

The unhealed wounds of 1971: Bangladesh’s unfinished liberation



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The 1971 Bangladesh Liberation War was not merely a military conflict; it was a civilisational rupture that tore through the social fabric of an entire nation, leaving scars that have never properly healed. While we celebrate our victory each December, we have collectively failed to confront the psychological devastation that persists across generations, or to adequately honour those who sacrificed everything in those nine terrible months.

Mujibnagar

One of the most persistent and damaging myths about our liberation struggle concerns the Mujibnagar Government—the provisional government of Bangladesh that operated from April to December 1971. A narrative has taken root, particularly among those who prefer simplified hero-worship over historical complexity, that the leadership of Mujibnagar lived comfortably in exile while freedom fighters died in muddy trenches. This is not merely wrong; it is an insult to those who carried the immense burden of organising a liberation struggle while being stateless and under constant threat.

The Mujibnagar Government, sworn in on April 17, 1971, at Baidyanathtala in Meherpur, operated under extraordinary difficulty. These were not men enjoying cushy exile; they were coordinating a multifaceted war effort while dodging Pakistani intelligence operations, managing a humanitarian catastrophe involving one crore refugees, and conducting desperate diplomacy efforts to win international recognition. Prime Minister Tajuddin Ahmad worked himself to exhaustion, orchestrating the formation of the Mukti Bahini’s eleven sectors, establishing training camps, managing arms procurement, and creating administrative structures for a country that didn’t yet legally exist.

The government established a functioning bureaucracy in exile, organised revenue collection in liberated zones, ran a clandestine radio station (Swadhin Bangla Betar Kendra) that sustained morale across occupied Bangladesh, and coordinated with the Indian government while maintaining Bangladesh’s distinct identity and autonomy. They managed internal political tensions between various factions, dealt with the complications of armed groups operating semi-independently, and



VISUAL: ANWAR SOHEL

planned for post-war governance—all while knowing that capture meant certain death.

To dismiss their contribution as comfortable exile is to fundamentally misunderstand what leadership in crisis entails. Wars are not won by battlefield courage alone; they require logistics, diplomacy, intelligence, coordination, and vision. The Mujibnagar Government provided exactly these elements. Without their organisational framework, the courage of individual fighters would have amounted to sporadic resistance rather than coordinated liberation.

Wounded generation

What we rarely discuss with adequate gravity is the complete dislocation of an entire generation. The 1971 war was not a distant conflict fought by professional soldiers; it was a catastrophe that invaded every home, disrupted every life, and fundamentally altered the trajectory of millions of individual

existences.

The exodus of one crore refugees to India represents one of the largest forced migrations in human history, but statistics obscure the human reality. Families that had built lives over generations abandoned everything within hours. The educated middle class, the students who would have been our doctors, engineers, teachers, and administrators, fled across borders with whatever they could carry. Many

was not incidental violence; it was a deliberate weapon of war, intended to humiliate, terrorise, and break the spirit of Bangalee resistance.

After liberation, these women—Biranganas (war heroines), as Bangabandhu named them—faced not support and rehabilitation but stigma and abandonment. Many were rejected by their families and communities. Some were forced into sex work, having been rendered

children unhealed, and those children absorbed the unspoken wounds. This is how trauma becomes intergenerational—not through genetics but through the emotional environment of families and societies that cannot acknowledge their pain.

We never had truth and reconciliation commissions. We never created spaces for survivors to tell their stories and be heard. We never provided systematic support for rape survivors or their children. We never helped refugees process the loss of homes and livelihoods. We never allowed freedom fighters to discuss what they had witnessed and done. Instead, we rushed towards nation building, mistaking silence for strength and suppression for healing.

The consequences persist. Our politics remains poisoned by unresolved questions about collaboration and resistance. Families harbour secret resentments spanning generations. Veterans struggle with memories they cannot share. Women carry shame for the violence committed against them. And all of these fester beneath a surface narrative of triumphant liberation.

The unfinished work

Bangladesh was supposed to be different. We were told we possessed a natural unity—a homogeneous population sharing language, culture, and history. This was always somewhat mythical, but it contained enough truth to inspire hope for a cohesive national identity transcending the religious divisions that had torn apart the subcontinent.

Yet we have squandered this potential. Instead of building on our shared sacrifice in 1971, we have allowed that very history to become another site of division. Religion has been weaponised for political gain, creating fault lines where solidarity should exist. The spirit of secular Bangalee nationalism that animated our liberation has been systematically undermined by those who prefer a fragmented population to an empowered one.

The time has come to reclaim what we fought for. This means finally, 53 years later, beginning the healing we should have undertaken in 1972. It means creating spaces for the complex truth-telling. It means honouring all who contributed—from Mujibnagar’s exhausted administrators to rural fighters to women who survived unspeakable violence. It means acknowledging our wounds rather than performing strength we don’t feel.

Most importantly, it means rebuilding the unity that was 1971’s promise—not by denying our diversity or suppressing difficult histories, but by recognising that our shared trauma and shared liberation bind us more deeply than any subsequently manufactured division ever could. We are all children of 1971. It is time we began acting like it.

Preserving 8 Theatre Road: Our Liberation War’s nerve centre



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In the heart of Kolkata, at 8 Shakespeare Sarani—formerly known as 8 Theatre Road—stands a building whose walls once echoed with the pulse of a nation’s liberation. Today, it is known as Sri Aurobindo Bhavan, a site of spiritual and cultural significance named after Indian nationalist and spiritual master Sri Aurobindo. However, in 1971, during Bangladesh’s Liberation War against the genocidal Pakistani military regime, it served a very different purpose: it was the wartime headquarters of the first government of the People’s Republic of Bangladesh, popularly known as the Mujibnagar Government. It was here that the first prime minister of Bangladesh, Tajuddin Ahmad, led the war for independence with unmatched resolve, humility, and vision.

Though the mango grove at Baidyanathtala in Meherpur was named Mujibnagar by Tajuddin Ahmad and declared the first capital of Bangladesh, the government was compelled—due to the intensifying war situation and bombardment in surrounding areas—to relocate its operational base to 8 Theatre Road. Tajuddin Ahmad declared that wherever the government moved during the war, it would carry the name Mujibnagar, in honour of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, who was in prison in Pakistan and made the president of the first government. Thus, this Kolkata address became the de facto Mujibnagar—the first capital in exile.

The building, then under the ownership of the Government of India and used by the Border Security Force (BSF), was transformed into a sovereign space. Within its modest rooms, Tajuddin Ahmad ran a government-in-exile that became one of the most principled, successful and effective administrations in Bangladesh’s history. He lived in a small, austere room adjacent to his office, washing his own clothes and refusing the comforts of

family life. He had taken a solemn vow: until Bangladesh was free, he would not return to his family or indulge in personal comfort. His leadership was not only strategic but deeply moral.

From this very building, some of the most consequential decisions of the war were made. It was here that the National Advisory Committee was formed, with Tajuddin Ahmad as its convenor and Maulana Abdul Hamid Khan Bhashani as its chairman. This committee played a pivotal role in uniting political forces and strengthening the liberation movement. On November 21, 1971, the decision to formally establish the Bangladesh Armed Forces was taken here. From here, Acting President Syed Nazrul Islam and Prime Minister Tajuddin Ahmad wrote to Indian Prime Minister Indira Gandhi requesting formal recognition of Bangladesh. Her affirmative response, received at this very building, marked a turning point in the war.

This recognition was not only a bilateral milestone—it reverberated across the globe. The Bangladesh Liberation War unfolded against the backdrop of the Cold War, where the United States, the Soviet Union, and China each held differing positions. From 8 Theatre Road, appeals were made that reached far beyond South Asia, shaping debates in the United Nations and influencing humanitarian responses worldwide. The plight of one crore refugees in India drew international media coverage, mobilising civil society groups in Europe and North America, and making Bangladesh’s struggle a matter of global conscience.

Perhaps most significantly, it was within these walls that Tajuddin Ahmad laid down three non-negotiable conditions for the entry of Indian allied forces into Bangladesh: first, that India must recognise Bangladesh as an independent and sovereign state; second,

that military operations would be conducted under a joint command of the Indian Army and the Mukti Bahini; and third, that Indian forces would withdraw as soon as instructed by the Bangladesh Government (Tajuddin Ahmad’s speeches, in *Tajuddin Ahmad Itihas* by Pata Theke, edited by Simeen Hussain Rimi, Dhaka, Pratibhas, 1999, p387, 411-412). These conditions were accepted, underscoring the Mujibnagar Government’s



PHOTO: SRI AUROBINDO INSTITUTE OF CULTURE

To avoid bombardment in surrounding areas, our Liberation War’s headquarters was relocated from Baidyanathtala in Meherpur to 8 Theatre Road, now 8 Shakespeare Sarani, Kolkata, which houses the Sri Aurobindo Bhavan.

insistence on sovereignty, dignity, and mutual respect—even while operating from exile. As Barrister Amir-ul Islam later noted in his interview published in *Tajuddin Ahmad: Alover Anontodhara* (edited by Simeen Hussain Rimi, Pratibhas, 2006, p87), that even the allied troops did not enter France during the Second World War under any conditions—an observation that highlights Tajuddin Ahmad’s foresight in securing Bangladesh’s sovereignty through clearly defined terms for India’s allied forces.

In insisting on sovereignty and equality, the Mujibnagar Government aligned Bangladesh’s liberation with broader global struggles for decolonisation and self-determination. Just as African nations were asserting independence and Vietnam was resisting external domination, Bangladesh’s

leaders at 8 Theatre Road positioned their cause within a worldwide movement for dignity and freedom. This global resonance gave the liberation war moral weight far beyond its borders.

Indian diplomat and former Foreign Secretary J.N. Dixit later recalled in his book *Liberation and Beyond: Indo Bangladesh Relations* and in his interview in “Itihaser Sattya Sandhane” (edited by Matiur Rahman,

with discipline, transparency, dedication and vision. He initiated the National Militia Project, composed of freedom fighters, to prepare them for post-war nation-building and to act as the country’s third defence pillar alongside the military and police. His vision was rooted in justice, law, and order—not retaliation. After Sheikh Mujibur Rahman’s return from prison, he abandoned the militia project; instead, a controversial Rakkhi Bahini was formed. Sheikh Mujib also issued a general amnesty without parliamentary consultation, allowing collaborators and war criminals to escape justice.

Despite the monumental role this building played in the victory of Bangladesh, its legacy remains largely unmarked. After the war, the property eventually came under the custodianship of Sri Aurobindo Bhavan. In 2018, I submitted a letter to the board of trustees and the board of directors of the property through an intermediary, respectfully requesting that a commemorative plaque be installed to honour the building’s role as the wartime headquarters of the Mujibnagar Government and where Bangladesh’s first prime minister lived. Though no formal reply was received, an officer noted that such a request should come through the Government of Bangladesh. While earlier efforts to preserve the historic site did not succeed, the responsibility to safeguard its legacy remains. The government can continue to pursue formal recognition and custodianship in due course, while civil society can at least work towards placing a memorial plaque to honour the role the site played during the Liberation War. Preserving this legacy will help ensure that the democratic principles born of that struggle are remembered with dignity and protected from distortion.

Preserving 8 Theatre Road is about contributing to global heritage. Nations worldwide safeguard sites that symbolise their fight for freedom—whether it is the wartime headquarters of Charles de Gaulle in London or the preserved independence landmarks of African states. By honouring this building, Bangladesh will affirm its place in that global tapestry of liberation, reminding the world that its victory was achieved through principled leadership and international solidarity.