

The Lasting Norouz

By: Mohammad Baq'ai

Certainly, each country's life is intertwined with the customs and traditions of its people, and each nation tries to protect and revive its national traditions and customs and to build its future upon the basis of its cultural heritage. Norouz is, no doubt one of the valuable heritages of human history and shows the constructive, brilliant mentality of its upholders.

Norouz has been honoured in our land for thousands of years and can be regarded as a strong pillar of our national identity. The secret behind the durability of Norouz can be sought in the traditions of the learned, the very traditions which purify the hearts and make the faces smiling. Pleasant meetings with dear ones, friends and the others during Norouz serve to add to compassion and respect towards the dear ones and also to remove the ill-feelings. Norouz refreshes the sense of being alive, brings beauty to houses and gardens, decreases harshness and enmities and strengthens friendships.

Norouz calls the people towards joviality and creativity and advises them against laziness and depressed moods. Norouz is, as a matter of fact totally joy and enthusiasm and this has added to Iranians' valuing Norouz. It should be noted that since old past times till now, in Iran, happy living has been closely connected with Divine worship. To Iranians happiness has invariably meant enjoying a pure heart and an enlightened spirit and not forgetfulness and harmful actions. Rather, in Iranian traditions including Norouz, merry-making has been directed towards dignified conduct, exhibiting lofty thoughts. As an example, we can cite the Norouz-related costumes of spreading 'The Haft Seen'

table-cloth and tying grasses as signs of the hearts' relation with the heavens and as bringing spiritual joy. Certainly, these facts have not been known by some Westerners who have expressed futile views in this regard. Interestingly, the various customs of Norouz are almost fulfilled in the same way throughout Iran, without having been propagated by any particular customs-teachers.

Needless to say, the Persian language has played a vital role in the unity of Iranian ethnic groups and their harmonious way of holding Norouz traditions add to their sense of devotion to their homeland, and to their country's territorial integrity. And the fact is that in many cases, the effect of shared traditions and beliefs are greater than a common language in unifying a nation, as the saying goes, "Being of the same belief is better than having the same language." And in Iran, both Muslims and non-Muslims including Christians, the Jewish and Zoroastrians hold Norouz in reverence and do their best to celebrate it. Thus, on the eve of Norouz, every Iranian, of whatever religious belief or ethnicity she/he may be, wishes a happy Norouz , and a happy year for all Iranians.

In the course of time, of course, Norouz attracted the attention of certain other nations, including Indians and some peoples in Egypt, Mongolia, South Africa and Zanzibar. It has been recorded in historical texts that some Turkish rulers, including the Ghaznavid and the Saljuk rulers honoured Norouz, though they were not Iranian themselves, and the Mongols too got interested in Norouz traditions in Iran and so spread it to India and where the Baberi ruled. In fact, some Indian rulers continued the celebration of Norouz up to 1800 AD, most splendidly. Norouz has also been honored by Ottoman rulers. Those of Iranian origin who reside in Iraq, specially the Kurds also hold the Norouz celebrations for 13 days enthusiastically just like those who live in Iran.

One of the impressions left by Norouz traditions on other countries can be found in a tradition prevalent among the Egyptian Coptics which tradition somehow resembles the ‘Sizdahbedar’ or the ‘Nature’s Day’ held in Iran on the 13th day of the first month of spring each year. They regard Norouz as the beginning of their new year and go out for recreation and sight-seeing on the 13th day. This day is called ‘Shamul-Nasim’ by them. Certain interesting poems have also been composed about Norouz by Arab poets.

Norouz, conveys the unforgettable message of hope, namely that of hope’s being a birth for humans. No doubt such a message wins hearts and encourages societies towards perfection. That is why this tradition has been welcomed by various world nations, those of Pakistan, China included.

In Turkey, the Ottoman rulers used to celebrate Norouz in their palaces, in the course of which the prime-minister would give gifts such as horses and fine clothes to the Sultan. The Turkish people would also make special meals for Norouz , which custom is still prevalent among them. The Turkish poets have also composed interesting poems on Norouz in various periods. Dr. Muzhgan Jonbur, the ex-director of the Turkish national library has authored a paper on Norouz in which she has introduced some of those poems known as ‘Norouziyyah’. In those poems, Norouz has been honored as a reviver and giver of freshness to life and regarded as sacred days. Also, some have honoured Norouz as the anniversary of Imam Ali (AS)’s birth, and his marriage with Hazrat Fatimah (SA). Since, a few years ago, the Turkish government has been paying particular attention to Norouz honoring it through holding conferences, meetings and publishing books and booklets on Norouz customs. In 1991 AD, Norouz was recognized as an official feast and holiday in Turkey.

And it has been about 1,000 years, since Norouz began to be celebrated in the Indian sub-continent, in particular by the Muslims there. In Pakistan, Norouz is often referred to as ‘Alam-Afrouz’ meaning ‘lighting the world’, which shows their interest in Norouz. Many families in Pakistan like Iranians clean their houses and wear new clothes, for Norouz and also visit relatives and friends. They also send each other beautiful greeting cards and try to make Norouz an occasion for the removal of grief and settling disputes. Some Persian-speaking poets, have composed poems on the beauty of the nature in the springs. Also, it has been narrated that Mas’ud S’ad (born in Lahore) has composed many couplets to glorify Norouz. Among the rulers in the sub-continent, Jalaledin Mohammad Akbarshah has been the most outstanding in celebrating Norouz. Also, presently in Pakistan some calendars are published each year in which special significance is attached to Norouz traditions. These illustrated calendars include an inscription containing the name ‘Ali’ (repeated 20 times) and the verse of the Holy Qur’an, “... Allah is the Best Guard and He is the Most Merciful.” In Arabic, together with certain numbers and sacred words. It is generally believed that writing that inscription with rose-water and Saffron on a clean page and carrying that with oneself during the year brings happiness and blessings.

During Norouz celebrations, the people of Pakistan set special tables, beautified with sweets and fruits and children receive gifts from the adults.

In Tajikistan, in particular in Badakhshan too, Norouz is held and celebrated splendidly. Tajikistan has in fact been part of the Iranian territory before and so the Tajik people regard Norouz as their ancestral national ‘Id (festival or feast) and call it a great ‘Id. The people of Tajikistan start making preparations for Norouz several days before that.

They clean their houses carefully, and for the first day of Norouz, they prepare a special breakfast which includes various kinds of sweet foods, hoping for a sweet year ahead. After breakfast, they hang a red cloth over the doors of their houses, believing it to be a sign of success and happiness. Then they open the windows to let the fresh spring air in. All members of Tajik families wear new clothing on Norouz. Also, children are taught to say 'Happy Spring' to their parents politely. In Badakhshan Norouz is celebrated for three days during which the people visit each other, exchange gifts and wish each other happiness.

In Afghanistan, Norouz traditions are held the way they are held in Iran and it can be said that some of the customs related to Norouz are observed by Afghan people with great eagerness. In Iran, the Afghan brothers and sisters (who have migrated to Iran) show much interest in Norouz and celebrate Norouz very eagerly.

In the Azerbaijan republic, Norouz is celebrated each year starting from March 20 and ending on March 22nd. The families there prepare themselves for Norouz since a few weeks ahead. This tradition is vividly reflected in some poems which are recited by them on the occasion of Norouz. Every family and person is cheerful on Norouz and express good feelings and best wishes for the others. These traditions are really thought-provoking, since they convey many meaningful messages, including the message of kind-heartedness, benevolence and pure thoughts the fruits of which are good words, kindness, and being well-wishers towards all. In fact, the Norouz customs and traditions lead the peoples towards honesty, righteousness and purity of intention. The poems composed by Azerbaijan (and other) poets about Norouz show such desirable attitudes. In Azerbaijan Norouz celebrations also include such sports as horse-riding, archery, playing with ropes over rivers and

the like, all of which add to the attraction of Norouz for the people of Azerbaijan.

And for the people of Kyrgyzstan, Norouz is a sacred 'Id. They celebrate it with much splendor. In their country, Norouz is celebrated on just March 21st. During the 70 year rule of Communists, (the former USSR) the Norouz traditions was apparently wiped out there. But in fact, the love for Norouz has never died in the people's hearts and in 1991, upon that county's gaining independence, Norouz started to be celebrated and honored in Kyrgyzstan openly and happily. On Norouz families gather in the greatest square of the city. Those squares are decorated beautifully, in particular in Bishkek (the capital city), Osh, Jalal-Abad, and Talas. Also there are some bazaars temporarily formed for selling various kinds of food, clothing, toys and other commodities to the people. On Norouz, high-ranking governmental officials talk to the people about the values of Norouz and congratulate them. In this country, Norouz celebrations also include the shows of horse-riding and fencing. It should be noted that in the past, under the rule of the Communist, people were prohibited from celebrating Norouz and so they had to limit their Norouz ceremonies to gathering-together in homes. Yet being of a lasting nature, Norouz never died in those people's memories and continued to live to gain significance and increased attention after the end of the Communists' domination over the Kyrgyz and the others. Norouz has been left for them as a great tradition by their forefathers. On Norouz, the night and the day become equal and light overcomes darkness.

In Turkmenistan, Norouz is celebrated every year on March 21st. Following the independence of Turkmenistan, Norouz has gained great importance and has since been celebrated by the people, especially since the 'Norouz-Nameh' of Khayyam was translated into their language,

giving the Turkmen knowledge about Norouz. Also the writing and publication of numerous articles on Norouz by Turkmen researchers, led the Turkmen to learn more and more wisdom behind the ancient Norouz tradition. In the wake of the independence of Turkmenistan, Norouz was recognized as a national festival in the country and is now honoured by both the youth and the elderly there. The Turkmen have a saying which goes: “Norouz gives the good-tidings of the new year.”

The Turkmen too have special ceremonies and customs for Norouz, including preparing special foods which bear the name of Norouz, such as ‘Norouz Koja’, ‘Norouz Yarmah’ and Samanou. Wrestling, horse-riding, playing chess, and so on are also part of the Norouz ceremonies there. Visitings which take place for Norouz also form an inseparable part of that tradition and show that Norouz has become mingled with the culture of the Turkmen people and is now a national tradition for them. Makhtumqoli Faraghi (Magtymguly Pyragy) and Shaidaii are among Turkmen poets who have presented beautiful poems on Norouz.

The people of Kazakhstan, too, regard Norouz as their national ‘Id. On March 22nd each year, they come out of their houses early in the morning, gather in the cities’ squares and express their joy and happiness. The Kazakh believe that Norouz is the beginning of each New Year and have certain sayings about that such as: “Norouz is the day we have been awaiting for a whole year.” , “Norouz - the day of the coming of blessings upon the earth.” In Kazakhstan too, the people make their homes clean for Norouz and believe that cleaning attracts Divine favor and blessings. They also try to fill their bowls and other vessels with water, milk and corns on the night before Norouz to receive more during the year. To these people, Norouz has always been a sacred ‘id and if on Norouz it rains or snows, they take it as a good omen. Also, they customarily wear colorful new clothes for Norouz and prepare a

special meal for Norouz and place a pot of water over which they recite Norouz prayers and the heads of the families are wished happiness and success, for him and his family members. Also according to a Norouz-related custom, young men plant trees and clean the rivers and streams for Norouz. The Kazakh people hold the elders in great respect, yet customarily on Norouz daughters-in-law and sons –in-law become somewhat jocular towards their fathers-in-law and mothers-in-law. This behavior is not common among them on the other days of the year. The people of Kazakhstan also believe in the significance of caring for the orphans and the disabled and exhibit this belief on Norouz quite markedly. Reciting poems in gatherings also form part of Norouz traditions for them.

As for Norouz in Uzbekistan, it is an official holiday there. The people decorate their houses and streets and wear new clothes for Norouz. The Communist regime of the (former) Soviet Union regarded Norouz to be a religious festival and so banned it. As a result, the people had to go to particular distant places to be able to celebrate Norouz. That is why numerous places there have been given names relating to Norouz, such as ‘Norouz Bolaqi’ (Norouz fountain) , ‘Norouz Sa’i’ (Norouz stream) , ‘Norouz Tappah’ (Norouz hill) and so on. Though under the Communists’ rule the people of Uzbekistan had to follow their Gregorian Calendar, yet they continued to greet each other on every Norouz and to celebrate that secretly, and inside their houses. After Uzbekistan became independent, valuable works on Norouz began to be published and researches made on Norouz which connects many Muslims together, including Payame Norouz (the Message of Norouz) and Neshate- Norouz (the joy of Norouz). Cooking is also part of Norouz customs in this country, as it is in Iran, Tajikistan, and Afghanistan.

To conclude, history is witness to the fact that Norouz will not only not lose its glory and attraction, as time passes but also become stronger, more attractive and better celebrated, since this ancient tradition carries the message of hope and affection, benevolence and dynamism. Hoping for the time when all world peoples welcome and celebrate Norouz.