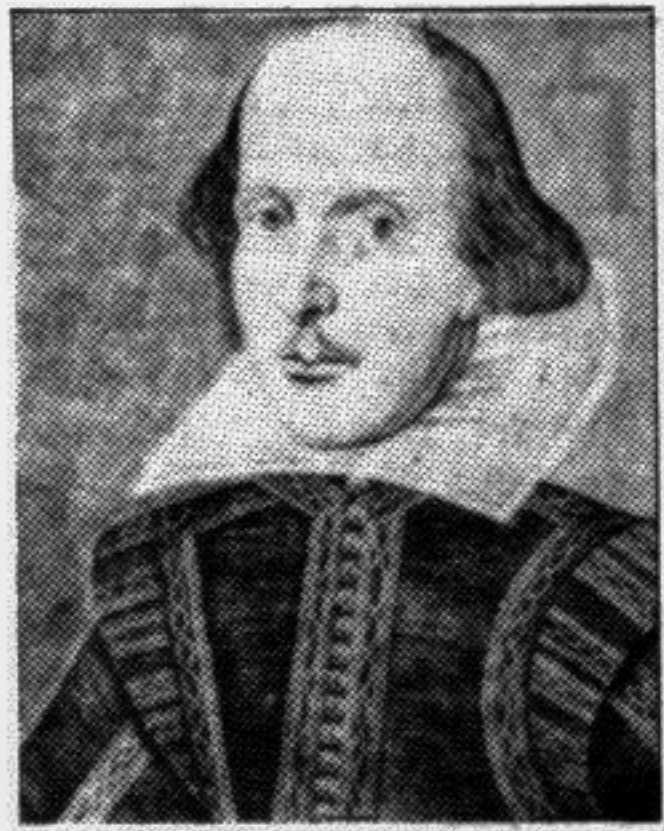


Literary Significance of Early Bengali Translation of Shakespeare



Bengali theatre turns 200 this year. This year also marks the 164th year of Shakespeare staging or a cult in the words of Nirad C. Chaudhury. Chaudhury wrote in his autobiography, "I do not know if any other country or people in the world has ever made one author the epitome, test, and symbol of literary culture as we Bengalis did with Shakespeare in the nineteenth century. Homer may have been something like this to the Greeks, but that is too distant a parallel. It was a cult which we had made typically Bengali, although the deity was foreign." The Shakespeare obsession was so ingrained among the Bengali intelligentsia that six Bengali versions of *Romeo and Juliet* were available only between 1848 and 1895. Professor Serajul Islam Choudhury traces the influence of Shakespeare on Bengali literature dating back to 1831.

THE Influence English literature has exerted on the Bengali language has been both deep and varied. The number of forms and concepts that Bengali literature acquired from its acquaintance and contact with English literature is not insignificant. Bengali drama, as we know it today, did not exist before a Russian, Gerasim Lebedeff, staged the translation of an "English dramatic piece" in 1796. That he was a foreigner is not without significance, for modern Bengali drama owes its origin to the deliberate imitation of the European plays that were performed in this country during the later eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. True, Sanskrit writers had practised a form of dramatic writing, but it was much too distant and different from modern Bengali drama to have any bearing on it. Nor could the popular tradition of musical performances, called Yatra, make any important contribution to the growth of the theatre in Bengal; in fact, the modern stage grew up independently of all native forms. It was consequently natural that Shakespeare who was given priority over other writers in the syllabuses of the newly set up academic institutions and staged in the original in Calcutta should exert the most dominant influence on the growth and development of Bengali drama. It was he who taught Bengali writers the form as well as the concept of tragedy. When JC Ghosh wrote what is now regarded as the first tragedy in Bengali he quoted Shakespeare in support of his thesis that tragedy does not, contrary to popular opinion, depress the audience.

JC Ghosh knew how difficult it would be for his readers to accept this wholly new kind of writing of which they had no previous experience whatsoever. Sanskrit aesthetics for one thing, would not permit plays to have unhappy endings. But what is more important is that the idea, central to the tragic vision, of accepting this world as an end in itself was alien to the religious beliefs cherished by many in India. The Hindu belief that earthly sufferings are a punishment justly awarded for what one did in a previous life and that what one suffers here will be adequately compensated for after death is not quite compatible with the tragic sense. For writers who had not known Shakespeare and for readers even after they had read him, it was difficult, if not impossible, to conceive life as a tragedy. Despite JC Ghosh's strong advocacy of tragedies and the attempts of other writers to promote them, tragedy in Bengal did not flourish as other kinds of writing did. Until Bankimchandra, the celebrated novelist, entered the field, Bengali literature could not develop a conception of tragedy peculiar to itself; whatever elements of tragedy we notice in plays and poems written before him were nothing more than Western ideas cast in a Bengali mould.

In the context of a situation like this its not difficult to realize that although Shakespeare was read with enthusiasm and frequently imitated, the dramatist could not be properly understood. Since the readers had no prior knowledge about the theatre, dramatic interpretation of his works was not possible and he was considered to be a poet writing in a language, and of a culture, completely unknown to the audience. When Girish Chandra Ghosh, Bengal's foremost dramatist, according to some, said that Othello, particularly Desdemona's love for the Moon was as unintelligible to the Bengali audience as Kalidas' Sakuntala would be to readers in a different country, he was speaking of a difficulty felt by many, perhaps to a certain extent, by all. There were, of course, writers like Madhusudan, the Christian and Vidyasagar, the pundit who outdistanced their contemporaries in their understanding of Shakespeare's greatness. Hemchandra, the poet who boasted of his English learning declared in the preface to his translation of *The Tempest* that Shakespeare was a poet of the world in much the same sense in which Kalidas was a poet of India. But it would not be wrong to suspect, in view of his performance as a translator of Shakespeare, that to Hemchandra, and others like him, the world's greatest acknowledged dramatist was rather a myth than a practising artist. More representative were the views that one Purnachandra Bose set forth in an article published in 1896. Tragedy, he taught, was a crude, albeit faithful, manifestation of the savage nature of the Europeans. To Purnachandra it was a pity that educated men and women of the community were being fed on the 'poisonous stuff that the 'matchless dramatist' from England, called Shakespeare, purveys through 'the poetic pipes' of his tragic writings and that Shakespeare-worship had to the detriment of the fame of Kalidas, become the vogue. This attitude, oddly similar to Tolstoy's can, in all fairness, be said to have been endemic in a cross-section of the nineteenth century intelligentsia of Bengal.

Another view, indulgent to Shakespeare, tended to regard him as a moral teacher rather than as a dramatist. When one hears Kaliprasanna stoutly dismissing the plea for poetic justice made by the Sanskrit aestheticians and then praising Shakespeare on the ground that his plays give the readers a good harvest of moral lessons, one suspects that observations like this were a veiled apology for the Bard. Shakespeare, it is pertinent to note here, became familiar to this country primarily through the academic institutions having eminent teachers like DL Richardson on the staff and to the students a text-book is, notwithstanding the skill of the teacher, a source of instruction and not entertainment. The result was that in spite of all the enthusiasm that he roused, Shakespeare remained vague and remote, not fully understood. A simple proof lies in the fact that until 1850 no complete book of criticism on Shakespeare was produced in Bengali. And the solitary volume by Rishi Das contains interpretations of Shakespeare's plays that are disarmingly naive and ingenuous, if not positively crude. But the most substantial testimony is provided by the translations of Shakespeare attempted in Bengali.

One of the first translators was Harachandra Ghosh, a person educated at Hooghly College and later employed as an Excise Superintendent at Maldah. His version of *The Merchant of Venice* was called *Bhanumati-Chittabilas* and published in 1854. *Bhanumati* is Harachandra's *Portia* and *Chittabilas* his *Antonio*. Unlike the original, the Bengali version stresses the element of romantic-love rather than the character of the melancholy Antonio or the calculating Shylock. Owing either to a misconception of the character of a desire to rouse the passion of hatred in the audience, Shylock, who is called the millionaire in the new play, has been tarred with the additional guilt of cruelty to his wife. There are, moreover, a king and queen, Portia's parents who ultimately go out on a pilgrimage with a view, perhaps, to setting the daughter free to have her own way. These make the play read like an impromptu dramatisation of a folk tale. Considerable damage is done to unity of the plot by the pointless introduction of a jester and his wife, who, despite their reckless efforts, fail to amuse the readers, as also by the addition of several songs, an introduction and an invocation to the goddess of learning. All of these things came from the popular tradition of Yatra.

Consequent upon these alterations, the play becomes sprawling and unwieldy, reminding us that Harachandra had no native models before him. He called his adaptation, for so it was, the first play in Bengali, although, historically, it was the third. But this does not substantially alter the position, because he seems to have been unaware of the two plays written before him. Harachandra was neither a good poet nor a competent dramatist. At his best, he was a versifier using a medium which was highly stylised and stiff. However, incompetent this version of *The Merchant of Venice*, it does in its own way indicate the difficulties and characteristics of Shakespeare translation in Bengali. The first is the problem of language. Personal deficiencies apart, language was a problem faced by all translators and, for that matter, all dramatic writers in Bengal. The observations of Hemachandra, a later and better poet, made apropos of his translation of *Romeo and Juliet* are to the point. "This *Romeo and Juliet* is only an imitation, and not a translation, of the original. I found it necessary to introduce changes because the Bengali language is so very unlike English that a faithful copy of the English play would, owing to differences in cultural, social and religious values, lose much of its appeal". In 1877 Kaliprasanna Ghosh, whom we quoted earlier, remarked that the Bengali language did not know how to walk straight; it only gaddled about unsteadily and neither in the country nor in its poetry could one see any signs of a capacity for sorrow or anger, hatred or courage.

Kaliprasanna recommended the adoption of blank verse, a metre unknown not only to Harachandra but to Bengali literature as such till Madhusudan tried to introduce it in his *Padmavati* in 1860. Madhusudan's avowed intention in writing blank verse was to throw of 'The fetters forged for us by a servile imitator of everything Sanskrit' and to imitate 'the greatest dramatists of Europe.' But the blank verse he introduced had a very obvious limitation. It was Miltonic rather than Shakespearean; it did not draw sustenance from common speech nor was it capable of dramatic movement. By its very nature, it was artificial, stylised and rhetorical. Secondly, the introduction by Harachandra of comic elements in his translation showed the persistence of the Yatra tradition. Comic elements and verse frequently occurred in both Sanskrit plays and the Yatra. The latter were musical compositions and consisted largely of songs. It was to this influence that Harachandra, like many others, succumbed. The influence could also be seen in the incorporation of a few songs, an introduction and a prologue by the stage manager. In his preface to the adaptation of *The Merchant of Venice* Harachandra claimed that his inspiration had come from advice given by an English man interested in the promotion of learning in this country. And in the preface to his translation of *Romeo and Juliet* he regretted the unwillingness of the Hooghly College authorities to prescribe the volume as a text-book. His motives appear thus to have been clearly utilitarian. None of his translations was ever staged. Harachandra was not unaware of the stiffness of his style and in his second translation, called *Charumukh-Chittahara* (*Romeo and Juliet*) published eleven years after the first, he deliberately tried to come closer to the language of conversation. But the success he achieved in this was counterbalanced by the almost precarious nearness to the ridiculous his style at times reached. As in his earlier version of Shakespeare, in this one too he made the usual concessions to the Yatra.

The best of the translations was published in 1869 and came, curiously but not insignificantly, from Vidyasagar, the Sanskrit scholar and social reformer who was not a dramatist and had no pretension to a great knowledge of English. He translated *The Comedy of Errors* into *Branatibilas* only because he hoped it would provide his audience with good fun. Clearly, Vidyasagar had a shrewder understanding of the genius of Shakespeare than Ghosh. For in his preface to the translation Vidyasagar spoke of Shakespeare's poetic genius and dramatic skill and, in spite of his knowledge of Kalidas whom he had translated into Bengali, conceded Shakespeare's claim to be regarded as the greatest of the poets in the world.

Vidyasagar's translation stands out from the work of other people particularly in two respects. Consider first the lucidity of his prose. The translation was in the form of a prose narrative and Vidyasagar's style brilliantly conveyed the sense of humour and fun of the original. The extent of this achievement can be properly assessed only when one remembers that Vidyasagar was himself the creator of modern Bengali prose. Working on materials which were utterly crude, he fashioned a style of writing which was as vigorous as it was lucid. Within the austere social reformer, there lurked a humorist who found in this translation an easy outlet for himself and whose sprightliness and spontaneity catches, to a remarkable degree, the comic vision of Shakespeare in the original.

Secondly, he did not introduce any great changes in the plot. This may, apparently, seem a negative virtue but is, nevertheless, something to reckon within view of the general tendency among other translators to indulge in additions and alterations. But even for him two passages, one in which Dromio of Syracuse calls Dromio of Euphesus names and the other in which Antipholus of Euphesus, when angry with his wife, speaks of the 'wench' he would dine with proved too strong. He left them out.

Perhaps, Vidyasagar's success was partly due to his choice of a comedy. Since

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season

Waheedul Haque

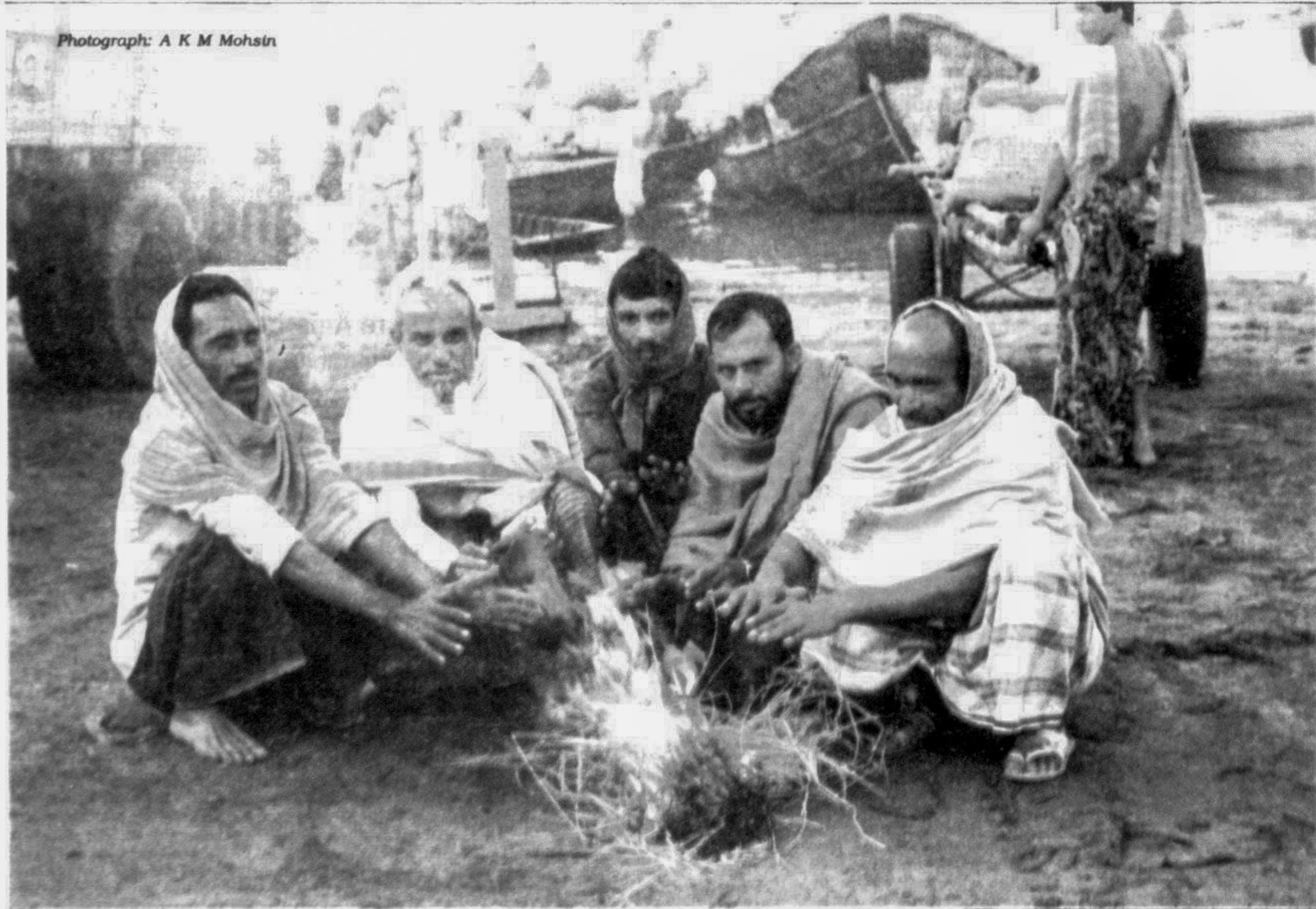
THERE is a chill in the air. Perhaps a tang than a chill. For, it is not only bracing but also making hearts leap up. The best of our time, in however worst of situations, is well at hand. It is only a week and some days to go for *Paush*, the month when the sun crosses over the Pusha constellation and also the month the Bengali adage — *Karo Paush Maash Karo Sarbonash* — celebrates as the antithesis of evil times.

Half way through *Kartik* winter starts creeping in. *Hemanta*, the *Jibonanda* season, is early winter

rather than late autumn. It is not that something is fading away or dying — *Kartik's* shortening days and *Agrahayan's* golden and short-lived afternoons speak of somebody's coming. Winter of the culinary delights and of the gourmet's dream days is approaching. It is the *Pitha-Puli* season.

Sugarcanes are being crushed in cleared openings amidst crop fields. Go and fill your glass from the big flat cauldron and let the peasants garnish the juice with lemon leaves for a treat-sit cushioned on the bagasse heap and sip the best drink in the world.

The Season of Delights



Photograph: A K M Mohsin

The afternoon simply flies casting tall shadows of datepalms. In the mornings help yourself to your fill of *rosh-rasa* in Sanskrit — the date palm juice. There isn't a comparable flavoured drink anywhere on the globe.

O, fish-eating Bengali! This is your time of the year. Take it with the best of vegetables that come with the chill. Just eye those sproutings from the earth — green and dew drenched, and you'll have all the beauty and peace life can offer.

This is the winter of Bengal — so unlike the terrorising monster of the colder climes.