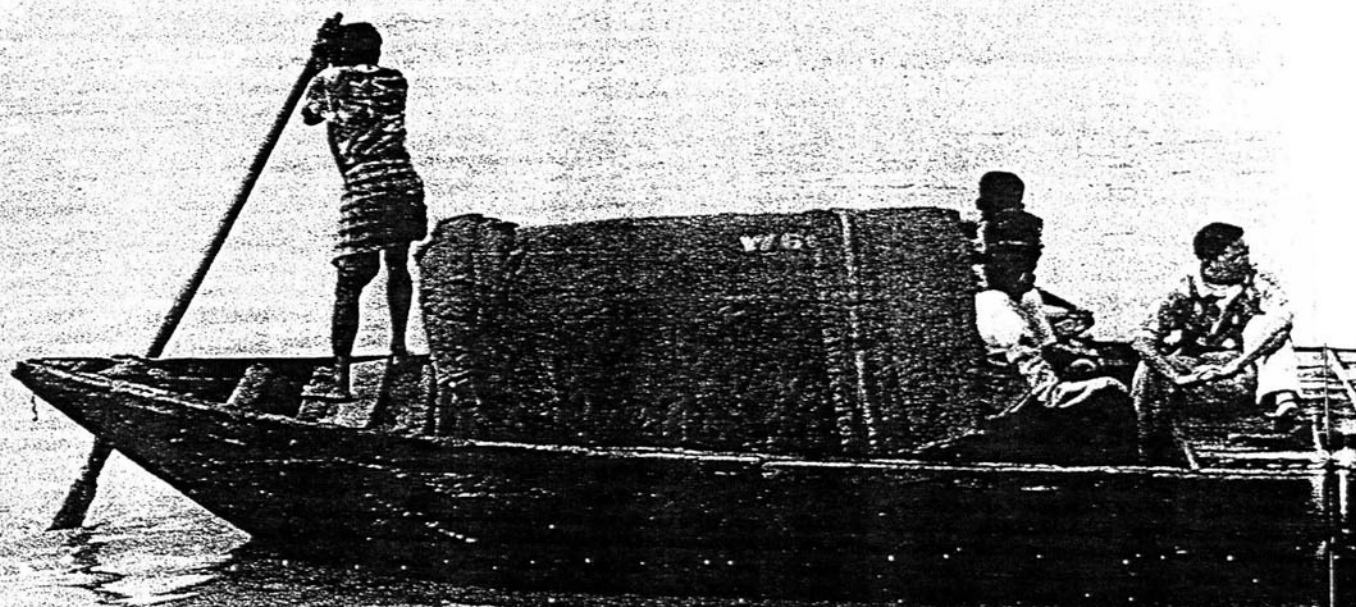




Above left: Open deck restaurant on board Chitraklekha. 'Munching time' with a dash of cool breeze Above right: ISKCON temple at Mayapur — a riverside view Below: Japanese tourists enjoying a boat ride at Howrah

Cruising Along the



Ganga in



Text and Photographs: Dr. Gautam Chatterjee

Bengal Tourism has identified a destination with a difference — a river belt from Murshidabad to Howrah — a stretch of 260 km studded with monumental history, spiritual aura and abundance of green eco-friendly habitations.

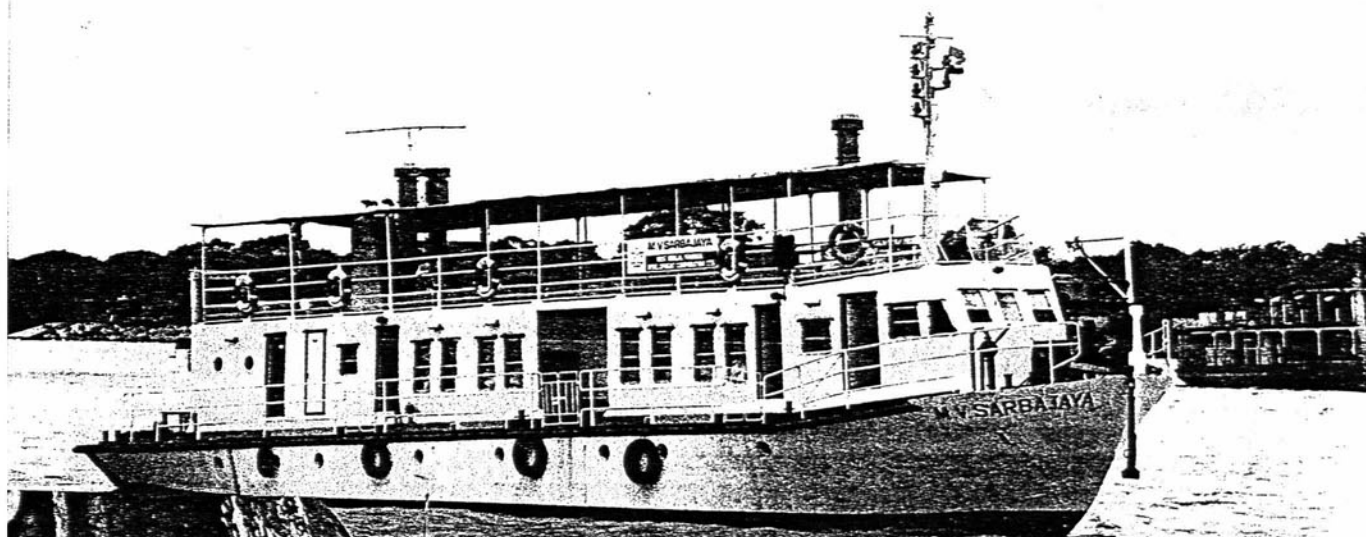
Recently West

Bengal Tourism organized a 'Ganga Heritage Cruise' which, it is hoped, will become a regular affair in the near future. The cruise was to project the amalgamation of multicultural sentiments. However, life and culture along the Ganga is as unique as the grandeur of the past and at times it projects an unchanging lifestyle amidst an ever-changing civilization.

A group of 60 odd people drawn from different backgrounds like the travel media and tourism travelled to Behrampur via rail. It was an overnight journey. Next morning we woke to a light drizzle and drove through lush green surroundings to our hotel. There were towering coconut and *tal* trees swaying as if to acknowledge our visit because tourists do not usually frequent this place. After a quick bath and breakfast we fastened our shoestrings and were ready for our tour. The first lap of our journey was by road. Our first halt was Murshidabad. This city was founded by Nawab Murshid Quli Khan and it prospered into a famous silk centre of Bengal. As the silk culture spread, the Europeans started eyeing this trade belt, initially for trade then to rule the trade as well. The Battle of Plassey that took place in Bengal in 1757 was a turning point in the pages of Indian history because the East India Company succeeded in laying the foundation of the British colonial empire.

Katra Mosque was first on our itinerary. The mosque was built by

Bengal



Above: M.V. Sarbajaya cruising through the Hooghly Below: Hazarduari — a treasure house of Bengal's recent past Facing page: Pilgrim's progress — daughter taking her mother around the 108 Shiva linga temple at Kalna



Murshid Quli Khan. Originally it had five domes but now only three remain as the rest were destroyed in an earthquake. After one year of construction of this mosque, Murshid Quli Khan died here but before his death he humbly wished that his tomb be below the stairs as in future whosoever came would step over him and his sins would be washed away.

Small rows of sitting places, designed in an arch-like fashion and meant for *maulvis* (Mohammedan priests) to read the Koran, is a unique feature. It was interesting to learn that during the Eid festival, the Muslims place a banana tree outside their houses to usher prosperity. One wonders how a Hindu symbolism could become a part of Islamic culture. Here we see the cultural synthesis in its true colour.

Moreover, even in the silk business you will find that cultivation is handled by Hindu peasants and the weaving is the expertise of Muslims. There is also a Shiva temple within the boundary of Katra Mosque. The sound of conch shells echo in the surroundings.

We passed through other celebrated places and finally halted at Katgola Garden. A huge gate bearing Indo-European influence awaited us. Scattered around were European style statues. Then we discovered a Jain temple of Paresnath built in 1780 by Raja Lajpat Singh Dugger. From the *pur* (temple priest), Bhagirath Sharm, I came to learn that this

temple was built by Rajasthani craftsmen who used silver, ivory and wood to create this temple. However, the pillars are studded with conch shells and done by local artisans of Murshidabad.

Tracing the lifestyle which the *purohit* has heard about from his forefathers, he describes how the Rajas used to sail in a silver *bajra* (a type of boat) listening to strains of classical music. Listening to him I suddenly felt saddened to see the present depleted conditions of this place except for the temple.

There are a few boys, Mithun, Ratan and Mohan, who work as part time guides and earn around 10-20 rupees a day describing the details of the place in a manner close to a religious discourse in Bengali. Mithun states that the Ganga is changing course very swiftly and has "taken many houses and old palaces in her womb!" Marine archaeologists, are you listening — here are some virgin places for a rich archaeological dig!

From Katgola we moved towards Hazar Duari. En route, with a 'cold drinks' halt, we were allowed to spend a few minutes to see Nasipur Rajbari. Here the Nahabhut Khana depicts the regality of a bygone era. Hazar Duari means 1000 gates. However, all are not real. It was built by General Duncan between 1829-37. This extraordinary place with fifty halls and galleries is the first sign of European architecture. Today it is part of the museum which houses rare books, original paintings, antique furniture, an ivory palanquin and a howdah. At the entrance of Hazar Duari is an *Imambara* which is said to be the largest in India. It was built by Siraz-ud-Daula and was destroyed in 1846 by a devastating fire and reconstructed in 1848. Between the *Imambara* and Hazar Duari is the Medina Mosque. It is said that Siraz brought mud from Karbela of Medina and placed it here.

From Hazar Duari we walked to the Wasif Manzil which was built by Sayed Ali Mirza — the Nawab Bahadur of Murshidabad. From the nearby ghat we started our river cruise. Here we boarded M.L. Ratna, the flag ship of the District Collector which took us to our launches, Chitraklekha and Sarbojaya, anchored offshore. These launches have a capacity of 60 passengers each. I boarded Chitraklekha, my allotted launch. The mini cabins had curtain separations. Upstairs there was a covered deck with

restaurant settings where the incredible view around with a strong breeze blowing was simply intoxicating. Below the cabins were more sleeping arrangements and a kitchen which they say can serve 200 people. While talking to the navigators, I learnt that the launch could move smoothly only if the portion below water could get at least 5 ft. depth and so the launch can sail only during the monsoons because of the depth of water required.

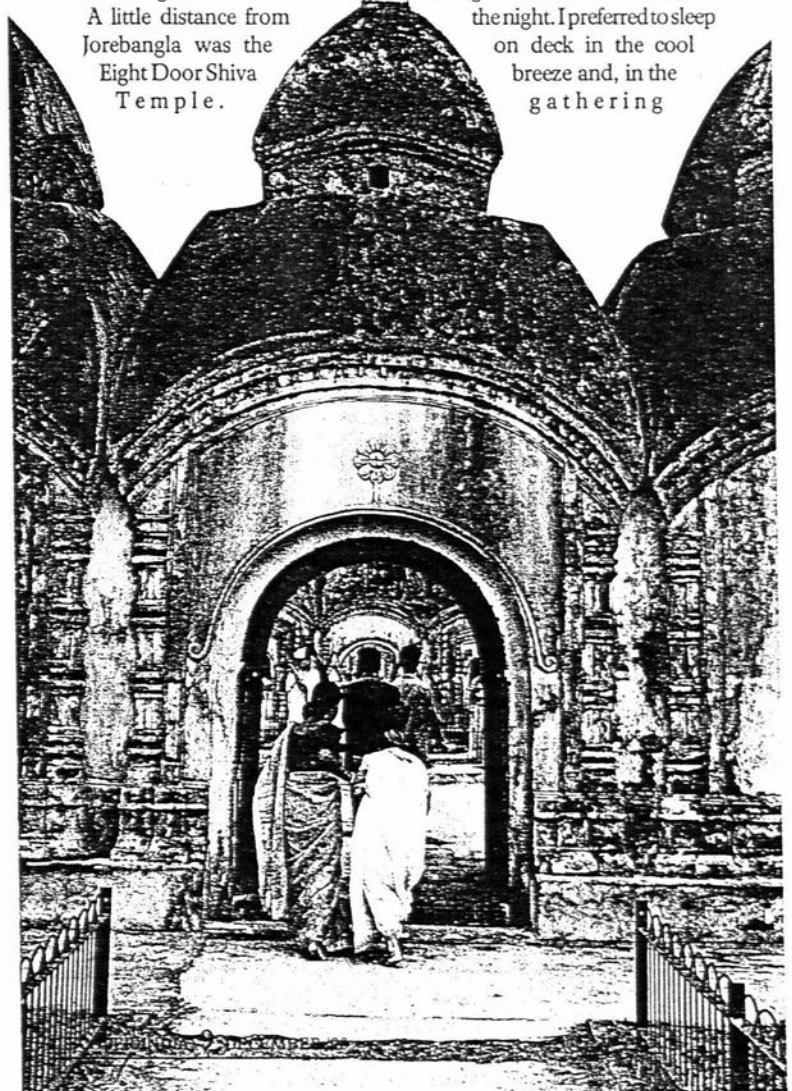
Before long, we were sailing upstream towards Azamganj where the Jorebanga (four temple complex) is situated. The temples were constructed during the rule of Rani Bhawani. The four face-to-face terra-cotta temples are unique examples of brick terra-cotta work. On the outside walls are 52 manifestations of Goddess Shakti or Kali. The 20 Shiva *lingas* and 10 *avatars* (reincarnations) of Vishnu and a recreation of war scenes from the Ramayana held us spellbound. In yet another temple there were delicate flower and foliage decorations.

A little distance from Jorebanga was the Eight Door Shiva Temple.

The unusual feature here is the lotus at the top of the dome which is placed upside down! Nearby some boys were playing football oblivious to our presence. Well, here in Bengal, football is another heritage of our times. When we returned to our launches we witnessed another heritage of Bengal — the hospitality. Small children to senior citizens had lined up along the shore watching us silently. Standing on deck I waved to them and they all waved back as if in gratitude and shouted in unison "Aabar aashbe!" (come again). This spontaneous gesture was perhaps far better than the 'red carpet' ushering we had received elsewhere.

We sailed downstream back to Murshidabad, this time to watch silk manufacturing but due to some miscalculation of time we missed the opportunity so we headed back to Hazar Duari, which by now, was illuminated. From a distance we saw the land of Plassey from where Indian history changed its course. We anchored for the night. I preferred to sleep

on deck in the cool breeze and, in the gathering



darkness. As I drifted into sleep, I relived the glorious past where once delicacy and patronage for aesthetics enveloped this land.

I awakened at dawn as our launch was about to move and it was raining. I immediately recalled that it was August 15, Independence Day, and India was stepping into her 51st year of independence. It was also Janmastami, the birthday of Lord Krishna. I stood by the railings and thought the rain was a celestial blessing of important conjunctions of history and mythology with different dimensions of time and space.

Today's destination was Nabadwip and Mayapur, the birth place of Shri Chaitanya who, some five hundred years ago, revived the *prem bhava* (eternal love) as a method to attain *vaikunthya*

(the Vaishnav heaven) where Lord Krishna resides. From here, in the medieval era, Vaishnavism dawned and displaced ritual Brahmanism.

Our launches cruised through the Bhagirathi. On the banks we could see badminton racket-like fishermen's nets swinging to and fro to catch fish. Women were washing their utensils, some were bathing and starting their daily chores. There were small villages all the way. Arch-like huts with thatch and bamboo show how eco-friendly they are. Bamboo and paddy cultivation is seen all along.

While cruising I noticed on the river bank were small triangles like sign posts tied on tree tops. This indicates that the water level near the bank is shallow and it's a 'zebra crossing' on the river. One can see 'cowboys' crossing the river with their herds of buffaloes and cows. We were now nearing Katwa, the start of Vaishnav land. This is a pilgrimage site for Vaishnavites as the place is associated with Shri Chaitanya. On the launch we

were served a vegetarian lunch to suit the land of non-violence. By late afternoon we neared the Triveni, the confluence of three rivers — Padma, Jolangi and Hooghly. We

anchored between Mayapur and Nabadwip. We could see the towering Samadhi temple of Prabhupada, the propounder of ISKCON (International Society for Krishna Consciousness) in Mayapur and rows of temples studded the banks of Nabadwip.

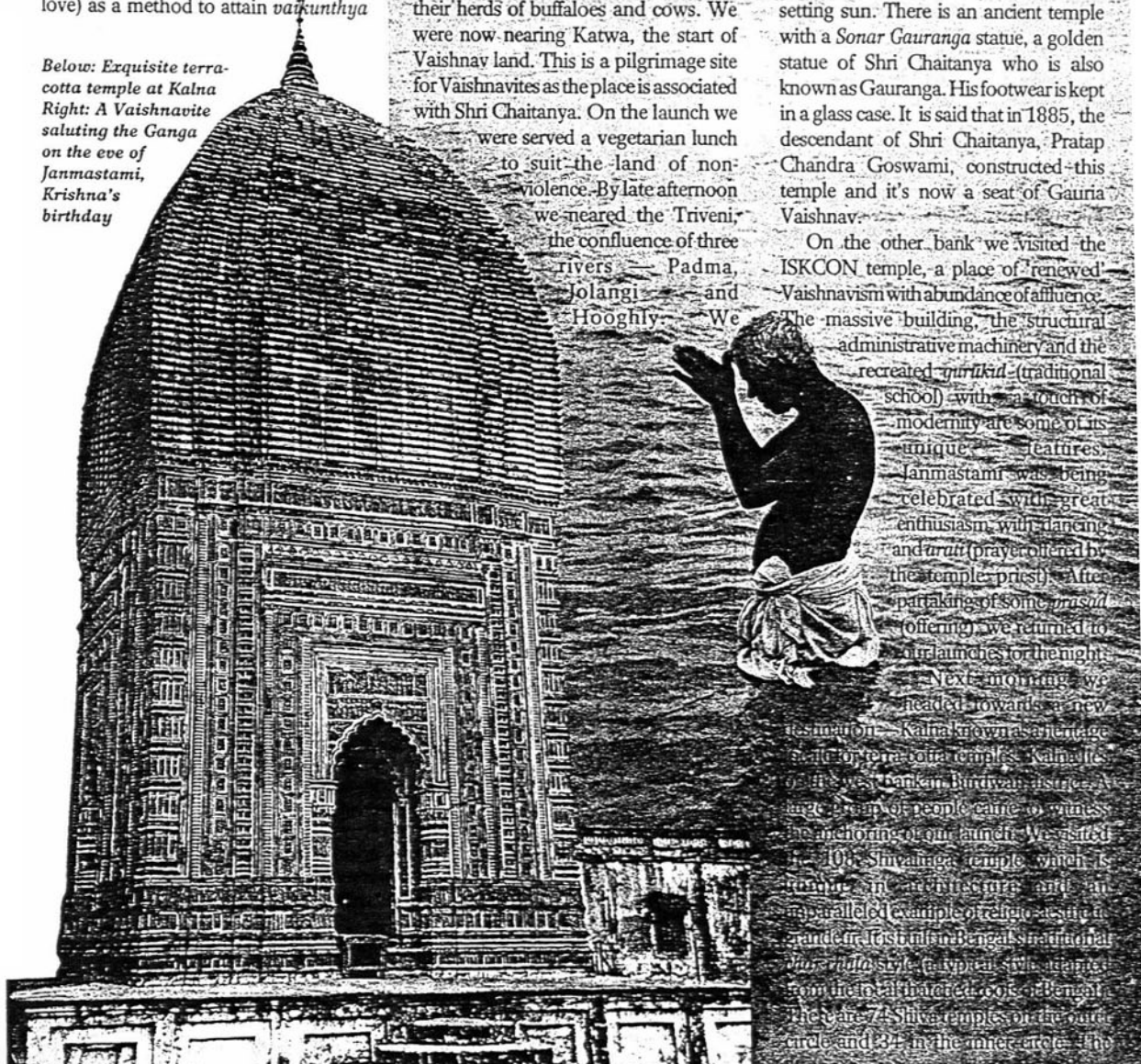
We were ferried to Nabadwip. This land is called the Oxford of Bengal. Shri Chaitanya, way back in 1485, propounded the philosophy of Vaishnavism here. It was a great land of religious discourse and *dharma* (religion), *artha* (meaning) and *karma* (work) till Shri Chaitanya introduced *prem bhava* (eternal love) for the Lord and His creatures.

We landed as the sun was setting. An old Vaishnavite, offering prayers to Ganga, was silhouetted against the setting sun. There is an ancient temple with a *Sonar Gauranga* statue, a golden statue of Shri Chaitanya who is also known as Gauranga. His footwear is kept in a glass case. It is said that in 1885, the descendant of Shri Chaitanya, Pratap Chandra Goswami, constructed this temple and it's now a seat of Gauria Vaishnav.

On the other bank we visited the ISKCON temple, a place of renewed Vaishnavism with abundance of affluence. The massive building, the structural administrative machinery and the recreated *gurukul* (traditional school) with a touch of modernity are some of its unique features. Janmastami was being celebrated with great enthusiasm with dancing and *arati* (prayer offered by the temple priest). After partaking of some *prasada* (offering) we returned to our launches for the night.

Next morning we headed towards a new destination — Kalna known as a heritage site for terracotta temples. Kalna lies on the west bank in Burdwan district. A large group of people came to witness the anchoring of our launch. We visited the 10th Shyamaanga temple which is unique in architecture and an unparalleled example of religious art and grandeur. It is built in Bengal's traditional *chhanda* style (typical style attained from their attached roots in Bengal). There are 74 Shiva temples on the outer circle and 34 in the inner circle. The

Below: Exquisite terracotta temple at Kalna
Right: A Vaishnavite saluting the Ganga on the eve of Janmastami, Krishna's birthday



outer circle has black and white Shivalingas placed alternately. The bases of the Shivalingas change their angle gradually from one temple to another to maintain their proportion. One can see 8 temples at one glance. From inside all 108 temples can be seen. The geometric perfection is simply awe-inspiring. This extraordinary temple was built by the Maharaja of Burdwan in 1809.

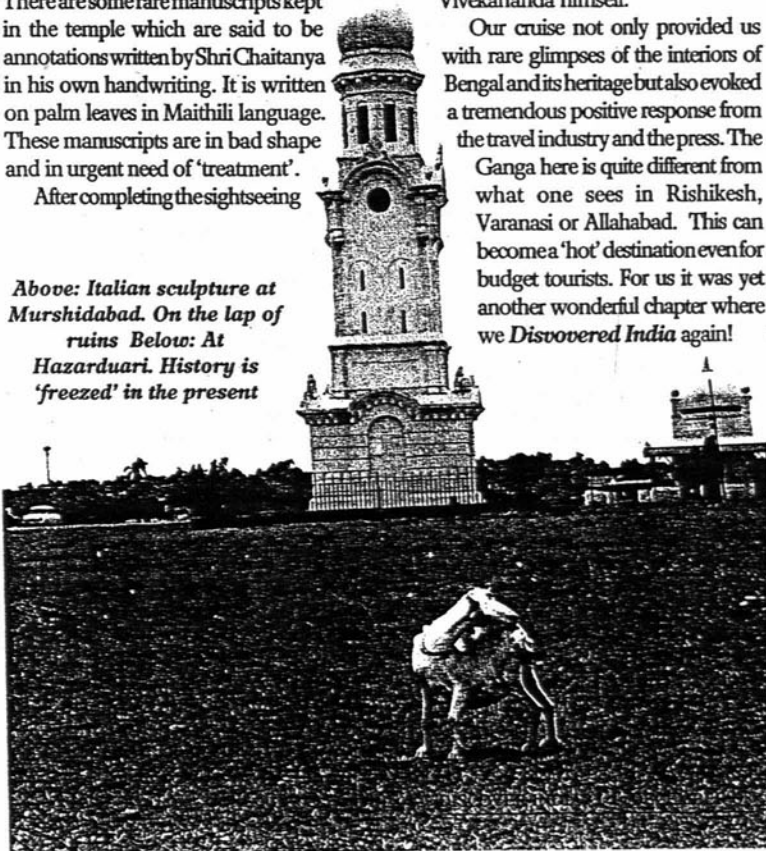
Just opposite the Shiva temples is the exquisite terra-cotta temple known as Pratapeswar temple. The ornamentation and motifs are so detailed that it would probably take a whole day to see them all. This temple was built in 1849.

Lalji temple of c. 1739 is an important religious punctuation from the architectural perspective. The Pancha Bimsati temple with twenty-five pointed ornamental tops is to be seen to be believed.

Other important sites are Krishna Chandrajit temple, Shyamsundar Bati and Amla Briksha, where it is said that Shri Chaitanya met one of his important disciples, Gouridas Pandit. If you are on a treasure hunt, do visit Gour Gouridas temple where once Gouridas Pandit resided. You will find xylography believed to be made from logs of neem wood under direct supervision of Shri Chaitanya. There are some rare manuscripts kept in the temple which are said to be annotations written by Shri Chaitanya in his own handwriting. It is written on palm leaves in Maithili language. These manuscripts are in bad shape and in urgent need of 'treatment'.

After completing the sightseeing

Above: Italian sculpture at Murshidabad. On the lap of ruins Below: At Hazarduari. History is 'frozen' in the present



of Kalna we returned to our launches. We breakfasted on board. By noon the weather had deteriorated. The heavy, lashing rain prevented us from disembarking at Chinsura (pronounced as Chunchra). Finally, when the weather cleared a bit, we had arrived at Chandanagar, the erstwhile French settlement. The governor's house where Dupleix stayed, the prison, police headquarters and the French institute were some of the interesting sites.

Bellur, the foundation of Ramakrishna Mission, was the last halt on our 260 km long cruise. On the last leg of the cruise everybody came up on deck to get a rare all-around glimpse of the Ganga — old temples on the banks, old colonial institutions, the archaic Bandel church... Cameras were clicking fast as evening was caving in. Fishermen were netting their catch midstream with floating lamps tied to the corner of their nets so that steamers and launches can avoid their path. Ferry boats carried people back to their homes. Children were seen playing on the historical ghats... Finally our launch reached Bellur. We could feel the original sentiments of the Mission. The room where Swami Vivekananda lived gave us the impression that he has gone out for a stroll and would be back any moment. The temple is really a milestone of new awakening. It is said that the temple was visualized by Swami Vivekananda himself.

Our cruise not only provided us with rare glimpses of the interiors of Bengal and its heritage but also evoked a tremendous positive response from the travel industry and the press. The Ganga here is quite different from what one sees in Rishikesh, Varanasi or Allahabad. This can become a 'hot' destination even for budget tourists. For us it was yet another wonderful chapter where we *Discovered India* again!



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