

TRIBUTE

Bir Protik Major Taher Ahmed: A Liberation War hero

TAHREEN AHMED

MAJOR Taher Ahmed BP (Rtd), of the first Bangladesh War Course (BWC), passed away on July 4, 2020, at Combined Military Hospital (CMH) Dhaka around 9 pm from a heart attack. The story of his life and legacy is intimately connected to the Liberation War of Bangladesh and as his daughter, I wanted to chronicle it here.

Born on July 30, 1948, in Chatkhil upazila of Noakhali district, Major Taher was the son of Late (Al-Haj) Saidur Rahman and Late Tahurun Nahar Chowdhurani. His father, who worked in the ceramics industry, was himself arrested, jailed, and tortured by the West Pakistan army in 1971.

Major Taher completed his SSC from Chatkhil High School and HSC from Jagannath College, Dhaka. When the Liberation War broke out, he was a final year student of Dhaka College, studying for a BSc in Physics with all the ambitions and aspirations of perhaps one day becoming a physicist. However, the genocide of his fellow countrymen and the sufferings he

observed steered him towards a totally different direction in his life's story.

On the morning of March 26, 1971, Major Taher was walking along the streets of his neighbourhood in Dhaka feeling tormented and confused about the events of the night before—Operation Searchlight. Suddenly, he found himself standing in front of a shop listening to a speech by Tikka Khan blaring from the radio. The Governor of Pakistan declared that he would never accept an independent Bangladesh. This event, along with a series of others, propelled Major Taher to go off to war for the liberation of his homeland. Leaving Dhaka, he took his family to their village home in Chatkhil, Noakhali, where he formed a platoon of 30 men and acted as their commander.

In April 1971, Major Taher and his platoon walked 40 miles across the border into Tripura, India, where he enlisted into Melaghar Camp Sector 2 (near Agartala) and underwent guerrilla training under then Major Khaled Mosharraf in order to fight in the Mukti Bahini. Then, from July to October, Major Taher took part in a rigorous pre-



Major Taher Ahmed BP (Rtd) (1948-2020)

commission training at the makeshift Bangladesh Military Academy at Murti in the Jalpaiguri district of West Bengal. There, he trained under Brigadier RP Singh (then Captain). Finally, on October 9, 61 commissioned officers graduated as the first Bangladesh War Course from Murti. Soon after, the

young Second Lieutenant Taher was posted to Sector 11 (under Sector Commander Major Abu Taher), arriving on October 17. The next day, he was driven to Dalu (on the Indian side) where he was appointed as Sub-Sector Commander.

Among his most notable victories during the Liberation War, Major Taher entered Nakla upazila in Sherpur district and with his men, blew up Begunbari Bridge in Mymensingh district in order to keep out the invading West Pakistan army. For this heroic triumph, Major Taher was awarded the Gallantry Award of Bir Protik by the Government of Bangladesh.

Later in his career, Major Taher Ahmed BP joined the Bangladesh Foreign Service and held diplomatic posts as the Assistant High Commissioner of Bangladesh to the UK, and First Secretary of Bangladesh in Belgium, Thailand and Singapore. He retired from the Bangladesh Army soon after his return to Bangladesh in December, 1996. Later, he worked in senior level positions in the readymade garments (RMG) sector.

In the last two years of his life, Major Taher Ahmed BP built a small resort, Shopno Ekattur Bagan Bari, in his home town. His dream was to give back to the community by creating a place where he could instill in the youth, the history and ideals of the Liberation War—including freedom of speech, freedom to vote, reducing the divide between rich and poor, equal justice for all, corruption free and drug free society, women's empowerment and secularism—all philosophies that Major Taher felt passionately about and were the reasons behind his participation in the fight for freedom in 1971. Moreover, he wanted it to be a place for people, especially young girls, to have the freedom to roam about without the fear of harassment—which is unfortunately far too common in rural Bangladesh. Bagan Bari has also created equal employment opportunities for both men and women alike, something that Major Taher Ahmed BP always strived for. He and his ideals will live on.

Tahreen Ahmed is the daughter of Major Taher Ahmed BP (Rtd).

Budget allocations must target different indigenous populations specifically



THE indigenous peoples of Bangladesh welcome the Bangladesh government's commitment of additional funding to combat the challenges in the Seventh Five Year Plan. However, the present budget lacks an exact and adequate allocation for both plain land and hill indigenous populations. More needs to be done to address promised special needs such as employment, mother tongue based education, non-farming opportunities, microcredit, vocational training, development of the tourism industry and more.

In Bangladesh, more than 54 indigenous communities live both in the Chittagong Hill Tracts as well as the plains, along with the majority Bengali population. According to the 2011 census, the country's indigenous population is approximately 1,586,141—the number is almost two percent of the total population in Bangladesh. However, indigenous peoples claim that their population is three to five million, according to a thematic strategy paper titled "Rights of the Ethnic People (Indigenous Peoples)" from Manusher Jonno Foundation in 2018. According to the Jatiya Adivasi Parishad, an apex organisation of the indigenous peoples of the country, the estimated population of plain land indigenous people (who are not based in the Chittagong Hill Tracts) is likely to be more than two million. This lack of disaggregated data and geographical mapping is one of the main obstacles to the allocation of a proportionate budget for indigenous peoples.

The national budget is regularly ambiguous regarding allocating separate and specific shares to indigenous peoples, even though they belong to the most disadvantaged sections of society and face multiple challenges that are economic, cultural, social and political. The poverty rate of indigenous peoples is 80 percent

in the plain land areas, whereas the national poverty rate is around 23 percent, as detailed in a World Bank Group Household Income and Expenditure Survey from October 2016. However, in the government declared Tk 5,68,000 crore budget for fiscal year 2020-21, there is no exact allocation for plain land indigenous peoples and their development.

At the moment, the coronavirus

Plain land indigenous peoples also have no separate ministry for budget allocation. As a result, no special scheme has been introduced by the government for boosting their economic activities and lifting up those who are the furthest behind. Often, a small portion of money for development of indigenous peoples of the plain lands are allocated under the Development Assistance for

most of this development assistance ended up going to non-indigenous peoples. While this non-indigenous population also needed the assistance, without targeted interventions of plain land indigenous peoples, they are likely to be pushed further into poverty as a result.

In the case of indigenous peoples from the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT), there are certain paradoxes

legal systems administered by both traditional leaders (circle chiefs, headmen and karbaris) and the state officials in the CHT are protected by the Constitution. There are laws in the country that do not apply to this region and there are some laws that apply only to the CHT— The CHT Regulation of 1900 (also known as the CHT Manual) is the most important legal instrument that is applicable only to the CHT. The CHT Regional Council is supposed to be the coordinating and supervising authority over the hill district councils, local government and the CHT Development Board, as well as all development activities and customary laws, among other things.

Nevertheless, the fund allotted for the CHT is under the the Ministry of CHT Affairs (MoCHTA), and this framework undermines the power of the CHT Regional Council—these different layers of administration and power structures are explained in detail in *Survival on the Fringe: Adivasis of Bangladesh*, a book edited by Philip Gain. In the fiscal year 2020-21, the proposed budget for MoCHTA is Tk 1,235 crore—however, there is no explanation of exactly how much of this budget is allotted for indigenous peoples specifically. All the legal administration, including the CHT Regional Council, must look to the MoCHTA for allotments from the budget, which takes away the authority to make decisions from the indigenous peoples in the CHT.

Indigenous peoples are culturally distinct societies and communities. Although they make up six percent of the global population, they account for about 15 percent of the extreme poor across the world. In Bangladesh, indigenous people are one of the major groups that require immediate attention and coordinated actions to minimise the socio-economic gap with the mainstream. Therefore, exact and adequate allotment of funds for indigenous peoples in the national budget is a necessity, and would be a new paradigm in Bangladesh.

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A large portion of tea workers in Bangladesh hail from plain land indigenous populations.

PHOTO: PHILIP GAIN

pandemic is another life-threatening risk for indigenous people in these regions. Besides, the unofficial lockdown has also impacted a large portion of indigenous peoples working in the informal sector, such as daily wage earners and migrant labourers. In terms of hardcore poverty, which is a subset of absolute poverty, the rate for overall rural Bangladesh is 17.9 percent, whereas for plain land indigenous peoples, the rate is about 25 percent, according to a research paper from the Bangladesh Economic Association.

Special Area (except CHT) project. However, recent details of this project fund allocation seems to show that the budget did not reach plain land indigenous peoples as expected. For example, in the fiscal year 2019-20, Tk 171 lakh was distributed from an allotted Tk 50 crore under nine upazilas—Tungipara, Kotalipara, Rajbari Sadar, Pangsa, Kalukhali, Baliakandi, Sakhipur, Faridpur Sadar and Pakundia. Regrettably, these nine upazilas are not areas with high concentrations of indigenous populations of the plain land, and

in the budget allocation as well. The CHT spans almost 5,093 square miles and is a unique territory, being the only mountainous area in the country, and home to one-third of the total indigenous population. The poverty rate of indigenous peoples is 65 percent in CHT, whereas the national poverty rate is around 23 percent, according to the 2016 World Bank Group survey. In CHT, the indigenous peoples often face difficulties such as unemployment, education, lack of health and infrastructure, etc.

The customary laws and unique

ON THIS DAY IN HISTORY

JULY 28, 1914
Beginning of World War I

Using the assassination of the Austrian archduke Francis Ferdinand as a pretext to present Serbia with an unacceptable ultimatum, Austria-Hungary declared war on the Slavic country on this day in 1914, sparking World War I.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

1 Red-ink entry

6 Spoil

11 Steer clear of

12 Earlier, quaintly

13 Poet's concern

14 Glossy fabric

15 Pack down

17 RBI or ERA

18 Front desk feature

20 Pop star

22 Valuable rock

23 Find

26 Rho follower

28 Sculpting medium

29 Money, in slang

31 Peach center

32 Bread spread

33 "Why don't we!"

34 Touch on

36 Broad smile

38 Bowling spots

40 Opposition

43 Center

44 Be of one mind

45 Bewildered

46 Assignments

DOWN

1 Rep.'s rival

2 Cain's mother

3 Areas of conflict

4 Perfect

5 Time in office

6 Xenon, for one

7 More or less

8 Tools for barkeeps

9 Verdi piece

10 Car scar

16 Shot

18 Office leader

19 Idle on film

21 Verve

23 Fill completely

24 Mile or meter

25 Cats and dogs

27 Blue-gray cat

30 Machinery part

33 Special jargon

34 – mater

35 Fishing need

37 Take in

39 RR stop

41 Ran into

42 "For sure!"

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BY MORT WALKER

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