



The Origin Of Muslim League In Assam

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The evolution of a politicized Muslim communitarian identity in the late nineteenth century was partly in response to initiatives of Sir Sayed Ahmed Khan and partly the new institutionalized knowledge of taxonomy that colonial rule offered. The growth of Muslim separatism can be explained as a consequence of the reality faced by the Muslims in terms of educational facilities, public employment and representation in the self government bodies to entry into the Legislative Councils. In the whole of India, including the princely states, the Muslims constituted 19.7 per cent of the population in 1881.¹ But there were significant regional variations in their distribution. The Muslims had long been feeling the need for a separate political organization for themselves. On October 1, 1906 thirty five Muslim delegates under the leadership of Sir Agha Khan met the Viceroy of India at Simla and decided to organize the Muslim community for independent political action to secure for themselves and recognition from the government as a nation within a nation. It was in the wake of Simla Deputation, the All India Muslim League was formally inaugurated on 30 December 1906. It was an effort of a search for distinctive political identity but not a quest for separate homeland. Subsequently, the All India Muslim League established its branches in all the major provinces and extended activities under the banner of provincial organizations. In this process, Assam Provincial Muslim League was formed.

In 1874, Assam division was separated from Bengal and upgraded as a Chief Commissioner's Province. The British authority also included three districts i.e., Sylhet, Golapara and Cachar to Assam. Significantly, in the early 20th century the Sylhet (a Muslim majority district) became the nerve centre of Muslim politics. Goalpara was another important center of Muslim population. The Muslim farmers who were brought to Assam by the British and Assamese landlords from East Bengal and large scale immigration from Mymensingh also led the increase of Muslim population in Assam. Thus, Muslim population in Assam grew 2, 50,470 in 1872 and by 1951 it totaled 19,95,936 as recorded in the Census Report.² The British took advantage of the situation and contributed a great deal in the process of immigration into Assam to secure imperialistic interests. To increase the revenue earnings in Assam, the British encouraged the large scale immigration in the vast wastelands of Assam.

¹ Bandyopadhyay Sekhar, *From Plassey to Partition: A History of Modern India*. Orient Blackswan Private limited, New Delhi 2008, p 262.

² Bhuyan Arun (ed) *Nationalist Upsurge in Assam*, Government of Assam Publication, Guwahati, 2000, p. 317

In the second half of the 19th century, the political consciousness gradually started to develop among the Muslims of Assam. The earliest political organization of the Muslims in Assam was established about 1888 as a branch of the Central National Mohammedan Association. Other important Muslim organizations of the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century were the Shillong Islam Mission, Shillong Muslim Institute, Anjuman Islamias, Mohammedan Defense Association, Surma Valley Mohammadan Association and Assam Valley Mohammadan Association. By the time of the Montagu-Chelmsford Reforms, the Assam Valley Mohammadan Association appeared to be the most representative amongst them. In 1917, Syed Mohammad Saadulla as the leader of Assam Valley Mohammedan Association represented the Muslim point of view in respect of the proposed reforms. The Anjuman Islamia of various nomenclatures also continued to look after the Muslims interests. As a result of the activities of the above mentioned organizations, the Muslims of Assam in general and Surma Valley in particular became politically articulated.

The increase of Muslim population and their active participation in the politics provided a platform for the rise of Muslim League in Assam. On 28 January 1928 at Sylhet, some followers Muhammad Shaffi formed a branch of the Muslim League in Assam with Munawwar Ali as the president.³ This branch of Muslim League could not make much progress in Assam in the initial years after its formation. The leaders of Muslim League like Abdul Matin Chaudhury, Munawwar Ali, Shaikhatul Ambia and others initiated the establishment of the League's branches at Nowgong, Jorhat and other places but did not get enthusiastic response from the masses in the initial years. They could not raise any powerful propaganda to mobilize the Muslim masses for the cause of Muslim League.

As per the Government of India Act 1935, the first election to the Assam Legislative Assembly was held in 1937. The election provided an opportunity to the Muslim League to assert itself and secured 4 seats from Surma Valley.⁴ But at the time of election of 1937 the League had no existence in the Brahmaputra Valley. The Muslim MLAs of Brahmaputra Valley like Sir Mohammad Saadulla, Fakhruddin Ali Ahmed, Sayidur Rahman and Abdul Hamid Khan Bhasani were elected as independents. But there was no solidarity among the Muslim MLAs. Meanwhile, some sensitive issues developed in the socio-political and religious life of the people.

All India Muslim League appointed a committee on March 28, 1938 under the presidentship of the Raja of Pirpur to collect data about the conditions of the Muslims in the Congress governed provinces. On November 15, 1938 the report of the committee was published. The report contained a long list of allegations against the Congress like the compulsion on Muslims to show respect to the Congress flag, to sing Bande Mataram, introduction of Wardha scheme of education etc. Besides, the Sharif Report was published in March 1939 and the Fazl-ul-Haq Report was published in December 1939. The Sharif Report highlighted the sorrowful condition of the Muslims of Bihar. The Fazl-ul-Haq Report highlighted miserable conditions of the Muslims of Bengal. Though these two reports basically concerned with Bihar and Bengal but the leaders of Muslim League in Assam realized their future

³ Bhuyan, Arun Chandra, *Political History of Assam, vol. III*, Publication Board of Assam, Guwahati 1999, p 251.

⁴ Deb, B.J., and Lahiri, D. Kumar, *Assam Muslims: politics and Cohesion*, Mittal Publication, New Delhi, 1985, p 61.

under Congress rule. They urged the need of unity among the Muslims under the banner of Muslim League.

In 1939, the playing of music before the mosques had generated a tense situation in Hailakandi, Cachar and some divisions in Sylhet. As a result Gopinath Bardoloi, who was then the Premier, issued a *communique* on 9 January 1939. It fixed the hours when music was prohibited before the mosques.⁵ The Muslim MLAs protested against the Government order. Muhammad Amjad Ali's contention in the Assembly was as follows: ⁶

No time can be fixed by clock dials for Mussalman to go to the mosque to stay their prayers. Sun-dial is applied as the method for timing of Muslim prayers. This communiqué is not the proper step for ending communal trouble over the question of music before mosque.

All these sensitive issues prepared a platform for political animation and communal passions ran high. Thereafter a large number of Muslims began to flock under the banner of Muslim League.

On the other hand, in the later part of 1930s, the leaders of All India Muslim League gave importance on the activities of its provincial organizations. This seems corroborated in a statement of Jinnah who, in his presidential address to the famous Lahore Session of the League declared that since the Patna Session of December 1938, branches had been established in all the provinces.⁷ The decision of Patna Session had a deep impact in Assam. The establishment of the branch of all India Muslim League in Brahmaputra Valley was to a large extent the result of this decision.

The rise of Muslim League in Assam received remarkable impetus when another branch of Muslim League was established in Brahmaputra Valley. According to Hurmat Ali Boralaskar, a veteran Nationalist Muslim leader of Cachar, it was started in December 1938 in a village named Alitangri in the district of Nowgong at the initiative of Abdul Hamid Khan Bhasani who became its first president.⁸ Thus, in 1938 branches of Muslim League were established in both the valleys i.e. Brahmaputra Valley and Surma Valley. But there were some significant differences existed between the branches of Brahmaputra Valley and Surma Valley because the Muslims of Assam were divided among themselves because of the existence of linguistic and valley- rivalry.

The leaders of All India Muslim League had taken initiative to reduce the differences existed between its branches of Surma Valley and Brahmaputra Valley in Assam. On December 25, 1939, the All India Muslim League sent three representatives to Assam to propagate the ideal of the Muslim League and strengthen the party by reducing the existing differences. The representatives were Abbas Bidyarthi (Bihar), Muhammad Asgar (United Province) and Sarfarj Khan (Punjab). They made valuable contribution to propagate the ideal of the Muslim League which ultimately helped to bring unity in the party.

In the election of 1937 the Congress emerged as the single largest party. But the Congress refused to form the government. Thus, Sir Mohammad Saadulla got an opportunity to materialize his political ambition. In the beginning, Sir Mohammad Saadullah did not join the Muslim League.

⁵ Assam Legislative Assembly Proceedings, Vol.I, No. March 23, 1959, pp. 613-14

⁶ Bhuyan, Arun Chandra, *Political History of Assam vol III*, Publication Board of Assam, Guwahati 1999, p 250.

⁷ Kar. M., *Muslim Politics in Assam*, Om Sons Publication, Delhi, 1990, p 310.

⁸ Ibid

Saadullah formed his first ministry on 1 April 1937 with the blessing of European Group and the backing of the Surma Valley United Muslim Party. But the non-inclusion of Muslim League in the Ministry proved to be a tactical error for Saadulla. To expose Saadulla's strength, the Muslim League joined hands with the Congress. When the Assembly met for the first time the Ministerial nominees for Speakership and Deputy Speakership were defeated. Due to Congress-League alliance, Congress candidate Basanta Kumar Das and League candidate Amiruddin Ahmed were elected as Speaker and Deputy Speaker respectively. In the budget session of 1937, the Muslim League with Congress support defeated Saadulla by eleven cut motions. Realizing his precarious position in the Government, Saadullah then decided to join the Muslim League.⁹ The joining of Saadullah in the Muslim League was a remarkable event for the Muslim League politics in Assam. He was a dynamic leader and charismatic personality. It was due to his capability, League emerged as a strong political force in Assam in the subsequent years. In 1940 Sir Mohammad Saadullah from Brahmaputra Valley and Abdul Matin Chowdhury from Surma Valley became respectively the President and Secretary of the Assam Muslim League. This was affiliated to the All India Muslim League in 1940 and so far the first time League representatives of Assam as a whole were represented in their all India organization. Thus Assam Muslim League emerged as a truly provincial one.

The emergence of Assam Provincial Muslim League can be divided into three phases. In the first phase, the nucleus of the Assam Provincial Muslim League was formed in Sylhet in the late 1920s under the guidance and control of the Muslims of Surma Valley. In the second phase its branch was established in Brahmaputra Valley and the development of various sensitive issues helped to extend its popularity in the late 1930s. Finally, the branches of Muslim League in Assam merged into one and received affiliation from All India Muslim League in 1940.

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⁹ Bhuyan, Arun Chandra, *Political History of Assam vol III*, Publication Board of Assam, Guwahati 1999, p 254.

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