

HIS-103: Emergence of Bangladesh

Lecture 11

Agartala Conspiracy Case 1968



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Agartala Conspiracy: Plot

- Since the inception of Pakistan, the people of East Pakistan were deprived of their legitimate rights in all spheres. Consequently, a general resentment against the Pakistani rulers formed among the people of East Pakistan. The demand for autonomy as placed through the six-point program of the Awami League chief Sheikh Mujibur Rahman thus received the spontaneous support of the people of East Pakistan.
- The acute disparity in the armed forces led some Bangalee army officers and soldiers to be united secretly. Knowing full well that the interest of the Bangalees could never be served under the rulers of West Pakistan, they decided to make East Pakistan independent through an armed revolt. Thus, they began to mobilize army personnel secretly.
- In this context, Pakistan Government in 1968 during the Ayub regime framed a case against Awami League chief Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, some in-service and ex-service army personnel and high government officials.

Detection of Plot

- They were accused of involvement in a conspiracy to split the East wing from Pakistan with the help of the government of India. It was said in the case that the conspiracy took place between the Indian party and the accused persons at Agartala city of Tripura in India. The case was thus called Agartala Conspiracy Case.
- The conspiracy was, however, detected by Lieutenant Colonel Shamsul Alam, who commanded the East Pakistan Detachment of the Directorate for Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI). It was during this time that an officer of the East Bengal Regiment, Rauf ur Rahman, who was in league with the conspirators made an attempt on Alam's life. Alam displayed great bravery and chased the would-be assassins; for this Alam was awarded the Sitara-e-Basalat, the highest award for bravery in action during peacetime. However, nearly 1500 Bangalees throughout Pakistan were arrested by the intelligence force.
- The Home Department of Pakistan declared through a press-note issued on 6 January 1968 that the government had detected in December 1967 a conspiracy detrimental to the national interest of Pakistan. The press-note disclosed the news of the arrest of 8 persons including 2 CSP officers and alleged that the persons seized were involved in attempting to separate East Pakistan through armed revolt. Through a separate declaration issued on 18 January 1968 the Home Department implicated Sheikh Mujibur Rahman in the conspiracy. He was already detained in jail along with many others since 9 May 1966.

- Initially the government decided to court martial the accused since a lot of the accused were military personnel. However, subsequently in the interest of the proper holding of the general elections of 1970 the government resolved to frame charge only against 35 concerned political personalities and high government officials **under civil law.**
- The persons included in the charge-sheet were Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, Commander Moazzem Hossain, Steward Mujibur Rahman, former LS Sultanuddin Ahmad, LSCDI Nur Mohammad, Ahmed Fazlur Rahman CSP, Flight Sergeant Mahfuz Ullah, Corporal Abdus Samad, former Havildar Dalil Uddin, Ruhul Quddus CSP, Flight Sergeant Md. Fazlul Haque, Bibhuti Bhushan Chowdhury alias Manik Chowdhury, Bidhan Krishna Sen, Subedar Abdur Razzaque, former clerk Mujibur Rahman, former Flight Sergeant Md. Abdur Razzaque, Sergeant Zahurul Haq, AB Khurshid, Khan Mohammad Shamsur Rahman CSP, AKM Shamsul Haque, Havildar Azizul Haq, Mahfuzul Bari, Sergeant Shamsul Haq, Shamsul Alam, Captain Md. Abdul Motaleb, Captain A Shawkat Ali, Captain Khondkar Nazmul Huda, Captain M Nuruzzaman, Sergeant Abdul Jalil, Mahbub Uddin Chowdhury, Lt. M Rahman, former Subedar Tajul Islam, Ali Reza, Captain Khurshid Uddin Ahmed, and Lt. Abdur Rauf.

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- A special tribunal was formed after an amendment was made in the penal code for the disposal of the case. The hearing of the case started on 19 June 1968 under Sections 121-A and 131. Sheikh Mujibur Rahman was enrolled as accused No.1. The case was entitled 'State vs Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and others'. The tribunal started proceedings of the case in a highly protected chamber inside Dhaka Cantonment. A charge-sheet consisting of 100 paragraphs against the 35 accused was placed before the tribunal. There were 227 witnesses including 11 approvers. However, 4 approvers were declared hostile by the government.
- Thomas William, a British lawyer and a member of the British Parliament, filed a writ petition in Dhaka High Court on behalf of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman challenging the legality of the formation of the tribunal. He was assisted in conducting legal proceedings in the special tribunal by Abdus Salam Khan, Ataur Rahman Khan, and others. The government lawyers leading the case were the former foreign minister Manzur Quader and Advocate General TH Khan.

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- The tribunal was formed with three members—Justice SA Rahman, Justice MR Khan and Justice Maksumul Hakim. The Chairman of the tribunal was a non-Bangalee and other members were Bangalees.
- The government was bent on identifying Sheikh Mujibur Rahman as a separatist and an Indian agent thereby arousing public support against him. But the approvers on the witness-box declared that the government had compelled them by threat and persecution to submit false evidence in its favor. Thus the governmental machination against the accused got exposed.
- In fact, this trial became an opportunity for Sheikh Mujib to publicize the demands of Awami League before the people of Pakistan. Thus, members of public looked at the case as a conspiracy of the Pakistan government against the political autonomy movement of East Pakistan, especially since the government was keen to prove that Sheikh Mujib was an Indian agent and a separatist.

Reaction of People of East Pakistan

- By this time, the *Sarbadaliya Chhatra Sangram Parishad* supported by Maulana Abdul Hamid Khan Bhasani organized mass movement against the conspiracy of the government and demanded immediate withdrawal of the case and release of all prisoners including Sheikh Mujibur Rahman.
- At a point when the streets of Dhaka became a hot bed of turmoil, Sergeant Zahurul Haq, 17th accused in the case, was mercilessly shot to death while in confinement in Dhaka Cantonment on 15 February 1969 along with flight sergeant Fazlul Haque. The news of his death led a furious mob to set fire to the State Guest House as well as other buildings.
- S.A Rahman, Chairman of the tribunal, and Manzur Quader, chief lawyer on the government side, who were then residing in the guest house, evacuated secretly. Some of the files concerning the case were burnt to ashes. In the face of the mass movement, the Ayub government was ultimately compelled to withdraw the Agartala Conspiracy Case on 22 February 1969.

Aftermath

- All the accused, including Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, were released unconditionally. On the following day (23 February), a grand public reception was accorded to the accused at Paltan Maidan in Dhaka where Sheikh Mujibur Rahman was vested with the appellation of 'Bangabandhu'.
- Later Ayub Khan convened a Round Table Conference which Sheikh Mujib triumphantly attended but walked out of when his Six-Point demands including full provincial autonomy were ignored.
- The case and the resulting uprising was a major factor in the fall of Ayub Khan's government and is also seen as one of the major events leading to Bengali nationalism and the Bangladesh Liberation War. Sergeant Zahurul Haq were honored by the naming of a students' residential hall of the University of Dhaka after him.

Confession

- In 2011, on the anniversary of the withdrawal on 22 February, surviving conspirator and Deputy Speaker of the Parliament Shawkat Ali confessed to the parliament at a point of order that the charges read out to them were accurate, stating that they formed a *Sangram Parishad* (Action Committee) under Sheikh Mujib for the separation of East Pakistan.
- Former minister and parliamentarian Tofael Ahmed added that had the case not been filed, the plot would have concluded in the separation of East Pakistan without bloodshed, and credit the Deputy Speaker for planning the liberation of the nation