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Makar Sankranti and India's Agricultural Festival Calendar

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SUBJECTS COVERED**HISTORY & CULTURE****GEOGRAPHY****SOCIAL ISSUES****CURATED & WRITTEN BY****Bharat Choudhary**

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WHY IN NEWS

Makar Sankranti 2026 was celebrated across India on January 14 — as Pongal in Tamil Nadu, Uttarayan in Gujarat, Magh Bihu in Assam, and Poush Sangkranti in West Bengal — highlighting how India's single astronomical event generates dozens of regional festival traditions, all converging on the solar calendar marker of the Sun's entry into Capricorn.

THE SOLAR CALENDAR BASIS

Most Indian festivals use the **lunar calendar** (*Panchang*) — which is why Diwali, Holi, and Eid shift dates each year. **Makar Sankranti** is one of India's few festivals governed entirely by the **solar calendar**: it falls when the Sun (*Surya*) transitions from **Sagittarius (Dhanu rashi)** to **Capricorn (Makara rashi)**.

This solar transition — called **Uttarayan** (the northward journey of the Sun) — occurs annually on **January 14** (very occasionally January 15 in years of exact zodiacal computation), making it one of the most calendrically consistent major Hindu festivals.

Astronomical significance: The term *Makara* (Capricorn) comes from Sanskrit, and the festival celebrates the Sun's transition past the **winter solstice** and the beginning of longer days — a universal agricultural signal marking the end of the harvest and the beginning of spring sowing preparation.

THE FESTIVAL ACROSS INDIA — GEOGRAPHICAL DIVERSITY

India's size and linguistic diversity mean the same astronomical event generates a rich spectrum of distinct regional festivals:

Tamil Nadu — Pongal (January 14–17)

Pongal is a four-day harvest festival and is Tamil Nadu's most important festival:

| Day | Name | Significance |
|-------|-----------------------|---|
| Day 1 | Bhogi Pongal (Jan 13) | Burning of old belongings; cleansing |
| Day 2 | Thai Pongal (Jan 14) | New rice boiled in milk until it overflows (<i>pongu</i> = boil over); Sun worship |
| Day 3 | Maatu Pongal (Jan 15) | Cattle worship; decorated cows, bulls; <i>Jallikattu</i> |
| Day 4 | Kanum Pongal (Jan 16) | Family gatherings; travel; forgiveness |

Jallikattu – the ancient Tamil bull-taming sport (also called *Eruthazhuvuthal*) – is practised on Maatu Pongal. The Tamil Nadu Jallikattu Act, 2017 regulates the event after the Supreme Court controversially banned it in 2014 (MoEFCC animal cruelty case – reversed by state law and central amendment to the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Act 1960).

The name **Pongal** derives from the Tamil *pongu* (to boil/overflow), symbolic of prosperity and abundance. The *pongal* rice dish is cooked in the open, in new earthen pots, with milk, jaggery, and turmeric.

Agriculture link: Pongal coincides with the harvest of **Samba** (late kharif/second paddy) and **sugarcane** in Tamil Nadu, celebrated as gratitude to the Sun, earth, and cattle.

Gujarat and Rajasthan – Uttarayan / Kite Festival

In Gujarat and Rajasthan, Makar Sankranti is celebrated as **Uttarayan** – dominated by **kite-flying** (**Patangbazi**). Ahmedabad’s skies turn colourful with millions of kites on January 14.

The competitive kite-flying tradition involves **manja** – string coated with abrasive material – but concerns over injuries from synthetic (Chinese) manja led to multiple High Court rulings. The Gujarat High Court ordered in 2020 that only **cotton thread manja** is permissible; synthetic/nylon/metallic manja is banned.

Traditional foods: *Til-gur* (sesame and jaggery sweets); *Chikki*; *Undhiyu* (a mixed vegetable dish cooked in earthen pots underground).

Punjab and Haryana – Lohri (January 13)

Lohri falls the evening before Makar Sankranti. A bonfire is lit in the centre of a gathering; people throw *rewar* (popped rice), peanuts, and *gur* (jaggery) into the flames while singing traditional folk songs. Lohri celebrates the end of the winter solstice, wheat sowing, and is particularly associated with the birth of a son in Punjabi culture (though now increasingly associated with daughters too, following social campaigns).

Assam – Bhogali Bihu / Magh Bihu

Bhogali Bihu (also called Magh Bihu) is the second Bihu of three annual Bihus (Rongali/Bohag in April, Kongali/Kati in October, Bhogali/Magh in January). It marks the end of the harvest season and is characterised by:

Meji: A community-built bamboo-thatched structure (*bhelaghar*) that is ceremonially burnt at dawn — symbolising offering to the fire deity Agni

Uruga: The feast evening before Magh Bihu, when communities cook and eat together, including rice, fish, and sticky rice cakes (*pitha*)

Dekahoi: Similar to meji; personal offerings

West Bengal — Poush Sangkranti / Makar Sankranti

In Bengal, Makar Sankranti (Poush Sangkranti) is marked by **pithe** making — various traditional rice cakes (Patisapta, Gokul pithe, Dudh pithe) made with rice flour, jaggery, and coconut. The **Gangasagar Mela** — held at the confluence of the Ganga and the Bay of Bengal on **Sagar Island** (South 24 Parganas) — is one of India's largest annual pilgrimages, drawing over 20 lakh devotees.

Sagar Island: Sagar Island (also called *Sagardwip*) is the largest delta island in the Sundarbans complex. The **Kapil Muni Temple** — where the sage Kapila is believed to have meditated — is the pilgrimage focal point. Gangasagar Mela has been recommended for UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage listing.

INTANGIBLE CULTURAL HERITAGE AND UNESCO

India has 14 elements inscribed on UNESCO's **Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) of Humanity** list (as of 2024):

Yoga (2016)

Kumbh Mela (2017)

Navroz/Nowruz (2016 — jointly with multiple countries)

Vedic chanting (2008)

Ramlila (2008)

Ramman religious festival (Uttarakhand, 2009)

Mudiyettu (Kerala, 2010)

Kalbelia folk songs (Rajasthan, 2010)

Chhau dance (2010)

Buddhist chanting of Ladakh (2012)

Sankirtana (Manipur, 2013)

Traditional brass and copper craft (Thatheras of Jandiala Guru, 2014)

Yoga (2016)

Durga Puja in Kolkata (2021)

Garba dance (Gujarat, 2023)

The regional harvest festivals (Pongal, Bihu, Lohri) have been proposed for UNESCO consideration, with Tamil Nadu's government actively lobbying for **Pongal** to receive nomination.

THE AGRICULTURAL CALENDAR — RABI AND KHARIF

Makar Sankranti's timing aligns with critical agricultural transitions:

Northern India:

Rabi sowing (October–November) has been completed; crops are in winter growth phase

Wheat and mustard will be harvested March–April

Makar Sankranti marks a **psychological midpoint** — farmers have planted, waited through the cold, and now celebrate as days grow longer

Tamil Nadu:

Pongal coincides with the harvest of **Samba rice** (November–January) — the main crop in Tamil Nadu

Also marks sugarcane harvest season

The festival name literally celebrates the boiling of **freshly harvested rice**

Assam:

Bhogali Bihu marks the end of winter paddy harvest (Ahu and Sali rice)

Community feasting uses freshly harvested rice and fish

UPSC RELEVANCE

Prelims:

Makar Sankranti: solar festival; January 14; Uttarayan (Sun northward); Makara (Capricorn)

Pongal (Tamil Nadu): 4-day festival; Thai Pongal (Jan 14); Jallikattu; Maatu Pongal

Bhogali Bihu / Magh Bihu (Assam): 2nd Bihu of three; Meji burning; Uruka feast

Lohri (Punjab): January 13; bonfire festival; wheat harvest

Gangasagar Mela: Sagar Island, West Bengal; Kapil Muni Temple; 20 lakh+ pilgrims

UNESCO ICH: India has 14 inscriptions; Garba (2023 latest); Durga Puja (2021)

Jallikattu: Tamil Nadu Jallikattu Act 2017; PCA Act 1960 amendment

Mains GS-1: Indian cultural geography — how ecological zones generate distinct cultural expressions from a common astronomical event; agricultural festivals as intangible cultural heritage; diversity within unity.

★ FACTS CORNER — KNOWLEDGEPEDIA

MAKAR SANKRANTI — SOLAR CALENDAR:

Date: January 14 (solar; Sun enters Capricorn/Makara)

Uttarayan: Sun's northward journey from winter solstice toward summer solstice

Few Indian festivals on solar calendar: Makar Sankranti, Vaisakhi (April 13/14), Onam (Kerala — movable in August-September)

REGIONAL FESTIVAL VARIANTS:

Tamil Nadu: Pongal (4 days Jan 13-16); Thai Pongal = Jan 14

Gujarat/Rajasthan: Uttarayan; kite-flying; til-gur sweets

Punjab/Haryana: Lohri (Jan 13 evening); bonfire; rewar, peanuts, gur

Assam: Bhogali Bihu / Magh Bihu; Meji burning; Uruka feast; pitha rice cakes

West Bengal: Poush Sankranti / Makar Sankranti; pithe rice cakes; Gangasagar Mela

Andhra Pradesh/Karnataka: Sankranti / Suggi; rangoli; cattle decoration

Maharashtra: Makar Sankranti; tilgul (sesame-jaggery balls) exchange

GANGASAGAR MELA:

Location: Sagar Island (Sagardwip), South 24 Parganas, West Bengal

Confluence: Ganga + Bay of Bengal

Pilgrimage centre: Kapil Muni Temple

Attendance: 20 lakh+ (2nd only to Kumbh Mela)

Status: recommended for UNESCO ICH

JALLIKATTU:

State: Tamil Nadu; Maatu Pongal (Jan 15)

Legal basis: Tamil Nadu Jallikattu Act 2017

Controversy: Supreme Court ban 2014 (PETA India case); Tamil Nadu legislated state law + Centre amended PCA Act 1960

UNESCO INTANGIBLE CULTURAL HERITAGE (INDIA, 14 INSCRIPTIONS):

Latest: Garba dance (2023); Durga Puja in Kolkata (2021)

Others: Kumbh Mela (2017), Yoga (2016), Ramlila (2008), Vedic chanting (2008), Chhau (2010), Buddhist chanting Ladakh (2012), Sankirtana Manipur (2013), Thatheras (2014), Mudiyetu (2010), Kalbelia (2010), Ramman (2009), Navroz (2016)

AGRICULTURAL CALENDAR:

Rabi crops (winter): wheat, mustard, gram; sown Oct-Nov; harvested Mar-Apr

Kharif crops (monsoon): rice, cotton, sorghum; sown Jun-Jul; harvested Oct-Nov

Tamil Nadu has a unique third season (Samba); paddy harvested Jan-Feb

OTHER RELEVANT FACTS:

Bihu (Assam): 3 festivals — Rongali/Bohag (April, new year), Kongali/Kati (October, fallow season), Bhogali/Magh (January, harvest)

Vaisakhi (Punjab): April 13-14; Sikh New Year; Rabi harvest; formation of Khalsa Panth (1699)

Onam (Kerala): August-September; Chingam month; King Mahabali legend; boat races, Pookalam

Sources: PIB, Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts, UNESCO ICH

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