



## SPECIAL FEATURE

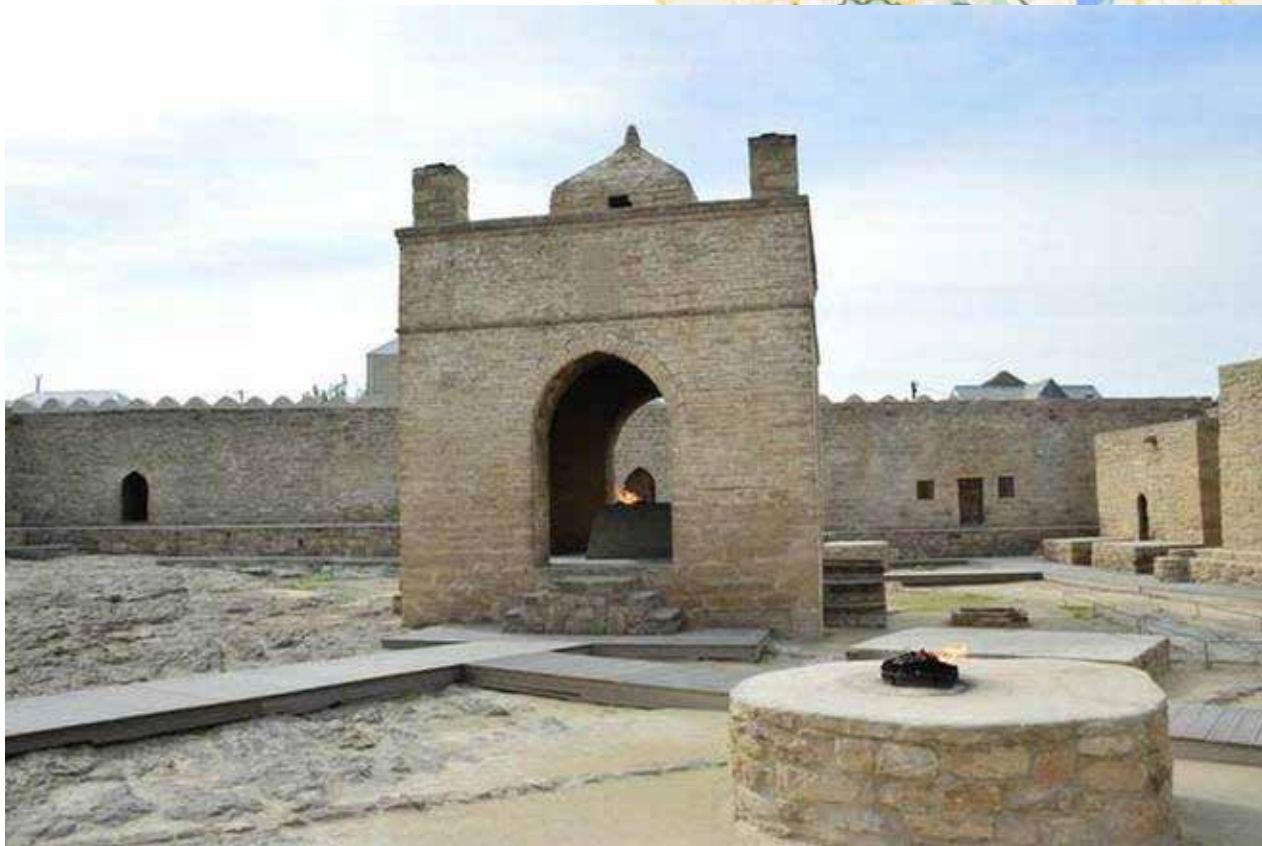
# 3,500-YEAR-OLD FIRE TEMPLE IN AZERBAIJAN

Compiled by : KIDAMBI RAJ

### Azerbaijan

Azerbaijan was part of the Silk Route that connected Asia and Europe, and it is believed that merchants from the Indian subcontinent came to hear of the legend of the “burning earth” and “eternal flames” that the *Absheron* peninsula in Azerbaijan was renowned for (Azerbaijan, in fact, is often referred to as “*The Land of Fire*”). And so, Indian travellers and pilgrims arrived in the late 16<sup>th</sup> and early 17<sup>th</sup> century, building *Ateshgah* in its current form, and worshipping the scared flames alongside their own Gods such as *Ganesha* and *Shiva*. *Ateshgah*, it turns out, is a fascinating little relict of history, of globalisation and the inter-cultural exchange between the Indian sub-continent and Europe, dating back to the 16<sup>th</sup> century.

### Hindu History of Azerbaijan Ateshgah of Baku Fire Temple



Fire Temple, Baku, Azerbaijan – “*Fire Temple Baku*” is a castle-like religious temple in *Surakhani town* in Suraxani raion), a suburb in Baku, Azerbaijan. The pentagonal complex, which has a courtyard surrounded by cells for monks and a *tetrapillar-altar* in the middle, was built during the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries. It was abandoned in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, probably due to the dwindling of the Indian population in the area. The *Baku Ateshgah* was a pilgrimage and philosophical centre of *Zoroastrians* from Northwestern Indian Subcontinent, who were involved in trade with the Caspian area via the famous “*Grand Trunk Road*”. The four holy elements of their belief were: *ateshi* (fire), *badi* (air), *abi* (water) and *heki* (earth). The temple ceased to be a place of worship after 1883 with the installation of petroleum plants (industry) in *Sutakhany*. The complex was turned into a museum in 1975.

Based on Persian and Indian inscriptions, the temple was used as a Hindu, SDikh and Zoroastrian place of worship. The Persian toponym *Atashgah* (with Russian/Azerbaijani pronunciation: *Atashgyakh/Ateshgah*) literally means “*home of fire*”. The Persian-origin term *atesh* means fire, and

is a loanword in Azerbaijani. *Gah* derives from Middle Persian and means “*throne*” or “*bed*”. The name refers to the fact that the site is situated atop a now-exhausted natural gas field, which once caused natural fires to spontaneously burn there as the gas emerged from several natural surface vents. Today, the fires in the complex are fed by gas piped in from Baku, and are only turned on for the benefit of visitors.

An inscription from the Baku Atashgah, the first line begins: I salute Lord Ganesha, venerating Hindu God Ganesha and the second venerates the Holy Fire, *Jwala Ji* and dates the inscription to *Samvat* 1802 or 1745-46 CE. *Surakhani*, the name of the town where Ateshgah is located, likely means “*a region of holes*” (*Suraakh* is Persian for hole), but might perhaps be reference to the fire glow as well (*sorkh/surkh* is persian for *red*). A historic alternative name for Azerbaijan as a whole has been *Odler Yurdu*, *Azeri* for land of fires. “*Surakhany*” in *Tati* (language of *Surakhany*, close to Persian) means “*hole with the fountain*”. *Shri Ganeshaya Namaha* is not an incantation one would expect to see etched in the heart of Azerbaijan, the tiny Muslim majority, former Soviet nation on

the banks of the Caspian Sea. But it is that, that catches the eye of the visitors on a stone archway as one enters Ateshgah, a Fire Temple near *Surakhani*, Azerbaijan. An inscribed invocation to Lord Shiva in Sanskrit can be seen at the Ateshgah. *Estakhri* (10<sup>th</sup> century) mentioned that not far from Baku (i.e., on the *Absheron Peninsula*) lived fire worshippers. This was confirmed by **Movses Daskhurantsi**, in his reference of the province of *Bhagavan* (“*Fields of the Gods*” i.e., “*Fire Gods*”).

In the 18<sup>th</sup> century, Atashgah was visited by Zoroastrians. The Persian handwriting *Naskh* inscription over the entrance aperture of one of the cells, which speaks about the visit of Zoroastrians from *Isfahan*: The translation of Persian inscription is: *Fires stand in line Esfahani Bovani came to Badak* (Baku) “*Blessed the lavish New Year*”, he said: The house was built in the month of *Ear* in year 1158.

The 1158 year corresponds to 1745 AD. *Bovan* (modern *Bovanat*) is the village near *Esfahan*. The word *Badak* is a diminutive of *Bad-Kubeh*. (The name of Baku in the sources of the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries was *Bad-e Kube*). At the end of the reference is the constellation of *Sombole/Virgo* (August-September). In the name of the month the master mistakenly shifted the “*I*” and “*h*” at the end of the word. According to Zoroastrian calendar *Qadimi* New Year in 1745 AD was in August.

### Open Flames

A tourist writes that on the day of their visit to the temple, the wind was very strong, whipping up dust all around them. He added that they were after all, less than 20 km from the capital city of Baku, unofficially



SPECIAL FEATURE



called the City of **Wind** in Azeri. But he said that the sacred flame in the raised main altar at the centre of the temple compound burnt regardless.



That central flame, and the open flames that burn in the two circular platforms on the side are today lit by Baku's main pipeline of gas. But for hundreds, may be thousands of years, they were a naturally occurring phenome-

the current one during renovations done at the temple in 1969. There are indications that the old temple might have extended beyond the existing perimeter, but any remains were most likely destroyed when the surrounding land was excavated for oil and gas from the late 19<sup>th</sup> century onwards. That was also what caused the end of the glorious natural phenomenon of the eternal flame. The aggressive century long mining of the natural gas reserves meant the flames went out by 1969. That possibly the reason why worship ended at the temple in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century as well. Historians speculate that the pilgrims were driven away by the setting up of petroleum plants in the Surakhani region.

**A Pilgrimage Site**



non, the result of the country's massive natural gas reserves that leaked through holes in the rocky surface, igniting into flames as it came into contact with air.

**Zoroastrian Origins**

These **eternal flames** have been venerated by fire worshippers throughout Azerbaijan's history. There are mentions as far back as 7<sup>th</sup> century by travellers to the region. Indeed, historians believe that the fire temple



itself in an earlier form, built by Zoroastrians long before the Indian travellers came. Part of an older structure was found beneath

Thankfully, the 500-year-old temple still stands, and retains traces of its multicultural past. The central altar isn't purely Hindu in its structure, with similarities to traditional Zoroastrian fire altars, and one of its inscriptions in the temple compound is in Persian as well. The Zoroastrian influence in Azerbaijan is old but rooted, a remnant of the days when pre-Islamic Persian dynasties ruled the region. Even today, **Nuvruz**, the Zoroastrian New Year celebration, is a major festival in their calendar. Fittingly enough, according to historical accounts, Ateshgah in the 19<sup>th</sup> century became a pilgrimage site for Parsis from Bombay, who came to visit the Indian temple that was once a Zoroastrian place of worship. Following its restoration in 1969, the temple was converted into a museum in 1975, and was officially listed as a **UNESCO World Heritage Site** in 1998.

Today, each of the tiny cells that line the pentagonal perimeter of the compound tells stories of the pilgrims and ascetics who lived there, showing them doing **tapasya**, draping themselves in heavy iron chains or indulging in extreme acts of self-denial and fasting.

Chants of **Om Gam Ganapataye Namaha** floats out of one and yet another, displays shards of pottery used in rituals long ago. Rooted in Zoroastrianism, the oldest of all monotheist religions, Novruz Bayram has



been celebrated since ancient times. The spring New Year has been welcomed by holidays in Azerbaijan, Iran, Afghanistan, Uzbekistan and other Eastern countries. Novruz, which means **New Day** in Persian is marked in the northern hemisphere on the day of the equinox (21-22 March), which is beginning of spring.

Zoroastrianism was founded by the Prophet Zoroaster in ancient Iran approximately 3500 years ago and revolves around the worship of fire. With a history that stretches back millennia, Baku is home to the **Baku Atesgah** or **Fire Temple**. The temple is an ancient Hindu castle like religious edifice in a suburb of greater Baku, which was initially recognized as a Zoroastrian fire worship place. Interesting information about Zoroastrianism in Baku is given by D. Shapiro in **A Karaite** from **Wolhynia** meets a Zoroastrian from Baku. **Avra-**



**ham Firkowicz**, a Karaite collector of ancient manuscripts, wrote about his meeting in Darband in 1840 with a fire-worshipper from Baku. Firkowicz asked him, **"Why do you worship fire?"**. The fire-worshipper replied that he worshipped not fire, but the Creator symbolized by fire – a **"matter"** or abstraction (and hence not a person) called **Q'rt'** (from **Avestan** kirdar or Sanskrit **"krt"** and signifies **"one who does"** or **"creator"**). Scholar, A.V. Williams Jackson, drew a distinction between the two groups. While stating that **"the typical features which Hanway mentions are distinctly Indian, not Zoroastrian"** based on the worshippers' **attires** and **tilakas**, their strictly vegetarian diets and open veneration for cows, he left open the possibility that few **"actual Gabrs (i.e., Zoroastrians or Parsis)"** may also have been present at the shrine alongside larger Hindu and Sikh groups.