

The life and principles of Tajuddin Ahmed

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SYED BADRUL AHSAN

TAJUDDIN Ahmed would have been eighty-four today. The tragedy of our collective national life is that he was not destined to live to a ripe old age. Any chances he might have had of taking charge of the country after the assassination of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and any possibility of his eventually transforming himself into an elder statesman were ruined the night he and three of his political associates were murdered in jail.

Tajuddin was fifty when the life was bayonetted out of him. He was too young to die, as young as Syed Nazrul Islam and A.H.M. Quamruzzaman and not much younger than M. Mansoor Ali. And consider this: the entire generation of Bangladesh's political leadership that was eliminated between August and November 1975 was essentially a band of young men who had ended up doing what much older men usually do in history. They led a popular movement for self-assertion and in the end left Bengalis, on this part of the political divide, a free state for them to utilise and power their intelligence and intellect in, in myriad ways. Bangabandhu was a mere fifty-five when the soldiers moved him down.

Tajuddin Ahmed was five years younger. And yet in that brief space of time, he had carved a niche for himself in the history of this part of the world. To those who knew Tajuddin in the 1960s, the man was destined for a bigger role than what his demeanour chose to reveal. You only have to go looking for some of the men who once enjoyed the reputation of being young, educated Bengali idealists responsible for much of what subsequently came to be known as the Six Points. They will inform you, perhaps to your great surprise and then to your usual expectations, how on a moonlit night on the Sitalakhya it was Tajuddin Ahmed who hurled the hardest questions at the men gathered to explain the core of the Six Points to Bangabandhu. A quiet man is always the keenest of observers. It was the silence in Tajuddin Ahmed that betrayed his eloquence every time he decided to ask a question

here or seek a clarification there.

Through making his points in those formative days of emergent Bengali nationalism, Tajuddin helped to fine tune the Six Points and thereby turn them into an unassassable argument for the satisfaction of Bengali aspirations. On that river and after that, it was Tajuddin who, with Bangabandhu, laid the foundations of Bengali nationhood in what the state of Pakistan still thought was its pliant eastern wing. It was anything but pliant, as Field Marshal Ayub Khan was beginning to find out. When the dictator warned that supporters of the Six Points would have the language of weapons applied against them, he merely revealed the growing nervousness among people in West Pakistan about the rising political ambitions of the Bengalis in the east.

In this forging of Bengali ambitions, Tajuddin Ahmed's role was as crucial as Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's. Where Bangabandhu was the inspirational leader, Tajuddin was the theoretician of the party. The relationship between the two men was in a very important sense akin to the ties that bound Mao Zedong and Zhou En-lai to each other. Tajuddin's courage was of the quiet kind. It rested on a perception of hard realities. Just how tough he could be came through almost immediately after the unfolding of the Six Points in early 1966. Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, sulking over Ayub's handling of the dialogue with the Indians in Tashkent, nevertheless felt, or was made to feel, that the proponents of the Six Points needed decisive handling. He valiantly challenged Mujib to a public debate at Paltan Maidan on the Six Points. Tajuddin Ahmed spoke for his leader, through offering to rebut Pakistan's soon to depart foreign minister. Bhutto never turned up, an early sign of the dread in which he held Tajuddin Ahmed. In the remaining years of united Pakistan, Bhutto would remain conscious of the power that Tajuddin exuded in political dialectics. He squirmed every time Tajuddin chose to speak at the abortive political negotiations in March 1971. He would warn his party men as also members of the Yahya Khan junta to watch out for Tajuddin.

Tajuddin Ahmed's political sagacity

had become a pronounced affair by the time he found himself making his way out of Dhaka in late March 1971. While other political leaders and workers may have been overwhelmed by thoughts of the darkness that lay ahead for Bengalis in the face of Pakistan's genocide, or had been rendered too distraught to begin thinking of a swift response to the assault, Tajuddin snatched time out of his

abouts of his colleagues remained shrouded in mystery. That was a stumbling block, but he did get around it by doing the necessary thing of announcing the formation of a government, the first ever in the history of the Bengalis.

He came under political assault the moment he took that considered step. The younger elements in the Awami League, typified by the likes of Sheikh

Fazlul Haq Moni, thought they had been upstaged. Tajuddin, they thought and indeed propagated the message, had gone beyond his remit. He was not, said these angry young men, qualified or empowered to establish a government because he had not been authorised by Bangabandhu to do so.

It was an unfazed Tajuddin who went ahead with what he saw as his historic mission of bringing Bengalis together. The socialist in him was unwilling to cave in to fate or human machinations. The intellect for finance, though, he demonstrated a tremendous degree of courage in warding off evil spirits, both in the form of international donor agencies and local opportunists. It was his conviction that a development strategy for Bangladesh did not have to include thoughts of aid from nations which had opposed its birth. Such a position, naturally, did not endear him to the right-wingers in the government; and these men kept up their noisy complaints against him before the Father of the Nation.

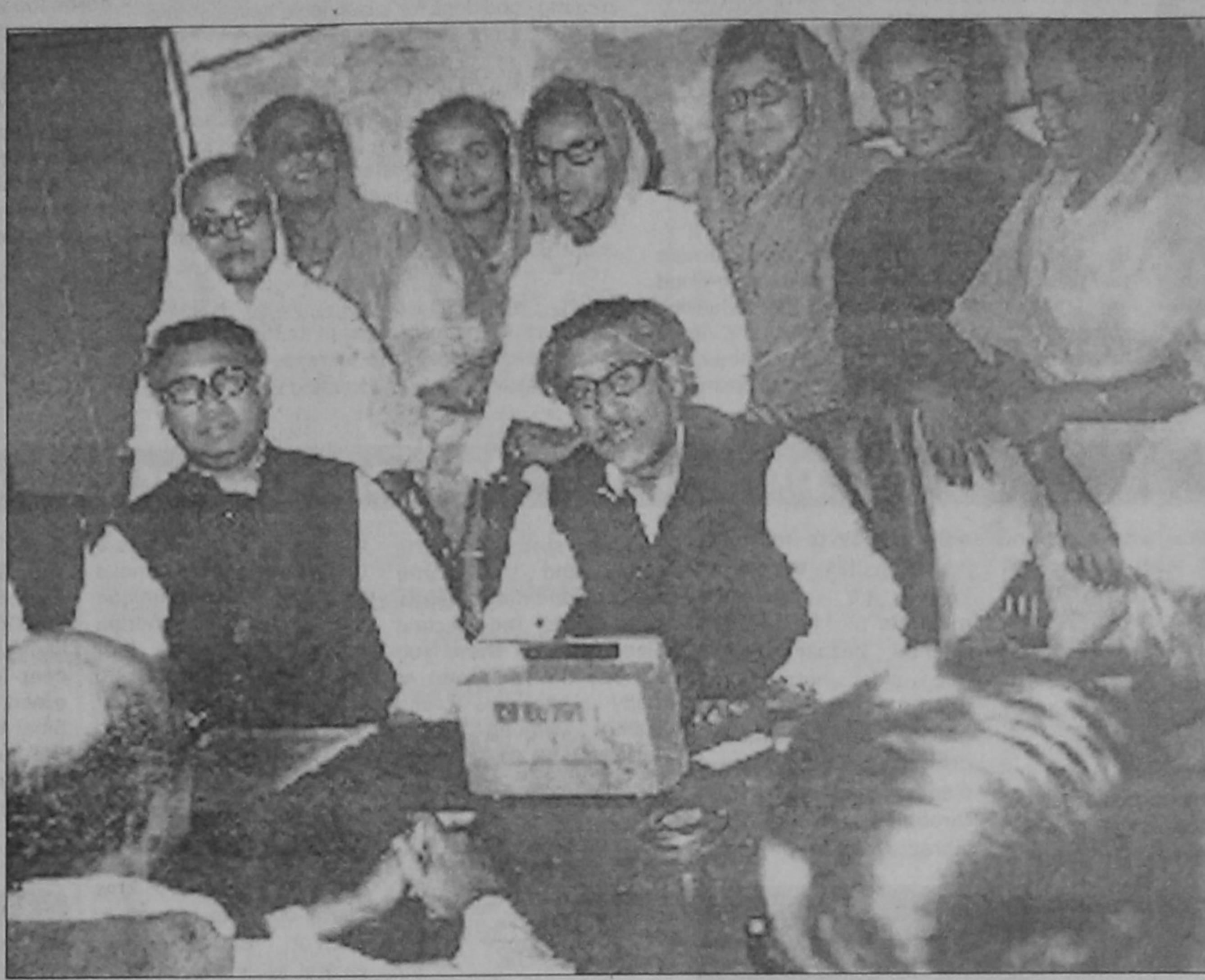
But what hurt Tajuddin Ahmed more than the whispering campaign against him was his sad, shocking realisation that Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman was listening more to men like Khondokar Moshtaque and Sheikh Moni than to him. Decent almost to a fault, Tajuddin never complained in public. In private, though, he found it inexplicable that Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, the leader and political soul-mate with whom he had shaped the political course of the Bengali nation, never once sought to ask him about the events leading up to the formation of the provisional government and the war of liberation that such a government waged.

The differences between these two giants of Bengali history only grew wider. Tragedy was bound to follow. It remains a curious, almost macabre tale in Bangladesh's history that Tajuddin Ahmed was instructed by Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman to leave the cabinet in the very month -- October 1974 -- when Henry Kissinger, prime architect of the Nixonian policy of backing Pakistan in its repression of Bengalis in 1971, came calling. That visit was a sign that Bangladesh was ready to pass into the American orbit. We as a people are still paying the price for the rudeness of overturning Tajuddin Ahmed's socialism and replacing it with unfettered capitalism. The robber barons in our midst, since that October day, have multiplied in number many times over -- and do so every day.

Tajuddin Ahmed was a principled man, one inclined to self-effacement and extraordinary humility. Not many were or have been able to command the intellectual heights of political leadership that he so easily was symbolic of. And few have been the individuals in our history who have so effortlessly cast the personal to the winds in the interest of the welfare of a toiling, battered nation. Self-abnegation was part of his character. As prime minister in 1971, he kept thoughts of family aside as he shaped the tortuous map of battlefield strategy. After October 1974 and till his murder in November of the following year, he went into exile of a kind. He internalised his pain, brooded in loneliness over the future of a country he had guided to freedom. And then he paid the price.

Tajuddin Ahmed, prime minister in the provisional government of Bangladesh in 1971, was born on July 23, 1925. He was murdered by soldiers in Dhaka central jail on November 3, 1975.

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Tajuddin was more than Bangabandhu's right hand man, he was a leader and intellectual himself.

travails to dwell on what needed to be done.

He lost little time in making his way across the border and linking up with Indira Gandhi. He was perspicacious enough to see, even at that early stage of national predicament, the need for outside assistance in an armed struggle he envisioned developing for Bangladesh's freedom. The man of substance in Tajuddin saw little alternative to the formal shaping of a governmental structure for a struggling nation. The where-

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Recalling our first prime minister

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 Ahmad's life and actions can indeed be inspiring for the policy makers who are genuinely committed to establish the *Shonar Bangla* we all fought for.

ATIUR 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, 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. 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.

Unfortunately the complementary leadership between Tajuddin and Sheikh Mujib did not last long. Besides whispering by the Young Turks against Tajuddin's efficient leadership during the war, conspirators like Khandker 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 *Shonar 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. Had the country benefited from the committed leadership of the architect 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. 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.

When he became the general secretary



Tajuddin Ahmed

wrong kind of development policy followed by the 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.

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 out of the ashes left behind by the occupying forces.

While it became clear that Bengalis

were winning the war, he immediately started speaking about peace. On December 8, 1971, he said: "After winning the war, we will have to win peace as well. *Shonar 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 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 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 1,000 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.

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 straightforward.

His enemies, however, were able to create a distance between him and Bangabandhu under the pretext 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.

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.

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.

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Atiur Rahman is Governor, Bangladesh Bank.