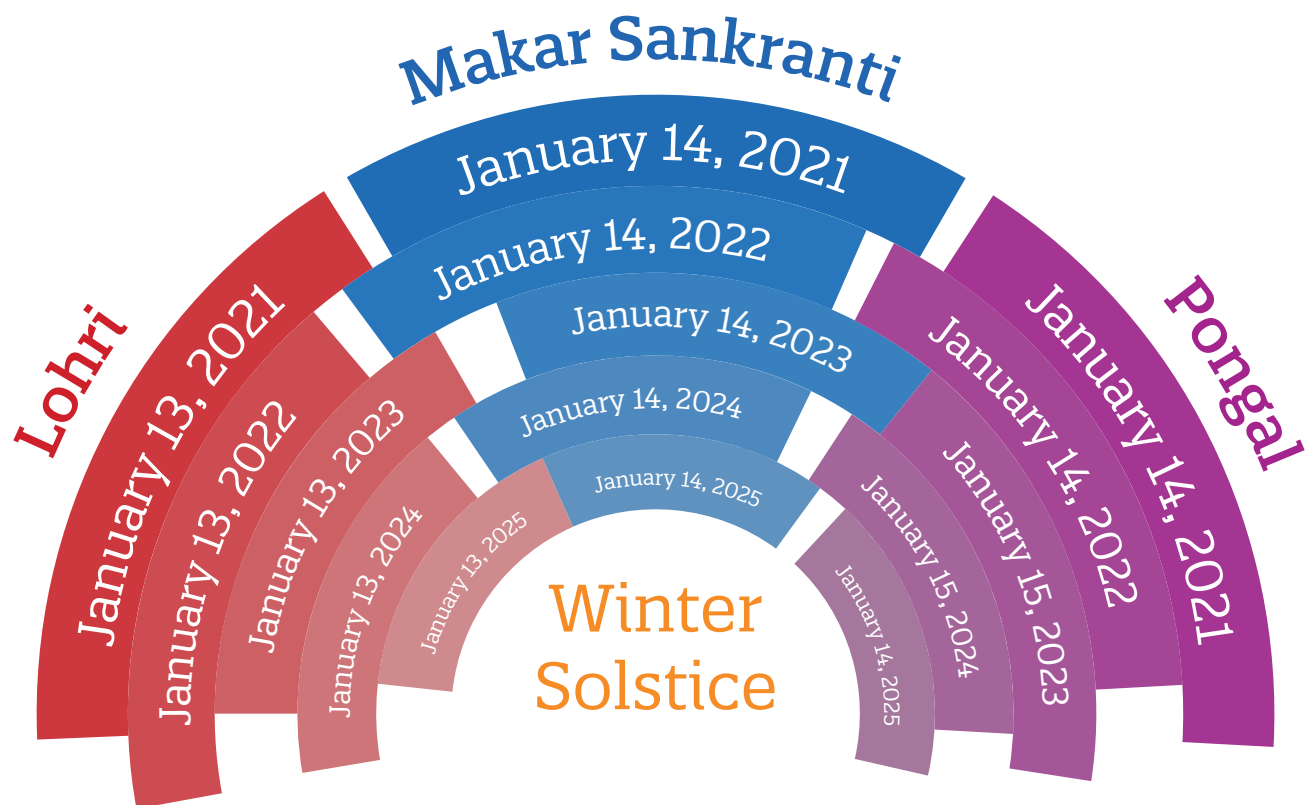
Makar Sankranti is a Hindu solar holiday that marks the transition of the sun into Capricorn (*Makar*) on its celestial path and the northward journey of the sun. The Sanskrit term *Sankramana* translates to begin to move. Therefore, the day in which the sun begins to move northwards is called Makar Sankranti. This holiday is celebrated every year in the month of January and honors the sun god Surya and Goddess Saraswati—its significance noted in the Rig Veda, and the Gayatri Mantra.

This is an auspicious time, as for many Hindus, Makar Sankranti marks the new year.



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Accordingly, people will travel to swim in holy rivers such as the Ganges, Yamuna, Krishna, and Kaveri in hopes of absolving any bad karma or actions from the past year. This is also the time period when the Kumba Mela is held every twelve years.

Makar Sankranti has spiritual significance for goal setting, as some believe that this six-month period during which the sun travels northwards is highly favourable towards defining and meeting goals and new endeavors. Therefore, as the northern direction of the sun is considered holy, many believe that it is only after this day that all auspicious occasions occur—such as an engagement, a wedding, or any other Hindu ritual or rite of passage.

While celebrations vary from community to community, the gratitude for the harvesting season coming to an end is apparent. The day before Makar Sankranti is called the Bhogi festival. On this day, old items are discarded and homes are tidied up with the roads swept clean. Some will even have bonfires to rid their homes of old items and to get rid of evil spirits or unwanted negative energy. Homes will be decorated with rangolis

or intricate designs hand laid on the floor with colored powder, chalk, or rice. On the actual day of Makar Sankranti, socializing and coming together as a community to enjoy the “fruits of their labor” is the priority.

It marks the end of the harvest season and many Hindu farmers will express their gratitude by honoring the cattle that help with the farming work. The vital role that cattle play is celebrated by decorating them with garlands of flowers, painted with colored powders, and given a special feast. Some areas will also hold a mini parade so that the farmers can show off their cattle.

In several of the northern states of India, Makar Sankranti is celebrated by flying kites. In these regions, the sky is filled with kites, and people of all ages compete by trying to cut each other’s kite strings. The spiritual metaphor of kite flying is that as one soars and leaps through life, they remain grounded by their connection to a higher power and the thread is a sign of devotion and attachment to God. Makar Sankranti is also considered an auspicious time to give to charities, temples, and those in need.

Pongal

Pongal is a four-day harvest festival celebrated in Tamil Nadu, Sri Lanka, Pondicherry as well as the Hindu diaspora and corresponds with Makar Sankranti. For many Hindus, especially Tamilians, Pongal ushers in the New Year and is celebrated over four days during the months of *Thai*—the January/February season—when crops such as rice, sugarcane, turmeric among others are harvested. During Pongal, many offer prayers to Surya, the sun god, for a good harvest and newly harvested produce is cooked for the first time on that day.

In Tamil, Pongal translates to “spilling over,” deriving its name from the tradition of boiling rice in a pot until it starts to overflow. Pongal also happens to be the name of a dish consumed during this festive time—a sweetened rice boiled with lentils. Therefore, celebrations often include boiling the first rice of the season, with milk and jaggery (a cane sugar). During Pongal festivities, the customary greeting among those that celebrate is, “Has the rice boiled?” The reply back is, “It has boiled.”



The history of Pongal can be traced back from 200 BC to 300 AD and is also mentioned in the *Puranas*, an ancient Hindu text. One popular legend associated with Pongal narrates that Lord Shiva sent his bull, Basava, to Earth to spread the message that food should be only eaten once a month so that there will be plenty of food available on earth and that no one will go hungry. However, Basava made an error and stated that people should eat every day. Angered by his mistake, Lord Shiva sent him to Earth to plough the fields and help people produce food. Therefore, Pongal is also associated with cattle and they too receive special attention during the festivities.

There are several ways to celebrate such as drawing *kolam*—the South Indian version of *rangoli*—and a traditional bull-taming event. Festivities continue on for four days, each with its own significance and celebrations. All the days of the festival are celebrated differently.

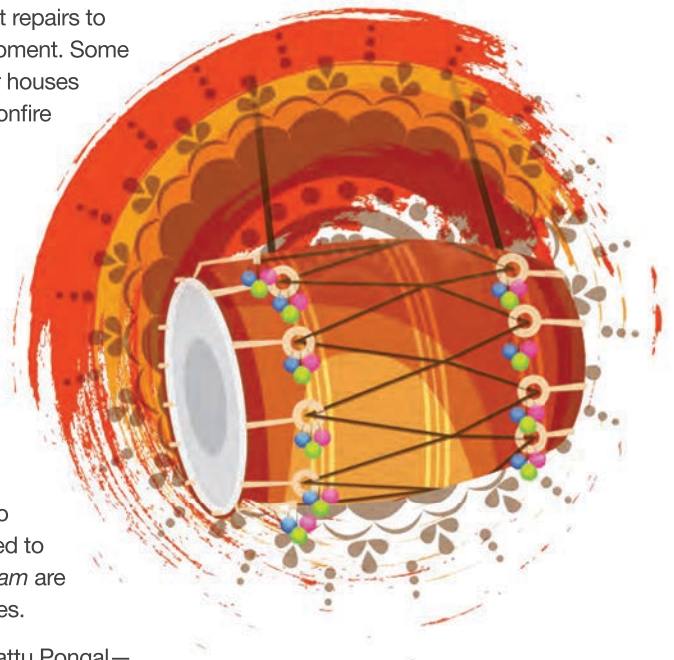
The first day of Pongal—known as Bhogi Pongal—is celebrated in honor of Lord Indra, who is considered the god of clouds and rains, and is believed to bring prosperity to the land. On the first day, a special *puja* (ceremony) is performed and then the crop of paddy is harvested. Farmers will apply

sandalwood paste and conduct repairs to their ploughs and farming equipment. Some will also use this day to rid their houses of unwanted items through a bonfire in a ritual called Bhogi Mantalu.

The second day—known as Surya Pongal—is dedicated to the sun god, Surya. On this day, a special ritual is performed where rice and milk are boiled together in a clay pot and tied to a turmeric plant and placed outside as an offering to Surya. As part of the offering, sugarcane sticks, coconuts, and bananas are also given and once they are believed to be blessed, they are eaten. *Kolam* are drawn at the entrances of homes.

On the third day—known as Mattu Pongal—cattle are honored and decorated with flower garlands and painted with colored powder. The cattle are bathed, given special food, and are sometimes the recipient of a special blessing by their owner as a way of thanking them for their hard work. Many will visit nearby temples. Sometimes, processions are held with the *murtis* (image or statue of a deity) adorned in silks and flower garlands on decorative float-like vehicles. People will get together to perform dances or drama performances to celebrate the harvest.

The fourth and final day—known as Kaanum Pongal—marks the end of the festival. On this day, a ritual is performed where the leftover sweet *pongal* and other food are set out for the birds to eat. *Kaanum* translates “to visit” so many will set out to see relatives and meet with family. Additionally, community events and social gatherings will continue to honor the community spirit.



Celebrating Abroad

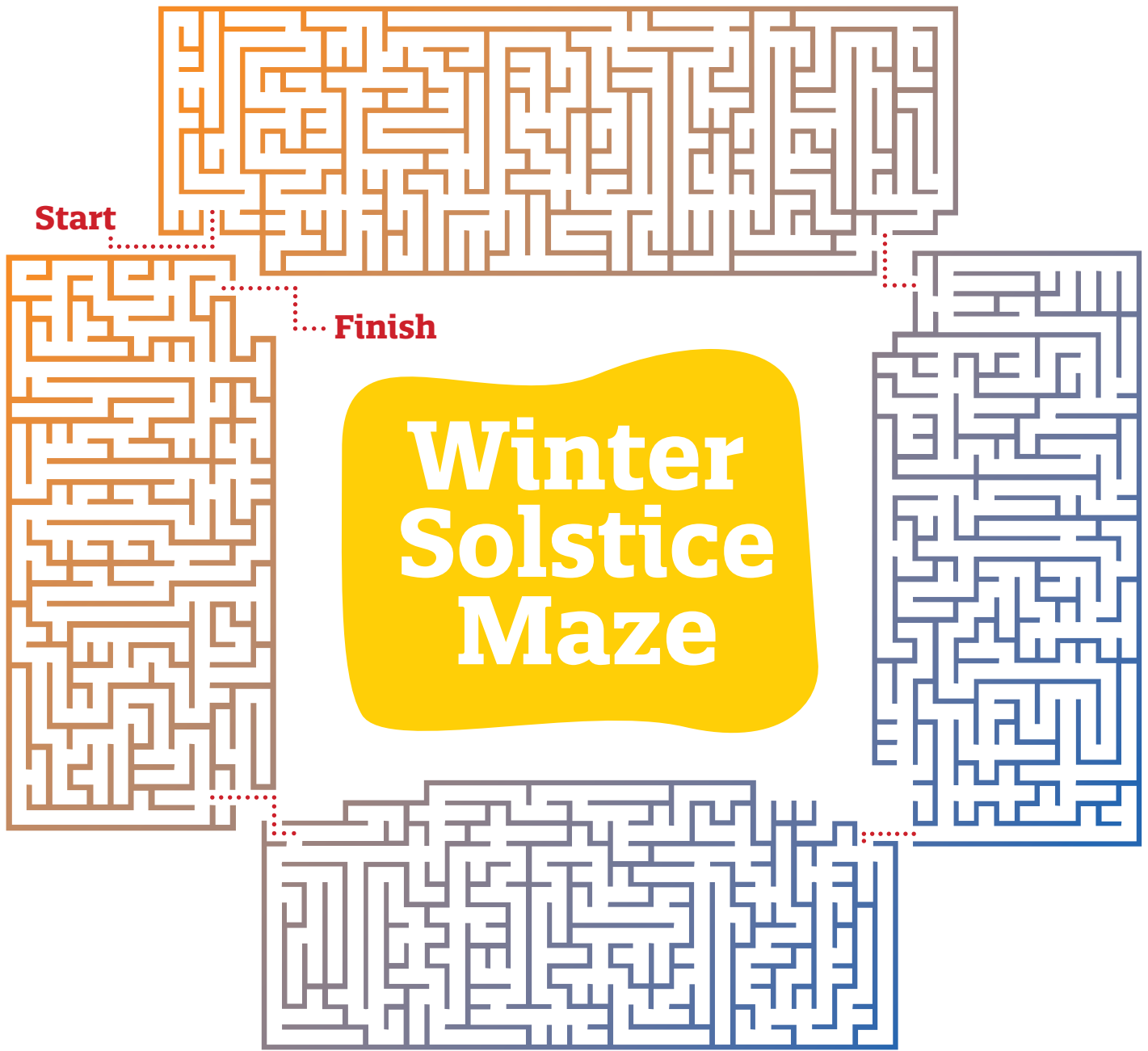
Even though much of the Indian Diaspora are not directly impacted by India’s harvest, they will visit Hindu temples and hold pujas for those that are. Honoring traditions and recognizing the significance of these holidays is a way to maintain the cultural and religious ties from abroad. Some will follow the traditional four days of *Pongal* observations while others may group the days into one ceremony. Many will still gather with others in festivities involving singing and dancing.

While each of these three holidays have their own regional practice, and their celebrations vary from community to community, all of them recognize the vital role played by the sun, earth, fire, and rain. The Earth represents food, while fire and rain maintain our health and land. The sun symbolizes wisdom and spiritual light which provides life and energy. Together these four elements foster a balance not just for the individual but for all of the land and what it offers.



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In this reading, the elements which are significant to winter solstice and harvesting crops are explained. As you go through the mazes, see if you can find the hidden messages spelled out by the path.



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