

YALDĀ FESTIVAL

The Birth of God Mithra & Significance of Winter Solstice in Iranian Culture

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Why Celebrate Yalda and not Christmas?

While the Christians celebrate Christmas, the Iranians, particularly **Zarthushtis** celebrate one of their most ancient celebrations, called **Yalda**, which means **Birth**. Yalda is the night of Mehr or Mithra's birth. This is traced to the primal concept of Light and Good, against Darkness and Evil in the ancient Iranian religion. From this day forward, Light triumphs as the days grow longer and gives more light.

When Mithraism spread to ancient civilised world from Iran, Dec 21st was celebrated as Mithra's birthday. But in the 4th century AD because of some errors in counting the Leap Year, the **birthday of Mithra shifted to Dec 25th**. Until that time the birthday of Jesus Christ was celebrated on Jan 6th. But the religion of most of the Romans and the people of many of the European countries was still Mithraism.

When Christianity spread, the priests could not stop the practice of celebrating **Mithra's birthday on Dec 25th**, so they declared this day as Jesus's birthday which is still so.

In ancient Persia, **Yalda festivities were symbolized by the evergreen tree**. Young girls wrapped their wishes in silk cloth and hung them on the tree. Eventually, it became a custom to place presents/gifts under the evergreen tree. As late as the 18th century a German learnt of the **Yalda tree** and created what we now know as the **Christmas tree**.

For decades the entire Iranian nation, particularly **Zarthushtis**, celebrate **Yalda** more as the night of the **rebirth of the "Sun"** than connect it with the birth of Jesus.

Yalda also known as Shab-e Cheleh in Persian is celebrated on the eve of the first day of the winter (December 21) in the Iranian calendar, which falls on the Winter Solstice and forty days before the next major Iranian festival "Jashn-e Sadeh (fire festival)". As the longest night of the year, the Eve of Yalda (Shab-e Yalda) is also a turning point, after which the days grow longer. It symbolised the triumph of Light and Goodness over the powers of Darkness.

Yalda celebration has great significance in the Iranian calendar. It is the eve of the birth of Mithra, the Sun God, who symbolised light, goodness and strength on earth. Shab-e Yalda is a time of joy. The festival was considered one of the most important celebrations in ancient Iran and continues to be celebrated to this day, for a period of more than 5000 years.

Yalda (yaldā) is a Syriac word meaning birth (*NPer. tavvalod* and *milād* are from the same origin). In 3rd century CE, Mithra-worshippers adopted and used the term 'yalda' specifically with reference to the birth of Mithra. The original Avestan and Old-Persian term for the celebration is unknown, but it is believed that in Parthian-Pahlavi and Sasanian-Pahlavi (Middle-Persian) it was known as Zayishn (zāyīšn - birth). The New Persian "Shab-e Cheleh Festival" is a relatively recent term. The celebration was brought to Iranian plateau by the Aryan (Iranian) migrants around middle of the 2nd millenniums BCE, but the original date of celebration could be reach as far as pre-Zoroastrian ear, around 3rd to 4th millennium BCE.

In most ancient cultures, including Iran, the start of the solar year has been marked to celebrate the victory of light over darkness and the renewal of the Sun. The last day of the Iranian month of "Āzar" (November-December) is the longest night of the year, when the forces of Ahriman (darkness) are assumed to be at their peak. While the next day, the first day of the month of "Dey" known as "Khorram rūz" or "Khur rūz" (the day of the sun) belongs to the creator, Ahura Mazda (the Lord of Wisdom). Since the days are getting longer and the nights shorter, this day marks the victory of the sun over darkness, and

goodness over evil. The occasion was celebrated in the festival of "Deygān" dedicated to Ahura Mazda, on the first day of the month of "Dey" (December-January).

Fires would be burnt all night to ensure the defeat of the forces of Ahriman. There would be feasts, acts of charity and a number of Zoroastrian deities honoured and prayers performed to ensure the total victory of the sun that was essential for the protection of winter crops. There would be prayers to God Mithra (Mehr) and feasts in his honour, since Mithra is an Ēzad (av. Yazata) and responsible for protecting "the light of the early morning", known as "Hāvangāh". It was also believed that Ahura Mazda would grant people's wishes in that day.

One of the themes of the festival was the temporary subversion of order. Masters and servants reversed roles. The king dressed in white would change place with ordinary people. A mock king was crowned and masquerades spilled into the streets. As the old year died, rules of ordinary living were relaxed. This tradition in its original form persisted until the end of Sasanian dynasty (224-651 CE), and is mentioned by the Persian polymath Bīruni and others in their recordings of pre-Islamic rituals and festivals.

The Egyptian and Iranian traditions merged into ancient Rome belief system, in a festival dedicated to the ancient god of seedtime, Saturn. The Romans exchanged gifts, partied and decorated their homes with greenery. Following the Iranian tradition, the usual order of the year was suspended. Grudges and quarrels would be forgotten and wars interrupted or postponed. Businesses, courts and schools were closed. Rich and poor became equal, masters served slaves, and children headed the family. Cross-dressing and masquerades, merriment of all kinds prevailed. A mock king, the Lord of Misrule, was crowned. Candles and lamps chased away the spirits of darkness.

Another related Roman festival celebrated at the same time was dedicated to "Sol Invictus" (the Invincible Sun) dedicated to the God Mithra. This ancient Iranian cult was spread into the Roman world by Emperor Elagabalus (r. 218 to 222) and declared as the god of state.

With the spread of Christianity, Christmas celebration became the most important Christian festival. In the third century various dates, from December to April, were celebrated by Christians as Christmas. January 6th, was the most favoured day because it was thought to be Jesus's Baptismal day (in the Greek Orthodox Church this continues to be the day to celebrate Christmas). In year 350, December 25th it was adopted in Rome and gradually almost the entire Christian church agreed to that date, which coincided, with the Winter solstice and the festivals, Sol Invicta and Saturnalia. Many of the rituals and traditions of the pre-Christian festivals were incorporated into the Christmas celebration and are still observed to this date.

It is not clear when and how the word "Yalda" entered to the Persian language. The massive persecution of early Christians in Rome which brought many Christian refugees into the Sasanian Empire and it is very likely that these Christians introduced and popularised "Yalda" in Iran. Gradually "Shab-e Yalda" and "Shab-e Cheleh" became synonymous and the two are used interchangeably. With the conquest of Islam the religious significance of the ancient Iranian festivals was lost. Today "Shab-e Cheleh" is merely a social occasion, when family and friends get together for fun and merriment. Different kinds of dried fruits, nuts, seeds and fresh winter fruits are consumed. The presence of dried and fresh fruits is reminiscence of the ancient feasts to celebrate and pray to the ancient deities to ensure the protection of the winter crops.

Iranian Jews, who are amongst the oldest inhabitants of the country, in addition to "Shab-e Cheleh", also celebrate the festival of "Illanout" (tree festival) at around the same time. Illanout is very similar to the Shab-e Cheleh celebration. Candles are lit and all varieties of dried and fresh winter fruits are served. Special meals are prepared and prayers are performed. There are also very similar festivals in many parts of Southern Russia that are identical to "Shab-e Cheleh" with local variations. Sweetbreads are baked in the shape of humans and animals. Bonfires are made and dances resemble crop harvesting. Comparison and detailed studies of all these celebrations no doubt will shed more light on the forgotten aspects of this wonderful and ancient festival, where merriment was the main theme of the festival.

Because Shab-e Yalda is the longest and darkest night, it has become to symbolise many things in Persian poetry; separation from a beloved one, loneliness and waiting. After Shab-e Yalda a transformation takes place - the waiting is over, light shines and goodness prevails.

' The sight of you each morning is a New Year
Any night of your departure is the eve of Yalda' (Sa'adi)

'With all my pains, there is still the hope of recovery
Like the eve of Yalda, there will finally be an end' (Sa'adi)