

A STUDY OF POLITICAL CHANGES FROM COALITION TO REGIONALISM IN ASSAM

V. Venkata Rao

“As far as I can judge, with my extremely limited knowledge of Assam, it would appear that you are the only individual to whom best applies the wording of the Instrument of Instructions as one who is most likely to command a stable majority in the Legislature. I write, therefore, to inquire whether you will be willing, at a very early date to come and see me at Shillong with a view to assisting in forming a council of Ministers”. So wrote Reid to Saadulla. ¹

“I was in correspondence with Sir Michael Keane” replied Saadulla “and my one idea was to help him in the formation of a stable ministry, apart from the question, whether I be in it or not. If I had my personal interest in mind, I would not have cared to come to Assam and join politics again. But I have been overwhelmed with requests from every nook and corner of Assam, and from persons of every shade of political opinion, and even enemies or people with divergent outlook in life have been urging me to come and help the country I love so much”.²

Promising to meet Reid on the 15th March, the egoism in Sir Mohammed induced him to write, “I do not commit myself in any way that I will be in the cabinet”. In the same breath he asserted, “I have a firm conviction that I will be able to get a stable ministry formed”, a tall claim. On April 1, 1937, Sir Mohammed formed the first coalition ministry with five members, three Muslims and one Hindu and one Christian. Assam was a Hindu Majority Province but the council of ministers was a Muslim majority one. Thus, Sir Saadulla sowed the seeds of regionalism to become a mighty force in course of time. The Ministry formed

by Saadulla was Noah's Ark. The two Muslim members of Council of Ministers, Sham-ul-Ulema Moulana Abu Nasar Muhammed Waheed and Moulavi Md. Ali Hyder Khan were passengers in Saadulla's cabinet. "Neither of them was upto the mark".³ Therefore, Reid was insisting that they should be dropped from the council of ministers. Saadulla agreed but this two troublesome colleagues refused to resign. Saadulla met the Governor on 3 February 1938, to discuss the reorganization of the council of Ministers. The Governor advised Saadulla to resign and at the same time assured him that he would be invited to form the council of Ministers. On the 4th February 1938, Saadulla saw the Governor and informed him that "the Ministry formed on 1st April 1937, worked as a whole till December 1937 last but since then there has been some misunderstanding and two of my colleagues are not co-operating with me. Under these circumstances, I am compelled to tender the resignation of the Ministry from this afternoon".⁴

While accepting the resignation of Saadulla, Reid replied "I very much hope, however that the association between you as Chief Minister and myself will not come to an end, for as I said at the meeting yesterday, I retain full confidence in you to form a fresh ministry with yourself as its leader and the old cabinet is dissolved".⁵

On the 4th February, Saadulla replied agreeing to form a six member council of Ministers, consisting of three muslims, one Hindu, one Scheduled Caste and one tribal christian. On the 5th February the new council of Ministers was sworn in. Here is a significant fact. Of the two new Muslim Ministers taken in, one Abdul Matin Choudhury was mainly responsible for the generation of regionalism, in North East India. If Sir Saadulla sowed the seeds of regionalism, it was Abdul Matin Choudhury that manured, watered and tended the plant. Choudhury was Sylheti Bengali Muslim. He was in charge of the Revenue Department. He promoted immigration on a large scale from the over populated districts of East Bengal districts of Pabna, Mymensingh and Rangpur. The activities of the Revenue Minister Choudhury caused deep suspicion in the Brahmaputra Valley which unsettled the stability of Saadulla's second ministry. On the 13th September 1938, Saadulla informed the Governor that there were defections and the spiriting away of some of his supporters. Therefore, he resigned and reco-

mmended the summoning of the leader of the opposition, Gopinath Bardoloi. Bardoloi had no majority in the House and yet he accepted the responsibility to form a council of Ministers. He, however, claimed that he had a following of 57 members including eleven Muslim M.L.As in a house of 107. Since Bardoloi had no majority in the House, he suggested to the Governor, the immediate prorogation of the Assembly. (*) Curiously enough the Speaker, Basanta Kumar Das, under the inspiration of Subhas Chandra Bose, the Congress President and Bardoloi, saw the Governor at his own instance, and suggested that the House should be prorogued. The behaviour of the Speaker was strange. Reid did not agree to this suggestion on the ground that the new Cabinet should face the Assembly without delay and obtain a vote of confidence. Bardoloi Ministry was sworn in on 20 September 1938. Immediately fifty six no-confidence motions were tabled. The Speaker, adjourned the House on the ground that the Government should have time to formulate its policy and then only no-confidence motions would be taken up for discussion. In the meanwhile, Bardoloi succeeded in persuading Ali Hyder Khan to join his Ministry. The Opposition insisted that the Assembly should meet to decide the fate of the Ministry. Bardoloi was not prepared to meet the Assembly and he desired that the Assembly should meet in January 1939. From 20 September to 13 October the Congress made herculean efforts to secure the support of some Muslim members of the House. On 13th October two Muslim members were sworn in Fakhruddin Ali Ahmed and Khan Bahadur Moulana Muhammad Ali and on the 20th October Ali Hyder Khan. The Bardoloi Ministry was also a coalition Ministry. The Assembly met on the 8th December 1938, 78 days after the Bardoloi Ministry was sworn in. When the Assembly met the no-confidence motions were taken up for consideration. All of them were defeated by 54 to 50 votes. Saadulla and Abdul Matin Choudhury did not participate in the debate.

The Second World war broke out in September 1939. The Congress demanded the declaration of war aims by the British. The British did not. The Congress resolved that it should non-cooperate with the British and therefore directed the Congress Ministries in the Provinces and the members of the Legislatures to resign. Bardoloi resigned on 16 November 1939 and recommended the imposition of Governor's rule as no one would be able to form a stable ministry. But Reid thought that Congress might

set up a puppet ministry. But was anxious to appoint Saadulla as the next Chief Minister. So he wrote to the Governor General.

"I think you will agree with me that it is extremely desirable to avoid the possibility of having the 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 myself".

So immediately after accepting the resignation of Bardoloi, Reid called upon Saadulla to form the Government. Saadulla accepted the invitation subject to the condition that the session of the Legislative Assembly fixed for 30 November 1939, should be postponed and that he should not be asked to face the Assembly till January 1940. Reid agreed to this demand. In the case of Bardoloi, Reid insisted that he should face the Assembly immediately. In the case of Saadulla, he allowed him nearly two months time. Again, Saadulla demanded that the strength of the Council of Ministers should be nine, one more than that of Bardoloi. Reid agreed to this reluctantly. Finally, the formation of the council of Ministers should be piecemeal. Reid accepted all these conditions because he was anxious to drive out the Congress as soon as possible. The attitude of the Governor towards the Congress was one of subdued hostility. Thus came into existence the fourth coalition and third of Saadulla. The third Coalition Ministry of Saadulla consisted of Rohini Kumar Choudhury, Harendra Chandra Chakravarty, Mahendranath Saikia, Rupnath Brahma, Miss Mavis Dunn and four Muslims, Saadulla, Abdul Matin Choudhury, Munowar Ali, and Mudabir Hussain Choudhury. Commenting on the competition of the council of Ministers, Reid wrote that it was a "scratch team" Reid described Rohini Kumar Choudhury, "He has, I am afraid, a reputation for dishonesty which was, if anything, enhanced, towards his last term of office. Munowar Ali, a Sylhet Muslim, not an impressive personage and certainly did not leave his mark as a Minister when he was in office before. Harendra Chandra Chakravarty, of good family from Hailakandi opposed to Congress, education not of high order but a gentleman. Mudabir Hussain Choudhury was opposed to Saadulla but changed after accepting office.

Reid always adopted a partisan attitude when Congress was in office. Anticipating that it would resign 1939, Reid wrote to the Governor General,

“If and when the present congress coalition ministry resigns, I intend asking Saadulla to form the Government, if he does, all the indications are to the effect that he will have considerable difficulty and that his ministry would be decidedly precarious. One important point is that five and probably six of the present non-congress Ministers will not accept office with Saadulla. Saadulla himself said that he would have none of them except Rupanath Brahma. I will do all I can to get him form the Government. Supposing Saadulla is unable to form the Government or defeated after accepting office, I shall be advised to send for Kamini Sen, a member of the present Government. He would act on the orders of the Congress and will continue to carry out the policies of the existing Government”.

The Governor General advised Reid to send for Kamini Sen. On 3rd November Reid committed another constitutional impropriety. He saw Saadulla when the Congress was still in office, to enquire whether he would be able to form the Government in case Bardoloi resigned. Bardoloi resigned on 15th November and Saadulla assumed office on the 17th and remained in office for nearly two years and more. Assam loved coalitions. The Saadulla Ministry fell. On the 6th December, 1941, some students objected the holding of the war exhibition in the Cotton College. The Deputy Commissioner Humphry and Dr. J. C. Das came to the College to see the exhibition but they were assaulted by some students who took out a procession. There was lathi charge and some students were injured. On the 8th December an adjournment motion was introduced in the Legislative Assembly. On the same day, Saadulla and Choudhury met and agreed to meet again on the 9th to discuss the report submitted by the I.G.P. and the D.P.I. who were sent to Gauhati to study the situation on the spot and report. Instead of seeing Saadulla as agreed previously, on the 9th December, Rohini Kumar Choudhury sent his letter of resignation from the Ministry together with a statement signed by five Members of the Assembly saying that they supported the stand taken by Choudhury. On the same day a no-confidence motion was tabled. Finding that he had no majority in the House, Saadulla announced that he had resigned and would submit his resignation immediately after the return of the Governor from tour, and requested the Speaker to adjourn the session until the return of the Governor. At first the Speaker agreed but allowed the discussion to take place. Saadulla and his supporters left the House.

Bardoloi confined his remarks to the activities of the Saadulla's ministry in regard to war effort. Rohini Choudhury sat with the opposition and voted for the motion a remarkable performance in view of the fact that the motion overed himself as a member of the Saadulla Cabinet. The whole thing was prearranged by Rohini Kumar Choudhury. The Gauhati Lathi Charge was a pretext. Choudhury was greatly encouraged by Vinayaka Damodar Sarvarkar, the President of Hindu Maha Sabha during the latter's visit to Assam. There was some amount of uneasiness against the Saadulla Muslim Ministry among the Hindus.

Saadulla met the Governor after his return from tour, tendered his resignation and advised him to send for Bardoloi as the leader of the biggest party in the legislative Assembly, and also for Choudhury. The Governor was sure that Bardoloi would not accept office for obvious reasons. The Governor was not inclined to send for Choudhury because "he condemned himself by voting in favour of the no-confidence motion. Further, Congress would not support him in his war effort". Therefore, the only alternative was to suspend the Constitution. But the Governor-General was anxious to put Congress in office. So he telegraphed to Reid, "Do your best to get Bardoloi to take office even if he holds for few days". The Viceroy further added, "you will no doubt discreetly do all you can behind the scenes possible alternatives, in particular with Saadulla, so that if there is a crash with Bardoloi, you would have some one to take over", The Viceroy further advised the Governor,

I think you would do well yourself, to address the House and make utmost play possible in public with the essential necessity from the point of view of the Province and of political development, of a ministry responsible to the legislature being thrown up". Reid replied "I will do my best with Bardoloi". On the 18th December 1941, Reid saw Bardoloi and asked him to form the council of ministers. Bardoloi declined the offer and at the same time informed the Governor that his party would support Choudhury. At the same time Bardoloi also made it abundantly clear that his support to Choudhury would be strictly limited, He would have nothing to do with imperialist war and he would not countenance any expenditure on it.

Since Bardoloi refused to accept office, the Governor General suggested to the Governor to see Choudhury. "We may find it

impossible to get a Government together with a majority in the legislature, but it is most important that it should be abundantly clear that we have rejected no possibility, however, remote it might have seemed.....Before we admit failure and resort to the breakdown clause, I shall ask you to make a final and urgent call upon Saadulla to resume popular Government in Assam”.

Reid saw Choudhury reluctantly with a closed mind. Choudhury informed Reid that he had a following of 26 members in a house of 107 and Congress support. Choudhury said that he would depend on the European Group for the promotion of war effort and on Congress for other purposes. Choudhury was not able to satisfy the Governor that he would be able to form a stable ministry. So he was not asked to form the Government. Reid saw Saadulla also for the same purpose on 22 December. Saadulla also was not able to satisfy the Governor. Saadulla informed the Governor that he would be able to form the Government in February 1942. So long, Saadulla's resignation was not accepted. Reid thought that a ministry defeated in a no-confidence motion should not be retained in office. Reid tried to form an all party government but found it impossible. So Reid recommended the suspension of the Constitution, The Viceroy enquired

“I hope you are satisfied after (an) exhaustive examination of all possibilities and discussions with all leaders who are likely to be in a position to assist in finding you a stable ministry, ready to play its part in the prosecution of war, that there is no possibility in the present circumstances of achieving of that object and that in your judgement we must now resort to Section 93. I accept the conclusion with deep regret. But I am satisfied on the material you have communicated to me that there is no alternative. I am making a recommendation in this sense to the Secretary of State but would ask you to postpone action until I hear from him and telegraph further”.

The Secretary of State accepted the recommendation of the Governor-General and the Governor accepted the resignation of Saadulla on 25th December 1941 with deep regret. He wrote to Saadulla,

“I should like to think that there was a chance of a Saadulla Cabinet being formed during the course of my Governorship but I fear that this is impossible as far as I know my office will be terminated in March next”.

Even after the suspension of the Constitution, the Governor-General wrote to the Governor,

"I hope it will be possible for you discreetly to keep as much pressure, as you can, on Saadulla, to get a ministry together, for neither you nor I want to remain in Section 93 any longer than we have to".

The person who was greatly disappointed with the suspension of the Constitution was Rohini Kumar Choudhury, whose hope of becoming Minister and Minister in Charge of Home and the IGP saluting him melted away like the morning mist before the rising sun. But hope is the unfailing and familiar companion of life. Choudhury did not give up the hope, the hope of becoming Chief Minister. On 10 February 1942, Choudhury saw the Governor at his own request and assured him that he was in a position to form the Government with the support of 35 members. He also informed Reid that Congress would support him. The Governor, who had tremendous affection for Choudhury enquired whether he had anything in writing from the Congress. Since he had nothing in writing from the Congress, the Governor told him bluntly "I am not satisfied that you command a stable majority". Then Choudhury in deep agony yelled "Then the door is closed". Reid realised that he was somewhat rude to Choudhury, came down and said in a conciliatory tone. "The door is not closed. I would invite you at any time". Choudhury showed his weakness by saying repeatedly "I am sure if only I am given a chance I would get people over to my side".

The matter did not end there. Choudhury made another attempt. He saw the Governor on the 15th March 1942 and had a long talk but Reid did not hand over the keys of office of Chief Minister to Choudhury.

Reid's term of office was over. He was succeeded by Andrew Clow. On 5th May 1942, Choudhury wrote to Clow that his party commanded a very large majority in the Assembly and desired to discuss the restoration of popular Government in Assam with him. Clow threw cold water on his face when he replied to Choudhury "You do not indicate whether your position or that of those who are prepared to support you has apparently changed, since you saw Sir Robert Reid on 4th March 1942. If it has not I doubt if

anything is likely to be gained by pursuing the question of forming a ministry under your leadership”.

On the 9th May Choudhury wrote to Clow saying that the Congress position has changed. There would be no difficulty for the Government formed by him in carrying on the necessary war effort in Assam. Clow informed him “I believe he (Choudhury) is working in close touch with the Congress leaders. His ministry may be reasonably stable, if it follows Congress dictation and not the policy he himself professes”. The Viceroy advised Clow to insist on full cooperation in war effort and a stable majority from Choudhury.

On 15th May Choudhury saw Clow and informed him that Saadulla's ministry was thrown out because of muslim immigration from East Bengal which was bitterly resented by Hindus and not the Gauhati Lathi Charge on students. But Clow insisted on unconditional support of the Congress for war effort. Choudhury could not give any such assurance and Choudhury was denied the chance of forming a ministry.

On 19th June 1942, Saadulla saw Clow and informed him that he was able to secure the support of 56 members in a house of 107 members and hoped to secure the support of two more members. At this stage, Clow adopted a different stand. Clow was anxious to include an European Tea planter in the Council of Ministers. Saadulla politely declined the suggestion. Further, he also demanded that the council of ministers should consist of eleven members and there should be remission of land revenue.

On 25 June 1942, Wittakar, the leader of the European group in the Legislative Assembly wrote to Saadulla that the European support to him (Saadulla) would be conditional. His group would not support a ministry whose first act would be to deplete the revenues of an exchequer already strained. The Viceroy and the Governor agreed with the European group. But Saadulla's supporters insisted on land revenue remission. Saadulla saw Clow on 4th July 1942 and informed him that unless he was in a position to concede the demand of his supporters for land remission he would not be able to form the ministry. On the 5th July Saadulla suggested a compromise formula ; namely that in 1942-43, he would give fifty percent remission ; in 1943-44 there would be no remission

and the entire remission would be withdrawn in 1944-45. Saadulla wrote to Clow, "I must be frank with you and state clearly that for the current year my proposal should be accepted. Otherwise there will be no need in my undertaking the responsibility of forming the Ministry, as I apprehend the opposition will raise the question of full remission of revenue and I will not be able to keep some of my party from voting with the opposition in this matter".

Saadulla saw Wittakar. Wittakar told Saadulla that the European group would not support a ministry which started its career with a remission of land revenue. Then Saadulla wrote to Clow, "I am quite confident that barring the European group of nine, the rest of the Assembly members will welcome and endorse my proposal... And should Your Excellency desire to revoke the Constitution, in Assam, the attitude of the European group in this matter should not deter you in placing the responsibility upon me to form the ministry". This letter indicates the anxiety of Saadulla for the formation of a new ministry. Clow wrote to the Governor General, "Saadulla apparently wants me to go ahead irrespective of the European attitude. But I do not at present see how he can hope to form a stable ministry without their agreement on the revenue issue. For I do not believe that the Europeans would agree to support him in all other matters of policy after he had in opposition to their views given remission of revenue...If the European final conclusion is non-passimus, on Saadulla's proposals, would it be wise to attempt to move in this direction".

Saadulla became restless because he was not being invited to form the ministry. So he wrote to Clow on the 12th July, "Personally, I am sick of Assam Politics and have made enough sacrifices in the past. Had some one else appeared from the Assamese politicians, with sufficient support to undertake the responsibility of forming the ministry, I would have gladly retired. But as it is the entire Assamese public have been pressing me hard to assume the responsibility at this critical time so that I may do something to relieve their sufferings and anxieties...And your Excellency is in favour of reviving the constitution in Assam, I suggest no further time be lost after the receipt of H. E. the Viceroy's permission.

Clow replied on 14 July 1942,

"My main difficulty is that, particularly in view of Wittakar's

letter to you, I am not satisfied you are yet in a position to form a stable ministry”.

Saadulla would not keep quiet. On the 16th July he knocked at the door of Clow and furnished particulars of his supporters. Clow changed his attitude and wrote to the Viceroy on 21 July,

“We have, I think reached a position where a conclusion should be taken to revoke the proclamation.....I would therefore be grateful, if, in advance any formal application for your Excellency’s concurrence.....when the application is made. This will enable me to work out the details with Saadulla.....without running the risk of finding myself and placing him in a false position”. The Governor General promised.

Then Clow sought clarification from Saadulla on certain points. Saadulla readily furnished the information called for. Yet Clow did not revoke the constitution. Saadulla became impatient and his supporters were upset at the delay. There was an imminent danger of their desertion. Clow was busy with the law and order problem created by the Quit India Movement. So on 9th August Saadulla wrote to Clow,

“It appears that your Excellency has not made up yet your mind whether to send for me to form the ministry or not. I would like a frank reply if possible at this stage, for a long delay may make it impossible for me to undertake the responsibility if called upon”.

In the meanwhile there was a crisis. P.T. Griffith, the leader of the European group in the Central Legislature came to Shillong along with Fleming of the Assam Oil Co. Both were disturbed to find how far Wittakar had gone in agreeing to support Saadulla and felt that if there was to be any ministry, Wittakar must be in it. So Wittakar and Griffith saw Saadulla and suggested that Wittakar should be included in the proposed ministry. Clow was wholly in favour of an European being included in the Ministry on the ground that it would insure against lack of vigour in war matters and would add some administrative capacity to the ministry. Clow wrote to Saadulla about the attitude of the European group and unless it was settled he would not go ahead with the formation of the Ministry. At the same time Clow thought that in case ministry was not formed, Saadulla should be appointed as an Adviser.

Saadulla explained to Clow the difficulties and dangers in the inclusion of Wittakar in the cabinet but argued that "he may be included after the first session of the legislature is over" Then Clow sought an assurance from Saadulla on war efforts. Saadulla promised that he would firmly support every war effort. On the 25th August 1942, Saadulla formed his fourth coalition Government. From 25th August 1942 to 18 March 1945 Saadulla was in power.

On 18th March 1945, the Governor reported to the Governor General that the Ministry was in a precarious position. Negotiations went on for the reorganization of the coalition Government between the opposition and Saadulla because there was no political stability and no progress in the development of the Province. On 23 March 1945 Saadulla informed the Governor that he was inclined to accept the conditions for the reformation of the coalition government. Saadulla was assured of the support of the Congress, though it would not accept office. Saadulla submitted the resignation of his cabinet and reformed his fifth and last coalition Government.

The struggle for power was between the Congress and the Muslims. The caste Hindus had a good deal in common with the Congress. Many of the others were naturally antagonistic to the Caste Hindus. A tribal Muslim alliance was not in frequent in the cabinet and else where. But the claim for Pakistan and the efforts of the Sylhet Muslims, particularly Abdul Matin Choudhury to force the pace of Bengali Muslim immigration had alarmed the tribals and many others. It was this more than anything else which threatened the Saadulla Ministry. Saadulla himself, as an Assamese Muslim, would have liked to keep the immigrants out and he would have had the support of every one to such a policy except the Surma Valley Muslims and the immigrants themselves. But the forces including the pressure of the Muslim League, aiming at the inclusion of Assam in Pakistan, economic pressure including the Bengal famine, the pressure of the Government of India and others to grow more food and the insistent pressure of the immigrants themselves who could not be kept out were too strong for him. After being forced to a policy favourable to the immigrants, he convened an all party conference to discuss the problem of immigration and swung the other way, securing the support of all but one of the cabinet—Abdul Matin Choudhury. This failed to satisfy the anti-immigrants who formed a majority of the legislature because Saadulla did not go far enough to please them and

it antagonised the Surma Valley Muslims, who formed the more solid core of his majority. They had accepted him as the only possible leader but had never liked him and he had always sat so lightly on the communal issue as to be far from popular with the Muslim league High Command. The Muslims in Assam realised, however, that they would not be able to retain power under any one except Saadulla. This had a sobering effect. The opposition thought that Muslims themselves would bring about Saadulla's down fall and thereby enable the opposition to seize power. This did not happen. So the opposition set itself to attract supporters from the Miscellaneous groups, particularly the tribal members. A good many of them were alarmed by the mischief played by Abdul Matin Choudhury. There was a good ground to believe that some were bought by the Birlas. The Ministry began to crumble. During the budget session, the ministry was saved by bringing an european member from sick bed. On another day it was saved by the casting vote of the Speaker. It was clear that the ministry was not stable. This had been achieved by the Congress which worked in close cooperation with the Nationalist party of Rohini Kumar Choudhury. There were overtures for an alliance on certain terms. The Governor objected to some of them but Saadulla requested the Governor not to take serious notice of them. Thus came into existence the fifth and the final coalition of Saadulla, consisting of five muslims and six non-muslims. Abdul Matin Choudhury did not like to be in this cabinet. He wanted to resign but Jinnah persuaded him to be in the cabinet because he was the strongest supporter of the immigrants. In the distribution of portfolios, there was some hitch. Rohini Kumar Choudhury insisted that the Revenue portfolio should be given to him. It was previously held by a Sylhet Muslim, Abdul Matin Choudhury. Saadulla wanted to give it to an Assamese Muslim who would be able to hold the balance. But Rohini Kumar Choudhury insisted on this. It had to be given to Rohini Kumar Choudhury but Saadulla laid down one condition that in respect of evictions he should be consulted.

The coalition did not work satisfactorily. Bardoloi directed all his five nominees to function as one unit. But one of his nominees, Surendra Nath Buragohain did not observe this direction. On the otherhand he supported Saadulla in all matters, and refused to accept any direction, from Bardoloi. There was acrimonious

correspondence between Bardoloi and Buragohain. Further, Saadulla did not implement the terms of the agreement. When Bardoloi pointed out this, Saadulla, arrogantly replied that the former was at liberty to do whatever he liked. Bardoloi requested Saadulla to call for a meeting of the Legislature to discuss this matter and decide the fate the Ministry. Saadulla refused to oblige Bardoloi. In the meanwhile, Clow, dissolved the legislature and asked Saadulla to function as a caretaker Government. The election to the Assam Legislative Assembly which ought to have been held in 1942, was held in 1945. The Congress contested 64 of the 108 seats available for contest and won 57, an absolute majority of the total strength. Jinna's apple cart of Pakistan was overthrown. Jinnah dreamed that Assam would be a part of his dream land—Pakistan. Immediately after the election, Rohini Kumar Choudhury resigned while Baidyanath Mukherjee continued to be a member of Saadulla Cabinet.

Congress Ministries from 1946 : On 1 February 1942, Bardoloi was invited to form the Ministry. The Governor enquired from Bardoloi whether it would be possible to form a composite ministry. Bardoloi politely informed the Governor that it would be against the Congress policy and principle. Bardoloi requested Abul Kalam Azad to come to Assam for consultation and guidance in the formation of the ministry. Azad arrived at Shillong on the 8th February 1946 and met Saadulla. Azad told Saadulla that if the Muslim League in Assam accepted the Congress Parliamentary Programme, there would be no difficulty in the formation of a composite ministry, a proposal which Governor Clow made and which Bardoloi rejected. Saadulla did not get the necessary permission from the Muslim League Parliamentary Board and therefore, Bardoloi was asked to form the ministry.

There was a crisis in Congress Politics in April in 1946 in Assam. On 27th April 1946, there was an election of delegates to the A. I. C. C. Bardoloi was defeated by Jagadish Chandra Medhi. Bardoloi interpreted his defeat as a vote of no-confidence in his leadership and resigned the chief Ministership. This created a sensation in Assam Congress politics. Azad wrote to Bardoloi :

You have been asked to serve the congress in the capacity of Premier because of the confidence this organization and your colleagues have in you. It is therefore a trust which you must carry out till you are relieved by the organization itself." So Azad the Congress President refused to accept the resignation.

Bardoloi replied that he deferred his resignation for the present and referred the matter to the election Tribunal. The tribunal set aside the election of Medhi.

A Chief Minister cannot be expected to have a safe sailing at all times. Bardoloi was attacked by Debeswar Sarma, Motiram Bora and Bishnu Ram Medhi. Being very sensitive in nature, Bardoloi thought of resigning and devote his life to constructive work.

Bardoloi had to face another major crisis. On May 16, 1946, the Cabinet Mission issued a statement containing proposals for the framing of the Constitution for India. It contained the famous grouping clause. In the C. Group Assam and Bengal were included. Each group would decide the framing of the constitution for the Provinces and groups. Assam did not like to be grouped with Bengal. It was afraid that it would lose its identity. Bardoloi was directed to oppose the grouping clause. Fortunately for Bardoloi, Jinna himself did not accept the grouping clause.

Thus Bardoloi survived crisis after crisis. On 26th January 1950, Bardoloi submitted the resignation of his cabinet on the eve of the New Constitution coming into force. Bardoloi was asked to form a new Cabinet and it came into being on the 26th January. Bardoloi died on the 6th August 1950. He was succeeded by Bishnu Ram Medhi. Medhi had to listen to the same music with which he treated Bardoloi. There were groups in the Party which turned their guns against Medhi. One of the groups was led by the Brahmin troublesome politician of Jorhat, Debeswar Sarma. I had a long interview with Sarma on two occasions. Sarma was frustrated because he was not given a place in the Council of Ministers. Medhi continued to be the Chief till the next general election held in 1952.

The first general election held in 1952, resulted in a landslide victory for the Congress which won 72 of the 108 seats available of for contest. The Legislative Assembly Congress Party was packed up with Medhi's men. Medhi was elected by a unanimous vote as the Leader of the Assembly Legislative Congress Party. There was dissatisfaction with the composition of the Council of Ministers. But Medhi did not make any change in the composition of the cabinet. The style of administration of Medhi did not satisfy several.

So representations were made to the Congress High Command for his removal. The Congress President went to the extent of asking Medhi to step down in the interests of the party. Medhi agreed subject to two conditions. First, he would lead the Congress to contest the next general election to be held in 1957. Second he would form his third ministry and resign one year after the formation of the council of Ministers. These conditions were not acceptable to his opponents. Medhi did not resign. The Congress High Command too did not like to remove him.

Medhi's opponents formed themselves into a group. They selected Bimola Prasad Chaliha to lead them. Thus, just before the general election to the Assembly in 1957, there were two groups, one led by Bimola Prasad Chaliha and the other by Medhi. Both the groups struggled hard to secure as many nominations as possible for their supporters. But misfortune struck the Chaliha group, Chaliha and some of his supporters were defeated in the election. In these circumstances, the Chaliha group persuaded Mahendra Mohan Choudhury to contest the leadership election. The Congress Parliamentary Board permitted him, to contest the leadership election, But Medhi announced publicly that he would contest under any circumstances. Choudhury got cold foot. He found himself in a dilemma. How to get out of the delicate situation. He informed his supporters, the Chaliha group that he would contest subject to the condition that he was elected without contest. This was an impossible condition Choudhury's retreat caused deep disappointment to the Chaliha group. Since Choudhury declined to contest, the Chaliha group turned to Debeswar Sarma who readily agreed. Sarma's day dreams swirled round the Chief Ministership of Assam which was his life's ambition. The leadership election was held on 10th February 1957. There was contest. Medhi polled eight votes more than Sarma. This situation naturally encouraged Chaliha's group to ask for its pound of flesh. Some of his (Medhi's) opponents had to be accommodated in the council of Ministers. Thus came into being the third council of ministers of Medhi. Even after the formation of the council, Medhi was not allowed to sleep quietly. The opponents wanted to throw out Medhi some how or other. Choudhury hinted that Medhi should be appointed as a Governor. There was opposition to this proposal. Ultimately he was appointed as the Governor of Madras. Medhi resigned and left Assam.

With the exit of Medhi, the question arose as to who should be the leader of the Party in the legislature. There were two candidates; Siddhinath Sarma and Chaliha.

On 20th December 1957, the Congress Legislative Party met and elected Chaliha as the leader of the party in the legislature although he was not a member of the legislature and defeated in the election. From the time he was elected in 1957 and resigned in 1970, he had to face a number of problems. Immediately after he was elected he had to face the oil refinery issue. He eminently succeeded in solving this problem by its location in Guwahati. The second problem was the demand of the tribals for a Hill State. Chaliha met this demand by the formation of a composite Cabinet. The third problem was the state language, a highly emotional issue. While Assamese was declared as the State language, it resulted in the dismemberment of Assam. Chaliha fought tooth and nail against partition but failed and Meghalaya was formed. Before that Nagas left Assam and became a state. Then Mizoram also left. When Chaliha became the Chief Minister in 1957, the bazar gossip was that he would fall within six months. This was also the view of Vishnu Sahay, the Governor of Assam. I asked Governor the factors responsible for his survival. "He does not express his views freely" said Vishnu Sahay. However, Chaliha continued to be the Chief Minister till the general election held in 1962.

On the 7th March Chaliha was elected for a second term as the leader of the party. But there was a conflict between Chaliha and one of the members of his council of minister—Dev Kanta Barooah. Chaliha demanded Barooah's resignation. Barooah did not oblige him. Ultimately he had to resign. Chaliha continued to be the Chief minister till the end of his second term.

The general election to the Legislative Assembly was held. There were three groups in the Pradesh Congress, Chaliha group, Choudhury group and Barooah group. On the 7th March, 1967, Chaliha was elected by 52 votes to 18 votes polled by Barooah. Chaliha's third council of ministers formed by Chaliha was a very big one.

Chaliha was continuously ill. The functions of the Chief Minister practically devolved on the Deputy Chief Minister, Mahendra Mohan Choudhury. Choudhury was not popular with the Dev Kant Barooah Fakhruddin-Moinul Huq Choudhury group. They wanted that Choudhury should be replaced by some one. So they induced Bijoy Chandra

Bhagavati to enter into State politics. Bhagavati essentially a honest man, lured by office, entered state politics, with an idea to become the Chief Minister of Assam after Chaliha. Chaliha had already resigned for reasons of health. The Parliamentary Board decided to set up Bhagavati as against Choudhury, but found that there might be a revolt against the candidacy of Bhagavati. So the Prime Minister requested Chaliha to continue though he was anxious to get out of office. Since the situation was critical, the Parliamentary Party was given complete freedom to select its own candidate for the leadership of the Legislative Party. The Legislative Party met in November 1970 under the presidentship of Bhagavati and elected Choudhury by a unanimous votes. Choudhury requested Bhagavati to join his council of Ministers. Bhagavati declined. Bhagavati regretted for leaving Lok Sabha for State politics.

Choudhury's council of ministers was the biggest of all with a number of passengers. During his tenure of office, which was the shortest of all his predecessors, one year, two months, and 26 days or 440 days, Choudhury tried to build up an image of his own. But he was a traditionalist, middle of the road politician favoured the middle class. Therefore he was unpopular with certain sections. Four persons joined together to pull him down. They were all at that time very near to the P.M. They fed the P.M. with all sorts of stories against Choudhury. When Choudhury met the P.M. on the 29th January 1972, he was advised to step down from the chief ministership in the interests of the party. Choudhury being a realist, saw what was written on the wall and readily agreed to oblige the P.M., that are the actual reasons for the fall of Choudhury. I wanted correct information from those who were involved in this drama. Choudhury at first agreed to give me the facts. Later on he declined on the ground that he was in office (Governor of Punjab) Sarat Chandra Sinha also declined on the same round.

The Congress Legislative Party met to elect Choudhury's successor. Choudhury himself proposed the name of Sarat Chandra Sinha. The transfer of power from Choudhury to Sinha is a remarkable event in the political history of Assam.

Immediately after Sinha was sworn in as Chief Minister, he had to face the general election to the Assembly. The political Pandits predicted that the Congress would be defeated. But the Congress won a thumping majority and on the 17th March 1972,

Sinha was sworn in as the fifth Chief Minister of Assam. During his term he had to face the movement on the medium of insurrection. Further, he favoured the other backward classes. This was resented by the caste Hindus. But Sinha continued to be the Chief Minister till the defeat of the Congress in 1978. Thus congress was in office from 1946 to 1978. During this period the Congress provided political stability.

The general election was held in March 1978. No party was able to obtain an absolute majority. The Janata secured just 53 seats in a house of 126. The Janata with the support of P.T.C.A. and P.D.F. formed the Government on 12 March 1978. The C.P.I. (M.) extended its support without joining it. Golap Borbora was elected as the Chief Minister. This was the first coalition Government after Independence. But Assam does not love coalitions. Defections took place and the party was reduced to a minority. On 3rd September 1979 a no-confidence motion was moved against the Ministry. The motion was taken up on 4th September for discussion. There was a dramatic development when the House met after lunch. The Deputy Speaker announced that the Speaker resigned and joined the opposition. The Governor informed the Deputy Speaker that the Chief Minister resigned and that he accepted the resignation and advised the Deputy Speaker to adjourn the House. The House was adjourned and the Governor prorogued the House. Thus came to grief the first coalition after independence.

The Janata split up into three groups, Janata with 32 members, Asom Janata Vidhayini Dal led by the former Speaker Jogendranath Hazarika-19 and the Janata (S) (Lok Dal) 7. Jogendranath Hazarika was able to enlist the support of the I.N.C., the C.P.I. and Lok dal and some independents a total of 64 and formed the second coalition on the 9th September. The I.N.C. did not accept office. Golop Borbora moved a no-confidence motion against the Hazarika Ministry but it was defeated. The ministry had face a number of problems. The Congress and the C.P.I. withdraw their support to Hazarika. The Governor was satisfied that no stable government could be formed because the situation was uncertain. But Hazarika claimed that he had a majority in the House which was not true. So the constitution was suspended and Presidential rule was imposed for the first time after Independence. Efforts were made by Congress and Janata to form the ministry but the Governor was not satisfied with their

claims to form the Government. There would be constitutional crisis if no government was formed after the Presidential rule was over. To get over the crisis, the Congress (I) under the lack luster leadership of Anwara Taimur was called upon to form the Government. Congress (I) which had only 8 members in 1978, increased its strength to 48 after the Congress came to power at the centre. Anwara Taimur was the first Muslim lady to form the Government. She formed the Government on 8th December 1980 with the support of P.T.C.A., C.P.I. and the C.P.I. (M). There were dissensions in the Congress (I) itself. The Asom Jatiya Dal announced that it would move a no-confidence motion against the Ministry. S.C. Sinha was making efforts to form an united front to take over office in case Taimur Government fell. Six no confidence motions were tabled but they were all defeated by the abstention of the Left from voting in the Assembly. But crisis after crisis threatened the Taimur Government and ultimately it was thrown out on 28 June 1981 and Presidential Rule was imposed for a second time. All the opposition parties formed the Left and Democratic Front with S. C. Sinha as its leader. The Front represented to the Governor that it would be able to form the Government. But the Governor was not satisfied with the claim of the Left Front.

The dissensions in the Congress (I) led to the change of leadership. K. C. Gogoi a defector from Dibrugarh was elected as the leader of the Congress (I) Legislative Party. Gogoi met the Governor and claimed the right to form the Government. S. C. Sinha also claimed the same right. The Governor accepted the claim of Gogoi and on the 13.1.82 K. C. Gogoi was called upon to form the Government. But Gogoi's ministry was a house of cards. It crumbled down on 17 March 1982. With the fall of the Gogoi Government, the Left and Democratic Front claimed the right to form the Government. But the Governor recommended the Presidential rule. Presidential Rule was imposed on the 18th March and on the 19th Assembly was dissolved.

There was the constitutional obligation to hold elections to the Assembly before the expiry of the Presidential Rule. So elections were held when the Anti-Foreign National movement was in full swing. The ASSU and the AAGSP opposed the elections. Yet election was held at a tremendous cost in terms of money, and human life. The percentage of poll was very poor. But Congress

(I) was voted to power. Hiteswar Saikia formed the Government. The Prime Minister was assassinated and her son Rajiv Gandhi was elected as the Prime Minister. While Saikia Government was in office negotiations with the AASU—AAGSP were initiated and an agreement was concluded, on 15th August 1985.

Conclusion :

We have so far reviewed the formation of Governments during the last half a century, from Muhammad Saadulla to Prafulla Kumar Mahanta. During this period Governments were formed on 23 occasions by 12 Chief Ministers. Of the 12 Chief Ministers Saadulla formed government on five different occasions, Medhi and Chaliha on three occasions each, Bardoloi and Sarat Chandra Sinha on two occasions each and the rest only once. Of the 12 Chief Ministers Bimola Prasad Chaliha held for the longest period from December 1957 to December 1970. Jogendranath Hazarika and K.C. Gogoi held office for the shortest period.

Of all the 12 Chief Ministers, Bimola Prasad Chaliha had to face a number of problems, like the location of the oil refinery, State language and the movement for the constitution of hill state.

Of all the 12 Chief Ministers, Saadulla was the ablest. He had firm grip on administration and commanded the confidence of all communities in some measure or other. He was not an out and communalists as is generally understood. Chaliha was a liberal, nationalist and at the same time would not sacrifice regional interests. Bishnu Ram Medhi incurred the displeasure of the minorities. Chaliha and Bardoloi commanded the confidence of the weaker sections.

There was chronic instability during the years 1937 to 1946 and again from 1978 to 1983. But there was no peace and tranquillity during the period 1950 to 1978. During this period law and order broke down several times.

During this period National Political Parties played a dominant role and the regional parties a subsidiary role. All the Saadulla ministries were composed of national and regional political parties. The shortlived Jogendranath Hazarika's Ministry was formed by a regional party. It was in 1985 that a full-fledged regional party

came to power. It is still continuing in power with occasional threats of breakdown. But the future of the regional parties is always dark. They come and go like the clouds in the sky. National parties alone with a sound economic programme has a brighter future.

Who should implement the Accord? The Regional Parties had no confidence in the Congress (I) and a regional party was necessary to implement it. A Convention was held at Golaghat on 12-14 October. All the regional political parties in Assam were invited to merge themselves into one party. The response was not good. Only two parties A.J.D. and the P.L.P. came together and formed the A.G.P. on 14th October. An Adhoc State Committee of 38 members was formed with a six member Presidium and Mahanta as the Chief President and three general Secretaries and five others as members. The aim of the A.G.P. was to defeat the Congress and deport all foreigners. The A.G.P. contested 109 seats in a House of 126 seats, polled 51 percent vote and won 64 seats. Mahanta was elected by a unanimous vote as the leader of the A.G.P. legislative Party and he formed the Ministry. Thus, a Regional Party was voted to power for a second time. But Mahanta claims that though the Party in power is regional in character it is national in outlook.

In the preparation of this paper I collected my bricks from many a masons' yard. But the design and the super structure are my own and the views expressed are my own. Dr. R. K. Baruah, Principal, Handique Girls' College, invited to write a paper on *From Coalition to Regionalism*: and indicated the lines of approach. I thought that the title must be short and arrest the attention of reader. So I coined the title as *Mohammad to Mahanta*: I consulted a score of scholars. They were very impressed by the title.

This paper is based entirely on the original sources like the letters written by the Governor of Assam to Mohammad Saadulla and vice-versa. So far I know no one has consulted them. I am most grateful to the former Governor of Assam, Sri B. K. Nehru for permitting me to consult these letters. I do hope that the readers will find the paper interesting.

1. Letter from Michael Keane to Saadulla dated 9-2-1937.
2. Letter from Sir Robert Reid to Mohammad Saadulla.
3. Letter from Mohammad Saadulla to Sir Robert Reid.
4. Letter from Saadulla to Keane 16-3-37.

5. Letter from Reid to Saadulla 18-2-37.
6. Letter from Saadulla to Reid 24-2-37.
7. Letter from Reid to Saadulla 9-3-37.
8. Letter from Saadulla to Reid 12-3-37.
9. Letter from Reid to G. G. 7-1-1938.
10. Letter from G. G. to Reid 12-1-38.
11. Letter from Saadulla to Reid 4-2-1938.
12. Letter from Reid to G. G. No. 8. 4-2-38.
13. Letter from Saadulla to Governor 13-9-38.
14. Letter from Governor to G. G. 14-9-38.
15. Letter from Governor to G. G. 14-9-38,
16. Letter from Reid to G. G. 15-9-1938,
17. Letter from G. to G. G. 3-11-1939.
18. Letter dated 16-11-1939 from G. G. to Governor.

There are nearly one hundred letters from Governor to Governor-General of India ; from Governor to Saadulla ; from Saadulla to Governor ; from Bardoloi to Reid ; from Clow to the Governor-General, and so on. No useful purpose will be served by mentioning all of them.

Abbreviations :

- A. G. P.—Assam Gana Parishad.
 A. P. C. C.—Assam Pradesh Congress Committee.
 Bardoloi—Gopinath Bardoloi, Chief Minister.
 Choudhury—Rohini Kumar Choudhury.
 Clow—Sir Andrew Clow. Governor of Assam.
 Reid—Sir Robert Reid.
 Muhmmad—Sir Mohammad Saadulla.
 Mahanta—Sri Prafulla Kumar Mahanta.