

45TH DEATH ANNIVERSARY OF ABDUL HAMID KHAN BHASHANI

Our foremost peasant leader and revolutionary



sharecroppers and fisherfolk, rickshaw *wallas* and jute and sugar producers, industrial workers and farm labourers, the urban poor and shopkeepers and primary school teachers, and other segments of the “Wretched of the Earth,” to use the Black revolutionary Frantz Fanon’s phrase. And—clad in his spotless white panjabi while always wearing his favourite lungi and *tupi*—he remained opposed to everything our ruling classes have hitherto come to stand for.

I’m speaking of none other than Maulana Abdul Hamid Khan Bhashani, proverbially known as the *majloom jononeta* (leader of the oppressed), one who was perhaps the most popular revolutionary peasant leader from Bangladesh. He organised and led the poor peasants from East Bengal to settle in a river island called Bhashan Char in colonial Assam—a place where he lived and was loved by its people, who gave him the title “Bhashani.” This is reminiscent of how the Argentine revolutionary Ernesto Guevara came to be lovingly called “Che” in Cuba, which, however, was not the place of his birth.

According to most, if not all, sources, Maulana Bhashani was born on December 2, 1880, in a poor peasant family, in a village called Dhangara, in the present-day district of Sirajganj. His father Sharafat Ali Khan died at 36, when Bhashani—then nicknamed Chyaga Mia—was about nine. Then he lost his mother Maziran Bibi, his grandmother, his two brothers, and his sisters to the 1894 epidemic. Chyaga Mia not only became an orphan, but also lost almost everyone when he was only about 14.

Yet, Chyaga Mia somehow succeeded in getting his elementary education at a small madrasa in Sirajganj. Later, in 1907, Pir Nasiruddin Shah Baghdadi sent him to Darul Uloom Deoband—then the leading centre of Islamic

learning in India. Following that time, Bhashani’s life had been an epic journey marked by relentless struggles against poverty, death, damage, destruction—and, of course, against all forms and forces of oppression and injustice he could possibly identify.

Bhashani died on November 17, 1976, at the age of 96.

Owing to space constraints, I can barely scratch the surface of Bhashani’s staggeringly eventful life and work. But I intend to follow only a few tracks and trajectories that I find significant. Overall, the political life of Maulana Bhashani encompassed three geographical sites—Assam, Pakistan and Bangladesh—and three broad historical periods such as the colonial (British India), neocolonial (Pakistan), and “postcolonial” (Bangladesh) periods, spanning six decades from, say, coming into contact with Deshbandhu Chittaranjan Das in 1917 that inaugurated Bhashani’s political life (it was also the heady year of the great October Revolution of Russia), to organising and leading East Bengal’s peasants in Bhashan Char in 1924, to leading the famous anti-Farakka long march in Bangladesh in 1976.

Avowedly anti-capitalist, anti-colonial, anti-imperial, and anti-feudal—one who uncompromisingly combatted British colonialism, the *zamindari* system, and all forms and forces of class politics represented by parties ranging from the Congress to the Muslim League to the Awami League and the like—Maulana Bhashani was characteristically and unwaveringly oppositional in the interest of the oppressed, as the peasant leader Haji Mohammad Danesh rightly pointed out. Bhashani was known as a socialist, even a “Maoist,” Islamic socialist, Islamist, *Pir*, spiritual leader, and so on. But by no means did he ever resemble any one of them in the run-of-the mill sense. In fact, neither so-called socialists nor so-called Islamists endorsed Bhashani’s positions and practices.

Yet, it was Bhashani who—more than any leader on the left—made socialism popular at a particular historical juncture. Bhashani also underlined the political and even revolutionary potential of spiritual projects—Islam included. His decisively anti-communal version of Islam—informed and inflected by his deep understanding of the notion of

Hukumat-e-Rabbania, which urges us to remain organically tied to the totality of life forms—was deeply resonant with the cause of the oppressed. In this, Bhashani edged close to the revolutionary poet Kazi Nazrul Islam. It was, then, not for nothing that the retrograde Jamaat-e-Islami party called Bhashani *kafir* (Nazrul was also called *kafir* in a different context).

Let me quickly allude to a creative

non grata in his own land: Bengal. Since then, however, he never ceased to act and agitate; he emerged as the most outstanding peasant leader by organising in 1931 the largest peasant rally ever held in Bengal during the British colonial period. Indeed, he organised, led, and took part in numerous rebellions and riots, resistance movements, mass uprisings, marches, protests, rallies, and so on—

was he who also initiated the anti-imperial movement—including the movement against US imperialism—in Pakistan. And when Bangladesh emerged as an independent nation-state, Bhashani quickly realised that power was just transferred from one ruling class to another, and that the anti-people system and state remained intact.

But what, then, is the significance of Bhashani today? True, Bhashani moved from party to party. He was in the Muslim League; then he founded the Awami Muslim League; then he turned it into the Awami League; then he left it to found the National Awami Party (NAP), yet leaving it later. Why? Because none of those parties could keep pace with Bhashani’s revolutionary politics that remained organically rooted in the struggles of the poor peasants and the oppressed. He enacted and embodied an unprecedented dialectic between class-line organising and mass-line organising in the interest of nothing short of total emancipation. His was a version of socialism creatively and radically indigenised: he certainly longed for an exploitation-free system and society that are impossible under capitalism and imperialism, and our national ruling classes, and he exemplarily internalised the values and messages of socialism such that he was able to turn them into active, material, and “national-popular” (to use Gramsci’s term) forces, without falling into the trap of a theory-fetishising intellectualism, and realising well before anyone else during his times that culture is political, and that politics itself has its cultural aspect. For Bhashani, that cultural aspect of politics resided in the ways in which he could not only use and energeise a language immediately accessible to the masses, but could also turn that language into a vehicle of what he himself and his people called *praner dabi*.

Indeed, to reload and reinvent Bhashani today is to inaugurate a new emancipatory, revolutionary politics in Bangladesh.

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Maulana Bhashani speaking at one of his mass rallies.

PHOTO: ARCHIVES

moment in Bhashani’s brand of socialist cultural politics. At mass gatherings, Bhashani used to say prayers—in the manner of what is called *munajat* in the Islamic tradition—and once he said something to this effect in his mass *munajat*: “Allah, keep our communists safe!” There were indeed numerous other moments that amply attest to the maulana’s breathtaking creativity, tactical flexibility and, of course, his principled oppositionality—all in the service of the oppressed. Let me make a few more points about Bhashani’s oppositional politics.

Bhashani joined the Swaraj Party of Deshbandhu Chittaranjan in 1923, and then had his fiercely antagonistic confrontation with the *Maharaja* of Santosh, for which Bhashani was expelled from Mymensingh. In fact, in 1926, Bhashani was declared persona

including, of course, the 1952 Language Movement, the 1969 Mass Uprising—of which he was an unparalleled and most exemplary leader—and the 1971 Liberation War itself. I intend to write about his distinctive and massive roles in all those three historic events on another occasion. For now, let me call attention to just a few, if not all, pioneering moments that characterised Bhashani’s insurrectionary politics.

Of course, as far back as the famous Kargari conference of 1957, Bhashani indicated the need for forming what he himself called “*swadhin purba Bangla*” (independent East Bengal), while on November 25, 1970, he unequivocally mentioned “*swadhin purba Pakistan*” (independent East Pakistan) in his speech. And it was he who inaugurated the moment of a democratic movement in Pakistan by first confronting and opposing the Muslim League. And it

Bangla literature is rooted in real life

Renowned writer and academic Prof Hasan Azizul Huq passed away on November 15, 2021, at the age of 82. A master storyteller, he won many accolades for his work, including the Bangla Academy Award and Ekushey Padak. To pay tribute to his illustrious literary career, The Daily Star reprints his interview, taken by Farhana Susmita and Rifat Munim, first published in 2012.

All literature is said to have streamed into many different strains, which applies to Bangla prose as well. What do you think is the main strain of Bangla fiction?

Bangla fiction came into being at a certain period of history, in the latter half of the 19th century. It is surprising that our prose had come to maturity immediately after its birth. Bangla prose truly began with Bankim. Very few works produced before him had little or no literary value. But with Bankim, Bangla prose acquired an exquisite richness in language, and with the magnificence of this scale began its journey. We Bengalis have this bad habit of comparing our famous people with those of the West. For example, we call Bankim “The Scott of Bengal,” comparing Scott’s “*Ivanho*” with his “*Durgeshnandini*.” Speaking from a purely objective point of view, I believe that Bankim was a far greater writer than Scott.

English prose began to grow incessantly after King James’ translation of the Bible in early 17th century. It was during this time that Francis Bacon was writing his remarkable essays. John Locke began writing thereafter, but creative writing had to wait until the 18th century. We know there’s Fielding and other writers. Considering all these, you can see that English prose is not much older than that of Bangla. But interestingly, we got someone as extraordinary as Bankim at the very outset. We are fortunate in this respect.

You can talk about his many shortcomings. Hindu nationalism, grudge against the Muslims and the consequent dependence on the British—all of these were products of his time; you can find these in his novels, too. But his literary excellence is undeniable. In his novels, he created a world which was intensely humane, more like that of Shakespeare’s. There is a famous saying that if there is anyone else who created as many human beings as God did, that’s Shakespeare! Bankim, too, created characters as individuals, each different from the other, and no one has been able to surpass that yet.

After Bankim came Tagore; and after Tagore came Manik, Bibhutibhushan and Tarashankar, who were then followed by many more. This is the main strain of our literature that you can compare with a vast flowing river.

But then came the politically manufactured Indian separation in 1947. Many believe it was at this time in history that the ever-flowing river of Bangla prose split into two.

Yes, Bengal was divided in 1947. But did the literature divide too? Did our culture divide too? Here, I have strong disagreement with many people, including some modernists. There was only a political separation by drawing a line between two parts of Bengal. The cultural differences we talk about were always there, even before the Partition. It is nothing drastic. Think of their writers: a good number of them were originally from this part of Bengal, and vice versa. Therefore, I am firmly against dividing Bangla literature on such a flimsy ground. There may arise some difference with the passage of time because of differing socio-political forces. Just imagine the case of American literature, which has grown to be entirely different from English literature. I’m ready to accept this kind of difference, which has yet to happen to Bangla literature. But I won’t accept it when some people take a vow to establish differences that actually have always been there. This tendency is common in both parts of Bengal, which I think is a manifestation of provincialism.

Based on that separation, one can still imagine that the literature produced in this part of Bengal since 1947 forms a different entity. Seen from this vantage point, however, I don’t see any form of literature coming up with any remarkable trait that we may call our own as distinct from West Bengal. In the 1950s, we virtually had no mentionable prose writers. The only noteworthy writer in this decade was Syed Waliullah, who was an exception. Poetry, however, took a different course. In the mid-1950s, our poetry, roughly speaking, joined the modernist tradition, which was nothing new and

just a continuation of the poets from the 1930s and 1940s.

Then there was the 1960s. The rise of “high modernism” in this decade was common to both parts of Bengal due to severe political unrest. When Shakti, Shandipan and Sunil were bringing about revolutionary little magazines, we also had many dissident magazines, especially Abdullah Abu Sayeed’s “*Kanthoswar*.” So, you see, the same change is happening concomitantly in both parts. If you take this to be a departure from the main strain of our literature, I will disagree with you.



Hasan Azizul Huq (February 2, 1939 - November 15, 2021)

PHOTO: STAR

Although very much present in Tagore, the three Bandyopadhyays (Manik, Bibhutibhushan and Tarashankar) are said to have laid the foundation of the socialist-realist tradition. Ever since then, in spite of other strains such as high modernism, can we say that the socialist-realist tradition is still the strongest strain of Bangla literature?

Precisely. I think this is the strongest strain. There are many who claim to dissociate themselves completely from reality. You can mention Buddhadev Bose in this respect. He stressed the artistic aspect of literature more than anything else. Tagore, too, in many places talked about aesthetics, art,

etc. It is true that without aesthetics, there is no art. But it has been the subject of so many discussions that I feel surprised sometimes. I think even when you write something that centres on life or real problems, you cannot exclude aesthetics from it. My point is: it is a part of life. But the attempt to separate it from life is very unfortunate.

Be that as it may, our literature has never departed from real life. Perhaps it has taken on many different dimensions. But then, there have also been some deviations at different points of time, and we can talk about the reasons behind those. Take the 1960s, for example. During this time, the emphasis on aesthetics was so much that what had been written before was considered outdated. Shawkat Ali and I, even Ahmed Sofa, were their contemporaries, and our works were regarded as having very little value. I think the disillusionment regarding Pakistan and the resultant frustration came as a serious blow to the East Bengalis. What could writers do in a situation like that? They could neither revolt, nor could they confront reality. Therefore, they chose escapism. This is why the emphasis was on aesthetics and the ideas associated with it, like “art for art’s sake.”

What happened thereafter? What was the impact of the Liberation War, and did it bring about any visible change in literature?

The escapist tendency, so pervasive in the 1960s, completely disappeared after the war. The war brought every single person face to face with stark realities—atrocities and displacement. Consequently, writers in the 1970s, irrespective of their differing orientations and thoughts, completely lost their preoccupation with aesthetics. Now they had the experience of the war, which made them incapable of being indifferent to life. The realist tradition is still active in the present literary scene. The predilection over aesthetics is also there, but the compulsion is gone.

With the advent of democracy, various experimentations including the

preposterous import of magic found a place. Such practices emerged as a very noticeable trend in the 2000s, which is often associated with postmodernism. Many critics, including Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, consider that such uncritical adoption of foreign literary forms—whether European or Latin American—stand in the way of spontaneous evolution of any country’s literature. How do you see this?

Yes, there was a visible change. In the 2000s, a sense of emptiness was created, which had a lot to do with it. We have to understand the underlying reasons behind this change.

The year 1989 saw the fall of one form of socialism, making way for capitalism to spread seamlessly all over the world. Capitalism since then has abandoned all its old machinations of forced colonisation, and instead has upheld the idea of globalisation and open market. I compare it with a situation wherein you are asked to run in a vast field with your hands and legs tied. Bangladesh is exactly in that situation. There is this huge market, but you have nothing to sell. All you can do is hold out your hand and accept whatever is given to you. This is economic imperialism, which nurtures the idea of postmodernism in order to legitimise its expansion. By asserting that there is no centre, you are not only lying, but also trying to free people from their social and political responsibilities.

Our writers also entered the circle of capitalism and had to experience the cultural emptiness it created. Many of them adopted postmodern experimentations, but in fact, these are ways of channelling out the inner void. Now we have to fill up this void. But with what? With responsibility and with the love for our country. A writer must be aware of their artistic tools; but then, they must be aware of their time and responsibilities towards society as a human being. I know many will differ with me, but that’s how I see postmodernism in our literature.

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