PHOTOGRAPHS **RAGHUBIR SINGH** / INTRODUCTION **ERIC NEWBY**

Ganga

SACRED RIVER OF INDIA



"...the Ganges, above all the river of India, which has held India's heart captive and drawn uncounted millions to her banks since the dawn of history. The story of the Ganges, from her source to the sea, from old times to new, is the story of India's civilization and culture, of the rise and fall of empires, of great and proud cities, of the adventure of man...."—Jawaharlal Nehru in *The Discovery of India*.

*

"She is the source of redemption.... Heaps of sin, accumulated by a sinner during millions of births, are destroyed by the mere contact of a wind charged with her vapour....As 'fire consumes fuel, so this stream consumes the sins of the wicked. Sages mount the staired terrace of the Ganges; on it they transcend the high heaven of Brahma himself: free from danger, riding celestial chariots, they go to Shiva's abode. Sinners who expire near the water of the Ganges are released from all their sins: they become Shiva's attendants and dwell at his side. They become identical with him in shape; they never die—not even on the day of the total dissolution of the universe."—Shiva in *Brahmavaivarta Purana, Krishna-janma Khanda* (compiled about 300 B.C.).

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"At Banaras, thousands drink the water every day at bathing places which are close to the outfalls of appalling medieval drains discharging raw, untreated sewage into the Ganga. No one really knows what effect this has on individuals, but it is rare to hear of the sort of mass epidemics that one would expect. Neither does the presence of large numbers of imperfectly cremated and decomposing corpses floating in it seem to have much adverse effect on it....My wife and I have both drunk the water unboiled in the 50-mile stretch of the river where it first enters the Indian Plain, and boiled and made into tea thereafter for most of the rest of its course as far as the beginning of the Bhagirathi, and without any unfortunate effects. Yet whenever we left the river we invariably became ill."—Eric Newby, author of "Slowly Down the Ganges", and Travel Editor of "The Observer," London, in the *Introduction* to this book.

*

"By 1966, photographing the Ganga had become my passion. I had visited Banaras during the solar eclipse in 1965 and returned many times thereafter. I had mingled with the crowds at the great animal fair at Sonepur, an unforgettable spectacle. I had visited the Kumbh Mela at Allahabad in 1966. In 1968 I photographed the Ardh Kumbh Mela at Hardwar; in 1971 the Ardh Kumbh Mela at Allahabad. During these mass bathing festivals and on trips to Gomukh, the headwaters of the Bhagirathi Ganga, I felt the intense passion and faith that the Ganga inspires...."—Photographer Raghubir Singh in the *Preface* to this book.

(continued on the back flap)

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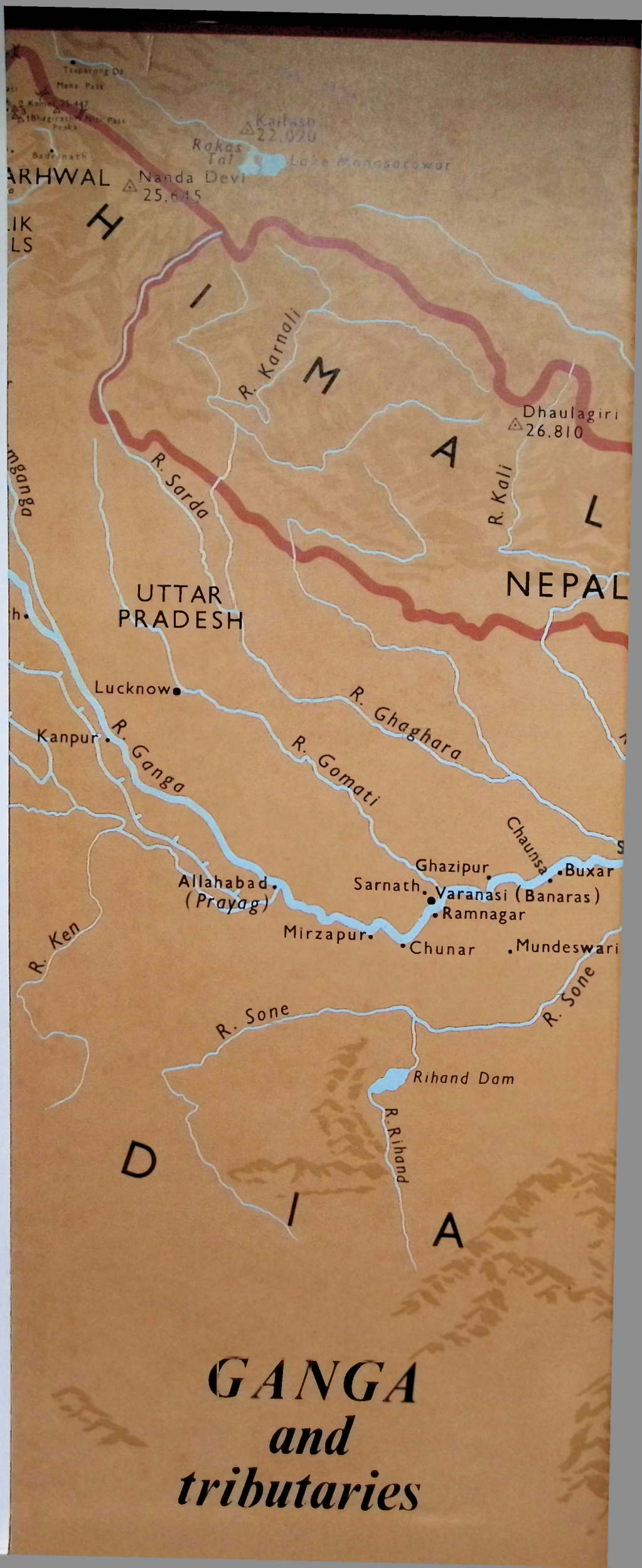

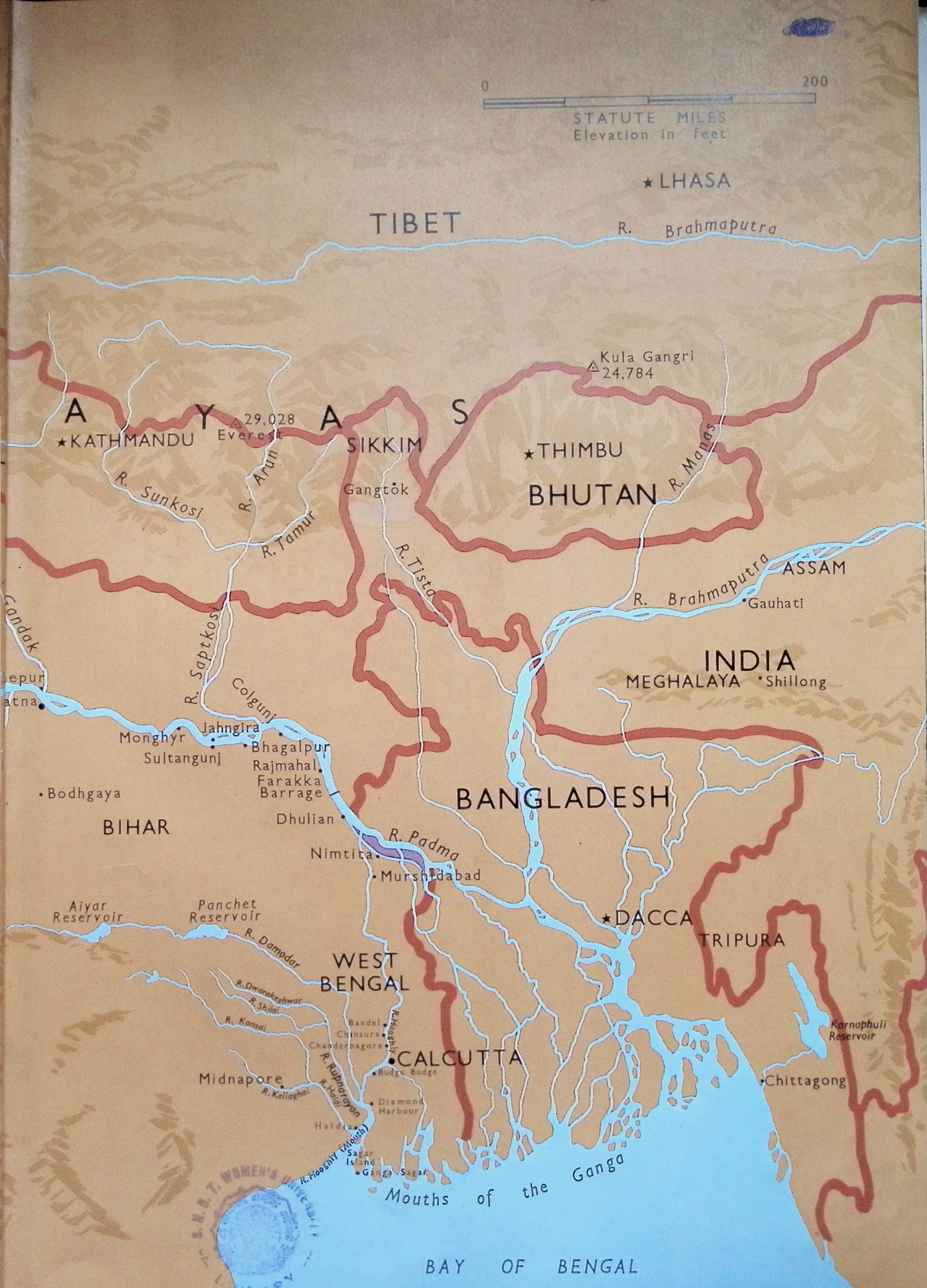
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Ganga

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28 JUL 1976

Throughout this book, the Ganges is referred to as Ganga, the correct Indian name of the river.

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Ganga

SACRED RIVER OF INDIA

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to my mother

"When the waters of the Ganga and the Yamuna mingle, it appears as though diamonds and sapphires were woven together in a string; as though a flock of white swans had suddenly run into another flock of black swans; as though a garland of white lotusbuds were interspersed with blue lotuses; as though streaks of lightning had merged into a sheet of darkness; as though a clear blue sky were spotted with woolly clouds of autumn."

Kalidas in *Raghuvansha (Canto XIII)*

Preface

I first saw the Ganga from the top of the Gola, the granary at Patna, in 1965. Surrounded by a group of villagers, I watched the Ganga sweeping by in a great bend past the capital of Bihar on its right bank. India's most revered river moved me deeply. I had always wanted to travel along it. In my youth my mother had read to me from the Ramayana which speaks so eloquently of the Ganga. She had explained to me the significance of Goddess Ganga and of other gods and goddesses of the Hindu pantheon. This was never done in a didactic way but casually; while cooking, at meals, or during the many religious ceremonies performed at home. For years she had intended to make the pilgrimage herself but something or other had come in the way. And at last she fulfilled her lifelong desire. She made the pilgrimage to Banaras, Hardwar and Badrinath and returned radiant. I can remember her moving descriptions of her beloved Ganga and her first immersion into the river's waters; it had left her body numb, she said, and her mind in a delightful shock. Even now she recalls that pilgrimage as if she had only just returned from it.

By 1966, photographing the Ganga had become my passion. I had visited Banaras during the solar eclipse in 1965 and had returned many times thereafter. I had mingled with the crowds at the great animal fair at Sonepur, an unforgettable spectacle. I had visited the Kumbh Mela at Allahabad in 1966. In 1968 I photographed the Ardh Kumbh Mela at Hardwar; in 1971 the Ardh Kumbh Mela at Allahabad. During these mass bathing festivals and on trips to Gomukh, the headwaters of the Bhagirathi Ganga, I felt the intense passion and faith that the Ganga inspires in our people.

In the Himalayas, at Gangotri, near the first temple on the river, I met a short, frail man, a Bengali school teacher in his early sixties. He told me he had spent many vacations since he was thirty, visiting and re-visiting the great Himalayan shrines—Gangotri, Yamnotri, Kedarnath, Badrinath—and had undertaken the most arduous of all pilgrimages: visiting the great Mansarowar Lake. His belongings were few: a blanket, one change of clothing, a towel, a tumbler and a bar of soap. In all, a redoubtable man whose spirit I admired. Other pilgrims who inspired me there were the older women, gaunt and haggard but resolute, climbing step by step the difficult mountain trails and chanting, "*Ganga Mai ki Jai*" ("Praise to Mother Ganga"). Most of these

women had never before ventured beyond their villages and towns. Then one day, staff in hand and balancing bundles on their heads, they set out to realise their lifelong aspiration: to pray before the image of Ganga and bathe in the icy waters of the river at Gangotri.

In Hardwar, where the Ganga enters the plains, I saw a Bihari peasant, who had bathed in the river, collect two jars of sacred Ganga water and set them in a basket. He prostrated himself, rose, took one step forward, placed the basket before him, then stepped back to prostrate himself again. This penance would take him at least three years to cover the 500 miles from Hardwar to the temple of Mundeswari in Bihar, where he had vowed to offer the sacred water. I was overwhelmed by his devotion and the faith that Ganga inspired.

In time, the beauty and mysticism of the Ganga captivated me. After two trips to the source at Gomukh in April 1967 and May 1968, I trekked once more to this Himalayan abode in March 1969 just before the end of winter. Below towering peaks, the Ganga wound through a majestic blanket of snow, patched here and there by outcroppings of brown rock. The river swept under a bridge of snow and reappeared, crystal-blue in the sunlight, a translucent green in the shade. Only a few sadhus braved the severe Himalayan winter.

Another aspect of the Ganga which attracted me was how, in the summer, passing through the scorching plains of Uttar Pradesh and Bihar, the river shrank to a narrow stream. Then the colour of sky and water turned to a pale grey, and dust and sand swirled round the banks, whipping dhotis and saris of villagers trudging home.

The monsoon that follows is to me one of the most dramatic, sad and beautiful seasons on the Ganga. When it breaks, the river expands into an ocean. Its current hums with a whirring noise like live electric wires, and sweeps away fields, huts, cattle —anything that obstructs its turbulent course. Then the Ganga is as wild as when she first burst into Siva's locks, intending to sweep the whole earth away. Villagers stow their belongings on trees and wait for weeks on the highest ground or on rooftops until Ganga's fury abates. The sky, the colour of molten lead, occasionally clears to permit the passage of an armada of immense, fleecy clouds. Peacocks sport on the river banks, now and then raising their necks to the sky as if calling for more rain.

These are the more vivid and indelible recollections of the six years I spent photographing the Ganga.

October 1973 *Raghubir Singh*

Introduction

A short while before Jawaharlal Nehru died I had the good fortune to be granted an interview with him at New Delhi when he heard that my wife and I were about to set off on a journey down the Ganga by rowing boat.

It was a very long interview, lasting an hour and a quarter, and talking to him then I realised how much he loved the river, for during the entire time he spoke of nothing else.

When I emerged from his drawing room I found a rather angry minister kicking his heels in an ante-room; he had been kept waiting there for more than an hour—my meeting had been scheduled to last ten minutes. I think it was that the Prime Minister was happy to escape for an hour or so from the awesome political and economic problems that faced him and will continue to face the Prime Ministers of India for a long time to come.

I remember very well what he said about the river. But nothing that I can write can compare with the beautiful and simple expression of his feelings for it that are to be found in his Will and Testament, a short extract from which I give below:

> "My desire to have a handful of my ashes thrown into the Ganga at Allahabad has no religious significance, so far as I am concerned. I have no religious sentiment in the matter. I have been attached to the Ganga and the Jumna rivers in Allahabad ever since my childhood and, as I have grown older, this attachment has also grown. I have watched their varying moods as the seasons changed, and have often thought of the history and myth and tradition and song and story that have become attached to them through the long ages and become part of their flowing waters. The Ganga, especially, is the river of India, beloved of her people, round which are intertwined her racial memories, her hopes and fears, her songs of triumph, her victories and her defeats. She has been a symbol of India's age-long culture and civilization, ever-changing, ever-flowing, and yet ever the same Ganga. She reminds me of the snow-covered peaks and the deep valleys of the Himalayas, which I have loved so much, and of the rich and vast plains below, where my life and work have been cast."

It is certainly not its length that makes the Ganga one of the great rivers of the world. Its entire course is only 1,560 miles from its source to the sea. The Nile is more than two and a half times as long, as are the Amazon and the Mississippi/Missouri; the Yangtze is twice as long; even the Danube is longer.

What makes it a great river, and in this sense the greatest of all, is that for more than 430 million Hindus in India and for countless others dispersed about the world, it is the most holy and most venerated river on earth. To each one of them it is *Ganga Mai*—Mother Ganga. For a Hindu to bathe in her is to be purified of all sin. To say, with love, the words "*O, Ganga! O, Ganga!*" even when far from her banks, can atone for the misdeeds of three previous incarnations. To be cremated on them, preferably having died there, and have one's calcined bones scattered on her bosom, or to cast those of one's deceased parents on it, is the ardent desire of every Hindu; the acts ensure that the persons whose remains they are will go to heaven.

Even before death, sick and aged people who have means to do so, and others who have not, make what are often long journeys to spend their last days by her side. Some reside in little huts, while those *in extremis* contrive to have themselves immersed in her so that their sins may be washed away while there is still life in their bodies.

And to drink the water, having bathed in it, and to carry it away in vessels for future consumption—both confer great merit. Many devout Hindus drink no other water at all, and those who live at a distance contrive to receive regular supplies of it, for Ganga water has extraordinary qualities. Bottled at one of the sacred bathing places, or anywhere else for that matter, it will keep for at least a year. Taken on board outward bound ships on the Hooghly near Calcutta in the days of sail, it is said to have outlasted all other waters, although it is not possible to fill a ship's drinking water tanks with Hooghly water today. It also seems to have a genuine capacity for absorbing germs and rendering them innocuous.

At Allahabad the Ganga is joined by the Jumna, another sacred river which has its source about thirty miles from that of the Ganga. There, just above the confluence, in the wintertime, the Jumna is half a mile wide, slow-moving, deep and limpid blue. Although it looks cleaner than the Ganga it is much dirtier. According to the medical officer in charge of the great bathing festival, the *Magh Mela*, who had it analysed in 1964, it was, unlike the Ganga, heavily laden with bacteria.

At Banaras, thousands drink the water every day at bathing places which are close to the outfalls of appalling medieval drains discharging raw, untreated sewage into the Ganga. No one really knows what effect this has on individuals, but it is rare to hear of the sort of mass epidemics that one would expect. Neither does the presence of large numbers of imperfectly cremated and decomposing corpses floating in it seem to have much adverse effect on it, although some Hindus have reservations about how far downstream they are prepared to drink Ganga water in its natural state. In 1964 some

Hindus told me that they were prepared to drink it as far downstream as Dhulian, near the place where the Ganga, under the name of Bhagirathi, takes off from the main river for the Hooghly and Calcutta. Some of the rather practical inhabitants of Soron on the Upper Ganga, which is far north of cities the size of Allahabad and Banaras, believe that this is the last safe place to drink it, because up to this point sewage has not entered it in appreciable quantities.

At Soron there is a large tank fed by the Burhiganga, an inconsiderable river which flows in an old bed of the Ganga and is further augmented by water drawn off from the Lower Ganga Canal. The water in it is said to have the peculiar property of dissolving the bones of the dead within three days of their being thrown into the tank; if this were not so it would be filled to the brim with them. My wife and I have both drunk the water unboiled in the 50-mile stretch of the river where it first enters the Indian Plain, and boiled and made into tea thereafter for most of the rest of its course as far as the beginning of the Bhagirathi, and without any unfortunate effects. Yet whenever we left the river we invariably became ill. I would not attempt to explain this. I only state it as a matter of fact.

It may have something to do with the silt, a mixture of mud and sand which is brought down in phenomenal quantities when the river is in flood and which may act as a sort of water filter. A Victorian engineer, Sir Charles Lyell—only a Victorian engineer would have had the stamina to make such a computation without a computer—wrote that 335,000,000 tons of silt were discharged at Ghazipur on the Middle Ganga. "Nearly the weight of 60 replicas of the Great Pyramid," he added, a comparison impossible for the mind to encompass even if one has seen one Great Pyramid.

In his book, *Mother Ganges*, His Holiness the late Sri Swami Sivananda, who attained Union with the Godhead (*Mahasamadhi*) on 14th July, 1963 and had until then been the guiding spirit of the Divine Life Society at Rishikesh, quotes or paraphrases a professor of McGill University, whose name he gives but I will omit, as saying:

> "A peculiar fact which has never been satisfactorily explained is the quick death, in three or five hours, of the cholera vibrio in the waters of the Ganges. When one remembers sewage by numerous corpses of natives, often cholera casualties, and by the bathing of thousands of natives, it seems remarkable that the belief of Hindus, that the water of this river is pure and cannot be defiled and that they can safely drink it and bathe in it, should be confirmed by means of modern bacteriological research."

It is certainly true that cholera, the great killer, travels up the river rather than down it. The disease is born in the stagnant waters of the Delta, the Sundarbans in Bengal, and it ascends it, carried by pilgrims who visit the sacred places in hundreds of

thousands, sometimes in millions, every year. The great nineteenth-century cholera epidemics started in Bengal and spread north as far as Hardwar, one of the holiest places of all on the Upper Ganga. From there they moved north-west into the Punjab, then overland into Afghanistan and through Persia and Russia and, finally, into Western Europe. Even today in India the seasonal rise in the incidence of cholera coincides with the great religious fairs which take place on the banks of the river.

What confers on the Ganga this unique holiness among rivers? It was not always so. The first Aryan invaders of India thought more highly of the Indus. It was much later that they gave Ganga the highest position and called her Sursarit, River of the Gods.

The Ganga emerges under the name of Bhagirathi from an ice cave at the foot of the Gangotri Glacier, 12,770 feet up in the Garhwal Himalayas, 12 miles above Gangotri. The cave is known as Gomukh, the Cow's Mouth; certainly nothing in nature could be nearer the divine than this lonely place to which only the most determined pilgrims penetrate, and then usually only men. Nearly all who reach Gomukh, whether Hindus or not, refer to the mystical and spiritual feelings which the place engenders, feelings shared by Raghubir Singh when he himself visited it and took the remarkable photograph of Swami Sharadananda, a sadhu (holy man) who for 16 years has lived in a nearby cave, which appears on page 49 and which speaks more eloquently than words of the splendour of the place.

It is here, according to the Puranas, that Ganga, the daughter of King Himavat and the nymph, Mena, was persuaded to come down to earth from heaven by Bhagirath, a saintly descendant of King Sagara, to redeem from hell the souls of the 60,000 loose-living sons of the king and Queen Sumati who had been reduced to ashes by Kapila, a holy man they had treated in a disrespectful manner. This is why it is here called the Bhagirathi.

What happened then is recorded succinctly by John Dowson in his *Classical Dictionary of Hindu Mythology and Religion, Geography and Literature**, an invaluable work for anyone interested in Hindu India.

> "Ganga was angry at being brought down from heaven, and Siva, to save the earth from the shock of her fall, caught the river on his brow, and checked its course with his matted locks. From this action he is called *Ganga-dhara*, 'Upholder of the Ganges'. The river descended from Siva's brow in several streams, four according to some and ten according to others, but the number generally accepted is seven, being the *Saptasindhava*, the seven *sindhus* or rivers. The Ganges proper is one of the number. The descent of the Ganges disturbed the sage *Jahnu* as he was performing a sacrifice, and in his anger he drank up the waters, but he relented and allowed the river to flow from his

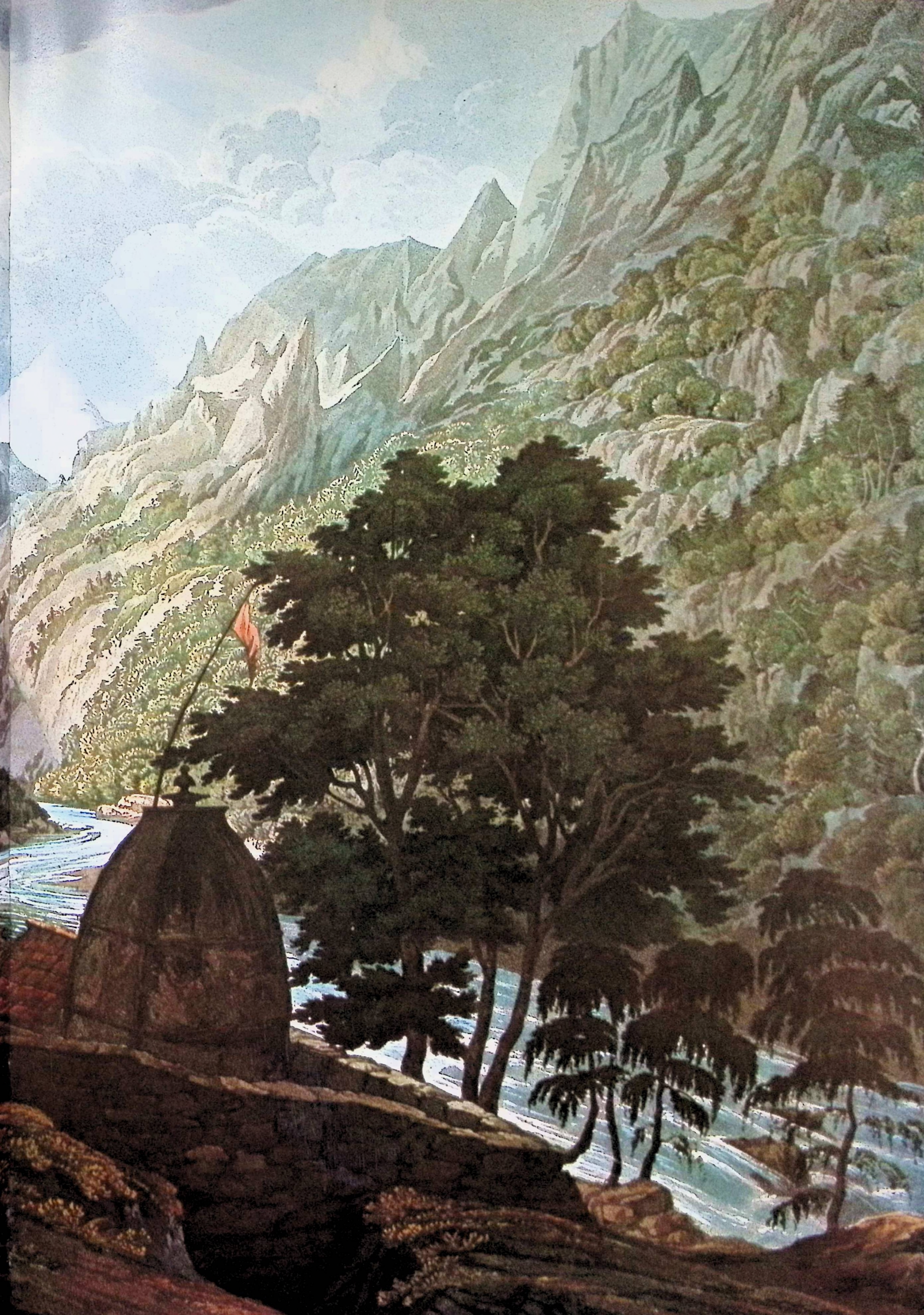
*Published by Routledge and Kegan Paul, London.



The Goddess Ganga, daughter of the Himalayas, consort of many gods, mother of Bhishma, one of the heroes of the Mahabharata, wound herself three times around Brahma's city on Mt. Meru. Ever since she flowed from heaven, through earth and into the ocean (Patala), Ganga is said to water the three worlds. In this nineteenth-century painting Ganga rides her makara (saurian). In one hand she holds a lotus, in another a pot of Ganga water.

(*overleaf*) In the summer of 1815 James Fraser visited and painted the Gangotri Temple, elevation 10,500 feet.





ear, hence the Ganges has the name of *Jahanavi* [sic]. Personified as a goddess, Ganga is the eldest daughter of Himavat and Mena, and her sister was Uma. She became the wife of King Santanu and bore a son, Bhishma. Being also in a peculiar way the mother of *Karttikeya**, she is called *Kumaru-su* [sic]."

This is the Saivite version of the birth of Ganga, assisted by the god himself, whose frozen locks can still be seen hanging in the form of icicles from the roof of the cave. Vaishnavites believe, on the contrary, that she rose from the big toe of Vishnu's left foot.

Whatever they are, devotees of Siva or Vishnu, the final approach to Gomukh is an awe-inspiring experience, especially for those who have been born and lived their entire lives in the plains of India, many of whom have never seen anything larger than a hillock or a mound of ruins and now find themselves at the feet of some of the world's greatest peaks.

Even the journey to Gangotri at 10,500 feet, the last stopping place before the actual source and Ganga's second stopping place on her way from *Swarga*, the heaven of Indra, is a great adventure for the pilgrims. Laden with *agarbattis, dhup* powder, wicks soaked in *ghee*, sandalwood powder, *kumkuma*, camphor, *japamala*, bedding, cooking and eating utensils, religious books, a list of departed souls, tongue cleaners and lamps—to name just a few of the religious and secular objects they bring—the pilgrims often combine the journey to Gangotri with visits to other sacred sources, usually travelling in a clockwise direction, from west to east.

Those that do this go first to the source of the Jumna, which is also one of the *Saptasindhava*, the Seven Sacred Rivers. The Jumna rises on the sides of the twin peaks of Bandarpunch (20,720 ft and 20,020 ft), which is about 20 miles as the crow flies from the source of the Bhagirathi, across the gorges it has dug for itself, through the Garhwal Himalayas. Many pilgrims now travel a large part of the way by bus, although, until recently, the last 20 miles to the source of the Jumna at Jamnotri had to be done on foot, by way of the Tapta Kund, hot springs in which they could cook their rice and vegetables, done up in a cloth. In the same way the last 60 miles to Gangotri had to be walked. Now it is possible to go by bus to Gangotri within 12 miles of the actual source at Gomukh.

Some pilgrims travel the whole way on foot, because they consider it more meritorious. The pilgrimage from the source of the Ganga to the mouth at Sagar Island, which is on the shores of the Bay of Bengal, and back is called *Pradakshina*. Some devotees travel the whole way prostrating themselves, measuring their lengths, rising, walking forward until their feet are upon the spot where their foreheads touched the

*Karttikeya. The god of war and the planet Mars also called Skanda. . . said to be the son of Siva or Rudra, and to have been produced without intervention of a woman. Siva cast his seed into the fire, and it was afterwards received by the Ganga: Karttikeya was the result. *Ibid.*

earth, prostrating themselves again, and so on. *Pradakshina* takes six years.

No English writer, so far as I know, has ever put into words, or could hope to, the feelings that the first sight of Gangotri engenders in the hearts of Hindus. For them it is the long-awaited climax of a journey planned possibly for the greater part of a lifetime and carried out more often than not in their declining years, sometimes travelling as mendicants, having discharged their mundane obligations to their families and society.

Not all, however, practise such austerities. Some wealthy pilgrims actually allow themselves to be conveyed to the source, pig-a-back, by a wretched porter; others who are not rich but simply unwell avail themselves of the same service, with more reason.

To appreciate what Gangotri was like 150 years ago, and how relatively little it has changed in appearance since, it is interesting to visit one of the larger libraries and look at a rare folio published in 1820, *Journal of a Tour through part of the Snowy Ranges of the Himālā Mountains*, by J.B. Fraser.

In it, among a number of striking aquatints made from Fraser's original water-colours, there is one of Gangotri (Pages 14 & 15), painted by him when he went there in the summer of 1815, two years before James Herbert, a young army subaltern, reached the source at Gomukh, the first European to do so as far as we know.

In the foreground, dwarfed by the great trunks of the sombre, green *devadaru* trees, the deodars, which are a feature of the valley and the region through which the river flows, there is a little temple with a tapering, truncated tower not more than ten or twelve feet high, topped with a sort of finial and a long, bent pole with a red flag drooping on it, the invariable sign of the existence of a Hindu shrine in India. This is the temple of Gangamata, in which reside the two images of Ganga and Bhagirath.

Apart from some more elaborate buildings which have sprung up nearby, the place is almost identical today.

Close to the temple, outside the drystone wall which encloses it in the picture, on a platform in the foreground, stands a little band of pilgrims, all wearing clean white dhotis. They are being blessed by Brahmins. Some of them appear to be in a state approaching ecstasy which is not uncommon at such a moment to this day.

To the right, some feet below the platform, is the Bhagirathi, here not more than twenty yards wide, in the picture a deep blue colour but in some places running white among the rocks as it makes its way to the gorges below.

From the far left bank, the mountains soar, becoming increasingly bare as the tree-line is reached; upstream, the river winds away into the middle distance, where it disappears from view at a wooded bend. From this point its course can be surmised for some little distance more by the trees which grow near it.

High above everything else, illuminated by long shafts of unearthly light which descend on them from behind a curtain of dark and thunderous clouds, are the great

peaks of the Garhwal Himalayas. Beyond them, far away to the north-east and out of the picture rises a 21,020-foot mountain north of the Mansarowar and the Rakas Tal lakes in Tibet. This is Kailash, the abode and paradise of Siva, who caught Ganga as she fell for the good of all mankind. Hindus and Tibetan Buddhists consider Mansarowar sacred. The ancient Hindu epic, the Ramayana, says, "If the earth of the Mansarowar district touches any man's body, or if he bathes in the lake, that man shall go to the paradise of Brahma, or he who drinks its waters shall know the heaven of Siva. Nowhere are there mountains equal to the Himalayas, for in them are both Kailash and Mansarowar."

From Gangotri those pilgrims who are intent on completing the course retrace their steps to a place called Malla Chatti. Eventually, after a journey of over one hundred miles, they reach Kedarnath on the south side of the same massif in which the Bhagirathi is born. The glaciers above Kedarnath give birth to the Mandakini, another sacred river, which joins the even more sacred Alaknanda, a major tributary of the Ganga. It is not always an easy journey. "Walk over ice in some seasons only", "Here there is great beauty of Nature, but journey here is very risky" are notes on two sections of the way there in a pilgrim's guide.

Here, there is a Saivite temple known as *Sri Kedarnatheswara*. It contains the ninth of the twelve great Siva lingas, the *Jyotirlinga*—the linga being the phallic symbol, generally a stone, under which guise Siva is worshipped—the twelve great lingas and the places where they are present being of particular importance, as Siva himself says in the *Siva Purana*. In this instance, the ninth, the *Kedarnatha* linga is a huge, pale, amorphous lump of rock which has no remote resemblance to a conventional, phallus-shaped linga at all.

From Kedarnath it is another 105 miles by the bus route to Badrinath, 10,000 feet up on another tributary of the Bhagirathi Ganga, the Alaknanda, at which the pilgrim should arrive, praising the Lord's name—in this case Vishnu—and saying "*Jai Badari Bishal Lalki Jai!*" as he walks along the road towards the temple which houses Lord *Badari Narayana* (Vishnu).

To the north-west of it is Mount Badrinath, 23,555 feet; to the north, Kamet, 25,483 feet, and still further, near the headwaters of the Saraswati, is the Mana Pass, 18,400 feet up in the Zaskar Range.

This was the pass used by the first European ever to cross the Himalayan range, Father Antonio de Andrade, a Portuguese Jesuit on his way from Agra to Tibet in 1624. In 1625 he made his second journey to Tibet and on April 11th, 1626, laid the foundation stone for the first Christian Church in Tibet at Tsaparang on the Sutlej River. The bell from this church is now at the Jakong Gompa in Lhasa. During the following twenty-five years eighteen Catholic missionaries followed him into Tibet.

To the south-east of Badrinath rises the Rishiganga on the flanks of Nanda Devi

(23,645 ft). The Rishiganga joins with the Dhauliganga, which in turn joins the Alaknanda below Joshimath. The Alaknanda meets the Bhagirathi at Devprayag (2,200 ft) and here, 35 miles upstream from Rishikesh, the two streams, Bhagirathi and Alaknanda, unite to become Ganga, the name by which the river is known until it reaches the hydra-headed delta on the Bay of Bengal.

For this reason Devprayag is a very holy place. All *prayag* (place of sacrifice) are sacred. There are five of them on the *Badar Yatra*, the sacred way to Badrinath, but none of them is the true *Prayag*.

Ganga has been variously and metaphorically described: The Sanskrit *Gangastotra-satanamavali* and the *Ganga-sahasranam stotra* enumerate 108 and 1,000 of her names respectively, all printed metrically in columns so that they can be chanted devotionally. Among the 108 and taken at random are *Kshira-subhra* (White as milk), *Kshira-vrksha-samakula* (Abounding in "milk trees"—*i.e.*, the banyan, the glomerate fig-tree, the holy-fig, and Bassia Latifolia), *Bhiti-hrt* (Carrying away fear), *Avyaya* (Imperishable), *Niranjana* (Not tainted with collyrium—*i.e.*, pure), *Subhrangi* (Having beautiful limbs), *Sankha-dundubhi-nisvana* (Generating a noise like a conch-shell and drum), *Bhagya-janani* (Happiness), *Anantha* (Eternal), *Omkara-rupini* (Having the appearance of the sacred syllable *Om*), *Samsara-visha-nasini* (Destroying the poison of illusion), *Sumukti-da* (Giving complete spiritual emancipation), *Jambu-dvipa-viharini* (Roaming through Rose-apple-tree Island—*i.e.*, India) and *Ajnana-timira-bhanu* (A sun amid the darkness of ignorance).*

Three hundred miles from its source at Gomukh, the Ganga finally breaks through the Siwalik Range, the last outriders of the Himalayas, and enters the plains of India at the place where the town of Hardwar stands on the right bank. Here, the young Ganga loses much of her newly-created strength. Vast quantities of water, about three-quarters of the total volume in winter, are channelled off by a barrage into the Ganga Canal. A remarkable piece of beneficent Victorian engineering which waters the entire Doab—literally the land of the two waters—the tract between the Ganga and the Jumna, that transforms what was formerly a famine-ridden region into one, by Indian standards, of relative prosperity; but debilitating the Ganga itself, so that, in wintertime, it is unnavigable downstream for many miles and is rarely more than 70 yards broad.

High above the town, all white and decked with flags, is the little temple of Mansa Devi which enshrines Durga, wife of Siva and the daughter of King Himavat, the embodiment of the Ganga.

The view from the temple is memorable. From upstream towards Rishikesh, a place which has attracted large numbers of holy men and women, not a few of them

*The 108 names of the Ganga, *the Gangastotra-satanamavali*, were translated for me into English from the Sanskrit by Mr. T.C.H. Raper, Assistant Keeper of the India Office Library, London, whose kindness in doing so I once again wish to acknowledge.

saints, the river winds down between banks of sand and stones, sometimes lost to view among groves of trees, and then races down through the gorge it has cut for itself through the Siwalik Hills, a passage not more than a mile wide, and possibly, as some Hindus believe, excavated by supernatural means.

On the far bank, a jungle extends to the Siwaliks, breaking high up on them like a great, green sea running up the face of a cliff. Ten years ago this jungle sheltered wild animals, though their numbers were even then much reduced. In this place the Indian lion survived until the middle of the nineteenth century; much more recently there were herds of elephant as well as tigers, leopards, wolves, sloth bear, nilgai, antelope, black buck and packs of wild dogs.

From the river the appearance of Hardwar is spoiled by a number of hideous buildings, some of them covered with enormous, equally hideous advertisement hoardings and by a singularly unattractive municipal clock tower on an artificial island by the bathing ghat*, part of a gift to the town by a well-meaning but misguided Indian motor-car manufacturer. The unsightly tower would be much more at home in Stoke-on-Trent, or in some other sad industrial town in the English midlands.

For this is one of the seven great places of pilgrimage for Hindus in India. To Vaishnavites it is *Hari-dwara*, the Gate of Hari, or Vishnu, and at the *Har-ki-Pairi* ghat, the footprint of Vishnu, who could cross the seven regions of the Hindu Universe in seven steps, is imprinted on a stone. Saivites call Hardwar, *Har-dwara*, the Gate of Siva. It is also known as *Ganga-dwara*, the Gate of Ganga.

The ghat is the scene of great bathing ceremonies, especially on the first of *Baisakh*, the day on which Ganga first appeared on earth, at the beginning of the Hindu solar year and on the occasion of a *Kumbh Mela*, which is celebrated at Hardwar once every twelve years. It is celebrated at three other places: at Allahabad downstream on the Ganga, at Nasik on the Godavari River in the Deccan and at Ujjain on the River Sipra in Madhya Pradesh.

Multitudes attend a *Kumbh Mela,* wherever it is held. During the one held at Hardwar in 1962, two million people are said to have bathed on 13th April, the principal bathing day. Such figures must be taken with a certain amount of reservation. But whatever the number, the *Har-ki-Pairi*, the most venerated ghat, has only 60 steps leading down to the water and is only 100 feet wide, and as it is practically obligatory to bathe from it and visit one or other of the adjacent temples at the water's edge, one dedicated to Vishnu and his wife, the other to Lakshmi-Ganga (Lakshmi was born of the ocean, perfectly beautiful, with a lotus in her hand), the confusion can be imagined.

In the early nineteenth century the ghat was only 34 feet wide at the top and there were only 39 steps down to the water; in 1820, in this confined space, 430 pilgrims and

**Ghat*. From the Sanskrit *ghatta*, among the various meanings of which are: "a landing place" and "steps on a river". These are the usages intended here.

a number of sepoys endeavouring to keep order were crushed to death.

On a winter's morning in December, which is the only time I have ever been to Hardwar, the sky to the east becomes faintly red about six. It is sometimes very cold at this hour and flights of duck roar upstream into the mouth of the gorge in which the river is often obscured by long horizontal belts of mist.

But then quite quickly the sky begins to glow, becomes a fierce, incandescent red and the sun comes shooting up behind the Himalayas, a huge and brilliant orb.

In summer it would be heralding the onset of another terrible day—no one who has not experienced an entire summer spent in the Indian Plain, even with the machinery of western civilisation as an assistance, can know what it is like. Now, in winter, it announces that the long, bitter night is over and the beautiful day is beginning. There are none more beautiful anywhere than the short days of the short Indian winter.

Soon the sun is strong enough to warm the Saivite sadhus who squat, coated in cowdung ash, before their dying fires in the niches below their temple of *Gangadhara* and the Vaishnavite *Namadaris*, who wear their hair in mud-packed beehives and daub on their foreheads three vertical stripes, two white on the outside and a blood-red stripe in the middle. The sun also warms the *nais*, the barbers, who are already waiting to shave the nostrils, heads and ears of their clients before they take the ritual bath. (At Allahabad these great masses of shorn hair are taken to a deep part of the Ganga downstream and buried there.) It illuminates rather than warms the men on little brush-wood rafts made more buoyant with gourds, half in and half out of the water, going downstream on the current, as well as the men, covered with soap, having a non-ritual bath on the offshore ghat, which is joined to the land by a couple of bridges of the same style as the clock tower. And it warms the limbless beggars who crawl like injured crabs across the stones that are still gelid from the night, and the faceless lepers, all hoping for a few paise from the faithful, rich and poor, who believe that such alms-giving will ensure them some merit in this world, more in the next. And the pandas, mostly debased Brahmins, all of them venal, the middle men between the pilgrims and their gods, all of them indispensable, who prepare their clients' horoscopes, inscribe their names in their books, according to their caste, perform the ceremonial Ganga-puja over their dripping heads which begins:

> *"Jambu-Dvipe Bharata Varshe Uttara-Khande Pavitra Ganga Teere..."*
> (In *Jambu-Dvipa*—one of the seven islands of which the world is made up, in the northern part of *Bharata Varsha*—south of the Himalayas, *i.e.* India, by the side of Holy Ganga... and so on).

Pandas also supply and apply anointing oils, sandalwood paste and the ground-up

yellow clay to make the *tilak* mark on the forehead which is supposed to cool the brain. The only true source of this clay is said to be the tank at Somnath in Gujarat in which some of Krishna's 16,000 wives drowned themselves after his death. The sun is encouraging, if not warming, at this early hour, the bathers themselves, the men in loincloths, the women in saris, who are embracing the river with the same ardour as they might, in other circumstances, their lovers.

Here the bathers can be seen engaging in a multiplicity of homages to the Ganga: drinking her icy waters, which are nevertheless sweet to the taste; launching on her bosom little boat-shaped baskets of stitched leaves containing marigolds, rose-petals and sweets; offering her milk; taking the water in their cupped hands and letting it run through them three times, making a libation and saying the prayer to the Seven Sacred Rivers, which is obligatory on every devout Hindu to recite at the time of taking his bath:

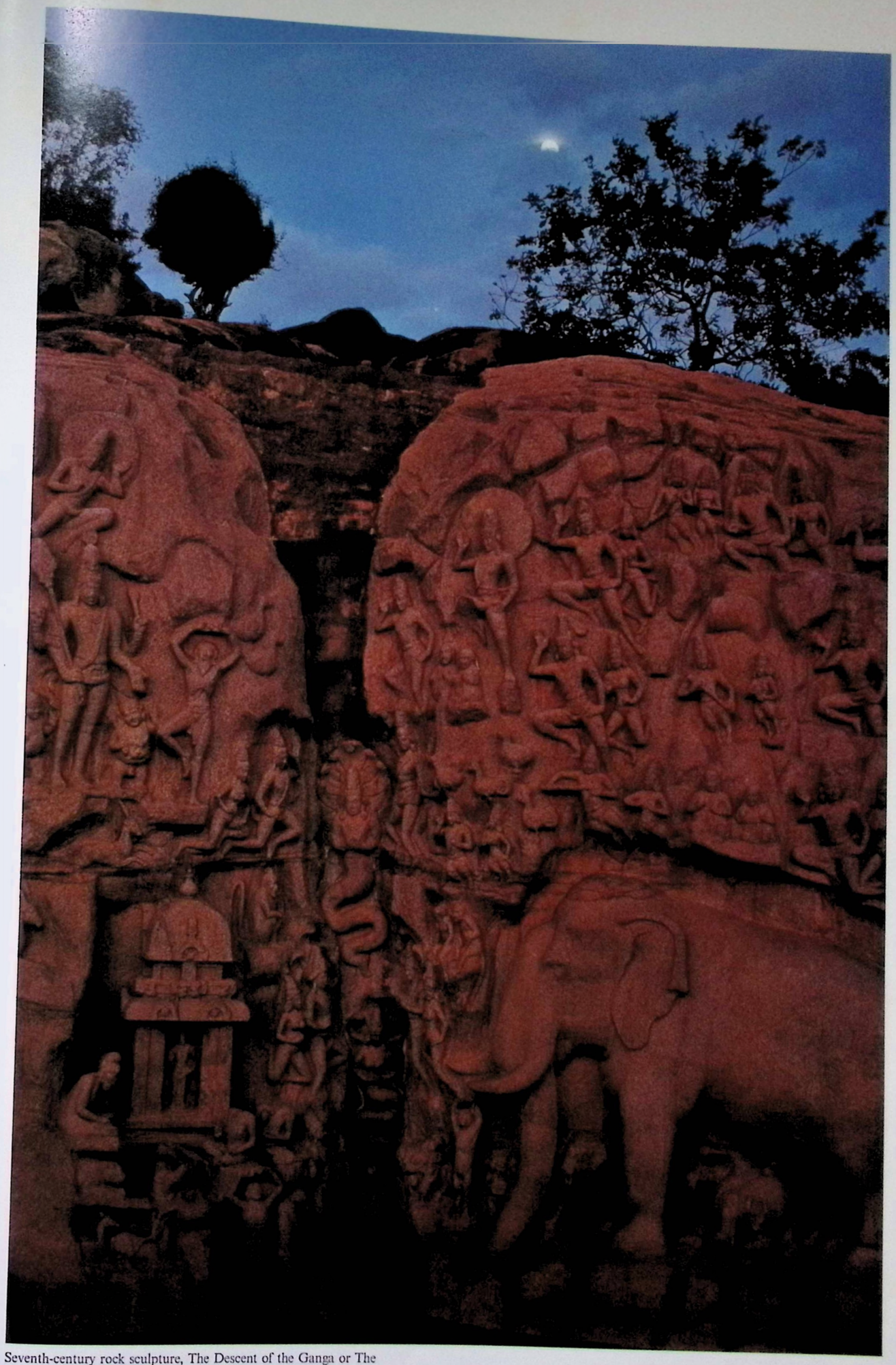
"Gange cha! Yamune chaiva!
Godavari! Saraswati!
Narmade! Sindhu! Kaveri!
Jale asmin sannidhim kuru!"

("O, Ganga! O, Yamuna! O, Godavari! O, Saraswati!
O, Narmada, Sindhu, Kaveri! May you all be pleased to
be manifest in these waters!")

Downstream now, the mist, usually present during the early hours, will be rolling away. The Ganga is revealed as a whitish ribbon of pale stones with a trickle of water running through it, reach after reach, until it is lost in the distance of the enormous plain.

This is what is known rather unromantically by geographers as the Gangetic Plain, actually the bottom of a 400,000 square mile basin, formed on the north by the Himalayas, on the south by the Vindhyan Ranges and, to the east where the Brahmaputra enters it, by the thickly-forested hills which separate Burma from Bengal. To the west are the great deserts of Rajasthan.

The Plain, in which the Ganga excavates a constantly changing course, is about 200 miles wide at its widest point and so gently sloping that in the 1,000 miles of country between Delhi and the shores of the Bay of Bengal to the east-south-east, there is a drop in altitude of only 750 feet, less than a foot a mile. It is in this valley, that is so limitless that if you are actually in it you can never think of it as a valley, and teeming with humanity, that most of Raghubir Singh's photographs have been made over a period of years, the only way they could have been made. In three of the states through which the Ganga passes—Uttar Pradesh, Bihar and West Bengal—there live nearly 190 million people, one third of India's population. What his heart has felt and his eyes



Seventh-century rock sculpture, The Descent of the Ganga or The Penance of Arjuna at Mahabalipuram, Madras. The central portion with the Naga and Nagini, inhabitants of rivers, lakes and seas, is the river Ganga. Bhagirath, or Arjuna, stands on one foot as a great ascetic.

have seen has been recorded lovingly and minutely: the beauty, the splendor and poverty, the faith and superstition, the unending struggle for existence of millions, each one of whom is an individual, the ultimate indifference to the value of human life and to material success which so many people have apprehended and so few have been able to express.

In this Introduction to his book, I have no intention of accompanying him step by step, picture by picture, down the river, peering over his shoulder trying to comment on what he sees. His pictures need no interpretation and he is more than capable of writing his own captions to them. What I shall try to do is to remember what I can of the Ganga. It is not difficult. How, once having known it, can one possibly ever forget it?

Of the navigable part of the Upper Ganga, once it leaves the mountains, it is the 40-mile stretch below Hardwar that is least known, where it passes through the *Bhabar*, the porous place in which the torrents from the Siwaliks deposit rocks and boulders and the already enfeebled river is deprived of yet more strength as its water sinks down through the dry limestone and percolates away.

In these first miles in the dry season, when the river is already low and its water level is sinking an inch or more a day, there are many places where the entire contents of a rowing boat have to be off-loaded and carried downstream by the crew, as does the boat itself, in a series of prolonged and extended portages, anything up to a mile in length.

For the purpose of navigation in this chartless region even the best maps, which are not generally available anyway, are useless. The bed of the river constantly shifts, as it does from now on throughout the remainder of its course. To travel down this part of the river at this time of year, there is always the possibility of entering a backwater with no water in it at all, or an offshoot such as the Banganga that may at one time have been its original bed, which may peter out completely among wastes of sand, savannahs of tall, plumed grass and what are impassable swamps during the rains, in what is known as the *Khadir*, the lowlands on the right bank. In the main stream there is often less than a foot of water over the bottom, filled with slimy round boulders the size of footballs, by the middle of December there is often no water at all and the islands in the river are left high and dry. They are composed of silt reinforced by layer upon layer of smooth, oval stones, and wooded with *shisham* (*Dalbergio Sissou*) trees, the boles and snake-like tufted branches of which are wrapped in coarse, sun-bleached grass brought down on the flood waters.

Here the Ganga traverses lonely country. To the right is the *Khadir*, to the left the jungle which extends up into the hills of Garhwal. Villages are few, for even here when the rains come the river can be miles wide, the countryside a morass, the roads, which are nothing but earth tracks, submerged and washed away every year. No pilgrims

visit the Ganga in this region; even a sadhu is rarely seen. Neither do the local people come to its banks except to fish, using weighted nets, or to cut on the fringes of the jungle *shisham* wood, which is used to make the frames and wheels of the great lumbering bullock carts. Even then they can only come here in the dry season.

"Our work is not with water," most of them say. "We know little of water"—and indeed they don't. They rarely know the river a mile above or below their habitual crossing place. Dressed in rags that have long since ceased to be white, they are more like scarecrows or resurrected corpses, still wrapped in the cerements of the grave, than human beings.

And they are full of fears, most of them perfectly legitimate, for this part of the Ganga, although extremely beautiful, has an eerie, sinister quality. They fear the beasts in the jungle and indeed the fringes of it, seen from the river, resemble those of the Wild Wood in "The Wind in the Willows"—at night a torch light beamed along the edge of it from one's camping place is reflected more often than not in numerous pairs of brilliant, unwinking animal eyes. They are afraid of the men of other villages, of evil omens and portents of disaster (they put out black pots in the fields to ward off the evil eye), of dacoits, roaming bands of robbers who are not unknown in this region, of being overtaken by night while far from home. In winter the sun sets soon after five o'clock, and when it does, fruit bats (*Pteropididae*) in their thousands, set off in their peculiarly horrible, undulating flight, squadron after squadron, to attack some far-off fruit gardens, in which they tear the fruit, and return to the jungle in the early dawn.

Only one man actually lived on the bank of this first stretch of river when I travelled down it ten years ago. He was very ragged and very old and wretchedly emaciated, and he lived on the right bank in a flimsy grass hut that resembled one of the strange constructions in an apocalyptical painting by Hieronymous Bosch. His job, he said, was to scare away poachers from the jungle. It was difficult to see how he could do this, as the jungle was on the other bank and he was not the sort of person who would inspire fear in a poacher's breast. Once, he said, there were many wild animals. Now, because of the poachers, there were very few, although there were still plenty of spotted deer and, in the rainy season, elephants.

Gradually, as the river writhes first south and then more to the west, the jungle draws back from it a little, the slimy, slippery boulders in the river give way to smaller stones, then to shingle, finally to sand. What in the earlier stages were waterfalls over which portages had to be made become long, exciting rapids down which the boat races among clouds of spray. There are at least 35 such rapids and waterfalls in the first 40 miles below Hardwar.

A typical village in the open country between the jungle and the river is hidden behind dense groves of reeds and grass. It consists of some 40 primitive huts presenting windowless faces to the outside world and guarded by hordes of savage dogs. There

is no proper road to such a place. Each hut has a platform of dried mud which forms the front porch. Inside, the mud floor is so shiny from use that it resembles polished wood. The back part, the sleeping quarter, is slightly raised and covered with straw mats. The hobbled cattle are penned in primitive enclosures made of branches. The village owns a communal fodder-cutting machine, usually very old and made of cast iron. Orange-coloured vegetables called *lobea,* a sort of gourd, grow on the thatched roofs in which birds roost. A solitary *shisham* tree, once giving shade from the murderous summer sun, is dead now but its branches are still full of vultures, black and dirty-white birds. Although horrible to look at, they perform an invaluable function as scavengers.

The crops are mustard, gram (chick peas), millet, wheat, rice, maize and tobacco. The work is laborious; everything is done by hand. In the fields men sit at night in little bamboo towers called *machan.* Their job is to scare off wild animals, especially wild pig, that might trample and consume the crops. The first crop is the *rabi*, wheat and gram, sown in November and harvested some time between mid-March and the middle of April, and trodden out by half a dozen bullocks moving round a post. This is followed by the *kharif*, rice, maize and millet, planted after the monsoon rains have begun and harvested early in October.

In such a village all the artifacts, tools, implements, ropes, receptacles, ploughs—which have to be light enough to be carried into the fields by one man—and the harrows are essentially the same as they have been for hundreds of years, perhaps more than a thousand years, almost all of them made from the basic materials: iron, wood, grass and clay. Even the clothing, the men's dhotis, the women's *lugris* (an old tattered dhoti or cloth) are as they always have been, the materials for them often woven in the village.

But however poor they may be, the women's jewellery, their only possessions, will be beautiful. Their bracelets and anklets of solid silver, their necklaces of coloured glass or crystals, all display an uncommon taste.

The 300 or so inhabitants—men, women, children and babies, the latter heavily swaddled, their eyes heavily ringed in lamp black, the women in their wraith-like shrouds, the men preternaturally emaciated, with legs and arms like match sticks and aged before their time—are all terribly vulnerable to misfortunes. Their crops are the prey of blight, flood, drought, the depredations of wild animals, lack of proper fertilisers, excessive cropping and—one of the worst misfortunes of all—the sub-division of property by inheritance that in some circumstances makes the cultivation of the land by the heirs an economic absurdity. They are prisoners of ignorance, caste, superstition and of iniquitous rates of interest.

But somehow, with their capacity for accepting suffering and their faith in their gods, they survive on the six *bighas* or so of land—a *bigha* being about one-third of



At the Sonepur Fair in Bihar a morality play is staged with the backdrop of Ganga riding her makara or saurian. Ganga is a personification of health and abundance, dignity and prowess.

an acre—land desiccated by the summer sun, a morass during the monsoon rains. Of the 567,000 villages in rural India, 450,000 are more or less like this one, all with fewer than 500 inhabitants.

One hundred miles below Hardwar, the Ganga is what it will be for the greater part of the rest of its journey: a river about two miles wide, narrowing to half a mile or less in winter, sometimes swollen by the monsoon rains to the proportions of an inland sea, five, ten, twelve miles in some places, even twenty miles broad, in which only trees and the roof of an occasional house break the surface.

In January some winter rains fall; when they pass, a disagreeable wind begins to blow from the west. The hot weather begins in February and becomes progressively hotter throughout March until in April, May and June the mean temperature night and day is always in excess of 90°F. In the day time it rises to 110°, 115°, even 120°, with almost always the terrible hot wind, the *loo*, blowing out of the western desert.

Sometimes the atmosphere is cooled momentarily by violent rainstorms accompanied by thunder and lightning and often preceded by a terrifying sand-storm which comes roaring across the plains like a moving cliff, and just as dark and solid-looking.

Then the monsoon rains come in earnest, early or late, strong or weak, but usually about the middle of June. The air that was insufferably dry becomes insufferably humid; the sky that was the colour of brass, now turns grey, sad and overcast; the Ganga rises 30 feet or more and goes down in full flood. At Rajmahal, on the great bend of the Ganga, 600 miles east of Allahabad, where it turns south towards the Bay of Bengal, it flows at about six knots in a volume exceeding one million cubic feet a second—more than the maximum discharge of the Mississippi, and more than 150 times that of the Thames at Staines in full flood.

In the long reaches upstream from Kanpur, in the heart of Uttar Pradesh, 800 or 900 miles west-north-west of the Bay of Bengal, perhaps three weeks' journey by rowing boat from Hardwar in the season of low water, the Ganga looks much as it will until it reaches the Delta: the water full of silt containing minute chips of mica that glisten in the sun as the river churns it, occasionally erupting in rips and whirlpools and sending great bubbles to the surface, but more often simply moving inexorably downhill as if it were some heavy, semi-solid mass of a yellowish colour and rather like molten lead.

As it goes, it snakes its way along an endless succession of islands, dropping about a foot in every mile, more gently than it does in its course through the *Bhabar* where in every mile it falls over 20 feet. Invariably, one bank is steep and high, twenty or thirty feet or more, the opposite one a low, gently-shelved foreshore from which mud and sand flats, imprinted with the myriad footprints of birds and beasts, extend away as far as the eye can see. For the river is constantly trying to straighten itself, setting

itself against any high, steep bank, undercutting it and leaving sluggish, shallow water on the other shore until it finally breaks through and begins the whole process anew.

The Ganga Plain is riddled with dead and forgotten watercourses. In abandoning them the river leaves villages and even cities high and dry and often moribund. Patiali, for example, a decayed town that once stood on the right bank, is now 18 miles away. Travelling on the river, one often passes settlements, especially on the Upper Ganga, which are on the point of collapsing into it. The next monsoon rains will see the end of them. Meanwhile the inhabitants camp along the ruins of their houses in grass huts.

On the high bank, when they are hard enough to resist the eroding river, are the permanent villages. It is impossible to say how old they are, for they are built of undatable mud, they may have endured for centuries, constantly rebuilt. From them come the lowing of cattle, the barking of dogs, the cries of children and the smell of burning dung.

In and about them the day-to-day activities of the inhabitants make a timeless, ageless scene. The long, pendant branches of banyan trees, which grow on the banks, overhang the water casting a deep shadow, turning it to the colour of greengages. Sadhus and small boys perch in niches in the bank, the sadhus immobile, looking like mummified corpses, the small boys happily fishing.

On the bank above, spindle-shanked men run rather than walk, as such men always do in India, with bamboos slung across their shoulders, heavy earthenware pots suspended from them at either end. Sometimes there are men carrying corpses wrapped in white cloths to the burning places, crying "*Ram Nam Sat Hai!*" (The Name of God is Truth) accompanied by another who carries a pot with fire in it to kindle the pyre.

In the river, near a shrine in which the platform from where the black linga rises is decked with fresh marigolds, some white-clad figures perform their *pujas* and women and girls wallop the washing on lumps of brickwork, all that remains of some Moghul palace or gazebo, and shout to one another in coarse, cheerful voices.

There are ruins everywhere: red stone temples, their spires carved with figures of men and animals and gods, but still in use and the even more ruined remains of secular Muslim buildings and mosques. All of them, overgrown with vegetation and reeking of the sickly smell of bat dung, stand incongruously among groves of mangoes, clumps of palms, plantations of castor oil, fields of bushy-topped millet and wheat and sugar-cane: the immense, horizonless agricultural country of Uttar Pradesh, in which the peasant's plough still turns up tiles, coins and broken pieces of sculpture, testifying to the transience of civilisations.

For many miles downstream from Hardwar a boat is a comparative rarity. But here are more: ferry boats loaded with men and bicycles and goats; fishing boats loaded with bag-shaped nets or the cone-shaped traps which are set on the bottom of the river;

country boats with upturned bows, square sterns, a deckhouse thatched with reeds and a crew of two, if they are travelling upstream on the low bank, one steering, the other with a towing line over his shoulder painfully tracking the boat up against the current, using one of the little paths along the high bank that look like sheep runs. And there are other boats going down under sail, running before the wind, sometimes lashed together in pairs with one ragged square sail set on a communal yard. All these boats are clinker-built of wood.

On the flats on the opposite bank in the winter season, men plant melons, in pits in the silt, women walk upstream trailing their wet saris in the breeze, like long banners; the fishermen dry their nets. In the heat of the day these flats are places of mirage over which villages and long lines of trees liquefy, wobble like jelly, float upside down, advance and recede into the horizon.

All the way down the river there are shmasans, burning places for the dead. Sometimes there are proper ghats with flights of steps, but usually the shmasan is nothing more than a piece of foreshore distinguished by some heaps of baked earth and ashes and some calcined bones.

If there is a cremation in progress, one of the smaller sorts of bullock cart will be standing close, laden with the fuel for the fire.

The four men who brought the body to the pyre will be a few yards off, usually laughing and chatting among themselves. One man, the chief mourner, squats alone near the fire.

Where the river widens to such an extent that no proper bank is visible, there is nothing but flats and sandbanks on either hand. The only human beings one encounters are boatmen and fishermen. Then it is lonely indeed. But in such reaches the absence of people is made up for by a teeming wild life. The river is full of fish—*rahu, mauli, katla, tengra, lachi, shoul* and *ban* are the indigenous names of some of them. There is also a rarely seen monster, sometimes heard as it surfaces. It is known as the *gaunch,* otherwise *Carcharias Gangeticus,* a sort of freshwater shark which is also found in the Euphrates. There are the dolphins, which are quite blind, fresh-water tortoises and mud-turtles, some large crocodiles such as the *gharial*—but most of them have been shot in the upper parts of the river—and there are snakes, some of them deadly.

Among birds there are kingfishers, gulls, cormorants, black and white avocets and white egrets, spoonbills looking for frogs in the lagoons, clouds of duck and geese and paddybirds.

By night there is pandemonium on these otherwise quiet reaches of the river, with the continuous rumble of sandbanks collapsing into it; the noise made by the huge flocks of tall, grey and red sarus cranes as they trumpet and thresh the water, the howlings of packs of jackals which are taken up and answered by other bands on the opposite bank.

At some places, but only in the dry season, there are bridges of boats, with a roadway of timber and straw on them. Across these in the freezing early mornings the big bullock carts lurch nose to tail. When they reach the other side the drivers pay their dues to the bridge-keeper, light fires and wait for the mist to rise. Otherwise they cross the river at the ford, axle deep, sometimes preceded by a man who sounds the way with a pole. At other places the river is spanned by immense rail and road bridges, most of them legacies of the Raj and built with unimaginable difficulty. In some cases the piers are sunk one hundred feet deep in the river bottom, and over them long freight trains rumble, whistling mournfully as if they were trying to draw attention to the hard lot of mankind.

If, in the course of this journey down the Ganga from Hardwar, I seem to have written more about it as a river and about the people who live on its banks, and less about Hinduism in its relation to the river as Ganga, this does not imply that the spiritual feelings engendered by it are less powerful. It is certainly not true for any Hindu who finds himself on its banks; neither is it true for at least one non-Hindu on whom these lonely upper reaches made a profound and lasting impression and one which he still retains many years later and will continue to for the rest of his life.

But reaching Allahabad and continuing downstream without any further reference to the unique position that the Ganga occupies in relation to the Hindu world would be unthinkable. For the confluence at Allahabad is the true *Prayag*. As we have already seen, there are others in the Himalayas and the foothills which are very holy; but here, not two but three sacred rivers mingle their waters: Ganga, Jumna and Saraswati, the latter a river which formed for the early Aryans one of the boundaries of *Brahmavartha*, their home, and is now invisible to the ordinary mortal.

The Rishis, the Vedic sages, believed that the confluence of any two or more rivers was a sacred place and the confluence at *Prayag* was regarded as being particularly suitable for doing penance, meditating and performing *yajnas*—sacrifices. Here, too, Brahma, who married Saraswati after being given her by Vishnu, who had had enough of her (he also got rid of Ganga to Siva) performed that most complicated of all operations, the *Dasaswamedh Yajna*—the horse sacrifice. *Yaga* has the same meaning as *Yajna*, a sacrifice; *Pra*, the sense of extensiveness and excellence; *Prayag* is the land between the Ganga and the Jumna, up to a certain distance from the confluence. Yajna personified was a god, one of those destroyed in a fearful holocaust precipitated on the bank of the Ganga at Kankhal, just south of Hardwar (the Temple of Daksheshwara marks the site) when Daksha, the son of Brahma, performed a sacrifice to Vishnu but omitted to invite his son-in-law, Siva. This slight so infuriated Siva's wife, the mountain goddess Uma, that she produced a monster called Vira-Bhadra with a thousand heads, eyes and arms, which wielded a thousand clubs. In the subsequent action among the victims were Saraswati, river goddess and bestower

of fatness, goddess of speech and learning and inventress of Sanskrit who lost her nose, and *Yajna*, who had the head of a deer and was destroyed but was later resurrected by Brahma in the form of a constellation.

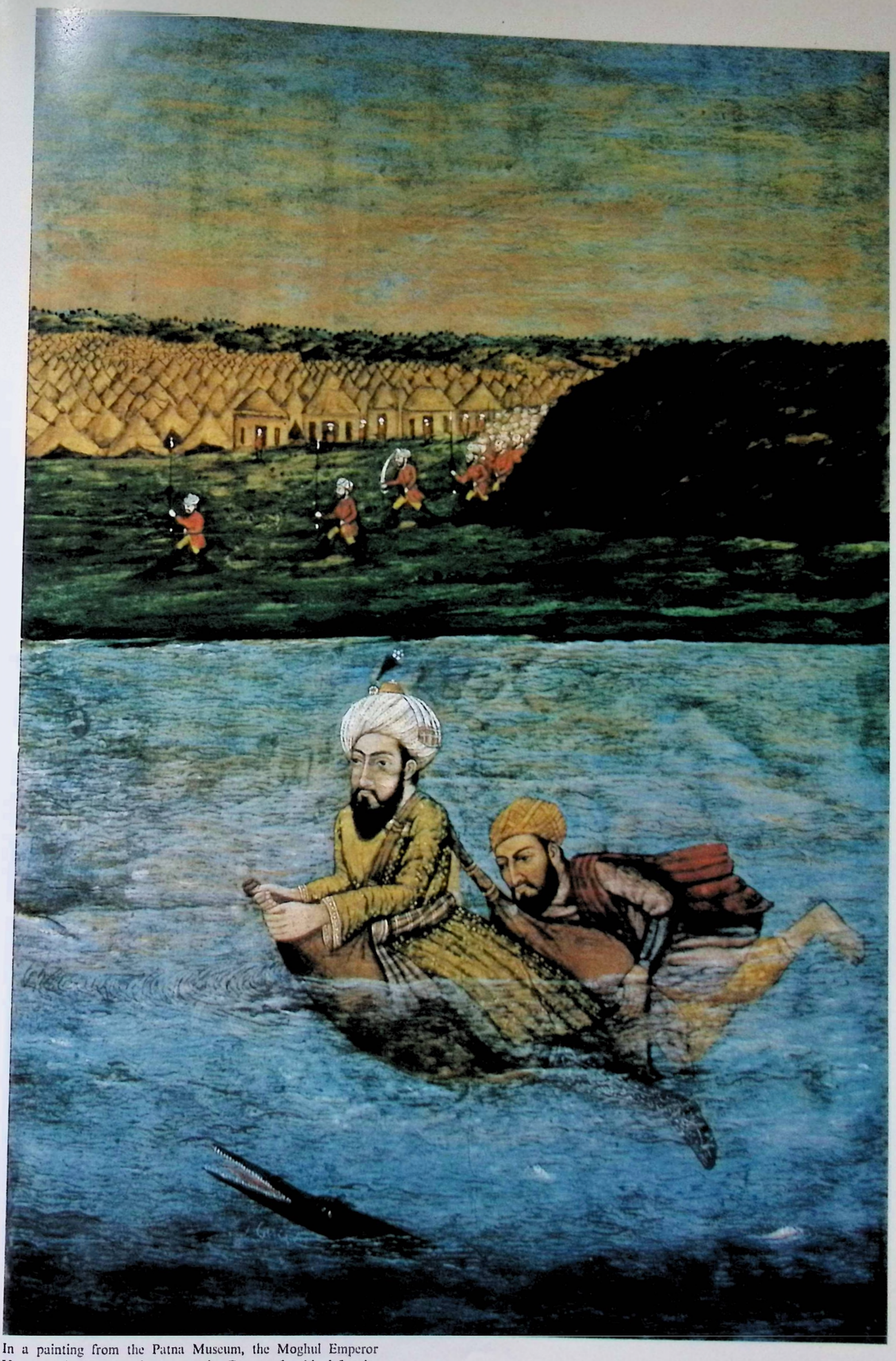
Yajnas were originally offerings made to the god and put into a sacred fire to the accompaniment of the chanting of *mantras*. Later it came to be believed that the greater the value of the sacrifice, the greater the merit; to die at *Prayag* was considered the most meritorious death of all. But as it is seldom possible for human beings to die a natural death at a moment which is convenient to themselves, the next step for those who believed in the sanctity of the river at this point, and who at the same time were afraid that they might not be at *Prayag* when they died naturally, was to rid themselves of their corporal integuments by doing away with themselves on the shore.

They found sanction for doing this by misconstruing certain passages in ancient religious works, which could be interpreted as an encouragement to killing themselves. One of these reads as follows: "Where the two rivers, white and black, commingle, bathing there people go to heaven and those brave ones who shed their bodies there attain immortality."

This interpretation led a number of kings, sages and mahatmas to destroy themselves at *Prayag*, though the majority are said to have waited prudently until they were one hundred years old before doing so. Some, like the Vedic scholar Kumarila Bhatta, immolated themselves; others cast themselves down from the branches of the Akshai-Vat, the undying banyan that grew in a courtyard packed with bones of persons who had gained salvation by destroying themselves in this fashion; while some holy men impaled themselves on hooks and hung suspended by them, a practice later forbidden by Akbar, who built the great fort at the confluence of the rivers in which the remains of the undying banyan is now represented in a niche in a subterranean temple by a bit of an old pipal tree.

It was fortunate that not all distinguished persons behaved in this way, otherwise the spiritual and intellectual impoverishment of the country would have been acute. Instead, it became more common to distribute one's worldly wealth to the poor than to kill oneself. In the seventh century A.D., the travelling Chinese Buddhist, Hiuen Tsang, who had himself seen the bones in the courtyard, wrote that King Harshavardhan distributed alms to the poor of his kingdom once every five years of his reign in lieu of self-immolation.

Apart from the performance of *yajnas*, four other ways are laid down for the attainment of *moksha* (salvation): *tatwa-chintana* (meditation on the supreme Reality —*Paramatman*); *adhyatma-shastra-vichara* (deliberating the rules concerning *Paramatma*); *mantra-japa* (verbal repetition of sacred formulas); and *thirtha-yatra* (pilgrimage to a sacred place, particularly one situated on the banks of a river). Because all these, with the exception of *thirtha-yatra*, which required nothing more than *shraddha*,



In a painting from the Patna Museum, the Moghul Emperor Humayun is seen escaping across the Ganga, after his defeat by the Afghan Sher Shah in June 1539 at Chaunsa, near Buxar in Bihar. The water-carrier who helped him escape on an inflated water-skin was given one day's rule when Humayun regained his empire.

true faith and devotion, were beyond the capacity of ordinary people, they chose to kill themselves—and where could it better be performed than at the *sangam* at *Prayag*, already hallowed by the *yajnas* of innumerable kings, sages, mahatmas and gods?

In the beginning, no particular period was regarded as being more or less auspicious for the pilgrimage to *Prayag*. But because the six-month period of *Uttarayana*, which begins on 14th January, sometimes on the day before, when the sun enters *Makara Rashi* (Capricorn), was always regarded as auspicious, the period of pilgrimage became linked with it, and the first month of *Uttarayana*, which includes the month of Magh (part of January and February), at the end of which the sun departs into Kumbh (Aquarius), what is known as *Makara Snan*, was thought to be especially so. It does not always happen that this period covers the entire month of *Magh* but the gathering which takes place at this time is known as the fair of *Magh*, the *Magh Mela*, although the ultra-orthodox regard the month, which lasts from the entry of the sun into the *Rashi* of Capricorn (*Makara Sankranti*) until it enters Aquarius (on *Kumbh Sankranti*), as being the operative period, whatever period of the month is included.*

Just as it is at Hardwar and the three other holy places, the *Magh Mela* at *Prayag* is celebrated every year, except in the twelfth year, when the *Kumbh Mela* is celebrated. Although it can happen that the *Kumbh* falls in the eleventh or thirteenth years it has not done so since 1882.

The *Kumbh* bathing is held during *Magh* (Jan.–Feb.) when the sun entering Capricorn coincides with the appearance of Jupiter in Aquarius. This forecast is made by a body of learned men—pandits and astrologers—and by sadhus who attend the *Mela* in eight separate *akharas* or bodies. If the sadhus disagree and abstain from coming the *Kumbh* cannot be celebrated. These *akharas* of sadhus observe strict order of precedence and have special privileges on the three principal bathing days: *Makara Sankranti, Amavasya* and *Vasanta Panchami*.

No one who has ever witnessed a *Mela* at Allahabad, whether it be a *Magh* or a *Kumbh*, can ever forget it. It takes place on the sandbank at the confluence below the walls of the great fort built by Akbar. The expanse of sand may be larger or smaller according to the vagaries of the Ganga in any particular year. Sometimes it can be as little as eighty acres in extent as it was in 1954. Although there are larger banks on the other side of the river, the bathing takes place from the right bank.

Here, on the great bathing days in a normal year, anywhere from 700,000 to one million or two million people converge on the *sangam* at the confluence. They come from the pilgrim encampments in the low-lying land on the side of Akbar's great fort; and from similar camps on the left bank at Jhusi, where the Beoraha Baba,

*For this information I am indebted to the astrologers and scholars who examined the origins of the *Mela* in the *Report of the Committee appointed by the Uttar Pradesh Government to inquire into the mishap which occurred in the Kumbh Mela at Prayaga on 3 February, 1954*. Allahabad, 1955.

a saint, resides in a little tower and where live the *kalp-basi*, the faithful, those who are resolved to abide for the period of the whole *Mela*. They also come from encampments on the sandbank itself, from those of the *pragwals* as the pandas are known here, whose camps are a forest of banners and strange emblems; from the sadhu encampment up towards the Banaras bridge; and from others upstream.

The *Kumbh Mela* of 1954 was *Purna Kumbh*, the perfect one, and one that would not occur again for 108 years—or, according to some authorities, 140 years. Because of this, on the morning of February 3rd, *Amavasya* day, at the time of the bathing and of the procession of the sadhus, an estimated between two million to five million persons were crowded in the immediate vicinity of the sandbank and actually on it—possibly one of the greatest assemblages of human beings that have ever taken place on earth in such a confined place.

In the course of a few minutes thousands of men, women and children, among them mutilated beggars unable to stand, were either crushed to death or driven into the river and drowned when the *akharas* of sadhus, swinging swords and iron tridents and accompanied by chariots, palanquins and elephants trampling people underfoot, drove into the main mass of pilgrims at a point on the causeway which leads down from Akbar's fort to the bathing places on the river.

The loss of life and the circumstances in which they were lost were terrible. But for the victims it was not perhaps such a dreadful fate as some, non-Hindus might imagine. For people that year said, before setting out for the perfect *Kumbh*:

> "If we are killed we shall attain salvation.
> If we escape death we shall go home.
> We shall be gainers in either case.
> Those who die at such a sacred spot, at
> such an auspicious moment, would be very
> lucky! We wish them the good fortune."

On the morning of *Makara Sankranti*, or any of the other auspicious days, gongs and bells sound, loud-speakers exhort the people to bathe and go away, making room for others. Over what can be described as a swarm of humanity the banners of the *pragwals* wave on the long poles and over their tents and grass huts. On the long horn of sand at the *sangam* where the rivers meet, people are bathing from a whole fleet of boats, one of them sixty feet long and decorated with painted figure-heads. Upstream, the encampment of the sadhus is like a field of saffron. The ceremonial barge of the Maharajah of Banaras is coming down the Jumna. The combined moanings of up to 10,000 beggars (some of them unimaginably mutilated and because of this possessing special merit), lepers and freaks of nature, rise on the morning air. But the sounds they make are a sussuration compared to those produced by the millions of

pilgrims; it is like the whirring noise from a great nest of winged insects that has been disturbed.

All the bathers—lepers with fingers like charred rope; Brahmins wearing sacred threads 96 hand-breadths long, enormous *banyas* (merchants) and their equally enormous wives, high court judges, old Harrovians, old Etonians, old Paulines, Indian Army officers with bushy moustaches who were cadets at Sandhurst, and their madams—all these and the little bands of peasants, men and women from the villages of India, who make up the vast majority of the pilgrims—all submerge themselves in the Ganga, the Jumna and the Saraswati, drinking the water, taking it in their cupped hands and letting it run three times through their fingers, healthy and diseased, rich and poor together. For this is the water that washes all sin.

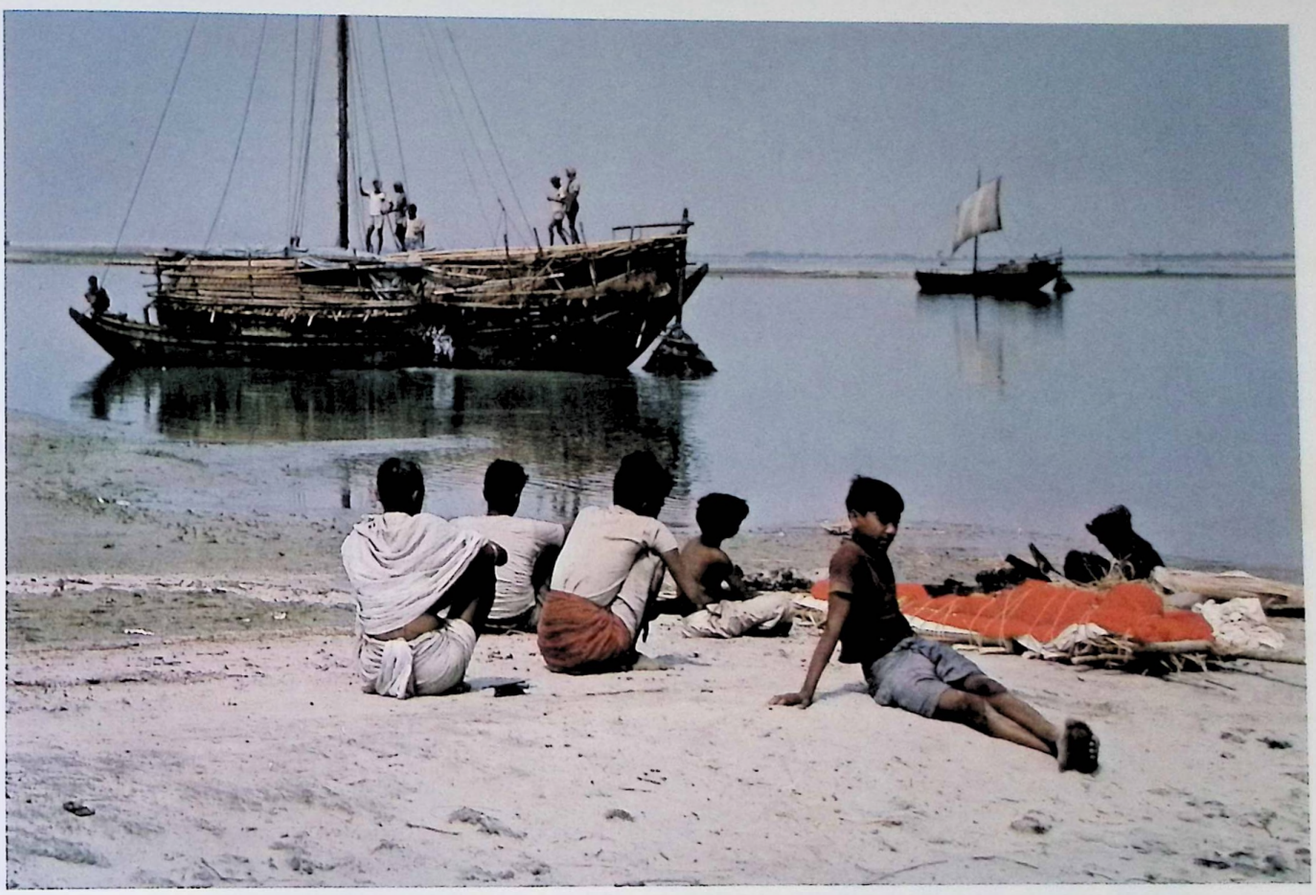
Sacred as the river is at *Prayag*, and there is no place where it is more so, it is to Banaras—otherwise Varanasi or Kasi, by which name it is better known to devout Hindus—that one must go to find a holy place where really large numbers of people carry out their *pujas* on the river bank, not only on the occasion of a great *mela* but throughout the entire year and whatever the weather. At the *sangam* at Allahabad the rivers rise forty feet over the sandbank during the rains.

Banaras is the religious capital of Hindu India and one of its seven holy cities—the others are Ujjain, Hardwar, Mathura, Ayodhya, Dwarka and Conjeevaram—a city devoted to the worship of Siva and of equal sanctity with *Prayag*, because it was the scene of yet another of Brahma's Ten-Horse Sacrifices. (A third took place at a ghat on the river bank at the now ruined city of Bithur, near Kanpur.) So venerated by Hindus is *Dasaswamedha* ghat that in the immediate vicinity where the sacrifice took place there are 692 Hindu temples, or almost half the total number in the entire city.

At Banaras's bathing places, it is as if a perpetual *mela* of the smaller sort were in progress; for this is a place to which many Hindus, particularly pious Bengalis, retire to end their days, with time enough on their hands to perform the most protracted rituals.

The five most sacred bathing ghats at Banaras are the *Panchtirth*, all five of which have to be visited in the course of a single day and in a certain order. One of them, the *Panchganga*, marks the spot where four other sacred rivers are said to mingle with the Ganga. Others are used by a variety of persons and for a variety of purposes: by sadhus, such as the staff-bearing *Dandis,* by *dhobis* (washermen), for the landing of goods and passengers and for cremations. The *Jalsain* ghat is the principal cremation place, to which corpses are brought in a continuous procession, on horse-drawn vehicles, cycle-rickshas, boats and stretchers, borne by the men called *Majil le Janihar*, all shouting *"Ram Nam Sat Hai!"* Altogether there are 74 ghats.

High above them, following the outer curve that the Ganga makes here, on the



At Rajmahal in Bihar, a group of villagers wait to cremate a relative on the banks of the Ganga as cargo boats pass in the background.



An armada of fishing boats at Nimtita.

right bank, is a golden crescent of temples, *dharmsalas* (resting places for pilgrims provided and maintained by pious benefactors), *ashrams*, secular buildings, mosques and minarets, some of them very fine, some disfigured by hideous hoardings or ugly in their own right, but beautiful in the light of the morning sun. At dusk the *Arati puja* to the river is performed by a little committee of men to the accompaniment of gongs and bells and it is offered lights, flowers and sweetmeats which it whirls around for a moment and then sweeps away as it does everything that is offered to it.

Behind the facade of buildings, which is as improbable as a stage set, wind dark, mysterious alleys. These alleys are so deep that, if one stands in one of them and looks upwards, the sky above is as remote as if viewed from the bottom of a coalmine. In them minute stalls, and shops that are nothing more than holes excavated in a wall, stock sacred and profane objects. Through their narrow ways sacred cows wander, or else they simply stand, breathing heavily and blocking the way. Everything about them, even their urine, is esteemed and venerated. They are the mistresses of creation, until such time as they break a leg or become old and decrepit. Then, unless there is room for them in one of the cow hospitals endowed by wealthy *Marwaris* (merchants), they die lingering, unpleasant deaths. For no Hindu will lay a violent hand on a cow, and anyone else does so at his peril. There are estimated to be 220 million cows in India, all sacred.

There is another obligatory pilgrimage at Banaras: the perambulation of the *Panchkosi*, a track which follows the perimeter of the holy city for a distance of $36\frac{1}{4}$ miles. The journey is divided into six stages and takes as many days. Anyone dying within this perimeter, irrespective of his religion, is instantly transported to heaven.

Yet, however revered by Hindus Banaras may be, to me, a non-Hindu, it somehow lacks the simplicity that I feel at the mingling of the waters at the *sangam* at *Prayag*. One cannot help thinking with longing of places further upstream with their simple, riverside shrines without a custodian in sight.

There is one such place in particular that I have known for more than thirty years. It is near Fatehgarh, a very old, one-time British military station, now Indian, above Kanpur, a place full of ancient trees and equally ancient thatched bungalows with thick walls, although old buildings such as these are rapidly disappearing.

There, down by the Ganga, at the foot of a deeply wooded combe (in India it would be called a *nullah*) a little shrine to Siva stands at the foot of a pipal tree. Buried in the heart of the tree which has grown up around it is a piece of cut stone with a frieze of figures on it that was probably carved in pre-Muslim times.

Whenever I visit this place it is always deserted. I have never seen another person there and I have visited it dozens of times. Yet there is always a fresh offering of marigolds on the plinth, so fresh that I feel whoever put it there must have literally vanished into thin air. It is a magic place and one of which there are thousands, perhaps millions,

in India.

There are other places still further down the river at which this feeling of sanctity and natural beauty are commingled. The island of Jahngira, near Sultanganj in Bihar is one. It is on the verge of Bengal, where the climate is damper, the fields greener, the vegetation generally more lush, the Ganga a great river, the sand flats immense.

It is at a place known as Uttara Bahini, where the river flows north, which makes it very sacred. All such places are sacred. The island rises 70 feet above the water in the dry season, an extraordinary, unearthly pile of smoothed, bulbous rocks with twisted trees growing from fissures in them in which no earth is apparent, crowned by a temple called *Gaibinath*, devoted to the worship of Siva. Other steps lead up from the water to subsidiary temples. The rocks are carved with figures of gods, one of them Parasurama, the sixth incarnation of Vishnu, and more ancient carvings of Buddha. On the far side where few people go there is a great, fallen rock bearing a carving of Ganga standing on her *makara* (saurian). Here at Jahngira, to see the white-clothed pilgrims setting off from the shore towards the island in the early morning mist, the women chanting a sort of dirge as they go, is like witnessing the crossing of the Styx.

Still another is at Colganj, perhaps a day's sail by country boat below Jahngira and about 280 miles from the Bay of Bengal, where the stream is three-fourths of a mile broad even in winter, full of country boats with big red sails. Here some *babas*, holy men, live on a large island in the river among clusters of rocks and groves of trees. It has always been hauntingly beautiful here, but in the early part of the last century it was frequented by river thugs. Unlike their counterparts on land who strangled their victims from behind with the *ruhmal*, the handkerchief, the river thugs leapt on them from the front, en masse. Until their power was broken at the end of the 1830s, the patroness of the thugs was Vindhya-Vasini-Devi, otherwise goddess Bhowani, the Black Mother, otherwise Mahayama Durga, whose effigy and temple are on the right bank of the river at Vindhyachal near Mirzapur in Uttar Pradesh, where the Vindhyan Hills come close to the river. A number of temples are devoted to the worship of the goddess, who was Siva's wife in her most terrible, hideous and destructive form.

Yet another magical place is the shrine of the Naga Baba on a promontory a little further downstream. Behind it is a long hill covered with jungle known as Chaurasi-Murthi, the 84 statues, which can be seen cut in the sandstone. There is also a standing Buddha with only one leg, an object of Hindu devotion. Not far from here on the big bend of the river, it is about 80 miles to Dhulian on the Bangladesh border. There a miserable stream, the Bhagirathi, nothing like its namesake, takes off from the main river in the direction of Calcutta, becoming the Hooghly on the way. Travelling down, one passes through what was once the kingdom of the Nawab Nazims of Bengal: a damp, green region of abandoned river beds and tanks choked with water hyacinth, indigo factories, the white pillared palaces of nabobs, Dutch and English cemeteries

full of mausolea, barracks and factories all overgrown with vegetation and crumbling slowly into dust. There you begin to feel that you, too, will be pulled down by the omnipresent vegetation and strangled by it. Melancholy engulfs the brain.

The Hooghly is the same. The banks are low and green at first but the bathing ghats are sinking into the river. One goes downstream past large jute mills, and what was a French possession until 1949, Chandernagore, a town with a gendarmerie, past a Dutch Church and the huge white country residence of the Governor Generals at Barrackpore. Suddenly there is no more country, scarcely any trees. Here, the Hooghly is three-fourths of a mile wide, its colour the uniform brown of Windsor soup. On its banks are temples built in the 1920s of grey concrete, factories discharging effluent, jetties overgrown with grass, once fine houses with pipal trees growing up through them and breaking them apart, muddy creeks containing the skeletons of boats with broken backs, melancholy brickfields, and yards in which wooden country boats are still being built.

The river is full of boats—the rowing boats called *panswais, oolaks* propelled by sweeps and sails, huge rafts of bamboo, cargo flats 200-feet long, that look like floating sheds, barges with so much hay on them that they look like floating stacks.

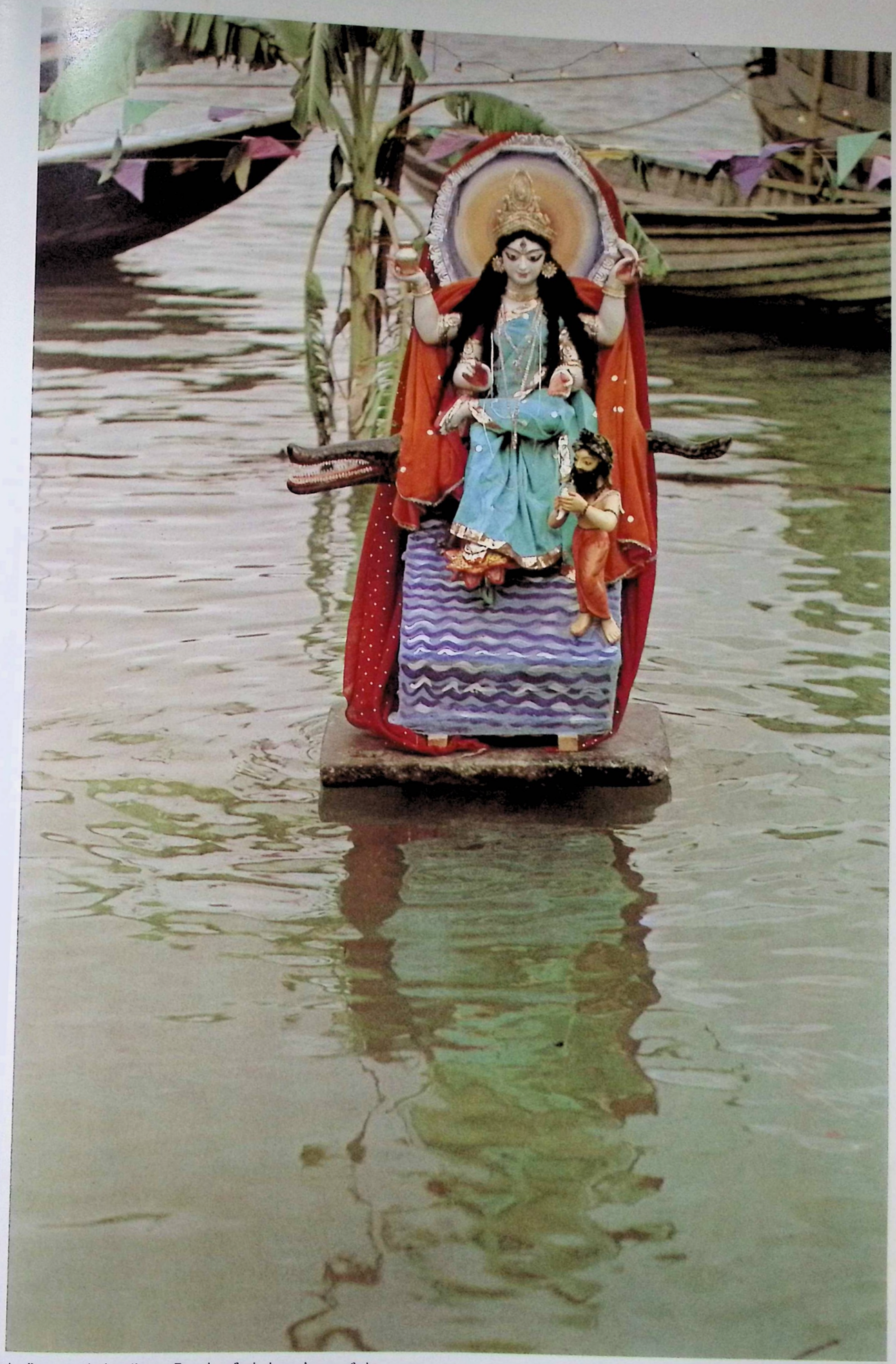
And finally, downstream, there looms up one of the great, shining, monuments to the British engineering skill, the Howrah Bridge.

The Bridge is jammed with people and their vehicles. There are carts and every conceivable conveyance, bicycles, motor bicycles, rickshas, cars and buses; but by far the largest number of people are surging across on foot. As one nears it the noise is deafening, indescribable, magnified perhaps by the river; in comparison the noise made by a million people at a *Mela* is a whisper, and as you shoot down on the ebb under the single span, edging in towards the landing ghat on the left bank, it suddenly cuts off and all you can hear for a moment is the surge of the river and the sound of the ship's sirens: but only for a moment.

This great city might be the end of a journey down the Ganga. But it is not the end for Hindus.

From a couple of miles below the Howrah Bridge until it reaches the sea, the river, in its guise as the Hooghly, is not regarded as particularly sacred; only a few temples stand on its banks. At this point, Tolly's Nullah, where a Major Tolly canalised the old bed of the river in the 1770s, and along the old course to the east of the present one, in the district called the 24 Parganas, there are old bathing tanks which Hindus regard as very sacred.

The end—or one of the ends, since Ganga has a hundred mouths—is at the southern tip of Sagar Island, where the Hooghly meets the sea. Here, on this lonely island, Hindus believe that a narrow creek on the southern side, the Ganga Saugorkhal,



At Banaras, during Ganga Dussehra festival, an image of the Goddess Ganga. Ganga represents joy in this life and hope in the life to come.

is one of the hundred mouths of Ganga who came down to earth to redeem the 60,000 sons of Sagar.

On the low, flat, sandy shore where the Bay of Bengal beats, there is a temple, at the mouth of the Khal. Here, at the same time as the *Melas* are celebrated at Hardwar and Allahabad, a similar fair takes place. It lasts for three days. In the course of it jewels are thrown into the sea and the image of Kapila, who reduced the sons of Sagar to ashes by means of flames which emanated from his person, is worshipped in the form of a block of stone.

Perhaps, materially, the end of Ganga is under the sea 60 miles south, where the long tails of sand run down towards the deeps of the Bay of Bengal, depositing the detritus of India on the bottom; or even further. Four hundred miles out in the Indian Ocean the sea is discoloured by the silt brought down by her. So there is no end to her, just as no one on earth knows the exact place where she begins.

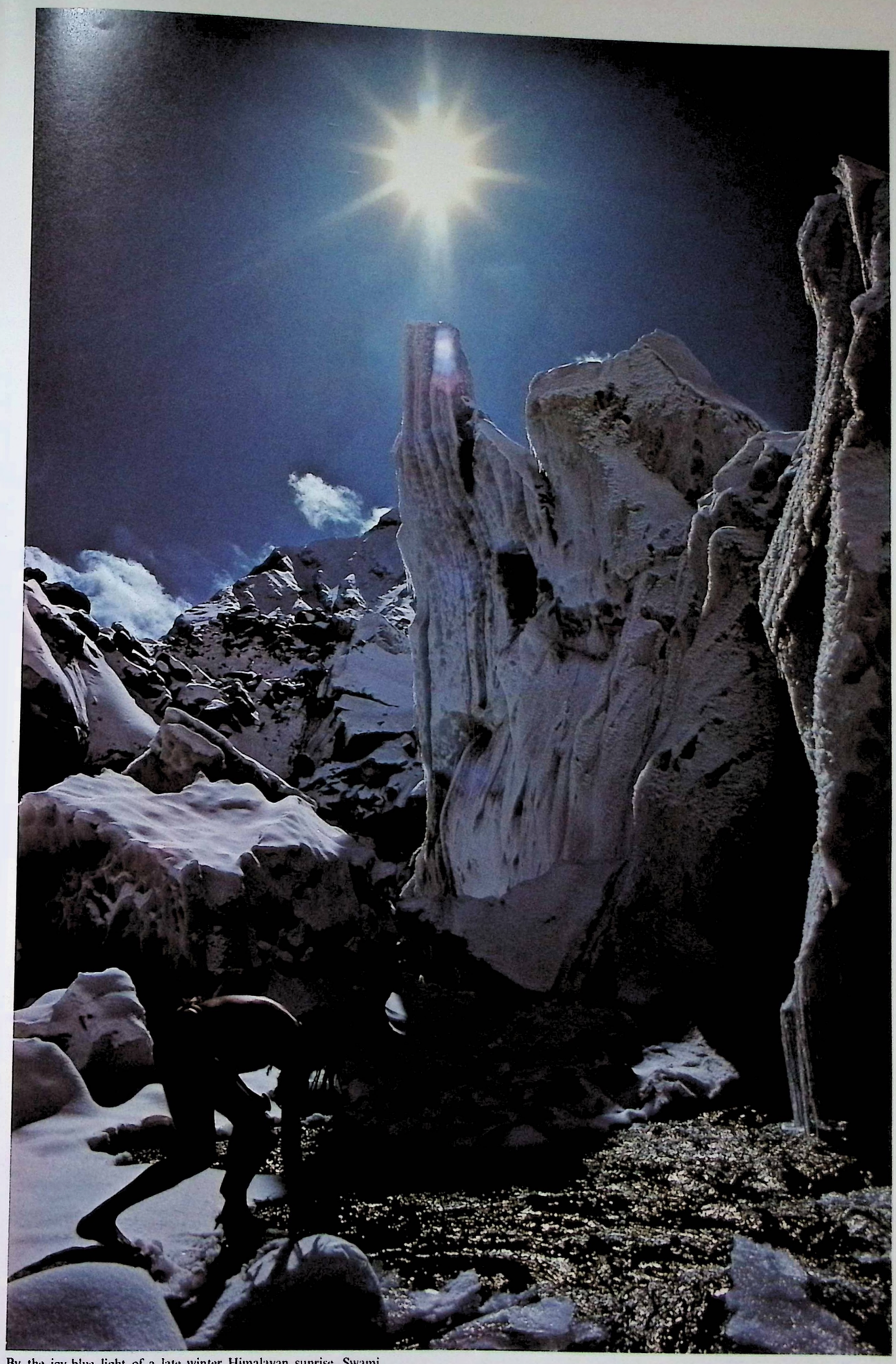
August 1973

Eric Newby

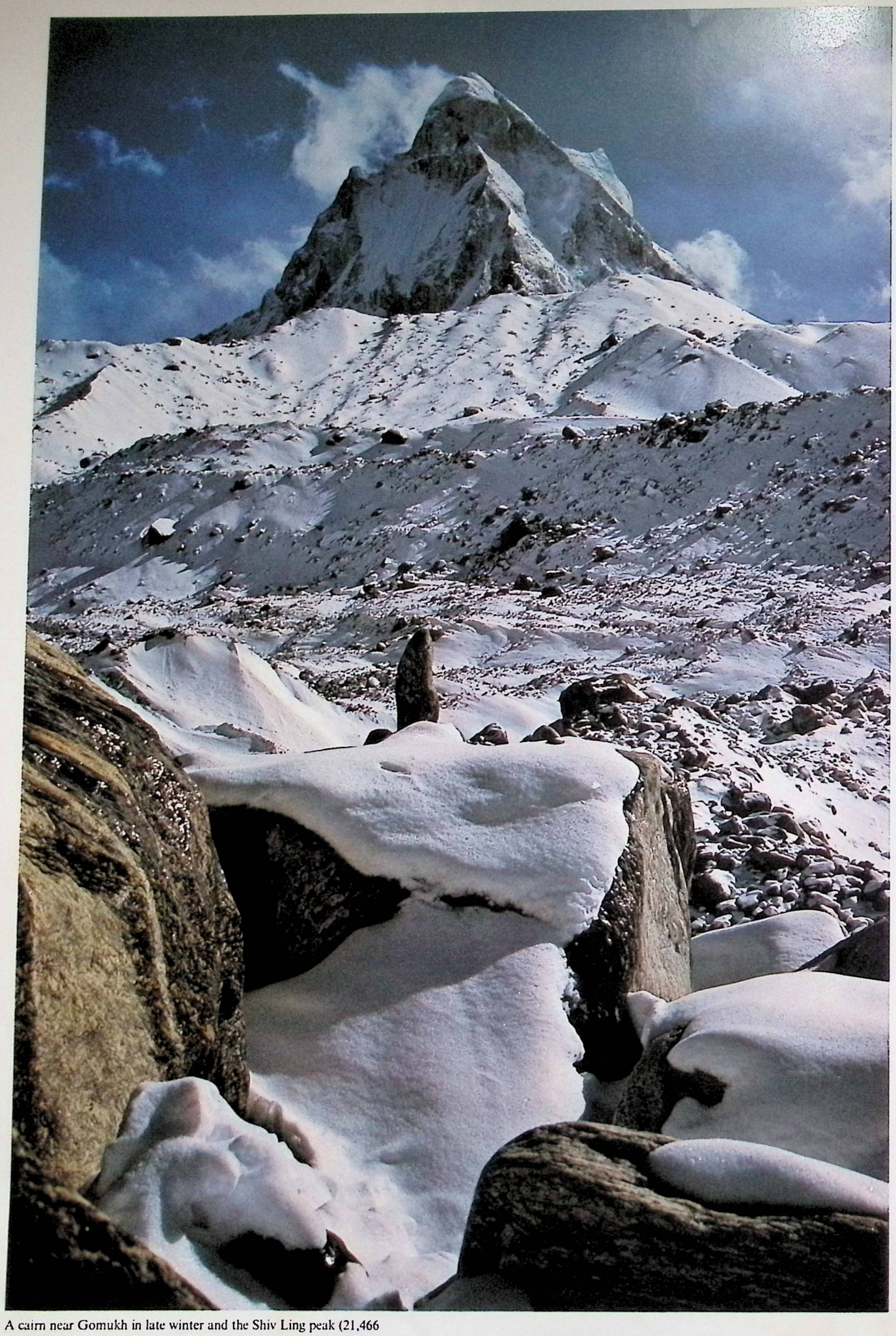


The image of the sage Kapila Muni at Ganga Sagar. With his gaze of sacred fire he burnt to ashes the sixty thousand sons of King Sagar of Ayodhya. Sagar's grandson through his austerities was instrumental in making Ganga flow down to earth and the ocean, where Kapila resides, and revive their souls.

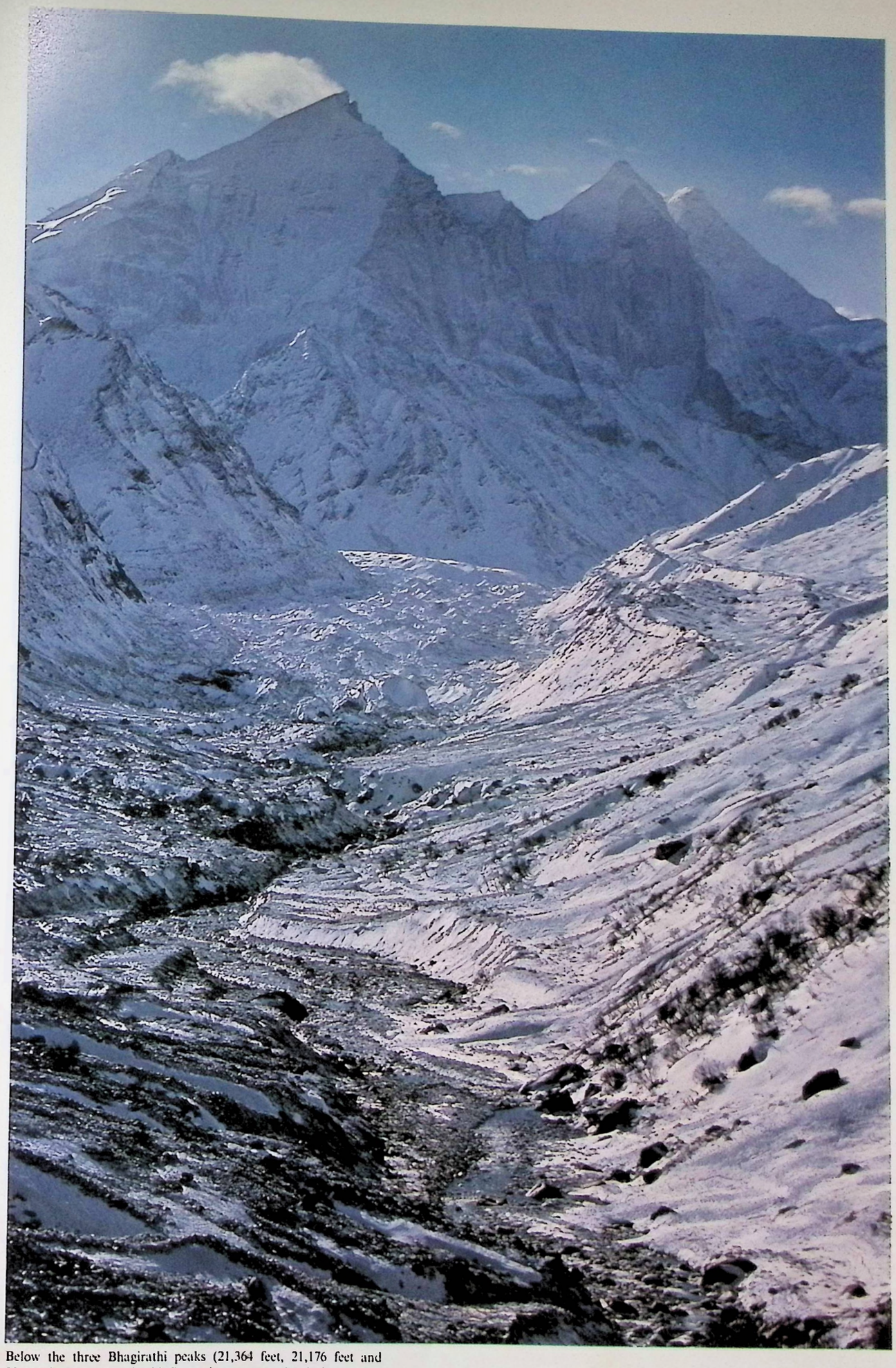
Ganga



By the icy-blue light of a late winter Himalayan sunrise, Swami Sharadananda bathes at Gomukh (Cow's Mouth), elevation 12,770 feet, where the Bhagirathi Ganga emerges from the Gangotri Glacier.



A cairn near Gomukh in late winter and the Shiv Ling peak (21,466 feet) which flanks the Gangotri Glacier.



Below the three Bhagirathi peaks (21,364 feet, 21,176 feet and 22,496 feet), the Bhagirathi Ganga is seen emerging in late winter from the Gangotri Glacier, where it begins its 1,560-mile journey to the Bay of Bengal.

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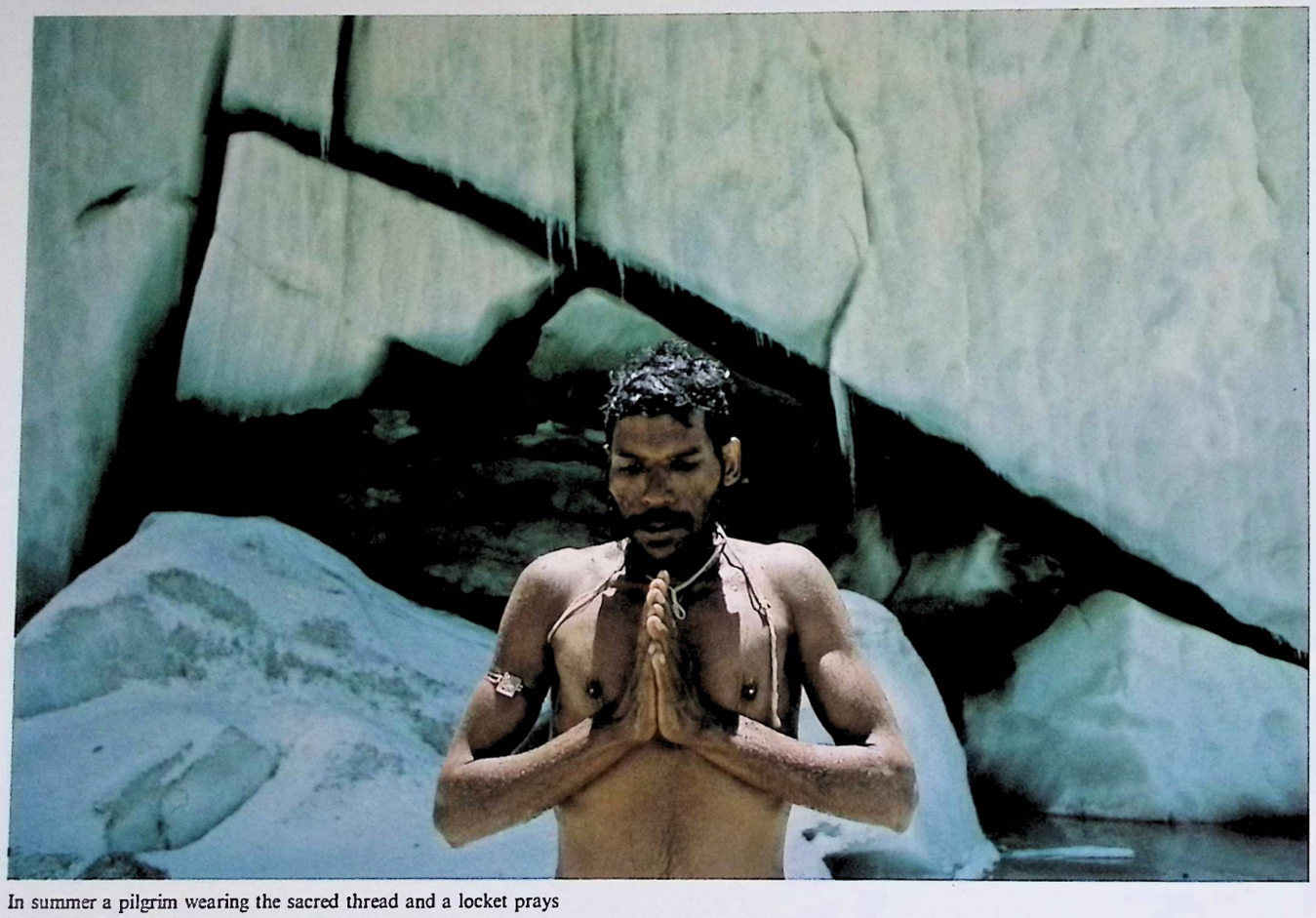
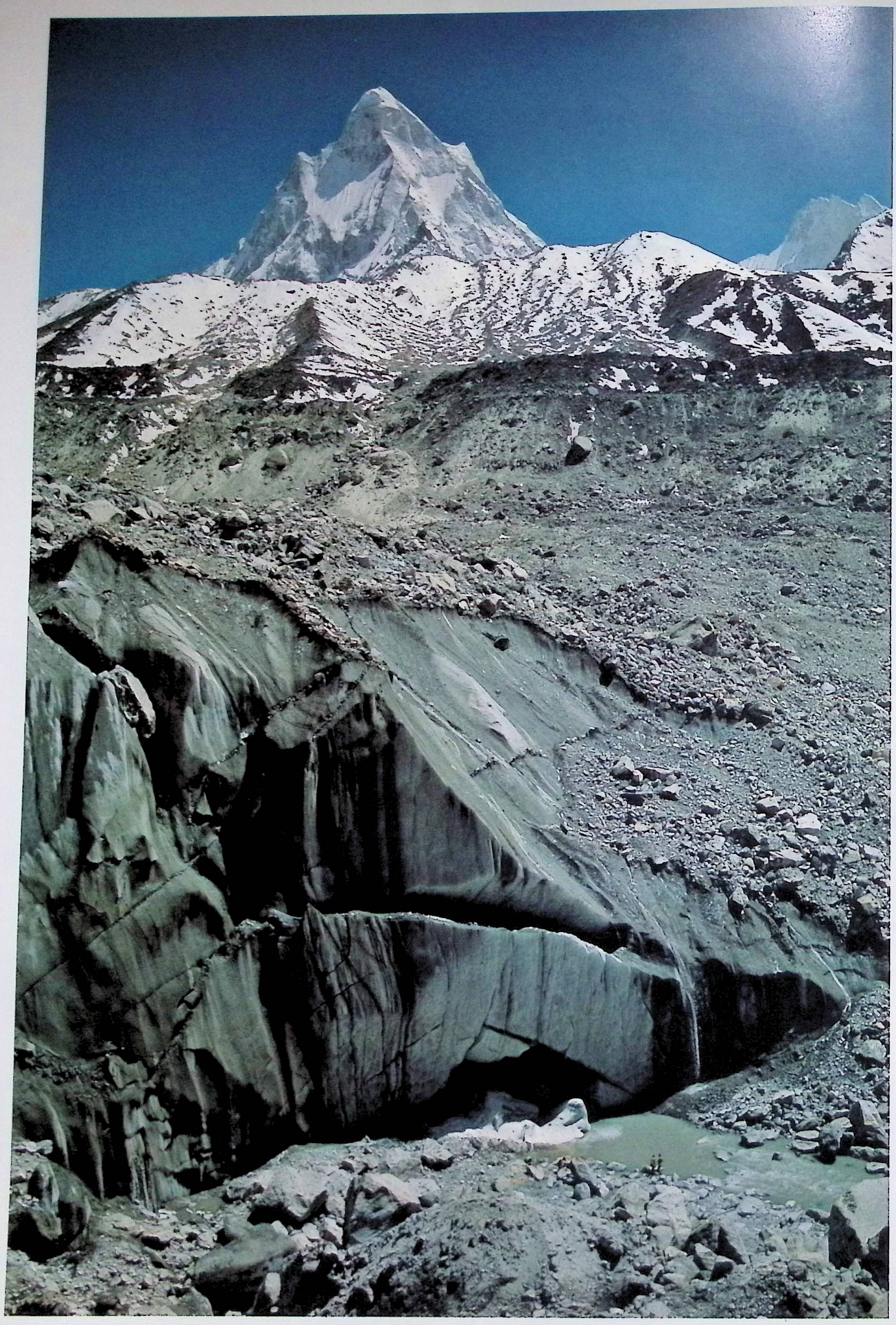


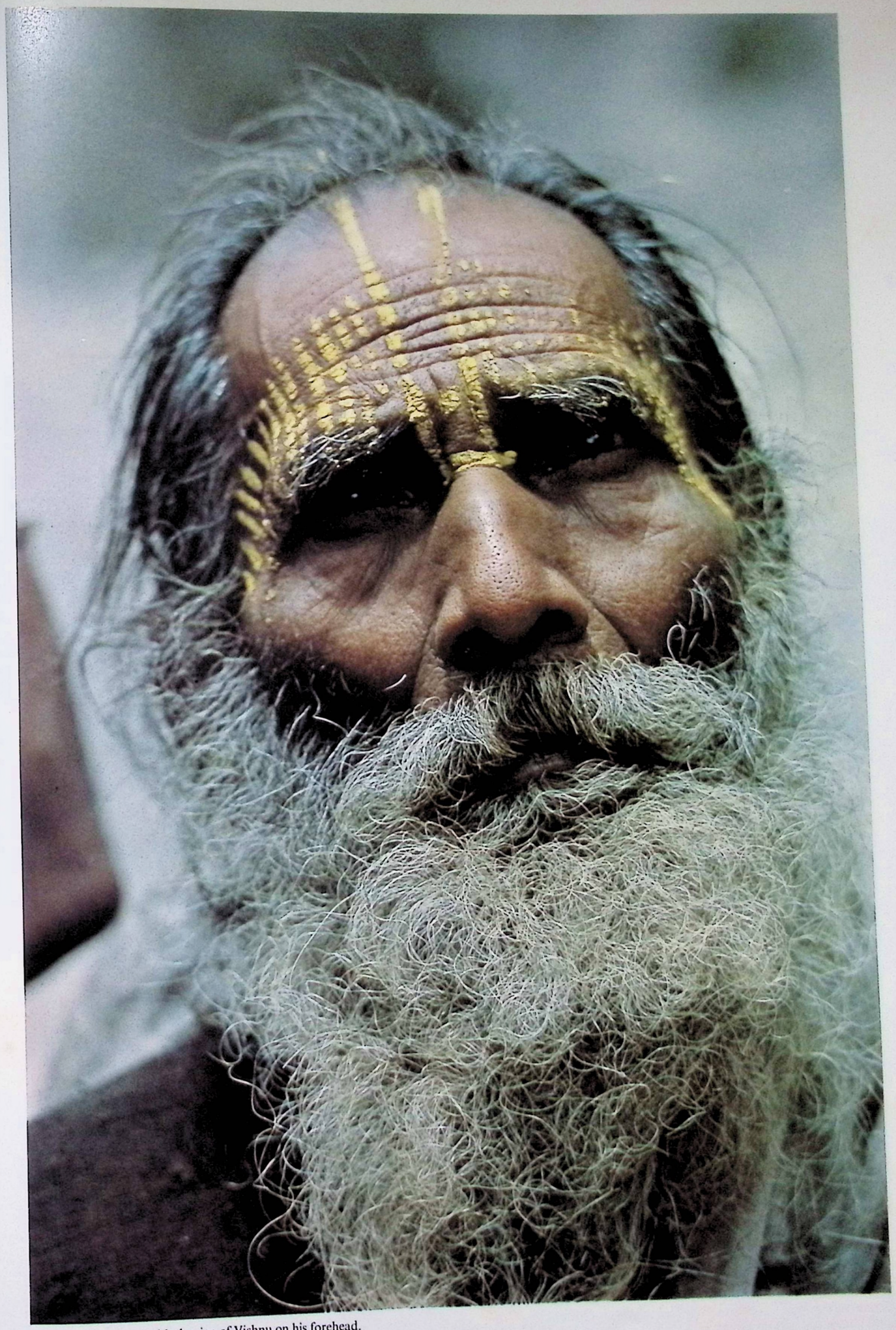
In summer a pilgrim wearing the sacred thread and a locket prays before the Gomukh ice cave.



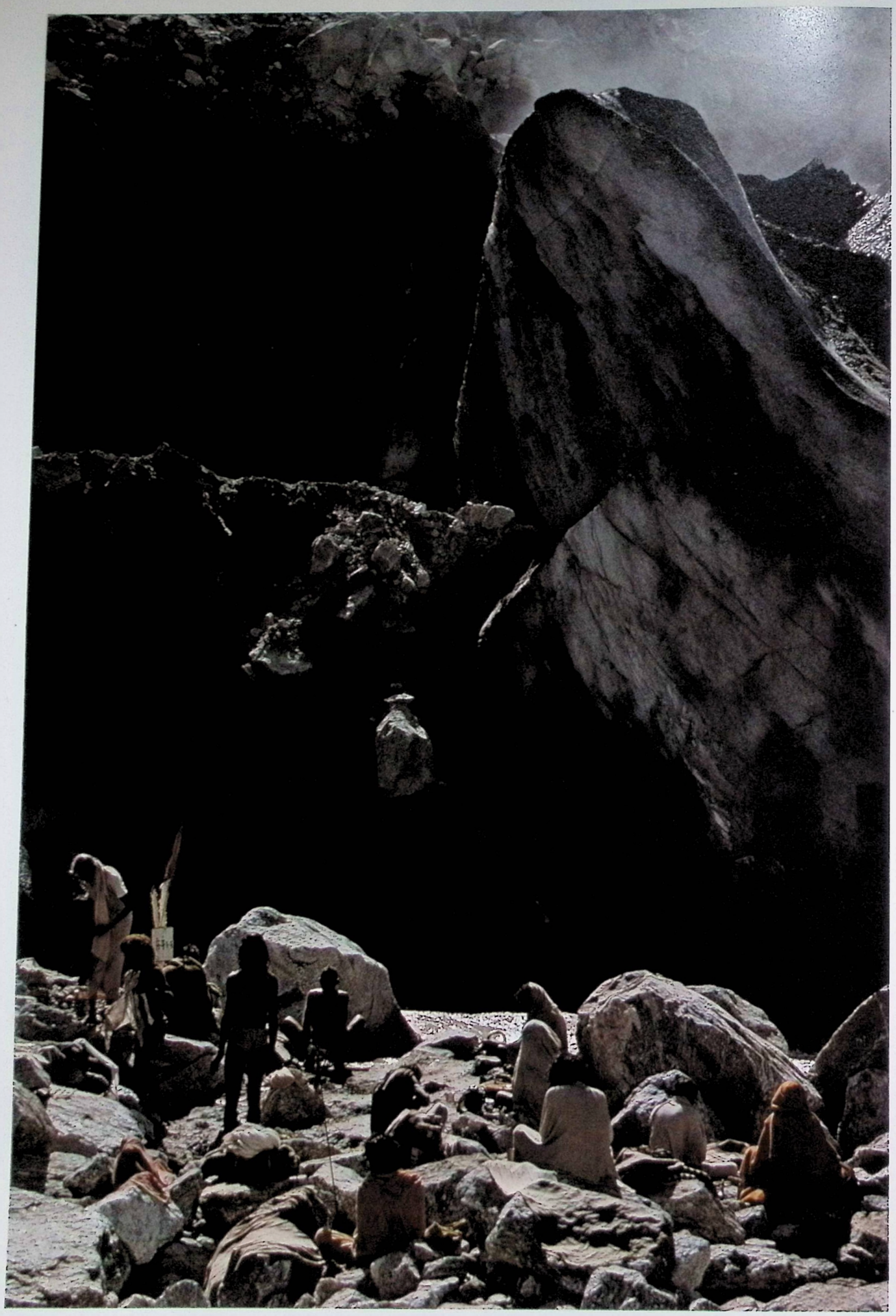
A son helps his old mother. They are pilgrims to the Gangotri Temple.



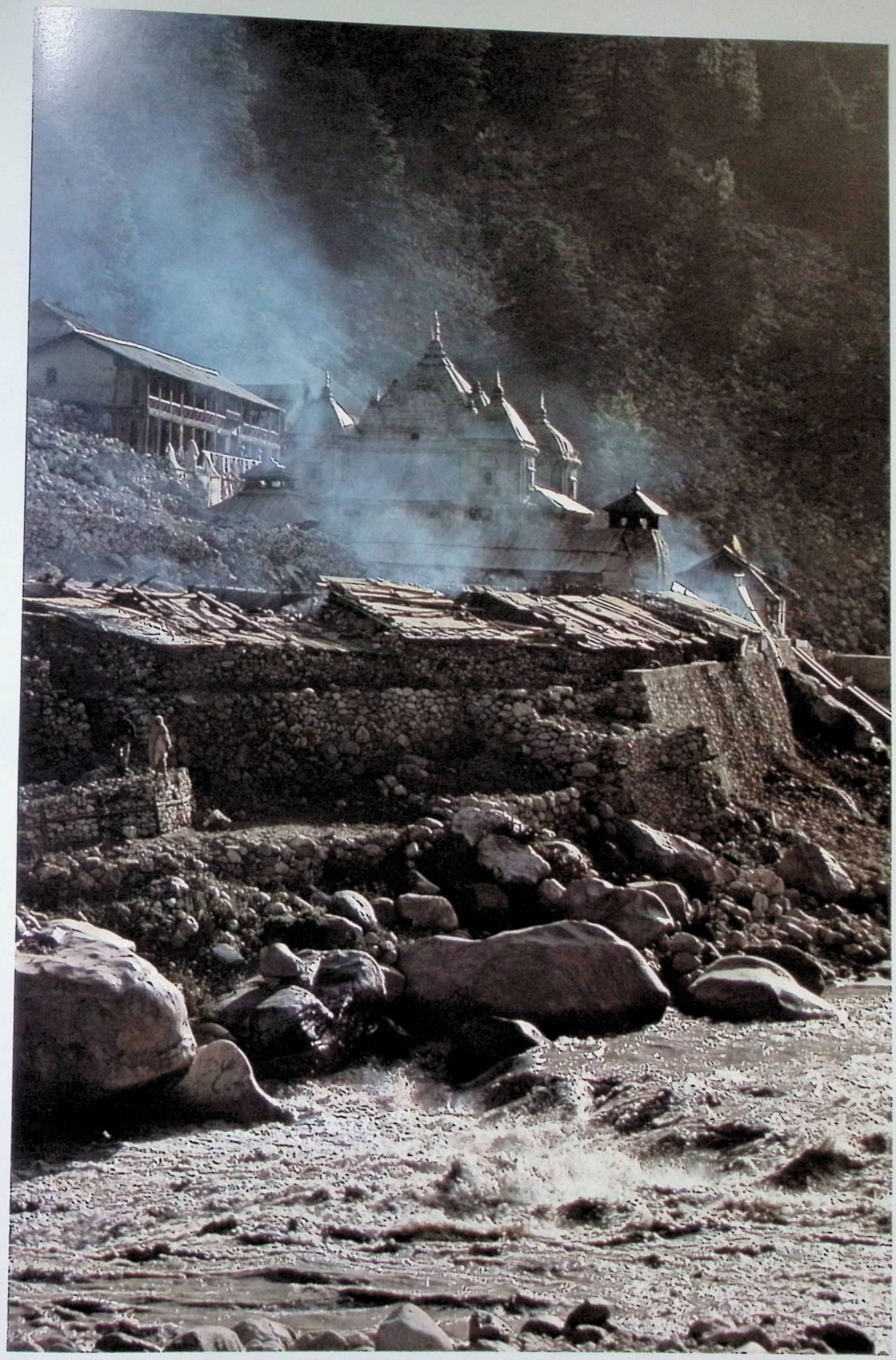
Two summer pilgrims appear as tiny figures silhouetted against the pool of icy water at Gomukh, below the towering height of the 21,466-foot Shiv Ling peak.



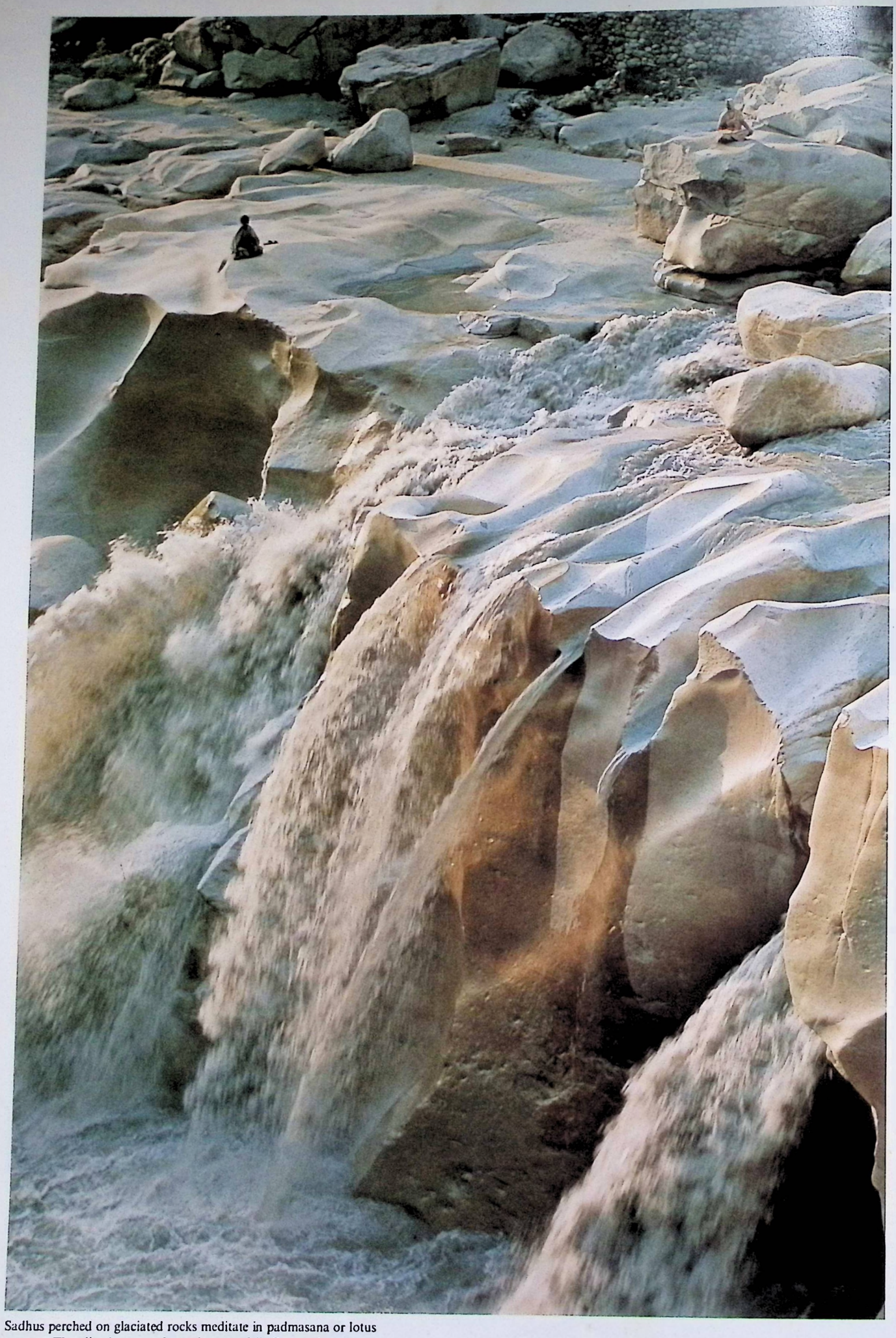
A sadhu at Gangotri with the sign of Vishnu on his forehead.



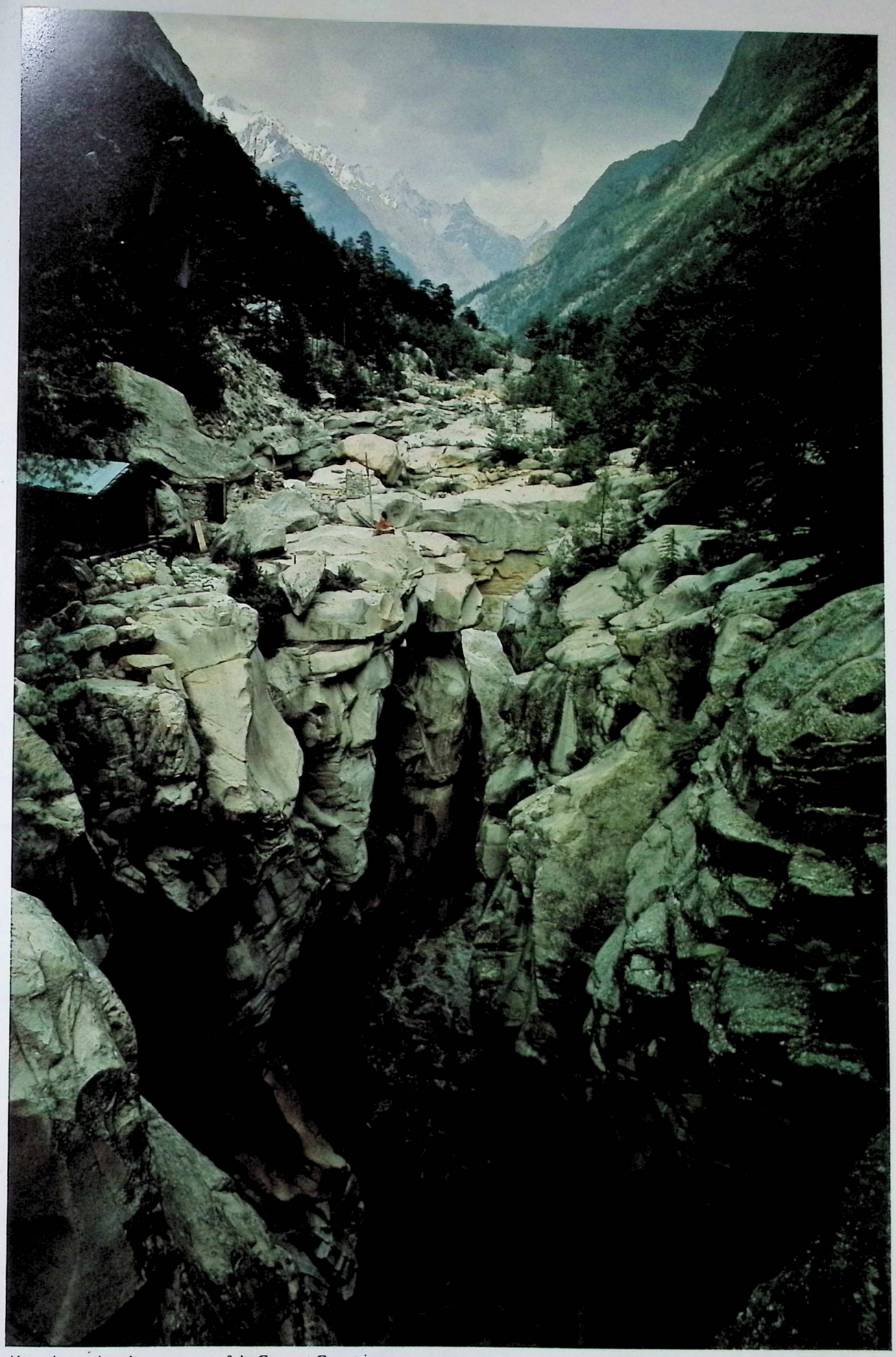
Sadhus and pilgrims perform rituals and ablutions before the stone-strewn and rubble-covered ice face of the Gangotri Glacier, Gomukh.



Smoke from cooking fires shrouds Gangotri Temple (10,500 feet), the first temple on the Ganga. It houses the image of Gangamata.



Sadhus perched on glaciated rocks meditate in padmasana or lotus posture. They live in caves above the waterfall. Gangotri.



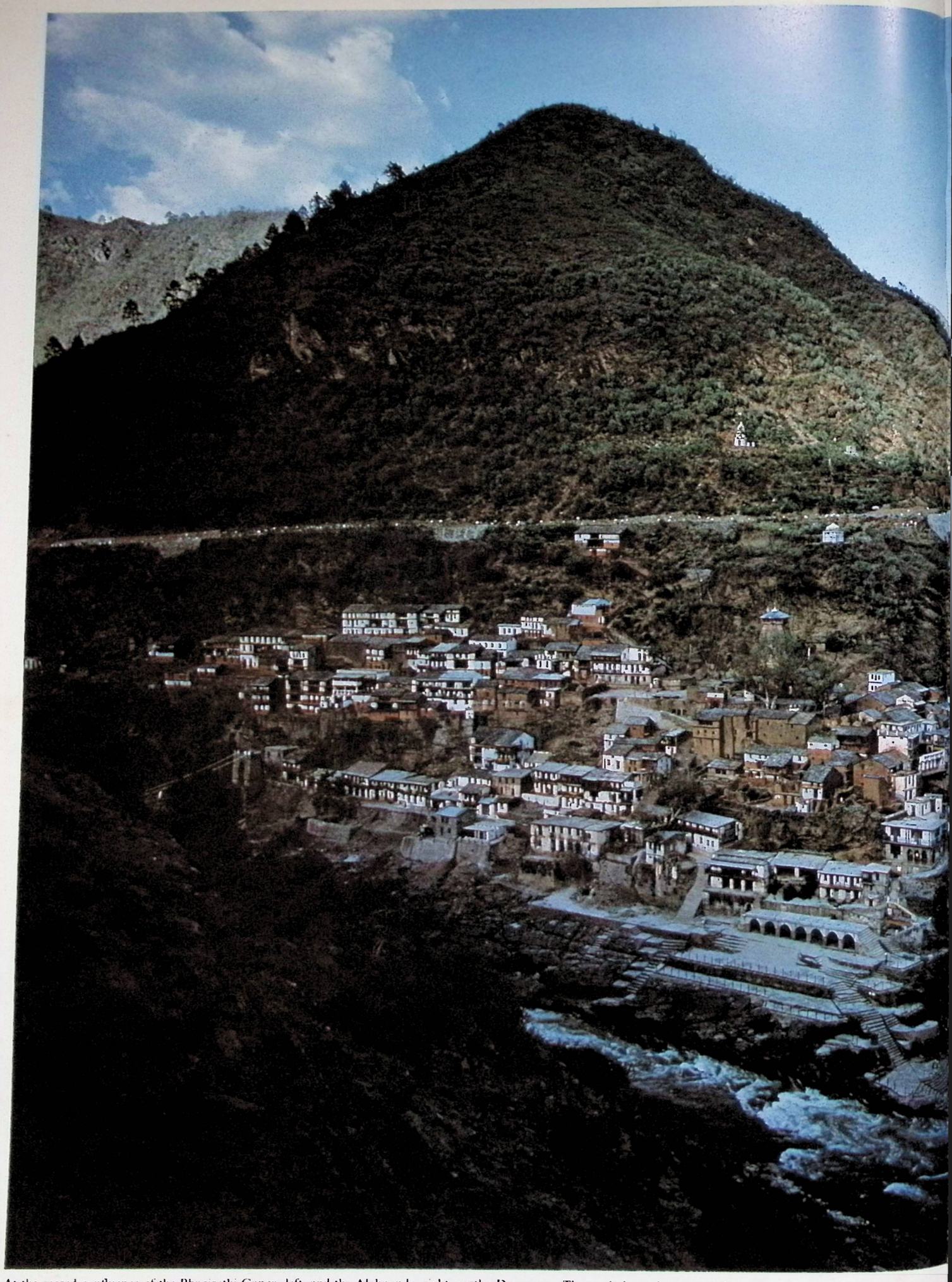
Above the mystic and narrow gorge of the Ganga at Gangotri, a sadhu meditates before his hut. Next to him is painted the sacred syllable OM, the Universal Sound which symbolizes the rounded wholeness of Brahman, the Supreme Being, the God above all gods.



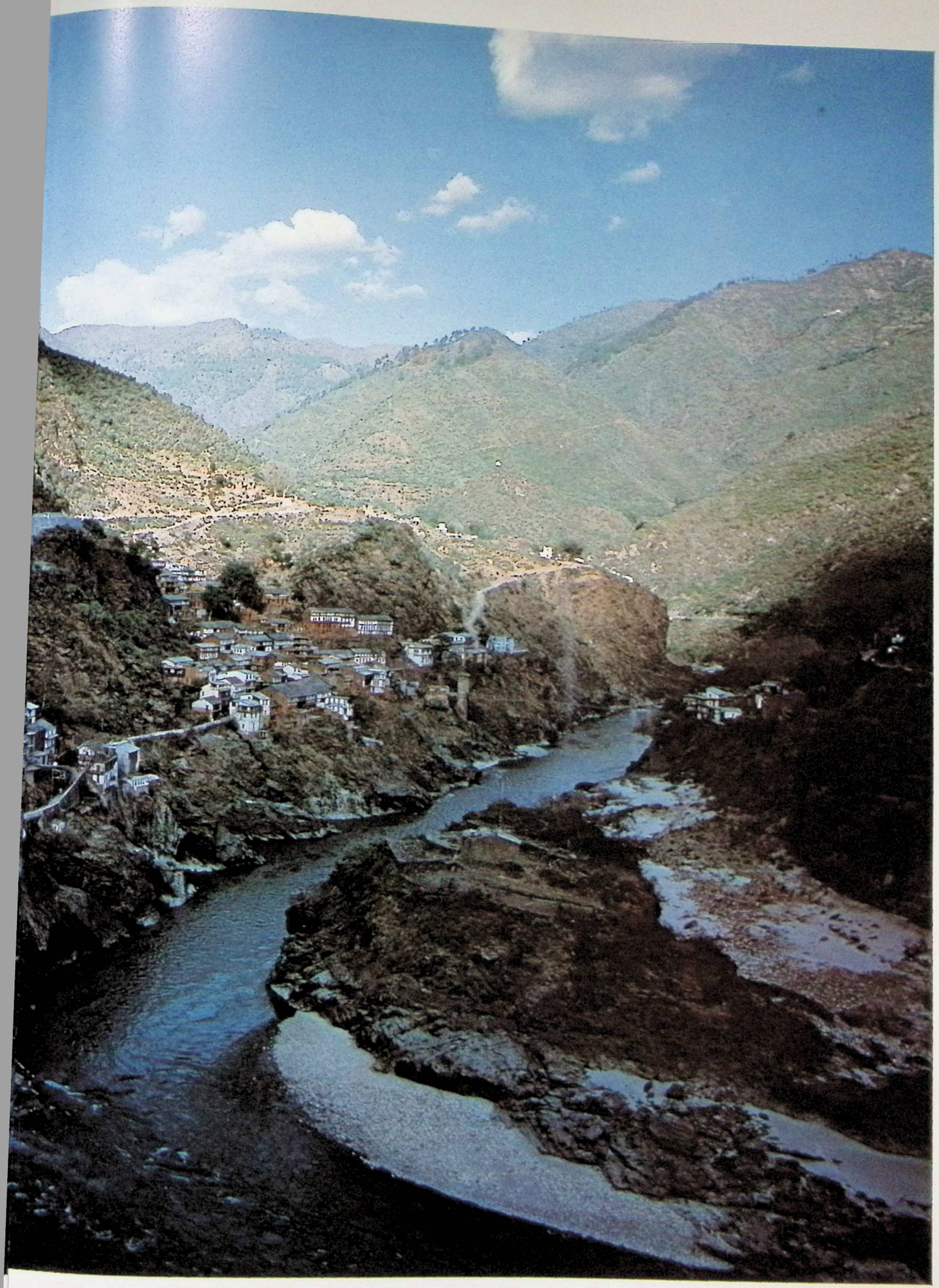
A bird perches on a rock inside the narrow gorge of the Ganga at Gangotri.



A section of the waterfall. Gangotri.

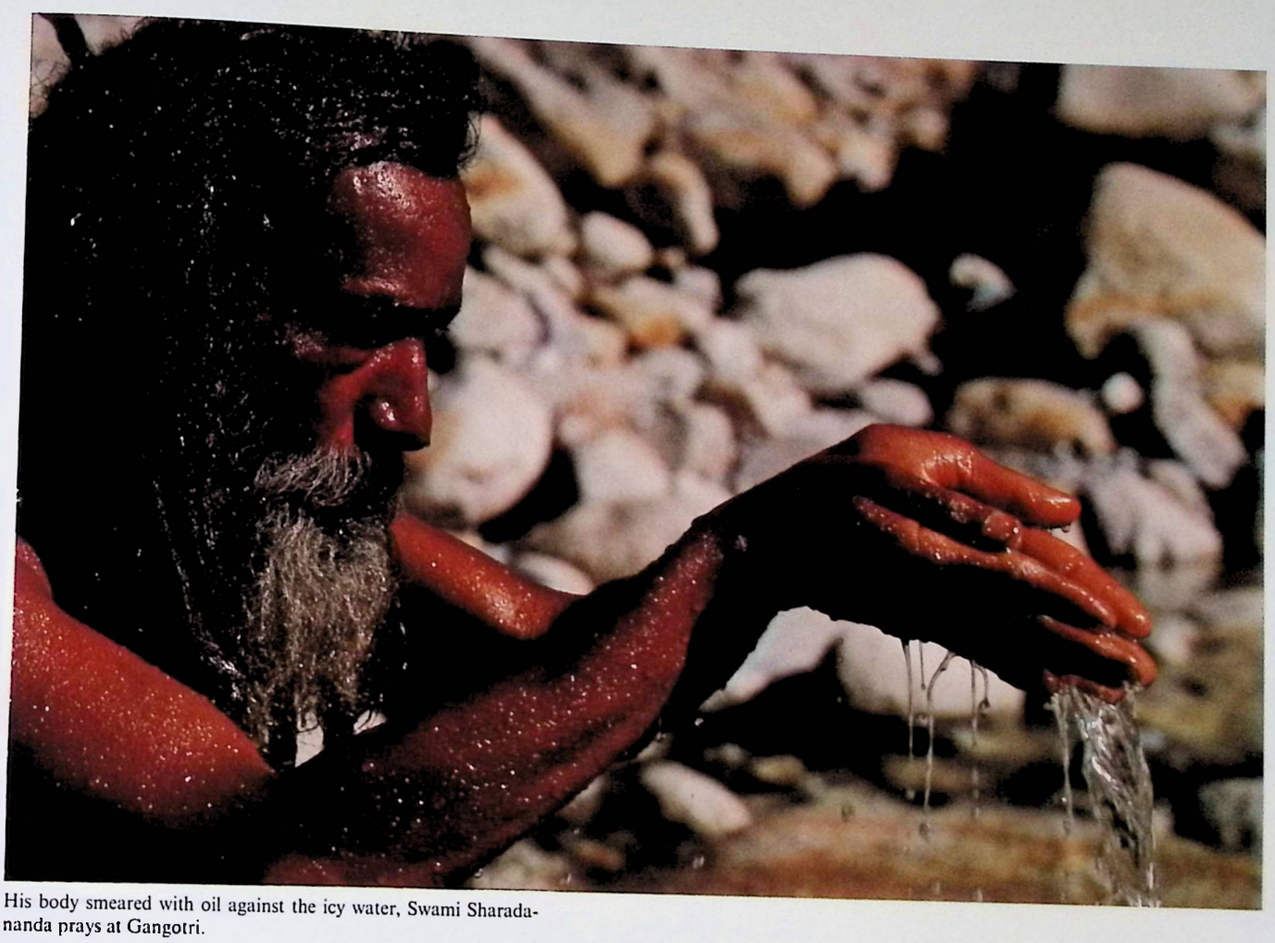


At the sacred confluence of the Bhagirathi Ganga, left, and the Alaknanda, right, nestles Devprayag. The road above the town leads to the shrine of Badrinath.



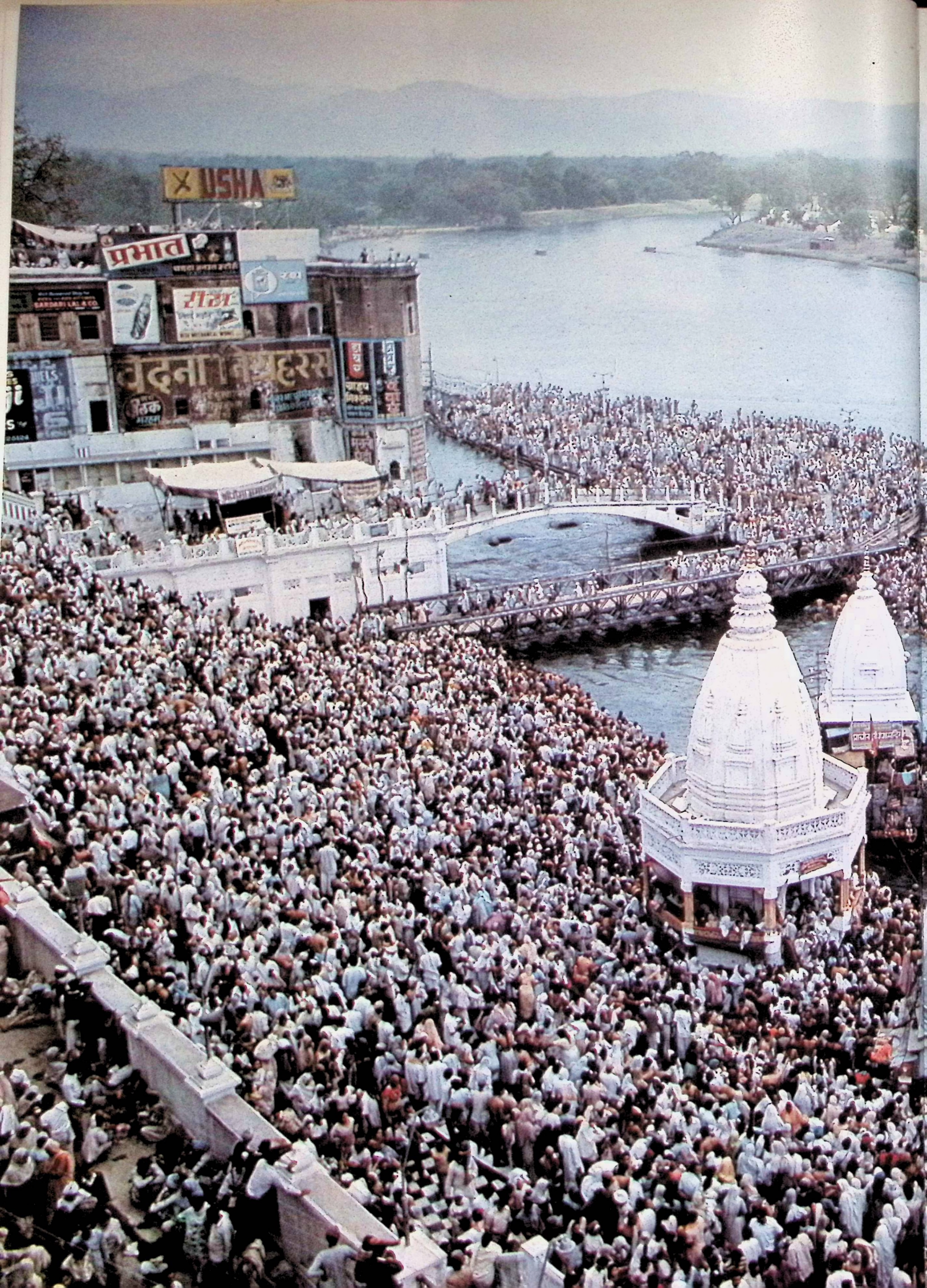


At Uttarkashi, a lumberman using an inflated buffalo skin as a float dislodges a log on its way to a sawmill.



His body smeared with oil against the icy water, Swami Sharadananda prays at Gangotri.

(*overleaf*) At an Ardh Kumbh Mela, Hardwar, millions gather to bathe at Har-ki-Pairi where the footprint of Vishnu is embedded.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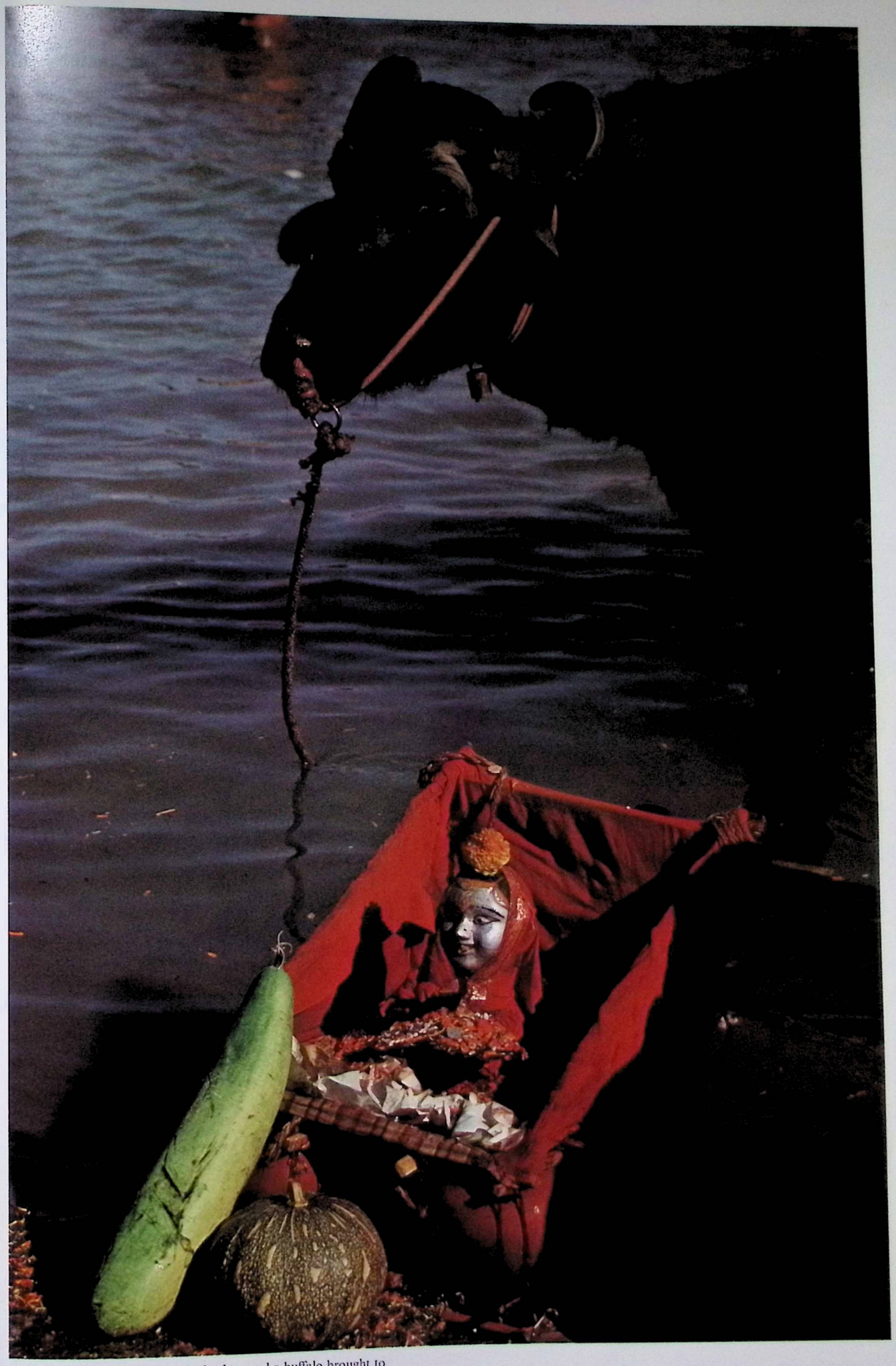
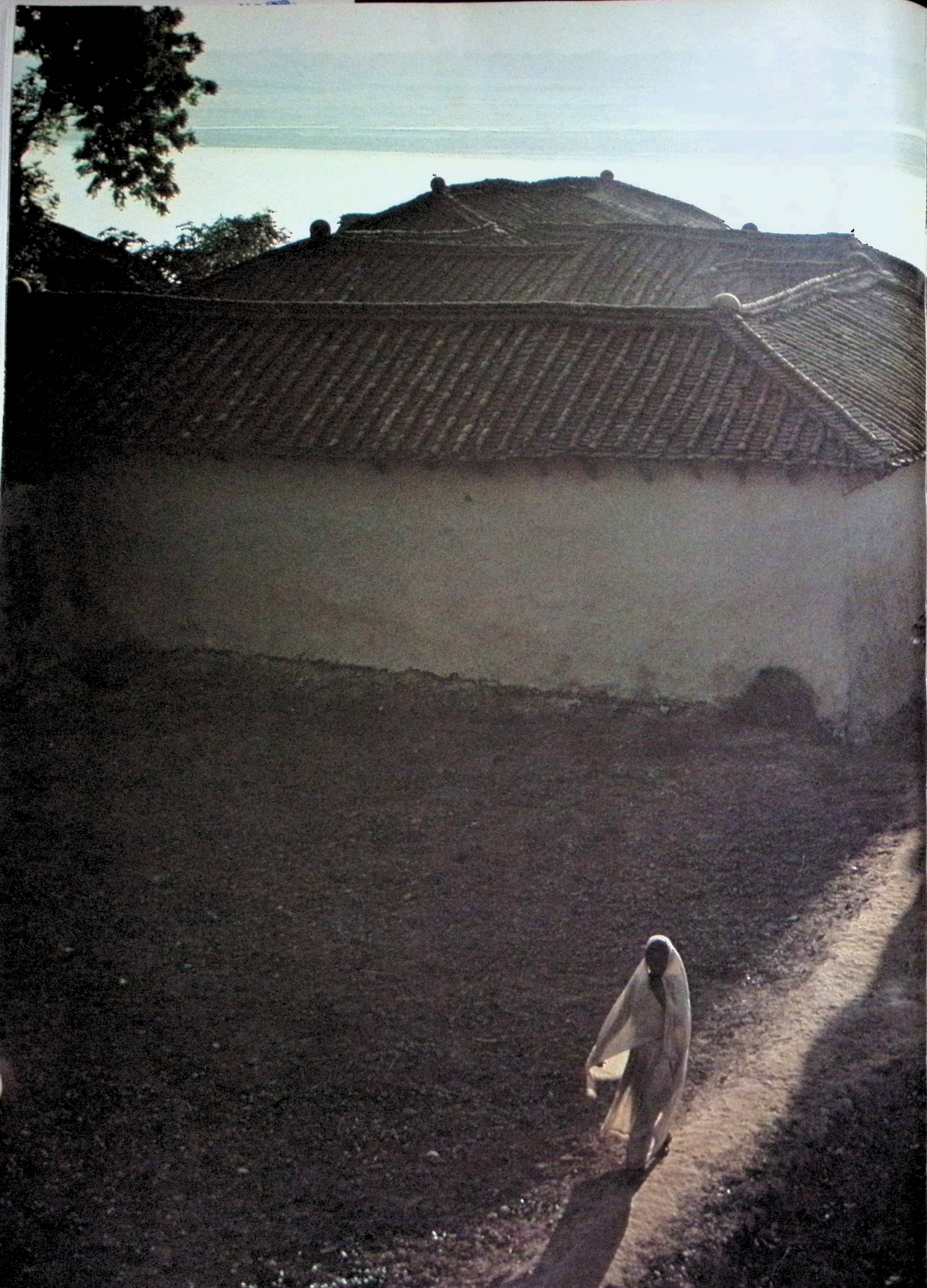
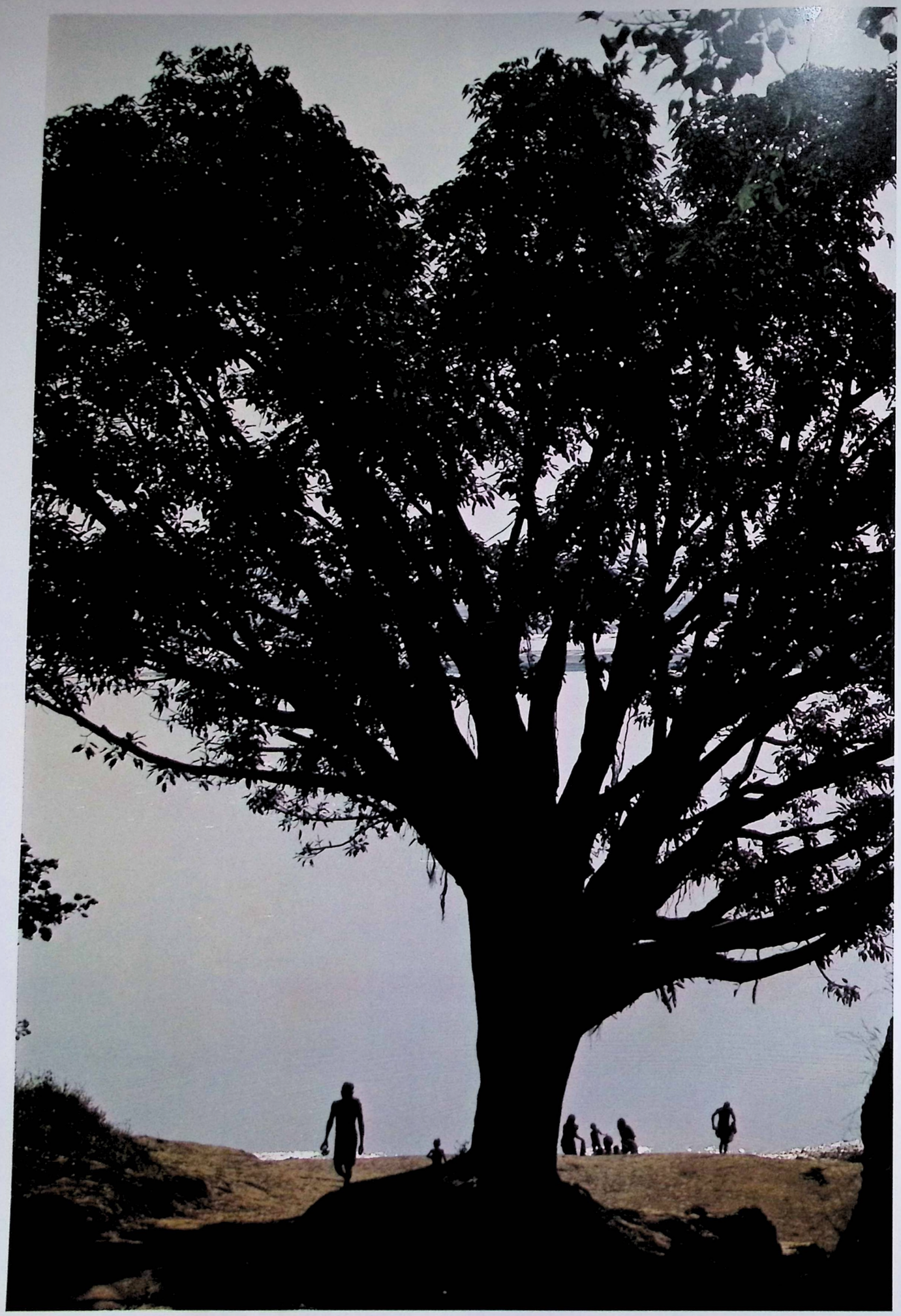
Pilgrims bathe at the late autumn festival at Garhmukteshwar.



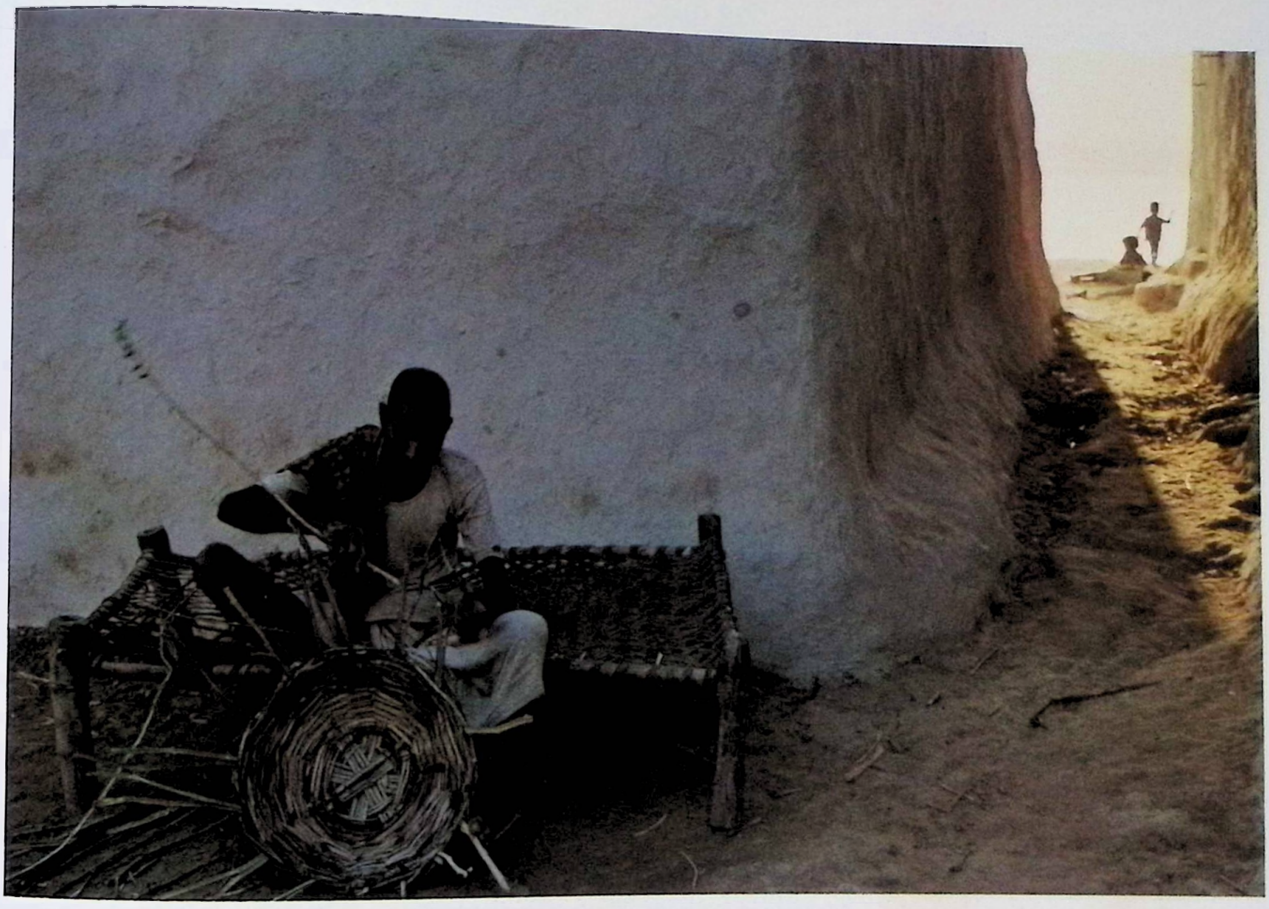
Offerings to a goddess and in the background a buffalo brought to be washed. Garhmukteshwar.

(*overleaf*) A rare village on the river bank in Uttar Pradesh. The Ganga floods constantly, erodes its banks and changes course.





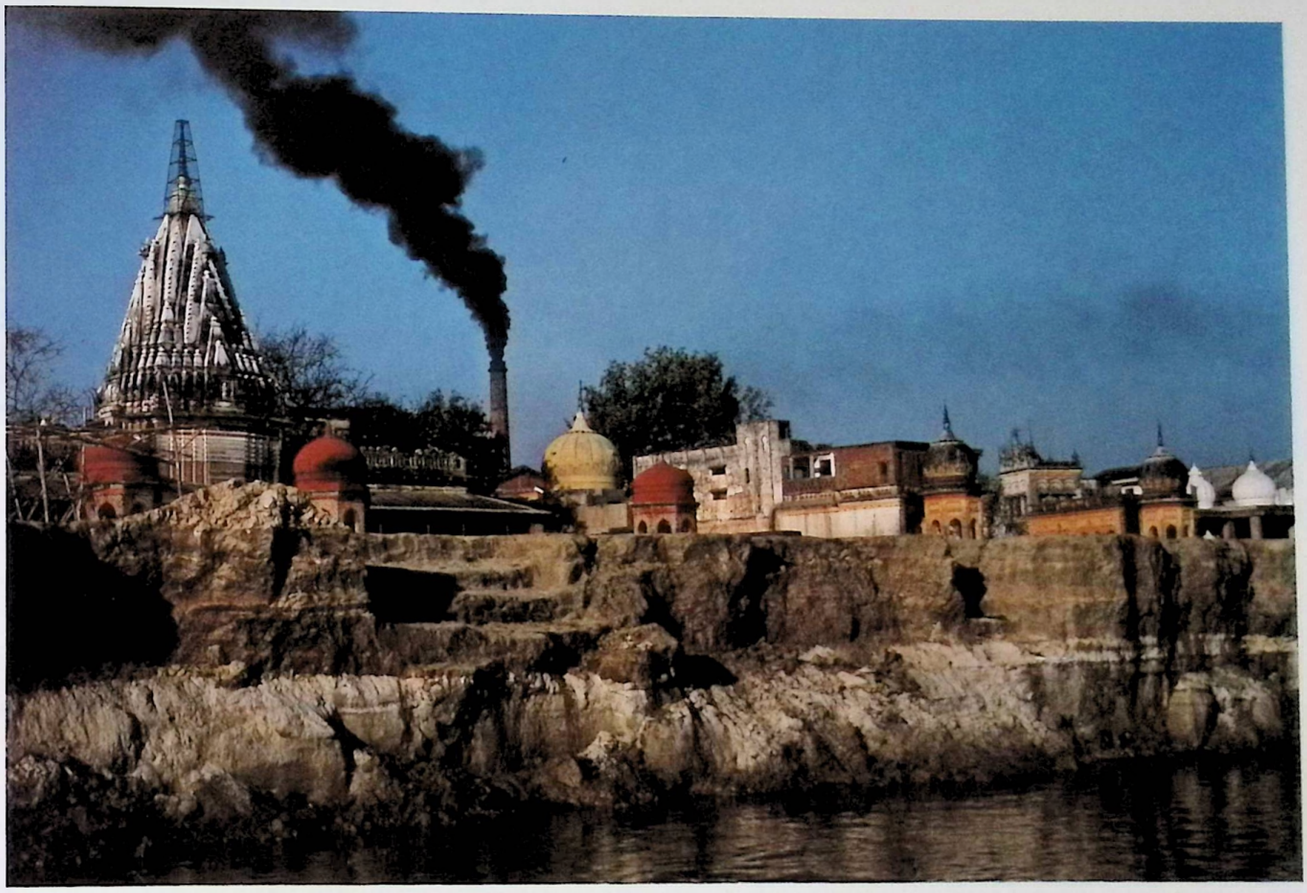
Villagers bathe near a pipal tree. Uttar Pradesh.



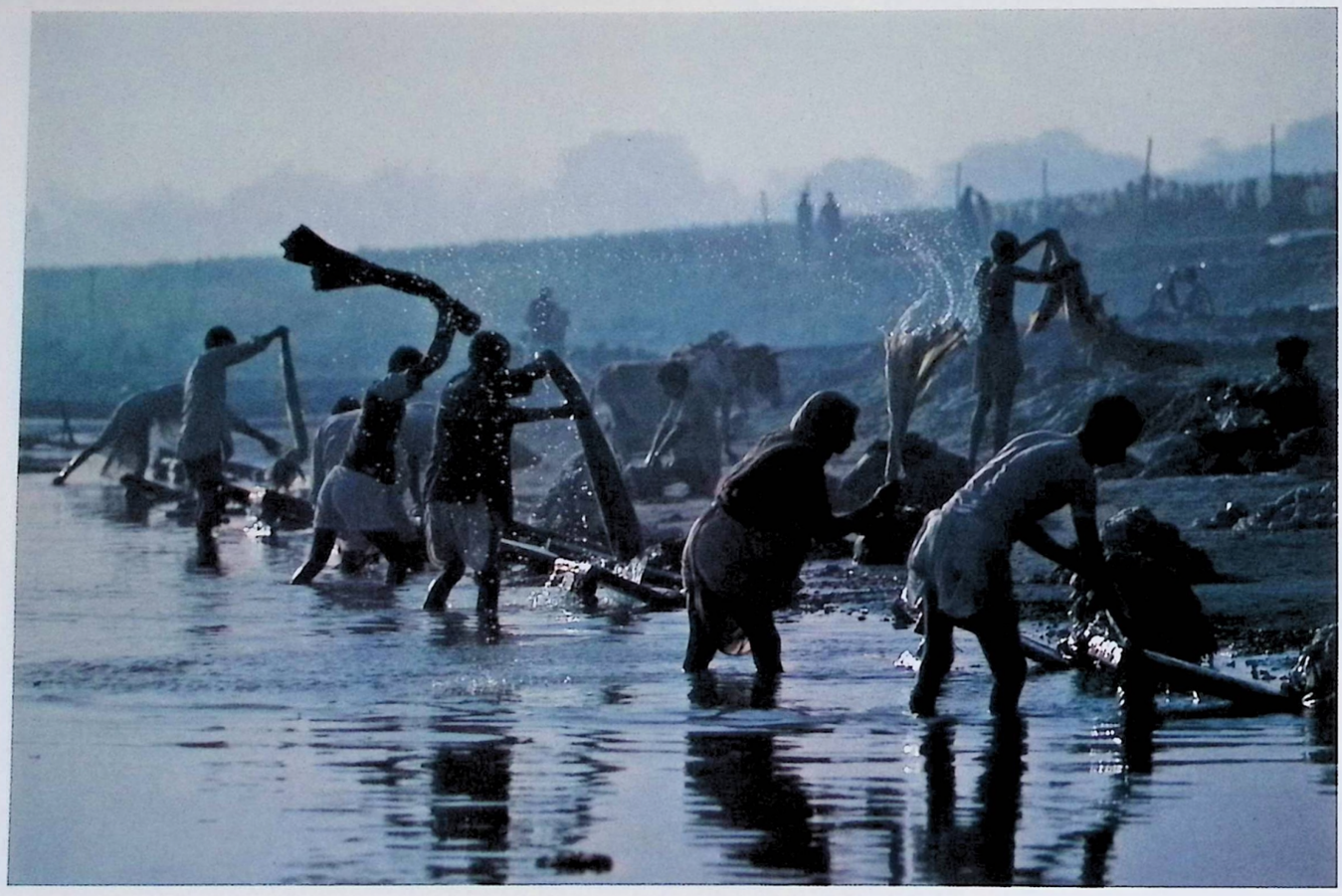
A villager weaves a basket as children play by the Ganga. Uttar Pradesh.



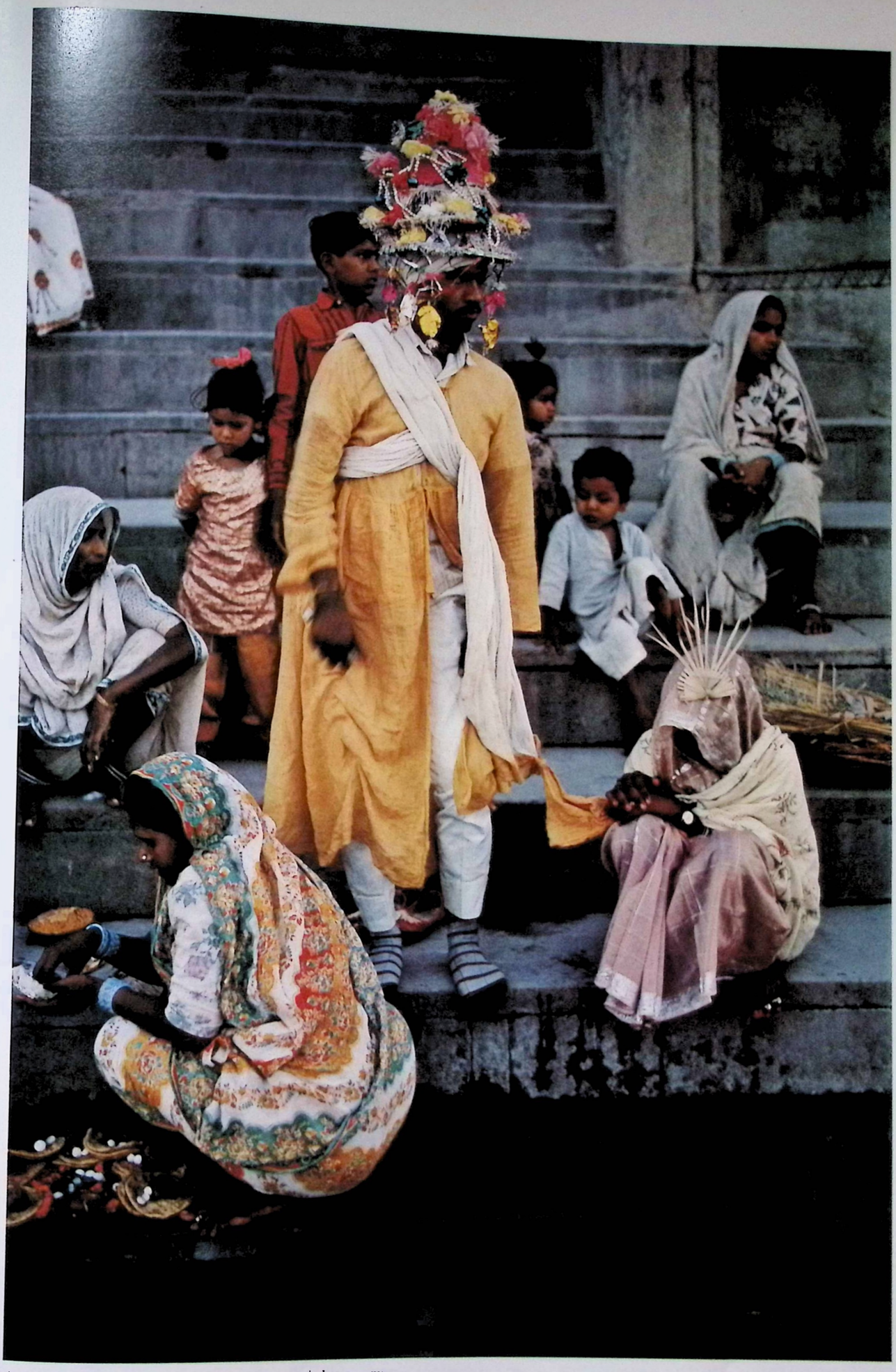
A sand island on the Ganga. Uttar Pradesh.



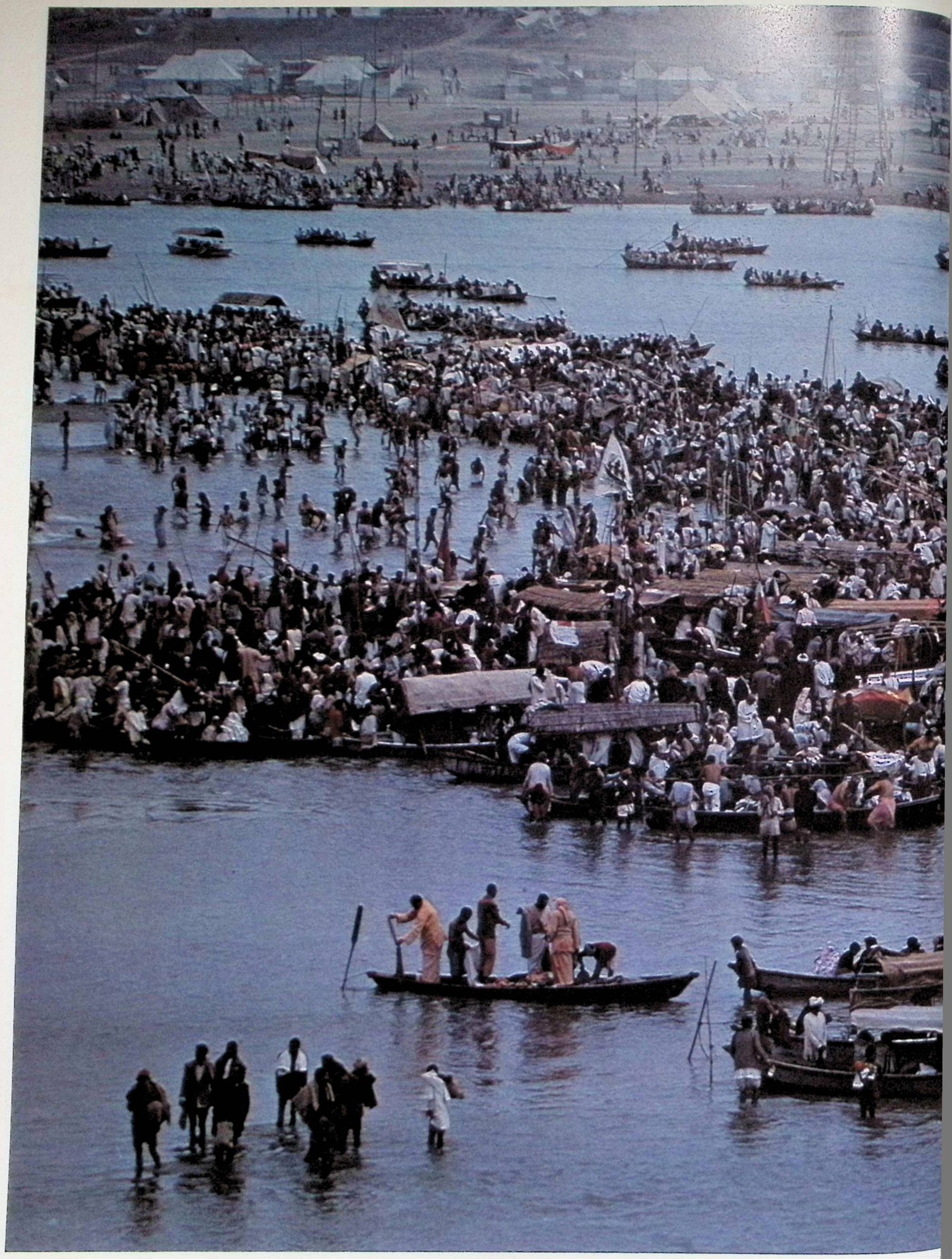
Above temple spires a factory chimney belches smoke at Kanpur.



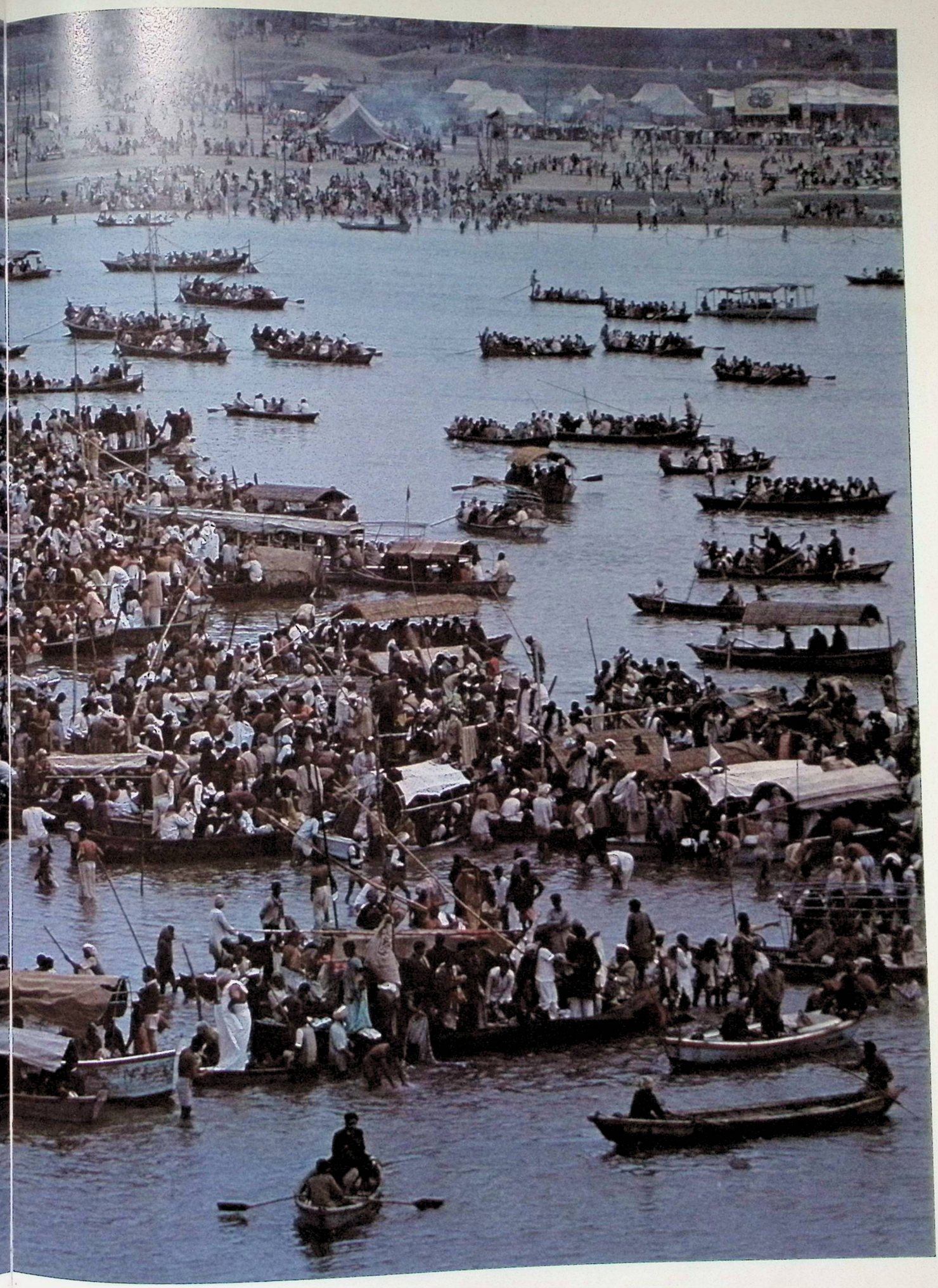
Washermen at Kanpur.

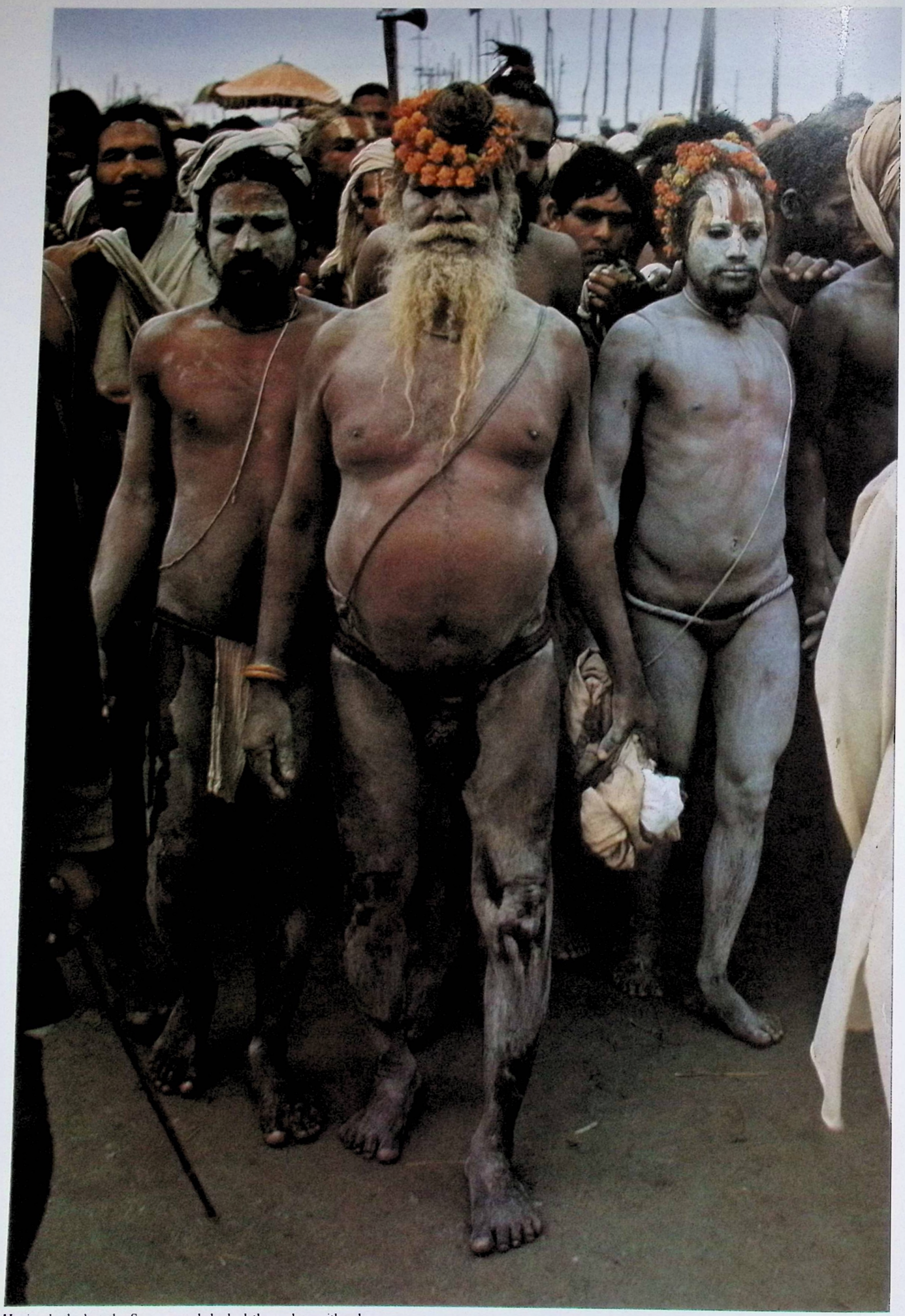


A groom and bride with relatives during a post-marital ceremony to invoke the blessings of Ganga. Kanpur.

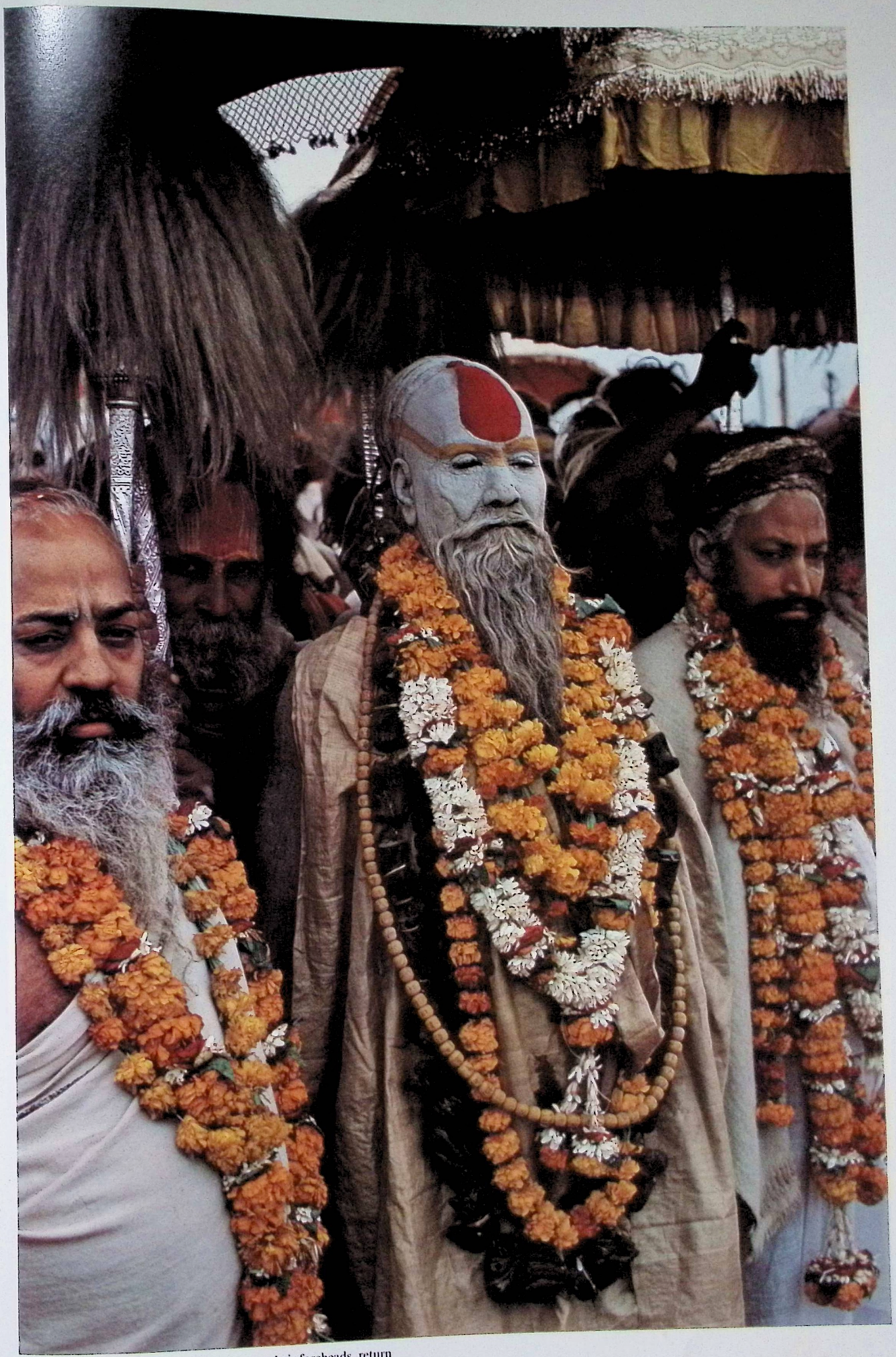


During a Kumbh Mela at Prayag, two to three million people gather to bathe at the Sangam, sacred confluence of the Ganga, the Jamuna and the mythical Saraswati. In a fight between gods and demons for an urn of nectar, four drops fell on earth, one of them at Prayag, Allahabad.





Having bathed at the Sangam and daubed themselves with ashes, sadhus return in procession to their camps. Kumbh Mela. Allahabad.



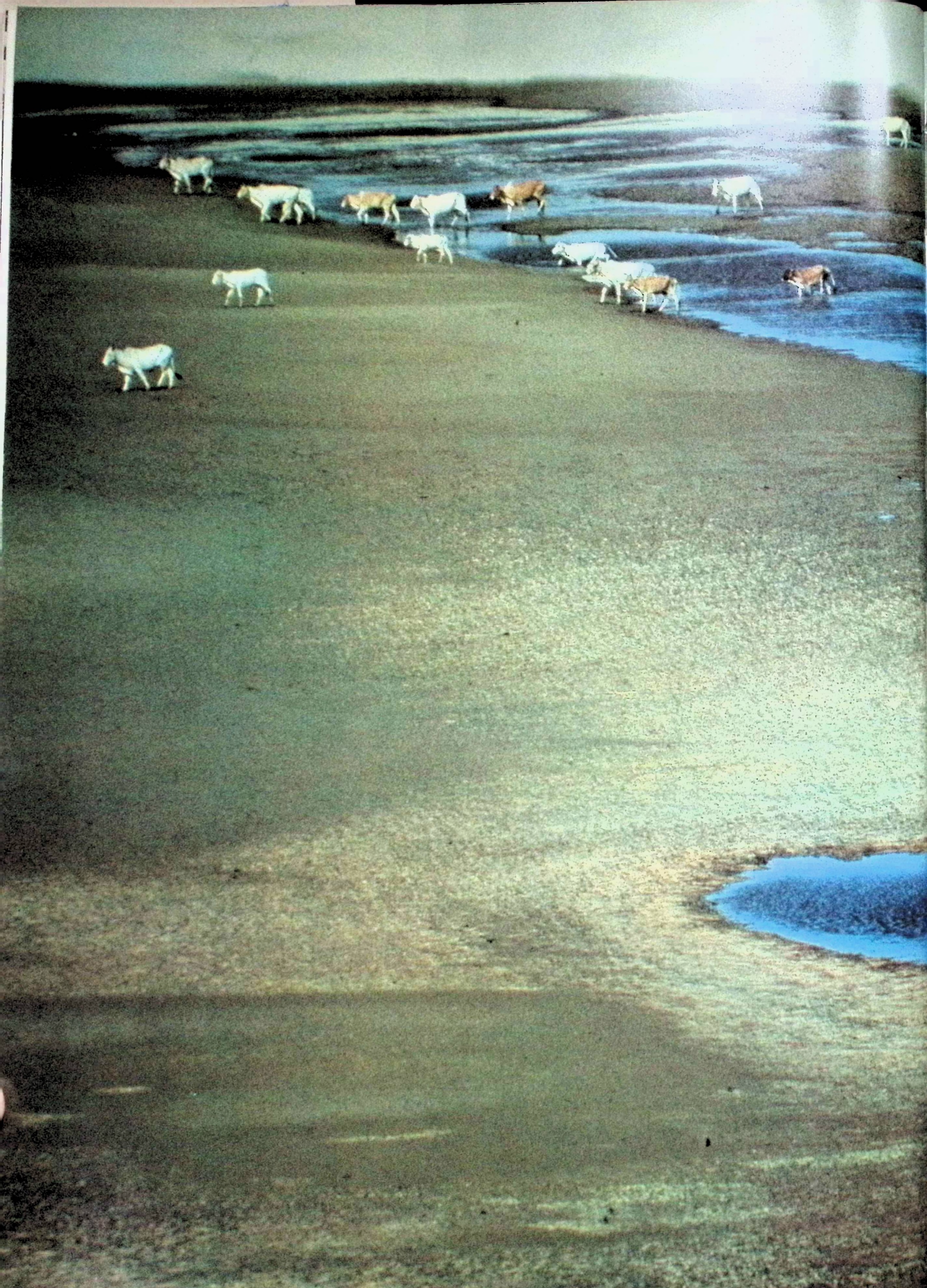
Sadhus, the sign of Vishnu the preserver, on their foreheads, return from the bathing at the Sangam wearing garlands of jasmine and marigold. Kumbh Mela. Allahabad.

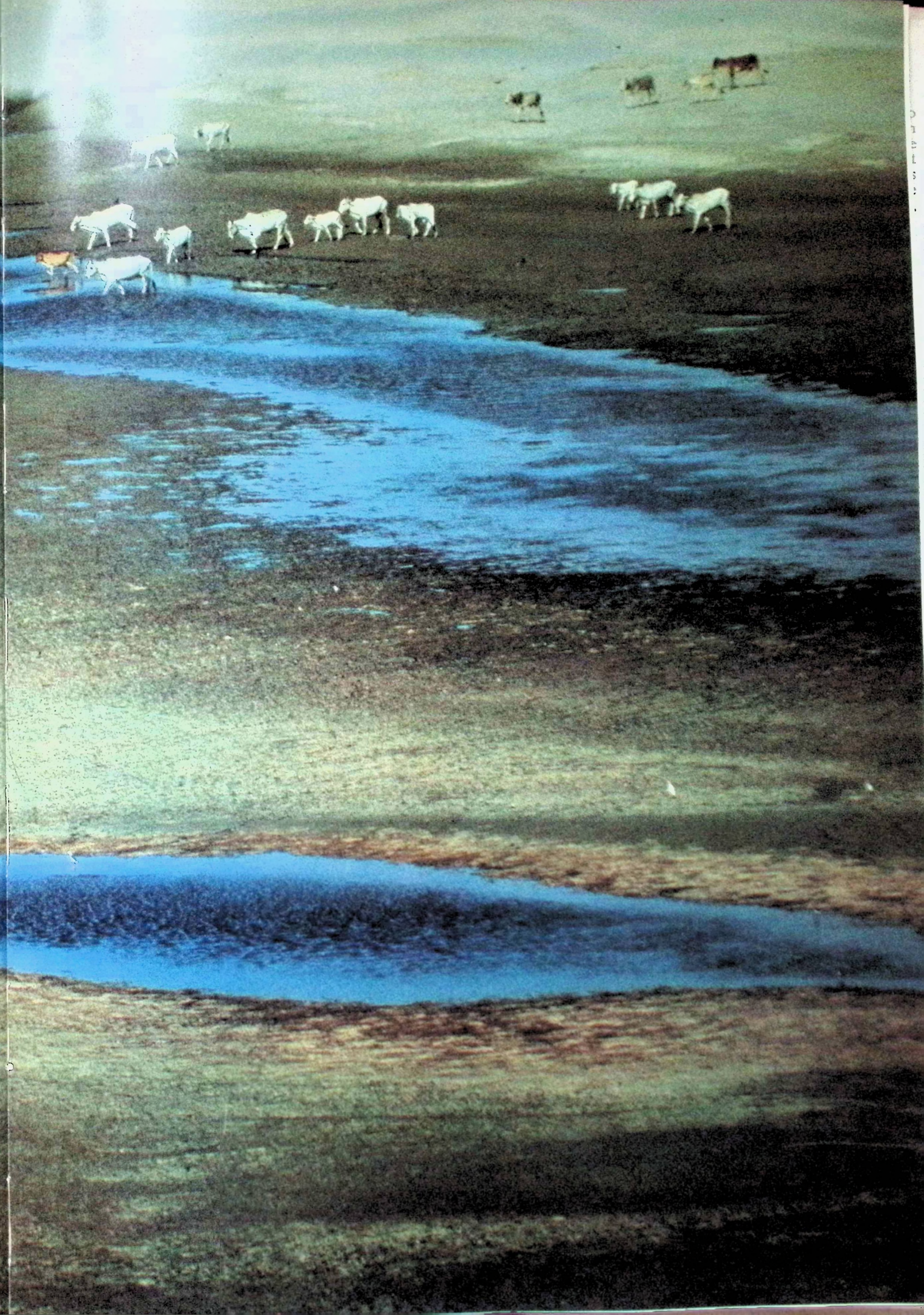
(*overleaf*) Kumbh Mela, Allahabad.

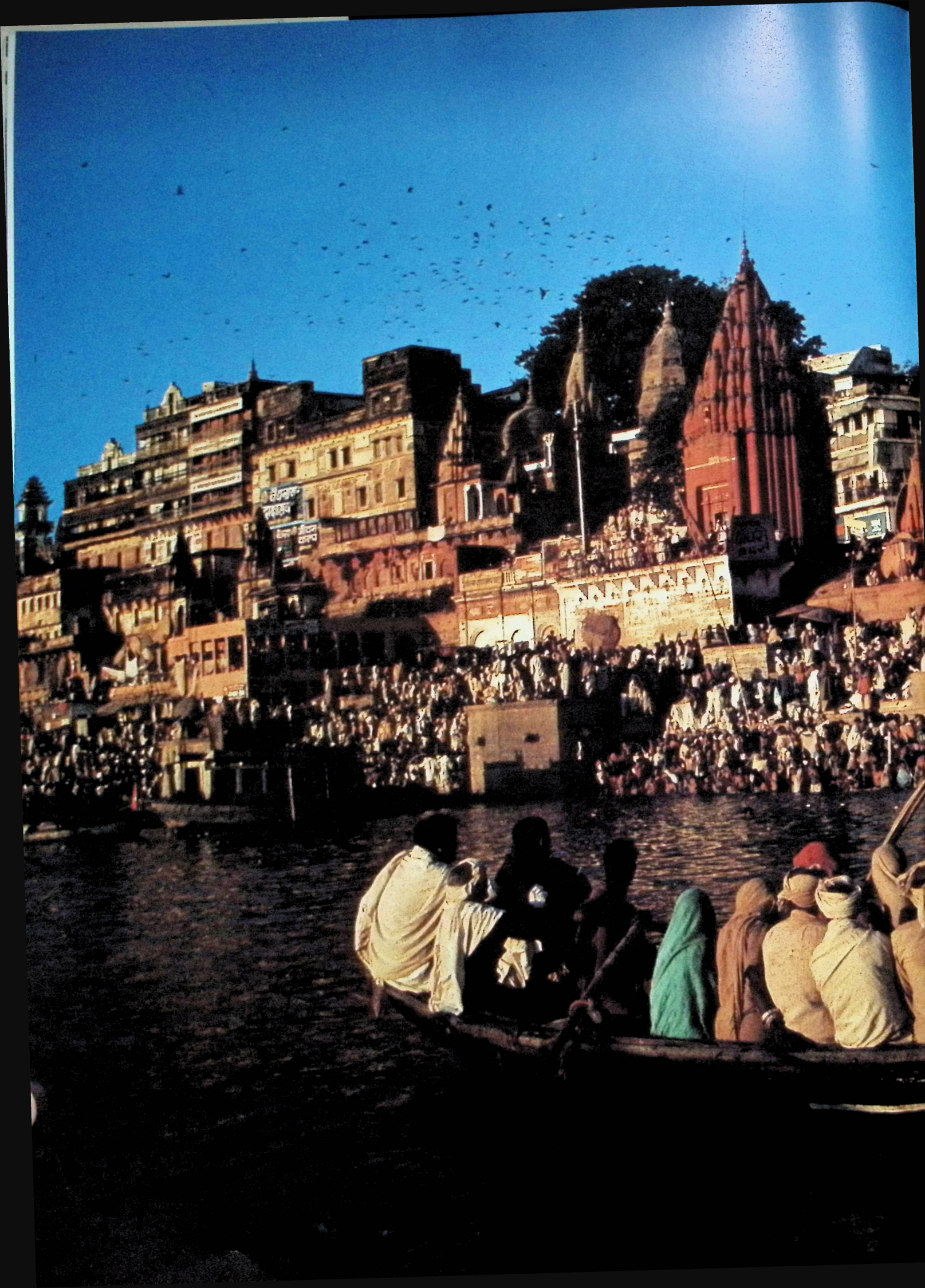
(*Pages 84–85*) Cows cross a channel of the Ganga at Chunar.

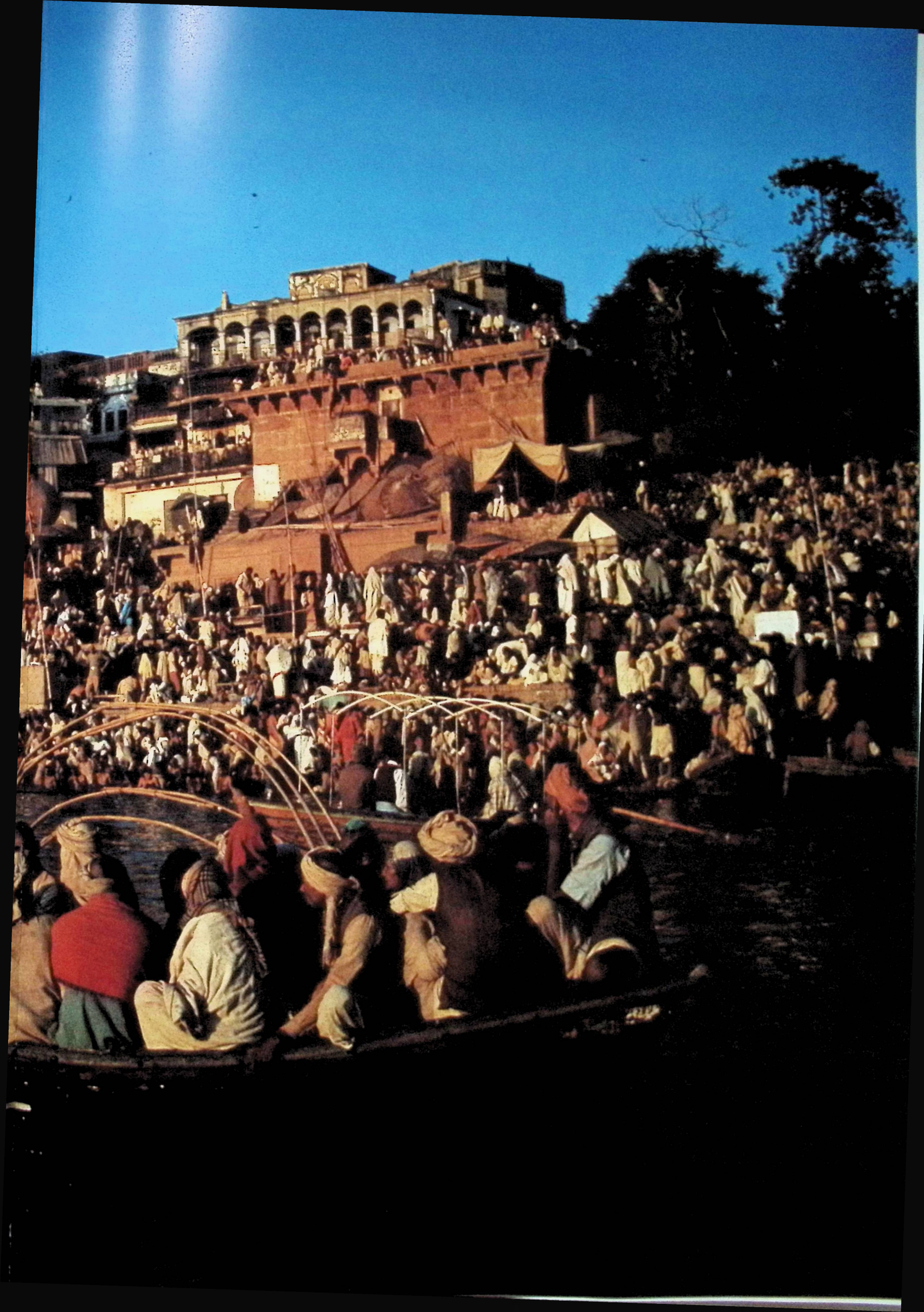


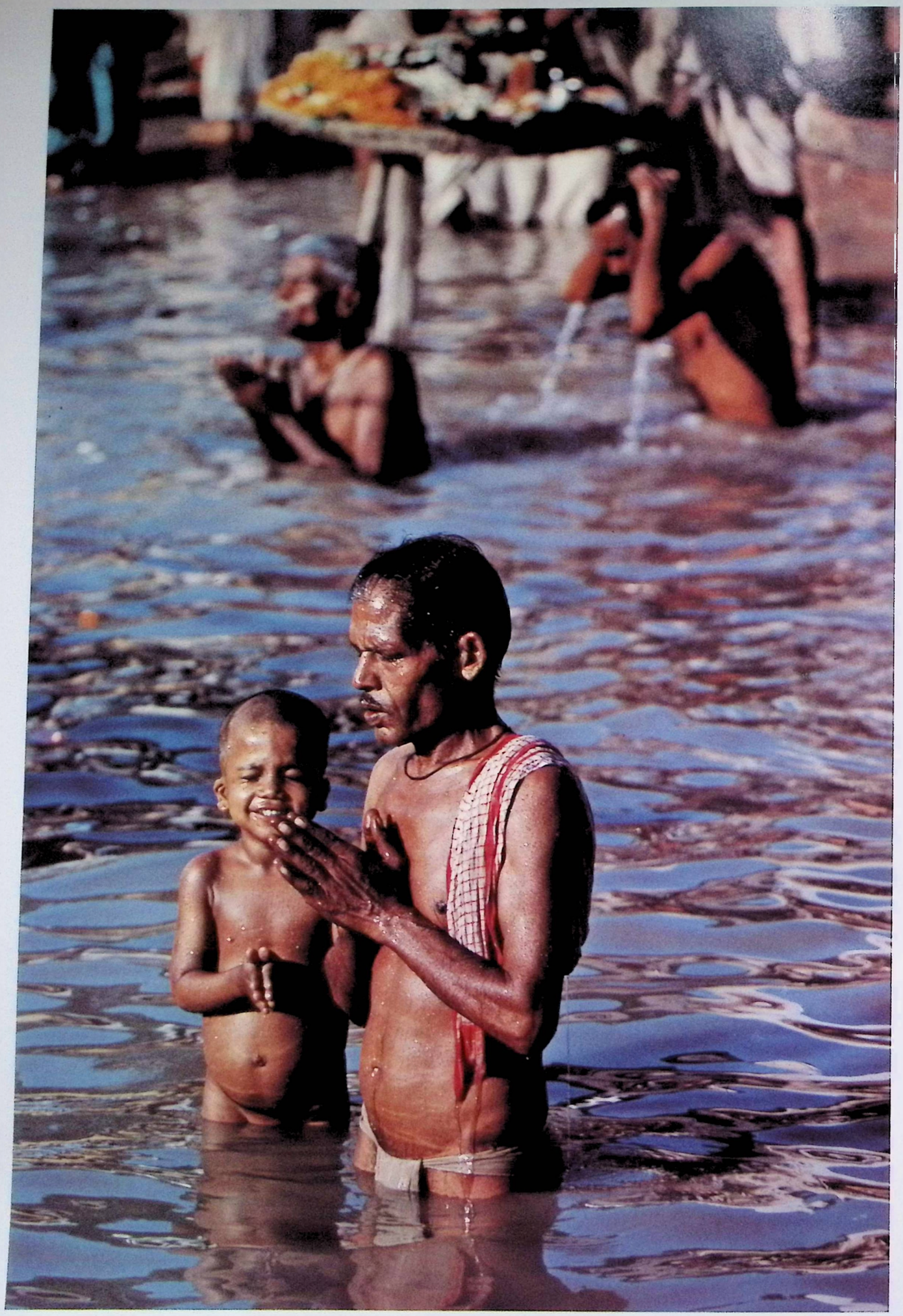












Father and son pray. Banaras.

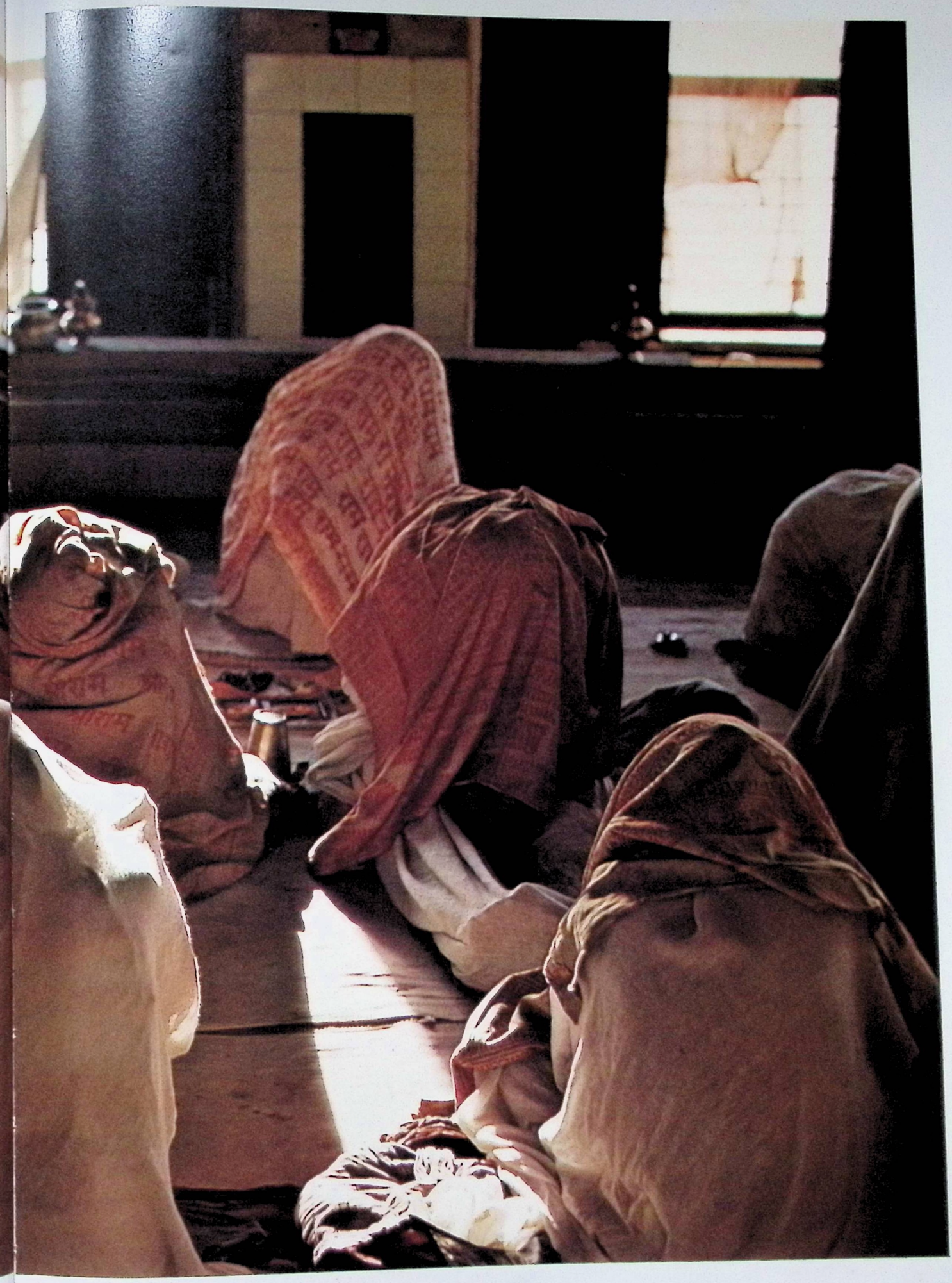
← The demon Rahu attempts to swallow the sun as crowds gather to bathe at the Dasaswamedha and Munshi Ghats during a solar eclipse at Banaras, the city of Siva on the northward bend of the



A bather prays floating on his back. Banaras.

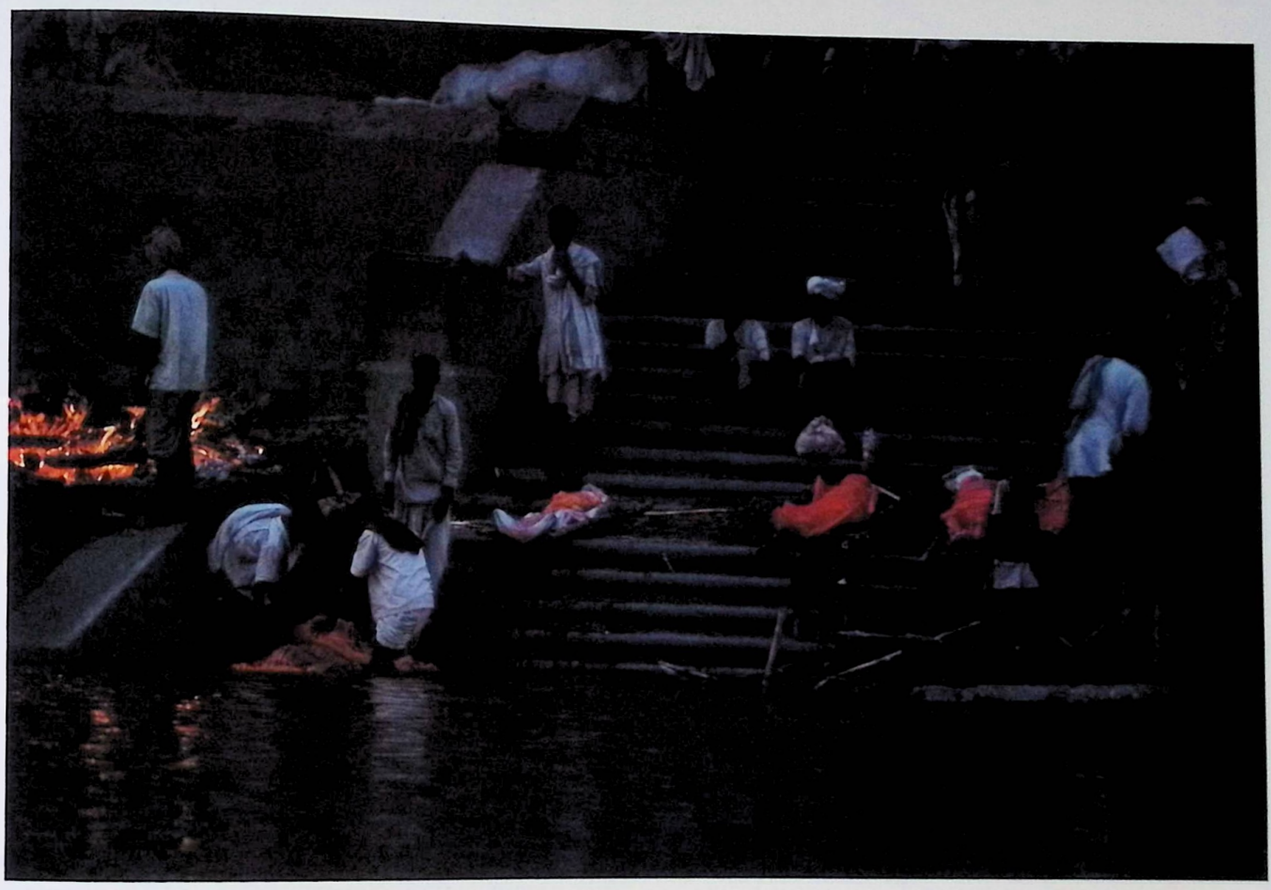


Widows retired to the Bhajan Ashram begin the day reciting a mantra, their bodies covered in shrouds printed with the word Rama. Uncovering themselves they will begin the chant, "Hare Krishna, Hare Krishna, Hare Rama, Hare Rama"—kept up all day and night in shifts.

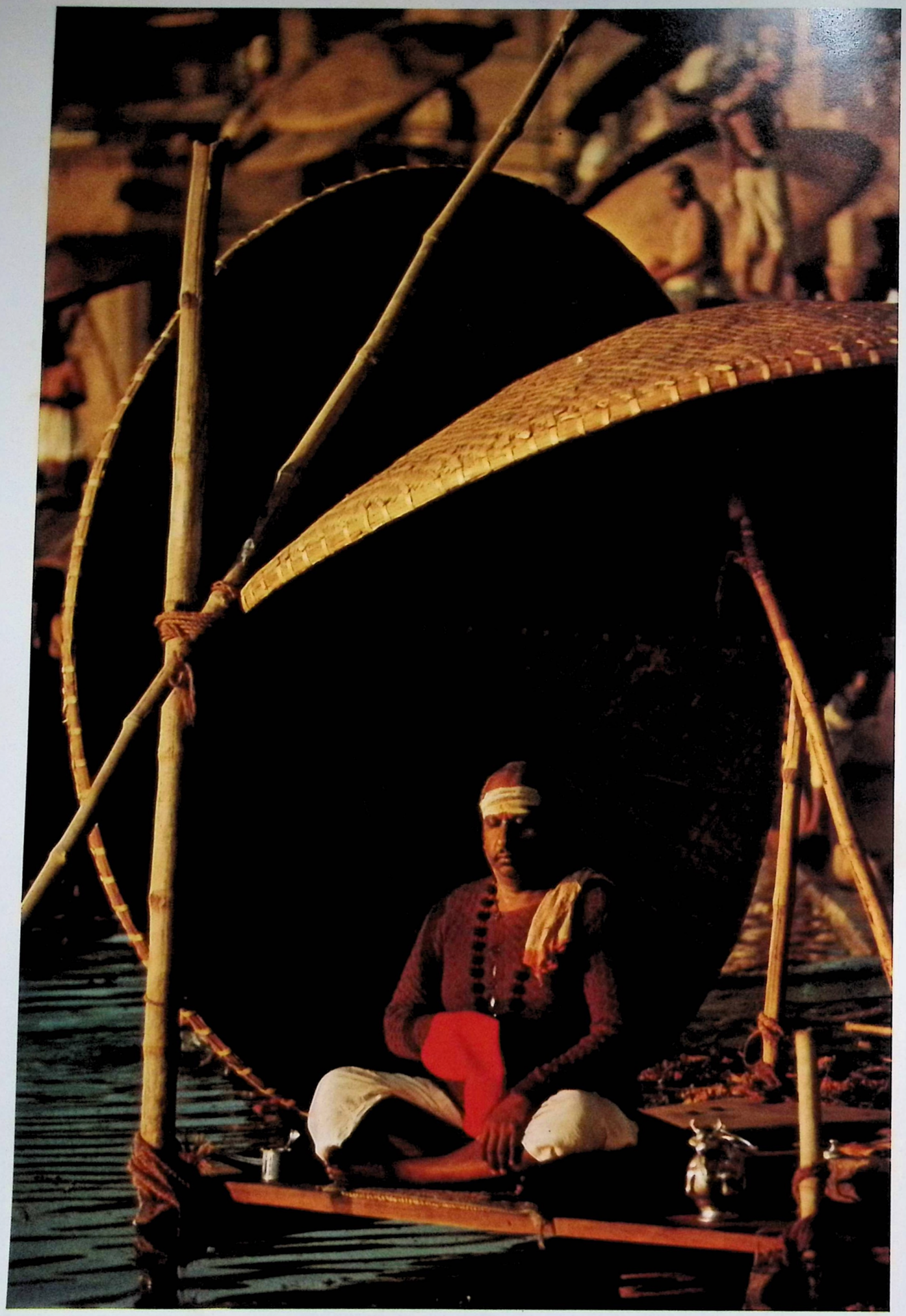




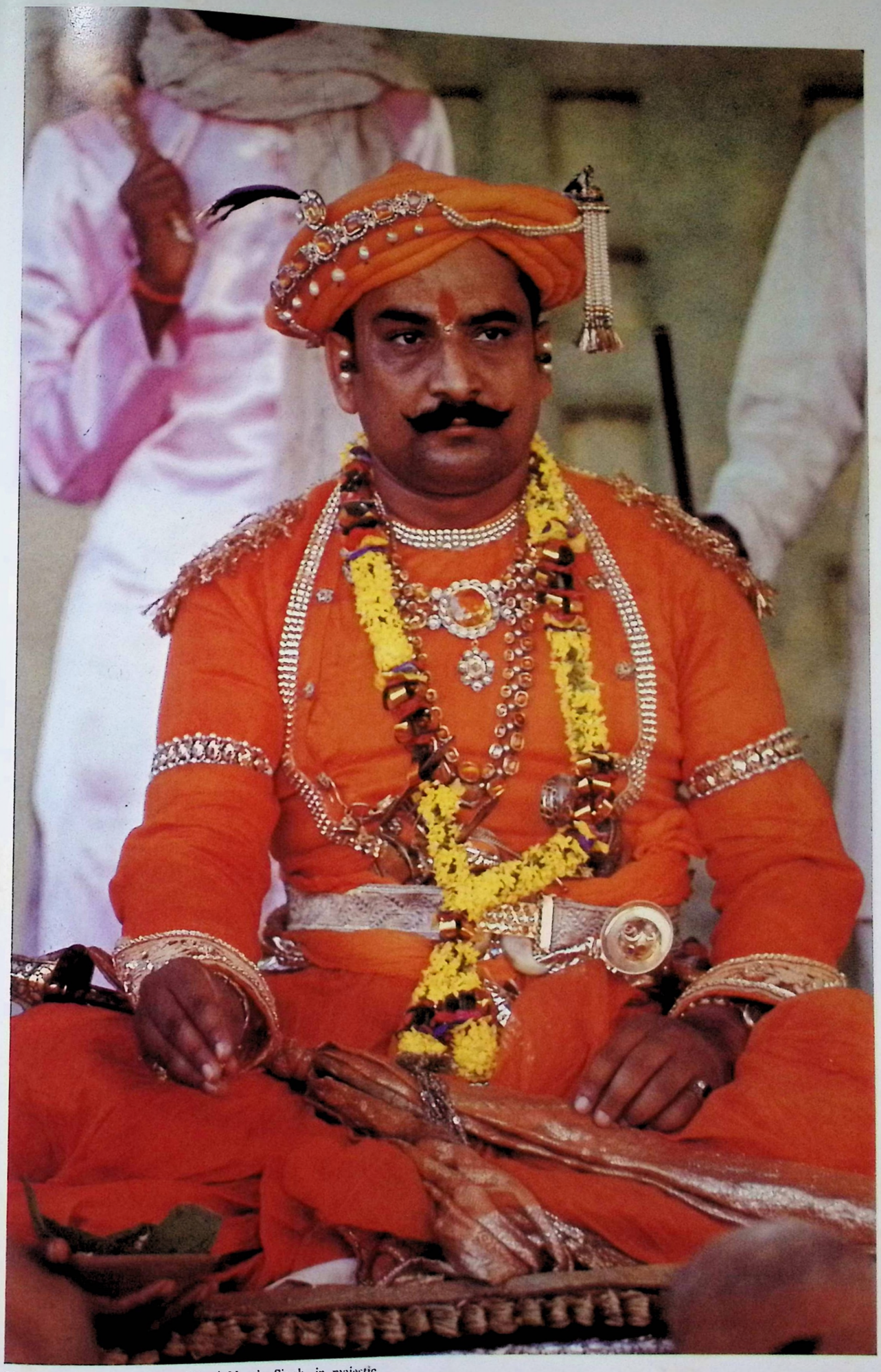
A flight of pigeons passes over morning bathers on a ghat (steps to a river). Banaras.



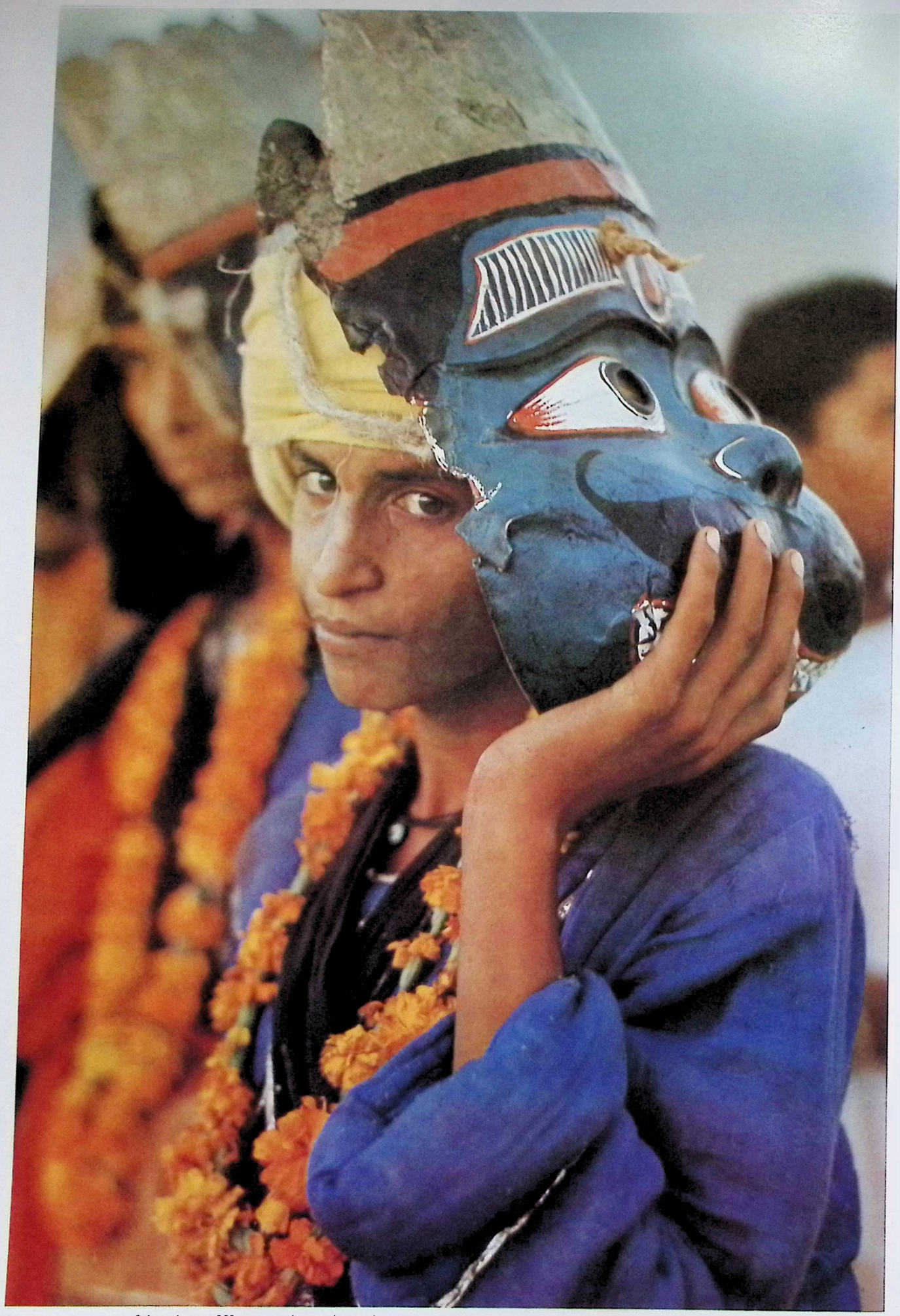
A dom, cremation attendant, tends to a funeral pyre as a body is given a ceremonial dip by relatives and others await consignment to the flames at Jalsain Ghat, Banaras.



A priest, the sign of Siva on his forehead, sits under a rattan umbrella counting beads with his hand inside a Gomukhi, the red glove personifying the Cow's Mouth. Manikarnika Ghat. Banaras.



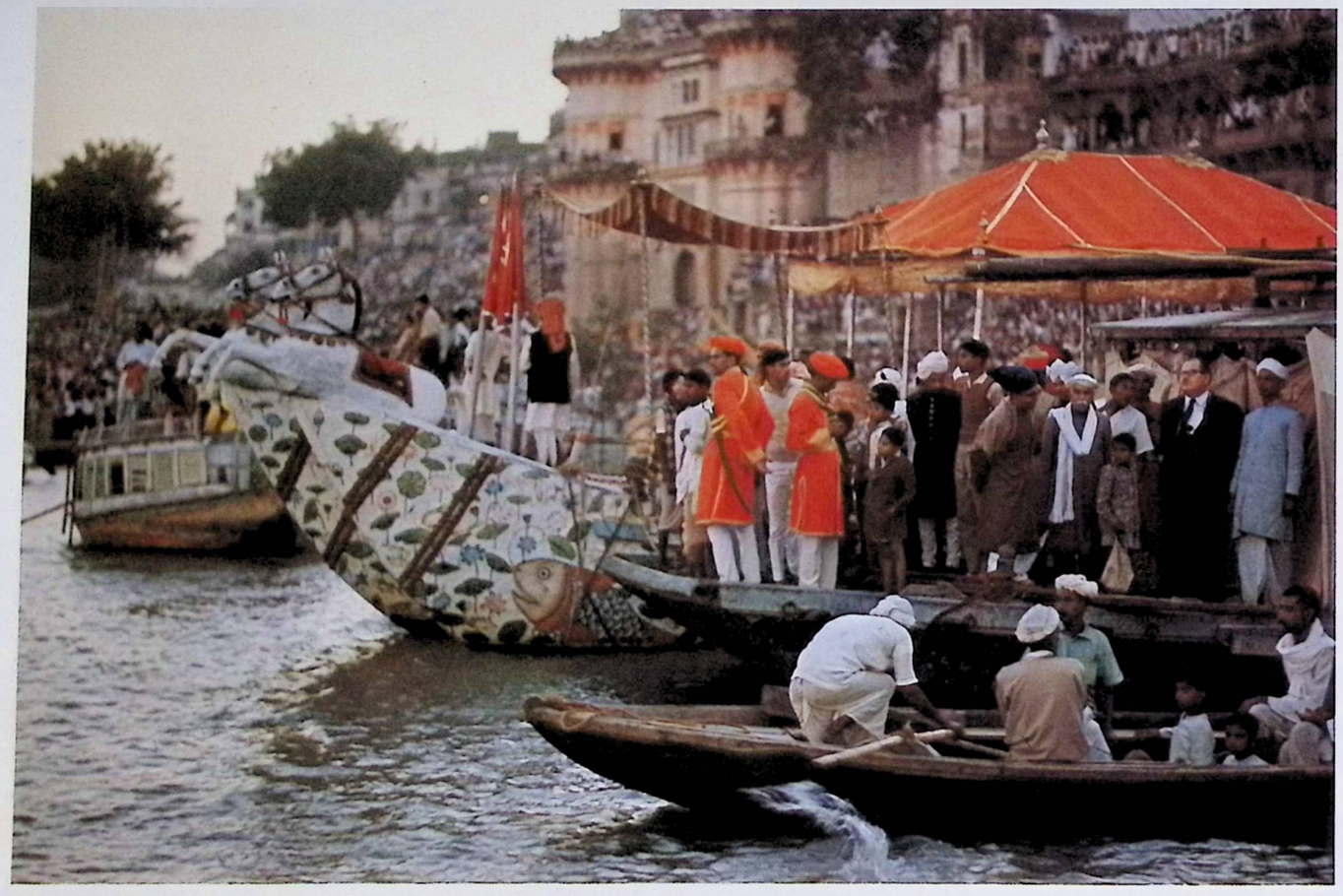
The Maharajah of Banaras, Vibhuti Narain Singh, in majestic robes during Dussehra festival at Ramnagar across the river from Banaras.



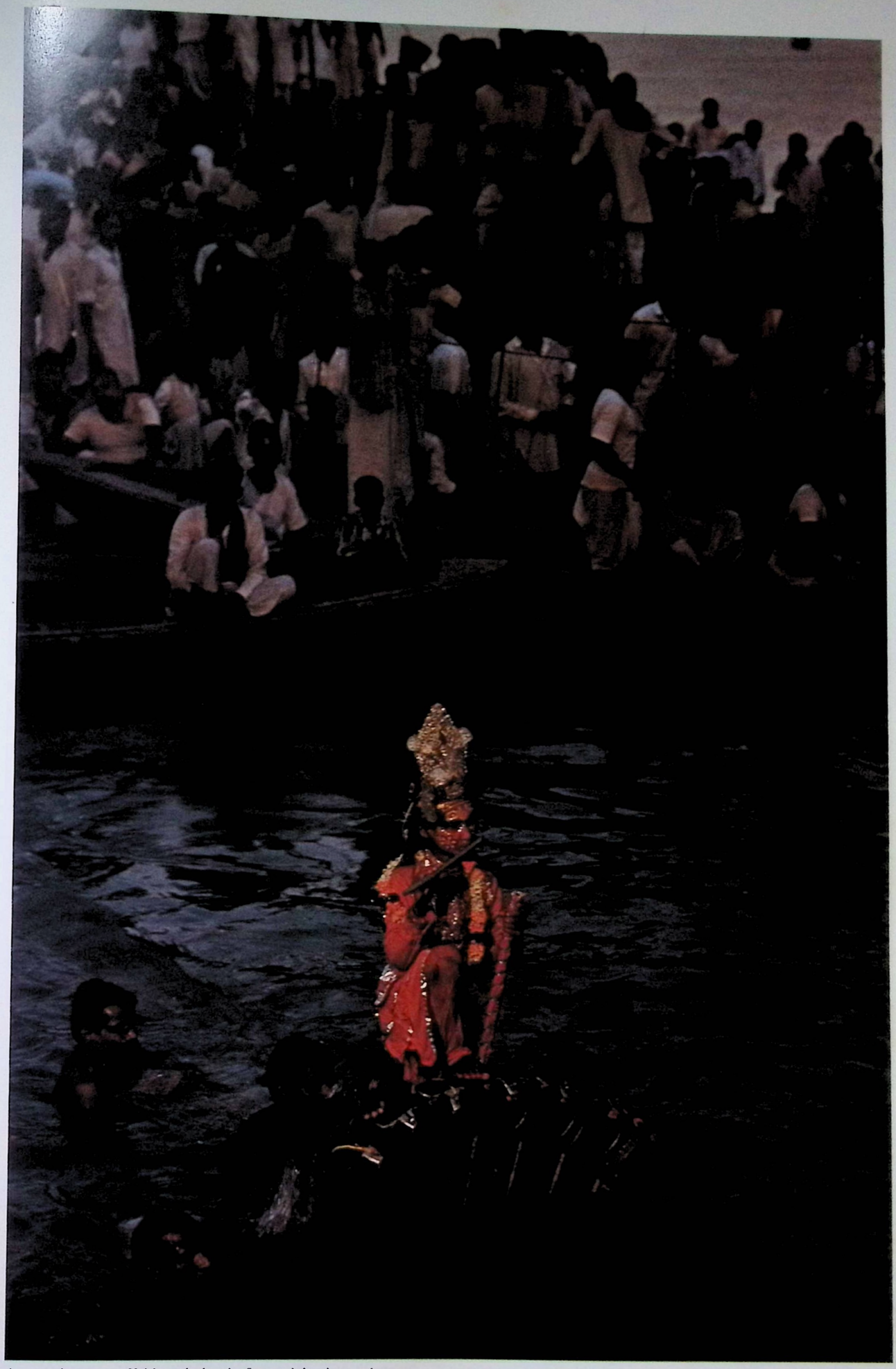
A young actor as one of the cohorts of Hanuman, the monkey god, in the re-enactment of the Ramayana during Ramlila at Ramnagar.



An aging actor plays Ravana, the demon king in the Ramayana, during Ramlila. Ramnagar.



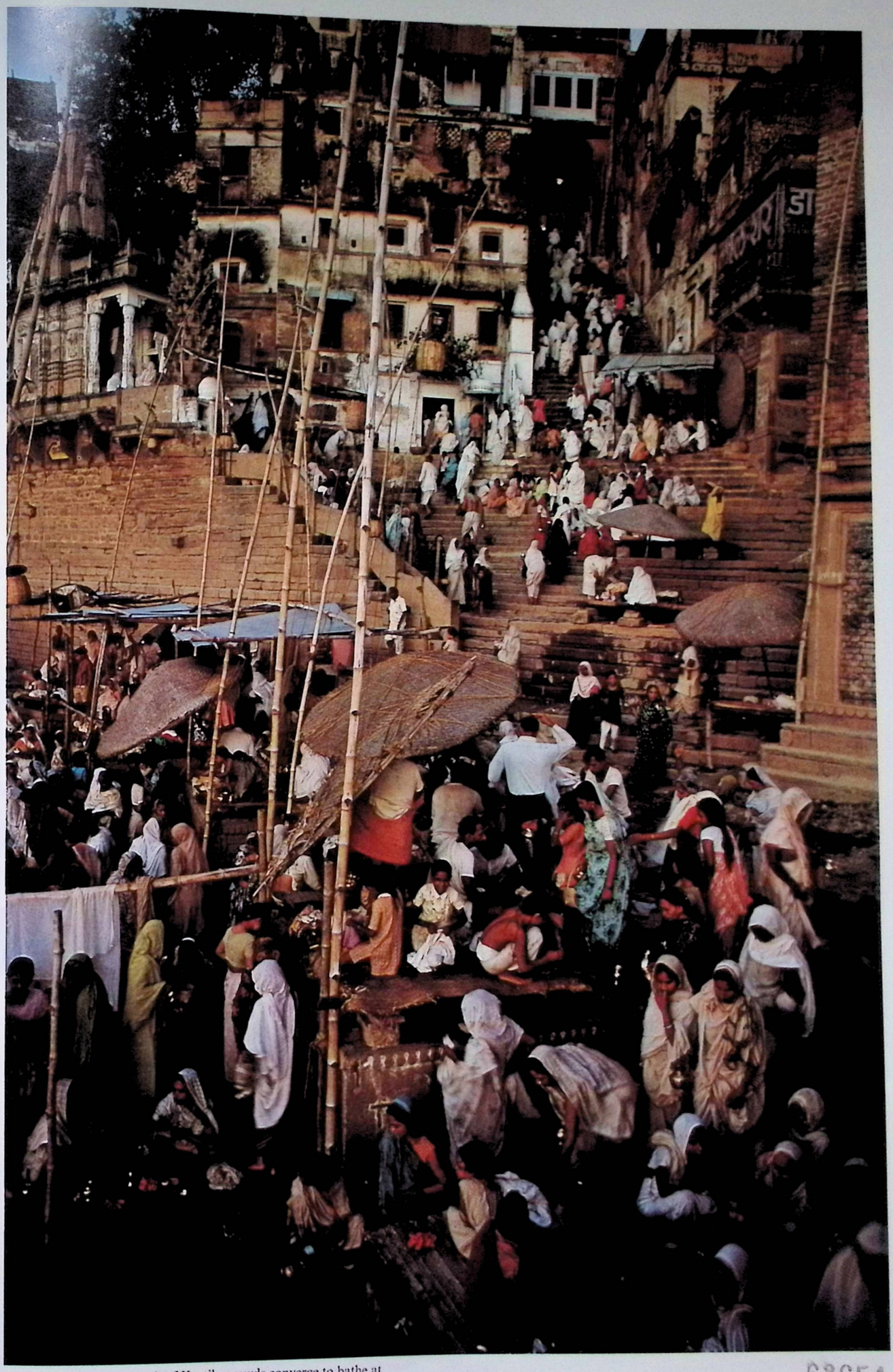
During Krishnalila festival at Assi Ghat, priests and liveried attendants of the Maharajah of Banaras stand on his barge painted with lotus and fish. Banaras.



A young boy acts as Krishna playing the flute and dancing on the demon Kaliya, the monstrous serpent he conquered. Krishnalila. Assi Ghat. Banaras.



Kartik bathing and ablutions. Panchganga Ghat. Banaras.



At dawn, during the month of Kartik, crowds converge to bathe at Panchganga Ghat. Banaras.

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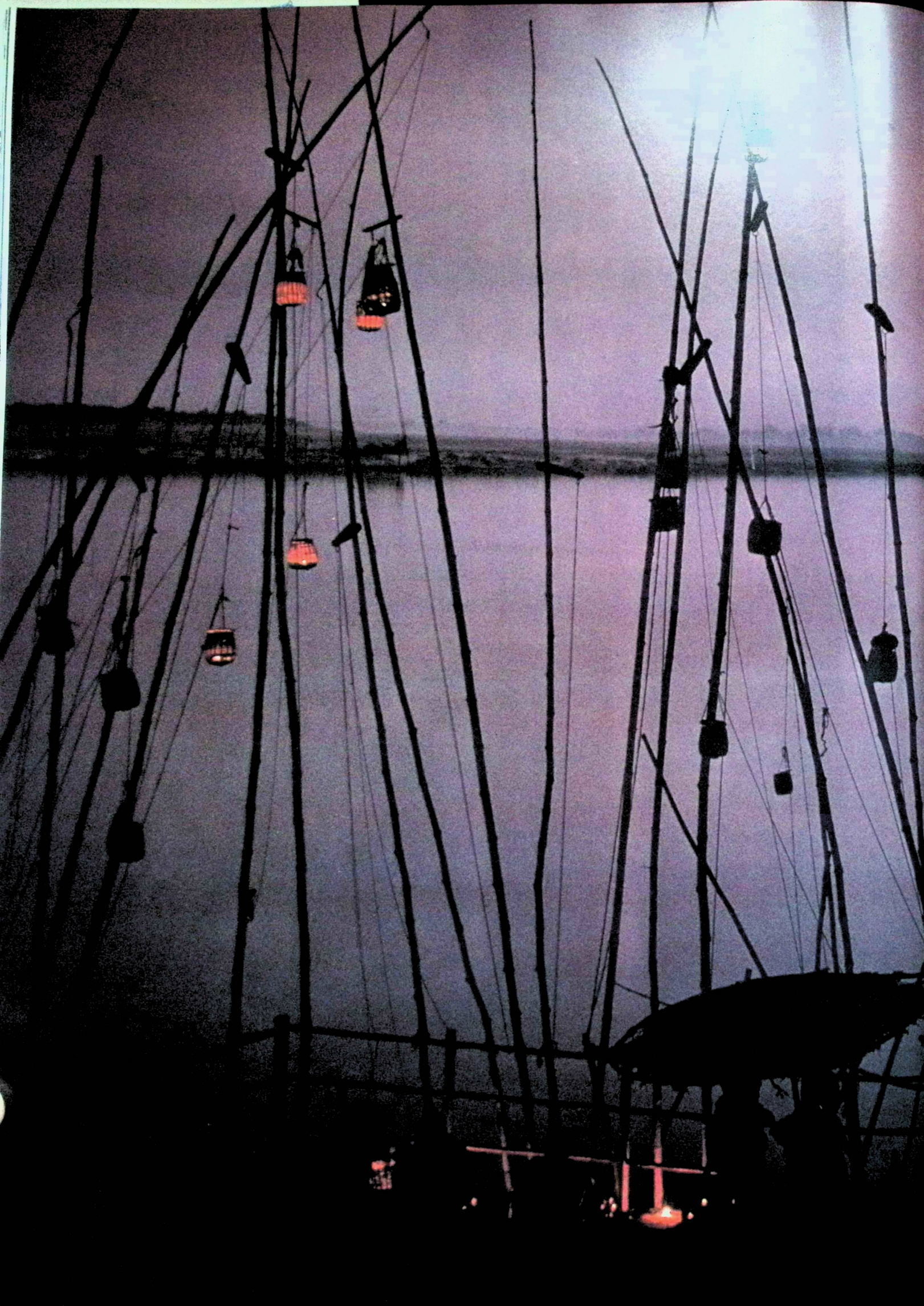
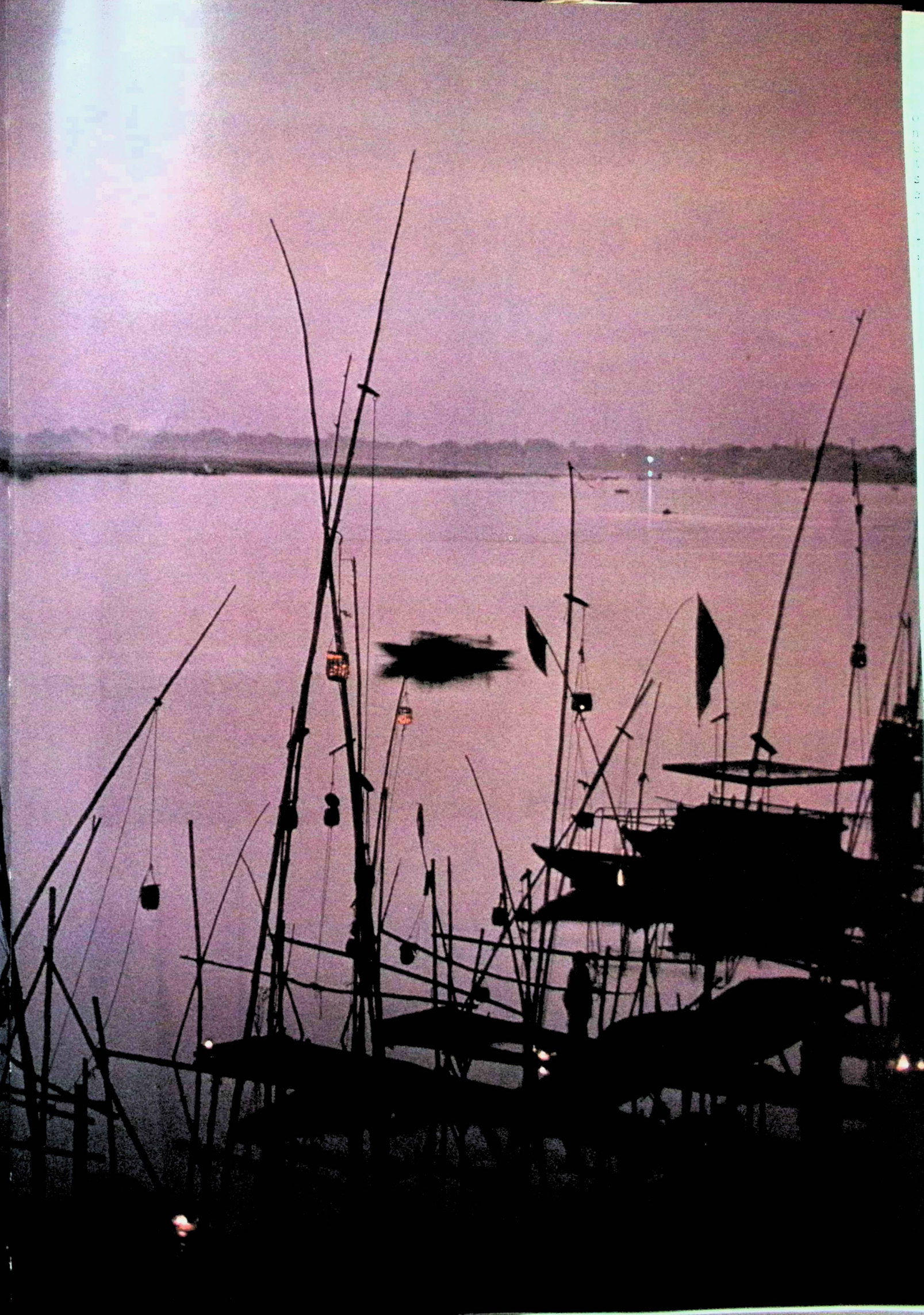
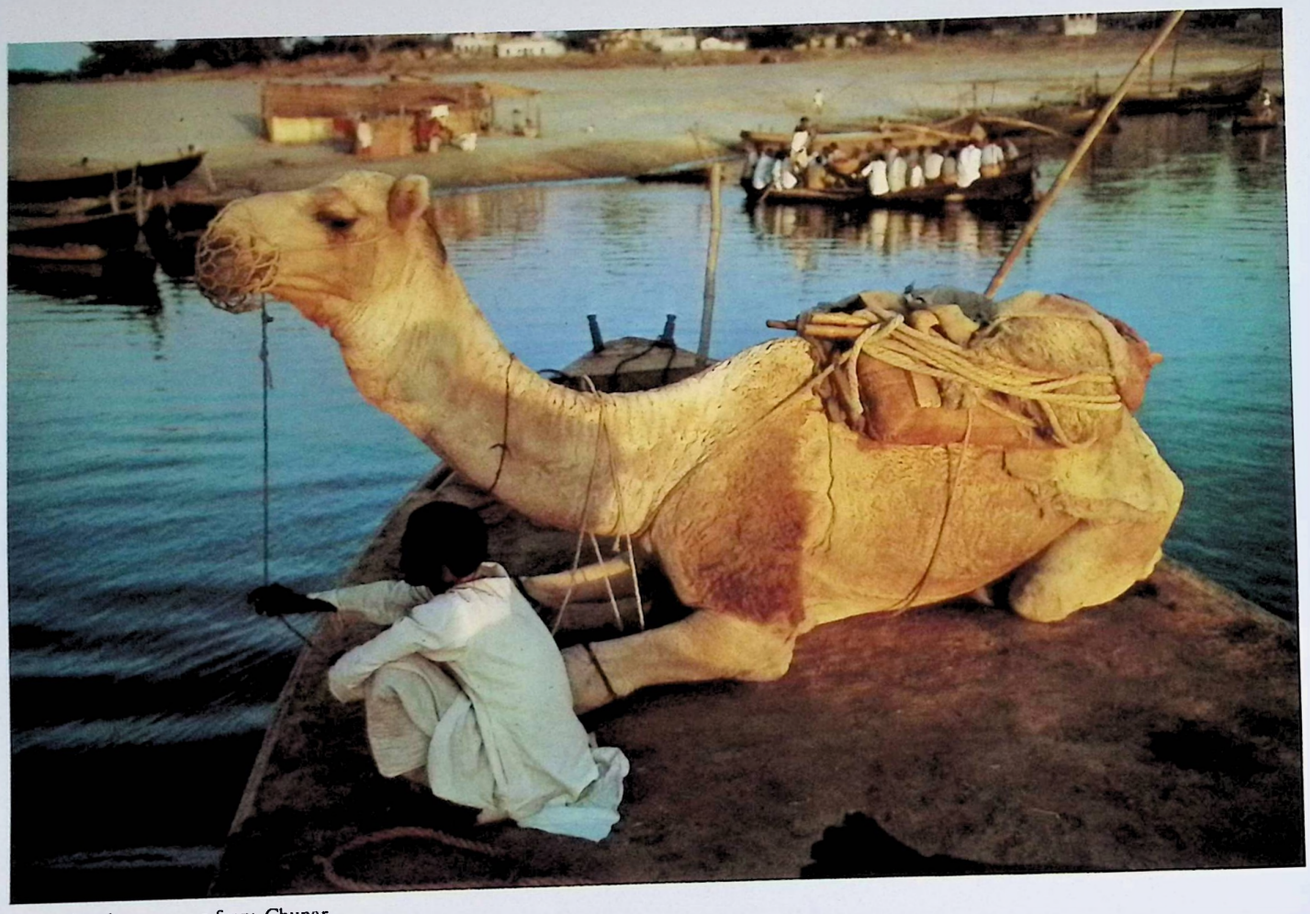
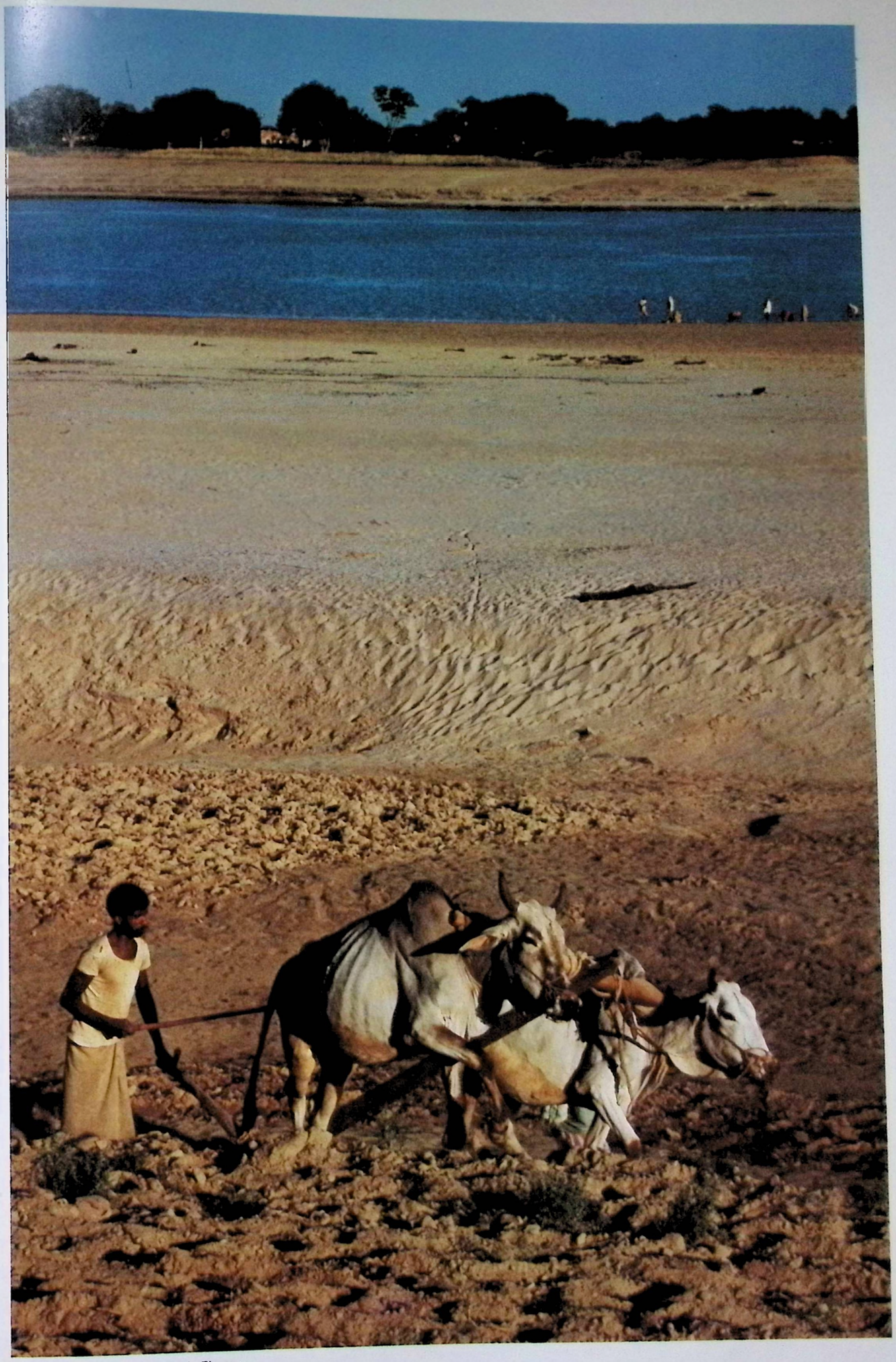
(*overleaf*) To light up the celestial abode of ancestral spirits akash-batti (skylamps) are raised on poles during the month of Kartik. Panchganga Ghat. Banaras.







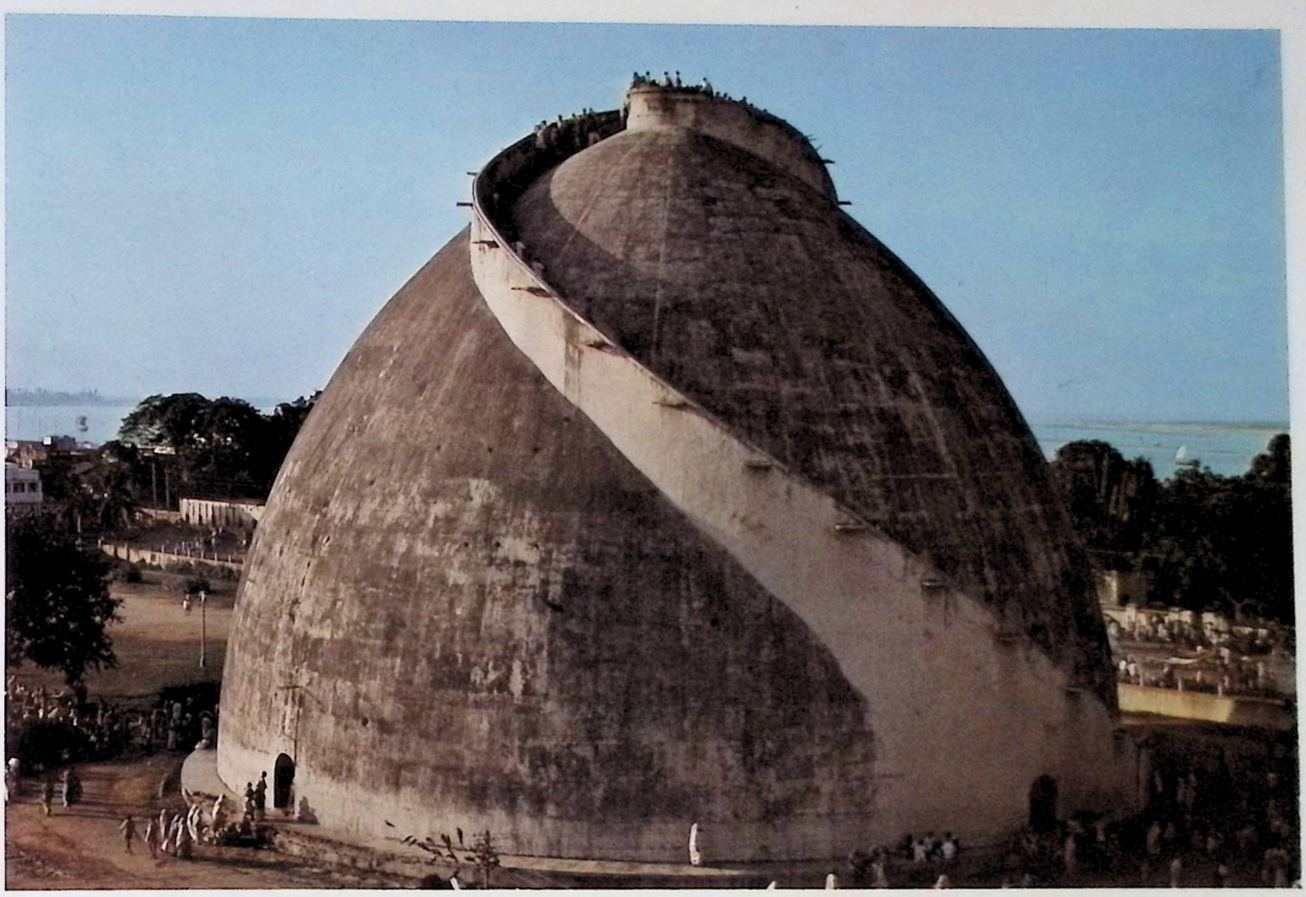
A camel and owner on a ferry. Chunar.



A farmer ploughs the river-bed. Chunar.



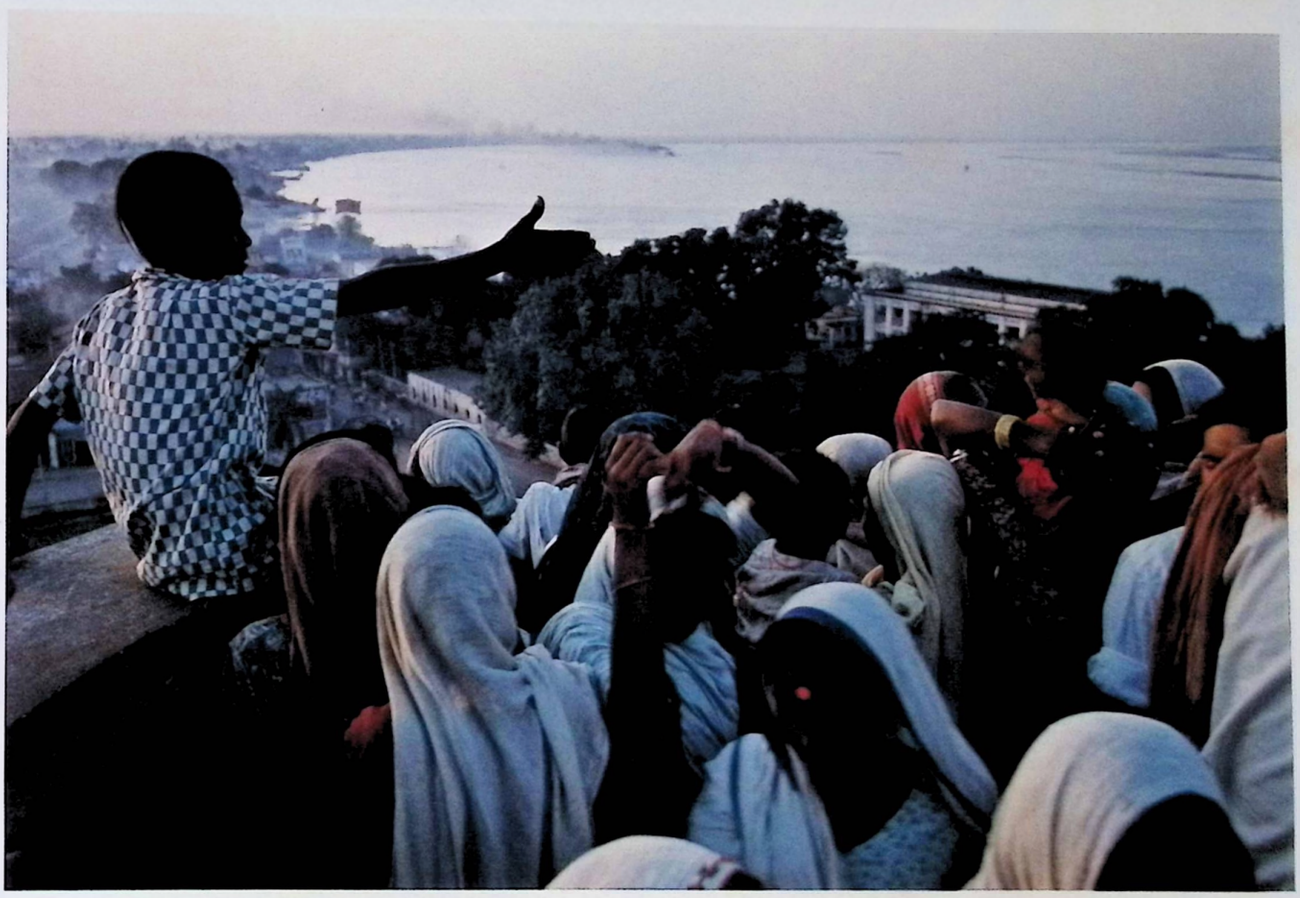
The old paddle-wheel ferry which runs between Patna and Sonepur.



The Gola, 90 feet high, 426 feet round at the base, with a capacity of 137,000 tons of grain, built at the instance of Warren Hastings by Captain John Garstin of the Engineers, "for the perpetual eradication of famines in these Provinces", rarely used until recently.

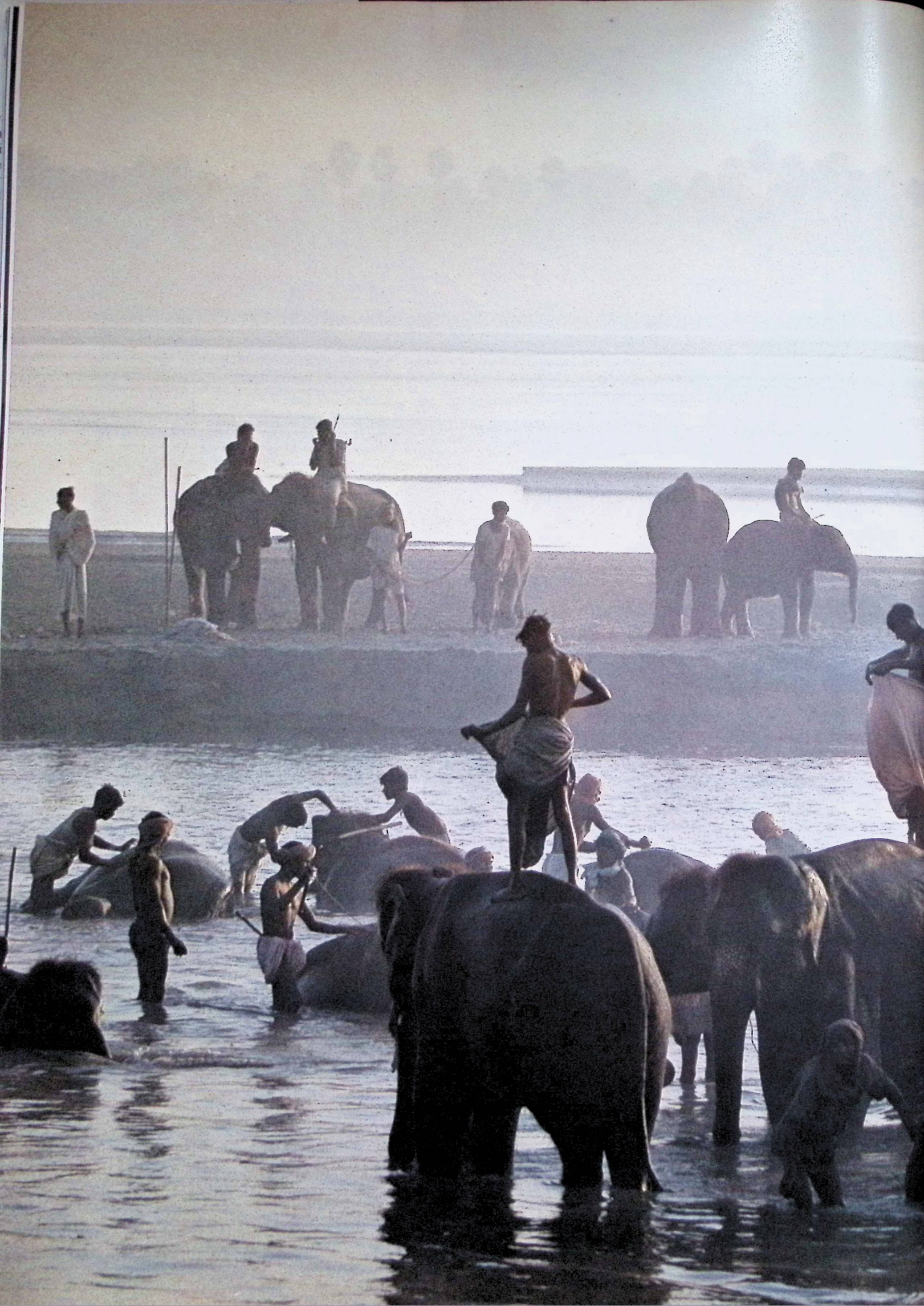


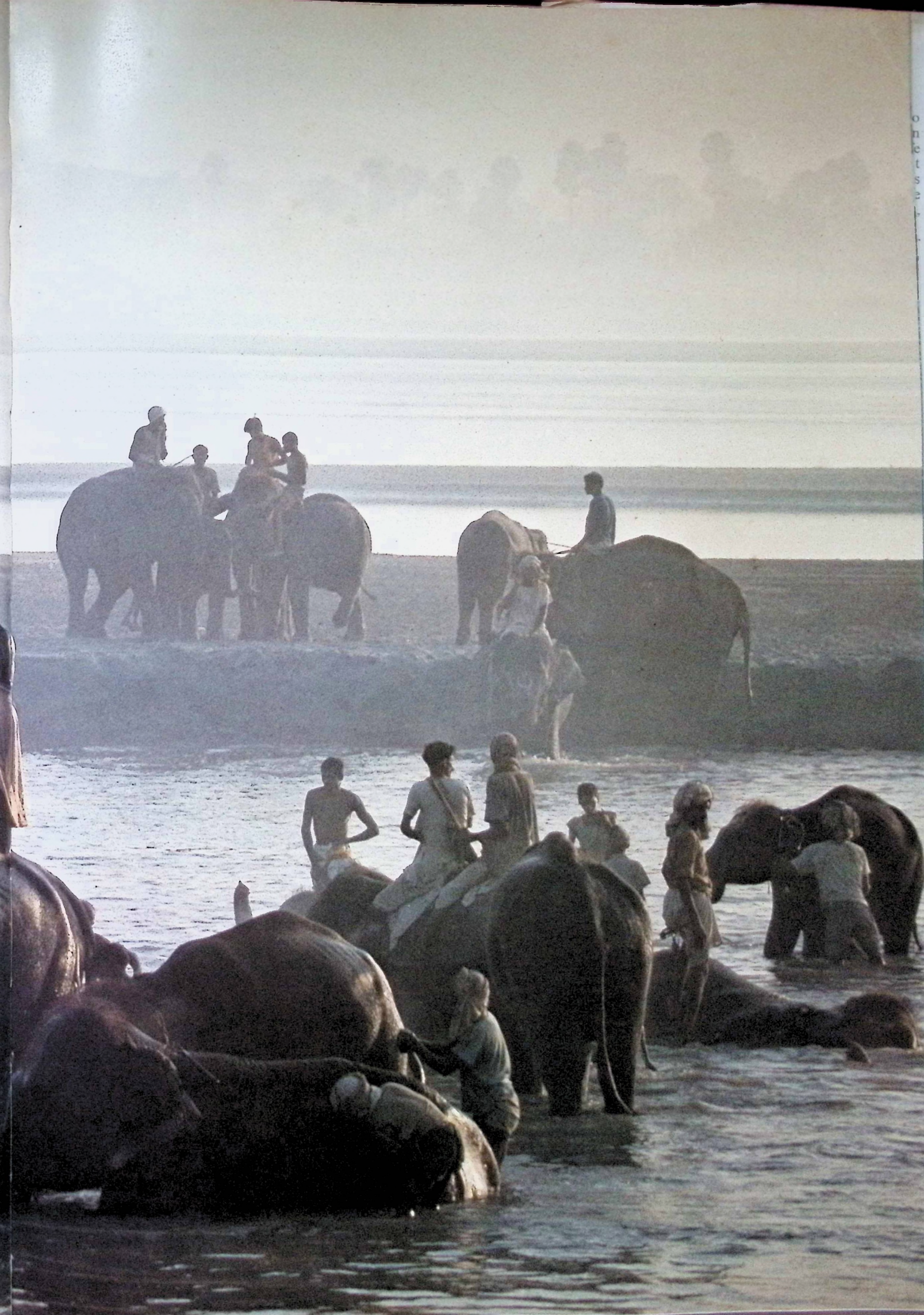
Crowds climb to the top of the Gola. Patna.



From the top of the Gola villagers take in the majestic view of the Ganga. Under its sands is buried Pataliputra, the capital city of the great Emperor Asoka who reigned from 273 B.C. to 232 B.C. and spread Buddhism beyond the frontiers of India.

(*overleaf*) Elephants are bathed on the Gandak just above its confluence with the Ganga at Sonepur during a fair which commemorates a fight between Gajendra (lord of elephants) and a huge crocodile. Elephants are associated with rainfall and bountiful crops. Ganesh, the elephant-headed deity, is a symbol of prosperity.





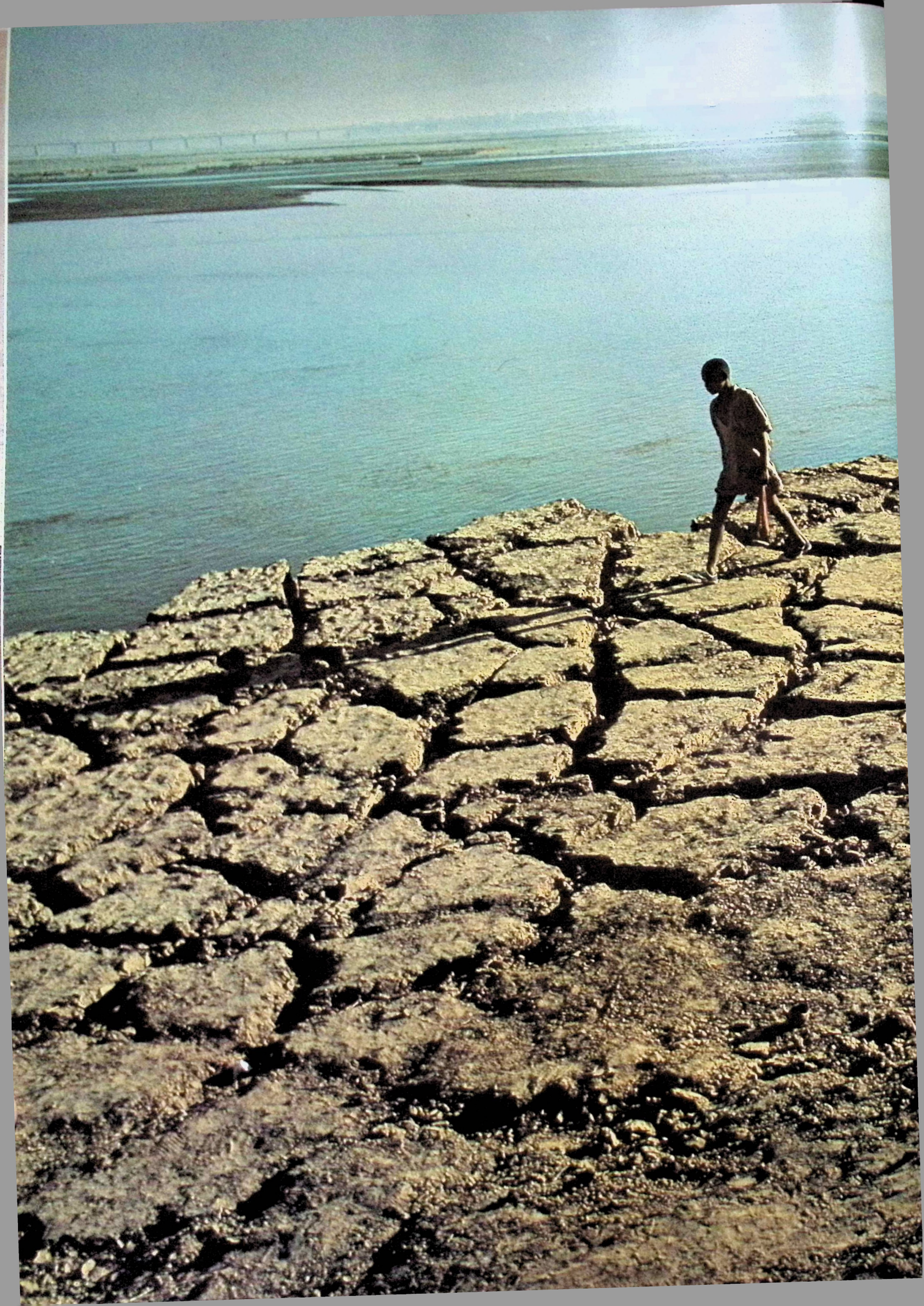


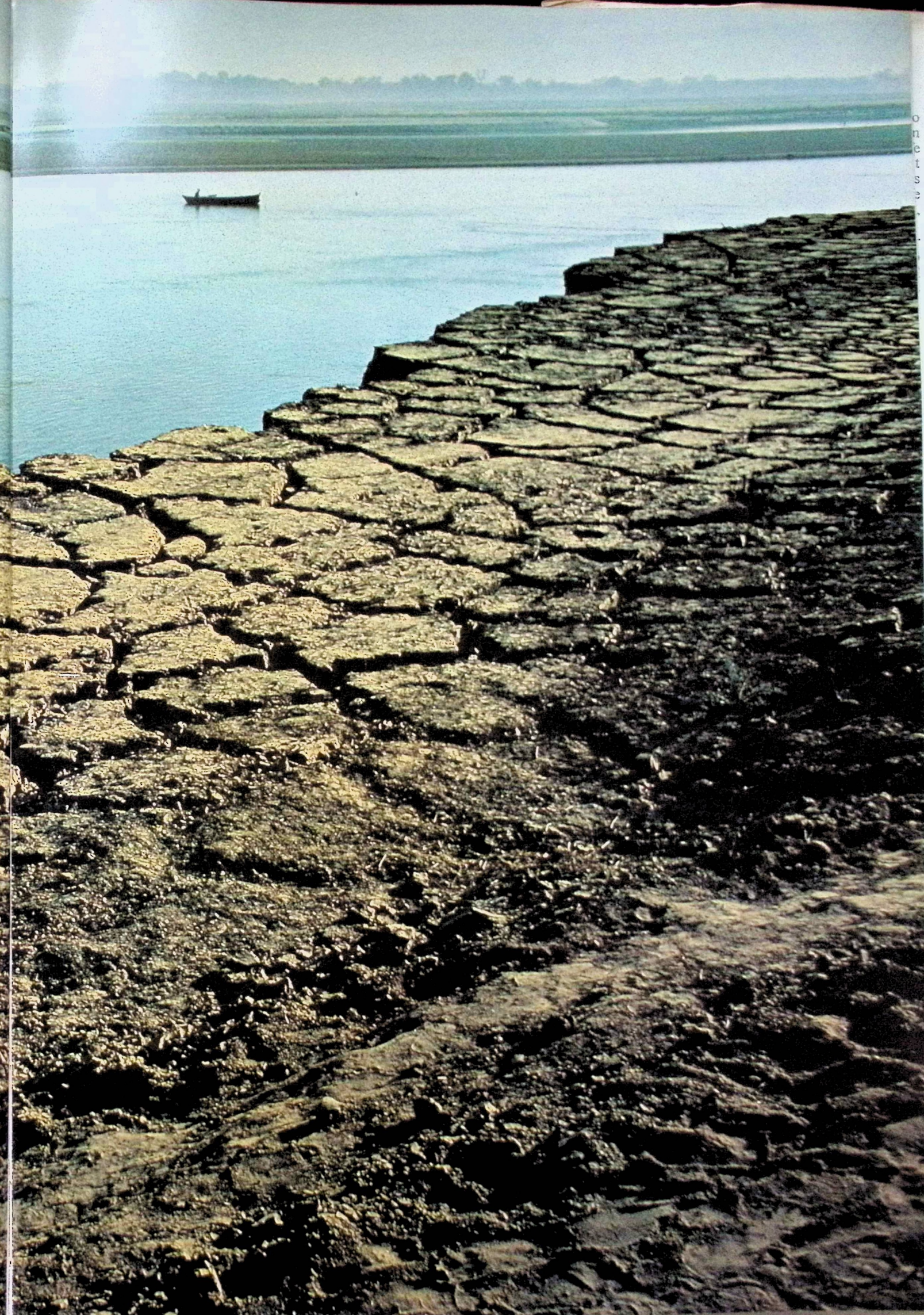
Elephants bathe in the background as a young mahout (elephant driver) lies dead, trampled by an elephant in musth. Sonepur.

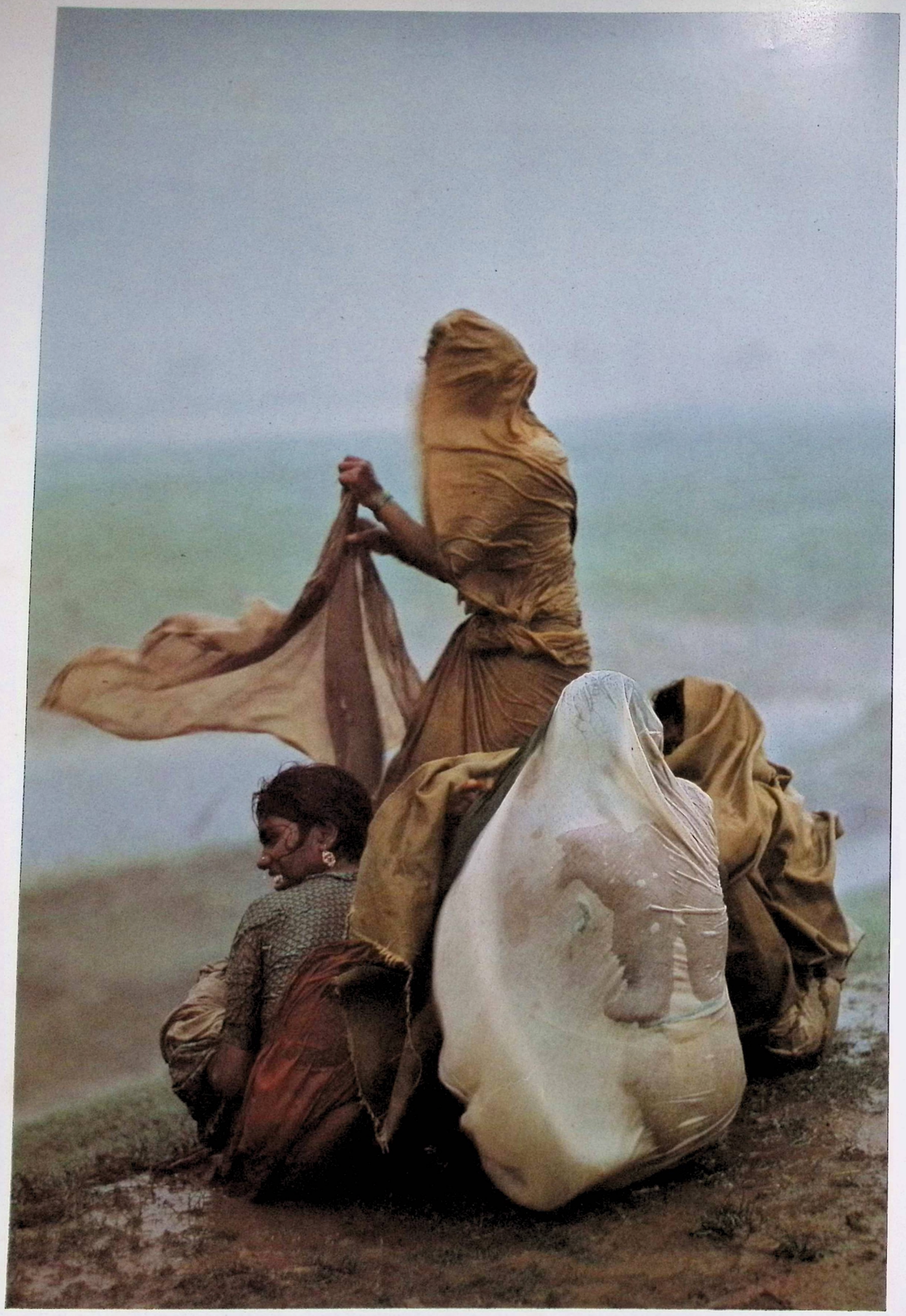


During a heavy sand-storm on the Ganga sandbanks a villager rushes home past a drydocked boat. Uttar Pradesh.

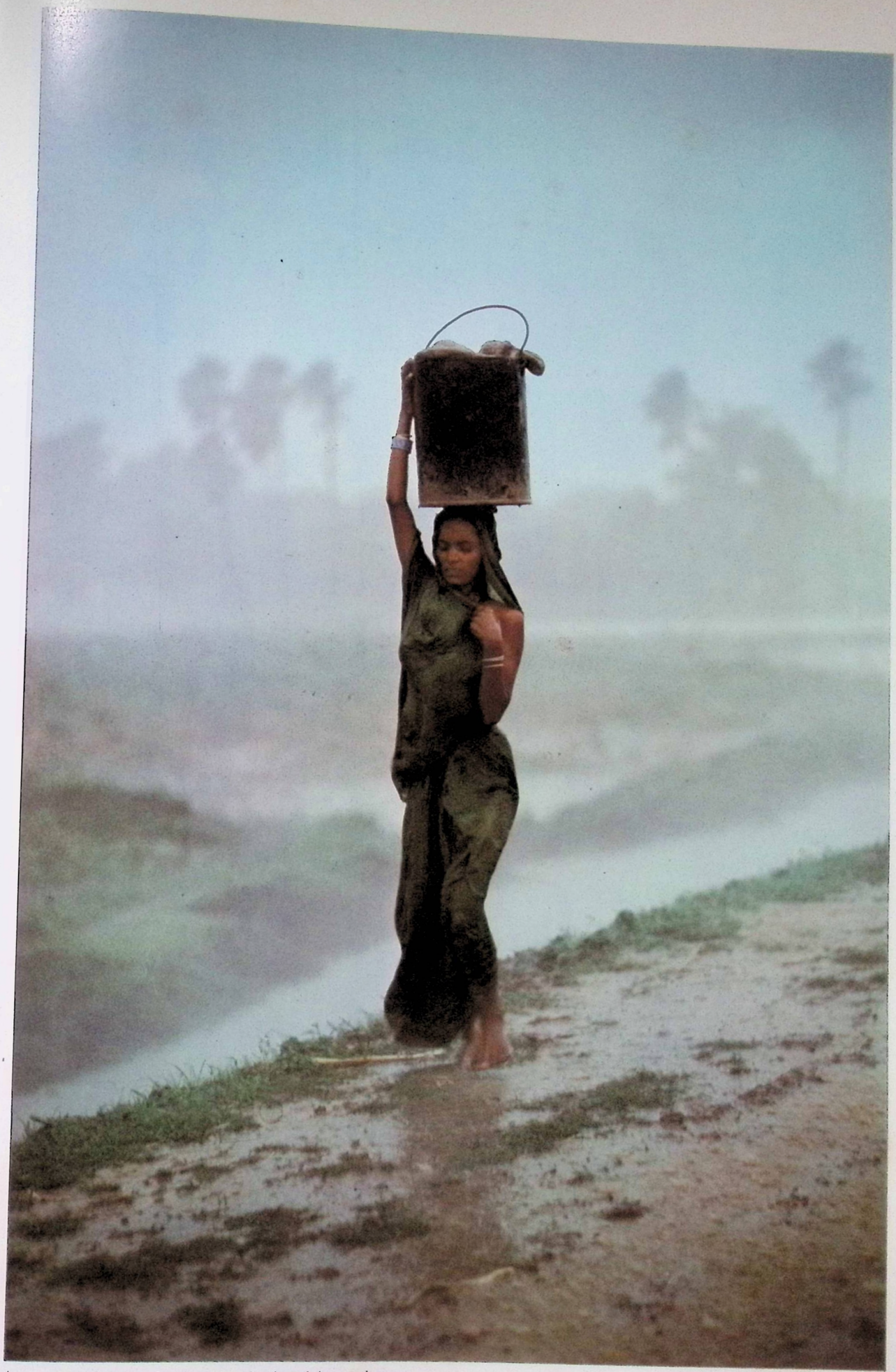
(overleaf) A villager walks over the cracked banks of the river in Uttar Pradesh.



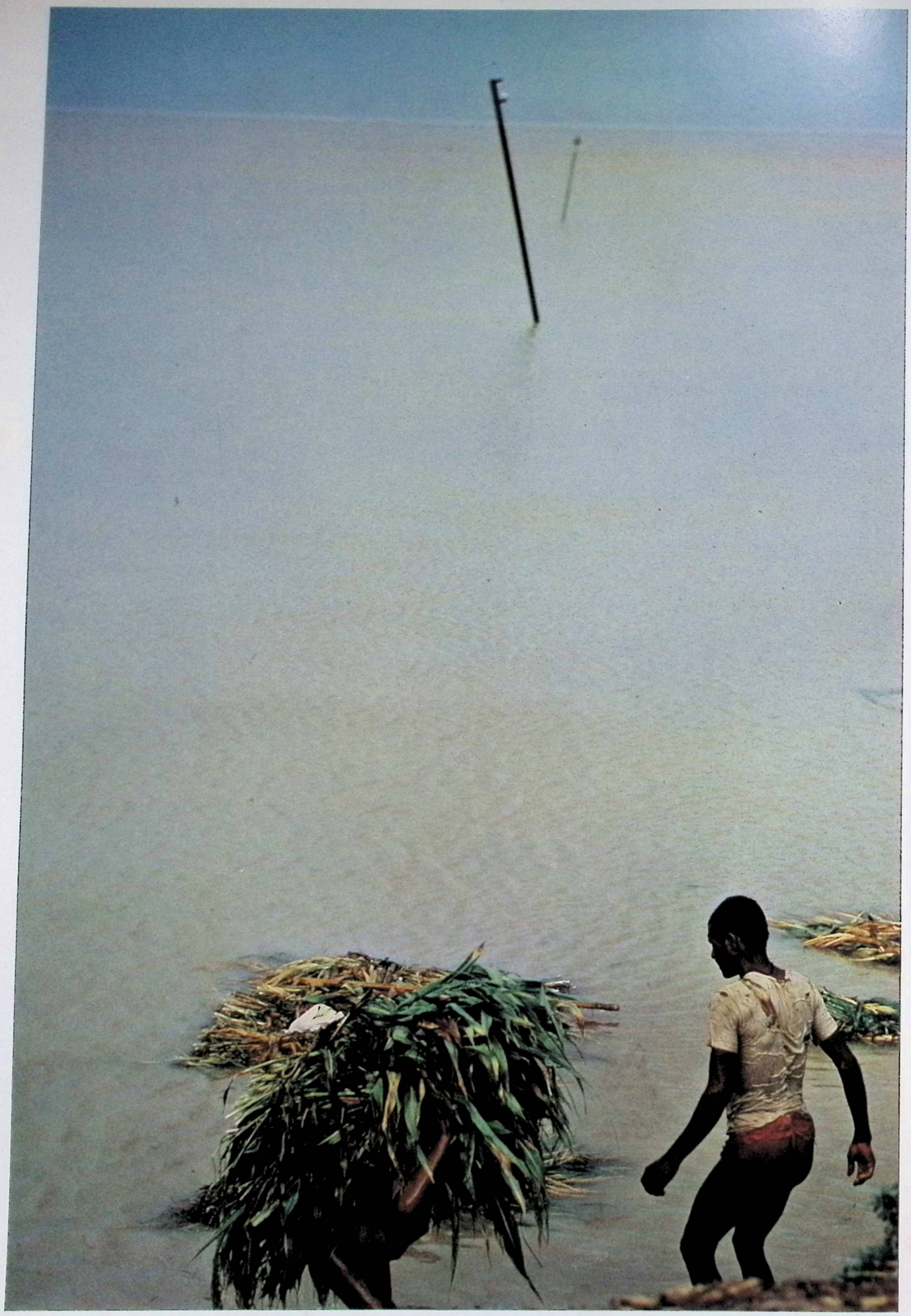




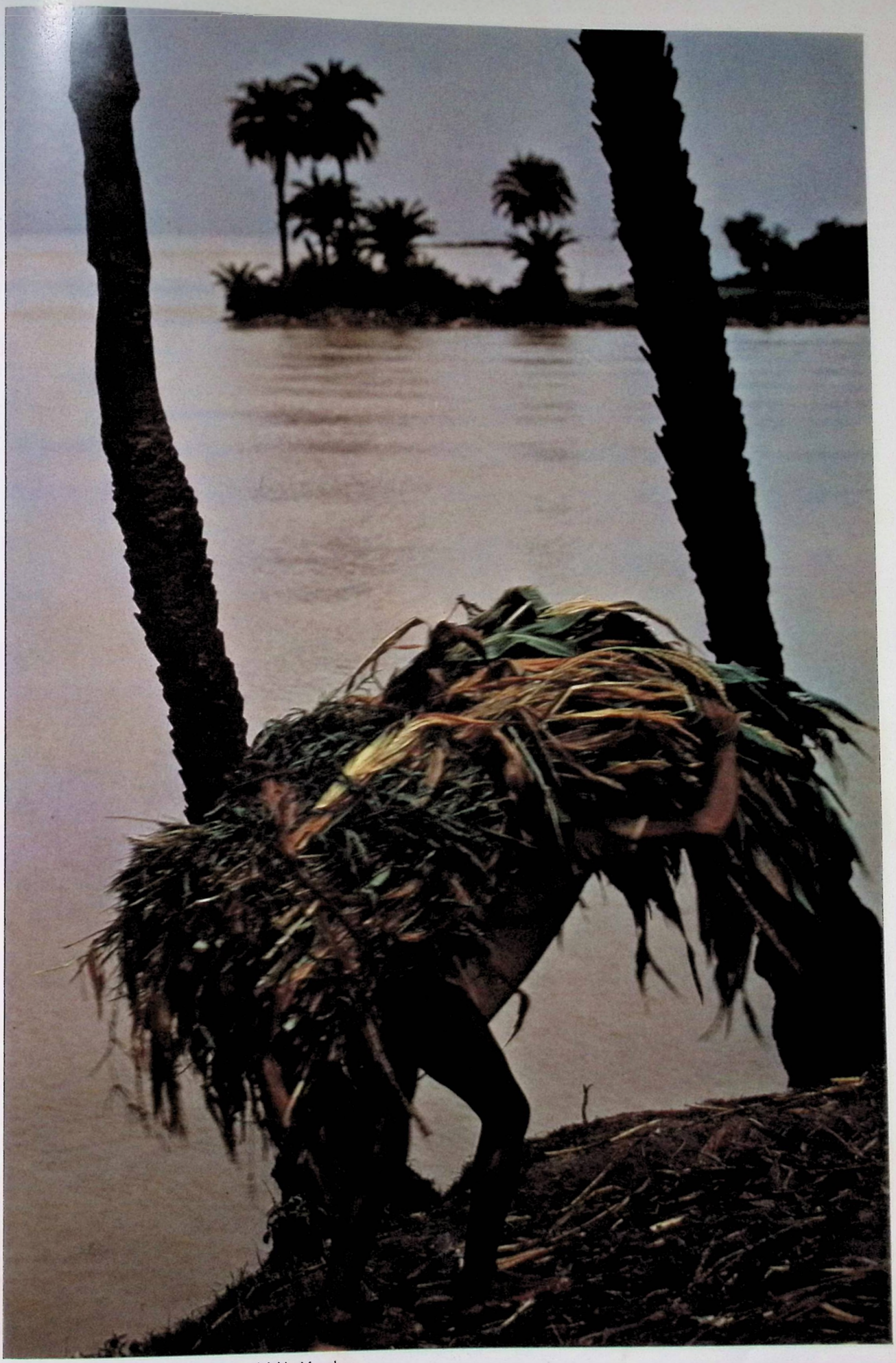
Women huddle together on high ground above their fields threatened by the rising Ganga waters at Monghyr, as heavy rain whips their saris.



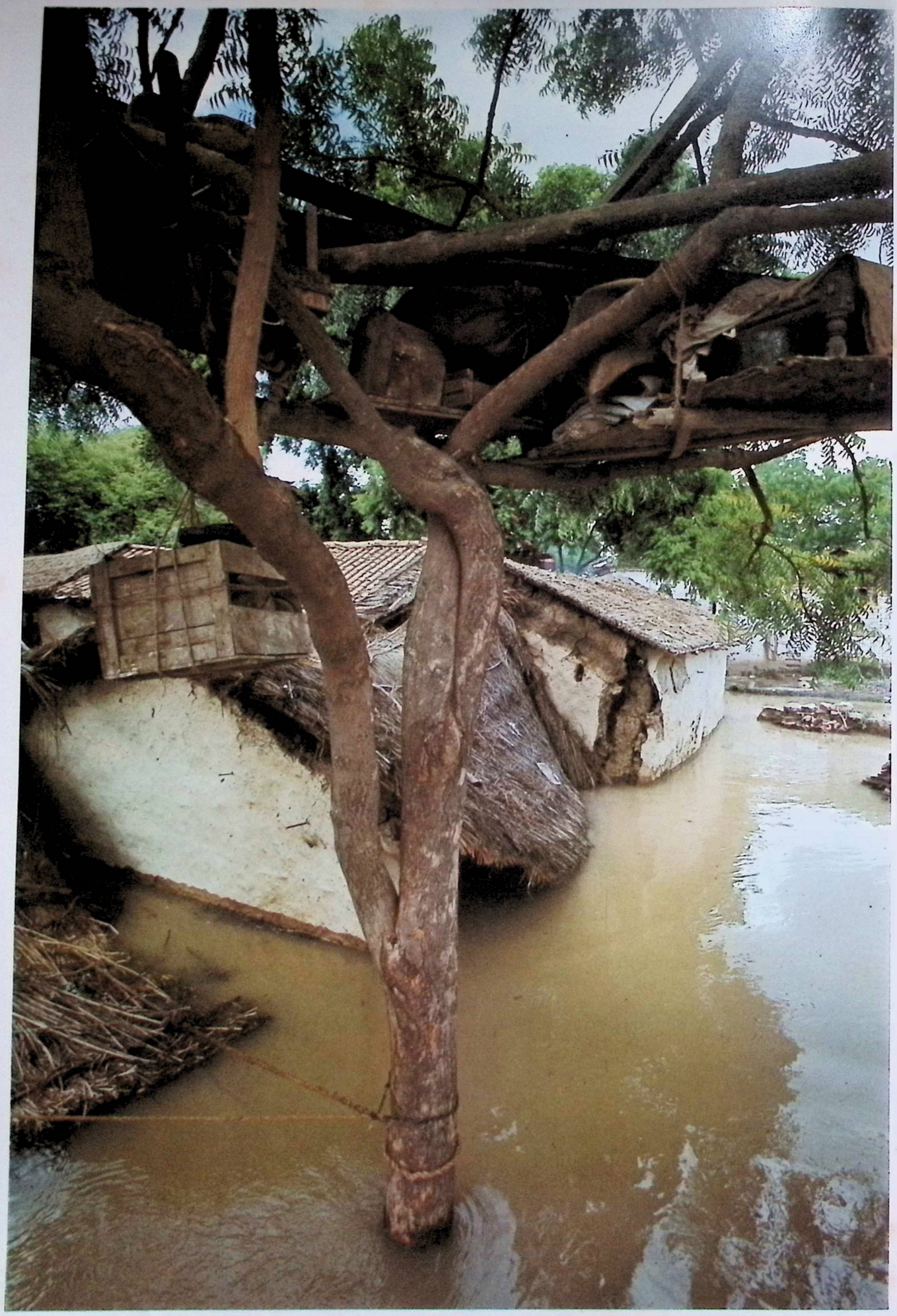
A woman carrying wheat flour in a can walks through heavy rain past submerged fields. Monghyr. Bihar.



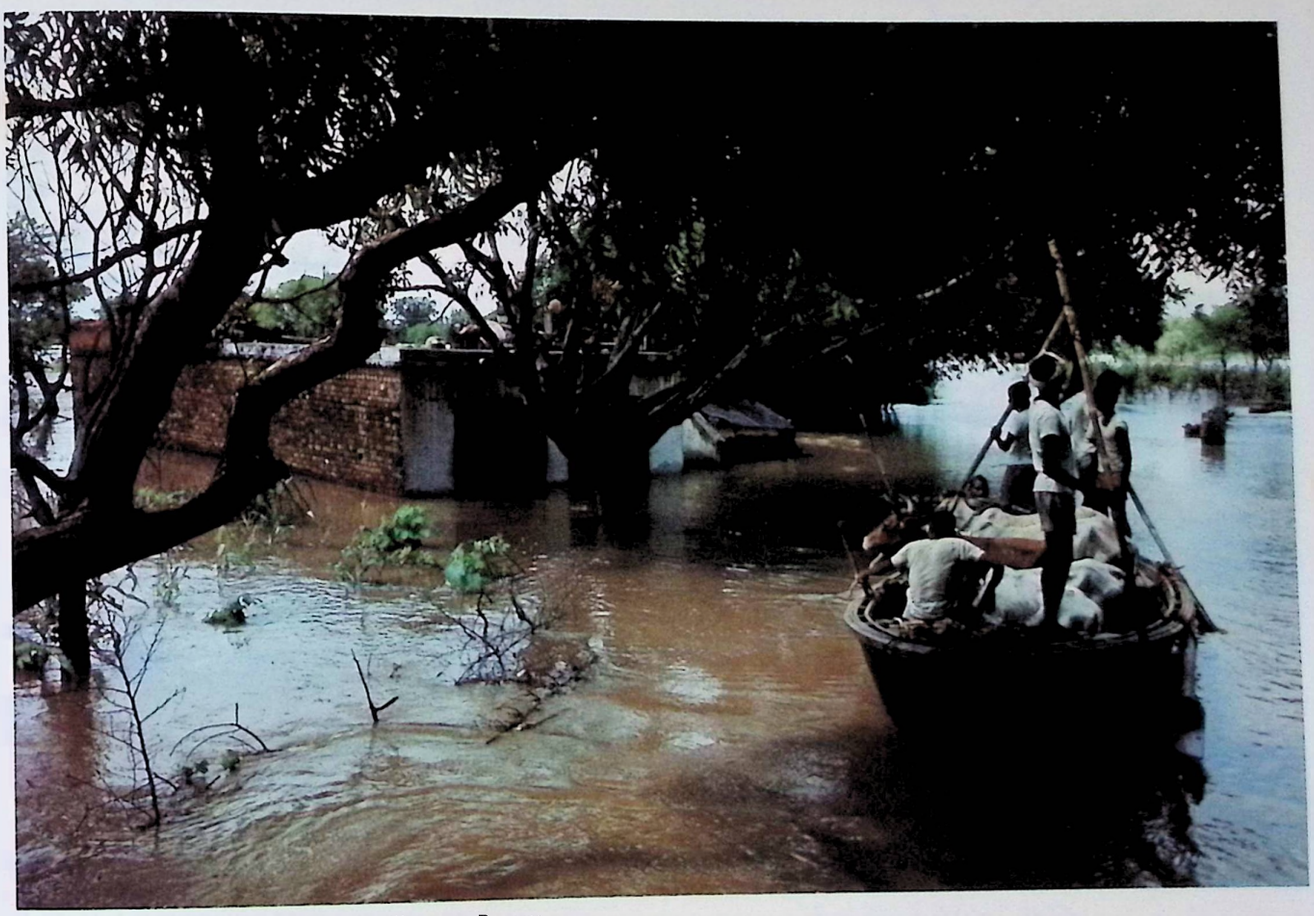
At Monghyr, the Ganga has submerged fields and power lines. Farmers retrieve maize from their fields.



A villager retrieves maize from his submerged fields. Monghyr.



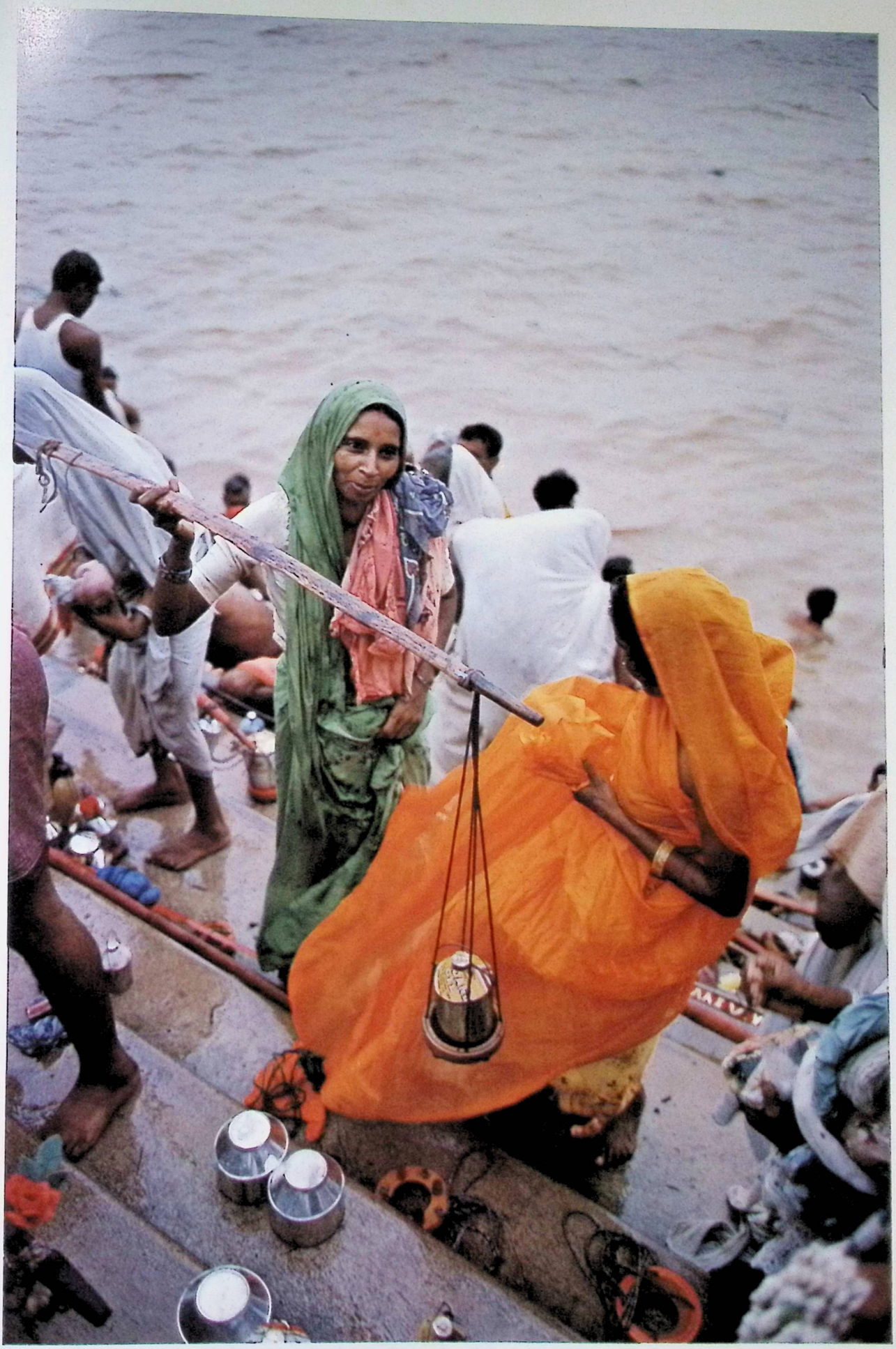
Their mud huts flooded and destroyed, villagers have left their belongings on trees in a village below Banaras.



Men and cattle are ferried out of a flooded village near Banaras.



In the monsoon a boatload of pilgrims cross the river at Sultanganj.



Women collect Ganga water. Sultanganj.

(*overleaf*) During a great flood at Banaras, fallen trees and power lines block a street. The swollen Ganga is seen in the background.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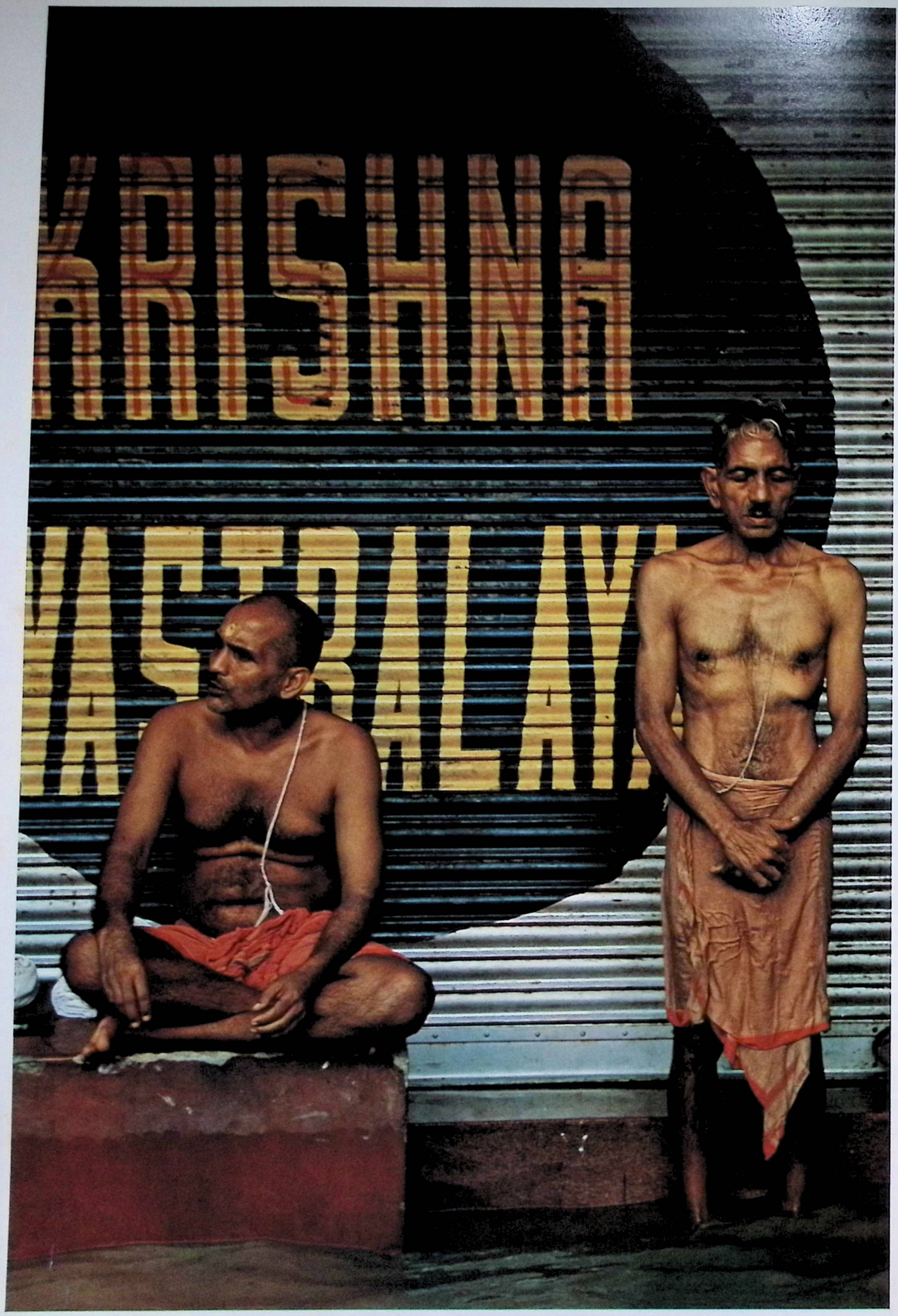


Two men wearing the sacred thread pray before a shop front during floods. Banaras.



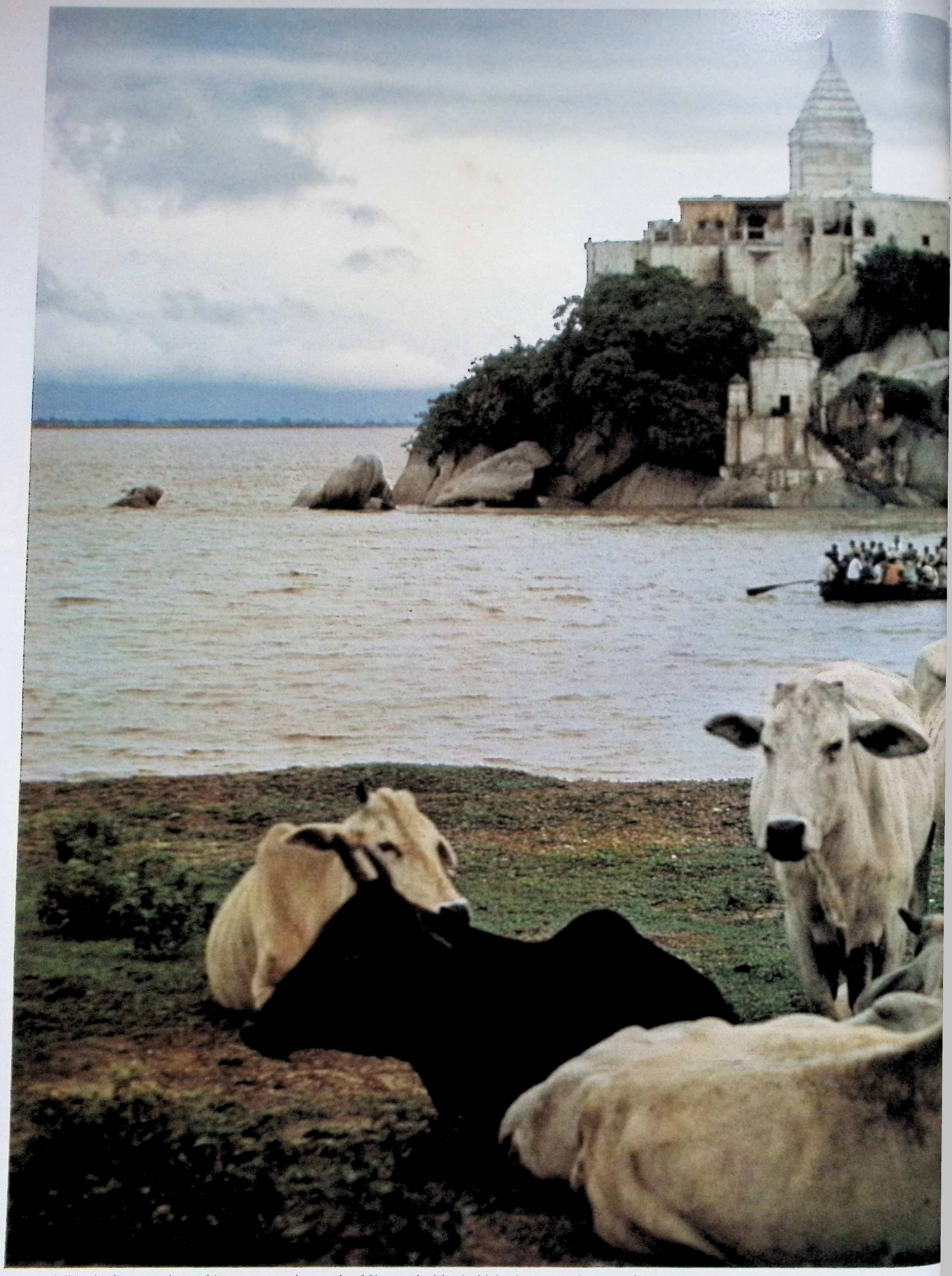
Before closed shops a man sleeps, unconcerned about the rising floods. Banaras.



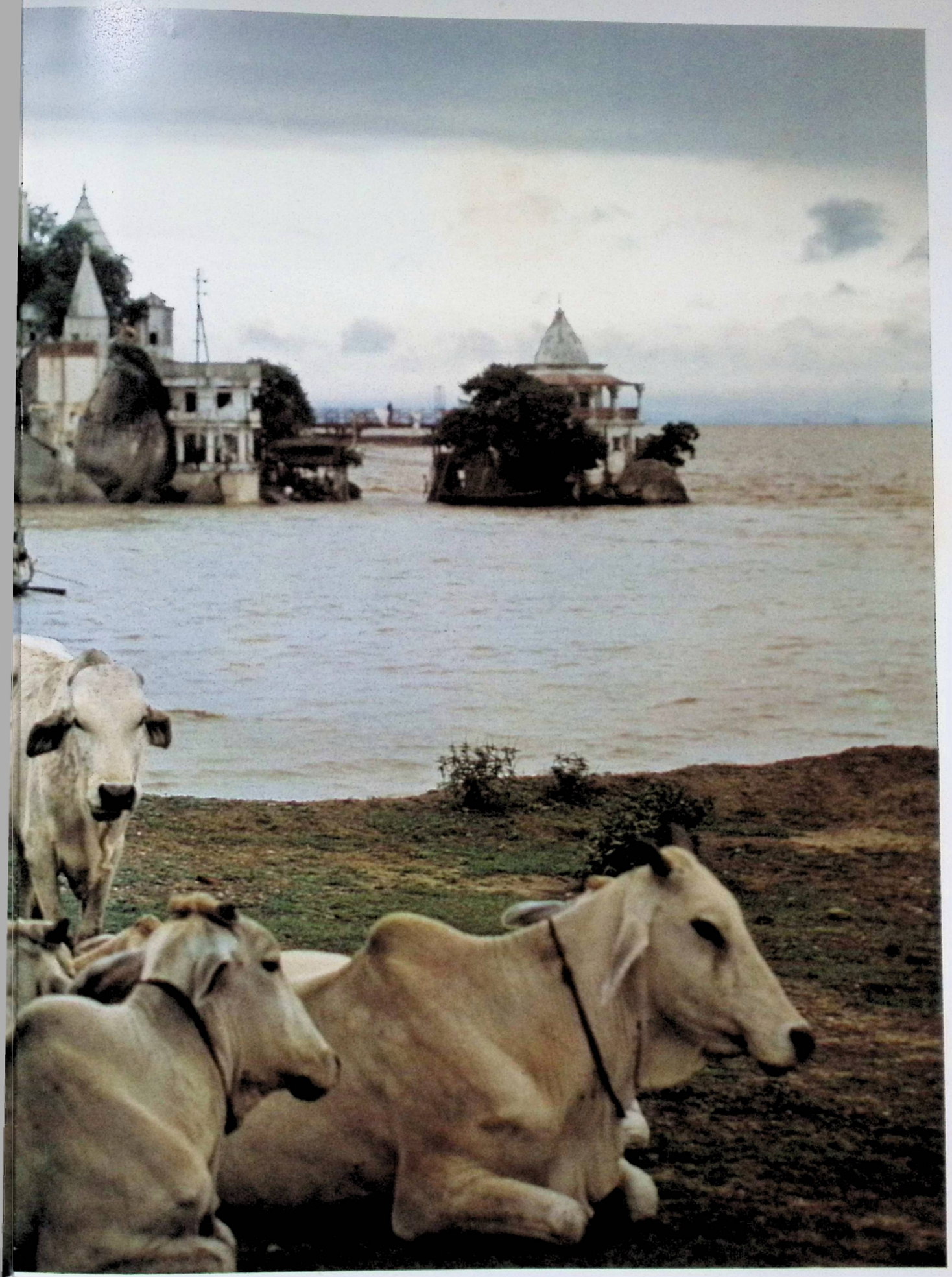
Two men play chess waiting for the floods to abate. Banaras.

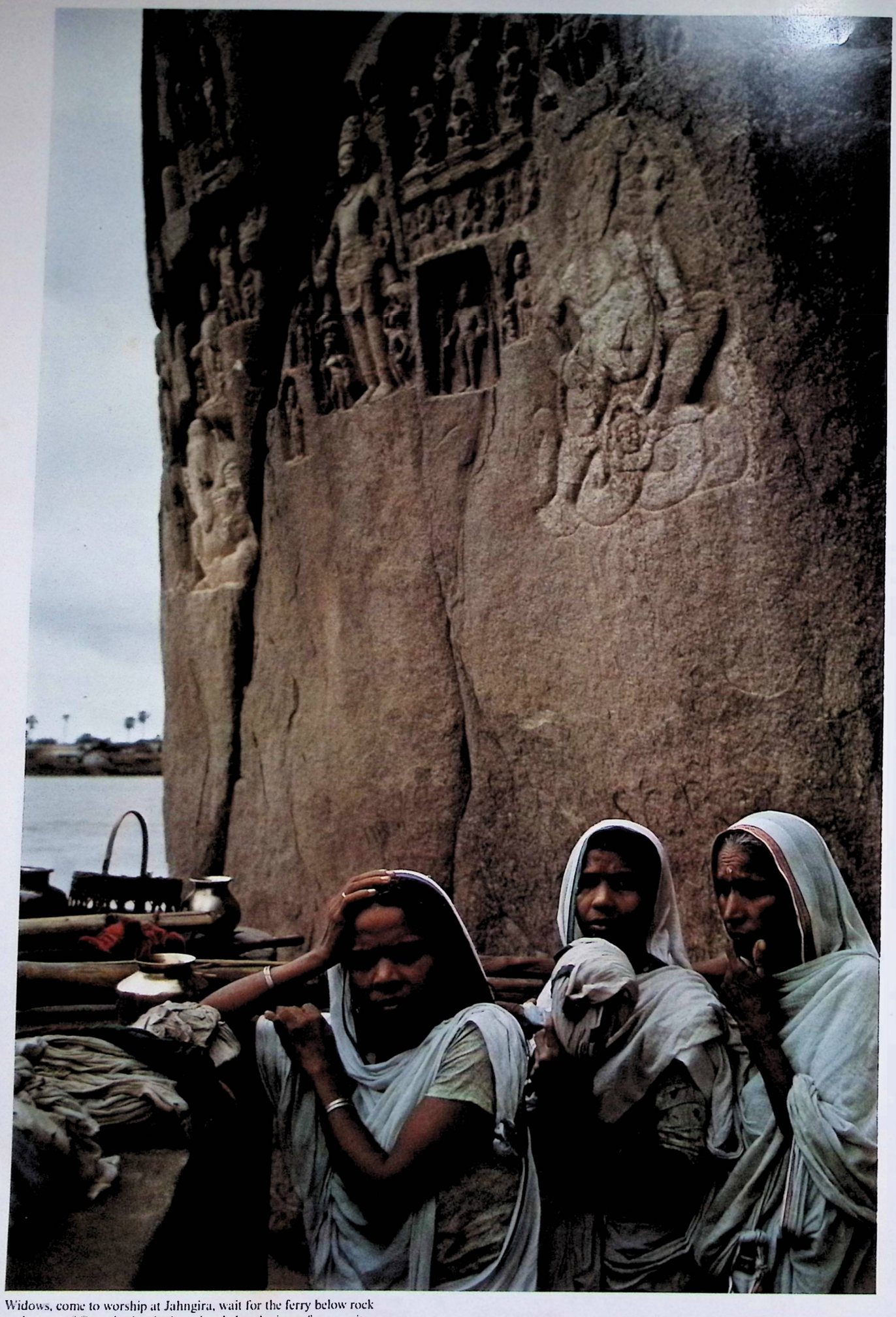


A merchant and his submerged rickshaws. Banaras.

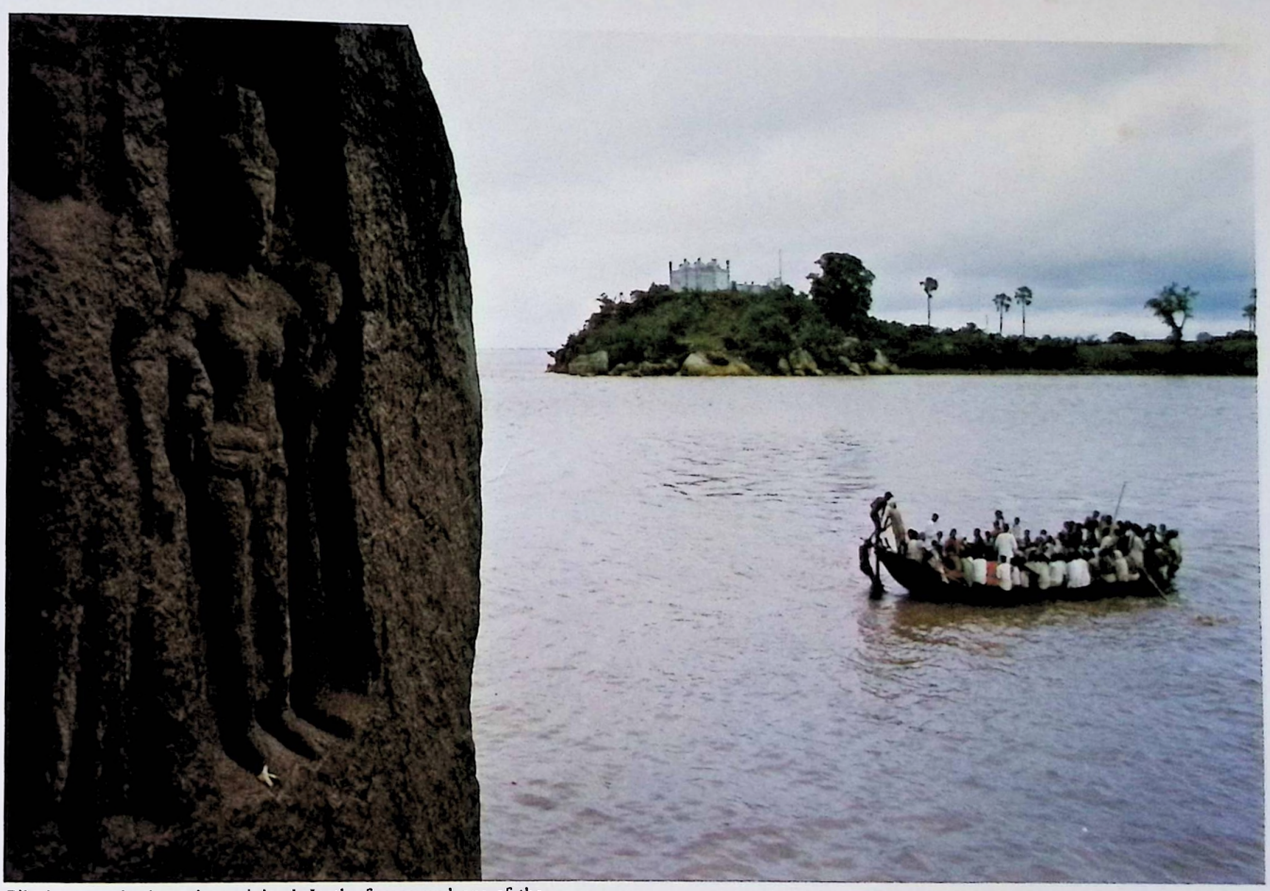


As cows loll in the foreground, worshippers row to the temple of Siva on the island of Jahngira, a sacred spot on the Ganga at Uttar Bahini, the reach where the river turns north.





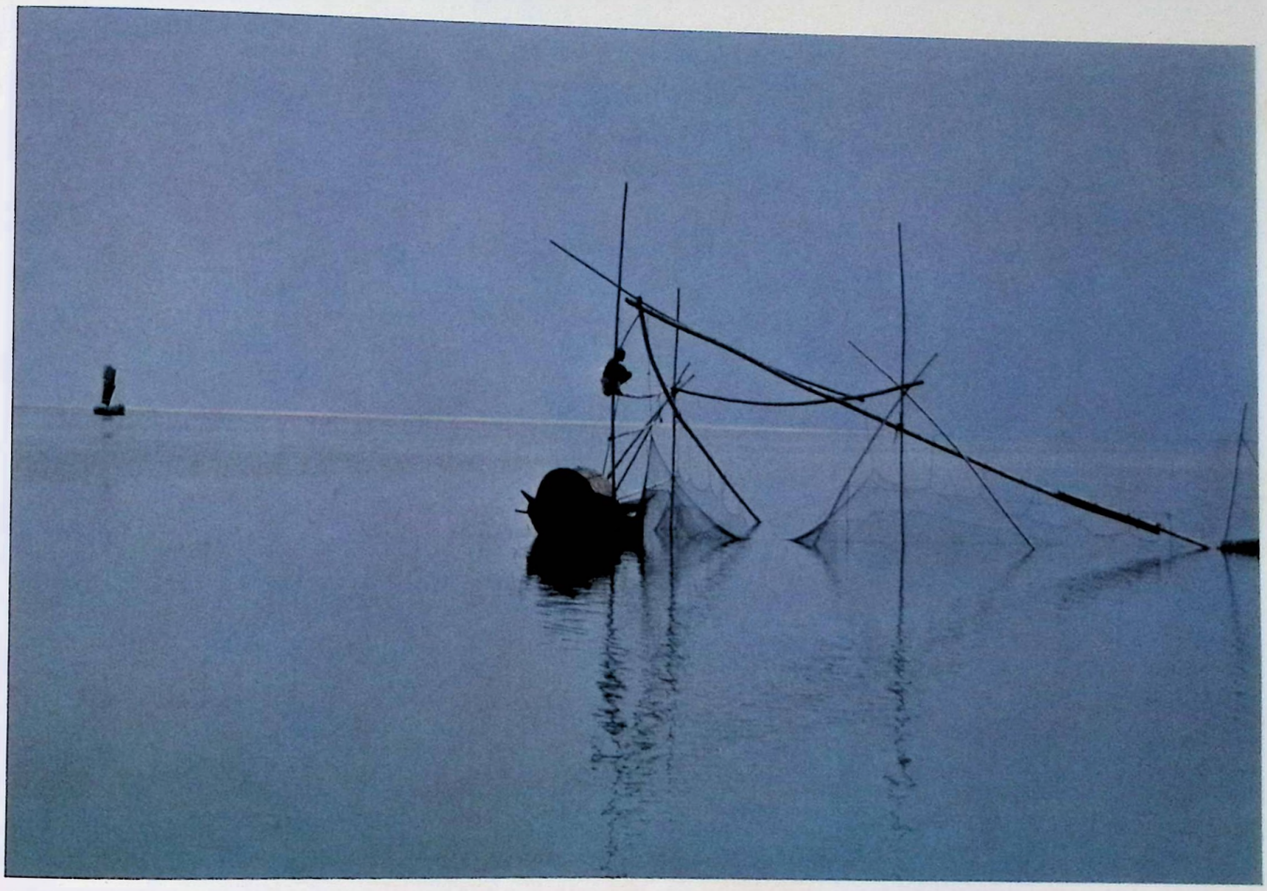
Widows, come to worship at Jahngira, wait for the ferry below rock sculptures of Ganesh, the elephant-headed god, giver of prosperity; Vishnu the preserver; and the third incarnation of Vishnu, Varaha the boar, bearing in the crook of his arm the goddess Prithvi, the earth, which he rescued.



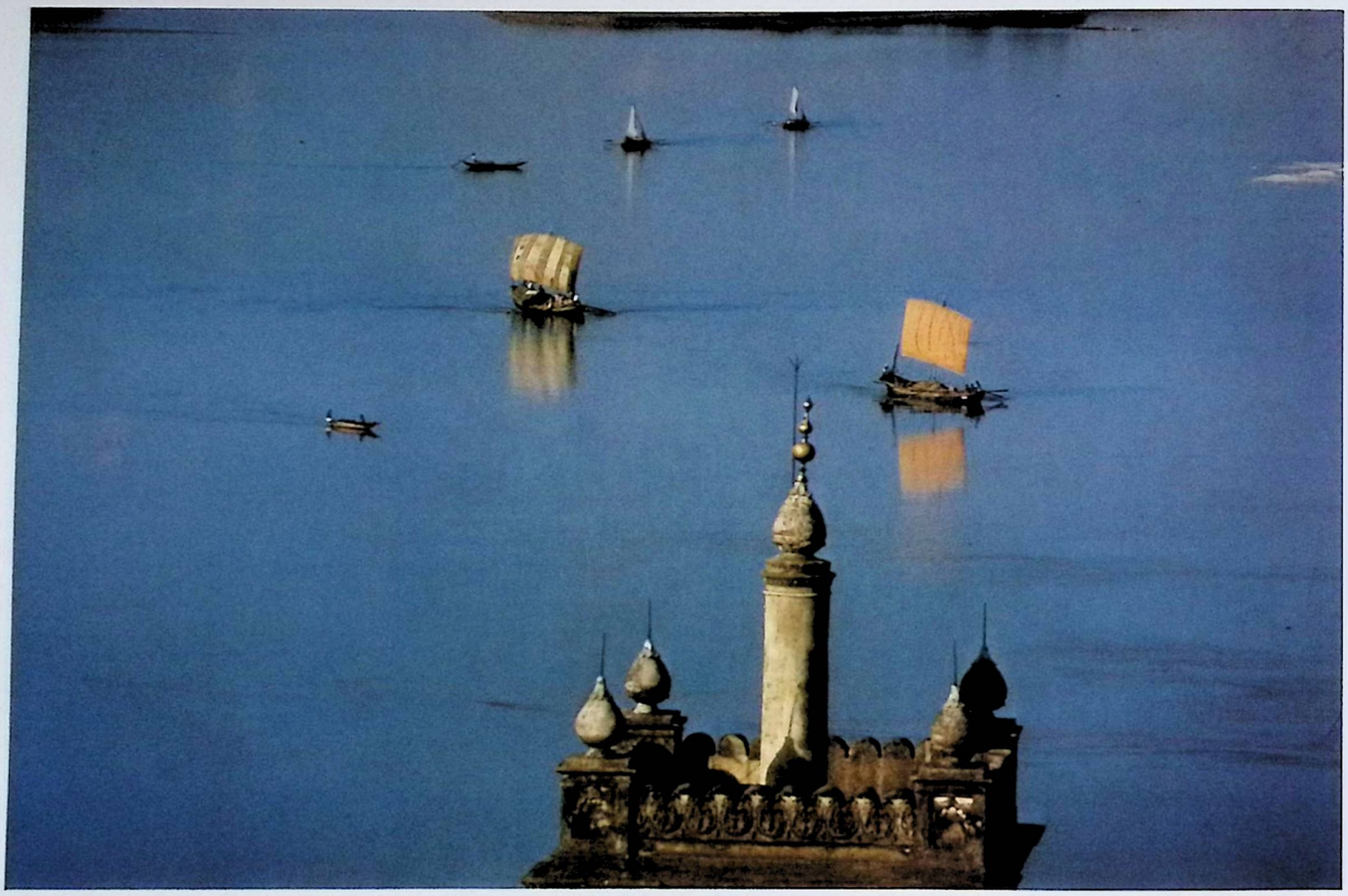
Pilgrims row back to the mainland. In the foreground one of the sixth century rock sculptures on Jahngira.



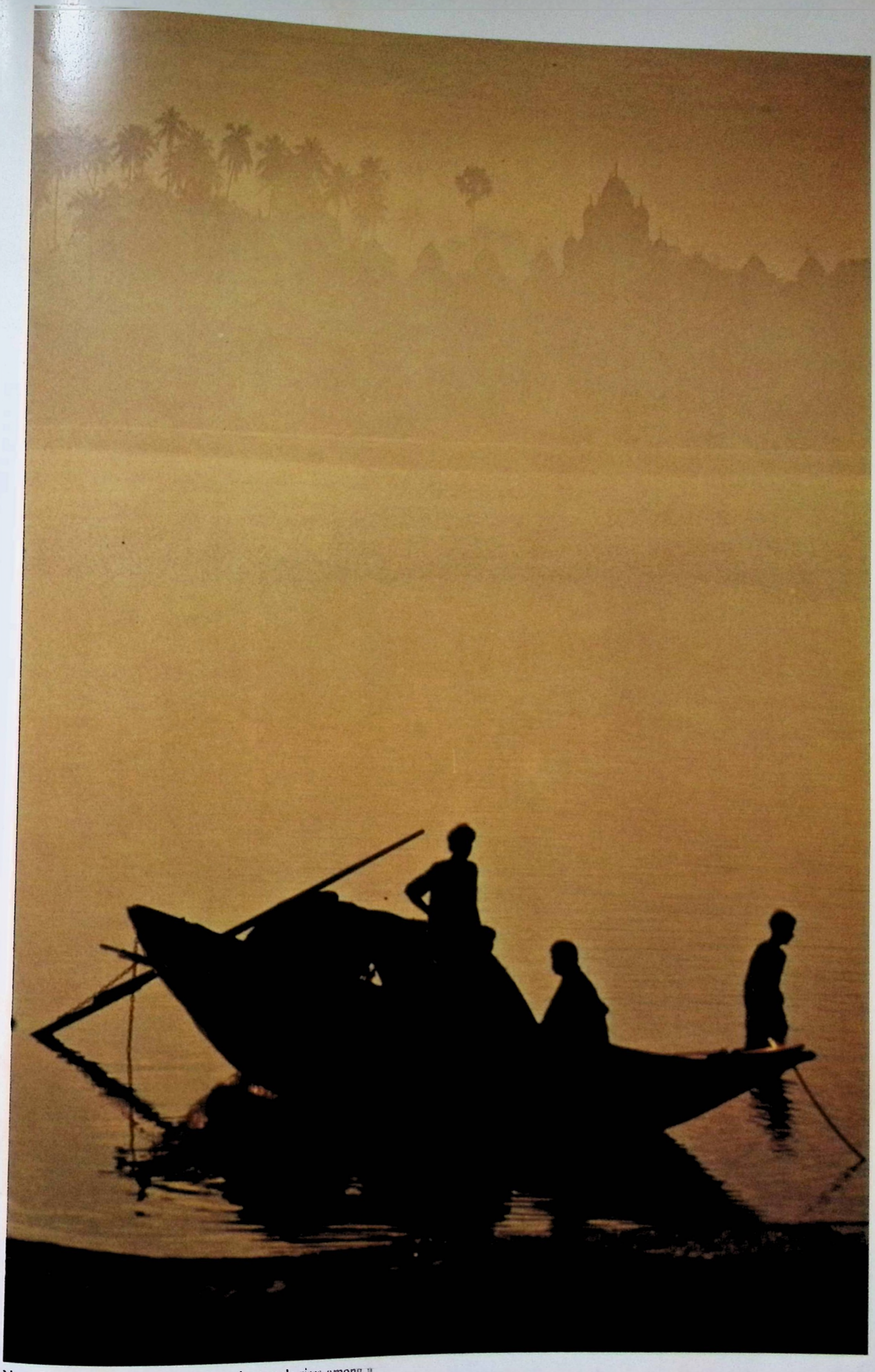
Three boatmen strain to pull their boat upstream near the border of Bihar and Bengal.



At Nimtita in West Bengal, just above the point where the Ganga divides into two streams, the Bhagirathi and the Padma, a fisherman perches above his net. Further out, a sailboat passes a sandbank a short distance from the Bangladesh border.

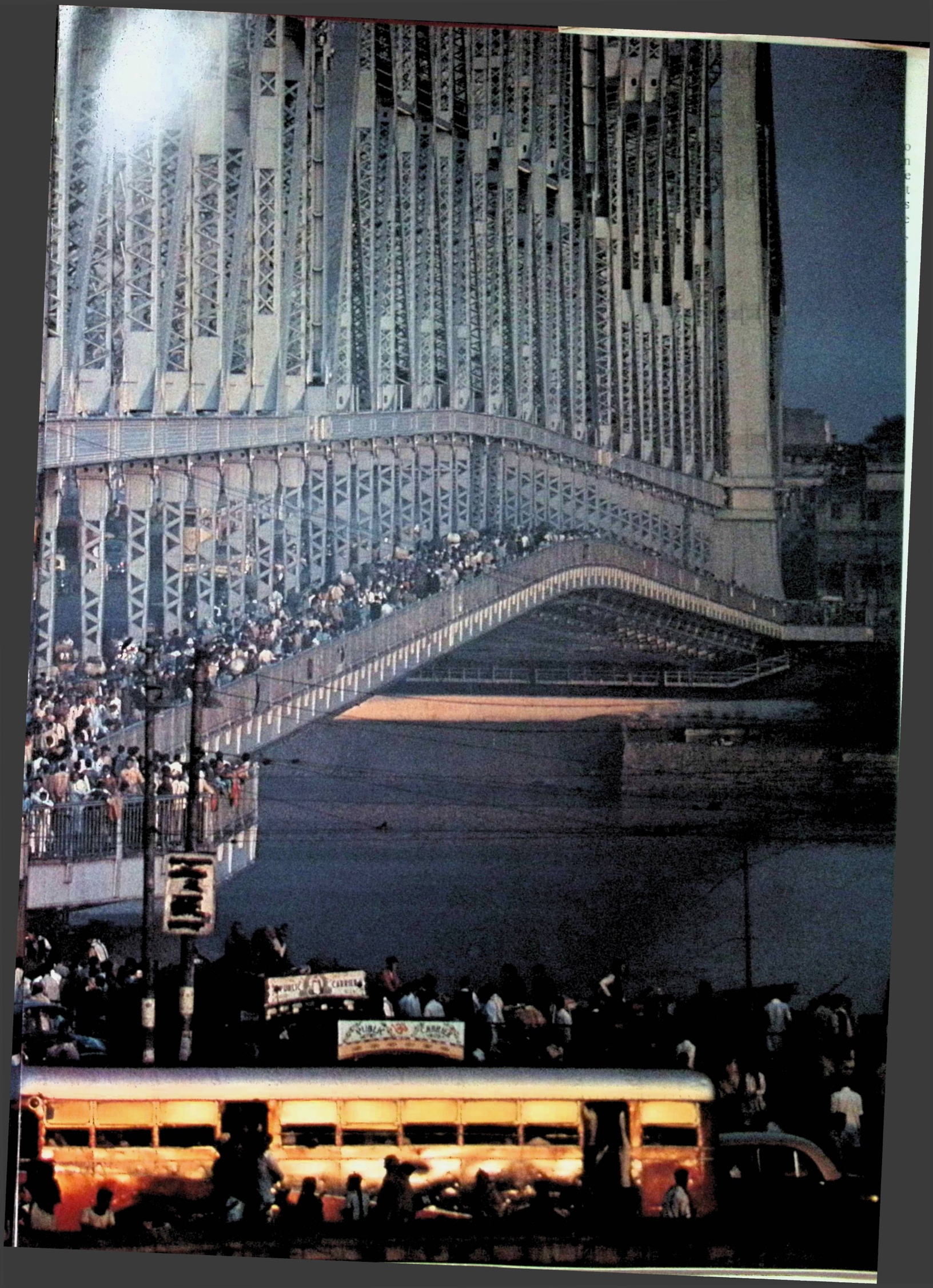


The minaret of the Imambara at Hooghly, between Bandel and Chinsura, overlooks a bend in the river.



Near Chandernagore, boatmen bathe and a temple rises among a grove of palm trees across the Hooghly.

(*overleaf*) The 27,000-ton cantilever Howrah Bridge, built in 1943. Half a million people on foot, in trams, buses, rickshaws and vehicles of every kind commute daily between Howrah and Calcutta, founded in 1690, today India's greatest metropolis.

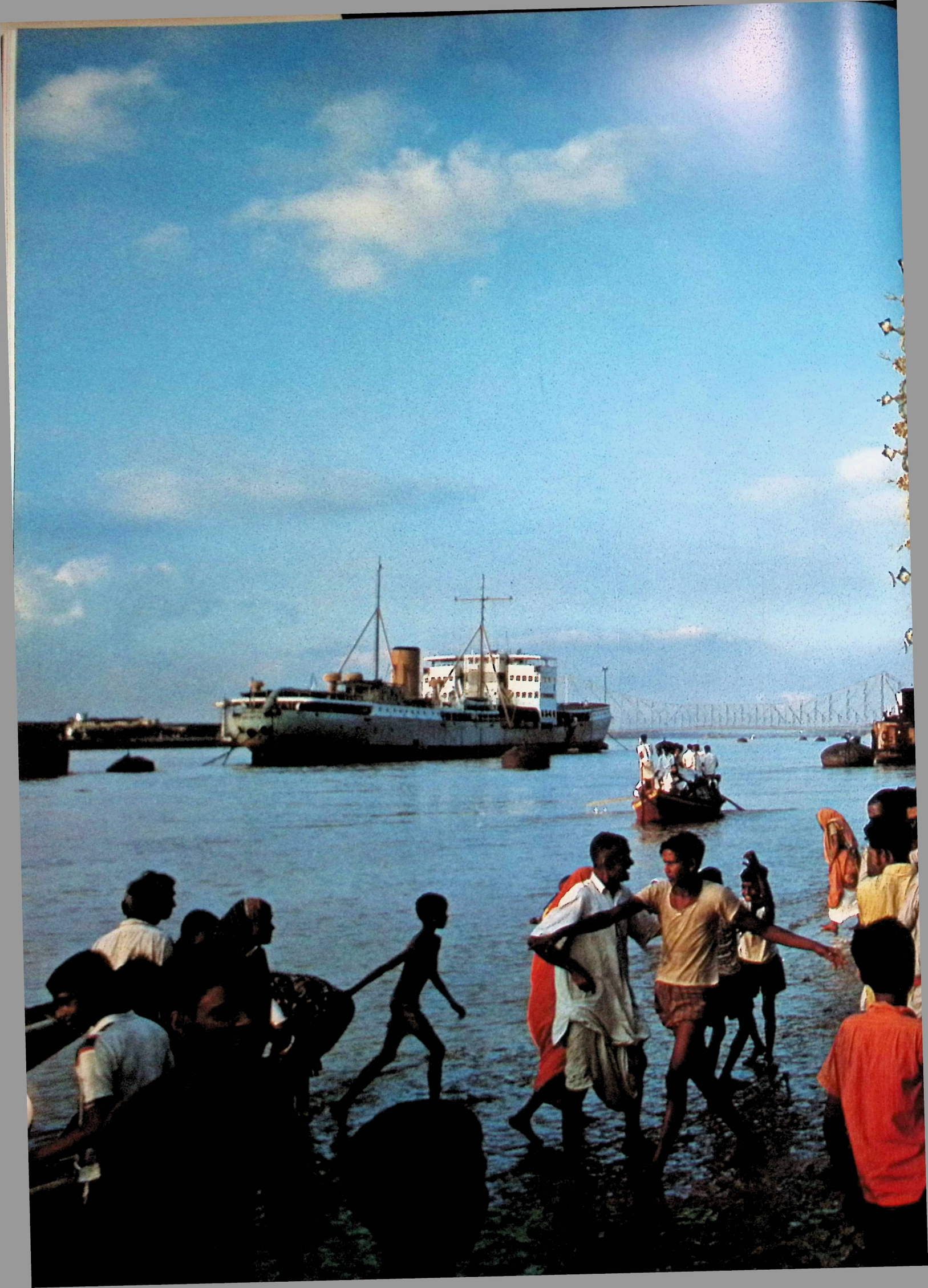




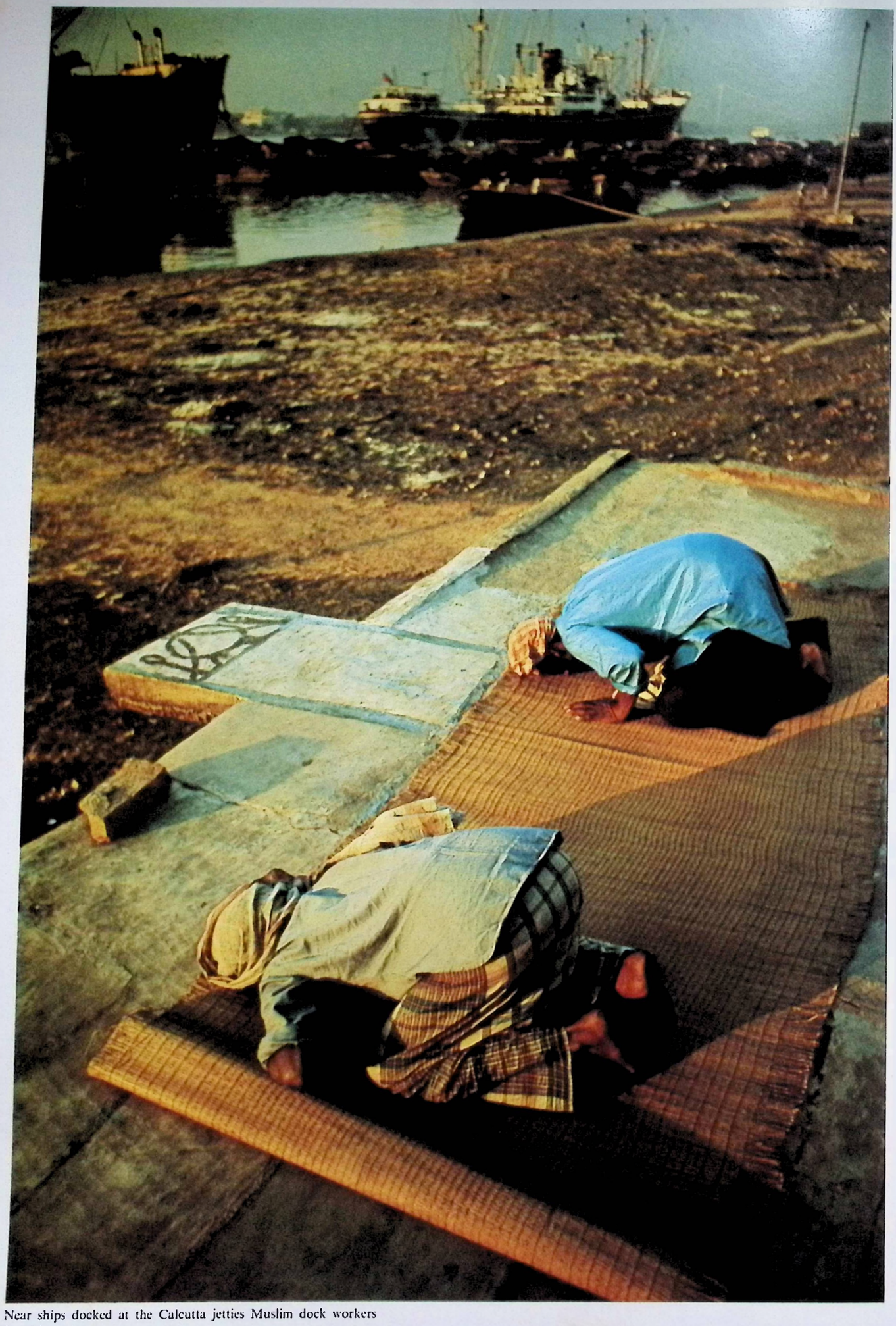
Pedestrians cross the Bascule Bridge in Kidderpore Docks as smoke drifts from cooking fires of dock workers living on barges. The eastward shift of the main channel of the Ganga from the Hooghly to the Padma has slowly increased the frequency of tidal bores to about 144 a year; 100 million cubic feet of silt are deposited annually in the upper reaches of the Hooghly. The Farraka Barrage is to flush the Hooghly and a deep water port has been built at Haldia, 65 miles downstream.



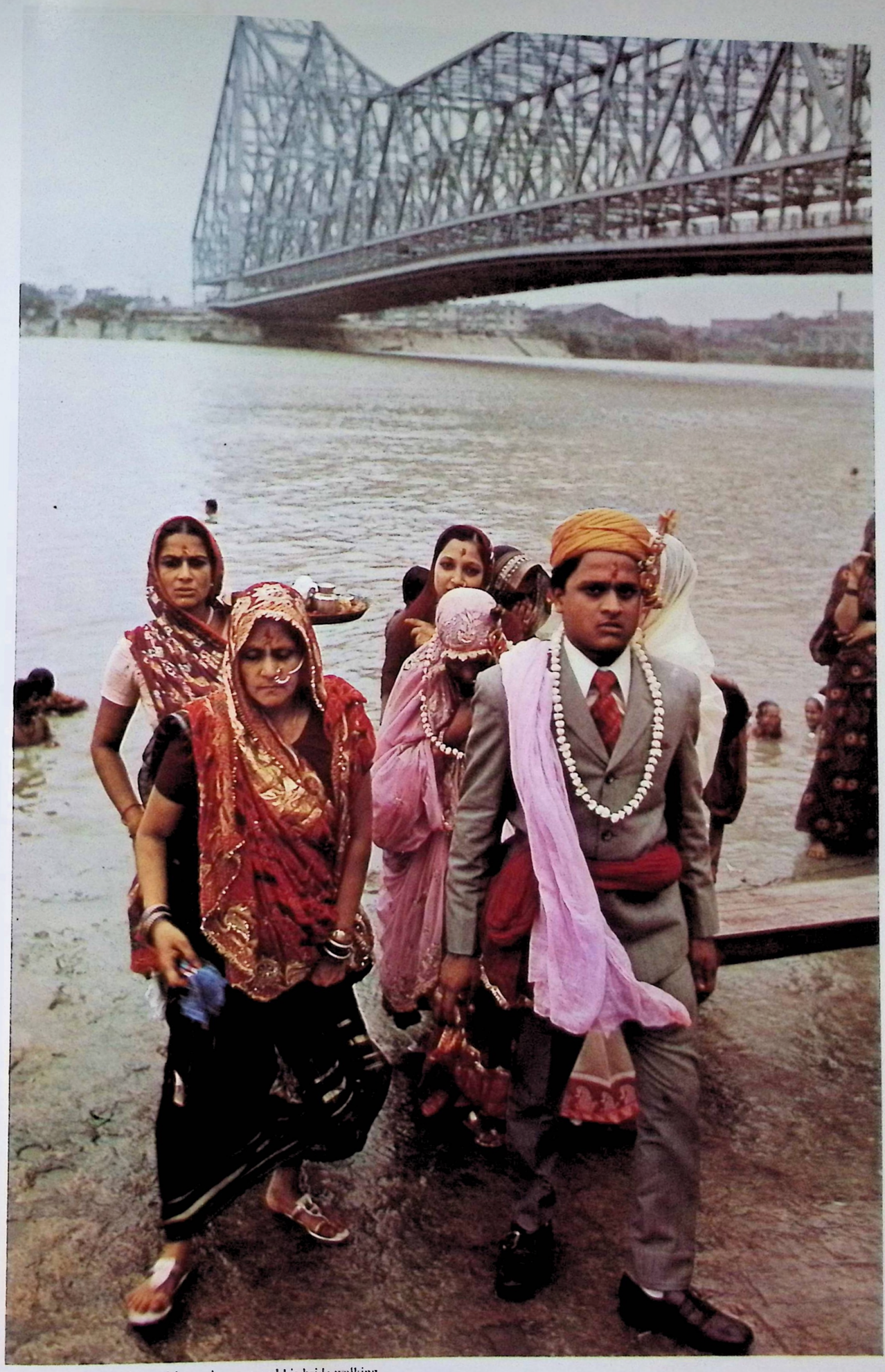
(*overleaf*) The clay image of Bengal's principal deity, Durga, born fully-grown and beautiful and representing the affirmative forces of the universe, is shown destroying the demon Mahisha who threatened to dispossess the gods. She carries in each of her arms one of the gods' weapons. This image and hundreds of others will be thrown into the Hooghly at Calcutta.





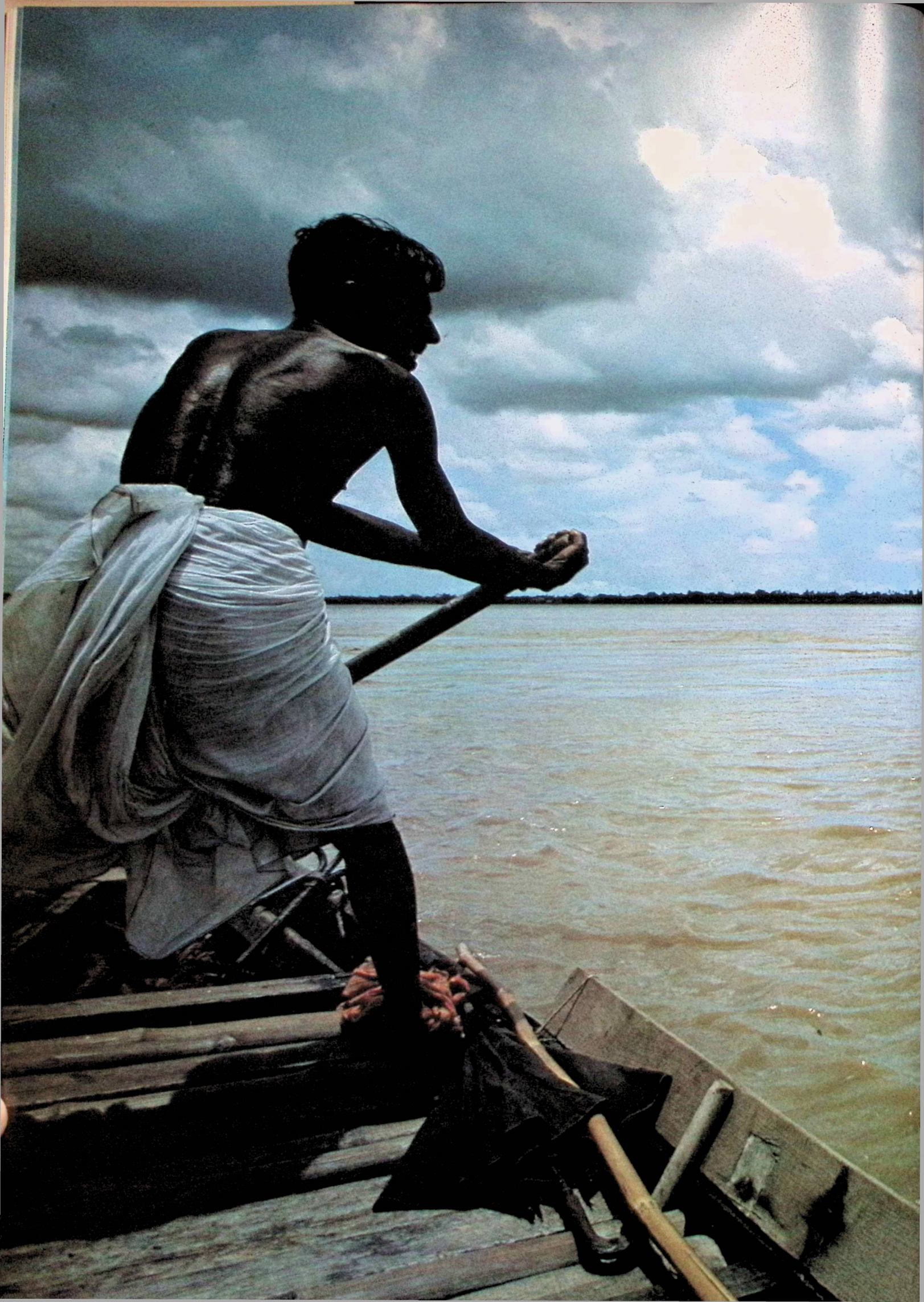


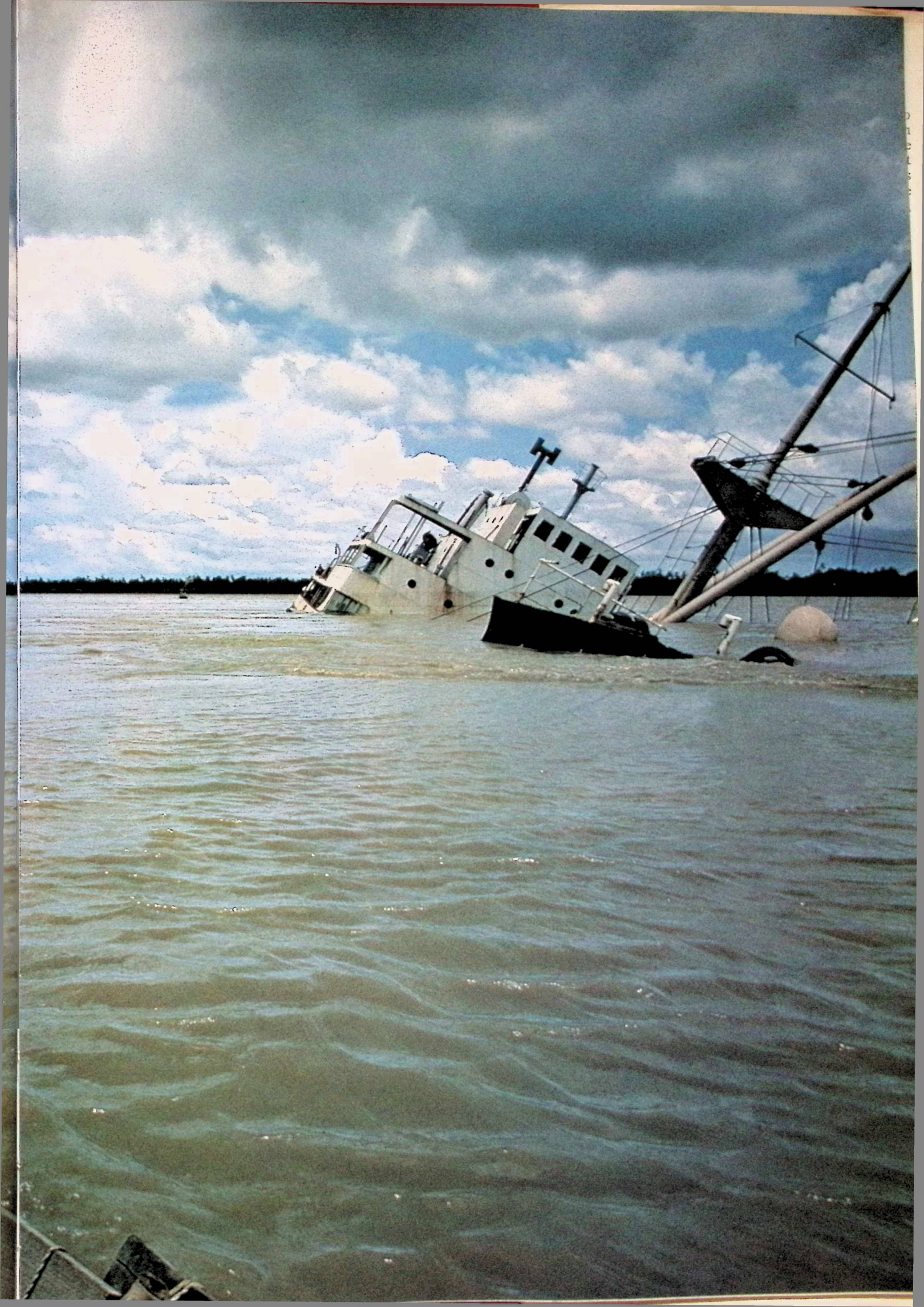
Near ships docked at the Calcutta jetties Muslim dock workers face Mecca in prayer.



Below the Howrah Bridge a Marwari groom and his bride walking behind him with relatives return from having invoked the blessings of Ganga. Marwaris (businessmen hailing from Rajasthan) took over British business in Calcutta.

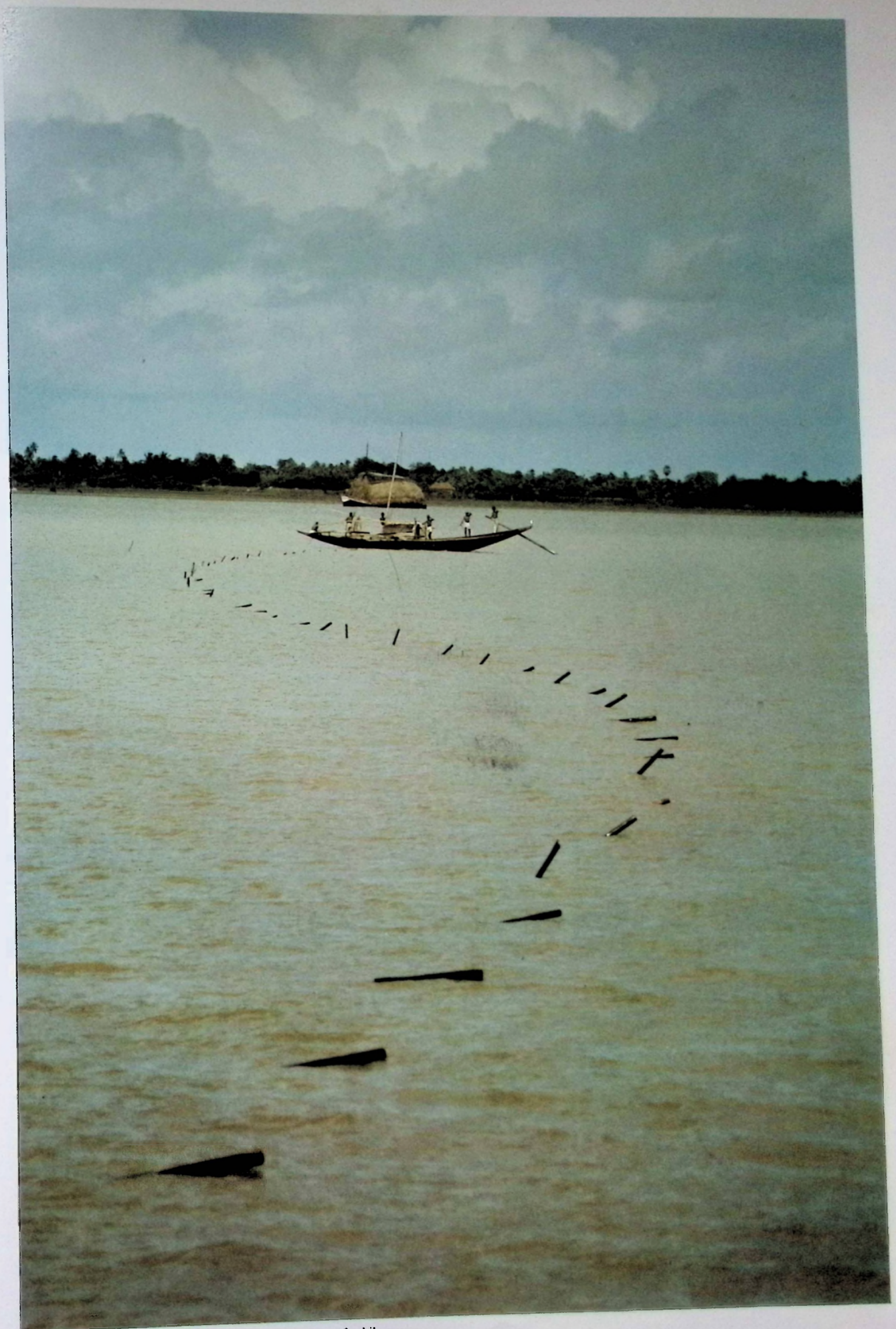
(*overleaf*) A boatman guides his dinghy past the wreck of the Ratnashobna, twelve miles below Calcutta.



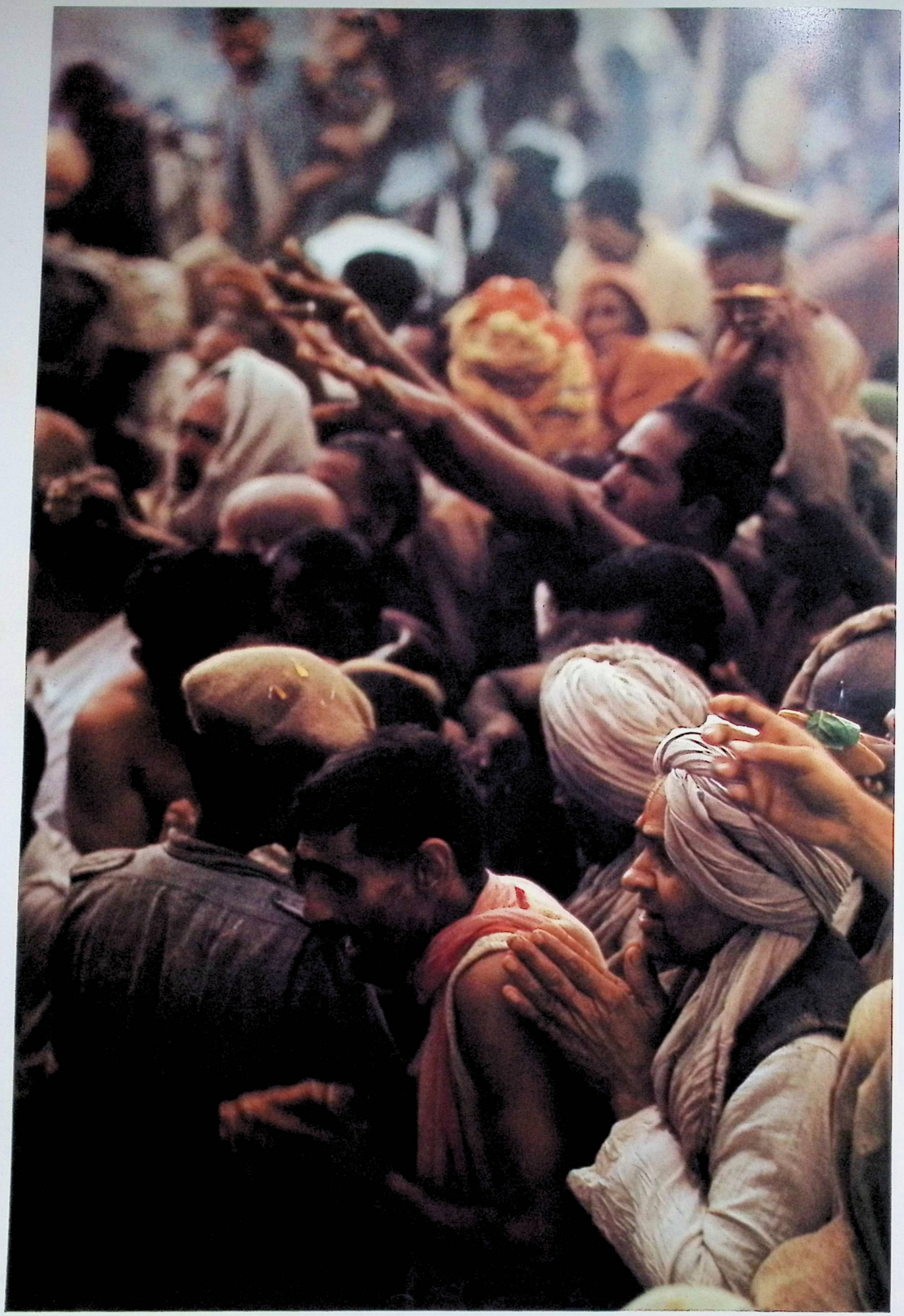




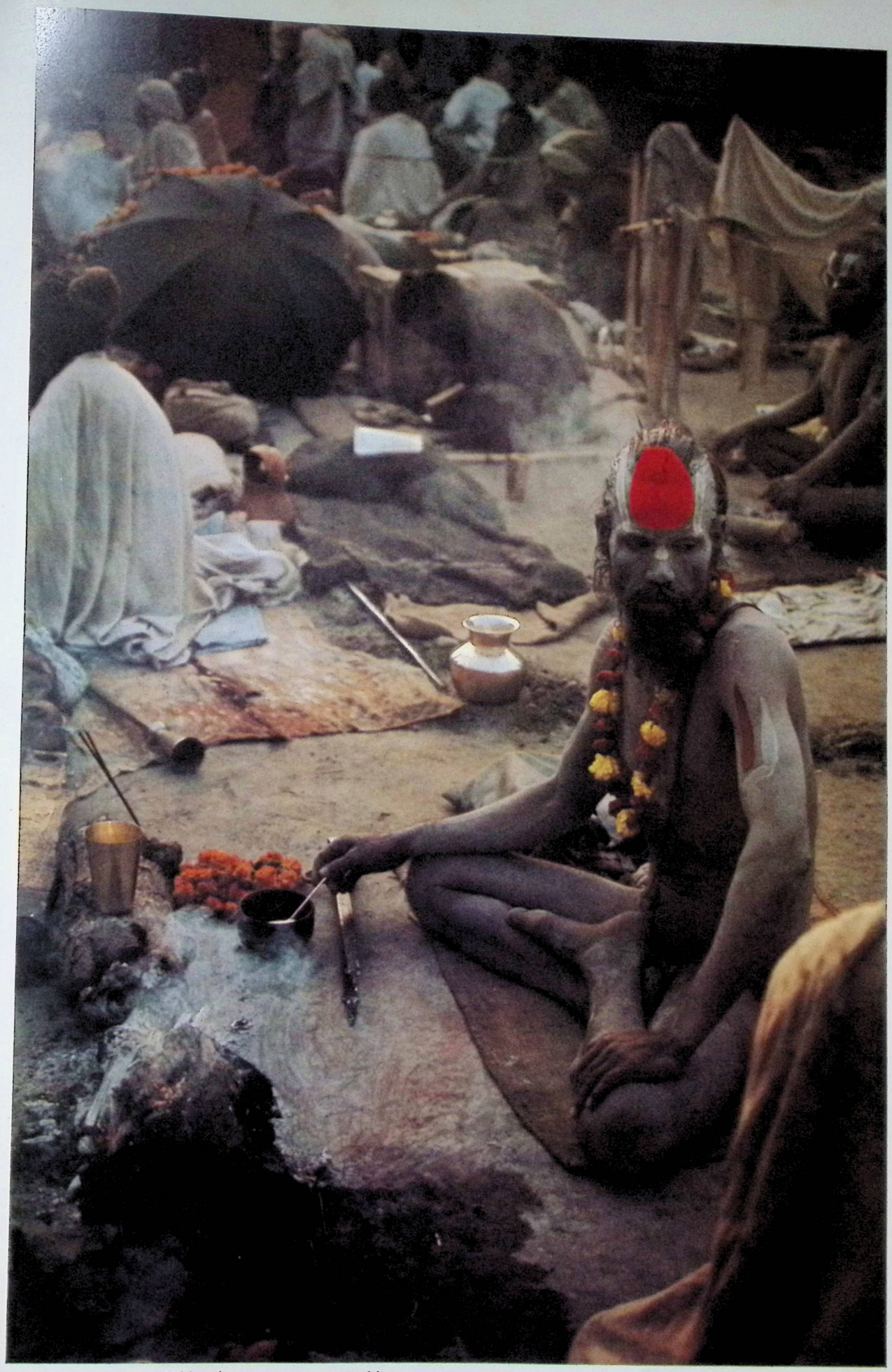
At Diamond Harbour men sit atop a heavily-laden boat full of hay from the Sundarbans. The cargo is destined for Calcutta's numerous khatals, or cattlepens.



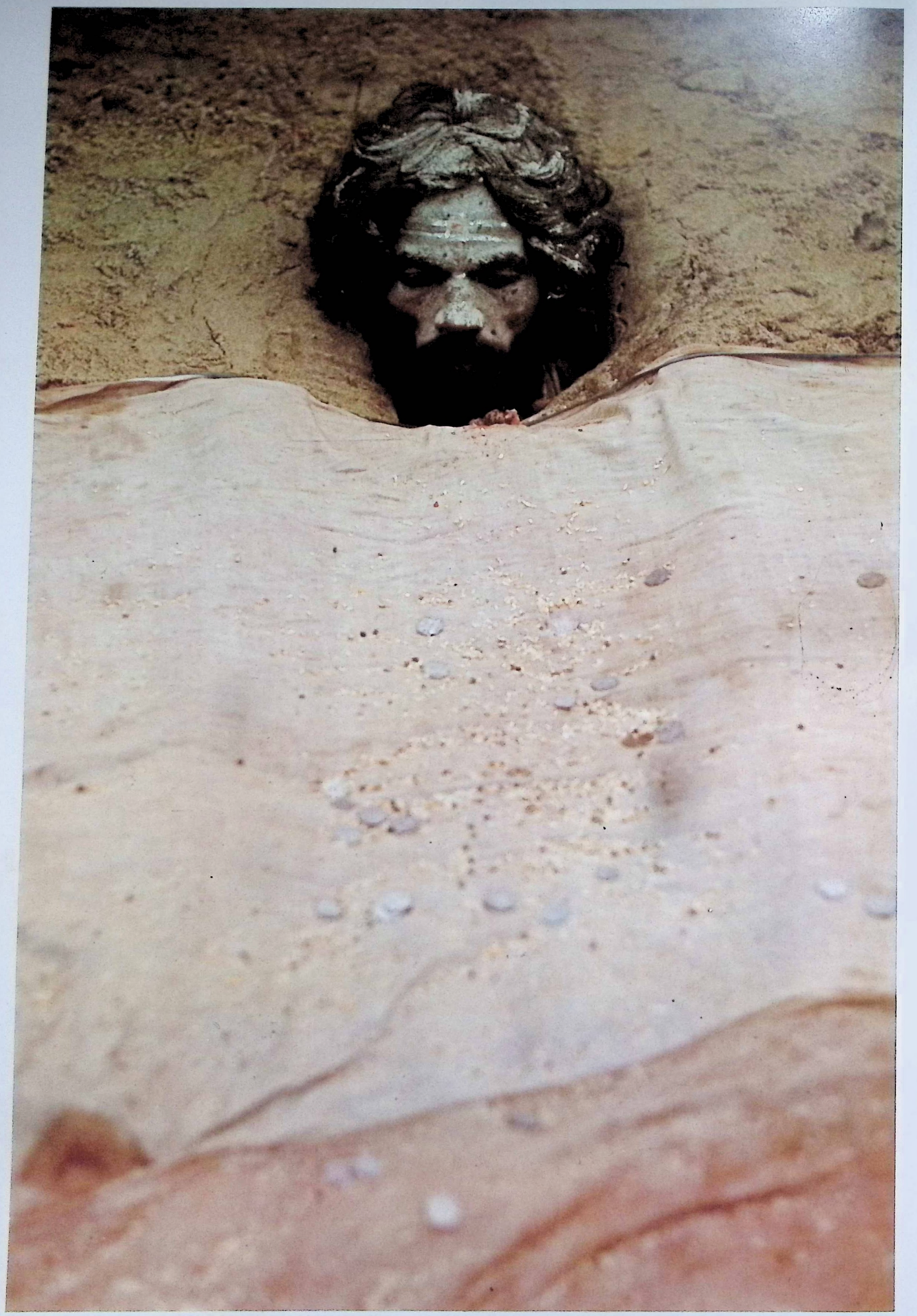
Near Diamond Harbour fishermen have spread their nets for hilsa,
a Bengali delicacy.



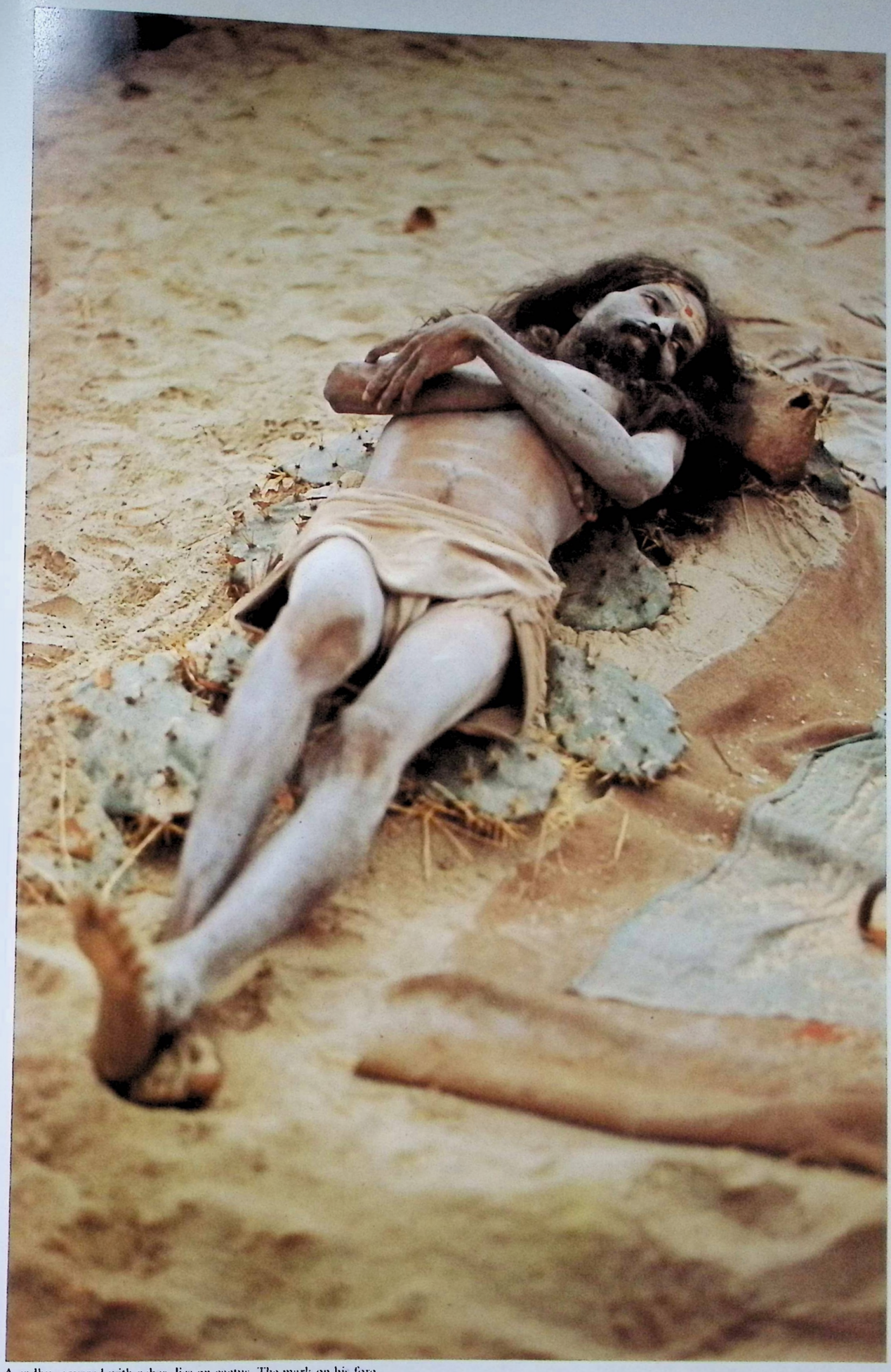
Pilgrims pray at the annual bathing fair at Ganga Sagar on Sagar Island.



A sadhu, wearing the sign of Vishnu the preserver, puts a spoonful of ghee, clarified butter, into the fire during a ritual in a camp of sadhus. Ganga Sagar.



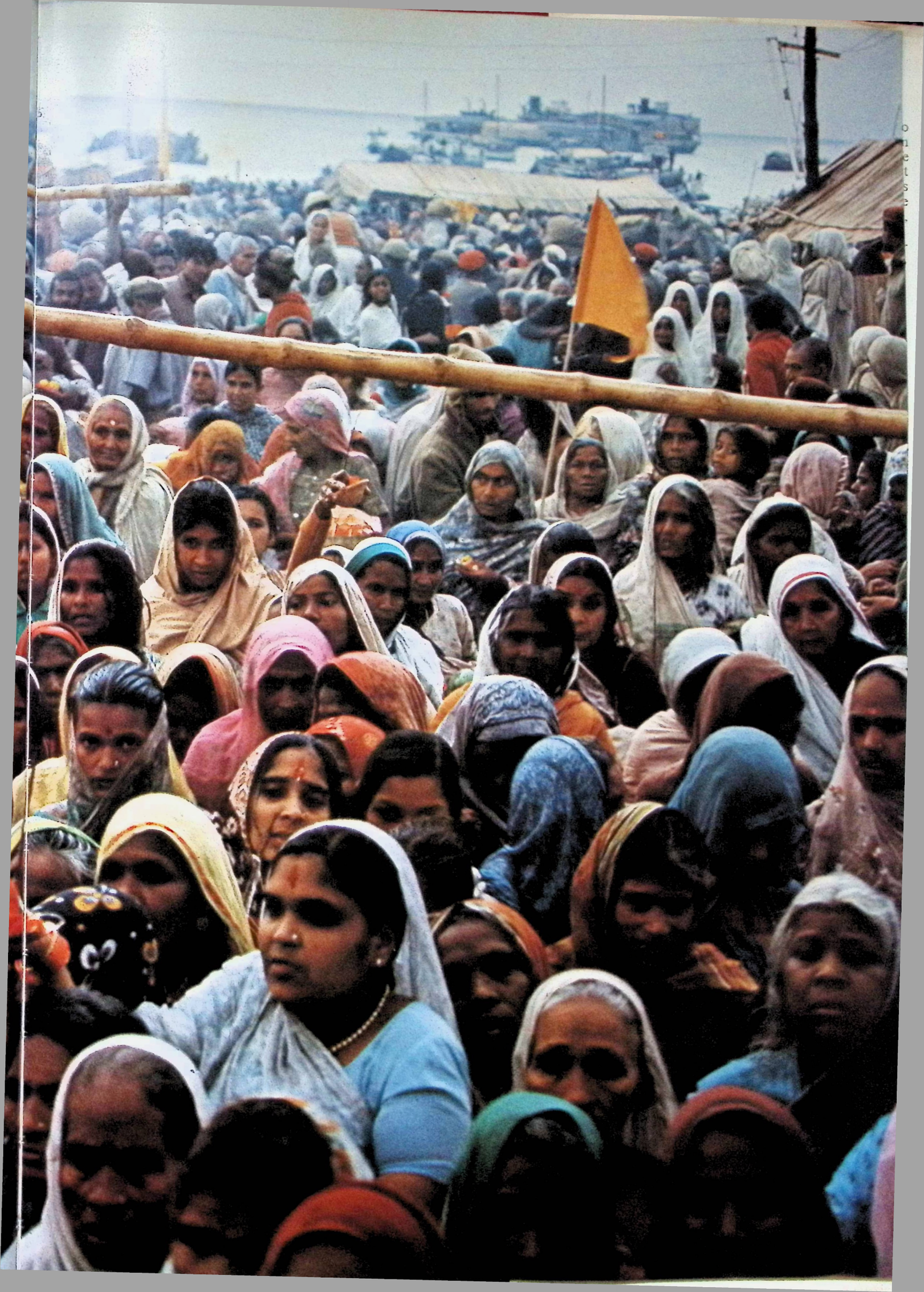
This sadhu, face smeared with ashes and buried neck deep into the sand, is a follower of Siva. As an act of charity and in veneration, pilgrims have tossed coins on the cloth before him.



A sadhu, covered with ashes, lies on cactus. The mark on his forehead proclaims him as a worshipper of Siva, the Great Lord, who repeatedly demonstrated his mastery of austerities as a source of power. Ganga Sagar.

(*overleaf*) Women pilgrims move through a crowd towards the temple of Kapila Muni. Ganga Sagar.

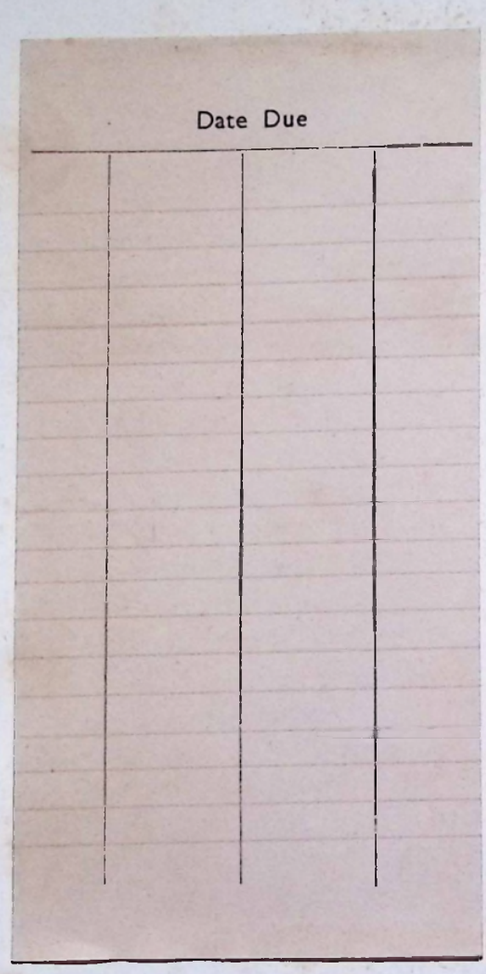








← After having bathed and then prayed before the image of the sage Kapila Muni, pilgrims in an armada of boats leave for the mainland from Ganga Sagar, which faces the open sea of the Bay of Bengal where Hindus believe the Ganga enters Patala, the ocean or nether world.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TITLE Ganga : sacred river of India.

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Nanda Devi
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GARHWAL
HIMALAL
Rishikesh
Hardwar
SIWALIK HILLS
BHABAR
Upper Ganga Canal
Garhmukteshwar
NEW DELHI
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R. Karnali
R. Sarda
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Agra
(Jamuna)
Fatehgarh
UTTAR PRADESH
Lucknow
R. Ghaghara
R. Chambal
Gwalior
Kanpur
R. Ganga
R. Gomati
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Jhansi
R. Betwa
Chaunsa
Buxar
Ghazipur
Allahabad
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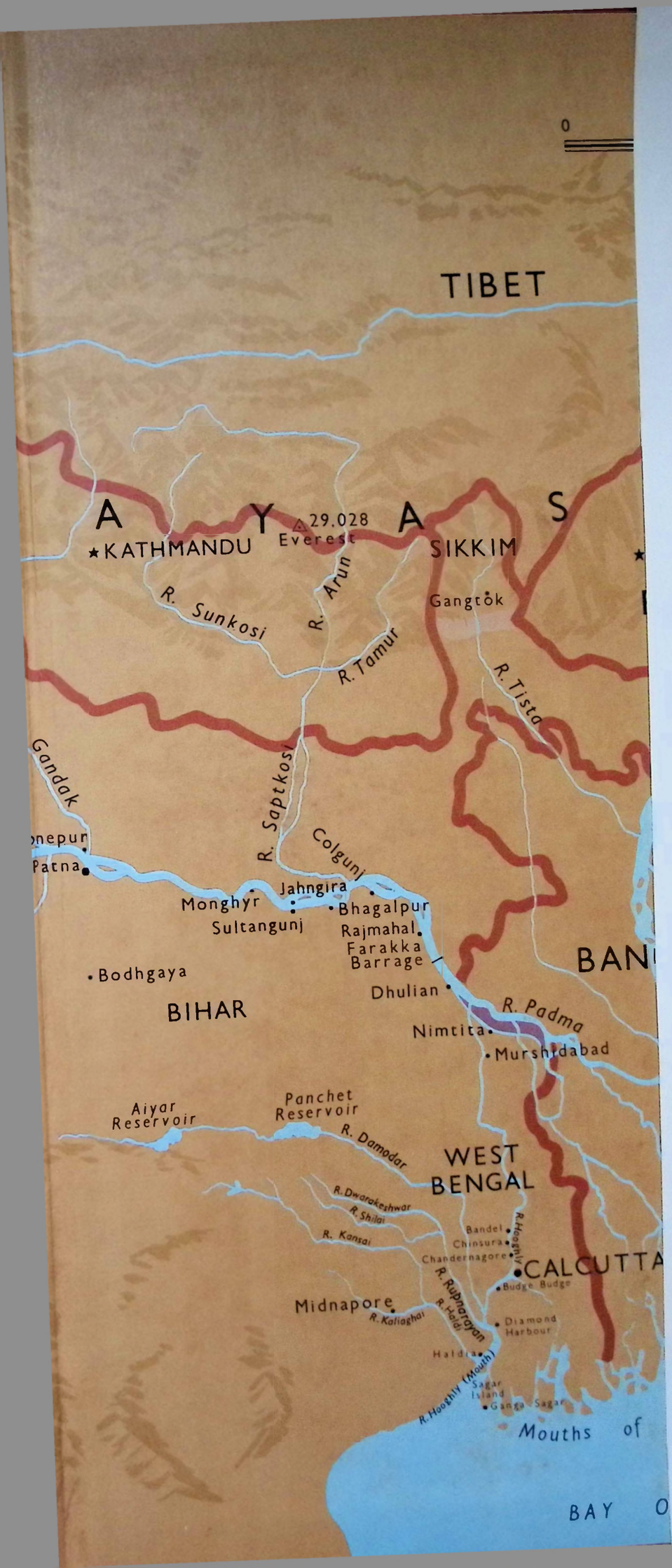


(continued from the front flap)

The Ganga is many things to many people. To millions of Indians, it is the river that washes sin and ensures a place in heavenly abode in life hereafter. To some Indians, it is the river that spreads superstition and disease, and brings death and destruction. To Raghubir Singh, the Indian photographer, the Ganga is an adventure, a passion—almost an obsession.

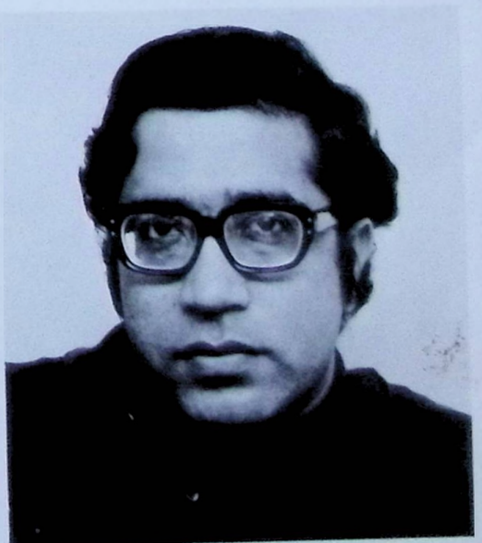
His magnificent photographs, which together paint the most vivid and uninhibited portrait, to date, of the great river, are the work of several years of labour. Raghubir Singh is not a religious man in the traditional Indian sense and yet, like millions and millions of others before him, he too was drawn to the Ganga. For the better part of six years, he wandered along the river, from its source at Gomukh in the Himalayas to the point of its diffluence, at Sagar Island in the Bay of Bengal, a watercourse of 1,560 miles. What is it really that inspires such passion, such obsession?

**

Raghubir Singh's photographs have appeared in many international publications, including, The New York Times, National Geographic, Life, Sunday Times Magazine (London), Horizon, Stern (Germany), Camera Mainichi, Asahi Graph and The Sun (Japan). He is presently working on a picture book on Calcutta.

**

Eric Newby, the well-known author and journalist, who wrote the *Introduction* for this book is among the very few to have rowed the Ganga from Hardwar to the Bay of Bengal, an experience he recounts in his book, "Slowly Down the Ganges". Among his other books, the better known are: "A Short Walk in the Hindu Kush", "The Last Grain Race", "Something Wholesale" and "Love and War in the Apennines".



Raghubir Singh

