

## Maghe Sankranti: Festival Of Atoning For Sins Siddhi B. Ranjitkar

Early in the morning a large number of Nepalis reach the confluences of three rivers if not two rivers and if that is also not available then to the bank of any river or to any water source to take a dip in the cold waters of the winter on the first day of the month called Magha (Jan-Feb) believing that taking such a cold dip on this day will clean up whatever sins they have committed in a year. Men wearing only loin clothes and women only thin petticoats rush to take a dip in the cold water. Women give the unique features of their beautiful bodies after coming out of the cold water but they immediately cover their bodies with towels and then with the petticoats. Then, they go to the shrines of Lord Shiva, and Lord Vishnu and other deities usually found around such shrines, and revere them. Then, they feast on the cooked yams, sesame seeds balls and meat dishes. This day is called Maghe Sankranti. The festival is atoning for sins and alleviating poverty.

Various communities in Nepal celebrate the festival of Maghe Sankranti following their age-old tradition. For example, one of the main ethnic groups of Tarai called Tharus, and indigenous people called Kiratis celebrate it as the first day of a New Year. The Magar ethnic community celebrates it as a national festival. Other communities celebrate it atoning for sins.

This festival of Maghe Sankranti ranks only next to the Dashain and Tihar festivals in Nepal. Actually, this festival is for welcoming a seasonal change from the cold non-auspicious winter to the auspicious spring season. This day is the beginning of the spring season in Nepal, as the sun starts moving toward the Tropic of Cancer on this day. The season opens auspicious days for wedding and for religious ceremonies and for performing other important social events such as adulthood ceremony to boys and child wedding called E-he to young girls wedding them to deity called Suvarna Kumar. The preceding month called Poush (Dec-Jan) is an inauspicious month for performing any auspicious ceremony; so, the Nepalese calendar does not include any auspicious day for such ceremony in Poush.

One of the unique features of this festival is Nepalis invite their married daughters, sisters and their husbands to the festival feast. Upon their arrival, the elders bless them and hold a family feast in the evening to see them off only the next morning. In the hills of Nepal, relatives live so apart; they need to walk from a few hours to a few days to reach them where modern vehicle transportation has not reached, yet; so they have stay overnight at the home they are invited.

The Tharu community celebrates the Maghe Sankranti as the first day of a New Year in Tarai. Tharu households make major decisions on this day. They close all household accounts on the eve of the Maghe Sankranti, choose a household head, and decide who is going to do what in the New Year. The Tharu community also makes many major decisions on this day choosing a community leader, a community guard, a community priest and so on. So, the first day of the Magha month serves them as a New Year day. They have the tradition of choosing a household head from among the male family members only on this day to manage the household business for a year. On this day, the new family head makes major decisions on the types of crops they are going to sow or plant and on the family members going to work as contract laborers for the year.

Other ethnic people particularly Rais and Limbus celebrate this festival as a spring festival. They have the tradition of collecting wild tubers from the nearby forest and eating them as the blessings of the nature on this day. They burn some of these wild roots in fire as an offering to the fire god. They consider the ashes as the blessing from the fire god, and they

use it for applying as a 'tike' on their foreheads. Following the tradition, they begin plowing the field only after the celebration of this festival.

Nepalis in general don't miss to go to the nearest confluence of rivers or any other water sources to take a holy dip in the cold water on the Maghe Sankranti day in the morning believing the cold water will wash out their sins they have committed in the past year. Some of them perform a purification rite by dipping their hands with sesame seeds in the water, and sprinkling the water on their bodies to make sure that all sins have gone off their bodies before going down to the water and taking a holy dip in the water of the confluence of rivers. After cleaning up their bodies in the cold water of a river or of any other water source, with their fresh bodies go to Lord Madhav and Lord Vishnu depending on the sect of Hinduism they follow, and make offerings to the deity. For Hindus, the confluences of two rivers are sacred; those of three rivers are the holiest sites for performing religious ceremonies.

During this festival, such confluences of rivers serve as the places for entertainment to youths and even the pilgrims, too. On the eve of this day, vendors pitch camps at the areas near such confluences for the night to serve food and drinks to pilgrims. They work the whole night for serving the people visiting the areas. Youths spend the whole night singing, dancing and drinking. Next morning, they take a holy dip in the water at the confluences and then make offerings to Lord Madhav or Lord Vishnu or both.

In the eastern region of Nepal, pilgrims congregate at the confluence of Sapta Koshi (Seven Koshi Rivers) to celebrate the festival of Maghe Sankranti. The confluence of seven rivers is the holiest place for the Hindus, as all Hindu pantheons descend on this area on this day. So, people going there and taking a holy dip in the waters of the confluence of the seven rivers and making offerings to all the Hindu deities that have descended on this area earn the merits of tremendous values in their lives. So, some people unable to go to this confluence but wish to earn merits visit the Kankai River for the holy ablutions. They believe that by doing so, they gain as much merits as visiting the Sapta Koshi confluence.

Major religious festivals similar to the one held at the confluence of Sapta Koshi, and another on the bank of Kankai River are held in other places of the eastern Nepal, too, on this first day of Magha.

A season of a religious festival begins at Dhanusha-dham in Janakpur on the Maghe Sankranti day. From this day on, devotees visit Dhanusha-dham every Sunday to perform worship to the divine bow called Shiva-dhanu. Lord Shiva gave it to King Janak, the pious ruler of the Mithila kingdom, in appreciation of the fire worship he had performed to Lord Shiva. The place is called Dhanusha-dham means the place of divine bow. King Janak set the condition that he would give his beloved daughter 'Sita' in marriage to the man who would lift and break it. Only Ram: the crown prince of Ayodhya kingdom could do the job. Thereafter, both Sita and Ram: divinities in the human forms got married. He is believed to be the human form of Lord Vishnu. Sita is believed to be the incarnation of Goddess of Wealth called Laksmi.

In the central region of Nepal, devotees congregate at Devighat: the confluence of Sapta Gandaki (Seven Gandaki Rivers) near Bharatpur in Chitwan to celebrate the Maghe Sankranti festival. The Holy Scripture called Barah Puran mentions that devotees gain merits if they take a holy dip in the waters of the confluence of Seven Gandaki Rivers on this day. So, hundreds of thousands of people assemble there before dawn. The place is so holy, and the day is so auspicious for Hindus that they perform important ceremonies such as marriages and adulthood ceremonies at this place on this day.

Every community in Kathmandu celebrates this day following the tradition. Some people visit the confluence of two rivers at Sankhamool in Patan; other people go to Pashupati and take a holy dip in the waters of the Bagmati River and then make offerings to Lord Pashupati in his temple. Some people go to the confluence of two rivers at the Hanumante in Bhaktapur considering it is one of the holiest places for Hindus, as Hanuman: the monkey god has taken a holy dip in the waters of the confluence of the two rivers at the Hanumante while he is on the way to collecting medicinal herbs in the Himalayas to treat Laxman injured in the war with Ravan: the king of Lanka.

Vendors start selling yams and tubers at the Kathmandu vegetable markets a few days before the Maghe Sankranti. So, customers may choose any roots from a mountain of yams piled up at each market place. In addition, customers find the small ready-to-eat sesame-seed balls packed in cellophane bags, and homemade butter called 'ghyeo' and purified molasses called 'chaku' at the markets. All these items together make a special festival dish for celebrating the Maghe Sankranti Day.

Natives of the Kathmandu Valley called the Nevahs celebrate this festival in the name of "Ghyeo Chaku Sanu", as the main dish of this day is made of the homemade butter called 'ghyeo' and the purified molasses called 'chaku' along with other dishes such as boiled yam, curried meat, sweetmeat (Lakhamari), and balls made of sesame seeds, especially made for this day. Married Nevah daughters and sisters do not eat at their homes on this day, believing eating at their husband's home on this day is not auspicious for them. So, they visit their parents. The mother or a senior-most woman in a family blesses them and their children applying warm mustard-seed oil with black beans on their heads. They do so while sitting on the warm winter sun. Most of Nevahs apply mustard-seed oil on their back and bask in the warm sun on this day believing that it takes off the winter cold from their bodies.

In the Western region of Nepal, a religious festival is held at the Dhunge-sanghu means a stone bridge in Pokhara on the bank of the Seti River. On the eve of the Maghe Sankranti, a large number of people gather there to drink, sing, and dance the whole night. It becomes a night festival for youths. Next morning, they take a holy dip in the waters of the Seti River and atone for all the sins they have committed in the past year.

A large number of devotees take a holy dip in the waters at the confluence of the Kaligandaki River and the Trishuli River in Devighat in the Tarai area: southern Nepal. They believe that more than thirty three thousands Hindu deities descend on this area on this day in other words a stream of those deities meets there making it the confluence of three rivers means the holiest possible confluence for the Hindus. So, their offerings made at this place on this day go to all of these deities. They earn huge merits making small offerings to all these deities at this confluence of two major rivers in Nepal.

In the mid-Western region of Nepal, a religious festival is held at the pond called Tapa Kunda in the Deukhuri Valley, 27 km west of Lamahi on the Maghe Sankranti day. People divert the water from the nearby hot spring to make a pond; hence, its name is Tapa Kunda means a hot water pond. Natives toss a coin in it and then take a dip in the water and attempt to retrieve the coin from the pond believing anyone retrieving such a coin will get her or his wishes met. Then, they hold the holy water of the pond in their cupped hands and offer it to the sleeping Parsu: one of the many incarnations of Lord Vishnu. They also make offerings to Lord Shiva in the nearby temple. Some of them also attempt to go around the big stone that is lying in front of the temple in the belief that their wishes will be met. This stone is believed to be the holy bull called 'Nandi' means a bull: the companion of Lord Shiva. A temple to the Boar-headed God called Baraha is there for the believers in the god as the third incarnation of Lord Vishnu to make offerings. Some people offer a sacrificial

lamb to this god. On the occasion of this Maghe Sankranti festival, not only Nepalis but also pilgrims from across the southern border visit this holy place.

Thus, Maghe Sankranti is an important festival all Nepalis belonging to various ethnic groups and religious sects celebrate following the tradition set by their ancestors. This festival is unique in the sense it binds all the ethnic people together to a single group for celebrating it following the tradition of each ethnic group.

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Selling chaku (unprocessed sugar), Gheu (homemade butter), and laddoo (sesame seed balls)

Source: facebook



Two women selling tarul (roots of different plants) for the maghesankranti