

the festival of 'Deygan', which is dedicated to Ahura Mazda on the first day of 'Dey'.

Fires would be burnt all night to ensure the defeat of the forces of evil. There would be feasts, acts of charity and prayers performed to ensure the total victory of sun--essential for the protection of winter crops. There would be prayers to Mithra (Mehr) and feasts in his honor, since Mithra is the Eyzad responsible for protecting "the light of the early morning", known as 'Havangah'. It was also assumed that Ahura Mazda would grant people's wishes, especially those desiring an offspring if all rites are performed on this occasion.

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 persisted till the Sassanian rule and is mentioned by Birouni, the eminent scientist and traveler, and others in their recordings of pre-Islamic rituals and festivals.

Its origin dates back to the Babylonian New Year celebration. They believed that the first creation was order, which was born out of chaos. To appreciate and celebrate the first creation, they held a festival and all roles were reversed. Disorder and chaos ruled for a day and eventually order was restored at the end of the festival.

The Iranian Jews, who are amongst the oldest inhabitants of the country, in addition to Shab-e Chelleh, also celebrate the festival of Illanout (tree festival) at around the same time.

The celebration of Illanout is very similar to Shab-e Chelleh's. Candles are lit and a variety of dried and fresh winter fruits are eaten. Special meals are prepared and prayers are performed. There are also festivals in parts of southern Russia, which are identical to Shab-e Chelleh with local variations. Sweet bread is baked in the shape of humans and animals. Bonfires are lit, around which people danced and made movements resembling crop harvesting.

Comparisons and detailed studies of all these celebrations will shed more light on the forgotten aspects of this wonderful and ancient festival, where merriment was the main theme of the festival.

One of the

other traditions of Yalda night, which has been added in recent centuries, is the recitation of the classic poetry of Hafez, the Iranian poet of 14th century AD. Each member of the family makes a wish and randomly opens the book and asks the eldest member of the family to read it aloud. What is expressed in that poem is believed to be the interpretation of the wish and whether and how it will come true. This is called Faal-e Hafez (Hafez Omen).

Coinciding with the beginning of the winter, Yalda is an occasion to celebrate the end of the crop season. It is today an event to thank the Lord for all blessings and to pray for prosperity in the next year.

iranreview.org

