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Fazlul Huq and the Bangalee Muslim question



THE phrase “Bangalee Muslim” is generally regarded as a “living oxymoron,” and the Bangalee Muslims are considered to be perennially trapped in a dilemma of identity over their Bangaleeness and Muslimness. The extraterritorial pull of religion often confounds their regional interests. How did AK Fazlul Huq, one of the most prominent Bangalee Muslims of the 20th century, deal with the dilemma? This article is an attempt to find the answer through a brief study of his life and works.

At the beginning of the 20th century, when Fazlul Huq joined politics, the Muslim political scene was dominated by elites—i.e. nawabs and zamindars. He himself was initiated into politics by *ashraf* Muslims like Nawab Salimullah and Nawab Ali Chowdhury. He actively participated in the founding of the All India Muslim League in Dhaka on December 30, 1906.

Fazlul Huq, like Salimullah and Nawab Ali, had the conviction that unless there was development of education, the Muslim community would remain backward and weak, and would continue to be exploited by the more advanced communities. Therefore, he put all his effort into the advancement of Muslim education and increasing their presence in civil services.

Fazlul Huq was closely associated with all the plans and schemes for the establishment of Dhaka University, which was an imperial concession to the Muslims of East Bengal following the annulment of the first partition of Bengal. He, with the help of Sir Abdur Rahim, obtained from the government a recurring grant of 550,000 rupees, and therefore the university no longer had to beg for money every year to the government of Bengal.

During the non-cooperation movement, launched on September 4, 1920 by Mahatma Gandhi, Fazlul Huq supported the Congress's programme of boycotting British goods and titles, but he was against the idea of boycotting schools and colleges. He felt that such a move would seriously hamper the progress of the Muslim community; therefore, he left Congress.

Similarly, Fazlul Huq was very vocal about the persistent discrimination in appointment of Muslims in government services. In his testimony to the Royal Commission on the Public Services in India (1914), for example, he said, “In considering what would be a due

representation of a particular community, regard should be had to its numerical strength in the province, to past history and political importance generally. In Bengal, for instance, Muhammadans (Muslims) should be given at least half the appointments every year.”

Politician and author Kamruddin Ahmad stated that the Fazlul Huq government (1937) in Bengal “for the first time opened avenues of employment [for] the educated middle-class Muslim young men.”

Thus, gradually, Fazlul Huq became the spokesman, respectfully called Huq *Saheb*, of the emerging educated Muslim middle class of Bengal. To the poor and starving peasants of Bengal, the majority of which happened to be Muslim, he was, according to politician and author Abul Mansur Ahmad, also the messiah of their *daal-bhat*.

Fazlul Huq founded the Krishak Praja Party (KPP), which started a mass movement with the objectives of establishing peasant rights, relieving the peasants of the oppressions of moneylenders and zamindars, and making *raiyyats* the owners of land by abolishing the zamindari system (*langol jar jomi tar*). Historian Tariq Omar Ali opines, “Fazlul Huq’s peasant populist election



The Fazlul Huq cabinet in 1937.

SOURCE: BANGLADESH ON RECORD

campaign, particularly his fiery oratory, were critical in shaping this emergent Bengali Muslim peasant community into a political force.”

Most of the zamindars in East Bengal were Hindu, and therefore, there were attempts to portray KPP’s political programmes as communal. But this does not hold true as Huq’s KPP was a fierce opponent of the Muslim League, which was committed to the strategy of communal separatism in politics, and was dominated by feudal and capitalist interest groups like Dhaka nawabs and the Ispahanis.

The 1937 Patuakhali election is a case in point. KPP’s Fazlul Huq versus Muslim League’s Khwaja Nazimuddin. The champion of Bangalee peasantry versus the scion of the Muslim elite, landed aristocracy of Bengal. Muslim League unashamedly played the religion card to attract Muslim voters. The Muslim League’s mouthpiece, *The Star of India*, wrote, “A vote for the Muslim League means a vote for united Islam.” The League ran vicious campaigns against Fazlul Huq, portraying him as a stooge of Hindu-dominated Congress. Huq’s KPP reproached the League’s campaign for Muslim solidarity as a “false cry” and adopted a non-communal programme highlighting peasants’ interest regardless of religious beliefs. Fazlul Huq came out victorious in

this “fourth battle of Panipat”—as termed by BD Habibullah—receiving 70 percent of the vote.

Fazlul didn’t limit himself to Bengal politics. He played an instrumental role in formulating the famous Lucknow Pact (1916), which was seen as a beacon of hope to All Indian Hindu-Muslim unity. He was the president of the All India Muslim League from 1916 to 1921. He also held the position of general secretary of the Indian National Congress from 1918 to 1919.

However, Fazlul Huq never completely merged his Bengal politics in all-India concerns that were often detrimental to the interest of the region. Abul Mansur Ahmad testified that Muslim League’s callous indifference to the annulment of the Muslim-dominated province of East Bengal and Assam, and its agreement in the Lucknow Pact to the permanent reduction of the Muslims of Bengal to a minority, in exchange for weightage of a few Muslims seats in other provinces, disillusioned Huq about the party. “It must have pained Fazlul Huq that all-India Muslim leadership did not raise its little finger of protest when Deshbandu’s Bengal Pact was turned down by (the) Indian Congress during his life time, and rescinded by the Bengal Congress after his death,” Ahmad added.

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The political career of Fazlul Huq can be summarised as follows: at the all-India level, Fazlul Huq fought for the regional interest of Bengal, and in the parley of Bengal politics, he fought for securing the rights of Muslims, particularly the Muslim peasants and educated Muslim middle class. His fight for his co-religionists never descended into communalism.

CHINA’S 50 YEARS IN UN

Epitomising advocacy of multilateralism towards sustainable peace



YESTERDAY, October 25, marked the 50th anniversary of the restoration of the lawful seat of the People’s Republic of China (PRC) in the United Nations, a historic event that has been solemnly commemorated by the PRC. Fifty years ago, the UN General Assembly adopted Resolution 2758 with an overwhelming majority at its 26th session on October 25, 1971. The resolution decided to restore all those rights to China and to recognise the representatives of its government as the only legitimate representatives of the PRC to the UN. Qiao Guanhua, the head of the Chinese delegation to that UN General Assembly, burst into laughter at the meeting after the resolution was passed. This scene has become a classic moment in the history of the UN. Qiao was subsequently invited to deliver a speech on the rostrum of the UN General Assembly on November 15, 1971. Fifteen days later, Huang Hua, permanent representative of the PRC to the UN, attended the Security Council meeting for the first time. Since then, both China and the UN have ushered in a new chapter.

The restoration of the lawful seat of PRC in the UN is a victory not only for New China’s diplomacy, but also for justice and fairness in the world, and for the purposes and principles of the UN Charter. It is of great significance.

The PRC, with its population accounting for a quarter of the world in 1971, had been excluded from the UN since its establishment. It is clear that the UN was incomplete without China’s participation. With China’s return to the family of nations, the UN truly became the most representative and authoritative international organisation. It is conducive to the better functioning of the UN, which became more balanced in reflecting the interests and wishes of the majority of countries in the world.

Chairman Mao Zedong once said vividly that it was our fellow developing countries that “carried” the PRC into the UN. The restoration of the lawful seat of China in the UN shows the rise of developing countries.

As H.E. Boukhelfa, the Algerian ambassador to China, pointed out, “China’s restoration of its legal seat in the UN is a victory for China and the people of all developing countries.” Since then, the PRC has been firmly upholding the purposes and principles of the UN Charter, breaking the dominance of the UN by the bipolar. The force for world peace and development has become stronger than ever before.

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financial obligations to the UN. Since 2000, its financial contribution to the UN has kept on in an increasing trend, making China the second-largest UN peacekeeping contributor in 2016 and the second contributor to the General Assembly in 2019. In 2021, China’s contribution accounts for 12.055 percent of the UN budget. As the largest troop contributor among the P5, China has participated in 29 UN peacekeeping missions, sending more than 50,000



Qiao Guanhua, head of the Chinese delegation to the 1971 UN General Assembly, bursts into laughter at the meeting after Resolution 2758 was passed. This scene has become a classic moment in the history of the UN.

PHOTO: COURTESY

PRC in the UN safeguards China’s national security at the international level. It started the process of China’s integration into the post-WWII international system. To date, China has joined almost all universal international organisations, more than 600 important multilateral international treaties, and the international trading system with the World Trade Organization at its core. It has also become a prelude to China’s reform and opening up.

During the past 50 years, China has kept its solemn commitment to the UN Charter, and made important contributions to the development of the UN.

China has never shied away from its

personnel.

China has strongly supported the goals set by the UN. In 2015, China created the China-UN Peace and Development Fund to facilitate the work of the UN and promote multilateral cooperation. As of 2020, a total of USD 100 million from China has been injected into the fund, and 95 projects covering issues from peace and security to development have been implemented, which benefited more than 100 countries and regions in Asia, Africa, Latin America, and Oceania. As a pioneer in the field of poverty reduction, China has achieved the target of eradicating poverty completely. As Rahamtalla Mohamed Osman Elnor,

permanent representative of the African Union to China, said, “China has achieved the poverty reduction goal of the UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development 10 years ahead of schedule, and it is especially worthwhile for Africa to learn from.”

China has put forward a series of new concepts, including a “Community of Shared Future for Mankind,” which has been absorbed into relevant UN documents. At the 76th session of the UN General Assembly, President Xi Jinping put forward the “Global Development Initiative,” which has received warm responses from the international community. “In the past 50 years, China has actively integrated into the international community and played a leading role in international politics, economic governance, and rule-making,” said a foreign envoy to China. So far, among 15 specialised agencies of the United Nations, four of them are led by Chinese director-generals—namely the FAO, the ITU, the UNIDO, and the ICAO.

At the new historical crossroads, China is committed to building a Community with a Shared Future for Mankind, and will continue doing its best to participate in UN affairs. We will defend the status of the UN, promote the purposes and principles of the UN Charter, and play the role of the advocate of world peace, the contributor to global development, the defender of international order, and the provider of public goods.

The UN-centred international system and basic norms in international relations based on the purposes and principles of the UN Charter are the pillars of multilateralism. We must oppose the use of multilateralism as a pretext by a few countries to impose their own rules on the whole international community. It is important to bridge differences through dialogue, and resolve disputes through negotiation.

Resolution (1940), Fazlul Huq’s emphasis on “independent states” shows that he was not acquiescent to a singular Muslim solidarity. Rather, it was a forceful statement in favour of provincial autonomy.

In 1943, Fazlul Huq wanted to form a national government in Bengal with representatives from all the parties, including the Muslim League, Congress and Hindu Mahasabha. However, due to Jinnah’s opposition, this couldn’t happen. Politician and author Abul Hashim opined that if this plan had been executed, the partition of Bengal could have been prevented. Even in the twilight of his political career, Fazlul Huq was illegally dismissed from the chief ministership of East Bengal (1954) by the Pakistani authority for expressing his desire for the unity and autonomy of Bengal.

Fazlul Huq was also the patron saint of Bangla language and literature. In 1937, at the Lucknow session of the All India Muslim League, some non-Bangalee leaders proposed adoption of Urdu as the official language of the party. The Bangalee delegates under the leadership of Fazlul Huq vehemently opposed this move, and the resolution was dropped. He was also an active supporter of the 1952 Language Movement. The election manifesto of the United Front, which Fazlul Huq led to victory, called for recognition of Bangla as a state language, transformation of the then official residence (Burdwan House) of the chief minister of East Bengal into Bangla Academy, construction of Shaheed Minar at the site of the police firing in 1952, and declaration of February 21 as a public holiday.

In light of the above discussion, the political career of Fazlul Huq can be summarised as follows: at the all-India level, Fazlul Huq fought for the regional interest of Bengal, and in the parley of Bengal politics, he fought for securing the rights of Muslims, particularly the Muslim peasants and educated Muslim middle class. His fight for his co-religionists never descended into communalism.

Historian Sana Aiyar rightly points out that Fazlul Huq refused to prioritise the Muslim identity over the Bangalee identity. The distinguished aspect of his politics, according to Aiyar, was the reconciliation of religious and regional identities into one political framework.

I want to conclude this article with the observation of the scientist and philosopher Acharya Sir Prafulla Chandra Ray about Fazlul Huq: Fazlul Huq combined in himself a true Muslim and a true Bangalee, and thus constituted the ideal Bangalee of the future.

Shamsuddoza Sajen is a journalist and researcher.

We must oppose the use of multilateralism as a pretext by a few countries to impose their own rules on the whole international community. It is important to bridge differences through dialogue, and resolve disputes through negotiation.

China will always take the side of fairness by upholding sovereign equality and opposing interference in other countries’ internal affairs, power politics, and hegemony. China will always take the side of justice by adhering to equity and impartiality and opposing geopolitical rivalry and exclusive blocs. China will always take the side of peace by advocating for political settlement and opposing the use of force and unilateral sanctions.

China is committed to common prosperity through development at home. As far as the world is concerned, China upholds the concept of “pleasure alone is not as good as all others.” We will help build an open world economy, and are willing to share our development opportunities with other countries to achieve global common prosperity.

Facing terrorism, climate change, major public health incidents, and major global economic and financial risks, the countries in the world cannot stand alone and must work together to address those challenges. In the global fight against Covid-19 in the future, as President Xi has solemnly announced, Chinese vaccines will be made a global public good, and China will be committed to ensuring accessibility and affordability of vaccines in developing countries.

Professor Klaus Schwab, founder of the World Economic Forum, said, “China restored its legal seat in the United Nations 50 years ago. In the next 50 years, we can build a better, more cooperative, inclusive, and resilient world together.” To respond to the expectations of the international community, China is willing to join hands with other countries in the world to make new and greater efforts to promote the peace and development of mankind.

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