

# Holi and Noruz in India and Iran

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While considering writing about either India or Iran, one has to consider reviewing the concerned topic with the history and culture of the other one. India and Iran are two nations derived from the same stock, with striking affinity and resemblances. In other words, while dealing with the history, culture or religion of Aryans of Iran, we must compare them with their brethren in India.

With such perspective the present article is a quest to analyze one of the national festivals from each nation and find connection and similar traits present among them. Holi in India and Noruz in Iran are one of the most ancient rituals and festivals of each country and the more ancient they are, more are the chances for them to be connected with the mother stock of Aryan traditions.

## India and Iran; a bird's-eye view

The names 'India and Iran', whenever mentioned together, carry an innate feeling of brotherhood which cannot always be explained by facts and figures; it's just *there*. To make it a stronger argument, one can find any common Iranian on the streets of Tehran and ask him what he feels about India? His first expression is definitely going to be a smile on his face and then he can go on and on for hours unless you don't stop him of course; telling you how he 'wants to visit a few places before he dies and India is on top of that list'. The famous quote of Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru in his book *The Discovery of India* further concurs with this belief that when it comes to the feeling of closeness which these two nations share, 'Among the many people and races who have come in contact with and influenced India's life and culture, the oldest and most persistent have been the Iranians'<sup>1</sup>.

Looking at these nations through the lens of history, we find striking resemblances among the architecture of palaces of Ancient Indian and Iranian Kings *Darius*

and *Asoka*, pointed out and proved by the historians and archeologists. We have seen theories being put forward and being proved, of these two nations having trade relations dating back to pre-historic times.

Linguistically speaking, the languages of northern, western, central and eastern regions of India belong to the same Indo-Aryan family of languages which the Iranian languages have evolved from. The word 'Iran' has originated from the Avestan word '*Airyānam Vaejō*' meaning 'expanse of the Aryans'.

Vedic Indian people calling themselves 'Arya' or the 'Noble' ones and their home as "*Aryāvata*" or 'abode of the noble' and the ancient Iranian king *Darius* referring to his lineage being '*Ariya*' in his *Bistoon* Inscription situated in the contemporary Kermanshah city of Kordestan province of Iran, is not a coincidence and in fact points towards the common lineage and roots of Indian and Iranians.

Among other facts proving the common background as well as profound and deep relations among the two nations, are the striking resemblances between *Rig Veda* (literally meaning Knowledge) and the ancient language of the Persian Zoroastrian sacred text *Avesta* and the fact that their names have been mentioned in each other's sacred text. According to *Vendidad* (chapter 1) *Ariya* lived in sixteen countries, one of them being '*Hapta Hindu*' which is the Avestan form of the Sanskrit '*Sapta Sindhu*' (*Rig Veda*) meaning 'seven rivers' and referring to the North-Western region of Indian Subcontinent.

Other than the above-mentioned facts, many different evidences have been brought into light by eminent scholars and historians throughout the passage of history and history writing, highlighting similarities present among the languages and cultures of the two nations. Al-Biruni being the first noted *Indologist* who came from Persia and spent most part of his life understanding the indigenous culture and finding similarities between India and Iran. On the whole, each scholar of his concerned field of interest has tried his best to prove yet another common

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factor between the two cultures. Scholars have worked upon common words between India and Iran<sup>2</sup>; words such as *Zameen*, *Rang*, *Safed*, *Shayad*, *Hamesha*, *Kharab*, *Khaali* to name a few; role of women in Indian and Iranian epics<sup>3</sup> and many other topics which come under the umbrella of comparative literature.

It may be fascinating for people interested in commonalities between Indian and Iranian cultures, to know that Indian and Iranian Proverbs or 'lokokti' as we call it in India, have extensive and deep-rooted similarities; to the extent that Persian proverbs are famous even among common Indian people who interestingly quote these 'words of wisdom' in their original form and at their right place, without even knowing or have learned Persian language per se<sup>4</sup>.

### Ritual Studies

The term 'ritual studies', has gained wide acceptance in the last fifty years; with a considerable number of scholars around the world, trying to analyze the cultures of various nations through the windows of rituals. These ritual theorists have explored and analyzed the ritual actions and values of various cultures, to analyze the society as well as nature of social phenomenon. Some even consider ritual as a fundamental element of cultural dynamics. Thus, by pointing out similar ritualistic aspects of these two festivals from India & Iran, scholars, theorists and anthropologists in the field of ritual studies, as well as comparative religions, will have more data to critically analyze them from various social, cultural and anthropological aspects.

### About rituals and festivals

W. Brennand in his book *Hindu Astronomy* states that "The early religion, indeed, of the Hindus, like other religions, had a close intimacy with times and seasons; and there was a connection with their rites and ceremonies"<sup>5</sup>. The statement can be seen as true to the fact that some of the popular and general Hindu rituals may seem to have been originally based on changes of the seasons or other natural phenomenon; as one may argue that *Diwali* and *Holi* represent the death and resurrection of seasons and *Basant Panchami* marks the approach of summers. On the whole it can arguably be said that most of the rituals and festivals today are possibly ancient ceremonies which signify in a way, the veneration of changes in seasons witnessed by our ancestors and were considered a sign of higher powers trying to connect to the ancient man; which he replied to by establishing simple rituals and ceremonies, which over the passage of time, obviously underwent numerous additions and subtractions, and

finally reached the current generation in their present form. If we consider the above-mentioned set of rituals based on natural phenomenon; arguably there can be another set of rituals based on Mythological or Historical backgrounds such as birthdays of different heroes or Gods, for example *Ram Navami*, *Janamashtami* and *Jayantis* etc.

Having established certain basic and important facts, our aim is to analyze and compare two such natural phenomenon rituals present between India and Iran namely *Holi* and *Noruz*, which have interestingly enough, witnessed certain mythological and historical additions to them through the ages, touted as the reasons behind their commemoration.

### Holi and Noruz Festivals

Looking at these nations through the lenses of tradition and rituals, one of the prominent and interesting common traditions in Iran and India is the celebration of *Noruz* (Literally meaning-new day) and *Holi*. The first day of ancient Iranian month of *Farvardin* (coinciding with 21 March) is the Iranian New Year day. According to ancient Iranian legends the '*Faravart*', or '*Prakriti*' as we call it, was created on this day; which in fact was also the day of the birth of *Kyumars* (Avestan—*Gayyumaretan*—meaning the living one who is destined to die)—the first human being—who was given the gift of life to help Ahuramazda protect righteousness in man from the evil spirit and be the first man of the Aryan race<sup>6</sup>. *Noruz* is also known as the *Jamshidi Noruz*; its celebrations started with '*Jamshid*' the legendary benevolent king of Iran who, according to legends, discovered fire, the cleansing and purifying element of nature; the day he sat on the throne of Iran was *UrmazdRuz* (the first day) of the *Farvardin* month of Iranian calendar; and it was his order to call this day *Noruz*<sup>7</sup> which was to be followed by celebrations lasting ten days.

### Basant and Bahār

The words *Basant* and *Bahār* are two Indian and Iranian words with common roots in the so-called theoretical language called the 'Indo Iranian language.' *Basant* means the *spring* season which starts from mid-March and lasts until the month of May. Moreover, it also has other meanings attached to it in Indian subcontinent; it is also the name of a *Rāga* or a musical mode or a type of Indian music which is recited particularly in the spring season and lastly it is also a type of garland made of yellow flowers<sup>8</sup>.

The word *Bahār* also carries different meanings in Iran; it is the first season of the year i.e., the spring season;

sometimes blossoms of flowers are called by this name; it is also a mixture of few flowers which are yellow in color and are found in mountainous region of central and southern Europe and west and Central Asia; it is also one of the types of soft archaic music<sup>9</sup>. Based on the above-mentioned facts, it can be said with a considerable amount of certainty that both the words *Basant* and *Bahār* are from a common linguistic root.

### **Holi and Noruz**

Generally, *Noruz* more or less coincides with *Holi*, one of the sacred festivals of Hindu tradition. *Holi* is the festival of joy where singing and dancing are at the center of its celebrations. This festival is celebrated throughout India, where men and women throw colors and colored water on each other and share joy among them. The performance model of ritual studies believes that the participants of such performance-based rituals, play an active role in them and thus reinterpret the symbols connected to it, as they communicate with them. The rituals of *Holi* and *Noruz* festivals provide the experience of empowerment and euphoria to the masses; by not being limited to only a particular social class of society. As we find later in the article, even this festival goes back to ancient times, like the Iranian *Noruz*. It is basically the celebration of spring season or *Basant* as it is called in India; when farmers harvest and reap the results of their crops and show their happiness by celebrating the occasion.

### **Holi and its roots in India**

The word *Holi* is derived from the Sanskrit word *Sol* meaning 'Bitter or Sour'; *Solika* on the other hand means 'coldness'. *Holi* is the saturnalia related to spring equinox and the wheat harvest of the western part of India; it can also be viewed as a collection of festivities such as the astronomical equinox, agricultural harvests and ancestral worship of heroes etc.<sup>10</sup>. Tradition ascribes it to the death of a giantess at the hands of Krishna and her request for a festival in her name, when she was on her death bed<sup>11</sup>. So, one account of the origin of this festival, describes it as having been founded in the honor of a female demon called *Dundhas* (meaning she who would destroy many)<sup>12</sup>. One may argue that the celebration time of the abovementioned festival asked for by the giantess, also coincides with what the ancient people may call the 'death of (the) winter season', which the giantess can be a symbolic form of. On the full moon day of the *Phalgun*<sup>13</sup> month, a hole is dug in front of every house and a castor oil tree is transplanted into it. Grass, cow dung cakes and other fuel are heaped around the tree and *Holi* or *Holika* is then worshipped while sounds and chants follow<sup>14</sup>. It

is one of the many legends related to the festival of *Holi*. Though there are different versions of the rituals to be followed, in the *Puranas* also<sup>15</sup>.

Another legend describes this festival as being related to the well-known legend of Hiranya-Kasipu or the 'golden dressed' and his son Prahlād. The legend goes that Hiranya Kasipu was a 'Daitya' who obtained the sovereignty of the three worlds for a million years from Siva and persecuted his pious son Prahlād because he was a devout worshipper of Vishnu. The daitya is slain by the angry god in his *Nar-simha* or Man-lion incarnation<sup>16</sup>. Harnākas, as he is called in the modern times, was an ascetic who claimed that the devotion of all human beings of the world should be paid to him alone. His son *Prahlād* on the other hand became a devotee of Vishnu and even performed miracles<sup>17</sup>. His father was enraged by this act of apostasy of his own son and started torturing Prahlād with the help of his sister *Holi* or *Holika*. After many failed attempts *Holika* tried to take Prahlād with herself into fire, since she was protected from any harm by the fire due to a boon granted by the Gods, which prohibited Fire from doing any harm to her. However, as she took Prahlād with her into the fire she was consumed by it and Prahlād remained unharmed. The fire is now supposedly burnt before *Holi* festival in commemoration of this event only. This story may once again show the importance of fire in ancient times in both India and Iran; where it was believed to burn the evil and do no harm to the righteous and pious; an example of which can be stated from the famous fire test of *Sita* in Indian *Ramayana* and *Siyavash's* fire test in Iranian *Shahnameh* of Ferdowsi.

Another legend connects the festival of *Holi* with the tale of Putanā the witch who attempted to kill *Krishna* in infancy by giving him her poisonous nipple to suck<sup>18</sup>. Lastly one more version of the legends which is famous in Haridwar, and according to scholars is probably closer to the real origin of the rituals of *Holi*, goes like this: *Holi* or *Holika* was the sister of *Sambat* or *Samvat* (the Hindu year). When *Sambat* died, his sister *Holi*, out of her extreme love for her brother, insisted on being burnt on his pyre and it was because of her absolute devotion that *Sambat* was given his life back. Hence according to this legend, the *Holi* fire is burnt every year to commemorate this legendary event.

Interestingly enough, approximately around the same time as *Noruz* and *Holi*, people of Punjab in India also organize a ritual bearing close resemblances to *Chahar Shambe-Suri* and *Holika Dahan*; and they call it 'Lohri.'

### **Noruz and its rituals**

*Noruz* is practically the day when the duration of night and day become same as each other. The festival may in

fact be reminiscent of old cultural and ethnological ties between Indian and Iranian branches of Aryan tribe, as even the Indian *Shaka* year coincides with the Iranian Solar Year. In Iran this day is celebrated in commemoration of the birth of creation and to foster goodwill, love peace and happiness among fellow human beings. The significance of such a day is further enhanced in the context of today, when wars and conflicts exist between various nations of the world.

Like *Holi*, the Iranian *Noruz* also has a handful of rituals which are followed even today in Iran; such as *ChahārShambe Suri*, *Sofre-ye-Haft Sin* and *Seezdah Bedar* to name a few. According to Al-Biruni the festivities of *Noruz* start five days before the New Year and last five days after<sup>19</sup>; and according to the legends, it is in this period of ten days that *Faravahar* or 'the holy aura or spirits' descend upon earth and remain here for this period.

The interesting part about one of the rituals of *Noruz*, which has come a long way from ancient times is 'throwing water on each other' and bathing on the New Year day; and the reason cited for this act is as follows: there were no deaths at all during Ancient Iranian King Jamshid's reign. Following this, the world was filled with animals and thus God increased the area covered by land three times and it was at that time Ahuramazda ordered people to bathe with water to wash away their sins<sup>20</sup>. Another theory is that because this day belongs to the Angel of Water '*Haruza*' or *Haurvatāt* (*Hordād*), people wash themselves at dawn<sup>21</sup>; because it is whose day it is and whose creation is water<sup>22</sup>.

The same practice of 'throwing water on each other' was preserved and Islamicized when Iranians converted to Islam and the water was replaced by a more Islamic option i.e. rose water. Likewise, on the Indian front, basically the most important part of *Holi* celebrations is throwing color and water on each other.

Among other rituals of *Noruz* are: wearing new clothes on the occasion; arranging a table of *Haft-Sin*; sowing seven types of seeds in a container, keeping a watch over which one grows best, indicating which crop will be favored and shall be sown this year; ritual of *Seezdah-Bedar* and the list goes on encompassing various activities and rituals which were added throughout the centuries this festivals has travelled through, to reach this generation.

### *Sofre-ye-Haft-Sin*

Another important ritual of *Noruz* is to arrange a table of *Haft-Sin*; where a table cloth is spread in one corner of the house and seven things starting with letter 'S' or "س" are arranged on it; like *Serkeh* (Vinegar), *Sib* (Apple), *Sabze* (Green herbs), *Somagh* (Sumac), *Samanoo* (Green wheat sweet dish), *Sekkeh* (Coins), and *Seer* (Garlic). Ancient

legends usually lie behind such traditions and in this case, it was the early belief of the Zoroastrian religion following Iranians, who considered *AhuraMazda* to be the symbol of purity and *Ahriman* as the symbol of impurity; they also used to believe that there are a number of *Amshaspandan* (Angels) surrounding Ahuramazda at all times and each one of them symbolized a specific ideal characteristic such as *Light*, *Truthfulness*, *Beneficence*, *Pleasure*, *Wealth*, *Honesty* and *Respect*. Interestingly, they were 'seven' in number and their names start with 'S'. Hence, seven things were kept on the table as the symbol of each one of those Angels. This ritual is followed in Iran even today; although it has lost its Zoroastrian face among the modern Iranians and now has become more of an 'Iranian' tradition than being just a Zoroastrian one.

### *ChaharShambe Suri*

Starting from the very first Ritual of *Noruz* one cannot overlook the importance of *Chaharshambe-Suri* as the pioneer of *Noruz* celebrations; technically it was the 360<sup>th</sup> day of the year when this ritual was organized as there was no concept of weeks in ancient times. It was believed that *Faravahar's* (the holy aura or the spirits) of the good and the righteous descend on earth on this day and the fire is lit to guide them<sup>23</sup>. *Suri* literally means 'red' (*Sorx*) and this is where the name came from; from the red flames of bonfires lit on that night, which at one point of time may have been *Chaharshambe* (Wednesday) and hence it also got attached to the original name. At places the word *Suri* is also used to mean 'Festival or Celebration' organized to please the spirits of people who have passed away<sup>24</sup>.

So, on the Wednesday preceding *Noruz* when bonfires are lit in every house and society, or locality in modern times, and people Jump over these fires chanting a specific Persian phrase which goes like this: *Sorxi-e-To Az Man Zardi-e-Man Az To*

Meaning: May your redness (positive energy of the fire) be mine (to have) and May my Yellowness (negative aspects of my life) be yours (to burn). This specific ritual of jumping over the fire is important and interesting from the perspective of this article as similarly in our Indian tradition and culture, bonfires are lit everywhere during the rituals of *HolikaDahan* as earlier mentioned and people (or priests to be specific) jump over these fires<sup>25</sup>.

Hence the jumping over fire flames or passing through fire as ancient people may call it, symbolizes the purification of that individual as he asks the fire to take away the negative and evil factors of his soul and burn them, while giving its qualities to them in return and as he jumps through or over the fire, he emerges purified with new hopes and aspirations for the coming year. It

is certain that *Chaharshambe-Suri* and *HolikaDahan* are ancient Aryan traditions which are practiced till today and giving such importance to Fire and light proves the point more effectively. The ancient Aryan Iranians believed that fire is sacred and used to believe that it purifies the air or cold and winter. The other reason that can be stated on this occasion is the fact that according to legends, it was *Jamshid* who discovered fire; it was he who first ordered Noruz be celebrated every year on *UrmazdRuz* (first day) of *Farvardin* month and it may well be that this ritual is in remembrance of *Jamshid* the founder of Noruz and the discoverer of Fire. As a matter of fact he boldly states in his stone inscriptions that:

*I am an Ariya, the son of an Ariya.*

### Fire in India and Iran

The importance of fire or light for the ancient Aryan man can be clearly seen in the Sanskrit shlokas of the Upanishads which are considered to be from the family of *Shruti* or 'that which has been heard'<sup>26</sup> and may even date back to prehistoric times. Shlokas which we as students used to recite every morning for twelve years of schooling in India and the generations that followed are tracing the same steps everyday as we did in our times and which our Aryan ancestors took for the first time. The very first mantra of Rig Veda is in the praise of Fire and its divinity in the eradication of darkness; darkness which has signified evil since time immemorial.

The famous Shloka '*Asto ma sad gamaya; tamaso ma jyotir gamaya; Mrityo ma amritam gamaya*' meaning 'Lead us from Unreality (of transitory existence) to the Reality (of self); Lead us from the "Darkness" to the Light (of spiritual knowledge); Lead us from the fear of death to the knowledge of Immortality'<sup>27</sup> actually reveals the fact that it is human beings' innate nature to detest the darkness and forever be in search of light. The same thing can even be related to the famous Aryan migration from their original home in the arctic region and to places such as Iran and eventually India. The importance of fire can be seen in the stone inscriptions of Achaemenid kings who ruled over Iran 500 years BCE and who mention 'keeping them safe from lies and darkness' vividly in their prayers to *Ahuramazda*; and this fact illustrates how important *Jamshid* is in the ancient Iranian world; as the discoverer of 'Fire' which destroys darkness. Moreover, the sanctity of Fire is celebrated in both India and Iran for thousands of years, and can be interpreted to symbolize greatness and divinity of truth and righteousness.

From the perspective of ritual studies, the markers or elements of purification rituals, namely fire and water, are central to the theme of Holi and Noruz, pointing towards

the common Aryan tradition of rituals connected to these festivals.

### Conclusion

An Iranian Cultural councilor speaking in Allahabad, as quoted in the book *The Discovery of India* said, 'the Iranians and Indians are like two brothers who according to Persian legends had got separated from each other, one going to the east and other to the west. Their families had forgotten all about each other and the only thing that remained in common between them were the snatches of few old tunes which they still played on their flutes. It was through these tunes that after a lapse of centuries, the two families recognized each other and reunited'<sup>28</sup>.

It is hoped that constantly finding more common tunes among the families of India and Iran will hopefully bring these two families together and closer to each other and eventually will set an example for the rest of the families of this global village to follow. From the perspective of ritual studies and comparative culture and religion; this article aimed to shed more light on the common elements and markers of these two festivals; i.e., the seasonal occurrence, the presence of purifying elements such as fire and water being central to these festivals as well as their close connection on various levels of cultural and ritual studies.

### Notes

1. *The Discovery of India*, p. 149
2. For further reading, Subhash Kumar, *Common words among Hindi and Persian*, M.A Thesis, Bu Ali Sina University-Hamedan-Iran, 2007
3. For further Reading, Mahenoor Saiyed, *Role of Women in Indian and Iranian Epics*, M.A Thesis, Bu Ali Sina University-Hamedan-Iran, 2007
4. For further reading, *Zin Qand-e-Parsi*, Dr. Aziz Mahdi, Negah Publication, Iran, 2010
5. *Hindu Astronomy*, p. 25
6. Ja'far Yahaghi, *A dictionary of legends and legendary tales in Persian Literature*, p. 713
7. *A dictionary of legends and legendary tales in Persian Literature*, p. 292
8. Dictionary of Hindustani and English, p. 257
9. Farhang-e-Soxan, Under: Bahār
10. *Hindu Holidays & ceremonials*, p. 91
11. *Ibid*, p. 87
12. *Popular religion and folklore of northern India*, p. 313
13. Please provide an introduction to this month.
14. *Ibid*, p. 87
15. *Ibid*, p. 88
16. *Ibid*, p. 313
17. *Ibid*
18. *Ibid*, p. 314

19. *A dictionary of legends and legendary tales in Persian Literature*, p. 834
  20. *Ibid*, p. 835
  21. *Ibid*, p. 835
  22. *Encyclopedia Iranica*, "Nowruz"
  23. *A dictionary of legends and legendary tales in Persian Literature*, p. 306
  24. *Ibid*, p. 306
  25. *Popular religion and folklore of North India*, p. 317
  26. *A history of ancient and early medieval India*, p. 17
  27. *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad*, I. iii. 28
  28. *The discovery of India*, p. 154
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