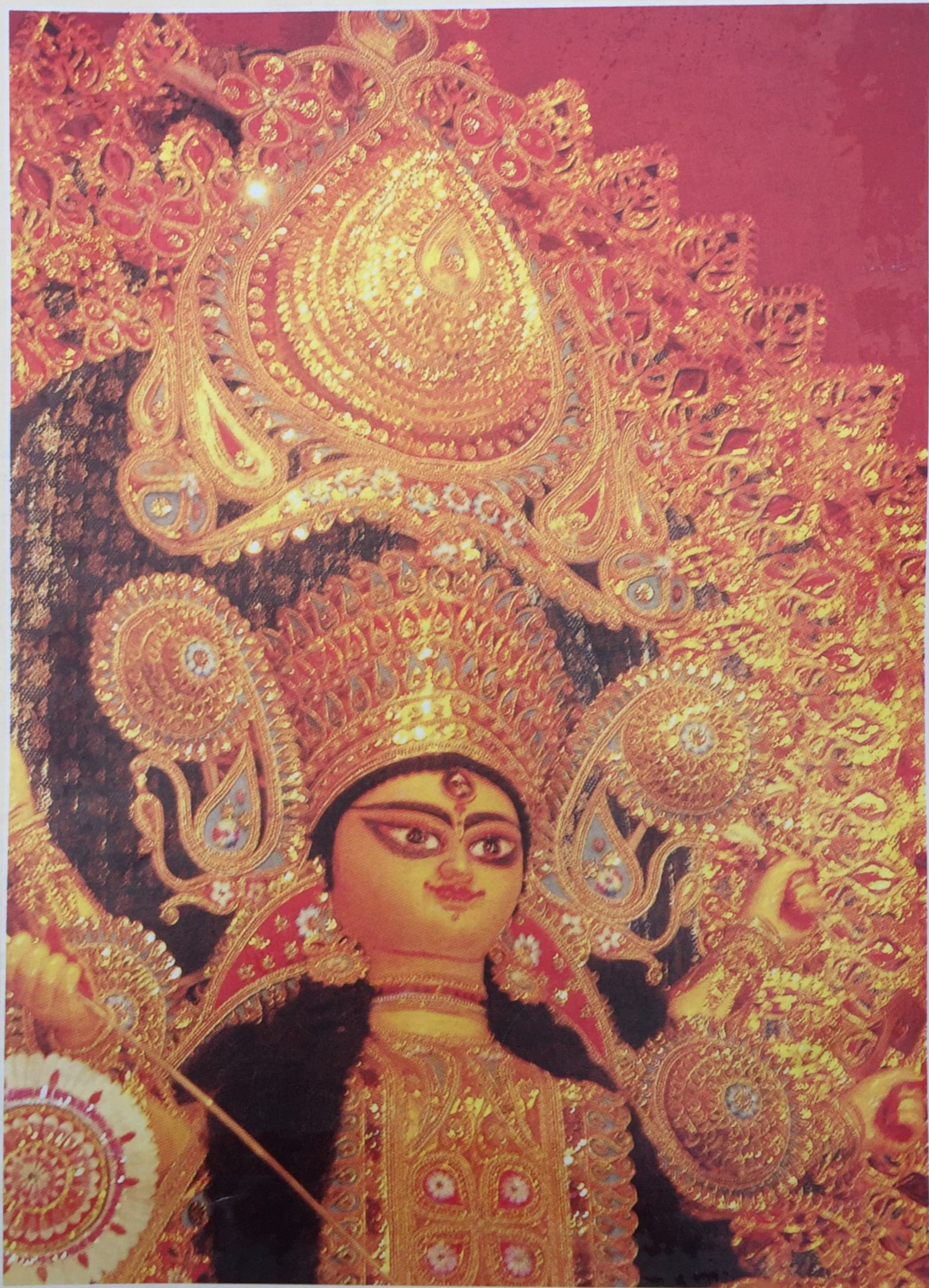


APRIL 2001

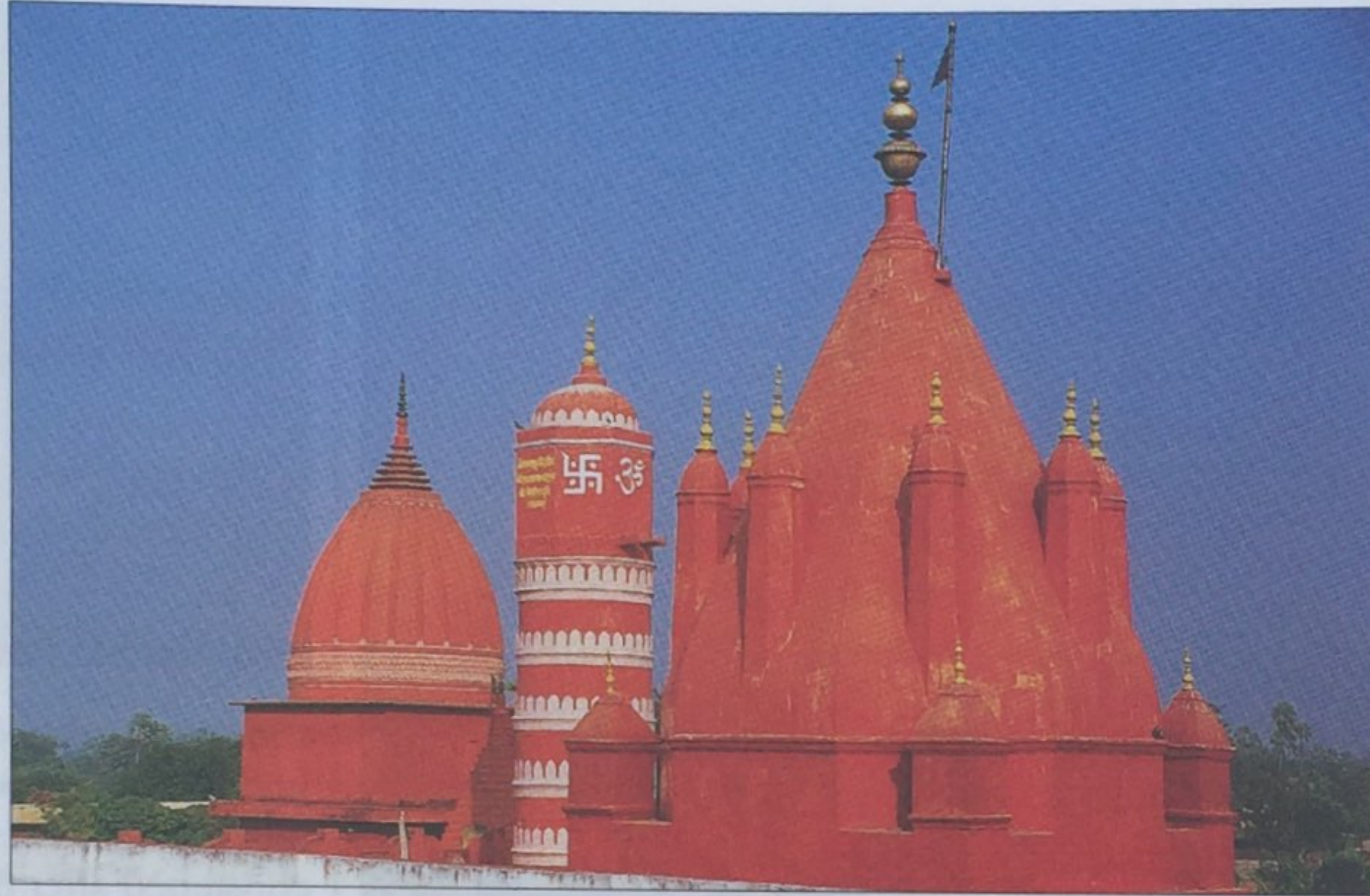
# India Perspectives











Digambar Jain Mandir at Bhagalpur.

# Bhagalpur

## WHERE HISTORY REVERBERATES

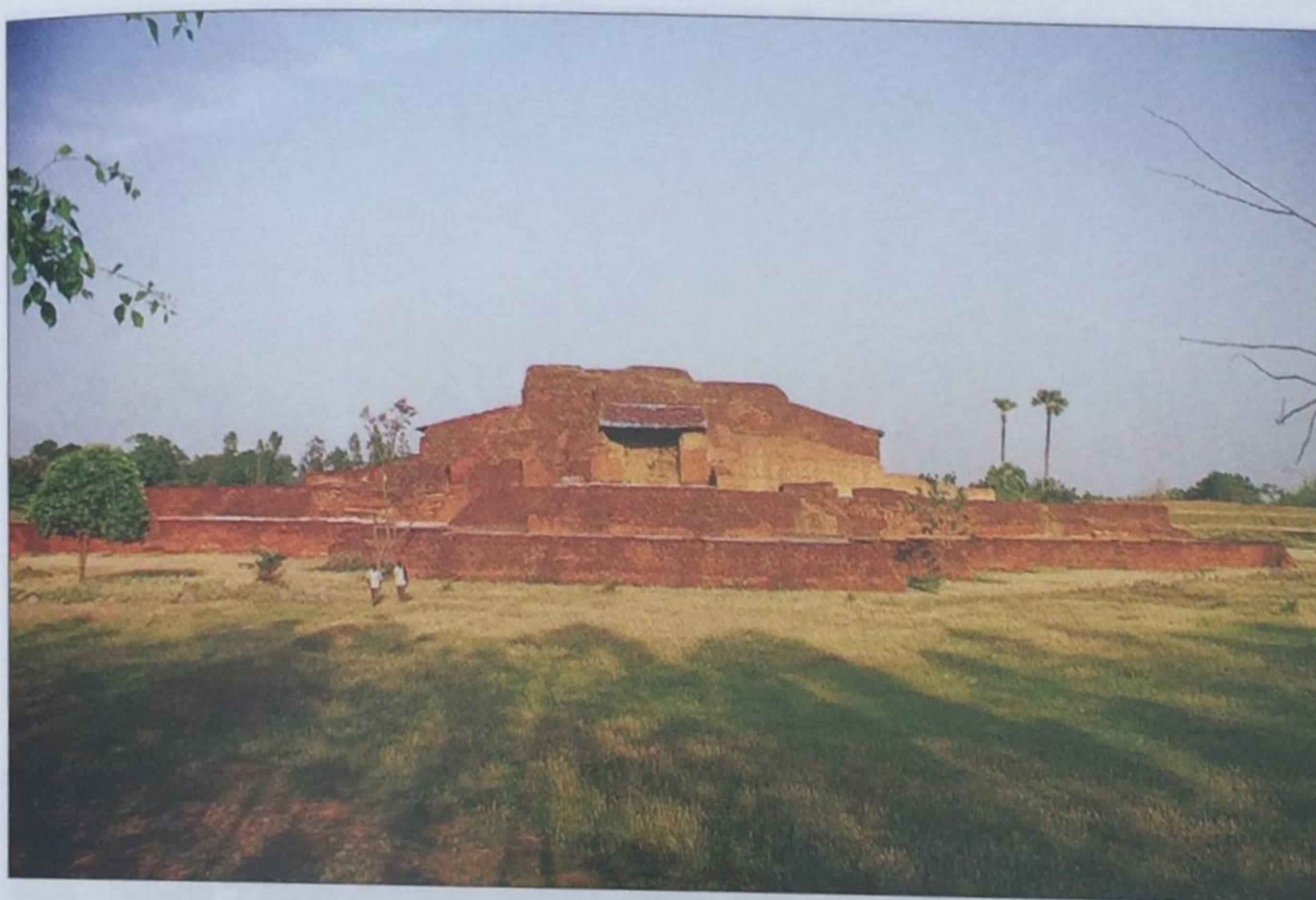
Text: SHAHID AKHTAR MAKHFI  
Photographs: SHAHEEN PERVEEN

*The leavening brush of India's ancient history exerts everywhere in Bihar. Though Bhagalpur today is a silent town, one can still feel the past resonating here. After all, it ranked among the six best Indian cities at one time.*

Legend, buttressed by a little hard evidence, has it that today's Bhagalpur was the Champavati of 5th century BC. It was a period when India's earliest republics were evolving around the Gangetic plains. Anga was one of these sixteen *Mahajanapadas* (republics), and Champavati its capital. It was also referred to as Malini, Champapuri, Champa Malini and Kala Malini.

Foundation of this kingdom is attributed to a prince named Anga. The Jaina *Sutras* refer to the city as adorned with gates, ramparts, palaces, parks and gardens. The city is depicted as a veritable paradise on earth, full of wealth, prosperity, joy and happiness. Champa traces its origin to the neolithic age when it was lucrative enough for the early settlers to inhabit the region. Ancient history enumerates no





Above: Excavated ruins of the Vikramsila University.

Right: Rock-cut sculptures at the Vateshwarsthan (6th to 7th century AD).



less than 25 kings who ruled Anga prior to the period of the *Mahabharata*. One such king was Lomapada, a contemporary and friend of Raja Dasratha (father of Lord Rama). The last among these kings was Karna, son of Kunti who fought the Great *Mahabharata* War as the commander-in-chief of the Kaurava army.

Anga, in the age of Buddha, was ruled by Brahmadatta, the last independent king who was killed by Bimbisara as a revenge for his father's defeat. Bimbisara resided at Champa as Viceroy and his son Ajatsatru was so enamoured by the beauty of this vanquished city that he shifted his capital from Rajgir to Champa when he ascended the throne. Later, when Magadhans picked up a quarrel with the republic of

Vaishali, they strengthened Patliputra and made it their new capital.

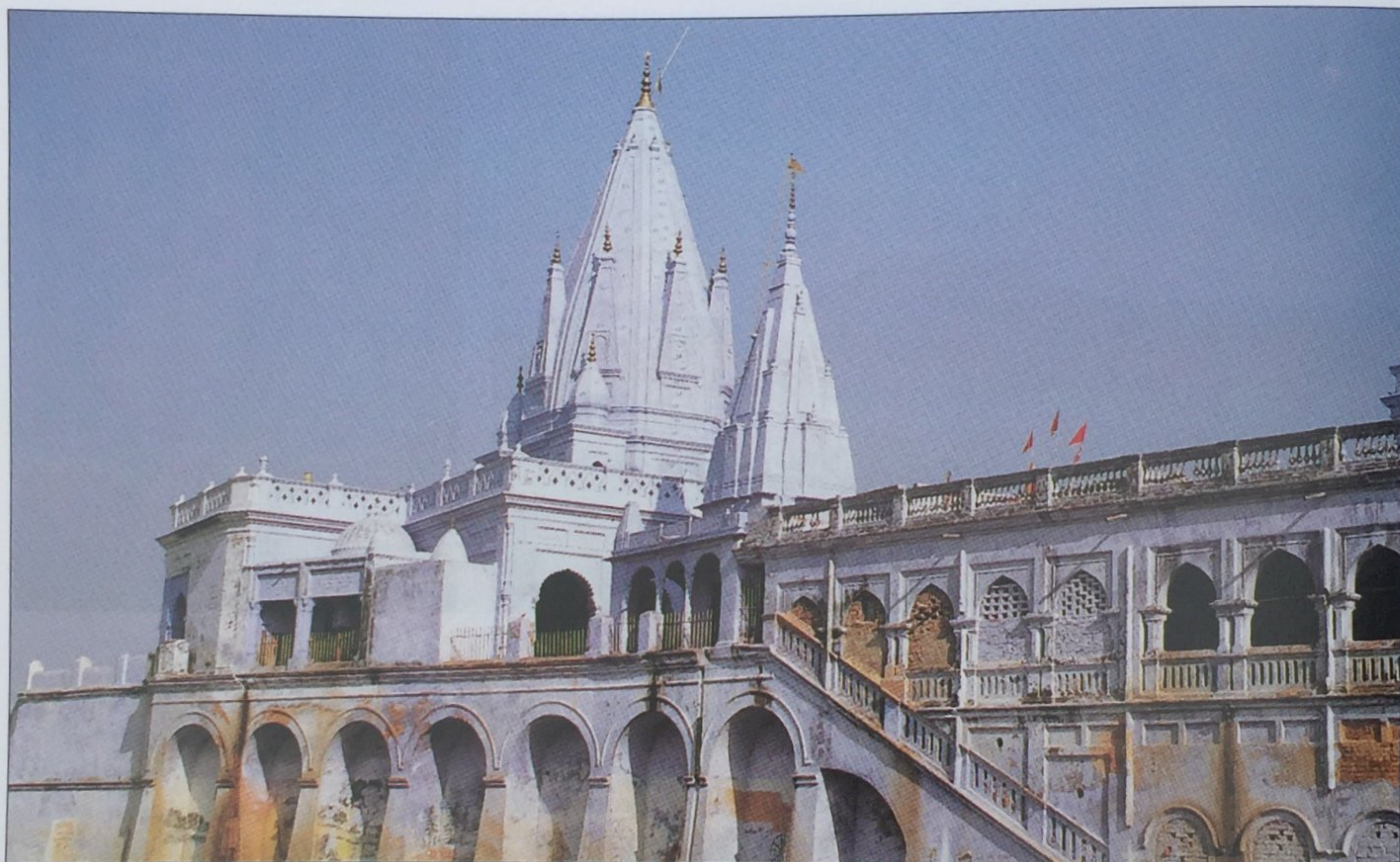
Champa was a fertile ground for the spread of both Jainism and Buddhism. The 12th Jain Tirthankar, Vasupujya, was born here and he spent his life preaching the doctrines of Jainism. Mahavira spent three *parjjusanas* (rainy seasons) here and the first female convert to Jainism after his *Kaivalya* (enlightenment) was a princess from Champa named Chandana. Sudharman, one of the select eleven disciples of Mahavira, was a native of this city and highly venerated.

Ajatsatru went barefoot beyond the city gates to receive him. Buddha too frequented this place and made numerous converts. He offered several sermons here, including one on *Dana* (charity). It was here that the Buddha was compelled to prescribe the use of

slippers by the monks. Ashoka's mother, Subhadra, belonged to Champa and he appointed his son Mahendra as the Magadhan governor of this city which continued to prosper despite dynastic changes. Its glory was once again revived by the Pala kings of Bengal (8th-12th century) who not only strengthened the Buddhist cause but have left behind a distinct stamp on the art form of the period. The Palas are further credited with the creation of Vikramsila university.

The great mound in the heart of Champagnagar, surrounded by a moat, does not arouse curiosity in absence of lofty structures but excavations in and around the site have yielded traces of a fortified complex, besides an abundance of polished wares. Archaeologists have ascertained that the rampart was made of rammed earth, which was later (2nd century B.C) rivetted with





Above: The Burhanath Temple.  
Facing Page: Shahi Jama Masjid of Astana  
Shahbazia.

burnt bricks. The mound referred to as Karngarh or the Palace of Raja Karan was overgrown with forest until Augustus Cleveland, the first Collector of the District, had it cleared. Today, this elevated structure houses a century old Sanskrit school besides the famous Manskamna Nath Mandir.

On the other end of Karngarh is the Ayurvedic College, a Catholic Church and other institutions. Down the road is the Royal Bridge, reminiscent of the Mughal forces who marched along this old road. Akbar camped here twice, in 1573 and 1575, but later the place was reduced to being the headquarter of the imperial *faujdars* (military governors). The

Maratha forces on their way to Bengal in 1743 lost their way at Bhagalpur (Champanagar) and had to pay a hefty amount in return for guidance to their destination. At the close of the 18th century, Bhagalpur was reduced to a mere *pargana* in the Monghyr *sarkar*.

A mile from the Karngarh mound we find four elevations which are believed to have served as observation towers of the fort. In the north-east is Tilhakothi, the hillock which impressed the Collector Cleveland so much that he erected his residence here.

History accounts for Champa as flourishing port-city and its maritime glory continued till the days of the Raj. There are





numerous references to merchant boats and missionary monks sailing from Champa to far off places like Suvannadipa (South-East Asia). Emigrants from Champa to Cochin are believed to have named their new settlements after this famous port-city. Kalidasa refers to the ripples of the Malaini river on the banks of which Sakuntala came with her friends. During medieval days Bhagalpur swords were in great demand as they were noted for their sharpness and durability. European traders in India often turned to Bhagalpur, which was famous for cloth that fetched a high price in Europe. Even today, *tasar* (coarse silk) is manufactured and traded here. In the last quarter of the 18th

century, Bhagalpur was popular with European indigo planters who acquired extensive landed properties here to cultivate indigo. Bishop Heber, who visited Bhagalpur in 1829, observed that the city was one of the healthiest stations in India.

Fa Hein on his way back to China via the port city of Champa mentions seeing *Stupas*, *Viharas* and Buddhist monks: Hiuen Tsang refers to this place as Chen-Po and accounts for various *Viharas* in ruins. He lauded the fertility of the soil and praised the people for their simplicity, honesty and good manners.

Bhagalpur, being an important junction between Delhi and Bengal, continued to be a

popular destination throughout medieval history. However, the fate of the city swayed with the fortunes of the kings of Delhi and the rulers of Bengal. Various grandees passed by this important city and have left their mark. During the Tughlaq period it was a mint town and was greatly patronised by the Mughals. A number of educational institutions were popular in medieval Bhagalpur. Jehan Ara awarded *jagirs* for the upkeep of a student *madarsa* founded by Maulana Shahbaz, a scholar and a saint who was an authority on Mohammadan law and tradition.

He established the *Khanqah-i-Shahbazia*, a highly reputed institution with a rich library and





Above: The Christ Church.  
Facing page: The Clock Tower.

a rallying centre for scholars and men of learning. One of the five jurists invited by Aurangzeb for the compilation of his famous *Fatwa-i-Alamgiri* was Mir Muhammad Radhi from Bhagalpur. In 1669, he received a daily allowance of three rupees and was later raised to the rank of an *Amir*. Sheikh Nizam, another noted theologian of his times, was also welcomed to the Mughal court. The *Khanqah-i-Shabbazia*, adjoining the Bhagalpur Railway Station, continues to be a flourishing seminary.

A visit to the *Khanqah* reveals a number of surprises such as the oldest mosque in Bhagalpur

wrapped in a black dome. The typical Bengali roof over the medieval tombs houses the *Kadam-i-Rasool* (footprints of the prophet) and other memorabilia dating back to medieval days. The library of the *Khanqah* is rich in Arabic and Persian theological works, which include hand written books dating back to the days of Maulana Shahbaz. One of the prized possessions of the library is the Holy Quran transcribed by Murshid Quli Khan, the *nawab* of Murshidabad, who was fond of donating his works to various *Khanqahs*.

◆  
The author is a noted travel writer.



