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The Harvest Festival

It was winter break, and I was at my grandparents' house in Chennai, India. It was also "Pongal", a special harvest festival celebrated in South India. My mom was trying to wake me up when the sound of the doorbell caught me by surprise. I ran to open the door, and saw my Thatha (granddad) carrying a huge sugarcane. It was about 7 feet tall!

Wow, that is gigantic!", I shouted.

My mom asked me to quickly shower and change into my "pavadai", a beautiful silk skirt and top. Then, my granddad carried the tall sugarcane to the balcony. My Ammama (grandma) drew a "kolam", a bright design made with rice flour, on the floor. After that, granddad placed the sugarcane, along with a variety of fruits, root vegetables, and flowers under the sun as an offering to the Sun God. We do this on the balcony facing east so that we can see the sun shining above us. I think it is so special that we thank the sun, because it helps farmers grow our food. It's also so cool how we get to worship the sun when it is right above us.

While my granddad was setting up the offering, my grandma was busy cooking an amazing feast with 15 different dishes! She also prepared the Pongal "paanai", a bronze pot decorated with fresh turmeric leaves and roots. She filled it with milk and rice, and sweetened it with jaggery (unrefined sugar made from sugarcane juice). Soon, the milk began to rise and overflow.

Grandma called everyone, "Come see the pot overflowing!".

My sister and I ran as fast as we could. When the pot overflowed, we all shouted, "Pongalo Pongal" and wished for joy and abundance. After that, it was time for lunch. Our whole family sat together on the floor and ate on banana leaves, which we use on special festivals. My grandma kept serving dish after dish – it seemed like an endless feast! Then came my favorite dish of all – "vadai" (a crispy lentil fritter). After lunch, I felt so stuffed that I could barely move.

Celebrating Pongal with my family was a fantastic experience, and an important part of our South Indian heritage. These traditions remind us of our heritage, and have been practiced for many years. Even if I grow up far away from India, I want to continue celebrating Pongal just like my grandparents do, draw kolams, cook Pongal in a special pot, shout "Pongalo Pongal", and most importantly, thank nature and the farmers!