

Political Philosophy of Maulana Bhasani

POPULARLY known as Mazloom Jananeta, the leader of the oppressed, Maulana Abdul Hamid Khan Bhasani, bestrides the century, to some extent, as Sun Yat-sen and Gandhi did theirs. Of course, their spheres of activities had been larger than that of Bhasani. He was born in 1885 at village Dhangora, Sirajganj and died in Dhaka on 17 November, 1976. Lived in an era of tension, trouble and turmoil, he witnessed most of the twentieth century events both local and international. During the period between the first and the second World Wars he emerged as an unparalleled leader of the down-trodden especially the peasants in East Bengal and Assam.

Maulana Bhasani was born at such a period in the 19th century Bengal when, on the one hand, Hindu nationalism preached by a section of intellectuals of the Hindu community to arouse patriotic zeal was gaining strength, while, on the other hand, the Muslims of Bengal who had been backward for over half a century were being organised to re-establish their socio-political, cultural and economic rights. After the battle of Palassey in 1757 it took several decades to consolidate the colonial rule of the East India Company in the Indian sub-continent. The first great revolt against the Britishers was the Sepoy Mutiny of 1857, but that was preceded by a series of sporadic revolts and movements including Fakir-Sanyasi revolt in the late 18th century against the colonialists and their local agents and collaborators. In his early youth Bhasani worked among the peasants in Pabna-Mymensingh areas. He joined Swaraj Party of C R Das in 1917 and became a member of the Indian National Congress in 1918. He participated in the Non-cooperation movement of Gandhi in 1920 and was imprisoned.

Since the founding of the Indian National Congress till the end of the British rule in India in August 1947 the feudal class or the highly educated lawyers-barristers used to dominate the politics in the sub-continent. Bhasani was the exception. Coming from an ordinary family and with little formal education he succeeded in reaching the summit of national politics. His main resources in this were his boundless courage, unlimited fighting spirit and great love for the common men. The 19th and 20th century India had produced a large number of popular leaders, but, Bhasani had been one of the very few great leaders of the sub-continent who not only realised the curse of colonialism but also

the brute reality of the society under feudal system created by the colonial rulers.

All the prominent leaders of his generation were busy with 'national politics' and they enjoyed the generous patronage either of the feudal class or of rich traders and industrialists. The basic feature of the politics of Bhasani was that he linked his anti-imperialist struggle with his struggle against internal exploitation, the exploitation by the landlords, big landowners and mahajans or money-lenders. Politics of bourgeois leaders had been confined mainly in the big cities and, to some extent, in small towns. They represented their own class. What distinguishes Bhasani from his contemporaries is his total love and great concern for the interest of the peasantry and rural poor. He did not care to attain prominence in All India level politics. From the very beginning of his political career he had deliberately shun the All India platform and concentrated and intensified his activities in the rural areas of East Bengal and Assam. As an unconventional peasant leader he had gone to the roots of the problem of peasantry. Even in his youth he would visit from village to village to talk to the farmers afflicted with indebtedness in order to ascertain for himself their debt liability.

The vast majority of the peasantry were at the mercy of the Hindu mahajans. The deep-rooted horror of usury had pained him. And he had begun movements against the rural money-lenders.

He organised farmers' rallies against the mahajans in the late 1920's. The historic peasants' rally he organised was the one held at Kawalkhola maidan of Sirajganj sub-division in December 1932. Presided over by Khan Bahadur Abdul Momin, the three-day mammoth rally was addressed among others by HS Suhrawardy and Abdul Mansur Ahmad. The government had imposed section 144 in and around the conference venue but the farmers defying the order attended the rally. Around four lakh people had attended the rally. Abdul Mansur Ahmad wrote in his political autobiography 'Amar Dekha Rajnitir Panchash Bachhar', 'Only one-fourth of the people settled down to their seats, the rest began to drift around the Pandal Like water-hyacinth.' The Maulana himself said, 'The weight of the receipt papers of debts of the farmers collected in the confer-

Maulana Bhasani on the question of what is politics once said: 'Politics is such a noble pursuit which aims at eliminating injustice, exploitation and oppression from the society to widen the path of welfare for all in the society irrespective of faith and opinion; and to ensure in the society justice, rule of law, freedom of expression and the overall democratic right.'

by Syed Abul Maksud

ence had totalled 20 maunds and 27 seers (around 800 kg).'

The administration, landlords and money-lenders were alarmed at the success of the conference. A warrant for his arrest was issued. To escape arrest the Maulana went straight to Dhubri, Assam where he had been occasionally living with his family since late 1920's. He selected an area in Assam on the left bank of the Brahmaputra where a large number of farmers migrated from the districts of northern Bengal during the first quarter of the century. Primarily his headquarters came to be known as Bhasan char (the isle of Bhasan) because of frequent flooding that afflicted the area. This is how he came to be known as the Bhasanchar Maulana or Maulana Bhasani.

Bhasani rose to prominence in the movement he launched against the infamous Line-System in Assam in the late 1930's. He was elected a member of the Assam Constituent Assembly in 1937. He demonstrated fierce resistance against the Bangal-Khedao Movement spearheaded by the Assamese students and political leaders to drive out the Bengalees from Assam in mid-1940's. He fought for Pakistan. A few weeks after

the independence of Pakistan he was released from Dhubri jail and pushed back to East Bengal. As soon as Bhasani entered the then East Pakistan, he raised the demand for full autonomy on the basis of the Lahore Resolution. In the only session of the East Pakistan Provincial Assembly, he got the opportunity to attend, he raised the question: 'Are we slaves of the Central Government?' He soon became a suspect in the eyes of the rulers because of such comments and he left the Muslim League. Then he mobilised democratic energies against the autocratic rule of the Muslim League government. In less than two years he formed Awami Muslim League, the first broadbased opposition party in Pakistan. The Maulana was the chairman of the All-Party Language Movement in or led almost all the movements launched to realise the causes of the people. He was one of the three leaders of the historic United Front the alliance formed in 1954 against the ruling Muslim League. The Muslim League suffered a humiliating defeat. His party, Awami League, formed government in the Province, but he persistently followed the path of opposition and criticised the governments for its mistakes and lapses. At one stage, on the question of foreign policy he left Awami League and formed another progressive party, National Awami Party (NAP) in July 1957. After the promulgation of Martial Law by General Ayub Khan he along with other nationalist leaders was arrested in October 1958. This time he spent four years in prison.

Though he was the leader of another party, the Maulana termed Agartala Conspiracy Case as the greatest conspiracy of

approach to political activities encouraged the communists to enlist the support and sympathy of the Maulana to their movement aiming at establishing a society free from economic exploitation. He became a strong sympathizer and co-traveller of the Marxists.

Maulana Bhasani participated in or led almost all the movements launched to realise the causes of the people. He was one of the three leaders of the historic United Front the alliance formed in 1954 against the ruling Muslim League. The Muslim League suffered a humiliating defeat. His party, Awami League, formed government in the Province, but he persistently followed the path of opposition and criticised the governments for its mistakes and lapses. At one stage, on the question of foreign policy he left Awami League and formed another progressive party, National Awami Party (NAP) in July 1957. After the promulgation of Martial Law by General Ayub Khan he along with other nationalist leaders was arrested in October 1958. This time he spent four years in prison.

Though he was the leader of another party, the Maulana termed Agartala Conspiracy Case as the greatest conspiracy of

Ayub-Momen clique against the Bengalis, and demanded unconditional release of Sheikh Mujib. Bhasani did not believe in the doctrine of non-violence. For the success of his Jalao-Pora-Gherao movement of 1968-69 against Ayub regime he was called by the Time Magazine as the 'Prophet of Violence'. As a result of the mass upsurge the Agartala Conspiracy Case was withdrawn, Sheikh Mujib was released unconditionally and Ayub had to quit unceremoniously.

The Maulana engaged all his energies in the movement for the independence of Bangladesh in 1971. During the War of Liberation he was the chairman of the All Party Consultative Committee of the Bangladeshi government-in-exile. Among the other members of the committee were Tajuddin Ahmed, Moni Singh, Muzaffar Ahmed, and Monorjan Dhar. In a long statement to the press on April 22, 1971, Bhasani said: 'Yahya, who is a Muslim himself, in the name of religion is mercilessly killing lakhs of Muslims, Hindus, Christians and Buddhists. His soldiers who say that they are Muslims are raping women, including Muslim women. ...

What will the Muslim world do about this? Will they support the un-Islamic anti-humanity abominable policy of Yahya? Or will they support the cause of truth, justice and love as preached by Islam?' The Maulana appealed to the peasants, workers, blacksmiths, poetry workers, boatmen, weavers persons engaged in cottage industry, students, traders, intelligentsia and service holders and others to forge a unity like steel. Some opportunists of East Bengal who are exposed are trying to mislead you in the name of religion and integrity by carrying on false propaganda. They are agents of the military Junta, industrialists, feudalists and despotic bureaucrats of West Pakistan.'

Talking to some media persons, Bhasani unequivocally said that complete freedom for Bangladesh was the only solution for saving the people from 'inhuman exploitation of the Bengalees by West Pakistanis'. He 'deplored the attitude of those who talked of a "political settlement" of the Bangladesh problem and said that "having been subjected to the world's most savage repression and exploitation for the past 23 years, the people of Bangladesh were now waging a total war." He said that "the fight in Bangladesh was between two sections of Muslims the exploiters and the exploited.'

Indian Express, New Delhi, 2 June, 71.

Known as a pro-Chinese leader, Bhasani in a long telegram to Mao Zedong and Prime Minister Zhou Enlai, with whom he had personal contacts, said, 'Ideology of socialism is to fight against oppression. ... If your government do not protest this brutal atrocities committed on oppressed masses of Bangladesh by the military junta with the help of the vested interests of West Pakistan, the world may think that you are not the friends of oppressed people.'

He further said: 'No such example of oppression, which the military junta is inflicting upon the innocent masses of Bangladesh, will be found even in times of Chiang Kai-shek's rule in your own land. Czar's rule in Russia and in times of British imperialism in pre-independence India.'

No man is above mistakes and Bhasani, too, was not. But despite his contradictions, faults and limitations he was a personality free from all mental bondage, with total independence of mind. He had no unconditional loyalty to any ideology or any powerful individual or any power. He was always ready to compromise with his belief, and stood for humanity against ideology.

Maulana Bhasani on the question of what is politics once said: 'Politics is such a noble pursuit which aims at eliminating injustice, exploitation and oppression from the society to widen the path of welfare for all in the society irrespective of faith and opinion; and to ensure in the society justice, rule of law, freedom of expression and the overall democratic right.'

This can be accepted as one of the best definitions of politics by a person who had been involved in this profession for seven decades. During his long career he established a number of political and professional organisations and at some stage he did not hesitate to leave them. He was always ready to sacrifice his party interest for his principle. The Maulana said:

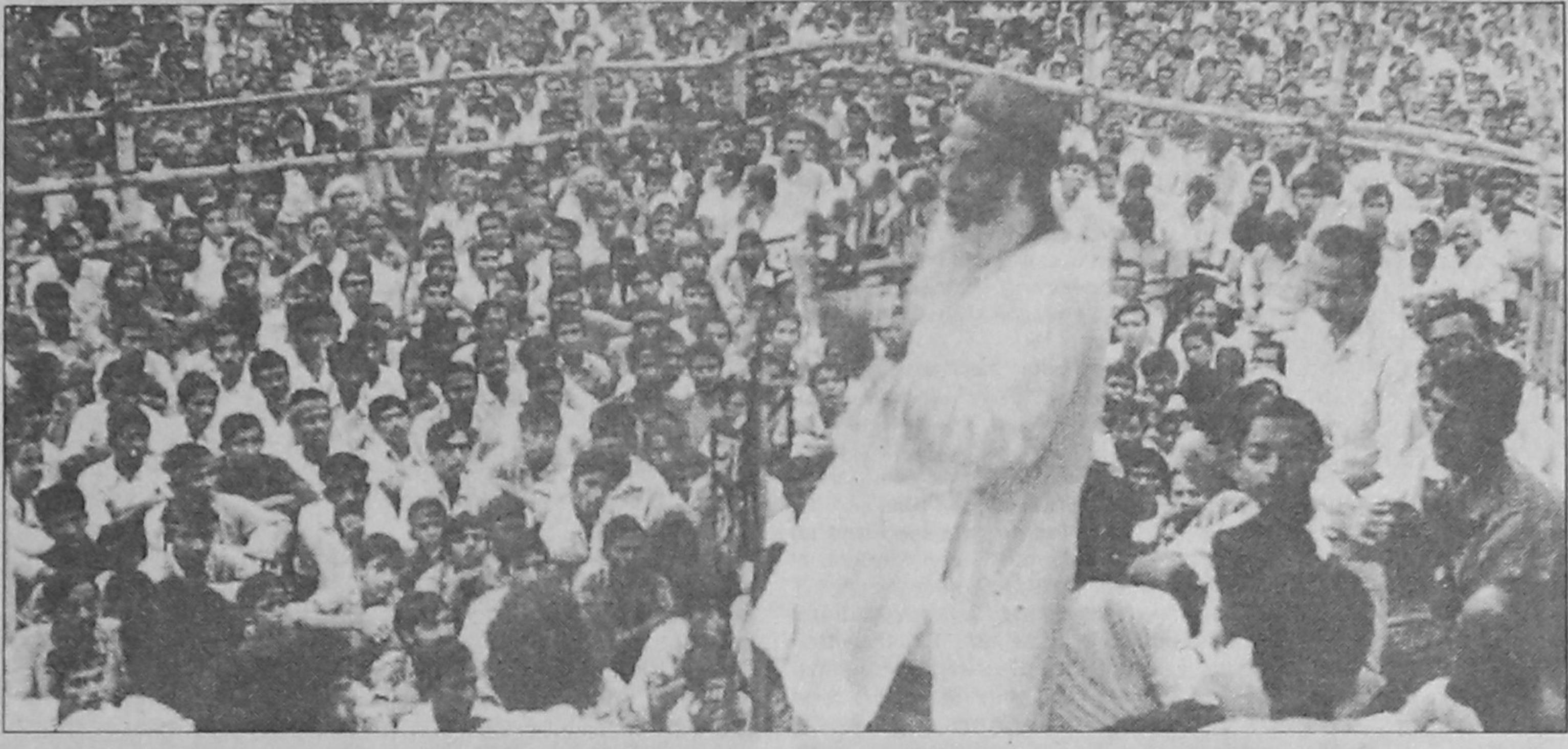
My opponents, even simple elements, who do not deeply think of politics, usually allege that Bhasani leaves and frequently changes political parties. But my critic friends possibly did not find occasion to quietly think 'What is the real policy of Bhasani?' Had they found time to deeply reflect it would not be at all difficult for them to realise that, Bhasani had to change parties time and again in the interest of his principle. They would also realise that for narrow party interest Bhasani never changed his principle.'

The Maulana emphatically said: 'Exploiters have no nationality, no country, no religion, no caste their only identity is they are exploiters.'

At the fag end of his political career the Maulana said of his own political line. In reply to a letter of Sheikh Abdul Aziz, a minister in the Awami Government, the Maulana said in 1972:

'I never practised politics by finding out which is progressive and which is revolutionary. The real aim of my politics is what benefits the people. I have practised politics by determining what is just and what is unjust. I do not believe in the politics of maintaining the system of exploitation by deluding the people in the name of religion. Rather I hate it. However, as fish cannot live without water, so the soul of man cannot repudiate the essence of any religion. Therefore, I do not believe in irreligious politics. Islam is my religion. I do my politics based on Islam because it inspires people to fight against all kinds of exploitation and oppression. Only Islamic Socialism can provide solutions to all problems.'

The author, a writer and journalist, has authored two volumes on the life and politics of Maulana Bhasani



1969: Mazloom Jananeta Maulana Bhasani's meeting at Paltan Maidan

Maulana Bhasani's Struggle against the 'Bangal Khedao' Movement in Assam: An Appraisal

by M. Waheeduzzaman Manik

large meeting of Bangalee peasants at 'Bhasan Char' (Bhasan) Island of Dhubri district. After being expelled by the then Bengal Government from various districts of Bengal (especially from Mymensingh, Pabna and other northern districts), Maulana Bhasani settled at Char Bhasan (Gaghmari) of Assam in 1926 (according to some accounts, he took permanent residence there in 1928 or in 1929). It is fair to say that being expelled from Eastern Bengal in mid-1920s, he had started living in several places of Assam including Gaghmari and Bhasan Char. People of Assam and northern Bengal had started calling him 'Bhasan Charer Chara' or 'Bhasanchar'. It is obvious that from the word 'Bhasan', Maulana Abdul Hamid Khan assumed the popular name 'Bhasani.'

Soon after Maulana Bhasani settled in Assam, his strategy was to prepare a solid grassroots level foundation for waging a protracted struggle against the line system through mobilizing the unorganised and vulnerable Bangalee settlers. He devoted most of his efforts from 1929 through 1935-37 in building up organisations throughout Brahmaputra valley. For example, he organised a huge Krishak Sommelon (Peasants' Conference) at Char Bhasan in 1929. The chief resolutions of this Conference were as follows: abolition of the line system, moratorium on the Bangal Khedao (Eviction of Bangalees) was an instrument of collective victimisation and discrimination of the Bangalee settlers in Assam. In fact, the Bangal Khedao movement was the brutal way of executing the infamous line system, and this deliberate policy of perpetual discrimination and repression against the vulnerable Bangalee peasants in Assam had reached its peak during the years between 1937 and 1947.

As a saviour of his fellow Bangalee immigrants in Assam, Maulana Abdul Hamid Khan Bhasani had organised a viable resistance movement against both the line system and Bangal Khedao movement. Indeed, Maulana Bhasani was the most trusted voice during the agonizing years of tears and fears of the repressed Bangalee peasantry in Assam. He relentlessly articulated the grievances of those Bangalee peasants and agricultural labourers. His defiance of the infamous line system and the vicious Bangal Khedao policy of the Assam Government made him a legend throughout Assam. He was rightly called 'Majloom Jananeta' (leader of the oppressed) for his dedication to the cause of the underprivileged and dispossessed segments of the society.

Maulana Abdul Hamid Khan Bhasani had become a legendary political figure in Assam in mid-1930s and 1940s for successfully building up a protracted resistance movement against the bullish and brutal imposition of the line system on the Bangalee immigrant settlers. However, he had Assam connection even before he settled there in later part of 1920s. Born in 1885 (retracing 1886) at Dhangora village of Sirajganj subdivision (under the then Pabna district), as a young disciple of Pir Syed Nasiruddin Boghdadi, he visited and stayed in Assam in the early years of 1900s (his first visit to Assam was believed to be in 1904). He was also a frequent visitor to Brahmaputra valley of Assam in mid-1920s. He had followers in Assam even before he permanently migrated there. He was already a recognized peasant leader throughout Mymensingh and Northern Bengal before he made the Brahmaputra valley of Assam his place of residence and struggle. For instance, Maulana Bhasani organised, in 1924, a

land encroachers' and 'land grabbers', the Borduloi cabinet declared that no 'grazing lands will be allotted to the landless Bangalee peasants.'

Neither the cut-off date nor the discriminatory provisions of the Immigration Policy were acceptable to the victimized Bangalee immigrants. Their grassroots level community leaders rejected it. Maulana Bhasani virulently criticised the unilaterally drafted immigration policy. He compared Borduloi's tactics of 'collective victimisation' of Bangalee peasantry in Assam with that of Hitler's Nazi tactics in Germany. He also accused Borduloi Government of spreading 'communalism' through the imposition of various forms of collective punitive measures against the Muslim peasants in Assam. He urged the Muslim leaders as an opportunist and power hungry politician, his shaky coalition ministry could subvert several votes of no confidence only through unprincipled political maneuverings. Unfortunately, the issues pertaining to the line system and Bangal Khedao movement became casualties of such unprincipled policies of logrolling. Due to intense internal squabbles and dirty

content with empty promises. He kept on pressing Syed Sadullah to translate his lofty promises into meaningful action-oriented plans and programmes. In fact, Maulana Bhasani forcefully demanded of the Prime Minister to distribute the promised barren land among the landless Bangalee peasants. He characterized the introduction of the proposed 'development projects' exclusively for Ahomi landed class as a subtle continuation and execution of the line system. Maulana Bhasani passionately urged Syed Sadullah to rescind the line system. While Maulana Bhasani castigated Syed Sadullah for failing to keep his promises, the Congress led coalition had mobilized enough support in the Assembly to unseat Syed Sadullah's cabinet.

Immediately after the fall of Syed Sadullah's cabinet, Goopinath Borduloi formed the Government. The obnoxious way of evicting the Bangalee immigrants from their settlements was deliberately intensified with vengeance. All types of punitive measures were taken for inflicting collective pain on the

name of Congress leader Goopinath Borduloi lives on in infamy because of the fact that during his infamous Bangal Khedao movement, he instructed the police to evict the settlers, and then demolish and burn the homesteads of thousands of Bangalee Muslim settlers throughout Assam.

Despite extreme provocations from the exponents of the infamous Bangal Khedao movement and Borduloi's politics of vengeance, it was Maulana Bhasani who kept on safeguarding the rights of the defenseless Bangalee immigrants in Assam. Without resorting to communalism, violence and terrorism, Maulana Bhasani kept on his vigorous mass campaigns to organise those poor Bangalees to stand up against the unjust and oppressive policies and programmes of Assam Government.

Maulana Bhasani passionately urged Syed Sadullah to rescind the line system. While Maulana Bhasani castigated Syed Sadullah for failing to keep his promises, the Congress led coalition had mobilized enough support in the Assembly to unseat Syed Sadullah's cabinet.

Immediately after the fall of Syed Sadullah's cabinet, Goopinath Borduloi formed the Government. He claimed that Borduloi's Government demolished and burnt homes and households of several hundred thousand Bangalee immigrants in different areas including Mongoldi, Borpeta, and Gouhati. He urged the displaced settlers to reconstruct

Bengal Provincial Muslim League and the Central Muslim League. There is no doubt that the top leaders of both the Congress and the Muslim League leaders of Assam put a lid on Maulana Bhasani's political activities since March, 1947. The central leadership of the All-India Muslim League totally ignored him when the partition plan was negotiated. There is no doubt that he felt used, and deeply hurt and betrayed by the Muslim League leadership. Although he worked hard for enlisting support for the Muslim League during referendum on Sylhet, he kept on organising numerous meetings and demonstrations in the Muslim dominated areas of Brahmaputra valley to articulate the demands of the Muslim immigrants. Many of those immigrant settlers became the victims of physical attacks and torments at that time.

Maulana Bhasani also became the target of police surveillance and false propaganda and ridicule. He fully comprehended that his days in Assam were numbered under the changed political environment. The Assam police arrested him once again in early August, 1947 on flimsy ground, and he was not released from jail till early November, 1947. Obviously, the most volatile defender of the Bangalee peasantry in Assam was deliberately kept behind bar at a critical juncture of the sub-continent's history. Being released from jail, Maulana Bhasani left Assam in November, 1947 for Santosh, Tengal.

Although Maulana Bhasani made a conscious effort to maintain a clear cut distinction between his struggle against the line system and his support for Pakistani movement, the line between these two distinct movements became blurred as the time was approaching toward the division of British India. In all fairness, it needs to be noted here that by 1945-47, Maulana Bhasani's protracted resistance movement against the line system and Bangal Khedao policy was equated with his 'movement' for the establishment of 'Pakistan'. Since Maulana Bhasani was the driving force in mobilising the entire Muslim population of Assam in support of 'Pakistan movement', many of his critics started misconstruing his lifelong struggle to be a 'ploy' for making Assam a part of Pakistan. This negative perception and Maulana Bhasani's relentless organisational activities for establishing 'Pakistan' during 1945-47 period had indeed created a hostile environment for the vulnerable Bangalee Muslim settlers throughout Assam. To a certain extent, the secular nature and socio-economic dimension of his resistance movement against the line system also got diluted. However, in spite of being the President and the chief organiser of the Assam provincial Muslim League, he deliberately maintained a non-communal posture during the most trying years of the Muslim peasantry in Assam.

The die-hard Hindu organisation in Assam took the full advantage of mobilizing public opinion of all groups of the non-Muslim population throughout the province against the Bangalee Muslim settlers. For instance, the 'Alom Jatiya Mahashabha', the largest Hindu organisation of Assam, took the leadership role in the Bangal Khedao movement in the form of demolition of houses, rampage, and siege. Borduloi's punitive measures against the immigrants took a communal

character. Pursuant to the decision of Borduloi's Cabinet, various 'tribal blocks' were created in the designated areas with heavy concentration of Bangalee Muslim immigrants for restricting their interactions and activities. Since the Bangalee Muslim peasants at this phase became the exclusive target of Bangal Khedao movement in the form of demolition of houses, rampage, and siege, Borduloi's punitive measures against the immigrants took a communal

character. Pursuant to the decision of Borduloi's Cabinet, various 'tribal blocks' were created in the designated areas with heavy concentration of Bangalee Muslim immigrants for restricting their interactions and activities. Since the Bangalee Muslim peasants at this phase became the exclusive target of Bangal Khedao movement in the form of demolition of houses, rampage, and siege, Borduloi's punitive measures against the immigrants took a communal

character. Pursuant to the decision of Borduloi's Cabinet, various 'tribal blocks' were created in the designated areas with heavy concentration of Bangalee Muslim immigrants for restricting their interactions and activities. Since the Bangalee Muslim peasants at this phase became the exclusive target