

TWO REVIEWS FROM SYED BADRUL AHSAN

From the pastoral to the cosmopolitan . . .

THOSE who have had occasion to read Nirad C. Chaudhuri's defining autobiography will have some sense of how feelings shoot straight from the heart. And that precisely is what Mahfuzur Rahman gives you in From Naogaon to New York. The title says it all. From a very rural background to a very cosmopolitan ambience is how the writer encapsulates his experience. Strangely and yet in a familiar way, Rahman's tale is essentially our own, given that we have all sprung from pastoral roots, have grown to adulthood on the basis of certain values we have through the years tried upholding despite creeping ultra modernity. Rahman's memoirs, originally written in Bengali before he decided to go for an English version, are a Bengali's narration of the winding, sometimes tortuous journey he has gone through in his pursuit of dreams, or their realization.

Mahfuzur Rahman's forte has been economics. His career was rounded off through working for the United Nations, a link that was strong enough for him to make the United States his home. And yet, in the manner of so many of his generation, with roots in the old Bengal, he returns home every now and then, to be reminded of the past, to inform others of the traditions they are heir to. There are the stories of his early education in a madrassa, of certain human factors which often came with such education. Rahman speaks with feeling about a teacher who once gave one of two poverty-stricken siblings an anna to buy some food. The boy pleads with the teacher to give the coin to his younger brother, for the latter has not eaten all day.

The narrative is partly about lost times, a truth which manifests itself through the students of the madrassa trekking long distances to their classes barefoot and washing their feet at a well before entering the classroom. That said, there is the political aspect of the memoirs that the writer brings into focus, through a detailed description of his experience in prison following a students' demonstration on the third anniversary of the Ekushey February shootings of 1952. Rahman is among a large body of university students carted off to jail. There is the sense that he rather enjoyed this spate of heroism, until of course the time came for him to be freed through his Boro Khala's intervention. A particularly happy aspect of the memoirs is Rahman's unwillingness to be selective in his narration of incidents and events. His aunt upbraids him over his role in the demonstration and reminds him of the poor economic condition of his parents, who had certainly not sent him to university to do politics. The upshot of it all is that he signs a bond before the prison authorities and walks out of prison, his head bowed in the realization that he has caved in to power where his peers have not. Sometime later, when every other student is freed, Rahman watches them being welcomed back as heroes from the sidelines. He knows his heroism is not there.

An especially appealing feature of the work is the certain literary quality --- through descriptions of the human character and the scene as well as through instances of introspection --- Mahfuzur Rahman brings into his telling of the tale. Dynamism is what his use of the English language is all about. Be it a recalling of the old roads he once traversed day after day, be it a survey of the homestead (A stray dog has been around

for the past few days. It might sneak into the kitchen. We the two brothers do not need to be called. We arrive at the mat), Rahman demonstrates his keen powers of memory and observation as he relives his boyhood and youth.

And then come the other stories, those of his early employment and constant trekking through mud and slush and dirt in the villages around Rajbari. There is then the call of Manchester and Rotterdam and eventually New York. The rural Bengali boy is beginning to see his horizons expand as he flies out to foreign land. In more ways than one, Rahman is representative of his generation, one powered by ambition which again rests on intellectual excellence. In From Naogaon to New York, you come by glimpses of individuals who were one day to play significant roles in East Pakistan and then the new state of Bangladesh, in various capacities. Observe Rahman's notes on a few of them:

"... S.M. Ali, the budding journalist, came to our office to take a look at the typed version. Sharp and witty, fair-complexioned and with eyes like a cat's, Ali chain-smoked while he read the report";

"Professor M.N. Huda takes over as director of the Board. Dr. Nurul Islam joins the team. Medium built, light brown, he walks fast, carries a fat briefcase, and works at great speed. He smells Harvard and is held in some awe by colleagues";

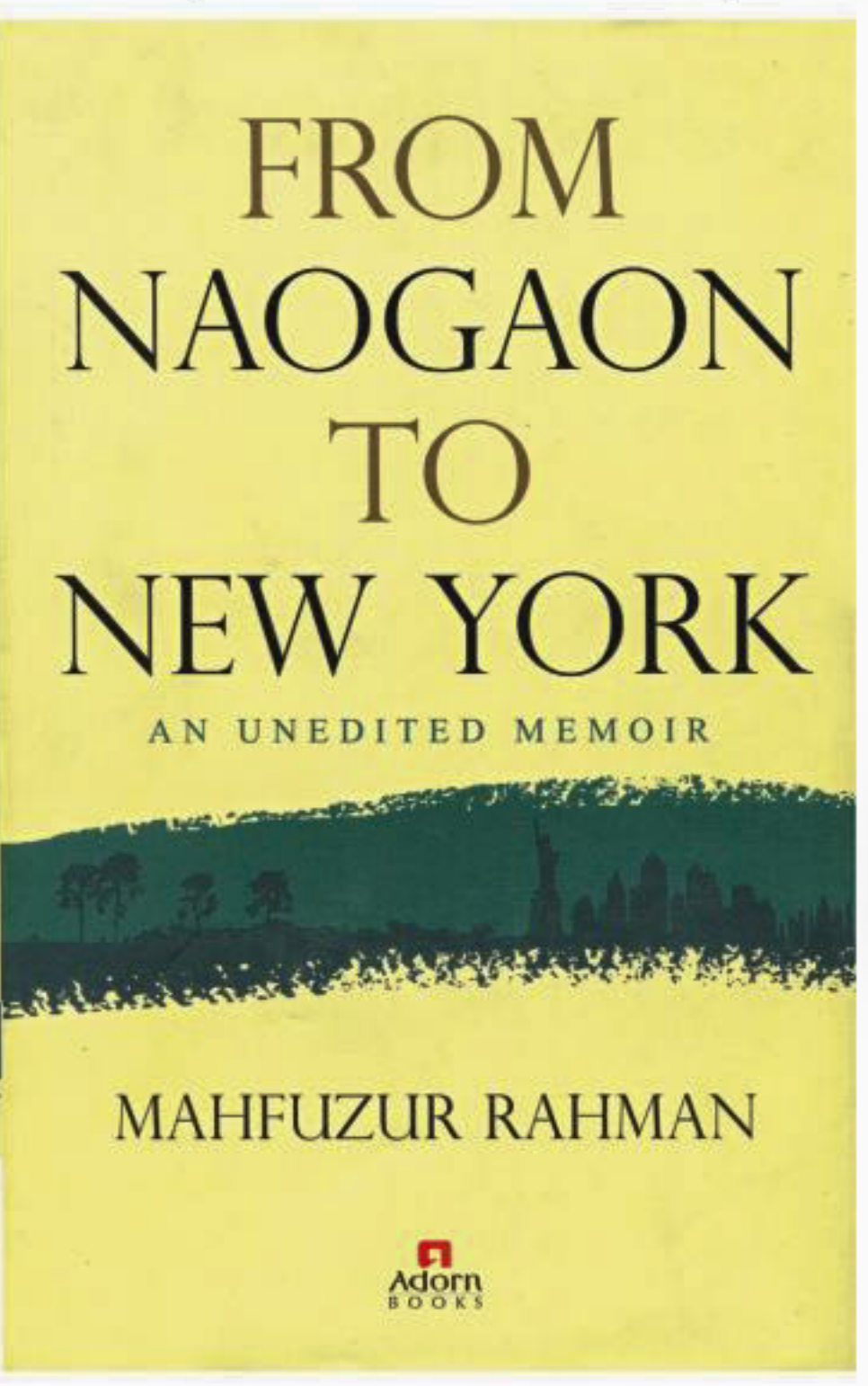
"Mr. Sanaul Huq, a batch-mate of Mr. Quddus in the civil service, joined. Mr. Huq was a poet and fairly well-known in literary circles. A short, corpulent man, his gait was slow. He was also often absent-minded."

It is in Rotterdam in 1971 that Mahfuzur Rahman hears of the genocide launched in East Pakistan by the Pakistan army. Listen to his sad narration of the unfolding tragedy:

"Post has stopped arriving from Dacca. Colleagues at the School give me news from Dutch newspapers, sometimes translating them. The situation in Dacca gets prominence on the television."

Rahman is worried about his wife Farida and their children. The tragedy of 1971 is followed, in slightly over three years, by the calamity of 1975. This time, Rahman is in New York working for the United Nations. Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman has been assassinated and now it is his aide Farash Uddin who turns up in New York. As Mahfuzur Rahman relates the story, "He extends his hand to me. 'My name is Farash Uddin,' he began in Bengali. He is an ex-CSP, now a member of Bangladesh civil service. He was deputy secretary to Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. He was a student of economics at Dhaka University and is now working for his Ph.D. in Boston. He wants to work as an intern at the UN."

There is inherent charm in Mahfuzur Rahman's depiction of the times he has lived through, of the personalities he has encountered in life, of the values and experiences he has imbibed in his dealings with the world around him. The tale is a portrait, in large measure, of the Bengali middle class struggling its way to the top, without letting go of its roots. Which is why From Naogaon to New York resonates with the reader. It is Mahfuzur Rahman's unique story. And yet it is a life that is every other Bengali's. The writer's urbanity only adds substance to the landscape he recreates for his readers.



From Naogaon to New York An Unedited Memoir Mahfuzur Rahman Adorn Books

. . . Dhaka University and the Bengali ethos

THE growth of Bengali nationalism in pre-1971 Pakistan had a whole lot to do with the various struggles put up by students and teachers of Dhaka University. And that was clearly a reason why during the War of Liberation the university would be made the target of the Pakistan army's particular wrath. That, of course, is an obvious truth. But what Rangalal Sen, Dulal Bhowmik and Tuhin Roy have come forth with in this work is a comprehensive study of the role Dhaka University has played in the shaping of Bengali nationalistic aspirations, beginning especially with the Language Movement of 1952. That is quite a departure from the title of the work. At the same time, for all the stress on the role played by Dhaka University and Calcutta University during Bangladesh's war for liberty in 1971, information on the contributions of the latter does not much go beyond an enumeration of the efforts its academics and students made towards assisting the Bengali movement. But, to be sure, it is invaluable information, a necessary reminder to Bengalis inhabiting the people's republic of the powerful wave of support that had come their way in clearly the darkest moment of their collective life.

These are instructive essays we have here, from individuals who have closely studied Dhaka University as it has operated through the decades. That the university has been a focal point of an assertion of freedom in this part of the world has never been in doubt. Successive regimes in Pakistan understood this truth only too well, and for the very good reason that of all the institutions of higher learning in pre-1971 Pakistan, it was only Dhaka University which identified itself, gradually and surely, with the larger canvas of Bengali political aspirations. The first instance of defiance went out from the university, back in March 1948, when an arrogant Mohammad Ali Jinnah sought to have Urdu imposed on the country as the language of the state. It was only the beginning. In subsequent years, the university would come

to acquire the role of a crusading spirit. It is interesting to think that almost the entire Bengali political set-up in the 1960s and, later, in the 1970s comprised the young men who as students had spearheaded various movements on the campus.

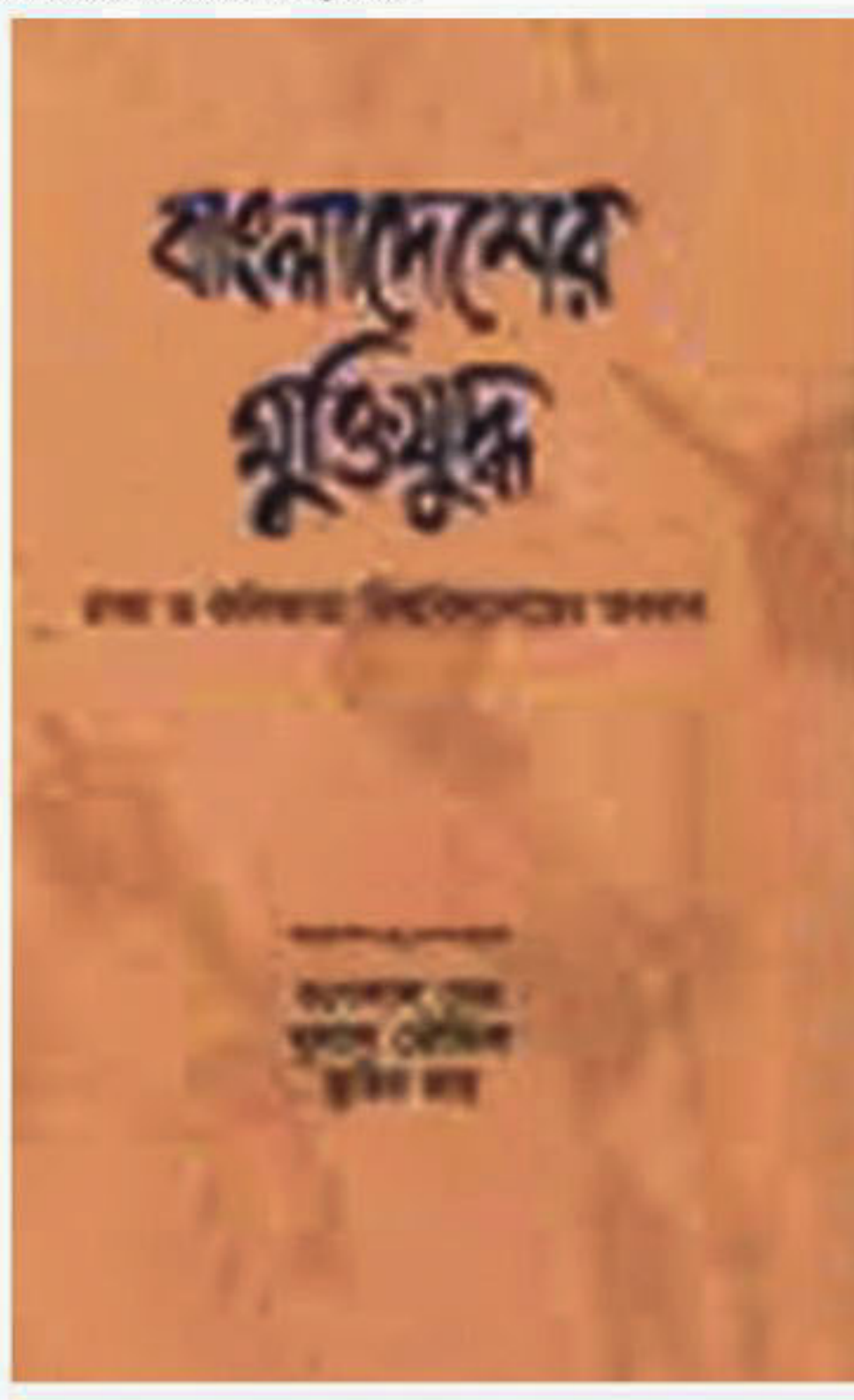
A wide range of subjects and themes is covered in the work. Ajoy Roy's reflections on Dhaka University as it carved a niche in tale of the War of Liberation provides an incisive account of how the university transformed itself from an academic institution into a hotbed of nationalistic activity. A similar approach is taken by Rafiqul Islam who, however, makes sure that it is a broad area he deals with. Islam records the number of casualties the university went through in 1971, in terms of the lives of teachers and students lost at the hands of the Pakistan army and then its local collaborators. A refreshing aspect of Islam's observations is the bare truth he reveals about the

collaborationist role adopted by a number of reputed academics. Syed Sajjad Hussain, Mohor Ali and Hasan Zaman come in for severe criticism, naturally and justifiably, because of their clear looking away from the genocide perpetrated in 1971. Hussain, appointed by Tikka Khan as vice chancellor in early 1971, remained indifferent to the many misfortunes students and his fellow academics were regularly subjected to by the occupation army. Sent on a trip abroad by the Pakistani junta to speak for it, he indulged in barefaced lies. The army, he told a disbelieving world, had not indulged in any atrocities in 'East Pakistan'. For himself, Islam had a narrow escape. Taken under arrest by the army, together with other teachers, he was eventually freed. But Giasuddin Ahmed, from the department of history, was not lucky the second time. The first time he was abducted by the army, he was allowed to return home. The second time,

on the eve of liberation, his fate was sealed: an al-Badr killer squad of the Jamaat e Islami seized him and murdered him, along with others, most viciously. Reports have circulated all these decades (and they do not come from Rafiqul Islam in this work) of some of those very young al-Badr elements rising to prominent bureaucratic positions in Bangladesh. Perhaps they are yet there? Perhaps a checking of the records in government ministries will yield these killers up?

The shaping of the Bangladesh nation-state through the periodic political ferment Dhaka University went through forms the theme of Abul Maal Abdul Muhith's essay. In essence, Muhith's thoughts go back to the earliest instances of student revolt and all the way through the gathering steam of the 1960s and early 1970s. It is a theme Rangalal Sen builds on in his admirable article on the 1962 student movement. There is another gem of a write-up from him, this one on Justice Abu Sayeed Chowdhury's role as vice chancellor and then as special envoy of the Mujibnagar government in 1971. Mohiuddin Ahmed expands on the Chowdhury theme in a separate chapter on the man who would subsequently take over as president of Bangladesh. You then go back to Rangalal Sen for some rich background information on the first twenty five years of student politics at Dhaka University, with particular reference to the times of Aditya, father of Madhu-da he of Madhu's canteen. But if you need a more detailed account of the canteen and Madhu-da's supreme sacrifice in 1971, you cannot but pore through K.M. Mohsin's informative essay on the subject.

Bangladesher Muktijuddho is a comprehensive, objective account of a significant part of national history that you ought not to ignore. It explains, in substantive form, why winning in 1971 was so important for the Bengali nation.



Bangladesher Muktijuddho Dhaka O Kolkata Bishwabidyalayer Obodan Eds. Rangalal Sen, Dulal Bhowmik, Tuhin Roy The University Press Limited

SYED BADRUL AHSAN IS WITH THE DAILY STAR

The making of a leader

Sabidin Ibrahim traces history in Bangabandhu's life

WHEN Sheikh Mujibur Rahman was young, his father gave him one insightful advice—"If you have sincerity of a purpose and honesty of purpose, you will never be defeated in life". Throughout his life, he never diverted from that course. And that made all the difference, helped him become an astute and compassionate leader and the greatest son of this soil, who was destined to lead the nation to freedom.

Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman is not merely a name but an inspiration to millions of youths of Bangladesh and the world as well. Many of us want to know how the man, whom Newsweek magazine once described as the poet of politics, mastered the nitty-gritty of politics and acquainted himself with different state-operating mechanisms.

Reading between the lines of The Unfinished Memoirs of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, one might get some clues about it. As he states in the book (page 33): "Those among us who were young or were students or were progressive-minded took up these points and began to speak out on them. (Abul Hashim led the intellectual body at the beginning of Pakistan and Sheikh Mujib was very close to him along with Huseyn Shaheed Suhrawardy). We needed to realise Pakistan and it was important to spell out what kind of economic and political framework Pakistan would have once it was created. Mr Hashim (Abul Hashim) would spend hours indoctrinating us on these issues. He would come to Dhaka for a few days at a time and would sit down with party workers to discuss these issues. He would also spend a lot of time in the Calcutta Muslim League office for similar meetings. He would always keep in touch with party workers. I accompanied him to many such meetings."

The above-mentioned excerpt is a fine example of his growing up with the masterminds of that time. One famous advice of Hazrat Ali ®, who was one of the four Khalifas of Islam,

is - "If you want to be a leader, serve others." Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman is the finest example of a serving leader. What great sacrifices he made in his beginning years! How passionately he worked and how lovingly he served people!

Sheikh Mujib's account of his journey to Delhi, Lahore and some other places makes revealing reading. One of the finest passages in The Unfinished Memoirs is the description of the Tajmahal. He visited this site for the first time while he was in Delhi as a Muslim League delegate at a conference. In his words: "It was so lovely! Even as I write this account twenty-one years later, the Taj's beauty overwhelms me; I'll never forget his loveliness".

The descriptions of some other places he visited as well are brilliant and enthralling. Those parts of this book where he wrote about many places can be used as a perfect example of a travelogue. How interesting and enjoyable to read these chapters as if we are also travelling with him!

In this book he has also depicted how Muslims as a minority were ignored during the British rule. That is why Muslims had to struggle for their own land and Pakistan was the result of it. The same thing happened with us in the time of Pakistan. Though Bangalees were greater in number, the Pakistani junta, as a weak, fickle minority, deprived us of our very basic rights. We came away from Pakistan and established our own country after a bloody struggle. To make this independence and the

sacrifices of the millions meaningful, we should take care of the rights of people irrespective of caste, colour, politics, religion and race. Let's everyone become the petal of a beautiful flower called Bangladesh.



The Unfinished Memoirs Sheikh Mujibur Rahman The University Press Limited

At last I want to say The Unfinished Memoirs is one of the greatest and finest inclusions in the history of Bangladesh. It is really a worthier experience to get some information, tales and insights from the very person who would later become the hero of tales, history and would be revered as the father of a nation. At the same time it is a matter of shame that it is the best book on Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and had to be written by the person himself. We talk a lot and endlessly expound on 'the spirit of liberation' and get emotional. There are so many lovers of Bangabandhu but few workers who would volunteer to research on the liberation war and Sheikh Mujibur Rahman as a person and statesman. There are some books and works on this but they are not enough. Maybe in future we will have some. However, let's show our profound respect and tribute to the person who wrote this for us. We should also be grateful to Professor Fakrul Alam for doing this great task of translating it into English and making it available to the world audience.

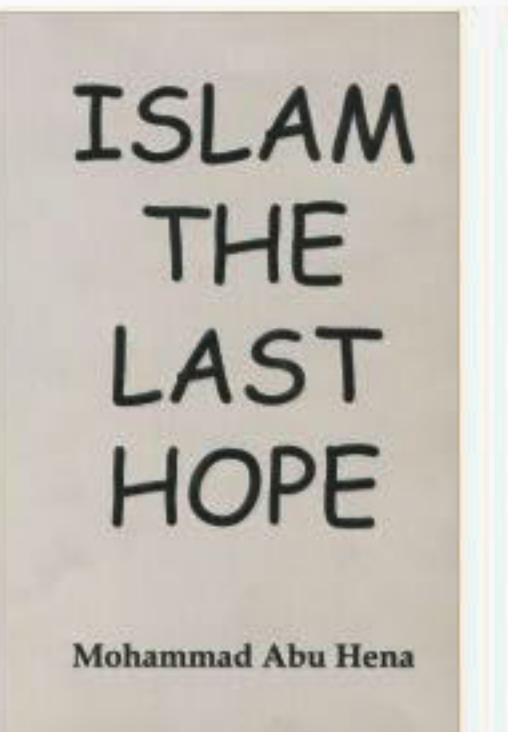
It is a book which should be included in the syllabi of schools and colleges. It can be easily included in a course on political personalities in the Political Science department; 'Literature in Translation' and 'Bangladesh Studies' courses in the English department; in Bangla and of course in the History department.

In brief, The Unfinished Memoirs is the diary of an young boy slowly but steadily joining politics, the growing up of that young boy and his turning into an active, dedicated and hard working worker; and from worker to leader.

Thirty eight years after the assassination of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, the best tribute we can offer him is to begin working unitedly to make Bangladesh free of poverty, hunger, corruption and communalism.

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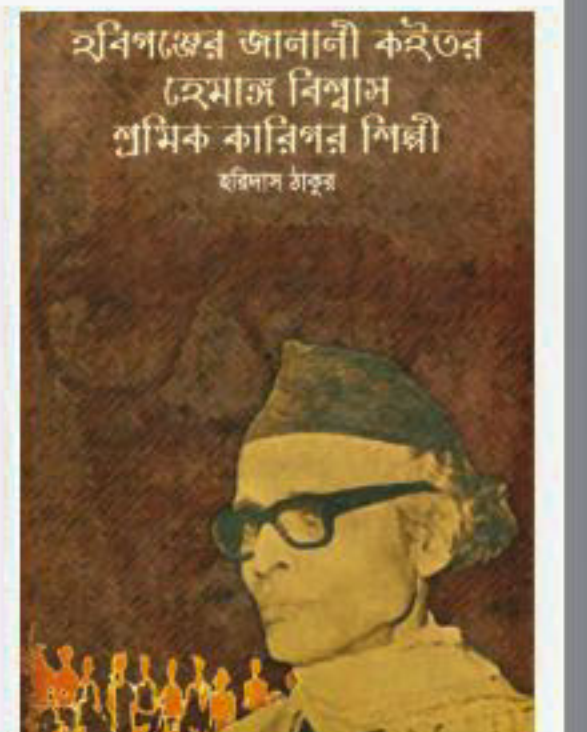
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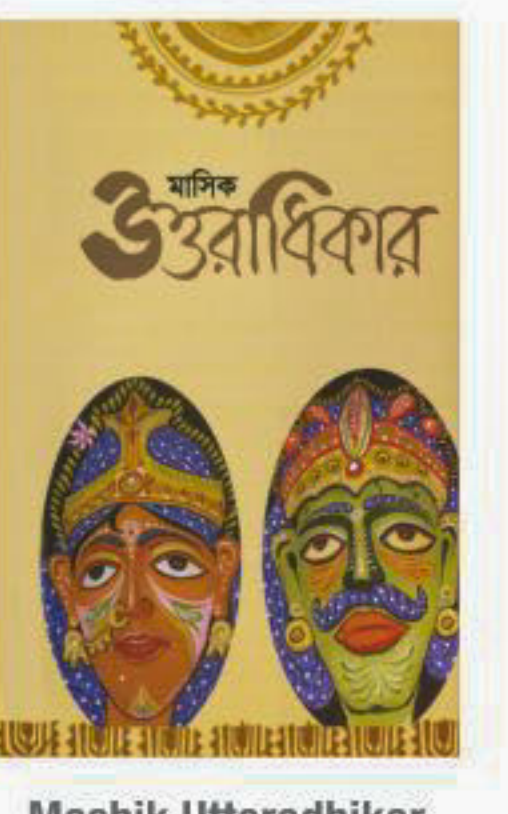
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