

RURAL Intellectuals and the Creation of Pakistan and Bangladesh

A Discussion on Perspectives

INTRODUCTION

By way of introduction to this essay on rural intellectuals, I wish to briefly explain my theoretical reference point: the teachings of the Italian philosopher, Antonio Gramsci. Gramsci was well aware of the distinct position held by rural intellectuals. In his Prison Notebooks he noted the division existing between urban-based and rural-based intellectuals. The latter category, the rural intellectuals, often play a mediating role between the peasantry and the institutions of the state. While peasants on the one hand do distrust intellectuals and, more generally, people who have enjoyed a formal education, - they on the other hand do seek the cooperation of village-based intellectuals when trying to defend their interests in the courts and in other institutions of the state. Rural intellectuals, on the whole, are relatively close to the life of the peasantry.

In his writing on intellectuals, Gramsci further recognized the difference between traditional and non-traditional intellectuals. The first category consists primarily of religious functionaries and leaders who in feudal society are responsible for the spiritual welfare of the oppressed. The second category of rural-based intellectuals, i.e. those who are considered 'non-traditional', are those whose number and influence has risen along with the building of the modern, secular educational system, such as school teachers and doctors. Both categories of rural intellectuals have contributed crucially towards the political evolution of East Bengal and Bangladesh. Thus, members of both sections of rural intellectuals, the traditional and the non-traditional intellectuals, can be approached by the new people's movement to champion the cause of the oppressed.

Below, we will look more closely at the role of rural intellectuals in the political evolution of Bangladesh. In Gramsci's view, religious leaders, i.e. priests and theologians, held a predominant position in 'civil society' in European countries, in the period that preceded the rise of capitalism. They were not only spiritual caretakers, but also functioned as doctors possessing medical knowledge, and as society's educators who ran the schools. In Bangladesh's traditional society, i.e. in the feudal villages of the colonial era, the Muslim clergy too were the main group of intellectuals. They too combined several intellectual functions, and were highly influential in building public opinion among the peasantry. Thus, in tracing the role of rural intellectuals in the political evolution of Bangladesh, we will have to look in particular at the role which members of the Muslim clergy have played in shaping the country's destiny, i.e. in preparing the ground for the creation, first, of Pakistan, and, then, of the independent state of Bangladesh.

THE CREATION OF PAKISTAN

The creation of the theocratic state of Pakistan in the year 1947, with East Bengal as a geographically separate province, would have been unthinkable without the political cooperation of a major section of traditional and non-traditional intellectuals in East Bengal. The Muslim League which advocated the founding of a Muslim state from 1940 onwards, originally expressed the aspirations only of urban-based, aristocratic intellectuals, i.e. the Muslim *ashraf*. Their contact with and influence among the peasantry was very limited. However, the Muslim *ashraf* succeeded in building a united front, a 'historic bloc', around an economic programme which took account of the peasantry's key demand for the abolition of the *zamindari* system. And in building its historic bloc, the Muslim *ashraf* crucially relied on the influence of rural intellectuals.

First, the Muslim League won over an important section of traditional intellectuals, i.e. of the Muslim clergy. Islam in Bengal historically was syncretic in character and the dividing line with Hinduism was not so sharp as to create communal antagonism. However, from the late nineteenth century onwards, a section of the Muslim clergy sought to impose a stronger religious discipline upon the Bengal peasantry and campaigned for greater religious orthodoxy. Communal feelings, further, were actively promoted in the twenties and thirties, when the British colonial rulers expanded the functioning of civil society and 'constitutional politics'. A section of *maulanas*, *maulvis* and *mullahs*,

unfortunately, did engage in campaigns which were clearly communal in kind, and they did so on behalf of a particular class: the Muslim petty landlords, jotedars, who hoped to harvest the benefits.

However, it was not only members of the traditional intelligentsia who helped pave the way for the building of ideological hegemony by the Muslim League. Non-traditional Muslim intellectuals in rural areas, such as lawyers, also played a significant role. In fact, the religious antagonism in the rural areas for a long time was primarily a matter of competition between two sections of professional intellectuals, i.e. the Hindu and Muslim section of rural intellectuals, and the antagonism between these sections again was actively promoted by British colonialism. For, as wellknown, in the modern educational system they built in the subcontinent, the British had for long privileged Hindus over Muslims. Thus, the growth of a communal ideology in civil society was very closely related to British colonial policies. In this sense, the politics of the Muslim League indeed were a 'product of colonialism'.

Still, it is necessary to understand the success of the Muslim League in building ideological hegemony in East Bengal as the outcome of a conscious class strategy. For the Muslim League did succeed in forging a historic bloc - between the Muslim *ashraf*, the *jotedars*, traditional and non-traditional intellectuals, and the masses in the countryside of East Bengal. The party could only win the support of a large section of the peasantry for the demand for the creation of Pakistan, since it adopted a programme for a 'passive revolution', i.e. the partial transformation of the rural social structure without complete elimination of feudalism (i.e. abolition of *zamindari* only). It could win ideological hegemony because it got the cooperation of significant sections of the Muslim clergy and also of lawyers and other non-traditional intellectuals in the rural areas of East Bengal. Without the support of rural intellectuals, the emergence of the Muslim League in the forties as dominant political force indeed would have been unthinkable.

It is, further, necessary to contrast the Muslim League's success in building a historic bloc with the Communist Party's failure to build a combined bloc of intellectuals and the masses of workers and peasants. In the very same period when the Muslim League gathered its mass membership (the half a decade preceding Partition), the Communist Party also expanded in strength, amongst others through the successful efforts of the Kisan Sabha to mobilise sharecroppers and other sections of the peasantry. Yet because its influence among traditional and non-traditional intellectuals remained relatively weak in East Bengal, the Communist Party did not muster a historic bloc of comparable influence and political strength. This failure to engage a significantly large number of intellectuals was at least one of the chief causes behind the collapse of the Tebhaga uprising which spread like wildfire between November, 1946, and February/March, 1947.

This point may be clarified by looking more closely at the positive role that traditional and non-traditional intellectuals played in the peasant movement of East Bengal during the 1930s. First, there is the example of the *proja* movement which flourished in particular between 1928 and 1935. The movement was initiated at the village level around the demand that landlords grant minimum respect to their tenants by allowing them the right to be seated on a chair. Through mass conferences held at district and provincial level, the *proja* movement highlighted a broad programme of peasant demands, such as rent reduction, a fixed interest on *mohajani* loans, and the abolition of *zamindari*. The record of these *proja* conferences, including the one organized by Maulana Bhashani in 1932, shows that a significantly large number of *maulanas*, *maulvis* and lawyers, were willing to champion peasant demands. Both traditional and non-traditional intellectuals were attracted to the *proja* movement.

Similarly, the peasant movement built by the Communist Party in the thirties also attracted rural intellectuals, including members of the Muslim clergy. Noteworthy in particular is the example of the peasant movement built in the Tippera-Noakhali subregion which was a politically volatile subregion. Reportedly, local *mullahs* helped organize Krishok Samities in this subregion via the mosques, and the Tippera-Noakhali Krishok Samity was led by a *madrasah*-educated *mullah*. Other movements of the period, such as the Congress-led non-cooperation movement against British colonialism, also witnessed the participation of members of the Muslim clergy, such as *maulanas* and *mullahs*. These examples indicate that traditional intellectuals did not uniformly favour the spread of communalism. Especially village-based religious leaders, i.e. *mullahs*, who were in close touch with the people, could well be won over to the causes of secularism and the emancipation of the peasantry.

Yet it appears that the Communist Party underestimated the possibility of forging alliances with sections of the traditional and non-traditional intelligentsia in the rural areas of East Bengal. Although the Bengal Congress in the

BPSC WORKSHOP, FEBRUARY 21, 1998

Legislature took an unequivocal pro-*zamindari* stance (1928), the Communist Party continued to privilege an alliance with the Congress over other potential alliances. As the above cited example of the *proja* movement brings out - significant sections of traditional and non-traditional intellectuals in East Bengal, during the decades preceding Partition, could be rallied around a programme for democratic transformation. On the eve of Partition, the mass appeal of the Communist Party was large both in Calcutta and in the rural Districts of Bengal. But the Party ultimately did not succeed in forging a historic bloc, i.e. a united front comprising traditional and non-traditional intellectuals alongside the masses of industrial workers and the peasantry.

BANGLADESH

The period from 1947 upto Bangladesh's political independence in 1971 was the period when the country was a province of Pakistan. It was the period when public opinion was built, first, around the demand for the recognition of Bengali language as state-language, and, then, around the demand that the province be granted regional autonomy. As the national movement grew in strength in the fifties and sixties, it increasingly got the support of the peasantry, which formed the overwhelming majority of the population of East Bengal. While the political history of this period has been well-recorded, the role that rural intellectuals played in changing the political culture in East Bengal is rarely given the importance it deserves. Yet this role was not a secondary one, but was in fact decisive.

First, it is true that urban intellectuals, such as writers based in Calcutta and teachers of Dhaka university, helped to initiate the language movement in 1947/1948. They were the first to start the building of public opinion around the language issue, when they questioned the proposal of Pakistan's rulers to adopt Urdu as the sole state language and debated several alternative policies. The proposal of Pakistan's rulers was favoured by the Urdu-speaking aristocratic intelligentsia, the *ashraf*, who were powerful in the Muslim League (see above). But it was clearly unjust to the population of East Bengal which formed the numerical majority of Pakistan's population. Opposing this undemocratic policy, intellectuals of Dhaka university promoted the formation of the organisation that launched the language movement, known as 'Tamuddin Majlis'.

Soon, however, university and college students took over the leading role from urban intellectuals. As is well recognized, students were the leading force of the language movement all through. They not only campaigned for the recognition of Bengali as national language through demonstrations and through strikes at educational institutions in Dhaka city. They also connected the issue with that of (Bengali) national self-determination. Moreover, when politically active sections of the urban intelligentsia in East Bengal, organized in the Awami League and other political parties, wavered in the face of state repression, Dhaka students independently brought the struggle to its climax, on February 21, 1952. They thus turned the language issue into a province-wide issue. Clearly, the students' contribution towards building public opinion in favour of Bengali language is paramount.

Nevertheless, rural intellectuals too did play their part in the construction of the national movement. This happened in particular during the subsequent period, when the question of regional autonomy was made into the province's central political question by Maulana Abdul Hamid Khan Bhashani - around the parliamentary elections of 1954 and afterwards. The followers of Bhashani, amongst others members of the Muslim clergy and village teachers, during the election campaign helped to bring the issue of autonomy to every nook and corner of the province. And when after the elections, urban political leaders joined the provincial and central government as Ministers, Bhashani continued to stage mass rallies, processions and conferences, including the famed Kagmari Conference, in order to prevent urban intellectuals from compromising the demand for autonomy. He tirelessly continued to build public opinion with the support of both traditional and non-traditional intellectuals.

Progressive rural intellectuals understandably take enormous pride in the glorious role of Maulana Bhashani as principal propagator of secular Bengali nationalism. Recently, a section of the intellectuals who are allied to the commercial bourgeoisie have been busy falsifying history. They have falsely depicted the Awami League as the sole champion of the national aspirations of the people of Bangladesh. The truth regarding Bangladesh's history is otherwise. Maulana Bhashani, the towering figure of East Bengal politics throughout the period when Bangladesh formed part of Pakistan, at several crucial junctures fought pitched political struggles against the tendency to compromise Bengali national interests. It is he who first proclaimed the possibility of separation from Pakistan, when

in 1955 he uttered the threat of a farewell to Pakistan, '*Pakistan Assalamu Alaykum*'. And it is he who first declared the inevitability of national independence, after the Pakistani rulers had failed to show compassion for the victims of the devastating cyclone that occurred in 1970.

This role of Bhashani's comes alongside his role as principal organiser of the peasant movement during the same period of history. Peasants throughout the ages have been represented by their own intellectuals, by people who have given their capacities to the task of trying to free the peasantry from exploitation and oppression. Such intellectual leaders can be traced in the history of peasant revolts in Europe, and they are also present in Bengal's history of peasant uprisings (e.g. the Sanyasis and Faraizis). After having defended the interests of Bengali peasants during his stay in Assam, Bhashani led the efforts by the Krishok Samity to rebuild the East Bengal peasant movement. These efforts culminated in the vast mobilisations of peasants with red caps and sticks, in 1968-1969.

Moreover, Bhashani also was the chief architect of the people's uprising against Ayub's military dictatorship, i.e. the uprising in 1968/1969 which preceded Bangladesh's independence war. To this people's uprising, urban students too did contribute their share, they led the rising through its 'middle phase'. But Bhashani's role was paramount. He personally launched the uprising through a rally of rickshawdrivers, held on December 6, 1969, he helped popularise the militant tactic of '*gherao-ing*' (physically encircling) factory managers and government functionaries, and he also promoted the spread of the uprising against Ayub Khan's dictatorship to the countryside. During the uprising Bhashani proved that he was the most effective Bengali revolutionary leader of his time - not only of the peasantry, but also of the proletariat, and of other sections of the oppressed!

There is thus no doubt that Maulana Bhashani made a decisive contribution towards the building of a new historical bloc of the intellectuals and the masses, against the Pakistani rulers and in favour of Bengali nationalism and the emancipation of the people. Where traditional intellectuals previously had helped build public opinion in favour of the creation of Pakistan, Bhashani and his followers precisely helped in breaking the ideological hegemony of the Pakistani ruling class. The experience of Bhashani thus illustrates how important it is to consciously include rural intellectuals in a broad people's front for revolutionary change. It seems in the interest of the contemporary peasant movement to demand that respect be granted to Maulana Bhashani and to other rural intellectuals for the crucial contribution they historically made towards the creation of Bangladesh.

(December, 1998)