

# **Interfaith ‘Pongal’ (Harvest) Celebration**

## *Expressing Gratitude is Love for One Another*

### **Rising Challenges in Interfaith, Inter-caste, and Gender-Based Equality**

India, renowned for its rich diversity and cultural heritage, is grappling with an alarming rise in interfaith, inter-caste, and gender-based violence in recent years. These issues are often exacerbated by systemic inequalities and inadequate measures for redressal, leading to social unrest that undermines the nation's progress toward inclusivity and justice.

*Inter-caste Discrimination and Violence:* Inter-caste violence, particularly the denial of access to public spaces like temples, remains a pervasive issue. Reports indicate that caste-based discrimination affects both rural and urban areas, with over 40,000 crimes recorded annually under the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act. Tamil Nadu, despite its progressive reforms, continues to witness incidents where marginalized communities are excluded from temple entry and other social activities, highlighting the deep-rooted challenges in achieving caste equality.

*Interfaith Tensions and Gender-Based Violence:* Interfaith tensions are also a growing concern. Nationally, over 1,000 communal violence incidents have been reported in the past decade, with Tamil Nadu witnessing sporadic cases that disrupt communal harmony. Meanwhile, gender-based violence persists as a significant issue, with over 400,000 crimes against women reported annually across India. While Tamil Nadu has made strides in women's education and employment, it continues to face challenges such as gender violence and inadequate representation of women in leadership and decision-making roles.

*Addressing Systemic Inequalities:* Discrimination in political participation and administrative appointments further deepens the divide, leaving marginalized communities underrepresented and voiceless in crucial platforms. Addressing these challenges necessitates collective efforts to foster inclusivity, ensure equitable opportunities, and uphold dignity and equality for all citizens. Proactive interventions, rather than passive indifference, are essential to strengthening social cohesion and protecting the rights of every individual.

### **Inclusive Community Development Services (ICDS)**

The Sisters of the Good Shepherd Congregation, with a presence spanning 68 nations across all five continents, are deeply committed to upholding the rights of every individual and fostering a spirit of compassion and merciful love worldwide. In collaboration with their Partners-in-Mission, the Sisters, who are actively engaged in Salem District, Tamil Nadu, conducted an empirical study in 2021. This study highlighted growing concerns around interfaith, caste, and gender-based violence, as well as discriminatory practices contributing to social unrest.

In response to these findings, the Sisters and their Mission-Partners have committed to working in select areas within the Ayyoithiyapattinam Block of Salem District. Their goal is to promote inclusive development and cultivate a society free from discrimination, where human rights are respected, and every individual's potential for holistic development is nurtured. Their mission

is to ensure that no one is overlooked or excluded in these challenging times, creating a community rooted in dignity and equality.

### **Celebrations as Opportunities to Foster Inclusivism**

The interfaith Pongal celebration marked a significant moment, bringing together religious leaders from three different faiths alongside elected representatives on a shared platform for the first time. This gathering highlighted the importance of unity and served as an opportunity for individuals to reflect on the true spirit of social harmony present in the community.

Members of all three communities actively participated in cultural and sports activities, fostering a sense of religious and social harmony among participants. The event began with a vibrant cultural display, as young people played traditional drums through the village streets, creating an atmosphere of festivity. Women were warmly welcomed with intricate rangoli designs, emphasizing inclusivity and respect for diverse contributions to the celebration.

This initiative demonstrated how celebrations can be powerful tools to nurture peace and understanding across faiths, castes, and genders, strengthening the bonds that unite communities.

### **The Vibrant Four-Day Pongal Celebration in Tamil Nadu**

Tamil Nadu is renowned for its grand and culturally rich four-day Pongal celebration, a festival dedicated to celebrating the harvest and expressing gratitude to nature's elements. Pongal, which marks the beginning of the Tamil month Thai, is a time for families, communities, and farmers to come together in joy and thanksgiving.

- **Day 1: Bhogi Pongal**

The festivities commence with Bhogi Pongal, a day dedicated to cleaning and decluttering homes, symbolizing the removal of negativity and the welcoming of new beginnings. Families light bonfires to burn old, unused items, reflecting the idea of letting go of the past and embracing positivity.

- **Day 2: Thai Pongal**

The second day, Thai Pongal, is the main day of the festival and is marked by the preparation of the traditional sweet dish called Pongal, made from freshly harvested rice, jaggery, and milk. This dish is offered to the Sun God (Surya) as an expression of gratitude for a bountiful harvest. The Sun is revered as the life-giver, and the day emphasizes the deep connection between humanity and nature. Homes are adorned with colourful rangoli (kolam) designs, adding to the festive spirit.

- **Day 3: Maatu Pongal**

On the third day, Maatu Pongal, the focus shifts to honouring cattle, particularly bulls and cows, which are considered vital partners in agriculture. Cattle are bathed, decorated with garlands, and their horns painted in vibrant colours. Special prayers are offered, acknowledging their contribution to the farming community. This day also reflects the harmonious coexistence of humans and animals in rural life.

- **Day 4: Kaanum Pongal**

The final day, *Kaanum Pongal*, is a day for social gatherings and community bonding. Families visit friends and relatives, share meals, and spend time outdoors, often by riversides or parks. This day emphasizes togetherness and strengthens familial and social ties.

The Pongal celebration is a beautiful blend of tradition, gratitude, and community spirit, embodying Tamil Nadu's rich cultural heritage and the timeless relationship between humans and nature.

### **Pongal: A Celebration of Unity and Communitarian Values**

Pongal, a harvest festival deeply rooted in Tamil Nadu's traditions, is much more than a cultural event—it is an opportunity to foster harmony and togetherness. This celebration of gratitude to nature and agricultural abundance embodies the values of shared humanity, mutual respect, and collective joy. Recognizing its potential to unite communities, the Sisters of the Good Shepherd, along with their Partners-in-Mission, organized a historic Interfaith Pongal Celebration on 11th January 2025 in Poovanur village, Ayyothiyapattinam Block.

Held at the Government Primary School premises, the event brought together community leaders from various castes and religious leaders from diverse faiths, making it the first of its kind in the region's history. The celebration served as a vibrant platform for individuals to come together, transcending barriers of caste and religion, and sharing a common spirit of gratitude and togetherness.

The festival began with traditional cultural activities, including dances and the preparation of the signature Pongal dish, symbolizing prosperity and abundance. Messages from religious and community leaders emphasized the importance of inclusivity, shared responsibilities, and building a society where every individual is valued. These messages, woven with the spirit of the harvest festival, resonated deeply with the participants, highlighting the significance of unity in diversity.

The event was a beautiful reflection of the Pongal ethos—coming together in joy, celebrating life's blessings, and expressing gratitude not just to nature, but also to one another. By sharing this moment of unity and hope, the Interfaith Pongal Celebration in Poovanur village demonstrated the power of collective celebration in nurturing bonds and creating a community rooted in mutual respect and shared values.

The following is the list of esteemed guests invited to address the gathering on this special occasion of the Pongal celebration:

### **Religious Leaders and Community Leaders for Peace**

1. Fr. James, MSFS, Jothi dharsan
2. Fr. Robert, MSFS, Jothi Dharsan
3. Mr. Periyasamy, Temple Priest, Mariyamman Kovil, Periyagoundapuram
4. Mr. Anand, Founder, Mei Unarvu Arakattalai, Salem

5. Mr. Selva Kumar, Director, Bhrama Kumaris
6. Pr. Vimal Mosses, Secretary, Salem Christian Church Protection Committee
7. Mr. Babu@ Shanavaskhan, Secretary, Jamaia Educational Trust
8. Mr. Selva Kumar, Ex-Vice President, Poovanur Panchayat
9. Sr. Nirmala, Director, St. Anne's
10. Sr. Rajakumar, Director, Good Shepherd Convent, Salem

***Following is the gist of the messages being shared by the key invitees on this occasion:***

### **The Significance of Pongal**

Pongal, a cherished festival deeply woven into Tamil tradition, is much more than a celebration of the harvest—it is a profound expression of gratitude and interconnectedness. Observed at the start of the Tamil month *Thai* (name of a month in Tamil), it is a time to honor the Sun, Mother Nature, and farm animals, all of which play an essential role in sustaining life and ensuring agricultural abundance.

This festival is a reminder of humanity's interdependence with nature and the importance of giving thanks for life's blessings. The central ritual of preparing and offering the traditional dish "Pongal," made from freshly harvested rice, symbolizes prosperity and the harmonious relationship between humans and the environment.

What sets Pongal apart is its universal and inclusive nature. Unlike festivals tied to specific religious scriptures, Pongal transcends religious boundaries, making it a celebration that welcomes all. This inclusivity highlights the '*secular essence*' of Tamil culture, emphasizing shared values of gratitude, harmony, and coexistence. It serves as a unifying force, bringing together people from diverse backgrounds to participate in a tradition that celebrates life itself.

The festival also underscores the importance of community, as families, friends, and neighbours come together to celebrate. From creating intricate '*rangoli*' (colour) designs to sharing meals and participating in cultural activities, Pongal fosters a sense of belonging and unity.

By bridging divides and embracing all, Pongal reflects the richness of Tamil heritage and the broader spirit of India—a nation where diversity is not just accepted but celebrated as a cornerstone of its identity.

### **Messages of Unity and Love**

The Pongal celebration became a vibrant platform for inspiring messages that emphasized the core values of love, gratitude, and unity. Religious leaders from diverse faiths shared heartfelt insights, reminding the gathering of the shared principles that bind humanity across all beliefs and traditions.

Each leader underscored the importance of cultivating love and gratitude—not just toward nature and the blessings it provides, but also toward one another. Drawing on teachings from their respective faiths, they highlighted the universal call to live in harmony, respect differences, and nurture relationships based on mutual understanding and compassion.

These messages resonated deeply with the audience, evoking a collective sense of belonging and shared purpose. The leaders called on everyone to recognize Pongal as not just a harvest festival, but as a celebration of life's interconnectedness and the strength of diversity. By coming together to honour the efforts of farmers, the role of nature, and the contributions of animals, the festival served as a poignant reminder of the gratitude owed to all who sustain life.

The words of the invitees also stressed the importance of upholding the values of unity, particularly in today's world. They encouraged the audience to carry forward the spirit of Pongal by fostering relationships that transcend caste, religion, and societal divisions, creating a community rooted in togetherness and shared values.

The messages delivered during the celebration inspired hope and optimism, reinforcing the idea that, despite differences, all are part of one Indian family. The event beautifully illustrated how festivals like Pongal can serve as bridges, connecting people and communities in the spirit of love, gratitude, and unity.

### **Acknowledgments and Appreciation**

The Panchayat President, addressing the gathering, expressed heartfelt gratitude to the Good Shepherd Organization for orchestrating such a significant interfaith celebration. He commended their tireless efforts in fostering unity, promoting awareness, and upholding the spirit of secularism and human dignity within the community. Highlighting the inclusive nature of the event, the President emphasized its role in bridging divides and creating a shared space where people from all faiths and castes could come together to celebrate with mutual respect and understanding.

The President also lauded the collaboration displayed by various community leaders, religious heads, and residents, acknowledging their commitment to sustaining harmony. He reflected on how the celebration echoed the core values enshrined in human rights, such as equality, inclusion, and the right to participate in cultural and communal life without discrimination.

Mr. Shanavaskhan, representing the Muslim community, added his appreciation, particularly for the active involvement of the village youth in the festivities. He recognized their energy and enthusiasm as a driving force behind the event's success. Encouraging their aspirations, he assured his support for initiatives aimed at empowering young minds, including sports activities and preparation for competitive exams. His remarks highlighted the importance of investing in the younger generation as a way to build a future rooted in fairness, opportunity, and social cohesion.

Both leaders underscored the significance of the celebration as a platform to foster values that transcend boundaries—secularism, human rights, and community development—while encouraging collective action toward a more inclusive and harmonious society. The acknowledgments reinforced the shared responsibility of every individual to uphold these principles in their daily lives.

### **Reflection of Secularism**

The Pongal celebration stood as a profound testament to the **\*\*secular essence\*\*** of this cherished festival, showcasing its ability to transcend boundaries of faith and bring people

together in unity. Rooted in the universal values of gratitude, harmony, and community, Pongal provided a unique opportunity for individuals from diverse religious and social backgrounds to celebrate side by side, reaffirming the inclusive spirit of Tamil culture.

Through this interfaith celebration, the community demonstrated how traditions, when embraced collectively, can serve as a bridge, connecting hearts and minds beyond the confines of religious or cultural identities. The shared rituals of the festival—preparing the symbolic Pongal dish, performing traditional dances, and exchanging messages of goodwill—became expressions of mutual respect and understanding.

The event reinforced the idea that festivals like Pongal are not limited by doctrine or scripture but are built on values that resonate universally. Gratitude for nature's abundance, respect for one another, and the joy of togetherness are ideals that transcend faiths, making Pongal a powerful symbol of unity.

By coming together as one community, the participants sent a resounding message of harmony and collaboration. Their collective celebration highlighted that diversity is not a barrier but a strength that enriches shared experiences. This reflection of secularism, where every individual is welcomed and valued, sets an inspiring example of how traditional festivities can cultivate inclusivity and mutual respect, fostering a society rooted in shared values and collective progress.

The Pongal celebration not only honoured the harvest but also celebrated the beauty of human diversity, proving that unity is possible when communities come together with open hearts and a shared spirit of gratitude.

### **Conclusion & Reflection**

For the first time in Poovanur village panchayat, an Interfaith Pongal celebration was held at the Government Primary School premises. This milestone event brought together elected representatives, community leaders, and religious heads to inspire harmony and understanding. Through meaningful dialogue, the leaders engaged with villagers, emphasizing the significance of peaceful coexistence. The gathering fostered a vibrant atmosphere, offering a shared platform to appreciate diverse cultures and faith practices.

This initiative proved to be an enriching experience, especially for the youth, by showcasing the values of respect and inclusion. Rooted in the principles of the Indian Constitution, the event encouraged the community to embrace unity and mutual appreciation, rising above all forms of discrimination. The celebration stood as a compelling reminder of the strength found in diversity and the importance of living together harmoniously.

*Documented by*

**Mr. Sam**, ICDS Project Coordinator &

**Sr. Rajakumari**, Director of Community Development Programmes

Good Shepherd Convent, Salem, Tamil Nadu, India



## Photographs of Interfaith Harvest Celebration



Mr. Periyasamy, Temple Priest, Mariyamman Kovil, Periyagoundapuram along with the other faith leaders lighting the lamp to initiate the Interfaith Pongal Celebration.



Mrs. Priyanka, Community Organizer, ICDS project staff welcoming the leaders and people for Interfaith Pongal Celebration at Poovanur Village.



The participation of youth in this interfaith celebration is uncountable so, as a appreciation from the leaders from different faith did the standing ovation and small gift were offered to motivate their efforts



Mr. Selva Kumar, Ex-Vice President addressing the gathering on salient features of Poovanur village people and also about the need of Interfaith Pongal Celebration.





Fr. Robert, Director, MSFS, Jothi Dharsan addressing the gathering through his motivating words by promoting the need of coming together for celebration.



Fr. James, MSFS, Jothi Dharsan expressed his sincere thanks to Good Shepherd sisters and Village Administration for organizing Interfaith Pongal Celebration to promote the unity in Diversity by understanding the Today's India's Context



Shree. Kanishka Shree, a eight grade student from the village is speaking about the significance of Pongal celebration and how it is associated with the Tamil traditions.



Mr. Babu@ Shanavaskhan, Secretary, Jamia Educational Trust motivating the youth and children to carry this essential interfaith celebration message and to replicate in the coming day to promote the Indian Constitutional values of Secularism.



Mr. Selva Kumar, Director, Brahma Kumaris Worship Centre expressed that peace and harmony is the only thing which man needs everyday so, in order to keep this alive the practice of interfaith celebration paves the way and it act as a bridge to negative to positive energy.



Children from the village are performing the tradition dance to promote the cultural richness and the importance of Pongal and the key message "Gratitude" with the Tamil traditional coustumes.



Group photo of all the children who performed the Tamil tradition folk-art and dance and the religious leaders from different faith sharing their gratitude with the village people for their support in this interfaith celebration and also requested the same in the upcoming days to be more unity and with harmony.



Sr. Arockia Mary, Project Coordinator, EJ project, Good Shepherd Convent is motivating the religious leaders to replicate this joy and happiness in their premises and encourages all the leaders for their dedication to promote peace and harmony at various levels.

