

BANGLADESH SHILPAKALA ACADEMY COLLECTION

was moved to a maximum security cell inside the cantonment in Dhaka.

The Agartala Case was a testing ground for Pakistan. Ayub Khan's goal was a snuffing out of Bengali political aspirations. Ironically, the precise reverse of what had been intended happened. Bengali nationalistic sentiments moved ahead by leaps and bounds, and Mujib was to become the voice of a people who would soon go their own free way, in the political sense of the meaning. That was not what Ayub Khan and his fellow travelers thought would happen when they decided to convene a special tribunal, as opposed to the normal judiciary, to try the case. Heading the special tribunal was the Punjabi Justice SA Rahman; and assisting him were two Bengalis, both judges of the East Pakistan High Court, Justice Mujibur Rahman Khan and Justice Maksumul Hakim.

The regime clearly banked on the assumption that the presence of the two Bengalis on the tribunal would lend credence to the case against Mujib and his fellow accused. As time would show, the reality was to be something quite different. The accused were kept away from their families between the time of their arrests and the day the trial commenced inside a small room in the cantonment. Reports later emerged of a number of the accused, including the CSP officers implicated in the case, being subjected to vicious treatment in military confinement. Among those meting out such treatment were a good number of Bengalis in the Pakistan military, especially in its intelligence services. Colonel Mustafizur Rahman, who years later served as foreign minister and then as home minister in the Bangladesh governments of General Ziaur Rahman and Khaleda Zia respectively, would deny that he had been responsible for cruel treatment to Sheikh Mujibur Rahman in military custody.

Hearings in the Agartala Conspiracy Case opened on June 19, 1968. For the first time in seven months the accused were seen in public. One of the more memorable of moments on the first day of the trial came when Mujib recognized a Bengali journalist sitting a couple of feet away from him, his back turned to the platform reserved for the accused. The incarcerated Bengali leader tried drawing the journalist's attention to him. The journalist pretended not to have heard. Mujib tried again, at which point the journalist whispered: "Mujib Bhai, we can't talk. There are intelligence people all over the place." That was when Mujib exploded. "Anyone who wants to live in Bangladesh," thundered the Awami League leader, "will have to talk to Sheikh Mujibur Rahman." Heads, including those of the judges, turned.

Mujib's courage in adversity was not missed. More tellingly, he had used the name Bangladesh, and not East Pakistan, in speaking of the province. It was an early sign of things to come. At the trial, Mujib's chief counsel was Abdus Salam Khan, who was assisted by, among others, a young Dr Kamal Hossain. Soon to join the defence team would be Sir Thomas Williams, QC, whose services had been obtained by expatriate Bengalis in the United Kingdom. But the British lawyer's stay in Dhaka was not to be a comfortable one for him. Pakistani intelligence constantly tailed him, and at one point held out clear, subtle threats to him. Two months after he landed in Dhaka, Thomas Williams would make his



BANGLADESH SHILPAKALA ACADEMY COLLECTION