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Dark days of winter are over - Pongal is here

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By **Thayumana Somasundaram**
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Pongal, a lesser known Indian harvest festival is more popular in the predominantly agrarian and rural areas of south 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, and Shankranthi.

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 friends. In Tamil, a Dravidian language of India, pongal means a dish prepared with rice, lentils and brown sugar. Rice is the staple food of south India.

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Pongal festivities typically last for three days. On Bhogi, the first day, people clean their houses and get rid of all old materials. Then they paint and decorate the house and draw kolam - decorative patterns drawn using rice flour and colored chalk powder - on the floor.

On the second day, they cook pongal in a decorated clay pot. Then the food is offered to God along with sugarcanes, coconuts and fruits placed on a big banana leaf. During this offering, oil lamps are lit; everyone wears new clothes and says thanks to God for the good harvest. Then they enjoy the meal together as a family.

The third day of celebration, Maattu Pongal (maadu means cow) is devoted to giving thanks to the livestock. Cows, bulls and calves are bathed and decorated with colorful paints and fed well. Hindus attach special significance to the cow, not only as a provider of milk but also wealth.

In the evening, villagers come together to watch Jallikattu, a game where young men chase bulls to get monetary rewards that are tied to the neck of the bull and impress the young women. In another game, children

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dressed in new clothes visit the neighbors, sing folk songs and get monetary rewards.

In the U.S, Indian families celebrate pongal by cleaning and decorating their houses, preparing pongal and other dishes, saying private prayers and inviting friends for dinner.

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