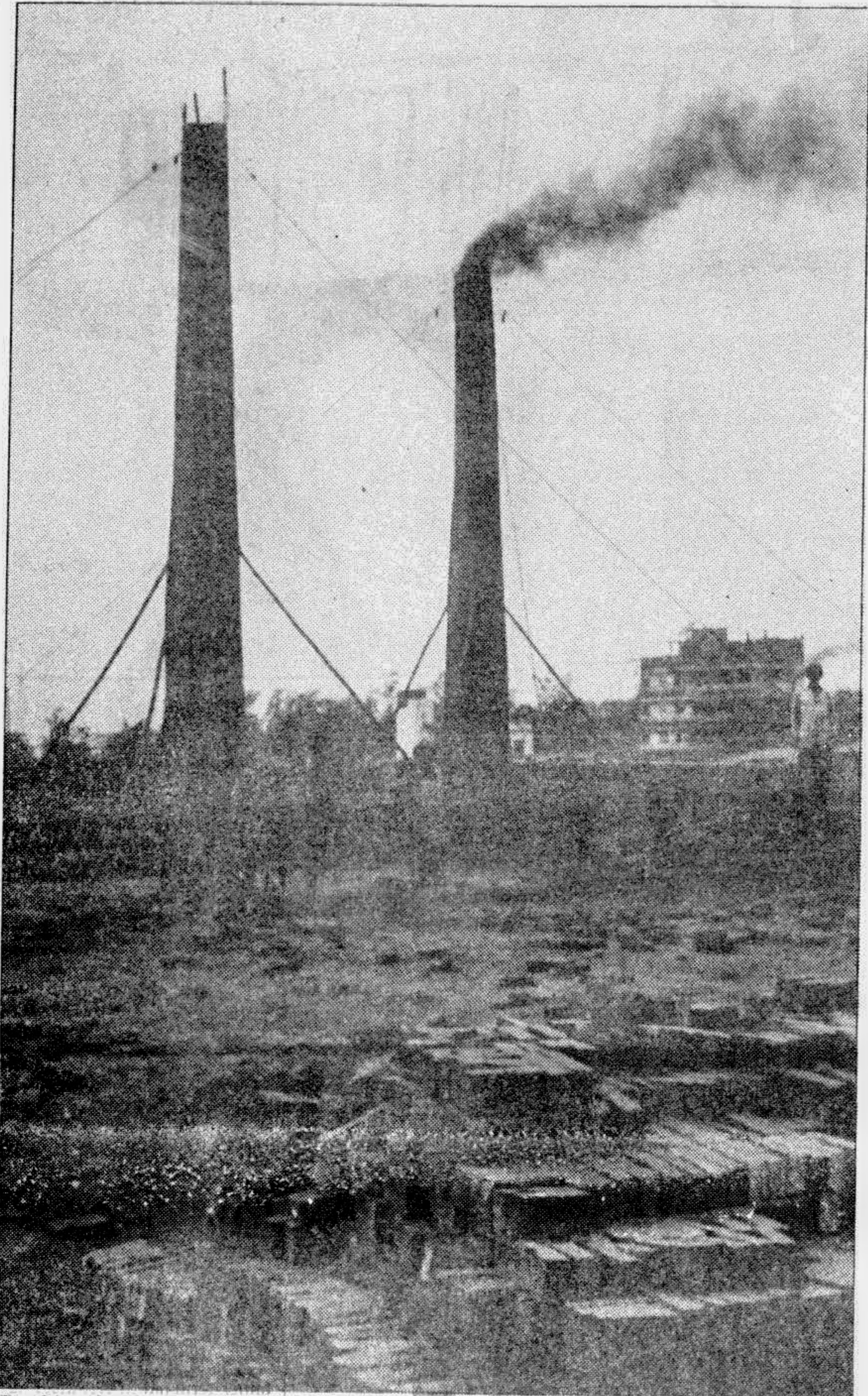


Endangered Existence

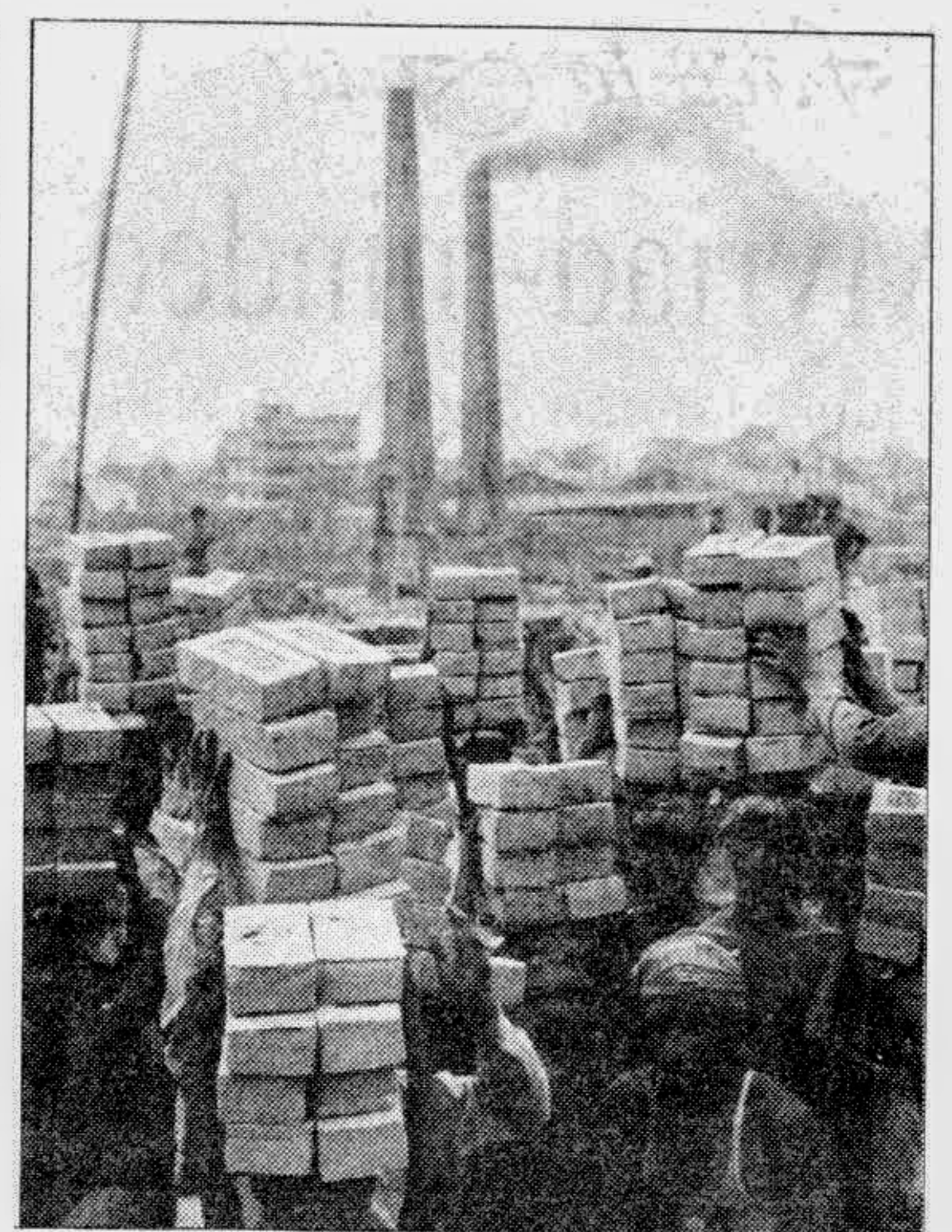
A photo essay by AKM Mohsin



Reaching the sky...smokes from brickfields add more pollutants to the already-polluted air.



Silent and sinned against...discoloured leaves cry for end to the murderous act in vain.



Sweating it out for a bleak future.



More bricks mean fast pace of urbanisation.

Demand has been on the high to cope with the fast pace of urbanisation. Workers give in extra hours, flames intensify in furnaces and owners count extra profit, while the environment pays the price. Carbon monoxide and other polluting emission aside, heat radiation tells on the ecosystem. Vegetation in the radius of 30 kilometres around a brickfield is retarded, say environmentalists. No-one cares, though, neither the owners nor the workers. For them, money only matters. Money means a secured future for posterity. They fail to realise that there will be no future, unless we stop this self-annihilating act.



Ravaged they wait for extinction.

South Hit Hard by Dry Spell

From Monojit K Das

MAGURA: Thousands of people in the rural areas of the greater Jessore district have been facing serious problems due to acute crisis of potable water. According to sources, the Department of Public Health Engineering (DPHE) has installed manual tubewells to ensure safe water for over 90 per cent of the region's total population. Most of the tubewells installed by DPHE were No 6 hand driven. They also installed special type hand lifting 'Tara pump' in many villages. In spite of arrangement of cool water pumped out of the ground by tubewells, one of the worst environmental crisis has arisen in most villages of Magura, Jhenidah, Narail districts of the greater Jessore. Some 80 to 85 per cent of the total Number 6 hand-driven tubewells installed in the area are not functioning smoothly as the ground water level has gone down. Some 60 to 65 per

cent have already gone out of order.

Sources at DPHE said water tables have gone down 25 to 30 feet in some areas of the greater Jessore district.

Drought has been prevailing in the south-western region of the country for four months. The last winter season was rainless. It rained last on November 23 in the areas, according to the local met office. The rainless winter season was rare in the past. Due to long dry spell the ground water level is going down gradually.

According to the Agriculture Extension Department (AED), thousands of acres of land are brought under IRR-boro paddy cultivation based on shallow pump and deep pumps in different areas. Due to fall of ground water level many pumps are not functioning.

While talking to a group of villagers in Magura district, this correspondent came to know that crisis of domestic water was also acute in many

areas. Most of the natural water bodies like pond, ditches, beels have dried up due to prolonged drought. The water supply situation has been made worse by the fact that the surface water of ponds which are commonly used for domestic purposes other than drinking are almost dry, the villagers said.

Meanwhile, some ponds and ditches of the greater Jessore district which contain little water are polluted due to indiscriminate use of pesticides and chemical fertilisers for pisciculture. The villagers are compelled to bathe and use polluted water of the ponds and ditches.

It was learnt that safe drinking water crisis is also acute in the poura areas of Jessore, Jhenidah, Magura, Narail due to ground water related problems. Irregularities of electricity are creating obstacle for smooth functioning of the pumps which supply safe drinking water to poura areas in the greater Jessore district.

Tara pump owners said that

DPHE installed the pumps were installed for lifting water from deep down the ground in different areas with financial support from the UNICEF. This type of tubewell is able to lift ground water from deep during the current dry season.

It was learnt from different villages that most of the Tara pumps are functioning well at present, in spite of the prolonged drought.

Drinking water management has been fully disturbed in public places like market places (haats and bazaars) in the greater Jessore district.

There are more than one hundred established haats and bazaars in Magura, Jhenidah, Jessore sadar and Narail. Thousands of people including buyers and sellers have to gather there everyday. Leaseholders of these markets hardly take any initiative to supply safe drinking water, although they earn a huge amount of revenue from the sellers and buyers every year.

Kuakata, Vast Expanse of Pristine Nature

By Aroop Talukdar

On the sandy white beach in Kuakata, one finds himself overawed at the pristine beauty of nature. The long beach, interspersed with coconut trees, and the glittering waves crashing onto the shore inspire thoughts on existence.

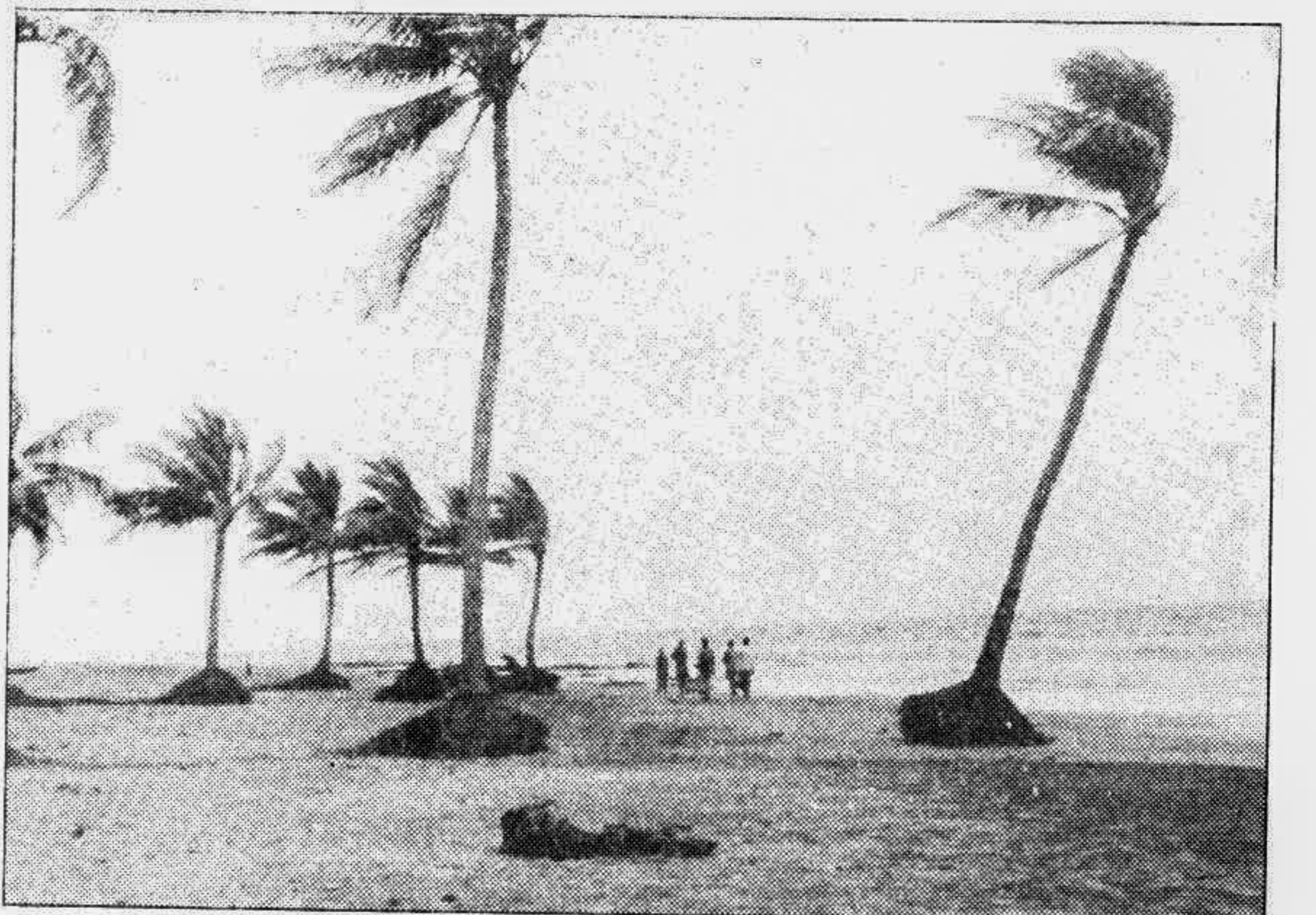
Proximity to the Sundarbans, the largest mangrove forest in the world which has been recently recognised as a World Heritage Site, makes Kuakata, one of the rare beaches in the world from where both sunrise and sunset can be watched, even more attractive to the tourists, especially the foreigners. Besides, there is the indigenous tribe, the Rakhains, whose very lifestyle inspires awe.

The Kuakata sea beach is only seventy kilometres away from the Patuakhali district headquarters. It takes just over three hours by bus to get to the beach. On the riverine route, by launch or engine-propelled trawlers, it may take more.

In recent times, influx of tourists has increased. Foreigners have also started coming in during the dry season. Rash festival of the Hindu community assembles many a religious soul. Visitors of other religion also throng to watch the grandeur of the festival.

During summer, coconut trees along the beach offer a respite from sweltering heat. The oldest Buddha Bihar, Sree Mangal Bihar, in the southern parts of the country at Kuakata is another attraction for the tourists. Some 70 years ago a seven-foot statue of Lord Buddha, weighing one and a half tonnes, was set up at the temple in Mulapara. Vikshu Ukhemta set up the statue in the temple. But that temple was severely damaged during the cyclones in the early sixties. One Bachin Talukder, as caretaker, rebuilt the temple. But unfortunately it was further damaged in the cyclone of 1965. Afterwards, the statue was shifted from Mulapara to Kera-nipara at Kuakata. From then Buddha idol, made of brass, remained there and is being considered as one of the great attraction for the tourists coming to the Kuakata resort. Everyday many tourists come to visit the temple to have a look at the statue.

To retain the Rakhain tribal heritage the department of special affairs has built a Rakhain Cultural Complex at a cost of 1.1 million taka, near the Kuakata Dak Bungalow. The academy has a rest house for tourists planning to stay overnight. In that complex there are some shops run by Rakhain girls where handi-



Kuakata beach... a vast expanse of pristine nature.

—Star photo by Aroop Talukdar

crafts, toys and many other things made of shells are sold. Besides, tourists can also buy bed sheets, lungi, wrappers made by Rakhain families.

Meanwhile, after the formal inauguration of the Holiday Homes by the prime minister some years back, many people are now interested to open residential hotels, rest house or cottages with modern amenities for tourists around the beach.

The two-storey Holiday Homes was constructed on five acres of land with an expenditure of 1.34 crore taka by the Barjatan Corporation of Bangladesh (BPC). On the first floor of the Holiday Homes, there is a 50-bed dormitory. On the ground floor, there is a restaurant.

In the dormitory, rent per seat is Tk 150. Some well-fur-

nished rooms are being rented at Tk 500 per day. For accommodation facilities for tourists, there are two district council Dak Bungalow, one Dak Bungalow of Revenue Board, one motel of BPC and a LGED rest house.

Besides, there are some private residential hotels — Hotel Sunrise, Hotel Aman, Hotel Samudra Bilas, Hotel Saikat, Hotel Sharif etc.

More hotels, cottages, restaurants and rest or guest houses are likely to be inaugurated next winter.

Meanwhile, travelling from the capital Dhaka to Kuakata has become easier for tourists than ever before. A BRTC luxury bus starts from Gulistan at five every evening and reaches Kuakata the next morning. The bus sets off for Dhaka at two in the afternoon. Fair per passenger is Tk 160.

Besides, there are more passenger buses plying between Barisal and Patuakhali, and Kuakata.

Except these road transports, there are launch services in between Dhaka, Barisal, Patuakhali and Kuakata in different times. A double-decker launch sets sail from Dhaka at around 5-00 pm everyday.

At the inaugural ceremony of the Holiday Homes at Kuakata, the prime Minister promised a STOL airlift between Dhaka and Kuakata, which is yet to start.

The sound and glittering lights of the rolling waters in the sea seem to spark like diamonds at the top of the running waves in moonlit nights.

It is really an unforgettable memory in one's lifetime, said a tourist.

Ramgopal Mela in Grips of Hoodlums

From Delwar Kabir

JHENIDAH: Mela (fair) is a regular feature in the socio-cultural scenario of rural Bangladesh. In recent times, for want of patronising coupled with excessive interference of hoodlums, mela is fast on decline.

Almost all the twelve months of the Bengali calendar year are associated with mela. There are Poush Mela, Maghi Mela, Chaitra Mela, etc. These fairs give rural people a break from their routine struggle for existence. Colours galore all around gives the assemblage from all walks of life much-needed recreation. Jatra (plays on open stage), circus, magic show, nagardola (merry-go-round), etc. create a world of illusion for the hard-working lot. Dawn-to-dusk toil seems episodes of distant memory. In some places, horse race, cock fight and bull fight are also arranged.

In Jhenidah, Magura, Kushiya and adjoining districts mela turns into mass gathering following various religious festivals of the Hindu community. Kali Pujar Mela, Durga Pujar Mela, Rath Jatra Mela, etc. attract a large section of people in the region. Various kinds of household utensils, cosmetics, dolls, sports goods, cloths, religious books and periodicals, sweets, ice-cream and other items are sold in different stalls. Rural women are usually the main buyers there.

Very recently, there have been some untoward incidents, engineered by a section of hoodlums, and local entrepreneurs, raising serious thoughts about whether to participate in the fair or not.

Ramgopal Mela is the most important festival in Saikupa thana of Jhenidah. On March 10 this year, visitors at the fair came under attack from a group of goons. A stall-owner was stabbed and six stalls were looted of valuables worth 25,000 taka. The trouble began when the stall-owners refused to pay the hoodlums toll.

Never before had there been such an attack, some stall-own-

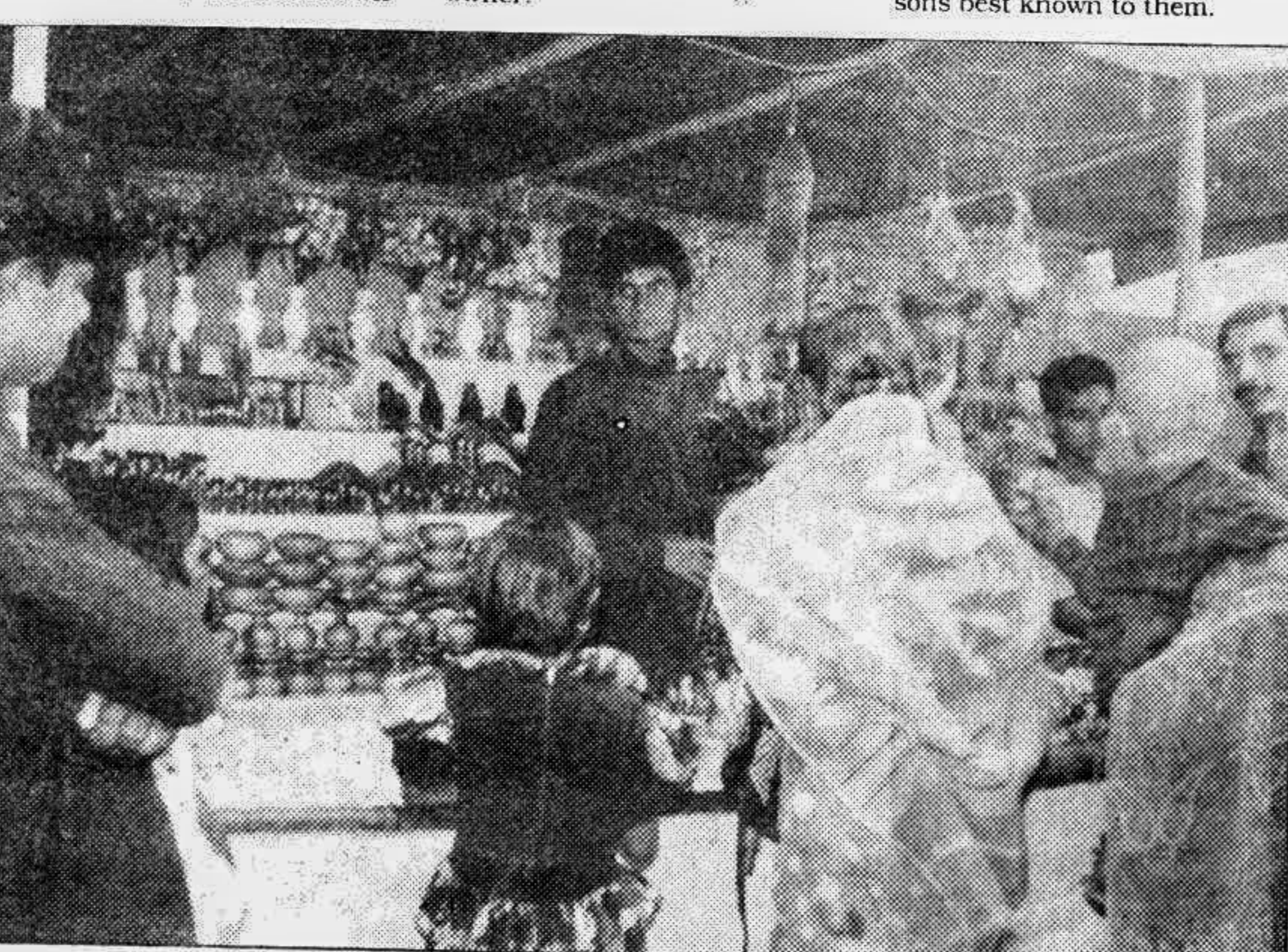
ers told this correspondent. The hoodlums could not exact tolls in the past. But nowadays, they brandish firearms to intimidate the traders into paying them.

Majority of the visitors at the fair are usually young women, some newly-married. After the March 10 incident, many would stay away for fears of the hoodlums, said one stall-owner.

Inadequate security would keep many away from the coming to the mela, said Ananda Biswas, 39, owner of a stall.

When contacted, Saikupa police said that a case had been lodged against 15 young men for attacking and looting stalls at the Ramgopal Mela.

They were yet to arrest anybody in this connection for reasons best known to them.



Stalls with toys, domestic utensils, etc. attract many.

—Star photo by Delwar Kabir

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