

Makar(a) (मकर) Sankranti (सङ्क्रान्ति)

My Jyotish guru Hart de Fouw taught that Makara Sankranti is a special moment for Jyotishis, one that traditionally marks the time to renew our links to the Jyotir Vidya and I've made some kind of observance every year since then. 2017 Makara Sankranti is now upon us, and I am about to go quiet for some time.

It is an extraordinary year we are facing into, given the global impact of both Brexit and the results of the American election. I find myself searching out those who think deeply about democracy, civil society, ethical and effective activity even more than is my norm. (George Monbiot <http://www.monbiot.com/> is but one of my favourites on the ecology/political/societal front and he will lead you to others, if you care for a view that is not wholly American)

I need also to remind myself how to be stable in the midst of what can seem a maelstrom of incoherence on the planet. This lovely piece by Dr. Svoboda was a worthy reminder of how important faith is to our well-being: <http://www.drsvoboda.com/faith-and-healing/>. Robert discusses the essential need for prana to move well to retain and develop faith, and indeed for the achievement of anything at all.

And the greatest source of prana for everything on planet earth is the Sun.

So with that context I offer this introduction to Makara Sankranti with the thought that renewal of one's relationship with Surya (सूर्य – the sun) can strengthen conscious, stable, enduring qualities of nobility – which in my Jyotishical universe is a key characteristic of the Sun. And to be clear about what I mean by nobility – some synonyms for noble character are: righteous, virtuous, honorable, upright, decent, worthy, moral, ethical, magnanimous, unselfish, generous. These are qualities I seek to embody irrespective of the changes in external world, but are yet more important in these dangerous times.

So, what is Makara Sankranti?

सङ्क्रान्ति: Sankranti

- Going from one place to another
- Course or passage or entry into
- Passage of the sun or planet from one sign or position in the heavens into another

मकर: Makara

- alligator or crocodile

Makara Sankranti therefore names the Sun's ingress into the constellation Makara, known as Capricorn in western astronomy.

Although there are 12 solar sankrantis in the Indian calendar, Makar Sankranti is the most significant among them, followed closely by the ingress of the Sun into Cancer.

These movements of Surya into constellations (राशि rasi) are both still sometimes associated in India with the winter and summer solstices, although the dates no longer align with the actual dates of Solstices – that’s a story for another day, involving as it does some explanation of what is called the Precession of the Equinox. Suffice for now to know that in about 285 BCE Winter Solstice aligned with the Sun’s movement into Capricorn, and Summer Solstice aligned with the Sun’s movement into Cancer. Which means that this is another gift of old-time brought to us from the depths of Indian history.

Uttarayana is the name in India for the northward movement of the Sun, which begins with the day after the winter solstice, and is something that many peoples celebrate – perhaps especially including those who inhabit really northern latitudes, including me. But this is distinct from the calendrical delineations that are marked by the sun’s apparent motion into the 12 successive constellations known in western astronomy as Aries through Pisces. (Of course there has to be an even further complication: Jyotisha uses the same names for constellations in English that western astrology uses to describe sun signs, even though those do not correspond to the constellations in the sky as understood in western astronomy. See story for another day above ;-)

Nonetheless, the depth of the tradition in India has us make our observances to Surya on the actual day of the Sankranti into a constellation, hence the importance of January 13/14/15 (depending on where you are on the planet).

Makar Sankranti is one of the few festivals that is celebrated throughout all of India, which may well be more to do with its ancient alignment with the Solstice than anything else. Solstice is one of those globally important events after all – Christmas has been aligned to the first days of discernible growth in the light of the sun (sorry for the northern hemisphere bias!), and Judaism’s Chanukah, Islam’s Festival of Light, Buddhism’s Bodhi observances, and many more all attest to the universal import of the Solstices, particularly the winter solstice which heralds the return of the Light which nourishes us all.

Various rituals in various places are undertaken during Makara Sankranti, and can include

- Ritual fire a day before Makara Sankranti
- worshipping rising Surya
- bathing in sacred bodies of water
- making Pongal and distributing it as Prasad
- acts of charity
- flying kites
- preparing sweets made of sesame and jaggery

I doubt that flying a kite in most of North America will be attractive given the cold of the season, but sesame and jaggery are both good foods in the winter months, so mindful preparation and distribution of them is a good practice. But even better is watching sunrise every day from January 13 through February 22. Those who know a mantra for the Sun can employ it. Those who know Gayatri can chant it. But a simple and heartfelt attitude of gratitude will do just as well. It’s a matter of a few minutes in your day, and you will be joining many people in the same act. May it serve you well, and may we all know peace and health and goodness in 2017! OM Shanti!