

SHAB-E YALDA



«Shab-e Yalda», celebrated on 21 December, 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.

Yalda is a Syriac word meaning birth. Mithra-worshippers used the term «yalda» specifically with reference to the birth of Mithra. 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. In ancient times it symbolised the triumph of the Sun God over the powers of darkness.

The Cult of the Sun was first introduced to Iran thousands of years ago by migrant Aryans. Mithra, the Sun God remained a potent symbol of worship throughout the following centuries. Centuries later, during the Achaemenid era, Mithra became a principal deity,

The Eve of the Birth of Mithra, the Sun God

equal in rank to Ahura Mazda (the god of all goodness) and Anahita (goddess of water and fertility).

In Sasanian times, Zoroastrianism became Iran's official religion, but Mithra's importance remained undiminished. This is evident from the bas-reliefs at Naqsh-e Rostam and Tagh-e Bostan. At Naqsh-e Rostam, Anahita bestows the royal diadem upon Nasri, the Sasanian King. At the investiture of Ardashir I, Ahura Mazda bestows this diadem to the new King. At Tagh-e Bostan too, Ahura Mazda is again conferring the royal diadem upon Ardashir II. Mithra is always present as a witness to these ceremonies.

Over the centuries Mithraism spread to Greece and Ancient Rome via Asia Minor, gaining popularity within the ranks of the Roman army. In the 4th century AD as a result of errors made in calculating leap years and dates, the birthday of Mithra was transferred to 25 December. Until then Christ's birthday had been celebrated on 6 January by all branches of the Christian Church. But with the cult of Mithra still popular in Roman Europe, the Christian Church adopted many of the Mithraic rituals and proclaimed 25 December as the official birthday of Christ. Today the Armenian and Eastern Orthodox Churches continue to celebrate 6 January as Christ's birthday.

It was said that Mithra was born out of the light that came from within the Alborz mountains. Ancient Iranians would gather in caves along the mountain range throughout the night to witness this miracle together at dawn. They were known as «Yar-e Ghan» (Cave Mates). In Iran today, despite the advent of Islam and Muslim rituals, Shab-e Yalda is still celebrated widely. It is a time when friends and family gather together to eat, drink and read poetry (especially Hafiz) until well after midnight. Fruits and nuts are eaten and pomegranates and watermelons are particularly significant. The red colour in these fruits symbolises the crimson hues of dawn and glow of life, invoking the splendour of Mithra.

Because Shab-e Yalda is the longest and darkest night, it has come to symbolise many things in Persian poetry; separation from a loved 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)

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By: Parviz Varjavand

YALDA

Mithrakana, The Reason for the Season ! Mehragan in Far-

si, Mehrajan in Arabic, and Mithrakana in Latin, all mean festivals and celebrations in honor of Mithra, Mithras, or Mehr Izad. These festivals do not necessarily occur at the same time. In present day Arabic usage, Mehrajan means any great celebration. In 1976 there was a great Islamic gathering in London called « Mehrajan Al Allam Al Islamiya », or « The Mehragan of the Islamic World ! ». This can only remind us of the grandeur that Mehragan must have had in ancient times so that the conquering Arabs thought that any great festival must be some kind of Mehrajan. The original Mehragan of the Iranians in honor of Mehr Izad occurred on the autumn equinox and as a counter part of Nowrooz that occurs at the spring equinox. Pre-Islamic Iran observed two calendars, one civil and one religious. While the Zoroastrian reform calendar, or the Faali, managed to keep the time of Nowrooz fixed at the Vernal Equinox, it could not do the same for Mehragan, and it is celebrated by Zoroastrians a few days after its proper time. The Romans celebrated Mithrakana on December 25th in honor of the birth of Mithra. There are many efforts to divide the field of Mithraic studies into separate spheres of Roman Mithras and Persian Mithra. It has something to do with having to keep the word « Aryans » tainted and illegitimate in order to get even with the bad deeds of Italian Fascism and German Nazism. The Christian placement of the birthday of Jesus Christ on this day is also responsible for not allowing too much information to come out regarding this issue and the water has to be kept muddy. Curiosity can kill the cat and one must be very careful when stepping in this field of study for unfortunately the field is still a minefield and a war zone due to what it may trigger amongst the crazy ultra right white brotherhoods. The difference between celebrating Yalda or Dijoer at winter Solstice and Mithrakana at Dec. 25th. further complicates the issue. Dec. 21st. is the birth of Solis Invicti or The Unconquerable Sun (The Mithra of Mythology), while Dec. 25th. is the birthday of a prophet Mithra who claimed to be the Sun God reborn in flesh. Festival of Deygan is something other than all the above altogether. So I celebrate Mithrakana on December 25th. I hang a wreath of green cypress on my door tied together with a big red ribbon. I wear a red pointed cap like Santa and put up a decorated evergreen tree. I give gifts to my loved ones. I kiss them under a mistletoe. I do all this to feast the night in honor of Mithra who is being born of His Virgin Mother Anahita. All the above and many more of Christmas traditions are Mithraic and Iranian in origin. If someone asks you « Do you know what is the reason for the season ? » answer « The birth of Mithra ».

traditional of yalda night

In the evening of Shab-e Yalda bonfires are lit outside, while inside the home, family and friends gather in a night-long vigil around the korsî, a low, square table covered with a thick cloth overhanging on all sides. A brazier with hot coals is placed under the table.

In the past, fruit and vegetables were only available in season and the host, usually the oldest in the family, would have carefully saved grapes, honeydew melons, watermelons, pears, oranges, tangerines, apples, and cucumbers. These were then enjoyed by everyone gathered around the korsî, or a fireplace.

On this night, the oldest member of the family says prayers, thanking God for previous year's blessings, and prays for prosperity in the coming year. Then he cuts the melon, and the watermelon and gives everyone a share. The cutting symbolizes the removal of sickness and pain from the family.

Snacks are passed around throughout the night: pomegranates with angelica powder (gol-par) and Ajil-e shab-e yalda, a combination of nuts and dried fruits, particularly pumpkin and watermelon seeds and raisins. This mixture of nuts literally means night-grazing; eating nuts is said to lead to prosperity in days to come. More substantial fare for the night's feast include eggplant stew with plain saffron-flavored rice, rice with chicken, thick yogurt, and halva (saffron and carrot brownies).

The foods themselves symbolize the balance of the seasons: watermelons and yogurt are eaten as a remedy for the heat of the summer, since these fruits are considered cold, and halva is eaten to overcome the cold temperatures of winter, since it is considered hot, or garmi. On into the night of festivities the family keeps the fires burning and the lights glowing to help the sun in its battle against darkness. They recite poetry and play music, tell jokes and stories, until the sun, triumphantly reappears in the morning.

