

TEENS and TWENTIES

Pahela Baishakh: A Brief History

by Nameer Rahman

EVERY major date in any calendar has a history behind it, from the Chinese twelve-year cycle to the Christian solar based year, and certainly the Bengali year.

The Bengali calendar can have its roots traced right back to the Moghul era in the subcontinent. Before that the Moghul rulers of India and Bengal had brought with them the Islamic calendar which was based on the lunar system.

The lunar calendar may have been very well suited to the dry arid deserts of Central and East Asia but was not at all compatible with the subcontinent.

The reason was simple. The lunar calendar, in fact very fluid, each lunar month having no fixed number of days. A single month can have twenty seven, eight or nine days so each year all the months start a couple of weeks before the previous year. As a result the lunar calendar could not adequately mark out the specific dates or times for the frequent seasonal changes in the subcontinent.

Yet the most important factor leading to the eventual "discarding" of this calendar was the fact that the using the calendar the Moghuls could not mark out a specific date or day during which the revenues were to be collected from the farmers, a fixed number of days after the fields were harvested. So faced with these problems the Emperor Akbar asked courtier, intellectual and close friend Abu Fazal to devise a calendar more suited to the subcontinental climate and way of life.

Abu Fazal after studying the seasons and astrological and astronomical charts finally devised a calendar more suited to the sub-continent based on the solar system. Yet he still needed a particular day to mark the new year.

After carefully studying the customs of the time he decided that the new year would begin on the day commonly referred to as "Hal khata" amongst the traders of the day they opened a new ledger. This became the Bengali new years day and also the day the Moghul rulers collected revenues or taxes from the farmers and land owners.

However, this new years day or Pahela (meaning first day) of Boishakh remained a working day right until the British era in the nineteenth century when Hindu intellectuals and writers such as Bonken and Tagore felt it was a day fit to celebrate. The festivities of Pahela Boishakh have now become a cherished ritual of Bengali society and culture, a custom which hopefully will continue for centuries to come.

More Junkies!!

by Shahed Latif

PAHELA Boishakh is the first day in the Bengali calendar, it marks the end of one year and the beginning of another.

One thing becomes clear that day: that even though we differ in opinions, support different leadership, but on the 1st of Boishakh every one seems to be committed to one thing and that is enjoying oneself and showing some appreciation for our rich culture. Hypocritical it may sound, but we do become Bengalis that day, all venture out to the month long Boishakhi mela and enjoy the Bengali version of junk food and take part in the funfare the Bengali way.

I was walking down the streets of Bailey road when I suddenly came across a badamwala (peanuts vendor), badam is an item sold in the mela, and called him. I bought some badams from him in an effort to start the conversation and asked him his name. He told me his name was Jamal and with a smile on his face gave me a brisk idea of his business. He informed me that he usually gets his badams from Kawan bazar and dableboot from Raibazar. Jamal told me he buys these for Tk 22 per kg each. Jamal also told me that they have big sized badam which costs Tk 32 per kg.

Then I asked Jamal where does he usually sell his items and does he go to the melas, usually the Boishakhi mela? And instantly he replied, "Yes, I do go to Boishakhi mela, we sell a lot there and make quite a profit from the mela. Usually most of the people buy from us." He also told me everyday he sells them near the schools and colleges because students buy them. Jamal told me that he does not sell his badams usually in the same place, once a week maybe on Thursday or Friday he goes to the AKC ground during the evening when the players are usually practicing. Then I paid him and began my walk down the road back home.

The next day around the same time I was on my way home from Bangabazar when I came across this chatpatwala who was pushing his cart down the road and suddenly remembered they also go to Boishakhi mela and called him. At that time of the day they usually don't sell this chatpati and was quite surprised. I asked him whether I could ask him a few questions regarding his spicy

item.

I buy the pulses and spices from the New Market bazar, usually 6-7 kg of dal (pulse) each day and mashala (spices). I also use boiled eggs with them along with Tatool (tamarind) part, he gives out his ingredients. He usually sells his foods in and around Bailey road from 4:00-10:00 pm. Here his business is booming. He also told me some times some customers, usually the "mastans", eat without paying money and that is a big loss for him and sometimes he has to give money from his own pocket in an effort to make up for the losses. He also sells fuchka, one of my favourites. To make the fuchka crispy I use flour and talmakhna, beet-laban and many other mouth-watering spices which make it tasty. He also said he uses ta-toolpani in an effort to make it more delicious. Then I asked him for how many years he has been doing this business and he replied for nearly 30 years. His father was also a fuchkawala and he got it from his father. Then I asked him whether he goes to Boishakhi mela and he replied quite quickly, "Yes, of course I do go to Boishakhi mela." He told me that he has a huge sale during the mela: "Everybody usually takes chatpati along with fuchka, and sometimes we cannot keep pace with crowd pressure and the customers go away without paying. But still we go to the mela because by selling these we get our food."

While I was returning from Bangabazar I saw the man who was selling sugar cane juice near Topkhana. It is also an item found in the streets.

Each glass of this delicious juice cost about Tk 3. He gets his sugarcane from Sreepur and Chandpur. He also informed me another thing, that the sugarcane of Sreepur are usually found during the summer time and the sugarcane that comes from Chandpur are found during the rainy season.

100 sugarcane are required for 50 glasses of juice and he usually sells 100 glasses per day and needs 200 glasses per day, more during the public rallies. He then told me that he usually profits Tk 200 and sometimes has no profit at all. The streets are full of junk food stalls, starting from burgers to chatpatis, and we craved for all but more so for deshi junkies.

A Fool's Errand

by AKM Ehsan

OVER the years, a popular conception has haunted the psyche of the inhabitants of our country, that being that Bengalis are natural born poets. But strangely enough (albeit being the offspring of very romantic parents), poetry kept itself away from me — a sheer mystery.

My girl-friend, a few months back, marooned me in a pasture-land of despair by rebuking me; a stone-hearted bucolic buffoon, lacking romanticism. All this propelled me, in my desperation, to indite a stunning masterpiece of poetry, which would compel Rabindranath Tagore to make a rebirth and retrieve suzerainty over the poetrydom.

On a gloomy afternoon, with nothing to do, I attired myself in our traditional bohemian dress, pazama-panzabi, unlocked the threshold of our abode and ousted my lanky physique I purchased a stick of cigar and then, influenced by a grotesque character of an absurd TV drama, I nudged myself into the famous place of lovers and losers, flowers and pastes, birds and beasts and poets and plunderers — Ramna Park.

Entering the park, I searched for of an apropos site from where poetry-catching would be convenient, and in great amusement, I unveiled a bush of rosyblossoms beneath which I established my physique of a would-be poet and toiled to concentrate in bringing out the pensive mood.

It was a hot, humid day. Scavengers were quarrelling in a sheer mess, competing with squalid squabblers, and vendors were selling their merchandise with even more squawk. Babes in bustle, smoothing their shrewd boyfriends (dear babies, couldn't you perceive that they were all swindlers?); what a tremendous environment in which to compose some bombastic

calligraphy! The iron entered into my soul and thunderous rage and loath groomed my blackie countenance, compelling me to light that all-important stick in an unaccustomed skill. I inhaled a couple of deep drags. What a marvelous feeling! It soared me high in the sky. I felt the honey-taste of zephyr and of Spring's young night

even in this scorching heat of a summer's dog-day. All the brawlings and pandemoniums that had vexed me before seemed to transform into the melancholy of Mozart in a dreamy colour.

Within a few moments, all the cadaverous surroundings adorned themselves in bizarre colour and the ultimate shape was a dreamy Eden in which

flowers were everywhere, swinging slowly, birds chirping in merriment, cascades sprinkling water to undirt the baby-soxers giggling and squirming here and there.

At a place, I saw some of these astonishing beautiful women were even more ecstatic, dancing and singing centring a bearded person primed in monk-dress, which enhanced my curiosity. I approached them. And the guy was, dear readers, keep yourselves soothed, Rabindranath Tagore, the Monarch of the realm of literature.

He gazed at me, his divine look shaking my entity. I could hardly breathe and numbness pervaded my perception. The melody of uni-giggling redeemed me from being eclipsed by this all-conquering personality. I at once scrambled from that place and what I saw, was a beautiful creature of nature, exposing her devastating posture — the best classic calligraphy ever to be indited on heaven and earth — Brigitte Bardot — the Goddess of love — a blazing blend of wild and aesthetic beauty of whom I had dreamt night after night. All the flowers stopped defusing odour, all the birds stopped chirping, all the cascades stopped splashing water and the bewitched guy shameless to say — myself, forgot to breathe. She approached me, her roseate robe trailing behind her, and extending a hand, by way of insinuation, she asked, "Atodin kothai chhila?" I touched her golden hand — what a feeling — I touched her, I touched her, I touched her.....

And the reverie ended — a great woe to me. I saw a man smirking with simulated deference, which characterizes pimps, panders and procurers the world over, bathing under the mystic neon-light of the park, a not-so-young lady behind him, laughing amorously at me.



SANGGRENG

Celebrating Pahela Baishakh the Tribal Way

by Shuvra

FROM the beginning of time man has seen with great amazement the falling of leaves, the budding of flowers. Man has seen with utter disbelief the flooding of rivers, and the massive changes in environment. Naturally man being the curious of all living beings has studied these changes in atmosphere.

This study led to the formation of different seasons. Different races of people have defined season in their own individual way. And to keep up with the different definitions different calendars have come into existence. The custom of celebrating the New Year exists from ancient times. Each nation or race celebrates the coming of the New Year in a unique way. Each nation views the coming of the New Year in a different perspective. The Bengali New Year was introduced by Mughal Emperor Akbar. Akbar introduced the Bengali New Year in order to facilitate the collection of revenue. The first day of the Bengali calendar is first of Boishakh, and is celebrated all over Bangladesh.

When we say all over Bangladesh we also mean the tribal people of Bangladesh who inhabit the mountainous portions of the country. Their celebration of the New Year is

extravagant and impressive. The New Year celebration of the Pahari people lasts 3 days. The day preceding the first of Boishakh is strictly reserved for preparing alcoholic beverages (Do-Choani, ARA). Oh! by the way, the Pahari people refer to the Pahela Boishakh festival as "Sanggreng". On the first day early in the morning just prior to the sunrise young girls go to the mountains or jungles to collect wild flowers. The most common of these flowers is the "Sanggreng". These flowers are used to decorate their rooms/houses. The girls make flower garlands for their domestic animals as well. From mid-day people go from house to house to make cakes. There are various kinds of cakes i.e., Domu, Seimung, Saimu. On the second day, in the morning the elderly people are given a bath by the younger people. The water used is generally brought from the bottom of the hill. The young people receive monetary reward from the elderly people for their services. From mid-day elderly people go to the temple and stay there until dusk. In the evening people go to the houses of their relatives, friends to exchange New Year's greetings. The night is exclu-

sively reserved for cultural programmes. Along with the programmes goes alcohol much to the heart's content of

bamboo is firmly placed on the ground. Butter oil (ghee) is poured all over the bamboo stick and expensive gifts are placed on the top of the bamboo stick. Any one who man-



Handicrafts, with long cultural heritage, found in almost all melas: by Dr Noazesh Ahmed and Naib Uddin Ahmed

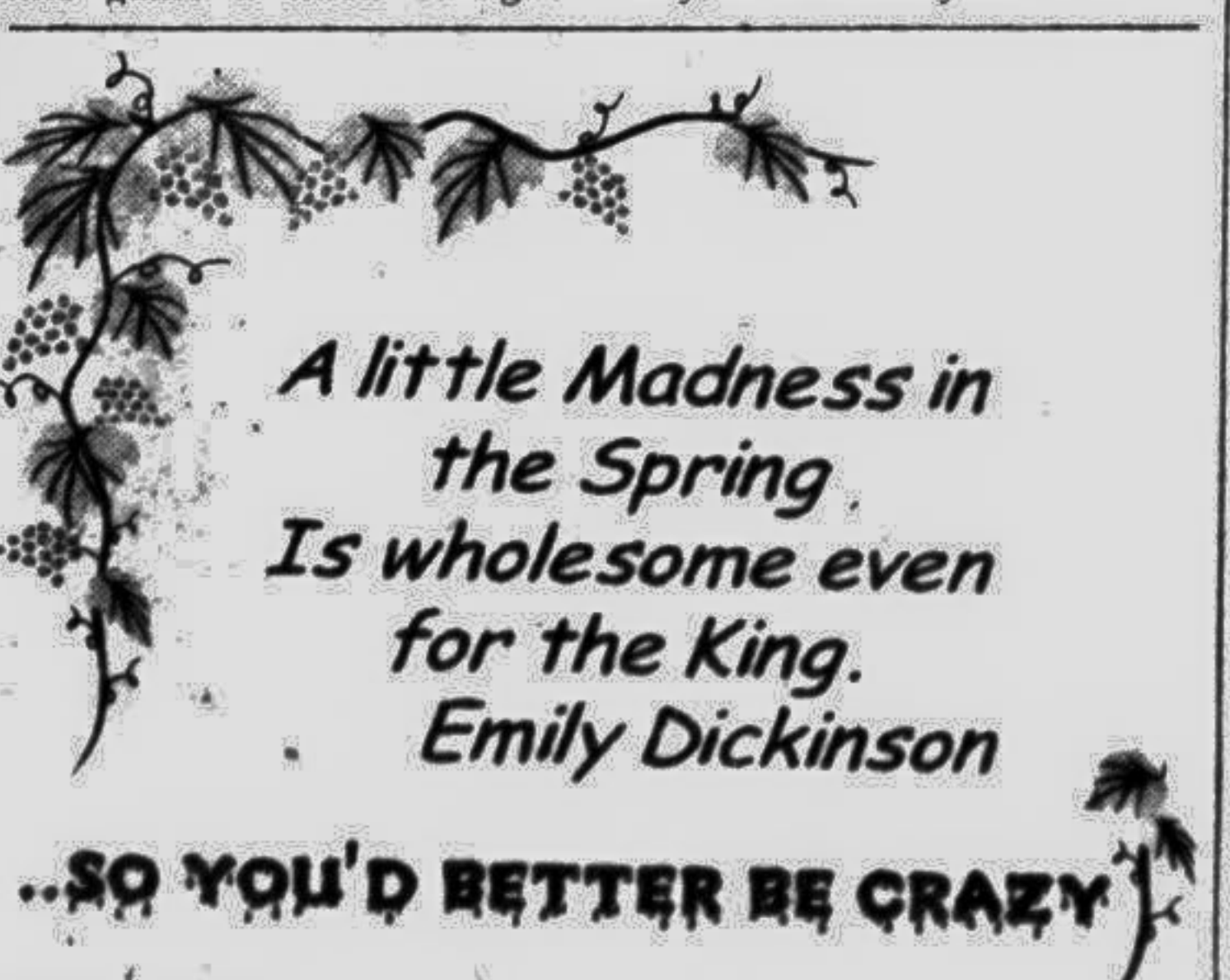
the people. The third and the final day features the water festival.

The festival consists of a remarkable sport. In this sport two groups of people sit on two boats close to each other. Each member is handed a mug. The game is that both the groups will have to throw water at each other. While doing so if any member of a group drops his mug then his team is declared the losers.

The game is usually played between boys and girls. There is another interesting game. In this game a thick straight

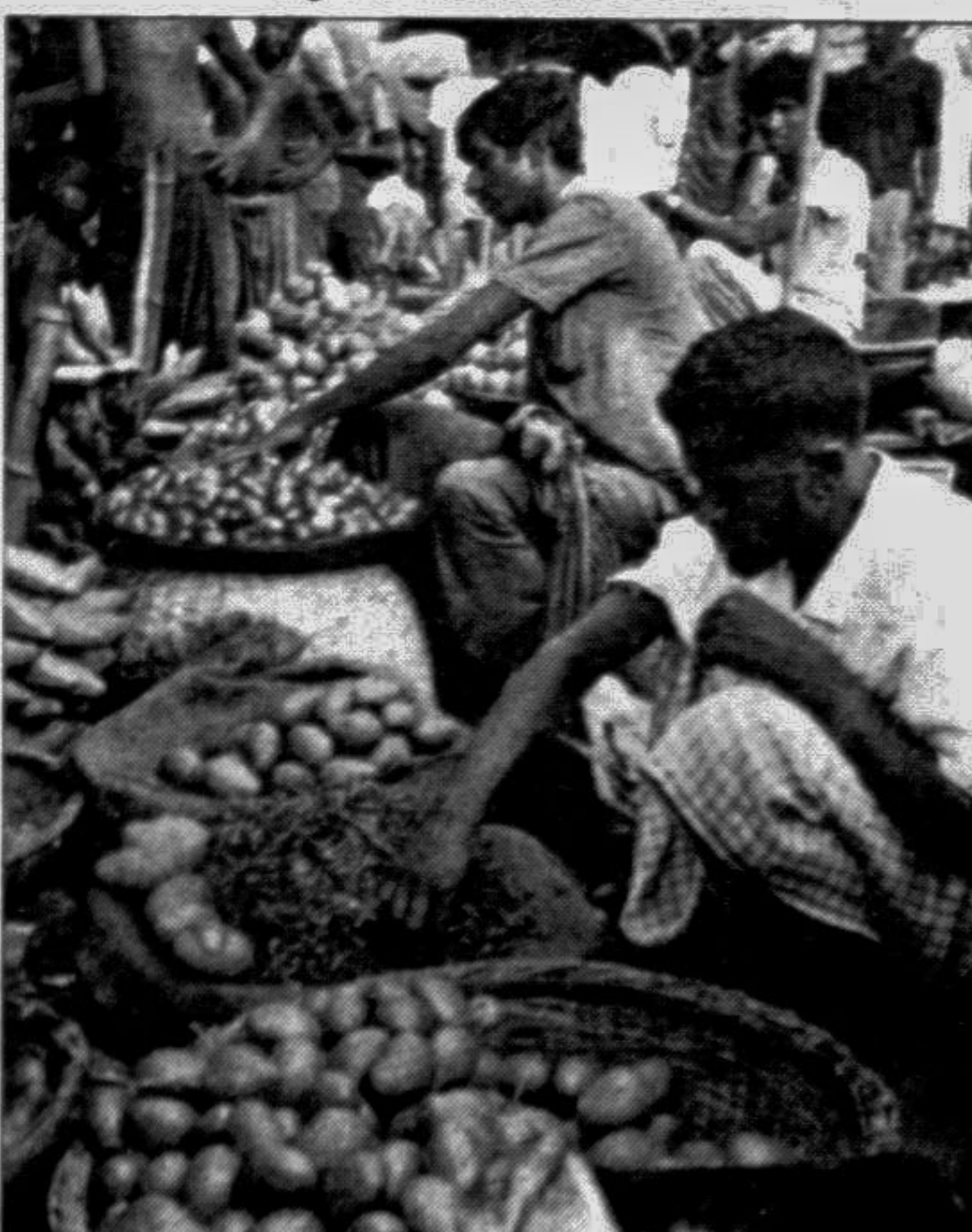
ages to climb the bamboo and get the gifts is declared the winner.

Young couples spend the night on top of the hill where there is a temple named Marmising. They seek divine blessings, worshipping and asking for everlasting love. Pahari people have an exceptional way of celebrating the New Year. Why don't we leave this mechanised city and go to the hill tracts to join the Paharis and welcome the Pahela Boishakh in an extraordinary way, at least this year!



Deshi Junk Food

by Nameer Rahman



Boishakh's Green Delight Kacha Aam: by Dr Noazesh Ahmed and Naib Uddin Ahmed.

ANYBODY who lives in Dhaka, or in Bangladesh for that matter, must be familiar with our local junk food. Shunned by a few and loved by many it is an integral part of our lives. Hot spicy and peppery are the only ways to collectively describe the various "dishes".

The unfortunate few who are newcomers to such flavours will experience the occasional burnt tongue and upset stomach. And those who choose not to eat it will do so purely on health reasons claiming the manner in which the foods are prepared make them less than hygienically unsuitable for consumption.

For anyone searching for these local delicacies, they are found wherever a crowd has gathered. Probably the commonest junk food seller is the murtiwala. Easily recognisable by the basket he carries on his head, the murtiwala is probably the most mobile of the junk food sellers.

He has no fixed place of business but is frequently found outside schools at dismissal time. In that basket one will find a large packet of muri or rice flakes which he mixes with boot, a type of lentil, mustard oil, and various spices, salts and peppers. The concoction can vary quite a bit from person to person. Some add to the muri another mixture of chopped vegetables like tomatoes, onions, cucumbers and chillies. One or two add chopped papaya. The murtiwala is usually found during the day at places of congregation i.e.

markets, schools, business centres, etc.

Next comes the aamwala or mango seller. He is usually recognised by his distinctive open cart which he pushes around all day and the heaps of raw mangoes lying in the cart. The aamwala can be found only during the summer season when the mangoes are available. However that doesn't mean he's out of work for the rest of the year. During winter and autumn he can be found selling boro, a type of berry, amras, kamrangas and during the monsoons jaam as well as mangoes. The aamwala sells the mango in small amounts chopped up, mixed in a thick liquid of mustard oil, salt, ground chillies etc. This mixture is however for those with a knack for strong tastes because it can be quite sour.

Now both these sellers have no fixed food items on their menu. Both the murtiwala and the aamwala can sell muri and mangoes or both of them can sell achar, another item made from a dried fruit or vegetable mixed with gur (molasses) and sugar. Or there could be just one person who just specialises in a particular foodstuff like achar. Another food that is quite commonly found with both types of businessmen is chachachur which is bits of a dry flour basin and peanuts. Whereas this is usually eaten at home plain, but the aam or murtiwala serves it mixed with mustard oil, chillies and tomatoes.

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