

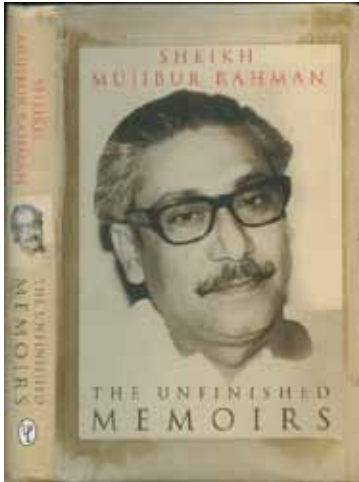
The Vanguard of Freedom

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The Unfinished Memoirs

Sheikh Mujibur Rahman

Translated by Dr. Fakrul Alam

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Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's *The Unfinished Memoirs*, one of the most interesting autobiographies, was published in 2012 by the University Press Limited, Bangladesh. The book was simultaneously published by Penguin Books India and by Oxford University Press Pakistan. This posthumously published memoir traces the life of Sheikh Mujib from his boyhood to his leadership of the then East Pakistan (now Bangladesh). It also unveils his indomitable spirit for independence, his lifelong fight against tyranny and injustice, his undying love for his people, and altogether manifests Mujib as the vanguard of freedom. Thus, the book inevitably carries great significance for Bangladesh as well as for the world.

Sheikh Mujibur Rahman was the architect of independence and the first prime minister of an independent Bangladesh. He led the struggle for independence against the ruthless rulers of the erstwhile West Pakistan and spent around twelve of his fifty-five years in prison for this. Hence, Mujib is rightly called the "Father of the Nation," "Friend of Bengal" (Bangabandhu), and the "Poet of Politics." Not only that, in 2004, BBC conducted a survey among Bengalis around the world where he was voted "The Greatest Bengali of all Time," pushing the World Poet Rabindranath Tagore to the second position in the list of great Bengalis born in the last thousand years.

Mujib's autobiography was discovered by his nephew in an abandoned office in 2004 and handed over to the Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, who later had it published. The present volume was written intermittently between 1967 and 1969 while Mujib was in Dhaka Central Jail as a prisoner of the state. In the book, he mostly describes the larger aspects of his struggle against institutional and ethnic discriminations, and explains some core issues regarding Bengali politics, communal riots, famine, Bengal partitions, various movements, and conspiracies ingrained in the system of that time. Though the book under review spans only thirty-five years from 1920 to 1955, it encompasses the writer's life, education, family history, and political activities. Apart from his long prison life, the writer also talks about his parents, wife, and children, especially their sacrifice and love for him. Some of the passages in the book are striking yet very lucid and simple, such as when he narrates how his young son, Sheikh Kamal, failed to recognize his own father and asked his elder sister Sheikh Hasina, "Sister dear, can I call your abba my abba too?" (208).

Sheikh Mujib's narrative takes readers beyond his family history and political career into the world of East Pakistan. Mujib was born in a well-known Sheikh family on March 17, 1920 in Tungipara village of Gopalganj, located in the southern part of Bangladesh. His father was Sheikh Lutfur Rahman and mother was Sayera Khatun. Being the son of a civil court clerk and a landowner, Mujib did his schooling in Gopalganj and Madaripur. It was at school that he fostered the seeds of independence under the influence of the Swadeshi Movement against the British. At the same time, he became involved in the Muslim Students' League of Gopalganj under the patronization of one of the influential leaders of all Pakistan, Hussain Shahid Shuhrawardy. While doing his Bachelor of Arts at the Calcutta Islamia College, Mujib played a leading role in the communal riot in Calcutta during the India-Pakistan partition in 1947. Later, he oriented himself to the national political movement when he got admitted in the Law Department of Dhaka University and eventually formed the East Pakistan Muslim Students' League in 1948. In the same year, when Khawja Nazimuddin, the then Chief Minister of undivided Bengal declared that "Urdu would be the state language of Pakistan," Mujib raised a spontaneous protest against the declaration. During the language movement in 1952, despite being in prison, he was organizing strong protests against this unjustified decision.

The Unfinished Memoirs highlights Mujib as a charismatic leader, a dynamic orator, and an undaunted advocate for democracy for the people. Being an unflinching voice against all kinds of corruption, oppression, tyranny and discrimination, Mujib never compromised his principles and ideologies. Ideologically, he believed in socialism and considered it to be the only means for liberating people from exploitation and for making economic and social progress. As he writes: "I myself am no communist; I believe in socialism and not in capitalism. I believe that capital is a tool of the oppressor. As long as capitalism is the mainspring of the economic order, people all over the world will continue to be oppressed" (237). As a leader of the exploited, Mujib empathized not only with his own people but with all oppressed people. As a pragmatic politician, to love humanity was his central political philosophy, to better the condition of human beings was his vision, and to ensure the welfare of the masses was his mission: "As a man, what concerns mankind concerns me. As a Bengali, I am deeply involved in all that concerns Bengalis. This abiding involvement is born of and nourished by love, enduring love which gives meaning to my politics and to my very being" (n.p.). However, he was not a mere theorizer but a man of action, never afraid to make mistakes.

As he wrote, “When I decide on something, I go ahead and do it. If I find out that I was wrong, I try to correct myself. This is because I know that only doers are capable of making mistakes; people who never do anything make no mistakes!” (85).

The book under review reveals Sheikh Mujibur Rahman’s unique personality. Mujib inherited his integrity and sense of justice from his ancestors and consolidated these with his patriotism, emotion, hospitality, bravery, tenacity, and eloquence. Mujib also took note of others’ good qualities and inculcated those in himself. It is important to note that Mujib was fortunate enough to come into close contact with three great personalities of the Indian subcontinent – Huseyn Shaheed Suhrawardy, Maulana Abdul Hamid Khan Bhashani, and Abul Kasem Fazlul Huq – from whom he acquired some of his personality traits. In all probability, Sheikh Mujib might have imbibed Suhrawardy’s generosity, Bhashani’s sense of sacrifice, and Fazlul Huq’s magnanimity. However, in spite of being very close to the influential leaders, Mujib never hesitated to point out erroneous acts of the senior party leaders, but he did this respectfully. An example can be drawn from the book. In 1944, Mr. Suhrawardy called upon all student leaders to settle a dispute over a prominent party post and asked them to give it to a candidate who was dissenting, fraudulent, and discouraging for good workers in Mujib’s opinion. Mujib instantly protested against Suhrawardy’s decision. The latter eventually burst out, “Who are you? You are nobody”; I [Mujib] retorted, ‘If I am nobody then why have you invited me? You have no right to insult me; I will prove that I am somebody; Thank you sir, I will never come to you again.’” (30). This demonstrated that Mujib was not a blind follower; he was unfalteringly firm in his principles.

Thus, Mujib’s family legacy, aptitude for learning from others, and interaction with diverse groups of people made him an all-encompassing personality. People from all walks of life had great respect and reverence for Mujib. As mentioned in the book, for example, once Mujib was travelling in a small boat along the River Modhumati to his village. Suddenly, his boat was surrounded by a gang of river pirates. As he wrote, “They asked him [the boatman], ‘Who is on the boat?’ The boatman said that I [Mujib] was on it. One of the pirates immediately hit our man with an oar, saying, ‘You swine, why didn’t you tell us that this is the boat of our honored Sheikh?’ They left quickly” (133). This shows how strong Mujib’s personality was that even criminals could not but show high regard for him.

The autobiography exhibits the intellectual flair of the author. Like a true anthropologist or a historian, Mujib used to study and talk about all aspects of the nature, culture, and history of his own nation. As a politician, Mujib could easily feel the pulse of his people, read their minds, and reach their hearts. As a writer, he remained unbiased in discussing the true nature of his people, even the negative ones. For instance, Mujib mentioned that “instances of envy and treachery can be found in our history” (51) and “blind faith and belief in the supernatural are the faults of our people” (52). Distinctively, he wrote, “Envy and malice are qualities people all over the world have but only Bengalis are stricken by grief at another’s prosperity. They are never happy to see their brothers do well. This is why Bengalis have been oppressed by other races throughout the ages despite being blessed with so many good qualities” (51). Yet, the author was proud of the Bengalis because they had always been politically active and informed. Thus, he stated: “[O]rdinary Bengalis are knowledgeable about politics and are very much conscious of the political situation ... Bengali Muslims loved their religion but they would not allow themselves to be made fools of by the people who were interested in using Islam for political gains” (262-263).



The Unfinished Memoirs, in one sense, can be read as a non-fictional bildungsroman as it educates readers about the writer's qualities and helps them see almost thirty-five years of his world. In another sense, it can be singled out both as a vivid description of a personal memoir and an earnest account of Bangladesh's journey towards freedom. Thus, it becomes not just an autobiography of an author but the autobiography of a nation. Still, some readers might argue that the book is carelessly written and not very well-knit like other great autobiographies. This is true to some extent, but readers need to keep in mind that it was not planned as an autobiography. Rather, it was written more as reminiscences. Yet, the book turns out to be a useful work for our future leaders and researchers because of the wealth of intimate details it provides concerning Sheikh Mujib and his vision for an independent nation. It will also remain an extraordinary document of a man who altered the course of history, transformed the fate of a nation, and turned the dream of freedom into reality.

Originally written in Bangla, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's *Oshomapto Attojiboni* was translated into English by Dr. Fakrul Alam as *The Unfinished Memoirs*. It is an excellent work of translation and Alam's passion for translation shines through in this work as he remains faithful to the language, style, and spirit of the original, as well as making it reader-friendly. It is evident from the quality of Alam's translation that he has diligently worked to recreate the original as closely as possible without compromising the taste and meanings of the source text. In this translation, Alam imparts ample value to the literary function of the work as well as the impact it has upon the readers' appreciation of the autobiography.

The Unfinished Memoirs is a great piece of work providing the most authentic introduction to Mujib's ideologies which were, after all, the driving force of his life. It will always continue to impact Bengalis as well as all freedom-loving people of the world. In short, the memoir and its translation reveal what the world would otherwise never have known: the pain, suffering, and sacrifices of a man whose love for his country was undying.