

Celebration of Life—Novruz

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Novruz (Nowruz) in Persian means ‘New[-year]-day’. It is the beginning of the year for the people of Afghanistan, Azerbaijan, Iran, Tajikistan, and other common cultural heritage countries. 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 the vernal equinox, around March 21st.

Tradition takes Novruz as far back as 15,000 years—before the last ice age. King Jamshid (Yima/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 severe 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 is said to be the person who first introduced Novruz celebrations.

Avestan and later scriptures state that Zarathushtra improved the old Indo-Iranian calendar as early as 1725 B.C. 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 and 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 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 5hr 48 min 45.5 sec. 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 the best and most correct calendar produced that far, and we may add, this far.

Some 12 centuries later, in 487 B.C.E., Darius the Great of the Achaemenian dynasty celebrated the Novruz at his newly built Persepolis in Iran. A 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 which repeats itself once every 1400 years. It also happened to coincide with the Babylonian and the Jewish new year. It was, therefore, a highly auspicious occasion for these ancient peoples. Persepolis was the location where the Achaemenid king, on Novruz, received his subject peoples from all across the vast empire. The walls of the great royal palace depict scenes of these celebrations.

We know that the Parthians celebrated the occasion, but we do not know the details. It should have, more or less, followed the Achaemenian pattern. During the Sassanian period, preparations began at least 25 days before Novruz. 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 planted on top of the pillars. They grew into luxurious greens by New Year’s Day. The great king held his public audience, and the High Priest of the empire was the first to greet him. 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 particular profession. Then on the sixth day, called Greater Novruz, 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 stock, whether Zarathushtrians, Jews, Christians, Muslims, Baha'is, or others, have celebrated Novruz precisely at the time of vernal equinox, the first day of the first month, on or around March 21st.

Today, the ceremony has been simplified. Every house gets a thorough cleaning almost a month before. Wheat, barley, lentils, and other vegetables 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. A table is laid. It has a copy of the sacred book (the Gathas for Zarathushtrians), a picture of Zarathushtra, a mirror, candles, incense burner, bowl of water with live goldfish, the plates and vessels with green sprouts, flowers, fruits, coins, bread, sugar cone, various grains, fresh vegetables, colorfully painted boiled eggs akin to "Easter eggs", and above all, seven articles with their names beginning in Persian with the letter 's' or 'sh'.

The usual things with s are vinegar, sumac, garlic, samanu (consistency of germinating wheat), apple, senjed (sorb?), and herbs. Those with sh include wine, sugar, syrup, honey, candy, milk, and rice-pudding. In other Asian countries and in Africa, North America, Latin America, Europe, and Australasia, these may be substituted with words in English or other national or local languages that would alliterate, rhyme, or make mouths water. The seven articles are prominently exhibited in small bowls or plates on the table. The whole table, beautifully laid, 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, beautifully 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 Novruz prayers, and after the time is announced, each member kisses the other and wishes a Happy Novruz. Elders give gifts to younger members. Next, rounds of visits to neighbors, relatives, and friends begin. Each visit is reciprocated.

Zarathushtra's Birthday and Novruz festival are celebrated by Zarathushtrians at social centers around 6th of Farvardin (26th of 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 picnics to the countryside begin. This 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 alongside stream 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 Novruz may find them married and carrying their bonny babies!
