

TAJUDDIN AHMAD'S 93RD BIRTH ANNIVERSARY

Defining Tajuddin's place in history

NAZMUL AHASAN

TAJUDDIN Ahmad was the one who filled a crucial void in leadership during Bangladesh's most important nine months in 1971 after Bangabandhu had been taken prisoner by the Pakistani army. A just question, therefore, is, with Bangabandhu's absence, whether Bangladesh's independence in such a short time would have become a reality had it not been for Tajuddin Ahmad's timely rise to the leadership challenge, his organisational acumen, statesmanship, political and diplomatic wisdom.

Like Bangabandhu, Tajuddin was pushed into irrelevance in the political discourse after his life and that of three other national leaders were brutally cut short on November 3, 1975. With the Awami League's return to power after the reinstatement of democracy in the 1990s, Bangabandhu's place was duly restored in contemporary discourse but Tajuddin remains somewhat underappreciated in political circles.

Tajuddin Ahmad had always had a strong opinion about all that mattered to him, and a clear socialist vision for the country he would later help liberate.

To him, an independent country meant one free of exploitation, hunger and poverty. "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," he told the fighting nation the day after the Provisional Government of Bangladesh was formed.

He was an ardent proponent of the idea of self-reliance. Once, while he was the finance minister of independent Bangladesh, he did not, at first, want to meet the chief of the World Bank, which he saw as an apparatus of exploitation of the global capitalist elites. When he finally did, he all but rejected the Bank's offer of assistance, refusing to go along with the government's apparent shift towards the West, even if it meant his being removed from the cabinet.

Tajuddin's exit from the cabinet came at a time when the nation was undergoing a famine apart from other political and social turbulence. Before his resignation, he presented his last and the nation's first Five-Year Plan, which reflected his philosophy of self-reliant development. The plan emphasised on educating the youth and students, eradicating poverty by developing physical and human infrastructure.

He was the kind of man who stood out in a crowd because he never hesitated to disagree when he felt it was the right thing to do and make his dissent known. When Bangabandhu decided to form BaKSAL by abolishing the multiparty system, for example, he respectfully demurred—a rarity among our politicians. However, the loyalty to his leader superseded anything in Tajuddin Ahmad's life, as evident by the fact that he joined BaKSAL despite having serious reservations.

Even before the War of Liberation



Syed Nazrul Islam, Bangabandhu and Tajuddin Ahmad.

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began, Tajuddin earnestly wanted Bangabandhu to lead the struggle by going into exile, as the Pakistani military had launched its genocidal crackdown on Bengali civilians, but Bangabandhu believed that an elected leader does not run from dangers and was soon arrested. When the

Bangladesh government in exile was formed in Badyanathala, Kushtia, he renamed the place as "Mujib Nagar" in honour of his absent leader; he welcomed foreign journalists "on behalf of the government of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman." After independence, he

spearheaded the diplomatic war to secure the early release of Bangabandhu from Pakistan's prison.

Tajuddin's stint as the wartime prime minister was marked by his ability to keep several factions—within and outside his party

and the Mukti Bahini—focused on the cause of liberation.

It was not an easy feat. In particular, as Professor Emeritus Serajul Islam Choudhury argued in a 2015 speech, Bangladesh Liberation Force (BLF)—also known as Mujib Bahini—sowed a rift between Bangabandhu and Tajuddin.

While Tajuddin, both during the war or in its aftermath, favoured leftist organisations, some of which were not associated with Awami League directly, drawing suspicion from a section of his own party, he never failed to pass the test of loyalty, dedication and commitment despite being held to higher standards.

The fact is, both Bangabandhu and Tajuddin have distinct places cut out for them in history, for the different roles that they played, and any attempt to place them against each other or undermine one in favour of the other will be a misguided one. Unfortunately, this is exactly what seemed to be the case for long.

Was it not possible for our successive governments, especially the ones led by the party he belonged to, to recognise Tajuddin in a manner befitting his stature without risking the legacy of Bangabandhu being undermined? He may not have been treated with the respect and grace the nation owes to him, but his legacy will surely be remembered as a chapter of national history filled with honour, integrity and rectitude.

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A leader ahead of his time

ANANTA YUSUF

"TAJUDDIN came much before his time and we are not yet ready to understand him properly."

Professor Sardar Fazlul Karim's famous words aptly describe the key architect of Bangladesh's Liberation War. In the physical absence of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, Tajuddin Ahmad was the key actor, who led the war with remarkable diplomacy to achieve freedom from the Pakistani colonial occupation.

Tajuddin Ahmad was born on July 23, 1925, to a traditional conservative family in the village of Dordoria, which sits 82 km north of Dhaka. His school friend M Wahiduzzaman, a former government official said that he was a star since his childhood,



Tajuddin's loyalty to Bangabandhu remained steadfast till the very end.

got married to Sayeda Zohra Khatun in 1959, but politics gave him little chance to live a family life.

After the death of Huseyn Shaheed Suhrawardy in 1963, and under the leadership of Bangabandhu, Tajuddin Ahmad helped to reorganise the Awami League. It was a time when Awami League had lost much of its charm and political ground in the grassroots level. Thus, it was of utmost importance to revive the party once again. The six-point programme came into being during this time, and Tajuddin played a crucial role in formulating the historic demand.

After Bangabandhu's historic speech of March 7, 1971, he became the most popular leader of East Pakistan. Under his guidance, all the administrative directives were issued by Tajuddin Ahmad during the non-cooperation movement from March 7 to 25.

On the terrible night of March 25, 1971, the Pakistani military went on a killing rampage in Dhaka. According to Barrister M Amir-ul Islam, it was previously planned that both Sheikh Mujib and Tajuddin Ahmad would take shelter in a secret hideout during the night. But Bangabandhu reiterated that if they were found the Pakistani army would destroy all the neighbouring areas of their hiding place, and he wasn't willing to risk the lives of thousands. Tajuddin Ahmad went ahead with the plan, and left for the hideout with Dr Kamal Hossain and Barrister Amirul Islam. Dressed in a lungi, Tajuddin carried only a shirt and a gun with him. "Eventually, Dr Kamal Hossain decided to stay back in Dhaka. And so it was just me and Tajuddin Ahmad who followed the original plan. On our way to India, we were surprised to see that people from all walks of life were ready and willing to fight for emancipation," says Barrister Amirul Islam.

Before leaving Dhaka, Tajuddin left a small note to his family, which read, "Bangladesh's war of independence has begun. Join the masses. We will meet again, if we

win." Even at this daunting hour, Tajuddin didn't lose his nerve, as he was willing to leave behind his family in the dark, confident that they could fend for themselves, and was ready to sacrifice his life if it meant freedom for his people.

When he crossed the border on March 30, 1971, he was not only leading a political party but also a nation to its freedom. It was a difficult challenge for him, since Awami League was a democratic party not a revolutionary one.

Tajuddin was wise enough to understand, even at that early stage of war, the need for international assistance in an armed struggle to free his country. After their meeting with Indira Gandhi, Tajuddin immediately decided to form a government with the elected members of parliament. He realised that forming a government was the only way to fight against the occupational power and to gain international support for a free nation. The whereabouts of his colleagues remained shrouded in mystery. But he was able to confront the situation by announcing the formation of a government, the first ever in the history of Bangladesh, on April 17, 1971. After the new government's oath, Prime Minister Tajuddin Ahmad said in a press statement, "We do not aspire to join any bloc or pact but will seek assistance from those who give it in a spirit of goodwill free from any desire to control our destinies."

However, it was not easy being a prime minister and running the newly formed government.

When the party was bridled with pettiness within its own domains, Tajuddin was busy uniting a nation.

In his first meeting with Indira Gandhi, he clearly stated that this war was being fought to free Bangladesh from oppression. "This is our war and we want to fight it on our own. We do not expect any interference from the Indian army. But we need training, arms and help for the refugees, who have taken shelter in West Bengal," he said.

His determination and flawless leadership attracted the Indian government. Indian politician-diplomat DP Dhar said, "Only Tajuddin was mentally equipped to lead Awami League out of a situation like this (the liberation war). That was his biggest strength. He took all the initiatives, while his rivals (within AL) failed to identify what else they were looking for apart from recognition from India."

On November 23, 1971, before the vigorous attack on the Pakistani army by Mukti Bahini, Tajuddin Ahmad delivered an inspiring speech to the nation, "We are fighting for our freedom in exchange of our tears and blood. The day of that final destination is very much within our reach. But we have to sacrifice more lives; we have to suffer even more. The inner meaning of independence is deep and profound. 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."

After the nation gained its independence, when Tajuddin returned to the newly formed Bangladesh on December 22, the country was in a devastating state. Downtrodden, dispirited people were coming back home from refugee camps, and the rest of the nation was struggling to stand on its feet. From December 22 to January 10, the socialist in him emerged in every speech he made in public, as he emphasised on the need for secularism, socialism and democracy to build a new nation. He believed that these could be the key pillars in the transformation of the society. Tajuddin made a plan

to build a militia force with the freedom fighters. He was against the withdrawal of weapons from the fighters, as he believed that the people who fought for the country could build a better nation. However, this proposal was not accepted by Bangabandhu's cabinet.

As a minister of finance, Tajuddin demonstrated tremendous courage. At that time, the government treasury was empty. All foreign exchanges were emptied by the Pakistani government. Import of essential goods and industrial raw materials had to be resumed without delay before acute shortage developed and local industries were forced to shut down. But he fought against all odds, and by September 1972, Bangladesh's foreign exchange reserve had soared to around USD 400 million.

During those difficult days of post-war Bangladesh, Tajuddin had to follow a strict line to build a better nation since he believed it was possible to get an independent land through an armed struggle but in order to complete the true revolution we still had to travel a long way.

Bangladesh was the only country in the world that successfully got its freedom by winning a liberation war, in between 1945-1971. Our history would have been a lot different if the lives of these great leaders had not been brutally cut short.

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adding, "He used to visit the Muslim League office at Kolta Bazar. He had many senior friends there. During one such visit, he declared that Pakistan could never remain united as per Jinnah's expectations." The prophecy that a school boy made became the core political vibe of Awami League in the early seventies.

As he grew into an adult, Tajuddin found himself more and more engrossed with politics, shaping his own political ideology along the way. He studied Economics at the University of Dhaka, a department that was a hotbed of politics. He helped to set up a student party on January 4, 1948, which was named the "Pakistan Chhatra League". A year later, when the Awami Muslim League was formed, Tajuddin joined the party, and became an integral part of our nation's history.

At 29, Tajuddin became a legislative member of the parliament by defeating his heavy weight opponent Fakir Abdul Mannan, then General Secretary of the East Pakistan Muslim League. From then on Tajuddin was arrested under various pretexts. In the meantime, his personal life was also changing. He

