



ČERĀĠĀNĪ

ČERĀĠĀNĪ (also *čerāġān*, *čerāġbānī*, *čerāġbārān*), the decoration of buildings and open spaces with lights during festivals and on occasions like weddings, coronations, royal birthdays, circumcision ceremonies, and so on. It may have originated in the tradition of lighting large fires to celebrate Nowrūz (new year) and Sada (festival of fire), attested in Persia as early as the 4th/10th century. Ebn al-Aṭīr (VIII, pp. 298-99) described the festival of fire in Isfahan in the year 323/935, and Naršaḳī (p. 37) reported a similar custom in [Bukhara](#) in the time of the Samanid ‘Abd-al-Malek I (343-50/954-61; cf. Bayhaqī, ed. Fayyāz, pp. 571-72, referring to celebrations at the court of the Ghaznavid sultan Mas‘ūd I, 421-32/1030-41). At some of these festivals birds and wild animals were set ablaze and released to fly or run about as living torches. [Bīrūnī](#) believed the lighting of fires for certain festivals and the incineration of wild animals were old Sasanian customs (*Ātār*, pp. 203, 207, 211, 213), but there is no known evidence that Zoroastrians sacrificed animals.

In 352/963 the Buyid amir Mo‘ezz-al-Dawla (334-56/945-67) ordered a great illumination in Baghdad for the Shi‘ite feast of Ġadīr (commemorating the Prophet Moḥammad’s designation of ‘Alī as his successor at the pool of Ġadīr Ḳomm in Arabia); the *bāzārs* were kept open at night, as was customary on holidays (Ebn al-Aṭīr, VIII, pp. 549-50; cf. Faḳīhī, pp. 469-71). While wintering in Baghdad in 484/1091 the Saljuq sultan Malekšāh (465-85/1072-92) ordered that candles and torches be placed in boats on the Tigris on the night of Sada (Nowayrī, I, p. 190; cf. pp. 186, 189).

The earliest use of the word *čerāġānī* seems to be from the Safavid period, by



which time the practice of illumination had become formalized; lights burned continuously for several days whenever the shah arrived in a city, returned to the capital, or simply ordered them for the entertainment of his household or guests (Eskandar Beg, I, pp. 499-500, II, pp. 837-38; Mollā Jalāl-al-Dīn, pp. 329-30). It was the custom for noblemen entertaining the shah to provide fireworks and to fill their houses and gardens with lights representing “a thousand different subjects” (Chardin, p. 11; cf. p. 77). Shah ‘Abbās I (996-1038/1588-1629), who was especially fond of *ĉerāġānīs* often ordered the merchants in the *bāzār* and along the *maydān* (open square) in Isfahan to organize grand displays (sometimes with more than 1,000 lamps and lanterns burning in each shop) to last for weeks, often at their own expense; he did so even in Moḥarram, the month of mourning. On one occasion he punished his vizier for an unsatisfactory *ĉerāġānī* by having one of his teeth pulled. On certain days the shah and his retinue, sometimes accompanied by foreign envoys, would ride out to see the *ĉerāġānī*. When the ladies of the court visited, the shops were tended only by the wives and daughters of the merchants. If there were no females in a merchant’s family, then a particularly handsome eunuch from the court would be chosen to replace him in the shop. Certain evenings belonged to the handsome youths (*sādahā*), and no adult male was allowed to take part (Eskandar Beg, I, pp. 499-500; Mollā Jalāl-al-Dīn, pp. 329-32, 364; Naṣrābādī, p. 431; Falsafī, II, pp. 285-91). In the *ĉerāġānī-e bām* (illumination of the roof) the rooftops of the entire city were lit with countless lamps and lanterns (Mollā Jalāl-al-Dīn, p. 330).

The most detailed descriptions of *ĉerāġānīs* are from the Zand (1163-1209/1750-94) and Qajar (1133-1342/1721-1924) periods. In Shiraz on 30 Jomādā 1201/20 April 1787 the English traveler William Francklin witnessed such an illumination as part of the circumcision ceremonies for the son of the Zand ruler Ja‘far Khan (1199-1203/1785-89): For seven days all the *bāzārs* in the city were splendidly illuminated by colored lamps. The walls of the *bāzārs* were covered with tapestries, mirrors (see *ā‘īna-kārī*), and paintings of the ancient kings of Persia and India, and the individual shops were adorned with silver paper and rich hangings. There were music, dancing girls, acrobats, and a great display of fireworks. The decoration of the *bāzārs* was paid for by the merchants themselves, who also offered gifts to the prince (Francklin, pp. 123-26).

In the Qajar period *ĉerāġānīs* continued to be associated with fireworks and sometimes took place in royal encampments (cf. E‘temād-al-Saltāna, *Rūz-nāma-*



ye k̄āṭerāt, pp. 47, 394, 837). Johan Polak reported that they were common on such occasions as the conquest of a city, appointment of the crown prince, and royal marriage, but he was not impressed by the quality of Persian illuminations (Polak, I, p. 79; tr., p. 65); state and religious occasions were also celebrated with *čērāgānīs* (Kaḥḥālzāda, pp. 293-94; Maḥdawī, p. 84; Mostawfī, *Šarḥ-e zendagānī* I, p. 533). Carla Serena reported the custom in connection with Nowrūz and described the *čērāgānī* for the marriage between ʿEṣmat-al-Dawla, daughter of Nāṣer-al-Dīn Shah (1264-1313/1848-96), and Dūst-Moḥammad Khan Moʿayyer-al-Mamālek (q.v.): The entire area between the royal palace and the bridegroom's house was flooded with light; soldiers with burning candles in the barrels of their rifles lined the streets through which the bridal carriage traveled, and the *bāzār* was decorated with thousands of lamps and candles provided by the father of the bridegroom (Serena, pp. 246-47; tr., pp. 275-76, 267; Mounsey, pp. 284-90). During the Nowrūz celebration and on the birthday (15 Šaʿbān) of Moḥammad al-Mahdī, the twelfth imam, the entire *bāzār* area was lavishly decorated with lights, mirrors, and flowers (Mostawfī, *Šarḥ-e zendagānī* I, p. 354); small shops throughout the city were also adorned with lights and other ornaments. For Nowrūz grocers customarily hung trays of *senjed* (jujubes) adorned with candles from their roofs.

In late dictionaries *čērāgān* is also listed as a synonym for *šamʿājīn*, a kind of torture (e. g., Deḥḳodā, s.v.; see also *čērāg*).

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