

CHAPTER-II

Emergence of Saadulla in Assam Politics

Saadulla, the Muslim member of the Legislative Council and the Muslim Premier of pre-independence Assam, was the descendant of the well known Muslim preacher Azan Pir.¹ The preacher had come to Assam in the early 17th century to propagate the message of Islam. It was Shah Milan alias Azan Fakir who introduced the practice of namaj in Assam through invocation of Azan and for which he became popular among the people of Assam as Azan Pir. It is said that Azan Pir married an Assamese lady of high stature. They had three sons and their descendants known as Saraguria Dewans are still prevailing in different parts of Assam.² The ancestors of Saadulla were also the inhabitants of Saraguria Chapori of Sibsagar and subsequently they settled at Naharani Kolahari and Kacharihat. Syed Tayibulla, father of Saadulla who hailed from Kacharihat, near Golaghat, came to Guwahati in or about 1878. He settled down with his wife in a very humble two-roomed house at Lakhtakia. He joined Sonaram High School situated at Bharalumukh as a classic teacher.³ Saadulla was born in Guwahati on May 21st 1885 to Tayibulla and his wife after one son and three daughters. After Saadulla, three more children were born to them. Altogether Tayibulla and his wife had four sons and four daughters. Though they suffered at times from economic hardship, there was religious ambience-in a healthy and

¹Baruah, Rafiul Hussain *Mahaan Asomiya Sir Syed Saadulla Aru Somosamayik Asom*, published by Rafiul Hussain Baruah , Jorhat (Assam), 1995, p-15.

² Ahmed, Rekibudin. *Contribution of Persian to Assamese Culture and Society*, Orunodoi Prakashan, Guwahati, 2011, p-150.

³ Baruah, Rafiul Hussain *Mahaan Asomiya Sir Syed Saadulla Aru Somosamayik Asom*, published by Rafiul Hussain Baruah , Jorhat (Assam), 1995, p-15.

congenial relationship. Steeped in religious wisdom, his father gave more importance to the principle of the things of the spirit rather than that of the body.

While Saadulla studied at the school of his father, his eldest brother, Obeidulla had joined the Aligarh Muslim University. After matriculation Saadulla joined Cotton College⁴ as one of the students of first batch in 1901, and turned out to be one of the most favourite students of Prof. C. Das, Head of the Department of Chemistry. Saadulla was also the first Muslim to obtain the graduate degree from Cotton College.⁵ After obtaining Master's Degree in Chemistry from Presidency College, he joined the Cotton College as Demonstrator in Chemistry Department. He wished to work as a Lecturer under his respected Professor, but he was refused by the college authorities.⁶ Being disgruntled with the decision of the college authorities, Saadulla resigned the college and began to study Law. Within a year Saadulla qualified himself for the Guwahati Bar.⁷

Side by side with his legal profession Saadulla also took part in public affairs of the period. The reason of Saadulla's involvement in politics lies on the socio-economic and educational condition of the Muslims in Assam. In this context it is necessary to cite the various aspects of the Muslims in Assam. Muslims began to enter Assam from the early part of the thirteen century. They entered Assam at

⁴ Cotton College was established in 1901 and its first batch consisted of 37 students.

⁵ Baruah, Rafiul Hussain. *Mahaan Asomiya Sir Syed Saadulla Aru Somosamayik Asom*, published by Rafiul Hussain Baruah, Jorhat (Assam), 1995, p-15.

⁶ Muhammed Saadulah - Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia.

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Muhammed_Saadulah (accessed on 20 December 2014)

⁷ Saadulla married Syed Mafizunnisa, eldest daughter of Syed Muhammad Saleh of Kacharihat in 1910. They had three sons and a daughter. They enjoyed their congenial life for only 14 years as because Mafizunnisa died on 9th December 1924.

different stages of history as conquerors, administrators, preachers and invitees of the local kings. The number of the Muslim population in Assam increased due to conversion of the local Hindus and tribals under the influence of Pirs and Sufis who entered Assam during the period of Muslim invasions in the province.⁸ In 1874, when the Surma Valley⁹ districts of Sylhet and Cachar along with Goalpara were separated from the Bengal presidency and clubbed with Assam, the Muslim population of the Assam increased from 5% to 28.3%.¹⁰ The number also increased when the British imported Bengali Muslims mainly cultivators from Bengal and Hindi speaking Muslims mainly from Bihar, Madhya Pradesh and Orissa for their economic purpose. But the economic condition of the Muslims in Assam from the very beginning was weak. As they were not economically sound, they were not only socially, educationally but also culturally backward. Since economy was the base of all round development of a community, so without sound economy no community can develop their other aspects. To improve the condition of his community by constitutional means and the need of the Muslims to play an important role in politics in order to reckon the Muslims as a political balancing force so that no party can ignore the interests of the Muslims of Assam in the new political set up of the British, Saadulla took part in politics.

In the early stage of his political career Saadulla involved himself in Municipal and Local Boards affairs for the purpose of including a Muslim

⁸ Deb, B. J. (ed.). *Population and Development in North East India*, Concept Publishing Company Pvt. Ltd., New Delhi, 2010, p-194.

⁹ Sylhet and Cachar districts together constituted Surma Valley before Independence.

¹⁰ Singha, S. P. *Lost Opportunities: 50 Years of Insurgency in the North-east and India's Response*, Lancer Publishers, New Delhi, 2007, p-27.

representative from Assam Valley in the Provincial Council. This can well be substantiated by the absence of a Muslim member from Assam Valley in the Provincial Council till 1910. In the Legislative Council of the newly created province of Eastern Bengal and Assam in 1905, there were only three Muslims out of total strength of fifteen nominated members and that all of them were from East Bengal. It was only on petition from Assam Association, two seats were allotted to Assam. One was filled by persons nominated by Lt. Governor on recommendation of the Local Boards and Municipalities on a rotatory basis and the other by the European Tea Industry. In such a situation the Muslim members from his valley could not expect to get a nomination in case of contests. However, in 1910 under the Indian Councils Act of 1909 the East Bengal and Assam Legislative Council was enlarged to consist of forty members.¹¹ With this the number of members in the Council from Assam also increased from two to five. In the enlarged Council the seats allotted for the Mohammedan Constituency on the alternative basis was taken by Surma Valley.¹² Thus, in the new Provincial Council, Muslims of Assam Valley were not represented. Absence of Muslim representative from Assam Valley in the Provincial Council till 1910 and the wider prospect that the next member of the Mohammedan Constituency would be elected from the Assam Valley inspired Saadulla to take part in Municipal and Local Boards affairs as because at that time the Local Bodies and Municipalities were empowered to recommend nomination of their representatives to the Provincial Legislative Council.

¹¹ Kar, M. *Muslims in Assam Politics*, Omsons Publications, New Delhi, 1990, p-189.

¹² Guha, Amalendu. *Planter Raj to Swaraj, Freedom Struggle and Electoral Politics in Assam 1826 - 1947*, People's Publishing House, New Delhi, 1977, p-78-79.

After the annulment of partition of Bengal in 1912 Assam was formally reverted to its old status as a Chief Commission's Province with a Legislative Council of its own consisting of twenty four members of whom thirteen were nominated by the Chief Commissioner while eleven were elected by class interests. Election of one Muslim member from the Brahmaputra Valley was perhaps the most important provision of the newly reconstituted Council.¹³ Saadulla who had already made his mark and became eminent not only as a citizen of Guwahati but also as a prominent figure in the province of Assam took full advantage of the provision. He contested the election to the Legislative Council from the reserved Muslim constituency of Brahmaputra Valley and got himself elected. He was the first Muslim to sit on the Legislative Council in 1912.¹⁴ When Saadulla entered into the Legislative Council as a member he found that the condition of Assam was very peculiar. There existed a rivalry between Assamese and Bengali, 'war' of valleys, unceasing immigration from outside the province and also division of population into two communities. The roots or causes of these issues had foundations in the very years when British annexed Assam after the treaty of Yandabo. After the annexation of Assam, the British established an administrative system in Assam that was different from administrative system prevailing during the Ahom rule. As the indigenous Assamese were not familiar with the British administrative system, the British establishment in Assam brought the middle class Bengalis mostly Hindus from Bengal who had already learnt English and acquired experience in colonial administration for managing the subordinate services and running the administration of Assam smoothly on the British

¹³ Kar, M. *Muslims in Assam Politics*, Omsons Publications, New Delhi, 1990, p-190.

¹⁴ In the reconstituted Council other leading members from Assam were Ghanashyam Baruah, Kamini Kumar Chandra, Manik Chandra, Radha Binode Das, Padmanath Gohain Baruah, Raja Probbhat Chandra Baruah, Tarun Ram Phukan.

pattern.¹⁵ By the beginning of the twentieth century, the Bengali Hindu migrants occupied all the subordinate offices in the Government, courts and also tea plantations.

The situation became more complex when Bengali Muslims mostly from East Bengal penetrate into Assam. During the early British colonial period, the British noticed that in Assam there existed large tracts of fertile lands that remained fallow for years. The British administrators in Assam felt that if the vast tracts of wastelands of the province were brought under cultivation, the revenue of the Government as well as the condition the people would be improved. The desire of converting the wastelands into cultivable lands was expressed by the British administrators in Assam in 1830's. Consequently, the British in Assam started experiments in the plantation sector and tea was also taken up for experimental cultivation. The tea cultivation began to flourish in Assam and development of tea industry in large number increased the demand for labour. The existing population of Assam being self-sufficient refused to work as day labourers in the plantations. To overcome the problem of scarcity of labour the planters then imported tea-labourers from Bihar, Bengal, Orissa and Madhya Pradesh.¹⁶

As indigenous peasants of Assam were not interested to increase or expand land cultivation there was shortage of food to meet the requirement of the growing labour population engaged in tea plantation. It, therefore, became necessary for the British to bring more farmers and settle them on wastelands in order to bring more lands under cultivation and to produce more crops to overcome the food deficit. It is important to mention that the Muhammadan farmers of Eastern Bengal were

¹⁵ Phukon, Girin. *Assam: Attitude to Federalism*, Sterling Publishers Pvt. Ltd., New Delhi, 1984, p- 7.

¹⁶ Ahmed, S.U. *Muslims in Assam (1200-2000)*, Published by H. Nessa, Morigaon (Assam), 1991,p-12.

expert jute cultivator and at that time there was worldwide expansion of jute-trade and therefore jute-cultivation was in high demand. But the production of jute in Bengal was insufficient and as there was no scope for increased production there, the jute-traders wanted to grow the same in the soil of Assam.¹⁷ In order to increase the food production as well as to increase the production of jute and other cash crops the British encouraged a marginal inflow of agriculturists from Eastern Bengal to Assam and their settlement in the wastelands of Assam. Increase in revenue and taxes; production of profitable crops and other raw materials for the industries in England were the main aim of the colonial administration. The Government levied taxes on land occupied by the immigrant farmers after the allotment of permanent 'patta'. As a result, of this policy of the Government a large number of Muslim farmers from Eastern Bengal migrated to Assam for permanent settlement. In the initial stage the Assamese people did not object the immigration of Bengali from Bengal. But gradually as more and more lands and jobs came under the occupation of Bengali from Bengal the relation between the Bengali immigrant communities and the Assamese embittered when they had to face keen competition with their counterparts of the immigrant communities for lands and jobs. In addition to this the replacement of Assamese by Bengali as the official language of Assam deeply hurt the feelings of the Assamese. The growth and development of hatred and ill-feeling between the Assamese and Bengali was also due to the territorial adjustment of the colonial Government to satisfy their imperialistic designs. It has already been mentioned that Assam, after the British occupation was placed under the administrative jurisdictions of the Dacca Division. In 1874, Assam was taken away from the administrative jurisdictions of the Bengal Presidency and was created as a separate Chief

¹⁷ Phukon, Girin. *Assam: Attitude to Federalism*, Sterling Publishers Pvt. Ltd., New Delhi, 1984, p-10.

Commissioner's Province.¹⁸ With this territorial adjustment the Bengali majority districts of Goalpara, Sylhet and Cachar were clubbed with Assam. The inclusion of Surma Valley comprised of Sylhet and Cachar in Assam added fuel to the existing conflict between the Bengali and Assamese. There subsequently emerged a war between the Surma Valley and the Brahmaputra Valley as Surma Valley was dominated by Bengali Muslim people and Brahmaputra Valley was dominated by Assamese Hindus people. Even though, in 1905,¹⁹ Assam was merged in eastern part of Bengal and, in 1912,²⁰ she was made a separate Province; yet all these changes did not end the 'war' of valleys. Because Sylhet and Cachar continued to be a part of Assam and its Bengali speaking people continued to compete with the people of Brahmaputra Valley in the political and cultural arena.

Besides rivalry or war between the two valleys and Assamese-Bengali conflict, the grant of separate electorate to the Muslims by the colonial Government not only widened the gulf between the Muslims and Hindus but also made the two communities conscious of their political status in Assam. Even though the principle of communal representation in public services in proportion to their numerical strength was adopted by the British Government it was found that the number of Muslims was under-represented in various departments of Government Service.

It was in this socio-economic political context Saadulla entered the Legislative Council as a representative of the Muslim community from Brahmaputra Valley who in the coming years played an important but controversial role in the

¹⁸ Barpujari, H. K. (ed.). *Political History of Assam (Vol-I)*, Govt. of Assam, Gauhati, 1999, p-176.

¹⁹ Guha, Amalendu. *Planter Raj to Swaraj, Freedom Struggle and Electoral Politics in Assam 1826 - 1947*, People's Publishing House, New Delhi, 1977, p-71.

²⁰ Guha, Amalendu. *Planter Raj to Swaraj, Freedom Struggle and Electoral Politics in Assam 1826 - 1947*, People's Publishing House, New Delhi, 1977, p- 81.

Assam political scenario. In order to understand his political activities it is very essential to discover the India during his times-the mental state of the people of Assam, the socio- economic, political and religious condition of the province which ultimately shaped the political destiny of Saadulla.

Saadulla as a member of Legislative Council:

Saadulla's realisation on becoming a member of the Council was that the Morley-Minto Reforms of 1909 had created a protracted atmosphere of mistrust and chaos between the Hindu and Muslim communities. But nevertheless, it had also placed the Muslim community in a better position by providing reserved seats for them in the Provincial Councils as well as in the Imperial Legislature. On one hand, the Morley-Minto Reforms had escalated the problems of the minorities in India and on the other hand, it had also emboldened the minorities to plead more vigorously for their special requirements and favours in the administrative set-up of the Government. Being the lone Muslim member in the Council from Assam, Saadulla came forward to represent to the authorities the aspirations and grievances of the community before the Council. Saadulla disapproved of the predominance of the official elements in the Local Boards and demanded representative of Muslims in such bodies on a communal basis. In Saadulla's own words, "The Muhammadan community is so scattered in Assam proper that we can hardly expect to be represented if our Hindu brethren choose to control us".²¹ Chief Commissioner Sir Archdale Earle made fresh assertions in 1912 about the principle of communal representation in the public services proportionate to the population of the community. Simultaneously, recognition was

²¹ Proceedings of the Assam Legislative Council, 1913, The Assam Gazette, Part, VI, A, 1913, Published by Authority, Shillong, 1913, p-80-1; Quoted in Barpujari, H. K. (ed.). *Political History of Assam (Vol-I)*, Govt. of Assam, Gauhati, 1999, p-211.

accorded to Muslims, Assamese, Bengali, Hindus, Khasis, and Ahoms as principal communities of the land. Earle wanted to know about the progress of the scheme and in 1913 he asked for returns showing therein how his orders incorporating each community's share of public services were being implemented. In this backdrop, Saadulla lodged the following complaint:

“The extremely kind hearted and sympathetic reply of Lord Minto.....the various circulars to give Muslims their share of service by the Eastern Bengal and Assam Government seem to have been forgotten when one finds the extreme paucity of Muhammadan officers in all departments of Government Service.”

Further, Saadulla demanded a detailed scrutiny of the lists of various services in different departments in order to ascertain the fair and just representation of each community and whether they had enjoyed the prescribed legitimate share in accordance with the Chief Commissioner's order.²² But Sir Archdale Earle refused to oblige the appeal of Saadulla as he realised it would lead to the violation of previous orders regarding appointment to various services. However, the Council Commissioner in the following year issued specific instruction to the recruiting bodies that appointment should be given to under-represented communities.

Saadulla fully believed that the future prosperity of Assam lay in the active participation of people of Assam in the administration and in the full acknowledgment of their political rights and duties in a constitutional manner. He also thought that the burning questions of the province could be solved by drawing the attention of the

²² Proceedings of the Assam Legislative Council, 1913, Assam Gazette Part VI, A, 1913, Published by Authority, Shillong, 1913, p-81; Cited in Kar, M. *Muslims in Assam Politics*, Omsons Publications, New Delhi, 1990, p-158-59.

Government through their speeches and debates in the Council. This attitude brought him closer to an organisation having a similar ideology named Assam Association. While marching along with this organisation and supporting its views and objectives he energetically participated in all debates and discussions in the Council and even moved resolutions against the issues which he thought were not fair. For instances when Saadulla, in his capacity as a member of the Council, observed that in keeping with the procedural rules of the Council Manual, it was necessary for a member of the Council to have a full five days' notice if he wanted to raise an issue relating to the budget to be discussed in the Council. Furthermore, he also observed that on account of the officials' failure to present the draft financial statement to members in time, many members failed to provide the required notice time for raising an issue for discussion. Saadulla took the Government to task for its impracticable procedure and spoke as follows on the subject in the Council:

“We consoled ourselves with the thought that we could not be authors of the budget, yet we had the valuable right of discussing the budget and try to persuade Government by moving resolution to modify it according to popular view.....by an impracticable procedure and on the strength of a rule in the Council Manual, this cherished right of real discussion of the budget is being snatched away, and the right of the people to influence the main heads of the budget turned into a sham”.²³

²³ Guha, Amalendu. *Planter Raj to Swaraj, Freedom Struggle and Electoral Politics in Assam 1826 - 1947*, People's Publishing House, New Delhi, 1977, p-83.

Saadulla never lagged behind in upholding the local issues in the Council. When Saadulla observed that in land-abundant Assam, peasants used to graze their cattle freely on the village commons and neighbouring forests in the past. But under the British regime grazing tax on each horned animals was introduced in order to increase the revenue Government exchequer. In 1888 the peasants had to pay annually 8 annas per buffalo and 4 annas per cow.²⁴ This fee gradually rose to Rs. 3 per buffalo and 6 annas per cow. As a result, of this tax the peasants of rural areas not only suffered economically but the urban people also suffered as the raise in the grazing tax the price of the milk products also increased. As this tax was a burden on the peasants they, no doubt, in many cases were not in a position to pay the tax but in spite of that the tax was levied arbitrarily and harassing methods. According to Saadulla this tax was not “only dangerous but obnoxious to the community”. Understanding the magnitude of suffering of the peasants due to gradual enhancement of rates and the oppressive manner of their collection Saadulla supported the motion moved by Ghanashyam Barua in the Council for the abolition of the grazing tax.²⁵ Saadulla always stood for the welfare of the Assamese people whenever occasion came up. This can also be perceived by his support to Ghanashyam Barua’s resolution for the abolition of the opium trade in the province within ten years.²⁶

Although Saadulla was involved in the specific problems of Assam, he did not cut himself adrift from the all India politics. In 1918 the British Government declared its intention to replace the Defence of India Act by a set of laws known as Rowlatt

²⁴ Reid’s reply, 23 Sept, ALCP (1920), Vol. 1, p-708-10.

²⁵ Proceedings of the Assam Legislative Council, 1918, The Assam Gazette, Part VI, A, 1918, Published by Authority, Shillong, 1918, p-186-90 and 193.

²⁶ Out of twelve Indian members in the House of twenty four members only four members including Saadulla voted for the abolition of the opium trade in the province.

Laws after the culmination of the First World War. According to these Laws the British Government could arrest any person even on the suspicion of offences of a revolutionary character for up to two years without any warrant or trial. These were greatly resented by Saadulla and he felt that it was an injustice met by the British in the form of notorious Rowlatt Laws. A meeting was going on at the Assam Club Public Hall on 16th February 1919 under the presidentship of Tarun Ram Phukan. Supported by the leading members of the Assam Association, Saadulla moved a resolution in the meeting expressing his strong sense of regret and disappointment at the action of the Government. The action was that of proceeding with the Rowlatt Bill even when there was opposition from non official members of the Indian Legislative Council and thus, Saadulla urged the Government to drop the Bill.²⁷

Saadulla, who was the Local Secretary of the Anjuman-i-Islamia in Guwahati evinced keen interest in the Khilafat Movement from its onset and other prominent leaders of the region such as Chandranath Sarma, Nabin Chandra Bordoloi and Tarun Ram Phukan showed their support towards the movement.²⁸ Though Saadulla evinced interest in the Khilafat Movement from its very beginning yet practically he did not involve himself in it. Though not involved in the Khilafat Movement, Saadulla participated in the Non Co-operation Movement by signing a petition presented to the chairman, Gauhati Municipality, expressing his total disapproval of the proposal for presenting an address of welcome to the Viceroy Lord Chelmsford.²⁹

²⁷ Assam Police Abstract of Intelligence DIG (SB) Office Shillong, Gauhati, 12 April 1919; Cited in Barpujari, H. K. (ed.). *Political History of Assam (Vol-I)*, Govt. of Assam, Gauhati, 1999, p-237.

²⁸ Dutta, Anuradha. *Assam in the Freedom Movement*, Darbari Prokashan, Calcutta, 1991, p-99.

²⁹ Bhuyan, A.C. & De, S.(eds.). *Political History of Assam, Vol.-II*, Government of Assam, Gauhati, 2008, p-11.

Saadulla's disapproval of the proposal for presenting an address of welcome to the Viceroy Lord Chelmsford was the last incident of Saadulla's participation in the National Movement as there is no evidence of Saadulla's participation in the National Movement after 4th October 1920. Rather when the Assam Association and the Assam Valley Muslims in their special sessions decided to boycott Council elections in response to Gandhi's call for Non Co-operation Movement, Saadulla went to Calcutta and there he enrolled himself as an Advocate at the Calcutta High Court. Non-availability of evidence of Saadulla's participation in the National Movement after the adoption of the resolution of the boycott of forth-coming Council elections by the Assam Association and the Assam Valley Muslims; and his engagement as a lawyer at the Calcutta High Court testify the fact that he favoured council entry.

Saadulla as a minister in Assam under the Dyarchy system:

Saadulla remained at Calcutta and practiced law there till the mid of 1923 thereby he kept himself aloof from the practical politics during the Non Co-operation Movement when Gandhiji had imparted a new religious mania and had mixed up political issues with those of religious morality. However, the withdrawal of the Non Co-operation campaign by Gandhi after the Chauri Chaura incident brought to the fore the issue of council entry in the Congress. A section of leaders of the Indian Congress led by C. R. Das and Pandit Motilal Nehru started to think in favour of entering the Legislative Council. This section of leaders under C. R. Das was known 'as pro-changers'. Their object was to follow a policy of uniform and continuous obstruction from within the Council with a view to putting an end to the system of Dyarchy. However, the annual session of the Indian National Congress, held at Gaya in December 1922, rejected the proposal of council entry. The Gaya session of the Congress was followed by the resignation of C. R. Das as the President of the

organisation. C. R. Das along with Motilal Nehru and others then formed within the Congress a party called the Swarajya Party.³⁰ After the formation of the All India Swaraj Party, Tarun Ram Phukan formed a branch of the Swaraj Party in Assam, with its headquarters at Gauhati with a view to pursuing the plan and programme of the Swarajya Party in a more systematic way.³¹ The Swarajya Party widened the prospect of entering the Council politics. The changed political situation impressed Saadulla so much so that he returned to Assam to stand for elections to the Reformed Legislative Council.

Syed Md Saadulla won the election to the second Assam Legislative Council as an independent candidate with the support of the Swarajists. Assam Swarajya Party could secure only eight seats in the election.³² The Swarajists then evolved a working relationship with the Independents and this led to the formation of a combined bloc under the name and style of the Assam Nationalist Party. Saadulla was also approached by the Swarajya Party leaders to join their party. But he refused to join the party as because he was not in favour of Swarajists policy and programme of continued obstruction rather he advocated a policy of 'parliamentary obstruction' if necessary and treatment of issues based only on their merit. Saadulla firmly believed that the policy of wholesale obstruction and wrecking would not bring any benefit to the people rather he preferred formation of a united opposition to democratically force

³⁰ Chaudhury, Khaliqzaman. *Pathway to Pakistan*, Longman, Lahore, 1961, p-117.

³¹ Tarun Ram Phukan was the President, R. K. Chaudhuri was the Secretary and Gopinath Bardoloi was the Assistant Secretary of Assam branch of the Swaraj Party.

³² The strength of the party numbered eight only. The members elected on the Swarajya party ticket were-Brojendranarayan Choudhury (Sunamganj), Gopendralal Daschoudhury (North Habiganj), Jatindranarayan Deblaskar (Silchar) Kuladhar Chaliha (Golaghat), Lakheswar Baruah (Dibrugarh), Mahadev Sharma (Tezpur), Nabinchandra Bardoloi (Mangaldai), Pareshlal Shomechoudhury (South Sylhet), Rasiklal Nandimajumdar (South Habiganj), Rohikanta Hatibaruah (Jorhat), Rohinikumar Choudhury (Gauhati), Sarveswar Baruah (North Lakhimpur), Taraprasad Chaliha (Sibsagar).

the Government of India to make concessions. The Governor noticed the attitude of Saadulla and it came at a time when the former was looking for a Muslim minister from the Brahmaputra Valley. By the end of February 1924, the Governor of Assam Sir John Henry Kerr sent a letter to Saadulla offering him a seat in his Executive Council in the capacity of a Minister. Saadulla had to choose one out of two alternatives – practicing in Calcutta High Court or serve as a Minister in Assam. Time in hand was short as the newly elected Legislative Council was due to meet in Shillong on 24th March. Saadulla was known for making fast decisions. He communicated to the Governor accepting the offer and assuring the Governor that he would reach Shillong well ahead of the date of commencement of the Council session. In due course, Saadulla was sworn in as Minister in 1924³³ and he was given the portfolios of Education and Agriculture. This was just the beginning and he was going to hold many such ministerial positions in the upcoming long and colourful political career. Most of his close relatives, friends and colleagues unanimously approved his decision.

By the time Saadulla became the minister, the situation of Assam had changed a lot. With the sudden unilateral suspension of the Non Co-operation Movement, the Muslims, particularly the conservative lost their interest in the Congress-led nationalist movement and they thought that it was baseless to continue their protest against the Government and they thought it wise to shift their allegiance from Congress to the Government. The unity between the Hindus and Muslims which was drawn during 1920-21 collapsed due to Gandhiji's policy of mixing up of political

³³ The year 1924 was a bad year for him; his beloved wife died at child-birth in the early hours of 9th December. He never really recovered from the cruel shock and profound grief. He never re-married and immersed himself in work and bringing up an infant daughter and looking after three sons.

issues with those of religious morality and as a result the communal situation also deteriorated throughout India after 1923. In 1923 the Hindu Mahasabha's activities for the maintenance, protection and promotion of Hindu race, Hindu culture and Hindu civilization and its activities to cater anti-Muslim sentiments created fear among the Muslims of being deprived and dominated by the Hindus in India. It was about this time the Sangathan and Suddhi movement among the Hindus and the Tabligh and the Tanzeem movement among the Muslims widened the gulf between the two communities and sown the seeds of communalism more deeply. In such prevailing situation the nationalists were looked upon as apostates and enemy of their co-religionists and their own religion. This situation at the national level also had its impact among the masses of Assam. When the relation between the two communities also deteriorated in Assam following the all India pattern Saadulla moved closer towards the British. Saadulla as a minister under the Dyarchy System co-operated with the British and even adopted the path of no confrontation with the British. Saadulla did this for the safeguard of his community and to uplift the status of Assam as a major province in India. He also developed a close association with the British to improve the financial condition of the province as the Britishers were the final decision makers. In this regard the issue relating to the separation of Sylhet stands out prominently. It is interesting to note that the issue is connected with status of Assam as a province more importantly it is associated with the ethnic conflict. It has already been mentioned that Sylhet was transferred from Bengal to Assam in 1874 to make the latter a Chief Commissioner's Province for administrative convenience. Since the incorporation of Sylhet in Assam the people of Sylhet, if not all, disgruntled to the existing set up; occasionally they gave vent to public manifestations of protest against separation of Sylhet from Bengal.

The complaint of the people of Sylhet was that they had no affinity whatsoever, linguistically or culturally with Assam and that their socio-economic base was in Bengal. The Sylhetis also felt that they had been yoked with backward people and that with the inclusion of Sylhet in Assam; the district was given inferior and imperfect laws and institutions.³⁴ The Assamese people on their part felt that they could not unite themselves with the Sylhetis who had a different tradition and ideas of different origin.³⁵ Moreover, Sylhet was economically a deficit district and therefore was a burden on Assam's revenue rather than a blessing. The Assamese people apprehend that the re-union of Sylhet with Bengal would improve the financial status of Assam and at the same time it would make Assam more homogenous. For all these reasons the Assamese people pressed for the separation of Sylhet from Assam. The issue of Sylhet separation from Assam thus involved both ethnic and nationality question. The conflict between Assamese and Bengali or the rivalry between the two valleys stood as a barrier in the smooth functioning of the administration and even in many cases made the allocation of funds between the two valleys a difficult task.

Saadulla, however, had opposed all proposals relating to the transfer of Sylhet from Assam to Bengal. Saadulla while leading a deputation to Secretary of State E S Montagu and Viceroy Lord Chelmsford in 1917 expressed his view that Sylhet should not be transferred. Saadulla in order to know mass opinion regarding the issue visited Sylhet. He met a large number of persons there both Hindus and Muslims and enquired from most of them about their real feeling with regard to the transfer of

³⁴ For details see *Proceedings of the Assam Legislative Council*, 1926, *The Assam Gazette*, Part, VI, A, 1926, Published by Authority, Shillong, 1926, p-47-74.

³⁵ For details see *Debates of the Assam Legislative Council*, 1924, p-568. Also cited in Nag, Sajal *Roots of Ethnic Conflict: Nationality Question in North East India*, Manohar Publishers, New Delhi, 1990, p-118.

Sylhet to Bengal. Saadulla was startled to find that the opinion of the people on the transfer issue was sharply divided. Majority of Muslims of Sylhet were against going to Bengal, while majority of educated Hindus were in favour of the proposal. Saadulla after ascertaining the opinion of the people of Sylhet on the issue wrote a letter to the Chief Secretary mentioning that:³⁶

When opinion in the country is divided, I hold that Government also should oppose the disturbance of the status quo, as a very large amount of the public funds, chiefly contributed by the districts of the province, other than Sylhet has been sunk in public institutions in Sylhet.

Saadulla felt that although some persons in the Assam Valley hold the opinion that the transfer of Sylhet to Bengal would be a good ridded in view of its being a deficit district, but it would not be an unmixed blessing. He also apprehended that, if Sylhet was transferred on the basis of linguistic affinity and the revenue settlement, similar move would rise from the people of Goalpara, Cachar and Lushai hills. Saadulla added that Assam minus Surma Valley would lose its distinct provincial status. He stated that with the separation it would take Assam fifty years to make up the population loss and thought that “self preservation is a virtue which is to be preferred to the new fangled principle of self-termination”. Saadulla even suggested that if transfer became inevitable, the whole of Brahmaputra Valley be taken to Bengal on the sole condition that the Assamese nationality, culture, and language would not be affected.³⁷ Beside, affecting the provincial status of Assam Saadulla felt that transfer of Sylhet would be particularly disastrous to the Muslims in Assam. He

³⁶ Kar, M. *Muslims in Assam Politics*, Omsons Publications, New Delhi, 1990, p-121.

³⁷ Saadulla's letter dated 20 July, 1925, in the Assam Gazette Part- VI, January 20, 1926.

tried to draw the attention of the Muslims of both the valleys of the fact that as long as Muslim majority district remained in Assam the Muslim population of Assam would be one third of the total population and that they would remain a respectable minority and the combined Muslim strength could play a dominating role in Assam politics.³⁸ But if the transfer was affected the Muslim population in Assam would sink into an inefficient minority and they would lose the proportionate share of representation in self-government institutions since at that time various governmental posts were divided on basis of the numerical strength of the communities. The Surma Valley Muslims, on the other hand, he observed, were enjoying a dominating position in Assam and they could hardly play such a role in the Bengal Presidency.³⁹ Saadulla requested the Muslims of the Surma Valley sincerely to consider whether “It will be the brotherly feeling which is inculcated in our Holy Book to leave us in such a helpless position in this valley and not to care a jot for us”.⁴⁰ As a result of Saadulla’s request and appeal the Muslims of the two valleys got united and they jointly fought inside and outside the Council for the retention of Sylhet in Assam till 1947. So, Saadulla’s stands on the issue of the transfer of Sylhet from Assam reflect his concerns for the provincial status of Assam. His views and suggestions on the issue even justified the fact that he was not influenced by the narrow Bengali-Assamese conflict rather he was concerned with larger political interests of the Muslims in Assam.

³⁸ For details please see Saadullah's speech in the Proceedings of the Assam Legislative Council, 1926, The Assam Gazette, Part-VI, A, 1926, Published by Authority, Shillong, 1926, p. 42.

³⁹ Guha, Amalendu. *Planter Raj to Swaraj, Freedom Struggle and Electoral Politics in Assam 1826 - 1947*, People's Publishing House, New Delhi, 1977, p-167.

⁴⁰ Proceedings of the Assam Legislative Council, 1926, The Assam Gazette, Part-VI, A, 1926, Published by Authority, Shillong, 1926, p. 42.

When the third general election to the Legislative Council was held in November, 1926, Saadulla again won the election defeating Nuruddin Ahmed.⁴¹ The British fell into an awkward position as Promode Chandra Dutta could not win the election. This led the Governor into a critical state in forming a new ministry. The Governor wanted Saadulla in his ministry. In order to retain Saadulla in the ministry and to maintain a balance between the Muslim and the Hindu representatives in the Council, the Governor had to appoint a Hindu candidate from the Surma Valley. But the Governor found it difficult to fill up the post with suitable Hindu candidate from the Surma Valley because all the suitable Hindu elected members of the Council were affiliated to the Congress Party and thereby refused to co-operate with the British. In the Surma Valley there were available qualified Muslim candidate for ministership. If the post was filled up with an elected Muslim member from the Surma Valley then the ministry would turn into Muslim ministry and this would no doubt evoke criticism throughout the province but also it might create antagonism between Muslim and Hindu. In order to provide a solution to this problem and to retain Saadulla for the second term the Governor appointed James Joy Mohan Nichols Roy, a tribal Christian elected from Shillong Urban Constituency as the minister.⁴² The Governor retained Saadulla in their ministry because he had a vast knowledge of the valley and had the capacity to assimilate the Muslim population and leaders of both the valleys. Above all, the Governor found it very convenient to use him as the suitable paraphernalia to counteract the growing nationalism of the Hindus. The Governor bestowed full faith on Saadulla because he had won the election by a large margin. After being inducted

⁴¹ *The Mussalman*, 12 February 1927, and *Asamiya* 5 February 1927.

⁴² Rao, V. V. and Hazarika, Niru. *A Century of Government and Politics in North East India, Vol-1, (Assam)*, S.Chand and Company Ltd, New Delhi, 1983, p-55; Guha, Amalendu. *Planter Raj to Swaraj, Freedom Struggle and Electoral Politics in Assam 1826 -1947*, People's Publishing House, New Delhi, 1977, p-161.

into the ministry Saadulla developed a cordial relation with the British and lend support to the British policies. Development of close relation with the European in the Council was for his political stability and this can be substantiated by the non confidence motion passed against Saadulla in 1927. In the third reformed Council when a no-confidence motion was moved by Bipinchandra with aspiration of getting the vacant berth for himself almost all the members of the Council including the fourteen members affiliated to the Congress voted against Saadulla. In spite of this the motion was defeated. As Saadulla was not affiliated to any party he had no party supporters in the House therefore in such situation it was obviously that due to the support lend by the solid European bloc (official and non-official) that constituted nearly a fourth of the House the no-confidence motion against was defeated .⁴³ Saadulla's matured leadership, towering personality with adequate deftness of political insight and above all his leniency towards the British Government highly satisfied the Europeans. As a result, he was offered the respectable knighthood by the king of the emperor in 1928 and was also chosen as the befitting successor of Kutubuddin Ahmad as Executive Councillor in 1929.⁴⁴

On January 2, 1929 when the Simon Commission arrived at Shillong for assessing the working of the ongoing Government of India Act of 1919 for the purpose of considering its feasibility in India and the need of any modification in accordance with the present scenario, Saadulla advocated the causes of the Muslims and other unrepresented groups before the Commission. Saadulla took leading in

⁴³ Bhuyan, A, C & De, S. (eds). *Political History of Assam*, Vol-II, Government of Assam, Gauhati, 2008, p-116-117; Guha, Amalendu. *Planter Raj to Swaraj, Freedom Struggle and Electoral Politics in Assam 1826 -1947*, People's Publishing House, New Delhi, 1977, p-162.

⁴⁴ Appointment File A, June 1929, Assam Secretariate, Appointment and Political Department, Nos 13- 21, State Archives of Assam, Guwahati.

presenting Assam's financial position and its backwardness before the Commission. He cited that many minority groups including the Muslim have not attained the required benefit of the reform scheme of the prevailing Act. Rather, the caste Hindus, who were more organised, educated and economically better situated have monopolised all the seats reserved for the non-Muslims in Assam. Again, due to the inclusion of non-caste-Hindus, primitive races, Christians and tea garden labours in a polyglot electorate, Saadulla complained that about sixteen lakhs of labour population were almost neglected in respect of their due right. He demanded a judicious representation of all the unrepresented communities, including the Muslim community according to the population structure in the past three or four censuses.⁴⁵ Saadulla expressed that as Assam was divided into two valleys and was surrounded by a range of inaccessible hills a major portion of her revenue was spent on the maintenance of rivers banks, administration of the hills and on the Assam Rifles for the defence of the frontier.⁴⁶ As these expenditures were a burden upon Assam's meager economy Saadulla pleaded for additional fund and even suggested that the heavy expenditure on Assam Rifles be borne entirely by the Centre. Saadulla hoped that Simon Commission would look into the problems of Assam with care and would take better step to remove the grievances. But when the Simon Commission Report was published in June 1930 Saadulla was upset to see that Assam had gained nothing special. As the Simon Commission Report failed to meet the expectation of Indian, most sections of the Indian political community resented the Simon Commission Report and different political parties gave vent to their anguished feelings in different ways. In the meantime, the Labour Party came to power in Britain in 1931 raising

⁴⁵ Kar, M. Muslims in Assam Politics, Omsons Publications, New Delhi, 1990, p-199.

⁴⁶ Report of the Indian Statutory Commission, Vol. XVII, Part II, p-33, Memorandum (non-official) submitted by Sir Muhammad Saadulla, member Assam Legislative Council.

fresh hopes in the minds of the people of India. Lord Irwin was invited by the British Prime Minister Ramsay MacDonald for consultations on the aforesaid issues. Lord Irwin, on his returned to India, announced, "I am authorised on behalf of his Majesty's Government to state clearly that, in their judgment it is implicit in the Declaration of 1917 that the natural issue of India's constitutional progress as there contemplated is the attainment of Dominion Status". Around the same time, the newly formed Government also decided to accept the recommendations of the Simon Commission. It was resolved to hold a conference of the representatives of the British Government, British India, and the Indian States in order to discuss the findings of the Simon Commission Report and to draw up a plan for the Constitutional reform. The First Round Table Conference held for the purpose was boycotted by Gandhi but he attended the Second one. The Conference failed to produce any tangible result on the question of future constitutional set-up as also in respect of representation of minorities. Therefore, the Indian leaders, both Hindus and Muslims, as well as the princes clashed over the question of formation of the Indian federation. Even the minority and the communal tangle found no solution. As a result, no agreement could be arrived at on the structure of the probable Indian political system. When Ramsay MacDonald saw that the Indian delegates had failed to reach an amicable point, he stated that the British Government would conclude, "as wisely and justly as possible but checks and balances the constitution is to contain to protect the minorities from unrestricted and tyrannical use of the democratic principle expressing itself solely the majority power".⁴⁷ This was the policy statement that ushered in the announcement of the Communal Award on August 17, 1932. The Communal Award paved the way for allocation of seats to the various communities in the Central and Provincial

⁴⁷ Prasad, Rajendra. *India Divided*, Hind Kitabs, Bombay, 1946, p-135-136.

Legislatures on the assumption that India was not one nation but a conglomeration of racial, religious and cultural groups with varying castes and interests. On the surface it appeared to be an Award for solving the communal tangle unilaterally but in reality, the Award was constructed in such a way that instead of resolving the problem it only separated the masses into two clear cut compartments, the Hindus and the Muslims. Ultimately it emerged as a stumbling block before the issue of national integration. The Muslims were happy that the Award gave them the right of separate electorate. So, the Muslims extended their overwhelming approval to the Award. On the other hand, the Hindus were completely disillusioned by the Award. The Governor of Assam wrote a letter to Saadulla on August 8, 1932 seeking information about the people's reaction to the Award. Saadulla was apprehensive about the effect of the Award and expressed his viewpoints in these words:

I am confident that 99 per cent of Assam Muslims if not cent per cent endorses my view that they were not satisfied with the Award. So far I have been informed that the Assam Muslim League, with headquarter at Sylhet proposed to protest against the Award on 21st August, but as the All India Muslim League also sitting on that very date at Delhi to discuss the Award, the Sylhet League has not passed any formal protest. They are waiting to see the result of the All India League.

Saadulla was very candid about his feeling that every Muslim that he had encountered and spoken with in Shillong had disapproved the Award. Saadulla himself was also critical of the Award. 'Disappointing' and 'unjustifiable' are the two words that he used to describe the Award. He commented in these words, "The Muslims of this province got a bitter pill to swallow in the shape of this Award and

they cannot, therefore, be satisfied with it.” He brought forward statistics to justify his view. According to him, the Muslims were allotted only 34 seats out of 108 whereas the Muslims formed 31.9 per cent of the population. Percentage wise this allotment worked out to be 31.4 per cent only. The reality was that the Muslims formed 34.90 per cent of the total population of the enfranchised area and this had to be taken into account.⁴⁸ Since this was not done, Saadulla was of the view that no Muslim could accept or be satisfied with the Award. Therefore, he urged upon the Government to modify the Award and grant 38 seats to the Muslims in the Council. Keane himself and the Government as a whole felt much worried because Saadulla was an Executive member and he always asserted a definite and open line disfavoured the Award. Even after Saadulla’s incessant disapproval on behalf of his community, the Governor tried to prove the Award acceptable to the people of Assam and no modification was made. Saadulla’s opposition against the transfer of Sylhet from Assam, his views placed before Simon Commission and even his strong disapproval of the Communal Award was influenced by a sense of communal consciousness. At the same time it cannot be denied that his concern to raise the finance of the Assam and thereby to elevate the status of the province remained close to his heart.

So, it is evident that Saadulla in the early phase of his political career was moderate in his political views in gradual constitutional advancement towards self rule. Saadulla opposed Swarajists policy and programme of wholesale obstruction and wrecking the Constitution on the ground that it would not bring any benefit to the people rather he preferred formation of a united opposition to democratically force the Government of India to make concessions and for this reason he held office as

⁴⁸ Bhuyan, A, C & De, S. (eds). *Political History of Assam*, Vol-II, Government of Assam, Gauhati, 2008, p-320.

minister under the tutelage of the British. But after the suspension of the non-cooperation and the Khilafat movement when the relation between Hindus and the Muslims deteriorated in Assam following the all India pattern Saadulla moved closer to British to draw more political concessions for his community on one hand and for the interest of his province on the other hand. It was because of his concern for the Muslim community he has been branded as communal and defender of the Muslim interests only. But Saadulla's role as the defender of Muslim interest was rooted in backwardness of the Muslims that berated their position in all walks of life and their permanent minority position in the political set-up based on the majority rule. Moreover, he extended his support to the British as they were the ultimate decision makers and even went to the extent of choosing a no-confrontation-path with the rulers, the British. Saadulla also developed a close relation with the British to attain stability to his political position in the Council as he was not affiliated to any party and had no party support in the Council and because of this he got branded as pro-British.