

GURU NANAK'S TRAVEL AN APPRAISAL OF BAKU VISIT

ARTICLE

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INTRODUCTION

Guru Nanak (1469–1539), the founder of the Sikhi (Sikhism), is a subject of perennial interest for the Sikhs and their scholars, and a quick look at any bibliography on the subject would reflect the range and the depth of writings available on various aspects of his life and teachings. Recently Chahal et al. [1] have reported concise life history, his travels to Middle East and some basic principles of his philosophy. Besides there is a wide variety of sources available about his life and mission. These comprise texts, including his poetic and the writings of his immediate successors and early followers; sites such as Talwandi, the place of his birth, and Kartarpur (The Town of the Creator), the center he established; and two known artifacts associated with his life. These sources provide primary information for a scholarly reconstruction of the Guru's life.

Chahal and Dhailwal [2] have reported in detail about Guru Nanak's possible travel to Middle East with special reference to his visit to Istanbul and Konya in Turkey. Chahal's work [3, 4] on Guru Nanak's travels to Middle East, Turkey and return to India via Azerbaijan provides guidelines to seek the truth and or start debate on Guru Nanak travels. Similarly work done by Atul Aneja [5] on rediscovering ancient silk route and cultural, economic ties between Azerbaijan and India was also instrumental in putting this article together.

Among the studies that have shaped the discussion on this issue are his travels especially in MENA (Middle East and North Africa) region. There are lots of articles and papers claiming to state that Guru Nanak visited as far as to Greece and Italy. I shall try to visit each site claimed to be visited by Guru Nanak and will try to present some facts starting with Azerbaijan, Baku.

Taking reference of many research papers and books written by eminent scholars and historians have always intrigued me to find out some facts about the travels by Guru Nanak. This article examines the various sites cited in research papers and books where Guru Nanak claimed to have visited and examine it in light of empirical evidence culled from early contemporary sources as well as from current understanding of existing monuments. By questioning various arguments and proofs regarding the paucity of general historical information about Guru Nanak's travel, the author argues that the Guru Nanak indeed visited these sites. In series of the articles, starting with Baku (Azerbaijan), I will try to put forth some arguments for each site Guru Nanak visited. Next Article would be focused on Istanbul, Turkey.

AZERBAIJAN, BAKU

Historical facts:

Around 100,000 years ago, the territory of modern Baku was savanna with rich flora and fauna. Traces of human settlement go back to the Stone Age. From the Bronze Age there have been rock carvings discovered near Bayil, and a bronze figure of a small fish discovered in the territory of the Old City. This have led some to suggest the existence of a Bronze Age settlement within the city's territory. Near

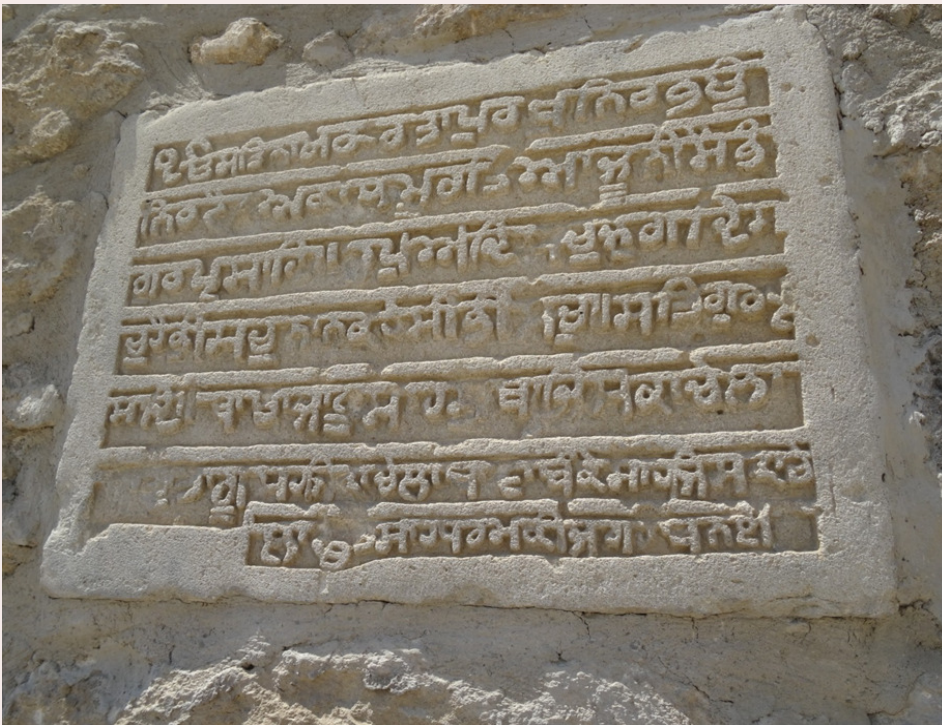


Figure 1: Inscription in Gurumukhi of Commencing Verse (Commonly called Mool Mantra) and the Sloka of *Jap* Verse from the Aad Guru Granth Sahib.

Nardaran, in a place called Umid Gaya, a prehistoric observatory was discovered, where on the rock the images of Sun and various constellations are carved together with a primitive astronomic table. Further archeological excavations revealed various prehistoric settlements, native temples, statues and other artifacts within the territory of the modern city and around it.

In the 1st century, the Romans organized two Caucasian campaigns and reached Baku. Near the city, in Gobustan, Roman inscriptions dating from 84–96 AD were discovered. This is one of the earliest written evidences for Baku

It is worth mentioning the historical facts about Baku to establish long history and center of trade routes for Central Asia.

Baku Ateshgah

The **Baku Ateshgah** (from Persian: Atashgāh, Azerbaijani: *Atəşgah*) or "**Fire Temple**" is a castle-like religious temple in Surakhani, a suburb of greater Baku, Azerbaijan. Based on Persian, *Devnagri* and *Gurmukhi* inscriptions, temple was used as a Hindu and Zoroastrian fire worship place. "*Atash*" is the Persian word for fire.

The very first reference of Fire Temple (Ateshgah Baku) was provided in 1683 by a German traveler Kaempfer [6] who had visited Baku. He noted that there are seven fire holes at the Hindu temple. Originally when the temple was built it had nine eternal flames. Modi [6] did an excellent job in taking photos and describing the temple and some historical facts. Every other scholar seem to have

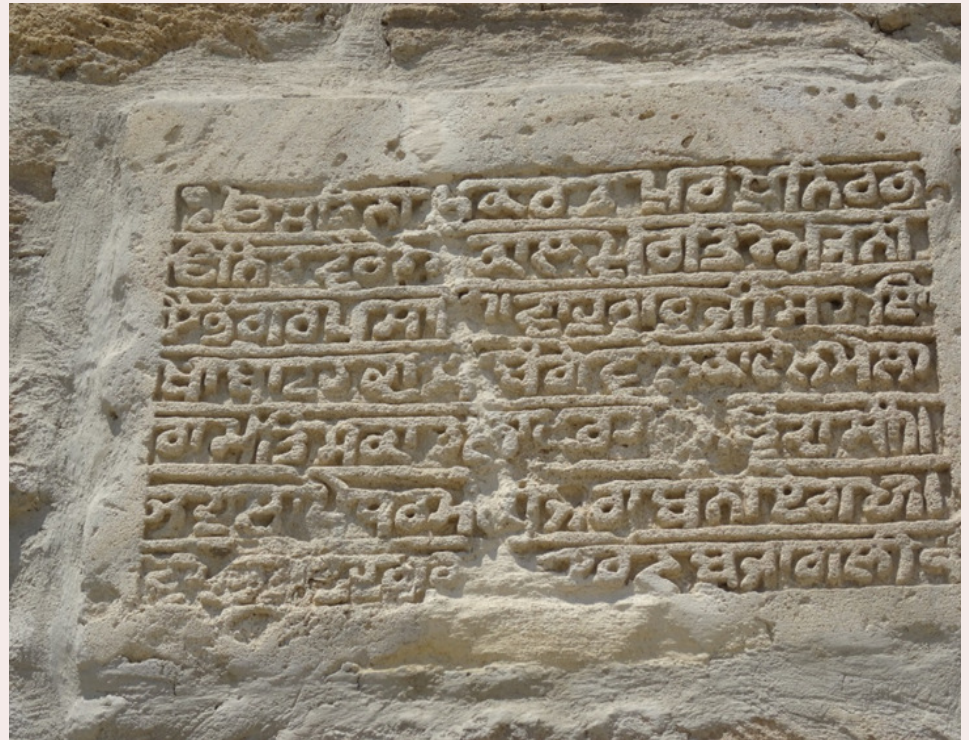


Figure 2: Another inscription in *Gurumukhi* of Commencing Verse (Commonly called Mool Mantra) and the Sloka of *Jap* Verse from the Aad Guru Granth Sahib at one of room's entrance.

used their reference and photos for their research and studies.

My Visit to Ateshgah

When I got an opportunity to visit Baku with Canadian Commercial delegation to Baku, I was thrilled to get an opportunity to visit the site to finding truth and facts. With that objective in my mind I contacted Prof D. S. Chahal [7] from Canada; a prominent scholar and well respected for his scientific views and approach on Sikhism. He was helpful in pointing some key facts to be noticed at Ateshgah.

Architect

The temple is about 20 Km East of the main Baku city and is in the Surakhany district/area also commonly known as Ateshgah. The centre temple is about 18 feet square. In the center is a fire pit about 3 feet deep and about 4 feet square. The fire burnt continuously due to the natural gas emitting from the bottom of the pit.

One of these cells is more than 35 feet long like a common dormitory. Some cells have a dome like structure at the top. Two cells were used to tie up the horses of the visitors. In 20 cells there are Sanskrit inscriptions in *Devnagiri* script.

I was able to understand writings in in one of the cells as followings (Fig 1):

ੴ ਸਤਿ ਨਾਮ ਕਰਤਾ ਪਾਰਖ ਨਿਰਭਉ
ਨਿਰਵੈਰ ਅਕਾਲ ਮੂਰਤਿ ਆਜੂਨੀ ਸੈਭੰ
ਗਰ ਪਰਸਾਦਿ ॥ ਜਪ
ਅਦਿਸਚ ਜਗਦਿ ਸਚ ਹੈ ਭੀ ਸਚ
ਨਾਨਕ ਹੇਸੀ ਭੀ ਸਚ ॥
ਸਤਿ ਗਰ ਪਰਸਾਦਿ ॥

ਬਾਝਾ ਜਾਟੂਸਾਰਕ ਥਾ ਜਿਸ ਕਾ ਚੇਲਾ
... ਤਾਰੂ। ਸਹਬਿ ਕਾ ਚੇਲਾ ...
ਵਾਬ ਕੇ ਸਾਹ ਜਿਸ ਕਾ ਚੇਲਾ ਉਰੇਸਾਹ
ਧਰਮ ਕੀ ਜਗਹ ਬਨਈ

1. Ek Omkar satanam karatapurakha nirabhaii
2. niravair akalamurati ajuni saibham
3. guraprasadi || jap adi sach jugadisa-
4. chu hai bhi sachu nanaka hosi bhi sachu || satiguru [pra?]-
5. sadi bava Judusahs [sukha] jisaka chela
6. bava Kagusa (a) ha ji [sa*] ka chelaba (a) va Bamkesaha jiska chle]-
7. !a ,, rasaha dharama ki jagaha bana (a) i

Translation:

1. There is Only One God
- 2-3. Truth is His Name He is the Creator, Protector, Without Fear, No Enmity, The First Entity, Without Incarnations, Self-perpetuating; With the Guru's grace:
4. O Nanak! Think about (this) forever infinite reality (which) is true (and) will always be true! So be merciful Guru is merciful!
- 5-6. (A) Bava Judusaha, whose pupil was bava Bamkesaha,
7. whose pupil was ... rasaha built this sacred place.

Another inscription in *Gurumukhi* of Commencing Verse (Commonly called Mool Mantra) and the Sloka of *Jap* Verse from the Aad Guru Granth Sahib was found at one of room's entrance (Fig 2).

1. EikOmankar. Satinma karatpurukhu nirabhg
2. ii niravaira [a-] Kalamurati ajuni

3. saibham gurap [r] asadi || Vahuguruji sahai
4. baba [Ta] gadasa Bamgevale ka chela Mela
5. rama jisaka chela [karatarama] udasi ||
6. [Sa]va [laji] dharatna [ki] jaga bangi gayi
7. dha ,, guru ,, vara ,, buja,,

Translation:

1. There is Only One God
- 2-3. Truth is His Name He is the Creator, Protector, Without Fear, No Enmity, The First Entity, Without Incarnations, Self-perpetuating; With the Guru's grace:
4. There was Baba (Ta) Gadasa, Bamge resident, whose pupil was Melarama,) or (Mardana ?)
5. whose pupil was Karatarama Udasi.
6. This sacred place called Javalaji
7. was built...

Figure 8 is very important as this telling about Guru Nanak and his pupil Mardana visiting this place and this sacred place was built in their honor.

There is also a strong evidence to prove the above statement that Guru Nanak Bhai Sahib Mardana Ji stayed in this Temple in September 1520 in the beginning of the month of Ramzan. Ismail-I alias Karun, who was the King of Azerbaijan, had a meeting with Guru Nanak. Ismail-I had conquered Azerbaijan in 1501 A.D. (reference Memoirs Of Zehir-ED-Din MOHAMMED BABUR published by Oxford University Press, 1921 and Baku -An Eventful History and Zindgan-E-Shah Ismail_E aval (Persian) and various History Books.) This Photo is taken as a token of courtesy of the Picture-Gallery of Toronto Public Reference Library.

This inscription was erected by masons under the guidance and instructions of the Emperor, Shah Ismail-I in 1520 when some parts of the Surakhany Temple were extended. The last three lines clear this. Ismail-I also became the disciple (Chela) of Satguru Nanak Sahib. The word Ajooni is clearly visible which confirms that Mul Mantra was written from the book which was with Satguru Nanak Sahib. This Mul Mantra and the first Slok of Japuji Sahib was not written and tally with Sri Guru Granth Sahib Ji because the word was written as Aajooni instead if Ajooni. This mistake occurred because they were copied from the handwriting of the Guru Nanak and was erected in His absence when He

and Bhai Sahib Mardana Ji went to Bukhara (in earstwhile Khurasan) after crossing the Caspian Sea by boat. The word 'Chela' clearly confirmed that Bhai Sahib Mardana Ji was His only companion.

The names of the persons mentioned in the inscriptions do not end with "-Singh", as usual Sikhi names. Probably, the names inscription goes back to Nanak time or before Guru Gobind Singh when Sikhs were given name Singh. However, the phrase, *Vahuguruji sahai*, found in Fig. 8 indicates that this inscription was written quite late after the time of Guru Gobind Singh since this phrase was never used by Guru Nanak.

CONCLUSION

Author is of the opinion that Guru Nanak did visited Baku because of the information in Memoirs of Zehir-ED-Din MOHAMMED BABUR published by Oxford University Press, 1921 and Baku -An Eventful History and Zindgan-E-Shah Ismail_E aval (Persian), and inscription of Commencing Verse of Guru Nanak found at two different places. However, the dates of these inscriptions are not available. The author would like to invite scholars to do some more search and request SGPC to have a research delegation be sent to Baku for proper research.

Ateshgah building layout– some pictures of inside of surrounding rooms and some inscriptions are in Figures 3 –8



Figure 3: Ateshgah Building layout with Center temple and surrounding structures Centre temple is surrounded by two layers the first layer with various worship structures and as well as crematory, food storage etc. Around the temple there is a large square with 25 rooms. They are closed from outside, so it appears as a compound wall. Every cell has a door but no windows. In one of them is a wall painting of Hindu God, Lord Ganesha. Some walls have pictures of banyan trees (found in Hindu temples) and Shiva's trident.



Figure 4: Centre temple with surrounding structures and rooms layer



Figure 5: Ancient Hindu idols



Figure 6: Roman stone inscription in Gobustan dating back to 84-96 CE.



Figure 8: Some scenarios generated to present the usage of the rooms in the temple.



Figure 7: Some Inscription in *Devnagri* and Arabic. Please note the date of inscription in Arabic is 1128 Hijri, which is equivalent to the 1715 of Current Era.

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