

Xavier Irudayaraj, S. J.
Arulkadal, Madras

THE PONGAL FESTIVAL

I

The Pongal festival in Tamilnadu is the celebration which yet preserves one of the richest traditions of mankind from the remote past. It is a day of thanksgiving to the Supreme Benevolent Power which is beyond all humankind. To the city dweller of the present day, Pongal is merely a ritual of an exchange of formal greetings and to the city workman it is merely the occasion for a few days of absence from work with wages and perhaps for the putting on of new clothes. But to the villager today, it is more meaningful and productive of deep rooted joy.

1. Occurrence

Of the two half years – *Uttarayana* (January 15 to July 15) and *Dakshinayana* (July 15 to January 15), the *Uttarayana* is considered to be meritorious while the other is not. The Pongal day, on the first of *Uttarayana*, is called the *Makara Sankranti* or simply the *Sankranti* day, on which the sun passes from the ninth sign (*rasi*) of the Zodiac to the tenth sign – the *Makara* (known as the month of *Thāi* in Tamil). (The day was specially auspicious to temple worship and we have epigraphical records of endowments made for performing special *abhishēkā* to Sivā on the *Uttarayana Sankranti* day.)

This day is celebrated by all people as the most auspicious. On this day the sun turns back from the southern most point. At this point he is at the longest distance from the earth and from the part of it which corresponds to the South of India. Hence the heat received by this part from the sun is the least and people experience a spell of cold. His retracing this steps northward signifies the dispelling of the cold and the ushering in of greater light and warmth. The first day of this month symbolizes the beginning of warmth and no wonder it is welcomed with great acclaim.

The Pongal festival in Tamilnadu consists of a four day celebrations. It celebrates Indra – the Lord of Marutam, Surya-Sun God as the giver of

all bounty, and the Cow as man's greatest helper through the ages, on the first three days respectively. On the days of Pongal the entire home is decorated with *kolam* (colourful drawings).

There is a proverb that the month of '*Thai*' always helps people to find the way out; for the cultivator, for the indebted, for the unemployed, for maids to be married, and many more, *Thai* offers solutions. This only signifies the relative affluence in which the month places every one and hence every one looks forward to the celebrations of Pongal in the month of *Thai* with joy and satisfaction.

The Pongal festival takes its name from the Tamil root 'pongu' which means to cook, boil over and overflow. 'Pongal' is the verbal noun from 'pongu'. When newly harvested rice is cooked in a mud pot, over an open fire in the yard made in a newly formed oven in brick, it boils over and this is called 'pongal'. The entire festival takes its name from this. Figuratively it is to swell up with joy. On this day, the rice which is boiled in milk, boils up and overflows: people take it as a good augury; women and children shout 'pongalo-pongal' and the festival itself takes its name from this feature.

The season is also one when every rural household is really swelling with joy and happiness born out of the satisfaction of having produced harvest and so the name Pongal is doubly appropriate.

2. BHOGI : Celebration on the First Day

The day is also one, which precedes '*Makara Sankranti*' the occasion when the Sun enters Capricorn. The festival is observed in honour of Indra on elephant—the god of the heavens, who is supposed to control the clouds and usher into the world seasonal rains causing thereby abundance and prosperity in the country. In fact, this festival and the two following it going by the names of '*Sankranti*' and '*Gopuja*', are similar to the observances of the harvest feast in the countries of Europe. The term 'Bhogi Pandigai' means 'the festival of physical enjoyment.' The name had its origin perhaps from the bringing in of the harvest which is the source of all enjoyment. The people have then their well-earned rest after a period of strenuous exertion in the fields, for raising crops and bringing in the harvest.

Moreover, it is the commencement of the Hindu marriage season, and people are used to say that 'the marriage court is open.' At any rate the festival is considered to be the harbinger of the coming period of marriage and enjoyment, and is consequently observed by the people in a fitting manner.

It is a day of disposing of the old things and a day of preparation. A good deal of scrubbing and cleaning goes on in all the houses in the country. Prior to day break on the festive day, the dirt and rubbish accumulations of the past year are swept out and burnt. The village and the several houses therein, present a smart and tidy look.

3. Pongal Day

The second day celebration is the most important and meaningful. The sun-god is invoked on the traditional lamp and a *puja* is offered. Whatever is considered the best in the year's harvest is offered to the sun-god. Newly harvested rice is cooked in milk on a new mud pot and offered on plantain leaves, numbering five, seven, nine etc. Sugarcane with the foliage, ginger and turmeric with the stem and leaves are offered. The mud pot is decorated by tying the ginger and turmeric stalks round its neck. Sacred ash-marks are placed on the pot. The offerings of food laid out on the plantain leaves are distributed again to the labourers and the village artisans. Cane represents the best of the sweet produce; turmeric is always a symbol of auspiciousness. Sugar rice, cooked in milk with sugar or jaggery, is served out on the leaves with a plentiful addition of ghee, slices of coconut kernel and plantain fruits. On this occasion, rice is cooked with the correct quantity of water and no water is filtered out. The whole cooking as well as the *puja* are done in an open central yard of the house, to signify that the worship and the offering is direct to the sun-god. The sun is the giver of life to the plants, animals and the humans. Through the whole year he had benevolently showered his kindness on the labours of the tiller and crowned his efforts with a rich produce. Hence the Pongal *puja* done to the sun is a kind of thanksgiving to the Almighty, by whatever name different religions may call him, through the form of the sun.

The Almighty cannot be seen or grasped by the senses. Man sees His glory and benevolence through the sun which is in a sense His visible

form. All the prayers in the morning and in the evening are directed to the sun and through him to God. Worship of the sun is probably as old as man. The daily *Sandhya Vandana* and the first act in all *Siva-Puja* are to the sun.

4. Gopuja – 'Mattu Pongal'

The day next to *Sankranti* is set apart for the worship of cows. The festival is given the name of '*Mattu Pongal*' from the custom of cooking pongal for the cows to feed on. Cattle form the chief asset of an agriculturist and consequently it is but proper that their services during the year are recognised. Hence a small portion of the year's produce is utilised to feed them. This is perhaps the simplest explanation that can be given for the origin of the custom.

There is an Indian proverb which says that the joys of the world do not exist for one without wealth, and cattle formed the wealth of the earlier inhabitants of the world. Hence the sages of old have in their profound wisdom laid it down that the worship of the bulls and cows once a year, at least, is necessary to be free from want, disease and sin.

It is no wonder that the Hindus try to show their feelings of gratitude to the cattle that were of immense use to them during the past year, by performing *pūja* to them, as soon as the harvest season is over.

The Cow in History

The cow has been the most valuable and cherished companion of pre-historic man in his nomadic life. True, the horse and the camel also had been such companions in certain areas, but there was nothing to equal the services of the cow. In return for man's services, the cow gave him milk for food and nourishment, surplus milk left over after feeding its own calf. Historians would say that the cow was the constant companion of the Aryans when they entered India and for the first time settled on the Gangetic plains. The cow provided them food in the first stage and was in a sense responsible for man's very survival on earth. Then the male of the species, the bull came to be used for transport. Probably ancient man rode the bull and later, harnessed it to wheels, to carry him and his goods. In the Saiva religion, the bull is the mount of Siva, the Supreme Being.

The earliest literature of man, the Rg Veda contains many prayers to Ushas, Agni, Maruts, Indra etc. to give him cows and protect his cows. The Rg Vedic mantras may be remembered. (Book X, hymns 169, 172):

These Rg Vedic hymns will show the concern of our ancients over the welfare of the cows. The cow had been glorified as the giver of all things to human beings; the Kamadhenu symbolizes this aspect of the Indian culture and the reverence to the cow. The Raghu vamsa devotes a whole chapter to the service rendered by the king Dilipa, an ancestor of Rama to the celestial cow in order that he might get the gift of a child. The story of Manu-Niti-Chola is even more well known. When his own son, and only heir to the throne, inadvertently rode his chariot over a calf causing its death, Manu would not be satisfied with any ritual of expiation; he actually rode his chariot over his own son, so that he also could share the grief of the cow.

Indian culture takes pride in portraying Krishna, the great hero of the Bhagavata and also of the Mahabharata, the teacher of the Gita, not as a king but as the Gopala, the tender of Cows; it symbolises that all the human souls are the cows and he is the cow-herd.

The cow is the most auspicious object for any good act and we have even today the ritual of taking a cow with its calf into a newly built house, the actual '*graha-pravesam*' (entering the house) being made by the owners themselves, after the cow.

When we know these concepts in Indian thought and culture, we can understand why cow slaughter is so abhorrent to the Indian mind.

In the Tamil language, '*mādu*' means the cattle, the cow and the bull, and as the cows were the real measure of the material richness of any person in pre-historic society, the term '*mādu*' was also applied to all wealth, and means the same even today in literary use. Man in the Indian civilization has always been a grateful being and this day, the second day of the month of Thai, the day after Pongal, is dedicated to an expression of this gratitude to his great helper, the Cow.

The Bull Fighting

On the same day there is another significant ritual in the evening. All the cows, bulls and calves of the village are gathered together in a

common large open space and driven round by the owners themselves, with loud noises and the sounding of the village drums. This is called 'mädu-mirattal' in Tanjavur and adjoining districts. It is known also as 'manji-virattu' in Ramanathapuram and some other districts, where young men set out to tame an infuriated bull. This is a relic of an ancient concept in popular as well as literary convention, of a hero taming a ferocious bull in order to win the hand of a bride. This is now done symbolically in every pastoral village.

This 'event' may be seen as the Indian style bull fighting. The bulls are decorated with floral garlands round the neck and the horns etc. and are subdued by daring young men by holding them down by the horns by sheer strength of arms. Aged men also take part in this dangerous exploit both out of their long practice and out of a desire to train the younger generation.

Fourth Day

The fourth day of the Pongal festivals is the *Kārināl*. The entire village puts on a holiday mood and sets this day apart for rural games and sports.

The city of Madras calls the day the *Kānum-Pongal* (or the Pongal of sight-seeing) and *Kānni-Pongal* (the Pongal of the young girls). In the Madras of the pre-war days, this was a great holiday for all the citizens. There were the electric trains, connecting many places at cheap fares; roads were free; gay walking on the roads was quite safe; The city for them then consisted of Mylapore, the Beach, Triplicane, Museum, People's park, Moore Market and Kandasami Koil. Young girls also freely roamed about with their families without any fear or inhibition and hence the name *Kānni-Pongal*.

Thus the four day Pongal festival, a truly social festival, which people had been for a long time longing for ends on such a gay note. The present city ramble was ofcourse unknown in the villages then.

II

REFLECTIONS ON THE FESTIVAL

1. Pongal is an Occasion of Rejoicing

In all countries men celebrate harvest festivals. For, in harvest, man sees the fruit of his sowing, the produce of his labour, and security for his

future. Just as every creative fulfilment, every self-realization brings joy to the heart, so too harvest, the gathering of the produced fruits, fills man with joy. And joy is very communicative as it is contagious. When one shares joy, his joy is doubled...., consequently rejoicing manifests itself in festival celebrations.

The time of rejoicing, hence, brings together families and communities and renews their bonds of unity. Such events of rejoicing in a community are like oiling the tired wheels of a vehicle or like overhauling an old machine. The festive mood renews the spirit of the community and refreshes the members to take up once again hard labour to produce and achieve.

2. Pongal is a Time of Thanksgiving and Offering of the First-fruits

While harvest brings joy, the cup of joy overflows with praise and gratitude to God. For in harvesting, man is over-powered by the gracious power of God manifested in nature and so he acknowledges that harvest is not only his product, but the blessing of God provided through sun, soil, rain, water, dew and air. Particularly in India we consider the earth as Mother who from her fecund womb brings forth all vegetation, to feed her children. So too we Indians personify God as our Mother and rejoice in the productive abundance (harvest) as a gift from the motherhood of God. Consequently as a sign of our gratitude, we offer to God the first fruits, since the first fruits are considered both the best and the most cherished fruits man could offer to God.

The Bible says that Abel offered the firstlings of his flock (Gen. 4:4). Later in Israel the first born was offered to God and redeemed by the parents (Exod. 13:11ff. also Lk. 1:23). In Tamilnadu, it is a custom that a son gives his first salary to his father or mother.

3. Pongal is a Festival of Cosmic Liturgy

Pongal is not simply a social and cultural festivity; it is also a cosmic festival. For, in Pongal, we rejoice over nature's gifts and celebrate our intimacy and oneness with nature. Does not nature feed us? Does it not protect us? Does not nature elevate us to new hopes by seasonal renewal?

Particularly in Indian traditions, closeness to nature is deeply felt and realized. Consequently nature is considered sacred. For example, rivers and mountains are specially venerated. Both the vedic rituals and Upanishadic meditations celebrate a cosmic liturgy.

In the Biblical tradition too, many festivals were originally of cosmic liturgies. Today, we are integrating cosmic festivals, like Pongal into Christian Liturgy, so that Christian worship may be enriched by the hymn of the cosmos and that in turn, the cosmos itself may become more and more redeemed and transfigured on its way to final consummation.

4. The Relevant Message of Pongal for Our Times

The above reflections on Pongal reveal to us two significant messages that challenge us to relevant actions.

First of all, Pongal, though socio-religious in nature, is also a socio-secular celebration; it is therefore universal in its invitation, as it is open to all irrespective of caste or creed.

Such a celebration of human labour and the produce of nature is a challenge to reach beyond one's own clan and kinship, particularly in the caste-ridden Indian society.

This universal characteristic of the festival points to the specific culture and religion of the Tamils. Though the Tamils, today, are said to be more regionalistic, or even separatists, the cultural roots of the Tamils, reflected in this festival, reveal their spirit of universality. It also brings out the fact that the religion of the Tamils is more humanistic and secular. Hence Pongal enables us to discover the real roots of the Tamils and to perceive their sense of solidarity with the all people and all nations, which is well sung by an ancient Tamil Poet :

Every country is my native land
And every man is my kinsmen.

In fact, the celebration of the 'overflow' of human heart and the bounty of nature is a very symbolic event depicting the divine 'overflow' in all creation. Thus, Pongal festival invites us to realise the wholistic communion of Man-World-God.

Secondly, Pongal festival highlights the current ecological-crisis, which is due to the rupture between man and nature. The earth, as we have come to face today, is being polluted and destroyed.

Spiritual writers and socially committed persons have, in recent years, been calling us to conversion, and demanding that we rethink our attitudes towards nature and environment. The festival also reminds us that a holistic approach to nature must correct the reductionist-scientific-technological approach. The call of Pongal is therefore to realise a pro-nature asceticism which unfolds into a joyful conviviality of nature, people and God. This conviviality, which recognises the nature as humankind's common table laid by God, calls for a critical examination and rejection of unjust social structures that maintain the unbalanced distribution of life-essential services and which contribute to the destruction of the inter-relationship of the ecological system. In fact, Pongal, illustrates the spirit of St. Francis, inviting us to celebrate our fellowship with all creatures, especially with Sun, Water, Fire, land and Cattle—thus integrating our lives with the ultimate mystery, the womb of all reality.

Thus the creation-centred approach manifest in Pongal festival, challenges us to practice an 'eco-spirituality' as expressed in the psalms of the Bible. Indeed the Indian way to God has been and continues to be rooted on earth; it is the earth that has nourished and natured us; it is the earth that has determined the way we grasp truth, goodness, beauty and oneness which we call God. In fact, in Pongal festival, we come to realise that one who has never seen God in the creatures is anti-cosmos, anti-human and anti-God.

III

PRAYERS OF THE PONGAL FESTIVAL

At the hour of Pongal, the whole village usually resounds with the cry raised from every house and hamlet:

“May your pot of milk boil over,
may your cup of joy overflow,
Pongalo I. pongal I

May the sun illumine you and yours,
 May the joy of this day and this hour
 Last on every day all the year round
 'PONGALÖ! PONGÄL'

The spirit of the festival as celebrated by Christians today can be well sum up in the following prayers:

On this day of rejoicing and thanksgiving, let us pray that God who has blessed us with harvest may help us to deepen our trust in him and share our joy with one another in the spirit of 'Pongal' that surges up in our hearts!

As we offer the first fruits to the Lord of the universe may we become aware of our responsibility to share the produce with all those who collaborated with us by their labour and sweat!

When we enjoy the first fruits of the harvest, may we be reminded of the final harvest the Angels will reap and may we prepare ourselves for the banquet in the kingdom where all tears will be wiped away!

O God of creation! You bless us with the seasonal crops for our bodily nourishment. May your Word find our lives good soil to germinate and yield a hundred fold so that we may share and rejoice with all the saints.!!!

References used:

1. Arunachalam M., *Festivals of Tamil Nadu*, Gandhi Vidyalayam, Tanjavur, 1980.
2. Jagadisa Ayyar P. V., *South Indian Festivities*, Asian Educational Services, New Delhi, 1982.
3. Brijendra Nath Sharma, *Festivals of India*, Abhinava pub, New Delhi, 1978.
4. Puthiyadam Ignetriss S. J., *Come Let us Celebrate I*, ATC, Bangalore, 1981.
5. Rayan Samuel, "The Earth is the Lords," *Vidyajyoti*, March, 1990.
6. Raja R. J., "On Loving the Earth," *Vidyajyoti*, Dec. 1989.