

Norouz in History

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The second calendar was the Avesta calendar which was the origin of the current Iranian calendar.

In ancient Iran lunar months were used in a different way. The week, which was one of the bases of the Semitic calendar, did not exist. Instead, the month was divided into thirty days, each month having a specific name.

The year in the Avestaian calendar was comprised of 365 days which made up twelve 30-day months. The five remaining days were called "Panjeh". In the old Persia, the time of the king's coronation was considered the beginning of the calendar and the years were named after the kings. For example, they said, 'the fifth month of Ardeshir's seventh year of rule'. In 247 B.C., beginning with the Parthian era, the origin of the calendar was changed. Beginning with the Sassanid dynasty, again the calendar was changed to that used in the Achaemenian era. At the time of Yazdgerd, the last Sassanid king, the year 631 A.D. was chosen as a new beginning for the Iranian calendar. Since no king ascended the throne after him, that calendar remained in use as the Yazdgerdi calendar.

In the Sassanid era, collecting taxes by the government started at Norouz (the first day of the new year). After the Arab invasion of Iran, when Persians were converted to Islam, the tradition of collecting taxes and many other Persian traditions were adopted by the Abbasid caliphs. However, since they did not take the leap year into account, each year the time of Norouz changed. They then decided to take the leap year into account, as the Persians had in the pre-Islamic era. Thus originated the Motavakkeli calendar and Mo'tazedi history.

It is not exactly known when and how Norouz emerged. Some people believe that natural changes in climate gave birth to Norouz. Some researchers consider it a national festival, while others regard it as a religious feast. According to Zoroastrian belief, the month of Farvardin (the first month of the Iranian solar calendar) refers to the Faravashis (spirits) which return to the material world during the last ten days of the year. Therefore, the Zoroastrians honor the ten-day period in order to make the spirits of their deceased ancestors happy. The tradition by some of going to cemeteries before Norouz may have its origin in this belief. Others have narrated tales about the origin of Norouz. One version is that on this day, Kia Khosrow, son of Parviz Bardina, ascended the throne and made Iranshahr flourish. Another version is that on this special day (1st of Farvardin), Jamshid, the Pishdadi king, sat on golden throne while people carried him on their shoulders. They saw the sun's rays on the king and celebrated the day.

Yet another story mentions Solomon who lost his ring and, as a result, lost his reign. After searching for it for forty days, he found his ring and recovered his sovereignty. Hence, the people cried, "Norouz (the new day) has come".

In ancient times the Norouz festival started on the first day of Farvardin (January 21, but it is not certain how long that lasted. In some royal courts the festivities continued for one month. According to some documents, the Norouz general festival was held until the fifth day of Farvardin, and the Norouz special festival continued until the end of the month.

Perhaps, during the first five days of Farvardin, the Norouz festival was of a public and national nature, while during the rest of the month it assumed a private and royal aspect, when the kings received the common people at the royal court.

The Norouz celebration is an ancient, national Iranian custom. The details of Norouz celebrations before the Achaemenian era are not known to us. There is no mention of Norouz celebrations in Avesta. It is not known either how the Norouz festival was viewed from the standpoint of the religious beliefs of ancient Persians. However, there exist some references to Norouz festival in a few books written in the Sassanid era.

According to some Babylonian works, Achaemenian kings sat in the veranda of their palace during Norouz celebrations receiving representatives of different states who offered their precious gifts to the kings. It is said that Darius the Great, an Achaemenian king (421-486 B.C.), visited the temple of Ba'al Mardook, the great deity in ancient Babylon, at the outset of every new year.

The Parthians and Sassanids also celebrated Norouz every year by holding special rituals and ceremonies. On the morning of Norouz, the king wore his adorned garments and entered the court alone. Then, someone famous for his lucky steps arrived in the court. Next, the supreme Moobed (Zoroastrian priest), holding a golden cup and ring and coins, a sword, a bow and arrow, ink, a quill and flowers arrived at court, reciting a special prayer.

High-ranking government officials arrived after the supreme Moobed, presenting their gifts to the king. The king sent the precious gifts to the treasury and distributed other gifts among the audience. Twenty-five days before Norouz, twelve pillars made of mud bricks were built in the courtyard; and twelve different kinds of seed were sown on tops of the pillars.

On the sixth day of Norouz, they picked the newly grown plants and strewed them over the floor in the court, not collecting them till the 16th of Farvardin, called Mehr Day. Building a fire was another public custom observed particularly on the eve of Norouz. The fire which Iranians by tradition build on the last Wednesday of the year has its origin in this ancient custom. Ancient Persians respected fire; it was believed fire can help purify the air.

On the first morning of Norouz, people sprinkled water on one another. After converting to Islam, the custom was preserved, only they used rose-water instead. Among other Norouz traditions was bathing on 6th of Farvardin (March 26) and offering sugar to each other as a gift. The most glorious tradition, however, was allowing legumes to grow in a shallow dish of water, called "Sabzeh".

Â During the first two centuries after Islam, the Norouz festival was not observed earnestly due to changes in the social and political circumstances. Gradually, the greedy Omayyad caliphs, wishing to increase their revenues through Norouz gifts, revived the custom of celebrating the Norouz festival. Beginning with the Abbasid era, the caliphs began to respect Persian traditions.

Â Released from the domination of Arabs, Persians began to revive their ancestors' customs. According to the great Persian scientist, Aburayhan Birooni, in the 4th century A.H. (After Hejira), the rulers of Khorassan Province presented new uniforms to their guards and troops on Norouz.

Norouz festival was also celebrated by the Samanid and Ghaznavid dynasties until the Mongols invaded Persia. After the Mongol invasion, as any other national tradition, Norouz lost its significance. Nevertheless, as time passed, it was gradually observed again. In the Safavid era, Norouz flourished again.

After the Safavid dynasty the Norouz celebration maintained its status and was regularly observed in royal courts. Nader Shah celebrated Norouz even in time of war. In the Qajar era, the Norouz tradition was preserved; the Qajar monarchs presented outfits, horses, money and adornments to their troops. The common people also celebrated Norouz gloriously. Today, Norouz is celebrated as splendidly as ever. Setting the Haftsin (Norouz table) and sitting around it at the turn of the year, wearing new garments, presenting Eidi (gifts of crisp paper money) to children, sprinkling rose-water, eating sweets and celebrating sizdeh-be-dar (13th Farvardin or 2nd April) are practiced by Iranians, even those living abroad. Muslim Iranians light candles as a symbol of ancient Persians' respect for fire, and place the Holy Qur'an on the Norouz table to show their esteem for this divine book. In recent years, by honoring the Norouz festival, Iranians have demonstrated their steadfast attachment to their national customs and traditions while firmly believing in the holy religion of Islam. Â