

SECULAR DEMOCRACY, SOCIALISM AND BHASHANI

Peter Custers

Let me initiate this tribute to Maulana Bhasani by recalling how I was personally introduced to him now 34 years ago. It was September 1973, when as a young journalist and activist I was taken to Santosh in Tangail by Nasu Bhai, my first political friend in Bangladesh, who had close connections with the underground Sharbahara Party. I had entered the country just a few days before then, determined that I was going to work for revolutionary change here in Bangladesh, following the great example of the Latin American revolutionary Che Guevara, whose exploits as guerrilla leader in Cuba and Bolivia I had heard of during my student days. Bhashani on that particular day in September of 1973 when I travelled to Tangail was holding a peasant Conference. I vividly recall that for the first time in my life I was invited to dine together with progressive political leaders of Bangladesh, who lined up to sit with crossed legs on the floor to take their food from banana leaves, like the Conference's peasant participants.

Although I do not have a written record of all that the Maulana said during the interview on that day, I have always felt that the occasion was the very occasion when I was initiated into Bangladeshi politics. Therefore, the message which Bhashani gave me was deeply imprinted in my mind. This message was given in the form of autobiographical facts regarding the Maulana's early days as revolutionary activist. As Bhashani stated, in his younger years—long before he became a leader of the peasantry—he had joined one of the 'terrorist' organisations which in the first decade of the 20th century had launched armed struggle against British colonial rule. If I recall well, he mentioned the famous underground organisation *Anusheelen*. Travelling back to Dhaka after the interview I felt very puzzled why the Maulana had emphasised his history as a 'terrorist'. It is only much later that I have come to realize that Bhashani had reacted to my visit with the psychological insight of an experienced leader, who cautions a young man against relying one-sidedly on his emotional drive to achieve social change overnight.

The *Bhashani Parishad* is going to commemorate the fact that it is now fifty years ago that Maulana Bhashani held his historic Kagmari Conference. An anthology will be brought out on the occasion, and I am delighted to contribute. I must, however, admit from the start that when I did meet Bhashani as a young journalist-activist, in 1973, my understanding of Bhashani's place in the history of Bangladeshi politics was poor, to say the least. I had duly been informed, of course, by my political friends, that Bhashani was the most important living peasant leader in the whole of Bangladesh, who amongst others had held huge Conferences of peasants with red caps and sticks in the late 1960s, as part of the people's ongoing struggle against Pakistan's military domination over East Bengal. Still, my view regarding Bhashani's politics at the time was very blurred, in line with the ideological prejudices that were current among major sections of

Bangladesh's revolutionary Left. These prejudices inevitably resulted in an underestimation of the significance which Bhashani held and holds for the people of Bangladesh, and for the international cause of the Left.

It is only during the decade of the 1990s, when I took time to read some of the biographies and anthologies which meanwhile have appeared on Bhashani's extraordinarily long and rich political life, that the full extent of his contribution to the cause of socialism in Bangladesh and beyond have started becoming clearer to me. My reading has convinced me without a shadow of doubt that of all the Left political leaders who during the period of Pakistan's domination contributed towards the struggles for social and economic liberation of the Bengali people, Maulana Bhashani stands out as by far the most clear sighted. Although by profession a theologian and although a devote Muslim himself, Bhashani was an extremely effective public opinion builder in favour of secular democracy and socialism. All through and up to the time when he reached a very advanced age, Bhashani displayed an unflinching revolutionary spirit.

ANTI-AYUB INSURRECTION OF 1968/69

It is appropriate, I believe, to pay respect to Maulana Bhashani as immortal revolutionary leader by focusing first on the role he played during the people's insurrection that was staged against Ayub Khan's military dictatorship at the end of the 1960s. Bhashani's powerful leadership in this uprising sums up his life of political achievements quite well. First, some words on his role in starting the rising. It is true that cities and towns in West Pakistan had already seen massive resistance during the month of November, 1968. Also, industrial workers in East Bengal had initiated resistance earlier by staging encirclements of factories. Yet the beginning of the people's uprising in East Bengal is generally dated on December the 6th, when Bhashani addressed a mass gathering held at Dhaka's Paltan Maidan. In his speech Bhashani expressed his firm support to drivers of baby taxis and *ricksha-walas* who were on strike. The rickshaw drivers then prodded the Maulana to call for a general strike, which he did. The hartal held spontaneously and without the least preparations on the very next day, December the 7th, drew a huge and enthusiastic response from the public in Dhaka. The police, however, responded with violence. It obstructed the people's procession which under Bhashani's lead marched towards the Governor's House, and killed picketing /hartal participants. Thus, when Bhashani threw his weight behind the workers, the insurrection of the people of East Bengal against dictatorship was decisively on.

This then is the first point: Maulana Bhashani who had been a leading opposition politician in East Bengal ever since the late 1940s, effectively initiated the people's insurrection in December of 1968. Second, Bhashani also influenced the choice of the fighting tactics which the people used in the course of the insurrection. The tactic of *gherao-ing*, of encircling factory owners and government officials in order to make them concede demands, had already been employed by workers spontaneously, before it became a prominent method of confrontation in the course of the uprising. Still, it was Maulana Bhashani who with great daring raised the tactic of *gherao-ing* to a defining element of the people's uprising. This he did when on the 28th of December he personally headed the people's procession which encircled the *bungalow* of the District

administrator in the town of Pabna. From then on the tactic of *gherao-ing* is said to have spread like wildfire to the far corners of the province. More recently, the politics of *gherao-ing* appears to have suffered from erosion and lost its erstwhile confrontational meaning. But in 1968/1969 the very idea of encirclement formed part of an insurrectionary approach. It embodied the resolve to go up to the very end in confronting Pakistan's ruling class, and everything indicates that Maulana Bhashani consciously intended the tactic to have this political significance.

Third—as unmistakably as the above mentioned points—is the fact that the Maulana tirelessly strove to draw the peasantry, then of course the overwhelming majority of East Bengal's population, into battle. Here again, as in the case of industrial workers, there had been signs of restlessness before the launching of the insurrection. For peasants producing sugar cane had earlier expressed their anger when the police had tried to confiscate their means to make molasses, gur, in an attempt to halt its production. During the insurrection it was a conscious policy on the part of Maulana Bhashani, whose status as peasant leader was paramount in East Bengal, to promote the fullest participation of the rural masses. For Bhashani knew well that such was a necessary condition for the insurrection's success. Thus, he called for a 'Day of Peasants' Demands', on December the 29th, inviting peasants to struggle over price issues, and against government indifference over ever recurrent floods. By January, peasant participation started becoming more visible, when villagers with ploughs and lathis, sticks, entered Dhaka city to demonstrate. As it happened, the full force of peasant militancy was only mustered in the aftermath of Ayub Khan's fall from power. Bhashani step-by-step succeeded in arousing the rural masses through the Red Cap (*Lal Tupi*) Conferences held in 1969 under his personal lead. It is thus crystal clear that Bhashani understood the central importance of forging a broad unity between workers and peasantry, and of mobilising the rural population.

Fourth—Maulana Bhashani with remarkable openness, without psychological complexities, welcomed the entry of students as political force into the arena of struggle. This entry happened from January the 5th, 1969 onwards, when diverse student organisations drew together to establish the *Chhattro Shangram Parishad*, i.e. a Student Action Council, around a charter of 11 demands. These demands included amongst others the demand for reduction of university fees, but also comprised the economic and social interests of the population at large. All through the month of January, university students were at the very centre of the people's insurrection. They called for several successful hartals, general strikes which were accompanied by street battles. They also held a torch-light procession through the streets of the provincial capital Dhaka, pledging to take the uprising to its final victory. In the night of February the 18th in particular, students demonstrated revolutionary courage when they massively broke the curfew, shouting slogans in protest against the Pakistani army. From his side the Maulana did not just welcome the students' militancy, but showed full appreciation for the programmatic orientation taken by the *Chhattro Shangram Parishad*. He publicly insisted on the unity, the absence of difference, between the students' 11 demands—and the demand programme of his own political party, NAP.

The fifth and perhaps most striking point is this : the aged Bhashani understood better than any other East Bengal politician that the people's uprising

offered a classic opportunity to achieve a turnover of class relations. And he also knew that such a change can only be brought about through a revolutionary process, and not in any other way. As experienced political leader Bhashani of course realised that dialogues and negotiations are a part of the methodology of political work. Yet during the people's insurrection he clearly set his mind on a struggle up to complete victory over Ayub Khan's military rule. Aside from insisting on the need for confrontational tactics—he called for a 'jhalao-porao' movement, Bhashani also showed his revolutionary resolve through the slogans and phrases which he employed in speeches and statements made during the insurrection. Thus, at one point he threatened to besiege the jails to obtain the release of Mujib and other political prisoners, on the model of the assault on the Bastille that had inaugurated the revolution in France. He specifically rejected the idea of a 'Round Table' meeting between political parties and the Ayub Khan regime, arguing that it is the oppressor who wins whenever the oppressed agree to sit and talk. Thus, for Maulana Bhashani the target of the people's insurrection was purely and simply : the overthrow of the old order. Unfortunately, the phase of people's insurrection against military dictatorship passed when General Ayub Khan on March the 24th resigned. Although this resignation did not mean the end of military rule, the people's upsurge which, parallel to East Bengal, had been staged in West Pakistan then waned. In the aftermath of Ayub Khan's fall, Bhashani drew broad international attention for his leading role in the uprising.

CAMPAIGN FOR REGIONAL AUTONOMY

Another chapter in the political life of Maulana Bhashani that definitely must be described in a commemoration of his achievements, is the campaign he led in the 1950s in favour of regional autonomy and Bengali national self-determination. The background to this campaign was, of course, the great language movement, i.e. for the recognition of Bengali as state language. The role which Bhashani played in this movement was limited, but nonetheless very meaningful. Whereas the public debate on the language question was originally launched by urban based intellectuals, it was students of Dhaka University who, as well known, took it to the streets. They confronted Pakistan's Prime Minister over his policies, held mass demonstrations defying the police, and enforced the temporary closure of educational institutions via students' strikes. When the language movement reached its peak, in February of 1952, - most established politicians hesitated to back up the students' resolve to break the state's prohibition on public protests. Not so Maulana Bhashani. At a meeting of the All Party Language Action Council, held on February the 6th, politicians hotly debated what should be done in case the government clamp down Section 144. Here, Bhashani threw his full weight behind the action-plans of the students, arguing that 'to bow to the government's repression would be equal to surrendering to autocracy'. As was to be the case during the 1968/1969 uprising, - Bhashani wholeheartedly supported the historic struggle which the students in February of 1952 waged under the leadership of Abdul Matin and the Dhaka University Students' Action Council.

The people's movement which emerged next, the campaign for regional autonomy, was unmistakably led by the Maulana himself. First, Bhashani in preceding years had already agitated publicly against Pakistan's economic

exploitation of East Bengal. Further, he ensured that the demand that self-rule be granted to the province be incorporated into the programme of the Muslim Awami League, which party had been founded at his initiative. Again, when different parties towards the end of 1953 held discussions on formation of an opposition alliance that would fight the Muslim League in the 1954 parliamentary elections, he made sure that the issue of regional autonomy be incorporated in the coalition's charter of electoral demands. More important yet is the fact that at literally hundreds of election meetings which Bhashani held in the rural areas of East Bengal, he turned the demand for autonomy into the public's 'heartfelt issue' (*praner dabi*). As one of his biographers has stressed, the question of autonomy was the very central issue which the Maulana brought up at all the gatherings where he spoke. Clearly, Bhashani on this occasion demonstrated that electoral campaigning can contribute towards a society's politicisation! Moreover, he did not stop halfway, after the united front had gained a convincing electoral victory. For he steadfastly continued building public opinion, now in the context of the debate over Pakistan's draft Constitution. Thus, he called on students and the public to wear black badges on a province-wide day of resistance, and he led numerous rural demonstrations to vent the public's discontent.

One point which needs to be emphasised here, is how Maulana Bhashani succeeded in shaping his campaign for autonomy by relying on the energies of different categories of rural intellectuals. In 1951, a major conflict had erupted between primary school teachers of East Bengal and the province's government over payment of teachers' salaries. Pay scales were so low and the government's attitude towards the teachers' demands so uncooperative, that the 80 thousand school teachers went on a province-wide strike. Although the government refused to give in, and although the strike was withdrawn before substantial concessions had been gained, it contributed towards the spread of political consciousness among primary school teachers in rural areas, and it was Maulana Bhashani who more than anybody else realised the importance of this fact. Thus, in campaigning for regional autonomy, Bhashani relied much on village teachers, alongside his own religious followers, *muridan*. Village level school teachers and other rural intellectuals reportedly were to, also, constitute the backbone of the new progressive party which Bhashani soon formed, the National Awami Party (NAP). Below, I will further elaborate on Bhashani's own position as intellectual and on his policy aimed at drawing intellectuals to the side of the oppressed. Here we just note in passing that his capacity to inspire both modern and traditional, rural based intellectuals was probably one of the keys to his political success.

The Kagmari Conference, which took place now 50 years ago (1957), was the culminating point in Bhashani's campaign in favour of regional autonomy, and stands as a true milestone in Bangladesh's political and cultural history. In the later part of 1956, the Awami League had assumed governmental power in Pakistan, both at the provincial and at the central level. Although the Bengali people expected that the party would use its position of power to carry out political reforms, it soon became clear that Awami League Ministers were bent on abandoning the party's principles in exchange for personal gain. It was under these circumstances that Bhashani as the Awami League's President called for the holding of a two-day Council session of the party in Kagmari, Tangail, to be

followed by a three day Cultural Conference. The Council session's debates focused two main issues, one of which was Pakistan's foreign policy. Earlier, the Awami League under Bhashani's leadership had expressed its firm disagreement with Pakistan joining any military alliance under the leadership of the US. Since the Awami League's Prime Minister Suhrawardy failed to initiate a revision in foreign policy, Bhashani at Kagmari sought to re-affirm the party's anti-imperialist stance. Again, at the same Council session Bhashani launched a passionate appeal to Suhrawardy who falsely claimed that the issue of self-determination had been solved for 95 percent, insisting that Suhrawardy use his power so as to end Pakistan's internal colonialism. In a truly prophetic fashion Bhashani threatened that if East Bengal were not granted autonomy, the people would say 'Assalamu Alaikum' (good-bye) to Pakistan.

Up to today there exists a tendency amongst a section of Bangladeshi politicians, to obfuscate history and downgrade Bhashani's achievements. It thus is critically important to underline how Bhashani's campaign for regional autonomy which reached its peak through the Kagmari Conference, formed the true precursor of Bangladesh's later struggle for independence from Pakistan. Yet what nasty opposition did Bhashani have to face! In the wake of the Kagmari Conference, conservative pirs and maulanas vilified Bhashani in public, arguing that he was only trying to disrupt Pakistan's territorial integrity. But Bhashani's own party colleagues were equally obnoxious. Suhrawardy, who had faced defeat at the Council session, decried Bhashani, his own party's president, as an 'agent of India!' Editorials of newspapers in both West and East Pakistan openly denounced Bhashani for his uncompromising stance. And Mujibur Rahman, the party's General Secretary, sought fit to misbehave against Bhashani at a post-Conference press meeting. Yet history, the history of East Bengal's subsequent evolution, brings out fully well that Maulana Bhashani via his sustained public opinion building in the fifties functioned as political pioneer, treading a path that other, less courageous politicians later would have to tread themselves. Since Bhashani's Kagmari Conference charted a direction from which Bengal's middle class politicians could no longer diverge, the Conference indeed was a true *watershed* in the history of Bangladesh.

RELIGIOUS TOLERANCE AND SECULARISM

Bhashani's greatness, however, cannot be fully measured until and unless we also take stock of the way he positioned himself as 'traditional' intellectual. I am speaking here not of his political ideas which were strikingly modern, but of his social position as member of the Muslim clergy. Professionally speaking Bhashani was a traditional intellectual in the sense in which Gramsci used the term : he was a Muslim theologian who had received his training at the well known Islamic education centre of Deoband. Yet although Bhashani gathered a huge following of people who considered him their spiritual guide, *pir*, he never propagated an intolerant Islam. Here the contrast with Maulana Akram Khan, who was another senior politico-religious leader in the Muslim League in the later part of British colonial rule, was perhaps the most striking. Both Maulanas rose to positions of prominence in the Muslim League during the forties of the previous century, Akram Khan as president of the Muslim League in Bengal, Bhashani as president of the Muslim League in Assam. Both religious teachers

had in the 1930s participated in Conferences of Bengal's tenants' (*proja*) movement, both were extraordinarily effective as public opinion builders. Yet whereas Akram Khan belonged to the wing of the Muslim League which propagated a communal ideology pitting Muslims in hatred against Hindus, - Maulana Bhashani throughout his political career tirelessly promoted religious tolerance and secularism.

This role of Bhashani's has been of such large importance, and it is of such great actual significance, that it needs definitely to be included in any evaluation of the Maulana's significance for the people of Bangladesh, and for the Muslim world. Let's, to start recall the role which he played in favour of communal harmony during the days when he stayed in Assam. In the later part of the colonial period, Bhashani worked amongst Bengali peasants who had migrated to the given area. Against the ghettoisation of these Bengali migrants, Bhashani built a broad social movement, renowned as the 'lineprotha' (line custom) movement. It is as successful leader of this movement, that Bhashani emerged as key Muslim League politician, defending the interests of marginalised peasants in the assembly of the Assam province, then part of British India. This happened during the first part of the 1940s, precisely at a time when the Muslim League was rapidly expanding its influence among the rural masses of neighbouring East Bengal. Whereas the expansion of the League's influence in Bengal resulted in a communal carnage on the eve of Partition (1947), - in Assam Bhashani used his double prestige, as politician and spiritual leader, to prevent the eruption of riots, championing communal harmony as the best policy to protect the peasants' interests.

Further, when after Partition Maulana Bhashani returned to do politics in East Bengal, he soon resumed his struggles in favour of religious tolerance. Pakistan was established with Islam as its state religion. Alongside the Muslim League's policy of discriminating against Bengali language, the party's insistence on Islam as state religion to the exclusion of other religions contributed to the creation of political tensions in East Bengal. These tensions, as is well known, led in 1949 to a split within the East Bengal Muslim League, and to the formation of the Muslim Awami League. The party was founded by Bhashani around the principle of the separation between religion and state, the principle of secularism, although it took time to shape this new orientation fully. Initially, the designation of 'Muslim' was still maintained in the name of the new party, but at a later date this designation was dropped. Today, leaders of the Awami League at times seem to have forgotten their party's history, such as when the party tried to forge an electoral alliance with the fundamentalist Khelafat Majlis, in December of 2006. At such moments, they appear to completely overlook the fact that religious toleration and secularism were a part of the party's founding ideology. The Awami League suffers from an equally dramatic loss of memory, when it hides the fact that it was Bhashani the Maulana, the party's founder, who personally led the struggle for secularisation in East Bengal!

The Kagmari Cultural Conference held in 1957 had its own deep significance for the secularisation of politics. As Bangladesh's senior journalist Kamal Lohani has argued with force, Maulana Bhashani was the only politician who at the time realised that 'politics divorced from culture' can never be acceptable to the

people. Bhashani realised well that the propagation of religious tolerance cannot be effective, if it is done by politicians alone. It can only be effective, if politicians rely on the sources of tolerance that exist within a country's cultural traditions. Moreover, Bhashani also knew that for this purpose it was necessary to rely on the rich tradition of folk art and folk songs, which reflects the extraordinary intermingling of the different great religions in the history of Bengal. At the Kagmari Conference, Bhashani thus provided ample scope for performances by rural artists, warning his fellow politicians against the neglect of folk culture. And here again, it appears that Bhashani was not only more farsighted than contemporary bourgeois politicians, but also stood out amongst politicians of the Left. Unfortunately, the realisation that Baul songs and other centuries old rural songs' traditions are important vehicles towards propagation of the equality of all human beings irrespective of their creed, even today does not seem to have sunk in among all the different currents of the Bangladeshi Left.

Perhaps the very most decisive point regarding Maulana Bhashani's contribution towards the emergence of a powerful Left in East Bengal, is the fact that he stood for religious tolerance *from within* the framework of Islam. Watching the erosion of Left influence in Bangladeshi society over recent decades, one wonders whether Bangladesh's Left parties have digested this crucial point. Historical research, as well known, has confirmed that the Islam that was brought to Bengal in pre-colonial times, was not an Islam that was based on a narrow reading of the Islamic scriptures, but a *liberal* Islam. Bengal received the Islam of the mystical Sufi preachers whose current held a pre-eminent influence over the Muslim world at the time. Like other world religions, Islam harbours currents of tolerance, and these currents have contributed enormously to the spirit of tolerance that has pervaded the rural culture of historic Bengal. Maulana Bhashani was a representative of this tradition in the political field, witness his fierce opposition against the misuse of religion for political ends, and witness his pioneering contribution to the secularisation of East Bengal's politics. Really, here it is that his relevance for Bangladesh's contemporary politics is perhaps the largest. For the polarisation between the forces of Muslim fundamentalism on the one hand, and those of tolerance on the other, has turned into one of the principal polarisations in Bangladesh's politics today. Hence, reliance on currents of tolerance within Islam and other religions is a must.

RELEVANCE OF GRAMSCI

I would lastly like to relate the political experience of Maulana Bhashani to ideas formulated by the Italian Marxist theoretician Antonio Gramsci. Bhashani belonged to the famous generation of leaders of the post-Second World War period, of leaders who led struggles for national and social liberation in different countries of Asia, Africa and Latin America. He belonged to the generation of leaders like Mao Zedung, Ho Chi Minh, Fidel Castro and Che Guevara. Bhashani's vision of social transformation thus was naturally influenced by experiences gained in China, Vietnam and other Asian countries, where the peasantry was the main motive force for revolutionary change. Yet, perhaps paradoxically, Bhashani's politics can well be analysed with concepts formulated by a European thinker, in particular with the ideas of the Marxist theoretician Antonio Gramsci, who in the 1920s for a brief period was General Secretary of the

Italian Communist Party. While incarcerated in jail, Gramsci formulated a whole set of concepts helping to analyse the sphere of politics as an autonomous sphere of human activity. Gramsci thus sought to supplement Marx's economic theories. And although Gramsci's ideas were not known to Bhashani when he fought his political battles, the ideas of Gramsci on the role of intellectuals, on civil society, on the building of ideological hegemony, and on formation of a historic bloc, can very well be utilised so as to highlight Maulana Bhashani's greatness.

First—it is almost embarrassing that it needs being state, and yet the point is crucial: Maulana Bhashani did not just relate to intellectuals, but he himself fully played the role of intellectual, of a great intellectual in Gramsci's sense. Gramsci used the term of intellectuals in a democratic sense, to refer to all those who are active as public opinion builders in society. He for instance identified all those activists who develop their political knowledge and leadership capacities while participating in class struggles as intellectuals, calling them organic intellectuals. This was, of course, at variance with the practice of Marxist parties until his days. Yet Gramsci also identified several other categories of intellectuals, called upon to play a role in defence of the emancipation of the working class. He notably referred to traditional intellectuals. The latter term in his framework of thinking referred primarily to religious preachers whose interests are largely bound up with those of the dominant classes in the old, feudal society. Yet traditional intellectuals, such as priests living at village level close to the peasantry, according to Gramsci can become agents of revolutionary change, - a truth which some Marxist parties have tended to overlook. This, of course, is illustrated with brilliant force by the example of Bhashani, a Muslim theologian who did not just sympathise with the struggles of workers and peasants, but played a leading role in advancing their cause.

Second—Maulana Bhashani understood fully well that the oppressed cannot achieve their liberation if their struggles are limited to the economic domain, and that it is the task of the representatives of the oppressed to also wage class struggle in the domain of civil society. This term today is frequently abused by organisations and institutions that stand opposed to class struggle. It is therefore good to emphasise the fact that Antonio Gramsci used the term *civil society* precisely to refer to a domain where *dominant classes* and *dominated classes* confront each other, just as they do in the economic sphere: the domain of a society's cultural, religious and non-state political institutions. Here the struggle for hegemony goes on as much as it does in the economic, or ultimately, in the military sphere. Maulana Bhashani understood the importance of agitation in the cultural sphere, and perhaps better so than most Marxist leaders in East Bengal. He showed this, for instance, whenever he took the oath of his religious followers, *muridan*, calling upon them to commit themselves to struggle against imperialism and landlordism. He also showed it through the active interest he took in the spread of education in rural areas, inaugurating hundreds of modern schools. And he illustrated it with great force, of course, when he held the Kagmari Cultural Conference.

Third, and closely related to the previous point, is the significance of Maulana Bhashani's struggle for politico-ethical hegemony. With the concept of hegemony Gramsci, when writing his befamed *Prison Note-books*, had referred to the idea

that a society's oppressed, 'subaltern', classes cannot lay their hands on the state apparatus without first ensuring that their ideas on socialism and on the construction of a new society, become a society's dominant ideas, accepted by the majority of the population. Surely, given the fact that Maulana Bhashani was a devote Muslim whose world outlook remained shaped by the religion with which he grew up, the philosophy which he sought to establish as hegemonic in East Bengal was not the philosophy of historical materialism. And yet Bhashani contributed tremendously to the emergence of new hegemonic ideas, by widely propagating the separation of state and religion, by taking his campaign in defence of Bengal's national self-determination to the remotest corners of the countryside, by popularising the need for a democratic revolution, and also by advocating his own version of socialism. The influence of socialist ideas in Bangladesh immediately after liberation became hegemonic in the country's politics. It would be wrong to belittle how much Maulana Bhashani's work as opinion-builder, as intellectual, has contributed to this.

Fourthly, Maulana Bhashani also understood, perhaps better than his Marxist colleagues, the importance of forging a socio-political alliance composed of both the exploited classes, workers and peasants, and sections of East Bengal's intellectuals. In this respect, his practice was broadly speaking in line with the concept of the historic bloc proposed by Gramsci. Gramsci proposed this term in order to highlight his own interpretation of the Marxian idea of united front. He insisted that the effectiveness of a united front aimed at capturing political power, primarily depends on whether the masses of the oppressed and groups of intellectuals succeed in combining their strength. With respect to Bhashani's attempts to forge a historic bloc, we can, for example, refer to his conscious efforts to engage rural school teachers in support of his campaign for regional autonomy and Bengali self-determination, in the decade of the 1950s. With equal or more justification, one could also point at the strategy which Bhashani pursued during the people's insurrection of 1968/1969. Here, Bhashani clearly tried to forge an alliance consisting of workers, of peasants and of students, young intellectuals. As already mentioned, he insistently argued that his party's programmatic orientation and the 11-point demand programme devised by the students' coalition were one and the same. He advocated that a revolutionary united front be formed that included both the Students' Action Council and parties of the Left.

In short, although Bhashani never claimed to be a Marxist, his political practice can well be analysed in Marxian terms. The theoretical ideas formulated by Gramsci while in prison can be utilised towards this end. Being himself a theologian, a traditional intellectual, Maulana Bhashani strived hard to forge a united front in favour of national and social liberation, comprising peasants and workers as well as rural-based intellectuals and urban-based young intellectuals. Towards establishing the ideological hegemony of his farsighted ideas, Bhashani did target the building of a historic bloc.

AN APPROPRIATE COMMEMORATION

In conclusion—Maulana Bhashani's example may be upheld as a model to all those striving to rebuild Leftwing politics in Bangladesh today. With hindsight it is perhaps easy to see, and yet it needs to be stated over and again: the anti-Ayub

people's insurrection of 1968/1969, and the period immediately following this insurrection, represented a veritable peak in the country's history of Leftwing politics. At no other point in history did people come so close to forging an alliance in favour of social liberation, at no other point in history were the aspirations of workers and peasants towards their own socio-economic liberation given a similarly bright shape, in the form of a strategy of confrontation vis-a-vis their oppressors. As my above account has hopefully brought out sufficiently, - Maulana Bhashani was the political personality who provided the revolutionary leadership which the people of East Bengal at the time required, readily responding to the spontaneous ferment existing in society. The first conclusion to be upheld in a commemoration of Maulana Bhashani's historical achievements, then is the conclusion that Bhashani established a model of insurrectionary leadership, refusing to compromise with the oppressors' state. At a time when the Left seems to have fallen back, and does not show a similar determination to confront the violence of the state, such as is the case in 2007/2008, the example of Bhashani's revolutionary leadership needs to be enthusiastically recalled.

Secondly, as part of a commemoration specifically dedicated to the historic Kagmari Conference, we need to also, and specifically, appreciate Maulana Bhashani's role as public opinion-builder. As the great Italian theoretician Antonio Gramsci has argued: the working class can only capture state power if it first constructs its own ideological hegemony in society, gathering the majority of the population around its socialist ideas. In the aftermath of the country's liberation war of 1971, Bangladesh for a short while experienced such an ideological hegemony, reflected in the fact that socialism was a perspective that was shared by a wide variety of political currents. It is true, Bhashani did not agree with all the philosophical views that were propagated by the Marxist-oriented parties with which he allied. Nevertheless, there is no doubt that he contributed tremendously towards creating acceptability of socialist ideas in the society of East Bengal, which just a generation back, in the 1940s, had been swept by the ideology of the Muslim League. In this respect, with respect to Bhashani's work as a public opinion builder in favour of progressive ideals, the holding of the Kagmari Conference was of course key. For it is through this Conference that Maulana Bhashani set Left parameters for society's debate on two central issues, being on foreign policy—a foreign policy independent from imperialism, and on the question of regional autonomy, the issue of the Bengali nation's emancipation from Pakistan's colonial dominance.

Lastly, what is perhaps of greatest significance for the new generation of political activists in Bangladesh, is Bhashani's contribution towards countering Muslim-fundamentalism. Bhashani's social status was that of a traditional intellectual, of a trained religious preacher whose primary following consisted in *muridan*, in those who considered him their spiritual guide. Yet he consistently opposed the misuse of religion for political ends. This standpoint of Bhashani's—it cannot be stated with sufficient force—has tremendous contemporary significance. At a time when forces which are bent on 'islamising' the Bangladeshi state have re-risen to prominence in Bangladeshi politics; at a time also when the Left—to all appearances at least—still has not pulled itself together in order to give leadership to the struggle to re-secularise Bangladeshi politics, it needs to be

humbly recalled that the Maulana-politician Bhashani personally gave leadership to the struggle to secularise East Bengal politics. He did so from the late forties onwards, and thus paved the way for the blooming of progressive ideas in subsequent decades. Here again, the example of Bhashani stands out as unparalleled. Surely, there have been other religious preachers who have advocated religious tolerance in Bengal in the past - both from within the framework of Islam, and from within the framework of other religious creeds. Yet Bhashani's effectiveness in countering the influence of Rightwing Muslim parties was exceptionally large. In short, we need to uphold Maulana Bhashani as the most farsighted leader and people's intellectual which Bangladesh has generated in the twentieth century.

[This essay has been drafted towards commemoration of the Kagmari Cultural Conference, held half a century ago (in 1957) in East Bengal (now Bangladesh); it has also been submitted for publication to the Maulana Abdul Hamid Khan Bhashani Parishad, Dhaka]

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