

# Mujibur Rahman's First Secret Meeting with an Indian Officer — Me



*In January 1972, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman — released from prison in Pakistan — flew to independent Bangladesh from Rawalpindi (Pakistan) via London and Delhi. In this second blog post to mark the Golden Jubilee of Bangladesh's independence, Sashanka S Banerjee, the Indian diplomat who accompanied Sheikh Mujibur Rahman on the special Royal Air Force aircraft from London to New Delhi recalls his time with revolutionary leader Sheikh Mujibur Rahman.*

On being released from Mianwali Prison located near the Pakistan Army's GHQ in Rawalpindi, Bangladesh's Father of the Nation, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, arrived early morning in London by a PIA special flight on 8 January 1972.

The ball was now firmly in Prime Minister Indira Gandhi's court.

Mrs Indira Gandhi quickly arranged an Air India VIP flight to ferry the Bangladeshi leader from London, with a stop-over in New Delhi to Dhaka. But in the meantime, a high-value intelligence was received by the prime minister. This made her change the flight arrangements.

***The report she received indicated that an external wing of an Intelligence Agency inimical to India, had planned to booby trap the Air India jet flying Mujibur.***

The PM wasted no time and quickly re-arranged with the British Prime Minister, Mr Edward Heath, requesting him to place a RAF VIP jet to fly the Bangladeshi leader from London to Dhaka, with a stop-over in New Delhi. Nothing could have been faster than this New Delhi-London arrangement of Mujibur Rahman's most historic air passage. Indira Gandhi wanted to achieve two objectives in this thoughtful rescheduling of Mujib's air passage on the RAF VIP jet. It got the nod from the British Prime Minister, and at the same time would ensure the safe passage of Mujibur Rahman in his triumphant return home.

## ***For Mujibur Rahman, A Negative Reply From India Was Not an Option***

Now, the question was: who was to fly with Mujibur Rahman as Officer on Special Duty, acting as PM Indira Gandhi's personal envoy on the flight? On the advice of the RAW Chief, Ram Nath Kao, the PM's key political advisor PN Haksar, and the Foreign Secretary, TN Kaul, I was chosen for the job. I was briefed that it was a very important political mission and that I would be carrying with me my PM's very own brief, laying down what to talk about with the Bangladesh leader. It was a once in a lifetime opportunity for me to play this role. Needless to say, I got ready as fast as I could to do the job as well as it was possible for me to perform.

***Why me, of all people? It was because I had met Mujibur Rahman at his own request on the night of 24/25 December 1962, which became the first ever meeting he had had with an Indian official.***

The meeting was shrouded in secrecy. Mujib was accompanied by Manick Mia, the editor of *The Ittefaq*, a widely circulated Bengali language nationalist newspaper. Manick Mia was also known as Taffazul Hussain. The meeting lasted three hours. To cut a long story short, Mujibur opened his book in a business-like manner into what he wanted from India. He wanted India's 'no-holds-barred' support to a Bangladesh Liberation Struggle which he was to lead, backed by the super cerebral Manick Mia as his ideologue.

Honestly, I was bowled over well and truly, seeing the most deeply thought through line up. Mujibur Rahman handed me a letter in an open envelope, dated 25 December 1962, containing a personal communication addressed to the then Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, requesting him for India's support to Mujib's Bangladesh Liberation Struggle. Mustering all my courage, I ventured to ask the Bangladesh leader if he had a Plan B if India, for whatever reason, was unable to do what he wanted. His reply was a categorical "No". He had no Plan B. For him, a negative reply from India was not an option.

### ***My Thirteen Hour Flight with 'Bongo Bondhu'***

After wide-ranging internal consultations, PM Nehru conveyed the agreement, which was India's first such venture of this kind, to extend support to Mujibur Rahman's revolutionary cause, as requested. But this decision was not written with pen on paper. Also the Indian PM conveyed a message to Mujib at an authoritative level, that the 'Liberation Struggle' which he would lead, should be driven by the ideals of Bengali nationalism, anchored on secularism; it should be a pluralist democratic movement, and non-violence should be the avowed creed.

Taking note of the geographical distance between West Pakistan and East Pakistan of more than a 1000 miles between them, it was obvious that it was a strategic decision taken in the light of the real possibility of the gamble ending up in an all-out war. The provocation was Pakistan's unending cross-border tactical pin pricks.

***The decision regarding me flying with the Bangladesh leader was in the backdrop of my nearly 10-year-old association with him since 1962.***

As the flight took off, it was the beginning of a thirteen hour journey for me with 'Bongo Bondhu' Mujibur Rahman. The flight stopped at Akrotiri in Cyprus, and also Oman, both of which were RAF airbases for refuelling and refreshments.

### ***One Man – Tagore – and Two Neighbouring Nations – India & Bangladesh***

Now, let me go into what transpired in this all important mission. Due to my official limitations, I will be able to dwell only on three items of our discussions. They are as follows:

a) After about an hour of small talk, 'Bongo Bondhu' stood up and started singing '*Aamar Shonaar Bangla, Aami Tomaye Bhalobashi*' (Oh my golden Bengal, I love you dearly'). I was seated next to him, and as he started singing, I too stood up as he did. Mujibur Rahman asked me to join him in singing the song with him, which I did. I don't have a good singer's voice but I tried.

***As he sang the song, I could see his eyes moistening with emotion and joy.***

At the end, he turned towards me and asked what I thought of the song. I had understood that Mujib wanted the song to be the national anthem or '*jaatiyo shongeet*' of Bangladesh. Who could deny that it was a beautiful song fit to be the Jaatiyo Songeet of Bangladesh. "You are right," he said, "that was what I was thinking too". "Good then; that will be the song that will be the national anthem of Bangladesh."

I was imagining, with my heart swelling with joy and pride that one man – India's national poet – Rabindranath Tagore, had composed the national anthems of two nations – '*Jana Gana Mana*' of India, and '*Aamar Shonar Bangla*' of Bangladesh. What an honour to India.

### ***A Proposal for Bangladesh to adopt Parliamentary System of Government***

After singing this song, the pilot of the RAF VIP Comet Jet, came to us with his camera and with our permission he shot a few photographs of us together. Here is one of the photos:



***Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and Sashanka S Banerjee on board the RAF flight from London to Delhi on 9 January 1972. The autograph (in Bengali) is signed “Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, 17 April/August(?) 72”.***

[“South Asia @ LSE” Editor’s Note: The month in the autograph is unclear, and the number may be read in Bengali numerals as either ‘4’ (April) or ‘8’ (August).]

b) Turning to a very serious subject, as was my prime minister’s instruction, I proposed to ‘Bongo Bondhu’ how he would possibly react if we suggested to him that Bangladesh adopt the Westminster Style of parliamentary system of government. I added that this system had worked well, and also matured satisfactorily in India. Surprisingly, he wasted no further time and agreed to the idea. He, however, didn’t fail to ask me in the immediate context what was the logic behind this idea.

I told him that with him, that is, Mujibur Rahman, taking over the reins of the government as prime minister, Justice Abu Said Choudhury, a world famous jurist, whose contribution to the Bangladesh Liberation Struggle on the diplomatic front was unparalleled, was an ideal choice to be the president. He liked the idea and said “yes, it is good thinking, let us go ahead with it”.

***No further arguments ensued. In the end, I did clarify that yes, the idea was Mrs Indira Gandhi’s very own.***

I added that PM Indira Gandhi had a dream that on India’s eastern flank, she wished to have a friendly power, a prosperous economy, and a secular democracy, with a parliamentary system of government like India’s. Mrs Gandhi abhorred the presidential system of government with a centralised power structure, which served as a magnet for the military chieftains to take over and create military dictatorship like Pakistan’s.

### ***A Feather in ‘Bongo Bondhu’s’ Cap***

c) Now, it was Mujibur Rahman’s turn to ask me to do a job for him. He suddenly became serious and went into a meditative and a thoughtful mood. He asked me to do what he described as ‘spade work’ for him, for something he wanted to achieve. Seated next to me, he pulled himself near my ear, and whispered that he would like me to reach out to PM Indira Gandhi after landing at Delhi Airport, with a message from him asking her to consider withdrawing the Indian Armed Forces within three months to 31 March 1972, bringing forward the date of the withdrawal from 30 June 1972, which she had announced earlier.

***As luck would have it, after the RAF flight landed in Delhi, within minutes I was met by a staff member of Durga Prasad Dhar, the Foreign Minister, informing me that the FM had sent his car to pick me up and take me to Rashtrapati Bhavan, where he was waiting for me.***

I knew DP Dhar quite well. No introduction was needed. We did not waste any time, and post-haste, we sat down for de-briefing. Meanwhile, I told DP that what Mujib wanted was to bring forward the date of withdrawal of India's Armed Forces from 30 June 1972 – as was announced by the PM earlier – to 31 March 1972, that is, within three months.

### ***“My Countrymen, Rejoice”***

I also told DP that the PM's brief was fully conveyed during my discussions with the Bangladesh leader during the flight, and was duly agreed to by him, including accepting PM Indira Gandhi's suggestion for a parliamentary system of government for Bangladesh. Within about 15 minutes, DP called me up from the PM's room, and as I arrived, he led me to the PM who wanted to hear from me verbatim what Mujib had actually said. The PM told me that I should ask 'Sheikh Sahab' – that is how she used to address Mujib – to bring the subject of what he wanted, directly to her at the Summit meeting. I passed the PM's message to 'Bongo Bondhu' accordingly. At the Summit, Mrs Gandhi conveyed to Mujibur Rahman directly, her agreement that the Indian Armed Forces would be withdrawn from the soil of Bangladesh as per Sheikh Sahab's request, by 31 March 1972.

***This was duly included in the joint communique. It was a feather in the cap of 'Bongo Bondhu'.***

Sheikh Mujibur Rahman returned home to Dhaka on 10 January 1972 to a hero's welcome. Over a million people had gathered to receive the Bangladesh leader at the Ramna Maidan, echoing slogans of '*Joy Bongo Bondhu, Joy Bangla*'. Raising his very masculine voice, 'Bongo Bondhu' declared standing on the podium: "My countrymen, rejoice. Bangladesh is now a sovereign, independent nation". ["South Asia @ LSE" Editor's Note: The gathering on 10 January 1972 was at Ramna Race Course (now Suhrawardy Uddyan).]

### ***The Emergence of Bangladesh as a Sovereign Nation***

It was my tremendous good luck that I could stand there and witness the joyous mass celebration of the people of Bangladesh, with their leader present in their midst, the emergence of Bangladesh as a sovereign independent nation.

On 12 January 1972, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman took over as the Prime Minister of Bangladesh, and Justice Abu Said Choudhury its President.

And finally, paying a tribute to 'Bongo Bondhu's' commitment to his all-inclusive human values, I quote his clarion call to his people: '*Give me Unity, I will give you Freedom*'. He ended his speech with his very own slogan: '*Joy Bangla*', which resonated with '*Jai Hind*' coined by Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose, for the Indian people.

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