

LESS than 400 years ago, the river port of Saptagram was the commercial hub of Bengal and the entire eastern region. Situated on the bank of River Saraswati, Saptagram basked in wealth and grandeur. One of its villages, Bangshobati especially increased in religious and political significance.

Bangshobati, now known as Bansheria is a small town of Hooghly hardly 50 km from Kolkata which still preserves many glorious vestiges of the past. It was here in 1673 that Raja Rameswar Roy, took refuge when he lost his zamindari of Patuli. Roy soon got the title of Raja from Mughal emperor Aurangzeb along with river side property measuring 401 acre.

Swept by the wave of Vaishnava Bhakti movement Raja Rameswar Roy built a Vishnu temple here in 1679. The temple known as Ananta Basudev Temple is a masterpiece of Bengal temple art. Built in typical *char chala ek ratna* style of Bengal school, this temple is embellished with the finest terracotta wall decorations. It is said that Sir John Woodburn, then deputy governor of Bengal was rendered speechless at its beauty when he visited the area in 1902.

The terracotta wall motifs mainly illustrate tales from the *Mahabharata*, *Krishnaleela* and the *Ramayana*. The *Dakshayogya*, *Dashamavidya* and *Dashavatar* tales also find representation. Among the other figures of court dancers and musicians, the image of a ship

with armed soldiers stand out. Representative perhaps of the glorious Bengal navy of the time.

The artists of this temple came from a place called Kotalpura village near Arambagh. Past master of the Bengal School, Nandalal Bose is known to have copied each and every panel of this temple in his sketch book.

With time Saptagram lost its glory. River Saraswati petered out, losing navigability and Kolkata became the new commercial centre.

The Bansheria royal



## Ancient wonder

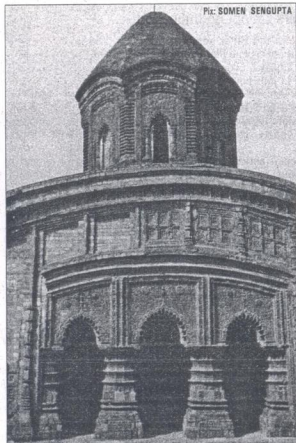
A 70 ft temple of pink stone with many towers, and one covered with exquisite terracotta motifs, are Bengal's pride, writes Somen Sengupta

family also changed its religious perspective. The great grand son of Raja Rameswar Roy, Raja Nrisingha Dev was a follower of the Tantric cult.

In 1799 he started constructing a massive temple just next to Ananta Basudev temple, known as Hangsheshwari temple of Bansheria. This also turned out to be an architectural gem of Bengal. The temple was a favourite of Sri Ramakrishna who was a frequent visitor.

The history of Hangsheshwari temple is interesting to say the least. Raja Nrisinghadev was born in 1790, three months after his father died, but by then Maharaja Manick chandra of Burdwan had already informed Nawab Aliwardhi Khan, then ruler of Bengal that there was no living heir to the throne and grabbed most of the property.

After the battle of Plassey, Nrisingha Dev appealed to Warren Hastings and managed to salvage nine localities of his rightful kingdom. He



again appealed to Lord Cornwallis in 1785 who suggested that he approach the court of directors in London. Soon afterwards Nrisingha Dev left for Varanasi, instructing his manager to collect funds for an appeal.

In Varanasi however Nrisingha Dev was profoundly moved by tantric cult and culture. He even got involved in the translation of "*Kashi Khanda*" with Maharaja Jainarayan Goshal of Bhu Kailash. In 1799 Nrisingha Dev's manager informed him that Rs 7,00,000 had been collected for the London appeal. But by then Nrisingha Dev was a changed man.

Instead of spending the money on salvaging property he ordered the construction of a temple. To this end he began sending sandstone from Varanasi by boat to Bangshabati.

Construction of the temple started in December 1799. But only three years later Nrisingha Dev died leaving the temple half finished. Nrisingha Dev's principal wife became a *Sati* but his younger queen Shankari instructed the immediate completion of the temple.

But since Maharani Shankari herself was locked in a legal battle with a foster son, construction work resumed only when

the queen won the property rights.

The 70 ft high Hangsheshwari temple was completed in 1814 at the cost of Rs 5,00,000. Pink stones had been brought from Chunar, Rajasthan and the craftsmen were from Varanasi. The image of Hangsheshwari was established in 1814. Sanskrit scholars & many Hindu holymen assembled here on the occasion.

Mention of this unique temple exists in *Religious Lyrics of Bengal* authored by one Alexander Chapman, then librarian of the Imperial Library. Chapman was enchanted by the architectural marvel. He was not allowed inside, being a foreigner but that didn't stop him from penning a poem on the temple's external beauty.

The Hangsheshwari temple is unique in many ways, unlike any other temple it has 13 towers which look like budding lotuses. As per the tantra cult the temple has six floors. A white Shiva linga was placed on the topmost floor. Other floors also have one black Shiva linga each. Once all walls were covered with terracotta.

The image of Hangsheshwari is also unusual. Neither Krishna nor Kali, this four armed blue deity stands with one foot on the chest of a sleeping Mahadev, while the other is folded.

The Archeological Survey of India has undertaken both these temples but the Ananta Basudev temple still stands in a sorry state. Many panels having been stolen or destroyed.

Access: Only 50 km from Kolkata. A one and half hour by local train from Howrah and 2 hours by the Kalyani Express highway and the newly constructed Iswar Gupta Bridge. There are trains from Bandel too.

Take cycle rickshaws to visit temple as well as the Basudev temple and the ancient Roy palace. Temple is closed from 11 am to 3 pm.

Be sure to visit Jafar Khan Mosque nearby.

**Accommodation:** No good restaurants or hotels at Bansheria but snacks, mineral water etc. are available at stalls.

### THE TICKET

Package Gangasagar from The Migrants is for Rs 1,000 (an adult) begins 13 January and extends for two days. Price includes deluxe bus fare, tent accommodation at Sagar Island, vegetarian meals, guide facilities and darshan. The tour involves bus ride from the city to Namkhana followed by three-hour cruise to the Sagar Island by motor launches run by Hooghly Jalpath Parivahan. The travel group will also offer essential medical aid and two professional lifesavers (from the Sea Explorer's Institute) for a group of six pilgrims.

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—Swaati Chaudhury