



SAGE STUDIES ON INDIA'S NORTH EAST

# CONFRONTING THE STATE

ULFA's Quest for Sovereignty

NANI GOPAL MAHANTA



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## List of Abbreviations

AALO	All Assam Liberation Organisation
AAMSU	All Assam Minority Students' Union
AASU	All Assam Students' Union
ABSU	All Bodo Students' Association
ABUSS	Asomiya Bhasa Unnati Sadhini Sabha
ADS	Asian Dialogue Society
AFSPA	Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act
AGP	Asom Gana Parishad
AIM	Assam Institute of Management
AJUP	Asom Jatiya Unnayan Parishad
AJYCP	Asom Jatiyatabadi Yuva Chatra Parishad
AL	Awami League
ALA	Assam Liberation Army
APCC	Assam Provincial Congress Committee
APLA	Assam People's Liberation Army
ATTSA	Assam Tea Tribes Students' Association
AVARD-NE	Association of Voluntary Agencies for Rural Development for North East
AXX	Axam Xahitya Xabha
BLTF	Bodo Liberation Tiger Force
BNLA	Brachin National Liberation Army
BNP	Bangladesh Nationalist Party
BNU	Brachin National Union
BSF	Border Security Force
CCHQ	Central Command Headquarters
CHQ	Central Headquarters
CNF	Chin National Front
CPI	Communist Party of India
CPI (ML)	Communist Party of India (Marxist-Leninist)

CR	Conflict Resolution
CSDS	Centre for the Study of Developing Societies
DGFI	Directorate General of Forces Intelligence
DHD	Dimasa Halong Daugah
DRDA	District Rural Development Agency
GHQ	General Headquarters
GOC	General Officer Commanding
GOI	Government of India
HDI	Human Development Index
HSLC	High School Leaving Certificate
IAS	Indian Administrative Services
IB	Intelligence Bureau
ICCPR	International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights
ICESCR	International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights
IIE	Indian Institute of Entrepreneurship
IIFT	Indian Institute of Foreign Trade
IMDT	Illegal Migrants (Determination by Tribunal) Act
IOJ	Islamic Oikya Jote
IOC	Indian Oil Corporation
IPS	Indian Police Services
ISI	Inter-Services Intelligence
JCI	Jute Corporation of India
JKLF	Jammu Kashmir Liberation Front
JMB	Jama'atul Mujahideen Bangladesh
JMMB	Jagrata Matri Mukti Bahini
KIA	Kachin Independence Army
KIO	Kachin Independence Organisation
KLO	Kamatapur Liberation Organisation
KMSS	Krishak Mukti Sangram Samity
LMG	Light Machine Gun
LOC	Letter of Credit
MASS	Manab Adhikar Sangram Samiti
MHQ	Mobile Headquarters
NDFB	National Democratic Front of Bodoland
NEEPCO	North Eastern Electric Power Corporation Limited
NERDA	North East Regional Defence Army

NESO	North East Students' Organisation
NHPC	National Hydroelectric Power Corporation
NNC	Naga National Council
NRCP	National River Conservation Plan
NSA	National Security Act
NSCN (IM)	Nationalist Socialist Council of Nagaland (Isak-Muivah)
NSCN	National Socialist Council of Nagaland
NSF	Naga Students' Federation
NSI	National Security Intelligence
OC	officer-in-charge
OIL	Oil India Limited
OPEC	Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries
PCG	People's Consultative Group
PCPIA	People's Committee for Peace Initiative in Assam
PLA	People's Liberation Army
PLP	Purbanchal Lok Parishad
PREPAK	People's Revolutionary Party of Kangleipak
PWG	People's War Group
RAW	Research and Analysis Wing
RBA	Royal Bhutan Army
SAARC	South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation
SP	Superintendent of Police
SULA	Seven Unit Liberation Army
SULFA	Surrendered United Liberation Front of Asom
TADA	Terrorist and Disruptive Activities (Prevention) Act
TMPK	Takam Mising Porin Kebang
UCS	Unified Command Structure
ULASS	United Liberation Army of Seven States
ULF	United Liberation Front
ULFA	United Liberation Front of Asom
UMF	United Minorities Front
UNLF	United National Liberation Front
UNPO	Unrepresented Nations and Peoples Organization
UPDS	United People's Democratic Solidarity
UPSC	Union Public Service Commission
URMCA	United Reservationist Minority Council of Assam/ United Revolutionary Minority Council of Assam



## Preface

The nation- and state-building project of India faces daunting challenges in North East India. What stifles is the simplistic, linear, development-centric approach of scholars and security experts from 'mainstream' India. Such a narrative neglects a host of other factors that sustain insurgency and violence in the region. It will be a gross mistake to analyse the phenomenon as only emanating from 'greed' factors and easy accessibility of arms in the region. These factors certainly play a decisive role—however, the centrality of analysis based on these factors does not answer many questions. As Sanjib Baruah said, poverty, under-development and lack of economic opportunities are everyone's favourite bogey as causes of armed conflict.<sup>1</sup> However, nature of state building, or the myopic vision of conflict resolution, receives scant attention from the policy maker of New Delhi. The people of the region are yet to own the Indian State. The problem lies with the legitimacy of the Indian State. North East India still remains the best experimenting ground, for what our security experts term as 'Carrot and Stick Policy'.

A majority of the armed rebellions in the North East region are led by people of Mongoloid origin. In other words, the indigenous North Eastern people of Mongoloid origin whose roots spread out in the South-East Asian region are yet to feel comfortable with the idioms of the Indian nation-state.

Armed rebellion in the North Eastern region is a medium—a language, a voice—to express their grievances. While the State may have the bounden duty to confront a violent movement, it has to understand the mindset, the psyche that keeps such violence going for ages. Undeniably,

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<sup>1</sup> Sanjib Baruah (ed.), *Beyond Counter-Insurgency: Breaking the Impasse in North East India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2009), 4.



the Indian State has won the war against United Liberation Front of Asom (ULFA).

ULFA represents a mindset, a suppressed voice which is deeply engrained in Assam's psyche. ULFA is the last source of Assam's protest against New Delhi, especially after the decline of All Assam Students' Union (AASU) and regional forces like Asom Gana Parishad (AGP). The declining support base of ULFA is not to be seen in its numerical strength. It represents the unmet aspirations of the innumerable tribal and ethnic groups of Assam. It is true that the organisation is losing its base in the urban areas because of its indiscriminate bomb blasts and killings. Such deviations did take place—but what about the original issues that the organisation had raised, like the issues of resource control and of land. The ethnic groups of Assam face twin challenges—one from the unchecked illegal immigration across the border and the other from the internal migration from mainland India—which have posed serious questions to the representation and identity of the smaller communities. Their greatest fear is that they have become alien in their own historical homeland and the groups have no mechanism to give vent to their grievances. They face a State which is insensitive, corrupt and partisan—that which listens to the logic of electoral dynamics. These ethnic groups, on the other hand, do not have the numerical strength through which they can influence the state politics.

The nature and issues of Assam's politics have remained the same from the days of the colonial period. The stalwarts of Assam have raised these issues right from the 1940s. They demanded a genuine federal structure that can protect the identities of smaller groups, through which they have a hold on their resources and can frame their own citizenship laws.

ULFA raises certain larger issues like representation, governance, citizenship, state making and nation building and the voice of smaller ethnic groups whose immediate priority is not market and profit but issues of memory, community land and a sense of belonging to the traditional system.

We are arguing that such politics of ULFA have limitations—after 30 years of military fight the organisation has to learn from its mistakes and take a realistic stock of the situation. They have deviated tremendously from their avowed goals and have become part of an international network. There are schisms and divisions in the organisation,

both vertically and horizontally. Sovereignty or secession is not an issue so dear to the Assamese society. The majority of the people of Assam do not support the methods of ULFA. But those deviations notwithstanding, the Indian State has to address the issues raised by the organisation. The issues that ULFA raises are the issues of the people of Assam—the State cannot crush them militarily. The State may win a battle but would lose the hearts of their own people.

Hiren Gohain, a highly celebrated intellectual of the state and instrumental in initiating peace talks between the Government of India and ULFA, believes that the organisation raises certain sound principles of self-determination.<sup>2</sup> A number of statistical surveys conducted by the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies (CSDS) in collaboration with the Department of Political Science, Gauhati University, and our own research on Human Security (The Plight of Civilians in Conflict Zone) revealed that the people of the region want a negotiated settlement of the vexed issue of insurgency. The people may not support the violent and terrorising methods of both the State and armed groups; however, there is an overwhelming approval of the ideological issues raised by groups like ULFA, with the exception of secession. ULFA's alliance with foreign agencies like Pakistani Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) or Directorate General of Forces Intelligence (DGFI) is considered to be more a tactical alliance for their strategic survival. The armed group has many unique characteristics that make it different from other organisations of the state:

- It is the only organisation that speaks about the people of Assam rather than the Assamese people.
- It is the only organisation having representation from all communities—unlike the other caste-Hindu or 'tribal' and other ethnic organisations.
- At a time when other organisations have taken a bold stand against the immigrants, it has tried to broaden the Assamese nationality by incorporating the immigrants from Bangladesh into the framework of the people of Assam.
- It has strong anti-India, anti-Delhi stand.

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<sup>2</sup> Hiren Gohain, 'Chronicle of Violence and Terror: Rise of the United Liberation Front of Assam', *Economic and Political Weekly* 42, no. 12 (24 March 2007): 1012–1018.

Although the organisation can claim to be the only one having representatives from all sections of the communities and groups, in the initial period the dominance of certain communities was very palpable. It is only in the post-1990s that the organisation has broadened its social base by incorporating various groups and communities into its fold. ULFA's emergence has to be seen in the context of contemporary history of Assam. ULFA is the culminating point of a movement that craves for a separate voice and identity for Assam. It is part of a movement that seeks to maintain the distinct identity of the composite Assamese people. It seeks to have control over its vast array of natural resources like land, crude oil, plywood, tea and forests. Quest for such a movement began during the period of the freedom struggle itself. During the period, the formulation of a future Assam province varied from an independent separate nation to the autonomous self-reliant state. There was always a fear of being inundated and overtaken by 'stronger' nationalities. Such insecurity was confronted by an articulation of a separate identity of Assamese people, which could be ensured through economic progress and cultural advancement. The protagonists of the freedom struggle in Assam contemplated a province which will be autonomous to fix its own destinations as an inseparable unit of the Indian State. ULFA is a logical conclusion of the process of denial of a space that began since the dawn of Independence. The entire trajectory moved through certain phases.

As we have stated above, the first phase began during the period of the freedom struggle itself. The Assamese middle class in the 1920s became highly apprehensive about the continuous immigration of East Bengal people to the region. The most worrying point for the middle class was that 'these immigrants would in due course, further tilt the provinces' demographic, cultural and political balance in favour of the Bengalis'.<sup>3</sup> Assam's fight with the Centre remained the core of her politics even before the attainment of Independence. In its early period of formation, the Indian political leaders were in a hurry to form the Indian nation-state. In the process, feelings and grievances of some of the communities living in the periphery remained unanswered. The Indian ruling elites had shown great insensitivity and nonchalance to some of the fundamental questions of Assam.

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<sup>3</sup> Amalendu Guha, 'Nationalism: Pan-Indian and Regional, in a Historical Perspective', in *Nationalist Upsurge in Assam*, ed. Arun Bhuyan (Guwahati: Government of Assam, August 2000), 91.

The second phase of conflict (1947–85) can be considered as an attempt for assertion for resources, language and identity. The leaders of the Indian freedom struggle barring Gandhi and a few others were in a great hurry to capture power. In the process they neglected some of the genuine issues of the region. The first major difference of opinion between Assam and the Centre occurred over the question of settling the refugees from newly-created East Pakistan in the state.

The Centre's continuous discriminatory policies reflected from the very beginning of India's independence, particularly in the exploitation of the oil sector of Assam. For ensuring a greater share of the state in the oil sector, there emerged the popular oil refinery movement which was supported by all political parties in the state. In spite of Assam's increasing crude oil production, the Government of India was not interested in establishing a new refinery in Assam. Realising the apathy of the Central government, the people of Assam belonging to all communities, languages and political outlook started a movement for the establishment of a large refinery in Assam in 1957.

According to Professor Tilottoma Misra, Assam, despite being the largest producer of tea, oil, plywood and forest products, remains one of the poorest and industrially backward states in the country.<sup>4</sup> While the problem of continued influx and the ever-growing pressure on land coupled with the fear of the Assamese losing their socio-political identity seemed to be the immediate motivating factors of the movement, it was in actuality a popular outburst against decades of economic neglect of the state by the Central government. It is significant that the immediate popular movement which preceded the Assam Movement was the one led by the AASU on the issue of economic backwardness of the state.

The third phase of conflict with the Indian State began through regional movements and militancy broadly from 1979 to 2005. The Assam Movement had laid down the foundation for the growth of an independent Assam by ULFA. Although some writers have expressed serious doubt about the democratic content of the Assam Movement, it is one of the most popular mass-based movement in the post-Independence period of India. A strong emotional content notwithstanding, for the majority of the Assamese this was the last fight to

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<sup>4</sup> Tilottoma Misra, 'Assam: A Colonial Hinterland', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 15, no. 39 (9 August 1980).

ensure their identity and culture. The Assam Movement surfaced the already palpable secessionist feeling in Assam.

Majority of the leaders of the movement believed that regional political party that came out as a result of the Assam Accord failed to address the structural issues such as resource control, more powers to the state and economic development of the state, etc. The real problem is now diagnosed to be the exploitation by the Centre which could be brought to an end by an armed struggle against the State.

However, the armed rebellion by ULFA also surfaced certain structural limitations which had come into the forefront in the fourth phase of conflict with the Indian State, i.e., from 2005 onwards. Organisations like ULFA never bothered to look into the issues of governance and day-to-day problems that the people of the state used to confront on a daily basis. Struggle over land, forest and water have acquired a new dimension after the emergence of a peasant-based movement known as Krishak Mukti Sangram Samity (KMSS) in 2005 under the leadership of RTI activist Akhil Gogoi. Before launching KMSS, Gogoi was associated with another land and forest movement in the Doyang–Tengani region of the Golaghat district in 2002–2003. When the government started evicting the settlers, two organisations named Brihhattar Tengani Unnayan Sangram Samity and Dayang Mukti Sangarm Samity were formed under the leadership of Akhil Gogoi. Gradually, the movement extended its activities in the districts such as Nagoan, Dhemaji and Lakhimpur in order to raise voice for the poor peasants and forest dwellers. Thus, movements centring on people's issues have become more popular and sustainable in comparison to the armed groups who have perennially neglected these issues for a dream of independent sovereign homeland.

However, issues remain. The ideological plank over which ULFA emerged remains unaddressed. It is to be seen how far the Indian State is sincere in accommodating the demands raised by ULFA. Or will it still rely on 'Conflict Fatigue' syndrome of the rebel leaders? ULFA in Assam represents what Sanjib Baruah prefers to call, in a terminology of Doug McAdam, Sidney Tarrow and Charles Tilly, as 'contentious politics'.<sup>5</sup>

If we look at ULFA's ideology as 'contentious politics' it actually represents a continuum with other non-violent social movements, political

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<sup>5</sup> See Sanjib Baruah, 'Separatist Militants and Contentious Politics in Assam, India', *Asian Survey*, 49, no. 6 (2009): 951–974.

parties and interest groups. Claimants like ULFA can acquire access to power and can adapt to institutional politics; and then they become more like interest groups or conventional political parties.<sup>6</sup> From that point, ULFA's violence is an instrumental violence, the basic premise of which is to bring certain structural changes in the behaviour and functioning of the Indian State.

Contemporary writings on the insurgency phenomenon in the region can be clubbed in a mutually antagonistic position. One school, constituted mostly by the security experts and scholars from the 'mainstream', conceptualises insurgency as a product of lack of development and unemployment. Security experts view groups like ULFA as puppets in the hands of foreign forces. Certain academics, particularly from the region, on the other hand, tend to overlook the role of external forces; there is a tendency to give salience to certain theoretical premises which hinge on the failure of the State in the region. Such mutually exclusive binary extrapolation actually tells us the half-truth.

This book is essentially a product of my association with the topic for more than 15 years. My interest in ULFA grew after my visit to a camp of ULFA in Bhutan in 1997. I express my gratitude to my underground friends for their very insightful exposure of the organisation. Interaction with the cadres has helped me in understanding what motivates a young boy/girl to join a path which is shrouded with life-threatening risks at every step. I owe an apology to them if I have not been able to do justice or give a sympathetic treatment to their struggle as my purpose is not to get enamoured by their individual sacrifice. My fieldwork in Bangladesh was very enriching as I had the opportunity to interact with a number of intellectuals, media personality, human rights groups and NGO workers. Among them, my interaction with Professor Imtiaz Ahmed, Professor Amena Mohsin, Professor Meghna Guha Thakurta (all from Dhaka University) was helpful in acquiring knowledge about their perception of insurgency and the role of Bangladeshi State in providing shelter to underground outfits of North East India.

I had a wide range of discussion with various officials of Government of India and Assam. In a number of occasions, I was engaged in debates and discussions with G. M. Srivastav, the ex-DGP of Assam and

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<sup>6</sup> Sanjib Baruah, 'The Rise and Decline of a Separatist Insurgency: Contentious Politics in Assam, India', in *Autonomy and Ethnic Conflict in South and South-East Asia*, ed. Rajat Ganguly (London and New York: Routledge, 2012), 27–45.

B. J. Mahanta, IGP (L&O), Assam Police, and also many others from the Army, Paramilitary Forces, the Intelligence Bureau (IB) and Special Branch (SB) who have wished to remain anonymous for their professional obligations. Many of them shared information which would have been otherwise impossible to gather. Of course, these sources were scrutinised and interrogated through the lenses of my orientation as a student of Social Sciences in general and Political Science in particular.

I am particularly grateful to my innumerable friends in the region for their help and support. I am particularly indebted to the leaders and cadres of ULFA (many of them have surrendered). I made it a point to interview them at the very first instance of their public appearance. I express my gratitude to various civil society leaders like Lachit Bordoloi, Bubumoni Goswami (from MASS), Dilip Patgiri (PCG member and Advisor, AJYCP), Ajit Bhuyan (PCG member and a human rights activist) and many others whom I cannot name them for want of space.

Subir Bhaumik—a prolific writer, journalist and a great admirer of the region—has always remained a great source of inspiration for me. I must thank my two dear friends—Professor Chandan Sarmah of Tezpur University and Dr Akhil Ranjan Dutta, Associate Professor of Political Science, Gauhati University, for their meaningful association. Three of us dialogue, debate and discuss on contemporary issues of the region with varying perspectives.

My esteemed colleagues in the Department of Political Science, Gauhati University—Professor Monirul Hussain, Professor Niru Hazarika, Professor Sandhya Goswami, Dr Alaka Sarma, Dr Akhil R. Dutta, Dr Jayanta K. Sarma, Dr Dhruva P. Sarma, Dr Shubrajit Konwar, Dr Joana Mehjebeen and Borosa Deka—have always inspired me in my intellectual journey. My wife asked me not to be formal in expressing my acknowledgement to her. Even at the risk of antagonising her, I must acknowledge my wife Gargi, sons Mahip and Adhip and daughter Nishtha for being constant sources of inspiration to me.

I shall always remain indebted to Professor Anuradha Dutta for her encouragement and guidance. I express my sincere gratitude and thanks to the entire family of SAGE Publications, especially Rekha Natarajan, Sugata Ghosh and Shambhu Sahu for their support. Finally, this book would not have been possible without the apt handling by Dhurjjati Sarma, the editor from SAGE.

# 1

## **From Nationalism to Secessionism** *Transformation of Assamese Identity*

### Road to Armed Struggle by ULFA: A Glimpse at Contemporary History

Is man violent by nature or by circumstance? Psychologists and social scientists don't regard aggression as fundamentally spontaneous. Rather they regard most aggression, including violence, as an emotional response to socially induced frustration and sometimes as a dispassionate, learned response evoked by specific situations.<sup>1</sup>

Ted Gurr, one of the most celebrated writers on collective violence argues that man's frustration over some of the materials and social circumstances of their lives is a necessary pre-condition of group protest and collective violence.<sup>2</sup> The more intense and widespread frustration-induced discontent is among people, the more intense and widespread collective violence is likely to be. Several general attitudinal and social conditions determine the extent and form of consequent violence. People are most strongly disposed to act violently on their discontent if they believe that violence is justifiable and likely to succeed. They are likely to take violent political action to the extent that they regard their government as illegitimate and responsible for their frustrations. The extent,

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<sup>1</sup> L. Berkowitz, *Aggression: A Social-Psychological Analysis* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1962), 65.

<sup>2</sup> Ted Gurr, *Why Men Rebel* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1970), 56.



intensity and organisation of civil strife are finally determined by the characteristics of the social system: the degree and consistency of social control and the extent to which institutions afford peaceful alternatives to violent protest.

It will be interesting to look at why Assam having strong socio-cultural links with India should embark on a path of armed struggle. For this, one must go back into the history of Assam's relationship with the rest of the country and how, after Independence, the insensitivity, ignorance and prejudice of the Central leadership helped to alienate Assam from the Indian Union. In this chapter, we make an attempt to look at the genesis of Assamese secessionism or quest for a separate identity process from a contemporary historical perspective.

Since the pre-Independence period, Assam's concern over protecting its identity and culture was never given due recognition by the Congress leaders. Politically or administratively, Assam was never a part of India—even during the reign of the mighty Mughals, Assam couldn't be annexed by the emperors.

In this chapter, we shall attempt to see how the identity of Assamese nationality has been formed and how certain historic-political factors have been nourishing the idea of separateness, although in a nebulous form. These have acquired new connotations and dimensions in the 1980s and 1990s. According to Professor Girin Phukan, the history of Assamese secessionism is deeply rooted in Assam's history. Professor Phukan opines:

A section of the Assamese elite expressed secessionist sentiment during the period when the Constitution was being framed. Within the framework of the Indian federation, they believed, the 'legitimate' Assamese interest would not be protected. Hence, they wanted to make Assam separate from the rest of the country. However, it seems that a vague and as yet nebulous secessionist tendency developed among a section of the Assamese elite which was however not sufficient to press home their demands.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Girin Phukan, *Politics of Regionalism in North East India* (Delhi: Spectrum Publication, 1996), 70–71.

The secessionist urges existed in the minds of a section of Assamese elite, albeit in a rudimentary form. Most of the time it remained dormant, but in some occasions it came into surface. It may be noted that the secessionist sentiments appear to have been articulated in different regional movements, such as the Language Movement, 1960; Refinery Movement, 1967; Movement on the issue of Medium of Instruction, 1972 and Anti-foreigner Movement, 1979–85.

The formation of ULFA can also be seen in the light of this perspective. The first factor that brought Assamese national identity in question is perhaps the issue of language. According to a perceptive scholar, 'Historically the regional nationalisms, or what I have called sub-nationalism, in India arose simultaneously with and indeed sometimes pre-dating pan-Indian nationalism.'<sup>4</sup> Like Bengal, the most important factor for the formation of Assamese identity in this period was language.

It would take another 70 years or so for this consciousness to develop and give shape to Assamese nationalism.<sup>5</sup> No doubt in saying that nationalism was the vehicle for the formation of Assamese identity and the most important catalyst in this formation was the role of the middle class or educated elites.

The cultural forms, values and practices of ethnic groups become political resources for elites in competition for political power and economic advantage. They become symbols and referents for identification of members of the group, which are called up in order to create a political identity more easily ... or to undercut its political support .... Nationalism is a political movement by definition. It requires political organisation skilled political leadership and resources to gain it to make successful demands in the political system. Moreover, the movement must be strong enough to withstand Government efforts to suppress it.<sup>6</sup>

The formation and growth of Assamese identity reflect all these characteristics. The Assamese sense of belonging was based on a significant literary movement of the second half of the 19th century. In 1836, a

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<sup>4</sup> Sanjib Baruah, *India Against Itself: Assam and the Politics of Nationality* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999), 68.

<sup>5</sup> Udayon Misra, *Periphery Strikes Back* (Shimla: IAS, 2000), 78.

<sup>6</sup> Paul Brass, *Ethnicity and Nationalism: Theory and Comparison* (SAGE Publications, 1991), 15.

decade after the takeover of Assam, the British colonial officials decided that the official language of administration in Assam should be Bengali. The earliest assertions of Assamese cultural pride grew as a reaction to that decision.<sup>7</sup> Reaction to such imposition was twofold. The middle-class intelligentsia reacted strongly to such a move by British officers and, secondly, a renaissance of Assamese society took place where the literary movement launched by the Assamese elites played the most dominant role. Anandaram Dhekiyal Phukan petitioned to Moffat Mills in 1852 against instruction in the 'vernacular schools' being imparted in the 'foreign language' that is Bengali. According to Professor Amalendu Guha, 'His contribution to early nationalist ideology apart, Dhekiyal Phukan also gave vent to Assamese national pride.'<sup>8</sup> Dhekiyal Phukan reminded the government that the Assamese were no way 'inferior in their intellectual capacities to any other Indian Nation'.<sup>9</sup> Through the literary movement, the educated Assamese middle class not only strengthened the Assamese language but also tried to impart new progressive ideas to the people.

It was only after the First World War that a distinct national consciousness, backed up by political organisations, began to take shape. Before this, the struggle for legitimate status of the Assamese language, which was replaced in 1836 by Bengali, had begun. Anandaram Dhekiyal Phukan (1829–59) and the American Baptist missionaries who, in the meantime, were writing grammars and dictionaries of Assamese language played a decisive role in the establishment of the language. According to Professor Maheswar Neog, the Christian missionaries, by publishing Assamese grammar, newspapers, dictionaries, school-books and books on science and literature, have immensely contributed to the growth of Assamese language and literature.<sup>10</sup> By publishing *Arunodoi*<sup>11</sup> for a period of 37 years, the missionaries had created a new bunch of Assamese nationalist writers and thus instilled confidence in the ambit

<sup>7</sup> Sanjib Baruah, *India Against Itself*, 71.

<sup>8</sup> Amalendu Guha, 'Nationalism: Pan-Indian and Regional in a Historical Perspective', in *Nationalist Upsurge in Assam*, ed. Arun Bhuyan (Guwahati: Government of Assam, August 2000), 90.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 90.

<sup>10</sup> Maheswar Neog, 'Potobhumi Unabingsha Satika', in *Assamese Literature in the 20th Century*, ed. Homen Borgohain (Jorhat, 1967), 6.

<sup>11</sup> *Arunodoi* is the first Assamese newspaper published in 1846 from Sibsagar.

of sagging morale which was created by the replacement of Assamese by Bengali as the court language.

The Assamese language regained its legitimate status in the year 1873. Ananda Ram Barua, along with Gunabhiram and Hem Chandra Barua, generated a linguistic consciousness and generated love for their own language. The establishment of the Asomiya Bhasa Unnati Sadhini Sabha (ABUSS) or Society for the Improvement of Assamese Language on 25 August 1888 by a few Assamese students in Calcutta is a landmark event in the history of Assamese language and literature.<sup>12</sup>

During this period, Haliram Dhekial Phukan (1802–32), Dinanath Bezbarua (1813–95), Anandaram Dhekial Phukan (1829–59), Gunabhiram Barua (1834–94), Hem Chandra Barua (1835–96), Rajni Kanta Bordoloi (1867–1940) and Kanaklal Barua are some of the names that will be reckoned with in the growth of Assamese nationality.

## Role of Assamese Middle Class: An Aggressive Posture to Maintain Assamese Distinctiveness

A search for a cohesive Assamese identity went along with pan-Indian nationalism. The following trends of Assamese nationalism were noticeable during the time of nationalist struggle from 1830–1947:

1. Fight against the domination by another regional group, i.e., the Bengali. This was done in a subtle manner by persuading the Britishers to accept the Assamese as distinct language.<sup>13</sup> The attempt was to assert Assamese language and literature.
2. The second trend was a pan-Indian identity which the Congress leaders were successful to establish with the help of anti-British nationalist struggle that had engulfed the entire country.
3. The third trend was more inward looking, which tried to fiercely protect Assamese identity from the aggression of immigrants from

<sup>12</sup> H. K. Borpujari, *Political History of Assam*, vol.1 (Guwahati: Publication Board of Assam, 1980), 142.

<sup>13</sup> See Prafulla Kumar Mahanta, *A Social History of Assamese Middle Class* (Guwahati: Purvanchal Prakash, 1991), 63–68.

East Bengal. These groups of leaders were highly critical about the insensitive attitude of Congress leaders towards Assam. A few nationalist leaders even tried to establish Assam as an independent sovereign state, if Assam's interest is not protected within the Indian Union.

The Assam Association in 1903 marks a significant step in the growth of Assamese nationalism. The Association served as the mouthpiece of the Assamese middle class in articulating their needs, grievances and aspirations. The Association was instrumental in organising the new generation to fight against the Britishers.<sup>14</sup> The first student organisation of the valley, Assam Chatra Sanmilan, came into existence in 1916, and Lakshminath Bezbarua was chosen as the president. Soon after, the Assam Sahitya Sabha was established in 1917, which was considered to be linchpin of nationalism in Assam. One distinguishing feature during this period was the growing settlement of Muslim population in Assam. Thus, on the one hand, the Assamese middle class had to face stiff competition from educated Bengali middle class patronised by the Britishers and, secondly, the elites were highly apprehensive about the increasing migrant population. Throughout this period, the Bengalis outnumbered the Assamese in both the total strength and representation in government services, profession and business.<sup>15</sup> While both the groups had fought against the common enemy of British imperialism, they also fought against each other for jobs, land and domination.<sup>16</sup>

The Assamese middle class in the 1920s became highly apprehensive about the continuous immigration of East Bengal people to the region. The most worrying factor for the middle class was 'that these immigrants would in due course, further tilt the provinces' demographic, cultural and political balance in favour of the Bengalis'.<sup>17</sup> Muslim immigration from Bengal began to be viewed as a calculated move to turn Assam into a Muslim-majority province, so that she could qualify herself for

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<sup>14</sup> K. N. Dutta, *Landmarks of the Freedom Struggle in Assam* (Gauhati, 1969), 45.

<sup>15</sup> The Assamese were 23 per cent and the Bengalis were 42 per cent as per the census of 1931.

<sup>16</sup> Guha, 'Nationalism: Pan-Indian and Regional', 91.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 91.

inclusion into the erstwhile East Pakistan, now Bangladesh. Professor Amalendu Guha gives a very detailed account about the problem in his seminal work *Planter Raj to Swaraj*:

Landless immigrants from overpopulated East Bengal—of them, 85% were Muslims—found land in Assam's water logged, Jungle infested, riverine belt. Used to an amphibious mode of living and industrious, these immigrants came by rail, streamers and bits up the Brahmaputra to reclaim those malarial areas. All that they wanted was land. From their riverine base, they further pressed themselves forward in all directions in search of living space in the areas held by the autochthons. It was then that an open clash of interests began to take place.<sup>18</sup>

All these organisations and middle-class leaders educated in the West, like Lakshminath Bezbarua, Jananath Bora, Kamalakanta Bhattacharyya, Ambikagiri Roychoudhury, Chandranath Sharma and others, contributed immensely to the growth of Assamese nationalism. Thus, the search for a cohesive Assamese identity went along with pan-Indian nationalism. However, in some cases, the regional brand of nationalism overshadowed pan-Indian nationalism.

The formulation of Assam province varied from an independent, separate nation to the autonomous self-dependent state. Two important issues that had helped in the Assamese nationalism are the restoration of the language and, secondly, the sense of insecurity which primarily emanated from unchecked infiltration from East Bengal. "The fear of being inundated and overtaken by "stronger" nationalities was attempted to be confronted by stress on separate identity of Assamese people which could be ensured through economic progresses & cultural advancement."<sup>19</sup>

Meanwhile, the movement for driving out the Britishers had already started in Assam. The members of Assam Association formed Assam Provincial Congress Committee (APCC) in order to contribute to the national efforts. Ambikagiri Roychoudhury, a notable writer, poet and a nationalist, however, did not allow Assamese nationalism to be merged into Indian nationalism. Roy choudhury clearly distinguished 'Asomiya

<sup>18</sup> Amalendu Guha, *Planter Raj to Swaraj: Freedom Struggle and Electoral Politics in Assam, 1826–1947* (New Delhi: ICAR, 1977), 206.

<sup>19</sup> Misra, *Periphery Strikes Back*, 80.

Swaraj’ from ‘Bharatiya Swaraj’ and argued that the Swaraj for India might not bring Swaraj for Assam.<sup>20</sup>

The Assamese elite conceived of nationalism not so much in the larger Indian context as it was in the context of Assam. They talked more aggressively about Assamese nationalism and less of Indian nationalism.<sup>21</sup> The appearance of newspapers and periodicals such as *Arunodai* (1846), *Assam Bilashini* (1871), *Jonaki* (1889), *Bijulee* (1890), *Assamiya* (1918), *Times of Assam* (1923), *Bonti* (1927), *Avahan* (1929), *The Assam Tribune* (1937), to mention the more important ones, had made immense contribution in the growth of Asomiya nationalism. ‘The rise in the level of political consciousness of the people was reflected in the articulation of regional demands which included rights of “Sons of the soil” and safeguard against unchecked and unlimited immigration from nearly provinces’, says Professor Mishra.<sup>22</sup>

Assamese press during this period can be divided into the following two categories:

1. nationalist press tilted more towards Indian nationalism and
2. newspapers leaning more towards the cause of Assam and the Assamese than Indian nationalism

Papers like *Assam Bilashini* (1913–24), *Weekly Asamiya* (1918–47), *Bi-weekly Asamiya* (1930–42) and *Assam Sevak* (1937–43) would fall into the first category and used to suffer at the hands of the British administration for their support to the nationalist struggle.

Professor Sunil Pawan Baruah, who had written the pioneering book *Press in Assam: Origin and Development*, said in one of his writings:

It is to be remembered that notion of nationalism of most of the News papers of Brahmaputra valley was different from the concept of nationalism as understood by the country.... In fact some sort of uneasiness

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<sup>20</sup> Amikigiri Rai Chaudhury, ‘Swaraj’, *Chetana* (An Assamese weekly published from Guwahati) III, no. 2 (1920): 2.

<sup>21</sup> Amalendu Guha prefers to call this sentiment of the Assamese as ‘little nationalism’. Guha, *Planter Raj to Swaraj*, 334–337.

<sup>22</sup> See Misra, *Periphery Strikes Back*, 86.

and apprehension of economic and cultural domination by the outsider's influenced to a certain extent, the tone of the Assamese press in the pre-Independence period and even after Independence, this attitude prevailed.<sup>23</sup>

*Chetona* (1919–27), *Deka Asom* (1935) and *Dainik Batori* (1935) were a few papers that would fall into the second category that we have mentioned above. The first daily newspaper of Assam, *Dainik Batori* (1935), didn't support the Non-cooperation Movement initiated by the Congress. 'Rather the paper stood for the ideology of "Assam for the Assamese" and urged the acceptance of this dictum as the ideal of life.'<sup>24</sup>

Intellectuals like Ambikagiri Roy Choudhury, Jnananath Bora, Chandra Nath Sharma were under the apprehension that British domination might be replaced by the domination of non-Assamese Indians over the Assamese. Roychoudhury continuously emphasised the need of developing national consciousness. It was at the insistence of Roychoudhury that in 1926 the Asom Sangrakhini Sabha, later known as Asom Jatiya Mahasabha, was established to protect the interests of the Assamese. Ambikagiri's idea about India and other smaller nationalities can be grasped from the following excerpts:

India is not a country; it is a continent—a totality of many countries. According to their own social systems, customs everyone is a nationality—and as a result of combination of all these nationalities is growing the great Indian Mahajati—therefore India is the Mahadesh of the Indian Mahajati. Though the people of various provinces may be of same ideology yet they have distinct customs, dresses, eating habits, social norms and distinct natures, system of thoughts are different literature and culture are different. None of them want to disappear.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Sunil Pawan Baruah, 'Role of the Press in the Nationalist Upsurge—Brahmaputra Valley', in *Nationalist Upsurge in Assam*, ed. Arun Bhuyan (Guwahati: Government of Assam, August 2000), 330–331.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 331–332.

<sup>25</sup> S. N. Sharma, 'Ambikagiri Roy Choudhuryr Pratibha', in *Ambikagiri Raichadhury Racanavali*, ed. Shrama (Guwahati: Ambikagiri Roychoudhuryr Sworoni Committee, 1986), 597.



'He viewed India as not one nation but as a combination of nationalities who aspire to protect their identities within the Indian Mahajati.'<sup>26</sup> Although some scholars have argued that 'Ambikagiri never dreamt of Assam as an independent country',<sup>27</sup> yet some scholars are of the opinion that 'he moved nearer to the idea of a Swadhin Asom'.<sup>28</sup>

Three strands of thought-process emerged on the question of the protection of Assamese identity:

1. Unsympathetic attitude of the Congress to the issue of influx had made people like Ambikagiri and organisations like Jatiya Masabha to demand for a separate existence of Assam.
2. The second group however believed that the separate interest of Assam could not be served without the achievement of larger national interest. Hence they wanted Assam to be an integral part of India.
3. The third group, many of whom were devoted Congressmen, wanted Assam's identity to be preserved and protected within the broad federal framework of India.

At any rate, thus with the practical disappearance of 'Assam Association', the Asom Sangrakhini Sabha (Sabha for Conservation of Assam) was founded in 1926 under the leadership of Ambikagiri Roy Choudhury. It demanded the vindication of the rights of the children of the soil. The *Deka Asom*, (an Assamese Weekly) a mouthpiece of the Samgrakshini Sabha, pleaded for the protection of indigenous Assamese people against the aggression of outsiders.<sup>29</sup> In fact, the Samgrakshini Sabha put up a strong case of 'Assam for the Assamese'. It also emphasised the fact that the 'Swaraj' for India must mean 'Swaraj' for each component unit like Assam, endowing it with full freedom to preserve and protect its individuality in respect of language and culture.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> A. K. Barua, *Social Tensions in Assam: Middle Class Politics* (Purbanchal Prakash, 1991), 59.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 61.

<sup>28</sup> Misra, *Periphery Strikes Back*, 85.

<sup>29</sup> *Deka Asom* II, no. 2, (1936).

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*

In a memorandum named 'Case of the Great Assamese People and of Their Homeland Assam: Memorandum on behalf of the "Asom Jatiya Mahasabha"' to the Members, All India Congress Working Committee and All India Congress Committee, dated 9 June 1946, New Delhi, the Jatiya Mahasabha was even planning to organise a strong Assamese volunteer troop named 'Atmarakshmi Vahini' to protect the existence of the Assamese.<sup>31</sup> Here it would be interesting to note that the urge for such a separate identity came closer to the idea of a sovereign independent Assam. Such a feeling got emboldened even after Independence. On 1 January 1948 the president of Jatiya Mahasabha, Kamrup, asserted that 'Assam could come out of the Indian Union and become an independent country like Burma or any other country'.<sup>32</sup> Moreover, some of the militant sections of the Mahasabha, in a letter to the editor of the *Shillong Times*, expressed the view that:

Assam's sovereignty was a fact of ages ago and it should be of future, there are many sovereign states in the world with lesser areas, population and potential resources. Assam is the home of brave martial races and tribes, whom the world has not seen in their full strength. In these days of national inter-dependence no state or country, however, small or big, can have any reason for fear of her defence and Assam can perhaps be one of the strongest little states in the whole of East.<sup>33</sup>

Members of the organisation were so dedicated to their cause that they were even prepared to have a truncated Assam. *The Assam Tribune*, 17 July 1947, reported that Jatiya Mahasabha wanted to leave out a portion of the Goalpara district which constituted the chief link of Assam with the rest of India. For this, they suggested that 'the southern part of Dhubri Sub-division might properly be transferred to East Pakistan'. In addition to this, some influential members of the upper-caste Assamese intelligentsia, who were not closely associated with the Asom Jatiya Mahasabha, had also expressed a deep sense of centrifugal sentiment. For instance, Jnananath Bora, a noted Assamese writer, in a series of articles

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<sup>31</sup> See Ambikagiri Roy Choudhury, *Dekadekerir Ved* (in Assamese) 2nd ed. (Guwahati, 1958), referred in Phukan, *Politics of Regionalism in North East India*, 73.

<sup>32</sup> Phukan, *Politics of Regionalism in North East India*, 66.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

published in the *Avahan* (a popular language journal) and in the *Dainik Batori* (an Assamese daily), asserted the feasibility and justification of a separate sovereign state for Assam.<sup>34</sup> In 'Kamrup Aru Bharatbarsha', Bora maintained that 'the survival of the Assamese nation, the rejuvenation of its diseased life called for our readiness to separate Assam from India'.<sup>35</sup> He articulated such separatist feelings, particularly in the event of the Second World War, when Assam was threatened of being attacked by the Japanese army. This section of the Assamese intellectuals felt that but for the 'merger of Assam with India, the problem of defence of the former would not have arisen'. They argued that the Assamese whom they called 'martial people' had never been conquered by any foreign power till the advent of the British rule. It appeared to them that Gandhi and his Indian National Congress had reduced the militancy of the Assamese people. Therefore, a section of the Assamese elite sometimes thought that for the sake of the defence of their land, Assam must come out of the Indian Union. Indeed, they wanted to see a militant type of leadership developed in Assam, distinct from the Gandhian ideology. Thus, a considerable section of the Assamese intelligentsia demanded the secession of Assam from India as a means of 'saving the Assamese race from extinction'.<sup>36</sup> It is interesting to note that some of them had even begun to conceptualise a model for the governance of their future free state of Assam. In this connection, Gauri Shankar Bhattacharyya, an Assamese intellectual and a provincial leader of the then Communist Party of India (CPI), in one of his articles maintained:

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<sup>34</sup> See Jnananath Bora, 'Kamrup Aru Bharatbarsha', *Avahan*, no. 3, (1936); 'Asom Desh Bharatbarshar Bhitarat Thakiba Kiya?' *Avahan*, no. 2, (1938) and 'Asom Desh and Congress', *DainikBatori*, (24 October 1937), etc. (Accessed in Nanda Talukdar Foundation Library.)

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>36</sup> This sentiment of the Assamese intellectuals was communicated to Nehru when he came to Assam in November 1937, by Nilomoni Phukon and Ambikagiri Roy Choudhury. They presented a memorandum to Nehru among other things. They stated: '... as a means of saving the Assamese race item extinction a considerable section of the Assamese intelligentsia has even expressed their minds in favour of the secession of Assam from India.' Memorandum presented to Nehru at Rongia on 28 November 1937, File No. p. 4 (i)-1937, AICC files, Nehru Memorial Museum and Library (New Delhi), referred in Phukan, *Politics of Regionalism in North East India*, 73.

... it will be more or less a Russian Model in which there will be two Houses of Legislature. The Lower House will be elected through adult suffrage on the basis of communities and groups, and each of them will get representation proportionate to their population. The Upper House will be constituted by representatives of different nationalities and tribes and communities.<sup>37</sup>

Statements such as these created an impression that in a free independent Assam, all the castes, communities and tribes would get adequate opportunities to take part in the state administration, under which different communities of the state would be in a position to maintain their distinct identities and to develop themselves according to their own genius. By and large, the above model of legislature indicated a measure of solution of the problem of ethnic multiplicity of the region.

In a bid to stake their claim for an independent status for Assam, this group of people had to reckon with the question of the economic viability of Assam and its capacity for growth. They, therefore, argued that Assam possessed considerable economic resources to survive as a sovereign independent state. Thus, Bhattacharyya asserted:

As to the plea of Assam proper being too small for statehood, it may be observed that both in point of view of population and resources, Assam is in a much better position than any sovereign state in Europe or America.<sup>38</sup>

Whether this statement is factually accurate or not is a different matter, but the point is that a section of the Assamese elite was anxious for a sovereign status for Assam. The Assamese elites were convinced that Assam remained a backward province in spite of her enormous economic potentialities. The Assamese elite called it 'a rich province with the poor people'. They thought that the Centre was taking too much revenue away from Assam, while she did not receive her 'legitimate' share of the duties on tea, oil, jute, etc. Thus, the Assamese elite were not happy with the existing financial adjustment between the Centre and Assam

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<sup>37</sup> Gauri Shankar Bhattacharyya, 'Pakistan and Assam', *The Assam Tribune* (10 November 1944).

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

and they characterised it as 'unscientific' and alleged that it constituted a 'grave injustice done to Assam'.<sup>39</sup>

Hence, they believed that her economic backwardness could be removed only if she became an independent state. On the other hand, they felt that if Assam remained a part of India, she would go into the economic grip of the Centre under the 'smoke screen' of a national government. The people of the state also held the Congress leaders responsible for being too submissive to the dictates of the Central Congress leadership.

They were characterised by a section of the Assamese elite as 'rubber stamp' or 'gramophones' to endorse or echo the decision of their 'All-India Bosses'.<sup>40</sup> In fact, these Assamese elite lost faith in the Congressmen of Assam and desired to see the development of a new leadership which would be independent of All India Congress. They apprehended that in due course, Assam might lose her distinct identity and even her very existence, if she continued her links with the All India Congress leadership which, they thought, went against Assamese interest. By and large, this sort of thinking naturally led a section of the Assamese elite to urge for a separate and independent political existence for Assam.

There is yet another group of Assamese intellectuals who articulated the idea of sovereign independent political status for Assam on the ground of Assam's socio-cultural distinctness and historical background.<sup>41</sup> They asserted that the Assamese, who constituted the dominant group in Assam, formed a sufficiently distinctive group from the point of view of language and culture. These, they thought, must at all costs be protected and preserved. They believed that the development of their language and culture could be fostered, if Assam was made a separate independent state. Dr Bani Kanta Baruah, a noted Assamese intellectual, in the course of his lecture at the Narayani Handique Memorial Historical Institute, Guwahati, was reported to have said that culturally,

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<sup>39</sup> *The Assam Tribune* (24 December 1949).

<sup>40</sup> Kedarnath Goswami, 'Assam's Rubber Stamp Leadership', *The Assam Tribune*, 8 January 1948.

<sup>41</sup> Girin Phukan, 'Politics of Secessionism in North East India', in *Insurgency in North East India*, ed. B. Pakem (New Delhi: Omsons Publications, 1996), 264–269.

racially and linguistically, every non-Assamese is a foreigner in Assam. He further argued that Assam, from the very ancient times, never formed a part of India.<sup>42</sup>

It is interesting to note that Kuladhar Chaliha, who was a veteran Congress leader and member of the Constituent Assembly, also associated himself with these sentiments of the said public meeting. It seems that most of the time these sentiments were dormant and even Congressmen, who were normally supposed to be nationalists, associated themselves with an inward-looking Assamese identity feelings.

The demand for a separate independent Assam also came from several tribal organisations of the province. These groups, like Nagas, Mizos and even the Khasis, were highly apprehensive about the caste Hindu domination and hence demanded separate homelands within or outside autonomous Assam. Even the United Mizo Freedom Party demanded for the secession of all Mizo areas from India and merger with Burma.<sup>43</sup> The Ahom Association (formerly Ahom Sabha)—an elite organisation of the Ahoms who ruled Assam for 600 years—tried to establish a separate identity for the Ahoms.<sup>44</sup> With progress of Independence movement, the members of the association felt alienated and marginalised at the hands of caste Hindus and demanded a separate sovereign Assam to reorganise Assamese society where the Ahoms would once again be the major cohesive force.

However, Professor Amalendu Guha told us in a personal interview that there was no serious audience or serious followers for a sovereign Assam while acknowledging its existence during this period. It was an expression of a few middle-class elites who were apparently very upset with the socio-economic development of that period.<sup>45</sup> 'It was but natural that the idea of a Swadhin Asom started losing much ground even as the popularity of the congress increased in the region.'<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Reported in *The Assam Tribune* (20 July, 1947).

<sup>43</sup> Girin Phukan, *Assam's Attitude towards Federalism* (New Delhi: Sterling Publications, 1984), 49.

<sup>44</sup> A. C. Bhuyan, referred in Misra, *Periphery Strikes Back*, 93.

<sup>45</sup> Amalendu Guha in a personal interview on 19 February 2001 at Guwahati.

<sup>46</sup> Misra, *Periphery Strikes Back*, 95.

How much these secessionist demands were widespread is not a very important question. The fact is that a vague and yet rebellious secessionist tendency developed among a section of the Assamese elite which was however not sufficient to press home their demands. 'There was no widespread movement demanding independent status for Assam corresponding to the Indian national movement or even the movement led by the Muslim League....'<sup>47</sup> This secessionist feeling continued to haunt the Assamese elites in various movements that had followed in the post-Independence period such as the Language Movement, 1960; the Refinery Movement, 1967; the Movement on the issue of Medium of Instruction, 1972; and the Anti-foreigner Movement, 1979–85 reaching its culmination with ULFA and other extremist organisations in the 1990s.

## Cabinet Mission and Grouping System

Assam's fight with the Centre remained the core of her politics even before the attainment of the Independence. In its early period of formation, the Indian political leaders were in a hurry to form the Indian nation-state. In the process, feelings and grievances of some of the communities living in the periphery remained unanswered. The Indian ruling elites had shown great insensitivity and nonchalance to some of the fundamental questions of Assam. The upcoming generations and the regional ruling elites have nurtured these feelings of the Centre and in later period, extremist groups, like ULFA and others, utilised them for gaining legitimacy to their anti-Indian stand and to advocate secessionism.

One of the significant aspects of the 1942 Quit India movement was the overwhelming participation of the people and various political groups, cutting across the ideological differences.

The people resistance in the face of massive repression proved finally that they were with the Congress and its brand of politics. For them the Congress seemed to be the only answer than to the machinations of the

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<sup>47</sup> Phukan, *Assam's Attitude towards Federalism*, 70.

Muslim league which had been consistently campaigning for Assam's inclusion in Pakistan.<sup>48</sup>

On 16 May 1946, the Cabinet Mission declared its statement, the most important features of which were that it recommended for the unity of India, a three-tier constitution—the Centre, groups and provinces and an interim government with the support of the major political parties till the constitution was complete. To expedite the composition of the constitution-making body, the Mission suggested the inclusion of representatives from the recently elected provincial Legislative Assemblies. Each province was to be allotted a total number of seats proportional to its population, approximating a ratio of one to a million. The population was divided into three major communities—General, Muslim and Sikh—which were to have equal representation. The representatives would be divided into three sections, A, B and C. Bengal and Assam were included in section C and the number of members from it was as given in Table 1.1.

**Table 1.1**  
**Representation of Assam in Cabinet Mission**

<i>Province</i>	<i>General</i>	<i>Muslim</i>	<i>Total</i>
Bengal	27	33	60
Assam	7	3	10
<b>Total</b>	<b>34</b>	<b>36</b>	<b>70</b>

Source: A. C. Bhuyan, *Political History of Assam*, vol. III, (Guwahati: Publication Board of Assam, 1980), 344.

The statement then read: 'These sections shall proceed to settle the Provincial Constitutions for the Provinces included in each section, and shall also decide whether any group Constitution shall be set up for those Provinces and, if so, with what provincial subjects the Group should deal.' A province was given the option to withdraw from the group provided that the decision regarding this was taken by the new legislative of the province after the first general election under the new constitution.

<sup>48</sup> Misra, *Periphery Strikes Back*, 96.



As soon as the statement was declared by the Cabinet Mission, there was sharp reaction in Assam against the grouping clause which had tagged the province with Bengal in section C to frame the group and provincial constitutions. This was exactly what the senior Congress leaders of Assam feared when the negotiation at Simla was going on. The APCC now understood that its appeal to preserve the province's autonomy went unheard. The people of Assam felt that the Cabinet Mission's decision to deny them provincial status was tantamount to effacing their culture and identity which in recent years was already dwindling in the social and political life of the province.

Gopinath Bordoloi, when he was invited to the Cabinet Mission to express his views in April 1946, strongly argued against the inclusion of Sylhet in the future territory of Assam. However, the grouping plan of the Cabinet Mission belied the expectation of the Assamese middle class. The grouping system divided the provinces of the India into three sections of A, B and C. Sections B and C comprised six Muslim-dominated provinces. Section C was to consist of Bengal and Assam.

Nirode Kumar Barooah in his seminal work says:

The problem with Assam was that since this Hindu-majority province would be together with the Muslim predominated Bengal in one section. The acceptance of the Section would automatically mean opting for the group and getting thereby submerged in Bengal. In fact there can be no doubt that the grouping provision was especially made to be an essential feature of the Cabinet Mission plan to satisfy the Muslim League.<sup>49</sup>

The provinces were free to form groups with executives and legislatures, and each group could determine the provincial subject to be taken in common. In Section C, Assam would have had seven general members and 3 Muslim members, whereas Bengal would have had 27 general members and 33 Muslim members. The Congress, in its attempt to appease the Muslim League by grouping the provinces in such a way that at least two Muslim-dominated areas would emerge eventually, made Assam the scapegoat. Had Assam become a part of Bengal, it would have

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<sup>49</sup> Nirode Kumar Barooah, *Gopinath Bordoloi: Indian Constitution and Center-Assam Relations* (Assam: Publication Board of Assam, 1990), 25.

posed a serious threat to Assam's identity as it would have placed Assam at the mercy of Muslim-majority Bengal.

The imposing nonchalant and insensitive attitude of the Central leaders greatly disheartened the Assamese leaders, needless to say such mental set-up of all-India political leaders continued even in the period of 1960s and 1970s, causing an unbridgeable gap between the Centre and Assam. Leaders like Gopinath Bordoloi, Bishnuram Medhi, Bimala P. Chaliha and others could not think of initiating drastic steps against the Centre as these leaders had tremendous faith and respect for Nehru and their comrades in the freedom struggle, who now happened to be holding important posts in the Central ministry. Unfortunately, legacy of freedom struggle was no longer romantically imbibed by the third-generation regional ruling elites, and hence they developed a strong sceptical view about the Centre.

The members of the State Assembly stood united and resolved against joining the section and declared that the provincial constitution could be framed only Assam's own representative.<sup>50</sup> 'The two most important central congress leaders negotiating with the Cabinet Mission, namely Maulana Abdul Kalam Azad and Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru did sympathize at the early stage with the APCC delegation that went out for a propaganda tour against the Grouping scheme.'<sup>51</sup> Nehru had said, 'Whereas no province could be compelled to go into the grouping ... who can force a constitution on Assam in Section C when Assam will not accept it at all?'<sup>52</sup>

Nehru went to the extent of suggesting that the Assam Assembly adopt a resolution refusing to sit in the group and a clear directive be given to the Assam representatives to the Constituent Assembly in this regard. Sardar Patel too expressed his solidarity in favour of Assam Congress and he fully backed Assam's stand.<sup>53</sup> Finally, when the Assam delegation met Gandhi, he categorically told them to stay out of the group.<sup>54</sup> The Congress Working Committee headed by Azad expressed its support for Assam's stand and endorsed Nehru's suggestion regarding a resolution

<sup>50</sup> Guha, *Planter Raj to Swaraj*, 311.

<sup>51</sup> Barooah, *Gopinath Bordoloi*, 25.

<sup>52</sup> Bhuyan, *Political History of Assam*, 360.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 361.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*

by the Assam Assembly. But surprisingly, when Azad and Nehru met the Cabinet Mission on 10 June 1946, they did not raise the issue of Assam's objection to the group.<sup>55</sup>

It was Mahatma Gandhi who provided the much-needed support.

If Assam keeps quiet it is finished. No one can force Assam to do what it does not want to do. It must stand independently as an autonomous unit. It is autonomous to a large extent today. It must become fully independent and autonomous ... As soon as the time comes for the Constituent Assembly to go into sections you will say, 'Gentlemen, Assam retires'. For the Independence of India it is the only condition. Each Unit must decide and act for itself. I am hoping that in this, Assam will lead the way.... If Assam takes care of itself the rest of India will be able to look after itself. What have you got to do with the Constitution of the Union Government? You should form your own Constitution. That is enough. You have the basis of a constitution yourself.<sup>56</sup>

Azad and Nehru, however, continued to hold the view that Assam's stand was helping the Muslim League and also acting as an obstruction to freedom. Nehru is reported to have told a three-member delegation from Bengal, which asked him why Assam was being let down after being given such high hopes by him, that 'Assam could not hold up the progress of the rest of India and support to Assam would mean refusal to accept the British Prime Minister's statement of December 6 and letting loose forces of chaos and civil war'.<sup>57</sup>

A question arises: If the Congress had betrayed the cause of Assam, why the leaders didn't take up for an independent Assam? Professor Mishra argues:

One of the major reasons for the low profile kept by the separatist forces was the fear of Muslim domination and the need to stay with the rest of India. These forces knew only too well that given the demographic pattern of the province and its past experience with the Saadullah ministries, a *Swadhin Asom* would be even more vulnerable to the machinations of Muslim east Bengal.<sup>58</sup>

<sup>55</sup> Bhuyan, *Political History of Assam*, 364.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, Appendix J, pp. 486–487.

<sup>57</sup> Transfer of power: IX, 510.

<sup>58</sup> Misra, *Periphery Strikes Back*, 95.

Such insensitive attitude of the Centre had always acted as the ideological plank for a secessionist struggle at a later stage. The Centre was presumed to be unsympathetic to the burning issues of Assam. It was in this context that the leaders including, the Congress party, advocated for more powers to the states and a loose federal India.

## Building the Psyche for an Independent Assam

As we have shown above, from the very beginning, the Central leaders had shown a great degree of nonchalance and apathy towards the cause of Assam. The leaders of the Indian freedom struggle, barring Gandhi and a few others, were in a great hurry to capture power. The dropping of the Cabinet Mission proposals and the separation of the Muslim-majority district of Sylhet by a referendum gave a big sense of relief. Very soon the Centre had shown its recalcitrant attitude on number of occasions as will be clear from the analysis below.

### *Refugee Settlement*

Around 1949, Assam faced essentially two major problems—paucity of funds for the state's development and continuous influx of Hindu and Muslim refugees from East Bengal. In spite of Bordoloi's repetitive requests, Nehru paid scant attention to the state's financial problem. It was at this point of time that Nehru linked the issue of financial grant with the issue of refugee settlement. Thus, in the post-Independence period, the first major difference of opinion between Assam and the Centre occurred over the question of settling the refugees from newly created East Pakistan in the state.

Assam had already given shelter to over three lakh refugees. When the state government expressed its unwillingness to settle more refugees due to purely economic reasons, Nehru, in a letter on 18 May 1949, retorted that if there is no land available in Assam, it is still less available in India. In the same letter, Nehru issued a mild threat by saying that if Assam refuses to accept those refugees, her case for financial help would suffer.<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> Barooah, *Gopinath Bordoloi*, 32.

Nehru also attacked Assam's finance and revenue minister Bishnuram Medhi, who later became the chief minister of Assam, dubbing him as 'a strong opponent of any further refugee coming to Assam'. Bordoloi refuted Nehru's allegations with facts and figure and argued that Assam had its own arduous problem of settling 186,121 landless peasant families from the seven plain districts of Assam. Besides, there were 50,000 peasant families that became homeless because of continuous flood. Bordoloi pleaded that his inability to take more refugees was entirely due to the economic backwardness of the state caused by the Centre's ill-treatment in the matter of financial allotment.

In reply to Nehru's threat of financial curtailment to Assam, Gopinath Bordoloi very firmly wrote:

I feel extremely hurt when you say that the claims of Assam for financial help would suffer for our incapacity to help solving the refugee problem.... It will be quite easy to throttle the province of its existence by withholding the necessary help for its life and growth; but I hope it will not be done—not surely on the plea of our failure to solve this particular problem.... I am sure that if we are unable to do more, it is entirely due to the non-development of the province. A more developed province today might have helped better in solving the problem.<sup>60</sup>

Nehru cautioned Bordoloi that such reactions would make it difficult for the Central government to have any major scheme in Assam. Nehru's outbursts against Bordoloi and the Congress government in Assam just after Independence amply reveal the degree of New Delhi's authoritarian attitude towards the peripheral states like Assam. Nehru could hardly consume the fact that on the issue of grouping, Bordoloi and Assam Congress bypassed stalwarts like Nehru, Patel, and now, with Bardoloi refusing to toe the Central line, it was natural for Nehru to resort to threats.

There are examples to show that on many important issues of refugee settlement, immigration, etc., the Central leadership preferred to listen to the reports of the Intelligence Bureau (IB) and other intelligence wings rather than trusting their own political counterparts in Assam. It's pertinent to mention that Assam had already settled 100,000 fresh refugees

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<sup>60</sup> Barooah, *Gopinath Bordoloi*, 32.

in addition to 125,000 refugees who had come one and a half years earlier. On continuous insistence from the Central government to settle more, the then Chief Secretary of Assam, S. P. Desai, in a letter dated 22 June 1950 to the Union Home Secretary, expressed his displeasure that the Government of India allowed itself to be influenced by intelligence report. Both Patel and Nehru were too furious with Desai for having expressed his opinion and the duo pressurised the Congress leadership in Assam to change the Chief Secretary. The only crime of Desai was he 'appears to have the monopoly of truth and thinks that the Government of India does not know their business'.<sup>61</sup> Nirode Kumar Barooah says that even in the matter of appointment of finance secretary in Assam, Nehru wrote to Patel, 'I don't think we should accept this at all.' Such patronising behaviour of the Central leadership from the very beginning sowed the seeds of discontentment among the middle-class leadership of Assam which later took the shape of violent struggle in the years to come.

The following three factors are discernible here:

1. Stalwarts of nation building like Nehru and Patel were not perceptive to the peculiar problems of the smaller states like Assam. In spite of Bordoloi's innumerable letters to Nehru, the latter never bothered to understand Assam's agony, rather she was continuously being blamed for 'narrow parochialism'.
2. Nehru's behaviour was totally contrary to the notions of federalism. In fact, Assam's political leadership had to fight for having their chief secretary and finance secretary of their choices.
3. From the very beginning, the political elites in Delhi preferred the voice of the intelligence officials in the matters of internal security, immigration, refugee settlement, etc. Such patron-client relationship got culminated in the period of early 1960s in the handing of resources such as oil and tea.

The differences between the Centre and Assam further sharpened over the question of unchecked illegal migration into Assam from East Pakistan. Right from the days of the Muslim League, ministries under

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<sup>61</sup> Referred in Barooah, *Gopinath Bordoloi*, 38.

Sir Syed Sadullah, the opening up of the reserve belts to Muslim immigrants had been a major issue in Assam politics. Though immediately after Independence some 50,000 immigrant Muslims were said to have left the state, tens of thousands more kept coming over the years. It was against this background that the Assam government demanded strong measures from the Centre which included the introduction of a permit system for Assam. The more Bordoloi drew the attention of the Central leadership to the grave dangers posed by illegal infiltration from East Pakistan into Assam, the more thick-skinned the latter appeared to be.<sup>62</sup>

The Shukla commission, which was appointed to look into the infrastructure scenario of the North East, submitted its report to the Prime Minister on 7 March 1997. The commission in its report said:

First and foremost, the North East was uniquely disadvantaged by partition which left its external perimeter with no more than two percent contiguity with the rest of India ... No other part of the country barring J&K has had to bear a comparable burden with severe market disruption, total isolation and loss of traditional communication infrastructure, all of which has pushed regional costs and prices well above national norms, transport subsidies notwithstanding. This rendered the normal market production processes in the region less attractive.<sup>63</sup>

Meanwhile, the migration from East Pakistan continued and the number of Bengali Hindu refugees in the state increased from 273,000 in 1951 to 628,000 in 1961.<sup>64</sup> The rate of growth of Assam's population during the period 1951–61 was 34.9 per cent as against the all-India average of 24.6 per cent. In the next decade, 1961–71, the population in the age group of 15 to 59 years, which normally constitutes the workforce, increased by some 20.59 lakh or 41 per cent. The number of jobseekers went up from 295,000 in 1961 to 938,000 in 1971. Thus, as the unemployment figures rose, dissatisfaction also grew at a fast pace primarily among the Assamese middle class (the middle classes of the other ethnic

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<sup>62</sup> Barooah, *Gopinath Bordoloi*, 52.

<sup>63</sup> Shukla Commission Report, submitted to the Prime Minister, India, 1997.

<sup>64</sup> *Census of India 1951*, vol. 12, Part I-A, Report 32–33; *Census of India 1961*, vol. 3, Part III C, 218.

groups were to follow suit) which started questioning the Centre's policies towards this resource-rich state.

## *Oil*

The Centre's continuous discriminatory policies reflected in the 1960s also, particularly in the exploitation of the oil sector of Assam. For a greater share of the state in the oil sector, there emerged the popular oil refinery movement which was supported by all political parties.

Petroleum was first discovered at Digboi in 1889 accidentally and a refinery was established there in 1901 which is the oldest in the country and Asia. The oil industry experienced growth only in postcolonial India. As we are aware, India is not self-sufficient in crude oil and is dependent on imports, paying a very high price for it in valuable foreign exchange. The increasing trend in the prices of crude oil which was enforced by the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) during the 1970s severely affected not only India but also many of the developed capitalist countries. Therefore, the Government of India had to accord a high priority to the exploration of oil indigenously, and in the process, organisations like the Oil and Natural Gas Commission and Oil India Limited grew in stature. After Independence, more oilfields, in addition to the one in Digboi, with high quantities of natural gas were discovered in upper Assam.

Till 1977, Assam continued to produce half the total crude oil produced in India. Assam also continued to produce half the total natural gas produced till 1979. However, discoveries of oilfields outside Assam decreased Assam's share in terms of percentage. However, in terms of the amount of production, Assam's contribution kept on increasing. In spite of that, the oil industry did not develop in Assam contrary to the expectations of the people of Assam. The foreign capital dominated the oil industry very significantly. The old Burma Oil Company became Assam Oil Company with 49 per cent British capital. Similarly, in Oil India Limited too, the British share was 49 per cent. However, due to continuous public pressure and other contingencies, the Government of India nationalised the Assam Oil Company and Oil India Limited in 1981. It would be important to note that till the beginning of the Assam



Movement, foreign capital played an important role in Assam's oil industry.<sup>65</sup>

In spite of Assam's increasing crude oil production, the Government of India was not interested in establishing a new refinery in Assam. Realising the apathy of the Government of India, the people of Assam belonging to all nationalities, languages and political outlook started a movement for the establishment of a large refinery in Assam in the mid 1950s. But the Government of India decided much against the popular will to establish the refinery at Barauni in Bihar to process the crude oil produced in Assam. In order to transport the crude from upper Assam oilfields to Barauni, a 1,400 km long pipeline, which is one of the longest in the Third World, was constructed during the early 1960s. It is worthwhile to recollect that on the basis of an extensive survey by a group of Soviet experts who were commissioned by the government, it was suggested that a large-scale refinery at Silghat in Nowgong district in central Assam be established. But, the Government of India preferred to choose Barauni against popular will and expert opinion. It was obviously a biased political decision and deprived Assam from reaping the benefit of its oil resources. This found expression in the 36th Lok Sabha Committee Report on Public Undertakings: '[I]n retrospect it was an entirely wrong decision to have located the refinery at its present site (Barauni), a decision taken, in spite of strong objections on technical grounds both from the Indian and Russian experts.'<sup>66</sup> The report also gave the following figures on comparative costs of refining in Guwahati, Barauni and Gujarat refineries. The per tonne cost of refining in the three refineries are ₹21.00, ₹ 37.93 and ₹37.48, respectively.<sup>67</sup>

The Assam Congress, keeping in line with the popular mood, made it plain to the Centre that it was opposed to the setting up of a refinery at Barauni in Bihar which would run on Assam crude oil carried over hundreds of kilometres of pipeline from the upper Assam oilfields. Nehru cited defence reasons for not setting up the refinery in Assam. In a letter to the Assam chief minister, he made clear his disapproval of the Assam Congress's opposition to the Barauni refinery and stated that the

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<sup>65</sup> Monirul Hussain, *Assam Movement: Class, Ideology and Identity* (New Delhi: Manak Publications, 1993), 74.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, 75.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*

Defence Ministry cited reasons of national security to have the refinery in Bihar. Bishnuram Medhi, the chief minister of Assam, wrote back to Nehru: 'If Defence cannot undertake to protect the refinery located in Assam, how will they protect the oil-fields and the transport system in the Eastern Region?' He further stated:

We feel that the proper course is not to think of protection of the refinery separately from the oil fields and the transport system, but to treat the refinery, oil fields and the lines of transport as parts of an integrated defence system in national interest.

Bishnuram Medhi reflected the mood of the people of his state when he raised the poser to the Central government thus:

In that case we do not understand how Defence will be able to protect the pipeline to Barauni, 140 miles of which will necessarily have to pass along the Pakistan border. We do not understand how the pipeline would be more defensible than the railways system as a good bit of it will have to pass at a distance of only 20 miles from the border.<sup>68</sup>

Though faced with a concerted public demand, the Centre did not revise its earlier decision of setting up a 3.30-million-tonne annual capacity refinery at Barauni. However, as a small concession to Assam, a toy refinery with a capacity of 0.85 million tonnes was set up at Guwahati. Much damage had already been done to Assam's relationship with the Centre. The feeling continued to grow among the people of the state that the Centre would not concede even their most legitimate rights without a fight.

By the time such an observation was made, it was too late for the government to reverse the process and do justice to Assam. However, in order to pacify the agitating people of Assam, the Government of India decided to establish a small refinery at Noonmati near Guwahati. Again, when the question of the third refinery came up in view of increased crude production, the people of Assam had to agitate once again in

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<sup>68</sup> Sanjay Hazarika, *Strangers of the Mist: Tales of War and Peace from India's North East* (New Delhi: Viking, 1994), 250.

the late 1960s and early 1970s. Ultimately, one smaller refinery was established.

**Table 1.2**  
**Production Capacities of Refineries in India, 1983–84**

<i>Refinery</i>	<i>Capacity (in million tonnes)</i>
1. Guwahati	0.85
2. Digboi	0.50
3. Bongaigaon	1.00
4. Barauni	3.30
5. Koyali	7.30
6. Haldia	2.50
7. Mathura	6.00
8. Madras	2.80
9. Cochin	3.30
10. Bombay (Bharat Petroleum)	5.25
11. Bombay (Hindustan Petroleum)	1.50
Total India	37.80

*Source:* Ministry of Petroleum and Chemicals, Government of India.

Assam's share in the production of crude oil has been very significant, but the refining capacity of Assam's oil refineries is very insignificant. The combined capacity of all the three refineries in Assam is less than the capacity of the Barauni refinery alone, which is being fed from Assam's oilfields. The processing capacity of Assam's three refineries can help us understand the relative position of Assam and the gross negligence on the part of the Government of India to meet the legitimate aspirations of the people of Assam to have either more or a larger refinery in Assam. In spite of increased crude oil production, the oil industry did not grow, or rather, was not allowed to grow adequately in Assam. We must mention here that this issue has been very successfully articulated by the leadership of Assam Movement to 'prove their contention of Centre's discrimination and negligence against Assam and Asomiya nationality'. Apart from the question of the establishment of a refinery, the people of Assam have been feeling that the state is not getting adequate royalty for its crude oil. The state's repeated plea for increasing the royalty on the crude oil has never been responded to sincerely or in time by the Government of India. The gains from the oil industry for the largest

crude-oil-producing state have been marginal. Similar is the case of natural gas. About 50 million cubic feet of natural gas is being flared up every day in upper Assam. On the crisis of petroleum and gas cylinders, Professor Hussain remarks:

It is very pathetic to see very long queues for kerosene and gas cylinders in Assam while it produces both crude oil and gas abundantly. The colonial pattern of exploitation, by and large, continues till date, an act which hurts the Asomiyas very deeply.<sup>69</sup>

## Chinese Attack

On the significance of the 1960s, Professor Misra remarks:

The sixties were indeed turbulent years for Assam. Close on the heels of the language agitation which nearly wrecked the socio-cultural fabric of Assam, came the Sino-Indian border conflict of 1962. The rout of the Indian forces and the virtual withdrawal of the army from Assam, followed by the 'farewell address' of Pandit Nehru contributed a lot to the emerging centrifugal forces in the state.<sup>70</sup>

Today, separatist ideologues constantly refer to the abandoning of Assam to the advancing Chinese forces by the Indian government as proof that the Centre considers Assam and the North Eastern region merely as its colony.<sup>71</sup> ULFA in its report to the UN Secretary General Jever Perez De Cueller, in the section 27, part IV, referred to the Indian government's sacrifice of Assam on 21 November 1962. The report said '... Assam and the North Eastern region was sacrificed to China on 21/11/62. The Indian Army which wholly retreated from Assam on 21/11/62 failing to combat the Chinese Army re-entered Assam and imposed territorial sovereignty without the right and title to rule Assam...' <sup>72</sup>

On the role of the Government of India, Professor Misra opines:

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<sup>69</sup> Monirul Hussain, *Assam Movement*, 76.

<sup>70</sup> Misra, *Periphery Strikes Back*, 119.

<sup>71</sup> Parag Kumar Das, *Swadhinatar Prastab* (Assamese) (Guwahati, 1983).

<sup>72</sup> Ulfa's report to the UN, 1990.

Even as the advancing Chinese troops captured the Arunachal town of Bomdila in November 1962 and were poised to enter the plains of Assam without any resistance from the Indian troops, Nehru in a broadcast to the nation over All India Radio, virtually abandoned Assam and the North Eastern region to the Chinese.<sup>73</sup>

The average citizen of Assam felt let down by the Centre's attitude and memories were revived of the grouping days when Assam almost went to Pakistan. The credibility of the Indian government was highly eroded. But, despite such feelings, the overall atmosphere in Assam was in favour of India and against the Chinese. Defence committees manned by students and the public sprang up overnight and aid was offered to the retreating soldiers.

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<sup>73</sup> Misra, *Periphery Strikes Back*, 120.

## 2

### Assam Movement

#### *Laying the Foundation of an Armed Struggle*

The twin concerns of the Assam Movement were detection and deportation of illegal immigrants and the stepmotherly attitude of the Centre towards a peripheral state like Assam. According to Professor Tilottoma Misra, despite being the largest producer of tea, oil, plywood and forest products, Assam is one of the poorest and the most industrially backward states in the country.<sup>1</sup> Professor Misra used the term *colonial hinterland* to describe Assam's position in the Indian nation-state.

Various journalists all over the country wrote passionately about the cause of the Assam Movement. In the *Sunday Magazine*, N. N. Prabhu said:

Alphabetically Assam is next to Andhra Pradesh in the list of Indian states. Economically it is somewhere at the bottom—the only area where development has taken place is oil. Assam's daily production of crude is estimated to be worth about ₹3 crore a day or ... about ₹1000 crores a year. The state's annual budget has been in the region of ₹300 crores only ... for every tonne of crude oil processed and sold, the union government receives a gross amount of ₹2000. Of this Assam gets only ₹42 a tonne by way of royalty. The Union govt. however gets as excise ₹864 a tonne. This would mean Assam's share of oil revenue every year is ₹29.4 crores (that is Assam's royalty plus share of excise) and the center's is ₹604.8 crores.

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<sup>1</sup> Tilottoma Misra, 'Assam: A Colonial Hinterland', *Economic and Political Weekly* XV, no. 32 (9 August 1980): 1357–1364.

... Assam supplies some 80 percent of domestic onshore oil production. Yet there is no downstream production. In Gujarat, Baroda has developed into a petro-chemical centre. Assam has nothing of the kind ... there is a strong case for rapid development of the North East.<sup>2</sup>

While the problem of continued influx and the ever-growing pressure on land, coupled with the fear of the Assamese losing their socio-political identity, seemed to be the immediate motivating factors of the movement, it was in actuality a popular outburst against decades of economic neglect of the state by the Central government. It is significant that the immediate popular movement which preceded the Assam Movement was the one led by the All Assam Students' Union (AASU) on the issue of economic backwardness of the state.

The Assam chief minister, Bimalaprasad Chaliha, had written to the union minister for Railways, expressing grave dissatisfaction at the unsympathetic attitude of the railway authorities towards the legitimate claims of the local youths.<sup>3</sup> The Assam Assembly members were evidently aware of the growing sense of alienation amongst the Assamese youth as revealed in the different agitations and the outburst on Republic Day in early 1968. But, apart from expressing their concern, the state government did little to improve the situation. For, the Employment Review Committee of the Assam Assembly in its sixth report revealed that:

Till the time of collecting the last phase of data of 21 February, 1976, the NF Railway headquarters at Maligaon had in all 4,474 employees of whom nearly two-thirds (59 per cent) had their birthplaces outside Assam. Of the Total number of employees only 1,830 accounting for 41 per cent had their birthplaces in Assam.

The same report states that of those employees who had recorded their birthplace as outside Assam, 57 per cent were from former East Bengal (present-day Bangladesh) and 22 per cent from West Bengal. Of the employees within the Class I to Class IV categories, only 28 per cent had Assamese as their mother tongue.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> 'The Assam Agitation', *Sunday Magazine* (Calcutta, 26 May 1980).

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 35.

<sup>4</sup> For a detailed account of the economic situation and how Assam was deprived, see Tilottoma Misra, 'Assam: A Colonial Hinterland', 1357–1364.

The Assam Movement provided the platform for the growth of a secessionist force like ULFA. Stalwarts such as Nibaran Bora, Homen Borgohain, Nagen Saikia, Suresh Phukon and many others, by dint of their activism and writings, have influenced millions of people against New Delhi. A section of the youth who believed that the Centre would not listen to the voice of non-violence resorted to the extreme path to make the Centre pay attention to the agonies of the periphery.

## Role Played by Nibaran Bora

From 1977 an aggressive regional nationalist thought engulfed the state. Regionalist parties like Purbanchal Lok Parishad (PLP), led by Nibaran Bora in 1977, and Asom Jatiyatabadi Dal, led by Nagen Hazarika in 1978, tried to create awareness against the illegal immigrants, economic exploitation of the Centre and anti-Assamese Bengali agents. The latter dubbed the CPI(M) as the agents of greater Bengali dream. In the period of 1977–78, slogans like ‘Go back Indians’, ‘Boycott Non-Assamese socially and economically’, ‘Arm yourself’, ‘We want Sovereignty’, etc., were to be found in various walls of Guwahati, Dibrugarh and other towns like Sibsagar.<sup>5</sup> A more extremist thought process had started with a clear cut appeal to ‘Arm yourself’ and ‘We want sovereignty’. A series of articles/reports were published in *Dainik Asom* depicting the fear psychosis of Assamese nationality. For example, the main resolutions of the PLP were expressed in the following manner: ‘*Lok Parishad* has observed that the state ministry is guided by an influential linguistic communal lobby (read Bengali) of the Cachar and Brahmaputra valley. In this process they are encouraged by Bangladeshi immigrants who are occupying vast tract of Assam’s land’ (author’s translation).<sup>6</sup> From this period onwards, the regional daily paper *Dainik Asom* was the most important vehicle that gave a concrete shape to the Assam Movement by publishing series of articles, reports and editorials on the issue of land, immigration and threat to the Assamese nationality from outside dominating groups

<sup>5</sup> Introduction in *Asom Andolan: Protisruti and Falashruti*, eds Hiren Gohain and Dilip Bora (Guwahati: Bonolata, 2001), iii.

<sup>6</sup> ‘PLP Meeting’, *Dainik Asom* (3 January 1979), 2.



of India. The 4 January 1979 editorial of the paper highlighted the issues raised by the PLP. On 5 January, on the theme of 'population control', various issues pertaining to immigration and its dangerous consequences were highlighted. The month of February also carried series of articles on the danger posed by continuous influx of Bangladeshi immigrants.

During this period, the role of Asom Sahitya Sabha is crucial in giving institutional support to the feeling against the Bangladeshi immigration issue. In its crucial Sualkuchi session in February 1979, it appealed to the government to take effective steps against the outsiders and urged the government to protect state language. In this session, the Sabha took important resolutions:

1. Effective steps should be taken to drive out the illegal foreigners from Assam.
2. Undesirable influx from other parts of India should be resisted and proper pressure should be exerted on their respective states and Union Government to settle them from where they come.

What is significant here is Sahitya Sabha's insistence on the expulsion of the non-Assamese hailing from other states of India. If we look back at the colonial history, the very construction of Assamese identity was based on a strong anti-Bengali platform.

*Nagarik* was another newspaper that played a pivotal role in the generation of a new thought for protecting Assamese identity. From 1977 onwards, the paper brought out diverse viewpoints on the theoretical and empirical issues of immigration across the border and the danger it might bring to the Assamese nationality. Nibaran Bora wrote series of articles titled as 'Islamabad vs Delhi: Delhi vs Dispur'.<sup>7</sup> On 2 February the paper referred to the gravity of the situation by referring to a writing of Nibaran Bora where he said that under the present political financial arrangement of the Indian Constitution the state government would be virtually a platform for exploitation by the national and foreign capital. He criticised the mechanism for division of tax share between the

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<sup>7</sup> Nibaran Bora, 'Islamabad vs Delhi: Delhi vs Dispur', *Nagarik* (15, 22 and 29 December 1977), 2, 2 and 3, and 2 respectively.

Centre and the states which according to him was heavily tilted towards the Centre.<sup>8</sup>

During this period both the newspapers *Dainik Asom* and *Nagarik* tried to depict the dilemma of the Assamese people in various walks of life. For example, in a front page article 'How Long Assam Will Remain a Colony of Foreigners' in *Nagarik*, it argued that the present unrest among the youth was quite natural considering the nature of discrimination that the Assamese boys face in the employment sector. Giving opinion on the ruling of the non-Congress Janata Government, the article further argued:

During the last thirty years of Congress rule Assam was the economic colony of the country. People just didn't want to change government by placing Golap Borbora as the chief minister in place of Sarat Singha—people wanted a change so that in the context of changed political environment Assam gets liberated from the unfortunate economic colonial domination of the outsiders.<sup>9</sup> (translation by the author)

Nibaran Bora's PLP and Asom Jatiyatabadi Dal by organising meetings tried to evoke the pent up feelings of the Assamese people against immigration and Delhi's exploitation. Similar meetings also took place in upper Assam. Assam Jatiya Sangha in its open meeting in the month of June 1979 took a resolution where they pledged to work against the infiltration and also to expel the illegal immigrants who have entered into Assam. The president of the Sangha was Nitya Hazarika and the general secretary was Bhimkanta Borgohain. They mobilised people's opinion in places like Margherita, Chabua, Saikhowa ghat, Doomdoma, against both illegal foreigners and the Indians who have settled in Assam. Incidentally, Bhimkanta Borgohain, the general secretary of the organisation, later on became the main protagonist of ULFA since the inception of the organisation. An excellent painter and social organiser, Bhimkanta Borgohain, subsequently known as 'Mama', was caught in the Bhutan operation in 2002.<sup>10</sup> Borgohain is said to be one of the most important ideologue and architect of ULFA's constitution.

<sup>8</sup> 'Interview with Nibaran Bora', *Nagarik* (2 February 1978), 5.

<sup>9</sup> 'How Long Assam Will Remain A Colony of Foreigners?', *Nagarik* (1 June 1978), 5.

<sup>10</sup> Bhimkanta Borgohain is lodged in Guwahati Jail since then.

In the period of 1970s, 1980s and 1990s, Nibaran Bora was perhaps the most talked about and influential leader, activist and writer in Assam. Apart from *Nilachal*, *Nagarik*, *Dainik Asom*, later on he wrote extensively in *Budhbar* (edited by Parag Das), *Sadin* and *Pratidin*. *Swadhin Asom Sambhavne?* ('Is Independent Assam Possible?')<sup>11</sup> is one of the most widely circulated books of Nibaran Bora. Later on, after his death in 2006, couple of books were published like *Nibaran Borar Pravandhawali* ('Articles of Nibaran Bora'),<sup>12</sup> *Singha Purush Nibaran Borar Kisu Chinta* ('Nibaran Bora: A Glimpse into the Ideology of a Lion Man')<sup>13</sup> etc.

Nibaran Bora's writings vividly reflect the contemporary exploitative nature of the political system and have consistently tried to provide an alternative to the present system which ranges from a loose federation to an independent Assam. Paresh Baruah, the commander-in-chief of ULFA, on 4 May 2010 in recent e-mails to the press has opined that ULFA considers Nibaran Bora and Parag Das to be the 'two most important intellectuals' that Assam has ever seen. Naturally, these two intellectuals and activists whom ULFA considers to be 'the two most important intellectuals' would figure prominently in our writings. Why ULFA ranks them so high needs deeper scrutiny and analysis.

Nibaran Bora was highly disenchanted with the political functioning of both the Centre and the state. He was also deeply perturbed by the efforts of some scholars who tried to dub Assamese nationalism as 'parochial' or 'small nationalism'. While appreciating scholastic achievements of Professor Amalendu Guha, Bora was equally critical on certain conclusions arrived at by Professor Guha. Bora said:

He (Professor Guha) has cited Indian Nationalism as big nationalism and Assamese nationalism as small nationalism. I don't know whether such classifications are correct or not, it is difficult for us to appreciate as we belong to a different genre. What we have understood with our limited knowledge is 'Assamese Nationalism' denotes certain feeling, realization, belongingness and pride which we have acquired for last

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<sup>11</sup> Nibaran Bora, *Swadhin Asom Sambhavne?* (Guwahati: Ekhona, December 1998).

<sup>12</sup> *Nibaran Borar Pravandhawali*, edited and collected by Bisweswar Deka (Guwahati: PLP, n.d.).

<sup>13</sup> *Singha Purush Nibaran Borar Kisu Chinta*, edited and collected by Ajit Bhuyan, Adip Kumar Phukon, Dileep Chandan and Lachit Bordoloi (Guwahati: Published by the Collectors, January 2006).

600 years—it's our asset, our birth right. We don't want to lose it. Above all there's nothing wrong in this feeling. We feel hurt when someone tries to snatch it—then we become rebel for want of any other choice. For such act of dissent we are facing harassment which is worse than the atrocities during the time of the Burmese.<sup>14</sup>

Nibaran Bora was highly influenced by the thought process and action of Gopinath Bordoloi. According to him, Assam's struggle with the Indian Union had started when Assam was included with East Bengal. Gopinath Bordoloi, with the blessings of Gandhi, stood solidly against the Congress proposal. Bordoloi said in the grouping meeting:

We took part in the Congress for the freedom of Assam as well as India. You have the authority to determine our destiny—but you don't have the right to annex us with any one at your likings.<sup>15</sup>

Bora tried to project the fact that Assam wanted a political system where it will have its full freedom to determine its own future. To support his hypothesis, he refers to a resolution where Bordoloi advocated for a separate constitution of Assam. In the Assam Assembly on 17 July 1946, Bordoloi proposed the following things:

1. The Assam Assembly will not would not accept the proposals of the British government which was issued on 16 May 1946, particularly the 15th clause.
2. The Assam Assembly believes that it is the representatives of the Assembly alone who can draft a constitution for Assam and its people.
3. No one else has the right to draft a constitution for Assam and its people.

Professor Guha considers this resolution as the proposal for Assam's independence. To this Nibaran Bora has said, 'A few people know that Assam's first independence proposal was mooted by the then Congress Government and the proposal were forwarded by Bordoloi only....'<sup>16</sup>

<sup>14</sup> Bora, in the Introduction of *Swadhin Asom Sambhavne?*, iv.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., vii.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., viii.

We shall deal with the issue more extensively towards our concluding chapter. Nibaran Bora praised Bordoloi for his untiring effort to exclude Assam from the Group C of the Cabinet Mission plan which would have meant Assam's inclusion with Pakistan. He never considered the Indian Constitution to be a representative one. To quote him:

What is the social or popular base of the Indian constitution which is kept above Vedas, Koran and Bible? It represents only the 16% of the population—it is to be added here that many representatives including the socialists, the leaders from Punjab did not give signature to it. It looks like the demand for an independent Assam must have more than 16% mass base.<sup>17</sup>

Bora was a strong critic of the Indian nation-building process in North East India. His argument was that the territory now known as the North East was not part of the various political units that emerged in the Indian subcontinent before 1826 AD. He further argued:

The process of nation building in the Indo-Gangetic valley of the Indian subcontinent was very different from that of the NE region. While the natives of the Indo-Gangetic valley yielded to the intrusions and yet failed to achieve a synthesis, the efforts here always ended in the natives retaining the character of their identity and yet achieving a synthesis. In other words every forced condition of history was given due consideration in the matter of nation building by the natives of the North East, whereas such historical conditions could not generate a mould to make an Indo-Gangetic nation. Therefore, the concept of 'Indian Nation' has remained nebulous till today.<sup>18</sup>

He tried to argue that Assam is more organically connected with the South and South East Asian countries than with the mainland India. The flow of ancient settlers to the north eastern part of the Indian subcontinent, however, continued unabated from the east and north east via the Patkai trade route, from the south east via Murrah, Manipur and from north east and west via Lasha-Bhutan (Lasha-Towang-Subansiri)

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<sup>17</sup> Bora, in the Introduction of *Swadhin Asom Sambhavne?*, ix.

<sup>18</sup> Nibaran Bora, 'In Search of Native Personality' (paper presented as Background paper in the All Parties Leaders' Conference, Guwahati, 12 and 13 June 1982).

trade routes. Therefore, the people of different racial stocks such as Mongoloid, Austro Mongoloid and Caucasoid, coming through these trade routes, came to accept this land as their home.

## Homen Borgohain

Another important scholar, littérateur and journalist who contributed to an aggressive nationalist thought process on the basis of colonial exploitation by Delhi was Homen Borgohain. His book *Oupnebishik Susonor Birueddhe Asomor Sesh Sangram* (The Last Struggle of Assam against Colonial Exploitation) and his writings on *Nagarik* (he was also the editor of the paper) is considered to be important documents against the 'colonial exploitation' of New Delhi and the migrants who have settled in Assam from other parts of India. From 27 July 1978, Borgohain wrote a series of articles which laid the ideological foundation for the Assam Movement, and later on for ULFA which aggressively picked up the colonial thesis popularised by people like Nibaran Bora and Homen Borgohain. Main arguments of Borgohain can be summed up in the following manner:

1. There is a continuous flow of people from outside Assam—the process sometimes takes the form of a dangerous flood in which the local Assamese people are scared of their own existence. They are under the apprehension that such floodgate of outsiders would make them a minority in their own land and would wipe out their language and culture. The whole process had started with the Britishers who replaced Assamese with the Bengali, and since then, for the last 150 years, such fear psychosis got deeply embedded in the minds of the Assamese people.
2. He argued, 'It looks like that so far as concept of outsider is concerned; Assam's public opinion has included the people from most of the other states of India—because numerical increases of these people are detrimental to the economic and cultural interest of the state.'<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Homen Borgohain, 'Bohiragotar Samashya', *Nagarik* (27 July 1978), 4.

3. Borgohain also supported such apprehensions and said that these people can't be accepted as the local (*tholua*), who have settled in Assam for their livelihood and send their earnings to their mother states. He said:

According to the principle of economic colonialism they are actual outsiders. In spite of living in Assam for odd fifty or hundred years one may send his/her entire earnings to Rajasthan, Gujarat or Punjab. With the money earnings from Assam there could be new industry in Faridabad or temples or school, colleges in Rajasthan; in such a context just because they have lived in Assam for hundred years they cannot be considered as the local (*tholua*). (Translation by the author)

Such writings have laid the foundation of the Assam Movement and also for the growth of an independent struggle for Assam launched by ULFA. The Assam Movement later on excluded the Indians as the target of the Assam Movement focused more on the illegal immigrants; however ULFA, as would become clear from our analysis later on, focused more on the internal colonial thesis and dubbed Indians living in Assam as the agents of the Indian State.

Homen Borgohain's *Oupnebeshek Susonor Birueddhe Asomor Sesh Sangram (Chah Silpor Rashtriyokoron)*<sup>20</sup> can be cited as one of the most pioneering books against the colonial exploitation of New Delhi. Borgohain said:

India is one of the largest tea producing country in the world. Assam alone produces 55% of the total tea produced in India. Assam's total tea production is almost 275 million Kilogram. Assam produces 20% more tea than the total production of Sri Lanka which is the second highest tea producing country in the world.... To speak the truth the people of Assam have no control over tea. Had Assam received one fourth of the share from the world famous tea industry, Assam would never have been counted among the poorest states in India. Had it been so the youths of Assam need have had to knock their heads on stones in quest of employment opportunities. Even the state government hasn't had to bow down

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<sup>20</sup> Homen Borgohain, *Oupnebeshek Susonor Birueddhe Asomor Sesh Sangram* (The Last Struggle of Assam Against Colonial Exploitation) (Guwahati: Vintage Bookshop, 1980).

with begging bowls before the central government to implement the smallest of the small developmental projects.<sup>21</sup>

Borgohain cited innumerable examples of tea industry's exploitation in Assam. He argued that the tea industry was an island unto itself and neither the local people nor the state government had any control over them. 'A bunch of anti-Assamese greedy people in collaboration with associates of Indian capitalism have been enjoying all the resources ... because of their exploitation Assam was deprived an amount of ₹110 crore in two years.' He reminded the people of Assam that ₹500 crore that India earns per annum as foreign exchange truly belongs to Assam.<sup>22</sup> 'These resources are the nature gifted properties of Assam—to claim over these resources is the birth right of the Assamese. Because of the inactiveness and fear psychosis, the others have been enjoying these benefits.'

Later on such appeal of Borgohain was accepted by ULFA ostensibly with the purpose of bringing back Assam's resources to its own fold. His analysis also helped organisations like ULFA to develop a strong anti-Delhi feeling. It would not be an exaggeration at all to say that Borgohain and Nibaran Bora theoretically developed the ground on the basis of which ULFA had emerged.<sup>23</sup>

Borgohain had great anticipation that someday the control over the tea resources would come back to Assam. If it happens, the agony of Assam would be over once for all and it would herald a new dawn in Assam's economy. He said:

In the post second world war period, a second tragic phase had begun when many Marawaris and other big Indian capitalist bought tea gardens—a new phase of colonial exploitation of Assam started with the nationalist capitalist ... the only difference between the foreign capitalists and the national capitalist is the former takes away the money to London and the latter to Bombay, Ahmedabad, Jaipur, Faridabad etc.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Borgohain, *Oupnebeshek Susonor Birueddhe Asomor Sesh Sangram*, 8.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 12–13.

<sup>23</sup> This was evident from our interview with many ULFA cadres who were highly influenced by the writings of Borgohain. In fact, a copy of Homen Borgohain's book *Oupnebeshek Susonor Birueddhe Asomor Sesh Sangram (Chah Silpor Rashtriyokoron)*, a rare book today, was provided to the author by a ULFA cadre to prove his anti-Delhi stand.

<sup>24</sup> Borgohain, *Oupnebeshek Susonor Birueddhe Asomor Sesh Sangram*, 30–31.



Borgohain considered the new owners of the Indian tea gardens to be more dangerous and harmful to Assam than the foreign capitalists. Perhaps they have similar quest for profit and exploitation, however, these Indian traders don't have the slightest traditional business honesty, faith, dedication and ideals of the foreign companies.<sup>25</sup> Needless to say, the Assamese had very little representation in the tea sector. As a result of the transformation of ownership, all the personnel, including the peon, superintendent and others, are imported from community and states of these new owners; a very few who were recruited were because of reference from high political connections rather than on the basis of merit.

In order to overcome the crisis, Borgohain strongly suggested the nationalisation of all tea gardens irrespective of their nature of ownership. He suggested:

In order to emancipate Assam from colonial exploitation and make her economically self reliant, it is not sufficient to nationalise the tea gardens owned by the foreigners alone, it must include the tea gardens of the domestic capitalist also as the nature of exploitation, character, religion and nature of all those are alike.<sup>26</sup>

Borgohain expressed apprehensions that the North Indian politicians (he referred to Morarji Desai, Indira Gandhi, Jagjivan Ram, Chandrasekhar and Mohan Dharia) may not support the nationalisation process of tea industry in Assam. To quote him:

They may not want as Assam's interest is not theirs, they have never cried for the people of Assam ... the continuous exploitation by the national and foreign capitalist is beneficial to them as they regularly get a good share of that extraction and by this exploitation their mother states would become richer. But why should the people of Assam bear it?

Borgohain's passionate appeal to the people of Assam was:

Oh the people of Assam, particularly the youths—you must not forget that the national and foreign capitalist have been encroaching by all

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<sup>25</sup> Borgohain, *Oupnebeshek Susonor Birueddhe Asomor Sesh Sangram*, 31.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 36.

deceptive means more than 15 lakh acre of land which is the best of it kind and for this they have not paid a single penny ...<sup>27</sup>

Towards the end of the book, Borgohain compared Assam with a sleeping giant which is awake now. He concluded by saying that:

[The] people of Assam were in deep slumber since the eclipse of Assam's independence into a phase of subjugation. Utilizing that slumber ... after the so called India's freedom, in collaboration with the new Indian ruling elites, the colonial class has been ruthlessly exploiting Assam ... however the people of the state are awake now and have now come to realize to what extent and magnitude they were exploited, cheated and neglected.

## Suresh Phukon

In the 1980s, another writer and cultural activist who influenced the thought process of upper Assam (particularly in Jorhat, Sibsagar, Dibrugarh and Tinsukia) was Suresh Phukon—a lecturer in the Education department of Sibsagar college. Although his writings are not that popular in comparison to Nibaran Bora or Homen Borgohain—nevertheless, his contribution in building the thought process can hardly be denied and what made him different was that he was a cultural activist and utilised cultural idioms (like songs, drama, recitation, etc.) to popularise the nationalist thought among the Assamese people. Phukon was initially a strong supporter of the Assam Movement; however, very soon he realised that his dream of Assam can't be realised through the Assam Movement and he joined the separatist movement launched by ULFA. He was the president of Assam Jatiya Unnayan Parishad—an organisation that ULFA launched to popularise its ideology and welfare activities. In the early part of ULFA's history and popularity, Phukon played an instrumental role.

The most popular book (which was later on banned by the Government of Assam) of Suresh Phukon is *Moidamor Pora Moi Lachite Koichu*.<sup>28</sup>

<sup>27</sup> Borgohain, *Oupnebeshek Susonor Birueddhe Asomor Sesh Sangram*, 68.

<sup>28</sup> Suresh Phukon, *Moidamor Pora Moi Lachite Koichu* (Sibsagar: Rupom Prakashan, 1980).

In the periods post 1983–84, the book was a bestseller and was considered to be the ‘bible of the young generation of Assam’.

In his book, he resurrects Lachit Borphukon<sup>29</sup> in his *Moidam*;<sup>30</sup> he is the dramatis personae who narrates the lost glory of Assam in various phases of history. Through Lachit Borphukan, the writer tries to look at the actors and events responsible for the present deplorable plight of Assam. The writer mouths his words and thoughts through the resurrected dramatis personae Lachit Borphukon. He narrated the glorious activities of Sukapha<sup>31</sup> and various Ahom rulers who ruled Assam till the she was subjugated by the Burmese and then by the British in 1826. The book re-contextualises the historic situation of 1662–65 when the Mughals, under the leadership of Mirjumla, attacked Assam several times. Lachit Borphukon says:

Sukapha named the landmass (i.e. Assam) as ‘*Mung-Dun-Sun-kham*’. Would the posterity of Sukapha who laid the foundation of greater Assam be a mute spectator to the phenomenon of subjugation of Assam by the Mughals? The Assamese race who had never tasted defeat in their life would ever allow their freedom to be lost.<sup>32</sup>

Very emotionally loaded book—*Moidamor Pora Moi Lachite Koichu*—raised the pent-up feelings of the youngsters of the 1980s. Lachit Borphukon further says:

Assam was victorious in the Saraighat battle—but by the stroke of destiny I died immediately after the victory.... Since then I’ve been lying in the bottom of the *Moidam*—with me I have been preserving many dreams for a new Assam. Since then, I have been observing the deceptive nature of the so called patriots.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Lachit Borphukon is an iconic figure in Assam’s history. Under his command, the Mughals were defeated in the Saraighat battle when they attacked Assam in the year in 1665. Seventeen times the Ahoms thwarted the Mughals’ attempt to defeat Assam.

<sup>30</sup> The tomb of Ahom kings and higher officials.

<sup>31</sup> Sukapha, who came from Thailand, established Ahom kingdom in Assam in 1228.

<sup>32</sup> Phukon, *Moidamor Pora Moi Lachite Koichu*, 2.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 6.

The author says that the crisis of Assam is such that even Lachit Borphukon today can't keep mum in his *Moidam*. Lachit Borphukon says:

The illegal foreigners today have surrounded the four corners of Assam. I'm thrilled by the slogans of the new generation like 'We will die if Assam dies', 'What's there to be afraid of becoming a martyr; if Assam is liberated'. Such convictions of the new generations prompted me to come out of my tomb and with me thousands of the soldiers who sacrificed their life in the historic Saraighat battle. Bagh Hazarika<sup>34</sup> is also accompanying me.<sup>35</sup>

Phukon argued that since 33 years of India's independence, Assam had witnessed deception and exploitation. He identified a few personalities who had betrayed the cause of Assam. Among them he identified the then chief minister of 1936, Sir Syed Sadullah, who was accused of facilitating entry of millions of Muslims to Assam from East Bengal. Phukon showered lot of praises on Gopinath Bordoloi and Ambikagiri Roychoudhury who fiercely tried to protect the cause of Assam. Ambikagiri Roychoudhury, according to him, strongly defended the cause of Right to Self Determination for the Assamese. Referring to Roychoudhury, he further said:

The Assamese want a system where they can solve their own social, economic and political problems ... the Assamese want full freedom for a self reliant path of development based on their own ideals.<sup>36</sup>

Phukon never propagated the cause of independent Assam or Right to Secession for the state. However, as we have seen above, his interpretations were sufficient to conclude that he had certainly expected an independent Assam to get rid of the nagging problems. In one of the pages, he said:

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<sup>34</sup> Bagh Hazarika—incidentally a Muslim—was a valiant fighter and minister with Lachit Borphukon against the Mughals.

<sup>35</sup> Phukon, *Moidamor Pora Moi Lachite Koichu*, 8.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 15.

In 1947, 15th August India attained independence—so does Assam—don't you have the slightest compunction to say that Assam has attained so-called freedom with the 33 years of India's independence [?]

He held the political elites of the state responsible for the present state of affairs. According to him, those politicians had betrayed the cause of Assam.<sup>37</sup> On the incident of Chinese attack in 1962, very strong remarks were also attributed to the then Prime minister Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru for his alleged remark: 'Sorry for Assam—my heart goes to the people of Assam'. He accused Nehru of betraying Assam by leaving the people to the mercy of the Chinese. Interestingly, this incident has played a very proactive role in popularising the secessionist thought among the new generations in the 1980s who believed that India had already left Assam and abdicated its responsibility to protect its own people. Phukon argued that Assam's woes did not end there. All those who had taken over the chief ministership betrayed the cause of Assam. Leaders like Sarat Chandra Singha, after becoming the chief minister, had refused to acknowledge that there were any illegal foreigners in the state. Phukon, through the voice of Lachit Borphukon, has expressed concern that in today's Assam there is an attempt to divide the rich fabric of Assamese society into various tribes, groups and religions.

These writers have provided the much needed thought process that acted as the platform to the growth of a secessionist movement. The Assam Movement acted as a rehearsal to a bigger plan of confronting the Indian State by violent means. The ULFA leaders who also worked hard in the foreigner's agitation soon realised that the core issues of Assam that she has been facing since the pre-Independence period can't be faced by the existing structure. Many writers have acknowledged this process in their writings. For example, Dr Nagen Saikia, the ex-president of Assam Sahitya Sabha, wrote couple of articles in the journal *Nagarik* where he acknowledged that 'a new radical lot is planning for an independent Assam'.<sup>38</sup> In this article, Dr. Saikia concluded by saying two things:

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<sup>37</sup> Some of them are Bishnu Ram Medhi, Bimala P. Chaliha, Sarat Chandra Singha, Debo Kumar Barua and Golap Borbora.

<sup>38</sup> Quoted in the Introduction, *Asom Andolan: Pratisruti aru Phalasruti*, viii.

1. That Assam was not a part of India is a historical truth—that she has been forcefully included in the Indian map is another truth. One can't possibly deny it.
2. Since we are under the Indian Constitution, for the time being, we must try to ensure constitutional protection for us.<sup>39</sup>

## Assam Movement: Institutionalisation of Violence

The Assam Movement, apart from addressing the issues of illegal migration, brought in some unintended consequences that helped in the legitimisation of violent/terrorist techniques in the post-movement period. The movement provided the means through which a new radical group could claim an independent Assam. Although the Assam Movement was predominantly a non-violent movement, it witnessed massive violence. This was largely triggered by massive state violence and police atrocities. About 150 supporters of the movement died as a result of police firing and atrocities when they tried to resist the holding of elections in February 1983.<sup>40</sup> The state violence was used mostly against the innocents who had nothing to do with the criminal activities. Such state violence of unprecedented scale also made many workers rebellious and they wanted to take revenge either by joining ULFA or giving support to it in direct and indirect ways.

Assam also witnessed some violent communal clashes from 1983 in which the immigrant Muslims, Na-Asomiya and Bengali Hindus were the victims. On 18 February 1983, about 1,000 people belonging to the Muslim immigrant community at Nellie were killed mercilessly about 70 km east of Guwahati. Such violent activities also occurred at Chaulkhowa Chapori in Darrang district. Supporters of the agitation were also killed at Gohpur and Chamoria at the hands of the immigrants.

Assam also witnessed for the first time a new form of violence—bomb blast. The technique was mostly utilised against selected individuals who

<sup>39</sup> Introduction, *Asom Andolan: Pratiruti aru Phalasruti*, viii.

<sup>40</sup> Monirul Hussain, *Assam Movement: Class, Ideology and Identity* (New Delhi: Manak Publications, 1993), 143.

were mostly opposed to the agitation or caused damage to the movement. Here it would be interesting to look at such bomb blasts from 1979–84.<sup>41</sup>

**Table 2.1**  
**Violent Incidents during Assam Movement**

<i>Year</i>	<i>Number of Blasts</i>	<i>Number of Deaths</i>
1979	4	0
1980	47	8
1981	81	5
1982	39	27
1983	259	55
1984	41	6
<b>Total</b>	<b>471</b>	<b>101</b>

*Source:* Special Branch, Assam Police.

The most audacious act of bomb blast took place at the office of the upper Assam commissioner on 6 April 1981. Commissioner E. S. Parthasarathy, IAS, was killed by a pressure bomb which was planted under a cushion in his office.

The violent acts were a desperate attempt by the radical group of the agitation to force New Delhi for the development of the state and deportation of the foreigners. There was a growing realisation by the radical group that New Delhi was not going to listen to the language of non-violence and satyagraha. The imposition of 1983 elections was greatly resented by the people of Assam. The increasing army and police atrocities forced a group of Assam agitationists to think that perhaps time had come to act violently to extract the benefit from the Central government. Thus, the Assam Movement has acted as the precursor for a violent movement by the ULFA.

<sup>41</sup> Hussain, *Assam Movement*, 143.

# 3

## Periodising ULFA's Metamorphosis *From Liberator to War Lord (?)*

Among the theoretical explanations for political violence, the 'relative deprivation' approach is of particular distinction. Its central point asks the question, what brings a group to a stage where it chooses to exercise political violence in anti-institutional action?<sup>1</sup> The approach of Ted Gurr does not focus on the group's objective deprivation but rather on its subjective feelings of deprivation. The basic assumption of this theory is that political violence constitutes an inseparable part of the human experience and is not simply a passing social event. A group's route to violence begins with dissatisfaction and frustration with present conditions and the group's belief that it is entitled to more rights or resources than it presently possesses. Over time, its dissatisfaction undergoes a process of 'politicization'; members of the group see their problem as stemming from a political structural source, blame that source for their predicament and reason that change will be gained only through political struggle and no other means. Finally, the citizens give vent to their rage against the political actors and institutions they find responsible for the present circumstances.

The degree of their anger is affected by the breadth of the gap between their value expectations, or what group members believe they are entitled to and hope to maintain in their possession, and value capabilities, or the political assets or services that members believe themselves capable of attaining. As the gap between these two criteria grows, the group's

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<sup>1</sup> Ted Gurr, *Why Men Rebel* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1970), 7.



belief in its capacity to actualise its rights to goods or services decreases.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, resource scarcity and demand enhance the likelihood of violent outbursts. An additional factor affecting the prospect of violent confrontation is the length of time that feelings of rage within the group were repressed. In other words, the longer the rage was contained, the greater its chances of eruption. Similarly, as feelings of deprivation are increasingly widespread, the probability of manifestations of violence increases. Over the years, the relative deprivation theory has been subject to criticism from several directions. Most of the criticism has focused on the phase of transition from feelings of deprivation to collective and organised political action capable of engendering social movements.<sup>3</sup> Other theories for the phenomenon of organised political protestation, such as the resource mobilisation theory, have largely underscored the stage leading to action, wherein the key factors accounting for political protest are associated with the group's available resources, its organisational infrastructure and the social environment in which it operates.<sup>4</sup>

As we have argued in the first chapter, it is the Assam Movement that has laid down the foundation for the growth of an independent Assam by ULFA. Although some writers have expressed serious doubt about the democratic content of the Assam Movement, it is one of the most popular mass-based movement in the post-Independence period of India. A strong emotional content notwithstanding, for the majority of the Assamese, this was the last fight to ensure their identity and culture. Scholars thus argue that the Assam Movement surfaced the already palpable secessionist feeling in Assam. Noted journalist Homen Borgohain wrote extensively about the genesis of secessionist ideology in the Assam Movement.<sup>5</sup> Professor Misra argues:

The Indian State's reliance on blatantly coercive measures to suppress the Assam Movement, particularly the State violence perpetrated during the controversial elections of 1983 in which at least one hundred and

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<sup>2</sup> Gurr, *Why Men Rebel*, 27, 28.

<sup>3</sup> Ami Pedahazur, Badi Hasisi, A. Brichta, 'A Proposed Model of Explaining Political Violence in Israel', in *World Affairs* 163, no. 1 (Summer, 2000): 18–27.

<sup>4</sup> J. L. Cohen, *Strategy or Identity: New Theoretical Paradigms and Contemporary Social Movements* (Cambridge, 1985), 67.

<sup>5</sup> Homen Borgohain, 'The Separatists in Shadow', *Nagarik* (13 November 1980), 1; 'Assam Movement was a Movement of Secessionist', *Nagarik* (12 March 1981), 1.

thirty persons lost their lives in police firings and other forms of State violence, succeeded in alienating the Assamese and also a large section of the plains tribals from the Indian 'mainstream'. By the time the Assam Accord was signed in August 1985, people's confidence in the Centre had been thoroughly shaken and the vacuum created in the political scene by the virtual nullifying of the Congress which had ruled the state 'almost uninterruptedly since 1947, was now sought to be filled in by forces which propagated separation from India through armed struggle.'<sup>6</sup>

The Government of India was well aware about the development of separatist tendencies in the Assam Movement. The then Home Minister of India, P. C. Sethi, said in the Lok Sabha on 14 March 1983:

Posters, leaflets with slogans have appeared from the very beginning of the Movement which certainly indicates how the minds of some elements have been functioning. Some of these sample slogans were—

'We shall have our country with blood of martyrs.'

'When Assam will be free.'

'India has no right to rule Assam.'

'Assam region should think of an independent united State of Assam after separating from India.'

'Indian dogs leave Assam.'

There were several leaflets galore advocating violence and sentiments similar to the above slogans. No doubt AASU/AAGSP has denied their association with such activities. But there has never been any strong denouncements and condemnation.<sup>7</sup>

## Pre-ULFA Period: Various Armed Groups/Wings that Subsequently Merged into ULFA

It needs to be mentioned that before the growth of ULFA there were a number of small fringe armed outfits that tried to fight with the Indian State. These groups had acted as the precursors for separatist

<sup>6</sup> Udayon Mishra, *Periphery Strikes Back* (IIAS, Shimla, 2000), 133.

<sup>7</sup> P. C. Sethi, 'Home Minister of India Statement in Lok Sabha, 14 March 1983' in *Documents of Assam, Part B*, ed. V. R. Trivedi (New Delhi: Omsons Publications, 1985), 642–643, referred in Uddipan Dutta, 'Creating Robin Hood: The Insurgency of ULFA in Its Early Periods (1985–1990)', WISCOMP Discussion Paper (2008), 37.

environment in Assam and facilitated an atmosphere for the growth of ULFA. Occasionally there are references to Lachit Sena and other groups like the United Liberation Front (ULF). However, there is no authentic information about these groups. The ULF was formed in 1981–82 in upper Assam. Borun Saikia and Indra Hazarika were the important leaders of the organisation. Their activities were mostly concentrated in Bolai, Tinsukia and Dibrugarh district. Main aim of the group was to drive out the illegal foreigners from Assam. Later on the group merged into ULFA.

There were other non-violent organisations that espoused the cause of independent Assam. These movements have actually paved the way for the growth of a more rigorous armed secessionist struggle in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Even organisations like AASU, Jatiyatabadi Dal, Asom Yuvak Samaj, etc., have occasionally espoused the cause of an independent Assam.<sup>8</sup>

There were three types of militant activities before the full-scale launching of ULFA:

1. The militant wing of the Assam Movement.
2. Another organisation that tried to gain Independence through violent means was Brachin National Liberation Army (BNLA).
3. Assam People's Liberation Army (APLA).

## Militant Wings of the Assam Movement

A wide section of the members of Assam agitation was highly demoralised by the atrocities committed by Army and police. Many have lost their lives, many were crippled for life. Girls were raped and molested. The young students at that point came to the conclusion that Delhi would not listen to the voice of non-violence. Some of the stalwarts who had contacted the People's Liberation Army (PLA) and other extremist organisations of the region for arms and explosives were Atul Bora, Bharat Narah, Lachit Kalita, Debo Dutta Borkotoky, Dilip Kumar

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<sup>8</sup> Misra, *Periphery Strikes Back*, 132.

Mahanta, Abihijit Sharma, Jaynath Sharma, to name a few.<sup>9</sup> Atul Bora was the leader of Assam Liberation Army (ALA) which was structured on the lines of PLA of Manipur.

In fact, Assam's first serial blasts are said to have been committed by the ALA on 1 January 1983 and 31 December 1992, and Jaynath Sharma was the chief of a volunteer force near Mangaldoi that tried to mobilise youth against the illegal foreigners—the force is said to have committed many killings. It needs to be mentioned that the first cache of arms and ammunitions and training to the cadres of Assam were provided not by National Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN) but by PLA. As would become clear from the BNLA, lots of cadres from Assam were already in PLA who facilitated the process of armed training by PLA. Organisations like North East Region Students' Union (which later on became North East Students' Organisation [NESO]) in 1979–80 also helped in receiving such help from the militant organisations. Ananda Borbor and Bhadreswar Buragohain were two other leaders who insisted on the use of more strong method than hartal and non-cooperation. These groups of the Assam Movement did not have a clear idea about sovereign Assam, nor did they talk about secession; however, they were highly dissatisfied by the army and police atrocities and wanted to take revenge. Many of them had learnt the art of making local bombs and pistols; however, due to their amateurish approach, around 10 activists died in 1982–83 while making bombs or in their attempt to plant bombs at or to throw them on police and politicians.<sup>10</sup> Bijay Wrangkhal of Tripura and Bisweswar Singh of PLP and Engelas—the then foreign secretary of NSCN—were the three extremists leaders from the North East who took initiative in providing training and other necessary logistics to the radical elements of the Assam Movement.

There were some other loose extremist groups in Assam like North East Regional Defence Army (NERDA), Seven Unit Liberation Army (SULA), United Liberation Army of Seven States (ULASS), etc. There was yet another group called Jagrata Matri Mukti Bahini (JMMB) around

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<sup>9</sup> This was expressed to the writer by a top AGP leader who was once associated with such activities. This was expressed to the writer on the condition of anonymity.

<sup>10</sup> Information provided to the author by Dilip Kumar Mahanta—a leader of Assam agitation.

Pathsala area of lower Assam.<sup>11</sup> It needs to be mentioned that during this period, most of the groups with an extremist ideology were heavily influenced by PLA. However, these groups did not sustain and gradually disappeared, except for some sporadic violent activities in certain pockets.

### *Assam People's Liberation Army (APLA)*

It is to be mentioned that ULFA was not the first organisation to have espoused the cause of secessionism by violent means in the post-Independence period. One such organisation which is a contemporary of ULFA is APLA. The organisation was born on 10 December 1979 at the residence of Chandra Chaudhury of Jamugurihat. Debodhar Kalita was the chairman; Lalu Bhuyan, Jiten Bhuyan, Paron Barua, Debo Bora, Nimesh Saikia and Khagen Kalita were the vice-chairmen; Arpan Bezbaruah was the general secretary while Putul Bora, Bijoya Chakravarty (who later became AGP and Bharatiya Janata Party [BJP] leader) and Hiten Goswami (who later on became the AGP minister) were in charge of foreign affairs.<sup>12</sup> The APLA had its own students wing under Abihijit Kalita which was known as All Assam Liberation Organisation (AALO). Born in Tezpur, Pithakhowa, initially, the organisation attracted a large number of youths from lower Assam and had a larger membership than ULFA.<sup>13</sup> The APLA had networks in the central belt of Mangaldai, Barpeta as well as in Nagaon. However, Arpan Bezbaruah, the general secretary, and most of the activists discreetly surrendered before the AGP government in 1986 and APLA ceased to exist. APLA is said to be the brainchild of Bhriku Kumar Phukon and Arpan Bezbaruah. The force did not continue with its revolutionary zeal as its main protagonist Bhriku Phukon became the Home Minister of the state. Regarding the growth and decline of APLA, Sunil Nath, who was a leader of this outfit and later on joined ULFA to become the publicity secretary, writes:

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<sup>11</sup> Uddipan Dutta, 'Creating Robin Hood: the Insurgency of ULFA in Its Early Periods (1985–1990)', WISCOMP Discussion Paper (2008), 39.

<sup>12</sup> Obtained by interviewing Arpan Bezbaruah—the general secretary of the organisation who had disbanded the organisation and now is a well-known cultural personality in Tezpur.

<sup>13</sup> Sunil Nath, an important leader of the organisation, in a personal interview.

The mushrooming of secessionist outfits dedicated to armed guerrilla methods gradually consolidated into two comparatively well-organised outfits, the ULFA and the Assam People's Liberation Army (APLA). The APLA was larger and better organised at first, and it concentrated on cadre-formation. ULFA, utilizing its geographical advantage, gained from having most of its founder members from areas adjacent to the inter-state border with Nagaland, and established contact with the NSCN (then a united entity, before the subsequent split in April 1988).... Most of the APLA leaders gave up the path of armed secession following the Assam Accord and installation of the Asom Gana Parishad (AGP) government under Prafulla Kumar Mahanta. In fact, the general feeling among the Assamese after the perceived victory of the agitation, with the agitation leadership controlling government, was that everybody should return to their normal lives. APLA vanished with the majority of its member returning home and a few obstinate ones joining the ULFA, which had declared that the Accord and the AGP government were of no consequence to their goal of a separate and sovereign Assamese state. The ULFA leadership painstakingly mobilised recruits from different parts of Assam and kept sending fresh batches of trainees to the NSCN camp.<sup>14</sup>

Under the leadership of Munin Nobis and Sailen Konwar Dutta, some Guwahati-based APLA members refused to give up the secessionist path and joined ULFA after the surrender of Arpan Bezbaruah. Both Munin and Sailen were to play a crucial role in establishing ULFA in lower Assam and were the undisputed leaders of the Kamrup district committee till their surrender in 1992.

Some other organisations which took up arms but took no time to fizzle out were Lachit Bahini, Mukti Sena, Adam Sena, etc.

### *Brachin National Union (BNU)*

Brachin National Union was another important armed group that tried to liberate Assam, the North East region and the larger parts of Chindwin river regions. Naren Gohain alias Noyan Singh alias Baba of Nagoan was the most important leader of the organisation. In fact, Naren Gohain

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<sup>14</sup> Sunil Nath, 'Assam: The Secessionist Insurgency and Freedom of Minds', *Faultlines* 10 (2004), <http://www.satp.org/satporgtp/publication/faultlines/volume13/Article2.htm> (accessed on 7 October, 2012).

can be said to be the pioneer of armed rebellion in Assam. His attempt for an armed group started in 1975 June–July when he tried to mobilise about 10 Assamese people for an armed resurrection with the help of Naga groups in Mokokchung areas of Nagaland. After the failure of the first attempt, he tried once again in 1977–78 when he contacted NSCN in Mon district of Nagaland. Both the attempts had failed and he started working with Assam Jatiyatabadi Dal which was the next best option for solving the nagging problems of Assam.

Gohain was never satisfied with the current state of affairs. In the 'Pen friend section' of Assamese magazine *Trishul* (in 1979 June–July issue), he requested for 'friends with revolutionary minds'. His appeal was accepted by two Assamese boys who were already in PLA in Manipur. Those two Assamese boys who were already in PLA—Biman Das of Podumoni village in Purohi Gudam and Durlabh Tamuli of the same area. Gohain subsequently became a top leader in PLA after obtaining training in Myanmar and Bangladesh. However, he was caught in 1982 by 17th Rajput rifles in Manipur and was kept in jail for several months in Alipur, Thana, Imphal and Nasik Jail.

After coming out from the jail, he along with Tomba Singh of Manipur and Lalthanhawala (the present CM of Mizoram), opened BNU. Gohain became the vice-president of the organisation. However, later on, the organisation under the leadership of Gohain became more Assam-centric. Some other members of the organisation were Tun Tun Moral of Lachit Nagar, Guwahati; Biswajit Bhuyan near Commerce College, Guwahati; Robin Deka of Lachit Nagar, Guwahati; Biren Sharma of Mongaldoi; Sambhu Saikia of Bamun Gaon, Nagoan and Amiya Bora of Nagoan.

The main aim of the organisation was to create an independent sovereign state comprising western part of the Chindwin river and north western to south western part up to Cox Bazar of Bangladesh, including all the North Eastern states and Kamatapur. The term 'Brachin' was derived out of the combination of the first two syllables of the Brahmaputra and Chindwin rivers.

APLA was more driven by the nationalist issues of Assam like Delhi's exploitation, lack of control over resources, illegal immigration and

plunder of resources by the North Indians, etc. The BNU's aim, on the other hand, was bigger and larger. They wanted to create a big federation as they believed all the exploited units of the region need to come together for a unified struggle against New Delhi.

Both the organisations slowly fizzled out and many of their cadres either had surrendered or joined ULFA. It is important to mention here that there were series of segregated militant activities in Assam from 1983 till 1985. For example, Dilip Sharma from Jagiroad's Oriya Goan Chariali and Kishore Hazarika (he was later killed by ULFA) from Mongoldoi in 1983 tried to create militant wings with an aim to create an independent Assam. Similar thought process had also taken firm grip in Guwahati in the period of early 1980s. Sunil Nath, a CPI (ML) activist; Partha Pratim Bharali, the then general secretary of Arya Bidyapith College; Sailen Dutta Konwar, a student leader from B Barooah College; Munin Nobis, the then general secretary of Cotton College and many more were attracted to the secessionist ideology and were of the firm belief that Delhi would not listen to the voice of non-violence. Most of them had joined APLA and then became members from ULFA.

Sworn into a secret existence on 7 April 1979 at Sibsagar's Rang Ghar, ULFA was midwived (conceptualised and brought to life) by Rajiv Rajkonwar alias Arabinda Rajkhowa (the organisation's present chairman), Paban Baruah alias Paresh Baruah (the 'Chief of Army Staff'), Samiran Gogoi alias Pradip Gogoi (the vice chairman) and Golap Barua alias Anup Chetia (the general secretary).

## ULFA'S Birth, Aims, Ideology and Leaders behind the Organisation

It was 7 April 1979 when seven young lads gathered at 'Ranghar'—the entertainment place for the 14th-century Ahom kings. It was an informal gathering of a few concerned Assamese who were highly apprehensive about the identity and future of the Assamese people. All the youths gathered here were worried about illegal migration, the stepmotherly and apathetic treatment of the Centre, the reckless and indiscriminate use of



Assam's resources and growing lack of opportunities to the Assamese people in their own land. The seven youths discussed the severity of the situation and three of them forcefully argued for an armed struggle and a fight for an independent Assam. The urge for an independent struggle caught the imagination of all the members and they kept on discussing the various parameters of armed struggle the entire night within the premises of the historical Ranghar. The end of the meeting was pronounced by the ushering of the sunrise which they considered as a good omen for the birth of their brainchild and spontaneously decided to make it the emblem of their new endeavour. It was decided that Rajib Rajkonwar (later known as the Aurobinda Rajkonwar—chairman of the organisation) would frame the constitution of the organisation keeping 'unity, revolution and liberation' as the chief motto of ULFA.

Interestingly enough, in the first executive meet, both Arabinda Rajkhowa and Paresh Baruah's names are missing. Nevertheless, very soon they became the nerve centre of the organisation as most of the first executive members, except Bhimkanta Borgohain, were no longer with the organisation. Meanwhile, Rajib Rajkonwar met Paresh Baruah when the former was the president of the district committee of the Asom Jatiyatabadi Yuva Chatra Parishad (AJYCP), Sibsagar. Both Paresh and Arabinda, as the active members of Assam agitation, had to remain underground to avoid army and police atrocity during the Assam Movement. Rajib was the sixth son (out of nine) of a distinguished Gandhian non-violent freedom fighter from Sibsagar—Uma Rajkonwar. Uma Rajkonwar was perhaps the senior-most living freedom fighter of the state who had completed 100 years on 11 January 2001. Rajib was very prominent in all social activities and was highly concerned about the community issues and later on the national issues of the state. The third important person along with Rajib and Paresh was Rajib's *mama* (maternal uncle), Bhimkanta Buragohain, who was arrested during the Bhutan army's raid out in the jungles of Bhutan in the year 2002. The fourth important person in influencing the initial works of Rajib and Paresh was Budheswar Gogoi, an ex-principal of Moran High School and a prominent social worker of the region. The fifth important person in the initial phase of the organisation was Bhadreswar Buragohain, a prominent citizen of Sapekhati, Sibsagar, who later on joined AGP and became

the vice-chairman of the Legislative Assembly. The sixth and the seventh important persons in the initial phase were Samiran Gogoi and Golap Barua. At the initiative of Bhimkanta Buragohain and Buddeheswar Gogoi, some other members took part in the proposed organisation. They were Suren Dhingia, Someswar Gogoi, Bhupen Buragohain, Nava Neog, Kiran Barua, Pabitra Neog and Chakra Gohain. By the end of 1979, when ULFA conducted its second meeting, the organisation had another eight members to assist the committee. However, there is no authentic report regarding the exact number of total members in the first-ever meeting at Ranghar. Some say Paresh Baruah was not present in the very first meeting.<sup>15</sup>

Towards the end of 1980, ULFA's first session of the Central Council took place at Dibrugarh. The meeting presided over by Buddeheswar Gogoi passed the name 'United Liberation Front of Asom' or ULFA as the name of the organisation. Two persons formally got rid of all the organisational responsibilities—they were Buddeheswar Gogoi and Bhadreswar Buragohain. During this time, ULFA could expand its organisational base to Nalbari, Guwahati, Barpeta, Guwahati and Nagaon. This fast expansion of ULFA was possible due to the effortless support of the AJYCP. During this period, practically there were no differences between the ULFA and the AJYCP.<sup>16</sup> In this period, ULFA was essentially divided into two wings—political and military. The Central General Council was to look after the political activities and it included members like Chitrabon Hazarika, Jugal Kishore Mahanta, Sasha Chaudhury, Sunil Nath, Manoj Hazarika and others. In this very first meeting of the Central Council, a military council was formed by including members like Chief of Army staff Paresh Baruah, Ratul Kotoki, Hirakjyoti Mahanta, Raju Barua, Baning Rabha, Lohit Deuri and others. The meeting also decided to use pseudonyms for their organisational activities. Thus, Rajib Rajkonwar has become Arabinda Rajkhowa, Paresh Baruah—Pawan Barua, Samiran Gogoi—Pradip Gogoi, Golap Barua—Anup Chetia and Rajen Sharma had become Uddipta Hazarika.

<sup>15</sup> There are varying reports regarding the numbers and Paresh Baruah's presence in the first meeting. See, Gautam Sharma, 'ULFA aru Asom', *Amar Asom* (10 May 1999), 14.

<sup>16</sup> Parag Moni Aditya, *Swadhinota* (Niyar Prakasan, 2002), 26.

The organisation got more strengthened after 1984, especially after the coming to power of the regional AGP government, although the organisation was known to be operating from 1979. It was from 1983 that ULFA was groping from one corner to the other in search of authentic ideology which could be acceptable to various communities. Initially, the organisation's leadership tried to project it as an organisation that was primarily constituted to protect the cause of the Ahom community of upper Assam. As was expressed by some cadres, this feeling was predominant till 1984–85. If one looks at the composition of the organisation, it becomes clear that two or three communities have been dominating the leadership front—although its membership represents almost all the communities of Assam. The Motok–Moran element in the leadership has added new angles of anti-Delhism and animosity towards the Hindi-speaking people in the state. Till today, Motok–Moran community is considered to be the strongest support base of ULFA. This we shall discuss in the coming chapters.

Describing itself as the revolutionary organisation, an ULFA declaration reads:

ULFA as a Revolutionary Organization: The nations of the world have been struggling for the restoration of their own identity and total development. The history of struggle in real sense is the struggle of establishing justice against injustice and truth against untruth. Above all, a nation under foreign occupation has no alternative other than to fight for freedom and national liberation. The 'United Liberation Front of Assam', ULFA, a revolutionary political organisation was born on the lawns of the historic Rang Ghar of Sibsagar on 7th April 1979.<sup>17</sup>

The genesis of ULFA can be traced to the AJYCP, a radical group, more systematic and active than the AASU. The AJYCP shuns the limelight and working silently—unlike the high-profile AASU—does more for the youth of Assam than anyone actually cares to mention. As a matter of detail, Arabinda Rajkhowa, Pradip Gogoi and Anup Chetia had all worked for the AJYCP at some point of time or the other. The organisation's central issues revolve around more power to the states, control over their resources and introduction of dual citizenship. Needless to say

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<sup>17</sup> <http://www.geocities.com/CapitolHill/Congress/7434>

the organisation has been playing a pivotal role in devising a negotiated settlement between the Government of India and ULFA. The organisation is, however, criticised for nourishing a soft corner for their former comrades.

## ULFA'S Aims and Objectives

Some of ULFA's aims and objectives could be understood by looking at what the organisation has to say about its existence:

1. To liberate Assam, through armed national liberation struggle, from the clutches of the illegal occupation of India and to establish a sovereign independent Assam.
2. ULFA represents, as its name implies, not only the Assamese nation but also the entire struggling peoples with independent thinking, irrespective of different race, tribe, caste, religion and nationality of Assam.
3. The struggle for national liberation of Assam is never a separatist or secessionist movement. The central argument of ULFA is that Assam was never a part of India at any point of time in history. The fact is independent Assam has been occupied by India, and deploying occupation forces, they are oppressing our peoples and persecuting them. ULFA itself and all freedom fighters of Assam are neither planning nor conspiring to break up India! It says, 'We are not conducting any armed operation inside India. Freedom fighters of Assam are only trying to overthrow Indian colonial occupation from Assam.'<sup>18</sup>
4. On the need for an armed struggle, the organisation says:

[T]he armed struggle for self-defense is a compulsive objective reality: The people of Assam are confronting with various problems. Among those, the National identity problem is basic. The communal riot that was followed by the partition of India and Pakistan was responsible for the influx of foreigners from the Indian subcontinent in large scale and thereby caused a real threat

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<sup>18</sup> *Ulfar Raijor Uchurat Nibedon* (In Assamese), a pamphlet of ULFA, 1985.

to the demographic composition of Assam. India has all along encouraged this influx because of a population base having ethnic affinity with main land India is always favourable to their long term security perspective. This is one of India's major aspects of colonial occupation of Assam.<sup>19</sup>

5. The organisation believes that in economic sphere, India has been engaged in large-scale exploitation. Despite its rich resources, Assam remains one of the most backward states. Therefore, the question of real threat to the national identity of the people of Assam under the colonial occupation and exploitation of India has become the basic problem. As a whole, the problem has become a question of life and death to the people of Assam.<sup>20</sup>

How does one explain the necessity and justifiability of violence as a historical necessity by ULFA? Here the analysis of Franz Fanon could provide theoretical understanding to the method of violence. Dedicated to the Algerian revolution, Fanon was concerned with the theory and praxis of violence. In his early writings, Fanon analysed the phenomenon of alienation under the conditions of French colonialism. He justifies violence on the grounds of socio-psychological plank; means–ends relationship where violence is legitimised as means to bring change in the structure of the society.<sup>21</sup> He argues that superstructure of exploitation will disappear only through a struggle for political liberation. ULFA asserted that ‘real threat to the national identity of the people of Assam under the colonial occupation and exploitation of India has become the basic problem’. Under such situation, the armed struggle for self-defence was understood to be a compulsive objective reality.

The key factors accounting for political protest are associated with the group's available resources, its organisational infrastructure and the

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<sup>19</sup> *Ulfar Raijor Uchurat Nibedon*.

<sup>20</sup> <http://www.geocities.com/CapitolHill/Congress/7434>

<sup>21</sup> See Franz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (Penguin books, 1963). Also see L. Adele Jenadu, ‘Some Aspects of the Political Philosophy of Frantz Fanon’, *African Studies Review* 16, (1973): 258.

social environment in which it operates.<sup>22</sup> Therefore, how an organisation moulds its network, mass contact, strategy and ideology; enforces discipline; recruits cadres, etc., would determine its sustainability.

## Organisational Structure and Powers

So far as the organisational structure is concerned, the organisation has undergone lot of changes. In the initial phase, particularly from 1985, ULFA had a primary unit, *Mouza*, sub-divisional unit, zila or district unit and central committee. Later on, from 1985–86, General Headquarter (GHQ) was formed to look into military issues and Central Headquarter (CHQ) was formed in order to look into political activities. When the military pressure had become more intense, a Mobile Headquarter (MHQ) was created in 1993. The organisation created the United Liberation Force of Assam (the military wing) in 1995. Making ULFA more military oriented and Paresh Baruah centric, the party had constituted various *mandals* dividing the entire state into certain regions. During this period, ULFA was divided into four zones.

In 2003, after the Bhutan operation, the organisation was restructured and both GHQ and CHQ were merged into Central Command Headquarter (CCHQ) which was based in Bangladesh. According to Article 1 of ULFA's constitution, the name of the organisation is United Liberation Front of Asom (ULFA). Clause 'B' of the same article says: 'United Liberation Front of Asom is a revolutionary political party and the military wing that works under the supervision of the party is [sic] United Liberation Force of Asom (also ULFA).'<sup>23</sup>

Under the administrative and political wing, there are four sections, namely, General Assembly, Permanent Council, Central Executive Council and Battalion Management Committee. These four units were

<sup>22</sup> J. L. Cohen, *Strategy or Identity: New Theoretical Paradigms and Contemporary Social Movement* (Cambridge, 1985), 67.

<sup>23</sup> Article 1, Section B of the ULFA Constitution (amended and accepted in 2005). It was obtained through personal contact. Thus initially there was a distinction between United Liberation Front of Asom and United Liberation Force of Asom (also ULFA) but later on, it came to be popularly known as United Liberation Front of Asom.

responsible for the operation of the organisation till the capture of its chairman Arabinda Rajkhowa.

There are three organs of ULFA<sup>24</sup> which play the most dominant role in the exercise of power. These are:

1. Central General Assembly
2. Central Executive Council
3. Permanent Council

According to Article 15 of ULFA Constitution, Central General Assembly is the highest decision-making body. It has the power to constitute or dissolve or bring necessary changes to the Central Executive Council. It has general powers like amending the constitution, framing the general objectives and guidelines of the organisation; it can also initiate self-criticism and modification in the light of changing circumstances. However, as per the Article 17 of ULFA Constitution, it is the Permanent Council which is in reality the most powerful body of the organisation. It is like the politburo of the communist party and the Cabinet of a parliamentary form of government. It consists of the following important portfolios of the organisation:

1. Chairman
2. Vice-chairman
3. General Secretary
4. Chief of Army
5. One more senior member from Central Executive Council

It may be mentioned here that the constitution of the Permanent Council was a bone of contention among the top brass of the organisation as all the occupants of the most important executive body belonged to upper Assam and mostly two communities of Assam. It is important to look at the constitutional powers of the organisation (council) as it is said to be the most powerful body.

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<sup>24</sup> In our analysis, we generally refer to the revolutionary political party ULFA. When we refer to the military wing of ULFA, it will be specifically mentioned.

1. It has the power to take all major emergency decisions. However, the participation and opinion of all departmental heads is a must.
2. It has the power to constitute a mass-based non-violent political party to espouse the cause of independent Assam.<sup>25</sup>
3. It has the power to decide on the elections of India like what will be the role of ULFA vis-à-vis elections and political parties subject to the verification by the Central Executive Council.
4. All the important decisions pertaining to military and other associated arms procurement, etc., will be decided by the Body.
5. It can directly supervise all the wings including the battalions according to the need of time.
6. It has the power to decide on all important decisions like ceasefire, talks with the government and so on. However, in this matter the opinion of the Central Executive Council will be indispensable.<sup>26</sup>

Central Executive Council is a broad-based wing of the organisation—as is clear from the above, although the Permanent Council is the most powerful; nevertheless, the mandate of Executive Council is mandatory on all important decisions of the organisation. It comprises the top 15 functionaries of the organisations. Apart from these bodies of ULFA, the constitution makes provision for a council of advisors who can advise on important issues of the organisation.

The party has five main functional battalions—the 7, 28, 27, 109 and 709 battalions. The numbers are not to be mistaken with serial numbers. Each number signifies certain milestones or events in the history of the organisation. For example, on 28 November 1990, early morning at 1:15 a.m., operation Bajrang was declared—in protest, the 28 Battalion was launched. The 7 Battalion is in tune with the establishment day of the party, i.e., 7 April 1979.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Clause 'c', part-3 of the article 17 of ULFA Constitution (amended and accepted in 2005). It was obtained through personal contact.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, part 12 of article 17.

<sup>27</sup> 7 Battalion signifies the martyr day of ULFA when the Border Security Force (BSF) jawans killed five civilians in Dipila on 27 July 1992. 109 and 709 signify the establishment year, i.e., 1979.



Apart from the regular organisational set-up, there were few other units which were created from time to time. The Volcano unit is a specialist military organisation constituted to perform a few objectives (mostly killing or assassination). The most active and physically fit cadres are examined to be recruited to this unit. It's basically a suicide squad. However, there are no reports of such suicide squad activities. The unit is constituted in the following ways—Paresh Baruah (Overall In-charge), Raju Barua (Operation In-charge), Dristi Rajkhowa (Commander of Volcano Unit), Biduyt Kachari (Asst. Commander), Nirmal Bodo and Babul Ingti (Field Commanders)—the former surrendered and the latter died during police encounter.

Organisationally, ULFA does not have many women cadres. Pranati Deka, now in police custody, is the highest ranking cadre who happens to be the cultural secretary of the organisation. The organisation is very selective in recruiting the women cadres into the military wing. Otherwise, the organisation has a women wing known as *Nari bahini* (women soldiers). The hierarchical order of the wing at GHQ is as follows: Kaberi Rajkonwari (wife of Arabinda Rajkhowa), Meghali Saikia (wife of Pallav Saikia, Lieutenant), Kalpana Neog, Moni Barua (wife of Satabda Kumar, Chief Instructor), Sadhana Batcha (Second Lieutenant), Rangdongiya Rabha (she held the highest position for women in the army wing), Malati Rabha (wife of Hiren Bodo, Commander of central training centre), Sangita Saod—Sergeant Major (wife of Bhaiti Gogoi, GHQ Commander). The main functions of the women cadre can be divided into: communicative, administrative, medical, transportation and building network for the release of the arrested leaders. The women cadres and the sympathisers act as the couriers of ULFA letters to various cadres and districts. Initially, it is through the women cadres that instructions were communicated. At the GHQ, Bhutan, it is the women cadres who maintain the office records and perform other necessary administrative works. The women cadres are generally trained in medical services and take care of the medical aspects of the camp. In military operations, particularly by the Volcano unit, women cadres accompanied the unit as it helped them to get rid of the police and military searching. Besides, it was the responsibility of the women cadre to secure release of the arrested ULFA leaders by mobilising people's support in

the form of gherao or mass protest. In addition, the women cadres also collected information necessary for the organisation. Such information included military and other security personnel movement, spying, etc.

## ULFA'S View on Migrants and People of Assam

A significant contradiction in ULFA's agenda is the sudden tolerance with which it began to view illegal migrants from Bangladesh. Some commentators argue this is due to its shelter at Bangladesh after it had set up its camps in the erstwhile East Pakistan.<sup>28</sup> Initially, the organisation seems to have supported the cause of the Assam Movement for driving out the foreigners from Assam. In fact, the growth of ULFA can be cited as a reaction to an apathetic and violent State during the time of the Assam Movement. The organisation says in one of its pamphlets:

The people of Assam confronted with the aforesaid problems such as influx of foreigners and massive exploitation of its natural resources and determined as national identity problem after summing them up. Against the gross injustice for sheer survival as a nation, as a people and as individuals, the people of Assam many times launched democratic and unarmed peaceful movement. However, India ruthlessly suppressed and crushed them ignoring the value of democratic movement. Especially in 1979, democratic and unarmed peaceful movement against the influx of foreigners and economic exploitation, the occupation force of India killed seven hundred unarmed agitationists where the majority were teenage students. Though the people of Assam and leadership of the struggle have a strong stand for peaceful and amicable solution of the conflict, India has always been trying to force a military solution.<sup>29</sup>

Sired as it were, by the need to rid Assam of foreigners, it would be expected that the organisation would throw in its lot to solve the vexed problem of illegal migration. But quite to the contrary, it sought to

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<sup>28</sup> See Jaideep Saikia, 'The ULFA Battles for Survival', in *Faultlines*, vol. 7, ed. K. P. S. Gill and Ajai Sahni (Bulwark Books and The Institute for Conflict Management, New Delhi, 2000), 39.

<sup>29</sup> <http://www.geocities.com/CapitolHill/Congress/7434/>

explain away the problem in a 15-page booklet which is addressed to 'The People of Assam of East Bengal Origin'. The document makes interesting reading, as it justifies the role of migrants in the life of the state:

When we refer to the Assamese, instead of meaning the Assamese-speaking people we actually mean the different inter-mixture of tribal nationalities—those who are committed towards working for the good of Assam. The mixture of nationalities that is the Assamese is, in reality, the result of immigration. We consider the immigrants from East Bengal to be a major part of the national life of the people of Assam. Our freedom struggle can never be successful without these people ... the masses who earn their living through hard physical labour can never be our enemies. All the labouring masses are our friends and the main motive force of our freedom revolt.<sup>30</sup>

ULFA's links with Bangladesh have not evoked the sort of anger and opposition from the Assamese people as one might have expected.<sup>31</sup> However, we believe ULFA's sudden change on the illegal migration issue is due to military compulsions. As Professor Mishra has correctly opined, there is reason to believe that military needs have compelled the outfit to shed much of its earlier intransigence towards foreigners and outsiders on Assam soil and adopt a position which would ensure support and sanctuary in Bangladesh.<sup>32</sup> Otherwise, it is difficult to explain the 15-page booklet issued in July 1992 which is addressed to 'The People of Assam of East Bengal Origin'. The 15-page booklet tries to look at the roots of migration from East Bengal into Assam; the ULFA document states that the migrants had now become a major part of the national life of the state.

Another portion of the document runs thus:

The contribution of the people of East Bengal origin in Assam towards increasing the state's economic output is indeed noteworthy. It is this community which produces the state's vegetables, mustard, sesame and

<sup>30</sup> 'Sanjukta Mukti Bahini Asom', *Prachar Patra*, July 1992.

<sup>31</sup> M. S. Prabhakar, 'Ulfa's Links with Bangladesh', *The Hindu* (8 September 1992).

<sup>32</sup> Misra, *Periphery Strikes Back*, 141.

82 per cent of the total jute. This is the main group of peasants who can produce plenty out of small areas of land.

The document further states: 'We would like to state here for everybody's information that the movement led by the All Assam Students' Union and the Gana Sangram Parishad from 1979 to 1985 is viewed by ULFA as one based on emotion' (author's translation).<sup>33</sup> Perhaps the most significant aspect of the document is that English would be the link language of independent Assam (*Swadhin Asom*), thereby nullifying almost a century of struggle to give the Assamese language its legitimate place in the state.<sup>34</sup>

## ULFA's Purbo Bongiya Samiti (the Committee on East Bengal People)

To know ULFA's position on the migrants, it is essential to know more about the Purbo Bongiya Samiti—a branch of ULFA which was constituted to look into the issues of mobilising the people of East Bengal origin. The committee established in the year 1990 was headed by Diganta Raghab, and Saddam Hussain was the general secretary of the committee. Sikhar Jyoti Deka and Sankar Barua of Darrang were a few other central leaders who looked into the minority issues. The committee was active in the areas like Darrang, Morigaon and Goalpara. The committee became active after the operation Bajrang. The main functions of the committee were as follows:

1. The most important function of the committee was to impart revolutionary and political principles to the common people, particularly to those of East Bengal origin.
2. The committee made attempts to make the immigrants feel that they are a part of the greater Assamese society.

<sup>33</sup> *Prachar Patra*, July 1992.

<sup>34</sup> M. S. Prabhakar, referred in Mishra's *Periphery Strikes Back*, 142.

3. The committee urged the people to get educated so that they couldn't be exploited by the leaders and the politicians.
4. The most important objective of the committee was to convey the message that ULFA is the friend of the *charbashi* people (most of the immigrants reside in the *chars* or riverine areas). They don't consider them as foreigners.

Very soon the protective assurance of ULFA made them very popular in the *char* areas. Once they had gained their confidence, about 90–100 people regularly attended those political meetings organised by ULFA.

It became clear from our interaction with surrendered ULFA cadres that essentially there were three factors for ULFA's bonhomie with the immigrants:

1. With the decline of ULFA's support base in the mainstream Assamese society, ULFA was in search of safe support base where they could hide and take shelter.
2. By 1990 it became very clear that ULFA's destiny was tied with Bangladesh for obvious reasons of shelter and arms facilities. The organisation didn't want to enrage the country from where the immigrants had come.
3. Lastly, the incorporation of the immigrants into the broader framework of ULFA's ideology fitted very well. ULFA, all along, talked about the people of Assam rather than Assamese-speaking people.

These are some of the excerpts of interview with a surrendered ULFA cadre Traloikya Saikia (Ranjit Ingti—organisational name):

ULFA's relationship with the immigrants (the cadre used the word *charbashi*) became more cordial after the 1994—it's always safe to take shelter in the Char areas and the *Miyas* (the inhabitants of Char areas are known as Miya) don't question us.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Traloikya Saikia (Ranjit Ingti—organisational name), in interview with the author immediately after his surrender, 26 February 2000.

ULFA's soft stand towards the immigrants is a fallout of Parag Das' increasing influence on the organisation. On the basis of his extensive field work, Parag Das wrote a series of articles on the people of immigrants in magazines like *Prantik* from 1988–90, whereby he considered them to be *Na-asomiyas* (Neo-Assamese). This is considered to be a revolutionary step in Assam as the people of East Bengal origin were always considered to be Bangladeshis. Except a few presidents of Assam Sahitya Sabha, no sociopolitical forces of Assam ever talked so openly about the incorporation of the immigrants into the broader Assamese identity.

The All Assam Students Union was naturally quick to criticise ULFA as working against the interests of the Assamese people.<sup>36</sup> The AASU is extremely critical of ULFA's stand over the Bangladeshi immigrant's issue. Facing such criticism, the organisation has issued another document which said:

We would like to make it clear that the ULFA is against any immigration from Bangladesh or any other country to Assam because such immigration often hinders the struggle for national liberation ... We appeal to the people of Assam to put up a common fight along with the people of the 'char' (riverine) areas against the continuing influx into the state.<sup>37</sup>

Thus, while attempting to assuage the Assamese-speaking people, ULFA made a clear attempt to broaden its support base:

By moving away from its earlier position of espousing the Assamese nationalist cause to one in which it seeks to represent the 'people of Assam' of whom the immigrant sections form a sizeable proportion, ULFA was obviously trying to widen its organisational base and its area of operations. It was trying to shed its image of being an organisation which was indifferent to both the immigrants and the tribals.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Sammujjal Bhattacharya in a seminar conducted by the Institute of Peace and Development at Hotel Bellevue, 12 January 2005.

<sup>37</sup> *Ulfar Prachar Patra*, 1992.

<sup>38</sup> Misra, *Periphery Strikes Back*, 142.

## Periodising ULFA's Metamorphosis

On the basis of ULFA's activities and mode of functioning, the following broad phases can be deciphered:

1. 1979–84: Emergence and Growth of ULFA
2. 1985–90: Stabilisation and Populist Measures
3. 1991–96: Indian State Strikes Back: Operation Bajrang and Rhino
4. 1997–2000: ULFA Retorts Back with Terror
5. From 2001 onwards: A Marked Change in Terror Tactics of ULFA

The second phase from 1985 till 1990 can be said to be the regionalist phase of ULFA. The phase of 1990–96 can be said to be the Parag Das phase of ULFA and from 1996 onwards, it can be said to be the post-Parag Das phase. It was during the time of Parag Das that a serious attempt was made to give an ideological basis of ULFA. During the post-Parag Das phase, the organisation has become directionless and has easily fallen into the hands of the foreign mercenaries and security agencies like Directorate General of Forces Intelligence (DGFI) and Inter-services Intelligence (ISI).

### *First Phase: Emergence and Growth of ULFA (1979–85)*

No military organisation can remain silent for too long mainly for two reasons: first, it has to acquire a quick publicity mileage not only from the people of Assam but also from the people of India at large and secondly, it has ultimately to come into conflict with the Indian State. ULFA shot into prominence precisely in both these ways.<sup>39</sup> By 1980, the Congress I was considered by the AASU and AJYCP to be pro-Bangladeshi. The first incident that ULFA attempted was the attempt to kill the then Congress MLA Hiteswar Saikia on the night of 19 April 1980. Hari Borkakti attempted to kill Hiteswar Saikia by throwing a hand grenade at his car; however, it didn't explode on time and the grenade

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<sup>39</sup> See Samir Das, *ULFA: A Political Analysis*, (New Delhi: Ajanta Publications, 1994), 26.

ultimately killed the ULFA leader. Later on, Hari Borkakti was declared by ULFA as its first martyr. On the incident, the organisation says, 'Before the organisation could impart sophisticated military training, on 1980, 19th April, in Gargoan, Balighat area Hari Borkakati of Khanikar village of Simuluguri died while trying to hurl a grenade at the then Home Minister of Assam Hiteswar Saikia.'<sup>40</sup> Eleven persons were arrested on suspicion. Among them, some of the notable people were: Professor Chandra Kanta Arandhra (Former principal of Gargoan College and later on AGP leader), Diganta Konwar (general secretary of Yuva Chatra Parishad, then the general secretary of Assam Jatiya Unnayan Parishad and later on, a People's Consultative Group [PCG] member), Budheswar Gogoi (the first chairman of ULFA), Sirajul Hussain, Pradip Gogoi (later on vice-chairman of ULFA), Prahlad Goswami, etc. Police suspected that the whole episode was planned in the Yuva Chatra Parishad office and the majority of the arrested were related to the student body.

The first connection of ULFA with the then undivided NSCN was established in year 1982 in an interior village of Ukhrul district wherein the latter agreed to provide training to the former and chalked out measures to be taken against the common enemy, i.e., New Delhi. Bhimkanta Borgohain, the then foreign secretary, and Suren Dhingia, the vice-chairman of ULFA, took part in the negotiations. Hemanta Phukon acted as the middleman and was instrumental in establishing relations with NSCN. On the part of NSCN, Foreign Secretary Engelas and Captain Ethiam took part. As per the decision, the first batch of ULFA was sent to NSCN camp on 12 May 1983.<sup>41</sup> The first batch members were Pradip Gogoi, the vice-chairman from Bakssu, Sibsagar; Anup Chetia from Dibrugarh, Panitula; Paresh Baruah from Dibrugarh, Panitula; Budheswar Gogoi alias Pradip Gogoi from Dibrugarh Chachani; Robin Neog alias Naren Neog from Sibsagar-Sorgowa; Nagen Haloi alias Prabitra Gogoi from Dibrugarh, Panitula. Very soon the second batch of ULFA was also sent to NSCN comprising Robin Hadique, Jibon Moran, Upen Deka, Hirak Jyoti Mahanta, Binay Kharghoria, Samiran Goswami, Pradip Mohan, Garam Rajkonawr, Man Singh, Rishiraj Sinha alias

<sup>40</sup> *ULFAr Jonmo aru Bikash—Amar Kabo Logiya* (in Assamese), unpublished pamphlets of ULFA, 2—obtained through personal connection on 22 January 2010.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.



Bhaiti, Suniti Saikia and Sunil Sangma.<sup>42</sup> In mid 1983, Paresh Baruah, Anup Chetia and Chakra Gohain established its first camp in the thick jungles of Lakhpathar, near Digboi under the Dirugarh District. The organisation established its second camp at Charaipung at Tinsukia.

There is no denying the fact that the Assam agitation was the immediate cause for the growth of secessionist ULFA. The army atrocities on the agitationists, the 1983 elections and the apathetic attitude of the Centre towards the issues of Assam agitation provoked the secessionist and independentist stand of a radical organisation like ULFA. Many agitationists of the Assam Movement who later on joined ULFA considered the Assam Movement to be the last battle of survival for the Assamese people. Siddhartha Phukan, alias Sunil Nath, who was in charge of Publicity wing of ULFA, said in one of the articles:

In the college days we jumped into the Assam Movement as proactive member ... we thought this is the last battle of survival for the Assamese. By applying all possible means we must protect the interest of the Assamese people. If we fail to achieve this objective Assamese national identity will be on the verge of extinction.<sup>43</sup>

Thus, the failure of the Assam Movement and oppressive policies of the government during this period acted as the most rewarding incentive in the growth of an armed rebellion. Another important leader of the Assam Movement, who also happened to be the brother of ex-Chief Minister Prafulla Kumar Mahanta, said in an interview:

The oppressive method which was employed on the non-violent masses during the Assam movement was primarily responsible for the growth of extremism in Assam. The growing unemployment has added another dimension to it. Long before people of Assam came to about ULFA or Paresh Barua we about 23/24 boys took armed training at Karbi Hills to revenge the oppression and domination of the state machinery.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> *ULFAr Jonmo aru Bikash*, 5 and 6.

<sup>43</sup> Sunil Nath, 'Bibesarthe', *Amar Asom* (20 April 2002).

<sup>44</sup> Dilip Kumar Mahanta, referred in Parag Moni Aditya, *Swadhinota* (Niyor Prakashan, 2002), 31.

During the time of Assam agitation, the government adopted very harsh method to contain the movement. Our interview with the surrendered militants made it very clear that most of the cadres who at one point of time were participants in the Assam Movement were mercilessly beaten and tortured by the security forces. Sunil Nath had written in one of the articles:

No doubt in 1983 the Assamese nationalism was defeated at the hands State's power. But this has generated new waves of thought in the thinking process of Assamese nationalism. Till now there was a dormant radical group of youth who were bent on taking up arms against the State. But the election of 1983 provoked the radical group to think afresh. Although we were firm believers in arms yet we were active participants in the Satyagrah, non-cooperation method of the agitation. But after 1983 we have realized that New Delhi will listen only to the language of gun.<sup>45</sup>

ULFA had to demonstrate its soaring popularity through some token activities like organising political killings and lootings. On 16 August 1984, the organisation is said to have caused a bomb blast at Chaudhury Cinema Hall at Guwahati. Later on, the intelligence wing linked it as an act of Asom Liberation Front. What surprises us is the particularly brutal and shocking nature (with the obvious objective of drawing attention) of these acts during this period. ULFA's bid for demonstration centred on the immediate but crucial issue of what it designated as the 'illegal' elections of 1983. ULFA's attitude towards the elections was twofold: On the one hand, the elections were held to be 'illegal' and believed to have exposed the 'mockery' of our electoral process. Hence, ULFA targeted those people who were associated with holding the election, the contesting parties and the enthusiastic voters who actually exercised their franchise. On the other hand, ULFA was equally committed to punish those who, in the name of opposing elections, were the masterminds behind a spate of communal riots all over Assam and were responsible for the killing of thousands of innocent civilians—may be Bangladeshis; ULFA claimed responsibility for murdering Utsavananda Goswami of

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<sup>45</sup> Sunil Nath referred in Aditya, *Swadhinota*, 32.

Congress (I) for his alleged involvement in the fratricidal riots at Gohpur in 1983 and again in 1989.<sup>46</sup> Similarly, it claimed responsibility for killing an IAS officer at Jorhat in 1983.

Apart from such individual killings, ULFA's audacious dacoities were intended to have a high demonstration effect: In May 1985, the attack by ULFA boys on the Silpukhri Branch of the United Commercial Bank in Guwahati spread the news of ULFA's presence to the whole of India. In the attack, the branch manager of the bank, Girish Goswami, died.

By 1985, ULFA became a popular name among the youths of Assam. ULFA's relationship with AJYCP, to begin with, was the most important factor in such popularity. It is through various branches of AJYCP that ULFA became a household name in Assam. According to one estimate by the time Assam accord was signed, ULFA had a total strength of 1,500 cadres.

The first phase of ULFA can be best described as the Assam agitation phase. The organisation's Leninist-Maoist ideology did not develop in this phase. The cadres were more driven by the issues of foreigners and Delhi's exploitation towards the North East in general and Assam in particular.

### *The Second Phase: Stabilisation and Populist Measures (1985–90)*

ULFA's first strike that drew the attention of the people of Assam at large was the murder of the Officer-in-charge of Namrup Police Station, Sri Putul Bora, on 1 March 1986. Putul Bora tried to stop the cadres from looting the State Bank of India branch at Namrup. Then, on 29 May 1986, Sri Roshan Ali, a *habildar* of the State Police, fell victim to ULFA bullets. On 29 August 1986, the ex-chief councillor of Golaghat, Deboksi Dhar Chaudhury, was killed by ULFA. He was punished for becoming the chief councillor in the post-1983 election. Besides, Chaudhury was held responsible for the death of Anil Bora in the Language Movement in 1972. This is said to be the first political killing of ULFA after the AGP came to power.

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<sup>46</sup> 'Ulfar Dabi', *Agradoot* (1 April 1990), 3.

During this period, ULFA basically intended to punish those who were found 'guilty' of having been associated with what it termed as 'illegal' elections of 1983 or masterminding the killings of innocent civilians in their wake and of committing 'social crimes' (like, seeing and showing of blue films, paying disrespect to the women and elderly people, brewing and drinking of liquor, human trafficking, narcotic trade, etc.).

One prominent killing during this period was the killing of Kalipad Sen who was the leader of the United Minorities Front (UMF). The UMF was openly casting their voice against the hobnobbing of the ULFA and the AGP leaders. On 16 September 1986, ULFA killed Kalipad Sen for indulging against the Assamese interest. In the later period, on 15 October 1988, ULFA killed the president of Kamrup Chambers of Commerce, Harlalka; general secretary, Shankar Bhimriwal (January 1990) and Surendra Paul (May 1990), who was the brother of Swaraj Paul, an Indian origin British businessman. These are some of the prominent non-Assamese killing by ULFA that had preceded the imposition of president's rule and a massive army operation against ULFA.

On the killing of the non-Assamese businessmen, Professor Samir Das remarks:

But, a noticeable feature of the retributions during 1987–October, 1990 was that the victims were pre dominantly chosen from amongst the businessmen. It seems that they were killed not because they were businessmen *per se* but because they as businessmen remained oblivious to 'social responsibilities'. Why is it that the non-Assamese businessmen—mostly the Marwaris are to bear the brunt of ULFA punishment? Babulal More, for instance, grapples with the question:

The people from the Marwari community came to Assam long before Independence but even after forty-two years of Independence they did not learn the Assamese language, the Assamese culture and the Assamese philosophy of life (*Asomiya Jeewanbodh*).<sup>47</sup>

For example, in the first fortnight of May 1990, militants from the organisation gunned down a well-known industrialist, Surendra Paul, head of the Apeejay Group and chairman of Assam Frontier Tea

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<sup>47</sup> See Das, *ULFA: A Political Analysis*, 45.

Company, for allegedly phasing out the ethnic Assamese from the employment registers of his company. If the official figures are to be believed, ULFA has been held responsible for 113 killings in the period of 1986–90. On 23 August 1990, ULFA attempted to kill Lachit Kalita, the Congress leader of Guwahati. However, in this attack, the daughter of Kalita, five-year-old Sawbnam, died in the killing.

However, during this period, the Assamese people, including the businessmen and the politicians, equally fell prey to the casualty list of ULFA. According to official figures, more than a hundred people were gunned down by ULFA during this period and the overwhelming majority of those killed were Assamese.<sup>48</sup>

### *ULFA Comes into Conflict with Other Ethnic Groups of Assam*

ULFA's politics of extortion and killing many of whom were non-Assamese created its own repercussions. In one word, it led to an unprecedented militarisation of political forces on all fronts.<sup>49</sup> Purbottar Hindi Bhashi Samaj (that was to serve more as the militant outfit of the Hindi-speaking businessmen of the North East) strongly felt, in November 1989, the need for making a movement to counter the atrocities on the Hindi-speaking population of Assam. Saiyad Azad Madani, addressing the eleventh Annual Conference of Jamiyat UI-Ema at Dobka, Nowgong, on 11 February 1990, urged on the Muslims to be united against the combined menace of AASU and ULFA. He openly called for military training in self-defence and added that Islam does not prevent anyone from fighting out the offenders.

The United Reservationist Minority Council of Assam (URMCA) later on came to be known as United Revolutionary Minority Council of Assam (URMCA)<sup>50</sup> was formed on 21 February 1986 in Guwahati. It came into open conflict with ULFA since its birth and ULFA, according to it, is an 'ultra-nationalist, militant stream of the Assam Movement. It is also reported that ULFA's anti-liquor campaign was more dictated by a caste Hindu ideology and it was an attempt to isolate the culture of

<sup>48</sup> M. S. Prabhakar, 'In the Thick of It', *Frontline* (Madras, 12–25 May 1990).

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>50</sup> The name was changed so in the Bihpuria conference in 1992.

the tribal people for whom drinking was an integral part of their cultural life. Jatiya Mukti Bahini (National Liberation Front), a new underground outfit once threatened to kidnap the relatives of ULFA rank and file if it did not unconditionally release the hostages of URMCA. The Front, unlike ULFA, does not subscribe to the 'philosophy of secessionism'. It only believes in a 'relentless struggle' against 'Indian administrative machinery'.

The URMCA can be said to be the first organisation that has critically reviewed the activities of ULFA. The general secretary of the organisation, Dr. Ranaj Pegu, has criticised the organisation for maintaining an opulent lifestyle by the leaders. On 3 June 1990, Dr. Pegu in a press statement made a vehement attack on the ideology and functioning of ULFA. He accused the leaders of ULFA to be more interested in motorcycle and luxurious lifestyle.<sup>51</sup> The organisation mobilised the tribal people of Dhemaji and Lakhimpur and prevented people from giving shelter to the ULFA cadres. Serious allegations were made by URMCA through Assamese newspapers. Sabyasachi Rabha of URMCA accused ULFA of unleashing a reign of terror in the state. The organisation accused ULFA of attempting to curb the production of country liquor and other traditional liquor of the tribal groups while providing a blind eye to the foreign liquor and questioning the corrupt officials of the excise department. Ranaj Pegu, the general secretary of the organisation, branded ULFA's insurgency as the luxury of a few groups of boys who are more attracted to the easy money and motor cycle culture of the organisation.

ULFA retorted to this. It accused the URMCA of making an attempt to divide the people of Assam in the name of tribes and languages. The publicity secretary of ULFA, Siddhartha Phukan, dubbed the tribal organisation as being patronised by the Home Ministry, GOI.<sup>52</sup> In a subsequent reply, Dr. Pegu castigated ULFA to be a caste Hindu organisation. Meanwhile, ULFA launched some major attack on the URMCA leaders. On 12 September 1990, the URMCA leader Ramen Pathak was killed. On 17 August 1991, ULFA launched a major attack on the URMCA General Secretary Debabrata Sharma at his Jorhat residence

<sup>51</sup> See 'URMCA aru ULFA', *Agradoot* (3 June 1990), 2.

<sup>52</sup> See Kanak Sen Deka, *Ulfar Swadhin Asom*, 136.

in which he had a providential escape. Many URMCA cadres had to pay their lives for an anti-ULFA stand. Surabh Bora, Amitabh Rabha, Akshyay Kalita, Mukul Bora, Ratikanta Das, Krishna Saikia, Manik Das, Bhuban Adhikari, Krishna Bahadur Raut Chetry, Premadhor Bora, Barki Tuti, Pabitra Das, Shyman Ghose were some of the URMCA people who were killed by ULFA.<sup>53</sup> ULFA, in return, also took a group of journalists to the interior places of Lakhimpur to depict how URMCA has been trying to create a caste divide by openly castigating ULFA in various graffiti. ULFA leaders also criticised URMCA's ideology and argued that reservation policy as demanded by the URMCA must be followed by economic deprivation as the yardstick. ULFA said it would be wrong to equate Assam with Bihar as oppression here does not follow a caste line like Bihar.

### *ULFA and Community Works*

In rural areas, people took great pride in giving shelter to the ULFA boys. The organisation even resolved many criminal and civil cases involving community and individuals. The leaders acted as the judges, the hearings of which mostly took place in the *Namghar* (village prayer houses). The organisation popularised the concept of community farming organised on a cooperative basis. Fishery, agricultural farming, etc., were taken up in various places of Assam. These programmes were palpable in areas like Sibsagar, Uttar Lakhimpur, Nagaon, Nalbari, Jorhat, Tinsukia, etc. The organisation in collaboration with the government machineries, like the primary health care centre, provided health care to far flung areas. The doctors who refused to serve in the rural areas obeyed ULFA's dictates without putting any question.

For the common farmers, it took many days and months to receive subsidised government seeds and other agricultural equipment, that too after paying hefty amounts to the corrupt officials. During this period, it was sufficient to receive a telephone call from the organisation and the whole lot was available for the farmers. Yet despite these pressures, ULFA's popularity was not merely mandated by fear. There was genuine backing from villagers and the middle class as well as academics

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<sup>53</sup> Uddipan Dutta, 'Creating Robin Hoods: The Insurgency of ULFA in Its Early Period', WISCOMP Discussion Paper (2008), 72.

and students. Many said that they were pleased that ULFA had stopped money from flowing out of Assam: they wanted funds and profits generated there to be used for local development. Another sentiment was that corrupt officials, politicians and businessmen had been taught a lesson. Alcoholics were beaten or ordered to do sit-ups holding their ears; those who ran prostitution and drug rings were warned and later kidnapped and shot dead, when the threats did not work. Summary executions even had the support of an ultra-nationalistic middle class fringe that felt betrayed by the Independence movement of the 1940s as well as successive governments and political parties in Delhi and Assam.

### *A Brief Note on Activities of Asom Jatiya Unnayan Parishad (AJUP)*

Popularly known as AJUP, the Asom National Development Council first emerged as the brainchild of ULFA during later part of 1989, although it was conceived some time in 1987–88 as a part of the operational design of ULFA to conquer the countryside in the state by populist measures like construction of roads, building of clubs and *Namghars* (village prayer houses), organising agricultural farms on cooperative basis and promoting socio-cultural and economic activities in the rural setting.

It may be noted that immediately after surfacing, the organisation established district and sub-divisional units in all the five upper Assam districts of Tinsukia, Dibrugarh, Sibsagar, Jorhat and Golaghat and the two districts of Lakhimpur and Dhemaji bordering Arunachal Pradesh where ULFA enjoyed considerable influence. Although at a later stage, the AJUP extended its bases to the other lower Assam districts of Kamrup, Barpeta, Nalbari and Goalpara and also Sonitpur, Nagaon, Darrang and Barak Valley. Significantly, the maximum impact of the AJUP was also felt in the districts of Lakhimpur, Dhemaji, Dibrugarh, Tinsukia, Sibsagar, Golaghat, Barpeta and Nagaon where ULFA has considerably penetrated the countryside. In Lakhimpur and Dhemaji district, the AJUP activities not only took the complexion of coercion exercised on the general members of public, but their activities also led to large-scale extortions and forcing of government officials to participate in the developmental project initiated by them. The AJUP also took up those government projects which remained unimplemented under the District



Rural Development Agency (DRDA), National River Conservation Plan (NRCP) and other developmental heads, and charged a bill for completion of these projects from the concerned departments by fronting selected agents of AJUP for billing the same. A similar pattern followed in Golaghat district, though on a small scale, while in Sibsagar district businessmen were called to AJUP office and made to donate substantial sums apparently for the AJUP coffers, which according to the police, was done under threat, intimidation and coercion.

The execution of the developmental projects by the AJUP in Lakhimpur and Dhemaji and construction work of a road or a bund or dyke, etc., were executed under full supervision of armed ULFA activists who were also responsible for herding the entire able-bodied village population to participate in these activities. The AJUP also forcibly took over government land in the name of developmental works such as cooperative farms, fisheries vegetable garden, etc. In these projects, apart from the participation by the local villagers, prominent persons like school and college teachers, councillors, etc., also took a leading role. In addition, officials of government departments such as engineers, Public Works Department (PWD)/Public Health Engineering (PHE) officials, doctors of Primary Health Centres (PHCs), Block Development Officers (BDOs), etc., were also forcibly involved by the AJUP through ULFA threats. Buses, trekkers and similar vehicles were hired free from government departments. While mustard seeds, rice, mustard oil and other items (needed for feeding the workers) were extorted from the local businessmen.

However, all the works did not go so smoothly! The almost unbridled authoritarian activities of AJUP ultimately led to social tension between the Mishing people and tea garden population, on one side, and the AJUP activists and supporters who were mostly non-tribal, on the other. Clashes between the rival groups soon followed, associated with incidents of kidnapping. As we have shown, the URMCA came openly to fight against ULFA and AJUP. These also led to clash between the Takam Mising Porin Kebang (TMPK) and the ULFA activists and supporters resulting in an embargo by the Mishing youths on the visit of ULFA members to their villages, followed by erection of village check gates to prevent entry of unauthorised outsiders. Such difference between ULFA/

AJUP, on the one hand, and Mishing and other tribals, on the other, got manifested in the fight between ULFA and URMCA.

The next important district where AJUP played a crucial role was the district of Golaghat. The AJUP developed a sister organisation and implemented the socio-cultural projects by the name of an organisation called *Naba Udita Yuba Sangha* which organised number of welfare activities. Initially, work began in 80 bighas of land and another 201 bighas of land were reportedly allotted for these activities. Police report of the district said, 'It may be noted that all the concerned departments such as Agricultural departments, Engineering departments, Forest departments etc. provided necessary help and assistance to the these project without questioning the background of these sponsors most of whom were found to be ULFA activists.'<sup>54</sup> It is interesting to note that at the initial stages, the AJUP was successful in motivating the people to flock around it for participating in the developmental projects and they evinced a lot of enthusiasm in such activities. In Lakhimpur district, the enthusiasm of the people reminded one of the agitation days when people from all walks of life extended wholehearted support to the agitating student leaders. The presence of government officials and unquestioned help from the government agencies to such developmental activities conducted under the auspices of the AJUP also added a new dimension to it. It hardly needs any empirical evidence to suggest that AJUP was the frontal civil wing of ULFA through which it attempted to gain legitimacy among people. Officially, ULFA has denied any link with the AJUP, and AJUP also claims itself to be a non-political organisation devoted to developmental and socio-cultural activities. The AJUP activities have not only motivated the people towards ULFA, but the agricultural farms organised by AJUP have also provided the base for requirement and training of ULFA cadres. A police report has suggested, 'It is in fact helping ULFA in creating liberated zones in the country side and in capturing the imagination of the public through populist measures.'<sup>55</sup>

Another most successful story of community initiative taken up AJUP was the agricultural farm in the name of Kakini Bahumukhi Krishipam

<sup>54</sup> Police report obtained through personal connection at Golaghat.

<sup>55</sup> Intelligence report on AJUP activities, 1990—obtained through personal connection.

at Kaki Taralangshu at Nagaon started functioning with effect from 10 March 1990, with registration no. 424-1990/91. The office-bearers were Prahlad Nath (president-cum-manager of No. 3 Kaki Pathar Block), Ratneswar Saikia (manager-cum-secretary of No. 2 Kaki), Pitambar Saikia (chief adviser), Prakash Mahanta (vice-president, AASU), Lachit Bordoloi, Hemonta Nath (secretary, Jatiya Unnayan Parishad, No. 3 Kaki Nathgaon) and Kamal Kalita, Pabitra Hazarika and Pawan Bora (members). The Jatiya Unnayan Parishad, with the help of unemployed youths, started agricultural farming on these 1,000 bighas of land with effect from 10 March 1990. In the farm, some thatched huts had been constructed and there was one office, one store room, one kitchen and a big barrack to accommodate the boys. There were altogether 60 boys. They belonged to the nearby villages and had come for some earning by way of agricultural cultivation, etc. The farm had been provided with tractor, agricultural implements, fertilisers, spray machines, spades, etc., by the agricultural department of Hojai and Roha. There were two tube wells which had been installed by the PHE department of Hojai. One ring-well had been dug out by the local boys and 12 cement rings had been supplied by the Lanka Bamungaon Development office.

Till the end of 1990, the firm had cultivated the following agricultural products: Sugarcane—80 bighas, Brinjal—6 bighas, Tomato—2 bighas, Chilli—2 bighas, Palang—2 bighas, Raddish—1 bigha, Cabbage—2 bighas, Ginger/turmeric—30 bighas, Sweet gourd—4 bighas, Melon—3 bighas, Bitter gourd—6 bighas, Potato—2 bighas, Onion—2 bighas, Arhar—50 bighas, Matimah—25 bighas, Sesamo—50 bighas, Mustard seed—8 bighas, Gram—3 bighas, Pea—3 bighas, Lady's finger—3 bighas.

By selling sugarcane, the office-bearer got ₹1½ lakh. Moreover, they had collected about 3 lakh bundles of sugarcane which have been stored in the camp and this fetched them not less than ₹2 lakh. It has been found that there were four to five boys who were provided with the facilities to undergo studies in schools. They belonged to a very poor family and as they have many brothers and sisters, their parents are not able to provide them with the basic necessities, and therefore, they have come for cooperative cultivation and are expected to earn at least ₹4,000–₹5,000 individually after a year. The firm was guided by the Unnayan Parishad and the office-bearers of Assam Jatiya Unnayan Parishad.

During this period, ULFA, with the help of such community work, gained tremendous acceptability among the rural people through its populist activities. They undertook massive village reform and development programmes where entire villages—at a spoken command from the local ULFA leader—turned out to build new roads, repair old ones, construct bunds (small earthen dams) to block floods. The legitimacy endowed by the presence of government officials undermined the authority of the government itself and strengthened ULFA's hold, while diverting attention from its other activities. ULFA virtually declared a war against the alcoholics, gambling, prostitution, corruption and nepotism. To punish the guilty, it established 'People's court' in different places of Assam. The organisation gave capital punishment to various people indulging in the poaching of endangered animals and species. During this period, the organisation undertook community works like bridge-building, farming in the government land, construction of schools, free education, etc.

However, welfare activities of AJUP backed by ULFA did not sustain long as many of its fund and financial collections remained unaccounted for and there was nobody to question anyone. In many occasions, people were coerced to participate in the community activities of AJUP—even school dropouts started dictating terms to the local teachers. The organisation, in its attempt to project a larger-than-life image, tried to bite more than it could chew. There was no discipline among the members and the forum became the platform for keeping people under subjugation by force and intimidation. It became a quasi-judiciary institution where the decisions of the local ULFA and AJUP leaders were final and absolute. Nevertheless, the welfare activities of the groups gained tremendous popularity among the rural people. The entire government machinery was utilised by ULFA to augment socio-economic well-being of the people. In other words, ULFA's popularity increased as the state had virtually abdicated its responsibility to govern.

### *AGP and ULFA Connection*

On the AGP-ULFA relationship, Professor Udayon Misra remarks:

With the coming to power of the AGP in December 1985 ULFA started spreading its network very fast and there is little doubt that in this it received a lot of direct and indirect support from the state government.

Thus, in the process, ULFA entered into a rather complex sort of relationship with the State authority. Many of the ULFA cadres were close to the *Asom Gana Parishad* and the latter could not help but patronize them.<sup>56</sup>

Much had happened between 1985 and 1990 that caused a failure of public confidence in the AGP. Among them was a series of scandals, financial and moral, and sheer arrogance, which enveloped Prafulla Kumar Mahanta and his colleagues. Meanwhile, ULFA made its presence felt everywhere including the police department. Sanjay Hazarika comments:

In the interregnum, ULFA was everywhere: it gained an almost invincible halo. Its informants infiltrated the police to the extent that when the state's Director General of Police watched a video film seized from an ULFA camp in 1990, the policemen on duty outside the room passed on the news to militant activists.<sup>57</sup>

It seems that the AGP had virtually built ULFA and provided the required atmosphere for its growth. The popular Assamese daily with the highest readership, the *Asomiya Pratidin*, on 23 April 2001, published an interview of Tamjeng Langkumera who is a so-called cabinet minister in the NSCN (Khaplang) faction, giving a detailed account of how the AGP higher leadership is involved with ULFA. He claimed the first visitors to Nagaland on behalf of ULFA were not its leaders but the student leaders Prafulla Kumar Mahanta and Pradip Hazarika, who later on became the chief minister and the transport minister of the state, respectively. The duo, along with Arabinda Rajkhowa, requested the NSCN leadership to provide arms and ammunition to the newly born outfit. Langkumera claimed, 'Immediately after the visit of Mahanta, Hazarika and Rajkhowa, a five member ULFA team came for training in Kachin... the second team was led by Paresh Barua himself.'<sup>58</sup>

In another interview in *The Week*, Paresh Baruah the Commander-in-Chief (c-in-c) of ULFA had acknowledged the help the organisation

<sup>56</sup> Misra, *The Periphery Strikes Back*, 156.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., 128.

<sup>58</sup> 'Interview of Mr Tamjeng Langkumera', *Asomiya Pratidin* (23 April 2001).

received from the AGP leaders in the period 1985–90. He said, ‘the current leaders of AGP could be against us, but once upon a time they were our friends and also talked about revolution. But with the stroke of chance they became ministers and we came to the jungles.’<sup>59</sup> Baruah, in the same interview, disclosed the receipt of a huge amount as donation from the AGP ministers like Bhriku Kumar Phukan, Pradip Hazarika and Chandra Mohan Patowari. In the later phase, the AGP leaders denied having given any donation to the insurgent outfit—but there is not an iota of doubt that both AGP and ULFA maintained a cordial relationship till the patronage became too costly for the former as it had to give the political space to the Congress (I) in the next election. Meanwhile, ULFA has established its camps everywhere in the state except, perhaps, in Barak valley. After interviewing various cadres and activists, we have made a list of ULFA camps that were present in various districts of Assam. (See Appendix at the end of the chapter)

It may be noted that the main base camps with the major stock of arms and ammunitions were located inside Nagaland on Nagaland–Burma border. The ULFA activists have set up camps in the unmanned areas of North Burma across Nagaland–Burma border and Arunachal–Burma border. While most of the camps within the state are located amidst a cluster of surrounding villages considered friendly by the extremist activists, these don’t carry any impression of permanent fixtures. These are mostly of temporary nature to be shifted at very short notice. Moreover individual houses are also used as training centres where the cadres get merged with the local population as co-villagers or domestic hands. ULFA has a large number of cars/two wheelers at its disposal. Since these are not kept at one place centrally and used only on rotation basis (ULFA calls it as ‘requisitioned from public’) no accurate account of these cars and two wheelers can be given. Some of these vehicles are taken from members of public as voluntary help to the organisation. Similarly its arms holding also changes hands from place and arms are not kept permanently at any particular place except the base camps.

Munim Nobis made the organisation’s first effort to internationalise their campaign in the year 1988. He was also successful in establishing his

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<sup>59</sup> Paresh Baruah in an interview with BBC correspondent Subir Bhaumik, *The Week*, referred in *Swadhinota* by Parag Moni Aditya, p. 35.

contact with the ISI. After that the ULFA leaders were taken to Pakistan and Afghanistan for further training. The ULFA delegation included Arabinda Rajkhowa, Hirakjyoti Mahanta, the deputy commander of ULFA's military wing, Pradip Gogoi, the vice-president, Arup Chetia, the general secretary, and Manoj Hazarika. In this manner ULFA solidly established its link with the foreign agents of Bangladesh, Pakistan, Myanmar and later on Bhutan.

### *Third Phase: The Indian State Strikes Back: Operation Bajrang and Rhino (1991–96)*

The abdication of responsibility by the then AGP government virtually invited the Central government to establish its rule in Assam.

#### *ULFA and Kachin Liberation Army: Training at Myanmar*

The first ULFA team which was trained in Kachin was led by Paresh Baruah himself in the year 1986 and the second batch was led by Arabinda Rajkhowa, the chairman of the organisation. ULFA's connection with Kachin came through the NSCN. Paresh Baruah and other members travelled to north western Myanmar through the eastern edge of Arunachal Pradesh, along the little-travelled road to Khonsa in Tirap District and then slipped across the forested terrain.<sup>60</sup> It is Kachin where ULFA established good contact with Thuengaling Muivah of the NSCN and met with Manipuri rebels and others in the Kachin camps. Shangwang Shangyung Khaplang, who first supported Muivah, fell out with him over the latter's insistence on a tough moral code of conduct for his followers and a stop to opium use and liquor.

The dispute between Khaplang and Muivah over principles and aims simmered in the background as Baruah and others, like Jugal Kishore Mahanta, took groups of young Assamese men and a handful of women across from the Brahmaputra Valley to the NSCN camps and, after 1988, to the Kachin Independence Army (KIA). The fringe outfits of Kachins who provided training to ULFA were Kachin Independence Organisation (KIO), Chin National Front (CNF) and its army wing KIA. KIA was a battle-hardened fighting force, engaged in a secessionist war

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<sup>60</sup> Obtained through interview with surrendered militants in 1998.

with the Burmese government, and a fighting force in the art of guerrilla fighting since the Second World War. The Kachin connection helped ULFA create a cadre of well-trained guerrilla fighters. It took a long time for the Assam police to match these trained cadres.

By 1988, about 60 members of ULFA travelled to Kachin which was also known as the 'death valley' because of its tough terrain. The Kachins agreed to give training to the ULFA men and women—but at a steep price. The relationship between the two groups was controlled by monetary principles than by any nationalist aims. In 1988, the Kachins demanded about 1 million rupees, then worth about 60,000 US dollars, for arms they proposed to sell to the ULFA fighters.<sup>61</sup>

On ULFA's training and shelter in Myanmar, Shelby Tucker, who walked through the insurgents of Burma in 1989, met with the ULFA cadres, particularly the Chairman Arabinda Rajkhowa whom he refers to as 'Castro'. He says:

The jeep sent to fetch me took me onto meet the chairman of the United Liberation Front of Asom (ULFA) ... he had many pseudonyms but we knew him only as Castro, owing to marked likeness to the Cuban autocrat. I knew that KIO was eager to establish good relations with Delhi. Why is it then hosting the leader of an organisation that was at war with Delhi? I was also curious to know how he had gone to the Pajau Bum.... If so it would be useful to learn from him what route he had taken, how long it had taken him and how arduous it was.<sup>62</sup>

One of the cadres who took training during this period said that the ULFA cadres were almost kept as hostages by the KIA. Many of the cadres died of malaria, dysentery, poisonous snake biting, and a mysterious high fever. Many (20) of the cadres died due to lack of medical attention—some desperately wanted to come back and died in pathetic condition with nobody to look after. KIA used the ULFA cadres to participate in all dangerous operations with the Myanmar army. About 10 ULFA cadres died in such fighting. By 1988–90, there were three batches of ULFA cadres in Kachin. Hirok Jyoti Mahanta, Kalpajyoti Neog, Chakra

<sup>61</sup> Interview with Jugal Kishore Mahanta who led a few batches to this region.

<sup>62</sup> Shelby Tucker, *Among Insurgents: Walking through Burma* (New Delhi: Penguin Books, 2000), 82.



Gohain, Bhaiti Gogoi, Bhakar Dutta, Prabhat Saikia, Munin Nabis, Jugal Kishore Mahanta, Surav Gogoi, Sasadhar Chaudhury, Raju Barua, Bening Rabha, Robin Neog, Agni Narzary, Tapan Barua, Asahanta Bagh Phukan, etc.—all important leaders took their training at Kachin. But very soon the Kachin link got snapped.

Already there were some tensions between KIA and ULFA over the issue of money and utilisation of ULFA in illegal activities. Meanwhile, India's secret agency RAW (Research and Analysis Wing) established contacts with KIA. On this Sanjay Hazarika writes:

For in 1989, the Research and Analysis Wing, established contact with the Kachins.... The Kachins were told bluntly that if they continued to back ULFA and the Nagas, the government would turn out the thousands of refugees in Manipur and other parts of the country. And since politicians from the mainstream groups of Myanmar also had taken shelter in Kachinland, this counsel prevailed.<sup>63</sup>

With the change of guards from Vishwanath Pratap Singh to Chadrachar, the president's rule was imposed in Assam on 27 November 1990. As a first step, ULFA was declared unlawful on 27 November 1990. The first ULFA camp that was struck was in the thick jungles of Lakhimpur, and Saraipung near Digboi and Dibrugarh. On 4 December, a large mass grave was found with 15 decomposed bodies. Many of the victims had been dumped in the graves after being shot dead and their hands and feet bound with rope. About 15 bodies were already decomposed. Most of the people killed were heavily tortured before they succumbed to their injuries. A few bodies could be identified, among them were Dimbeswar Gogoi, a URMCA leader of Sapekhati; Rana Goswami, a Congress (I) worker of Doomduma; businessman Radheswam Lahoti; Debu Chaudhury of Tinsukia. By 12 January 1991, 35 dead bodies were found in ULFA camps and out of that, 18 could be identified.<sup>64</sup>

Army operations had involved very rude behavior of Indian army to which Assamese people were never accustomed. Rural people were highly annoyed with the army. People were harassed in the name of finding out ULFA. All public and private vehicles were thoroughly checked

<sup>63</sup> Sanjay Hazarika, *Strangers of the Mist* (New Delhi: Viking, 1994), 186.

<sup>64</sup> Intelligence report, Government of Assam.

up and people were picked up at slightest suspicion. The main problem that cropped up was the language. The rural people where ULFA was having stronger bases didn't have exposure to the typical North Indian Hindi. On many occasions the villagers had to get roughed up only because they wanted to say something, whereas something else was expressed which the army personnel found to be offending.<sup>65</sup> Thus, the first military operation came to an end in April 1991 and the army began its second operation after 14 September 1991.

There was a temporary lull in the wake of Operation Bajrang till July 1991. Between the conclusion of the first military operation and the middle of February 1991, 40 persons had lost their lives allegedly at the hands of ULFA. But there is a reason to think that the rate must be significantly low. According to one rough estimate, 50 persons had lost their lives between the middle of February and the end of March at the hands of ULFA.<sup>66</sup>

ULFA's renewed emphasis on public campaign to wean away popular support should not escape our notice. This campaign had two aspects—positive and negative.<sup>67</sup> More positively, it aimed at reducing peoples' reliance on the phenomenon of State itself. ULFA's development activities in general, and more particularly during this period, were pretty well known. This is perhaps the most novel experiment that it had ever made. The government servants, bank employees, BDOs and even policemen and tea garden managers were forced to work on embankments, cleaning of community houses, maintenance of sanitation and public hygiene, etc.: 'All these were done under the banner of Jatiya Unnayan Parishad', which technically has no relation with ULFA. In practice, the

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<sup>65</sup> In one such incident in village Kowerour, Sibsagar, in early 1991 and in which the author was also present, an army personnel asked a villager what he was making. The villager said 'ye tum hai' (Means 'I am making you' in Hindi. 'Tum' in Assamese is the bamboo made pot which is used for the pollination of seeds meant for paddy cultivation). The army personnel asked him several times and the village man came up with the same answer. 'Tum' which means 'you' in Hindi could not be accepted by the army personnel easily and the villager was dearly beaten by the soldier. Many such words which are used in Hindi language are very derogatory in Assamese. For example, the Hindi translation of banana is a slang word in Assamese. Another important reason why the army is not easily accepted by the rural Assamese people is the use of slang words by the army—such words are considered to be something highly demeaning.

<sup>66</sup> Das, *ULFA: A Political Analysis*, 81.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, 83.

link between the two is an open secret and Unnayan Parishad members freely admit it.

How far was ULFA successful in winning popular support and cutting into peoples' reliance on the state? Prakash Singh, the director general of police (DGP), who himself is a Padma Shree and was sent to Assam during President's Rule. He explained: 'The police cannot work without the help of the people. The common people are policemen in plain clothes while a policeman is a common man in Uniform.'<sup>68</sup> The militants, as he admits, are 'a glorified lot'.

The most significant event during March–June was the elections in Assam. ULFA's stand on the elections was twofold. On the one hand, ULFA made it clear that it would certainly abstain from them. It goes one step further by promising that it will not make friends with those political parties that contest the elections and thereby pay allegiance to the country's constitution. Arabinda Rajkhowa, general secretary of ULFA, in a press statement, warns against any propagandist attempt at associating ULFA with electoral politics and lashes out: 'Over and above, none of the political parties that expresses obeisance to the Indian Constitution can ever be our friends.'<sup>69</sup> Siddhartha Phukan, one of ULFA's leading spokesmen, argues: 'We would never participate in elections under the Indian framework. Nor would we ask the people to boycott elections.'<sup>70</sup>

But it would be wrong to think that ULFA was completely neutral in the election. Professor Samir Das opines:

But it might be wrong to take ULFA's stand as one of supine non interference with the elections. ULFA was by no means a passive onlooker of the political events in Assam. The organization was believed to have exerted pressure on the AGP to rivet its bonds of unity that seemed to have been cracking on the eve of elections. Such a unity, according to ULFA, would not only put up a formidable electoral front against other parties but also have a reserve force of ULFA sympathizers in the Legislative Assembly.<sup>71</sup>

<sup>68</sup> Das, *ULFA: A Political Analysis*, 83.

<sup>69</sup> 'Ulfar Press-Bigyohti', *Agradoot* (25 November 1990), 1.

<sup>70</sup> Quoted in Farzand Ahmed, 'Assam: Electoral Entanglements', *India Today* (15 May 1990).

<sup>71</sup> Das, *ULFA: A Political Analysis*, 82.

On 30 July 1991 Hiteswar Saikia, the most shrewd politician of the state, who already had the experience of becoming the education minister, home minister and the chief minister of Assam, once again was elected as the chief minister of Assam. Saikia hardly got time to celebrate his coronation as the chief minister of the state—ULFA kidnapped 15 major senior officials of the state. They included the secretary of the General Administrative Department (GAD) and 14 other executives of the Oil and Natural Gas Commission, including Soviet engineer Gritchenko Sergei and mineral expert T. S. Raju. ULFA demanded the release of 24 of their cadres arrested in various jails in lieu of the kidnapped. Sergei was killed 'as he could not be subdued by threats or physical intimidation'.<sup>72</sup>

Hiteswar Saikia declared that he would follow a policy of moderation. But it degenerated into an appeasement when he offered amnesty to all the prisoners and released forthwith 404 ULFA cadres and cleared the deck for another batch of 101 of them.<sup>73</sup> Seeing the government relenting under pressure, ULFA demanded the release of another 186 cadres in phases. The government first demanded the release of the hostage and the militants assumed offensive against the government and the Congress (I) workers.

The failure of negotiation over the hostage issue and the killing of ONGC officials Sergei and later T. S. Raju sparked off nation-wide protests. Ultimately, the Saikia government gave up hopes for a negotiated settlement and decided to revert to military operations. Lieutenant General Ajay Singh was recalled and the second military operation was clamped on 14 September 1991. The operation continued from September 1991 to January 1992, when the prospects of talks between the government and ULFA led to a temporary suspension of army operations. In April 1992, army operations were resumed in six districts, specifically targeted because the local ULFA leaders were against the surrender of arms and negotiations. Operation Rhino itself was suspended in April 1993. But on 7 May 1996, just before the change of government, when two electoral candidates were killed allegedly by ULFA, Operation Rhino

<sup>72</sup> Deka, *Ulfar Swadhin Asom*, 215–216.

<sup>73</sup> H. K. Borpujari, *North East India: Problems, Policies and Prospects* (Guwahati: Spectrum publication, 1998), 84.

was relaunched. Assam since 1990 has been witnessing a strong presence of military and paramilitary personnel engaged in fighting both ULFA and the Bodo militants.

Operation Rhino, the second of its kind, was preceded by Operation Cloudburst that started in the first week of September 1991 to smash the militant dens of ULFA along the Arunachal–Nagaland border of Assam. The second phase of Operation Rhino was clamped at the midnight of 14–15 September 1991. Kuldip Nayar writes:

The army operation has proved to the Assamese the futility of an armed uprising. The ULFA's think-tank, some of whose members I met, admit that violence is not the way out. The ULFA is on the run and its middle leadership has been practically eliminated. Sixteen camps have been destroyed and 1,000 people arrested. An assortment of weapons, about 4,000 in all have been captured.<sup>74</sup>

### *Rehabilitation Scheme for the Surrendered ULFA Cadres*

In order to attract the ULFA cadres who intended to surrender, Hiteswar Saikia came up with a rehabilitation plan for the surrendered. The scheme was later known as Scheme for Surrender-cum-rehabilitation of Militants in the North East: Government of Assam. This scheme was called the '100 Per Cent Special Money Margin Scheme' and was implemented between 1 June 1992 and 31 March 1997. Later on, the state government of Assam declared another scheme in 1998 for the surrender and rehabilitation of the terrorists of various outfits. The objective of the scheme is to wean away the misguided youth and hard-core militants that have strayed into the folds of militancy and now find themselves trapped into that net. The scheme also seeks to ensure that the militants who have surrendered do not find it attractive to join militants again.<sup>75</sup> Out of ₹100 crore central assistance, two kinds of loan were provided. Individually, one surrendered cadre was given assistance of two lakh rupees and up to an amount of 20 lakh rupees for a cooperative group of surrendered militants. In addition, the cadres got preferable treatment in government contracts, running of fish, coal, market syndicates and were liberally given licence for liquor permit. The cadres were given

<sup>74</sup> Kuldip Nayyar, 'Waiting for Peace in Assam', *Statesman* (6 November 1991).

<sup>75</sup> Government document on the rehabilitation scheme for the militants, 1998.

permission to carry their own guns and have government security personnel. Later on, the government came up with another scheme in the year 1998. Whatever is written in the government schemes for the renegades, the fact is that the politics of surrender known by an euphemism called 'coming back to the mainstream' had marked a new chapter in the Assamese society.

### ***Benefits under the Scheme 1998<sup>76</sup>***

1. Persons eligible under the scheme will be initially lodged in a rehabilitation camp where they will be imparted training in a trade/vocation of their liking or befitting their aptitude.
2. They shall be paid a monthly stipend for a period of 12 months. The stipend in respect of a surrendered ULFA cadre shall not exceed ₹2000/- per month. The scale of stipend for various categories of surrenderees will be decided by the State Government in consultation with the Government of India.
3. Board and lodging at the rehabilitation camp will be free.

Note 1. The stay of a surrendered cadre in a rehabilitation camp shall not exceed one year. All attempts shall be made to settle the cadres during this period. In case of settlement of any cadre before the expiry of one year, the stipend shall be stopped with effect from the date of settlement.

Note 2. Minor crime cases against successfully rehabilitated surrendered cadres will be withdrawn.

Note 3. The surrendered cadres who have committed heinous crimes like murder, rape, abduction, etc., will be subject to the due process of law and surrender shall not imply amnesty from the crimes.

Note 4. A surrendered cadre who indulges in crime while under rehabilitation shall forfeit the benefits under the scheme.

Note 5. The agency for rehabilitation may be a suitable NGO and/or the state government. In case it is an NGO, it will run the rehabilitation camp with support from the security forces and the government where required. (A suitable NGO, which has good credentials and willing to work in this sphere, will have to be identified and provided necessary support from the government). Necessary infrastructure for board, lodging and training of surrenderees shall be provided to the NGO at government cost.

<sup>76</sup> Government document on the rehabilitation scheme for the militants, 1998.

*Incentives for weapons*

The following incentives have been built into the scheme for the surrendered weapons/ammunitions:

**Table 3.1**  
**Incentives for Surrender of Arms**

1. Rocket Launchers/UMG/GPMG/PIMCA/ Sniper Rifle	₹25,000 per weapon
2. AK 47/56/74 Rifle	₹15,000 per weapon
3. .303 Rifles/Pistol/Revolver and Other Service Weapon	₹3,000 per weapon
4. Rocket	₹1,000 per weapon
5. Grenade/Hand grenade/Stick Grenade	₹500 per grenade
6. Remote Control Device	₹3,000 each
7. Ammunition of all Types	₹3 per round
Wireless Sets :	
8. a. Short range	₹1,000 each
b. Long range	₹5000 each set
9. IED	₹3000 each
10. Explosive Material	₹1000 per kg

Source: Assam Police, Government of Assam.

However, the incentive given for surrender of the aforesaid arms shall be deposited in the form of a fixed deposit in the joint name of the surrendered cadre and the NGO/state government nominee and shall be given to the cadre at the time of his leaving the rehabilitation camp.

The state governments of the North East shall implement the scheme. However, the Government of India shall provide 100 per cent reimbursement for expenditure incurred on the rehabilitation of the surrendered cadres. In view of the financial position of insurgency-affected states and also the fact that the NGOs that may undertake rehabilitation work would immediately need some money in advance, it was felt that there shall be provision for giving a part of the rehabilitation money in advance and the rest as reimbursement. Details would be worked out by the Ministry of Home Affairs in consultation with the Ministry of Finance. The Government of India shall have the right to inspect any of the camps set up for rehabilitation or transit and to verify any record in this regard.

Under this scheme, more than 5,000 ULFA cadres had surrendered to the government authority till 31 March 1997.<sup>77</sup>

<sup>77</sup> Information received from the Special Branch.

### *Surrender of Important Cadres and Communication for Talks*

In the midst of operations against ULFA, army arrested one of the most important persons of the organisation—Anup Chetia alias Golap Borbora on 18 November 1991. Besides, important leaders of the organisation such as Manoj Hazarika, Bhaskar Barbarua, Prabhat Barua, Raj Barua and his wife Juli Barua were arrested. On 31 December 1991, one of most hard-core cadre and deputy commander-in-chief of ULFA, Hirak Jyoti Mahanta, was killed by army. But most of the newspapers argue that uncompromising Mahanta was killed by army as he refused to relent after being caught.<sup>78</sup>

On the same day, stalwarts of the organisation like Sunil Nath, Sailen Dutta Konwar, Moon Ali were arrested; however, police sources say that they have surrendered. Very soon Javed Bora (the foreign secretary of the organisation) and Pradip Gogoi (the vice-chairman) were also caught. In such a situation, the chairman of the organisation, Arabinda Rajkhowa, wrote a letter to the prime minister's office, urging for talks.

In his secret letter to the prime minister, he agreed, subject to the ratification of the Central Committee, to accept a solution within the framework of the Indian Constitution, to abjure violence and surrender arms at an appropriate time. He, of course, urged the prime minister to remove the ban on the organisation, to end army operation and use of sweeping powers of arrest and detention under the Armed Disturbed Areas Act and the Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act.<sup>79</sup>

Preparation for a breakthrough was made in fact on 1 February 1991 when the General Publicity Secretary Siddhartha Phukan alias Sunil Nath 'on behalf of the Central Council ULFA' addressed Governor Devidas Thakur, soliciting removal of the president's rule to create a favourable climate to hold discussion.

### *The Fourth Phase: ULFA Retorts Back with Terror (1997–2000)*

The general State Assembly election was declared on 31 April 1996. The AGP gained significant popularity by opposing the army and police

<sup>78</sup> Aditya, *Swadhinota*, 65.

<sup>79</sup> Borpujari, *North East India*, 120.



atrocities in the state. Besides, a series of scams like the Letter of Credit (LOC) scam and other corruption charges brought down the image of the Congress government in the eyes of the people. During the election which had also witnessed the death of Chief Minister Hiteswar Saikia, ULFA carried on massive killing, extortion and kidnapping of the members of political parties, mostly belonging to the Congress (I). In the midst of these political uncertainties, Prafulla Kumar Mahanta came back as the chief minister of the state for the second time. In this election too, the support of ULFA to the AGP was well known. According to our sources, there was secret agreement between the AGP leaders and ULFA. The deal was that ULFA would create a reign of terror which would facilitate the return of AGP and the latter, in turn, would provide critical support to ULFA. Very soon after coming to power, Prafulla Mahanta had to break all promises as his own political survival was at stake.

### *Reorganisation of ULFA*

Taking full advantage of the political chaos and violence, ULFA conducted its fifth general assembly somewhere in Nagaon in the mid of 1995. In this five-day meeting, it was decided to revive the organisation which was forced to go back by Operation Rhino. In this meeting, the military wing was detached from the General Council and the latter was constituted as a separate wing. In this meeting, the organisation went for major restructuring of the organisation. The district committees were dissolved and the state was divided into *pub* (east), *paschim* (west), *dakshin* (south) and *madhya* (central) *mandal*. Under each *mandal*, there were Anchalik Parishad and under Anchalik, Sakha Parishads were constituted.<sup>80</sup> Besides, the special operation groups were brought under the newly constituted Mukti Fauj. The latter, which is known as the Sanjukta Mukti Fauj, has been constituted as the separate military wing of the organisation. The head office of this unit was established at Marshala located in the Samdrup Jongkhar district of Bhutan, near the Nalbari district of Assam. According to sources of interview given to us by the surrendered ULFAs, in this meeting, Commander-in-Chief Paresh Baruah, General Secretary Anup Chetia, Advisor Bhimkanta Buragoahin, Foreign Secretary Sasha Choudhury, etc.,

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<sup>80</sup> Information gathered by interviewing surrendered militants in 1998.

were present in the meeting. Mithinga Daimary was selected as the publicity secretary of the organisation and the names of Lohit Deuri, Raju Barua and Bening Rabha were proposed for the posts of deputy commander-in-chief.<sup>81</sup> Perhaps, this is the last organised General Council meeting of ULFA conducted in Assam.

### *Unified Command Structure: State Hits Back with Vengeance*

Prafulla Kumar Mahanta, who came to power on the question of army atrocities on the innocent people, soon realised that he himself had very few options in his hand except going for another round or army role in containing ULFA cadres. On the very next day of his coming to power, the superintendent of police (SP) of Tinsukia, Robikant Singh, and his security personnel were killed by ULFA in a daredevil attack. On the very next day, Parag Kumar Das, the executive editor of *Asomiya Pratidin*, was killed in the broad daylight at Guwahati when he was coming back with his son from school. Informed sources suggest that the immediate cause for Parag Das' assassination was the killing of the superintendent of police at Tinsukia. It would be interesting to note that Parag Das played a decisive role in bringing the AGP government back to power. All the adversary forces of Prafulla Mahanta and AGP were either cajoled or neutralised by Parag Das. Immediately after the coming of the AGP government, ULFA started a massive extortion exercise and started collecting regular taxes from government employees, businessmen, industrialists, etc.<sup>82</sup> Prafulla Mahanta realised that he had been taken for a ride by ULFA which expected him to repeat what he had done in the first term. It was too simple for Mahanta to realise that if ULFA continues its reign of terror, he would not survive politically, and therefore he decided to crack down on ULFA before it was too late.

In consultation with the security experts, a Unified Command Structure was promulgated. The new structure included the army, state police and other paramilitary forces as its constituents. The structure was to be directed by the state chief secretary, home secretary, DGP, the director general of CRPF, the central joint home secretary and four corps

<sup>81</sup> Aditya, *Swadhinota*, 79.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, 79.

General Officer Commanding (GOC). In addition to taking decisions, an 'operational group' was formed including the army, the state police and the paramilitary forces. According to the new system, any operations to be conducted by the security forces must be accompanied by the state police and the local officer-in-charge (OC) must be kept informed about the operations.<sup>83</sup>

### *Clash between ULFA and AGP*

Very soon ULFA and AGP came at loggerheads. On 9 June 1997, ULFA made an abortive attempt on the life of Prafulla Kumar Mahanta. In the attack, the chief minister had a providential escape. The attack on the chief minister brought to surface the strained relationship between AGP and ULFA. Till now the Congress (I) was thought to be the enemy of ULFA. It has been said that the sudden change of ULFA's position on the AGP is due to the breach of promise which was made to ULFA. This becomes clear by interaction with a number of surrendered cadres. Besides, Lohit Deuri, who was nominated to the deputy commander-in-chief position, said in an interview:

Why is the ULFA against P. K. Mahanta? The ULFA has tried to assassinate him; it has killed one of his ministers, Nagen Sarma ...

A: ULFA wanted to utilise the AGP as an over ground political party in the first instance, just before the elections of 1996. Accordingly, various pressure groups were sent down from the ULFA's General Headquarters to 'press' the people. These pressure groups met many AGP MLAs and ministers and held talks. Some sort of decision was arrived at and consequently the word went around that the AGP is to be supported. It was expected that the AGP will pressure the Centre on the issue of self-determination. But this the AGP did not do. As a result a decision was taken to assassinate Mahanta.<sup>84</sup>

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<sup>83</sup> Unified Command Structure, guidelines collected from the Intelligence department.

<sup>84</sup> Jaideep Sakia, 'Allies in Closet over Ground Linkages and Terrorism in Assam', in *Faultlines* 8, <http://www.satp.org/satporgtp/publication/faultlines/volume8/Article4.htm#29>

### *The Killing of Sanjay Ghosh*

The killing of Sanjay Ghosh is considered to be one of the main factors for the decline of ULFA's image in front of the public. On 4 July 1997, Sanjay Ghosh, the general secretary of Association of Voluntary Agencies for Rural Development for North East (AVARD-NE), was kidnapped for the association's alleged alliance with the RAW. But my field visit to Majuli makes it clear that he was an immensely popular worker who worked for the betterment of Majuli through voluntary works. Agricultural development, finding ways for the prevention of flood, women empowerment, etc., were some of the areas in which the organisation excelled in Majuli.

Sanjay's killing is a serious blow for ULFA, both domestically and internationally. The permanent representative of India at UN, Arundhati Ghosh who was connected to Sanjay Ghosh, made every possible effort that their case be presented in international human rights forum.

In the later days and months, ULFA started an offensive against the ministers and politicians particularly belonging to the AGP. Several ministers were attacked, killed, kidnapped and bombed. Several ministers, including Biraj Sharma, Jainath Sharma, were attacked. In one of the most tragic incidents, Cabinet Minister Nagen Sharma, along with a few social workers and prominent citizens, was killed in a bomb blast in Nalbari on 27 February 2000. Thus, ULFA had started a serious offensive war against their one-time mentor. Very soon, ULFA started witnessing its perceptible decline in the eyes of the people.

### *The Fifth Phase: A Marked Change in Terror Tactics of ULFA (from 2001 onwards)*

Some significant events took place in the period from 2000–05. Some of the incidents took place in this period are:

- The killing of non-Assamese Hindi-speaking people that started in the year 2000.
- The Bhutanese crackdown, 'the operation all out' on ULFA in December, 2003.

- The Dhemaji incident on 15 August 2004 that killed 15 innocent children.
- The recent initiative for talks between Government of India and ULFA.

In this section, we shall mainly take up the changing terror tactic of ULFA in this post-2000 phase. The other issues will be dealt with in the following chapters.

ULFA started a massive onslaught against the non-Assamese Hindi-speaking people from October 2000. The series of killings that took place in Tinsukia, Dibrugarh, Sibsagar and other places of Assam claimed, in total, lives of 120 people. Following is the list of killings by ULFA:

1. On 23 October 2000, at Dibrugarh and Tinsukia, a total number of 15 Hindi-speaking people were killed.
2. On 27 October, 12 Hindi-speaking people were killed at Nalbari.
3. On 8 November, 8 Hindi-speaking people of North Indian origin were killed.
4. On 10 November, 10 such people were killed at Sibsagar.
5. On 26 November, 4 Bihari workers were killed.
6. Another 3 Hindi-speaking people were killed on 28 November.
7. On 30 November, in a gruesome killing in three separate incidents, 22 Hindi-speaking people were killed. Most of the victims in this incident were third-generation Hindi-speaking Assamese people who had settled in Assam.
8. On 7 December, 28 Hindi-speaking people were killed at Sadiya.

It is to be mentioned that during this time, the other insurgent groups of the state like National Democratic Front of Bodoland (NDFB), fighting for sovereign Bodoland, and United People's Democratic Solidarity (UPDS), fighting for Karbi state, also conducted series of such killing during this period.

Question arises as to why the organisation has undertaken such massive killing of the Hindi-speaking people. Various organisations, analysts and the newspapers blamed ULFA for acting on behalf of Bangladesh. The killing, it was argued, was basically to please the boss in Bangladesh.

Nobody can deny this accusation that ULFA might have wanted to cause internal disturbance in India—which is the basic objective of the intelligence agencies like DGFI of Bangladesh.

It needs to be analysed why ULFA has adopted such ghastly killings, mostly of manual labourers. It has been found, and as we have outlined in previous chapters, that ULFA's pro-Bangladeshi immigrant stand became more palpable from the 1988. We have argued above that ULFA's pro-immigrant stand is more dictated by survival requirements than any ideological commitment. ULFA took out various pamphlets to justify its stand. In these pamphlets,<sup>85</sup> ULFA made some serious departures from either its earlier stand or from some widely believed ideas of the Asomiya people.

1. The contribution of the people of East Bengal origin is noteworthy. They are hard-working people and ULFA's real enemies are the migrants from India who have been occupying the land and other economic sectors of Assam. The report further says:

The mixture of nationalities that is the Assamese is, in reality, the result of immigration. We consider the immigrants from East Bengal to be a major part of the national life of the people of Assam. Our freedom struggle can never be successful without these people ... the masses who earn their living through hard physical labour can never be our enemies. All the labouring masses are our friends and the main motive force of our freedom revolt.<sup>86</sup>

2. The report says, 'We would like to state here for everybody's information that the movement led by the All Assam Students' Union and the Gana Sangram Parishad from 1979 to 1985 is viewed by the ULFA as one based on emotion.' (Author's translation.)<sup>87</sup>
3. Perhaps the most significant aspect of the document is that English would be the link language of *Swadhin Asom* (Independent Assam), thereby nullifying almost a century of struggle to give the Assamese language its legitimate place in the state.

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<sup>85</sup> See, for example, *Sanjukta Mukti Bahini Asom*.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid.

It is clear from the report that ULFA considers the Hindi-speaking people as the migrants from India.

However, it is not because of any ideological convictions that ULFA had killed so many Hindi-speaking people. In our view, this is a systematic design and the post-2000 period marks a distinct change in the terror tactics of ULFA, and all this was done with a purpose—this terror design has a message; this kind of terrorism has its own audience. Interestingly, ULFA was also afraid of the Assamese public opinion and hence they have coined a new terrorist outfit—‘Assam Tiger Force’—and left their leaflets at the killing site. But ULFA realised that the Assamese people are not coming up with protest and very soon the ‘Assam Tiger Force’ also disappeared.

We believe that ULFA’s anti-North Indian attitude has more to do with Bangladesh’s growing Islamic fundamentalism which is built around anti-Indian feeling.<sup>88</sup> Before this series of killings, a number of ISI agents were arrested in Assam. In fact, there was detailed discussion on the role of ISI on 6 April 2000 in the State Assembly where the chief minister of Assam presented a detailed account of ISI activities in Assam. The pressure of ISI and DGFI on ULFA was already palpable in the Kargil war, in which ULFA appealed to the people of Assam to oppose India. On this occasion too, many security personnel and analysts believe that there was a hidden hand of ISI and DGFI in the gruesome killing.

Otherwise, it is very difficult to explain the behaviour of ULFA—as never in its 21 years of existence, it had indulged in such indiscriminate killing. Influence of foreign factors made certain structural changes which were unknown to its history. A few sporadic individual killings notwithstanding, ULFA was always selective and discriminatory in choosing its target and victim, unlike many other extremist organisations in the region. Although numerically much smaller than ULFA, both the Bodo Liberation Tiger Force (BLTF) and the NDFB cadres were more ruthless in pursuing their agenda—carrying out indiscriminate

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<sup>88</sup> For a detailed account how Islamic fundamentalism is growing, see Bertil Linter, ‘Bangladesh: A Cocoon of Terror’, *Far Eastern Economic Review* (4 April 2002). Also see Alex Perry, ‘A Very Dirty Plot’, *Time Asia*, (16 June 2003) and, Alex Perry, ‘Deadly Cargo’, *Time Asia*, (21 October 2002).

bombings, killing innocent civilians and indulging in ethnic cleansing by massacring the non-Bodos.

Such indiscriminate killing of the Hindi-speaking people, most of whom were manual labourers, and the Dhemaji incident, in which 14 school children died by a bomb blast on the 15 August 2004 (details in the next chapter), have blurred the distinction between insurgency and criminal terrorism. Even the police sources pointed out that in its more than 20 years of existence, ULFA never resorted to indiscriminate killing and that security plans were never made to encounter such acts of violence.

The result is the extensive expansion of violence in various forms where the civil society, the security forces and also the members of ULFA had to pay a heavy price in terms of loss of human resources. The most tangible result is perhaps the easy availability of lethal arms which 'has in itself become a decoding factor for various small ethnic groups to turn to militancy to achieve their respective political objectives.'<sup>89</sup> Perhaps in this period, terrorism marked by ULFA became a liability and an end in itself. At this stage, insurgency ceases to be simply a dependent variable that has to be explained by larger independent process and events. In such situations, political violence may alter the meaning, direction and, indeed, the very basis of the resolution of conflict itself, wherein violence becomes a medium to check its decline.

## Appendix: List of ULFA Training Camps

### *Period from 1986–90*

#### A. TINSUKIA

1. Lakhimpur Forest Area under Makum PS. About 200 trainees underwent training. Camps comprise small hutments covered with polythene sheets and also thatch. Arms held by camp inmates are AK 47, carbine, light machine guns (LMGs)/Sten guns/rifles and Chinese-made grenades and other shotguns. Vehicles that are used on rotation basis are cars,

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<sup>89</sup> Anindita Dasgupta, 'Small Arms Proliferation in India's North East', *Economic and Political Weekly* (6 January 2001).



Ambassadors and Maruti Gypsies. These are forcibly taken from members of the public.

2. Dense forest area ahead of Jagun under Margherita PS (Near Assam–Arunachal Pradesh border) bypassing the Jairampur check-post.

## B. DIBRUGARH

1. Sensua Pukhuri under Moran PS.
2. Borpathar—Bhabanipathar (temporary camps).
3. Pathalibam—Changmaigaon, Moran PS.
4. Guijan Reserve Forest, Forest on Rangagora—Tinsukia road (About 200 trainees underwent training in this camp.) (semi permanent type).
5. Saraipung Reserve Forest area via Sabitri T. E. (Nagajan) under Duliajan PS on the foothills of Arunachal Pradesh. This is the largest concentration of ULFA with its top-level leaders operating from this camp. There are about 500 armed cadres, mostly trained in NSCN/KIA headquarters, in this camp.

The camp is well fortified with minefields all around and fixed LMG/gun posts. A large number of AK 47 rifles, carbines, Stens M-20 pistols and other arms are kept in the camp. The camp has a network of operations and walkie talkie (WT) communication system, a large number of Maruti cars, vans, gypsy cars, Ambassadors and trucks for transportation of the cadres and trainees. These are taken from the members of public in the name of the organisation.

6. Rangali Reserve area (Rajgarh under Moran PS and also Moranhat PS of Sibsagar district. About 200/300 trainees underwent training). Arms used: Sten/carbine/AK 47 and grenades. Vehicles used: Ambassador cars, Maruti cars/van/Gypsy and motorbikes (all procured from members of public).

## C. SIBSAGAR

1. Sala Reserve Forest (near Lakua).
2. Rangoli Reserve under Moranhat PS (camps of a permanent nature).
3. On Assam Nagalan border across Kanubari.
4. Tiruhills area.
5. Friendly villages in the surrounding areas of both Assam and Nagaland helped the cadres in every possible way.

**D. JORHAT**

Majuli Konwargaon (later on abandoned).

**E. GOLAGHAT****Table A3.1**

1. Panbari PS Dergaon	
2. Difaloo Pathar	Temporary camps with
3. Misamari	cooperative farming
4. Melamora (Golaghat PS)	carried out by the cadres
5. Japorijog	Bokakhat PS
6. Mikir Chang	
7. Barpathat adjacent to K/Anglong	

**F. NAGAON****Table A3.2**

1. Borjuli village under Kailabor PS	
2. Uriagaon	(Nagaon PS)
3. Bhotagaon	-do-
4. Kandoli	(Kathiatoli PS)
5. Bamuni	-do-
6. Kampur Ahomgaon	Kampur PS
7. Hashpani	Samaguri PS
8. Anjukpani	-do-
9. Saichabari	-do-
10. Chapanal	-do-

**G. KAMRUP**

1. Kalakuchi Village (Kamalpur PS; temporary camp).
2. Silakuri across Bamundi area under Hajo PS

**H. NALBARI**

1. Pakhila forest area on the foothills of Indo-Bhutan border under Tamulpur PS.
2. Nakhuti under Nalbari PS.
3. Bahjani under Nalbari PS.

**I. GOALPARA**

1. **Ajagar Hills**—Located at a distance of 3 kms from Hatigaon on Assam—Meghalaya borders (Dudhnoi PS). A piggery and a poultry farm located at Hatigaon area. Total number of trainees: 300 (including some girls). Girls are imparted training to drive motorbikes and cars. Arms: About 6 carbines, 1 AK 47 rifle and about 12 pistols/revolvers and some shotguns. These are carried by the active cadres. Motor bikes/scooters: about 25/30 in number. Routes: (a) Through Balbala and also from (b) Meghalaya side via Rangasai.

**J. BARPETA (Patacharkuchi PS)**

1. Training camp located in a forest area about 1½ kms from Awhata and about 20 kms from Sarupeta. The area is a hilly area covered with forest.  
     Small training camps located at Chamua Gati and Banhbari Tea Estate (temporary camps) and Sonapurabari areas. About 100 trainees, including some girls, are undergoing training. Number of arms—Carbines: 10/12, AK 47 : 2/3; Pistols: about 20 and some shotguns including country-made pistols and guns. Routes: (a) From Kenduguri to Sailabari, (b) From Sarupeta via Saudorbhita (c) From Baglimara via Salbari. Motorbikes: About 30/40; Cars, Ambassadors, Maruti: About 30/40.
2. **Pheurakhowa**—South of Bhalukadoba under Sorbhog PS—comprising an area of about 37 bighas of land. About 180 trainees undergoing training in the grab of cooperative agricultural workers.
3. **Komargaon via Sorbhog**—About 150/200 trainees undergoing training in a forest area of about 75 bighas of land in the garb of cooperative agricultural farmers. Motor bikes: 10/12, used for transportation of hard-core cadres.

**K. DARRANG**

1. **Jhapakhana** inside dense forest area under Paneri PS.
2. **Rangamati** under Magaldoi PS.
3. Dense forest area on Assam–Arunachal border under Majbat PS across Dhansiri T. E. and Lalpani OP about 2 kms from Sikaridanga.

## L. SONITPUR

1. Pithakhowa (under Tezpur PS).
2. Bihaguri.
3. Balijan—Gohpur PS.

## M. LAKHIMPUR

**Table A3.3**

1. Jorabari	Bihpuria PS
2. Narayanpur	Bihapuria PS.
3. Bhogpur	-do-
4. Tantibahar	N. Lakhimpur PS; Police seized 1 sten, 6 guns, 2 grenades and other items.
5. Deobil Bantoogaon	N. Lakhimpur PS
6. Khabulughat	-do-
7. Murhanigaon	-do-
8. Jamunakhata	-do-
9. Gohain Tekela Sokdigi Chapori	-do-
10. Khoga Kalitagaon	-do-

## N. DHEMAJI

**Table A3.4**

1. Kedisjha Chapari	- Dhemaji PS.
2. Gopalpur	-do-
3. Ghuriagaon	-do-

## 4

### Parag Das *The Ideologue*

In contemporary history of Assam, Parag Das is the most important thinker and activist who provided the ideological foundation for independent Assam. Parag Das provided a distinct ideological character to ULFA—without him, the understanding of the organisation would remain incomplete. Through ULFA, he wanted to actualise his dream of an independent Assam. In contemporary times, Parag Das is perhaps the most ardent critic of *Delhibaad* (Delhiism). It was Parag Das who, by his persuasive analysis in *Boodhbar* (a weekly Assamese paper which was most active in the early 1990s) and books like *Swadhinotar Prastab* (Proposal for Independence), *Swadhin Asomor Arthanity* (Economy of independent Assam), *Rastradruhir Dinlipi* (Diary of a State Rebel), *Mok Swadhinota Lage* (I Need Independence), *Nisiddha Kolom aru Anyanna* (Banned writings and others) and *Sanglot Phenla* (a novel on the life of the rebels), provided ideological legitimacy of ULFA. Journalists like Ajit Bhuyan, Haidor Hussain and lawyers like Niloy Dutta, Nekibur Zaman were some of the notable personalities whose support to ULFA in its initial period was crucial for its growth and popularity in the Assamese society.

By no means can the ideology of Parag Das be considered as the product of a chronic rebel who wanted to liberate Assam since his school-college days. He was one of the most brilliant students of his time. Parag stood 4th in Assam in the High School Leaving Certificate (HSLC) (+10) examination, he also secured 4th position in the Higher Secondary

Examination in science stream from prestigious Cotton College. He graduated with a first class from the country's most prestigious college, St. Stephens' College, Delhi, and M. Sc. from Delhi School of Economics. Interestingly, Parag appeared thrice in the interview of Union Public Service Commission (UPSC) civil service examinations—had he been successful in getting Indian Administrative Services (IAS) or Indian Police Services (IPS), Assam's destiny with insurgency would have substantially changed. He worked as the general manager in Guwahati Stock Exchange only to resign in 1995 to join as the executive editor of *Asomiya Pratidin*—arguably the largest circulated daily in Assam, and he held this position till he was killed by the secret killers on 17 May 1996. He was arrested several times under the National Security Act (NSA) in 1992 and under Terrorist and Disruptive Activities (Prevention) Act (TADA) in 1993. His book *Swadhinotar Prastab* was banned by the government. He is considered to be one of the most ardent advocates of freedom of speech and was the leader of Manab Adhikar Sangram Samiti (MASS)—the pioneer human rights organisation of the state with allegedly a pro-ULFA stand. Parag's insistence on the Right to Secession started more specifically from 1990 after he had started a new weekly called *Boodhbar* and a magazine called *Aagan*.

Parag's writings do not represent a very systematic scheme for proposed independence—his writings are mostly scattered in the weekly paper *Boodhbar* which he edited since 1989. There are a few other writings which we shall focus on to understand a person who undoubtedly was the greatest champion of independent Assam in the post-Independence history from 1990 till his death in 1996. Some of these books that represent the thought process of Parag are *Swadhinotar Prastab*,<sup>1</sup> *Rastradruhir Dinlipi*,<sup>2</sup> *Nisiddha Kolom aru Anyanna*<sup>3</sup> and *Swadhin Asomor Arthanity*.<sup>4</sup> Later on, some other books on Parag Das' writings were published such as *Paragar Kisu Prasna-Kisu Uttar* (Some

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<sup>1</sup> Parag Das, *Swadhinotar Prastab* (Guwahati: Parag Das, November 1993).

<sup>2</sup> Parag Das, *Rastradruhir Dinlipi* (Guwahati: Udangshi Prakashan, October 1992).

<sup>3</sup> Parag Das, *Nisiddha Kolom aru Anyanna* (Guwahati: Udangshi Prakashan, February 1994).

<sup>4</sup> Parag Das, *Swadhin Asomor Arthanity* (Guwahati: Parag Das, December 1995).

Questions and Answers of Parag).<sup>5</sup> Parag's writings can be classified into several categories such as right to self-determination and right to secession, international law and right to self-determination, internal colonialism and resource control, ULFA as the custodian of an independent Assam, limitations of ULFA activists, the Congress rulers as the lackey of Indian imperialism, human rights violation by the security forces and so on.

ULFA for Das is different from other organisations of the state. They had a different thought process—their ideology was different from other ultra-nationalistic Assamese organisations. ULFA was perhaps the only organisation in the state that spoke for the 'people of Assam' rather than the Assamese people—which is yet to be defined to the satisfaction of all communities. Organisations like AASU and regional political parties like AGP are criticised for their exclusive concerns with the Assamese-speaking people—in fact, Assam Accord is considered by many smaller nationalities of Assam as a constitutional protective mechanism for the Assamese people. ULFA tried to broaden the Assamese base by incorporating members from all communities and had tried to espouse the identity concerns of these communities.

Parag argued that there are three essential issues that make ULFA different from violent and non-violent ethnic organisations of the region:

1. ULFA's cause was for the people of Assam rather than for a few linguistic groups of the state. ULFA represents, as its name implies, not only the 'Assamese nation' but also the entire 'independent minded struggling peoples, irrespective of different race-tribe-caste-religion and nationality of Assam'.
2. According to Parag Das, the ideologue of the organisation:

In spite of many weaknesses of ULFA, we are providing support through constructive criticism because they could herald a new political thought process in Assam ... for the first time in Assam's history they were successful in providing a convincing analysis for identifying the true enemy of Assam.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> *Paragar Kisu Prasna Kisu Uttar*, ed. Udangshi Group (Guwahati: Udangshi Prakashan, October 1998).

<sup>6</sup> Das, *Rastradruhir Dinlipi*, 10.

3. It is ULFA that could truly analyse the character of the Indian State. ULFA identified Delhi as the main enemy of the people of Assam. It could highlight the magnitude of exploitation carried out by the multinational agencies at the behest of Centre and spoke against the centralised administrative system of Delhi.

He said that most of the previous movements in Assam were driven by emotions—two movements were launched only on the basis of language. A systematic attempt was made to divide between the Bengali- and Assamese-speaking people. Later on, the toiling agricultural masses of the Char areas were identified as the enemy of Assam. A six-year-long anti-foreigner movement was launched to drive out these people who constitute the backbone of our agricultural economy. According to Das, ULFA provided a welcome break from such a thought process of the ultra-nationalistic movements.<sup>7</sup>

To espouse the causes, Parag wanted a platform. Parag Das and some of his colleagues had established the human rights organisation MASS on 2 November 1991. Later on, the organisation was considered as a pro-ULFA organisation and many of its leaders were arrested for having close connections with ULFA.<sup>8</sup> Some commentators have considered MASS to be the frontal organisation of ULFA.<sup>9</sup> The objectives of the organisations which were highlighted by Parag Das were:

1. To highlight with facts and figures the human rights violations committed by the Indian security forces. It was the main objective.
2. To mould public opinion against such violation of civic rights and make people aware about draconian laws such as Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act (AFSPA), NSA, TADA, etc.
3. The organisation adopted three-pronged strategies to espouse the cause of human rights in Assam. As its first strategy, it organised several public meetings in various parts of Assam and prepared

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<sup>7</sup> Das, *Rastradruhir Dinlipi*, 11.

<sup>8</sup> Some of the MASS leaders who were arrested under various security laws were Ajit Bhuyan, Niloy Bora, Lachit Bordoloi apart from Parag Das.

<sup>9</sup> Jaideep Saikia, 'Allies in the Closet Over-ground Linkages and Terrorism in Assam', *Faultlines*, vol. 9, 2001, <http://www.satp.org/satporgtp/publication/faultlines/volume8/Article4.htm#29> (accessed on 7th October, 2012).



periodical reports to highlight the state terror with proper documentation supported by audio-visual sources.

4. As the second strategy, the organisation attempted to create constituencies for their cause at the national level. Attempt was to visit various places of India and unify the other exploited nationalities and groups by the Indian State. Purpose was to create national stakeholders and express the true character of suppression and oppression of the Indian State.<sup>10</sup>
5. The third strategy was to internationalise the cause of Assam. To quote Parag:

At the third level we attempted to expose to the world the nature of State terror and the true exploitative character of Indian State. Last year, our colleague Smt. Nandita Haksar<sup>11</sup> has put the Indian State in defensive mode by highlighting the state terror in the North East region in the last Human Rights Council meet in United Nations (UN) in New York ... we have contacted various international Human Rights organizations and have received very positive feedback.<sup>12</sup>

Apart from these activities, the MASS also took up cases relating to corruption, arrest of journalists and reported deaths of some 500 tea garden workers from gastro-enteritis and malaria in 1994. Due to such pressures exerted by MASS, the National Human Rights Commission visited the state in July 1994 and urged the setting up of a State Human Rights Commission and a Human Rights Court.

It would be interesting to look at how the state considered the activities of Parag Das. The state considered Das not only to be an ideologue of ULFA but also an ULFA activist. The Assam police published couple of photographs where Parag Das was seen with all the top leaders of the organisation which was supposedly taken in the jungles of Bhutan. Essentially, Assam police lodged nine accusations against Parag Das:

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<sup>10</sup> Das, *Rastradruhir Dinlipi*, 17.

<sup>11</sup> A prominent human rights activist of India. One of her prominent books on the issue is *Rogue Agents* (New Delhi: Penguin, 2009).

<sup>12</sup> Das, *Rastradruhir Dinlipi*, 17, 18.

1. Parag Das has got political ambition and, in order to attain his ambition, he has been utilising his newspaper *Boodhbar* to propagate the ideals of ULFA. Every edition of his paper is dedicated to the cause and ideals of ULFA; in the process, he has been advocating the secession of Assam from India.
2. He has been criticising every attempt to normalise the situation in Assam—he has been resisting those very forces which were employed to stop the subversive activities of ULFA.
3. On 22 January 1992, in an editorial entitled as ‘Yes we are still talking about Independence’, he had protested the talk process of a section of ULFA with the government. He also supported a unified struggle of all the nationalities of India against the Indian State.
4. In addition, he referred to Hiral Jyoti Mahanta, the self-styled deputy commander-in-chief of ULFA as the freedom fighter who got killed in an encounter with the Army on 31 December 1992. He is making all efforts to sabotage the peace process between the GOI and ULFA. He has referred to the chief minister of Assam as the *Ganasatru*.<sup>13</sup>
5. In collaboration with various pro-ULFA activists like journalists Manjit Mahant, Rajib Bora (both of them were arrested for their pro-ULFA activities), Niloy Dutta, Ajit Bhuyan, the editor of *Sadin*, and Tridib Kumar Sarma (who attempted to kill Hiteswar Saikia) established MASS through a convention on 2 November 1991.
6. On 8 November 1991, Parag Das, Niloy Dutta, Ajit Bhuyan and other associates took out a procession in violation of clause 144 of Indian Penal Code and had a clash with the police which resulted in the destruction of valuable properties.
7. Without obtaining the government’s permission, a meeting was organised in AASU’s office at Golaghat on 16 November 1991 where Niloy Dutta, the advocate of Guwahati High Court; Ajit Bhuyan, editor, *Sadin* and Parag Das were present amongst others. Parag Das said in that meeting that the Centre had been exploiting Assam since the dawn of Independence and urged for a unified struggle against the exploitative character of the Indian State.

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<sup>13</sup> *Ganasatru* means the enemy of the masses.

8. The accused Parag Das, along with Mukul Mahanta, Kabiranjana Saikia, Debojit Bora, Nibaran Bora and others, took part in another meeting organised by the Nobin Lekhok-Lekhika aru Silpi Samiti which took place in Gopinath Bordoloi hall of Nagaon College on 19 November 1991. In that meeting, Parag Das dubbed the Indian Constitution as 'document of the cheaters' and requested people to reject it in totality. He supported the cause of independent Assam as was launched by a section of armed rebels. His whole speech was provocative, inciting and tried to mobilise the people against the Indian State.
9. On 12 February 1992, he attended a meeting at Dahi High School, organised by the ULFA unit in the Darang District. He appealed to the ULFA leaders not to start the talk process on agendas fixed by the government. He requested ULFA leaders to raise the issue of Assam's separation from India and vehemently supported to wage a struggle till Assam attains her desired goals. Thus, Parag Das has been systematically engaged in propaganda against the State and such campaign is considered to be detrimental to the social security.

How far a journalist-activist can propagate his ideology and thought in the name of freedom of press? Can a journalist-activist propagate anti-State ideology of Indian democracy, mobilise people against it, provide support to a secessionist movement and expect total immunity for his works? Here the opinion of B. G. Verghese is noteworthy:

Cases against the press relate to the alleged glorification of ULFA by the editor of *Sadin*, an Assamese weekly, and the proscription of a book by the editor of *Boodhbhar*, *Proposal for Freedom* which would grant the right to secession to Indian states. A third editor, who was detained, is alleged to have been involved in the kidnapping of an official. While these actions have been criticized, they have also led to soul searching within the press with regard to its role and code of conduct in times of stress. A distinction has to be drawn between the actions of a citizen as a journalist or editor and as an activist. The latter cannot claim protection under the rubric of freedom of press.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> B. G. Verghese, *India's North East Resurgent* (New Delhi: Konarak Publishers, 1996), 56–57.

What does Parag have to say against these allegations? For Parag, in this hour of crisis, one has to take a stand and present the facts as has been happening in Assam. He says:

In the name of objective journalism, we are not in favour of writing a few lines for and a few lines against of an event and satisfy everyone in the process. It is true that for taking stand for the people we have received ill feted treatment from vested interest. But at the same time people have appreciated our analytical genre of journalism.<sup>15</sup>

He made his point clear by stating that:

When the State gets mortgaged in the hands of a few and exploitation becomes its rule, it can't stand for the interest of the people—the contradiction between the two is inevitable. In such eventuality I have no way out but to stand with people.<sup>16</sup>

Parag proposes the idea of independent Assam State in his book *Swadhinotar Prastab* which was later on banned by the government. Much before that, he wrote an editorial named as 'Yes, We Are Talking About Independence' in his weekly *Boodhbar*. In this editorial, which is crucial to the understanding of the idea of *Swadhin Asom* (Independent Assam), he says:

We have been providing constructive support to ULFA as a force that has been fighting against Delhi. As a political force providing an alternative to Delhism they would receive support from the people, however as an organization they are not above of People's interest ... as well wishers, we would like to say that ULFA should not have imposed the idea of independence and armed struggle on the people of Assam if it did not possess the sense of sacrifice and courage needed to face the Indian State.<sup>17</sup>

He was highly perturbed by the surrender of a section of ULFA leaders like Sunil Nath, Kalpajyoti Neog, Munin Nabis and others to the Indian

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<sup>15</sup> Das, *Rastradruhir Dinlipi*, 22.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Parag Das, 'Hoi Aami Swadhinotar Kathai Kaisu', *Boodhbar* (Guwahati, 22 January 1992).

State in 1992. Having done so, he argued that they had resisted a process of spontaneous mass uprising against the Indian State. People of Assam have been slowly realising the hollowness of the Indian State and people would have rejected the Indian Constitution collectively. People themselves would have jumped into the struggle of an independent struggle when all other alternatives have been systematically shut down by the Indian State. He said:

Our only grief is, a section of immature ULFA leaders without having patience and enduring capacity of to carry forward the national liberation struggle had propagated theories of liberation and conveniently discarded them in adverse situations in front of the State. If they did not have adequate idea about people's support to ULFA nor did they have any sense of timing for an independent struggle why did they propagate those theories and had halted a natural process of struggle against the State.<sup>18</sup>

However, Parag argues that the nature of exploitation by the Indian State is very structural and Assam would always be treated as the colonial hinterland. The protest against the State would always be there. He says that the question is not about a few economic concessions to the State.

Here lie the questions of dignity, freedom, honour and identity of our nationality. The conflict between people of Assam and the Indian State is not only economic. The promises of a few economic crumbs therefore cannot silence the people of Assam. Since the Right to life of those who live in Assam depends on the whims of ordinary Indian soldiers, the national self respect of the Assamese can not be bought with economic assistance of a few million rupees.<sup>19</sup>

He acknowledges that an oppressed and subjugated nationality secures its independence through struggle and not through entreaties. Such a struggle is bound to be long-lasting and full of hurdles with periodic lapses here and there. He accepts the surrender of a large chunk of ULFA cadres to the authority as a part of these periodic lapses. Parag

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<sup>18</sup> Das, 'Hoi Aami Swadhinotar Kathai Kaisu'.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

as an activist is aware that the support to such a *Swadhin Asom* will be limited. He argues:

We accept the fact that majority of the people of Assam and particularly the opinion moulding Assamese middle class are not yet prepared to accept the idea of an independent Assam. The booties offered by the Indian State to the urban middle class to maintain the status quo and the farce of elections which still misguide the masses stand in the way of a spontaneous rising of the common masses. It will take some time for the people to come out such a mirage created by the state.<sup>20</sup>

However, Parag is resolute to keep the idea of an independent struggle alive in anticipation that some day civil society would realise the true character of Indian Constitution and jump into a spontaneous struggle against the Indian State.

He justified the notion of independent Assam more in *Swadhinotar Prastab*. Parag rejects the Indian Constitution because it is drafted by the Constituent Assembly that represents only 16 per cent of the Indian population. According to Parag, 7 April is a red-letter day for the people of Assam which is declared as illegal by the Indian State.<sup>21</sup> According to him:

The constitution imposes a meaningless concept of unified India. So naturally a demand for independent Assam will not be valid in front of Indian law.... however, such restrictions notwithstanding, the young generations one after another is jumping into the path that has been already declared illegal by the State. Brutal army oppression, million rupees enticement have not been able to diminish the quest for freedom.... there are many instances when village women organized themselves in groups to free the freedom fighters from the clutches of Indian Army camps.... such awakening has clearly proved that the people of Assam have now started identifying with the demand of independent Assam.<sup>22</sup>

Why is it happening? Are there any historical bases for such an 'illegal' demand? Why the restrictions imposed by the Indian Constitution

<sup>20</sup> Das, 'Hoi Aami Swadhinotar Kathai Kaisu', *Boodhbar*.

<sup>21</sup> 7th April is the establishment day of ULFA—which was established on 7 April 1979.

<sup>22</sup> Das, *Swadhinotar Prastab*, 9, 10.

have not been able to tether the people of Assam (with India)? Why the young generations of Assam could no longer identify with the concept of Indian State? These are some of the questions raised by Parag himself and he seeks to answer some of them. According to him, 7 April was not the first time that Assam had raised the question of independence. He cites the following examples when Assam raised the issue of separation from India:

1. Gomodhar Konwar and Piyoli Phukon resisted British rule in Assam and Moniram Dewan, the first tea planter of Assam, attempted to create a separate national capital for the state.
2. The peasant struggle of Patharughat, Phulaguri Dhowa, Rangia, etc., against the Britishers attempted to keep the distinct identity of Assam.
3. In the 20th century also personalities like Ambikagiri Roychoudhury, Gyannath Bora, Mohendra Nath Deka Phukon and other nationalists attempted to maintain the separate identity of Assam from India. Around 50 years back, Gyannath Bora wrote extensively on the need for Assam's independence from India.
4. Gopinath Bordoloi, the first chief minister of Assam, made a systematic plan for an independent Assam when he was lodged at Jorhat District jail.
5. On 16 July 1946, the Assam Assembly took a resolution that the Constitution of Assam would be drafted by the representatives of the people of Assam, no one else has the right to impose a constitution on the people of Assam.
6. The student forces of Assam gave an institutional expression to such feelings in the 1960s when Assam was virtually left to be taken over by China in 1962. Lachit Sena was organised to work for an independent Assam.
7. Mohendra Nath Deka Phukon, on 26 January 1968, declared on the Republic day that Assam has no way out but to demand for independence. Only after a decade, the rigorous demand by ULFA became a reality.

Parag then wants to look at the validity of independence from the perspective of international laws which are also sanctioned and consented

by the Indian State. He refers to the Montevideo convention of 1933 which had outlined the characteristics of an independent state. He refers to the convention by quoting from the first article of the convention: 'The State as a person of international law should possess the following Qualifications—a) A permanent population b) A defined territory c) Government and d) capacity to enter into relations with other states.'<sup>23</sup>

Parag questions whether Assam as a constituent of India has got those rights and privileges as enjoyed by India? A permanent population has been accepted to be the most basic primary identity of a nation-state. But India has systematically denied this feature in the case of Assam. Continuous flow of illegal immigrants from across the border has made the 'permanent population' feature totally irrelevant. Indian democracy is determined by numbers, and when the State itself becomes a party to the illegal influx, how would the interest of the indigenous people be protected? Besides, the Indian State has also deprived the local government the autonomy to determine its own policies. Since 1826, Assam doesn't have the right on her resources and economic planning. She has been denied the minimum modicum of political autonomy where people of Assam can reflect their views.

Parag then tries to justify the cause of Assam for an independent state from the perspective of international law. He refers to the Article 1 (2) and Article 55 of the UN Charter where Right to Self-determination and socio-economic cultural rights of all the nationalities have been recognised as fundamental rights. Referring to the following section of the 2160 (XXI) resolution of UN General Council in 1966, Parag said this resolution was taken to lay emphasis on the issue of Right to Self-determination of smaller nationalities:

Any forcible action, direct or indirect, which deprives people under foreign domination of their Right to Self-Determination and freedom and independence and of their right to determine freely their political status and pursue their economic, social and cultural development, constitutes a violation of the charter of the United Nations. Accordingly the use of force to deprive peoples of their national identity, as prohibited by the declaration of the inadmissibility of intervention in the domestic affairs of states and the protection of their independence and sovereignty

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<sup>23</sup> Das, *Swadhinotar Prastab*, 12.



contained in general Assembly resolutions 2131 (XX), constitutes a violation of their inalienable rights and the principle of non-intervention.

On the other hand, by the resolution 225 (XXV) on 24 October 1970, the General Council has said in regard to the issue of Right to Self-determination:

By virtue of the principle of equal rights and self determination of peoples enshrined in the charter, all peoples have the right to freely determine, without external influences, social and cultural development and every state has the duty to respect this in accordance with the provisions of the charter.

Referring to the Indian interpretation, he says that Indian interpretation in regard to the issue of Right to Self-determination is somewhat different. Indian position on the issue is that Right to Self-determination is applicable only to the independent states. If an independent state violates the Right to Self-determination of another independent state, then in that case only the aforesaid provision will be applicable. Henceforth, the Right to Self-determination demand made by Kashmir, Nagaland, Assam or Punjab is always illegal in the eyes of the Indian State.

Parag Das argues that this is a partial reading of the provision of UN. Article 73 (a) of UN Charter that refers to the rights of the subjugated nationalities:

Declaration regarding Non-Self governing territories: ... To develop self-Government, to take due account of the political aspirations of the peoples, and to assist them in the progressive development of their institutions, according to the particular circumstances of each territory and its peoples and their varying stages of development.

Likewise the Article 76 (b) of the Charter has also recognised the Right to Self-determination of the smaller nationalities.

On the contrary, Parag argues that the Indian State has been trying to bulldoze all such aspirations by a more brutal army rule and operations. Army operations since 28 November 1990 are a glaring example of such intolerance by the Indian State.<sup>24</sup> He refers to 2625 (XXV) of UN

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<sup>24</sup> Das, *Swadhinotar Prastab*, 16.

council resolution of 1970 where it is said that, 'Every State has the duty to refrain from any forcible action which deprives peoples referred to in the elaboration of Self Determination and freedom and independence.' According to Parag Das, in case of denial of such rights to the smaller nationalities, the latter can approach the UN for proper reprisal of their grievances. To substantiate his argument, he refers to 3314 (XXIX) UN resolution in December where it is said that 'in their action against, and resistance to, such forcible action in pursuit of the exercise of their Right to Self Determination, such peoples are entitled to seek a deceive support in accordance with the purposes and principles of the charter'. To prove his point, he referred to a document by ULFA. ULFA, according to Parag Das, appealed to the UN, requesting to intervene in the state of Assam to rescue it from the clutches of Indian terror and misrule.<sup>25</sup> It is said that the document is written by none other than Parag Das himself in collaboration with Nibaran Bora.<sup>26</sup>

On the question of whether Assam can claim this right as suppressed, subjugated nationality under the category XI of the UN, he refers to another resolution of the UN 1541 (XV) of 1960 passed by the General Assembly where it is said, 'A territory is *prima facie* non Self Governing, if it is both geographically separate and ethnically distinct from the country administering.' This reference to geographic separation and ethnic distinctiveness has been continuously used by the ideologues of ULFA as the basis of Assam's claim for a separate independent state. Parag says that the Indian State gave consent to this resolution by voting in favour of it and later on, on 4 December 1971, in the UN General Council meet, the GOI pleaded for the independence of East Pakistan on the basis of this resolution.<sup>27</sup>

Parag then goes on to justify the two distinct criteria mentioned in the above document of UN 1541 (XV) of 1960, i.e., geographic separation and ethnic distinctiveness as the basis of Assam's claim for independence. He argues that till 1826, Assam was never a part of India and till 1920, the so-called nationalist school of Indian freedom struggle did not recognise the very existence of Assam. In 1947, by means of Transfer of

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<sup>25</sup> Das, *Swadhinotar Prastab*, 17.

<sup>26</sup> The document is said to be the most elaborate document ever prepared by ULFA.

<sup>27</sup> Das, *Swadhinotar Prastab*, 17.

Power, although Assam became part of India, geographically the state remains totally separate from India. The whole region is connected with the rest of the country by a tenuous 22 kilometre land corridor through Siliguri in the eastern state of West Bengal—a link that came to be referred to as the ‘chicken’s neck’. The protagonists of independent Assam continuously refer to this separation of Assam from India. Only 2 per cent of the landmass is connected with India and the rest of the boundaries, which are more than 4,500 kilometres of international border, are shared with South and South East Asian countries like Bangladesh, Nepal, Bhutan, China and Myanmar.

Parag Das, along with Nibaran Bora, more vehemently emphasises on the issue of ethnic distinctiveness of North East India with the mainstream India. Nibaran Bora argued that till 1826 the vast land mass of India’s North East was not part of the various political units of the Indian subcontinent. In contrast to a homogenous nation-building effort of the Indian State, the various ethnic groups of the region maintained their distinct ethnic identity. Bora deplored the fact that the historical and socio-cultural connection with the Far East and other south-eastern countries has been systematically nullified by a section of historians. Bora says, ‘Chinese record of 248 AD refers to Assam in the trade route from Yunan to Pataliputra. Another ancient trade route from Lasha to Chounahat (Lhasa-Tawang-Udalguri route) is still in use.’<sup>28</sup> The process of nation-building in the North East region cannot be described when contribution to the process by the very ancient settlers from the west Asia is ignored. But modern history writers seem to have ignored this very vital aspect for apparent reasons. Thus, a very distorted and confused view on the North East and their culture has been created. As a result, an impression has grown that the North East is an offshoot of the so-called Indo-Gangetic personality.<sup>29</sup>

As a result, the North East, the territory known by that name today, became a part of British India between 1826 and 1911 AD. The result was that various dissimilar systems, politically, socially, economically and culturally, were brought under one administrative system. The British

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<sup>28</sup> Nibaran Bora, ‘In Search of Native Personality’, paper presented as Background paper in the ‘All Parties Leaders’ Conference’ held at Guwahati on 12 and 13 June 1982.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

imperialists and the British-Indian exploiters were imbued with the twin intentions of conquest and exploitation and believed in the principle of 'divide et imperia' to rule the conglomerate natives of this region. Whether it was in the plains of Assam and Manipur or with the tribal communities of the Khasi, the Jaintia or the Kachari, the Garo, the Mizo, the Adi, the Hrusso, the Naga and the Mishimi as also the Singphoo and the Khampati, submission to the British was not abrupt but gradual and it became never total. The natives of the region retained their urge to independence, unabated.

Ajit Bhuyan, a colleague of Parag who was also arrested for his pro-ULFA views, said:

We in Assam often wonder as to why there has been so much concern to depict India as one nation-state. The ruling politicians or their subservient intellectuals never forget to propagate this myth at every opportune moment. But the undisputable truth is: India is a multi national state, a land of innumerable nationalities, big or small, dominant or weak. Each of these nationalities was formed of various tribes and races on the basis of a common language, common territory, common economic life and a common psychological make-up.<sup>30</sup>

He argued that it would be very difficult to keep India as a united nation-state. In the face of the current insurgency situation, some may be tempted to argue that the principle of the right of nationalities to self-determination or upholding the cause of emancipation of these oppressed nationalities would be incompatible with the need of preserving the unity and integrity of India.<sup>31</sup>

Bhuyan argued that the national question in a multinational India has all the potentials to threaten the integrity of India by defying any degree of oppression and coercion that may be inflicted by rulers. It is under conditions of the most distorted and uneven capitalist development of the country that the nationalist urges and aspirations of the oppressed nationalities have continued to find expression in demands for more autonomy or for separate states in some parts of India. Parag argued

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<sup>30</sup> Ajit Bhuyan, 'Flames of Freedom Still Burning, a Probe into the National Question in India', in *Symphony of Freedom* (New Delhi: AIPRF, 1996), 156.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 157.

that in this historical background, it is only natural that the flames of freedom are still burning in the hearts of the long-oppressed nationalities. And it is the indomitable urges for freedom that led the oppressed nationalities of the North Eastern region, like the Nagas, Manipuris, Tripurians, Assamese, etc., to embark on the path of armed struggles for their national survival long time ago. The people of this region are well known as the most backward and neglected section of India's population. Because almost all the precious resources of the region like crude oil, tea, jute, timber, etc., have been systematically taken away to strengthen the economy of other states beyond the North East. Like the British rulers, the Indian rulers too have done nothing to industrialise the region so as to benefit the indigenous nationalities who have remained deprived and ruthlessly oppressed for centuries from the time of British conquest.

Parag argues that Assam gives us a different demographic mosaic from that of mainstream India. To quote Parag, 'For example the Anthropologists while studying the ethnic groups of Assam have revealed that there is a distinct presence of Hemoglobin E among the local ethnic groups of Assam which is not to be seen with other social groups of India.'<sup>32</sup> However, he did not provide any reference to cross-verify the source. In this connection, it is essential to critically look at some of the assumptions of ULFA. ULFA, at the behest of Parag Das, claims that Assam was never a part of India. For instance, in his address on the 11th foundation day of ULFA, its chairman, Arabinda Rajkhowa, declared:

History does not sustain the argument that Asom and Asom's identity is part of India and the Indian identity. It is of this reason that Asom is not even mentioned in India's national anthem.... We are not secessionists. The demand for Asom's independence is a just demand. History provides no instance of any Indian ruler ever ruling over Asom. The British were able to rule over Asom only half a century after they conquered India. After the British left, India had the moral right to take over Asom. At the time of India's independence the Indian rulers masquerading under the guise of democracy and Gandhism deceptively forced us to be a part of India instead of allowing us to be independent.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Das, *Swadhinotar Prastab*, 19.

<sup>33</sup> 'ULFA Sabhapotir Boktyabo', statement by the ULFA's Chairman, released on 8 May 1990.

Professor Udayon Misra argues that ULFA's claim on the issue doesn't hold much logic.

Obviously, in trying to build up his argument, the ULFA chairman has made a selective reading of Assam's recent history, especially about the struggle for independence from British rule and Assam's role in it. In his speech, the ULFA chairman has not mentioned the participation of the Assamese masses in the freedom struggle against the British and the role played by countless leading intellectuals in the Congress-led movement. Not to speak of reformer-saints like Sankardeva for whom 'Bharatvarsha' was such an important concept and who contributed immensely to bringing Assam within the Indian 'mainstream', even rebels like Jyotiprasad Agarwalla and Bishnuprasad Rabha, and literateurs like Padmanath Gohainbaruah and Laksminath Bezbaroa, believed in Assam's destiny to be inextricably linked with India's. Mention is also not made of the many martyrs who embraced death in the belief that theirs was a struggle for an Independent India.<sup>34</sup>

One of the important hypotheses of Parag Das is that Assam was never a part of India.<sup>35</sup> Das goes to the extent of saying that Sankardeva<sup>36</sup> was not part of the overall Indian socio-cultural ethos because he was a fish-eater!<sup>37</sup>

Professor Misra refutes Parag Das's logic in the following ways:

Das draws lessons from a simplistic reading of the anthropological traits of the Assamese people to prove that the Assamese are closer to their Mongolian brothers and sisters and have little or nothing to do with the Indian peoples. All this shows that while the case of colonial exploitation of the region appears to go down well with the masses and may, in the long run, sustain the idea of a *Swadhin Asom*, the very selective reading of Assam's history is bound to lead to greater confusion.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Udayon Misra, *The Periphery Strikes Back* (Shimla: IIAS), 78.

<sup>35</sup> Das, *Swadhinotar Prastab*, 23–25.

<sup>36</sup> Sankardeva—the great philosopher, poet, dramatist, actor, artist and social reformer of the 13th and 14th century heralded the saga of neo-Vaishnavism in Assam. It was Sankardev who initiated the Bhakti movement in Assam by propagating 'Ek saran naam dharma'.

<sup>37</sup> Das, *Swadhinotar Prastab*, 29.

<sup>38</sup> Misra, *The Periphery Strikes Back*.

Parag also seems to make a partial reading of the provisions of international law. The basic point here is that although there is some confusion, the international law in contemporary times does not allow the right to secede until there is some major sanction on it by the UN and other powers of the world. 'Self-determination is not mentioned in the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights, even though there is a preambular reference to developing friendly relations between nations.'<sup>39</sup> The United Nations General Assembly adopted the declaration on the granting of independence to colonial countries in 1960.<sup>40</sup> The declaration '[s]olemnly proclaims the necessity of bringing to a speedy and unconditional end to colonialism in all its forms and manifestations' and declares that '[a]ll peoples have the right to self-determination; by virtue of that right they freely determine their political status and freely pursue their economic, social and cultural development.'<sup>41</sup>

But Article 6 then makes it clear that self-determination cannot be interpreted in ways that oppose self-determination to 'the existing geographical delimitation of territorial boundaries of existing states'.<sup>42</sup> It stipulates, '[a]ny attempt at the partial or total disruption of the national unity and territorial integrity of the country is incompatible with the purposes and the principles of the charter of the United Nations'. Article 7 then follows with the injunction that it is the duty of all the states to 'uphold the obligation to enforce the charter of the United Nations and the Universal declaration of human rights States respect for the sovereign rights of all peoples and their territorial integrity'. The articles here are clear enough to suggest that the UN has sealed the scope of any secession. This has led Richard Falk to remark that, in essence, coupling self-determination to de-colonisation meant subordination of 'the notion of the self-determination itself ... to an overriding conception of the unity and integrity of the State'.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Hurst Hannum, *Autonomy, Sovereignty, and Self-determination: The Accommodation of Conflicting Rights*, (Pennsylvania: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1990), 33.

<sup>40</sup> General Assembly Resolution 1514, 15 UN GAOR, Supplement 16, 1960.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, Preamble, para 2.

<sup>42</sup> Paul Keal, *European Conquest and the Rights of Indigenous Peoples* (UK: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 131.

<sup>43</sup> Richard Falk, 'The Rights of Peoples', in *The Rights of Peoples*, ed. J. Crawford (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988), 26.

The obvious questions raised by the declaration on colonial countries—for instance the definition of ‘peoples’ and the larger issue of whether the right to self determination exists outside the context of decolonisation—were addressed, if not necessarily clarified, ten years later in the declaration on principles of international law concerning friendly relations and cooperation among the States in accordance with the Charter of the United Nations.<sup>44</sup>

Among those issues relevant to the issue of self-determination are the following:

By virtue of the principle of equal rights and self-determination of peoples enshrined in the Charter of the United Nations, all peoples have the right freely to determine, without external interference, their political status and to pursue their economic, social and cultural development, and every State has the duty to respect this right in accordance with the provision of the charter. Every State has the duty ... a) to promote friendly relations and cooperation among States; and b) to bring a speedy end to colonialism.... Nothing in the foregoing paragraphs shall be constructed as authorising or encouraging any action which would dismember or impair, totally or in part, the territorial integrity or political unity of sovereign and independent States conducting themselves in accordance with the principle of equal rights and self-determination of peoples.... The territorial integrity and political independence of the State are inviolable.<sup>45</sup>

The topic whether the UN Declaration of 1970 on Friendly Relations contains any scope for secession generated some heated debates among the scholars of international law and the ethnic studies. Here the observation of British jurist James Crawford is very important:

State practice since 1945 shows very clearly the extreme reluctance of the State to recognise or accept unilateral secession outside the colonial context. The practice has not changed since 1989, despite the emergence during that period 22 new States. On the contrary, the practice has been powerfully reinforced.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Hannum, *Autonomy, Sovereignty, and Self-determination*, 34.

<sup>45</sup> General Assembly Resolution 2625, Annex. 25 UN, UN doc. A/5217, 1970.

<sup>46</sup> James Crawford, ‘State Practice and International Law in Relation to Secession’, *British Yearbook of International Law* (Oxford, England: Clarendon Press, 1999), 85–117.



Most cases, such as Eritrea and the Baltic States, involved mutual consent. Finally, he says that there is

no recognition of a unilateral right to secede based merely on the majority vote of the population of a given subdivision or territory. In principle, self-determination for peoples or groups within the State is to be achieved by participation in its constitutional system, and on the basis of respect for its territorial integrity.<sup>47</sup>

Where Central governments oppose unilateral secession, Crawford argues, the secessionist gains little or no international recognition.

There is some confusion regarding the interpretation of self-determination by the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR) adopted by UN resolution 2200A (XXI) of 16 December 1966 that came into force from January 1976. This Covenant has to be read with the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) adopted by UN resolution 2200A (XXI) of 16 December 1966 that came into force from March 1976. Both the covenants have unequivocally recognised the right to self-determination.<sup>48</sup> But nowhere there is any reference that these covenants recognise external self-determination. On the contrary, in a number of references and articles, both the covenants have limited the scope of these rights on the basis of public morality and state security. For example, the Article 19, Part 2, says:

Everyone shall have the right to freedom of expression; this right shall include freedom to seek, receive and impart information and ideas of all kinds, regardless of frontiers, either orally, in writing or in print, in the form of art, or through any other media of his choice. 3. The exercise of the rights provided for in paragraph 2 of this article carries with it special duties and responsibilities. It may therefore be subject to certain restrictions, but these shall only be such as are provided by law and are necessary: (a) For respect of the rights or reputations of others; (b) For

<sup>47</sup> Crawford, 'State Practice and International Law in Relation to Secession', 116.

<sup>48</sup> Both ICESCR and ICCPR have said under the article 1: 'All peoples have the right to self-determination. By virtue of that right they freely determine their political status and freely pursue their economic social and cultural development.' See ICESCR and ICCPR, adopted by General Assembly resolution 2200A (XXI) of 16 December 1966.

the protection of national security or of public order (order public), or of public health or morals.<sup>49</sup>

Further, the Article 20, Part 1, says, 'Any propaganda for war shall be prohibited by law.'<sup>50</sup> Again the Article 21 of ICCPR says:

The right of peaceful assembly shall be recognized. No restrictions may be placed on the exercise of this right other than those imposed in conformity with the law and which are necessary in a democratic society in the interests of national security or public safety, public order (order public), the protection of public health or morals or the protection of the rights and freedoms of others.<sup>51</sup>

Parag, while propagating the concept of independent Assam, has certain assumptions in his mind that the new generation is gradually getting dissatisfied with the notion of the Indian State and desperately wants to get rid of it. However, a section of the youth still believes that Delhi can't protect the identity of Assam, still, after 14 years since Parag's death, there is no such sign of an axiomatic people's struggle for an independent Assam. On the contrary, at present, hardly any one talks about the idea of independent Assam. Thanks to the Indian market economy that had created its constituencies in every nook and corner of India. The phenomenon is more visible after 2000. The spectacular growth of Indian economy has created strong stakeholders among the middle classes of Assam who anticipate more benefits within Indian Union than with a perceived notion of an independent Assam as visualised by ULFA. Nevertheless, it would be too naïve to suggest that the idea of a separate existence of Assam that has been dominating the politics of Assam for so many decades has lost its relevance for ever.

Perhaps Parag anticipated such an apathy and as we have shown above, he said:

We accept the fact that majority of the people of Assam and particularly the opinion moulding Assamese middle class are not yet prepared to accept the idea of an independent Assam. The booties offered by the

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<sup>49</sup> ICCPR, adopted by General Assembly resolution 2200A (XXI) of 16 December 1966.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

Indian State to the urban middle class to maintain the status quo and the farce of elections which still misguide the masses stand in the way of a spontaneous rising of the common masses. It will take some time for the people to come out such a mirage created by the state.<sup>52</sup>

In one of his books, he said:

While challenging the Indian constitutional system we don't want to rupture the Indian political system. We are not getting carried away by an emotional branding of *bharat mata* and hence propagate one unified India. On the basis of compelling mutual economic dependence world-wide, there is a wave for political unification.<sup>53</sup>

He cited the examples of European Union, former Soviet Russia and many other countries who have quelled their skirmishes in order to create a unified platform. With the gradual popularisation of a market economy, there is always a great demand for an expanded market. On the basis of a squeezed internal market, small underdeveloped administrative units like Assam can't embark on the path of growth and development. He said:

At least for an expanded market of India we favour Assam to be a part of one political India. However that does not mean that for an expanded market we shall accept status quoism as it is today.

He seems to be favouring a more loose federation where all groups and nationalities would be granted Right to Self-determination, and that's how the idea of a political India would be possible. Much on the lines of Hobbesian state of nature, Parag said that it is in such circumstances only that all the constituent groups would create one unified political unit, i.e., India.<sup>54</sup> According to him, it's pertinent to ask why various groups today are embarking on the path of separation. It is precisely because these groups have been denied the Right to Self-determination and ownership over the sources of production.

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<sup>52</sup> Das, Hoi Aami Swadhinotar Kathai Kaisu.

<sup>53</sup> Das, *Rastradruhir Dinlipi*, 26.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 26.

ULFA also, on a number of occasions, has hinted that the issue of Assam's sovereignty may be settled within the Indian Union if the system fulfills certain criteria. These assumptions of ULFA are very crucial because these were generated after heated discussions in the organisation and not under the compulsions of military, police or Home Ministry officials in the wake of any surrender drama. From early 1990s, in *Boodhbar*, there were some important discussions by ULFA leaders and it is in this paper edited by Parag Das that ULFA came up with an alternative to sovereignty and independent Assam. Here ULFA argued that sovereignty is a means to an end not an end in itself. For example, on 14 February 1990, ULFA said:

Exploitation by the Indian State is going on in various parts of India similar to the kind that has been going on with the people of Assam. We have no objection to jump into a unified struggle initiated by the toiling exploited people of India against the Indian capitalist class. We shall take part in such a struggle. Because our objective too, is to create a society which is devoid of any exploitation, we are not for a Sovereign Assam for the sake of it. We shall have no compunction to give up the demand for separation if we can establish exploitation less society within India.<sup>55</sup>

On another occasion, ULFA said:

We have never ruled out the possibility of establishing an Assam which is devoid of any exploitation and discrimination while remaining within India. However for that situation *Delhism* must end to begin with. Toady the people of Punjab, Kashmir, Tamil Nadu are fighting against *Delhism*. We welcome such mass uprising. We are always ready for an open discussion with the representatives of various parts of India for establishing a Confederation type of political arrangement (within India).<sup>56</sup>

One of the important characteristics of Parag Das's thought process is that he advocated for the recognition of the Right to Secession. To quote him,

We are demanding the Right to secession to be recognized as the constitutional right. Whether the people of Assam want to get rid of Indian

<sup>55</sup> Auniruddha Choudhury, 'Ulfar Lokhya', Part I, *Boodhbar* (14 February 1990), 4.

<sup>56</sup> Auniruddha Choudhury, 'Ulfar Lokhya', Part II, *Boodhbar* (25 April 1990), 4.

political system or not can be a question that can be addressed later on. But for a proper equal socio-economic development based on dignity we want the right to secede.<sup>57</sup>

He urged for a debate on Assam's independence where all the ethnic groups as well as the representatives of the State would participate. He said:

We urge the State to give us the right to talk for and against the concept of *Sudhin Asom* and let there be a referendum on the issue. We shall abide by the decision of that referendum. Does the State have the courage to accept our proposal?<sup>58</sup>

## Criticism of ULFA from the Viewpoints of Theoretical and Operational Viewpoints

Parag Das was never an apologetic follower of ULFA. For him, separation of Assam from India under the existing State system was inevitable, irrespective of the existence of ULFA. On various occasions, Parag provided critical assessment of the organisation. To quote him,

Time was ripe for the growth of a revolutionary force against the exploitation of Delhi and that is why initiative of a few progressive, honest and dedicated youths of the state could draw favourable response from the common masses. But very soon this organization called ULFA has become irrelevant. We are becoming the unfortunate witness to the rapid decline of it—with the same pace that it had become a popular force in the state.<sup>59</sup>

Parag's criticism of the organisation came in the wake of surrender of a section of ULFA leadership to the Central government in 1992. He was deeply pained to see the theoretical and organisational weakness and decline of ULFA that could challenge the Indian State so effectively. Main criticism of Parag is that the organisation did not have resilience to

<sup>57</sup> Parag Das, Editorial Comments, *Boodhbar* (4 March 1992), 3.

<sup>58</sup> Parag Das, Editorial Comments, *Boodhbar* (19 February 1992), 3.

<sup>59</sup> Das, *Rastradruhir Dinlipi*, 33.

fight against its adversaries. Rather than making personal attacks against those who had surrendered, he wanted to provide a general critical analysis so that the new generations (who would take up the cause further) would not make the same mistake.

Ideological limitation, according to Parag, is the greatest weakness of ULFA. Ideological orientation provides the foundation for a movement on the basis of which the masses can be mobilised. It is not only important for the cadres to be indoctrinated into the ideology, it is also important to tune that ideology according to the changing socio-economic requirements of the society. But there was no systematic analysis of these issues within ULFA and, later on, it failed to understand the dynamics of Indian State. The regional AGP government did the greatest disservice to the organisation by providing easy support, material and money. Practically, during the first AGP regime in 1985, there was no difference between the AGP, ULFA and AASU. To quote Parag,

By confronting the weak administration during AGP's tenure they made the mistake of equating the regime with mighty Indian State and in the process began to feel invincible. There is no doubt that one day or other an organization that challenges the status quoism will come in direct conflict with the State. Your dexterity is proven when you prepare your organization professionally and avoid direct conflict till you are capable of doing so.<sup>60</sup>

Parag argues that the Indian State is a very complex phenomenon:

[I]n spite of its colonial and exploitative character it has got a positive accommodative character through which it can manage many conflicts. Rather than crushing a movement in its entirety the State tries to come to some kind quid pro quo agreements —accords signed in Mizoram, Punjab, Assam are some of examples of such compromising character. In the name of compromise and understanding the Indian state can beguile any organization—we must understand this character of the Indian State and in return should try to put the State into our trap.

ULFA has failed to understand this diplomacy of the Indian State. Parag urges the people of Assam to utilise all the democratic rights

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<sup>60</sup> Das, *Rastradruhir Dinlipi*, 34.

offered by the Indian State—this is not a concession that the State is providing to the people, rather this is the rightful claim of each and every individual. In order to actualise that, Parag even proposed to utilise the politics of parliamentary democracy. Although he believed that the electoral politics would never be able to address the grievances of the people, nevertheless, he believed, it could give a platform to mobilise public opinion. ULFA failed to understand these techniques and it was because both a money-centric and arms-centric culture gripped the organisation so much that the leadership and lower ranks could hardly come out for other constructive and thoughtful activities. For Parag, armed struggle could be an important stage of revolution. Depending on the character of the enemy, the use of violence could become inevitable. However, mere display of firepower, indiscriminate use of arms and money don't ensure the success of a struggle. There is a qualitative difference between armed struggle and terror. Parag referred to such avoidable killings by ULFA which did not help the anti-Delhi struggle at all.<sup>61</sup> It is the political ideology that must dictate the military agenda and not vice versa. Long back in 1992, Parag Das realised that reckless use of violence would invite the decline of the organisation. At present, after the arrest of all top ULFA leaders including the chairman, vice-chairman, the foreign secretary, etc. (virtually all top leaders are in jails or killed, except Paresh Baruah, the commander-in-chief), Parag's prediction looks so prophetic. A terror-driven agenda with exclusive focus on arms, international network, money and a hopeless ideology have gradually made ULFA a near-irrelevant force in Assam.

How does one evaluate the role of Parag Das? Parag Das provided a distinct phase for ULFA. Nibaran Bora and Ajit Bhuyan were the two other activists who provided support with their views. As we have said above, by no means can Parag Das be called a chronic rebel who wanted to liberate Assam since his college days. He was one of the most brilliant students of his time. Many of his contemporaries opine that his fight against Delhi is more personal than ideological. While studying in Delhi,

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<sup>61</sup> One such killing he referred to was a popular prominent Congress leader Manabendra Sarma who was killed by ULFA. The name of a powerful Minister (who was then a ULFA leader) of Congress Government (2006–11) is frequently cited as the killer of Sarma. Interestingly, case diary of the murder has been missing after the Congress government came to power in 2001.

Parag was a hard-core aspirant of becoming an Indian Administrative Service (IAS) officer. Had Parag succeeded in his attempt to become a civil servant, ULFA's ideological plank would have substantially weakened. However this must not be seen as an aberration as becoming a Civil Servant remains perhaps the most sought-after goal for all the students studying in New Delhi. It is his post-Delhi phase in Assam that made him realise the exploitative mechanism of the Indian State and he became the staunchest critic of New Delhi. While studying in Delhi, Parag was always the forerunner in observing various student activities including various all-India ceremonies. His colleagues always identified him as the one who was eager to defend the national cause. His failure in the UPSC civil service examination changed his orientation and he became very discontented with the system.

Parag's transformation from a pan-Indian outlook to a regional and then to a secessionist ideology was too abrupt and quick. Parag's main political convictions can be summarised as follows:

1. Undoubtedly, he was a strong proponent of *Swadhin Asom*. He strongly advocated the cause of an independent Assam.
2. He justified armed struggle as a means to actualise the dream of independent Assam. However, he distinguished between terrorism and armed revolution.
3. He supported ULFA as an organisation to realise the dream of *Swadhin Asom*. For him, ULFA is different from other organisations with a strong accommodative character of various ethnic groups of the state.
4. However, in many of his later writings, he advocated a loose federation. In such a mechanism, various groups would voluntarily come up to form a political unit called India.
5. He urged for the recognition of Right to Secession as a constitutional right for the federating units.
6. He was in favour of utilising the limited scope of parliamentary politics. Although he believed that the parliamentary electoral politics would never be able to address the grievances of the people, nevertheless, he believed, it could give a platform to mobilise public opinion.



Towards the last part of his life, he desperately fought for bringing back AGP to power, although he was critical about AGP in its first tenure. Parag informally constituted a civil society team comprising various activists, scholars and journalists to campaign for the regional party. After the election in 1996, he played an instrumental role in garnering support of various smaller political parties to AGP.<sup>62</sup> After 14 years of his death, none of his political predictions have come true. The people of Assam, rather than jumping into a freedom struggle against Delhi, are relatively contented with the system. Parag could not anticipate certain developments of his time. The most important being the globalisation and rapid rise of Indian economy. The middle class is the greatest beneficiary of globalisation in India. The middle class in Assam, which was the harbinger of an anti-Delhi sentiment from the dawn of Indian independence, is now reluctant to associate itself with the ideology of ULFA, although they are quick to accept the benefit that Delhi has acceded as a result of presence of a force like ULFA. The middle class apathy towards secessionism and a separate Assam has pushed ULFA to the periphery, away from the mainstream thought process. Besides, Assam never saw an armed revolution in the line of what Parag had anticipated. He made a clear distinction between terror and armed revolution. But what Assam had seen from 2000 onwards at the behest of ULFA was mindless terrorism.

Nevertheless the Parag phase of ULFA could be said to be the most prolific period for ULFA in terms of its ideology and thought process. Parag started it by providing a critique of ULFA in his paper *Boodhbar* from 1990 onwards. For this, he came into conflict with the top leadership of ULFA. In the pre-Parag phase, ULFA was more influenced by regionalist sentiments and attitudes. The issues of illegal immigration control over resources, and 'son of the soil' issues dominated their thought process.

However, the top rung of ULFA leadership, especially after the surrender process in 1992, started giving more importance to Parag Das. Parag effectively challenged some of the old ideals and practices of ULFA and helped them in identifying the 'true enemy'. The Parag phase has made ULFA fight against Delhi and its representatives in Assam. Henceforth,

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<sup>62</sup> According to his colleagues who requested anonymity, Parag also played an important role in distributing important portfolios in the ministry.

the Hindi-speaking and other non-local people were identified as the agents of Delhism. He made an admixture between Marxism, Leninism and nationalism of *Asombasi*<sup>63</sup> rather than nationalism of Assamese-speaking people. It is at the behest of Parag that ULFA expanded the base of *Asombasi* by including the habitants of the riverine areas who were hitherto considered to be illegal immigrants. Parag's greatest contribution for ULFA would be that he tried to make it a representative organisation of all the groups and nationalities of Assam. After the abrupt end of this highly talented, honest and dedicated man of Assam, ULFA was directionless and soon became stooge to international terror network.

Parag's greatest failure was that he failed to understand the pulse of the people with whom he wanted to liberate Assam from India. Thus, the name of Parag would remain in the history as the one who loved Assam desperately and who was in a hurry to facilitate Assam's sovereignty.

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<sup>63</sup> The terminology *Asombasi* would signify the people of Assam in contrast to Assamese people.

## 5

### **‘ULFOcide’, State Terror and Truncated Democracy**

It is pertinent to look at the role of the Indian State in resolving one of the greatest challenges to the survival of the State itself, i.e., secessionism and political violence of the non-State groups. On the role of the Indian State in tackling the issue of political violence, Sanjiv Baruah remarks that there is very little ideological response to the demands of ULFA. Assam Accord of 1985 was the last effort for a political settlement of Assam’s confrontation with the Indian State. State’s response to ULFA has been more militarist than political.<sup>1</sup>

The history of resolving disputes in India shows that the State is essentially after a ragtag, piecemeal approach. The State seems to be not competent to resolve the socio-ethnic disputes in the country. The response of the Indian State to some of the intractable ethnic issues in the North East have so far been: divide the rebel organisations by pitting one against the other, corrupt the leaders in front of the public, manage conflicts rather than transforming or resolving, physically eliminate the family members of rebel organisations and put pressure on the rebels to surrender. Added with these are strategies to develop and help counter-insurgency forces; put maximum State power with the help of police and army; appoint retired army generals, police and intelligence chiefs as the governor of these insurgency-affected regions and putting draconian undemocratic laws into practice. After a considerable period of time, when the leaders

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<sup>1</sup> Sanjib Baruah, *India Against Itself: Assam and the Politics of Nationality* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999), 144.

are tired and people fed up, an accord is imposed whose provisions are seldom implemented. The State basically relies on conflict fatigue of the people and the rebel leaders. Such strategies provide provisional respite to the State and guarantee a face-saving device to the rebel leaders who capture power of their respective states and become a part of the State machinery. In such gambling of power, which is played in the name of the people, the real issues are always sidelined until this is taken by a new brand of leadership. In other words, the response of the Indian State is largely militaristic and bureaucratic. If we look at the approaches of Indian State to some of the nagging issues in the post-1980s period, particularly in the North East region—perhaps the most disturbed region of the country after Kashmir—the above-mentioned strategies of the Indian State become prominently visible.

The typical security attitude of the Indian State was best reflected by a statement of the governor of Assam in an all-India Police Golf Tournament at the Shillong Golf club where he talked about his version of bringing peace to Assam. His approach to the peace-making process in Assam is conspicuous by the following characteristics: (a) The governor said that the fact that more and more insurgent outfits are coming for dialogue could be an indication of two things: (1) They were so broken that there was no option left for them. (2) They were trying to regroup themselves by using the strategy of talks. In such cases, '... dialogues are just an escape route', the governor argued. (b) In a clear disapproval of ULFA's demand for pre-conditional talks, he categorically said that the dialogues should be on 'our terms and pressure should be maintained on the ULFA'. (c) Another point he made was that militancy in the region has substantially declined due to fatigue and disintegration amongst the militants groups, and now seeing no other alternative, they were coming forward for the peace talks.<sup>2</sup> In addition to the above-mentioned approach, the governor, on a number of occasions, talked about the 'final battle' to 'wipe out' ULFA forever. This can be termed as the victor and vanquished attitude. History has proved again and again that issues must be settled in their merit—not with a self-contented attitude of victor and vanquished. On many occasions, dialogues are put forward not to solve conflict but to delay it. Subir Bhaumik argued,

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<sup>2</sup> *The Sentinel* (31 October 2004), 1.

In such a situation, the crisis also provided opportunity to the Indian State to use the four principles of real politik statecraft propounded by the great Kautilya.... *sham* (reconciliation), *Dam* (Monetary inducement), *Danda* (force), and *Bhed* (split)—the four principles of Kautilyan statecraft—have all been used in varying mix to control and contain the violent movements in the North East.<sup>3</sup>

The basic premise of Kautilyan statecraft, which is based on the ideal of ‘*Sham, Bhav, Danda, Bhed*’ argues that longer the negotiations, the easier it is to wear down the rebel leaders, partly by discrediting them and partly by infusing a sense of complacency amongst the guerrillas. The crux of the argument is that most of the accords that the Indian State has signed with various rebel groups have never resolved the substantive issues—they have merely capitalised on the conflict fatigue of the rebels and the people who have supported these movements. In most of the cases, due to longer period of struggle and the realisation about the futility of a never-ending fight with the Indian State, the leaders come to a negotiated settlement that also paves the way for capturing of power of their respective states.

But the Indian State must realise the fact that this will never take away the merit of the case and even if one group of elites leading the movement is satisfied, another batch of new leaders will emerge who will come with a more vigorous battle and, thus, it virtually becomes a vicious circle. Tribal-to-tribal approach of the Indian State, as a method of managing conflicts pertaining to the demands of the ethnic communities in the North East, has actually triggered more conflicts than it has resolved. Nowhere in the country have we found such diversity in terms of language, dress code, food habits and ethnic compositions as in the North East region. As politics is *who gets what, when and how*, these groups are increasingly becoming assertive about their rights. The ethnic groups are demanding a separate and autonomous state and recognition under the sixth schedule of the constitution. The State has to maintain a delicate balance while giving concession to a specific community, as these regions are extremely heterogeneous. But granting of district council to

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<sup>3</sup> Subir Bhaumik, *Troubled Periphery: Crisis of India's North East* (New Delhi: SAGE Publications, 2009), xvi.

one group and undermining the interest of the others is like opening up Pandora's box. Such firefighting approaches are not the appropriate language of conflict resolution and can hardly help in the establishment of enduring peace in the region.

The state government, including the successive governors, talked about a final battle to wipe out ULFA; once they are crushed, ULFA will sit on the negotiation table on the terms as fixed by the government. The basic philosophy of the State to wage a final battle against ULFA once and for all, whereby Assam will be showered with permanent peace, is problematic. The assumption of the political elites that once the backbone of the rebel group is broken, they would be forced for talks under the terms of the government is a typical reflection of the attitude of the military generals and police chiefs who also happen to be the governors of these states. Peace will be dictated by police, military and bureaucracy—once those bad guys are killed or gagged, Assam will have 'permanent peace'. But as a matter of fact, until the core structural issues that provide legitimacy to the militancy is not addressed, no matter how many agreements the Central government signs with the rebel groups of the North East, the militancy will emerge again and again, which has almost become a source of livelihood and a plank for fulfilling unmet aspirations for the unemployed and frustrated youths of the North East India.

While the act of containing terrorism and political violence by the State could be justified on certain grounds, the basic rationale and philosophy of the government is defective and would generate more violence than peace. What we have seen in Assam is a glorification of 'negative peace'<sup>4</sup> where peace is understood to be the absence of violence and killing. There is no effective attempt to address the structural issues that put the North East in such an abysmal condition.

The core issue that needs to be understood is that peace is not just stopping violence. A sustained peace effort will be to shun violence and prevent destructive conflicts by tackling their root causes to solve problem through dialogue and negotiations among individuals, groups and the State.

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<sup>4</sup> On the concept of 'negative peace', see Johan Galtung, *Transcend Road to Peace* (Pluto press, 2002), 16–19.

## Role of the Renegades or State Militants and Their Impact on the Body Polity of Assam

Some of the best examples of the State's myopic handling of violent conflict are the surrenders and secret killings that the state of Assam had witnessed from 1990 to 2006. The surrender of ULFA cadres was encouraged from 1996 during the time of Hiteswar Saikia. The then governor of Assam, Lt. Gen. (Retd) S. K. Sinha, summed up the essence of the scheme: each of the Surrendered United Liberation Front of Asom (SULFA) cadres 'was given ₹2.5 lakh cash and ₹1.5 lakh soft loan, which was never returned. They were allowed to retain their weapons as well.'<sup>5</sup>

The Human Development report of 2003 indicates that the overall growth rate in the 1980s has been little over 2 per cent. In absolute terms, the number of poor people in the state has increased from 7.8 million in 1983 to 9.5 million in 1999–2000. 36.09 per cent of the state's population continues to live below the poverty line, a figure much above the national average of 26.10 per cent.<sup>6</sup>

By 1980–81, Assam's per capita income was 27 per cent lower which has further gone down to 45.5 per cent than the national average. Thus it is really surprising that a state which was reeling under poverty and unemployment, the government was going all the way to entice anyone who happened to be a terrorist and expressed willingness to surrender with over 90 times more financial benefit than the state's annual per capita income. The scheme was criticised even by KPS Gill, the super cop of Punjab, who himself was said to be engaged in extra-judicial killing for which he received considerable criticism from the human rights Groups. But the levels of unemployment in the state, Gill observes, should have been 'an argument for the generation of greater employment for all youth, rather than an argument for preferential discrimination in favour of those among them who choose to resort to terrorist or criminal violence.'<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Samudra Gupta Kashyap, 'Rehabilitation Scheme Brings Change in Ex-ULFA Cadres' Life', <http://www.indian-express.com/ie/daily/20001127/ina27004.html>.

<sup>6</sup> Assam Human Development Report 2003 (Government of Assam), ii.

<sup>7</sup> K.P.S. Gill, 'Uncertain Wisdom of Policy Makers', *Pioneer* (New Delhi, 9 December 2000), quoted in Ajai Sahni and Bibhu Prasad Routray, 'SULFA: Terror by Another Name'

On the situation, Sunil Nath, the ex-publicity secretary of ULFA who later on got caught and is now working as a journalist and commentator, says in an article in *Himal Asia*:

A section of ULFA cadres laid down their weapons en-masse before the state government in March 1992, the surrendered militants claiming that they in fact represented a split in the organisation and that they carried with them half of the total cadre-strength of the ULFA ... Saikia bestowed 'blue-eyed' status on the surrendered boys, granting them all kinds of proper and improper favours. Very soon the term 'Syndicate', referring to its mafia-style mode of operations, became synonymous with the Sulfa. The label 'Sulfa', coined by the local media, itself took on a pejorative connotation.<sup>8</sup>

The threat of large-scale desertion loomed before the ULFA leadership, for it was beginning to appear as if renegade members were getting the best of everything, while the loyal had to be on the run. After some hesitation, ULFA hit back, systematically attacking its erstwhile members. Once the surrendered boys, wallowing in their new-found riches, realised that they were now at the top of ULFA's hit list, they started grouping together. The SULFA boys, in order to protect themselves from their former comrades, adopted a quid pro quo policy whereby they would help the security agencies to apprehend ULFA cadres in return of official protection and patronage. The military and police officers could hardly suppress their glee when they found eager volunteers amongst the SULFA boys, with their insider's knowledge, in the fight against ULFA.<sup>9</sup>

The story is the same in almost all areas of India affected by terrorism, including Kashmir and Punjab. Various militant armed groups, namely, Hizbul Mujahideen, Jammu Kashmir Liberation Front (JKLF), Harkatal-ul-Ansar, Lashkar-e-Taiba and countless others are found to be active since almost a decade with their 'secessionist' and 'divisive' agenda. The army has established a joint command of its various wings along with the parliamentary forces and the civil administration. Similarly, in Assam we

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*Faultlines* 9, <http://www.satp.org/satporgtp/publication/faultlines/volume9/Article1.htm> (accessed on 17 October 2012).

<sup>8</sup> Sunil Nath, 'The Surrendered Insurgents of Assam', *Himal South Asia*, (December 2001).

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.



also find a few groups or outfits which are called *sarkari* militants (government militants). The likes of Ikhwanul Muslimoon, Muslim Mujahideen and few others have a similar genesis in Jammu and Kashmir as their Assamese SULFA counterparts. It is also reported that these outfits in Kashmir aid and abet the army in the fight against 'Pakistan sponsored terrorism' in the valley. There are also reports, yet unconfirmed, from Punjab which tell us that in the heyday of the Khalistani movement, the army and the paramilitary forces had dropped up a few Khalistani gangs which used to engage in similar activities.

One thing which becomes quite clear is that all these 'renegade' militants and their actions have added a new dimension to the ongoing counter insurgency. Their actions and the blatant violation of human rights at their hands makes it incumbent upon every right thinking person to at least think deep into this phenomenon. It is time to know the rationale provided by the powers that be about their emergence. The question that needs to be asked with utmost urgency is whether the State can be allowed to raise such apparently private criminal gangs under the name of quelling insurgency in these supposedly 'special times'.

The SULFA who surrendered to the government after the infamous operation Bajrang and operation Rhino in the 1990s were mostly utilised for government's anti-ULFA operations as they had a thorough knowledge of ULFA, their internal functioning and their families. It was widely reported how the SULFA was engaged in the brutal killings of the relatives and family members of the ULFA activists back in 1998 and 1999, leading to a spate of mysterious killings which remain a mystery till date. Even the state flood control cabinet minister, Sri Promode Gogoi, who was a CPI representative in the AGP government, openly accused the ruling government and pointed to the involvement of the surrendered militants and the state police.<sup>10</sup> From the year 2000, the CPI has been demanding an impartial enquiry into the alleged secret killings.

On the night of 10 August 1999, Tapan Dutta, a member of SULFA who had surrendered in 1991, was killed allegedly by ULFA men in Guwahati. The very next morning, the entire family of Mithinga Daimary (His actual name is Deepak Das.) was in the Guwahati jail after being caught by Bhutanese army in operation 'All out' (He has

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<sup>10</sup> For details, see *The Sentinel* (9 January 2001).

been released to facilitate talks with the GOI.). The publicity secretary of ULFA was gunned down in Nalbari district. His mother, sister, brother and sister-in-law fell to the bullets of the assailants who had barged into their house and opened fire indiscriminately. That very evening, Dimbo Rajkhowa, brother of Arabinda Rajkhowa (ULFA's chairman) and an employee of the Assam State Transport Cooperation, was shot dead at Dibrugarh. Another ULFA leader Munna Mishra's brother, H. K. Mishra, an employee of Oil India Ltd. at Duliajan was kidnapped in the morning. His dead body was recovered later in the day. In continued killings, the kin of the ULFA top brass Debakanta Gogoi, supreme leader of the armed wing of ULFA, was killed at Barapather on 15 August 1998. The local press, disturbed over these killings, blamed the unholy nexus of the SULFA and the army for these killings (vide newspaper clippings published in August and September 1998).

It does not even require a modicum of intelligence to understand that those secret killings<sup>11</sup> are just to avenge the killings of SULFA members by ULFA cadres. Immediately after such a killing or attack on the SULFA cadres, the killing of ULFA family members, most of whom had nothing to do with ULFA, took place. In fact, the rule was if ULFA kills one SULFA, the surrendered renegades, in connivance with the police officials, would kill many numbers or might even wipe out the whole family members of that unit.

By killing the renegades, ULFA wanted to give a strong message to the cadres in the organisation about the dire consequences they will have to face if they go out of the organisation. Already the message was going wide across that those who would surrender would get about ₹3 lakh, not to be returned at all and, in addition, other perks as well as contractual government jobs. On the other hand, for the government and police, such wanton killings by ULFA would prevent further erosion in the organisation. Such calculations on both the sides have killed more than 130 people from 1995 to 2000.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Prafulla Kumar Mahanta, during whose chief ministership maximum number of secret killings took place, always had a ready-made answer to those killings; on being asked about those killings, he would give a ready-made answer with a calculated smile—'all killings are secret'.

<sup>12</sup> See *India Today* (8 November 1999).

On 3 January 2001, ULFA allegedly killed prominent SULFA leader Abinash Bordoloi at Nalbari.<sup>13</sup> On the very next day, the two family members (nephew and brother-in-law) of Deputy Commander-in-chief Raju Barua, alias Hitesh Kalita, were killed. Another person was seriously injured in the attack and died later on. This happened notwithstanding the fact that the army camp was only one kilometre away from the accident site. This was not the end of the killings. The same night, unknown assailants killed Jyotish Sharma, an employee of Guwahati University who also happened to be the brother-in-law of Subhash Sharma, a lieutenant of ULFA. Our interview with family members who reside at Nabin Nagar of Guwahati suggest that on that night, at around 12:30 a.m., Jyotish Sharma was physically dragged out of the home by a few boys with their faces masked. Next day, his dead body was found at the outskirts of Nalbari.

All these killings, however, did not go without the protests of the common people. People have protested the killings of both the SULFA members and the family members of ULFA. In both the above-mentioned cases, thousands of people have come out and the whole Nalbari town came to a halt at the protest march against the killing of the innocent people. How such killings had become a day-to-day affair was reflected in *India Today* in the following manner:

Around April this year, (1999) contract labourers working on an embankment on the Brahmaputra at Hudumpur Dokhola near Guwahati came to a firm decision. They were not going to work there anymore as they were scared. Each day at about midnight two or three Maruti Gypsies would take the dirt road to the edge of the embankment. A dozen or so heavily armed men would alight and scare the workers out of their shanties. The armed men would then go to an isolated hut at the brink of the river. When the labourers returned to the hut the next morning they would almost always see fresh blood stains...from Sibsagar, way to the east, to Guwahati there are many other spots where the remains of scores of people have been thrown after the extra-judicial murders which now have a name: 'gupta hoitya' or 'secret killings'. Human rights organisations claim the toll is huge.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>13</sup> See 'Ulfar Dwara Hotya', *Amar Asom* (5 January 2001), 1.

<sup>14</sup> Avirook Sen, 'Jungle Justice', *India Today* (8 November 1999), 18.

Since 1998, more than 150 people have been victims of these secret killings.

Another important case of such *gupta hoitya* (secret killing) is Ananta Kalita, an AJYCP member who had a providential escape after being forcibly taken away from his home. The following is the story of Mr. Kalita which was narrated in front of many people including me: On 16 September 1999, Kalita had retired for the night in his house in Kalitakuchi when the knocks came. Ten men, with pistols, dragged him into their waiting vehicles. Blindfolded, Kalita was driven off to meet his destiny. From the stray conversation of his captors, he got to know that he was headed towards Guwahati. On the way was the Singhimari checkpoint where the vehicles would surely be stopped. There was, Kalita felt, a torch on his face. A jawan said, 'Murga mil gaya.'<sup>15</sup> There was muffled laughter. The captors asked him about the whereabouts of Rupjyoti Baruah, a ULFA cadre, and when Kalita denied having met him for a long time, he was dropped at Jorabat and was shot in his head. But luckily for him, he survived. The Assam government promised a judicial enquiry, but nothing had happened so far.

In Tezpur, on the night of 29 September 1999, two boys, Rajesh Mishra and Rajib Koch had gone to arrange an ambulance for an ailing relative. They were bundled into a vehicle by armed men. No one has seen them since. The locals suspect the involvement of SULFA men because the boys had been involved in a land dispute with some of them. The police, under pressure, 'arrested' two SULFA members. But the duo managed a 'miraculous escape' on the way to the police station. Sonitpur's superintendent of police and his deputy were subsequently suspended. But not before a group of enraged citizens raided the SULFA den in the Ananta Talkies area. The police had arranged the place for the surrendered militants and when the public broke in, they found police uniforms and weapons. Tezpur incident is perhaps the only one which had forced the government to take some action against the police officials.

At the heels of the killing spree unleashed by the SULFA as a retaliatory measure against the 'terrorist action' of ULFA, the so-called Jamir Khan episode had come to light, which further disrobed the alliance of the army with the *sarkari* terrorist outfit SULFA which has been operating

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<sup>15</sup> It suggests: 'We have caught the chicken.'

with impunity for quite some time. The government found itself in an embarrassing situation since it had, all this time, been disclaiming any connection whatsoever with this outfit.

In the sensational Jamir Khan episode, initially, it was reported that an attack was conducted on an ULFA hideout in Jeraigaon in which four ULFA militants were killed on the spot. It was also reported that a few lakh rupees were recovered from the hideout. A few days after those killings, three SULFA men, Raja Gagoi, Utpal Baruah and Raju Phukan were killed under mysterious circumstances. As usual, ULFA was initially blamed of those murders. Then suddenly, the very next day, 10 SULFA men, in a joint statement faxed to the president, chief of the armed forces, chief minister as well as chief secretary of Assam, blamed not ULFA but some Jamir Khan, one of the majors in the 11th Jat Regiment of the army, for the murder of their men. The general officer commanding (GOC) of the Second Mountain Division, Ashok Chaki, after taking cognizance of this whole issue immediately suspended the army major and instituted an enquiry into the whole incident. Further investigations revealed that these three SULFA men who had participated in the initial 'action' on the ULFA hideout knew very well that a few crore rupees had been recovered from the place in the 'rain', which the Major wanted to keep for himself. The fight over the division of this 'booty' ended in the elimination of these men.

A few things are quite clear from the different clippings, be it the demand by the CPI minister in the Prafulla Kumar Mahanta government or the Jamir Khan episode or, for that matter, the mysterious killings that cannot be considered isolated incidents. There is, so to say, a method in the madness. It is also true that all these incidents have been promptly forgotten, taking into consideration the alleged threat to the unity and integrity of the country. Many argue that during this time many army officers posted in Assam were the ones most sought after. It was because ULFA during its heydays kept hundred of trunks full of 100/500 rupees hidden at their sympathisers' residence. Once the surrender process began, those uncountable trunks were distributed among the security forces and the renegades, and only a fraction of it was deposited to the government account.

What is worrisome in this whole chain of events is that under the pretext of engaging in counter-insurgency operation, the armed forces of

this country have been given every liberty to trample on the basic democratic rights of common people, including their right to life. The question that hogs people's mind is what right do the State and its armed forces have to silence, brutalise, maim or kill the common people of this country under the name of protecting the geographical integrity of this country? Would one have to pay with his/her life if a family member is engaged in activities which are inimical to the State? Arabinda Rajkhowa may be a top leader of ULFA and the State considers his activities improper or a 'threat' to the unity and integrity of this country, but this can hardly be considered a sufficient reason to eliminate his entire family, including his brother Dimbo who was an employee in the State Transport Cooperation.

The disturbing fact is that the State has engaged in aiding, abetting, nurturing the 'renegade militant' outfits (which have essentially been reduced to criminal activities with State patronage) whose *raison d'être* appears to be the decimation and elimination of the inter-state militant outfits and terrorism of the wider population to wean them away from such 'anti-national' activities.

Definitely, facilitating formation of renegade militant outfits like SULFA with government patronage seems to be the 'new' rule of the game aptly called 'counter insurgency'. What appears to be 'new' to the whole stratagem of counter-insurgency operations is the brazenness with which the armed forces have created renegade outfits and the sanction and the encouragement they have got from the top echelons of the civilian administration. For example, the then governor of Jammu and Kashmir who took credit about a policy which was adopted vis-à-vis the government militants. In an interview to the *Indian Express* (3 October 1996), he narrated that there were different opinions about the use of pro-government militants and it was he who had insisted that the most important among them, Kuka Parey, be kept under the control of the army. In one of articles from a series of articles in the *Frontline* about the Kashmir imbroglio, published in the first quarter of 1999, it was accepted that all these pro-government militants operating in Kashmir were on the payroll of the Indian army.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Praveen Swamy, 'A Beleaguered Force' *Frontline* (30 January 1999), 7–9.

In Jammu and Kashmir in the 1996 election, the renegades were utilised to the maximum extent possible. The likes of Ikhwanul Muslimoon, Muslim Mujahideen or their leader Jamshed Shirazari, alias Kuka Parey, or Papa Kishtwari were much in news when Kashmir went for polls in 1996.<sup>17</sup> These were some of the groups which were appointed by the Indian army with full consent of the ruling elites of New Delhi. Needless to say that the various Kashmir militant groups, either fighting for a separate Kashmir or advocating full *Azadi*, or their other counterparts, who are for advocating for merger with Pakistan, had boycotted the Lok Sabha and State Assembly elections.

During the heyday of the militancy in Punjab, when fascist criminal gangs of the Khalistanis were engaged in killings and murders of the innocents without any mercy, there were allegations in a section of the press that the State had propped up fake Khalistani gangs to discredit the Khalistanis. It was also reported that these fake outfits did involve themselves in activities very much akin to what the Khalistanis were doing. The plight of the Punjabi people caught in the crossfire of State terrorism as an antidote to the terrorism of the Khalistani brand was unimaginable. In August 1998, the Andhra Pradesh newspapers were abuzz with the killings of the squad members of Communist Party of India (Marxist-Leninist)—CPI(ML), People's War Group (PWG) or CPI(ML) Janashakti, not at the hands of the police or the infamous 'grey-hounds' in any encounter, but at the hands of their former comrades.

All these examples put together the phenomenon called SULFA and lead one to think about the nature and character of the democratic State itself. What are the human rights implications of the whole exercise? Does it not throw a light on the unlimited powers, vested in the armed forces, which are free to operate with impunity in such areas?

In this age of the information superhighway, it is desirable for any State, which is not overtly dictatorial nor autocratic or feudal or which has not closed its doors to the outside world, to appear as democratic as possible. The need to maintain a humane face compels any such State not to appear as murderers, rapists of their own citizens, at least to the outside world in those areas also where its own forces are engaged in

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<sup>17</sup> Swamy, 'A Beleaguered Force', 7–9.

what is known as 'quelling the insurgency'. The pro-government outfits serve a double purpose: they can be relied on for any work which has the possibility of flak from any section of society, media or human rights agencies. In all such situations, the government is 'better placed' to call a barbaric act as committed by 'alleged militants'. Secondly, the impunity with which they move or the clout they enjoy acts as an incentive to the dissident elements in the militant movement.

## Surrender Politics and Nexus between SULFA, Politicians and Government Machinery

It is interesting to see how a bunch of people who go to the jungle to fight a war against the Indian State to liberate Assam from clutches of Indian imperialism, urge people to fight till the last drop of their blood; in the process, they get tired, come back, surrender and in connivance with that very State machinery, break every cannon of civility and fight against the comrades and their family. It's not that the politics of surrender is the only one that causes human rights violations in the state. The SULFA has virtually entered into every aspect of criminal activity of the state—more alarmingly, at the behest of the institutional protection of the state. A group of people published a document called 'Assam and the North East 2000-SULFA'.<sup>18</sup> They have compiled a series of incidents in a year from daily newspapers involving the SULFA and the government machinery and how they violated the rules of law. If we make a content analysis, it is obvious that the kind of anti-social work that they were involved in were threatening, kidnapping, killing of innocent people if their command is not obeyed, arrest by police for illegal works, forceful snatching of land, involvement in the killing of human rights workers, CBI indictment of SULFA for being involved in killing, public retaliation on the SULFA cadres for their anti-social works, use of SULFA in the election, use of SULFA by political parties, involvement in theft cases, collection of illegal taxes (what is known as *goonda* tax) on essential items such as

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<sup>18</sup> <http://www.Fathweb.com/news/sept2.html>



vegetables, fish, etc., preventing the contractors from filing their tenders, running of illegal tax gates, timber smuggling, etc. The list is endless.

SULFA's terror extends further, deep into the operations and institutional apparatus of the government itself. Unofficial sources suggest that virtually every government department pays out a proportion of its budgetary allocations to the SULFA (and, for good measure, to ULFA), and this has been confirmed in many cases by open source information. A report in September 2000 indicated that SULFA cadres were extracting a 10 per cent 'commission' from officials at the procurement centres of the Jute Corporation of India (JCI) at Kharupetia and Dhubri. As a result, the JCI had to stop procurement at Kharupetia for some time, until the district administration and the police intervened. The officials at the centres at Dhubri town, Lakhiganj (Dhubri) and Abhayapuri (Bongaigaon) faced similar problems as well.<sup>19</sup> A similar racket on rail contracts was also exposed in a report that claimed, 'Construction work for upgradation of the 198-km-long Silchar–Lumding metre gauge railway track into a broad gauge line has been jeopardised by a syndicate which has links with a section of SULFA activists.'<sup>20</sup>

The enormity of these examples still fails to approximate the real magnitude of the SULFA's operations. In a stagnant economy, with declining rates of industrial growth, increasing unemployment and no visible basis for improvements in legitimate economic activity, H. N. Das, former chief secretary of Assam, indicated that signs of an artificial boom financed by the funds that are accumulated through extortion and the siphoning out of governmental resources were multiplying at an unprecedented rate. In Guwahati city alone, Das discloses, over 604 multi-storied buildings, housing residential and commercial apartments had come up over the period 1995–2000 alone. These are said to have involved an investment of over ₹12 billion. Most of these buildings are owned or constructed by prominent SULFA cadres, or by those who collude with them. The entire riverfront in Guwahati, Das states further, is dotted with new and palatial private mansions—once again, SULFA members and their associates predominantly own these.<sup>21</sup>

<sup>19</sup> 'Miscreant's Demand', *The Assam Tribune* (21 September 2000), 2.

<sup>20</sup> *The Telegraph*, Calcutta (7 October, 2000), 3.

<sup>21</sup> Haren Das, *The Sentinel* (2 May 2002).

Das also pointed to a number of secondary indicators of dramatic increases in disposable income and conspicuous consumption among a narrow section of the population in the state. Other sources indicate that a number of very prominent businesses, including several new hotels set up in Guwahati and other prominent locations in the state, are owned by the SULFA, which also runs the cable television network in the city.

The 'Road Tax Syndicate' illustrates the modus operandi of some of SULFA's larger operations. The Jalukbari and Khanapara gates in Guwahati control almost all the commercial traffic that enters the entire North East region, with the exception of the route to Arunachal Pradesh through Tezpur (which, incidentally, is said to be controlled by the NDFB). On a conservative estimate, some 1,500 trucks pass through these gates every day, and conservative estimates by official sources indicate that the total 'levies' extorted from them are in the region of 1 to 1.5 million rupees a day. Once the trucks enter Guwahati, the 'Sales Tax Syndicate' comes into play: the loads of most of the trucks simply disappear from the official record; in other cases, high-value goods, such as spices, are officially recorded as low-value goods, such as rice or pulses, and a nominal tax is paid. The difference is split between the SULFA cadres controlling the syndicate, the transporters and the sales tax officials—with a significant proportion also trickling up to the political patrons who facilitate these arrangements.

SULFA has also profited from a number of windfall gains as a result of government policies allegedly framed in collusion with its leadership. Thus, the AGP government in the years 1999 and 2000 decided to create 800 wine shops in the state (in two batches of 400 shops each), of which some 90 per cent are alleged by official sources to have been allotted to SULFA cadres against a kickback of ₹400,000 per shop which is said to have been shared by the political leadership, government officials and senior ULFA leaders.

Similarly, governmental resources intended for rural development flow in substantially to the SULFA, ULFA and the NDFB in their various 'areas of influence'. The cumulative total of these financial transactions is impossible to estimate, given the current availability of information, but would be a staggering proportion of the total resources in the state.

## Human Rights and Role of the Indian State

Gross human rights violation is taking place in Assam and the North East as a result of the army and paramilitary forces operation right from the days of the Assam Movement. Besides, the Government of India is adopting a lot of draconian laws which blatantly violate the human rights by giving sweeping powers to the police and the army. Some of these laws are the NSA, the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act of 1967 and the TADA, which lapsed in 1996.

In general discussion with security forces and seminars on the part of the State-sponsored groups (more specifically, Home Ministry-funded organisations), there is an oft-repeated allegation that the academia, the so-called human rights groups, only highlight the excesses by the security forces and never talk about the human rights violations of the terrorist forces. There could be some elements of truth in that and there is no denying the fact that some human rights groups covertly espouse the causes of insurgent groups.<sup>22</sup> In another encounter, one senior police officer, over a series of conversations, confided to the writer about the need for *gupta hoitya* during the period from 1996 to 2000. His argument was that 1996 to the 2000 is the period when ULFA carried out massive killings of people in Assam, including the series of Bihari killings in the year 2000. He said:

the people and the press would criticize us as being inactive if we don't stop those killings by ULFA. For that if you think ULFA would come and make themselves available for arrest you are wrong. Besides they are not simple rebel. They are the one who are now acting more on behalf of Bangladesh and ISI than for propagating their ideology. They have the most dangerous explosives like the RDX, TNT etc. if exploded that we had captured in the last month was sufficient to blow up the entire Zoo-Narengi area. If you look at the statistics the way ULFA was going—and if you believe the state has the minimum responsibility to provide protection, to safeguard life and property than the so called secret killing of a few who were in gloves with ulfa was the only answer to stop them and they (Ulfa) definitely slowed down and got a strong message that if you kill we shall also kill your family.

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<sup>22</sup> Jaideep Saikia, 'Allies in the Closet Over-ground Linkages and Terrorism in Assam', *Faultlines* 9 (The Institute for Conflict Management, 2001).

Maybe he was right from his perspective, it is also true that ULFA is gradually becoming more dependent on the outside forces for its support, including ISI, but the basic questions that need to be answered are:

1. Can the police be both the judge and the executor?
2. Can the State punish those people who have to lay their lives just because they happen to be the relatives of a ULFA?
3. If the State can kill people, what happens to democracy and our Constitution that guarantees right to life under Article 14.
4. If this is so, what is the difference between the terrorists and the police which is operating under the rule of law of a democracy like India?

The mid 1980s or early 1990s phenomenon of engaging *sarkari* militants needs to be dealt with at various levels. The need to maintain a humane face compels any such State not to appear as murderers, rapists of their own citizens, at least to the outside world. In addition, it is difficult to accept that ULFA's killing has come down from 1996.

## Unified Command Structure, Ethics of Federalism and Civil Rights

Assam's history of secret killings began with Parag Das. He was editing the highly popular Assamese newspaper *Asomiya Pratidin* when he was killed by unknown militants on 17 May 1996. As we have shown in the previous chapter, Parag was highly critical of the SULFAs and his writings were damaging the business interest of many. The second killing was Mitradev Mahanta—a successful businessman who was supposedly killed for business interest—which till date remains a mystery for all. Thus, the process of a mindless killing of people had started in Assam from 1996 and lasted till 2001. The Congress-ruled Tarun Gogoi government appointed Justice S. N. Saikia on 16 August 2005 to look into the issues of secret killing. Initially, the notification included 11 cases.<sup>23</sup> Notable among them were the murder of ULFA Chairman Arabinda

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<sup>23</sup> Vide Assam government notification PLA331/2005/1.

Rajkhowa's brother Dimbo Rajkhowa, killing of ULFA's Publicity Secretary Mithinga Daimary's family, ULFA leader Subhash Sharma's relatives, ULFA's Foreign Secretary Sasha Choudhury's brother and others. Later on, 24 more cases were given<sup>24</sup> and total four reports were submitted by the S. N. Saikia Commission, the process of which has begun on 21 August 2006. The commission had the following terms of reference, and any other matters with recommendations:<sup>25</sup>

1. Circumstances, in each case, leading to the killing of the victims of these cases.
2. Identity of the killer(s) and accomplice(s), if any.
3. To find out whether there was any conspiracy in targeting the victims and the motive behind such killings.
4. Pinpoint responsibility on persons who were involved directly or indirectly in the commission of such killings.
5. To make recommendation to prevent recurrence of such killings.
6. Any other matter related to or relevant to the purpose of this enquiry.

S. N. Saikia Commission looked into 35 such cases and had submitted four thick volumes. The commission has described the process not as secret killing but as 'Ulfocide' suggesting 'the killing of ULFA's and their families and relatives'.

If we look at the nature of secret killings in Assam from 1996 to 2001, following types of victims are discernible:

1. Direct family members of ULFA.
2. Killing of sympathisers.
3. Killing on suspicion.
4. Killing of manufactured ULFAs (mostly business persons) who refused to collaborate with the killers on business interest and benefit. This has led to a process of criminalisation of economy.

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<sup>24</sup> Vide Assam government notification PLA331/2005/2. The said notification also gave 15 more cases of secret killing.

<sup>25</sup> For details, see the S. N. Saikia Commission Report submitted to the Government on 20 February 2007, 1.

In all the ULFOcide cases, the commission found the following common characteristics:

1. Each killing involved an ULFA family, or an ULFA-related family; all the police enquiries met with dead end having no clue. No charge sheet is submitted in any of the cases.
2. All the killings, except that of Dimbo Rajkhowa which was in the evening, were committed in the dead of night. The assailants invariably spoke in Assamese to awaken the inmates for killing victims.
3. The assailants were armed with sophisticated firearms of prohibited bores and masked with black wrappers or caps, to avoid being identified.
4. As firearms of prohibited bores were mostly used, forensic/ballistic examination of exhibits was mostly avoided or unduly delayed and investigation ultimately fizzled out.
5. Vehicles used in the operations were mostly Maruti Gypsies and vans. The vehicles had no registration numbers.
6. In all the cases police patrolling was missing. There were police patrolling in the crime areas prior and posterior to, but surprisingly not during the killings.
7. The involvement of army was found in all cases. By army the commission meant the armed forces of the Union deployed in Assam in aid of civil power. The commission said:

There was lurking evidence of Police–SULFA nexus in the killings, some of the later being constituted into an extra-constitutional authority and used as the executioners, the modus operandi being to visit the family, ask members to persuade its ULFA member to surrender, failing which, to send an advanced team to survey the location and structure of the house, then to send armed and masked men to the family house at dead of night, knock at the door to wake up the inmates and then drag him/them out and shoot him/them dead or take him away and secretly kill and throw the bodies somewhere.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> S. N. Saikia Commission Report submitted to the Government on 21 August 2006, 8.

8. One of the important findings of the commission was that people have unequivocally reacted against the operational tactics of the security apparatus of the state. There was general resentment and decry against the unified command structure (UCS)/chief minister.
9. The investigation was not commensurate with the seriousness of the crime perpetrated and no modern scientific methods of investigation, finger-/footprints, dog squads were used. The commission opined that no *ex gratia*/compensatory payment was made by the Government of Assam in any such case.

The commission opined that in all the cases, except one, the entire killings were remotely orchestrated; death penalty having been imposed on the victims for 'status offences' of being members of ULFA-related families and the principle of 'kill and get killed' is deducible.

The commission's report can be called as a big indictment on the functioning of the armed forces and of the Union and it strongly suggested the dismantling of the UCS at the earliest. The UCS had become the source of all human rights violations in the state as the system had given operational freedom to the army and they remain practically unaccountable to the civil administration.<sup>27</sup> The principle of 'kill and get killed' was remotely orchestrated by a few police and military officials who were the most abiding disciples of K. P. S Gill—the Assam cadre super cop who built a larger-than-life image in Punjab. The political leaders whose ultimate nodding was a must for such a systematic madness gave in to such immature advice primarily because of their political compulsions.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> On many occasions, such operational freedom to Army had created great confusion. There was no coordination between the army and police and there is always a tug of war between the two for who can kill how many 'terrorists'. In the process, many innocents were concocted to be 'dreaded terrorists', especially in the hands of the army. However, the process is always self-defeating as it is an attempt to extinguish fire with fire. Our interview with hundred of ULFA cadres in upper Assam showed that they joined ULFA primarily to kill a few army personnel who committed unbearable torture to them and to their near and dear ones.

<sup>28</sup> The regional government, AGP, had to pay a heavy price for being soft to ULFA in its first tenure. Besides, gradual dependence of Assam on the Centre, especially in financial matters, gave the then rightist BJP leaders, who wanted to crush such insurgency outfits at any cost, an upper hand.

The Saikia Commission is a reflection of the present dominating role of the Union over the states. The Central government, in the name of counter-insurgency operations, systematically increases the Union's command over the state's administrative jurisdiction. Operation of various draconian laws and declaration of certain areas as disturbed zone help the union to deploy Central forces in the name of law and order. The Armed Forces (Assam and Manipur) Special Powers (Amendment) Act, 1972 (Act No. 7 of 1972) (5 April 1972) amended the principal Act of 1958. It is now applicable in the states of Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Nagaland, Tripura, Arunachal Pradesh and Mizoram. The amended section three says,

If in relation to any State or Union territory to which the act extends, the Governor of that State, the Administrator of that Union Territory or the Central Government, in either case, is of the opinion that the whole or any part of such State or Union Territory, as the case may be, is in such a disturbed or dangerous condition that the use of armed forces in aid of the civil power is necessary, the Government of that State or the Administrator of that Union territory or the Central Government, as the case may be, may, by notification in the official gazette, declare the whole or such part of such State or Union territory to be a disturbed area.

In such event, if a state is declared as the disturbed area, the deployment of central paramilitary forces and army become inevitable. The Sarkaria Commission, which was appointed to look into the Centre-state relations in 1983, specifically mentioned about mutual consultation between the Centre and the states before deployment of Union armed forces. The Sarkaria Commission said:

The Union Government should invariably consult and seek the co-operation of the state government, if it proposes either to deploy suo mutuo its armed forces in that state or to declare an area as 'disturbed', the constitutional position notwithstanding. It need hardly be emphasized that without the state Government's co-operation, the mere assertion of the Union Government's right to deploy its armed forces cannot solve public order problems.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Sarkaria Commission Report Part II, 1983, 978.



It is imperative that the UCS was introduced in Assam primarily at the directions of the Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA), GOI. It may be noted that GOI's MHA issued an order no. T-7/NS/97 on 4 January 1997; the Ministry issued another order no. T-7/NS/97 on 16 January 1997 regarding army operations in the state of Assam. Complying with such orders, the Government of Assam created the UCS by Government of Assam Political A Department, no. PLA 271/95/223 on the 24 January 1997 to operationalise actions against militant groups. The following four committees were constituted as a part of the UCS:

1. Strategy Group: A strategy group headed by the chief secretary to the Government of Assam is set up at the state-level with the following members: GOC Corps/Chief of Army Staff 4 corps, Inspector Generals (Operations), CRPF, BSF and the senior most representative of RAW. The Joint Secretary (Home and Political) is the convener and keeps records and minutes.
2. Unified Headquarters: For operational purposes, unified headquarters are set up with the following members: headed by GOC 4 Corps of the army and the Director General of Police (Assam), the Brigadier General, Staff of 4 Corps of the army, IGP Operations (Assam), IGPs of (SB) Assam, BSF & CRPF and representatives of SIB and RAW. The terms of reference of unified headquarters would be: (a) to synergise counter-insurgency operations conducted by the army, central police organisations (CPOs) and state armed police, including deployment and redeployment. (b) to decide on modification of the areas of operations between the army and the CPOs vis-à-vis the project's action plan. (c) to monitor the proceedings of the district-level coordination committees. (d) crisis management.
3. District-level Coordination Committee: The district-level coordination committees are constituted with six members headed by the commissioner of division as chairman, and including the deputy commissioners, superintendents of police, representatives of army and paramilitary forces along with representatives of intelligence agencies as members. The committees would function at the district level on the lines similar to that for the state unified headquarters.

4. This order would be reviewed at the end of three months from the date of the first meeting of the Strategy Group. This arrangement shall be deemed to have come into force from 20 January 1997.

The UCS is, thus, not a statute or statutory order. Such methodology of counter-insurgency operations conceptualised at the behest of the Centre is an alibi to erode the state's authority. There is no effective attempt to modernise the state police; rather, by making the state dependent on the Centre to fight counter-insurgency operations perpetually, the Union is keeping all options open to intervene in the law and order situation of the state. This is in contravention with the federalist principle which is also underscored by the Sarkaria Commission as we have mentioned above. To declare a state a disturbed area for more than 13 years (from 1997 till 2010) suggests that there is no normalcy in the state and this makes us conclude that the Congress government's tall claim for bringing back normalcy in the state is a myth. Till now the system of UCS is going on with full intensity where there is the supreme dominance of army, with the only exception that it is the chief minister who has now become the head of the unified structure and not the chief secretary.

It looks like that the Central government, rather than taking over a government by imposing president's rule under article 356 of the Constitution, has devised an institutional system which is no less than the president's rule in terms of its power and scope, yet they don't have to be accountable for taking over a state's administrative machinery. Thus, the UCS can be termed as a surrogate president's rule in Assam. Such near-permanent system of the Centre makes us forget that the use of the armed forces is in aid of the civil power. In aid of the civil power does not mean irrespective, or in supersession, of the civil power. This provision is somewhat inconsistent with the federal structure, for it does not envisage any review or cessation of the order or decision by any judicial or impartial authority. It should not be that once an area is declared a disturbed area, it will always remain so. The peaceful Assembly elections in 2006 actually established the prevailing of a normal condition in the state. Declaration of certain areas as 'disturbed' has practically become a euphemism for president's rule in North East India.

Here the opinion of the S. N. Saikia Commission is noteworthy:

Thus a review will be consistent with the basic structure of our federal constitution and any intrusion into the powers of a state and of its subjects will be violative of the basic structure of the constitution and hence, ultra virus. The functions in aid of civil power have been ruled by law and not by discretion.... This is important because putting the civilians exclusively under the army *ipso facto* affects their civil rights and to that extent discriminated against without authority of law. In the absence of any other law the power of the union in this regard may be confined to Article 355 on duty of the Union to protect states' external aggression and internal disturbance and to ensure that the government of every state is carried on in accordance with the provisions of the Constitution. So the Constitution itself provides the ultimate limitations as also guidelines for the state.<sup>30</sup>

It is always dangerous to use the army in the internal law and order problems. The attitudinal and orientation differences between the police and the army are quite obvious; the former is to maintain law and order and control crimes, while the latter is to combat in war against enemies. In general perception, the role of army is meant to fight against the enemy and its success is in the unrestrained killing and destruction of the enemy. Compared to that, the police has to control crimes and criminals and maintain law and order within the pillars of the Constitution and the laws of the country. Police is to deal with the citizens of the country and protect their life and property. According to the commission:

To make the police and the army work together in a civil situation may result in policisation (sic) of the Army, on the one hand, and the militarisation of the police, on the other. The result will be that we have a militarised police, and the policised military. Indeed in almost all the cases under reference we found evidence of frequent visits of army men to the Ulfa families, and during some of the so called 'encounters'. There has also been allegation of Constitutional violation of exposing the civil population, women and children, to the harassment of the military with consequent region of terror to the civil populace. Either way it may be undesirable to continue it for long and to turn it into a pattern of civil administration.

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<sup>30</sup> S. N. Saikia Commission Report submitted to the Government on 21 August 2006, 12.

Since 2001, after the change of government, there has been a shift of operational strategies from 'kill and get killed' to 'zero tolerance' or 'kill to protect'. While in the first paradigm family members and sympathisers had to pay with their lives; in the second paradigm, anybody having to do with the armed revolution 'must be killed'. However, in both the paradigms, the killing of innocent people went unabated. The extra-constitutional power of the army, by dint of UCS, did not stop at the killing of ULFA and their relatives only. The same structure is also in operation in other trouble-torn areas of Assam like NC Hills, Bodoland areas and Karbi Anglong. For example, according to an estimate by the Dimasa Apex Body, more than eight Dimasa people were killed by army in 2008 on suspicion of belonging to the DHD Garlosa group. Interestingly, the list of such 'dreaded terrorists' included one 80-year-old man and a 12-year-old girl.<sup>31</sup> How do the security forces, particularly the army, manufacture such killings? The remark of the S. N. Saikia Commission is noteworthy:

Throughout evidence the official witnesses say that they kill the boys self defense. The idea varies, and some seem to be of the view that Ulfas are to be shot at sight. Fake encounters are often reported in news papers. Almost always some obsolete weapons/ammunitions and/or some Ulfa related papers are put near the dead bodies. Obviously for post mortem justification of the killings this will not stand on the way of the spade being called a spade.<sup>32</sup>

These observations were made only in relation with ULFA. However, even though the institutional process of secret killing has ended, killing of innocent people on suspicion is still going on in Assam. From many such incidents, we would like to refer to one such incident. On 19 February 2010, Indian army jawans located in Gohpur's Ghograpar camp killed one Bijoy Boro near Assam–Arunachal border area of Helem police station. The army sources have said that a group of four persons tried to open fire with AK 47 and the army team responded as a result of which Bijoy Boro died on the spot. The army declared the team as the dreaded NDFB cadres. However, the next day, the entire village rushed

<sup>31</sup> Obtained through an interview with the president of Dimasa Apex Body on a personal visit to Haflong, NC Hills, on 1 July 2009.

<sup>32</sup> S. N. Saikia Commission, the second supplementary report on the third group of 10 cases on secret killings, submitted on 15 March 2007, 5.

onto the Helem police station and demanded the arrest of the killers. According to Rokh Mech who was also present during the shoot-out, all four of them sat down after illegally collecting firewood from forest. On seeing the army personnel whom they confused to be forest guards, they started running. Mech said that the bare-bodied Bodo was wearing a small *gamocha* (towel) and they were horror-struck to know that the army personnel could discover one AK 47, one walkie-talkie and many objectionable items from his dead body. The entire village was infuriated precisely because they had to pay regular donations to the extremists and they had to face the wrath from the army personnel as well.<sup>33</sup>

The Assam police too does not have very high opinion about the army as it is the local police who needs to face the common public after such fake encounters are carried out by the army. How does one explain such trigger happy character of the Indian army, especially in counter-insurgency operations within the country? It is because the counter-insurgency operations today in the North East India have been practically reduced to 'kitne ko giraya?' (How many have you killed?). The prospects of promotion of army officers or the opportunities to get higher trainings in the prestigious defence institutes in the country depends on the following three factors:

1. How many insurgents/terrorists have been killed?
2. How many insurgents/terrorists have been apprehended?
3. What is the amount of explosives, arms and ammunitions captured?

In order to fulfil these criteria, the army has to fabricate many stories including branding many thugs, common thieves and dacoits as the dreaded anti-national terrorists.<sup>34</sup> However, such career-friendly

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<sup>33</sup> Details obtained after visiting the place on 21 February 2010. The villagers were forced to provide the Bodo extremists regular donation, shelter and other facilities like providing sim card for mobile connection. The villagers said that instead of protecting the villagers, the army turned out to be the butchers. Details were also given in various newspapers. For details, see *Amar Asom* (20 February 2010).

<sup>34</sup> Such an incident took place where the Indian Army claimed to have killed six allegedly HUJI terrorists in the border district of Dhubri, near Bangladesh, on 17 September 2008. In order to prove that they were HUJI terrorists, the Indian army claimed to have found six Bangladeshi passports in their pockets. Later on, they were confirmed to be cattle smugglers—a flourishing trade in the border areas of Bangladesh and India.

approach of the Indian army has got serious consequences in developing a truncated democracy in the North East region.

Here the opinion of S. N. Saikia Commission report is very significant:

Usually in this part of the country, what is being seen is the army men and the militarized policemen, perhaps for being in the same UCS, assume themselves to have been required or authorized to kill the suspected Ulfas/extremists straightway ... very often some make belief posthumous evidence is laid near the dead body to show or prove that the victim was an ULFA.... this perhaps shows in what casual manner the Human Right to Life and liberty is being dealt with/defrauded by these some of the State agencies personnel.

On the issue of 'kitne ko giraya', the commission has said:

There is evidence to show that (credit) of killing of boys who are (suspected) Ulfas and /or who are garbed as Ulfas is often related to the officer's prospect of promotion or favourable posting, or SULFA's encounter specialist's expected favour from the army or police hierarchy. These questions have to be considered in the prevailing background situations namely the state of Assam has been declared a disturbed area under the Assam Disturbed areas Act ... and the position that once a disturbed area, always a disturbed area, in the state of Assam.<sup>35</sup>

However, it would be wrong to dub the entire secret killings from 1996 onwards as the fault of UCS, although we can hardly minimise its impact in designing and executing the killings. The role of political leaders, particularly the then chief minister of the AGP government, Prafulla Kumar Mahanta, is shady in the whole issue of 'Ulfocide'. It would be interesting to look at what the commission has to say on the role of Parfulla Kumar Mahanta, the then home and chief minister of the state.

There is enough evidence to show that the then Home Minister was at the helm of these extra constitutional killings. In all the cases where the then Home Minister's name have been directly mentioned, Shri Prafulla Kumar Mahanta has been evading opportunities to cross-examine the witnesses by various pretexts and untenable pleas of this commission

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<sup>35</sup> S. N. Saikia Commission, the second supplementary report on the third group of 10 cases on secret killings, 7.

being without jurisdiction, a plea which has been rejected by this commission on numerous occasions.<sup>36</sup>

Thus, the fight against insurgency makes the Indian State as brutal as those of the terrorists who had never taken an oath to defend the Constitution—the highest law of the land. What makes the State different from the terrorist is that the State functions under the rubric of rule of law. The Constitution and the laws of India do not envisage or permit any setting up of an extra-constitutional authority; and it is always dangerous to empower any extra-constitutional authority to deal with matters involving human life and liberty. The police–SULFA unholy nexus forged into an irresponsible extra-constitutional authority, jeopardising human life, liberty and rights, as has been in evidence, is wholly unconstitutional, and the then executive department of the state must be held accountable for the dreadful, unconstitutional killings, endangering human lives in the state during the period.

Thus, it becomes clear that UCS and other anti-insurgency devices adopted in the North East region have been changing the nature of democracy, which can be described as ‘democracy deficit’. Secret killing is a manifestation of military- and security-oriented policies of the Centre towards the North East in general and Assam in particular. The North East is one of the most securitised and militarised zones in South Asia. Secret killing or ‘ULFOcide’ has intensified the process of militarisation. What is most surprising is the casual attitude of the state government in implementing the recommendations of the commission. Enquiry commissions are some of the attempts of the State to go for self-introspection. Such commissions can be said to be the self-auditing mechanisms of the State through which it can correct/amend or modify some of its own actions. However, till now, except giving some amount to the victim’s family, the major recommendations go unimplemented. The commission recommended the gradual dismantling of the UCS, but till now the government has not tabled the reports so that they can be discussed in the State Assembly, not to talk about minimum action on the report. Where is the principle of collective responsibility? It seems that the commission was appointed to gain political mileage.

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<sup>36</sup> Saikia Commission, the second supplementary report, 2.

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### **What Keeps ULFA Going** *Endogenous and Exogenous Factors*

#### Rebel Imaginaries and Reality

From the very beginning, ULFA was never successful in developing a sense of peoplehood the way Nationalist Socialist Council of Nagaland (Isak-Muivah) NSCN (IM) was successful in doing it in Nagaland. Whether it is the issue of migration, resources control or identity of the Assamese people, ULFA claims to have undivided people's support. But the fact is the organisation had never tried to measure people's opinion on such an important issue—whether the people of Assam support the secessionist claim of ULFA.

On the other hand, quite contrary to ULFA's claim, Naga National Council (NNC) could build up a sense of belongingness to the cause of Naga independence, notwithstanding the fact that the Nagas are a cluster of more than 18 groups with innumerable records of head hunting and killing among themselves. The long struggle against the State had brought various factions of the Naga tribes into one common political platform, although they have no common language among the tribes.<sup>1</sup> A distinct tribal economic pattern, local traditions of self-governing institutions, deep sense of attachment to the native soil, a desperate urge to protect the traditional laws, customs and tribal authority are a few factors that gave tremendous sense of unity to the Naga tribes—what

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<sup>1</sup> Nagamese ('patois' Assamese) is the lingua franca for the Naga tribes. English is also widely spoken in the urban areas.



they claim to be the 'Naga way of life'.<sup>2</sup> Today the Nagas have achieved a 'sense of peoplehood'<sup>3</sup> that very few sub-national groups have attained.

The formation of NNC marks an important phase in the formation of Naga peoplehood. Representatives of individual tribal councils held a meeting in February 1946 and reorganised and renamed the erstwhile Naga Hills District Tribal Council as NNC. (Here the word 'national' was used for the first time. For the first time, an attempt was made to bring various Naga tribes under one sociopolitical platform.) 'The movement of solidarity launched by the NNC contributed to the lessening of the inter-tribal feud and the consequent emergence of the "Naga identity" which the Nagas claim to be the "Naga way of life".'<sup>4</sup> The coming together of otherwise divergent tribal groups, who had no common language and were marked by inter-tribal feuds, under the banner of NNC is a glaring example of an ethnic mobilisation to desperately protect their distinctiveness. Urmila Phandis, the noted scholar on ethnic movements in South Asia, describes five components of such ethnic groups. They are: (a) a subjective belief in real or assumed historical antecedents; (b) a symbolic or real geographical centre; (c) shared cultural emblems such as race, language, religion, dress and diet, or a combination of some of them which, though variegated and flexible, provide the overt basis of ethnic identity; (d) self-ascribed awareness of distinctiveness and belonging to the group and (e) recognition by others of this group differentiation. It is thus a self-defined and 'other recognized' status.<sup>5</sup> The self-awareness process has already begun: there is a long struggle looming ahead for the Nagas to be recognised by others as a separate nationhood. Prior to the advent of the NNC, most of the tribes lived in isolation and the role of the village council was restricted to the 'village republic'. The NNC utilised all the arsenals of ethnic mobilisation such as customs, tradition, village-level self-governing institutions, religion, a definite sense of territoriality and so on. These factors were sufficient to highlight

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<sup>2</sup> For details, see Udayon Misra, 'The Naga National Question', *Economic and Political Weekly* 13, no. 14 (Bombay, 8 April 1978).

<sup>3</sup> A term used by Horowitz. See Donald Horowitz, *Ethnic Groups in Conflict* (UC Berkeley, 1985), 41, 52.

<sup>4</sup> Udayon Misra, *Periphery Strikes Back* (Shimla: IAS, 2000), 30.

<sup>5</sup> Urmila Phandis, *Ethnicity and Nation-building in South Asia* (Delhi, London: SAGE Publication, 1989), 14. Misra has also referred to Phandis.

the issue of cultural incompatibility with the Indians. In the later period (in the 1980s), the Naga ethnic leaders developed a historically defined Nagaland with an irredentist claim over the territories over other sub-national groups.

ULFA has never attempted to take the people of Assam into confidence. The Naga extremist groups maintain and formulate their policies at least to begin with the tribal bodies such as Naga hoho, Tatar hoho, the Church and later on the Naga Mother's Association, Naga Student's Federation, etc. ULFA is in clash with almost all the important personalities and organisations of Assam. Some of the prominent personalities who were attacked by ULFA for their anti-ULFA views are Homen Borgohain, Professor Hiren Gohain, Dr Amalendu Guha, Kanak Sen Deka, Chandra Prasad Saikia, Jayanta Madhab, Dr Nagen Saikia and many others. ULFA has also fought with almost all the recent presidents of Asom Sahitya Sabha—the recent being Kanak Sen Deka who had opposed ULFA for their pro-Bangladeshi views.<sup>6</sup> ULFA's fight with the premiere organisation of the state, AASU, is well known. In May 2005, some youths of Chiringchapari, Dibrugarh, appealed to all people for a total boycott of the Bangladeshi in all kinds of work. This has led to the massive exodus of the suspected Bangladeshis from upper Assam. Among the organisations which had opposed such exodus were the Congress (I) and ULFA.<sup>7</sup> On this occasion too, ULFA and AASU came to open clashes. ULFA ridiculed AASU's attempt to resolve the migration issue through tripartite talks with the GOI. In this whole controversy, ULFA's stand is that first we have to deport the Biharis, the Marwaris, Nepalis and other North Indian people and then only we have the right to drive out the so-called Bangladeshis. Almost all the organisations and newspapers criticised the viewpoints of ULFA.<sup>8</sup> Even other prominent religious organisations such as *Asom Satra Masabha*, *Sankar Sangha* and others have opposed ULFA for their recent activities.

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<sup>6</sup> See *Amar Asom*, 27 May 2005.

<sup>7</sup> All the newspapers from 13 to 25 May 2005 were agog with this controversy.

<sup>8</sup> See *Amar Asom*, 27 May 2005. The editor Nagen Saikia in a first-page write-up criticised ULFA for acting on behalf of Bangladesh.

## How People Look at ULFA's Demand: Result of Field Survey

We ourselves tried to look at the support base of ULFA by trying to know the opinion of the people on some issues such as secessionism and 'Assam being never a part of India'. The survey which was conducted in May 2001 was primarily an election survey which was conducted under our guidance.<sup>9</sup> In recent times, many surveys were conducted as part of election studies; however, a survey of 2001 is of great significance as 2001 was ULFA's heyday.

Altogether, 29 Assembly constituencies were selected on the basis of sampling. Factors like religion, geographical distance, demographic composition, literacy rate, caste, etc., were taken into consideration while selecting these 29 constituencies. A structured questionnaire was prepared to interview 56 voters in each constituency. These 56 voters were picked up from four polling stations which were again selected on the basis of the factors mentioned above. Fourteen voters were interviewed from each polling station, who were again selected on the basis of systematic random sampling from the voters list. Out of the total voters interviewed (total no. 1624), 64.80 per cent were males and 35.20 per cent were females. The majority of the voters who were interviewed belonged to the age group of 34 to 41, comprising 24.08 per cent. The highest number of voters lie in the age group of 18 to 41 (57.35 per cent), and in that sense, the voters were comparatively young and dynamic. Only 2.35 per cent of the voters were above 65 years of age.

The respondents in the sample were mostly literate. Only 8.89 per cent of the respondent voters were illiterate. Seventy-eight per cent of the voters interviewed were graduates or above that level. The majority of the respondents were Hindus comprising 81.32 per cent, while 15.98 per cent were Muslims. No hard-and-fast criteria were adopted to choose some specific number of voters from specific communities. Nevertheless, the representation of religions, various castes, ethnic groups, minority groups can be said to be adequate. As many as 70.21 per cent of the respondents came from a rural background, while

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<sup>9</sup> For details, see Nani Gopal Mahanta, 'Pre-Election Survey', *The Sentinel* (1 May 2001), 1 and Nani Gopal Mahanta, 'Nirbachan Somikhya', *Amar Asom* (2 May 2001), 1.

26.97 per cent were from the urban areas of the state. A small segment of the sample (2.82 per cent) also comprised tea garden labourers.

This electoral study was done to find out the support base of ULFA in the civil society. Our question was: 'It is said that the ULFA had tremendous mass support. Do you think that this mass support still exists?'

The responses were as follows:

1. No (46.37 per cent)
2. Yes (5.23 per cent)
3. It is declining, although not completely wiped out (44.86 per cent)
4. No response (3.54 per cent)

Thus, 91.23 per cent respondents (1+2) think that the support base of ULFA does not exist any more, or is declining.

We also asked: 'The ULFA and some other extremist organisations do not want to call Assam as a part of India or want to secede from India. Do you support this view?'

The responses were as follows:

1. Yes (10.09 per cent)
2. No (76.40 per cent)
3. No response (13.51 per cent)

Although the rejection of ULFA's demand is overwhelming, the 10.09 per cent of the total respondents is very significant as far as its support base is concerned. However, the people of Assam never want the ULFA issue to be resolved through police and military. The people of Assam have unanimously opined for the resolution of the insurgency issue through dialogue and negotiation. Here we would like to refer to one field study of the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies (CSDS) on society and politics in Assam.<sup>10</sup>

The question that was asked was 'What would you say, should insurgency be suppressed or resolved through negotiation?' (See Table 6.1).

The other important aspect relevant for us is the identity of the Assamese people—whether they identify themselves as Indians or

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<sup>10</sup> CSDS field study on the society and politics in Assam, mimeo, 2003.

**Table 6.1**  
**Should Insurgency Be Suppressed or Resolved through Negotiation?**

	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Percentage</i>	<i>Valid Percentage</i>	<i>Cumulative Percentage</i>
Should be suppressed	115	7.4	7.4	7.4
Resolved through negotiation	1,112	71.8	71.8	79.2
Not heard of the insurgency issue	52	3.4	3.4	82.6

*Source:* Obtained through Professor Sandhya Goswami. Based on the field study on the society and politics in Assam conducted by Centre for the Study of Developing Society (CSDS), New Delhi.

Assamese. The responses to the question: ‘While others identify themselves only with their state identity. How do you identify yourself?’ are given in Table 6.2 below.

**Table 6.2**  
**While Others Identify Themselves Only with Their State Identity,  
 How Do You Identify Yourself?**

	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Percentage</i>	<i>Valid Percentage</i>	<i>Cumulative Percentage</i>
Assamese	596	38.5	38.5	
Assamese and Indian	336	21.7	21.7	
Indian	444	28.7	28.7	
Other identities	135	8.7	8.7	
Don’t Know	38	2.5	2.5	
Total	1,549	100.0	100.0	

*Source:* Obtained through Professor Sandhya Goswami. Based on the field study on the society and politics in Assam conducted by Centre for the Study of Developing Society (CSDS), New Delhi.

## Why ULFA Has Failed to Mobilise People

The analysis of the above data is worth mentioning. Almost 47 per cent believe that it has lost its support base, whereas 45 per cent believe that the support base is declining, but not completely wiped out. Only 5.23 per cent people interviewed believe that ULFA still enjoys mass support. It seems a total of 92 per cent of the people believe that ULFA’s support base is fast depleting. The people also seem to have rejected ULFA’s

claim for secession or ULFA's claim that Assam is not a part of India. On the question, 'The ULFA and some other extremist organisations do not want to call Assam as a part of India or want to secede from India. Do you support this view?', 76.5 per cent respondents have rejected ULFA's demand. Apparently, it seems that about 10 per cent respondents believe in ULFA's ideology of secession. This 10 per cent figure is quite significant. However, this figure actually does not reflect the reality. Many respondents have said that they relate to a more Assamese identity than an Indian one. Here, the CSDS data is important. Out of 1,549 respondents, almost 39 per cent prefer to call themselves as Assamese. Almost 22 per cent prefer to call themselves as both Indian and Assamese. Twenty-nine per cent would like to call themselves as Indians. The 39 per cent respondents who would like to call themselves as Assamese don't mean that they support secession. What becomes clear from the above data is the people of Assam believe in a more federal identity—which is multiple and multilayered.

ULFA claims that Assam was never a part of India. For instance, in his address on the 11th foundation day of the ULFA, its Chairman, Arabinda Rajkhowa, declared:

History does not sustain the argument that Asom and Asom's identity is part of India and the Indian identity. It is of this reason that Asom is not even mentioned in India's national anthem. For us Asom is our only mainstream. We are not secessionists. The demand for Asom's independence is a just demand. History provides no instance of any Indian ruler ever ruling over Asom. The British were able to rule over Asom only half a century after they conquered India. After the British left, India had the moral right to take over Asom. At the time of India's independence the Indian rulers masquerading under the guise of democracy and Gandhism deceptively forced us to be a part of India instead of allowing us to be independent.<sup>11</sup>

In addition, ULFA could never present a map of the proposed independent Assam. Considering the way the NSCN (IM) has been propagating the case of 'Nagalim', ULFA till now had never come with a map that would represent its independent Assam. Nor has ULFA ever tried

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<sup>11</sup> 'ULFA Chairman's Speech', pamphlet released by ULFA, 2 May 1990.

to gauge the opinion of the ethnic groups of Assam—whether they support the cause of ULFA or oppose their demand. They have never tried to take into account the opinion of the ethnic groups like the Bodos, Karbis, Rabhas, Koch-Rajbangshis, Deuris, Chutias, Mising, Tiwa and other caste Hindu groups in their proposed demand for independent Assam. In a survey conducted by the Assamese daily *Amar Asom* it was found that the other insurgent groups like 'NDFB, Rabha People's Liberation Front, Tai Ahom Liberation Front, MALTA and others don't share ULFA's view on independent Assam rather they oppose the views of ULFA'.<sup>12</sup> Does it have any plan about cementing the widening differences among the ethnic groups in Assam? Neither has the organisation come up with any plan about the flood problem of the state that has caused about 500 human lives and had damaged ₹7,000 crore worth property and agriculture in the year 2004 alone [*Mélange*, the Sunday magazine of *The Sentinel* on October 31, 2004]?

The organisation has to say nothing except blaming the centre for exploiting the resources in Assam. (In an interview, Paresh Barua, the Commander-in Chief of ULFA said that the issues of flood and immigration are not important to them, they are struggling for an independent Assam (*Asomiya Pratidin*, 17 November 2004). ULFA has never ever tried to answer these basic questions. The old hackneyed rhetoric argument—once the state becomes independent and then socio-economic issues, corruption, alcohol and drugs, and the divisions among the ethnic groups would be taken care of is too a far-fetched argument and has no takers that the organisations like ULFA would like the Assamese people to believe.

ULFA claims that it represents the people of Assam. But ULFA has never defined the definition of the people of Assam. The question that comes to the minds of the people is where do the immigrants stand in this definition of 'people of Assam'? On the ULFA's claim that Assam was never part of India and became one after the treaty of Yandaboo in 1826 which they have rejected to accept was opposed by almost all the leading intellectuals of Assam. On this claim, Dr Amalendu Guha, the prominent social scientist of the state argued in an interview:

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<sup>12</sup> See Gautam Sharma, 'Ali Dumujat Ulfa', *Purbachal*, the Sunday magazine of *Amar Asom* (11 July 1999).

Indeed Assam was independent till the year 1826. However, Assam is not an exception here. That way Punjab was an independent state. So was the Bengal state. Before the independence in India there were seventy independent states in India. Later on all these have been brought together to form independent India. If we study the history of the nation-state this is the process how nation-state was formed—which is known as ‘law of agreement’. Even before the 1826 there were so many independent tribal tiny states of the Karbis, Dimasas, Kachari etc. The Ahoms have brought them together to form one unified ‘greater asom’.<sup>13</sup>

If ULFA can bring back the treaty of 1826 there is no earthly reason why the other tribal groups can’t claim independence as they too were independent before they were brought together by the Ahoms to form what Professor Guha says—‘Bor Asoam’ (Greater Assam). This is what the Nagas are trying to do by demanding—‘Nagalim’ or greater Nagaland by bringing some reference of history. The main demand of the Nagas, i.e., unification of all the Naga tribes into one Nagaland is structurally problematic and recipe for ethnic clashes in the North East region.

There is also no sufficient logic on the part of the Nagas for this irredentist claim. How can the Nagas claim that they had one historical Naga land when

prior to the coming of the British, the idea of a well-defined territory for the Nagas or the other tribes was virtually non-existent? It has therefore, been a long journey from the ‘Naga village republic’ to the concept of a unified *Nagalim* covering some 120,000 kilometers of land which would include all those who consider themselves to be Nagas, irrespective of whether they reside in Assam, Manipur or Arunachal.<sup>14</sup>

This trend of identifying one territory as belonging to a specific group does not augur well in a highly mixed ethnic society like North East India—this trend is also becoming contagious in the neighboring areas of Manipur, Assam, Tripura and Meghalaya. There are separatist and

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<sup>13</sup> ‘History Doesn’t Have Solution for the Practical Problems of the Present’, interview with Dr Amalendu Guha, *Amar Asom*, 2 December 2004.

<sup>14</sup> Udayon Misra, ‘Naga Peace Talks’, *Economic and Political Weekly* 38, no. 7 (15 February 2003): 596. The author, however, told me in a personal interview on 21 November 2012: ‘I have always insisted in my writings that Naga national unity is a fact, although it may be ridden with fissures at the present moment.’



secessionist groups in all these states who are trying to create independent (or within India) a homogenous land for their respective communities.<sup>15</sup> Such domination of one group is simply neither possible nor desirable in any of the states as they are mixed with diverse groups and languages.<sup>16</sup>

The ethnic groups which are fighting for an independent space want unqualified ownership of their history. They claim to be the real custodian and interpreter of history—the outsiders are simply ignorant and hence they will distort their authenticity and originality. At least, this is what the Naga Students' Federation (NSF)—perhaps the most powerful student body and a non-violent organisation in Nagaland—want us to believe. The support of the NSF to the Naga sovereignty and Greater Nagaland is well known. They issued a directive and a warning requiring non-Naga scholar to secure its permission and clearance before undertaking any academic research pertaining to the Naga people and their History.<sup>17</sup> The president of the NSF said that 'people from outside the community' would not be allowed to undertake any research on Naga history without the organisation's permission. It is really surprising that such a directive is coming from a so-called non-violent student group and not from an insurgent group. The origin of this feeling of insecurity for the Naga history is emanating from the 'genome project' that has been going in Nagaland university for last two years. Among other things, the project requires the collection of blood samples from every Naga tribe. It was felt that the project attempts to establish that all the Naga groups are actually discrete, not one nation as claimed by the Naga groups.<sup>18</sup> The leaders feel if any such claim is made at this hour, this will considerably negate the claim of Naga being one nation which they have built so laboriously for so many years.

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<sup>15</sup> Some of these groups are ULFA, NDFB in Assam, United National Liberation Front (UNLF) of Manipur, People's Revolutionary Party of Kangleipak (PREPAK) in Manipur, Tripura Volunteer Force (TVF) of Tripura, etc. For details, see <http://www.satp.org>.

<sup>16</sup> There are over 225 communities found in North East India and over 150 languages spoken. For details, see B. G. Verghese, *India's North East Resurgent* (New Delhi: Konark Publishers, 1996), 2–3.

<sup>17</sup> In one of my visits to Kohima in January 2004, one leader of NSF told me that such an order is required as people having no interest for tribal life project a very negative image about the Nagas.

<sup>18</sup> M. S. Prabhakar, 'Objects of History', *Frontline* (26 September 2003), 42.

ULFA too follows the same logic as far as their version of history is concerned. ULFA never answered certain basic questions that the people of Assam would have liked to ask. They never allowed a healthy debate that can address some structural issues. ULFA's obsession with sovereignty and fight against Delhi could not attract the common masses. Unlike the Maoists they have failed to take up the people's issues that confront them on a day-to-day basis such as corruption, unemployment, nepotism, illiteracy, communication, etc. Why does Assam need sovereignty? Why Assam's liberation is not possible within the present political system of India? What would be the socio-economic and political basis of independent Assam? What is ULFA's plan to solve some of the structural issues of Assam like flood, immigration, unemployment, etc? How do they plan to bring various nationalities within the proposed framework of independent Assam? How do they propose to build the human resources of Assam? What is their perception about globalisation? How do they plan to protect the cause of agrarian toiling people? Unfortunately, ULFA never tried to address these issues, rather they have tinkered with some of the generic macro issues which the masses could not feel attached with.

ULFA has turned to be yet another emotionally driven misplaced movement which failed to address the core issues of Assam. Parag Das, in his initial phase of ULFA-centric analysis, provided a critical assessment of ULFA. According to him:

While narrating the colonial character of Indian State or analyzing the futility of parliamentary democracy, ULFA could not provide any alternative to the system ... they never tried to explore the benefit of parliamentary politics as a transitory phase nor could they utilize the benefit of Indian democracy ... they never tried to create constituencies among the exploited masses of the region ... they talked about scientific socialism, but there is no answer how are they going to operationalise such socialism in Assam. How are you going to establish classical socialism at a time when there is overwhelming presence of market economy ... can we just remain oblivious to the positive benefits of market economy?<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Parag Das, *Rastradruhir Dinlipi* (Guwahati: Udangshi Prakashan, October 1992), 41.

Parag further said that it is easier to propagate an idealistic system of socialism, but how far an underdeveloped economy like Assam can ignore market economy? There was no such scientific discussion initiated by the ULFA cadres. ULFA's initial bonhomie with a Robin Hood image post 1985 was mostly done out of infatuation which was facilitated by the then inexperienced regional AGP party. Their notion of struggle was initially concentrated to the cooperative agricultural production by forcing the agricultural officials to cooperate with them. They spoke for the poor, fought against corruption, made the officials work, enforced prohibition, punished the black marketers, but could hardly sustain the process. ULFA wanted everything in a platter—they thought attainment of independence is a matter of time. There was no planning, sacrifice, training and proper conceptualisation, whatsoever, about liberation struggle. Slightest enticement, hardship, threatening and military rule was sufficient to bring them forward and surrender. In fact, ULFA has been considered to be the 'softest rebels' of the region by Indian Army. While being in the village, they preferred to be with the rich and wealthy ones, who could provide them with good food, music and vehicles. Even while demanding shelter in the remote village areas, their preference was always sumptuous non-vegetarian meals—it did not matter if the poor man had to work hard for arranging such hospitality. Ostensibly, to fill up their coffers, they started protecting those very corrupt people against whom they had declared a war.

Akhil Gogoi, an undisputed agrarian and peasantry leader of Assam, has criticised ULFA for neglecting the agrarian issues of Assam.<sup>20</sup> He raised certain questions such as 'Who will rule Independent Assam? Isn't it the same middle class? What will be the role of the toiling peasantry in the proposed independent Assam? .... Will there be proper land reforms? Will the poor peasantry be the same stakeholders?'<sup>21</sup>

ULFA's eerie silence can also be noticed in regard to the nearly 0.09 million tea garden workers in Assam. Tea garden workers are perhaps the most exploited sections of the state. Till now, the issues of tea garden

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<sup>20</sup> Akhil Gogoi is the leader of Asom Krishok Sangram Samity—a mass-based agrarian movement of Assam.

<sup>21</sup> Akhil Gogoi, 'The National Issues of ULFA and Our Apprehensions' (in Assamese), *Gorima* 2 no. 9 (December 2006): 27.

workers have hardly been taken up by any mainstream organisations.<sup>22</sup> ULFA claims to represent the cause of 'Asombasi', i.e., residents of Assam rather than the Assamese people. The organisation always comes forward for the cause of the toiling masses. However, it is ironical that an organisation who claims to represent the people of Assam did not bother to take up the socio-economic issues of the Adivasi communities. Here it is pertinent to look at the plight of the labourers. As Gita Bharali has said:

Most gardens lack the basic facilities they are supposed to have. Most did not have a crèche. In most cases an untrained worker looks after the infants in a run-down building. In some gardens, crèches are in the place used as a cowshed. The children do not get proper meals. In many gardens the management gives some facilities for sports and entertainment but in most gardens the dispensary is ill equipped with insufficient medicines and untrained staff. The workers do not have a club. Drinking water is inadequate and many are deprived of the basic facilities. The hospital too is of very poor quality. A few gardens have trained nurses or even doctors but in most of them the building used for it is decaying with time. There is hardly any difference by district of the type of management. We expected gardens run by registered companies to be better than the others since they have to be accountable to their shareholders. But it is rarely the case. In fact, at times we found better facilities in family owned gardens than in those owned by bigger companies.<sup>23</sup>

ULFA made very tall claims about the exploitation by the big tea garden companies; in fact, one of the most important factors for the growth of ULFA is the lack of control over resources such as tea and oil. The colonial thesis against Delhi is primarily based on lack of control over tea resources and its subsequent utilisation by other metropolitan states of India. They kept on collecting big donations from the big tea companies but they have never bothered to think about those people who made this industry possible in Assam.

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<sup>22</sup> For an account of the tea garden labourers, see Gita Bharali, 'The Tea Crisis, Health Insecurity and Plantation Labourers' Unrest', paper presented at a seminar on 'Society, Social Change and Sustainable Development' organised by the Department of Sociology, North Bengal University, 11–13 April 2007.

<sup>23</sup> See, Gita Bharali, 'Tussle between the Management and Labourers of Tea Gardens of Assam', in *Seuj Silpar Sandhanat: Asomor Cha Udyogor Oitihāsik, Rajanaitik, Arthanaitik aru Samajik Disamuh*, ed. Jayanta Madhav Datta (Jorhat: Assam Chah Karmachari Santha, December 2006), 254–255.

## ULFA's Declining Support Base in Assam

Contrary to the demand of ULFA that they are fighting a war on behalf of the people and that ULFA still is the organisation of the people doesn't reflect in reality. In fact, they are fast losing popularity because of their activity. This becomes clear from the anti-ULFA demonstration in different parts of Assam. On many occasions, rebels were hacked to death by public because of continuous harassment and extortion. What caused the decline of ULFA? We believe the following factors are primarily responsible for its decline:

1. Indiscriminate killing of Raju, Sergeio, Rashmi, Sanjay Ghosh, Manabendra, Kamla Saikia, and others, and senseless killing of Biharis at the behest of Bangladesh.
2. Support to Bangladeshi immigrants.
3. Connivance with ISI and support base at Bangladesh.
4. Dhemaji incident.
5. Support to Pakistan during the war of Kargil.

Commenting on the decline of ULFA, Ajit Patowary, one of the seniormost journalist of the state, wrote in *The Assam Tribune*, on August 1999, stating the following factors that indicate the decline of ULFA:

1. Till then all sorts of high-handedness like brutal killing and burial of the opponents by ULFA could not provoke much protest from the common people. Nor did its practice of extortion draw much criticism. But, the first shock received by its supporters was that its top brass started taking shelter in Bangladesh, the very country which has been regarded by the common Assamese people as the main bastion for the demographic threat facing them!
2. The second shock came in the form of a revelation by some nabbed ULFA leaders that the organisation has been maintaining a good rapport with the notorious ISI of Pakistan. This was again deepened when the militant outfit started blowing up oil pipelines and other oil installations inside the state, seemingly in a bid to satisfy their mentors within the ISI.

3. The abduction and killing in custody of AVARD-NE Secretary General Sanjoy Ghosh by ULFA was perhaps the major incident which not only shocked the Assamese society but also pushed it to the last limit of its tolerance. People started taking out processions condemning the incident and ULFA.
4. However, the final shock perhaps came to the Assamese people in the form of the ULFA statement which urged the people not to support the Indian cause in the wake of the Kargil confrontation. And this marked a major watershed in the relation between the common people and ULFA.

To quote Patowary:

Earlier, the highhandedness and brutalities committed by the ULFA activists were by and large forgiven by the people. Even the unearthing of the mass grave in the Lakhpathar ULFA camp during the Army's 1990 'Operation Bajrang' and the 1997 Lakhimpur incident of a college-going girl's death in a cross fire during the encounter of ULFA with the security forces following some of the outfit's members forcefully taking shelter in the house of the girl's family, were almost forgiven by the people. Significantly, the father of the girl, a school teacher, resented the way the ULFA boys were taking shelter in his house only to be roughed up by the ULFA boys. He was later killed by ULFA gunmen as a 'punishment' for the encounter with the security forces. This incident also failed to provoke any popular protest. But, today the situation is quite different. People in many areas have become vocal against ULFA high handedness. They have started holding meetings openly with the item *Ugrapanthi Sangathanar Kano Sadsyak Gaont Ashraydan Diyar Birodhita Kara* (opposing shelter to any member of the militant outfit in the village) on their agenda. They have also in the items—opposition to the ULFA statement on the Kargil issue and homage to the Kargil martyrs on their agenda.<sup>24</sup>

The killing of Sanjay Ghosh is considered to be one of the main factors for the decline of ULFA's image in front of the public. On 4 July 1997, Sanjay Ghosh—the general secretary of AVARD-NE was kidnapped for

<sup>24</sup> Ajit Patowary, 'ULFA Facing Alienation from the Masses?', *The Assam Tribune*, 17 August 1999.

AVARD-NE's alleged alliance with the RAW. But our field visit to Majuli makes it clear that he was an immensely popular worker who worked for the betterment of Majuli through voluntary works. Agricultural development, finding ways for the prevention of flood, women empowerment, etc., were some of the areas in which the organisation excelled in Majuli. Sanjay's killing is a serious blow for ULFA both domestically and internationally. The permanent representative of India at the UN, Arundhati Ghosh, who was Sanjay Ghosh's aunt, made every possible effort to ensure that their case is presented in international human rights forum. People like Mother Teresa, Dalai Lama, Kuldip Nayar and organisations like Amnesty International appealed to ULFA for the release of Sanjay Ghosh. ULFA accused Ghosh to be an agent of Indian intelligence forces like RAW and Intelligence Bureau (IB).

In the very next month, ULFA got the result of the act. In August 1997, the UN commission on the Human Rights organised a conference at Geneva. In that meeting, the general secretary of ULFA, Anup Chetia alias Gulap Barua, in the name of one John David Saloma, arranged one passport from the Bangladesh government and came to present the case of ULFA.<sup>25</sup> He made a detailed account of ULFA's objective, and the nature of India's exploitation in Assam. Chetia tried to espouse the cause of ULFA with both his fictitious and real names. Arundhati Ghosh opposed Chetia's version and established ULFA as a terrorist organisation with no respect for human rights, thus preventing Chetia from presenting his case. This act had also prevented ULFA from becoming a member of the Unrepresented Nations and Peoples Organization (UNPO), an organisation which is the most sought-after platform for those organisations which are fighting against the State to become independent, and is yet not recognised by the international and national community.<sup>26</sup> According to our information visit to Majuli, Sanjay Ghosh was killed on the very night he was kidnapped after he was returning with one Chandan Doley after participating in a meeting. He was kidnapped from the Mekheli village where the meeting was held. Both Ghosh and Doley were kept at a riverine area called Salmara Chapari. However, Doley was fortunate to have escaped from the scene

<sup>25</sup> See Parag Moni Aditya, *Swadhinota* (Niyar Prakasan, 2002), 81.

<sup>26</sup> See [www.unpo.org](http://www.unpo.org).

by jumping into river Brahmaputra and reaching Nimatighat. This annoyed the kidnappers who therefore killed Sanjay Ghosh and threw his body into the river. Another incident which had caused damage to ULFA's name is the killing of Rashmi Bora of Raidingia, Nagaon. ULFA later on acknowledged the killing and accused her of having physical relationship with an army officer and passing on vital information about ULFA. It was said in the statement by ULFA that Rashmi took ₹30,000 for the work.

According to our source, ULFA cadre Gobinda Das alias 'fifty' proposed Rashmi many times and the proposal was repetitively turned down by Rashmi who was studying at class VIII at Raidingia High school. Meanwhile, Rashmi, who was a very gifted Bihu dancer, was requested by one army major to teach her daughter the art of Bihu dance. The ULFA cadre warned Rashmi not to go to the army major's residence and ultimately killed her for not obeying his dictate. Both the killings were opposed by the common people, and thousands came out to express their protest. These killings were conducted by the local cadres without informing the higher leaders. This shows the gradual loss of control of ULFA at the grass-roots level.

Another act which had greatly eroded ULFA's support is the role the organisation played during the time of Kargil war. In a very self-defeating attempt, the organisation took the side of Pakistan when the Kargil war was at its peak. In the midst of the war in the month of June 1999, the president of ULFA, Arabinda Rajkhowa, sent a long statement which was published by almost all the newspapers in Assam on 5 June 1999. Here we refer to one reporting by the Assamese daily *Dainik Janmbhumi* on 25 June 1999:

In the midst of the Kargil war the ULFA is expressing its support to the infiltrators i.e. the Pakistani army against the Indian army. The organization has also appealed to the Assamese jawans serving at Kashmir to abandon the Indian side and come back to Assam. The president of the organization Sri Arabinda Rajkhowa in a statement to the press today has said that like Assam, Kashmir was never a part of India. In the unjust war of India against the freedom loving people of Kashmir, India is also trying to malign the Pakistan as the infiltrator. In the statement the organization has also appealed to the people of Assam to contribute to the



coffers of ULFA instead of paying hard earned money to the families of those killed in the war.<sup>27</sup>

In another report by the press, ULFA had sent one team to fight against the Indian army at the Kargil war, but on the way, many of them had surrendered to the authority in Assam. Besides, ULFA also informed the ISI about the army movements from Assam to Kashmir.<sup>28</sup> There is no denying the fact that during the time of Kargil war, a nationalistic feeling swept across Assam also. Many soldiers of Assam like Jintu Gogoi, Udhab Barman died in the war. In many places people came out for donation to the affected families of war. According to one source even NSCN declared ceasefire at the time Indo-China war in 1962 to give relief to the Indian army.<sup>29</sup> The middle class in Assam believes that the organisation has no control over its own affairs and is now totally dictated by the ISI and DGFI of Pakistan and Bangladesh, respectively. This feeling, which is further fuelled by government propaganda, has changed the opinion of the middle class about ULFA.

During the period of Kargil war, the organisation even earned the wrath of people like Ajit Kumar Bhuyan and Parag Das who were known to be two most important ideologues of ULFA. During the time of operation Rhino and Bajrang, Bhuyan was arrested many times for his pro-ULFA views. In the front-page main article in *Natun Samay*, Bhuyan wrote:

By armed struggle the organization who wanted to make Assam independent is today becoming a puppet in the hands of foreign powers? The leaders seem to be listening only to the directives of the foreign power—this is a million dollar question in front of the people of Assam.... To speak the truth the ISI and ULFA relationship is the talk of discussion among all the households of Assam today. The issue just can't be brushed aside as Government propaganda.

Why is this happening? This is because ULFA's recent activities, statement to the paper and their political role. ULFA's role in Kargil war has proved that ULFA is yet to understand the nuances of international and

<sup>27</sup> 'Ulfar Aahban', *Dainik Janambhumi* (25 June 1999), 1.

<sup>28</sup> 'Ulfar aru Kargil Juddha', *Dainik Janambhumi* (12 September 1999), 3.

<sup>29</sup> Udayan Dutta, 'Kargil Juddha aru ULFA', *Purbachal* (11 July 1999), 6.

national politics, in other words they have failed to take the national struggle to its desired goal. The role the organization has played during the Kargil has proved beyond doubt that something is wrong—its facing a big problem, somebody is forcing the organization to work according to Pakistan.

.... Recently I have written in many occasions the vast expansion of ISI in Assam. This goes without saying that today ISI has expanded its net in all the parts of Assam. If ULFA is not aware of this situation, ULFA shall fall prey to ISI. Question arises what kind of thought process today guides ULFA?... It has opposed India but had not spoken a word against Pakistan. How come Pakistan is innocent? It has accused India of being engaged in illegal war and gave a clean certificate to Pakistan. A totally irresolvable arithmetic for us!

We are forced to think that today that ULFA's every move is controlled by Pakistan, it's extremely difficult for ULFA to go against Pakistan.<sup>30</sup>

Finally, ULFA's stand on the migration issue is the most complex position that the people of Assam find difficult to accept. ULFA's pro-Bangladeshi position became more clear after 2000 when the organisation established its permanent base at Bangladesh. Otherwise, how can one explain ULFA's elaborate report to the then secretary general of UN, Pérez de Cuéllar, majority portion of which is dealing with the migration issue to Assam? Even in its website the organisation deals significantly with the issue of illegal migration in Assam. The final shock came to the people of Assam when ULFA openly sided with the Bangladeshi immigrants and appealed to drive out the Indians first in a major controversy regarding the exodus of some illegal Bangladeshi migrants from Dibrugarh, Assam, in May 2005. The local youths urged all people not to absorb the Bangladeshi immigrant in the work and not to give them shelter. Getting annoyed, many immigrants left Dibrugarh for other parts of Assam. All the newspapers of Assam expressed their surprise at the way ULFA responded to the whole crisis.<sup>31</sup> Here we would like to refer to a front-page prime article written by

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<sup>30</sup> Ajit Kumar Bhuyan, 'How Come Pakistan Is Innocent, Will It Do Arabinda Rajkhowa–Paresh Barua?', *Natun Samay* (9 July 1999), 1–4.

<sup>31</sup> See the newspapers of Assam, particularly from 20 to 27 May 2005.

Dr Nagen Saikia, an ex-professor of Assamese department of Dibrugarh University, a littérateur and an ex-president of Asom Sahitya Sabha who was then the editor of one of the most popular Assamese daily of Assam, *Amar Asom*. He says in the article entitled 'How Much Independent Is ULFA',

One vital question that erupts in every conscious person of Assam today is how much ULFA itself is independent—the organization who wants to make Assam sovereign by armed struggle. The statement of the president of ULFA, Arabinda Rajkhowa, on the 22nd May to consider all the Bangladeshi as the Assamese and the Indians as the foreigner evoke strong reaction among the minds of the Assamese people. It is the most unfortunate for the Assamese people that ULFA which emerged in the anti-foreigner Assam movement (against the Bangladeshi) is now taking shelter at Bangladesh ... the whole world knows that Pakistan stands no where at the military might of India not to talk about Bangladesh. In such a situation can any militant organization even dream of liberating Assam by the military might of Pakistan and the population of Bangladesh? If that unthinkable ever takes place whose Assam will be this? In that case, Assam will be an extension of Bangladesh! The current Bangladesh is not the secular Bangladesh of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, Bangladesh is now the hub of Islamic fundamentalism led by Begum Khaleda Zia. In nook and corner of Bangladesh innumerable fundamentalist Islamic organizations are growing up. At the initiative of Pakistan's ISI this invariably extends to Assam also. ULFA at the directives of ISI is now based at Bangladesh to liberate Assam! What an erosion of self-respect and dignity!...The ULFA president says why the Bangladeshi, first the so called Indians should be driven out of Assam. Besides he also urges not to harass the Assamese Muslims in the name of foreigner's expulsion. Now the question is those who are coming out of Dibrugarh at an appeal to the people not to absorb and give shelter to Bangladeshi cheap workers—how many of them are Assamese Muslim? If Indians are foreigners, in that case Sankardeva, Madhavdeva, Sukapha, Bezbarua, Krishna Kanta Handique, Gohainbarua, Jyoti Prasad Agarwala, Kanaklal Barua, Surrya Kr. Bhuyan, Syed Abdul Malik, Lila Gogoi, Jyotindra Nath Goswami (they are the most celebrated Assamese who have laid down the foundation of Assamese culture) all will be the foreigners! By this very act of ULFA, the last thin ray of hope that the Assamese people had on ULFA is now vanished! It will be very difficult to revive that feeling. If they want to establish the rule of Assam and Assamese they must first free themselves from ISI, Pakistan and Bangladesh. They must give

up the hope to liberate Assam by giving the state into the hands of the foreigners.<sup>32</sup>

The last incident that we would like to refer is the Dhemaji bomb blast by ULFA that had killed 14 school-going children on 15 August 2004 when a massive crowd gathered to celebrate the Independence day at an official function of the district administration. The incident shook the entire country and anti-ULFA rallies were taken out in all the parts of the state. Needless to say, many of them were arranged under the tutelage of the State administration. On many occasions, there were spontaneous reactions from the people, particularly in the rural areas. People refused to give shelter to the ULFA boys—a big change of circumstance from 1985–87 when providing shelter to the boys was a great act of accomplishment for the rural masses.

In the stronghold of ULFA, particularly at Nalbari and Rangia—there were huge reactions against ULFA and other insurgent groups such as NDFB and BLTF. I had the opportunity to attend one such anti-insurgent sabha at Rangia on 1 August 1999. According to the estimate by the organisers, more than 5,000 people gathered from seven districts of lower Assam—Barpeta, Nalbari, Darrang, Kamrup, Dhubri Kokrajhar and Bongaigaon. Although it is difficult to get the exact figure, what we have observed is a sea of humanity coming against the atrocities of violence indulged in by ULFA, NDFB and the BLT. Some of the slogans and play cards which were displayed were ‘Don’t give money to extremists’, ‘Protect us from extremists’, ‘We are not afraid of ULFA, NDFB and BLT’, ‘We don’t want independent Assam and Bodo land’, ‘It’s better to die than live like a coward’ and ‘Let us live’. After the procession which was nothing more than human chain for many kilometres, a series of meetings took place at B. D. College and at Haradutta–Birdutta Bhawan of Rangia. In the representative meeting which took place at 2 p.m., various leaders from all the districts spoke against the fear psychosis created by the extremists and the government security agencies. One common allegation raised by the speakers was the forcible shelter that those extremists ask for from the rural people. All the speakers alleged that as a

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<sup>32</sup> Nagen Saikia, ‘ULFAr Swadhinota Kiman’, *Amar Asom* (27 May 2005) (author’s translation).

result of such forcible shelter, the female members have to live in constant fear. The meeting urged the government to give protection to the presidents of Santras Birodhi Gana Marcha (Anti-terrorism People's Front), Sri Umesh Rabha and Bipin Kalita, who were responsible for mobilising people against the terror of the extremists. The meeting took a resolution that the "Marcha" would give protection to the people against the menace of terrorism—more 95 per cent of the people are against separatism and people would not buckle down under the pressure of the terrorists'.

Attending such a meeting was a unique experience for us. It is to be mentioned that it was not a typical government-sponsored meeting against ULFA which is a common phenomenon today. People came on their own to lodge their protest against terrorism and violence. The extremists who were afraid of such development killed Umesh Rabha later on for his non-violent resistance against violence. It is to be mentioned that the extremists made several attempts on his life and ultimately they were successful.

Here are some of the lists prepared by the Assamese daily *Agradoot* on some of the ULFA activists who were held up by the villagers and handed over to the police.

**Table 6.3**  
**Militants Captured and Handed Over to Police by Public**

<i>Name of the Extremists</i>	<i>Organisation</i>	<i>Place of Events</i>	<i>Date of Incident</i>
Pranab Tamuli	ULFA	Bhella, Barpeta	13 May 1999
Tanu Bora	ULFA	Na-Sirajinagar, Jorhat	26 May 1999
Mantu Barman	ULFA	Belsar, Nalbari	12 December 1999
Mohan Deka	ULFA	Belsar, Nalbari	12 December 1999
Nripen Mahanta	ULFA	Rongdoi, Jorhat	4 July 2000
Mrigen Bora	ULFA	Rongdoi, Jorhat	4 July 2000

*Source:* 'Raije Policer Hatot Gotai Dile Ugroponthi', *Agradoot* (17 July 2000), 1.

Thus, ULFA that came up primarily to emancipate people of Assam from the shackles of exploitation and discrimination has itself become the source of fear and terror. The organisation has failed to provide any alternative to the existing exploitative State system. A euphoria was created by ULFA in its initial period as it carried on massive communitarian work in every nook and corner of Assam, particularly in the mid

1980s. Our field observation has also made it clear that the rural people had tremendous faith in ULFA that 'it would do something for the people, for us'—but that expectation was continuously belied by ULFA. The people of Assam were particularly enraged by the fact that it wanted to free Assam by taking help of Bangladesh—a country believed to be the creator of all evils in Assam. On top of that, the organisation does not have any plan about the genuine issues of Assam as we have highlighted above. The organisation never responded to some of the questions initiated by some newspapers like *Amar Asom*. *Amar Asom* initiated a series of debates on the questions raised by ULFA.<sup>33</sup> These issues were:

1. How far the claim of secessionism is feasible?
2. Can Assam sustain if it becomes independent?
3. Can Assam become independent only on the basis of the Yandaboo treaty?
4. How far is ULFA's claim feasible from an international point of view?
5. What is ULFA's future vision of Assam?

The various regional newspapers began a series of discourses on the questions of Sovereignty and Right to Self Determination. Professor Hiren Gohain, Professor Amalendu Guha, Jayanta Madhav (economist), Professor Udayaditya Bharali, Professor Monirul Hussain and others were interviewed. ULFA never bothered to answer the criticism except by using some rhetoric. The newspaper carried out a series of interviews in the month of December 2004. But ULFA gave only one answer and that is too full of rhetoric. The organisation's basic response was that the Indian State has selected a few intellectuals and through them the State has been trying to denounce ULFA's struggle which the latter are launching on behalf of the people. There are few takers of such an argument!

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<sup>33</sup> See *Amar Asom* from 1 to 30 December 2004.

# 7

## What Sustains ULFA?

If ULFA's support base was over, it should have no longer kept a centre stage the way the organisation is still doing, in spite of the arrests of all the top ULFA leadership and after all the important leaders have either surrendered or have been killed. Is it just an organisation of the frustrated, unemployed, vagabond youths? Or did they join ULFA to make some quick money? Or are they really motivated to carry forward a war against Delhi's exploitation? Or is it just a proxy war on behalf of anti-Indian forces like ISI and DGFI?

According to an estimate, more than 5,000 cadres of the organisation have surrendered. A total number of 984 extremists were killed in anti-insurgency operations from 1997 to 15 May 2001. So the major question that comes to the mind is what sustains ULFA? In this chapter we shall try to answer this question. The issue of ULFA's sustenance has been dealt with by various scholars. Professor Udayon Misra addresses this question in his seminal work *The Periphery Strikes Back*. Professor Mishra argues that the main support base of ULFA is the Assamese middle class who has been holding a strong sense of dissatisfaction towards New Delhi:

Even then, the main ideological prop to ULFA's idea of a *Swadhin Asom* still continues to come from the Assamese middle class which, despite its strong stakes in the Indian market, has been nourishing a feeling of deprivation ever since Independence ... the idea of independence holds great charm for sections of this class which has long been burdened by a sense of antagonism and hatred for the 'Indian' ruling class which, it

feels, has been depriving it of its rightful share in the development process. Therefore, this section, even when realizing the unattainable nature of the independence demand, would like to keep the idea alive so as to use it as a convenient lever to extract concessions from New Delhi.<sup>1</sup>

On the sustenance of ULFA, M. S. Prabhakar, a perceptive commentator from the North East, says:

Indeed the problem in Assam is that while the ULFA phenomenon in itself is neither mysterious nor profound, the organization rather than the social base that has sustained the organization has received an undeservedly large amount of attention. For, the organization has been sustained not merely by its numerical strength or the strength of its arms or its organizing capacity, though all these, especially the last, have been considerable, but by its social base. It is the ideological and moral sanction provided by the Assamese society—even making allowance for all the fragmented nature of that structure—that has sustained the ULFA.<sup>2</sup>

Professor Sanjib Baruah also argues in the same breadth. He argues that without resolving the issues raised by ULFA it would be difficult to smash the organisation. He argues:

While it may be possible today to mobilize the sizeable section of multi-ethnic Assam's population against ULFA, the fact remains that the underlying sympathy for ULFA among the ethnic Assamese are the unresolved key issues that have been central to the legitimacy of government institutions in Assam.<sup>3</sup>

We don't contest the central argument of these scholars. In fact, we have shown in the chapters two and three how the Assamese middle class led the identity issues against New Delhi. But to say that the Assamese middle class is still the support base of ULFA, without taking into account some other factors, will be too simplistic an argument. Initially, Assamese middle class provided qualified support to ULFA for being

<sup>1</sup> Udayon Misra, *Periphery Strikes Back* (Shimla: IIAS, 2000), 134.

<sup>2</sup> M.S. Prabhakar, 'For Permanent Solution', *Frontline* (3 January 2003).

<sup>3</sup> Sanjib Baruah, *India Against Itself: Assam and the Politics of Nationality* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999), 156.



able to draw the attention of New Delhi in the form of more money; more business means more money for the middle class. Sunil Nath, the former publicity secretary of ULFA and now a senior journalist in an Assamese daily, opines:

The Assamese middle class played the role of Frankenstein when it applauded from the gallery at an emerging ULFA, which rapidly grew in strength during the late 1980s in the adulatory atmosphere created by the middle-class led Assamese media.<sup>4</sup>

It will be very simplistic to say that ULFA derives its support base from the Assamese middle class. Even to say that the peasantry class is the source of ULFA's support base is not a correct assessment. There are lots of indications to show that the Assamese middle class is becoming extremely critical of ULFA's view on certain issues of Assam like the illegal migration issue, ULFA's support to Pakistan over Kargil war, its shelter at Bangladesh, some thoughtless killings—the recent being in Dhemaji—and so on. We shall have occasion to discuss these issues later on. But in this chapter, we would like to argue that in spite of so many military crackdowns and disillusionment with militancy in Assam, ULFA is surviving because of the following four factors:

1. The pride factor
2. Strong anti-India or Delhi factor
3. Low level of human and economic development
4. Exogenous help—primarily help from the neighbouring countries like Myanmar, Bangladesh and China.

In this chapter, we shall talk about the pride factor and low level of economic development as the triggering factor for the sustenance of ULFA. How ULFA has developed strong anti-Delhi and anti-India feeling has already been illustrated in the third and fourth chapter. The role of neighbouring countries, arms dealers and international agencies will be dealt with in the next chapter.

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<sup>4</sup> Sunil Nath, *Himal South Asia*, December 2001.

Scholars like Professor Misra and Professor Baruah have overlooked the fact that in this age of 'new terrorism',<sup>5</sup> an organisation can't survive on the basis of the internal source only—particularly when that source is fast depleting. North East India shares more than 98 per cent open border with the south and south east Asian countries. Vast track of open border, difficult terrain, external help to the insurgents, accessibility of a vast illegal arms market, etc., are responsible for an unending armed resurrection in North Eastern states like Assam. All the major insurgent groups have a mutually interdependent relationship, and ULFA is not an exception to it.

However, it would be wrong to analyse the sustenance of ULFA only in terms of external help. The main support base or the recruitment to ULFA, as our interaction with hundreds of surrendered ULFA cadres shows, comes from the lower middle class Assamese society comprising extremely poor, mostly educated, unemployed youths and poverty-ridden areas. Our main argument here is that those areas of Assam which are relatively more underdeveloped, where sense of human insecurity is higher, sense of relative deprivation is high and unemployment rate is alarming are more affected by insurgency than other places of Assam.

## The Pride: The Ahom and the Motock–Moran Factor

If one looks at the social profile of the ULFA leadership, it is essentially an organisation led by Ahoms and Motock–Morans. From the very beginning, the Ahom factor was predominant in the organisation. The first batch of ULFA consisted of the following members and incidentally, all members except one were Tai-Ahom.

1. Buddeheswar Gogoi—chairman
2. Suren Dhingia—vice-chairman
3. Someswar Gogoi—general secretary

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<sup>5</sup> Ian O. Lesser, 'Countering New Terrorism: Implications for Strategy', in *Countering New Terrorism*, eds Ian O. Lesser, Bruce Hoffman, John Arquilla, David Ronfeldt and Michele Zanini, prepared for the United States Air Force (Rand, April 2003).

4. Bhimkanta Borgohain—foreign secretary
5. Bhupen Borgohain—finance secretary
6. Ponaram Barua—special member

Initially, ULFA was branded as an organisation for protecting the interest of the Tai-Ahom community. A perceptive scholar who wrote a book on Tai-Ahom identity said,

How did the ULFA and Tai scholars facilitate the Tai-Ahom movement?... definitely Gogoi and his cohorts were not against the Tai-Ahom movement. In fact they were very sympathetic to it. What they resented, however, was, Hiteswar Saikia had assumed the leadership of Tai-Ahom people. The ULFA considered themselves the leaders of the communities in upper Assam and the Tai-Ahom was the emblematic cultural movement in the region. Throughout the 1980s and 1990s both Saikia and the ULFA continued to vie for the exclusive leadership in upper Assam.<sup>6</sup>

The writer further argued that the socio-cultural orientation of the leaders and ULFA's political language and programmes were deeply influenced by the narratives of Tai-Ahom organisations. ULFA frequently invoked the golden days of the *Ahom Swargadeo*.<sup>7</sup> On many occasions, the Ahom dominance of the organisation was discussed several times within the broad framework of ULFA. From the very beginning, Motock–Moran and Tai-Ahom leadership in ULFA was palpable.

The Ahom—a tribe of Shans in Northern Burma—came into the plains of Assam in 1228 AD and established their kingdom comprising, in course of time, the whole of the Assam Valley. In fact, they were the representatives of the great Tai race of the Mongolians who now inhabit the vast regions of south-east Asia. It is this group which gave to Assam its modern name and, in course of time, they had even identified themselves with the Assamese. Professor Girin Phukon said,

The Ahoms had been the latest rulers of the Assam Valley and after six centuries of their rule in Assam, the British had taken over the country

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<sup>6</sup> Yasmin Saikia, *Fragmented Memories: Struggling to Be Tai-Ahom in India* (Duke University Press, 1994), 204.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 205–206. The name *Swargadeo* was given to the Ahom Kings. The term literally meant the owner of heaven.

from them in 1826. But they could not forget the tradition of freedom and independence which they had been enjoying for such a long time. As in many other parts of India the traditional ruling elite who had lost their power objected to the new power system. They did not relish the prospect of losing not only the powers and privileges that they enjoyed in the past but also their former social status and position of influence under the new order of things. Being a ruling race, it was a natural inclination among the Ahoms to get back their lost power and position.<sup>8</sup>

During the freedom struggle, the Ahom Association—the main representative body of the Ahoms—demanded a sovereign Assam. A resolution was adopted in a meeting of executive committee of the Ahom Association, held on 28 September 1944 at Lakhimpur, which demanded that ‘in the event of India being divided into Hindustan and Pakistan, Assam should be separated from India and constituted into a dominion on the basis of history, culture and nationally’.

Professor Girin Phukon has further said,

It appears while demanding for an independent state, the Ahom elite mainly referred to their history, tradition and culture. They felt that they had a ‘legitimate’ claim to have dominance in Assam on these grounds.... It could, of course, be argued that the caste Hindus were not a part of the ruling group which created this history. And unlike, the caste Hindus, the Ahom elite, therefore, felt that they had a ‘legitimate’ claim to remain separate from the rest of India so as to maintain distinctness of Assam which was formed under their impact.

The Ahom Association later on attempted to broaden their base by including other tribal groups of the region. ULFA too initially had a similar Tai-Ahom influence, pride and ego—what Professor Phukon has referred to as ‘they could not forget the tradition of freedom and independence which they had been enjoying for such a long time.... Being a ruling race, it was a natural inclination among the Ahoms to get back their lost power and position.’

As Dr Yasmin Saikia has said, ‘The ULFA’s ideology eclectically combined information concerning the *swargadeos* (found in the *buranjis*)

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<sup>8</sup> Girin Phukon, *Politics of Regionalism in North East India* (Delhi: Spectrum Publication, 1996), 123.

with present populist demands for justice and economic rights in ways not very different from those demanded by the Tai-Ahom leaders.<sup>9</sup>

Saikia had also referred to her interview with ULFA cadres who claim to have said that ULFA's training in Myanmar was possible because of their Mongoloid connection. The ULFA cadre said,

It had to be so, because we were looking for support from the Shan and Kachin organisations and they had very little respect for Assamese Hindus. They had no faith that the Assamese people could carry out a revolution. They dismissed them as a weak *Jati* who can't be fighters. In fact they did a physical test of our boys. It is believed that a certain body part indicated Mongoloid traits in a person. They checked our boys to verify ... the present ULFA boys don't know about this.<sup>10</sup>

Arabinda Rajkhowa, the chairman of ULFA, belonged to the *Saringia* sect of Ahom genealogy and as such, he is supposed to be an Ahom prince eligible for becoming the *Swargadeo*. There are essentially five Ahom sects known as *foid* from whom the future Ahom king may be chosen. They are *Saringia*, *Tunghungia*, *Tipomia*, *Porbotiya* and *Dihingia*. Rajkhowa belongs to the first fold.

Were there any specific reasons for the dominance of these two groups? If we look at the present structure, Arabinda Rajkhowa (the chairman), Pradip Gogoi (vice-chairman), Bhimkanta Buragohain (political trainer), Akhanta Baghphukon (organising secretary), etc., were Ahoms and Anup Chetia (general secretary), Paresh Baruah (commander-in-chief) were Motock–Morans. ULFA's most powerful battalion, i.e., 28th Battalion which had come into ceasefire in 2007, mostly comprised the Motock–Moran youths from Sadiya, Kakopathar, Meleng, Dirak, Maithong, Doomdoma, Margherita, Dibrugarh, Moran, etc. Are there any historical reasons for such an overwhelming presence of the Tai-Ahom and Motock–Moran youths? Although later on these factors became redundant and the national issues of Assam and anti-Delhi factors dominated the core ideology of ULFA, the huge presence of these communities (especially in the top rung of the organisation) requires socio-cultural and historical analysis.

<sup>9</sup> Saikia, *Fragmented Memories*, 204.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 209.

The Motock–Moran, known by a generic name of Moamariyas, are one of the proudest races in the history of Assam, especially in the later part of the 18th century and the early part of 19th century. The Moamariyas turned the fortune of the mighty Ahom kingdom<sup>11</sup> by leading the historic Moamariya rebellion which can be regarded as the first mass-based sociopolitical movement in Assam.<sup>12</sup> Dr Dhrubojoyoti Bora who wrote the famous book *Moamariya Gana-abhyutan* considered the rebellion to be the first national agrarian liberation struggle of the exploited, alienated masses.<sup>13</sup> In the course of this rebellion, Ahom *Swargadeo* Gaurinath Singha (1780–95) was dethroned and the Moamariyas took over the Ahom capital Rangpur and registered the victory of the common masses against the ruler. However, later on, the Ahom king Purnanda Buragohain could recover the principalities which were occupied by the Motocks and he had to adopt a policy of reconciliation towards the Motock and Morans. He granted them an autonomous state which came to be known as the Motock kingdom.

Regarding the boundary of the Motock kingdom, the *Imperial Gazetteer of India, Eastern Bengal and Assam*, 1909, said:

The area between the Noa-Dihing, the Brahmaputra and the mountain ranges in the south, viz, the entire area of the erstwhile Lakhimpur district on the south-bank of the Brahmaputra was known as the Motock kingdom.<sup>14</sup>

Sir Edward Gait in his *History of Assam* said,

The tract which lay to the South & Sadiya, in the angle between the Brahmaputra and Burhi Dihing and was chiefly inhabited by the Moamaria sect, was governed by a chief called the Barsenapati.

<sup>11</sup> The Ahoms ruled Assam from 1228 till 1826—when Britishers took over Assam by the treaty of Yandaboo of 1826.

<sup>12</sup> Swarnalata Baruah, 'Swargadeo Sarbananda Singha—the First Ruler of the Motock kingdom', in *Smaronika*, ed. Sri Kumar Dohotia (Tinsukia: Smaronika Committee, 3 May 2000), 1.

<sup>13</sup> Dhruba Jyoti Bora, 'Maomoria Ganaabhyutan, Ketbur Charitta Aru Tatpojya' in *Smaronika*, ed. Sri Kumar Dohotia (Tinsukia: Smaronika Committee, 3 May 2000), 12–15.

<sup>14</sup> *Imperial Gazetteer of India* (1909), 591, quoted in Sri Kumar Dohotia, *Prachin Motock Rajyar Buranji* (Tinsukia: Motock Sangha, 1994), 65.

His capital was almost in the centre of his jurisdiction at Rangagora on the Dibru River (1926, Thacker, Spink & Co., Calcutta).

In 1791, Sarbananda Singh shifted his capital from Rangagora to Bengmora. The present district headquarter of Tinsukia is located in Bengmora. According to the descendants of Sarbananda, he belonged to Buruk Chutia clan.<sup>15</sup> Sarbananda is known to be the victim of the atrocities committed against the Moamoriyas during the reign of Ahom king Lakshmi Singha (1779–80). Sarbananda organised the aggrieved people of the north bank and, along with Harihar Tanti, captured Ahom capital Rangpur and took control of the areas lying between Burhi Dihing and Brahmaputra.

According to Sri Kumar Dohotia, a prominent Motock–Moran scholar, the Motock kingdom was divided into two regions, the upper Motock and the lower Motock. Upper Motock was inhabited by the Morans situated between the Dangari and the Dibru rivers.<sup>16</sup> Lower Motock lies between the Burhi Dihing and the Brahmaputra. It was mainly inhabited by the Motocks excluding the Morans. In course of time, immigrants from other parts of Assam, who were the followers of the Brahmanical *Sattras* came and settled in this area. They were called *bamuniyas* by the local people. According to historian Professor Swarnalata Barua:

Sarbananda Singha's rule was based on democratic values. Even the British praised his administration and recorded that the Motocks maintained a sense of equality among their subjects. The people hardly paid any taxes in the Motock kingdom. The people were not compelled to offer their service to the king or officers except for public service and war. The burden of Taxes was so low that people from Ahom kingdom crossed over to the Motock territory.<sup>17</sup>

The Moamariyas are the disciples of Kala Sanghoti sect of Mahapurush Srimanta Sankardev's Monotheism renowned in this part of the world

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<sup>15</sup> Interview with the grandson of Purnanda Singh, Hemonta Gohain, in Tinsukia. He is the first son of the 8th generation of the Motock kingdom. For details see *Smaronika*, ed. Sri Kumar Dohotia (Tinsukia 3 May 2000), 4.

<sup>16</sup> For details, see Sri Kumar Dohotia, *Prachin Motock Rajyar Buranji* (Tinsukia: Motock Sangha, 1994), 7.

<sup>17</sup> Baruah, 'Swargadeo Sarbananda Singha', 4.

as 'Eksaran Bhagawati Dharma'. The Moamariyas belonged to the Kala Sanghoti sect which is considered to be the most egalitarian, democratic form propagated by Sankardev. It was Anniruddha Dev (disciple of Sankardev) who propagated Vaisnavism among the Moamariyas. Unlike the other sects (*Sanghoti*) of Sattrra Institution, the Kala Sanghoti is the most democratically organised system. Unlike other Brahmanical systems, there is no system of idol worship in these groups of *Sattras*. Ultimate devotion to the guru or to the spiritual masters is the most important aspect of Kala Sanghoti. Increasingly, various tribal groups embraced this form of religion and there was distinct impact of tribal culture in the observation of various religious festivals which are not found in any other *Sattras* of Assam. Because of its flexible and accommodative character, this form of religion soon became very popular and the Moamariyas *sattras* became the most powerful ones having largest number of disciples. The Ahom kings and their officials were highly annoyed at the growing power of these *Sattras*—Shiva Singha and Phuleswar Konwari (1714–44) and other Ahom kings forced the Moamariyas to observe the rituals of the Shakti cult, including forcing them to bow down before the idol of goddess Durga. Their foreheads were dotted with vermilion and sacrificial blood. The Moamariyas Mahantas and disciples were forced to bow and touch the feet of Aoniati and Garmur *Sattradhikars* which belonged to the typical Brahmanical cult. These disciples of Anniruddha Dev preferred to die than to bow down in front of others. Both the gurus and the disciples were subjected to inhuman torture and according to a rough estimate, a total number of 40,000 people have had to die as a result of such atrocities. Incidentally, section of Moamariya disciples constituted the lowest rank of Ahom administration known as the *Paiks* who had to serve as servants to the Ahom nobles. To get rid of such an atrocious system and to avenge the ruthless killings, the Moamariyas jumped into revolt against the Ahom kingdom, and from 1769 till 1806, they revolted against the system three times, which shattered the pride of the hitherto 550 years of Ahom rule.

The Motock kings built many historical tanks and monuments. Some of the important tanks are Na-Pukhuri, Tinikonja Pukhuri, Chauldhua Pukhuri, Da Dhaua Pukhuri, Mahdhaua Pukhuri, Devi Pukhuri and many more. The *Tinikonja Pukhuri* was a religious pond to Swargadeo



Sarbananda Singha and the pond was consecrated to god Sri Krishna—the supreme godhead of the entire Motock society.

However, all the historical relics, reminiscences, tanks have been on the verge of extinction as a result of unbridled expansion of trade and commerce. The British regime facilitated the entry of commercial agencies and north Indian business groups to Tinsukia and Dibrugarh. In due course of time, these two districts became the most fertile zones for tea production and that brought various multinational companies to the then Motock kingdom.<sup>18</sup> By coming to an agreement with the British East India Company, a north Indian businessman Senai Ram Dungarmal took the legal possession of the capital of Motock kingdom area from the period of 1902 to 1905. By paying minimum bribes to the *Laat mandal*,<sup>19</sup> he took possession of most of the land of the area. Very soon Senai Ram Dungarmal was joined by his brother Sunni Lal Dungarmal. The brothers were well conversant with the idioms of new land laws and expanded their business enterprise by taking land from the Motock and Moran by any means. They were also responsible for erasing all the historical memories of the Motocks and Morans. They established two big business houses—Senai Ram Dungarmal Merchant Jamidar and Sunni Lal Dungarmal Merchant Jamidar.<sup>20</sup> In 1864 the place was renamed as Tinsukia<sup>21</sup> instead of Bengmara. The last prince of Motock kingdom, Raj Kumar Lankeswar Gohain, submitted a petition to the Minister of Home Affairs, Government of India, in March 1967, whereby he appealed for the restoration of land which had been fraudulently taken by the businessmen from north India. The main appeal of the petition was:

That your humble Memorialist, RAJKUMAR LANKESWAR GOHAIN who is the eldest living descendant of SRI SRI SARBANANDAN SINGHA, the Chieftain of Motock Kingdom, Upper Assam, had the honour of submitting his Memorandum on the 3rd April, 1964, to the president of India with a prayer that the Motock's former capital, known as 'BENGMORA RAJNAGAR', now wrongfully acquired by a business

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<sup>18</sup> Chabua, the most prolific centre for tea production, is located in the Tinsukia district. It is the place for tribes like Singphos with whose help the Britishers had discovered tea in Assam.

<sup>19</sup> *Laat mandal* was responsible for granting land.

<sup>20</sup> Kumar Dohotia, ed., *Smaronika*, 3–4.

<sup>21</sup> Tinsukia means three corners. Named after the Tinikunia Pukhuril.

house in the name and style of Messrs. Senairam Doongarmall within Tinsukia town, Lakhimpur district, be restored to the Memorialist.<sup>22</sup>

The petition further said,

That having known this trick of the business House, the humble Petitioner and the public at large of Lakhimpur district were greatly perturbed and deeply agitated at the wrongful act, thereupon, from the middle of Forties, they informed the Government in many ways. But the foreign government did not pay any heed to the public sentiment. Then came Independence. In 1954, the Motock people combined by other public of Tinsukia and led no less than the local members of the Legislative Assembly of Assam, strongly moved the State Government, and as a result thereof, the Deputy Commissioner of Lakhimpur district asked your humble memorialist to submit his deposition.... now the Motok people are more conscious of the rights and fully seized of the fraud committed on the ancient capital of the Motock kingdom. This has now to be remedied.<sup>23</sup>

This was just a beginning, in due course of time the entire Tinsukia region and Dibrugarh have become the main business centres of Assam and the Motock and Morans, who were among the most backward communities of the state, had no way out but to become mute spectators to these developments. They were agitated again and again as the system had given them no benefit and had rather taken away their most precious land by illegal and fraudulent means.

The situation has been nicely depicted by a scholar of Moran community in the following manner:

As a result of the tea industry in Assam, India has been gaining foreign currency and country's income has been substantially increased. But people hardly know how the *Bhumiputra*<sup>24</sup> Morans have been exploited and

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<sup>22</sup> Petition submitted by the last prince of Motock kingdom, Raj Kumar Lankeswar Gohain to the Minister of Home Affairs, Government of India in March 1967. Through this petition, he appealed for the restoration of the land which has been fraudulently taken by a businessman from north India. Obtained through personal contact with Sri Kumar Dohotia.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Suggesting 'son of the soil'.

neglected by the tea industry.... What the *Bhumiputras* have gained from this tea industry? How many unemployed youths of the Moran community are absorbed by Tea industry? What are welfare works conducted by the Tea industry in the areas inhabited by the Morans? We must remember precisely for the growth of this industry the Bhumiputras was displaced; their lands were encroached as a result of which their plight is the worst.... Our independent governments have done very little for the upliftment of these *Bhumiputras*.<sup>25</sup>

The tribes of the Moamoriyas are highly critical of the role played by various business houses in the area. For the Motocks and Morans, they have gained nothing as a result of so-called development, rather their land is adroitly taken over by the big companies at the connivance of the government, so they believe that this system does not belong to them—it belongs to the capitalists and the businessmen.

Ghana Kanta Moran has further said:

The subsequent state and the central governments have not taken up effective steps for developing the *Bhumiputras*. Does the Government which is hijacked by the capitalists and virtually puppets in the hands of the businessmen have time to listen to the people? Therefore, we can't look up to any one; we have to think and ponder and must find our own ways to resolve our problems.<sup>26</sup>

The gradual encroaching and disappearance of the Tipuk Sattra<sup>27</sup> was a great setback for the Morans as the majority of the disciples belonged to the Moran community. Around 10,000 disciples of the Morans were dispersed in Sadiya and Tinsukia, which fall under the then undivided Lakhimpur district. The Sattra is situated in the Dibru–Sadiya rail line which is seven kilometres from the Doomdooma Railway station. From 1895–1920, the traditional inhabitants of the Moran ryots were displaced to give land to the tea gardens.

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<sup>25</sup> Ghanakanta Moran, *Bhumiputra* (Tinsukia: Padma Moran, 1998), 2.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>27</sup> Sattra is a Vaisnavite Monastery established by Sankardeva to propagate Vaisnavism in Assam during the medieval period.

The Sattradhikar (Head of the Sattra) of Tipuk Sattra made several appeals to the district commissioner of Lakhimpur. One of such appeals said:

The Tipuk Sattra is one of the oldest of the religious Satras in the District, having been established some 150 years ago, and the disciples of the Satra mostly belong to the original inhabitants of the district, namely the people known as the Morans, who live mainly with the 4 mauzas of Ujan Nakankhola; Rongapara, Sadiya, and Tinsukia, who number about ten thousand, and the whole body of which tribe are disciples of the Tipuk Sattra.

That with the opening of tea gardens within the mauza, the people have been gradually driven out in considerable numbers into other mauzas and further back into the mauzas bordering the British territory, till about 4,000 or so of them only are now scattered about the whole mauza, hemmed in different directions by tea gardens.

That the progress of the opening out of jungles by tea gardens has, specially within the last 10 or 12 years, gradually not only driven out the larger number of them out of the mauza, but has brought the boundaries of tea garden grants within touch of lands actually occupied or cultivated by the immediate attendants and disciples of the *Gossains*.

That the manner in which lands to the mauza have been settled with tea gardens, within the last 6 or 7 years, inspite of repeated objections on the part of the ryots who have been thus deprived of pasturage and of the old convenience of getting firewood from Government forests, had made it clear to your memorialist that our satra will have to be removed from its traditional site, if the higher authorities do not see their way to check any further encroachment by tea gardens on village lands.<sup>28</sup>

Various tea companies like Doom Dooma Tea Company, the Pabhojan Tea Company, the Rupai Tea Company, the Jokai Assam Tea Company, Tata Tea Company, Doom Dooma Samdang Tea Division, etc., were gradually granted more than 2,200 acres of land which belonged to the *Bhumiputras* and the Tipuk Sattra.<sup>29</sup> Ghana Kanta Moran refers to about a minimum of 14 tea gardens which have come out in the traditional Motock–Moran area. These are Bisakupi tea estate,

<sup>28</sup> Appeal to the District Commissioner of Lakhimpur by Molan Chandra Deka Goswami on behalf of the Sattradhikar of Dipuk Sattra—obtained from Moran, *Bhumiputra*, 45–50.

<sup>29</sup> See Moran, *Bhumiputra*, 45–50.

Rupai tea estate, Tipuk tea estate, Badalabhata tea estate, Bokpara tea estate, Mesaijan tea estates, Chokoriting Tea estate, Khowang tea estate, Daichajan tea estate, Dubarmara tea estate, Daimukhia tea estate, Digholtong tea estate, Bakojan tea estate, Bordubi tea estate, etc.<sup>30</sup>

The socio-economic profile of the Motock–Morans is pitiable. According to an estimate, the total number of Morans in Dibrugarh and Tinsukia would be 83,583.<sup>31</sup> A survey was conducted by a civil society group in 2007–08. The group took stock of about 75,225 Moran people. According to the survey,

Out of 83,583 a negligible portion is in the government jobs, Total of employees are 1123. Only 1.49 per cent is in the Government Jobs. Most of the employees are in the third and fourth grade. 24 nos. are absorbed in other jobs which is about 2. No one has worked abroad.... There are very few who are working as the labourers in the tea garden ... 40/50 people are working as security guards under the contractors in the OIL company. There are about 30 labourers working in the bottling plants.<sup>32</sup>

According to an estimate in 2001, there are 42 tea gardens in Tinsukia, 52 in Doomdooa, 20 in Margherita—altogether 114 tea gardens in the area. Oil India Limited (OIL), Indian Oil Corporation (IOC), tea companies, coal sector, railways and government jobs are the major job providers in the area. Table 7.1 contains the data about the total number of Morans employed in these companies in the year 2008.<sup>33</sup>

Out of 226 Moran villages, 79 per cent villages are having access to primary education; however, a total number of 179 villages (79 per cent) don't have access to the secondary section education. Seventy-three villages don't have access to electricity. So far as communication is concerned, only 34 per cent villages (total 78 villages) have access to good roads. Till 1966, there were only 10 graduates and 2 postgraduates. The

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<sup>30</sup> Moran, *Bhumiputra*, 6.

<sup>31</sup> Ajit Bora, *Apangteya Moranor Bokola—A Census on the Moran Tribes* (Tinsukia: Ekalobya Prakashan, 2009), 21. The survey was conducted in 2007–08.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 25.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 27. According to the census report above, the data was collected from various employment exchange offices of Tinsukia, Dibrugarh, Digboi and Dibrugarh in mid-2008.

**Table 7.1**  
**Representation of Morans in Various Private Companies**

<i>Organisation</i>	<i>Total Employees</i>	<i>Morans</i>	<i>Per cent</i>
OIL	7,997	68	0.850
IOC	2,388	15	0.628
Coal	2,917	0	0.0
Railway	7,375	18	0.244
Education (Tin)	1,542	370	23.99
Tea (Tin)	2,850	73	2.56

*Source:* Ajit Bora, *Apangteya Moranor Bokola—A census on the Moran Tribes*, (Tinsukia: Ekalobya Prakashan, 2009), 27.

number has now increased to 366 graduates, 36 postgraduates in 2008.<sup>34</sup> With 148 number of liquor shops, Tinsukia has the second highest concentration of foreign liquor shops approved by the government.

What pains the *Maomoriyas* the most is that they were never treated with respect by the mainstream Assamese intellectuals, historians, poets, scholars and *littérateurs*. Most of the Assamese literatures have dubbed them with all negative connotations. Because of the *Maomoriya* rebellion, they were accused of breaking the great Ahom kingdom and facilitating the entry of the Britishers to Assam.

Hem Chandra Barua (1835–96), along with Ananda Ram Barua and Gunabhiram Barua, played a historic role and generated a linguistic consciousness and love for their own language. Because of their initiative, the Assamese language gained its legitimate status in year 1873. Hem Chandra Barua wrote the famous Assamese dictionary *Hemkosh Abhidhan* where he defined ‘Moran’ in the following manner: ‘Moran Motock Maomoriya; this tribe during the time of Gaurinath Singha became rebellious and mercilessly killed many people; hence their name is Moran, a tribe in Assam, said to be very cruel, hence it comes to mean cruel’ (p. 794). Giridhar Sharma, who was the president of Asom Sahitya Sabha in 1973 and ex-principal of Arya Bidyapeeth College, in another Assamese dictionary in 1952 also gave similar version about the Morans.

Lakhminath Bezbarua is considered to be one of the greatest *littérateurs* of Assam. Bezbarua was chosen as the president of the first student

<sup>34</sup> Bora, *Apangteya Moranor Bokola*, 37–39.

organisation of the valley, Assam Chatra Sanmilan, which came into existence in 1916. He contributed immensely to the growth of Asomiya nationalism. In one of his poems, 'Bin Boragi', he compares the Morans with Bodan Borphukon<sup>35</sup> and accuses them of being responsible for the destruction of Assam.<sup>36</sup> Another great scholar who was honoured with the title *Sahityacharya*, Atul Chandra Hazarika, said that the state was in absolute doldrums and chaos as a result of aggression by the Maan<sup>37</sup> and Morans.<sup>38</sup>

Jyoti Prasad Aggrawala is an architect of modern Assam and will be remembered for his immense contribution as a poet, dramatist, film director and freedom fighter. His poems are reflexive of the accommodative character of Assam—he always pays tribute to the great assimilative character of various races and groups that comprise the Assamese nation. His poem 'Asomiya Dekar Ukti' (The Utterances of Assamese Youth)<sup>39</sup> is an excellent reflection of the variegated mosaic of Assam and various communities of Assamese society (He wrote it long before the state of Assam was divided into seven states.) Jyoti Prasad, in his immortal composition, perhaps mentions all the tribes of Assam, but he blissfully forgets to mention about Motocks and Morans. The Maomoriyas believe that this is an omission by intention.<sup>40</sup> Even many modern scholars have myopic vision about the Morans. In one of his poems, a well-known poet Gynanda Sharma Pathak, an IPS officer who was the ex-DGP of Assam, said:<sup>41</sup>

You deceiving cheat  
Raghav Moran's group  
I want to  
Cut you people into pieces  
With my own hands!

<sup>35</sup> He is said to be responsible for bringing the Burmese to Assam which prompted the Britishers to interfere in Assam.

<sup>36</sup> Bezbarua *Granthawali*, ed. Granthawali Committee (Guwahati: Sahitya Prakash, 1993), 978.

<sup>37</sup> The Burmese were called the Maan.

<sup>38</sup> Bora, *Apangteya Moranor Bokola*, 66–67.

<sup>39</sup> *Jyoti Prasadar Racanawali* (Guwahati: Assam Prakashan Parishad, 1981), 672–675.

<sup>40</sup> This was evident after interviewing various Motock–Moran scholars such as Sri Kumar Dohutia, Ghanakanta Moran, Ajit Bora and others.

<sup>41</sup> *Asomiya Pratidin* (18 April 1999).

Slicing you repeatedly cutting...  
 And then apply salt and lemon  
 On the sore parts.  
 I want to feed your  
 Poisonous dirty meat  
 To the packs of dogs and foxes  
 And the vulture flocks!!  
 Yet, I have no way out.  
 Your ugly malformed  
 Protector's flesh,  
 If fed to the  
 Innocent pristine  
 Dogs, crows, vulture and foxes  
 Of my country,  
 Will die instantly.  
 Which I do not desire,  
 Never, ever  
 Until I remain alive ... (Translated by the Author)

Such narrow interpretations and pejorative subtext of the Assamese mainstream scholars reflect their lack of understanding about one of the largest tribes of Assam and it also reflects inability of our scholars and pundits to appreciate the underlying causes of the Maomoriya rebellion. We consider the Maomoriya rebellion to be the Assam's first mass-based rebellion against a system which was insensitive and cruel to the people. Before holding the Morans responsible for initiating the rebellion against the Ahom, it is essential to look at the manner in which the Morans and other toiling masses were subjected to torture by the tyrannical system. Some of the old history books, such as *Tungkhungia Buranji* by Surya Kumar Bhuyan, narrate how the Morans were mercilessly killed by the tyrannical Ahom nobles. *Nauboicha Phukonor Asom Buranji* said that 600 Motaks and Morans were killed by throwing them into the Dikhow river and another 200 by dumping them in a deep well after putting layers of stone and mud.<sup>42</sup> Besides, it is wrong to dub the rebellion as planned and executed by the Morans only. A wide section of people cutting across castes and communities took part. The sons and brothers of Bhoga Borbarua, Jopora Gohain, Jabor Saikia, Mohonmala

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<sup>42</sup> Referred in Bora, *Apangteya Moranor Bokola*, 65.



Gohain, Naga Mojinder Barua, Boragi Raja, Dorongi Deka Raja, Horihor Tanti, Pitambar Mahajon, Bhorothi Raja, Bayan Deka, Gorudharia Sodiya Khowa, Dofola Bohotia and many other non-Morans took part in the rebellion. Besides the large number of *Paiks* took part in the struggle primarily to get rid of the exploitative system of Ahom nobles.

How is such a situation related to the growth of ULFA? ULFA's anti-Indian and anti-Delhi attitude is largely moulded by huge presence of the north Indian and Hindi-speaking people in Tinsukia and Dibrugarh who were never sensitive to the tribal and local culture. In fact, in the common parlance, Tinsukia has come to be known as the 'Mini Bihar'. ULFA was a movement against the domination of the Hindi-speaking and Bengali-speaking people who have high presence in Tinsukia, Dibrugarh, Digboi, etc. Apart from Motock and Moran, these areas are living space for other indigenous smaller tribes like Turung, Aiton, Singphou, Tai-Phake, Lichu, etc. These smaller groups are getting marginalised due to the shrewd cut-throat market and trade principles of the traders who took over their historical memories, land and relics. Around 1980, there was huge mobilisation of people against the Hindi-speaking people at Tinsukia in places like Jerenga. Reboti Dutta Phukan (the famous foot player who played for OIL), Hemonta Gohain (known as Dara Singh), Paresch Baruah, Golap Barua (Anup Chetia, the GS of ULFA), Bhaben Barua (later on AGP MLA) were some of the stalwarts of this initiative against the north Indian settlers. Meanwhile in 1980, at the moment of the anti-Hindi sentiment against the Biharis and so on, an English- and Bengali-speaking person Bismatir Khan from Bangladesh stayed at Jerai to indoctrinate the local people against Indian colonialism. The whole bunch of the leadership of the Assam Movement were at Jerai to listen to the revolutionary wordings of Khan. It was Khan who also later on provided them with huge cache of arms and ammunitions. With those arms, a lot of Hindi-speaking people were terrorised and killed. The numbers given by one of the stalwarts were around 50. It was during this time that lots of land plots at the Borguri area of the Tinsukia town were 'liberated' from the domination of Bihari and Marwari people. Sripuria (another posh area of the town) was also virtually taken over from the Hindi-speaking people at the gun point. The legal task for preparing valid land documents for the local people fell on a shrewd lawyer Ranjit Borthakur. Today in Tinsukia, Borthakur is considered to be one

of the biggest landlords. The police department alone in the town pays him around ₹70,000 per month as house rent.

What was the role of Paresh Baruah at this point of time? Initially, he was mentally weak, timid, a football player arranging pretty errands for the seniors. He was even scared to cross a dead snake. Today when the colleagues of Assam Movement look back, they believe the person who came to Jerai in the late 1980s and provided all arms was none other than ‘an ISI person from Bangladesh’. Bangladesh had a design to see Assam disturbed. The design was to look at the sensitive points where the locals and indigenous groups can be mobilised against the Indian heartland. During the whole period of Assam Movement, the upper Assam belt from Dibrugarh onwards was a hotspot of the movement. The region was primarily motivated against the Hindi-speaking people. The purpose of the planners from Bangladesh was to drive out the Hindi-speaking people from mainland and fill up the gap by the immigrants from across the border. They were looking for such a leadership that is gullible—sufficiently indoctrinated to the cause and that has resilience to fight. It took them around two years to find such a leader and by 1982, Paresh Baruah was the man who could become the icon against ‘Indian imperialism’.

While attempting to trace the origin of ULFA, we have tried to show the link of Ahom and Motock–Moran connection. However, it would be wrong to dub the organisation as a platform for the Motock and the Morans. Later on the organisation has substantially increased its mass base and perhaps it is the only organisation of the state which has the representatives from almost all the communities. By 1989–90, the organisation has become stronger in all parts of Assam and the cadres of Nalbari, Kamrup, Darrang, Goalpara, Nagoan, etc., have joined the organisation. Pronoti Deka, Raju Baruah, Hira Sarania, Chitrabon Hazarika, Mithinga Daimari and Sashadhar Chaudhury are a few leaders who hail from these regions. Nevertheless, it would be safe to conclude that the leadership essentially belongs to the Motock–Moran and the Ahoms.

## Low Level of Human and Economic Development

While acknowledging the strong external support that ULFA receives from the foreign powers, we can’t do away with the internal sources of

political violence in Assam. In fact, we argue that it is the internal socio-economic, political, cultural and identity issues which sustain ULFA more than the external sources. Here, in this section, we would primarily like to take up the issues of human insecurity and shall try to argue that the sources of human insecurity are primarily responsible for the continuing recruitment to ULFA. Factors of unemployment, poverty, feeling of relative deprivation, corruption, underdevelopment, devastation caused by flood, etc., are acting as the breeding ground for ULFA. I had the opportunity to interview 120 surrendered ULFA militants in various places of Guwahati, Nalbari, Dibrugarh, Sibsagar and Tinsukia. Most of the cadres were interviewed in non-controlled environment in government guest houses (immediately after their surrender). The cadres were placed in a group of mostly five members. Each group was interviewed separately. However, there were no hard and fast rules of the group—sometimes the group consisted of two or three, depending on the numbers available for interview. So it was kind of participatory assessment with the rebels who had surrendered to the authority. It was basically a semi-structured interview focusing on individual cases as well as group response on important issues. Most of these interviews were conducted immediately after their surrender (at a government guest house in April 2002).

The main motivating factors for the cadres to join the group were: (a) They had nothing to do ('koriboloi eku nasile') or unemployment; (b) corruption of the government machinery; (c) losing the Assamese pride mainly from the influx of illegal migration (expressed by the cadres of Nagaon) and the dominance of the non-Assamese in the business sector and the government sector (as expressed by the cadres of the Tinsukia district). Some other factors responsible for the cadres to join the outfit were: (a) persuasion by the friends in the organisation; (b) exploitation by the centre (what they call the 'mahi aai soku' of the centre); (c) utilisation of the resources of Assam by the centre and thus Assam getting nothing from her own resources; (d) army and police atrocities during the time of Assam agitation and during the time of operation Bajrang and Rhino (they wanted to take revenge and when they got the arms, they felt terribly empowered).

It's not just one factor that drove the boys to militancy but the constellation of various factors as we have shown above. However, the factor of

unemployment or what they call 'had nothing to do' is the most important driving factor to join ULFA.<sup>43</sup> We can draw some inferences from the interview. It is observed that the first batch of leaders who were there at the time of launching ULFA (broadly from 1979–89) were mostly influenced by the 'exploitative attitude of the center'. But the later group of the cadres was more influenced by issues like corruption, unemployment, lack of opportunities, etc. The basic human and social issues like employment, providing of basic services like food security, health, roads, communications, education, rampant corruption, insecurity caused by the security forces, etc., were equally important for the rise of ULFA. About 80 out of the above leaders were trained in Myanmar, Bhutan and Bangladesh. A few of them went to Pakistan and Afghanistan for training. It shows the role of the neighboring countries in the sustenance of the organisation.

To see how the human security or insecurity issues affect the common people in violence-affected regions of Assam, one can refer to an article by Dr Anindita Dasgupta, published in the *Economic and Political Weekly* in 2004.<sup>44</sup> Her basic objective in this article was to see what causes insecurity to the people of Nalbari—one of the most violence-affected areas of Assam. In a participatory research project, she selected three groups to know the cause of insecurity in their area.

The author selected Nalbari as her field study. Nalbari is one of the worst affected areas of insurgency and considered to be a hotbed of ULFA. The almost regular incidents of armed violence, proximity to the international border with Bhutan allowing easy escape for the insurgents, and the overwhelming presence of militant groups in the area were some factors responsible for taking the participatory study at Nalbari. Spread over an area of 2,257 sq km on the northern bank of the Brahmaputra, Nalbari district in Assam has emerged as a locus of persistent armed violence. With a population of about seven lakhs, it is one of the bigger districts of Assam and because the 'new' insurgencies now happen in populated

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<sup>43</sup> The members told us that it's not just one specific factor which they believe to be the most motivating factor; however, 36 cadres told us very clearly that their motivating factor was the fact that they 'had nothing to do'.

<sup>44</sup> See Anindita Dasgupta, 'Localisation of Conflict', *Economic and Political Weekly* 39, no. 40 (2–8 October 2004): 4461–4470.

terrains, civilians are more directly affected here. Approximately 97 per cent of the population lives in extremely underdeveloped rural areas, and the district has for over a decade suffered the brunt of ethnic clashes, militant violence, counter-insurgency operations, extra-judicial killings by unidentified gunmen, political assassinations and criminal violence. Ethnic Assamese constitute 71 per cent of the population and are concentrated in the areas to the south, while the Bodos, who constitute 13 per cent of the population, predominantly inhabit the areas to the north of National Highway 31, which neatly bisects the district. Other smaller ethnic groups like the Bengalis and Hindi-speaking groups—mostly Marwari traders and Bihari labourers—are more or less concentrated in Nalbari town, which is the district headquarters. The three most powerful insurgent groups of Assam, namely, ULFA, BLTF and NDFB, operate and wield considerable influence in the district.

Here the findings of the writer are quite interesting:

All communities were unanimous in saying that the root causes of insurgency, its resultant armed violence and human insecurity were 'acute socio-economic problems which the state and its political elite have, for long, ignored'. Listing and ranking of their major problems by different groups showed interesting trends. Issues like underdevelopment, unemployment and floods were unanimously declared as the 'biggest' problems by the communities. But most of the groups again stated the underdevelopment and unemployment were the two most important causes for insurgency in the state and that, ironically, it was the existence of militancy that was the excuse forwarded by the government for not carrying out development activities.<sup>45</sup>

The importance of the issues of basic human needs can be gauged from the observation of a teacher mentioned in the following write-up:

It is beneficial for the political class because so long as the common people are caught up in the violence and live in fear of their lives, they are not likely to raise the difficult questions as to why the political elite has failed to deliver for all these past years. Why are we still so underdeveloped?

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<sup>45</sup> Dasgupta, 'Localisation of Conflict', 4461–4470.

Where are the roads? Where are the schools and hospitals? Where are the jobs?.<sup>46</sup>

On analysing it becomes clear that some of the basic problems such as underdevelopment, unemployment, lack of agricultural infrastructure, lack of access to government departments, flood, corruption, communication, lack of health care, etc., after being neglected for decades, have acted as the greatest incentive for the youth to join the militancy. In this context, it is worthwhile to analyse and look at the human development scenario in Assam (Tables 7.2 and 7.3).

**Table 7.2**  
**Human Development Indicators, Assam and Its Districts, 2001**

<i>Rank/District</i>	<i>HDI Value</i>	<i>Income Index</i>	<i>Education Index</i>	Ranked by HDI Value
				<i>Health Index</i>
1. Jorhat	0.650	0.564	0.722	0.664
2. Kamrup	0.574	0.573	0.701	0.450
3. Golaghat	0.540	0.409	0.650	0.564
4. Karbi Anglong	0.494	0.491	0.535	0.457
5. Morigaon	0.494	0.562	0.551	0.371
6. Dibrugarh	0.483	0.162	0.654	0.636
7. Sibsagar	0.469	0.242	0.702	0.464
ASSAM	0.407	0.286	0.595	0.343
8. Cachar	0.402	0.266	0.634	0.307
9. Barpeta	0.396	0.385	0.527	0.279
10. Tinsukia	0.377	0.082	0.571	0.479
11. Hailakandi	0.363	0.234	0.563	0.293
12. N. C. Hills	0.363	0.211	0.650	0.229
13. Sonitpur	0.357	0.071	0.552	0.450
14. Nagaon	0.356	0.179	0.583	0.307
15. Kokrajhar	0.354	0.145	0.474	0.443
16. Nalbari	0.343	0.076	0.641	0.314
17. Lakhimpur	0.337	0.154	0.657	0.200
18. Goalpara	0.308	0.146	0.536	0.243
19. Karimganj	0.301	0.078	0.620	0.207
20. Dhemaji	0.277	0.026	0.622	0.186
21. Bongaigaon	0.263	0.103	0.557	0.129
22. Darrang	0.259	0.057	0.514	0.207
23. Dhubri	0.214	0.102	0.454	0.086

Source: Assam Human Development Report, 2003, Government of Assam.

<sup>46</sup> Dasgupta, 'Localisation of Conflict', 4461–4470.

Following observations can be made on the basis of Table 7.2:

1. The HDI value derived for the state as whole was 0.407. There are significant variations across districts. Only seven districts have HDI values the state average. The remaining 16 districts have HDI values lower than the state average, reflecting considerable inequity. Most of the upper Assam districts and the districts of Kamrup and Karbi Anglong have HDI values higher than the average for the state. All the lower Assam (except Kamrup) districts have HDI values lower than the state average. Nagaon, Hailakandi, Lakhimpur, Karimganj, Dhemaji and Darrang also have HDI values below the state average. Jorhat, the district that is ranked first, has an HDI value which is more than three times that of Dhubri, the lowest ranked district.
2. The figures for the income index are much skewed. Only six districts (Kamrup, Jorhat, Morigaon, Karbi Anglong, Golaghat and Barpeta) have income index values higher than the state average; the remaining 17 districts have income index values lower than the state average. The income index for Kamrup is more than twice the state average.
3. Educational attainments measured by the education index are more evenly spread through the state with 11 districts ranked above the state average and 12 districts with educational index values below the state average. The highest ranked district, Jorhat, has an education index value a little over one and a half times that of Dhubri, which is ranked lowest.
4. Ten districts have health index values higher than the average for the state, and 13 districts have health index values lower than the state average. The highest ranked district, Jorhat, has a health index value nearly twice the state average.

It has been observed that there is a symbiotic relationship between the HDI, income tax, education and health indexes with the level of recruitment to the insurgency groups like ULFA. According to the intelligence department of Assam police, Nalbari, Tinsukia, Dhemaji, Dhubri, Darrang, Goalpara, Sibsagar, etc., as the hub of ULFA activities. All this eventually means that the economies do not stir and fail to meet the

**Table 7.3**  
**Human Development Indicators, Assam and Its Districts, 2001, by Rank**

<i>Rank/District</i>	<i>HDI Value</i>	<i>Income Index</i>	<i>Education Index</i>	<i>Health Index</i>
1. Jorhat	1	2	1	1
2. Kamrup	2	1	3	7
3. Golaghat	3	5	6	3
4. Karbi Anglong	4	4	19	6
5. Morigaon	4	3	17	10
6. Dibrugarh	6	12	5	2
7. Sibsagar	7	8	2	5
8. Cachar	8	7	9	12
9. Barpeta	9	6	20	15
10. Tinsukia	10	18	13	4
11. Hailakandi	11	9	14	14
12. N. C. Hills	11	10	6	17
13. Sonitpur	13	21	16	7
14. Nagaon	14	11	12	12
15. Kokrajhar	15	14	22	9
16. Nalbari	16	20	8	11
17. Lakhimpur	17	13	4	20
18. Goalpara	18	14	18	16
19. Karimganj	19	19	11	18
20. Dhemaji	20	23	10	21
21. Bongaigaon	21	16	15	22
22. Darrang	22	22	21	18
23. Dhubri	23	17	23	23

*Source:* Computed by Directorate of Economics and Statistics, Assam.

growing aspirations of the people, particularly the younger generation. This, in turn, provides a fertile ground for grooming various militant groups or a spurt of popular uprisings. In some sense, lack of growth and disturbed environment feed on each other. This is exactly what is happening in most of the North Eastern states.

Thus Assam's economic situation is such that it can't generate high growth and more employment. The situation is more alarming as twenty lakh educated and unemployed youths clamour for productive engagement in the government sector. Government's inability to accommodate them makes a fertile ground for recruitment by the insurgent outfits. If we analyse the interview with the surrendered militants and the field visits, it becomes amply clear that insecurity of the youths with full energy and frustration contributed to the growth of insurgency in Assam. Some



of the experiences of ex-rebels as to why they had to join insurgency out of frustration may be paraphrased as follows:

1. The unemployed youths mostly in the rural areas have nothing to do—they pass most of their time by playing carom, cards or just loitering around.
2. On many occasions, some youths open up a small grocery shop to be closed due to lack of sale.
3. Applications for a minor loan of ₹20,000 by the unemployed youths get lost in the bureaucratic machinations and red-tapism. Many of such frustrated youths give up any hope even after paying grafts to the corrupt officials.
4. Many of small scale sector business like poultry, piggery, dairy farming, fishiculture, power loom, wheat mill, rice mill, tractor, cycle repairing, TV mechanic, etc., had been closed due to lack of entrepreneurial skill, power failure, non-payment of loan, flood, etc.
5. Many of them were frustrated by the corrupt officials. The peon would not pass on the application without being bribed, the dealing assistant wouldn't forward the application without some reward, the officials would ask them to come again and again for the same work, the typist wouldn't type without a good amount being given—otherwise the letter gets lost from the file.
6. Merit is the most important casualty of a corrupt system. Aspirations of youths are throttled by an insensitive corrupt bureaucracy. A hefty amount needs to be paid to the politicians through middle man if one wants to ascertain his/her job.<sup>47</sup>
7. A few of them systematically went for rabi and kharif crops. They undertook these ventures because there is heavy demand of these agricultural products in the urban areas. But due to overproduction, thousands of kilograms of agricultural products were destroyed. By the time these products came to the market, they were rotten—so they gave up next year.

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<sup>47</sup> Noted Assamese film director Sanjib Sabhapundit directed an award-winning film *Jatinga Etiyadi* which depicts how a crisis of governance in the form of corruption precipitated an armed rebellion in Assam.

All these conditions were made worse by a brutal, insensitive police and security personnel. The continuous harassment of the rural people by the security forces made them flee from their original place for a long time. These are all basic human security issues which compound the insurgency issue in Assam. Continuous heaping of all those issues for many days, months and decades have given these frustrated youths to look for an alternative—and that was provided by ULFA. ULFA was ever ready to accept them as their cadres and fight the Indian State for a better future.

## ULFA in International Network

### *From Grievances to Greed*

Essentially, there are two approaches to look at the causes of civil conflict or violent conflict in the society—the Greed, or the supply side of violence, model vis-à-vis Grievances model. The supply-side-of-violence model or greed theories have concentrated on economic opportunities in war. It argues that much of the post-cold war civil conflicts have been driven by not purely political reasons but rather powerful economic motives and agenda to grab booty. The Greed theorists concluded that conflict could be seen instead as the continuation of economics by other means. Warfare was to be better understood as ‘an instrument of enterprise and violence as a mode of accumulation’.<sup>1</sup> Paul Collier’s empirical research into the cause of large-scale civil conflicts from 1965 to the present for World Bank concluded that the best predictors of conflict, all other things being equal, were low average income and the availability of a high proportion of young men with inadequate access to educational opportunities, low growth and high dependence on primary products such as oil, diamond, etc.

The Grievance model is based on the more traditional perceptions of the reasons for conflict; the theorists focus on the failures of the social contract between the states and citizens like inequalities, weak institutions, poverty and lack of social services as root cause of the conflict. They noted that while wars were essentially group activities, individual

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<sup>1</sup> Paul Collier, ‘Doing Well Out of War’, in *Greed and Grievances: Economic Agendas in Civil Wars*, eds M. Berdal and D. Malone (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 2000).

motivations could prolong conflict. In studying the economic and social causes of war and development, they categorised group formations around religion, class, clan and regional interest. Power inequalities and asymmetries can include sources of long-term as well as short-term grievances. It's not merely the existence of these inequalities, but a collective feeling of 'unfairness' stemming from a skewed distribution of development gains and power sharing. The failure of political structures to address inequalities and curb the dominance of a particular group leads to dissatisfactions that ignites conflicts.<sup>2</sup>

Most of the academic writings on ULFA have underestimated the role of exogenous factors in the sustenance of insurgency. The role of internal dynamics in the rise and sustenance of ULFA can hardly be overlooked. In fact we have shown in the previous chapters how the Assamese middle class led the identity issues against New Delhi. But to say that the Assamese middle class is still the support base of ULFA will be too simplistic an argument without taking into account some other factors. Initially Assamese middle class provided qualified support to ULFA for being able to draw the attention of New Delhi in the form of more money; more business means more money for the middle class. There are indications to show that the Assamese middle class is extremely critical of ULFA's view on certain issues of Assam, like the illegal migration issue, ULFA's support to Pakistan over Kargil war, it's shelter at Bangladesh, some thoughtless killing the recent being in Dhemajai and so on.

## ULFA , NDFB and Kamatapur Liberation Organisation (KLO) in Bhutan

Thus, insurgent groups of Assam and the North East have received support from neighbouring countries, including Pakistan and China.<sup>3</sup> In addition, Myanmar fringe outfits (primarily the Kachins) have deepened existing historical-cultural ties further by supporting local

<sup>2</sup> For details see G. Ostby, 'Horizontal Inequalities and Civil war,' Centre for the Study of Civil War, Oslo, International Peace Research Institute (PRIO), 2003, Norway.

<sup>3</sup> For details see Nirmal Nibedon, *Nagaland: The Night of the Guerillas* (New Delhi: Lancer, 1983, second edition) and also see Subir Bhaumik, *Insurgent Crossfire* (New Delhi: Lancer, 1996).

movements by offering training, safe havens and outward routes. As a matter of detail, the Myanmarese connection in the separatist campaigns of the region predates almost all other such external aid.<sup>4</sup>

The roles of Bhutan and Nepal in 'the little wars' have largely been those of accessories. The two Himalayan nations have provided safe havens to separatist groups from the North East, as also transit facilities. ULFA and NDFB had their headquarters in Bhutan until the Bhutan government clamped its military power on ULFA and NDFB. Perhaps, the most fruitful support that ULFA receives is from the Islamic militancy in Bangladesh and from ISI and DGFI of Bangladesh.

Writers like Jaideep Saikia and Wasbir Hussain have provided security-oriented analysis of such sanctuaries in Bhutan and Bangladesh.<sup>5</sup> However, it is also essential to look at the political dynamics as to why Bhutan and Bangladesh have provided political sanctuary and patronage to ULFA at a certain point of time and denied them at another, and what is the nature of such an assistance.

The most important treaty that guides Bhutan–India relationship is 1949 Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation. The treaty has the following three main characteristics:<sup>6</sup>

1. By this treaty, India recognises the independence of Bhutan.
2. India will not interfere in the internal matters of Bhutan.
3. Bhutan accepts India's guidance on foreign policy.

ULFA and later on a host of other insurgent groups like NDFB and KLO preferred to take shelter in Bhutan after the first organised military offensive in Assam named as 'operation Bajrang' took place on 27–28 November 1990. The process of taking shelter in Bhutan increased as

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<sup>4</sup> See for details, Dipankar Banerjee, *Myanmar and North East India* (New Delhi: Delhi Policy Group, 1997) and also Bhaumik, *Insurgent Crossfire*, 32.

<sup>5</sup> See Jaideep Saikia, *Terror sans Frontiers* (New Delhi: Vision Books, 2004); Jaideep Saikia, 'Asom: Quest For Peace', in *India's North East*, eds Pushpita Das and Namrata Goswami (New Delhi: Manas Publications, 2008), 241–57 and Wasbir Hussain, 'Insurgency sans Borders: An Analysis of Separatist Insurrections in India's North East', in *Order in Chaos*, ed. Wasbir Hussain (Guwahati: Spectrum Publication, 2006), 109–25. Their writings can also be seen in various articles in *Faultlines*—a security-centric journal published by Institute of Conflict Management, New Delhi.

<sup>6</sup> 7 Leo E. Rose, *The Politics of Bhutan* (NY: Cornell University press, 1977), 7–72.

the pro-India Awami League (AL) came to power in Dhaka in 1996 and crackdown on the rebels was intensified. Stefan Preisner has said that the Bhutanese government initially used to ignore them mainly in the Samdrup Jongkhar district of southern Bhutan along the Indo-Bhutan border.<sup>7</sup> The Foreign Ministry has said that the rebels were operating from 30 camps which include 13 for ULFA, 12 for NDFB and 5 for KLO. The ULFA camps were located in Samdrup Jongkhar district, Sarpang district and the lower Zhemgang district; the NDFB camps were located in Samdrup Jongkhar district, Sarpang district; and the KLO camps were located in Samdrup Jongkhar, Kalikhola Dungkhag and Samtse districts.

However, the following three factors had forced Bhutanese governments to put pressure on ULFA, NDFB and KLO to leave and shift their camps in 1998:<sup>8</sup>

1. Continuous pressure from India
2. Increasing disturbances in Southern Bhutan
3. The Lhotshampa issue

Bhutan resisted India's pressure till 2000. From 2001 to 2003, a number of dignitaries from India visited Bhutan. Both India's national security advisor and the chief of army staff visited Bhutan in 2003 to raise India's deep concern. India, in very categorical terms, told Bhutan that such huge presence of insurgents in Bhutan is not acceptable to India. Providing shelter to the armed groups from the region, if goes unabated, would affect the friendly relations with India.<sup>9</sup>

Meanwhile, ULFA and the other militant groups took the Bhutanese government too lightly and started their own dominance in southern Bhutan, including extortion and threatening the traders in the area. In his speech, the Bhutanese Prime Minister Lyonpo Jigme in the 12th Summit of South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) in Islamabad, in January 2004, complained that the rebels had impeded

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<sup>7</sup> Stefan Preisner, 'Bhutan in 1997: Striving for Stability', *Asian Survey* 37, no. 2 (February, 1998): 158.

<sup>8</sup> Arijit Majumder, 'Bhutan's Military Action against Indian Insurgents', *Asian Survey* 45, no. 4 (2005): 566–580.

<sup>9</sup> Rajesh Kharat, 'Bhutan's Security Scenario', *Contemporary South Asia*, 13, no. 2 (June, 2004): 181.

trade, forced the closure of several large industries and educational institutions, prohibited general development and conducted unprovoked attacks within the Bhutanese territory.<sup>10</sup>

The Lhotshampa (ethnic Nepalis) issue in southern Bhutan also prompted the Bhutanese government to take action against ULFA. The Bhutanese nation-wide survey in 1991 had shown large increase of the ethnic Nepalese who increasingly settled in the fertile southern areas. The Bhutanese thought that the increasing rise of the Lhotshampas might precipitate a disturbed situation in the Himalayan kingdom. Interestingly, Bhutan was reminded of the role played by the Sikkimese Nepalis in their revolt against the Sikkimese monarchy which ultimately resulted in the merger of Sikkim with India in 1975.<sup>11</sup> The royal government, in order to prevent such a scenario from happening, attempted to impose Bhutanese Dzongkha language, style of dress and the dominant Drukpa Buddhist religion. The citizenship of many of the Nepalis was taken away, and nearly 100,000 fled the kingdom. The Lhotshampas resented such action and had drawn lot of international reaction.<sup>12</sup> The Bhutanese government did not want the Lhotshampas to align with ULFA and NDFB and pose a larger security threat to Bhutan. The Bhutanese did not want ULFA to supply arms and lessons of dissent to the Lhotshampas. From 1998 to 2001, the royal governments have been in five rounds of talks with ULFA and three rounds with the NDFB. In spite of repetitive requests and agreements, ULFA closed down only one out of nine of their camps in Bhutan.<sup>13</sup> The top-level leadership of both the organisations never bothered to talk—rather middle-level office bearers were sent to negotiate when their counterparts were the prime minister of Bhutan himself and, in some occasions, the King himself.<sup>14</sup> In 1999, the National Assembly of Bhutan adopted four-pronged approaches to put pressure on ULFA and NDFB. These included talks with the armed

<sup>10</sup> Referred in Majumder, 'Bhutan's Military Action against Indian Insurgents', 570.

<sup>11</sup> Kharat, 'Bhutan's Security Scenario', 177–178.

<sup>12</sup> Amnesty International, *Nationality, Expulsion, Statelessness and the Right to Return* (New York: Amnesty International USA publication, 2000), 4.

<sup>13</sup> By December 2001, ULFA was supposed to close four out of their nine camps. Later on it increased its number to 15.

<sup>14</sup> Thierry Mathou, 'Bhutan in 2001: At the Crossroads', *Asian Survey*, 42, no. 2 (January/February 2002), 193.

groups, curtailing supplies to the militant camps and prosecuting those Bhutanese who assisted the insurgents.<sup>15</sup> Military action is contemplated only as the last option. The Bhutanese government did not want to go to a military confrontation with only 6,000 odd soldiers of the Royal Bhutan Army (RBA) who did not have any practical exposure to jungle warfare.

Meanwhile the presence of the militants hampered the business interest of Bhutan dearly. The Dungsum cement project had to close down and the trade routes with India were seriously hit. The 900 MW Mangdechhu Hydroelectric Project to be built with Indian assistance was also stalled.<sup>16</sup> India also offered its military help but was sceptical to intervene as it might draw reverse international public opinion to conduct operations in a sovereign country. The Bhutanese government made one last-ditch effort in the 81st session of the Bhutan National Assembly on June 28 2003 that continued till 18 August 2003 by taking two resolutions. The first was to request the armed groups of the North East region to leave the country voluntarily or expel them by using military force if they don't pay heed to the first one. As expected, this time too the brothers in arms failed to recognise the gravity of the situation.

On 15 December 2003 the RBA launched attacks on ULFA, NDFB and KLO in the southern parts of Bhutan. The last war the Buddhist Bhutan fought was 138 years ago when they fought British in the Anglo-Bhutanese war of 1865 in which Bhutan was defeated by the crown's army.<sup>17</sup> However, the kingdom did not have to try hard to oust the Indian insurgents. ULFA's central headquarters at Phukaptong and the group's general headquarter at Merengphu—both in Samdrup Jongkhar—were destroyed in three days and it also captured the NDFB camp at Tikri and KLO camps in Samtse district. According to Timeline Bhutan Year 2003, by 19 December, all 30 camps had been captured and more than 90 insurgents were killed and 100 captured. However, another account says at least 650 rebels were neutralised—killed or captured.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>15</sup> Majumder, 'Bhutan's Military Action against Indian Insurgents', 572.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 573.

<sup>17</sup> Bhabani Sen Gupta, *Bhutan; Towards a Grass Root Participatory Polity* (New Delhi: Konarak, 1999), 25–26. Referred in Hussain, 'Insurgency sans Borders', 113.

<sup>18</sup> Provin Kumar, cited in Subir Bhaumik, *Troubled Periphery: Crisis of India's North East* (New Delhi: SAGE Publications, 2009), 179. *The Assam Tribune* on 3 January 2004 quoted General Vij who also gave the figure of 650.



The Indian Army 4 corps based at Tezpur sealed the 266-km international border and 20th Mountain division; Siliguri helped in the medical evacuation. India's role was more in terms of providing logistics, medical evacuation, surveillance, hot chase around the border and communication. Major General S. S. Dhillon, commandant of the Indian Military Training Team, coordinated the whole operation with the chief of operation officer, RBA, Lieutenant General G. G. Lam Dorji in the Bhutanese capital Thimphu and reported directly to the King Wangchuk. The topmost leaders of ULFA who were captured and handed over to India were Bhimkanta Buragohain, the seniormost leader and one of the members since the foundation of the organisation in 1979, Mithinga Daimary (publicity secretary) and Robin Neog (a close aide of commander-in-chief of ULFA). Around 64 family members, women cadres and children of these organisations who were residing in the camps were handed over to Indian authorities. However, the fate of many topmost ULFA leaders is not yet known—whether they were killed or are in custody.

## ULFA in Bangladesh

According to Subir Bhaumik, Bangladesh had started providing shelter to the rebels of the North East from 1978, three years after India started arming the Shanti Bahini to fight in Chittagong Hill tracts.<sup>19</sup> ULFA, after being flushed out of Bhutan, has set up minimum eight bases in the Mymensingh region bordering the Indian state of Meghalaya.<sup>20</sup> Initially, ULFA's presence in Sherpur was very temporary, but after the Bhutan episode, its presence in the area increased substantially. ULFA's leadership was however based in Bangladesh.

Why has Bangladesh started providing such huge support to the insurgent groups of the North East? Is it just because of porous border or Dhaka's inability to control its periphery? Is this to revenge India's support to the Shanti Bahini to fight in Chittagong Hill tracts? Is India's hegemonic role in South Asia responsible for keeping the north eastern India disturbed? How far is it to do with the growing Islamic

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<sup>19</sup> Bhaumik, *Troubled Periphery*, 169.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 173.

fundamentalism in Bangladesh? To what extent are China and Pakistan responsible? These issues require deeper analysis for which we shall have to look into the politics of Bangladesh.

After playing a decisive role in ensuring Bangladesh's independence in 1971, India immediately pulled out its forces from Bangladesh and was the first country to recognise her as an independent sovereign country. In 1972 both the states signed an agreement 'Treaty of Friendship and Peace' for a term of 25 years. By the agreement, both the states would respect each other's independence, sovereignty and territorial integrity while refraining from interfering in each other's internal affairs. However, after the death of Mujibur Rahman in 1975, there was a gradual transformation of Bangladesh from linguistic nationalism to Islamic nationalism. From the stated objectives of nationalism, secularism, democracy and socialism, Bangladesh embraced Islamic ideology as the means to legitimise the subsequent regimes. The Bharatiya Janata Party's coming to power in 1998 with a proclaimed Hindutva ideology triggered Bangladesh's apprehension about India.

India's gigantic size, economy and military power are a great source of concern for Bangladesh. Bangladesh shares a 4,095-km international border with India. Of this, the state of West Bengal has a border length of 221 km, Tripura 856 km, Mizoram 318 km and Assam 262 km. India is also deeply concerned about Bangladesh's strategic alliance with Pakistan and China. There is suspicion that Pakistan's former president Pervez Musharraf's visit to the country in 2003 was to forge strong military ties and ensure smooth operation of the ISI from the territory of Bangladesh. To meet his objectives, he surveyed the possibility of harnessing insurgent forces that could be utilised for anti-India activities in her north eastern border. It is also widely reported in the regional and national newspapers that Musharraf in his visit met with ULFA's General Secretary Anup Chetia who has been detained in Bangladesh jail since 1998 for illegal stay in Bangladesh.<sup>21</sup> The allegation was made by local government minister and AL General Secretary Syed Ashraf

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<sup>21</sup> Musharraf's meeting with Anup Chetia was widely reported in the newspapers of Assam on 10 January 2010. See 'Musharraf met Chetia in Dhaka', *The Assam Tribune* (10 January 2010), 1.

Islam while accompanying the Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina who visited India on 9 January 2010.<sup>22</sup>

India's suspicion of Bangladesh also increased as the latter tried to woo China to prevent India from asserting hegemonic position in the region. Manish Dabhade and Harsh V. Pant have argued that the smaller states in the region have utilised China as leverage in their dealings with India.<sup>23</sup> China is too happy to increase its interventionist role as it would keep India engaged in the regional issues and would effectively prevent her aspirations to become a global power. China did not recognise Bangladesh till 1975; however, China's relations with Bangladesh were determined by the Pakistan factor. Growing Islamic resurgence in Pakistan and Bangladesh bring them closer. Because of their common security perceptions, both are happy to be a part of China's 'encirclement policy' towards India. Bangladesh's increasing defence cooperation with China might divert India's attention from the western sector to the eastern sector. Very soon China tried its best to wean off Bangladesh from India's influence. The Defence Cooperation Agreement signed between the two countries in 2002 in Beijing can be considered to be the most significant steps in bringing the two countries together. China is also helping Bangladesh in the construction of a deep water port at Chittagong.

Like Pakistan, Bangladesh's domestic politics is largely determined by India. Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) and other political parties have defined themselves in opposition to India portraying the AL as India's stooge. Beside the Islamic religious parties have gained ground in the electoral politics of the state by adopting a harsh anti-Indian line. Bangladesh's help to the insurgent outfits of the North East increased substantially after the BNP-led coalitions assumed power in 2001. Immediately after the election, there was an attack on the Hindus at the behest of the ruling party activists. The near silence of the government had encouraged the non-state radical Islamic groups to make Bangladesh an Islamic state and fight against the infidels. The supporting alliances of the BNP governments were among the most radical groups

<sup>22</sup> [http://www.thaindian.com/newsportal/world-news/clear-evidence-of-musharraf-meeting-militant-anup-chetia\\_100301721.html](http://www.thaindian.com/newsportal/world-news/clear-evidence-of-musharraf-meeting-militant-anup-chetia_100301721.html) (accessed on 15 June 2010).

<sup>23</sup> Manish Dabhade and Harsh V. Pant, 'Coping with Challenges to Sovereignty : Sino-Indian Rivalry and Nepal's Foreign Policy', *Contemporary South Asia* 13, no. 2 (June 2004): 157–169.

in the country. The Jamaat-e-Islami (Islamic Assembly) and the Islamic Oikya Jote (IOJ, Islamic Unity Front) were linked to various Islamic organisations of Bangladesh. Incidentally, the Jamaat-e-Islami opposed Bangladesh's liberation and took a pro-Pakistani stand.<sup>24</sup> The growth of radical Islam in Bangladesh owes a lot to the failure of parliamentary politics and weakening of civil society.<sup>25</sup> Frequent fighting between the political parties and their inability to resolve nagging problems of the people have prevented the democratic institutions to function effectively. The vacuum has been filled up by the radical religious institutions. According to Kanchan Lakshman, 50,000 Islamic militants belonging to more than 40 groups now control large areas of Bangladesh with the assistance of the radical elements of the BNP government who were the stakeholders of the government.<sup>26</sup> After the US intervention in Afghanistan in 2001, the member of the IOJ one of the constituents of the ruling BNP took the street chanting—'We will be the Taliban and Bangladesh will be Afghanistan'. Bangladesh has the third largest Muslim population in the world; however, 70 million populations live on less than \$10 a day.<sup>27</sup> Besides, Bangladesh is the most densely populated state in the world with 1,250 persons living per sq km. Population doubled in Bangladesh from 1961–91 from 55 million to 111.4 million, which is now nearly 130 million. Because of such tremendous pressure on land and acute poverty, Assam and other North Eastern states become the preferred destination of immigrations from Bangladesh.

The growing radicalisation has great consequences for the North East in general and Assam in particular. Since the precolonial period, the issue of illegal immigration from then East Bengal (now Bangladesh) remains the core issue of Assamese identity.<sup>28</sup> In fact, as we have argued in the first chapter, Assam's growing demand as an independent country emanates from the inability of the Indian State to give this much-needed security

<sup>24</sup> Shahedul Anam Khan, 'Bangladesh: Challenges to Peace', in *Order in Chaos*, ed. Wasbir Hussain (Guwahati: Spectrum Publication, 2006), 39.

<sup>25</sup> Harsh V. Pant, 'India and Bangladesh: Will the Twain Ever Meet?', *Assam Survey* 47 (2007): 238.

<sup>26</sup> Kanchan Lakshman, 'Islamist Extremists Mobilization in Bangladesh', *Terrorism Monitor* 13, no. 12 (June 2005), 6.

<sup>27</sup> Pant, 'India and Bangladesh: Will the Twain Ever Meet?', 242.

<sup>28</sup> The first chapter of the book and the conclusion deal with the issues of immigration and identity.

to the Assamese elites. Although the Bangladeshi scholars and security experts deny the existence of Bangladeshi immigrants in Assam,<sup>29</sup> but the fact is that an objective analysis would clearly reveal that such movements of population are bound to happen as the border between the two is virtually non-existent and there are many pushing factors that pull the Bangladeshi immigrants to Assam.

In recent years, several studies have analysed immigration and its impact on Assam and the other states of North East India. Much of the available literature points to immigration being problematic for Assam and the North East,<sup>30</sup> though certain studies hold that the illegal immigration issue has been exaggerated<sup>31</sup> and that post-1971 migration from Bangladesh is more a myth than anything else and that 'there is no need to generate hysteria about a culture-in-crisis in order to expel a few thousand "illegal" migrants.'<sup>32</sup>

What is the magnitude of illegal immigration from Bangladesh? On the basis of Indian and Bangladeshi documents, one estimate holds that not less than one-third of Assam's 22.38 million population are immigrants and their descendants and those 10–14 million Bangladeshi migrants were settled in India.<sup>33</sup> Another estimate by a former governor of Arunachal Pradesh and West Bengal holds that about five million illegal migrants from Bangladesh are settled in Assam.<sup>34</sup> Central Home Ministry/IB sources place Assam's alien population from Bangladesh at about 4 million. Another study estimates that

<sup>29</sup> Khan, 'Bangladesh: Challenges to Peace', 43, and also Prof Imtiaz Ahmed, 'Image of the Other' (paper presented at the Contemporary South Asia Lecture Series, Queen Elizabeth House, University of Oxford, 20 June 2005).

<sup>30</sup> B. G. Verghese and G. Desai, eds, *Situation in Assam*, mimeo (New Delhi: Gandhi Peace Foundation, 1980); Sanjay Hazarika, 'Bangladeshisation of India', *The Telegraph*, (6 February 1992); Mahmud Taher, 'Ethnic Situation in North East', *North Eastern Geographer* 28 (1997); and Myron Weiner, 'Rejected Peoples and Unwanted Migrants', *Economic and Political Weekly* 28, no. 34 (21 August 1993); Anup Saikia, 'Global Process and Local Concerns: Bangladeshi Migrants in Assam', *Dialogue* 3, no. 3 (January–March 2002): 36–39.

<sup>31</sup> S. K. Das, 'Immigration and Demographic Transformation of 1891–1981', *Economic and Political Weekly* (10 May 1983); Monirul Hussain, *Assam Movement: Class, Ideology and Identity* (Manak Publication, 1994); Anindita Dasgupta, 'Political Myth Making in Post-colonial Assam', *Himal South Asia* 13, no. 8 (2000).

<sup>32</sup> Dasgupta, 'Political Myth Making in Post-colonial Assam', 14–23.

<sup>33</sup> Hazarika, 'Bangladeshisation of India'.

<sup>34</sup> T. V. Rajeshwar, 'Migration or Invasion', *The Hindustan Times* (7 February 1996), New Delhi.

based on the 1951 growth rate, the state of Assam should have a population of about 15 million. It has more than 7 million extra, according to the latest (1991) census. The extra numbers can be accounted for by either immigrants and/or their descendants. (Census 1991, cited in Sanjay Hazarika, 'Bangladesh and Assam: Land Pressures, Migration and Ethnic Conflict'.)

This would seem very plausible considering the estimates of four to five million made by intelligence sources being of reference only to the Bangladeshi immigrants and not to the descendants of such migrants.

Going by such analysis, had Assam's population increased at the same rate as India from 1901 to 1991, at 254.99 per cent, her population would be 8.33 million rather than 22.4 million in 1991, the share of migrants and their descendants amounting to 14.03 million.<sup>35</sup>

**Table 8.1**  
**Population Variation in India and Assam (in per cent)**

<i>Decade</i>	<i>Assam</i>	<i>India</i>
1901–11	16.99	5.75
1911–21	20.48	–0.31
1921–31	19.91	11.00
1931–41	20.41	14.22
1941–51	19.93	13.31
1951–61	34.98	21.51
1961–71	34.95	24.80
1971–81	23.36	24.69
1981–91	24.24	23.82
1991–2001	18.85	21.34

*Source:* Census of India, various years.

Though such analysis is indicative of the migrant population in Assam, it is not useful in estimating the illegal immigration from Bangladesh. For this the rate of growth of Muslim population in Assam proves more useful, though this would ignore any non-Muslim immigrants from Bangladesh. It is apparent that growth rates of Muslim population in Assam has been far higher than the all-India aggregates. Such high growth rates can be attributed only to illegal immigration from Bangladesh. Fertility rates of the indigenous Assamese Muslims,

<sup>35</sup> Anup Saikia, referred to above.

who are educated, have high economic and income levels, are in no way higher than the Muslims across other parts of India. On the contrary, it is likely, given their high literacy rates, that fertility rate of the indigenous Assamese Muslims are lower than those of Muslims residing in other states of India. Finally, since Muslims from other states of India are not unduly attracted to migrate to Assam, it establishes beyond reasonable doubt that behind the abnormal growth rate of Muslim population in Assam lies the Bangladeshi factor.

**Table 8.2**  
**Proportion of Muslim Population in India and Assam (in per cent)**

<i>Decade</i>	<i>India</i>	<i>Assam</i>
1911	22.39	16.23
1931	23.49	22.78
1951	9.91	24.68
1961	10.71	25.30
1971	11.21	24.56
1991	12.12	28.43

*Source:* Census of India, various years.

While the 1991 and 2001 censuses show low population growth rates in Assam, the religion wise data of 1991 provides insights to the proportion of illegal migrants from 1981–91. Growth rates of Muslim population in Assam have been inordinately high vis-à-vis the non-Muslim population. Using the figure estimated by other sources, the quantum of illegal Bangladeshi immigrants in Assam of four to five million, would mean that between 18 to 22 per cent of Assam's population comprises of illegal aliens.<sup>36</sup> Few regions in the world have such a high proportion of its populace as illegal aliens.

The problem of immigration from Bangladesh is over a century old. Only with India's independence did the migration become 'illegal'. While the fact remains that several states of India face a similar problem, such as West Bengal and Bihar, the larger base populations of these states in a way alleviates the intensity of the problem. In Tripura, another north eastern state of India, the local populations have been turned into a minority community over time by the sheer numbers of cross-border

<sup>36</sup> Anup Saikia, referred to above.

migrants from Bangladesh. In 1947, 56 per cent of Tripura's population consisted of tribal (or indigenous) population. Today this stands at a quarter of the total.<sup>37</sup> Bengali Hindus had become 71 per cent by 1971 and by then political and administrative power had passed from the indigenous tribal population to migrant Bengalis; transfer of land to the Bengali migrants proved to be the critical factor in deteriorating social relations and in the June 1980 riots hundreds lost their lives. The tribals of Tripura have today been reduced to numerical nonentities and are engaged in armed conflict against the migrants whom they see as the usurpers of their homelands. With political and administrative power in the hands of the latter, the tribals are engaged in a losing battle for survival. The perception in Assam is that just as the tribals of Tripura were economically, politically and numerically marginalised, the same fate may befall them. A veritable 'Tripurisation of Assam' in the coming decades cannot be ruled out.<sup>38</sup> Unfortunately, such fears have been treated lackadaisically, perhaps due to political compulsions, both by Delhi and Dispur.<sup>39</sup> We shall have occasion to discuss about the issue of immigration in our last chapter where I shall argue for a more pragmatic approach as a state of denial or an exaggerated figure of immigrants are landing us nowhere.

Whatever the numbers of the immigrants in Assam, the fact is Bangladesh occupies a significant position in the contemporary political history of Assam. However, from 1995 onwards the issue is more directed towards Bangladesh's role in providing sanctuary to the militants of the North East and their design in doing so. Is it linked to the process of immigration or the creation of Brihot Bangla<sup>40</sup> as some writers have argued? Jaidip Saikia has termed one of his chapters in his book 'Terror Sans Frontiers' as 'Swadhin Asom or Brihot Bangladesh'.<sup>41</sup> Saikia has argued:

Bangladesh is the main abettor for the new interest group, with a section of its intelligentsia, backed by the 'barrack politics' of the country,

<sup>37</sup> H. Narayan, 'Tribal Tribulation in Tripura', *The Statesman* (20 March, 1997).

<sup>38</sup> Anup Saikia, 'Tripurisation of Assam', *The Assam Tribune* (15 May 1996).

<sup>39</sup> Mahmmd Taher, 'Ethnic Situation in North East'.

<sup>40</sup> Greater Bangladesh.

<sup>41</sup> Jaidip Saikia, *Terror Sans Frontiers*, Chapter 3, p. 66.



which seeks annexation of Assam to be a greater Bangladesh.... the new interest group's technique is to exploit Islam in order to consolidate the annexation from illegal migration from Bangladesh into Assam that is happening for reasons of economics.<sup>42</sup>

The greater Bangladesh and Islamic alarm may be too early and seem to have grossly neglected the moderate section of the middle class and intelligentsia in Bangladesh. Security experts give us an impression that the entire Bangladesh is engulfed with Islamic radicalism and Taliban's taking over the country is just a matter of time. As a perceptive Bangladeshi scholar has opined:

Bangladesh can also take solace in the fact that the deeply religious but moderate Bengali Muslim would not allow this to happen (radicalization of Bangladeshi society). It is their attitude to religion that makes them conform to the liberal values that Islam preaches that will militate against obscurantism and the distorted ideology of the extremists prevailing in the country.<sup>43</sup>

Sheikh Hasina's coming to power in 1999 and the massive loss of BNP and other radical Islamic forces is a testimony to the fact that Islamisation or radicalisation of Bangladesh society is taking place with a section of groups only. Too much reading of Islamisation of Bangladeshi society might hamper a durable conflict resolution process through people-to-people contact and Track II initiative.

However, the elitist and the radical elements in the military establishment and intelligence establishments had definitely played a proactive role in providing logistical and strategic support to ULFA and other militant groups of the region. A scholar has argued in the journal *Asian Survey*:

Bangladesh, in fact, has long been a willing host to militant outfits operating in North East India. Even before the emergence of Bangladesh as an independent state, the Chittagong Hill Tracts were used by the Pakistani Army to train and shelter Mizo and Naga insurgents fighting against India. It has been suspected that Bangladesh, and Pakistan's

<sup>42</sup> Saikia, 'Asom: Quest for Peace', 248.

<sup>43</sup> Khan, 'Bangladesh: Challenges to Peace', 39.

ISI, has been coordinating anti-India activities along with outfits like the United Liberation Front of Assam, the National Socialist Council of Nagaland, the National Liberation Front of Tripura, and the All Tripura Tiger Force.<sup>44</sup>

ISI in order to create disturbances in the North East region has started following a policy of encirclement by trying to exploit every conceivable area of potential conflict. A high-level presence of immigrant Muslims and their growing sense of alienation coupled with poorly managed porous border helped ISI in their design to instil trouble in states like Assam. With that objective in mind, the organisation operates training camps near the border in Bangladesh where separatist groups of the North East, collectively known as the 'United Liberation Front of Seven Sisters', are given training in various armed activities. These groups include the National Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN), People's Liberation Army (PLA), the United Liberation Front of Asom (ULFA) and the North East Students' Organisation (NESO).<sup>45</sup>

B. G. Verghese in his seminal work *India's North East Resurgent* gives an account how ULFA received support from Myanmar, ISI and DGFI in Bangladesh and less successfully with LTTE. Indian government was successful in putting pressure at Myanmar government for withdrawing their training camp by the KIA.<sup>46</sup> Verghese further remarks:

Pressures in Myanmar led ULFA a couple of years later to establish contacts with the ISI and the Afghan Mujahideen in Pakistan and still later with the Bangladesh Field Intelligence in Dhaka and, less successfully, with the LTTE.<sup>47</sup>

The Assam Assembly discussed the ISI activities in Assam on 6 April 2000 after presenting a comprehensive report by Chief Minister

<sup>44</sup> Pant, 'India and Bangladesh: Will the Twain Ever Meet?', 243.

<sup>45</sup> [www.fas.org/irp/world/pakistan/isi/](http://www.fas.org/irp/world/pakistan/isi/)

<sup>46</sup> Operation Golden Bird by both Indian and Burmese armies in April–May 1995 killed 50 insurgents and a substantial number was arrested. The major engagement took place in the Champai and Chhimtuipui sectors of Mizoram. ULFA's foreign secretary Sasha Choudhury was among those caught later on to be released on bail. This information obtained through intelligence sources in Assam.

<sup>47</sup> B. G. Verghese, *India's North East Resurgent* (New Delhi: Konark Publishers, 1996), 58.

Prafulla Kumar Mahanta. It is one of the rare incidents where the activity of a foreign intelligence agency was discussed in a State Assembly. The report gives details of the penetration by the agency and its effort to create communal tension in the state. The episode of ISI activity in Assam became clear after the arrest of a few of their agents in Assam.<sup>48</sup> The report talked about the dissemination and eventual dismantling of one of the Pakistani intelligence Agency's network in the state. On 7 August 1999, the Assam Police arrested two officers of the ISI as well as two other agents of the same Agency from a hotel in Guwahati. The 16-page Report identified the following areas of ISI activities in Assam:

1. Promoting violence in the state by providing active support to local militant outfits.
2. Effort to create new militant outfits along ethnic and communal lines by instigating ethnic and religious groups.
3. Providing explosives and other sophisticated weapons to the militant organisations.
4. Mobilisation of local Muslims to fight against the Government in the name of *jehad*.

According to the report, Pakistani officials in the High Commission at Dhaka were responsible for arranging passports and other documents for the travel of the ULFA cadres. The ISI is accused of being involved in providing different passports for the ULFA commander-in-chief, Paresb Barua. The report also reveals that the ULFA leader has been travelling to Karachi under the name of Kamaruddin Zaman Khan.

Bangladesh's role in providing shelter and other infrastructural facilities to the terrorist groups of the North East is a great source of concern in the South Asian region. In this regard, I had the opportunity to interview Professor Imtiaz Ahmed of Dhaka University. His main argument

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<sup>48</sup> The four ISI operatives arrested were identified as Mohammad Fasih Ullah Hussaini alias Mamid Mehmood alias Khalid Mehmood of Hyderabad (Sind), Pakistan; Mohammad Javed Waqar alias Mohammad Mustaffa alias Mohammad Mehraj alias Abdul Rahman of Karachi, Pakistan; Maulana Hafiz Mohammad Akram Mallik alias Muzaffar Hussain alias Atabullah alias Bhajjan alias Abdul Awal of Mukam Shahwali village, Jammu and Kashmir; and Kari Salim Ahmad alias Abdul Aziz alias Sadat of Mehilki village in Muzaffarnagar, Uttar Pradesh.

is that developing countries, particularly countries like Bangladesh in South Asia, have very little control in the peripheries. In the peripheries of Bangladesh, a strong illegal arms racket exists which does not require the patronage of any country. Therefore, areas like Chittagong or Rangpur or Sylhet might have the bases of some terrorist groups. In addition, Professor Ahmed argued that the people of Bangladesh might have a soft corner for the 'oppressed groups' of the North East as Bangladesh's struggle for liberation against the West Pakistan is too recent to be forgotten. In this regard he cited one Bangla group that became very active for providing support to the Ireland cause.

However, this kind of analysis completely overlooks the role of the State in such patronage. It is extremely difficult to accept that Bangladesh does not have any role to play. Our interaction with ULFA cadres as well as the surrendered militants of ULFA clearly demonstrates that not only the ULFA cadres but also members of other outfits of the North East region have been receiving the official patronage of Bangladesh, particularly its intelligence wing DGFI.

Bangladesh's such anti-Indian posture has to do with its growing Islamic fundamentalism. The politicians in Bangladesh try to gain legitimacy by maintaining an anti-Hindu and anti-India stand. Bertil Linter of the *Far Eastern Economic Review* remarks:

A revolution is taking place in Bangladesh that threatens trouble for the region and beyond if left unchallenged. Islamic fundamentalism, religious intolerance, militant Muslim groups with links to international terrorist groups, a powerful military with ties to the militants, the mushrooming of Islamic schools churning out radical students, middle class apathy, poverty and lawlessness—all are combining to transform the nation.<sup>49</sup>

## ULFA: Getting Entangled in the Politics of Bangladesh and International Arms Network

ULFA while taking shelter in Bangladesh made certain monumental mistakes, which are listed below:

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<sup>49</sup> Bertil Linter, 'Bangladesh: A Cocoon of Terror', *Far Eastern Economic Review* (4 April 2002).

1. It came to be identified with the Islamic radical groups of Bangladesh.
2. It started funding and patronising political parties for its survival.
3. It came to be identified more as international arms dealer, particularly for the insurgent outfits of North East region.
4. ULFA's involvement in the 2004 Arms Haul case, which is the biggest arms seizure not only in the history of the country but also in entire South Asia, hastened the Bangladeshi establishments to tighten the screws against ULFA.
5. The final nail in the coffin was the attack on Sheikh Hasina's political rally in which 23 people were killed and she narrowly escaped on 21 August 2004.

*The Assam Tribune*, the oldest and the most premiere English daily of Assam, published a sensational news item on 26 February 2007 regarding ULFA's investment of \$6 million among the major political parties of Bangladesh. The paper presented a report from Strategic Foresight Inc., better known as Stratfor, which was released on 31 January 2007. The report indicated that ULFA leaders might find themselves on a sticky wicket because the state department officials in Washington have been keeping a close watch on ULFA's activities in Bangladesh. The Stratfor report said that besides the Islamist parties, the AL and BNP also are receiving substantial support from one of India's most prominent indigenous militant groups, ULFA. ULFA has developed into a powerful, moneymaking machine that relies on Bangladesh for its protection, making it all the more important for ULFA to ensure that its interests are satisfied in the upcoming elections.

On ULFA's moneymaking business in Bangladesh, the report further said:

ULFA's core leadership is believed to have been living in luxury in Bangladesh for 15 years under the protection of political allies in Dhaka. As long as ULFA can continue funding the appropriate candidates, it can ensure that the Bangladesh government will resist caving into Indian demands to crack down on the militant group.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> 'ULFA invests in Bangladesh', *The Assam Tribune* (26 February 2007), 1.

The paper said ULFA's commander-in-chief is said to have amassed an amount of worth approximately \$110 million. Paresch Baruah is said to have business operations throughout India, Bangladesh and the Persian Gulf, including hotels, consulting firms, driving schools, tanneries, department stores, textile factories, travel agencies, investment companies, shrimp trawlers and soft drink factories.

Interestingly, ULFA has not offered any contradiction of the report in the newspapers of Assam, which it generally does immediately, criticising it as a ploy of the Indian State or the intelligence officials.

ULFA is the only insurgent group in Dhaka that has ventured into such an exercise. Almost all the insurgent groups of the North East have their base in Bangladesh. But none had embarked upon such activities. Dr. Anand Kumar, a prominent security analyst of India, in one of his papers said that ULFA was involved in the assassination attempt of Sheikh Hasina on 21 August 2004. Dr. Kumar said:

It (ULFA) acted as a tool in the hands of certain political forces of Bangladesh who despise a major political alliance in that country led by Sheikh Hasina. Interestingly, ULFA also despises this alliance, though it rarely says so openly. In these circumstances, it is hardly surprising that the outfit made a common cause with the opponents of Hasina led alliance and tried to eliminate her in a public rally.<sup>51</sup>

On 21 August 2004, a lethal attack took place on Sheikh Hasina while she was addressing a public rally in Dhaka. In this incident 23 people were killed. One of the victims was Ivy Rahman, a close associate of Sheikh Hasina. Sheikh Hasina herself narrowly escaped with some injuries. Many people believed that this attack had the sanction of former four party alliances led by BNP. Without their support, it was almost impossible for the attackers to escape from such a huge gathering.

The one-member government judicial enquiry commission of Justice Joyrul Abedin linked a foreign enemy with the attack but his report was not made public. The judicial enquiry commission claimed to have identified the perpetrators but its head declined to disclose their identity. Dr. Kumar argues that the foreign enemy is ULFA. To quote him,

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<sup>51</sup> <http://www.southasiaanalysis.org/papers22/paper2129.html> (accessed on 16 June 2010).

A private news agency of Bangladesh BDNews24.com quoted Assam police intelligence chief Khagen Sharma as saying that a ULFA commander, Pallav Saikia, has confessed about the involvement of his group in attacking the AL rally. Saikia, arrested in Shillong on December 14, 2006, said that he led 11 men from his group. He reportedly said, 'Some Bangladesh intelligence officials helped us plan the assault and even gave us the vehicles for the assault but I don't know these Bangladeshis.'<sup>52</sup>

In fact, on 8 and 9 February 2007, various news agencies in Dhaka reported that former National Security Intelligence (NSI) chief Major General Rezakul Haider Choudhury assisted ULFA in carrying out the attack on 21 August and Jama'atul Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB) later in raising bomb attacks. The official was transferred and then dismissed from service earlier that month. If all those allegations are true, a question arises: Why ULFA went berserk? Such meddling is unheard of from any other insurgent outfits. I tried to cross-verify it with some of the ULFA leaders who were there in Dhaka during that period of time. Their argument looks convincing. One of the leaders have said that ULFA's cadres may not have been directly involved in such attacks. But surely arms and ammunitions have been provided by ULFA.

ULFA's frequent meetings with the political leaders, particularly with Mukti Judha Sanmilan, a wing of BNP, began in 1995 and it is Anup Chetia—the charismatic general secretary of the organisation—who took the lead in generating support and brought the organisation closer to BNP. The tussle between the two parties (between AL and BNP) had become more intense and some sleeper cells of BNP in collaboration with Islamic radical parties even contemplated extreme actions to discredit the AL.

ULFA's gradual intervention into the politics of Bangladesh has, later on, been taken over by Paresh Baruah after the arrest of Anup Chetia in 1996. After 2000, especially after the NSCN-IM's peace process with the GOI in 1997, Paresh Baruah by dint of his excellent connection in South East Asia became the undisputed leader of arms dealing and arms selling. Apart from the insurgent groups of the North East, even the Maoist leaders were dependent on Paresh Baruah for arms and ammunitions.

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<sup>52</sup> <http://www.southasiaanalysis.org/papers22/paper2129.html>. Paper no. 2129. Published on 9 February 2007.

Since then the politics and grievances of Assam took a back seat and a violence-driven industry gained preponderance. Henceforth, violence has become an independent variable; it found its own clientele and logic. Paresh Baruah became an island unto himself. In order to understand this character, one must look at the 2004 Chittagong arms case.

## April 2004 Chittagong Arms Case: ULFA's Nexus with Intelligence and Other Fundamentalist Forces in Bangladesh

A huge cache of arms was seized in Chittagong in April 2004 by security teams of Bangladesh—the huge transaction was supposedly done and supervised at the behest of ULFA's Army Chief Paresh Baruah. The Chittagong arms haul case refers to police seizing 10 trucks of arms and ammunitions with 4,930 different types of firearms, 27,020 grenades, 840 rocket launchers, 300 accessories of rocket launchers, 2,000 grenade launching tubes, 6,392 magazines and 11,40,520 bullets, weapons and ammunition. They were being loaded on 10 trucks from two engine boats at the jetty of Chittagong Urea Fertilizer Limited on 2 April 2004. The seizure has been described by the Bangladesh newspaper as the 'most sensational and biggest-ever arms and ammunition haul' in the history of Bangladesh.<sup>53</sup>

The two prime accused have acknowledged that the confiscated arms in Chittagong in 2004 were meant for ULFA and the confiscation was done under the direct supervision of Paresh Barua. The entire lot was confiscated on 1–2 April 2004 by the Bangladesh police. Bertil Lintner argues that ULFA arranged these weapons with the help of a Pakistani businessman in Dubai. Lintner referred to Jane's Intelligence report that (in July 2004) the shipment originated from Hong Kong and reached Sittwe in Myanmar where the weaponry was transferred to smaller vessels and shipped to Chittagong. The shipment was worth US\$4.5–US\$7 million.<sup>54</sup>

<sup>53</sup> See '2 NSI Ex-Dgs Placed on Fresh Remand', *New Age* (a popular daily newspaper of Bangladesh), (21 May 2009). See <http://www.newagebd.com/2009/may/21/index.html> (accessed on 3 January 2010).

<sup>54</sup> Bertil Lintner, 'ULFA: Radar-less Rebellions', *Look East* 10 (May 2010): 18.



## The Internal Schism in ULFA: Clash between the Chairman and Commander-in-Chief

ULFA's internal contradictions became more intense after 2004–05 when Paresh Baruah started taking many decisions unilaterally and organisational meetings and decisions became a mere formality. In fact, it would not be an exaggeration to say that ULFA is practically run by Paresh Baruah since 1995–96. After the arrest of Anup Chetia, nobody had the charisma to question Paresh and the chairman always played a second fiddle in front of the chief of army staff. Unquestionably, Paresh is the most powerful person in the organisation because of three factors:

1. He is in charge of arms—practically all the military cadres are personally loyal to the commander-in-chief. The chairman's influence was restricted to the executive meetings of the organisation only.
2. Practically, he is in charge of all expenditures, including providing logistical support to the chairman and other members of the central executive committee. From 2004 onwards, as the financial collection from Assam and the recruitment process to ULFA came down, Paresh had to look for other sources to run the organisation. He did not have many options in front of him. He selected the one which he can do most efficiently, i.e., arms dealing and providing them to the national and international clientele.
3. In the process, he developed a rapport with all the arms network in China, Myanmar and other parts of South East Asia. In order to do so, he had to overcome all the pressures and limitations he had on him from the organisation. To maintain his relations with the network, he had to be the absolute controller of the organisation. Practically, he took over the powers of everyone, including the chairman and other powerful members like Sasha Choudhury, Chitrabon Hazarika and Raju Baruah. From 2006 onwards, all the office bearers of the organisation at Dhaka had become useless. Even for petty errands, the chairman had to request the commander-in-chief. The only person with whom Paresh had conversation was the chairman and his few loyal cadres. Paresh's dynamism, manoeuvrings, diplomatic shrewdness and impeccable

anticipation helped him to become the unquestionable authority of the organisation as the others were counting days for a better future—recollecting their golden days in Assam.

The Chittagong arms case has given tremendous fillip to the international connection of Paresh Baruah—he is now one of the most well-known names in the annals of South Asian arms history. However, both Paresh and the organisation had to pay a heavy price as the former got practically alienated from the organisation and in order to be in the international network, he facilitated the arrest of many of his compatriots.<sup>55</sup> According to the sources from the organisation, Paresh had left Dhaka a few days before the arrests of Sasha Choudhury and Chitrabon Hazarika. Paresh's safe departure from Dhaka came at a price. ULFA's anti-Hasina activities resulted in a tough stand by the AL government that came to power in 2008. Paresh's close aides in DGFI and military wings in Dhaka made it abundantly clear that the pressure from GOI is too much to withstand and the establishments in Dhaka have no way out but to capture a few leaders. There are unconfirmed evidences to believe that both Sasha Choudhury and Chitrabon Hazarika were made to arrest from within the organisation.

A major confrontation started between Paresh Baruah and Arabinda Rajkhowa from 12 November 2009. This is the only occasion when the chairman of ULFA dared to confront the commander-in-chief in all conceivable ways. After the arrest of Sasha and Chitrabon, the chairman along with the leftover members took a resolution. It says:

today, i.e. 10/11/2009 at the central Headquarter an emergency meeting of the central executive (*kendriya samiti*) was held. The following resolutions were taken at the meeting—the three fourth Central Executive Council members of ULFA are either arrested or are at large. At the central shelter zone (i.e. Dhaka) we witness a situation of Bhutan like situation of 2003. At the Bhutan attack entire Central Command Headquarter (CCHQ) was destroyed which resulted in a big vacuum at the administrative level. Whatever Battalions have been left; they are

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<sup>55</sup> The writer could access some e-mail letters among the top ULFA leaders, particularly after the Hasina government came to power in 2008. These were obtained through security sources which were later on confirmed through a series of interviews with captured ULFA leaders from Bangladesh (information provided on the request of anonymity).

incapable of executing any decisions. The organisation and the armed struggle are gradually becoming alienated from the masses. In such a situation the meeting considers that it is essential to strengthen the collective leadership and in the interest of the struggle it is imperative to take a few emergent decisions. In order to ensure the release of the arrested leaders and to ensure the safety of the left over leaders, the meeting has decided to start the peace process for the effective political solution of the Indo-Assam conflict which got halted in 2007.<sup>56</sup>

For that purpose, the following decisions were taken:

1. To resolve the Indo-Assam conflict and to hasten the halted peace process, it was decided to constitute two groups—one to appoint a ‘group to act as the interlocutor’ with the GOI and the other a ‘unit from within the organisation’ to prepare the primary modalities for talks. For that purpose, Reboti Phukon and Dr. Brojen Gogoi have been appointed to act as the interlocutor. In order to prepare the primary ground for resolving Indo-Assam conflict, the following members from within the organisation have been given the responsibility—Pradip Gogoi (vice-chairman), Anup Chetia (general secretary), Lieutenant Colonel Chitrabon Hazarika (finance secretary) and Major Sasha Choudhury (foreign secretary). Other members were barred from articulating their opinion.
2. The above-mentioned resolutions have been sent to various battalions and central leaders of the organisation for immediate compliance.
3. It has been decided to stop all kinds of armed activity till the peaceful talk process continues and till further instructions from the headquarters.
4. The woman and child members of Rupohi (code name for the camps in Bangladesh) camp have a greater responsibility. In the event of male members being arrested or shifted to different place, they have the responsibility to face the situation by contacting various national and international human rights organisations.

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<sup>56</sup> The writer has obtained resolutions and other transcripts through a series of meetings, interviews and visits to some locations of ULFA which include Dhaka.

Rajkhowa made frantic attempts to give effect to these resolutions. The plight of the chairman and other leaders in Dhaka was quite palpable as the security agencies in Dhaka were dreadfully after them. Rajkhowa had a tough job—on the one hand, he had to face the most intractable commander-in-chief who was unlikely to follow the resolutions, and on the other hand, starting the peace process was the only option in front of him. Apart from trying to contact his counterparts in Assam, he did two things: first, he wrote a letter to the prime minister of Bangladesh so that his stay in Dhaka remained secure at least for a few days; secondly, he wrote another letter to the prime minister of India. In the letter to the prime minister of Bangladesh, he tried to strike an emotional cord so that Sheikh Hasina could develop some soft corner for ULFA. The letter can be divided into three parts. In the first part he tried to depict the contribution of Assamese forefathers to the cause of the liberation of Bangladesh. He wrote:

Historically conscious every Bengali is aware of the help and support of the people of Asom in the freedom struggle of Bangladesh. Birajananda Choudhury was one of those who trained your Mukti Bahini is an Assamese. He is the uncle of the Foreign Secretary of the ULFA Shasha Choudhury. Dulal Hazarika ended being a disabled soldier fighting the Pakistan army in creation of Bangladesh is none other than one of the brothers of our Finance Secretary Chitrabon Hazarika. Both of them were arrested in Dhaka on 1 November 2009 and handed over to India on 5 November 2009.

Then Arabinda Rajkhowa tried to depict how the entire state of Assam was overwhelmed by the liberation of Bangladesh. He wrote, 'People of Asom has indelible memories of distributing food and medicine to the refugees from your land sheltering in Asom singing Bhupen Hazarika's song,

Zoi Zoi Nabajata Bangladesh  
Zoi, Zoi Mukti Bahini ...

In the third part, he tries to minimise or deny ULFA's role in the fundamentalist activities of Bangladesh:

Therefore ULFA is not harmful to Bangladesh. We are always against terrorism and religious fundamentalism. So ULFA never trained or supply arms to any fundamentalist organization. Till today we are not doing any arms activities in Bangladesh. We shall maintain this principle in future too. That is our cordial commitment.

In the last part, Rajkhowa expressed his commitment for peaceful resolution of the conflict and urged Hasina's support for expediting the peace process:

Honourable Prime Minister, the raging conflict in Asom has damaged the social fabric and the local economy immensely. The majority in Asom are getting poorer day by day. My organisation the United Liberation Front of Asom (ULFA) has been making efforts to bring a peaceful political solution to the conflict and confrontational state of affairs. But our efforts have been thwarted repeatedly by some conspirators. Therefore, on behalf of my organisation I am appealing to your good office to support our efforts in seeking a peaceful political conflict resolution process with appropriate assistance in bringing peace to Asom, upholding the human rights in general and the birth rights of the our people in particular. Your positive contribution at this juncture for the cause of the oppressed people of Asom will be greatly appreciated.

In his second effort, Rajkhowa wrote another short letter to the prime minister of India, urging to initiate the peace process. Interestingly, in that letter dated 21 November 2009, Rajkhowa reiterated Assam's non-negotiable rights of sovereign Asom. In that letter he wrote:

In 2005 under your leadership and the perceived sincere efforts shown by your good self, a process for the peaceful political solution to the Indo-Asom conflict was embarked upon with high hopes. The process came to a halt unexpectedly in 2007. I am writing to you to apprise you of the decision of ULFA to restart the stalled process. I would like you to know that my organisation has appointed Mr. Rebati Phukon and Dr. Brajen Gogoi as interlocutor between us and your government. Moreover, to take the peaceful political solution process to its decisive conclusion i.e. restoration of the sovereignty of Asom, my organisation has formed a seven member committee comprising of 1. Mr. Bhim Kanta Burhagohain, Political Adviser 2. Mr. Pradip Gogoi, Vice Chairman 3. Anup Chetia, General Secretary 4. Lieutenant Colonel

Citraban Hazarika, Finance Secretary 5. Mr. Shashadhar Choudhury, Foreign Secretary 6. Mithinga Daimari, Publicity Secretary 7. Mrs. Pranati Hazarika, Cultural Secretary. I trust you will receive the two interlocutors entrusted by my organisation and the leaders of the same with due respect and genuine effort with total sincerity to reopen the peaceful political solution of the conflict meaningfully.

What was the reaction of the all-powerful Commander-in-Chief Paresh Baruah to these peace initiatives? Paresh Baruah was never serious for any peace initiative. In fact, ULFA's peace agenda was always guided by the crisis of the situation—peace effort was an alibi to come out of danger that the organisation was facing from time to time. Naturally, on this occasion also Paresh opposed the move on various grounds. It would be interesting to look at the exchange of letters between the commander-in-chief and the chairman.

Paresh Baruah (PB):

Your meeting on 10/11/09 was not correct because before that it was essential to dissolve and reconstitute the emergency Executive Council. Even for that it is essential to know my opinion. Likewise I feel that it is your moral duty to inform me before convening the meeting of the Central Committee.

Arabinda Rajkhowa (AR):

It is absolutely wrong—according to our constitution, if any members of the central committee is arrested or remain absent, the responsibility lies on the Chairman. So the question of dissolving the emergency Executive Council does not arise here. On the other hand, a day before you had left Dhaka, I told you that day after tomorrow, all three of us must seat together (i.e. the Standing Council). There is a need for it. You had never told me that you were leaving on the next day, only just before leaving you told me, 'Sir, the preparation for my departure is complete.' I was very pained to know how much significance you attach to my request. You never told me that you would discuss later on. In fact we wanted to discuss how to meet the emergent situation before us for which you had to leave. We were all facing similar situation.... you tried all along to create such situations within the organization so that after being insulted thoroughly, Raju Barua and Sasha Chaudhury were forced to leave the

organization.... When I insisted you to talk to them, you shouted like mischievous boy—‘I would never ever talk to them (Sasha and Raju).’ As if your voice is the last voice in the organization. For having not agreed to your directions you have given me a treatment which I can never divulge to any one in my life. It’s now beyond our apprehension that you are not the same Paban or Dukaba (the nick name of Paresh Barua). We have discovered a new Paban Barua who is now listening to no one—he listens to himself. The other day when you telephoned me with so filthy language I felt humiliated. I bear everything in the name of the organization—this is not the language used with the chairman of any organizations. As If I took the Chairmanship after oiling and messaging your legs. The day after my arrival from Malaysia, you rebuked me in front of your family members—I kept quite all in the interest of the organization. On that day in Sherpur when you telephoned me at night when I insisted on formal meeting, you said you would never sit for talks with Bana Hazarika (Chitraban Hazarika). Initially you said you would not talk with Sasha and Raju and now you have included Bana.... We can’t go out, talk to any one, telephone any one, can’t check neither mail nor can we send it to any one. At any point of time we may face a crack-down—danger is engulfing us all the time. In such a situation holding of emergency Executive Council meeting with the available members in the Central Headquarters can never be anti-constitutional.

PB:

I have no doubt that decisions on 10/11/09 were a mistake. Had they been mere proposals I would have nothing to say.

AR:

It shows that you consider yourself to be above the organization. Will the Chairman send the proposal to the CS? Yes you have the right to ask questions—but you can’t interpret in other manners. More than that you don’t have rights to instigate lower cadres against me. We sent the resolutions to you and GS. You could have sent your opinion to me—rather you started mobilizing cadres against me. I would have appreciated had you utilized your promptness in rescuing us rather than mobilizing cadres against me so quickly.

Till the last moment Paresh did not listen to voice of the chairman. Finally, Arabinda Rajkhowa was arrested on the first or second day of

December 2009. The arrest of ULFA's leader looks like a drama (the preparation of which must have begun much earlier) and a lot of parleys took place before he was handed over to Indian authorities. After his arrest, the Ministry of Home Affairs and the RAW officials insisted on a talk with ULFA where there will be no mention of sovereignty and the organisation would agree to abjure violence. The MHA and RAW officials did not have the sensitivity to understand that it was too early for the chairman to give up the demand of 'sovereignty' for which he has been fighting for 30 years. Since he was adamant, he was handed over to the Assam police.

So let us conclude this chapter by looking at the issues from where we had begun. The transition of ULFA from 1979 till 2009 cannot be analysed from the exclusive prism of 'Greed or Grievances' model. The militant organisation started its journey relying on the grievances of the Assamese people against the Centre. However, in the later phase, the organisation made substantial compromises on its autonomy, and the reliance on unregulated financial collections alienated the organisation from the masses.

Transition of the group cannot be explained or limited to the choices of greed and grievances. Various political sociologists have advanced the salience of relative deprivation, resource mobilisation and opportunity structures to account for the formation of or the use of violence. In addition, international arms network, transnational state and non-state actors play pivotal part in the sustenance of neo-form of terrorism. Policy errors of the State, lack of control over resources, misuse of laws, repression, recognition, misrecognition, etc., are vital variables for the study of violence as our analysis on ULFA has shown.

It needs mentioning that those material incentives for leaders—'greed', in the form of pecuniary advantages or lootable resources was never critical in initiating the insurgency by ULFA. Control over resources and checking of illegal migration were the twin objectives for which the organisation demanded secession of the state from the Indian Union. However, unlike many other armed groups, ULFA was quick in negotiating its autonomy and from 2004–05 its integration with international terror network had become complete. Today the organisation is considered to be a major source of arms dealer in South Asia. Commenting on similar situations, Briendan O'Leary and Andrew Silke say,



The leaders of ETA, Hamas, Hezbollah, the IRA, JKLF, LTTE, PKK, FARC, or Nepal and Peru's Maoists have not led luxurious lifestyles, nor have their volunteers or cadres, including their forcibly conscripted cadres. The leaders of GAM ... were hardliners in constitutional negotiation because of their secure status in Sweden, not because of their control over loutable resources or pecuniary stakes in conflict.<sup>57</sup>

That analysis is not applicable to ULFA which couldn't resist the trap of international terror network—the result is that the organisation today stands discredited in the eyes of the people of Assam. We believe that the causes matter more in initiating a group like ULFA; however, the 'supply side explanations'<sup>58</sup> can't be set aside in explaining the transition of an armed group like ULFA.

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<sup>57</sup> For details see Marianne Heiberg, Brendan O'Leary and John Tirman, eds, 'Conclusion', in *Terror, Insurgency and the State: Ending Protracted Conflicts* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007), 401.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 400.

## Peace Process with ULFA, Civil Society and the Indian State

More than 60 years of a Conflict Resolution (CR) attempt in the North East by the Indian State can be best described as an approach of conflict management and suppression. The conflict management theorists see the violent conflicts as an ineradicable consequence of differences of values and interests within and between communities.<sup>1</sup> The propensity to violence arises from the existing institutions and historical relationships as well from the established distribution of power. Resolving such conflicts is viewed as unrealistic—the best that can be done is to contain and manage them and occasionally to reach a historic compromise in which violence may be laid aside and normal politics resumed. Conflict management is the appropriate intervention to achieve political settlements, particularly by those powerful actors having the power and resources to put pressure on the conflicting parties.<sup>2</sup> It is also the art of designing appropriate institutions to guide the inevitable conflict into appropriate channels. Conflict management is the mixture of both conflict settlement and conflict containment. Conflict settlement means agreement between parties to settle a political conflict ending an armed conflict.

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<sup>1</sup> See Hugh Miall, *Conflict Transformation: A Multi-Dimensional Task* (Berghof Research Center for Constructive Conflict Management, 2004). Also available on [www.berghof-handbook.net](http://www.berghof-handbook.net)

<sup>2</sup> D. Bloomfield and Ben Reilly 1998, 'The Changing Nature of Conflict and Conflict Management', in *Democracy and Deep Rooted Conflicts*, eds Peter Harris and Ben Reilly (Stockholm: Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance [IDEA]).

Conflict containment includes peacekeeping and war limitation with an intention to terminate conflict at the earliest opportunity.

This model of management and suppression has been conspicuous by the following characteristics:

1. In this model, issues of 'dignity and Justice' are compromised. Protection of human rights is understood as the last bastion for the pro-insurgent NGO activists and academia. Continuation of AFSPA in the North Eastern states is one such indication, in spite of recommendations by the Justice Reddy Committee for its repeal. The committee says:

The Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act, 1958 should be repealed. Therefore, recommending the continuation of the present Act, with or without amendments, does not arise.... The Act is too sketchy, too bald and quite inadequate in several particulars.... We must also mention the impression gathered by it during the course of its work viz., the Act, for whatever reason, has become a symbol of oppression, an object of hate and an instrument of discrimination and highhandedness.

The attempt of the state is to analyse the insurgency-related developments purely from a perspective of Greed Model as popularised by Paul Collier.<sup>3</sup> Yes, pervasions take place, many of the insurgent groups have come a long way from their stated idealism—many have lost their mass support. But the basic issues for which armed rebellions have come need to be looked into dispassionately.

2. Procrastination and bureaucratic machinations in resolving the insurgency issues is the latest approach of the Indian State. The State has realised that suppression is the best method and entices the groups to join the 'mainstream'. The State is rarely successful in bringing the entire group to the so-called 'mainstream'; and the splinter group keeps clamouring about talks—slowly and gradually the groups will be lost into oblivion until a new batch

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<sup>3</sup> P. Collier, 'Economic Consequences of Civil War' (Oxford University Papers, 1999), 51–168.

of insurgent groups comes up. In other words, there is a 'traffic jam' of pro-talk groups—NSCN-IM, NSCN-Khaplang, Dimas Halong Daogah (DHD), UPDS, NDFB, ULFA—the list is endless in Assam, Nagaland, Manipur and Tripura. Exclusive reliance on 'conflict fatigue' of the rebels and prolonging the peace process for an endless period seems to be the cardinal principle of the latest peace management technique of the Indian State.

3. The State is too immature or afraid of giving a space to the civil society groups in resolving conflicts in the region. State's main thrust in resolving conflicts is top-down, focusing on symptoms of conflict, leader-centric and attempting to achieve specific goals with clear exit strategies in the form of signing of some kind of agreement. Attempt is to co-opt members of civil society so that they can act as the force multipliers and psy-operatives in the society. Seminars like 'Peace alone leads to development and prosperity', 'Peace is a must for development' and many more are examples of this exercise.<sup>4</sup>
4. This model talks about liberal funding to the states without seriously taking into account the issues of human development and human security. People are accepted as the passive recipients of charity—there is no attempt to enhance the capability of the individuals as highlighted by the theory of human development. In other words, empowerment of individuals is never taken seriously. The recent declarations of 'Mamoni', 'Majoni' by the Government of Assam are a few examples.<sup>5</sup> Unfortunately, development is understood not separately but as an antidote to insurgency.

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<sup>4</sup> Interestingly the Ministry of Home Affairs, Government of India, has been organising such seminars with the help of some selected NGOs. In recent times many research institutes with the avowed goal of peace have come into operation in Assam with direct funding from Home Ministry. The Ministry has been also launching massive audio-visual commissioned programmes against insurgency in the Doordarshan channels of north east India. Such programmes worth hundred crores have been running for many years. The objectives of all those programmes, of course, are to denounce ULFA and outfits and thereby focus on pan-Indian culture.

<sup>5</sup> These programmes meant for women and girl children were hurriedly declared just before the 15th Lok Sabha election in Assam.

## Conflict Resolutions: Some Reflections in North East India

We accept that most wars in the 21st century are intra-state and they are incredibly resistant and tend to defy easy solutions. These contemporary conflicts have been defined in various manners: These wars have been described as 'New Wars' (Kaldor), 'internal conflicts' (Brown), 'Small wars' (Harding), 'Conflict in post colonial states' (Van de Goor), 'protracted social conflicts' (Edward E. Azar), 'deep-rooted conflicts' (John W. Burton) and so on.<sup>6</sup> Preferring the term 'intractable conflicts', Benjamin Gidron, Stanley N. Katz and Yeheskel Hasenfeld argue that characteristics of these conflicts include being protracted, continual, violent, perceived as irreconcilable, zero sum, central to the lives of the identity group involved.<sup>7</sup>

It has been argued that one of the greatest shortcomings of the contemporary CR process is that they often fail to address the bitterness—including the memories and images, and the sources that generate it. In CR literatures, two approaches are widely talked about—one group that perceives conflicts to be structural and the other that perceives it to be psychosocial and psycho-cultural. The structuralists focus on the issue of rights, justice and identity. The psychosocial and psycho-cultural group has emphasised on relationships and the need to work on eliminating the ignorance, misperceptions, fears and hostility between the groups, often through cooperative activities and encounters.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Mary Kaldor, *New and Old Wars: Organised Violence in a Global Era* (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999); Edward E. Azar, 'The Analysis and Management of Protracted Conflicts,' in *the Psychodynamics of International Relationships*, vol. II: Unofficial Diplomacy at Work, eds Vamik D. Volkan, Joseph Montville and Demetrios A. Julius (Lexington, MA: Lexington Books, 1993), 120; John W. Burton, *Resolving Deep Rooted Conflict: A Handbook* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1987).

<sup>7</sup> Benjamin Gidron, Stanley N. Katz and Yeheskel Hasenfeld, 'Introduction: Theoretical Approach and Methodology,' in *Mobilizing for Peace: Conflict Resolution in Northern Ireland, Israel/Palestine and South Africa*, eds Benjamin Gidron, Stanley N. Katz and Yeheskel Hasenfeld (New York: OUP, 2002), 3–35.

<sup>8</sup> Michelle I. Gawerc, 'Peace Building: Theoretical and Concrete Perspectives', *Peace and Change* 31, no. 4 (October, 2006): 437.

Here we believe that

- the State-centric approaches have failed to build durable peace process in the North East region.
- conflict transformation (CT) is another angle that needs to be taken seriously for resolving intractable conflicts in North East India. Purpose here is not to de-emphasise the security approach as irrelevant but to complement it with CT for a durable peace process in the region.
- both the approaches—structural and the psycho-social and psycho-cultural dimensions—are complementary to each other and should not be looked at through a binary lens.

Peace efforts which have been attempted so far in Assam can at best be described as efforts for conflict settlement and managements. There are six conflict settlement attempts as far as ULFA and Government of India is concerned.

1. First effort for Peace Talks in 1991 by the ULFA chairman on the eve of army operations. However, when the Central leaders failed to carry forward the peace process there was a parallel attempt which is included below.
2. 1992—second attempt by the pro-talk group under the leadership of Sunil Nath.
3. The third attempt by the People's Consultative Group (PCG) in 2005.
4. The fourth attempt was by the ULFA's 28 Battalion—pro-talk group in 2007.
5. An abortive fifth attempt was made by Arabinda Rajkhowa in 2009 which, however, did not proceed further as a result of arrest of the chairman.
6. The last major initiative for conflict settlement is made by Assam Jatiya Mahasabha which began by holding a national convention on 24 April 2010. This can be considered to be the first civil society effort in Assam for a settlement of the ULFA issue.

## 1991 Initiative

In the midst of Operations Rhino against ULFA, army arrested one of the most important persons of the organisation, Anup Chetia alias Golap Borbora on the 18 November 1991. Besides, important leaders of the organisation such as Manoj Hazarika, Bhaskar Barbarua, Prabhat Barua, Raj Barua and his wife Juli Barua were arrested. On the 31 December 1991, one of most hard-core cadre and deputy commander-in-chief of ULFA, Hirak Jyoti Mahanta, was killed by the army. However, it looks like that the uncompromising Mahanta was killed by army as he refused to relent after being caught.<sup>9</sup> On the same day, stalwarts of the organisation like Sunil Nath, Sailen Dutta Konwar, Moon Ali were apprehended. Very soon the foreign secretary of the organisation, Javed Bora, and the vice-chairman, Pradip Gogoi, were also arrested. In such a situation, the chairman of the organisation Arabinda Rajkhowa wrote a letter to the prime minister office urging for talks.

In his secret letter to the prime minister, he agreed, subject to the ratification of the Central Committee, to accept a solution within the framework of the Indian Constitution, to abjure violence and the surrender of arms at an appropriate time. He, of course, urged the prime minister to remove the ban on the organisation, to end army operation and use of sweeping powers of arrest and detention under the Armed Disturbed Areas Act and the Armed forces (Special Powers) Act.<sup>10</sup> Preparation for a breakthrough was made in fact on 1 February 1991 when the General Publicity Secretary Siddhartha Phukan *alias* Sunil Nath 'on behalf of the Central Council ULFA' addressed to the Governor Devidas Thakur and requested him for the removal of the President's rule to create a favourable climate for peace talks. In early January 1992, ULFA took the initiative and as a gesture released hostages and declared indefinite ceasefire for facilitating a peaceful atmosphere. The negotiations carried on both in Delhi and Dispur paved the way for the talk on 12 January 1992. High officials of the Ministry of Home and Cabinet Secretary apart, the meeting was attended by the Assam chief minister and delegation of five

<sup>9</sup> Parag Moni Aditya, *Swadhinota*, 65.

<sup>10</sup> H. K. Borpujari, *North-East India* (Guwahati: Spectrum Publications, 1998), 120.

headed by the General Secretary Anup Chetia of ULFA.<sup>11</sup> The prime minister was assured that the insurgents would formally end violence and seek a solution within the framework of Indian Constitution and in return prime minister would suspend army operations and ULFA would have to surrender arms and get necessary clearance from the Central Council for the accord and surrendering the militants. Hiteswar Saikia was advised by Home Minister S. B. Chavan 'to create an atmosphere conducive to facilitating process of future negotiations', though he had grave doubts regarding the bona fides of the ULFA leaders. They had carried forward the talk process in Delhi, he thought, to get concessions such as release of leaders and withdrawal of Operation Rhino as they had done when Operation Bajrang was 'too hot' for them. He wanted that talk should be conditional to cadres surrendering arms and expressing faith in the government.<sup>12</sup> Hiteswar Saikia was no less sceptical as to the true motives of the militants. As he knows ULFA better than the Centre, he was aware about the techniques of ULFA. Like its peace offer after Operation Bajrang, it would be just 'a tactical retreat in a war of attrition.' These fears and calculations prompted the chief minister to reject the suggestion made by the opposition on the eve of Panchayat election of the previous year to ease army's hold on the militants. Saikia's views received the concurrence of the army authorities not to stop operations then in progress.

A deadlock ensued. No meeting of the Central Council was held to endorse the assurance given by the Chairman Rajkhowa to the prime minister on 1 January 1991, nor of the five members' delegation of the Delhi talks on 12 January 1991. Chairman Arabinda Rajkhowa, Vice-Chairman Pradip Gogoi and General Anup Chetia had the herculean task of convincing the hard-core faction which, under Paresw Baruah, had stuck to their ultimate goal of Swadhin Asom and viewed the talks 'as a continuation of the struggle in another form'.<sup>13</sup> Parag Das, the most important ideologue of ULFA, wrote that talks could be a platform for raising the fundamental issues of the state. It could be one of the stages for

<sup>11</sup> Borpujari, *North-East India*, 120.

<sup>12</sup> Ferzand Ahmed, 'Break Through', *India Today* (31 August 1992); Prabhakara, 'Dangerous Games', *Frontline* (8 May 1992), 38–39.

<sup>13</sup> Parag Das, *Rastradruhir Dinlipi* (Guwahati: Udagshi Prakashan, 1992), 50.



expressing anti-Delhi stand of the people of Assam. Parag Das provided the most important support to Paresh Baruah to continue the struggle and criticised the pro-Hiteswar Saikia stand of the pro-talk group. Paresh Baruah and his group condemned split in the cadre and expelled the dissidents from primary membership of the organisation. The action of the chairman was denounced by the commander-in-chief, Paresh Baruah, then in Bangladesh,<sup>14</sup> as 'unacceptable sell out'. A section of the militants resolved not to abandon the path of struggle adopting tactics according to the exigencies of the situation.

The leaders of the five district units, Kamrup, Barpeta, Sonitpur, Jorhat and Lakhimpur, being tired of insurgency, decided to endorse the Delhi talks and come out in favour of the dialogue that began on 12 January. As many as 18 of these members formally met the chief minister and senior officials on 31 March. They denounced their leaders in Bangladesh and accused them of misleading the state, and decided to start direct negotiations with the government. They declared that 'revolution would go on' but as Parag Das said, 'as was desired by Hiteswar Saikia and without disturbing the status quo'.<sup>15</sup> The talk process led by three leaders from Kamrup—Sunil Nath, Kalpajyoti Neog and Munin Nobis—conducted a meeting of five districts and took the following resolutions:

1. The meeting has mourned the death of their colleagues in their struggle.
2. At this hour of crisis the central emergency council of ULFA has failed to give any specific directions to the people of Assam, rather they have preferred to stay away from common people taking shelter in secure zones. On such circumstances we don't want to push the people of Assam to a state of uncertainty. Therefore, respecting our commitment to the people, various district committees assembled here have decided to take their own decisions.
3. The central committee members of ULFA have never faced any military atrocities, rather it is the common people who face the wrath; hence, we have decided to carry forward the peace process. The meeting has decided to resume direct talks with the government;

<sup>14</sup> Kanak Sen Deka, *ULFAr Swadhin Asom* (Guwahati: Dispur Print House, 1994), 67.

<sup>15</sup> Das, *Rastradruhir Dinlipi*, 48.

- the talks will take place in an open atmosphere, taking the full confidence of the people.
4. Arms accumulation in the name of people's revolution has caused more harm to the people of Assam. Instead of the revolutionary zeal getting misused in the reckless use of arms, it is important to provide a correct platform to give vent to the grievances of the people of Assam. The meeting decides to collect all illegal arms and oppose its possession.
  5. The meeting condemns atrocities and terror of both the government and non-governmental groups. The meetings feel that only in a non-violent democratic atmosphere could the problems of Assam be resolved.
  6. To regulate the activities of the group, a central committee is constituted by taking the following members as directors: (a) Munin Nobis (Kamrup), (b) Sunil Nath (Kamrup), (c) Kolpojoyoti Neog (Kamrup), (d) Rudra Padun (Lakhimpur), (e) Jibon Barua (Sonitpur), (f) Brojen Deka, (Kamrup), (g) Tapan Bhuyan, (Borpetta), (h) Lila Saikia (Jorhat).

Interestingly, out of eight members of the Pro-talk group, four of them are from Kamrup. Ironically, it's really intriguing how such dedicated hard-core leaders who were so deeply engaged with ULFA for so many years (especially from 1985–91) could jettison their ideology and former comrades in just 2–3 days' comfort provided by the State. They killed, kidnapped and maimed people in the name of revolution, issued all provocative statements to carry out their struggle of liberation till their last drop of blood and rebuked those as 'lackey of the State' who dared to criticise ULFA! The hard-core militants have discarded revolutionary zeal at slightest provocation. One may certainly disagree with the violent methods of ULFA and can come out of the organisation, but what about their ideology? Were they tired of the ideology of the organisation or were they tired of the leadership? There is no mention of anything about those ideals in their resolutions for which they have fought for so long. The Pro-talk group said that the revolution would continue—but how? After 20 years of their proclaimed declaration, one is tempted to ask where this revolution is today. They claim themselves to be the Pro-talk group. Where and when has the 'talk' taken place?

The mass exodus of cadres from ULFA can be explained from the point of view of the composition of the organisation itself. The organisation never tried to draw its support or cadres from the toiling masses, peasantry or exploited labourers. Rather, the organisation primarily relied on the middle class for its support base and membership. This middle class in ULFA were beneficiaries of the corrupt administrative system from where the organisation drew huge amount as donation. It hardly made any difference to these leaders whether they were in the organisation fighting for the cause of the people or they were in contractual government assignments. When the organisation could no longer offer them any opportunities and being there became a risky proposition, ULFA was conveniently discarded.

## 2005—Constitution of PCG

After a gap of 13 years, the next major initiative for talks was taken in September 2005, when ULFA constituted the PCG for facilitating talks between ULFA and GOI for an amicable resolution of the ‘Indo-Assam’ conflict. The mandate of the PCG was to facilitate the talk and create primary conditions for a direct talk between the GOI and ULFA. The group had nine members plus Professor Indira Goswami, popularly known as Mamoni Roisom Goswami—the Gyanpith Award winner novelist and *littérateur*—as the chief coordinator and Mr Reboti Phukon as the coordinator for the PCG.<sup>16</sup>

The PCG was constituted primarily because Paresh Baruah wanted it to happen. He always utilised talk process as an alibi to protect the organisation from army operations. In 1990 after the military action in Soraipung, he gave a direction to Siddhartha Phukon to issue a statement that ULFA would come for talks. The same situation also applied in 2005. Prabal Neog (one of the most important commandant of the 28th Battalion, which later on came into ceasefire with the Government of Assam) was about to be arrested in the army operation in Dibru-Saikhowa

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<sup>16</sup> The nine members were Mukul Mahanta, Arup Borbora, Dr Brojen Gogoi, Ajit Kumar Bhuyan, Haidor Hussain, Hiranya Saikia, Dilip Patgiri, Lachit Bordoloi and Diganta Konwar.

forest reserve (launched in 31 August 2005). It was crucial for Paresh Baruah to halt that decisive army assault on ULFA—the declaration of PCG was an excellent opportunity to divert the attention of the people and the government.

It would be pertinent here to mention a few excerpts of communication between Paresh Baruah and the Chairman Arabinda Rajkhowa on the issue of the constitution of PCG:

Paresh Barua (PB): The entire talk process was done with your permission.

Arabindo Rajkhowa (AR): When it comes to earn name and fame you know very well how to keep others in periphery. I supported the entire process as I did not want to hamper a good initiative and hence did all the clerical works. In order to do the petty errands I gave the responsibility to Diganta (Diganta Konwar—childhood friend of Arabinda) and Lachit Bordoloi. Later those were interpreted as chairman's man and some other as CS's Man. In 2005, when Prabal Neog was gheraoed in Dibdru-Choikhowa, you appointed an interlocutor and PCG was appointed unilaterally by you. I did not utter a single word for which Chitrabon, Raju and Sasha still criticize me. But for last two months all the executive members of the central council including the Chairman are in great danger—you have no time to look at.

Another reason for Paresh Baruah to start the PCG was his continuous association with Mamoni Roisom Goswami. Both of them had a lot of telephonic conversations from the mid of 2005. Mamoni Roisom prevailed over Paresh to start the peace talks. Paresh found a very patient listener to his side of the story and it took him no time to realise that the present crisis and credibility of the organisation can be restored by utilising the apolitical innocuous image of 'baidew' (as Mamoni Goswami was referred to). Professor Goswami had already established herself as a non-political literary personality of national repute. At a time when all other prominent personalities of the state preferred to stay in their self-drawn comfort zone, Professor Goswami travelled throughout the state to understand the problem and seek an amicable solution of the vexed insurgency issue. Mamoni Goswami had started the process with all moral, ethical and good intentions—unfortunately, merely having good intentions is not sufficient to resolve an issue which has already

made a journey of almost 30 years, and in the process, she had to find ways to overcome the hurdles put by bureaucracy and shifting terrain of insurgency, the epicentre of which is located in Dhaka.

Why Mamoni Goswami was so keen in bringing peace to Assam? She said:

My yearning for peace in my native Assam became stronger after I visited several families of the victims who were killed during insurgency, especially in the interior areas of Kamrup, Darrang and Nalbari districts. Some estimates say that during that during the past twenty five years, more than 12,000 people were killed. They included poets, doctors, engineers, and others, many of whom I knew rather well.<sup>17</sup>

Professor Goswami was deeply pained by the sufferings of people from both sides—the army and police and the militants. She said,

My question is: If the Indian Army can fight atop the Siachen Glacier and in other adverse conditions, couldn't they capture those women rebels and put them behind bars?... I was gripped by the same agonising feeling on the Dhemaji College. When I saw the memorial built in the memory of young children killed in Dhemaji during August, 15, 2004 bomb blast, I was pained...<sup>18</sup>

Although Arup Borbora, a prominent advocate and a member of PCG, tries to argue the composition of PCG as an example of civil society initiative;<sup>19</sup> it is at best a quasi-civil society initiative, as the majority of the members were nominated by ULFA for their prolonged support to ULFA.<sup>20</sup> In fact, four of the members were arrested for their pro-ULFA

<sup>17</sup> Indira Goswami, 'Militancy and Education', in *Order in Chaos*, ed. Wasbir Hussain (Guwahati: Spectrum, 2006), 160–63.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 162.

<sup>19</sup> Arup Borbora, *All about PCG and Talks*, (Guwahati: Aak-bak, 2010), 9–20.

<sup>20</sup> Hiren Gohain, a prominent intellectual of the state who is now taking the initiative for ULFA–GOI talk from April 2010, has all along considered PCG as a 'ULFA picked up group'. He frequently referred to PCG as 'ULFA picked up group' to distinguish Jatiya Maha Sabha's initiative, under his leadership, as the Civil Society initiative to resolve ULFA conflict in Assam. He made this point more clear when he was addressing the press conference on the eve of Jatiya Mahasabha's meet with the Prime Minister of India on 21 June 2010 at New Delhi. His address was telecast live by various private TV channels in Assam such as NETV and News Live.

activities. However, this debate over whether the PCG is a civil society or 'ULFA picked up' group is an immaterial one; undoubtedly, the group had some of the respectable names of Assam who had carved a niche for themselves in their respective fields.

The PCG held three rounds of talks with the Union government in New Delhi. The first meeting on 26 October 2005 was attended by Prime Minister Manmohan Singh. The second PCG-government meeting was held on 7 February 2006, and the last one, on 22 June 2006, was attended by the then Home Minister Shivraj Patil. According to reports, in the third round of talks between the PCG and the GOI, following points were broadly agreed upon:

1. The GOI urged the PCG members to impress upon the ULFA leaders to ensure a peaceful and conducive environment so that direct talks with the GOI are held at the earliest.
2. The Central government said that the release of five ULFA detainees would be favorably considered in consultation with the state government.
3. Modalities for holding direct talks between ULFA and the GOI in a fixed time-frame would be worked out through mutual consultations.
4. The meeting concluded with a hope that there would be restraint on all sides.<sup>21</sup>

The PCG initiative failed because none of the parties followed the agreed principles. ULFA took the peace process as a golden opportunity to mobilise its cadres and give a boost to the sagging fund position, and the bureaucrats in Delhi were somewhat not interested to give the process a logical conclusion and kept on imposing new conditionalities. Most confusing signals came from ULFA as it was following both the versions of war and peace by resorting to bomb explosions, weapons procurement, massive extortion drive and killing of hundreds of innocent people, not to talk about the killing of security agencies and their own cadres.

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<sup>21</sup> Joint Statement, 22 June 2006.

According to the Assam Police sources, between 8 September 2005 and June 2006, ULFA militants triggered off as many as 52 explosions, with a majority of these attacks coming in late January and early February 2006, and again between 8 and 12 June 2006. While preparatory talks were going on between the PCG and GOI, both the parties were engaged in violence and killing:

At least 41 civilians have been killed and 135 injured in ULFA violence between September 8, 2005 and June 2006. During the same period, rebels of the group attacked the SFs on 15 occasions, killing six and injuring 41. On their part, the SFs engaged with ULFA cadres on 20 occasions, in which 21 militants were killed and 48 arrested. What is significant is that ULFA violence during the first six months of 2006 has actually been more intensive and has taken a much higher toll as compared to the same period in 2005.<sup>22</sup>

The fragile peace process is constantly confronted with the threat of derailment even before it has actually taken off.

It becomes clear from the joint statements that those were not the real words for concrete action—merely appeal, request and hope for some positive action, and as a result, nothing had happened at the ground level. A truce, after all, is a must, and hostilities will have to be put on hold from both sides if the peace process is to be carried forward. That did not find any mention in the joint statement. The ceasefire, interestingly, is not among the conditions and counter-conditions articulated by either side, nor is its absence apparently threatening to derail the peace process. ULFA appears to be against entering into a ceasefire at that stage, and New Delhi is not actually pushing for a truce before the start of possible direct talks with the group. The PCG seems to be not very keen on ceasefire as it would mean disarming ULFA and according to them it's a ploy to keep them engaged in never-ending dialogue without resolving the actual issues raised by ULFA. Nor is the GOI keen to declare unilateral ceasefire as the organisation was already launching a massive extortion drive and arms procurement. In fact, ULFA's extortion drives and

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<sup>22</sup> Wasbir Hussain, 'India: War and Peace in Assam', *South Asia Intelligence Review*, Weekly Assessments and Briefings 5, no. 3 (31 July 2006), [http://www.satp.org/satporgtp/sair/Archives/5\\_3.htm](http://www.satp.org/satporgtp/sair/Archives/5_3.htm)

arms procurement have prompted security forces to launch their operations against the outfit. In June and July 2006 the outfit demanded a hefty amount from the RBI chief in Guwahati and also from the ONGC. There are also reports of extortion notices to doctors, teachers and the government officials (what they call 'donations') much in the line followed by both the factions of NSCN and other fringe outfits of the region.

Nevertheless, good sense prevailed and a temporary unilateral suspension of army operations was declared by the Government of India on 13 August 2006 which was also reciprocated by ULFA as a result of which on 15 August, Independence Day, celebration went off peacefully without any incidents, which was a rare one in last two decades. It was desirable on the part of the government to show some bold political initiative, especially in releasing five central committee detainees, going beyond usual hurdle put by bureaucracy. Had they been released as a measure of good will, taking the PCG as the guarantor, the ball would have been in ULFA's court to take the next step. But that did not happen. The government wanted ULFA to formally name its negotiating team. Heated exchange of words took place between the government and ULFA. ULFA demanded the release of five central committee members lodged in various jails of Assam, so that they could have a meeting of the executive committee and decide on the negotiating team. All of a sudden, the government asked for a written letter from ULFA expressing their desire to negotiate with the Indian State. ULFA, on its part asked the government to give them a written assurance that the core issues would be discussed. In conditionality, the government wanted another written letter from ULFA cadre urging their interest to talk.

When Mamoni Roisom Goswami went to meet the Union Home Secretary on 13 July 2006, to know why there was delay in releasing the five detainees, the latter said that ULFA needs to give a fresh letter expressing their desire to talk directly with the GOI. How did the PCG respond to such a request? Arup Borbora, a PCG member said,

When this was reported by Dr Goswami to PCG, we immediately termed it as preposterous and a deliberate attempt to push the entire peace initiative back to square one. The formal letter of the ULFA leadership expressing its willingness to come forward for a dialogue as addressed to the Prime Minister of India way back in February 2nd, 2005



personally carried by Mamoni Roisom Goswami and was handed over to Mr M. K. Narayanan.<sup>23</sup>

Perhaps this act vividly expresses the willy-nilly attitude of the Central government. Arabinda's Rajkhowa wrote to the prime minister expressing their desire to talk in February 2005. In response to this letter, Mr. M. K. Narayanan, the national security advisor, wrote a letter to Rajkhowa (vide letter No.H-4 (1)/2005-NGO dated 24 May 2005) in which he said:

This is to acknowledge receipt of your letter addressed to the Prime Minister expressing a desire for a dialogue and mentioning, amongst other things, the issue of Sovereignty.

The Prime Minister is happy that you have evinced faith in the dialogue process. The Government of India is prepared to discuss core issues if the group is willing to abjure violence. An acceptable solution can only emerge in frank exchange of views through discussions.

True, ULFA also violated the norms of the agreed principles. But such insistence by the GOI to ask for another letter is demonstrative of the fact that the government was not interested in a negotiated settlement. Interestingly, the PCG said that the top-rung leaders of ULFA would certainly participate if the GOI is also represented by the top political leadership. Arup Bora said to the home minister in the third round of talks:

If the Government of India is represented or led by the political head or the political top leadership of the Government, definitely the top leadership of the ULFA will be present.<sup>24</sup>

Certainly the GOI did not like such arrogance, especially in suggesting that Paresh Baruah and Arabinda Rajkhowa would come if GOI is represented by the top political executives of the country, by which PCG perhaps meant the prime minister and home minister. Ultimately, the advice of the army and bureaucrats got preponderance, who had prevailed over the prime minister and other political masters that ULFA must not be talked to on equal terms. ULFA's violations of promises

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<sup>23</sup> Borbora, *All about PCG and Talks*, 88–89.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 70.

were just a few flimsy pretexts to divert the talk process. The Indian government wanted to go back to the old theory of CR, i.e., finish them, crush them, pound ULFA and then talk about talk. At least that is what the army firmly believed in.

## Peace Initiative by 28 Battalion

Another peace initiative between ULFA and GOI was taken by 28 battalion of ULFA which came into ceasefire in June 2008. Among all the battalions, the 28 Battalion with its area of operation in upper Assam, particularly near the Indo-Myanmar border, was the most powerful one in terms of its striking power and extortion power. The A and C companies of the Battalion under the leadership of Marinal Hazarikia, Mrinal Dutta and Prabal Neog declared cessation of war with the state government and since then their cadres have been staying at the designated camps at Kakopathar, Maran and Nalbari. The 28 Battalion abandoned its subscription to the ULFA's demand of sovereign Assam. After 1991–92, this was the second vertical division within ULFA and the group too came to be known as ULFA (Pro-talk). Why the group, which according to the sources of Assam police had the most dedicated and disciplined cadres, had to surrender?

We joined the United Liberation Front of Assam to liberate Assam from India. After 29 years of our struggle we have painfully observed that top leaders of ULFA instead of fighting for desired goals, failed to safeguard the identity and the existence of indigenous people, overlooking or ignoring the presence of large number of illegal immigrants (who will become majority in next 20 years and they will conspire to merge with Bangladesh through a referendum) and involved in activities by getting distracted from revolutionaries ideologies. Therefore, we the pro-talk ULFA group looking at the (a) global political and economic situation (b) continuous threat from the neighbouring countries surrounding Assam (c) possible terrorist attacks in Assam by anti-Indian religious and fundamentalist groups (d) age-old religious and cultural ties with India; have adopted a resolution in favour of Full Regional Autonomy instead of independent Assam as a pragmatic approach.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Manifesto by Pro-talk Group, February 2009, 1.

However, there are qualitative differences between the surrender/cease-fire process of 1991–92 and 2008. Unlike the previous surrendered batch of 1991–92, the cadres of 28 Battalion rather chose to confine themselves to the designated camps and put forward a well-developed scheme which could be the basis for talks between the Centre and ULFA. In recent times the proposed model devised and conceptualised by 28 Battalion is the first of its kind, the most comprehensive and elaborate one which could also be the foundation for talks in future. The Pro-talk ULFA conducted a series of people to people meets, seminars, dialogues to popularise the concept of full regional autonomy instead of independent Assam in various parts of Assam and had also visited Delhi a couple of times to urge the Centre to talk to ULFA on the model devised by the Pro-talk group. It would be interesting to look into some of the demands of the Pro-talk group. The group in its letter to the prime minister of India said,

Sir, it is the prime duty of central and state government to protect and safeguard the interests of the citizens from foreign invasions and check infiltration. By performing this duty a state can maintain its territorial integrity and safeguard the interest of citizens. We believe, Sir, you will agree with our painful observation that in the last 61 years, the government of Assam has failed miserably to discharge its responsibilities sincerely. Sir, no-where in the world, it has been witnessed that, for preserving and protecting the regional language, building up refineries, Tea-Auction centers, roads and bridges, sealing of borders, protesting against illegal migrants; has the youth started movements and thousands of youth have laid their lives fighting for the above causes. At the same time, with great pain the people of Assam will never forget that during the 1962, Chinese aggression, the then Prime Minister of India, honourable late Jawaharlal Nehru bade farewell to Assamese people and Assam by saying 'my heart goes to the people of Assam'. Then the Prime Minister had virtually surrendered Assam to the hands of Chinese....

Sir, we sincerely believe that, full autonomy to the state of Assam can be the only solution to the Assam-India's conflict. The full autonomy in Assam will not only remove the fear and insecurity from the minds of indigenous people and will provide safeguards to land, language, economy and right of self-determination. This will reduce the resentment towards the Indian government and will help to refrain them from hostile activities.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Jiten Dutta, Charter of Demands to the Prime Minister of India, February 2009.

The group placed 18 charters of demands to the prime minister and was successful in putting it across to the minds of the people of Assam. However, the Central government was in no mood to talk to a group of ULFA and the initiative of the group dwindled gradually due to lack of interest. Visiting all the Pro-talk group-designated camps, we can well assume that the cadres of the battalion are in deep crisis as they are trapped in designated camps and the Government of Assam has no scheme whatsoever to rehabilitate them or put them in productive works. It seems that the government's intention is to somehow get the boys out of jungles, put them in designated camps and once they are out, the authority in power conveniently forgets them until they create other kinds of law-and-order problem. The policymakers need to give a serious thought regarding how to handle the ex-extremists who have discarded the path of insurgency. Perhaps a police battalion drawing sepoy from the designated camps could be one way to rehabilitate them after proper training and indoctrination.

## Civil Society Initiative for Conflict Settlement and Peace-building

At the beginning of this chapter we have shown that CR theorists have given salience to the active role of the people-to-people activities in building peace as well as in maintaining conflict. The relatively new emphasis in multidimensional, comprehensive and multi-track approach to peace is due to the limited success of the State-centric realist approaches to the resolutions of conflicts and peace-building. Question arises as to why is there such renewed interest on the common citizens and local leaders. The importance of local people and grass-roots leaders is to be understood not only as the 'victims of violence' but also as 'perpetrators of violence'. Camilla Orjuela points out that the necessity for civilians to be involved in working for peace can also be seen as 'question of representation'.<sup>27</sup> Besides insurgents, democratic and non-democratic

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<sup>27</sup> Camilla Orjuela, 'Civil Society in Civil War', 18–19, cited in Michelle I. Gawerc, 'Peace Building : Theoretical and Concrete Perspectives', *Peace and Change* 31, no. 4 (October 2006): 441.

actors to varying degrees are dependent on the people to get support, sustain their power, legitimacy and resources and their need to recruit.<sup>28</sup>

## Multi-level/ Multi-track Initiatives for Peace-building

Harold Saunders said, 'Politics is not just a linear series of Governmental decisions, actions and programs; it is a multi-level organic process of continuous interaction among people and group.'<sup>29</sup>

Leadearch suggests that conceptualising CT would involve three levels of work simultaneously—Top policy level, Middle range (community and leaders) and grass-roots work. For a sustainable and inclusive peace process, various stakeholders of society need to be involved, including the government, NGOs, business, research/education, activism, religion and communication and media. McDonald coined the term 'Multi-track initiatives' and Diamond argues that this is 'a System's approach to Peace'.<sup>30</sup>

The engagement of Track 2 would involve bringing together of scholars, journalists, opinion leaders, former government officials and representatives from conflicting parties to work together with the intention of clarifying long-standing agreements, exploring different possibilities for resolving them and, in the process, influence others and be influenced in the process. 'Common people' at the grass-roots level have a significant role in CT and peace-building process. These initiatives which have symbolic and cultural values involve a wide range of activities and often are called people-to-people projects. The process can best be described as 'getting to know each other'. While these initiatives can't substitute for an official process in any way, the building of integrative ties and the establishing of relationships of shared interests can help create, build, stabilise or strengthen relationships between people.

<sup>28</sup> Orjuela, 'Civil Society in Civil War', 441.

<sup>29</sup> Harold H. Saunders, *A Public Peace Process* (New York: Palgrave, 1999), 74–75.

<sup>30</sup> John W. McDonald, 'The Need for Multi-track Diplomacy', in *Second Track/ Citizen's Diplomacy*, eds John Davies and Edward Kaufman (Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 2002).

People's priority in conflict situation is not absolute—be it peace, justice, or even coexistence. Each is desirable as is freedom, security and economic well being. At some level, there are trade-offs among all these values that each of us would seek and defend.

However, as Camilla Orjuela has said, there is not always a clear link between the often rather vague theoretical utterances about the virtues of civil-society peace builders, and the isolated but concrete 'peace activities' of the organisations and groups that in everyday speech are named as Civil Society.<sup>31</sup> In the civil society arenas, people voluntarily get together to defend common interests or work for social and political change. So far as civil society's role in Assam is concerned, we are looking at some non-governmental initiatives which attempted to come in between the government and the rebel organisations and tried to create a platform for dialogue and debate for the resolution of violent conflict. Civil Society Organisations (CSO) in Assam, rather than performing a role for CT, preferred to play an advocacy role, i.e., bringing the rebel groups and GOI for talks unlike CSO in Nagaland where the initiative is more prolonged, multi-faceted, sustained and organised.

## Initiative by All Assam Democratic Citizen's Association (AADCA), 1990

The first civil society initiative in Assam, in order to usher a peace process with ULFA, was taken by the All Assam Democratic Citizen's Association (AADCA), established in the year 1990 at Guwahati. It was a platform for progressive people comprising intellectuals from all sections of the society. Noted freedom fighter and trade union leader, Bijoy Chandra Bhagawati, was the president of AADCA and Pradip Acharya, a reputed scholar from Cotton College, was the general secretary. Professor Hiren Gohain (a prominent leftist scholar), Dhiren Bezbarua (journalist), Paresh Malakar (literary activist) and Preeti Barua (educationist) were involved among others. On 16 December 1990, the AADCA organised a state-level convention in the District Library Auditorium of Guwahati

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<sup>31</sup> Camilla Orjuela, 'Building Peace in Sri Lanka: A Role for Civil Society?', *Journal of Peace Research* 40, no. 2 (March 2003): 195.

with active participation of people representing almost all the social and ethnic groups of the state. The convention took a resolution against the continuation of the Disturbed Areas Act & Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act (AFSPA). On the crucial question of peace process with ULFA, the convention decided to set up a five-member committee to mediate the negotiation between ULFA and Government of India (GOI). The convention appealed to the Central government to come forward for negotiation and urged ULFA to abjure violence. However, ULFA rejected the mediatory offer of the convention as it did not consider the AADCA as an impartial organisation. Although the initiative of AADCA did not bear much fruit, it was a significant initiative from a group of people whose democratic credential and social stature was beyond any doubt. Unlike many other initiatives, the members of AADCA were neither tied with the government nor with ULFA. The basic objective of the organisation was to work for a democratic, secular and peaceful society and that prompted them to vouch for a negotiated settlement. AADCA's voice was the first civil society dissenting voice against a climate of fear and agony created both by the State and ULFA. Before the initiative of AADCA, hardly any civil society body barring a few individual cases, dared to criticise ULFA. In other words, the dissenting voice was missing in the midst of mindless killing and violence. AADCA opened up a floodgate of a democratic voice against State and ULFA terror.

## Asom Jatiyatabadi Yuva Chatra Parishad (AJYCP) Initiative, 2000

From that perspective, AJYCP—a more cadre-based organisation—has been playing a pivotal role in mobilising public opinion for a peaceful resolution of ULFA issue. Interestingly, ULFA's leadership has had their primary background in AJYCP. Arabinda Rajkhowa was the general secretary of AJYCP of Sibsagar district Unit. Like Anup Chetia, the general secretary of ULFA was also a prominent leader of the central wing of AJYCP. The organisation was established on 12 March 1978 at Guwahati Nobin Bordoloi Hall. Unlike AASU, AJYCP's cadres are more disciplined, dedicated and ULFA leaders drew their initial training of

anti-colonial thesis from AJYCP only. In many aspects, AJYCP's aims and objectives were close to the thought process of ULFA. For example, the Constitution of AJYCP, Part 2, Article 1 says:

The aim of the organization is to remain outside the domain of parliamentary politics in the interest of the people of Assam and to 'establish peace, equality and prosperity in socio-economic aspects of Assam by abolishing the neo-colonial exploitation of the Indian State'.<sup>32</sup>

The main theoretical and ideological premise of the organisation is 'nationalism of the exploited nationalities'. Some of the other objectives of the organisation were:<sup>33</sup>

1. Full state autonomy by redefining Centre-state relations and establishing socialism to secure dignity and interest of various nationalities.
2. Dual citizenship for the people of Assam.
3. To establish state control over interstate and international migration.

Interestingly, much in the line of ULFA, AJYCP too, wanted to broaden the definition of Assamese by including various factors such as time, place and context. However, the AJYCP is a non-violent organisation expressing clear allegiance to India's nation-state.<sup>34</sup> Perhaps the first major initiative for peace effort in Assam was taken by AJYCP in 2000 under the leadership of Dilip Patgiri.

The parishad took the initiative in December 2000. The newspapers of Assam reported it to be the first of its kind:

Coming out harshly against the unending cycle of violence rocking the state, for the first time an influential student's body the Assam *Jatiyatabadi Juva Chatra Parishad* (AJYCP), has appealed to the militant outfit to give up violence ... calling for a cessation of all forms of violence, the parishad had chalked out a campaign for 'bringing about change of heart' among the militants.<sup>35</sup>

<sup>32</sup> Jatiyatabadi Juva Chatra Parishad, Constitution of Assam (Guwahati, n.d.), 1.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 3.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 2.

<sup>35</sup> 'Shantir prosestha', *North-East Times* (2 December 2000), 2.



The parishad in its press statement said:

The whole Assam today is coloured by blood. Killing, extortion and kidnapping has become a day to day affair. The state which was once known for peace Non-violence and integrity has become a land of graveyard. The people of Assam are not ready to be mute spectator of all these developments. Let us raise voice—‘against Terror, for integrity; against Violence for Peace; against Death, for Life’.<sup>36</sup>

For that the parishad organised a huge procession and meeting near the Indo-Bhutan border on 9 December 2000 where hundreds of people from all walks of life took part. Prominent personalities and intellectuals of the state belonging to the fields of art, culture, sports, journalism, academics, political parties and NGOs took part. Through the procession and meeting, the parishad appealed to ULFA and NDFB to come out for talks. The Indo-Bhutan border was selected for the peace appeal as both ULFA and NDFB had their camps across the Bhutan border at the Sandrupjonkhar district of Bhutan. Some of the important personalities who took part in the campaign were Golap Borbora (the former chief minister of Assam), Professor Hiren Dutta of Gauhati University, Prof Nirmol Chaudhury (the former vice-chancellor of Guwahati University), Dr. Sibanth Barman (noted scholar) and Jahnu Barua (noted film personality) among others. The meeting gave a clarion call to the rebels to ‘throw away their guns and join the mainstream’. The leaders urged both the Central government and ULFA and the NDFB to create congenial atmosphere for talks. The meeting identified the UCS as responsible for present militarisation in the state. The meeting further said, ‘The centre should announce a Jammu and Kashmir type unilateral ceasefire to give the rebels a chance to come to the mainstream.’

The first national convention on the issue of ULFA–GOI talk to resolve the national issues was organised by AJYCP on 20 and 21 September 2004 at Lakhiram Barua Sadan, Guwahati. The parishad said,

In our views it will be impossible to isolate ULFA from the masses, as ULFA is the product of a situation. The step-motherly attitude of the central government in the post independence period, plunder of our

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<sup>36</sup> ‘Appeal to ULFA and NDFB’, Press statement by AJYCP, December 2000.

resources from Assam to benefit the metropolitan centers, unemployment, conspiracy to disrupt the unity of the Assamese people etc. have given birth to a self-pride to the Assamese people. ULFA represents that pride—it's an attempt to redeem our lost glory ... so ULFA by itself is not the problem; the factors leading to such a situation is the problem which ULFA wants to rectify by demanding sovereignty.... we may not agree with the sovereignty demand but we can't prance the background the has led to the growth of ULFA.<sup>37</sup>

The meeting which was attended by more than 120 organisations and more than 1,500 persons urged to tackle the ULFA issue through political means—excessive reliance on military means and treatment of the issue as law and order problem would not help to mitigate the situation. The Mahasabha blamed the Central government for not paying heed to the prolonged demand of the people of Assam to resolve the issue through dialogue. The meeting among others took the following resolutions:

1. It requested the Central government to invite ULFA for talks on the basis of the demands put forwarded by ULFA.
2. For a political resolution of the issue, it urged ULFA to shun violence and other armed activities and also requested the Central government to immediately withhold anti-insurgency operations.
3. The conclave expressed solidarity to the people of Manipur in their struggle against the AFSPA and resolved that the draconian Act be scrapped immediately.

ULFA responded positively to the resolutions of AJYCP. It expressed the opinion that Dr. Indira Goswami should take the resolutions of the Mahasabha as the basis for her proposed model of talk between ULFA and the GOI which she plans to submit to the Centre.<sup>38</sup> Arabinda Rajkhowa in his message on 28 September 2004 extended his support to the resolutions of the Mahasabha. However, he insisted that the talks must not be a process for surrender of the ULFA cadres. He condemned the attempt of a few sections of people and media who attempted to bring ULFA for talks and pressurise for a 'solution less peace'. Rajkhowa argued that

<sup>37</sup> Press statement and leaflet published by AJYCP, 1 September 2004.

<sup>38</sup> 'Shanti Alusonar Proti Ulfar Xohari', *Asomiya Pratidin* (26 October 2004), 2.

talks must be the mechanism to resolve 'Asom-India political conflict'. The chairman expressed the commitment of ULFA for talks by saying that if sovereignty becomes the core issue for discussion, ULFA would come out within 48 hours.

## National Convention (Jatiya Abhibartan) Sibsagar, People's Committee for Peace Initiative in Assam (PCPIA), 2005

More than 45 organisations of the state came together for a national convention which took place on 13 and 14 March 2005 at Sibsagar Natya Mandir. Although the convention was a product of collective efforts of various organisations, the predominant role of AJYCP was perceptible from the very beginning.<sup>39</sup> The report of the convention criticised the colonial mindset of the Central government and a military-centric approach in addressing the issue of insurgency in the state. The main conclusions and resolutions of the convention were:<sup>40</sup>

1. The ULFA issue is not merely a law and order problem and behind the armed movement, there is the question of national rights of the Assamese people. Only a meaningful political dialogue with dignity can resolve such national issues. On account of the colonial attitude of the Central government for last 57 years, Assam has been witnessing assertive movements one after another. The emergence of ULFA has to be looked into in this historical context.

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<sup>39</sup> Some of the groups which took an active part in the Sibsagar convention were MASS, Krishok Adhikar Surakhya Samiti, Nari Adhikar Surakhya Samity, NESO, Daiang Mukti Sangram Samiti, Tai Ahom Students' Association, Assam Lawyers' Association, Sibsagar, Karbi Students' Union, All Assam Minority Students' Union (AAMSU), All Assam Motok Chatra Sanmilon, All Assam Moran Students' Association, Assam Tea Tribes Students' Association (ATTSA), Purbanchal Tai Sahitya Sabha, AASU, All Assam Gorkha Students' Union, representatives of political parties and many more. The convention was also attended by many prominent personalities of the state.

<sup>40</sup> A report on the Jatiya Abhibartan, 2005, published by Chandradya Gogoi, General Secretary and Kamal Bora, Working President, the organising Committee of the Jatiya Abhibartan, Sibsagar, 2005.

2. The GOI as being the guardian of the nation and the Constitution should immediately invite ULFA for talks, and all military actions against the organisation should be stopped forthwith. The government should also release all the children, women and other cadres who were arrested during the Bhutan operation in 2003. ULFA should reciprocate to such offer and should bring down all their armed activities.
3. The convention took the resolution that political dialogue between ULFA and the GOI should be started on the basis of the demand of sovereignty. An open dignified discussion between the two would give a solution to the issue.
4. The convention was of the opinion that the Centre has been trying to militarise Assam and other parts of North East India by taking help of anti-democratic legislation like the AFSPA. This law has been decried by all democratic forces including the committee appointed by the government. The convention resolved that the draconian Act be scrapped immediately.
5. The meeting protested the attempt to divide Assam in the name of creation of greater Nagaland. It urged the government to resolve the Naga issue without causing any threat to the neighbouring nationalities of the region.
6. It urged to the GOI to remove the restrictions it had imposed on the Right to Self-determination, particularly the 11th chapter of the ICCPR and ICESCR.
7. AJYCP and MASS have been appointed as the joint conveners to move forward the talk process between the GOI and ULFA. With the consent of the members present, a new platform was created to be known as PCPIA.
8. If the GOI does not start the talk process with ULFA on the issue of sovereignty, the newly constituted body, the PCPIA, would consider for conducting a plebiscite to solicit the opinion of the indigenous people on the issue of Assam's sovereignty. On the basis of the findings, the PCPIA would urge for resolving the issue.

Thereafter, the PCPIA conducted a number of meetings in various parts of Assam to mobilise people's opinion on the issue of political resolution of the issues. One of the noticeable features of the PCPIA was

in the number of occasions the platform, which was a conglomerate of more than 64 organisations, expressed voice for amicable resolutions of all the nagging issues of the North East while voicing for protecting the territorial boundary of Assam. To resolve the boundary dispute between Assam and Nagaland, it visited the neighbouring states to gloss over the issue with the civil society organisations of Nagaland.<sup>41</sup> The PCPIA gave equal importance to all the other insurgency movements and demanded to initiate political dialogue with organisations such as NDFB and others.<sup>42</sup>

In one of the letters, PCPIA wrote to the prime minister of India:

It has been over three decades since Assam has been subjected to relentless violence and terror by both the state and non-state actors. During this time, every aspect of life has become militarised, even though bureaucrats and security analysts periodically claim that peace has been restored.

Nothing can be further from the truth. Even as the security apparatus claims a series of successes against armed opposition groups like the United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA) and National Democratic Front of Bodoland (NDFB) and others, the lives of common people are held at ransom. We believe that despite the overall situation, where the military option is always exercised, there is still scope for imaginative and ethical solutions to the long-standing problems of the peoples of Assam. Thousands of lives have been lost in the past three decades. Political life had become so fraught that the right to life was constantly challenged by the presence of secret killers and death squads who terrorised common people.... Bombings and targeted assassinations have become commonplace in the political lives of the people of Assam. It is true that anger from below—from those marginalised by the government's policies—has lead to nothing productive but retaliatory violence from the State. Only political dialogue can help break this unfortunate and tragic condition.<sup>43</sup>

However, PCPIA's effort was criticised for being too soft on ULFA and branded as the frontal platform of ULFA. The organisation was dubbed

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<sup>41</sup> Details obtained from the Press Conference and Press release of PCPIA on 8 April 2005 at Guwahati Press Club.

<sup>42</sup> Resolutions of PCPIA mass gathering at Golaghat on 20 May 2005.

<sup>43</sup> The PCPIA letter to the prime minister of India dated 24 November 2009. Obtained through personal connection.

as the group of a few organisations 'having soft corners for ULFA'.<sup>44</sup> Many leaders of the organisation including Dilip Patgiri, Lachit Bordoloi (both of them were the coordinators of PCPIA) and Diganta Konwar were subsequently appointed as the members of PCG by ULFA. They were accused of making attempts to legitimise the demands of ULFA in the name of civil society initiative. The PCPIA conducted another major national convention (Jatiya Mahasabha) at Machkhowa ITA complex, Guwahati on 22 March 2007, which was attended by not less than 2,500 people from various parts of Assam. The resolutions were nothing new and reiterated its previous demand for initiating the talk process with ULFA including the release of the detainees of the jailed ULFA leaders. The meeting, however, blamed the GOI for derailing the PCG's effort for an honourable settlement of ULFA issue.

It is a truism that members of PCPIA had a soft corner for the rebel group and many of the members were forced by ULFA top leaders to take resolutions in the favour of the rebel organisation. However, it would be wrong to say that such demands were articulated by PCPIA or AJYCP only. Other peace initiatives in the state echoed similar sentiments. For example, a conglomeration of 12 non-Congress political parties initiated an effort to bring together intellectuals, journalists, NGOs, etc., for a citizen's meet on 24 February 2007. The resolution of the meeting urged the GOI, Assam Government and ULFA to take solution-centric steps for a durable peace in Assam. It said:

The meet believes that Government's attempt should be sincere and transparent and so does ULFA's response too should be equally convincing. The meet appreciates the good will gesture shown by ULFA while conducting 33rd National Sports Meet at Guwahati. The Government should respond to such positive signal.

In the light of PM's appeal for talks, the central government should not take the 'sovereignty' issue as the stumbling block. On the basis of discussion between the PCG and GOI on 22nd June, 2006, the five detainees should be released to facilitate a direct talk. It would be interesting to note that the chief minister of Assam, Sri Tarun Gogoi, on the eve of taking over power declared that the five detainees would be

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<sup>44</sup> Intelligence Report, 2006, obtained through personal connection.

released.... The Civil Society meet today believes that in a democratic set up dialogue and discussions are the best methods to resolve conflicts.<sup>45</sup>

Suchibrata Rai Chaudhury, daughter of Ambikagiri Roychoudhury, along with other Gandhian leaders, made a series of attempts from 2006 till the time of her death to convince the Central government for a negotiated settlement. Some other civil society appeals also criticised the State role and urged the GOI to play a proactive role. The appeal made by some of the most prominent Gandhians of the state like Hem Bharali, Rabindra Bhui, Suchibrata Rai Chaudhury, Hem Bhui, Nattawar Thakkar and many others fervently prayed to both the parties to speed up the talk process. The appeal said,

Even at the hands of the security forces and peace keepers there is loss of human lives and inhuman treatment and torture on the mothers and sisters. Even the minor girl children are not spared. Many lives have been lost in fake encounters. The Government had acknowledged such wrong-doings and we strongly believe that such a situation comes to an end.... It is true that the North East has been exploited in regard to employment and development. But we believe in Non-violence and hence urge both the parties to tackle the problem through dialogue.<sup>46</sup>

The Gauhati University's Peace and Conflict Studies of Political Science department conducted several Round Table Dialogues on the issue 'In Search of Peace' on 3 December 2008. Apart from the major political parties, organisations and activists, all the rebel groups who were in ceasefire with GOI took part in the Dialogue. This was the first time that various armed groups, student's groups, political parties, intellectuals, journalists, etc., came together in one platform to discuss the issues of peace and justice.<sup>47</sup> While urging upon all rebel groups to come

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<sup>45</sup> The resolutions of the civil society meet organised by 12 political parties on 24 February 2007. Published by Pobindra Deka and Dharendra Dev Adhikari, Guwahati.

<sup>46</sup> 'An Open Appeal to ULFA and Other Insurgent Groups and to the Governments of the Region', obtained from Hem Bhui, September 2008.

<sup>47</sup> Some of the groups are ULFA Pro-talk group, Dimas Halong Daugh (DHD-Nunisa)—the militant group from NC Hills, Birs Commando Force (another militant group in ceasefire), All Bodo Students Union, AASU, BJP, AGP, CPI, Indian Confederation of Indigenous and Tribal People, Dimas People's Council, All Dimas Students' Union, Krishak Mukti Sangram Samiti, etc.

forward for peace, the Dialogue also very objectively and comprehensively discussed the obstacles towards peace in the state. The Dialogue emphasised on the primary responsibility of the state towards taking the peace initiatives to their logical conclusion. The meet at Gauhati University has expressed its concern over the state's insincerity towards taking the dialogue to a logical conclusion for peace. It has expressed its deep concern over using cease fire as a delay tactic on the part of the government. The Dialogue has resolved to strongly urge upon the state to take the peace dialogue forward with all rebel groups including with the groups currently under suspension of operation. The Dialogue feels that any insincerity and negligence on the part of the state towards the peace dialogue will pave the way for renewed violence by those groups.

## The Sanmilita Jatiya Abhivartan under the Leadership of Professor Hiren Gohain

More than 109 civil society organisations, activists, intellectuals across the state gathered at ITA Machkhowa on 24 April 2010 to participate in a meet to chalk out modalities for GOI and ULFA talk to settle the long-standing demands of the state. Inaugurating the meet, chief convener and noted intellectual of the state, Professor Hiren Gohain said,

The Assamese community is in crisis due to external pressure which we have failed to tackle. In the last 30 years, over 12,000 ULFA members and 18,000 others were killed. This apart, many ULFA leaders have been missing. There are blasts in various parts of the State and that has made individual liberty very fragile. If the peace process is stalled, we won't get rid of the problems afflicting the State. Now both the ULFA and the government have shown positive gesture for peace talks, but a sense of mistrust pulls them back.

Commenting on the peace initiative by Mamoni Raisom Goswami and PCG, Professor Gohain said:

The peace overture taken by Mamoni Raisom Goswami with the formation of the People's Consultative Group (PCG) is a chapter of history and the participation of the prime minister generated lot of enthusiasm.



However, sincerity on the part of the government was lacking and the PCG too split later on. We need to learn a lesson from that incident—that an individual's view can't be above that of the masses.

Professor Gohain made it clear that the conveners<sup>48</sup> of the meet have had nothing to do with the Government or ULFA—question of taking any one of the sides does not arise. He said:

We are distressed by the present state of affairs in the state and on behalf of the people of Assam; we would like to attempt for a negotiated settlement of ULFA issue.... We have had informal discussions with some ULFA leaders, but that led various quarters to undertake a false propaganda against us. However, the ULFA leaders who have got the chance to feel the pulse of the people of Assam from a close range haven't misunderstood us. ULFA has to bury the differences within itself.<sup>49</sup>

Almost all the major civil society organisations of the state attended the convention. The viewpoints of some of these groups are worth mentioning as they would reflect the viewpoints on the contemporary issues of insurgency, the role of the State and the identity of Assamese people.

Professor Deba Prasad Baruah, former vice-chancellor of Gauhati University and one of the advisors of the convention, said, 'Peace talks can be held on any issues, including sovereignty. The government should know what the ULFA wants to say with their demand for sovereignty. The government should be open to hold discussion with the ULFA on any issues.' Another noted senior journalist, editor and advisor of the convention Radhika Mohan Bhagwati said,

The Assamese community has been confronting a challenge, and the main issue should be its solution. What is the problem to hold talks on sovereignty? But ULFA has not been given the right over the conscience of the people of the State. The decision should come from the people without whom there can't be any movement.

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<sup>48</sup> The convention, chaired by a presidium, was headed by Professor Hiren Gohain. The other members of the presidium were Dr. Nirmal Kumar Choudhury, Professor Mamoni Raisom Goswami, Hiranya Kumar Bhattacharya, Harekrishna Deka (was absent), Rohini Baruah, Indibor Deuri, Khursed Alam and Ratneswar Basumatary. Dilip Patgiri and Lachit Bordoloi were the secretaries.

<sup>49</sup> Speech of Hiren Gohain, *Asomiya Pratidin*, 25 April 2010.

Even the representatives of the national political parties wondered why sovereignty should be a hinder for talks. As the CPI's central executive committee member Promode Gogoi said:

Talks should be without any preconditions. The Government of India held talks on sovereignty with the Mizo National Front (MNF) of Mizoram and the NSCN-IM of Nagaland. What is the problem to hold talks on sovereignty with ULFA? This doesn't mean that sovereignty should be given to Assam. There shouldn't be any opposition to provide special rights to Assam as given to Jammu & Kashmir.

The written statement of the Aham Xahitya Xabha (AXX)—the premiere literary body of the state—urged the government to initiate talks even on the issues raised by ULFA: 'All core issues of the ULFA, including the issue of sovereignty, can be discussed. However, both the government and the ULFA should shun violence.' AASU—perhaps the most popular student body of the state—that launched the Assam Movement and from where ULFA draws substantial support base said:

Talks should be held on all issues, including sovereignty. Whether Assam should get sovereignty or not is a matter to be decided in the negotiation table. The ULFA came up due to the step-motherly attitude of the Central Government towards Assam. While the AASU protests this step-motherly attitude of the Centre without arms, the ULFA protests it with arms. The indigenous people of Assam should be given constitutional safeguard and all jailed leaders should be freed so as to pave the way for talks.

The draft resolution of the convention said that the top leaders of both the government and ULFA should sit together to resolve all the issues. The convention called upon the government to give free passage to the ULFA leaders and demanded that the jailed leaders of the militant outfit should be released to facilitate holding of meeting of the central committee of ULFA to take decisions regarding talks with ULFA. The convention also said that no legal procedure should be initiated against leaders of ULFA till a settlement comes out. The convention formed a steering committee for facilitating the peace process. The members of the steering committee are Professor Hiren Gohain, Dr. Nirmal Kumar Choudhury, Dr. Mamoni Raisom Goswami, Hiranya Kumar Bhattacharya,

Harekrishna Deka, Rohini Baruah, Indibor Deuri, Khursed Alam and Ratneswar Basumatary. Dilip Patgiri and Lachit Bordoloi will work as the secretaries of the steering committee. The steering committee will finalise the resolutions by incorporating suggestions from different sections of people and the committee has sought suggestions within seven days. The steering committee will also aid ULFA in the process of negotiations with the government. It will form expert committees for studying basic issues like right of the indigenous people over the natural resources, economic development, problems like flood and erosion and infiltration, etc. The expert committees will be asked to finalise reports within 2 to 3 months so that the same can be placed before the Centre during talks.

What are the achievements of the Jatiya Sanmilen? Later on, a delegation of six-member steering committee met with the prime minister, the home minister, Sonia Gandhi and other leaders of opposition parties. From the very beginning the initiative of Professor Gohain-led convention was shrouded with controversy and misunderstanding. Many important groups representing communities like the Bodos, Dimasas, Motok–Moran did not participate at the convention because of variety of reasons. Day before the convention, the writer had a long conversation with some of the leaders of these communities. The All Bodo Students' Association (ABSU)<sup>50</sup> did not participate as the convention was too ULFA-centric and the very formulation of the objectives of the meet was sufficient to suggest that it would be again an attempt to ventilate the concerns of the Assamese only.<sup>51</sup> The Motok–Moran<sup>52</sup> leaders did not participate as they thought the whole peace talk exercise was an attempt to isolate Paresh Baruah<sup>53</sup> who is considered by the security agencies as

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<sup>50</sup> ABSU is the most popular civil society organisation of the Bodo community. It has been at the forefront of mobilising Bodo identity since the 1960s. The writer had a long conversation with Promod Bodo—the president of the ABSU.

<sup>51</sup> The Bodos considered the Assam accord as an attempt to protect the identity of the Assamese only and not the Bodos. The performance of the first regional AGP government confirmed their apprehensions. The Bodo leaders disliked the fact that the proposed convention had nothing to say about the Bodo militant group like NDFB, which had also been demanding talks with the Centre.

<sup>52</sup> As we have argued in the previous chapters that one of the most important support base of ULFA comes from Motok–Moran community. Paresh Baruah, the CIC of ULFA; Anup Chetia, the general secretary; etc., belong to the Motok–Moran community.

<sup>53</sup> Sri Kumar Dohutia, a widely respected person and a historian scholar of Motok–Moran community, expressed his displeasure towards Professor Gohain as the latter had

the most powerful man of ULFA as he controls the military wing and many dreaded cadres who are yet to be surrendered. They expected Professor Gohain to play a more proactive role in attempting to bring Paresh Baruah to the peace process rather than confronting him through newspaper writings.<sup>54</sup>

Professor Gohain's remark in Delhi also sparked off lot of controversies after his meet with prime minister on 21 June 2010. Even a member of the steering committee told me on the condition of anonymity, 'We gave in everything to the centre without keeping some bargaining chips.'<sup>55</sup> What did Professor Gohain say that has caused so much fury from all quarters including Paresh Baruah—the elusive ULFA leader who decried Professor Gohain's initiative to be bereft of the 'national concerns' of Assam.<sup>56</sup> Professor Gohain's meeting with the prime minister and his press meet was described by the state's premiere daily newspaper *Assam Tribune* in the following manner:

Dr Gohain replying to questions on relevance of the proposed dialogue without the presence of Paresh Baruah, opined that he may be marginalised, if he does not come for the talks. He is a member of the ULFA central committee and has to work as a member. If the central committee manages to resolve the vexed problems then Barua would be marginalised, even if he does not come for talks. Dr Gohain said that though ULFA has not formally dropped the demand for sovereignty, a tricky issue that has stalled the peace process, they are certainly willing to tone down their demand.<sup>57</sup>

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expressed the opinion that Paresh Baruah is a member of ULFA—he is not above the organisation. He can't challenge the decision of the whole organisation. There were a lot of exchanges of opinion between Paresh Baruah and Professor Gohain on these issues.

<sup>54</sup> Ghana Kanta Moran, another vocal leader and writer of many books on Moran's identity, told me in a personal conversation that historically the Assamese mainstream intellectuals always treated them as the 'cruel ones'. 'Professor Gohain's remarks remind me those days when we were blamed for disrupting Assam during Ahom's rule', Moran said.

<sup>55</sup> It was all along Professor Gohain's show. Six members who accompanied the peace negotiation team were some of the most respectful names in Assam. However on all occasions and discussions it was only Professor Gohain whose voice was heard, thus effectively reducing the other members of the team into a mere supportive role. One former close colleague of Professor Gohain at Gauhati University, termed it to be a 'Prof Gohain's autocratic show all along'.

<sup>56</sup> For example, see 'Paresh Baruar Boktyabo', *Amar Asom* (26 June 2010), 1.

<sup>57</sup> 'PM's Green Signal for ULFA Talks', *The Assam Tribune* (22 June 2010), 1.

Various individuals, organisations, intellectuals expressed surprise that Professor Gohain, contrary to the resolutions of the national convention that took place on 24 April, could be in such a hurry to provide a model for talks that has nullified ULFA's 30 years' core demand so easily. Besides, Professor Gohain's showering of praise to the prime minister was perceived to be too early. In fact, many quarters have criticised Professor Gohain as the agent of government and intelligence agencies—an allegation without any substance.<sup>58</sup>

There is a difference between the PCG which was appointed by ULFA in 2005 and the Professor Gohain-led SJA initiative. Whereas the PCG was a facilitator for talks between the GOI and ULFA, SJA not only acted as the facilitator but also provided a basic framework by developing rules and regulations of talks. The SJA declared the constitution of seven specialised committees to help ULFA to prepare the ground for talks. What makes PCG quite distinct from the SJA is that the latter under the leadership of Professor Gohain had categorically given up the idea of 'sovereignty' as the main demand of ULFA. However, in the process the SJA seems to have achieved very little. SJA's initiative generated lot of enthusiasm and hopes about talk went to a reasonable point. Professor Gohain's hard-earned name as a noted leftist intellectual of the state and his no-nonsense public reputation took the peace process to a new dimension. People of Assam believed that after conceding every possible point as desired by the Centre, the talk process with ULFA would resume. Then came the announcement from the home minister of India on the 1 July 2010. One of the most important demands of SJA and all the peace initiatives since 2005 was the release of all central committee ULFA leaders from Jails so that they can convene their Central Executive Committee (CEC) meet and accordingly decide on a formal peace talk with GOI.

Article 12 of Chapter 17 of ULFA's constitution says that the Permanent Council comprising the chairman, vice-chairman, general secretary, chief of army staff, and a senior member will decide on important issues such as ceasefire, discussion with government, etc., subject to the ratification by the CEC. Almost all the members (except Paresh Baruah) of both the bodies of ULFA are lodged in central jails in Guwahati. Three of

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<sup>58</sup> To know the opinions of various organisations and individuals, see 'Hiren Gohair Boktybor Protibad', *Dainik Janmbhumi* (23 June 2010), 1.

them—Ramu Mech, Pradip Gogoi and Mithinga Daimary have already been released on various grounds. Prime Minister Manmohan Singh in his conversation with the delegates of SJA said he is in favour of an honourable settlement of the ULFA issue and he personally does not have reservations against the release of the detainees. However, his home minister had different perceptions in his mind. On 30 June 2010, Home Minister P. Chidambaram made it clear that the detained leaders could talk with the government from prison. *The Assam Tribune* reported:

He made it clear that talks, if held at all, would be according to government's terms and not the other way around. He had reportedly opined that it was an old ploy of the militant outfit to engage in talks, whenever it faced the heat. He mentioned that it was with great difficulty that India had managed to lay its hands on the ULFA leaders, all of whom were hiding in Bangladesh.<sup>59</sup>

Such a victor-and-vanquished approach has firmly demonstrated that in terms of CR techniques, the Indian State has not matured at all and still relies on old-fashioned 'Kautilyan' manipulative diplomatic manoeuvrings. The home minister's comment on an essentially political issue of insurgency reminds us of military attitude of the mainstream politicians and bureaucrats. Long back, similar sentiments were also expressed by a governor with a typical military background. The Governor of Assam in an all-India Police Golf Tournament at the Shillong Golf club talked about his version of bringing peace to Assam. His approach to the peace-making process in Assam is conspicuous by the following characteristics:

1. The governor said that more and more insurgent outfits are coming for dialogue could be an indication of two things: (a) they were so broken that there was no option left for them; (b) they were trying to regroup themselves by using the strategy of talks. In such cases, 'dialogues are just an escape route', the governor argued.
2. In a clear disapproval of the ULFA demand for preconditional talks, he categorically said that the dialogues should be on 'our terms and pressure should be maintained on the ULFA'.

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<sup>59</sup> 'Chidambaram Rules Out Leaders' Release', *The Assam Tribune* (1 July 2010), 1.

3. His another point was that militancy in the region has substantially declined due to fatigue and disintegration amongst the militant groups, and now seeing no other alternative, they were coming forward to the peace talks.<sup>60</sup>

In addition to the above-mentioned approach, the governor on a number of occasions talked about the 'final battle' to 'wipe out' ULFA forever. This is an attitude what can be termed as 'victor and vanquished'. History has proved again and again that issues must be settled in its merit—not in that of the 'victor and vanquished' approach. On many occasions, dialogues are put forward not to solve conflict but to delay it. The crux of the argument is that most of the accords that the Indian State has signed with various rebel groups have never resolved the substantive issues—they have merely capitalised on the *conflict fatigue* of the rebels and the people who have supported these movements. In most of the cases, due to longer period of struggle and the realisation about the futility of a never-ending fight with the Indian State, the leaders come to a negotiated settlement that also paves the way for capturing of power of their respective states.

At least the Indian State should respect the sentiments of the representative opinion of the people of Assam who in various civil society peace initiatives from 2000 onwards have clearly favoured for a negotiated settlement of the issue. The Centre must keep in mind that the Indian State is not confronting merely with a physical force—ULFA is an idea—a hidden psyche of the people of Assam. Certainly its support base declined because of the circumstantial compromises from time to time and resorting to indiscriminate violence. After 30 years of military fight, the organisation has to learn from its mistakes and take a realistic stock of the situation. We have argued that they have deviated tremendously from their avowed goals, became a part of international network and the organisation is vertically divided. Sovereignty or secession is not an issue so dear to the Assamese society. Majority of the people of Assam don't support the methods of ULFA. But those deviations notwithstanding, the Indian State has to address these issues. The issues that ULFA raises are the issues of the people of Assam—the State can't crush them militarily.

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<sup>60</sup> 'Governor on Peace Talks', *The Sentinel* (31 October 2004), 1.

Supply-side explanations of all movements hardly take into account the causal factors that led to the growth of a militant force like ULFA. All movements, whether they are violent or non-violent, have their cycle of life—discontent, articulation of discontentment, mass mobilisation, popularity, deviation and decline. But what is important is to go beyond the physical manifestations and resolve the conflict by addressing the root cause.

A survey was conducted to look into the issue of 'Human Security Mapping in Conflict Zones: The Case of North East India' (see Tables 9.1, 9.2 and 9.3).<sup>61</sup> The survey was conducted in three insurgency-affected states of the region—Assam, Nagaland and Manipur. The survey reflects some of the issues pertaining to the notion of peace, insurgency and role of the State.

**Table 9.1**  
**Whether to Negotiate with Insurgents or to Suppress Them**

<i>How to achieve peace</i>	<i>Assam</i>	<i>Manipur</i>	<i>Nagaland</i>	<i>Total</i>
1a Negotiating with insurgents (%)	70.7	73.7	77.8	73.6
1b Suppressing insurgents (%)	20.0	15.8	11.6	16.4

Source: Nani Gopal Mahanta, 'Human Security Mapping in Conflict Zones: The Case of North East India', in *Human Security: From Concepts to Practice*, ed. Amitav Acharya (series editor) (New Jersey: Asian Dialogue Society, 2011), 84.

**Table 9.2**  
**Solving Insurgency Problem by the Government Alone or by Involving the Greater Society**

3a Solving insurgency problem by the government alone (%)	29.0	24.6	7.4	21.7
3b Solving insurgency problem by involving greater society (%)	68.4	62.3	79.4	69.6

Source: Nani Gopal Mahanta, 'Human Security Mapping in Conflict Zones: The Case of North East India', in *Human Security: From Concepts to Practice*, ed. Amitav Acharya (series editor) (New Jersey: Asian Dialogue Society, 2011), 84.

<sup>61</sup> The survey was conducted on behalf of the ADS, Singapore, in which the writer was the Project-in-charge. Total 2,552 respondents were surveyed from March to July 2006. For details, see Nani Gopal Mahanta, 'Human Security Mapping in Conflict Zones: The Case of North East India', in *Human Security: From Concepts to Practice* (World Scientific Series on Human Security), ed. Amitav Acharya (New Jersey: Asian Dialogue Society, 2011).



**Table 9.3**  
**Causes behind Insurgency in North East India**

<i>Causes behind insurgency in North East India</i>	<i>Assam</i>	<i>Manipur</i>	<i>Nagaland</i>	<i>Total</i>
Exploitative policies of Indian government (%)	82.4	67.5	66.2	73.4

*Source:* Nani Gopal Mahanta, 'Human Security Mapping in Conflict Zones: The Case of North East India', in *Human Security: From Concepts to Practice*, ed. Amitav Acharya (series editor) (New Jersey: Asian Dialogue Society, 2011), 84.

It becomes imperative from the above analysis that cutting across all the states, people want a negotiated settlement of the vexed insurgency issue in the region. Of the total respondents, 73.6 per cent want continuous peace dialogue with the insurgent groups and suggestion for suppression is very low, which is about 16 per cent only. Total 69.6 per cent people believe that the government should involve the civil society in resolving insurgency in the region. Of the total respondents, 67 per cent have expressed their opinion in favour of a continuous peace dialogue with the rebel groups so that a sustainable peace process is attained in the table and not in the battle ground.

Other factors that are also mentioned as the triggering factors for insurgency in the region are unemployment, corruption and lack of basic facilities. It is interesting to note that in Assam 82.4 per cent of the people surveyed have blamed the Centre's exploitative policies as responsible for the growth of insurgency in the state. This has confirmed our previous analysis in chapter one and subsequent analysis on the rise of ULFA that the Centre's exploitative policy is indeed the greatest factor for the rise of ULFA in Assam. Is there something wrong with ULFA only or is there something wrong in the operatives of the nation-state? Do our political elite, including our mainstream leaders, need to think imaginatively about the North East region as a whole? These issues will be discussed in the concluding chapter.

# 10

## Confronting the State

### *Exploring Ways for Sustainable Peace*

#### Provincial Autonomy and Crave for Separateness: A Continuum of Nationalist Struggle

The challenges that the State is facing in India can be primarily attributed to the nature and formation of the nation-state itself. A straight-jacket application of colonial State system with its monolithic credo and unitary administrative structure on the deeply divided multicultural society is problematic. The whole process negated diversity and encroached upon the autonomous spheres of social/community interaction that were fundamental to the culture of South Asian society. In this complex mosaic of different nationalities, the Indian State is facing some of its gravest challenges, with the entire process of nation-building being questioned. In response to this, various ethno-sub-nationalist movements in India are increasingly questioning the legitimacy of the State to rule over these communities. The violent nature of these movements also precipitates a violent response by the State.

The present literature on nationalism and ethnic conflict is dominated by the modernist school of thinking that has primarily shaped our notion about the State and identity. Its main thesis is that the nation-states are created by certain causal factors, which bind together the diverse communities living within a territorial boundary.<sup>1</sup> The rise of nationalism

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<sup>1</sup> For details, see Navnita Chadhra Behera, *State, Identity and Violence: Jammu, Kashmir and Ladakh* (New Delhi: Manohar, 2000), 10–13.

in India is explained through a dominant, centralising idea that organises different section of people and social groups into one single nation-state. The nation-state and the modernisation framework as adopted in developing countries like India and other South Asian countries is supposedly believed to have created a framework that would gradually accommodate all the divergent regional, ethnic, caste identities into one pan-Indian identity.<sup>2</sup> From the very beginning, the Indian nation-state tried to impose one pan-Indian identity because, as Ashis Nandy points out, nation-state fears diversity.<sup>3</sup>

In India, the Congress leadership, although sensitive in the beginning to the plural identities of India, finally decided to end up with a strong Centre with some subsidiary powers with the states in the light of disturbances that India faced during the time of Independence. The result was that the Constitution of India provided enormous socio-economic and political power to the Centre to organise and manage social relations among diverse communities and sub-nationalities to ensure their allegiance to the Indian nation.<sup>4</sup>

There is need to create a political system that allows healthy nurturing of the sub-national and sub-regional identities and develop stakes for them so that polity holds together because its myriad identities desire a voluntary union with the state and not because the dominant identity believes it is in its interest to do so. This calls for a serious rethinking on the notion of 'national identity' and restructuring the Indian State. However, the irony of the situation is that these sub-national violent groups want to replace the existing nation-state by creating another nation-state.<sup>5</sup> Fundamental problem with these violent articulations in the North East region is that they have never tried to take into confidence the opinion of the diverse communities whom they claim to represent.

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<sup>2</sup> Rajni Kothari, the most well-known political scientist from India, believed in such a democratic modernisation process, although in the 1970s Kothari has subsequently changed his opinion. For details, see the introduction in *Politics in India* (New Delhi: Orient Longman, 1970).

<sup>3</sup> Ashis Nandy, 'Nation, State and Self-hatred', *Himal South Asia* (July 1996): 17.

<sup>4</sup> Some of the articles which are important in this regard are articles 1, 352, 356 and so on. See Durga Das Basu, *Shorter Constitution of India* (New Delhi: Prentice-Hall of India), 1988.

<sup>5</sup> Navnita Chadha Behera, *State, People and Security: The South Asian Context* (Har-Anand Publications, 2002), 26.

The homogenising and standardising principles which guide the nation-state also regulate the internal and external functioning of these so-called alternative violent movements. This is the problem with the Kashmiri militants, the Naga NSCN leaders, the Bodos and also with ULFA who want an independent state for the people of Assam. The sub-national groups, too, follow the same alienating logic of nation-state. They have failed to go beyond the narratives of colonialism that solidly erected the pillars of nation-state. The social movements in South Asia (whether violent or non-violent), when they are fighting against the over-centralising and the homogenising tendencies of the nation-state to protect their distinctiveness, are also reproducing the same logic. These social groups fighting against the injustice of the State are also extremely diverse and plural. But the ethnic groups who have captured state power at the provincial level or aspiring to attain so are no different from the operation of the State. In other words, the pathology of the nation-state as being afraid of diversity has infected these movements also. As we have argued above at various levels, over-centralisation of State power mainly came from the obsession of the post-colonial political elites who, irrespective of the political system and type of government, wanted to produce a uniform sense of national identity at any cost. However, the attempt to homogenise a national identity in the space occupied by numerous and distinct ethnic identities generated an 'ethnic backlash', which in turn posed security risks for the State.

Hence, conflict resolution strategies should take into account this fundamental reality and respond to ethnic aspirations and movements by recognising the need to grant ethnic groups greater autonomy in their own affairs.<sup>6</sup> Thus, the political space of India needs to be restructured by providing substantial degrees of provincial or regional autonomy. A pluralist conceptualisation of national identity will be an important step for the eventual resolution of ethnic conflicts.

As Rajat Ganguly and Ian Macduff have argued, if the 'resolution' of violent and intractable ethnic conflicts in South and South East Asia is to be a realistic long-term goal, in the short and medium terms, a lot would

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<sup>6</sup> See Rajat Ganguly and Ian Macduff, *Ethnic Conflict and Secessionism in South and South East Asia* (London: SAGE Publications, 2003), 16–21.

depend on how effectively these conflicts are 'managed'.<sup>7</sup> Conflict management entrails the establishment of a peace process, which would allow for maximising the potential benefits accruing from the conflict, while at the same time minimising the destructive consequences unleashed by it.<sup>8</sup> In a real sense, it calls for political dialogue between adversaries, often with the help and encouragement of an external third party, leading to an end of the violence, hostility and warfare through the signing of a negotiated peace agreement.<sup>9</sup>

If political dialogue could be short-term means to bring a long-standing conflict to an end, contemplating structural changes in the political system and going beyond the standard procedures and practices of nation-state could be a long-term attempt for sustainable peace in the North East region. The journey of North East India as an inalienable, inseparable unit of Indian nation-state is relatively new in comparison to its past history of community relations which was conspicuously marked by a boundary-less, mutually competitive yet fulfilling relationship. In a number of Assam's historical analyses, there are references of the possibility of the borders of Assam not being historically immutable and consistent.<sup>10</sup> Dr. Sanghamitra Misra has said:

In the period after the collapse of the Mughal rule in the late eighteenth century, Bijni was one of the most powerful chiefdoms in the region, which later came to form the colonial districts of Goalpara. It straddled the hills of the Eastern Dooars and the plains below and in other areas shared its sovereignty with the rulers of Cooch Behar, Bhutan, Assam and Tibet.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Ganguly and Macduff, *Ethnic Conflict and Secessionism in South and South East Asia*, 18.

<sup>8</sup> Jacob Bercovitch and Allison Houston, 'The Study of International Mediation: Theoretical Issues and Empirical Evidence', in *Resolving International Conflicts: The Theory and Practice of Mediation*, ed. Jacob Bercovitch (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 1996), 11.

<sup>9</sup> Michael Harbottle, 'The Strategy of Third Party Interventions in Conflict Resolution', *International Journal* 35, no.1 (Winter 1979–80): 120.

<sup>10</sup> See Alexander Mackenzie, *The North East Frontier of India* (New Delhi: Mittal Publications, 2011), 9–20. Also see Laksmi Devi, *Ahom–Tribal Relations* (Guwahati: Lawyer's Book Stall, 1992), 215–231.

<sup>11</sup> Dr. Sanghamitra Misra, *New Subjectivities: Writing Histories in Colonial Goalpara and Assam* (Lecture series Publication by Indian Council Historical Research, NER Centre, 2007), 9.

For example, the Bodos were engaged in border trade activities with the neighbouring countries from the medieval period till the middle part of the 20th century. Having migrated from the Sino-Tibetan border regions through the numerous mountain passes, the Bodos, settling in the northern foothill regions of Bengal and Assam, had for long maintained trade links with the bordering hill tribes on the north and through them the Tibetans and the Chinese traders. Several trade routes through these passes existed throughout the ages between Tibet and the north eastern part of India. The places in the foothills through which these passes opened up to the Indian plains were and are still known 'Kachari-Dooar' meaning door or gateway opening to the Kacharis. Several such 'Dooars' exist on the northern foothills of Jalpaiguri in North Bengal and Kokrajhar, Bongaigaon, Barpeta, Nalbari, Kamrup and Darrang districts of Assam. In the north Bengal region, these 'Dooars' were often controlled and operated by the Bhutan authorities, whereas in the Assam region the same was done mostly by the Tibetan authorities. But when the Ahoms came to power, they tried to bring these 'Dooars' under their control. This brought them in conflict with those respective governments. A lot of skirmishes took place between the contending parties and truce was achieved from time to time by payment of tributes or compensations to the respective hill governments (known as the 'posa' system).

The most famous of these trade routes was of course the Lhasa-Tawang-Udalguri (Darrang district of Assam) route which saw a considerable volume of barter trade between the Tawang hill tribes and the Bodo tribes of Udalguri region. This trade link however did not end at Lhasa and extended much beyond right into the interior of Tibet and China. The entire Tawang valley right up to the last hill range north of Udalguri used to be loosely administered at that time by the Tawang Lama authorities.<sup>12</sup>

Thus, multiple sovereignties and fluid cultural and territorial boundaries marked the sociopolitical fabric of Assam which went unabated till the Ahom rule came to an end by the British takeover of Assam in 1826. In other words, the North Eastern indigenous people of Mongoloid origin whose roots spread out in South East Asia are yet to feel comfortable with the idioms of Indian nation-state.

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<sup>12</sup> See Ajay Roy, *The Boro Imbroglia* (Guwahati: Spectrum Publications, 1995), 20–25.

Nibaran Bora, one of the most influential intellectual activists of Assam, argued:<sup>13</sup>

The territory now known as the North East region was not a part of the various political units that emerged in the Indian subcontinent before 1826 AD. The process of nation building in the Indo-Gangetic valley of the Indian subcontinent was very different from that of the NE region. While the natives of the Indo-Gangetic valley yielded to the intrusions and yet failed to achieve a synthesis, the efforts here always ended in the natives retaining the character of their indentify and yet achieving a synthesis. In other words every forced condition of history was given due consideration in the matter of nation building by the natives of the North East, whereas such historical conditions could not generate a mould to make an Indo-Gangetic nation. Therefore, the concept of 'Indian Nation' has remained nebulous till today. The flow of ancient settlers to the North Eastern part of Indian sub continent however continued unabated from the east and north east via the Patkai trade route, from the south east, via Murrah, Manipur and north east and west, via Lasha-Bhutan (Lasha-Towang-Subansiri) trade routes. Therefore, the people of different racial stocks such as Mongoloid, Austro Mongoloid and Caucasoid, coming through these trade routes came to accept this land as their home. These people generated a nation building process in the land of ZUH-THIUS, or the ancient Pragyoishpura.

Our analysis from the very first chapter amply proves that the Indian State never allowed a peripheral state like Assam to take control of its destiny. Assam had to fight for its legitimate share from the very beginning of the nation-state. Whether its resource control, protection of identity, issue of citizenship or development, Assam had to fight with the mighty Indian State for justice. It is precisely such apathetic attitude and attempt to divide the native people by various manipulative means that had given rise to a militant force like ULFA. ULFA is a medium through which Assam ventilates its grievances against India—ULFA is a mode of protest; it is yet another mode of protest against New Delhi that has remained insensitive to the demands of Assam since the dawn of Independence.

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<sup>13</sup> Nibaron Bora, *In Search of Native Personality* (presented as background paper in the All Parties Leaders' Conference held at Guwahati, 12–13 June 1982).

Ajit Bhuyan, a journalist and one of the early sympathisers of ULFA, said:

The people of this region is well known as the most backward and neglected section of India's population. Because, almost all the precious resource of the region like crude oil. Tea, jute, timber etc. have been systematically taken away to strengthen the economy of other states beyond the North East. Like the British rulers, the Indian rulers too have done nothing to industrialise the region so as to benefit the indigenous nationalities, who have remained deprived and ruthlessly oppressed for centuries from the time of British conquest till today.<sup>14</sup>

It was precisely because of such apprehensions that visionary leaders of Assam since the days of anti-colonial struggle advocated a system that gives sufficient space to the provincial units like Assam. It was imperative for the political elites of Assam to develop a system that gives sufficient space to the various streams of Assamese nationalities that combine to form the greater Assamese society.

There are two important developments which would also help us to understand the notion of Divided Sovereignty by the Congress party in the context of then undivided Assam.

1. The first is about the discourse on sovereignty that took place in Jorhat jail from 1940–41.
2. The second is Assam Congress' insistence on a separate constitution of Assam on the eve of grouping plan in July 1946.

## Discourse on Sovereignty in Jorhat Jail from 1940–41

Following the imposition of war on India, Gopinath Bordoloi (the first premiere of Assam) courted arrest on 11 December 1940 as the first individual satyagrahi. Very soon other stalwarts of freedom struggle like Bishnu Ram Medhi, Farkhruddin Ali Ahmed, Gauri Kanta Talukdar,

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<sup>14</sup> Ajit Bhuyan, 'Flames of Freedom Still Burning', in *Symphony of Freedom* (All India People's Resistance Forum, September, 1996), 159.



Lakheswar Barooah, the Congress Chief Maulana Tayyebulla, Omeo Kumar Das and Krishna Das were arrested.

In their jail term, Bordoloi initiated a lot of discussions on the future political system of Assam and requested all the prominent Congressmen to participate in the discourse. According to Tayyebulla, some, including himself, refused to oblige. Tayyebulla calls these meetings as the Rastra Gathan Sabha of Bordoloi having no substantial support from others. Tayyebulla tried to demean such meetings and asserted that the object of these meetings was to find ways and means of bringing about an independent national state of Assam, separated from, and independent of, India either with the help of Indian National Army (INA) or the Japanese.<sup>15</sup>

Some of the important issues which were discussed in the meetings were the future territorial boundary of India, Assam's future political relations with India and Assam's internal problems and their solution. Nirode Barooah in his seminal work on Gopinath Bordoloi said,

As regards to the relationship between the centre and the provinces, the groups were confronted with two general issues which they considered the two sides of the same coin. 1) Where should the Sovereignty lie—with the centre or the provinces 2) To whom should the residuary powers be assigned?<sup>16</sup>

Farkhruddin Ali Ahmed, who later became the fifth president of India, insisted on the notion of Provincial Sovereignty. In fact, he can be called as the most important protagonist of the concept of Provincial Sovereignty. According to him, that would enable the provinces to delegate certain powers like defence, external affairs, etc., to the Centre. He strongly advocated granting of residuary power to the states. It is not known whether Ali Ahmed advocated separation of Assam; nevertheless, the group in general favoured maximum amount of autonomy to the states. The members opined that under the new Constitution, the sovereignty would lie with the states subject to the delegation of some powers to the Centre. Thus, the prominent Congressmen of Assam way

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<sup>15</sup> Nirode Kumar Barooah, *Gopinath Bordoloi: Indian Constitution and Centre-Assam Relations* (Guwahati: Publication Board of Assam, 1990), 6.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

back in the 1940s advocated a confederation-like system where the states would have maximum powers and the constituting provinces would delegate some power to the Centre. The minutes of the meeting which took place on 12 January 1941 at 12:50 p.m. is particularly significant. It says:

All are agreed that the free State of India should recognize every individual in the State as an equal unit ... but it would be desirable to provide for certain fundamentals in reference to i) freedom of conscience, worship and religion; ii) freedom of speech and expression; iii) protection and safeguard of the interest of the recognised communal minorities ...; iv) freedom of local language and culture; v) recognition of the sovereignty of the provincial state, subject to the delegation of such powers regarding defence, international relations etc. to a central State, etc.

## Assam Congress's Insistence on a Separate Constitution of Assam

The second perspective of the Congress leaders can be gathered when Assam was to be included with the Group C scheme of the Cabinet Mission. The Governor of Assam summoned the Assam Legislative Assembly on 16 July 1946 to elect 10 representatives to the Constituent Assembly as per the provision of the Cabinet Mission scheme. It was a crucial day for Assam as the Assembly was going to cast its verdict on its members not to form the group in section C. Gopinath Bordoloi, who was later conferred the Bharat Ratna award, which is the highest civilian award of India, moved the resolution:

Whereas this Assembly after a very careful consideration of the statement made by the British Cabinet delegation and the Viceroy on May 16 last is of the opinion that the province of Assam has an undoubted claim to have the constitution of the province framed and settled by its own representatives elected to the constituent Assembly, and that it will be detrimental to the interests of the province of Assam to form any section or sections or group or groups with any other province of British India for the purpose of settling the constitution of for the province of Assam and whereas this Assembly is of the opinion that no group constitution should be set up for any group of provinces including therein the provinces of Assam and that no provincial subjects in which the province

of Assam is interested or concerned should be dealt with by any such section or group of provinces this Assembly directs its ten representatives elected by it as laid down in the manner as set forth below:

That the said representatives shall frame and settle a constitution for the provinces of Assam at a meeting or meetings at which only they, that is, representatives elected for the Constituent Assembly, by the Assam Legislative Assembly shall take part.<sup>17</sup>

The same Assembly resolution also instructed the representatives not to take part in any meetings and has been instructed to resist all or any attempt made to set up a group constitution for the settlement of questions relating to the province of Assam. Bordoloi said that there were two motives behind the motion. The first was that Assam's representatives would alone frame the provincial constitution; secondly, in all matters in which Assam would have relations with other provinces, she would not be governed or dictated by the majority of votes of the group.<sup>18</sup>

From the very beginning, Assam had to fight for more financial gain which was rejected by the Central leaders. Omeo Kumar Das said:

My province Assam has been the source of contribution to the central exchequer to the extent of nearly rupees eight crores annually in the shape of excise and export duty on tea and petrol. But the subvention that was given to Assam was only rupees thirty lakhs. I don't find any change in the outlook today.<sup>19</sup>

The following were the three apprehensions of the Assamese elites:

1. Assam was worried about the attitude of the Central leadership in extracting Assam's natural resources to the maximum extent possible without giving the return benefit to Assam. Bordoloi explained this to the Cabinet Mission and to the other Central leaders. In order to enable Assam to utilise its resources in its own interest, Bordoloi urged maximum autonomy to the state.

<sup>17</sup> *Assam Legislative Assembly Proceeding (ALAP)*, 9 (1946), 785–797.

<sup>18</sup> A. C. Bhuyan and Sibopada De eds, *Political History of Assam*, vol. 3 (Guwahati: Government of Assam, 1980), 366–371.

<sup>19</sup> *ALAP*, 1 (1949), 20.

2. To protect Assam's identity from unchecked immigration, it wanted autonomy so that it could regulate its own citizenship policy. For this purpose, the Assamese elite demanded dual citizenship.
3. The provincial leaders were worried about gradual dominance of the non-Assamese trading and middle-class community over the culture and economy of Assam.

It was believed that under single citizenship the distinctive composite character of the Assamese people would not be maintained. In an appeal to the members of the Constituent Assembly, the Asom Jatiya Mahasabha suggested that the provinces or state should be given full autonomy and their local people special rights and privileges in the shapes of a provincial or state citizenship as distinct from the federal or union citizenship.<sup>20</sup> Prof Girin Phukon argued:

The Assamese elite apprehended that common citizenship would not safeguard the interest of the Assamese people. They, therefore, felt that the provision of dual citizenship was of utmost importance to a state like Assam which possessed certain peculiar features unlike other states of India. In no other state, was there so much floating population from outside. The question of citizenship, therefore, became acute for Assam due to the rapid and large scale increase of non-Assamese population into this state.<sup>21</sup>

Such apathy as shown by the national elites led Kuladhar Chaliha to comment in the Constituent Assembly debate:

If you suspect the provinces and take greater powers for the centre it will only lead to undesirable results. You are doing something which will have a disintegrating effect and will accentuate differences instead of solving them. If you take too much power for the centre the provinces will try to break away from you.<sup>22</sup>

In the light of the challenges that the Indian State has been confronting in Jammu and Kashmir, North Eastern states and the Maoist violent

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<sup>20</sup> Asom Jatiya Mahasabha, *A Plea for Dual Citizenship: Appeal to the Members of the Constituent Assembly* (Guwahati: Asom Jatiya Mahasabha, 22 July 1949).

<sup>21</sup> Girin Phukon, *Politics of Regionalism in North East India* (Guwahati: Spectrum Publications, 1996), 116.

<sup>22</sup> *Constituent Assembly Debate*, vol. VIII, 919.

upsurge, the political elites need to pose and rectify certain basics for the well-being of the political system. A radical reworking of the federal scheme would have to evolve as a bottom-up process, whereby the states and regions feel that they have voluntarily come together to create a new Centre. A five-tier, or perhaps six-tier, structure of federal governance may be adopted to create a new federal balance. In spite of its many limitations what distinguishes the Indian State from other counterparts in Asia and elsewhere is its accommodative capacity and flexibility to incorporate contending forces. The states should become autonomous in exercising their political and financial powers.

## Three Basic Issues That Would Determine the Future of Assam

We reiterate that ULFA is not the only manifestation of the deeper crisis of the Assamese society. An ULFA-centric solution will never herald a sustainable peace in Assam. Therefore, when we talk about a durable peace in Assam, we look at those factors that cause or have the potentiality of causing violent conflict in Assam. We believe that there are essentially three factors that deserve utmost attention for a durable peace in the North East region in general and Assam in particular. These are:

- The aspiration of the smaller communities vis-à-vis the greater Assamese identity.
- The illegal migration issue that threatens the existence of the Assamese nationality.
- The issues of Human Security and Human Development in the absence of which the insurgency shall find its most fertile ground in the unemployed, poverty-ridden and underdeveloped economy.

## Respect for Diversity and Recognition of Cultural Differences in Assam

It would be wrong to bring unity in the Indian State by asking the ethnic communities to think in terms of citizenship and forget their cultural

roots. This is indeed a difficult proposition. In Assam we have no way out but to develop a multicultural policy that recognises the distinctiveness of each and every community, by giving sufficient choices to develop a sense of unity. Further splinterisation of Assam can be prevented only by allowing each and every community to develop culturally, socially, politically and, above all, economically. Going beyond the contractors, politician and the elites, development process must reach the common man whether he is a Bodo, immigrant Muslim or caste Hindu resident of the state. Cultural diversity is here to stay—and to grow.

Here in Assam we urge for respecting diversity and building more inclusive societies by adopting policies that explicitly recognise cultural differences. Individuals can and do have multiple identities that are complementary—ethnicity, language, religion and race as well as citizenship. Nor is identity a zero sum game. There is no inevitable need to choose between state unity and recognition of cultural differences. A sense of identity and belonging to a group with shared values and other bonds of culture are important for individuals. But each individual can identify with many different groups. Individuals have identity of citizenship (for example, being Indian), gender (being a woman), race (being of Tibeto-Burman origin), language (being fluent in Bodo, Assamese and Hindi), politics (having left-wing views or regionalism) and religion (being Hindu or Muslim).<sup>23</sup>

Even in the case of Assam there are substantial numbers of people who prefer to identify themselves as both Indian and Assamese, while some of them prefer to have one identity. This has come into picture from a survey by the CSDS, New Delhi.<sup>24</sup> The question that was asked was 'How do you identify yourself?'

It is very clear from the above data that the people of Assam would prefer to call themselves as Assamese or both as Assamese and Indian. What it clearly establishes is that people believe in a more federal identity than one political identity.

<sup>23</sup> UNDP report, (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2004).

<sup>24</sup> Obtained through Professor Sandhya Goswami, coordinator-in-charge of North East India, CSDS, 2005.

**Table 10.1**  
**How Does One Identify in Assam?**

	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Per cent</i>	<i>Valid per cent</i>
Assamese	596	38.5	38.5
Assamese and Indian	336	21.7	21.7
Indian	444	28.7	28.7
Other identities	135	8.7	8.7
Do not know	38	2.5	2.5
Total	1,549	100.0	100.0

*Source:* The survey was conducted by the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies (CSDS), New Delhi. The Department of Political Science, Gauhati University was given the responsibility to carry out the survey. Obtained through Professor Sandhya Goswami, coordinator of the project (in charge of North East India) in 2005.

## Constitution of an Ethnic Council in Assam

Therefore, for any future vision of Assam or the North East, we have to think innovatively about the identity issue of the ethnic groups in the state. The aspirations of the smaller nationalities and tribes as well as the immigrant minority communities are seen in direct conflict with the Asomiyas because they tend to demand the creation of a separate homeland by carving out the areas of Assam. Any process of conflict resolution in Assam can't thus narrowly focus, as is often done by the academics and political and administrative elites on the issue of political terrorism alone.<sup>25</sup> A perceptive journalist of BBC who writes very often on the North East India wrote:

It is true that groups such as the ULFA continue to plan for violence and would perpetrate it, given the chance. So there is no reason to step down vigil, but I feel it is much more important for the government to work out a future vision for Assam, that will take care of the aspirations of the smaller nationalities and minority communities and ensure that the threat of Assam's splinterisation is decisively and permanently averted.<sup>26</sup>

<sup>25</sup> Even writers like Professor Udayon Misra have not tried addressing this issue of smaller group identity in his seminal work *Periphery Strikes Back*.

<sup>26</sup> Subir Bhaumik, *A Road Map for Conflict Resolution in Assam* (Seminar organised by the Institute for Conflict Management, New Delhi, Guwahati, May 2002).

The question is how can we accommodate the burgeoning demand of the tribal groups? For that we need to explore the sociopolitical structure that can satisfy the Bodos, the Rabhas, the Karbis, the Dimasas, the Tiwas, the Chutias, the Koch-Rajbangshi, the Tai-Phakes, The Matak and Moran, the Ahoms, and the minority groups like the Bengali Hindus, the Muslims, the Nepalis and the Adivasis. Unless we work out a comprehensive structure that can at least satisfy the basic socio-cultural and economic needs of the people, there will be continuous turmoil in the state. Thus how the Assamese middle class and elite accommodate their demands and the growing aspirations of the smaller tribes and nationalities would determine the future of Assam.

Scholars like Professor Sanjib Baruah argue that the 6th schedule of the colonial construction has failed to fulfill the basic objectives of the constitution makers. Instead of devoting our energy for creation and recreation of innumerable homelands in Assam, we need to think beyond the 6th schedule. On the other hand, scholars like Professor Apurba Barua is extremely critical of the narrow, parochial, inward-looking politics and anti-Asomiya stand of the tribal and ethnic communities of Assam. He argues that it is wrong to think that the Asomiya elite are alone responsible for the present inward-looking politics and anti-Asomiya stand of the tribal leaders. Professor Barua argues for the delimitation of the indigenous peoples of Assam. It is in this context that the demands of the various communities in Assam for constitutional protection should be discussed:

It must be kept in mind that any policy that seeks to protect the interests of the ethnic communities *per se* will lead to a proliferation of such identities and would further divide the society, because it sends the signal that ethnic identity is a useful political platform. Today there seems to be no end to this process of fragmentation. While the existing identities as of now will have to be recognized, fragmentation will have to be halted in the interest of political integration. Or we may soon be in a situation of facing demands for village republics. That need not be a healthy development.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Apurba Kumar Barua, 'Ethnic Politics and the Need for Constitutional Protection in the Contemporary Assam', in *Nationality Question, Security and Development in North East India*, ed. A. B. Deb (Proceedings volume of XIIIth Annual NEIPSA Conference, 2004, published in February 2005).



Professor Barua is however aware of the difficulties in that process. It will be extremely difficult to find out a common standard for defining the indigenous peoples of Assam. Therefore, he says:

If we concentrate on protecting the interests of the permanent residents of Assam instead of trying to protect the interests of what we call the 'indigenous' peoples of Assam, it will of course be necessary to decide upon a cut off date for according permanent resident status. It may appear to be easier than deciding upon who is and who is not an indigenous because of the date already arrived at by the Government of India and the forces that led the Assam movement. But political forces are already divided on the acceptability of the date. However, arriving at a cut off date for this purpose may lead only to a political controversy and need not generate an unending process of fragmentation. In this sense it may be better to try and protect the interest of all permanent residents without raking up the issue of ethnic identity.<sup>28</sup>

Professor Barua is very critical of the negative tendencies of ethnic identities:

Though the contemporary world appears to be completely divided on ethnic lines yet the parochialism of the ethnic orientation should not be overlooked. The universal humanitarian values take a back seat when the reality is perceived from ethnic point of view. The exclusive rights claimed by the ethnic identities on the basis of indigenous status are also problematic because no community can conclusively prove that they are the original inhabitant of an area. They can merely claim. The original settlements in most parts of the globe are matters very early period of human history. The evidence about that period is rather insufficient and definitely not verifiable. It is therefore more realistic to talk in terms of permanent residents than in terms of indigenous people.<sup>29</sup>

Certainly, the suggestions of Professor Barua deserve greater debate and attention and the idea of permanent citizen of the state could be of particular value. But to say that this process of constitutional protection to the permanent citizens will get rid of the ethnic identity is an extremely difficult proposition. No ethnic groups of Assam or the North East will be ever ready to forget about their distinctive identity. We also

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<sup>28</sup> Barua, 'Ethnic Politics and the Need for Constitutional Protection in the Contemporary Assam', 62.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 63.

agree with Professor Barua that it is essential to contest the undemocratic, political segregation attempt of the tribal elites. But without taking into account their identity concern and fear, it will be disastrous to give them the status of permanent citizens of Assam and tell them to forget all their distinctive ethnic identities. In order to give them a greater share in the state of affairs, we propose for the constitution of a socio-ethnic council in Assam on the lines of upper house of the state, i.e., the Legislative Council. Of late there is talk and discussion going on in various circles of Assam regarding the constitution of Legislative Council in Assam. This is a very outdated institutional set-up having practically no utilitarian value except putting burden on the state coffers. Instead of it, with a constitutional amendment, we propose to set up an ethnic council in state capital of Assam with a proportional representation from each and every community of Assam.

## Nature and Functions of the Proposed Ethnic Council in Assam: A Conceptual Elaboration

1. The ethnic council will be modelled on the lines of house of Legislative Council. Parliamentary procedures will be followed in conducting its sessions and workings. However, modalities can be worked out later on and this is a conceptual elaboration only.
2. The proposed ethnic council is a socio-cultural body that would look into the distinct issues of the ethnic groups of Assam and would also address the common socio-cultural concerns of all nationalities.
3. This will not be a replication of the political and economic works of the existing seven tribal councils or the panchayati raj institutions in the state. The proposed council shall essentially look at the identity issues and other socio-cultural issues so that it can address their concerns.
4. Every ethnic group of Assam shall have a representation in this council and shall be provided with an assembly hall and an office to discuss their ethnic socio-cultural-linguistic issues. Apart from that, all the nationalities shall come together for a general assembly where the common concerns and general issues of all the

nationalities will be discussed. The assembly would meet at least twice a year. If any serious controversy arises between two communities, a special session of the council will be convened.

5. Apart from the members from the ethnic community, 10 distinguished sociologists, anthropologists, historians, social scientists or any other persons having expert knowledge on the ethnic, demographic and tribal issues of Assam and the North East should be nominated by the governor of Assam as neutral representative of the government and people of Assam.
6. The ethnic council is a debate or rather a dialogue forum where the respective community can raise their issues of concern and can meet with other communities, and this will help to understand each other's view point while protecting ones own interest.
7. It is mandatory for the government to accommodate the advice/recommendations of the members in the council while formulating policies that might affect the groups in that area.
8. The council is modelled in the consociational model where the principle of proportionality, mutual veto, grand coalition and consensus methodologies will be followed while arriving at decisions.
9. The main purpose of joint or collective session is to understand each other and appreciate each other's viewpoints democratically in a healthy atmosphere which is lacking in Assam today. A fascist, inward-looking attitude devoid of understanding each other's concern has been growing in Assam. In such an atmosphere a healthy democratic dialogue is the only answer to these vexed issues where the state can't alone enforce a decision.

Today the communities who are at loggerheads with each other due to various reasons need to initiate a dialogue among the affected communities. The issues like claiming the territories of other states or communities, the fear of being treated as the second-class citizens in the homeland politics, etc., should be included in such dialogue. An overnight solution may not come, but it will help in understanding the minds of each other. If carried on for a longer period, a desirable solution might come up. In conflict resolution literature, this process is known as informal problem-solving approach or workshops where a third party assists conflicting parties to find solutions to their problems. The philosophy of these

dialogues is not to force the parties to accept a settlement, but to provide an informal atmosphere where the parties can exchange their perspectives about their needs and conceive a solution that satisfies the needs of those involved in the conflict.<sup>30</sup>

The protection of Assamese identity from the growing infiltration of the Bangladeshi is another most important concern for the people of Assam. We have shown in previous chapters that ULFA's benign approach towards the immigrants in Assam is more dictated by their survival necessities than anything else. The organisation's change in their perception came when after the virtual rejection of training at Myanmar, the organisation had to look for its base and shelter at Bangladesh.

The crisis of such illegal migration is not onefold. The immigrants put maximum pressures on the land holding pattern of Assam. Discussing the impact of migration on land use, Myron Weiner says, 'The impact of these Muslim migrants on land use in Assam has been considerable. Between 1930 and 1950, some 1,508,000 acres, mostly in the Brahmaputra Valley, were settled by migrants.'<sup>31</sup>

Continuous immigration has resulted in great pressure on cultivable land in Assam and this has been one of the leading factors contributing to ethnic tension. Just before the outbreak of the Assam Movement too, the land factor had assumed disturbing proportions with the indigenous Assamese and the tribals being increasingly alienated from their land. Because of the high rate of population growth and the occupation of vast tracts of land by the immigrants over a period of some 75 years, during the years 1961–71 the size of per capita agricultural holdings in Assam declined by 26 per cent against the national average of 16.7 per cent during the same decade.

It was but natural that in course of time the students' demands for economic development of the state would be shifted to the foreign migrants who were seen as the chief factor contributing to the present state of affairs. The immediate cause was the apprehension in the Assamese mind that the migrants, particularly the immigrant Muslims, constituting easily the largest vote-bank of the state, were about to emerge as a

<sup>30</sup> Carlos L. Yordan, 'Instituting Problem-solving Processes as a Means of Constructive Social Change', *Online Journal of Peace and Conflict Resolution*, no. 1.4 (November 1998).

<sup>31</sup> Myron Weiner, *Sons of the Soil: Migration and Ethnic Conflict* (Princeton University Press), 123.

viable political entity. The long-built Assamese fear of being outnumbered and outvoted in their homeland found voice in the statements of the chief election commissioner on the immigration issue. Chief Election Commissioner Sakhder expressed serious concern at the fact that foreign nationals constituted a sizeable proportion of the voters of the state and urged upon the Union Home Ministry to issue identity cards to the genuine voters of the state. But the chief election commissioner's warning cut little ice with the central leaders who continued to display the arrogance and insensitivity that one had come to associate with leaders like Jawaharlal Nehru. The final stage for the Assam Movement on the foreigners' issue was set in mid-1979 with the updating of the rolls for the parliamentary bye-election to the Mangaldoi constituency caused by the death of a sitting member. In the process the tribunal set-up by the state government declared as many as 45,000 voters in an electorate of 6 lakhs to be foreigners. The foreign infiltrant had finally emerged as a major electoral factor in the state's politics.

Thus, the challenges of migration in Assam are not only in the identity politics of Assam but also in the landholding pattern of Assam. In other words, the migration issue in Assam can hardly be undermined. However, while tackling the issue we don't stick to some of the ultra-nationalistic uttering of some organisations including the AASU. Here we shall try to look at some of the practical, humane measures to tackle the issues of illegal migration in Assam.

Sammujjal Bhattacharjya, an undisputed student leader of Assam and the North East for last 15 odd years (approximately), has highlighted the identity concerns of Assamese people in the following words:

There is the instance of a long peaceful mass movement from 1979-1985 against the illegal foreigners.... after which the Assam accord was signed in 1985 ... but till now we have not been benefited from the accord.... the forest lands, the towns and agricultural fields all occupied by the illegal Bangladeshis. And this definitely poses a threat to the identity of the indigenous people of the state. Therefore how can we have a peaceful state in such a situation?<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Sammujjal Bhattacharjya, the advisor of AASU in a panel discussion conducted by the Donbosco Institute, published in *Peace Initiative: A North East India Perspective*, ed. Thomas Vattathara (Don Bosco Institute, 2004), 181.

Indeed even after 25 years the central issue of the Assam Movement remains unfulfilled, rather it has created more fissures, distrust among the ethnic communities of Assam and the North East. Assam Movement (1979–85), which was primarily launched to drive out the illegal migrants from Assam, is one of the largest mass-based movement in India's post-Independence period.<sup>33</sup> But so far, an amicable solution of the issues has not been found nor could the government expel the illegal immigrants from Assam. On the other hand, the psyche of the Assamese-speaking middle-class elites is becoming more aggressive and ultra-nationalistic.<sup>34</sup> In the context of such a scenario, in concluding this chapter we would like to propose a new way of looking at the illegal migration issue since the existing ultra-nationalist position and gradual communalisation of the issue could serve nobody except the politicians for narrow political means.

The politics of accord also manifests the character of the Indian State. The Assam accord has created more discord with the State that has led to the growth of a more radical group with a demand of an independent Assam and it has also strained the relationship between the Assamese-speaking people and the other ethnic tribal groups of the state. The accord agreed to devise formulas for identifying, expelling and disfranchising the illegal migrants. The regional government which was formed out of this Assam agitation couldn't do much as constitutionally the citizenship is under the Central government's jurisdiction. The Illegal Migrants (Detection by Tribunal Act) (IMDT) which was passed by the parliament made the task more difficult. Major clauses of the accord thus remain unimplemented. Therefore, the non-implementation of the accord remains to be the core of the issue and is hogging the politics of Assam for a long time. Clause VI of the accord had promised

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<sup>33</sup> Monirul Hussain, *Assam Movement: Class and Ideology* (New Delhi: Manak Publishers, 1993), 10.

<sup>34</sup> On 22 March 2005, the Assam Institute of Management (AIM) conducted a seminar on the impact of Assam agitation at Vivekananda Kendra, Guwahati, where the author was also invited. The argument which I have been developing in this chapter was the core of my presentation at the seminar. All the speakers including the majority audience came at loggerheads with me and I was accused of being pro-Bangladeshi and not sensitive enough to the identity of Assamese. It seems that the ultra-nationalist elites have blocked all their rational thinking and prefer to be emotional on this issue. For details, see 'Seminar on Assam Agitation', *The Assam Tribune* (23 March 2005), 2.

constitutional, legislative and administrative safeguards to protect, promote and preserve the cultural, social, linguistic identity and heritage of the Assamese people.<sup>35</sup> The formulation had greatly angered the Bodo activists in the late 1980s who argued that it might legitimise the imposition of the Assamese language and culture on the Bodos. The insistence of AASU on the issue of 100 per cent job reservation to the 'indigenous people' is the hub of the all controversy. Lots of groups are very much apprehensive of being left out from this definition of 'indigenous Assamese'.

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<sup>35</sup> Clause 6: 'Constitutional, legislative and administrative safeguards, as may be appropriate, shall be provided to protect, preserve and promote the cultural, social, linguistic identity and heritage of the Assamese people.'

Clause 7: 'The Government takes this opportunity to renew their commitment for the speedy all round economic development of Assam.'

## Re-visiting Immigration and Identity

### *Issues of Human Security, Development and Sustainable Peace*

Commenting on the need for a more flexible approach, a prolific writer and academic of Assam Sanjib Baruah argues, '[M]inimally we need a framework that does not involve the State for ever categorising groups of people in ethnic terms and making descendants of immigrants into perpetual outsiders.'<sup>1</sup> Undoubtedly, Assam needs some mechanism to control immigration into the state. The state can no longer afford to absorb more immigrants as in terms of population growth Assam has been one of the fastest growing state in the country. However border-fencing is not the best mechanism to prevent infiltration from across the border. There is a need to develop some other mechanisms. South Asia is the only region in the world where we don't have a well-documented or legalised citizenship policy towards each other. As Sanjib Baruah says, the North East region requires some rules about incorporating the descendants of immigrants—no matter how restrictive. 'And at least a generation or two later, they have to become full citizens.'<sup>2</sup>

Movements against illegal migrants have not produced any desirable results since the post-Independence period. Deletion, deportation and detection of the illegal migrants remain the most important variables for the Assamese identity. Nothing has happened so far; from the very beginning, Assam Accord was a non-starter.

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<sup>1</sup> Sanjib Baruah, *Durable Disorder* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2005), 123.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 204–205.



On the other hand, the Assamese society is getting polarised on communal lines. The 2012 violence primarily against the immigrants in the Bodoland Territorial Council (BTC) has resurfaced the second phase of agitation against the illegal migrants after the unsuccessful end of the first phase of anti-foreigner movement from 1979 to 1985. Assam has been witnessing a resurgent phase of anti-foreigner movement since August 2012. However, the 2012 Bodoland conflict has got certain specific characteristics:<sup>3</sup>

1. The dichotomy between the local vis-à-vis the immigrant Muslims has become more polarised.
2. There is a tactical alliance between the Bodos and the non-Bodo indigenous groups like the Assamese-speaking, the Rabhas, the Koch-Rajbangshis and the Adivasis who were otherwise fighting with each other for space and identity till 1998. In fact, the polarisation between the immigrant Muslims vis-à-vis other communities in Assam is quite substantial. Religious minority leaders like Baddruddin Ajmal of All India Democratic United Front (AIUDF) and All Assam Minority Students' Union (AAMSU) had succeeded in bridging the gap between the local Assamese Muslims and the immigrant Muslims. The Assam Bandh declared by AAMSU on 28 August 2012 in protest against the violence in Bodoland has received widespread support in some hitherto untouched areas in upper Assam which is known to be free from brand of politics popularised by the immigrant Muslims of East Bengal origin. The marginalisation, killing and displacement of the immigrant Muslims in western Assam since July 2012 have a wider connotation. The minority leader of AIUDF, Maulana Baddruddin Ajmal, had already succeeded in transcending the plight of the immigrant Muslims beyond the national border—thanks to the massive 'exodus' of the North Eastern people from metropolitan

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<sup>3</sup> In a series of group clashes involving indigenous Bodo and immigrant people, nearly 100 people got killed with the displacement of four hundred thousand people (400,000) primarily in the four districts of Bodoland area—Kokrajhar, Chirang, Baksa, Dhubri and Bongaigaon in western Assam. Although both the Bodo and immigrant Muslims were affected, the highest affected group was immigrant Muslims.

cities like Bangalore and Mumbai.<sup>4</sup> Muslim organisations already have done the unthinkable, i.e taking the battle of the Muslims to upper Assam districts which are considered to be the epicenter of Assamese culture. It had also succeeded in creating an atmosphere of mistrust and qualm among the local indigenous Muslims with the Assamese by popularising the tenet: Islam is in danger.<sup>5</sup>

It is now high time that Assam comes out of the hitherto unproductive discourse on immigration issue. The Assam Accord Clause 5.8 says, 'Foreigners who came to Assam on or after March 25, 1971 shall continue to be detected, deleted, and expelled in accordance with law. Immediate and practical steps shall be taken to expel such foreigners.'<sup>6</sup> However, this provision of the Assam Accord seems to be ineffective in the context of the Citizenship Amendment Act of 2003. If the Act is not modified, it would mean that anyone who is born before the commencement of the Act in 2003 shall be a citizen of India. The Act says:

Citizenship by birth: (1) Except as provided in sub-section (2), every person born in India-(a) on or after the 26th day of January, 1950, but before the 1st day of July, 1987; (b) on or after the 1st day of July, 1987, but before the commencement of the Citizenship (Amendment) Act, 2003 and either of whose parents is a citizen of India at the time of his birth; (c) on or after the commencement of the Citizenship (Amendment) Act, 2003, where-(i) both of his parents are citizens of India; or (ii) one of whose parents is a citizen of India and the other is not an illegal migrant at the time of his birth, shall be a citizen of India by birth.<sup>7</sup>

The sub-clause like 'one of whose parents is a citizen of India and the other is not an illegal migrant at the time of his birth, shall be a citizen of India by birth', does not hold much value as illegal migrants entering on 25 March 1971 would be very old (assuming that he/she comes at

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<sup>4</sup> The group clash in western Assam led to a fierce backlash on the people of the North East who are working in various parts of India, like Bangalore, Mumbai and Hyderabad leading to an exodus of nearly 30,000 people from those cities.

<sup>5</sup> See Nani Gopal Mahanta, 'A Kashmir in the Making', *India Today* 37 no. 40 (1 October 2012): 12.

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.aasu.org.in/contribution/contribution.html>

<sup>7</sup> [http://www.helpline.law.com/docs/THE%20CITIZENSHIP%20\(AMENDMENT\)%20ACT,%202003](http://www.helpline.law.com/docs/THE%20CITIZENSHIP%20(AMENDMENT)%20ACT,%202003) (accessed on 11 October, 2012).

the age of 15) and by the time the National Citizenship Register (NRC) comes into effect, he/she would probably die and their descendants would become citizen by birth. Besides in a state like Assam, all the illegal migrants must have acquired their citizenship through fraudulent means. Even if the NRC is updated it is apprehended that all dubious illegal migrants would regularise their citizenship by incorporating their names in the electoral list (the criteria for being included in the NRC would be made very flexible—name in the electoral or voters list is one of them). In addition, there is no guarantee that the NRC would be accepted as a piece of legal document. For example, in 1967, the then Chief Justice of Gauhati High Court, Parvati Kumar Goswami, refused to accept the NRC as the valid legal document in *Van Vasa Seikh vs the Government of India Union case*.<sup>8</sup>

Although NRC would regularise almost all the illegal migrants as the citizens of India, even then a revised NRC would be a welcome step for the fact that it would bring to an end to the vexed Assam's citizenship issue once for all. I would like to suggest the following steps for the permanent solution of the citizenship issue in Assam:

1. The Citizenship Amendment Act of 2003 should be modified so that its provisions are not implemented in Assam. Those who are identified as foreigners or illegal migrants as per the provision of Assam Accord clause 5.8 may be subsequently absorbed in Assamese society as there is no deportation treaty with Bangladesh and the latter refuses to admit that there is any illegal migration to Assam. Identified illegal migrants may be provided a) partial citizenship, b) status of permanent residents, c) partial residents, d) denizens, or e) full membership of the state without the membership of the nation.<sup>9</sup> Of course these issues would require further debate and discussion both at the civil society and government level.

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<sup>8</sup> For details see, Homen Borgohain, 'Nagarikor Rastiyo Ponji aru Asomor Somosya', *Nagarik* (3 July 1980), 3.

<sup>9</sup> For a detailed analysis of these citizenship categories, the writings of William Roger Brubaker is significant. See William Roger Brubaker, 'Immigration, Citizenship, and the Nation-state in France and Germany: A Comparative Historical Analysis', in *International Sociology* 5, no. 4 (December 1990): 379–407. Also see William Roger Brubaker, 'Membership without Citizenship: The Economic and Social Rights of Non-Citizens', in *Immigration*

2. Assam needs a proper immigration policy where immigration issue needs to be frozen once for all. Assam cannot afford any more immigrants as landholding pattern is dwindling day by day.
3. The state of Assam should be granted greater rights and autonomy in the regulation of citizens as the smaller communities have the apprehension of being swamped by the bigger ones. As in the case of the east Malaysian states of Sabah and Sarawak, states like Assam should be given larger autonomy in matters of control over immigration and additional sources of revenue so that it can follow an effective 'look-east' policy.
4. An institutional mechanism in the form of reservation of seats in the State Assembly and Parliament need to be devised for the protection of the Assamese identity. Here we can draw a clue from the Bodoland Territorial Council (BTC) accord. The BTC Accord in 2003 has made 30 seats reserved for the Scheduled Tribes (ST). Minimum 50 per cent reservation of seats to the local, native and indigenous people of Assam is perhaps a big policy requirement for a durable peace process in the state. Former Home Secretary, G. K. Pillai drafted a mechanism for such a constitutional provision of Assam in 2009.
5. Such protection of the indigenous community has already been made in the neighbouring state of Tripura by the 72nd Constitution Amendment Act, 1992. The Act says:

For restoring peace and harmony in the areas of the State of Tripura where disturbed conditions prevailed, a Memorandum of Settlement was signed by the Government of India with Tripura National Volunteers on 12-8-1988. The said Memorandum provides for a greater share of tribals in the governance of the State.<sup>10</sup>

Clause 2 of the Act further says:

In order to implement the said Memorandum, action is to be taken to determine the seats which are to be reserved for Scheduled

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*and Politics of Citizenship in Europe and North America*, ed. W. R. Brubaker (German Marshall Fund of the United States and University Press of America) 145–168.

<sup>10</sup> <http://india.gov.in/govt/documents/amendment/amend72.htm> (accessed on 11 October, 2012).

Tribes in the State of Tripura. Reservation of seats for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes in the Legislative Assembly of any State is governed by the provisions of article 332 of the Constitution. Having regard to the special circumstances obtaining in the State of Tripura, it is proposed to further amend article 332 of the Constitution for making a temporary provision for the determination of the number of seats reserved for Scheduled Tribes until the re-adjustment of seats on the basis of the first census after the year 2000 under article 170 of the Constitution for the State of Tripura.<sup>11</sup>

It would be a great achievement for ULFA if it can ensure a constitutional protection mechanism for the people of Assam.

6. Internationally too, countries like Malaysia have adopted preferential policies in order to give political salience to the indigenous Malay people. Anindita Dasgupta has argued:

Malaysia could be said to have a combination of both strategies of domination and power-sharing in the post-1969 period. Malays, despite internal conflicts, zealously guard their political and cultural hegemony, while the large body of Chinese and Indian citizens enjoy limited but significant rights to participate in government and a large measure of economic freedom.<sup>12</sup>

The homeland discourses of Assam and the North East—concerning the Assamese, the Bodos, the Karbis, the Nagas or the Dimasas—all tend to define their identity in static and exclusionary terms. Therefore, the identity discourse of the North East can't keep on cornering the immigrants as the aliens forever and use them as the vote bank by the political parties. They are the people who are being taught in the Assamese medium school—and they would love to be a part of grater Assamese culture. There are lots of indications of this trend and many Assamese *littérateurs* and social activists have acknowledged this trend.<sup>13</sup> Scholars

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<sup>11</sup> <http://india.gov.in/govt/documents/amendment/amend72.htm> (accessed on 11 October, 2012).

<sup>12</sup> Anindita Dasgupta, 'Postcolonial Ethnic Management: Assam through the Prism of the Malaysian Experience', [www.asianscholarship.org/asf/ejournal/articles/anindita2.doc](http://www.asianscholarship.org/asf/ejournal/articles/anindita2.doc) (accessed on 11 October, 2012).

<sup>13</sup> The Assam Sahitya Sabha, the most popular literary body of Assam, conducted its one of the bi-annual sessions at Kolgasiya in the year 2001. The then president of the Sabha

like Professor Udayon Misra was more on a cautious note—‘at different levels the process of assimilation of immigrant Muslims into Assamese nationality is going on, yet certain questions are bound to arise regarding the changes that could be wrought in the overall Assamese society by such assimilation’.<sup>14</sup>

The Assamese middle class must understand that their exclusionary nationalism has in fact alienated many ethnic groups for last 30–40 years. The current 6th schedule politics of Assam indicate for the further division of state. Apart from the division of the state into Nagaland, Meghalaya and Mizoram, the ethnic groups of the state like the Bodos, Karbis, Rabhas, Koch-Rajbangshis, Mising, Tiwa, etc., increasingly assert an identity which is quite distinct from the caste Hindu Assamese identity. Therefore, there is an urgent need to seriously ponder over the identity question of the Assamese people. As a matter of fact this very exclusionary identity discourse is the root cause for a shrinking number of the Assamese-speaking people in the Brahmaputra valley. The Assamese society is an immigrant’s society—doesn’t matter since when this had begun. On top of that, the crystallisation of ethnic identity is not static; it is very often fluid depending on the sociopolitical, economic and cultural situations. The South Asian people have multi-layers of identity and they utilise that identity depending on situations and contexts. These layers of identities are constructed on the basis of religion, community, gender, caste, profession, class, language and region. All these identities are important and the community evokes that factor for identity construction which they believe has been jeopardised or threatened due to various factors.<sup>15</sup>

As we have outlined above, there are many communities in India who maintain bicultural identity. They live in a rich Islamic life within a cultural frame which today will be called Hindus. There are about 600 communities or roughly 15 per cent of the communities in India see themselves as having more than one religious identity—of simultaneously being Hindu and Buddhist, Hindu and Muslim or Hindu and Christian. How is this illustration relevant with Bangladeshi immigrant

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Homen Borgohain is an important advocate of incorporation of the Na-Asomiya (the Assamese name for the immigrants) into the Assamese culture.

<sup>14</sup> Udayon Misra, *Periphery Strikes Back* (Shimla: IIAS, 2000), 170.

<sup>15</sup> UNDP report, 2004, 177, <http://hdr.undp.org/en/reports/global/hdr2004/>

and Assamese identity? The immigrants don't live in a world of isolation—and they are also constantly in touch with the Assamese or tribal culture. The immigrants didn't come to Assam with a great ideological baggage behind them with the intention to Islamise the state of Assam. Islamisation could be the agenda of the DGFI and ISI, but it would be grossly wrong to visualise the immigrants as the agents of these agencies. A few individuals could also be involved—for that one can't punish the whole community or generalise on their behaviour. Bangladesh is the most densely populated country on earth with about 900 people per sq km. They come purely for survival strategy. People generally talk about an 'Islamic conspiracy'. But it's not the Muslims alone who have left Bangladesh but there are 5,000,000 Hindus who have left Bangladesh.

If the elites keep on cornering them as the immigrant Muslim, we would be pushing them to construct their identity in that line. Time has come to give the immigrants a chance to be a part of greater Assamese culture—and they would love to be a part of this tradition because being in this perpetual duality helps them neither. By becoming good Muslims they can be good Assamese and by becoming good Assamese they can be good Indians. Absorbing the immigrants into the greater Assamese culture or giving them general amnesty does not mean that the immigration will be a continuous affair in the state of affairs in Assam. Question is how to stop further immigration into Assam. Besides, as we have shown above, there is no doubt that the immigrants put a lot of pressure on the landholding pattern of Assam. The border, however, is not the most effective mechanism for stopping migration to Assam. The issue of further restriction of the foreigners to India must keep in mind the historical relationship between the two groups of people in India and Bangladesh. Till 1947, the two groups of people were not restricted by any border and territory. People used any territory and landmass unless restricted by political regime. However, this has come to an abrupt halt after the operation of the idioms of nation-state.

## Going Beyond Border

The leaders of the Assam Movement and the dominant nationalist school in Assam frequently talk about immediate completion of fencing

as the panacea of foreigner's issue. But it can hardly stop the toiling manual labour and they easily find ways of cutting the fencing. With the full knowledge of the security personnel present in the border areas, there is a vibrant illegal border trade taking place through the informal sector. These informal sectors include the cattle trade, the pharmaceutical products, etc. Besides, there is huge confiscation of drugs and illegal arms which take place on a regular basis. Cattle are smuggled out to Bangladesh through many corridors. According to a report published by Indian Institute of Entrepreneurship (IIE) on border trade with Myanmar and Bangladesh, there are 38 prominent routes through which illegal trade takes place. It is observed that the intensity is very high in routes like Chotakola-Tarun Feri, Sunamara-Komilla, Agartala-Akhoura, Baghmara-Duragpur, Dharampur-Rangamati and Rahimpur-Saldapur sector.<sup>16</sup> The informal trade between India and Bangladesh is more than two times of the official figure, which is 1.5 billion dollars. The number of cattle smuggled across is 2 million per annum.

The total annual volume of illegal trade for the North East region has been estimated to be ₹331 crores annually.<sup>17</sup> However, the actual volume will be much larger than this as the estimate of IIE is based on the basis of month-wise seizures maintained with the concerned custom officials, police and BSF. However, one such study done by the Indian Institute of Foreign Trade (IIFT) in the year 1998 put the total informal trade volume between the North East and Bangladesh as ₹600 crores annually. Fencing or a border will not be able to stop this process. One can't fence the river—they will come via river. The North Eastern states Assam, Meghalaya, Tripura and Mizoram share 1880 km international border with Bangladesh. Out of 263 km that Assam shares with Bangladesh, 160 km is land border and 103 km is riverine and river border.

Therefore, border or fencing is not the only solution of the illegal migration problem of Assam. Even physical protection of the border (which is impossible) will not ensure total proof. Studies show that the informal or illegal trade takes place with prior information of the enforcement and security agencies. It has been ascertained that about

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<sup>16</sup> Indian Institute of Entrepreneurship, *Prospects of Border Trade with Myanmar and Bangladesh* (unpublished report, 2001), 103–104.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 106–111.



60 per cent of Bangladeshi traders paid bribes between 3 to 6 per cent of their turnover while 78 per cent of the Indian traders paid 1 per cent to 3 per cent of their total output.<sup>18</sup>

There are lots of suggestions to curb immigration going beyond the fencing model of India vociferously supported by our ultra-nationalist leaders. Sanjay Hazarika is focusing on two issues: identity cards and work permits.<sup>19</sup> Indeed they are vital suggestions which require further deliberations. The most important step shall perhaps be the legalisation of the border trade in the North East and Bangladesh and North East and Myanmar sector. Until the economic situation of the people in the border sector/regions is improved, immigration will continue. Ultimately it is the government who is the loser from such illegal trade. Here we would like to refer to some observations made by an organisation of the Ministry of SSI and ARI, Government of India:

It has been well documented in the theory of international trade that the rationale for illegal trade is similar to that of legal trade i. e. the profit maximization behavior of the individuals. However, apart from economic, historical factors in the Indo-Bangladesh and Indo-Myanmar cross border illegal trade flow, certain non-economic factors are observed there also.

The report cites those non-economic factors:

Though partition created an artificial divide among the people of both region, friendly and ethnic bond exist between at least in the population of the border district—cultural and social bond on both the sides of the border facilitates the illegal trade to take place.... quick realization of payment, no paper works, lower transportation cost, presence of high duties in the official channel influences informal trade to take place.<sup>20</sup>

Perhaps a long-term vision will be increasing trade between Bangladesh and India with special focus on the border areas. Increased volume of

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<sup>18</sup> Indian Institute of Entrepreneurship, *Prospects of Border trade with Myanmar and Bangladesh*, 207–208.

<sup>19</sup> Hazarika, Sanjoy, *Writings on the Wall* (India: Penguin Books, 2008), 141–142.

<sup>20</sup> Indian Institute of Entrepreneurship, *Prospects of Border Trade with Myanmar and Bangladesh*, 202.

trade and business will increasingly act as a disincentive to cross border as it will generate income and economic activity. If Bangladeshi's get the basic requirements in their land, they wouldn't certainly find it fun to come to a place and be treated as a second-class citizen and always be looked at with suspicion.

India-Bangladesh must come closer in terms of trade relationship. Globalisation and the much talked about Looking East policy opens up lot of avenues for such cooperation. The Shukla Commission which was appointed to look into the infrastructure scenario of the North East submitted its report to the prime minister on 7 March 1997. The commission in its report said:

First and foremost, the North East was uniquely disadvantaged by partition which left its external perimeter with no more than two percent contiguity with the rest of India .... No other part of the country barring J&K has had to bear a comparable burden with severe market disruption, total isolation and loss of traditional communication infrastructure, all of which has pushed regional costs and prices well above national norms, transport subsidies notwithstanding. This rendered the normal market production processes in the region less attractive.<sup>21</sup>

It needs to be noted that for a long period India has denied transit facilities to Nepal and Bhutan for sending goods through Chittagong and Mongla ports. Similarly Bangladesh has denied India both the corridor facility (movement of goods to and from the north eastern states of India through Bangladesh) as well as transit facility (export and import by India through Bangladesh ports). In the pre-partition days, the transportation of goods to the North East was a fraction of today's highly subsidised transportation—because the communication took place through what was then known as East Bengal. If transit link between Bangladesh and the North East are established, then the magnitude of the benefit for the North East could be higher as ultimately the North East will be getting access to the sea through Bangladesh. From the Bangladesh's point of view, such transit links with India should be increased as a part of a comprehensive integrated development package where Bangladesh's export can flow freely to the markets of India, Nepal and Bhutan. Once

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<sup>21</sup> Shukla Commission Report, submitted to the Prime Minister, 1997.

the opening takes place, the possibility may emerge where industries in Assam can use the raw materials of Bangladesh. Bangladesh can also be identified as a suitable location for processing industries based on the raw materials of the North East. Such prospects could be attractive for the local as well as foreign investors since currently foreign investors may not find it very cost-effective to establish processing plants in Calcutta and exporting the products to the North East via Bangladesh.<sup>22</sup> It has been estimated that about 34 lakh tonnes of commodities are transported from and to the north eastern states, the cost of which will be a fraction what it presently incurs.

Thus, any solution of the vexed immigrants issue from Bangladesh must address two areas—the issue of cultural interaction and co-existence of the immigrants with the Assamese culture and the issue of economic development of the border areas. What is required in tackling the illegal immigration from Bangladesh in the North East in general and Assam in particular is not heavy doses of emotions and ultra-nationalistic rhetoric but a creative or perhaps a new way of looking at the problem.

The identity movements of the North East, which are based on exclusionary principles, ignored the historical reality of pluralism. The Brahmaputra valley, which is the core of Assam's identity politics, has been a shared homeland of innumerable racial, religious, linguistic and ethnic groups.<sup>23</sup> The issue has been haunting the North East politics right from Independence when Gopinath Bordoloi was fighting with Jawaharlal Nehru for settling the refugees in the so-called virgin land of Assam.<sup>24</sup> Perhaps time is ripe to start a process of dialogue between the Assamese nationalist elite and the leaders of the immigrants for an amicable solution of the problem, otherwise merely highlighting the danger of immigration serves nobody, for it is better to light a candle than blame the darkness forever.

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<sup>22</sup> Debapriya Bhattacharjee, 'Economic Confidence building measures in South Asia', in *CBM's in South Asia: Potential and Possibilities*, ed. Dipankar Banerjee (Sri Lanka: RCSS), 125–30.

<sup>23</sup> Monirul Hussain, 'State, Identity and Displacement', *Economic and Political Weekly* 35, no. 51 (16 December 2000).

<sup>24</sup> Nirode Kumar Barooah, *Gopinath Bordoloi: Indian Constitution and Centre-Assam Relations* (Guwahati: Assam Publication Board, 1990).

## Issues of Development and Human Security in the North East

In response to the developmental, modernisation and cultural policies of the Indian nation-state, violent political movements have emerged in the North Eastern region which is generally oriented towards bringing about change—either partial or total—in the existing relationship, values and norms. As politics is about ‘who gets what, when and how’, such policies have greatly annoyed the young generations who had little faith in the non-violent mode of protest. From the very beginning there was a strong feeling that New Delhi wouldn’t listen to the voice of periphery nor would give the community an opportunity to exercise control over its resources.

For example, ULFA has to say:

In economic sphere, India has been engaged in large-scale exploitation. Despite its rich resources, Assam remains one of the most backward states. Therefore, the question of real threat to the national identity of the people of Assam under the colonial occupation and exploitation of India has become the basic problem. As a whole, the problem has become a question of life and death to the people of Assam.<sup>25</sup>

Thus, lack of control of resources and, on top of all, plundering of resources of the region to the benefit of other metropolitan areas remain the central themes in the identity crystallisation process of Assam.

## North East as Future Power House of India: The Rationale

The October 2001 Central Electricity Authority (CEA) ‘Preliminary Ranking Study’ of the nationwide potential of hydroelectric schemes gave the highest marks to the Brahmaputra river system.

The 168 schemes considered by the ranking study have a cumulative installed capacity of 63,328 MW and 149 of these were given ranks A and B,

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<sup>25</sup> *Prachar Patrika* by ULFA (1996), 5.

B indicating high viability. These schemes will be developed by agencies such as the National Hydroelectric Power Corporation (NHPC), North Eastern Electric Power Corporation Limited (NEEPCO), the Brahmaputra Board and State Electricity Boards and a major portion of this power will be evacuated to other parts of the country.

The rationale for the projects is as follows:

1. the projects will be utilising the country's largest perennial water system to produce cheap, plentiful and renewable power for the whole country
2. and at the local level, these installations will offer economic benefits through power export across the country
3. and employment opportunities
4. not to mention flood control
5. will resolve conflict

However, the critics argue that such massive constructions of dams would lead to various types of violent conflicts in the region. Let us take the example of Pagladia dam: Pagladia was planned in 1968 as a flood control scheme at a cost of ₹12.6 crores. The Public Investment Board of the Union Cabinet approved it at ₹526.62 crores in March 2000 and the Cabinet Committee on Economic Affairs approved it in November 2000 at ₹542.9 crores. Purpose was to protect of 40,000 hectares of land from floods and erosion covering 190 villages, irrigating 54,160 hectares in 145 villages and generating 3 megawatt of electricity. It fixed its completion year as 2007. People to be affected by the dam were not even informed of it and came to know about it when the survey team came to the village. Pagladia will submerge 34,000 acres of fertile and highly productive agricultural land. They have been promised land in return and a house has been built in the model village. When the people visited the resettlement site they realised that the land was sandy and infertile. Besides, one of the two plots is already under the occupation of the East Pakistan refugees of 1947 and others who came later. So resettling them on that plot is a recipe for a major conflict.

Most important is the fact that the ₹47.89 crore rehabilitation packages is for 18,473 persons from 3,271 families while the people claim that around 120,000 persons from 20,000 families in 38 revenue villages

under Tamulpur and Baganpara revenue circles will be uprooted. 90 per cent of them are tribals. Where will the others go? So, from 1968 the people to be displaced have been protesting against the dam and have brought their movement under an organisation called Pagladia Bandh Prakaalpar Khatigrasta Alekar Sangram Samittee. One of its leaders, Keshab Rajbangshi reported that the protest is needed because it will uproot the already marginalised indigenous people, both tribal and non-tribal, living both the north bank of river Pagladia.

How such dams could lead to displacement can be gauged from the following examples:

**Table 11.1**  
**Nature of Displacement from Big Dams in North East India**

<i>Dam</i>	<i>State</i>	<i>People to be displaced</i>
Gumpti	Tripura	60,000–70,000
Dumbur dam	-do-	35,000–40,000
Loktak hydel	Manipur	20,000
Tipaimukh	-do-	40,000
The Pagladiya Dam	Assam	1,20,000
Siang, Dibang, etc.	Arunachal	35,000–40,000

*Source:* Various Newspapers in North East India.

## Cultural Displacement—Demographic Change

Fear of being swamped away by outsiders remains one of the most important variables for identity exclusiveness in North East India. Right from Tripura, Meghalaya to Assam, fight against the migrants remains the central theme for collective identity in the region. Two states—Sikkim and Arunachal Pradesh—were relatively free from such movements against the outsiders. However, the Teesta Dam in Sikkim has already brought about 50,000 cheap migrant workers from outside Sikkim. It is feared that the influx of people will change the demographic of the project area. Government has issued certain precautions such as—first preference will be given to the local people for all skilled, semi-skilled and unskilled workers. Only when such workers are not available locally the developers are allowed to bring in workers from outside the state. All those who

are brought in should be registered and their work permit should be renewed every six months. Such labourers have to leave the project sites as soon as their job is done. Residential quarters and colonies shall not be allowed to be set up in Dzongu area. This is a stipulation of the Ministry of Environment while issuing environmental clearance. There are few takers of this argument. Dawa Lepcha has been on a fast since 10 March. Last year he fasted for 63 days. He and his friends are protesting against the dams on the river Teesta in Dzongu in north Sikkim, the home of the Lepchas, Sikkim's earliest inhabitants. These young men are in hospital, starving to make sure their tribe survives.

'The entire Teesta river is being tunnelled. The main river of Sikkim is disappearing underground. Is this development?' asks Dawa Lepcha. 'Sikkim is a very small State, but very rich in biodiversity. If they are allowed to go ahead with the hydel projects, they will ravage, plunder and destroy everything.'

## UN Declaration on the Rights of the Indigenous People Adopted in 2007

- Article 10 says indigenous people shall not be forcibly removed from their land or territories.
- It further says that no relocation shall take place without free, prior and informed consent of the indigenous people concerned.
- Only when this is not possible for factual reasons should the right to restitution be substituted by the right to just, fair and prompt compensation. Such compensation should as far as possible take the form of lands and territories.
- Implicit in the recommendation that indigenous peoples shall have the right to own, develop, control and use their communal lands, territories and resources is recognition of some degree of autonomy or self-government.

In 2001 a report was published by the International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty. The title of the report is 'The Responsibility to Protect' (R2P)—the idea is that sovereign states have a

responsibility to protect their own citizens from avoidable catastrophe. Basic principle is when the State exercises the right of Sovereignty, it also implies responsibility and the primary responsibility of its people lies with the State itself. The R2P embraces three specific qualifications:

1. The responsibility to prevent: to address the root causes and direct causes of internal conflict and other man-made crises putting population at risk.
2. The responsibility to react: to respond to situations of compelling human need with appropriate measures.
3. The responsibility to rebuild.

The Indian State cannot remain oblivious to these issues just by giving the logic of development. Human rights-centric development paradigm addresses issues like development by whom for whom and who are the beneficiaries.

The issues of development have to be seen in the context of human security in the region. The whole region, barring a few states, is exposed to a terror atmosphere where a situation of anxiety, helplessness, fear of being killed, raped or displaced prevail all around. In addition, the promulgation of Nationalist Security Laws such as AFSPA, NSA, TADA—now known as POTA—etc., provide immense power at the hands of the security forces. Human rights violation and harassment of the civilians at the conflict areas are some common scenes in North East India.

However, issues that affect the common people at the grass-roots level during the time of violent conflict, such as conflict-induced displacement, loss of education, human rights violations, trauma, rape victims, gender inequality including female-headed family, issues of child soldier, lumpensiation of economy, arms proliferation, drugs, prostitution, extortion, etc., are blissfully forgotten both by the State and by the insurgent groups. This leads to more human insecurity in conflict zones.

This is more aggravated by a 'soft State' which is corrupt and has failed to deliver basic developmental issues to its own people. The only means through which a State gains legitimacy is governance—it is here that the Indian State has failed to deliver. This is the most significant factor of insecurity to the common people as our analysis on the basis of our field



survey would reveal.<sup>26</sup> The opinion of the people at the grass-roots level is always taken for granted. In order to better understand the subjective experiences of people living in conflict zones, we tried to ask how civilians coped with insecurity and sought to understand how they managed their lives. We selected some basic human security questions which are assumed to be detrimental to their day-to-day lives. Purpose of the present study has been to ascertain peoples' views on the situation that they have been confronting for decades together and the ways out that they perceive as important to come out of the whole situation. A comprehensive questionnaire for the said purpose has been developed and trained investigators have been sent to the field to reach out the voices of the people. The study has been carried out in three states in North East India, namely, Assam, Manipur and Nagaland for the field survey as these three states represent the multidimensional nature of conflict in North East India. Within the three states, a few districts have been selected on the basis of the intensity of conflict experienced in the respective states. Within the districts, a few blocks have been selected on random basis so as to represent varied categories of people across locality, gender, age, caste, religion, educational and income categories.

In the case of North East India, security from military and insurgency have obsessed the policy analysts and researchers to the extent that the issues of day-to-day security have virtually been neglected. Under the UNDP Human security paradigm, the issues of food, health, water, etc., are priority issues to be taken up in the process of governance. However such policy need not be followed by neglecting issues like internal security. Following one policy does not necessarily mean that the other will be de-prioritised. In the case of North East India, internal security has been such a priority for the Indian State that people's day-to-day security has virtually been pushed to the periphery. In such a context, ascertaining people's perception of their day-to-day security assumes great deal of significance towards mapping human security in this conflict-ridden zone.

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<sup>26</sup> The survey was conducted on behalf of Asian Dialogue Society (ADS), Singapore, in which the writer was the Project in-charge. Total 2,552 respondents were surveyed from March to July 2006. For details, see Nani Gopal Mahanta, 'Human Security Mapping in Conflict Zones: The Case of North East India', in *Human Security: From Concepts to Practice*, ed. Amitav Acharya (New Jersey: Asian Dialogue Society, 2011).

**Table 11.2**  
**Non-military Insecurity Indicators**

<i>Insecurity Indicators</i>	<i>Assam (Per cent)</i>	<i>Manipur (Per cent)</i>	<i>Nagaland (Per cent)</i>	<i>Total (Per cent)</i>
a. Food Insecurity	28.3	52.1	9.3	30.5
b. Job Insecurity	50.0	72.7	39.5	54.1
c. Health Insecurity	53.8	63.5	22.3	48.2
d. Peer group/Family insecurity	8.4	34.5	8.3	16.4
e. Water insecurity (contamination)	24.0	28.4	10.6	21.7
f. Insecurity from theft & Dacoity	26.8	39.8	18.2	28.5
g. Natural insecurity (drought & flood)	23.8	32.3	10.8	22.9
h. Insecurity due to bank erosion	10.2	24.9	16.9	16.6
i. Insecurity due to environmental pollution	31.6	48.3	50.9	42.0
j. Insecurity due to corruption in public offices	81.7	89.3	83.1	84.4

In the three states together, 30.5 per cent of the respondents reveal that they feel insecure due to lack of enough food. In case of Manipur, as high as 52.1 per cent have reported that they are insecure due to lack of enough food. Job insecurity is as high as 54.1 per cent. It is relatively lower in Nagaland (39.5 per cent), but it is as high as 72.7 per cent in Manipur. In case of Assam, it stands at 50.0 per cent. The percentage of respondents who revealed that they are suffering from medical insecurity is 48.2. It is relatively low in Nagaland (22.3 per cent), but high in both Assam (58.3 per cent) and Manipur (63.5 per cent).

In all the three states where the study was conducted, the single most important factor for the source of insecurity is corruption. The level is highest in Manipur which is at almost 90 per cent. In both the other states of Assam and Nagaland the figure is at 81.7 per cent and 83.7 per cent, respectively. Insecurity caused by these factors act as the most fertile ground for the unemployed youths to take up arms against the State. A number of such studies has confirmed the relationship between insurgency and insecurity caused by lack of food, employment and health insecurity.

## Causing Insurgency in North East India: Peoples' Perceptions

**Table 11.3**  
**Causing Insurgency in North East India: Peoples' Perceptions**

<i>Causes behind insurgency in North East India</i>	<i>Assam (Per cent)</i>	<i>Manipur (Per cent)</i>	<i>Nagaland (Per cent)</i>	<i>Total (Per cent)</i>
a. Unemployment	86.0	85.0	90.9	87.1
b. Poverty and lack of basic facilities	74.5	83.2	83.6	79.7
c. Corruption and nepotism at government offices	80.3	83.6	82.3	81.9
d. Exploitative policies of Indian government	82.4	67.5	66.2	73.4
e. Involvement of ISI	52.7	22.8	37.6	39.4
f. Weak policies to control insurgency	68.0	67.8	60.9	66.0
g. Overall social insecurity	64.2	54.9	50.1	57.5
g. Military operation	36.7	46.2	40.4	40.6
h. High-handedness of security forces	41.6	54.4	34.4	43.6
i. Ethnic movements	93.7	62.0	51.8	72.5

*Source:* Nani Gopal Mahanta, 'Human Security Mapping in Conflict Zones: The Case of North East India' in *Human Security: From Concepts to Practice*, eds Amitav Acharya, Subrat K Singhdeo and M Rajaretnam (New Jersey: Asian Dialogue Society, 2011), 86.

We gave people 10 options to choose as factors responsible for the growth of insurgency in the region. The first three factors cited by the people are:

1. Unemployment (87.1 per cent)
2. Corruption and nepotism in public offices (81.9 per cent)
3. Poverty and lack of basic facilities (79.7 per cent)

In case of Nagaland and Manipur there are striking similarities—the above factors constitute the three most important factors responsible for the growth of insurgency in those two areas. However, in case of Assam, the factors are slightly different. People believe that the following factors are responsible for insurgency in the state:

1. Ethnic movements (93.7 per cent)
2. Unemployment (86.0 per cent)

3. Exploitative policies of the Central government (82.4 per cent)
4. Corruption and nepotism in government offices (80.3 per cent)

## Other Sources of Insecurity: People Say 'No' to Bandhs and 'Yes' to Non-violence

In North East India, bandhs/road blockades have become an endemic issue for all the states. In short, we can define bandh as a 'device resorted to by political parties, organisations and unions to focus attention of people on some issues by disrupting the normal life like closing down shops, banks etc'. Various insurgent groups, political parties, innumerable trade unions and different student associations and women groups would summon bandh in order to push up their charter of demands to the Union government and the State governments, etc. Bandh is more rampant in our region and it may not be an exaggeration to say that at least some groups would summon bandh at least in one corner of North East India almost every day! Therefore, bandh often paralysed the functioning of the government offices, business establishments and banks. The student community as a whole is often the innocent victims and the vast marginalised poor people who constituted majority of the population who live from hand to mouth are indeed the worst sufferers. Various insurgent outfits use blockade and road block as a means of ventilating their grievances. We asked people how far economic blockade or bandhs affect their day-to-day lives.

**Table 11.4**  
**How Do Road Blockades and Call for Bandh Affect People's Life?**

<i>Affect</i>	<i>Assam</i>	<i>Manipur</i>	<i>Nagaland</i>	<i>Total</i>
Food supply	61.2 per cent	90.4 per cent	82.9 per cent	75.1 per cent
Livelihood	65.8 per cent	87.6 per cent	67.4 per cent	73.1 per cent
Emergency situations like medical treatment	77.6 per cent	89.8 per cent	69.6 per cent	79.8 per cent

*Source:* Nani Gopal Mahanta, 'Human Security Mapping in Conflict Zones: The Case of North East India', in *Human Security: From Concepts to Practice*, eds Amitav Acharya, Subrat K Singhdeo and M Rajaretnam (New Jersey: Asian Dialogue Society, 2011), 86.

## Road Blockade and Its Effect on People's Lives

It follows then that 71 per cent of the total respondents oppose such bandhs or blockade by insurgent groups. In Assam almost 80 per cent, in Manipur 76.4 per cent people oppose such kinds of bandh by various groups. It is worthwhile to mention that out of 2521 respondents a total number of 2143 people (85 per cent of the total respondents) have said they prefer non-violent movement to violent method. It shows that people are increasingly becoming exhausted by violent means in the society. 90.7 per cent people from Assam, 79.7 per cent from Manipur and 85 per cent people from Nagaland support non-violent method as form of protest. This could go a long way in removing some of the stereotypes that prevail in the existing thought process of other parts of India—that the people of North East are essentially very violent.

The above analysis presents a very dismal picture of the status of human security situation in North East India. In all the areas of insecurity, the failure of the State is quite palpable. The State in the North East region can at best be described as the 'Weak State'. Weak State, according to human security approach, can be described:

as the one that can't uphold the Hobbesian contract for providing not only Security, but also and especially developmental goods and Human Rights imperatives for its own citizens. State weakness is judged not only on the basis of problems that threaten the security of other regions, or the State itself (such as through armed movements or ethnic strife), but conditions that threaten the physical integrity, welfare, self-determination and opportunities for citizens.<sup>27</sup>

Agents of the State are responsible for their actions and accountable for their acts of commission and omission towards social and economic policies which can help in reducing poverty, mitigating fear of conflict, violation of human rights, torture, rape and initiating and sustaining developmental process. The State thus has a primary responsibility to provide its citizen 'freedom from fear' and 'freedom from want'.

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<sup>27</sup> Tadjbakhsh Chenoy, *Human Security* (New Delhi: Routledge, 2007), 356.

The State from the perspective of human security has the following three primary responsibilities:

1. The primary responsibility of the State is to provide traditional security, prevent threats and protect people from them.
2. The second responsibility is to 'provide'—a notion embedded in the upholding of people's Rights and Freedoms as well as delivering on Social Services in an equitable manner.
3. The third is the responsibility to 'Empower'. The strength of the State rests in its responsiveness to people and their needs by enhancing people's ability to act on their own behalf.

In that line, it could be argued that the State in North East India has to protect, provide and empower its people.

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