

Thai Pongal: A Festival of Thanksgiving

Posted on

Welcoming the New Year, the much-celebrated “Festival of Harvest” – Thai Pongal takes place on January 14th, by Hindu Tamils across the world, when preparations start a week ahead. ‘Thai’ is the time when farmers pay their gratitude to nature’s gifts – Sun God, Earth, Rain God, cattle, and other natural elements that have helped reaped a bountiful harvest. Pongal (sweet rice) is prepared and offered to guardian deities.



In India, the day before the festival is usually called Bhogi, which refers to cleaning and discarding old items. Following that, the Surya or Perum Pongal takes place and concludes with Mattu Pongal, where the cows are bathed and decorated, with garland, horns polished with colors, and other rituals are conducted. The festival is known to have originated from the time of Cholas, who had introduced this festival. However, there is an interesting legend connected to the festival. Lord Shiva had sent his bull Nandi to earth with a message to convey to humankind. Have a gingerly oil massage and bathe daily and eat once a month. Nandi, however, mistakenly told the people to eat every day and bathe once a month. Enraged, Lord Shiva cursed Nandi to live on earth forever and help people plow the fields. Thus, Mattu Pongal has an association with the cattle. In Sri Lanka, the Surya or Perum Pongal is celebrated as the main festival, and it takes place on the tenth month according to the Hindu calendar. The festival marks the start of the Sun’s northern journey into the constellation of Capricorn (Makara). On the festival day, places of worship – kovils decorate the floors with colorful kolam, hang thoranam, tie banana plants and sugar canes to the entrance, set up a makeshift hearth. With the rising of the sun the auspicious hour of celebration begins.

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Hindus decorate the floor with attractive kolam on the day of the festival.

Milk and other ingredients such as red/white raw rice, jaggery, ghee, cashew nuts, raisins, split yellow mung dhal, and cardamom is boiled in plain or decorated pots. While boiling the concoction, people let the milk spill over the pot; this spilling over of cooked rice is an auspicious sign of material abundance and prosperity. The prepared sweet dish, Pongal, is offered to the Sun God and then distributed among devotees as prasadam. It is a spectacle of color and sound at kovils, where priests conduct special poojas, and the idols in the shrines are adorned with colorful garlands. The reverberating sounds of nadaswaram add joy to the festival. Hindus dressed in new and bright attire visit with families to seek blessings. A vivid and energetic spirit fills the atmosphere. While at home, similar preparation takes place. Ladies wake up before dawn, sprinkle turmeric water on the floors, adorn the floor with intricate kolam, and hang mango leaves at the door entrances; some may even tie sugar canes. Usually, the preparations occur outdoors in houses, where households gather to prepare Pongal. Idols in the shrine rooms are decorated with colorful garlands. Also placed trays filled with fruits and Nirai Kumbam (brass/silver pot filled with water and mango leaves and a coconut placed on top is placed on a banana leaf spread with raw rice). The breakfast table is often laden with sweet Pongal, and ven Pongal is optional (a savory Pongal accompanied with chutney), vadai, murukku, Kesari, and other sweetmeats. Overall, the celebration of the festival aims to thank the successful harvest and encourage social cohesiveness and family reunions. Still, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the gathering of large crowds is restricted.



Colorful garlands to adorn the deities.



Pongal is prepared in plain or decorated clay pots, which is placed on a makeshift hearth.



Enjoy a mouthful of sweet pongal.



On the day of Mattu Pongal, people bathe the cattles, polish their horns and carry out rituals.