

48TH DEATH ANNIVERSARY OF MAULANA BHASHANI

# Remembering a legacy of opposition, a vision of independence



Priyam Paul is a journalist and researcher.

PRIYAM PAUL

Maulana Abdul Hamid Khan Bhashani (1880-1976) was one of Bengal's most charismatic and influential leaders, whose political contributions and multifaceted personality have been the subject of extensive evaluation. His leadership in the anti-colonial struggle, uncompromising efforts to unite the impoverished peasants of Bengal to alleviate their suffering, and his tireless political journey in pursuit of democracy were monumental. However, his enduring legacy lies in his steadfast commitment to oppositional politics and his vision of independence, which remain vital for sustaining democratic politics.

Maulana Bhashani's political journey began in the 1920s with his involvement in the Khilafat and non-cooperation movements in Bengal. However, Bhashani, at that time, did not become a prominent figure in Bengal politics like his contemporaries AK Fazlul Haq, Huseyn Shaheed Suhrawardy, Akram Khan, or Abul Hashim. Rather towards the late 1920s, he was compelled to move to Assam by landlords in Tangail, Pabna and Bogura because he organised peasants to protest against the landlords' exploitation. The Maulana rose to political prominence in Assam, where he popularised the Muslim League, and eventually served as its president. Bhashani became especially known for his opposition to the line corridor movement. Later, Muhammad Sa'dullah's Assam government arrested him. He was released in late 1947 on the condition that he would permanently leave Assam.

After relocating to Dhaka, Bhashani witnessed the Bengal

Muslim League governing the province in an increasingly autocratic manner, continuing to perpetuate the suffering of the people even after Pakistan's independence. In response, he founded the East Pakistan Awami Muslim League in June 1949. Through his tireless efforts and extensive travels across East Bengal, the party rapidly gained traction, drawing many young people and disillusioned factions of the Muslim League. Bhashani played a crucial role in the United Front's victory in the 1954 elections, which delivered a decisive blow to the ruling Muslim League.

Bhashani also played a significant role in the party's evolution by advocating for the removal of "Muslim" from its name, renaming it the Awami League, and opposing separate electorates for minorities, a position supported by leaders like Suhrawardy in 1956. Ultimately, Bhashani left the Awami League due to disagreements over East Pakistan's autonomy, growing frustrated as the then Prime Minister Suhrawardy, whose stance was increasingly aligned with the US, ignored this crucial issue.

Notably, Bhashani was a trailblazer in anti-communal politics, staunchly opposing religious bigotry and hatred during the heightened sectarian tensions surrounding India's partition. He played a key role in establishing *Itefaq* and revitalising *Sangbad* as a pro-people voice. These publications left an enduring legacy in shaping democratic opinion in both Pakistan and Bangladesh.

The Kagmari Conference of 1957, chaired by Bhashani, was one of the most influential cultural-literary-

political gatherings in Pakistan. It challenged the restrictive socio-cultural environment and rejuvenating ties between East Bengal and West Bengal. Serving as a vibrant hub for both folk and modern literary circles, it fostered dynamic cultural exchange and drew significant public participation. During the conference, Bhashani and

rule. He even offered concessions to Ayub, as reflected in his remark, "Don't disturb Ayub." This stance might have been influenced by broader global politics, particularly Ayub and Bhashani's mutual alignment with China and the dynamics of the 1965 Indo-Pak war, which shaped Bhashani's periodic inaction towards Ayub's regime.

vulnerable on the eve of Pakistan's first national elections. Bhashani's bold and action-oriented politics, meanwhile, unsettled many in the middle class, prompting them to shift their support to the Awami League, which appeared to offer a more stable and pragmatic alternative.

Bhashani's decision not to contest the 1970 elections further

ruling Awami League accountable on critical issues such as drafting the constitution and addressing the food crisis. His last major political initiative was the historic march protesting the Farakka Barrage issue, underscoring his enduring commitment to national causes.

Bhashani's political journey was marked by shifting trajectories and evolving strategies, often reflecting the complexities of his time. During the Pakistan period, he was perceived by some as sympathetic to India. However, following Bangladesh's independence, his actions were criticised as overly anti-Indian, with some attributing these stances to heightened communal tensions in the nascent country.

In the final stage of his life, while reflecting on the most significant event of his life, in response to a question from a physician, Bhashani recounted the struggles of the people of the Indian subcontinent, particularly in Bengal, against British colonial rule. He said, this historic movement did not achieve complete liberation but, its partial success brought him immense joy. He spoke with pride about how the people of Bengal fought for their own freedom and contributed to the broader struggle for independence across the subcontinent.

When he was asked why he always led the opposition but never took power, Maulana Bhashani explained that political power alone cannot guarantee the well-being of the people or eliminate all forms of discrimination. He emphasised that throughout his life, he championed political, economic, social, and cultural independence, urging people to strive for these goals. This did not mean he rejected power entirely; rather, he believed in waiting for the right conditions to achieve true independence in all its forms.

His response captured the essence of his identity as a leader of the oppressed and underscored his unwavering commitment to remaining in opposition throughout his political journey.



VISUAL: ALIZA RAHMAN

his leftist colleagues championed an anti-imperialist, non-aligned foreign policy, a stance that faced fierce opposition from Awami League leaders, making a split inevitable.

Bhashani aspired to steer the Awami League towards anti-imperialist, anti-feudal, and anti-communal principles. When this vision could not be realised, he founded the National Awami Party (NAP) in 1957 to pursue his mission independently.

Later, when Ayub Khan seized power, Bhashani appeared to adopt a cautious approach, refraining from strong opposition to strategically navigate the early years of military

rule. Unfortunately, NAP later split along ideological lines, driven by debates over the Sino-Soviet conflict, despite not being a communist party.

However, this same Maulana later delivered the final blow to Ayub Khan's regime, igniting a grassroots movement that swept from cities to villages and ultimately contributed to the downfall of Pakistan's "great dictator."

However, by this time, NAP had been significantly weakened as many of his young communist associates defected to pursue more radical paths. These departures further destabilised the party, leaving it

compounded the challenges for his party, NAP. This decision weakened the party's position as the second-most significant political force after the Awami League, causing it to lose even more ground.

Despite this, Bhashani remained a pivotal figure during the 1971 Liberation War. His unwavering support for the war effort brought immense legitimacy to the cause and played a crucial role in garnering global attention towards Bangladesh's struggle for independence.

After the liberation of Bangladesh, Bhashani continued to exert significant influence by holding the

## Local voices must be at the heart of climate adaptation planning



Nazrul Islam is a development analyst and former Bangladesh country director of Relief International. He can be reached at nazrul07@gmail.com.

NAZRUL ISLAM

Bangladesh is one of the most climate-vulnerable countries globally, with its unique geography and socio-economic conditions leaving it particularly exposed to the impacts of rising sea levels, salinity intrusion, cyclones, and unpredictable weather patterns. However, beyond these environmental challenges lies a critical factor that shapes the country's response to climate change: governance.

As the global focus shifts from merely mitigating climate change to adapting to its inevitable consequences, Bangladesh faces a survival challenge. Adaptation is not just about policy but about ensuring that governance structures are robust, inclusive, and equitable to allow for effective climate resilience. Governance is the key to how well Bangladesh can navigate the climate crisis.

Governance encompasses the processes, institutions, and actors that determine how decisions about public matters are made and implemented. When it comes to climate change adaptation, it involves multiple levels of governance—local, regional, national, and international. In Bangladesh, managing these levels of authority effectively is a significant challenge, as national policies are often disconnected from the realities of local communities.

Bangladesh has made substantial progress in establishing climate governance frameworks, including the Bangladesh Climate Change Resilience Fund (BCCRF) and the Bangladesh Climate Change Strategy and Action Plan (BCCSAP). Numerous representatives from the government, civil society organisations, and the private sector are actively contributing to the global climate adaptation policy dialogue. These efforts reflect a strong commitment to addressing



The marginalised groups in the Sundarbans should be involved in climate change adaptation planning and decision-making.

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climate risks. However, the true measure of effective governance lies in the translation of these policies into tangible local actions, particularly in vulnerable rural and coastal regions like the Sundarbans mangrove forest and coastal districts such as Cox's Bazar.

The Sundarbans is one of Bangladesh's most climate-vulnerable regions, home to the Munda indigenous communities. These communities rely on fishing, agriculture,

and forest products for their livelihoods. The region has already experienced the devastating effects of climate change, including rising sea levels, salinity intrusion, and frequent cyclones. For the Munda people, adapting to these changes is not just a necessity but vital for preserving their culture and livelihoods.

Despite their vulnerability, marginalised communities like the Munda often find

no single entity—national government or local authorities—can address climate change adaptation on their own. Instead, adaptation requires coordination among various stakeholders, including local governments, civil society, NGOs, and community leaders. In Bangladesh, this is particularly important due to the diversity of ecosystems and the economic disparities between regions.

Local governments, especially union parishads (the lowest administrative unit in rural areas), play a critical role in implementing climate adaptation strategies. However, many of these local bodies lack the resources, technical capacity, and autonomy needed to design and execute comprehensive plans. This disconnect between local needs and national priorities can be seen in disaster management practices. While cyclone shelters may be built, they are often poorly located or inadequately equipped due to insufficient local input and coordination.

At the national level, governance frameworks often operate in silos, with limited integration between climate adaptation policies and other critical sectors such as disaster risk reduction, livelihoods, and infrastructure. A lack of policy coherence hampers the effectiveness of adaptation efforts, as conflicting goals across sectors can lead to resource misallocation. While the National Adaptation Programme of Action (NAPA) and the BCCSAP offer essential policy guidance, their success depends on how well they are implemented locally, particularly in areas like the Sundarbans.

To address these governance gaps, it is essential to value community-based adaptation and indigenous knowledge systems. The Munda people and other indigenous communities in the Sundarbans have lived there for generations, developing traditional knowledge and practices that help them withstand climate shocks. These practices include managing saline soils, sustainable fishing techniques, and disaster preparedness systems.

However, the integration of indigenous knowledge into formal governance frameworks remains limited. Community-based adaptation empowers local

populations and ensures that strategies are context-specific and culturally appropriate. Local governance structures must be more inclusive, allowing indigenous communities to have a say in decision-making processes. This requires moving away from a purely technocratic approach to one that values the lived experiences and knowledge of vulnerable communities.

A major concern in climate change adaptation governance is equity and justice. In Bangladesh, climate change disproportionately impacts the poor and marginalised, who often lack the resources needed to recover from its shocks. As the country advances its adaptation agenda, it is essential to ensure that adaptation efforts are equitable.

Distributive justice requires that vulnerable communities receive adequate support, both financially and in terms of policy attention. This can be achieved through targeted financial mechanisms such as grants or subsidies for climate-resilient agriculture, infrastructure, or livelihood diversification. At the same time, procedural justice ensures that marginalised groups are involved in adaptation planning and decision-making, enhancing the legitimacy and effectiveness of adaptation strategies.

As Bangladesh navigates the complex challenges of climate change adaptation, governance will be the deciding factor in whether these efforts succeed or fail. While the country has made significant strides in developing climate policies, the real challenge lies in bridging the gap between national frameworks and local realities. Achieving this will require stronger multi-level governance, improved policy coherence, and a commitment to equity, inclusion, and justice. Integrating indigenous knowledge, empowering local communities, and grounding adaptation strategies in the specific contexts of each region can help Bangladesh foster a more resilient future for all its citizens. Ultimately, effective governance is about more than just policies and institutions. It is about creating systems where every voice is heard and every community is empowered to thrive in a changing climate.

Multi-level governance recognises that