

TWO REVIEWS ON A NEW BANGABANDHU BIOGRAPHY

The life of a political giant

A liberator's hamartia

SYED MAHBUBUR RASHID

SYED Badrul Ahsan is a renowned journalist. He is the Executive Editor of The Daily Star, the leading English daily of the country. Badrul Ahsan has written a book on Bangabandhu. His style of writing is superb. All kinds of his writings have always been admired. But here the case is to be examined from a different and complex situation. The author has put himself to an acid test. Why? Sheikh Mujib is a legend, a history. Bangladesh and Bangabandhu are inextricable. In writing the biography of such a gargantuan personality like Bangabandhu, the author is to maintain a tricky balance between contemporary history and the personality. One cannot be overplayed or downplayed at the cost of the other. In a word, the author will have to be true to the history, notwithstanding the fact that he may have some personal liking or disliking. We believe that the author has been very faithful and committed to the responsibility of a true biographer. There has not been an iota of sycophancy in the writing.

The book starts with a most appropriate comment: "While it is quite legitimate to argue that Mujib was no intellectual in the sense that India's Jawaharlal Nehru was, it would be quite incorrect to believe that he did not have a comprehension of what politics was all about. The steady manner in which he was to rise to the top, over nearly three decades, gives the lie to the argument that it was circumstances alone that made the man. In more instances than one, it was Mujib who shaped circumstances for his country" (Part-1, Page-1, line 10-16). Mujib's revival of the party after the death of Suhrawardy was testimony to the aforesaid comment. After the withdrawal of martial law by Ayub Khan, most of the senior politicians were of the view that they would not resume party activities till the self-proclaimed field marshal Ayub Khan had bestowed parliamentary democracy upon them. Of course Bangabandhu did not think so before the death of Suhrawardy as he well knew that his mentor was a thousand times more Pakistani than Bengali. Bangabandhu's activities, spread a little over three decades, have been vividly described in a picturesque manner. The presentation of the Six Points by Sheikh Mujib in the political scenario of Bangladesh is another brilliant example of how Sheikh Mujib shaped circumstances. The Six Points were a Magna Carta for the emancipation of the Bengali nation.

When Henry Kissinger, then US secretary of state, visited Bangladesh and held a press conference at Gonobhaban, the official residence of the prime minister, Bangabandhu himself was present. The author comments, "The Kissinger trip was to serve as a defining moment in relations between Dhaka and Washington in that it formalized a restructuring of diplomacy between the two countries (P-241)." I do not agree with the author about what he calls a defining

moment. At least subsequent attitude and activities were to compel us to believe that Kissinger's visit was to hoodwink Bangabandhu in particular the and people of Bangladesh in general.

Zulfikar Ali Bhutto was the abettor of the genocide perpetrated in Bangladesh by the Pakistan army in 1971. It was an irony that he was invited to and welcomed in Bangladesh, three years later, though he did not publicly express any sorrow over the happenings of 1971. The haughty and arrogant Bhutto reluctantly went to visit the National Mausoleum at Saver. In the language of the author, "He refused to doff the Mao cap and as Tofail Ahmed, the Bangladesh Prime Minister's political secretary, offered him the visitors book, Bhutto huffed. "Enough of this nonsense", he said angrily as he pushed the book away. Of course the author has very efficiently described Bhutto's arrogant, haughty and megalomaniac behavior on page 97 of the book. Bhutto was a liar. Though there was no secret clause in the Tashkent Declaration signed between India and Pakistan after the 1965 war between those two countries in 1966 under the auspices of the then Soviet Union, yet Bhutto continuously propagated this lie to gain political mileage.

As mentioned earlier, the biographer's role is not to be confined to the person concerned only, but also to mention the circumstances and other incidents of historical importance. A youth leader's belligerent attitude towards Prime Minister Tajuddin Ahmed, The great public Leader Maulana Bhashani's unfortunate role after liberation and the treachery of Khandoker Mostaq have been described in a very objective manner. The chapter where the killing of Bangabandhu along with other members of his family described has been captioned, "Murder of Caesar" The title itself is a great tribute to the best Bengali in a thousand of years. After the murder of Caesar, while Antony was addressing the Roman crowd, he intoned, "When the great Caesar fell, O What a fall there was my countrymen/then you and I and all of us fell down/whilst bloody treason flourished over us." Unfortunately, we did not have any Antony on that fateful day of 15 August to utter these most appropriate words. There are a thousand books on Bangabandhu and thousands will come out in future. But quality books on him, particularly in English, are rare.

The most important issue for a biographer is to approach his subject in a very objective manner without any distortion. Syed Badrul Ahsan has been very much objective. He knew Bangabandhu from his boyhood but that did not have any bearing on his writing. Remaining impartial and objective, he has shown great respect to Bangabandhu and contemporary history.

SYED MAHBUBUR RASHID IS A FORMER CIVIL SERVANT AND AT PRESENT WRITES FOR A NUMBER OF NEWSPAPERS

MARTIN SWAPAN PANDEY

THE life was cut short and it rained on the evening of August 16, 1975, soon after his body was hastily buried as some army men stood guard. But the fifty five years he lived, he lived to give birth to a nation. How did he do it? If anyone, Syed Badrul Ahsan has it all in his masterpiece *From Rebel to Founding Father: Sheikh Mujibur Rahman*.

The study of history is captivating when all the right dots are connected with masterly accuracy and superior authority. Miss one dot, and history is a riddle. And if history is the exact, dispassionate recording of time, it is one. Layer upon layer, the past unfolds before our eyes and some of history's greatest giants come back to life as we read it. We don't miss a single dot – Huseyn Shaheed Suhrawardy, AK Fazlul Haq, Maulana Abdul Hamid Khan Bhashani, Mohammad Ali Jinnah, Ayub Khan, Yahya Khan, Indira Gandhi, just to name a few, who mattered in the making of the country Mujib would bring into existence. The roles of each of these individuals, and scores others, are offered in minute detail in a way that we stop reading and shake our heads in shock or in astonishment and pace around the room to digest what we have just swallowed. And then start reading again.

To weigh what lies ahead, one must dig into the past. Dig not to brood over but to consider, reflect and get a sense of what is in the making. And Badrul Ahsan digs deep and relates what nobody can relate. To give a sense of Mujib's political awareness even in his schooldays in the late 1930s, he tells us how a young Mujib confronted Suhrawardy and Fazlul Haq with the demand that development work be undertaken in his native Faridpur district. Mujib was not yet 20 then. Read on, and the history of the Awami Muslim League, Pakistan in the post-Jinnah era, the Language Movement, Mujib's taking charge after Suhrawardy, the 1965 India-Pakistan war, the Six-Point Movement, the rise of Bhutto, the Agartala Conspiracy case, the 1970 elections, the failed negotiations between Yahya, Bhutto and Mujib, the black night of March 25 and the Liberation War happen before your eyes.

There is no skipping, no omission of facts here, for doing so would be a denial of history – a cardinal sin for a historian. In the first few chapters, Mujib will be missing page after page and men like Suhrawardy, Fazlul Haq, Bhashani, Jinnah and Liaquat Ali Khan will dominate. There are three reasons for that. First, Mujib was yet to take centre stage in these early years. Second, Mujib's story would be incomplete if the stories of these men were held back. And third, while these men occupied centre stage Mujib was either languishing in a Pakistani jail or crisscrossing the country on election campaigns or organising the grassroots of his party, the Awami Muslim League that was later named as Awami League. It was a charge he was given by his guru Suhrawardy, who saw in Mujib an organiser and a politician whose ability to connect with the masses was unparalleled.

And when Mujib took centre stage in the real sense after Suhrawardy's death in 1963, there was no looking back. But

consider the title: *From Rebel to Founding father*. By calling Mujib a rebel, the author makes his readers face a moment of truth. If Mujib was any rebel, what did he rebel against? He rebelled against the time he was living in. His was a rebellion against the piles of political and economic injustice done to his people by the Pakistani dictators, and nothing short of a war could undo that.

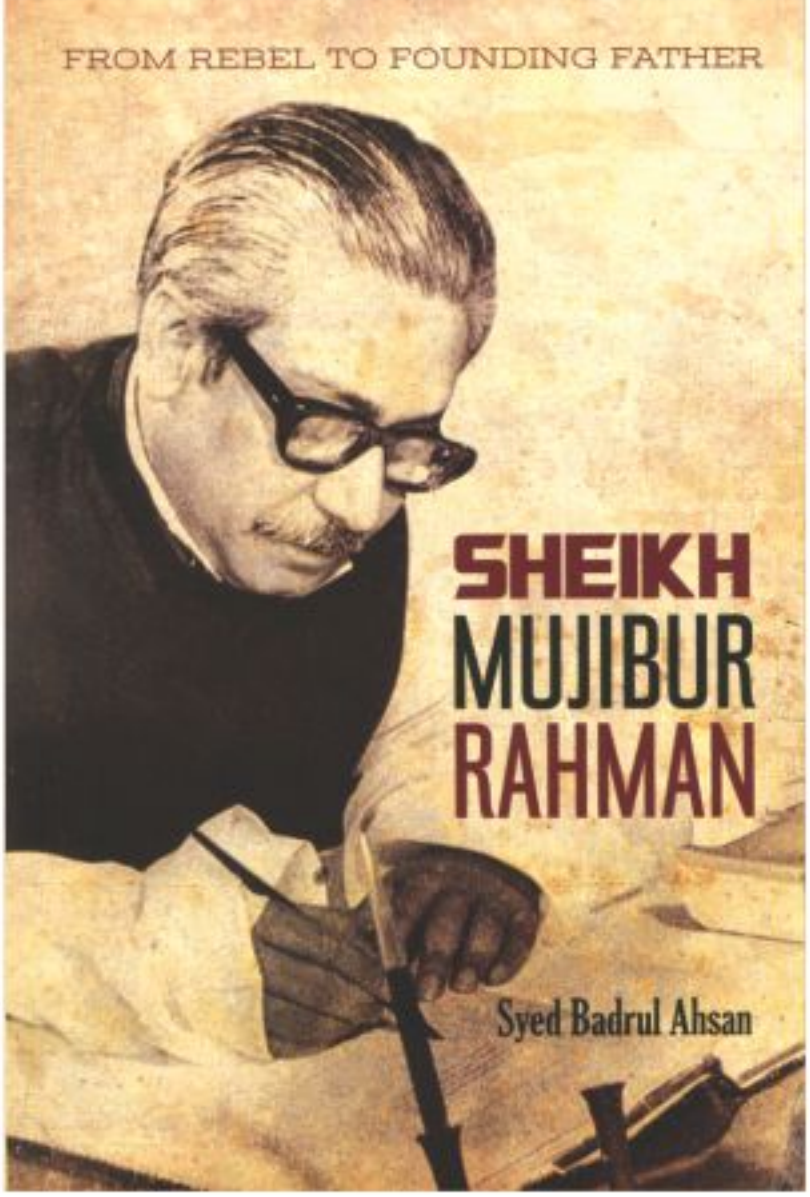
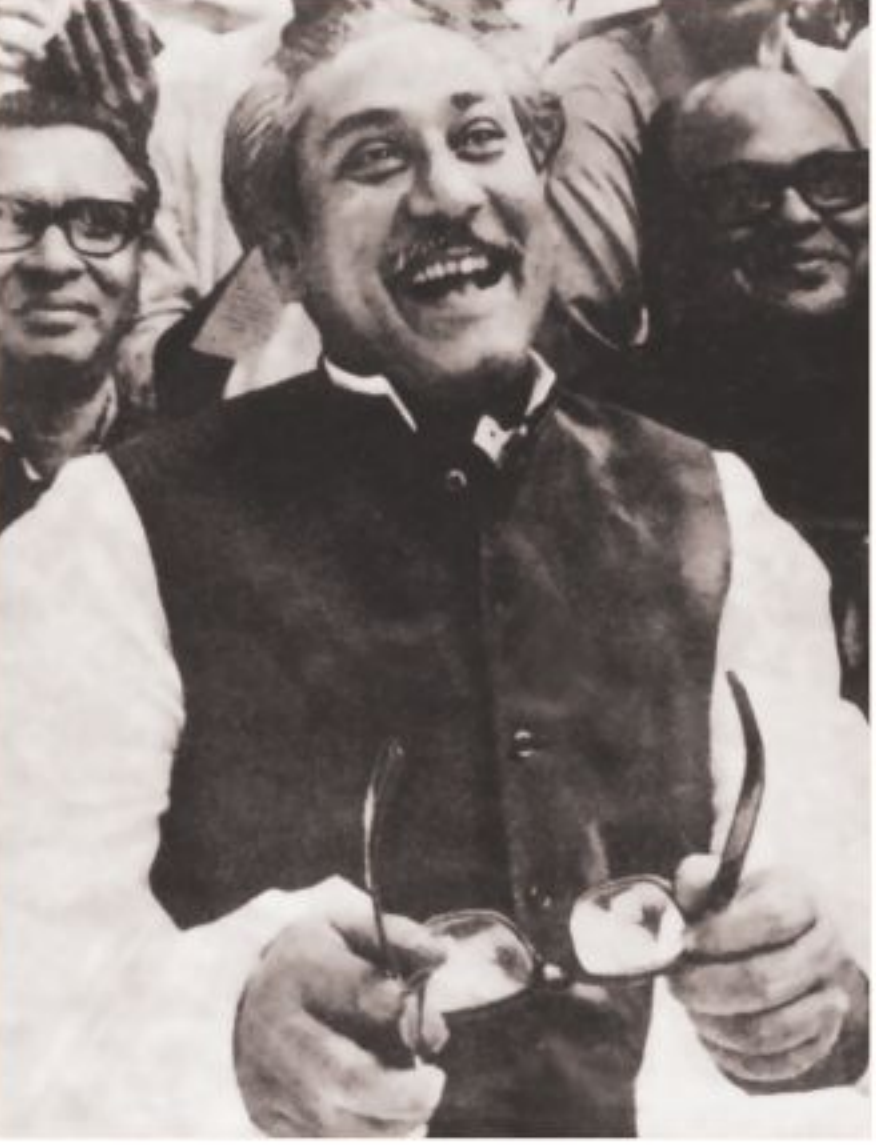
So the war begins and the author turns graphic: those barbaric shootings at Dhaka University, at Rajarbagh Police Lines and at Pilkhana on the night of 25 March. And from that night on the massacre of some 30 lakh people, the rape of about 2 lakh women, the persecution of Hindus and the exodus of some 10 million people to India during the nine-month war, as Mujib remains in a Pakistani jail for the entire period.

Once you finish it, you may argue that the book does not give any details of the battlefields, the resistance put up by the freedom fighters, including women and children, the US administration's continued support for the Pakistani junta, India's diplomacy for the cause of the Bangladesh war and the reason why Indira Gandhi ordered her generals to prepare to intervene (which Gandhi actually did in early April when her generals said they needed about seven months to prepare, that is until the winter when snow and dense fog would prevent Chinese troops from attacking India, if the Chinese wanted to). But it is good to remember that this book is not about the war and the international diplomacy for and against it. It is a book about the man who led his people to war, one that his people won. A bible on the creation of Bangladesh the book may be, but even the Bible does not explain why God needed to rest on the seventh day, after he was done creating the universe in the six previous days.

After the war, the first time we see Mujib upon his arrival from Pakistan's prison is on 10 January 1972. It is an emotional Mujib that we now see who for the first time cries in public as he speaks to the million-strong crowd that gathered to greet him that afternoon at Suhrawardy Udyan. Subsequently, taking charge from Tajuddin Ahmad, he began what he later called his "ditio biplob" (second revolution) to right the wrongs of the war. It was a massive job even for Mujib, and he sought three years from his people to finish his unfinished revolution.

But Mujib was a tragic hero and tragic heroes must falter. Soon he loses a trusted friend like Tajuddin. Then come the one-party system called BAKSAL and the banning of all newspapers save for four, and those, too, would be government-controlled. Enemies are on the prowl. While Hamlet and Macbeth's hamartia was their indecision, Dr Faustus's excessive pride in his knowledge and King Oedipus's in error of judgment, Mujib's was his failure in identifying enemies like Khandaker Moshtaque. Mujib's was a father's belief that his sons would not be his assassins. But in time they would be.

And the way Syed Badrul Ahsan relates the story of the rise and fall of the Father of the Nation, one can only wonder how he took the pleasure or the pain of such thorough research. To read him is a pleasure.



From Rebel to Founding Father
Sheikh Mujibur Rahman
Syed Badrul Ahsan
Niyogi Books, New Delhi

In search of Lascars

Ansar Ahmed Ullah trawls history for the past

IN 2012 I got involved with the Imperial War Museum's research project, Whose Remembrance? – a study aimed at investigating and opening up understanding of the role of colonial troops and civilians in the two world wars.

Hundreds of thousands of Africans, Indians, Caribbeans and other people from former British colonies contributed to the winning of the two world wars. Their story remains under-researched and relatively little known. There are still many ways in which the 'colonial story' has yet to be fully told.

A central objective of the project was to uncover emerging trends in work that has already been done or is currently underway, and to establish how the IWM and other repositories of relevant information can contribute to a fuller understanding of different communities' past heritage and history.

I was one of three external specialist researchers recruited to assist IWM to address how the number of Black & Minority Ethnic (BME) visitors to the IWM's physical and virtual sites can be increased; how a fuller understanding by minority groups with a past history can best be developed; and to identify gaps in research and how these might be best addressed so as to allow the investigation and presentation of a more comprehensive and coherent story.

I chose South Asian seamen, and, to be more specific, seamen of Bengali origin who were from present-day Bangladesh, the eastern half of Bengal in the then British India.

This was a natural progression from my last research project, Bengalis in London's East End that had looked at the first Bengalis who had settled in the East End of London. I also knew that one of my grandfather's cousins had been a seaman who had come to England in 1936.

From our research at the Swadhinata Trust we knew that the Bengali seamen formed the first sizeable South Asian community in Britain. They settled in the Midlands, Cardiff and in London's East End close to the Docks. These early Bengali seamen were commonly referred to as 'lascars'. The word was once used to describe any sailor from the Indian subcontinent or any other part of Asia, but came particularly to refer to people from West Bengal and modern-day Bangladesh. It comes from the Persian Lashkar, meaning 'military camp', and 'al-askar', the Omani word for a guard or soldier.

During the First World War more lascars were needed to take the place of British sailors who had been recruited into the Royal British Navy. As a result the numbers of Asian lascars grew further. By the end of the First World War Indian seafarers made up 20 per cent of the British maritime labour force. The Indian Army was likewise a major contributor of men to the First World War effort. Nearly a million Indians served in that conflict. The Indian Army grew even larger during the Second World War – amounting to two and half a million men.

Close to Tower Bridge, in Trinity Square Gardens, near Tower Hill tube station, is Tower Hill Memorial, a monument that commemorates British Merchant Seamen who lost their lives in the First and Second World Wars.

Many of the names on the monument indicate seamen of Bengali origin with names such as Miah, Latif, Ali, Choudhury, Ullah or Uddin. However, these named individuals only represent the privileged few Bengalis employed as British crew members, and exclude some 4,000-5000 lascars who died at sea and whose names were never known.

For the First World War the total loss of seamen of all backgrounds, recorded at Tower Hill Memorial, is 17,000. Indian sources, however, give the figure of 3,427 lascars dead and 1,200 taken prisoner. For the Second World War, Indian sources also give an estimate of 6,600 Indian seamen dead, 1,022 wounded and 1,217 taken prisoner.

While researching I was also contacted by a gentleman from Portsmouth whose grandfather had come to Britain as a seaman. His grandfather worked as a chef, was a founder member of the Muslim funeral service which is still operating from the East London Mosque and had served in London during the war. The gentleman had given me information about his grandfather's soldier service book which gave his unit as the Indian Pioneer Corps. While I was aware IWM didn't hold personal records I was hoping to find information about his grandfather's unit, the Indian Pioneer Corps. On contacting IWM's Collections I was informed that it was difficult to trace any information about the Indian Pioneer Corps as it was not a front line unit but there was good regimental history in their collection.

Armed with that information, I visited IWM's research room. I found an excellent brochure on the Auxiliary Military Pioneer Corps and an excellent book by a Brigadier. The Auxiliary Military Pioneer Corps was formed in 1939 to assist with the clearing of obstacles, the smoothing of roads and to execute repairs. Furthermore, I found papers by a colonel who had commanded the Pioneer Corps.

80 Company, the unit that my contact's grandfather had served in, was active during the Blitz in London, and was established to attract Indian residents in Britain in early 1940. Although it was anticipated that the London docks would be a fruitful area for recruitment, the numbers were never as great as hoped for. The highest number of other Indian ranks at its peak in June 1941 was only 172.

The Imperial War Museum (IWM) has extensive collections, many of them described on its own website. There are books and publications, including printed ephemera, booklets, handbooks, maps, newspapers and journals, arts, documents & sound, exhibits, film & photographs.

The theme of colonial troops is well documented, although the collections tend to be slanted towards the experiences those who commanded units experiences of the men and women from the colonies who joined up or who contributed to the war effort.

Whose Remembrance? The team recommended I take a look at some of the collections held at Duxford Airfield, the former Battle of Britain airfield, where there are large stores of archives. In particular it was recommended that I take a look at the BBC Monitoring Report transcripts of what came over the radio during the Second World War. Rather interestingly there are transcripts from so called 'Freedom stations', which were broadcasting during the Second World War against the British government's line – a useful source for students of India's independence movement.

I spent a fair amount of time browsing IWM's online catalogue. Typing in the word Bangladesh produced 57

items - mostly books but also some photographs, for example, of an old Navy ship that had been sold to the Bangladesh Navy; the Bangladesh Army training abroad and with the UN; and films - mainly of Chittagong. I wasn't expecting to find a large collection as Bangladesh as an independent state didn't exist during both First and Second World Wars. Interestingly, I came across a film showing the 81st West African Division fighting the Japanese from Mowdok, India (Bangladesh). I wasn't aware of African troops fighting in Bangladesh.

I then came across a Bengali in London in 1940. The photograph featured a Miah Jorif (I suspect they got his name the wrong way round, it would normally be Jorif Miah), a waiter at the Istanbul restaurant in Soho, at work at the salad table, which, according to the original caption, is "the pride and joy" of his heart. The caption stated that Miah was originally from Bengal and had been in Britain since 1940.

Another photograph titled, 'Muslim Community: Everyday Life in Butetown, Cardiff in 1943' showed visitors to Butetown for the opening of the new Mosque enjoying a meal at 'The Cairo' cafe. In the photograph are 'Abdul Aziz, from Calcutta, who runs a cafe in South Shields, Mrs Aziz and their daughter Joynob, Mrs Annie Nian, with her son Kenneth and Azin Ulla, a seaman from Bengal'. This was my first discovery of a direct reference to a Bengali seaman.

In my search I came across an Indian seaman (though perhaps not a Bengali), a Xavier Fernandez from Bombay who was injured when the Russian convoy in which he was sailing was attacked. He was in hospital, undergoing a process of rehabilitation in 1942. Another photograph showed a seaman, who seemed a Bengali, by the name of Mohamed Maberzak (I am assuming

his last name is spelt incorrectly and perhaps should be Mubarak) undergoing treatment at the same hospital.

I knew from my previous research that most Bengali seamen worked in the engine room as 'donkeywallahs' (named after the engines 'donkey engines') and that those who greased and oiled machinery were known as 'telwallahs'. Others worked supplying the furnace with coal and disposing of the ashes. The working conditions were harsh and hot, and many seamen died of heat stroke and exhaustion. You can imagine my delight at discovering a photo of three stokers of the Royal Indian Navy on the mess deck of the sloop HMIS SUTLEJ in 1944.

We also knew from research that many Bengali seamen worked as cooks. I came across a photograph of the Royal Indian Navy at Stamshaw, Portsmouth in 1942 on training, showing cooks with some of their specially prepared dishes on their way to the mess.

Duxford has wealth of archival documents including the proceedings of Nuremberg and Tokyo war crime trials - of interest to me as Bangladesh itself is at present proceeding with war crimes trial of Bangladesh War of 1971. Within the Tokyo trial papers I came across a Bengali Justice Radhabinod Pal who was representing India. I also came across a broadcast where Mohammed Ali Jinnah, was asserting for Pakistani state as a land for India's Muslims.

South Asian historians who are studying India's independence and the partition would find Duxford



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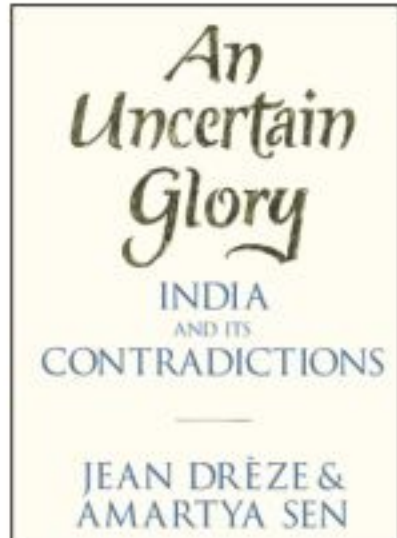
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