

146TH BIRTH ANNIVERSARY OF SHER-E-BANGLA AK FAZLUL HUQ A champion of the common man

ABUL MANSUR AHMAD

SHER-E-BANGLA was an "institution" rather than an "individual". So say his critics as well as his admirers. And rightly so. But it seems very few have really appreciated the deeper significance of this epithet. It appears that many regard him as an institution just in a conventional way. They do so because his colourful personality, his phenomenally eventful life, his apparently conflicting ideologies, his incomprehensible contradictions, his bold and unapologetic inconsistencies, his obsession with secret munificence, his monumental successes interspersed with abysmal failures, his childish mistakes in the context of his prodigiously sharp intellect—in short, the ocean-like expanse of his stormy life full of gems and jewels, on the one hand, and mud and dirt, on the other, could not be explained except by the theory of an institution.

But their assessment of Fazlul Huq's life, while otherwise quite correct, appears to have overlooked two very important traits of his character: one, his confident and unfaltering insistence that, in all his quarrels, it was his opponents who were mistaken and not he; two, his candid confession that he never tried to be the master of his fate but allowed chance to play her part in his life. This is very significant. Indeed, in my view, these two traits combined together are key to the secret chamber of Fazlul Huq's life. It clearly implies that Fazlul Huq was led more by intuition than by intelligence. In judging Fazlul Huq, we have always talked of him being guided more by heart than by brain, more by impulse than by deliberation. But we have never thought of intuition.

An intuition is no mere instinct or impulse. It is that esoteric channel through which one can approach the portals of truth or rather truth may glint in one's mind in flashes. Most

of Fazlul Huq's uncommon and eccentric behaviour referred to above becomes crystal clear if seen through this prism light of intuition. Thus interpreted, Fazlul Huq's life can only mean that he was destined to fulfil a mission. At least he felt he was. It was his intuition, and he believed in it.

On his recovery from a grave illness in 1935, he solemnly asserted: "The fact of my miraculous recovery from such a mortal disease indicates that Allah wishes me to fulfil a noble mission." He may have expressly said so on that occasion but in reality, he must have started feeling it decades earlier. He himself might not have any clear idea as to what that noble mission was. His mind at that time might have been too engrossed in his quarrel with the Congress over the Mayoralty of Calcutta Corporation and his dual with Governor Anderson over the latter's nominee Sir Nazimuddin, whom he was to fight at Patuakhali, for any such spiritual evaluation. These two events, in and of themselves, were no doubt great events serving as turning points in the political history of Bengal, but compared to Fazlul Huq's life's mission, even these events pale into insignificance.

But what was that mission? A little reflection on the salient traits of Fazlul Huq as a public figure will provide that answer. Let us see what those traits were. To the Muslim intelligentsia, he was the champion of all-round renaissance of Muslim Bengal. To the educationist, he was the patron saint of education in Bengal, second only to his teacher Sir Ashutosh Mukherjee. To the Hindu intelligentsia, he was the most beloved of Muslim leaders in spite of the fact that amongst the latter, Fazlul Huq was the most ruthlessly outspoken in his attacks against the Caste Hindus. To Dr Sir PC Roy, the great scientist-philosopher, who typified a catholic Hindu mind with a broad outlook, Fazlul Huq combined in himself a true Muslim with a true



Sher-e-Bangla AK Fazlul Huq (1873-1962)

Bengali and thus constituted an ideal Bengali of the future. To the teeming and starving millions of the peasant Bengal, he was the Messiah of their *dal-bhat*. Last of all, he was Sher-e-Bangla, the people's lion of Bengal, in spite of, or rather because of, the various esteems he was held in by their cross-sections.

On the whole, he belonged to the people and the people belonged to him. This has been very succinctly epitomised in the aphorism that "Fazlul Huq was Bengal and Bengal was Fazlul Huq." The one really belonged to the other. To Fazlul Huq, the "people" was not a vague term to be interpreted according to political exigencies. To him, it was the peasantry, the common man, of Bengal. So, if democracy could be defined by

Abraham Lincoln as "the government of the people, by the people, and for the people," we can as well describe Fazlul Huq as "the Sher-e-Bangla of the common man, by the common man, and for the common man."

Many a politician have spoken and written democratically, but no one has lived democratically as Fazlul Huq has done. Many a statesman have spoken and written of the common man, but no one has lived like a common man in the midst of the common men as Fazlul Huq has done. The one trait of his character which completely identified him with the common man was the ups and downs, lights and shades, the sun and the rain of his own life. In the case of the common man, this instability in life was entirely due to the social

and economic inequities from which he had been suffering. But what about Fazlul Huq?

If he wanted, he could have led a successful and happy career and gotten to the top in any sphere of life—as success and happiness are understood by an average wise man—and thereby could have lived in a station far above the common man. But he seemed not only to not want such a life, but to have deliberately avoided it. If he so wanted, he could, much earlier in his life, have adorned all the high offices he ultimately occupied at the ripe old age when he could, and should, have retired from an active life and led a peaceful one. But he did not. He would not accept anything unless it was a gift from the common man. To him, no office was attractive enough to separate him from his people. And he did not want to lead a peaceful life.

Peace seemed to be the last thing he wanted. If a normal political life meant peace, he would prefer an abnormal one. In all disputes, he was the aggressor. He quarrelled with the Congress at a time when it was the most influential political party in the country and left it. He quarrelled with governors and left ministerships. He quarrelled with Quaid-e-Azam and left the Muslim League after he himself had made it the most powerful party in the country. So it was always the stronger party that he picked up quarrels with, and never with the weaker.

In all these quarrels, however, he claimed to be in the right and his opponents in the wrong. It was in these quarrels again, "if he was ever sorry for what he had done, he was far more remorseful for what he had left undone."

Abul Mansur Ahmad (1898-1979) was a renowned writer, journalist, and politician. This is an excerpt from an article first published by the *Observer* on April 27, 1966 (on the fourth death anniversary of Sher-e-Bangla AK Fazlul Huq), and later included in the author's book "End of a Betrayal and Restoration of Lahore Resolution" (1976).

One step forward, 10 steps back

Regressive new laws in some US states undermine reproductive rights

ZAHA CHOWDHURY

"I was sixteen. I had been raped by a school volunteer. The foetus had caused internal bleeding and I was minutes away from dying. I was a Sophomore in high school...dying because of the choice of one man. It was either me or the foetus that was going to die anyway", Jennifer N (@TheSaltWell) had tweeted in the wake of "the most aggressively anti-abortion law in the recent Alabama history."

It has been a terrible year for reproductive rights in America: Alabama outlawed abortion, and Missouri has passed a bill banning abortion after eight weeks—before most women even realise they're pregnant. In fact, women across America are contemplating the worst with the advent of Trump as president, as abortion rights opponents

essentially undermines the "commitment" of "pro-life" advocates to decrease abortion rates.

In 1846, the Michigan Legislature passed a complete ban on abortion except for when the mother's life is at risk, "carrying with it a punishment of felony manslaughter." This unleashed havoc among women all over America, as activists fought to protect a woman's right to control her body. This led to the monumental case of *Roe v Wade*, the 1973 US Supreme Court decision that legalised abortion nationwide. However, in recent times, "some fear the new laws may lead to more widespread criminalisation of miscarriages." Jezebel reported last month: "Black women and low-income women are more likely to be arrested for these pregnancy-related charges." This is already becoming a reality in El Salvador, where women are being convicted of homicide and sentenced to 30-plus years in prison after suffering miscarriages. If a new Supreme Court overturn *Roe v Wade*, "as President Donald Trump has promised and as Democrats and activists fear, the law that governs a Michigan woman's right to choose will be more than 170 years old and one of the strictest in the country."

Other states in the USA, including Missouri, Mississippi, Louisiana and Georgia have pursued "heartbeat bills"—legislation that would prohibit abortion as soon as a physician detected a foetal heartbeat and additionally, doctors are likely to face sentences of 99 years. And under the new Alabama law, there is no exemption of rape or incest: "the 11-year-old raped by her father will be sentenced to nine months pregnancy with all the health risks that entails, as well as the horror." Dr

Ted Anderson, president of The American College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists, criticised the "heartbeat bill" saying that it is largely "misleading" and "out of step with the anatomical and clinical realities of that stage of pregnancy." According to the Guttmacher Institute, between 2010 and 2014, 25 million abortions were considered unsafe, putting women, in particular, women of colour and women in poorer regions, more at risk. Hence, the abortion debate ultimately comes down to women's access to safe/unsafe abortion methods and "pro-life" legislators establishing a world mired with misogyny and control, in turn, indicating a significant regressive move in terms of women's reproductive rights.

And it's not just about implementing a total ban on abortion—service providers are being denied funding under the "global gag rule" instigated by Trump, which will strip them of the ability to carry out the most basic women's healthcare, as reported by the Population Action International (PAI). It is very difficult to grasp the idea that prosecutors and juries would impose a law that forces women to carry out unwanted pregnancies and threatens to kill them if they don't. It is indeed difficult to imagine how conservative forces and bureaucracies regularly overlook family planning and its fundamental impact on individual empowerment and national development. But prosecutors have adamantly prosecuted women in states where abortion is de facto illegal. It would be rather ignorant to "underestimate their capacity for cruelty."

Despite this, self-induced and self-managed abortions are on the rise again. Before *Roe*, this was largely risky and while self-managed abortions are now relatively safe (Misoprostol and Mifepristone pills), what is significant here is that women's autonomy are being constricted and reproductive rights are up for debate when it should not be. If outlawing abortion and even jailing women doesn't actually decrease abortion rates, then what does? The answer is obvious: "access to affordable and reliable contraception" and a robust social safety net where women can choose whether they want to conceive or not.

Ironically though, keeping in mind that politics create "pro-life" and "pro-choice" division, history suggests that "boldly supporting a woman's right to legal abortion is a winning strategy for Democrats on the road to the White House", as

opposed to the belief that abortion only motivates voters on the right. This was the reason behind Bush receiving only 37.5 percent of the popular vote and Obama's whopping 7.5 million vote margin with women. The arguments put forward by "pro-life" advocates and Republican Senate candidates are indicative of how states are chipping away at issues of women rights' injustices: "I think it's important to remember that if a drunk driver kills a pregnant woman, they get charged twice," said the state representative Tony Tigerholt, a Republican from Arlington, according to Fox 4 News. "If you murder a pregnant woman, you get charged twice. So I'm not specifically criminalising women. What I'm doing is equalising the law."

In other words, there is no medical basis for these restrictions and legislators do not even care for reason, or actual medical advice. We need to understand that reproductive rights' restrictions are advocated by people who show no interest in the well-being and health of infants and children, and instead, deprive women to be able to fully participate in economic and public life in their fertile years. We need to understand that it is simply about "misogyny and control". We need to understand how problematic the anti-abortion movement has become that the bill's rape and incest exceptions, since removed, dominated the conversation in the Alabama Senate. Anti-abortion lawmakers remain open about their motives—to overturn *Roe v Wade*—especially with the Supreme Court that "seems clearly tilted in their favour."

Beyond hoping that *Roe v Wade* won't be overturned, let's educate ourselves and those around us about the political debates over abortion pills. There are 214 million women in the developing world who don't want to conceive right now, but don't have access to family planning. Let us enforce how political and cultural discrimination is not a thing of the past for women—I mean, we're still arguing over birth control in the US, let's not get ahead of ourselves by talking about how good women have it. A dangerous and cynical populism from the Pro-Brexit and Trump campaigns is on the rise, but don't let abortion rights wane from consciousness as these severe laws become America's new normal.

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A protester holds up her arm with 'My Body My Choice' written on it during a protest against the recently passed abortion ban bills at the Georgia State Capitol building.

PHOTO: ELIJAH NOUVELAGE/AFP

"seem to be moving from a longstanding strategy of chipping away at abortion rights to full-on assaults." Alongside sparking an increase in the number of women seeking long-term birth control measures such as IUDs, the regressive new laws have also given rise to a viral social media campaign, with thousands of women sharing their abortion experiences with the hashtag #YouKnowMe. The takeaway is clear: 1 in 4 women have had abortions and women will go to any lengths to end unwanted pregnancies, which

It is indeed difficult to imagine how conservative forces and bureaucracies regularly overlook family planning and its fundamental impact on individual empowerment and national development.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

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BABY BLUES by Kirkman & Scott

YESTERDAY'S ANSWERS

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QUOTABLE Quote

EDWARD SNOWDEN (Born 1983)
American intelligence contractor

Arguing that you don't care about the right to privacy because you have nothing to hide is no different than saying you don't care about free speech because you have nothing to say.