

97TH BIRTH ANNIVERSARY OF TAJUDDIN AHMAD

‘Leadership during the war reflected the yearning of the people’

This is an interview of Tajuddin Ahmad, the first prime minister of Bangladesh, published in the Dainik Bangla newspaper on December 13, 1972. It was written in a reporting format.

“IN the present condition, it is the historical duty of all the patriotic political parties to lead the country in the right direction to achieve our desired goal.”

On the eve of the first anniversary of independence, the then prime minister of People's Republic of Bangladesh, Tajuddin Ahmad, said this in a special interview session with journalists on Tuesday (December 12, 1972). Against the background of the liberation struggle, he answered different queries by journalists.

“We have to seek support from socialist countries to establish socialism,” he said. “A truly socialist state could not be established with the help of imperialist and capitalist countries.”

He further added that the nation had to be aware and cautious so that the US could not establish a base in Bangladesh after their humiliating defeat in Vietnam.

In response to a question, Tajuddin said there was nothing in the constitution that stood in the way of socialism; rather, it provided certain directions towards that goal. “It is not possible to establish democracy with a 19th century mindset. In our democracy, we must have the support of people who believe in socialism,” he said.

The prime minister of the Mujibnagar government also said that the nation could never deny the role of the valiant youths in our liberation struggle. He said the government was preparing a plan to employ these youths in building the country. After the election, it would take effective measures to realise that plan.

Tajuddin expressed with sorrow that these youths could not be employed successfully in nation-building. That's why they had gone wayward to some extent. An evil intent to snatch away others' money and assets, rather than earning it, had developed in them. “It is very harmful for the country,” he said. “If the youths get corrupted, we will not have the necessary cadres for nation-building. They have to be made

politically conscious and motivated. To do that, we need to establish mutual trust.”

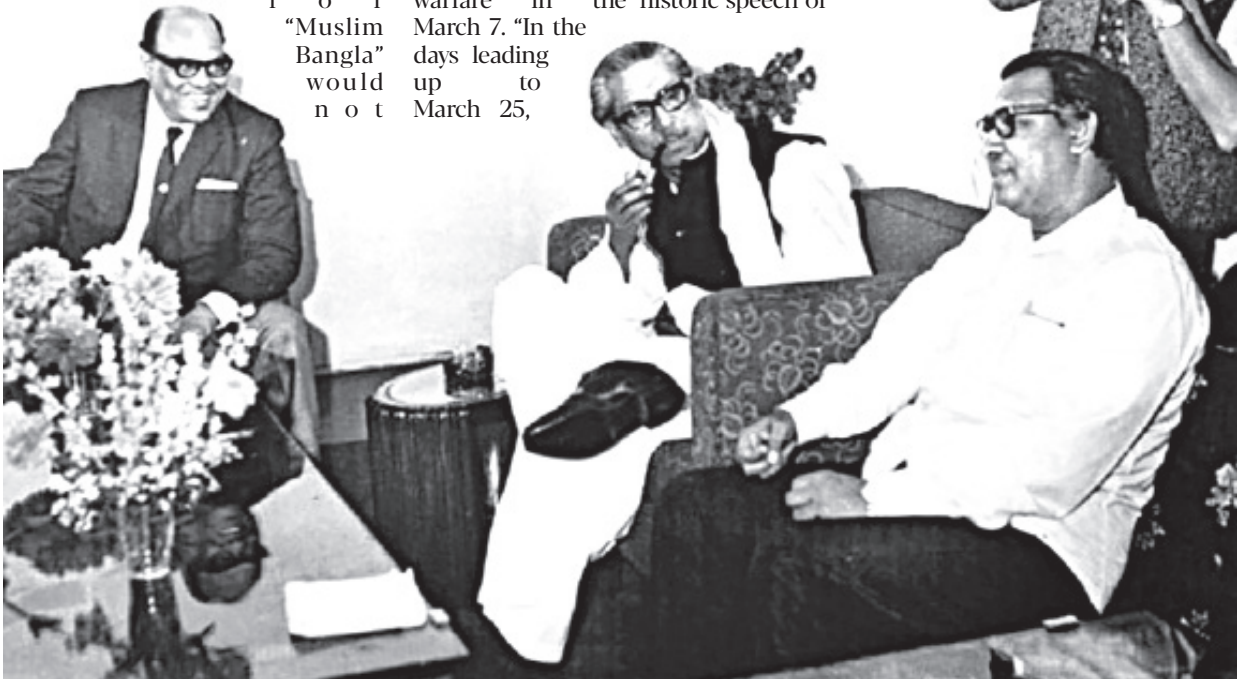
Tajuddin Ahmad said that, though the current (1972) situation seemed relatively discouraging, the people should not be upset, and that adoption of the constitution would bring stability.

During the press meeting, Tajuddin proclaimed confidently that the movement for “Muslim Bangla” would not

recent history and publish it, because it could create conflict among the living persons who had been involved in those events. It could even affect the national interest.

He said that, for the sake of national interest, he would not lie, but would keep quiet about it.

He also said that there had been clear indications of the independence of Bangladesh and possible guerrilla warfare in the historic speech of March 7. “In the days leading up to March 25,



COURTESY: SIMEEN HUSSAIN RIMI

Tajuddin Ahmad, right, with Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and Syed Nazrul Islam.

gain ground in the country. “But we have to be aware of its risks,” he said. During the Pakistan period, communalism was provoked in the name of Islam. Now they are playing with the same strategy in the name of “Muslim Bengal.” It has to be confronted politically.

When requested him to shed some light on the liberation struggle, Tajuddin said it was very difficult to write on

ambassadors from at least 40 countries had met me. I had already been aware of America's attitude towards Bangladesh.”

Tajuddin Ahmad also said that Yahya Khan had made gross mistakes at the very beginning by attacking the EPR, East Bengal Regiment, and the civil administration. Generally, no colonial force attacks its sister services.

“On the other hand, being called upon by Bangabandhu, we had succeeded in uniting the nation through non-violent, non-cooperation movement in March. On March 25, 1971, Yahya made a mistake by attacking this united nation. Basically, on that very night, we gained our first victory in the liberation struggle.”

He said, due to the attack on the civil administration, it had been possible for

them to unite in Mujibnagar, evading the attack. Even before March 25, Tajuddin had in his hand the secret message sent by Lt Gen Tikka Khan to Lt Gen Pirzada, who was military adviser to Yahya Khan. He said he had shown it to Bangabandhu.

“I never imagined that a general activist like me would have to shoulder the historic duty of the nation,” Tajuddin said at the press meeting. “Possibly, our countrymen never imagined so. In reality, the leadership was a reflection of the yearnings of the people. We founded the Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh with the attitude of not joining the capitalist block or any war alliance. It was a great step in the diplomatic front of the liberation struggle.”

He told the journalists that Pakistan had tried to divide the exiled government through its friends, but could not succeed. The US government had also tried in many ways to destroy the liberation struggle. “At some stage of our struggle, the US raised the question: Did we want liberation or Mujib? In reply, I said that we wanted both liberation and Mujib. We could get Mujib only after getting liberation. Because I had the feeling that the liberation struggle would be strengthened only if we could keep Sheikh Mujib alive in our hearts and minds. And only through that, it might be possible to keep Bangabandhu alive. For 27 long years, I have been in politics with Bangabandhu. I knew him deeply.”

Tajuddin also mentioned that China had helped Pakistan in the war, though strategically. “We sent a telegram to Chinese leaders through Maulana Bhashani to get their support for Bangladesh. But we did not receive any reply.” He expressed with sorrow that Maulana Bhashani was now propagating wrong information.

Translated by Shamsuddoza Sajen; edited for clarity.

An unfair world against the paid working woman



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TASHFIA RAWNAK ANIKA

AFTER graduating business school, I had the unique opportunity of meeting women doing both paid work at corporations, NGOs, military institutions, rural agriculture and urban maid services, and unpaid and unrecognised work at households. Women's recorded and unrecorded participation in Bangladesh's economy has seen quite an incredible growth over the years. And yet, when women pursue either paid or unpaid work, they are asked to face a society that is indoctrinated to deal with them unfairly – and often oppressively.

Bangladeshi society has internalised that the typical working person is a man – whether he has a family to support or not. A man working a white-collar job is capable of working long hours, often without worrying about his other responsibilities, like cleaning the house, doing laundry, preparing meals and so on. Consequently, it is the women of the households – either hired maids or family members – who take care of all the backstage essentials for the working persons. The average working man is also available to travel across cities and is expected to do out-of-office work and attend unplanned client meetings at odd hours. Attending a physical office by availing public transport is also an easier task for the urban man, who can push his way out anywhere in the bustling capital.

But a young woman starting off her career has to think twice when availing public transport in Dhaka, wherein reports of sexual harassment are rampant. Conducting field visits is another strenuous task for women, as public facilities like women's toilets are often inaccessible. Travelling across cities is more challenging for women than men who don't have to worry about their safety and security like women do. Working overtime is also more difficult as finding safe transport at late hours is burdensome. Our terms and conditions for women willing to do paid work is simple: She has to be like her male counterpart as much as possible. The reasoning behind this is that most organisations – and the society at large – don't want to accommodate women.

The one question I have often faced during job interviews is: “Will you be able to do market/field visits and travel often?” This

is often asked to test a female candidate's loyalty to her job and career. I find myself caught off-guard as a host of plausible answers shoot through my head: “Umm, I would have to take my baby with me.”; “Where will I be staying?”; “Will you provide a safe and secure work environment?”; “How will I manage with a child dependent on me?” At the end of the day, the average member of the institution is a man who doesn't have to worry about the nitty-gritties of family life or his safety and security. More often than not, a woman, regardless of if she is a jobholder or not, is doing tireless unpaid work at home to keep the man of the household from worrying about these.

And so, we have a woman who is told to “suck it up” by not raising her concerns, to not hesitate or back away from doing overtime or travelling on short notice or

People often argue that if a woman can do anything a man can do, why do we need to accommodate the few women who can't? Well, first, women do not need to be like men.

doing physically strenuous work when it is medically not recommended. She has to relentlessly prove her worth to her employer by being like a man, in every way possible. I find that working women in corporations are constantly reassuring employers that they will be joining work after their maternity leave ends. Women often get sidelined and need to have exceptional assertiveness to voice their unique needs. People argue that if a woman can do anything a man can do, why do we need to accommodate the few women who can't? Well, for starters, women do not need to be like men. But why put men on a pedestal saying, “There you go, there's our ideal working person: A man.”

The dominant culture teaches women to suppress their voices and to push themselves beyond what is humanly capable. How often would a woman suffering from severe menstrual symptoms be able to take a day off from work? Could a woman dare to explain how she is experiencing labour pain even days after a miscarriage? Would she be able to easily talk to her supervisor and get some days off while being paid? Aside from women's common medical needs, how often is a young woman's security concerns taken seriously? Sexual

advances by male colleagues and unprofessional advances are often termed “harmless.” Rejecting women's concerns, dehumanising them, and not valuing their contribution to the organisational goals is downright oppressive.

Edwin Ardener, a British anthropologist, developed the Muted Group Theory. The theory posited that women's voices and perspectives in society are often muted by the dominant male counterparts. Historically, a hunter-gatherer or breadwinner-homemaker dichotomy in a structural-functional society is used to put men in the upper class and women in the lower class. Women's increasing recorded and unrecorded participation in the economy in both paid and unpaid forms has done little to dismantle this outdated social construct, and women remain muted even in the paid working sphere.

For a woman, being exceptionally good at what she does is often not enough. Whatever her contribution to the organisation, she often has to prove her loyalty to the working world by having inhuman capabilities of raising a child and contributing to household work, while being a star

employee. According to a study titled “Estimating Women's Contribution to The Economy: The Case of Bangladesh” by the Centre for Policy Dialogue (CPD) in 2015, men work 2.7 hours per day doing household activities while women work 7.7 hours per day. Women do at least 12.9 activities on a typical day in rural areas, while in urban areas they do 11.2 activities. Men, on the other hand, do only about 2.6 household activities in both urban and rural areas. The report also estimated the value of women's unpaid work (non-SNA activities) at 76.8 percent of GDP in FY2013-14.

Women's rights have often come across as a privilege in the male-dominated working world, and any rights that women have achieved so far has been the result of tireless struggle. An article titled “The Forgotten Origins of Paid Family Leave” in *The New York Times* by Mona L Siegel highlights how the Maternity Protection Convention of 1919 was adopted by the newly formed International Labour Organization (ILO). However, it was not developed because employers deemed it was needed after women's increasing economic participation during and after World War I.

Rather, the minimum 12 weeks of maternity leave came about due to the impassioned undertaking by women who were feminist leaders, unionists, and social workers.

As more and more women join the workforce, women may become a stronger force in Bangladesh, where their diverse needs are discussed and addressed by employers. Organisations often do not want to meet women's specific requirements, shrugging them off as a privilege and thereby difficult to accommodate. Maybe that's why, as per World Bank data, during the Covid-19 pandemic, women's labour force participation dropped from 39 percent in 2019 to 35 percent in 2020, whereas male labour force participation dropped just one percentage point during the same period, from 80 percent to 79 percent.

Even though women have proved their contribution through the centuries, their worth is still questioned. Here we still are, suppressing working women's voices as much as possible, holding them responsible for being who they are – women.

To read the full article, please visit our website.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

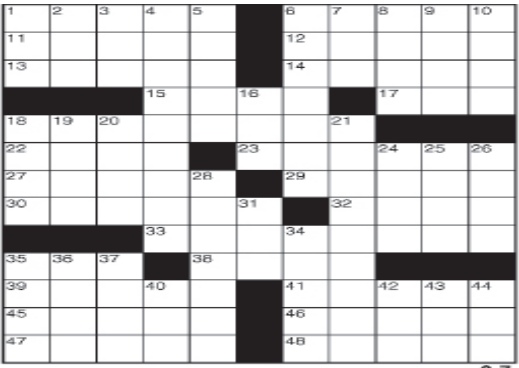
- 1 Soothing ointments
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- 11 Heep of Dickens
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- 17 Soak up
- 18 Plate-washing need
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- 29 Barrel piece
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- 39 Carry on
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- 47 Very serious
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DOWN

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- 25 Flat
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- 36 Bounce back
- 37 Wild guess
- 40 Take advantage of
- 42 Lode material
- 43 Road rescue
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