

A Great Leader We didn't Know We had

November 3 is one of the two darkest days in the 36-yr history of Bangladesh. The other is August 15, 1975. On the latter date the founder of the newly independent state of Bangladesh, Shaikh Mujibur Rahman, was gunned down along with everyone in his family who was in the same house on that fateful night. On Nov.3, the same year, another act of unimaginable butchery was committed in the confines of Dhaka Central Jail when masked gunmen opened fire on the 4 original leaders of the 1971 War of Liberation, namely, Syed Nazrul Islam, Mansur Ali, Kamruzzaman, and Tajuddin Ahmad. It was the murder of Mr. Tajuddin Ahmad, in particular, that was the most hurtful of all, since he was the one who gave the most to his country, and was the best hope to lead it out of its time-old misery and into a better future. In a span of no more than 12 weeks the evil forces of the time managed to undo everything that the nation had achieved in its long struggle for independence, as well as eliminate the brightest shining star that could show us the way to a world free of poverty and suffering. The past and future were both buried about the same time. Having gotten rid of the only two political giants the country ever had, the little pygmies then took over and got on their mission of demolishing almost every institution that a modern society needs to have to bring prosperity to its people. They tore down most of the basic tenets of the original Constitution, thus reversing the secular character of the new nation and making room for the triumphant return of the very forces that were responsible for the genocide of 1971. What we are witnessing today in Bangladesh is a direct consequence, in my opinion, of the two barbarous acts that I just mentioned.

But who was this man called Tajuddin that I'm raving about, yet most people of today's Bangladesh don't seem to have even heard of? Well, to begin with, he was born on 23rd July, 1925, in a conservative family of rural Bengal, educated first in a village madrasah, then in an ordinary public school, ending up in a premier high secondary school in Dhaka run by Christian missionaries. Throughout his school life he excelled both as a student of exceptional academic potential, as well as a budding political activist with progressive ideas. Had he chosen to pursue a regular academic career, his biographers all agree, he could have been one of the most successful professionals of the entire subcontinent. Instead, he chose the path of uncertainty by dedicating his life to the service of his country, having been motivated by the unbearable scenes of death and disease, hunger and suffering, during the 1943 famine of Bengal. So, at a very early age, he took a vow to himself that he would do everything in his power to bring relief to his people from the indignities of poverty and suffering, from economic and political domination of external forces, as well as from the built-in social structures that inhibit the equitable distribution of national wealth. It was freedom, democracy, and socialism that he was committed to right from the beginning.

Tajuddin's political career started as a young student leader championing the cause of Pakistan for a separate state for Muslims of India. However, he seemed to have some doubts even as he was actively organizing rallies in support of the Muslim League. How foresighted this man was can be seen by a casual statement he once made to Mr. Wahiduzzaman, one of his closest friends from high school :” Yes, Mr. Jinnah is talking about Pakistan, but I don't think it is going to work. It's not a viable idea to have a religion-based state.” This was in 1942, 5 years before the eventual partition of India,

when the entire Muslim population of the subcontinent was swept up in the crazed frenzy of an independent Muslim state.

Born and brought up in a traditional Muslim family Tajuddin was a practicing, if not devout, Muslim all through his life. However, that didn't stop him from becoming a strong, vocal advocate for a secular state, where all minority groups would have equal rights as the mainstream Muslims. His dream was to create a modern democratic society in an independent country, where people would have economic freedom to pursue their own dreams, to seek friendly and harmonious relations with the rest of the world, and to help build a strong knowledge-based community. His exceptional talents were diverted from any thoughts of personal achievement to a global ambition for a better future for his people. He wanted nothing less than a prosperous Bengali nation able to keep pace with the new economic giants of the East as well as the fast moving Western world. He never sought power for the sake of power, rather as a means to achieve these goals.

It would not be an exaggeration to say that politics was in Tajuddin's blood, yet he was different from all other politicians of his time. He was more of a thinker than an agitator, more a planner than a talker, more a doer than a dreamer. His thoughts on economic matters were based on his deep knowledge of various economic models that existed at that time. It was after a lot of careful thought, and consideration of the peculiar issues facing the nation, he came to the conclusion that the most suitable model for his country was socialism. Not necessarily the Soviet or Chinese version, but one adapted to the special character and needs of Bangladesh. He was, after all, a pragmatic politician, not unlike Jawaharlal Nehru of India, who was interested in nothing less than finding the quickest way to modernize the country.

Although Tajuddin's political career started with the Muslim League he became disenchanted with it soon after Pakistan and India split into two separate countries, and especially after the language dispute with the policy makers of Pakistan erupted into a full-fledged movement in 1948, in which he played a leading role. He, along with Shaikh Mujib and other prominent leaders of the time, helped form the Awami League on June 23, 1949, which was instrumental in the fall of the Muslim League government in East Pakistan, and the continuation of the struggle for language and economic rights for the Bengali-speaking majority of the country. Through the long period of uninterrupted political activities in the fifties and sixties he got very close to Shaikh Mujibur Rahman. Tajuddin recognized the immense mass appeal of the charismatic Shaikh, while Mujib saw the exceptional intellectual qualities and organizational skills of Tajuddin. The two of them bonded like two brothers. They were soul-mates in politics—one knew the other's mind. It was Tajuddin who drew up the initial framework for the historic 6-pt program, that he and Shaikh Mujib presented at the 1966 Lahore Conference of the opposition parties of Pakistan. It was Tajuddin who ran the day-to-day administrative machinery of East Pakistan Govt. during the month-long non-cooperation movement in March, 1971. Most importantly, it was Tajuddin who, as the General Secretary of the Awami League had to take charge of the government-in-exile of Bangladesh while Shaikh Mujib was held in a Pakistani jail in Islamabad. It was Tajuddin who, without the benefit of any formal training led a masterful military operation in Mujibnagar, guiding the freedom fighters all over the country. It was in this role that Tajuddin's extraordinary talents and leadership qualities shone through in spectacular ways. He was the one, along with his friend and close associate, Barrister Ameer-ul-Islam, who traveled to New Delhi

to convince Mrs. Indira Gandhi to help the cause of the liberation movement, providing material and tactical help, but leaving the actual fighting to the Bangladesh freedom fighters themselves. During the 9-month war, Tajuddin proved beyond any doubt that he was not an ordinary leader. Without him at the helm the outcome of the war might have been quite different. He showed incredible skill, patience and wisdom in directing and coordinating the military actions everywhere, as well as in handling the personnel in his own ministry, particularly in dealing with the delicate situation of the secret plots of Mushtaq Ahmed and his friends to sabotage the war efforts. Any lesser person could have easily messed up the whole thing.

But it was the unique qualities of Tajuddin as a person that endeared him most to his friends and associates during the war as well as during the brief period he was able to serve his country as a cabinet minister. His strong principles, his deep moral and social convictions, integrity, his commitment to freedom and democracy, sense of fairness and justice, his frugal habits, his humility, and a fierce sense of honour for his country, were not just beyond reproach, they were beyond belief. How could a man of so much power and influence be so incorruptibly honest in a country where power so often goes hand in hand with ill-gotten wealth and affluence? How could the first prime minister of a country choose to live in a modest 2-room complex running a war office, a secretariat, and his living quarters all at the same time? Would anyone believe that he had only two shirts, two pairs of pants and one jacket while in office at Mujibnagar? Furthermore, at the end of the day, while taking a bath he would hand-wash his clothes himself. And he did these things not to show off as political stunts, but with genuine concern for the meagre resources his clandestine government had at that time. His legendary sacrifices were universally acknowledged and admired by the men in uniform. He had taken a vow not to indulge in any personal comforts as long as his men were fighting in the field. There was a story of his refusing to go to visit his son in Calcutta who was seriously ill, just because he thought it would be unfair to the fighters who didn't have the same opportunity.

Tajuddin's sense of justice and fairness was legendary. Once, as the minister of Economic Affairs and Planning, he approved the promotion of an officer in his ministry, knowing full well that this same man had once left Mrs. Zohra Tajuddin and children stranded at night on a Dhaka street completely exposed to the murderous Army of Pakistan. He never let his personal feelings stand in the way of deciding official matters on their own merits. Such characters are rare everywhere, but almost nonexistent in our societies.

Tajuddin was a Bengali in every possible way, except one. He was not a very emotional person. He showed no emotion when his older brother died, nor when his father passed away. Yet he broke down completely when he heard of the assassination of Mahatma Gandhi on Jan.30, 1948. That was a total mystery not just to others, but even to himself, because Gandhi, at that time, was seen in Pakistan as an enemy, and he himself had spoken against him many times before. Then why is this strange reaction to Gandhi's death? Because, many thought, he sensed the loss of a truly great soul from the earth. Could it be that his own greatness enabled him to grasp the enormity of the event?

Was there any leader like him in Bangladesh, or anywhere else in the subcontinent? In my view he had something in common with many great leaders of the time: Gandhi, of course, then Nehru, perhaps also Radhakrishnan. But I think his real greatness was in the

fact that he was not quite like anyone but himself. He was just a unique leader, standing all by himself, at the top.

Did he have an idol? Yes, he had. Shaikh Mujibur Rahman. He loved this man more than anyone knew. Once someone asked him: Sir, whom do you love more, Mujib or Bangladesh? Without batting an eye he said: Mujib Bhai. Sounds unbelievable, from a man who gave everything to his country. Perhaps he saw the future of Bangladesh in one person: his Mujib Bhai. Mujib personified the free and prosperous country he longed for all his life. So, love for Mujib, and love for his country, was synonymous.

Personally, I have often wondered if there was anyone in the political arena of Bangladesh whom I could really admire without any reservation, whom I could, in fact, recommend as a possible idol or hero to my children and grandchildren. One might suggest the obvious name: Shaikh Mujib. Yes, I'm fully aware that without his leadership Bangladesh might still be a part of Pakistan, but I'm not absolutely sure about his greatness in the administrative role of a prime minister. I have often heard older people commenting, a bit wishfully, how different it might have been if Shaikh Mujib had followed the example of Gandhi by staying away from administration and left the job in the abler hands of Mr. Tajuddin. I have to admit that I, too, made such comments many times, but not from real knowledge of Tajuddin's life, rather from hearsay and scattered articles here and there. Today, I know a good deal more about him, thanks to this remarkable lady from Montreal, Aklima Sarker, who loaned me the books on Tajuddin to read, then possibly to write about him. It is so refreshing to see that the real stature of this great man had to be brought home to me by a very ordinary Bangladeshi girl, yet who has such extraordinary gifts to recognize the great injustice that was done to this man by our contemporary historians. I wonder if she has better grip on our history than some of our learned scholars that fill the corridors of mighty colleges.

I think it will be an act of gratitude to this great leader to acknowledge him for what he gave to his country, as well as a partial redemption for what we, as a nation, callously failed to do for 36 years. Let us think of Nov. 3 as a day of mourning, just as Aug. 15 is. Let us honour him by taking Aklima's suggestion that an academic institution called "Tajuddin Ahmad Institute of Freedom and Democracy" be established, possibly in his birthplace, in order to perpetuate and propagate the values that he gave his life for.

Mizan Rahman,
Nov.3, 2007, Ottawa.