

Maulana Bhashani and the transition to secular politics in East Bengal

Peter Custers

Formerly Associated Fellow of the International Institute
for Asian Studies (IIAS), Leiden University

During the decade of the 1950s, East Bengal, then a province of Pakistan, saw the emergence of a mass movement in support of the demand for national self-determination of the Bengali people. This movement was primarily led by the politician-preacher maulana Abdul Hamid Khan Bhashani, who had emerged as the leader of marginalised Bengali peasants in Assam before the Partition of the subcontinent. Though Bhashani initially positioned himself as a Muslim League leader, he actually openly opposed the orientation of other Muslim League politicians. This article discusses the significance of Bhashani's politics against the background of his training as a theologian and against the background of his ideology of Rabubiyat. It argues that although Bhashani's was an Islamic world outlook, he vigorously advocated the need for a separation between state rule and people's religious faiths. Moreover, Bhashani did not just take a stance in favor of secularism, the evidence collected by historians brings out that he personally led the transition to secular politics in the decades that preceded the formation of Bangladesh in 1971.

Left-leaning Leader in the Muslim League

On 10 March, 1947, a day of non-cooperation was observed in the colonial province of Assam. That morning, Maulana Bhashani, who mustered wide support, particularly among the province's immigrant Bengalis, succeeded in eluding the British intelligence services who had issued instructions to arrest him. He crossed the river Brahmaputra in a *nauka* (small boat), then travelled onwards by land in a bullock cart, eventually reaching the town hall of Tejpur. Here, thousands of peasants had gathered for a public meeting in support of the demand for the formation of a separate state of 'Pakistan', to comprise Bengal and Assam. Though the day

***The Indian Economic and Social History Review*, 47, 2 (2010): 231–59**
SAGE Los Angeles/London/New Delhi/Singapore/Washington DC
DOI: 10.1177/001946461004700204

of action was sponsored by the Muslim League, claiming to represent exclusively Muslim interests, Bhashani's speech was free of the communal rhetoric to which other Muslim League leaders were prone. He called on his supporters to court imprisonment towards fulfilment of the movement's demand, but without allowing themselves to be influenced by feelings of communal hatred. Rather, the senior peasant leader-politician insisted that the unity between Hindus and Muslims be maintained. His movement was directed against 'British imperialism', not against any religious community.¹

In this essay, I will review the contribution which the theologian, peasant leader and politician Maulana Abdul Hamid Khan Bhashani has made towards the formation of Bangladesh as an independent secular state. I begin with a brief description of his trajectory in the decades before the 1947 partition of the subcontinent. Though Bhashani originally hailed from Shirajganj in East Bengal (now Bangladesh), he derived his appellation 'Bhashani' from *char* Bhashan, a low lying area of Assam. It was here, in the late twenties, having been forced by the British colonial authorities to seek refuge beyond the borders of Bengal, that Bhashani cleared the jungle to build his own bamboo hut.² Already by this time, the fiery theologian had distinguished himself as an opponent of the feudal zamindari system which was the backbone of Britain's rule over Bengal. The Bengal province in the 1920s had seen the emergence of a movement for tenants' rights. This *proja* movement, protesting unjust impositions by absentee landlords, was actively supported by many rural intellectuals, including lawyers and Islamic preachers. Maulana Abdul Hamid Khan, later to be known as 'Bhashani', was not only an advocate for, but also a key organiser of this movement. In fact, he convened several big peasant gatherings, before being compelled to shift his habitation to Assam.³

In Assam, the Maulana re-emerged as an effective and popular peasant leader, ready to champion the cause of the downtrodden. Perhaps paradoxically, he also emerged as a widely respected leader of the Muslim League. On the occasion of the 1937 elections to Assam's Legislative Assembly, he was voted in as a Member on behalf of the League. Subsequently, in 1944, he was also elected to be the Party's President.⁴ Yet Bhashani's political clout was largely based on the prestige he garnered over many years as a spokesperson for immigrant peasants. Since the late nineteenth century, Assam had seen a major influx of impoverished Bengalis, most of them peasant cultivators. These immigrants gained access to a

¹ The observance of 10 March, 1947 as 'Assam Day', and Maulana Bhashani's appearance and speech at the gathering in Tejpur, are (amongst others) described by Bhashani's chief biographer Syed Abul Maksud, in *Maulana Abdul Hamid Khan Bhashani*, p. 57.

² See the life-overview by Abu Noman Khan, 'Maulana Bhashanir Jibansrote'.

³ Information on the Peasant conferences Bhashani held in the 1920s and 1930s is contained in Abu Noman Khan, 'Maulana Bhashanir Jibansrote', pp. 263–64.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 46; Abu Noman Khan, 'Maulana Bhashanir Jibansrote', p. 265.

plot of land by clearing a small portion of Assam's jungle, often at great risk to their lives. Though they were generally down-to-earth and unassuming, the presence of these immigrants was exploited by the British colonial authorities as justification for drawing a territorial dividing line separating Assamese from Bengalis. Thus, in 1920, the British had instituted the 'Line System' (*Lain Protha*), restricting the movement and presence of Bengali immigrants in Assam. Bhashani began mobilising against this 'Line System' from the very moment he established himself in Assam. His activities reportedly resulted in a relaxation of the system by August of 1943.⁵

The mass appeal which Bhashani developed via his movement in support of immigrant peasants can be illustrated through a short account of the *Shammelan* (conference), held in Mangaldoi in 1946. The event is vividly described by the journalist-writer Samsuddin, who had been invited to chair it.⁶ Upon his arrival at the conference ground in Mangaldoi, Bhashani was reportedly greeted by a large crowd of peasants, raising their sticks above their heads. The maulana and the journalist jointly tried to take stock of the size of the crowd, by moving about seated on a huge elephant. 'There must', Samsuddin writes, 'have been at least two lakh (two hundred thousand) participants!' Bhashani's enormous popularity could also be gauged from the fact that, at Bhashani's behest, participants had supplied large quantities of rice as conference food, resulting in an excess stock of rice.⁷ In a two-hour long speech to the Mangaldoi conference, Bhashani criticised the British, but also singled out the police for atrocities committed against Bengali immigrants. What is perhaps most remarkable, however, is that at this gathering held under the slogan '*Pakistan Zindabad*' (Long Live Pakistan), he also criticised his own Muslim League colleagues, exhorting them to work harder in attempts to get the hated '*Line System*' removed.⁸ Characteristically, Bhashani followed up on the success of the conference, by staging a 61 day hunger strike in support of peasants' demands.

This brief outline of the course of action which Bhashani pursued during his stay in Assam, is helpful towards starting my discourse on the nature of his politics. Just months before the Mangaldoi conference was held, in April of 1946, the Muslim League had captured all but three seats in elections to Assam's Legislative Assembly. This resounding victory, according to the biographer Syed Abul Maksud, should 'almost entirely' be credited to Bhashani alone.⁹ Yet, as indicated,

⁵ Syed Abul Maksud, '*Maulana Abdul Hamid Khan Bhashani*', p. 44; an elaborate description of the movement against the 'Line System' is also contained in Saidul Islam, *Assam O Maulana*.

⁶ See Abul Kamal Samsuddin, '*Maulana Bhashani O Assamer Lain Protha*', p. 15; also Syed Abul Maksud, *Maulana Abdul Hamid Khan Bhashani*, pp. 49–50.

⁷ Abul Kalam Samsuddin, '*Maulana Bhashani O Assamer Lain Protha*', p. 20; also Syed Abul Maksud, *Maulana Abdul Hamid Khan Bhashani*, p. 50.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ Syed Abul Maksud, *Maulana Abdul Hamid Khan Bhashani*, p. 47.

Bhashani was no conventional Muslim League politician. In 1944, at the very meeting where he was elected Party President, Bhashani appealed to the League's General Secretary, Sadullah, not to act as a 'post box' for the British authorities.¹⁰ And in later days he was to recall the fact that, at a certain point during his stay in Assam, he had allied with the Congress party so as to press the Muslim League into action against the 'Line System'.¹¹ Clearly, all along, Bhashani used his standing as a religious leader and politician to advance the cause of the peasantry. His causes were not those of the Muslim League's main leadership.¹² On the eve of Partition, we find Bhashani combining the espousal of migrant peasants' interests, with principled opposition against communal hatred and advocating the formation of a greater Bengal state.¹³ In this essay, I propose to analyse the successes which Maulana Bhashani scored as a politico-religious leader, and will highlight how he championed the cause of secularism from within the framework of Islam.

In writings eulogising Bhashani, there has been a pronounced tendency to focus on his politics and the fact that he played a central role in the political evolution of (East) Bengal.¹⁴ This is a rather myopic view, for Bhashani's politics cannot be understood without also taking into account the fact that he was a religious preacher with a huge following. Thus, in Assam, where he lived until the 1947 Partition of the subcontinent, Maulana Bhashani was widely regarded as a *pir*, a saint-like figure, commanding a large number of disciples who accepted his religious teachings, drew inspiration from his speeches at *waz mahfil* and other gatherings and were also willing to support his politics and his opposition to the 'Line System' and British colonialism. It is therefore appropriate, I believe, to devote separate attention to Bhashani's training and evolution as religious preacher and leader, in order to analyse in full his contribution to the secularisation of East Bengal's political life. How did Bhashani relate to Islam and to the religion's mystical and liberal currents which had brought it to the subcontinent?¹⁵ What exactly was the religious ideology he propagated?

¹⁰ Abu Noman Khan, 'Maulana Bhashanir Jibansrote', p. 265.

¹¹ Syed Abul Maksud, *Maulana Abdul Hamid Khan Bhashani*, p. 8.

¹² For an account of the way the Muslim League abused the peasantry's aspirations that feudalism be abolished in Bengal, see for example, Tajul Islam Hashmi, *Peasant Utopia*; also the powerful historical novel written by Akhtaruzzaman Ilyas, *Khowabnama*; for a brief review in English of this novel, see Subhoranjan Dasgupta, 'History's Creative Counterpart'.

¹³ On the controversy that existed in the Muslim League of Bengal over the formation either of one common state of Pakistan, consisting of a Western and an Eastern territory, or of two distinct state entities, meaning that a separate state of Bengal be formed, see notably Kamruddin Ahmed, *The Social History of East Pakistan*, p. 82 and pp. 87–88; and Shila Sen, *Muslim Politics in Bengal*.

¹⁴ This is true in particular for writings by Left-wing intellectuals and activists on Bhashani. See, for example, the bulk of the writings included in the anthology edited by Mohsin Sastrapani, *Majlum Jananeta*.

¹⁵ On the Sufi orders which brought Islam to the subcontinent and to Bengal, see for example, Annemarie Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam*; Richard Eaton, *The Rise of Islam and the*

Bhashani was born to a family of modest peasant stock in the village of Dhangora, in the District of Shirajganj.¹⁶ His father is known to have been a pious Muslim who, when participating in the pilgrimage to the holy places of Islam, is known to have walked barefoot through the desert, from Mecca to Medina. Bhashani received his basic training in Islam from the Iraqi *pir* Syed Nasiruddin Shah, who came on a visit from Assam. On his return to Assam, the *pir* agreed to take the young Abdul Hamid on as an assistant. In this way, Bhashani reportedly got the opportunity to study the Quran and Islam's legal system, and learn the languages of Arabic and Urdu.¹⁷ Between 1907 and 1909, Bhashani attended the famous Islamic University of Deoband, where he received theological training. It is important to note that Deoband was widely regarded to be a training centre with progressive leanings. Several of the Sufi orders which have shaped Sufism's South Asian tradition, are known to have influenced the university's teachings. Above all, Deoband's theologians are reputed to have shared an 'anti-imperialist' orientation and to have actively propagated the need to end Britain's domination over the subcontinent.¹⁸

Before proceeding to record how Bhashani's religious orientation was further shaped, I wish to pause for a moment to emphasise the significance of the fact that the Maulana is considered to belong to the tradition of Muslim saints, *pirs*. This tradition, of veneration of *pirs*, is centred on tombs called *mazars* and is widely acknowledged (historically at least), to have been an expression of the harmonious relations that have long existed between the main religious communities of Bengal. Indeed, for many centuries, the cult of *pirs* has been exceedingly popular in the rural areas of the region, and has included both historical-legendary and fictitious personalities.¹⁹ Maulana Bhashani was well aware of this history and of the fact that the veneration of *pirs* traditionally has cut across the main religious divide in Bengal. Thus, in one of the writings he drafted towards the end of his life, he referred to *pir* Shah Jaman, a saint who was honoured in the late seventeenth century with a grant by the Moghul Emperor Aurengzeb, and who consequently came to preach Islam from Kagmari, in Bengal. Bhashani believed *pir* Shah Jaman to be the very symbol of religious tolerance. Indeed, deeply venerated by Hindus and Muslims alike, members of both faiths were equally attracted to visit his tomb.²⁰

Bengal Frontier; Saiyid Zaheer Husain Jafri and Helmut Reifeld, eds, *The Islamic Path*; and Muhammad Enamul Haq, *A History of Sufi-ism in Bengal*.

¹⁶ Syed Abul Maksud, *Maulana Abdul Hamid Khan Bhashani*, p. 11.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 15.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, on the founding theologians of Deoband and Sufi mysticism, see notably M. Azam Qasmi, 'Sufism and the Founders of Deoband'.

¹⁹ Asim Roy, *The Islamic Syncretistic Tradition of Bengal*, Chapter 6, 'Pirism or the Cult of Pir', p. 208.

²⁰ Bhashani, 'Palanbad: Ki O Keno?'.

Let us now return to the story of Bhashani's evolution as religious leader and thinker. The details cited so far suggest that the liberal tradition of Sufi preachers had an impact on his training and formation. Yet these facts alone do not reveal which current within the tradition of Islam Bhashani ultimately chose to embrace. This Bhashani discloses in his essay on the policy of '*Rabubiyat*', written in 1974, at the twilight of his prolonged political life.²¹ Here the Maulana briefly describes his encounter, in 1946, with the 'revolutionary philosopher' Allama Azad Sobhani. At that time, both men were highly respected personalities within the Muslim League, Sobhani as philosophical source of inspiration for the Party's Bengal Secretary Abul Hashim and his young followers;²² and Bhashani as the Party's President in Assam. A chain-smoking Sobhani suddenly called on Bhashani to imagine they were present at the holiest of holy places, the Kaaba in Mecca. Sobhani invited Bhashani to make a pledge to dedicate his life to the implementation of the revolutionary philosophy of *Rabubiyat*. Bhashani writes that he agreed, and made his pledge.²³ Interestingly, for several decades afterwards Bhashani apparently refrained from referring explicitly to this philosophy in the political speeches he gave. However, the 1974 essay indicates that, from 1946 onwards, the *Rabubiyat* remained his guiding ideology.

This essay also outlines, if only briefly, how Bhashani interpreted the given philosophy. *Rabubiyat*, Bhashani argues, insists on the egalitarian message of Islam. The purpose of the religion is to establish a society without exploitation where all people are equal and share weal and woe, free from feelings of jealousy and egotism. For the God of Islam, Allah, who Bhashani describes as 'the source of all consciousness', all humans are equal.²⁴ Thus, *Rabubiyat* preaches the undivided equality of all people, whatever their caste, nationality or religion. The message of equality is not unique to Islam alone, of course—it is also propagated, for instance, by people who follow a communist ideology. The distinguishing mark of *Rabubiyat* is that it advocates the abolition of private ownership on the basis of faith. Bhashani states, 'Man is only a custodian, whereas Allah holds ownership over all properties that exist. Thus, the state should abolish all private ownership, and should distribute things in equal proportions, on the basis of need'.²⁵ This position is differentiated from that of the learned scholars (*alemwalara*) who acknowledge Allah's ownership, but do not strive for abolition of private property. It is also differentiated from the materialist position of modern communists, who favour equal distribution of wealth, but without acknowledging God's supremacy.

²¹ Bhashani, 'Rabubiyater Bhumika'.

²² Kamruddin Ahmed, *The Social History of East Pakistan*, p. 83; for the support which Abul Hashim extended to Sobhani's ideology of *Rabbaniyat*, see also Amalendu De, *Dharmiya Maulyabad O Dharmaniropekkhata*, p. 120.

²³ Bhashani, in Syed Abul Maksud, *Maulana Abdul Hamid Khan Bhashani*, p. 699.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 700.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 701.

I began this section arguing that to fully understand Bhashani's political career and successes, it is necessary to highlight the path he followed as religious leader and saint. Thus far, I have only briefly touched on the Maulana's philosophy. And yet the above statement reveals just how intertwined politics and religion were in Bhashani's vision and life. Indeed, for him the message of Islam was so much a vision on how society should be structured economically, that he used every occasion to impress on his followers the need to engage in struggles for socio-economic change. It is well known, for example, that when accepting an undertaking from people wanting to be his *muridan* (disciples), he would insist that they take an oath stating they would work as member of the peasant association he led.²⁶ Bhashani *preached* that the peasants needed to get organised. This is only natural. As my quotations from his ideology of *Rabubiyat* illustrate, Bhashani's religion stated both his faith in and his submission to Islam's Supreme Ruler Allah, and also his vision of a future society in which wealth would be distributed on the basis of equality.

I now wish to resume my story about Bhashani's role as politician. In the introduction I briefly touched on the fact that the Maulana, while leading immigrant peasants in Assam, repeatedly clashed with leader-colleagues of his own Party, the Muslim League. In this section I will elaborate on Bhashani's place among Muslim League politicians. This is necessary in order to understand the special nature of his politics and his role as public opinion builder. To begin, let's highlight the contrast that existed between Bhashani and another leading politician of the Muslim League, Mohammed Akram Khan, who like him was a theologian, a maulana.²⁷ Both Maulana Bhashani and Maulana Akram Khan, in the later part of British colonial rule, played a prominent role in the Muslim League's politics—Akram Khan as the League's Bengal President and Bhashani as the party's President in Assam. Furthermore, in the 1930s, both religious teachers participated in conferences of the *proja* movement. Both were extraordinarily effective as public opinion builders. For instance, Akram Khan gathered influence as founder-editor of a newspaper called *Mohammadi*; Bhashani, amongst others, was founder of *Ittefaq*, one of the leading newspapers in East Bengal since the 1950s. Yet there is a striking contrast between the two men. Whereas Maulana Akram Khan belonged to the wing of the Muslim League which propagated an ideology objectively pitting Muslims against Hindus, Maulana Bhashani devoted his political career to the tireless promotion of religious tolerance and secularism.

How is it possible that these two politicians co-existed as leaders of the same party? To understand this, a brief discourse is necessary on the class relations that

²⁶ Haji Mohammed Danesh, 'Maulana Bhashanir Rajnoitik Jiban'.

²⁷ For the life and politics of Akram Khan, see for example, A.T.M. Atikur Rahman, *Banglar Rajnitite Maulana Mohammed Akram Khan*.

existed in the rural areas of Bengal in the late colonial period. I previously referred to the fact that these relations were governed by the zamindari system—the system of absentee landlordism—under which Bengal's tenants had to transfer the bulk of their paddy harvest to the owners of the land, the zamindars.²⁸ However, the picture was not one of undifferentiated peasants confronting feudal owners. In fact, rural relations were structured along lines that included various intermediaries. In other words: whereas the zamindars topped the hierarchy of feudal exploitation, they shared their dominance with a second layer of relatively wealthy people known as jotedars, who skimmed off their own portion of the peasants' harvest. Moreover—and this is crucial towards analysing the complexity surrounding the issue of communalism in Bengal—the religious divide in Bengal coincided with the main class cleavage, that between zamindars and peasants. Zamindars were, by and large, adherents of the Hindu faith, whereas the mass of cultivator–tenants were followers of Islam. Still, this same religious divide did not apply to the class divide between intermediaries and cultivators, for both jotedars and tenants on the whole shared the same religion of Islam.

This story may sound like a diversion from my narrative on Bhashani and religious tolerance. Yet it has an enormous bearing on our analysis of the Muslim League's (internal) politics. For the story of rural class relations and religion explains how two currents with profoundly different perspectives on the question of tolerance, came to co-exist—albeit temporarily—within the framework of the same political party. On the one side there were the communalists and Maulana Akram Khan. On the eve of Partition, they agreed to a programmatic standpoint which on paper committed them to the abolition of feudalism. History shows that this was, in fact, a standpoint intended to encourage peasants into supporting the demand for the formation of the state of Pakistan.²⁹ On the other side were leaders such as Maulana Bhashani, for whom the abolition of all exploitation by Hindu zamindars was essential if the emancipation of Bengal's peasantry was to be achieved, but who did not intend to preserve the dominance of Muslim jotedars under a post-colonial state. Clearly, one can only grasp the internal divide existing in the Muslim League at the time, if one realises that class and religion both *did*, and did *not* coincide with the zamindari feudal system. Whereas both jotedars and tenants were interested in removal of the zamindars' dominance, jotedars wished to preserve theirs in the name of a common communal identity with people they oppressed.

²⁸ For a summary on the zamindari system in Bengal, see for example, Narendra Krishna Sinha, *The Economic History of Bengal*.

²⁹ See for example, Tajul Islam Hashmi, *Peasant Utopia*; also Subhoranjan Dasgupta, 'History's Creative Counterpart', p. 30.

Only by giving this issue a prominent role in our narrative can we understand the enormous confusion which overtook Bengal's politics on the eve of Partition. The road towards the Partition of Bengal and the formation of a separate state of Pakistan was paved by the adoption of a resolution by the Muslim League in 1940, known as the 'Lahore Resolution'. Just as the reality of class relations in Bengal allowed for the coexistence of two currents with fundamentally opposed perspectives within one single party, the Lahore Resolution made possible the temporary coexistence of currents with opposed views on the future of Bengal.³⁰ On the one hand, there were those who aimed at the formation of a single state of Pakistan—people like Jinnah and Maulana Akram Khan. On the other hand, there were many Muslim League leaders in Bengal, including the League's Secretary Abul Hashim and its Assam President Bhashani, who targeted a separate State in the Eastern part of the subcontinent—one fulfilling the aspirations of those they defined as Bengal's oppressed. It is significant that, on the eve of Partition, the politics of Bengal were characterised by endless haggling between politicians of different camps—the Congress and the Muslim League—over which position to agree on.³¹ In the end, middle class politicians were to completely squander the prospects for preservation of Bengal's unity. Equally striking, however, is the fact that a powerful undercurrent of Bengali nationalism existed in Bengal's Muslim League!

Lastly, Bhashani's position as leader of the Muslim League, besides being anchored in opposition to the zamindari system and in his support for Bengali nationalism, needs to be analysed in the context of his understanding of Islam. Here again, Bhashani shared a common outlook with the Muslim League's Secretary, Abul Hashim. Both Bhashani and Abul Hashim were Left-wing oriented leaders of the League. For instance, one story suggests that Abul Hashim engaged a communist intellectual to help draft the League's election manifesto.³² Reportedly, Hashim believed the Bengal Muslim League should side with the Communist Party. One can interpret his moves as intended to promote the success of the Muslim League's politics, of forging an alliance under the leadership of jotedars and *mullahs*, meaning feudal class intermediaries and traditional intellectuals. But then Abul Hashim, like Bhashani, was also charmed by the ideology of *Rabubiyat* propagated by the radical philosopher Sobhani, an ideology which envisioned the creation of a classless society in the name of Islam!³³ In the end, the project of the Muslim League's Left-leaning intellectuals surely lost out, and

³⁰ See for example, Kamruddin Ahmed, *The Social History of East Pakistan*.

³¹ For instance Shila Sen, *Muslim Politics in Bengal*, Chapter VII, 'The Rise of Suhrawardy: Pakistan vs. United Bengal, 1946–47', p. 203.

³² See for example, Amalendu De, *Dharmiya Maulyabad O Dharmaniropekkhata*, p. 119.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 120; also Kamruddin Ahmed, *The Social History of East Pakistan*, p. 83.

Partition brought communal carnage rather than the social emancipation these intellectuals had dreamt of. Yet the cleavages that existed in the Muslim League on the eve of Partition, between Right- and Left-leaning currents, illustrate that Bhashani's vision—the creation of an emancipatory state of Bengal—was not the dream of one single individual. Rather, it was a dream shared by a sizeable section of Muslim League leaders in the colonial provinces of Bengal and Assam.

Transition to Secular Politics

The next chapter in Bhashani's political life is once again located in East Bengal (East Pakistan), where he returned after Partition. In the 1950s the Maulana led a mass campaign in favour of regional autonomy and Bengali self-determination. This campaign was to play a key role in the Maulana's journey towards the secularisation of politics. For the momentum which this movement gained decisively demonstrated to him that the hold of the Muslim League and of Pakistan's rulers over the minds of the population in East Bengal was weakening, and that secularisation was truly possible.

The immediate precursor to the campaign for regional autonomy was the historical movement for recognition of Bengali as state language.³⁴ Whereas the public debate on the language question was originally, in the late 1940s, launched by urban intellectuals, it was students of Dhaka University who took it to the streets. They confronted Pakistan's Prime Minister, held mass demonstrations defying the police and enforced the temporary closure of educational institutions via student strikes. The role which Bhashani played in this movement was limited, but meaningful nonetheless. When the language movement reached its peak, in February 1952, most established politicians hesitated on whether to back the students who resolved to break the state's prohibition on public protests. Not so Maulana Bhashani. At a meeting of the All Party Language Action Council held on 6 February, politicians hotly debated what should be done if the government proclaimed its prohibition, Section 144. Bhashani threw his full weight behind the action plans of the students, arguing that 'to bow to the government's repression would be equal to surrendering to autocracy'.³⁵ In February of 1952, Bhashani wholeheartedly supported the struggle which the students waged, under the leadership of Abdul Matin and the university-based Students' Action Council. He similarly was to support the students' agitation during the uprising against dictator Ayub Khan (1968–69).

³⁴ See Abdul Matin and Ahmed Rafiq, *Bhasha Andolen. Itihash O Tatparja*.

³⁵ Syed Abul Maksud, *Maulana Abdul Hamid Khan Bhashani*, p. 89; also Muhammad Samsul Haque, *Maulana Bhashanir Rajnoitik Jiban*, p. 20.

The people's movement that emerged from these protests—the campaign for regional autonomy—was unmistakably led by the Maulana himself. In preceding years Bhashani had already protested in public against Pakistan's economic exploitation of East Bengal.³⁶ Furthermore, he had also made sure that the demand stating that self-rule (*swayatshashan*) would be granted to the province was included in the programme of the new party, formed as breakaway party of the Muslim League. This party came to be known as the Awami League.³⁷ Again, when, towards the end of 1953, different parties held discussions on the formation of an opposition alliance that could fight the Muslim League in the 1954 parliamentary elections, it was the Maulana who proposed that the issue of regional autonomy be incorporated in the coalition's charter of demands.³⁸ Perhaps more important is the fact that at literally hundreds of election meetings which Bhashani held in the rural areas of East Bengal, he turned the demand for autonomy into the public's 'heartfelt issue' (*praner dabi*). As one of his biographers has stressed, the question of autonomy was the very central issue which the Maulana brought up at all the gatherings where he spoke.³⁹ Clearly, on this occasion, Bhashani showed that electoral campaigning can contribute significantly towards a society's politicisation. Moreover, he did not stop halfway. After the party coalition had gained a convincing victory in the elections, he steadfastly continued building public opinion in support of self-determination, now in the context of the debate over Pakistan's draft Constitution. Bhashani called on students and other sections of the public to wear black badges on a province-wide day of resistance and he led numerous rural demonstrations to vent the public's discontent.⁴⁰

It is noteworthy also that Maulana Bhashani succeeded in shaping his campaign for autonomy by relying on the energies of different categories of rural intellectuals. In 1951, a major conflict had erupted between primary school teachers of East Bengal and the province's government over teachers' salaries. Pay scales were so low and the government's attitude towards the teachers' demands so uncooperative, that the school teachers (then numbering some 80,000) had gone on a province-wide strike.⁴¹ Though the government refused to give in, and though the strike

³⁶ See for instance Bhashani's speech on the budget of the Pakistan government, given in 1949; Saidur Rahman, *Maulana Abdul Hamid Khan Bhashanir Bhashan O Bibriti*, p. 17.

³⁷ See for the inclusion of the demand for autonomy in the 12-point demand programme of the Awami Muslim League; Syed Abul Maksud, *Maulana Abdul Hamid Khan Bhashani*, p. 718 (point 3).

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 94; Abu Noman Khan, 'Maulana Bhashanir Jibansrote', p. 272.

³⁹ For example, Muhammad Samsul Haque, *Maulana Bhashanir Rajnoitik Jiban. Tatvalochona O Mulyayan*, p. 21.

⁴⁰ Muhammad Samsul Haque, *Maulana Bhashanir Rajnoitik Jiban. Tatvalochona O Mulyayan*, p. 24; Syed Abul Maksud, *Maulana Abdul Hamid Khan Bhashani*, p. 126–27. Abu Noman Khan, 'Maulana Bhashanir Jibansrote', p. 279.

⁴¹ See Badruddin Umar, 'Primary School Teachers on the Striking Path' (*Weekly Holiday*, Dhaka, Bangladesh, 27 November 1998); and Peter Custers, 'Introducing Maulana Bhashani, Representative

was withdrawn before substantial concessions had been gained, it did contribute a great deal to increasing political awareness among primary school teachers in rural areas. And it was Maulana Bhashani who, more than anyone else, realised the importance of this. Thus, in campaigning for regional autonomy, Bhashani relied heavily on village teachers, along with his own religious followers. School teachers and other rural intellectuals were also to constitute the backbone of the new progressive party Bhashani was to form in 1957.⁴² Elsewhere I have elaborated on the significance of Bhashani's policy aimed at drawing rural intellectuals to the side of the oppressed.⁴³ Here we note in passing that his capacity to inspire both 'modern' and 'traditional' intellectuals was one of the keys to his political success.

The Cultural Conference staged in 1957 at Kagmari, formed the culminating point of Bhashani's campaign in favour of regional autonomy and is considered to be a milestone in Bangladesh's history. In the latter part of 1956, the Awami League had assumed governmental power, both at the provincial and at the central level in Pakistan. Although people expected that the party would use its position of power to carry out political reforms, it soon became evident that Awami League Ministers were bent on abandoning the party's principles in exchange for personal gain. It was under these circumstances that Bhashani, as the League's President, called for the holding of a two day Council session of the party in Kagmari, Tangail, to be followed by a three day Cultural Conference. The Council session's debates focused on two main issues, one of which was Pakistan's foreign policy. Earlier, the Awami League under Bhashani's leadership had expressed its firm opposition to Pakistan joining any military alliance under the leadership of the US. Since the Awami League's Prime Minister Suhrawardy failed to initiate a revision in foreign policy, Bhashani used Kagmari to re-affirm the party's 'anti-imperialist' stance.⁴⁴ Again, at the same Council session Bhashani launched a passionate appeal to Suhrawardy who falsely claimed that the issue of self-determination had been resolved for 98 per cent.⁴⁵ Bhashani insisted that Suhrawardy use his power to end Pakistan's internal colonialism. In his conference

of an Emancipatory Islam' (*Samachar*, Newsletter of the Bangladesh People's Solidarity Centre, Amsterdam, the Netherlands, December, 1999, p. 7).

⁴² See Peter Custers, 'Rural Intellectuals and the Creation of Pakistan and Bangladesh' (*Samachar*, Amsterdam, the Netherlands, No. 11, December 1998, pp. 13–16).

⁴³ *Ibid.*, for Antonio Gramsci's differentiation of categories of intellectuals, see David Forgacs, ed., *An Antonio Gramsci Reader*, p. 300; also Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, p. 3.

⁴⁴ See notably Shah Ahmed Reza, *Bhashanir Kagmari Shammelan O Shayatshashoner Sangram*.

⁴⁵ See Syed Abul Maksud, *Maulana Abdul Hamid Khan Bhashani*, p. 196; also Muhammad Samsul Haque, *Maulana Bhashanir Rajnoitik Jiban*, p. 30.

speech, he threatened—prophetically—that if East Bengal were not granted autonomy, the people would ultimately say ‘Assalamu Alaikum’ (good-bye) to Pakistan.⁴⁶

Even today there exists a tendency amongst a section of Bangladeshi politicians to obfuscate history and downgrade Bhashani’s achievements. Thus, it is critically important to underline how Bhashani’s campaign for regional autonomy, which reached its peak at the Kagmari Conference, both created the environment for the secularisation of politics and formed the precursor to the 1971 war for the independence of Bangladesh. Yet, what nasty opposition the aged preacher–politician had to face! In the wake of the Kagmari Conference, conservative *pirs* and maulanas publicly vilified Bhashani, arguing that he was trying to disrupt Pakistan’s territorial integrity.⁴⁷ Bhashani’s own party colleagues were equally uncooperative. Suhrawardy who had faced defeat at the Council session, decried Bhashani, his own Party’s President! Editorials of newspapers in both West and East Pakistan openly denounced him for his uncompromising stance, calling him an ‘agent’.⁴⁸ And Mujibur Rahman, the Party’s General Secretary, found it fit to misbehave with Bhashani at a post-Conference press gathering.⁴⁹ Yet, despite all this, the history of East Bengal’s subsequent evolution attests that Maulana Bhashani, via his sustained work of public opinion building in the 1950s, played the role of political pioneer, treading a path that other, less courageous politicians would have to tread later themselves. Since Bhashani’s Kagmari Conference charted a course from which Bengal’s middle class politicians could no longer diverge, the Conference is indeed a watershed in the history of Bangladesh.

I now will move on to discuss Bhashani’s promotion of religious tolerance and his contribution to the secularisation of politics in the post-1947 period. As an astute and experienced politician, Bhashani moved step-wise, gradually broadening the scope for non-communal politics. When Pakistan was created in 1947, Islam had of course been given recognition as the state’s only official religion.

⁴⁶ On Bhashani’s famous ‘ukti’ threatening his ‘Assalamu Ailakum’ to the existence of Pakistan, see Shah Ahmed Reza, *Bhashanir Kagmari Shammelan O Shayatshashoner Sangram*, p. 51; Syed Abul Maksud, *Maulana Abdul Hamid Khan Bhashani*, p. 126; Muhammad Samsul Haque, *Maulana Bhashanir Rajnoitik Jiban*, p. 30.

⁴⁷ See Shah Ahmed Reza, *Bhashanir Kagmari Shammelan O Shayatshashoner Sangram*, p. 71; also Peter Custers, ‘Introducing Maulana Bhashani, Representative of an Emancipatory Islam’ (*Samachar*, Newsletter of the Bangladesh People’s Solidarity Centre, Amsterdam, the Netherlands, December, 1999, p. 7). For an overview of negative reactions to the Kagmari Conference, see Syed Abul Maksud, *Maulana Abdul Hamid Khan Bhashani*, p. 151.

⁴⁸ Syed Abul Maksud, *Maulana Abdul Hamid Khan Bhashani*, p. 151; Muhammed Samsul Haque, *Maulana Bhashanir Rajnoitik Jiban*, p. 31.

⁴⁹ Shah Ahmed Reza, *Bhashanir Kagmari Shammelan O Shayatshashoner Sangram*, p. 66.

The Muslim League under Jinnah's leadership fully dominated the country's politics. However, as indicated above, tensions between the country's political leadership based in West Pakistan, and different sections of the population in the country's Eastern wing, emerged with surprising speed. Moreover, tensions not only emerged between the party-in-power and the East Bengal public at large, but also *within* the governing Muslim League. These were, largely, tensions between central leaders unreservedly committed to the party's founding principles and East Bengal leaders who disagreed and who ultimately decided to part company with the Muslim League. Maulana Bhashani, as the League's provincial President, headed this latter group. He personally led the struggle for the formation of a new political party, which occurred in 1949. The party was initially known as the 'Muslim Awami League'—*Awami* meaning 'people'—indicating the new party's commitment to defending the interests of 'the common man'.⁵⁰

As the new party's name further suggests, at this juncture the Muslim Awami League was not yet secular. Indeed, the Constitution and the 12-point Demand Programme it adopted still contained communal elements. Nevertheless, the party's documents heralded a shift away from the Muslim League's stance. For instance, under the aims and objectives laid down in its constitution, the party stated that it would promote the 'religious, cultural and other interests of the Muslims of Pakistan'; it would also 'disseminate true knowledge of Islam'. Yet the new League, in its charter of demands also stated the secular view that whatever their nationality or religion, all citizens of the country would enjoy 'equal rights', if the new party were to come to power.⁵¹ With hindsight, it is evident that the given formulations were not final but transitory formulations, and that Bhashani intended to proceed further. In fact, his aim was the very abolition of communal politics, something which became obvious in the middle of the 1950s, after about half a decade of the Awami Muslim League's existence. By then the party-coalition formed under Bhashani's lead, as mentioned, had scored a resounding victory over the Muslim League, in the parliamentary elections of 1954. With mass support for his politics proven, Bhashani moved forward. According to his biographer Maksud, it was in the wake of these elections that the Maulana took the decision that the (Muslim) Awami League should 'be transformed into a completely non-communal institution'.⁵²

Bhashani's conviction that this transition was necessary is reflected in his Presidential speeches given at the party's Council Sessions in 1955 and 1956.

⁵⁰ See the wording under the section 'aims and objectives', of the draft Constitution and Rules of the East Pakistan Muslim Awami League, published as appendix to Syed Abul Maksud, *Maulana Abdul Hamid Khan Bhashani*, p. 715.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 720.

⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 106; Maksud quotes a press statement issued by Bhashani on April 20, in which he indicates: 'after my recent journey I have no more doubt but that the country's inhabitants want to see the East Pakistan Awami League emerge as a non-communal institution'.

In his 1955 speech the Maulana openly raised questions about the continued validity of the so-called 'two-nations theory'—the very theory which had been the cornerstone of Pakistan's formation as a state. At a time when Pakistan's Constitution was being debated, he argued that if Muslims would continue to insist on their communal identity, this would only encourage religious minorities, including Hindus living in Pakistan, to demand that a separate territory be carved out for them. Thus, it would be very unwise to nurture religious divisions through separate electorates or otherwise.⁵³ Again, in the speech he gave the next year at the party's 1956 Council Session, Bhashani went further. Here he announced his decision to drop the word 'Muslim' from the party's name. He reminded the audience of the fact that he had been entrusted with the task of holding consultations with party cadres at District and sub-District levels, and proclaimed that the outcome was unequivocal: 'The overwhelming majority of the cadres are not just in favour of making the (party) institution non-communal, but *they also demand such with force*'.⁵⁴

Thus, from 1955 onwards the party was to be known by the name it has carried until today, the Awami League. After having reached this turning point in the politics of East Bengal, Bhashani steadfastly continued to use his status and influence to impress upon his supporters the need to oppose communalism of any kind. One occasion in particular, the aforementioned Kagmari Cultural Conference, turned out to be crucial. Though Bhashani's own world view was admittedly Islamic, the way in which the Maulana projected Bengali culture at this conference expressed a keen awareness of the fact that the region's traditional rural culture is a repository of religious tolerance. He publicly warned his fellow politicians, many of whom were urban-based, against the neglect of folk culture. And he invited a wide range of village artists, dancers and musicians to enliven the conference's evening sessions.⁵⁵ In the following section, it will be noted that Bhashani's acquaintance with the religio-cultural currents that have shaped Bengal's past, was circumscribed. Here, I wish to stress that the programme of the Kagmari Conference reflected Bhashani's acute awareness of the need to nurture Bengal's rural folk traditions, as anchorage of religious harmony. Among the cultural troupes invited, for instance, were singers of hymns composed by Lalan Shah, the famous nineteenth century mystic from Kushtia.⁵⁶

As explained above, the thematic of the Kagmari Conference and of the Council session of the Awami League that preceded it, was primarily geared towards highlighting the combined demands for regional self-rule, and for independence from US dominance in Pakistan's foreign affairs.⁵⁷ Yet in his welcoming speech

⁵³ See Saidur Rahman, *Maulana Abdul Hamid Khan Bhashanir Bhashan O Bibriti*, p. 41.

⁵⁴ Syed Abul Maksud, *Maulana Abdul Hamid Khan Bhashani*, p. 134.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 151.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 151; on Lalan Shah, see Sudhir Chakraborti, *Bratya Lokayat Lalan*.

⁵⁷ See the previous section.

Bhashani is reported to also have dwelled at length on the problem of communalism. As before, he pushed aside Jinnah's 'two nations' theory, insisting that while it was a country with a Muslim majority, Pakistan had 'not just been created for Muslims'. This country, he preached, is for all, 'for Hindus, Buddhists, Christians, *adivasis* and other small nationalities alike'. According to the writer Abu Zaffar Samsuddin, Bhashani stated in his speech that the communal problem was the 'very biggest problem of the people of India and Pakistan'. If this problem, he warned, was not resolved, the people of the two countries could never live in peace, and 'all efforts at development' would be utterly wasted. Thus, it was in the interests of both sides, that 'good relationships of neighbourliness be maintained'.⁵⁸ In short, though fighting communalism was not one of the Karmari Conference's chief targets, there can be little doubt that this cultural conference, termed 'the very largest one ever held in the history of East Bengal',⁵⁹ was crucial for the defence of religious tolerance.

The details registered above regarding East Bengal's political evolution during the 1950s reveal Bhashani's key role in steering the transformation of East Bengal's politics. Indeed, history attests that the 1950s saw a dramatic transition from the Muslim League with its communal grip over East Bengal's politics, towards the secularisation of the region's politics. Facts also prove that Maulana Bhashani did not just contribute to, but played the very determining role in achieving this transition. Through his leadership in the formation of East Bengal's (Muslim) Awami League, via the consultations he held on abolishing the party's communal bias, and via his speeches on the problematic relations between the Subcontinent's main religions, Bhashani helped lay the foundations for the subsequent formation of Bangladesh as a secular state.

Bhashani's Class Politics

Having highlighted Bhashani's intense efforts to strengthen religious tolerance in East Bengal in the 1950s, it is now necessary to return to discuss the Maulana's class politics. Here it should be stressed that during the given historical period Bhashani did not just stick to the policy he had pursued before, that of championing peasant demands, but took it to a new stage.⁶⁰ He invariably took a stance in favour of the demands put forward by various sections of the labouring population, such as industrial workers, fisher folk and peasants producing Bengal's 'golden' fibre, jute. Moreover, Bhashani did not just use his leverage as public opinion builder to promote these causes through inclusion of their demands in speeches he held. He also took a personal interest in the self-organisation of each labouring

⁵⁸ Syed Abul Maksud, *Maulana Abdul Hamid Khan Bhashani*, p. 149.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 140.

⁶⁰ See the introduction to this essay on Bhashani's peasant politics in Assam.

class or section. And since the enhancement of class struggle was so central to the methodology and strategy he used to defend religious tolerance, it is necessary to describe these efforts in some detail.

First of all, it is noteworthy that, soon after his return to East Bengal from Assam in the late 1940s, Bhashani agreed to champion the cause of waged workers employed in modern enterprises. Here two examples must suffice. First was the unionisation of railway employees. Newspapers reports published in 1949–50 record the sorrowful plight of workers recruited to labour for the province's railways. Many lacked proper housing and job security did not exist. Against this background, a union of railway workers was formed in 1949 and Bhashani was elected to be its President. In this capacity he is reported to have repeatedly spoken at gatherings of the union's leading members and to also have participated in negotiations which the union held with the railway authorities.⁶¹ Four years later, the Maulana was called upon to be president of another trade union. This time it was the union of workers employed in Adamjee Jute Mills, the very largest industrial complex then existing in East Bengal. Here again there had been constant problems over workers' pay and housing.⁶² Understandably, the newly-founded unions appealed to Bhashani, since he was the province's senior-most progressive politician.

One personal initiative which the Maulana personally took was regarding the formation of East Bengal's union of fisher folk.⁶³ This initiative dates from 1958: it was launched immediately after Bhashani had parted ways with the Awami League and had formed his own Leftist party, known by the name of NAP (National Awami Party). The NAP's programmatic documents—adopted at a conference held within months after the Kagmari Conference—unequivocally expressed Bhashani's combined orientation on class struggle from below and on religious tolerance. Thus, the NAP's aims and objectives stated that the party would ensure that all religious communities be permitted to follow their own religious rules. The document also referred to the need for 'land reform'—the distribution of government-owned land among the rural poor.⁶⁴ Furthermore, the implementation of these commitments, Bhashani opined, could not wait but had to follow suit.⁶⁵ In 1958 he launched a month-long drive to help prepare for the holding of a conference of fisher folk. Over a hundred delegates are reported to have gathered for

⁶¹ For details on Bhashani's involvement with the union of railway workers, see Amzad Hossain, 'Panchash Dashaker Sramik Andolen O Maulana Bhashani', pp. 170–71.

⁶² *Ibid.*, p. 171.

⁶³ See Syed Abul Maksud, *Maulana Abdul Hamid Khan Bhashani*, p. 225.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 208.

⁶⁵ There reportedly was a controversy within the N.A.P. over formation of a peasant organisation, with some of the Leftist leaders surprisingly opposing Bhashani's decision to form the *Krishok Samity*—see Syed Abul Maksud, *Maulana Abdul Hamid Khan Bhashani*, p. 236.

this event, termed 'singular' in the history of Bengal.⁶⁶ The *Shammelan* adopted a 12-point charter of demands, with strikingly concrete propositions, such as: that import licenses for fishing gear be offered to professional fishermen and that floating hospitals be set up in fishing zones.⁶⁷ In its central demand the *Shammelan* targeted the government's policy on leases which unjustly favoured the private interests of large businessmen (*izaradars*). Under the slogan '*Jal Jar Jola Tar*' Bhashani demanded that anyone owning a net, meaning only those personally engaged in fishing, should be granted rights over water bodies, and that all police repression against fisher folk be stopped.⁶⁸

Bhashani's efforts towards self-organisation at the grassroots level picked up towards the middle of the 1960s. Not long before he had started his drive in support of fisher folk, in January 1958, the Maulana had already taken the initiative towards the formation of a peasant association. This association, the East Pakistan '*Krishok Samity*', was officially launched via a mass gathering held in the North of Bengal, in Phulcharighat. The *Samity*'s demand programme comprised mainly economic issues, such as the demand that agricultural loans be granted on easy terms and that the widely prevalent sharecropping system be reformed.⁶⁹ Soon after the process of organising in the rural areas was disrupted, when the military took over state power and imposed Martial Law. It was only in 1964 that organising could be re-intensified. In that year three large peasant conferences were held in the North-Western region of East Bengal, reminiscent of the successful conferences held by the Maulana in the past.⁷⁰ The three gatherings were followed, in 1965, by a three-day provincial conference of the *Krishok Samity*. Yet the most impressive *Shammelan* which he staged during this decade was probably the one held in support of jute cultivators, then the province's main cash crop. According to Bhashani's biographer Syed Abul Maksud, this *Shammelan* brought together more than a hundred thousand peasants. One thousand volunteers worked to feed participants. As in the old days, attendees brought their own bamboo poles to build temporary shelters, along with paddy rice and lentils as provisions for the conference.⁷¹

Clearly, the aged Bhashani in the Pakistan period made sustained efforts to promote the formation of union-type organisations, both in villages and in towns of East Bengal. By the end of the 1960s these efforts bore fruit and in a very explosive manner. In the late 1940s, after Partition, the sphere of politics in the

⁶⁶ Maksud calls it the 'first political organisation of fisher folk in East Bengal'. See Syed Abul Maksud, *Maulana Abdul Hamid Khan Bhashani*, p. 226.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, see also Abu Noman Khan, 'Maulana Bhashanir Jibansrote', p. 285.

⁶⁸ Syed Abul Maksud, *Maulana Abdul Hamid Khan Bhashani*, p. 227; and Abu Noman Khan, 'Maulana Bhashanir Jibansrote'.

⁶⁹ Syed Abul Maksud, *Maulana Abdul Hamid Khan Bhashani*, p. 234.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 260–63; and Abu Noman Khan, 'Maulana Bhashanir Jibansrote', p. 289.

⁷¹ Syed Abul Maksud, *Maulana Abdul Hamid Khan Bhashani*, p. 278.

province had largely been communalised. It may be recalled that when the Awami Muslim League had been formed as a first hesitant step towards secularisation of politics, its manifesto had hovered between support towards Muslims on the basis of their communal identity and support towards people of all faiths.⁷² By the late 1960s, through the intense and sustained efforts which the Maulana and other politicians opposed to intolerance had made, the impact of communal parties in East Bengal had dramatically declined. The change in public discourse was very visible in the uprising against Ayub Khan's dictatorship, which was launched in the final months of 1968. At times during this uprising, Maulana Bhashani employed religious symbols and imagery to defend the struggles that were being waged. At one point he is reported to have sat down to pray, transforming a demonstration into a *namaz* (prayer) in order to counter potential violence by army and police personnel.⁷³ When calling on Bengal's peasants to attend the militant mass gatherings which he convened in 1969, he asked them to dress up in *tupis* (caps), partly modelled on Islamic caps.⁷⁴ Thus, he did not cancel all religious symbolism from his politics. And yet the success of the 1969 uprising, to be narrated in the following paragraphs, indicates that the state could no longer exploit religion to manipulate the sentiments of East Bengal's population. Politics had largely been secularised.

Maulana Bhashani's social orientation and political methods can best be summed up by describing the role he played during the people's insurrection staged against Ayub Khan's military dictatorship at the end of the 1960s. Bhashani's powerful leadership in this uprising sums up his life of political achievements quite well. First, however, some words on his role in instigating the rising. It is true that cities and towns in West Pakistan had already seen massive resistance during the month of November 1968. Also, industrial workers in East Bengal had initiated resistance earlier by staging encirclements of factories. Yet the beginning of the people's uprising in East Bengal is generally dated to 6 December, when Bhashani addressed a mass gathering held at Dhaka's Paltan Maidan.⁷⁵ In his speech, Bhashani expressed his firm support to drivers of baby taxis and *rickshaw-walas* who were on strike. The rickshaw drivers then prodded the Maulana to call for a general strike, *hartal*, which he did. In fact, the general strike was held spontaneously and without the least preparations on the very next day, 7 December, drawing a huge and enthusiastic response from the public in Dhaka. The police,

⁷² See the previous section.

⁷³ See Tariq Ali, *Pakistan: Military Rule or People's Power*.

⁷⁴ For further detail and references on *Lal Tupi* Conferences see the following section.

⁷⁵ See Tariq Ali, *Pakistan: Military Rule or People's Power*, p. 175; also Syed Abul Maksud, *Maulana Abdul Hamid Khan Bhashani*, p. 314; and Abu Noman Khan, 'Maulana Bhashani's Jibansrote', p. 296.

however, responded with violence, obstructing the procession which, headed by Bhashani, marched towards the Governor's House. A number of picketing *hartal* participants were killed. Thus, when Bhashani threw his weight behind the workers, the insurrection of East Bengal's people against dictatorship was on.

This then is the first point: Maulana Bhashani, who had been a leading opposition politician in East Bengal ever since the late 1940s, effectively initiated the people's insurrection in December of 1968. Second, Bhashani also influenced the choice of the fighting tactics which the people used in the course of the rising. The tactic of *gherao-ing*—of encircling factory owners and government officials in order to press them into conceding demands—had already been employed by workers spontaneously, before it became a prominent method of confrontation in the course of the uprising.⁷⁶ Still, it was Bhashani who with great daring raised the tactic of *gherao-ing* to a defining element of the people's uprising. This he did when, on 28 December, he personally headed the people's procession which encircled the bungalow of the District administrator in Pabna town.⁷⁷ From then on, the tactic of *gherao-ing* is said to have spread like wildfire to the far corners of the province. More recently, the politics of *gherao-ing* has been eroded, and appears to have lost its erstwhile confrontational meaning in Bangladesh. But in 1968–69 the very idea of encirclement formed part of an insurrectionary approach. It embodied the resolve to go to the very limits in confronting Pakistan's ruling class, and everything indicates that Maulana Bhashani intended the tactic to have this significance.

Third is the fact that the Maulana strove tirelessly to draw the peasantry into battle. Here again, as in the case of industrial workers, there had been signs of restlessness before the launching of the insurrection. Peasants producing sugar cane had earlier expressed their anger when the police had tried to confiscate their means to make molasses, *gur*, in an attempt to halt its production.⁷⁸ During the insurrection it was a conscious policy on the part of Maulana Bhashani, whose status as peasant leader was paramount in East Bengal, to promote the fullest participation of the rural population. Bhashani knew well that this was a necessary condition for the insurrection's success. Thus, he called for a 'Day of Peasants' Demands', on 29 December, inviting peasants to struggle over price issues and against government indifference over ever recurrent floods.⁷⁹ By January, peasant participation became more visible when villagers with ploughs and *lathis* (sticks)

⁷⁶ On the use of the tactic of encirclement ('*gherao*') in the uprising, see Tariq Ali, *Pakistan: Military Rule or People's Power*, p. 179 and p. 213; Syed Abul Maksud, *Maulana Abdul Hamid Khan Bhashani*, p. 316; and Abul Noman Khan, 'Maulana Bhashanir Jibansrote', p. 297.

⁷⁷ Syed Abul Maksud, *Maulana Abdul Hamid Khan Bhashani*, p. 317; Abu Noman Khan, 'Maulana Bhashanir Jibansrote', p. 297.

⁷⁸ On the issue of sugar cane cultivation and processing, and harassments of peasants and workers by the state and the police, see Tariq Ali, *Pakistan: Military Rule or People's Power*, p. 178.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 178.

entered Dhaka city to demonstrate. As it happened, the full force of peasant militancy was only mustered in the aftermath of Ayub Khan's fall from power, when Bhashani aroused the rural poor through the Red Cap (*Lal Tupi*) conferences held under his lead.⁸⁰

Fourth, Maulana Bhashani with remarkable openness welcomed the entry of students into the arena of struggle. This entry happened from 5 January, 1969 onwards, when diverse student organisations drew together to establish the *Chhattro Shangram Parishad*, the Student Action Council, around a charter of 11 demands.⁸¹ These included the demand for the reduction of university fees, but also comprised the economic and social interests of the population at large. Throughout the month of January, university students took centrestage in the insurrection. They called for several general strikes which were successful and which were accompanied by street battles. They also held a torchlight procession through the streets of the provincial capital Dhaka, pledging to take the uprising to its final victory. In particular, during the night of 18 February, students demonstrated revolutionary courage when they massively broke the curfew, shouting slogans against the Pakistani army. From his side, the Maulana did not just welcome the students' militancy, but showed full appreciation for the programmatic orientation taken by the *Chhattro Shangram Parishad*. He publicly insisted on the absence of difference between the students' 11 demands and the demand programme of his own political party, the NAP.⁸²

The fifth and perhaps most striking point is that the aged Bhashani understood better than any other East Bengal politician that the people's uprising offered a classic opportunity to achieve a turnover of class relations, and opined that such a change can only be brought about through a revolutionary process. As an experienced leader, Bhashani of course knew that dialogues and negotiations are a part of the methodology of political work. Yet, during the people's insurrection he set his mind on a struggle for complete victory over Ayub Khan's military rule. Aside from insisting on the need for confrontational tactics, Bhashani also showed his revolutionary resolve through slogans and phrases which he employed in speeches and other public statements. Thus, at one point during the uprising he threatened to besiege the jails to obtain the release of Mujib and other political prisoners, on the model of the assault on the Bastille that had inaugurated the French revolution.⁸³ Also, he specifically rejected the idea of a 'Round Table' between political parties

⁸⁰ On the *Lal Tupi* Conferences, see Mohsin Sastrapani, 'Ananyashadharan Jatiya Bir'.

⁸¹ see Tariq Ali, *Pakistan: Military Rule or People's Power*, p. 197; Syed Abul Maksud, *Maulana Abdul Hamid Khan Bhashani*, p. 319; and Abu Noman Khan, 'Maulana Bhashanir Jibansrote', p. 297.

⁸² *Ibid.*

⁸³ Syed Abul Maksud, *Maulana Abdul Hamid Khan Bhashani*; Abu Noman Khan, 'Maulana Bhashanir Jibansrote'.

and the Ayub Khan regime, arguing that it is the oppressor who wins whenever the oppressed agree to sit and talk.⁸⁴ Thus, for Bhashani the target of the people's insurrection was the overthrow of the old order, ruled by West Pakistan's communal elite.

The phase of people's insurrection against military dictatorship passed when General Ayub Khan resigned on 24 March, 1969. Although this resignation did not mean the end of military rule, the people's upsurge which had been staged concurrently in West Pakistan and East Bengal then waned. In the aftermath of Ayub Khan's fall, Bhashani drew much international attention for his leadership in the uprising.⁸⁵

Sensitivity towards Bengal's Cultural/Religious Traditions

Let us now discuss how Maulana Bhashani related to Bengal's cultural traditions of tolerance. So far I have largely recorded how Bhashani practiced politics during the decades from the 1920s through to the late 1960s, including the fact that he consistently opposed feelings of hatred between people over religious differences. But to what extent did Bhashani ground his vision of religious tolerance in the religio-cultural experiences of Bengal? Elsewhere I have argued that one of the key reasons why the ideology of tolerance gained broad acceptance among the people of East Bengal/Bangladesh, is that its tradition of tolerance as evolved in the past is grounded in a combination of mysticism and the syncretic intermingling of faiths.⁸⁶ On the one hand, Bengal has seen the emergence and flourishing of a variety of mystic currents, including the Islamic trend of Sufism and the Hinduist trend of Vaishnavism, as preached by Chaitanya. On the other hand, both at the grassroots level and in the writings of intellectual intermediaries belonging to these and other trends, there has long existed a willingness to pay respect to, or draw elements from competing faiths.

How then did Bhashani relate to this syncretic–mystical past? First, it needs to be admitted that the Maulana did not follow the same path that had been trodden by the Sufi intermediaries who sought to popularise Islam during the centuries when the overwhelming majority of Bengal's peasant population was non-Islamic. Take for instance the case of the sixteenth century Sufi poet Saiyid Sultan, who

⁸⁴ On the issue of the Round Table Conference, see Syed Abul Maksud, *Maulana Abdul Hamid Khan Bhashani*, p. 325; Abu Noman Khan, 'Maulana Bhashanir Jibansrote', pp. 300–01; and Tariq Ali, *Pakistan: Military Rule or People's Power*, pp. 214–15.

⁸⁵ Notably, Syed Abul Maksud, *Maulana Abdul Hamid Khan Bhashani*, p. 328.

⁸⁶ Peter Custers, 'Kazi Nazrul Islam. Bengal's Prophet of Tolerance' (*I.I.A.S.-Newsletter*, No. 50, Spring 2009, pp. 14–15); Peter Custers, 'Islamic Mysticism, Religious Tolerance and the History of Bangladesh' (*New Age*, Dhaka, 12 November 2009); Peter Custers, 'Bangladesh: Legacy of Secular Nationalism Revisited' (I, II and III; *New Age*, Dhaka, 6, 7 and 8 December 2009).

reputedly was an esteemed *pir* with a very large number of disciples.⁸⁷ Trying to break with the alien cultural orientation of the Muslim aristocrats of Bengal—the Ashrafs—Saiyid Sultan wrote the *Nabi Vamsa*, a large work in Bengali, on the history of the world's creation and on the history of all prophets recognised by Islam. Here he reportedly made no distinction between, but virtually equated *avatars*—incarnations of deities according to the Hindu tradition—with *nabis*, prophets in Islam. Saiyid Sultan is also known to have written a theory of the human nerve and energy system, largely based on ideas derived from the Yoga-tantric tradition of the subcontinent.⁸⁸ And this Sufi *pir* by no means stands alone. According to Asim Ray, from the fifteenth until the eighteenth century, Bengal has known a whole series of Sufi writers who freely created poetry combining Islamic imagery with indigenous, non-Islamic elements, notably ideas drawn from the yoga-tantric tradition which used to have plenty of adherents in Bengal.⁸⁹

I have found no indication in Bhashani's writings and speeches that he was specifically inclined towards syncretism, as was so characteristic for these Sufi precursors. And yet there is sufficient evidence to prove that Bhashani was very sensitive towards Bengal's cultural and cultural-political traditions. First, Bhashani's role in Assam stands in a long line of Sufi preachers whose enduring popularity and veneration as saints is largely based on the fact that they led the people in remote corners of East Bengal in clearing the jungle and in establishing themselves as cultivators of the soil. Richard Eaton, in his study on Islam and the Bengal frontier, points out that the authority of these charismatic *pirs* rested amongst others on 'their connection with the forests', 'a wild and dangerous domain that they were believed to have subdued'.⁹⁰ In a sense Maulana Bhashani forms the very culmination of this tradition of Sufi *pirs*. At the time when he himself arose, the 'frontier' had, of course, shifted, from parts of East Bengal's interior areas towards the neighbouring province of Assam. In leading peasants who, while undertaking heroic efforts to transform forests into agricultural fields, faced discrimination by the colonial state, Bhashani emerged as Bengal's last and most effective frontier saint.

However, Bhashani has also expressed his affinity with Bengal's mystic-syncretic tradition in explicit ways. Here the example that immediately comes to mind is that of the 1957 Kagmari Cultural Conference, referred to earlier. Some of the delegates who participated in this conference have described the many

⁸⁷ On Saiyid Sultan, see Momtazur Rahmam Tarafdar, *Husain Shahi Bengal. 1494–1538 A.D.*, p. 198; and Asim Roy, *The Islamic Syncretistic Tradition of Bengal*, Chapter 2, p. 58 and Chapter 4, p. 111; for an elaborate analysis of Saiyid Sultan's writings, see Ahmed Sharif, 'Saiyid Sultan', in Ahmed Sharif, *Rachnaboli* 2, pp. 3–238.

⁸⁸ For Saiyid Sultan's theory, see Momtazur Rahman Tarafdar, *Husain Shahi Bengal*, p. 205.

⁸⁹ On the yoga-tantric tradition in India and Bengal, see Mircea Eliade, *Yoga. Immortality and Freedom*, Chapter VI, p. 200.

⁹⁰ See Richard Eaton, *The Rise of Islam and the Bengal Frontier*, p. 218.

gates, 'toren', that had been erected to welcome the conference participants.⁹¹ One of these gates was devoted to the prophet Mohammed; others featured well known leaders of India's national liberation struggle, such as Mahatma Gandhi and Bengal's Subhash Chandra Bose. But there also stood a *toren* depicting Maulana Rumi, Iran's thirteenth century mystic, who in his rich poetry liberally employed ideas derived from a variety of Sufi trends.⁹² Yet another *toren* had been erected for the poet Nazrul Islam who, as we now know, uncompromisingly intermingled Islamic and Hinduist imagery in his efforts to promote religious tolerance.⁹³ And there was one gate which projected Lalan Shah, the nineteenth century mystic composer of hymns who refused to be considered an adherent of any one single faith, and who developed a following of over a thousand disciples in the rural Districts of East Bengal.⁹⁴ Bhashani's affinity with Bengal's tradition of tolerance was well reflected in the policies he used to shaped the Kagramari Conference.

Third, Bhashani pointedly expressed his openness towards non-Islamic cultural trends when he protested against the government's communal boycott of Tagore songs. This he did in 1967, after the government of Pakistan had announced that Rabindranath Tagore's songs would henceforth be banned from radio and television, since they were 'Hindu' songs. At the time Bhashani was undergoing medical treatment, but from his hospital bed he condemned the government's action as being directed against the nationalist consciousness of the Bengalis and against their movement for self-determination. In his statement of protest, Bhashani employed the following words:

Via his poetry, his literature, short stories, essays, theatrical plays, novels and music, Rabindranath has immersed Bengali language in new glory. Rabindranath's contribution is universal. Islam has proclaimed the birth of Truth and Beauty, and Rabindranath has raised this same flag of Truth and Beauty. Hence, those who in the name of Islam attack Rabindranath, in reality do not believe in Islam's principle of Truth and Beauty.⁹⁵

Although Bhashani evidently did not share Tagore's specific mystical orientation, his condemnation of the banishment of Tagore songs clearly shows that he

⁹¹ See memories of the Left leader Nurul Haque Chowdhury, recorded in Syed Abul Maksud, *Maulana Abdul Hamid Khan Bhashani*, p. 145.

⁹² On Jalaluddin Rumi, see A.J. Arberry (transl.), *Mystical Poems of Rumi 1. First Selection, Poems 1–200*; and Annemarie Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam*, p. 309.

⁹³ Peter Custers, 'Maulana Bhashani. Visionary Leader and People's Intellectual', *Aneek*, Kolkata, August, 2009.

⁹⁴ On Lalan Shah, see Sudhir Chakraborti, *Bratya Lokayat. Lalan*.

⁹⁵ Syed Abul Maksud, *Maulana Abdul Hamid Khan Bhashani*, pp. 280–81; and Abul Noman Khan, 'Maulana Bhashanir Jibansrote', p. 293.

had no problem in accepting the validity and the enormous significance of this poet's creative efforts for the people of Bengal.

The above listed examples thus demonstrate Bhashani's affinity with the mystical-syncretic cultural tradition of Bengal. Bhashani's own training and knowledge were circumscribed by the teaching he received when studying to become a Muslim theologian in his younger years. Yet the course of action he chose to follow through the long years of his religio-political career reveals his strong affinity with Bengal's cultural traditions of tolerance. As leader of immigrant peasants working to transform the jungles in Assam he stood in the tradition of the Sufi saints who had led these efforts in Bengal during past centuries and who continue to be venerated by peasants across the boundaries of different faiths. As the organiser of the Kagmari Conference, he showed that he cherished poets and mystics who in their ecstatic desire for union with the Supreme have transcended religious borders. And he spontaneously, in the form of a public protest against the government of Pakistan, paid his allegiance to Rabindranath Tagore, whose own affinity with Islam was limited.⁹⁶ Bhashani's opposition against communalism was not just anchored in persistent efforts to promote class struggles from below. It was also anchored in sensitivity towards the tolerant cultural traditions which, even as he mobilised, were alive in the rural areas of East Bengal.

In this essay I have followed the political trajectory of the Islamic preacher-saint Bhashani from his days as peasant leader in Assam, via the inspiring movement for regional autonomy, up to his leadership in the people's uprising against Pakistan's dictator Ayub Khan. In this concluding section I propose to sum up Bhashani's vision of and role in defending religious tolerance. To start, I would like to narrate one more story from his long and tumultuous political life. The story dates from the year 1956. At that time a food crisis prevailed in East Bengal and Bhashani feared that the lack of initiative on the part of the government—the government of *his* Awami League!—would result in famine. To avert this nightmarish scenario, the scenario of mass starvation that had visited Bengal so frequently in the past,⁹⁷ Bhashani first staged a mass gathering in the centre of Dhaka. Immediately after, he began a 'hunger-strike to death', demanding that food be distributed on an emergency base. As his health was frail, the Mmaulana soon ended up in hospital. Yet his action harvested a quick result. Pakistan's President personally gave instructions for financial allocations to be made, so that rice could be imported towards solving the food crisis in East Bengal. After a period of 17 days Bhashani agreed to break his hunger strike.⁹⁸

⁹⁶ On Rabindranath Tagore's affinity with the Baul minstrels and with the mystic composer of hymns, Lalan Shah, see Sri Sanatkumar Mitra, ed., *Baul. Lalan. Rabindranath*.

⁹⁷ For the history of Bengal famines, see Kalicharan Ghosh, *Famines in Bengal, 1770–1943*; Tusharkanti Ghosh, *The Bengal Tragedy*; and Peter Custers, *Women in the Tebhaga Uprising*, Chapter 2.

⁹⁸ Abu Noman Khan, 'Maulana Bhashanir Jibansrote'.

This story underlines Bhashani's class politics and reveals that, at times, Bhashani did not hesitate to use the same tactic of personal sacrifice which India's nationalist leader Mahatma Gandhi had employed. And yet the politics of these two leaders who both were religiously inspired, cannot be equated. Whereas both were strongly opposed to religious intolerance and advocated the need to maintain communal peace, calling on Hindus and Muslims to refrain from mutual violence, Bhashani's approach towards religious tolerance was different from the Mahatma's. Not only did the two leaders belong to separate religious traditions, but the very methodology which they employed to promote peace and tolerance was fundamentally different. Mahatma Gandhi reportedly dreaded the kind of unity which Hindus and Muslims forged in the course of class struggle,⁹⁹ whereas Bhashani saw this type of struggle as effective means towards greater understanding between people of different faiths. As the case of the anti-Ayub uprising illustrates, not only did the Maulana endorse class struggle, he personally and unhesitatingly led East Bengal's workers and peasants to confront the state by revolutionary means.

What were the other characteristics of Bhashani's approach to religious tolerance? First, aside from appealing to the pride of workers and peasants as society's labouring classes, Bhashani employed yet another source of self-respect. This was people's national consciousness, their sense of belonging to the same Bengali nation. If one were to follow the trajectory of Bhashani's party-politics from his presidency of the Muslim League in Assam to his later presidencies of the Awami League and of the National Awami Party (NAP) in East Bengal, one might be inclined to conclude that Bhashani underwent a political metamorphosis in course of his life. Did not his trajectory imply that he moved from a pro-Pakistan stance in the late colonial period, to an increasingly vigorous rejection of the religion-based state of Pakistan? As the stories recorded in the beginning of this essay illustrate, the Maulana appealed to the nationalist feelings of his supporters in Assam long before Pakistan was created, calling for the formation of a greater 'Bengal' to replace British colonial rule. Hence the course of action which he pursued during the 1950s—of building public opinion in favour of Bengali self-determination in combination with the secularisation of politics—can be traced back to his pre-Partition politics.

It was against the background of his efforts to ensure communal harmony on the eve of Partition that Bhashani emerged in the subsequent period as powerful advocate of religious tolerance in Pakistan's province of East Bengal. The significance of the Maulana's efforts to strategise a transition in the province's political culture cannot be underestimated. All the evidence indicates that his strategy, of combined advocacy of nationalism and tolerance, was of decisive importance in making this transition possible. The preacher-politician, by now a very senior

⁹⁹ For Gandhi's denunciation of the sailors' revolt of 1945 as an 'unholy alliance' of Hindus and Muslims, see Sumit Sarkar, *Modern India, 1885–1947*, p. 425.

public opinion builder, promoted the transition from the Muslim League's communal politics to the secularisation of political life in East Bengal. In the 1950s in particular, Maulana Bhashani personally led this transition, using his prestige and influence as an Islamic preacher in order to de-communalise the feelings of his fellow citizens. Moreover, Bhashani remained consistent in his support for the formation of a secular state of Bangladesh, up to and after state formation had become a reality. This is reflected in the fact that his party, the National Awami Party, immediately after the country gained independence in 1972 demanded that the country's new Constitution be 'secular': people should all be granted equal rights under the state's laws, whatever be the religious community, or the nationality they belonged to.¹⁰⁰

It only remains to state briefly that Bhashani's efforts should be assessed within a broader, longer-term perspective on religious tolerance and the history of Bangladesh. Here two points may be re-visited. First, the fact that Bhashani spoke from within the tradition of Islam, and its significance. Contrary to the poet Nazrul Islam, Bhashani did not try to position himself beyond the parameters of a single religion. As his speeches and his writings on his personal ideology, the ideology of *Rabubiyat*, illustrate perfectly well, Bhashani consistently believed in the universal validity of the religion of Islam. Bhashani's way of identifying with Islam, it may be argued, limited his scope for incorporating syncretic elements derived from other faiths into his own world view. Nevertheless, his championing of religious tolerance from within the framework of Islam has its own, positive, importance for the contemporary debate on religious tolerance. For at a time when Right-wing, Western politicians are trying to make their public believe that there is an irreconcilable conflict between the values of religious tolerance and the nature of Islam, the example of Maulana Bhashani reveals, with full force, that the very opposite is the case.

Lastly, though Bhashani's own worldview was largely circumscribed by Islam alone, there is ample evidence that he had an affinity with both the mystical and with the deeply syncretic tradition of Bengal. Here, as a final note on Bhashani's extraordinary life, it is the Maulana's status as a saint-like figure, a *pir*, who since his death in 1976 continues to be venerated by a large following of disciples, *muridan*. Recent literature on the history of Islam's rise in Bengal records that the phenomenon of *pir*-worship has multiple significance. It embodies both the historical advent of *Sufi* mystic preachers at Bengal's frontiers. It expresses the respect of Bengal's peasantry for the assistance of saint-like figures towards 'development', the spread of agriculture and the cultivation of the soil.¹⁰¹ It also embodies the history of relatively harmonious relations between people of different faiths, reflected in numerous syncretic stories on *pirs*. Maulana Bhashani stands within

¹⁰⁰ Syed Abul Maksud, *Maulana Abdul Hamid Khan Bhashani*, p. 453.

¹⁰¹ Richard Eaton, *The Rise of Islam and the Bengal Frontier*.

this tradition, projected in the literature as Bengal's tradition of 'syncretism from below'.¹⁰² Standing as the last great *pir* in Bengal's tradition of saint-like preachers, Bhashani defended not just Bengal's powerful heritage of tolerance, but, at least implicitly, also the heritage in which it was grounded—the region's mystical-syncretic cultural heritage.

References

Primary Sources

- Bhashani, A.H.K. 'Palanbad: Ki O Keno?', in S.A. Maksud, *Maulana Abdul Hamid Khan Bhashani*, Dhaka, 1994, pp. 687–91.
- . 'Rabubiyater Bhumika', in S.A. Maksud, *Maulana Abdul Hamid Khan Bhashani*, Dhaka, 1994, pp. 698–702.
- Interviews with Maulana Bhashani (Personal, Tangail, September, 1973); of Abdul Matin, Leader of the Language Movement (1952) and Historical Peasant Leader (Personal, Shirajganj, 1992); and of Haidar Akbar Khan Rano, Leading Left Intellectual (Personal, Amsterdam, 1988).

Secondary Sources

- Ahmed, K. *The Social History of East Pakistan*, Dhaka, 1967.
- Ali, T. *Pakistan: Military Rule or People's Power*, London, 1970.
- Arberry, A.J. (transl.), *Mystical Poems of Rumi 1. First Selection, Poems 1–200*, Chicago and London, 1966.
- Chakraborti, S. *Bratya Lokayat. Lalan*, Kolkota, 1998.
- Custers, P. *Women in the Tebhaga Uprising. Rural Poor Women and Revolutionary Leadership (1946–1947)*, Kolkota, 1987.
- Danesh, H.M. 'Maulana Bhashanir Rajnoitik Jiban', in H.A. Quayyum, ed., *Mozlum Jananeta Maulana Bhashani*, Dhaka, 1988, pp. 1–14.
- Dasgupta, S. 'History's Creative Counterpart—Partition in Akhtaruzzaman Elias' Khowabnama', in J. Bagchi and S. Dasgupta, *The Trauma and the Triumph. Gender and Partition in Eastern India*, Kolkota, 2006, pp. 30–55.
- De, A. *Dharmiya Maulabad O Dharmaniropekkhata*, Kolkota, 1992.
- Eaton, R. *The Rise of Islam and the Bengal Frontier. 1204–1760*, New York and New Delhi, 2000.
- Eliade, M. *Yoga. Immortality and Freedom*, Princeton, 1973.
- Forgacs, D. ed., *An Antonio Gramsci Reader*, New York, 1988.
- Ghosh, K. *Famines in Bengal, 1770–1943*, Kolkota, 1944.
- Ghosh, T. *The Bengal Tragedy*, Lahore, 1944.
- Gramsci, A. *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, New York, undated.
- Haq, M.E. *A History of Sufi-ism in Bengal*, Dhaka, 1975.
- Haque, M.S. *Maulana Bhashanir Rajnoitik Jiban. Tatvalochona O Mulyayan*, Tangail, Bangladesh, 1987.
- Hashmi, T.I. *Peasant Utopia. The Communalisation of Class Politics in East Bengal, 1920–1947*, Dhaka, 1994.

¹⁰² Asim Roy, *The Islamic Syncretistic Tradition of Bengal*, Chapter 6.

- Hossain, A. 'Panchash Dashaker Sramik Andolen O Maulana Bhashani', in M. Sastrapani, *Majlum Jananeta. Maulana Bhashani Smarak Grantha*, Dhaka, 2002, pp. 167–72.
- Islam, S. *Assam O Maulana Bhashani Ebong Lain-Protha Bangal Kheda*, Dhaka, 2000.
- Iliyas, A. *Khowabnama*, Dhaka, 1998.
- Jafri, S.Z.H. and H. Reifeld, eds, *The Islamic Path. Sufism, Politics and Society in India*, New Delhi, 2006.
- Khan, A.N. 'Maulana Bhashanir Jibansrote', in M. Sastrapani, *Majlum Jananeta. Maulana Bhashani Smarak Grantha*, Dhaka, 2002, pp. 259–353.
- Maksud, S.A. *Maulana Abdul Hamid Khan Bhashani*, Dhaka, 1994.
- Matin, A. and A. Rafiq, *Bhasha Andolen. Itihash O Tatparja*, Dhaka, 1991.
- Mitra, S. ed., *Baul. Lalan. Rabindranath*, Kolkata, 1995.
- Qasmi, M.A. 'Sufism and the Founders of Deoband: A Study of Their Understanding and Responses', in S.Z.H. Jafri and H. Reifeld, eds, *The Islamic Path. Sufism, Politics and Society in India*, New Delhi, 2006, pp. 338–62.
- Quayyum, H.A. ed., *Mozlum Jananeta Maulana Bhashani*, Dhaka, 1988.
- Rahman, A.T.M.A. *Banglar Rajnitite Maulana Mohammed Akram Khan, 1905–1947*, Dhaka, 1995.
- Rahman, S. *Maulana Abdul Hamid Khan Bhashanir Bhashan O Bibriti*, Dhaka, 2000.
- Reza, S.A. *Bhashanir Kagmari Shammelan O Shayatshashoner Sangram*, Dhaka, 1986.
- Roy, A. *The Islamic Syncretistic Tradition of Bengal*, Princeton, 1982.
- Samsuddin, A.K. 'Maulana Bhashani O Assamer Lain Protha', in H.A. Quayyum, ed., *Mozlum Jananeta Maulana Bhashani*, Dhaka, 1988, pp. 15–23.
- Sarkar, S. *Modern India, 1885–1947*, New Delhi, 1983.
- Sastrapani, M. *Majlum Jananeta. Maulana Bhashani Smarak Grantha*, Dhaka, 2002.
- . 'Ananyashadharan Jatiya Bir', in M. Sastrapani, ed., *Majlum Jananeta. Maulana Bhashani Smarak Grantha*, Dhaka, 2002, pp. 241–58.
- Schimmel, A. *Mystical Dimensions of Islam*, Chapel Hill, USA, 1975.
- Sen, S. *Muslim Politics in Bengal, 1937–47*, New Delhi, 1976.
- Sharif, A. *Rachnaboli*, 2, Dhaka, 2006.
- Sinha, N.K. *The Economic History of Bengal. From Plassey to the Permanent Settlement, Volume II*, Kolkata, 1968.
- Tarafdar, M.R. *Husain Shahi Bengal, 1494–1538 A.D. A Socio-Political Study*, Dhaka, 1965.