

ESCAPE FROM SRINAGAR JAIL

*A true story of Kashmiri
Freedom Fighters' Escape
from Srinagar Jail*



Mohammad Maqbool Butt

*An enlightening journey
Of knowledge and awareness
For those who seek reality
Lie facts step by step*

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FOREWORD

After reading this booklet in the Urdu language, I made a promise to myself that I would make sure it is translated into English to make it more accessible to a wider audience. If Saeed Asad had not published this booklet when he did, I am sure that today we would no longer be able to access it and translate it, given the growing curtailment of freedom of expression in the region.

Last year, the government of so-called 'Azad Jammu & Kashmir' banned the circulation of this booklet and other books relating to Kashmir, including some literature about the freedom-fighter Maqbool Butt. Throughout his life, Maqbool Butt struggled to fight for and serve an independent Kashmir. He sacrificed his life for his motherland and for his future nation. But unfortunately today there is not much information available about him in the English language.

As some of you may be aware, I raised money for the publication of 'Mera Quaid, Mera Rehbar' ('my leader, my guide'), a book written about Maqbool Butt. And God-willing, I will endeavour to keep using such funds for publishing more books on Kashmir and translating them into English. In doing so, the younger generation living in Britain and elsewhere can learn more about their motherland.

My hope and wish is that one day the youth and diaspora of Kashmir will be the pioneers of a movement for an independent, diverse and united Kashmir.

Azhar Ahmed

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MOHAMMAD MAQBOOL BUTT SHAHEED ¹

His personality and endeavours

A brief introduction by: Mohammad Saeed Asad

Mohammad Maqbool Butt Shaheed was born on the 18th of February 1938 in a village called Trehgam which is situated in sub-district Handwara, in the Kupwara district of Indian-occupied Kashmir. His father was a hard-working man by the name of Ghulam Qadir Butt. Maqbool Butt gained his basic education at the village primary school and later attained his BA from St Joseph's College in Baramulla. During his school and college days, he would engage heavily in the activities of movements and social campaigns. Upon seeing the activities of this youngster the Christian principal of the college -Mr. Shanks- predicted his future thus, "this young man will either accomplish great things, or he will be lowered into the valley of death" (i.e. he will die trying).

During the time that Maqbool Butt took his BA exams, The Kashmir Valley was descending into mayhem due to the arrest of Shaykh Abdullah. Therefore, upon completing his exams he set off with his uncle, Abdul Aziz, and crossed the ceasefire line into Azad Kashmir, where the Pakistani border guards detained them for questioning in the Muzaffarabad fort. After being

¹ *Shaheed* literally means 'martyr'. The names of martyrs are usually suffixed in this way as a mark of respect so the anglicised version of the title should be: Mohammad Maqbool Butt the Martyr. (translator's note)

released Maqbool Butt settled in Peshawar, where with the help of a Kashmiri man called Muhabbat Khan, he gained entry into Peshawar University to study for his MA. Alongside studying he would also work for the **Anjaam** newspaper which was based in Peshawar. He also started a weekly magazine called **Khyber Weekly** but was unable to keep it running due to financial pressure. He obtained MA degrees in Urdu literature and journalism from Peshawar University. In 1961 he married a lady from an acquainted family, Raaja Begum, from whom he received two sons in close succession, Javed Maqbool and Shaukat Maqbool. In 1960, during the presidency of K.H. Khurshid, when the new Basic Democracies system was introduced, Maqbool Butt took part in the first local elections in Kashmir as a hopeful candidate and won. In 1965 he married a school teacher, Zakirah Begum, from whom he received a daughter, Lubna Maqbool.

In 1965, Maqbool Butt and some of his associates laid the foundations of a new political party which they called *Mahaz e Rai Shumari*. In April 1965 the first convention of *Mahaz* took place in Sialkot during which Maqbool Butt was elected as the publicity Secretary of *Mahaz*. After the convention the leading officials of *Mahaz* proceeded to the Suchetgarh border which runs between Sialkot and Jammu, where they scooped up handfuls of soil from Indian occupied Kashmir, held it aloft, and vowed: "We will give everything, even our lives, to restore honour and freedom to this land."

On the 13th of August 1965, Maqbool Butt and a friend called Amanullah Khan established the National Liberation Front - a covert military wing of *Mahaz*. The purpose of its establishment was to give military training to the Kashmiri youth and in effect,

prepare them to fight the occupying Indian forces. Maqbool Butt used the NLF as a platform to explain the underlying ideology of the armed struggle for freedom and to set a clear course of action. His philosophy was that freedom could not be attained by merely requesting it; rather one must forcefully take it back from the occupying forces. He would say that if the Kashmiris do not take up arms and combat the occupying forces, the dream of a liberated Kashmir can never come true.

Then, in June 1966, to initiate the guerrilla war against India, he and some of his comrades: Major Amanullah Khan, Subedar Kala Khan and Aurangzeb Shaheed of Gilgit crossed the ceasefire line and entered The Kashmir Valley. Here they spent three months undercover, devoting their time to organisational activities and recruitment, persuading the youth to enter the battlefield for the liberation of their motherland. Things took a turn for the worse however, when one day during a gun battle; he and his friends were arrested and imprisoned in Srinagar Central Jail. One of his friends, Aurangzeb, was martyred in that battle. Maqbool Butt and his associates were officially charged with the offence of promoting rebellion against the Indian occupation. Neelkanth Ganjoo, a judge at the Kashmir High Court wasted no time in announcing his decision before them; they were to be put to death. Maqbool Butt, upon hearing the death sentence spoke up in the courtroom and addressed the judge thus: "Sir, as of yet there is no such rope available which is capable of hanging Maqbool Butt."

While he was in Srinagar Central Jail, even before hearing the death sentence, Maqbool Butt was already contemplating the idea of escape. But after he had heard the judge sentence them to death, he decided to make a definitive plan. Firstly he

approached like-minded fellow inmates: Meer Ahmad, Ghulam Yasin, Subedar Kala Khan, Jamas Khan, Gul Zaman and others for their advice and counsel. It was decided that the small number of guards at the jail should be overpowered by way of a sudden assault, and then their weapons and keys should be seized and the jail doors should then be unlocked. On the day before the night of the planned attack however, Jamas Khan (of Kharal Maldialan, Bagh), and Gul Zaman (of Jundgram, Muzaffarabad) suddenly got cold feet, and overcome by fear, they refused to co-operate. Mohammad Maqbool Butt, after seeking the advice of his other friends, came up with another idea; they would escape by breaking through a section of the prison wall. Mr Butt and Meer Ahmad were being held in cell number 1. They pierced their way into cell number 2 which was being used as a storeroom. It was here that they pierced a hole into the 3 ft. thick and 20 ft. high wall. Most of the work was carried out by Meer Ahmad. It was on the 9th of November 1968, (the night between the 17th and 18th of the holy month of Ramadhan), at 2.15 a.m., when Meer Ahmad, Ghulam Yasin and Mohammad Maqbool Butt successfully escaped through the hole in the wall.

The jail officials received news of the incident at the time of *Sehri*² around 4 a.m. when it was time for the guards to change shifts. The emergency siren was echoing throughout the whole of Srinagar. The city was placed on high alert. The army, police and other security units were out searching frantically for the escaped prisoners. But to no avail. The Indian government, in spite of exhausting its resources, power and might was unable to apprehend those great lovers of liberation.

² *Sehri* is the name given to the pre-dawn meal consumed before starting the fast. (translator's note)

The difficult conditions that Maqbool Butt and his friends had to face during their escape journey were penned down by Maqbool Butt himself while he was being held for the Ganga hijacking case. He wrote a thought-provoking and historic recollection of events regarding his escape from the Srinagar Central Jail in which he said: "That journey of 16 days was a historic moment in my life. I consider the experiences and observations gained during that time to be my most valuable assets. And yes, the success of my prison escape was partly due to the product of my mind's exertions and divine intervention, but that 16 day journey breathed new life into my faith and conviction. Memories of that selfless love and adoration which the occupied people of my native land displayed while they helped me complete my mission, and while they reached out to me on every step of the way, will forever remain etched on my heart and my mind. I can never forget. The light of the sincerity and the fervour of pure intention that I witnessed, made me believe once again that very soon the sun of liberation will rise, and the darkness of slavery will be dispelled. I will always remember those tears of love and gratitude streaming down the innocent faces of those who would come to bid us farewell as we moved onto the next stage of the journey. Surely, fate is not so merciless that it will not bless the cries and prayers originating from within the depths of hearts with acceptance. I have never forgotten that tear-jerking scene with the inhabitants of The Kashmir Valley, when some of my fellow countrymen came to see me off at the final stage of the journey amid the evening mist. The inhabitants of my homeland, my friends, expressing their faith in us, with tear streaked faces and voices breaking they bid me farewell. I am unable to describe how I felt. It was the effect of their prayers that in the blood-curdling cold of December, while being unequipped, I crossed

over impassable snow-covered mountains 12 to 14'000 ft. high, and travelled for six consecutive days until I reached the safe place known as "Azad Kashmir." The manner, in which my fellow countrymen threw caution to the wind and showed aversion to both greed and fear of repercussion to assist me, will prove to be a shining tower of light in our national liberation movement, and the future generations will deem it to be a praise-worthy example. It was the miracle of that assistance which rendered the enemies of our freedom incapable of recapturing me. And thus, through the help of the public, the counter operations of the enemy proved futile."

[Adaalati Bayan (court statement), Mohammad Maqbool Butt, Pg. 22 - 24. Published in 1972 by Defence Committee for the hijacking case.]

This Autobiographical account by Mohammad Maqbool Butt was published by the weekly *Kahaani* and the monthly *Hikaayat* as well as some other magazines and newspapers at the time. Since then it has been reproduced occasionally, but this is the first time, after considerable effort and research that the story is being published in book form with references.

I hope that the readers will read this story with their undivided attention, and while reading it will be moved by how this worthy son of Kashmir, in freezing conditions, crossed rivers and rivulets, streams and lakes, forests and mountains, snow-covered, sky-scraping peaks, with determination and fortitude and successfully escaped custody of the enemy. Difficulties at every step of the way, road blocks, hunger, extreme cold, freezing winds and snowstorms could not stand in his way. The faith of this warrior was so strong and true, that nature took it upon itself to guide and protect him on every step of the way. In

this story you will read the incident of the poor shepherd at whose house Mohammad Maqbool Butt and his friends stayed, who saw in a dream at *Sehri* time, his *Peer Sahib*³ giving him the good news that: “today some very special guests will visit your home, take good care of them.” When Maqbool Butt and his friends entered the old man’s house, his happiness knew no bounds.

While this story on the one hand reflects the determination and will-power of Mohammad Maqbool Butt Shaheed and his associates, it also shines a light on the attitude and good character of the Kashmiri people. During this journey, these travellers while being intoxicated with their desire for liberation were welcomed by the new moon of *Eid-ul-Fitr*⁴ rising over the tall, snow-covered peaks of Kazi Nag. Maqbool Butt Shaheed, while giving account of this memorable journey writes: “We shall only celebrate *Eid* when Kashmir is liberated”. It is this determination and character, which every Kashmiri who seeks to attain freedom must embrace. On the 25th of December 1968, upon reaching Azad Kashmir, Mohammad Maqbool Butt Shaheed and both of his associates were arrested by the FIU⁵ and imprisoned in the infamous Black Fort at Muzaffarabad where they were subjected to a new round of cruelty and harsh treatment. Maqbool Butt, while mentioning that incident writes: “At Black Fort, I was confused by the new circumstances

³ *Pir Sahib* literally means ‘respected spiritual mentor’. It is the term used to describe a man of God who guides his disciples along the path of spirituality and enlightenment. (translator’s note)

⁴ *Eid ul Fitr* or *Eid al Fitr* literally means ‘the breakfast festival’. It is the name given to the Muslim festival which marks the end of *Ramadhan* and the start of the next lunar month. (translator’s note)

⁵ FIU is the acronym for the ‘Field Intelligence Unit’ of the Pakistan Army. (translator’s note)

I had found myself in; such circumstances which forced me to rethink many things, and my thoughts opened up to hitherto undiscovered pathways in my mind. It was becoming increasingly difficult to differentiate friend from foe.”

The FIU checked the court files of Mohammad Maqbool Butt Shaheed which included the 300 page hand-written statement he had prepared on the decaying, earthen floor of cell number 1 in Srinagar Central Jail. This file of Mohammad Maqbool Butt is a trust of the Kashmiri people which should be taken from the archives of the FIU and handed over to the people of Kashmir. At Black Fort in Muzaffarabad, Maqbool Butt and his friends suffered extreme torture, but they remained steadfastly devoted to the cause of liberation. After going through a period of harsh treatment they were finally freed and they immediately resumed work on their cause. In 1968, Mohammad Maqbool Butt was elected chairman of *Mahaz e Rai Shumari*. On 30th January 1971, Ashraf Qureshi and Hashim Qureshi, two Kashmiri youngsters, hijacked an Indian passenger plane named Ganga and brought it to Lahore because of which Maqbool Butt and dozens of his associates were made to suffer in numerous jails and detention centres across Pakistan, but these lovers of liberation remained high-spirited.

In May 1973, after being released without charge, Maqbool Butt once again sprang into action. In 1975 he campaigned as a candidate for the Azad Kashmir Legislative Assembly in the constituencies of both Abbottabad and Murree but was unsuccessful. He did however ensure that during the election campaign the cause of his homeland's liberation reached every home. In 1976, Maqbool Butt and two of his young friends, Riyaz Ahmad Dar and Abdul Hameed Butt once again crossed

the ceasefire line into The Kashmir Valley to restart organisational work on the freedom struggle but he and his companions were arrested during a gun battle. Shortly after being arrested they were transferred to Tihar Jail in Delhi, where the Indian Supreme Court upheld their previous life sentence and announced that they were to be hanged.

On 6th February 1984, Ravindra Mhatre, an Indian diplomat working at the Indian embassy in London was kidnapped by members of a covert organisation known as the “Kashmir Liberation Army”. The kidnappers demanded that Maqbool Butt and his associates be freed within 24 hours, but 54 hours later when the Indian government was still refusing to cooperate, the kidnappers murdered Mhatre. Immediately after this advancement, the Indian Government announced that Maqbool Butt would be hanged. The Kashmiris protested tirelessly in one final, desperate bid to save Maqbool Butt from the death sentence, but The Indian Government remained firm on its decision. And so, on Sunday morning, the 11th of February 1984, he was hanged in Tihar jail Delhi. The executioner pulled the noose, and while Maqbool Butt was dangling on the execution noose, his final words were: “Dear homeland, you will most certainly be liberated....”

The Indian government refused to hand over the body of Maqbool Butt to his family, so the Muslim inmates of Tihar Jail buried him in the prison compound.

جس دھج سے کوئی مقتل کو گیا وہ
 شان سلامت رہتی ہے
 یہ جان تو آئی جانی ہے اس جان
 کی کوئی بات نہیں

Whatever the appearance of one headed for battle, his splendour lives on...

This life comes and goes, one cares not for this life...

When it comes to the issue of the struggle for the liberation of Kashmir, Maqbool Butt Shaheed occupies the uppermost rank. Maqbool Butt's sacrifice for the cause of liberation gave the Kashmiri people renewed determination and a boost of morale. Undoubtedly, the respect and appreciation which the new generation of Kashmiris gives to Maqbool Butt and the rank he holds is enjoyed by no other. The new generation considers Maqbool Butt to be the hero of the freedom struggle, the reason being that Maqbool Butt abandoned the status quo, trampled personal comfort and gain underfoot and with truth, purity of heart and sincerity he showed the new generation the true vision of freedom and independence. He then broke all records in showing forbearance and perseverance in an attempt to bring that vision to life.

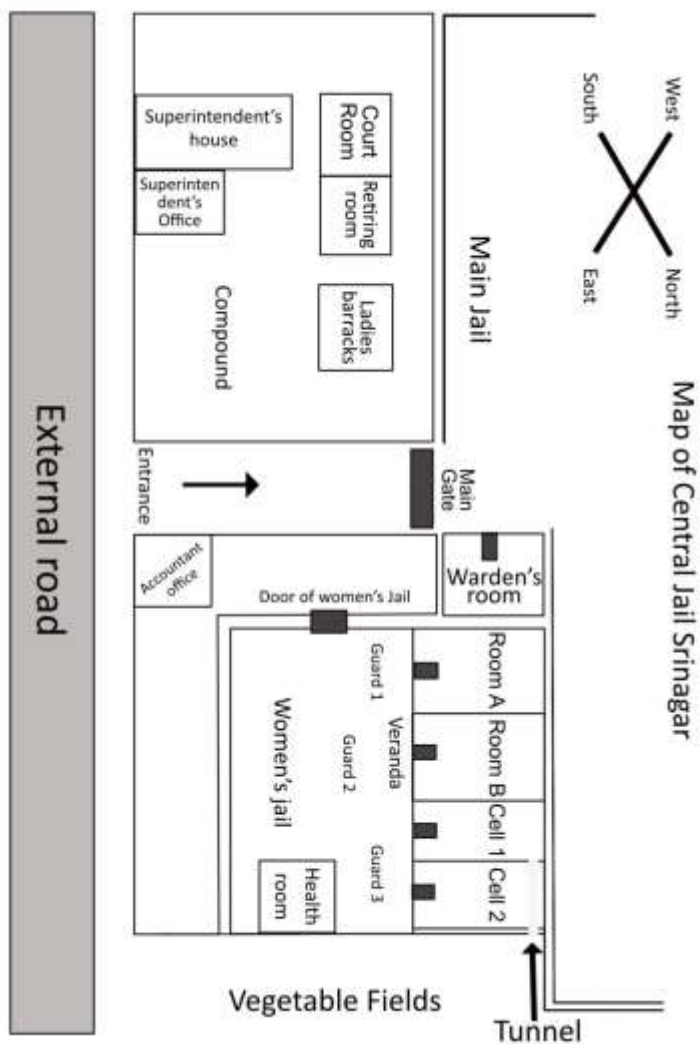
This historic account of the escape from Srinagar Central Jail by Maqbool Butt and his two associates is being published with explanatory notes and references. Wherever the need has been felt to bring certain points of additional information to the readers' attention, footnotes have duly been added. Much effort and toil went into the completion of this task, after which I am certain that this story will be very informative and pleasing to read. Though I have ensured that no traces of ambiguity or brevity remain, if the readers do come across any point that needs expounding upon then they are kindly requested to point it out so that it can be rectified in future editions.

I am experiencing great pleasure in my heart and soul to present this autobiographical account of the martyr of Kashmir, the leader of liberation, Mohammad Maqbool Butt Shaheed, in a refreshingly unique literary style to the new generation of Kashmiris. No doubt my efforts will help to polish the eyes and hearts of the new Kashmiri generation, causing them to follow in the footsteps of their martyred leader, working to regain their freedom, braving all that comes their way in the form of hardships and difficulties, they will continue to advance until they reach their intended destination and no tyrant, ruler or robber will be able to stand in their way.

ان شاء الله

(God willing)

Mohammad Saeed Asad.



THE STORY OF ESCAPE FROM SRINAGAR JAIL

Whether it is an enemy prison or a military camp, those who love to be free have always attempted to escape, and such attempts are considered to be an integral part of guerrilla warfare. My escape from Srinagar Central Jail was no coincidence; rather it was the result of thorough planning and a carefully executed plan. When I was arrested⁶ I was seriously contemplating the idea of an escape, and midway through 1967, I came to the conclusion that my escape was of vital importance to that movement, for the advancement of which I had travelled from Pakistan to Indian occupied Kashmir.⁷ Major Amanullah Khan⁸, the head of the military wing of the National

⁶ Mohammad Maqbool Butt was arrested on the night of 6 September 1966 in Indian occupied Kashmir, district Baramulla, in a village called Koneel at the house of Abdullah Meer along with his friends, Subedar Kala Khan and Meer Ahmad during a very bloody gun battle. In that battle, a 19 year old loyal friend of theirs, Aurangzeb, who hailed from Gilgit was martyred.

⁷ On 10th June 1966 Maqbool Butt, along with his friends Major Amanullah Khan, Habibullah Butt, Subedar Kala Khan and Aurangzeb entered Indian-occupied Kashmir in two groups.

⁸ Major Amanullah Khan hailed from Hai Aama in Indian-occupied Kashmir. During World War 2, while fighting on the Burmese front, he was captured by The Japanese. After being freed he joined the revolutionary forces of Subhas Chandra Bose, the Indian National Army. He served on the Kashmiri front during the 1947 war. In 1964 he retired from his post of Major at the Azad Kashmir Regular Forces (AKRF) and settled in Peshawar. He was one of the founders of the NLF, and was appointed head of its military wing. He died during an

Liberation Front had returned to Azad Kashmir and it had now become necessary for me to escape from prison and organise that wing. Seeing the diligence of the patrols was a factor amongst many which made me decide that I would not seek outside assistance. The main reason for this decision was that if such an attempt failed, then those freedom campaigners who were on the outside and would help me escape, would also get into trouble alongside myself.

During the autumn of 1967, some of the inmates of Srinagar Jail that had been convicted of security offences were transferred to our part of the jail. The part in which we were being held was called “the women’s quarters”, or “the women’s jail”.⁹ The transferred inmates included Gul Zaman,¹⁰ Jamas Khan,¹¹ and Ghulam Yasin Khan.¹² The former two entered

accident in 1976 and is buried in the Tanga Addah graveyard, Muzaffarabad.

⁹ This section of Srinagar Central Jail was originally reserved for female prisoners, but after punishment of females was repealed, the section was used to house the most dangerous inmates.

¹⁰ Gul Zaman hailed from Jundgran, district Muzaffarabad, Azad Kashmir. In 1965 he was sent into Indian-occupied Kashmir as a volunteer to take part In Operation Gibraltar. He was arrested and taken to Srinagar Central Jail where he remained as a prisoner of war.

¹¹ Jamas Khan hailed from Kharal Maldialan, district Bagh. He became a prisoner of war in 1965 and was taken to Srinagar Central Jail. Since then he has been freed in a prisoner exchange and has settled in Azad Kashmir. 80 year old Jamas Khan is currently alive and well.

¹² Choudhry Ghulam Yasin’s forefathers hailed from Dogarpora, District Handwara, in Indian-occupied Kashmir. His family migrated to Nokot Leepa after 1947 and settled there. In 1965 he was sent into Indian-occupied Kashmir as a soldier to take part In Operation Gibraltar. He was arrested and taken to Srinagar Central Jail where he remained as a prisoner of war. In 1968 he escaped from prison with Maqbool Butt and went to Azad Kashmir where he remained affiliated

Indian-occupied Kashmir from Azad Kashmir during the 1965 war, while Ghulam Yasin was being detained in Indian-occupied Kashmir facing allegations of spying for Pakistan. All three of these men hailed from Azad Kashmir, and with their addition, we became six in total.

Subedar Kala Khan¹³ and Meer Ahmad¹⁴ were already with me. We were staying in room “A” of the block. We would use room “B” as a kitchen and bathing area during the day, and as a lavatory at night. Even though both these rooms had electric light bulbs outside them, we were still watched over with extreme diligence and there would always be two to four

to the military activities of the Kashmir liberation movement. At present, he resides in the village of Ieepa Ghaywara.

¹³ Subedar Kala Khan was from the village of Sariyan, Muzaffarabad. During the war of 1947 he demonstrated his bravery and courage on the Kashmir front. After retiring from the Kashmir Army, he joined the NLF in 1966 and accompanied Maqbool Butt and Major Amanullah Khan into The Kashmir Valley to take up the armed struggle. He ended up in a gun battle with Indian security forces after the murder of Amarchand and was taken into custody injured. He was taken to Srinagar Central Jail and sentenced to life imprisonment. Due to his old age, he refused to take part in the escape plan. Since then he was freed as part of the prisoner exchange and was placed under protection by the government of Pakistan. On 29th November 1982, this soldier of the liberation war left this world.

¹⁴ Meer Ahmad’s forefathers hailed from Rafiabad, district Baramulla. In 1966 at the age of 22, he joined Maqbool Butt in the liberation struggle. It was this warrior of a man who accomplished the great task of piercing a hole into the wall of Srinagar Central Jail, and in doing so saved Maqbool Butt from the clutches of Death. He suffered greatly, firstly in Black Fort at the hands of the infamous FIU, and thereafter at the hands of the Pakistani government during the 1971 Ganga hijacking case. Meer Ahmad has been living in Mirpur since 1974 where he leads an extremely simple life. This champion of the Kashmir liberation movement is currently 73 years of age.

guards present. One of them was armed with either a Sten gun or a Tommy gun and the other three with rifles. These guards were members of the Indian Army security forces.¹⁵

Our escape plan can be divided into three parts:

- 1- Our relationship with the jail officials and administration
- 2- Our way of dealing with the guards and patrol officers
- 3- Our lifestyle in the prison block

As far as our relationship with the jail officials and administration was concerned, my policy was that we should make them conscious of the fact that we are highly civilised and sensible individuals; no matter how harshly they treated us, we smiled and cooperated. According to the plan, at no point did I or any of my associates allow them to think that we were common criminals who posed a security risk. If we had any complaints I would write a respectfully worded letter and have it delivered to the jail superintendent, and after much insistence we persuaded him to agree that he would reply to us in writing. In this way, we never gave the jail officials a cause for complaint regarding non-cooperation or any trouble on our part.

After the senior officials, we concentrated our efforts on striking up a friendship with junior staff members, especially the warden and the senior inmates. And consider it to be our good fortune that the majority of staff members were Muslim, who in spite of being civil servants would show us a degree of leniency. Occasionally, we would get the chance to speak to some of

¹⁵ These guards were members of the Gurkha and Maratha regiments.

them, and when the guards were out of earshot we would make it clear to them that the rebellious activities that we had been imprisoned for are in no way connected to looting, thieving or pillaging. Rather, we want Kashmir to be liberated, we want to improve the lives of the poor public, and this can only be attained through political freedom.¹⁶ After a few months of effort, we gained a few sympathisers amongst the staff, who would happily assist us in small tasks like passing messages to those friends and associates of ours that were being held in the main jail.¹⁷

As for the guards, we did not expect any sympathy from them because they had come from a principled, armed military unit and would readily carry out their duties. However, we would always try to ensure that we caused them no trouble and would in no way make their job of watching over us difficult.

New coming guards would come with the impression that we were extremely dangerous criminals; so our first priority would be to do away with those preconceptions so that they do not feel the need to watch over us constantly. To achieve this we would, while speaking to one another, or if we got the

¹⁶ Mohammad Maqbool Butt's idea of liberation was very clear and unambiguous. He wanted to see the region of Jammu and Kashmir liberated and independent through a struggle on the political, military and diplomatic fronts. He considered national liberation and political freedom to be the prerequisites of all freedoms. His philosophy was that, unless the state of Jammu and Kashmir attains political freedom, the dream of public success and betterment, social improvement, national well-being, freedom to practice one's faith, civil revival, cultural freedom, and economic self-sufficiency cannot be achieved.

¹⁷ This message delivery would be both verbal and written. They would write on empty cigarette packets or pieces of scrap paper and have them delivered to one another.

opportunity, while speaking to them, make it seem like we bear no enmity towards Indian soldiers and we are not rebels, robbers or looters. We are disciplined soldiers, who are committed to law and order and expect the same from our guards. Whenever I got the opportunity to converse with them, I would convince them that as far as their duty of ensuring we remain bound by the jail regime is concerned, we would not make their job difficult but rather follow all the rules eagerly without being ordered. In return we expect to be treated like loyal soldiers and comrades, not criminals and robbers. Consequently, whichever guard came to watch over us, we made sure to respect him and keep him happy. The reward of this was that we were treated very well.

We would always offer tea and tobacco to the guards. And though they would refuse to accept, they couldn't help but smile. We were well aware of the fact that these guards are members of the Indian army, and so we would openly mock the jail police and regular civil police in front of the soldiers, this would fill them with a sense of superiority. We would matter-of-factly compliment them on their civilised ways, discipline and good organisation. Because a Subedar was working under me¹⁸, the guards assumed that I was a commissioned officer, and so those who were soldiers or junior officers in the Indian Army would respect and salute me in true military style despite the fact that I was an inmate. To impress them further, whenever their commander (captain) or battalion commander (colonel) would come for a routine check-up, I would say *hello* to him and speak to him in that distinct style that army officers converse with one another even if they are from opposing armies. By

¹⁸ This person was Subedar Kala Khan

doing this I would impress upon the watching guards that I, contrary to being a rebel, robber or looter was actually a respected army officer. Apart from this I spent months watching the guards, observing their every habit and seeing their alertness slowly diminish. This was a painstakingly long task but it needed to be done.¹⁹

My fellow inmates also needed to be organised and disciplined. We continuously worked to awaken feelings of mutual respect, courtesy, trust and love. I forbade all types of futile talk, loud laughter, whispering to one another, heated debate, and discussion of controversial issues because these things could potentially create tension amongst us. My friends acted upon my request, and suggested that whenever a dispute broke out, the matter should be presented before Subedar Kala Khan. And if his decision was also disputed then the matter would be brought to me and my decision would have to be accepted whole-heartedly.²⁰

Another issue which was potentially controversial was the division of labour. I delegated the tasks of cooking and washing of clothes according to duty. Apart from that I started tending to a small garden in the courtyard of the women's quarters to help preserve my physical and mental health. I also reserved one hour of the daily timetable for physical exercise. In the evening we would exchange views on guerrilla activities and each one of us would recount his previous experiences. I wanted to ensure that our spirits remain high and we don't lose

¹⁹ From this one can gauge how knowledgeable and experienced Maqbool Butt was in human psychology.

²⁰ Meer Ahmad later told me that, "Maqbool Butt formulated this rule after consulting with all of us".

hope.²¹ As for the escape plan, I would tell my associates the stories of those who escaped custody of the enemy during World War 2, and then discuss the various methods of escape and how they could be applied to the setting of Kashmir.²²

By mid-1968 we all saw escape as a possibility, and we would carry out little exercises and plays to give our plans a more practical form and then review them. Some of us would play the part of guards while the others would play the prisoners. We would have intense discussions about how guards and prisoners perceive things in different situations.

In the beginning we would receive food from the main canteen. When we appeared before a court, for the second time, a short while later, I handed in a written complaint saying that the food was spoilt and the dishes were extremely dirty. Apart from this, soap, oil, blankets and straw mats were hardly, if ever, available. Judge Neelkanth Ganjoo promised that he would look into the matter. He wrote something on my request slip which I couldn't make out and handed it to the jail superintendent²³. After that we began to receive dry groceries and were also provided with dinner plates and other things. We could now cook our own food.

²¹ If an activist loses hope, he begins to distance himself from the struggle. This is why Maqbool Butt wanted to ensure that even in prison, his comrades remain high-spirited.

²² Meer Ahmad later told me that, the newspaper they would receive in jail once carried the story of a prisoner of war who passed his days in prison with great courage and steadfastness and was eventually released. Maqbool Butt had told this story to us in prison.

²³ The jail superintendent, Mahmood Qureshi was a resident of Srinagar.

After that, Jamas Khan, Gul Zaman Khan and Ghulam Yasin were transferred to our section of the prison, and because they were “category C” inmates they would receive 3 rupees daily for food and 5 rupees a month to buy washing powder and stationery. Every morning, Sodagar Singh, a Sikh warder, would visit us and take an order for food items. Apart from this we would also receive an English newspaper, *Indian Express*, Delhi and a local Urdu Daily, *Aaftab*, Srinagar, and some cigarettes. During the winter we would be given coal, which we would burn to keep the room warm. We also received an iron stove that had iron bars fixed to it- these iron bars later proved very helpful during our escape.

THE DEATH SENTENCE

On 17th August 1968 the judge announced his decision.²⁴ Meer Ahmad and I were sentenced to death while Subedar Kala Khan was sentenced to life imprisonment. We assumed that they would now place us in separate cells. But we came to learn that we were to be kept in the same sanctuary due to security reasons. Subedar Kala Khan remained in room A with his three companions. Meer Ahmad and I were transferred to cell number 1. This cell was also situated in the women's quarters. The news of our death sentence spread rapidly throughout the jail and our associates began to weep and mourn. Our three friends who were with us in the women's quarters embraced us and started to weep profusely, but I eventually managed to calm them down.

The women's quarters was an old building, its walls were plastered with mud. The main wall was made of stone while the inner walls were made from a single row of bricks. The tin roof, like cinema buildings was cone-shaped, with a wooden ceiling beneath it. Room A contained two windows and two doors. One of these doors was used to go in and out while the other was barricaded with iron bars. Room B contained two padlocked windows and one door. Cell number 1 was very dark and restricted and contained only one wooden door, which when closed would cause the cell to become engulfed in darkness. Cell number 2 was being used as a storeroom. It contained unusable and abandoned blankets, torn straw mats

²⁴ The judge was Neelkanth Ganjoo, he was shot dead by Liberation Front fighters on 14th November 1989.

and other broken items. Its doorway was boarded up. The floors of room A and B were of solid cement, while the floor of cell number 1 was bare earth. The floor and up to a foot of the walls were damp and decaying.

On 21st August 1968 I submitted an appeal to the chief justice of Indian-occupied Kashmir to repeal the judge's decision. The appeal comprised 300 pages which I wrote while sitting on the damp and decaying floor of cell number 1.²⁵

A few days later, the jail officials had the wooden door in my cell replaced with an iron one. Upon our request they laid concrete down on the floor and white washed the walls. We requested electric light bulbs but they refused, saying that it was not permitted for inmates on death row to have indoor lighting. At night however, a dim lantern would be placed near the bars of our cell causing a little light to be cast into the room. Upon our request, the contractor who was white washing the

²⁵ After Maqbool Butt was sentenced to death, his lawyer, Latif Qureshi sourced the case file and advised him to write an appeal himself. The file also contained the charge sheet levelled against Maqbool Butt and his associates by the Indian government. It contained many allegations including the murder of Amarchand, illegal border crossing, planning a rebellion, damage to governmental property, attempting to overthrow the government and promoting mischief etc. this appeal was prepared by Maqbool Butt while sitting on the decaying earthen floor of cell number 1 after many days of effort. It was 300 pages long. The appeal and the other records of the case were brought by Maqbool Butt along with him when he escaped Srinagar Central jail. Officials from Pakistan's secret agency, FIU, took the case file into their own possession during the initial investigation in Muzaffarabad. This file was never returned by the FIU. This case file of Maqbool Butt and his handwritten appeal is without doubt a valuable and historic artefact which should be handed over to the Kashmiri people.

walls nailed a 6 inch iron nail into the cell wall so that we could hang clothes and a copy of the Holy Qur'an. Strict security measures were put into place because Meer Ahmad and I had been sentenced to death, for that reason we would be handcuffed when we wanted to walk around the compound or visit the lavatory.

THE ESCAPE PLAN

We officially started work in October 1968. While the appeal was being processed in the high court, I slowly gathered the following points of information:

- The women's quarters were only 8 ft. away from the large, outer wall of the jail.
- Outside the large, outer wall of the jail there were fields of vegetables ²⁶ where the non-dangerous inmates would be taken to work.
- There were no guards posted outside the large, outer wall of the jail.
- Winter was the best season for an escape.
- Cell number 2, which was being used to store old items, was connected to the outer wall of the prison.
- The outer wall of cell number 2 was plastered with cement while its inner walls were made up of bricks, round stones and limestone paste. The wall was approximately 3 ft. wide at its base.
- In between cell number 1, where we were staying, and cell number 2, which was a storeroom, there was a brick wall which was plastered on both sides.

²⁶ Outside the jail walls were fields containing turnips and radishes etc.

Towards the end of October 1968, Gul Zaman, Jamas Khan and Ghulam Yasin who were residing in room A, protested to the jail officials that they could not bear to see Subedar Kala khan, an officer of their army, having to cook for them. Subsequently, a local man called Ismail, who was facing allegations of thieving and pocket cutting was sent to us as a cook. I got the following information from Ismail:

- 1- It is relatively difficult to break through a brick wall.
- 2- A stone wall can easily be dismantled by dislodging the stones one at a time.
- 3- While piercing through a stone wall, it is difficult to break through the paste which is used to join the stones.

Meer Ahmad and I jointly decided that we would first of all, create a hole in the partition wall between cell number 1 and 2 so that when the need arises, one of us can get into cell number 2. It was possible to get through the pile of old blankets in cell number 2 and then pierce a hole into the outer wall from which we could escape the jail. This method can be better understood from the map.²⁷

According to our estimations, breaking through the partition between cell number 1 and 2 was not a difficult task, but breaking through the outer wall of cell number 2 seemed almost impossible. This was because the wall was not just a cell wall, it was the final wall of the prison itself after which lay the vegetable fields. And the main problem was; how do we go about hiding a gaping hole in the partition wall between the cells from the watchful eyes of the guards?

²⁷ Please see map of Srinagar Central Jail, page 16

With the onset of winter, we noticed that the walls of the cell were becoming increasingly damp and decayed, so we took some blankets and hung them up, two and a half ft. high on the walls. We explained to the guards that the damp was spoiling our clothes, and the bare walls were allowing the cold in, so we were using the blankets to keep the room warm. The guards did not object and assumed it to be the norm.²⁸ After covering the walls with the blankets we waited for the jail superintendent, the company commander and the battalion commander to come by on their routine patrols. All three came and not a single one of them objected. I complained to the jail superintendent that during extreme cold, the wooden doorframe and the iron bars cause us difficulty, and requested him to have a new door installed. He promised us that he would have the work carried out very soon. During that time we also managed to procure permission to hang a blanket across the iron bars at the front of our cell, leaving only a foot at the top uncovered to allow the guards to peer inside and also allow the light of the lantern to shine in.

Sodagar Singh would bring us the newspaper every evening. The Delhi newspaper would usually reach Srinagar in the evening, and would be given to us at night after being censored by the jail officials. I would use reading the newspaper as pretence to stand by the doorway and look out through the gap above the blanket. The period of reading the newspaper would be over in 10 to 15 minutes. Out of 24 hours, those 10 to 15 minutes were all we had to carry out work in the cell. I would appear to be reading the newspaper but in reality the focus of

²⁸ The blankets were hung two and a half feet high up the wall with the help of small nails.

all my attention was the guard on duty out front. These 15 to 20 minutes would be available to us between 5 and 6 o'clock.

A HOLE IS PIERCED INTO THE WALL

Out of every 24 hours during the first phase, we really valued those 15 minutes. I would stand by the doorway reading the newspaper and all the while keeping a close eye on the guard. Meer Ahmad took the 6 inch nail we had had fitted into the wall for the purpose of hanging our clothes (and which we later replaced with a smaller nail), and began the task of piercing through the wall between cell number 1 and 2. The pieces of cement and sand which came out while piercing the wall would be hidden beneath the straw mat. This task would be carried out so quietly that if a guard passed by the blanket-covered doorway he would be unable to hear anything.

After this came the phase of dismantling bricks. Twelve bricks were removed. We hid the first few bricks under our pillows. Then when the hole grew bigger and it became possible to enter cell number 2, the bricks, plaster, cement and sand was concealed beneath the blankets in cell number 2. All this work would be carried out daily within a 10 minute window, and that was only when we received the English newspaper, in which case I could stand by the doorway pretending to read in the light of the lantern to secretly keep my eye on the guard. If we had a day in which we didn't receive the newspaper we would have to put the work on hold.²⁹ And so, that small hole, through which one man could wriggle into cell number 2 with difficulty, took us 8 days to complete. There was a blanket hanging over

²⁹ According to Meer Ahmad there were 2 or 3 such days when the newspaper didn't arrive and they had to halt the work.

the hole, from two and a half ft. high to the floor and running around the entire cell. This meant that even when the guards peered into our cell, nothing seemed amiss to them.³⁰

During the second week of November we started work on the second phase. Now the intention was to forge a path through the enormous, ceiling-high pile of blankets in cell number 2 and gain access to the outer wall. I gave Meer Ahmad a shaving blade which I had taken from the bathroom; he used it to cut open a bundle of blankets and pushed many rotten, putrid, stinking, torn, unusable blankets into our cell. We quietly and carefully laid these blankets beneath our sleeping mats in such a way that they could not be seen. The floor of our cell was now slightly raised but not enough for anybody to notice.

We now chose a different time to work at. Work was no longer required in cell number 1 so there was no longer a need to keep a look out while pretending to read a newspaper. I did however, as per routine, stand by the doorway for a while upon receiving the newspaper to avoid arousing suspicions. Now the last part of the night was most suitable, the time between midnight and 2 a.m. seemed relatively safe, so we would pretend to be fast asleep until midnight. Meer Ahmad would rise around 1 a.m., lift the blanket covering the hole and wriggle through to cell number 2. He would then push a blanket back through the hole towards me; I would roll it up and place it into his bed where it would serve as a make-shift dummy. If a guard was to walk up to our cell and look in through the gap above the blanket he would not suspect a thing. I would continuously stay awake between 1 and 2 a.m. and my ears would be listening out for the sound of the guard's footsteps. Our entire set of tools was

³⁰ The hole was created from the floor upwards

made up of a shaving blade and an iron nail, and this phase took us 8 to 10 days to complete.

The third phase was an extremely difficult one in which the goal was to pierce through the large outer wall of the prison. It took Meer Ahmad 20 to 25 days to complete. During this phase, along with the 6 inch nail the 10 inch iron bar we detached from the stove proved very useful to us. First we would use the nail to remove the external cement and then we would use the iron bar to scrape away the edges of the stone. Next we would use a wooden stick which we had picked up from amongst the firewood to support the falling plaster. All this work would be carried out around midnight for half an hour to 45 minutes.

On the 1st or 2nd of November there was a change of staff in the guards that patrolled our compound. The new arrivals were, as always, members of the Indian Army and had come from the CRP battalion, Madras. The soldiers and their junior officers were quite young, and never mind Urdu, they could barely speak Hindi. They could only read English or Tamil. As usual, within a short period of time we made them feel solemn, vigorous, and dignified. I began to learn some Tamil from their conversations. The poor men had come from the open plains, and after being in the hot climate of the south they were unable to bear the freezing winter of Srinagar. Initially we offered them our portable stoves, and then the prison officials later provided them with coal and larger stoves. At night, the four of them would huddle around a large stove and remain sitting there. They would make tea and engage in idle chit chat thinking that the inmates are fast asleep in their cells. They did not have the faintest idea as to how we were spending our nights.

On 17th November 1968, the Indian home minister, Mr Chavan announced that as of 12th November 1968, the government has ruled that all those inmates who have been sentenced to death shall instead be sentenced to life imprisonment. This leniency was shown to the prisoners to mark the 20th annual remembrance day of Mahatma Ghandi. This act of clemency meant that thousands of death row inmates across India had now become life-serving inmates instead. And so the next day, some members of the jail staff came to congratulate us. The guards and the prison officials were of the opinion that we should be removed from our cells and transferred elsewhere.³¹ We were really perplexed by this new development because three quarters of the escape plan had been enacted. We had pierced through the partition wall between cells 1 and 2, and also through the outer walls of cell 2 and the jail. The rubble was concealed beneath the blankets in cell 2. The hole in cell 2 had been hidden behind a bundle of blankets while the hole in cell 1 was covered by the hanging blanket.

We told the jail staff that it makes no difference to us whether we remain here or move to another jail. We also came to know that until we receive official confirmation from the Indian President, our status will remain as inmates on death row. Despite this, security was relaxed around us; we could now leave the cell without having to be handcuffed.³² I thought that we must hurry to escape lest they transfer us elsewhere.

³¹ A rumour began to circulate in the prison that Maqbool Butt and Meer Ahmad were going to be transferred to Rajasthan Jail.

³² Meer Ahmad later told me that, "Maqbool Butt had taken to assuming that we would not be shown any leniency because of the nature of the crime that we had been convicted of, and as such we should continue to dig our way out."

Meanwhile I gathered from eavesdropping on the guards that these south-Indians were not happy staying in the highlands of North India. Whenever I would tell them the news stories from Madras or read out the statement of a Madrasi leader, their faces would light up with joy.

During the second week of November, Ismail the cook had an argument with the occupants of room A and had himself transferred back to the main building by requesting the officials. From our remaining associates, Ghulam Yasin was ordered to cook for us two. *Ramadhan* began during the third week of that month. Ghulam Yasin would join me and Meer Ahmad in our cell at *Sehri*, *iftari*³³ and prayer times. The guards made no objection to his unusual visiting times, showing consideration to our faith and the holy month of *Ramadhan*. We would therefore perform the dawn prayer in our cell, after which I would raise their spirits by reciting those Quranic verses that speak of the virtues of struggling for a good cause.

During the first phase, the hole between cells number 1 and 2 was dug in front of me, while the second and third stages were carried out by Meer Ahmad alone, and in complete darkness. According to what he had told me, the hole in the external wall of the prison was complete, all that remained was one final layer of bricks on the outer-most part of the wall, which he had tactfully left untouched so that it can be broken only when the time comes to escape, breaking it prior to that would involve the risk of it being spotted from the outside. The thickness of the outer wall was twice that of an ordinary one. One night Meer Ahmad went to complete the final phase of the task, only

³³ *Iftari* or *Iftar* is the name given to the meal which marks the end of the fast.

to come crawling back, short of breath and teary-eyed, saying in a dejected voice, “It seems that fate does not approve of our freedom; the external wall contains a stone that is refusing to budge, what do we do now? We can neither block the hole nor escape through it”.

I consoled Meer Ahmad and explained to him that he should continue to chisel away at both edges of the stone. He estimated that it would take 3 to 4 days. The next day, i.e. the night between 8 and 9 December, Meer Ahmad went to work as usual and started to scrape at the stone which was next to the larger, troublesome stone. As soon as he got the smaller stone to move, the larger stone which had been blocking the hole was extracted within 15 minutes.³⁴ Meer Ahmad returned overjoyed, I do not have the words to describe the expression of happiness on his face. He was brimming with so much emotion that he took hold of me and kissed my forehead. There were 15 minutes remaining till the clock struck two. We waited until two.

³⁴ When Meer Ahmad eventually removed that final stone, he was overcome with emotion and climbed through to the outside and back in, to see whether one could pass through it or not. During one of his interviews, Meer Ahmad recalled that memorable moment with the following words: “Even today when I remember that moment in the early hours of the morning, my body begins to tremble. I remember striking that stone with my bare fist, and when it rolled out and hit the ground it let off a loud thud which echoed throughout the jail. At that moment, the only thing louder was the sound of our hearts beating. (*Nawaa e Waqt* weekly magazine, interview with Meer Ahmad, 9th March 1984)

THE NIGHT OF THE ESCAPE

The guards came and took up their usual positions. Ghulam Yasin was escorted from his room to our cell to prepare food for *Sehri* as usual. He lit the stove, and we warmed up some milk and drank it. Then Ghulam Yasin went to the doorway, and while complaining about the cold, spread the blanket out even further. This is the winter of Srinagar we are talking about so you can imagine just how cold it must have been. The guards were sat around their large stove warming their hands as usual, completely heedless of us. We explained the plan to Yasin. Meer Ahmad entered the hole, followed by Ghulam Yasin and me. This took us just 15 minutes. We had the following food items with us: 4 *Rotis*³⁵, two sticks of butter, a little sugar, a pound of dried milk, a packet of Lipton tea, a dozen boiled eggs wrapped in a pillow case, and a packet of cigarettes. All this was carried by Meer Ahmad. Yasin had our copy of the Holy Qur'an, my detention documents and the complete file containing the records of my trial at Srinagar Jail. I was carrying two blankets.

Here we stopped for a moment to think of those friends of ours who had not accompanied us. In the last few weeks when I had worked out an approximate date for our escape, they initially adopted a mildly sceptical tone and then a more blatant one, saying, "Escaping is extremely difficult, and to get to Azad Kashmir by crossing snow covered mountains and valleys in these freezing temperatures is impossible for us." And so when we met them for the last time they completely opposed the idea. I was deeply disappointed because they were so close to

³⁵ A *Roti* is a flat, unleavened piece of bread-a staple food in the sub-continent.

the goal yet they wanted to turn on their heels, but I didn't like to debate with them. I repeatedly asked them why they were so hesitant, to which they always replied: "This is no less than suicide, and even if we do escape the jail, we will not be able to reach Azad Kashmir alive and well."

I thought it was best to not annoy them any further, lest they become upset with us or worse, lose control of themselves in a fit of emotion and cause our secret to be discovered. I said "okay, if you don't want to accompany us then fine, however do help us by not allowing a word to come on to your tongues. After that you may leave us to our own devices. They happily agreed to this. I believe they were merely fearful. When the opportunity to escape presented itself, fear held them back.

It was more than two hours into the 9th of December. At precisely 2:15 a.m. Meer Ahmad, Ghulam Yasin and I began to crawl through the hole of the double-skin outer prison wall and a few minutes later we found ourselves standing in the vegetable fields outside the prison, breathing in the fresh, albeit freezing Srinagar air. All this happened so quickly; I couldn't believe my own eyes. We were breathing heavily and our entire bodies were poised, listening out for a footstep or a sound. But there was nothing to see in all four directions except frozen vegetable plants. We passed through the vegetable fields and headed towards the foot of the Badam Wari Mountains. 15 minutes later we reached the bank of the stream which runs from Dal Lake and contains paralysing, cold water. After crossing the stream we reached the road which connects Srinagar to Soura Village, the home of the famous Kashmiri leader Shaikh Mohammad Abdullah. Our bodies had become numb after crossing through the freezing water. It was the

burning desire for liberation and the warmth of faith which helped us to conquer the cold.³⁶ Otherwise under normal circumstances our legs would have definitely given up on us. Towards our right stood Mehan³⁷ Mountain which we could use to work out our position. Here we left the road, and changed our direction by entering the apple orchards.

Having passed through the orchards, we reached Tailbal village. There was a stream on its outskirts filled with wild ducks which we tried to tip-toe past, but they still managed to hear us and reacted by immediately taking to the air and letting off loud quacks. We panicked because we didn't want the villagers or a guard to become aware of our presence but everyone in the village was fast asleep. The December cold made it impossible for a living being to be roaming the streets at 3 a.m. without a reason. After passing that village, we had put a reasonable amount of distance between ourselves and Srinagar and began to feel at ease. The area we were now in was such that even if a search party had already been sent after us, we could easily hide away for some time.

After this village, the difficulties we had to face, the life-threatening situations we found ourselves in, the way we stared death in the face and challenged it, and the way God eventually granted us salvation is a story in itself which I would like to reserve for another time.

³⁶ The desire for liberation and the warmth of faith are two such blessings, that when nature grants them to someone, he does not fear any evil power of the world. The high walls of prison, tight patrols, freezing streams and rivers, sky-high mountains and fatal glaciers, turn into dust before the zeal for freedom and pure faith.

³⁷ "Mehan" is the Kashmiri word for "tall", the mountain in question is actually Haramukh, the highest mountain in the backdrop of Srinagar.

(I am exercising a lot of caution while narrating this story because I want to avoid making mention of certain routes, places, and people intentionally. This is so that the Indian government does not come to know the names of those who sympathise with freedom fighters, those who are in any way fighting Indian rule, and those who are prepared to secretly assist the freedom fighters.) (Maqbool Butt)



I was aware that the enemy security forces would see our escape from prison as a challenge to their authority. And that no stone would be left unturned in trying to recapture us. It was therefore necessary that to get to Azad Kashmir we plan a route that ensures our safety at every step of the way. And so I laid down the following rules:

- A- While in Indian-occupied Kashmir, we must stay away from our relatives and anybody we were in contact with during our armed struggle, because it was obvious that immediately after our escape from prison, the attention of the enemy would turn to these very people.
- B- We must not leave behind anything that could show the enemy our direction of travel or give them any other information regarding our movements.
- C- We must not leave behind anything that shows the enemy that we have been assisted in any way.
- D- Contact with the general public should be avoided, and if due to extreme circumstances we do meet someone, then all the necessary precautions must be taken.

We hoped that we would be able to travel at an average rate of 5 miles an hour despite the fact that long periods of staying put in one place made this difficult. I had also decided that after escaping, we would cross as many rivers

and lakes as possible so that if the enemy made use of sniffer dogs, this method of ours would render them ineffective. This is because dogs generally lose the scent of their target when they reach water. I had also decided that our journey should be through the northern area of the Jhelum River. This area is made up of Srinagar, Ganderbal, Bandipora and Sopore. I personally knew this area and had knowledge of its paths.

The way to capture a run-away is to block all the roads around him. This includes placing security measures on the public roads, pathways, and riverbanks within a specific perimeter. Along with this, security forces carry out a wide ranging search of the area in question including house to house searches. No corner remains unchecked. In this regard, I was certain that the entire apparatus of the intelligence agencies would be employed along with the security forces in a bid to recapture us. I later learned that I was 100% correct.³⁸

On 9th December 1968 at 2.15 a.m., we were out of Srinagar Jail, and this was the first time after a long period that we were breathing while standing in the vast open space of Srinagar. After trekking through the adjoining vegetable fields which at that time were empty of vegetables, we jumped over some brick walls and marched westwards and very quickly reached the foot of Hari Parbat hill. While

³⁸ The Indian Government announced a reward of ten thousand rupees for anyone who provides information regarding the whereabouts of these liberation campaigners who had escaped Srinagar Jail. It also began a large scale search operation itself. This announcement was widely advertised in the press and on radio.

crossing Badam Wari we had left the jail very far behind. Approximately 15 minutes later we crossed a stream which runs from Dal Lake and was brimming with water. We had reached a village situated on the outskirts of Srinagar. The inhabitants of this village were fast asleep. We carefully continued to advance so that the barking stray dogs do not land us in trouble. We reached the road that links Srinagar to the town of Soura. (Soura is the birthplace of Shaykh Mohammad Abdullah, the famous Kashmiri leader.) The mountain range which was situated on the other side of the lake remained a constant aid for us in determining course. We left the road and continued our journey through the centre of the apple orchards. Due to the area being inconsistent, with steep slopes, dried up streams and damaged, uneven land, our pace was not as steady as we had hoped. Approximately one and a half hours later, we settled down to rest on a hill. We each ate one egg and a piece of buttered bread (*Paratha*). It was now 4 a.m. and still dark all around us. According to my estimations, it was now time for the guards in the women's quarters to change shifts. They would change shifts every two hours. The incoming guards would have cast a glance into our cell, and upon finding it empty there would be uproar.

We swapped clothes. Ghulam Yasin wore my *phiran*. (A *phiran* is a loose, tunic-like Kashmiri shirt, similar to the *kurta*³⁹.) He gave me his hunting coat which had large buckles and a hood. Along with that I wore trouser-like,

³⁹ A *phiran* is a type of loose shirt made of thick, warm material. It is worn by the rich and the poor during the winter. It protects the body from extreme cold. The Kashmiri word *phiran* is from the Persian word 'pir han'.

warm pants. After exchanging clothes we set off from the hill and continued along our intended route. Approximately 45 minutes later we reached Tailbal Village. We were travelling along a stream which took us directly into the centre of the village. A large number of ducks were swimming on the surface of the water and as soon as we approached them they began to quack loudly. Nevertheless, we passed by them and entered the centre of the village where we crossed over the stream via a hanging bridge. The Muslim inhabitants of the village had awoken to eat *Sehri* and some of them had started to arrive at the stream to wash. It is common practice in Kashmir to repeat the *Kalimah e Shahaadat* ⁴⁰ while performing *Wudhu*.⁴¹ We had crossed the stream and continued to advance along its other side when we came across a man performing *Wudhu* and repeating the *Kalimah*. We all stopped walking. He finished washing, approached us and greeted us with *Salaam* (peace). I returned the greeting. Then he innocently asked us, “who are you people and where have you come from?” I told him that we had come from one of the preceding villages and are going to Shaalkot. I knew that Shaalkot village was in that direction towards the other side of the mountain. I quickly added, “friend, we have lost our way, would you care to take us to the road outside the village?”

He instantly agreed, so the three of us set off with him. Within a few minutes we were out of the village and on the

⁴⁰ The declaration of faith: “I bear witness that there is none worthy of worship besides Allah, and I bear witness that Mohammad peace be upon him is the messenger of Allah”. (translator’s note)

⁴¹ Ritual washing performed before prayer. (translator’s note)

road to Shaalkot. Our guide had invited us to partake of *Sehri* but I had politely declined saying that we were in a hurry. We continued to advance northwards until we reached the foot of the mountain range where we turned west. The sun had risen but people had not yet emerged from their homes due to the cold. We continued on the dirt track until 8 a.m. when the villagers started going about their daily chores. To avoid being seen by passers-by we left the road and continued along the foot of the mountain range. While walking we came across a canal that runs from the Ganderbal hydroelectric plant.⁴² We continued to walk for some time along the bank of the canal. Now the mountain range was on our right while on our left, below, there was a village. At that time the sun had risen quite high and to continue travelling was risky, we were now faced with the problem of finding a place to hide for the day. We left the bank of the canal and opted for the mountain path on our right which took us to the peak of the mountain. We had just settled down to rest in a dry rain-water ravine behind some large boulders when we noticed a man approaching us. He appeared to be of *Gujjar* ethnicity. As he walked by he glanced at us and continued on his way. I told Ghulam Yasin to call him back, so he ran after him and returned with him. He greeted us with *Salaam* and I returned the greeting. When he noticed my city attire he began to show signs of nervousness. I asked him his name and where he lives so he told us that his name was Naik Mohammad and that his village was close by at the foot of the mountain. I reassured him by telling him that we were

⁴² This canal runs from the Ganderbal hydro-electric station and irrigates the district of Hundwara.

not dangerous men and had only come here to hunt. We are in need of a little rest and we want to make arrangements for some food. He immediately offered his services and took us along to his house which was two furlongs away.

We rested for a while at his house, had some tea made and sipped it with *Paratha*. He stayed with us for around two hours. I told Naik Mohammad that we wanted to cross the mountain and get to the valley on the other side. He pointed us in the direction of a track that would take us to the other side of the mountain through the forest. His wife was a traditional woman, she was offended to see us eating and drinking in the month of Ramadan. I sensed that she wanted to rid the house of our presence, so at midday we set off from there. Naik Mohammad the Gujjar accompanied us for a while through the dense woodlands and then returned. We began to make our way up the mountain. Two years of being imprisoned had taken its toll on us and we were finding it very difficult to climb. We continued our journey until sunset. We stopped by a very large, protruding boulder. Evening had set in; we gathered some firewood, lit a fire and settled down to rest for the night. Clouds had gathered above us and it had even started to precipitate a little, but we were too tired to care, we fell asleep.

On 10th December 1968 at 2:00 a.m. I awoke to find the ground around us covered in 6 inches of snow. The snow was still falling. I woke up my friends and after waiting a while we made some tea, drank it and continued to climb. We were not equipped to be traveling in the snow, our feet

became frost-bitten and while climbing we had veered of the path. The whole area seemed identical under a blanket of snow. Nevertheless, after two hours of difficulty, we finally reached the peak.

The sun had not yet risen and the icy winds of the north had made us numb. There was no sign of a path nearby and no sign of any dwellings no matter how far and wide we looked. Stopping to rest was not an option; if we did it could lead to our feet being frost bitten beyond repair, and eventually, amputation. After much searching and running to and fro, I managed to find a cave-like place, which had come about by two boulders being merged at the top. We entered the shelter to save ourselves from the violent, freezing wind. Even though we were now out of the snow, we continued to ward off the frostbite by marching on the spot while we waited for morning to arrive.

After assessing our circumstances we came to the conclusion that to continue at that particular time would be futile; the risk of getting lost in the vast wilderness that lay before us was a real one. Besides this we had run out of bread, so we decided to turn back and return to the valley we had just come from. We retraced our footsteps, and three hours later found ourselves in the place where we had lit the fire and warmed ourselves for a while. It had stopped snowing. We continued our descent and by afternoon, we had left the snow covered area. Below, we could clearly see the valley through the clean atmosphere. Cemented roads and flowing streams were sparkling in the sunlight. We continued our journey downhill and by early afternoon we

reached some grassland that contained a small Kashmiri village consisting of a very small number of houses. This village was called *Dagnibal*.

My eyes came to rest on a solitary house on the edge of the village and I told my friends that this is where we will be staying today. It was a single storey house with a mud roof that seemed to be mocking the poverty of its owner. We concealed ourselves behind some bushes and eagerly waited for *Iftar* time. Evening came and the villagers began to enter their homes to break the fast, we descended into the now-dark village and knocked on that poor villager's door. He emerged and asked us the purpose of our visit to which I replied that we had come from very far, we had just reached there after having crossed the mountain, we were fatigued due to the heavy snow and rain, and we would like to rest for a while at his house. The poor villager, considering us to be respectable people immediately took us to the fireplace. I told him that we were hunters. He presented us with salted Kashmiri tea without milk after which we all settled down and began to chat.

Our host turned out to be a shepherd. He told me that yesterday at *Sehri* time, he had seen his Pir Sahib in a dream telling him that today, "some guests will come to visit you, make sure you take special care of them". The old shepherd thereafter showed us a great deal of respect. He washed our feet with warm water (this is customary in Kashmir and the host considers it an honour. It instantly removes the tiredness one experiences after traveling). He fed us rice

with a stew prepared from sun-dried spinach.⁴³ At night Meer Ahmad and Ghulam Yasin fell into a deep sleep, but I stayed up with our old, shepherd host talking late into the night as the poor man shared his many problems with me.

We woke up around 2 a.m. We washed our hands and faces and ate *Sehri* with our elderly host. We then offered the dawn prayer. I no longer remember the name of that old benefactor of mine, all I know is that the village is situated a few furlongs northwest of Asteng Town. This is the same place from which drinking water is sourced for the city.

On 11th December 1968, we left the old shepherd's hut before dawn under cover of darkness. He brought us to the path that leads to the Srinagar - Ganderbal pass. We continued to head south and reached the upper level canal leaving Ganderbal. Here we turned right and followed the canal-side path towards the Ganderbal hydroelectric plant. Towards our right was the mountain range while far below on the left were some small settlements of poor farmers. Besides us were fields of corn which were completely dry at the time. There were also apple orchards. We travelled until day break. It was very likely that the area we were heading towards had strict security measures in place. The reason for this was that apart from the presence of the Ganderbal hydroelectric plant, the area was also home to the local

⁴³ Meer Ahmad later told me that this old man was extremely kind-hearted. He was unable to contain his excitement at the fact that we had been 'sent' by his Pir Sahib. He treated us with extreme humbleness and open-heartedness.

government headquarters. I was certain that it would be in a state of heightened security following our escape.

It was our good fortune that it suddenly began to rain causing the entire area to be submerged in a thick layer of fog, such that it was impossible to see further than 50 yards. This was divine help.⁴⁴ We used the rain and fog to our advantage and continued to travel. After travelling for around two hours we arrived at an apple orchard. The security hut at the orchard was empty so we climbed in through the window. Inside were a large number of empty apple crates. After resting here for a while we continued in the direction of Ganderbal. A short time later there was a downpour of heavy rain which slowed us down. We reached an area called Munshi bagh, on the outskirts of Ganderbal around midday, where we rested again for a while. To continue straight ahead was hazardous.

We now had two alternatives,

Firstly we could take the mountain route again, but the bad weather would prove too dangerous. And to make matters worse we were out of rations.

The second option was that we find a safe place to hide until nightfall, and if possible we could try to gain some information about the area to help us navigate better. Then when it was dark again we could cross this dangerous area.

I decided to take the latter option. There was an orchard to our left which had a three storey house in it; I had

⁴⁴ This divine help is not unusual for those that walk the path of truth. It keeps their spirits up at every step of the way.

decided to use that very house as a hideout. I descended into the Nala (rivulet) on the left, waded across towards the orchard and beckoned my friends to follow me. A few moments later we climbed up a slope and entered the orchard. I motioned to my friends to stay back while I approached the house and called out to the owner.

An old man, around 60 years of age with a short, trimmed, white beard opened a window on the first floor and shouted “this isn’t our residential house! We live down there in the village! Go there and you will get something!” The old man had thought we were professional beggars, like the ones that do the rounds in rural areas and are referred to as *Musafir*. These *Musafir* go from village to village, especially in autumn, and ask for grace while singing Sufi folk songs. This grace is usually given to them in the form of items rather than cash. This type of begging has taken the form of a hereditary profession and is perceived as somewhat sacred - a privilege not enjoyed by regular beggars. The word *Musafir* is also used to describe those travellers who lose their way due to reasons like bad weather, not knowing the area or due to some other accident. The Kashmiris take pride in coming to the aid of such people and offering them a place to stay because it is an integral part of their culture. Anyhow I shouted back to the old man, “We are not Musafir! We have not come to collect alms! Please come down for a minute! We need to speak to you!” I could tell that he was about to say something else and sensed that he just wants to get rid of me so I shouted again, “why are you hesitating?! Come down quickly this is a very important matter!”

After a little to-ing and fro-ing the old man, whose name I later learnt was Ahmad Rathar, came down wrapped in a blanket to open the door. I beckoned my friends to come closer. The old man wanted to talk whilst standing in the doorway but I told him to take us inside so that we can sit and talk with ease and he obliged. Inside the room there was an old lady who was operating a spinning wheel. She was his wife. We sat on mats that were woven from rice husk (known as *patji* in the Kashmiri tongue). I shuffled closer to the old man and began to speak. I told him, “we had come to the mountain to hunt. Today morning we have returned across the mountain and now we want to get back to Srinagar. We would like to rest at your house until it stops raining, in that time our clothes will dry as well. We do not want to trouble you in any way; all we ask for is a few portable stoves, nothing else.”

The old man told a young girl who was standing by the old woman to fetch the stoves, she returned shortly with the stoves.⁴⁵ The old man was a little sceptical about us; he asked who we were and what we do as a living. I replied that I have a business on Residency Road in Srinagar, and I live in Rajbagh Officers Colony. (Rajbagh is a new settlement in greater Srinagar). I went on to tell the old man that both my companions work for me. The old man seemed satisfied. Then he began to say, “we have an on-going court battle with someone concerning land in the village and the court is in Srinagar, would you be able to help us in this matter?”

“Why not?” I replied, “This is no hard task, nearly all the magistrates in town are friends of mine. Simply give me the

⁴⁵ The old man’s daughter brought three stoves full of coal.

details of the case and the name of the magistrate and I will assist you.”

The old man became very happy and said, “let me call Habib, he will tell you everything”. Habib Rathar was his son and he was the one overseeing the case. The old man asked us “Are you fasting?” I replied, “We didn’t fast because we are travelling”. He then asked, “Would you care for some *Theuth*?” I replied in the affirmative. The old man told the girl to heat some *Theuth* (salted coffee) in the *samawar*⁴⁶. A short while later we drank cups of hot *Theuth*.

During that time it had stopped raining. I asked the old man, “What time do the buses leave from Ganderbal to Srinagar?” after thinking a while he said, “Transport is not an issue here, we can get a bus at any time.” He insisted however, that we wait until his son arrived so that we can get the details of the court case from him. I acceded to his request and decided to stay a little longer and we continued to speak. I asked him again regarding the bus times. He said in a cautious tone, “travelling to Srinagar these days has become a real problem, the army and CRP have set up check points everywhere, they are searching every traveller and they don’t even leave Burqa-clad women alone.”

I interrupted him and asked, “When we came from there a week earlier there was no checking in place, why are these people inconveniencing the public now?”

The old man, amazed at my question said, “Don’t you know that three Kashmiri freedom fighters have escaped Central Jail?” I

⁴⁶ A *samawar* is a kettle-like pot made of brass or copper which the Kashmiri people use to prepare tea or coffee.

replied, “We don’t know anything, we left Srinagar a week ago.” I then feigned amazement and interest and began to ask the old man about the freedom fighters.

The old man confidently said, “These fighters had been imprisoned for quite a while, and some of them had even been sentenced to death. They pierced a hole into the wall of the prison and escaped through it. My son has recently returned from Srinagar, he is the one who brought this news home.”⁴⁷ That’s why the Army as well as the CIDs are looking for them but as of yet there is no information regarding their whereabouts.

“That is strange indeed” I said, “but if it is true then those brave men are worthy of praise.” After that we began to discuss the fighters of 1965. I made it seem like I had greatly assisted the fighters in 1965. The old man was very impressed. I said, “During 1965, some fighters (commando) operated in this area.” This was true.⁴⁸ The old man sighed and said, “Yes I have heard, some fighters were operating in this area and some people claim that they have seen them, but I did not see anyone. If only I could have had the honour of seeing them.”

I changed the subject and began to ask the old man about his life. He was a middle class farmer and during his younger days, a professional *Markaban*. In the Kashmiri tongue, a *Markaban* is a person who keeps weight-carrying horses and mules, which he

⁴⁷ Habib Rathar had brought the daily *Aftab* newspaper from Srinagar which contained the news of Maqbool Butt and his associates’ escape.

⁴⁸ During 1965, Pakistan sent thousands of armed volunteers to Indian-occupied Kashmir as part of the covert ‘Operation Gibraltar’. This action later led to Pakistan suffering a defeat on the 6th of December. Operation Gibraltar had failed miserably.

uses to transport goods across rural areas. The old man kept me entertained with his stories of transporting goods from Srinagar to Gurez, Astore, Bunji and as far as Gilgit. He said with great sadness, “these are stories of bygone days, the boundary (ceasefire line) has split our country into two. The people of this side cannot go over to that side and the people of that side cannot come over to this side.”

During the hour long conversation, I had probed the personality of the old man. I asked if we could speak in private regarding a very important matter. He agreed so I took him to the third storey of the house and we sat down on a mat. I asked him if he was in state of *Wudhu* to which he replied in the affirmative. I reached into my pocket, produced a *panjsoorah*⁴⁹ and opened it; he was illiterate but recognized that it was the Holy Qur’an. I said, “baba⁵⁰, place your hand on the Holy Quran and swear that whatever I am about to tell you will not be shared with anyone. The old man did so without hesitation. I then told him that we are the fighters that have escaped prison, upon hearing this, his face suddenly lit up and I saw that his cheeks had turned red. Words cannot describe the emotion that was being expressed on his face. His entire demeanour had changed. Tears of joy began to fall from his eyes. He kissed my hands and embraced me. We had now become extremely respected guests of his. He stood up, told me to follow him and proceeded downstairs almost running. When he reached the

⁴⁹ *Panjsoorah*, which is also called ‘Panjpara’, literally means ‘five parts’. The Holy Qur’an is sometimes printed as separate parts which make up a set. This is done for ease of carrying. The Holy Quran constitutes 30 equal parts. These are printed as a set of six booklets containing five parts each. (translator’s note)

⁵⁰ A respectful term usually used to address an old man (translator’s note)

lower floor he went into another room, laid out a mat, took out some fresh, clean bedding from the closet and laid it all out on the floor. He then said to me, "Bring your friends to this room." I did just that.

The old man was full of energy; he spoke to his wife, slaughtered a chicken and prepared a feast for us. Instead of bitter tea without milk, coffee was prepared for us in the *Samawar*.⁵¹ The old lady was overjoyed as well. The girl was told to go to the village and call the old man's elder son, Habib. When Habib came he was introduced to me. He was then sent to fetch the food from downstairs. The old man told Habib very firmly that no one else is to come upstairs. The old lady had prepared the meal with her own hands that night, feeling proud that she was cooking for freedom fighters. Only Habib and his younger brother were permitted to join us for the meal. The women folk were told to steer clear of our part of the house. The strange travellers had, in a few moments, become important personalities. The family did everything possible to keep us entertained and comfortable. An extravagant spread of food was laid out for us at dinner. We would repeatedly be offered tea and coffee after short intervals. The old man and his two sons remained with us and chatted for a long time. Eventually I said to them, "tonight we must move on to a new place", Habib told us that wherever we wanted to go to get out of that dangerous area, he was ready to accompany us. We then retired to bed and slept peacefully.

Our eyes opened around 1 a.m. on 12th December 1968. The old man was already awake. He proceeded to wake his son up. Fresh food was prepared for us. The old man gave us some

⁵¹ See footnote 45

apples, 1 Tarakh⁵² of rice (a Tarakh is equivalent to approximately 6 Sayr), and some freshly cooked *Rotis* to take with us. We were forced to accept these gifts after some to-ing and fro-ing. We left his house and went out into the dim moonlight. The old man bid us farewell with a heavy heart and prayed for us. Habib joined us as a guide and with his help we managed to avoid the security perimeter with ease. The rice paddy fields were full of rainwater but we continued to trudge through them. We crossed the main road and the bridge over the Sindh Nala (rivulet) and then travelled north for quite some time. After an hour of walking with us, Habib put us on the path that would lead us to our next planned stop.

Before leaving the kind, old man's house I had left a letter with him which I had addressed to the leader of *Mahaz e Rai Shumari*, Shaikh Nazeer Ahmad (the paternal nephew of Shaikh Abdullah). In it I had written a brief account of our escape and our so-far-successful journey. I had also requested him to assist Habib Rathar in his Srinagar court case to the best of his abilities. I was introduced to Shaikh Nazeer through a mutual friend in Srinagar Jail when he too happened to be an inmate.

After crossing the Sindh Nala (rivulet) we travelled northeast towards dense woodland, and an hour later we reached the Lar canal which turned out to be divine assistance for us. We changed our direction and walked along the canal. After a while we reached a village whose name I do not recall. The canal flows through the centre of the village splitting it in two. In the middle of the village, just by the canal, we saw a mosque. We went forwards and entered into the public washroom (most mosques in Kashmir have public washrooms attached to them,

⁵² 1 tarakh is around five and a half Kg. (translator's note)

complete with warm water). We had a bath and then went into the mosque to offer *Nafil* (non-compulsory) prayers. During that time the locals began to come to the mosque so we picked up our luggage and left. Keeping the woodlands to our right we stuck to our course along the canal. Sometime later we reached a place called *Rakh* which is near village Barsoo. After passing through *Rakh* we came upon the Srinagar-Bandipora road, whence we continued on towards Bandipora and reached the intersection of Sumbal-Ganderbal Road and Srinagar-Bandipora Road. We turned onto Sumbal Road. Dawn was fast approaching. After a while we reached Barsoo Village. On the edge of the village there was a curved street from which a man emerged. He greeted us with *Salaam* and I returned the greeting. He had just eaten *Sehri* and was on his way to the mosque to offer the dawn prayer. He enquired as to who we were and where we had come from. I told him that I was the forester of a nearby sub-district and we were on our way to Sumbal (Sumbal is the main town in the area). The people who work in the department of forests and the department of land registry are always sought after by village dwellers trying to befriend them. The person I had just met was called Mohammad Akhun. He had just built a new house and was desperately in need of timber. He proposed that we visit his house for a cup of tea and some rest, which we immediately accepted seeing that the sun was about to rise, and we needed a safe place to stay anyway. He took us along with him, and after a few steps we arrived at his under-construction house. He had not yet moved in due to it being incomplete. Mohammad Akhun's original house was a few hundred yards away. He showed us around the house and I resolved to stay there because we could see the entire village and road from it. He took us to a room on the second floor and left us to return to

his other house. He returned about half an hour later with a *Samawar* full of salted tea and some *Rotis* made of rice flour. I advised my friends not to unpack their luggage and to remain ready to move. We didn't even remove our shoes. And though it was considered uncivilized in our culture; I remained by the window so that I could keep a lookout.

When Akhun returned he seemed to find our behaviour quite strange but he made no mention of it. Even whilst drinking tea I refused to remove my shoes. Eventually Akhun couldn't contain himself any longer and began to ask me why I would not relax and why I had not removed my shoes. I silenced him by telling him not to ask unnecessary questions because we are intending to leave very soon. He changed his tone instantly and said, "I didn't mean to annoy you, all I am saying is that you are my guests and I would like to see you at ease, otherwise you may do as you please."

I motioned to my friends to unpack, remove their shoes and lie down to rest. I then turned to Akhun and said, "If you are that eager to take care of us then we should be grateful to you and respect your wishes." Upon hearing this he was very pleased and we sat down to chat. I asked him about his family. Apart from his wife he also had a young daughter that had just been married. I promised him that I would make arrangements for the timber he needed to complete his house. The sun had now come out. I told him that we would wait for a bus to come to the village and use it to get to Sumbal. My eyes fell on a sewing machine, and I learned that Akhun works as a tailor in his free time, although his main occupation was farming. I asked him if I could use the sewing machine and a pair of scissors. I cut out a pair of gloves from one of the jail blankets and sewed

them on the machine. I gathered some information during my conversation with Akhun. Apart from the information I had gotten from Baba Ahmad Rathar in Ganderbal, I gained some more details from Akhun regarding the many security check points and search parties in the area that were looking for the escaped fighters. They were the talk of the town.

I noticed that Akhun was quite sympathetic in nature, and after making sure that he was a well-wisher of the freedom fighters I carried out the usual procedure of making him swear upon the Holy Qur'an and then broke the truth to him. Mohammad Akhun was over the moon, he wanted to go home and get a meal prepared for us but I refused saying that he would now have to remain with us. He was sincere in saying that he wanted to get some food prepared from home but I told him in no uncertain terms that because he had now discovered our true identity, I could not allow him to leave. I explained that, "this is a matter of principle and you should not take offence. The tea that you brought for us is enough." Akhun then relaxed and remained with us for the entire day.

His young son in law came to meet us that morning. Akhun told him to go home and have a meal prepared for us. He also told him that he would be remaining with his guests so he should look after the house. We spent the day chatting to him and took turns to rest. Akhun implored me that I at least allow his daughter, his only child, to have the honour of seeing us, i.e. the freedom fighters. At first I declined, but when he really insisted I had to accede to his request. It was therefore decided that she would bring the food at *Iftar* time and have a glance at us.

Upon my request, Akhun even agreed to send a guide with us to Sumbal. The guide that had been arranged for us was a young man of 25, and a trustworthy relative of Akhun who ran a shop in the village. Shortly before *Iftari*, Akhun left with my permission and returned a few minutes later with his daughter and son in law in tow who were carrying the food. We ate the food and saw them off. The couple were overjoyed to see us. They had even brought some fruit as a token of affection. Akhun brought the guide to us after nightfall. The guide embraced us all and was very pleased at the fact that he was assisting us. To make our journey easier, he had brought some green tea, sugar, cigarettes and kulchay (small, hard, dry, crumbly bread, usually round in shape). We left the house, together with the guide at 7 p.m. in the darkness of night. Akhun gave the guide some advice regarding the route.

We walked along the road towards Sumbal for a while, and then left the road and began to walk through the corn and rice fields. Even though it was dark, we could still make out different villages because of the electric light bulbs glowing in the distance. After travelling for about two hours, I sent the guide back but he insisted on staying with us until we reach Sumbal. I explained to him that the town of Sumbal was now clearly visible and as such it was no longer necessary for him to remain with us. Apart from this, it was also likely that his family would become worried if he delayed his return home. Reluctantly, he turned back. A few minutes later we changed our direction because we had no intention of going to Sumbal. Instead we travelled west through the fields that were parallel to the Srinagar-Bandipora road. We travelled for hours. The glow of light bulbs would tell us when we were passing a village, and we guessed that we were now very far from Sumbal, nevertheless,

we continued without stopping. We reached Manasbal Lake⁵³ around midnight. This area was actually riddled with quicksand and small lakes and it is a paradise for water-fowl hunters. We spent an hour trying to find a way to bypass the lake but to no avail. There was a large village to our left, judging by the amount of electric light bulbs we could see, and when we still couldn't find a way to pass the lake, we decided to enter the village and find a guide. We chose two solitary houses that were sitting on the edge of the village away from the others, but unfortunately both of them were derelict. We stopped for a while to consider our next move when suddenly the whole area became engulfed in darkness due to a power shortage. The sky was cloudy. The only remaining option was to go into the village and find someone who could guide us.

We cautiously entered the village and advanced slowly, making sure to avoid any dogs. It was dangerous to even call out for help in front of a house because this could potentially startle the whole village and cause uproar. I therefore told my friends to keep their eyes and ears open so that we can find out if the inhabitants of any house are awake. We had only just entered the first street when we heard the sound of a cough from an upper-storey window of a *Kathar*. (A *Kathar* is a wooden enclosure used by farmers to store their grain. Some well-off farmers build a room above it for the use of guests. The *Kathar* is usually built near the family home and they share the same entrance.) I motioned to my friends to stop and used a wooden stick to knock on the window which opens out towards the street. At first there was no reply, but after knocking a second

⁵³ Manasbal Lake is situated in Safapoor, 27 miles from Srinagar. The lotus flower grows here in great abundance and it is also home to a large number of fish.

time a voice called out, "who's there? And what do you want at this time of night?" he probably assumed we were undesirables. I quietly replied, "good man, we are not thieves, do open the window a while and speak to us." He opened the window and asked us what we wanted. I replied while making sure to keep my voice as low as possible, "we are travellers; we have come from Sumbal and are on our way to a village further on. We are extremely tired and would like to rest for a while."

He pointed to a certain place and said, "That is the village mosque, go there and rest for as long as you like." I said, "friend, the problem is we cannot rest in the mosque, if it was so possible then we would not have disturbed you at this time of night. Either come down and speak to us or invite us in and we can speak inside."

He was an educated young man, after some hesitation he pointed towards the porch entrance and the steps of the *Kathar*. We therefore made our way into the courtyard and climbed the wooden steps up into the *Kathar*. The young man opened the door and called us in. He lit a lamp and held it up to us, examining us closely. All of a sudden his face broke into a smile and he said, "Okay! So it's you people, it's an honour to have you here. I understand now why you cannot stay in the mosque; you are the fighters that have escaped prison."

I interrupted him, "we are very grateful for your kindness, we would not have troubled you but we have encountered a problem which cannot be solved without your help. We want to get to the other side of the lake, would you be able to assist us?"

He replied, “of course, it is no trouble at all, if you want I can assist you in other ways as well.” He spoke with a very passionate tone, he continued, “sir, we are willing to sacrifice anything for the freedom fighters, if only you would stay and rest a while.” Upon the young man’s insistence, we sat down while he dimmed the lamp and continued to talk about the freedom fighters and their movement. He told us that he had a younger brother who was studying at college and would be very eager to meet us.

I told him get ready to leave because time was passing quickly, but he did not wish to leave so soon. He said, “How can I just let you go like that? You must wait a while until *Sehri*, we will eat together and then I will come along with you.”

I was forced to accept his invitation. About half an hour later he stood up and led us to his house where he introduced us to his brother who was also very pleased to meet us. We washed our hands and faces with warm water. We were given cold rice and a curry made of small fish (small fish are referred to as “*guran*” in the Kashmiri tongue). After that we also listened to the *Sehri* programme on Srinagar Radio. Thereafter both brothers set off with us and took us to the other side of the lake. They accompanied us until the Sumbal – Bandipora Road. I told them that we will now be able to get to Bandipora from here. They wanted to continue walking with us but eventually returned upon my insistence. I do not remember the names of those two brothers, but I do recall that they were members of the Wagay family.

On 13th December 1968 we travelled along the road for about two hours until we reached Sidrakot. In Kashmiri folklore, the people of this village are famous for being simple hearted and

of little understanding. Dawn had just broken and the sound of people sending peace and salutations on The Prophet and reciting their prayers could be heard from the mosques. Women were coming and going in droves with water pots balanced on their heads, having collected fresh water from the pure streams and springs. We passed swiftly through Sidrakot and began to search for a safe place to stay. The sun rose while we were still searching. About a mile from Sidrakot, we saw a small settlement consisting of three houses. Such a settlement is known as a *Takya*. This place was situated north of Bandipora Road at the foot of a barren hill. I decided that we should either stay at one of the houses, or find a place on the hill.

We waded through a Nala (rivulet), reached the last house of the settlement, entered the courtyard and called out to the occupants. A young boy emerged and I asked him if any other family members were around. He said, "Father has not yet returned from the mosque, he will be here shortly." I said, "We are your guests, we would like to meet your father and rest at your house for a while". The boy immediately led us inside. I asked his name and some questions regarding the rest of the family. His name was Ghulam Rasool and he was a student. 15 minutes later the boy's father, who seemed to be 40 or 45 years old returned from the mosque. As soon as he arrived the boy informed him about the arrival of the strange guests.

The father entered the room, and after greeting us sat close to me and asked, "Who are you people and where have you come from?" I told him that we are hunters and are on our way to the other side of the mountain to hunt. And that we are waiting for our friends who we are on their way with hunting rifles. He was satisfied with my answer and we began to speak casually.

During that time we had a shave. I told him that I was a school teacher. Upon hearing this he requested me to test his son. The poor man was himself illiterate but had gone to great pains to have his son educated. I beckoned the boy closer to me and asked him a few questions. He was in the 9th grade. After testing him for about an hour I told his father that the boy is not at all weak, and God willing he would pass the exams. He then asked me to test his 10 year old daughter who was studying in a *Maktab*.⁵⁴ The girl entered carrying a copy of the Qur'an and began to recite in the distinctive Kashmiri style. She was somewhat weak at reciting and I had to correct her repeatedly. The villager expressed sudden interest in my style of recitation and asked, "Where did you learn to recite like this?" I could sense from his tone why he was asking but nevertheless said, "why the sudden interest?" he replied, "Your recitation has taken me back to the time before Partition when I was a young man. I would travel to The Punjab to work and I remember that the *Molvis* (religious clerics) over there would recite like this.

I told him that I had indeed received my religious education in The Punjab. I began to ask him regarding his past; his face lit up as he happily described his experiences whilst staying in The Punjab. Our conversation moved on to political issues and eventually, the activities of the freedom fighters in Kashmir. After probing our host I revealed my true identity to him. His joy knew no bounds and he did everything he could to honour us. My friends took turns to keep watch because we learnt from our host that there were countless roadblocks in Bandipora, and raids were being carried out across the area in a bid to recapture us.

⁵⁴ A *Maktab* is a religious supplementary school. (translator's note)

This was extremely worrying news and the prospect of getting to Bandipora now seemed very dangerous so I decided to change our route. At night I requested our host to make arrangements for a guide who could lead us to such a part of the Jhelum River whence we could cross over into sub-district Sonawari. He told his son to call three men from the neighbouring houses. They were all his trusted relatives. He explained our predicament to them and told them to assist us in the matter. After some debate and discussion it was decided that they would firstly get us to Chandargir, and then they would make arrangements to get us to Sonawari. From amongst the three relatives, one of them called Ghulam Mohammad Khan volunteered to go along with us.

We set off at approximately 9 p.m. after dinner. We travelled south for three hours through the fields and reached Chandargir. Ghulam Mohammad Khan took us to the home of his son in law and introduced us to two men, Abdul Salam and Sanaullah Shaykh. They both greeted us very warmly and entertained us well. The plan to cross the river was postponed because we were informed that CID agents in plainclothes had been positioned along the river bank. We were told that to help us cross the river, we would need a boatman we could trust. This would require time and relevant planning because the place was teeming with security. Our host assured us that all the necessary arrangements would be complete by the following morning. We therefore decided to spend the night in the house as was suggested by them. Nevertheless they were casually warned that if we sensed any foul play on their part, we would burn down the entire house along with its occupants. We then spent the remainder of the night sleeping in turns. We three and Mohammad Khan slept in one room while the others

slept in another. At *Sehri* time Mohammad Khan took leave from us and told us that he would gather some information and return by late afternoon.

On 14th December 1968, Sanaullah brought us a transistor radio and we passed the time by listening to programmes of our choice. His old father remained with us constantly, and if we needed anything he would immediately see to it. Sanaullah took leave from us at 7 a.m. saying that he must attend the office and would return as soon as possible. I asked him to find out about the activities of the enemy in the surrounding area and report his findings to us when he returned. Abdul Salam was a very intelligent and brave young man; he took up the responsibility of arranging our safe passage to Sopore. Sanaullah returned from the office at 2 p.m. and had with him a copy of the daily *Aftab* Srinagar. The newspaper contained a story regarding our escape from prison and said something about disciplinary action being taken against the jail officials.⁵⁵ A short while later Ghulam Mohammad Khan and Abdul Salam also returned.

Ghulam Mohammad Khan gave us details of all the security measures that had been put into place in the area for our recapture. Abdul Salam had arranged for us to cross the Jhelum River on a boat and be transported to a place whence we could enter the Nangal wilderness and travel through it to Sopore. It was decided that this journey will be undertaken in the evening. When I had become satisfied with the arrangements of the journey I allowed Ghulam Mohammad Khan to return home. In the evening we left Chandargir after dinner and travelled west

⁵⁵ Jail warden Sabra Maneem was arrested along with two other security officers.

for about a mile until we reached a solitary house which was home to a boatman. Thanks to Abdul Salam's preparations a 20 year old young man was ready and waiting for us. There was an old woman in the house who offered us salted tea. These were the only two people in the house. After gulping down our tea the five of us left with the boatman leading the way. We walked for 200 yards to the bank of Jhelum River. It was quite intriguing to see the river peacefully travelling its course even in the darkness. The boatman's boat was tied on the bank. We got aboard and the boatman began to row for about a mile until we reached the embankment of a village where we got out of the boat and tied it to a tree. The area of Sonawari was spread out before us. It was the place where the boat-man had agreed to take us to, and whence we could allow Sanaullah and Abdul Salam to return.

We came on to a dirt path and followed it for about 3 miles after which I told my friends to rest a while. While we were resting, I motioned to Abdul Salam to come closer and said to him, "I have decided to leave our planned route, and now, instead of the taking a land route I think we should cross Wular Lake from a suitable point and then land someplace between Sopore and Watlab. I explained to him that this was to avoid enemy security in Sopore because it had once been a centre of activity for the National Liberation Front. This new plan of mine posed a new problem.

We called the boatman and sought his assistance on the matter. The Kashmiri term for sailing on the Wular Lake between Sonawari, Bandipora and Sopore is "*Taar*". He gave us a lot of information regarding it and also told us that there was a settlement of fishermen in the area we were currently in.

After assessing the situation, we decided to forego the “*Taar*” route and chose instead to cross the lake at a different location. We set off and continued to walk along the flood defence barriers with the Wular Lake to our right. The water level of the lake drops during winter, and the surrounding areas which are usually submerged in summer become exposed. Fishermen build temporary settlements on these exposed pieces of land to stay as close as possible to the water. The settlements are moved according to the rise and fall of the water level. Around 2 a.m. on the bank of the Wular Lake, we reached one such settlement called *Muqaddar Yar*. I knocked upon the door of a single storey hut. The occupant of the hut refused to open the door, probably fearing that we were robbers. After much persuasion we succeeded in assuring him that we had no evil intentions, and so he opened the door and allowed us in. We told the fisherman of our plans to cross the lake but he was extremely hesitant. Abdul Salam finally made him agree by telling him he would pay him whatever amount he asked for, but even then he wasn’t prepared to take us before daybreak. He explained that the water of the lake is peaceful and safe to sail upon only in the morning, then during all other hours it becomes riddled with dangerous undercurrents running in multiple directions. I was already aware of this fact, so we decided to wait until morning. The fisherman’s wife, who had until now been asleep was woken up and told to prepare tea. We provided the tea leaves and sugar and she returned shortly with the tea. We sipped our tea with the rice flour *Rotis* that we had brought with us.

The fisherman’s wife was mentally unwell and was convinced that she was being haunted by evil spirits. She would suddenly be overcome by a fit of screams and start to display some

extremely bizarre behaviour. It was all very worrying. I recited some verses of the Qur'an and blew upon her, and then I took some salt, recited *Ayat e kareemah*⁵⁶ and blew upon that too. I advised her to use it daily by mixing it into tea or water and then drinking it. I told her, "If God wills you will be freed from the evil spirits very soon". She considered our arrival to her house a blessing and said many prayers for us. We remained with the fisherman until 6 a.m. Abdul Salam gave him some money from his make-shift handkerchief wallet and we boarded the boat. Before boarding the boat we bid farewell to our three caring friends: Sanaullah, Abdul Salam and the boatman.

It took us around three hours to cross the lake, we touched the other side and landed in a place called Sangar at 10 a.m. Sangar is the name of the hill upon the peak of which sits the grave of Baba Shakruddin Wali. From here, the entire area of Zeenager and Sonawari is visible. It is also the start of a long mountain range which stretches out into the valleys of Sopore and Bandipora and continues for miles on end. After reaching the mountain range we continued our journey along the Zeenager canal for approximately four hours before entering an apple orchard and resting for a while. We remained there until sunset. We sent Meer Ahmad to a nearby village where a friend of ours called Abdul Rahman Meer was residing.⁵⁷ After establishing contact with him we proceeded to his house and had dinner. We also met an old associate by the name of

⁵⁶ *Ayat e Kareemah* literally means 'the noble verse'. It is also referred to as 'the prayer of Jonah' peace be upon him, mentioned in the Holy Quran 21:87 (translator's note)

⁵⁷ Abdul Rahman Meer was an operative of *Mahaz e Rai Shumari*. He too had spent time in jail due to his involvement in liberation related activities.

Mohammad Maqbool Meer. Maqbool Meer was a well-off farmer who also had a business in Kupwara. We spent that night at his house.

On 16th December 1968, the next morning, we sent Maqbool Meer to get information on the security presence in the surrounding areas. Apart from this we were also in need of some tea, sugar and cigarettes. Maqbool Meer returned in the evening with the aforementioned things and some important information. The responsibility of arranging the next stage of our journey was assigned to Abdul Rahman Meer. This was the last inhabited valley on our journey and from here we had to advance directly to the ceasefire line. We estimated that we would be able to cross the ceasefire line in four days' time, so Abdul Rahman had to provide us accordingly with cooked and dry foods which included: rice, flour, crushed barley, sugar, salt, *Rotis*, pickle and some other things. We also managed to procure an axe, a few cooking pots, a torch and a few small bundles of straw. Abdul Rahman also gave us a few lengths of cotton and some sheepskins so that we could keep our legs and feet warm as we travel through the snow. Regular shoes and socks are useless in snowy areas, so country dwellers wrap strips of cotton or sheepskin around their feet and legs and then fit small rolls of straw onto their feet. The legs are wrapped down to the ankles with cotton that is around 4 inches thick. This protects the feet from the freezing snow and also ensures that you don't slip whilst walking upon it.

After resting the entire day we set off. Abdul Rahman and another two people accompanied us for a while, helped us to cross the River Pohru on a boat and then turned back. We set off on an un-cemented track passing by Rafiabab into the

wilderness, north of Baramulla town within the boundary of Panzala Police Station. Whilst in the wilderness we prepared some tea for ourselves and then rested for a while. We had decided that we would make our way across the ceasefire line from the Kazi Nag area. It was a very difficult route but we had no choice. Ghulam Yasin was somewhat familiar with this area and the surrounding wilderness because he had crossed through it on his way to Azad Kashmir during the commando operations in 1965. This area also contained many sky-scraping peaks up to 14,000 ft. high, proving too difficult for ordinary people to cross and hence minimising the probability of enemy presence. We had also learnt that units from the Indian Army were carrying out regular house to house raids in areas bordering the ceasefire line. Apart from this, the Crime Branch CID had notified all elements loyal to India, especially heads of communities and security guards to remain alert, and that if they see any strangers in search of food or shelter; they should inform the police immediately. The authorities had put up large posters everywhere bearing our pictures and a promising a reward of 10'000 rupees for any information regarding our whereabouts. They also carried a warning that anyone who assisted us in any way would be sentenced to 7 years in prison.

On 17th December 1968 we set off northwards from the Panzala wilderness in the direction of Nawgam. We continued our advance through dense woodlands because this part of our journey had to be completed in daylight. Throughout the entire route we remained far from inhabited areas. Our pace was very slow and we had to take every step with caution to ensure we remain hidden from view. On the one or two occasions that we did come across a passer-by we asked for directions to a nearby village and quickly made ourselves scarce. We reached

Dhudakol around 4 p.m. This place is situated between Nawgam and the valley of Hamam Markoot. We climbed a slope with the Nawgam Nala (rivulet) to our right and the Hamam Markoot Nala to our left. The climb was easy and did not take long. We continued along the slope until we reached the snow-covered region. When evening began to set in we selected a dense thicket of pine trees to spend the night. Here we lit a fire, prepared some food and spent the night sleeping in turns.

On 18th December 1968-the next morning- we started travelling towards Kazi Nag Gully. We removed our boots and wrapped our feet and legs with strips of cotton and sheepskin. We then attached rolls of straw to our feet, and tied blocks of wood to them to ensure a good grip. Our journey had now entered a dangerous phase. We could not maintain our previous speed because of our biggest obstacle yet- the snow. After covering some distance we had to remove the blocks of wood tied to our straw-shoes because they were slowing us down, but Yasin left them on because he had past experience in using them.

At 2 p.m. we reached the centre of Kazi Nag Gully where we turned west and began to climb. Before ascending the slope we rested in one of the *Behak* huts (In mountainous regions, nomads take their flock to the high grazing grounds. These grazing grounds are known as *Behaks* and they have huts built upon them for temporary accommodation which remain empty during the winter.) Here we prepared food for ourselves and after eating we started the ascent up the slope. The climb was very dangerous. At times we would become caught up to our waist in the snow which slowed us down immensely. All thanks to Allah that the sky was clear and the sun was shining with all

its splendour. We continued our climb until evening. This particular mountain was full of trees.

Our next destination was Dubri Top. At sundown, my companions wanted to rest under the trees but I did not agree with them because we had only covered a little distance and our supplies were quickly running out. I had estimated that if we do not cover a significantly longer distance every day; we would not be able to reach our destination and would die a slow death along the way. We had brought food supplies sufficient for four days from which we had consumed two days' worth. We therefore continued our ascent towards the peak with the glow of the stars reflecting off the snow. At around 2 a.m. we were about a thousand yards away from Dubri Top. Here there was a small clearing, and thankfully, another *Behak* hut. We entered it and prepared some food, which we ate and then went to sleep to gain some much-needed rest.

On 19th December 1968 at first light we hauled up our belongings, said goodbye to the hut and continued our journey to the top. When we reached Dubri Top the sun was shining brightly, bouncing off the snow covered peaks that stretched far ahead. After reaching Dubri Top we reached a raised platform, such a place is known as a *Sangarmal* in the Kashmiri tongue. It was 10 a.m. and we were in such a spot where if we went a little further the valley would vanish from view, so we decided to stop for a little while. I wanted to take one last look at the valley, the sun was overhead, and then to my dismay I realised there was nothing to see. I was looking towards the valley but the entire region was covered in clouds, thousands of feet below where we were standing. Because of this, I was unable to

catch a final glimpse of my beloved, beautiful valley for whose freedom I had risked my life.

We continued on from the raised platform. The route ahead consisted of slopes, small peaks, and the occasional boulder. Fortunately, this entire region was directly in the path of the sun, and the coolness of night had caused the surface of the snow to solidify. This meant that the risk of our legs sinking into the snow was now greatly reduced. I wanted to take full advantage of the situation and cover as much distance as possible. At approximately 2 p.m. we reached the edge of the raised platform where a mountain range begins and extends towards Azad Kashmir. The height of this raised platform is 14'000 feet. From here many mountain ranges of kazi Nag branch out in multiple directions and many streams flow between them into the Jhelum, Neelum and Pohru rivers. There are a total of 7 to 9 streams. This area of the raised platform was free of trees, and the issue now was for us to cross this bare mountainous terrain and get to another wooded part before nightfall so that we could make arrangements to pass the night.

I scanned the area below and my gaze fell upon a thicket of trees towards our left which was quite close. We thought it would be wise to head towards it. The descent was very steep and difficult. Rather than walk straight down we descended sideways, firmly fixing our foot before each, cautious step. We maintained a gap of 15 to 20 yards between ourselves. At one point Meer Ahmad slipped, lost his balance, and began to roll down towards me across the surface of the snow. I quickly pushed my heavy stick firmly into the snow, held it firmly and braced myself for the impact. With great difficulty we

descended that dangerous slope and reached an area where a stream was gushing forth and running down into the depths. We walked along the stream at a quick pace towards the thicket of trees. After covering some distance we managed to find a hut. Night had fallen, and when we got closer we saw that the hut was actually a border security post which was unoccupied at that particular time due to the winter. We searched the security hut but besides a few letters written in Hindi and some empty *Dalda*⁵⁸ tins, we found nothing. We did however realise that this was an Indian Army security post and as such, we were now very close to the ceasefire line. The stream that we were walking along was descending into an area of Indian-occupied Kashmir called Uri. After preparing some food we took some rest so that we could be fresh and ready to continue the journey tomorrow.

On 20th December 1968 the next morning we left the stream and turned west to begin climbing the steep mountain side. This climb was, again, very difficult and painstakingly slow; we would have to make sure that each step was safe to take before we took it. We took turns to walk ahead and carry out this job, and after toiling the entire day we still did not manage to reach the peak of the mountain. It often happens while travelling on mountains that after a tiring journey you reach a peak, only to realise there is another peak ahead. And so you have to climb peak after peak thinking each time that it is the final peak. We covered the wooded area of the mountain by evening and took some rest on a peak in the shade of a large boulder. We cut a *Bhoojpatar* tree and prepared a fire. *Bhoojpatar* is the bark of a

⁵⁸ Dalda is a brand of hydrogenated vegetable oil popular in South Asia. It is an alternative to the more expensive 'ghee'- a type of clarified butter. (translator's note)

tree which is used to write upon. It is light brown in colour-much like the surface of clean parchment paper. Our supplies were on the verge of being depleted so we took whatever remained of the rice, crushed barley and tea leaves, boiled everything together and added some salt. The result was a kind of *Malghooba*⁵⁹ which was no less than an unexpected blessing considering how tired we were. We were unable to sleep due to the cold even though we had lit a camp fire. If we slept facing the fire our backs would begin to freeze and if we turned over, the front of our body would become exposed to the paralysing, cold winds battering the mountain side. Nevertheless, the fire did protect our bodies from freezing over completely, despite being at such high altitudes beneath the open sky.

On 21st December 1968, the next morning, we set off after sunrise and continued to climb until noon after which we turned northwest. We now had to cross the mountain via a gully. At times we would have to climb almost-vertical boulders and at times we would have to make long detours around them. We reached the gully around 2 p.m. We would have reached much earlier were it not for a small incident that had occurred on the way there. While we were en-route my foot slipped and I tumbled right down into the stream. My companions rushed to my aid whilst tripping and falling and brought me back up to the path after much difficulty. My hand had become injured when it collided with a boulder during that incident, but due to the sub-zero temperatures of the area there was hardly any blood. We resumed our journey uphill until we reached a hillock called *Satsiri*. From here 7 streams gush forth and then flow out, some

⁵⁹ Food prepared from mash or any other pulse mixed with curd. (translator's note)

to Azad Kashmir and some to Indian Occupied Kashmir.⁶⁰ After reaching the top of the hillock we had to cross yet another raised platform. Now there was an upcoming slope with a channel running down it, which in Azad Kashmir is known as Chamb Nala (rivulet). This gushes out of the mouth of Kazi Nag and flows southwest. Even though I was unfamiliar with this area, I was convinced that we had reached Azad Kashmir. By evening we had covered much of the bare terrain along the stream and entered into a thicket of trees. We set up camp beneath a *Partal* tree and lit a camp fire but we now had nothing to eat or drink except a small amount of green tea leaves. We prepared a few cups of salted tea without milk, drank it and offered thanks to Allah. We were exhausted, and despite our empty stomachs we fell asleep.

On 22nd December, the next morning, our journey along the Chamb Nala (rivulet) continued. By midday we had crossed the snow-covered region and we breathed a sigh of relief. Our journey continued along the banks of the Chamb Nala (rivulet) into a forest. When evening fell we settled down to rest under the shade of a towering boulder on the banks of the rivulet. After we had left the snowy area, a slight rise in temperature caused our frozen straw-shoes to thaw and we began to experience unrelenting pain in our feet. Our feet were frost-bitten, and the cords tying our straw-shoes had left cuts on our feet and ankles. We decided to leave the straw-shoes on for fear that our wounds may become exposed and render us unable to walk. The pain was unbearable but we kept our feet away from the warmth of fire because that could possibly

⁶⁰ The names of these seven streams are as follows: Kazi Nag Nala, Pohru Nala, Warni Nala, Cham Nala, Karna Nala, Darnagbal Nala and Lambar Nala.

worsen the pain. Meer Ahmad's feet were in a very pitiful condition. He did not sleep for a moment the entire night due to the pain and we spent the night consoling him.

On the morning of 23rd December 1968 we continued along the rivulet in the hope that we would reach a settlement. At one or two places we passed by some *Behak* huts which was a sign that inhabited areas were not so far away. The pain in our feet also increased as we moved. At midday when we got up to continue after resting a while, Meer Ahmad refused to go any further and was sobbing with pain. He told us to leave him and carry on. He was unable to take another step due to the pain. When we failed to persuade him to walk, I lost my temper and spoke quite harshly to him. This caused his eyes to well up with tears and he began to plead with me that he is absolutely incapable of walking and he should therefore be left alone.⁶¹ I removed his luggage from him, hoisted him up and made him walk while I held him. Whenever we encountered a slope we would carry him up. And had we not done what we did, having escaped death row in Srinagar Jail he would have certainly died in that freezing region. At 2 p.m. we emerged from the forest and could clearly see the area of Chamb.

⁶¹ During this snowy mountainous journey Meer Ahmad lost a great toe and a little toe after they became frost bitten and separated off, while a toe on his other foot was left permanently damaged. He had lost all sensation from the waist down. He had dragged himself up to this stage of the journey. He could no longer feel the pain in his feet even while walking barefoot on snow and considered himself to be a living corpse. He had lost all hope of survival and therefore requested his companions to go on without him but they could not bear the thought of abandoning him.

While we were descending we saw a man about a few hundred yards below us and called out to him, he stopped and motioned for us to come down. We reached him after a while and Ghulam Yasin spoke to him asking, "What is the name of this village? Are we on the ceasefire line? In which direction is Pakistan?" having confirmed everything we became at ease and told him that we had escaped Srinagar Jail and requested that he take us to his house. It was the day after *Eid*. I have already related where and how we spent *Eid*. We will truly celebrate *Eid* the day Kashmir is liberated.⁶² The man told us his name was Shah Mohammad.⁶³ When we reached his house we told him that we had not eaten in three days and requested some food. He quickly boiled some rice, had some potato curry prepared and presented it to us. Here we rested for a while and removed the straw-shoes. Our feet had thawed and were dripping with blood. While we were at Shah Mohammad's house we were introduced to his friend, Mohammad Yaqoob who was a shopkeeper in the village.⁶⁴ He was visiting Shah Mohammad's family on the occasion of *Eid*. Because of a shortage of space it

⁶² Meer Ahmad later told me that they offered the *Eid* prayer in that very condition and Maqbool Butt Shaheed had said to them, "Our greatest *Eid* will be when we celebrate the independence of Kashmir". We then prayed to Allah not to take our lives during that journey because we still had many unfulfilled dreams.

⁶³ Shah Mohammad was originally a resident of a village called Shahkot, situated in district Baramulla. He emigrated to Chamb in 1958. He spent his life herding and farming. He was also tortured in Black Fort, Muzaffarabad at the hands of the FIU for giving shelter to Maqbool Butt Shaheed and his friends. Shah Mohammad spent some time working in Mirpur. He passed away in 2003 at the age of 80.

⁶⁴ Mohammad Yaqoob was originally from a village called Lambar situated in district Baramulla and he too had emigrated to Chamb and settled there, where he ran a shop in the village. He passed away in 1985.

was decided that Ghulam Yasin and I spend the night at Mohammad Yaqoob's house and Meer Ahmad remains resting with Shah Mohammad. Meer Ahmad was groaning with pain. We reckoned that after a night of rest his condition would slightly improve and we could continue with our journey. We set off with Mohammad Yaqoob to his house and as we were leaving told Shah Mohammad to bring Meer Ahmad to where we were staying the next morning. We were shown much respect at Mohammad Yaqoob's house and our injured feet were also treated with some local remedies.

Some of the locals gathered at Yaqoob's house, congratulated us on our safe return and informed us that there was an outpost of the Azad Kashmir Regiment a few miles away.⁶⁵ It was decided that news of our arrival should be given to the soldiers; a local freedom fighter was requested to carry out this task and he promised to do so early next morning. This was the first time after days of testing and difficult situations that we slept peacefully in a warm room.

On the morning of 24th December 1968, Shah Mohammad brought Meer Ahmad to Mohammad Yaqoob's house as was planned. The news of our arrival had spread in the area and some people came to congratulate us in the morning. After a while, the local freedom fighter returned with an AK soldier from the Chamb outpost. We had breakfast. We were unable to walk so the locals carried us on their backs and after 2 hours of walking we reached the outpost. Here we were welcomed by a Subedar, who after seeing off the locals served us tea and some food. Senior officers were informed of our arrival. I personally

⁶⁵ This post was being manned by soldiers from the 8th Azad Kashmir Regiment.

spoke on the phone with the force commander who was stationed at a different outpost and he told me that he would report our arrival to the senior officers and would promptly notify us as soon as a decision is made. I spent around two hours conversing with the Subedar in his bunker while Ghulam Yasin and Meer Ahmad chatted to the soldiers in another bunker. Eventually orders were received to have us transferred to the battalion headquarters in Chunari where we would be handed over to the FIU. A horse was arranged for me and some porters were arranged for Meer Ahmad. Porters were also arranged for Ghulam Yasin but he chose instead to walk because his feet had not been affected much by the frostbite.

It was cloudy that day. When we reached the outpost in the morning it had begun to snow. And when we set off from the outpost towards Saawan Kacha, around 9 inches of snow had fallen and was continuing to fall. I thanked the Almighty for showing us mercy; had it snowed during our journey from The Kashmir Valley to Chamb we would have perished midway and there would have been no sign of us. We reached the battalion headquarters in Saawan Kacha at night. The next morning during breakfast in the mess hall I spoke with some officers of the Azad Kashmir Army.

The date was 25th December 1968. A junior commissioned officer from the FIU came to the camp and asked us some questions while an army doctor administered first aid to us. I shaved and washed my face with warm water-something I had not done for many days. The aforementioned JCO left for a while then returned with a jeep and took all three of us to Muzaffarabad, where he headed straight to Gojra Fort which is

commonly referred to as 'Black Fort'.⁶⁶ There we were handed over to the Pakistan Army Field Investigation Unit 611.

This marked the end of our long, gruelling journey which we had to undertake for our sacred mission. On the tactical side of things this was such a move that had required careful and meticulous planning. There were many dangers lying in wait at every step of the way which had to be foreseen and planned for in advance. We were eventually victorious. This was a victory against such an enemy that was far more powerful than us. An enemy that had unlimited resources at its disposal and was constantly vigilant. This was a victory which instilled new hopes and dreams within me and strengthened my zeal and determination for the attainment of national freedom which I had promised to achieve at the time of joining the Qaumi Mahaz e Azadi. I now see myself more hopeful and more confident. I was convinced that I would be able to fulfil my responsibilities in achieving this purpose. My faith had increased in the fact that when a struggle is undertaken through the right avenues, dreams really do come true. This was a time of great joy and pleasure. I was home at last and safe and sound. What more happiness could a person who had just escaped death ask for? But this happiness of mine was very short lived. At Black Fort, I was confused by the new circumstances I had found myself in; such circumstances which

⁶⁶ This historic fort of Muzaffarabad is situated in Gojra. It was built for military and defence reasons but the Pakistan Army took it into their possession after gaining control of Azad Kashmir. Covert agencies established their offices here and it was converted into a prison and a torture cell. Many great leaders of the Kashmir liberation movement were held prisoner here and made to endure torture. Because such oppressive treatment was meted out to political prisoners and liberation activists, it was aptly named Black Fort or *Qila e Siyah*.

forced me to rethink many things, which broke me from within, and my thoughts opened up to hitherto undiscovered pathways in my mind. It was becoming increasingly difficult to differentiate friend from foe.⁶⁷

Mohammad Maqbool Butt

⁶⁷ At the Black fort in Muzaffarabad, Mohammad Maqbool Butt and his companions were made to suffer unbearable torture at the hands of the head of the FIU Major Faqir Gul Khatak and his agents. They experienced all kinds of cruel treatment. The escape of these great freedom activists from Srinagar Jail was alleged to be a “ploy of the Indian Government”. Many lies were invented in a bid to force them to change their statements. The FIU was trying very hard to get them to make a fictional statement which they themselves had already prepared in advance, all the while trying to show that these freedom activists are actually agents of India. The FIU did all this to try and uproot the liberation movement in Kashmir. But these freedom lovers remained steadfast and stuck to the truth leaving the interrogators with nothing but disgrace. Maqbool Butt and his associates triumphed. This oppression on the part of the Pakistan Army and other agencies left Maqbool Butt thinking in a different way. The enemy treatment at Srinagar jail and the treatment of the ‘friend’ at Black Fort eliminated the difference between friend and foe. The followers of the mission of Maqbool Butt Shaheed (r.a.) should also learn to differentiate their enemy from their friend.