

Discover India

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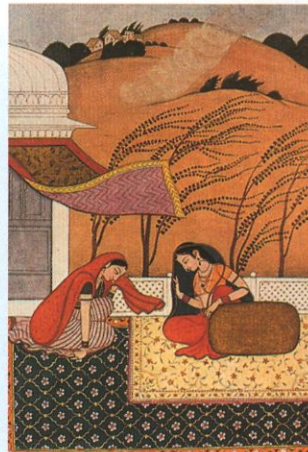
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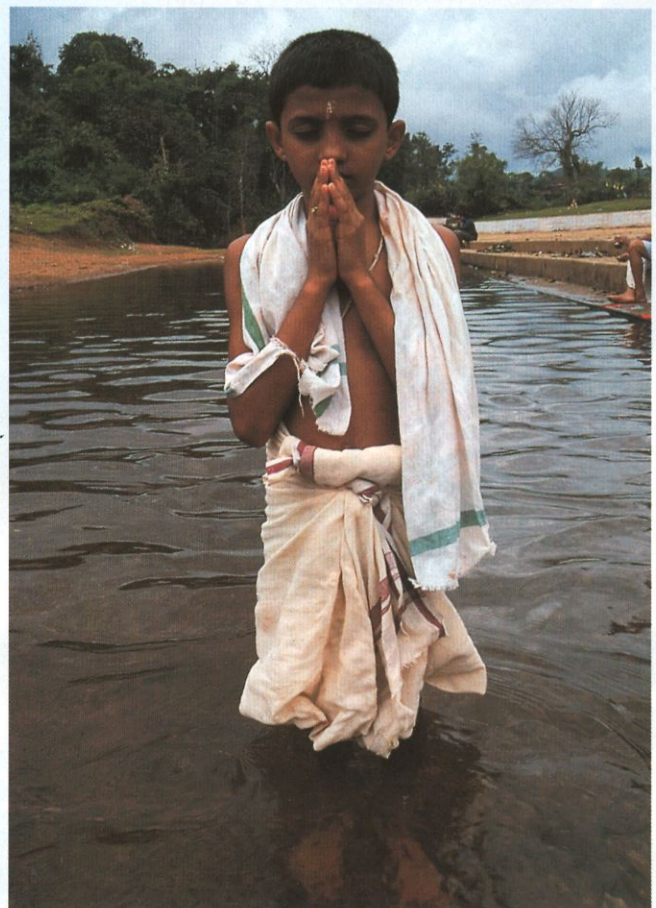


Cover: Miniature painting from the 'Baramasa' collection depicting 'Grishma,' the Indian Summer.
(Surendra Sahai)

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AMLAN PALIWAL

GRISHMA **The Indian**

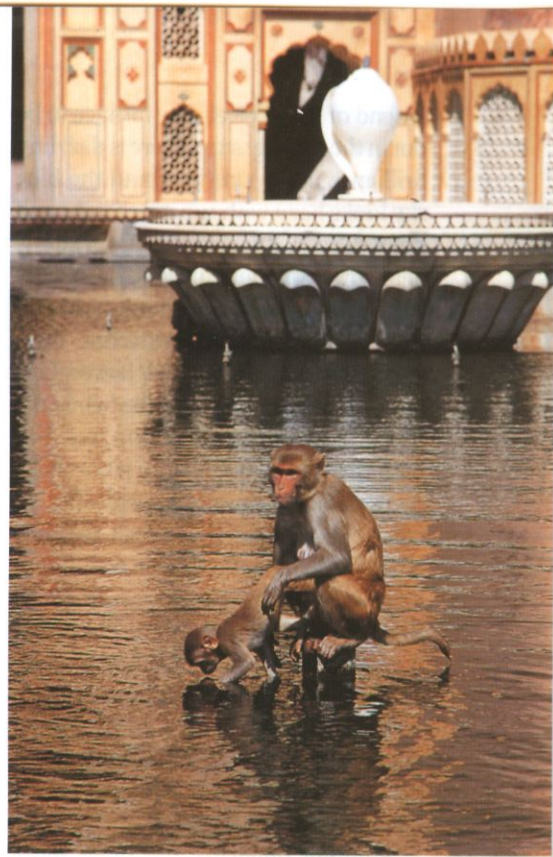


Summer



*Mashaqwala with goatskin bag of water waiting to serve thirsty passersby.
(Amlan Paliwal)*

Above right: Stretching out for a cool dip. (Prakash Israni)



Philosophically, Grishma, the Indian summer marks a period of separation. This is a time of longing, when one remains thirsty, unquenched, unfulfilled, waiting to be united, waiting to be drenched, waiting for the rains....

Text: Nihal Mathur

It is the call of the koel that announces the approaching summer. Over the years, I have heard the koel call for the first time around the festival of Holi. Traditionally, it is Holi in the month of March that marks the beginning of the hot and dry season when woollens are stored away and cottons come out to brace up to the onslaught of the heat.

The temperature begins to rise appreciably in April when the sun, with every passing day, turns into a fiery orb.

By end of May, it feels like furnace to be out in the midday sun. There is dazzling brilliance in the sunshine and the blue sky looks hazy with too much light and suspended dust scooped up from fallow fields by strong air currents. Lashed by the winds the landscape looks arid and barren. Anticipating waterless days ahead, most trees shed their leaves. Leaf litter rustles on the sidewalks while the wispy wool of the silk cotton tree drift with the winds. But Nature presents its own paradox by adding splashes of colour to an otherwise bleak scenario when gulmohar (*Poinciana regia*) and *amaltash* (Indian laburnum) begin to flower in all their splendour. The hotter it gets, the more glorious they bloom.

Just how the gulmohur and *amaltash* manage to thrive without a drop is a secret that mankind hasn't quite unraveled! We definitely need tons of water to drench a dehydrated body and soul!

Nothing quenches the thirst more than a cool glass of water, drawn not from the refrigerator, but from a *matka* — a clay pot which imparts a special flavour of the earth. Tradition decrees that the cool *matka-ka-pani* or potted water is just the right temperature for the human body. *Kumhars*, the traditional potters, do brisk business selling all shapes and sizes of *matkas* and *surais*. In the bazaars, *piaos* or water kiosks spring up as acts of public charity serving free water to the thirsty. Water vendors in their push-carts also position themselves on the streets, adding fresh lime and crystal salt for an extra price. *Nimbu pani* or fresh lime juice, is welcome any time of the day.

This is the time of the year when



there is a real need to shower at least twice a day — once in the morning and a second time in the evening — to wash off the day's sweat and grime. In the country-side, the community water tank becomes a big draw for one and all. This is the time of the year when one wants to have a love affair with water but is frustrated to find acute shortages in both city and countryside. Levels drop in wells, reservoirs shrink, lakes dry up





Village children ward off the heat in cool canal waters.
(Amlan Paliwal)

Left: Hat sellers do brisk business in summer.
(Prakash Israni)

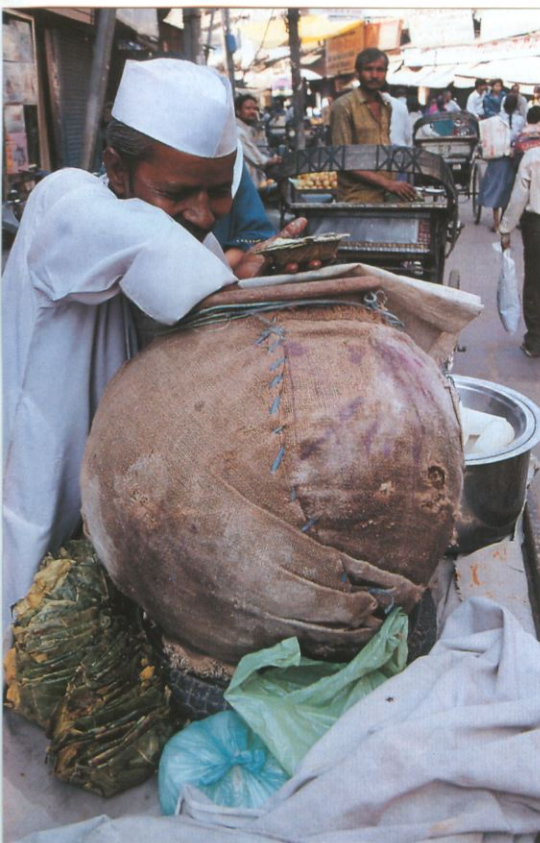
and in village ponds, buffaloes wallow in muddy waters all day long.

The day begins to stretch as the summer advances. It is an early dawn with an all too brief a magical morning. Then there is a feeling of an extended midday as the sun climbs up quickly and then stays there for a much longer afternoon, chasing everybody indoors. Traffic slows down on the streets and so does the pace of life as people slink towards the shadows.

This is siesta time, strictly enforced for children. But day dreams are abruptly broken by the persistent belling of the *kulfi* and *chuskiwala* in the street, beckoning the children for an ice-lolly. Mind you, often the adults land up joining the kids for the slurpy iced treat! Then, ever so slowly, the afternoon turns into a late evening, blending twilight into night. It's time to be out again, especially for those who live in high density areas. Fountains play in public

parks and gardens which get crowded by people who come out for fresh cool air.

It is indeed a challenge to get a proper night's sleep in the cities where iron, steel, cement and tar bake in the sun all day long to radiate heat during the nights. Like adding insult to injury, mosquitoes make their annual comeback in summer. Churning hot air, the fan brings little relief in keeping cool or the mosquitoes at bay. Once upon a time,



it was the *khas-ki-tatties* or wet screens of *khus* grass that were put up on windows and doors to cool homes. Unfortunately, modern times have made the *tatties* extinct and, instead, replaced them by the ubiquitous "Desert Cooler" that has become a permanent fixture in most urban homes. The affluent switch on their air conditioners. And just when one thinks one cannot do without these cooling contraptions, the paralyzing power cuts strike. Those without the luxuries of generator sets and inverters hear of "load shedding" "power staggering" and "transformer blowups" leading to hours of no electricity and patient sweating. It is considerably cooler, however, in rural India which faces no such problem as most people sleep alfresco, under the starry skies — a truly refreshing experience.

Never mind the heat! If there is one season that children look forward to, it is the summers because school's out and "We-Are-Going-On-A-Summer-Holiday!" A mad summer rush starts with trains, planes and tourist buses running advance reservations. It's towards the high Himalayan retreats that anybody trying to escape the heat is headed. Schools routinely organize summer camps and tours for the students. Families pack up for a week or ten days trip into cooler climes of hill stations where room rents shoot up in peak summer season.

Considering the heat in the plains,

the summers have never been a great season for eating. The meals are per force small and light. Whether it is breakfast lunch or dinner, there is always yoghurt in some form or other. There is an emphasis on vegetables as summer brings its own seasonal variety, chiefly gourds, okra, cluster beans, jack fruits etc. However, with cucumbers, mint, lime, raw mangoes and coriander flooding the markets, it is salad and

chutney time. But surely, one of the redeeming features of living through the hot season is that one is rewarded by a whole range of summer fruits. The first to arrive on the scene are the juicy watermelons. These are followed by succulent grapes, plums, apricots, cherries, litchis and of course, mangoes — the king of fruits.

But liquids are the order of the day as there is a constant need to replenish



swiftly evaporating body fluids. It's boom time for cold drinks business. After the customary glass of water, sweet sherbets are served to moist a parched throat. And sherbets come in large variety — in both colour and fragrance. The all time favourite is of course red *Roohafsa*, green *Khus* and yellow *Kewra* in that order. Then there are a whole range of traditional *Thandais* — literally coolants. Unlike the modern aerated

cold drinks, these sweet, soothing traditional concoctions are ideally suited to bring down body temperatures. Similarly, the mint flavoured *jal jeera*, prepared in large earthen pots, is another traditional summer drink that has an instant cooling effect. But it is *panna* made from raw mangoes and mint which is said to beat the *lu*.

The infamous *lu* is the hot dust laden wind that blows all through the day and

sometimes unabated through the night as well. If you catch the *lu* you can fall ill — run a fever or suffer loose motions. A long spell of *lu* is often broken by an *andhi* that provides a much sought after relief. Essentially a dust storm, *andhi* is a strong westerly wind that picks up tons of sand from the Thar desert in Rajasthan and sprays it all over the Gangetic plains. Moving as a solid wall of sand, the *andhi* covers the sky,

The temple of Shitla Devi the "Cool One". (Nihal Mathur)
Above left: A kulfiwala, the indigenous ice cream vendor. (Amlan Paliwal)

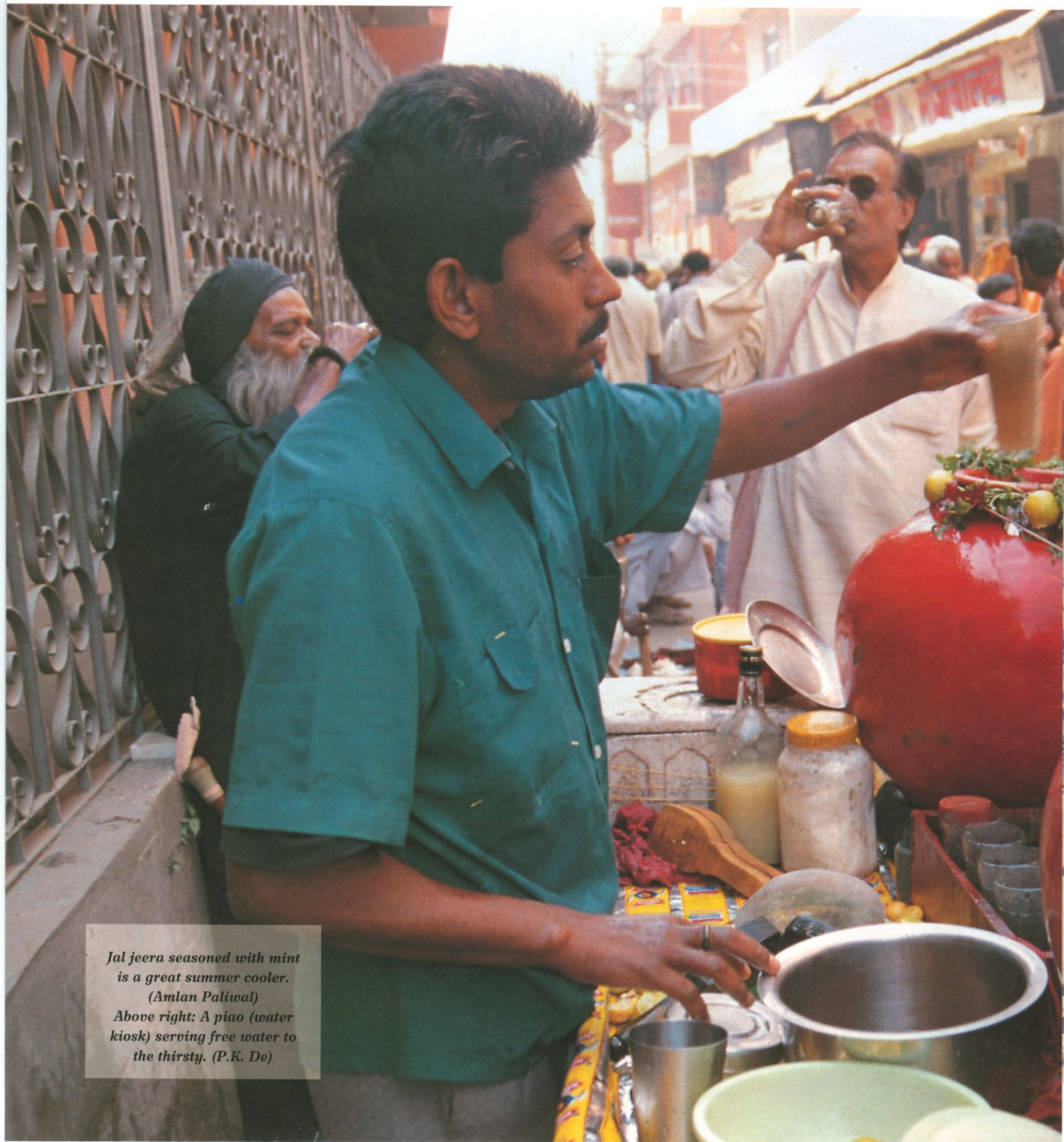


darkening out the sun. Visibility is reduced to few metres and the whipping winds rattle every door and window. Luckily, *andhies* are of a short duration and helps in bringing down the temperature sharply with a few drops of precipitation.

Meteorologically speaking, it is March, April and May that are the designated months of summer in India since, in the first week of June, the

cooling showers of the monsoon strike some of the southern and north-eastern states of India. However, for much of north and west India, the gradually advancing monsoon doesn't really arrive till the end of the month. June 22nd marks the longest day with almost 15 hours of light. In fact, when we speak of Indian summers, we actually speak of the sweltering north and west Indian plains in June. Summers peak in this

region that reels under a relentless merciless sun in June when the mercury climbs to record levels — 50 degrees centigrade at Alwar in 1956! With temperatures hovering in mid 40s, it really burns to be in direct exposure to the sun. Inadvertent contact with heated surfaces like parked cars in the sun sizzles the skin upon touch. This is the time when one is afflicted by a rash of prickly heat. Newspapers headline "heat



*Jal jeera seasoned with mint
is a great summer cooler.*

(Amlan Paliwal)

*Above right: A piao (water
kiosk) serving free water to
the thirsty. (P.K. De)*

waves" sweeping the region as heat strokes claims many lives. Clearly, this is the time to propitiate Goddess Shitla — the "Cool One" who rules over fever diseases, especially chickenpox, measles and mumps that spread in summer.

Although life continues as usual, this rainless hot season is generally seen as a period of lethargy that slows down not only the people but their economy as well. Industry and business experience



a summer slump — but not in "marriage markets". There is cause for celebration as some of the wealth of the winter crop harvested around Holi, is now spent on marriages, as biannual *sayas* or astrologically auspicious times come in the month of May and June. Arranged in open public spaces, the elaborate marriage receptions are often thrown out of gear not so much by the oppressive heat but by an unexpected squall that catches everybody with surprise. While the organizers are visibly dismayed, the guests however, are happy to receive the cooling downpour. These pre-monsoon showers release a subtle fragrance from the freshly wetted earth which is vividly described by poets.

As summer comes to an end, the strident call of peacocks seems to herald the rains — a theme so powerfully depicted in the *Baramasa* — the miniature paintings from the Hill Schools that illustrate the twelve months of the year. The changing weather of every month finds reflection in the moods of *Nayak* and *Nayika* or the hero and heroine. *Jeystha* and *Ashaadh*, the summer months of the Indian calendar are wonderfully portrayed with a sensitivity for flora and fauna and other details that symbolize summer. For instance, we see women wearing a transparent muslin *dupatta* (scarf), their palms dyed in henna which is said to have a cooling effect. We see mirages, the austerity of the elements and the women forlorn, awaiting their lover's return. Fountains play in the foreground while ascetics sit in a distant temple in the background waiting for the rains...

