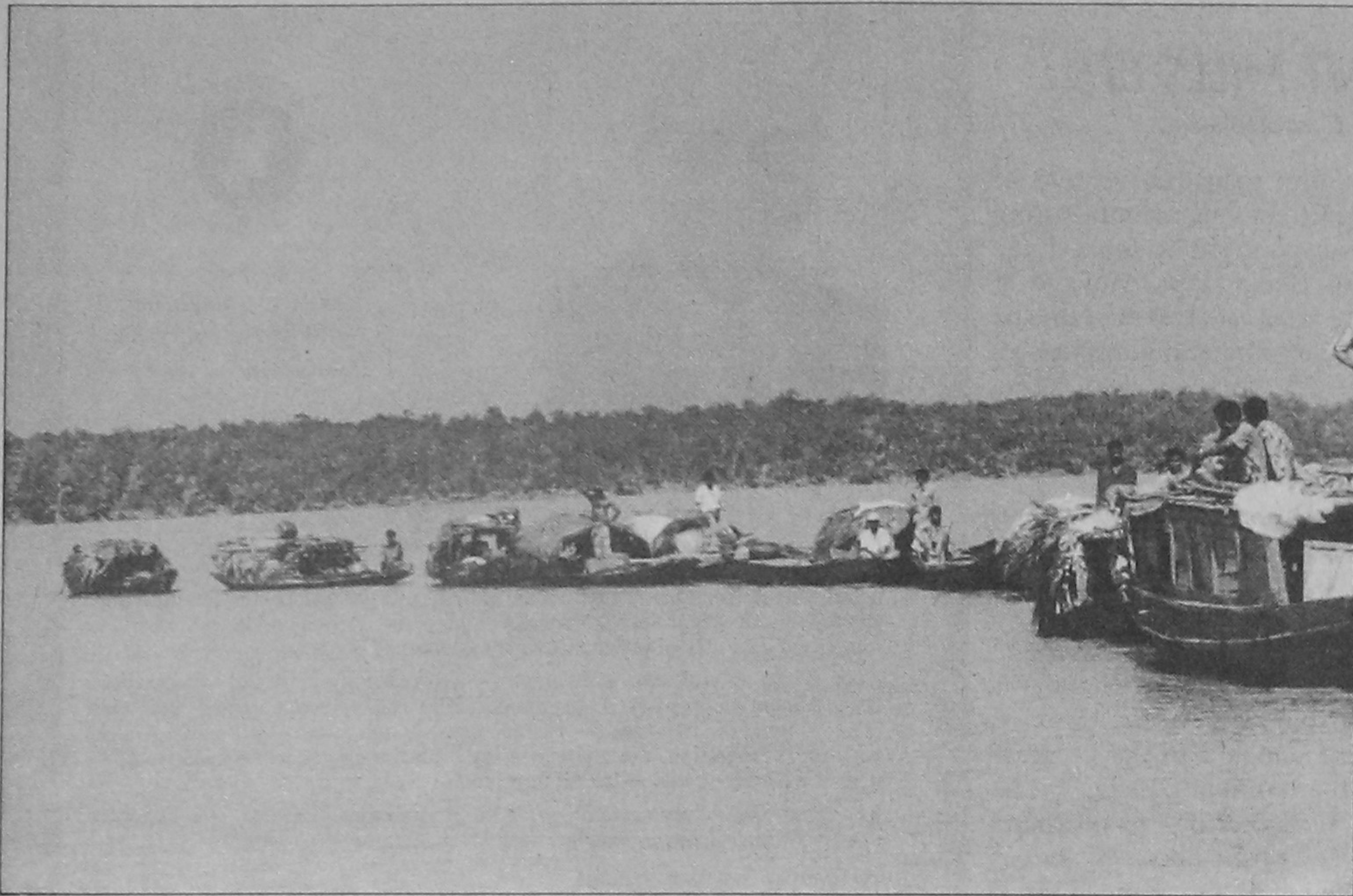


Photo Feature

The Sunderbans: Hunt or be hunted

The Sunderbans, the largest single track of mangrove forest in the world, is a World Heritage Site. Life is serene there, but not free of danger. Danger lurks at every corner. Hunting is the name of the game. Sometimes hunter becomes the hunted. It's true for Royal Bengal Tigers, snakes, crocodiles and other wild animals, and also, of course, the humans. Yet, the struggle goes on; for, survival is the ultimate success. **AKM Mohsin's** camera arrested in frames glimpses of life in the Sunderbans.



Unity is strength...the pirates too strike in groups of their own.



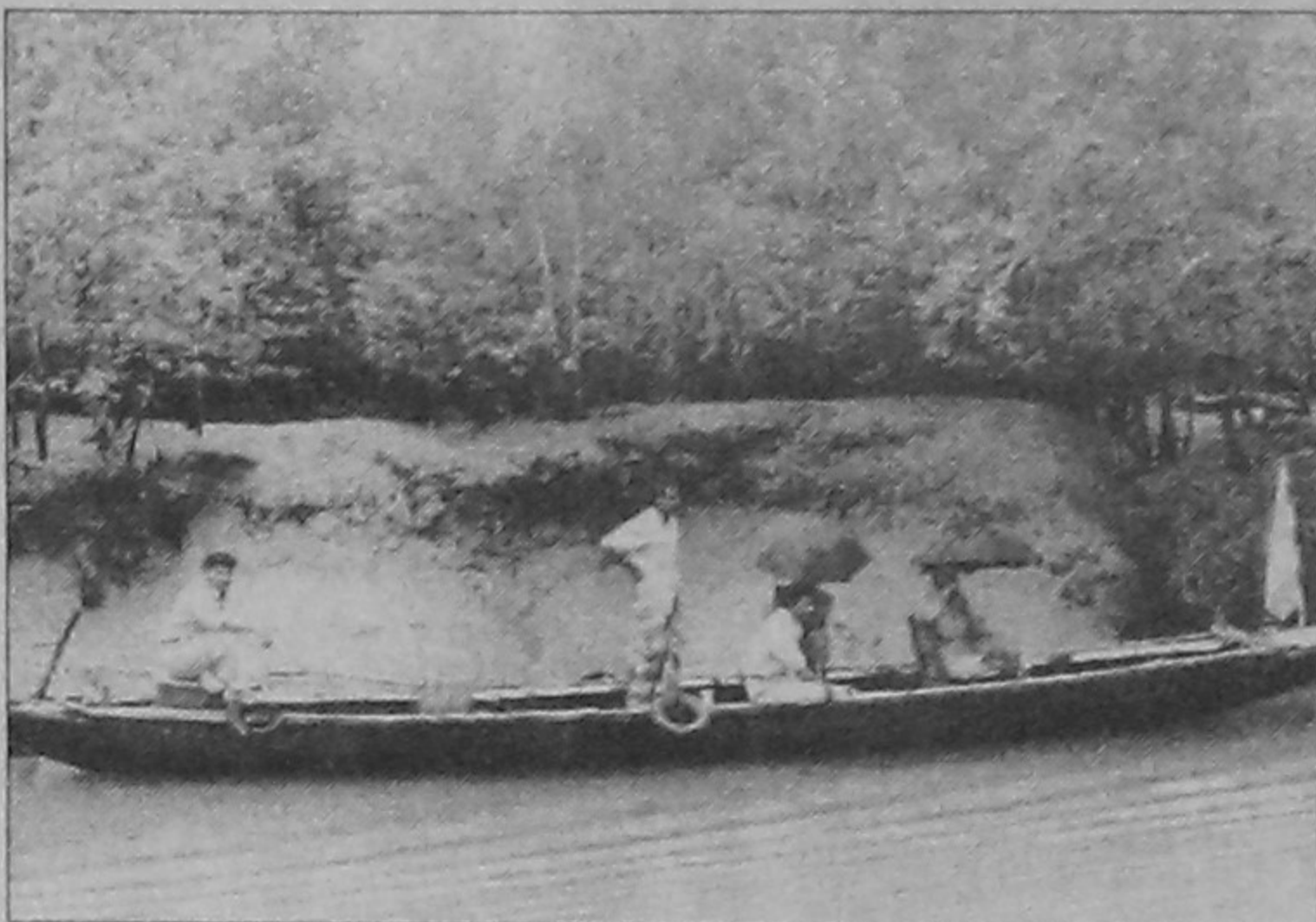
Nonchalant to the danger around, fishermen relax in between work on their boats.



The gol pata groves...when danger looms in the form of tigers.



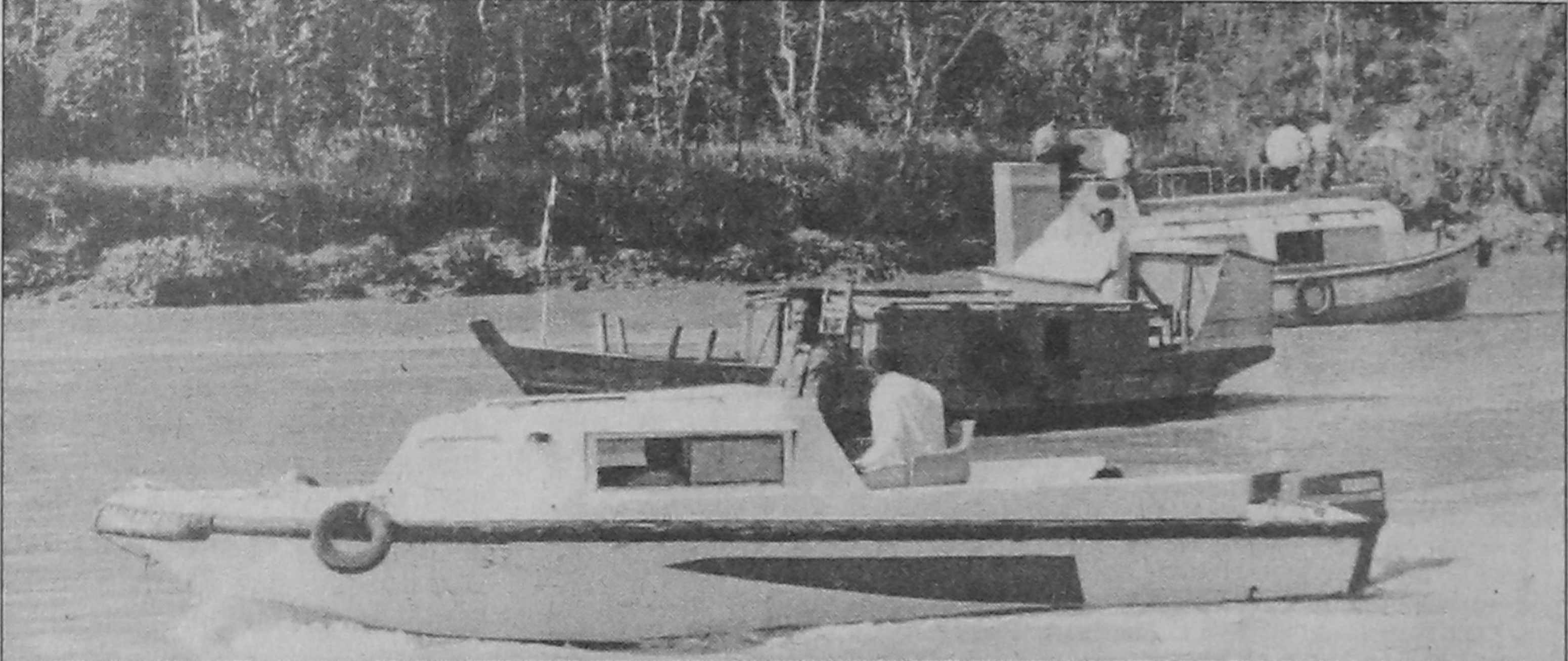
Locals collecting gol pata.



... and the guards, trying to keep peace.



Fishermen out in groups of tiny boats to earn a living.



Leisure trips on speedboats...responding to the call of the wild forests behind.

Feature

Progress of happiness

by Alif Zabr

In this age of fast and vast changes, the global focus is on development; in the broadest meaning of this saleable term; regardless of its polarity, and the means employed to achieve the goals, sometimes objectively, but mostly subjectively. In the ersatz process, one of the universal end products escapes attention. How is happiness developing? Is it a fixed, permanent quality of life? Then how to categorise bliss, ecstasy, empathy, harmony, and all the permutations and combinations? Is modern man trying to get beyond the boundary conditions fixed eternally?

The point at issue is different from the pursuit of happiness. In the latter case the definition of happiness is presumed to be confined within the traditional parameters. Is the definition of happiness changing; or the foundation is the same, and the super-structures are changing? There are changes in approach and styles in anything 'modern', hence it is necessary to ponder whether the basic, wholesome joys of life are also subject to human amendment. The preliminary test is to have a quick survey of the small pleasures of life, which are independent of economic indicators. The bigger pleasures in one's lifetime come at rare and long intervals, hence these remain as landmarks in the footprints of life (mixed metaphors are one of life's pleasant surprises). At the mundane level, pleasures are tagged to desires. The more you have, the more you want. No desire, no want. Those who retire from the drawing room to the *hujra* (as one of my dear friends did, soon after retirement from service) have also the right to seek happiness and contentment, whether through tuition or intuition.

But nowadays, the market forces, and the virtual world of alluring advertisements on the screen in the silly box unmake more lives than make it. Cyber adventures could be exciting, but be prepared for the crash of the hard disc inside you.

Materialism in this information age has taxed the mind with varied options available for 'buying

'instant happiness'. But there is one restriction: money is round and made to roll; while the secret urge is represented by the epigram "money is flat and made to pile up". But, alas, happiness is not for sale, and money cannot buy contentment and peace of mind. Rockefeller was sick till he became a philanthropist, and the great Aga Khan could not enjoy his simple meals with all the cash in the world.

There is natural happiness, and man-made happiness. The joy of motherhood is priceless, while few can afford of BMW, claimed to be the perfect interface between man, machine and the road. A good cup of tea at the right time is more satisfying than ... you name it.

How the job satisfaction of a politician is measured, compared to that of an office worker or a professional? How a child's happiness factor is different from that of an adult? The latter's expectations and wish list grow up with age, or is it compressed (as with a computer programme) to pack more items into the same capacity of the holder? Certainly overdose is not a blessing in disguise.

Apparently, the pursuit of philosophy (of life) has become rather disenchanting these days, as its fruits take longer to mature, and there is no time to wait, because other crowded preoccupations occupy the digital mind. But the divine monitoring has not been speeded up, nor modernised, to tune with the human times. God never becomes out of date (thankfully!).

Life's processing might be digitally enhanced, but the Complete Man projects an analogue image; and, pleasures can only be enjoyed in the integrated analogue mode (the overall effect). Since digitalisation is a tool for processing, and not an end product, Happiness holds its fort, and continuity prevails since antiquity.

On the other hand, today hatred is developing faster, in new configurations; and metropolis Dhaka is not far behind in the evil competition. Happiness can be rediscovered, but genetically engineered happiness cannot be invented. However its presence is there as garbage.

Turning on and turning out Kerala discovers trashy TV

Satellite TV is beaming down an entertainment revolution in India's progressive state of Kerala, hooking households on everything from salacious soaps to tabloid television. This surge in programming has renewed the debate on the merits of the idiot box, writes **Joshua Newton** from Kochi, Kerala

SARALA Balakrishnan spends three hours in the kitchen each day, with the rest of her time reserved in front of her new Philips 21-inch colour television. Surfing on four local language channels, she treats herself to no fewer than five soap operas and a full-length feature film every day. Balakrishnan belongs to a fast growing clan of housewives in India's southwestern state of Kerala who have become happy 'telly addicts'.

"Soap serials that grabbed the popular imagination are now replacing the pulp weeklies filled with trash novels," comments Kamaluddin, a popular film director known by his screen name Kamal. "The content lowers our aesthetic sense and sensibility. Moreover some of the television programmes condemn our common sense."

"And it's sad that such a powerful medium is used to spread such an odious culture in Kerala."

Kerala is India's most socially

advanced state, boasting very high literacy rates, excellent health records, a society that favours women and, most of all, an enviable intellectual and cultural awareness among its people. The province is also among a handful to be ruled by left-wing parties.

In common with the rest of India, television sets began pouring in to Kerala markets in the early 1980s. Private satellite channels followed a decade later after India began opening up its economy. The oldest private local language channel is Asianet, which is nine years old. All other Kerala channels are less than five years old.

Before the TV invasion, many lower and middle income Keralites entertained themselves with cheap pulp magazines filled with three or four romances and a couple of thrillers. Now the masses seem to have dumped the written word.

But some say television merely holds up a mirror to society. Paul Zacharia, an author and

media consultant, notes: "I feel we now have a choice. In a state where nothing else but political struggles mushroomed, these channels now provide ideas of leisure to choose from. It's a window to the world."

Kerala has four channels that are exclusively devoted to showing soaps. Asianet, Surya, Kairali and Doordarshan Malayalam. Three more of them are in the offing.

Asianet's daily serial *Stree* (Woman) was flagged as a 24-part story. Popular demand stretched it to a whopping 480 episodes.

Stree made history in Indian television industry. Although the production cost hit 10 million rupees, it reaped nearly three times that amount from advertisements and sponsors. *Stree*'s star cast made millions of rupees. Producer-director Shyam Sunder became a multi-millionaire overnight. The show held the audience spellbound for nearly 80 weeks (although some complained that it lagged towards the climax).

Others made a beeline for soaps in the wake of *Stree*. Today producers shoot a few episodes at a single stretch and screen them every day. They seek viewers' response and make changes in the story. *Stree* now has a successor - a new daily serial called *Stree Jwala*, created by the same team.

A soap called 'Woman' may have made its makers a fortune, but television has returned the favour in kind. In a recent column in the *Indian Express* newspaper, noted media critic C S Venkiteswaran wrote how a rape victim was portrayed in Surya's newscast.

A university employee who had been raped while riding a bus spoke about her ordeal to the media, including eager television crews. In the broadcast, suggestive close-ups of the woman portrayed her as a sex object, in contrast to staid shots of the state Women's Commission chairwoman.

"It made us vulnerable to the fact that even the television camera was raping the girl," Venkiteswaran wrote.

Programmes like *Tharikida* mock real life dramas for laughs. A television crew bursts into homes with actors in police uniforms, who enact pre-rehearsed skits to make fools of the homeowners.

When the epic serials of

Ramayana and *Mahabharatha* were broadcast, which included scenes of warriors using bows and arrows, several cases of eye injuries were reported among children. The kids were evidently mimicking the epic heroes.

Some critics fear these soaps will gnaw away at a particularly important activity in Kerala reading.

"Unlike theatre or cinema, television essentially estranges man from society," award-winning filmmaker Lohitha Das notes. "These serials create anxiety rather than experience. Driven by commercial interest of multinational companies, these soaps send ridiculously harmful messages to the viewers."

Evidently, Kerala men and women have quietly stopped taking evening walks, postponed dusk prayers, and dumped neighbourhood chats over the wall.

Instead, day after day, they sit primed in the evenings for their favourite faces to appear on the television.

It appears Kerala's much-vaunted citizens are indeed amusing themselves into ignorance.

-- Gemini News

The author is a culture writer based in Kerala, freelancing for several Indian and international magazines.