

TAJUDDIN AHMAD : A MAN OF DESTINY

Anisuzzaman

Does the second part of the title of this paper sound like a cliché? Does it appear worn-out from overuse? Perhaps the answer to both the questions is in the affirmative. Then why do I use it here? I do so because I think that human history casts a number of people in a similar mould : they achieve for their collective entity something extraordinary, something more than expected of them, and disappear from the scene even before they finish playing their role. Tajuddin Ahmad (1925-75), the first Prime Minister of Bangladesh, was certainly such a person.

Born in a middle class agrarian family, Tajuddin was a brilliant student, who was among the first ten successful candidates both at the Matriculation and Intermediate examinations. He took his BA (Honours) degree in Economics from the University of Dhaka and a Law degree much later from the same institution as a candidate appearing from the Dhaka Central Jail. He was devoted to politics from his early life – the politics of the Muslim League – and was more mindful of serving the people of his locality in many other ways. For instance, he led an uncompromising campaign against the corruption of the Forest officers of the area which caused a lot of suffering to the people. He also struggled against the superstition of the people that prevented them from vaccinating themselves against small-pox. In all these he had no personal agenda except for serving the people in the midst of whom he was born.

The Bengal Provincial Muslim League had within it two factions – one led by its President, Maulana Mohammad Akram Khan (1868-1968) and Khwaja Nazimuddin (1894-1964), a member of the central legislature, who received a knighthood from the British Government, and the other led by Huseyn Shaheed Suhrawardy (1892-1963), a prodigy of the illustrious C R Das (1870-1925), and Abul Hashim (1905-74), the General Secretary of the provincial Muslim League. Inspired by the latter's ideals of egalitarianism, Tajuddin had aligned with the second faction. His leaders in Dhaka were Kamruddin Ahmed (1912-82) and Shamsul Huq. The form and manner in which Pakistan was realized did not bring

them unmixed joy. Punjab and Bengal were partitioned, Assam – with the exception of Sylhet – remained a part of India. Suhrawardy had to seek re-election as the leader of the Muslim League Parliamentary Party and was eventually ousted. His efforts to keep undivided Bengal as a sovereign state were made to fail and his loyalty to Pakistan was questioned for this very move which had the blessings of the Muslim League high ups at the beginning. But, to cap it all, the activities of the Muslim League governments – at the centre and in East Bengal – in the first six months of Pakistan frustrated them and they had to look for alternatives. These came in the form of the East Pakistan Muslim Students' League in 1948 and the East Pakistan Awami Muslim League in 1949 in the making of which all of them had contributed. Recognition of Bengali as a state language of Pakistan and practice of democracy in the new state were two of the main issues that agitated their minds. They also thought that with the establishment of Pakistan, politics on communal lines should have been abandoned. The atmosphere, still, was not favourable for that. A non-communal and non-political organization was founded in 1951 under the style of East Pakistan Youth League with Mohammad Ali as President and Oli Ahad as General Secretary. Tajuddin was a member of its Executive Committee. It was in the Youth League that I first met him towards the end of 1951. The Youth League contributed most to the State Language movement of 1952 and Tajuddin Ahmed was arrested for the first time for his connection with that movement.

In 1953 Tajuddin chose to join the Awami League formally. He became the General Secretary of the Dhaka District Awami League and was elected to the Legislative Assembly by a huge margin of votes. Subsequent years saw him go to prison, get released and move up in the hierarchy of the Awami League. He held the position of the General Secretary of the party from 1966 and actively campaigned for the six point programme. He was elected to the National Assembly of Pakistan in 1970 and played a significant role during the non-cooperation movement in 1971 under the leadership of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman (1920-75). The instruction from the Awami League in the form of directives used to go under his signature for the civilians, professionals and businessmen to follow. The world at large was impressed by the solidarity expressed by the people in such a peaceful manner.

It ended with the enforcing of Operation Searchlight when on the night of 25 March 1971 the armed forces of Pakistan unleashed all violence at their command on the unarmed civil population of Dhaka and elsewhere in the country. This was the beginning of one of the worst genocides in history and continued unabated throughout the period of their occupation. The Bangabandhu was arrested, but Tajuddin escaped and, together with fellow politician and MNA, Amer-ul-Islam, left Dhaka for the Indian border, partly by foot, partly by whatever vehicle they could commandeer, witnessing through their journey the atrocities committed by the murderous hordes and also the resolve of the people to fight for freedom. It was at Tongi, near Jivannagar, close to the Indian border, where a tired Tajuddin rested for a while under a bridge as he awaited entry into India that he vowed to form an independent government to conduct the liberation war.

When he met the Indian Prime Minister in Delhi, he was introduced as the Prime Minister designate of Bangladesh. The claim was undoubtedly exaggerated at that moment, but that was the only way he could talk to Mrs Gandhi as an equal. He maintained this position of equality throughout the liberation war although it was known to all concerned that he and his government were enjoying the shelter of India. That fateful meeting with the Indian Prime Minister made many things possible for Tajuddin, for the freedom fighters and for the millions of refugees to do.

The Proclamation of Independence was made on 10 April, the day the formation of Bangladesh government was announced, the government took oath ceremoniously on the soil of Bangladesh and in the presence of foreign journalists on 17 April. Tajuddin's declaration that Pakistan was buried under a mountain of compose was significant. The journey for him, however, was not smooth. There was opposition to him from his own party. With the patronage from the Research and Analysis Wing (RAW) of the Government of India, a parallel militia – Bangladesh Liberation Force – was organized outside the pale of the Bangladesh Government and brought into play. Tajuddin told me more than once that there was only one question to which he could never get an answer from the Indian authorities and that was, why did they find it necessary to raise another Bangladeshi armed force that would operate independently of the government of Bangladesh. Everytime he posed the question, he was promised an answer soon, but never did it come.

When the elected members of the National and Provincial Assembly met in June 1971, Tajuddin was challenged to explain how he could occupy the chair of the Prime Minister. It was Syed Nazrul Islam (1925-75), the Acting President, who took upon himself to answer. He said that everyone knew that in the absence of the Bangabandhu, he used to act as the chief of the party. In the same manner he, in his capacity as the Acting President, has appointed Tajuddin as Prime Minister. The sentiment of the House went in his favour and the matter rested there.

Tajuddin's one great task was to reorganize the freedom fighters. He formed the eleven sectors and appointed their commanders. Then these were regrouped into several brigades. He had to negotiate with India for the training of the fighters and for the supply of arms and ammunitions. In a meeting of the Sector Commanders, some had reflected adversely on the Commander-in-chief, Major (later General) MAG Osmani (1918-84). Osmani submitted his resignation and Tajuddin had to persuade him to withdraw the letter. The Bangladesh Prime Minister had to keep in touch with Bengali diplomats in different diplomatic missions of Pakistan and negotiate for the proper time for declaring their allegiance to Bangladesh, for their well, being in the host countries and for their facility to campaign for the freedom of Bangladesh. The Foreign Ministry worked from some distance from the Prime Minister's office, but the distance between the Foreign Minister and the Prime Minister could not be bridged. Khondkar Moshfaque Ahmed (1919-96) had already authorized Zahirul Qayum, MNA, to negotiate with the US Consul-General in Kolkata for a settlement with Pakistan. The Indian intelligence got hold of the matter and reported to the Bangladesh Prime Minister. Moshtaque was allowed to keep his position but his authority was forfeited. He was due to lead a Bangladesh delegation for lobbying in the UN. He was now replaced by Justice Abu Sayeed Chowdhury (1921-87), the Chief Representative of the Bangladesh Government abroad. The Foreign Secretary Mahbub-ul-Alam Chashi was replaced by Abul Fattah, who had left Baghdad to join Bangladesh government. The Swadhin Bangla Betar was reorganized. A weekly Bengali organ was brought out and war correspondents appointed. A psychological warfare unit was established at the Ministry of Defence. A Planning Cell was created and later made into a Planning Commission with the task of preparing short term, mid term and long term plans.

When a joint command of India and Bangladesh forces was set up in October / November 1971, Major Osmani had expected to lead it. That was not to be. We were enjoying the hospitality of India and our army officers were much junior in rank. In the British Indian Army, of course, Osmani was senior to many Indian officers and contemporary to some, but that was a matter of the past. Osmani resented the arrangement and resigned again and again did Tajuddin persuade him to take back his resignation letter.

From the very beginning Tajuddin had declared three principles which the Bangladesh government would stand by. Those were: democracy, secularism and socialism. All these came from the 1970 Election Manifesto of his party and the party's overall thrust since its inception. Fortunately those were accepted by his colleagues, even by the Foreign Minister, without a grudge. The question of forming an All Party Advisory Council was not so easy. There were opposition both from the party and the cabinet, but the Prime Minister succeeded in convincing them of its need to give the liberation a wider basis formally.

In his contact with civil and military bureaucracy in India, Tajuddin maintained a dignity that earned him a lot of praise from them.

From the very beginning Tajuddin Ahmad did aim to achieve the liberation of the country by the winter of 1971. He reckoned that had the war lingered, Pakistan, with the backing of the USA, would render it into another Vietnam War. In order to achieve liberation by that time, active Indian participation would be necessary, and India could participate fully only when the Himalayan passes were covered with snow, making it impossible for the Chinese forces to interfere. All his energies were directed towards that strategy. His government had clearly told India that the Indian forces would get into Bangladesh as a 'supporting force' and that they would leave the Bangladesh soil when Bangladesh would feel that their presence was needed no longer.

On the question of the Bangabandhu's release from captivity, let me quote him. 'Many people ask me', he said, 'do you want the Bangabandhu's freedom or Bangladesh's liberation? My answer is : both. The Bangabandhu can return to safety in dignity only when Bangladesh becomes free.'

Tajuddin dreamt of a Bangladesh where all citizens will have access to food, clothes, shelter, education, health, welfare and security. It will be a state where religions will be a matter of personal belief and will not play any role in the affairs of the state. There will be no minority community. Fundamental rights will be enjoyed by all and rule of law will prevail over everything else. One will not occupy an office in the party and another in the government at the same time. Corruption must come to an end. Talking of socialism, he said that our socialism will neither be of the Soviet model nor of the Chinese one, we shall find our own way of socialism. He was wary of foreign aid. He knew that we needed support from others, but we must not be treated as beggars and tied with conditions which were not honourable for any free nation. Tajuddin's dream has not yet been realized. He did not have the time to translate most of his ideals.

As he left Dhaka for India in 1971, Tajuddin had sent a note to his wife, asking her and the children to get free with the people at large and expressing the hope to be reunited with them when the country becomes free. During the liberation war he lived separately from his family, in a room adjoining the Prime Minister's office. He washed his own clothes and even nursed his peon when the latter had become sick.

It is a pity in a free Bangladesh that self-seekers succeeded in creating difference between him and the Bangabandhu. Tajuddin had decided to leave the cabinet anyway, but before he could do so, he was asked by the Prime Minister in writing to resign. Even the draft of the resignation letter was attached to the Prime Minister's instruction. The killers, however, had no confusion. He had proved with his life that his loyalty to the Bangabandhu was unquestionable. The tragedy was that the Bangabandhu had no way of knowing that. Yet the fact remains that Tajuddin had realized the greatest task that history had assigned him: the liberation of Bangladesh.