

MAULANA BHASHANI – REKNOWNED POLITICO-RELIGIOUS LEADER IN THE HISTORY OF BANGLADESH

November 17, 2001. Many thousands of people have gathered to commemorate the death anniversary of Bangladesh's most reknowned theologian-politician, *Maulana* Abdul Hamid Khan Bhashani, who died twenty-five years ago, in 1976. The venue of the event is Santosh in Tangail District, where Bhashani used to live and founded an Islamic university. Amongst those attending the commemoration gathering are not just family members and former associates sharing his political beliefs. Amongst the audience are prominent politicians belonging to different parliamentary parties, large numbers of peasant men and women from villages in Santosh's surroundings, as well as many religious followers who consider Bhashani to be a Muslim saint, a *pir*. The commemoration meeting thus brings out well that Bhashani continues to be highly popular in today's Bangladesh. Although the state has never given him official recognition for the fact that he made a crucial contribution towards the East Bengal people's struggle for national selfdetermination and liberation, Bhashani's heritage indeed is thriving and alive.

Maulana Bhashani was known to be both a very pious religious leader and an astute politician, but his style of living and working methods differed radically from those of the average Bengali politician then and now. Bhashani reached the status of East Bengal's most respected political leader when he was elected to be the Muslim League's president in the late 1940s, shortly after the incorporation of East Bengal as a province of the newly formed state of Pakistan. Yet through subsequent decades and until his death he continued to live as an ordinary peasant. His 'residence' was a hut covered by a straw roof, he frequently wore a *lungi** when speaking at mass gatherings in Dhaka, and he very regularly went around visiting villages in the area near his home. Bhashani's knowledge regarding agricultural practices and fisheries was truly legendary. People living in Tangail's *chars** recall how he once instructed professional fishermen in the way to catch a big fish, employing a spear (*sharki*) with great dexterity.

The significance of Bhashani's legacy for contemporary Bangladesh becomes readily apparent, once the problem of the desecularisation be raised, i.e. the erosion of secular values under the country's present political system. When Bangladesh was founded as an independent state, in 1971, the country's constitution enshrined the principle of *secularism*, meaning that the new state would maintain a policy of neutrality vis-à-vis the various religions practiced by the country's population. Today, however, both of Bangladesh's main parliamentary parties, the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) and the Awami League, make use of Muslim-religious symbols in order to attract the electorate, some 90 percent of whom are Muslims. In the case of the Awami League, which ruled from 1996 til 2001, this is particularly saddening, since the party half a century ago was founded with the very purpose of promoting secular politics in the then East Bengal. Maulana Bhashani, who was the party's president, personally advised that the Awami League should uphold secularism!

Everywhere in Bangladesh one encounters monuments to commemorate the martyrs of the language movement, the cultural movement for recognition of Bengali language which preceded the struggle for Bangladesh's political independence. These monuments, the '*shaheed minar*', were erected to honour the students who were killed by the Pakistani police

when, in February of the year 1952, they demanded that Bengali be given the status of a state-religion, at par with other languages of Pakistan. Shortly before the language movement reached its peak in a people's uprising, the Pakistani authorities had proclaimed a prohibition on the holding of peaceful demonstrations. While urban politicians were bogged down in discussions as to whether the authorities' ban should be observed, Bhashani, who at the time was well respected as aged politician, was one of those politicians who unreservedly supported the students. While the Pakistani state privileged Urdu as '*Islamic language*', the Muslim theologian Maulana Bhashani gave full backing to the demand that Bengali be recognized as one of Pakistan's national languages.

Another memorable event in the history of Bhashani's career as secular religio-political leader is the *Kagmari* Conference, held in the year 1957. One of the themes of the given Conference was that of religious tolerance. Maulana Bhashani delivered a speech in which he specifically discussed the religious contradictions between the subcontinent's Hindu and Muslim communities. He argued that Hindus, Buddhists and Christians owned East Bengal as much as did the province's Muslim population. In order to highlight the fact that *syncretism*, the intermingling of religions, was rooted in the traditional culture of Bengal, prominent writers and poets were invited to present their vision at the *Kagmari* Conference. So were musical groups representing the province's folk culture, including singers of the songs of *Lalan Shah*, a key mystical figure in nineteenth century rural Bengal. Because Bhashani's *Kagmari* Conference so clearly celebrated Bengal's syncretic folk culture, the event continues to bear large significance for contemporary Bangladesh.

The mystical writer-poet Rabindranath Tagore who as first Asian citizen obtained the Nobel prize for his literary achievements, is often considered to be the very embodiment of Bangladesh's culture. Undoubtedly, Tagore is unequalled in having offered an expression for the emotions and moods of his countrymen and –women. During the decade of the fifties of the last century, Pakistan's government banned Tagore's songs from performances at the country's state radio, because it considered his songs to be contrary to 'Islamic principles'. The theologian Maulana Bhashani fiercely protested this government decision. He was personally very fond of Tagore songs, and made sure that landless peasants were enabled to cite Tagore poems at Conferences he organised. When the authorities of Pakistan pronounced their boycott of Tagore songs, Bhashani wrote an open letter protesting the decision, thus inspiring others to wage resistance against the Islamic state.

Maulana Bhashani did not just voice his view on secularism domestically, in his province of East Bengal, but equally did so internationally, at Conferences staged in Europe and in Japan. As early as in the 1950s, Bhashani achieved the stature of a progressive religious thinker at the world level, when he was invited to address a peace conference held in Sweden's capital, Stockholm. The speech which he held on this occasion was printed in full in one of Sweden's daily newspapers. Bhashani expressed as his point of view the need for a clearcut separation between religion and politics, between statecraft and the performance of religious rituals. Again, when addressing the world peace conference, held in Tokyo, Japan, in 1964, he criticised those 'forces bent on *misusing* religion for political ends'. He opined that all efforts should be made to counter such 'exploitation', arguing that those who are sincerely religious will never agree to promote contradictions between people belonging to different religious communities.

Although his commitment towards secularism within the framework of Islam runs like a red thread through his life, there are moments in his political career when Maulana Bhashani felt obliged to take recourse to religious practices, in order to protect his supporters

against possible repression by the state. This was the case, for instance, during the 1968-1969 explosion of people's anger against the military dictatorship of Pakistan's ruler, Ayub Khan. The wellknown Pakistani revolutionary, Tariq Ali, witnessed how Bhashani gave guidance to the uprising in East Bengal. In the course of the rising, Bhashani staged a mass gathering in the centre of Dhaka. The police intervened and tried to disperse the thousands-strong crowd. When it failed in its attempts, the Pakistani army appeared on the spot and threatened to open fire. At this very moment of danger for the safety of the public, Bhashani raised his hands and uttered the sacred words '*Allah Akbar*', gesticulating that he was to initiate an Islamic prayer service. In thus giving a religious twist to the political protest, Bhashani pre-empted a bloodbath. Many of those who had meanwhile fled felt sufficiently safe to return to the place where Bhashani and others were kneeled down, facing Ayub Khan's soldiers.

The rising against military dictatorship formed the immediate precursor to the 1971 war for the independence of Bangladesh. Mujibur Rahman who ruled in the first post-independence period, from 1972 til 1975, is generally ascribed with having played the chief role in the drama of the country's independence struggle, while it is often overlooked that Maulana Bhashani made a *decisive* contribution towards the same struggle as public opinion builder. During the decade of the 1950s, in particular, he was the most farsighted politician of the East Bengal province, questioning leaders who tended to compromise on the demand for selfdetermination, in exchange for lucrative posts in Pakistan's central government. Meanwhile, Bhashani took the campaign for a secular Bengali nationalism to the remotest corners of the province. In a prophetic speech held in 1955, he threatened that the Bengali people would say farewell, '*Pakistan Assalamu Alaykum*', if the government would not give in to the autonomy-demand. Lastly, Bhashani's championship of secularism is particular noteworthy at a time, when both Khaleda Zia's BNP and Hasina's Awami League have patently failed to consistently uphold the cause of religious tolerance and secularism.

Dr.Peter Custers
Director
Bangladesh People's Solidarity Centre (BPSC)
P.O.Box 40066
1009 BB Amsterdam
The Netherlands
Tel/Fax: 00.31.20.6937681
Email: bpsc@xs4all.nl

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* a *lungi* is a long loincloth worn from the waist downwards by Bengali men;

** *chars* are lowlying areas along rivers and along the sea.