

# 'Swadhin Bangla Betar Kendra': Account of an Insider

by Shahidur Rahman

"YE Radio Bangladesh Hai - Aab Shahidur Huq Se Urdu Me Khabre Sunte". It is this Khabre - the news in Urdu - from which the Pakistani jawans (soldiers) got the other side of the story of our liberation movement. Our news were accurate, to the point and devoid of any propaganda. In the beginning the Pakistanis were distrustful but by July 1971 they were convinced that all is not well in the eastern front. The truth started to filter in and the Pak jawans listened to our news in their bunkers with rapt attention. Dear readers you are probably informed that Pak soldiers were mostly Punjabis and Pathans and would only understand Punjabi, Pushtu and Urdu. Bengali and English were like Chinese to them. Therefore, Urdu was the only medium through which we could communicate with them.

Although belated - but this is to remind the nation that Urdu played a very important role in the War of Independence. Keeping this in mind 'Swadhin Bangla Betar Kendra' started its Urdu section from early June '71, to infiltrate the minds and souls of the Pakistani soldiers.

It all started when myself and Shafiq Rehman of BBC and presently of "Jai Jai Din" decided to cross the border over to India and join the mainstream of our liberation movement. This secret was kept within three of us only - myself, Shafiq and Qamrul Huda (now Managing Director of Eastern Bank). In mid April one fine morning I and Shafiq started for Narsingdi enroute to Rasulpur (village home of Shafiq). Our transport, a Toyota jeep, was provided by Qamrul Huda, the then Asst. Vice President of United Bank. Qamrul lent this jeep because the driver was a Pathan, with the hope that our journey would be less hazardous. All the time during the journey I kept the Pathan amused by my fluent Urdu and asked Shafiq to keep silent pretending a sore throat. When we reached Narsingdi we saw the market completely gutted a day earlier by the Pakistan army. We managed to reach Manikgaur and walked the 5/6 miles to Rasulpur.

On reaching Rasulpur we found Shafiq's parents, our revered teacher Principal Syedur Rahman and his wife, Dr Muniruzzaman, head of the Bengali Department, Dhaka University, his wife and their bright little daughter, who in those days were a star in Pakistan Television's children's programme also were there. I stayed in the village for ten days and shall never forget the love and affection bestowed on me by Shafiq's mother. Possibly she could understand the hapless situation I was in, that is, away from the family my future being bleak with no

chance of joining the family in the near future. My wife, one daughter and three sons were lucky enough to be sent away to England. Here, I would like to thank Mr Aminul Huq Chowdhury the then Deputy Controller of Foreign Exchange, State Bank of Pakistan, Karachi (later Deputy Governor of Bangladesh Bank and presently Executive Director, IFIC Bank) who gave the "P-forms" and passage permit to travel abroad. I have on purpose mentioned this, because in those days it was impossible for a Bengali family to obtain 'P-forms' without the approval of the Government House. Therefore, I am personally indebted to this gentleman.

To come back to main theme, we (me, Shafiq and Dr Muniruzzaman) discussed about our travelling to India. It was finally decided that Shafiq who held a British passport and already a prominent member of BBC, London, would rather go to UK and work for the liberation movement. As for myself, since I had no option and no particular aim as to how to contribute towards the movement, would cross over to India. I do not know what were the reasons that prevented Dr Muniruzzaman to cross the border, to India, although it seemed to me that his wife was keen to go.

Anyway those few days that we spent together are like gems stored in my memory box. We sang patriotic songs, discussed pros and cons of the movement, our future which led to a blind alley and so on and so forth. When you are distressed and your chips are down you are also ravenously hungry. We relished our meals of egg curry, *alu bharta* *begun bharta*, *daal/bhat* and of

course, chicken curry on rare occasions. All prepared by that loving lady - Shafiq's mother (may her departed soul rest in peace - Amen).

Our Sir, Late Syedur Rahman arranged for an escort for me, a person called Dudu Miah who would take me to Agartala border. Dudu Miah procured two bicycles and with much adieu we proceeded towards our destination. But soon it transpired that to ride the cycle on rough and uneven path and on the narrow path along the paddy fields is an impossibility. So I abandoned the cycles in the next village. By evening we reached a village (I forgot the name) and Dudu Miah took me to his brother-in-law's house, where his cousin sister fed us with boiled eggs, *daal/bhat* and a bowl of hot milk.

But by late evening it transpired that few workers from Adamjee Jute Mills who happened to visit their village home came to know that I was to cross the border. They were pro-Pakistani and decided to hand me over to the Pak authorities. Had not Dudu Miah whisked me in time to the nearest village in thick of the night my fate would have been otherwise. There in another relative's place I spent a sleepless night. We departed when it was still dark but before I was given hot milk and *muri*. It was still dark when we reached the Dhaka-Chittagong Trunk Road. It was a scene to be watched - thousands of people were crossing with their meagre belongings to save themselves from the Pak atrocities.

Safely, we reached the Agartala border in the late afternoon from where Dudu Miah returned back. There was

a huge refugee camp near the border. Instead of staying back in the camp I headed for the Agartala town. There I stayed in a small dingy hotel. Next morning I went to see Late MR Siddiqui who was in charge of Joy Bangla affairs. After hearing that I want to fly to Calcutta, he laughed and said that flights are all booked for weeks together, besides, I have to pay for the passage money myself. The other alternative was to go by bus to Dharmanagar and catch a train to Calcutta. I went to the bus station and there also all buses were full, even extra seats provided by way of "moras" were also booked.

I was very depressed and was walking aimlessly. After a while I stopped in front of a small store to buy some biscuits and all of a sudden somebody hugged me from behind and shouted "Farhat bhai, you?" I turned around and saw with utter surprise that it was my brother-in-law, my wife's maternal brother Ferdous (Abdul Matin Chowdhury then a 3rd year medical student and now Managing Director of Graphics Ltd., Rahim Textile Mills). He was with three other boys in an army jeep. I came to know that his elder brother Faruq (Late Abdul Salek Chowdhury, then an army Captain) was commanding the liberation forces in Agartala front and that Ferdous and his other friends also from Dhaka Medical College were manning the make shift hospital. He insisted that I should come along with him to see Faruq. So I went and met Faruq who was equally surprised in seeing me. But in those days surprises were a common factor. I went around

the camp and saw EPR *Jawans* and *mukti joddhas* (freedom fighters) from villages. All were vibrantly alive with confidence and dedication. I distinctly remember that night, Faruq (Salek Chowdhury) was to ambush a Pakistani patrol. I wanted to go along also but the Subedar Major put his foot down and said I being a civilian would be a hindrance to the operation. So, I stayed back and the whole night and I could hear the firing from distant places. Early next morning Faruq returned with his men. Fortunately, there was no casualty, only two of the men were injured (though not seriously). I found Faruq very nervous and at the point of a breakdown. Later, he told me that he has killed a Punjabi Captain who happened to be a batch mate of his and a dear friend.

I stayed for 2/3 days in the camp and since I found myself of no use in that martial environment, I decided to proceed to Calcutta. Faruq's jeep dropped me in Agartala. Again there were no seats in the buses, so I made up my mind to ride a truck. Oh, I forgot to mention that three of Ferdous's friends, one a doctor and two other final medical students were also to come to Calcutta. They were to look for their near relatives who crossed the border separately. Poor Ferdous was left alone to care for the wounded.

Fortunately, we got seats along with the driver. One of us sat on the right side of the driver and the other three on the left side. It was a nightmarish journey I shall never forget. We had to go over

the winding roads of Meghalaya mountain range. The road was hazardous, there were numerous hairpin bends and steep slopes ran down thousands of feet. As usual the truck driver was a reckless one. However, at around 2 pm we stopped at a small market place to have refreshment. We had some biscuits and tea and waited for the driver to return. After about one hour the driver emerged with blood shot eyes and swaying a bit from side to side. No wonder he had drunk country liquor heavily! He instructed his assistant to take over the steering wheel and went up behind the truck to take his nap. God only knows how we were saved from any untoward incidents. All the time I kept my eyes shut and silently said my prayers. Then I think, at about 6 pm., the truck stopped and the driver came down and took over the wheel. I heard little commotion behind and gathered that the train from Dharmanagar departs at 8 pm. and that we were behind schedule. The driver was now driving like a mad person. By God, believe me, it was like jumping from the frying pan to the fire. I do not know how we reached Dharmanagar in one piece.

Somehow or the other we managed to board the train just seconds before it departed. The compartments were full of Joy Bangla people. Next morning we reached a junction station and up came the Railway Police who demanded to see our passes and asked us to get the passes from railway police station. By the time we were trying to collect the passes, the train had left. The idea was to accommodate the local revenue passengers as all Joy Banglas

were travelling free. I saw thousands of refugees scattered in and around the platform. Most of them waiting for days. It was a terrible situation. I decided that whatever it takes I must board the next train. So we bought third class tickets and boarded the train. We reached Scaldah in the evening only to find that it was a halt day and no transport were available.

I had made up my mind first to go to Late Ashraf Ali Chowdhury, the famous M.P. who drew the highest votes in the election, even higher than Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. He was then residing in Taltolia in his in-laws residence. So I walked down all the way to Taltolia with the other three boys who could not proceed to their destinations as the areas were far flung. When I reached the Taltolia residence, I looked absolutely like a beggar famished and at the point of dropping down. Chowdhury Bhai and his wife (who are very close family friends) could not recognise me and when they did we all broke into tears. I was provided with a white lung and *kurta* (Chowdhury Bhai's branded attire) and then had a bath, probably after 7/8 days. I shall never forget the taste of hot *parathas* and omelette that Bhai made for us.

Next day I moved over to one of my distant cousin's residence at 9 McLeod street. In premises No. 7, I met Mammur Rashid CSP and his wife Raka who were staying with their relations. However, every evening I used to meet Chowdhury Bhai who was then in a state of depression and has become very frail and weak. Chowdhury Bhai was in the longtime habit of having a



Mass upsurge



The freedom fighters.

peg or two after sun down which he did not touch since he landed in Calcutta. So to revive his spirits with spirit, the mantle fell on me. I had to provide the Indian stuff once or twice a week of course. Bhai gave me the money. In matter of weeks Chowdhury Bhai was his vibrant self again. He was one person who was second to none in enjoying life and parting joy to others. A person of unique character with boundless energy and full of humour which could contaminate anyone coming near to him.

I distinctly remember, it was in the early parts of May '71 that I went to see Mannan Bhai (Mr. Abdul Mannan, then Information & Broadcasting Minister of the shadow cabinet at Mujibnagar. He became Home Minister after liberation). He was also a very close family friend of ours. He used to sit at "Joy Bangla" office in Jhatala Road, Park Circus. Another personality with distinctive character he was. When Mannan Bhai saw me he just gaped at me for minutes and finally shouted "I have found it, I found it". Everyone around him was astonished. After usual exchange of courtesies, he said you know Farhat (pronounced Farhad by him) that I was looking for someone who has good grasp of the Urdu language and now that I have got you, you must start Urdu section in 'Swadhin Bangla Betar Kendra'. Mannan Bhai mentioned that Information Ministry of India through the All India Radio has been pressing him to start Urdu news from Swadhin Bangla Betar Kendra, as this was the mother tongue of the Pakistani leaders.

All India Radio (AIR) maintained that our English news would reach the foreigners and intellectuals and Bengali news would communicate with the masses of Bangladesh. But to influence the Pakistani *Jawans* and let the realities of the Liberation War drive home, Urdu was the only answer. AIR was ready with personnel to broadcast Urdu news from Swadhin Bangla Betar Kendra. But Mannan Bhai was reluctant and was vying for time till he could find someone among us. It was fortunate for me that I happened to be there at the right moment. Needless to mention that I was and still am quite proficient in the Urdu language, probably because of my mother's Urdu origin. Mannan Bhai knew my background and instructed me to start the ball rolling.

I requested Mannan Bhai to give atleast two weeks time by which I would be able to brush up my Urdu. I started to listen Radio Pakistan's Urdu news and read Urdu dailies. In Urdu news there are many coin words or phrases which otherwise are not commonly used in literature. Finally, be-

Continued on page 13

## Formation of Provisional Government of Bangladesh: Agartala Episode

As is known, Barrister Amirul Islam has narrated his account regarding the formation of Provisional Government, being in company of its founder, late Tajuddin Ahmad. My participation was confined to Agartala events. Khondkar Mushtaque was in hiding in my clinic in Dhaka from the noon of 27th March, 1971. He was brought in camouflaged as a corpse covered in white cloth on a stretcher in a vehicle.

On 7th of April, while having breakfast together we were listening to All India Radio, Calcutta. In the news commentary after the News, it was suggested that the Indian Government should recognise the Provisional Government of Bangladesh.

This was considered to be a significant indication either about the formation of a Provisional Government or inviting to form one and approach the Indian Government. And we discussed dispassionately about the probability. In case, some one has already formed a government, it must be found out. In case, it is an invitation, it must be formed. Khondkar Mushtaque Ahmad was the senior most Vice-President of the Awami League after Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. It was known that the Sheikh was already taken to custody. Therefore, naturally Khondkar was the next competent person to form any Government. So, I persuaded him that is any case, it was high time for him to go to Agartala. We had information that a large number of our politicians both from Chittagong and Dhaka were already there. Besides, something had to be done to cope with the devastating situation. Person like Khondkar Mushtaque Ahmad could not be in hiding for an indefinite period. He had a responsibility, particularly in absence of the Sheikh. But he could not do anything being inside Bangladesh then. The only immediate alternative was to go to Agartala; The Chief Minister capital of eastern Indian state of Tripura. There was originally a person from Brahmanbaria. I met him during 1957 in the house of the then Health Minister late Dhirendra Nath Datta at Minto Road. He was politician from Surya Sen's time. We had a long discussion about those periods. I suggested to Khondkar that I could escort him to

Agartala and introduce to the chief minister, Sachin Babu. We could ask for transport to go to Delhi if no one had already formed the Government.

I had an advantage. As a physician, having an ambulance, I could move about in white dress. But how to escort the Khondkar? Next day was Friday. Curfew used to be lifted during Jummah prayer. The Khondkar could be dressed as a *Namaji* and escorted by the clinic boy. I gathered more information about Akhaura-Brahmanbaria border. At noon, Khondkar took leave from the inmates of the clinic in the garb of his elder brother who came to Dhaka for treatment.

The Clinic ambulance ran a couple of kindred meters ahead of the baby taxi which carried the Khondkar. I followed him in my car driving myself in a doctor's dress in an equidistance from the baby taxi. Except for one obstruction of questioning at Jatrabari, the journey was uneventful. I put him in a small boat and returned to get ready for my trip. It was arranged that he would be going to Rayer Bazar, to the House of an Awami League there and I'd join him by 11 pm.

At night I went to Demra ghat in my ambulance and crossed the river in a small boat in the darkness. There was no ferry service, but small boats were always handy against some extra payment. Rickshaw was also available on the other side. So I reached Khondkar in time. It was a two-storey building. Khondkar was kept upstairs. By then, the bazar was flooded with Pakistani flags. It was decided that my next destination would be the house of another Awami League at Chandina. I left at 5 am with a nephew of Khondkar and crossed both the Meghna and Gumti rivers by small boats maintaining a distance from the ghats which were guarded by few soldiers. There was no one on the road but transport was available. We reached Chandina by noon and were shown the way to the border by a narrow village pathway; the Mainamati Road was blocked by the army. I was given an escort as Khondkar's nephew returned to him. I was well accommodated by 5 pm.

Khondkar reached there by midnight. In the early morning, Khondkar was dressed as an ordinary villager and few of us walked a couple of miles towards the border.

At the border, Khondkar perhaps hesitated to cross it standing at the crossroads between the past and the future. He was saying: "after all, we brought Pakistan!" I replied, "Yes, but the Pakistani soldiers destroyed it by indulging in massive genocide." He crossed the border perhaps with a bit of his sentiment within. I kept him waiting at a distance from the locality and found out the BSF Captain, gave him Khondkar's identity and sought for a transport.

It took an hour to procure an old jeep to take us to Agartala. The jeep fell out of the road at one place. The Khondkar was telling me that I brought him to meet the fate of Shubhash Bose. I requested him not to kid himself. We found Agartala was crowded by known faces including that of Col Osmany who shaved his moustache. It was revealed that the secret of having unusual moustache was some spot in the upper lip. I took him out of the room to ask whether any attempt was made to form a government. He replied, that Mr Tajuddin was coming in the evening with other leaders from Tura. Khondkar got more information from Taheruddin Thakur. We were escorted to a school which was given for refugee camp at an area known as Chwakh Chomuhani. We were taken to the room where Thakur stayed with Mahbul Alam Chashi.

Khondkar got upset when he heard that Tajuddin was reported to have seen Mrs Indira Gandhi. However, in the evening, Tajuddin, Syed Nazrul Islam and Capt. Mansur Ali arrived. They were accommodated in the Circuit House. They came to the Cottage in which the late Mr M R Siddiki was staying with his family and father in law Mr A K Khan. The four leaders had a closed door meeting until 11 pm.

We were waiting outside. Khondkar Mushtaque Ahmad came out rather restless and looking very upset. Tajuddin Ahmad followed him saying:

Mushtaque Bhai, I fall on your feet, please accept this arrangement for three months. Afterwards, I'll listen to whatever you say." The Khondkar replied, "I have got headache and belly ache. I cannot talk now. Doctor, please take me back quickly and treat me."

We got into a rickshaw. On the way, he told me: Tajuddin already went to Delhi and met Indira Gandhi. He fixed up a Government with himself as Prime Minister and Bangabandhu as the President. Syed Nazrul Islam was made the Acting President. I cannot agree with this arrangement. I am the senior most man and I should be made either the Acting President or the Prime Minister." He also said that Tajuddin made a recorded speech which was broadcast in the morning.

by Dr T Hossain

I was happy to hear that at least a Provisional Government was formed and some one had been to Delhi to make arrangement with Mrs Gandhi. I listened to Khondkar very sympathetically and appreciated that he had a point. But I told him, "How could he name you in your absence? It was surely wrong not to place you in a senior position. But, once an announcement is made, it is not the time to question it."

After all it was done by a bonafide leader, Tajuddin who had been issuing directives on behalf of the Awami League since March 1. He was the right person to name himself the Prime Minister. But, the post of Acting President was due to the Khondkar. However, there is a very long story about this vice-presidentship. Provincial Awami League had three vice-presidents. The seniority belonged to him but it was never determined.

I told Khondkar to consider the gain due to the formation of the provisional Government. It created an identity, an authority. It could be utilized to organise the movement and plan the confrontation with the Pakistani Army. It mattered little who occupied which position. The fact was that the Provisional Government was composed of the leadership of the Awami

League. No body else had that authority. Bangabandhu was made the President very rightly. In his absence, any of the vice-presidents of Awami League was good enough to carry on the responsibility. Besides, the very presence of the Khondkar was good enough. Both Syed Nazrul and captain Osmany personally respected and regarded Khondkar as their senior. Still I found the Khondkar very upset and persuaded him very politely. After all, I took him to declare him as the Head of the Provisional Government but I had to defend Tajuddin's action under the circumstances.

When we reached our room of stay, we met Abdul Mannan and Abdus Samad Azad in our room. They were seen physically shattered and too tired. There were two cots in the

room. Initially, Thakur and Chashi were sleeping on them. These were allotted to Khondkar and me in the afternoon. When these two persons arrived, Thakur tried for alternative accommodation but every room already had many persons. The Swadhin Bangla Betar that was brought from Kalur Ghat was being put into operation from the ground floor of that house and many enthusiastic persons were trying to make it work. Its broadcast would not go beyond one mile. Whatever could be recorded, was first played from a distant place inside the forest. Thakur was the senior person in that group. Every body listened to him. He arranged another cot but got no place for himself and Chashi. So, they shared one, Mannan and Azad were placed on another. Khondkar and I shared the third. Mannan and Azad were too tired. They slept early. Thakur and Chashi did not participate in my discussion with Khondkar. They were busy in making arrangement for food and shelter.

I was trying to solve the most crucial problem of the moment. Unless, some solution was found in the night, the problem would flare up in the morning. If it is disclosed that there had been difference in the formation of the Gov-

ernment, the personality clash would overshadow other issues. Division may take place amongst the supporters. The non-faction majority would be dismayed. If the disclosure went to the host circle, whom would they support? Such a situation could not be allowed to prevail in the morning. It had to be solved at that very moment, at least before the dawn. So, I put together all my experience and acumen. I took up the question of seniority. Conceded to Khondkar's claim. Then, I said, "If you find some one on the top of the tree in the morning, it means that he was climbing while you were sleeping. Your seniority goes during that time. While you had been resting at the clinic in Dhaka, Tajuddin had been walking all the way to Kushtia border and escaped to the other side. He found his way to Delhi rightly. He did the correct thing so much needed at the moment. An arrangement was agreed upon. Now, how can he go back to Gandhi and tell her about the change? He will have to prove the truth of his position. He will have to present a unified appearance. Once that is done, subsequent modification can be made on the basis of unity. No difference of opinion should be made visible." The Khondkar asked me what could be his position in the cabinet? I said, the portfolios had not yet been decided upon. The formation of the Government had not yet been publicised. It needed a formal declaration which must be constitutional. Being a lawyer, he should look at the constitutional aspect of regularising the formation of the government. Its bonafide was to be fixed up first. The question of position of an individual was irrelevant.

It was soon realised that every Minister must be allocated specific responsibility. Then I said, "Alright, left every one have a responsibility. Tajuddin is the Secretary of the Party. As such, the organisation can be looked after by him. In that case, his appointment as Prime Minister is justified. So, let it remain as such. He can move around the border with Col Osmany who can be designated as the Chief of the Armed Forces. He had no rival

being the senior most. The Acting President can be left in charge of all paper works and Syed Nazrul was a befitting person for that job. Then I put my next proposal to Khondkar: The war would be fought in two fronts - the home and the foreign capitals. No one was more suitable than the Khondkar to represent the Government abroad and I could introduce him to any Head of the Government anywhere including Washington and Moscow. I read the open letter of MN Roy to President Wilson written in 1917, on the question of Durable Peace. Moscow politics was also well known to me ever since 1940. We had already a good will among the Non-aligned Movement nations and it would be easy to take Marshal Tito in confidence. The British Commonwealth nations could be treated as a block. The only problem would remain with the Muslim countries where the Khondkar could appeal with his religious background. I gave him a vivid description of the task ahead.

After a couple of hours of arguments, the Khondkar began to see the logic and visualized his position as a Foreign Minister. But he asked me what would happen if he stayed out of the Government? The Khondkar asked me the next question: "Suppose I do not join this Government what will you do?" I said, "When I accompanied you from Dhaka, I burnt my boat there. I can no more return - does not matter what happens to my clinic and family. I shall have to fight this last battle for freedom. At Dhaka, life was not worth more than a bullet. But my life is too important to offer to that bullet. I must play my role. I prepared myself for this day ever since I participated in the school procession in support of Surya Sen when he was captured. If you do not agree to my proposal, my first act will be to get you interned as if you have not come to Agartala."

I told him, "The Government must be formed. It must have full control over the anti-Pakistani force. In that case, naturally, no difference of opinion should prevail. This war will have to be won at any cost. Here victory is the only

way to survival. Do or die is the only slogan until total victory. I became celebrated extempore for about an hour. The Khondkar became quiet. He broke his calmness at about 4 am by saying "All right, I'd accept the Foreign Ministership."

I do not know whether he could sleep or not. But I did have a very sound sleep for an hour. I had problems with the Khondkar at least three times. First was to make him agree to cross the border. He was saying: The Sheikh instructed him to stay at Dhaka. He was hesitant to cross the border, when it was reached. He said, "Once I do that, my allegiance to Pakistan would go forever."

It was about 6 am that our final journey started from the other side of the border which was virtually vanished for all the thousands who were crossing in every day. More than a lac were already sheltered in the foresthills of Tripura. I got Thakur and told him about the decision. He looked at Khondkar who instructed him to go to Tajuddin with me. We went to the Circuit House. I stayed out of the room, Thakur went in. Tajuddin came out and hugged me by saying: "Doctor, your appearance is angelic." He wanted to meet at 10 am. I suggested it would be better to meet after lunch and take far reaching decisions.

We stayed out of the room where the four leaders met for three hours. They washed off all differences and swore by the Holy Koran to remain united until final victory. They shed lot of tears holding each other's hands, hugging each other. To me, it looked like a foregone conclusion. There was no alternative.

Next morning, we all gathered at the Circuit House where the BSF chief conveyed the decision to escort the Cabinet members to Calcutta. I could leave for Dhaka at that time. My job was done. I left Dhaka telling my wife that I was going home at Choudhagram to see my ailing mother. I had a doctor's bag with necessary kits. Intuitively, I felt, I should also take care of the baby just delivered. Let me accompany the Cabinet to Calcutta.

Then it was another chapter, another episode.