

The Tiger of Bengal: A.K. Fazlul Huq

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SYED ASHRAF ALI

"In my stormy and chequered life, chance has played more than her fair part. The fault has been my own. Never at any time have I tried to be the complete master of my own fate. The strongest impulse of the moment has governed all my actions. When chance has raised me to dazzling heights, I have received her gifts with outstretched hands. When she has cast me down from my high pinnacle, I have accepted her buffets without complaint. I have my hours of penance and regret. Disappointments have no cured me of an ineradicable romanticism. If at times I am sorry for something I have done, remorse assails me only for the things I have left undone."

THAT is how the Tiger of Bengal A.K. Fazlul Huq summed up the successes and failures, trials and tribulations, dreams and despairs of his great and eventful career. If the test of a statesman be the measure of his power to change the course of history, then Sher-e-Bangla deserves to be mentioned among the great statesmen of the world.

Although he does not belong to that small group of leaders who have carved out a new state by their political genius or sagacity, he is certainly a "salt of the earth" whose place is assured in the annals of history.

It was on April 27, 1962 that the faithful mariner of the Bengali nation set sail towards the Great Unknown and reached the shore from which no traveller returns. Bengal, nay the whole of this subcontinent, was plunged into an ocean of grief.

When a prominent person passes way, it has almost become commonplace to claim that he is irreplaceable, that his final departure has created a void which cannot be filled. To some extent, that is often true, but it is absolutely true with regard to the Tiger of Bengal.

It is not that no great man will be born in Bangladesh in future. We have had many a great man and we shall have great men, but that special and peculiar type of greatness that Fazlul Huq represented is not likely to be reproduced in this subcontinent or anywhere else.

It is perhaps not necessary to refer to his many qualities -- his scholarship, his courage and conviction, and his great oratory. He was a great educationist, a great champion of truth and justice, a great social reformer, and great in many other ways.

There was in Sher-e-Bangla a combination of the greatness of the past with the greatness of the present. He represented, and always reminded one of, what we have read in history about the great men of several hundred years ago -- men of intellect, men of action, men of vision, men with golden qualities of head and heart.

He also reminded us of what might be called the great qualities of olden days -- graciousness chiefly. There were many bad qualities in the old days of course, but there was a certain graciousness, a certain courtesy, a certain tolerance, a certain patience which we sadly seek in the world today.

We have made tremendous achievements in scientific and technical ways but we do it with a lack of graciousness, with a lack of tolerance, with a lack of something which has made life worthwhile since it began. It was the strange and unique mixture of the good qualities of the past -- the graciousness, the deep learning and tolerance -- with the urges of today that made Sher-e-Bangla what he was.

Providence distributes its gifts to different persons in diverse measure. To some it gives physical strength and to others intellectual eminence; to some it gives affluence and to others fame and recognition. It is rarely that all these gifts are showered upon the same individual.

Sher-e-Bangla was one of the fortunate few to whom Allah, in His infinite Mercy, gave in full measure all the things which human beings desire, and yet with a contrariety which is beyond human understanding, combined all these gifts with a sensitiveness and sympathy for human sufferings which sometimes turned his personal achievements into agony at the sight of so much futility and so much hatred all around.

Sher-e-Bangla's was a career of outstanding service, of great achievement and of dedication to a cause. The flame of his faith in freedom and in nationalism did not flicker at any time. Neither were his powerful pen nor his enviable gift of oratory in three different languages ever used for any but the highest purposes.

Great as a statement, great as an orator, great as a philanthropist, great as an administrator, great as an educationist, Sher-e-Bangla was undoubtedly a giant among men, almost an institution by himself. A rare combination of human qualities, he had a heart that suffered for the poor and the people around him.

His extreme kindness imparted a goodly grace to a personality that was even otherwise lovable. Courteous, shrewd, witty and kind, he gave out of his mature judgment and ripe experience counsel which was often sought and ever valued. His ardent patriotism, his deep scholarship and his robust thinking have always been distinct assets in the political evolution of the sub-continent.

Single-minded in his devotion to the national movement, broad-minded in his approach to the varied international problems, Sher-e-Bangla had always been revered and adored as a keen intellectual, eloquent speaker, sober politician and, above all, a lovable man.

Entirely selfless, free from all narrowness, truthful in thought, fearless in action, meek as a lamb, but a lion in spirit as he was, Fazlul Huq never failed to rise to the occasion and respond to the call and urges of the country and its people.

His foresightedness was indeed amazing, and in a letter written to the then Governor of Bengal, Sir John Herbert, on August 2, 1942, he had the courage and conviction to demand a separate Bengali army, and wrote: "I want you to consent to the formation of a Bengali Army consisting of a hundred thousand young Bengali Hindu and Muslim youths on a fifty-fifty basis. There is an insistent demand for such a step being taken at once, and the

people of Bengal will not be satisfied with any excuses. It is a national demand which must be immediately conceded."

He also pointed out in the same letter: "Administrative measures must be suited to the genius and traditions of the people and not fashioned according to the whims and caprices of hardened bureaucrats to many of which autocratic ideas are bound up with the very breath of their lives."

A great man of dauntless spirit as he was, he never cared a button for his personal security and safety nor hesitated an inch to bring a person to book, whatever was the rank and status of the person concerned. Even the British governor of Bengal was warned in writing by this fearless representative of the people.

In February, 1943, he made a statement in the capacity of chief minister of Bengal on the floor of the Bengal Legislative Assembly regarding the then government's policy on Midnapore affairs.

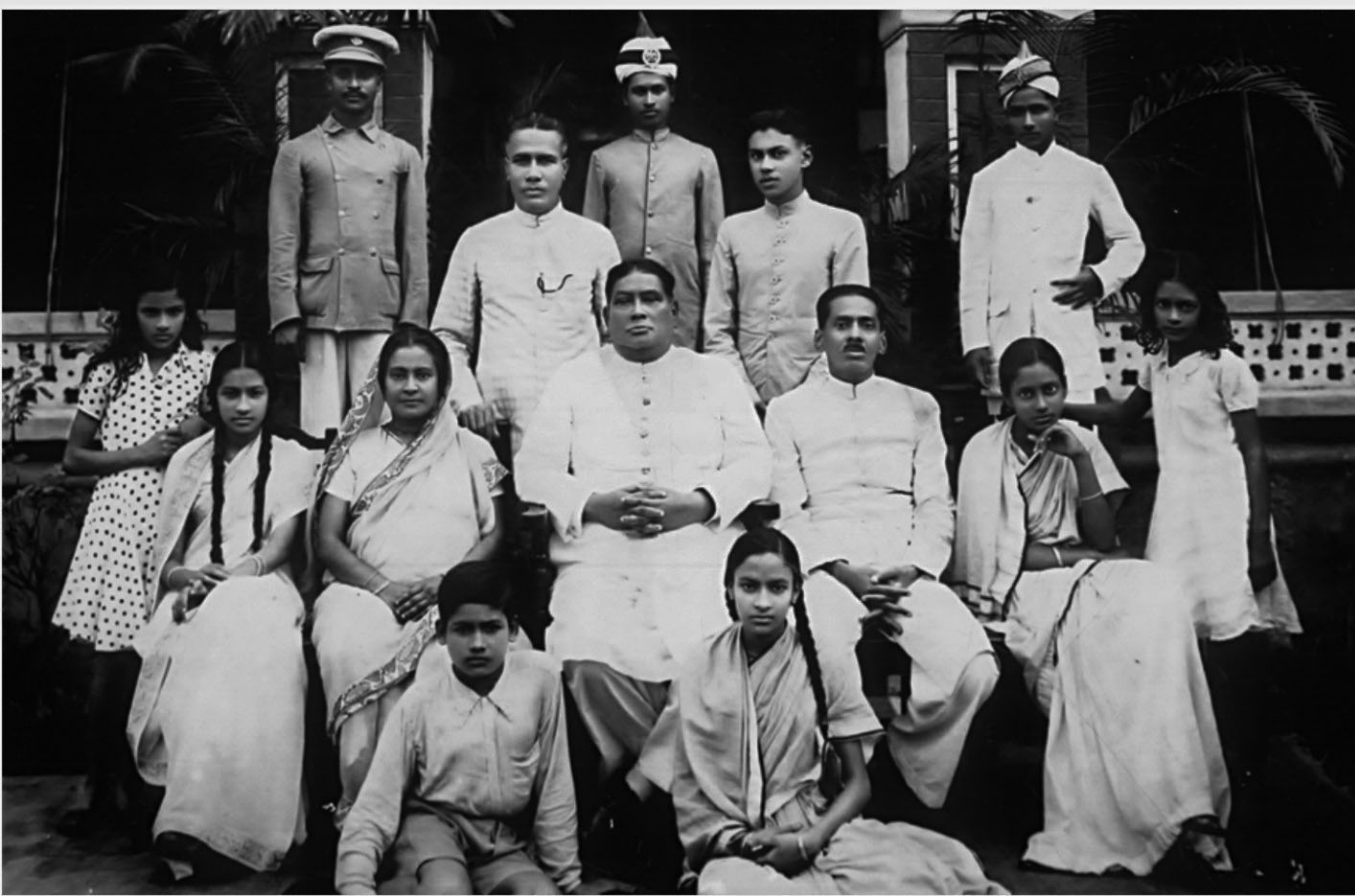
Sir John A Herbert, the Governor of Bengal, did not like the statement, and in a letter written to the Sher-e-Bangla on February 15, 1943, he demanded: "I shall expect an explanation from you at your interview tomorrow morning of your conduct in failing to consult me before announcing what purports to be the decision of the government."

This letter very naturally angered Sher-e-Bangla. In a befitting reply sent on February 16, the Tiger roared: "Dear Sir John, In reply to your letter of February 15, I write to say that I owe you no explanation whatever in respect of my conduct in failing to consult you before announcing what, according to you, is the decision of the government, but I certainly owe you a duty to administer a mild warning that indecorous language such as has been used in your letter under reply should, in future, be avoided in any correspondence between the governor and his chief minister."

This was indeed the roar of a tiger, which in his own words "reverberates from Bengal across the seven seas to the homes of the British Nation," not the roar of one "who is as docile as a tiger in a circus show." It was a roar which "makes thrones tremble," not the roar of one who "knows how to crouch beneath the throne and wag the tail in approbation of government policy."

Syed Ashraf Ali is a former DG of Islamic Foundation Bangladesh.

Granddaughter's sweet memories



Standing: Syed Mohd. Taifoor, Syed Hossain Ahmed. Middle row: Maleka P. Banu, Lulu B. Banu, Begum Sarah Taifoor, Sher-e-Bangla, A.H.M. Wazir Ali, Razia Banu, Zakia Banu. Sitting on the ground: Syed Mohd. Parvez, Leila A. Banu.

I was shown so much love and honour because of my *nana* -- whose life-long slogan was "poor people at least must have *dal bhat*." The Congress used to get fed up with *nana*. They used to say: "Fazlul Huq only talks about landless peasants and *dal bhat*."

RAZIA BANU

IT is very difficult to write about Sher-e-Bangla. I don't have the courage or ability to write about his life. But I will narrate a few incidents.

In 1970, I had gone to Kushtia for an election campaign. On the third day, I became very sick -- my voice became hoarse and I could hardly speak. While returning from a meeting on a rickshaw, I told my companion: "I can't stay any more. Since I won't be able to address the meeting, what is the use of my staying here? Tomorrow I will leave for Dhaka." When we reached the bungalow, the rickshawalla -- a very old man with white beard -- stood before me with folded hands.

I thought he wanted some more money, but to my surprise he said: "I don't want any money. *Amma* please don't go back to Dhaka so soon. I have heard when you were telling your friend about your throat. Please *Amma*, stay here and attend the meeting. You don't have to speak -- you just go and sit there. We want to see you. We all came from far-flung place to have a look at you -- we want to see Huq Saheb's blood -- his granddaughter. We can feel our dear Huq Saheb -- the poor man's friend. He worked for us only. We have lost him, but we will always remember him. Please, *Amma* don't go back."

I was stunned. This was too much an honour for me. For this honour, I bow my head to Allah -- I bow my head to *Nanajan*.

In 1996, I stopped at Geneva for a few days while returning to Canada. At the hotel, I met Mr. Asrar Hossain -- our ex-advocate general and a very eminent lawyer. Through him I met his delegation, which comprised of high profile officials.

On the day of my departure, a friend said: "Tonight you will dine with us at Mr. Ahmad's house. His wife will cook for us."

I vehemently opposed him: "You are putting that lady so much trouble, I tell you. Please give up this idea. I am really indebted to you for all you have done for me, but no dinner please." They all smiled and the senior-most gentleman told me with a laugh: "No dinner for you -- only *dal bhat* -- you are the granddaughter of *dal bhat* -- so we thought we will have *dal bhat* together. I was thrilled to acquire this new title -- *dal Bhat*er *natni*."

Just imagine, this was all in a foreign country. I was shown so much love and honour because of my *nana* -- whose life-long slogan was "poor people at least must have *dal bhat*." The Congress used to get fed up with *nana*. They used to say: "Fazlul Huq only talks about landless peasants and *dal bhat*."

That night's meal is one of my most memorable ones. That lady who had taken so much trouble embraced me with a smile. The food was very simple but it was spiced with the love and affection of kind and noble hearts. I will always remember them.

My *nana* was also very kind to his attendants. They used to take advantage of his kindness. He never lost his temper with them. When he was the prime minister, he resided at Jhawtala Residence. One morning, it was found that a costly pen and a watch had been stolen from his bedroom.

A police officer came to check his room when he was bathing after breakfast. *Nana* never liked his presence. *Nana* became furious with the officer and scolded him because they had sent the police to search the house of Cherag Ali -- one of *nana's* attendants. Cherag had told my *nana* that the police had searched his house.

He called Mr. Islam and asked why the police had gone to Cherag Ali's house. Mr. Islam replied: "This is done whenever there is a big theft." My *nana* told Mr. Islam: "You have done a very wrong thing. I don't care for this costly pen or watch, I am very much hurt that police have gone to Ali's village home and his parents have written to him that they felt very small and humiliated before other villagers. I am very annoyed with you." He felt so much for the honour and dignity of the poor people that he was called, *mogo Huq Shaheb*. He will always live in the hearts of all Bangladeshis -- rich and poor alike.

Courtesy costs nothing. Still sometimes, we lack this virtue. One famous writer wrote: "My father goes to meet his Hindu friends but never goes to his Muslim neighbours -- it hurts me very much. There was one exception: he used to go to Huq Saheb's (Sher-e-Bangla) house regularly. One day I went with him to see why he went there. My father was warmly greeted by Huq Saheb whose room, as usual, was full. After some time a Hindu widow (with a long veil) in a white sari entered the room."

"Huq Shaheb at once stood up and said: '*Boudi*, why did you take the trouble of coming here, had you informed me, I would have gone to your house.' He asked a boy to take the lady to the next room and went to talk to her. When the lady was him she said: '*Bhai*, I have fixed up the date of my daughter's marriage.' She said only this much. Huq Shaheb said: 'Please wait, I am coming back.' He left the room and went out. Then he borrowed money from a *Kabuliwala* and returned to the lady, and giving her the packet he told her, '*Boudi*, this is my blessing for my niece. Please accept it and send her home with an escort.' He did this for one of his colleague's wife also. It didn't matter which party or what religion he or she belonged to -- this was a gesture of courtesy. It is so noble and so gracious that it touches our hearts. The widow in distress also knew that and instead of going to her relations, she came straight to Huq Shaheb."

The writer became MLA in 1954. She was Parliamentary Secretary for Education till 1958 and served as an MP from 1970-1975. She was the only female member of the Constitution Committee.

Larger than life

Sher-e-Bangla remains, warts and all, a significant point of historical reference in Bangladesh, indeed in pre-1947 India.

SYED BADRUL AHSAN

ABUL Kashem Fazlul Huq went through a rather rich, fulfilling life, of course with its periodic disappointments. Born on October 26, 1873, he died in Dhaka on April 27, 1962. The final four years of his life were hostage to physical agony, compelling him, as Sirajuddin Ahmed notes in his excellent work on the late politician, to implore the Almighty for deliverance from his sufferings.

And yet Sher-e-Bangla, as he has come to be known in history, was one of the more prominent Bengali politicians whose entire life revolved around the principle of public welfare. By the time the All-India Muslim League met in Lahore in 1940 to demand a separate homeland for India's Muslims, Huq was already a household name within undivided India's political circles. But it was certainly that conference in Lahore which cemented his reputation as the Tiger of Bengal.

Abul Hashim, himself one of the foremost Muslim politicians in pre-partition times, records in his slim work, *In Retrospect*, the grandeur in which Huq made his way to the podium in Lahore on March 23, 1940. He made his entry into the venue of the Muslim League conference even as Mohammad Ali Jinnah was busy exhorting the party faithful on the need for Pakistan. Observing Huq, all League representatives cheerfully welcomed him as Sher-e-Bangla. Huq clearly savoured the moment. He deliberately slowed his walk to the dais, bowed left and then right as he acknowledged the cheers and finally found his place beside Jinnah. The future founder of Pakistan told the assembled delegates: "The tiger has now been caged." Moments later, Fazlul Huq moved the resolution for Pakistan.

Huq quit the Muslim League in 1942 and after that, till the division of India, engaged in various political permutations and combinations, notable among which was his forging a coalition in Bengal with Shyama Prasad Mukherjee. It was a coalition that in the end was fated to collapse.

In 1947, Huq moved to East Bengal, the eastern province of the newly created state of Pakistan. With politics increasingly taking a negative hue through the parochialism of the ruling Muslim League, Sher-e-Bangla found himself adopting, more and more, anti-establishment and therefore popular causes.

In 1954, the combined force of his personality and those of Huseyn Shaheed Suhrawardy and Moulana Abdul Hamid Khan Bhashani (symbolised by the Jukto Front) forced the Muslim League out of power through landmark elections in East Bengal. As chief minister of East Bengal, Huq expected to redraw the frontiers of politics vis-à-vis relations between the province and the four provinces constituting West Pakistan. In the event, he failed.

Soon after his government took over, an unhappy West Pakistani ruling clique instigated riots at Adamjee jute mills in Narayanganj. And then Huq made a trip to West Bengal, met his old friend Bidhan Chandra Roy and waxed nostalgic about the historical ties between the two parts of old Bengal. The Pakistani administration painted his remarks as a conspiracy to break up Pakistan. On May 31, 1954, barely two months into office, the Jukto Front ministry was dismissed under Section 92(a). But a political comeback was what would define Huq's career within slightly more than a year. In August 1955, the man who had been accused of treason in May 1954 was inducted into the cabinet of Prime Minister Chaudhri Mohammad Ali as Pakistan's interior minister. That was remarkable peripety for Sher-e-Bangla.

Fortune came his way again when, on March 24, 1956, a day after the Pakistan constituent assembly adopted a constitution for the country, Huq took over as governor of East Pakistan. Here too something of history was made, since Huq was the first Bengali to be governor of his own people. His predecessors had been either British colonialists or West Pakistanis.

A.K. Fazlul Huq was removed from the office of governor on April 1, 1958. That effectively was the end of his career in politics. Age was finally catching up with him. In the four years left to him of life, he would be witness to the first military takeover of Pakistan in October 1958 and the suppression of democratic politics in the country.

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Syed Badrul Ahsan is Editor, Current Affairs, The Daily Star.