

Tajuddin Ahmed

PROFILE



- 1925: Born in Dardaria village, Kapasia.
- 1943: Joined Muslim League.
- 1944: Elected councillor of Bengal Muslim League.
- 1948: Founder member of East Pakistan Chhatra League.
- 1949: Joined Awami League.
- 1953: Elected General Secretary of Awami League (until 1957).
- 1954: Elected as MLA, defeating Muslim League GS.
- 1962: Jailed for active participation in movement against military rule.
- 1964: Elected Organising Secretary of Awami League.
- 1966: Helped draft historic Six-Points.
- 1966: Re-elected General Secretary of Awami League.
- 1966: Jailed again for campaigning for Six-Points.
- 1967: Released from jail after mass movement.
- 1970: Elected member of National Assembly.
- 1971: Appointed Prime Minister of Bangladesh Government in Exile, April 10.
- 1972: Appointed Minister of Planning and Finance.
- 1974: Resigned from Government, October 26.
- 1975: Put under house arrest on August 15, day of Sheikh Mujib's assassination. Later moved to Dhaka Central Jail.
- 1975: Assassinated in jail, November 3.

A civil servant's homage

FARUQ CHOUDHURY

THIS humble birthday tribute to one of the greatest sons of Bangladesh is so titled because I knew and admired him essentially from the point of view of a civil servant. Mr. Tajuddin Ahmed's cowardly jail murder, along with that of three other national leaders, created a void in the political arena of Bangladesh, that to this day, remains perceptively unfilled. Born on July 23, 1925 he would have been seventy-nine today.

As a civil servant, I had the occasion to see Mr. Tajuddin Ahmed from close quarters, in Dhaka as well as in London, where I served as the Deputy High Commissioner.

Had he been alive today, even with the achievements he would have most certainly had to his credit, I do not think he would have "celebrated" his birthday, in any public manner. We have admittedly only circumstantial evidence to go by, but the one I refer to, I think is a conclusive one. In the two volumes of his published diary of 1947-1948 and 1949-1950 (Papas, July 1999 and February 2000 respectively), against his daily diary entries recorded on Wednesday, July 23, 1947 and Sunday, July 23, 1950 (there are also no July 23 entries for 1948 and 1949), there is no mention whatsoever of his birthday.

On July 23, 1947 (three weeks before the birth of Pakistan), besides recounting his daily activities, the better part of his day was apparently spent on discussing student politics with a close friend. On July 23, 1950, his primary concern, ironically in contrast to the flood of July this year, was the lack of "significant rainfall... which was essential for a good crop." In his published diary he appears as a politically conscious, perceptive, and knowledgeable young man in a hurry, who clearly did not have the time to write too much about himself.

Here I cannot help recall his January 4, 1948 entry, (on that day I turned fourteen, but he had, of course, no reason to mention this!) -- a day when he rises at 3:30 a.m. and studies from 3:30 a.m. to 4:30 a.m., from 7:30 a.m. to 10:00 a.m., and from 7:30 p.m. to 8:00 p.m., and in the afternoon in the "party meeting" (which party, I know not) he proposed, "(I) that we should put forward our programme appealing to reasons only -- in no way we will try prove it by Scripture, and (II) we shall

recant all antithesis put forward by Ulemas by Scripture, no more than that."

Incidentally, Mr. Tajuddin Ahmed, who kept his diary in English was a brilliant student, a scholarship holder, and knew the Holy Quran by heart (*hafiz*). On that busy day of January 4, 1948 he went to bed at 8:00 p.m. but had the time to mention that Burma had on that day become independent! As he went early to bed he would have hardly known of the central role he would be called upon to play twenty-two years later in the creation of Bangladesh, Burma's immediate neighbour.

From all published accounts of our Liberation War, (including two authentic and brilliant books *Mool Dhara 71* by Moidul Hasan and *Bangladesh Sarkar 1971* by H.T. Imam) we have a blow by blow account of Mr. Tajuddin Ahmed's leadership role in our War of Independence -- a role which happily not even the long and far-reaching hand of the so-called "authorities" can ever touch and distort. Here, one fervently hopes that the present national pastime of distorting history will one day pass.

Now, back to the personal recollections of this remarkable man by a civil servant.

My first close glimpse of him was in the evening of December 22, 1971, the day he arrived from Kolkata to Dhaka to take over, in the absence of Bangabandhu, the reins of the government in Dhaka. He came to what is now known as Bangabhaban wherein along with some other offices we had, in a couple of rooms temporarily set up the Foreign Office. A rough English rendering from my Bangla book, *Desh Deshantor* brings out my sentiment of the day.

"On that day," I wrote, "Prime Minister Tajuddin Ahmed met each and every civil servant present one by one and went around shaking hands with them. For many of us, this was our first meeting with him. This leader-like approach of his was of considerable significance. On that evening of the seventh day of our 'Victory Day', Mr. Tajuddin Ahmed established the role of political leadership in that nerve-centre of governmental activities. This he did, not with any post-war roughness, but through the initial demonstration of his habitually polite, deliberate, and self-confident personality. A man of few words that he was, this knowledgeable, intelligent, and efficient political

personality left a deep impression on many of us."

Another incident I recall was on the evening of January 4, 1972 (coincidentally on that day I was a thirty-eight-year-old keen civil servant), I accompanied the then Foreign Minister Abdul Samad Azad to the residence of Mr. Tajuddin Ahmed, the Acting Prime Minister of Bangladesh. The purpose was to get his approval of the brief for the Foreign Minister's visit to New Delhi in which I had accompanied him and which was to commence the next day. As I sat and listened with admiration, the Acting Prime Minister's one and a half hour discussion of the brief, I could appreciate his grasp and deep understanding of the socio-economic and political problems that we were then facing.

As we stood up to take leave, I recall his parting words on that occasion. He said, "Remember, the most important duty for you is to impress upon the Indian government to

help us build up international pressure for securing Bangabandhu's release from Pakistan. We need him urgently for keeping the nation together." Mr. Tajuddin Ahmed represented Bangabandhu, (who had, on his return from Pakistan, taken over as Prime Minister by then) at the Indian Republic Day celebrations in New Delhi on January 26, 1972. On his return to Dhaka from Delhi he was confronted at the airport with a protocol mess up, when his car did not turn up in time to receive him. Later when I, as the Chief of Protocol regretted this incident, he looked up, smiled and said "I know it was not your fault, but that of my Ministry. But never mind, we learn from experience." I say to my young civil servant friends of today, maybe, we in our time served superior political masters!

I recall that in London at a dinner given by a High Commission colleague in honour of Mr. Tajuddin Ahmed, a very highly placed academic holding an important government

appointment tried to publicly pull me up for having placed an Audi 100 car at his disposal instead of a Mercedes, (which incidentally, was not available for him). I could not take his behaviour in the presence of my junior colleagues. I knew that I was not at fault. The illustrious academic had raised his voice above permissible decibel limits, and so I did too, saying, "Sir, please do not raise your voice. Go ahead and dismiss me if you please."

Again, I say to my young colleagues, I would not dare do this under the present circumstances! However, on that occasion an ominous silence (for me, that is) fell all around. This academic traveled back from the dinner to his hotel with Mr. Tajuddin Ahmed, this time in a Mercedes. The latter's Private Secretary, sitting in the front seat of the car reported to me the next day that the academic had indeed tried to raise the subject with Mr. Tajuddin Ahmed, who changed the subject by saying, "Never mind these small things. Now tell me what was your visit to the United States like?" Happily, I did survive to recount this story!

But then Mr. Tajuddin Ahmed, sitting in that famous Mercedes, pulled me up alight on another occasion, in his inimitable gentle and soft style. I was accompanying him to Heathrow Airport and the car had the national flag flying. At one stage, Mr. Tajuddin Ahmed said, "Mr. Choudhury, I want to point out to you an impropriety in the manner that the flag has been flown. The flag is fitted into the flag pole with a strong piece of white cloth border. This is not permissible, as the color white is not prescribed in the approved design of our national flag. Please make sure that this is corrected." I must have blushed in shame, accepted my responsibility and said, "Sir, I'm sorry this will not happen again." "I know," he said reassuringly.

On this, his seventy-ninth birthday, I pay homage to an extraordinary man and a remarkable leader. It was not my good bureaucratic fortune to see too much more of him, but the more I saw of him, the more I admired. This unfortunate nation was indeed just a little fortunate in having the stamp of this man's personality in the formative years of our nationhood. Perhaps right at this moment this is not evident. But I have this conviction that it will one day show up.

The writer is a former civil servant.



In London with the author (right) and S A Sultan, Bangladesh High Commissioner to UK.

Recalling our first Prime Minister

ATTUR RAHMAN

THROUGHOUT 1971, Mr. Tajuddin Ahmed, the first Prime Minister of Bangladesh, led the war of liberation on behalf of the country's undisputed leader Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, then in Pakistani jail. The whole of the Bengali nation remained united and able to fight the unequal war with so much confidence and heroism only because it was led by someone like Tajuddin and his able comrades.

He led the war from a small office room no bigger than ten feet by ten feet with very modest furniture, like a table, a few chairs, an iron chest, a steel cabinet, and, of course, a photograph of Sheikh Mujib hung on the wall in front of the desk. Indeed, Tajuddin never let us feel that he was leading the war all by himself. Besides being flanked by committed political colleagues like Syed Nazrul, M. Monsur Ali, and Qamruzzaman, he always had Sheikh Mujib in spirit with him. Everything he did was on his behalf.

Once the die was formally cast in the early hours of March 26 by Bangabandhu, just before being arrested, Tajuddin assumed the leadership of the war of liberation as an almost natural continuation of his capable administration during the days of non-cooperation. Besides preparing and then presenting the proclamation of independence on April 10, 1971, and forming a small cabinet to run the government in exile, he also led the war with utmost commitment. He preferred to remain in the war field with the valiant liberation fighters rather than sitting in his office. It was because of his steadfast leadership that we could transform the war of liberation into a people's war and could defeat Pakistan in only nine months.

Unfortunately the complementary leadership between Tajuddin and Sheikh Mujib did not last long. As Tajuddin himself told Mr. Khan, his private secretary, the Awami League was a big party and there were big problems in it. Besides whispering by the Young Turks against Tajuddin's efficient leadership during the war, conspirators like Khondker Mushtaq and his gang were equally active in dividing the two. Finally, they were able to separate the two leaders and it was then quite easy to make the final onslaught on both Bangabandhu and Tajuddin and the other three senior members of the high command.

Had they all remained alive for some more years, Bangladesh would have surely prospered and started moving towards its ultimate goal of becoming *Sonar Bangla*. But destiny had other plans and we are still mired in failures and frustrations of paramount dimensions despite many signs of creativity by ordinary people in many areas. The young entrepreneurs from different fields have shown great resilience even after facing all kinds of governance failures. It is because of them that the country is still kicking. Had the country benefited from the committed leadership of the architects of the country, including Tajuddin, we would have perhaps by now reached the stage of development achieved by Malaysia.

What were the leadership qualities of Tajuddin? He was an intelligent person, and yet very close to the masses. Born in a middle-class rural family, he could feel the pulse of the peasants and small artisans. At the same time, he studied economics and had acquired all the qualities of a modern intellect. His involvement in organisational activities gave him an extra edge over others in dealing with ordinary people as party workers, and at the same time running a multi-class party under the guidance of the charismatic leader Sheikh Mujibur Rahman.

Tajuddin was not a leader by chance. He systematically prepared himself day by day for leading the process of formation of a nation, along with his other political colleagues. All of them participated in the language movement during the early years of Pakistan and helped prepare the ground for germination of the seed of Bengali nationalism. He was a highly organised man. He used to write his diary regularly right from his school days. That he was deeply political and a first class patriot with all the humane qualities could be guessed as early as 1947. As reflected in the page of his diary of August 7, 1947, Tajuddin was involved in forming a political party named East Pakistan Economic Freedom League in association with leaders like Mr. Toaha, Nurul Islam Chowdhury and others.

When he became the General Secretary of Awami League in the sixties, he was able to articulate more clearly against the wrong kind of development policy followed by the

country, particularly in the field of education. That he was a great crusader against income inequality was vividly reflected in his first speech given to the nation as the first Prime Minister of independent Bangladesh.

On April 11, 1971, he told the fighting nation: "Let there be a new world for the hungry and suffering millions of Bangladesh where there will be no scope of exploitation. Let us pledge for freedom from hunger, disease, unemployment, and illiteracy. Let 75 millions of brothers and sisters of Bangladesh engage themselves to realise their goals through their collective will and strength. Let there be a newly democratic society out of the blood and sweat of martyrs of new citizens of free Bangladesh."

He was fully confident about the outcome of the 1971 war. He said on April 17, 1971, after the swearing in ceremony of the cabinet, that the only goal of the struggle was to build a new and prosperous Bangladesh

development."

And he did not wait a minute after returning to Bangladesh before moving fast to reconstruct the countryside and to wage a diplomatic war for the early release of Bangabandhu. He, of course, started sending useful directions to the administration even before coming to Dhaka from his Calcutta office. On December 20, he already passed some orders encompassing stoppage of any financial transaction including revenue with Pakistan either through post-offices or banks. He also made it clear that Bangladesh would follow a self-reliant economic policy and avoid US aid. As soon as he came to Dhaka, his first consideration was to improve the law and order through the help of Indian army. His next concern was how to bring back ten million refugees quickly and help them readjust. He then quickly moved into establishing bilateral economic and diplomatic ties with countries that

Bangladesh. But he was also vocal on global economic inequality and elaborated on how tariff walls of the rich countries were forcing poor countries to remain poor due to their inability to access rich markets.

Tajuddin always dreamt of a prosperous Bangladesh which was free from poverty, inequality, hunger, and foreign dependence. He indicated this bent of his mind through his various early actions as Prime Minister during the difficult days of post-independence. But his three budgets are even better testimonies of his pro-poor development thinking. His emphasis on improving the lot of the working class while formulating land and industrial policies was also very straight forward. His enemies, however, were able to create a distance between him and Bangabandhu under the pretexts of events like price-hike, food insecurity, and economic "mismanagement" that were essentially by-products of a very unstable global economy following oil crisis and beyond the capacity of a finance minister.

His nationalistic attitude towards donors was also misunderstood by many. Tajuddin resigned on October 26, 1974, at a time when the country was facing a very difficult time including a famine. Before resigning, he was, however, able to present his third budget and first Five-Year Plan. His thoughts of self-reliant development were adequately reflected in this plan. This plan envisaged the use of voluntary mobilisation of resources including the educated youths and students for poverty eradication through development of physical and human infrastructures.

Gradually, Tajuddin realised the ground reality of Bangladesh vis-a-vis the world economy. He too changed his policy thoughts. This is well-reflected in his 1974-75 budget speech. He said that it was easier to speak against foreign aid. But in the absence of enough national savings, it was quite difficult to reduce poverty without foreign aid. Yet, he was not quite complacent with the development strategy reflected in the first Five-Year Plan. He said this was only the minimum programme of action. If the nation failed to implement even this minimum programme, there was no chance of winning a war against poverty. The fruits of freedom, according to Tajuddin, would continue to elude us if we did not achieve this minimum goal.

The subsequent events, particularly the oil crisis, food shortage, deteriorating law and order, high inflation and all kinds of conspiracies, both within and outside Bangladesh, did not allow Tajuddin to stick to his guns and promote a nationally owned pro-poor development strategy. His was an era of national assertion for self-development and poverty reduction. Destiny did not allow him to pursue this development policy of pro-poor growth. After many years of his departure from this world, we are once again talking about "pro-poor growth" and "poverty reduction strategy." The difference is that this time it is being pushed by outsiders. Once again, we are talking about "nationally owned" development policy. Again, this slogan has not originated from within.

We can indeed learn a lot from the development thinking of Tajuddin if we genuinely want to go for a nationally owned pro-poor development policy in Bangladesh. Tajuddin Ahmed's life and actions can indeed be inspiring for the policy makers who are genuinely committed to establish the *Sonar Bangla* we all fought for.

Attur Rahman is an economist.



Tajuddin Ahmed with his family.

An unsung hero

MAHJABIN AHMAD

Although many an epithet is attached to his name describing him essentially as a lonesome, private, and introverted person, but in reality Tajuddin Ahmad was a man who was a worshipper of work and work only. He loved his work religiously. A trait rare indeed in this day and age.

I once made an intense study of his own handwritten diaries or followed his life closely; the face one would see emerging from the depths of time would be that of a man devoted wholly to his country and fellow man. Committed, dedicated, focused, and of unwavering conviction to the cause of the welfare of his land and its people throughout his life -- that was Tajuddin Ahmad, the unsung hero of our history.

He was not the conventional, flamboyant political leader as can be found in plenty around us. It was rather his accomplishments that were more illustrious than his persona. It was not the limelight he sought for himself, as a true believer of this cause, he had dedicated his entire life in making better the lives of the lot of hapless people of this country. An epitome of integrity and self-sacrifice, Tajuddin had kept to the path of truth to the very final moment of his life, without deviating in the slightest from his ideals.

Inordinately gifted, of impeccable honesty and razor sharp intellect, this undaunted leader with his unequalled tenacity, wisdom, and tenacity combined, had imparted a unique leadership to his people in their great war of liberation that had seen the birth of an independent nation after nine long months of bloodbath. Tajuddin had in effect sacrificed his very life upholding the sanctity and spirit of our liberation and freedom, right down to his final breath.

Today this unpretentious, selfless leader barely exists in our mind and memory, there isn't even a trifle mention of his enormous feat and contribution in our war of independence in 1971. The glory of advent of a free nation entails some integral factors, one of these factors, or probably the chief one, being the recognition of the person or persons responsible for the leadership in a war of liberation. For it is on the firm ground of that recognition from which stands tall the real history of a people -- the true and inherent history of a nation's step by step transition to democracy hinges on the very foundations of the recognition of their founding fathers. Woeful it is, but true nevertheless, today standing on the changed plane of realities, this unassuming, ascetic, and principled leader is being brushed off with icy indifference while we choose to sit back and gleefully watch the proceedings with diabolical complacency.

I remember with great honour and pride one of the greatest sons of the soil, a noble freedom fighter Tajuddin Ahmad, the founding Prime Minister of the first legitimate and valid Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh. All other successive governments of Bangladesh till today have been the legacy of that government formed on the 10th of April 1971 and sworn in on the 17th of April 1971 in Mujibnagar, Meherpur, that brilliantly led our armed struggle for independence spanning nine months, bringing about the final victory on 16th of December 1971.

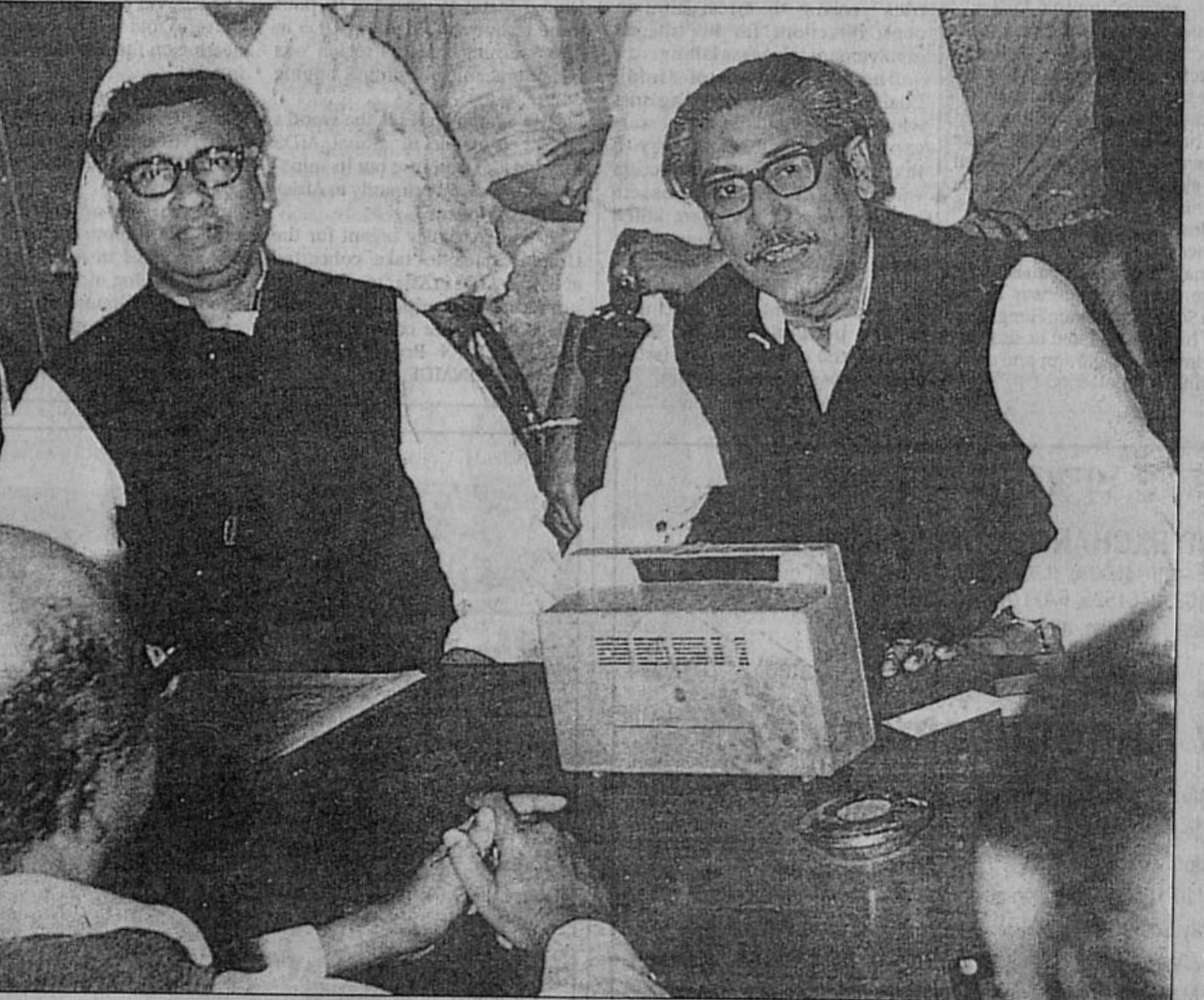
Great feats do not long for a reward, nor await a return, but then we as a nation shall only be free from the ironhold of our conscience the day we will find it in our hearts to break free from the shackles of collective amnesia to unabashedly recognise and validate the work of this man for his country. That will have been the most singularly elevating event happening to our psyche.

It is such freedom-seeking and timeless leaders who have been celebrated and revered from nation to nation, from age to age across the globe for their heroic roles in history making. Tajuddin Ahmad, undoubtedly, was one such leader.

Perhaps in the final analysis, time and history, by dint of their unerring judgement, will someday bestow upon this man the honour he deserved in his own right.

It is today the 79th birth anniversary of Tajuddin Ahmad. What better moment can there be than this to pay tribute to his undying soul. Salute to the sacred memories of the unsung hero.

Mahjabin Ahmad is the daughter of Tajuddin Ahmad.



Listening to the radio for election results in 1970 with Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman.

then Pakistan. In one of his political speeches back on December 27, 1969, Tajuddin said 95 percent of the people of the country earned such a meagre income that they were not able to make both ends meet. He also emphasised that the monopoly and cartel promoted by Pakistan's ruling elites were pushing the country towards greater inequality and that the price of commodities was therefore increasing abnormally high.

In another political speech on January 12, 1970, he complained against heavy taxes, both direct and indirect, on peasants, and yet they did not get any support from the government in facing the flood which was nearly perpetual. On June 27, 1970, he made a serious critique of the fourth Five-Year Plan of Pakistan for encouraging more income disparity between the two parts of

out of the ashes left behind by the occupying forces. More clearly, he spoke on September 5, 1971, that the depth of sorrow experienced by the Bengalis was beyond comprehension by any human measure. Yet he felt that Bengalis had endless creative strength. So this creativity of the nation would overwhelm the natural and man-made disaster imposed on the people of Bangladesh. While it became clear that Bengalis were winning the war, he immediately changed his gear and started speaking about peace. On December 8, 1971, he said, "After winning the war, we will have to win peace as well. *Sonar Bangla* has to be erected on the ashes of a war-ravaged economy. All the sons and daughters of Bangladesh have to engage themselves in the joyous efforts of reconstruction and

recognised Bangladesh.

The cabinet came to Dhaka on December 22. On December 23, Prime Minister Tajuddin, in his first cabinet meeting in Dhaka made Bangla the state language. He also passed government decisions to provide salaries to government officials of up to Tk 1000 as the highest ceiling, nationalisation of jute, textile mills, and tea gardens. He also ordered Bangladesh Bank to function as a Central Bank by December 1971. Although he was dead against foreign aid he could realise the depth of the changing realities. As finance minister, he never hesitated to take pragmatic steps to make economic policy pro-people. When he went to Washington in 1972 to attend a finance ministers conference he appealed to the World Bank to support reconstruction of