way back to London in August 1968, but not before he had told the tribunal that the trial was a sham and that the case itself was a cooked up one. Khan Bahadur Mohammad Ismail took up the defence of the accused CSP officer Ruhul Quddus while Khan Bahadur Naziruddin appeared for Major Shamsul Alam.

An intriguing aspect of the story of the Agartala Conspiracy Case was the very large number of state witnesses and approvers arrayed on the side of the government. Between December 1967 and continuing well into the first quarter of 1968, as many as 1,500 Bengalis in various professions had been detained by the authorities on charges of being complicit in the conspiracy. Of them, apart from the 35 accused put on trial, 232 became, or were compelled to become, state witnesses. A good number of Bengali lawyers happily seized the opportunity of being part of the prosecution team.

But as the days and weeks stretched into months, it became obvious that the case was collapsing. A number of state witnesses turned hostile and revealed the inordinate torture they had been subjected to by the authorities before they had agreed to turn approvers. Some of them even broke down in court, leaving all those present in a state of shock. As the proceedings continued, nevertheless, the political movement outside became increasingly more frenzied, with crowds of Bengalis demanding the dropping of the case.

The killing of Sergeant Zahurul Haq ignited passions further, to a point where angry Bengalis attacked the rest-house where the chairman of the tribunal, Justice SA Rahman, had been lodged. He fled, and was not to return to the court. The homes of Information and Broadcasting Minister Khwaja Shahabuddin, already notorious as the man behind the 1964 decree banning Tagore from the state media, and a provincial minister, Sultan Ahmed, came under assault. Two days later, on February 17, Field Marshal Ayub Khan contacted the newly constituted Democratic Action Committee, a grouping of opposition politicians led by Nawabzada Nasrullah Khan, and suggested convening a round table conference of government and opposition politicians to resolve the impasse.



BANGLADESH SHILPAKALA ACADEMY COLLECTION

The Awami League, definitely the strongest component of the DAC, refused to be part of any RTC unless Mujib was freed and the Agartala Case withdrawn. The regime was unwilling to accede to such a demand, and Ayub Khan himself ruled out Mujib's freedom when he termed the on-going case a matter of national security. But he did send out feelers to the imprisoned Mujib about freeing the Awami League leader on parole, and so enabling him to participate in the RTC. Significantly, a number of DAC politicians, too, defended the parole idea, arguing that the issue of dropping of the Agartala Case and an unconditional freeing of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman could be thrashed out at the RTC in Rawalpindi. At that point, hints emerged of Mujib being receptive to the parole offer. The parole question was, however, swiftly shot down by the students, Moulana Bhashani, and, in particular, Mujib's wife Fazilatunnessa. After February 19, 1969, when the army shot Professor Shamsuzzoha, a respected academic of Rajshahi University, the parole issue became irrelevant. Mujib himself rejected anything less than freedom for himself and his co-accused, and a full withdrawal of the Agartala Conspiracy Case.

Buoyed by rumours of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's imminent release, huge crowds of Bengalis milled before the gates to the Dhaka cantonment on February 21, the anniversary of the Language Movement of 1952. Mujib remained a prisoner that day. The government of President Ayub Khan capitulated the next day, February 22. In a statement issued in Dhaka, Pakistan's Defence Minister, Vice Admiral AR Khan, informed the country that the Agartala Conspiracy Case was being withdrawn and all the accused in the case were being released unconditionally.

On February 23, 1969, Mujib appeared before a cheering million-strong crowd of Bengalis at the Race Course in Dhaka. There was little question that he had emerged from the ordeal of the Agartala Case as the authentic spokesman of Bengal in what would be the rapidly declining state of Pakistan. Student leader Tofail Ahmed electrified the audience when he referred to Sheikh Mujibur Rahman as the friend of Bengal. And thus arose the man Bengalis would thenceforth call Bangabandhu. In slightly less than three years, he would provide singular leadership to the struggle for the creation of the independent People's Republic of Bangladesh.

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