

## CHAPTER-IV

### Saadulla's leadership in Assam during 1939-1945

The devastating Second World War is generally said to have begun on 1<sup>st</sup> September, 1939 when the German army under Adolf Hitler invaded Poland. Hitler's unprovoked act of aggression on Poland subsequently drove France and Britain to declare war on Germany two days later. Since India was under the British rule, the Viceroy immediately declared India's participation in the war against Germany. The Viceroy also issued a number of laws, rules and regulations "for the maintenance of public order or the efficient prosecution of war or for maintaining supplies and services to the life of the community."<sup>1</sup> Linlithgow dragged India into the war without consulting the Indian leaders or the members of the Legislatures. The Viceroy sat for discussions with the Indian leaders after the promulgation of ordinances in order to secure their co-operation and support. The Congress became very angry with this one-sided and despotic approach of the British and wanted assurance from the British that after the war, India would be given independence and the right to frame their Constitution. As the British did not agree to it the Congress refused to co-operate the British in their war effort and also instructed all the Congress ministries in different provinces to resign in protest.<sup>2</sup> The Congress Working Committee's decision of resignation of all the Congress ministries in the provinces left the British Government in India in a much complicated situation at the time of the war. The Congress Working Committee's decision created a rift among the members of Assam

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<sup>1</sup>Bhuyan, A. C. and De, S. (eds). *Political History of Assam, Vol-III*, Govt. of Assam, Guwahati, 2008, p-2.

<sup>2</sup> Bhuyan, A. C. and De, S. (eds). *Political History of Assam, Vol-III*, Govt. of Assam, Guwahati, 2008, p-257.

Provincial Congress Committee. A section of the member favoured the decision of Congress Working Committee while the other wanted that the Congress-coalition ministry should stay in power in order to frustrate the installation of Saadulla in power. In view of the war, the Governor General became restless to set up any ministry in power in the province which would co-operate with the British during the time of war and thereby help the British in avoiding the suspension of the Constitution in the province. Under these circumstances, the Governor of Assam, Robert Reid had made up his mind to ask Saadulla to come forward and take the initiative of forming the ministry and thereby help them in their disaster. He even cherished the hope that Saadulla would not dishearten him in his plan. Saadulla received the Congress Working Committee's decision with great enthusiasm and agreed to help the British in their crisis as he thought that it was the only way by which he could put himself in power. More than this his moderate political views inspired him to accept the Governor's proposal of forming Government after the resignation of Bardoloi. Saadulla was by nature an astute, witty, skilled, modest, moderate and good-natured. Because of this persona and also because of the fact that he belonged to the Assamese Muslim community, the British considered him as their favourite Premier. Saadulla assured the Governor that he would work hard to gain majority and thereby he would qualify himself to be appointed as the Premier. While making efforts to gain majority he had to face greatest challenge from the side of Congress Party which under the leadership of Bardoloi had hatched a plan to install another coalition ministry with the help of Nicholas Roy and Hyder Ali Khan.<sup>3</sup> Due to the conspiracy of Bardoloi and intrigue of politics Saadulla was unable to cobble the requisite majority. Being conscious of his lack of majority support behind him, Saadulla refused to shoulder the

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<sup>3</sup> Nicholas Roy and Hyder Ali Khan formed a new party known as Assam Coalition Party.

responsibility when, the Governor persuaded him to form the Government after Bardoloi submitted his resignation on 15<sup>th</sup> November in pursuance of the Congress Working Committee's directive on the issue of war. Saadulla's inability to form the Government made the Governor very unrest and upset. Therefore, he wrote to the Governor General as follows:

I think, you will agree with me that it is extremely desirable to avoid the possibility of having a puppet ministry and on this account, I personally am very anxious to do all I reasonably can, to assist Saadulla without of course laying myself open to the charge of entering into politics.

Saadulla, however being aware of the attitude of the Governor, asserted that he would take the risk of forming the Government on the ground that he should be given sufficient time to work for party support by postponing the session fixed for 30<sup>th</sup> November 1939. He also proclaimed that he should be allowed to increase member of his cabinet. The Governor and the Governor General approved his proposal because they did not wish to lose the services of an outstanding personality like Saadulla.<sup>4</sup> Saadulla then called a meeting at Shillong to discuss the strategy and finalised the ministry and finally on 17<sup>th</sup> November Saadulla formed his ministry with six ministers.<sup>5</sup>

After forming the ministry Saadulla engaged himself to revive his political position with the utmost task of gaining the confidence of the members who were

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<sup>4</sup> Rao, V. Venkata and Hazarika, Niru. *A Century of Government and Politics in North East India, Vol-I (Assam)*, S. Chand and Company Ltd., New Delhi, 1983, p-68.

<sup>5</sup> Guha, Amalendu. *Planter Raj to Swaraj, Freedom Struggle and Electoral Politics in Assam 1826 - 1947*, People's Publishing House, New Delhi, 1977, p-264.

hostile to him. To begin with he turned his attention towards League leaders. No doubt, a fraction of Muslim leaders rendered their support to his newly formed ministry, but most of the League leaders were hostile to him. Saadulla was indecisive about the abolition of the Line System and this indecision brought him wrath of the League leaders. Moreover, the Congress coalition ministry's resolution of 4<sup>th</sup> November, 1939 regarding the Line System made them more angered and hostile to Saadulla. In the first Assam Provincial Muslim League Conference held on November 18-19, 1939, immediately after Saadulla had taken oath as the Premier of Assam, there he got an opportunity to appease the aggravated immigrant League leaders. In the conference he delivered a highly provocative address and assured them to repudiate the policy of the previous government pertaining to the Line System. He even promised to provide land to two lakh landless immigrants within a period of two months.<sup>6</sup> With this assurance he solicited the support of the immigrant members of the Assembly for stabilising his ministry. Not only this, for wooing the support of the League members he offered them the post of ministership. His plan worked and the League members swallowed the bait of ministership. In corollary to this, on 5<sup>th</sup> December two more League leaders were inducted in his ministry. By this strategy and tactics Saadulla could now muster the strength of thirty three out of thirty four Muslim members.

By this time Saadulla received news that the Congress Party's attempt to set up a puppet government in Assam was rejected by the Congress Working Committee. Saadulla came forward to take full advantage of the situation. He persuaded the members of Tribal League to lend their support to his newly formed Government. He

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<sup>6</sup> Proceedings of the Second Day's Sitting of the First Session of the Assam Provincial Muslim League held at Ghagmari on 19 November 1939. (Secret Records); also Quoted in Dev, B. J. and Lahiri, D. K. (eds). *Assam Muslim Politics and Cohesion*, Mittal Publications, New Delhi, 1985, p-68.

tried to convince them that by joining hands with him they would get the opportunity to participate in the policy matters of the Government. Saadulla's attempt at last bore fruit. When the Assam Coalition Party's plan of forming an alternative government in collaboration with the Congress Party failed, the leaders of the Tribal League who had not committed its support to the Assam Coalition Party<sup>7</sup> ultimately moved to the Saadulla's fold after getting a seat in the cabinet. Consequently, on 9<sup>th</sup> January Rupnath Brahma was inducted in Saadulla's cabinet. Saadulla had to increase size of his cabinet for ensuring the necessary support. Thus, by the end of the first week of December Saadulla not only succeeded in drawing support from different political groups and individuals to his side but also brought his third ministry on sound footing.<sup>8</sup> Saadulla after bringing his third ministry on sound footing engaged himself to consolidate his recent gains.

It was about this time, Jinnah announced that the resignation of the Congress Government in the provinces would be celebrated by the Muslim on 22<sup>nd</sup> December as Deliverance Day to rejoice the end of the oppression, injustice and tyranny that had occurred under the Congress regime.<sup>9</sup> Saadulla, who was then the President of Assam Provincial Muslim League, also received the instruction from Jinnah to observe the Deliverance Day in Assam. Being the President of the Assam Provincial Muslim League<sup>10</sup> on one hand and the Premier of Assam on the other hand Saadulla's position was very pathetic. Saadulla's opinion was that his declaration of celebrating the Deliverance Day in Assam might antagonise the members of his cabinet who were not

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<sup>7</sup> Nicholas Roy was the leader and Hyder Ali Khan was the President Assam Coalition Party.

<sup>8</sup> The Governor described Saadulla's cabinet of his third ministry as a scratch team.

<sup>9</sup> Ghose, Sankar. *Jawarlal Nehru, a biography*, Allied Publishers, New Delhi, 1992, p-128.

<sup>10</sup> The Assam Provincial Muslim League was reconstituted on 30<sup>th</sup> November 1939 with Saadulla as the President and Abdul Hamid Khan (Bhasani) as the Vice-President.

affiliated to Muslim League.<sup>11</sup> While on the other hand his objection to observing the Deliverance programme might displease the League members of Assam. But by giving the decision in favour or against the celebration of the Deliverance Day programme in Assam, he did not want to lose the support of his constituent parties which he had clobbered with great difficulties. In such a critical juncture, Saadulla tackled the situation by avoiding the entire episode. So, when the time of implementing the programme came he left for Calcutta without implementing it, which was observed by the other members in Assam. All this vindicated the fact that Saadulla was not only very calculative and conscious about his decision but also a far-sighted politician. It also proved the fact that Saadulla was more influenced by political consideration than anything else. Besides, had political policy not been his primary objective, than Saadulla being a member of the Muslim League would have definitely implemented Jinnah's instruction.

### **Saadulla and his war efforts**

Ignoring the stand taken by Assam Provincial Congress Committee as regard the war Saadulla welcomed the Viceregal action and even highly praised the brave stand taken by Britain to save democracy and freedom and thereby to destroy Fascism and aggression. Saadulla even appealed the people of India "to stand by Britain in these difficult and uncertain times".<sup>12</sup>

During this crucial period of war Saadulla mainly confined himself to assist the British in their war efforts to consolidate his political position but also to

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<sup>11</sup> Bhuyan, A. C. and De, S. (eds). *Political History of Assam, Vol-III*, Govt. of Assam, Guwahati, 2008, p-259.

<sup>12</sup> Bhuyan, A. C. and De, S. (eds). *Political History of Assam, Vol-III*, Govt. of Assam, Guwahati, 2008, p-4.

reciprocate the gesture that the Governor had shown by allowing him to remain in power in spite of lacking majority support. In order to ingratiate himself with the British, he also headed a provincial war aid committee which included other members of his ministry.<sup>13</sup> He also opened branches of the provincial war aid committee at various district headquarters and assured to provide the committees his sincere support at all phases. In order to substantiate his pro-war activity, Saadulla also initiated fund raising efforts for the British military campaign.<sup>14</sup> Due to his initiative the Government of Assam under him could contribute a sum of one lakh rupees to the war fund in 1940.<sup>15</sup> Assam was the first and only province to make such a huge contribution to the Central Government for the prosecution of war. For this token of loyalty shown by Saadulla, the Secretary of State for India expressed his warm feeling of satisfaction.<sup>16</sup> Saadulla did not stop here rather he went further and made an appeal to various Local and Municipal Boards and the town committee of the province to contribute to the war fund.

The government officers also participated in the collection of war fund by exercising pressure on the mercantile firms, by realising subscriptions from the applicants for gun licenses at the time of issuing or renewing licenses for guns. Some magistrates also compelled the litigants to make contributions to the war fund. The employees of the Government or the Government aided institutions had to suffer from pay-cuts if they refused to contribute to the war fund. The Nagaon Local Board while

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<sup>13</sup> Hirendrachandra Chakravarty, R. K. Choudhuri, Rupnath Brahma and Abdul Matin Chaudhury were the members of the provincial war aid committee headed by Saadulla.

<sup>14</sup> Hazarika, Sanjoy. *Strangers of the Mist: War and Peace from India's Northeast*, Penguin Groups, New Delhi, 1994, p-57.

<sup>15</sup> IAR, Vol. 2 July-December 1940, p-250; Guha, Amalendu. *Planter Raj to Swaraj, Freedom Struggle and Electoral Politics in Assam 1826 -1947*, People's Publishing House, New Delhi, 1977, p-265.

<sup>16</sup> Thakuria, Pratibha. *Politics and Government in Assam (1874-1947)*, Bani Prakash, Guwahati, p-173.

making settlements of hats and pounds pressurised the successful bidders to contribute to the war fund. In Nagaon district some mauzadars refused to accept revenue dues until the ryots made a substantial contribution to the war fund.<sup>17</sup> When the matters were brought to notice by legislators of the Assam in the Assembly Saadulla himself admitted that mauzadars of the Nagaon district were involved in that coercion. In this context it cannot be denied that Saadulla being the Premier of the province was not familiar with those activities of the head of the various institutions of the province. It can also be taken into consideration that Saadulla had given them free hand to exercise their influence in fund collection. So in the light of the above argument it would not be wrong to conclude that Saadulla adopted massive coercive methods to raise war fund to satiate his personal interests by impressing the British only.

Meanwhile, the deteriorating situation of the war at the international level created an apprehension in his mind that war might extend to the eastern frontier of India and that may jeopardise the internal security of the province. To cope up with the anticipated situation he raise a body of 50 civil guards in each District Headquarters in the plains and provided them appropriate civil defence training. Saadulla was not satisfied with all the steps that he had taken to serve Britain in its war efforts. Saadulla as a part of his pro-war activity raised an Assam Regiment and called upon the Assamese belonging to different classes to join the armed forces.

To impress the British, Saadulla even accepted, without any reference to Jinnah, the offer of a seat on the National Defence Council. Saadulla's attitude and contribution of several lakhs of rupees to the cause of the war was severely deplored

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<sup>17</sup> Bhuyan, A. C. and De, S. (eds). *Political History of Assam, Vol-III*, Govt. of Assam, Guwahati, 2008, p-13-14.

by the Congress members. According to them such a huge contribution to the British exchequer for the war fund during 1940-41 would not benefit Assam in any way and that it was only a burden on the provincial exchequer. But such comment from the side of the Congress members hardly had any influence upon him and his policy and in defence of his policy Saadulla said as follows:

I cannot admire their mentality and their outlook. But this side of the house differs fundamentally with the other side in this. They are out to make bargain when Britain is involved in a life and death struggle. But this side of the house had not been endowed with such mentality. We do not like to take advantage from a stricken nation.

Saadulla did not stop here and to counter them he pointed out that – ‘it is the bounden duty of every Hon’ble Member of the House to see that his Majesty is kept in power to rule justly over Assam and his kingdom’. To impress the British, Saadulla even violated the League’s directive of 15<sup>th</sup> June 1940 forbidding Muslims to serve on war committees pending further instructions but later to escape punishment he resigned from the Defence Council when Jinnah proposed disciplinary action against him.

However, Saadulla’s contribution to war fund in the face of stiff opposition from the Congress Party, his acceptance of seat on the National Defence Council without any reference to Jinnah and the violation of the League’s directive of 15<sup>th</sup> June 1940 forbidding Muslims to serve on war committees pending further instructions from Jinnah clearly proves that Saadulla had done all that he could do in his capacity to reciprocate the gesture that the Governor had shown by allowing him to remain in power in spite of lacking majority support behind him. Besides this it

also proves that Saadulla gave more importance to his political position than following the principles and ideologies of Muslim League.

### **Saadulla's attempt to silence the Muslim Leaguers**

Hardly Saadulla had stabilised his ministry, than he found himself under heavy pressure from Abdul Hamid Bhasani. Bhasani constantly pressed Saadulla to transplant his pious pronouncements of providing lands to two lakh immigrants into meaningful action in order to remove the grievances of the Bengali peasantry. Saadulla was also fervently urged by Bhasani to rescind the Line System as early as possible. On the other hand, the tribals expressing their discontent regarding Bordoloi's decision that the immigrants who were occupying land for 12 years prior to 1<sup>st</sup> April 1937 were not to be disturbed from the occupied lands through eviction, demanded legislative changes and enactment of law to evict all illegal settlers irrespective of whether they had settled before or after April 1937 and this was their stand on the issue of amending the condition of the Line System. So, Saadulla was caught between the two groups - the tribal representatives demanding protection and the Muslim League calling for the abolition of the Line System.

Such demands from the two ideologically divergent groups had put Saadulla in precarious position. To retain the support of the tribal group he needed to evict the immigrants, whereas to satisfy the Muslim leaders he had to abolish the much controversial Line System. This dilemma pushed Saadulla into a dungeon of confusion and insecurity. Saadulla could realise that any decision regarding the issue would antagonise the Muslim legislators or the Tribal representatives. This would no doubt lead to lose the support of either group. In order to resolve this issue, Saadulla applied his shrewd policy and very tactfully thrust the ball to the court of all the

parties of the legislature. Saadulla convened an all party meeting on 31<sup>st</sup> May and 1<sup>st</sup> June 1940 for an amicable settlement of this burning issue of Line System. A new policy known as 'Land Development Scheme' was enunciated as a result of the Line System conference. According to this scheme a ban was imposed on settlement of wastelands with any immigrants entering Assam after 1<sup>st</sup> January 1938.<sup>18</sup> But the decisions of the all party convention was vehemently criticised by the Muslim League members particularly the immigrant legislators. Saadulla's attempt of providing an amicable settlement of the thorny issue of Line System and the settlements of Muslim immigrant in the wastelands was greeted with considerable dismay by almost all the Muslim leaders. Bhasani accused that Saadulla had betrayed him and Muslim leaders. Criticising Saadulla and his attitude towards Line System and the settlements of Muslim immigrant in the wastelands Bhasani stated as follows:

... As regards giving land to two lakhs of landless people (as promised by the Premier in the League Conference), this has remained a pious wish. The Government (say Saadulla) have done nothing beyond calling a conference of different groups in the Assembly which is the safest bureaucratic method of shelving a question. The present Premier himself, no friend of the immigrants, under the influence of some of his colleagues whose avowed object is retention of the Line System and killing Bengali language and the culture, have already spent four years in a go-lucky manner..... If the Ministry were sincere in what they professed the best course for them was to abolish the Line System straight away.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> For details please see Saadulla's Speech in Assam Legislative Assembly Debates, Vol-II, No. 22, 6th December 1941, p-1416-1424.

<sup>19</sup> *The Dawn*, 25 October, 1940; also quoted in Dev, B. J. and Lahiri, D. K. (eds). *Assam Muslim Politics and Cohesion*, Mittal Publications, New Delhi, 1985, p-70.

The situation became complicated when Bhasani and four other immigrant members even threatened Saadulla to withdraw their support if Saadulla failed to fulfill their demand. This development put Saadulla in tight corner and to retain their support and to silence Bhasani and other Muslim legislators sympathetic to the immigrants Saadulla under compulsion had to give his consent of giving virgin land in various parts of Assam to at least one lakh immigrants within two months.<sup>20</sup> By giving this guarantee Saadulla was able to compel Bhasani to give up his decision to sever his link with Assam United Party. In response to his assurance during 1939- 40, Saadulla allotted one lakh bighas of land to the Muslim immigrants.<sup>21</sup> So, it is evident that Saadulla used the immigration issue as an instrument to revitalise his dwindle political position. In this context it is very important to mention that as a member of the Council since 1913 and later as a Premier Saadulla had firsthand knowledge of the Assam's financial position. There is no doubt that Assam was rich in its natural resources. Assam's main source of income was tea and petroleum, kerosene etc. but Assam had to pay maximum of its income to the Central Government in the shape of excise duty. As a result the remaining income of Assam was not sufficient for running the administration. As a minister under the Dyarchy system Saadulla placed Assam's financial problem before Simon Commission and urged for additional funds. Augmenting the financial revenues appeal had been made that the entire proceeds of the excise duty on petroleum and kerosene manufactured within the province should be allocated to Assam. But all these attempts bore no fruits. Rejecting Assam's claim on oil the Subvention Committee under Sir Otto Niemeyer, Assam received subvention of Rs 30 lakhs per annum.<sup>22</sup> In addition to this from divisible income tax

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<sup>20</sup> *Star of India*, 25 Feb, 1941; also cited in Dev and Lahiri, Op. Cit., p-70.

<sup>21</sup> Land Revenue Administrative Report of Assam 1939-40, Government of Assam, Shillong.

<sup>22</sup> Indian Financial Enquiry Report, 1936, p-7.

together with a share of the export duty Assam was assigned 2%.<sup>23</sup> When Saadulla accepted office as Premier in 1937 he found the subvention of Rs 30 lakhs per annum inadequate to run the new Constitutional Scheme under the Act of 1935. Moreover, the new Government under Saadulla inherited liabilities of 32 lakhs. In such situation Saadulla dealt with fiscal matters very cautiously. He was an ardent advocate of the policy of balanced budgets and avoided taking any loans from Central government to meet the expenditure for various schemes of development to prevent any rise in public debt. This deteriorate financial status of Assam led Saadulla to follow British policy of increasing the revenue of the province by opening up the wasteland for settlement with the Muslim immigrants. Saadulla gave preference to the Muslim immigrants from East Bengal because they were basically expert cultivators who could grow as many as five crops from the same soil in the same year.<sup>24</sup> For the perspective of developing Assam and making it a wealthier state, Saadulla thought that immigration was essential. So, in the light of above fact it cannot be denied that Saadulla provided land to the immigrants under economic consideration and political compulsion. Saadulla by giving land to the Muslim immigrants attempted to serve his personal interests as well as the economic prosperity of the province. Saadulla's attitude towards Line System and the settlements of Muslim immigrant in the wastelands was vehemently criticised throughout the province by the indigenous Assamese. Indigenous Assamese were against the continuous inflow of the immigrants as they were of the opinion that unchecked immigration might change the demographic composition of the province and that would reduce the ethnic Assamese to a minority in their homeland.

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Saadulla's Speech, n. 19, p-116; Quoted in Dev, B. J. and Lahiri, D. K. (eds). *Assam Muslim Politics and Cohesion*, Mittal Publications, New Delhi, 1985, p-36.

## **Impact of the Census operation and Lahore Resolution on Saadulla's political position**

When Saadulla was busy in safeguarding his personal interests along with economic interests of the province through the immigration issue, he as the Premier received the instruction from the Central Government that during the forthcoming Census operation of 1941 enumeration of population of the province should be conducted on the basis of community and not on the basis of religion. The colonial government stated that the purpose of such type of tabulation was to create separate community identity for the purpose of franchise. The colonial government's community based tabulation was supported by Tribal League with a view to create unified plain tribes. The members of League believed that if the tribal people were categorised under the head "tribal" then they would be more politically, socially and economically benefitted. Saadulla also shared the same view with the Tribal League. But there were some tribal leaders who did not like to enlist themselves separately from the Hindus in the Census operations of 1941. The differences of views among the tribal leaders ultimately divided them into two sections.

In spite of opposition from some tribal leaders the Census operation was carried out on the basis of community rather than on the basis of religion. As a result of this type of classification, a large number of tribal people who had earlier included under the head-Hindus, Christians or Buddhists were now included under the head "tribal". Consequently, the figure of the population of the Hindus, Christians and Buddhists dribbled down where as the figure of the population of Muslims and tribal in the Census of 1941 increased.<sup>25</sup> These changes in the pattern of the population created widespread resentment among the masses in the province. The Congress Party

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<sup>25</sup> *The Assam Tribune*, 15<sup>th</sup> August, 1941.

and the newspaper of the period held Saadulla responsible for the entire happenings. Saadulla was accused that he had instructed the Census Superintendent to manipulate the Census operation of 1941 to alter the demographic structure of the society. It is important to note that when the issue was brought for discussion in the Assembly the Congress Party could not produce any authentic document to prove Saadulla's direct involvement in the manipulation of the Census operation of 1941. Moreover, when Saadulla in his defence said that he or his Government is not at all responsible for community tabulation rather enumeration was ordered by the Central Government and that he only carried out the instruction, no counter argument was put forward by his critics.

The issue of providing land to the immigrants under economic compulsion and political consideration; the enumeration of the census of 1941 on the basis of community and not on religion under the order of the Central Government were two different issues but these two issues had an adverse affect on Saadulla's political position as the Premier. This was due to the declaration of the Lahore Resolution by the All India Muslim League which declared that "geographically contiguous units should be demarcated into regions so constituted, after necessary territorial adjustments, that the areas in which Muslims enjoy a numerical majority should be grouped into 'independent states' in which the constituent units should be autonomous and sovereign". It may be noted that the Lahore resolution of 23<sup>rd</sup> March 1940 did not clearly mention or distinguish the areas to be incorporated in Pakistan. However, the Lahore resolution abandoned the League's old politics which had consisted of evading the status of minority of Muslims and paved the way for a direct march towards a definite goal. Jinnah urged the Muslims of India to be behind the Muslim League and give full support to their ultimate goal. His propaganda was

directed at convincing the Muslims that the Congress was primarily a Hindu institution and that the interest of the Muslims was not safe in their hands.

Suffice to mention that after the passing of the Lahore resolution things began to move fast. During 1941 the fire of communalism had reached at its zenith and the division of Indian into two major communities, the Hindus and Muslims was completed. For this situation the communal politics of the period was no doubt responsible. Even in Assam the situation was not different. The evil of communalism had already taken its place in Assam and communal political party like Assam Provincial Hindu Sabha had entangled themselves in Assam politics. The Assam Provincial Hindu Sabha carried propaganda against Saadulla and his ministry and appealed the Hindus of Assam to unite themselves under one banner and work against Saadulla's government. Since Saadulla was a Muslim and the Premier of Assam on one hand and Muslim League member on the other hand it confirmed the apprehension among the Hindus of Assam that Saadulla through immigration issue and Census operation of 1941 wanted to make Assam Muslim majority province and thereby to include Assam in Pakistan zone. Saadulla now no doubt was looked upon as a communal political figure and his activities were suspected as pro Pakistan activities. Amidst protest movements and public agitations in the province, Saadulla on his part proceeded very cautiously as the head of a coalition and therefore he never identified himself publicly with League's views regarding Pakistan rather he emphasised more on Assam's economic condition. He maintained this attitude even during his interviews with the Reforms Commissioner India in 1941 and with Sir Stafford Cripps in 1942.

## **Role of R. K. Choudhuri in ousting Saadulla from power**

Saadulla was strange enough, to observe that his land settlement policy and the allegation of his involvement in the Census operation of 1941 coupled with All India Muslim League's separatists politics not only created serious hullabaloo and stirred the mind of the Hindu of Assam but also it created an atmosphere of ill-will and distrust within his group mainly among the non-Muslim groups, particularly R. K. Choudhuri's party. R. K. Choudhuri had joined Saadulla ministry in 1937 and since then in each of the Saadulla ministry, he was a member in his cabinet holding a formidable position. R. K. Choudhuri was a Caste Hindu and his United Peoples' Party was composed mainly of Hindus legislators whereas the ministry which they supported was not only headed by a Muslim but was also dominated by the Muslims. Moreover, there were a variety of issues on which R. K. Choudhuri and his Muslim colleagues had divergent opinion and even at some occasion he had quarreled with them on those issues. But those differences were never brought before public. Due to the Muslim League's Lahore Resolution and the propaganda of the Congress Party against Saadulla, R. K. Choudhuri felt discomfort to remain within Saadulla ministry and was looking for an opportunity to quit it. In this juncture, he got a chance to meet V. D. Savarkar and expressed his eagerness to join the Hindu Mahasabha and also sought tickets for the next elections. Savarkar approved to nominate him on the ground that if he and his ally succeeded in substituting the Saadulla ministry by one with a Hindu majority.<sup>26</sup> By this time, the immigration issue which was mainly a political and economic issue, was given communal colour and the Congress Party had obtained permission from the Congress High Command to attend the winter session beginning from 1<sup>st</sup> December and also obtained permission to get the ministry

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<sup>26</sup> Kar, M. *Muslims in Assam Politics*, Omsons Publications, New Delhi, 1990, p-246.

changed by winning over or buying off the more volatile elements in the ministerial party and thereby to form another ministry. There is no reason to suppose that the Congress maneuvers were unknown to Saadulla. In addition to that, even within the party he knew that there was strong opposition to him. A tense atmosphere started to blow against Saadulla and against this background Saadulla was aware that his existence as the Premier would be tough in the coming days. However, being aware of the Congress Party's attitude, Saadulla made up his mind to face the coming winter session of the Assembly cautiously and boldly. From 1<sup>st</sup> December to 5<sup>th</sup> December he was able to protect himself from the Congress Party's onslaught successfully in the Assembly. But on 6<sup>th</sup> December 1941 an unexpected incident occurred outside the Assembly which proved fatal for him and his ministry.

On 6<sup>th</sup> of December 1941 the students of Gauhati took out a large procession which traversed through the main thoroughfares of the town shouting slogan, "not a man not a pie, to the imperialist war". The main cause of the protest was the manhandling of a Cotton College student by a Member of the Managing Committee of the College for boycotting a science exhibition which was organised for raising funds for the war. Accompanied by a band of armed police, The Deputy Commissioner, Mr. Humphrey himself came out to stop the procession. What followed was a lathi charge and brutal assault on the student processionists by the armed force. This development took a violent turn in the days that followed. Demonstrations, strikes, processions and meetings to protest the violent turn of events on 6<sup>th</sup> December police lathi-bayonet-charge continued to be held across the province.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Dutta, Anuradha. *Assam in the Freedom Movement*, Darbari Prokashan, Calcutta, 1991, p-241-243; Guha, Amalendu. *Planter Raj to Swaraj, Freedom Struggle and Electoral Politics in Assam 1826 - 1947*, People's Publishing House, New Delhi, 1977, p-268.

When Saadulla received telegram from Gauhati on the matter, he immediately sent the Inspector General of police and the Director of Public Instructions to Gauhati to enquire into the matter and to submit their reports.<sup>28</sup> On the other hand, Gopinath and other members of the opposition benches went to Gauhati to enquire into the incident. On 7<sup>th</sup> December the students demanded a non official enquiry into the matter and disciplinary action against the authority and officers responsible for the incident. These demands of the students were conveyed to Saadulla through letter by Gopinath Bardoloi. It was against this backdrop, R. K. Choudhuri entered into an understanding with Gopinath Bardoloi to oust Saadulla from power. According to the understanding it was agreed that the Congress Party and its allies would support him in wrecking Saadulla Ministry and in forming a stable Ministry. In the meanwhile, Saadulla received the report of the Inspector General of Police and the Director of Public Instructions. Since the facts elicited by the enquiry of Gopinath Bardoloi, Inspector General of Police and the Director of Public Instructions did not tally, Saadulla found it difficult as to the action to be taken. Facing difficulties in this regard Saadulla called a meeting with R. K. Choudhuri, the then Education Minister, on the 8<sup>th</sup> December to discuss the Gauhati incident. Since they could not take any formative decision regarding the line of action to be taken that day, they agreed to meet again in the following morning to continue their discussion. But on the next day instead of meeting Saadulla, R. K. Choudhuri sent his resignation from the Saadulla cabinet. Saadulla was no doubt shocked about the attitude of R. K. Choudhuri. But before Saadulla could do anything to win over the confidence of R. K. Choudhuri and his party members everything went out of his hand as both Bardoloi and R. K. Choudhuri had entered into an understanding with Gopinath Bardoloi to oust Saadulla from

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<sup>28</sup> Assam Legislative Assembly Debates, 1941, Vol. 3, p-1492.

power.<sup>29</sup> According to the understanding it was agreed that the Congress Party and its allies would support him in wrecking Saadulla ministry and in forming a stable ministry. It is important to mention here that Saadulla who was so conscious and calculative in his decision became aware of the fact that without the support of R. K. Choudhuri and his party, he could not command a majority in the Legislature and in such a situation his fall was obvious. So, Saadulla after receiving the resignation letter of R. K. Choudhuri at 9:30 in the morning of the 9<sup>th</sup> he immediately called a meeting of the rest of the ministry and by 10 o'clock they planned to submit their resignation.<sup>30</sup> When the Assembly met in the morning of that day Saadulla intimated the House about the letter of resignation of R. K. Choudhuri. He also informed the House that as R. K. Choudhuri has resigned the whole cabinet had made up their mind to resign soon on the principles of joined responsibility. As soon as Saadulla finished his speech Bardoloi raised a discussion on the Gauhati situation. Being harassed and criticised by the Congress legislators on the issue, Saadulla guaranteed the legislators of the House that no further arrest or any other action would be taken against the students, but at the same time he refused to accept the demand that were put forwarded by the students. Saadulla's stiff approach made the legislators of the House more aggressive and they tabled a no- confidence motion against the ministry. Not only this, two more no-confidence motions were tabled against the ministry and fixed for discussion on the 13<sup>th</sup>. Saadulla understanding the political crisis of the period and also being aware of the fact that he no longer enjoyed the confidence of the House, submitted his resignation to the Chief Secretary in absence of the Governor on 12<sup>th</sup> of December. He did this only to avoid the discussion on the no-confidence motion and

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<sup>29</sup> Confident File No. Dept. G.S., progs for Dec, 1941, No. 242 (GS); Quoted in Dev, B. J. and Lahiri, D. K. (eds). *Assam Muslim Politics and Cohesion*, Mittal Publications, New Delhi, 1985, p-71.

<sup>30</sup> Assam Legislative Assembly Debates, 1941, Vol. 3, p-1514.

to save himself from facing an embarrassing situation in the Assembly. But the opposition party was not satiated even though Saadulla submitted his resignation letter. To become clear that the ministry as a whole had lost the confidence of the House they moved a no-confidence motion and voted on it. Excepting People's Party of R. K. Choudhuri and the Europeans, the entire Saadulla group withdrew from the House. The motion got carried through. Surprisingly, Choudhuri and two Parliamentary Secretaries were among those who voted in favour of the motion.

After the defeat of Saadulla ministry the Governor called a meeting with Gopinath Bardoloi and invited him to assist him in the formation of a cabinet. Bardoloi declining the offer informed the Governor that the Congress Party had decided to lend their support to R. K. Choudhuri who had undertaken to follow the Congress Programme and Policy, except war measures to form a stable government. In the next move the Governor called a meeting with R. K. Choudhuri and discussed with him the vital issue of war measures. But R. K. Choudhuri's proposal to depend on his group and on the Congress to keep himself in power and on the opposition in regard to war measures failed to convince the Governor and therefore he did not call R. K. Choudhuri to form a Cabinet. Finding no other alternative the Governor held a last meeting with Saadulla and try to convince him to form the Government. Saadulla being aware of the lack of majority support behind him, refused to form the ministry. In desperation, the Governor then tried his last resort of forming an all party cabinet. But this endeavour of the Governor went in vain, because of divergent attitudes of different parties. Under such circumstances, the Governor, finding no way to form a cabinet, was compelled to suspend the Constitution. Therefore, the Governor accepted the resignation of Saadulla and by his proclamation dated 25<sup>th</sup> December he

suspended the Constitution and subsequently took over the reins of administration of the province in his hand.<sup>31</sup>

### **Saadulla's effort to come back to power during Governor's rule**

The Governor's direct rule in Assam continued for eight months and Saadulla during this period engaged himself in enlisting party support. During the period of Governor's rule, the Governor of Assam on his part withdrew the Land Development Scheme of Saadulla in a bid to pacify the indigenous people of the province in order to obtain their support in the war efforts.<sup>32</sup> The Government's decision to evict all encroachments from the reserved areas and to preserve them for the future generation created unrest among the immigrants and their leaders.

Meanwhile, Japan entered the War as an Axis power and the Second World War took a serious turn. They also inflicted defeat on the Allied power at different places. As an aftermath of Japanese occupation of Burma (present Myanmar), several lakhs of evacuees entered Assam following which the State was declared a War Zone. This declaration caused enormous panic among the people of Assam. Moreover, because Assam was declared War Zone, the State was dotted with units of field army under the British Command. For the smooth transportation of military troops and war materials, the improvement of the communication system became urgent need of the hour. So, the Government of Assam had to start road construction projects as well as the construction of a large number of aerodromes in Assam. To meet the expense of the wartime expenditure, the Governor stopped the emoluments of the members of the

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<sup>31</sup> Home Poll, File no. 18/ 12/41; Fortnight Report, Assam, second half of December 1941, NAI; Reid, Sir Robert. *Years of Chang in Bengal and Assam*, Ernest Benn Limited, London, 1966, p- 147-148.

<sup>32</sup> Guha, Amalendu. *Planter Raj to Swaraj, Freedom Struggle and Electoral Politics in Assam 1826 - 1947*, People's Publishing House, New Delhi, 1977, p-270.

Assembly. He also withdrew the fifty percent of the revenue remission granted by the previous ministries.

The above mentioned steps viz. the withdrawal of land revenue, stoppage of emoluments of the members of the Assembly and summary eviction of new encroachers, taken by the Governor during the Governor's regime in Assam created havoc not only among the members of the Assembly in general but also among the ryots in particular. Moreover, the Governor's repeated refusal to invite R. K. Chaudhuri to form a ministry convinced non-Congress members of the Assembly that without Saadulla they would not be able to form a stable government and perform their parliamentary activities. A lifelong reputed politician, Saadulla exploited the situation for his political benefit. He began to champion the grievances of the members of the Assembly and untold miseries and distress of ryots together to attract supporters from the miscellaneous groups. By adopting this strategy when Saadulla succeed in gathering requisite majority, he met the Governor on 19<sup>th</sup> June and intimated him about his political status and persuaded the Governor to allow him to form the ministry. But the Governor hesitated to hand over the reins of the Government to Saadulla on the ground that the formation of a ministry might effect in a deficit of rupees and might harm the prosecution of war effort. He also thought that Saadulla after forming the Government might demand for the remission of land revenue.<sup>33</sup> But Saadulla on his part continued to put pressure on the Governor to hand over the keys of the office to him. Saadulla through his persist demand and pressure compelled Whittakar, the leader of the European group to sit for a discussion with him. Whittaker, under the tutelage of the Governor promised to lend support to

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<sup>33</sup> Rao, V. Venkata. 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-78.

Saadulla's group on two conditions-firstly he should be given a berth in the ministry and that he should be entrusted with the task of the prosecution of war effort. Secondly, Saadulla after forming Government could not demand for the remission of land revenue. Saadulla was aware of the fact the members of Assembly who had recently agreed to co-operate him in his ministry effort would not be contented without any remission and even if he accept the demands placed by Whittaker in order to acquire the support of the European group then majority of the members of Assembly would desert him. This dilemma pushed Saadulla into a dungeon of confusion and insecurity. Finding no other option Saadulla met the Governor. Saadulla while explaining the reasons behind his refusal of remission of land revenue told the Governor that a bulk of the members of the Assembly would be pleased if the land revenue was reduce by fifty percent, even though there were many who insisted for hundred per cent remission.<sup>34</sup> When his frantic efforts to convince the Governor to allow him to form the Government and to win over the confidence the European group failed Saadulla made up his mind to form Government without the European group. Saadulla informed the Governor about his plan through a letter and even requested the Governor should hand over the administration of the province to him, irrespective of the European attitude. But the Governor hesitated to do so. Later due to the intervention of P. J. Griffiths, the leader of European Group in the Central Legislative Assembly and Fleming of the Assam Oil Company a compromise was settled. According to the understanding Saadulla agreed that Transport and Supply Departments would be entrusted to the expert and Whittakar would be included in the cabinet only after the first session of the Assembly was over. But the Governor, not being satisfied with the compromise, moved ahead with his last attempt to persuade

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<sup>34</sup> Rao, V. Venkata. 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-79.

Saadulla to include a European in the cabinet. But Saadulla did not accept the Governor's proposal. Saadulla's interpretation of not including a European in the cabinet was that his ministry making effort would be frustrated if a European was included.<sup>35</sup>

### **Formation of Saadulla's Fourth ministry**

When Saadulla was busy in corresponding with British for assuming power, Gandhiji and other Congress leaders at the national level were engaged in making plan to pull out the British from India as they believed that as long as the British authorities persevered, India would not be able to protect herself against Japanese, nor it could solve its domestic problems. The Indian National Congress at its Bombay session approved the famous Quit India resolution and the country under Gandhiji's leadership gave a call for mass struggle under the slogan of "do or die". However, even before the Congress could start the movement, the authorities clamped down on the Congress and arrested all its top leaders. This repressive act of the British created wide resentment among the Indians and in protest a popular upsurge broke out throughout the province.

Jinnah on his part criticised the step taken by the Congress Party. According to Jinnah if the British quit India then the internal problem of India would not be solved and India would be dominated by the Hindu Raj without any fair justice to the Muslims masses. So, the League strongly condemned the Quit India Movement as not only anti-British but also anti-Muslims and advised the Muslims to remain aloof from the movement completely. At this the Viceroy facilitated the installation of League

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<sup>35</sup> Rao, V. Venkata. 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-82.

Government under Saadulla in Assam as a welcome gesture to the stand taken by the All India Muslim League.<sup>36</sup> Even the arrest of all the important leaders of the Assam Congress after the declaration of the 'Quit India' Resolution and the eagerness of the Governor of Assam to install a "popular ministry" to combat the movement of 1942 paved the way for Saadulla to come to power.

Like their counterparts in other parts of India, the people of Assam also disobeyed the doctrine of non-violence by taking to sabotage activities. In fact in all the districts, the mobs in large number started to attack and destroy police and railway stations, post offices, telegraph offices, government or semi government school buildings, inspection bungalows and other symbols of British authority.<sup>37</sup> On the very night following Saadulla's assumption of the office of Premiership the mob attacked Sorbhog police station. At the same time a military aerodrome under construction, in Barpeta Sub-division were set ablaze by another section of the militants. All these activities were no doubt a process of putting enormous strain upon the resources of Government.

Seeing the frenzy and that the situation was slipping out of the hands the Government under Saadulla adopted a number of repressive measures for controlling the movement. The measures taken by him to deal with the disturbances were confined primarily to the preservation of life and property. He reinforced the Police Force to establish guards and also put into service the patrols and guards from the military to maintain law and order in the province. As a part of defensive measures to stop sabotage caused by the public, collective fines were imposed and measures were

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<sup>36</sup> Zakaria, Rafiq. *The Man Who Divided India*, Popular Prakashan, Mumbai, 2011, p-88.

<sup>37</sup> Bhuyan, A. C. and De, S. (eds). *Political History of Assam, Vol-III*, Govt. of Assam, Guwahati, 2008, p-66.

taken to ensure public co-operation in the protection of public property. He authorised the Districts officers to make use of these measures to enforce prompt enforcement of justice. In this pretext, Saadulla described the movement as ‘subversive and mischievous’ and felt that people have been misguided in the name of freedom and independence.<sup>38</sup> In a statement on the political situation of the province Saadulla noted.

...Whatever may be the official attitude of the Congress, some of the Congress leaders and under their instructions-the rank and file of the Congress members and their Santi Senas are heavily involved in this Civil Disobedience Movement. There can be no gain saying that by the present movement we have not in any wish that every reasonable individual, every thinking man and woman in India will calmly consider whether India’s cause for freedom and independence has in any way been augmented by the present movement whether started by the Congress or by the hooligans or by the sympathisers of the Congress’.<sup>39</sup>

While upholding the principle of suppression Saadulla declared “I have got no hesitation in saying that every measure that Government have taken so far is at my own responsibility and I am not ashamed of the steps taken”.

### **Enunciation of a new policy in favour of the immigrants by Saadulla under pressure and its consequences**

When Saadulla came to power in 1942 he found himself surrounded by economic problems demanding urgent solution. As a part of his commitment to

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<sup>38</sup> Assam Legislative Assembly Debates, Vol. 1, No. 5, 26 November, 1942, p-440.

<sup>39</sup> Assam Legislative Assembly Debates, Vol. 1, No. 5, 26 November, 1942, p-442.

support the war efforts he had to bear the load of supporting the war economy including the burden of feeding the military men, stationed at various parts of the province to resist the advance of the Japanese in Assam. But Saadulla found that the provincial exchequer was not sufficient to meet the economic crisis of such huge magnitude. In addition to this, as a result of war there was shortage of food, cloth and other essential commodities. When Saadulla was struggling to solve the problem of economic situation of Assam a terrible famine erupted in the neighbouring province of Bengal. The magnitude of the consequence of famine was so horrible that a large number of people had migrated to various provinces of India including Assam in search of food thinking it to be a land of plenty. To reduce the hardship of the of famine stricken mass who had migrated to Assam, the Government of Bengal requested Saadulla to provide them with food and shelter by opening its reserves lands to the land hungry immigrant from Bengal in the interest of the inter-provincial amity and particularly as an act of sympathy towards the landless immigrants. Thus the exodus of famine stricken mass to Assam also intensified Saadulla's problem of providing food to them.

It was about the same time Indian Viceroy Linlithgow initiated a policy known as the 'Grow More Food Campaign'. The main purpose of this policy was to increase the food production of India and to remove the temporary scarcity of food by supplying food grains from surplus region to deficit region within the country. Saadulla also received the order from the Central Government to implement it with immediate effect. The Central Government opined that there was vast wasteland in Assam. Even Saadulla shared the same opinion. During the budget session of 1940 Saadulla affirmed that "Assam is suffering from want of population to cultivate the

vast quantity of arable land what is waiting for the plough”.<sup>40</sup> In order to achieve the goals of ‘Grow More Food’, the Government of India had made plans for extending cultivation in Assam up to 57 lakh acres from existing 52.8 lakh acre, but the Assam Government headed by Saadulla felt that as the year had advanced too far, the target was not realisable.

Saadulla being confronted with so much economic problems engaged himself in finding the solutions of these problems. Saadulla thought that the crisis of food staff in Assam could be increased only by extensive use of existing uncultivated lands. He felt that if he settled immigrant cultivators from Bengal, instead of the local Assamese, for cultivation of food crops then he would be able to meet the Bengal government demand of providing land to landless people, solving the food crisis of the province and the least he would be able to enhance provincial exchequer through land revenue. With this object in view he enunciated a new policy in August 1943 in favour of the immigrants.

Saadulla arranged the policy in such a way that besides protecting the interests of all old encroachers in the various reserves it opened a large number of small grazing reserves for the immigrant population without taking any decision regarding the Line System. In a way Saadulla relaxed the perimeter of the Line System and allowed lands to be passed into the hands of the immigrant population at an unprecedented pace owing to the imperative need of growing more food. But Saadulla’s policy was vehemently criticised by the Hindus population of Assam. His policy was viewed by them as a ‘Communal Game’ to inflate the Muslim population

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<sup>40</sup> Proceedings of the Assam Legislative Assembly, 1940, The Assam Gazette, Part, VI, B, 1940, Published by Authority, Shillong, 1940, p-117; also quoted in Dev, B. J. and Lahiri, D. K. (eds). *Assam Muslim Politics and Cohesion*, Mittal Publications, New Delhi, 1985, p-68.

in the province under the garb of ‘Grow More Food’ and thereby to include Assam in the proposed eastern wing of Pakistan. Echoing almost the same view the then Viceroy Archibald Percival Wavel, writing his memoirs in the Viceroy’s Journal’, stated that:

The chief political problem (in Assam) is the desire of the Muslim Ministers to increase immigration into the uncultivated lands under the slogan of “Grow More Food” but what they are really after is grow more Muslims.<sup>41</sup>

Whether Saadulla wanted to solve the economic problem of Assam only or he wanted to include Assam in the Pakistan zone by allotting more lands to immigrants is very difficult to ascertain. Whatever might be Saadulla’s real motive but it can be said with certainty that by allotting more lands to the immigrants under the pretext of ‘Grow More Food’ Saadulla endeavoured to pacify the League leaders who clamoured for more lands for the immigrants and at the same time without declaring the Line System as null and void he avoided to arouse hostility among his supporters. Saadulla’s strategic and tactical dealing with Line System and with economic problem of the province without hampering his political position clearly demonstrate his skill and aptitude of being a perfect politician.

But his attempt of leading the economic problem of the province and at the same time, pacifying the League leaders for retaining their support without striking at the root of the Line System controversy did not bore any fruit. Abdul Matin Chaudhury and Munawwar Ali, upholding the portfolio of forest and revenue in

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<sup>41</sup> Moor, Penderel.(ed.). *Wavell: the Viceroy’s Journal*, Oxford University Press, London, 1973, p-41; Hazarika, Sanjoy. *Strangers of the Mist, Tales of War and Peace from India’s North – East*, Penguin Books, New Delhi, 1994, p-59-60.

Saadulla's cabinet and even Abdul Hamid Bhasani of the Muslim League with the instructions from the High Command put more pressure on Saadulla to abolish the Line System by intensifying and taking full advantage of the 'Grow More Food Scheme'. They even stressed Saadulla to increase the numerical strength of the Muslims in the province under the grab of "Growing More Food" campaign and cooperated with them in including Assam in the proposed eastern wing of Pakistan. But Saadulla as usual refused to eradicate the Line System out rightly.

In the meantime, as per the provision of the already declared land settlement policy of August 1943, S. P. Desai, a foremost I.C.S officer from Maharashtra, was appointed as Special Officer to determine the portion of surplus grazing reserves for settlement. While at work, Desai was astonished to notice that the massive portion of the reserves had already been occupied and invaded by the immigrants from Bengal. He even discover that the immigrants, in violence of the prevailing rules and regulations, had already encroached upon huge portion of grazing reserves in the Assamese or tribal areas after the announcement of the Saadulla's New Policy in August 1943.<sup>42</sup> His report was that there was no surplus land available for new settlement. The report of Desai put Saadulla in a very confused position about the line of action to be taken regarding the immigrant encroacher in the grazing lands. The influential members of the Muslim League were pressuring Saadulla to take decision very carefully without hampering the interests of immigrants. Saadulla was aware of the fact that he could not afford to remain in power by ignoring the views of majority of the Provincial Muslim League members as they were his solid supporters. This political obligation compelled Saadulla to override Desai's report and to satisfy the

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<sup>42</sup> Barooah, Nirode Kumar. *Gopinath Bordoloi, 'The Assam Problem' and Nehru's Centre*, Bhabani Print and Publications, Guwahati 2010, p-164.

League leaders Saadulla took no action against the illegal trespassers and squatters. But the problem for Saadulla did not end here. The steps taken by Saadulla satisfied neither the Bengal Government nor the land hungry Bengali Muslim immigrants and their leader Bhasani.

Not being contented with Saadulla's policy on land settlement the Government of Bengal laid extra stress on Saadulla to take more immigrants and provide them the requisite food and shelter on the grounds of severe misery existing in Bengal.<sup>43</sup> On the other hand, Bhasani, the leader of the immigrants had become more and more strident and continued to put pressure upon Saadulla to abolish the Line System. Bhasani, while visiting the immigrant areas preached the concept of Pakistan and propagate that it was Saadulla's indecisiveness and nervousness that led to the disgraceful prolongation of the notorious Line System. But Saadulla on his part was not willing to give in such pressures. Saadulla's haziness regarding the abolition of the Line System not only aggravated the immigrant leader, Bhasani but also created a rift in Assam Provincial Muslim League. In the midst of this prevailing situation the Assam Provincial Muslim League conference was called in April 1944 and Saadulla was also invited to attend the conference. When Saadulla visited the venue of the conference he was astonished to see the wittings like 'Ministers give us land or resign', 'We want to live where the animals live', 'Muslims do not fear to die', 'Immigrants want better deal', 'Pakistan is our better right', 'Open out grazing reserves' etc. in the walls of the 'pandal' of the same conference. Saadulla reacted to entire situation very mildly and while delivering the speech on the occasion he said:

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<sup>43</sup> Barooah, Nirode Kumar. *Gopinath Bordoloi, 'The Assam Problem' and Nehru's Centre*, Bhabani Print and Publications, Guwahati 2010, p-166.

I have become old in service; it will be better if you relieve me of this burden. I have been a Minister for a long time and if you say that I should resign, I shall tender resignation by wire to the Governor. Maulana Abdul Hamid Khan and Maulvi Motiur Rahman challenged and said that they would see how we can maintain the Ministry unless we accept their view. I recognise that they are the backbone of the Ministry. Tell me now and we shall go out at once”.<sup>44</sup>

In the conference Saadulla had to face an embracing situation. He was attacked openly by Bhasani for having done nothing for ameliorating the grievances of the victims of the Line System. Contradicting Bhasani’s charges when Saadulla highlighted the instances of sufferings of Assamese Muslims and plain tribals at the hands of the aggressive Bengali immigrants a hot version took between them on the matter in which Saadulla had to suffer a defeat. In spite of all these Saadulla did not give up the battle and stood by his already declared policy of 1943.<sup>45</sup>

At this time the Congress leaders under the leadership of Bardoloi resumed political legislative activities after a lapse of three years. Saadulla’s policy of allowing the immigrants to obtain settlement of lands on the Assamese and tribal areas naturally caught the attention of the Assam Congress leaders as well as the Governor. They put heavy pressure upon Saadulla for reconsideration of the land settlement issue by an all party conference. Moreover, Saadulla being disappointed of the high expectation of immigrant leaders and their behavior towards him at the Assam

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<sup>44</sup> Proceedings of the Third Annual Session of the Assam Provincial Muslim League; Dev, B. J. and Lahiri, D. K. (eds). *Assam Muslim Politics and Cohesion*, Mittal Publications, New Delhi, 1985, p-42.

<sup>45</sup> Guha, Amalendu. *Planter Raj to Swaraj, Freedom Struggle and Electoral Politics in Assam 1826 - 1947*, People's Publishing House, New Delhi, 1977, p-282.

Provincial Muslim League conference welcomed the suggestion for a talk among parties on the question of land settlement without holding any prior consultation with the Muslim League party. Saadulla after fixing the date and arranging venue of the conference invited all the concerning parties for discussion on land settlement policy on 16<sup>th</sup> December 1944.

The discussion of the conference which lasted for three days mainly centered round the following subjects: the pattern of land settlement, how to protect the interests of the indigenous people, food problem of the province and whether professional reserves should be opened for settlement or not. Saadulla made a detour this time. In the conference Saadulla did not adhere to the stand taken by the Provincial Muslim League spokesperson. He even did not extend support to the Provincial Muslim League viewpoint for the abolition of the Line System at the conference, a demand which was put forward by the Working Committee prior to the first day's sitting of the conference. Rather in the conference Saadulla stood by the policy of Congress Party on settlement issue and agreed to whatever was suggested by the Congress Party. Among other things, the inviolability of professional grazing reserves was once again recognised in principle in this conference and agreed that this was to be maintained through eviction. Front ranking leaders of the Muslim League vehemently opposed this decision of the conference. But ignoring the opinion and viewpoint of majority of Muslim League leaders when Saadulla in response to decisions of the All –Party Conference passed a new resolution on land settlement on 15<sup>th</sup> January 1945, the new policy provoked widespread opposition. Criticising Saadulla and other members of the ministry who supported Saadulla's land policy, Abdul Matin Chaudhury in his paper "The Assam Herald" stated "Leaders of the

Muslim League in Assam are, with a few exceptions, a lazy, worthless lot".<sup>46</sup> Muslim Leaguers under Bhasani and Abdul Matin Chaudhury even brought several charges of indiscipline against Saadulla and these were also referred to the Muslim League High Command.<sup>47</sup>

While implementing the resolution of 15<sup>th</sup> January 1945 Saadulla faced greatest objection from the side of Abdul Matin Chaudhury and Manuwar Ali. These two Muslim League leaders were always present whenever squatting immigrants hindered the Government officials from taking action against the law breakers. Simultaneously, Saadulla also noticed that Bhasani was moving from one grazing reserve to another with hordes of immigrants behind him with a view to hinder the implementation of the new land settlement policy. Bhasani not only provoked them but also encouraged them to squat on the grazing reserves. He even dared to proclaim that so far the Line System was concerned there was hardly any difference between Saadulla and Bordoloi. Bhasani made fun of the leaders by emphasising that the little difference between these two political heads was in fact a matter of a 'Tupee' (the cap on Saadulla's head) and a 'Tiki' (a clump of hair at the rear end of Bordoloi's head). Very soon it became clear to Saadulla that the Revenue Minister was overenthusiastic in allocating land to the immigrants of Mymensingh District even though it was at the cost of the Assamese landless people. There were Assamese petitioners who were in possession of five bighas of land and had applied for allotment of more land. They were denied additional allotment on the ground that they could not be considered as landless. Contrary to the decision taken by the All Party Conference, the Revenue Minister even went to the extent of ordering the local officials not to evict those

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<sup>46</sup> File No. RD 69/ 44 (AS).

<sup>47</sup> *Hindustan Standard*, 21 January 1945.

immigrant farmers who had illegally occupied a piece of land for more than three years. Several clashes took place between the graziers and the encroachers as also between immigrant settlers and indigenous population on account of such arbitrary actions. A lot of indigenous people were in search of land as their own land had been under occupation of the militants. But before Saadulla could take any step against the Revenue Minister for his partisan attitude and onslaughts of the League leaders opposed to him, the Congress Party under the leadership of Bardoloi adopted a critical attitude towards the latest policy declaration on account of some inherent omissions therein and thus refused to extend support to the resolution. Saadulla was deeply shocked by the turn of events. He was depressed to see that Bardoloi, instead of sitting inactive, got busy with mobilising support to unseat him. Most of the Legislative members of the Brahmaputra Valley including the tribals who got dissatisfied with the indiscriminate settlement of wastelands and grazing reserves with Mymensinghia immigrants join hands with Bardoloi to topple Saadulla from power by bringing in no confidence motions against the ministry. As a result of the annoyance of the Muslim Leaguers with Saadulla, lack of discipline in the Ministerialist Party, release of Congress MLAs from detention and their return to the Assembly as opposition, and lastly, the nerve wrecking propaganda of the Congress, Saadulla found his position as the Premier very shaky in the Assembly session that commenced on 1<sup>st</sup> March 1945. Obviously, Saadulla was now placed in a tight corner. Faced by the stark possibility of a defeat and eventual resignation, Saadulla now got busy searching for fresh and new allies. Meanwhile, Hyder Ali Khan on behalf of Saadulla spoke to Bardoloi on 17<sup>th</sup> March and advised him to stay away from all attempts of toppling the Government any more by bringing in no confidence

motions.<sup>48</sup> Instead he suggested to Bardoloi to settle the issues of (a) land settlement, (b) civil liberty, (c) Local Board elections, (d) food supply, and (e) corruption through mutual agreement and consultation between the Opposition and the Government. Khan even went out of the way to offer his mediation for bringing Bardoloi, leader of the Nationalist Party Rohini Choudhuri, and Saadulla under one umbrella to endeavour for an amicable settlement of all major pressing issues at that time. Bardoloi readily agreed, apparently for two reasons – he was extremely reluctant to form a Coalition Ministry led by the Congress on one hand and anxious to avoid another stink of Governor's rule again. On the other Saadulla also found this idea quite favourable as it was, according to him, the only way by which he could put the foundation of his ministry on a wider platform and hope to perpetuate his stay in power. It was on 18<sup>th</sup> March Saadulla was called upon by Bardoloi and Rohini Chaudhuri to head a coalition ministry with support extended to it by Congress Party. Fortunately Saadulla, was given a free hand to deal in the matter by his cabinet colleagues. The three leaders sat together on 20<sup>th</sup> March to thrash out the issues. Their talks continued until the forenoon of 22<sup>nd</sup> March. While the afternoon session of the Assembly was on, Saadulla made an announcement of his decision to reshuffle the cabinet allowing the opposition to select half of its members.<sup>49</sup>

The Government's earlier resolution in relation to land settlement which was published on 15<sup>th</sup> January 1945 was now revised. New guidelines were worked out. With a view to raising the standard of living of the farming class, the Government announced that it would now onwards make available, on application for land in the planned settlement area, an economic holding area of not less than 20 bighas per

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<sup>48</sup> Barooah, Nirode Kumar. *Gopinath Bordoloi, 'The Assam Problem' and Nehru's Centre*, Bhabani Print and Publications, Guwahati 2010, p-183.

<sup>49</sup> Assam Legislative Assembly Debates, Vol. 1, No. 11, 22-23 March, 1945, p-780-782.

applicant or per family. Such a family would consist of five members or less. There was a limit and in no case would a family or an applicant would be allotted more than 30 bighas. There would be no discrimination for indigenous or immigrant people in the allotment of these 20 bighas of land. The tribal people were also granted concessions. Among them, those who lived scattered among the ordinary people of the plains, they would exercise the same rights as the other people in the planned settlement as well as have tribal blocks like other communities. It was further resolved that some of the grazing reserves would be kept intact and the Deputy Commissioner would be instructed to ensure that they were kept from encroachment by eviction trespassers irrespective of past, present or future. Wherever any individual case of hardship arising out of the policy is noticed, such cases would have to be reported to the Government for redress.

On the issue of restoration of civil liberty, agreement was reached on the following issues: (a) two-thirds of security prisoners would be released immediately and the remaining ones not later than June 1945; (b) those politicians who are convicted would also be released forthwith unless they have been charged with grave and heinous offences; (c) the ban imposed on public meetings, assemblies, and processions would be withdrawn forthwith except in the protected areas and the Dibrugarh Sub Divisions; and (d) the ban, if any, imposed against Congress Committee, and all restrictions on MLAs would be removed instantly.

On two topics of current importance – distribution of Local Board seats and supply system of essential goods which was mired in corruption, there was no significant discussion. Nevertheless, there was expectation in the public mind that the new reconstructed all party cabinet would deal with both these issues.

The most significant aspect of the agreement was the manner in which the new ministry would be formed after Saadulla's fourth ministry tendered its resignation. Nabakanta Dutta, one of Saadulla's ministers who held the portfolio of Agriculture, resigned on the morning of 22<sup>nd</sup> March paving the way for the reconstitution of the ministry.

It was agreed upon that Saadulla would be reconstituting his cabinet by inducting five Muslims including himself as well as five non-Muslims nominated by the Opposition and this reconstitution would take place on 23<sup>rd</sup> March. It was further stipulated that there would be three caste Hindus, one Plains Tribal and Scheduled Caste among the cabinet members selected by the Opposition. There was an expectation that one representative from the Hills Tribes and Christians would also be included in the cabinet.<sup>50</sup> Speaking on the Tripartite Agreement in an address to the Assam Legislative Assembly, Saadulla's words were as follows:

... if the spirit in which this negotiation has been carried out to a successful conclusion can be kept up... I hope, a new era in the political history of Assam may be ushered in.<sup>51</sup>

Saadulla submitted the resignation of his fourth ministry on the scheduled date as per the terms and conditions of the agreement and formed his fifth All Party Coalition ministry.<sup>52</sup> The All Party Cabinet of Assam, a product of the Tripartite Agreement, was indeed a bold and novel experiment in Indian Parliamentary

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<sup>50</sup> Saadulla's speech in the Assembly on 22 March 1945.

<sup>51</sup> Assam Legislative Assembly Debates, Vol.1, No.11, 22 March, 1945, p-782.

<sup>52</sup> Five Muslim members of the cabinet including Saadulla were Abdul Matin Chaudhury, Munawwar Ali, Sayidur Rahman, and Mudabbir Hussain. Five non-Muslim ministers nominated by Congress Party were R. K. Choudhuri, Surendra Nath Buragohain, Akshay Kumar Das, Baidhyanath Mukherjee and Rupnath Brahma.

proceedings. What is noteworthy is that at a time when the rift between the Muslim League and the Congress was widening at the all India level, the leaders of Assam took a clear and decisive initiative in forming a coalition ministry in which both the Muslim League and the Congress joined hands together with a view to solving some of the most intractable problems of the province.

Saadulla also acceded to Bardoloi's demand for reshuffling the portfolio of Revenue Minister and giving it to R. K. Chaudhuri while constituting his fifth ministry. Hitherto, this portfolio used to be held by prominent League leaders Mannuwar Ali and Abdul Matin Chaudhury. The agreement was in a sense a triumph for the Congress as Saadulla accepted all the concessions asked for by Bardoloi. Some leading Congressmen such as Muhammad Tayyebulla, the then APCC President, came out sharply to criticise the Saadulla-Bardoloi-Chaudhuri agreement and the subsequent support extended by Bardoloi to the all-party cabinet. Tayyebulla went even to the extent of expressing through a press statement that Bardoloi did not have the authority to use the name of Congress in concluding an agreement with Saadulla and Rohini Kumar Chaudhuri who were none other than war collaborators. Tayyebulla did not end his tirade at that point; he even went to the extent of referring the matter to the Congress High Command with a demand that the matter be taken up at the forthcoming Congress Working Committee Meeting.<sup>53</sup> Interestingly, on the other hand, bitterness was generated among the Muslim leaders mainly those belonging to the immigrant lobby on the issue of terms of the agreement especially those relating to the land policy. Most of the Muslim leaders were of the opinion that

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<sup>53</sup> Tayyebulla, Muhammad. *Between the Symbol and the Idol at Last*, Allied Publishers Private Limited, New Delhi, 1964, p-158-16.

Saadulla had sold himself to the Congress.<sup>54</sup> Provincial Muslim leaders were so disappointed with the agreement that they demanded its outright rejection.

Saadulla on his part was so hurry and busy in negotiating with Bardoloi and R. K. Chaudhuri that he did not informed the Muslim League High Command about the entire matter perhaps out of the fear that the Muslim League High Command might not give him permission to do so. Actually only when the Tripartite Agreement had already been signed, Saadulla wrote a letter to Jinnah's immediate deputy, Liaquat Ali Khan where he described in detail the situation and circumstances which compelled him to sign the agreement. As expected by Saadulla his action offended the Muslim League High Command. On being totally taken aback by the turn of events, Liaquat Ali came to visit Assam along with Chaudhury Khaliquzzaman. These League leaders after taking stock of the situation asked Saadulla to halt the implementation of the agreement, mainly on the issues of land settlement until they discussed the matter with Jinnah. Saadulla was, however, disinclined to deviate from the requirements of the agreement. Therefore, Saadulla took a firm stand and not caring for the instructions of the High Command, he engaged himself in implementing all the terms of the agreement reached with Bardoloi and R. K. Chaudhuri. The situation was intricate and various obstacles were put forward by the League. As such, Saadulla's progress in implementing the agreement was undoubtedly very slow. Moreover, while Saadulla was making afford to accomplish the task within due time, he became seriously ill and was practically out of office for about a month. When he recovered from illness he proceeded to Shimla to attend a conference of prominent leaders of India, convened by the new Viceroy, Lord Wavell and therefore got little time to

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<sup>54</sup> *Assam Herald*, 26 March 1945; cited in Dev, B. J. and Lahiri, D. K. (eds). *Assam Muslim Politics and Cohesion*, Mittal Publications, New Delhi, 1985, p-46.

fulfill the terms of the agreement. On his way back to Shillong he stopped in Calcutta (now Kolkatta). Here he was surprised to see the contents of a letter addressed to him, published in the press before he had received it. This letter was written by Bardoloi where he accused Saadulla of non-implementation of the policy adopted in consultation with him and R. K. Chaudhuri. He even declared that the Government should not therefore expect further support from Congress. The release of the letter in the press before Saadulla had gone through it and replied to the allegations infuriated him very much. He was also annoyed because when half of the Agreement was implemented including official announcement of a new resolution on land settlement policy on 13<sup>th</sup> July as per the term of the agreement, Bardoloi was talking of withdrawing Congress support to the ministry. On the other hand, the Central Parliamentary Board of the Muslim League was annoyed with the resolution of 13<sup>th</sup> July and wanted it to be modified. Being disappointed with the attitude of the Congress Party, Saadulla made up his mind to stand boldly by the policy of the Muslim League on the land settlement issue. With this view in mind Saadulla wrote a letter to R. K. Chaudhuri, the Minister of the Land Revenue, on 28<sup>th</sup> July, demanding some amendments to the resolution of 13<sup>th</sup> July as per suggested by the Central Parliamentary Board of the Muslim League. The inherent idea of the proposed amendment was those immigrants who had already sown at least one crop should be eligible for land settlement irrespective of their arrival dates in the Brahmaputra Valley or of the legality of their squatting on reserve lands earmarked for grazing.<sup>55</sup> Saadulla also sent another letter to Bardoloi where he gave a very detail account of work done by him since the conclusion of the agreement of 22. 3. 1945 and also

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<sup>55</sup> Saadulla to Choudhuri, 28 July 1945, in the File containing "Leaders Correspondence" APCC papers, packet no. 43, n.7 and people's war, 15 July 1945; cited by Guha Op. Cit., p-291.

declared Bardoloi's charges 'a travesty of truth'. Saadulla also rebuked Bardoloi gently for giving the letter to the press before he had seen or read it.

Saadulla informed Bardoloi that on the question of procurement and supply, eradication of corruption, and securing more popular support and cooperation, his government had consistently tried to secure sufficient supplies of foodstuff. But in this matter, his government was in a tight situation because it was dependent upon the quotas released by the Central Government. In respect of eradication of corruption, Saadulla had already informed Bardoloi in mid-May that he was contemplating to constitute a committee to enquire into the matter. But in reality there was not much progress and Saadulla had a reason for this which he expressed in these words, "before I could formulate the scheme, I fell seriously ill and was out of action for a month, three weeks of which I was in hospital, and immediately, I had to proceed to Shimla to attend the Wavell Conference on behalf of Assam and was absent from the province for another month".

Rebutting Bardoloi's charge in respect of inactivity in the matter of land settlement agreement, Saadulla explained that a new government resolution in keeping with the terms of the agreement had indeed appeared in the Gazette Extraordinary on 13<sup>th</sup> July. In respect of restoration of civil liberty in the province, Saadulla in his communication stressed on the point that Assam was the first province to withdraw the ban against Congress Committees, remove all restrictions on public meetings, assemblies, and processions except in the Sadar Sub Divisions of Dibrugarh and 'Protected Areas.' He further informed Bardoloi that all political prisoners had been released except some persons belonging to Subash Chandra Bose's Forward Block and Mahendra Hazarika's 'Mrityu Bahini' as those persons were involved in

terrorism and sabotage.<sup>56</sup> Saadulla surmised that only in case of convicted persons, it could be accused that his government had done nothing.<sup>57</sup> The concluding part of the letter had the following words:

“You talk of withdrawing support to the Ministry. You may take whatever course your conscience dictates. I never relied upon any support from you or your party, for the simple reason that you are not free agents and that whatever is ordered by your High Command you have to obey it implicitly.”

After receiving Saadulla’s letter Bardoloi convened a meeting of the ‘Congress Coalition and the Independent Muslim Party’ and he chaired the same in the Congress Assembly Party room on 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> August. The meeting took up for discussion the suggestions from the Muslim League recommending further modification of the land policy but it was rejected. The 25 members who attended the meeting authorised Bardoloi to register protest, on their behalf, against the non-implementation of the agreement with regards to the extent that was agreed upon with particular reference to land settlement policy of the Government.

Consequent to this, Bardoloi sent a letter to Saadulla on 21<sup>st</sup> August expressing the loss of support for the Government by the opposition. At the same time Saadulla was asked by Bardoloi to convene the next session of the Assembly in October prior to the commencement of Puja Holidays in order to provide an opportunity to the parties responsible for the agreement to give their final word in the matter and take up for discussion other important relative issues. The news of the

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<sup>56</sup> Bardoloi Dinlekh I, Appendix 0, p- 161-162; cited in, Barooah, Nirode Kumar. *Gopinath Bordoloi, ‘The Assam Problem’ and Nehru’s Centre*, Bhabani Print and Publications, Guwahati 2010, p-192.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

impending dissolution of the Assembly was out by the end of August and this dissolution was on the plea for preparation for renewal election. The news got disseminated nearly five months before the actual poll. This decision besides jeopardising the convention of the next session of the Assembly in October saved Saadulla from confronting another embarrassing situation on the floor of the Assembly. The superannuated Assam Legislature was dissolved by the Governor on 1<sup>st</sup> October 1945 following an order of the Viceroy. Saadulla, however, was allowed to continue as the head of a caretaker government until the general elections.