

M. R. SIDDIQI — a remembrance

Homage to late M. R. Siddiqi on his 2nd death anniversary



JIMMY CARTER

On this 2nd anniversary of the death of our friend, M. R. Siddiqi, let us not mourn his departure, but rather, commit ourselves to continuing the fine humanitarian work in which he was involved. Let us honor Bangladesh & Mr. Siddiqi by following his examples as a politician, social worker, family man, and friend.

Jimmy Carter

February 6, 1994



Late Ambassador M. R. Siddiqi and Mrs. Siddiqi were seen with President Jimmy Carter and Rosalynn Carter at the White House in 1977

"AS I KNEW HIM"

Alamgir M. A. Kabir

President BIRDEM, Past District Governor 315 Lions Clubs Int.

I am writing to pay my tribute to the memory of Late Lion M.R. Siddiqi.

It will take a volume to record the great services he rendered to the nation in various fields. So, I would mention only a few aspects of his contribution for human welfare.

I first came in close contact with him when he and his charming wife, Kohinoor, were our house guests in Gulshan, Dhaka, in early 1969 on the occasion of his official visit as District Governor, Lions Clubs International to my home Club, the Lions Club of Dhaka. The affection that grew between us then was carried to the last.

In the politico economic situation in the then East Pakistan, he was an entrepreneur. Facing many handicaps, he showed his quality of leadership in organising two successful financial organisations in the Banking and in the Insurance fields.

The nation will remember with gratitude his contribution in the War of Liberation in 1971. He paid the price and, among other things, half of his beautiful house in Battaly Hill in Chittagong was demolished by the forces of the military junta which had usurped power in Pakistan.

He was at the same time a person with wide sympathy for those who were ailing or in

need. He again became a legendary figure in the service activities of Lions Clubs in Bangladesh. For his exemplary leadership in bringing succour to those who suffered in the terrible cyclone in Chittagong in 1960 he was rightly awarded the rare honour of Humanitarian Medal by the Lions Clubs International.

After Liberation, when we were trying to pick up our strides in all matters, he again took the lead to organise the Lions Clubs all over the country, so that the tradition of service to those in want may continue. I still recollect numerous occasions when on his invitation I joined him and his best friend Lion Mohammed Khaled to visit District after District to re-organise or start new Lions Clubs. His selfless service earned him the title of love from fellow Lions who came to regard him as the "Father of Lionism in Bangladesh".

The Traits in which he, of course, excelled himself were sincere friendship, his unfailing courtesy to all irrespective of social status and sympathy with an unequalled magnanimity for those who were in misfortune. The nation is poorer by the passing away of this great son of the soil, who will always live in the heart and thoughts of those who came in contact with him.

M. R. Siddiqi and the Liberation War : A personal memoir

Prof. Rehman Sobhan
Economist, Former Adviser to the President

I have known the late M. R. Siddiqi for many years since our relations go back to an earlier generation where my father and his father-in-law the late A.K. Khan were well known to know M. R. Siddiqi more intimately in the 1969/70 period after the fall of the Ayub government.

I met him at a very critical moment in our history, on the 23 March, 1971. On that day, a public holiday, he had driven up to Dhaka with Mr. Khaled, a well known banker from Chittagong. We met in the Circuit House Row, residence of Dr. Kamal Hossain. M. R. Siddiqi was anxious to obtain instructions from the Awami League high command about what to do in the face of the mounting confrontation with the Pakistani army in Chittagong. As the then District President of the Awami League he was expected to give local leadership to the nationalist forces. He told Kamal and myself that in Chittagong he was in touch with the Bangalis in the army and EPR and that they were awaiting instructions from the nationalists leadership as to what they should do in the face of the imminent attack by the Pakistani forces building up in Chittagong. The stand-off over

the unloading of the M. V. Swat was reaching boiling point and the Pakistan GHQ had given instructions that in the face of the non-cooperation by the dock workers in Chittagong the Swat was to be unloaded by army jawans, by force if necessary. As the principal political figure in Chittagong at that time M.R. Siddiqi was expected to liaise between the Bangalis in the military and the political forces but remained uncertain of what he should do in view of the ongoing political dialogue between Bangobandhu, Yahya and Bhutto. After his meeting with us M.R. and Khaled went on to Road 32, Dhanmondi to get direct instructions from Bangobandhu. We did not see him again, on that day so that I do not know what brief he carried back to Chittagong and how this influenced events in and after the 26th of March.

My next meeting with M.R. Siddiqi was at a no less historic moment at the Agartala Stadium around 31st March or 1st April. I had just come across the border with Prof. Anisur Rahman and the TV celebrity Mostafa Monwar. We had passed through Teliapara tea garden where we had another historic meeting with the late Khaled Mosharraf who was then a Major who had made the tea garden his headquarters after capturing his Pakistani commanding officer and brought his Bengali troops into the liberation war. Khaled had given us a shopping list for arms which we were supposed to pass on to the Probashi Bangalis who were raising funds abroad to support the Mukti Bahini—that is if we got as far as London. When I therefore met M.R. Siddiqi at the stadium my first thought was to pass on my responsibility as an arms procurer to a person in a rather more responsible position than



Mr. M. R. Siddiqi seen handing over a letter to President Richard Nixon as the Special Envoy to the Prime Minister Sheikh Mujibur Rahman at the Oval office, White House in 1973.

mine. In those days teachers of economics did not have too much of a comparative advantage in the area of military hardware procurement. M.R. Siddiqi was located in the Agartala Stadium where a miscellaneous collection of M.P.s., political workers, some Bangali armed forces personnel, had been located by the local administration in Agartala after they came across the border. M.R. Siddiqi told Anis and myself that he was the senior most Awami League leader with whom the Indian authorities had till then established contact. According to Siddiqi the Indian officials in Agartala, attached to the Tripura government were quite unprepared for the dramatic events unfolding across their border. Large numbers of refugees had already begun to cross the border and were being housed in such makeshift facilities as the local stadium.

Of more concern to the Indian authorities in Tripura was the situation created by the Bangali commanders of the EPR and army who had come across the border and were seeking arms from India to help them engage the much better equipped Pakistan army getting ready to launch its counterattack in Chittagong. M.R. Siddiqi's first task was thus to seek arms from India on behalf of the Bangali, armed resistance locked in a critical battle for Chittagong. However the Chief Minister of Tripura whose name I forget, had neither the authority or the capacity to handle such a request for arms. The Chief Minister had thus advised M.R. Siddiqi to accompany him immediately to Delhi to place his request for political recognition for the newly independent Bangladesh and arms to reinforce the resistance to Pakistani armed aggression against the newly independent state.

When I met Siddiqi at the Agartala Stadium he was getting ready to leave for Delhi that evening accompanied by Sirajul Huq, then an Awami League M.P. and a well known advocate from Comilla. Mr. Siddiqi suggested that Anisur Rahman and myself accompany him to Delhi where our connections with the Indian economist's fraternity may be serviceable in establishing contact with the powers that be in Delhi. Anis and myself were somewhat unprepared for suddenly being thrust from being teachers of economics to emissaries on behalf of a newly independent nation in a state of armed insurgency. If I remember correctly I had to be loaned a pyjama and panjabi as well as a razor by M.R. Siddiqi to look sufficiently respectable as an emissary for Bangladesh. Thus within hours of our arrival in Agartala, Anis

and myself found ourselves flying to Delhi along with M.R. Siddiqi and Sirajul Huq, with the Chief Minister of Tripura as our escort. On the plane first to Calcutta and then onto Delhi, I had long discussion with M.R. about what we should do in Delhi. He had till then no knowledge if any of the Awami League high command was alive and was thus unsure of what authority he had to speak for Bangladesh with the Prime Minister of India. Since at that time the Indian authorities had no idea of what was going on in Bangladesh or the background to these events or knew any one of the leaders of the Awami League we seemed to be flying into an unknown political terrain where M.R. Siddiqi, as the first senior representative of the Bangladesh Liberation Movement to reach Delhi to seek the help of the Indian government, had to assume a temporary mantle of leadership.

When we reached Delhi we were all taken to Tripura House the Chief Minister of Tripura. I then managed to phone Amartya Sen who immediately came over with his wife Nabaneeta from the University in old Delhi and took Anis and me back to his home. Before leaving we discussed with M.R. the ground he may cover in his prospective meeting with the Indian Government.

As I understand it, M.R. Siddiqi did meet Indira Gandhi but by that time Tajuddin Ahmed, accompanied by Barrister Ameerul Islam (minus his well known beard) had reached Delhi, having crossed the western border into West Bengal. Since Tajuddin was the General Secretary of the Awami League and a member of the party high command, he was the obvious person to speak for the independent government of Bangladesh in its dialogues with the Government of India. Siddiqi was happy to hand over the role of spokesman for Bangladesh to Tajuddin and to return to Agartala to assume political leadership in that critical area where he could also re-establish contact with his family.

He was the District Governor of District 315E (Pakistan) Lions International 1968-69, 1969-70 and District Governor 315 (Bangladesh) from 1972-73. He received the "Humanitarian Award", the highest and most prestigious in Lions International, for his outstanding relief work after the 1960 devastating cyclone and tidal bore in the coastal areas of Chittagong. He was the Founder Chairman of the Bangladesh Lions Foundation and Eye Hospitals in Dhaka & Chittagong. Apart from Lions, he was also President of OISCA (Bangladesh Chapter), Chairman, Under-privileged Children Education Programme (UCEP) and Founder of Latifa Siddiqi Girls College and Girls High School, at Kumira, Sitakund. He had innumerable leadership positions in

likewise. By then the Bengali diplomats in Washington and New York had switched allegiance from Pakistan to Bangladesh so that in Washington Siddiqi could draw upon the services of senior diplomats such as Enayat Karim, S.A. Karim, Shamsul Kibria, A.M.A. Muhi and a host of others who formed the nucleus of the Bangladesh Mission in Connecticut Avenue and in New York and provided a very strong infrastructure for the campaign in the U.S. In Washington, Siddiqi served as a suave spokesman for Bangladesh, whose soft spoken manner went down well in presenting our case.

M. R. SIDDIQI : A PERSONAL TRIBUTE

Dr. Kamal Hossain
Chairman, Democratic Forum, Former Foreign Minister.

Although I had known Mr. M. R. Siddiqi on a personal and professional level throughout the sixties when he had been a Member of the National Assembly, I had the privilege of first having direct working relations with him during the non-cooperation movement in 1971. I was then one of the persons deputed to be in the control room with Mr. Tajuddin Ahmed. Mr. M. R. Siddiqi was in constant touch reporting on the situation in Chittagong in order to obtain directives from Bangabandhu. He was maintaining contact with Bengali Officers in the Chittagong cantonment along with other important sectors. It was not, therefore, surprising that he and his family were among the prime targets after the crackdown. He had, thereafter, played a distinguished role in the diplomatic mobilisation of international support for Bangladesh.

I also had the privilege of being his colleague when he was Minister of Commerce in Bangabandhu's Cabinet. He was always soft-spoken but forthright and firm in putting across his point of view in cabinet meetings. He did not hesitate to offer constructive criticism, some of which in retrospect seems to have been timely and appropriate. Thereafter I had the privilege as Foreign Minister of Bangladesh of participating in his

appointment as Ambassador to the United States. Unfortunately the tragic events of August 1975 intervened so that he could only take up his post in September. I remember with a sense of appreciation that he was one of the first of my colleagues who came to see me in hospital in London in September, 1975 with the full knowledge that the post-coup government in Bangladesh would no doubt receive a report about this meeting and would not like it. The change in the Government did not affect either his political convictions or his personal relationships. I continued to meet him during his days in Washington D. C. and I had the pleasure of being his guest there.

During the last of his working days we came into contact professionally. I was impressed to see how despite having spent an active public and diplomatic life, he had remained a highly professional person, having started life as a professional chartered accountant. I remember him with profound respect and affection as a perfect gentleman, courteous and modest, but a person of firm convictions and someone whose love for the country led him to accept sacrifices and suffering for the political cause in which he believed. He has left behind a legacy and an example which will be a source of inspiration to all those whom he has left behind.

M.R. Siddiqi

A Life Sketch



Mr. M.R. Siddiqi, eldest son of the late Al-haj Mohammad Hossain Chowdhury, was born March 1, 1926 in Sitakund, Chittagong. He completed his M.Com. from Calcutta University in 1947, served as Lecturer, Dhaka University

(1948-50), went on to take a degree from London University, and followed with the final examination of the Institute of Taxation, 1954 and Chartered Accountancy (Institute of Chartered Accountants of England & Wales) in 1954. He was elected a fellow of both the Royal Economic Society and the Royal Statistics Society. After returning from the U.K., he joined James Finlay P.L.C. as Chief Accountant (1956-58). On 9th February, 1957 he married Latifa Khan, eldest daughter of Mr. A.K. Khan. Former Central Minister of Government of Pakistan. They have five sons. In 1958 he joined the A.K. Khan Group of Industries as Finance Director.

His career as an entrepreneur started around 1962, and he played a leading role in the

establishment of a number of new ventures as Managing Director and/or Chairman. These companies were: A. K. Khan Jute Mills Ltd., Eastern Insurance Company Ltd. (now part of Sadharan Bima Corporation), S. K. M. Jute Mills Ltd., National Motors Ltd., Crescent Motors Ltd., Therapeutics (Bangladesh) Ltd., Sidko Limited, Sidko Limited (Garments Division), and Federal Insurance Company Limited. He was also a founding Director of the Eastern Mercantile Bank Ltd., (first East Pakistani Bank, at present Pubali Bank Ltd.) and the founding Vice Chairman of Al Baraka Bank Bangladesh Limited.

Apart from a distinguished career as an entrepreneur, Mr Siddiqi was also a leading

figure in Government and politics. He was first elected Member of the Pakistan National Assembly in 1962 as an Independent Candidate. Within a short period, he organised an opposition group in the National Assembly and was elected its Treasurer. He joined the Awami League in 1964 and became its Treasurer, as well as the President of Chittagong District Awami League (1964-72). He was again elected Member of the National Assembly of Pakistan in 1970 and Member of Bangladesh Jatiya Sangsad in 1973. The high point of his political career was his leading role in the Liberation War, when he was Chairman of the Sangram Parishad of Chittagong District and organized the resistance against the Pakistan Army

including the establishment of the Shadhin Bangla Betar Kendra, initially at Kalurghat Radio Relay Station. He initiated the activities of the Bangladesh Government in exile and was subsequently Chairman of the Eastern-zone (Command) comprising of the then five districts of Chittagong division and the districts of Barisal, Faridpur and Dhaka. In July 1971 he went to the U.S.A. as Envoy of the exiled Government to lobby support with the U.S. Government and people.

After liberation in 1972, he was appointed Minister for Commerce and Foreign Trade in the first Mujib Cabinet and went on record as its only member to oppose the nationalisation policy. In 1973, as special envoy of the Prime

Minister, he met the heads of the States and Governments of the U.S.A., Canada and Western Europe and lobbied for the repatriation of the stranded Bangladeshis in Pakistan. He was appointed Ambassador to the U.S.A. and Mexico in July 1975 by the Mujib Government. He was an ardent believer in democracy, and his strong opposition to BAKSAL, the one party concept, ultimately led to his expulsion from the Awami League in 1980. He then retired from active politics, despite being approached by successive regimes.

Mr. Siddiqi was an equally well known social worker, especially as the "Father of Lionism in Bangladesh" for his service and dedicated leadership over the years towards the cause of Lionism.

He was the District Governor of District 315E (Pakistan) Lions International 1968-69, 1969-70 and District Governor 315 (Bangladesh) from 1972-73. He received the "Humanitarian Award", the highest and most prestigious in Lions International, for his outstanding relief work after the 1960 devastating cyclone and tidal bore in the coastal areas of Chittagong. He was the Founder Chairman of the Bangladesh Lions Foundation and Eye Hospitals in Dhaka & Chittagong. Apart from Lions, he was also President of OISCA (Bangladesh Chapter), Chairman, Under-privileged Children Education Programme (UCEP) and Founder of Latifa Siddiqi Girls College and Girls High School, at Kumira, Sitakund. He had innumerable leadership positions in

associations and organisations of various types, including Presidency of Metropolitan Chamber of Commerce, & Industry, Bangladesh Aushad Shilpa Samity and Insurance Association of Pakistan, to name a few. He was also the founder President of Bangladesh Japan Friendship Society. He was the Convenor of Bangladesh Chamber of Industries and established it in 1985.

Mr. Siddiqi led an active and fruitful life, setting standards of personal and professional conduct across Bangladesh society wherever he was involved. He was kind and generous to a fault, and will perhaps be best remembered for his exemplary attitude towards people from all walks of life, for which he earned the affection and respect of thousands.