

Journey to the Land of Ancient Fires, Azerbaijan

by kersi shroff and galina woodova

It was on September 24, **1925**, that Sir Jivanji J Modi, the great Parsi Priest, Scholar and World Traveller, arrived in Baku, Azerbaijan, and upon seeing the Caspian Sea, which he referred to as Vourukash, wrote in his diary:

“In all my lifelong prayers of Afringan, I have made Hamazor many a time with this sea, reciting ... To celebrate this momentous occasion, I did my Kusti and daily morning ... prayers and recited Avan Ardvisur Nyayesh and paid homage to this sea with many thanks to Ahura Mazda ...”*
*“Hamajor zareh varkash”, meaning “Hamazor with Vourukash Sea!”¹

It may interest readers of *Hamazor* to learn of the happy coincidence that on September 24, **2018**, ninety-three years to the day from the start of Dr Modi’s journey, a group of five Zoroastrians, along with two scholars, found themselves in Baku, Azerbaijan. Not that we had timed our visit on the anniversary, but in our own way, we too were in “search of clues about Zoroastrian civilization”, as Dr Modi wrote of his visit.

Familiar Names in Azerbaijan

The name of Azerbaijan and the prayer recited by Dr Modi begin to give clues to the Zoroastrian antecedents of the country that sits astride East & West – a modern and proudly independent nation, but in which “the religion, culture and traditions of Zoroastrianism remain highly respected.”² Under several theories, the name Azerbaijan is either derived from Adar or Atash, or its former name Athroathena, is based on the Avestan *athravan*, meaning one tending a fire. The continued burning of ancient ever-burning fires, fed by natural gases, could possibly have made the country “the flaming center” of Zoroastrianism, while another writer considered it “the papal area of Zoroastrianism” (Yampolskiy).³ The place of

an atashgah close to Baku, called **Surakhana**, is also redolent of Dr Modi’s prayer recited to Avan Ardvisur. Among other related names, there are at least three villages named *Zarat*, and two *Girdiman* Rivers, one of which we were to come across.

As to fires fed by natural gases, Dr Modi also mentions the prayer *Apaam Naptaarem Yazamaide*, meaning the veneration of *Naptaar Aatash*, in which *Naptaar* is the root of the word Naphtha, the gas which keeps the fires ever burning.

Our Journey

This is an account of our three-week journey through the length and breadth of Azerbaijan, involving travel by trains, domestic airlines, a comfortable 12-seater van, and four-wheel drive Russian *Nivas* and *Ladas* for navigating rough mountainous terrains. The account focuses on the Zarthosti aspects of the journey.

Our group invited a guide, Dr Galina Woodova, PhD, a Czech, who has lived in Azerbaijan for eight years and researched the culture of the Lahij people. Gali-Ji, as we began to endearingly call her, amazed us with her melodious rendering of Avestan prayers. She also firmly established the ritual of a benediction given by Ervad Kobad Zarolia, of Toronto, each time we broke bread. This Avestan picture was enhanced many a night when our other scholar-companion, Benedikt Thomas Peschl, a German PhD student in Zoroastrian studies at SOAS, London, gave us lessons and handouts on the ancient script and grammar. Benedikt was also the ‘official’ photographer. The other Zoroastrians in our group were Soonu Engineer from London, an adventurer and a melodious singer of Gujarati monajats and songs, who had fortuitously recruited Benedikt for the tour; Dr Mahvash Agvald, from Maryland, USA,

who achieved a doctorate from Sorbonne University, Paris, on the political and social history of Iran, including Azerbaijan, which was Iranian territory until the Russo-Persian wars, 1804-1828; Ardeshir Dehmobed ("Golden Eddy") of Toronto, a staunch Zarthosti who took many an opportunity to inform Azeris of his Iranian roots; and, Kersi Shroff, a retired attorney, devoted to discovering ancient Zoroastrian traces and committed to interfaith dialog, who brought the group together and organized the tour. The number in our group thus reached the revered *haft* (seven).

The atashgah in Surakhana, 15 kms from Baku, has ancient origins as affirmed by Farrouk Jorat, an enterprising Zoroastrian who greeted us in Baku (more about him later), along with a young, radiant, and generous Zoroastrian lady, Irade:

*"Earliest mention of the Zoroastrian worship of fire in Suraxane belongs to the Sasanid era. Armenian chroniclers in the description of Bhagavan (Baku) in the Paytakaran province on the Caspian coast mentioned "Seven sacred fire holes" and establishment of fire temples by Shah Ardashir I (227-241). In 1683 a German traveler Kaempfer has visited Baku. He noted that there are seven fire holes in Suraxane, revered by descendants of the ancient Persians who migrated to India."*⁴

This contradicts Dr Modi's conclusion that "it is without a doubt clear that this building is not a Parsee Aatash Kadeh."⁵ We can only confirm that Surakhana has a modern overlay from the 17th - 18th centuries when Hindu merchants from the Punjab connected with the then abandoned structure and added several features, including an inscription in Sanskrit. Among the merchants are said to have been several hundred Zoroastrians from Multan. The Atashgah has retained the Iranian architectural style of *chahar tagi* four arches. In 1975, it was restored and opened to the public. A fire is kept burning during the daytime and the Atashgah is both a place of worship and a museum, making it a popular site for tourists. The President of

Azerbaijan, Ilham Aliev, started the European Olympic games hosted in Baku by a torch lit from the Surakhana Atashgah.



Surkhana Atashgah, Er Kobad reciting the Atash Niyash

For an auspicious start to our journey, Ervad Kobad solemnly recited the Atash Niyash before the flaming fire. The Surakhana museum houses items, such as, an ancient fire holder and implements, and a Sudreh and Kusti. The Zoroastrian exposition was organized by Farrouk Jorat. During our visit, young Azeris in colourful costumes and musicians playing the national instrument *tar* were being televised for a cultural programme.

Maiden's Tower

Another structure of greater significance to Zoroastrians is in the heart of the old city (Icheri Sheher) of Baku, called the Maiden's Tower. It is possible that despite its name it was an Aatash Kadeh, considered by Dr Modi to be one of the ancient temples of fire. In describing the seven-story tower, we can do no better than to recall Dr Modi's impressions:

"This is an ancient Iranian building and it is an Aatash Kadeh. It is not a common Aatash Kadeh with its fire maintained by burning wood by its priests. But it is an

Aatash Kadeh fed by the natural gases, Naphtha, (apaam Napaat). Haft or seven is a very holy number in Zoroastrian religion and hence there are seven story's or stages in it. At each storey, in one corner, there is an escape hole for the natural gas Naphtha which when lit created a fire ball."

We observed that each of the seven floors has a niche where burned the "eternal" fires. The tower is built in such a way that at Novruz, the light enters directly through its narrow openings on each floor.

Other scholars, too, have claimed that the Tower was "once a temple with an eternal fire burning on its rooftop" and that the fire was "fed with gas or liquid petroleum supplied via pipes."⁶ It is further noted that a tower-shaped temple with eternal fire on its rooftop was also found in Iran.

As if to confirm these findings, in 1964 two archaeologists, O Ismizade and Jiddi, excavated an almost preserved fire altar in front of the Tower, which unfortunately was soon destroyed. The altar had a three-tiered octagonal base and a column at the top of which was a shallow bowl in which were found traces of oil and fire. The altar was of the type found on Sasanian coins.

At a lecture given to local scholars at the Archaeological Society, and in a meeting



Baku, Maiden's Tower, our group

with the President of Azerbaijan, Dr Modi emphasized the importance of the Tower's Aatash Kadeh and implored them to take good care for its preservation. We were happy to see

that the restored building is indeed well preserved.

It is no surprise that UNESCO has declared the inner city to be of Outstanding Universal Value, one selection criterion of which is: "The Walled City of Baku represents an outstanding and rare example of an historic urban ensemble and architecture with influence from Zoroastrian, Sasanian, Arabic, Persian, Shirvani, Ottoman, and Russian cultures."⁷

Historical sources also note that in the environs of Baku, people venerated flames that burned by themselves. The poet Nizami Gyanjevi tells in his verses of a place where a fire is burning amid rocks and people called it *khud-suz*. Sources also explain that in areas where natural fuel was available, it was used to feed the eternal fire, while in its absence, firewood was used. Additionally, a special combustible liquid of sandal oil was also used, stored in small jars identified by archaeologists.⁸

Westwards and more

After Baku, we branched off towards the Caucasus mountain range of Niyal Dag, for the culturally historical region of Lahij, whose ancient customs have been explored by Galina Woodova's immersive fieldwork.⁹ Lahij is an ethnic minority region, incorporating *Gennet Bag*, a garden of paradise, and has breathtaking rock formations through which flows the previously mentioned Girdiman River. The Lahij people have preserved an ancient Iranian southwest Tat language branching out of Pahlavi,¹⁰ and a traditional way of life, including rituals and a daily use of blessings.¹¹ Though they are Shia Muslim there is a strong Zoroastrian undercurrent in their traditions. Their chief identity marker is the celebration of Novruz.¹² The Lahij name for the swallow, 'Parstek', an auspicious bird that brings spring, reveals their ethnic roots.

Our host, a



Branches of juniper being delivered



Map showing Nakhchivan & Girdiman River

high school teacher in Lahij, who holds a title of the best teacher of Azerbaijan, opened his comfortable house and welcomed us with a bonfire of flaming branches of juniper which were delivered on horseback. The smells and sparks of the fire were enhanced by two musicians dressed in festive green traditional clothing, playing and singing in the *mugam* folk style in Azeri, Farsi and Lahiji languages. The host family also prepared a candle lit Novruz *khoncha* tray, with special baked delicacies shaped as heavenly lights symbolic of the cosmic change of seasons. We found the host, Dadash Muellim, interesting to talk to in English as he was curious about practicing Zoroastrians that he met for the first time. He is researching the folklore of ethnic minorities in Azerbaijan for a PhD thesis.

On the way to the town of Sheki, we stopped at a Caucasus Albanian ancient *Udi* church and discovered an *afringanan*-like dish hidden at the back. The Caucasus Albanians (no relation to the country by that name) adopted Apostolic Christianity and it became a state religion in the early 4th century CE (Common Era). The church was situated in a “Maflar Muhalla”, a name derived from ‘Magian’, referring to Zoroastrian priests. We found another church in the village of Kish, this one being the oldest messianic Caucasus Albanian church, preserved by locals. A large poster on display describing the “History of Caucasian Albania” stated: “It’d be appropriate to note that Albania was a country of various beliefs [including] Zoroastrianism.” Another poster mentioned the existence of fire temple complexes during the 4th century BCE to 3rd century CE.



Dadash Muellim, our host

After visiting the Sheki Palace, reminiscent of Shiraz and Isfahan, we were invited to an orchard, where locals were baking bread in a clay oven. They heartily shared their produce and cheese in front of their burning home fire, allowing us to achieve *hamazor* with an Azeri family. In another typical Zoroastrian way, we got to feed stray dogs on the platform of the Zaqatala train station.



Hamazor with an Azeri family

An overnight train ride, the first of two that we experienced, in a rattling but comfortable Soviet-era train, allowing us to sleep in twin-birth compartments supplied with fresh linen and morning tea made in an old-fashioned samovar, brought us back to Baku. Our return to the Capital was necessitated in order to travel north to the scarcely populated Shah Dag mountains, on the border with Russia. There we were to achieve a highly anticipated part of our journey, the planning for which took the longest as we had to obtain official permission to visit a military controlled area. Farrouk Jorat had made the complicated arrangements for us to visit the Atashgah.

A few words about Farrouk who has previously contributed to *Hamazor* and is an aeronautics engineer, but has a passion for the early history of Azerbaijan. He willingly agreed to get us a special permit from the border guards to visit an atashgah in Khinaliq, hugging the Russian Republic of Dagestan. It was Farrouk who initiated the restoration of the everlasting fire there, with the support of the World Zoroastrian Organization, and drew authentic architectural plans for the *Chahar tagi* temple structure. Without his help we would have missed what turned out to be the highlight of the visit.



Dakhma, Sukut Kala

The world's highest mountain Atashgah

On the way to Khinaliq we detoured to visit a *Dakhma, Sukut Kala*, meaning a 'tower of silence' in Azeri, above *Budug* village in Shah Dag Mountains. We took dirt roads and even worse terrain on vehicles that were constantly overheating. With the absolute mastery of the Khinaliq drivers, we reached a

point from which the walls of the *dakhma* became visible. Benedikt and Farrouk, the fittest among us, made the rugged climb

close to the disused structure, but the rest of us were satisfied with viewing it on the horizon against the blue sky, providing stone-solid evidence of the once presence of a Zoroastrian population.¹³

It was past sunset that we could go through the border controls and reached a steep mountain peak from where we saw flames underneath us of the Khinaliq atashgah. Under a full moon the stone *Chahar tagi* temple presented a spiritual scene that could

be centuries old. We surrounded the warm lapping flames while Ervad Kobad Zarolia recited the Atash Niyaaesh.



Atashgah rebuilt by WZO at Khinaliq We felt privileged to experience a now rarely frequented high atashgah, where for



WZO plaque at Khinaliq Atashgah

thousands of years Zoroastrian pilgrims must have come to worship. We were amazed to learn that a Muslim family

voluntarily tended the atashgah throughout the year.

A few days later, at dawn, near the town of Agstafa, we were fascinated by a burning water spring at Yanar Daag Bulak. The slight touch



Burning water spring at Yanar Daag Bulak



Ervad Kobad reciting Avestan prayers

of a flame spectacularly set the running water ablaze. The phenomenon lasted for several minutes, creating a sacred moment

for Ervad Kobad to recite Avestan prayers. Later, near the coastal town of Nabran, after a dip in the waters we could be said to have achieved *hamazor with the Vourukash Sea!*

A flight from Baku brought us to the western province of Nakhchivan, on the borders with Iran and Armenia. It is recorded to have had *dakhmas* in Kharaba Gilan, and a formerly Zoroastrian village named Kodam. Unfortunately, the village is presently under military control and barred to visitors. In a local museum, there was a photo of a now destroyed *dakhma* and a thick encyclopedia on Nakhchivan recorded that the Sasanian King Yazdegard (632-652 CE) built a fortress known as Torpaggala in the southeast of the province. In an earlier period, in the town of Ordubad, coins were minted in the name of King Hormuz IV (579-590 CE). The town of Julfa afforded us a view of close by Iran, and out of the windows of the van, Mahvash and Eddy were even able to touch the luxuriantly green juniper trees of their native land.

To end this account, we remind readers that the 100th anniversary of Dr Modi's journey to Baku will fall on September 24, 2025. Will anyone mark the centenary with a pilgrimage to the land of revered ancient fires?

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Each year since 2013, Kersi B. Shroff has explored countries in Central Asia, Russia, and Azerbaijan. In the lands mentioned in the Avesta, the traces of early Zoroastrianism or Mazdayasnm are manifestly evident. In planning the tour, Kersi greatly relied on Galina Woodova's knowledge and experience acquired through fieldwork and extended residence in Azerbaijan.



Galina Woodova, grew up in Czechoslovakia, and is married and blessed with four children. She has lived and worked in the Siberian Altai, the Caucasus, and now in Kyrgyzstan. In Azerbaijan, she carried out research at a remotely located 'mountain sanctuary,' and, having read Mary Boyce's books on Zoroastrianism, she discovered that the Iranian speaking Lahijans have strong Zoroastrian roots. In the last seven years she has explored the living Zoroastrian heritage, including taking a journey through Gujarat, India, and explored historical links to Central Asia and Altai of Avestan thought and ethics. She considers it a great privilege to have been a guide on the journey to the land of ancient fires with likeminded Kersi Shroff.



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