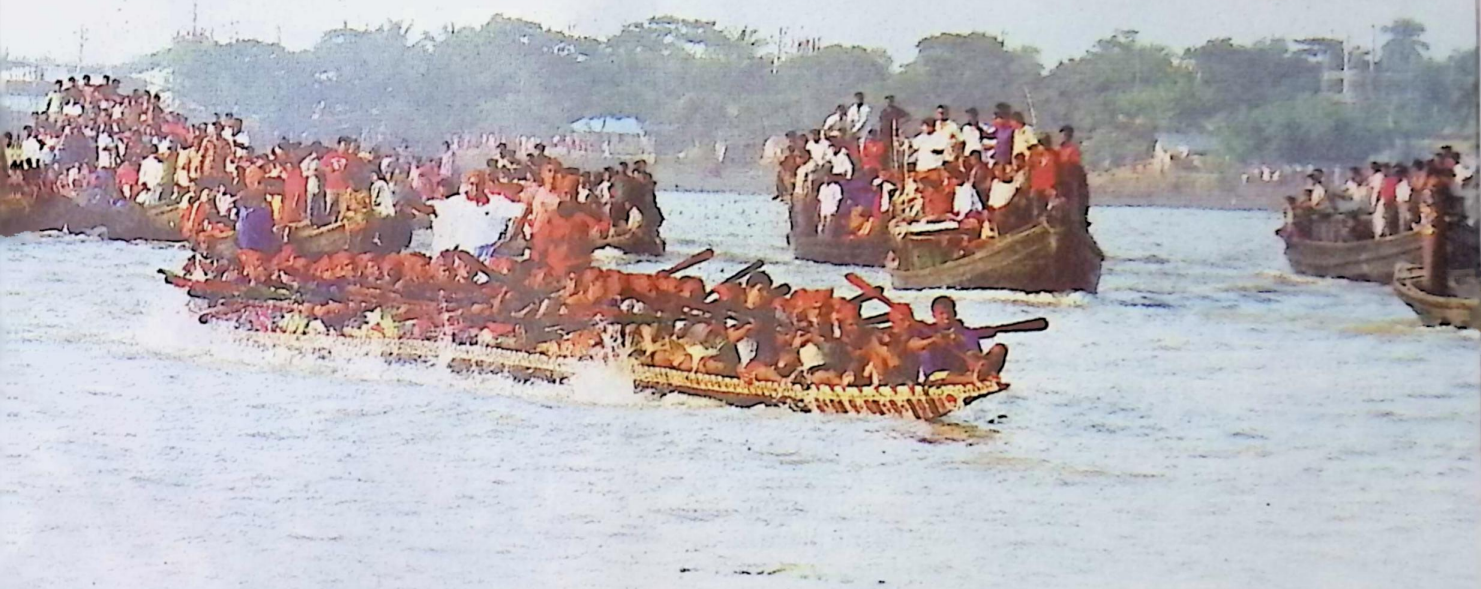
the Waves



At the sound of the whistle, the race begins.

"The Lord is with us. We have been championing this contest for the last three years. We will win again," exclaims Deepak Biswas, the team leader of his boat Jitendra Shah Biswas, named after his late father who had been a boat racer himself for more than 35 years. Forty-year-old Deepak's boat, numbered 6 in the serial, was the first one to arrive at the contest. Clad in colourful tees and orange bandanas, the team of seventy rowers, posing for the journalists and the television crew, also included a man with a *dhol* to keep the rhythm flowing amongst the rowers during the race, two men acting as navigators and one man sitting in the bow, dancing and flaunting his long messy hair, mostly for the sake of the audience. The *Nouka Baich*, which was to begin, soon promised a colourful performance, which would be witnessed by hundreds of villagers living near and far.

Unfortunately though, the Jitendra Shah Biswas team had to lose their title this year. In fact, they were not even close to the winning spot. Soon after the boat positioned itself at the starting point, five more boats joined in. 135 feet long, carrying 70-75 rowers, the audience by the river could not stop admiring the grand sight created by the boats, gearing up to begin the race. Once the whistle blew, the boaters immediately shifted their focus from smiling at the audience and the cameras, to rowing their boats and winning the race. Rowing at full speed with all their strengths, a combination of the rhythmic splashing of water with the singing and dancing on the boats filled the air, not to mention the loud cheers that followed from the audience. Most of the singing on the boats seemed to be a call to God to help them reach their destination as fast and as smoothly as possible.

Since rivers form an integral part of Bangladesh's history, tradition, literature, culture and sports, boat races have been and still define an important element of folk culture. For centuries *Nouka Baich*, or boat races have been taking place in the subcontinent. Every year, a *baich* would bring together young and strong farmers,