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Indians will celebrate Pongal on Monday

By [Thayumana Somasundaram](#) [Post](#) [Comment](#)

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People in the United States may have heard of Diwali, an Indian festival of light. However, there is a less-known Indian harvest festival called Pongal that is more popular in the predominantly agrarian and rural areas of India. (According to 2001 Census of India, 74 percent of Indians live in rural areas.)

Pongal is celebrated both as a religious and non-religious festival throughout south India and is called by different names - Mahar Shankranthi, Shankranthi and Lohri. As a non-religious festival it is an event where farmers are thankful for their bumper crops and would like to share the fortune with family and neighbors.

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In Tamil, a Dravidian language of India, *pongal* literally means the process of rice boiling-over a pot and the dish itself. Rice is the staple food of south India.

Pongal falls on the day in Indian (lunar) calendar when the sun starts its northern course in the sky indicating that the dark days of winter are over and spring is around the corner. Since Pongal (like other Hindu festivals) follows the lunar calendar, it doesn't fall on the same day in the Gregorian (western) calendar. This year Pongal will be celebrated on Monday.

Pongal festivities last for three days. On Bhogi, the first day, people clean their house and get rid of all old and unused materials. Then they paint and decorate the house and draw *kolam* - decorative patterns made with rice flour and colored chalk powder - on the floors.

On the second day they make *pongali* in a pot decorated with turmeric and rice paste. Then the food is offered to God along with sugarcane, coconuts and bananas on a big banana leaf. During this offering oil lamps are lit, and the family prays to God for the good harvest and health. Everyone wears new clothes and eats sugarcane, *pongali* and other sweets together as a family.

The third day of celebration, Mattu Pongal, is fully devoted to giving thanks to the livestock. Cows, bulls and calves are bathed and decorated with colorful patterns and fed well. Hindus attach special significance to the cow as a provider of not only milk but also wealth. In the evening villagers come together to witness Jallikattu, where young men chase bulls to get monetary rewards that are tied to the neck of the bull, and to impress young women. In

another game, children dressed in new clothes visit the neighbors and sing folk songs and are rewarded with sweets.

In the United States, Indian families celebrate Pongal by cleaning their houses, decorating them with Indian handicrafts, saying private prayers and inviting friends for dinner.

Thayumana Somasundaram, 47, is a research scientist at Florida State University. He was born and raised in India and has been living in Tallahassee for 14 years. He lives here with his wife and son.

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