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Jamshīdī Nō-Rūz : Facts v/s Myth

Daštūr Firoze M. Kotwal

Jamshīdī Nō-Rūz does not mark the beginning of the Zoroāstrian Religious Calendar as is generally understood by most Parsis. It commemorates the occurrence of an important historical event in Iran of ancient times. The Zoroāstrian calendar which comprises of 365 days is simple and convenient to follow. The calendar begins on *Fravardīn Māh*, *Hormazd Rōz*, which is known and celebrated as *Nō-Rūz*. According to the *Shāhnāma*, Shah Jamshīd ascended the throne of Iran on *Nō-Rūz* day and Firdausī describes this event in his epic the *Shāhnāma* as under:

*jehān anjuman šud bar-ē taxt-ē uy
azān bar šudeh farre baxt-e uy*

“His (i.e. Jamshīd’s) fortune shone bright as a result of which people from all over the world gathered around his throne.”

*ba Jamshīd bar gauhar afšāndand
marān rūz rā rūz-ē nav xvāndand*

“The people showered jewels upon Jamshīd and this day was given the special name of *Nō-Rūz* by them.”

*sar-ē sāl nav Hormuz-o fravardīn
bar āsude az ranj tan-o del ze kīn*

“It was the day *Hormazd* of the month *Fravardīn*, the beginning of New Year. Their bodies and souls (on this day) were relieved of hard work and feelings of revenge.”

*ba Navrūz-ē nav šāh-ē gētī farūz
bar ān taxt benišāšt firūz rūz*

“The glorious King whose light has filled the world came to the throne on the auspicious day.”

*buzōrgān ba šādī beyārāstand
may-o rūd-o rāmešgarān xvāstand*

“To express their joy, the elders of the land called for an assembly where wine, music and minstrels had their presence.”

*čunīn jašn-ē farroḥ azān rūzgār
bemāndeh azān xusravān yādgār*

“The memory of that day and that of the great King is kept alive through such happy celebrations.”

In the above lines, Firdausī does not talk about the revolution of the sun nor does he write that the New Year begins when the sun is in Aries.

Fravardīn Māh, *Hormazd Rōz*, is the auspicious day of the New Year and Firdausī states that like King Yazdegird Shahryār (r. 632-651 CE), the last Zoroastrian King of the Sasanian dynasty, Shāh Jamshīd also came to the throne on that day. Nor does Firdausī state that Shāh Jamshīd established this day as the New Year’s Day and called it *Jamshīdī Nō-Rūz* because it heralded the season of spring or because the sun was in Aries at that time.

During the reign of Yazdegird Shahryār (632-651 CE), *Fravardīn Māh* fell in the month of June and although during Firdausī’s times the calendar year continued to be of 365 days, in 1000 CE due to intercalary lapses in the calendar, *Nō-Rūz* slipped to March. Therefore, acknowledging *Nō-Rūz* as auspicious, Firdausī describes the coronation of King Jamshīd as having taken place on that happy day.

Sultānī Nō-Rūz in the guise of Jamshīdī Nō-Rūz

Just as the *Fasli Sāl* is a pseudonym, *Jamshīdī Nō-Rūz* is also not the correct nomenclature for the New Year. History clearly states, that following the advice of his sagacious vizier Omar Khayyām, the Saljukī King, Shāh Sultān Jalāluddīn Malēkshāh who ruled Iran (r.1072 -1092 CE), decreed in 1079 CE that the civil year of Iran should begin on 21st March in order to facilitate the collection of land revenue.

This first day of the civilian New Year in Iran came to be recognized as *Nō-Rūz-e Jalālī* or *Nō-Rūz-e Saljukī* (from the Saljukī dynasty) and in common usage it was also called *Nō-Rūz-e Sultānī*, from the title of the King. In Iran, the Muslims as well as the non-Muslims celebrate this day as a social and civil festival and it is simply known as *Nō-Rūz*, not *Jamshīdī No-Rūz*.

However a point to be noted is that the Iranian Zoroastrians of those days did not accept the *Jalālī Nō-Rūz* as the religious New Year.

From the Zoroastrian religious point of view the *Jalālī* year was considered by traditional Zoroastrians as *jadīd* or ‘modern’ and *nā-durušt* ‘incorrect, imperfect’, and it was the old traditional *Fārsī* almanac which was termed by them as *qadīmī*, meaning ‘ancient’. Sultan Jalāluddīn commenced the civil year from 21st of March just like the official year which is used at present by the Iranian Government. However the original Islamic religious year which follows the Lunar calendar, commenced from the month of Muharram as is the practice even today.

The Beginning of *Jamshīdī Nō-Rūz* in Surat

The celebration of *Nō-Rūz* on 21st March in Iran has turned into an important social festival and therefore it is celebrated throughout Iran with great joy and gusto. However, in India, it was the well-to-do Sethia of Surat, Seth Nusserwanji Cawasji Kōhyājī (d. 1797 CE) who introduced the celebration of *Jamshīdī Nō-Rūz* by wrongly equating it with the *Nō-Rūz* festival established by the Muslim King Jalāluddīn Malēkshāh Saljukī in Iran. Nusserwanji was a broker with the Dutch East India Company in Surat and was well-versed with Persian as well as the Arabic language, as he travelled to Iran frequently for purposes of trade. His faith in Zoroastrianism was unshakeable. He had also donated moneys to renovate the Yazd Atash Bahram on one of his visits to Iran.

He was a resourceful man and no task was too challenging. He gave help to the Zoroastrians of Kerman when they wanted to build an Ātash Bahrām. One of the sixteen fires used for the consecration of an Ātash Bahrām is the fire of a burning corpse. In order to establish an Ātash Bahrām in Kerman in 1795 CE, he arranged for the fire of a burning corpse to be sent all the way from Surat to Yazd, which was then the religious headquarters of the Zoroastrians of Iran.

Seth Nusserwanji knew that the *Sultānī Nō-Rūz* was celebrated in Iran every year on 21st March, and it was he who introduced *Nō-Rūz* as *Jamshīdī Nō-Rūz* to the people of Surat by organizing lavish celebrations at his bungalow. This caused a great controversy among the people of Surat at the time.

Jamshīdī Nō-Rūz began to be celebrated in Surat towards the end of the 18th century, whereas in Bombay this practice was started in the 19th century. Seth Merwanji Panday (d.1876 CE), a well-known Parsi industrialist, had the *jashan* of *Jamshīdī Nō-Rūz* performed in his house every year. The reason for this was that his wife Gulestan, was the daughter of Kaikhusru Yazdiyar an Iranian from Yazd, who fled to Bombay with his daughters to escape intense religious persecution. Merwanji Panday celebrated *Jamshīdī Nō-Rūz* for his Iranian wife’s sake. Their daughter Sakarbai Panday married the First Sir Dinshaw Petit.

The celebration of *Jamshīdī Nō-Rūz* in Bombay received further support from Seth Khurshedji Ruštomji Cama (d. 1909 CE), who was the chief official of the Freemason Lodge. He first introduced this festival in his lodge and held festivities for the occasion on a grand scale. Thereafter, this festival began to be observed in other lodges and clubs in Bombay as well.

K.R.Cama began a movement to formulate a new Zoroastrian calendar on the lines of the Christian calendar. In this calendar, 21st March marked the beginning of the religious New Year and this day was called *Jamshīdī Nō-Rūz*. However, this movement did not succeed.

Anomalies and Lacunae of the Christian Calendar

The supporters of the established reform movement within the Zoroastrian community are attracted to the Christian calendar which has several anomalies and is full of imperfections. For example, a week in the Christian calendar has 7 days and according to its calculation 52 weeks make one year. If we multiply 52 by 7 the total would be 364 days, whereas the Christian calendar is deemed to have 365 days. The number of days in each month differs from month to month. Some have 30 days, some 31 days, and February has 28 days and in a leap year it has 29 days. The order of the months in the calendar year, does not tally with the meanings of the names given to each month with those found in the original old Latin calendar. For example, September originally means seven, but in the Christian calendar it is the ninth month. Again, October means eight in Latin, but in the Christian calendar it is the tenth month. Moreover, the months of November and December originally mean nine and ten respectively in the Latin calendar, but they are numbered eleventh and twelfth in the Christian calendar. Hence, there are glaring discrepancies in the Christian calendar.

It is interesting to note the history of the current Christian calendar that has its origin in the ancient Roman calendar. For the ancient Romans, a year consisted of a period of 10 new moons. According to tradition, the Roman King Numa Pompilius (715-673 BCE) is credited with the formulation of the Roman religious calendar, by adjusting the solar and lunar years. He corrected the ancient Roman calendar by counting alternately one month of 29 days and the next one of 30 days in a year, thus making a year of 354 days (6 months of 29 days = 174 days and 6 months of 30 days = 180 days, making a total of 354 days in a year). In order to bring the year closer to the solar one, Numa further decreed that an intercalary month Mercedinus should be considered at an interval of every two years. He introduced the months of January and February and thereby improved it by making a year consisting of twelve lunar months of 354 days. After a long period of time, this calculation was found to be flawed and in 47 BCE Roman General and Statesman Julius Caesar (100-44 BCE) instituted a year consisting of 365 days with an additional day added every fourth year.

The calendar founded by the Roman General is termed as the Julian calendar after his name and was used in all Christian countries till it was reformed by Pope Gregory XIII (1572-1585 CE) in 1582 CE. In order to come closer to the tropical year, the Pope rectified the error of the Julian year amounting to 12 superfluous days by causing 10 days to be dropped in 1582 CE, thus 15th October in that year being reckoned immediately after the 4th. It was also ordained that every centesimal i.e. 100th year (which by

the former calendar was bissextile, i.e. a leap year of 366 days with February having 29 days) should be a common year, except those divisible by 4 after suppressing the two zeros. Thus 1600 was a leap year, but 1700, 1800, and 1900 were common years, whereas 2000 was a leap year, and so forth. The change was adopted immediately in all Catholic countries. In England, a Protestant country, the change took place, by legislative enactment, in September 1752 CE when 11 nominal days were struck out. The Gregorian and the tropical years so nearly coincide in length that the difference in 3000 years amounts to less than one day. The Julian calendar is still adhered to by Russia and Greece. Thus it is clear that the Christian calendar has passed through considerable changes and is full of lacunae.

The Spiritual and Divine Nature of the Zoroastrian Calendar

On the other hand the Yazdegerdi calendar immortalizes the memory of the last patriotic king Yazdegerd Shahryar of the Sasanian Dynasty of Iran. The ancient Zoroastrian calendar is based on and has its roots in the Avestan text of Chapter 16 of the Yasna high liturgy. The Zoroastrian calendar is very simple and consistent. A Zoroastrian month has 30 days with each day dedicated to a divine being. The month has four weeks and each week begins with the Creator Hormazd and his three co-workers namely Depādār, Depameher and Depadīn. The first two weeks consist of seven days and the last two weeks consist of eight days, making in all 30 days. A Zoroastrian calendar has 365 days, each month having 30 days plus 5 additional Gāthā days called the epact or intercalated days, since the Gāthās do not belong to any month and are termed 'moveable, intercalary' (wihēzagīg) in Pahlavi texts. The Zoroastrian calendar is a simple easy to follow calendar and each day of the month is dedicated to a Yazata (adorable being worthy of worship) except Fravardin which is dedicated to the Fravashis. Compared to the calendars followed by other communities it is a far simpler calendar to adhere to. The Parsis are well advised to follow the divinely ordained Zoroastrian calendar on all religious occasions such as Birthdays, Navjotes, Weddings, Salgirehs of Holy Fires, Death Anniversaries, etc..

It is also worth noting at this juncture that different groups of people commence their civil day at different times; the Zoroastrians start their day at dawn, the Babylonians at sunrise, the Umbrians (the residents of Umbria in Central Italy) at midday, the Greeks at sunset and the Romans as well as the inhabitants of most nations in modern times, at midnight.

Since *Nō-Rūz* was linked by its supporters with the name of the illustrious King Jamshīd of the *Pēshdādiān* dynasty, over the years the Parsis began to give this festival a lot of importance. However many of the famous architectural and sculptural wonders of ancient Iran have been wrongly associated with the names of Jamshīd, Ruštam and Solomon, e.g. *Takht-e-Jamshīd* for the Achaemenian palaces at Persepolis, *Naqsh-e-Ruštam* for the rock tombs of the Achaemenian period and some bas-relief of Sasanian times, and *Masjid-e mādar-e Suleimān* for the stone edifice at *Naqsh-e-Ruštam*. In the same manner, the civilian New Year of ancient Iran has been wrongly associated by the Parsis with the name of King Jamshīd.

Jamshīdī *Nō-Rūz* as a festival or a religious rite is not mentioned in our sacred texts. The ancient manuscripts relating to the high liturgical rituals of the Zoroastrian religion list a number of import-

ant historical days when *jashans* are to be celebrated. Nowhere in these lists is there a mention of the *jashan* of *Jamshīdī Nō-Rūz*. This is in itself proof that at least from a Zoroastrian religious point of view, there is no recognition in the ritual format of the religion for the celebration of *Jamshīdī Nō-Rūz* as it is non-existent in our religion.

Thus *Jamshīdī Nō-Rūz* as celebrated by the Parsis is not a religious *Nō-Rūz* at all, since it is not associated or connected with any *rōz* in the ancient Zoroastrian calendar which we follow and is in fact a day instituted by the Seljuki King to facilitate the collection of taxes.

Jamshīdī Nō-Rūz is a relatively new historical phenomenon which was instituted in later times and is viewed as the day which commemorates King Jamshīd's accession to the throne. Again, as is well-known, the sun does not enter Aries every year on 21st March itself. How then can one begin a New Year on that day when the very event which it is meant to celebrate has no relation to it?

There is no harm if Zoroastrians wish to celebrate this day with prayer and festivities as a mark of remembrance of King Jamshīd but only after understanding the true history of this day. It is the sincere prayer of all Zoroastrians that like the Golden Age of King Jamshīd there will be everlasting joy, the delights of springtime and there will be no sickness and premature death and that the whole of mankind will be full of peace, harmony, joy and youthful vitality. Thus may it come about as I bless (*aḍa jamiiāt̄ yaḍa āfrīnāmi*).

