

INTRODUCING MAULANA BHASHANI, REPRESENTATIVE OF AN EMANCIPATORY ISLAM

The Muslim theologian Maulana* Bhashani is a historical figure who is well remembered in Bangladesh for his contribution towards the country's creation. Born in a peasant family of modest stock in a village close to presentday Shirajganj, the young Bhashani got inspired by a visiting Muslim spiritual leader, a 'pir', who took charge of his education in far-away Assam. Having been grounded in a liberal school of Islamic thinking, Bhashani subsequently was sent to receive further training and become a theologian at Deoband, an educational centre with a progressive reputation. Contrary to those currents within Islam which insist on the strictest observance of written religious rules, Deoband's theologians upheld the principles of a preacher's commitment towards people's social welfare, and of opposition against the (then) British colonial rule. Hence, the Islam which the Maulana was taught to propagate, and to which he developed a life-long dedication, was not a fundamentalist Islam, but an Islam with an overtly emancipatory content.

Bhashani's life as a preacher and socio-political leader expresses this form of Islam in the most striking manner. It is, therefore, worth recalling his experiences, to remind us that there do exist alternative trends within Islamic religion. Through his efforts to redress peasants' grievances in the thirties and forties - first in East Bengal, and later, when the authorities forced him to leave, in Assam - Bhashani gained the stature of a Maulana who well understood the economic and political causes of poverty. Yet the most remarkable chapter in his life Bhashani wrote as an aged and respected political leader, when, in the period during which East Bengal formed a part of Pakistan (1947-1971), he publicly took position against the misuse of religion by the state's authorities, and became the most effective advocate of a secular Bengali nationalism. In this article we wish to introduce the readers of *Samachar* to Maulana Bhashani. To this end we will highlight key-episodes in his socio-political life. But before doing so, let's briefly refer to Bhashani's interpretation of Islamic principles.

In speeches he held in East Bengal villages, but also at international events, Bhashani took pains to explain he was in favour of a separation between religion and the state, and opposed preparations for, and the waging of war. Thus, in a speech at the Stockholm Peace Conference in 1954, which reportedly aroused the Swedish press, Bhashani insisted that he considered engagement in the world peace movement to be a 'religious duty', a duty enshrined in the very name 'Islam'. Again, when attending a world gathering of religionists in Tokyo, in 1964, Bhashani warned against forces bent on using religion to serve their own political interests, and called on the people of the world to resist such! (1) The commitment of the Muslim theologian Bhashani towards the building of a state in which people of different religions would be able to live together in peace, i.e. in which religious tolerance be the rule, runs like a red thread through the later part of the *Maulana's* life.

* The term *Maulana* indeed refers to a Muslim theologian, i.e. to somebody well versed in the scriptures of Islamic religion

Significance of the Kagmari Conference

Let's, to start, describe a single event which well brings out Bhashani's contribution towards the creation of Bangladesh. The Kagmari Conference, held in February, 1957, was a veritable milestone in the history of East Bengal during the Pakistan period. In the previous year, the Awami League which had gained popularity around a progressive political program, had assumed governmental power, - both within the province, and at the centre, in Pakistan's capital. On September 6, 1956, Aaur Rahman Khan had formed the provincial government, and 5 days later, a coalition government of the Awami League and the Republican Party was formed in Rawalpindi, under the leadership of Suhrawardy. The Bengali people naturally expected that the Awami League would carry out important political changes, that it would fulfill its electoral promises. However, within a few months it became clear that Awami League Ministers were tempted to abandoning the party's principled demands in exchange for personal power at the centre of state. It was under these circumstances that Maulana Bhashani, as president of the Awami League, called for the holding of a two-day Council session in Kagmari, Tangail, to be followed by a broad, three-day Cultural Conference.

Two issues were hotly debated at the Council Session, held on February 7 and 8, 1957. One was that regarding Pakistan's *foreign policy*. Surrendering its own independence as a Third World state, Pakistan had recently agreed to join a military alliance under the leadership of the US. The Awami League with Maulana Bhashani as president had clearly expressed its disagreement with this direction in foreign policy, and had advocated that the country should rather pursue an independent, non-aligned course. It should resist US hegemony as was being done by other countries in Asia, such as China, Indonesia and India. However, Suhrawardy, since becoming Prime Minister,

had cared little to revise Pakistan's existing foreign policy-line. At the Council Session in Kagmari, Maulana Bhashani sought to re-affirm the party's opposition against military alliances and in favour of world peace. He insisted he would not diverge one inch from this stance, and he warned Suhrawardy and other Awami League Ministers not to disregard the organisation's decisions on foreign policy adopted previously (2).

The second issue debated at the Kagmari Conference was the demand for *regional autonomy* of East Bengal. This issue had formed the basis for the very formation of the Awami League, and had been the key issue around which the Awami League and other, allied political parties had fought and won victory in the parliamentary elections of 1954. Unfortunately, Suhrawardy's becoming Prime Minister had not brought the recognition that East Bengal were a separate entity any closer, and had not resulted in any efforts to redress the existing inequality in government spending between the Western and Eastern regions of Pakistan (3). Yet Suhrawardy made statement claiming that the issue of Bengali selfdetermination had been solved for 95 percent! At the Council Session Bhashani described the continuing oppression of East Bengal, and passionately appealed to Suhrawardy to immediately transform the situation. At Bhashani's request, most Council members rose to express their resolve to stand by the party's principles and programme. Moreover, Bhashani made a prophetic statement. If Bengal were not granted full regional autonomy, the people of the province would ultimately be forced to go their own way and say '*Assalamu Alaikum*'(good-bye) to Pakistan (4).

The Kagmari Council Session of the Awami League was followed by a three-day Cultural Conference which has been termed 'the largest cultural gathering ever held in East Bengal' (5). This Cultural Conference indeed was a very impressive event, and further illustrates Bhashani's farsightedness. Invitations had been sent to academicians and writers abroad to come and present their views at the Conference. Bhashani's intention here evidently was to build bridges between Bengali culture and the cultures of other countries, including the USA and the UK, and to promote the cause of Bengali culture internationally. Further, well-known poets, writers and other urban intellectuals of East Bengal province were asked to address a broad range of cultural topics, such as modern Bengali literature, the language question, and East Bengal's educational system. But what is perhaps most striking is how Bengali folk art was highlighted at evening performances. Bhashani personally appealed to the Conference to ensure that folk art be preserved, stating that 'the onslaught of polished urban art should not lead to the demise of traditional village folk-art' (6).

Meanwhile, by the time the Cultural Conference ended, Bhashani's enemies within the Awami League had initiated a vicious campaign to vilify the party president. When Bhashani held a press conference, in the afternoon of February the 8th (1957), to inform journalists of the proposals that had been adopted, Mujibur Rahman who was the Awami League's General Secretary, rudely interfered and tried to downgrade the achievements of the Kagmari Conference. Suhrawardy who had faced political defeat, in the aftermath of the Conference took the unprecedented step of denouncing Bhashani, his own party's president, as a 'paid agent of India'! Moreover, long editorials appeared in the daily newspapers of East and West Pakistan, targeting Bhashani's uncompromising stance and raising an outcry against him. Several prominent members of the Muslim clergy, including two *maulanas*-turned politicians, issued statements arguing that *Maulana* Bhashani's course was bound to endanger Pakistan's territorial integrity (see box)(7). They were deeply irritated at Bhashani who defended secularism and championed the cause of Bengali nationalism!

Yet all these attempts to counter Bhashani and the Kagmari Conference ultimately failed to turn the tide. At the Kagmari Conference, Bhashani had dared to challenge both the Muslim League and the Awami League, the two largest parliamentary parties in East Bengal. His speeches to the Council delegates contained both an elaborate analysis of the causes behind the fall from power of the Muslim League, and a critical analysis of the compromising tendencies displayed by Cabinet Ministers belonging to his own party, the Awami League. Through the Kagmari Conference Bhashani thus started the building of a new, *third current* which would take the movement for national selfdetermination forward. As subsequent history has amply proven, it was not the cowardice of Bhashani's party colleagues, but his own uncompromising attitude which was ultimately to triumph. The Kagmari Conference at a very critical juncture in history inspired rural and urban intellectuals alike to continue their work of opinion-building in favour of selfdetermination. For this reason, the Conference should be evaluated as a watershed in Bangladesh's political history.

Maulana Bhashani and the Campaign for Regional Autonomy

The Kagmari Conference was not an isolated occurrence but typifies Bhashani's untiring efforts to defend a Bengali nationalism that 'naturally' clashed with the orientation of Pakistan's ruling class. To understand further how important Bhashani's role was in building a climate in which East Bengal's urban politicians could not compromise people's interests, let's further recall the way Bhashani succeeded as a public opinion builder, i.e. as an intellectual in the Gramscian sense (8). In March, 1951, a major conflict erupted between the primary school teachers of East Bengal and the government, over payments of teachers' salaries. Pay scales were so low, and the government's attitude towards the teachers' demands so uncooperative, that the province's workforce of 80 thousand primary school teachers went on a strike to try to enforce the pay rises they demanded. Though the government refused to give in, and whereas the leaders of the East Pakistan Primary Teachers' Association unfortunately withdrew the strike before substantial concessions had been gained, the strike, as Bangladesh's wellknown historian Badruddin Umar justly recalls,

importantly contributed towards the growth of political consciousness amongst primary school teachers of East Bengal (9).

The man who realised this fully and acted upon it with a sense of vision, was *Maulana Bhashani*. As mentioned briefly in the previous issue of *Samachar*, East Bengal was in the throgs of a language movement from the formation of Pakistan onwards, and all through to 1952 (10). This movement, around the demand that Bengali as the language of the country's numerical majority be recognized as a state-language, was basically led by urban students, i.e. by students belonging to the Dhaka university and to other city- and town-based educational institutions. Yet Bhashani, seeing that the mood of struggle amongst rural teachers was growing, grasped well that the language movement could be taken forward, and could be transformed into a fullscale, province-wide movement for Bengali national selfdetermination. In a move that was probably decisive in building public opinion amongst the people of the province, he mobilised both his own religious followers, *muridan*, and village teachers - i.e. both traditional and non-traditional intellectuals - to widely advocate the demand for regional autonomy. Rural intellectuals were to subsequently form the backbone of a new progressive political party under his personal leadership, the National Awami Party (NAP).

Thus, when the preparations for the holding of the 1954 general elections started, he made sure that the issue of regional autonomy be incorporated into the programme of the *united front*, the coalition of parties jointly opposing continuation of Muslim League rule. More importantly, at literally hundreds of electoral mass meetings which Bhashani held in rural areas, he turned the demand for autonomy into the public's heartfelt issue (*praner dabi*). As one of his biographers stresses, the question of autonomy was **the** main issue the Maulana brought up at all the gatherings where he spoke. Again, when the national People's Assembly of Pakistan started its deliberations over the country's draft Constitution, Bhashani took to public campaigning throughout the countryside of East Bengal. In the then prevailing cultural style, he warned of a '*big conspiracy*' that was underway to keep the oppressed people of East Bengal enchained. Further, he called on students and the broad public to wear black badges on a province-wide day of resistance against Pakistan's undemocratic new Constititon, and led numerous demonstrations in rural areas to vent to the public's indignation. Bhashani is a classical example of a religious teacher using his oratory skills to propagate a progressive cause.

Maulana Bhashani's Greatness Re-assessed

Bhashani's role in the evolution of the politics of East Bengal has been well documented in several major biographies (11). These biographical documents are a great source of annoyance for the present ruling party, the Awami League. The government under the leadership of Sheikh Hasina surely is not interested in keeping a truthful record, but would rather wish to monopolise history and claim that its deceased leader, Mujibur Rahman, singlehandedly achieved the liberation of Bangladesh. Yet historical facts cannot be suppressed for very long. The episodes mentioned above, from the language movement and the struggle for national selfdetermination, unmistakably prove that not Mujibur Rahman but Maulana Bhashani anticipated that the people of East Bengal would ultimately have to say farewell to Pakistan. It was Bhashani who through his uncompromising attitude and ceaseless efforts to popularise the demand for regional autonomy, pushed history forward and prepared the peasantry for the inevitable liberation struggle of 1971. As Syed Abul Maksud, author of Bhashani's most detailed biography, states, - through his extensive travels and speeches in rural areas preceding the 1954 parliamentary elections, Bhashani became 'the true spokesperson of the people of East Bengal, oppressed by internal colonialism' (12).

Bhashani's class stance within the national struggle too stands on record. This essay has not paid much attention to Bhashani's 'class politics', but his class role was as unconventional - given the fact that he was a Maulana - as his role in defense of national selfdetermination. Well before he emerged as champion of Bengali national rights, Bhashani had already made his mark as advocate of social justice. In the 1930, he participated in a campaign to defend tenants' rights, the proja movement. And after the British forced him to migrate to Assam along with many oprotted Bengali peasants, he led a campaign against the 'line custom' which ghettoised undernourished Bengalees in Assam. Upon returning to his homeland in the late 1940s, Bhashani became the most prominent patron of the oppressed classes, encouraging labouring people - fisherfolk, industrial workers, ricksaw-pullers, jute and sugar producers, and other sections of the peasantry.- to organise themselves. Once again he emerged as peasant leader, through the East Bengal Krishok Samity, of which he became the president. And when workers and peasants rose to question Ayub Khan's military dictatorship, in 1968-1969, Bhashani was their chief leader (13). Really, Bhashani's championship of peasants and workers cannot be belittled either.

All these achievements have been highlighted faithfully by Bhashani's autobiographers. What needs to be emphasized further, since it has been undervalued by most historians, is Bhashani's role and place as intellectual. Though biographers who themselves form part of the urban intelligentsia naturally do not emphasize the point - Bhashani's greatness above all lies in the fact that he was a dissident among the Muslim clergy to which he belonged. Ultimately, what needs to be emphasized in order to understand Bhashani's greatness, is that he interpreted his role as public opinion-builder very differently from other traditional intellectuals, from other members of the group to which he belonged. Bhashani understood well that his profession, theology, aimed at influencing the thought processes of the rural population. He knew that Maulanas and other religious functionaries do crucially contribute to/or impede the political choices that peasants make. In taking position in favour of secularism and Bengali nationalism, Maulana Bhashani exerted an influence on public opinion in the countryside of East Bengal that few other political personalities could have had. And in consciously choosing to play this role, Bhashani proved to be a very courageous intellectual. Rather than

fulfilling his mission as traditional intellectual, Bhashani chose to be a 'people's intellectual' who maximally uses his status and skills to promote the liberation of those who are nationally and socially oppressed.

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November 1, 1999

References:

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- (2) see Shah Ahmed Reza, *Bhashani's Kagmari Conference and the Struggle for Selfdetermination* (in Bengali - Gana Prokashani, Dhaka, 1986), p.59;
- (3) see Muhammad Samsul Hoque, Maulana Bhashani's Political Life. Discussion on Facts and Evaluation (in Bengali - Mohammed Sharifa Khatun Renu, Tangail, Bangladesh, 1987), p.29;
- (4) Muhammed Samsul Hoque, op.cit., p.30; Shah Ahmed Reza, op.cit., p.59;
- (5) Syed Abul Maksud, *Maulana Abdul Hamid Khan Bhashani* (Bangla Academy Dhaka, Bangladesh, 1994, p.140);
- (6) Syed Abul Maksud, op.cit, p.149; also Shah Ahmed Reza, op.cit., p. 63/64;
- (7) Muhammed Samsul Hoque, op.cit., p.30/31; Shah Ahmed Reza, op.cit., p.71/72;
- (8) see Antonio Gramsci, Prison Notebooks (International Publishers, New York, undated);
- (9) Badruddin Umar, 'Primary School Teachers on the Striking Path' (The Weekly Holiday, November 27, 1998);
- (10) see Peter Custers, 'Rural Intellectuals and the Creation of Pakistan and Bangladesh', **Samachar**, No.11, December 1998, p.13-16;
- (11) Syed Maksud, op.cit.; Shah Ahmed Reza, op.cit.; Muhammed Samsul Hoque, op.cit.;
- (12) Syed Abul Maksud, op.cit., p.610;
- (13) Mesbah Kamal, *The People's Uprising of Nineteen Sixty-Nine* (in Bengali -Bibartan, Dhaka, 1986).