

WHAT PERSPECTIVE FOR PEOPLE'S RESISTANCE IN BANGLADESH?

1. To start, let me emphasize how much pleased I am with the request made by your weekly magazine *Arbetaren* to state my views in writing. Although I have been involved in the progressive movement of Bangladesh for over a very prolonged period, I am not a Bangladeshi national by birth. Hence I consider it quite an honour to be asked to comment on the perspective of the people's movement in Bangladesh. At the same time, it is a truly inspiring issue to discuss. For although the tide of Bangladesh's people's movement and of its revolutionary politics at the present juncture in history are rather low, a reading of the country's political past as also an analysis of its cultural traditions easily bring out that the ideals of social justice and economic equality continue to have much mass appeal, and have the potential of leading to a true transformation of Bangladeshi society. Below I will try to explain why I am convinced that this is the case. According to me, the principle obstacles to the emergence of a powerful revolutionary movement lie in the failure of (most of) Bangladesh's Left forces to *self-critically review their experience*, and in a failure to *rethink orthodox Marxist ideology*.

2. Let's go back to the first phase after Bangladesh's formal political independence, i.e. to the period from 1972 to 1975 when the present government party, the Awami League, ruled for the first time. Those were the years when I myself lived in Bangladesh as a journalist working for Dutch newspapers. I had chosen this profession after breaking off my doctoral studies, since I was moved by the example of the Latin American revolutionary Che Guevara, and believed in the need to immerse myself in the struggles of the oppressed in Bangladesh. Shortly upon my arrival I got the opportunity to meet *Maulana* Bhashani, the Muslim liberation-theologist born from poor peasant stock, who in the fifties and sixties had oriented the East Bengal peasantry, rural intellectuals and other sections of the people, towards self-determination and socialism. Since then I plunged myself in several experiments aimed at village organising. My dream of revolutionary change also brought me in close contact with the former army colonel, Abu Taher, who played a leading role in the soldiers' uprising that ended the first era of Awami League rule, in November of 1975.

3. How to describe in a nutshell the political situation that prevailed in Bangladesh during those years? It was characterised amongst others by a sharp *contradiction between a political culture that was predominantly Left - and a weak level of mass organising*. Thus, while the ruling Awami League represented the rising bourgeoisie, i.e. people holding trade permits and making windfall profits on the marketing of agricultural products; and while the party soon took recourse to violent suppression of any political opposition, - the principles which it proclaimed and enshrined in the country's constitution were quite progressive: they comprised both secularism and socialism. On the other hand, almost all organisations engaged in oppositional politics too identified themselves as socialist. The main party trying to function as parliamentary opposition party, the JSD, advocated 'scientific socialism', and the underground armed groups which rejected the parliamentary path advocated an egalitarian socialism as practised in China. Clearly, the ideas of economic equality, to be achieved through land distribution and public ownership of industrial goods, held an almost complete *ideological hegemony* in Bangladesh's society during those years.

4. And yet the mass base to sustain a socialist ideology was weak, it had been tremendously weakened in consequence of the disruption caused by the 1971 liberation war

and in consequence of errors made by the pro-Chinese Left. In 1969 East Bengal had been in the throngs of revolutionary upheaval. At the call of *Maulana* Bhashani, the oppressed - first in Dhaka city, then in the countryside - had staged a true people's uprising against dictator Ayub Khan of Pakistan, the state to which East Bengal belonged as a province. In that very year, 1969, the history of militant peasant struggles which spans at least two-and-a-half century of British colonial dominance, reached its culminating point. There were three major mass Conferences of peasants armed with *lathis* (sticks) and wearing red caps. In each Conference, literally hundreds of mainly landless, landpoor and middle peasants participated. These Peasant Conferences helped raise the level of organising in East Bengal's villages, - they strengthened the organisational influence of the anti-imperialist and pro-socialist, militant peasant association led by the aged, but vibrant *Maulana* Bhashani.

5. By 1972, however, much of the organisational structure of the Left's peasant association had vanished. This surely was due in part to the ravages caused by the war, in which the occupying Pakistani army had indiscriminately tortured and killed people they had suspected of having nationalist sympathies. Yet another crucial factor responsible for the setback was that pro-Chinese leaders who held key positions within Bhashani's peasant association at the very most critical juncture in the history of 20th century East Bengal had withdrawn from and denounced the methodology of legal organising as 'revisionist'! After formal independence, then, Leftwing militants had to virtually start from scratch. And since the Awami League regime was intolerant towards its Leftwing opponents from the very start, during those years when I lived in Bangladesh first, i.e. in the period 1973-1975, it was extremely difficult to hold village meetings about class struggle and landreform. In fact, from January, 1975, onwards, after President Mujibur Rahman had declared an emergency, any politics critical of the then government had to be undertaken in secret.

6. The political situation in Bangladesh today differs quite radically from the one that prevailed a quarter of a century ago. No doubt, peasant organisations like the *Krishok Federation* and the *Kisani Sabha* are making very laudable efforts to recover the ground that was lost by the revolutionary Left in 1969-1972. Surely, the building of a peasant women's association in the 1990s, side-by-side with the male peasant organisation that has functioned since the late 1970s, is a novel feature; it has resulted in participation by many tens of thousands of landless women in demonstrations in favour of the abolition of the dowry system and other burning demands. Undoubtedly also, the *Federation* and the *Sabha* have scored a credible success in having sustained land settlements of landless peasant women and men in *char* areas along the coast for over a prolonged period of eight years. Moreover, a variety of other examples of grassroots' organising in the Bangladeshi countryside can be mentioned, showing that the peasantry has not buried its history of activism, but is keen to defend its class interests whenever and wherever the opportunity arises.

7. Unfortunately, however, the country's contemporary political culture is highly unfavourable to emancipatory initiatives from below. Whereas in the early 1970s socialism, as stated, held ideological hegemony, - today the main political parties competing for influence among the public are all four decidedly bourgeois; each of them supports the 'free' market ideology, and each accepts the dominance of the US and other Northern powers over the Bangladesh economy. The change in political climate is nowhere more evident than in the erosion of secularism within established politics. Under the pressure of *Maulana* Bhashani, then the party's president, the Awami League in the 1950s had agreed to drop the denomination 'Muslim' from the party's name, and the principle of secularism was also incorporated in Bangladesh's constitution, in 1972. Yet since the Awami League under Mujib's daughter Sheikh Hasina returned to power in 1996, the party has done very little to re-

affirm the separation between state-politics and Muslim religion, or to confront Muslim fundamentalism. Some of its own longterm activists admit that the party is walking backwards and belies its own history.

8. What then is the way forward for Bangladesh's Leftist forces? One of the essential conditions for the re-assertion of a socialist hegemony within the country's politics is that those engaged in grassroots' organising do some rethinking regarding the role of intellectuals, and in particular of *rural* intellectuals. Traditional and non-traditional rural intellectuals have throughout much of the twentieth century had a decisive influence on the country's political evolution. Thus, Muslim religious functionaries in the 1930s and 1940s helped the Muslim League gain the sympathy of the peasantry for the idea of a separate state of Pakistan. Again, primary school teachers in the fifties did much to spread Bhashani's message of a secular nationalism to the remotest villages of East Bengal. These instances of public-opinion building in the countryside of East Bengal can well be analysed *via* the views of the Italian Marxist thinker Antonio Gramsci. Gramsci's thesis eg. on the formation of a '*historic bloc*' after all was closely related to his conception of the role of intellectuals. Yet a critical analysis of the impact of *public opinion-building* by Bengal's rural intellectuals has, to my knowledge, been lacking so far.

9. Secondly, Bangladesh's Left forces, more particularly those small political parties belonging to the *Left Democratic Front*, still carry the burden of Marxist orthodoxy, hampering a true understanding of economic and social realities. One instance in mind is the issue of common property resources. Since the 1980s, major efforts have been underway, by the World Bank and Western imperialist countries, to build *enclosures*, in the form of polder-like areas surrounded by embankments with inlets and outlets to regulate the flow of water for irrigation. These schemes entail privatisation of a natural resource, i.e. water, that in the past used to be commonly owned. As the Russian anarchist writer Peter Kropotkin so penetratingly explained in his two-volume study of the French revolution, - the issue of common property is a class issue, which often pits poor peasants against rural property-owners. Yet most of Bangladesh's Left forces seem to be only remotely aware of the significance which the struggle for the maintenance of the commons has, both for the immediately survival of landless and landpoor peasant families, and for our own ideas on socialism!

10. Again, although the second feminist wave has not left progressive women in South Asia unaffected, although this wave has in fact led to a *hausse* of feminist-inspired studies on the labouring conditions faced by peasant women and by female workers employed in garment-

factories and other industries in Bangladesh and India, - among established Left parties in Bangladesh there still exists a striking unwillingness to admit the need for a transformation of orthodox Marxist ideology. Marx skipped domestic labour when trying to build a holistic economic theory, but when one says that this is a reflection of patriarchal ideology, one is decried as a heretic! Yet one of the reasons why Western-financed non-governmental organisations have been able to gather so much social influence in Bangladesh is their ideology of women's emancipation. The militant work of the *Kisani Sabha* in the 1990s has brought out how superficial the ideology of (most) NGOs is: structural violence against women remains all-pervasive inspite of numerous NGO-programmes. Still, in order to make sure that the gains scored by the *Kisani Sabha* are not just temporary, a transformation of Leftist ideology at national level is required.

11. Bangladesh is a predominantly Muslim country with an extraordinary history. One of its characteristics is the intermingling of religions at the level of folk culture, i.e. syncretism. Therefore, religious tolerance is deeply embedded in the country's history. In the fifties of the last, the 20th century, these secular feelings were translated into a political program by the towering figure of *Maulana* Bhashani, a Muslim theologian who opposed the misuse of Islamic religion by the Pakistani state. In combining his message of secular nationalism with the propagation of socialism, *Maulana* Bhashani created a groundswell of activism and Leftist thinking which until today reverberates in the villages and towns of Bangladesh. At the level of national politics, as stated above, bourgeois ideas propagated through the media have taken over ideological hegemony from socialism. Yet below the surface, in particular in the country's villages, the influence of Bhashani's socialist ideas remains very strong. The *Maulana's* impact as a public opinion-builder has been so enormously large, that even a quarter century after his death it continues to be sheer impossible for Bangladesh's ruling class to formally disown him.

12. The way forward for Bangladesh's Leftist forces, in short, lies in a combination of basically two things. It lies in revival *plus* renovation. Alongside all the painstaking work of organising landless peasants and oppressed labourers at grassroots' level, there needs to be a *renaissance*, a revival of public opinion-building by traditional and non-traditional intellectuals around the ideas of secularism, progressive nationalism and socialism which Bhashani and his Leftist allies propagated in the 1950s and 1960s, and which Bangladesh's present elite is abandoning in the most shameless manner. That struggle for cultural revival, surely, cannot simply be a repetition of history, but necessarily needs to be combined with a critical re-assessment and renovation of the ideas which hold sway amongst the Old Left. Lastly, a new, imaginative campaign of '*pro-Bhashani forces*' will not only be crucial for the struggles of the oppressed in Bangladesh itself, but will clearly have an international significance, for it can contribute largely towards a revived interest in socialist ideals in other parts of the Muslim world too.

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