

Tajuddin Ahmed: A rare patriot

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TWO reputed constitutional lawyers of Canada, while analysing the legalities of the possible separation of Quebec from Canada, observed: "After 1945, Bangladesh was the only country of the world that successfully seceded from Pakistani state through an armed struggle. However, the principal strength of that struggle came from the unparalleled election victory of Awami League, led by its charismatic leader Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. The popular support their leader enjoyed was unheard of in a Western democracy." In the absence of Bangabandhu, four of his close associates carried the mantle of freedom and provided the leadership through the grueling nine months of torture, destruction, genocide and armed struggle against a well-equipped enemy. Foremost among them was Tajuddin Ahmed, the prime minister of the then government in exile in Mujibnagar.

Aside from Bangabandhu's inspirational name, two other factors played the defining role in the success of our liberation war in a very short period of nine months. They were Tajudddin's prudent leadership, and the indispensable Indian help that not only saved but glorified the defining moment of our history. One the one hand, Tajuddin was successfully able to quell the rebellion from party leaders who were bent on capturing the leadership of the provisional government, while on the other there was the CIA axis that was conspiring to jeopardise our struggle for freedom in the form of confederation within the Pakistani state. In the words of D.P. Dhar, the architect of Indian policy vis-à-vis our liberation war: "Only Tajuddin was mentally equipped to lead Awami League out of the situation like this (liberation struggle). That was his biggest strength. He displayed all the initiatives, while his rivals (within AL) failed to formulate what else to look for apart from Indian recognition, followed by military attacks."

Similar sentiments were echoed by P.N. Haskar, who was responsible for formulation Indian policy in the first five months of the conflict. In his words: "Tajuddin was found to be the only person who had right political ideas for the task Bangladesh had set before itself. The government of India also realised that Tajuddin was irreplaceable in the sense that things would have been even more chaotic if somebody else other than him took over. These two considerations decided the issue of continued Indian support to Tajuddin despite

numerous representations from the opponents within Awami League."

Tajudddin Ahmed was the general secretary of AL, and for more than two decades was the closest confidant of Bangabandhu. Since the resurrection of AL in 1964, he was the principal architect of its policies and programmes. He was a reticent personality who preferred to work behind the scene without self-declaration. Tajuddin played the leading role in the overall planning and direction of the historic non-cooperation movement of 1971 that culminated in the declaration of independence by Bangabandhu in the early hours of March 26, 1971.

After Tajuddin crossed over to India on March 30, 1971, he found himself not only leading a political party but also leading a nation to freedom through an armed struggle. This was a



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very difficult challenge, considering

the fact that AL was a democratic organisation, not a revolutionary one.

The Bengalis in uniform, who joined the liberation war, had no legal binding to obey the command of civilian commanders, who also had no legal recognition from anybody else but themselves. This made Tajuddin's task even more challenging. His relation with the Commander-in-Chief of Mukti Bahini, General Osmany, was not always very smooth. General Osmany was not a politician and on many occasions he failed to appreciate the political farsightedness and diplomatic articulation of Tajuddin, which was essential for the ultimate success of the liberation war.

Tajuddin's devotion to the cause of our national emancipation is legendary. He preached what he himself practiced. During those difficult days as the prime minister of a still-to-be free nation, he practiced extreme austerity himself to keep in

resonance with the hardship the whole nation, and especially the freedom fighters, had to endure. Among the top leaders of the government in exile, he was the only one who kept his vow not to meet his family during the period of exile.

On November 23, 1971, before the all-out attack by Mukti Bahini, Tajuddin Ahmed delivered a defining speech to the nation through Swadhin Bangla Betar Kendra that had no rhetoric nor any uncertain promise, but the self-conviction of a leader to his suffering but determined people. In his address he reiterated: "In exchange of our tears and blood, we are fighting for our freedom. The day of that final destination is very much within our reach. But we have to sacrifice more lives; we have to suffer more. The denotation of independence is deeper and more meaningful. The essence of freedom is related to the price we pay for it during war and how we use it during the time of peace. As we eliminate our enemies in the battlefield, we have to pledge to build a society that befits the blood of our martyrs."

The dream that Tajuddin Ahmed dreamt during the most crucial cross-road of our history never crystallised into reality. As a humble "engineer" of our nation, Tajuddin became a forgotten

man even when Bangabandhu was at the helm of the state. The conspirators were finally successful in creating a rift between the "architect" and the "engineer." The result was the multiple catastrophes that engulfed our nation. During the nine months of bloody struggle for our existence, Tajuddin was the nucleus of almost everything. He performed his responsibilities with utmost devotion and unbounded honesty. But this modest human being never disclosed anything about his own role. As a result, the many untold stories of our liberation war will remain unknown forever. During the previous tenure of AL and in the last three years and six months of its current tenure, did we do enough to offer deserved recognition to the memory of our first prime minister, the man who showed our nation a rare breed of patriotism? I would have been happier to receive an affirmative answer to my scepticism.

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Tribute to Humayun Ahmed



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TARIQ IQBAL

I have not read a single book by Mr. Ahmed in the last seventeen or eighteen years, but I remember what I read before 1995/96. Surprisingly, his style remained unchanged, or so I guess from occasional viewing of snippets of his dramas and glimpses of teaser passages from his books posted online. So, on his passing to a different dimension I feel like saying something.

I don't know if literature has any purpose other than what we impose on it. One can always argue whether Humayun Ahmed's works were literature or not. But, if literature is meant to influence a people or a generation who are a subset of those people, if literature is meant to shape their thoughts, their mode of mutual interactions, their linguistic as well as everyday emotional expressions to a visible, discernible extent, then it's fair to claim that Mr. Ahmed's work served quite a significant purpose -- whether he intended it or not.

He is one of the very few authors who successfully superimposed Western style conversational forms in Bengali fiction. Also unique is his extensive use of psychological insights, theories of the unconscious, the ideas of shadow-self, the animal self of a human entity, and his favourite I think was the power of the unconscious mind. He used a lot of elements from Jungian theories, which themselves were derivatives of Freudian concepts. But reading his Mishir Ali stories will certainly enlighten one about how one's unconscious affects one's behaviour and drives one in a direction without one's being aware of it. The free-spirited nature of another of his famous characters Himu is also a manifestation of unconscious desires latent in all of us to be free from conventions and norms.

Humayun Ahmed was not unique or original as a writer in that aspect -- most experiments in that track had already been done by authors in the west way before his career as a writer began. But Humayun Ahmed was first to reconfigure the results of those experiments in Bangladesh's context and give his readers a taste of something global, on a local plate.

The young generation of Bangladeshi writers or thinkers owes him sincere thanks for his pen, since he opened up several windows for them to look at the reality around them. Of course, what each of us sees through those windows are subjective, and depend on the individual's intellectual and emotional make-up. Yet, Humayun Ahmed introduced a sense of clarity that was absent in classic Bengali literature. The logical and rational directness with which his characters progress through a story has been emulated by many of his mostly younger readers. He influenced how young middle-class readers feel about romance, and enriched the verbal repertoire of many with idiosyncratic use of words tinged with humour, and even fashion.

His minimalist use of words could possibly be a result of his science background and his exposure to America, and readers have been better served for that. Simplicity is his strength, like a good draftsman's who can show vivid details of a scene with a few lines of a pencil on a sketch pad. I don't think the analogy of a painter will be appropriate for late Humayun Ahmed, rather, let me call him a "draftsman of words."

I don't think I should wish the obvious wishes common for an obituary for him (i.e. RIP, "may he rest in heaven," etc), since I believe he was too philosophical for that, and even more so because of his apparent ambivalence about the whole heaven-hell dichotomy in a religious sense. He himself had doubts about his post-mortem status, and would write something with his trademark dry, tragic humour. I am certain of that.

Once, in one of his science fiction novels, he toyed with the idea of how one's conscious thinking or imagination creates reality in a different dimension of the universe. In other words, he implied through his protagonist that whenever one thought about anything, good or bad, object or individual, that thinking manifested as reality in a different universe. If that is true, I guess it won't be misplaced if I wish him good times with his own creations, i.e. Mishir Ali, Himu, Jori, his Mayaboti women, etc, in a different dimension, in a universe far removed and far different from us. I am sure he would appreciate my lighthearted approach towards the news of his departure from this mortal world. He was too good an artist to take offense at such an effort like mine.

The writer lives in USA.

BUET and WB: Erasing Bangabandhu's legacy?

M. FIROZE

As the first Chancellor of Buet, Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman appointed Dr. Abdul Rashid as the first vice-chancellor of Buet in independent Bangladesh. Dr. Rashid was never an Awami Leaguer, he was chosen for his impeccable credentials as the best engineering mind in the country and a man of proven integrity and outstanding public service. It was a wise choice; Dr. Rashid ruled with humility and consensus and never permitted divisive teacher politics to vitiate the academic ambience of the university. He left behind a legacy of excellence and learning and service to the nation which, till the other day, was the pride of the nation. The choice was no accident. In 1973, Bangabandhu appointed the most outstanding Bengali physicist, Dr. Abdul Matin Chowdhury as the vice-chancellor of Dhaka University. Professor Chowdhury was never an Awami Leaguer either.

Buet was one of our few success stories of post-independent Bangladesh which we could be rightly proud about. It was a success for which the present ruling party could rightly claim credit; instead it has unwittingly set itself on a course of dismemberment of this great institution and undermining the legacy of Bangabandhu. The government has chosen to back to the hilt a man of incompetence and pettiness as the vice-chancellor.

The office of the vice-chancellor is one of trust where moral authority supersedes administrative authority. Late Dr. Rashid knew this dictum by heart, but the present VC does not care as long as he has the home ministry and police behind him.

In another episode of consummate egotism the ruling party is set to undermine yet another sterling achievement of Bangabandhu. It has locked horns with the country's leading development partner for the last 40 years, to defend a minister whose contribution to the nation is at best unknown to ordinary citizens like me. By contrast, Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman gracefully eased out finance minister Tajuddin Ahmed to

build a long term relationship with the World Bank.

Tajuddin Ahmed was not just another minister; he was the prime architect of our liberation struggle, a tireless and humble worker in the Mujibnagar government. He was a man of immaculate character, and deep intellect and a trusted friend and colleague of the Bangabandhu. Tajuddin Ahmed was also a socialist by conviction. In 1974, with the Cold War at its pinnacle, to many educated and idealist minds, Cuba and North Korea were role models for development.

The only way to stem the rot in our institutions is not by filling top positions by the party faithful but by putting men of character and proven competence in top positions, as Bangabandhu did.

Bangabandhu, a pragmatist at heart, instinctively knew Bangladesh's prosperity lay in relationship and trade with the western world. He knew about Tajuddin's reluctance to meet the then World Bank president, Robert McNamara, and his socialist leanings were directly at odds with the World Bank's free market and entrepreneurial prescriptions. As a leader Bangabandhu made a painful choice, in the best interest of the nation.

A ministerial position, too, is an office of trust. In democratic and civil societies mere suspicion or perceived misdemeanour is sufficient ground for stepping down from high office. None of the ministers and aides in David Cameron's government was criminally indicted in the wire tapping scandal involving Rupert Murdoch's media empire. They stepped down from their offices, immediately on press and TV news reports alone. In a very recent episode, Neil Diamond, head of Barclay's Bank's investment arm, stepped down immediately once his name cropped up in the LIBOR rate fixation

scandal press reports. If our concerned minister had resigned earlier there would not have been a bone of contention with the Bank.

The damage from the Padma episode goes beyond the bridge. It is a relationship issue and how the outside world perceives us. If we fail to receive the loan from the World Bank the consequences will be long-term; the outside world will perceive Bangladesh as a state incapable of interacting with international institutions. Foreign direct investors will become even more wary about the country. Ultimately, this will have a foreign policy consequence as we will be perceived as a risky country to do business with. The grim reality is we need the World Bank far more than they need us. The world's second largest economy, China and the sixth largest economy, India, are both hefty recipients of the World Bank's largesse. Corruption is endemic in both the nations. They do not make it to top of the list in the corruption index largely because they do not go into a denial mode, as we do.

Financing the bridge with our own resources will be a victory for our Bengali sense of *abhiman*, but the nation will be the loser. Resource mobilisation for the bridge will deprive investment in all other sectors of the economy. The economic benefit from the bridge will be lost.

Leadership is about taking painful decisions and sacrificing personal preferences. Bangabandhu was a giant among men and a visionary who could see beyond petty party squabbles and interest. If Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina is to stake a claim on the mantle of her illustrious father's name she has to act fast and put men of character and competence in high office. Awami Leaguers will say they are reversing the politicisation and partisanship of past governments. They are dead wrong. The only way to stem the rot in our institutions is not by filling top positions by the party faithful but by putting men of character and proven competence in top positions, as the late Bangabandhu did.

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