

BOOK REVIEW: HISTORY & POLITICS

Of the peasants' quest for a state and Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman

ANISUR RAHMAN

Afsan Chowdhury's *Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and Bangladesh: The Quest for a State (1937-71)*, published in 2020 by Shrabon Prokashani, studies Bangabandhu in the context of the peasants' resistance against colonialism and their quest for a state in South Asia.

Chowdhury suggests that a village is an important power-base where peasants fought to liberate themselves from economic oppression that was hundreds of years old. At one stage of their long struggle, a common identity had appeared—"the Margin"—which subsumed all other identities, including those based on religion. The Margin is, therefore, a historical identity of people who had shared similar socio-economic and political experiences. The opposite of the Margin is the Centre, an urban-based powerhouse such as Kolkata, Karachi, or Dhaka. For Afsan Chowdhury, the process of forming a historical Margin had started roughly in 1905 or earlier, and Sheikh Mujib had helped peasants establish contact with the urban-based middle class before he accomplished the task. Being the carrier of the peasant's state-making project, which was in utero until 1971, Sheikh Mujib appeared as the leader of the greater alliance of the Margin, Chowdhury suggests. His finding overlaps with that of Professor Abdur Razzaq, while differing from those of Ahmed Sofa.

Chowdhury insists that Centre-Margin power politics are key to understanding the birth of Bangladesh. Consequently, in the first part of the book, he explores the development of the historical identity of the Margin, which had at its heart, the peasants. He takes four chapters to show the uprising of peasants against colonialism, their formation of alliance with other classes, and the appearance of a new historical identity which abolished other language- or faith-based identities. It was none but Sheikh Mujib, Chowdhury emphasises, who could understand the nature of the peasant's state and lead them to it in 1971.

In the second part of the book, Afsan Chowdhury focuses on the importance of Centre-Margin power politics before and after the 1947 partition and its impact on the peasants' quest for a state. He reiterates that it was the Centre-Margin (Karachi-Dhaka) power relationships that contributed to the birth of Bangladesh, and then follows Mujib's political career—including his encounters with Fazlul Huq and Huseyn Shaheed Suhrawardy and his sojourn to Baker Hostel in Kolkata—to show him as an agent of the Margin for the Centre (Kolkata). Chowdhury insists that Mujib's desire for Pakistan, a new state for Muslims of India/Bengal, was fundamentally different from that of his mentor Suhrawardy. While Suhrawardy saw Pakistan as an opportunity for Muslims of India/Bengal, Sheikh Mujib saw in it the peasants' liberation

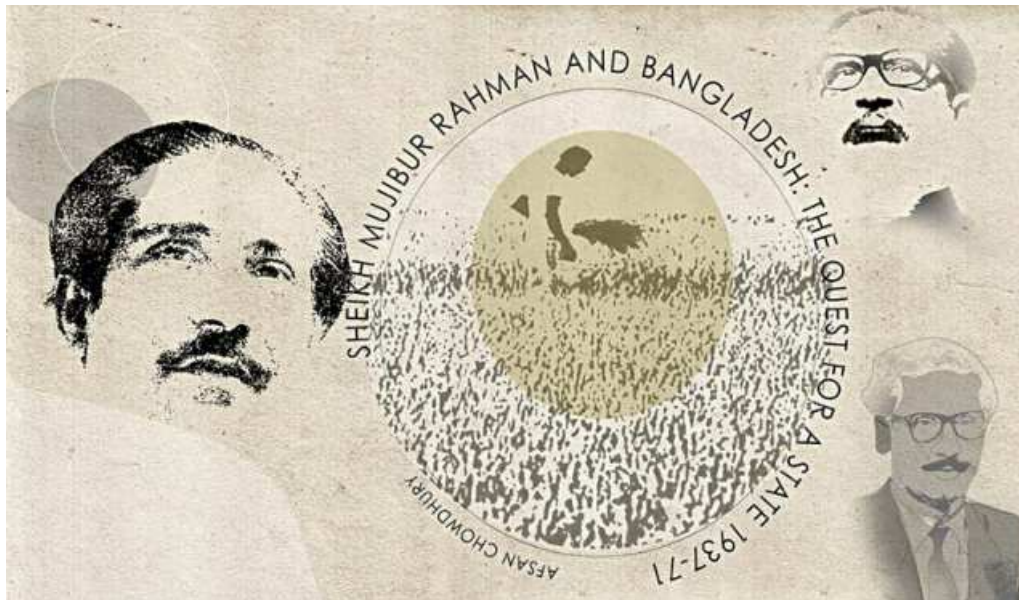


ILLUSTRATION: ZAREEN TASNIM BUSHRA

from exploitation. Mujib's politics "as a militant margin never changed under any history", the writer emphasises.

To my knowledge, Zillur Rahman Khan's *The Third World Charismat* (UIP, 1996) has been the best political biography of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. One may also find piecemeal analysis of Sheikh Mujib's contributions to establishing an independent state in the lectures and interviews in Professor Abdur Razzaq's *Bangladesh: State of the Nation* (University of Dacca, 1981) and Sardar Fazlul Karim's *Dhaka Bishyabidyaloy ebong Purbobongiy Shomaj: Oddhyapok Abdur Razzaker Alapcharita* (Shahitya Prokash). His disciple, Ahmed Sofa, has also published two excellent essays about the father of the nation in *Sheikh Mujibur Rahman O Onyamro Probandho* (Hawladar Prokashani, 2014), and Abul Fazal has published a memoir of his encounters with Bangabandhu in *Sheikh Mujib: Taake Jemon Dekhechi* (Baatighar, 2016).

Bangabandhu's own memoirs and autobiography, too, are good sources for understanding his political ideals. They are useful sources to write a history of his time, as Salimullah Khan has recently emphasised in an article for the *Daily Jagaran*. These writings, no doubt, generate academic interest in Bangabandhu's political ideals, leadership, socio-legal thoughts and, above all, his quest for an independent state. But how do we study Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, the person? The absence of an appropriate method, approach, and framework has made this task hard to accomplish. Consequently, although hundreds of titles about him have come out over the past few years, only a few are worth

recommending to academia.

This new book by Afsan Chowdhury does not, however, do justice to its ambitious project. The study is indeed full of observations, but the arguments are not carefully constructed with the support of evidence. As a result, they leave a host of questions unanswered, including at what point of time the peasants of East Pakistan left their religious identity behind, and whether we can consider peasants to be an independent political being. Why is 1937 important for understanding the birth of Bangladesh? As the central theme of the book is the peasants' quest for a state, the research could have shown exactly when peasants started to think of a state, since most of their anti-colonial movements were issue-based.

The title, also, does not do justice to the content of the book as Sheikh Mujib is hardly the centre of it. The book deserves better organisation as absence of logical connections between chapters, sections of a chapter, and paragraphs in a section are rampant across the book. Above all, the study seems predetermined and is not guided by sources.

However, this new approach of examining the birth of Bangladesh and Bangabandhu's contributions in it, in connection with the history of state formation in South Asia, are what make this book worth reading. It is an excellent attempt to rescue South Asian history from the history of India.

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BOOK REVIEW: TRAVELOGUE

For lovers of traveling and history

TOWRIN ZAMAN

Shamsul Alam's *From Love Lane to the World: Tales of Travel & More* (Sea Sands, 2021) is a selection of his magazine and newspaper articles, based on his many travels over the years. This book takes readers on a journey through those places visited, along with their fascinating histories. Each chapter is an article dedicated to a place of Alam's travels—Italy, Mexico, Spain, Peru, Russia, and Tunisia, to name a few. He also dedicates a few chapters to Bangladesh, specifically Chattogram and Cumilla, places he has strong associations with.

The title of the book led me to expect a memoir of the writer's travels. But while the book is speckled with some personal anecdotes, it is the histories behind the locations that get the spotlight. Most of the chapters start with a brief account of the author's visit to a place before directly taking us to the stories behind them.

Born in Love Lane, Chattogram, and schooled in Cumilla, Shamsul Alam studied law in Dhaka University and in universities in England, including at Cambridge. By his own admission, Alam never planned on being a writer, yet his voice here is fluent, with a wry sense of humor. He does not go into long leaden essays, nor does he meander with pointless details. He rather lives up his storytelling by injecting opinions and insights of his own about the storied events. He does digress at times but with a discerning sense of self-awareness. It is this self-awareness that makes him freely acknowledge in the prologue that this book does not aim to be life-changing, nor is it an attempt at fame, but rather a medium for self-expression.

From Love Lane is filled with little hidden gems from history—the various names of Chattogram in the past and the speculative backgrounds behind them; the gold chain that could have changed the history of both the Mughal and the Ottoman empires; and Lenin's long-standing connection with the British Library. "As the aircraft circled on, I recalled that prior to the conquest by the Muslims, Chattogram, lying on the disputed frontier between the Hinduism of Bengal and Buddhism of Myanmar, formed a source of almost chronic feud between the rulers of Tripura and Arakan", Alam writes. But it is the small interjections of his own stories that make the book stand out. For instance, the chapter based on his college days as a student of Cumilla's Victoria College

is a personal favourite. It is filled with nostalgia and stories of coming of age with his friends, ending with a brief account of their current whereabouts today, in their "sunset years".

The writer does not deliver the stories of his personal travels with words of embellishment or sentiment. Even the account of his wife, researcher and chemist Dr Shirin Alam, being diagnosed with a terminal disease during one of their travels, an illness that eventually took her life, is stripped of any emotion, and yet laden with meaning. The delivery is impactful and it almost catches you off-guard. This forthrightness and self-restraint in Shamsul Alam's writing are what make it truly an impressive read.

The book does suffer from the major flaw of weak publication and editing, which at times takes away from the pleasure of reading. It is laced not only with spelling and punctuation errors,

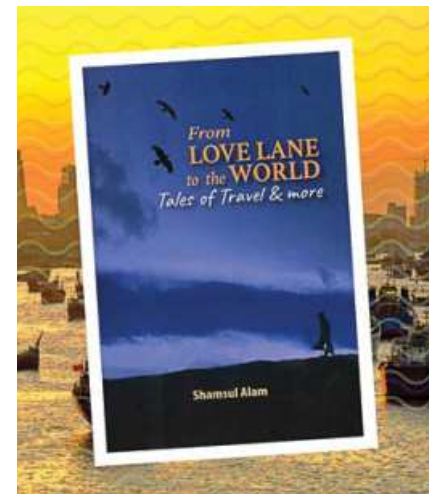


PHOTO: RAJIB RAIHAN
DESIGN: KAZI AKIB BIN ASAD

but also inconsistent typography. It is a pity, because the writing deserves better editing. However, although distracting at times, these flaws are not substantial enough to completely derail one's enjoyment of the book. Above all, it is a well-researched and well-written book that will be one to seek out for travel and history enthusiasts.

Shamsul Alam's *From Love Lane to the World: Tales of Travel & More* (Sea Sands, 2021) is available at Bookworm Bangladesh.

Towrin Zaman is a researcher who loves reading anything and everything.



ILLUSTRATION: ZAREEN TASNIM BUSHRA

THE BIRTH OF BANGLADESH IN BOOKS

Remembering the Birangona: The power of personal narratives

Half a century from where we began, *Daily Star Books* will spend all of this year—the 50th year of Bangladesh—revisiting, celebrating, and analyzing some of the books that played pivotal roles in documenting the Liberation War of 1971 and the birth of this nation.

ISHRAT JAHAN AND NAHALY NAFISA KHAN

The books we recall today, *Ami Birangona Bolchi* (1994), *Rising from the Ashes* (2001), and *The Spectral Wound* (2015), are among the documentations which highlight women's voices and their perspectives of 1971. These three books focus on the memories of wartime violence against women (and men) and the aftermath of

that violence in terms of their lived experiences, and the responses they received from families, the community, and the government.

Read this article online on The Daily Star's website and on Daily Star Books' pages on Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and LinkedIn.

BOOK REVIEW: FICTION

Forgiveness, growth, and second chances in Sarah Hogle's 'Twice Shy'

SAMEIRAH NASRIN AHSAN

Reading Sarah Hogle's *Twice Shy* (GP Putnam's Sons, 2021) is like biting into the cool freshness of summer fruits in the scorching Bangladeshi heat. Sweet and tangy, the book fills your heart with the pangs that come with a delightful enemies-to-lovers plot. This delectable slow-burning romance is so redolent with gentleness, wit, and endearing plot points that it will shoot sparks of light into your imagination even after you have turned the last page. It is topped with the most adorable gentleman of a hero and attempts to take you to a place blissfully sweet, where happy endings are the only possibility; the kind of book you could devour in one sitting. But instead you take your time with it, to absorb each chapter, because the thought of parting with it is bittersweet.

A feel-good book through and through, *Twice Shy* is the archetypal romantic comedy. The entire story is told—in engaging and hilarious prose—from the point of view of protagonist Maybell Parrish, a dreamer and complete social failure, or so she makes of herself. Maybell has spent most of her childhood and adult life feeling like she has ruined her mother's dreams, simply by existing. Stuck in an unfulfilling job, with abusive coworkers and friends, she escapes reality often by disappearing into the safe haven built inside her mind. In this imaginary world, life is perfect and Maybell has it all: she has a stable job, amazing talent, a doting partner, a handful of loyal friends—all that eludes her in

reality. Underappreciated and overwhelmed, it is only when Maybell learns that she has inherited her late aunt's mansion, a dream house from her childhood, that she starts believing in luck. Soon, however, she learns, with a sinking heart, that she is not its sole inheritor. Wesley Koehler, the groundskeeper for her late aunt, and the most insufferable man Maybell will meet, is an equal owner to the property. Now, she must find a way to



DESIGN: SARAH ANJUM BARI

reason with this irritable man who is bent on wrecking her plans for his own.

As is the law of romantic comedies, *Twice Shy* dishes out some over-exaggerated plot points; however, in this case they ultimately add to the progression of the story. The most real element of the novel is the ensemble of complex, thoroughly multifaceted and flawed characters that Hogle has created for her story. Getting to know Maybell through her internal monologues is so much fun.

She is relatable, funny, and a total riot altogether. She is a non-confrontational, accommodating, gullible 30-year-old woman, who often tends to fade into her own background. She is also resilient, determined, and delusional to the point of foolishness—a quality that keeps her moving forward in life. "Being delusional is our downfall but it's also our saving grace: we're deluded enough that we don't see why tomorrow shouldn't be better, even if the last thousand days in a row have been bad."

Both Maybell and Wesley mask their vulnerabilities under their adult exteriors. They each have certain perceptions of what a fully functional, successful adult should be like, but struggle to attain those qualities for themselves. Maybell laments: "It's rough when you have a nature that begs you to avoid heartache at all costs but also makes you wear your heart on your sleeve." The writer does a remarkable job of handling each character's growth with great care. It is particularly admirable how Hogle handles delicate issues like social anxiety and panic attacks with such gentleness and respect. *Twice Shy* is about accepting your vulnerabilities and taking charge of your own destiny. It is about forgiveness, growth, and giving love a second chance.

Sameirah Nasrin Ahsan is a mechanical engineer in Dhaka. She aspires to be an author someday. For now, she is content with reading and sharing the stories that make her think beyond herself. Instagram: @booksnher