50TH DEATH ANNIVERSARY OF MAULANA BHASHANI

A rebel dervish on the grey horizons of Bengal's history



Mohiuddin Ahmad is a writer and researcher of Bangladesh's political history.

■ MOHIUDDIN AHMAD

History is shaped not only by rulers, presidents, and state-builders, but also by those rare souls who remain forever in opposition to power. They challenge authority whether it wears the uniform of empire, nationalism, military rule, or independent statehood. Maulana Abdul Hamid Khan Bhashani belonged to that extraordinary lineage. In the political history of India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh, he stands less as a conventional politician and more as a moral force, a restless conscience who walked alongside the poor and questioned every throne he encountered.

Bhashani's life resembled an epic journey across the turbulent landscapes of the 20th century. He was at once a religious scholar, a peasant leader, an anti-imperialist activist, a socialist sympathiser, and a wandering mystic. Yet none of these labels fully captures his identity. He moved through history as a figure larger than ideology, carrying with him the aspirations of farmers, workers, and the dispossessed.

This connection with rural Bengal became the foundation of Bhashani's influence. He possessed an unusual ability to combine the language of faith with the language of resistance. In his speeches, Islamic notions of justice merged naturally with demands for social change. He did not translate foreign ideologies word for word; rather, he transformed the universal desire for dignity into a language that resonated with Bengal's peasants. He could stand before a congregation as a preacher and depart as a revolutionary leader.

When Pakistan was created in 1947, Bhashani initially welcomed the new state with hope. For many Muslims of Bengal, partition promised an escape from political marginalisation and economic hardship. Like countless others, Bhashani believed Pakistan might provide a more just future for poorer Muslims. But his optimism soon met the harsh realities of governance.

Out of this growing dissatisfaction emerged one of the most significant political developments in the history of Bengal: the formation of the East Pakistan Awami Muslim League in 1949, later known as Awami League. As its founding president, Bhashani helped establish a platform that would ultimately shape the destiny of Bangladesh. Among the younger activists within that movement was a charismatic organiser named Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. History brought together an experienced rebel and an ambitious young politician. Their relationship would evolve over decades, marked by mentorship, admiration, disagreement, and political divergence. In those early years, Bhashani played an essential role in nurturing a movement that demanded greater rights for Bangalees.

The turning points in Bhashani's political career often emerged from his refusal to compromise deeply held convictions. One of his most significant ruptures occurred with Huseyn Shaheed Suhrawardy. While Suhrawardy emphasised parliamentary democracy, constitutional politics, and pragmatic alliances with Western powers, Bhashani increasingly looked towards a more radical path.

At the time, anti-colonial movements were challenging old structures of power across Asia, Africa, and Latin America. Revolutionary currents swept through newly emerging nations. Bhashani found inspiration in these struggles, particularly in the rise of China and the broader movement against imperial domination. His politics grew increasingly internationalist, connecting the plight of Bangalee peasants with larger global struggles for justice and liberation.

This ideological divergence became dramatically visible during the historic Kagmari Conference of 1957. There, Bhashani's symbolic farewell to West Pakistan sounded like a warning delivered by a prophet. Long before separation became inevitable, he had sensed that the relationship between East and West Pakistan was moving towards a crisis. Shortly afterwards, he left Awami League and formed the National Awami Party, starting a new chapter in his lifelong rebellion.



ILLUSTRATION: BIPLOB CHAKROBORTY

Maulana Abdul Hamid Khan Bhashani (1880-1976).

What made Bhashani especially remarkable was his refusal to fit neatly into established political categories. He was too religious for many orthodox socialists and too socialist for many traditional religious leaders. Nationalists often found him insufficiently constrained by national boundaries, while Marxists regarded his spirituality with suspicion.

These very contradictions formed the essence of his uniqueness. Bhashani sought a politics grounded in both moral faith and social justice. His vision blended Islamic ethics, peasant activism, anti-imperialism, and egalitarian aspirations in a way that defied conventional classification. The complexity of his political life is also evident in debates surrounding his relationship with President Ayub Khan. Historians continue to examine periods when their interests seemed to overlap amid the shifting geopolitical realities of the Cold War. However, any attempt to define Bhashani through those tactical intersections overlooks a more significant reality.

In 1968, East Pakistan erupted with growing dissatisfaction against military rule. Students, workers, intellectuals, and farmers increasingly challenged the authoritarian regime. At this critical moment, Bhashani emerged once more as a powerful mobiliser of popular resistance. His calls for mass action spread rapidly across towns and villages. Demonstrations intensified and political awareness deepened. The result was one of the most important democratic uprisings in Pakistan's history. The regime that once appeared invincible began to crumble. Ironically, the very man who had sometimes been accused of accommodating power became one of the forces contributing to its downfall. Such paradoxes characterised much of Bhashani's political journey.

The defining moment of Bhashani's life was during the Liberation War of 1971. As violence engulfed the land and millions faced displacement, uncertainty, and suffering, Bhashani stood firmly with the cause of independence. Despite his advanced age and declining health, he lent his immense moral authority to the liberation struggle. Serving as chairman of the advisory council of the provisional government, Bhashani provided not only political support but also symbolic legitimacy. During one of the darkest periods in Bangalee history, his voice reminded people that independence was more than a geopolitical objective: it was a moral imperative rooted in justice, dignity, and self-determination. The ageing rebel once again found himself aligned with a historically decisive movement.

Of course, the tensions that had long shaped his political life did not disappear after independence. Bhashani's relationship with Sheikh Mujibur Rahman entered a new and more difficult phase. As economic hardship, corruption, and political disillusionment spread during the early years of Bangladesh, culminating in the devastating famine of 1974, Bhashani became one of the government's most vocal critics. Some viewed this criticism as disloyalty, while others saw it as the continuation of a lifelong commitment.

Bhashani's allegiance had never been to governments or institutions, but to ordinary people. Whenever he believed rulers had forgotten the suffering of the poor, he felt compelled to speak. The same instinct had guided him under British rule, under Pakistani rule, and within independent Bangladesh as well.

Perhaps the greatest paradox of Bhashani's life was that he excelled at inspiring movements but never became a builder of states. He could awaken the masses, shake governments, and influence the direction of history. But he never occupied the commanding heights of power. Instead, he remained a figure on the margins, persistently questioning those at the centre.

History often celebrates the architects of nations. But societies also require prophets, dissenters, and moral critics. Bhashani belonged to this second tradition. He stood outside palace gates, asking the uncomfortable questions which those inside preferred not to hear. Perhaps that is precisely why his legacy endures to this day. He was not the owner of power, but its challenger. Not the architect of governments but the guardian of public conscience. Bhashani's life contained errors, contradictions, and unresolved tensions, yet it was also animated by a profound concern for the downtrodden and forgotten.

Abdul Hamid Khan Bhashani may be remembered less as a statesman than as a rebel dervish crossing the stormy plains of Bengal. He carried no crown, commanded no lasting army, and occupied no throne. Still, he left behind a question that remains eternally relevant: does power exist to serve rulers, or does it exist to serve the people? As long as that question continues to echo through political life and discourse, the shadow of Maulana Bhashani will continue to fall over the ever-extending horizons of our history.

Rushing into Phulbari coal mining without assessing its costs will be unwise



Jannatul Naym Pieal is a writer, researcher, and journalist. He can be reached at jn.pieal@gmail.com.

■ JANNATUL NAYM PIEAL

"I think the time has come to explore that coal mine through open-pit mining," Power, Energy and Mineral Resources Minister Iqbal Hassan Mahmood Tuku said on Saturday, bringing the Phulbari coal project back into the conversation. Speaking at the fifth Bangladesh Economic Summit in Dhaka, he argued that modern technology could minimise damage to agricultural land and that the benefits of coal-based electricity could outweigh losses in agricultural production. He said Prime Minister Tarique Rahman had instructed officials to finalise a coal-extraction roadmap within three months, with talks on the bidding process already underway.

His argument is not without merit. Bangladesh does need to secure more reliable electricity, reduce its costly fuel import bill, and ease pressure on foreign exchange reserves. But whether to extract Phulbari's coal is an issue that cannot be settled by weighing the promise of energy security against the immediate financial costs alone; the larger calculation must include the land, water and livelihoods that could be lost if the Phulbari project is reopened.

Phulbari, in Dinajpur, holds an estimated 572 million tonnes of coal, of which around 475 million tonnes is considered mineable. The project's origins date back to August 1994, when the then government signed an exploration contract with Australian mining company BHP following an international invitation for expressions of interest in developing coal resources in north-western Bangladesh. BHP explored the area between 1995 and 1997, before transferring its contract to the British company Asia Energy Corporation in 1998. The latter subsequently submitted a formal open-pit mining proposal to the then government in October 2005. The plan envisaged producing around 1.5 crore tonnes of coal annually over roughly three decades. Supporters have since argued that mining the coal could supply domestic power plants, generate employment, attract investment, and reduce dependence on imported coal.

But the size of the deposit and the promise of greater domestic supply tell only part of the story. The central question is whether the economic gains from extraction would justify the broader cost of developing the mine. The government is also considering establishing a coal-fired power plant near the mine, which could reduce transportation costs. That, however, would make little difference to the larger calculation if the costs borne by affected communities and the environment outweigh the benefits.

To begin with, one of the biggest concerns is water. Open-pit mining requires continuous removal of groundwater to keep the pit dry. In a 2007 piece, engineer AKM Shamsuddin, a petroleum and mining consultant and former official of Petrobangla, cited the project's own estimates that 400 million to 800 million litres of groundwater would have to be discharged every day through the mine's 36- to 38-year life. The surrounding communities depend on the same water for drinking and irrigation. Thus, a sustained fall in water levels could dry tube wells, cut agricultural productivity and strain wetlands. The government may say modern technology and better water management can reduce the risks, but that claim must be tested independently. The north-west already faces considerable pressure on its groundwater, and the effects of further extraction would not stop at the mine's boundary.



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FILE PHOTO: REUTERS

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Then there is the question of displacement. Asia Energy's own estimate was that about 40,000 people would have to be resettled on land covering roughly 67 square kilometres. Activists put the number several times higher, and UN experts warned in 2012 of 50,000 to 130,000 people being displaced, and 220,000 others affected by drying up wells and irrigation channels. A recent report mentions the official expectation of 18,000 to 20,000 relocations under current plans, a gap that itself needs explaining. Prime Minister Tarique Rahman acknowledged the problem in parliament on September 2, saying that affected people must be properly resettled and their livelihoods protected before any decision. This is reassuring, but details matter. Where will the locals go? Will they receive land of comparable quality? What about people who do not own the land but depend on it for their livelihoods? And who remains responsible after the mine closes? These questions cannot be left until after approval.

Phulbari's history cannot be separated from this debate. On August 26, 2006, a protest against the proposed mine ended in a violent confrontation with law enforcement agencies, leaving three people dead and hundreds injured. Four days later, the government and the National Committee to Protect Oil, Gas, Mineral Resources, Power and Ports reached the Phulbari agreement, which included cancelling the deal with Asia Energy and prohibiting open-pit mining in the area. Some locals, however, support mining: on November 6, 2026, more than 300 residents rallied demanding coal extraction, provided it comes with fair compensation, rehabilitation, and jobs for them. This strengthens the case for revisiting the 2006 commitments, but the concerns that shaped the project's history cannot be ignored or set aside without meaningful consultation. If circumstances have changed enough to reconsider it, the government must clearly explain why and involve the affected people of Phulbari from the start.

Another question that cannot be bypassed is who stands to gain from the coal and how much. In its 2005 proposal, Asia Energy offered Bangladesh a royalty of just 6 percent. Two decades later, the company, now known as GCM Resources, is still pressing for government approval, welcoming recent statements that coal remains under consideration in Bangladesh's energy mix. Any fresh bidding process must, therefore, address the questions: who will own the resource, how much will Bangladesh earn, and who will be held responsible for the environmental and social costs? Though unlikely at this point, if the government can present a credible plan for resettlement and environmental protection, it must also make clear what Bangladesh stands to gain. How much coal will be reserved for domestic use? How will its price be determined? Who will pay for restoring the land and managing the long-term damage? Having reduced fuel imports would mean little if most of the gains went to the contracting company while local communities bore the costs.

Nor should the debate be reduced to a choice between imported LNG and domestic coal. Bangladesh also needs to explore its gas reserves, improve the efficiency of its power sector, expand renewable energy and assess its other mineral resources. Coal may continue to be in the energy mix, but that decision should follow a transparent assessment of the economic, social and environmental costs, including resettlement, water management and the challenge of restoring a vast open-pit mine.

The government does not have to rule out using coal reserves to address the concerns surrounding Phulbari, but it should not rush into open-pit mining either, before its economic, environmental and social implications are fully assessed and prepared for. Rather than limiting the exercise to preparing a three-month roadmap, it should commission a fresh, independent assessment of the project's environmental and social impact before inviting bids.

The last official assessments were conducted decades ago, and much has changed since then, including the area's population and agricultural needs. The new findings should be made public so that local communities can examine them, particularly the likely effects on groundwater, farming and families who may have to relocate. The government should also compare open-pit mining with other energy options and clearly explain how much the country stands to gain. Above all, locals must have a meaningful say in a decision that will directly affect their future.