



Frontal view of Radha Govinda Temple

PHOTO: ANANTA YUSUF

# THE INHERITANCE OF LOSS

## Why do we treat our heritage with such neglect?

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This is a story of a journey into the past of Tongibari, an important part of the incredible Vikrampur civilisation. Once known as the City of Courage, Bikrampur's (as it is called now) glory might have faded a long time back but there are still some remnants that bear testimony to our rich past.

Before travelling to Tongibari upazila to get a firsthand account of the present state of some old architectural sites of the area, we had collected the archeological survey report of Munshiganj (hereafter referred as ASRM), published in 2000, to understand the changes inflicted on them over the last sixteen years. What we found was shocking. The old structures are dilapidated, in complete ruins. Some have decayed over time and some are on the verge of extinction. There are hardly any preservation efforts from the government. Fortunately, we were at least able to get some interesting stories on these cultural relics that speak volumes as to why these are more than just brick structures.

After a two-hour bus ride from Dhaka, we arrived at Tongibari Bazar. We asked the locals to direct us to the Sonarang Temples, showing them pictures of the temples for reference. They hardly recognised them and provided us with conflicting directions. Finally, we went to a nearby temple and got the route details. It took another twenty minutes on a scooter to reach the Sonarang Temples.

The Sonarangs are basically two temples, standing side by side on a single masonry platform. The temple on the west is a Kali temple while the one on the east is dedicated to Shiva. The ASRM notes that in an inscription fixed over the temple, it appeared that a certain Rupchandra had built the large Kali temple in 1843 and the smaller one was built in 1886. Unfortunately, we did not find the inscription. The locals also do not know about him neither do they have any idea about the construction period. The temples are now abandoned.

The surface of the *sikhara* (a Sanskrit word literally translating to mountain peak, which refers to the rising tower of a temple) of the Shiva temple is relieved with a concave arched panel with a serpent hood on each side, a feature that is repeated all over the structure. While speaking to residents of the area, one of them mused that there are hidden treasure chambers in *sikharas*. Another one stopped him from further elaboration, warning that the treasures are purportedly protected by giant snakes.

The design and decoration of both the temples bear close resemblance to each other. These are *nava-ratna* temples. On the second stage of the temples there are small *ratnas* (spires) around a relatively taller spire. Interestingly, there were three clocks engraved on the walls of temples, each showing different times of the day. These probably depict the prayer times. For us, this seemed to be a remarkable illustration of incorporation of modern symbols in traditional architecture.

A signboard of the Archeological Department near the site warns of fines and punishment for any harm done to the architecture of the temples. But the whole structure, with peeled off wall decorations, broken *ratnas* and serpent hoods, and encroaching weeds, bear testimony of gross

neglect. The plastered dome and a heap of bricks near the site indicate some renovation work in recent times. But the plaster work has wiped out the relief works of the surface, and the wall bears a distorted look, both in colour and design. The ASRM notes that there were two altars on a marble floor inside the dark sanctum of the temple, but without any idols. However, we did not find any such altars; instead, there were some sacks of cement in one of the sanctums. We hoped that the serpent story was true. At least that would save the temples from further dereliction.

After spending one hour at the Sonarganj Temples, we started for Balai Mosque and reached there with relative ease. The image of

have a plan to remove the old ramparts and build another mosque there. Though the cultural relic was included in the archeological survey, it, unfortunately, has not been preserved.

Our next destination was Outshahi Math, located at the village of the same name. The *sikhara* type structure, with 19 m long conical spire, can be viewed from a long distance. The surface of the spire is relieved with curved cornice designs, repeated vertically upwards from the base to the crest.

There is no signboard of the Archeological Department at this spot. Some Hindu families, who live near the Math, informed us that they do not know of any government

on the top of the Math are habitats of colourful birds that fly and chirp around the old relic.

It was already afternoon when we started for Mulchar village. There we found the oldest temple of Bikrampur, popularly known as the Radha Govinda temple. This is a good specimen of the *do-chala* temple, very popular in Bengal during the late medieval period. According to the ASRM, the temple may be dated to 16<sup>th</sup> century.

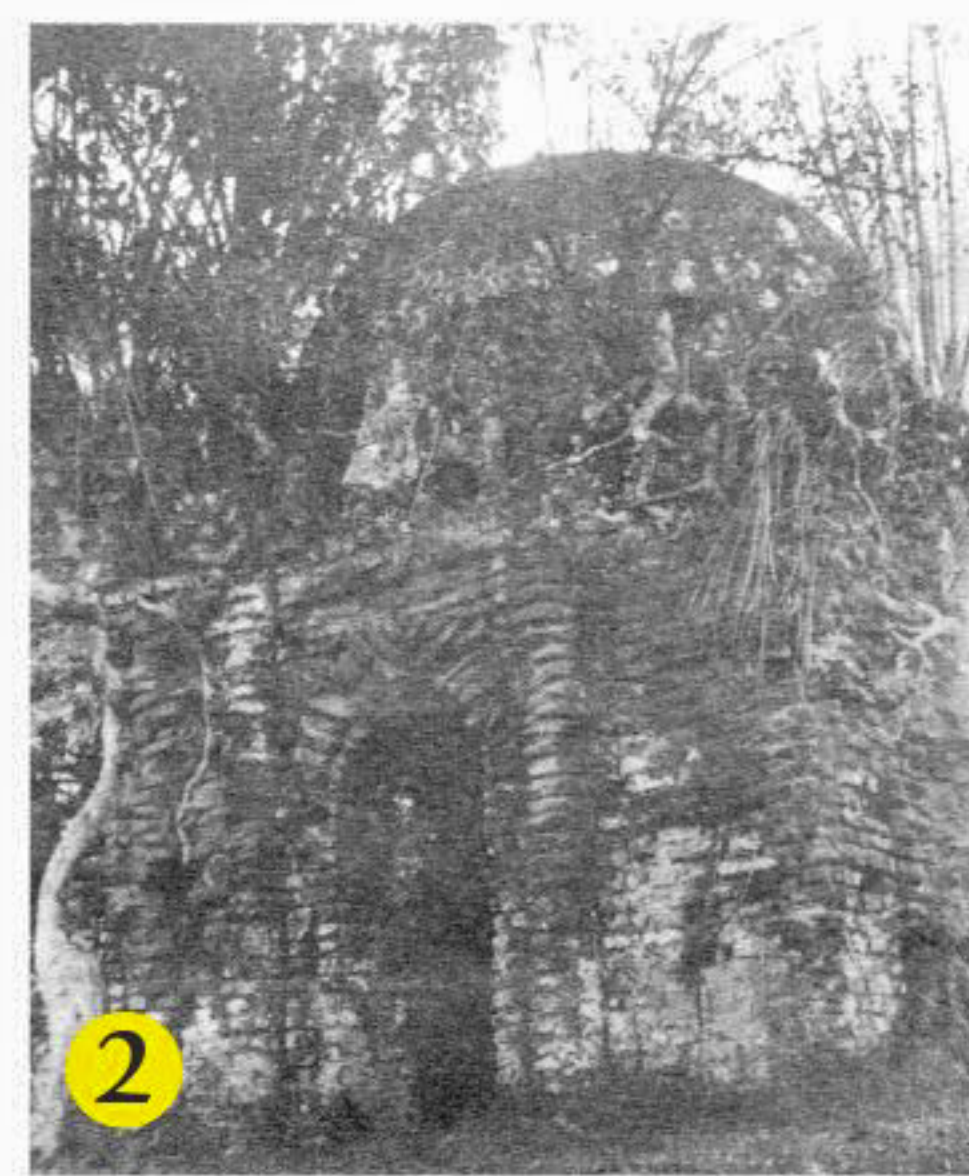
The south facing temple rises to a height of 4.50 m. This part is highly ornamented with terracotta panels; however, it is not in a good state. It has a curved roof with two sloping sides. The roof is badly damaged and both its

like a member of their family. Many people advised him to remove the structure and make profitable use of the land. But his family spared the land for the old relic, respecting the feelings of the devotees. At a time when we are befuddled with growing intolerance and religious bigotry, this story makes us proud. We feel assured that in the remote corners of our society, there are still people who have fondly preserved the spirit of communal harmony.

The temple has developed innumerable cracks that bear witness to its advanced stage of disintegration. Though it was included in the archeological survey, there is no visible effort from the government to protect it. It



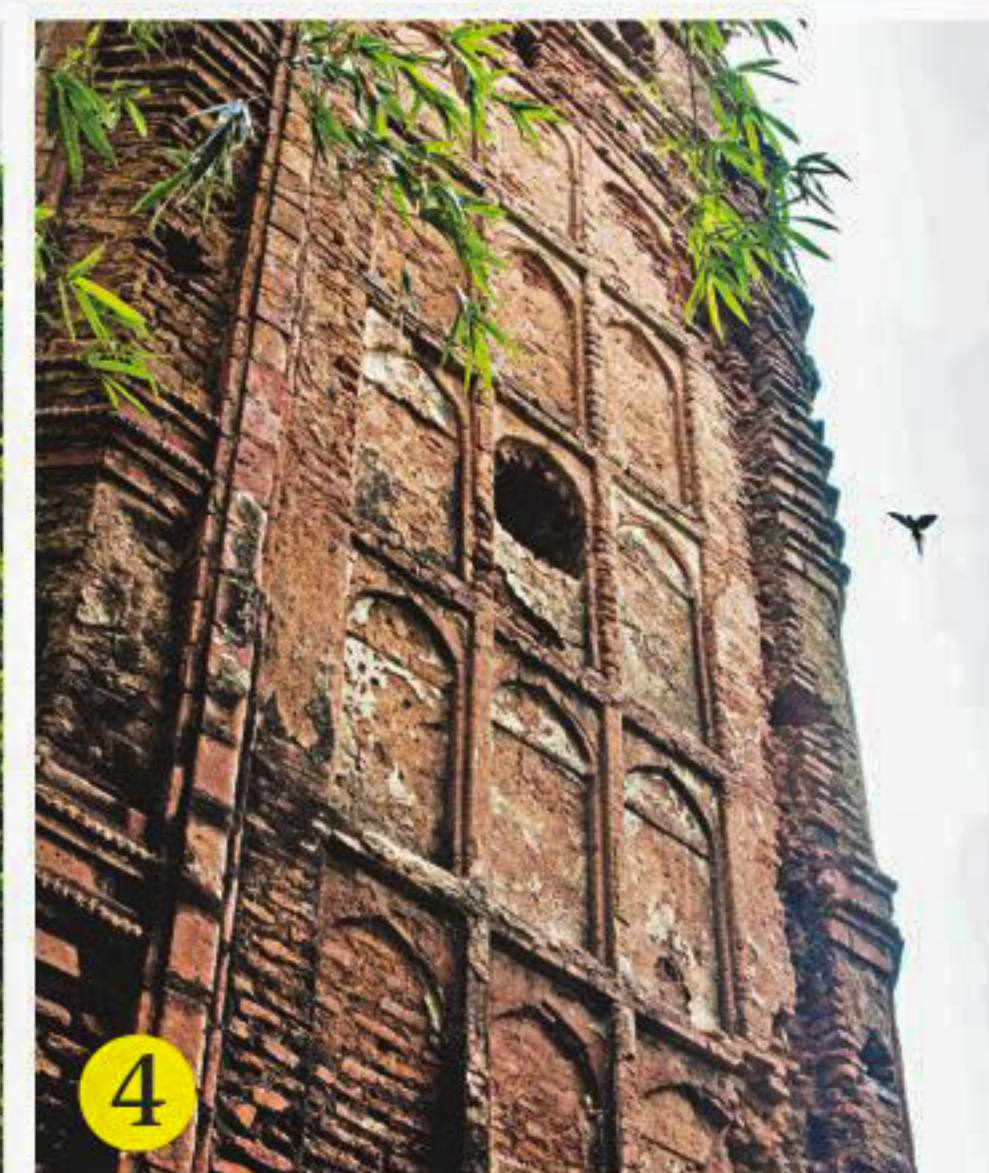
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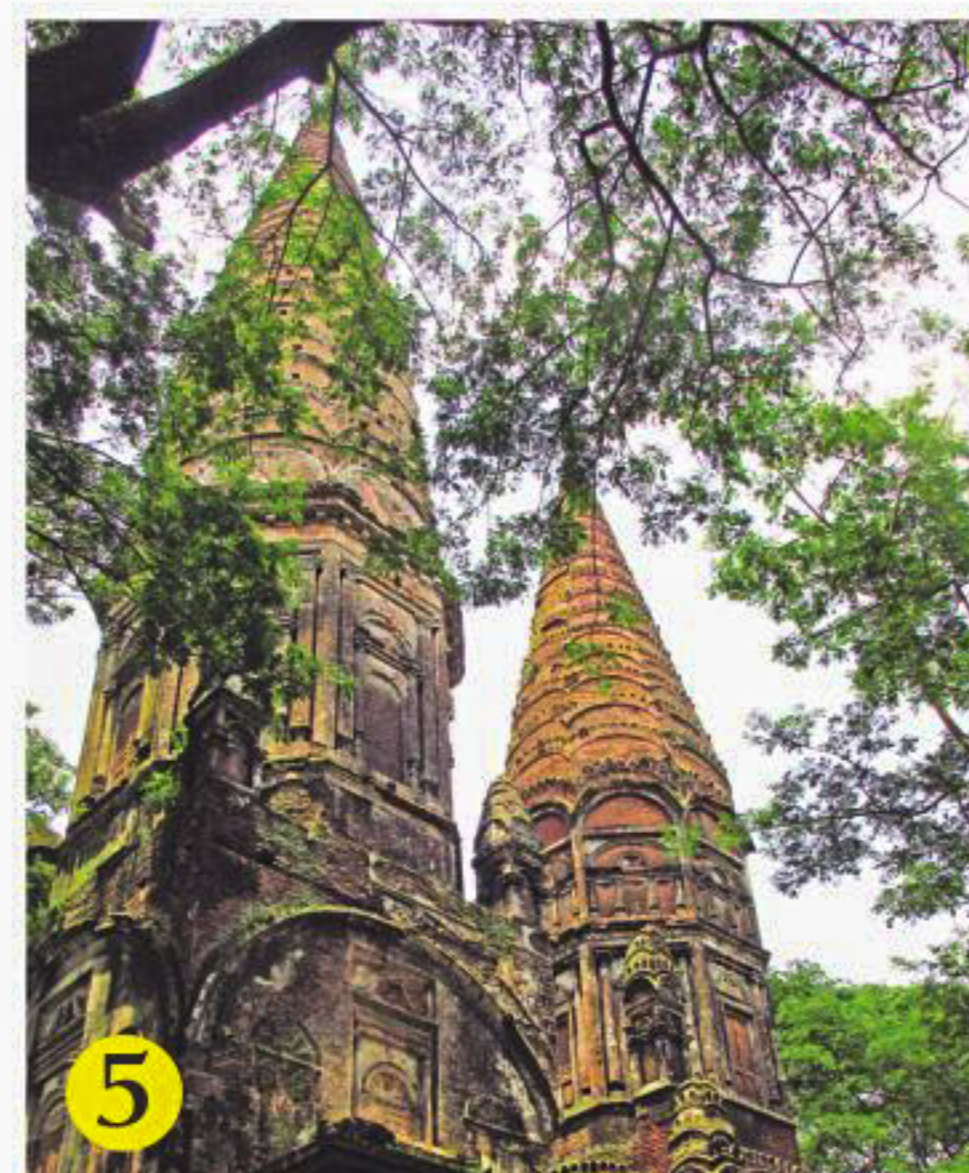
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1 & 2. The dilapidated Outshahi Mosque and an earlier picture of the mosque 3 & 4. Outshahi Math and its peeled off wall 5. Sonarang Temples

the mosque depicted in the ASRM shows its beautiful late Mughal design, though in a dilapidated condition. But what we found at the spot was horrifying. The single-domed square building, which measured 2m sides, is now reduced to a pillar strangled by trees and bushes. It confirmed our worst fears; another heritage site lost forever.

The Balai Mosque was owned by the Sikdar family. We found a member of the family at that spot, who, in the past, had the opportunity to perform prayers in the mosque. According to him, the mosque was not spacious enough to accommodate a large gathering. So another mosque was built and the old one was abandoned. They currently

initiatives to preserve the site. Basnati Rani, who has been living there for five decades, said there was an inscription on the entrance wall that suggested that the Math was built 600 years ago. We did not find the inscription and there is no mention of the construction period in the ASRM. She further told us that a certain Vaisya Zamindar built the Math on a cremation ground. His descendants left the country during Partition but the place gives you some idea of the grandiose landlord.

One might be confused to see the Muslim prototypes of floral works and arches on the Math. But this was the tradition of Bengal, where the two communities shared lives as well as aesthetics. The pigeon holes stamped

sloping wings are broken. A fig tree has grown over the wall, strangling the whole structure.

The priest of the temple Binoy Sadhu passed away recently. The centenarian remained unmarried and spent all his life in devotion to the temple. We found Biplab Mandal, a devotee of the temple, working near the area. Now, he performs the rituals in absence of any designated priest.

The temple area belongs to a Muslim family who bought the land from Sen Zamindars, who left the area during Partition. Originally, it was one of the family temples of the Sens. Faruk Haldar, the current land owner, fondly spoke of the priest who was

could break down someday soon; the ramparts will be thrown away, and we will lose another rich vestige of our heritage.

We are aware that cultural artifacts decay quickly in our damp weather. But our negligence is more ruthless than the nature's force. We are not experts to suggest what to do to protect these treasures. We just want to share the fact that with these artifacts, our glorious tradition of craftsmanship, aesthetics and stories of religious harmony is also dying. In essence, all we will leave our future generation are the loss of a past glory to inherit.

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