SUPPLEMENT

A LIFE FOR
BANGLADESH

The Daily Star
DHAKA WEDNESDAY JULY 23, 2025, SRABAN 8, 1432 BS

BIRTH CENTENARY OF TAJUDDIN AHMAD

Remembering TAJUDDIN BHAI

KAMAL HOSSAIN

I first met Tajuddin Ahmad—or Tajuddin Bhai, as I knew him—in the 1960s, during the pre-Liberation period. After I joined the Awami League, Bangabandhu told me to meet Tajuddin Ahmad, as he would answer all my questions on politics and the party, and that he possessed deep knowledge of both politics and people.

From my first interactions with him, I recognised a man guided by profound political clarity and unwavering principles. Tajuddin Bhai was not merely a politician; he was a statesman whose vision transcended immediate political calculations to prioritise the long-term welfare of the nation and its people. He delved deeply into every issue, studied problems on the ground, and made every effort to understand how people felt about them.

Tajuddin Bhai's vision was already evident during the critical early days of our independence. In 1966, when other leaders met Field Marshal Ayub Khan, it was Tajuddin Bhai who articulated the radical demand for autonomy, laying the groundwork for the historic Six Points. His clarity and resolve demonstrated his remarkable ability to see through political turbulence and articulate a compelling path forward, eventually making the Six Points the cornerstone of Bangladesh's autonomy movement.

In March 1969, at the Rawalpindi Round Table Conference, Tajuddin Bhai's insights and guidance were indispensable. He directed us as we meticulously drafted statements defining regional autonomy based on the Six Points. His careful approach reflected his deep understanding of governance, federalism, and the nuanced balance required between regional autonomy and central authority. These discussions laid the groundwork for the decisions that shaped our nation's future.

I recall his role in issuing directives sustaining the Non-Cooperation Movement in March 1971. Tajuddin Bhai's strategic vision was always clear: maintain pressure through non-violent means while ensuring minimal disruption to essential services. His capacity to balance principle and pragmatism was exemplary.

Tajuddin Ahmad's legacy resonates profoundly today. He was a man ahead of his time, recognising early that lasting progress demanded not only independence but robust, accountable, and inclusive political structures.

Once the Liberation War began, as Prime Minister of the fledgling nation, he navigated enormous political and diplomatic challenges with courage, decisiveness, and humility.

Even after independence, Tajuddin Bhai's commitment to democratic principles never wavered. He repeatedly stressed the critical need to energise our political structures with youthful idealism and disciplined commitment to democratic values. To him, democracy was not merely about elections, but about institutional integrity, accountability, and the active participation of citizens in governance—ideals he tirelessly upheld throughout his life.

A defining memory is etched vividly in my mind from 1974 at Washington D.C.'s Dulles Airport. After a high-level international meeting, Tajuddin Bhai, Ambassador M. R. Siddiqi, and I stayed back, deeply engaged in a conversation about the future of our country. With characteristic honesty, Tajuddin Bhai expressed deep concerns about the growing inclination towards a one-party system. His fears were not personal, but deeply rooted in his understanding of democracy. He passionately advocated for reforms, emphasising the urgent need to revitalise political structures through engaging young people—idealistic, dedicated, and committed individuals who could breathe new life into the democratic foundations we had worked so hard to establish.

Tajuddin Bhai's resignation later that year deeply saddened me. I recall rushing to express my concerns, sensing a great loss not just for the government but for the entire nation. Later, visiting him at home shortly after his resignation, I found him at lunch—calm yet resolute. His departure was not about personal differences, but stemmed from his unyielding commitment to democracy, accountability, and transparency. His actions were a testament to his integrity and remain a powerful lesson in selfless leadership.

Tajuddin Ahmad's legacy resonates profoundly today. He was a man ahead of his time, recognising early that lasting progress demanded not only independence but robust, accountable, and inclusive political structures. For all of us today, and particularly for young people who will spearhead efforts to shape our country's future, his unwavering belief in the power of democratic principles, his uncompromising integrity, and his exceptional courage should continue to serve as a guide.

Dr Kamal Hossain *is a Senior Advocate of the Supreme Court of Bangladesh, an eminent jurist, and one of the principal architects of the Constitution of Bangladesh.*

A LIFE FOR BANGLADESH

SUPPLEMENT
The Daily Star
DHAKA WEDNESDAY JULY 23, 2025
SRABAN 8, 1432 BS
S2

Our Finest Representative of LIBERAL POLITICS

He was also very firm on one principle: whatever assistance he received from India, he would repay it. He was clear that he would not take anything as charity. He was strongly opposed to accepting loans from imperialist countries. At the time, the World Bank was a powerful actor, but Tajuddin refused to accept aid from them. He actively obstructed those efforts. Even when the Americans and the World Bank wanted to provide aid, he declined.

SERAJUL ISLAM CHOUDHURY

I did not personally know Tajuddin Ahmad, but he was a contemporary of ours, and the politics he practised was within the Awami League—though there were different strands within the party. One faction was the right-wing, represented by Khondokar Mostaq Ahmad, and another faction was more liberal, even significantly liberal. Tajuddin Ahmad belonged to the liberal faction. Sheikh Mujibur Rahman maintained ties with both sides, but toward the end, since the Liberation movement had taken shape, he had to move in the direction of the liberal faction.

Sheikh Mujibur Rahman even described himself as a socialist—specifically, a national socialist. Tajuddin, however, never described himself as a socialist or national socialist in that sense. Yet, during the Liberation War, three principal ideas emerged—secularism, democracy, and ultimately socialism. Tajuddin Ahmad supported all three, and the government established under his leadership embodied these three principles. Nationalism, however, was not yet a prominent part of the discourse at that time.

Nationalism came later—after the Liberation—and it was Sheikh Mujibur Rahman who introduced it. Tajuddin, in that sense, stood as a secular democrat whose ultimate position inclined towards socialism. And the historical role he played was something that had been imposed upon him; he hadn't prepared himself for it.

Of course, he had been involved in politics since his student days, but not in the sense of being deeply embedded in student politics. Rather, he was directly involved in mainstream politics from the very beginning.

Many of Tajuddin's friends were socialists and were affiliated with the Communist Party. But Tajuddin never joined the Communist Party himself. One possible reason for this might be that he wanted to pursue a kind of politics that could nationally reflect or represent the public's sentiments, demands, and problems.

And when he crossed the border into India, he didn't go as a fugitive seeking shelter or refuge. He went as a political leader—a leader of the Awami League and an elected representative. That's how he wanted to present himself. When he spoke with Indira Gandhi, he made it clear: "We will take your help, but this is our struggle, and we will fight it ourselves. We ask for your assistance, and if needed, we will take loans from you—which we will repay."

At that moment, Indira Gandhi was facing two major challenges. First, the massive influx of refugees from East Pakistan had become extremely difficult to manage. Second, there was the humanitarian question—people were engaged in a struggle, and it was necessary to politically support that struggle.

There was also a political dimension from the Indian point of view. On one hand, it was a humanitarian refugee crisis. On the other, politically, India had antagonistic relations with Pakistan and wanted to weaken it. This situation presented an opportunity—a war could break out, and through that confrontation with Pakistan, perhaps Pakistan would collapse altogether.

Indira Gandhi had another political objective: in India—especially in West Bengal—the Naxalite movement had become increasingly intense. Suppressing that movement was also one of her goals. And she was able to use both Bengali nationalism (as it emerged in Bangladesh) and Indian nationalism to suppress it, which served her political objective.

Another anxiety Indira Gandhi had at the time was that if this Bengali nationalist movement gained further momentum, there might be attempts to unify the two Bengals. The narrative was: Bengalis are being attacked here, Bengalis are taking refuge there, and many of those taking shelter in West Bengal had already migrated earlier and established roots there. So, her concern was: what if Bangladesh and West Bengal, both Bengali regions, start to move toward unification? That anxiety intensified at the time, and a certain kind of nationalist sentiment began to rise.

At that time, a flag of Bangladesh had been designed. The flag had a red circle in the middle, and within the red circle was a map outlining the region of Bangladesh. Tajuddin was carrying that flag with him. When Indira Gandhi saw it, he told her, "What we are trying to achieve is this—nothing more, nothing beyond this. This is our land—and that's how we want to define it."

This moment captures the uniqueness of Tajuddin's leadership during the war. He had to negotiate with the Indian government under difficult circumstances. At the same time, he faced internal opposition within his own party—some factions even issued a vote of no confidence against him. Yet, he continued to lead the Liberation War. He had to coordinate not only with political allies but also with military generals who were part of the liberation effort.

So, he was navigating pressure from all sides—internal, regional, and international. And amid all this, he served as the spokesperson for Bangladesh.

He was constantly communicating with international correspondents, and what stands out is how calmly and steadily he managed all this. One particularly unique aspect was that he had no family life during that time. Others who had gone abroad were accompanied by their families, but Tajuddin lived entirely alone. This solitary existence—working alone, thinking alone, carrying the weight of leadership alone—is almost unprecedented in our history. He had an exceptionally clear head.

After the Liberation, Tajuddin had a specific vision: he wanted to absorb the Mukti Bahini (freedom fighters) into a national framework, rather than making the state depend entirely on the military. That was his plan. He did make efforts towards this, but ultimately, he couldn't implement it. That failure wasn't due to a lack of trying—it was because his government didn't support him in this endeavour.

He was also very firm on one principle: whatever assistance he received from India, he would repay it. He was clear that he would not take anything as charity. He was strongly opposed to accepting loans from imperialist countries. At the time, the World Bank was a powerful actor, but Tajuddin refused to accept aid from them. He actively obstructed those efforts. Even when the Americans and the World Bank wanted to provide aid, he declined.

Secondly, since Tajuddin took on leadership during the war, there was naturally an element of jealousy from Mujib's side—along the lines of: "I wasn't here, and he's doing this work during the 1971 war."

Then, those followers known as the Mujib Bahini were actually formed by the Indian government. The Indian government created them but did not inform Tajuddin. This group was anti-leftist; their objective was that if Sheikh Mujib could not return, they would control the movement. Even if Mujib did return, they wanted to ensure that the leftist elements would not gain influence or power. That's why they restructured the Mujib Bahini.

Tajuddin, however, did not approve of the Mujib Bahini at all. Their ideology was different, and the difference between the Mujib Bahini and Tajuddin reflects Tajuddin's political outlook and ideology.

The Mujib Bahini was anti-leftist, and their main purpose was to prevent leftists from gaining power or leadership roles by any means. Tajuddin, on the other hand, was liberal and tried to accommodate everyone.

Sheikh Mujib's followers convinced him that Tajuddin would become his rival and try to take away his power. So, Sheikh Mujib was urged to remove Tajuddin. Interestingly, Sheikh Mujib never wanted to go to Mujibnagar—the place regarded as the provisional government headquarters during the Liberation War. He also never showed much interest in knowing the detailed story or history of the struggle. This was a weakness of his.

If Mujib had taken that leadership himself during the 1971 war, it might have been different. But Tajuddin never saw himself as a rival to Sheikh Mujib. He always respected Sheikh Mujib, calling him "Mujib Bhai", and wanted to remain under his leadership. He was never a "first man" type of leader. Instead, he wanted to be the party secretary, and as secretary, he was respected and accepted.

Ironically, the people who came to power after Sheikh Mujib's assassination identified Tajuddin as their number one enemy—and that is why they killed him.

One thing that stands out is that Tajuddin never went to India as a refugee; he went as a political representative of Bangladesh. In August 1975, when the anti-liberal forces took over—especially through the army—his friends advised him to leave the country. They warned him that those now in power would not tolerate him. But just as he had stayed in the country during 1971, he chose to stay again, even five years later. He refused to flee.

His friends told him that at the very least he could take shelter in India, where he would be safe. But he remained—and was arrested and then killed. He was our finest representative of liberal politics.

But perhaps the greater tragedy was not just his death, but the fact that after Liberation, he was pushed aside. His experience, his vision—none of it was reflected in the post-war governance of the country. He wasn't forced out; he voluntarily stepped aside once he realised he was no longer wanted. He didn't join JASAD either, although they had invited him. He didn't associate with them or any other party.

He remained committed to the liberal politics within the Awami League—even when right-wing forces, including Khandakar Mushtaque and elements of the Mujib Bahini, began to dominate. Some parts of the Mujib Bahini later drifted towards ultra-leftist politics, but Tajuddin was not comfortable with them either.

He knew he could have become President. But he deeply loved Sheikh Mujib—he considered him like an elder brother. While others began calling him "Bangabandhu," Tajuddin continued to refer to him as "Mujib Bhai." If anyone was truly equal to Mujib in terms of integrity, sacrifice, and vision, it was Tajuddin. And perhaps that's why a certain kind of jealousy grew around him.

Tajuddin Ahmad shared a very intimate relationship with Maulana Bhashani. During the 1954 elections, Maulana did not initially support the United Front (Jukto Front), as he observed that elements of the Muslim League had infiltrated it. Sheikh Mujib, too, was reluctant at first, but eventually, both accepted the United Front.

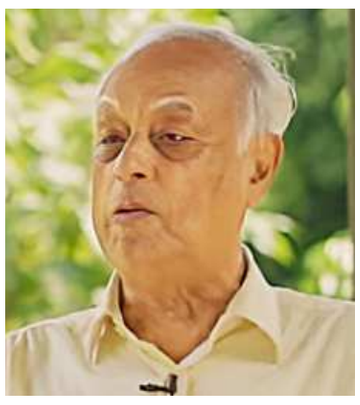
During the election campaign, Maulana Bhashani personally came to Tajuddin's constituency to campaign for him—something we do not hear of him doing for others. That constituency was considered dangerous and hostile, with armed elements active in the area. It was so inaccessible that Maulana had to be taken there on the back of an elephant.

He personally campaigned in support of Tajuddin Ahmad, despite usually campaigning more broadly against the Muslim League rather than endorsing individual candidates. In Tajuddin's case, however, it is well known that he made an exception and personally supported him.

Professor Serajul Islam Choudhury *is an eminent intellectual, thinker and writer.*

SUPPLEMENT
The Daily Star
DHAKA WEDNESDAY JULY 23, 2025
SRABAN 8, 1432 BS
S3

'Tajuddin was objective, fact-based — quite unlike many other Awami League leaders'



Muyeedul Hasan

In this conversation with The Daily Star, Muyeedul Hasan, who served as Special Assistant to Tajuddin Ahmad, Prime Minister of the Bangladesh Government-in-Exile, reflects on his early encounters with Tajuddin. He is also the author of *Muldhara '71*, widely regarded as one of the most authoritative books on the Liberation War of Bangladesh.

Tajuddin Ahmad, Prime Minister of the Bangladesh government-in-exile, with D. P. Dhar in 1971. Indian Prime Minister Indira Gandhi had appointed Dhar as Chairman of the Policy Planning Committee in the Ministry of External Affairs—a one-man taskforce created specifically to coordinate India's strategy for the liberation of Bangladesh.

The Daily Star (TDS): How and when did you first come into contact with Tajuddin Ahmad?

Muyeedul Hasan (MH): I first met Tajuddin Ahmad in 1961, when I was working for *The Daily Ittefaq* and had been writing editorials for about a year. One of my colleagues — a woman who oversaw the women's page — once asked if I had ever spoken with Tajuddin Ahmad, noting that he was somewhat different from most political leaders. Curious, I decided to meet him. So, we went to his house on Karkun Bari Lane. His room was simple, with just two chairs. I noticed that he read all the newspapers thoroughly. He began the conversation by discussing my writings.

What struck me as different about Tajuddin was that he rarely commented on individuals. Instead, he was deeply interested in writing — what was being published, who wrote what, and how good a particular piece was. That was something quite unique about him.

Also, I had the rare opportunity to spend an extended period with Tajuddin Ahmad — from February 1962 until mid-June. We were imprisoned together in Dhaka Central Jail during that time.

This was when Ayub Khan announced his second constitution. In response, the student community began mobilising for protests. The government anticipated unrest by the Awami League and arrested many of its members. Some leaders from the Communist Party, including Ranesh Dasgupta and others, were also detained. We were kept separately, near Urdu Road.

In that section were Tajuddin Ahmad, Manik Miah, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, Abul Mansur Ahmad, Kafiluddin Chowdhury, and Korban Ali — all prominent Awami League figures. I was arrested too, even though I was only an assistant editor at *The Daily Ittefaq* at the time. It seemed that my association with the paper — as the youngest member of the editorial section — was enough for the authorities to assume I was an Awami Leaguer.

The then Chief Justice of Pakistan, Muhammad Shahabuddin, had led a commission to review the proposed constitution. A series of editorials about that was published in *The Morning News* over 11 or 12 days.

There were 24 of us imprisoned together, and soon there was a scramble over who would get to read the newspaper — pages would tear in the chaos. So, from the second day, a system was established: Abul Mansur Ahmad and Manik Miah decided that only two people would read and summarise the constitutional reports. They would then brief the rest of us, along with their critical observations.

Tajuddin and I were part of that small reading group. He was about ten years older than me and a much more accomplished scholar. While working together in jail with Tajuddin Ahmad, I noticed that our reasoning often aligned. He was objective, fact-based — quite unlike many other Awami League leaders.

For four and a half months in prison, we worked together each morning, reading reports, underlining key points, and preparing materials for presentation to the group. Through that process, an intellectual bond formed between us.

After our release, we saw each other occasionally — perhaps once every month or two — usually when he visited the *Ittefaq* office.

From the beginning, I used to write about the economy in *Ittefaq*, and I realised that we were victims of disparity in many ways. Perhaps I was doing that work quite well. However, I left journalism and the Communist Party at the end of 1966. I saw that the Party leadership was fixated mainly on the Moscow and Peking affairs, with nothing about our local issues. So, I left the Party and got involved in a bit of business. Then the anti-Ayub movement began, Ayub fell, and Yahya came. I suddenly went to Bogura, where people already recognised me from my newspaper writings and my past involvement with the Student Union. As soon as I arrived, the members of East Pakistan Student Union started reaching out to me. They said I had to contest, and I stood in the election for NAP in 1970.

At that time, some of my writings were published—about the Six-Point demands—where I explained how these demands could be achieved, given that there was no scope for their implementation within the framework of a united Pakistan. These articles appeared in Forum magazine. The logic was simple: people would vote in favour of the Six-Point demands, and the Awami League would win. However, I raised a critical question: how would these demands ever be implemented, given that Pakistan's power structure—its army, bureaucracy, and business elites—would never accept them? Then would the Awami League really fight the army for it? No—except for a few leftists and some individuals, no one would. So, if we truly wanted autonomy for Bengal, it was essential to contest the election jointly with the left and allied groups. This perspective went against the official stance of the Awami League. Shortly afterwards, Sheikh Mujib reached out to me through Tajuddin. My concerns had been discussed in the Awami League's central committee, and Sheikh Mujib intended to offer me a party ticket to contest the election and join the party's planning team. He believed this would address my criticisms.

TDS: What sequence of events led to the March 1971 crackdown, and how did the resistance movement emerge in response?

MH: In March 1971, Masih-ud-Daulah, the elder brother of Asaf-ud-Daulah—the former Secretary—was serving in the Pakistan Army as General Staff at the Corps Commander's Office in Dhaka. As G-2 of the Corps Commander, he was responsible for Intelligence and held the rank of Major at the time. Another of his brothers was Anis-ud-Daulah. One of Masih-ud-Daulah's close friends, Anwarul Alam, was also a friend of mine.

Anwarul Alam met me on March 3. He said that an informant had asked him to pass on critical information to the higher political leadership. Preparations for a Pakistani military operation were already at an advanced stage. A tank convoy had been transported from Rangpur to Dhaka, where the tanks were being fitted with rubber belts—making them suitable for movement and combat on the roads leading into Dhaka city. Alam urged me to share this intelligence with the appropriate political circles.

I trusted Alam—not only because of our long-standing friendship and shared political beliefs, but also because I respected his honesty and political judgement. I agreed to relay the message. However, I added that while this information might reach us through other channels, he should ask his source whether there was any possible way to prevent the imminent attack.

Over the next two days, Alam was extremely busy but took considerable risks to reach out to the other side at least twice. He also remained in close contact with me. On the evening of March 5, I finally received a complete response to my question. He told me that the only way to prevent the Pakistani military assault was through a counter-military operation. At that time, Bengali soldiers in the province still outnumbered non-Bengali troops. With their support, it would be possible to simultaneously destroy the Godnail fuel depot, disable the Dhaka airport, and seize the Chittagong seaport. Executing these three operations together would severely cripple the Pakistani military's capabilities.

Thus, it was clear that the number of Bengali soldiers was sufficient to resist the impending attack — but it wouldn't happen automatically. Orders had to be given. And of course, those orders would have to come from the elected leadership — someone who had gained legitimacy through the election. So, I met Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, and he told me to discuss the matter with Tajuddin Ahmad.

After hearing everything, Tajuddin asked me, "Why did Mujib send you to me?" I replied, "Perhaps you'll ask a lot of small, detailed questions and then report back to him. Or maybe he just doesn't want to be involved in this at all and is avoiding me." Tajuddin responded, "It seems your second assumption is correct."

TDS: How did you become involved with Tajuddin during the war?

MH: At that time, a Punjabi man named Jafar Naqvi lived next to my house. He had served as the Chief Reporter of *The Pakistan Times* between 1962 and 1964. We became very close friends. Both of us belonged to the same faction of the Communist Party — the one entangled in the Moscow–China ideological conflict. Like me, he was disillusioned with both sides, though he leaned more towards the pro-Moscow position. I was around 35 years old then, while he was over 40. By that time, he had left journalism and was serving as the resident director of Eastern Refinery Ltd in Chittagong. He frequently travelled between Chittagong and Karachi, as his maternal uncle was the head of the organisation. Every week, he was required to report to Tikka Khan two to three times regarding Petroleum, Oil, and Lubricants — detailing available stock, goods in transit, and quantities being refined.

He would occasionally drop by and share updates. One day, he suddenly asked, "So, you're still around?" I replied, "Yes, everything seems normal now." He responded, "What normal? Another major crisis is imminent. It's going to happen soon."

He warned, "The Indians are training so many people — do you think Pakistan will just sit idle? They will strike. And once the attack happens, the war will begin."

He advised me to leave, saying, "War is about to begin again." When I asked why, he explained that the Pakistani army was delaying because the Chinese hadn't fully given their nod yet. Pakistan, he said, would find it difficult to go to war alone without clear support from China.

Within our group, we quietly gathered information. Shahidullah Kaiser, my mentor in the Communist Party, was a small-built, cheerful man of about 45. We met almost daily in Dhanmondi, where he, Ahmadul Kabir, and Zohur Hossain Chowdhury would often exchange news.

It was Shahidullah Kaiser who first told me that Tajuddin Ahmad was either in Kolkata or Delhi, and that I should go and find him — someone reliable was needed to brief them on the situation in Dhaka. So, in May, I went to Calcutta. I didn't find Tajuddin right away, but I met Amirul Islam and Nurul Quader first.

Tajuddin Ahmad first shared with me his belief that Mrs Gandhi was a sincere leader who would stand by Bangladesh's cause. In response, I raised a concern — though she may have assured full support, there remained a possibility that if China were to intervene or launch an attack, she might frame it as an external conflict and withdraw her support, leaving us to face the situation alone. This concern stemmed from insights I had received earlier from Jafar Naqvi.

Tajuddin acknowledged the risk but noted that such developments were beyond what they could have anticipated at the time.

I then argued that India's security could only be ensured through a firm assurance from the Soviet Union — specifically, that the Soviets would deter any potential Chinese aggression. I reminded him that China still had around one lakh soldiers deployed along the Ussuri River, and there was fighting between these two countries along the border. If China were to intervene and the Soviet Union formed a formal alliance with India, it could dissuade Chinese action. Only under such an arrangement, I asserted, could India feel genuinely secure. At that point, we had no other support on the global stage.

Tajuddin remained silent for a while and then suggested that I go to Delhi to raise these strategic concerns with Indian policymakers. Following his advice, I went to Delhi to engage with Indian policy-level think tanks.

The rest of my account of working with Tajuddin Ahmad during the Liberation War is documented in detail in my book *Muldhara '71*.

The interview was taken by **Priyam Paul.**

A freedom fighter stands before Prime Minister Tajuddin Ahmad during the Liberation War, expressing unwavering determination. The moment captures the spirit of sacrifice and resolve that defined 1971.

A LIFE FOR BANGLADESH

SUPPLEMENT
The Daily Star
DHAKA WEDNESDAY JULY 23, 2025
SRABAN 8, 1432 BS
S4

The Forgotten Luminary of Bangladesh's Liberation War

Several factors contributed to the historical marginalisation of Tajuddin Ahmad. First, his principled opposition to authoritarian tendencies made him inconvenient for successive governments that preferred compliant historical narratives. Second, his intellectual approach to politics and governance lacked the populist appeal that resonates with mass political movements. Third, Tajuddin's assassination removed his voice from post-independence political discourse, leaving his legacy in the hands of others with different priorities.

K A S MURSHID

History has a cruel way of dimming the light of those who served with quiet dignity while amplifying the voices of those who demanded attention. In the pantheon of Bangladesh's founding fathers, few figures have been as systematically overlooked—and arguably mistreated—as Tajuddin Ahmed, the nation's first Prime Minister. Born on July 23, 1925, Ahmed's story is one of unwavering principle, strategic brilliance, and ultimate sacrifice, yet it remains largely ignored in the popular consciousness of the very nation he helped birth.

The Hero of 1971

While Sheikh Mujibur Rahman rightfully earned the title "Bangabandhu" (Friend of Bengal), Tajuddin Ahmed led the first Government of Bangladesh as its Prime Minister during the Bangladesh Liberation War in 1971, and is regarded as one of the most instrumental figures in the birth of Bangladesh. When the Pakistani military launched Operation Searchlight on 25 March 1971, it was Ahmad who demonstrated the presence of mind and organisational acumen that would prove crucial to the independence struggle.

In the chaos following the crackdown, while many leaders fled or were captured, Ahmad managed to escape to India and immediately set about the monumental task of establishing a government-in-exile. He became the Prime Minister of the Bangladesh government in exile at Mujibnagar and organised the war of liberation. The Mujibnagar Government, proclaimed on 17 April 1971, was not merely a symbolic gesture—it was a functioning administration that coordinated the liberation war, managed international diplomacy, and laid the groundwork for the independent state that would emerge nine months later.

Ahmad's leadership during this critical period was characterised by pragmatism and strategic thinking. He understood that military action alone would not suffice; the independence movement needed legitimacy, organisation, and international support. Under his guidance, the provisional government established diplomatic relations, organised the Mukti Bahini (liberation forces), and created the administrative framework that would transition into the independent state's governance structure.

The Principled Politician

What distinguished Ahmad from many of his contemporaries was his unwavering commitment to democratic principles and constitutional governance. Unlike the populist politics that often characterised South Asian leadership, Ahmad believed in institutional integrity and the rule of law. This principled approach, while admirable, would later contribute to his political marginalisation.

Tajuddin's life was a long, ceaseless commitment to principles. Even after independence, when opportunities for personal enrichment and political manoeuvring abounded, Ahmad remained steadfast in his convictions. He believed in a parliamentary system of government, fiscal responsibility, and inclusive economic development—positions that sometimes put him at odds with the more populist tendencies of the time.

Members of the cabinet of the provisional government of Bangladesh. From left to right: Syed Nazrul Islam, Tajuddin Ahmad, Khandaker Mushtaq Ahmed, Captain M. Mansur Ali, A.H.M. Qamaruzzaman, and Colonel M.A.G. Osmani.

His vision for Bangladesh was that of a secular, democratic state with a mixed economy that could provide opportunities for all citizens. This vision, though prescient, was perhaps too sophisticated for a nation emerging from the trauma of war and struggling with immediate survival needs.

The Tragic Downfall

The greatest tragedy of Ahmad's story is not merely his assassination but the circumstances that led to his political eclipse. He resigned from the cabinet in 1974 to live a quiet life. This resignation was not born of personal ambition or political manoeuvring but of principled disagreement with the direction the country was taking.

Ahmad had grown increasingly concerned about the concentration of power, the suspension of democratic institutions, and the establishment of a one-party state. His opposition to these developments, while constitutionally sound, marked him as a potential threat to the new order. In late July 1975, he received a desperate call from a trusted source, warning him of a conspiracy to assassinate Bangabandhu. True to his loyal nature, he rushed to warn Sheikh Mujib, despite their political differences.

The assassination of Bangabandhu on 15 August 1975 sealed Ahmed's fate. Following Sheikh Mujib's assassination in a coup d'état, Tajuddin was arrested and assassinated on 3 November 1975 while in prison, along with three senior Awami League leaders. On 3 November 1975, just over two months after their capture, all four men were brutally assassinated—a flagrant violation of both prison regulations and the nation's legal framework.

This heinous act completed a systematic campaign to eliminate every key leader from the 1971 government. Only one figure from that era's leadership survived: Khondoker Mushtaque Ahmed, Tajuddin's former colleague in the government-in-exile, who had conspired with pro-Pakistani forces to orchestrate this carnage. Even during the 1971 struggle, Mushtaque's loyalty had been questionable, though Tajuddin had managed to contain his subversive influence and prevent him from undermining the independence cause. The 1975 assassinations represented the ultimate settling of scores—revenge finally seizing its moment.

The manner of his death was particularly barbaric. The four senior leaders of the Awami League were killed with "bullets and bayonets" by those opposed to Bangladesh's liberation, working closely with Bangabandhu's assassins. As he went down the stairway of his residence in August 1975, a man in army custody, Tajuddin told his wife he might be going away forever. These words proved prophetic, and his widow was left to raise their children alone, struggling against both poverty and the political ostracism that followed.

Historical Injustice and the Need for Rectification

The treatment of Tajuddin Ahmad's legacy represents one of the most glaring injustices in Bangladesh's historical narrative. While other leaders have been celebrated with monuments, institutions, and extensive biographical works, Ahmad has remained largely in the shadows. This oversight is not merely academic—it represents a fundamental misrepresentation of the independence struggle and the values upon which the nation was founded.

Several factors contributed to the historical marginalisation of Tajuddin Ahmad. First, his principled opposition to authoritarian tendencies made him inconvenient for successive governments that preferred compliant historical narratives. Second, his intellectual approach to politics and governance lacked the populist appeal that resonates with mass political movements. Third, Tajuddin's assassination removed his voice from post-independence political discourse, leaving his legacy in the hands of others with different priorities.

Moreover, the political dynamics of post-independence Bangladesh meant that acknowledging Ahmad's contributions might have implied criticism of other leaders' actions. This created a climate where his role was systematically minimised.

The Case for Restoration

The time has come for Bangladesh to rectify this historical injustice and properly acknowledge Tajuddin Ahmad's contributions. This is not merely about historical accuracy—though that alone would justify the effort—but about reclaiming the values and vision that he represented.

Ahmad's commitment to democratic governance, constitutional propriety, and inclusive development remains relevant to contemporary Bangladesh. His understanding that independence was not merely about political sovereignty but about creating institutions that serve the people offers valuable lessons for current challenges.

The resurrection of Ahmad's legacy should involve several concrete steps. Educational curricula should properly reflect his role in the independence struggle and post-liberation governance. Public institutions should bear his name, and scholarship programmes should support research into his contributions. Most importantly, his political philosophy and approach to governance should be studied and discussed as part of the ongoing effort to strengthen Bangladesh's democratic institutions.

Conclusion

Tajuddin Ahmad was more than Bangladesh's first Prime Minister—he was the architect of its independence struggle and a visionary leader whose principled approach to governance offers enduring lessons. His assassination was not merely the loss of a political leader but the silencing of a voice that advocated for the democratic values and institutional integrity that any nation needs to thrive.

The failure to properly honour his memory represents not just ingratitude toward a founding father but a fundamental misunderstanding of the values that should guide the nation he helped create. Bangladesh's journey towards fulfilling its founding promise remains incomplete as long as leaders like Tajuddin Ahmad are kept in the shadows.

Tajuddin was merely 50 years old when he was murdered, leaving behind a young family and an unfinished vision for his country. The ultimate tribute to his memory would be the creation of the democratic, just, and prosperous Bangladesh he envisioned—a goal that requires first acknowledging the debt the nation owes to this forgotten architect of independence.

In remembering Tajuddin Ahmad, we remember not just a man but a set of principles that transcend individual personalities and political calculations. His resurrection in the national consciousness is not about partisan politics but about reclaiming the values of integrity, service, and democratic governance that he embodied. Bangladesh deserves to know and honour this remarkable leader who gave everything for his country and asked for nothing in return.

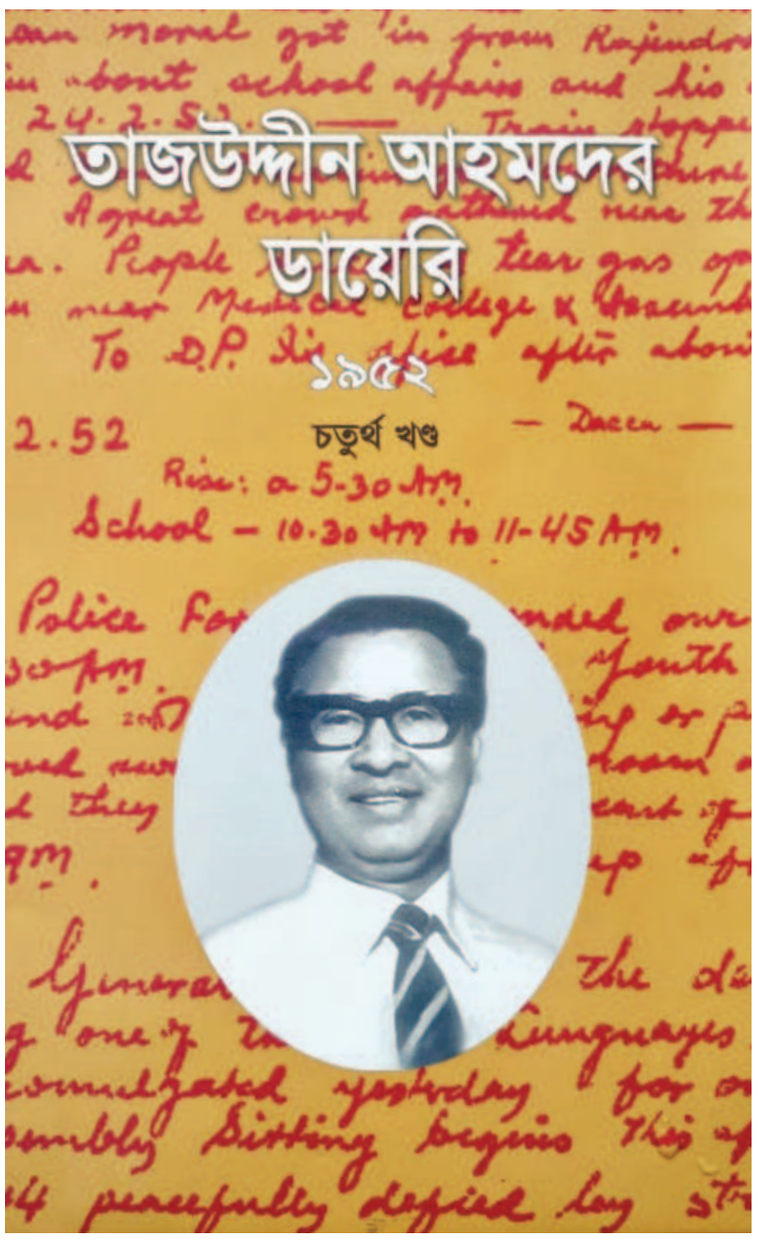
The prevailing impulse to diminish our heritage of struggle and liberation while undermining the legacy of our founding fathers portends troubling times for our nation. The ramifications manifest themselves with stark clarity: diminished leaders stumble through obscurity, stripped of wisdom and bereft of any sense of national purpose, while our directionless state founders amid tempestuous waters. What we urgently require is another sagacious and prescient leader of Tajuddin Ahmed's stature—one capable of delivering us from our own folly.

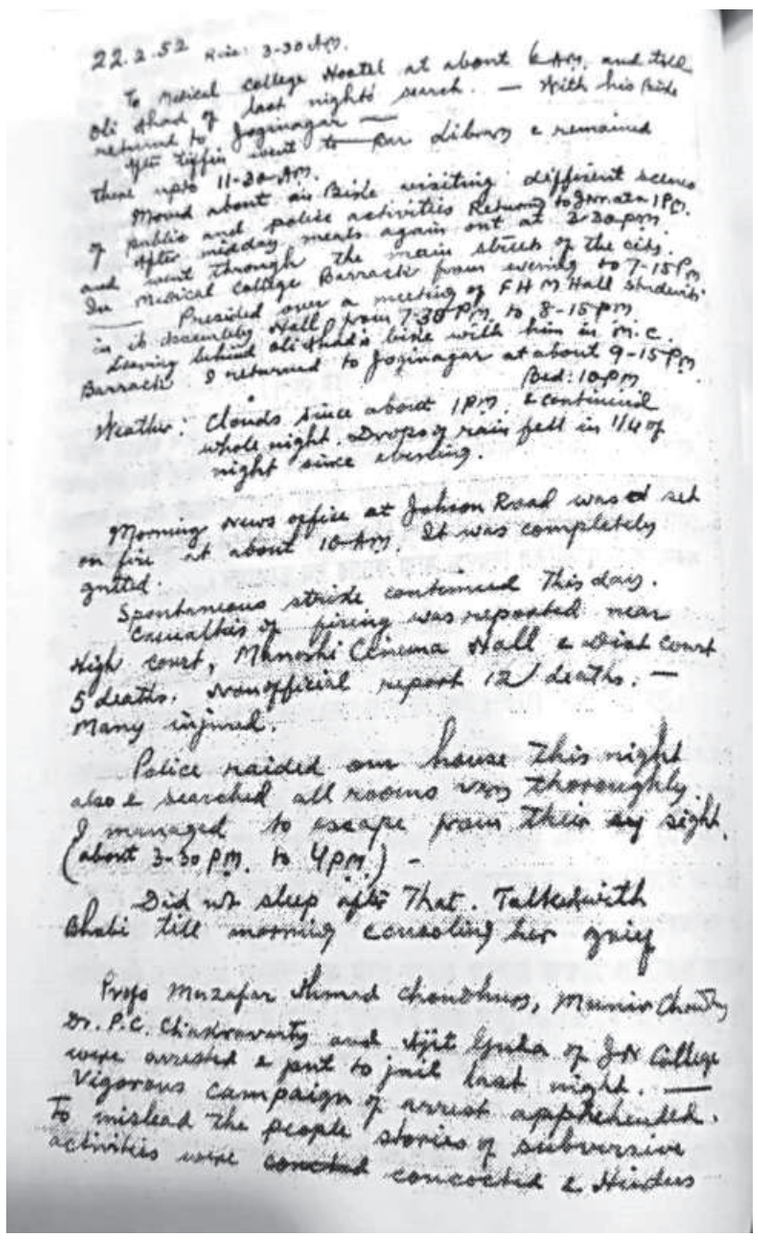
K A S Murshid, *an economist, served with the Foreign Ministry of the Mujibnagar Government during the Liberation War in 1971.*

A LIFE FOR BANGLADESH

SUPPLEMENT
The Daily Star
DHAKA WEDNESDAY JULY 23, 2025
SRABAN 8, 1432 BS
S5

Reading His Diaries and Understanding the Man





SELIM JAHAN

I do not remember who gave me the book—it may have been a friend, colleague, or a student of mine. But once I looked at the title, I was quite intrigued, for the simple reason that the book is a compilation of diaries from 1947 to 1952 by none other than Tajuddin Ahmad, one of the architects of Bangladesh as well as the country's first Prime Minister. So, I eagerly took the book.

As I started to read it, aside from its contents, five things struck me. First, Tajuddin Ahmad wrote something in his diary each and every day for five long years. The tenacity of the man is enviable. Second, it is also a reflection of a disciplined mind. He trained himself to make an entry every day, irrespective of how insignificant the happenings of the day were. Third, the entries were exceptionally detailed in terms of names of people, places, and events. Tajuddin Ahmad took note of every detail, however minute. It may be that he was keen to reflect facts rather than fiction.

Fourth, the language of the diaries is so simple that it feels as though someone is just sitting next to you and speaking. Fifth, the entries are in English, not in Bangla.

In my reading of different books based on diaries, I have come across two basic trends: one, some diaries simply record the facts—what happened, when it happened, and how it happened. To my taste, these sorts of diaries are boring, and I can hardly relate to what is written. Two, some diaries contain stories, observations, inner thoughts, etc. I am drawn to this second type of writing. Needless to say, the diaries of Tajuddin Ahmad belong to the first category.

Thus, as I began reading them, the descriptions initially felt too mechanical, quite dry, and somewhat boring. But soon, I became completely immersed in the writing. It became clear to me that the entries were not merely descriptions of events—they also portrayed the time, the society, and the politics of that era. More importantly, the diaries are a testimony to the evolution of a great leader: his thoughts and ideas, his journey to becoming who he was.

From the diaries, I gathered how deeply Tajuddin Ahmad loved the land of his birth and its people. In various entries, his concerns come through very clearly—sometimes for local areas, like Kapasia, his birthplace; sometimes for Old Dhaka, the centre of his political activities; and sometimes for the country as a whole.

His writing reveals that he was determined to establish people's rights, their voices and autonomy, and their emancipation. He dreamed of a welfare state for the people. On these issues, Tajuddin Ahmad was uncompromising. Some of the patriotic ideals he formed at a young age later shaped his stance on various economic issues when he served as Bangladesh's Minister of Finance.

As evidenced in the diaries, Tajuddin Ahmad was a political animal—politics was in his DNA. Apart from a few personal events, most of the entries are about meetings with friends and peers, who, like him, were deeply involved in political activity. Tajuddin Ahmad was grounded in local realities. He was closely connected with political workers at the grassroots level.

There is an entry in which he describes a meeting with a student activist who had travelled from afar. He spent four hours with him one-on-one. His comment on that meeting was: "It enriched me so much." Tajuddin Ahmad saw politics not as a means to power but as a tool for serving the people. From that perspective, he was absolutely objective and unemotional in political matters. This becomes evident in his conversations with his political colleagues in Old Dhaka.

As a politician, Tajuddin Ahmad was neither a man of empty words nor a drawing-room politician—he was a political activist. From his diary entries, it is clear how, during the Language Movement, he strategised the resistance against the administration, how he mobilised his peers, and how he himself took to the streets.

He stood with the people, as he had throughout his life. He saw the Language Movement not only as a struggle for the cultural identity of Bengalis but also as a broader fight for autonomy and emancipation. This critical phase helped shape his path towards the Liberation War of Bangladesh.

In reading the diaries, I also sought to answer the perennial question: Was Tajuddin Ahmad a socialist?—a label often attached to him, rightly or wrongly. From my reading, it seemed that he was, at his core, a nationalist leader with a strong commitment to social justice, human welfare, equity, and equality.

Was he a Marxist? In strict definitional terms, my answer would be "no", but in spirit, "yes". As he himself once said: "I am neither a Marxist nor a Communist, but I definitely follow the teachings of Marxism in my way of life." He may not have been a Marxist, but he was undoubtedly a socialist, and his socialist ideas were reflected in the economic policies, strategies, and plans that Bangladesh pursued when he served as the country's first Finance Minister.

Reading the diaries, I got a clear sense that Tajuddin Ahmad followed history closely. It also reminded me of his own words:

"You work in such a way that you make history, but you are not to be found anywhere in it."

Selim Jahan *is former director of the Human Development Report Office under the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and lead author of the Human Development Report.*

AN UNSUNG HERO:
Tajuddin Ahmad and the Bangladesh Revolution

Tajuddin, a socialist by conviction, was aghast when a petty bourgeois party like the Awami League pretended to be a revolutionary outfit and proclaimed a one-party dictatorship. He grew distant from Sheikh Mujib but warned him of an impending coup.

SUBHO BASU

The period between 1945 and 1979 was one of Cold War and decolonisation. The Cold War entered a different trajectory with the rapprochement between China and the US and the Iranian Revolution. Those who became active in politics in this era were swayed by the dynamics of the Cold War, its ideological fallout, and a quest for national emancipation. Tajuddin Ahmad, who was born on 23 July 1925, belonged to the era of the Cold War, ideological competition between socialism and capitalism, and emancipation from imperial domination. Tajuddin Ahmad was a young student activist in the Pakistan movement. A perceptive student, he identified it as critically related to the settlement of the national question on the subcontinent alongside the emancipation from colonial control. On 14 August, he was elated when Pakistan was proclaimed a sovereign republic. In his diary, he sang praises for the coming of Pakistan.

Yet did Pakistan become a land of eternal Eid? Did it provide food to the multitude of toiling masses in East Pakistan? Did peasants gain their freedom from the domination of landlords and parasitic classes? He was dismayed by the absence of democracy, the obstinacy of the Muslim League with a particular version of development, and the increasing absence of democracy. He toyed with the idea of a social-political formation and briefly associated with the Gana Azadi League, an ephemeral political organisation that came into existence at the moment of political exuberance in 1947. Like many others, he veered towards the People's Muslim League, or Awami Muslim League, when it was born in the Rose Garden of Dhaka in 1949. He was not an ebullient, flamboyant political personality. He was rather a quiet, self-introspective person dedicated to achieving the goal.

The global 1950s and 1960s were moments of political rebellion, and the Cold War was raging supreme. In the Muslim world, there emerged new political heroes like Abdel Gamal Nasser, Sukarno, and Ahmed Ben Bella. The Algerian revolution, emancipation in Congo, the Bandung Conference, the Cuban Revolution, and later on the war in Vietnam and the Cultural Revolution in China inspired many. Students, youths, and emerging politicians in East Pakistan noticed with alarm the gradual slide of Pakistan towards a military-bureaucratic axis—a growth of praetorian capitalism that initiated a process of internal colonisation of East Pakistan, and global alignment with the United States, at a time when the entire Muslim world in the Middle East, and Asia, Africa, and Latin America in general, was moving ahead with national emancipation struggles. Tajuddin remained active in the movement for the restoration of democracy, developed sympathies for the underground Communist Party and the Soviet Union, and remained engaged in the newly resurrected Awami League under Sheikh Mujibur Rahman.

Pakistan was experiencing a democratic political convulsion in the late 1960s. As student revolutions broke out in Paris and Mexico City, could Lahore, Karachi, and Dhaka be left behind? Though imprisoned for his participation in the autonomy movement in East Pakistan, Tajuddin remained the quiet organisational man in the Awami League. At the time, the Awami League was the national platform for the autonomy movement. He was with Sheikh Mujib and prepared the ground for the electoral victory of the autonomy movement in East Pakistan.

In 1971, he was one of the key architects of the negotiations with the military regime for the transfer of power to the elected majority party in the constituent assembly. But on 25 March, Operation Searchlight unleashed a campaign of genocide in East Pakistan. At this critical moment, Sheikh Mujib could offer no guidance. He chose arrest, hoping that autonomy could still be achieved through non-violent means. Tajuddin, however, recognised that the path ahead was no longer political negotiation—it was a war of liberation.

Tajuddin soon moved to India along with Amirul Islam. It was through his political sagacity that Bangladesh witnessed the birth of a government-in-exile, which took oath in Baidyanath Tola, in a historic mango grove—reminding Bengalis of the lost independence of 23 June 1757. He was opposed by radical students loyal to Mujib, particularly Sheikh Moni. The factional squabble reached its crescendo when an assassin attempted to take the life of Tajuddin in Calcutta. Khondoker Mushtaq, a veteran Awami Leaguer, conspired to compromise the liberation struggle and established contact with the US Consulate in Calcutta.

Acting President, Syed Nazrul Islam and Prime Minister. Tajuddin Ahmed reached Dacca Tejgaon Airport on December 22, 1971

Tajuddin steered the leaky boat of the Mujibnagar government to the safe harbour of independence amid genocide, conspiracies, a refugee exodus, and an international alliance between Pakistan, China, and the United States of America.

Along with his colleague Syed Nazrul Islam, he guided the liberation struggle, coordinated the movements of Mukti Bahini field commanders, and negotiated with the Government of India—an alarmed partner with its own national interest. On 16 December 1971, he could claim that under his stewardship, Bangladesh had achieved independence.

Yet after independence, it was not smooth sailing. The country was in chaos, the economy was in ruins, and infrastructure was devastated. He took time to return to Dhaka, coming back a week later. His command was weak. Sheikh Moni and Sirajul Alam Khan refused to recognise his authority. More importantly, when Sheikh Mujib returned on 10 January 1972, he was informed against Tajuddin. Sheikh Mujib, the towering figure of Bangladesh's politics, grew distant from Tajuddin. He was also apprehensive about his absence during the most pivotal moment in the country's birth.

The attempt to build a state-guided economy was a disaster. A famine stalked the countryside. The new quasi-Marxist nationalist revolutionary party JASAD was moving against Sheikh Mujib. Tajuddin was clearly uncomfortable in such a situation. He was isolated within the Awami League, yet he was reluctant to revolt against Sheikh Mujib. He finally resigned from the Bangladesh ministry in 1974, when famine was about to rage across the country.

Tajuddin, a socialist by conviction, was aghast when a petty bourgeois party like the Awami League pretended to be a revolutionary outfit and proclaimed a one-party dictatorship. He grew distant from Sheikh Mujib but warned him of an impending coup.

When a revolution collapses, its leaders often fall with it. In the aftermath of a bloody coup, Tajuddin could not bring himself to align with Khondoker Mushtaq. At that moment, his fate was sealed. He was arrested, cast into prison, and brutally assassinated on 3 November—in the very country he had helped steer towards independence. It was a time of profound confusion, as successive coups and counter-coups eroded the fragile foundations of Bangladesh's government. The forces of revolution and counter-revolution came to define the lives of those who had once dared to dream of emancipation.

Tajuddin joined the ranks of Nkrumah, overthrown from power; Patrice Lumumba, brutally assassinated; Ben Bella, ousted in a coup; and Sukarno, cast into imprisonment. Yet could the forces of counter-revolution erase his name from history? It is precisely there that he lays claim to the glory of immortality.

Subho Basu *is an Associate Professor at the Department of History and Classical Studies at McGill University.*

SUPPLEMENT
The Daily Star
DHAKA WEDNESDAY JULY 23, 2025
SRABAN 8, 1432 BS
S6

Tajuddin Ahmad, Prime Minister of the Bangladesh government-in-exile, speaking to foreign journalists in 1971.

OUR MORAL INHERITANCE
Tajuddin Ahmad's Call to National Conscience

We must, however, rediscover our heroes for our own sake. When we choose to forget the best among us, we choose to forget the best within us. We are all Tajuddin. My grandmother understood this when, upon hearing of her husband's assassination, she recognised that however tragic her personal loss, losing Tajuddin was a far greater loss for the country.

TAJ IMAN AHMAD IBN MUNIR

If we but listen closely, we may yet hear the resounding footsteps of Tajuddin Ahmad echoing from the hallowed halls of heroes past. Interwoven within the fabric of the starry constellations above our blessed motherland, and embedded within the very soil upon which we tread, are Tajuddin Ahmad's pulsating heart, his resonating soul, and his unshakeable legacy. This July marks the centennial of the pioneer of the first-ever Bengali nation in history—our nation's first Prime Minister and founder of Bangladesh's wartime government-in-exile, who, against all odds, through the strength of the people's will and his own tenacity, foresight, and character, successfully shepherded Bangladesh through the Liberation War of 1971 to achieve independence and nationhood.

Since his foundational wartime stewardship, we have, as a nation, tragically borne witness to over half a century of alternating governance breeding cultures of cynical, zero-sum hyper-partisanship and violent factionalism—all characterised by the misuse of public institutions and abuses of public trust, culminating last year in the most heinous mass slaughter and savagery since independence by the powerful few over the voiceless many. We continue now, wading through the fallout of unbridled degeneracy in the forms of rape, looting, armed intimidation, and political killings.

Where is the humanity?

A collective conscience in crisis has proven as great an affliction for the nation as any pandemic or plague. In the midst of our struggle to find our bearings as a people—caught between justified anger at recent betrayals and the dangerous temptation to abandon our foundational truths altogether—we commemorate the centennial of one of the most consequential and conscientious statesmen of the 20th century. What inspiration can we draw from Tajuddin's life, legacy, and heart in helping heal Bangladesh?

The cynics would have us believe that moral bankruptcy was always our destiny, that the seeds of corruption were sown from independence itself. Yet Tajuddin's example stands as a living refutation of such historical nihilism. Here was a leader whose private virtue and public service formed an unbroken whole, whose very existence proves that principled governance was not only possible but achieved—however briefly—at our founding moment.

I recall much of my formative youth in the United States spent sharing a home with struggling guests and families. Sharmin Ahmad "Reepi," my mother and Tajuddin's eldest daughter, once hosted a family of six whose two-month stay turned into several years until the guests could get back on their feet. During her own childhood, my mother would frequently wake to find mothers with their children from myriad villages sharing her room and bed. Her father would use the home as a waystation for those in need of treatment or other help. My Nanu, the late Zohra Tajuddin "Lily," continued this tradition and would often tell me that my Nana, Tajuddin, was not only her husband but also her greatest mentor. Their very union had been consecrated in the same spirit of principled simplicity—wedding jewellery fashioned of jasmine flowers, their symbolic rings mere strings—in beautiful defiance of materialistic extravagance. Tajuddin's indelible impact remained alive in both the dignified poise and presence of his wife, and remains apparent in the altruistic idealism of his daughter.

Tajuddin Ahmad interacting warmly with a student during an award presentation ceremony.

In Tajuddin's conception of leadership, privileges were not meant to be acquisitively coveted or exploited. They were meant to be directed towards public welfare and those most in need. So transcendent was his integrity that when a government employee who had once refused his fleeing wife shelter during the military crackdown came up for promotion, Tajuddin advanced the man based solely on merit, placing principle above personal grievance. In fact, in the current era—where one can be hard-pressed to find the virtues extolled by public figures reflected in their private lives—Tajuddin, by contrast, was remarkably congruent. Loath to vain practices, diary entries going back to the era of British India demonstrate him eschewing even simple birthday celebrations for day-long public service and meetings.

Having a heart purged of ego attuned him to the needs of others. His life of service is often described as one of "self-sacrifice." Undoubtedly, when he—after a life of civil disobedience campaigns and years in prison—held himself to an oath to return to family life only on condition of successfully liberating Bangladesh, and set off with his revolutionary protégé, Barrister Amirul Islam, to risk life and limb to do so, "self-sacrifice" seems an apt description. However, I believe that, to Tajuddin, it went beyond that.

Service must necessarily have been sacred to him. You see, "sacrifice" implies becoming diminished in some sense. I do not believe Tajuddin could have channelled the will of the people of nascent Bangladesh to overcome seemingly insurmountable obstacles in the way he did without deriving immense purpose—and, dare I say, spiritual fulfilment—from what he did. His service was simply his way of life; his service reflected his heart.

Examining his more private moments, how many in their adolescence would otherwise choose to spend their leisure time picking the brains of four imprisoned anti-colonialist revolutionaries in pursuit of actionable intellectual edification—and then go on to finish reading their large stack of recommended books? How many children would trade idle play or gossip to tend to the needs of outcast cholera victims, and enlist their mother's support in cooking to feed them? During the devastating famine of 1943, an adolescent Tajuddin devised and implemented the "Dharmagola" system—collecting food from the rich during harvests and storing it for the hungry in case of future disasters. Renowned among his peers as a peacemaker, young Tajuddin would even stand up for the wronged at the risk of his own status or well-being. His acutely sensitive heart remained his defining feature into adulthood. My mother often recalls how she spied on him from a distance, silently weeping over a bird that died during a terrible storm.

On another occasion, when he was found uncharacteristically missing from his Mujibnagar office, Prime Minister Tajuddin was traced to the quarters of his office staff, where he was tending to the man's fever with a wet towel in hand. Even while embroiled in a geopolitical nightmare—the feeding and sheltering of 10 million Bengali refugees, the arming and training of freedom fighters, fending off assassination attempts and subversive plots all the while—he was not beyond the moment and the simple calls of humanity.

Tajuddin's understated nature with those in subordinate positions belied the steely, forthright resolve with which he would confront those in power. This reputation preceded him in such a way that Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, fearing Tajuddin's prowess, declined to participate in a public debate with him over the Awami League's Six-Point Programme of 1966. Author and veteran diplomat S.A. Karim favourably compared Tajuddin's adeptness at organising the Awami League's civil disobedience campaigns with that of Mahatma Gandhi. The golden era of Bengali politics truly reminds us how unapologetically altruistic that generation was. Power was not coveted for its pretentious trappings.

Even while accepting India's crucial aid during the war, Tajuddin maintained Bangladesh's sovereignty with remarkable diplomatic finesse—securing India's commitment to withdraw troops upon Bangladesh's request (an exceedingly rare occurrence of a greater military power honouring such wishes in the 20th century) and ensuring his government operated on taxes collected from liberated Bangladeshi territories rather than foreign funding. This principled independence would define his approach to all foreign relations: years later, facing World Bank President Robert McNamara's conditional lending offers for a war-torn Bangladesh, Tajuddin's unwillingness to eagerly thaw tensions to chase quick loans earned him recognition at the time as "the best finance minister in the world."

Then Finance Minister Tajuddin Ahmad speaking at a programme at Shaheen School, Dhaka in 1973.

This principled courage extended even to allies: when the larger-than-life Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman—seemingly in lockstep with Tajuddin until 1971—chose to stay at home, even in the face of the impending military crackdown and slaughter, Tajuddin resolved to forge ahead alone to carve out the path toward freedom. Years later, facing mounting cronyism and abuse of power, he would again choose principle over position, quietly resigning from the cabinet in disagreement over the direction the country was heading.

Tajuddin's star ultimately shone the brightest during the darkest, bloodiest days, where he had to reassemble and reorganise the scattered leadership while navigating a geopolitical labyrinth. Achieving victory would not confer upon him any of the glory, but defeat would certainly spell doom for him and the fledgling nation. Among his most able compatriots, Amirul Islam helped defend the integrity of Tajuddin's government from would-be detractors among the young guard, and Muyeedul Hasan helped orchestrate the Soviet-Indian pact as a signal to potential aggressor nations. His leadership was further exemplified by his rare capacity to amass and earn the respect of individuals of the highest intellectual calibre—eminent economists Rehman Sobhan and Nurul Islam, renowned scholar-professor Anisuzzaman—into the councils and advisory bodies that guided the nation's cause.

Tajuddin's stewardship helped secure Bangladesh's liberation in nine months, prevented further genocide, and helped free Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman from Pakistan's captivity. In the war's aftermath, Tajuddin envisioned a grand path forward for his people, their vigour and hopes still high, fresh off the battlefields. His national initiative was supported by respected figures like Mowlana Bhashani in an inclusive all-party National Advisory Committee to channel the liberated masses into rebuilding the nation, while the government provided for upkeep, education, and training. This vision sought to bring within reach of the common individual the very resources and stakes of nationhood, ensuring that the farmers, students, and labourers who had bled for freedom would help build what they had died to create.

Tragically, however, the hostile elements opposed to this inclusive vision—the very elements who had opposed, betrayed, and lethally attacked Tajuddin and Bangladesh's nascent government throughout the Liberation War—would manoeuvre their way back into the centres of power. This fundamental shift away from Tajuddin's founding ideals—from empowering the masses to concentrating power among the unchecked few—would begin the cycle of partisan divisions, institutional capture, and abuses of authority that have characterised the alternating governments in the decades since. Even after Tajuddin had relinquished leadership following his successful liberation of both Bangladesh and Sheikh Mujib, even after his principled resignation from the cabinet in 1974, those who viewed his very existence as an intolerable reminder of what governance could be would not be satisfied. His brutal assassination while imprisoned without charge on 3 November 1975 revealed the depths to which power-seekers would sink when confronted with the moral authority of someone who had proven that principled leadership was achievable. In nine months of wartime stewardship, he had shown a nascent nation—and the world—the heights that dedicated service could reach.

We must not allow the betrayal of his vision to eclipse the vision itself. Tajuddin's legacy is not diminished by what came after; it is made more precious, more necessary. In our current moment of national reckoning, when we are tempted to burn down the house to rid it of what may fester, we must distinguish between the architecture of liberation and the rot that later set in. To abandon Tajuddin's principles because they were later corrupted is to complete the work of those who corrupted them.

At the outset, Tajuddin had declared the fight for Bangladesh's freedom to be the province of the students, the farmers, and the labourers. The common individual had a stake in their own country and future. He implored the freedom fighters, "Let us work in such a way so that we cannot be found in the pages of history." How prescient! We must, however, rediscover our heroes for our own sake. When we choose to forget the best among us, we choose to forget the best within us. We are all Tajuddin. My grandmother understood this when, upon hearing of her husband's assassination, she recognised that however tragic her personal loss, losing Tajuddin was a far greater loss for the country.

His centennial calls us not merely to remember but to reclaim—to resurrect the moral clarity that once made liberation possible, to revive the sacred conception of service that once made governance noble. In an age of cynicism, his life stands as proof that idealism can be practical, that principle can be powerful, that service can be sacred. The question is not whether we are worthy of his legacy, but whether we are brave enough to live it.

A people without a history cannot claim an identity. And a people without an identity cannot claim a future.

Taj Iman Ahmad Ibn Munir *is the grandson of Tajuddin Ahmad and founder of Jaagoron: a transformative movement for peace and unity. He is also the host of Quest and Conquest Podcast.*

SUPPLEMENT
The Daily Star
DHAKA WEDNESDAY JULY 23, 2025
SRABAN 8, 1432 BS
S7

‘Tajuddin Ahmad seems like a Greek tragic hero who had all the great qualities but destiny was against him’

Tanvir Mokammel

In conversation with Tanvir Mokammel, Director of the documentary *“Tajuddin Ahmad: An Unsung Hero”*.

The Daily Star (TDS): What inspired you to make the documentary Tajuddin Ahmad: An Unsung Hero?

Tanvir Mokammel (TM): Tajuddin Ahmad was a rare Bangladeshi politician—incorruptible, highly educated, secular, profoundly patriotic, and an organisational wizard. I had deep respect for these personal traits of Tajuddin Ahmad, as well as for his decisive role during our Liberation War.

Events in the 1971 war happened almost with Biblical proportions—three million people killed, more than two hundred thousand women raped, and ten million people forced to migrate to India. Never in history have so many people migrated from one country to another. In every sense of the term, the 1971 war was an epic war. And it was also a people’s war. Millions of families were affected or took part in this war.

But after independence, to glorify one person or a family, the roles of others like Tajuddin Ahmad and his comrades—who had successfully led the war—were neglected. There was also the tragic way this star-crossed man was later murdered inside Dhaka jail in 1975.

To me, Tajuddin Ahmad seems like a Greek tragic hero who had all the great qualities, but destiny was against him. I always wanted to make a documentary on this remarkable man in our history. But the specific moment, I reckon, was when Tajuddin Ahmad’s daughter, Simeen Hossain Rimi, approached me to make the film on her father.

TDS: Tajuddin Ahmad remains overshadowed in our mainstream narratives. Do you think there has been a deliberate political amnesia surrounding his legacy?

Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and Tajuddin Ahmad at an informal meeting on 11 January 1972.

TM: The Liberation War of 1971 is the most glorious legacy of our nation, and also the very raison d’être for Bangladesh to be an independent state. But unfortunately, there have been quarters in Bangladesh who tried—and are still trying—to obliterate the memories of our people about the war.

Czech novelist Milan Kundera once said, “The struggle of people against power is the struggle of memory against forgetting.” I believe my job as an artist is to rekindle those memories of our people which the Paki-minded ruling cliques want to erase. My job as a filmmaker is to give voice to the voiceless.

The problem also remained within Tajuddin’s own party, the Awami League. Since its birth, one section of the Awami League was pro-Western (read: pro-American). Another chunk wanted socialism. Tajuddin belonged to the second camp. But this section was never at the helm of the party.

The international scenario was also not in his favour. To quote Hamlet, the time was “out of joint”. It was the era of the Cold War, when the USA was very aggressive against any socialist endeavour in the Third World. A time when Congo’s Patrice Lumumba or Chile’s Salvador Allende were murdered because of their left-leaning activism.

Robert McNamara, an epitome of aggressive US capitalism, was then the chief of the World Bank. McNamara was the person who had initiated the concept of NGOs in Third World countries, which, to a large extent, was instrumental in destroying the left movement in these societies.

Tajuddin’s pronounced dislike for McNamara was so strong that, on one occasion in Delhi, he even refused to speak to him! It requires some guts for the Finance Minister of a poor Third World country to disrespect the all-powerful World Bank supremo! So, no doubt, a spirited person like Tajuddin Ahmad would not be tolerated by the Western deep states.

Tajuddin’s fall—and subsequent murder inside jail—were, in that sense, very much on the cards.

TDS: What were the most challenging aspects of making this documentary—be it access to archival material, ethical dilemmas, or political sensitivities? In retrospect, is there anything you would have done differently?

TM: As a nation, we Bengalis are not very history-conscious and have very little archival sense. So, for any documentary filmmaker in this country, lack of well-preserved archival material or footage is an endemic problem. But I acquiesce to this as part of my professional hazard.

The real concern for me in making the film on Tajuddin Ahmad was addressing the special bond that existed between Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and Tajuddin Ahmad.

When Bangabandhu revived the Awami League in the early 1960s, due to Tajuddin’s exceptional intellectual ability and organisational skills, he rightly picked him as the general secretary of the party. Tajuddin, on the other hand, had immense respect for Bangabandhu as a charismatic leader of men. He once told Tofael Ahmed, “We have placed all our life’s savings in Mujib Bhai’s account.”

The relationship between the two had a special chemistry and was mutually very compatible. But their harmonious relationship began to sour after Bangladesh’s independence. Bangabandhu, once a protégé of Hussain Shaheed Suhrawardy, though he wanted socialism, also had a fascination for Western liberal democracy. Tajuddin, on the other hand, was more of a social democrat.

So there was a schism—and that schism gradually widened, to the point that Tajuddin Ahmad ultimately had to leave Bangabandhu’s cabinet. Addressing the nuanced political sensitivity of this part of our history was the most challenging aspect for me in making the documentary.

TDS: In today’s polarised political climate, what lessons from Tajuddin Ahmad’s leadership and character do you believe are most relevant for Bangladesh and the wider region?

TM: As I said earlier, incorruptibility, dedication to a cause, secularism, organisational skill, and commitment to the welfare of the people were the hallmarks of Tajuddin’s persona and political ideology. Unfortunately, these qualities are missing among today’s politicians.

And I reckon this is true for the whole world now. Politics has become more of a corporate affair. Idealism, unfortunately, has taken a back seat among today’s politicians—both in Bangladesh and across the globe.

The interview was taken by **Priyam Paul.**

A MAN HARD TO FIND

Tajuddin Ahmad (1925–1975) was the Prime Minister of Bangladesh during the Liberation War and the first Prime Minister of post-war independent Bangladesh. After the war, he returned to the newly independent country and assumed office as Prime Minister. However, on 10 January 1972, when the Father of the Nation, Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, returned to Bangladesh from a Pakistani prison and became Prime Minister, Tajuddin Ahmad was appointed as the Finance and Planning Minister in his cabinet.

Tajuddin Ahmad, Prime Minister of independent Bangladesh, meeting with members of the armed forces in Dhaka on 5 January 1972.

SHUVO KIBRIA

Tajuddin Ahmad was tragically killed in jail on 3 November 1975. His life was cut short at the age of 50. Yet, in this brief life, he had the rare opportunity to perform great service to his country — and he made full use of it.

On 20 December 1971, Time magazine published a cover story titled “Bangladesh: Out of War, a Nation Is Born” about the country’s liberation. In it, they wrote of Tajuddin Ahmad:

“Tajuddin Ahmad, 46, Prime Minister, a lawyer who has been a chief organiser in the Awami League since its founding in 1949. He is an expert in economics and is considered one of the party’s leading intellectuals.”

Tajuddin Ahmad was born on 23 July 1925, in Dardaria village of Kapasia upazila in the Gazipur district near Dhaka. His life can be viewed in four distinct phases:

Phase I: 1925–1947 – Formative Years

From his birth in 1925 to 1947, these 22 years marked his early development. During his school and college years, he became deeply engaged in politics, driven by a strong desire to serve the people. From a young age, he was clear about his future goals.

He studied in maktabs, schools run by Muslim and Hindu teachers, and Christian missionary schools offering both Bengali and English medium instruction. This diverse educational background gave him a liberal, cosmopolitan outlook, influenced by many religions and ideologies.

However, this liberalism was not unchecked. He deeply respected the social and religious values of his community. He embodied values such as integrity, justice, simplicity, discipline, honesty — both financial and moral — respect for others, a deep sense of social responsibility, and an unwavering work ethic. These principles became the hallmarks of his life, from which he never wavered.

The partition of India in 1947, and the painful events that accompanied it, left a deep impression on him. It inspired him to engage in progressive politics, and although many of his peers were drawn towards communism, he chose to work within the Muslim League to reform it from within and fight for people’s rights.

Two influential figures shaped his early political journey: Abul Hashim (1905–1974), a progressive intellectual from Kolkata, and Kamruddin Ahmad (1912–1982), a prominent advocate of liberal politics in Dhaka.

Kamruddin Ahmad, in his book Banglar Moddobitter Attobikash – Volume 2, wrote:

“Party House was formed on 1 April 1944, at No. 150 Chowk Mugholtuli in Dhaka with the inspiration of Abul Hashim Sahib.... Among the full-time workers were four people – Shamsul Haque, Shamsuddin, Tajuddin Ahmad, Mohammad Shawkat Ali.... We later took responsibility for running the Hushiar weekly news magazine. I received the most support from Tajuddin Ahmad. He was a very silent worker, always staying behind the scenes, and many people never realised his capabilities.”

Phase II: 1947–1971 – Rise in Politics

The 24 years from 1947 to 1971 were central to his socio-political life. During this time, he was actively involved in the Language Movement, documenting events meticulously in his diary.

For example, on 11 March 1948, he wrote:

“Woke up at 6 in the morning, went out for the general strike at 7 and first went to Fazlul Haque Muslim Hall. Mr Toaha and I worked together. Toaha Sahib and some others were arrested near the Ramna Post Office. I narrowly escaped arrest. Later, he was released.

After the picketing ended at noon, a meeting was held at 1 p.m. on university grounds under Naeemuddin Sahib’s chairmanship.

When the procession headed toward the Secretariat at 2 p.m., it was blocked near the High Court gate. We moved toward the north gate where the police launched a lathi charge. Toaha Sahib was severely beaten.

Sheikh Mujib, Shamsul Haque, Mahbub, Oli Ahad, Shawkat, Ansar, and 69 others were arrested. Fourteen were hospitalised. I met them at Central Jail, Kotwali and Sutrapur police stations, and the hospital. Returned to the hall by 8 p.m.”

Special note: “Today’s strike was a resounding success despite police brutality and hired thugs.”

In 1954, he became an MLA of the United Front, defeating the powerful Secretary General of the East Bengal Provincial Muslim League. In 1966, he was instrumental in launching the Six-Point Movement. As General Secretary of the Awami League, he played a vital role in the non-cooperation movement and political negotiations with the Pakistani regime.

Always humble and low-profile, he worked tirelessly for independence alongside Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman.

Phase III: 25 March – 16 December 1971: The Liberation War

These nine months marked the most intense and defining chapter of his life.

In the absence of Bangabandhu, who was imprisoned in Pakistan, Tajuddin Ahmad led the first government-in-exile of Bangladesh and oversaw the Liberation War. Under his leadership, the government achieved two historic victories:

1. Liberation of Bangladesh
2. Bringing back Bangabandhu alive and with dignity

Despite tremendous odds, betrayals, and international conspiracies, Tajuddin Ahmad’s courage and leadership helped secure victory.

Phase IV: 1972–1975 – Statesmanship and Martyrdom

After independence, when Bangabandhu became Prime Minister, Tajuddin Ahmad served as Finance Minister. He was instrumental in rebuilding the nation from the ruins of war.

On 26 October 1974, he resigned from the cabinet. Though no longer in official party leadership, he remained committed to holding the government accountable. He never compromised on principles, which alienated him from many within his own party.

In a famous speech on 20 January 1974, at the closing session of the Awami League’s biennial council, he stated:

> Everyone says, ‘thief, thief, thief.’ But who are the thieves? In the last two years, I haven’t heard a single worker say that their uncle stole relief rice.
>
> But when someone is arrested for corruption, that same worker comes to my house saying, ‘Tajuddin Bhai, my uncle was arrested — please help get him out.’
>
> I ask, ‘Didn’t you hear what I said in my speech?’
>
> He replies, ‘That was a speech for the organisation; now please save my uncle.’
>
> This is the condition of Bangladesh. Where is the social boycott? There should be one against corruption.

After the assassination of Bangabandhu and his family on 15 August 1975, Tajuddin Ahmad was arrested along with other senior leaders. On 3 November 1975, he was murdered in cold blood in Dhaka Central Jail — an event known as the Jail Killing.

At the End

Though trained in economics and law, Tajuddin Ahmad had a deep understanding of history. During the Liberation War, he would say to his comrades:

“Let us work in such a way that when historians write the history of Bangladesh, it will be hard to find our names.”

And he often added,

“Erase my name, but let Bangladesh live.”

Prime Minister Tajuddin Ahmad inaugurating a visa and customs office at the liberated border area of Burimari in northern Bangladesh during the Liberation War in 1971.

Shuvo Kibria *is a senior journalist and political analyst. He can be contacted at kibria34@gmail.com.*

A LIFE FOR BANGLADESH

SUPPLEMENT
The Daily Star
DHAKA WEDNESDAY JULY 23, 2025
SRABAN 8, 1432 BS
S8

'The Trial of the Jail Killing Case Should Be Reopened'

Sharmin Ahmad

In conversation with Sharmin Ahmad, the eldest daughter of Tajuddin Ahmad.

The Daily Star (TDS): We all know Tajuddin Ahmad as a leader, but how was he as a father?

Sharmin Ahmad (SA): My childhood memories with my father are like fragmented clouds, because I never fully had him as a father, since he was frequently sent to jail. Throughout my early years and while I was growing up, he spent long stretches behind bars. Still, whatever time I did get to spend with him profoundly impacted me in shaping my worldview and how I have dealt with things later in life. It stirred me deeply and expanded the very landscape of my thoughts and consciousness.

For instance, he was an animal lover. During the catastrophic cyclone on 12 November 1970, many people sought shelter at our home—751 Satmasjid Road in Dhanmondi. At one point, my mother asked me to look for him because she couldn't find him. When I went searching, I saw him standing alone on the balcony, holding a dead bird in his hand. Tears were flowing down his cheeks. The bird had nested in a money plant that we kept in a pot.

In a voice full of sorrow, he said, "Our home gave shelter to so many people, but it couldn't protect this little bird! If I had taken the plant pot inside, the bird wouldn't have died." He was so saddened that he did not eat anything all day. To this day, whenever I see a bird, I'm reminded of him. If I see a wounded bird, I try to help it.

Everyone can become a politician, but not everyone can become a compassionate, humane leader. A true leader should concern themselves with larger socioeconomic issues like food, clothing, shelter, security, and healthcare—but at the same time, their heart should ache for a wailing bird or its death. Only such a person can be a truly humane leader.

He would rise early, wake us up too, and take us out marching. My father was a lifelong member of the Boy Scouts. In 1942, he also took civil defence training. If there was garbage on the street, he would ask me and my little sister to clean it. Even though we weren't responsible for it, he wanted to teach us that public spaces are also part of our personal responsibility.

Another memory I vividly recall is that he made a vow not to lead a family life until the country was liberated. He informed my mother of this decision. At that time, he was the number one enemy of the Pakistani Hanadar Bahini, because he was leading the Liberation War in Bangabandhu's absence. Our family was on the death list. We moved from one house to another, seeking shelter in about a hundred villages. Wherever we went, villages were being burned, murders were common. Eventually, we became refugees and entered India on 25 May.

We reached Kolkata through Agartala. When we arrived, my father met my mother for only five minutes and reminded her of his vow—not to live a family life until the country was free. He said, "Those who are fighting on the battlefield have also left their families behind, and I am their leader." It was an incredible moment.

At the time, we were living in a small two-room flat. In August, a freedom fighter came to my mother and informed her that my father was unwell. But he had forbidden my mother from contacting him; he said he would reach out himself if needed.

Still, my mother took me and my little sister, along with Badrunnesa Ahmed, to visit him without informing him—at 8 Theatre Road, which was the heart of the Liberation War's strategic command. This was the place where war policies were formulated, weapons arranged, and refugee supplies planned. It was, essentially, the Prime Minister's Office of the provisional government, housed in a BSF building provided by India. We could have preserved that site, but unfortunately, we did not.

However, when we entered my father's room, he was not there. A large map of Bangladesh hung on the wall, marked with pins at every location where a battle was taking place. Though he was the Prime Minister of the government in exile, he also served as the Defence Minister. His desk was cluttered with files, documents, and books. There was a small room beside the office where he used to sleep on a simple cot.

As we stood there, we heard a sound coming from the washroom. When my mother slowly opened the door, we saw him sitting on the floor, washing his shirt. He had only one full-sleeve khaki shirt, which he wore throughout the war, and he was washing it himself because he had a meeting with Senator Kennedy the next day.

When he came out, we saw that his white undershirt was stained red with blood. A boil on his chest had ruptured, and he had a fever. We were too young then to grasp the gravity of the moment. But later in life, when I reflected on it, I realised that this is what true leadership looks like.

It is rare in Bangladesh to find a Prime Minister—especially one leading a war—washing his only shirt by hand. It is a precious memory to me. One more thing I want to say proudly is that my father loved the freedom fighters more than he loved his own children.

TDS: How did Tajuddin Ahmad's political journey shape his rise to leadership?

SA: I would say his career evolved bit by bit. He built himself from the ground up, like a seed growing gradually into a gigantic tree. At every stage of his career, he fulfilled his responsibilities with the utmost sincerity. He was never overwhelmed by power, because his foundation was strong.

In Bangladesh, we have only one ancestral home—751 Sat Masjid Road. My father bought the land in 1958 for BDT 2,500. The house was built with a BDT 344 loan from the House Building Finance Corporation. Even though he was the Prime Minister and Finance Minister, he never built another house.

After his death, my mother repaid the loan in 1981. She supported our family throughout her life from the rent of that house, because my father spent much of his life in jail. Today's politicians should draw inspiration from him.

When I was younger, I had a dream of studying abroad. But my father did not allow it. He said, "You'll study like every other ordinary child. Once you become an adult, you can go abroad through your own efforts." Now I live in Maryland, near Washington D.C. I see ministers, secretaries, and even general government staff buying million-dollar homes. Where is this money coming from? They are laundering the hard-earned money of the people of Bangladesh.

My father entered politics at the age of 12. His political awakening and development were deeply influenced by three revolutionaries who were imprisoned during British rule and held in Sreepur Thana. At the time, he was studying at the Minor English School. The students would whisper about these detained revolutionaries and try to catch glimpses of them. The revolutionaries gave patriotic books to the children, and Tajuddin Ahmad was among those who received them.

When he used to go to return the books, they would ask, "Did you read it all?" He would reply, "Yes." They would quiz him, and he could answer everything. Impressed, they recommended that he be admitted to a better school. That is how he was enrolled in St Nicholas Institution, then Dhaka Muslim Boys' High School, and finally St Gregory's. In matriculation, in undivided Bengal, he was ranked 12th in the first division. At the intermediate level, he ranked 4th.

I mention this because, alongside his political work, he always had a deep thirst for knowledge and a dedication to learning. In his diaries, he would note every day the time he woke up, the weather, and how many hours he studied. At night, he would read literature or non-fiction. His deep sense of patriotism ultimately led him to join the Awami League; he had previously been a devoted member of the Muslim League.

In 1953, he became the general secretary of the Awami League at the district level, then rose to organising secretary, and in 1966, he became the general secretary of the East Pakistan Awami League. That is how his career developed step by step.

At the same time, if you look at his work, he was deeply thoughtful, analytical, and objective. As one of the main visionaries behind the Six-Point Movement, his insight was well-known. Rehman Sobhan, who was involved in drafting the Six Points, said that the questions Tajuddin asked about the Six-Point demands showed his thorough understanding. He would argue both for and against the points before presenting his own argument. It was remarkable.

When he met Indira Gandhi on 3 April, he told her, "We don't want the internationalisation of this war." He believed that if this happened in 1971, it would undermine the spirit of our Liberation War. He said, "This is our war. You are our ally, but the fight for freedom is ours."

In his 10 April speech, he stated clearly, "Any support we receive from our allies for the war must come without preconditions. My country is not fighting for freedom to become subordinate to any other country."

During World War II, France was occupied by Germany, and when Allied forces like the U.S. and U.K. entered France, they did not sign treaties or ask for permission. Yet, in our war, before the surrender of Pakistan on 16 December 1971, when the Indian Army was preparing to enter with the freedom fighters, Tajuddin Ahmad took the initiative to establish the framework. In November, he clarified that they would enter as an allied force under joint command.

Field Marshal Manekshaw had proposed that they would enter in a single command under the Indian Army, but Tajuddin firmly refused. He said that if that happened, the surrender would be to the Indians. Instead, it must be recorded that the Pakistan Army was surrendering to the allied force of Bangladesh Muktibahini and the Indian Army. That's why A.K. Khandker later said in an interview that if Tajuddin Ahmad had not done that, the victory would have belonged solely to India. But he ensured the protection of Bangladesh's sovereignty even in that moment.

Another true statesmanlike decision he made was formal recognition of Bangladesh. He said: Indian forces must enter only after formal recognition, and whenever our government requests the withdrawal of your forces, you must leave immediately. On that basis, when Bangabandhu later asked for the withdrawal of Indian troops, the Indian Army promptly left. As a result, Indian writers, researchers, and even Indira Gandhi's secretaries, like J.N. Dixit, have acknowledged that it was Tajuddin Ahmad and Syed Nazrul Islam who imposed that framework. In many countries, allied forces did not withdraw even after independence, but in our case, they did relatively quickly.

Tajuddin Ahmad had a powerful vision for this country. He used to tell that to Bangabandhu as well, "Winning independence is easier. You were in jail at that time, but now we have to rebuild the country, and that will be far more difficult."

The spirit of our revolution was rooted in equality, social justice, and human dignity, and we must spread that vision at every level with dedicated, trained, and principled people. If that vision had been implemented, Bangladesh would be one of the most developed countries in the world today.

In the history of Bangladesh, the highest allocation in the national budget for education and agriculture was during his time, because he believed education is the backbone of a nation. He dreamed of creating an educated society, citizens who could critically analyse news, advance in digital technologies, and emerge as intellectual leaders globally. He believed in training skilled teachers, building institutions, and fostering independent thought.

His growth was not limited to becoming a politician, because politicians often think only of today and immediate gains. But a true statesman thinks long-term: if I plant a fruit tree today, even if I don't live to eat its fruit, people will benefit from it for years. Tajuddin Ahmad was that kind of leader.

TDS: You have researched and written on the tragic assassinations of the four national leaders. While a verdict has been delivered in the case, how do you personally reflect on these killings?

SA: In my opinion, the trial was never fair. The verdicts delivered in 2004 and 2008 were a sham, because those who orchestrated the killings were far greater criminals than those who carried them out with weapons. Among the Subahdars, some of whom were never even found, death sentences were handed down.

At the time the killings took place, the first group was led by Subahdar Moslem (also known as Musleh Uddin). A second group later arrived, led by Nayek A. Ali, to ensure that everyone had been killed. At that point, they charged a bayonet into Mansur Ali's eyes because he was still alive. They continued to stab him to make sure he was dead. However, A. Ali was never held accountable for any of this.

There was also another individual who had been in Kolkata for 25 years. When he was captured and brought to Bangladesh five or six years ago, he was sentenced to death within a week. The public never learned what his final statement was. If he had indeed been living in Kolkata for that long, it is likely that Indian intelligence was aware of it. So why did they shelter him? He was hanged with little public knowledge or transparency.

Those who were politically involved in the conspiracy never faced any consequences. Khondaker Mostaq Ahmad died without ever being held accountable. The ones who were politically convenient were let go freely, while some members of the armed forces were executed. I believe the trial of the jail killing case should be reopened.

TDS: How, in your view, can Tajuddin Ahmad's philosophy and leadership continue to shape and inspire the journey of a new Bangladesh?

SA: Tajuddin Ahmad's life is incredibly relevant to our times, because we are currently facing a severe leadership crisis. No one is in harmony with another. We have no national unity. The Liberation War is our nucleus of unity, and it is from there that we must draw our inspiration. The leadership of that era is something to be proud of, but these examples are missing from our curriculum.

We are in dire need of intellectual leadership. We cannot progress by ignoring the Liberation War and that era. Tajuddin Ahmad and Bangladesh's Liberation War are inextricably linked. If we diminish him, disrespect him, we, as a nation, will keep stumbling through mistake after mistake.

Let the youth know. It is the state's responsibility to reveal the true history of the Liberation War to the people. People are not fools—if everything is revealed transparently, they can determine for themselves what is true, what is right, and what is authentic.

The interview was taken by **Priyam Paul** *and transcribed by* **Miftahul Jannat**.

Tajuddin Ahmad, Prime Minister of the Bangladesh government-in-exile, greeted with garlands upon his return to a newly independent Bangladesh in December 1971.

Tajuddin Ahmad
MAN WHO SHAPED HISTORY

The historic journey of the people of Eastern Bengal in the middle half of the last century, to be more precise from 1947 to 1971, was an amazing story with great impact on the post-colonial social and political development of the subcontinent. The destiny of Tajuddin Ahmad is intertwined with this historical process that demands a deeper study as we celebrate the birth centenary of this extraordinary political personality, who was a witness to history, a humble contributor at a critical juncture, and was destined to play the vital role of guiding Bangladesh to its emergence during the nine months of the Liberation War.

MOFIDUL HOQUE

The British left India in 1947 with the division of the subcontinent along religious lines. The line of physical demarcation drawn over the map of Punjab and Bengal resulted in unprecedented internecine killing and the uprooting of people across the border on a scale nobody could predict or imagine. But the line of partition was more devastating in the minds and psyches of a large number of Muslims and Hindus all over the subcontinent. The emergence of Pakistan on the basis of the "Two-Nation" theory solidified this division, and even within Pakistan, the ruling coterie denied the national rights of the Bengali-speaking population, overshadowing this with a majoritarian religious identity. The linguistic-ethnic identity of the Bengali people was essentially secular and inclusive, where national identity was never a negation of religious identity; rather, it embraced the multi-religious reality of the nation. This struggle culminated in the emergence of Bangladesh in 1971, not as the dismemberment of Pakistan but as a new state based on a different philosophy—a secular, liberal, democratic one. Right from his youthful days, Tajuddin Ahmad was associated with this national aspiration, furthering the commitment to serve his people. He left a track record of his journey from a social activist to a young United Front member of the Provincial Assembly in his diaries, written from 1946 to 1954. It is a rich personal and political narrative that reflects the commitment, determination, and zeal of young Tajuddin Ahmad.

He was more engaged in serving his people and therefore took a secondary role in the political movement. His politics was shaped by his concern for the welfare of the people. As a member of the Muslim League in his earlier days, he always searched for an alternative to the elitist, communal leadership of the Nawabs of Dhaka. He belonged to the radical Abul Hashem group within the Muslim League. He was a man of action with deep love for his community; at the same time, he was thoughtful, looking for the right path to freedom and emancipation. On 25 May 1950, as a student of Economics at Dhaka University, he critically noted in his diary that reforms cannot be accomplished in isolation. If one focuses only on social structure and tries to address injustice without a broader outlook, he will only complicate the process. This may turn the reformers into victims.

On 22 August 1954, he wrote about a lecture in the Economics Department delivered by Dr R. Ahmed on "Problems of Distribution of Wealth in Islam." He noted the lecture was not up to the mark. In many of the diary entries, he mentioned the weather of the day—a legacy of lessons he learned as a student of the Missionary School. His diary, interestingly, is also written in English. While chronicling the rainfall, he sometimes noted how the peasants would benefit from such downpours.

The diary shows that Tajuddin Ahmad had an eye for detail and was a very organised man, with deep concern for his people. He was always ready to serve society, with no claim for a leading role. Ultimately, in the 1960s, the leadership was bestowed on Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujib by the people, and Tajuddin Ahmad was chosen to be his deputy by being elected as General Secretary of the party. They were destined to play a complementary role that created history, especially during the turbulent days of March 1971, when Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman called for a comprehensive non-cooperation movement that paralysed Pakistan's authority over the eastern part and established the virtual supremacy of the people's representatives elected in the national election of 1970. The call was made by Sheikh Mujib, while Tajuddin Ahmad's thoughtful everyday directives from the party headquarters steered the movement forward in a complex situation.

On 7th March 1971, Sheikh Mujib made the historic speech at the Race Course Ground, virtually declaring the independence of Bangladesh while falling short of a formal proclamation. It was a delicate situation, where Bangabandhu, as the leader of the majority party in Pakistan, had the claim to legitimate authority. On the other hand, instead of handing over power to the elected representatives of the people, the military rulers decided to resolve the political crisis through military might and resorted to genocidal acts to establish their control over the population.

The struggle for Bangladesh was not a secessionist movement but a legitimate part of the broader struggle of oppressed nations for their right to self-determination. On the evening of 7th March, a press note in English was circulated by the Awami League to the international press, setting the context and legitimacy of the people's struggle for Bangladesh. This statement was clearly drafted by Tajuddin Ahmad, with the help of a few close associates of the party. The press statement noted, "We, as the representatives of the overwhelming majority of the people of Bangladesh, assert that we are the only legitimate sources of authority for Bangladesh. The events of the last seven days have shown that all branches of the government functioning throughout Bangladesh have accepted us as the sources of legitimate authority and have carried out our directives."

The legitimacy of the struggle for Bangladesh stood on a solid foundation. Therefore, when the Pakistani rulers scuttled the negotiations for a political settlement and resorted to a brutal military attack, Sheikh Mujib declared independence—having the legitimate authority to do so. Following his arrest, Tajuddin Ahmad took the helm as party secretary and elected representative of the people. He and his colleagues did not lose any time in proclaiming the People's Republic of Bangladesh and forming the government. The following nine months were the worst of our time, and the best of our time. Tajuddin Ahmad steered the nation to a glorious victory during those turbulent days of war.

Dr Kamal Hussain, a Professor of Political Science, wrote a book on Tajuddin Ahmed, where he pointed out that Tajuddin to Sheikh Mujib was what Chou En-lai was to Mao Tse-tung, or Che Guevara to Fidel Castro. They had their differences, but they always worked together, and history judges them not in comparison but in compliance. More than the other duos, Mujib and Tajuddin worked in tandem throughout their lives, and both embraced death almost simultaneously—in August and November of 1975—at the hands of the same group of conspirators.

The birth centenary year calls for a study of Tajuddin from a broader perspective, where his greatness and unique contributions can be highlighted in historical context, not blurred by contemporary political views or parochial interests.

Mofidul Hoque *is an essayist and cultural activist.*

AN ATYPICAL LEADER

AHRAR AHMAD

In the fraught political environment of Bangladesh, where the image of politicians and the idea of politics have remained systematically devalued and perverted, Tajuddin Ahmad (TA) dared to be different and charted his journey according to his own intellectual and moral imperatives. This brief essay is a cursory exploration of that contrast, emphasising the ways in which his uniqueness remained in sharp opposition to a political culture marked by rhetorical excess, sentimental superfluities, and the feckless pursuit of self-interest.

First, political leaders usually spend much time and energy relentlessly highlighting their supposed importance with reference to speeches they have made, their nearness to "big" leaders and centres of power, and their participation in intrigues and "king-making" manoeuvrings. They focus on the performative aspects of their public life by emphasising the exercise of charismatic authority rather than ideological consistency or ethical priorities.

Second, political parties abet this process. They do not practise internal democracy or external transparency and are not based on some essential agreement on ideals, values, policies, or a shared sense of history. They represent little more than a clustering of sycophantic enablers around one or two central figures. For most parties, politics is a question of ensuring the supremacy of the leader and transactional bargaining with others. Therefore, they remain in constant flux regarding where they stand and whom they support. They come together in alliances and alignments that are temporary, self-serving, and cynical. Larger parties function as protective covers used by the followers to extract personal gain through corruption, bullying, violence, and maximising the opportunities provided by crony capitalism.

Third, political writing is largely shaped by focusing almost exclusively on individuals. The media become complicit in sustaining this simplistic and personality-centred milieu because concentration on individuals and reporting on speeches is much easier than analysis, judgment, explanation, exposition, or investigation.

Fourth, the notion of "politics" itself is consistently degraded. The idea of politics as a call to public service to achieve some ideals of peace, justice, and progress is reduced to the crass pursuit of power, position, and privilege. Moreover, it lowers our intellectual standards, most noticeably in history and the social sciences, because researchers are intimidated by "political correctness" and the absolute control of narratives by those in power, and because they have so little source material to draw from (except self-serving biographies and memorials). This lack of credible content makes the task of locating empirical evidence, interrogating texts, establishing logical connections, and utilising theoretical frameworks very challenging. Consequently, the writing of history is frequently reduced to sophisticated (and often biased) storytelling. The yawning emptiness in scholarly writings on our valiant struggles, including our War of Liberation, testifies to these limitations.

It is in this clumsy and intellectually vacuous landscape, contrived by our leaders and perpetuated by a compliant system, that Tajuddin Ahmad stands out so starkly—determined, defiant, distinct. His claim to uniqueness becomes obvious in various ways.

First, he was a brilliant student. This was noted early and rewarded with many stipends and scholarships. Even though he came from a conservative Muslim family, he was encouraged to attend the best schools, even though they were organised by missionaries (first St Nicholas in Kaliganj and later St Gregory's in Dhaka). He "stood" 12th in his Matriculation exams in 1944 in undivided Bengal and 4th in his Intermediate in 1948.

He decisively disproved the standard middle-class axiom that "good" students do not "do" politics but go into the professions. Thus, as a high school student, he joined the progressive Bongiyo Muslim League in 1943 and served as a councillor in its Delhi conventions in 1945 and 1947. His university education was interrupted by his political activism after the turbulent creation of Pakistan in 1947, but, though delayed, he received his B.A. Honours in Economics, and later his law degree from Dhaka University, while he remained incarcerated in 1964.

Second, unlike many of his political peers and contemporaries who adjusted their sails according to prevailing winds, he remained steadfast in his convictions and commitments. For example, despite his religious upbringing and his own strong faith in Islam (he was a Quran-e-Hafez), he stayed an avowed and unwavering secularist all his life.

Similarly, he never betrayed his liberal-humanist and enlightenment orientations. These evolved over the years and were buffeted by circumstances, but he remained faithful to their inherent values and

instincts. He was at the forefront of the Gono Azadi League, a decidedly left-wing splinter within the Muslim League in the late 1940s (the other members of this group were Oli Ahad and Mohammad Toaha, both known for their pronounced leftist orientations), and was one of the key founders of the Awami League in 1949 as a bulwark against the Muslim League's factional in-fighting, authoritarian tendencies, and cultural callousness. In 1951, he was elected to the University Language Action Committee and played a critical role in the mass uprising.

During a mourning rally in memory of the Language Martyrs, Tajuddin Ahmad is seen with Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, Maulana Abdul Hamid Khan Bhashani, and Mohiuddin Ahmed (21 February 1964).

It should also be pointed out that the early trends towards democratic socialism in independent Bangladesh, reflected in the first Planning Commission which he chaired as Minister of Finance and Planning, came largely through his vision, energy, and advocacy. Most of the luminaries in the Committee (Profs Nurul Islam, Rehman Sobhan, Anisur Rahman, Muzaffar Ahmed, etc.) acknowledged his leadership, his intellectual acumen, and his principled engagement in steering that populist aspiration towards fulfilment. It failed; it was overcome by reactionary forces and adverse international circumstances; he was forced to resign, but he did not abandon his beliefs or his party, nor forsake his long and trusted relationship with Bangabandhu.

Third, while it is unusual in a politician—and almost an anathema in Bangladesh—he was self-effacing and humble. This was reflected in his oratorical practices and habits. Instead of delivering firebrand speeches full of admonishments, ultimatums, and demands, he always remained organised, prepared, thoughtful, and almost professorial in his public pronouncements. Substantive relevance was much more important to him than rabble-rousing demagoguery. Moreover, he was a practical leader, more focused on what needed to be done, and how to achieve results, than delivering facile platitudes or participating in ego-driven spectacles.

That same low-key approach was demonstrated when he bravely crossed over to India after Operation Searchlight was unleashed on Bengalis and immediately understood the importance of harnessing India's help in achieving Bangladesh's independence. He, along with his friend Barrister Amirul Islam, met with Indira Gandhi in Delhi on 4 April and was able to persuade her to open the border for refugees and provide necessary logistical support for the liberation struggle. Even a hardened politician like Mrs Gandhi—herself a product of Santiniketan and Oxford—and seasoned public servants like P.N. Haksar found him credible, his argument compelling, and his immediate and long-term plans worthy of respect and support.

In undertaking the momentous task of putting together the Bangladesh government-in-exile and physically picking up Awami League leaders from various places to organise a Cabinet, he retained his down-to-earth demeanour. He played a consequential role in the war as the first Prime Minister of the country and realised the significance not only of the military struggle but also of organising a civil administration that could provide some institutional structure and moral authority to that strategic objective. It is noteworthy that during the entire 9-month struggle, he never lived with his family and, in solidarity with his suffering countrymen, resided in one small and relatively bare room next to his office in the government-in-exile premises in Kolkata.

In none of this—and even after his return to independent Bangladesh—did the people see any chest-thumping braggadocio or self-promotion. When Bangabandhu returned on 10 January from Pakistan, TA immediately went into the less glamorous task of tending to the economy and nudging it towards a populist direction.

Finally, very few leaders demonstrated an awareness of history as keenly as he did. This was amply exhibited in the meticulous and objective notes and diaries that he left behind. In fact, Badruddin Umar's magisterial History of the Language Movement depended largely on TA's private chronicles of the period. Similarly, the highly regarded and authoritative version of the events in 1971 contained in Muyeedul Hasan's Muldhara 71 also relied on his notes and used them extensively. In fact, in the Appendix, which contains many relevant documents of the war, he included many pages of his minutes, memoranda, official orders, and transcripts of meetings written in TA's orderly and precise style, both in English and Bangla. TA's diaries offer a virtual goldmine of information as well as impartial insights and astute observations.

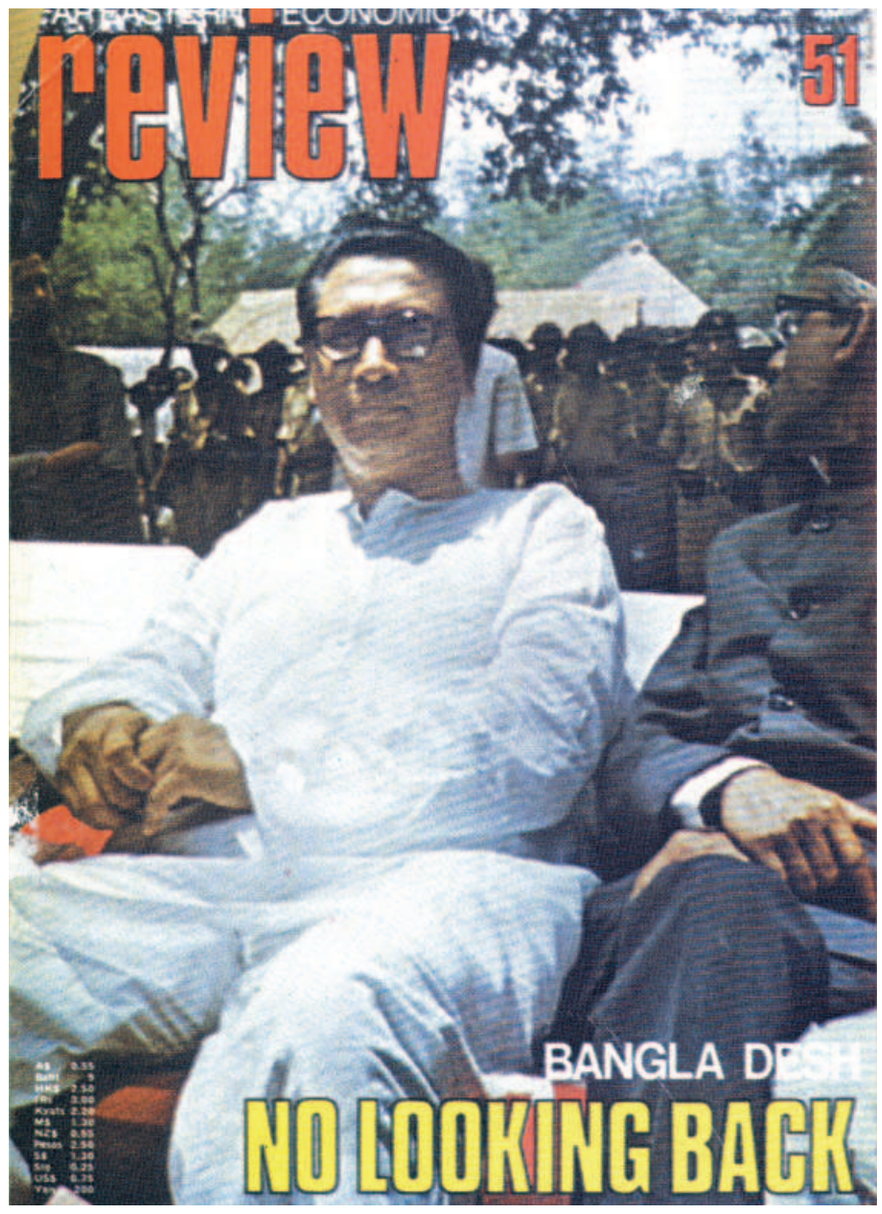
TA was shot to death in a jail cell, together with several fellow Awami League stalwarts, on 3 November 1975. It was a brutal and shameful moment in our history. They may have killed him, but he remains etched in our memories for his lively intellect, his personal probity, his moral clarity, his political integrity and constancy, his populist commitments, his organisational and bureaucratic skills, his contribution to the construction of history, his understated personality, his devotion to his family, and his authentic patriotism. He survives as an example and inspiration and, most importantly, as a defiant challenge to the popular stereotypes and judgements about politics and politicians in the country.

Dr Ahrar Ahmad *is Professor Emeritus at Black Hills State University in the US.*

A LIFE FOR BANGLADESH

SUPPLEMENT
The Daily Star
DHAKA WEDNESDAY JULY 23, 2025
SRABAN 8, 1432 BS
S10

Tajuddin's UNFINISHED REVOLUTION



MORSHED SHAFIUL HASAN

As a person, Tajuddin Ahmad was an idealist. In his personal life and professional conduct, he was disciplined and guided by a deep sense of restraint and propriety. These qualities are evident in his diaries, as well as in his speeches and statements. He was a man of ideals, but he had to work during a time when idealism itself was disappearing from the world.

As Prime Minister first, and later as Finance Minister, he declared that he did not want to build the country with loans from imperialist powers, nor did he believe that socialism could be established with the help of capitalist money or assistance. When he spoke of establishing socialism in the country, he did so from deep conviction. Unlike many of his colleagues, for him, socialism was not just a political slogan. He spoke sincerely about establishing true socialism—genuine and unadulterated. He did not believe in attaching additional terms or qualifiers to it. He even stated this explicitly on a few occasions.

These positions increasingly isolated him within both the party and the government. Even while holding ministerial office, he openly expressed his dissatisfaction with the prevailing conditions in the country and criticised certain actions of party members. Needless to say, neither the party nor its leadership appreciated such views and attitudes.

The conflict or tension had existed since the Liberation War. At that time, due to Indian support, it was difficult to act against him. But after independence, his rivals became actively determined to use their resentment against him. Taking advantage of the doubts or mistrust the top leader (Sheikh Mujib) had towards Tajuddin, they continuously poisoned his ears.

In fact, in the conventional sense of what we understand by the term "leader," Tajuddin Ahmad perhaps never possessed those typical leadership traits. He could not deliver rousing or crowd-stirring speeches. Outside of organisational necessities, he didn't seem to maintain much personal contact with party activists across the country beyond his own constituency. Rather, as General Secretary, he diligently carried out his secretarial responsibilities under the shadow of party chief Sheikh Mujib's leadership. His deep sense of duty and administrative efficiency was most evident during the non-cooperation movement of 1971.

He never desired to become a leader himself; he always accepted 'Mujib Bhai' as the leader and worked under his leadership for the liberation of the country and its people. His assuming the role of Prime Minister during the Liberation War was more a matter of circumstantial compulsion than personal ambition. One could say he took on that responsibility in response to the call of the time.

Even after independence, despite disagreements on various issues, he never displayed any lack of loyalty—at least publicly—towards the supreme leader. Not even after being removed from the cabinet or excluded from the newly formed BAKSAL.

As Finance Minister, he sought to restructure the country's economy along socialist lines—and there is no doubt about his sincerity in that regard. However, in the beginning, he was driven purely by ideological conviction, without adequately considering the state of the country, the party, or the broader international context. It was only through his work that he began to grasp the harsh realities on the ground. At that point, changes could be observed in both the content and tone of his statements. But by then, he had become completely isolated—both within the government and the party.

Tajuddin had said that socialism could not be established with aid or support from American imperialism or the capitalist world. Perhaps he was speaking the absolute truth. But socialism aside, it became evident that even the necessary financial assistance for rebuilding a war-ravaged nation could not be provided by the Soviet Union or the socialist bloc. To meet even the basic food requirements of the people, we were forced to extend our hands to America.

Even within the country, political parties that claimed to believe in socialism and oppose imperialism did not stand firmly by Tajuddin at this juncture. None of them expressed open support for him. Among the leftists, those identified as pro-Chinese had understandable reasons for not supporting Tajuddin. He had led the Liberation War from the shelter of India, with their support and assistance. Moreover, while in India, he had signed a so-called "secret 25-year treaty" with the Indian government—which, according to them, was essentially a treaty of subordination or servitude.

However, the pro-Chinese leader Mohammad Toaha claimed in his memoirs and elsewhere (as far as I recall, in an interview with Dhaka Digest in the 1980s) that Tajuddin had always been a member of the Communist Party, and that he worked within the Awami League as a Communist Party member. What Toaha did not clarify, though, was to which faction Tajuddin remained loyal after the Communist Party in this country split into Soviet-leaning and China-leaning factions in the mid-1960s, following rifts in the international communist movement. When Toaha says "our party," did he mean the pro-Chinese Communist Party?

On the other hand, among the Moscow- or Soviet-aligned leftists—especially shaped by their experiences during the Liberation War—there emerged a certain reliance on and admiration for Tajuddin. After independence, his public commitment to establishing socialism—more precisely, genuine socialism—further deepened this admiration. (It is worth recalling that on one or two occasions, he even mentioned in his speeches the goal of establishing Marxist socialism.) There was also an effort from the leadership to convince party workers that Tajuddin represented the "progressive wing" within the Awami League—that he was "one of us." However, this lasted only as long as Mujib's displeasure with Tajuddin had not come to the fore. After Tajuddin's removal from the cabinet, they adopted a more cautious stance.

Let me conclude this article with a small personal anecdote.

The day Tajuddin Ahmad resigned—or rather, was removed—from the cabinet is still vivid in my memory. I was a student at the University of Dhaka at the time. During a university holiday, or perhaps some other occasion, I had travelled to Chattogram. I heard the news in the evening while standing at a second-hand bookstall on the sidewalk of Reazuddin Bazar, listening to the radio. Naturally, I was deeply unsettled. Although I had somewhat distanced myself from active politics by then, and had my own share of dissatisfaction and disagreements, I still aligned ideologically with the pro-Moscow political stream. During holidays in Chattogram, I would often drop by the offices of the Student Union, NAP, or Udichi to catch up with old comrades. The NAP and Student Union offices were located side by side in Darul Fazal Market. That evening, upon hearing the news, I immediately rushed to the Student Union–NAP office. When I entered the NAP office, I saw Chowdhury Harunur Rashid there. Before independence, he had been involved in underground politics, so I had never had the chance to meet or speak with him before.

I first saw him during the Liberation War at the Craft Hostel in Agartala. After independence, he began his political career in Dhaka. He held a top position in the TUC on behalf of the Communist Party and was a central leader of NAP (Mozaffar faction). So, when I went to the NAP office and shared the news of Tajuddin Ahmad's removal, I noticed a palpable sensation among those present (though I don't know if they had already heard the news). At that moment, Chowdhury Harunur Rashid calmly said a few words, which I still remember—his reaction to Tajuddin's departure from the cabinet seemed largely positive. Though I cannot recall his exact words after all these years, the gist of what he said was something like: "It's for the best. The government is now out of danger. With all his ultra-revolutionary talk, he was actually harming the progressive path. He was essentially a man of JASAD..."

Thirty-five years ago, I dedicated my book *Pakistanbader Biruddhe* (1990) to him, writing: "To Tajuddin Ahmad, in gratitude on behalf of an ungrateful nation."

Dr Morshed Shafiul Hasan *is a writer, researcher, and academic.*

Self and Society
Tajuddin's Formative Years

PRIYAM PAUL

No leader emerges in a vacuum. The making of a political figure is deeply influenced by the social structures around them—family, religion, education, and the broader environment all leave lasting imprints. Equally important is the role of childhood psychology, which shapes values, convictions, and the capacity for public life. In the case of Tajuddin Ahmad, Bangladesh's first Prime Minister during the Liberation War, these formative forces were especially significant. Understanding his early years offers essential insight into how a quiet, disciplined village boy grew into one of the most principled and selfless politicians of his time.

Tajuddin Ahmad was born on 23 July 1925 in the village of Dardaria under Kapasia Thana, in what is now Gazipur District but was then part of the undivided Dacca District. He was born into a traditional Bengali Muslim family, the son of Moulavi Muhammad Yasin Khan and Meherunnesa Khanam.

During his school years, Tajuddin Ahmad caught the attention of three veteran revolutionary leaders, who recommended that he be enrolled in a better institution. Following their advice, he was admitted to St Nicholas Institution in Kaliganj. His academic brilliance soon became evident, prompting the headmaster to recommend his transfer—first to Muslim Boys' High School in Dhaka, and later to St Gregory's High School. Remarkably, he also became a Hafez of the Holy Qur'an during this time.

His strong educational foundation led to early academic success: he ranked 12th in the first division in the 1944 matriculation examination and secured fourth place in the first division of the Higher Secondary Examination in 1946. He went on to complete his BA and MA at Dhaka University, all while remaining actively engaged in politics.

The establishment of Dhaka University in 1921, following the annulment of Bengal's first Partition, marked a significant turning point for Eastern Bengal. It coincided with the political awakening of Bengali Muslims and the rise of parties like the Muslim League and the Krishak Praja Party, as the Indian National Congress gradually lost support among Muslims in Bengal. In this evolving political context, Tajuddin Ahmad's early affiliation with the Muslim League seemed a natural step.

Gandhi lying in state after his assassination.

One of the most revealing sources for understanding Tajuddin Ahmad's early development is his personal diary, which features regular entries beginning in 1947—a watershed year that marked the Partition of India and the end of British colonial rule. Deeply private in nature and never meant for publication, only a small portion of these entries have survived.

Though emotionally reserved in his writing, Tajuddin Ahmad meticulously recorded significant political events and moments of historical importance. His diaries provide valuable insights into the gradual formation of his personality and worldview, revealing how, during his formative years, he engaged with local affairs, mediated social and political issues, and kept track of global developments.

In the first volume of his diary—written at the age of 21—Tajuddin Ahmad noted how little time he had for studying in the mornings, as politics increasingly consumed his daily routine. Each entry ended with a brief comment on the day's weather, a habit that revealed both his discipline and his observant, analytical nature. Other entries suggest a growing emotional sensitivity and a compassionate outlook that often extended beyond personal or party boundaries.

On 13 August, he reflected on the stark contrast between the Congress and the Muslim League, labelling the former a communal party—an expected view for a League member at the time. In his entry on 15 August 1947, he simply wrote *"Independence"*. He described a crowd of nearly one lakh, including many Hindus, who joined the celebrations in Dhaka, though he noted it was smaller than that on Direct Action Day.

Disillusionment followed quickly. Even before Partition, Tajuddin and his associates were already contemplating a political alternative. On 7 August, he wrote that he, Kamruddin Ahmad, Mohammad Toaha, and others were drafting manifestos for a prospective party, provisionally titled the East Pakistan Economic Freedom League or Gana Azadi League.

Kamruddin Ahmad later explained that this initiative had begun in June 1947, after the failure of the independent Bengal proposal and Abul Hashim's decision not to join Pakistan. In response, the group sought to unite with East Pakistan's communists to resist what they saw as a fascist Muslim League regime. This effort culminated in the formation of the Gana Azadi League, with Kamruddin as convener and Tajuddin, Toaha, Oli Ahad, and others as members of its first committee.

On 26 August 1947, he met a Muslim League leader who became furious upon learning about their efforts to form a new party without remaining within the League. In his 29 August entry, he noted responding to questions about their stance on the communist movement, and described discussions they had about the global dynamics of youth movements. Then, on 30 August, he wrote that they had decided not to use the word "Muslim" in the name of the city committee or the party itself, which had yet to be finalised, and Tajuddin himself explained all about their efforts.

Tajuddin Ahmad during his school years.

One of the most poignant entries in Tajuddin Ahmad's diary is dated 30 January 1948—the day Mahatma Gandhi was assassinated. He admitted that he had frequently criticised Gandhi, echoing the Muslim League's party line without independent reflection. But on that day, he wrote, he truly grasped the meaning of death. His father's death did not move him to grief, yet the news of Gandhi's assassination left him numb. So profound was his reaction that he was unable to write in his diary for three days—a rare interruption in his otherwise disciplined habit—underscoring the emotional depth of his response and the quiet transformation in his political awareness.

He also recalled the death of poet Rabindranath Tagore in 1941, when he had managed to buy a newspaper and kept it as a cherished memento. In contrast, he noted, the demand for news following Gandhi's assassination was so overwhelming that newspapers were hard to find—people had to share whatever copies they could get hold of.

Only on rare occasions does Tajuddin Ahmad reveal his personal feelings or emotions in his writings; instead, he consistently focuses on people and society—an orientation that, in retrospect, aligns with his eventual path as a politician.

Professor Serajul Islam Choudhury notes that Tajuddin Ahmad embodied qualities often associated with motherhood—patience, steadiness, and quiet strength. These traits were evident in his wartime leadership as Prime Minister in 1971, when he steered the country through its most turbulent period with calm determination. In later entries of his diary, Tajuddin fondly recalled tender moments with his mother, such as watching her late at night as she made cakes in the kitchen—scenes that reveal his emotional closeness to her.

By contrast, his emotional distance from his father may symbolise a deeper discomfort with patriarchal authority, perhaps mirroring his quiet resistance to the authoritarian tendencies of the state.

A closer reading of his surviving writings, along with more sustained historical inquiry, could uncover hidden layers of his formative years—years that shaped one of Bangladesh's most principled political leaders. While his politics evolved, his moral conviction, democratic commitment, and deep respect for others remained constant.

Priyam Paul *is a researcher and journalist.*

SUPPLEMENT
The Daily Star
DHAKA WEDNESDAY JULY 23, 2025
SRABAN 8, 1432 BS
S11

Tajuddin Ahmad in newly liberated Jashore on 11 December 1971, just days before victory. Standing behind him is Barrister Amirul Islam, who accompanied Tajuddin on his escape from Dhaka at the onset of the war, as they crossed into India together to form the Bangladesh government-in-exile.

ON THE PATH OF DAWN

SYEDA ZOHRA TAJUDDIN

Every moment of the night of 25 March 1971 and the following two months will always shine brightly in the depths of my memory. Even though I might not be able to express all those living memories in words, I will try to articulate a possible description of the events.

I remember my husband Tajuddin telling me on the day of the horrifying 25 March 1971, "Lili, none of you should stay home tonight, because I'm leaving, and Yahya's army has chosen a merciless path. I don't think it would be wise to take an unknown risk by staying at home tonight." He didn't say anything else. However, I couldn't leave the house on that terrible night.

It felt as if everyone could foresee the frightening consequences of the failed meeting and dialogue between Yahya and the leaders of the Awami League. But perhaps no one could truly imagine what was actually going to happen. A strange kind of eeriness hung in the air; it felt as if something ominous was about to take place. Relatives, friends, acquaintances, and even strangers crowded into our house to find out what the real news was. Many of them were leaving for safer places. By the time I had bid farewell to all of them, it was almost half past eleven at night. Yet despite a hundred doubts, I couldn't bring myself to step outside my house and go elsewhere.

I had sent my elder daughter and her younger sister—Ripi and Rimi—and an adult niece who had come to visit us a few days earlier, to my elder sister's house in Tatibazar. My only son Tanjim, who was just over a year old at the time, and my five-year-old daughter Mimi were with me. I had thought that if I had to escape in a hurry, it would be difficult to manage with all of them; I might be able to slip away swiftly with just my youngest children.

On that dreadful night, Tajuddin left the house in a car with Barrister Amirul Islam; Dr Kamal Hossain also accompanied them. On the way, Dr Hossain got down at a relative's house in Dhanmondi. I later learnt that he was arrested by the Pakistani army a few days later. I was standing by a bush near the gate of our house, watching their car speed towards Road 15 in Dhanmondi, and then take a turn towards Lalmatia. Right at that moment, I heard the sound of bullets and mortar fire in the distance, and I immediately noticed several armed vehicles of the Pakistani army speeding along the road opposite our house, rushing towards Lalmatia. An unfamiliar fear gripped me at that time, but the very next moment I realised that Tajuddin had set out on a dark, dangerous journey to fulfil a great responsibility—and no matter how terrifying or gloomy the path, there was an invisible force guiding him unstoppably towards his destination. The speeding vehicles of the Pakistani army had lost their way. He had succeeded in eluding the army's reach. It was as if a divine manifestation of this event was unfolding within me.

Now I turned the focus back on myself, as I took a firm resolve to gather all my strength. Our house was two-storeyed; we used to live on the ground floor. Abdul Aziz and Begum Atiya Aziz lived as tenants on the second floor. Mr Aziz was from Kaliganj in Dhaka; he was a former vice-president of the Chhatra League. Over time, we had become very close. A few minutes after Tajuddin's car had departed, I took my two children and got into our car, instructing the driver to head towards Road 21, which lay opposite to our house, as quickly as he could. I intended to get down in front of any house there. I could see electricity and telephone lines being torn down, making a tremendous noise as they fell right in front of our gate. Just then, Aziz and Atiya almost leapt in front of us and stopped me from setting off. In a subdued voice, they said, "Bhabi, get down from the car without a moment's delay; the moment the car leaves the gate, it will be seized by the military." I immediately realised that the path of escape was blocked, but we couldn't stay in the house either. I quickly changed my mind. I got out of the car and, standing under the stairway, told Atiya, "I will go upstairs with you and pretend to be a tenant as well."

Thankfully, Atiya and I both knew Urdu well. We changed our appearance by putting on salwar-kameez. Atiya would sometimes wear this attire at home. Due to our height and overall appearance, we both looked like non-Bengalis, and this gave us hope that we might evade the clutches of the enemy.

Aziz bhai was also not supposed to be home that night, but unfortunately, due to Atiya's firm opposition, he was forced to stay back—an act that led to tragic consequences. He was captured by the Pakistani army and incarcerated in the cantonment for seven months, enduring near-death suffering, though he was ultimately released in an unimaginable and miraculous manner. I went upstairs, changed my clothes, laid my sleeping son and daughter on the bed in Atiya's bedroom, and stood by the window. The sound of gunfire and mortar shells drifted in from the distance. I saw that Atiya and Aziz bhai were arranging sleeping spaces on the sofas in the large hall room. But I thought it would be wiser for Atiya and me to stay in the same room. The sound of shooting gradually came closer. Atiya and I remained together in the room.

Neither of us spoke a word. I peeked through the curtains of the southern window, and an indescribable scene met my eyes—the entire sky in the south was splattered in red. It seemed the sky itself had disappeared into the red. I heard the sound of one vehicle after another, and it felt as though our entire house was surrounded by military forces. They were now truly entering the house, firing as they moved. Having heard Sheikh Saheb's call for creating a fortress of resistance, they perhaps assumed there were arrangements for defence and counter-attack in the homes of the leaders. Thus, they positioned themselves around the house, armed with the modern weapons of that time, moving forward in a cautious manner. I peeked out again to get a quick glimpse of the main road outside our house. Nothing appeared except for the vehicles of the Pakistani army and the occupying force.

Atiya and I decided to keep the door closed and stay inside the room. If they knocked or pushed, we would open it and confront them. But by that time, intense shooting had already begun downstairs. The occupying forces were destroying the doors, windows, and the thick wire fencing around the veranda, which had already come under shell attack. They went into every room searching for Tajuddin and me.

We were ready to face death with resolute determination. My father, a nephew, and my sister-in-law's son were downstairs. Sixty-year-old Barik Miya, the caretaker and gatekeeper of our house, unable to comprehend the full scale of the situation, had hidden in the bathroom of my father's room. One group of the occupying force tied their hands and shouted loudly, demanding to know our whereabouts. Another group—around 50 men—shelled the door to the stairway, breaking it into pieces and entering the veranda on the second floor. It felt as though some of them were even running across the rooftop. When a group of around 25 to 30 men pushed against our door with a tremendous noise, Atiya asked in Urdu, "Who's there?" and opened the door. Immediately, four to five army officers entered, taking position and pointing a small sten gun at our chests. In a stern voice, they asked in Urdu, "Where is Tajuddin? Which one of you is Mrs Tajuddin? You or you?" Meanwhile, the rest of the soldiers were firing relentlessly through the windows.

Atiya promptly replied in Urdu, "Where is Mrs Tajuddin here? You must be mistaken. All of us are tenants here—Tajuddin is our landlord. They live on the ground floor."

I was worried about a picture of me hanging on a wall downstairs; there was the possibility of getting caught if we were even slightly careless. My son was in my arms, and I concealed him slightly. Before Atiya could even finish her sentence, I said in a chastising tone in Urdu, "I had told you before not to rent a place in these politicians' houses. Finally, this is what is in our fate... Inna lillahi wa inna ilayhi raji'un." Before I could end my sentence, the officer who had been asking questions quickly lowered his sten gun and, fixing his sharp gaze on us, accepted his mistake, saying, "We made a mistake. Please stay here without any worry. I don't need to ask anything else." Meanwhile, my five-year-old daughter Mimi woke up from her sleep. She clung to me in fright, but thankfully she did not speak in Bengali at that time. The officer patted my daughter's head and said to me, "Bibi, please go to sleep. You need not be scared of anything." After that, they left the room. Atiya also followed them.

A newly married couple—guests of Atiya—were sleeping in the next room. They had come to visit from Narayanganj in the evening. As it had got late after dinner, and it was risky to go out at night, they had decided to stay back and had gone to sleep. They awoke in shock at the dreadful noise of the door being pushed, and as soon as they opened the door in fright and stepped outside, an army officer ordered the gentleman in a stern voice to go with them. Immediately, Atiya said in a reprimanding tone in Urdu to the guest (who had recently joined Tolaram College as a lecturer), "Habib bhai, what kind of sleep were you in? These men were screaming so loudly, and yet it took you so long to open the door!" In response, Habib bhai's wife accepted their fault in Urdu in an apologetic tone. Immediately, an army officer said, "It's alright. You can go back to sleep." In an unthinkable twist, they both escaped.

Then they tied up Atiya's husband, both my nephews, and the elderly Barik Miya, and kept beating them while taking them to their car. Aziz bhai's nine-year-old nephew witnessed all of this while hiding from the army.

My father used to stay in a corner room downstairs. They went there and asked him various questions in a rough voice. My father was quite ill at that time; he could not even get out of bed. The main question in their interrogation was where Tajuddin and I were. A few of them suggested taking my father with them, but two of the officers were unexpectedly well-mannered. When they asked him to lie down again, it felt as if his illness had touched their hearts. Later, remembering this gesture of theirs, I felt it was nothing but a wolf in sheep's clothing. My father did not lie down expecting to be spared; he thought he would be shot the moment he did. He overcame his fear and replied to them in English, "President Yahya can best say where Tajuddin is." At that moment, my father also played his own part. While lying in bed, he recited a stanza of a timely and poignant poem by Sheikh Sadi in Farsi, and then translated its meaning into English for them. Even amidst such a tense situation with gunfire, they looked at one another's faces and left the room, saying "Assalamu Alaikum," leaving behind a bundle of rope in my father's room. When I saw it later, I guessed that the rope had been brought to tie up Tajuddin and take him with them. I have kept that rope with me, as it remains a small witness, should the history of the Liberation Movement ever be written.

After about two hours, when the invaders finally left, all of us seemed to have turned into stone. None of us moved an inch; not a word left our mouths. We looked around very carefully to ensure no one was still there. Atiya and I were alone upstairs, even though Habib bhai and his wife were in the next room with their door closed, and my father was alone downstairs. Every moment was spent in a state of terrifying anxiety. But there was nothing to be done.

At that intolerable moment, I felt a sharp sense of pride deep in my subconscious. Without even realising it, I was confronted by a heart-wrenching question—how strange is the human mind! Tajuddin did not say a word before leaving; he didn't even point towards any direction. That night, at around 10.30 pm, he returned home with Mr Samad and Mr Mohaimen. Amidst the urgency, I noticed the faces etched with worry. There were many others with them. All of them left almost immediately. I saw him strolling around the garden without saying a word to me; I felt as if he would leave right then. Just about then, Barrister Amirul Islam and Dr Kamal Hossain arrived at our house. They left shortly afterwards. On his way out, Tajuddin almost ran to me and asked for a small towel. At the final moment, nothing was said. He simply left me in the midst of danger. How was this possible? I found the answer to that question later. The rights of over seventy million people were shining luminously in the glow of his decision at that moment; his wife and four children were lost amidst this.

This was the first article in the series titled Udoyer Pothe, written by Syeda Zohra Tajuddin. It was published in Dainik Bangla on 12 December 1972.

Syeda Zohra Tajuddin *was a prominent leader of the Awami League and served as its president from 1980 to 1981. She was married to Tajuddin Ahmad, Prime Minister of the exiled government.*

The article is translated by **Upashana Salam.**

Tajuddin Ahmad with his family.

I remember my husband Tajuddin telling me on the day of the horrifying 25 March 1971, "Lili, none of you should stay home tonight, because I'm leaving, and Yahya's army has chosen a merciless path. I don't think it would be wise to take an unknown risk by staying at home tonight." He didn't say anything else. However, I couldn't leave the house on that terrible night.

SUPPLEMENT
The Daily Star
DHAKA WEDNESDAY JULY 23, 2025
SRABAN 8, 1432 BS
S12

‘Tajuddin’s place in history should be seen in terms of his wartime leadership’

Mohiuddin Ahmad

In this interview with The Daily Star, acclaimed writer and researcher Mohiuddin Ahmad—author of *Tajuddin Naame Ekjon Prodhanmontri Chhilen*—offers a compelling reflection on the leadership, struggles, and legacy of Tajuddin Ahmad.

Tajuddin Ahmad in a meeting with Indian Prime Minister Indira Gandhi.

Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, Tajuddin Ahmad, and other senior Awami League leaders in March 1971.

The Daily Star (TDS): How do you view Tajuddin Ahmad’s early political journey and his emergence as a key national figure?

Mohiuddin Ahmad (MA): Tajuddin Ahmad’s emergence as a key leader of the Awami League was marked by his appointment as General Secretary in 1966. He was later arrested, and while the 1969 mass movement unfolded, he remained in jail; at that time, Amena Begum served as acting General Secretary. After his release, Tajuddin returned to active politics, and from 1970 onwards, his role within the party grew steadily more prominent. However, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman remained the party’s central figure. His popularity and charismatic presence were so overwhelming that no other Awami League leader was nearly as visible. As is often the case in our political parties, there was essentially only one dominant leader.

In the early years, Maulana Abdul Hamid Khan Bhashani served as party president, but once Sheikh Mujib became General Secretary, he effectively took control of the organisation. It was within this framework that Tajuddin began to rise, though he continued to be overshadowed by Sheikh Mujib.

A sense of humanity and principled commitment was evident in Tajuddin from the very beginning. From the outset, he held strong secular beliefs. Among the young Muslim League activists who later rallied under the Awami League banner, many were followers of Abul Hashim, and Tajuddin was part of that progressive stream.

It is also widely acknowledged that communist ideas had a notable influence on Tajuddin. As he became more active in the Awami League, he distinguished himself from many senior leaders who increasingly aligned themselves with Sheikh Mujib. Yet, since Sheikh Mujib was the undisputed central leader of the party, there was no real tradition of collective leadership. Loyalty to him was essential for survival within the organisation. While Tajuddin was unquestionably loyal, he also maintained an independent outlook—a rare quality in the political culture of the time.

TDS: What challenges did he encounter during the 1971 Liberation War, both from internal party conflicts and external pressures that intensified the crisis?

MA: On 1 March 1971, when the National Assembly session scheduled to be held in Dhaka was suddenly postponed, it was actually Tajuddin who first played a significant role. The idea that there should be a separate constituent assembly and a separate constitution for East Pakistan initially came from him. Sheikh Mujib later adopted this idea, and accordingly, the Awami League prepared a draft constitution. However, Yahya Khan did not accept it.

After that, the West Pakistani crackdown began. Sheikh Mujib never instructed anyone to go to India and form a government. Had he done so, there would have been some form of evidence—but there is none. What he did do was give a few people an address in Kolkata—Chittaranjan Sutar, an operative of the Indian intelligence agency R&AW—and told them to keep the address with them. After 25 March 1971, many people went to that address. But Tajuddin did not go there. Instead, he went directly—along with Barrister Amirul Islam—and they were taken to the Director General of the BSF, who was then Rustomji.

On 3 April, they had their first meeting with Indira Gandhi. It was on Indira Gandhi’s advice that Tajuddin formed a government-in-exile. Since he was seeking India’s cooperation, a formal government was necessary. Pakistan was a full member state of the United Nations. Bangladesh, still officially a part of Pakistan, could not receive formal support from India unless there was a legitimate government to recognise. Without that, it would not fall within accepted international diplomatic norms.

There was a notable point here: since India did not immediately recognise the Bangladesh government-in-exile, Tajuddin Ahmad himself did not publicly comment on the matter—but he did send multiple letters regarding it.

We have come across information from Dr Kamal Siddiqui, who served as the Private Secretary to Khandaker Mushtaq Ahmad, the Foreign Minister of the Mujibnagar Government. Before taking on that role, Siddiqui had been the SDO (Sub-Divisional Officer) of Narail.

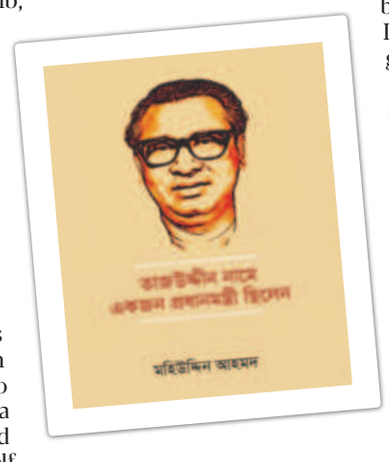
On one occasion, Kamal Siddiqui asked Tajuddin why India had not yet recognised Bangladesh. In response, Tajuddin explained that Indira Gandhi was under considerable pressure. Recognition at that point was risky, as Sheikh Mujib was still in Pakistan. If Sheikh Mujib were to reach some sort of compromise or settlement with Pakistan, India could find itself in a diplomatically awkward position after having already extended recognition.

I have included this account in my book *1971: Kolkata Kondol*. We know that in Nigeria, a province called Biafra once declared independence in 1967, and a few countries—especially France—granted it recognition. However, Biafra ultimately failed to achieve independence and remained a part of Nigeria. France later faced serious difficulties because of its support. When a permanent member of the United Nations appears to encourage the disintegration of a member state by recognising a breakaway region, it becomes a serious diplomatic issue.

One of the many reasons behind India’s delay in recognising Bangladesh was precisely this: Indira Gandhi did not want to take that risk, especially since no one knew what was on Sheikh Mujib’s mind at that time. Later, when Sheikh Mujib was taken to prison in Pakistan and put on trial, we still do not fully know what he actually said during those proceedings. But one thing is clear to us: forming a government and leading the Liberation War from exile was not an option Sheikh Mujib ever considered. There is no evidence to suggest that he contemplated this path.

In addition, it is clear that even within the Awami League, Tajuddin’s position was not without contest from some senior leaders. Moreover, many of the military commanders did not like him, and he did not have much control over them either. It was not until the end of July that a meeting was finally held with the sector commanders of the Liberation War. In that meeting, the country was divided into eleven sectors. This reorganisation took place only at the end of July—it had not been possible before that.

According to protocol and the warrant of precedence within the Awami League, Tajuddin Ahmad held a relatively low position. First came Sheikh Mujib, followed by the three vice-presidents—Nazrul Islam, Mansur Ali, and Abu Hena. Then came the Secretary of the All Pakistan Awami League, and only after that was Tajuddin’s position considered. So when he formed a government and appointed himself as Prime Minister, many did not take it well—because he had not consulted anyone in making that decision. Since it was a unilateral decision, it was not well received by others.



Leaders of the BLF (Bangladesh Liberation Force) have claimed that Sheikh Mujib had instructed them—and that the Awami League high command also knew—that in his absence, a Revolutionary Council would be formed, which would take the necessary decisions. But Sheikh Mujib had never said that a formal government should be formed in his absence. Tajuddin took a great risk. He acted out of historical necessity—without such an initiative, it would not have been possible to liberate Bangladesh.

The Liberation War had, in fact, already begun on the night of 25 March. The armed resistance started that very night around 10:30 or 11:00 p.m.—with BDR, EPR, and the Rajarbagh police lines actively resisting. So the resistance was already underway; rebellions and resistance were occurring in various places. To lead this movement, a formal government was needed—and Tajuddin understood this before anyone else. Others did not yet grasp this urgency.

Now, one may ask why he did not consult everyone and arrive at a collective decision. But the truth is, in Sheikh Mujib’s absence, the Awami League leadership lacked the capacity for decisive collective action. Therefore, Tajuddin made this decision on his own. And I would say that, in one sense, this reflects his firmness and political courage.

TDS: How do you assess the performance of the government-in-exile under the leadership of Tajuddin Ahmad?

MA: I would argue that Tajuddin Ahmad did not really have the freedom to run his administration independently. He was entirely dependent on India—particularly on Indian intelligence agencies. In Kolkata, a Joint Secretary and a Deputy Secretary from India’s Ministry of External Affairs were primarily responsible for maintaining liaison with and guiding the Bangladesh government on behalf of the Indian central government.

Tajuddin could not go beyond the boundaries of India’s grand design. Many had hoped that Tajuddin would emerge as the global diplomatic face of the resistance—building international public opinion and securing diplomatic support. Historically, we have seen leaders of resistance movements travel the world during such times, like Norodom Sihanouk of Cambodia, Yasser Arafat of Palestine, and others, who campaigned for their causes internationally. But Tajuddin Ahmad had no such opportunity.

In fact, not just Tajuddin—no minister of the Bangladesh government-in-exile was allowed to set foot outside India, not even for a single day. They were confined to Kolkata and Delhi. At one point, they held a three-day meeting in Siliguri—but even that was arranged by the Indian military.

In short, it can be said that the government operated under a range of limitations and was heavily dependent on India throughout that critical period.

TDS: What happened to him after the Liberation War, and how will history ultimately judge his position?

MA: After the Liberation War, Tajuddin Ahmad essentially began a new chapter in his life. At that time, Bangladesh was going through a deep crisis—rising prices, food shortages, and overall economic instability. As Finance Minister, he was tasked with managing an economy in shambles, and that required bold, visionary national leadership. In this regard, Sheikh Mujib’s government lacked the necessary capacity. The situation kept deteriorating, and as Finance Minister, Tajuddin Ahmad increasingly had to shoulder the blame.

Though he did criticise certain issues in various forums, there was a certain timid mood about him—I would say he failed to demonstrate the courage that was required. He never openly spoke out about the widespread administrative mismanagement, lack of cooperation from various ministries, and other systemic issues. He kept presenting national budgets—one after another—in 1972, 1973, and 1974. He could not present one in 1975.

Throughout, he never took the bold step of resigning. Eventually, he was sent a written resignation letter to sign—and only then did he sign it. So, in essence, it can be said that he was made to resign. The humiliation of being dismissed in this way was something he had to endure.

But he alone was not to blame for this outcome. At a certain point, when it was clear that he either could not perform his duties or was not being allowed to, he should have taken the moral and political decision to resign.

But the overall assessment is this—Tajuddin Ahmad, the man—his place in history should be seen in terms of the leadership he provided during Bangladesh’s Liberation War. Even though the Proclamation of Independence—which functioned as a provisional constitution at one point—envisioned a presidential form of government, with Sheikh Mujibur Rahman as the head of state and, in his absence, Syed Nazrul Islam assuming that role, it was ultimately Tajuddin Ahmad’s leadership, personality, and administrative approach that defined the functioning of the Mujibnagar Government.

He became widely recognised as the de facto head of the government-in-exile. So, in that sense, when we speak of Bangladesh’s Liberation War, his place in history must be determined by the fact that he was the central figure of the government that led the war effort. His legacy rests on being the principal leader of the wartime administration that carried the struggle for independence forward.

The interview was taken by **Priyam Paul** *of The Daily Star.*