



THE ASIAN AGE

11 MAY 2003

Cooch Behar Shiva temple tells many tales

This Shiva temple in Cooch Behar is perhaps the only one in India where animal sacrifice is a century-old tradition, reports SOMEN SENGUPTA

North Bengal is full of historical and religious places which pack rich folklore of history and mythology. A Shiva temple in Cooch Behar has an interesting past.

Baneswar temple is a unique one as far as Hindu customs go. This is perhaps the only Shiva temple in India where animal sacrifice is a century old tradition and non-vegetarian *prasad* is offered to god. Situated on the Cooch Behar-Alipurduar highway the temple is located at a one-hour drive from Toofanganj town. History tells us that king Prasanna Narayan founded the temple nearly 500 years ago.

Mythology has it that Usha, the daughter of *Asur Raj* Banasur married Anirudha, the grandson of Krishna. The marriage was conducted without the consent of Banasur who chained Anirudha in his palace. This led to a war between Krishna and Banasur.



HERITAGE: Baneswar temple in Cooch Behar. Photograph by SOMEN SENGUPTA

Banasur being a devotee of Shiva, the lord played the role of peacemaker between them and Banasur's consent was obtained.

Banasur conducted the marriage of his daughter with Anirudha at this place and the Shiva temple was thus founded and named after Banasur.

The way the temple has been constructed is very different from the traditional Bengal school of architecture, in which *ekchala* or *aatchala* style is followed. The outer structure is squarish with a small

round-shaped tower. The temple has only one gate with a *Garvagriha* where the *Shiva linga* is placed. Animal sacrifice specially that of goats is an indispensable part of the culture of the temple.

Here animals are not sacrificed by beheading but hanged and killed by striking the head.

This merciless way of killing the animal is supported by sacred Hindu texts. After objections it was stopped in 1954. But on the local people's insistence the old form of sacrifice is back.