

# Political Philosophy of Maulana Bhasani

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 Dhubbri, 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 Bhasani char (the island of Bhasani) because of frequent flooding that afflicted the area. This is how he came to be known as the Bhasani 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 Dhubbri 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 broad-based opposition party in Pakistan. The Maulana was the chairman of the All-Party Language Movement Action Committee formed on January 30, 1952. He was arrested after the tragedy of the 21 February and suffered more than one year's imprisonment.

Bhasani came in close contact with a number of communist leaders including Hazi Danesh in Dhaka Central Jail in 1952. His sympathy for the oppressed especially the poor peasants and handicraftsmen, anti-colonial demagogue and agitational

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-Monem 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-Porao-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 Bangladesh government-in-exile. Among the other members of the committee were Tajuddin Ahmed, Moni Singh, Muzaffar Ahmed and Monoranjan 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 worst 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, 1971].

Known as a pro-Chinese leader, Bhasani in a long telegram to Mao Zedong and Prime Minister Chou 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 checkered 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 as 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 life. 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 Jananata Maulana Bhasani's meeting at Paltan Maidan

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

DURING the early periods of the 20th century, the incentive of cheap and fertile land had attracted the Bangalee peasants in thousands to Assam. The flow of Bangalee migrations to Assam (majority of whom happened to be Bangalee Muslim peasants from East Bengal) had continued throughout 1920s and 1930s, notwithstanding the introduction of the infamous Line System in 1920. The successive Assam governments had systematically employed the so-called 'line system' and other repressive policies and methods to thwart the legitimate rights of those hardworking Bangalee immigrants. The so-called 'Bangal Khedao' movement (Eviction of Bangalees) was an instrument of collective victimisation and discrimination of the Bangalee settlers in Assam. In fact, the Bangal Khedao movement was but a British way of executing the infamous line system, and this deliberate policy of perpetual discrimination and repression against the vulnerable Bangalee peasantry 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 agonising years of resistance against 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 rightfully called 'Majloom Jananeta' (leader of the oppressed) for his dedication to the cause of the underprivileged and disinherited 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 British and British 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 (circa 1886) at Dhangora village of Sirajganj subdivision (under the then Pabna district), as a young disciple of Pir Syed Nasiruddin Gohadi, 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

large meeting of Bangalee peasants at 'Bhasan Char' (Bhasani island) of Dhubbri 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 (Gaghmar) of Assam in 1926 (according to some accounts, he took refuge in Assam 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 Gaghmar and Bhasan Char. People of Assam and northern Bengal had started calling him 'Bhasan Charer Maulana' or 'Bhasani Maulana'. 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 Sammelan' (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) initiative, the redress of the atrocities of Raja Probat Kumar Barua (the Zamindar of Gouripur) over the Bangalee Muslim migrants, and the introduction of uniform weighing system throughout Assam. (In fact, Maulana Bhasani's efforts later led to the adoption of uniform weight system). Maulana Bhasani also assembled the 'Bangla-Assam Proja Sammelan' (Bangal-Assam Tenants' Conference) in 1931 at Sirajganj of the then Pabna district. One of the purposes of this inter-provincial tenants' conference was to sensitize the people of the neighbouring Bengal about the discriminatory policies and initiatives of the government in Assam against the Bangalee settlers. He gave political voice to the agricultural labourers and landless peasants of Assam through the formation of 'Assam Chashi Major Samiti' (Assam Agricultural Labourers' Association) in 1937.

Maulana Bhasani was elected to the Assam Legislative Assembly in April 1937 from South Dibrui, a constituency which he effectively represented till 1945. He relentlessly fought both inside and outside the Legislative Assembly for safeguarding the legitimate rights of the Bangalee peasantry. The fragile coalition governments which were formed several times from 1937 through 1945 under the Prime Ministership of either Syed Mohammad Sadullah (his coalition Government fell five times within a period of eight years) or Goopinath Bordoloi, a die hard anti-Bangalee Congress leader in Assam, refused to rescind the

infamous line system. However, the parliamentary factions of both Syed Sadullah and Goopinath Bordoloi started softening the hard-line stand on the issues of the line system and Bangal Khedao movement for the exclusive purpose of wooing support of the Muslim legislators. Although motions for abolishing the line system were raised and debated by various members during the first session (which continued only for three days) of Assam Provincial Assembly in 1937, no agreement could be reached.

Maulana Bhasani urged the Assembly members to rescind the infamous line system 'for the sake of humanity'. Yet, Syed Sadullah's first cabinet failed to rescind the infamous line system and Bangal Khedao movement. Often characterised by his fellow 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 politics of logrolling. Due to intense internal squabbles and dirty

land encroachers' and 'land grabbers', the Bordoloi 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 Bordoloi's tactics of 'collective victimisation' of Bangalee peasantry in Assam with that of Hitler's Nazi tactics in Germany. He also accused Bordoloi Government of spreading 'communism' through the imposition of various forms of collective punitive measures against the Muslim peasants in Assam. He urged the Bangalee Muslim peasantry to remain organized and vigilant against all types of provocations, tactics and ploys of deception and retaliation of the Congress-led Government of Goopinath Bordoloi.

Goopinath Bordoloi's anti-Muslim and anti-Bangalee initiatives led to the downfall of his

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 Ahom 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 Sadullah's cabinet, Goopinath Bordoloi 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 Bordoloi 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 of the infamous Bangal Khedao movement and Bordoloi'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. He kept on protesting the Government sponsored atrocities on the Bangalee settlers. He claimed that Bordoloi's Government demolished and burnt homes and households of several hundred thousand Bangalee immigrants in different areas including Mongoloi, 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 urged the Hindu-Muslim leaders of Assam to maintain harmony among various communities. Despite the fact that Pakistan movement was going on in full swing in earlier months of 1947, some Congress leaders and several pro-Congress newspapers in Assam and elsewhere vehemently criticised Assam Government's premeditated atrocities against the Bangalee Muslim peasantry. However, no substantial help from any external sources ever reached Assam in support of Maulana Bhasani's resistance movement against the Assam Government's discriminatory policy of collective victimization of Bangalee Muslim peasantry.

To the chagrin of both the central Muslim League and Congress leaders, Maulana Bhasani added (in March, 1947) a new twist to his movement for the salvation of the Bangalee peasantry by urging the people to fight for the 'independence' of Assam. For accomplishing this objective, he urged the Muslim League leaders to form 'Non-violent and Non-communal Resistance Committee' throughout Assam. He also urged everyone to observe 'Assam Day' on March 10, 1947. In a mammoth gathering on March 10, 1947 for March 9, 1947, he emphasized that his fight was not directed against any particular religious or racial groups in Assam. He said: 'My struggle is against the British imperialism and the misuse and atrocities of the Assam Government'. Maulana Bhasani asked his followers to 'break laws for establishing their legitimate rights on the basis of non-violent and non-co-operation movement'. He passed a resolution instructing his followers 'to embrace death instead of passively accepting brutal eviction from their homesteads and settlements. You will be buried wherever you are killed. Don't vacate your homesteads as per order of the Government. Go back to these landless settlements wherever you have been evicted'. In retaliation, the Assam Government put Maulana Bhasani behind bars immediately after this public meeting. There was outcry against Maulana Bhasani's arrest throughout Assam province. Numerous violent demonstrations took place throughout Assam demanding his immediate release. The Bengal Provincial Muslim League leaders also protested his arrest.

Maulana Bhasani was released from Gouhati jail on June 21, 1947. By that time, due to the failure of the proposed Cabinet Mission Plan, the non-Bangalee dominated central leadership of the All-India Muslim League already accepted the formulae of division of India. With the exception of Sylhet district, there was no provision in the fateful partition plan for holding referendums in any of the Muslim dominated areas of Assam province. Nor

was there any scope in the imminent partition plan for carving out an independent status for Assam along with greater Bengal. The Congress leadership in 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 movement was under way. 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 legitimacy of 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 bars at a critical juncture of the sub-continent's history. Being released from jail, Maulana Bhasani left Assam in November, 1947 for Santosh, Tanga.

Although Maulana Bhasani made a conscious effort to maintain a clear cut distinction between his struggle against the line system and his support for Pakistan movement, the line between these two distinct movements became blurred as the time was approaching towards 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's time was approaching towards 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'. 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