

Abul Hashim: The Unsung Hero of the Freedom Movement

By Asma Zia Ullah

Introduction:

A charismatic leader as expressed in Weberian term is the one who combines passion and reason, emotionalism and pragmatism, idealism and realism in such a balanced proportion that the masses feel compelled to take his lead. Whether through stroke of fortune or by the uncontrollable unraveling of circumstances, a charismatic leader answers the call of destiny and rises to the occasion. Abul Hashim was one such leader, he emerged as one of the leading giants of Bengali Muslims alongside Fazul Haq and Suhrawardy, who worked tirelessly and wholeheartedly to improve the lot of the common Bengalis, aiming to set them free from the stranglehold of Hindu zamindars and industrialists. Born in an age when British imperialism had reached its zenith, unleashing in its wave the horrors of capitalism, this free spirited and independent minded man sought to free the society from the ravages of capitalism and religious fanaticism and establish a more humane society based on Islamic socialism. He chose Muslim League as a platform for the realization of a just and egalitarian society. His struggle towards this end was sabotaged by the vested and parochial interests of non-Bengali, pro-Punjabi politicians.

Hypothesis

This paper will trace down the political career and the philosophical cum religious outlook of Abul Hashim, how this outlook influenced his political strategy vis-à-vis the stakeholders of Bengal politics. It will seek to explore and analyze the key question whether the failure of his strategy be ascribed to the intrigues of non-Bengali elements or to the larger uncontrollable and fast changing dynamics of Indian political scenario, or was his strategy, like the strategies of all great men, far too ahead of his time? Max Weber extrapolates that “charismatic leaders emerge during “societal distress” and are under constant pressure to prove themselves because their charisma arises from their personality and ability to deliver the goods. Was Abul Hashim one such leader? This paper will also highlight the excruciating circumstances prevailing in Bengal, which made its

socio-economic problems distinct from the rest of Muslim provinces in India, since charismatic figures are here being taken as “intelligent, innovative, persuasive, and magnetic leaders who emerge in situations where people are economically, socially, and politically oppressed”.¹ Hashim’s ingenious objection to the Lahore resolution and last moment efforts for an independent greater Bengal, which later developments proved, were not without logic and deeper understanding of Bengal politics, sadly though, all such attempts were misconstrued as anti-state and anti-Islam. The central establishment, dominated by the feudal landlords and industrialists mainly from Punjab failed to read into the deep seated fears of Bengalis which were firmly grounded in the history of economic exploitation. But history held him out, an independent Bengal was the dream of Abul Hashim and an independent Bengal was what the world eventually saw.

Background

Bengals political struggle for independence was firmly embedded in its economic dynamics. The fact that 90 per cent zamindars and 99 percent of money lenders in Bengal were Hindus and their consequent hold over resources cannot be easily repudiated, in kamruddin Ahmed estimation it was “really a class struggle, which was converted into communal rivalry”.² The only respite was during the Muslim leagues ministry 1937-41 which infused confidence in the Bengali Muslim leaders and business community. The Muslim youth got more chance to enter government posts which were hitherto closed for them. It was this “competition between the Hindu and Muslim middle class”³ which provided the key to the rise of Muslim league and the popular support behind the creation of a separate state.

Secondly, the political landscape of India underwent a drastic change, particularly at the provincial level, after the elections of 1937; Muslim provincial leadership realized the futility of separate electorates and all other constitutional safeguards. “The stark reality of near total political powerlessness”...“Majoritarianism of arithmetical numbers”⁴ dawned upon them. So accurately pinpointed by Fazul Haq that “their number (80million) might sound a big number but was not in

¹ Common Threads among Different Forms of Charismatic Leadership” in *International Journal of Business and Social Science*. Vol. 2 No. 9 [Special Issue - May 2011]

² Anwar Dil and Afia Dil, *Bengali Language Movement to Bangladesh*. (Lahore: Ferozsons Intercultural Forum, 2000), 54

³ *Ibid.*, 54

⁴ Jaswant Singh, *Jinnah: India-Partition Independence*, (New Delhi: Rupa Publications, India, 2010), 232

“effective majority”⁵ even in Punjab and Bengal where, too, the position of Muslims was not safe. Moreover, they wanted economic liberty which was only possible in a state where they exercised complete control over their resources. Political autonomy naturally preceded economic independence, in fact, Fazul Haq fell over with Jinnah over this issue that “Muslim league High Command” had reduced the provincial autonomy and had made it impossible for him to function effectively as Chief Minister of Bengal”⁶

It was in light of these two factors that Bengali Muslims joined the rest of India in their support of Muslim league and Jinnah. Little did they know that their rightful claims and their rightful leaders would be so callously denied and crushed that within a decade another freedom struggle would take birth.

Abul Hashim’s political creed

Abul Hashim’s political strategy, his response to the Lahore resolution, reorganization of BPML⁷ and goals must all be seen in the light of his philosophical outlook towards life in general and the interrelationship between religion and politics. In this context, he was influenced by his father, who like Jinnah was the product of middle class intelligentsia, which breathed in the moderate, on-communal anti-imperialist outlook of Congress in the early 20th century. Hashim was a gifted orator who hated the British imperialism and did not believe in the Two-nation Theory, he was an exponent of the “multinationalism” which meant that India was a sub-continent comprising various nations each having its own racial, linguistic, cultural and religious identity. “To me”, he wrote, “India conveys the same sense as the term Europe does”⁸.

His political philosophy was based on the idea of nationalism, regionalism, lingualism and socialism. He was a socialist of a different brand i.e. Islamic Socialism, called Rabbaniyat, meaning the social order prescribed in Islam.⁹ That was the reason he so vehemently opposed the zamindari system and made its abolishment the focal central point of all his manifestos.

⁵ Anwar Dil and Afia Dil, *Bengali Language Movement to Bangladesh*, 55

⁶ *Ibid.*, 60

⁸ Rana Razzaque, *Abul Hashim as a political thinker*,
<http://www.asiaticsociety.org.bd/journals/vol%2052/ABUL%20HASHIM%20AS%20A%20POLITICAL%20THINKER.html> (7/26/2012)

⁹ *Ibid*

Entry into politics

Abul Hashim can easily be classified as the sole politician who was responsible for making Muslim league a mass party with more than a million registered members, his extraordinary organizing and rhetorical skills were matched by his high intellect and humanistic attitude, above all, he was an “enlightened Islamic scholar” and a “visionary thinker”¹⁰

He was born in a distinguished family of Burdwan, his father Abul Qasim was a member of the Congress and had a non-communal outlook towards politics, from his mother’s side he was related to Hussein Shaheed Suhrawardy. His father had been an ardent supporter of Surendranath Banerjee (1848-1925) and had taken part in the anti-partition movement. Muslim support for the Swadeshi movement in Bengal was a rare incident. He had also taken part in the Khilafat- Non-cooperation movement (1919-1922) in its early stage under the leadership of Gandhi during the Khilafat Movement (1918-1922). Abul Kasem never supported separatist politics. A tendency his son also inherited.

Abul Hashim took his degree in Law from Calcutta University. His formal entry into politics began in 1936 with his election to the Bengal legislative Assembly. In 1937 Jinnah met him at Ispahani’s house and Hashim, in his autobiography narrates that when Jinnah said ” Come, let us organize ourselves in such a way that we could oust the opportunists in Bengal and Punjab in 24 hours, Hashim thought he was speaking of Khawaja Nazimuddin and Sir Sikandar Hayat and the other landed gentry. He was disillusioned. He had pinned great hope on the leadership of Jinnah and struggled tirelessly to win mass support for Pakistan. But all his hopes were dashed.

Political ascendancy/Secretary General

Harun-ur-Rashid extols Abul Hashim’s contribution to Muslim League in these words “The election of Abul Hashim to the Secretary ship of Bengal Muslim League marked the beginning of a new era in its history.”¹¹

Hashim’s rise to political ascendancy was facilitated by a number of factors. In the wake of World War II, Fazul Haq had alienated himself from Jinnah and remained Jinnah’s “worst personal problem”¹² Muslim league and due to Surawardy’s mass campaign movement, demonstrations against Fazul Haq had

¹⁰ Anwar Dil and Afia Dil, *Bengali Language Movement to Bangladesh*. 285

¹¹ Harun ur Rashid, *The Foreshadowing of Bangladesh*, (Dhaka: Asiatic Society of Bangladesh, 1987). 160.

¹² Stanley Wolpert, *Jinnah of Pakistan*, (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 2005). 216.

become common. The formation of Suhrawardy's ministry in 1942 provided a launching pad for Abul Hashim to spread the power base of league through the length and breadth of Bengal. The Bengal famine, which brought grievances of the poor and the famished to its peak, resulted in people losing faith in the traditional centers of authority and turning towards Muslim league in flocks. Moreover the ousting of Chandra Bose from Congress also left a political vacuum in Bengal. Hashim's brilliant organizational and administrative skills soon turned the moribund Muslim League into a mass party of the Bengali Muslims. On November 7, 1943 when Suhrawardy became the CM of Bengal, Abul Hashim was elected the Secretary General of Bengal provincial Muslim league by defeating Abul Qasim, the nominee of Khawaja group. The seeds of rivalry were beginning to be sown. Under the leadership of the Hashim and Suhrawardy "the BPML turned its attention towards organizational and policy matters."¹³

His personal courage and insight into politics became apparent when in his inaugural speech as General Secretary of Muslim League he observed that League was "thrice mortgaged firstly to Ahsan Manzil, meaning Nawab of Dhaka, secondly to Maulana Akram Khan's for its media campaign through his newspaper Azad and thirdly for its economy to Ispahani. He vowed that Muslim League would be "freed from three centers of vested interests."¹⁴ In Retrospection, he writes that "Nine members of the Dhaka Nawab family were in the BPML. Hashim also observed in his memoirs, that Khwaja Shahabuddin was very good at adopting Machiavellian means when needed. Hashim was puzzled at times to see their political maneuverings."¹⁵

Hashim's son, Badruddin Umar also observed that Suhrawardy was equally Machiavellian like the Khwajas and all of them were power seekers.¹⁶

His most outstanding contribution was that he freed Muslim league from the coterie of landlords and industrialists and Islamic orthodox-the so called Nawabs of Dhaka, Nazimuddin, Ispahani and Maulana Mohammad Akram Khan. He made

¹³ *Ibid.*, 160.

¹⁴ Kamruddin Ahmad, *A Social History of Bengal*, (Dhaka: Progoti Publishers, 1970). 61.

¹⁵ Abul Hashim, *In Retrospection*, p. 38. as cited in Rana Razzaque, *Abul Hashim as a political thinker*,

<http://www.asiaticsociety.org.bd/journals/vol%2052/ABUL%20HASHIM%20AS%20A%20POLITICAL%20THINKER.html>

¹⁶ Rana Razzaque, Interview with Badruddin Umar, Dhaka, October 29, 1995.

<http://www.asiaticsociety.org.bd/journals/vol%2052/ABUL%20HASHIM%20AS%20A%20POLITICAL%20THINKER.htmls> (28/7/2012)

league “a party of common man”¹⁷. His commitment to the peasantry and his socialist leanings were not a secret and he openly preached Islamic Socialism in all his meetings. He wanted to “liberate the peasantry from the rusty shackles of permanent settlement.”¹⁸

At the time of the Bengal famine (1943) he again reached out to help his fellow brethren, not only did he tried to provide for the needs of the famished population of Bengal, but also gave them hope for the future by giving them a promise of social and economic equality. It was in this period of “social distress” that he emerged as a magnetic, charismatic leader of the masses. He made the League a voice of the poor and underprivileged. It was his aim to alleviate poverty from Bengal and free the society from the evils of feudal system, for that purpose, he wanted to empower the lower strata of society and reverse the power-flow from bottom to top. Single-handedly he increased the membership of BPML so that it numbered more than the total membership of League in the rest of India. His extraordinary organizational skills resulted in a crushing defeat of Nawab family in Dhaka district Muslim league elections of 1944. He like Gandhi brought politics out of the drawing rooms to the doors of the poor and downtrodden. By 1945, ten lakh one million Muslim leaguers were enrolled in Bengal, the leftists and communist elements also aligned themselves with the league.

Steps taken to revive the Muslim league:

On taking over the BPML, Hashim saw three main stumbling blocks to league’s popularity, lack of infrastructure, lack of funds and lack of democratization. He devised a three pronged strategy of a) to democratize and decentralize the Muslim league b) to increase its membership and c) to make it a truly mass based party by taking it from the grassroots to the top.

As the Secretary General he got 500,000 receipt books and membership forms printed and established a well manned office called party house at 150 Mugultuli Dhaka in April 1944, right at the front door of Nawab of Dhaka’s office. The membership fee was reduced to two annas, result was, in words of Mafidul Haq, Bengal Muslim league became a truly mass supported party.

His vigorous electoral campaign showed the level of his commitment and dedication to the cause of freedom. “Within a period of only two years he was able to open Muslim League branches in 18 districts. Hashim made a tour of

¹⁷ Anwar Dil and Afia Dil, *Bengali language movement to Bangladesh*. (Lahore:Ferozsons Intercultural Forum, 2000. pg 61.

¹⁸ Harun ur Rashid: *The Foreshadowing of Bangladesh*, (Dhaka:Asiatic Society of Bangladesh, 1987).171.

Bengal for 45 days, in 1945, and called it a “Long-March for 45 days”, which reminds one of Chairman Mao-TseTung’s Long March in China. Hashim’s methods of organizing the party through direct personal contact with the people, through discussions, bulletins, pamphlets and manifestoes were similar to those of the Communist party.”¹⁹ The tons of placards and posters, sent to the mofussils, reflected the anti- zamindari rhetoric “land belongs to the plough”, “Down with the vested interests”, ‘Laborers will be Owners’. “Abolish Zamindari without Compensation”, during the election campaign. Abul Hashims newspaper *Millat* “Pakistan would bring emancipation of the ‘proletariat’ and complete destruction of all kinds of vested interests”...and that abolition of Zamindari would be a minor matter for the league.”²⁰ He strove to organize the league along the Communist-Congress party model. Instead of amateur workers, he organized a “cadre of whole time workers”, constituted of college and university educated middle class romantic youths. Students and the promise of a new homeland were his main armory. While electioneering District/Constituency Worker’s camps were organized, this played a decisive role in the elections. To the opponents who lamented the loss of one year of studies, he replied: “Lose it, it is worth it.” He even took political classes, particularly in “grammar of political warfare”. These steps clearly reflected the Russian communist influence, but one can safely say in his defense that the communist and fascist parties in the 20th century had the most organized and disciplined party structures. It was his “organizing ability which was a considerable factor in the success in the 1945 elections.”²¹ Above all, it was this training which churned out the future leadership of Bengal, Shamsuddin, Khondkar Mushtaq Ahmad, Kamruddin Ahmad, Mohammad Toaha and Oli Ahad all looked up to Hashim as their mentor. His opponents criticized him for giving too many high hopes to the youth, but had they given Hashim a chance to implement his plans he would have taken Bengali youth to even greener pastures.

The BPML had no organized fund or any treasury at the time when Hashim took over.. Although Mirza Hasan Ispahani was the treasurer and the “big guns” of the party collected funds, there was no regular system of preparing annual budget or disbursing the bills and making payments at regular times. For the Provincial Assembly elections BML prepared million rupees budget. On refusal of League

¹⁹ Harun-or-Rashid, *The Foreshadowing of Bangladesh*, 166-167.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 222.

²¹ Shaista Surawardy Ikramullah, *Huseyn Shaheed Suhrawardy*, (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 2001), 61.

High Command Suhrawardy and Hashim took upon a self claimed mission to raise the funds. Union League was ordered to subscribe a minimum sum of between Rs 250 to 500 towards the provincial Election fund. District ML and sub-committees in towns and business centres were set up for fund raising purposes. Students and youths engaged in fund raising drives.²² Some 20,000 students from post-graduate level to middle school and junior madrassah campaigned for the League, as proclaimed by the Provincial Parliamentary Board.

The Muslim League had no office in any of the districts of Bengal. Office bearers were elected or selected in the “drawing rooms of local leaders”²³ Under Hashim's skillful organizational leadership, 30 District Election offices and 119 sub-offices were set up, they were equipped with furniture and a library was made a must. League's workers were motivated to contact individual voters and since BPML had a number of rival parties to counter apart from the Congress, KPP (Krishak Proja Party) Muslim Parliamentary Board, Jamiat-ul-Ulema Hind, Nationalists Muslims and the Emarat Party, extra attention was paid to constituencies of Fazul Haq (KPP), Syed Nausher Ali (Congress) and Maulana Shamsul Huda (Emarat Party).

A regular bank account was opened and accounts were audited. The constitution of the party was modified to make room for lower cadre to move upwards and to get rid of “the age weight which was retarding the growth of league”²⁴ In his move to further democratize the party he ordered the holding of annual elections at all levels. A dispute settlement committee was set up to resolve intra-party disputes. These measures bore fruit and the membership and attendance in Leagues council showed a remarkable increase. The League, in Hashim's own words “was attaining manhood”. Finally, the successful culmination of Hashim's electoral strategy was exhibited in the elections to the Bengal Legislative Assembly of March 1946, BPML was able to give a crushing defeat to all its rival political parties by winning 114 out of 250 seats.

Results of the elections (Muslim constituencies) to the Bengal Legislative Assembly held in March 1945.

²² Harun or Rashid, *The Foreshadowing of Bangladesh*, 224.

²³ *Review of Muslim League Organization in Bengal* submitted by the Secretary Abul Hashim of the BPML to the

Secretary AIML as cited in Harun-or-Rashid, *The Foreshadowing of Bangladesh*, 164.

²⁴ Abul Hashim quoted in *Star of India*, 21st March 1944, as cited in Harun-or-Rashid, *Foreshadowing of Bangladesh*, 166.

Name of the Party	Number of Candidates	Seats won ()b	Votes pulled (Special Constituency excluded)	% Total votes polled
BPML	121	114 (12)	2,036,049	83.64
KPP	43	4	131,191	5.39
JUH	12	---	27,756	1.14
EP	3	1	16,941	0.69
MPB	10	—	15,816	0.65
Congress	6	—	11,759	0.48
NM	5	—	4,426	0.18
CP	2	—	3,244	0.13
RDP	3	—	669	0.03
Independents	143	2	186,255	7.65
Totals:	348	121	2,434,106	99.98

- a. These also included 3 special (reserved) seats, 2 women and 1 Muslim chamber of commerce and 1 special (general) i.e. Dacca University seat.
- b. Number of seats won uncontested in brackets.
 JUH Jamiat-ul-Ulema-i-Hind, EP Emarat Party, MBP (Muslim Parliamentary board), NM (Nationalist Muslim), CP (Communist Party), RDP (Radical Democratic Party) compiled 23rd May 1946, Franchise: elections in Bengal 1946

“If Suhrawardy was the organizer of the league in Bengal, Hashim was its builder and consolidator.”²⁵ It was under Hashim’s “progressive leadership that a party of KPP’s stature in Bengal was totally absorbed by the BML.

RIFTS

All these measures, geared towards the elimination of traditional centres of control and authority perturbed the feudal cum industrialist class, the so called rightists group, the tussle was indeed between “the rising middle class v. the

²⁵ Harun or Rashid, *Foreshadowing of Bangladesh, 191*.

landed oligarchy or people v palace”²⁶ Unfortunately, this led to rifts within Muslim league, the rightists dominated by Nazimuddin group and leftists by Abul Hashim. The Khawajas wanted a “government party” whereas Hashim wanted a “party government”. Shahid Ahmad, a dedicated member of the ML, in a letter to Liaqut Ali Khan observed that the khawaja group was “nervous about its own leadership.”

In order to curb the influence of the khawaja group, Suhrawardy and Abul Hashim concentrated on establishing their full control over the organization.”²⁷ The extent of hatred of the Khawajas against Abul Hashim can be gauged from Ispahani’s statement, Ispahani wrote to Suhrawardy on March 6, 1947, from Calcutta, “... Fazlul Huq is a danger and Abul Hashim is most undesirable.”²⁸ Shahid Ahmad in a report to Liaqut Ali Khan made the following remarks about the Khawajas “Being unsuccessful in their mission they brought out the most dangerous weapon...it was given out that the young people in the organization belonged originally to the Communist party...Even the district magistrates were requested to keep special eye on us”²⁹ Same charges were levied against Hashim that firstly he was preaching communism under the Islamic garb; secondly, he created polarization inside the party and lastly for the controversial stance he had adopted during the Gandhi-Jinnah talks.

The hold of Khawaja coterie:

The President of the Dhaka District Muslim League was Khawaja Shahabuddin, also called the Chief whip, the younger brother of Khawaja Nazimuddin. While Bengal was passing through famine the Nawab family, under Nazimuddin’s ministry was busy in “money-making by all means...Ministers and even their wives turned into government contractors”³⁰ Hashim saw all this and also noticed that whoever wanted to gain any political position in the BPML or fulfill any political aspiration, had to work in allegiance with the Khawajas. The cream of Bengal politics, Presidents and secretaries of district Leagues, like Nurul Amin, Ghysaduddin Pathan, Azizuddin, Hamidul Haq Chaudhry and Fazlul Rehman were all toadies of Ahsan Manzil. Hashim observed with disgust and also with

²⁶ Harun Rashid, *The Foreshadowing of Bangladesh*, 160.

²⁷ Harun or Rashid, *Inside Bengal politics, 1936-1947: unpublished correspondence of partition leaders.* (Michigan: Michigan University Press, 2003). 19.

²⁸ Z. H. Zaidi (ed.), *M. A. Jinnah – Ispahani Correspondence, 1936-1948* (Karachi, 1976). 295, 516, 517.

²⁹ Harun or Rashid, *Foreshadowing of Bangladesh*, 169

³⁰ Shahid Ahmad to Liaqut Ali Khan (17th may 1945) cited in Harun or Rashid, *Foreshadowing of Bangladesh*,

Asiatic Society of Bangladesh, Dhaka, 1987. pg 171

great concern that even Suhrawardy at times accepted the authority of the Khwajas to retain his political position. He was critical of the Khwajas from the beginning and kept himself out, as he put it, of this “unholy game of power politics.”

Harun or Rashid mentions in his book that “the democratic upsurge failed to affect the upper echelons of the party mainly because of Suhrawardy’s moderating role.”³¹ Although Hashim was his choice but when it came to direct confrontation with the khawajs he advised Hashim to “maintain truce”. Maybe he realized the dangers of a split in party at this crucial juncture of freedom struggle. Political expediency won over higher principles. He tried to balance himself in the middle but little did he know that the politics for power and vested interests would soon engulf him in its fold. Anwar and Afia Dil hold the view that Jinnah was more inclined towards the rightists because he relied on their funds and suspected the leftists of favoring moves for United Independent Bengal whereas Shila Sen claims that the division of Bengal League into pro-Nazimuddin and pro-Suhrawardy factions was to some extent based on varying commitment to All India League policy and to the person of Jinnah.”³² Liaqut too had reservations about Mian Iftikharuddin and Abul Hashim whom he thought were conspiring with GM Sayed of Sindh to take his place. Despite the Isphahani-Liaqut moves to keep leftists out of power, the March 1946 provincial elections saw the stupendous victory of Muslim league due to the twin efforts of Suhrawardy as Secretary to the Parliamentary Board and Abul Hashim as General Secretary of Provincial Muslim League. In the aftermath of communal riots of 1946, Abul Hashim came under the attack of Hindu extremists which according to Sir Francis Tucker were led by Hindu Mahasabha, this caused him grief because he had “always held himself apart from partisan communal politics, who had the ability to harmonize diverse religious and ideological groups within the framework of his vision of Islamic socialism”³³

Divide goes further

The Lahore resolution envisaging the creation of ‘independent states ‘in which constituent units would be autonomous further strengthened Hashim’s resolve to fight for independence. Later events, however, shook his conviction and again

³¹ *Ibid.*,174.

³² Shila Sen, *Muslim politics in Bengal*, (New Delhi: Impex India, 1976). 192.

³³ Anwar Dil and Afia Dil, *Bengali Language Movement to Bangladesh*. 290.

brought forth the bitter reality of compromise in politics. Although in politics he was against communalism and consequently against the Two Nation Theory, but he accepted its importance as a political bargaining chip. India at that stage was facing an upsurge of separatist tendencies and therefore Hashim's propagation of multi nationalism came under criticism. In fact it became another tool in the hands of non-Bengali leadership. What most East Pakistanis viewed as an intransigent behavior of Abul Hashim during the time of all India Muslim leagues Legislators Convention in Delhi on April 9th 1946, was more a reflection of his acute observation and genius for seeing the far off consequences of the word states versus state, when he raised an objection that Lahore resolution envisaged the creation two sovereign states, not a state, Jinnah tried to dismiss it as a topographical error but when Hashim insisted on consulting the minutes book, he was proven correct. Jinnah submission to his legal correctness was obvious when he asked Hashim for a suggestion, what followed was an exchange of dialogues between two legally sagacious minds

“Maulana sahib, I do not want one state of Pakistan. I want a legislative assembly for the Indians you suggest an amendment to my resolution in such a way that I can get what I want without going against the Lahore resolution.”
Hashim replied “then please cross out the article one and put in the indefinite article “a” so that your resolution reads we want a state of Pakistan in the North West India and a state of Pakistan in North East India with Bengal and Assam.”

His defiant attitude was based on logical reasoning and acclaims full credit. It was in recognition of this that Jinnah accepted it. For the conservative minded non-Bengali leadership this added conviction to their belief that Abul Hashim was out to destroy the very foundations of Pakistan. Since the elections of 1946 were fought and won on the demand for a single state, it became very difficult to address the issue at this stage. Jinnah's assurance that Pakistan's Constituent Assembly will be the final arbitrator put an end to all voices of dissent temporarily. Sajjad Hussein writes that “Abul Hashim realized that in the changed circumstances the demand for separate state meant not only weakening the demand for Pakistan but virtually counteracting it. Since the demand for Pakistan was “less a territorial than an ideological concept.”

Greater Bengal debate

Abul Hashim carried a distinct approach towards the idea of Pakistan, for him it was more of a political objective than a communal demand, he could see that for non-Muslims “Pakistan stands for the pogrom of all those who are outside the

Muslim pale”³⁴. He felt the need for a clear-cut manifesto and in March 1945 published a manifesto embodying fundamental rights of people, freedom from discrimination and oppression, equal opportunities, religious freedom, end of zamindari system and capitalism. His was a charter for the establishment of a truly viable welfare state.

The Muslim League High Command had avoided defining the Pakistan scheme in concrete terms till 1946 but as the partition drew closer so did the question of boundaries. It was in this context that the scheme for “greater Bengal” (stretching from Purnea in Bihar to Assam) which had been on foot since February 1947 was renewed with more vigor by Hashim and Suhrawardy in collaboration with Sarat Chandra Bose and Shankar Roy. Shila Sen is of the view that the initiators of the move for an independent Bengal were Sarat Bose and Abul Hashim and not Suhrawardy.³⁵

Hashim had seen the fascist tendencies of Hindus during 1946 Calcutta riots and wanted to work with moderate enlightened leaders like Bose. He also believed in the distinct nationality of Bengali Muslims, in 1942, East Pakistan Renaissance society was formed under Sheikh Mujibur Rehman to promote the idea that Purba (Eastern Pakistan) are a different from Hindus as well as the “religious brothers of Pakistan” Some Bengali leaders also suffered from centre-phobia which further led to the support of this scheme. Bengal had been the victim of British “denial policy” during 1943 and longed for freedom from central control. Their leadership was confident that Bengal left alone could better manage its resources. Maximum provincial autonomy was the whole purpose behind their support for Pakistan, the *raison d’être* of their struggle; ironically, the non-Bengali leadership of Pakistan instead of allaying their fears turned them into reality.

The working committee of BPML had also discussed the Raghbir Ahsan’s Confederacy of East Pakistan and Adibasistan. A confederation between Eastern Pakistan or Bangsam(Bengal and Assam) and the autonomous homeland of Adibasistan(for tribal people around Bihar). Abul Hashim and Suhrawardy supported this scheme. Their aim was to make Bengal self-sufficient both economically and militarily.

The Greater Bengal scheme was the continuation of the same efforts, it had three main points a) that present government will continue to hold office but new Hindu ministers will be nominated by Congress b) Bengal will not join either India or

³⁴ Harun or Rashid, *The Foreshadowing of Bangladesh*, 189.

³⁵ Shila Sen, *Muslim Politics in Bengal*, 224.

Pakistan but will remain free, Constituent Assembly based on adult franchise will decide the issue later c) seats will be allotted according to the population ratio.

In June 1947, when Muslim league again met in Delhi to decide the issue of partitioning Bengal, Hashim implored Jinnah not to accept a “truncated Pakistan” he would rather wait for ten more years for real independence than rush through what he called such a “Mad scheme”³⁶ he warned Jinnah that it would lead to an “unstable government” and to adopt the Raja Gopalacharia plan but Jinnah spoke of realities which made it necessary to push through Pakistan. In desperation he had appealed to the Council” do you want to have Pakistan in my lifetime? The Dawn dubbed Abul Hashim and his group as “snakes in the basket” On the question of position of minorities in the new homeland both Hasrat Mohani and Hashim were forced into silence.

Abul Hashim derisively criticised the leaders favoring the partition, he termed them as “intellectually bankrupt ,opportunistic and seeking cheap popularity” he showed them their true faces as agents of the imperialists” cent per cent alien capital, both Indian and Anglo American exploiting Bengal is invested in west Pakistan...he went on to prophesize “that Bengal today is standing at crossroads,one leading to freedom and other to eternal bondage” he assured the Hindus that in “free Bengal they will not be denied of their legitimate share in administration and in the employment of her material resources. But in a divided Bengal, west Bengal is bound to be treated as a far flung province a colony of alien Indian imperialism where Hindus will be reduced to the status of daily wage earners of an alien capitalism”³⁷ lastly he appealed to Hindus to accept his 50 50 formulae.

Abul Hashim decided to quit Muslim league and give more time to greater Bengal scheme but sadly the Congress and its handmaiden the Hindu Mahasabha under Prasad Mookerjee put an end to all schemes,although Gandhi had given them his blessings. Hindu historian Mujamdar comments that the reasons behind this attitude of congress was rooted in the Hindu capitalists of Rajasthan and Western India who owned iron and coal fields in western Bengal.Abul Hashim continued undauntedly to propagate the idea of united Bengal; Jinnah’s stance on Bengal is ambiguous, it is true that he wanted a united Bengal but whether he wanted it independent or with Pakistan is disputed amongst historians. On 26th April 1946, he had told Mountbatten “What is the use of Bengal without Calcutta they had better remained united and independent. I’m sure they would be on friendly terms with us”³⁸ When Jinnah had refused to accept the division of Punjab and Bengal,

³⁶ Anwar Dil and Afia Dil, *Bengali Language Movement to Bangladesh*, 63.

³⁷ Anwar Dil and Afia Dil, *Bengali Language Movement to Bangladesh*, 65

³⁸ Ayesha Jalal, *The Sole Spokesman*. (Lahore: Sang e Meel Publications 1999),265.

Mountbatten accused him for throwing away the substance for the shadow.³⁹ Ayesha Jalal makes a similar allegation on Jinnah, according to her” A provincial agreement to keep Bengal and Punjab undivided was the only way to achieve a viable Pakistan but “seven years of strident propaganda for Pakistan” and economic grievances had turned into a communal issue and “made supra-communal agreements practically impossible.”⁴⁰ Ayesha Jalal accuses Jinnah of keeping a “calculated silence” over this issue but it is to be fairly said in his defense that he saw the growing opposition from Congress and realized that it would open up a Pandora’s Box and torpedo the demand for Pakistan.

Failure of the plan

Even within the Bengali leadership there were divisions over the issue of united Bengal. Maulana Akram President of Muslim league Bengal clamored for a “sovereign Muslim state in Bengal” “such a state would be an integral part of Pakistan”⁴¹ Secondly he wanted to get rid of Burdwan district, “perhaps as a way of ridding the league of the Abul Hashim plague”⁴² Leaders like Noor ul Amin, speaker of Bengal Assembly dreamed of the Premiership of Bengal, he had already started distributing loaves and fishes to his cronies like Hamid ul Haq Chaudhry.

At this juncture, Hashim along with Maulana Azad Subhani became more devoted to cause of Islamic universalism. By early 1947, there emerged a rift between Suhrawardy and Abul Hashim over the presidentship of Bengal Muslim league, when Akram Khan resigned and Abul Hashim and Fazul Haq both offered their candidacy. Suhrawardy at this juncture kept neutral and quiet and did not support Abul Hashim despite the fact that in 1946 he had supported Suhrawardy against Nazimuddin. Rana Razzaque mentions in his article that “he was disappointed when he observed that Suhrawardy too, was interested in gaining higher political position than in merely organizing the party.” But Hashim gives him the credit of being totally non communal and not vindictive.

Totally disillusioned, he left for hometown Burdwan, devoting more time to research and writing on Islamic thought. But the socialist spirit he had infused in

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 253.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 267.

⁴¹ Shila Sen, *Muslim politics in Bengal*, 234 and 235

⁴² Ayesha Jalal, *The Sole Spokesman*, 266.

younger generation did not vanish, writes Kamruddin Ahmad, they decided to rededicate themselves to the economic emancipation of common man, to fight evils of religious fanaticism.”⁴³ His autobiography, *In Retrospection* and his other writings, such as, *As I See It*, *The Creed of Islam*, *Integration of Pakistan*, reveal his political, social and religious views.

Refutation of Bengali leadership as being un-Islamic

Bengali leadership has often been criticized as having secular tendencies, being pro communists and sharing little of the Aligarh traditions so ardently followed by their west Pakistani counterparts, nothing can be further from truth. Surawardy, Fazul Haq and Abul Hashim were as secular as Jinnah, they believed in liberal democracy and protection of minority rights. Suhrawardy and Abul Hashim were as obsessed with the safeguard of religious minorities as was Jinnah, the same yardstick should have been applied to both cases but that was a quality rarely exercised by our ruling clique. Anwar and Afia Dil also seem to have fallen prey to this tendency, their claim that “a number of West Pakistani leaders were furthermore dominated by the pan-Islamic ideology which did not have much appeal for Surawardy, Abul Hashim, Fazul Haq and a number of other Bengali leaders”.⁴⁴ For Surawardy and Fazul Haq the immediate concern was the welfare of Bengalis, maybe their thought at that time did not transcend beyond their immediate concerns. But to say that about Abul Hashim would be nothing short of grave misunderstanding. His perception of social justice, egalitarian society, end of zamindari system and emancipation of tenants were all inspired from Islam. Islamic socialism formed the basis of all the manifestos he devised for political parties and his appeal to the youth circled around the same objectives.

Even the power sharing plan between Chandra Bose and Hashim was devised to guarantee equal rights for minorities and prevent subjugation of one dominant group over another, in this sense Hashim was clearly inspired by Islamic ideals of social and economic justice, Anwar Dil’s contention can be refuted on the grounds that Abul Hashim constantly demanded safeguard of minority rights and economic emancipation from the gilded capitalist and landed aristocracy class which had for long subjugated the Bengalis. It was this fake claim of Punjabis that Bengalis were not “true Muslims” which later resulted in giving religious connotations to the movement which had in its heart graver political and economic factors.

⁴³ Anwar Dil and Afia Dil, *Bengali Language Movement to Bangladesh*. 291

⁴⁴ Anwar Dil and Afia Dil, *Bengali Language Movement to Bangladesh*. 57

Conclusion

The sense of political failure and disillusionment coupled with the large scale massive killings and riots which followed partition caused irreparable grief to Abul Hashim his eyesight dwindled with sorrow. His house in Burdwan was burned down by Hindu nationalists, so he migrated to Dhaka in 1950.

“But there were enough hints to tell him that all was not well in the new country. There were not merely the old stirrings of communalism but the very clear indications of Bengalis being threatened with insignificance in the new order of things. It was clear to him that unless there was resistance to those who believed the Bengali language could be relegated to the backyard in the interest of the Pakistan state, the future for Pakistan’s Bengalis would be at risk. The authorities did not fail to notice his activist role in the movement and only days after the shootings of 21 February 1952 packed him off to jail. He was to remain a prisoner of the Pakistan state for sixteen months. When he was freed in 1953, he formed the Khilafat-e-Rabbani Party, to which he provided leadership till 1956.”⁴⁵ The success he could not achieve in politics was compensated through his literary achievements; his book *the creed of Islam* is considered an asset in cotemporary Islamic thought.

In the new political stage, the greatest heroes of the freedom struggle were ruthlessly driven out of power through well planned propaganda and political maneuverings of the feudal industrialist’s non-Bengali elite, which quickly became the new masters and eroded all opposition which threatened their powerbase.

Hashim’s biographer Mafidul Hoque writes that although Hashim helped in drafting the manifesto of the Awami league in 1949, he did not take interest in the new party.”⁴⁶ He shifted his focus towards Islamic research under the banner of the Tamaddun Majlis which fought for the status of Bengali as the national language. He presided over the historic All Party State Language Committee held on 20th February, 1952, a day before the Ekushe. He died in 1974. He was a towering though tragic figure writes Anwar and Afia Dil, who warned his people to stay away from narrow sectarian attitudes.⁴⁷

M.H. Askari in his article asks the pertinent question” Did Abul Hashim and other Bengali leaders who were in harmony with his thinking have the premonition that

⁴⁵ Stories of politician, tales of struggle. <http://badruddinumar.blogspot.com/2008/06/tribute-to-badruddin-umar-on-his.html> (26/7/2012)

⁴⁶ Anwar Dil and Afia Dil, *Bengali language movement to Bangladesh*. 292.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.* 292.

within the setup of a single state, the people of Bengal despite their majority, would have to live under the domination of a highly centralized government, with no regard for their own aspirations and political and cultural identity? ⁴⁸. Eminent historian, Prof Khalid Bin Sayeed has expressed the view that once Pakistan had come into being, the central leadership adopted the perception that "a significant number of influential Bengali Muslims were probably not completely loyal Pakistanis." It was openly suggested that in matters such as the Bengalis' insistence upon retaining the Bengali language and culture, it was evident that they were under the influence of ideas from across the border. Syed Badrul Ahsan writes in his review of Badruddin Ahmad's book on Abul Hashim-stories of politician, tales of struggle

"A recapitulation of the life and times of Abul Hashim is fundamentally a going back to an era where good men defined the parameters of politics. And yet some of these good men, for all their political integrity, somehow found themselves drawn to the tragic drama that was soon to divide India on a scale of violence and passion never before seen in its history. Hashim was one of these men. He loved nature and was fond of flowers. For him life was forever a matter of aesthetics."⁴⁹

The success he could not achieve in politics was compensated through his literary achievements; his book the creed of Islam is considered an asset in cotemporary Islamic thought.

Analysis:

In the final analysis, Abul Hashim undoubtedly emerged as a charismatic leader for the Bengalis, he did not reach the stature of a national leader unlike Jinnah but did enjoy the honour of being amongst the " Big Three" of the revolutionary Bengali leaders(H S Suhrawardy, Fazul Haq). He played a major role in the self awakening of the Bengal masses. His strategy for the revamping of BPML and infusing it with a more democratic spirit was completely successful. He freed the Muslim League from the elitist, oligarchical rule of khawajas, Ispahanis and Nawab of Dhaka. His services cannot be easily undermined, had ML not returned with sweeping majority in Bengal and Punjab, events would have unfolded in totally different manner.

His second strategy for the formation of greater Bengal met defeat due to the larger drama unfolding in the political scene of India, the beast of communalism

⁴⁸ M.H. Askari, *Who is to blame for '71 crisis?* <http://www.lib.virginia.edu/area-studies/SouthAsia/SAserials/Dawn/1998/07Mar98.html>

⁴⁹ <http://badruddinumar.blogspot.com/2008/06/tribute-to-badruddin-umar-on-his.html> access date: (27/7/2012)

and the mindboggling issue of divisions rendered his Greater Bengal scheme futile. Later on, Pakistan's own ruling clique dominated by the feudal cum industrialists and corrupt politicians proved a death knell for Bengali inspirations for autonomy. A systematic campaign was carried out to tarnish the image of Bengali leadership as traitors and secessionist serving as Trojan horses for India. Hashim one man front was swept away in the tide of vaulting ambition of iron control from the centre. His disillusionment with politics was acute, his experience taught him how in reality politics was far from ideals and ground realities demanded Machiavellian tactics, only shrewd politics of self-aggrandizement succeeded. But the success of a leader is gauged not by his temporary achievements but by their influences on the future course of events, from that angle, Abul Hashim emerges as one of the greatest and most charismatic leader of the 20th century. "For only a charismatic leader has the ability to break through the inherent conservatism of organization and to excite masses to support great things."⁵⁰ Time and again his ideals were smashed but since revolutions are born in the mind first, Hashim had already sown the seeds of that revolution for equality and Islamic socialism in the minds of the Bengali youth, who later became the flag bearers of Bengali Language movement which later crystallized in the form of a separatist movement, or rather, a movement for justice, equality and end of exploitation.

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