

Seasonal Festivals

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Asho Zarathushtra, born in an agricultural environment, preached and spread his Good Religion among people engaged in crop cultivation and animal husbandry. His dynamic message introduced a completely new order in the spiritual, or as he put it, the *mental* sphere; it purged all evil and superstitious thoughts, misleading words, and harmful deeds; and it helped to strengthen and promote all the then-existing constructive activities of a good living.

The agricultural people were in tune with nature in their day-to-day life. They fully knew the solar and lunar movements and the changes in the seasons. They had timed their activities to suit the climate in which they lived. This timetable kept in step with the *saredha*, the tropical solar year of 365 days, 5 hours, 48 minutes, and 45.5 seconds, but differed a little on certain points.

Their activities were scheduled to correspond with various phases of their agricultural life. It was divided into six phases. The end of one phase and the beginning of other were celebrated as a special time of festivity. The six festivals were known as *yâirya ratu*, the ‘rightful yearly rite’. *Yâri* means ‘year’, solar or not, perhaps because the festivals were not precisely based on regular seasonal changes but, as said, to suit the particular climate of the people concerned. And this is a particular point to note. The six seasonal festivals were:

- (1) *Hamaspahmadaya*, meaning ‘vernal equinox’, the 1st day of Farvardin, the beginning of spring, on or about 21st March, was to celebrate the end of the old year and the beginning of the New Year—*Nowruz*. It was, according to the Avesta, the time to “properly set” everything and prepare for the new year.
- (2) *Maidhyoi-zaremaya* (‘Mid-spring’), 45 days from *Nowruz*, 14th day of Ardibehesht, on or about May 4th, was the time to celebrate the occasion for the cattle having delivered their young and yielded “abundance of milk” and also for appraising the crops sown in late winter or early spring.
- (3) *Maidhyoi-shema* (‘Mid-summer’), 60 days from *Maidhyoi-zaremaya*, 12th day of Tir, on or about July 3rd, was the beginning of the harvesting season.
- (4) *Paitish-hahya* (‘Grainful’), 75 days from *Maidhyoi-shema*, 25th day of Shahrivar, on or about September 16th, marked the end of harvesting.
- (5) *Ayâthrema* (‘no-travel’), 30 days from *Paitish-hahya*, 24th day of Mehr, on or about October 16th, was to enjoy the end of trade caravans and the time for cattle to mate before the winter set in.
- (6) *Maidhyâirya* (‘Mid-year’), 80 days from *Ayâthrema*, 15th day of Dey, on or about January 4th, heralded the passing of the winter peak and for preparing to meet the spring with agricultural activity.

It may be noted that the seasonal quarters and semi-quarters fall the 1st and 16th days of *Fasli*, or ‘seasonal’ months, on or about May 4th, June 22nd, August 7th, September 23rd, November 7th, December 22nd, and February 5th. Only the first two *Gâhânâbâr* festivals coincided with the solar seasonal changes. The others were purposely put off to meet the living conditions. They were neither a ‘calendrically’ nor traditionally bound people but very practical.

Most probably the festivals were celebrated with sacrifices to gods and goddesses and by indulging in a joyous festivity.

Chanting and Feasting

Avestan evidences, particularly the book of *Vispered*, show that the early Zarathushtrians turned it into an occasion to fit into their new pattern of life. Each festival was traditionally celebrated for one and later for five days. They were devoted to reciting, chanting, explaining, understanding, and holding questions-and-answers on each of the five Gathas of Asho Zarathushtra. The festival was rounded up with a feast prepared by collective participation and efforts, and merrymaking. A piece in the Avesta states that all participants should bring whatever they can afford—meat, vegetables, legumes, grain, other food ingredients, and firewood. If one was not in a position to contribute in kind, one might put his or her labor in preparing the food in a common pot, or just join the prayers. The food, with a large variety of ingredients, was a tasty stew, resembling today's more sophisticated Iranian *âsh* or the Parsi spiced *dhansâk*, both relished on the occasion. Merrymaking was the folk music and dances still observed among Iranian tribes all over the Iranian Plateau and beyond.

Gâhânbâr

The word *Gâthâ* was eased into *Gâs* and *Gâh* in Pahlavi or Middle Persian. *Gâsân* or *Gâhân* is the plural form and in Pahlavi and Zoroastrian Persian, it always means the five Gathas and nothing else. *Bâr* in Pahlavi and Persian means 'occasion, time, turn'. The Persian name for the festival is *Gâhânbâr*, the time (to turn to) the Gathas. The folk etymology of *gâh+anbâr*, which should grammatically be *anbâr+gâh* (stack-time), is of only recent interpretation by persons either not knowing Pahlavi or not understanding the significance of the festival in connection with the Gatha recitation. *Ghambâr* is Parsi Gujarati.

Why was so much importance given to the Gathas? The answer is provided by the *Yasna* (chapters 55 and 58) and the *Vispered* (13–14, 16, 18–24). They say the Gathas:

“are the Primal Principles of Life, [and] we wish to maintain our lives fresh as is the will [of Ahura Mazda] ... They are our guardians and protectors. They are food for our minds, in fact, they are food and clothing for our souls. We recite, sing, learn, memorize, chant from memory, practice, and teach them. ... We esteem each and every word, line, stanza, and song—the entire bound (book) of the Gathas. We also esteem all the questions and answers exchanged in regards to them.”

The Gathas, as said earlier, are prayers to God and guidance for humanity. They are communion with God, and at the same time, they impart an eternally modern message. The Gathas lead humanity, with all its modern science, to Mazda Ahura, the Super-Wise God. With the Gathas as the guide in thought, word, and deed, one may devote one's good life in learning, practicing, teaching, and preaching the divine doctrine.

The Zarathushtrian Assembly has revived the true *Gâhânbâr* spirit. It celebrates the *Gâhânbârs* by an opening prayer appropriate to the Gahanbar concerned; the recitation, explanation, and questions-and-answers of one Gathic song; an enlightening talk; collectively provided stewed dish and refreshments; and music and dance.

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