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Editorial

Ground Realities

The life and principles of Tajuddin Ahmed

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Tajuddin Ahmed would have been eighty-one this month. The tragedy of our collective national life is that he was not destined to live to a ripe old age. Any chances he might have had of taking charge of the country after the assassination of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and any possibility of his eventually transforming himself into an elder statesman were ruined the night he and three of his political associates were murdered in jail.

Tajuddin was fifty when the life was bayoneted out of him. He was too young to die, as young as Syed Nazrul Islam and AHM Quamruzzaman and not much younger than M. Mansoor Ali. And consider this: the entire generation of Bangladesh's political leadership that was eliminated between August and November 1975 was essentially a band of young men who had ended up doing what much older men usually do in history. They led a popular movement for self-assertion and in the end left Bengalis, on this part of the political divide, a free state for them to utilise and power their intelligence and intellect in, in myriad ways. Bangabandhu was a mere fifty-five when the soldiers mowed him down.

Tajuddin Ahmed was five years younger. And yet in that brief space of time, he had carved a niche for himself in the history of this part of the world. To those who knew Tajuddin in the 1960s, the man was destined for a bigger role than what his demeanour chose to reveal. You only have to go looking for some of the men who once enjoyed the reputation of being young, educated Bengali idealists responsible for much of what subsequently came to be known as the Six Points. They will inform you, perhaps to your great surprise and then to your usual expectations, how on a moonlit night on the Sitalakhya it was Tajuddin Ahmed who hurled the hardest questions at the men gathered to explain the core of the Six Points to Bangabandhu. A quiet man is always the keenest of observers. It was the silence in Tajuddin Ahmed that betrayed his eloquence every time he decided to ask a question here or seek a clarification there.

Through making his points in those formative days of emergent Bengali nationalism, Tajuddin helped to fine tune the Six Points and thereby turn them into an unassailable argument for the satisfaction of Bengali aspirations. On that river and after that, it was Tajuddin who, with Bangabandhu, laid the foundations of Bengali nationhood in what the state of Pakistan still thought was its pliant eastern wing. It was anything but pliant, as Field Marshal Ayub Khan was beginning to find out. When the dictator warned that supporters of the Six Points

would have the language of weapons applied against them, he merely revealed the growing nervousness among people in West Pakistan about the rising political ambitions of the Bengalis in the east.

In this forging of Bengali ambitions, Tajuddin Ahmed's role was as crucial as Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's. Where Bangabandhu was the inspirational leader, Tajuddin was the theoretician of the party. The relationship between the two men was in a very important sense akin to the ties that bound Mao Zedong and Zhou En-lai to each other. Tajuddin's courage was of the quiet kind. It rested on a perception of hard realities. Just how tough he could be came through almost immediately after the unfolding of the Six Points in early 1966. Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, sulking over Ayub's handling of the dialogue with the Indians in Tashkent, nevertheless felt, or was made to feel, that the proponents of the Six Points needed decisive handling. He valiantly challenged Mujib to a public debate at Paltan Maidan on the Six Points. Tajuddin Ahmed spoke for his leader, through offering to rebut Pakistan's soon to depart foreign minister. Bhutto never turned up, an early sign of the dread in which he held Tajuddin Ahmed. In the remaining years of united Pakistan, Bhutto would remain conscious of the power that Tajuddin exuded in political dialectics. He squirmed every time Tajuddin chose to speak at the abortive political negotiations in March 1971. He would warn his party men as also members of the Yahya Khan junta to watch out for Tajuddin.

Tajuddin Ahmed's political sagacity had become a pronounced affair by the time he found himself making his way out of Dhaka in late March 1971. While other political leaders and workers may have been overwhelmed by thoughts of the darkness that lay ahead for Bengalis in the face of Pakistan's genocide, or had been rendered too distraught to begin thinking of a swift response to the assault, Tajuddin snatched time out of his travails to dwell on what needed to be done.

He lost little time in making his way across the border and linking up with Indira Gandhi. He was perspicacious enough to see, even at that early stage of national predicament, the need for outside assistance in an armed struggle he envisioned developing for Bangladesh's freedom. The man of substance in Tajuddin saw little alternative to the formal shaping of a governmental structure for a struggling nation. The whereabouts of his colleagues remained shrouded in mystery. That was a stumbling block, but he did get around it by doing the necessary thing of announcing the formation of a government, the first ever in the history of the Bengalis.

He came under political assault the moment he took that considered step. The younger elements in the Awami League, typified by the likes of Sheikh Fazlul Haq Moni, thought they had been upstaged. Tajuddin, they thought and indeed propagated the message, had gone beyond his remit. He was not, said these angry young men, qualified or empowered to establish a government because he had not been authorized by Bangabandhu to do so. It was an unfazed Tajuddin who went ahead with what he saw as his historic mission of bringing Bengalis together. The socialist in him was unwilling to cave in to fate or human machinations. The intellectual in his being was prepared to withstand onslaughts of the kind his fellow Awami Leaguers were throwing his way. He emerged from the experience a sadder man and a necessarily stronger man.

In a free Bangladesh, Tajuddin Ahmed ought to have played a bigger

role in the transformation of society. That role could have come through his holding on to the position of head of government. As minister for finance, though, he demonstrated a tremendous degree of courage in warding off evil spirits, both in the form of international donor agencies and local opportunists. It was his conviction that a development strategy for Bangladesh did not have to include thoughts of aid from nations which had opposed its birth. Such a position, naturally, did not endear him to the right-wingers in the government; and these men kept up their noisy complaints against him before the Father of the Nation.

But what hurt Tajuddin Ahmed more than the whispering campaign against him was his sad, shocking realization that Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman was listening more to men like Khondokar Moshtaque and Sheikh Moni than to him. Decent almost to a fault, Tajuddin never complained in public. In private, though, he found it inexplicable that Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, the leader and political soul mate with whom he had shaped the political course of the Bengali nation, never once sought to ask him about the events leading up to the formation of the provisional government and the war of liberation that such a government waged.

The differences between these two giants of Bengali history only grew wider. Tragedy was bound to follow. It remains a curious, almost macabre tale in Bangladesh's history that Tajuddin Ahmed was instructed by Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman to leave the cabinet in the very month -- October 1974 -- when Henry Kissinger, prime architect of the Nixonian policy of backing Pakistan in its repression of Bengalis in 1971, came calling. That visit was a sign that Bangladesh was ready to pass into the American orbit. We as a people are still paying the price for the rudeness of overturning Tajuddin Ahmed's socialism and replacing it with unfettered capitalism. The robber barons in our midst, since that October day, have multiplied in number many times over -- and do so every livelong day.

Tajuddin Ahmed was a principled man, one inclined to self-effacement and extraordinary humility. Not many were or have been able to command the intellectual heights of political leadership that he so easily was symbolic of. And few have been the individuals in our history who have so effortlessly cast the personal to the winds in the interest of the welfare of a toiling, battered nation. Self-abnegation was part of his character. As prime minister in 1971, he kept thoughts of family aside as he shaped the tortuous map of battlefield strategy. After October 1974 and till his murder in November of the following year, he went into exile of a kind. He internalised his pain, brooded in loneliness over the future of a country he had guided to freedom. And then he paid the price.

[Tajuddin Ahmed, prime minister in the provisional government of Bangladesh in 1971, was born on July 23, 1925. He was murdered by soldiers in Dhaka central jail on November 3, 1975.]

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