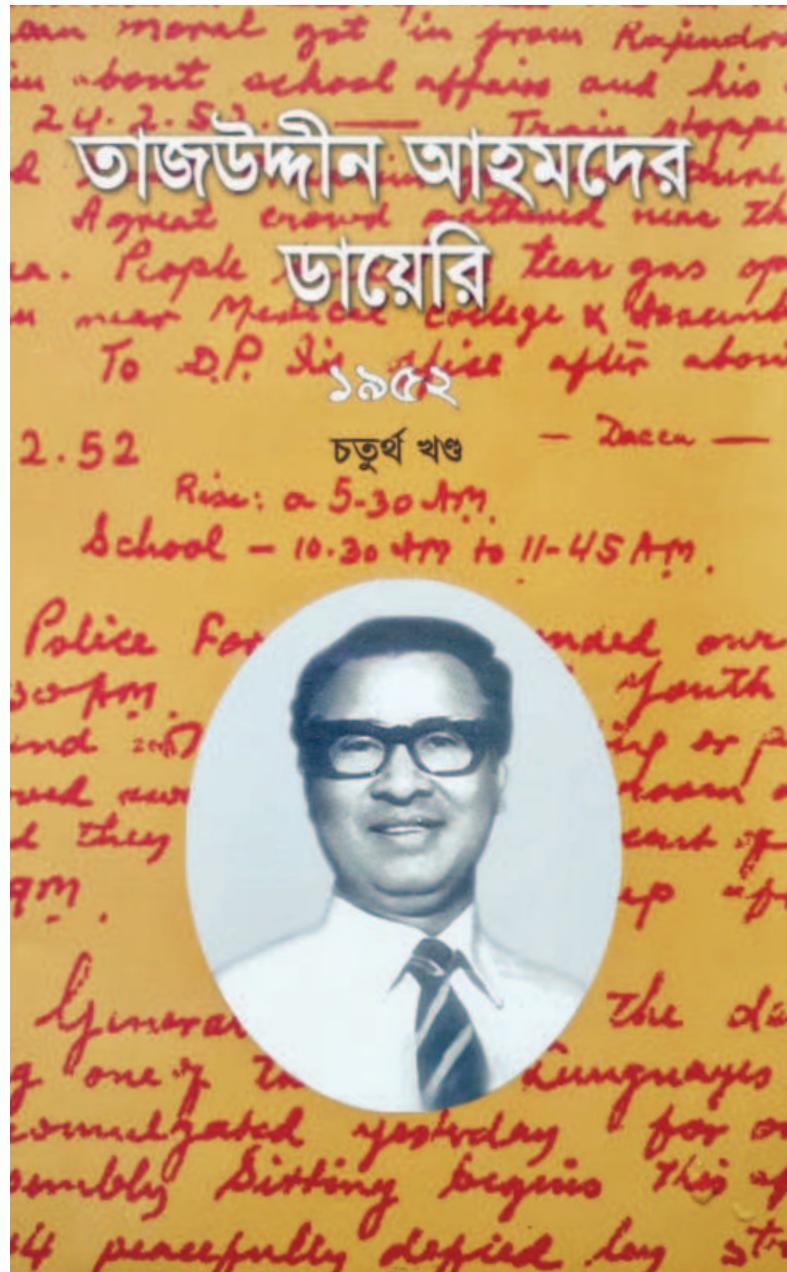




A LIFE FOR BANGLADESH

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Reading His Diaries and Understanding the Man



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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."

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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.

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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 Ganai 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.

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

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



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

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.

Tajuddin steered the leaky boat of the Mujibnagar government to the

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.

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