

Agartala 1967–Agartala 2024

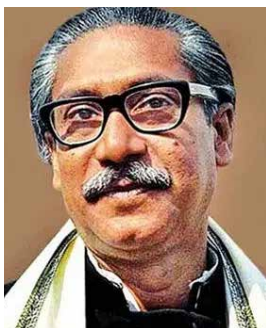
A Journey of Six Decades

Brigadier Nasir Shafiq, SI(M) retired

Introduction

The History of the Indo-Pak Subcontinent is replete with examples of inter- and intra-ruling class conspiracies. It peaked during colonial rule when colonists attempted every possible way of conspiring to establish their authority and gain more power—brothers against brothers and sons against fathers. After the partition of British India in August 1947, Pakistan experienced two conspiracies within its first twenty years of independence, other than many political happenings. The *Rawalpindi Conspiracy Case* of 1951 was the first to occur just four years after independence. The second was unearthed towards the end of 1967, later known as the *Agartala Conspiracy Case*, with much more grave implications for the future of Pakistan, than the first one.

A specific class of East Pakistani politicians started getting disillusioned about the future of Pakistan right from the beginning, with the Bengali language controversy coming up in March 1948. It grew much more in intensity and magnitude with time, instead of getting settled, especially after the 1965



Sheikh Mujibur Rahman
(Source: prothomalo.com)

Indo-Pak War. Sheikh Mujibur Rahman of Awami League, once a student worker of the Pakistan Movement in 1947, and the leader of a dominant political party of East Pakistan in the mid-1960s, shot into prominence after

the departure of three political stalwarts from the eastern wing of the country, namely, A.K Fazlul Haq, Hussain Shaheed Suhrawardy and Khawaja Nazimuddin, in 1962, 1963 and 1964 respectively. Having assumed the leadership



A.K Fazlul Haq
(Source: historypak.com)

Hussain Shaheed
Suhrawardy
(Source: dawn.com)

Khawaja Nazimuddin
(Source: historypak.com)

of Awami League in 1966, he presented his famous *six-point political formula* for enhanced autonomy of East Pakistan, on 5 Feb 1966 at Lahore. Soon after, he embarked upon a political campaign to garner support for his six-point agenda from the East Pakistan masses. While returning from Khulna on 8 May 1966 after addressing a political rally, he was arrested and lodged in Dacca (now Dhaka) jail. While he was in jail, Lieutenant Colonel Shamsul Alam—a Bengali officer—unearthed the *Agartala Conspiracy* which was further investigated by Lieutenant Colonel Muhammad Amir Khan, both from Inter Services Intelligence (ISI) in December 1967.¹

Around this time, Rauf ur Rahman of the East Bengal Regiment, aligned with the alleged conspirators, made an attempt on Alam's life. However, Alam successfully defended himself against the assassination attempt, an act of remarkable bravery that

1 Meraj Hasan, "Agartala Conspiracy: Fact or Fiction?," Pakistani Bibliophiles, May 5, 2019, accessed on November 14, 2024, <https://pakistanbibliophiles.home.blog/2019/05/05/agartala-conspiracy-fact-or-fiction/>.



earned him the *Sitara-e-Basalat* from Pakistan.² According to the press note issued by the home department, government of Pakistan, on 6 January 1968, a group of Bengali military officers, civil servants, politicians and a few others were conspiring to secede East Pakistan from Pakistan, through collusion with India. Reportedly, a few conspirators out of 34, had already crossed into India to meet Indian officials at Agartala, the capital of the Indian state of Tripura, and very close to East Pakistan's eastern border. Later, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman was also included in the list of conspirators as accused number 1, as conveyed through a separate press note issued on 18th January 1968. The trial started on 19 June 1968 and ended within a year on 22 February 1969, without reaching its logical conclusion, amid much political pressure and street agitation in East Pakistan. The framing of the entire case and how it was handled and conducted, had a profound and significant impact on the future of Pakistan, as it later turned out. The Agartala Conspiracy Case remained a mystery, and controversial for many long years, as all the alleged conspirators pleaded 'not guilty', till confession in recent years by a few who were actually part of this conspiracy.

Proving the Agartala Conspiracy to be a reality is not significant at this moment in history, nor is it the intent of this article. The paper aims to analyse and shed light on its consequences and fallout for the political future of Pakistan, especially for the unity of Pakistan between both wings of that time, so as to learn from history. Before discussing the analysis of this historical case, it would be relevant to go through the historical context of the entire political milieu of that time.

The Historical Context

- By 1946, it became evident that many Bengalis favoured the idea of two distinct Muslim homelands, over a unified Pakistan. However, the Congress cornered the Muslim League, and insisted on the partition of Bengal to secure Calcutta, the region's key port city. With the British endorsing the Congress stance, the Muslim League faced a stark choice: accept partition or risk losing Pakistan altogether. In response, the Muslim League rallied behind the demand for a single Pakistan, even though its founder, M.A. Jinnah, and future prime minister, Liaquat Ali Khan, had no objection to the concept of a separate Bengali Muslim state. This strategy was aimed at amplifying their collective political voice.³ Therefore, Pakistan was created with two non-contiguous wings. Fazlul Huq, a prominent Bengali leader, assumed the position of chief minister of East Pakistan on 30 March 1954, but his tenure was cut short when Governor-General Ghulam Muhammad imposed governor raj on 30 May 1954, after just two months.⁴ In 1956, Huseyn Shaheed Suhrawardy assumed the role of prime minister and announced elections for 1959, igniting fresh hope among Bengalis who believed his return to power could transform their fortunes. However, this optimism was short-lived, as the imposition of martial law in 1958 dashed their aspirations. The instability of Pakistan's political landscape during this period is evident, because between 1947 and 1958, the country saw four heads of state and seven prime ministers.⁵

2 Moiz Khan, "Revisiting the Agartala Conspiracy – Op-ed," *Eurasia Review*, December 15, 2022, <https://www.eurasiareview.com/15122022-revisiting-the-agartala-conspiracy-oped/>.

3 Stanley Wolpert, *Jinnah of Pakistan* (UK: Oxford University Press 1984), 323.

4 Inam Ahmed & Shakhawat Liton, "A passage to Agartala," *The Business Standards*, January 24, 2020, <https://www.tbsnews.net/analysis/passage-agartala-38771>.

5 Ahmed and Liton, "A passage to Agartala".

- An early indication of Mujib's aspirations for Bengali independence emerged in 1957, when he questioned Huseyn Shaheed Suhrawardy, then the Prime Minister of Pakistan, about the possibility of political sovereignty for East Pakistan. Suhrawardy, however, firmly dismissed the idea.⁶ This has a linkage with the Agartala case, which surfaced a decade later in 1967. Sheikh Mujib's inclination to the secession of East Pakistan, or liberation from Pakistan, whatever scholars may call it, was quite evident ever since the language issue of 1948. Later, while speaking on the occasion of the sixth death anniversary of Huseyn Shaheed Suhrawardy on December 5, 1969, Sheikh Mujib referred to the territory of



Sheikh Mujib on his way to the special tribunal set up in the Dhaka Cantonment to try the Agartala Conspiracy Case in 1969
(Source: mujib100.gov.bd)

East Pakistan as *Bangladesh*. He declared this name during his speech, saying, "On behalf of the people, I am announcing that starting today, the name of the eastern province of Pakistan will be *Bangladesh* instead of *East Pakistan*."⁷

- Mujib's intentions became evident in an incident from 1970 when he candidly shared his views on the Legal Framework Order (LFO) with his key companions, unaware that the discussion was being surreptitiously recorded for Yahya Khan.



General Yahya Khan
(Source: bitlanders.com)

Mujib remarked: "My aim is to establish Bangladesh. I shall tear L.F.O into pieces as soon as the elections are over. Who could challenge me once the elections are over?" It was played to Yahya by ISI, who said, "I will fix him up if he betrays me"⁸ Even at the informal swearing-in ceremony of newly elected assembly members on January 3, 1971, he announced severe punishment for those who would break the covenants of the 6-point program. He also renamed the *Bangladesh Liberation Front* as *Bangladesh Liberation Force*, heralding the advent of armed struggle.⁹ He discussed the creation



Tajuddin Ahmad
(Source: daily-sun.com)

of Bangladesh with his close allies, party secretary Tajuddin Ahmad and a few other key personnel, and briefed his subordinate leaders about the master plan of the new country, armed

6 Syed Badrul Ahsan, "February 1969: Revisiting the Agartala Conspiracy Case," *Daily Star*, February 2007, <https://archive.thedailystar.net/forum/2007/february/feb69.htm>.

7 "Agartala case: Evidence of Bangabandhu's armed struggle for independence," Awami League Bangladesh, January 7, 2022, accessed on December 5, 2024, <https://www.albd.org/articles/news/38218/Agartala-case:-Evidence-of-Bangabandhu's-armed-struggle-for-independence>.

8 Syed Ali Zia Jaffery, "A leaf from History: India and the Breakup of Pakistan," Centre for Strategic and Contemporary Research, May 15, 2017, accessed on December 6, 2024, <https://cscr.pk/explore/themes/politics-governance/leaf-history-india-breakup-pakistan/>.

9 Dr. Abdul Mannan Choudhury, "Agartala Conspiracy Case and Bold Move of DU Students," *Daily Sun*, July 6, 2021 <https://www.daily-sun.com/printversion/details/563096>.



revolution, political pressure, diplomatic engagement, etc. That is how the 7th March Speech 1971 became an *operation order* for total war. That shows how Mujib was playing on both sides of the wicket. He was keeping all political forces engaged through political dialogue, and on the other side, he had full preparation for an armed revolution with help from the Indians.¹⁰

- In 1958, Governor General Iskander Mirza



Iskander Mirza
(Source: president.gov.pk)



General Ayub Khan
(Source: moib.gov.pk)

imposed martial law, dissolved parliament, abrogated the constitution, banned political activities, and appointed General Ayub Khan as the chief martial law administrator on October 7. However, within 20 days, Ayub removed Mirza from power, declared himself president on October 27, and sent Mirza into exile in London. Thus, nine years of constitution-making (1947 - 1956) resulted in just two years of

implementation before the constitution was abolished. The 1956 constitution, often considered balanced, addressed key issues, including the language dispute. During Ayub’s rule, the pre-1965 period marked an era of economic and military growth, significantly supported by U.S. aid. However, after the Indo-Pakistan War

of 1965, demands for autonomy gained momentum, prominently represented by the *Six Points* political program, which received backing from the Swadhin Bangla Biplobi Parishad (SBBS), a few Bengali military officers. Following the Pakistan Army’s launch of OPERATION SEARCHLIGHT on March 25, 1971, the Provisional Government of the People’s Republic of Bangladesh—commonly referred to as the Mujibnagar government—was established on April 10, and formally took oath on April 17 in the Meherpur subdivision of Kushtia district. Sheikh Mujib’s arrest intensified international attention, with the exiled Bangladesh government appealing to the global community to secure his release and recognise the newly declared *Bangladesh*.¹¹

Analysis

Truths and Revelations

- For many years, the Agartala Conspiracy Case was regarded as a meticulously crafted scheme by Ayub Khan to demonise Mujib and East Pakistani politics. This was taught even in Bangladeshi schools. It



Professor Ian Talbot
(Source: theconversation.com)

is well-established in history that the meetings did take place in Agartala, a city in Eastern India, in 1962 and continued till 1967. Professor Ian Talbot has confirmed this in his book *Pakistan: A Modern History*,¹²

10 Squadron Leader (Rtd) M Sadrul Ahmed Khan, “Agartala Conspiracy to Mujibnagar Government: Bangladesh’s Provisional Government in Exile,” Awami League Bangladesh, April 17, 2021, accessed on December 5, 2024, <https://www.albd.org/articles/news/36336/>

Agartala-Conspiracy-to-Mujibnagar-Government:-Bangladesh’s-Provisional-Government-in-Exile.

11 Khan, “Agartala Conspiracy to Mujibnagar Government: Bangladesh’s Provisional Government in Exile.”

12 Ian Talbot, *Pakistan: A Modern History*, (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 190.

Subir Bhaumik in his book *The Agartala Doctrine*,¹³ Mujib himself, and even Indian



Subir Bhaumik

(Source: eurasiareview.com)

authorities after the creation of Bangladesh.¹⁴ In 2010, a surviving alleged conspirator and deputy speaker of the Bangladesh Parliament, Shawkat Ali, confessed that the Agartala

Conspiracy was true. He stated that “part of the plan, called the *Agartala Plot*, had navy steward Mujibur Rahman and educationist Mohammad Ali Reza going to Agartala, to seek Indian support for Bangladesh’s independence”.¹⁵ He repeated this statement on 23rd February 2011 when he informed the parliament that the allegations against the accused were genuine. “The charges against us read out on the first day of hearing in the case, were absolutely right. We formed a Sangram Parishad led by Bangabandhu to free East Pakistan through armed protest”.¹⁶

- The revelations by Sashanka S. Banerjee, a retired Indian diplomat, author, and scholar who served as a diplomat in East Pakistan from 1961 to 1965, and later authored *India, Mujibur Rahman, Bangladesh Liberation & Pakistan*, are worth noting. He also accompanied Sheikh Mujib during the latter’s flight from London to Dhaka via New Delhi, after his release from Pakistan on 8 January 1972. He alludes to Sheikh

Mujib’s Indian connection as early as 1962. He says, “I have been associated with the Bangladesh freedom movement since Christmas Day of 1962 when Mujibur Rahman made his first appeal to India for support to the Bangladesh Liberation Struggle. I stood witness when India agreed to extend support on grounds of Mujib’s commitments to the ideals of inclusive secularism, liberal democracy, pluralism, and Bengali nationalism”.¹⁷



Sashanka S Banerjee, author of ‘India, Mujibur Rahman, Bangladesh Liberation & Pakistan’ with Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, on board a Royal Air Force VIP flight on their way from London to New Delhi and then on to Dhaka on 9 January 1972

(Source: Author)

- He further writes, “Mujib chose Christmas Day of 1962 to open his first line of communication with India. Simply said, it symbolised his commitment, a devout Muslim by religious faith, to secularism”.¹⁸ Mr Banerjee has also commented on Sheikh Mujib’s physical visit to Agartala and meeting with Chief Minister Sachin Singh. He writes in his book, “Mujib felt that dealing with the bureaucrats in Dhaka was getting him nowhere. He decided to change course and pay a secret visit to

13 Subir Bhaumik, *The Agartala Doctrine* (UK: Oxford University Press, 2016), 13; Hasan, “Agartala Conspiracy: Fact or Fiction?”.

14 Abdul Hafeez Kardar, *Pakistan’s Soldiers of Fortune* (Lahore: Ferozsons, 1988), 133. ; Hasan, “Agartala Conspiracy: Fact or Fiction?”.

15 <https://www.thedailystar.net/news-detail-142345> (<https://www.thedailystar.net/news-detail-142345>).

16 Faisal Khosa, “From Agartala to the fall of Dhaka,” *The Nation*, December 22, 2021, <https://www.nation.com.pk/22-Dec-2021/from-agartala-to-the-fall-of-dhaka>.

17 Sashanka S Banerjee, *India, Mujib ur Rahman, Bangladesh Liberation and Pakistan: A Political Treatise* (US: CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2011), xxviii.

18 Banerjee, *India, Mujib ur Rahman, Bangladesh Liberation and Pakistan*, 9.



the bordering State of Agartala in India. He crossed the borders in utmost secrecy without a passport. There he had a few meetings with Sachin Singh, the Chief Minister of Agartala, and put across his request for political support to the cause of Bangladesh Liberation to be passed on to the Prime Minister of India. Mujib did not fail to inform the Chief Minister of Agartala that he had also contacted India’s Diplomatic Mission in Dhaka but complained that they were taking too much time to respond. He was in a hurry”¹⁹

- Two other pieces of evidence also merit attention. One notable source is the widely recognised book *Inside RAW* by former RAW operative Ashoka Raina, which explicitly references the Agartala Conspiracy.²⁰ Additionally, a statement from Mrs. Kohinoor Hussain, the wife of Lieutenant Commander Moazzam Hussain, also supports the authenticity of the conspiracy. The quote is as follows: “Dearest Husband You are no longer with me. I remember your contribution towards the cause of independent Bangladesh. I remember how you came to Dacca from Karachi on leave under a pseudonym, met P.N Ojha, First Secretary Indian Embassy, at the border at Agartala along with other Indian and Bangladesh officers. You



Maj Gen Khadim Hussain Raja
(Source: wikipedia.org)

negotiated with Indian authorities for arms and other kinds of help...”²¹ Likewise, during the transfer of command of Pakistan’s 14 Division in East Pakistan to Major General Khadim Hussain Raja, Major

General Muzaffar Uddin succinctly outlined the Agartala Conspiracy. Muzaffar Uddin



Maj Gen Muzaffar Uddin
(Source: Blogger.com)

explained to Khadim: “Sheikh Mujib Ur Rehman was genuinely implicated. Some Bengali troops were to launch surprise attacks at night and capture quarter guards and armouries of

the West Pakistani military units. These units would be disarmed and confined to the barracks as prisoners of war..... The government of India would assist in various ways, such as banning over-flights from West Pakistan”²²

- The *Daily Sun* of Bangladesh has narrated another revealing story in this context, lesser-known hitherto, written by Dr Abdul Mannan Choudhury, former vice chancellor of World University of Bangladesh. “In late



Dr Abdul Mannan Choudhury
(Source: wub.edu.bd)

1969, Bangabandhu went to London for so-called medical treatment and met Indira Gandhi. In clear terms, he stated that he would attain landslide victory in the next election scheduled in 1970, but Pakistan would

not allow him to rule the country. And, therefore, he expressed his intention to launch a movement for independence, asked for training, assistance in arming, procuring weapons and publicity facilities

19 Banerjee, *India, Mujib ur Rahman, Bangladesh Liberation and Pakistan*, 16-17.

20 Jaffery, “A leaf from History: India and the Breakup of Pakistan”.

21 Jaffery, “A leaf from History: India and the Breakup of Pakistan”.

22 Jaffery, “A leaf from History: India and the Breakup of Pakistan”.

to freedom fighters of Bangladesh to Indira Ghandi. When she gave the green signal



Indira Gandhi

(Source: The sunday guardian)

a politician named Chitta Ranjan Suter was made a go between. After winning the 1970 election, Sheikh Mujib emerged as the undisputed leader of Bangladesh; and in March 1971,

Indira also returned to power in India. Bilateral talks continued and Bangladesh Liberation Front (BLF) central command was re-constituted with Sheikh Fazlul Huq



Sheikh Fazlul Haque Moni

(Source: bssnews.net)

and Tofail Ahmed. Razzak remained the head of the volunteer force²³ There is no doubt that Sheikh Mujib gave his blessings to the Agartala conspiracy,

and his daughter Sheikh Hasina has openly acknowledged this, but the extent of his active involvement after his arrest is unclear. G. W. Chaudhry has reported that Sheikh Mujib kept active contact with the



Sheikh Hasina

(Source: imdb.com)

conspiracy even while he was in jail, and in fact, he was leading the conspiracy from his jail cell.²⁴

The Management and Aftermath of the Case

- The Central Intelligence Bureau investigated the Agartala Case under the monitoring of ISI, and Major Hasan, from the General Headquarters, was appointed to prepare documents of the case and gather key witnesses.²⁵ A special tribunal was established following an amendment to the penal code, to handle the case. The proceedings began on June 19, 1968, under Sections 121-A and 131, with Sheikh Mujibur Rahman listed as the accused number 1. Initially titled *State vs Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and Others*, the case later became widely known as the *Agartala Conspiracy Case*. The tribunal held hearings in a highly secure chamber within Dhaka Cantonment. A charge sheet with 100 paragraphs was presented against the 35 accused, and there were 227 witnesses, including 11 approvers. However, four of the approvers were declared hostile by the government.²⁶ The Agartala Conspiracy Case was widely discussed after its public announcement on January 6, 1968. Arrests of the alleged conspirators had started in late 1967, but the case gained significant attention after Sheikh Mujib's involvement on January 18, 1968. By that time, Mujib had already been in prison since his arrest on May 8, 1966.²⁷ He was released from

23 Choudhury, "Agartala Conspiracy Case and Bold Move of DU Students".

24 Hassaan Bokhari, "The Agartala conspiracy and the resultant deification of Sheikh Mujib in East Pakistan," *Global Village Space*, November 13, 2021, accessed on December 20, 2024, <https://www.globalvillagespace.com/the-agartala-conspiracy-case-and-the-resultant-deification-of-sheikh-mujib-in-east-pakistan/>.

25 Ahmed and Liton, "A passage to Agartala".

26 "Agartala Conspiracy case," *Banglapedia*, last edited on June 17, 2021, accessed on November 23, 2024, https://en.banglapedia.org/index.php/Agartala_Conspiracy_Case.

27 G.W. Chowdhury, "The Fall of Ayub: A Personal Account" in *The last days of united Pakistan* (London: C. Hurst & Co. Publishers Ltd, 1974), 22.



Dhaka Central Jail on 17 January 1968, but he was arrested immediately at the jail gate under a sedition case.²⁸

- Other than Sheikh Mujib, 34 others were also implicated in the case namely, Ahmed Fazlur Rahman CSP, Commander Moazzem Hossain, Steward Mujibur Rahman, former LS Sultanuddin Ahmad, LSCDI Nur Mohammad, flight Sergeant Mahfiz Ullah, Corporal Abdus Samad, former Havildar Dalil Uddin, Ruhul Quddus CSP, Flight Sergeant Md. Fazlul Haq, Bibhuti Bhushan Chowdhury alias Manik Chowdhury, Bidhan Krishna Sen, Subedar Abdur Razzaque, former clerk Mujibur Rahman, former Flight Sergeant Md. Abdur Razzaque, Sergeant Zahurul Haq, A.B. Khurshid, Khan Mohammad Shamsur Rahman CSP, AKM Shamsul Haque, Havildar Azizul Haq, Mahfuzul Bari, Sergeant Shamsul Haq, Shamsul Alam, Captain Md. Abdul Motaleb, Captain A. Shawkat Ali Mian, Captain Khondkar Nazmul Huda, Captain A.N.M Nuruzzaman, Sergeant Abdul Jalil, Mahbub Uddin Chowdhury, Lt. M Rahman, former Subedar Tajul Islam, Ali Reza, Captain Khurshid Uddeen Ahmed, and Lt. Abdur Rauf.²⁹ Each of the 35 accused had their



Sir Thomas Williams
(Source: npg.org.uk)

own lawyers, but Sheikh Mujib was explicitly represented by a UK lawyer, Sir Thomas Williams QC. The appointment of the UK lawyer is another fascinating story. It is believed that the



Newspaper Headline on the Agartala Conspiracy Case
(Source: Liberation War Museum)

chief minister of Tripura, Sachindra Lal Singh, played a leading role in arranging for a foreign lawyer. Sheikh Mujib had developed a close relationship with Sachindra Lal after visiting Agartala in 1963 to discuss the issue of East Pakistan's secession.³⁰ It is also believed that the



Monem Khan
(Source: dailysangram.com)

Governor of East Pakistan, Monem Khan, played a crucial role in persuading Ayub that the Agartala Conspiracy presented an ideal opportunity to involve Sheikh Mujib

in the case.³¹

- On the first day of the trial, a 42-page charge sheet outlining the accused's plot to stage a coup and seize power, was presented. As Sir Thomas Williams entered the courtroom the following day, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, former foreign minister under Ayub, was already present to represent Sheikh Mujib in the case symbolically. Bhutto had a personal motive for this: having fallen out with Ayub and been dismissed from his position, he was

28 Dr. Atiur Rahman, "The Agartala Conspiracy Case," *Daily Sun*, December 28, 2020, <https://www.daily-sun.com/printversion/details/526389>.

29 (6) Source later – 34 NAMES.

30 Ahmed and Liton, "A passage to Agartala".

31 Ahmed and Liton, "A passage to Agartala".

leading an anti-Ayub movement in West Pakistan, and saw an opportunity to align himself with Mujib's cause.³² According to the charge sheet, the armed forces officers involved in the plot intended to overpower the small groups of West Pakistani troops, take control, and declare independence, with Sheikh Mujib as their leader. To achieve this, they raised funds to purchase weapons from India. An Indian diplomat in Dhaka acted as intermediary, holding several meetings with the conspirators at his residence, and assuring them of both arms and financial support. However, when a three-member team from the conspirators travelled to Agartala to finalise the arms deal, it fell through, as the Indians considered the team to be of too low a rank.³³ As the case advanced, the Sarbadaliya Chhatra Sangram Parishad, backed by Maulana Abdul Hamid Khan Bhashani, began organising a mass movement to oppose the government's actions. They called for immediate dismissal of the case and release of all detainees, including Sheikh Mujibur Rahman.³⁴

- Amid widespread protests in Dhaka, Sergeant Zahurul Haq, the 17th accused in the case, was shot dead on 15 February 1969 while in custody at Dhaka Cantonment. This event fueled street protests and violence. A furious mob torched the state guesthouse, compelling Justice SA Rahman, the tribunal chairman, and Manzur Quader, the chief prosecutor, to escape from East Pakistan.³⁵ Meanwhile, the newly formed democratic action committee (DAC) planned to hold a roundtable conference

(RTC) in Rawalpindi, to address political issues. But the Awami League, being the most potent committee member, rejected an offer from Ayub Khan for Mujib to attend the conference on parole. Prominent politician Maulana Bhashani also declined this offer. Confronted with a widespread movement, the Ayub government had no choice but to withdraw the Agartala Conspiracy Case on February 22, 1969. All the accused, including Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, were released without conditions. Brigadier Rao Farman Ali accompanied Mujib to his Dhanmondi home, where he was greeted with cheers and celebrations. The following day, February 23, 1971, a grand public reception took place at *Paltan Maidan* in Dhaka, where Sheikh Mujibur Rahman was bestowed the title *Bangabandhu*.³⁶ After his release,



Sheikh Mujib seen smiling with his daughter Sheikh Hasina after his release from Agartala Conspiracy Case in 1969
(Source: mujib100.gov.bd0)

Sheikh Mujib continued to carry out parallel democratic activities and armed preparations, for independence. He even decided on the colour and shape of the national flag, and chose a song by Tagore as the national anthem.³⁷ Sheikh Mujibur Rahman rose to political prominence in the early 1960s, and the sudden conclusion

32 Ahmed and Liton, "A passage to Agartala".

33 Ahmed and Liton, "A passage to Agartala".

34 "Agartala Conspiracy case".

35 Md Ziaul Haque Howlader, "Sheikh Mujib Agartala Case Memorial Museum," *Daily Sun*, March 9, 2020, <https://www.daily-sun.com/printversion/details/468087>.

36 "Agartala Conspiracy case".

37 Choudhury, "Agartala Conspiracy Case and Bold Move of DU Students".



of this case propelled him to the top of East Pakistan’s political leadership. His innovative approach of playing on both sides of the wicket, helped secure a victory in the 1970 general election, ultimately paving the way for the creation of Bangladesh.³⁸

- While there is considerable evidence regarding this conspiracy, the way it was handled was highly inadequate. Involving Sheikh Mujib in the case while he was already imprisoned seemed rather odd. After his involvement, He was released, and the case was dismissed entirely.³⁹ The RTC proved unfruitful; while Ayub made concessions to Mujib, the West Pakistani leadership opposed them. Mujib’s demands were approaching the point of secession. The stage was set for a major confrontation when the time came, with India’s role being subtle yet significant. Throughout this period, India increasingly supported Sheikh Mujib.⁴⁰ The careless investigation and mishandled judicial proceedings, instead, raised doubts about the conspiracy’s authenticity, even among loyal Pakistanis.⁴¹

Indian Role

- The Indian role behind the Agartala Conspiracy is no longer a secret. Some Indians involved, and revealed later, included P.N. Ojha, the first secretary of the Indian High Commission, Lieutenant Colonel Misra, and Major Menon. This revelation was not unexpected given the public knowledge of India’s connections with East Pakistani leaders. In hindsight, even Mujib acknowledged that he had

engaged in conversations with Indians.⁴² The All-India Radio aired a weekly program called *Apper Bangla Oupper Bangla* (This side and the other side of Bengal). This indicates that India was strongly supporting the separatist movement, which was being conducted under the guise of promoting unity.⁴³ Four youth leaders, namely Sheikh Fazlul Huq Moni, Serajul Alam Khan, Abdur Razzak and Tofail Ahmed were entrusted with the responsibility of the Bangladesh Liberation Force to unify the scattered forces under a central command.⁴⁴ Chitta Sutar, who acted as the intermediary between Indira Gandhi and Sheikh Mujib, was given additional duties, including working with Tajuddin and the four youth leaders. Sutar, an ex-Awami League member of parliament who had migrated to India, maintained contact with Sheikh Mujib, who tasked him with reaching out to various Indian intelligence agencies to foster a positive attitude toward the emerging liberation movement. He also arranged accommodation for future trainees in India, and worked to create favourable conditions for all those who would undergo mass training. To keep these



Begum Fazilatunnesa Mujib
(Source: bdnews24.com)

activities hidden from Pakistani intelligence, Sutar was placed under the direct supervision of Begum Fazilatunnesa Mujib (wife of Sheikh Mujib). In March, Dr. Abu Henna was

38 Choudhury, “Agartala Conspiracy Case and Bold Move of DU Students”.

39 Jaffery, “A leaf from History: India and the Breakup of Pakistan”.

40 Jaffery, “A leaf from History: India and the Breakup of Pakistan”.

41 Bokhari, “The Agartala conspiracy and the resultant deification of Sheikh Mujib in East Pakistan”.

42 Khan, “Revisiting the Agartala Conspiracy – Op-ed.”

43 Jaffery, “A leaf from History: India and the Breakup of Pakistan”.

44 Choudhury, “Agartala Conspiracy Case and Bold Move of DU Students”.

secretly sent to assess the progress of these efforts. After confirming that everything was in order, he returned to East Pakistan. Sheikh Mujib also instructed Tajuddin to establish contact with officials from the Indian High Commission in Dhaka. A communication route was also set up through Zahirul Qayyum of Comilla, to facilitate quick contact via the Tripura state government, to support the secession of East Pakistan.⁴⁵

- Following the launch of OPERATION SEARCHLIGHT by the Pakistan Army, Awami League's then General Secretary Tajuddin and Barrister Amirul Islam crossed the Kushtia border, where they were escorted to Kolkata by the Indian Border Security Force (BSF). On April 1, 1971, Tajuddin flew to Delhi aboard an AN-32 aircraft of the Indian Air Force. He met with Prime Minister Indira Gandhi on April 3, conveying Sheikh Mujib's plan to establish a government-in-exile for Bangladesh, and lead the liberation struggle. After their discussions, Prime Minister Gandhi assured full support for the new country and its government.⁴⁶ After returning to Kolkata from Delhi, Tajuddin began searching for his fellow Awami League leaders, a challenging task due to the lack of communication across various borders and camps. With the assistance of the Indian Air Force (IAF), Tajuddin travelled to several refugee camps using airstrips established by the British during World War II. He eventually gathered the prominent leaders from these camps and brought them to Agartala.
- On April 10, 1971, a provisional constitution was created, marking the

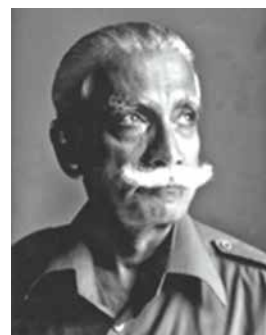
formation of the Bangladesh government in exile. The newly formed government took its oath on April 17, 1971, in Meherpur district. The oath ceremony took place in a mango forest at Baidyanathtala, which the provisional government later renamed Mujibnagar. The selection of this site was strategic: it was relatively free from the Pakistani Army, access by road from East Pakistan was difficult, and India protected it from three sides. However, the Pakistan Air Force's threat of airstrikes remained, making the mango forest's natural cover crucial for the ceremony's security.⁴⁷ The cabinet members were Sheikh Mujibur Rahman (President of Bangladesh), Syed Nazrul Islam (Vice President and Acting



Syed Nazrul Islam
(Source: dailysianage.com)

President), Tajuddin Ahmad (Prime Minister), A. H. M. Qamaruzzaman (Minister of Home Affairs, Relief and Rehabilitation), Mansur Ali (Minister of Finance and Planning),

Khondaker Mostaq Ahmad (Minister of Foreign Affairs and Law), and Colonel M A G Osmani (Commander-in-Chief of Mukti Bahini). Agartala was the place where



Colonel M A G Osmani
(Source: bssnews.net)

Sheikh Mujib first shared his vision for creating a new country. Just three years later, members of his government in exile convened at the same location, united by the same goal.⁴⁸

45 Choudhury, "Agartala Conspiracy Case and Bold Move of DU Students".

46 Khan, "Agartala Conspiracy to Mujibnagar Government: Bangladesh's Provisional Government in Exile".

47 Khan, "Agartala Conspiracy to Mujibnagar Government: Bangladesh's Provisional Government in Exile".

48 Khan, "Agartala Conspiracy to Mujibnagar Government: Bangladesh's Provisional Government in Exile".



Six Points⁴⁹

- Elections to the national and provincial assemblies should be direct and on the basis of universal adult franchise.
- The centre should be responsible for defence and foreign affairs only.
- Currency should be controlled by regional reserve banks.
- Federating units to provide money to the centre on a pre-determined procedure.
- Federating units to maintain their own foreign exchange accounts.
- Federating units can raise their own military and para military forces.

Ramifications for Pakistan

Edification of Sheikh Mujib

- The Agartala Conspiracy, a plot with significant implications for Pakistan, shaped the direction of future events. The decision to release Sheikh Mujib was heavily criticised as a grave mistake, undermining the seriousness of the conspiracy.⁵⁰ It provided Mujib a platform to promote his political agenda, dramatically increasing his support base. The withdrawal of testimonies by the other conspirators, the sympathy evoked by their emotional displays, the inaction of state institutions, and Ayub Khan's desire for re-election, all contributed to the government's decision to dismiss the case and free Mujib. He was welcomed as a hero and titled *Bangabandhu* (Friend of Bengal). Abdul Hafeez Kardar of the Pakistan People's Party remarked: *Ayub made a martyr of Mujib by insinuating the Agartala conspiracy.*⁵¹ The withdrawal of the case made it clear to all, that the state

could not defend itself against treason. By this time, there was a clear faction in East Pakistan (albeit in a considerable minority) that advocated the break-up of Pakistan, even with the help of India. That faction received huge encouragement and recruitment after the botched Agartala case.⁵²

- Consequent to the withdrawal of the Agartala Case, Ayub Khan resigned and handed over power to General Yahya Khan instead of the national assembly speaker Abdul Jabbar Khan (a Bengali), violating the law. Since Sheikh Mujib had become the unchallenged Bengali leader and champion of East Pakistanis' rights, he continued his campaign to garner support for his political agenda. General Yahya allowed all kinds of political activities to take effect from 1 January 1970, and all parties engaged in election campaigns one year before elections. December 1970 elections are a rare example amongst world democracies, where an election campaign was allowed to continue for one year. Awami League's election campaign, based upon 6 points and the narrative of exploitation by West Pakistan, was intensified and came into full swing of hate, after the devastating *Bhola Cyclone* of November 1970. Awami League played the sympathy card quite effectively, by alleging that the central government had not done enough for the flood victims. Yahya Khan had an opportunity to postpone elections for an indefinite time. Still, he refrained from doing so, which indicates his intent to hand over power to the country's elected representatives. What happened afterwards is another episode, where three major

49 Kamal Matinuddin, *Tragedy of Errors – East Pakistan Crisis 1968-1971* (Lahore: Wajidali, 2011), 39.

50 Khan, "Revisiting the Agartala Conspiracy – Op-ed".

51 Kardar, *Pakistan's Soldiers of Fortune*, 133; Hasan, "Agartala Conspiracy: Fact or Fiction?".

52 Bokhari, "The Agartala conspiracy and the resultant deification of Sheikh Mujib in East Pakistan".

stakeholders (Sheikh Mujib, Z.A Bhutto and Yahya Khan) played their parts in a race to the throne, as per their vested interests. It would not be wrong to say that the creation of Bangladesh was the by-product of the Agartala Conspiracy Case, in so many ways.

- The significance of the Agartala Conspiracy Case for the Bengali nation can be judged from the fact that there is also a museum in Dhaka named after this case. This museum is located on Shaheed Belayet Road in the Dhaka Cantonment area, just a 10-minute drive from Hazrat Shah Jalal International Airport. It is situated near the Combined Military Hospital (CMH) and only a few minutes from the Bijoyketon Liberation War Museum, where the trial occurred. The historical events of the Agartala Conspiracy Case closely link the two museums.⁵³

The Rise of Bengali Nationalism

- The Ayub regime expected the Agartala Conspiracy Case to tarnish Mujib's reputation as a conspirator, but the reaction from the Bengalis was entirely unexpected. Rather than discrediting him, it strengthened and unified the concept of Bangla nationalism. The outcome of the case, along with Ayub Khan's removal from



Nur ul Amin
(Source: pantheon.world)

power, led to a rise in assertive Bengali nationalism, which culminated in a landslide victory for the Awami League in the elections. Awami League won all the seats except two, which Nur-



Raja Tridev Roy
(Source: flickr.com)

Ul-Amin and Raja Tridev Roy won.⁵⁴ The case's withdrawal also revealed the vulnerabilities of the Pakistani government, further fuelling Bengali resentment and

mistrust towards the central government in Islamabad. The election results were not surprising, but they far exceeded the Inter-Services Intelligence expectations. Mujib's Awami League won 160 out of the 162 seats allocated to East Pakistan. The ISI's report predicted that Mujib would only secure around 45 seats, which was a deliberate misrepresentation. The ISI officers responsible for East Pakistan at the time, Major Nurul Islam and Major Anwarul Islam, were both Bengalis with nationalist leanings.⁵⁵

- Ayub has often been heavily criticised for releasing Mujib, thereby enhancing his prominence. However, a closer examination reveals a different perspective. The way the trial was conducted essentially turned Mujib into a hero for the people of East Pakistan. The excessive publicity surrounding the trial transformed him from an outcast into a celebrated figure. Inadvertently, the government did a significant disservice to the nation, by making him a hero. Karrar Ali Agha offers a grim explanation for why Ayub had to release Mujib. He writes; "As political support for Ayub Khan in both wings of the country rapidly diminished due to a massive nationwide agitation in 1968-69, the situation in East Pakistan

53 Howlader, "Sheikh Mujib Agartala Case Memorial Museum."

54 Dr Farid A Malik, "Understanding Agartala and London Conspiracies," Pakistan Today, June 7, 2023, <https://www.pakistantoday.com.pk/2023/06/07/understanding-agartala-and-london-conspiracies/>.

55 Jaffery, "A leaf from History: India and the Breakup of Pakistan".



worsened. Unchecked violence, murder, and looting escalated in the province... Pro-Mujib protests intensified to the point where Ayub was not only compelled to withdraw the Agartala Conspiracy Case but also to release Sheikh Mujibur Rahman from prison without conditions.” Ayub’s hold on power and his health were rapidly declining, leading him to call for a round table conference in a desperate attempt to resolve the crisis.⁵⁶

Conclusion

Secessionist movements that use armed rebellion and foreign assistance to gain independence often succeed, but at a significant cost to human lives. The secessionist movement of Awami League also succeeded in 1971 at huge human cost, unfortunately, through

overt and covert Indian collaboration, playing to Indian strategic designs of breaking up Pakistan. Resultantly, Bangladesh had to serve as an Indian client state, compromising her sovereignty in multiple ways, much to the dislike of the Bangladeshi people, though. The students’ movement of July-August 2024, which resulted in the ouster of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina on 5th August 2024, is testament to the fact that the Bangladeshi people always believed in the ‘Two Nations Theory’ of M.A Jinnah, and never accepted Indian machinations and hegemonic designs. The forced exit of Sheikh Hasina from Bangladesh’s political landscape indicates that the conspiracy initiated in Agartala in 1963, came full circle, reaching its culmination on August 5, 2024, at Agartala—completing a journey spanning around six decades.

About the author



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⁵⁶ Jaffery, “A leaf from History: India and the Breakup of Pakistan”.