

ACROSS THE RIVERS OF BANGLADESH

PRINTED in glossy art paper, "Sailing Against the Wind" is largely a pictorial essay on the mighty rivers, Jamuna, Padma and Meghna, which dissect the whole of Bangladesh, all ending in the Bay of Bengal, thereby making this area the largest delta in the world. The photographs (in colour) are taken by Trygve Bolstad, a Norwegian from Oslo during many trips to Bangladesh between 1988 and 1991. Coming from a country where a considerable proportion of its inhabitants derive their living from the sea, Bolstad shows his kinship with the colossal rivers of Bangladesh; which, in many areas, appear to be as limitless in expanse as the sea itself.

Bolstad takes pictures of the different kinds of country boats, the boatmen and crew in their natural habitat going about their work of plying their simple, indigenous crafts along the huge rivers. Some of the bigger country boats are equipped with large sails and when unfurled with the wind in full gust, they made quite a spectacular sight. Scenes of the people connected with this riverine life are represented in many splendid photographs — the hardy workers loading and unloading heavy bags of jute, sand and stone; the river Gypsies who live out their lives on their house boats, rarely stepping ashore and the boat carpenters constructing decorative bows for new vessels.

While city dwellers in Bangladesh, more often than not, face suffocation from the polluted, gritty atmosphere of buses, trucks and other vehicles spouting their vicious

fumes, those living in the countryside are blessed with magnificent sunrises, sunsets and peaceful vistas of the never-ending rivers. Bolstad's pictures capture this seldom-focused aspect of the country ... for which its citizens must indeed be thankful. However, just in case some over-optimistic soul may think that life in the rural areas is a bed of roses, there are also vignettes of tough, sinewy men with cumbrous loads on their shoulders and women making do with basic cooking facilities.

One obvious question facing the reader would be, why a book on country boats now — after all they have been around for ages: as long as the rivers themselves! Erik G Jansen,

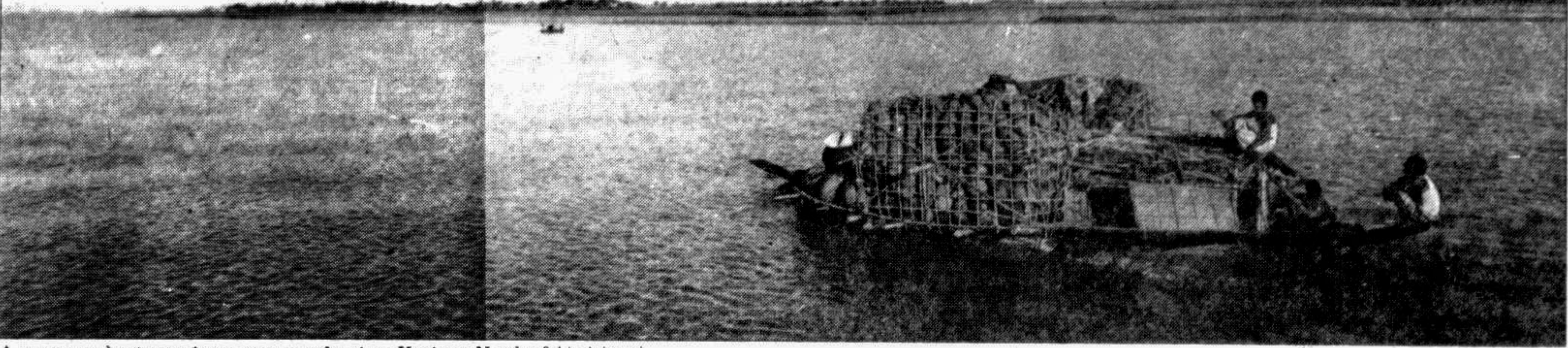
also from Oslo, Norway, has written an illuminating text, giving a brief summary of their existence dating from the early days of the Arab seafarers (about a thousand years ago) who ventured to Chittagong and left their mark on boat building. After a study on the subject (financed by the Netherlands government and NORAD), he concluded that the country boats are facing extinction because of the changing times. The agrarian sector of Bangladesh has caught up with modern times and a large majority of the previously manually operated country boats have been fitted with outboard motors. Hence country boats with their wide, glorious sails fluttering gaily on

one generation to the next. Because of limited technology and gadgets on the country boats, keen knowledge of the river in changing seasons is of prime importance; and some boatmen specialise along certain stretches of specific rivers.

While romantics may prefer to view a sail boat majestically gliding along a wide expanse of water to that of a noisy, fume-spouting motor boat dash across the waters, the inevitable fact of life is that in many cases the latter is more efficient and faster. This entry into the mechanized age for country boats started in the early 1980s and grew quite rapidly. As Jansen points out "one study in fact, estimates that as many as 250,000 small diesel engines may have been installed during the last ten years". This seems to have been welcomed by boat owners and all concerned as it means less backbreaking labour.

According to Jansen, there has not been a loss of jobs since they have been able to adapt to the new circumstances. The boatmen's ingenuity has enabled them to fit the small diesel engines to their vessels themselves and carpenters have been able to modify the boats' designs accordingly. Besides, the boatmen enjoy safety from storms and pirates and their income has increased by 50 per cent.

Hence, all's well that ends well for those who earn their livelihood from the mighty rivers of Bangladesh. As for nostalgic fans of a fast disappearing picturesque rural scene, invest in a copy of "Sailing Against the Wind" and gaze upon the highly evocative photographs at leisure!

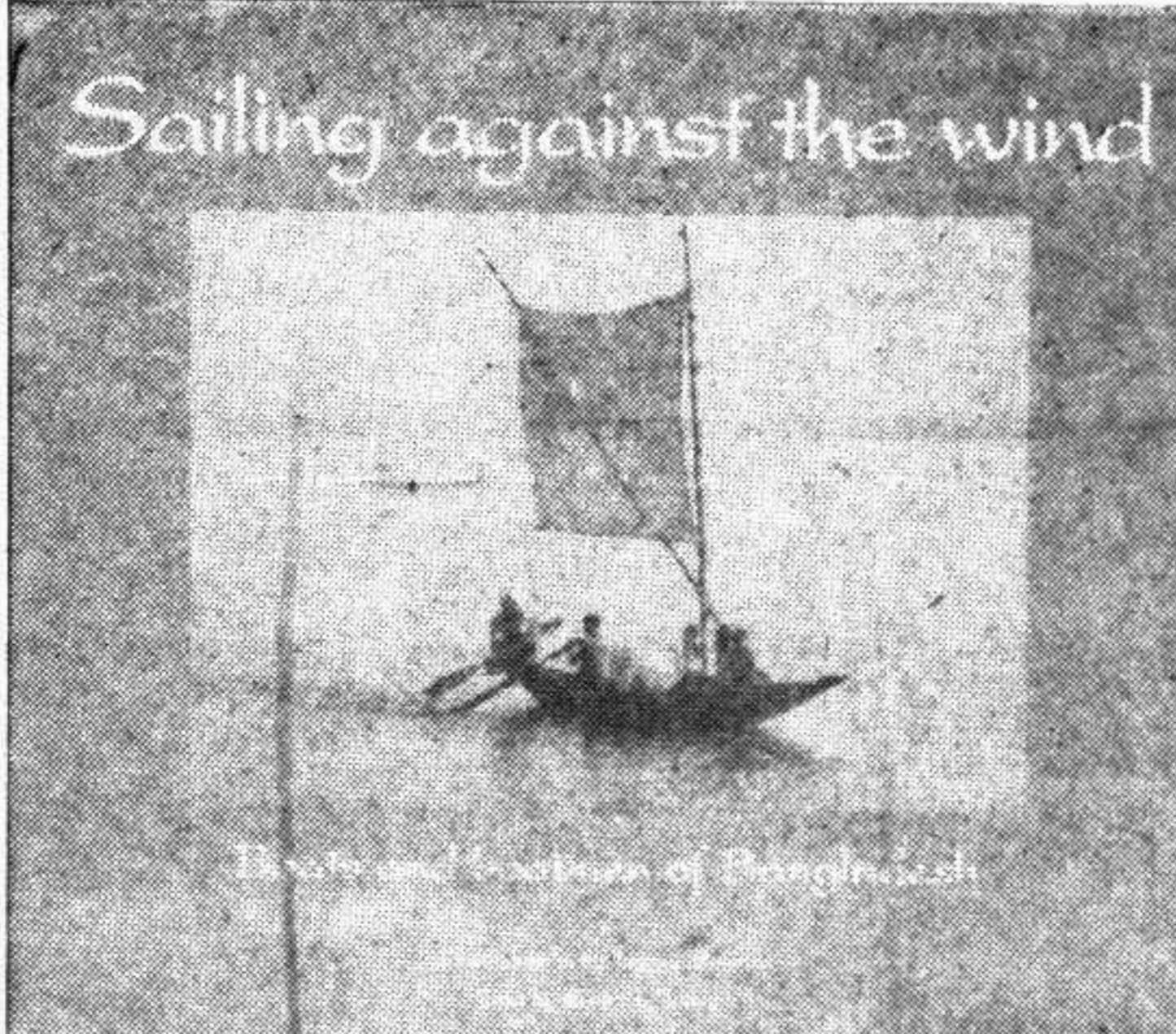


A swaronga boat carrying pottery on the river Kusiya: North of Ajmiriganj.

REVIEW

SAILING AGAINST THE WIND
Photographs by Trygve Bolstad
Text by Eric G Jansen
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Reviewed by NANCY WONG



the rivers may soon become a thing of the past — just as the huge windmills of the Netherlands which used to dot its countryside, are now historical displays found in isolated spots.

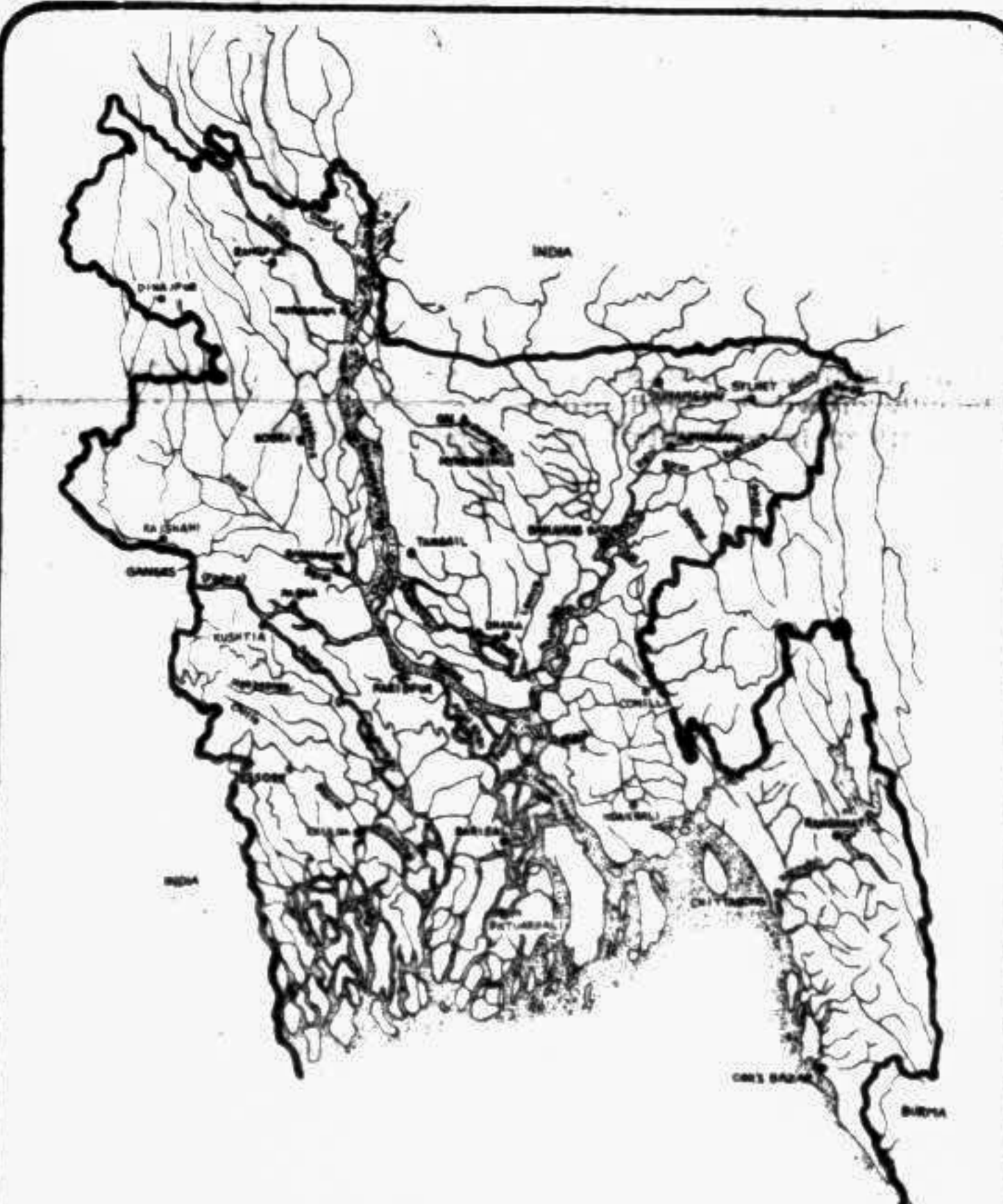
Jansen does a commendable job in giving an overall look at the country boats' function and place in the economy of Bangladesh. They form the backbone of transportation for the rural areas which are inaccessible by roads. Their maneuverability makes it easier to traverse small tributaries to reach remote villages. This is especially important for farm produce which need to be transported from villages to local markets. These country boats also play a

pivotal role in the carriage of heavy building materials such as bricks, sand, stones, timber and fuel wood from the major forest reserves, particularly the Sunderbans. Their contribution to the rural economy is substantial, taking into account their large numbers. One significant feature is that the proceeds stay within this sector as their earnings are largely used to purchase food grains and other necessities for their own consumption.

A whole industry has grown out of the existence of country boats — raying from boat carpenters to crew members to master boatmen whose skill in steering them out of the rivers' shallows and dangerous currents has been passed on from



Unloading wheat from a punshi boat: Jhitka market, Manikganj.



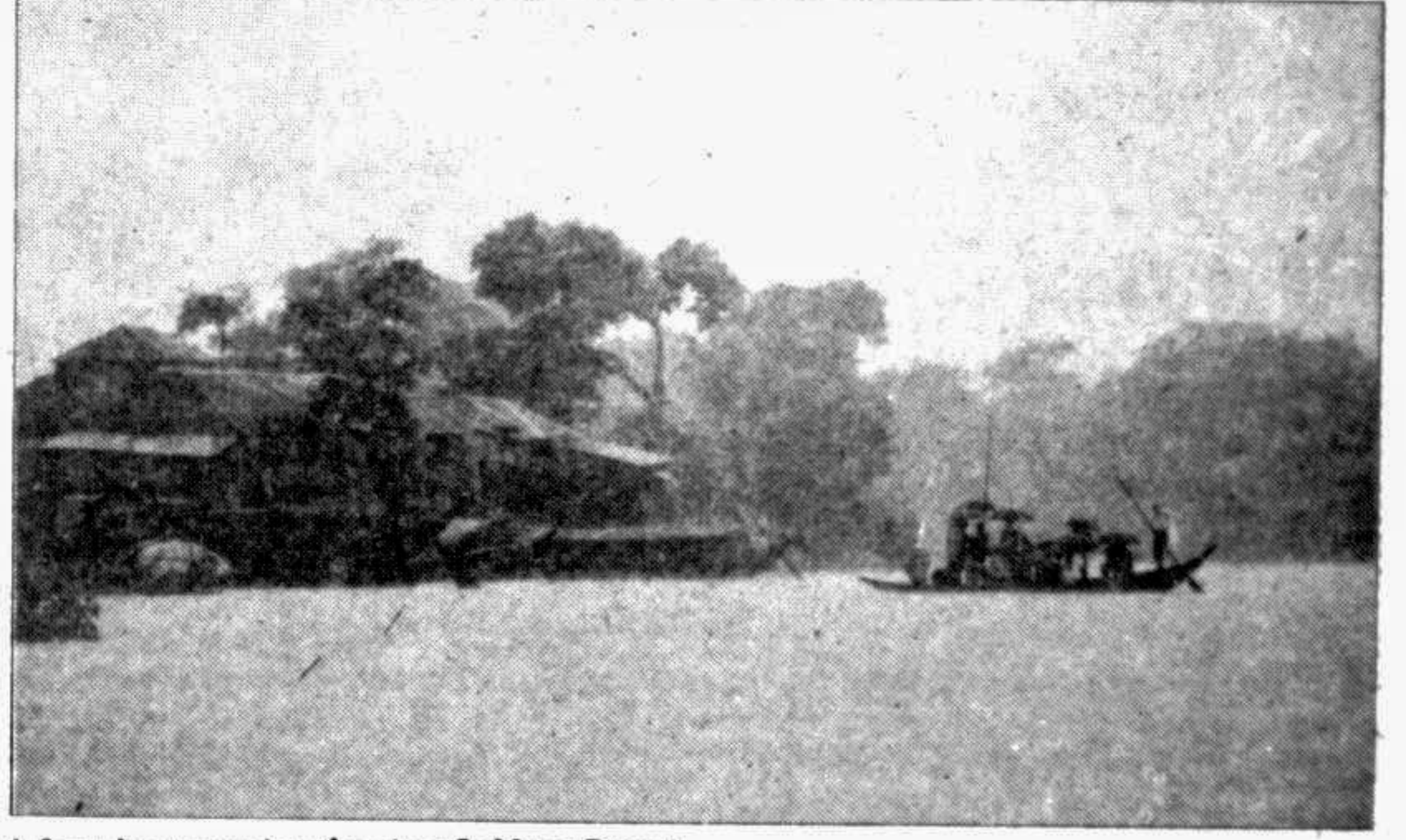
Bangladesh has about 15,000 miles (24,000 km) of rivers, streams and canals that together cover nearly 7% of the country's surface during the dry season. These waterways swell to inundate up to half of the country during the monsoon period from June to September. About 85% of all the water brought into Bangladesh is carried by the three major river systems: The Ganges (called Padma in Bangladesh); the Brahmaputra (called Jamuna); and the Meghna. These rivers meet in Bangladesh and form the world's largest delta. At 23,000 sq miles (60,000 sq km), this delta is twice the size of that formed by the Mississippi and three times the area of the Nile delta.



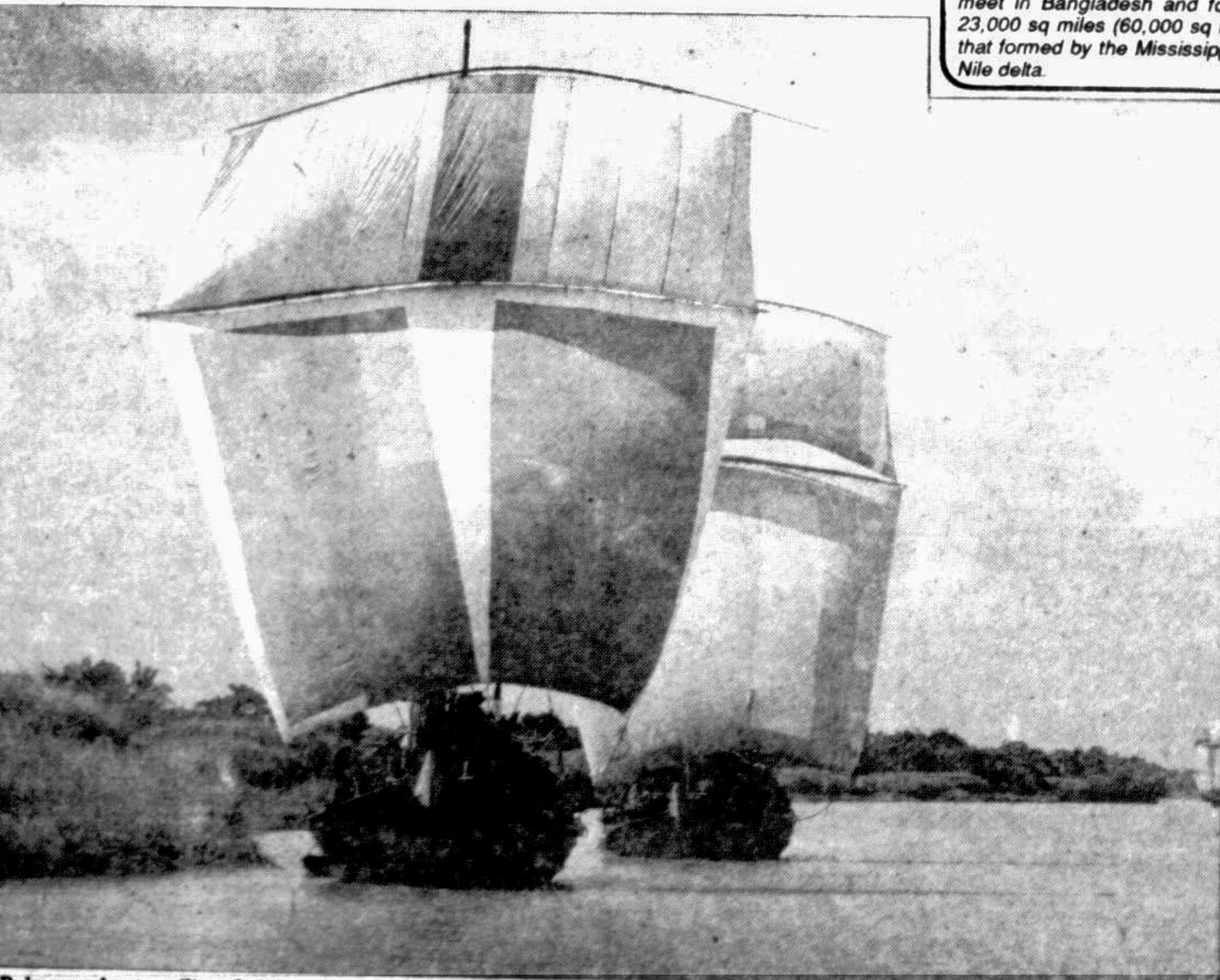
Vegetable market on the boats: Sylhet.



The railway bridge: Bhairab Bazar.



A ferry boat crossing the river Lakhya: Burmi.



Palowary boats sailing: Lakhya river.



Pulling dhairol boats on Meghna river: North of Bhairab Bazar.



A boatman: Shahzadpur.



Gypsies on the boats, west of Mirpur Bridge: Mirpur.