

"...it is both easy and profitable to say what the authority that might want us to say. Bhashani had the inner strength and understanding to say 'no' not only to the rulers but also to the very system of capitalism that has been ruling over us. This no-saying was radical, and was not in negative in character because behind it laid a very positive vision of a democratic state and society. It is because of this ability to stand up, if necessarily alone against the wrongness of the system that made him different from other political leaders. Nurul Kabir has done an excellent job in showing us the Moulana's great Commitment and capacity to oppose the oppressors of the people. I congratulate him and warmly recommend his book to all who are interested in knowing the Moulana and the struggle of our people for emancipation."

—Serajul Islam Chowdhury, Professor emeritus  
University of Dhaka

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THE RED MOULANA • NURUL KABIR

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# THE RED MOULANA

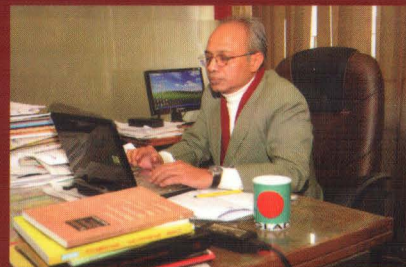
AN ESSAY ON BHASHANI'S EVER-OPPOSITIONAL  
DEMOCRATIC SPIRIT

NURUL KABIR

"...During times when the politics of convenience prevails, when political practitioners exchange ideology, if they have any at all, for material gain at the blink of an eye, when they find it politically convenient not to protest against autocratic decisions within their party or against the undemocratic activities of party bosses, when, on top of these, they refuse to stand by the suffering of the toiling millions, it is most important that the democratically oriented sections of a society work towards a revival of the oppositional spirit—social, political and intellectual. Without providing effective opposition to the forces of un-democracy, without putting up public resistance against exploitation of the politically weaker classes, the democratization of society and state is well-nigh impossible. It is in this light that the Moulana's life and his lifelong struggle remains a source of inspiration for all those who are committed to the democratic transformation of society and state, and thus ensure the democratic emancipation of people in general—both in Bangladesh and beyond."

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Cover Design by Sabyasachi Hazra



Nurul Kabir, the editor of the New Age, a Dhaka-based English-language national daily and the Budhbar, a Bangla weekly, is known for upright journalism and bold views on issues relating to democratic transformations of society and the state. Born in Munshiganj in November 1960, Kabir received a master's degree in English from the University of Dhaka in 1983. He also received a Bachelor of Law degree from the University of Dhaka in 1984. Besides, he has studied advanced journalism in the United Kingdom's Wales-based Thomson Foundation in 1988 and he was awarded Jefferson Fellowship by the United States' Hawaii based East-West Centre in 2004.

Before he took up the profession of journalism in late 1990, Kabir was a leftwing political activist. He had an active role in forming the Students' Committee of Action for democracy in 1983 that played a decisive role in fighting against the martial-law regime in the eighties.

Nurul Kabir's first book, titled Ganatantrik Mukti Andolon: Manusher Srijonsheel Utthan Prosonge, in Bangla, appeared in 1991. Meanwhile, he has published a number of essays in different newspapers and journals at home and abroad, and presented research papers at a good number of national, regional and international seminars.

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### ***The Red Moulana***

*An essay on Bhashani's ever-oppositional democratic spirit*

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For

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The late Fazlul Haque Khan,  
my father and first teacher,  
who taught me very early  
in my life to protest  
against social  
injustice.

**Writers are really people who write books not because they are poor, but because they are dissatisfied with the books which they could buy but do not like.**

**– Walter Benjamin**

## Acknowledgment

I wrote an essay on Moulana Bhashani's 'ever-oppositional democratic spirit' for an international seminar on the great politician held in New York in December 2010. The USA-based Moulana Bhashani Foundation organized the seminar. The seminar over, the leaders of the Foundation resolved to publish a book—a collection of the essays presented at the seminar addressing different dimensions of the Moulana's life and works. The decision provided me with the opportunity to research further on the Moulana's oppositional democratic activism. The essay got longer. Understandably, the Bhashani Foundation had a positive role in making me do the necessary research and write down the long essay within a specific timeframe. I thank the Foundation.

My scholarly friend Professor Rahnuma Ahmed, who is always of great help in any intellectual endeavor, has indebted me not only by reading the essay and giving valuable comments on the work, but also by taking the trouble to technologically fix the endnotes and references despite her very busy schedule. Mir Ashfaquzzaman, a lovely colleague of mine, the deputy editor of New Age, the daily newspaper that I edit, took the trouble of doing the first editing of the essay. I express my gratitude to Zaman, as I fondly call him.

After I sent the essay to Dr. Anis Chowdhury, the editor of the proposed collection of essays on Moulana Bhashani, I thought of working more on the Moulana's ever-oppositional political spirit, an essential component of people's struggle within an undemocratic political and economic environ for democratizing society and the state, which is badly missing in Bangladesh these days. So, I further worked on the subject. The essay got longer, again. Finally, I serialized the essay in New Age

in 13 installments between November 14 and 26 of 2011 for the paper's readership. The published essay drew the attention of Zonayed Saki, a leading official of the left-progressive publishing house, Samhati Prakashon, who felt it politically important to publish the work in a book form. I complied happily. Hence the book. I whole-heartedly thank Saki for the initiative.

My sincere thanks also go to Tarik Ahsan, a respected colleague, an associate editor of New Age, who is known as the 'English Sahib' of Dhaka journalism, for he took the final look at the manuscript.

Professor Serajul Islam Chowdhury, the Dhaka-based leftwing public intellectual of subcontinental repute, has kindly written the foreword of the book, understandably in his great admiration for the great Moulana and also, as I would like to believe, for the great affection that he has for me—a worthless student that he taught in Dhaka University. I am extremely grateful to my magnanimous teacher.

Last but not least, my gratitude goes to Fauzia Sultana, my wife, partner and sensitive anchor in my otherwise unworldly life, who, other than providing me with moral support in the times of difficulties, has always helped me work freely—uninterrupted particularly by household duties.

## Foreword

Moulana Abdul Hamid Khan Bhashani was unique in many respects. He was a political activist who had never allowed himself any respite in his political struggle since the age of 14 till he died at 91. And unlike most political leaders of our region, he was more than a politician; he was indeed a statesman with a dream to which his commitment was unflinching. Bhashani's interest was not in gaining power for himself or his party; he did not work for electoral success, his dream was of a social revolution. That is precisely where he travelled beyond the other political leaders we have known. But his greatness is not as visible as that of others. It cannot be measured in terms of concrete achievements; he remains present behind the progress we as a people have made. In this short book Nurul Kabir has done a job that was necessary, not only to understand the greatness of the Moulana but also to have a view of the history to which we Bengalis belong in making of which the Moulana played a role worthy of attention and examination.

Abdul Hamid Khan's circumstances were unpromising. He was born in a lower middle-class peasant family in East Bengal. By the time he was 9 he had lost his parents, and had neither any substantial property nor a guardian to fall back on. As an orphan he was obliged to fend for himself; but he refused to give in. At 14 he joined a group of underground armed activists fighting against British colonial rule.

While retaining his faith till the last days of his life in the necessity of force to overthrow the existing politico-social system, he did not take long to turn to the politics of mass movement, and continued to rise in eminence because of his commitment and qualities of leadership. During the Pakistan regime he became an international figure, travelling to many



countries in Asia, Europe, Africa and Latin America and establishing personal contact with the principal socialist leaders of his time. Nevertheless, all his life his permanent address was the hut in the village where he was born. There was nothing artificial in him or about him. He was born to be a leader, and he lived as he was born, among the common men. But he did not idealize poverty; all his life he struggled to achieve the emancipation of working class from their bondage of oppression and deprivation. Moulana's total commitment to a social revolution never failed him. He remained true to it all along his political life of 77 years. And it was his unwavering stand that made many of his erstwhile friends his enemies. He was the founding president of the East Pakistan Awami Muslim League, and it was at his initiative that the party gave up its communal vestige of Muslim and became the Awami League. Forming a united front, Bhashani worked with Suhrawardy and Fazlul Haq in 1954 to bring down the provincial government of Muslim League. He was successful; and that success made it possible for both Suhrawardy and Fazlul Haq to serve under civil-military bureaucracy of the central government, the sworn enemy of the Bengalis. But he remained where he was ? with the public. When, on an invitation from the socialist leaders, he went to Europe to attend a peace conference, Iskandar Mirza, who had taken over the post of Governor of East Pakistan, declared Bhashani to be an enemy of the state and that he would arrange to have Bhashani killed the moment Bhashani landed at the Dhaka airport. Well, Bhashani did come back to Dhaka, and it was Mirza who was thrown out of Pakistan by Ayub Khan after a military take-over. But the story of state hostility to the Moulana did end there. The next attack came from Suhrawardy, the leader of Awami League, the party that Bhashani had organized and popularized; he found himself unable to stay in the Awami League because of Suhrawardy's pro-American foreign policy and refusal to concede autonomy to East Pakistan. With the support of the leftist and left-leaning political activists in both wings of Pakistan, Bhashani formed the National Awami Party (NAP), which, Suhrawardy was prompt in calling Nehru-Aided Party, and the *Ittefaq*, the paper the Moulana had set up, went to the extent of finding in him an 'Indian agent' That, incidentally,

was how Suhrawardy himself was initially described by the Pakistani rulers. The circle had taken its full turn.

During those fateful days of Bhashani's departure from the Awami League, Sheikh Mujib was with Suhrawardy, deserting Bhashani. And an instance of historical irony was created when Mujib himself had to come round to demanding full autonomy for East Pakistan and also to include in his Election Manifesto of 1970 the pledge to establish socialism, the two demands for which Bhashani had to part company with the Awami League leadership. The Moulana had not changed, the two leaders of the Awami League had.

When Mujib was put on trial by Ayub Khan in the hatched-up Agartala Conspiracy Case, an occurrence that brought Mujib popularity together with taking near the gallows, it was Bhashani who led the public movement that got Mujib released. Yet it is also a matter of historical record that only a few days after his release Mujib had publicly said that Bhashani should retire from politics in consideration of his old age.

Even the whole of his new party, the NAP, which was gaining popularity in both parts of Pakistan, did not stay with him. When the party was split on pro-Peking and pro-Moscow lines, the pro-Peking group took him as their leader, with the other group turning against him. But in their new-fangled ultra-leftist enthusiasm, some of pro-Peking leaders went in for the politics of Naxalite violence, and a section of them called him a CIA agent, an appellation the Muscovites had been inclined to add to the Moulana's name.

The momentous people's uprising of 1969 was the creation of Moulana Bhashani. It would have gone farther ahead, had the leftists worked with him. Instead they dismantled their public fronts, went underground, and, in consequence, not only lost a great moment but also isolated themselves from the public. The Moulana remained, as before, committed to a social revolution through mass mobilization. Much to their regret, some of the ultra-leftists had realized their mistake at hindsight, but it was no longer possible for them to capture the opportunity they had lost.

Bhashani was a nationalist, and his nationalism was of the entire people, and not class-oriented. While in Assam he stood for

the cause of the Bengalis, protesting against their ill-treatment by the Assam government and wanted the two nationalities ? the Ahamias and the Bengalis ? to live and work together. His faith was in linguistic nationalism, contradistinguished from religious nationalism. He had pinned his hope on the Lahore Resolution's dispensation of an Eastern region comprising Bengal and Assam. This he had seen as a viable entity ? geographically as well as economically. His vision of Pakistan as a state belonging to the people was entirely different from the bourgeois state Jinnah had visualized. In his inaugural speech to the Pakistan Constituent Assembly Jinnah had spoken of creating a democratic secular state. But he was unable to stick to his view; he tried to impose Urdu as the state language on the East Pakistanis who constituted 56 percent of the population and began to promote political Islam as a bulwark against Communism. As a democratic Bengali nationalist Bhashani took up the cause of the Bengali language and headed the All-party Committee of Action set up to secure recognition of Bengali as one of the state languages.

Time and again the Moulana had been arrested and put behind bars by his enemy, the ruling class. Thus, during his stay in Assam he had suffered imprisonment as many as three times. As he came to East Pakistan the enemy continued to hound him. In 1949, while leading a hunger march he was put in prison and kept there for 14 months. In jail he met many of the communist leaders and having had discussions with them he was confirmed in his opposition to capitalism. During Ayub's martial law regime he remained under house arrest for as many as four years. In 1971, the genocidal Pakistani army went to his village home to arrest him. In all likelihood, they would have killed him; for they had known him to be the most uncompromising among the leaders. Moreover, with Mujib in custody, the Moulana was the real political threat to them. Minutes before the army had reached his home, the Moulana, with his uncanny power of perception, saw what was coming and left his dwelling without any preparation and companion. The river Jamuna, which he knew so well, was about three miles away. He walked all the way, took a boat, collected two of his political followers en route and arrived at the Assam border. While in India he was under surveillance of

the Indian government, who were apprehensive that the Moulana might revive his old demand of an independent Eastern Region, comprising Bengal and Assam. The Moulana, however, did not cause any embarrassment the host government, he did not even complain of his virtual incarceration; instead he issued a long statement to the press condemning the atrocities of the Pakistani hordes, sent telegrams to world leaders including those of China, urging them to support the liberation war. And when the newly-formed Bangladesh government in exile needed his help in securing international attention and help, he readily agreed to act as the chief of an advisory committee put up with leaders of non-Awami League political parties. Although the committee met only once, it was useful in signifying to the world at large as well as to the Indians and the Bengalis that the Bengalis were fighting a united war of national liberation.

Things did not go well in Bangladesh after liberation, and when Bhashani began to protest, which was natural for him to do, he was interned in his village home for some time.

Bhashani was elected to the Assam Provincial Legislative Assembly in 1937, and the East Bengal Legislative Assembly in 1948. In both Assemblies he had been outspoken in favour of the people's cause. But it did not take him long to realize how hollow and ineffective the Assembly debates were, and he promptly resigned from the East Bengal Assembly. Never again did he contest for an elective position. Nevertheless, he worked wholeheartedly for defeating the Muslim League in the 1954 provincial election.

Again, when the combined opposition was set up to support Fatima Jinnah's candidature against the military dictator Ayub Khan, Bhashani joined the campaign. In 1970 the NAP, under Bhashani's leadership, did not take part in the first-ever national election. Presumably, the reasons were two. Firstly, he wanted the slogan of food before vote that he had raised to reach the people; and secondly, because he wanted East Pakistan to give an undivided verdict in favour of independence, he was unwilling to create a division by NAP's participation. Many of the hopefuls within the party were disappointed as were the West Pakistani leftists and representatives of minority provinces, who had found

him as their leader and spokesman.

The Moulana was born to be a leader. He had courage, commitment, wisdom and charisma. He knew the urges, temper and language of the people. Bhashani was an extraordinary speaker, but in no way a demagogue. He roused the public and gave them ideas to think about. Of course he used rhetoric, but his rhetoric was not designed to cover up hollowness within; for he was never hollow. The West Pakistan left-leaning leaders were happy to have him as their chief and were disappointed when they lost him in 1970. In the last council meeting of the NAP, held at Dhaka, prominent West Pakistani members of the party wept feeling that the meeting was also a parting.

All his life he had fought for the emancipation of the toiling masses; and he had done what no other leader in East Bengal had done before. With his personal initiative he had set up a labour federation and a peasants' association. He had helped the fishermen and rickshawpullers to get themselves organized, politically. When the communist workers found it necessary to set up at Calcutta a coordinating committee for their struggle to liberate Bangladesh, they could look up to no one other than Bhashani to be its chief, although the Moulana was unable to join them physically because of restrictions put on his movement.

Moulana state believed in going to the public as often as he could. He toured, lectured, organized meetings, processions, marches and hartals. He had founded two weeklies ? the *Ittefaq* and the *Haq Katha*, wrote pamphlets and addressed press conferences. His interest in culture was impressive. Those who knew him intimately have heard him humming songs from Rabindranath Tagore after his morning prayers. While he was in Assam he had organized a conference of writers and journalists; and complementary to the Kagmari Council session of the Awami League, he had convened a cultural conference for the benefit of the delegates and the villagers.

Sir Saadullah, who had once been the chief minister of Assam, said that a single Moulana is good enough to pull three Pakistans down. True, Saadullah was being rhetorical, but his words contained the truth that Bhashani was a real foe to the enemy of the people. He had been painted in many hues, not all

of them complimentary. The Western press has called him a prophet of violence. That, however, is not a fair description of the great man. If anything, he was a prophet of revolution, and he knew that a revolution could not be imposed from above, it has come from below and also that it would come, when it did, through mass uprising and that the vote would never beget a revolution. If was, therefore, only natural that he would be opposed to political negotiation with the ruling class.

Negotiations, he felt, was sometimes a trap and almost always a camouflage. Events in our political history have proved how correct he was. He believed in mass movement. It was not uncharacteristic of him that months before his death, Bhashani would lead the Farakka Long March, knowing, as he did, that the intransigent Indian rulers would not listen to the voice of Bangladesh unless backed up by proper demonstration of mass mobilization.

He has been a role model for public leaders and a challenge not only to the oppressors of the people but also to their leaders. Bhashani has been, and will remain, a measure against whom the real worth of the political leaders could be measured.

In the culture and circumstances we live in, it is both easy and profitable to say what the authority that might be want us to say. Bhashani had the inner strength and understanding to say 'no' not only to the rulers but also to the very system of capitalism that has been ruling over us. This no-saying was radical, and was not in negative in character because behind it laid a very positive vision of a democratic state and society. It is because of this ability to stand up, if necessarily alone against the wrongness of the system that made him different from other political leaders. Nurul Kabir has done an excellent job in showing us Moulana Bhashani's great commitment and capacity to oppose the oppressors of the people. I congratulate him and warmly recommend his book to all who are interested in knowing the Moulana and the struggle of our people for emancipation.

Dhaka  
Serajul Islam Choudhury  
December 14, 2011

## Preface

The people at large create history through ceaseless political struggles. For the people's political struggles to succeed, and thus create new chapters of history, they need political leaders committed to their cause. The people, therefore, choose their leaders from among those, who are always in the forefront of such struggles with unflappable commitment, and who are courageous and consistent in putting up organized resistance against anti-people forces.

Bangladesh was created in 1971 through a bloody War of Liberation, fought primarily by the people, following a series of political struggles against the neo-colonial civil and military regimes of Pakistan then. A number of leaders played significant roles in different phases of those struggles and the war, but not all of them lived up to the expectations of the struggling masses all the time. Of the great leaders contributing to the emergence of an independent Bangladesh, only one remained consistently committed to the democratic causes of the people. The most courageous of these leaders, who was ever ready to organize the people and lead their resistance against various kinds of oppressions and exploitations by various regimes without any compromise, from his early years to his final days, was none other than Moulana Abdul Hamid Khan Bhashani. The Moulana remains the greatest of the political greats who made tremendous contributions to, and enormous sacrifices for, the creation of Bangladesh. The country, which has been undergoing difficult political, economic and cultural situation for quite some time now, badly needs the revival of the Moulana's fighting democratic spirit.

The reason is simple. Bangladesh has not yet fulfilled its promises as regards the political, economic and cultural

aspirations of the people who actively took part in the political struggle between 1948 and 1970 and finally the armed struggle during the War of Liberation in 1971. Successive governments, civil and military, and their service intellectuals, are primarily to blame for the failure.

An objective analysis of the people's struggle in question clearly shows that the people had clear political, economic and cultural objectives behind the creation of Bangladesh. Political victims of the tyrannical civil and military regimes of the Pakistani ruling oligarchy, the people of the then East Pakistan fought for democracy, the multi-party representative democracy, in which competing political forces would be able to debate and discuss issues of public interests in different public forum without any fear of state reprisal. Victims of economic disparity, the people of the Eastern wing fought for an egalitarian economic system committed to equitable distribution of 'national' resources. In order to oppress those democratic movements of the people, the autocratic regimes of Pakistan regularly used religion by projecting Islam and Pakistan as synonymous. The bitter experience made the people of Bangladesh aspire for a secular state, committed to the separation of religion from politics.

The successive governments of Bangladesh-the country's ruling classes in other words-have failed miserably to meet all those political, economic and cultural aspirations of the people that inspired them to fight for the independence of Bangladesh. Instead, the ruling classes, organized under various political parties and organizations, have imposed on the people a kind of two-party political system, which could at best be called electoral autocracy, and has been frequently interrupted by military interventions. On the economic front, the successive governments, civil or military, have pursued unbridled market economy, within the framework of neo-liberal economic order, which is indifferent to the economic wellbeing of the ordinary masses. Culturally, the mainstream political parties of the ruling classes have drifted far away from the secular ideologies, with one camp nurturing Bengali chauvinism and the other celebrating Muslim identity, while the both using religion as and when necessary for their parochial partisan purposes.



Under these circumstances, the people of Bangladesh need to wage fresh movements to realize what they had fought for which the successive governments have deliberately acted against—a truly representative democracy, an egalitarian economic system and a secular political culture devoid of religious communalism. For that to happen, the people have been left with no option but to successfully fight against the imperialist 'neo-liberal political and economic order', its godfathers of the west and their local collaborators—political, economic and cultural. The local collaborators are those who pursue and patronize the political, economic and cultural manifestations of the imperialist globalization-unbridled market economy which aims at maximizing profit, market democracy which is nothing but an oligarchy of the rich few that denies the democratic rights of the poor millions, and a lumpen culture that perpetually seeks to legitimize the political oppression and economic exploitation of the people in general. Needless to say, all the contemporary major political parties of Bangladesh, and their minor partners in and outside the power, the left and the right included, are guilty of collaborating directly or indirectly with the forces of neo-liberal imperialist globalization of the day. Thus, the new struggles for realizing the people's spirit of Liberation War must aim at defeating the dominant political forces of the day, which is indeed a challenging task.

To accomplish a challenging political mission in a new political circumstance, the people need leader/s committed to the cause of the people and ready to take up the challenge courageously. In other words, the people in their difficult times need Moulana Bhashanis. While there are leaders still fighting for the cause of the people, none of them is like Bhashani. However, the fighting people have always created Bhashanis across the world, and the Bhashanis have led the struggles to their logical conclusions, creating new chapters of history. Maybe, the people would create, or discover a new Bhashani, from among those fighting with them, and for them, today. Meanwhile, for one aspiring to be a Bhashani, s/he must be aware of what makes an ordinary rural man an undisputed leader of the people of his/her country and beyond. The Red Moulana is a humble attempt to

introduce Bhashani's ever-oppositional political spirit dedicated to the democratic causes of the people at large.

However, The Red Moulana is not a biography. Moulana Bhashani's was a long life, from 1885 to 1979, and he was involved with the people and their struggles of various kinds. A fighter against colonialism, neo-colonialism, and electoral autocracy throughout his life, Bhashani organized and led many struggles against vested interest groups—political, economic and cultural, fought against various repressive regimes—civil and military, waged ideological struggles against anti-people trends and components within his organizations and outside, forged alliance with a large number of organizations at various phases of history and dismantled them as and when necessary for public cause, founded many newspapers—dailies and weeklies, established many organizations—beginning from night schools for illiterate adults to colleges for knowledge-seeking youths, et cetera. Besides, he interacted with politicians and intellectuals—local and foreign, at home and abroad, written many articles and pamphlets on a wide range of public issues—national and international. Moreover, the moulana endured imprisonment for many years in his long political life. Perhaps, a lifelong scholastic research by an individual would not be enough to write a complete biography of the great Moulana.

I have, therefore, made a humble attempt to highlight only one important dimension of his life—his ever-oppositional democratic spirit, for which, he was reputed to be Red at home and abroad. I have tried to show, referring to relevant documents, how the moulana relentlessly fought against the exploitation of the poor peasants by the zaminders and usurers, against British colonialism, against Pakistani neo-colonialism, against American imperialism, against politics of opportunism, against religious communalism, against military autocracy, against electoral autocracy, against isolated violence, against the curse of public un-education, et cetera. The moulana has always said 'no' to all these enemies of the people, and in all his 'no's remained latent a shining 'yes'—yes to the democratic emancipation of the people at large, irrespective of their faith, gender, ethnicity and colour. Bangladesh, reeling under pervasive conformism for years now,

needs many non-conformists, particularly among politicians and intellectuals, to be freed from the clutches of imperialist neo-liberal political and economic order and its yes-men, and women as well, at home and abroad.

However, until we have a new Bhashani to recreate the history of the people of Bangladesh, the late Bhashani would do. When the living behave like the dead or, in other words, keep silent about oppressive and exploitative political and economic systems, the people aspiring for change need to recall the dead who, when alive, were vocal against such phenomena, to speak out. Hence my humble effort to write and publish *The Red Moulana*. Moulana Bhashani's life and works, I believe, would continue to speak out against all kinds of oppression and exploitation of the people of Bangladesh and beyond. Bhashani, after all, was the people's moulana, while oppressed peasants, exploited workers and toiling masses in general were the moulana's people.

I only hope that the essay would generate among the younger sections of the people, aspiring for democratic transformations of society and the state, some curiosity about the great Moulana. After all, the dominant political parties of the day and their service intellectuals have deliberately buried the history of the Moulana's great democratic struggles, lest it should stand in the way of their exploitative electoral autocracy.

**Nurul Kabir**  
Dhaka, December, 2011

*[T]he [collective consciousness of the] people of any country has never made any mistake. Those who claim that the people may make mistakes due to their illiteracy or ignorance and cannot therefore be relied upon fully, do not really know the people.*

*Moulana Abdul Hamid Khan Bhashani*

*Talks between the oppressor and the oppressed never benefit the latter; it is always the oppressor who wins at the negotiating table... There should, therefore, be no discussion with a tyrant; the people are to realize their legitimate demands through mass movements.*

*Moulana Abdul Hamid Khan Bhashani*

The most important thing in life, particularly for those aspiring to lead it with human dignity, is to learn to say ‘no’—no to social injustice, to economic disparity and to political tyranny; ‘no’ to racial and gender discrimination, to wars of aggression, to unfair temptations, to greed; and so on and so forth. To learn to say ‘no’ remains all the more important for the politicians claiming to be working for democratic emancipation of the people—men and women, black and yellow and white, rich and poor—from all forms of undemocratic social, political, economic and cultural orders that make the beautiful Earth look ugly, and precious life unbearable, to millions across the globe. Understandably, not every individual can say ‘no’ to established order/s, nor do they have the ability to do so—thanks particularly to the political, economic and intellectual constraints inflicted on humanity by the pervasive undemocratic systems ruling the world. But there are some, not in large numbers though, who have said, and still say, ‘no’ to various temptations, in order to save and uphold their human dignity, which, in turn usually contributes to protecting the human dignity of others around them. Of the politicians claiming to have championed the causes of the people, very few

have been seen to have consistently said ‘no’ to the temptations offered by the establishment throughout their life, particularly with a view to protecting and promoting the democratic interests of the people in their countries and beyond. Moulana Abdul Hamid Khan Bhashani (1885–1976) of India, of Pakistan and of Bangladesh, or of the Bangladesh-India-Pakistan sub-continent, is one of the very few who did. ‘No’ to undemocratic orders, be it racial, social, political, economic or cultural, was the main mantra of his political activism throughout his life.

The Moulana said ‘no’ to the British colonial exploitation of the people of India, ‘no’ to the neo-colonial exploitation of the Bengalis by the Pakistani rulers and ‘no’ to the oppression of Bangladesh’s people at large by the Bengali ruling classes. He said ‘no’, consistently and without deviation in his long extraordinary political career to the powers that be—colonial, neo-colonial or nationalist—who refused to serve the democratic causes of the people at large. He even said ‘no’ several times, to the political parties, and the governments of the parties that he belonged to, whenever the parties and governments deviated from the democratic principles as well as the causes of the people. And his ‘no’s were never an empty political rhetoric to bargain for his personal gain, political or material, a tactic that many of his contemporary politicians had employed. A genuine leader of the people, the Moulana’s ‘no’s were always followed by resistance, people’s resistance against vested powers—political or economic. One wonders how he had become such a rebel against injustice since his boyhood and, more importantly, how the Moulana sustained the rebellious spirit to the last day of his long life. The answers lie, at least partly, in his political-intellectual upbringing.

### **Moulana’s political-intellectual upbringing**

While Bhashani’s political-intellectual nationalist positions against imperialism and colonialism took shape between 1907 and 1909 in Deoband Darul Uloom of India, an anti-colonial centre for the study of Islam then,<sup>1</sup> his everlasting commitment to the fight against exploitation of poor peasants, feudal or capitalist,

had its roots in his painfully humble upbringing in rural Bengal.

Born in a farmer's family of Sirajganj of undivided Bengal sometime in the first half of the 1880s,<sup>2</sup> Abdul Hamid, who would later be known in the Bangladesh-India-Pakistan sub-continent and beyond, as Moulana Abdul Hamid Khan Bhashani, had known poverty since his childhood. The second of four siblings, he lost his father when he was less than ten years of age. His mother, two brothers and lone sister died of cholera in his early teens. An orphan, he was provided shelter by his uncle, which, however, he lost soon. Brutally beaten and humiliated by his uncle for his alleged failure to control a herd of cows, the adolescent Bhashani left the shelter for good in 1893. Out in the cold since then, he underwent physical hardship by working as an agricultural day-labourer at that tender age, to earn his livelihood. The difficulties that the orphan Hamid suffered in his childhood, and the miseries and humiliation of the peasants that he witnessed, left a lasting impression on his political psyche for the rest of his life.

“The so-called aristocracy of society struck my mind in childhood. I could never tolerate the idea of class distinction between human beings on the basis of the amount of land they own. My mind wanted to demolish the [class-based] social system, and introduce a new one on the debris of the existing one from the day I came to understand the deliberate and systemic exploitation [of peasants] by the landed aristocracy of zamindars and moneylenders,” says Bhashani.<sup>3</sup> “This is why I joined, in response to the demand of the time, the terrorist movement, Khilafat movement, Congress and the Muslim League, despite the fact that I received primary lessons of life from spiritual leaders like Sufi Saint Shah Nasiruddin Bogdadi in Joleswar of Assam.”<sup>4</sup>

Again, describing the realities that turned him to a political rebel from a spiritual apprentice, the Moulana says: “When I first came to Assam, I had no social or political mission. I came here as a disciple of a *pir* (spiritual leader of Islam). The objective was very simple: serving the *pir*, carrying out his orders in day-to-day life and eating to my heart's content while performing religious rites in the neighbourhood. But as I started mixing with my fellow

disciples, I realized that the world hereafter is far away, while the lives and livelihoods of thousands of human beings are destroyed by the hell of sufferings herein. Subsequently, I got more inclined to life on earth rather than the idea of achieving rewards in heaven. So, I got involved in the resistance against the 'Line System' [against the poor Bengali migrants] and the 'Oust-Bengali' programmes [of the Assamese establishments]. Thus, from being a *mullah*, I turned into a political activist."<sup>5</sup>

Moulana Bhashani went to Deoband, as noted earlier, in 1907 and lived there until 1909. In his Deoband days, he got renowned Deobandis, such as Moulana Mahmudul Hasan, *Shaikhul Hindh*, to train him in the Qur'an and the Hadith. A staunch anti-imperialist, 'Moulana Hasan strongly believed in Hindu-Muslim unity to free India from British rule'.<sup>6</sup> The famous teacher, Moulana Hasan, left a lasting impression on the thought process of the student Abdul Hamid, who would be a famous politician of the sub-continent in the years to come.

Besides, Bhashani got Moulana Azad Sobhani as his political guru. "Moulana Azad Sobhani was a free spirit, outspoken and spokesperson of the oppressed poor. Because of the life which he led, his intellectual activism and public speeches, Indian politicians used to call him a communist. In response, Moulana Sobhani would say, 'Yes, I am a communist, but with Allah.' The erstwhile Communist Party of India used to invite him to address various public meetings and rallies,"<sup>7</sup> writes Professor Muzaffar Ahmed. Moulana Sobhani's intellectual and political activism now appears to have made a lasting impression on Bhashani's intellectual and political thought process.

Bhashani returned to his fatherly patron, Shah Nasiruddin Bogdadi, in Assam in 1909. He brought with him, along with progressive interpretations of Islamic thought which he had learnt from his two years at Darul Ulum, an anti-imperialist and anti-colonial political spirit—courtesy of the political-cultural environment of Deoband of the time. His newly-gained political orientation against imperialism and colonialism, combined with his inherent affection for the toiling masses, made Bhashani a political maverick—the 'red Moulana', to be precise.

However, he remained a practising Muslim throughout his

life. But his Islam, unlike that of many a reactionary variety pursued by Islamically-oriented political parties like, say, the Bangladesh Jamaat-e-Islami, was radical humanist in nature, and that too with an absolutely secular outlook towards the practitioners of other religions. The kind of Islam that Bhashani practised lies in his practice of *Rububiyah*.

*Rububiyah* is an Arabic word that derived from the core word 'Rabb', which in the Qur'an refers to God as *rabb al-alamin*, or the 'Lord of all being', who 'owns everything on earth', in other words *La hu ma fissamawata wa ma fil ard*. Providing a pro-people interpretation of *rububiyah*, Bhashani used to argue that since God is the creator of all human beings and all resources on earth, it is only natural that all human beings, as equal servants of God, have equal rights to all earthly resources.<sup>8</sup> In the modern age, this is nothing but political and economic egalitarianism, which can be ensured only by securing people's access to, and control over, the natural resources of the world.

However, Moulana Abul Kalam Azad of the Congress Party of India interpreted *rububiyah* in his *Tarjuman al-Quran*, as 'providence' and *rabb* as 'nourisher' "Since the need for Nourishment is one of the basic needs of human life, the meaning given to the term *rabb* as Providence or Nourisher may be regarded as a natural first approach to God," argued Moulana Azad.<sup>9</sup> For Bhashani, *rububiyah* was 'service to humanity'

Understandably, the Moulana related his pro-people interpretation of Islam and his anti-colonial as well as anti-imperialist philosophy of politics with his democratic struggles for the masses in general, and the peasants in particular: the peasants were the victims of feudal exploitation by the landed zamindars, while the zamindars were the agents of British colonialism. The struggles for land-rights and economic emancipation of poor peasants from the zamindars, therefore, politically amounted to anti-colonial political movements. The Moulana, thus, combined his Islamic spirit to free the poor peasants from the exploitation of landed interests with the freedom struggle of an entire colonized people against the British regime of the day. The Moulana continued to fight against imperialist interests and traces of colonialism in Pakistan and in



Bangladesh, long after the British colonialists had left the sub-continent in 1947.

### **No to exploitation of peasants**

Naturally, the first political ‘no’ that the Moulana uttered in his youth, even before he joined mainstream politics against British colonialism in 1917, was to the feudal exploitation of the peasantry by the zamindars of Bengal. He became involved with the revolutionary ‘terrorists’ of Bengal in 1909 and resorted to setting ablaze the go-downs [of corns] of the oppressive landed money-lenders and usurers in the northern districts of the then Bengal,<sup>10</sup> writes Syed Abul Maksud. He, however, abandoned the ‘terrorist movements’ which were devoid of mass participation in 1913, and concentrated on putting up organized resistance of the people at large against the zamindars’ feudal exploitation of poor peasants in different areas of Bengal such as Rajshahi, Tangail, Gouripur and Sirajganj.

While protesting against the oppression of peasants by the zamindar of Dhupganj in Rajshahi, Bhashani invited the wrath of the zamindar which put his life at risk. Subsequently, he retreated to Kagmari in Tangail district, which was far from being a heaven for peasants. As he began organizing the resistance of the local peasants against the feudal exploitation of, and the social humiliation inflicted upon, poor peasants by landed maharajas, the influential maharajas of Santosh of Tangail and Gouripur got united to oust him from the area with the assistance of the district administration. Consequently, the district commissioner of Mymensingh officially declared Bhashani *persona non grata* in the district ‘for the sake of keeping law and order in the area’.<sup>11</sup>

Bhashani moved to Pabna. There too, he discovered thousands of peasants were becoming landless—thanks to the systemic exploitation by local zamindars and usurers. He, therefore, began organizing the resistance by poor peasants against the oppressive zamindars of Pabna region. Again, the zamindars and usurers got united against Bhashani and, with the assistance of the British administration in Kolkata, managed to get Bhashani ‘legally’ ousted from the Pabna-Rajshahi region. He

moved to Dinajpur and went underground to get some breathing space for awhile. But, no. Vested quarters did not feel safe with Bhashani around. In 1926, they managed to get the government of Bengal to declare Bhashani *persona non grata*, this time in the entire province.<sup>12</sup> Bhashani was forced to take refuge in Assam, the neighbouring state of colonial India—a place where he had earlier lived for a couple of years.

While in Assam in 1924, he organized an unprecedentedly huge conference of immigrant Bengali peasants at Bhasan Char under Dhubri district of the state. After the grand success of the conference, people started calling him, instead of Moulvi Abdul Hamid Khan, *Bhasaner Maolana* (Moulana of Bhashani), which gradually turned into Moulana Abdul Hamid Khan Bhashani, and finally, Moulana Bhashani. Notably, it was the Assamese Hindus, albeit its poorer sections, who affectionately conferred Bhashani the appellation ‘Moulana’.<sup>13</sup> The incident clearly suggests that poor Hindus of Assam had found in Abdul Hamid Khan a secular person.

However, side by side with the mainstream political struggles for democracy and independence in different political eras in the sub-continent, Bhashani always found it important to separately organize peasants for their political empowerment and economic emancipation, even in the face of stiff resistance from both non-communist and communist colleagues of his parties at different phases of his political life. Bhashani himself wrote in April 1972: “There was no existence of peasant organizations after Pakistan came into being in 1947. I first took the initiative to organize the peasants from Santosh in 1956 and proposed to form Krishak Samity (peasants association). ...My colleagues in the Awami League like Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, Oli Ahad and others objected to the idea on the ground that organizing peasants on the basis of class-struggle would isolate the middle class [from the party]. ... When the country’s first peasant convention was held in January 1958 in Fulchori, the communist leaders of the National Awami Party opposed the idea of forming Krishak Samity on the same pretext that my Awami League colleagues had used a couple of years ago—leaders who came from a middle class background would leave the party. But I stuck to my idea of going ahead with

the Krishak Samity, without caring about the possibility of middle-class leaders quitting the party... Again, after getting out of jail in 1963, I concentrated on rejuvenating the Krishak Samity. Yet again, the communists opposed the idea. But I reorganized the Krishak Samity.”<sup>14</sup>

The Moulana’s commitment to the peasant movement against exploitative landed interests, and his ceaseless political struggle against imperialism, was also evident in the text of the ‘oath’ that he used to administer to hundreds of rural poor in different places when making them his *murids* (religious disciples). Anyone desiring to be his *murid*—hundreds of poor villagers across Bengal and beyond evinced a keen interest—had to take a three-point oath that read “I will abide by the messages of God and His prophet; I will become a member of the Krishak Samity and I will fight against all exploiters and tyrants, zamindars and money-lending usurers, capitalism and imperialism, particularly US imperialism, all my life.”<sup>15</sup>

Notably, the Moulana, who had command over thousands of people at any point of his political life and effectively influenced the country’s political course for more than four decades, always led the life of a poor peasant. “Most of the time he used to live in his house at Santosh, near [the district headquarters of] Tangail. It is better to call it a hut, rather than a house. On one side there was a [couple of] tin-shed rooms, there were another couple of huts made of bamboo on the other side. There was a wooden bed with an old mat on it. He used to sleep on that bed. A stray dog was often seen entering through one door of the hut and getting out through the other. There was hardly any furniture inside the house... Any person could enter his house at any time. The *lungi*-clad Moulana used to sit on a chair in the veranda, with or without a *panjabi* on,” writes Haider Akbar Khan Rono, presently a top ranking leader of the Communist Party of Bangladesh, on the basis of what he himself saw in 1961.<sup>16</sup> “The members of his family also led lives lived by ordinary people in those days. They used to fetch drinking water from the tube wells themselves,” Rono writes on.



Moulana Bhashani addresses the 'red cap' conference of the peasants at Santosh, Tangail in 1970. Photo: Rashid Talukder.

## No to British colonialism

However, although Bhashani had been involved in various kinds of people's movements, it was in 1917 that he entered active politics, inspired particularly after hearing a public speech delivered by the Congress leader Chittaranjan Das in Mymensingh in October that year. Impressed by a secular democratic nationalist like Das, the Moulana involved himself in various Congress activities and became a 'primary member' of the Indian Congress Party in 1919 and devoted himself to 'whole-time politics'.<sup>17</sup> He was also involved with the Khilafat movement launched by the famous Moulana brothers, Mohammad Ali and Shawkat Ali, an anti-colonial movement which secured support from Mahatma Karam Chand Gandhi of the Congress.

Later, in the wake of serious differences of opinion between the Moulana brothers of the Khilafat Movement and the Hindu leadership of the Congress during the party conference held in January 1930, Bhashani left the Congress to join the Muslim League. Moreover, while C. R. Das' nationalist zeal and truly secular democratic political ideology drew Bhashani to the Congress party of the day, Bhashani's political eagerness to free the peasants of Bengal, mostly Muslims by faith, from the feudal exploitation of landed zamindars, mostly Hindus, pushed Bhashani towards Muslim League politics against the British Raj. However, C. R. Das' truly non-communal nationalist spirit and his commitment to the economic emancipation of the poor remained a permanent influence on the Moulana throughout his life. He missed no opportunity to praise C. R. Das' secular, democratic ideals.

While in exile in India during Bangladesh's war of independence in 1971, the Moulana once told Saiful Islam, one of his companions: "Had Deshbandhu (C. R. Das) been alive, Bengal would not have been divided [in 1947]. Deshbandhu used to say that the Muslims are neglected in Bengal. They have to be upgraded. If the two wings of Bengal, Hindus and Muslims, are made equally strong, the struggle for *swaraj* (self-rule) would be strengthened. For that to happen, the Hindus needed to do away with their parochial mindset and undertake sincere efforts

to win the confidence of the Muslims. In order to materialize his thoughts, he kept provisions in his Bengal Pact to provide 80 per cent of all government jobs for the Muslims. Government jobs apart, he provided for the reserved quota by the same ratio for the Muslims in the autonomous bodies like Kolkata Corporation, municipalities, district and local boards. After getting elected to the post of mayor of the Kolkata Corporation, he nominated young barrister Huseyn Shaheed Suhrawdy as deputy mayor, Shubhas Bose as chief executive and Alhaj Abdur Rashid as executive officer of the corporation. Besides, he appointed many Muslim graduates to various important posts of the Kolkata Corporation. Opposition came from various directions. Ismail Hossein Siraji of your Sirajganj initially opposed the idea of the Bengal Pact. Ignoring such opposition, he got the Pact passed in the conference of the provincial congress held in Sirajganj, with Moulana Akram Khan presiding. It is indeed a misfortune for the Muslims and Hindus of Bengal that Deshbondhu passed away [at that phase of history]."<sup>18</sup>

After serving as the acting president of the Muslim League's Assam chapter for four years, the Moulana was eventually elected president of the Assam Muslim League in 1944. Earlier, in 1937, he was elected to the Legislative Assembly of Assam on the Muslim League ticket and continued to be a member of the assembly until 1945.<sup>19</sup>

For Moulana Bhashani, the Muslim League's Pakistan movement was not merely the struggle for gaining a separate and independent homeland for the Muslims of the Indian sub-continent, but more, a movement for the political, economic and cultural emancipation of poor Muslims in the region who were lagging behind other communities for different historical reasons. That the Moulana was not happy with a mere homeland for the Muslims was evident in his ceaseless struggle against any establishment which stood in the way of attaining democratic rights for the poor—a struggle which was accompanied by the movement against British colonialism. In his struggles, the Moulana did not even spare the political establishment of his party.

## No to ethnic segregation (in Assam)

In his long political life, the Moulana time and again stood against his party, or the governments formed by his party, as and when the party or the government deviated from pursuing the democratic cause of the people at large. Parochial and partisan interests in power games never prevented him from protesting against compromises on broader public interests. The Moulana's first rebellion against his own party found expression in his official protest against a bill, moved by the Muslim League government of Assam, seeking legitimization of the Line System—a system socially introduced first by the district administration of Assam under the British regime in 1920 to segregate Bengali migrants from the rest of society by way of restricting their movement to certain areas of Assam. Notably, some 5.75 lakh Bengali immigrants were living in Assam in 1920.<sup>20</sup> The 'Line System' also accompanied the *Bangal Khedao* (Oust Bengali) programme in Assam, although the migration of people from one area to another was not illegal in British India. The Moulana firmly, and successfully, stood by poor Bengali migrants, mostly East Bengal's poor victims of river erosion, who were trying anyhow to make a living by cultivating hitherto uncultivated fallow land in Assam.

So, when Assam's Muslim League government, headed by the Chief Minister Sir Muhammad Sadullah, moved a bill in the Legislative Assembly seeking the legitimization of the Line System, the Moulana, a Muslim League member of the House, vigorously protested against the proposed bill which he, rightly so, found 'inhuman'. When put to the vote, the Moulana sided with the opposition Congress representatives in the House and voted against the proposed law tabled by his own party, the Muslim League.<sup>21</sup> Simultaneously, he advised Sadullah not to act as a 'postbox' of the British rulers and invited him rather to provide leadership to the movement for Assamese independence from British colonial rule. The government of Sir Sadullah was eventually forced to change its attitude towards the racist system and, in the face of the people's movement led by Bhashani, compelled to allot land to about one lakh poor migrants. The



Moulana Bhashani talks to the first premier of the People's Republic of China, Zhou Enlai, during a meeting in Dhaka in 1956. From the collection of poet Samudra Gupda.



movement, both for abolishing the Line System and resisting the Oust Bengali programme, continued for more than two decades. The Moulana remained at the forefront of the movement until the poor Bengali migrants of Assam were rehabilitated.

The Moulana's struggle against the infamous Line System in Assam in the early 20th century is comparable to the anti-apartheid movement which took place several decades later in South Africa. The white racist government of South Africa implemented the infamous Group Areas Act in 1950 which laid the foundation of 'residential apartheid'. Under the law, 'each racial group could own land, occupy premises and trade only in its own separate area. Indians could henceforth live only in Indian areas, Africans in African, Coloureds in Coloured'.<sup>22</sup>

Earlier, in 1946, the apartheid regime of South Africa passed the Asiatic Land Tenure Act, "which curtailed the free movement of Indians, circumscribed the areas where Indians could reside and trade, and severely restricted their right to buy property. ... This law—known as the Ghetto Act—was a grave insult to the Indian community and anticipated the Group Areas Act, which would eventually circumscribe the freedom of all South Africans of colour."<sup>23</sup>

The democratic forces of South Africa, including the Transvaal Indian Congress (TNC) led by Dr Dadoo, the Natal Indian Congress (NIC) led by Dr Naicker and the African National Congress (ANC) led by Dr Xuma simultaneously fought that battle.

Although the Moulana fought against the segregation of the Bengali immigrants, he was never a Bengali chauvinist. The same Bhashani, who fought for the human rights of Bengali Muslim immigrants against the oppressive Assamese social and political establishment, also fought for the local non-Muslims against those sections of settler Bengali traders who cheated the locals by using different standards of weights when buying and selling goods from them. Notably, different standards of weights—ranging from 60 tolas to 120 tolas per *seer*—were prevalent in Assam those days. Bhashani discovered that while buying produce from the innocent locals, many Bengali traders used the standard of weights ranging from 90 *tolas* to 120 *tolas* per *seer*

but when selling them goods they would use the standard of weights ranging from 60 to 80 *tolas*. The Moulana launched a movement against this corrupt practice of the Bengali immigrants and eventually succeeded in establishing a single standard, 80 *tolas per seer*, to be used during sale and purchase, which immensely benefited both non-Bengali and non-Muslim Assamese.<sup>24</sup>

### **No to hegemony of foreign language(s)**

Moulana Bhashani had command over a number of languages that included Bangla, Hindi, Urdu, Arabic, Assamese and English. He was politically aware of the fact that a language was not merely the means of communication between people. Instead, language is power, political power that is, for any given populace trying to assert its cultural identity in a multi-lingual, multi-cultural society. The Moulana, who later became the president of the *Sarbo-doliya Rastra Bhasha Sangram Parishad* (All-party Action Committee for State Language) for the official recognition of Bangla to become one of the state languages of Pakistan in January 1952, therefore, fought for the introduction of the Bangla language in the parliamentary proceedings of Assam's Legislative Assembly. He strongly demanded that he should be allowed to speak in Bangla and that the ministers should reply to his questions in Bangla, instead of English, which was fashionable then. The Moulana wrestled out the ruling of the Speaker of the House to deliberate in Bangla and thus, as Syed Abul Maksud notes, Bhashani was the first politician to address the Assamese parliament in the Bangla language.<sup>25</sup> In the wake of the language movement of Assam in 1961,<sup>26</sup> the Assamese political establishment adopted Bangla as an official language in 1961, but history records that it was Bhashani who had politically paved the way for Bangla to enter the Assamese Parliament as early as 1937.

Being a Muslim League leader and a protagonist of the independence of Assam, or its inclusion in Pakistan, Moulana Bhashani was imprisoned when the partition of the sub-continent was being completed in August 1947—thanks to the Indian

National Congress' government of erstwhile Assam. The Moulana was released from Gouhati jail in Assam in September and immediately sent to East Pakistan.<sup>27</sup>

It did not take long for the Moulana to stand against the anti-people stances of the Muslim League government in Pakistan. He pronounced his first 'no' in the East Bengal Legislative Assembly of Pakistan to the English language as well as signs of economic discrimination against Bengalis by the West Pakistani rulers.

In February 1948, he was elected uncontested to the East Bengal Legislative Assembly in a by-election from a Tangail constituency as a Muslim League candidate. The assembly went into its budget session on March 15—four days after Dhaka city witnessed a general strike on March 11 demanding that Bangla be made a state language of Pakistan. The Muslim League's official leadership, as history records, was in favour of Urdu being the sole state language of Pakistan; it is noteworthy that the proceedings of East Bengal's Legislative Assembly were being conducted in English.

However, as his turn to speak in the Assembly came on March 17, the Moulana told the Speaker of the Assembly that 'this is a country of the Bangla-speaking people' and demanded that the Speaker give a ruling to the effect that all members of the House should deliberate in Bangla, further, that the Speaker should deliver the ruling to this effect, in Bangla. In response, the Speaker said that it was yet to be decided by the House as to which language would be used for conducting the business of the Assembly and, therefore, until the House decided on the official language of assembly, the 'members are free to speak in any language that they feel comfortable with.' Unhappy with the answer, the Moulana insisted that the Chair speak in Bangla instead of English and himself addressed the House in Bangla.<sup>28</sup>

A Muslim League member himself, the Moulana castigated the Muslim League government of East Pakistan for 'compromising the economic interests of the people of East Pakistan by way of conceding the control of the province's sales-tax in exchange of only taka one crore a year.' In this regard, he questioned the jurisdiction of the provincial government to do so. "Are we slaves to the central government [of Pakistan]?" the



Moulana Bhashani, accompanied Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, leads an Ekushey mourning procession in 1956. Photo: Rashid Talukder.

Moulana asked the provincial government of East Pakistan, and said: "I have never been a slave of the British; rather I have always fought [against British colonialism] for the just causes [of the people], and will continue to do so."<sup>29</sup> There is no doubt that he fought against establishments throughout his life, and this is the reason why every government—be it the British Raj, or that of the Muslim League, or the Congress government of Assam, or military and non-military regimes of Pakistan or the governments of Bangladesh—felt uncomfortable when Moulana Bhashani was around.

Notably, the two issues that the Moulana raised right away in March 1948 in the sole session of the legislative assembly of East Pakistan which he attended—the status of Bangla in the framework of Pakistan and the economic exploitation of the Bengalis of East Pakistan by the non-Bengali central government of Pakistan—not only determined the country's course of politics for the rest of the period of united Pakistan, but also inspired the Bengalis to become politically united soon against the non-Bengali regime in Pakistan. It was the question of language, and economic parity for the Bengalis that gave birth to ethno-linguistic nationalism, i.e., Bengali nationalism, in the erstwhile East Pakistan, which eventually culminated in the emergence of Bangladesh as a sovereign nation state in 1971. The Moulana's political foresight was matchless, compared to that of his political contemporaries.

Understandably, the presence of Moulana Bhashani, always an active leader of the poor masses, in East Pakistan's Legislative Assembly, and that too, as a member of the ruling Muslim League, soon proved to be embarrassing as well as dangerous for the government of the Muslim League. After all, as Shamsul Huda Harun rightly points out, "the Muslim landlords and the westernized middle and upper classes formed the nucleus of the Muslim nationalist movement which culminated in the formation of the All-India Muslim League in 1906."<sup>30</sup> Meanwhile, for various political, ideological and historical reasons, immediately before the independence of Pakistan, the leadership of the provincial Muslim League of East Bengal had come to Khawaja Nazimuddin, an Urdu-speaking nawab in Dhaka. Subsequently,

after the independence of Pakistan, Khawja and the like retained their leadership in the East Pakistan Muslim League. The Moulana, who fought against the landed aristocracy for the benefit of the landless millions all his life, naturally appeared too radical for a Muslim League led by a landed Nawab representing the interests of the privileged minority. The rulers, therefore, began intriguing with the aim of stripping Bhashani's membership in the legislative assembly. On discovering that there was a procedural mistake in the process of the Moulana's election to the provincial assembly, they used this as a pretext to oust him from the Assembly. Khurram Khan Panni, the zamindar of Korotia, sued him on legal-technical grounds. The Moulana, who was already disgusted with the anti-people policies of the Muslim League government, decided to quit the party and resigned from the assembly in December 1948, before the case was taken up by the court.

Bhashani cited the reasons behind his resignation in a press statement in early December, 1948: "I was elected to the Legislative Assembly of East Pakistan in February this year with a view to serving East Pakistan's poor people, both Hindus and Muslims, particularly the proletarian peasants and workers who cannot make a decent living despite labouring hard from dawn to dusk... During the budget session of the Legislative Assembly in March this year, I spoke of the just causes of the people despite various obstacles there. As a result, I have been exposed to various repressive cases framed, and false propaganda manufactured, by the bourgeois zamindars, money lenders, smugglers and other self-seeking as well as opportunist politicians... [Under these circumstances], I am constrained in serving the public cause [in the Assembly] and thereby honour the oath of office that I took. I, therefore, have no intention of retaining my membership of the legislative assembly just for the sake of drawing monthly salaries and travelling allowances. So, I have decided to resign... My countrymen, however, should not think that I will quit serving the people. On the contrary, I will choose the right path for serving the country."<sup>31</sup>

The Moulana founded and quit political parties, and reorganized them many a time in his life with the sole objective

of paving the way for advancing the genuine democratic causes of the toiling masses. In the process, he continued to say 'no', whatever be the circumstances, to all attempts by the non-Bengali political establishment of Pakistan to avoid recognizing Bangla as one of the state languages of Pakistan.

In the wake of the historic language movement in East Bengal in February 1952 and the Muslim League's colossal defeat in East Bengal's legislative assembly elections to the United Front of the nationalist parties of the Bengalis<sup>32</sup> in March 1954, the Constituent Assembly of Pakistan on May 7, 1954 unanimously adopted a resolution, saying that "the official languages of the Republic should be Urdu, Bengali and such other Provincial languages as may be declared such by the Head of the State on the recommendation of the Provincial Legislatures concerned." The resolution, moved by prime minister Mohammad Ali (Bogra), however, added, "Notwithstanding anything in the above article, for 20 years from the commencement of the Constitution the English language should continue to be used for all official purposes of the Republic for which it was being used immediately before such commencement."<sup>33</sup>

While none of the Bengali members of the Constituent Assembly protested against the resolution, the Moulana, not a member of the Assembly, reacted to the resolution sharply. In a statement issued to the press the next day, he said: "The resolution of the Constituent Assembly on the demand of State language of Pakistan is unacceptable to us [in] its entirety as it has completely failed to meet the popular demand of the country...the demand to make Bengali as one of the state languages of Pakistan is categorical and unequivocal...Bengali should be adopted as one of the State languages here and now...but the resolution adopted by the Constituent Assembly says that it will be given effect after 20 years. Twenty years is a long and far away cry for us...so this resolution is of no interest to us...and the movement for immediate recognition of Bengali as one of the State languages of Pakistan should be intensified throughout the length and breadth of the land."<sup>34</sup>

The Moulana, as history records, proved to be politically

prophetic. In less than 20 years since the adoption of the resolution in 1954, Bangladesh emerged as an independent state.

The Moulana was absolutely clear about the political role of language, particularly when it came to the identity politics of a populace aspiring to be organized as an independent state. He addressed the Stockholm international peace conference, held in 1954, in Bangla. It was for the first time that a Bengali had addressed such a large, international forum in Bangla.

### **No to Muslim League of vested interests**

On his resignation from the East Bengal Legislative Assembly in December 1948, the Moulana had assured the people, as mentioned earlier, that he would not stop serving their cause and would choose the 'right path' to serve the poor millions. He eventually chose his political path in June 1949. Bhashani convened a two-day 'conference of the workers of the Muslim League' for June 23-24 that year, which pronounced a resounding 'no' to the anti-people and reactionary politics of the Muslim League. Earlier, on June 15, the Moulana in a press statement asserted that the Muslim League was 'no longer a party of the people and, therefore, has not been able to make its government do any work for the welfare of the people', and that the 'workers conference would discuss the ways and means of ridding the people's organization of self seekers'.<sup>35</sup>

The conference of dissenting Muslim League leaders and workers of East Pakistan gave birth to the East Pakistan Awami Muslim League, in other words, the People's Muslim League of East Pakistan, with Moulana Bhashani as its president. The Moulana, upon consultation with all concerned, announced a 40-member executive committee of the new party, with politicians like Ataur Rahman Khan and Abdus Salam Khan as its vice presidents, Shamshul Huq its general secretary, and Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and Khandaker Mushtaque Ahmed as joint secretaries of the party—the first mainstream opposition party in the erstwhile Pakistan.<sup>36</sup> Notably, some eight months after the floating of the East Pakistan Awami Muslim League in Dhaka in June 1949, Suhrawardy formed the All Pakistan Awami Muslim



League at a convention of political workers in Lahore in February 1950 and announced himself as 'president and sole organizer' of the party.<sup>37</sup>

But Bhashani's East Pakistan Awami Muslim League was neither a constituent of Suhrawardy's All Pakistan Awami Muslim League, nor was it affiliated to the All Pakistan Jinnah Awami Muslim League that Suhrawardy formed in 1951 by the merger of his All Pakistan Awami Muslim League and the Jinnah Muslim League founded by Nawab of Mamdot of West Punjab.<sup>38</sup>

The initiative for the affiliation of the East Pakistan Awami Muslim League with the All Pakistan Jinnah Awami Muslim League was taken by Suhrawardy after the latter party's candidates were defeated by those of the ruling Muslim League in the elections of the provincial legislature of West Punjab in late 1951. Meanwhile, as Shyamoli Ghosh writes, "the East Pakistan Awami Muslim League had already been accorded the status of an opposition party in the East Bengal Legislature by championing the East Bengali grievances regarding the state language issue and by participating in the protest moves against the controversial Interim Report of the Basic Principles Committee (1950)".<sup>39</sup> The decision of affiliation was made at a convention in Lahore in December 1952, when Bhashani was in prison. It was eventually approved, conditionally, by the central organizing committee of the East Pakistan Awami Muslim League in April 1953. According to the conditions, "the East Pakistan Awami Muslim League retained its name, manifesto and programme intact."<sup>40</sup> In doing so, the Moulana took the lead. During the council session of the party held in late 1953, he unambiguously said that the East Pakistan Awami Muslim League 'would stand by its programme and manifesto', which was adopted much before the decision of affiliation was made in absence of the Moulana 14, 1952, 'in case of any conflict with [those of] the All Pakistan Jinnah Awami Muslim League' "Besides", the Moulana stated unequivocally, "if anybody wants to interfere with our programme, then we shall be compelled to consider the question of our affiliation with the central party...two wings of Pakistan have completely different sets of problems and the East Pakistan Awami Muslim League's stand on



Moulana Bhashani addresses a rally at Paltan Maidan in Dhaka in 1970. Photo: Naib Uddin Ahmed.

complete provincial autonomy had to be reflected in its organizational set-up.”<sup>41</sup>

The East Pakistan Awami League eventually resolved to become the regional branch of the All Pakistan Awami League during the former’s council session in October 1955, ‘on the basis of the acceptance of its (EPAL’s) constitution and programme’, upholding the firm stand taken earlier by its president Moulana Bhashani.<sup>42</sup>

For Bhashani, the autonomy of the East Pakistan-based political party was of immense political importance, because he was absolutely clear, unlike his mainstream contemporaries, about the fact that there was no future for Bengalis within the framework of Pakistan. A staunch progressive nationalist, the Moulana, therefore, had always been reluctant to obligate his party to any bindings which could stand in the way of the emergence of Bangladesh as a sovereign state. It was not accidental that the Moulana had never missed the opportunity to remind Bengali and Pakistani rulers alike that the Lahore resolution which was adopted in 1940 envisaged the creation of separate ‘states’ for the Muslim-dominated areas in the sub-continent. In this regard, it is worth remembering that as soon as the Moulana gave his final call to start fighting for independence of East Pakistan on December 4, 1970, he immediately dismantled the Pakistan National Awami Party, although he was one of its top leaders, while keeping its eastern wing active.<sup>43</sup> He knew that there was no relevance of the existence of an all Pakistan-based political party for the Bengalis anymore. He was proven right.

However, although he was aware of the democratic importance of anti-colonial and anti-imperialist movements, the Moulana was never a national chauvinist. The progressive democratic content of his nationalism always directed him to fight for democratic causes of the people of West Pakistan and beyond. He did this unflinchingly throughout his life.

### **No to politics of religious communalism**

The Moulana was deeply religious and led the life of a pious

Muslim. But for him, Islam was neither a means of political exploitation of the powerless poor by the powerful rich, nor just a set of rituals to be mechanically performed by religious believers. For him, as he explained on many an occasion, Islam was a religion of justice, and *jihad* was against injustice. He interpreted the message of God and His prophet as being a manifesto of human equality, which calls for equal treatment of all people and that too, at all levels of human activity—social, political, economic and cultural.

The Moulana hardly found any difference between the essence of socialism and that of Islam. It is not surprising that the Moulana, not a communist in the strictest political and philosophical sense of the term, always provided shelter to various brands of communist leaders and workers whenever times became difficult for them, under various repressive political regimes. The communists often abandoned the Moulana, but he never abandoned the socialist ideals of emancipation of the poor millions. He even propagated ‘Islamic socialism’—socialism of his brand that envisaged an exploitation-free social, economic and political order based on the egalitarian spirit of Islam. He found socialist ideas of human emancipation to be very close to Islamic ideals, a close inter-connectedness that made them interchangeable in his own life. The following anecdote may help us understand the Moulana’s attitude towards Islam and socialism.

The Moulana was in Dhaka central jail when the Kuomintang forces of Chiang Kai-shek in China suffered a major defeat in the battles with the people’s army of the government of the Chinese Communist Party in 1950. The Moulana received the information in his prison cell and called the leftist Haji Mohammaed Danesh, who was also in the Dhaka central jail, to provide him with the ‘good news.’ “Haji sahib, it seems communism has already arrived,” the Moulana told Danesh. “If it is true, you will have to shave your beard off,” Haji Danesh retorted in a light vein. But the Moulana was serious. “So what? The common people will have food and clothing and will be able to live with dignity,” He replied. The Moulana, however, did not fail to add, “But Haji *shaheb*, if my Islam contains the truth, thousands of communists

won't be able to resist it."<sup>44</sup>

Understandably enough, for Bhashani, the political spirit of Islam was one that preached equality and egalitarianism, i.e., the radical humanist principles which early Islam had based itself on. Islam, after all, grew as a socio-political movement of the poor and oppressed against the vested interests of the time. Moreover, all monotheistic religions that believe in the idea of one God creating all human beings on earth, presuppose an inherent equality among His children. This idea resembles the ideal of communism. The Moulana, absolutely committed to the cause of the poor, the oppressed, the neglected, the victims of feudal exploitation, therefore, did not find any qualitative difference between the political spirit of Islam and that of communism.

But Moulana Bhashani was dead against the communal use of religious sentiments in politics, which meant that he was against politically dividing society on religious lines as it would hide the class exploitation of poor millions by the rich minority—an obnoxious tactic always applied by the ruling Muslim League of the day. The Moulana, politically the secular democrat that he was, therefore, decided to drop the word 'Muslim' from the East Pakistan Awami League and open the party to all citizens irrespective of their religious faiths. Subsequently, he moved a proposal to this effect in the council session of the party held in November 1953.

Suhrawardy, president of the West Pakistan-based All Pakistan Jinnah Awami Muslim League, which the East Pakistan Awami Muslim League was affiliated to, was not a member of the latter's central organizing committee, and was, therefore, consulted at an unofficial meeting of the organizing body on the proposed change of the nomenclature of the party. Although he was a modern secular democrat, Suhrawardy opposed the idea on 'tactical' grounds, particularly before the general elections to East Pakistan's Provincial Assembly, which were to be held in early next year and that too with separate electorates on the basis of Muslim and non-Muslim voters. To the surprise of many, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, known to be a staunch supporter of Suhrawardy, supported the Moulana's proposal.<sup>45</sup> The Sheikh's support of the idea of secularizing the East Pakistan Awami



A police officer gets in the way of Moulana Bhashani as he tries to come out of Baitul Mukarram to break Section 144 of the CrPC barring public rallies and processions in 1968. Photo: Rashid Talukder.

Muslim League was surprising not only because he was opposing Suhrawardy, but also because he had opposed the idea of secularizing the East Pakistan Muslim Students League in 1949. In January, 1949, Oli Ahad moved a resolution at a meeting of the convening committee of the East Pakistan Muslim Students League, 'seeking to de-communalise the organization in order to open the Student League for the students of all religious faiths.'<sup>46</sup> But the resolution was abandoned in the face of stiff resistance from Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, Abdur Rahman Chowdhury and Noymuddin Ahmed.<sup>47</sup> The word 'Muslim' from the East Pakistan Muslim Students League was eventually dropped in the council session of the organization held in 1953.<sup>48</sup>

However, despite Suhrawardy's reluctance, Moulana Bhashani's proposal to secularise the party was officially put to vote in the central organizing committee. But it was opposed by 27 members, including party stalwarts like Khondokar Mushtaque Ahmed, of the 55-member central organizing committee of the East Pakistan Awami Muslim League. Subsequently, Moulana Bhashani was authorized by the committee to assess the popular feeling about the idea of secularizing the party and place his observation at a special council session of the party to be held later.<sup>49</sup>

There was hardly any scope for the Moulana to convene a special council session of the party, thanks to the imminent general elections to the East Bengal Legislative Assembly on the one hand and the Pakistani central government's wrath on the other. The elections, held in March 1954, kept him extremely busy and the central government's fury kept him away from Pakistan until April 1955.

The Moulana forged an electoral alliance between his East Pakistan Awami Muslim League and A. K. Fazlul Haq's Krishak Sramik Party in December 1953 to contest the ruling Muslim League in the Provincial Assembly elections in March 1954. The alliance, which historically came to be known as Jukto Front (United Front), was formed in the face of Suhrawardy's initial objection and sustained opposition from Sheikh Mujibur Rahman till the last moment.<sup>50</sup> Some other parties later joined the alliance. The massive electoral victory of the United Front<sup>51</sup> not only

wiped out the anti-people and communal politics of the Muslim League from the soil of East Pakistan, it also politically advanced the cause of ethno-linguistic nationalism, Bengali nationalism that is, to a stage that decisively influenced the next course of the democratic struggle leading to the independence of Bangladesh in 1971. It was the 21-point election manifesto of the United Front, formulated against the backdrop of the secular Bangla language movement of the masses in 1952 that articulated Bengali aspirations for complete autonomy, political and economic, of the erstwhile East Bengal. It was precisely the 19th point<sup>52</sup> of the United Front's 21 point-programme, which later constituted the six-point programme<sup>53</sup> of Sheikh Mijubur Rahman, announced on February 5, 1966 that provided the basis for a great movement that pushed the people's aspiration further towards independence.

However, the question of secularizing the East Pakistan Awami Muslim League was not lost to Bhashani during the United Front's election campaign. "I am entirely convinced after my recent tours across the country that the people want to see the Awami Muslim League as a non-communal party," said the Moulana in a press statement issued on April 20. But getting the job done then and there was not that easy, especially due to, as noted earlier, the wrath of the central government.

The Moulana left Dhaka for Europe on May 25, 1954 to attend an international peace conference in Berlin. Meanwhile, on May 30, 1954, the central government of prime minister Mohammad Ali 'sacked' East Pakistan's United Front government of A. K. Fazlul Huq on the pretext that the Huq administration had 'failed to contain the chaos created in the province by the communists.' However, as the Moulana left for Europe, the central government not only attempted to obstruct his travel plans to Germany to attend the peace conference, which included exerting diplomatic influence, but it also imposed 'restrictions' on his return to Pakistan. Eventually the Moulana attended an international peace conference in Stockholm the same year, and spoke on the need to fight against imperialism, colonialism, militarism, et cetera in order to ensure global peace.

The erstwhile defence secretary of Pakistan, Major General Iskander Mirza, who was made governor of East Pakistan,



immediately after taking over office in Dhaka, termed the Moulana a 'traitor' and announced that 'as soon as Bhashani returns to the country, he would be shot dead at the airport by a smart police Havildar' However, in the face of tremendous political pressure in both wings of Pakistan, the government was eventually forced to lift the ban on his return on April 22, 1955 and the Moulana landed in Dhaka on April 25—a year after his departure from the country.

The East Pakistan Awami Muslim League, finally, held a two-day council session of the party in October 21-23, 1955. This time the Moulana succeeded in getting the word 'Muslim' dropped from the name of the party.<sup>54</sup> The Awami Muslim League became the Awami League. The conversion was very necessary for him to construct a 'nationalist polity' based on secular-democratic principles particularly for the Bengalis of erstwhile East Bengal.

The Moulana's commitment to non-communal politics also became evident in 1956, when he opposed tooth and nail a move in the Constituent Assembly of Pakistan to retain the colonial provision of 'separate electorates' for the citizens belonging to different religious faiths. Besides, the Moulana vehemently opposed the idea of making the state of Pakistan an 'Islamic Republic.' He was for a 'Federal Republic' of Pakistan with no bias for any religion.<sup>55</sup>

Bhashani's secular-democratic attitude towards life also found expression when he reacted sharply to the communal decision of the Martial Law regime of General Ayub Khan, made in June 1967, to ban Tagore's songs in Pakistan, and that too in the name of Islam. "Rabindranath has enriched Bangla language and taken it to new heights by his poetry, prose, short stories, dramas, novels and songs. He has made universal contributions," the Moulana said in a press statement on June 27, 1967.<sup>56</sup> The statement further said, "Islam has announced the birth of truth and beauty. Rabindranath has held high the truth and beauty of Islam. Therefore, those who are attacking Rabindranath, do not really believe in Islam's principles of truth and beauty." The Moulana then 'called upon the people at large to resist the government's attempts to ban Tagore's songs'.<sup>57</sup>

Bhashani himself was a great admirer of Tagore's songs. During the difficult days of the country's War of Independence in 1971, the Moulana, in the custody of the Indian government and under perpetual surveillance, was once heard singing a couplet from a Tagore song—*Tomar pataka jare dao, tare bohigare dao shokti* ([Oh God] whomever you give the flag, give him the strength to uphold it)—while sitting on his prayer mat after Fazr prayers.<sup>58</sup>

Not surprisingly, a famous Indian writer, Basant Chatarjee, compared the Moulana with a couple of great Indian secular socialist leaders in 1973. "On a purely secular plane, he (Moulana Bhashani) can be compared with Ram Monohar Lohia and Kamraj Nadar of India," wrote Chatarjee.<sup>59</sup>

The Moulana's abhorrence for religion-based politics, or politics of religious communalism, was also evident in his critique of Jamaat-e-Islami Bangladesh. He found the Jamaat to be an 'Islamic edition of fascism',<sup>60</sup> and castigated the party for 'using religion as the shield for its self-defence' after the independence of Bangladesh and called upon the people to 'resist Jamaat's ill-activities' that it undertook after the fall of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's government in 1975.<sup>61</sup>

"I hate [religious] communalism, I have fought against this menace several times in my life," the Moulana said in a statement in January 1976 and cautioned the governments of Bangladesh and India 'not to do anything towards each other that might contribute towards escalation of religious communalism' in the two neighbouring countries.<sup>62</sup>

Around this time, some of his political adversaries started accusing the Moulana of making communal statements. In fact, the Indian government of Indira Gandhi was then backing a group of Bangladeshis under the leadership of Abdul Kader Siddik, *Bir Uttam*, who had been provided asylum in India, and supplied with arms as well, to wage 'war' against Bangladesh on different frontiers to 'avenge' the murderous ouster of the Mujib regime from power.<sup>63</sup> The Moulana, like a true nationalist, on the one hand, and committed to the cause of the people beyond borders on the other, considered it essential to warn the Indian political establishment of the day about the multidimensional dangers of

backing a seditious war against Bangladesh. A radical humanist to the core, the Moulana was genuinely concerned about the possible outbreak of riots on communal lines in the two countries—one dominated by Muslims, and the other, by Hindus. But the country's pseudo-secularists suddenly found a communal person in the red Moulana.

The Moulana was hurt. "Should my criticism of the [foul] activities of the Indian government be construed as indulging in communalism?" the Moulana was quoted as having ruefully asked Professor Muzaffar Ahmed. "Whatever I may be, I am the last person to say 'yes' to imperialism and communalism, even if I am asked by Keramin and Katebin,<sup>64</sup> to do so," the Moulana, a practising Muslim, told his former party colleague.<sup>65</sup>

Professor Muzaffar, who had quit the Moulana's National Awami Party to form his own faction of NAP in 1967, said that "some people did smell communalism in his (Moulana's) speeches toward the end of his life. [But] I did not. Nor did I hear [him say anything like that]," the professor testified in his memoir, *Kichhu Kotha*, in 1991. He also wrote in his memoir, "I have also noticed that many in our society are incapable of making the distinction between criticising the government of India and criticising the Hindus."

Bhashani's commitment to secular-democratic ideals became evident in a resolution that his National Awami Party adopted at the first post-independence meeting of the extended body of its executive council on February 6, 1972. The party resolved, along with other things, that it 'would not accept those as members who were involved in any kind of activity against the struggle for independence of Bangladesh, and those who are not committed to the three ideological principles of democracy, socialism and secularism'.<sup>66</sup>

### **No to Awami (Muslim) League's politics of opportunism**

Always an uncompromising politician when it came to peoples democratic causes, the Moulana abhorred political opportunism all his life, although his nationalist democratic political mission had suffered setbacks more than once due to the political

opportunism of many of his political allies inside and outside the organizations that he led. The Moulana recounted the opportunistic politics which he had encountered in his long political journey from the early days of Pakistan in 1948, particularly, the Muslim League's betrayal of the Lahore Resolution, to the final phase of the political struggle for the independence of Bangladesh in 1971. In a statement issued on January 3, 1971, four weeks after he had publicly urged Sheikh Mujibur Rahman to join the struggle for the independence of East Pakistan on December 4, 1970, Bhashani explained the background of the independence movement: "I started the movement against the Muslim League government by way of forming the 'opposition' with the participation of 45 influential members of the East Bengal Legislature who included people like the late Sher-e-Bangla A K Fazlul Haq, late Mohammad Ali of Bogra, late Dewan Lutfar Rahman, late Ahmad Ali Mridha, late Khawaja Nasrullah and others. But after a few days, they left me, one taking the ambassadorial job in Burma, another that of public service commissioner, some others taking the posts of chief whip, provincial minister for revenue, central minister or the post of advocate general. It was I who was exposed to the wrath of the governments of the late Liakat Ali Khan and the late Khawaja Nazimuddin Ahmed and stayed behind bars for two and half years. Once out of jail, I formed, in the wake of an extreme crisis, the East Pakistan Awami Muslim League. Again, most of my colleagues abandoned me, either because they were allured by government favours or became afraid of the repressive measures of the government, by declaring that they had no connection with the Awami [Muslim] League. I said *Assalamualikum* [in the sense of saying good-bye to Pakistan] during the Kagmari conference of the Awami League. This time some Awami League officials resorted to *jihad* against me. They started propagating across East and West Pakistan that I had said *Assalamualaikum* as an agent of Hindustan, in order to divide Pakistan. I felt helpless at this phase, and formed the National Awami Party. Again, there appeared in NAP some officials who were secretly and regularly cooperating with the Communist Party. Such so-called communists engaged themselves in secret *jihad* against me by way of propagating that

I am a communal and autocratic person. They also left me gradually. But the people know that I continued to follow the path of struggle in the midst of enormous difficulties.”<sup>67</sup>

However, Huseyn Shaheed Suhrawardy's politics of opportunism, particularly in the late 1950s, enraged Bhashani most because of the former's betrayal of the professed anti-imperialist cause of the erstwhile Awami Muslim League on the one hand, and East Pakistan's aspirations for political and economic autonomy on the other. The difference of opinion over these issues widened so much that the Moulana eventually left the Awami League.

In the first half of 1954, Pakistan entered into an alliance with the United States and signed a mutual Defence Aid agreement. Besides, it also became party to two military pacts, the Baghdad Pact which came to be known as the Central Treaty Organisation (CENTO) after Iraq withdrew from the pact, and the South East Asian Treaty Organisation (SEATO).

The Moulana had always been against Pakistan becoming a party to any military alliance. At this phase of history, Suhrawardy received an offer from the centre to join Prime Minister Mohammad Ali (Bogra)'s non-party cabinet of technocrats as law minister. Ali, once a junior in the legal practice of Suhrawardy, was also finance minister in Suhrawardy's cabinet when the latter was chief minister of undivided Bengal in 1946. It was therefore unbecoming of Suhrawardy to take a ministerial position under Mohammad Ali. However, Suhrawardy was tempted. He met Bhashani in London to discuss the proposal. But the latter opposed the idea on the ground that if the former joined such a non-party cabinet, it would hamper the movement for realizing the 21-point programme of the United Front to which the Awami Muslim League was committed. Suhrawardy countered Bhashani by saying that through joining the Cabinet, he would be able to help implementation of the 21-point programme better. Eventually, despite Bhashani's opposition, Suhrawardy joined Mohammad Ali Bogra's Cabinet on December 20, 1954.

Later, on February 17, 1955, the governor general of Pakistan promulgated an Ordinance seeking the formation of a



Moulana Bhashani returns to a roaring reception at Tejgaon airport in 1968. Photo: Rashid Talukder.

Constitutional Convention Committee, comprising an equal number of representatives from both the eastern and western wings of Pakistan, and that too, on the basis of a separate electorate system, to formulate the Constitution for Pakistan. The Moulana discarded the proposition on the ground that East Pakistan, which represented the majority of the population, deserved to have more representatives on the committee than West Pakistan, and that the idea of separate electorates for Muslim and non-Muslim citizens was inherently communal and, therefore, undemocratic. Suhrawardy, who had previously supported a joint electorate system, insisted that the United Front agree to the proposition, arguing that it would enable them to accommodate the relevant issues of the 21-point programme in the Constitution of Pakistan. Subsequently, the central organizing committee of the Awami Muslim League grudgingly approved the constitution convention on April 26, 1955. Bhashani, however, made Suhrawardy sign the following undertaking: "I hereby declare that I shall try my utmost to get the twenty-one points of the United Front Programme and joint electorate accepted by the Constitution Convention so far as the proposals affect the Constitution. On failure to do so, I shall resign from the Ministry."<sup>68</sup>

Meanwhile, the Ordinance was declared illegal by the federal court of Pakistan, and then came another, on May 28, 1955, seeking to set up an 80-member Constituent Assembly. As the Constituent Assembly was formed, Mohammad Ali Bogra lost his premiership, thanks to palace conspiracy, which was those days the political norm in Pakistan. Chowdhury Mohammad Ali of Nezam-e-Islami Party took over. The Constitution of Pakistan, the first ever since the creation of Pakistan in 1947, was eventually formulated on February 29, 1956. The Constitution, adopted under the leadership of the Nezam-e-Islami leader, did not recognize autonomy for East Pakistan. Again, palace conspiracy made Chowdhury quit his prime ministerial job on September 8, 1956—this time to pave the way for Suhrawardy, previously the Law Minister, to take up the top post.

Suhrawardy, according to the undertaking that he had given Bhashani, was supposed to quit the government in the wake of his

failure to incorporate in the Constitution the spirit of the United Front's 21-point programme. But he dishonoured the promise only to take the office of the Prime Minister on September 12, 1956. He was asked to leave the office by President Iskander Mirza in October 1957.<sup>69</sup>

However, as soon as Suhrawardy became prime minister, he began lending support to the pro-US foreign policy adopted earlier by Pakistan's powers-that-be, in violation of a party resolution adopted merely a few months ago. The Awami League council session on May 20, 1956 unanimously adopted a resolution against all kinds of war pacts, and demanded the scrapping of the Baghdad war pact, SEATO, etc.<sup>70</sup>

Earlier, in October 1955, a resolution adopted by the council session of the East Pakistan Awami Muslim League held in Dhaka said: "The council session has adequate reasons to believe that the government of Pakistan has signed over the past few years such international agreements as the Pak-US military pact, Baghdad war pact, SEATO, et cetera, that have hampered the country's sovereignty on the one hand and economic, trade and commercial freedom on the other."<sup>71</sup>

Besides, as Oli Ahad records, "after the 1954 elections, 167 elected members of the East Bengal Provincial Assembly including Aatur Rahman Khan, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, Mahmud Ali, Haji Mohammad Danesh, Year Mohammad Khan and others in a joint statement on April 21, 1954 strongly condemned the Pak-US military pact, demanding that the agreement be repealed."<sup>72</sup>

A staunch anti-imperialist, Moulana Bhashani strongly opposed Suhrawardy's pro-American foreign policy stance, while many an Awami League leader supported the latter's opportunistic ideological shift. In Suhrawardy's own words, "Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, one of my star organizers...and Tofazzal Hossain, whose powerful pen swayed mass opinion through the Bengali daily, *The Ittefaq*, accepted my views and supported me. Bhashani remained unconvinced."<sup>73</sup>

Suhrawardy and his followers severely criticized the Moulana for years for his firm opposition to a pro-USA foreign policy for Pakistan and the Awami League. But history proved



that the Moulana's political foresight was better than that of his detractors. While the United States actively opposed Bangladesh's war of national independence in 1971, the US military aid to Pakistan, and the subsequent strengthening of the armed forces of Pakistan over and above every other institution of the country, still remains one of the biggest impediments toward democratization of Pakistani society and state.

Huseyn Shaheed Suhrawardy's political opportunism, or compromise over the politically legitimate aspirations of the Bengalis for provincial autonomy, found clear expression in a statement that he made at the Awami League's historic council session at Kagmari on February 7, 1957. "The demand for autonomy [for East Pakistan] does not have any basis. Besides, 98 per cent autonomy has already been achieved. There would be no change in the situation if legislation to this effect were to be passed in the National Assembly," said Suhrawardy, then Prime Minister of Pakistan.<sup>74</sup>

But the Moulana rightly realized that an Awami League leader becoming the Prime Minister of Pakistan would not mean autonomy for East Pakistan. So, he vigorously protested against Suhrawardy's statement and resorted to organizing public opinion for the demand for regional autonomy. He told people at large that 'the social, political and economic emancipation of 4.5 crore Bengalis is impossible without the regional autonomy of East Pakistan'.<sup>75</sup>

However, again, on June 14, 1957, Suhrawardy claimed at a public rally at Paltan Maidan of the Dhaka city that "ninety-eight per cent autonomy has already been granted to East Pakistan."

In the council session of the Awami League at Kagmari on February 7-8, 1957, the Moulana moved a resolution demanding a repeal of the US-Pak military alliance. Earlier, on February 5, 1957, the Moulana in an interview with the Dhaka-based *Dainik Sangbad* had said: "I do not believe in war pacts. Any war pact against world peace is an impediment toward the emancipation of people and civilizations. Come what may, I will continue to fight for an independent as well as a neutral foreign policy for the sake of the welfare of the people of Pakistan."

But at the conference, Suhrawardy opposed the idea of a



Moulana pulling up Mujib affectionately towards his bosom as the latter was to touch the former's feet to seek blessing. Photo Collected.

neutral foreign policy for Pakistan. His followers like Aaur Rahman Khan, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, Khandaker Mushtaq Ahmed and others followed suit and Bhashani's resolution was eventually voted out. The triumph of political opportunism in the Awami League was complete.

Absolutely committed to the Bengalis' right to self-determination on the one hand and a diehard enemy of imperialist hegemony on the other, the Moulana decided to part ways with his long-term comrades who had found democratic ideals and principles negotiable for power. He left the Awami League on July 24, 1957 to start his new political journey, aimed at constructing a democratic polity to advance the 'socialist' economic order for the people at large. He began his new journey by launching the Pakistan National Awami Party the same month, with himself as the president of the organization and Mahmudul Huq Osmani of West Pakistan its general secretary. The NAP manifesto asserted that Pakistan will be a 'federal state comprising two units, East Pakistan and West Pakistan, based on complete regional autonomy' It also said that the 'autonomous states will exercise all the powers, authority and jurisdiction on all matters, while the matters of defence, currency and foreign policy will be under the jurisdiction of the central government within the ambit of a parliamentary democracy'. The same programmes that the Moulana had consistently been pursuing since 1948. He was indeed a consistent leader, when it came to democracy and people's interests.

### **No to Pakistani neo-colonialism**

For the political, economic and cultural emancipation of his people, Bhashani knew all along that the first thing that the Bengalis needed to do was to do away with the system of neo-colonial exploitation, instituted by the Pakistani ruling class. The surest way to do that was to secure national independence from Pakistan. The Moulana, before being explicit about it in 1970, had several times hinted at the proposition in question. Understandably, he was waiting for people's collective consciousness to reach its political climax so that they could

welcome the explicit declaration which he made in 1970.

While analyzing the overall political situation of Pakistan at a public rally on June 17, 1955, the Moulana warned the West Pakistan-based central government that if the centre did not abandon its oppressive and exploitative attitude (toward East Pakistan), the East will be forced to say *assalamulalikum* (to the West), which means East Pakistan will secede [from West Pakistan]'.<sup>76</sup> The daily *Sangbad*, while reporting on the Moulana's speech the next day (June 18, 1955), quoted him as saying, "If exploitative and repressive policies continue to be pursued against East Bengal, I am afraid that the future generation of the people of this province will be forced to think of separation."<sup>77</sup>

A few months later, while delivering his presidential address to the council session of the Awami League in October 1955, the Moulana presented a concrete outline of the 'autonomous' East Pakistan. "Full autonomy for East Bengal is a very old demand... All matters except defence, foreign policy and currency will have to be left with the regional or provincial government. The naval headquarters of the Defence has to be set up in East Bengal and the foreign trade will also have to be left to the provincial government,"<sup>78</sup> said the Moulana as he urged the members of the [East Bengal] Legislative Assembly to adopt a resolution to this effect in the ensuing session of the assembly. The underlying political message of the speech was that the people of East Pakistan must secure control of their own fate.

The people of Pakistan were exposed to martial law in late 1958, thanks to the failure of a section of self-seeking politicians to pursue a democratic course, and the political ambition of a few military generals, coupled with the United States's strategic interests in the region. General Ayub Khan imposed martial law on October 7, 1958 and forcibly took over presidency from Iskander Mirza on October 27. The military junta imposed a ban on political activities and resorted to repression of political leaders and activists across the country. The Moulana was arrested on charge of 'activities which are prejudicial to the security of Pakistan and its external affairs' Sheikh Mujibur Rahman was also put behind bars. Mujub was accused of

corruption. The political movement for democratic process was subjected to serious difficulties.

Under these circumstances, the student community of East Pakistan took to the streets against the Martial Law regime. The Moulana was eventually released on November 3, 1963. And he engaged himself in rejuvenating his still-banned National Awami Party. Meanwhile, on March 5, 1963, he issued a 'long and strongly worded' statement against the autocratic practices of the military junta. In the statement meant for the political parties of the country, he called upon 'all to work unitedly towards a truly democratic order so that people can think freely, talk freely, work freely and for the betterment of the masses'.<sup>79</sup> Besides, he asked the people, while addressing a public rally in Chittagong, on March 22, to 'remain prepared to make sacrifices' in the struggle for 'complete regional autonomy of East Pakistan'.<sup>80</sup>

It is worth mentioning that the leanings of Ayub's martial law regime towards China, particularly in the context of the regional political scene ridden with conflicting relations between India and Pakistan, on the one hand, and India and China, on the other, created confusion in political circles of both wings of Pakistan. Besides, his inherent weakness for the pro-people Chinese political system of the day, and the continued dissuasion by pro-Peking leftwing politicians who had taken shelter under his political umbrella, National Awami Party, made the Moulana refrain from opposing the Ayub regime's foreign policy for quite a while, but this did not constrain him from opposing the regime's autocratic policies at home. However, the Moulana was soon disillusioned with Ayub's foreign policy, and compensated history by way of launching, almost single-handedly, a prolonged mass movement against the military regime in 1968 that forced Ayub to step down the next year.

At a stage of the movement, he openly threatened the Pakistani military authorities of the time with the 'secession' of East Pakistan at a public rally held at Paltan Maidan on December 6, 1968. If Bengali demands for provincial autonomy, direct adult franchise and freedom of the press are denied, the Moulana 'apprehended', "East Pakistan might secede [in order] to become independent."<sup>81</sup>



Moulana Bhashani presides over a meeting of the Council of Advisers to the expatriate government of Bangladesh during the War of Independence in 1971. Photo: Naib.Uddin Ahmed.

This, again, was a clear message to the people of Bangladesh that answer to the problems of the Bengalis lies in the independence. However, as noted earlier, the Moulana was not a politician who would spout mere rhetoric against oppressive rulers. He was one who followed what he said with appropriate action.

The Moulana continued his agitation, which, with the active participation of people from all walks of life, and particularly the organized resistance of the student community, turned into the historic 'mass upsurge' in January 1969 which eventually did away with the military regime of the so-called 'iron man' General Ayub in March 1969. It is this mass upsurge led by Bhashani that saved Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, accused in the Agartala Conspiracy Case, from the gallows. Mujib was set free from imprisonment on February 22, 1969.

In his last-gasp attempts at clinging to power, General Ayub called a roundtable of politicians from both wings of Pakistan to work out the means to establish political stability in an otherwise unstable country. The Moulana refused to attend the roundtable and also advised the Sheikh to do so, arguing that 'talks between the oppressor and the oppressed never benefit the latter; it is always the oppressor who wins at the negotiating table' "There should, therefore, be no discussion with a tyrant; the people have to realize their legitimate demands through mass movements,"<sup>82</sup> the Moulana argued. The Sheikh, however, did not listen to the Moulana and joined the roundtable in Rawalpindi only to return empty-handed and disillusioned. The Moulana continued with political protests, forcing Ayub to step down on March 24, 1969. Ayub, however, handed over power to another general—Aga Mohammad Yahya Khan. Yahya's 'interim martial law regime' announced general elections in Pakistan for December 7, 1970.

Meanwhile, a devastating cyclone hit the southern coastal belt of East Pakistan on November 12, 1970—24 days before the scheduled general elections. The cyclone took the lives of more than a million men, women and children, but censorship by the state-run media of Pakistan suppressed the information. The Moulana, then ill and under treatment at a nursing home in Dhaka, received information about the country's severest human

tragedy from a BBC news bulletin two days later that said, on the basis of an initial estimate, 'some 50 thousand people have either been killed or washed away into the Bay of Bengal by a devastating cyclone'

A physically weak Moulana rushed to the coastal south, ignoring his physicians' advice, and reached the cyclone-affected areas after an arduous journey—by train, motor launch, country boat, and sometimes on foot—to see the situation for himself. Exposed to the aftermath of the country's greatest human tragedy caused by nature, the Moulana was reportedly seen 'weeping like a child' many times during the tour. The Moulana returned to Dhaka on November 22 and held a press conference to inform the people, both at home and abroad, about the colossal scale of the tragedy. While the Moulana made emotional appeals urging people, both at home and abroad, to come forward to stand by the afflicted, without home and shelter, without food and medicine, 'the people', he said, 'had somehow survived the devastation, despite the fact that none in the central government housed in West Pakistan having cared to visit [and see for themselves the condition of] the hapless citizens of the East' He called a public rally in Dhaka the next day.

The public rally, held on November 23, 1970, was huge. The Moulana described the extent of devastation caused by the natural calamity to the public as to how 10 to 12 hundred thousand human beings had been killed by the cyclone, how their homesteads and livestock had been washed away, how nearly four hundred thousand mutilated bodies of men, women and children, along with hundreds of mutilated livestock, were still lying under the open sky and, how the survivors were struggling for their lives without food and shelter. He urged 'every Bengali' to do whatever s/he could for cyclone survivors. Politically, he outlined before the public the extent of cruelty and indifference which the Islamabad-based central government in Pakistan had displayed towards the people of East Pakistan by way of suppressing the news of the cyclone in the first place, and secondly, distancing itself from the miseries of the Bengalis at the time of their greatest misfortune. After adding a few words about the uselessness of a united Pakistan, the politically important



words that he pronounced from the dais was: *Swadhin Purbo Pakistan Zindabad*—Long live independent East Pakistan.<sup>83</sup>

Notably, when asked about his stance on the independence of East Pakistan, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman of the Awami League told a press conference on November 26, two days after the Moulana's Paltan declaration, "I have demanded regional autonomy, not independence."<sup>84</sup>

Mujib was honest in speaking his mind, as his party was still optimistic about resolving the problems of the Bengalis within the framework of Pakistan. Mujib continued negotiations with General Yahya to avert the disintegration of Pakistan till the last minute, even until a few hours before the latter ordered the genocide of Bengalis on March 25, 1971.

A political anecdote of historical importance substantiates the said recounting of events: Mir Ghaus Bakhsh Bijenzo, a former governor of Balochistan who was elected to the Pakistan National Assembly in 1970 on a NAP ticket from West Pakistan, came to Dhaka on March 13, 1971 to tell Sheikh Mujibur Rahman that they, the NAP led by Wali Khan, supported the Sheikh's 'political stand' that power should be 'transferred to the Awami League' and to urge the Sheikh 'not to break [up] Pakistan'. In response, Bijenzo writes in his autobiography, "Mujib became very emotional ... Tears welled up in his eyes. He asked: Who is telling whom not to break up Pakistan? You, who were associated with the Congress, telling me, who was a hardcore Muslim Leaguer and rendered sacrifices for the creation of Pakistan? What an irony!"<sup>85</sup> Indeed, it was the irony of history that forced Mujib to be on the centre stage of the independence movement of Bangladesh.

However, Bhashani had the political foresight to understand that the phase of demanding regional autonomy within the framework of Pakistan was already over, and that it was time to press for independence.

The December 1970 elections were held with the Moulana's National Awami Party boycotting the polls. Mujib's Awami League easily won a landslide victory. But, as the whole world knows, the military regime of General Yahya refused to hand over power to the Awami League.

While the Moulana publicly professed, and rightly so, that not even an outright electoral victory, let alone the mere holding of elections, would help put an end to the neo-colonial exploitation of East Pakistan by the West Pakistan-based ruling elite, it must also be noted that he had a tactical reason for boycotting the polls—a reason which he disclosed to Saiful Islam, his close associate during the country's War of Independence in 1971. When asked why he had boycotted the polls, the Moulana told Saiful, "Many a revolutionary leader and worker of the party did not believe in elections in the first place. They believed that the objective situation for revolution was ripe. Whereas, I myself thought that revolution or no revolution, the timing was perfect for earning [national] independence. If I had participated in the elections, the voters would have been divided into two camps. Differences of opinion would have reached an extreme point. Subsequently, there would not have been a War of [national] Independence. Hence, I [thought] let Mujibur win. Let territorial independence come, although that would not ensure [the people's] emancipation. We will do the rest. Mujibur has made a grave mistake by making himself available for arrest [by the Pakistanis]."<sup>86</sup>

However, some newspapers, particularly those supporting the Awami League, severely criticized the Moulana for his pronouncement of 'independence' in November 1970.

But the Moulana stuck to his stance. He reasserted his stance the next week, at a mammoth public rally held on December 4, by announcing a 'do-or-die movement' for 'sovereign East Pakistan', reportedly with a three hundred thousand strong roaring audience repeatedly responding to the slogan. The octogenarian Moulana also publicly asked Sheikh Mujibur Rahman to join the movement for the independence of East Pakistan. "Mujib, come and join the East Pakistan independence movement", said the Moulana.<sup>87</sup>

The Moulana meant business. He dismantled the Pakistan National Awami Party, keeping its eastern wing active, which caused dissatisfaction among many a Bengali leader of the organization. Leaders like Haji Mohammad Danesh left the NAP. But the Moulana was uncompromising, and called a conference

of those ‘persons [who were] in favor of independence’ on January 9, 1971.<sup>88</sup>

Mujib started feeling the political pressure mounted on him by the Moulana on the one hand, and the student community, including those loyal to his own party, on the other.

The Bangladesh Students Union (Menon group), the most influential student body of the time, had announced the political programme for establishing an ‘Independent People’s Democratic East Bengal’ from a public rally at the historic Paltan Maidan as early as February 22, 1970. While people at the rally roared and cheered, immediate-past leaders of the group, Kazi Zafar Ahmed and Rashed Khan Menon, publicly argued for independence, for achieving it through an armed struggle by peasants, workers and people.<sup>89</sup>

Much earlier, on December 1, 1968, Siraj Sikder, the leader of the East Bengal Workers Movement, had announced his political thesis for the country’s independence through an armed guerrilla warfare. Several months later, in April 1969, the Co-ordination Committee of the Communist Revolutionaries of East Bengal had announced its programme of national independence through armed struggle.

It was in this context that Mujib told a mammoth public rally on March 7, 1971 that *Ebarer songram muktir songram, ebarer songram swadhinotar songram*, while negotiations over the modalities of the transfer of power were taking place with General Yahya in Dhaka. Thousands were disappointed as they had expected Mujib to clearly declare ‘independence’ The Moulana, who had already done so, observed on March 9 while addressing a public rally at Paltan, “Sheikh Mujib is like my son, he’s incapable of betrayal.” By speaking thus, the Moulana was not only protecting Mujib, toward whom he had always been affectionate, from the growing disaffection of the millions aspiring for independence, but also applying tacit pressure on him to uphold the aspirations of the people.

The Moulana said ‘no’ to attempts by the Awami League to compromise on people’s aspiration that the movement be directed towards national independence. On March 9, 1971, he issued a signed leaflet, cautioning the people of ‘the conspiracies of a few

exploiting Bengalis and their cronies being hatched with military rulers and the exploiters of West Pakistan to forge an opportunistic negotiation to form a government somehow, and thus destroy, again, the unhesitant aspiration of the exploited Bengalis for their right to self-determination' "Full independence, nothing short of it, is our objective, because, there is no alternative for the people of East Bengal to ensure their political and economic progress and self-sufficiency," the Moulana said in the leaflet, and called upon the 'deprived people of East Pakistan' in general and 'peasants in the field, workers in the factories and all the youths' in particular to 'start struggling to protect independence as well as ensure the liberation of East Pakistan'.<sup>90</sup>

As is well known, General Yahya's military regime betrayed Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and the electoral mandate which he had received from the people of East Pakistan. The General resorted to military crackdown on the Bengalis at the dead of night on March 25, 1971. The Sheikh chose to get arrested by the military regime, while the Moulana managed to escape arrest and crossed over by river to Assam, the neighboring state of India, where he still had hundreds of admirers. The War of National Liberation began, and continued until the emergence of Bangladesh as a sovereign state on December 16, 1971.

The central political authorities of India, having perfect knowledge of Bhashani's political inclinations towards red egalitarianism, regarded it as being politically unsafe for them to leave the Moulana alone, to allow him to politically guide the Bengalis' War of National Independence autonomously. Although happy with the Bengali desire for liberation from Pakistan, the last thing that the Indian ruling bourgeoisie wanted was to allow the Moulana to infuse red radicalism into the independence war. The Indian government, therefore, kept the Moulana under its custody throughout Bangladesh's War of Liberation. While under perpetual intelligence surveillance in the custody of the Indian government during the war, the Moulana still managed to effectively intervene more than once in the attempts of a powerful Awami League faction, reportedly led by Khandaker Mushtaq Ahmed, to enter into negotiations with Pakistan. "There can be no

question of negotiating with the killer [Yahya]. Any such negotiation would amount to a betrayal of the nation. Anyone trying to do so would be identified as a national traitor, and would be thrown into the dustbin of history," the Moulana said in a press statement in May 1971, when Mushtaq was reportedly desperate about entering into discussions with the Pakistani political establishment. "War is the only solution. Either we will win the ongoing just War of Independence, or we will perish. There can be no other alternative,"<sup>91</sup> further said the press statement. Bangladesh's independence owes a great deal to the Moulana.

### **No to post-independence electoral despotism**

Bangladesh came into existence as an independent state on December 16, 1971, after a nine-month-long period of guerrilla war conducted by the Bengalis against the occupation forces of Pakistan. Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, who emerged as the topmost leader in the last phase of the Bengalis' political struggle against the erstwhile ruling class of Pakistan before the commencement of the liberation war, returned to Dhaka from Pakistan, via London, on January 10, 1972. Mujibur Rahman embraced arrest on the night of March 25, 1971—the night the occupation forces of Pakistan began a deadly crackdown on unarmed Bengali civilians. He was kept behind bars in Pakistan throughout the Bangladesh war. Still, the Sheikh's political image remained, symbolically, as the top leader during the independence war. However, on his return home, Mujib received a rousing reception in Dhaka and took over the official leadership of the newly-created republic on January 12 as head of the state.

Bhashani returned to Bangladesh from India via the Haluaghat border on January 22, 1972. Since the Pakistani military had burnt his Santosh residence to ashes, the Moulana passed his first night in independent Bangladesh at the Tangail circuit house. The next morning, upon hearing the news of the Moulana's return, a large number of ordinary local people, Hindus and Muslims, started pouring into the circuit house premises to greet their leader. The Moulana addressed the gathering, his first in independent Bangladesh, and asked them to

‘support the government of the Awami League in reconstructing the country’.<sup>92</sup> He, then, visited his burnt-down house at Santosh, and passed the night on a ‘bed made of straw, old sackcloth and worn-out rural *kantha* [quilt]’ at a classroom of what is now the Islamic University.

A people’s man to the core, the Moulana knew the social, political, economic and cultural aspirations of the people at large who had fought politically in the streets for more than two decades, and with arms, for nine months for autonomy and independence. Notably, as S R Mirza admits, ‘in [Bangladesh’s] Liberation War, seventy per cent of the freedom fighters, i.e., the guerrilla warriors, came from the peasantry’.<sup>93</sup>

The Liberation War was a people’s war and the people had taken part in it in the hope of setting up a democratic state that would pursue egalitarian social and economic policies for the welfare of the multitude—a political aspiration which was ignored within the framework of Pakistan. During those years, the slogan of socialism, in the sense of democratic egalitarianism, earned popularity among the ordinary masses—thanks to the influence of a powerful, though not predominant, left movement in the 1960s. The influence of the left-leaning slogan was so strong that it forced the Awami League, the dominant political party of the erstwhile rising Bengali bourgeoisie, to adopt the popular slogan in its political discourse and to promise to establish ‘socialism’ The Moulana knew, rightly, that the adoption of the slogan of socialism was a mere political tactic on the part of the Awami League to politically disarm the left- and the left-leaning camps. A pragmatic politician, the Moulana felt it important to give the Awami League, which had presided over the successful nationalist war, and was therefore still very popular, some time to govern without any opposition.

“There is no example in the history of establishing socialism without a mass revolution. But if any quarter wants to establish socialism through parliamentary means, it should be allowed time to give it a try under watchful eyes of the others,” said the Moulana on February 6, 1972.<sup>94</sup> One of the resolutions of his NAP adopted officially at the end of its Executive Committee meeting the same day, reiterated the Moulana’s stance: “The

course of history shows that socialism cannot be established without a mass revolution. However, Prime Minister of India Mrs Indira Gandhi and Prime Minister of Bangladesh Sheikh Mujibur Rahman assert that socialism can be established through parliamentary means. If they prove to be correct, a new political spring will flow across the world. Under these circumstances we should wait, and monitor [the situation]. The meeting, therefore, urges people that the government of the Awami League should be allowed time to materialize its three professed programmes—democracy, socialism and secularism.”<sup>95</sup>

The Moulana, however, did not refrain from reminding the Awami League government about the purposes of the people’s sacrifices in the War of Liberation. He rather cautioned the government, particularly its supremo Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, about the possible adverse political implications if it failed to honour these sacrifices.

“Our independence is not meant to be merely geographical. The independence, earned through the blood and sacrifices of the people, has to be translated into the liberation of the toiling masses,” said the Moulana while addressing his first public rally at the historic Paltan Maidan in independent Bangladesh on April 2, 1972.<sup>96</sup>

In the wake of increasing allegations of the plunder of public wealth by a section of Awami League leaders and workers, the Moulana cautioned the Sheikh, “Mujib, a quarter in the Awami League is out to grab the ownership of houses, cars and banks by exploiting your popularity. Restrain them. If you fail to do so, a bleak future awaits you. Stop the anti-people activities of the *lutpat samity* [group of freebooters] and feed the masses, otherwise your popularity will vanish.”<sup>97</sup>

The Moulana criticized the Awami League for its decision to unilaterally frame the Constitution of the newly emerged state. “Three million people believing in different political ideologies have sacrificed their lives in the War of Independence. The writing of the Constitution of the state, therefore, cannot be an Awami League monopoly,” the Moulana argued. He also said, “a [national] convention [of different political parties and groups] should have been convened to formulate the Constitution, so that



Moulana Bhashani observes hunger strike at one stage of the movement for 'food for the people' in 1973. Photo: Rashid Talukder.



the document reflects the opinions of all concerned.”<sup>98</sup>

The Awami League did not pay heed to any advice, any reminder, any warning coming from any quarter of political opponents or any person holding an opposing opinion. The League’s supremo, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, who was then at the peak of his popularity, chose the path of eliminating his political opponents instead. He even ordered law enforcement agencies to ‘shoot Naxalites (ultra-lefts) on sight’. The Moulana instantly protested, saying: “Nobody bears the mark of being a Naxalite on his face. So, such an order is absolutely inconsistent with democratic norms and principles. You are free to arrest the alleged criminals, to try them in a court of law and to punish them if found guilty. But any extra-judicial murder is unacceptable.”<sup>99</sup>

However, the League went ahead and adopted the state’s Constitution unilaterally<sup>100</sup> on November 4, 1972—completely ignoring political parties and groups of opposing ideologies, particularly the ones which had actively fought the country’s liberation war independently of the League’s control. The League’s unilaterally adopted Constitution of the newly emerged republic recognized as ‘fundamental principles of the state’ (a) ‘Bengali nationalism’ ignoring the identity and existence of national minority groups, (b) ‘socialism’ without recognizing the citizens’ rights to food, clothing, shelter, education and healthcare as legally enforceable fundamental rights, (c) ‘secularism’ without separating religion from the state, and (d) ‘democracy’, which, as later developments proved, had no commitment to the idea of tolerating, let alone accommodating, dissenting views of political opponents.

Notably, during the process of unilateral adoption of the Constitution of the republic, top-level leaders of the pro-Moscow NAP issued a leaflet on October 29, 1972 against the unilateralism. The leaflet read: “It is a matter of deep regret and grave concern that the ruling party, while preparing a sacred document like the Constitution of the state, has displayed an extremely parochial partisan attitude. The incumbents have neither shown any respect towards the opinions or advice of the political parties that actively participated in the Liberation War, nor have they bothered about public opinion in this regard.”<sup>101</sup>

The government of the League, which adopted the parliamentary system of governance, announced that the first parliamentary polls, based on the newly-framed Constitution, would be held on March 7, 1973.

Moulana Bhashani's NAP<sup>102</sup> decided to contest the polls. Although the Moulana was the most popular opposition leader, he did not have a well-organized party at his command. Besides, 'some right-wing communal elements intruded into his left-leaning NAP around the time, and the left-wingers' conflicts with their right-wing counterparts further weakened the party'.<sup>103</sup> The Moulana, therefore, responded positively to the urging by smaller parties to contest the elections jointly against the Awami League which was visibly developing autocratic tendencies, and as a result, an opposition 'electoral alliance' of seven heterogeneous political parties and groups was forged under the leadership of the Moulana. Some opposition parties, like the Jatiya Samajtantrik Dal (JSD), the pro-Moscow Communist Party of Bangladesh led by Moni Singh, and the pro-Moscow faction of the NAP led by Professor Muzaffar Ahmed, remained outside the opposition alliance. While the JSD was politically hostile towards the Awami League, the pro-Moscow parties were sympathetic to the ruling party.

In the beginning, all the contesting parties enthusiastically put in all-out efforts to consolidate their respective political strength through fighting the first-ever parliamentary polls in the newly-independent country. But as the elections came nearer, the signs of autocratic intervention of the League became more visible, which got crudely manifested at first by the forcible ousting of several opposition candidates out of the electoral race on February 5, 1973—the date scheduled for the submission of nomination papers by the candidates. The League forced opposition candidates in as many as 10 parliamentary constituencies to stay out of the polls to pave the way for the League's candidates to be declared elected uncontested.<sup>104</sup> Sheikh Mujibur Rahman was also declared elected uncontested, but there was no controversy over his election.

However, in the midst of the electoral campaign, the Moulana suddenly appeared unenthusiastic about the campaign and got

admitted to the hospital on the 'pretext of illness' on February 28, 1973, a week ahead of the elections. Moreover, when the Sheikh paid a visit to the Moulana in the hospital on March 5, less than two days before the polls, the latter publicly blessed the former, and a photograph showing the Moulana blessing Mujib by laying his hand affectionately on Mujib's head was printed in the national dailies of the day.<sup>105</sup> The political message of the gesture was absolutely clear to the electorates: The old man has decided to give Mujib a political walkover in the maiden general elections in independent Bangladesh. The Moulana still believed that the League, which had practically presided over the War of Liberation, and its party chief Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, who was still at the zenith of his popularity, should be allowed to secure a landslide victory to govern the country for the initial years without much obstruction from a strong parliamentary opposition.<sup>106</sup> The Moulana was exposed to adverse criticism from some leaders of his own party and the opposition alliance which was concerned about his 'political sympathy' for the Sheikh.<sup>107</sup>

Had the election been free and fair, the Awami League would still have secured a comfortable majority in Parliament. Nevertheless, the Leaguers were in no mood to allow a free and fair democratic election and, therefore, resorted to 'brazen vote-rigging' which polluted the beginning of the republic's democratic journey. In many a constituency the Awami League candidates 'lost the vote but still won the count'.<sup>108</sup> In the end, the League bagged all but seven seats in the 300-strong Jatiya Sangsad. Of the seven seats, one went to the Bangladesh Jatiya League of Ataur Rahman and the rest to non-partisan independent candidates.

The League was exposed to severe criticism for vote-rigging and manipulating electoral results. Professor Muzaffar Ahmed and Pankaj Bhattacharya, president and general secretary of the pro-Moscow faction of the NAP, in a joint statement on March 9, 1973, accused the League of 'forcible capture of polling stations, kidnapping of polling agents of the opposition, casting false votes, et cetera' on the election day. "Had there been no rigging, the opposition parties would have won at least 70 seats," asserted

the NAP leaders.<sup>109</sup> Earlier, on March 8, Prime Minister Sheikh Mujibur Rahman claimed at a press conference in the capital city, "There is no opposition in Bangladesh."<sup>110</sup>

However, it was common knowledge in the country that the parliamentary elections were massively rigged by the incumbents, although, as noted earlier, the governing League would have easily secured a comfortable victory over the opposition without any rigging. Why did the League rig the polls, then? The most charitable explanation put forward by S A Karim, a biographer of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, remains: "(a) to keep [opposition] candidates out of the Parliament who might give trouble to the ruling party and (b) to make sure that important ministers like ... [Abdus Samad] Azad and Abdul Mannan did not lose their seats."<sup>111</sup> But a more realistic one was buried in the Sheikh's claim, which, in fact was a manifestation of the League's political desire that would surface soon: setting the political stage to get rid of dissenting ideologies. After all, the signs of the elimination of politicians of opposing ideologies came to be visible even before the elections, when young and popular left-wing leaders like Kazi Zafar Ahmed and Rashed Khan Menon started to receive death threats from the still-armed Mujib Bahini boys.<sup>112</sup>

Under these repressive political circumstances, the ever-oppositional Moulana found it important to provide democratic opposition to a governing party which was getting more autocratic by the day. Subsequently, he formed a political alliance of seven left and liberal-democratic opposition parties and groups<sup>113</sup> in April 1973 to stand in the way of autocratic political practices of the League.

As part of a movement against the soaring prices of essential commodities, repressive measures against political opponents and anarchism in all spheres of public life, including that in the state-owned enterprises, professional and industrial sectors, the Moulana announced a 'fast unto death' programme from a Paltan rally on May 14, 1973. He began the fast at his NAP office the next morning.

His health deteriorated seriously on May 19, the fifth day of the fast. Subsequently, people from all strata began pouring into

NAP office' premises. His condition reached a critical stage on May 22, the eighth day of the fast, leading the top pro-democracy intellectuals of the time to urge him in person, and to issue a press statement, to break the fast 'for the sake of being able to lead the democratic movement against the autocratic regime of the League' Eventually, the Moulana had to be admitted to hospital. Meanwhile, his NAP organized a public rally at the Paltan Maidan the same afternoon to press home the septuagenarian politician's pro-people demands. In response, "the pro-government goons launched a brutal attack on the public gathering and vandalized the dais constructed for the rally. The League activists unleashed a reign of terror in the entire city that day. Many an organizer of the rally was injured."<sup>114</sup> Under these circumstances, the Moulana broke his fast, after 180 hours, reportedly by taking lemon juice from a poor Hindu pushcart driver, Moley Sarkar, on the night of May 22, 1973.<sup>115</sup> The Moulana, after all, was the leader of the poor, irrespective of their religious identities. Around that time, the country's law and order situation had deteriorated further. According to a media report, between January 1972 and April 1973, as many as 4,925 persons were the victims of secret killings and 2,035 persons of political killings.<sup>116</sup>

At this moment in history, society started getting sharply polarized on political lines, with the Awami League gradually constricting the space for the opposition, on the one hand, and the opposition forces fighting for democratic space, on the other.

In the process, in September 1973, the Awami League forged an alliance with the pro-Moscow factions of the Communist Party of Bangladesh and the National Awami Party against the rest of the political forces—a unity that would eventually culminate in the introduction of the Sheikh's one-party rule in January 1975.

Subsequently, as historian Williem van Schendel notes, "The opposition parties, feeling that they had been swindled out of their parliamentary role, returned to the street politics that had been so effective in Pakistan times. General strikes (*hartal*) and mass encirclements (*gherao*) reappeared, and the government reaction resembled that of the erstwhile Pakistan government. For example, an Awami League mob set fire to the headquarters of

the JSD, the JSD newspaper was taken over by the government and hundreds of party members were arrested.

“Now an inescapable dynamics set in. The state’s strong arm tactics left little room for open opposition and pushed many dissenters underground. A plethora of leftist groups, all out to complete what they saw as Bangladesh’s unfinished or aborted revolution, began to wage armed resistance in the countryside,”<sup>117</sup> writes Schendel.

In attempts to regain control, the Sheikh’s government came up with various coercive instruments, such as the paramilitary *Rakkhi Bahini* comprising youths having political allegiance to the Awami League, the tyrannical *Lal Bahini* comprising pro-government industrial workers, *Secchaasevak Bahini* comprising the so-called youth volunteers of the party, et cetera to eliminate political opponents with any ideological leanings. As the conflicts proceeded, ‘some 4,000 leaders and activists of the Awami League and several thousand of its opposition counterparts were killed by the end of 1974’.<sup>118</sup>

Meanwhile, the Awami League government had made a mess out of the country’s economy, seriously affecting the purchasing capacity of the people. The Moulana, always a people’s man connected with the ground realities, ‘saw in 1973 the signs of a famine approaching and kept on cautioning the government and the governing party about the impending danger’ But the old man’s warnings fell on the deaf ears of the incumbents, many of whom were busy making money by various illegal means.

Even though the rice harvest of December 1973 was good, rice prices kept rising, ‘a situation blamed largely on politically well-connected traders’ However, according to schendel, “by March 1974 starvation, begging and distress migration were on the rise. In these desperate circumstances nature struck a blow: the summer brought deep, long and damaging floods, pushing many more people over the edge.”<sup>119</sup>

Notably, “there was a 21 per cent increase in the average price of rice in a few weeks from July to August, in some of the most flood-affected areas the price doubled in three months between July and October [1974],”<sup>120</sup> writes S A Karim.

By the end of August 1974, as Mohiuddin Khan Alamgir

describes, “the whole of Bangladesh turned into an agonizing spectacle of confusion and human suffering...it was 1943 re-enacted. Streams of hungry people (men, women and children), who were nothing but skeletons, trekked into towns in search of food. Most of them were half-naked ...there was very little support available for the destitutes in urban centers except for some private charity ...after a few days of wandering around the streets of the city they simply collapsed and died.”<sup>121</sup>

By September, according to a foreign journalist visiting Bangladesh those days, “most Bangladeshis are eating less than they did before independence (down from an average 15. 4 ounces daily to 12.9). Nearly half of them no longer eat the minimum supposedly needed to stay alive”.<sup>122</sup>

Bangladesh’s then food minister claimed on November 22, 1974 that 27,500 people had died from hunger. But ‘other estimates indicate much higher mortality, including the estimation that in Rangpur district alone 80 to 100 thousand persons died of starvation and malnutrition in 2–3 months’ during the famine,<sup>123</sup> notes Indian Nobel Laureat Amarta Sen. Some unofficial estimates put the death toll at about 200,000.

The devastating famine of 1974 reminded many historians of the two large-scale famines that severely hit Bengal killing people in the millions. The first one hit Bengal in 1770, only 13 years into the victory of the Battle of Plassey by the British, which ‘wiped out a third of the Bengal population’ The second large-scale famine hit Bengal in 1943, four years before the British quit India, which ‘killed at least 1.5 million people’ The third devastating famine hit the people of Bangladesh in 1974, two years into the country’s independence.

The tragedy about the killer famine of 1974 was that it did not occur due to a shortage of food in the market, nor was it the result of any natural disaster which some Awamil League supporters had wanted the people to believe. “Whatever the Bangladesh famine of 1974 might have been, it wasn’t a FAD (Food Availability Decline) famine,” argues Amartya Sen.<sup>124</sup> “In fact food availability was at its peak in the Bangladesh famine of 1974—higher than in any other year during 1974-1975. Market power was used to command food and snatch it from others, and



Moulana Bhashani addresses a workers' rally at Tongi in 1971. Photo: Rashid Talukder.



Devil took the hindmost. The hindmost came mostly from a few occupation groups.”<sup>125</sup> S A Karim says, “Black marketeers, hoarders and smugglers made a lot of money during the famine”.<sup>126</sup>

The terrible difference in the conditions between the two classes of people, one, the victims of the famine, the other, its beneficiaries, was reflected in the contemporary international press. A foreign journalist noted, “A stone’s throw from the Intercontinental Hotel where rich young Bangladeshis are happy to pay nearly £ 1 for a tin of lager (beer) from Singapore, there is an open space where an industrial bank is to be built. It was awash with mud and odure and nearly 1,000 people exist there living in thatched shacks battered by monsoon rains, hungry, with scabies and T.B. at epidemic levels and completely without hope.”<sup>127</sup>

The famine and its devastating effect on the toiling millions must have emotionally affected the Moulana, already 89, and he got disgusted with self-seeking politics in general and the rulers’ selfish indifference toward the interests of the ordinary millions in particular. At this stage of his long political life, the Moulana confided in his confidants more than once that he had, in fact, already quit party politics.<sup>128</sup> Subsequently, he launched on April 8, 1974, the *Hukumate Rabbania Samity*, describable as a humanist organization dedicated to the wellbeing of all ‘children’ of God irrespective of their faith. Under the auspices of the Samity, the Moulana held a public rally on April 14 at the Paltan Maidan of the capital city, and passionately urged Sheikh Mujib’s government to save the lives of famine-hit poor.

“I don’t want to live any longer, my contemporaries have already died. I’m still alive, it would seem, to see the sufferings of human beings, the best of God’s creature,” a saddened Moulana told the rally.

“Please save, save the lives of the people, save the best of God’s creatures. People are dying of hunger! Mothers are forced to sell their children! Please save the people...come forward, sink differences with your political opponents, forget your bitter rivalry with them.

“Given the enormity of the crisis, Mujib, it is no longer

possible for you alone to save the people [from the famine]. Release the political prisoners, withdraw the warrants of arrest against your political opponents, convene an all-party meeting. I will also attend the meeting. Make all-out efforts to save dying human beings,"<sup>129</sup> the Moulana was reported to have said in the public rally.

Mujib's government, however, paid no heed to the caring advice of the nonagenarian politician. It was busy instead in imposing Section 144 of the CrPC across the country to foil opposition rallies protesting against the government's failure to take appropriate measures to save the poor from famine.

On June 2, 1974, Bhashani issued a four-week ultimatum to the government within which the food crisis would have to be effectively addressed and the deteriorating law and order situation contained. In case of failure, the Moulana announced in advance, a protest rally would be held at Paltan on June 30 on behalf of the six-party opposition alliance<sup>130</sup>, which he had forged in early 1974.

The government failed on both fronts and imposed Section 144 in the Paltan areas of Dhaka city, banning all rallies and processions in the city. Oli Ahad, a leader of the opposition alliance, filed a writ petition on June 28 with the Appellate Division of the Supreme Court against the ban on holding the June 30 public rally.<sup>131</sup> The government deployed the *Rakkhi Bahini*, a paramilitary force already infamous for its partisan allegiance to the League and its brutal oppression of the League's political opponents, around the Paltan Maidan on June 30 to foil the public rally. As the leaders of the alliance reached the meeting venue in the afternoon, Oli Ahad was arrested, and sent to prison. The rest managed to escape.

Earlier, at dawn on June 30, 1974, the government arrested the Moulana, and forcibly took him to his village home at Santosh in Tangail, where he was detained by the police and kept under a 24-hour surveillance. The Moulana remained detained there for more than a year, until the brutal murder of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman on August 15, 1975.

Meanwhile, both the country's economic condition, and the law and order situation deteriorated further. Moreover, a

catastrophic flood hit the country in July 1974, pushing the already miserable lives of the famine-stricken people into complete jeopardy. Economic mismanagement reached its climax soon. The finance minister, Tajuddin Ahmed, blamed the government's 'wrong policies' for the economic disaster. "Because of the wrong policies pursued by the government, the country's economic condition is in jeopardy," the finance minister admitted to the press on October 13, 1974.<sup>132</sup> But instead of correcting the administration's wrong economic policies, Mujib punished Tajuddin for his public confession of the government's failure in economic management. Tajuddin was made to resign from the Cabinet on October 26. "By the end of the year, the Bangladesh government stood exposed as inept, indifferent and heartless. All its political credit had vanished. Seventy distinguished Bangladeshi economists, lawyers and writers issued a statement saying that the famine was manmade, and had resulted from shameless plunder, exploitation, terrorization, flattery, fraudulence and misrul,"<sup>133</sup> writes Schendel.

The Sheikh's regime was getting more and more autocratic by the day. It promulgated a 'state of emergency' across the country on December 28, 1974, suspending the fundamental rights of the citizens, such as the right to freedom of conscience, right to freedom of speech and expression, right to freedom of movement, assembly, et cetera, guaranteed by the constitution of the republic.

The year 1975 began with the arrest of Siraj Sikdar, the leader of the *Purba Bangla Sarbahara Party*, a communist party that had fought actively in the country's liberation war in 1971 and put up armed resistance against the autocratic governance of the Awami League since independence. Sikdar was shot dead the next day, January 2, 1975 while in police custody, marking the country's first high-profile extra-judicial murder of a political opponent by the government.

With Moulana Bhashani detained, Siraj Sikdar killed, JSD leaders hounded, and other opposition parties and groups scared and scattered by the terror unleashed by the governing quarters, Mujib got the politically infamous Fourth Amendment to the Constitution passed by Parliament, without any debate in the

House, on January 25, 1975. The amendment in question introduced an autocratic presidential system of governance with an all-powerful President placed above the Constitution of the republic,<sup>134</sup> one which empowered the President to undo any law enacted by Parliament. It also imposed executive control over the judiciary and curtailed the democratic jurisdiction of the appellate courts to safeguard the fundamental rights of the citizens. Moreover, the amendment provided the President with the authority to launch a political party of his own and impose a ban on all opposition parties. It was, indeed, a civilian *coup d'état* against a democratic political system that was yet to take root. The autocratic political measures, in fact, substantively distorted the country's political process.

Many historians suggest that there was a lot of provocation at that time from within the Awami League and particularly its youth front, the Jubo League, for Mujib—who had championed the cause of multi-party parliamentary democracy his whole life—to degrade himself to the level of a civilian autocrat. M A Wajed Miah, one of Mujib's sons-in-law, describes one such incident which took place in mid-November 1974: "A group of middle-aged as well as young leaders of the Awami League and the Juba League came to see the Bangabandhu at his residence. In the course of discussion, one of them told the Bangabandhu, 'Leader, it is not fair that another person should enjoy the highest honour of the state as president of the republic, while you, despite being the father of the nation, should remain the country's prime minister. We, therefore, humbly appeal to you that you switch over to the presidential system of governance from the parliamentary one and take the post of the president of the state' The rest of the leaders present unanimously supported the view quite strongly."<sup>135</sup> S A Karim provides us with another such example as he writes, "for quite some time [Sheikh Fazlul Huq] Moni had openly advocated the 'rule of Mujib, instead of the rule of law'."<sup>136</sup>

Within an hour of the adoption of the draconian constitutional amendment on January 25, 1975, Prime Minister Sheikh Mujibur Rahman became the all-powerful president, discarding the democratic accountability of the elected representatives of the

people, on the one hand, and the democratic separation of power, on the other. Within a month, on February 24, 1975, the Sheikh floated his political party, the Bangladesh Krishak-Sramik Awami League (BKSAL) and banned the rest. He called this civilian dictatorship the 'second revolution' and 'installed himself as Bangladesh's first autocratic ruler'.<sup>137</sup> The pro-Moscow factions of the Communist Party and the National Awami Party happily joined the dictatorial one-party system. The others went underground. Later, on June 16, 1975, the Sheikh's one-party regime came down heavily on the freedom of expression of the citizens in general and the political dissidents in particular. It promulgated the Newspaper (Annulment of Declaration) Ordinance, 1975, under which only four daily newspapers—two in Bangla and two in English—were allowed to continue publication, and that too under strict government control. The rest of the papers were banned.

Around the time, Mujib visited the detained Moulana more than once in the latter's home at Santosh, but nobody knows what exactly transpired during the private talks between the two leaders. The Moulana's critics as well as a section of the League leaders speculated that Mujib had secured the Moulana's nod of approval for the introduction of the so-called second revolution. But given his proven abhorrence for dictatorial rule, one has reason to believe that the Moulana, if free, would have vigorously protested against this 'civilian dictatorship' imposed by Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. The Moulana, after all, had written a couple of years ago that 'any kind of dictatorship, even if it be proletarian, is unacceptable'.<sup>138</sup>

However, a bloody military *coup d'état* followed Mujib's civilian one which brutally dethroned Mujib and dismantled his BKSAL on August 15, 1975. Mujib's political opponents, having apparently been relieved of the autocratic regime, particularly the ones disbanded and hounded by his government, appeared happy at the military takeover. But eventually the military *coup d'état* further distorted the country's political process, making the democratization of society and state not only more difficult than ever, but also contributing to the autocratisation of the country's political parties. Unlike other leaders, the Moulana had foreseen

the adverse political consequences of the violent overthrow of the Mujib regime. "Everything is finished,"<sup>139</sup> uttered the detained Moulana instantly after hearing the news of the extrajudicial murder of President Sheikh Mujibur Rahman.

### No to politics of isolated violence

Moulana Bhashani had never been a great admirer of the political philosophy of non-violence. He had rather dissuaded political activists committed to the idea of people's power against the philosophy of *ahimsa*, i.e., non-violence, on more than one occasion.

"Do not get carried away by the concept of *ahimsa*. If you do, you will lose the revolutionary spirit. If you lose the revolutionary spirit, you can at best pretend to be an amateurish patriot, but cannot do anything effective for the emancipation of the toiling masses," the Moulana cautioned progressive political activists dedicated to the cause of the people at large.<sup>140</sup>

"*Ahimsa* subdues the people who, with the flag of revolution hoisted high could defeat the exploiters, make humble appeals to the palaces of those who would never free the people from exploitation...

"*Ahimsa*, after all, is a great tactic of exploitation...a soft means of controlling or destroying the people's revolutionary spirit of taking bold steps towards abolition of exploitative systems...That is why I have never tolerated the theory of *ahimsa*—however sweet it may sound or however philosophical it may seem. The welfare of 95 per cent of the people lies, I believe, in rejecting with disgust the principles of *ahimsa* and the retention of revolutionary programmes."<sup>141</sup>

The Moulana believed that 'an interesting seminar could be held among educated circles on Gandhian, and Tolstoy's, philosophy of *ahimsa*, but no effective programme could be adopted on the basis of *ahimsa* that would put an end to imperialist, colonialist and capitalist exploitations, and would ensure the democratic emancipation of the proletarian masses'.<sup>142</sup>

Understandably, the Moulana believed in the political utility of violence in fighting against the social, political and economic

injustice imposed on the poor masses by the politically powerful rulers who use institutional violence of the state to keep the ruled subjugated. It was, therefore, not surprising that the Moulana organised and politically indoctrinated the professional dacoits in the mid-1920s to put up resistance against the colonial zaminders and the usurers – two groups of vested interests that ruthlessly exploited the poor peasants of the erstwhile Bengal. “Moulana Bhashani, at that time, drew closer to him some daring dacoits and deployed them to terrorise the zaminders and usurers. Besides, he arranged for burning out the houses of the usurers in order to destroy the deeds made to accrue high rate of interests from the poor peasants,”<sup>143</sup> writes Sayed Irfanul Bari, who was a close political associate of the Moulana particularly in the last years of the latter’s life.

The Moulana used to keep in touch with such ‘daring dacoits’ terrorising the exploiting landed class even in the later phases of his political life. One of such ‘dacoits’, Kasimuddin Dewan, turned out to be a great Freedom-Fighter during the country’s Liberation War in 1971. He eventually faced martyrdom while fighting against the occupation forces of Pakistan in late 1971.<sup>144</sup>

However, Moulana Bhashani never believed in isolated violence—the violence which is devoid of people’s conscious political participation. For him, isolated violence was nothing more than ‘terrorism’, be it sponsored by state or non-state actors, one which did not help in achieving any of the great political objectives of the people.

It is this that made the Moulana protest vigorously against Mujib’s prime ministerial order to ‘shoot Naxalites at sight’, that made him ask that the perpetrators of any crime should be punished through an open trial in a court of law. Clearly, he refused to accept state-sponsored extra-judicial violence against political opponents. Similarly, the Moulana refused to accept the brutal murder of Mujib and his family by a group of disgruntled army officers—serving, retired and sacked—at the dead of night on August 15, 1975.

Most of Mujib’s political opponents were visibly happy at his violent dethronement, while the people were largely indifferent to the gruesome murder, although many of them celebrated the

politically disastrous event—thanks to Mujib’s post-independence autocratic governance. Many politicians, and a group of intellectuals, put forward various justifications for the violent murder, arguing that Mujib, by means of politically banning the opposition, had left no political means to fight against the civilian dictatorship that he had unleashed. But Bhashani, despite his democratic political struggle against the autocratic governance of Mujib, did not rejoice. Instead, the Moulana wept at the news of the gruesome murder. It was not only his deep personal affection for Mujib that the Moulana wept at the former’s murder, but also he must have been deeply troubled by the possible adverse political implications of the military putsch. The old man perhaps instantly realized that the isolated violence that took the president’s life might expose the country to military rule; that a one-party civilian dictatorship might eventually bring in a one-man military dictatorship.

The Moulana came to know of the grisly murder of Mujib, and the subsequent change of guard in the centre of power, from one of his followers who had gathered at his hut in Santosh early in the morning. As the Moulana came out of his prayer room after saying his *Fazr* prayer, the follower claimed to have heard of the murder from the state-controlled radio. Totally astonished, the Moulana asked someone to get him a radio to enable him to hear the ‘unbelievable’ news himself. “The radio came. After hearing the radio announcement [of the murder], the Moulana asked me to stay back for a while. He entered the prayer room again, and came out after about an hour, his eyes full of tears. ‘Everything is finished’, he said. Tears were rolling down his cheeks continuously, as he quickly kept counting the beads of his rosary... I realized how deeply Sheikh Mujib had resided in his heart. I realized that the *huzur* was praying from the core of his heart for Mujib,” recalls Atiqur Rahman Salu, a close associate of Moulana Bhashani at that time.<sup>145</sup>

It is pertinent to raise the question as to why the Moulana uttered the words, ‘everything is finished’, on learning about Mujib’s murder—particularly when he himself was politically critical of Mujib’s autocratic governance? Simple. Possessing a genuinely democratic political mind, and being a lifelong fighter



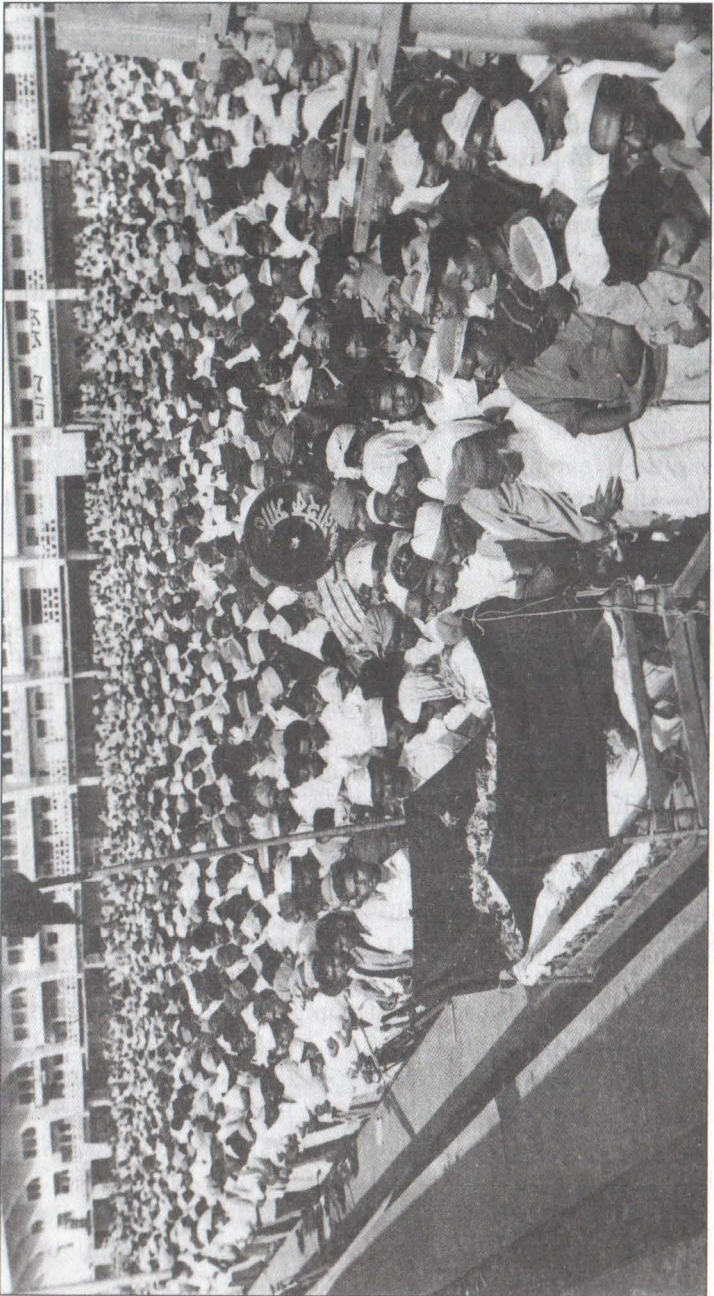
against autocratic regimes of various colours, it was only natural that the Moulana would understand the adverse effects of a military-driven political takeover of power on the country's future political process. For Bhashani, the answer to any authoritarian regime lay with the ouster of the regime by a militant mass-movement guided by democratic politics.

However, it was none other than a group of Mujib's men, his admirers when Mujib had been alive, who readily formed the government within a few hours of his murder, and that too before the burial of the slain President and his family members, roundly denouncing his autocratic BKSAL regime.<sup>146</sup> The chiefs of three services of the country's armed forces—army chief Major General K. M. Shafiullah, air force chief Air Vice Marshal A. K. Khandaker and naval chief Commodore M. H. Khan—who had been included in the central committee of Mujib's BKSAL, publicly expressed their allegiance to the newly-formed government of Khandaker Mushtaq Ahmed.

Bhashani did not. The Moulana snubbed Mushtaq by way of refusing to see him.

In his first bid to win Bhashani's support, Khandaker Mushtaq sent General M. A. G. Osmani, the chief of the armed forces during the Liberation War, to Bhashani's Santosh residence on August 16, 1975. The retired General, who was reportedly 'sad about what had happened to Mujib and his family', urged the Moulana to issue a public statement 'supporting Mushtaq's government to save the situation' arising out of the overthrow of the Mujib regime. The Moulana turned down the request outright.<sup>147</sup>

Then, on August 21, Mushtaq himself went to meet the Moulana, to seek his support. But the Moulana was aware that Mujib, when alive, had trusted Mushtaq the most. He probably discovered a Brutus in Mushtaq. Having been a courageous fighter for democratic transparency in politics throughout his life, being committed to fighting political tyrants upfront with the active support of the masses, Bhashani had no reason to appreciate a cowardly, dishonest and ambitious politician like Mushtaq who seemingly had plotted to betray his own leader, Mujib, to rise to power over the latter's dead body. Therefore,



Moulana Bhashani takes part in the namaz-e-*janaza* of Sergeant Zahurul Haque, who was allegedly killed in custody in 1969.  
Photo: Naib Uddin Ahmed.

“the Moulana refused to see Mushtaq, on the pretext of illness due to throat problems and a troubling hernia.”<sup>148</sup>

The Moulana ‘welcomed’ Mushtaq only when the latter publicly pledged, in a speech broadcast on October 4, 1975, to ‘release political prisoners, hold general elections based on adult franchise and ensure media freedom’.<sup>149</sup> Later, after a series of military coups and counter-coups, Major General Ziaur Rahman emerged at the helm of power on November 7, 1975 and the Moulana wished him ‘good luck’, and advised him to ‘do justice to the responsibility that had fallen on’ him, perhaps because ordinary soldiers and the people at large had visibly provided massive support to the general. “The spontaneous support displayed, and the explicit solidarity expressed, by the people at large to the November 7 revolution remains a manifestation of people’s disapproval of the politics and the political leadership that the country has witnessed in the preceding years,” said the Moulana on December 7, 1975 at the first public gathering which he addressed after the mid-August political changeover.<sup>150</sup>

However, it is important to note that despite differences of opinion with Mujib, Bhashani valued the Sheikh’s political struggle for democracy in the Pakistan era. This was clear as he defended Mujib after his assassination when the latter’s opportunist followers indulged in abusing the slain politician, now that the political circumstances had changed. When the Moulana went on a weeklong tour of the country’s northern districts in November-December 1975, he was witness to, along with the miseries of poverty-stricken people, the Awami League workers’ verbal abuse of Mujib, prompted by their bid to regain the people’s support in the coming elections. The Moulana detested it, and protested against opportunist League supporters whom the Sheikh had left behind.

In the Moulana’s own words: “The Awami League workers were busy bad-mouthing Sheikh Mujib [in the northern districts], saying that he had never listened to others... I told the people of north Bengal that it was because of Sheikh Mujib’s political struggle of the past that many a leader, semi-leader and worker [of the Awami League] got the opportunity to become ministers, to become members [of the local government].”<sup>151</sup>

Mujib's violent assassination eventually exposed the people of Bangladesh to a one-man military dictatorship from a one-party autocratic regime, and further distorted the country's democratic political process. Had Mujib's autocratic regime been defeated by an organized public resistance guided by democratic politics, a sound growth of democratic political process would have germinated on the debris of the Awami League's civilian autocratic regime. In other words, the subsequent military regimes would not have been able to stand in the way of the democratization of society and state. Moulana Bhashani was right in opposing the politics of violence devoid of people's active participation.

The Moulana had tremendous confidence in the people's intellectual ability to politically assess a given state of affairs, be it social, economic or otherwise, and their inherent strength to change any adverse situation to the favour of the masses through organised movement.

He used to believe, "[T]he [collective consciousness of the] people of any country has never made any mistake. Those who claim that the people may make mistakes due to their illiteracy or ignorance and cannot therefore be relied upon fully, do not really know the people."<sup>152</sup>

He also knew, rightly, that the mass movement, or organised resistance of the masses, instead of going negotiations across the table, was the ultimate solution to the social, political and economic oppressions imposed on the people by the ruling elites. That is why the Moulana could unequivocally announce: "Talks between the oppressor and the oppressed never benefit the latter; it is always the oppressor who wins at the negotiating table... There should, therefore, be no discussion with a tyrant; the people are to realize their legitimate demands through mass movements."<sup>153</sup>

For the Moulana, the right path to achieve people's democratic emancipation from tyranny was therefore neither non-violence by the people, nor violence without politically-guided active participation of the people. The first hardly delivers, while the second, even if it does away with one kind of tyranny for the time being, could lead to another form of autocracy without much

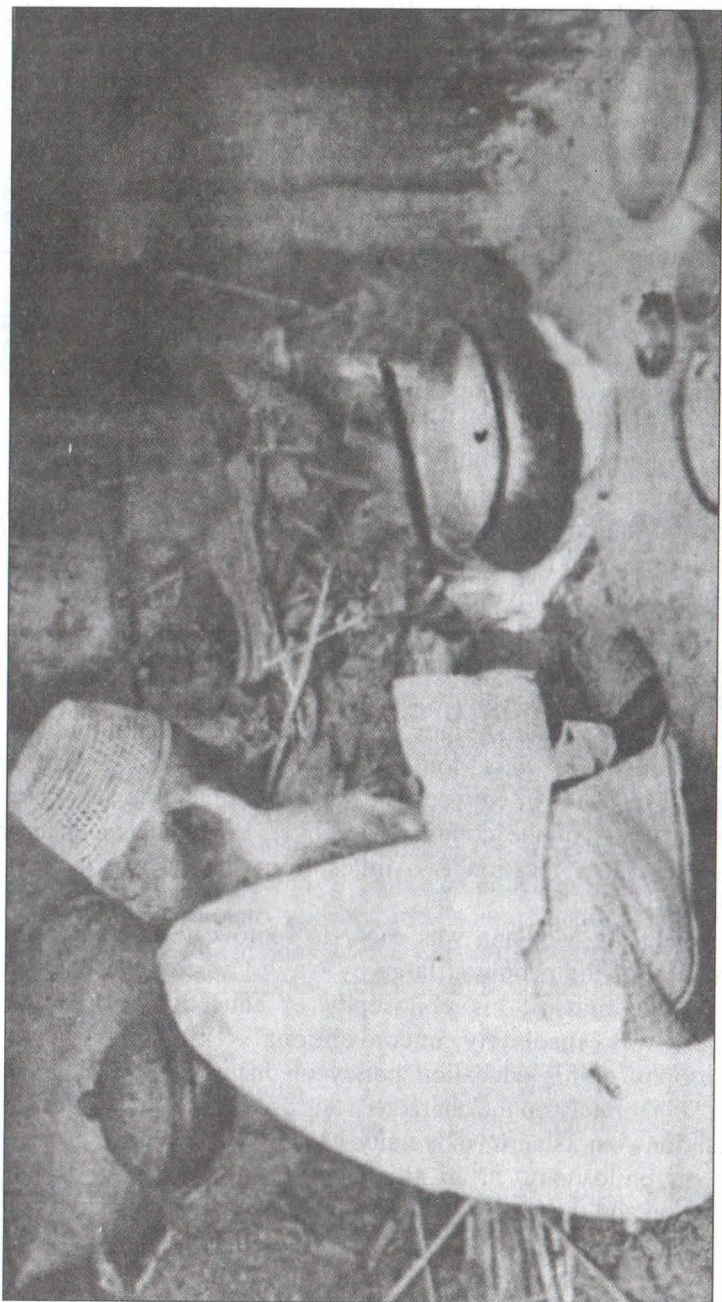
delay. The Moulana was for combining violence with peoples' active political resistance.

While saying 'no' to any form of autocracy is very important for the democratization of societies and states, the decisively uncompromising mass movements guided by democratic politics remain the correct political answer to autocracy—civil or military.

### **No to luxury and un-education**

A great popular leader with millions of admirers at home and abroad, Moulana Bhashani could easily have lived a luxurious life. But he decided not to. Instead, he chose a life similar to that lived by the country's poor millions. The Moulana spent most of his life in his 'mud-and-mat huts, with a mat-screen around' in his village, except, of course, for the long years when he was forced to stay in prison under different autocratic regimes. He would come to Dhaka, the capital city, on political occasions, but hardly ever stayed in the city for more than a week at a time. He did not own any house in Dhaka or, for that matter, in any other city, because he did not deem it necessary in the first place.

The kind of attire that the Moulana wore was the one worn by the country's ordinary millions: an inexpensive *lungi*, a *panjabi* and a pair of plastic sandals. In the initial years of his struggle for the peasants' rights, he would wear *pajama-panjabi*, at times even a *sherwani*. However, he left them for good after his political and religious guru, Allama Azad Subhani of India, once asked him to wear the clothes worn by ordinary people—those whom he aspired to lead towards social and economic emancipation.<sup>154</sup> It was not only Bhashani, but also his family that led the simple life of peasants. His wife did not even have a pair of sandals. Once when one of his followers drew his attention to this, the Moulana countered: How many rural women have sandals to wear in the country?<sup>155</sup> His children grew up in the village, similar to how common rural boys and girls grew up in those days. There were occasions when the Moulana did not have enough money to buy rice for his family at Santosh.<sup>156</sup> There is no other example of a big politician in Bangladesh, one who has



Moulana Bhashani in his kitchen. Photo : collected.

enormously influenced the political course of history as had the Moulana, of having lived the life of an ordinary peasant.

He could have – if he just had wanted. His followers, both religious and political, regularly gave him money enough to lead a luxurious life. But the Moulana, a people's man, unflinchingly maintained a distance from luxury in a land of the poor. He would use the money to help the poor, and finance various social welfare programmes, particularly, setting up educational institutions—from primary school to university.

Notably, the Moulana realized that spreading education among the poor is very important for raising their political consciousness against the exploitative ruling classes. While the ruling classes had always tried to keep the poor uneducated in order to perpetuate smoothly the social, political and economic exploitation of poor people, the Moulana was bent on spreading education among the poor in order to raise their political consciousness so that they could put up an organized resistance against the exploitative rich. He never missed an opportunity to set up schools and colleges, formal and informal, for the education of the poor. The Moulana began his venture of spreading education with the setting up of informal night schools for poor Bengalis in Assam in 1938 and finished it with the establishment of the Moulana Mohammad Ali College at Kagmari in 1975. In between, he set up innumerable schools in different parts of the country. Moreover, he set up an Islamic university, at a location two miles from the district town of Tangail.

While the Moulana was eager to remove the curse of un-education of the people at large by way of spreading education among the masses, his philosophy of education, primary or higher, was absolutely unconventional. He spoke on the philosophy of his education policy on many an occasion and wrote elaborately on the characteristics of his cherished project of education—an Islamic university—that provides deep insights into his philosophy. In an article on his perception of Islamic education and the kind of education that he wanted his university to impart with both boy and girl students, belonging to different faiths, the Moulana wrote: "Islamic education is not that which

goes by the name of madrassah education these days. The study of the fundamental principles of the Qur'an and the Hadith at the [proposed] Islamic University would neither allow the students to develop parochial mindsets nor would it make them obscurantist. They would be rebellious like Abu Zar Ghaffari, their thirst for knowledge would be like that of Hazrat Ali, they would become warriors like Gazi Salah Uddin and they would embrace martyrdom as did Imam Abu Hanifa. They would respect Abraham Lincoln and they, at times, would follow Mao Tse Tung. They would magnanimously respect all human beings and cherish an education dedicated to the welfare of the people."<sup>157</sup>

The curriculum of the Islamic university that the Moulana planned included language, literature, science, history, geography, commerce, philosophy, economics, political science, sociology, et cetera. "However, in preparing syllabuses particularly for subjects like history, philosophy, economics, political science and sociology, the guiding principle should be to make sure that the students achieve the temperament of attaching highest importance to the cause of humanity."<sup>158</sup> The Moulana, in his plan, also attached serious importance to the 'pro-people researches' by the scholars.

Clearly, Moulana Bhashani said 'no' not only to the un-education of the people at large, but also to the 'existing education system introduced by the imperialist and colonial powers to help perpetuate exploitations'<sup>159</sup> of common people. The Moulana, thus, was in favour of an education system which would provide students with the intellectual weapons needed to create a counter-hegemony of the existing culture—the culture that helps perpetuate social, political and economic exploitation of the people at large.

### **Moulana's parting shot:**

#### **Historic Farakka march to say 'no' to the regional hegemon**

Moulana Bhashani always recognised the invaluable contribution of the people of India to Bangladesh's War of Liberation against the occupation forces of Pakistan in 1971. The Moulana never hesitated to recall, with a sense of gratitude, the crucial role that



the-then government of India, led by Indira Gandhi, had played in mobilising international opinion in favour of Bangladesh's Liberation War, and the military support that it had provided to Bangladeshi Freedom Fighters to help them to resist the occupation forces of Pakistan. Bhashani also expressed gratitude on many an occasion to Indira for the hospitality that her government had provided him in India in 1971, despite the fact that her administration had virtually placed him in detention throughout the period. However, unlike many of his contemporary politicians, the Moulana, as history records, was not a person who would accept the subservience of independent Bangladesh to India on the pretext that the latter had helped the former to achieve independence from Pakistan. He never hesitated to pronounce the core political aspirations of those who made genuine sacrifices for the country's liberation: Bangladesh fought for its independence from Pakistan to exist independently, not to exist as a state subservient to India or, for that matter, any other country.

The Moulana, like millions of Bangladeshis, always sought a friendly relationship between Bangladesh and India based on mutual respect, but never an unequal relationship between the two neighbouring states. But successive Indian governments consistently failed, albeit to different degrees, to appreciate the spirit of the people of Bangladesh. They always searched for stooges, political and otherwise, in Bangladesh, who would be ready to help fulfil their hegemonic aspiration in the region. As part of this policy, the Indian state never missed any opportunity to twist the arms of a 'small' neighbour, aspiring to uphold its political and economic interests independently of the influence of the 'big brother' India's arm-twisting of Bangladesh increased particularly after the change of regime in Bangladesh in August 1975. It provided arms and military training to the *Shanti Bahini*, the military wing of Parbatya Chattagram Jana Sanghati Samity, to fight against the government of Bangladesh. In this regard, Subir Bhaumik, an Indian journalist working on the issue writes: "By mid 1976, the first batch of Shanti Bahini leaders had finished training at a military facility near Dehradun. Larger batches of guerrilla fighters were also trained at Haflong in

Assam, where a larger training facility for the Special Services Bureau (SSB) existed. By the end of 1979, India had trained 700 guerrillas of the Shanti Bahini including their entire military leadership.”<sup>160</sup> As noted earlier, the Indian government also provided shelter, arms and military training to an armed group, led by Abdul Kader Siddik, Bir Uttam, which initiated a ‘war’ in the bordering areas of Bangladesh against the country’s post-BKSAL government/s. Besides, India continued to unilaterally withdraw waters in the upstream of Ganges, depriving Bangladesh of its just share of water of an international river, which severely affected the country’s agriculture and ecology, particularly in northern Bangladesh. Bhashani was not one to suffer silently such arm-twisting of liberated Bangladesh by the Indian political establishment. He was, therefore, often critical of the Indian hegemonic attitude towards Bangladesh.

While there was a number of disputed issues between Bangladesh and India, water remained, and still remains, at the centre of the dispute. And, at its core, lies Farakka which remains the prime source of Bangladesh’s mistrust of India. There are reasons for that.

India announced its decision to build the barrage across the Ganges at Farakka ‘to divert a portion of the flow’ of the common river ‘to flush out the lower reaches of Hooghly and save the Port of Calcutta endangered by siltation’. But the then government of Pakistan protested against the Indian decision to build the barrage, arguing that the building of the ‘Farakka Barrage could leave East Pakistan with insufficient water’. Subsequently, ‘it was agreed that experts of the two countries should exchange data for the use of the common river,’ which ‘was to be followed by ministerial level meetings’ Giving a brief account of the history of the Farakka project in the Pakistan era, SA Karim, the first foreign secretary of Bangladesh says: “In 1963, Pakistan proposed a ministerial level meeting as soon as possible. India did not reply and it took Pakistan two years to send a routine reminder. It was sent in May 1965 and India conveyed its agreement to such a meeting in August. A month later war broke out between the two countries over Kashmir. In March 1966, the two Foreign Ministers had their first meeting to deal with various

bilateral problems...the Farakka issue was not discussed at all."<sup>161</sup>

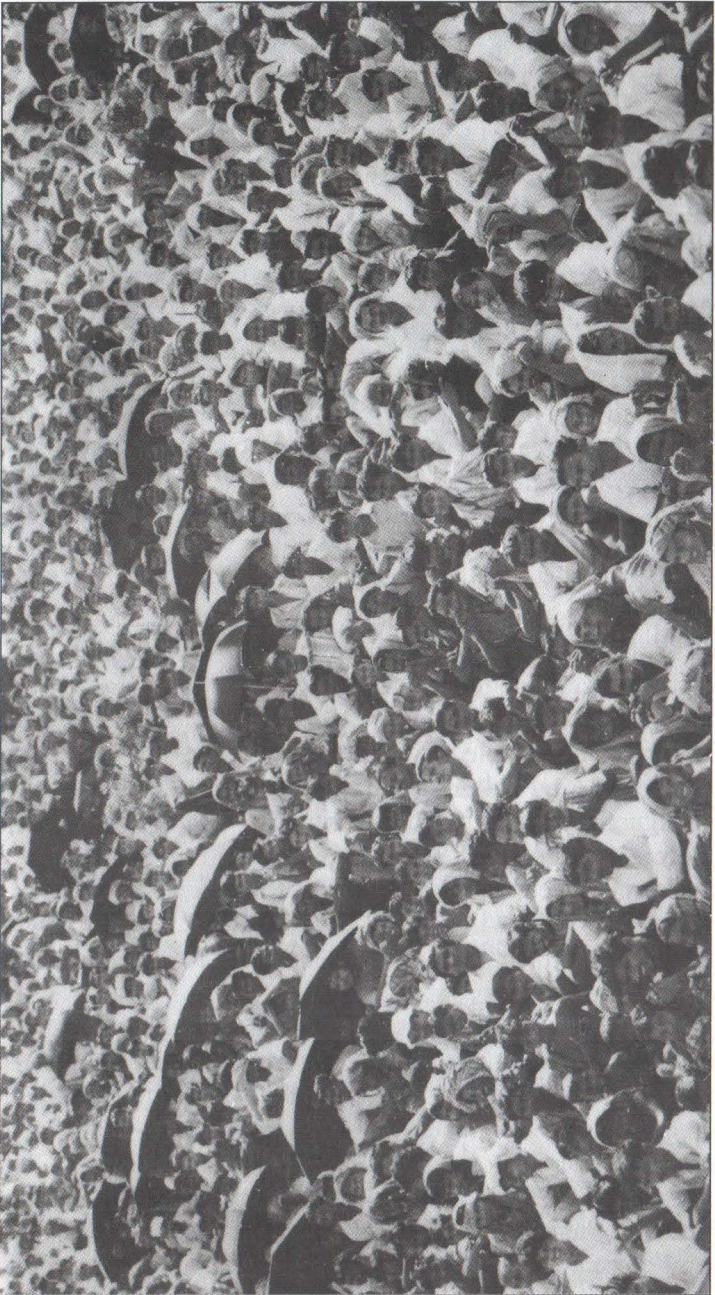
The independence of Bangladesh created a congenial atmosphere between the two countries to resolve all bilateral disputes including Farakka, on the basis of mutual interest. But, in practical terms, the situation worsened.

It all began with Bangladesh entertaining, in good faith, an Indian proposal, made at a ministerial level meeting in Dhaka on April 18, 1975, that the feeder canal at Farakka should be run on a trial basis during the current period of low flow while continuing discussion on the ways of ensuring equitable share of the Ganges water between the two countries. Notably, India completed the structure of the barrage in 1971—when the people of Bangladesh were engaged in a fierce armed clash with the occupation forces of Pakistan for national independence, while the feeder canal, which diverts water to the river Bhagirathi, was completed in 1975.

Sheikh Mujib's government of Bangladesh on April 18, 1975 gave its consent to a test operation of the barrage for three weeks, with discharges varying between 11,000 and 16,000 cusecs over a 10-day period from April 21 to May 31, 1975, with the remainder of the flow guaranteed to reach Bangladesh. But India continued to divert the Ganges waters at Farakka after the test run; throughout the 1975-1976 dry season, water was diverted to its full capacity of 40,000 cusecs, with no sign of renewing or negotiating a new agreement with Bangladesh. The breach of trust on the part of India created serious problems in Bangladesh, which included the drying up of tributaries, salt poisoning of the vast Sundarban mangrove swamps in the Ganges delta, and setbacks to agriculture, fisheries, navigation, et cetera, Bangladesh, understandably, felt cheated.

Meanwhile, four more meetings were held between the two states between June 1975 and June 1976, with little results. In January 1976, Bangladesh lodged a formal protest against India with the General Assembly of the United Nations, but there was no immediate response.

At this point, Moulana Bhashani announced on April 18, 1976, on the first anniversary of Bangladesh's consent to India on the 'test operation of the barrage', that if India did not stop the



A section of the participants in the Farakka Long March led by Moulana Bhashani. Photo: Rashid Talukder.

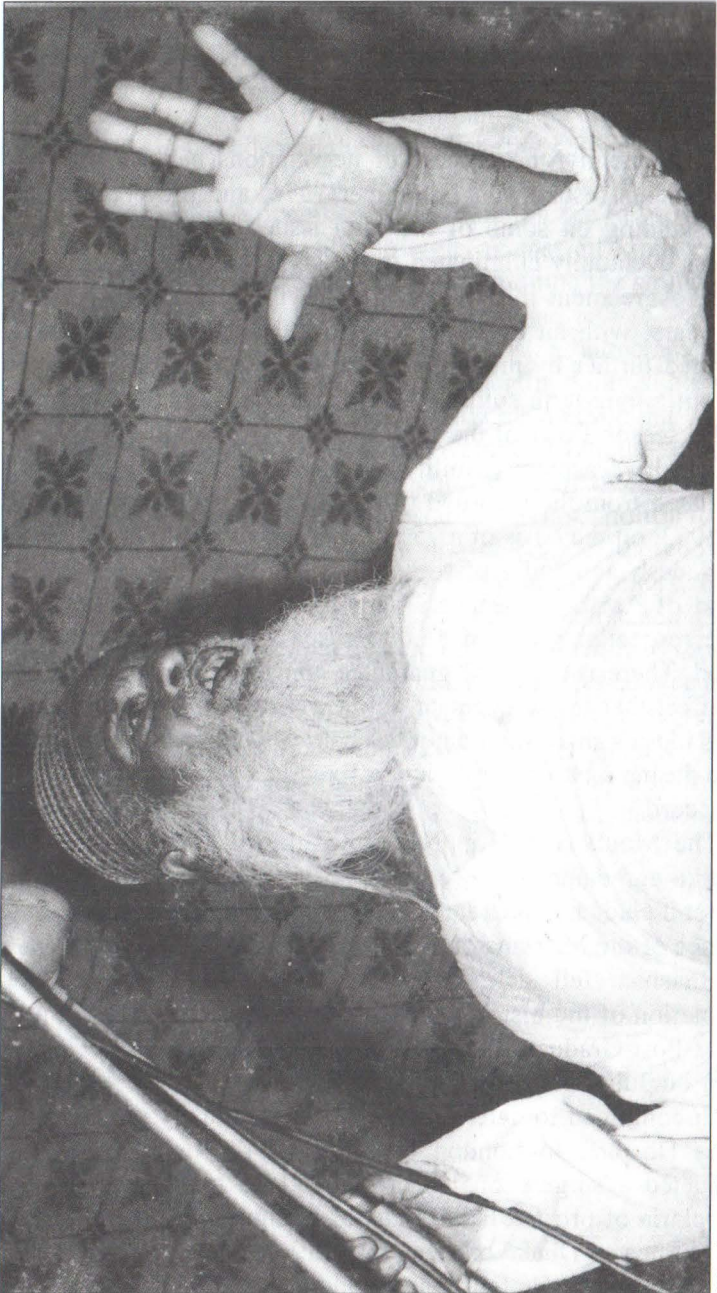
withdrawal of water in the upstream of the Ganges and did not ensure the just share of water of an international river within a month, he would lead a mass procession towards the point of Farakka. While announcing the programme, he said, 'in the face of Indian governments' indifference [towards the just demand of Bangladeshis], we will seek justice from the 600 million people of India'

The Moulana set May 16, 1976 for, what he called, the 'long march' to start from Rajshahi. A national preparatory committee for guiding the Farakka procession, initially a 31-member body and eventually a 72-member one, headed by Bhashani, was formed. The march of the people was planned to end at Shibganj via Premtali and Chapainababganj town on May 17—a day before the end of a year into Bangladesh's consent to the test operation of the Farakka barrage. The 'march' was really a 'long one', 64 kilometres, a historic procession in which about a million people from the towns and villages enthusiastically took part on foot.

"This procession is a symbol of mass struggle against big powers," the Moulana told a mammoth public meeting held at the end of the peaceful march at Kansat under Shibganj upazila in the afternoon of May 17, 1976. "If India refuses to meet the aspirations of the people of Bangladesh to have the just share of the Ganges water, I will initiate a 'no to Indian goods' movement from August 16," the Moulana announced.<sup>162</sup>

Before concluding the programme, the Moulana also led a mass oath-taking ceremony to the effect that 'they [the protestors] would lay down their lives if necessary, to get the just share of Ganges water, protect the independence and sovereignty of the state and build up the country'

The unique political event of mass protest against the hegemonic attitude of the Indian state towards Bangladesh received wide national, regional and international media coverage. It succeeded in putting effective psychological pressure on the Indian administration. It is true that the Indian government did not resolve the problem '[with]in a month', nor has it resolved it since, but the protest significantly contributed to making the General Assembly of the United Nations adopt 'a consensus



Moulana Bhashani addresses a public rally at the Rajshahi Madrassah ground on May 16, 1976 during the historic Farakka Long March. Photo: Rashid Talukder.

statement' on November 26, 1976, calling upon the two countries to meet urgently at the ministerial level for negotiations, 'with a view to arriving at a fair and expeditious settlement' of the water dispute.

Subsequently, the process of negotiations between the two governments resumed in December 1976, and they reached an understanding on some of the vital issues in April 1977. The process eventually culminated in the signing of the first Ganges Waters Agreement in November 1977, initially for a period of five years, with an understanding that the agreement could be extended further by mutual consent, while the two sides would find out a long-term solution to the problem of augmentation of the dry season flows of the Ganges.

The dry season availability of water at the Farakka point was calculated from the recorded flows of the Ganges between 1948 and 1973, on the basis of a 75 per cent availability; the shares of Bangladesh and India of the Ganges flows in the last 10-day period of April, the leanest, were fixed at 34,500 and 20,500 cusec respectively out of 55,000 cusec availability during that period. There was also a 'guarantee clause' in the agreement to the effect that in the event of any lower availability at Farakka, Bangladesh's share should not fall below 80 per cent of the stated share during a particular period, affixed in a schedule annexed to the accord.

The Moulana died in November, 1976. The expiry of the Farakka agreement followed new accords, but later agreements did not include any guarantee clause—thanks to, who knows, the absence of the Moulana on earth.

Bhashani fell sick, this time fatally, after the successful completion of the historic Farakka procession. He was admitted to the Post-Graduate Hospital in Dhaka on May 28, 1976 and again on July 31. He was operated upon on August 4. But his health continued to deteriorate. He was eventually sent to Saint Peters Hospital in London on August 14, where the doctors conducted a surgery on his prostate gland to address 'benign hypoplasia of prostate with focus of malignancy' on August 17. He returned to Dhaka on September 12 and went straight to his home in Santosh. He fell ill again and was admitted to the Dhaka

Medical College Hospital (DMHC) on September 28, and was released on October 22. Due to respiratory complications, the Moulana was re-admitted to the DMCH on November 4. He left for Santosh on November 13, accompanied by two physicians, and returned to the hospital the same day after having delivered a written speech there, at a public programme. The Moulana died of cardiac arrest on November 17, 1976, at the age of 91, leaving behind a history of perpetual struggle against all kinds of unfreedom, for all who are committed to continuing the struggle for democratic emancipation of the people at large.

The Moulana's commitment to opposing autocracy from whichever quarter, is evident in his democratic political activism during the last days of his illness. While he was moving in and out of hospitals between May and November 1976, the Moulana issued about a dozen or so statements, some of these from his hospital bed, against various establishments, political and otherwise, to protect and promote the interests of the common people. Even a new organisation of the industrial workers, *Jatiya Sramik Dal*, was launched in August with Bhashani heading it. In the last press conference that he held on November 7, 1976, only 10 days before he passed away, the Moulana announced: "If anyone starts any anti-people activity, I will launch a movement against him again, despite my illness owing to my old age."<sup>163</sup> All signs indicate that he was threatening General Zia, who rose to power a year ago on November 7, 1975, with launching a movement on behalf of the toiling millions.

The Moulana, after all, was a people's man and the people of his time knew that the man, a rebellious democratic spirit, found meaning in life by fighting against the powers that be, in favour of the people's unattained democratic rights.



**Afterword:****Need to revive Moulana's oppositional democratic spirit**

The preceding sections on Bhashani's multi-dimensional colourful public life perhaps adequately prove that the political motto of the great Moulana was to provide effective opposition on behalf of the people at large to the powers that be. Had he decided to enjoy power, state power that is, the Moulana could easily have done so, when he was president of the Assam Muslim League under British rule, when he was a Member of Parliament from the ruling Pakistan Muslim League in 1948, when the United Front, of which he was a top leader, won the general elections of Pakistan in 1954, and, of course, in post-independent Bangladesh, both before and after the violent ouster of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman from power. But clearly, he chose not to. In his extraordinarily long political career he preferred to remain an 'influential' people's leader in the opposition, rather than becoming a 'powerful' politician in office. He knew well, as does any person endowed with common sense about the political culture of this part of the world, that there was no scarcity of politicians, particularly of mainstream 'liberal democratic' politics, eager to become ministers. He also knew that there was no scarcity of leaders in the left-of-centre political camps either, who would hurriedly abandon their leftist ideology and quickly join the Cabinet of right-wing dictators—whether military, or civilian or pseudo-civilian. What was scarce was, as Bhashani knew, politicians who had the moral and intellectual strength to say 'no' to power on behalf of the powerless multitude. The Moulana, a people's man from head to toe, took upon himself this role.

The Moulana's commitment to fighting against the exploitative socio-political system was uncompromising to the extent that he, a pious Muslim throughout his life, never hesitated to politically befriend the communists—known in Bangladesh more for their atheism than their pro-people political activism. "I don't understand communism, Leninism or Maoism, I haven't even read Marx's *Capital*," admitted the Moulana, "but what I understand pretty well is that the majority of our people suffer

from hunger.”<sup>164</sup> This admission came from the communists as well. “Moulana Bhashani was not a communist, but the communists were dear to him. The communists could depend on him... He believed in class struggle. He was a revolutionary,” observes Haider Akbar Khan Rono, a well-known communist admirer of the Moulana.<sup>165</sup> Not surprisingly, Bhashani earned the reputation of being the ‘red Moulana’

Rono also writes that, Horekrishna Koger, renowned leader of the Communist Party of India (Marxist), had once told him that Bangladeshi communists were fortunate, unlike communists of other countries, in having had a national leader like Bhashani. “It is our misfortune that we were unable to utilize the opportunity properly [of having had a national leader sympathetic towards communists],” laments Rono.<sup>166</sup>

During times when the politics of convenience prevails, when political practitioners exchange ideology, if they have any at all, for material gain at the blink of an eye, when they find it politically convenient not to protest against autocratic decisions within their party or against the undemocratic activities of party bosses, when, on top of these, they refuse to stand by the suffering of the toiling millions, it is most important that the democratically oriented sections of a society work towards a revival of the oppositional spirit—social, political and intellectual. Without providing effective opposition to the forces of un-democracy, without putting up public resistance against exploitation of the politically weaker classes, the democratization of society and state is well-nigh impossible. It is in this light that the Moulana’s life and his lifelong struggle remains a source of inspiration for all those who are committed to the democratic transformation of society and state, and thus ensure the democratic emancipation of people in general—both in Bangladesh and beyond.

## Notes and References

1. The Islamic pundits of Deoband regarded British rule in India as being nothing but subjugation, and deemed it their responsibility to resist British colonialism. Notably, innumerable teachers and students of Deoband suffered various forms of repression, including imprisonment, by the British rulers, particularly during the 1919-1921 and 1930-32 struggles for Indian independence.
2. The Moulana's date of birth was not properly recorded. From oral histories of the Moulana's resistance against vested interests, politicians and intellectuals estimate that he was, in all probability, born in January 1885.
3. Abdul Hamid Khan Bhashani, '*Amar jindegee*' (My life), *Dainik Paigam*, Dhaka, January 13, 1971.
4. Ibid. Bhashani, notably, came in contact with the Assam-based Sufi Shah Nasiruddin Bogdadi as an adolescent, when the latter came to, and stayed for sometime in Sirajganj—the Moulana's ancestral town. Impressed by Abdul Hamid, an orphan, who was both hardworking and pious, the Sufi saint took the boy along with him when he returned to Assam in 1904. While Hamid had earlier attended a Bangla school, Bogdadi taught him Urdu and Arabic. As Hamid increasingly displayed his prowess in learning the teachings of Islam, the Sufi sent him to Deoband Darul Ulum (Saharanpur, Uttar Pradesh) to study the Qur'an and the Hadith in 1907.
5. Moulana Bhashani, quoted in Saiful Islam, *Swadhinota Bhashani Bharat* (Independence, Bhashani and India), Fifth edition, Bartoman Somoy, Dhaka, 2005, p. 179.
6. M. Inamul Haque, *Abdul Hamid Khan Bhashani*, published by Serajul Islam Chowdhury, Samaj-Rupantor Odhoyon Kendro, Dhaka, 2005, p. 18.
7. Professor Muzaffar Ahmed, *Kichhu Kotha* (A few words), published by Nizam Uddin Ahmed, Dhaka, 1991, p. 34.
8. See Dr. Abid Bashir, "Searching for Bhashani: Citizen of the World," Xlibris Corporation, USA, 2010, pp. 67-70.
9. Azad quoted in Dr. Abid Bahar, *ibid.*, p. 69.
10. Syed Abul Maksud, *Maulana Abdul Hamid Khan Bhashani*, Bangla Academy, Dhaka, 1994, p. 17.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 25.
12. *Ibid.*, p. 26.

13. Ibid., p. 24.
14. Abdul Hamid Khan Bhashani, "Bangladesher Srenee Songothoner Itihas" (History of the Class Organizations in Bangladesh) in *Moulana Bhashanir Haq-Katha Samagra* (The Collection of Moulana Bhashani's Haq Katha), Abu Saleque, (ed.) Third Edition, Ghas Phul Nadi, Dhaka, 2006, pp. 147-150.
15. Haider Akbar Khan Rono, *Shotabdi Perie* (Beyond the Century), Taraf Prokashoni, Dhaka, 2005, p. 68.
16. Ibid., p. 67.
17. Ibid., p. 20.
18. Saiful Islam, op. cit., p. 187.
19. The five-year tenure of the assembly ended in 1942, but as there was no fresh poll in 1942 being in the midst of the Second World War, the government extended the tenure of the assembly until 1945.
20. Hasan Morshed, "Amor Unishe," *Rajkut, Kaler Kantha* (daily) Dhaka, May 26, 2010.
21. Haji Mohammad Danesh, "*Moulana Bhashanir Rajnoitik Jeebon*" (Political life of Moulana Bhashani), in the Moulana Bhashani Smarak Grantha, (Moulana Bhashani Commemorative Collection), Bashir Al Helal et al. (eds.), Moulana Abdul Hamid Khan Bhashani Parishad, Dhaka, 2002, p. 15.
22. Nelson Mandela, *Long Walk to Freedom*, Abacus, London, first published in 1994, reprinted in 2009, p. 140.
23. Ibid., p. 118.
24. Saiful Islam, "Kachhe noi, shathe theke dekha" (Seen while accompanying the Moulana), in *Moulana Bhasani Smarak Grontho* (Moulana Bhasani Commemorative Collection), Bashir Al Helal et al. (eds.), op. cit., p. 51.
25. Syed Abul Maksud, op. cit., p. 41.
26. The Bangla language movement was launched in Assam in 1960, after the erstwhile Chief Minister of Assam, Sir Bimala Prasad, moved in the Assamese State Assembly on March 3 an undemocratic bill, the Official Language Act—1960, seeking to establish Assamese as the sole official language of the state. The movement reached its climax on May 19, 1961, with 11 people killed in the police firing, forcing the government to accept both Assamese and Bangla to be the official languages of Assam.
27. The Moulana was arrested after calling upon the Assamese from a public rally on March 10, 1947—Assam Day—to immediately start agitation for independence of Assam. The Moulana was barred by the Assamese government to address the pre-scheduled rally on the day. Some are of the opinion that the Congress government, afraid of the Moulana's movement for independent Assam, or the inclusion of Assam in Pakistan, in fact, physically pushed him off into East Pakistan after his release from jail post-partition.
28. *Bangladesher Swadhinata Juddher Dalilpatra* (Bangladesh War of Independence Documents), Volume 1, ed. Hassan Hafizur Rahman, Ministry of Information, Government of the People's Republic of

- Bangladesh, 1982. Reprinted by Hakkani Publishers, Dhaka, 2003, p. 73. Henceforth referred to as BSJD.
29. Ibid., p. 76.
30. Shamsul Huda Harun, *Parliamentary Behaviour in a Multi-national State (1947-58): Bangladesh Experience*, Asiatic Society of Bangladesh, Dhaka, 1984, p. 4.
31. (Weekly) *Sainik*, Sylhet, December 10, 1948. Quoted in Syed Abul Maksud, op. cit., pp. 66-67.
32. The United Front was forged between the Awami Muslim League of Moulana Bhashani, Krishok Sramik Party of A. K. Fazlul Haq and others.
33. *BSJD*, Volume 1, op. cit., p. 395.
34. Ibid., p. 398.
35. Syed Abul Maksud, op-cit., p. 69.
36. Ibid., p. 70.
37. Shyamali Ghosh, *The Awami League: 1949-1971*, Academic Publishers, Dhaka, 1990, p. 6.
38. *Memoirs of Huseyn Shaheed Suhrawrdy*, Mohammad H. R. Talukder (ed.), University Press Limited, Dhaka, 1987. p. 113.
39. Shyamali Ghosh, op. cit., p. 6.
40. Ibid., p. 8.
41. Ibid., p. 9.
42. Ibid., p. 21.
43. Syed Abul Maksud, op. cit., p. 364.
44. Haji Mohammad Danesh, op. cit., p. 16.
45. Kamruddin Ahmad, *Banglar ek Moddhobitter Atmakahini*, Dhaka, 1979. Also quoted in Syed Abul Maksud, op. cit., p. 96. Notably, Kamruddin Ahmad, himself a secular democratic politician, refused to join the Awami Muslim League until the party dropped 'Muslim' from the name of the party in 1955.
46. The East Pakistan Muslim Students League was launched on January 4, 1948, with Noimuddin Ahmed heading its 14-member convening committee. People like Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and Oli Ahad were among the members of the convening committee. The first council session of the East Pakistan Muslim Students League was held in September 1949.
47. Oli Ahad, *Jatiya Rajniti: 1945 to 1975* (National Politics: 1945 to 1975), 2nd edition), Dhaka, Bangladesh Co-operative Book Society Ltd, undated, p. 64.
48. Mizanur Rahman Chowdhury, *Rajniti Tinkal* (Three eras of politics), Hafez Mahmud Foundation, Dhaka, Index 1, p. 342.
49. Shyamali Ghosh, op. cit., p. 11.
50. Shyamali Ghosh, ibid., p. 13.
51. Of the 236 Muslim seats of the provincial assembly, the Jukta Front got 222 seats, the Muslim League 9, independents 5 and the Khelafat-e-Rabbani Party 1. Besides, of the 71 non-Muslim seats of the assembly, Jukta Front candidates got 9 seats, while the Congress Party got 24, Gonotantri Dal 2, the Communist Party 5, the Tofshili Federation and

- Independents 25, Buddhists 2 and Christians 1. The ruling Muslim League, which opposed the Bengalis' legitimate demand for Bangla to be recognized as a state language of Pakistan, got only 9 seats in the 308-strong provincial assembly.
52. The 19th point of the 21-point charter of the manifesto said that East Bengal would enjoy complete autonomy of a sovereign nature on the basis of the Lahore resolution, and that all the powers, authority and jurisdiction excepting defence, foreign policy and currency would be brought under the government of East Bengal, that the naval headquarters of Pakistan would be set up in East Pakistan while the army headquarters would remain in East Pakistan, that the ordnance factory would be set up in East Pakistan to militarily equip the province for self defence and, that the Ansar bahini would be absorbed into the armed forces.
53. The first point of the six-point charter said that Pakistan would be a federation of states based on the Lahore Resolution, while the country would be a parliamentary democracy. The second point said that the jurisdiction of the federal government of Pakistan would remain limited to matters of defence and foreign affairs, while the rest would be the jurisdiction of the federated states. The third point was an expansion of the Jukta Front's demand as regards currency. It said Pakistan would either have two separate but easily convertible currencies or one currency with constitutionally guaranteed means to prevent capital flight from East Pakistan to West Pakistan. The fourth and the fifth points elaborated on how the two economies would function in a coordinated way in one country. Understandably, these points came on the basis of the empirical experiences of West Pakistan's economic exploitation of the East, which was not clear during the formulation of the Jukta Front charter in 1953. The sixth point said the federated states would raise their own paramilitary force or regional army for their respective security.
54. Syed Abul Maksud, op. cit., p. 129.
55. Ibid., p. 128.
56. *Dainik Pakistan*, Dhaka, June 28, 1967. Also, quoted in Syed Abul Maksud, ibid., pp. 281-282.
57. Ibid.
58. Saiful Islam, op. cit., pp. 106-107.
59. Basant Chatarjee, *Inside Bangladesh Today*. New Delhi, 1973, p. 96.
60. Syed Abul Maksud, op. cit., p. 526.
61. Bhashani had refused to support the illegal regime of Khandaker Mushtaq Ahmed which advanced the process of Islamization of Bangladesh's society and state after the toppling down of the one-party regime of president Sheikh Mujibur Rahman on August 15, 1975.
62. Syed Abul Maksud, op. cit., p. 522.
63. For a somewhat detailed description of the military encounters between Kader Siddiki's troops and the Bangladesh army, see Matiur Rahman Rentu, *Amar Fansi Chai* (I deserve to be hanged), Sawrna Lata and Bana Lata, Dhaka, 1999, pp. 57-77.
64. Believed by the Muslims to be two angels sitting on each person's

- shoulders and monitoring their activities—good and evil respectively.
65. Professor Muzaffar Ahmed, op. cit., p. 33.
  66. *Moulana Bhashanir Haq Katha Samagra*. op. cit., p. 3.
  67. *Ibid.*, pp. 365-366.
  68. Shyamoli Ghosh, op. cit., p. 18.
  69. Suhrawardy formed his minority government, with the support of the Republican Party of Malik Firoz Khan Noon, at the invitation of president Iskander Mirza—the man who as defence secretary wanted Bhashani to be shot dead at the airport on the latter's return from Europe in 1955. Ironically, Suhrawardy had to quit the office of prime minister as president Mirza asked him to either resign or face dismissal. Chundrigar, the leader of the Muslim League Party, replaced Suhrawardy on October 18, 1957.
  70. *BSJD*, Volume 1, op. cit., p. 594.
  71. Oli Ahad, op.cit., p. 167.
  72. *Ibid.*, p. 168.
  73. *Memoirs of Huseyn Shaheed Suhrawardy*. Mohammad H. R. Talukder (ed.), University Press Limited, Dhaka, 1987, p. 117. Also, see, editorial note 13, p. 244.
  74. *BSJD*, Volume 1, op. cit., p. 599.
  75. Bhashani's signed leaflet on March 26, 1957. *BSJD*, Volume 1, op. cit., p. 602.
  76. Oli Ahad, op.cit, p. 227.
  77. Syed Abul Maksud, op. cit., p. 128.
  78. *Ibid.*, p. 132.
  79. Quoted in Syed Abul Maksud, *ibid.*, p. 242.
  80. *Ibid.*, p. 243.
  81. *Pakistan Observer*, December 7, 1968. Also, *BSJD*, Volume 1, op. cit., p. 398.
  82. *Ibid.*, p. 323.
  83. Syed Abul Maksud, op. cit., p. 356.
  84. *Ibid.*, p. 358.
  85. Bijenzo's account is quoted in B. Z. Khasru, *Myths and Facts: Bangladesh Liberation War*. Rupa Publications India Pvt. Ltd., New Delhi, 2010, p. 60. It is a well-known fact that some of Mujib's close associates in the Awami League tried to save Pakistan from being dismantled even during the Bengalis' war of liberation—Khandaker Mushtaq Ahmed being the leader of the group.
  86. Saiful Islam, "Kache noi, shathe theke dekha," op. cit, p. 53. Saiful Islam, a close political associate of the Moulana who left his NAP to join a breakaway faction of the party led by Professor Muzaffar Ahmed, accompanied the Moulana during the nine months of the country's liberation war, from East Pakistan to India.
  87. *Ibid.*, p. 360.
  88. *Ibid.*, pp. 364-365.
  89. A military tribunal in June 1970 awarded Kazi Zafar Ahmed and Rashed Khan Menon seven years of rigorous imprisonment each on charge of sedition against Pakistan. Mustafa Jamal Haider, president of the

Students Union. and Mahbubullah. secretary of the student body, were awarded a year of rigorous imprisonment each. The former presided over the rally while the latter was the publisher of the 11-point charter of demands announcing the independence of East Bengal.

90. *BSJD*, Volume 2, op. cit., p. 715.
91. Saiful Islam, op. cit., p. 99.
92. Syed Abul Maksud, op. cit., p. 440.
93. S. R. Mirza in *Muktijuddher Purbapor* (The compilation of a series conversations held between Moidul Hassan, special assistant to Tajuddin Ahmed, the prime minister of the government of Bangladesh in exile in 1971, A. K. Khandaker, Deputy Commander in Chief of the People's Army of Bangladesh during the liberation war in 1971 and S. R. Mirza, Director General of the Youth Camp, set up in Kolkata, India, by the exile government of Bangladesh in 1971 for the recruitment of Freedom Fighters), Prothoma Prokashon. Dhaka, 2009, p. 120.
94. The Moulana made the statement in his first presidential address to the meeting of the extended central committee of his National Awami Party in independent Bangladesh. The meeting was held at Santosh under Tangail district.
95. (Weekly) *Haq Katha*, February 25, 1972.
96. *Dainik Bangla*, Dhaka, April 3, 1972.
97. Ibid.
98. Syed Abul Maksud, op. cit., p. 450.
99. Ibid.
100. The Awami League members of the national assembly of erstwhile Pakistan and provincial assembly of the erstwhile East Pakistan, who were elected in 1970 to frame the constitution of Pakistan, formulated the constitution of Bangladesh which emerged after the dismantling of Pakistan in 1971. Notably, the Awami League had won 160 out of 162 seats for East Pakistan in Pakistan's national assembly, and 288 seats out of the 300-strong provincial assembly.
101. The NAP leaders who signed the leaflet included Pir Habibur Rahman, Pankaj Bhattacharya, Matia Chowdhury, Abdul Halim and Suranjit Sengupta. Sengupta, the lone opposition person on the 15-member constitution drafting committee, eventually refused to sign the document on the grounds that it did not properly reflect the aspirations of the people at large who had fought the liberation war in 1971.
102. The NAP was divided in 1967 following the division of the international leftwing movement into two camps led by Russia and China. The Moulana led the pro-China faction of the party, while Professor Muzaffar Ahmed led the breakaway pro-Moscow faction.
103. Syed Abul Maksud, op. cit., pp. 458-459.
104. *Saptaha*, a Kolkata-based Bangla weekly of the pro-Moscow Communist Party of India, criticized the phenomenon in its February 23, 1973 issue of the magazine, which was quoted in Syed Abul Maksud, *ibid.*, p. 462.
105. *Dainik Bangla*, Dhaka, March 6, 1973.
106. Earlier, in 1970, Bhashani played a crucial political role, as noted by



- Willem van Schendel, expert on Asian history. 'when he decided that the NAP would not contest the first general elections in Pakistan, leaving the field wide open for a landslide victory for the Awami League' headed by Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. Willem van Schendel, *A History of Bangladesh* (first South Asian edition), Cambridge University Press, New Delhi, 2009, p. 206.
107. Syed Abul Maksud, op. cit., p. 459.
108. S. A. Karim, *Sheikh Mujib: Triumph and Tragedy*, 2nd edition, The University Press Limited, Dhaka, 2005, p. 306.
109. *Dainik Bangla*, Dhaka, March 10, 1973.
110. *Dainik Bangla*, Dhaka, March 9, 1973.
111. S. A. Karim, op. cit., p. 308.
112. M. A. Wajed Miah, *Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibkey Ghirey Kichu Ghatana O Bangladesh*, 4th edition, The University Press Limited, Dhaka, 2000, p. 137.
113. The components of the opposition alliance included the Moulana's National Awami Party. Bangladesh Jatiya League led by Aatur Rahman Khan, Bangla Jatiya League led by Oli Ahad, Jatiya Ganamukti Union of Haji Danesh, Sramik Krishak Samajbadi Dal led by Khan Saifur Rahman, Communist Party of Bangladesh led by Nasim Ali and Communist Party of Bangladesh led by Haider Akbar Khan Rono.
114. Syed Abul Maksud, op. cit., p. 471.
115. *Dainik Ittefaq*, Dhaka, May 23, 1974.
116. *The Bangladesh Observer*, Dhaka, July 7, 1973.
117. Willem van Schendel, op. cit., pp. 179-180.
118. Syed Abul Maksud, op. cit., pp. 487-488.
119. Willem van Schendel, op. cit., p. 180.
120. S. A. Karim, op.cit., p. 335.
121. Mohiuddin Khan Alamgir, *Famine in South Asia: Political Economy of Mass Starvation*, Gunn & Hain. Cambridge, MA, 1980. p. 128.
122. Claire Sterling. *Monthly Atlantic*, Boston, September 1974. Also quoted in S. A. Karim, op. cit., p. 337.
123. Amartya Sen, *Poverty and Famines: An Essay on Entitlement and Deprivation*, Oxford University Press, Delhi, 1982, p. 134.
124. *Ibid.*, p. 141.
125. Amartya K. Sen, "Conflicts in Access to Food" IFDA (International Foundation for Development Alternatives) Dossier 35, May/June 1983, Petra Kelly (ed.), p. 4.  
www.dhf.uu.se
126. S. A. Karim, op. cit., p. 339.
127. Christopher Dobson. *The Sunday Telegraph*, London, July 28, 1974.
128. Syed Abul Maksud, op. cit., p. 483.
129. *Dainik Bangla*, Dhaka, April 15, 1974.
130. The components of the alliance included, other than the Moulana's NAP, the Jatiya League faction led by Aatur Rahman Khan, the Jatiya League faction led by Oli Ahad, Jatiya Ganamukti Union led by Hazi Danesh, the Communist Party of Bangladesh (Leninist) and the Sramik Krishak Samajbadi Dal.

131. The court eventually declared on September 9, 1974 that the government imposition of ban on protest rallies was unlawful and unconstitutional and therefore void.
132. M. A. Wajed Miah, op. cit., p. 210.
133. Willem van Schendel, op. cit., p. 181.
134. Article 53 of the amended constitution said that the change of the constitution would require the support of two-thirds of members of the parliament while the change of president would require the support of three-fourths of the parliament's members.
135. M. A. Wajed Miah, op. cit., pp. 215-16.
136. S. A. Karim, op. cit., p. 345. Sheikh Fazlul Huq Moni, a nephew of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, was the president of the Awami League's youth front—the Juba League.
137. Willem van Schendel, op. cit., p. 275.
138. Moulana Bhashani, "*Palanbad: Ki ebong Kano*", a written speech delivered to his followers in late 1973.
139. Atiqur Rahman Salu, 'Smritir Monikothai', 'Moulana Bhashani', a collection of articles published jointly by the Ganatantrik Forum and the Moulana Bhashani's Death Anniversary Observance Committee, Chittagong, Bangladesh. 1992.
140. Moulana Abdul Hamid Khan Bhashani, "*Sarbahara Janatar Jonno*" (For the proletariats). (Weekly) *Haq Katha*, Dhaka, March 17, 1972.
141. Ibid.
142. Ibid.
143. Syed Irfanul Bari, "*Bangio Prajasatma Ain Ebong Moulana Bhashanir Krishak Andolon*" (The Bengal Tenancy Act and the Peasants Movements led by Moulana Bhashani), in Kagmari Sommelson Smarakgrantha (Kagmai Conference Commemorative Volume), ed. Mahasin Shastrapani, Published by the National Committee to Celebrate 50 years of Kagmari Conference, Tangail. 2011, p. 100.
144. See footnote 8 of Syed Irfanul Bari, Ibid., p. 106.
145. Atiqur Rahman Salu. "*Smritir Monikothai*" (At the bottom of heart), 'Moulana Bhashani', op. cit.
146. Khandaker Mushtaq Ahmed, hitherto known as the most trusted political associate of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, headed the government as president, and former president Mohammad Ullah took the oath as the vice-president of the government. The other members of his cabinet included former president Abu Sayeed Chowdhury, Abdul Mannan, Monoronjon Dhar, professor Mohammad Yusuf Ali, Fanibhushon Majumder, Abdul Momin, Sohrab Hossain, Asaduzzaman Khan, Dr A. R. Mallik and Dr Mozaffar Ahmed Chowdhury. Besides, the ministers for state included Taher Uddin Thakur, K. M. Obaidur Rahman, Shah Moazzem Hossain. Nurul Islam Manjur, Moslem Uddin Khan. Dr Khitish Chandra Mandal, Reazuddin Ahmed Bhola Miah, Syed Altaf Hossain and Mominuddin Ahmed.
147. Syed Abul Maksud, op. cit., p. 514.
148. Ibid.
149. *Dainik Bangla*, Dhaka, October 5, 1975.

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150. (Weekly)*Haq Katha*, November 12, 1975.
151. Moulana Abdul Hamid Khan Bhashani, "*Uttorbonge Ki Dekhilam, Ki Shunilam*" (What I saw and heard in North Bengal), (Weekly) *Haq Kotha*, January 12, 1976.
152. Moulana Bhashani made the statement while addressing the historic Kagmari council session of the Awami League on February 7, 1957. See BSJD, Volume 1, Op-cit., p. 597.
153. Ibid.
154. The only exception was when Bhashani, while on a visit to China in 1976, wore trouser and overcoat, a set of gift from Mao Tse Tung to save the Moulana from the freezing Beijing winter.
155. Syed Abul Maksud, op. cit., p. 556.
156. Irfanul Bari, *Bhashanir Anashan* (On Bhashani's Hunger-Strike), Dhaka, April 1974.
157. Moulana Abdul Hamid Khan Bhashani, "*Amar Parikalpanai Islami Biswabidyalay*" (An Islamic University: The Way I See It), 1970. See annexure in Syed Abul Maksud, op. cit., p. 670.
158. Ibid.
159. Moulana Abdul Hamid Khan Bhashani, "*Kano ei Islami Biswabidyalay*" (Why this Islamic University), 1974, *ibid.*, p. 675.
160. Subir Bhaumik, *Troubled Periphery: Crisis of India's North East*, SAGE Publications India Pvt Ltd, New Delhi, 2009, p. 166.
161. S. A. Karim, op. cit., p. 323.
162. *Dainik Bangla*, Dhaka, May 18, 1976.
163. *Dainik Ittefaq*, Dhaka, November 9, 1976.
164. Interview with *Dainik Purbadesh*, Dhaka, March 17, 1971.
165. Haider Akbar Khan Rono, *Baytikromi Dharmiya Neta Bhashani* (Bhashani, an exceptional religious leader), a collection of commemorative articles published on the occasion of the Moulana's sixteenth death anniversary, Chittagong, 1992, p. 24.
166. Ibid.

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