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Gaur & Pandua

RELICS OF BYGONE GLORY

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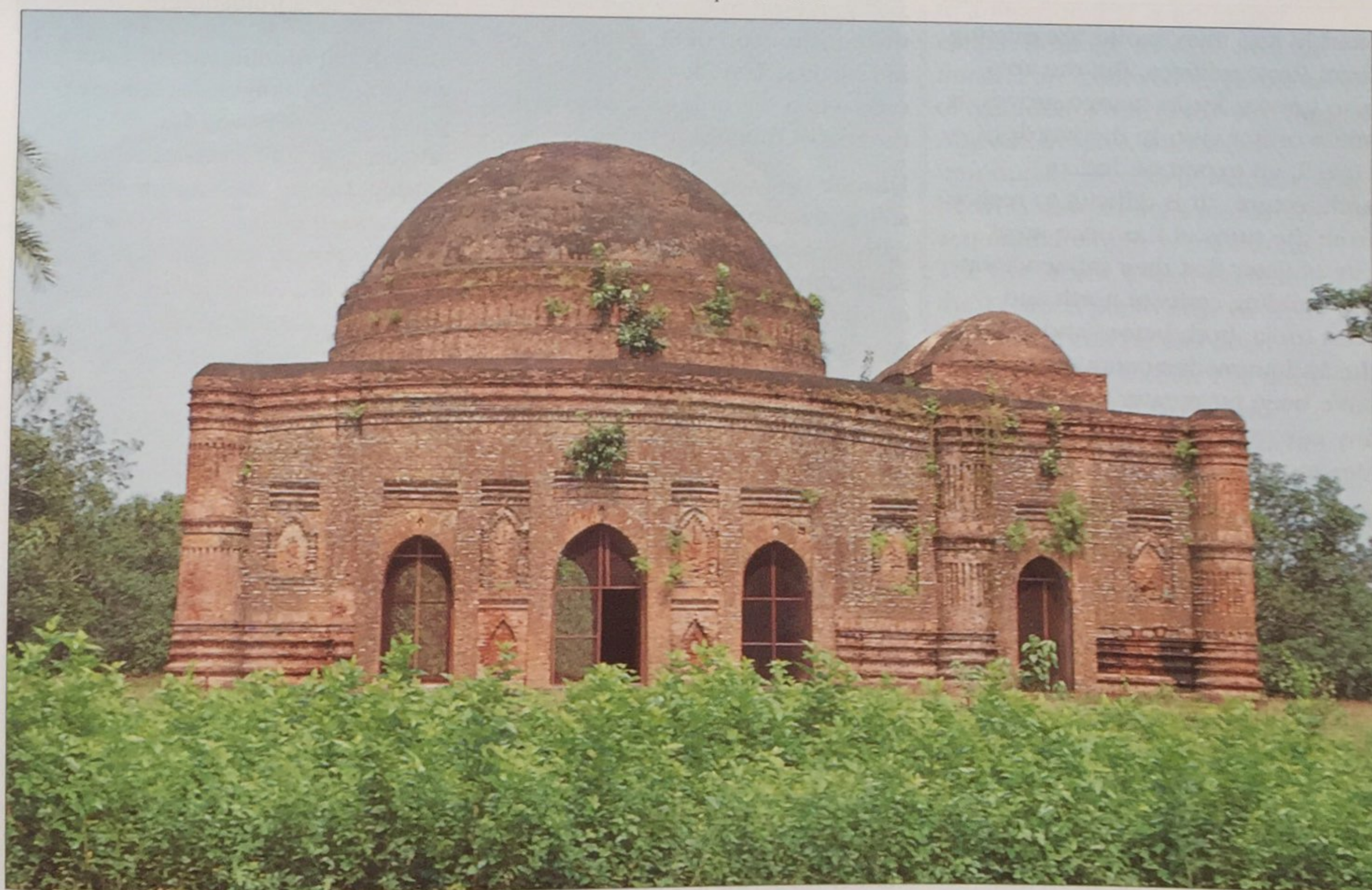
In the wilderness of the eastern fringe of India, along the border with Bangladesh, is a remote little area known as Gaur. Sher Shah, the Afghan monarch, summed it up as "a great city built on great ideas." Sher's Mughal adversary, Humayun, was so enamoured by the climate and beautiful surroundings of this great city that he christened it *Junnatabad*, the heavenly city.

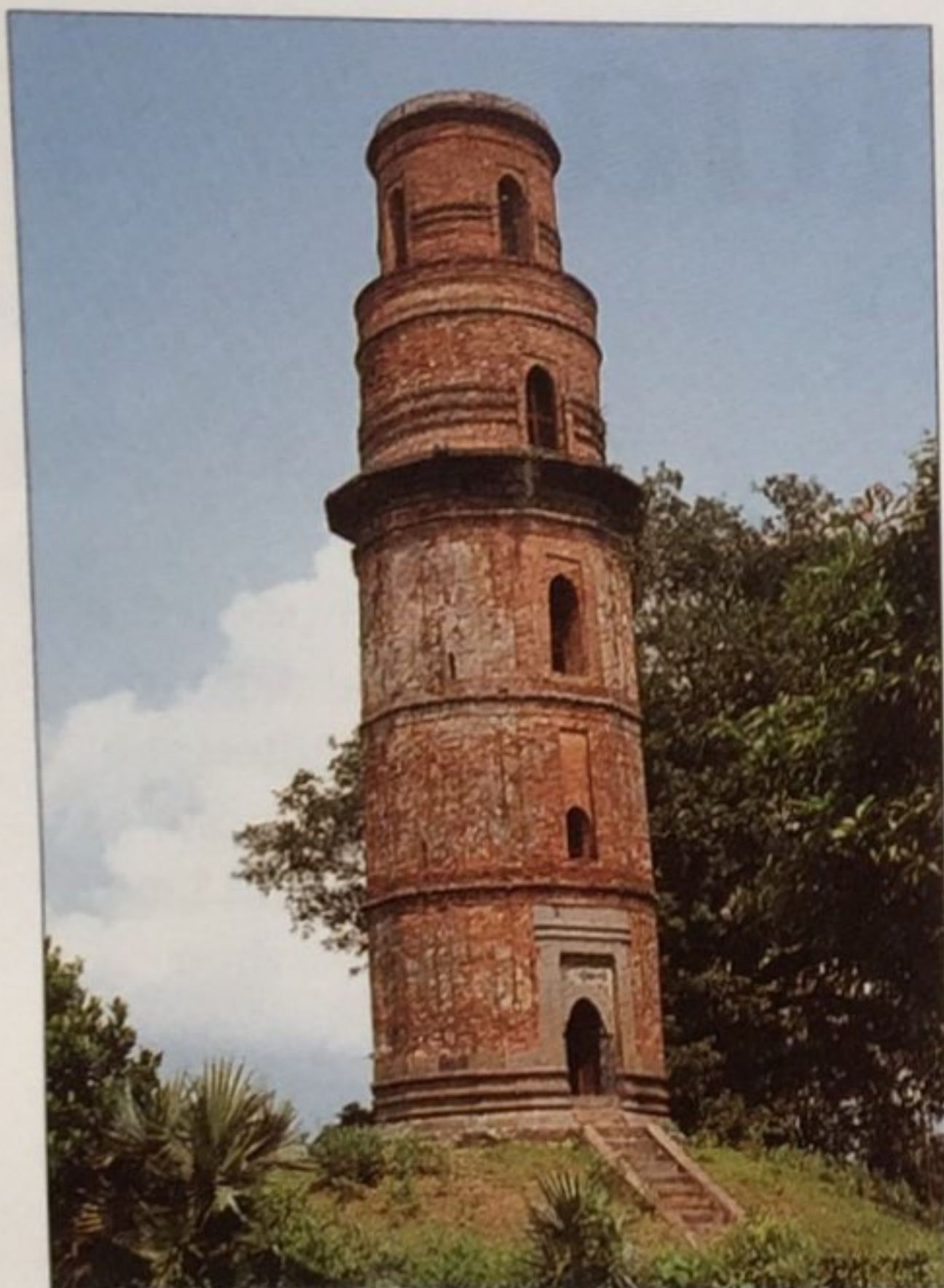
The terrestrial paradise, however, predates the Mughals and Afghans. History records Lakhnauti (ancient name of Gaur) as a metropolis of 7th century Bengal under King Sasanka, who was succeeded by the Buddhist Pala dynasty (8th century) which, in turn, was taken over by the Sena dynasty. By this time, Gaur was a flourishing capital famed as a seat of learning, art and culture. The Turks, in 1204,

stormed the city and remodelled it. A few centuries later, the Afghans plundered the city and shifted the capital of Bengal to Pandua, 20 miles north-east of Gaur. Still later, the Mughal masters added their own touch to the place.

Visitors to Gaur and Pandua will find these places replete with monuments well preserved. Unfortunately, the colourful tiles,

The Lattan mosque in Gaur.





Gaur's Firoz Minar (above) and entrance to the Bara Sona mosque.



marble and inlay works are missing from these edifices. But the area, also known for its mango groves, is still worth a visit. In the words of Havell, an expert on Indian architecture, "It is difficult to realize from the ruins of this once great city of Gaur that their influence on the building crafts of north and west India, both before and after the Muhammadan conquest, must have been far greater than that of any city in Persia, Arabia or Mesopotamia."

The fortunes of Gaur were eclipsed soon after the Mughal occupation in sixteenth century. Plague and earthquake ravaged the city and it was deserted. The splendid buildings were left to nature's mercy. People were loath to return and for quite some time it remained woebegone. Occasionally, nearby villagers entered the ghost city to procure the building materials abounding in the area. Even the

British at one time considered removing the marble that lay waste and scattered in Gaur and use it for the construction of St. John's church in Calcutta. The idea was shelved only when the orthodox opposed the use of pilfered material.

Despite past depredations, Gaur is still a spectacular sentinel studded with an array of architectural achievements. Consider the curvilinear roof for instance. This typical sloping bamboo roof cornice is a practical design for quick dispersal of the heavy downpour in Bengal. This feature, as a matter of decoration, can be seen at places as far as Delhi and Lahore. The first extant example of such a roof constructed of stucco over bricks can be seen in the tomb of Fateh Khan, a Mughal general. The rectangular tomb lies in the compound of *Qadam Rasul* mosque, constructed in 1530 by Sultan Nusrat Shah to preserve the Prophet's footprint. *Saugar Digi* is an artificial reservoir. Yet another smaller reservoir is *Piayaswari*, 'the

abode of thirst', known for its bitter water that was served usually to criminals as a punishment.

Most of the monuments in Gaur are without their epigraphs, some of which were removed for safekeeping while others were lost to time. Dating the monuments with precision, therefore, is a difficult task. *Chakmati* mosque is ranked as one of the earliest mosques. Its date, 1478, can be fixed with certainty as the inscription is preserved in the British museum. It was built by Sultan Yusuf Shah, one of the Sultans of Bengal.

The largest and perhaps the most impressive monuments at Gaur is the *Bara Sona Masjid* (Big Golden Mosque). It was built in 1526 by Sultan Nusrat Shah. The massive mosque is rectangular in plan with eleven arched openings. The roof is spanned by 44 hemispherical domes, of which eleven still exist. These domes were originally gilded and hence its name, *Sona* or Golden. From the interior these

domes are arched and built half in brick and half in stone. An impressive gateway to the east stands as a silent guard to the grand mosque.

The builders of Gaur guarded their citadel with numerous gates, some of which have survived the ravages of time. *Kotwali Darwaza* to the south is a fifteenth century gate. It once had a monumental pointed entrance arch with massive semi-circular bastions on either side. Today, it is reduced to a small niche of bricks. West of *Qadam Rasul Masjid* is the stupendous defensive brick wall called

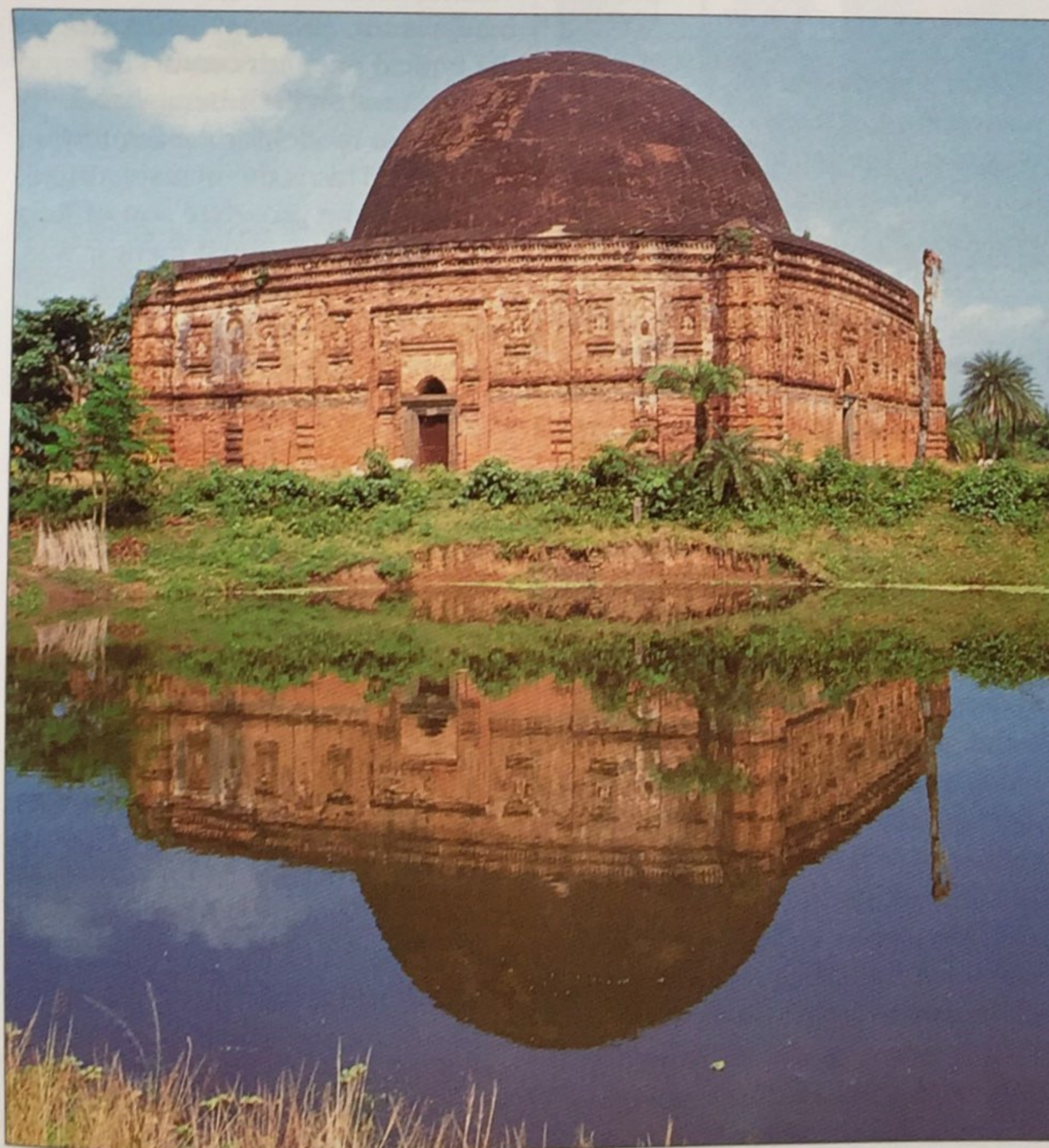
Baisgazi, the very name being indicative of its height of 22 *gaz* (20.11 mt.) On the eastern periphery there are two gateways, *Gumpti Darwaza* and *Lukochori Darwaza*. The former is a small square domed structure dating to the late fifteenth century while the latter was built in 1655 by a Mughal prince, Shah Shuja, as a royal entrance. The double storey tripartite gate has inner apartments to serve as guard rooms and drummer's chamber on the top. The most impressive gateway, however, is the *Dakhil Darwaza* - the early fifteenth century ceremonial entrance also known as the *Salami*

Darwaza. It is a perfect blend of decorative beauty and structural proportion. The 35 mt. high entrance is noted for its huge arched passage at the centre and double barrel vaulted rooms, one each on either side, intended for the guards. Its four corners are topped by a 12-sided tower, five storeys high and capped by a dome.

South east of *Dakhil Darwaza* (halfway between *Lukochori*) is an interesting brick minaret. This is the 26 m high *Firoz Minar* built in the late fifteenth century. The crowning cupola is missing but the surface decoration in brick and terracotta makes it quite appealing, although the blue and white tiles have vanished. It was originally attached to a mosque that is no longer extant. Both the mosque and the minaret are believed to be the work of Saifuddin Firoz (1487-90), the Abyssinian slave who set an unfortunate precedent, namely, that he who slew a king's murderer acquired the right to the throne. The five storey tower, excluding the 12-sided plinth now covered with earth, can be ascended by a spiral staircase within. The three lower storeys are twelve sided, followed by a projecting balcony topped by two circular storeys. The top most storey is pierced with four arched openings.

Other monuments of interest in the vicinity are the *Chika* mosque, *Gunmat* mosque, *Lattan* mosque, *Tantipara* mosque and *Chamkati* mosque. *Chikka* mosque is known for its most evident Hindu influences. *Lattan* mosque is named after a dancing girl of Gaur.

The Eklakhi tomb.





The Adina mosque of Pandua.

It is still a profusion of multicoloured glazed tiles. *Tantipara* is popular for its delicate, flowering brick relief work, which ranks it as one of the most beautiful.

Monuments in the sister capital of Pandua (34 kms from Gaur) are perhaps less in numerical terms but some are real medieval marvels. In fact, Pandua possesses some of the finest examples of Muslim architecture of the period. *Adina Masjid* has rightly been construed as the *piece de resistance*. Judged as the largest mosque in the subcontinent, it was erected in 1374 by the newly established Ilyas Shahi dynasty. Though in ruins, the visual proclamations determine its original appearance. Delhi's Jama Masjid in comparison to this mosque appears to be the puny castle of a child! Covering an area of 174 metres by 92 metres, the mosque is known for its barrel vaulted central bay of the prayer chamber. The most remarkable

feature, however, is the total absence of any entrance gateway worthy of such a structure. The monotonous façade of the building must have been even more apparent with its 378 identical domes that shaded the mosque supported by 260 pillars. The western wall deserves a closer look for its double storey structure known as *Badshah ka Takht* - a formation quite unparalleled in India. It was the king's entrance and was later converted into a makeshift tomb for Sikandar Shah, patron of this mosque.

If you feel upset by the monotony of the *Adina* Mosque, consider visiting the most elegant mausoleum, *Eklakhi*, that represents the typical fifteenth century architectural style of Bengal and serves as a model for subsequent buildings. This is the mausoleum of Jalaluddin, the proselyte son of Raja Ganesh. Jalal's spiritual mentor was Nur Qutb Alam whose *dargah* complex is replete with mosque, tomb, tank, guest house and other structures. A still older *dargah* is the *Bari Dargah* and dates back to 1337. It was the spiritual centre of Shah Jalaluddin Tabrezi. Perpetual renovations have made it difficult to ascertain the original structure but it continues to be cared from the proceeds of 2,200 *bighas* of land even today. This was a gift for the saint by the Hindu raja who venerated him. North of this is the *Qutb Shahi* Mosque built in honour of the saint by one of his followers in 1582. Its ten small domes are no longer there but the mosque is still counted as the last specimen in the series of mosques with a double aisled prayer chamber.

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