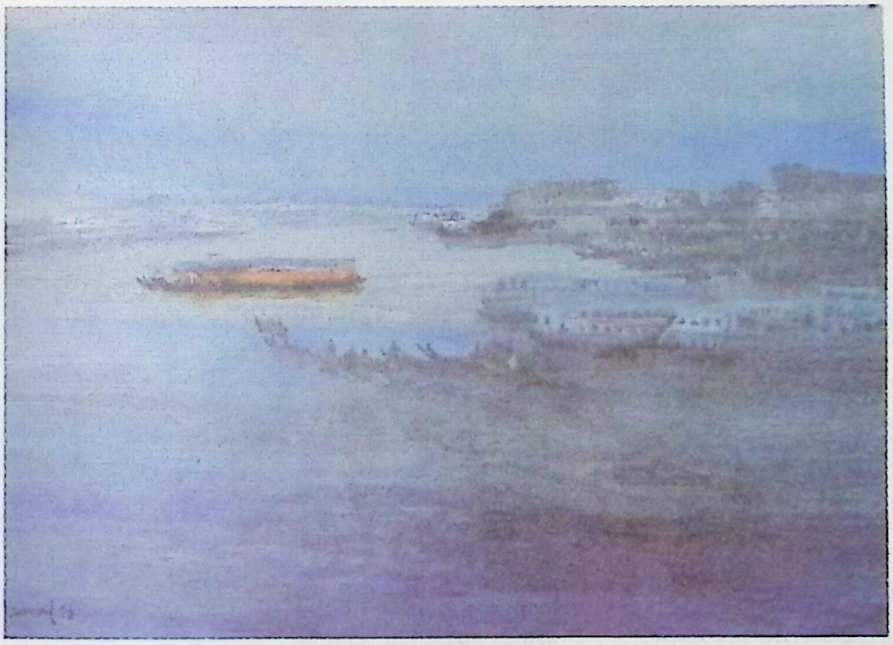
Those were the 1960s. And then came the 1970s. Dacca was still a pretty place. It was a pretty place where wild men come from the mountains a thousand miles away dispensed terror in the year we went to war for freedom. The blood that flowed was incessant, the screams that were heard were chilling. But then came liberty and with that a renewed zest for life. On the stretch of road leading from the old airport in Tejgaon to Bangla Motors, it was largely timber shops that you could see. The sense was almost one of being part of surroundings that were a hallmark of the pastoral. And



Jamal Ahmed, *Memory of Dhakai River*, acrylic on paper.

along that road, in the early 1970s, travelled Bangabandhu in the company of dignitaries come visiting from lands far away. We waved at Anwar Sadat, at Josip Broz Tito, at Gough Whitlam. And under that huge banyan tree outside Ganobhavan, formerly President's House opposite Ramna Park, we watched Kurt Waldheim drive in to speak to our leader.

Back then, Dacca had innocence about it. Queen Elizabeth II came calling in 1961. Little boys, perched on the shoulders of their cousins, joined the milling crowds to wave at her in the brilliance of evening lights before the gates of President's House. It was the year when the wrestlers Bholu and Gama and Aslam enthralled the Bengali crowd with demonstrations of their physical prowess. It was the season, in 1961, when the Tagore centenary celebrations marked the beginning of the rise of Bengali nationalism in this land. As children, of course we had little idea of politics at the time. But we did hear our parents' generation dropping names like Azam Khan and Ghulam Faruque, both of whom served as governors in what was then East Pakistan.

In that era of glorious black and white, Dhanmondi was a quiet place, almost a suburb. In and around what is today Road 27 was a vastness of green, of an elemental nature. With few homes around, and none more than two storeys high, the skies were an epic story of expansiveness that brought home to you an entirety of the cosmic system as we have known it. At Kamalapur, before the railway station came up, state buses manned by polite drivers operated till the late hours. The child in you wondered how those drivers manned such huge vehicles. And you then wished that you were a bus driver yourself.

There was the Race Course. And Ramna Park was where your parents took you on the weekends. As they reclined on the grass and conversed among themselves, you and your siblings munched peanuts and savoured ice cream and frolicked all over the place. It was a day for families and all around you were mothers and fathers and children. The water shimmered in the lake.

In Dacca, people were privy to good movies in the many cinema houses across town. In Gulistan, young writers, poets and journalists converged at tea houses in the evening, to debate and philosophise on the myriad aspects of life and living. The ubiquity of the man peddling journals before housewives was an image you did not miss. Your mother and mine were voracious readers of *Begum*.

In 1960s and 1970s Dacca, the rains poured, through the branches and twigs and leaves of the trees. They came in torrents, making music on the tin-roofed homes we lived in. You smelled the warmth of the earth. Once the showers ceased, the flowers that lined the frontiers of our homes, the vegetable patches that took up space at one end of the courtyard, gleamed in the light of a returning sun.

Back then, life was a long experience in sheer delight. Dacca was a town where dreams took shape and songs wafted through the air. Until the town became a city. Until Dacca became Dhaka.

The writer is Executive Editor, The Daily Star.