

# *Nowruz*

## **The Zarathushtrian New Year**

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### **Calendar**

Almost all of us know that the year is approximately 365.25 days long. All of us in the Northern Hemisphere know that the seasons are regular, and March means the coming of spring, June the beginning of summer, September the beginning of fall, and December means the coming of winter. The reverse is the case in the Southern Hemisphere.

Many know that spring begins with the vernal equinox on about 21 March, summer with the summer solstice on about 22 June, fall with the autumnal equinox on about 23 September, and winter with the winter solstice on about 23 December.

Some know that the “tropical”, solar, or seasonal year is of 365 days, 5 hours, 48 minutes, and 45.5 seconds. In other words, it is 365.242+ days. They also know that one day is added every four years to compensate for the loss of four 5 hours 48+ minutes (each year), that each of the equinoxes and solstices have their precise time of beginning pre-calculated and published by many world observatories and other astronomical establishments, and that the astronomical and astrological worlds follow the tropical year. A few know that the minutes and seconds in the length of the year vary from year to year, mainly because of the movements of the moon and the planets and that the present shift from 21 to 20 March is due to the fact that instead of calculating exactly 5 hours and 48+ minutes, the Common Era (Gregorian Calendar) has full 6 hours, which advances it by 12+ minutes every year. This is corrected to an extent by having a leap year every four years. But it still has its flaw. Therefore, a year is a leap year if either (i) it is divisible by 4 but not by 100 or (ii) it is divisible by 400. In other words, a year which is divisible by 4 is a leap year unless it is divisible by 100 but not by 400 (in which case it is not a leap year). Thus, the years 1600 and 2000 are leap years, but 1700, 1800, 1900 and 2100 are not. Even this does not make it precise like the Iranian calendar and further measures are anticipated to precisely correct it.

Very few know that the official Iranian and Afghani calendars, both of Zarathushtrian origin, are tropical. Only a very small number know that if the beginning of the year is considered from the precise start of vernal equinox, there shall never be any need to have a leap year at all—the reason why the ancient Zarathushtrians did not have it!

The Iranians of old had a tropical calendar for many centuries. The downfall of the Sassanian Empire in the 7th century disrupted the astronomical structure of the religion and the state. The 365-day year, followed by the majority of Zarathushtrians in India and Pakistan with little astronomical knowledge, for the last eleven hundred years, has advanced the calendar to where Nowruz now occurs in the late summer. However, almost all Zarathushtrians in Iran and a minority of Parsis of India and Pakistan follow the “Fasli” or seasonal calendar. It is an almost tropical calendar. It is corrected by observing the leap year.

Meanwhile, although the Iranians, who were converted to Islam, observed and are observing the Muslim lunar calendar for religious purposes, the Iranian calendar was soon restored within a century for administrative and economical reasons and that it continues to be their daily time reckoning.

## **Legend and History**

**Nowruz** [pronounced NO-ROOZ] in Persian means “New-[year]-day”. It is the beginning of the year for the people of Afghanistan, Azerbaijan, Iran, and Tajikistan. Other Asian republics of the former Soviet Union are joining the group, and the latest report says that Turkey too has decided to declare Nowruz a holiday. It is also celebrated as the new year by the people of the Iranian stock, particularly the Kurds, in the neighboring countries of Georgia, Iraq, Syria, and Turkey. It begins precisely with the beginning of spring on vernal equinox, on about March 21.

Tradition takes Nowruz as far back as 15,000 years and that goes beyond the last ice age. King Jamshid (Yima or Yama of the Indo-Iranian lore) symbolizes the transition of the Indo-Iranians from animal hunting to animal husbandry and a more settled life in human history. Seasons played a vital part then. Everything depended on the four seasons. After a sever winter, the beginning of spring was a great occasion with mother nature rising up in a green robe of colorful flowers and the cattle delivering their young. It was the dawn of abundance. Jamshid symbolizes the person/people who introduced Nowruz celebrations.

Avestan and later scriptures show that Zarathushtra improved, as early as 1725 BCE, the old Indo-Iranian calendar. The prevailing calendar was lunisolar. The lunar year is of 354 days. An intercalation of one month after every thirty months kept the calendar almost in line with the seasons. Zarathushtra, the Founder of the Good Religion, himself an astronomer, founded an observatory and he reformed the calendar by introducing an eleven-day intercalary period to make it into a lunisolar year of 365 days, 5 hours and a fraction.

Later in the post-Gathic period, the year was made solely a solar year with each month of thirty days. An intercalation of five days, and a further addition of one day every four years, was introduced to make the year 365 days, 5 hours, and a fraction. Still later, the calendar was further corrected to be a purely solar year of 365 days 5 hr 48+ min. The year began precisely with the vernal equinox every time and therefore, there was no particular need of adding one day every four years and there was no need of a leap year. This was [and still is] the best and most correct calendar produced that/this far in history.

Some 12 centuries later, in 487 BCE, Darius the Great of the Achaemenian dynasty (700 to 330 BCE) celebrated the Nowruz at his newly built Persepolis in Iran. Recent research shows that it was a very special occasion. On that day, the first rays of the rising sun fell on the observatory in the great hall of audience at 06:30 a.m., an event that repeats itself once every 1400-1 years. It also happened to coincide with the Babylonian and Jewish new years. It was, therefore, a highly auspicious occasion for the ancient peoples. Persepolis was the place the

Achaemenian king received, on Nowruz, his peoples from all over the vast empire. The walls of the great royal palace depict the scenes of the celebrations.

We know the Parthians (250 BCE to 224 CE) celebrated the occasion, but we do not know the details. It should have, more or less, followed the Achaemenian pattern. During the Sassanian period (224 to 652 CE), preparations began at least 25 days before Nowruz. Twelve pillars of mud bricks, each dedicated to one month of the year, were erected in the royal court. Various vegetable seeds—wheat, barley, lentils, beans, and others—were sown on top of the pillars. They grew into luxurious greens by the New Year Day.

The great king held his public audience, and the High Priest of the empire was the first to greet him. Other priests and government officials followed next. Each person offered a gift and received a present. The audience lasted for five days, each day for the people of a certain profession. Then on the sixth day, called the Greater Nowruz, the king held his special audience. He received members of the Royal family and courtiers. Also, a general amnesty was declared for convicts of minor crimes. The pillars were removed on the 16th day and the festival came to a close. The occasion was celebrated, on a lower level, by all peoples throughout the empire.

Since then, the peoples of the Iranian culture, whether Zarathushtrians, Jews, Christians, Muslims, Baha'is, or others, have, under Arab, Turk, Mongol, and Iranian rulers, celebrated Nowruz precisely at the time of vernal equinox, the first day of the first month, on about March 21.

## **Eras**

Zarathushtrians have six seasonal thanksgiving festivals, called *Gâhânbârs*, to celebrate in a year. Vernal Equinox, called *Hamaspahmaidhaya* in Avesta, meaning “Middle of Equal Paths”, or in simpler rendering “vernal equinox” is the top celebration. It was called in later days *Nava Saredha* and still later Now Sal, both meaning “New Year”. Today it is known as Nowruz, New Day. It is the first day of spring in the Northern Hemisphere.

The early Zarathushtrians counted their era, the Zarathushtrian Religious Era (ZRE), from Nowruz (vernal equinox) of 1737 BCE. It may be noted that the credit of precisely calculating ZRE goes to an Iranian scholar, the late Zabih Behruz. Right now, we are going through the last days of the last month of 3742 ZRE. It was practically revived by the Zarathushtrian Assembly 15 years ago and has been happily adopted by the Zarathushtrians in Iran and abroad, including in North America.

The Zarathushtrian era was abandoned when the Achaemenian monarchy was influenced by the prevailing custom in the Mesopotamia. The year started with the accession to the throne of every monarch. That is the reason why Zarathushtrians—followers of the Fasli (solar), the Shahenshahi (majority of Parsis), the Qadimi (a minority of Parsis and Iranis of India and Pakistan) calendars—have the Yazgerdi era, the year King Yazdgerd ascended the throne in 632 CE. Both Shahenshahi and Qadimi reckoning have a year of 365 days only. They have advanced

almost seven months by gaining one day every four years. It means that they gave up the leap year (*avardâd sâlgâh*—literally ‘perfection of year-time’) about 852 years ago—in about 1150 CE. All Iranian Zarathushtrians follow the Fasli, the seasonal or the solar calendar.

When Iranian Muslims returned to the solar year, they reckoned with the Hejra year in solar terms. It will be 1384 Khorshidi (solar) this Nowruz. The months are Zarathushtrian—Farvardin, Ordibehesht, Khordad, Tir etc.—in Iran and Zodiac—Aries, Taurus, Gemini, Cancer—in Afghanistan.

## Nowruz Table

Every house gets a thorough cleaning almost a month before. Wheat, barley, lentils, and other vegetable seeds are soaked to grow on China plates and round earthenware vessels some ten days in advance, so that the sprouts are three to four inches in height by Nowruz.

Today, the ceremony has been simplified. A table is laid. It has a copy of the sacred book (the Gathas for Zarathushtrians), picture of Zarathushtra (or a Saint's picture by other creeds), a mirror, candles, incense burner, bowl of water with live gold fish, the plates and vessels with green sprouts, flowers, fruits, coins, bread, sugar cone, various grains, colorfully painted boiled eggs like “Easter eggs”, and above all, seven articles with their names beginning in Persian with the letter “S” (*seen*) or “SH” (*sheen*). The usual things with “S: are vinegar (*serkeh*), sumac (*somâgh*), garlic (*sîr*), *samanu* (consistency of germinating wheat), apple (*sîb*), sorb (*senjed*), and *sabzi* (herbs). Those with an initial letter “SH” include wine (*sharâb*), sugar (*shakar*), syrup (*shîreh*), honey (*shahd*), candy (*shîrîni*), milk (*shîr*), and rice pudding (*shîr-berenj*). The seven articles are prominently exhibited in small bowls or plates on the table. The table is laid with a white cloth. White represents spotless purity.

Let me repeat the brief play put up by young members of the Zarathushtrian Assembly to define the significance of the seven plates of “S” and seven plates of “SH”. The youngsters, dressed in tune with what they represent, tell us by themselves their own significance. Those with “S” inform us:

- First Plate: I am SERKEH, the vinegar. I am sour but I am a good preservative. I add taste to the things you want to preserve and relish. I symbolize tasty preservation.
- Second Plate: I am SUMAC, exotic in my own way, I make your favorite kabobs have a tangy taste, a taste you relish. I symbolize taste.
- Third Plate: I am SIR, garlic. Some may not like my aroma and others love it. I lower blood pressure. I pacify. I symbolize peace.
- Fourth Plate: I am SAMANU, a sweetish paste, a kind of halwa, made from germinating wheat. I symbolize the sprouting spring, the time for happy growth.
- Fifth Plate: I am SIB, apple. I symbolize the fruits of our world, both literally and allegorically.

- Sixth Plate: I am SENJED, the tasteless berry of the sorb tree. I am the fruit of a tree which provides shade in summer. I symbolize the shelter and security you need when you want a rest.
- Seventh Plate: I am SABZI, fresh green herbs. I come from green fields. I symbolize prosperity.

The seven plates with “SH” tell us:

- First Plate: I am SHARAB, the wine. I am the nectar. I symbolize health and happiness, of course, if taken in moderation! To your health!
- Second Plate: I am SHAKAR, sugar. I give your favorite foods their sweetness. I symbolize sweetness.
- Third Plate: I am SHIR, milk, the first food one tastes in this world. I symbolize nourishing food.
- Fourth Plate: I am SHIREH, syrup. I am the sap, the fluid essential for life, health and vigor. I symbolize vigorous health.
- Fifth Plate: I SHAHD, honey. I am the sweet produce of the cooperative bees. I symbolize the sweet result of teamwork.
- Sixth Plate: I am SHIRINI, candy, loved by those who have a sweet tooth. I simply symbolize sweetness with no sign of bitterness.
- Seventh Plate: I am SHIR-BERENJ, rice pudding, and a tasty food. I symbolize food for taste and health.

The copy of the Gathas symbolizes guidance for a good life. The picture of Asho Zarathushtra reminds us of the author of the Gathas, the founder of the Good Religion and the Conveyer of the Divine Message. The mirror reflects our past and shows us our present so that we thoughtfully plan our future. The candles are light, warmth, and energy to lead a righteous life that would, in turn, radiate light, give warmth, and provide energy for others. The incense burner gives the fragrance we need to meditate, pray to God, and ask for help and guidance. The goldfish symbolizes a happy life, full of activity and movement. The plates of green sprouts represent creativity and productivity, and so do the colorfully painted eggs.

As you see, the whole table is beautifully laid. It symbolizes the Message and the Messenger, light, reflection, warmth, life, love, joy, production, prosperity, and nature. It is, in fact, a very elaborate thanksgiving table for all the good and beautiful things bestowed by God.

Family members, all dressed in their best, sit around the table and eagerly await the announcement of the exact time of vernal equinox over radio or television. The head of the family recites the Nowruz prayers, and after the time is announced, each member kisses the other and wishes a Happy Nowruz. Elders give gifts to younger members. Next, the rounds of visits to neighbors, relatives, and friends begin. Each visit is reciprocated.

Zarathushtra's Birthday and Nowruz festival are celebrated by Zarathushtrians at social centers on about 6 Farvardin (26 March).

Singing and dancing is, more or less for the first two weeks, a daily routine. The festivity continues for 12 days, and on the 13th morning, the mass picnic to countryside begins. It is called SIZDEH-BE-DAR, meaning “thirteen-in-the-outdoors”. Cities and villages turn into ghost towns with almost all the inhabitants gone to enjoy the day in woods and mountains along streams and riversides. People sing, dance, and make merry. Girls of marriageable age tie wild grass tops into knots and make a wish that the following Nowruz may find them married and carrying their bonny babies!

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## **The Precise Time of Nowruz**

Date & Time in Iran's time: 04 hr 03 min 00 sec PM Tehran time on Sunday, 30 Esfand 3742 ZRE = 1383 official Iranian solar year [Khorshidi] = **March 20, 2005**

### **Conversions:**

- Greenwich Meantime: 12:33:00 PM, Sunday March 20, 2005
- North American Eastern Time: 07:33:00 AM, Sunday March 20, 2005
- North American Central Time: 06:33:00 AM, Sunday March 20, 2005
- North American Mountain Time: 05:33:00 AM, Sunday March 20, 2005
- North American Pacific Time: 04:33:00 AM, Sunday March 20, 2005
- Afghanistan: 05:03 PM
- Australia/New Zealand: 11:33 PM
- Brazil: 09:33 AM
- Central Asia: 05:33 PM
- China: 08:33 PM
- Europe: 01:33 PM
- India: 06:03 PM
- Near East: 02:33 PM
- Pakistan: 05:33 PM
- Persian Gulf (upper): 03:33 PM
- Persian Gulf (lower): 04:33 PM
- Turkey: 02:33 PM

### **The New Year begins:**

**Monday, 1st Farvardin 3743 ZRE = 1384 Khorshidi = 21 March 2005 CE**

**A very Happy Nowruz to all!**