

GAHANBARS: A LINK TO ANCIENT TIMES

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“The coming of the seasons at the proper time of the solar year”
Haptan Yasht Ha 3

“I learn about and I work with the solar year, the righteous period”
Yasna Ha 1.9 Ha 3.11 Ha 4.14
Visparad 1.4

INTRODUCTION

Unlike the holy but unscientific modern era calendars the ancient Zarathushti calendar was a scientific and very precise solar calendar. All Zarathushti festivals were the celebration of solar and season related events.

The moon also played a role but a scientific one within the confines of the solar calendar; it was not used to track the days like in the other ancient civilizations, instead they knew of the powers of the moon and took advantage of them.

“When the light of the moon waxes warmer,
Golden-hued plants grow on from the earth during the spring.”

Mah Yasht Ha 4

Modern science has also come to the same conclusion, namely that seeds sown in spring at the appearance of the crescent of the moon will grow better and produce richer fruits.

The Zarathushti year started with the celebration of the first day of spring and was called *Sal e Now* (New Year). According to the *Avesta* and the *Shahnameh* this celebration dates back to the time of Shah Jamshid, who initiated it by celebrating the first day of spring after the last Ice Age, some ten thousand years ago.

So how did the New Year become New Day - Now Rooz?

Zarathustra, who had an observatory near Lake Hamun, in the kingdom of Balkh, realized that the vernal equinox of 1725 BCE would coincide with sunrise in the vicinity of his observatory near the border of modern day Iran and Afghanistan. In other words the New Year and the New Day would start at the same moment and be a once in a lifetime event for those living in Balkh, so Zarathushtra named that New Year *Now Rooz* (New Day).

Vernal Equinox is a horizontal occurrence of the sun crossing the equator from south to north once a year and sunrise is a daily vertical occurrence from east to west, the two coincide every year at a different location on Earth and it takes about 72 years to return to the vicinity of the same longitude. Thus being a once in a life time event, it was but natural to celebrate that particular year with greater fanfare. When this phenomenon occurred in Persepolis in 487 BCE we see from the bas-reliefs the extent of the celebration.

Zarathustra also coined the word *Nim Rooz* (Mid-Day) to designate 63 degrees longitude as the Meridian, where when the sun is in the mid-day position there is sun shine all over the hemisphere,¹ from Japan and Australia to Europe and Africa. This is a daily feature and can be observed on the website, <http://www.timeanddate.com/worldclock/sunearth.html>. What better location can there be for a Meridian?

The celebration of these astronomical occurrences demonstrates the scientific knowledge of Zarathustra and his followers 3300 years before Galileo. It was after 1640 CE that the western world realized the role of the sun, and that the Earth was not the center of the Universe. Keeping these facts in mind we shall study the Gahanbars.

GAHANBAR

Gahanbars are seasonal festivals explicitly celebrating an important farming related occurrence in each season.² With only four seasons, the celebration of six Gahanbars as seasonal festivals, at first seems to be out of tune. But keeping in mind the fact that the Zarathushtis had advanced knowledge and that their festivals were based on precise calculation like the equinoxes and solstices one realizes that the Gahanbars too are precise, but for the two different regions on Earth, where the ancestors of the Zarathushtis lived and flourished at different periods of their history. Initially the Aryans lived in the harsh Arctic region in *Aryana Vaejah* where they had only two seasons or *Gahs*, seven months of summer from *Farvardin* to *Mehr* and five months of winter from *Aban* to *Esfand* just like in northern Canada.

In the middle of the *first Arctic Gah*, that is the summer season, when they harvested the corn in the month of Tir, they celebrated the harvest and called this celebration *Maidhyo-Shahem Gahanbars* (or the Mid-Summer Gahanbars). (June 29 to July 3) (8 to 12 Tir).

The *second Arctic Gah*, the winter season, which started in the month of Aban was celebrated just before the start of winter and was called *Ayeh-Threm* (the Coming of Winter). This was to celebrate the sowing of the winter crops which were generally root crops. (Oct 12 to 16) (20 to 24 Mehr)

Later when they migrated to the temperate region where they had four distinct seasons they did not discard these two Gahanbars but added the four new ones to represent the four seasons of their new homeland.

It is worth noting that, Mid-Summer in the Arctic region is in the middle of the month of Tir, but in the temperate region it is a month later in middle of Amordad. So also the beginning of winter in the Arctic is in the month of Aban, but in the temperate region it starts two months later in the month of Dey. By maintaining the same name and date, they kept the link to their ancient motherland alive.

THE FOUR NEW GAHANBARS THAT WERE ADDED TO THE TWO FROM THE ARCTIC PAST ARE.

1. *Maidhyo-Zarem* (Mid Spring): when fresh vegetables are in plenty. (10 to 14 Ardibesht – 30 April to 4 May)
2. *Paiti-Shahem* (End of Summer): gathering of fruits. (Sept.12 to1 6) (21 to 25 Shahrivar).
3. *Maidh-Yarem* (Middle of perfect rest): when farmers, shepherds and their animals are resting. (Dec 31 to Jan 4) (10 to 14 Dey).
4. *Hamas-Path-Maedem* (Equality of heat and cold, day and night): preparation for the revival of Nature. (March 16 to 20) (25 to 29 Espand).

Modern scholars and writers compare the Persian Zarathushti civilization to other ancient civilizations and cannot comprehend the fact that they were scientifically advanced. Scholars and archeologists have acquired considerable knowledge about Babylonia and Sumerian civilizations, believing that they were at the apex of civilization and, that if the Persians had anything superior, they most probably borrowed it from the Babylonians. Since most civilizations contemporaneous with the Zarathushtis were superstitious, many scholars assumed that Zarathushtis were also. For example, as there are six Gahanbars, scholars associated them with the personified version of Amesha Spentas. Others have linked the number six to the creation of sky, water, earth, plants, animals, and humans. Zarathustra's teachings are evolutionary—not based on creation—for he teaches how to progress towards perfection: *Khordad-Hurvatata*.

CELEBRATION OF GAHANBARS

The celebration of Gahanbars over their long history has evolved. According to the *Vispered*¹ Gahanbars were celebrations of events in the agricultural cycle—a kind of thanksgiving and time to enjoy the fruits of their labour. They were celebrated in the farms with plenty of food and wine, and with dance, music, and merriment over a period of five days.

Today, Gahanbars have become a somber and serene event for the remembrance of dead family members. In Yazd and Kerman (Iran), Gahanbars are celebrated in older ancestral



homes some of which are no longer in use and others no longer liveable. Modern Gahanbars are usually celebrated in memory of the departed and not a celebration of the seasons. Food plays a central role and is the impetus for people to attend. They celebrate it according to the non-seasonal Kadmi and Shehenshahi calendars. Although the name and the date both relate it to seasons, nobody questions or understands the relationship any more. Even the prayers recited include those prayed for the departed soul. It has become more of a priestly affair rather than the farmer's festival that it originally was. Prayers have been developed and rituals so

well formulated that one is made to believe that that is how it has been since its conception.

Of course the change from merriment to somber ritual of prayers for the departed stems from the period after the Islamic invasion and genocide, which left no room for merriment and plenty of departed souls for whom to mourn.



In Iran, fruits and dry fruits of seven types each are part of the prayer rituals. A special fried dough called *Sirog*, a sweet made from fried flour mixed with sugar syrup, and a herbal dish called "*Saydab*" (*Ruta Graveolens*) which has medical propertiesⁱⁱⁱ is served with *Aash*, a mixed beans and herb soup— these are part of the customary menu. Other food items may vary depending on the finances of the party sponsoring the Gahanbar. There is no music, dancing, or merriment at these somber events. Up to the early 1900's it was celebrated discreetly, out of

fear of their Muslim neighbours.

Those Zarathushtis that migrated to India after the Islamic invasion no longer had the distinct seasons in their new homeland in western India and for various reasons their calendars got mixed up and their priests made the calendar a part of their religious rituals, thereby making the calendars holy. These calendars being seven and eight months behind have made the seasonal events even more meaningless and aided in the loss of the science behind the calendar and festivals.

In the Indian version of celebration, the *Sirog* has been miniaturised and called *Papri* and, by adding semolina to the flour, a sweet named *Malido* is created.

CONCLUSION

In the 1500s (CE), when the Safavids dynasty in Iran reconverted the Muslims from Sunni to Shia, the remaining Zarathushtis were also forcefully converted. At that time, many Zarathushtis and the celebration of the Gahanbars and other cultural festivals went underground. There are stories that if a person bought seven types of dry fruit the shopkeeper flagged him as a potential Zarathushti and followed him to see where he was going—then they raided the location and harassed the Zarathushtis that had assembled there. Using the same technique, many Zarathushtis found each other and regrouped. The celebration of these festivals in hiding and in secrecy caused a major change in the way it was celebrated. As music is restricted in Islam, it has slowly and surely been forced out of the Iranian and Zarathushti culture. For the same reason the little Iranian music that is left is sad music.

In the late 1800s there were as few as 7,711 identifiable Zarathushtis left in Iran. They had survived by taking refuge in the harsh desert of Yazd and Kerman. They were harassed in all possible ways, they were even forbidden by the authorities to learn reading and writing, although most would secretly learn whatever they could. They were economically in dire straits with the Jaziye tax hanging over their head. Often, Zarathushti girls were abducted and the

boys enslaved, all of which contributed to a change that turned the scientifically advanced culture into a superstitious community having limited knowledge of their history or religion.

It was only after 1860 when Maneckji Limji Hataria, a coreligionist from India, championed their cause and bought them partial freedom by paying the King a substantial amount in lieu of the dreaded Jaiyeh tax and secured for them and the other minorities the exemption from paying Jaziyeh for eternity.

It was during this period that western scholars became interested in the Zarathushti religion and deciphered the Avesta language. These scholars visited Zarathushtis and based their translations on what they saw and learned. These initial works have become the bases of modern understanding of the Zarathushti religion and festivals including the Gahanbars. These scholarly researches have influenced the very practice of the religion by its adherents. Thus nobody knows of the science behind the celebration of the various festivals nor do they look for it although it is so obvious.

As for the Zarathushtis that took refuge in India, the majority would have been the younger generation that had the strength to survive the long journey. Naturally these immigrants would have had limited scriptural knowledge and very few would have had adequate theological knowledge. The proof of this is in the fact that in the later years they sent emissaries to Iran with religious questions and the answers obtained from them are recorded in books called the *Rivayats*, which have become the basis for the practice of the religion in India.

To understand and find the true philosophy behind the festivals like Gahanbars we need to look beyond the books and information of the last 1400 years. We need to accept that the ancient Zarathushti civilizations were wiser than their contemporaries and wiser than what most scholars perceive them to have been—most importantly, that their outlook and practices were scientific and not superstitious. That Gahanbars have nothing to do with Amesha Spentas or creation. While Gahanbars are seasonal festivals, they represent the seasons of two different regions on planet earth and are a link to the ancestral home of the Aryans. Gahanbars are joyful seasonal festivals of the farmers and so should be celebrated in the open fields with dance, music, and merriment, during the proper seasons as specified by their names.

May Wisdom Prevail.

REFERENCES

ⁱ Mehr Yasht Karda 104-5

ⁱⁱ Vispared Karda 1.2

ⁱⁱⁱ Saydab is known to bring down blood pressure and relaxes the body it is antibacterial and anti-inflammatory high in vitamin K & P. In ancient times it was considered a panacea and widely used.

Photo of Gahanbar being performed near the Tower of Silence in Yazd Courtesy of –www.Berasad.com

Other Photos courtesy of <http://amordadnews.com>