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India Perspectives



Patliputra

THE GLORY THAT WAS...

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The lofty, hypnotic lure of ancient India finds anchorage in the city of Patliputra. Buddha attested its birth while Hieun Tsang saw it abandoned. Sher Shah revived it and today, pulsating with life, Patna is more than what archaeologists are looking for.

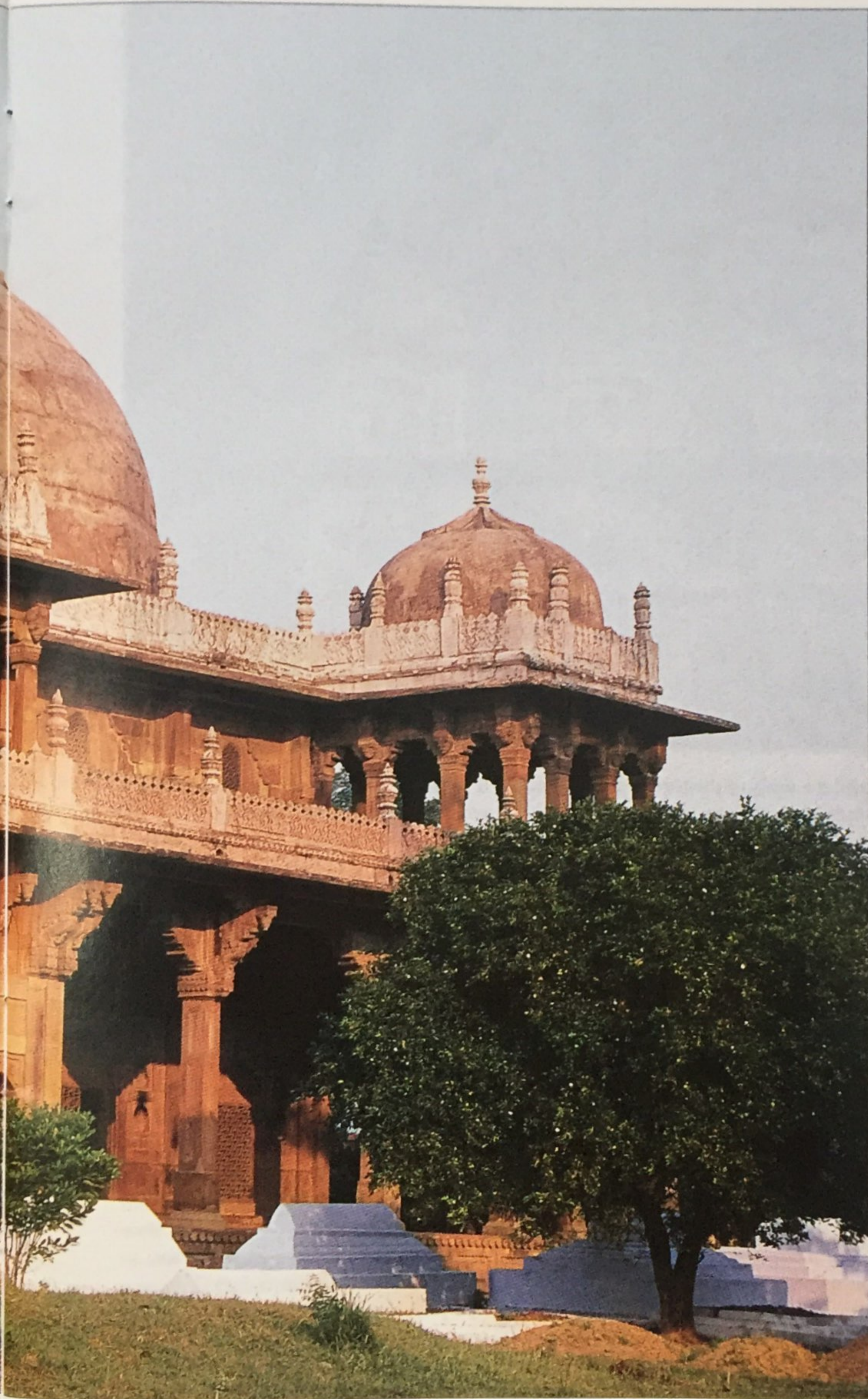
Patna at its earliest was a small straggling village with the name of Patali or Pataligrama as mentioned in Buddhist texts. The origin, according to Jain and Puranic traditions, is ascribed to a

king who was overwhelmed with grief owing to his father's death. The council of ministers advised him to bypass the city of his father and build a new one. Experts were sent in different directions to locate

Kumrahar – the site where ancient palace of Patliputra stood.







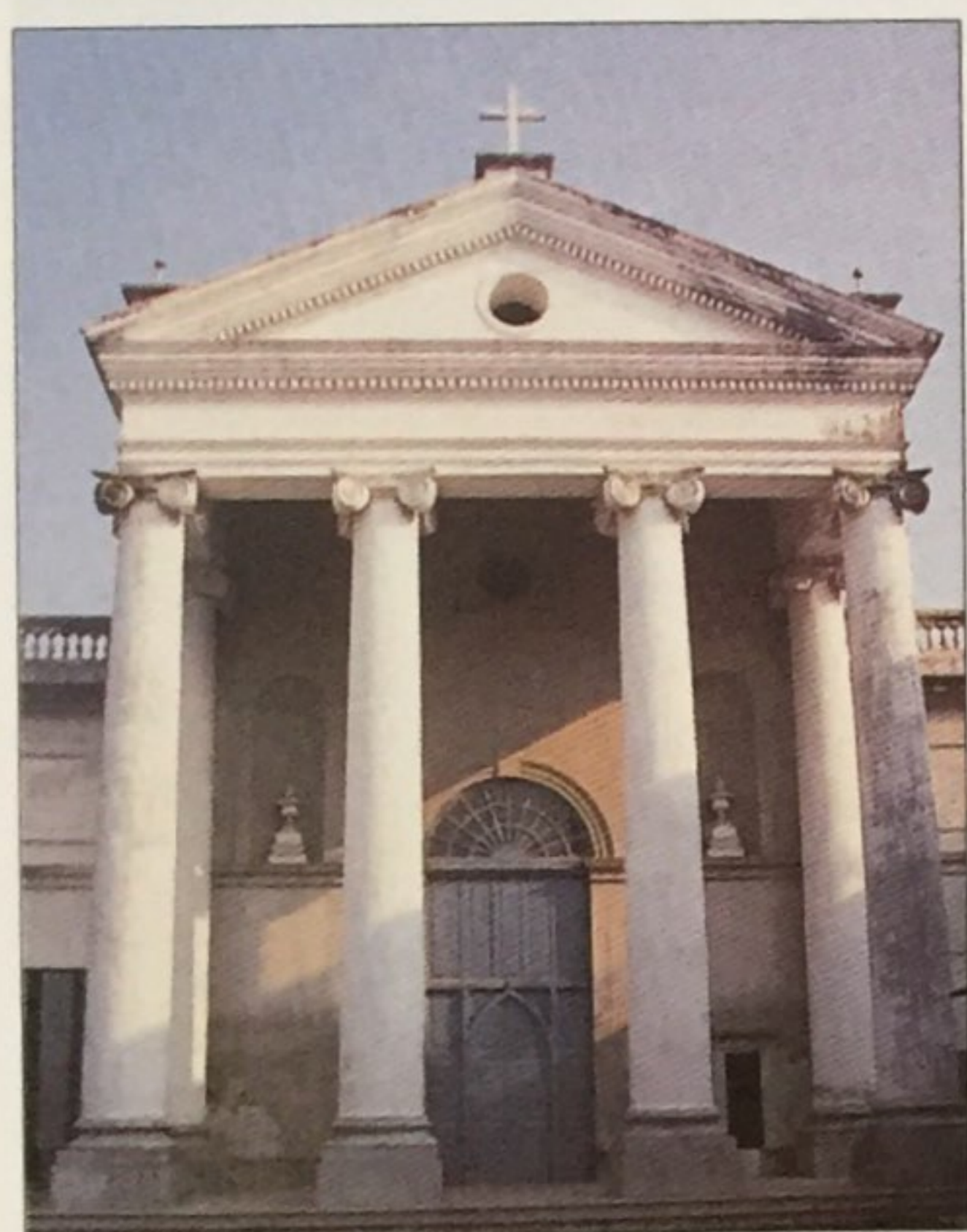
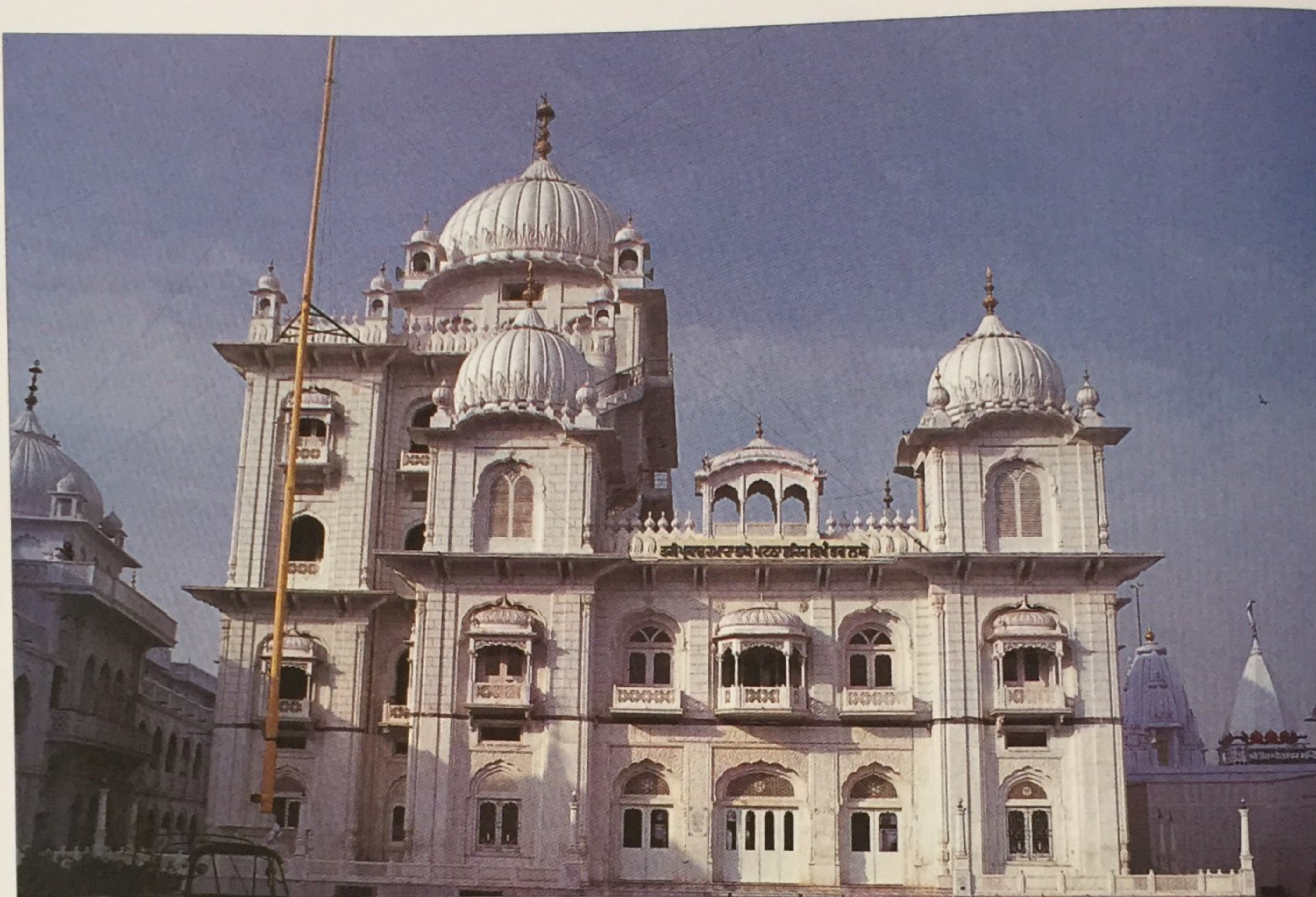
a suitable place which was discovered on the banks of Ganga. What impressed them was a shining Patali tree burdened with flowers of thick foliage; hence the name Patali.

King Ajatshatru was interested in shifting his capital from the hilly Rajagriha to a more strategic Patali, on the confluence of the Ganga, to serve as a base for his operations against the Lichchhavis. This fact is further corroborated by Buddha who was impressed by the site when he saw the fort being erected here while he was passing by this village in the last year of his life. The enlightened one further prophesied a great future for the new found city but simultaneously predicted its ruin from flood, feud or fire.

Patali, under different names like Pataligrama, Kusumpura, Pushpapura, Kusum Dhvaja, Padmavati, Patliputra, Azimabad, and finally Patna served various dynasties. However, it witnessed its golden days under the Mauryas in the 4th century B.C. who brought about an all-India empire for the first time. The lofty buildings and parapets for which Patliputra was known impressed Patanjali to the extent that he referred to them in his grammatical examples. Patliputra's fame as a centre of learning outlived its political glory where scholars like Aryabhata, Ashvaghosha, Chanakya, Panini, Sthalabhadra, Vatsyayana (author of Kamasutra) penned their ideals. Greek ambassador Megasthenes left behind a vivid account of Patliputra which is further supplemented by Kautilya's work and much later by the Chinese travellers.

A fertile imagination is required to recreate the Mauryan Patliputra

The Dargah of Sharfuddin Yahya Maneri.



Takht Harmandir Sahib (top) and the "Padri ki Haveli" (above).

replete with multistoreyed wooden buildings, palaces surrounded by parks and ponds. If we are to believe the Greek accounts of Selukos Niketor, the royal parks were lined with evergreen trees, which neither grew old nor shed their leaves. The capital city with more than 500 towers and 64 gates was surrounded by wooden palisade with loopholes for the arches. A moat around the city served the dual purpose of defence as well as sewage disposal. Every street had its water courses serving as house drains that finally emptied into the moat. Any deposit that obstructed the passage was punishable by law. House owners were also required to have fire prevention elements and the streets were provided with vessels of water and sand kept ready in thousands.

It was Ashoka who transformed the wooden capital into a stone construction around 273 B.C. This sudden change prompted Fa Hein, who visited India between 400-15 AD, believe that demons were commissioned to erect these massive stone structures.

Mauryan architecture is one of the least known subjects in Indian history, though literary references to palaces, forts, halls and stupas are aplenty but archaeological evidences are scarce. Kumarahar site at Patna is associated with the ancient Palace site of Patliputra. The excavations have brought to light the period from 600 B.C. to 600 A.D. Here one can admire the remains of the 80 pillared hall that impressed Magasthenese most. These pillars with the magic of



Saif Khan's mosque.

Mauryan polish continue to impress even the architects of today. Arranged in eight rows with ten pillars in each, the plan resembles the hall of hundred columns at Persepolis. Possibly, Kautilya urged the king to attend the public issues here for three hours each day.

Within the Kumarahar complex are the excavated remains of Ashoka's charitable hospital. A little distance away is another Ashokan remain, the *Agam Kuan* or the fathomless well which is believed to be a part of the legendary hell created by the emperor. Later he demolished the hell and embarked on better projects of compassion and piety. Besides the numerous rock edicts proclaiming his message of

universal peace, he is credited with the construction of 84,000 stupas throughout his mighty kingdom.

Since the imperial innings of the Mauryas and the Sungas, Patliputra lay, not in darkness but in perpetual twilight. Besides the loss of political patronage, Patliputra suffered the ravages of nature. At the close of the 6th century, continuous rain for 17 days devastated the city which had earlier been set aflame by the Greeks. Patliputra further witnessed violence and bloodshed at the hands of Kharavela, Shasank and Huns who were all set to destroy the vestiges of Buddhist establishment.

Patliputra was revived by Sher Shah Suri in the middle of the 16th century. On his return from one of

the expeditions, while standing by the Ganga, he said, "If a fort were to be built at this place, the waters of the Ganga could never flow far from it, and Patna would become one of the great towns of this country." Sher Shah's fort in Patna does not survive, except for some of the walls that have been incorporated within the complex of the Jalan House which was formerly the nawab's haveli but now a private residence that houses an interesting museum famous for its jade collection and Chinese porcelain.

A little away from this place is the historic mosque of Sher Shah where there are numerous tombs, including that of Mustafa Khan Rohilla. The earliest mosque in Patna is dated 1489 and erected by



The Patna Museum.

Alauddin Hussani Shah (one of the Bengal rulers). Locally it is called Begu Hajjam's mosque, simply because it was repaired in 1646 by a barber of this name.

It was in August 1574 when Akbar came to Patna to crush the Afghan Chief Daud Khan. His successful siege resulted in an enormous booty that included 265 elephants and much more to the rejoicing of common people who enjoyed picking up gold coins and other articles on the river bank through which Daud had fled to Orissa under the cover of darkness. Akbar's Secretary of State and author of *Ain-i-Akbari* refers to Patna as a flourishing centre for paper, stone and glass industries.

He also attests to the high quality and the numerous varieties of rice

grown in Patna that had gained popularity in Europe. Much later, the Venetian traveller Manucci was impressed by the fine earthen pottery and the cups of clay made in Patna that were finer than glass, lighter than paper and highly scented.

Shah Jahan as a rebel prince visited Patna together with Queen Mumtaz and their architectural pursuit finds reflection in the shape of a beautiful mosque cum madarsa by the side of the Ganga. It was built by Saif Khan, the Mughal governor married to Mumtaz's eldest sister, Malika Bano. Other Mughal constructions include the Idgah and a serai that was once rented for months to make it easier for foreign traders. Later in 1704, Mughal Emperor Aurangzeb acceded to the request of his favourite grandson,

Prince Muhammad Azim, to rename Patna as Azimabad after his own name. Prince Azim was a young prince who aspired to make Patna a second Delhi but his ambition was cut short by the fratricidal war. With the decline of Mughal power, Patna slipped into the hands of the Nawabs of Bengal, who maintained its commercial prosperity.

Patna during the 17th century was the centre of international trade. The Britishers started with a factory in Patna in 1620 for the purchase and storage of Ambati calico and silk. Soon it became a trading point for saltpeter, musk, rice and other commodities urging other European powers like the French, the Dutch and the Portuguese to compete in the lucrative business. Various European factories and godowns started mushrooming in Patna and it acquired a trading fame that attracted far off merchants.

Peter Mundy reached Patna in 1632 after his 25-day sojourn that covered 544 miles from Agra; 21.75 miles per day on a bullock cart speaks high of the medieval roadways! He describes Patna as the greatest mart of the eastern region. Another European, Manrique, talks of its population as 200,000.

Bankipore Club is precisely the place where the Dutch are believed to have anchored their boats and the dance hall of the club is one of the original Dutch buildings. Today's Patna College administrative block was said to be the Dutchman's residence. Other important European landmarks are the *Padri ki Haveli*, deemed to be the oldest church in Bihar dating back to 1772. Nearby is the Patna cemetery which was once the haveli of the Bengal nawabs. The cemetery is marked by an obelisk

that covers the remains of the 47 Englishmen done to death by Samru, a French freebooter in the army of Nawab Mir Qasim.

Takhat Harmandir Sahib here is one of the sacred Sikh shrines, marking the birthplace of the 10th Sikh Guru Gobind Singh. The present five-storeyed building was completed in 1957 though it was started by Maharaja Ranjit Singh. A little distance from the shrine is Mir Ashraf's mosque dating back to 1773 and admired for its beautiful tank just outside the mosque. A unique and Patna's only single domed mosque built during Shah Jehan's period can be seen around the Mangal Talao. Mirza Masoom's mosque, built in 1616, is appreciated for its beautiful black basalt door that possibly belonged to a Buddhist shrine as is evident from its rich carving.

Other places of interest in Patna include the Khuda Baksh Oriental Library, famous for its rare Arabic and Persian manuscripts, rich paintings and numerous volumes of rare books. Likewise the Patna Museum is a treasure house of stone sculptors dating back to the Mauryan period and other archaeological finds. Among the stone sculpture, special reference may be made of the famous Chouri bearer of the Mauryan period, popularly called *Didarganj Yakshi*. Another captivating image is that of *Shalabhanjika* (late Maurya Sunga period) in her full youthful posture, twisting the branches of the Sala tree. One of the museum's prized exhibits is the 16-metre long fossilized tree, and another priceless object that has just been included in the display section are the ashes of Lord Buddha.

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The author is a noted travel writer.