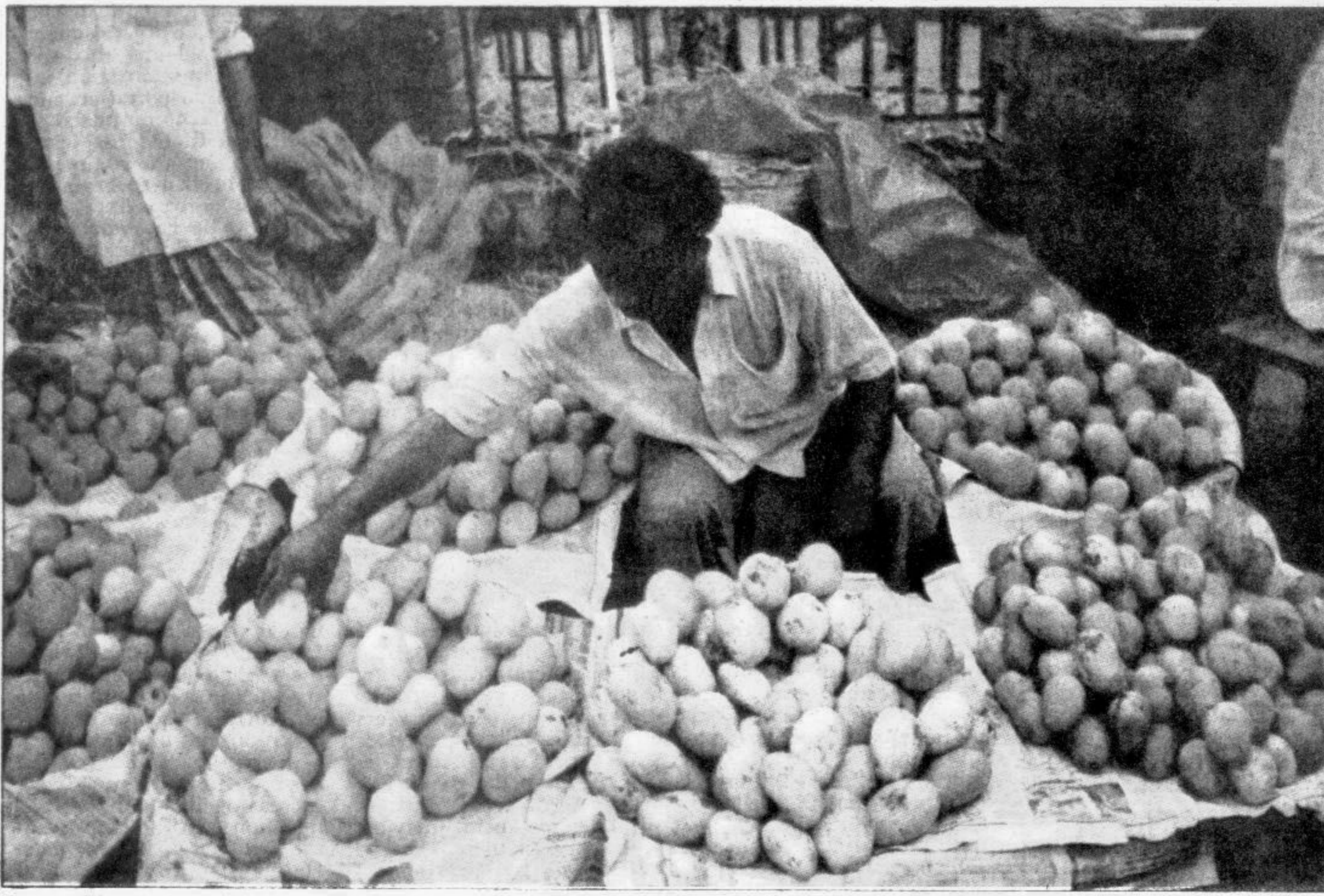


The Season of Heat and Honey

Commonly known in this part of the world as the season of heat and honey, the summer comprising the months of *Baishakh* and *Jaistha* had just come to an end, according to the Bengali calendar. But, how was that blazing hot summer that just rolled on? The write-up here features some of the predominant images and experiences of the season.

by Azfar Hussain



Seasonal fruits around the city stalls

Star photo by A K M Mohsin

NOT all seasons spell out their presences, or exhibit their movements, with equal intensity. Some seasons only slip by, or even thieve by, or just race by, or simply sink down, while others arrive with loud reports, in moods boisterously jubilant, or even revengeful. There are still others which come and go, with their own music, magic and beauty.

In summer, for example, the earth's bosom is split by the sun's parching heat, making the season's presence more than felt, leading one to cry out in desperation — *Allah megh dey, chhaya dey, pani dey re ru!* (O God, give us clouds, give us shades, give us showers). And, then, as the famous "Song of the Twelve Months" puts it: "Comes *Shravana* when the sky is full of clouds, and there are flashes of lightning, and the flood comes from all the corners." These two seasons — the summer and the rainy — are perhaps the most pronounced, visible, intense, immense ones, drawing and demanding and even dismantling our senses in a variety of ways.

But, an autumn dawn in Bangladesh, as it seems to span a dew-drop duration, certainly lacks intensity, but not serenity. Rabindranath Tagore, who is perhaps more sensitive and responsive than anyone else to the rhythms and colours of Bengal's seasons, discovers his land's lovely, lonely, lyrical form in the heart of an autumn dawn: "O my Mother Bengal, your green limbs glow in stainless beauty." Indeed, this is the season which does not celebrate sound, nor even sight, it has its own aesthetics of silence. For example, in this season, a river writes its name in the whispers of silence, even when the *doel* calls or the *koel* sings in the woodland court, one does not merely hear them, but one only responds reflexively to the syllables of silences lyrically carved onto the space of the wind.

Then, what a perfect lyric of silence, serenity and sympathy is evoked by a *Hemanta* sunset: the evening looks like a coy mistress sitting alone beneath the limitless azure shading off into gold. Then

comes the month of *Magh* when you have golden mustard-fields, when the smoke of fog keeps whirling and twirling and forking and reworking its path through the field, when the river is wrinkled, shrivelled-up, and I am sure the ghost of Tagore now laments over the plight of his once-billowy, once-life-throbbing Padma which is today more a skeleton than a river (I am also sure that had Tagore been alive, he would have been the first one to be dead set against the albatross-like-hanging Farakka conspiracy!). And what about spring in Bengal? Very silent,

very meek, — certainly not as pronounced as summer. Yet, in spring, one may see the *shumul's* (silk-cotton flower) crimson or the red of the *Palash* and the *Krishnachura*: one may also hear the "honey-tongued nightingales singing sonorous madrigals", as one of our poets thus sings a springtime tune.

Now, to come back to the season of sight, sound and smell — summer, which is commonly known as the season of sunshine and heat, fruits and splits. It is this season we will now be talking about. The season comprising the months of *Baishakh* and

Jaistha had just completed its spell, as our calendar, that time shaping machine, pointed its finger to such an end. True, we had spent those two months — two intense, unavoidable, obtrusive months — one by one. But, how?

One of the most obvious and common responses is that it was a blazing hot, and a tellingly humid, summer. Had Shakespeare ever chanced upon this summer in Bangladesh, he would have forgotten the epithet *lovely* he had so unreservedly attributed to "a summer's day." Perhaps to say that there was

the heat in this land would amount to an underserving understatement. But, how was the heat anyway? To put it simply, it was intensely oppressive, if not just oppressive, it was "obscene", as one of my journalist-friends characterised it, showing his superb strength in fetching an appropriate epithet even when he was oppressed by the fanatical heat of a late *Baishakh* morning.

Yes, it simply peeved one to face a morning, it was easy to get prickly, it was easy to lose temper in the heat, and I have come to know that many did, exemplifying a

perfect correspondence between the heat *within* and the heat *without*. It was the only other day that some students were inordinately intimidated by their teachers shouting with intense heat. As I also heard, lovers' quarrels increased at a record-rate as it were, and some relationships simply found their easy conclusions in the heat of *Jaistha*. Sometimes a wife, and sometimes a husband, turned cantankerous and irascible, at the total expense of conjugal romanticism! Oh, such was the infuriating heat that turned shirts, blouses, lungis, saris, genjis simply sweaty with a kind of odd and semi-inaudible *pach-pach* to the extent that one would reflexively want to peel them off. It was the heat that turned relationships sour, speeches sarky, minds scatty, and English romanticism about summer simply blackcomical! As both scrapping and scratching scaled up in the rabid heat, as one even could not be on heat in the heat, the market, too, had its own way: there had been an astronomical rise in the prices of the essentials. And one should not forget to note that the heat was turned more oppressive and obscene by the infernally insistent cycle of load-shedding and water-failure which are perhaps yet to show their cruel, sadistic *tour de force*!

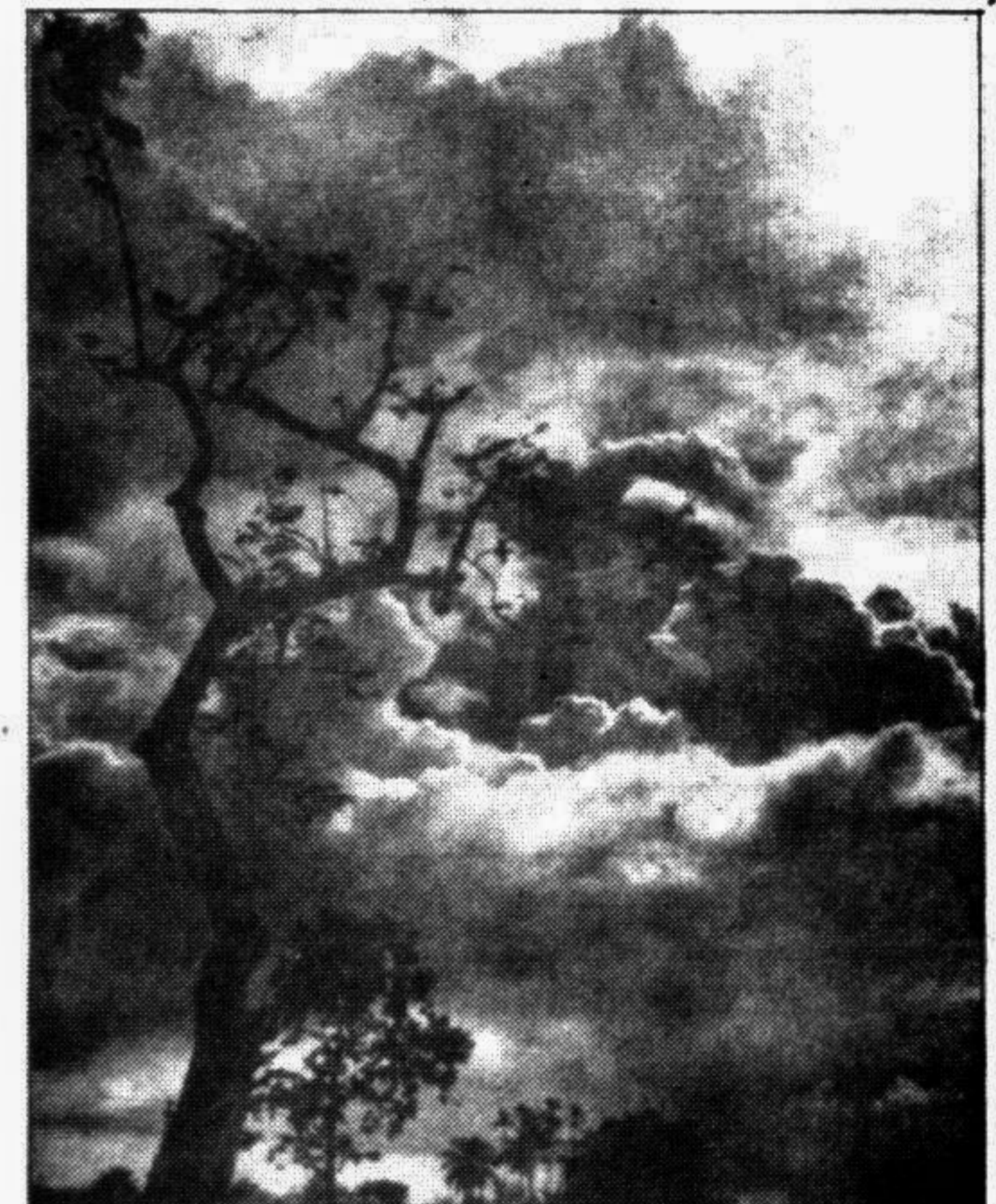
There is nothing new about the scourge of drought in Bangladesh. It is almost endemic in the country. This year, too, drought had its own range of impact on our life and nature: sources of surface-water dried up, farm-crops were affected, trees had to shed their leaves, stream-flows were reduced, ground-water shrank interior, the soil in many areas lay waste and barren in the scorching sun, foodgrain production declined, and human lives were lost. Understandably, the poor were the worst victims of the season.

Yet, the scourge of those two months, only punctuated with a meagre rainfall, was somewhat tempered, though inadequately, with the enduring lyric of the green — the green of mango-blossoms which, to an extent, managed to survive the savagery of the furious *Kalbosheki*. Though

our mango-orchards were not replete with the uninhibited splashing green or the *catka* smell of the blossom, these orchards were not empty either. Some of our markets now and then exhibited those live images of green fruitfulness — *dalis* after *dalis* were celebrating the joy of fullness, as they captured those spheroid or rounded shapes of green or red. Mangoes in the warmth of their togetherness looked celebratory, jovial, welcoming. Fruits like *lichis* and *jaams* (blackberry fruits) also had their images and utilities foregrounded in this season which was once proverbially known and celebrated as the *modhu mash* — the season of honey. Honey, of course, did not flow, as it used to; but it certainly had its hint at least. That grand mix of mango, milk and *chira* was not just an image evoked from our memories; it was for many a reality this time, a dish offered to guests, particularly special guests like son-in-laws. True, in our community, the month of *Jaistha* is still known as *jamai soshhi*, for it is in this month that a son-in-law receives a special treat, a *honeyed* treat, full of mangoes and *lichis* and other fruits, at

the house of his in-law's. But, it is indeed a pity to observe and experience that we have today almost moved away from the natural rhythms and familiar colours of our seasons which appear to be more erratic to us than they were ever before. Sometimes, our seasons do not tend to listen to the conventional calendar, because our hedonism, our violence, our intolerance, our excessive greed have disturbed and disrupted not only the rhythm of our living in harmony with the seasons, but also our contact with a healthy environment and a friendly nature. Our great loss is that we can no longer treat nature as our friend. But it is not that nature is always unfriendly to us; we are, in fact, more cruel to nature which, in turn, only seeks to take revenge on us.

Finally, where there is poverty, and only poverty, there is no special season to celebrate. A poor farmer with no shelter and no food does not know what difference it makes when a breeze blows in the summer heat. For him, perhaps, no season has yet gone by; but, then, a season is there only to come — a season of real fruitfulness!



And comes monsoon — the season of rains
 Courtesy — Noazesh Ahmed and Naib Uddin Ahmed

A couple dressed in saffron robes singing their way through the village alleys, often collecting alms, but always soothing the passerby's soul with their thematic songs is a common sight in many a Bangla village. They are the baul couple, loved by the villagers.

The bauls of Bangladesh are a group of singing mendicants or fakirs who are known for their humanism and disregard for social stratification.

They are loved for their mystic music and approach to life. Because of their simple way of living and total disregard for the material world around them, bauls seem secluded from the mainstream of people. And we actually know very little about them, yet, however, we make a great show of sentiment and fondness for them when we hear their songs.

Recently Lokshilpi Goshthi undertook a praiseworthy initiative to bring these bauls and their culture to the centre of activities — the capital. Hundreds of bauls from different parts of the country participated in the festival at the foot of the banyan tree at Ramna Green. And intoxicated by their songs, the city dwellers took a musical break from their mundane city life.

Lalon Shah was the greatest and most prolific composer among the bauls. He lived to the age of 116 and died near Kushtia. In Kushtia a lot of his followers now worship Lalon Faqir.

The bauls are members of a cult both in Bangladesh and in West Bengal, India. Some are Muslims, some Hindus. They live together in *akhras* or monasteries, a Hindu might have a Muslim spiritual guide, a Muslim might have a Hindu guru. Bauls believe that the human body is a miniature world with the Sain, the master, dwelling within. They see no contradiction between their baulism and their faith in Islam or Hinduism. They have their own explanation for beliefs and myths.

Murshid-Tatta is knowledge of *Murshid*, meaning guide, *guru* or *pir*. The spiritual guide is an intermediary between God and the believer: "Keep

Bauls of Bengal Hundreds Throng the Mela

Found in all ages, in all parts of the world and in all religious systems the mystics have more or less manifested themselves in an identical spirit and elan. The mystics or its Bangalee phenomenon *Bauls* dwell somewhere between religion and philosophy, where philosophical enquiries and religious meditation act together to seek the contact of the Divine or the *achin pakhi* — the elusive bird. And mysticism has always been an inspiration to philosophy, poetry, art and music. In our part of the world it has found its expression in songs and reached an apogee in the compositions of Lalon Shah. Last week a three-day Baulfest brought the opportunity to the citizenry to listen to the mystics and have the feel.

by Raffat Binte Rashid



The Bauls at the festival

Star photo by A K M Mohsin

the known one before you to learn the unknown."

Atta-Tatta, spiritual and metaphysical knowledge, allows them to be true, if the guide is to be the source of truth. They believe that the Elusive One, or God, dwells within your heart, your body. *Deha-Tatta* is the understanding that the body is the seat of all truths, that it is a miniature world.

The final or last knowledge is *Param-Tatta*, knowledge of the Ultimate, or the Absolute Being.

Now, has this, first of its kind, the three-day (14-16 June) national baul festival achieved the task of bringing these mystical poets and singers to the place where they belong — to the hearts of the people? To an extent, yes. They enchanted a sizeable audience throughout.

(Few facts were collected from the book 'Songs of Lalon', translated by Brother James.)

Song of Lalon

How does the Unknown Bird go into the cage and out again?/ Could I but seize it, / I would put the fetters of my heart/ around its feet.

The cage has eight rooms and nine closed doors./ From time to time fire flares out./ Above there is the main room, / the mirror-chamber.

O my heart, you are set on the affairs/ of the cage, / (Yet) the cage was made by you, / made with green bamboo; / The cage may fall apart any day.

Lalon says, / The Bird may work its way out/ and fly off somewhere.

Translated by Brother James

Baul Mohin Shah



He was just another face in the crowd, sitting idly with his all-time companion, his *srengi*, in one hand and a pink plastic bag of clothes in the other. Nobody actually felt his presence until he was brought on the stage. Wearing a black *lungi*, an offwhite *tata*, and his hair tied up in a bun Mohin Shah, who looked to be in his mid sixties, seemed almost a misfit among others on that dais. But it was only when he talked of music that people around realized the depth of his mystical being.

Born in 1310 (Bangla calendar), i.e. 1903, Mohiuddin Ahmed Dewan was a boy of the famous Fakir Bari of Hari-rampur village in Manikganj. Mohiuddin from his early childhood days was strongly drawn towards music. His father was an admirer of Lalon. Moreover it was a custom in the village that seasonal fairs would take place in their premises. Music and songs were always around him and thus his attraction as a boy. By the time he was a lad of 13, green, classical tunes of Gazi, Murshidi, Bhaawal were

like his second tongue. "It was at one such fair that I met the famous poet Jasimuddin, and things took a different turn for me," vividly recalls this 92-year-old man, who is still a young man at heart. Restless and always an adventurer, Mohiuddin ran away from home and went to Calcutta. There he worked as a *tandul* or assistant in a dock and later trained as a steamer quartermaster and joined the Scottish ship 'Sky' as a crew member. "In my four year trip around the world, I landed in 40 different ports, crossed the Indian, Atlantic and Pacific Oceans and many more. Finally I returned home in 1929. At this point my family members were eager for me to settle down and arranged my marriage with a mere *sak cola chhur* (a kid playing in the fields) of nine years. My child bride didn't like me, let alone understand my whims and desires of life. With a heavy heart and a restless mind I again set out to join Jasimuddin's group."

It was around this time that he came to meet the fa-
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