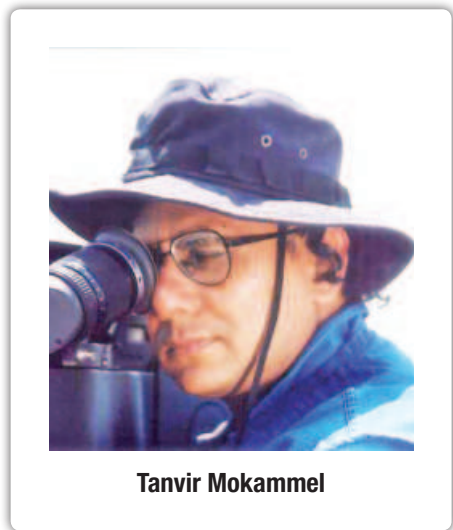




# A LIFE FOR BANGLADESH

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



**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



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

been a deliberate political amnesia surrounding his legacy?

**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.**

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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 makhtabs, 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 Moddobbiter 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



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

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 Naemuiddin 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.”

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**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.**