

Assam

The Secessionist-Insurgency and the Freedom of Minds

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Though the Assamese speaking indigenous people of the State, known by the generic name of Assamese, are not the only ethnic constituency in India to have a secessionist group, it is the largest among ethnic groups in the country which have rebel elements practising armed activities for avowedly secessionist goals. The Government of India (GOI) has shown remarkable flexibility in dealing with secessionist outfits elsewhere – the five-year old cease-fire with the National Socialist Council of Nagaland–Isak-Muivah (NSCN-IM), which is yet to renounce secessionism, being the most glaring and geographically proximate example in the context of Assam. By contrast, the proposal for so-called talks with the United Liberation Front of Asom (ULFA) – an organisation whose activities have kept the security forces engaged in the State since 1990 – though much

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desired by the Assamese, has received only lukewarm response from the Union Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA).¹ Consequently, the popular perception, presently, is that the GOI is not really interested in solving the problems of Assam, echoing the old, though disputable, refrain of the Centre's 'step-motherly attitude' towards the State. While the MHA might have its own reasons for its apparent intransigence, the continuance of this perception is succeeding in deepening the feeling of alienation amongst the Assamese *vis-à-vis* Delhi. In this context, the old adage 'justice should also appear to be done' may be worth noting.

Contrary to the secessionist movements among some tribes and nationalities in the Northeast since the emergence of independent India, Assam is a late entrant to the arena of separatism. Despite appeals by the then leadership of the Naga secessionists, the Assamese, on the whole, with odd exceptions only proving the general rule,² remained quite satisfied and optimistic about their Indian citizenship in the early decades of independence. In fact, Partition, conceived as a necessary evil in other parts of India, was seen as much-sought-after relief because, with the ceding of Sylhet to erstwhile East Pakistan, the Assamese gained a comfortable dominance over the affairs of the State by virtue of their newfound relative majority in the post-Partition demography of Assam.³

Though the ULFA was founded on April 7, 1979⁴, it came to be noticed as a nascent-armed organisation only in late 1983, when it commenced a series of political assassinations and

¹ See "Gogoi urges PM to initiate talks with ULFA", *The Hindustan Times*, New Delhi, April 22, 2002; "Centre, ULFA should start talking informally first, says Mahanta", *The Indian Express*, New Delhi, January 17, 2001. "Talking points", *Frontline*, Chennai, vol. 19, no. 11, May 25-June 7, 2002.

² "Ambika Giri Roy Choudhury (AGRC), General Secretary, Ahom Jatiya Mahasabha, has this morning sent a telegram from Jorhat to Aliba Inti, President, Naga National Council (NNC), Kohima. AGRC in the wire informed the NNC president that the AJM workers assembled at Jorhat have expressed their fullest sympathy with their Naga brothers' stand for self-determination." For details see *Assam Tribune*, Guwahati, January 3, 1948.

³ An editorial in *Assam Tribune*, July 29, 1947 noted that "the case for the Assamese people is clear; they do not want to retain any part of Sylhet district." It also stated, "...the Assamese people seem to feel relieved of a burden."

⁴ Homepage of the ULFA at <http://www.geocities.com/CapitolHill/Congress/7434/>

audacious bank robberies, often abortive.⁵ Following the bulldozing through of elections to the State Legislative Assembly by the then Prime Minister, Indira Gandhi, in spring 1983, secessionist sentiments were rising amongst the normally timid Assamese. Though quite a few secessionist insurgent outfits appeared on the scene in Assam at this stage,⁶ only ULFA survived the Assam Accord⁷ signed between the GOI and the Assamese nationalist leaders of the famous or notorious (as the perspective might be) Assam Agitation against unabated and unchecked illegal immigration from the erstwhile East Pakistan and present-day Bangladesh. Other linguistic ethnic groups in Assam have since sprouted their own secessionist-insurgent organisations like the National Democratic Front of Bodoland (NDFB) among the Bodos, United People's Democratic Solidarity (UPDS) among the Karbis and Dima Halim Daoga (DHD) among the Dimasas.⁸ Nevertheless, for the Assamese – the single largest linguistic group in Assam – the ULFA remains the most serious issue. Irrespective of the level of activity of ULFA, not a single week goes by in Assam without the demand being made in one or the other widely circulated Assamese dailies for the GOI to negotiate a settlement with ULFA. It is also to be noticed that, though the ULFA has come up with some uncompromising pre-conditions for negotiations with the GOI, the basic thrust of most of the local commentators, including some leading Assamese intellectuals, is towards the GOI accepting the pre-conditions rather than of ULFA withdrawing them.⁹ Till a few years ago, criticising the ULFA was an assured means of earning unpopularity in Assam.

⁵ <http://www.rediff.com/news/2001/jan/23inter.htm>

⁶ Assam Peoples Liberation Army (APLA), North Eastern Region Defence Army (NERDA), Seven Sisters United Liberation Army (SSULA).

⁷ The Assam Accord was signed on August 15, 1985, between representatives of the GOI and All Assam Students Union (AASU), which spearheaded the Assam agitation. For full text of the Accord, see South Asia Terrorism Portal; Countries; India; States; Assam; Documents; Assam Accord; www.satp.org.

⁸ For a profile of these groups, as well as a comprehensive listing, see South Asia Terrorism Portal; Countries; India; States; Assam; Terrorist Outfits; www.satp.org.

⁹ See "A Peace Initiative", *Frontline*, vol. 18, no. 26, December 22, 2001-January 4, 2002.

Statistically speaking, the ULFA does not possess the lethality that other insurgent groups in India have. Its armed activities are, in general, more in the nature of selective assassinations and acts of sabotage against State-owned economic assets like the oil pipeline, rather than aimless terror tactics. Of course, it is known that ULFA did carry out some typical terrorist attacks against the Hindi-speaking people of Assam in year 2000.¹⁰ Though a hitherto unknown group calling itself the Assam Tiger Force claimed responsibility for the attacks, the State government and a large section of the people of Assam believe that the attacks were carried out by the ULFA, albeit clandestinely. The number of deaths resulting from attacks by the ULFA is quite low compared to some other insurgencies. The importance of ULFA lies, rather, in the sympathy it gets from the Assamese or, as M.S. Prabhakara expresses it, “ULFA is a state of mind in Assam.”¹¹ Though the strength of ULFA lies more in the sympathy factor it gets among its home-population (despite lack of empathy for its declared goal) than in cadres and weapons, it is believed to have a cadre-strength of around 5,000 trained insurgents and, according to Indian intelligence agency reports, possesses thrice the number of weapons suitable for guerrilla activities.¹²

Continued operations against ULFA by the security forces (SFs) since December 1990 have contained the firepower of ULFA. According to government claims, till date, more than 8,000 ULFA cadres have surrendered.¹³ However, the recruitment of ULFA has also continued unabated.¹⁴ Furthermore, ULFA

¹⁰ For instance, three non-Assamese, Biharis, were killed by ULFA in Tinsukia district on November 28, 2000. 22 persons, majority of them non-Assamese, including eight Bihari truck drivers were killed in three separate massacres in Bongaigaon district on November 30, 2000. On December 7, 2000, 28 Hindi-speaking petty traders and farm workers from Bihar were killed by ULFA near Sadiya. See South Asia Terrorism Portal; Countries; India; States; Assam; Timeline 2000; www.satp.org.

¹¹ “Rebels Acquiring Legitimacy”, *The Hindu*, Chennai, March 9, 1990.

¹² Revealed to this author by a senior ULFA cadre (since surrendered), who was a part of the team bringing in new weapons to the ULFA General Headquarters.

¹³ The former Chief Minister of Assam, Prafulla Kumar Mahanta, in the State Legislative Assembly during a question-answer session, made this claim.

¹⁴ See “ULFA recruits 300 youths during April”, *Assam Tribune*, April 28, 2002.

remains an influential factor in the electoral politics of Assam. Following deliberated strategies, ULFA has extended selective and conditional support to different political parties alternately, or rather, has attacked selected political parties and candidates, thereby restricting the activities of the target party's workers during election campaigns to subvert its poll prospects, thus increasing the comparative advantage of its favoured political party or candidates.¹⁵

Political parties have, more often than not, fallen prey to ULFA's tactics, unable to resist the temptation of securing the tacit support of the insurgents. ULFA has been able to regularly influence electoral outcomes since 1991.¹⁶ This has led to a periodical breakdown of morale amongst the State police, who are sometimes unsure of their political bosses' inclination towards curbing insurgency. The recurring phenomenon of newly elected State governments going soft on the insurgents has been quite visible in Assam. The invisible but strongly felt power of ULFA to further or hamper individual political careers has often made politicians hostage to ULFA. Similar pressures are also experienced among the local intelligentsia. This unhealthy trend is destroying the democratic atmosphere of Assam and such destruction renders the ground more fertile for insurgency, with the resultant stultifying affect is gradually making important issues like large-scale corruption to be non-issues. ULFA's importance lies more in its all-pervasive effect on the Assamese society than in its immediate armed activities.

¹⁵ While Asom Gana Parishad (AGP), the political party favoured by ULFA in 1996, won a majority in the elections to the State Assembly and formed the next State government, the Congress party benefited in the last general elections to the State Assembly held in year 2001 by the fact that, while AGP, the ruling party then and the main rival of Congress aspirations for government power, along with its election ally, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) were the targets of a spate of terrorist attacks by ULFA. For details see "ULFA leaves bloody trail in Dibrugarh", *Indian Express*, May 5, 2001; "Congress used insurgents to win polls: Mahanta", *Indian Express*, May 16, 2001; "EC caught in Cong-AGP crossfire", *Hindustan Times*, May 8, 2001. For party positions in 1985, 1991 and 1996 elections, see

¹⁶ <http://www.expressindia.com/election/assam/asm-map.html>
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Bypassing Semantics

Before embarking on an attempt to analyse the insurgency related situation in Assam, one should be clear about what one means by these words. The semantics of non-state armed activity has remained a quagmire of conflicting and overlapping definitions. That is why the oft-repeated phrase that “one man’s terrorist is another man’s freedom-fighter” circulates. Xanana Gusmao, currently elected President of the newly formed state of East Timor, was a guerrilla commander. He is not, quite justifiably, termed a terrorist by anybody now, but even while he was active in his earlier incarnation as commander of an armed secessionist-insurgent group, the sympathetic Western press did not use the term ‘terrorist’ for him. Yasser Arafat wears a military uniform and carries a pistol, but the anti-Israeli world does not term him a terrorist. For some, Ariel Sharon is the mad terrorist, while Yasser Arafat is a sinister terrorist leader for others. The subjectivity is starkly apparent.

Moreover, the careless use of terminology by a section of the media and intelligentsia has created a veritable comedy of errors, which does not, however, lead to innocuous mirth. Rebels, militants, insurgents, terrorists are the words which have been used as freely interchangeable nomenclature for any arms wielding non-state group professing political goals. The somewhat overlapping, generally accepted meanings of the words have also not been helpful. If the belief is upheld that proper analysis of a problem is a sure step towards its solution, then definitions should be unambiguously laid down beforehand. As such, without going into pure semantics, it is useful to state what we understand by particular words in the present discussion:

1. **Secessionism:** Desiring secession from a larger sovereign political entity, with the goal of creating a separate sovereign political entity for one’s own people, as perceived. It should be noted that secessionism is not necessarily an armed activity. Examples include the ULFA, NSCN (both the factions), NDFB, Jammu and Kashmir Liberation Front (JKLF), Hizb-ul-Mujahideen (HM), etc. The left-wing extremist People’s War Group (PWG) and Maoist

Communist Centre (MCC), practising insurgency through armed struggle to install communism, would not fall under such a definition.

2. **Insurgency:** Active rebellion against the state waged from the territory and population under the declared control of the particular State. Very often, but not necessarily, armed.
Example: ULFA, NSCN, NDFB, JKLF, HM, PWG and MCC.
3. **Armed struggle:** Using collective armed activity as means to an end, normally, but not necessarily, political.
Example: All organisations in the above-mentioned examples.
4. **Guerrilla activities:** Armed activity against enemy combatants and utilities. It should be noted that guerrillas generally hit selected targets only. Though the same armed insurgent individual guerrilla or guerrilla group may practice terrorist tactics simultaneously, guerrilla activities and terrorist activities differ in the matter of targets and methodology. State armed forces may also use guerrilla tactics and often do in counter-insurgency campaigns.
Example: NSCN, to a certain extent ULFA and NDFB.
5. **Terrorism:** Armed activity generally carried out against unexpected and unprepared non-combatants not directly involved with the conflict, instilling a sense of terror among a targeted population, to stimulate coercion. The intentions of spreading fear being given priority over the objective qualification of the targets as the enemy. Armed insurgents tend to adopt terrorist tactics, thereby becoming terrorists, when losing and on the run. The scrupulous guerrilla becoming a terrorist and using terror tactics is an oft-repeated phenomenon. So are the phenomena of state forces using terrorist tactics in counter-insurgency campaigns to subdue populations perceived to be sympathetic to the rebels.
Example: HM, Lashkar-e-Toiba (LeT) are non-state examples. The killings of some relatives of ULFA members are examples of pro-state terrorism.¹⁷

¹⁷ See Human Rights Watch, World Report, 1999, India, <http://www.hrw.org/worldreport99/asia/india.html>.

Historical Background

For those who are not acquainted with the history of Assam, a brief note on the relevant historical factors, which have contributed to the evolution of the present demographic scenario of the State, might be of use to follow the analysis and argument.

In 1826, the colonial East India Company annexed the erstwhile Ahom kingdom of 'upper' Assam, i.e. the eastern part of Assam, starting from Nagaon to the Naga foothills. 'Lower' Assam, from the western boundary of the Ahom kingdom to the north eastern frontier of the then British province of Bengal was already under British control following a transfer of power by the erstwhile Mughal rulers. Initially, Robert Clive, the British officer responsible for this expansion of the colonial domain, faced disapproval by the Board of Directors of the Company, as the then famine stricken and sparsely populated Brahmaputra valley did not yield enough revenue to cover the administrative costs of retaining the expansion. Quite soon, however, the British stumbled on tea and oil in the Brahmaputra valley and realised the need for labour in order to exploit the natural bounty of the land. The local Assamese were an easy-going lot contented with the cultivated bounty of the fertile valley. The British entrepreneurs embarked on a policy of actively encouraging landless peasants of the neighbouring populous province of Bengal to migrate and settle in the Brahmaputra valley. Tribals from the Chotanagpur plateau and other parts of India were enticed and often forced to come to Assam to work as labourers in the newly grown tea gardens of Assam. The flurry of economic activity led to the laying down of railway lines in far-off corners of the province. The arrival of the poor Bengali peasants and tribal labourers was of no concern to the rising Assamese middle-class deliberately patronised by the British to counter-act the influence of the erstwhile ruling feudal class of Ahom nobility. Bengali petty officers and clerks, disparagingly called 'Babus' by the British, were the immediate rivals for the residuary scraps of the colonial administration open to the 'natives' for grabs. The British adopted cautious neutrality in the tussle between the Bengali Babus and the Assamese middle-class in pursuance of their notorious policy

of 'divide and rule'. Christian missionaries, on the other hand, actively helped the Assamese nationalists in establishing the unique credentials of Assamese language, initially replaced by Bengali language in the courts and offices till 1872. The fond hope of the missionaries of spreading Christianity amongst the Assamese were, however, belied due to the strong influence of the 15th century neo-Vaisnavism prevalent among the Assamese, and the missionaries gradually moved on to greener pastures among the tribes of adjacent hills, where success did not elude them. The rivalry between the Assamese and Bengali middle class continues till date, but the bitter antagonism between the two neighbouring nations has not led to violent clashes since 1983, bringing to an end, it is hoped, the occurrence of violent clashes between the two linguistic communities.

While the immigrants, goaded on by the colonial British, continued to arrive in Assam, the indigenous people ignored this movement since the then-sparsely populated Brahmaputra valley could easily absorb the newcomers. However, the locals started taking adverse notice of the ubiquitous migrant settlements when availability of fallow land diminished noticeably. In their perception, the lack of easy availability of fallow land, crucial for the required expansion of agriculture and grazing of livestock, was related to the ever-increasing number of immigrants.

By the 1920s, the Provincial Council reverberated with heated debates on the issue between Assamese leaders (most of them Hindus) and Bengali leaders (predominantly Muslim). Nearly all the migrant peasants from Bengal were Muslims, naturally because Muslim peasants were the most destitute segment of the teeming population of land-starved Bengal. The rise of the Muslim League in contemporary Indian politics galvanized the migrant Muslim peasants, who rallied around a charismatic, though rustic, leader called Maulana Bhasani. The decade preceding the advent of Indian Independence was an uninterrupted political battle between the Muslim League's Sir Saidullah (scion of an indigenous Muslim family), propped up by Maulana Bhasani, and Gopinath Bordoloi, leader of the Assam Pradesh Congress, heading the Assamese nationalist camp, dominated by upper caste Hindus.

When Independence and Partition came simultaneously, Assam escaped being clubbed with East Pakistan by a whisker.¹⁸ The ultimate losers were Maulana Bhasani and his followers. Though the pre-dominantly Muslim district of Sylhet opted for Pakistan in a referendum, the Muslims of Brahmaputra valley were left in the Indian State of Assam, where Gopinath Bordoloi and his camp were the unchallenged ruling class by virtue of the new-found majority of the Assamese, after the populous district of Sylhet separated from India. In fact, the Assamese leadership discreetly rejoiced after the result of the Sylhet referendum was declared. At this point of time, Maulana Bhasani, the influential leader of the Brahmaputra valley's Muslim migrants, announced a directive to his followers, which had a far-reaching effect on the demographic politics of Assam, and which is followed to this day. The Maulana, bitter at the desertion by the central leadership of the All India Muslim League, directed his followers to accept Assamese as their mother tongue, and to assimilate into the indigenous population of Assam. The Assamese middle classes, who were more wary of Hindu Bengali Babus than of the lowly Muslim peasants, accepted this overture, much to the chagrin of the Hindu Bengalis.

This demographic equation continued till the late nineteen seventies when a sudden discovery of a substantial number of names of illegal immigrants from the newly created Bangladesh in the voters' list led to a mass agitation against the immigrants.¹⁹ This led to a souring of relations between the migrant community and the Assamese mainstream. The Muslim migrant community who had sought shelter under the Congress umbrella during Indira Gandhi's leadership felt jilted when Rajiv Gandhi reached an accord with the leaders of the agitation and practically allowed them a 'walk-over' to the seat of the State government. They formed their own political party and contested the elections as a separate block.²⁰ With the gradual erosion in the popularity of the

¹⁸ Amalendu Guha, *Planter-Raj to Swaraj*, New Delhi: Indian Council of Historical Research, 1977, pp. 309-15.

¹⁹ Ajit Kumar Sarma in Hiren Gohain and Dilip Bora, eds., *Asom Andolan: Pratisruti aru Phalasaruti*, Guwahati: Banalata Publications, 2001, pp.58-9.

²⁰ The United Minorities Front (UMF)'s rise and electoral performance can be ascertained from the following figures. In 1985, it contested elections as an unrecognised party and won 17 out of the 56 seats it contested and secured

agitation leadership after it became the ruling party, however, their threat perception was significantly toned down. The disaffection among the migrant community, however, seriously affected the numerical majority of the Assamese *vis-à-vis* the Bengali, with many migrants declaring Bengali as their mother language before the census enumerators. Jolted by the 1991 census, the Assamese nationalist camp rediscovered the virtues of the migrants, and deliberate efforts by a changed leadership of the socio-cultural apex body, the Assam Sahitya Sabha, has resulted in a renewed spate of amity between the two socio-political groups. The Assamese-Bengali relation, a constant cause of worry to administrators earlier, is going through a period of unprecedented calm. In fact, from all appearances, one is emboldened to presume that violent clashes between these two formerly antagonistic ethno-linguistic communities are a closed chapter.

The mitigation of traditional antagonisms, however, has been replaced by newly aroused tensions running along perceived ethnic lines. The latest in this series is the mutually irreconcilable stand taken by the Bodos and the Koch-Rajbongshis, both indigenous local ethnic entities, hitherto abiding in non-antagonistic relationships, over the issue of the formation of the Bodo Territorial Council (BTC) under a revised 6th Schedule of the Indian Constitution. While the ULFA goes on waging a secessionist rebellion for an independent Assam, most of the indigenous ethnic groups of Assam are demanding a separate autonomous territory, if not a separate state. The ULFA rejects these differences of interests among the indigenous people, by conveniently, but unconvincingly, claiming that these problems would be amicably sorted out after the attainment of sovereignty.

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10.85 per cent of the total votes polled. However, in 1991, it failed to win a single seat even though it contested 28 seats. Its vote percentage also plummeted to a mere 1.29 per cent.

See <http://www.eci.gov.in/archive/SE91/StatisticalReport-ASS91.pdf>.

21 The outfit in various leaflets distributed at different periods has expressed such views.

Rise and Growth of ULFA

As already stated, the Assamese had neither empathy nor sympathy for the secessionist insurgency launched by the Naga leadership immediately after the advent of independent India. The Assamese never fancied themselves to be any different from the other Indian citizens and States. Gradually, however, the feeling that the Union government is neglecting Assam gained currency after Assam was deprived of major industrial projects being set up by the Indian state to fulfil the Nehruvian vision. It is a fact that the general perception among the policy makers of India was that the Northeast was not a safe place for major industrial ventures, given its proximity to quite a few foreign countries.²² The feeling of alienation of the Assamese gained strength following a grossly misunderstood speech by Jawaharlal Nehru, the then Prime Minister, when the Indian Army and the administration evacuated the Assamese town of Tezpur, retreating after a debacle at the hands of the invading Chinese.²³ The consolidation of this ambiguous feeling of alienation into full-blown secessionism was achieved by Jawaharlal Nehru's daughter, Indira Gandhi, when, as Prime Minister, she imposed State Assembly elections on the unwilling Assamese in 1983. In the context of the ongoing agitation, the demand of the Assamese was that the issue of illegal immigrants should be solved before holding any election in Assam, since elections would have the effect of legitimising the presence of the names of the illegal immigrants in the voters' list, thereby entitling them to citizenship. Indira Gandhi, however, unleashed brute state power to go through the motions of holding a sham election, with unbelievably low voter turnout, particularly

²² "Our defence chiefs having examined these various schemes said definitely that they could not undertake to protect the refinery if it was situated in Assam." Excerpt of Nehru's letter to Fazal Ali, Governor of Assam, quoted in Sanjoy Hazarika, *Strangers of the Mist: Tales of War and Peace in Northeast India*, New Delhi: Penguin Books, 1995, p. 362.

²³ Jawaharlal Nehru's speech on All India Radio, November 19, 1962: "...now what has happened is very serious and very saddening to us and I can well understand what our friends in Assam must be feeling because as this is happening on their doorstep, as one might say ...we feel very much for them and we shall help them to the utmost of our abilities."

in Assamese dominated areas.²⁴ The lack of a provision in the Indian Constitution stipulating a required minimum number of votes to win led to a State government duly coming into being. For all practical purposes, this government had no legitimacy in the minds of the vast number of Assamese, the largest ethno-linguistic group in Assam. The Assamese, for the first time since Independence, had no say in the State's governance. Consequently, while the mature segments of Assamese society became vehemently anti-Congress, the youth rejected Indianness altogether. Suddenly, there was a spurt of secessionism in Assam, and a number of separatist outfits announced their appearance through petty violence. The mainstream of the anti-immigrant agitation was avowedly non-violent, officially subscribing to the Gandhian methodology of political mobilisation and protest. Though over-enthusiastic young supporters of the agitation sometimes engaged in stray violence, the same young men would also dutifully participate in non-violent agitation programmes like hunger strikes. The 1983 elections changed all this. A section of the youth completely rejected non-violent methods of protest and dedicated themselves to preparation for armed struggle. The newfound secessionism and attraction of arms was a heady cocktail and attracted many otherwise-sober and intelligent young men to a dangerous path.

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.²⁵ ULFA, utilising 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). The last days of the year 1983 witnessed the first batch of

²⁴ In the 1983 Assembly elections, voter turn out was an all time low of 31.46 per cent. The figure can be compared with the subsequent years. 1978- 66.85%, 1985- 79.21%, 1991- 74.67%, 1996- 78.92% and 2001- 74.63%.

²⁵ APLA was founded in Tezpur, Pithakhowa. Initially, it attracted a number of youth of lower Assam and had a larger membership than ULFA. However, Arpan Bezbaruah, the General Secretary, and most of the activists discreetly surrendered before the AGP government in 1986 and APLA ceased to exist.

Assamese youth crossing the international boundary with Burma (now Myanmar), to receive training at the NSCN Head Quarters. The NSCN and the People's Liberation Army (PLA)²⁶ of Manipur, another secessionist insurgent organisation sharing the NSCN camp, received the new rebels warmly. The hosts were aware of the immense advantage of friends in the largest State of the Northeast.

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 ones²⁷ 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.²⁸ The ULFA leadership painstakingly mobilised recruits from different parts of Assam and kept sending fresh batch of trainees to the NSCN camp. Before the completion of two years of the AGP regime, considerable disillusionment had set in among the Assamese, with the inevitable unfulfillment of the unrealistically high hopes reposed on the agitation leaders turned politicians of the ruling AGP.

With rising disenchantment against the AGP regime, ULFA was able to regain some amount of public support and sympathy for their 'cause'. The year 1988 saw a spectacular rise in the

²⁶ The PLA, established under the leadership of N. Bisheswar Singh on September 25, 1978, aims to organise a revolutionary front covering the entire Northeast and unite all ethnic groups, including the Meiteis, Nagas and Kukis, to liberate Manipur. For a profile of PLA, see South Asia Terrorism Portal; Countries; India; States; Manipur; Terrorist Outfits; PLA; www.satp.org.

²⁷ 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.

²⁸ Source: ULFA leaflet published after the Assam Accord and distributed in the founding convention of AGP, 1985.

popularity and influence of the ULFA amongst the Assamese. There was competition – at times bitter – between district and local committees to send more recruits for training. In the spring of 1987, the first batch of 80 selected ULFA cadres went to the Kachin State of Burma for advanced training under the Kachin Independent Army (KIA). KIA was a battle-hardened fighting force, engaged in a secessionist war with the Burmese government, and was experienced in the art of guerrilla fighting since the Second World War. The Kachin connection helped ULFA create a cadre of well-trained guerrilla fighters. The State police and the para-military forces could not match the zeal of these trained young men. The AGP government, failing on all fronts, sought to reach a tacit understanding with the rebels, so that their own interests would not be harmed by the ULFA. The ill-concealed understanding between their political masters and the insurgents led to the further evaporation of the already depleted morale of the police. With the government firmly keeping its eyes shut, the ULFA commenced ‘implementing social reforms’, such as the ban on consumption of alcohol, which made them popular amongst women. It is often said that, in the late nineteen eighties, the ULFA ran a parallel government in Assam. It would, however, be more appropriate to say that ULFA *was* the government in those days.

The state of affairs, however, abruptly changed after the Union government dismissed the AGP government in the State, imposed President’s Rule and commenced counter-insurgency operations by the Army in the last days of the year 1990. Though elections to the State Legislative Assembly were held within six months, and a Congress government was installed, the Army stayed on. To cut a long story short, by 1992, the ULFA was on the run, with many cadres, including scores of district level leaders and a few central committee members surrendering before the government.²⁹ In the immediate aftermath of the 1992 surrenders, ULFA appeared to be a spent force.

It regained strength, however, to become a force to reckon with after a downswing that lasted no more than a couple of

²⁹ Seven district committees out of a total of 12 surrendered before the State government on March 31, 1992.

years. It has been forced to abandon its previous high-profile 'social-reform' activities, but has continuously engaged the security forces, primarily through hit and run tactics. The Assamese, who have had to face the brunt of unabated counter-insurgency operations through over a decade, now increasingly wish to see a negotiated settlement between ULFA and the GOI. The romantic fascination for secessionist insurgency has all but evaporated. The quelling of the secessionist tendency by security forces, at times with brute force, has resulted in a sullen silence. Gradually, the initial attraction of the armed 'boys' was replaced by consternation at their obstinacy regarding a negotiated settlement. Furthermore, terrorist actions by ULFA have led to a further erosion of its already emaciated support base. The discernible turning point was the ULFA leadership's posture during the Kargil war in 1999. ULFA declared the Pakistani intruders in Kargil to be Kashmiri 'freedom fighters' and issued a call to Assamese men serving in the Indian Army to desist from fighting against them.³⁰ The timing could not have been more inauspicious for ULFA. While its leaders were siding with the Pakistanis, the dead body of Captain Jintu Gogoi, an Indian Army officer, killed during action in Kargil, was brought to Assam. Huge crowds of people gathered to pay their last respect to the brave soldier, and ULFA was publicly denounced for advocating support for the Pakistanis.³¹

³⁰ In two separate press statements, issued (June 24, 1999) to a section of the local vernacular dailies, Arabinda Rajkhowa (Chairman, ULFA) exhorted all the Assamese Army personnel to refrain from taking part in the 'war' presently going on and alleged that Kashmir, like Assam, was never an integral part of India and that the Kashmiri people, like the Assamese people, had all along been protesting against the 'illegal occupation by India'. In a clear indicator of his Islamic motivations, he also described the present conflict in Kashmir as a 'pre-election strategy of the Hindu communalist Government of Delhi'.
<http://mha.nic.in/pr0900.htm>; See "Will ISI support to ULFA stop?", <http://www.hinduonnet.com/thehindu/2001/07/16/stories/0216000i.htm>.
Also see *Assam Tribune*, August 4, 1999.

³¹ See "Now Kargil will fight militancy in N-E", <http://www.rediff.com/news/1999/jul/19ne.htm>.

Current Situation

The last State government, led by Prafulla Kumar Mahanta, started off by being openly soft towards the ULFA. Quite a few top-ranking ULFA cadres, who had been captured earlier and incarcerated, were released. The honeymoon, however, did not last long, and towards mid-1998, the State government was waging a vicious counter-insurgency (CI) campaign against the ULFA with the help of Army and surrendered ULFA militants (SULFA). Till the change in the State government in spring 2001, three years of lethal CI operations had made a mess of ULFA's organisational structure and confidence.³² The multiple terrorist attacks on targets in the US on September 11, 2001, and their aftermath have further aggravated its woes, since no regime in the world is now willing to be seen as being soft towards armed non-state actors in the current scenario. The ULFA has been maintaining an unprecedented and uncharacteristically low profile for some time now. From the outward appearances of the present situation, it may be construed that a GOI initiative to negotiate a solution with the ULFA could well prove fruitful.

Unfortunately, appearances are often deceptive. Like most other rebel entities, ULFA too has the phoenix-like habit of rising anew from its ashes. According to reports, fresh recruitment by the ULFA is going on unabated. All its important leaders, barring Anup Chetia, the General Secretary, who is under-going a jail sentence in Bangladesh, are active.³³ It is quite probable, moreover, that Chetia might be allowed to walk away and

³² ULFA losses-1998-2001.

³³ Bangladesh immigration and security officials from Dhaka's North Adabor locality arrested Anup Chetia on December 21, 1997. The main charges against him have been illegal entry into Bangladesh, possession of two forged Bangladeshi passports (No 0964185 and 0227883), possession of an unauthorised satellite telephone and illegal possession of foreign currency of countries as diverse as the USA, UK, Switzerland, Thailand, Philippines, Spain, Nepal, Bhutan, Belgium, Singapore and others. Two other accomplices, Babul Sharma and Laxmi Prasad, were also arrested along with Chetia. See "ULFA leader Anup Chetia gets 3-year jail term in Bangladesh :", <http://www.northeastvigil.com/newsarch/01032001i.htm#07>.

‘disappear’ after completing his sentence, which is nearing its end.³⁴

Although the Assamese do not support or empathise with ULFA at present, tacit sympathy for the local ‘boys’ has not vanished completely. Though very few support the use of terror tactics by ULFA, there is a general feeling that ULFA’s demand for sovereignty is understandable, given the unacceptable attitude of the Union government towards Assam. And if the ULFA has lost popularity amongst the Assamese, this does not mean that the GOI has won wide acceptability either. The CI operations of the last three years, while succeeding in debilitating the ULFA, have also, unfortunately but inevitably, sharpened the feeling of alienation amongst the common people through the use of counter-terror through ‘secret killings’, a term used in Assam to describe ‘mysterious’ lethal attacks on supporters and relatives of ULFA leaders and members. Nearly 200 young men have ‘disappeared’ after being picked up by unrecognised persons, reportedly security forces concealing their identity, aided by the SULFA.³⁵ The total difference in approach of the GOI towards Naga insurgents and the secessionist agenda in Assam, too, have not gone unnoticed. Though the scale is currently tilted in favour of the GOI, there is no guarantee that the *status quo* will be permanent.

The most worrying probability is that of the transformation of ULFA into a purely terrorist outfit. At first glance, it might seem that the detachment of ULFA from the public is good for peace, but the experience in many parts of the world is that a purely terrorist outfit is a more sinister problem than an ethnic insurgency. The difference between a dictator and a democratically elected leader answerable to the public is quite similar to the difference between a terrorist and an insurgent guerrilla. Whereas an insurgency cannot survive without popular support, a terrorist outfit does not depend on such support. A handful of terrorists are enough to create chaos. Terrorism

³⁴ See Bibhu Prasad Routray, “New Regime in Bangladesh: Misplaced Notion of Concern in the Northeast”, <http://www.ipcs.org/issues/newarticles/604-ne-bibhu.html>.

³⁵ Human Rights Watch, World report, 1999, India, <http://www.hrw.org/worldreport99/asia/india.html>

undermines democratic processes and vitiates the political atmosphere, bringing society to a virtual standstill. The resultant stagnation leads to disruption of economic activity leading to a chronic lack of development. With foreign bases and foreign friends, ULFA is in a position to carry out terrorist activities against the Indian state for an indefinite period. If MHA entertains the fond belief that the ULFA leadership may lose steam with the aging of the top leadership,³⁶ it should also keep in mind that, with continuous recruitment to the ULFA cadre, fresh and young insurgents are coming up, who would be only too willing to step into the positions of an ageing leadership. Though the actors would change, the morbid saga would continue.

A Critique of the Official Approach towards Conflict Resolution

The present approach of the GOI towards a negotiated settlement with the ULFA does not give much scope to commend it. The word 'talks' in MHA lexicon means withdrawal, undeclared if necessary, of the demand for secession. As with the GOI-NSCN-IM talks, the priority seems to be that ULFA should renounce its secessionist demand, not its armed activities. This is evident in the case of the peace-process with the NSCN-IM, which has merrily continued using the threat of weapons against the common public while maintaining a temporary silence on the aim of secession. While officials may construe the apparent 'neutralising' of secessionist forces as a success, the civil society continues to suffer from the continuance of armed activity by insurgents, who become more of a menace after cessation of CI operations against them following a cease-fire with the GOI. To reach a permanent solution, the Indian state shall have to change its mindset. The common people, who are in overwhelming majority against armed insurgency, will have to be taken into confidence. The need of the hour is mutual trust and confidence

³⁶ The top triumvirate: Rajib Rajkonwor @ Arabinda Rajkhowa, the Chairman, would be approximately 46/47 years old in 2002; Prabin Barua @ Pares Barua, 'Chief of Staff' (head of the armed wing) would be 44/45; Golap Barua @ Anup Chetia, General Secretary (now incarcerated in Bangladesh) would be 48/49.

between the people of the region and the Indian state. The Northeast has long suffered due to the imposition of certain special Acts, like the Disturbed Areas Act, 1955, and the Armed Forces Special Powers Act, 1958,³⁷ admittedly necessitated by abnormal situations. Suspicion amongst the Assamese about the Centre's antipathy towards the State precedes the appearance of the ULFA's secessionist insurgency. The ULFA has only been cashing in on the general discontentment prevalent in society against perceived injustices. The vitiated democratic environment, inevitable after arming the State police and other security forces, including the Army, with quasi-judicial powers, has been a fertile ground for the growth of secessionism amongst the Assamese in general and armed secessionism amongst the Assamese youth in particular. The common people, though coerced into silence by extra-constitutional exercise of state power, develop sympathy for the armed insurgents as a reaction to this arm-twisting by the state. The insurgents have been extracting full advantage of this harmful situation and the irresponsible utterances by certain MHA officials exhibiting disdain for Assamese sentiments have not been particularly helpful.³⁸

While it is correct that underdevelopment preceded insurgency in Assam, it is equally true that the continuance of insurgent violence has led to an outflow of scarce capital from the State. The resultant stagnation in economic development has, in turn, created a vast horde of unemployed youth, which is a potential source of fresh recruits into the insurgent ranks. Thus, Assam has entered a full circle of underdevelopment leading to insurgency, which in turn leads to more underdevelopment. This

³⁷ Special legislation, enacted to ensure the maintenance of law and order where there is perceived to be a threat to the internal security of the state, was first enforced in many parts of what is now the State of Assam on April 5, 1980. Both the Assam Disturbed Areas Act, 1955, and the Armed Forces (Assam and Manipur) Special Powers Act, 1958, confers powers upon forces operating under these acts to arrest without warrant and to shoot to kill. Both of these acts protect those acting under them from prosecution, except with the sanction of the concerned State government. See 'Assam: The killing of a human rights defender', <http://www.web.amnesty.org/ai.nsf/index/ASA200281996>.

³⁸ "Negotiations with ULFA: Centre ready to talk even on sovereignty", <http://www.assamtribune.com/jan1701/at02.html> Also see "ULFA questions Govt sincerity for talks", <http://www.assamtribune.com/jan2101/at02.html>.

vicious cycle has to be broken to liquidate insurgency from the State. It is obvious that if the ready cause of the perceived 'exploitation and neglect by Delhi' had not been easily available, the ever-increasing pool of frustrated youth-power in Assam would have discovered other 'causes' to serve as an excuse for embarking on a career in illegal armed activities. Without going into statistical details, one can say, on the basis of first hand knowledge and experience, that more than 90 per cent of the present ULFA cadre consists of educational drop-outs hailing from a rural poor background. Gone are the days when well-educated boys and girls of all economic segments of the Assamese society were attracted to the romantic notion of becoming a 'rebel with a cause'. The real threat to life has undone the earlier romantic appeal of being an ULFA cadre, and only the really desperate among these join the ULFA now. Unfortunately, with a stagnating economy and no scope for earning a livelihood, there is no dearth of desperate youngsters opting for an alternative career. It would not be off the mark to say that ULFA, and for that matter, the various ethnic insurgent outfits cropping up in Assam and in the entire Northeast region actually serve as an arena for alternative employment. Those who could have earned a decent living without becoming insurgents are a fast disappearing species among the underground cadres now. The dismal economic scene, coupled with popular disenchantment against the state, has created an ideal environment for the growth and sustenance of collective armed activity in the name of secessionist insurgency.

At the same time, consequent to the fading of the initial admiration for 'our boys' amongst the common people, the insurgents have replaced voluntary support with coerced co-operation. In rural areas, where the state is not omnipresent and omnipotent, people have to continue cooperating with the armed ULFA cadres under the threat of the gun, normally discreet or implicit but, if necessary, openly expressed. If they resist the ULFA, when asked for shelter, food and other services, they risk being harmed by the cadres. On the other hand, if they acquiesce to the demands, they are punished by the security forces for 'supporting' ULFA. Though this situation has alienated the people from the ULFA, insofar as genuine support and sympathy is concerned, it has also not endeared the state and its agencies to

the common people, who perceive the latter as a malevolent punitive authority, rather than a benevolent benefactor.

The urban segment of the society has its own problems. The insurgent gun, unchecked by legal or constitutional constraints, is feared and the rebel *diktat* is surreptitiously obeyed, though, vocally, loyalty is proclaimed to the state. A section of the intelligentsia, however, uses the insurgent influence as a shortcut to secure personal objectives and fame. It is not a rare exception in Assam to find a respected intellectual advocating the insurgent cause, of course from a safe distance and carefully balancing constitutional restrictions and revolutionary babble. Many among the more sober intellectuals in Assam prefer to maintain a deliberate silence on the issue. The most harmful effect comes from the general criticism of the Union government, which is a common refrain amongst the Assamese intelligentsia.³⁹ The insurgents and their supporters amongst the intelligentsia have to merely increase the tone of this general criticism by a few notches to convert it into rebel propaganda. Many Assamese intellectuals thus unconsciously provide propaganda material to the insurgents by openly condemning the Union government for its perceived negative attitude towards the State. From personal experience gathered while interacting with the MHA, this author, however, holds the opinion that the lack of a proper attitude amongst some officers of the Union government has more to do with an individual lack of sensitivity and administrative efficiency, rather than a deliberate government policy. The prevailing mistrust between the GOI and the Assamese, which has been stirred up over a period of time, leads to a negative interpretation of most of GOI's activity *vis-à-vis* Assam. This brings us back to the earlier refrain that 'justice should also appear to be done.'

Suggestions on Conflict Resolution

It is hoped that the preceding discussion has been able to specifically characterise the problem arising out of ULFA's

³⁹ Sanjib Baruah, "India's Failure in the Northeast", <http://bangladesh-web.com/news/jan/29/br29012002.htm>. Also see Nabendu Pal, "India's North-Eastern Region: Towards a more humane approach", <http://www.bharat-rakshak.com/MONITOR/ISSUE3-2/pal.html>

secessionist-insurgency in Assam. Within the context of this analysis, it is felt that an unbiased approach to 'secessionist insurgency' – a political problem – and 'terrorism' – a heinous method of registering protest and conducting insurgency – is needed to tackle the problem of violence in the forms currently prevailing in Assam. Romantic and idealistic youth with a rebellious inclination and lumpen elements with criminal and terrorist tendencies co-habit the insurgent camp. It is certain that the insurgent, whose priority lies in the ends rather than the means, would accept a peaceful and easier method of propagating secessionism. The terrorists, for whom the goal of secession is just an excuse to indulge in inhuman violence, would be effectively isolated and denied any popular sympathy. Though secessionism itself is harmful to the concept of a united India or India as a nation, the pan-Indian nationalism preferred and propagated by the Indian state is more a matter of winning hearts than imposing constitutional restrictions on freedom of speech. It should be remembered that though freedom of speech may be partially suppressed by statutory restrictions, no power on earth can suppress freedom of thought, unexpressed though it might be. Whispers and murmurs carry ideas as effectively as open discussions.

The continued existence of democracy and a democratic state ultimately depend on the freedom of speech and expression, in practice as well as in theory. The restrictive clauses applied to the freedom of speech and expression as enshrined in the Indian Constitution have provided a valid excuse for all secessionists to practice armed rebellions which have, more often than not, degenerated into terrorism. While the practice of terrorism has effectively unmasked the secessionist-insurgent organisations as unworthy leaders, the people of the affected areas have not been provided with an unambiguous method of expressing a convincing verdict on the worthiness of the goal itself. This has led to the revival of the insurgent movements like the mythical phoenix, and has in turn led to certain areas of the country being permanently labelled as unsafe places for investment.

Tottering along second-generation economic reforms, India can ill-afford a disgruntled populace. Rebellions start in the weakest moments of the state. And a succession of such weak

moments is a strong possibility before India can successfully complete the process of its economic reforms.

It is sensible to remove disgruntlement among the people to the extent that this is practicable, rather than to expend the nation's resources in quelling rebellions after they occur. Very few areas of India actually have a population that desires secession. It is the lack of a convincing democratic apparatus to gauge public sentiments that has deprived the Indian state of the means to effectively project the microscopic support actually enjoyed by the separatists in most cases of secessionist-insurgencies.

Unadulterated freedom of speech, including the right to peaceful and democratic propagation of secession, would effectively liquidate the excuse to take up arms for secessionism. While, in all probability, this might boost the morale of the Kashmiri separatists in the Kashmir Valley, it can be confidently assumed that, it would only be an exception to the general rule of rejection of secessionism by the majority in States like Assam and Punjab.

The process of bringing in a proposed change in the constitutional law of India could begin by repealing the sixteenth amendment to the Constitution of India,⁴⁰ which brought in the so-called 'reasonable restrictions' to the freedom of speech and expression, as also to the freedom of association laid out in Article 19, clause 1, sub clause 'a' through 'c'. Such a repeal cannot be deemed a radical change, as it only restores the Constitution to its original form as envisaged by its founders in the Constituent Assembly. In plain language, the law of the state should be suitably rectified to make peaceful and democratic propagation of political ideas, including secession, a legal exercise, without the provision of any punitive reaction by the state. The recalcitrant rebels who cling to their guns and lumps of RDX after the availability of democratic and peaceful means of propagating their professed cause, would lose the last remnants of any goodwill or sympathy they may have among their own people. There is, of course, the theoretical possibility of the populace of a particular area expressing its desire to secede

⁴⁰ 16th amendment-1963, <http://law.indiainfo.com/constitution/freedom.html>

through the means newly made available to them, but this cannot be something that the Indian state should be intimidated by.

This proposal, most probably, would have to run the gauntlet of hostility from many quarters. But the exploration of every probable avenue of conflict resolution is an unavoidable necessity to arrive at a suitable solution. Holding man-made concepts and laws as sacrosanct has the same affect as that of putting pre-conditions before negotiations. Every concept should be clinically analysed before retaining or discarding it. In fact, a logically explained repudiation of the proposal proffered here would itself contribute in strengthening Indian democracy. The plurality of India necessitates an open mind on the part of its intelligentsia. Loyalty extracted from convinced minds is always a better option than coerced allegiance. It would be immensely beneficial if this debate could be taken further.