

# Sizdah Bedar



*last phase  
of the  
celebrations of  
the New Year  
(Nowruz)*



by: Mazdak Samii

**T**he tradition of leaving the house on the thirteenth (Sizdah) day of Farvardin, the last day of the Nowruz period, and spending that day outside with joy, laughter and pleasure has been in practice since ancient times in Iran. This is the last phase of the celebrations of the New Year ( Nowruz). This joyous celebration has its roots in the Zoroastrian belief that laughter and joy symbolize the throwing away of bad thoughts. According to Zoroastrianism, bad thoughts are the gift of Ahreeman (the devil) and his offspring and the festival of the New Year will cleanse all bad thoughts. The celebrations defeat the enemies and plant shoots of comradeship and peace. The custom of kissing each other on the cheeks also comes from a belief that it cleanses the individual.

On the last day of the New Year celebrations, the 13th of the first month Farvardin, it is the custom of Iranians to pass as many hours as possible outdoors. All people leave their homes to go to the parks or

local plains for a very festive picnic. It is a must to spend this day in nature and the occasion is called Sizdah-Bedar. It is generally believed that if people stay home something bad can happen.

This day was not celebrated in this manner before Islam and might be several rituals in one. It is possible that this day was devoted to the deity Tishtrya (Tir), protector of rain. In the Zoroastrian calendar each day is named after a deity and this particular day in the month of Farvardin is named after Tishtrya. In the past there were outdoor festivities to pray to this Eyzad in hope of rain that was essential for agriculture. The act of throwing away the Sabzeh from Haft Seen into rivers and running waters on this day also indicates veneration for a water deity. The act symbolically represents an offering made to such a deity.

However, Anahita was the goddess protector of running waters and not Tishtrya. It appears that at least part of the celebration is to pay respect to some water deity. Tishtrya/rain or Anahita/water



are likely mixed together to preserve veneration for water deities in general. In ancient mythology the deity Vata the rain-bringer was associated with Harahvati Aredvi Sura, which means possessing waters (Anahita is a later assimilation of this deity). She personified a mythical river and all rivers flow out of this one. Clouds also took up rain from the same mythical river every year. Tishtrya goes to the river once per year in the shape of a white stallion to fight the Demon of Dearth appearing in the shape of a black stallion. After Tishtrya's victory he rushes into the sea and water is hurried all over, and Vata snatches some for the clouds. The rest of the water is mixed with seeds of plants, which sprout as the rain falls. Ancient Iranian rituals quite often enacted their mythologies, waters were respected and many rites existed with respect to waters. It is very likely that several of these were combined to preserve some aspect of the ancient celebrations venerating waters. Till the 19th century there was horse racing on this day, which very likely represented the fight between the two stallions.

Another account of Zoroastrian folk stories mentions that twelve devilish spirits sent by Ahreeman are eating away at the 12 pillars of the world all year around, and at the end of the year when the pillars are on the verge of collapse, the evil spirits come to earth to celebrate. While they are dancing with joy, during the first 12 days of Nowruz, the pillars are restored to their original state due to the people's joy, celebrations and goodwill. The bad spirits will again start eating away at the pillars on the thirteenth day of the year hoping to topple the world once again. The first twelve days of the year were therefore considered particularly significant and had the important duty of safekeeping the world and the lives of people on earth. The thirteenth day of the year was considered the beginning of the normal period of the year.

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