Until Dacca Became Dhaka . . .

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Biren Shome, *River of Stories*, pen and ink.

There was a sleepy little town named Dacca (that was how it used to be spelt) once upon a time. The roads were narrow, with rows of date palms and mango trees on either side of them. Homes had exquisite gardens before them and were peopled by educated Bengalis, many of whom had a dash of the aesthetic or literary about them. The men, in their kurtas and pyjamas, were handsome, of the kind you usually spotted in the movies. The women, in their long hair and flowing sarees, were emblems of beauty rare around the globe.

The monstrosities we now know as apartments or condominiums were not to be seen anywhere. There were only homes, only houses. Cars were few and so were rickshaws. All around the town and sometimes within it were water bodies, the presence of which, along with all that greenery, made it easy for nature to breathe, for the breeze to blow across our faces and make us feel we were part of the beauty of Creation. We took strolls with our mothers in the evening, with nary a thought to the probability of something going wrong. Nothing went wrong. Our mothers were pretty, to a point where we felt like telling the world that nothing could be more beautiful than the women who had brought us into the world. The wind played in their hair as they took their evening walks, as our little hands held on tight to theirs.

Dacca was a slice of paradise in the old days. The twilights were symbolic of nature's charms, for it was the endless twitter of birds you could hear once the sun had sunk in the west. The moon, yet undefiled by human touch or man's footprints, was always a ceaseless object of poetry. There was about it a degree of seduction that brought out the poignant in you, drew out of your soul streams of melody that have constantly replenished us with energy over the years. The nights, tiptoeing into our courtyards in the warmth of spring, spoke to us of the endless joy of childhood. We were children. Dacca was heaven.