

The Muslim League Politics in Assam (1936-1947)

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With the passing of the Government of India Act of 1935, the history of Indian nationalism underwent a subtle change. Though not noticeable immediately after the introduction of the Act, the provincial elections held under its provisions in 1937, and the results thereof, made this change more apparent and clear. One of the major impacts of this Act was the reorganisation of the All India Muslim League by M. A. Jinnah after 1937, that shortly became a very powerful political organisation claiming to represent the Muslims of the country,¹ The annual session of the League held at Lucknow in October 1937, was probably the first indication of the growing strength of the Muslim League. The Premiers of Bengal, Punjab and Assam declared at this session that they were advising the Muslim members of their respective ministries to join the Muslim League.² The increased activities of the Muslim League at the national level had its impact on the provincial levels, and the later were swayed by it. The present paper is an attempt to study the activities of the Muslim League in Assam, and to see how it influenced the politics of the province during 1936-1947.

II

The Muslim community of Assam was divided into two distinct groups- the native Muslims, who had settled in Assam long time back and who had become well-established and economically well-off; and the Muslims who started migrating into Assam from the now Bangladesh, and who took up agriculture as their main source of income. This division within the community proved very fatal for Assam and for the forces of nationalism.³ It was these immigrant Muslims that were used by the communal forces to further the cause of the Muslim League in Assam.

The Assam Muslim League had been formed in the late 20s in the district of Sylhet, but had never emerged as a strong political force in the province. During the first election to the Assam Legislative Assembly under the Act of 1935, the Muslim League had no existence worth mention and only four of its nominee could be elected from Sylhet district. Leading Muslims of Assam like

Md. Saadulla, Fakhrudidin Ali Ahmed, Sayidur Rahman and Maulana Bhasani were elected as independents.⁴ However the the Muslim League had become vocal by 1939 and its strength had increased to 9 in the Assembly. As mentioned above, Saadulla, the Premier of Assam joined the Muslim League in 1937 and Abdul Matin Choudhry and Munnawar Ali were included in the Cabinet.

One single factor that proved very useful for the Muslim League in Assam was the 'Line System' by which the Muslim imigrant in the state were permitted to settle only in the limited areas of Assam.⁵ The main intention of the Line System was to protect the indigenous Assamese and to prevent a conflict between the different factions of the society. Gradually, the Line System took a communal colour, the Muslims demanding the abolition of the system and the Hindus defending it. The Muslim League further tried to exploit the disadvantages of the Line System. Abdul Matin Choudhry stated on 15 Sept' 1937 in the Assam Legislative Assembly "This is a system of racial prerogative, a system of economic exploitation for which you won't find any parallel anywhere in India,"⁶ and urged the Muslims to join the Muslim League if they wanted to protect their interests. The members of the Assam Legislative Assembly joined the Muslim League on the understanding that the Muslim League would work for the abolition of the Line System in Assam. Abdul Hamid Khan Bhasani addressing a public meeting held at Karimganj Town Hall on 2 April, 1940, strongly advocated the abolition of the Line System and also declared that the Muslims of Assam had no faith in non-violence and 'Charkha'.⁷

When the Congress ministry, that was formed in 1938, passed a resolution on 4 November 1939, outlining the usefulness of the Line System for the cultivators of Assam especially the backward classes and the tribals,⁸ the Assam Provincial Muslim League at once exploited the opportunity to further its own cause. At the session of the Assam Provincial Muslim League held at Goalpara on 19 November, Gyasuddin Ahmed observed : "The Congress administration for nearly two years has created a doubt in the minds not only (of) the Mussalmans but also in the minds of non-Congress Hindu, Depressed Classes, Indian Christians and other minorities Time has come to think whether the Congress can be allowed to handle the destiny of the minorities."⁹ During the Budget Session of 1940 at Shillong it was pointed out that "the exponent of the Indian National Congress which is pledged to the one-nation theory should raise an artificial barrier between

Indians against the peaceful settlement in the vast cultivable wasteland lying fallow for centuries, only on the ground that they happen to be Muslims”¹⁰ was a clear indication that the interests of the Muslims were in danger on Assam.

The year 1940 saw the passing of the Lahore Resolution by the All India Muslim League that demanded a separate homeland for the Muslims of the country. In the ‘Resolution’ it was stated that “the North-Western and Eastern zones of India should be grouped to constitute Independent States.” Although no reference had been made in the ‘resolution’ regarding the areas to be included in Pakistan the other suggestions in this direction the Scheme of Rehmet Ali,¹² the scheme of Dr. Abdul Latif¹³, the scheme called the ‘Confederacy of India’¹⁴, the scheme of Sikander Hayat Khan¹⁵—suggested that Assam would be included in Pakistan if it ever materialised. This further strengthened the League position in Assam. Muhammad Ali Jinnah was recognized as the ‘Quaid-i-Azam’ and Saadulla expressed his firm belief in Pakistan. “The Pakistan scheme demands that in order to avoid conflict between the Hindus and the Muslims, they should live separately and establish separate States. What objection can there be against this proposition? If the Muslims be in majority in Assam then Assam and Bengal can form one Pakistan State and Punjab, W. N. W. F. P., and Sind can form another Pakistan State.”¹⁶

The Saadulla Ministry started ‘Grow More Food’ programme in 1942, and in the guise of this programme found a suitable tool to strike at the Line System and to facilitate the ultimate inclusion of Assam in Pakistan. Some 1,60,000, bighas of land was settled with the immigrants. The political designs behind this campaign was rightly commented on by Lord Wavell himself, who saw behind this ‘Grow More Food’ campaign a ‘Grow More Muslims’ plan.¹⁷ Earlier in 1941, it was alleged that the Saadulla ministry had manipulated the census report in Assam. It was pointed out that the number of the Hindus in Assam was reduced,¹⁸ so that Assam could be declared a Muslim majority province to be included in Pakistan.

III

The influence of the Muslim League was quite substantial in Assam after 1942. At the Berpeta session of the League held on 8 and 9 April, 1946, Chaudhury Khaliq-uz Zaman declared that “Pakistan was the only safeguard for the protection of the political, cultural and religious rights of the Muslims against the vagaries

of the majority,"¹⁹ A resolution was adopted expressing the full faith of the Muslims of Assam in Pakistan. Another resolution was passed for the abolition of the Line System.²⁰ Mulana Bhasani was elected the President of the Assam Provincial Muslim League and immediately Bhasani started organising the Muslim League Committees in every village of the province, Saadulla, himself an Assamese Muslim (indigenaous), was under great pressure from the Congress and the Tribals to abandon the policy of supporting the immigrants. It was declared in January 1945, that Law would be strictly enforced in Assam and that no further attempt would be made to abolish the Line System.²¹ In July the same year the land settlement policy was further modified in favour of the indogenous people. The Muslim League at once raised the religious sentiments of the Muslims by raising the slogan of 'Islam in danger'. It was pointed out that, "the Line System in Assam has no moral or legal leg to stand upon."²² It was also stated that : "Assam now comparitively quite will be heading a conflagration of disastrous dimensions and in their unequal yet noble fight against the forces of Hindu Congress tyranny..... they will not be alone. Muslim India is one."²³

Gradually, the problem of immigrants into Assam got mixed up with the issue of the creation of Pakistan and the inclusion of Assam in it. The Muslim League in Assam had a ready-made tool in the form of the immigrants to further its cause. Whereas the Congress was not willing to accept that there was any communal conflict in India,²⁴ the Muslim League put forward the argument that so far as the Muslims were concerned their secular affairs could not be separated from religion. Therefore, the economic and other arguments in favour of the Line System were overshadowed by the communal propaganda of the Muslim League. The Provincial Muslim League decided to launch a Civil Disobedience Movement against the government and a volunteer crop of ten thousand members was raised. The Working Committee of the All-India Muslim League viewed the situation in Assam with great concern and declared the policies of the Assam government as 'barbarous atrocities', "forcible mass eviction' and inhuman practice',²⁵

It was under these circumstances that the provincial elections were held in 1946. The Muslim League fought the elections on the only issue of Pakistan. Saadulla warned the Congress ministry "not to kill the goose that lays the golden eggs",²⁶ and Abdul Rauf criticised the government for being inhuman towards the

immigrants,²⁷ He suggested on 24 April that the solution for the Muslims of Assam was in the creation of Pakistan, and that Pakistan could be only achieved if the Muslim League was strong. Another member justified Pakistan by declaring that the Congress was a Hindu organisation, and that the Muslims could never expect a fair treatment under the Congress raj. Whether or not there was any justification in these utterances of the Muslim League, it was able to further its cause successfully in Assam. All the seats were captured by the Muslim League in the 1946 elections, though it was not able to form a ministry. When the new Congress ministry decided to implement the Line System strictly, it had to face a strict opposition from the Muslim League and its followers.

The arrival of the Cabinet Mission and its proposals raised high hopes in the minds of the Muslims of Assam since there were indications that Assam would be included in Pakistan. The Congress took a firm stand against the inclusion of Assam in Pakistan. The All India Muslim League, however, refused to accept the Cabinet-Mission Plan after some considerations. The All-India Muslim League now consolidated its forces and the entire attention was diverted towards the provinces of Bengal and Punjab. With the publication of the Mountbatten Plan the Muslim League in Assam lost its appeal to the Muslims of the province and went into disarray.

In conclusion, it would not be wrong to suggest that like other parts of the country, in Assam also the Muslim League was governed by the desire to prevent radical changes or democratisation of India not because of a Hindu majority but because the radical elements would have put an end to the special privileges of the Muslims. The Muslims were made to believe that, "they could not get any justice under the Congress raj and the idea lay more profoundly . . . in the knowledge that 'safeguards' are designed to improve, but cannot radically alter the position of a minority, which remains a minority, a Cinderella with trade union rights and a radio in the kitchen but still below the stairs."²⁸ The Pirpur Committee Report of 1938 had clearly demonstrated the fear of the Muslims of India under the Congress raj. It was pointed out in the Report that the communal problem remained unsolved not because of the communalism of the minorities, but because of the communalism of the majority. In each province, it was for the majority to win the confidence of the minorities, but the Congress, according to the Muslim League, had failed to win the confidence of the Muslims of Assam.

Notes & References

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5. For details of Line System see ibid, passim.
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