

Fire and Jashn-e Sadeh

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The Greatest Discovery:

Take away fire and man (stands for both genders) will revert to wilderness like any other animal! The greatest discovery made by man alone on this good earth is the art of making and maintaining fire. He, like any other animal, had seen fire striking from clouds, burning bushes and trees and devouring large tracts of verdant land. He had also seen fire spew forth from volcanos, the molten lava snaking and snarling its way down the slope. He also knew that fire radiated off heat and drove away ferocious animals. He had most probably learned how to keep it burning. It provided him and his associates with light, warmth, and a way to drive off to keep ferocious animals. He must also have learned to control fire which, in the long run, enabled him to smelt ores into metals.

But man did not yet know how to kindle fire. The day he did discover this art, he departed for good from that animal kingdom which roams the earth. He had discovered a source of light, heat, and energy—the very basis of civilization. Fire helped man to reduce nomadism and develop social and political institutions connected with a fixed abode.

Legends of how man discovered fire are as numerous as there are ancient cultures. The legend of a god stealing it and bringing it down from the sky is but an illusion to lightning striking and starting a fire. The legend of it being spit up out of the earth us of a volcanic eruption. It being brought down a tree by a wise man indicates that it was obtained from a burning tree. It being a product of two rubbing branches or a child of ten mothers, points to the much later discovery of creating friction by placing a stick in a wooden groove and rotating the stick with two palms, the ten fingers, the ten mothers.

The most striking is the Iranian legend, preserved, among other writings, in Ferdowsi's Shahnameh. Here is a gist of the Shahnameh's story:

Hushang and the Discovery of Fire

Hushang succeeded his grandfather Kayumars, the first of the Pishdadian Kings. He girdled himself with wisdom and justice. His ancestors worshipped God, had their traditional beliefs, and followed relevant ceremonies. In those ancient days, the blazing fire was an altar, just as the Arabs have stone as their prayer niche. But the discovery of fire was quite incidental. This happened before iron was discovered.

One cold day, Hushang and his party were returning from a hunting expedition. They saw a snake in their path coiled in a rocky area. Hushang took his flint axe and threw it at the snake. However, he missed and the snake slithered away. But the axe just so happened to hit a flint stone amidst the rocks and produced a bright spark. The curious king took hold of the two flints and struck—more sparks. And he learned to produce enough sparks to ignite a fire. He

discovered how to make fire! “This spark”, he proclaimed, “is God’s gift; Hold it high in regard.” He thanked God for the gift and made fire his altar. He then created a bonfire and held a great feast. Every person sang, danced, drank, and feasted around the bonfire. For the first time, Hushang and his people could light their dark caves and feel cozy and warm in their beds. They passed through a wonderful winter as a consequence. Hushang never forgot this revolutionary discovery. He held this great feast every year on that eventful day. It is called *Sadeh*.

He was the first to separate iron from ore and established the profession of smithery. He fashioned axes, saws, and adzes. Next, he diverted water from rivers into plains for cultivation. Prior to this, human beings subsisted on fruits and covered themselves with leaves. Furthermore, Hushang separated the beasts which were hunted from those that could easily be domesticated. He introduced soft and comfortable furs as clothing.

Hushang’s reign introduced peace, prosperity, plenty, and happiness. He died after ruling for forty years. It may be pointed out here that the “forty” years can symbolize the Paleolithic period of man’s discovery of the use of fire, some 500,000 to 10,000 years ago—from wandering with stick and stone implements to cave-dwelling and domestication of animals.

To put it simply: Fire was accidentally discovered when a flint-axe, thrown by King Hushang to kill a snake, missed and struck a rock and caused a spark. That sparked the idea to kindle fire by striking two pieces of flint together. This theory is confirmed by archeologists to be the most probable means of its discovery in the early stone stage.

Hushang, the Iranian legend says, celebrated the discovery by throwing a feast, a feast that has been kept alive through ages. It is held every year on 10 Bahman (30 January), almost mid-winter. It is called Sadeh, meaning ‘century’ because, according to one popular tradition, it falls on the hundredth day from October 21st, the beginning of winter among ancient Iranians. Alternately, as I see it, it is a contracted form of the Avestan *saredha-*, Persian *sard*, meaning ‘cold, winter’.

On the afternoon of Sadeh, people gather outside town and make a mound of dry shrubs, bushes, weeds, and branches. Priests lead the prayers, exalting fire as the divine light, warmth, and energy; they ask God for an ever-progressing life leading to eternal happiness; and, as the sun sets in the west, they set the mound ablaze. It is a sight to see, watching huge flames leaping off the bonfire. Those at home light little bonfires on top of their flat, mud-plastered, “fire-safe” roofs—a tribute to the civilized blessings given by the discovery of kindling fire.

Venerating Fire:

At a time when man was little more than a wild animal, hunted and haunted by ferocious beasts, he discovered fire, which changed the future of his whole race. No wonder a blazing fire soon became an object of veneration, especially when his imagination formed for him many forms of deities. Fire became a deity as well, a deity close and personal. The god of the sky was as high and all-encompassing as the sky itself, the earth goddess was wide as the earth, the wind

god swept across the earth, the sun god/goddess regularly traveled across the day sky, the moon god waxed and waned, and the water goddess streamed across rivers and into lakes and oceans.

Fire was the only deity that sat cozy and close. It held a special position, and as such it was kindled with care and kept alive. It gave light. It gave heat. It gave power. It turned night to day and winter to spring. It baked clay into pots, and smelted metal into tools and instruments. It frightened dangerous animals, and above all, it made the daily food tender and tasty. It had revolutionized human living. It required constant attention, and attention means attraction and affection. It became special and was given a special seat, the hearth. It became the center of man's activities—cooking, eating, conversing, sleeping, and, by extension of its importance, receiving homage in the form of wood and later burnt-offerings. Moreover, it was able to reach up into the sky in a column of smoke; because of this, the fire god could have contact both with the gods and goddesses above and the men and women below. As fire was the intermediary, the hearth became the altar, the earliest altar. All the gifts presented to deity and deities—animal fat and flesh, grains, food, sweet smelling herbs and wood—were put to burn and rise in smoke to reach the deity/deities. The smoke and scent of this fire reminded man of its divine seat.

Ever-burning:

Kindling fire by striking flints or rubbing sticks was no easy job. It was much easier to keep it burning. Man learned that fire can snugly sleep beneath ashes and arise, glowing when blown into flames. The habit of keeping fire “alive” through sleeping and leaping became a habit. Habit forms tradition. The hearth fire, and later the temple fire, became an ever-burning fire. Tradition becomes sacred; sacredness demands ritual; ritual becomes elaborate. Once sanctified and ritualized, even when well outdated and fossilized, a tradition cannot be easily abandoned by conservatives.

Matchsticks and gas and electric lighters have extinguished the hearth fire, and yet I know in Iran there are still old ladies, Zoroastrians and Muslims, whose hearth fire is never extinguished. My mother and mother-in-law, one from Kerman and the other from Shiraz, 300 miles apart, had their hearth fire going as long as they lived. If this could be the case within the home, what should one expect from places of worship?

Fire has served as the altar, the illuminating light, for many religions. Fire, in the form of candid candle, lighted lamp, burning incense, or blazing wood, still adorns prayer niches, rooms and halls all over the world.

Fire in the Gathas:

Fire is used eight times in the Gathas. It is mental (Song 4.3 and 12.6), the radiant light (4.19 and 16.9), the warmth (8.4), and full-of-energy (7.4), which helps good and evil people to find happiness. It helps to meditate in quest of righteousness (8.9) and to enlighten one's mind to find means to ward off danger (11.7).

The Gathic Fire symbolizes the Divine Progressive Mind in human beings. It is the altar that enlightens a meditating mind of a Zarathushtrian. Facing it, a Zarathushtrian wishes to forge an

ideal society. Here are two brief prayers, one in the Haptanghaiti and the other from Atash Nyâyesh (Fire Prayer) in the Avesta. They explain fire's symbolism and depict the society a Zarathushtrian wants the world to enjoy.

Haptanghaiti, Song 3.1-3:

“In this fire-enclosure, first of all, we approach You and You alone, Wise God, through the most progressive mentality, symbolized by Fire -- bright, warm and energetic. Reverence to it, because You have appointed it for reverence.

Fire, you belong to the Wise Lord. You symbolize the most progressive mentality. This is the best of your designations. O Fire of Ahura Mazda, it is because of this that we approach you.”

Atash Nyâyesh:

Grant me, O Fire of Ahura Mazda, prompt welfare, prompt maintenance, prompt living; full welfare, full maintenance, full living; zeal, progress, eloquence, discerning intellect; next, comprehensive, great and lasting knowledge; next, all-encompassing courage, steadiness; vigilance, wakeful even at rest; and self-supporting children, able to govern the country, outstanding in assembly, harmonious in growth, and gentle in character, who shall advance our homes, settlements, districts, countries and the world fellowship.

May the Fire of Mazda enlighten our minds!
