



Nowruz

The New Year Celebration in Iran

An excerpt by Professor Ehsan Yarsharter

Of all the Persian national festivals, the New Year celebrations are at once the most important and the most colorful. This festival embodies a wealth of ancient rites and customs, and it is about the only one in Persia that is not confined to the traditions of only one religious group. It symbolizes the continuity of ancient Persian culture, which has survived so many adversities and vicissitudes.

The Nowruz celebration stretches over a period of thirteen days, the last being a special occasion calling for particular ceremonies. The period begins with the first day of spring, when the sun enters the zodiacal sign of the Ram. At Nowruz people join nature in making a fresh start, full of joy and hope for the coming year. The origin of Nowruz is traditionally attributed to Jamshid, the mightiest and the most glorious of the legendary kings of Persia.

Nowruz is reckoned by a solar calendar. This was adopted in ancient times by the Zoroastrians, and it is used today as the national calendar of Persia. However, one must bear in mind that the Zoroastrian year did not always begin on the 21st of March (1st of Farvardin). There are reasons to believe that at one time it began with the commencement of autumn. Nowruz, along with Mehregan, another ancient festival, continue to be the main national Persian festivals.

Today, while many of the ancient festivals have faded away in most parts of the country, Nowruz remains a national Persian festival, and its advent brings joy to the hearts of the people. Although many of the old customs and ceremonies, as recorded in histories and travel books, have vanished with the passing of time, what remains makes Nowruz the most fascinating of the Persian festivals, rich in folkloric details and symbolic reminiscences.

The preparation for Nowruz begins well in advance. Children and young people particularly are excited at the thought of approaching Nowruz with its prospects of gifts, new clothes, and the round of festive parties. Some fifteen to ten days before Spring each household starts preparing the "sabzeh": grains of wheat or lentil are put into water to germinate; then the germinated grain is spread over a dish and allowed to grow. By the time Nowruz arrives, the grains have sent up a fresh mass of green blades as a token of spring. This decorative symbol of good omen is kept till the end of the holidays.

During the days immediately preceding Nowruz, an amusing spectacle is provided by the "fire lighters," men wearing high hats, harlequin dress studded with small bells, often with their faces painted black, or wearing a grotesque mask. These messengers of joy parade the streets with a troupe of performers, which may include dancers, acrobats, and folk musicians, reciting folk songs and trying various tricks to amuse the spectators.

The Wednesday preceding the New Year calls for particular ceremonies and performances of very old origin. The rites and customs vary somewhat from region to region, but a common and essential ceremony consists of piling at least three small heaps of shrubbery in the courtyard and setting them afire. Then all the members of the family jump over the flames in turn, reciting a little rhyme of good augur: "My pallor to you, your ruddiness to me."

A thorough housecleaning is essential to the preparations for Nowruz: all the rugs and linen are washed, furniture meticulously cleaned, and, if possible, the house repaired and painted. In some regions it was customary to break all the earthenware vessels and throw them out, replacing them with new ones.

Everyone is supposed to provide himself with new clothes, shoes, and hats for Nowruz. Children are particularly attached to this aspect of the festival. As the exact time of the New Year draws near, everyone gets ready for the occasion. The exact time, that is, the moving of the Sun to the sign of the Ram, is announced in larger cities by the firing of cannons. A few hours before this solemn moment, all the members of the family gather in the house. By this time they have all bathed, men have had their hair cut, women have finished their toilet, and all have put on their new clothes. Candles or lamps are lit, and a special table is spread in the main room. On it are placed a mirror, candlesticks, and the holy book, according to the family's faith. Generally, also a bowl of water, with a green leaf floating in it, a flagon of rosewater, a piece of bread, herbs, fruits, candies and cakes specially made for Nowruz, and two other items particularly prepared: colored eggs and the *Haft-Sin*. The latter is a special feature of Nowruz and consists of seven articles whose names begin with the letter "S." As a rule, they are *seeb*, *sabzi*, *sir*, *serkeh*, *sumac*, *senjed*, and *samanu*; that is, apple, fresh herbs, garlic, vinegar, sumac, and a Bohemian olive and a sweet-tasting food prepared with green wheat. Other articles of good omen may be added to those already mentioned.

“ WHEN FINALLY THE MOMENT ARRIVES THE FAMILY GATHERING IS PERVADED BY A SPIRIT OF JOY AND HAPPINESS. THE MEMBERS OF THE FAMILY EMBRACE EACH OTHER, GREETINGS AND GOOD WISHES ARE EXPRESSED, AND GIFTS ARE EXCHANGED. ”

When finally the moment arrives the family gathering is pervaded by a spirit of joy and happiness. The members of the family embrace each other, greetings and good wishes are expressed, and gifts are exchanged. The special food being served on the New Year's Eve consists mainly of steamed rice mixed with herbs and fried fish.

Visiting relatives and friends, a characteristic feature of Nowruz, begins on the first day and continues to the end of the twelfth. The elder members of the family receive the visit first, and the junior members later. A general air of gaiety, contentment and rejoicing marks the atmosphere of these days.

Nowruz ceremonies are brought to an appropriate end by spending the thirteenth day in the open country. It is considered unlucky to stay at home, and on this day the countryside around the large cities is covered by groups of people in high spirits, who have trooped out to walk in the fresh fields and enjoy a rest along the banks, enjoying games. Comic performers resembling the "fire lighters" are particular favorites of the people.

The green shoots of wheat or lentil must be thrown out on the thirteenth day, and when possible, thrown into the running water. With the discarding of the "sabzeh" one throws out all the misfortune and bad luck. By going out into the open country one welcomes in the spring and leaves all the bad luck associated with the number thirteen on the lap of nature where it can do no harm.

On the return from the countryside the Nowruz holidays come to a close, and there is almost a year to prepare for the next.

ABOUT HAFT-SÎN / SEVEN-S's

Haft-Sîn or the seven S's is a major tradition of *Nowruz*. The *Haft-Sîn* altar includes seven items starting with the letter S or Sîn (S in the Persian alphabet). The items symbolically correspond to seven divine creations and/or bounteous immortals. The *Haft-Sîn* items are:

1 SABZEH

Wheat, barley or lentil sprouts growing in a dish

Symbolizing
REBIRTH

2 SAMANU

A sweet pudding made from wheat germ

Symbolizing
AFFLUENCE

3 SENJED

The dried fruit of the oleaster tree

Symbolizing
LOVE

4 SÎR

Cloves of Garlic

Symbolizing
MEDICINE

5 SÎB

Red apple

Symbolizing
BEAUTY / HEALTH

6 SOMĀQ

Sumac berries

Symbolizing (the color of)
SUNRISE

7 SERKEH

Vinegar

Symbolizing
AGE / PATIENCE

+

Sometimes a missing Sîn is replaced with another item starting with an S. For example:

SONBOL – The fragrant hyacinth flower
Symbolizing: **THE COMING OF SPRING**

SEKKEH – Coins
Symbolizing: **PROSPERITY / WEALTH**

OTHER ITEMS ALSO INCLUDED ON THE ALTAR ARE:

TRADITIONAL PERSIAN SWEETS such as *baghlava*

LIT CANDLES – *Enlightenment / Happiness*

A MIRROR – *Cleanness / Honesty*

DECORATED EGGS – *Fertility*

A BOWL OF WATER WITH AN ORANGE – *The earth in space*

ROSE WATER – *Magical cleansing powers*

A BOWL WITH GOLDFISH – *Life / The transition of Pisces to Aries (Esfand to Farvardin)*

