



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.

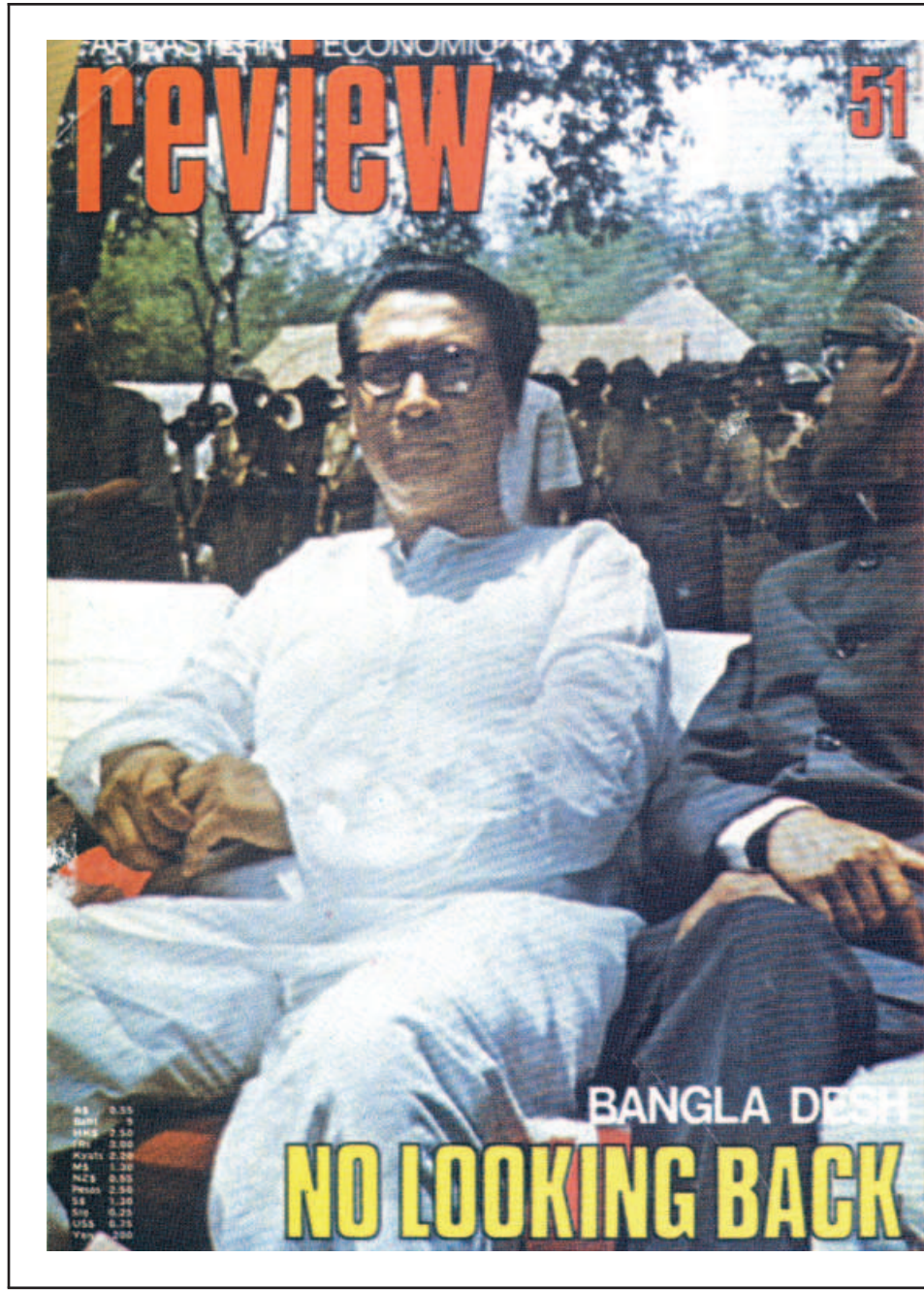
However, the pro-Chinese leader

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



Gandhi lying in state after his assassination.

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.

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



Tajuddin Ahmad during his school years.

explained all about their efforts.

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 inquiries, along with more sustained historical writing, 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.