

“Atashkadeh in North America”

Introduction

A significant number of Zoroastrians now call North America (primarily Canada and the United States of America) their home. Though they have embarked on new lives in new environment, they have made every effort to preserve and protect their religion and heritage. The North American concept of “freedom of speech, religion and assembly” has created ideal conditions to practice Zoroastrianism and preserve its heritage.

Parsis, Irani Zoroastrians and Zoroastrians originating from other parts of the world have united themselves in North America under the banner of “Zoroastrian”, and have formed regional Zoroastrian Associations with a view to preserve and promote Zoroastrianism.

The Zoroastrian population in North America has now reached a critical mass to establish their own places of worship in various cities throughout North America. The various associations have committed significant resources to purchase properties with the intention of building Zoroastrian places of worship.

The North American Mobed Council (NAMC), in its capacity as the advisory body on Zoroastrianism in North America, have been approached to provide instructions and guidance in setting up Zoroastrian places of worship, suitable to the North American environment.

This paper is restricted to the establishment of Atashkadeh (with a Dadgah fire) in North America; with provisions for setup for rituals like Yazashne, Visparad and Vendidad. Procedures and methods of performing these rituals in the North American setting are to be established in the future by NAMC after discussions and advice from Mobeds and Zoroastrian scholars of the time.

NAMC recognizes that the views and practices of the present generation of Mobeds are influenced by their emotional ties to traditions practiced during their training, upbringing and initiation in their home countries; resulting in a strong desire to maintain such views and practices. NAMC acknowledges that the future generation of Mobeds will be open to new and bold initiatives and will be amenable to forge new traditions and practices that would conform to their generation. Mobeds of that generation will be challenged to balance our traditions and their new initiatives. They will be compelled to explore creative solutions for the requirements of

- consecration and use of Alat
- source and use of water, pomegranate and date palm leaves, Nirang and goat milk
- disposal of consecrated water and other items. and
- availability of Mobeds to administer and maintain Bareshnum

Therefore, NAMC recommends that at this time, an Atashkadeh in North America be established with sufficient flexibility to allow future Mobeds to upgrade the fire as and when circumstances may justly warrant.

This publication is produced for use by various North American Zoroastrian Associations as they fulfill their members' religious and cultural needs by constructing or expanding their places of worship.

May 2012

Name of Zoroastrian place of worship:

Zoroastrians have traveled far and wide in search of business or employment opportunities while maintaining their religion and culture.

As Zoroastrians spread out in various parts of the globe, they have expressed their devotion to their faith and culture by establishing places of worship wherever they settled.

These places of worship came to be known by different names; most popular amongst them being “Fire Temple”, “Agyari” (Place of Agni or fire), “Dar-e-Meher” (Door of Mithra) and “Atashkadeh” (Place of Fire).

The structures described above are built to serve the fire that resides in it. Name of Fire Temple describe the physical structure of the temple. The Fire within the structure is described by the type of fire.

(e.g. an “Agyari”, “Dar-e-Meher” or “Atashkadeh” (being the structure) contain an “Atash Behram”, “Atash Adaran” or “Atash Dadgah” (type of fire housed in the structure).

In keeping with our Zoroastrian heritage and to appropriately describe the structure, it is NAMC’s view that a Zoroastrian place of worship in North America be commonly known as “Atashkadeh”

Category of Fire:

Modern day Zoroastrians pray in the presence of three categories of Fire:

Atash Dadgah

The *Atash Dadgah* is the basic grade of sacred fire. It can be either a perpetually burning fire or allowed to be extinguished and relit when necessary. It does not require periodic Boi ceremony. A Mobed (in absence of a Mobed, a Mobedyar and in absence of a Mobedyar, a lay Zoroastrian) can tend the fire in the Atash Dadgah.

Atash Adaran

Atash Adaran, the "Fire of fires" is the middle grade of fire. It requires a gathering of hearth fires from representatives of the four professional groups: the priests (*athornan*), the soldiers (*ratheshtaran*), the farmers or herdsman (*vastryoshan*) and the artisans (*hutokhshan*). This procedure takes about three weeks. Atash Adaran is a continuously burning fire and needs to be attended five times a day by a Boi ceremony performed by a Mobed.

Atash Behram

Atash Behram, "Fire of victory" is the highest grade of fire. It involves gathering of fires from 16 different sources, including lightning and cremation pyre. This procedure could take up to about a year.

To comply with the current conditions, NAMC recommends that “Atash Dadgah” be established in North America at the present time, with a view to upgrade it to Atash Adaran when circumstances permit and new traditions and practices facilitate such an upgrade under the guidance and supervision of Mobeds of that time.

ATASHKADEH Structure:

Architecture:

Zoroastrian fire temples of yester years were magnificent edifices, worthy of pride in their architecture and for the communities that constructed them. The surviving structures are a testament to such magnificence.

NAMC believes that an Atashkadeh should be a magnificent structure. It should be an edifice worthy of the sacred fire that it houses.

To maintain security of the structure, to prevent flooding and to preserve ritual purity, the entire Atashkadeh structure should be elevated by about 3 feet from the adjoining normal ground level.

Use and capacity of ATASHKADEH:

Entry and use of an Atashkadeh should be open to those who adhere to the Zoroastrian customs and requirements of purity, Paadyaab and covering their heads while in the Atashkadeh.

To maintain ritual purity and to distinguish from other buildings, the ATASHKADEH should be a stand alone structure; distinctly separate from a community centre, banquet hall, gymnasium or any other utility building.

The occupancy capacity of the Congregation Hall should reflect the size of the Zoroastrian community in the vicinity and the affordability of the association.

Direction:

It is a Zoroastrian tradition to refrain from facing northern direction while reciting prayers. Ahura Mazda's valued creations of water and vegetation are said to reside in the southern direction. Since our ancestors lived in the northern hemisphere, it is likely that they believed that the strong winds, snow and severe weather originated from the north, and therefore, not to turn towards that direction while praying to Ahura Mazda and His creations. In keeping with this tradition, the main entrance to the Atashkadeh should not face north.

As the sun rises in the east and provides a source of light throughout the day, and that most of the religious ceremonies are performed in the morning hours of the day, it is preferable that an Atashkadeh entrance face the east.

Though it is recognized that various fire temples throughout the world face in different directions, NAMC feels it be preferable for the Atashkadeh entrance to face east.

Segments of ATASHKADEH:

Paadyaab Kushti Area

Zoroastrian tradition enjoins visitors to perform Paadyaab Kushti before entering the main body of an Atashkadeh. Paadyaab is the process of cleaning the exposed parts of the body for physical purity. This is followed by a Kushti prayer facing the direction of the sun during the day and source of light during the night.

Adjacent to the entrance, a separate area for men and women should be set aside for Paadyaab Kushti, where facilities be made available to visitors to hang their coats, store their shoes, and cleanse exposed areas of their body. Prayer caps and scarves should be provided in this area.

Prayer Hall and ATASHGAH

Prayer hall or Main hall could be set up two ways. Please refer to the drawing.

Fig 1. An open prayer hall with Atashgah in center or on one side.

Fig 2. Prayer room with another room with Atashgah in it

East

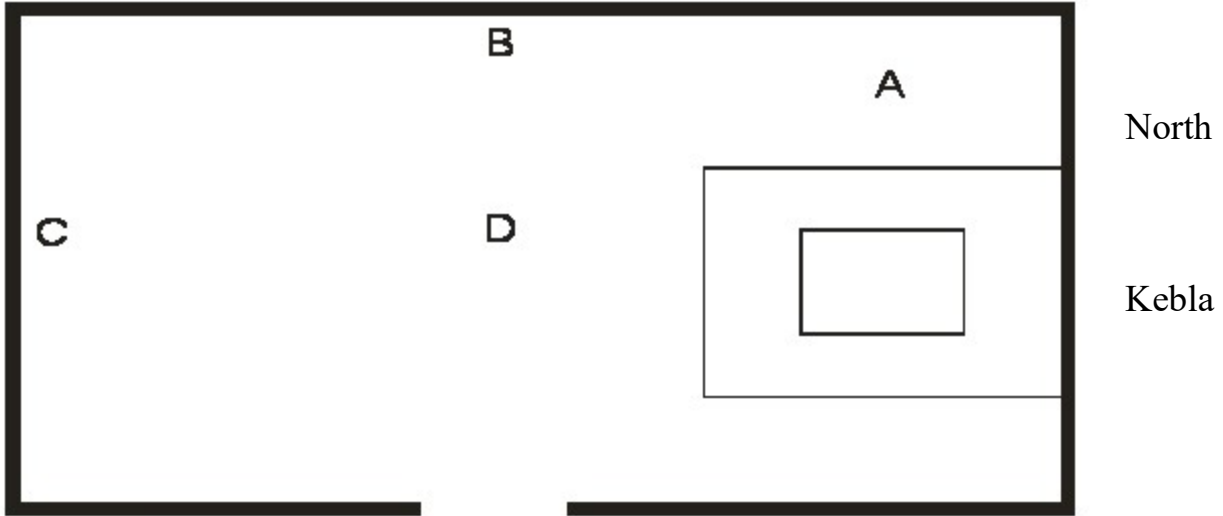


Fig. 1

Kebla could be placed at any of the A B C or D positions

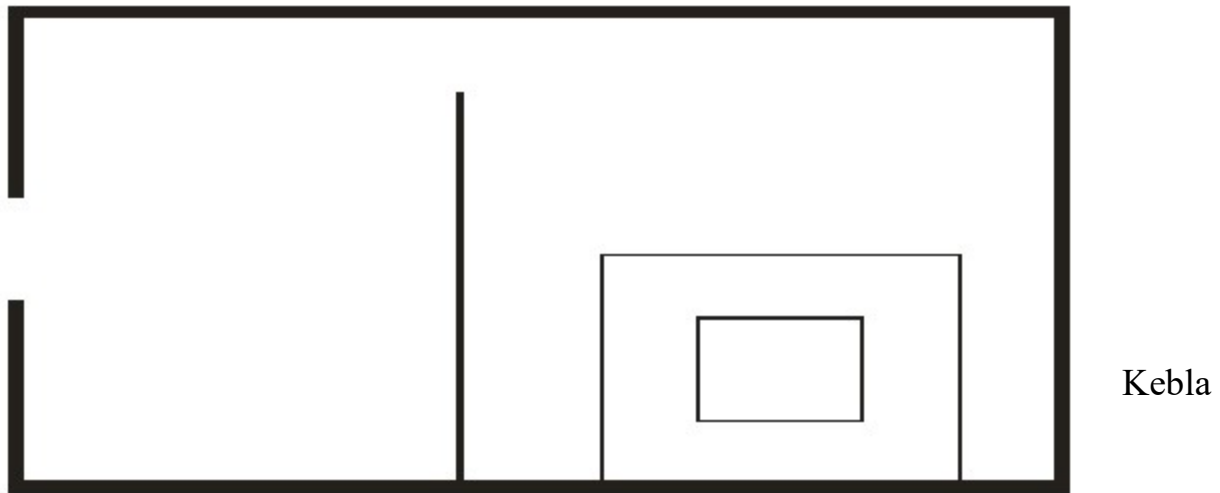


Fig. 2

A convenient and safe area should be set aside outside the Prayer Hall for lighting Deevo (an oil based flame lit lamp) or a substitute thereof that would comply with the local environmental regulations.

ATASHGAH

The Sanctum Sanctorum of the edifice is known as **ATASHGAH**. Zoroastrianism regards this area in an Atashkadeh as holy area as it holds the holy Fire.

The Atashgah area should be clearly identified as a separate area restricted to all visitors. A railing, mini wall or such other architecture should form a barrier to prevent accidental entry.

An entrance area should be provided for the Mobed to enter and exit the Atashgah, and the same area may be used by the visitors to pay homage to the holy Fire.

Since devotees pray in front of the holy fire, their focal point and centre of concentration is the holy fire; the direction being faced by the devotee is of no consequence.

Atashgah should consist of an area of suitable size with stone, marble or tile flooring.

The roof of the Atashgah should be dome shaped, designed to facilitate unobstructed escape of smoke from the holy fire, while preventing water, snow and direct sunlight.

PAAVI: ritual furrows, act as a barrier to guard the ritual purity of the holy fire, and act as drainage while cleaning the inside of the Atashgah.

Paavi should be about two inches in width and two inches in depth with a place for water drainage and should mark the outside perimeter of the Atashgah.

According to rituals the attending Mobed is required to disengage himself from outside surroundings as he enters the Atashgah. An area marked by a Paavi at the entrance to the Atashgah should be made available for such disengagement.

In the centre of the Atashgah an ornate stone pedestal about a foot in height should be constructed to represent the throne on which the holy fire is enthroned. The pedestal is marked by a Paavi to guard its ritual purity.

Holy fire is placed on this pedestal in an Afarganyu; a special metal fire vase. The Afarganyu should be about 3' high.

The holy fire is tended by the attending Mobed by performing a Boi ceremony. Boi ceremony involves ritual cleaning of the stone pedestal and sounding the bell. Two metal bells should be placed at diagonally opposite corners (North East and South West) of the Atashgah. They should be suspended at a distance from the Afarganyu such that the Mobed could reach them comfortably while making connection with the Afarganyu with a metal ladle (Chamach).

Urvisgah:

In their efforts to preserve and protect their religious rituals and customs, the Zoroastrian of North America have expressed their desire to be able to conduct the inner liturgical ceremonies often referred to as "Paav Mahel Kriya"

Paav Mahel Kriyas generally refer to the ceremonies of Yazashne, Visparad, Vendidad, Nirangdin and Baj.

Paav Mahel Kriyas are performed in a specially assigned area in a consecrated Atashkadeh by Mobeds.

The area dedicated for Paav Mahel ceremonies is known as "Urvisgah" and forms an integral part of an Atashkadeh.

Situated on north south axis and the outer area marked by a Paavi, the Urvisgah should consist of an area of 18' x 10', of stone, marble or tile flooring and have pedestals as identified in the layout.

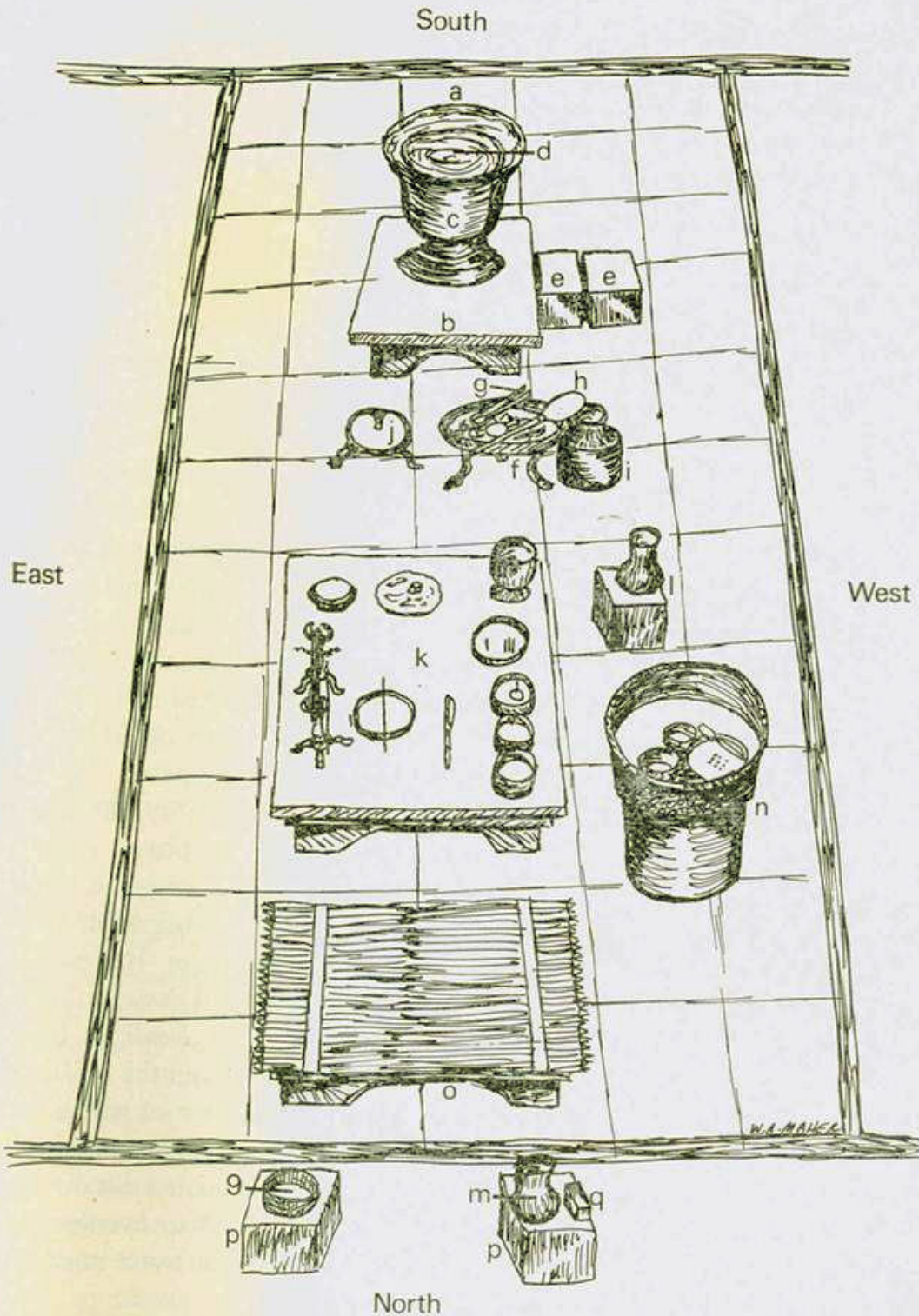


Figure 1 The yazišn-gāh (urwis-gāh); (a) pāwi, (b) ātaš xʷān, (c) āfrīngānyu, (d) sarpoš, (e) sang ī ēsm-bōy, (f) xʷānēce (khumchī), (g) chipyō, (h) čamač, (i) kahārnu, (j) stand for kahārnu, (k) ālāt-xʷān, (l) karasyō, (m) karasyō (for jiwām), (n) kundī, (o) zōdgāh, (p) niches, (q) metal box containing hōm twigs.

Miscellaneous areas:

To maintain ritual purity of the Atash Dadgah, the following miscellaneous areas should be separately constructed and connected by a corridor with the Atashgah.

Mobed Change room:

Mobeds should be provided with a separate rest and change room, washroom and shower facilities.

Bareshnumgah and Naahn area:

As Paav Mahel ceremonies require a Mobed to undergo Naahn or Bareshnum ceremony requiring seclusion for 9 nights, a room should be set aside for this purpose.

Kitchenette:

A separate kitchenette should be provided for the use by Mobeds and others attending to the needs of the Atashgah

Storage and boiler room:

Provision should be made for storage of wood and other supplies needed for smooth functioning of the Atashkadeh.

Heating, Ventilating and Air Conditioning area should be provided for.

Public Washrooms:

In cases where an Atashkadeh is separate from Congregation Hall, the public washroom facilities at the Congregation Hall should be used.

Fire Alarm:

Respecting the building codes throughout North America that require smoke alarms and fire sprinkler systems in public buildings, an Atashkadeh should have a fire alarm system that can be deactivated (subject to permission from local fire authorities) while the Atashkadeh is in use.

Water source:

Paav Mahel ceremonies require a source of clean water, preferably an open well. In the absence of an open well, locally available source of clean water including tap water may be used for ceremonial purposes and a man made body of water or a garden be used to return the ceremonially used water to its source.

Consecration Ceremony of Atashkadeh (Building)

Laying the foundation:

Importance of foundation stone is recognized in its prominence as all other stones will be set in reference to it and determines the position of the entire structure.

In addition to being a significant emotional event in the life of a Zoroastrian community, the event of laying the foundation provides an opportunity to recognize the efforts of the community.

In preparation for consecration, the area of the proposed Atashkadeh is to be isolated.

A Baj and a Jashan ceremony in honor of Spendaarmad Ameshaaspanand have to be performed on the isolated area.

The foundation stone may include a time capsule containing Zoroastrian artifacts, Sudreh, Kusti, gold and silver coins, prayer books (Khordeh Avesta, Yazashne, Vendidad etc.) and information on the Zoroastrian association that constructs it.

Consecration of the Atashkadeh:

Once a “Certificate of Occupancy” is obtained from the relevant local authority, a day is to be set for the consecration of the Atashkadeh.

The Atashgah area should be cleansed three times with clean water.

For three days, starting from the third day prior to the final enthronement of Atash (Dadgah), a Mobed is to perform a Baj dedicated to Sarosh Yazad in the Haavan Gah. The fire used on the first Baj should be kept burning and the same fire should be used throughout all the Baj ceremonies.

Using the same fire, at midnight on the day prior to the final enthronement day, Vendidad Sadeh should be performed by a Mobed.

Using the same fire, in the Haavan Gah of the day of enthronement, after the completion of the Vendidad, a Baj dedicated to Ahura Mazda is to be performed.

After the Baj ceremony, the fire is transported by a group of Mobeds from the Urvisgah to the Atashgah while visitors line their route and recite aloud, in unison, Yatha Ahu Vairyo prayer.

On reaching the Atashgah, the Mobeds enthrone the fire on the Afarganyu.

Mobed that performed the Baj ceremonies for the three previous days should be given the honor to offer the first Boi ceremony for the newly enthroned Atash Dadgah.

A Jashan in honor of Ahura Mazda for thanksgiving should be performed on the first day of the enthronement of Atash Dadgah.

Adherence to rituals and traditions:

Historical writings reveal that Zoroastrians adapted to the surroundings and conditions they found themselves in, while establishing their places of worship when they settled in various parts of the world. Their pragmatism and their ability to adapt is a contributing factor to their survival as Zoroastrians.

There is every reason to believe that the Zoroastrians of North America will preserve their faith, rituals and culture while adapting to the North American environment, just as their ancestors did through centuries of prosperity and adversity.

Published: May 2012