

# LIVING

## Those Charms of Old Dhaka

by Fayza Haq

*Cuisine, fads, fancies and wit of old Dhaka are being fast forgotten with the rush of modernisation and industrialisation*

HERE are many fascinating, unique and admirable qualities and peculiarities that were part and parcel of old Dhaka living. The slow and leisurely way of life of those days mingled with fun and pomp, have nearly all faded out. Even the dishes peculiar of Dhaka are often non-existent. Treasures like silverware for which Dhaka was once famous is also seeing a decline. *Qawwals* and marriage songs are dying out. *Bakarkhani* and *kulfi* are seeing their last days. Even Dhaka wit is something people are fast forgetting with the rush towards modernisation and industrialisation.

Among the various types of food that Dhaka has been famous for and can perhaps satisfy the critical gourmet is *bakarkhani*. This has the taste of a wafer biscuit and looks like a cream coloured saucer shaped round. This can be eaten both with tea as a snack, or with 'curry' in the main food. Although the ordinary ones continue to be made with soyabean oil in the days of high cost of production, the bakers will make it of special flour, ghee and ghee if you should place the order for it. This light delicate item is baked in a *tandoor* (oven) over a carefully maintained temperature. The Dhaka people claim that this recipe has come down to them from Greece and Turkey where food made with cheese is in great demand. 'I've often had *bakarkhani* in Greek ships,' says a Dhakaite. With mass produced conveyor food items in the market, one does not sample these very much any more.

*Paya*, which is the gelatinous part of the leg of the goat cooked with milk, is another delicacy of the city that is slowly dying out. This was eaten in individual bowls with bread. Hand made *kulfi*, a local conical ice-cream, made with a lot of almonds, pistachio and rich cream sold by the vendors in their push carts, has also seen its last days with the introduction of machine made, mass produced ice-cream.

*Kashmiri chae*, a form of tea made with cream, a lot of sugar and dark purple green tea, vigorously mixed with soda, is yet another old speciality of Dhaka cuisine. The local people of the metropolis would sip this during their formal sitting to discuss the engagement or marriage. *Koboli*, which is *polao* and chicken cooked with salted peas and orange peel during winter is yet another recipe that was a favourite with the well-to-do city dwellers some decades ago. This had to be cooked over wood or charcoal fire and never over gas or electric heaters. A dish of *koboli* was often complemented with

*basin pudding*, a baked preparation with saffron and eggs or *patishapta* which was rich with eggs, cream and saffron. Yet another local favourite was *makhana* which is a fruit grown in Sylhet and Myensingh and once sold on the streets of old Dhaka. It tastes like *paniphal* and grows on a plant that resembles water lilies. This is available only for a few weeks in a year.

In the thirties and forties there were a few cars in Dhaka city and people often moved about in horse drawn wooden carriages which were like boxes on wheels with windows at the side, with blinds and shutters on them as Muslim women travelling in them always observed *pardah*. There was a seat attached at the back for the accompanying servant.

Flourishing their sticks they gave a tremendous performance, specially during Muharram. The inhabitants took great interest in their performance. Yet another entertainment for the young at heart was kite flying which was as popular as are the soccer competitions today. Prizes for the best kite flying team were an enormous fortune in the days gone by.

A favourite with girls was doll's wedding which was carried out on a scale that was no less great than the wedding festivities of actual people these days. *Guruya ki shadi* included feasting, illumination, singing and merriment in plenty. Tinsels, silks satins and baubles flourished among the merry-makers. Bands with uniforms, playing their trumpet

mother who was for weeks on a bland diet after the birth of the child, was allowed delicacies and spicy food again.

The poorer section of old Dhaka would celebrate the birth or the *khatna* (circumcision) of a child by having a band party and by carrying the child all over the neighbourhood in a *ghora gari*. Fasting would automatically follow as a matter of routine.

Ramzan was an occasion that was treated with solemn seriousness by the inhabitants of Dhaka. It was important that all the fasts should be kept with regularity. There was thus the tradition to go around singing from house to house in groups late at night in order to wake everyone up for *sehri*. The songs were not mere jin-

ory of the saint a *milad* would be held, the Koran read by a group of holy men, and sweets distributed among the readers and the neighbourhood. On this day, to mark the occasion, every family would give eleven takas as charity to the poor. *Bara egarwin* would celebrate the saint's birthday and all the ardent devotees of Hazrat Gausal Azam would consider this day to be set aside for prayers and feasting.

During Muharram, feeding the populace with *sherbal* was another popular ritual of the Dhaka residents, whether they were Sunnis or Shias. Great drums and silver jugs would flow with cool red, orange and green drinks. Men, women and children took great pride in supplying drinks to people in memory of the martyred Imam Hussain, grandson of the Prophet Muhammad (SM).

*Bolta kawaara* was yet another traditional happening in which the people carried the *tazia*, running non-stop all over the older areas of Dhaka, covering Farashganj, Sadarghat, Islampur, Chawk and Lalbagh area. Sunnis would eagerly join in the group during the Muharram days.

Some well-to-do families owned private orchards like *Shahbagh* and *Paribagh* and grew their own jackfruits, liches, guavas and blackberries. People would vie with one another to produce the sweeter and bigger fruit.

The silver of *Shakharipatti* and *Islampur* was famous for decades. *Atardan* or perfume casket, *golab-pash*, *paner-bata* and *thali* (tray) were beautifully created from silver and kept for special occasions of feasting. Jugs and children's milk pots were often products of the expert silver-smiths.

Dhaka humour is among the finest specialties of the region which is yet another element that is fast fading out. The people from Dhaka were full of fun and banter. They took pride in flaunting their wits and teasing simpletons that came from outside their region. Dhakaite managed to see something funny in every day humdrum of life. The horses that draw carts often have wounds on their backs. A visitor from outside Dhaka, on first seeing this, asked what the deep marks were there for. A Dhakaite turned round and replied that the local horses had wings and often they are shorn leaving the gaping scars. On another occasion a visitor bought a hand fan of palm leaf paying four *potshas* instead of ten. When it broke in a few days and he came flying in wrath, the Dhaka shopkeeper explained that the fan, being cheap, was not meant for the usual fanning. 'You are to hold the fan before you and turn your face from side to side,' he said coolly.

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The carnivals on Eid known as *Eid-milan-missil* was another tradition of the city. The local people wore their best finery with gold and silver threads running through them and donned their brightest ornaments for the occasion. Cattle drawn carts, push carts, and people on foot all assembled and went around the old town making merry. Spicy food was sold along the way and firecrackers of all shapes and sizes were lit.

Celebrating the *egarwin* or the eleventh day of the moon in honour of Hazrat Gausal Azam was another pious occupation with the Dhaka inhabitants. On this day in mem-



Instead of owning cars, families had private carriages. Today these *ghora-garis* are almost nonexistent. Rickshaws, buses and cars have taken over the monopoly of the road.

A great tradition in the city was to have *qawwals* that dealt with religious subjects. These were not only for religious occasions but for all functions of celebrations. *Qawwals* were called from far off places like Patna to perform in the night-long singing at weddings. The singers sang with enormous energy and zest and were full of dramatic zeal. Today the *qawwals* appear to have scattered and most of them have left the country.

*Lathi-khet* experts were yet another integral part of Dhaka.

and drum set the house agog. Even a doll's house, in those days, used to be made with meticulous care.

*Tara dikhana*, meaning showing the stars, was yet another old and well loved traditional ceremony in the well-to-do families. During the naming of the child on the fortieth day after its birth, known as *aqika* among Muslims of the subcontinent, the child was taken up to see the stars in the terrace or garden of the house. On this occasion the mother and the children of the house and family friends still today eat off a massive tray laden with food of all types ranging from lemon to *halwa*. *Tara dikhana* was thus an occasion for introducing the child to the world around, and on this day, the

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## Are You INSANE?

by Rashida Ahmad

**A quick quiz to find out if you are fit to be let out on the streets on your own, or whether you should be locked up, in your own best interests, in a padded cell. Does society need to be protected against you? Are you a danger to others and yourself? Find out by answering these questions...**

1. You are taken out for a meal by a friend, who offers to pay for whatever you want. At the end of the main course, you are presented with the dessert menu. Do you order:
  - a) The very expensive Triple Chocolate Gateau Deluxe. TWICE
  - b) The Ice-cream Sundae with Everything on top
  - c) The Fruit Salad
2. Do you ever talk to yourself?
  - a) Yes, but usually there's other voices in my head talking back



- a) Yes, actually, a large carving knife, but I'm saving up for a Samurai sword. And don't forget the sawn-off shot-gun under the bed.
  - b) No, but I have thought about it once or twice after watching a particularly frightening news programme, on some very gruesome murder....
  - c) No, what do you think I am. CRAZY?
3. You switch on the TV to watch your favourite programme of the week, only to find out that it was rescheduled and shown earlier to make room for a special broadcast urging you to help create a better society, consolidate the democratic process, contribute to the sustainable development of the country... blah, blah, blah... Do you:
    - a) Take out the sawn-off shot-gun you keep under the bed and blow up the TV
    - b) Complainingly switch off the TV
    - c) Watch the broadcast with interest
  4. Were you popular at school?
    - a) No, no-one ever wanted to play my games
    - b) Quite popular, some of my closest friendships were made at school
    - c) EVERYONE was my friend at school
  5. You win a large amount of

money in the lottery. Do you:
 

- a) Spend, spend, spend like there's no tomorrow, wake up the next day and find you have just enough to pay for this month's rent
- b) Give some of it to your mother, but put most of it in a high interest deposit account
- c) Buy presents for your family and friends and give the rest to charity

6. Do you ever wear socks that don't match?
 

- a) Always, they come out of the wash like that
- b) Sometimes, by mistake
- c) Never

7. You make a huge error at work on the computer that may well spell total disaster for the company you work for. However, the error is not traceable to you. Do you:
 

- a) Tell no-one and leave the country, laughing all the way
- b) Point out the error to your immediate superior, pretending to have just discovered it yourself, in time to rectify some of the damage
- c) Call a general meeting and announce to everyone that you are very sorry that you've ruined all their lives, that you

8. Are you superstitious?
 

- a) Only on Wednesdays
- b) Not really, no more than anyone else. I mean I don't actually BELIEVE in all that stuff....
- c) No way! All these idiots that do the Tarot cards, and astrology... and all that stupid,

9. Are you worried about the environment?
 

- a) No, I'm waiting for the day when we wipe ourselves out... global warming... nuclear war... we're all going to die, become extinct... and then the earth will be saved... from the cancer that is humanity
- b) Yes, I do worry that unless we act soon, there will be no environment left for future generations, our own children
- c) Which environment do you wish to specify? Political? Social? Economic? Socio-economic? Socio-political? Politico-economic?...

10. Do you, by any chance, sleep with a knife under your pillow?
 

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will do anything, ANYTHING, to make it up to each and everyone of them... that is, when you get out of prison... because you're going to hand yourself in to the authorities now....

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stupid stuff about walking over ladders and not stepping on cats... are these people mad, or what?

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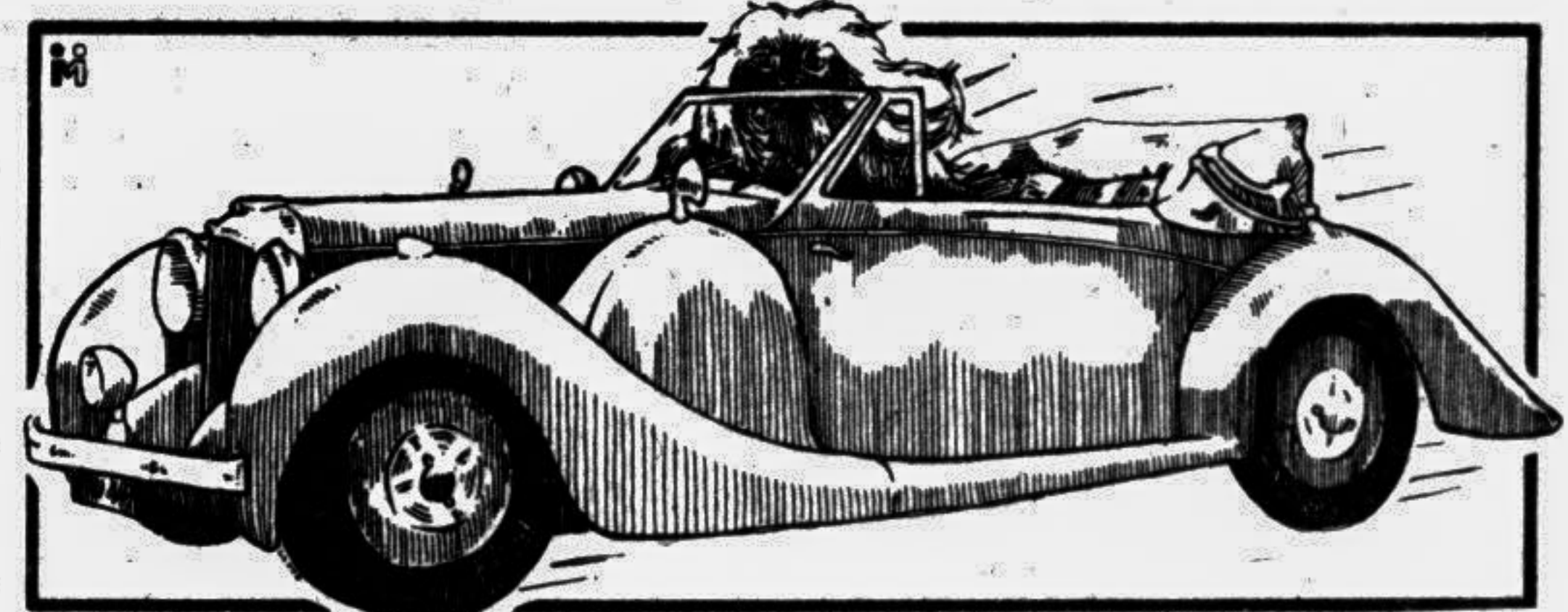
c) No, what do you think I am. CRAZY?

**How did you do?**  
Mostly c's — The ambulance is on its way. Meanwhile would you mind putting this strait-jacket on, just to try it on for size.... Mostly b's — There's hope for you, but not much.  
Mostly a's — you are totally and utterly sane, in an insane world.

## It's a Dog's Life in Beijing

by Fons Tuinstra

*Residents of Beijing have been invited to submit their views on official proposals to legalise the keeping of dogs, frowned on as a bourgeois luxury in the days of hard-line communism. But already thousands of people have literally taken a lead and added a canine to the household.*



his luxurious lifestyle was not complete without a genuine Pekinese dog, imported from Europe.

The prohibition against dogs may have been a good thing in revolutionary China, which had problems feeding its human population and considered dogs to be useless and bourgeois, 'but nowadays there is no hunger in China,' Kent claims.

'People can spend money on things they like. And I like these dogs,' says Kent, who gladly paid \$600 for Baobao, the latest pet in his collection. Imported Pekinese like Baobao can be worth upwards of \$1,000. Once associated with imperial China, the breed was almost extinguished after the revolution. With their return to popularity, the best Pekinese are now brought in from other countries. Baobao was not difficult to import. Customs officials waved him through without inspecting his vaccination papers.

However, China's new breed of dog owners appear to know little about keeping dogs.

In the market, some dogs look as if they have been dyed with bleach to make them appear more unusual.

Wang Jun Xiang, director of the Beijing World Pet Zoo, is waging a one-man campaign to increase public knowledge about the proper care of dogs. The city's first pet shop, the Pet Zoo resembles a Disneyland building and on Sundays is packed with customers.

Next to Wang's shop is a dog-grooming salon, where the animals are washed, perfumed and have their nails trimmed. On the wall is a poster of China's Empress Cixi (1835-1908), surrounded by Pekinese dogs.

In imperial times, says local lore, it was forbidden for ordinary citizens to keep Pekinese, which were raised especially to please the emperors. Puppy merchants, carrying Pekinese in their coat pockets, cite their imperial background and charge top prices for them.

But historian Zhu Jia Jin, researcher at the Palace Museum in Beijing's Forbidden City, laughs at the stories of

the so-called 'imperial Pekinese.'

'I know these people who will tell you the Pekinese is an imperial dog,' he says. 'I know they say only emperors were allowed to keep them. But I'm old enough to know this claim is nonsense. The merchants only use this argument nowadays as an opportunity to make more money from their Pekinese.'

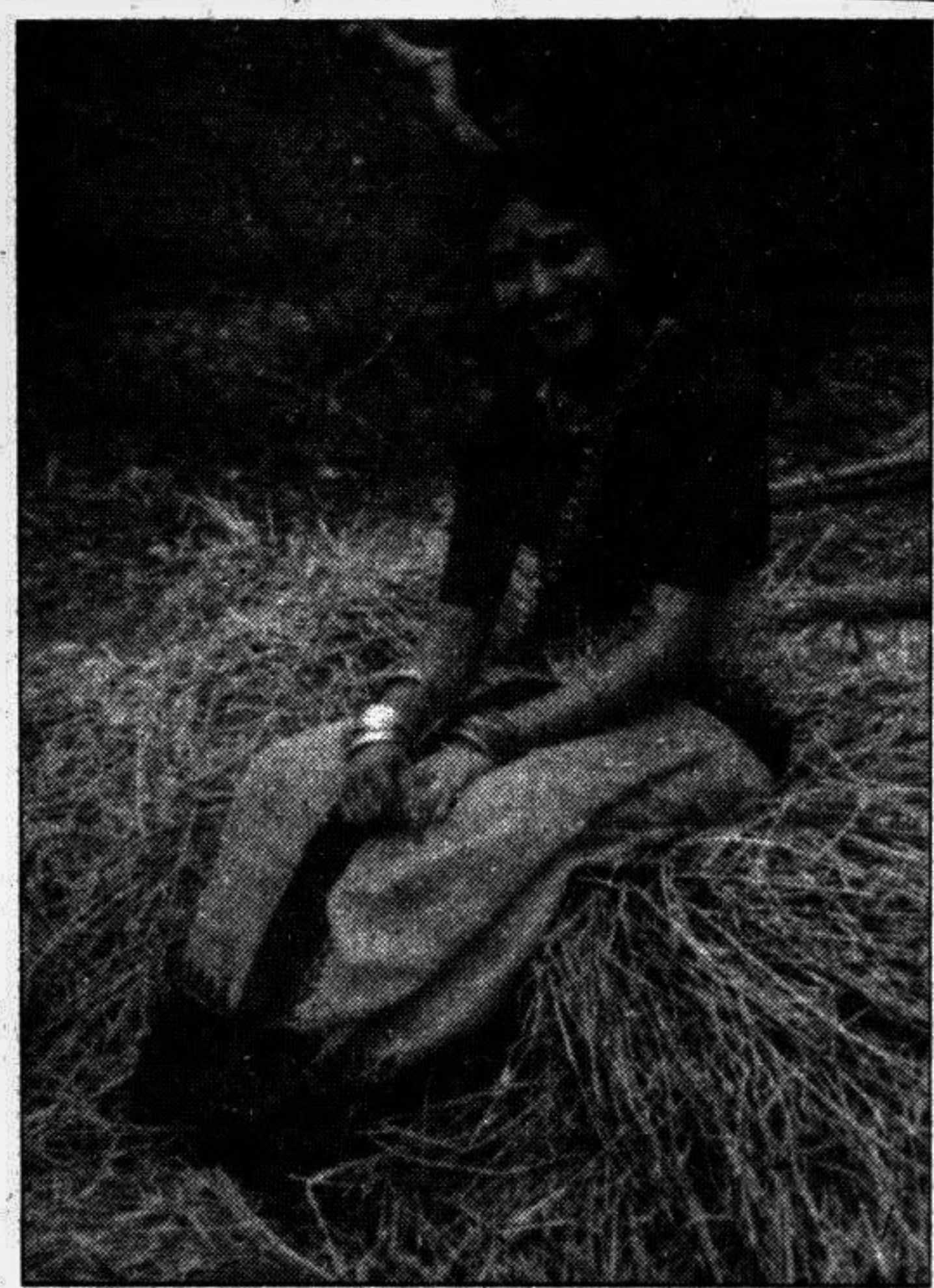
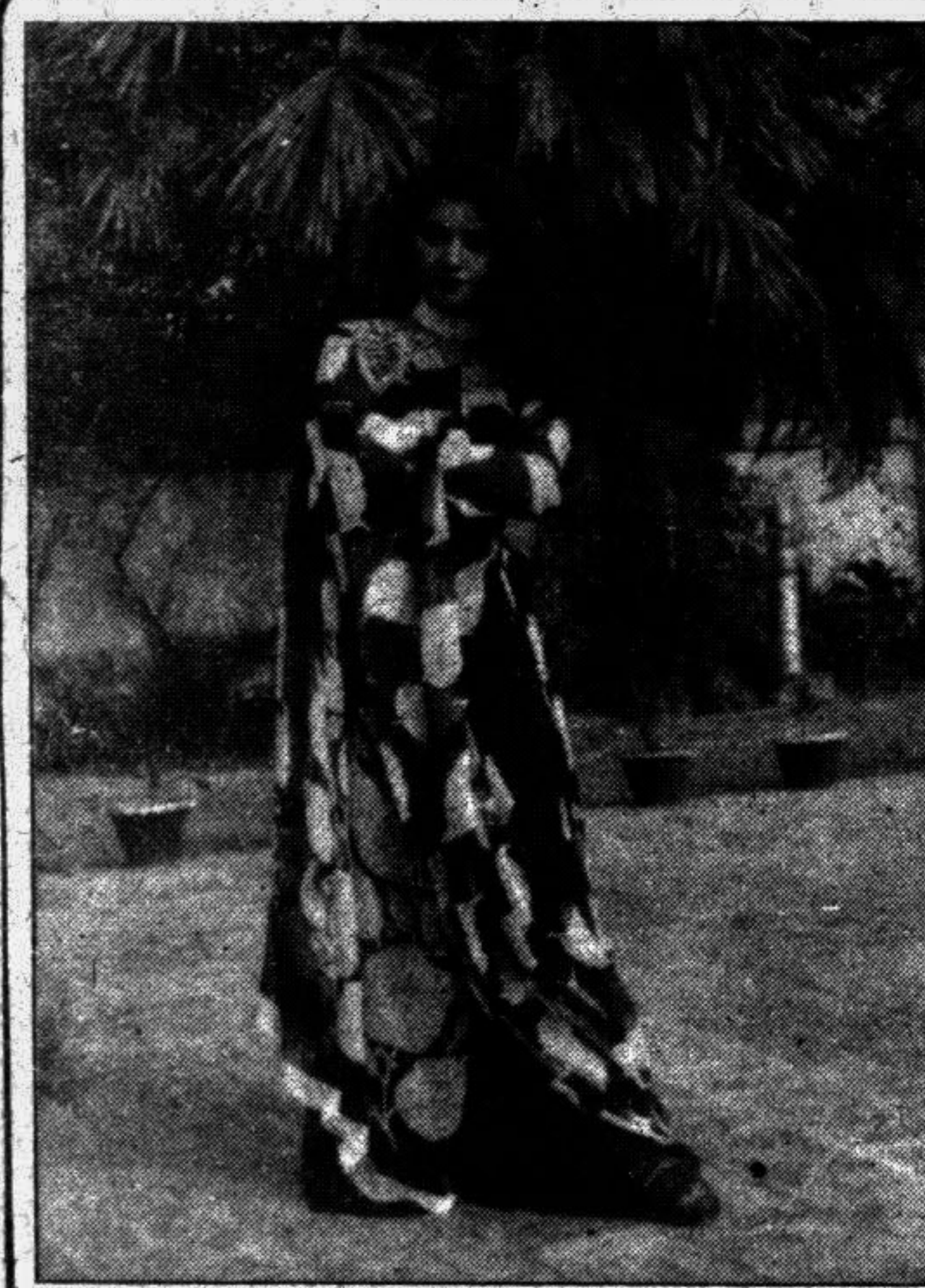
'Already before the revolution you could buy Pekinese at the market just outside the Forbidden City,' says Zhu.

When he hears the historian's verdict, Kent is quite upset.

Then, Kent thinks about it a little longer and offers a more Chinese explanation: 'Maybe, just like now, keeping the Pekinese was officially forbidden, but everybody was keeping them.'

It seems dog owners in Beijing have already voted in favour of legalising their pets.

— Gemini News Journalist currently residing in China.



Two facets of fashion: In the modern town and in the traditional countryside

Photo: Anokhi

Photo: M Harisuddin

### COOKERY

**Murgh Tikka**  
Ingredients  
800g/ 1 3/4 lb Chicken (legs)  
Butter for basting  
The Marinade  
50g/ 1/4 cup Yoghurt  
40g/ 6 3/4 tsp Ginger paste  
40g/ 6 3/4 tsp Garlic paste  
3g/ 1/2 tsp White Pepper powder  
3g/ 1/2 tsp Cumin powder  
5g/ 1 tsp Mace-Nutmeg-Green Cardamom powder  
3g/ 1/2 tsp Red Chilli powder  
3g/ 1/2 tsp Turmeric  
60ml/ 4 Tbs Lemon Juice  
20g/ 2 Tbs Gramflour Salt

75 ml/ 5 Tbs Groundnut Oil  
Serves: 4  
Preparation time: 4 hours  
Cooking time: 10 minutes  
Preparation  
The chicken: Clean, remove the skin and debone. Cut each leg into 4 pieces — 24 tikka in all.  
The marinade: Whisk yoghurt in a large bowl, add the remaining ingredients and mix well. Rub the chicken pieces with this mixture.  
Keep aside for 3 1/2 hours.  
The oven: Pre-heat to 350°  
E  
The skewering: Skewer the marinated tikka at least an inch apart.  
Keep a tray underneath to collect the drippings.  
Cooking  
Roast in a moderately hot tandoor for about 6-7 minutes, basting at least once. In a charcoal grill, for about the same time, basting once. In a pre-heated oven, roast the tikka for 8-10 minutes, basting at least twice. Make sure that the chicken does not touch the sides or the bottom of the oven.