Festivals: Hindu New Year
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Hindu New Year
Let's Celebrate Springtime!

New Year is celebrated with gaiety and pomp around the world wherever Hindus live, but not on January 1. India's ancient faith salutes the annual genesis at the start of spring, when nature comes to life, in mid-April. The festival has a different name in each regional language; Baisakhi, Vishu, Varusha Pirappu, Ugadi, Badi Deepavali and Bestu Varas are just a few. Homes are lit with oil lamps and decorated with flowers to attract blessings.

Why is New Year celebrated in April?

Like most ancient cultures, Hindus traditionally observe the start of each new year with the arrival of spring, which occurs in mid-April in South Asia. That day coincides with the Sun's entrance into the constellation Mesha (Aries), the first sign in Hindu astrology. Following this astrological calculation, the celebration falls on April 14 in most years.

How is the New Year celebrated?

Hindus don new clothes, exchange sweets, gifts and greetings of goodwill. They clean their homes and decorate the entrance and shrine room with beautiful, colorful patterns called kolam or rangoli, symbols of auspiciousness. They visit temples, beseeching God and the Gods for blessings for the year ahead. The Goddess Lakshmi and the elephant-headed God Ganesha are especially venerated on this day. In some communities, elders give money to youth and children as a token of good luck--making the year's first financial act selfless and thus auspicious. Families feast together with great revelry, enjoying elaborate dishes and good company. People gather to listen to interpretations of the star's positions and auguries of things to come, for in this culture the Hindu calendar is closely interwoven with astrology. An elder or a learned astrologer may read the family's fortune for the next 12 months. Predictions are even given on Indian television.

What is the "first seeing" tradition?

In South Indian families, a dazzling arrangement called kani is created in the home on New Year's Eve. It is a display of money, jewels and clothing, plants and flowers, fruits and sweets, in the center of which stands a shrine with Hindu Deities. At dawn on New Year's Day, the matriarch wakes up the family members one by one and blindfolds them. She guides them to the shrine and there removes the blindfold, assuring that their first sight of the year is the auspicious, gleaming kani. One of the beautiful things to see is a mirror, which serves a dual purpose: it symbolically doubles the abundance and reflects the family with all the signs of wealth around them--an elegant catalyst to manifestation!

Is there just one date for the New Year?

Several other dates are observed by various communities. Particularly in North India, many celebrate New Year on the day after Diwali, the September-October festival of lights, which signifies hope and new beginnings. Still, nearly everyone joins in the celebrations in mid-April.

Tidbits About the Hindu New Year

What is the nature of the Hindu calendar? The sacred Hindu calendar, called panchangam, is an almanac containing astronomical details such as sunrise, moonrise, star-rise, eclipses and lunar phases. It also provides astrological information, including auspicious times for various activities, and inauspicious times as well. The rishis of old imparted the means to calculate this information to help people navigate the ebbs and flows of cosmic energies.

What part do neem leaves play? The bitter leaves and flowers of the neem tree (Azadirachta indica) are among the central items of New Year celebrations. They are used in food dishes, in decorations and on the kani display. Neem is a sacred plant, a botanical marvel with numerous medicinal uses. It is said that its bitterness, spread among the glittering opulence of the New Year's festivities, adds a more realistic perspective on life.

Payasam

This milk-based pudding is immensely popular and so easy to make.

Preparation time: 5 minutes

Cooking time: 25 minutes

Serves: 6

Cooking equipment: A heavy-bottomed saucepan, a ladle, a dish.

Ingredients

1 cup vermicelli or sago,

4 cups milk, 1 cup sugar, 1/2 tsp cardamom powder, 5-6 tbsp chopped cashews and/or almonds, 4 tbsp raisins,

1 tsp ghee, pinch saffron

Method

1. Heat the milk gently until hot but not boiling.

2. Saute the cashews, almonds and raisins in half the ghee. Set aside.

3. Saute the vermicelli or sago in remaining ghee for a few minutes.

4. Add a little of the hot milk to the vermicelli or sago; lower the heat. Drain excess water.

5. Add the saffron to the rest of the milk, and add it gradually to the vermicelli or sago, stirring until the pasta becomes translucent and soft. Cook until milk thickens.

6. Add the sugar and stir until it dissolves. Turn off heat.

7. Garnish with powdered cardamom, fried nuts, raisins and a few strands of saffron.

Hinduism: Fact & Fiction

Fact: Reincarnation, a central Hindu belief, gives the assurance that there is no eternal Hell, only chance after chance to improve and redeem oneself as the law of karma brings back to us the fruits of our past actions so that we can learn and evolve. All people are seen as divine, yet shrouded by ignorance. While every soul will ultimately achieve the highest spiritual attainment after many births, still there are young souls and old souls. Young souls, who have lived few lives, are often selfish, instinctive and cruel. Old souls, having experienced many lives, tend to be compassionate, superconscious and gentle.

FICTION: It is often thought that Hindus are forbidden to eat meat. This is not true. Hindus teach vegetarianism as a way to live with a minimum of hurt to other beings, but in today's world, not all Hindus are vegetarians.

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