

MARCH 1999

India

PERSPECTIVES







Monghyr

THE HUB OF HISTORY

Text: SHAHID AKHTAR MAKHFI
Photographs: SHAHEEN PARVEEN

Laced with legends, leavened by history, the Little Birmingham of the Raj still retains the provincial flavour, so sought after by nostalgic inhabitants of big cities. Clean air, blue sky, forbidding cliffs, rocky crags, limpid streams add to the tranquillity of Monghyr which offers an apocalyptic red sun sinking amidst the swish and slap of the Ganga.

Surrounded by the Ganga on three sides and guarded by the Kharagpur hills, Monghyr's strategic location has lured the kings and kingdoms since time immemorial. The history of Monghyr is, in fact, a chronology of battles. It begins with the *Mahabharata* that records the encounter of *Bhim* with the ruler of *Modagiri* (Monghyr's ancient name as mentioned in the *Mahabharata*) and concludes with the defeat of Nawab Mir Qasim in 1763 at the hands of the East India Company. In between, the pages of history of Monghyr are riddled with rebellions, sieges and battles fought between *Palas*, *Pratiharas*, Turks, Mughals, Afghans, *Marathas* and the English.

Kharagpur Lake, picturesque place to spend the evening and watch the sun leaping through the hills.



When history is not in sharp focus, it gets besmirched with countless tales and traditions. True, they confuse us but certainly, they entertain us. Historians differ on the origin of the ancient fort of *Modagiri*. Some of them make us believe that *Jarasanda*, the king of *Magadha* established his capital here as well and confined thousands of Indian princes on the hills of *Nauyagarhi*, whom he wanted to sacrifice in order to appease the gods! Another account links the fort to *Raja Karna* of *Anga* who established this capital which still retains the name of *Karanchaura* where he used to meditate and distribute tons of gold in charity. Some historians stand by *Chandragupta* as the founder of Monghyr, which was called as *Gupta Garh* – a name that has been found inscribed on a rock here. Buddhist tradition refers to Monghyr as *Maudgolyagiri*, named after a rich merchant – *Maudgala* who was converted by Buddha to his religious order. Ramayana too is replete with references to Monghyr.

Kharagpur hill, an extension of the Vindhyan Range, is rich in hot springs like *Bhimbandh*, *Rishi Kund* and a dozen others. The easiest to reach is *Sita Kund* (six km) where Sita, Rama's consort, is said to have plunged herself after the fire ordeal to prove her chastity. The hot spring, enclosed in a masonry reservoir is to be seen to be believed. The water, besides being burning hot, is crystal clear, with small bubbles emerging in clusters every now and then. Surprisingly, there are

The imposing gateway to the Fort.



four other pools (named after *Ram*, *Lakshman*, *Bharat* and *Shatrughan*) near *Sita Kund* temple but their water is cold.

The hot spring has puzzled travellers, tourists and scientists alike. *Hiuen Tsang* calls this place *Hiranya Parvata* and describes the mountain which emitted smoke and vapour and obscured the light of the sun and moon. The Chinese' account suggests an active volcano which possibly gave vent to some deep thermodynamic action that still churns out hot water.

Twining, in his account of 1794, observes *Sita Kund* water being packed to Calcutta for use by persons who were about to undertake long sea voyage. He further attests to the purity of water remaining intact for more than a year. Sir Joseph Hooker considers the pure water ideal for export.

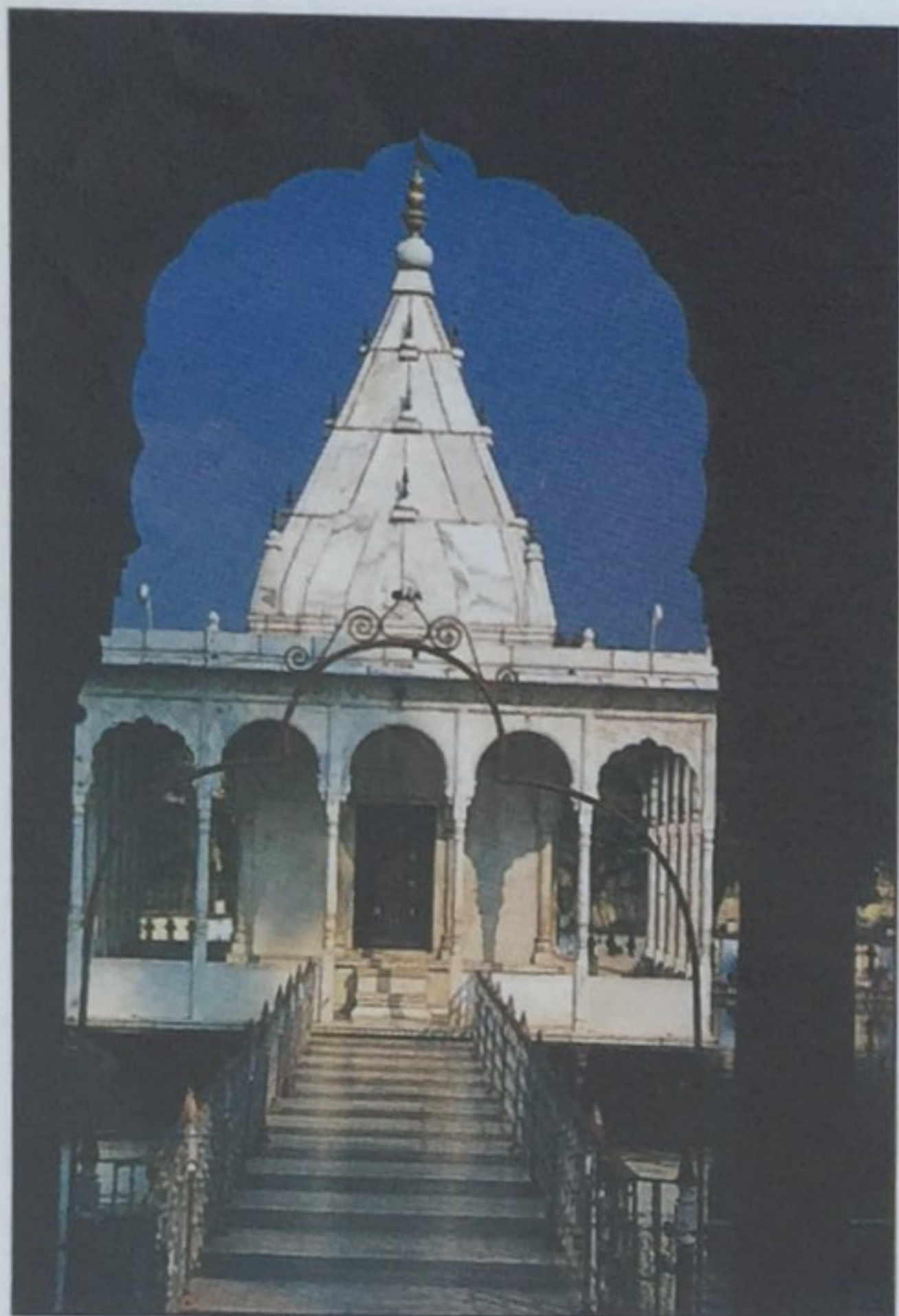
Kharagpur is a small and picturesque town which is referred to as the Kharagpur Raj where the old *havelis* and *hammams* have given way to modern mansions. The three-domed Shahi mosque built during the reign of Shah Jahan in 1656 appears like the Taj built on the riverside. The Kharagpur lake created by the Maharaja of Darbhanga in 1877 is a place to spend the evening and watch the sun leaping through the hills. Nearby are the various hot springs and waterfalls.

Conclusive history of Monghyr is gleamed from the numerous copperplate inscriptions of the *Palas*, issued from Monghyr, one of their capitals. Consolidation of their power commences with their fight against the *Pratiharas* in the 8th century and concludes in the middle of the 11th century when

Kastharani Ghat (bathing place) by the side of the Ganga.

Rampala, a frustrated and helpless *Pala* king, drowned himself in the Ganga at Monghyr in 1130 AD. During these four centuries of *Pala* rule, Monghyr was their playground. The *Pala* sculptors fully used the black basalt from the Kharagpur hills to create numerous beautiful pieces. Much later in 1643 the *masnad* (throne) of the Nawab of Bengal was chiselled in Monghyr.

The Turks overtook the *Palas* in the 12th century when the ambitious forces of *Bakhtiyar Khilji* came as far as Bengal. Throughout the Muslim period the fortune of Monghyr oscillated between the power of the Delhi kings and the prowess of the Bengal Sultans and for a brief interlude it went over to the



Shivalaya, a temple devoted to Lord Shiva.

Sharqis of Jaunpur. The strategic location and the healthy climate of Monghyr lured people from far and wide. *Chandrabansi Rajputs* from *Bundelkhand* migrated to Monghyr as early as the 11th century. They were followed by the *Zamindars* of *Sheikhpura*, the *Chaudhris* of *Bakhtiyarpur*, founders of the *Kharagpur Raj*, etc.

Humayun and Sher Shah Suri criss-crossed Monghyr several times in the course of their decisive battles. In fact, Sher Shah loved Monghyr because of his early success here which later paved his way to the throne of Delhi. He was once wandering here in disguise when a milk woman offered him refreshment. Pleased with her services he acceded to her request for a road among the hills which is still referred to as *Goalin Khand*. *Ain-e-Akbari* describes Monghyr as the chief town where Raja Maan Singh had his residence and Raja

Todar Mall remained entrenched in the Monghyr fort when he came to crush the rebellious Bengal army of the Mughals.

The fortunes of Monghyr once again surfaced momentarily in 1762 when Nawab Mir Qasim Ali resolved to shift his capital from Murshidabad to Monghyr in order to keep an eye on the increasing influence of the British. The Nawab was popular for his justice and able administration but his political miscalculations ended in his defeat and death after a few years.

East India Company acquired the palace of Nawab Mir Qasim Ali after two days of severe shelling which rendered Princess Gul and Prince Bahar homeless. Sheltering themselves in one of the tunnels, they used to attack the British during the night. The ploy was soon discovered and the young prince dressed in tiger skin was shot dead. Princess Gul was later found in a man's attire by the side of her brother's grave. The British officers honoured the children by ordering a daily salute of guns in the evening.

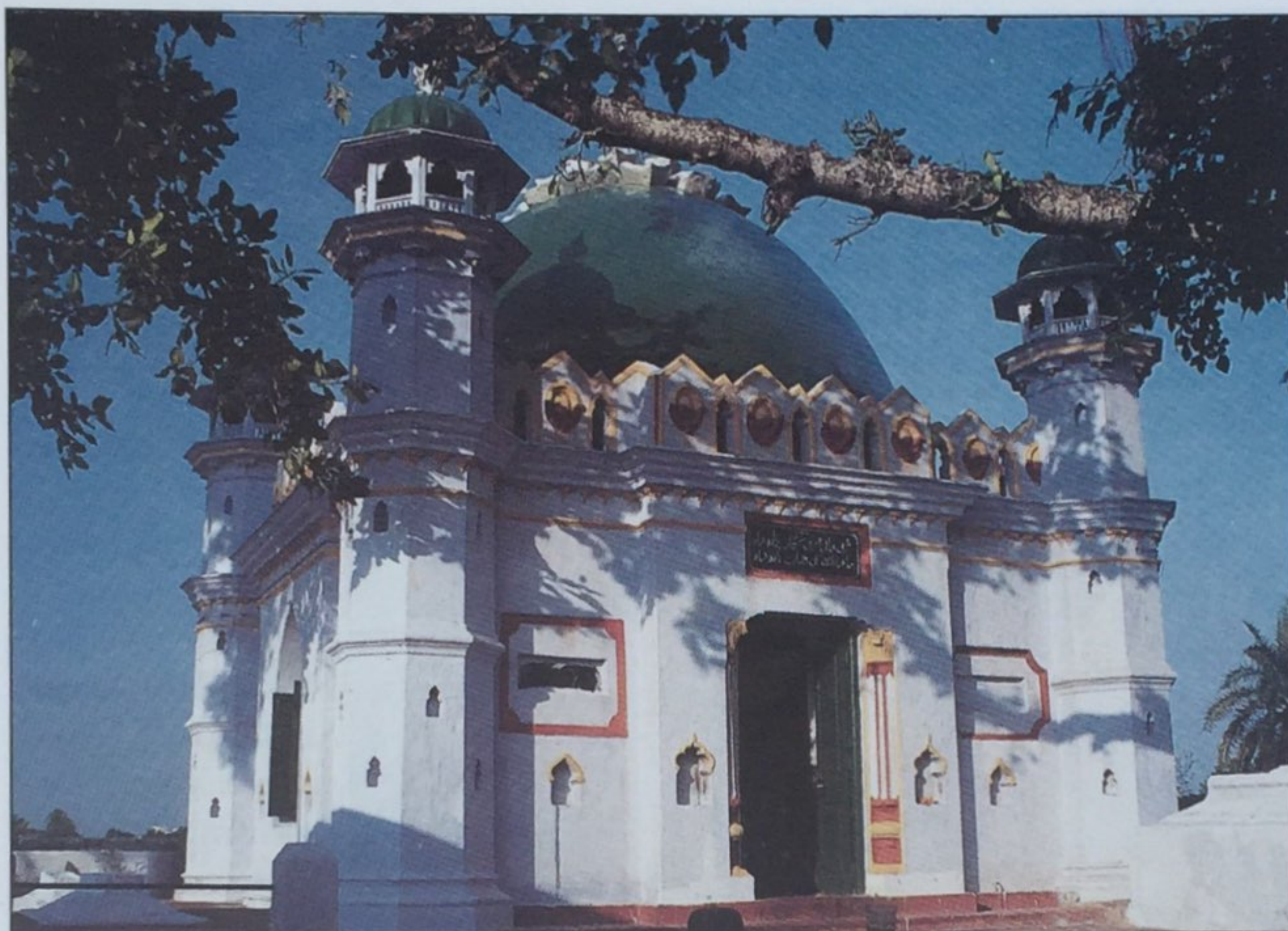
With the occupation of Monghyr by the forces of East India Company, a number of Europeans, influenced by the salubrious climate, turned to Monghyr. Warren Hastings often refers to this place as "a delightful change of atmosphere from that of Bengal." Bishop Heber (1823) was delighted at the imposing appearance of Monghyr and describes two extremely beautiful European houses. Fanny Parkes (1836-44) admired the river view and was touched by the Bairagi temples. Beveridge would prefer to spend

the moonlit nights sitting on one of the bastions and recording the Ganga lapping against the rampart. Sir Joseph Hooker adjudged Monghyr as the prettiest town he had seen on the riverside with a splendid townscape. The Dutch physician Nicolas Graafe, who came to Monghyr as a prisoner, admired the sight of Monghyr's white walls, towers and minarets.

Monghyr's popularity did not translate into progress and development as it continued to be a mere station with a little garrison that steered a mutiny in 1766. Lord Clive had to come to Monghyr to quell the dissidence. The town had to wait until 1812 to be declared as an administrative centre.

Monghyr was rich in industries and European travellers were impressed by one thing or the other. If Walter Hamilton praises the tailors for being so adept in native and European fashion, Twining admired the ironware of Monghyr workmen and was surprised to see knives, forks, tea kettles, trays and similar utensils akin to an iron monger's shop in London. Emily Eden in her book "Up the Country" appreciates the various crafts of Monghyr like the inlay tables, boxes, sofas, etc. that were created to European tastes. Indigo was a major manufacture of this district along with colours, chemicals and the unique window talc.

The British officers of the Company praised the local fire locks and rated it as superior to the best sent to India for the Company's use. Bishop Heber took fancy to the Monghyr spears which he purchased in good number for his



The tomb of Shah Nafa.

servants. The gun makers of Monghyr competed with those of Europe. Nawabs like Alivardi Khan and Mir Qasim Ali relied on Monghyr guns and muskets in their fights against the British. Gun making was a popular profession and a cottage industry in Monghyr where it was sold freely during the melas which were later banned under the Arms Act. The old coach factory is also here at Jamalpur where 452 railway engines were assembled in the first decade of its establishment in 1862.

Of the many vestiges of old glorious days that survived the earthquake of 1934 for the contemporary visitor, the fort tops the lot with its imposing horse shoe gateway erected in 1885. The square projecting bastions flanking the gateway are probably restorations of the old one. The fort is not a secluded monument but is home to a

greater population of Monghyr and incorporates a prison, cemetery, numerous government buildings and residencies that were erected on the remnants of the fort.

The earliest monument is the 15th century tomb of *Shah Nafa* that reflects typical Bengali architecture. The 12th century saint is believed to have come from Iran at the invitation of *Khwaja Moinuddin Chisti* of Ajmer. *Nafa* refers to the aroma of musk emanating from the grave that aroused the attention of Prince Daniel when he was strengthening the fortification in 1497. A little distance beyond the southern gate is an old Chamberlain Memorial Church with an inscription *Ebenezer 1819*.

The remains of the fort (surviving bastions) can be best seen from the river side which also offers a better view of the *Kastharni Ghat* and the adjoining *Babua Ghat* (welcome ghat) used by the

viceroys and governors. Little remains of the original palace, except for the tunnel from where Nawab Mir Qasim escaped from Monghyr. A good number of tunnels are talked about in Monghyr but they are all sealed and no one is sure where they end. Some of the prisoners made good their escape through one of the tunnels near the prison which was once a part of the palace complex. Within the enclosure of the Monghyr Jail, one can still see remains of the torture chamber, palatial rooms, guard annexe and armoury with 17 feet thick walls!

Around six kilometers from the town is *Pir Pabar*, near *Sita Kund*, which offers an excellent view of Monghyr and its surroundings.

Monghyr has a rich public library, Krishna Seva Sadan, famous for its vast collection of books. Another library rich in oriental books, Persian and Arabic manuscripts is the Khanqah-I- Jamia Rahmania, established by the noted scholar, Maulana Muhammad Ali Mungeri in 1927.

◆
The author is a noted freelance writer.