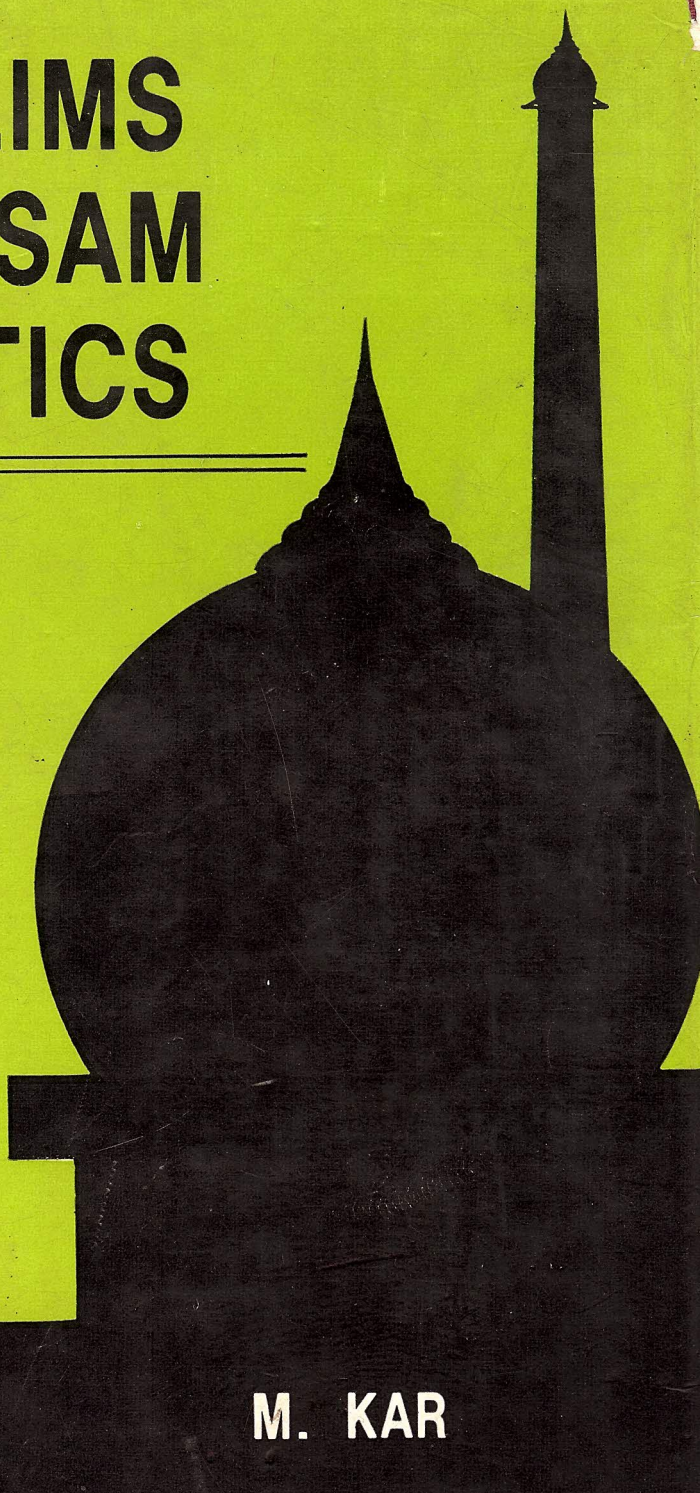


MUSLIMS IN ASSAM POLITICS



M. KAR

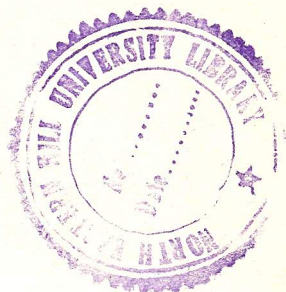
This book is a pioneering and indepth study of Assam politics with special reference to Muslims who constitute about a third of the State's population. It gives a fully documented background to present-day features of Assam politics on the basis of original records of the Governments of Assam, Bengal and India as well as all available private papers.

The author gives a systematic and chronological analysis of the coming of the Muslims and the politicisation of their immigration, a basically socio-economic problem. He also traced the origin and development of the forces of contradictions and conflicts between the Assamese and the Bengalis. The factors leading to valley, linguistic, racial and communal animosities which ultimately resulted in complete community alienation despite centuries of their associations are important features of the work.

The study thoroughly examines, analyses and assesses the Muslim role in and contribution to Assam politics including the Freedom Movement and the demand for Assam's inclusion in Pakistan. Future portents of the State's politics have also been portrayed.

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MUSLIMS IN ASSAM POLITICS



By

M. Kar

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IN SACRED MEMORY OF
MY MOTHER AND
MY NIECE BITHI

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Shillong,
14 July 1989.

Makhanlal Kar

Contents

| | |
|---|-----|
| <i>Introduction</i> | ix |
| 1. History of Muslim Immigration | 1 |
| 2. Politicisation of Immigration and Government Policy | 16 |
| 3. Legislature and The Problem of Immigration Appendix | 35 |
| 4. Saadulla Vis-a-Vis The Line System and Problem of Immigration Appendix | 54 |
| 5. Congress Government's Policy On Immigration and its Reaction—The Muslim League Civil Disobedience Movement | 86 |
| 6. The Transfer of Sylhet and Cachar | 112 |
| 7. Public Services and Ethnic Conflicts Appendix | 140 |
| 8. Language Problem and Muslims | 176 |
| 9. Council Government and Dyarchy Appendix | 189 |
| 10. Parliamentary Politics 1937-1947 | 210 |
| 11. The Resignation and After Appendix | 238 |
| 12. Freedom Struggle and Muslims Appendix | 263 |
| 13. Assam in Muslim Geo-Politics | 294 |
| 14. Assam Provincial Muslim League | 310 |
| 15. Sylhet Referendum | 325 |
| 16. A Review Appendix | 343 |
| <i>Bibliography</i> | 375 |

Abbreviations

| | |
|-----------------|--|
| A.G. | for Assam Gazette |
| A.P.C.C. | for Assam Pradesh Congress Committee |
| CENSUS | for Census of India, Assam |
| E.B. & A.G. | for Eastern Bengal And Assam Gazette |
| I.A.R. | for Indian Annual Register |
| I.S.C. Report | for Indian Statutory Commission Report |
| L.S.E.C. Report | for Line System Enquiry Committee Report |
| R.P.C. | for Rajendra Prasad Correspondence |

Introduction

To the author's knowledge any study of Assam politics with a particular reference to Muslims is conspicuous by its absence. So this is the first attempt of its kind. The initial disadvantage of a researcher in the field is obvious. In absence of organised literature on the subject information had to be gleaned from assorted sources at provincial and national levels. It is very unfortunate that much of the Assam Government record was callously destroyed and little authentic unofficial assistance is available. There was absolutely no response to a questionnaire circulated to a number of politicians of the Congress, League and Jamiat following. Even then, many interesting and significant facts hitherto buried in files and books have been for the first time dug out, brought to light and interpreted. Some generally prevailing notions about the Muslims and the Muslim League have been proved wrong and some myths exploded. Contradictions in Hindu-Muslim relation and the activities of the Muslim League and the Congress come to surface and receive new interpretation.

Muslims have a history of more than seven and a half centuries in Assam. For over four hundred and fifty years they tried to conquer the Brahmaputra Valley consisting of the districts of Darrang, Kamrup, Lakhimpur, Nowgong and Sibsagar (and later Goalpara) but failed. In course of the invasions, captive mercenaries and others settled in small numbers and could little influence the existing population. Some Muslim professionals were also invited by the Ahom Kings. Surma Valley consisting of Sylhet and Cachar (as well as Goalpara) had since Akbar's time been in Muslim dominion and came under Assam administration in 1874. Partition of Bengal and creation of Eastern Bengal and Assam Province brought Muslims and Assamese to a closer contact.

Early years of this century witnessed the beginning of an altogether different phenomenon of extremely far reaching

consequences. The vast expanse of cultivable waste lands attracted a large scale influx of Muslim farmers from the Bengal districts particularly Mymensingh. The immigrants soon settled in every nook and corner of the Brahmaputra Valley. Within two decades their number rose to several lakhs and this brought face to face two communities and races with distinctly different ways of life. Basically economic in character, immigration soon became an administrative and social issue causing grave apprehension of being swamped in the minds of the Assamese Hindus who, however, refused to accept any restraint on their right to transfer land. The Government encouraged immigration as a matter of practical politics. At a later stage, the Assamese attempt at legislation to check or prevent their advent and settlement as well as the widening communal gulf between the Hindus and the Muslims following the Khilafat and Non-Co-operation Movement transformed the problem into an inextricable mixture of racial, communal, valley and political animosities and controversies. The whole period of Dyarchy was characterised by anti-immigrant sentiments and this ultimately became one of the main causes of communal estrangement during Provincial Autonomy.

Progress of education and political propaganda made the Muslims alive to the importance of numerical strength and unity as a community. Assam Muslims joined the all India movement for greater shares in Public Services, representation in Local Bodies and legislature, right to education in mother tongue and Islamic education etc. The Assamese looked at these demands with suspicion and apprehended that Bengalees, Hindus and Muslims, if given to continue their acknowledged position of predominance in the province would convert it into a part of Greater Bengal and jeopardise Assamese culture and other interests. Therefore, we find that even as Assam entered the mainstream of national life, the racial, communal, linguistic and valley jealousies instead of being subdued by the broader perspective of nationalism, became rather acute and found emphatic expression particularly in the legislature. The Assamese equally disliked British rule and Bengali predominance in her social, economic, political and cultural life. They initially disfavoured the Sylhet Bengal Reunion Movement as separation of the district might endanger Assam's existence as a separate province. But gradually valley and racial animosities aggravated and alienated the Bengali Hindus in general from the

Assamese Hindus and they began to champion the cause of transfer. The move was at first spearheaded by the Muslims, later on they grew hostile to the idea but after the Lahore Resolution they began to advocate not only the reunion but also the inclusion of the whole of Assam in Pakistan.

While the Assamese Hindus followed the all India pattern of anti-British struggle, they had two home fronts to fight on, namely the Bengali Hindu 'bhadralogs' who had settled in urban areas from where they championed and disseminated their cultural and political influences and the Bengali Muslim farmers who wanted land and settled in rural areas. The Assamese thought of assimilating the immigrants through the adoption of Assamese language forgetting the 'bhadralogs'. The Muslims also belied their expectation as they refused to allow the obliteration of their cultural identity and became the champions of Bengali language. As a matter of fact, till 1950, they were much more vocal about the place of Bengali and cried hoarse for its protection and continued use in different spheres.

Having secured land and numerical strength, the Muslims became more emphatic and vehement in echoing the views of separate interests in all spheres of life in the thirties. The establishment of the Muslim League in the Brahmaputra Valley in 1938 was a turning point in the history of Assam. The Muslim legislators who were so long divided into numerous groups now sank their differences and consolidated their strength under the sectional leadership of Sir Muhammad Saadulla and owed complete allegiance to the All India Muslim League through its provincial organisation. As in the rest of India, so also in Assam, the two communities were alienated by the Lahore Resolution of the League. By 1944, the Assamese Hindus awoke to the dangers of the demand for creation of Pakistan although Assam had always been within the ambit of all India Muslim geo-politics. By and large, Assam Muslims wanted Pakistan in which they now sought to include the whole of Assam. Though the Assamese Hindus opposed Pakistan, they advocated the inclusion of the Bengali district of Sylhet with a Muslim majority in Pakistan.

Elections of 1937 were followed by accretion of Congress strength to the largest single party in the Assembly but without an absolute majority. But the Congress policy of non-acceptance of ministerial responsibilities in provinces where they were in a

minority brought Saadulla to the forefront of Assam politics. His installation to political power as the Premier was significant for more than one reason. Firstly, formation of a Cabinet with a combination of Muslim, European and Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe groups successfully isolated the Congress not only within the legislature but also without. Secondly, working of Dyarchy was a success in Assam mainly through the co-operation of Muslims and now the successful working of Provincial Autonomy under an allegedly anti-Hindu Government exploded the myth of indispensability of Congress vis-a-vis the working of the reforms. Thirdly, if the first Saadulla Coalition tottered to its fall in the face of Congress assault characterised by inspiration of defection and lure of berths in the Cabinet, the Congress also could never stand on its own legs till after the elections of 1946. Saadulla adopted no other method than this and made it impossible for the Congress to secure a stable majority. Hindu-Muslim relations were embittered by communal riots during Saadulla's first Premiership.

The Congress Coalition of Gopinath Bardalai which ousted Saadulla in 1938 through defections frantically tried to obtain and procure Muslim support but without any conspicuous success. The efforts involved flagrant violation of the Congress principles and were criticised by no less a person than Rajendra Prasad himself. The sole interest of the Assam Congress was the enhancement of the strength of the Legislature Party neglecting the Mass Contact Programme. Of course some individual Muslim leaders of the Jamiat were with the Congress but a few enrolled directly as members of the party. Perhaps that explains why Assam Muslims almost instantly came under the banner of the Assam Provincial Muslim league. None of the Muslim supporters of the Congress except Fakhruddin Ali Ahmed would openly contest the elections of 1946 on Congress ticket.

The ouster of Saadulla Cabinet had great significance. The Muslims rightly or wrongly regarded this as a symbol of Congress intention to establish a Hindu Raj in India. When Saadulla and his allies brought a No-Confidence Motion against the Bardalai Cabinet, the Speaker, a Hindu Congressite, abruptly adjourned the Assembly sine die taking the advice of a premier designate and not one officially sworn in. The Muslims again concluded that the Congress would never allow them to form and sustain a Cabinet. This period also witnessed serious communal tensions and riots

because of various reasons. The implementation of the Wardha Scheme was considered by the Muslims of the League camp as a sacrilege of Islam. The Congress Coalition Government's strict application of the Domicile Rule and the Agricultural Income Tax Act allegedly aimed at crushing the Muslims; the Bandedmataram song and the Congress flag which found an unfettered environment were nauseant to them. They considered all this as a foretaste of Muslim position in "Akhand Hindusthan."

The most serious crisis of this time was the Hindu-Muslim riot in Sylhet on the issue of music before mosques which the Assam Government tried to regulate by issuing a Communique. When Government was shaken with all these problems, Congress decided to resign as a measure of anti-war stance leaving the field open to Saadulla. His immigrant and land settlement policy and the provincial Census of 1941 showing a Muslim majority in the province tore the two communities further asunder. The Hindus regarded these as aiming at conversion of Assam into a Muslim majority province. The Muslims pleaded that they as Indian citizens had the right to have lands in Assam which had surplus cultivable wastes. But the Hindus and the Congress who brought the charge adopted a policy of appeasement. They condemned Saadulla as pro-Pakistan and at the same time the Congress Legislature Party entered into agreements to maintain him in control of the affairs of the state as Premier. This was a political drama of the highest interest and evoked adverse comments even from the Muslim President of the Assam Pradesh Congress Committee.

Saadulla was an apparently ardent advocate of Assam's interest but joined the Muslim League for leadership and power which he ensured to himself by alliance with other groups. But neither he nor Bhasani had little direct hand in the formulation of the League demand on Assam. It was of course inspired by the spectacular success of the Assam Muslim League in the elections of 1946 which was fought on the clear issues of Pakistan and United India. Even Jinnah's demand was half hearted and that explains why he contented himself with the Sylhet district only. In their publicity and propaganda for Pakistan the Provincial Muslim League played second fiddle to the All India Muslim League as it could advance no arguments of its own in support of the demand.

Assam politics could never have a uniform pattern. The

divergences centred round a motley of causes. Firstly, political consciousness of the Assamese people engendered by the Caste Hindus and sectional leadership did not pervade other levels of society. Lack of seriousness on the part of the Congress for a mass base among the Muslims contributed no less. Secondly, Hindus of the valleys considered their interests opposed to each other's. The Muslims were at first united as a community. But soon those of the Brahmaputra Valley complained of predominance of their co-religionists of the other valley. Thirdly, Dyarchy witnessed the discussion of each and every important public issue in the legislature on clearly racial, communal and valley lines. Fourthly, the demand for Pakistan completed the alienation of the Hindus and the Muslims. Above all, the Bengali and the Assamese Hindus were unwilling partners in the province and in fact never had a meeting ground and so could hardly reconcile to a brotherhood though living together for such a long time.

This book is an attempt at a dispassionate study of Assam politics fully revealing and analysing the various cross currents of thoughts and actions of leaders and people, particularly Muslims and their role in moulding Assam's political life for a century from 1874. It may be emphasized that events were followed where they led. In course of our discussion sometimes several persons of the same political inclination had to be quoted at length because seldom a particular individual conveyed an idea in its entirety,

Chapters 1 and 2 deal respectively with the history of Muslim immigration and settlement and its politicisation. Chapter 3 describes and analyses the attempts to solve the problems arising out of immigration during Dyarchy on purely imperialistic principles. Chapters 4 and 5 critically examine the efforts of popular Cabinets of the Muslim League and the Congress to settle the issue and their results. A detailed analysis of the racial, communal and valley interests has been given.

Chapters 6, 7 and 8 are devoted to the study of the effect of the dichotomy traced in the earlier Chapters and its clear reflection on the different spheres of public life such as territorial transfers affecting the administrative unity of the province, public services, language and education. It has also been revealed how Dyarchy furthered and cemented Anglo-Muslim collaboration and ensured Muslim dominance in Assam politics.

Chapters 9, 10, and 11 probe the different phases of constitu-

tional development, Congress policy and its reaction ensuring further Anglo-Muslim alliance and Muslim predominance in Parliamentary Politics till partition. The politics of defection which was a special feature in Assam have been thoroughly enquired into and brought to light in their various aspects including function of the legislature.

The next Chapter is a detailed analysis of the different phases and movements in our Freedom Struggle with particular reference to Muslim participation. This exposes the complete divergence of attitudes of the two major communities of the province in political field after the Khilafat and Non-Co-operation Movement. A study of their respective role particularly reveals a total lack of a universal leadership based on the concepts of democracy and secularism.

Chapters 13 and 14 study the political alienation of the Muslim masses and intelligentsia with a few exceptions from the Hindus. These also explain how and why they drifted away from the main current of an all India nationalism and subscribed to the demand for Pakistan.

Subject matter of the Chapter following is the background and process of parting of the way between the two communities and the valleys. It culminated in the amputation of the most populous district of the province and its merger in Pakistan. Chapter 16 studies the legacies in Assam politics and traces the trends in post-Independence Assam.

Dr. Makhanlal Kar, a B.Sc. M.A. (Double). Ph.D. of Calcutta University, was a Lecturer in History at the St. Edmund's College, Shillong for about twentyfive years.

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