

WITHDRAWAL OF AGARTALA CONSPIRACY CASE

'Agartala case provided a spark for our dream of independence'

Amanullah is a former Director General of Press Institute of Bangladesh (PIB) and former Chief Editor of Bangladesh Sangbad Sangstha (BSS). The author of an upcoming book on the Agartala Conspiracy Case, he covered the historic trial while working for Associated Press of Pakistan (APP). On the occasion of the 52nd anniversary of the withdrawal of this case on February 22, 1969, he talks to Badiuzzaman Bay of The Daily Star about its backdrop, his experience of witnessing court proceedings, and how the case provided a spark for our independence movement.

How did you come to be involved with the Agartala Conspiracy Case?

It was sometime around mid-1960s when a group of Bengali officers of the Pakistani armed forces organised themselves for a planned rebellion against the government. They were able to maintain strict secrecy about their activities for quite some time. Later, it transpired that the plan was foiled because of the betrayal of one of the members of the group. Sergeant Amir Hossain surrendered and gave out their secret plan, exposing his fellow rebels to great risk. Security agencies swung into action and made a number of arrests of suspected rebels working in the defence forces of both wings of Pakistan.

I remember I was in Rawalpindi then. It was perhaps towards the end of 1967 that I could learn from a very reliable source that General Ayub Khan was thinking of trying the suspected rebels for treason. I came to know that he initially thought of trying them in a military court on camera. The government also thought of a trial on camera by a special tribunal with civilian judges. However, finally, it decided to conduct an open trial by a special tribunal with judges from Supreme Court and High Court.

SM Zafar was then the federal minister for law and parliamentary affairs, and as such, a key person in respect of the proposed trial. During my coverage of the National Assembly

proceedings before, I had come into close contact with SM Zafar, and he became a dependable news source for me. So one day, he invited me for a private meeting to assess the possible public reaction in East Bengal to the planned trial. I told him that whatever might be the procedure of the trial, either by court martial or trial by a special court, open or in camera, the Bengali reaction was bound to be angry. I also suggested conducting the trial, if they must, by civilian judges in an open court. Later developments suggest the government took the issue of public reaction seriously.

Eventually, when the trial began, I was assigned by APP's then-head Safdar Ali Qureshi to cover it along with my senior colleague HR Batalvi and Mojammel Haque. Batalvi returned to Pindi after about a week, leaving me and Mojammel to cover the case till its abrupt withdrawal on February 22, 1969 at the height of a popular movement.

What can you tell us about the trial?

I still remember the opening day of the trial in Dhaka's Kurmitola cantonment on June 19, 1968. It was well before nine in the morning when journalists entered the tribunal chamber and took their assigned seats in the small, congested press gallery, just on the right-hand side of the judges. Before entering the court chamber, we were cautioned by security men against talking during the court proceedings.



Amanullah PHOTO: BADIUZZAMAN BAY

Earlier, journalists had been issued passes for the coverage of the trial. It was shortly before nine when the 35 accused—including the principal accused Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman—were brought in and led to the dock, an enclosure with wooden railing. There was pin-drop silence in the courtroom when they entered. The seats for the accused were also fixed, possibly because of the gravity of the charges brought against them. Among the accused, the first one to enter was Bangabandhu, wearing white pajama and panjabi, and he approached his seat with confident steps. On the first day, Bangabandhu's father, Sheikh Lutfar Rahman was also present in the chamber, as were his children. It should be mentioned that

Bangabandhu was implicated in the case merely for political reasons and not for any action on his part in connection with the so-called conspiracy. Although he was described as the leader of the movement, the prosecution's statement itself showed that Lt. Com. Moazzem Hossain, who was shown as accused number two, played the most important role and Mujib's was only of a secondary character in the organisational set-up of the revolutionary group. It was Moazzem along with a few others like Steward Mujib, Sultanuddin and Noor Mohammad who were in the "process of forming an organisation for the independence of East Pakistan". During the trial and in its aftermath, I came to know Moazzem closely and was privy to many of his thoughts and decisions.

Can you recall any incidents from the trial?

There are in fact many, and in my book, I'm going to provide a day-to-day coverage of the trial. I can tell you about one particular incident. On September 4, 1968, Kamaluddin, an accused-turned-approver, complained from the witness box about physical and mental torture that he had endured while in custody, leading the prosecution to declare him a "hostile" witness. The emotional outburst of Hasina Kamal, Kamaluddin's wife, in the courtroom was hard to forget. Even the judges were moved. Kamaluddin's release on bail later may have consoled his wife and old mother-in-law. But

Hasina Kamal would still come to the tribunal where her brother Sultanuddin was still facing the ordeal as an accused. There were so many incidents like this—sometimes interesting and often tragic—involving the accused, their relatives and lawyers, prosecutors, witnesses, journalists and even judges. These incidents show that the courtroom drama was no less intense as the one unfolding out on the streets, with the people coming out in their thousands, enraged by the absurdity of the Pakistani attempt.

As a journalist, you closely observed the trial and its aftermath. How significant is the case in the history of our independence?

The Agartala case provided a spark for the independence movement. Until that point, Bengalis had in their minds the contours of some kind of a vision for autonomy or self-determination. There was a need for a conflict for the dream of independence to burst onto the scene, and this case created the occasion for that conflict—a point of no return for those still in doubt. It made the appeal of a revolt for freedom that much convincing. The history of the Agartala case is a must read for today's generation. It shows us that the Liberation War was not fought in those nine months only; it had its origin a long time ago. It also shows us that good things may come out of a bad development if we remain persistent to achieve our goal.

Remembering Maulana Azad when we most need him

MD SHAHNAWAZ KHAN CHANDAN

WHEN the Indian subcontinent was pushed into violent communal turmoil and was being partitioned as its consequence, one person firmly stood out as the guardian of secularism, unity and peace. He was Maulana Abul Kalam Azad.

He was, in fact, one of the architects of India's secular constitution, the pioneer of free and compulsory elementary education in the Indian subcontinent, a preacher of Islam and a statesman of unparalleled wisdom.

However, Maulana Azad never attended a formal school, college or university. He was born in Mecca in a conservative Muslim family. He was home-schooled and self-taught and he was a prodigal learner.

By the age of 12, he could compose poetry and could write literary treatise in Urdu, Arabic and Persian. He even started to edit his first weekly newspaper *Al-Misbah*. Azad went on to complete Dars-E-Nizami curriculum which required him to study Quran, Hadith, Islamic laws and philosophy deeply.

He was deeply influenced by the pan-Islamic thoughts of Sir Syed Ahmad Khan and Jamal-al-Din-al-Afghani. He dreamt of the revival of the lost Islamic heritage by achieving freedom from the British colonisers.

In the wake of the First World War when the Ottoman Empire joined hands with Imperial Germany, Maulana

Azad published two magazines named *Al-Hilal* and *Al-Balagh* where he tried to persuade Indian Muslims against British rule and in favour of the Ottoman Khilafat.

Both of these magazines were banned by the British government; his place in Kolkata was ransacked and he was forced to leave the city. After the war ended, Maulana Azad became a key organiser of the Khilafat movement which was aimed at preserving the Ottoman Khilafat under which Maulana's pan-Islamic vision could be materialised.

Although the Khilafat was lost and Mustafa Kamal's abolitionist steps threw it into oblivion, Maulana Azad through this movement came in contact with Mahatma Gandhi which greatly changed his political career.

He was greatly inspired by Gandhi's non-violent civil disobedience movement and became extremely critical of the Muslim League's communal and often violent approach.

He left the Muslim League in 1920 and joined the Indian National Congress. After the end of Khilafat movement, Maulana Azad's focus of political activism was shifted to preserving Hindu-Muslim unity.

He vehemently opposed the two nations theory stating that "India's actual problem is economic, not communal."

Due to his firm anti-colonial stance and uncompromising dedication for Hindu-Muslim unity, he became extremely popular and was elected as



PHOTO: WIKIMEDIACOMMONS

Maulana Abul Kalam Azad (November 11, 1888–February 22, 1958).

the youngest president of Congress in 1923 at the age of only 35. In the same year, during the Delhi Convention, he made an historic remark which made him the "ambassador of Hindu-Muslim unity."

He said, "Today if a farishta (an angel) were to descend from the Heaven and declare from the heights of the Qutab Minar that India will get Swaraj within 24 hours provided she relinquishes Hindu-Muslim unity, I will relinquish Swaraj rather than give up Hindu-Muslim unity. Delay in the attainment of Swaraj will be a loss to India but if our unity is lost it will be a loss to entire mankind."

Maulana Azad opposed partition

not just as a congress leader but also as a Muslim scholar. He foresaw that the formation of Pakistan on the basis of religion would not sustain and Muslim minorities in partitioned India would face alienation and discrimination.

He said in his book *India Wins Freedom*, "There would remain three and half crores of Muslims scattered in small minorities all over the land. With 17 percent in UP, 12 percent in Bihar and 9 percent in Madras, they will be weaker than they are today in the Hindu majority provinces."

Maulana Azad's political and religious wisdom has been vividly reflected in his magnum opus *Tarjuman-ul-Quran*, an interpretation of Quran published in two volumes (one in 1930 and another in 1936).

In this partial-Urdu translation and interpretation of Quran, he discussed different tenets of Islam along with the faiths existing at the time of Islam's revelation such as: Daoism, Buddhism, Christianity, Zoroastrian and Hinduism. This modern and unifying interpretation of Islam was acclaimed internationally at that time.

As the education minister of free India, Maulana Azad took many historic steps which ultimately shaped modern India and ensured quality education for millions of minorities.

He was one of the founders of Jamia Millia Islamia, a central university of India which has become the epicentre of educational and cultural renaissance of Indian Muslims. It is today one of the top 10 universities in India.

Maulana Azad universalised elementary education and launched a massive drive for adult education to remove illiteracy. University Grants Commission, Board for Rural Higher Education and Indian Institute of Technology (IITs) were his brainchild which have qualitatively remodelled India's higher education system.

He replaced the colonial education system by an open and democratic education system where minority and marginalised communities enjoyed free access.

On his 63rd death anniversary, we have to admit that we have deviated greatly from Maulana Azad's modern, progressive thoughts. We didn't listen to his warnings and the entire subcontinent is still paying the price for it.

The passing of the citizenship amendment act in India, spread of communal and ethnic conflicts in Pakistan, Bangladesh, Myanmar prove how right he was.

Although his birth anniversary is observed as India's national education day, today he is remembered only in the Muslim majority areas of the country. Pakistanis have a mixed feeling towards him and in Bangladesh he is rarely mentioned.

However, there is no doubt that for the peace and stability of this region, it is now that we most need a progressive leader like Azad and to re-visit his modern, secular ideals.

MD SHAHNAWAZ KHAN CHANDAN is a teacher and journalist. Email: shahnawaz.khan@thedailystar.net

QUOTABLE Quote

MARK TWAIN
(November 30, 1835—April 21, 1910)
American writer

Kindness is the language which the deaf can hear and the blind can see.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

- 1 Swampy area
- 6 Minnesota team
- 11 Fill with joy
- 12 Custom
- 13 Croc's cousin
- 14 Cast out
- 15 Substandard
- 17 Put in stitches
- 18 American marsupials
- 22 Corned beef dish
- 23 Where Gauvain painted
- 27 Director Forman
- 29 Mine veins
- 30 Sounds of derision
- 32 Bona fide
- 33 Lie
- 35 Toper

DOWN

- 1 Ryan of movies
- 2 - carte
- 3 Lab animal
- 4 Suddenly slam on the brakes
- 5 Long sandwiches
- 6 Underwear type
- 7 Candles makeup
- 8 Sacred bird of Egypt
- 9 River of Egypt
- 10 Hearty dish
- 16 Unconscious
- 18 Resistance units
- 19 Aspirin target
- 20 Norwegian city
- 21 Baseball position
- 24 Notion
- 25 Bluish color
- 26 Cruise stop
- 28 Horse houses
- 31 Crafty
- 34 Plumbing problems
- 35 Con man's con
- 36 Seep
- 37 Faithful
- 4 Museum focus
- 42 Mine output
- 43 Spike of film
- 44 Young fellow

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YESTERDAY'S ANSWERS

S	L	A	T	E	C	O	A	S	T
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BEETLE BAILEY BY MORT WALKER

BABY BLUES BY KIRKMAN & SCOTT