

The voice of Mukulbhai is stilled, long live *Charampatra*

During the war days of 1971 , his radio broadcast made millions find hope and courage

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M.R. Akhtar Mukul, who wrote and read out *Charampatra* from the Swadhin Bangla Betar Kendro in 1971, was one of the greatest institutions that 1971 birthed. His voice and reading kept the spirit of ordinary people alive during those dark, desperate days. He was certainly more influential than any civil institution in the country, and had as much impact on the situation as the other forces including the armed forces that fought on this side of the war.

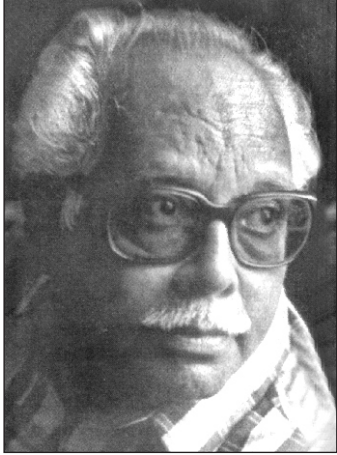
By reaching out to people inside the country who had access to radio, he literally became the voice of freedom and ultimately liberation. In that process, he also personified the sense of continued existence of an independent Bangladesh lending proof and therefore belief to the war waged by the Mujibnagar government. That voice is now stilled.

Through radio, he spoke to those who didn't have a voice and gave them hope and courage when nothing else or no one could. *Charampatra* was the voice heard, the most telling evidence of resistance, speaking to them in their tongue, their language, and their tone. His greatest success was to turn the medium of radio from an official tool of ordering into a public tool of communication, jumping across the fences of occupation. Yet in his last days, his words were shaded by the dark as he reflected upon the fact that the people he thought he was speaking to in 1971 had found no space in the republic after the war was over. It was a republic in founding which he had played such a significant role.

On our last conversation

The last time we met was almost two years back in his Bailey Road residence. He was unwell and was reluctant to talk about his deeds on radio in that year. I was producing a series on 1971 for the BBC and had wanted to know about how the SBBK was run and his own process of creating *Charampatra*. He had had a couple of operations, but we went back to the days when I was working with Hasan Hafizur Rahman, and we shared an affectionate albeit irregular relationship, and he couldn't refuse.

He sat on the sofa and explained that several of his internal organs were seriously affected and his family was planning to sell property to send him abroad for treatment. He walked with some difficulty but otherwise looked hale and hearty. He looked at my tiny mini disc tape



recorder and said, "That little thing?" I nodded. He laughed at miniaturization. As we were chatting, I had the machine on, and when I told him I was recording he was taken aback. But he gamely went on.

He must have spoken about it before, but here he gave a detailed description of his residence in Kolkata, waking early to write the script, check the sources and collect any extra information on battles fought and then put it in his script, apart from managing the radio station.

"I knew many were listening so it was a dicey job. I couldn't afford to lose credibility in my broadcasts. So when I heard five on the enemy side had died, I would make it eight perhaps, but not ten. The people in that area would know it was a lie and never listen again, never believe again."

"My father had a transferable job so we traveled all over Bangladesh. I knew many cities and places and some I could recall in great detail. So when I mentioned that tree, that lane in some distant town in my script, people would be shocked. How did he know? He must have been here. People would trust me more."

"I lived in the old city for long and knew the culture. The sense of neighbourhood and social camaraderie is high. In almost every *para* there was a *Chokku Miah* and a *Meramot Mia* -- and I just transplanted them into my script. They were part of my cultural ambience and had a universality that touched everyone."

Of course these two were the most celebrated characters not only in our history of radio but in the literature of 1971 as well. They found their way into his books too.

And now he is gone or maybe liberated from all the bodily ailments. I would like to think he is somewhere amongst the radio waves and ether, reading out *Charampatra* to an eternal audience who in its darkest days had found hope and comfort in his words and voice.

A roaring life

Mukul bhai led ten lives cramped into one. He had every kind of story to tell and they ranged from escaping to India to flee from police in 1952 -- he crossed the border bought some peanuts and chewed them and laughed in relief lying on the grass -- to the frightening days of April 1971 as he made his way to India on a rickshaw with his family and came upon an insanely enraged mob who had killed all Pakistanis and Biharis, and one fellow whose father had been killed had ripped out the heart of an army officer and chewing it in revenge and grief cried, "Pasee re pasee, captain saber koljeta pasee (I have it, I have got Mr. Captain's heart)." They were not nice times and he never flinched in retelling. They were part of his life.

After returning to Bangladesh in probably 1980 and starting a transport business and later branching into publishing, he relished talking about his bloodied hands after a hard day at a leather cutting shop in London after 1975 when he lost his job as the Press Counselor in the BHC there. He would laugh loudly and share the irony and he was in a way as proud of his troubles as he was of his success. No regrets.

His spirit was close to that of his leader Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, and Mukul bhai's pieces in Ittefaq on the Kolkata based intellectuals was criticised by some for not being non-communal, but they missed the point. He wrote about the contemporary Muslim mentality that drove many to the folds of the Muslim League and however great or flawed, he was responding to his heart. And many other hearts too. It was a good mirror of the era.

Of course he was a hustler in some sense too, but he never bothered to hide that. During the Ershad era he landed close to him, became important, and later led the final stage of the Liberation War History project. This was not a happy phase because he ran into management problems and in a way peace returned in his new life as a publisher of Sagar publishers, with his best friend and companion, his son Sagar in tow.

These were less rumbling waters and he slowly slowed down and as bad health gained the upper hand, he too became slightly distant. When I met him he was on his final lap.

Radio's finest hour

I had told him that our research showed that the Swadhin Bangla Betar Kendra was the most popular radio at any time and his programme the most popular too. I suppose he knew it and didn't need a researcher to tell him that. But he had shown the immense possibility of radio too.

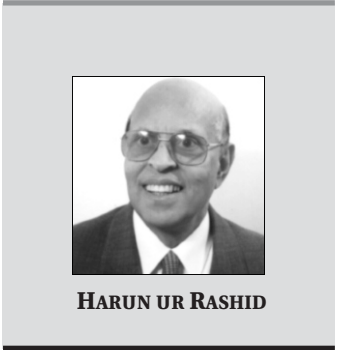
On that day when we were chatting, there was load shedding and we talked in candle light. I then asked him to recite a few lines from *Charampatra*. He refused. I gently pleaded. And then suddenly the voice, the words, the memory were all back. He was reciting the final script, the one read out on December 16 describing the end of Pakistan and it was yesterday once more. After all these years I could sense the power and the magic of that great broadcasting. I used that clip in the inaugural episode of my series and it was a big hit, coming across with all its aplomb, zaniness, crudity, and relevance. It was radio for all, I suppose the only time radio really became the voice of the people.

His final words were somber. "I don't think the poor peasant who gave the most in this war got a fair deal. We urban elite have no complaints, but it didn't become the poor peasant's state." I hope our book on 1971 will carry the full interview but nothing can carry the voice.

And now he is gone or maybe liberated from all the bodily ailments that plagued him. He is free now. I would like to think he is somewhere amongst the radio waves and ether, reading out *Charampatra* to an eternal audience who in its darkest days had found hope and comfort in his words and voice.

Good-bye Mukul bhai.

Circles of self-interest hide the truth in Iraq



THE secret manner in which power has been handed over on June 28, two days ahead of the scheduled date, to the US-picked interim government in the presence of reportedly only 30 persons in the audience in a windowless room with intense security, speaks volume of the much-heralded hand over power to Iraqis with "full sovereignty". Some Iraqis say that the US came to Iraq like a "lion" and left like a "mouse". It demonstrates that that the most powerful military power in the world cannot subjugate the people in Iraq with its occupation.

The US has not been able to fool people across the world, in particular in the Middle East that "full sovereignty" has been passed on to the interim government. Although the interim government appears to run the country, their very survival depends on the presence of 138,000 American troops. The legitimacy of the interim government is in serious doubt and its sovereignty is highly qualified, but this has not been reflected in the speeches made by the US and the head of the interim government. This seems to be a classic example of the dictum that truth is the first casualty of war.

Nothing will change from June 28 because the US will run Iraq with an "Iraqi face".

This is demonstrated by the following facts:

The US will control Iraq's vital oil industry, despite the fact that the interim government is paraded in many Western electronic media as having "full sovereignty". Although Saddam Hussein will be in the legal custody of the Iraqi government within a week, his physical security will be manned by the US troops. Furthermore the interim government cannot make long term policies or international agreements.

The Coalition forces have been renamed as "the Multi-National Force" but it does not change the composition of the forces. The same armed forces will control Iraq under the new sanitized version of its name. Essentially it is principally

the US force that looks after the security situation in the country. It reminds me of what Shakespeare once said that a rose is a rose whatever name you call it.

On June 28, the US administrator Paul Bremer left Baghdad hurriedly and secretly. Meanwhile two changes have been made by the Bush administration in respect of its personnel in Iraq. The US strong man in Baghdad will be the US Ambassador Negroponte, replacing Paul Bremer. Another is the replacement of three-star

and no one knows him except the US and British intelligence.

The interim government is loudly thinking to postpone "holding of direct democratic elections to a Transitional National Assembly, by 31 December, 2004 if possible and in no case later than January 31, 2005" as envisaged by the UN Security Council resolution (1546) of 8 June.

Furthermore, the US Secretary General Kofi Annan decided not to send UN team to Baghdad because of the serious security situation in the country. Obviously he does not

Minister Nasreen Berwari admitted, "The reconstruction story has not been all we hoped for." Rick Barton, a co-director of the Post-Conflict Reconstruction Project at the Centre for Strategic and International Studies in Washington reportedly said: "We haven't done what we said we would do."

In recent days, life in Iraq has reportedly come to standstill. Dozens of new security checkpoints have been thrown up across the country and foreigners were told to stay in their fortified compounds, Iraqis are being advised not to leave their homes and local curfews are being imposed. There is now a speculation that martial law may be declared in Iraq. People are asking whether martial law is a new form of democracy and freedom as assured by the Bush administration for new Iraq.

Barry Rubin, the director of the Global Research Centre in International Affairs in Israel reportedly says that the US blundering in Iraq has discredited the idea of democracy itself and set back for years the prospects for democracy in the region.

To restore infrastructures in Iraq, the World Bank said that it could cost US\$47 billion. A revised estimate figure is now thrown at US\$150 billion. This amount is far in excess of the US\$12 to 15 billion, Iraq will receive in yearly oil revenue. But frequent sabotage of oil pipes both in the south and in the north of Iraq exposes the vulnerability of oil revenues.

It is reported that 54 per cent of Americans also believe that it is an error of judgment for President Bush to attack Iraq, a jump from 41 per cent early this month. About 55 per cent said that war had not made the US any safer from terrorism. US military deaths passed 850 since the war began and well over 5000 have been wounded. An estimated 11,000 Iraqis died and up to 40,000 are believed wounded.

Iraq has become a "hot potato" that President Bush is eager to toss to other hands. But he can't because from the very beginning Iraq's war had no approval of the UN. It is an illegal war under international law. Former President Clinton could not remain silent when he criticised President Bush for not allowing UN weapon inspectors to complete their search for Iraq's suspected weapons of mass destruction. Many believe that had there been no halting of Florida vote counting during the 2000 President election by the US Supreme Court, history would have been different for the US and Iraq.

wish to be blamed again to send UN team in Iraq after his senior colleague Sergio De Mello was killed in August last year in bomb attacks to the Baghdad UN Office. The UN has been entrusted with the task of assisting the Iraqi authorities on the process for holding elections.

Meanwhile, the plea for sending NATO troops to Iraq by President Bush at the EU meeting in Ireland and at the NATO Summit in Istanbul was rejected by France and Germany. But as a face-saving device for the US President, NATO agreed "in principle" to train Iraqi security forces. It is not clear whether Iraqi forces will be trained inside Iraq or abroad.

The impact of Iraq's volatile situation has reverberated on Iraq's neighbours. Turkey, a key US ally, is scared that the Kurds in northern Iraq will declare autonomy or independence, setting a precedent for its own 15 million Kurds. In Saudi Arabia, the royal family sits atop a simmering volcano dissent and opposition that is fuelled by images of turmoil and torture in Iraq. At a recent programme on CNN with Arab media and others, it was clear that no one supported the US policy in Iraq and they all agreed that it was a mistake for President Bush to invade Iraq. In fact terrorism has increased across the world because of it.

The US planned its post-war planning poorly and has failed to meet many of its own goals. There is not enough electricity or sewerage facilities in cities, unemployment is unacceptably high and most importantly people don't feel safe. Iraq's interim Public Works

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