

Unity in Diversity

Sucheta Garud

India has six main religions. Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs, Christians, Buddhists and Jain all live here with their individual and diverse cultures and unique sets of beliefs, and there is always a celebration around the corner at regular intervals. This is what makes India so diverse, culturally rich, and an experience in itself. With festivals, the country becomes a colourful riot of rituals, dances, songs, cuisines and traditional dress. From East to West, North to South, each corner of the country is steeped in rich and ancient history about why each particular festival is celebrated.

Festivals revere nature - earth, light, air, water and space – which we call Panchatatva, the five elements. Festivals revere animals and the tools of different professions; there are festivals celebrating brothers and sisters, children, elders, and ancestors who have crossed the threshold. There are rituals for each festival which have special significance. Many spiritual symbols are used in these rituals. The days when these festivals are celebrated also have very special meaning. If one takes a deep interest, one can realize how beautifully these festivities are planned.

When we celebrate these festivals in kindergartens, they surely help the child connect to the culture as well as developing aspects such as memory and awareness about the land where they live. One festival, called Sankranti, is a wonderful example of how rituals and ways of celebration change according to geographical location. This festival is celebrated in different ways all over India and Nepal and shows gratitude to Mother Earth. When the Sun goes through the zodiacal sign of Capricorn, we mark this day as Sankranti, the day when winter phases out. The days become longer and the nights shorter. Sankranti is a festival of the Sun. The Sun travels to the north and so it is also called Uttarayan (movement to the north).

It is also believed that on this day Lord Sun visits God Shani (Saturn), the owner of the constellation Makar (Capricorn). Since Shani is the foster child of Lord Sun, they do not have a good relationship. However, it is Shani's responsibility to take care of his father. Hence, this day signifies the priority of responsibilities.

Even an episode in the ancient Indian Sanskrit epic, the Mahabharata, mentions how people in that era also considered the day auspicious. Bhishma Pitamah, even after being wounded in the war, lingered until Uttarayan set in so that he could attain heavenly abode in auspicious times. It is said that death on this day brings Moksha (salvation) to the deceased.



Sankranti is also a harvest festival. It usually falls on 14th day of January. In the North of India, it is called Lohri. In the evening, people in the same locality sing and dance traditional songs and rhythms. In the South, to indicate an abundance of harvest, people make a sweet with milk and rice, jaggery (brown sugar) and cardamom. Traditionally it is allowed to overflow a little bit. On the third day of Sankranti, they make big rangolis (powdered color designs) of the Sun chariots facing North, signifying the journey of the Sun.

Beautiful stories from mythology are connected with all the festivals in India. In the West, the elders give small, sweet balls with sesame seeds, jaggery and cardamom to the younger ones. The significance of this is to keep the warmth and sweetness in our relations, just like sesame seeds and jaggery.

In the East of India, the festival is marked by feasts and bonfires. Young people erect makeshift huts, known as *Meji* and *Bhelaghār*, from bamboo, leaves and thatch, and in *Bhelaghār* they eat the food prepared for the feast and then burn the huts the next morning. The celebrations also feature traditional games.

There is also kite flying in some parts of India, as farmers are not free after the harvest and there are now cool winds and clear skies.

In our kindergartens Sankranti is celebrated differently depending on the state. We start this rhythm after Christmas. (Since it's a multireligious country and kindergarten is a perfect reflection of this diversity, we have woven the most precious festivals from different religions which are important for each state in our yearly rhythm.)

During that season, children see white storks flying by the lush green paddy fields. They sing songs about the storks and the cool breeze and clear blue sky. They make small kites, while some make the sweets for this feast with teacher. The kindergarten prepares to celebrate by making rangolis with rice flour. Rangolis are not merely a decoration, but care for insects and ants who eat this rice flour. When one looks deeper into the traditions or rituals, one can see the meaningful essence of it.

A story of sweet porridge, in which the porridge overflows, connects to the tradition in South of India that signifies abundance. It surely delights the children. The photos from a kindergarten make this visible. Connecting with the essence of Christmas, of giving warmth, hope and love, this Hindu festival is about gratitude, abundance, and contentment.

Just as all the different tasting spices make one delicious recipe, just as all the colours together make white, the one colour of peace, all our diversity makes one warm bond of warmth. It is really special to be an Indian.



Sucheta Garud has been a Waldorf kindergarten teacher in Abhaya Waldorf school. She has been actively training and holding workshops for Waldorf and introductory seminars for non-Waldorf schools across India. She is the representative for Indian Waldorf kindergartens on Council of the International Association for Steiner/Waldorf Early Childhood Education.