

CELEBRATING 140TH BIRTH ANNIVERSARY OF MAULANA BHASHANI

# Maulana Bhashani and The Islam Question

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In public discourse, there are two images of Maulana Abdul Hamid Khan Bhashani: "Green Maulana" and "Red Maulana". The first tries to portray him as an Islamic cleric or *pir*, and overlooks his lifelong struggle against communalism, authoritarianism and exploitation of the poor masses. The second depicts him as a communist, and ignores the spiritual aspect of Maulana's political ideology. An in-depth analysis of his idea of Islam and its reflection in his political activities can help us understand the true essence of his life and work as well as why he is ever more relevant in the fight against the unholy alliance of authoritarianism and communalism.

Maulana Bhashani's politics was inspired by religion but it never descended into communalism. He had the belief that Islam was the most just religion and, therefore, he found his spiritual fulfilment in the establishment of a just society.

A cursory glance at Bhashani's politico-religious life will illustrate two distinctive traits of his idea of Islam: universalism and liberation of the oppressed.

In his article on the policy of "Rabubiyat" written in the twilight of his life, Bhashani explained his ideology as the undivided equality of all people irrespective of their caste, nationality and religion. Since all human beings are equal before the creator, Allah, the purpose of Islam

is to establish a society without discrimination and exploitation, reiterated the Maulana. This spirit of universalism helped him overcome narrow identity politics and embrace common humanity.

Bhashani received religious education at the Deoband Madrasa. His association with progressive Islamic thinkers like "Shaikhul Hind" Mahmud al-Hasan inspired him to join the fight against British imperialism. He actively participated in both the nationalist movement led by Deshbandhu Chittaranjan Das and the Khilafat Movement.

Bhashani joined Muslim League in 1930. But he was never a conventional Muslim League politician who invariably toes the party line. He became the president of Assam Muslim League in its Barpeta Session in 1944. At the very meeting, he exhorted the League's General Secretary Muhammad Sadullah, who was also the prime minister of Assam at that time, not to act as a "post box" for the British authorities.

Another story is worth sharing in this regard. Maulana Abul Kalam Azad used to preside over the Eid prayers at Kolkata Eidgah. During the 1940s when the Pakistan demand was garnering wide support from the Muslims of India, particularly from the Muslims in Bengal, Maulana Azad was removed from this honorary duty as he was against the idea of Pakistan and an active member of Congress. Maulana Bhashani was at that time a leading



This undated photo shows Maulana Bhashani holding a portrait of Lenin. SOURCE: SPUTNIKIMAGES.COM

figure of Assam Muslim League. At a public meeting, he criticised this decision with his characteristic sarcasm that Muhammad Ali Jinnah should be appointed as the new Imam.

Bhashani devoted himself to the

Pakistan movement. He led the successful campaign during the 1947 Sylhet Referendum through which Sylhet became a part of Pakistan. But soon after the establishment of Pakistan, Bhashani along with Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and

others formed Awami Muslim League to protest corruption and discrimination by the Muslim League government. Four years later, he proposed to drop the word "Muslim" from the party's official name to make it a platform for people from all religious backgrounds, and thus the Awami Muslim League became Awami League.

In his effort to empower the oppressed, Bhashani always laid emphasis on organising them and making them politically conscious. He was widely respected as *pir*. He had many *muridans* (disciples). Bhashani used his religious appeal to organise them politically. When accepting someone as a *murid*, Bhashani would insist that he took an oath that he would work as a member of the peasant or labour organisation that he led.

Maulana Bhashani identified private property as the source of exploitation. To him, it is contradictory to the spirit of Islam as, according to the religion, Allah holds ownership over all properties and a human is only a custodian. This is clearly different from the position commonly held by Muslim clerics who believe in Allah's ownership but don't strive for abolition of private property. This brings him closer to the communist ideology that also calls for abolition of private ownership.

All through his political career, Bhashani kept up his two-pronged fight against authoritarianism and

communalism. He exposed how authoritarian forces often use religion to create a false identity tension between different religious groups and perpetuate their rule. He was also a staunch critic of those communal forces that, in the name of religion, create divisions among people and thereby serve undemocratic forces.

In today's Bangladesh, when a large number of people are reeling under extreme socio-economic pressure caused by the pandemic, we see the rise of a false debate on the difference between sculpture and idolatry. This is not the problem but the symptom of a bigger problem characteristic of a society founded on extreme inequality, injustice and intolerance. Bhashani rightly identified this problem and proposed solutions to it through a revolutionary interpretation of Islam.

Bhashani had a dream of establishing an Islamic university that would be open to all irrespective of their religious identity. He wanted the institution to be an epitome of Islamic education where universalism and the libertarian spirit of Islam would be taught. He believed this kind of education would attract people from all over the world and establish the glory of Islam as a harbinger of peace and prosperity. Will the dream of Bhashani remain unfulfilled?

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## 'We are the 95%': Bhashani and the Kagmari Festival

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In 2011, people reclaimed the streets, parks and public spaces in major financial districts across the world as part of the Occupy Movement. "We are the 99%" was the popular slogan of the movement, coined by the anarchist anthropologist David Graeber and others. The movement occupied space, amplified marginalised voices, and reimagined a new world, necessitated after the 2007-8 global financial disaster had rendered visible the damage inflicted by the wealthy few on the rest of the world. This was, of course, not the first time that the demand for the world to be reimagined in different ways had been made. This article revisits a moment in South Asia when something similar happened.

On the occasion of the 140th birth anniversary of Maulana Bhashani, I wanted to re-examine the 1957 Kagmari Sammelon—the event that signalled the break-up of the Awami League and the birth of the National Awami Party (NAP)—and argue for its uniqueness as a political event in postcolonial South Asia. The Kagmari Sammelon was the festival of the "95%".

In early 1957, Awami League held the reins of power at the Centre and in the Province, the only time this would happen in the pre-71 history of Pakistan. Hussain Shaheed Suhrawardy was the Prime Minister of Pakistan, and Ataur Rahman Khan was the Chief Minister in East Pakistan. However, this power had come at a cost, a U-turn, in fact, on the party's position on autonomy, complete withdrawal from bilateral and multilateral security agreements, and a free and independent policy. On the other hand, Maulana Bhashani's commitment to anti-imperialist and Third World solidarity politics had strengthened. The people, he argued, could not be the "masters" of their destiny if they were also the "talpi-bahok" (porters) of

imperial powers. Bhashani planned an event that would overpower and undermine Suhrawardy's onward march in defence of security pacts and bolster his demands for love and friendship in the newly decolonised Afro-Asia bloc.

So he called out to the "95%"—"poor cultivators, labourers, blacksmiths, potters, etc." and "all those with whose money the country runs"—to attend the Awami League Council Convention in Kagmari in February 1957. These were not the typical attendees of a convention, but Bhashani did not intend for the Kagmari Sammelon to be a typical run-of-the-mill political gathering. It was a uniquely disruptive political event, invariably described as a *mela* (festival), *sanskritik sammelon* (cultural gathering) and "Afro-Asian cultural convention". The Kagmari Sammelon disturbed the traditional arrangement of power and politics, democratised spaces, and population, and opened up new ways of sensing, relating and inhabiting the world. Over the course of six days, conversations on Cold War in the Third World, military pacts, and anti-imperial and decolonial futures—usually confined to parliament chambers, university halls, debating clubs and mansions of Dhaka—migrated to the rural *maidan* (public space) of Kagmari, foregrounding the participation of those excluded from the formal spheres of politics. It was in these unlikely settings that the demand for radical anti-imperial friendships and solidarity with the Third World triumphed over the case for more arms spending and military pacts. The subaltern was not the parochial subject, nor the elite the international elite actor as traditionally imagined.

How was this done? Kagmari was the enacted vision of a world turned upside down, dramatising the power and equality of those who had come to be ignored by those in power. Those who organised and attended the event described how

the *oiparagaon* (backward village) transformed into an *osthaya rajdhani* (temporary capital) over this period. This was not just a remark on the thousands of people that descended onto the small village, including the Prime Minister and the Chief Minister of East Pakistan, politicians, international guests and foreign diplomats, but a reference also to the infrastructural and aesthetic makeover that the village underwent. The sights, sounds and smells normally associated with the small towns or villages in East Bengal were not to be found over the duration of the festival. Instead, what the residents and attendees encountered were road networks leading to a

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well-lit village connected to the electricity grid, constant supply of clean water, latrines which produced no strong and strange odours, huge furnace ovens used to cook food fit for foreign guests, and medical arrangements on standby. The estate of the former Maharajah of Santosh, unused and abandoned since the Partition, recovered some of its old lustre and glory in its new role as the actual site of the Sammelon. This is important because the rural village, which during the colonial

era had captivated the anti-colonial nationalist imagination, lost much of its political importance in the postcolonial period. The dominance of the urban over the rural was apparent in East Pakistan by the mid-1950s. In September 1956, as villagers poured out of boats and ferries onto the riverbanks of Dhaka to take part in a hunger march, the police fired shots at them. The city was where people now came to articulate basic socio-economic and political claims and be seen by the modern state.

The changing infrastructure and aesthetics in Kagmari—the village that turned capital—presented a vision of the power and possibilities contained within rural spaces and constituencies, a role otherwise denied to them. Kagmari was a rebuke to those in the power, who thought politics could only happen in modern spaces. Bhashani, through Kagmari, had shown that peasants, and other marginalised constituencies, were as modern, progressive and capable of political thought as their urban and elite counterparts. The Sammelon was a manifestation of Jacques Ranciere's "principle of axiomatic equality—the equality of anyone with anyone", a space of radical equality.

However, Kagmari was not just about the re-ordering of spatial and temporal configurations of power, but also the articulation of alternative left subjectivities, communities and futures. Bhashani turned Kagmari into a pedagogical space, where rural aesthetics and culture revealed worlds that were radically egalitarian, anti-capitalist and creatively combined vernacular and global ideas and practices of Islam and socialism. Central to the pedagogy was the idea that if people were to see that it was possible to inhabit the world differently, they would want to change it. However, it was not in an abstract way that the world was to be experienced but through local, concrete and visible forms, through

things that can be touched, seen, smelt and heard. Bhashani used gates, music and dance to persuade and educate his constituencies.

The gates were one of the most striking sights of Kagmari Sammelon, memorable enough to merit a mention in Sunil Gangopadhyay's epic Partition novel "Purbo Paschim", where one of the main characters attending the event remarks on the "beautifully made gateways". The gates, numbering 50 and possibly more, were more likely the work of Quamrul Hassan, the *patua* artist and founding member of Dacca Art School in 1948. They had the names of political, religious and cultural figures—including Mao, Gandhi, Haji Shariatullah, Tagore, Stalin and the Prophet—emblazoned on them. There was no serious attempt to organise these gates in order of importance or any other identifiable category. Although it has not been possible to retrieve stories that were told or imagined by subaltern constituencies as they passed through these gates, but as suggested by other historians working on marginal histories, speculation becomes a necessary historical task. It is possible that the arches, a structural feature in Mughal imperial architecture, paradoxically played a similar as well as a radically different function in Kagmari. Historically, they have denoted the king's rule and power and the connection between different spaces. But at Kagmari, the gates were designed to place emphasis on connection between those lifeworlds rather than what divided them, with peasants and labourers being shown that they were part of a wider and richer moral and cultural universe.

Central to the Kagmari narrative is how important subaltern joy was in the thinking and fighting for decolonial politics and futures. Mikhail Bakhtin in his work on Rabelais describes carnival laughter and its "indissoluble and essential relation to freedom". Descriptions of Kagmari demonstrate the

carnavalesque nature of the gathering, with people "milling around scores of shops and stalls", people "cheering and watching the fun", ferris wheels, stick fighting, and the singing and dancing. Joy was integral to the experience and intellection of solidarity and internationalism at Kagmari. The physical feeling of collective joy and togetherness generated by the laughter, chattering and hustle-and-bustle offered a physical embodied sense of diverse popular gatherings and the power that a demotic left future could bring to the people.

As Kagmari wound down, the repeated shouting of "long live global solidarity" by peasants, workers and others resonated across the village, signalling a dramatic defeat for Suhrawardy, an outcome he himself later conceded. The Prime Minister of Pakistan was unable to convince the assembled crowd of peasants, workers and other groups of a future at war. Bhashani had turned the villages of East Bengal into a site of defeat of narrow understandings of nationalism or Islam. He had shown how the "95%" were integral to the reimagining of futures based on radical egalitarianism, Afro-Asian love, and vernacular socialism.

Some of the most important progressive political moments of recent years have come from occupied space: Shaheen Bagh, Tahrir, the Indignados movement. These and other creative protests have reworked and combined existing cultural forms for progressive ends. With Kagmari we see a unique South Asian example to draw energy and inspiration to renew efforts for rebuilding our world for the many and not the few, a demand more urgent than ever.

Layli Uddin is a Leverhulme Early Career Fellow at King's College London. She is currently working on her book on the making and unmaking of East Pakistan, examining the role of Maulana Bhashani and peasant and worker mobilisation. This article is an abridged excerpt from her chapter in the forthcoming book "Forms of the Left: Left-Wing Aesthetics and Postcolonial South Asia".

**QUOTABLE Quote**

**CESAR CHAVEZ**  
(1927-1993)  
Latino American civil rights activist.

*You are never strong enough that you don't need help.*

**CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH**

**ACROSS**

- 1 Rush swiftly back and forth
- 7 School member
- 11 Portugal's place
- 12 Regarding
- 13 Braque, e.g.
- 14 Very bright
- 15 Toss out
- 16 Public outburst
- 17 Secluded spot
- 18 Be agreeable
- 19 Promotable man
- 21 Granola bit
- 22 Ballet dance
- 25 Hightail it
- 26 Physics amount

**DOWN**

- 1 Cut into cubes
- 2 Nigeria's capital
- 3 Defy authority
- 4 Arm muscle
- 5 Shopping aid
- 6 Put away
- 7 Ornate

**27 Response to a joke**

**29 Muscle quality**

**33 Deserve**

**34 Farrel or Firth**

**35 Seethe**

**36 Became close**

**37 In the past**

**38 For each**

**39 Vast expanses**

**40 Brought up**

**8 Words after "peekaboo"**

**9 Early chopper**

**10 Truthful**

**16 Smooths, in a way**

**18 Worry**

**20 Let on**

**22 Headline spot**

**23 Atlas section**

**24 Latvia neighbor**

**25 Passes the bar?**

**28 Floor squares**

**30 More mature**

**31 Flower girl, often**

**32 Over**

**34 Make do**

**36 Butter unit**

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**YESTERDAY'S ANSWERS**

P	A	T	T	I	P	U	T	T	S
A	S	H	E	N	E	T	H	A	N
M	I	E	N	S	R	E	E	V	E
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S	O	O	T	I	N	F	O	L	K
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V	A	L	I	M	P	L	A	M	
A	T	O	L	L	A	L	I	T	O
N	O	V	E	L	R	E	F	E	R
T	R	E	E	S	K	N	E	E	S

**BEETLE BAILEY** BY MORT WALKER

I CAN'T GO ON THE HIKE TODAY, I HAVE A HEADACHE, MY FEET HURT, IT'S TOO HOT, IT'S TOO COLD I'M TOO TIRED, I HAVE BLISTERS, CORNS, BONE SPURS...

WHAT ARE YOU DOING, BEETLE?

THROWING EXCUSES AT YOU HOPING ONE WILL STICK

**BABY BLUES** BY KIRKMAN & SCOTT

I'M TRYING TO SET A RECORD FOR DISTANCE LEARNING.

LET'S GO.