



Fazlul Huq and his political rivals

ALTAF PARVEZ

In the 1946 elections, the Muslim League in Bengal overwhelmingly defeated all other Muslim political parties. Yet it must be noted that before 1947 the League was not the sole major political current among Bengali Muslims. Two entities in particular require mention: the Khilafat Movement and the Krishak Praja Party.

From the end of the First World War until about 1925, the Khilafat Movement was the most important socio-political movement among Bengali Muslims. In the next phase the Krishak Praja Party gradually emerged as a party and the Muslim League was also revived.

During the Khilafat Movement Indian Muslims argued that Britain should side with the Ottoman Caliphate, since India had a large Muslim population. Mahatma Gandhi lent his support to the Khilafat Movement and successfully linked it to his anti-colonial satyagraha campaign. A.K. Fazlul Huq also played an organising role in the Khilafat movement.

Kolkata was a key provincial centre of the Khilafat Movement. The office of the organisation was located there. Here Huseyn Suhrawardy, returning from London, joined the movement near the end. He served for a time as secretary of the Calcutta Khilafat Committee.

Although the Muslim League was expected to play a leading role in the Khilafat Movement, its central leaders remained aloof. Muhammad Ali Jinnah, in fact, opposed the movement.

After 1924, the Khilafat Movement gradually declined in India, but by then it had already produced a new generation of political workers and organisers among Bengali Muslims. These men became the organisational strength of the Krishak Praja Party and revived the Muslim League.

THE ALL-BENGAL PRAJA ASSOCIATION'S FAZLUL HUQ
In 1920–21, Fazlul Huq was active in the Barisal region of Bengal, holding mass meetings on agrarian and land issues. In this way the foundation of his future party, the Krishak Praja Party, was being laid. At that time he and his associates worked under the name the All Bengal Praja Association (Nikhil Banga Praja Samiti). Its president was Sir Abdur Rahim. Fazlul Huq became vice-president; Akram Khan was general secretary. Among the vice-presidents was Abdullah Suhrawardy, maternal uncle of Huseyn Suhrawardy.

Since many tenants (praja) were Muslim and their socio-economic adversaries mostly non-Muslim zamindars (though Muslim ones also existed, fewer in number), the “praja-mobilisation” appeared a viable alternative to communal Hindu-Muslim politics. It could also be read as a new kind of class politics. The Praja Association’s

slogan was: “Land belongs to the one who ploughs.”

In 1925 the death of C.R. Das and, a year later, widespread communal riots in Calcutta triggered fresh communal polarisation in Bengal. The nascent organisers of the Praja Party began to raise demands for Muslim tenants in the field. The long-term fruit of this was the emergence of the Krishak Praja Party by about 1936. After the 1937 election the party emerged in Bengal as the principal organisation of the Muslim community. Its assemblies even included many Namasudra [historically underprivileged] peasants.

Why Suhrawardy chose to join the League instead of the Praja Party can be partly explained by his shifting outlook after the 1926 riots. His thinking increasingly centred on the question of political power for India’s Muslims.

SYAMA PRASAD & FAZLUL HUQ: A MEANINGFUL BUT FLEETING ALLIANCE
In the elections of 1937 and 1946 although Syama Prasad Mukherjee was a member of the provincial Legislative Assembly, it was under the indirect support of the Congress at the University of Kolkata seat of Graduate electors where he stood unopposed. His



Syama Prasad Mukherjee

party, Hindu Mahasabha, in Bengal secured 2 seats out of 250 in 1937 and 1 seat in 1946.

In the years leading up to 1947, northern Indian influence largely shaped Bengal’s political trajectory, and only a handful of Bengalis resisted this dominance—most notably Suhrawardy and Syama Prasad Mukherjee. In the intervening decade between the 1937 and 1946 elections one can observe Suhrawardy and Mukherjee in opposing political positions.
In 1941 Syama Prasad drew near to Muslim politicians for a while. Fazlul Huq was then serving as Chief Minister of Bengal. In dispute with the League he formed a second term government in alliance with the Hindu Mahasabha, sometimes referred to as the “Progressive Coalition Ministry” or “Huq–Mukherjee Cabinet”.
In the charged communal atmosphere of the time, the Huq–Syama coalition government was a positive development. Even so, it was not unusual for the Muslim League to oppose the government

led by Fazlul Huq. In fact, the League reacted fiercely, making Fazlul Huq its principal target. Jinnah virtually declared war against him, while Suhrawardy, Nazimuddin, Isphani, and Akram Khan carried that battle into the villages. The British administration, too, took deliberate measures to weaken the coalition.

The Huq–Mukherjee coalition stood little chance of survival under the twin pressures of the League and the colonial administration. Unsurprisingly, the government proved short-lived.

After the 1936 election in Bengal, Fazlul Huq formed the province’s first government through the Krishak Praja Party. When the Muslim League withdrew its support and the fall of the Huq Ministry seemed inevitable, Syama Prasad Mukherjee stepped in to help sustain it. That act alone marked him out as an adversary in the eyes of the League. Moreover, Mukherjee’s Hindu-oriented policies clashed with the League’s advocacy of Muslim interests. This tension gradually evolved into the Mukherjee–Suhrawardy rivalry, bolstered by Congress support. By 1947, Mukherjee had come to be viewed in Bengal as the chief defender of “Hindu interests,” while the League positioned itself as the champion of Muslims. In



Huseyn Shaheed Suhrawardy

this polarised environment, Huq’s centrist politics steadily lost their appeal.

FAZLUL HUQ – SUHRAWARDY: A SELF-DESTRUCTIVE RIVALRY
In the politics of Bengal among Muslims the role of the individual has always been a crucial element. Accordingly, in the mid-20th century Bengal Muslim League’s development featured two sub-factions. One, the “Calcutta Group” led by Suhrawardy; the other the “Dhaka Group” led by Khaja Nazimuddin. These two sub-groups symbolised different socio-economic interests: the former representing the rising middle class within the League, the latter representing wealthy landlords and zamindars. Although these two groups were constantly embroiled in intra-party struggle, their common political adversary was Fazlul Huq.

Although Fazlul Huq was actually the primary opponent of both League sub-factions, the most aggressive efforts to sideline

him and remove him from the Chief Minister’s office came from Suhrawardy. This escalation began after 1941 when Huq’s relationship with the League was severed.

By September 1941, Huq’s relationship with Jinnah had deteriorated. Following his expulsion from the League in December, Suhrawardy was soon seen rallying public opinion in Calcutta against him. In 1943, Suhrawardy finally succeeded in driving Fazlul Huq from power. Interestingly, the two men were distantly related by marriage—Suhrawardy’s maternal uncle, Hassan Suhrawardy, had married the sister of Huq’s first wife. Yet, as events proved, political ambition outweighed kinship.

At that time the British Raj increasingly began to recognise only the Congress and the Muslim League as representative all India forces. Faltering beneath that marginalisation, Fazlul Huq’s centrality in Bengal politics declined from 1944 onward. Direct evidence of this is the 1944 Calcutta Corporation election — no candidate nominated by Huq succeeded.

After the 1946 election, when Suhrawardy became Chief Minister, politics and society in Bengal were being reshaped. The British Raj’s negotiations with the Congress and League over the Partition of India had deeply absorbed the local society; the 1946 riots added fuel to this trend.

At the same time Fazlul Huq was discussing, at various levels, a concept of an all party government in Bengal. As part of that he met Gandhi at Haimchar (now Chandpur) on February 27, 1947. Yet everyone, including Gandhi, knew Huq was no longer the driving force of Bengal politics. He was in Calcutta at the time of the riots. But the focus of communal violence diverted attention away from him. The League considered him a “fifth column”.

When the vote was cast in the provincial council in June 1947 on Bengal’s geographic future, Fazlul Huq was wholly absent — a striking fact. He took no major initiative to prevent Bengal’s partition, which remains surprising.

When Partition of Bengal was virtually assured and mass refugee movements began from both sides, it was only on August 1, 1947 that Fazlul Huq came to Barisal and urged Hindus not to leave.

It was during this tug-of-war over Bengal’s partition that the long separation between Suhrawardy and Fazlul Huq occurred. We would see them again on a same platform when the United Front (Jukto Front) was formed in East Bengal in 1954.

Half a century later, in a 2004 survey by the BBC asking for the greatest Bengali person of all time, both Fazlul Huq and Suhrawardy were ranked among the top twenty: the former coming fourth and the latter twentieth.

Altaf Parvez is a researcher of history.

MY DISCOVERY OF Sher-e-Bangla

TARUN YOUSUF

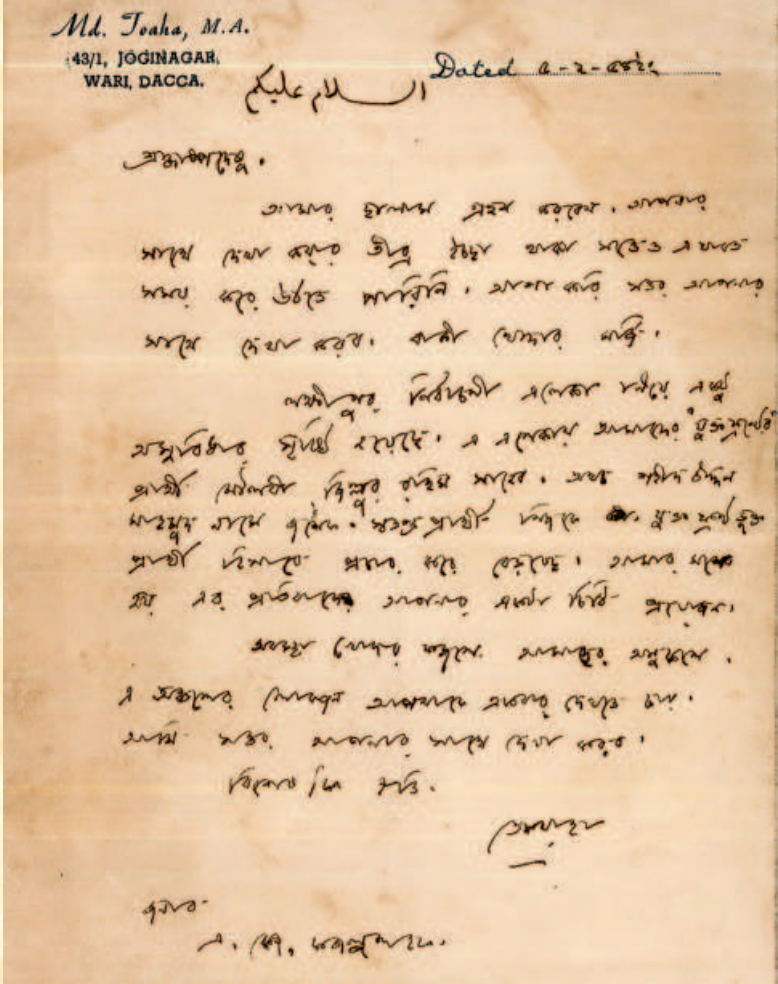
Almost unnoticed, the 150th birth anniversary of Sher-e-Bangla A.K. Fazlul Huq has gone by, and this year marks his 152nd. As I sit down to write about him, I cannot help but echo the words of B.D. Habibullah, the biographer of Huq Saheb — is it at all possible for an ordinary man like me to write about such a great soul? Yet, I gather the courage to do so, perhaps because I share a subtle, indirect connection with Sher-e-Bangla himself.

It so happened that I became coincidentally involved in the recovery of several letters, telegrams, proposals for candidate selection, and lists of United Front nominees — all sent to Sher-e-Bangla in connection with the 1954 election.

I work in the Deposit Insurance Department of Bangladesh Bank, within a sub-division known as the Defunct Bank Monitoring Unit. Its main task involves tracing and managing the remaining assets (if any) of certain banks from the British and Pakistani periods that ceased to exist following the Partition of British India or after Bangladesh’s independence.

Our department holds numerous cupboards, sacks, and boxes filled with old documents, which are occasionally inspected for this reason. We even have a dedicated team whose sole duty is to examine these papers. One member of that team, Ariful Islam was the first to come across a set of old letters and brought one of them to me.

Reading the letter, I realised it dated back to the 1954 United Front election — a correspondence addressed to Sher-e-Bangla. The writer was Abu Mohammad Toaha, a name that immediately sounded familiar; I knew of a politician by that name. I asked Ariful where he had found it. He said, “It was inside a sack among our old documents on the twelfth floor.” He added that there were many more letters, including one supposedly signed by Sher-e-Bangla himself.



This immediately caught my attention. I said, “Let’s go see where those letters are — we must retrieve them.” We rushed down from the sixteenth floor to the twelfth. I asked the peon working there about the letters. To my dismay, he replied that they had been torn up and discarded. My heart sank. I ran to the dustbin where the torn papers were usually thrown. There I found scraps of paper, but not the kind of letters I was looking for.

Then, moments later, our peon Momin came and said, “Sir, the papers you were looking for have been found. Shamim — another peon — kept them aside following Arif’s instructions.” What a relief! I immediately brought them in for inspection.

What we found was not only letters but also telegrams, leaflets, and several confidential reports prepared by a fact-finding committee that had been formed to evaluate candidates for the United Front election. The committee’s job was to gather information about potential candidates and submit detailed reports. All these letters, telegrams, and confidential reports were addressed to Sher-e-Bangla himself.

How did these United Front election documents end up in our department? Could there be any connection between Sher-e-Bangla and this division — or even with Bangladesh Bank?

In truth, there is no direct or institutional link between Sher-e-

Bangla and Bangladesh Bank or this department. Yet, there exists an indirect one that deserves explanation. Bangladesh Bank was appointed as the official liquidator for defunct banks in 1977. Before that, the responsibility was laid with lawyers of the High Court Division.

If we look into the life of Sher-e-Bangla A.K. Fazlul Huq, we know that he was a distinguished lawyer. In 1953, when the general elections were announced in East Bengal, he was serving as the Advocate General of the Dhaka High Court. It is therefore quite plausible that some of the lawyers who worked as official liquidators for defunct banks had close professional ties with him.

Moreover, some of them might have been members of the Krishak Sramik Party or active supporters of the United Front. Perhaps, through one of them, these letters and documents accidentally found their way into the archives of a defunct bank — and from there, into our department.

Of course, all of this remains conjecture.

Among the recovered materials were letters, telegrams, reports of the Fact-Finding Committee, lists of potential candidates sent from different regions, the official list of United Front nominees, and various leaflets. All these letters, telegrams, leaflets, and reports were addressed to Sher-e-Bangla A.K. Fazlul Huq.

Sher-e-Bangla A.K. Fazlul Huq and the 1954 United Front election are inseparable from one another. The political coalition emerged primarily to free the people from the oppressive misrule of the ruling Muslim League and to establish the right of self-determination in East Bengal.

The 21-point manifesto of the United Front reflected the aspirations of East Pakistan’s rising middle class, self-reliant peasants, and emerging industrial and business communities. The manifesto pledged not only social and economic rights through the development of education,

agriculture, and industry in East Bengal, but also a commitment to democratic governance.

The 1954 United Front election was a turbulent moment in history, and at its centre stood Sher-e-Bangla. Every letter addressed to him was related to the election. The subjects of the letters, telegrams, reports, and leaflets included the persecution of United Front workers by Muslim League supporters and government officials, campaign strategies, the status of candidates in different constituencies, internal conflicts among nominees, requests for candidate changes, appeals for financial assistance from the party to conduct campaigns, and disagreements among leaders regarding nominations. The documents also vividly portray the hopes, struggles, and movements surrounding that election, as well as the deep respect and devotion that political leaders and ordinary citizens alike held for Sher-e-Bangla.

The discovery of these rare documents offers deeper insight into history, revealing new information while verifying past accounts and vividly bringing the story of the United Front election to life. I have published a book titled Sher-e-Bangla o Juktofront Nirbachan: Kichu Dushprappo Dalil (‘Sher-e-Bangla and the United Front Election: Some Rare Documents’), based on these materials.

Tarun Yousuf is a poet and author.