

Triumphing Over Injustice: A Daughter's Account of Leadership During the Violent Birth of Bangladesh

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In this presentation, I will share my personal journey that I took alongside my father, Tajuddin Ahmad. He was a political leader-activist who fought for freedom, democracy, and liberty. As a result of his courage, determination, foresight and moral leadership he became the first prime minister of Bangladesh. I am going to share some things that have touched me deeply on a personal level, such as witnessing genocide, war, survival, and the creation of a country. How many people have had such an intense experience in their lifetime? I believe that I am fortunate because I have been able to embrace all aspects of life, and in doing so, I have learned a few things. Enduring the turmoil and upheaval made me stronger and braver than before. Similarly, when it comes to leadership, it does not mean that a leader never failed; rather, a leader understands how to bounce back after failing. These are some of the lessons that I learned along the way that are embedded in my lecture. I will also highlight the role of Pennsylvania, where I am speaking today, in the history of Bangladesh. Since some of you are from a newer generation, this narration will start from the beginning: how Bangladesh emerged from the origins of Pakistan.



*Figure 1. Image of East & West Pakistan before the Birth of Bangladesh.
Photo: Public Domain.*

Where is Bangladesh? Figure 1 shows the map of where East Pakistan and West Pakistan were located. East Pakistan is now Bangladesh and West Pakistan is now Pakistan. East and West Pakistan conformed into one nation though they were separated by about 1,600 km (1,000 mi) of Indian territory

and had no common boundary. This was different from the case of East Germany and West Germany, which were divided but still part of the same country geographically. Interestingly, Pakistan was formed as a nation state in 1947 with the most votes coming from the people of East Pakistan due to its large Muslim majority. However, after Pakistan was formed, the East Pakistanis, though they were the majority, faced discrimination and exploitation from the central government of West Pakistan and the military, which led to several movements and finally independence.

So, it was not the other way around. We were not fighting for our rights as a minority. We were fighting for rights as a majority. When Pakistan was formed, we hoped it would have been led by a government that represented the people. However, in the first few years of Pakistan's formation, the democratic institutions began to erode. None of them were sustainable. In 1949, the Awami League was formed in East Pakistan. It was a political party to represent the people of East Pakistan. My father, then a student, joined the party. They yearned for free and fair elections, for the ability of self-determination, and for the fair distribution of wealth because many resources for Pakistan came from East Pakistan. Military dictatorship took over in 1958, and in that sense, it was an attempt to bury those democratic pursuits.



Figure 2: Dardaria, Birthplace of Tajuddin Ahmad. Source: Author.

I wanted to give some background of my father before he became a political leader. He was born on July 23, 1925, in the district of Dhaka (now Gazipur). His ancestral home was built by my grandfather Muhammad Yasin Khan. It is about 100 years old and overall, a humble home. The house is made from mud and the roof is made of tin. It stays cool in the summer and warmer in the winter. The Shitalakshya River runs right through the small and lush green village. My father came from a quaint life and hailed from a middle-class socioeconomic background. A brilliant student, with stellar results, he could have pursued a lucrative career and lead a comfortable life. But he thrust his lot with the common people and embraced a life of service and simplicity. We did not lead a privileged life because my father said that we were one of them. Thus, we all became part of the suffering.

My upbringing, along with his, taught me my first lesson about the true meaning of poverty. My father was gone most of the time either at the political forefront or imprisoned for his beliefs and activism. My mother automatically became the head of the household, and everyone knew that. I was seven years old then when one of my teachers who knew about my tough home situation, gave me a form that was to apply for funds distributed to those considered poor. Up until then, I did not know what poverty was. I felt we were okay; the teacher felt compassionate towards me and urged me to give it to my mother. She told me that my mother would understand. I came home and I gave that form to my mother. When my mother looked at the form, she asked me if I thought we were poor. I told her yes because that was what I was told. We also never really celebrated our holidays or wore new clothes. My mother looked at me and suggested that maybe we were the richest. She asked me questions like “How many people’s fathers would sacrifice their lives for the country?” “We are rich”, she emphasized. That was the first awakening that dawned on me that poverty is not something defined by material wealth. I reflected with the passing of time, how many children's fathers could help our country end the suffering? I would see in my own lifetime and the people of Bangladesh would witness that these were the ingredients that make a leader a true leader. In all actuality, my father redefined what really are the true values and purposes of living your own existence. Poverty is not only a lack of material resources, but also a state of mind that limits one’s potential. Poverty is when you have a small heart or when you make decisions out of fear. Poverty is when you don’t feel compassion for fellow human beings. My father did not have that, and it showed in his actions during the war.

Let’s go back to the pre-liberation era. When allocation of the resources came into play, former



Figure 3. Two photos of the Tajuddin Ahmad Family. The photo on the left depicts my father returning home from prison in 1969. On the right is a family picture from December 7, 1971. Source: Author.

East Pakistan was only getting some crumbs of the pie. At the time, the people of East Pakistan decided that there should no longer be a military dictatorship, and people should have the right of self-determination. My father, and many others, took to the streets to protest. They were imprisoned and many

suffered brutal treatment. Those who marched gave up a portion of their lives just to have one free and fair election. is a special family picture because my father, due to his resistance and political activism, used to be imprisoned a lot. We did not see much of our father when we were growing up. Big festivals still came and went. Religious holidays arrived and left. Sometimes we would spend those days in prison visiting him. In 1969, after three years of being in prison, he was released. That was the first time, I think after three years, that we had our father together and celebrated one of the religious holidays (Eid-Al-Adha).



Figure 4. Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and First Prime Minister Bangataj Tajuddin Ahmad in 1969. Source: Author.

When he started his journey as early as 1944, he and our Father of the Nation, Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, were very close.¹ They were complementary forces with idealism, courage, vision, pragmatism, and foresight. Together, they inspired the nation. The election took place in December of 1970. That was the first ever national election in the history of Pakistan in which my father's party, the Awami League, won with a landslide victory. In a sense, out of 169 seats in East Pakistan they secured 167 seats by meeting an overwhelming majority eligible to form the government. Plus, their constitution, that was in the process of getting drafted, reflected equality, majority aspirations, and popular demands.

The Pakistani military leaders thought otherwise. They never imagined that East Pakistan would have won with such a large margin. They were hoping that we did not win or secure that many seats. In retaliation, on March 25th, 1971, an unprecedented genocide occurred in which millions of people were killed and Bangabandhu was arrested. It was carried out under the name of Operation Searchlight. Democracy failed and the people's mandates were overruled. There were ten million refugees in the aftermath of this horrendous event. They had to flee and take shelter in the neighboring country, India. On top of this mass exodus, we had over 200,000 women who were raped. It was systematic murder and

barbaric acts. West Pakistan's military crackdown-imposed war on its own people and saw them as the enemy. At that point, the call for self-determination turned into a fight for independence. We knew it early on, but still we were trying to hold an election to work within the Pakistan framework to give democracy a chance. When it did not happen, Time, Newsweek and every other newspaper in the world began to cover these oppressive events.

To the dismay of the Pakistani military regime, my father formed the First Government of Bangladesh which led the war of liberation with courage and foresight to victory. The responsibility fell on my father's shoulders in the absence of Bangabandhu to make sure the people crossed the finish line. My family was one of the many on a hit list and it also forced us to cross the border. We were all on the death list. My father barely managed to flee from our home. Our whole house was surrounded by the military. They came with machine guns and bulldozers to tear away the foundation of our home. Every member of our family was arrested. My mother guessed the outcome of this dangerous situation because my father let her know that if he could survive, he would do something for the country. She did not have time to escape. When the military came and put the machine gun on her, she spoke fluent Urdu, which was not Bangla, the language I speak. In Bangladesh, we are culturally different from West Pakistanis, which includes the sphere of language.

We have a homogenous language, except for the indigenous languages, which is Bangla. However, my mother was fluent in Urdu, which is the official language of West Pakistan. So, she spoke in Urdu to the violent intruders. She said, "You are mistaken, I have made a great mistake by renting a house from a politician, and I am going to just buy my ticket tomorrow and leave for West Pakistan." She spoke with such conviction and with such fluency that the military men were confused. As a result, they released her, but my mother knew that if they bothered to look at all those pictures, they would have arrested her. In the chaos, when they were coming, they did not look. My mother had to flee by crossing from wall to wall to the neighbors' homes and taking two little kids with her. My sister and I, two older siblings, were staying at our aunt's home at the time. My mother separated us so that at least whoever survived could have brought the news to our father that we made it. Up until then and the next few months, we were on the run. We did not know what happened to our father. We had no news from him.

Within the same timeframe, U.S. Consul General Archer Blood who was stationed in East Pakistan, risked his career, and sent a telegram to the U.S. Department of State on April 6th, 1971. The Blood telegram is regarded as the most strongly worded letter in the history of the State Department. He wrote:

Our government has failed to denounce the suppression of democracy. Our government has failed to denounce atrocities. Our government has failed to take forceful measures to protect its citizens... Our government has evidenced what many will consider moral bankruptcy, ironically at a time when the

USSR sent President Yahya a message defending democracy, condemning arrest of leader of democratically elected majority party (incidentally pro-west), and calling for end to repressive measures and bloodshed....But we have chosen not to intervene, even morally....in which unfortunately the overworked term genocide is applicable. Private Americans have expressed disgust. We, as professional public servants, express our dissent with current policy and fervently hope that our policies are redirected to salvage our nation's position as a moral leader of the free world.²

Blood signed along with twenty officials and diplomats in the U.S. Consulate. When it reached the State Department in Washington, nine more senior members also signed the document with Archer Blood's consent.³ Blood's telegram brought into question how the U.S. could talk about themselves. How could Americans be the moral leaders of the free world when they were siding with a military junta that inflicted genocide on its own people with U.S. arms and ammunition? It truly brought an eye-opening perspective.

In the commotion of war and tragedy, the peace activists of Pennsylvania and other States came together in 1971 to protest the U.S. government's support to Pakistan. Richard Taylor, a member of American Friends Service Committee and resident of Philadelphia, his wife Phyllis Taylor and their non-violent resistance group for social justice came up with an amazing idea. They organized the anti-war groups, Bangladeshi activists, academic and women's organizations and led an unprecedented historic blockade of the Port of Baltimore to stop the US shipment of arms to the Pakistani ship. It was a life-threatening and risky mission. They used dinghy boats to surround the Pakistani ship from docking at the port. (These included the Quaker religious community, The Friends of East Bengal, Bangladesh Association of Delaware Valley of Philadelphia, Bangladesh Information Center, and similar organizations committed to the cause of peace and Bangladesh liberation also organized significant protests and supported Bangladesh.) Police came and arrested all the protesters involved in the blockade.⁴ Richard Taylor was asked multiple times why he protested since he did not have any connection with Bangladesh. He answered, "there are times when people must listen to their inner voice and do the right thing."⁵

That is one thing with any kind of aspiration or freedom, it is not local, the essence spreads beyond all physical limits. It is a universal yearning and calling. World famous musician Ravi Shankar, who came from my part of the world, Bengal, was also very good friends with another world-famous music celebrity, former Beatles star George Harrison. Shankar explained to Harrison that the people of Bangladesh were being slaughtered. He wanted Harrison to use his high level of celebrity power to enact change. Within a month, Harrison put together an amazing mega concert in the U.S. for Bangladesh. This was not an easy feat. In 1971, there was no fax, email, text messages, or social media. Harrison called everybody on the phone. Madison Square Garden in New York was the first venue to accept his proposition of holding “The Concert for Bangladesh” for more than 40,000 people. On August 1, 1971, the case of Bangladesh won the hearts and minds of people all over the world. That is the soft power of music, which can make such a profound impact. That event was a pioneering benefit concert of such a magnitude. This highly successful humanitarian effort paved the way for other concerts such as the concert for South Africa.



Figure 5. U.S. Peace activists from Philadelphia blocking ships in Baltimore and Philadelphia Ports carrying weapons to Pakistan in 1971. Source: 1971: Our War, Their Battles |The Daily Star.

Meanwhile, the refugees continued to pour into India. Thousands crossed the border every day. There were about ten million refugees who were sheltered by the Indian Government and the Indian people. U.S. Senator Edward Kennedy was the chairman of the Senate Judiciary Subcommittee on Refugee Affairs and visited refugee camps in 1971. This is part of the report he gave to the Congress after visiting the camps. He stated,

Unfortunately, the face of America in South Asia is not much different from its image over the past years in Southeast Asia. It is the image of an America that supports military repression and fuels military violence. It is the image of an America comfortably consorting with an authoritarian regime. The situation in East Bengal should particularly distress Americans, since it is our military hardware-our guns and tanks and aircraft delivered over a decade-which are contributing substantially to the suffering. And

even more shocking is the fact that the military supplies continue to flow, apparently under the instructions from the highest officials of our land.⁶

He delivered the speech before the National Press Club on August 26, 1971, which was printed in the congressional record on September 8, 1971.

Through my own journey, I began to discover two versions of the United States. This is part of an excerpt from my book, *Tajuddin Ahmad: Neta o Pita (Tajuddin Ahmad: Leader and Father)*:

Through the backdrop of the 1971 Liberation War, I discovered the United States of many colors. The inhumane America and the humane America; America, the friend of oppressors and the compassionate America. The contradictory behavior of America also allowed me to understand the complexity of human nature. It was time to move beyond the black and white in search of a broader spectrum.⁷ I have already touched on a few examples of how the United States has shown support and opposition to the Bangladesh cause. One example of the support was the blockade of the port by peace activists who protested the shipment of arms to Pakistan. Another example was the Concert for Bangladesh organized by Ravi Shankar, George Harrison, Ustad Ali Akbar Khan, Eric Clapton, Bob Dylan, along with other musicians and artists from various genres and styles. They came together to raise funds and awareness for the humanitarian crisis in Bangladesh. These people are the true face of humane America. They represent the beautiful parts of America that value freedom and liberty. Conversely, the decisions made by the Nixon-Kissinger Administration did not hold up to the promises of diversity, freedom, equality, and justice. Since the responsibility of this war of liberation fell on the shoulders of my father, he took charge by addressing the freedom fighters, highlighting the victories throughout the fighting, inspiring other people to join the cause. Looking back, this is the time span that many news outlets began to cover this conflict such as “The Bloody Birth of Bangladesh.”



Figure 6. Prime Minister Tajuddin Ahmad Visiting the Freedom Fighters Camps. Photo: Author.

To continue, my father wrote to India's Prime Minister at the time, Indira Gandhi. He conveyed to Mrs. Gandhi that the Indian Government must recognize Bangladesh as a free and sovereign state. As neighboring countries, they had to be on equal footing. In response, Prime Minister Gandhi informed my father that she and her colleagues in the Government of India were deeply touched by the message. She made special mention that they considered his request to accord recognition to the People's Republic of Bangladesh acknowledging my father's efforts in leading the war of liberation with such dedication.⁸ When my father first met Mrs. Gandhi (April 3, 1971), he stood his ground and told her that this was our war. It was a people's war of liberation of Bangladesh. This should not, as Pakistan would want, be portrayed as a war between India and Pakistan or Pakistan's internal conflict. India, he requested, should provide weapons for our freedom fighters, arrange shelter and aid for the refugees, help establish radio station, diplomatic channels, and necessary support.⁹ He maintained that status quo, he held dignity, even in a moment of crisis. With the extensive political and diplomatic support of the Indian Government provided by Prime Minister Gandhi, Bangladesh soon became liberated. We achieved our victory on December 16th, 1971.



Figure 7. Tajuddin Ahmad Meeting with India's Prime Minister Indira Gandhi Source: Author.

This is only a snapshot of what my father did for our country. He was very hands-on as a leader. He went directly to the people in communities all around the liberated areas of Bangladesh. This effort alone inspired thousands because it was a people's war. People joined the fight just like patriots in the American Revolutionary War. This was not a war where a military went up against another military. Our freedom fighters were formed by soldiers, businessmen, farmers, ordinary citizens, and students. Most of

them lived in villages and did not know much about fighting. Their daily lives had them most likely working on the rice fields and tending to agriculture. One day they were forced to take up arms to fight for their future, for freedom. So, they all had to leave their ordinary lives behind. The structure in Figure 10 is carved with the faces of those who fought in the nine months of the war. As my father was leading the war of liberation, we were on the run and had no contact with him. We never knew his current condition or his whereabouts. Regardless of these constant feelings of uncertainty, my mother always said that the country would be liberated because he was the man, and he would take the country to full victory.

April 10, 1971, was different from any other day. It was around ten o'clock at night in our small village Dardaria, where we took shelter only temporarily. This was the day when he delivered his first on-air speech from a clandestine radio station as the founding Prime Minister of People's Republic of Bangladesh. More importantly, that was when we heard our father's voice, we knew that he was alive, we knew that he was leading. He courageously spoke the following words:

We must not, even for a moment, forget that this war is the people's war, and in truth this is the war of the destitute people of Bangladesh. This new independent Bangladesh is born from the courage, faith, patriotism, souls engrossed with the spirit of liberty and sacrifice of the hardworking ordinary farmer, laborer, student, and multitude of people... May a new order be created for the starving destitute people of Bangladesh where people will not exploit people... let a new democratic social order emerge from this soil wet with their blood and tears.¹⁰

During that entire war period, Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman who was named the President of the newly formed Government of Bangladesh was held in Pakistan prison. My father had to step up and continue the cause. With the dedicated leadership of my father, his colleagues Syed Nazrul Islam (Acting President), M. Mansur Ali (Finance Minister), A.H.M Quamaruzzaman (Home Minister), the valiant freedom fighters and the sacrifice of the seventy-five million people, the country showed immense strength. That was the worst time yet the best because we were united people for freedom and peace. With the addition of all the international support coming from all sides, my father heightened that momentum keeping the pressure alive for unconditional victory and thereby stopping the genocide. Owing to the dedication, support of Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, and the success of our liberation, my father was able to free and bring back Bangabandhu to the sovereign soil of independent Bangladesh.

What kind of leadership made victory possible? While leadership essentially means sacrifice,



Figure 10. War of Liberation Memorial. Source: Author Photo.

there are three important elements: integrity, a sense of justice, and follow through or walk the talk that make leadership genuine. I believe that integrity is first and foremost. It is an element that you keep doing the right things, just as Richard Taylor said that it was the right thing to do. This goes for when nobody is looking at you, even when you do not receive any help, and when you must turn against the waves. We have seen many times that in my father. One aspect of his integrity in addition to him following through with his actions is spelled out in the letter he wrote to my mother “Lily, I have left. I could not say anything to you at all when I left. Forgive me, I don't know when we'll meet again... after liberation. Take the children and merge with the seventy-five million people.”¹¹ That was part of integrity, that we were not some privileged children, leaders, daughters, son, or wife. We all merged with seventy-five million people and embraced the suffering.

I interviewed Golok Majumder, the Inspector General (IG) of the Indian Border Security Forces (BSF) of the Eastern Command in 1971.¹² He recalled meeting my father at the border. My father was half starved, didn't have food, he was walking on foot for miles and fleeing the Pakistani army. He and his colleague barrister Amir-ul Islam had to find a safe refuge. At that time, IG Majumder received my father and his colleague at the border. They conveyed to the Inspector General “we are representing a free nation, Independent Bangladesh. We will enter your country only if you receive us as the representatives of a sovereign state.”¹³ IG Majumder assured they would be received accordingly with proper honor. My father established the Head Quarters of the First Government in Kolkata (capital of the state of West Bengal, India). Bangladesh won its victory on December 16, 1971. The Government in exile returned to

liberated Bangladesh soon thereafter, on December 22. IG Majumder and Director General of the Indian BSF, K.F Rustamji went to the airport to see off my father and his colleagues. And at that time, DG Rustamji said, “Now that Bangladesh is free there should be eternal friendship between our two countries.” My father’s immediate response was, “yes, as equals.”¹⁴ IG Majumder said he was so touched by my father’s patriotism. Even at the height of jubilation, that Bangladesh won its freedom, Tajuddin Ahmad did not forget to remind them that we stand as equals.

What makes a leader a true leader? He must walk the talk, have vision, foresight and be ready to sacrifice. If you see in all the pictures, my father is almost always wearing one shirt in various pictures, one shirt with two pockets. And because he had no other shirt, that was the only shirt he would wash, dry at night and wear day after day. I remember the month of August when Senator Kennedy was visiting the refugee camps. We heard my father was sick. So, without telling my father, we paid a visit to him. You might ask why you paid a visit to your father. Because he did not live with his family during the entire period of the liberation war. Again, he walked the talk. He made a vow along with his colleagues, other Cabinet Ministers, that they would not lead a family life till the country was liberated.

We crossed the border to India after two months of getting run around by the military. We saw the genocide, bullets, fire, villages being torched. As we arrived, we were looking forward to seeing our father. Our father came and visited us just for a few minutes. He told my mother, “Look, we are at war. And I made a vow with the other cabinet Ministers that we will not lead a family life till our country is liberated. Because our freedom fighters have left their families behind and are fighting in the front to liberate our country.”¹⁵ So he really did walk the talk and sacrificed his personal comfort. No other colleagues were able to keep the promise. That was my father, who was living in his office far away from where we were and adjacent to his office was his small bedroom. And that's where he was conducting the war of liberation.

So that day when we heard that my father had fallen ill, we knew that if we called him, he would not see us. So, without giving him any notice, we went, my mother, my sister, we went, and we heard that there was a sound coming from the small room adjacent to the office room, and there was a common door between the two rooms. And we didn't see our father in the office, and his staff said, no, he's in the office. We saw a big map of Bangladesh and there were the pin marks on it indicating where all the key battles were happening and so on. But where was our father? We went to the small bedroom; he was not there. Then we saw the door to the restroom was ajar and we heard the sound, as if somebody was washing something, some water running. We opened the door; we found our father. He was sitting on the floor while running a high fever. He was washing his only shirt. He was also diabetic. He had a boil on his chest, which ruptured. I still remember that. He turned around and we saw his white vest, bloody. And he looked at us in a way as if he got caught, he was embarrassed that we found him. He was sitting on the

floor, the First Prime Minister, a wartime Prime Minister sitting on the floor and washing his only shirt because he had a meeting with Senator Kennedy the next day. So that's called leadership.

I already touched on the topic of activating the soft power of art through music and the vision of statehood and independence. Just like the United States of America, Bangladesh as the People's Republic of Bangladesh emerged as a sovereign state through the Proclamation of Independence. And the key words in the document were that Bangladesh would embrace the ideals of human dignity, equality, and social justice. So, I think these ideals and aspirations are much broader. We may call the system of government socialism, capitalism, democracy etcetera. But in the heart of all of that should be human dignity, equality, and social justice. We can put it under any framework, but these are undeniable elements that make democracy work, that make a government work, that make a nation and state work in the right direction. My father defined the character of a new nation based on sovereignty, democracy, and mutual respect. He said that "it would be an independent and non-aligned foreign policy political institutions will be democratic." When the foreign journalists asked, "And what would be your relationships with India?" He answered, "The friendship based on mutual respect for our sovereignty and mutual cooperation in economic field and other fields."¹⁶ Tajuddin Ahmad knew how to work through regional and global dynamics to win. India, Pakistan, China, Soviet and USA all were players. And then there were internal challenges. And you had to skirt through all the complexities. You must navigate through; you must talk to a lot of people who are not in alignment with your views.

He conceived the idea of forming a government on 30 March 1971. On the first anniversary of our victory day, he stated:

When I was on the run, the awakening of the desire for freedom that I had seen in our ordinary people-that unquestionably helped me in my decision making for the future. At the border town of Tungi near Jibannagar that day, I laid down my tired body under the bridge and made this ultimate decision for the sake of the seventy-five million Bengalis: establish an independent government and begin the work of conducting the liberation war.¹⁷

The formation of the government was a turning point in history. The people of Bangladesh had for the first time a government representing them. We were no longer a scattered freedom-aspiring people. We now had a government. And that was a visionary step because if you didn't have a government, then this work could be framed as a secessionist work of some sort. But the government represents the nation just as the USA, during the Revolutionary war formed a government through the Continental Congress. It had a legalistic framework. The Bangladesh government also emerged on the premise of a legalistic framework mandated by the elected representatives. Then a true leader with foresight knows how to work even in a dire situation. And my father was the first prime minister of the country. He was chosen by the people, by the elected representatives. This is how the onus of responsibility fell on his shoulder to lead this war of liberation.

He had to convince different groups to support our cause. For example, take the case of India, our neighboring country who really did a remarkable job sheltering our people, giving us the support and Indira Gandhi was very committed toward our liberation. But at her own party, not everybody had the same opinion. So how to get them on board. There was a lot of work that had to be done through diplomatic channels and negotiations had to happen. And then initially India was also hesitant to give enough arms and ammunition because if you recall the map that India was surrounded by Pakistan on one side, which was an adversary nation. And on another side, it bordered with China. So, India was surrounded by two nations that were hostile toward India.¹⁸ And USA was a friend of Pakistan. But India didn't have any superpower on its side. And that was a time of the cold war. So, my father opened a policy cell—a diplomatic channel to work with India and talk with the Soviet Union to bring it on the Indian side to strengthen the support for Bangladesh.¹⁹ Nascent Bangladesh adopted democratic principles and a non-aligned foreign policy, which meant it would not side either with the communist or the capitalist bloc. Yet gaining Soviet Union's support was crucial for the survival of Bangladesh. My father understood the complexities of the situation and exerted his diplomatic know-how at its best. So, when on August 9th, 1971, India and Soviet Union signed the peace, friendship, and cooperation treaty, it was a big relief, particularly for Bangladesh. Henry Kissinger in his memoir wrote that this treaty was a “bombshell”.²⁰

Long after, around 1986, we had a chance to ask Dr. Kissinger at Georgetown University why he supported the ruthless Pakistan military junta. He knew that Bangladesh was not a communist country and was fighting for her democratic rights. We held a free and fair election. We won. So why did the USA, being a democratic country, not give support to another democratically elected party? Why did you still support an undemocratic and genocidal military regime of Pakistan? And you know what his reply was? He said, “we knew that Bangladesh participated in a free and fair election and won. We knew the election results were overruled by the Pakistan military, but we needed Pakistan at the time because we were trying to open doors of diplomacy with China at the time and Pakistan was working as you know, as the middle person.” So, in a sense there was no answer to that. USA needed Pakistan to open the doors to China. Did that justify supporting and aiding a genocide? I will ask again, “what kind of leadership made the victory possible for Bangladesh?” The blockade, all the songs, international pressure, Senator Kennedy's visit, everything helped, but then there must be a leadership which can bring everything together in the direction of victory.

The first government popularly known as the Mujibnagar government worked day and night to advance the cause of Bangladesh and gain the international support.²¹ Yet it faced a lot of internal challenges. Tajuddin Ahmad had several attempts on his life. One such planned and attempted attack was aimed at him when he was all alone working in his office.²² A youth faction within his political party

didn't want the government. The foreign Minister, Khondaker Mostaq was making secret channels with Pakistan and with the other superpower USA to form a federation with Pakistan short of full independence.²³ Tajuddin Ahmad tackled and foiled these conspiracies and paved the way to unconditional and complete independence. So it was, again, genuine leadership, which knows how to master and how to really manage all those challenges without giving up on the principles. The government led by my father gave a principled response to Senator Kennedy. In that same lecture which I quoted before, senator Kennedy mentioned:

There is irony in the voices of the leaders of East Bengal with whom I talked and who now constitute themselves as the government of Bangladesh. These leaders will not come to America to ask for assistance.... [As one leader said,] “many nations and people come to America to ask for billions of US dollars, for more guns, more supplies. We Bengalis ask only that you provide nothing – no guns, no money to either side- that you simply remain neutral.”²⁴

My father maintained this sense of dignity throughout the course of leading the war of liberation. He made a dignified appeal to the world. In his address he said: “We appeal for arms from all countries who value freedom and have fought aggression in their own time. In seeking aid from abroad we must remind our friends that this should be given in a spirit of goodwill without strings and designed solely to aid us in our liberation struggle. Bangladesh has struggled for too long to allow itself to become anyone's satellite.”²⁵

The most dignified agreement in the history of Bangladesh was enacted between India and Bangladesh during our war of liberation. Tajuddin Ahmad stated, “Even during the most difficult times of the war I told the Indian forces and Srimati Gandhi, you will enter our country as a friendly state. You will be a friendly state only when you have recognized us as a sovereign nation.... In those nine months, Syed Nazrul Islam and I had jointly signed the agreement that you (India) will recognize us and enter Bangladesh as a supporting force, and you will leave Bangladesh the day we tell you that we no longer need your support.”²⁶

J. N. Dixit, the former Foreign Secretary of India and the First Head of Mission, selected by Indira Gandhi, in the newly liberated Bangladesh, stated, how Tajuddin Ahmad took a firm stand against the Uni command, emphasized by the Indian Military High Command and proposed a joint command structure between the Indian armed forces and the Muktibahini (freedom fighters) of Bangladesh to bring a final defeat to the Pakistan Military in Bangladesh. This stand among others, such as India's official recognition of Bangladesh was honored by Mrs. Gandhi.²⁷

The able and visionary leadership of the First Government of Bangladesh during 1971 galvanized recognition and stopped a genocide. The emergence of Bangladesh as a sovereign nation through the blood and tears of the millions and the dedicated leadership of the First Government led by my father

made Bangabandhu's return to the liberated Bangladesh possible. He was released from Pakistan prison and reunited with his people on January 10, 1972. On January 12, 1972, Bangabandhu assumed power as the next Prime Minister. However, my father's vision of Bangladesh rooted in the democratic principles was not realized in his lifetime. He resigned from Bangabandhu's cabinet as the finance minister on October 26, 1974. Contrary to my father's advice and warning, Bangabandhu abolished all political parties, established a one-party system, transitioned from the parliamentary to presidential form of government and he became the President in January 1975. I will discuss this chapter, the post Bangladesh liberation period in another lecture.

Bangabandhu was assassinated by a wayward section of the military on August 15, 1975. All his family members except his two daughters, (Sheikh Hasina and Sheikh Rehana) who were abroad at the time, were killed on the same tragic day. It is an irony that Bangabandhu appointed the very people, including Mostaq, in the upper echelon of his government, who would plan with the military his assassination and assume power. My father was offered a high position by the assassins, but he declined. He embraced death with dignity, knowing that his refusal to cooperate with the new regime would cost him his life. When they took him from our house, where we were under house arrest, on August 22, my mother asked him when he would come back. The new regime never told us that they were taking my father to prison. He said, "Consider it as if I'm leaving forever." He knew that he would be killed. On the fateful night (November 3, 1975), he was killed along with three of his colleagues with whom he had formed the First Government of Bangladesh. The same day and the day before, he had planted hundreds of flowers. During my mother's last visit with my father, he said that he had seen the military entering the prison and inspecting where they were staying. He said they would not keep them alive. Yet he planted the flowers. A man who can plant flowers knowing that death is imminent is a true leader.

The story doesn't end. My mother, Syeda Zohra Tajuddin (Lily) emerged as a leader. She was the first woman leader of the largest political party of Bangladesh. After Bangabandhu, four National Leaders including my father were assassinated and top-key leaders imprisoned, Awami League, our political party, was left with a huge vacuum of leadership in its darkest time. The people of the party selected my mother to lead the struggle for democracy and social justice. She revived the morale of the party in its most crisis-ridden time and led it with amazing courage, dedication, and sacrifice. That is another story of exemplary leadership I will come back to later. In defining leadership, I would like to quote from the last chapter of my memoir:

Our father left for the hereafter leaving our hearts empty. I wonder sometimes, has he really left? Those who transform their worship of a loving and all-knowing creator into a struggle for the welfare and freedom of distressed humanity, gain immortality in this world as well and become beacons of hope. In search of a Pearl, I found the ocean!²⁸

We humans tend to look for the pearl, the material, in the depths of the ocean. We dive deep into the water to find the pearl, not realizing that the ocean is more valuable. It is so vast. It contains all the pearls and the universe. And what is the lesson of extraordinary leadership? It calls us to the vastness of the universe and guides our thoughts and actions. It leads by example. It teaches us to plant a flower in the face of death. A person who plants a flower knowing that death is imminent is the leader of yesterday, today, and tomorrow.

NOTES

1. Bangabandhu means friend of the Bengalis. It is a title given to Sheikh Mujibur Rahman by the Sarbadalya Chatra Sangram Parishad in 1969. This parishad was a political coalition of students' groups struggling to establish the right of self-determination in East Pakistan.
2. Archer Blood, *The Cruel Birth of Bangladesh: Memoirs of an American Diplomat* (Dhaka: The University Press Limited, 2002), 245.
3. *Editor's Note*: The lead Washington signatory was Craig Baxter, at the time the Desk Officer for South Asia and later Professor of Politics at Juniata College.
4. More information on this historic protest for justice can be found in Richard K. Taylor's acclaimed book, *The Blockade: A Guide to Non-Violent Intervention* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2013).
5. Ferdous, Hasan. 1971: 1971: Our war, their battles | The Daily Star Dhaka. March 26, 2016.
6. Edward M. Kennedy, Speech to the National Press Club, August 26, 1971. Reprinted in *The Congressional Record* 117, part 23, 30949 (September 8, 1971).
7. Sharmin Ahmad, *Tajuddin Ahmad Neta o Pita (Tajuddin Ahmad Leader and father)*, (Dhaka: Oitijhya, 2014), 105.
8. Letter of Prime Minister Indira Gandhi to Prime Minister Tajuddin Ahmad, collection of the author.
9. Amir-ul Islam, *Tajuddin Ahmad: Aloker Anontodhara (Tajuddin Ahmad: Endless Stream of Light)*, edited by Simeen Hussain Rimi (Dhaka: Pratibhas, 2006), 69. Barrister Amir-ul Islam was a close associate of Tajuddin Ahmad. He served as the Principal Aide to Prime Minister Tajuddin Ahmad in 1971.
10. First on Air Speech of Prime Minister Tajuddin Ahmad. Muhammad Nurul Quadir, *Independence of Bangladesh in 266 Days: History and Documentary Evidence* (Dhaka: Mukto Publishers, 2004), 64. Advocate Quadir was the roving ambassador of the People's Republic of Bangladesh, 1971.
11. Ahmad, *Tajuddin Ahmad Neta o Pita*, 65.

12. Interview by the author with Golok Majumder, 24, February 2013. Salt Lake City, Kolkata: India.
13. For more information about this historic meeting please refer to *Tajuddin Ahmad: An Unsung Hero*, A documentary by Tanvir Mokammel, Kino-Eye Films. YouTube.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LijTzF3NWFc>
14. Ahmad, Sharmin. Muktir Kandari Tajuddin: Konnar Abhibadon. Dhaka: Oitijjhya, 2017, 207. Golok Majumder described the conversation between Rustamji and Tajuddin Ahmad in his handwritten letter to Sharmin Ahmad, dated December 8, 2014. The letter was published in the book mentioned above. He also mentioned the same in the documentary, *Tajuddin Ahmad an Unsung Hero*.
15. Amir-ul Islam, *Tajuddin Ahmad Aloker Anontodhara*, 88. Ahmad, *Tajuddin Ahmad Neta o Pita*, 86. This vow, which was possible only for Tajuddin Ahmad to keep had also been mentioned by others who knew and worked with him in the liberation period.
16. Tajuddin Ahmed, First prime minister of Bangladesh – YouTube.
17. Dainik Purbodesh. December 16, 1972. Also, *Tajuddin Ahmad Itihasher Pata Theke (from the pages of history)*, edited by Simeen Hussain Rimi (Dhaka: Pratibhas, 2000), 291.
18. Hasan, Muyeedul. Muldhara 71 (Mainstream 71). (Dhaka: University Press Limited, 1986), 80-81.
19. Hasan, Muyeedul. Upodhara 71 March-April. (Dhaka: Prothoma Prokashan, 2015), 105-116.
20. Henry Kissinger. *The White House Years: 1968-72* (Boston: Little Brown and Company, 1979), 866.
21. The First government's oath taking ceremony was held at the "Baidyanathtala" mango grove in Meherpur, Bangladesh. Tajuddin Ahmad renamed the place "Mujibnagar" "after Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. He stated that Mujibnagar will be the Capital of Bangladesh."
22. Hasan, Muyeedul. Muldhara 71, 145.
23. Ibid. Hasan, Muyeedul, 145. Moshtaq's then private secretary Dr. Kamal Siddiqui corroborated the incident in the following documentary, *The First Government of Bangladesh-1971* <https://www.youtu.be/FGe49uSpeFo> and *Documentary - Tajuddin Ahmad*.
24. Senator Kennedy's speech. Congressional Record, September 8, 1971, p. 30950.
25. Quadir, *Independence of Bangladesh in 266 Days*, 64.
26. Tajuddin Ahmad's speech at the closing ceremony of Awami League's biennial council. January 20, 1974. *Itihasher Pata Theke*, 411-12.
27. J. N. Dixit, *Liberation and Beyond: Indo-Bangladesh Relations* (Delhi: Konark Publishers PVT Ltd., 1999), 85-87.
28. Ahmad, *Tajuddin Ahmad Neta o Pita (Father and Leader)*, 237.